AJAYA
Epic of the KAURAVA Clan
BOOK I

ROLL OF THE DICE

ANAND NEELAKANTAN
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WHY WRITE ABOUT DURYODHANA?
Many years ago, I witnessed a spectacle many of my readers would not even have heard about, let alone seen. It was a day of grand celebration. Even the hot tropical sun shining above could not diminish the pervading festive spirit. There were more than 100,000 people assembled to watch the procession and pay homage to the presiding deity of the temple. The devotees belonged to all castes and creeds and the fervour they displayed was bewitching to watch. Strangely enough, the majestic festival was in honour of a man I had always believed to have few admirers, if any. The deity at the Malanada Temple in Poruvazhy village, Kerala, is none other than the most reviled villain of Indian mythology – Duryodhana. If the devotees are to be believed, the tradition of this procession goes back centuries to the time of the Mahabharata itself.

There is a fascinating story attached to the temple: Duryodhana came to the village in search of the Pandavas in exile. Thirsty, he asked an old woman for water. Impulsively, she gave him the toddy she was carrying. The parched Prince drank it with relish. It was only then that the woman noticed he was a Kshatriya warrior and he could lose his caste by drinking toddy served by an Untouchable Kurathi woman like herself. Horrified by what she had done, she was certain the Kshatriya Prince would punish her with death if she told him the truth. However, not wishing to cheat someone who had trusted her, she confessed her ‘crime’ and risking her life. She waited for her certain punishment, but was astonished by Duryodhana’s response. “Mother,” he said, “there is no caste for hunger and thirst. Blessed are you for putting the interest of a thirsty man before your own safety.”

The villagers rushed to see this high-born man, who was so different from the haughty, upper-caste men who came only to punish them or treat them like worms. The Hastinapura Prince announced he was gifting the surrounding villages to a temple that would be built but have no idol. A Kurava Untouchable would be the Priest. To this day, family members of that old woman’s family are the hereditary Priests of the temple, which has no idol. Instead, the presiding deity
is Duryodhana. The minor deities are his wife Bhanumati, his mother Gandhari, and his friend Karna. It is generally believed that the spirit of Duryodhana resides here to protect the poor and weak. He answers the prayers of the destitute and those suffering from disease, poverty, or harassment from those stronger than themselves. This deity is the protector of the weak and downtrodden.

My first reaction to the story was one of incredulity. Why should a Prince of Hastinapura, located at the northern-most border of the country, have come all the way to a village at the southern tip of India—a distance of more than 3000 kilometres—thousands of years ago? The answer to my question was like a slap in my face. The villager asked me why the Adi Shankaracharya had travelled so many times from a village in Kerala to Kedarnath or Badrinath, in his short lifespan of 32 years? It made me rush home to revisit the Mahabharata, an epic that has inspired countless writers over the centuries. Once I started viewing the Kaurava Prince through the eyes of the villagers of Poruvazhy, a different picture of Duryodhana began to emerge—far removed from the scheming, roaring, arrogant villain of popular television serials and traditional retellings. Instead, here was a brutally honest Prince, brave and self-willed, willing to fight for what he believed in. Duryodhana never believed his Pandava cousins to be of divine origin; and to modern minds, their outlandish claim now sounds chillingly similar to present-day political propaganda used to fool a gullible public.

Duryodhana’s personality comes alive when he makes Karna, the King of Anga at a crucial moment in his life, when he is being humiliated because of his caste. The Kaurava Prince challenges orthodoxy by making a Suta a King, and he does so without selfish motives. His treatment of Ekalavya; his refusal to fight for Subhadra; his courage in taking on the Pandavas; and his unwavering faith in his friends; all make him hero material rather than a despicable villain. He never attempts to justify his treatment of Draupadi. His flaws make him human and believable, unlike the protagonists, who wrap themselves in a cloak of dharma, miracles, and divinity, to justify their actions. Tomes have been written in praise of the actions of the Pandavas and Krishna. Great works exist about Karna and Draupadi. There are literary masterpieces in vernacular languages about Bhima, Arjuna,
and Kunti. However, except for Orubhanga, a play in classical Sanskrit by Bhasa, dealing with Duryodhana’s last moments, and Gadayudha, by the medieval Kannada poet Ranna, no authors have been sympathetic to the Crown Prince of Hastinapura.

Ajaya is an attempt to view the Mahabharata from the side that lost the war. One of the meanings of Duryodhana is ‘one who is difficult to conquer’, in other words, Ajaya (Unconquerable). Though named Suyodhana, the Pandavas used the derogatory ‘Dur’ to slander him as ‘one who does not know how to wield power or arms’. Duryodhana’s story includes those of Karna, Aswathama, Ekalavya, Bhishma, Drona, Shakuni, and many others. It is the narrative of the Others – the defeated, insulted, trampled upon – who fought without expecting divine intervention; believing in the justice of their cause. Perhaps Ajaya is my belated answer to the villager, who stumped me with his simple question on the humid afternoon when the procession honouring Suyodhana was marching through the green paddy fields of Poruvazhy: If our Lord Duryodhana was an evil man, why did great men like Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, and the entire army of Krishna, fight the war on his side?
IT WAS RAINING HEAVILY when the General entered the palace. Except for the dull rhythm of the falling rain, the palace was eerily silent. The General halted at the foot of the wooden stairs, his heart filled with apprehension. Pools of water formed strange patterns at his feet in a curious shade of red, made more prominent by the lily whiteness of the cold marble floors. He adjusted his battledress and winced as blinding pain shot through him. He was bleeding from many wounds, yet he held his tall and powerful frame erect. A cold wind from the distant snow-covered peaks ruffled his long, dark beard and pierced his body as if with icy shards. He was chilled to the bone, unused to these rugged mountainous terrains and snow-laden passes. He was from the East, a son of the vast Gangetic plains. The naked sword he gripped in his right hand had slain scores of warriors in the past hour.

A few paces apart, his men stood reverently. The rain had lost its fury and become a drizzle. Rainwater dripped from the roof into the gutters, forming eddies of darkness before rushing down the mountainside to join the waters flowing through the distant and dusty plains to the sea, carrying with it human flesh and the blood of unknown warriors who had guarded the mountain city of Gandhara just a few hours before.

The General stood stiff and unmoving, frowning at the faint sounds of sobbing coming from the floor above. Somewhere a cock crowed, followed by the clucking of hens. A peddler cried out his wares from outside the fort walls, and a bullock cart passed by, the jingling of its bells fading away. The General took a tentative step to climb the stairs but stopped again. Something had caught his eye. He bent down painfully and picked it up. It was a wooden cart with a broken wheel
– a little boy’s toy. A smear of blood had dried on its broken side. With a sigh, the General started climbing up. The steps groaned in protest. As if on cue, the sobbing stopped.

The long verandah ran a considerable distance, vanishing into shadow. It started snowing and the white flakes fell on the wooden benches placed along the corridor, forming strange shapes. The General walked slowly, careful not to step on the dead soldiers. He held the broken toy in his left hand and a curved Indian sword in his right. He hated the snow and the bitter cold of the mountains and longed for the sunny plains of his homeland. He wished only to finish this task and get back to the banks of the Ganga. He paused to listen. There was a rustling of clothing and he sensed somebody waiting for him within. His wounded body tensed. The toy in his hand had become a burden. ‘Why did I pick it up?’ he wondered. But now he did not now wish to throw it away. With the tip of his sword, he slowly pushed at the half-open door. The General entered the room, his tall and broad silhouette throwing dark shadows into the dim room. Once his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he saw her; partly veiled by the shadows that cloaked the room. She sat with eyes downcast and her arms wrapped around her knees. She looked tired of waiting for her fate. The warrior’s tense muscles relaxed a little as he let out a weary sigh. ‘Thank God, no more bloodshed today,’ he thought.

An oil lamp in the corner apologetically spread a small circle of dull light. It only served to amplify the darkness beyond the reach of its frail aura. The General turned up the wick and a golden light fell upon the exquisitely beautiful woman. ‘My fate is to bring unhappiness to such beautiful creations of divinity,’ he thought with sudden anger. He cursed the day he had impulsively taken the oath of celibacy to satisfy his father’s lust. It had made almost all the women in his life unhappy and ruined the lives of some. ‘Today, I add one more to that unhappy list,’ he thought in frustration, and then ruefully chuckled at the irony of fate which deigned that a celibate like himself should hunt women and spill blood for them.

Pushing aside his dark thoughts, the General made an elaborate bow to the lovely woman before him. “Daughter, I am Gangadatta Devavrata,
Grand Regent of Hastinapura. You may perhaps have heard the name Bhishma. I have come to seek your hand in marriage for my nephew, Dhritarashtra, Prince of Hastinapura.”

In the thick silence that ensued, Bhishma kept his gaze averted from the lovely grey eyes that burned with such fire. In the years to come, Bhishma would always remember those eyes staring into his own, even when they were hidden from the world. The girl let out a wrenching sob that pierced his heart. Collecting herself, she stood up, raised her head, and said with majestic dignity, “Grand Regent Bhishma, I trust Gandhara has not failed in its hospitality towards you. I apologise that my father is not here to greet you himself. I, Gandhari, Princess of Gandhara, welcome you in his name.”

Bhishma stood paralysed by the icy chill of her voice. He felt a strange urge to confess everything to her; to justify the acts he had been forced to commit for the sake of his kingdom. He felt small and mean before this young girl who carried herself with such dignity and composure in the face of so much tragedy. Bhishma felt like a brute. He wished his anger would return so that he could take her by her narrow waist and ride off to Hastinapura with her, like a warrior of fable. But he could not; he was a warrior of the old school and a man of chivalry.

“I do not have a choice do I, Sir? When the Regent of Hastinapura decides which maiden is to be stolen as a bride for his nephew, what choice do we, who live on the borders of the great Indian empire, have? Do not perturb yourself... our resistance is at an end. Gandhara has been routed as you intended. I am your captive and shall go with you to become your blind nephew’s bride.”

Bhishma found he had lost the ability to speak. He looked into the distance, at the snowy slopes of the mountains and thought she could finish him off right now with a quick thrust of a dagger into his back. Yet he did not want to face her and gaze into those grey eyes. Being stabbed by this beautiful woman would be a good way to end his dry life; it was better than knowing such beautiful women existed in the world but all he could do was steal them on behalf of his incompetent or impotent nephews, or whichever fool sat on the throne of Hastinapura.
Life had been a series of battles, treachery, politics and intrigue, and he was weary of it – the bloody defence of others – his father, his country, his brothers, his nephews, but never for himself. He was sick of it all. Yet there was no warrior in the whole of India, no King or Prince, who could challenge the Regent of Hastinapura.

Bhishma walked away, half-expecting Gandhari to stab him and was rather disappointed when she followed meekly. As they reached the verandah, a sudden blast of icy wind hit him and he shuddered. He turned back to see Gandhari looking at the broken toy in his hand. He felt embarrassed, wanting to throw it away or hide it from her gaze. Then he heard a sob. It did not come from the lovely woman before him, but from somewhere within the dark depths of the room where she had sat waiting for him. When Gandhari saw that he had heard the sob, a look of fear and pure hatred crossed her face. Bhishma moved quickly towards the room. Gandhari grabbed at his arm and clawed at his back, trying to stop him. Venting the pent-up anger and frustration of many years, he pushed her back in sudden fury and entered the room. Gandhari fell but was up and after him in a trice, trying to slow him down, scratching him with her long nails and biting – to no effect.

The sobs came from under the bed. The tall warrior bent down, his sword held before him to block an unexpected thrust from a sharp weapon that could slash his face. A small hand reached for the toy cart and then disappeared in a flash. But Bhishma caught the small hand and pulled hard. It was a little boy, barely five years old. Bhishma carried him into the light of the verandah to observe him. The boy was covered in blood but unhurt except for a wound on his left leg. His large, animal eyes looked at the tough warrior-prince with all the hatred he had gathered in his young life. It was at such moments that Bhishma hated himself. He could face a thousand arrows on the battlefield but the little boy’s eyes pierced his armour and reached deep into his heart. His Gurus would have advised him not to spare the boy’s life. When one conquered a country, it was prudent to finish off all the males and take the women. It prevented misadventures and future wars of revenge. Bhishma could almost
hear his father’s voice prompting him to thrust his sword through the tiny heart.

Slowly, very slowly, Bhishma put the boy down. He immediately collapsed onto the floor, unable to stand on his hurt leg. “Who is he?” Bhishma asked Gandhari.

“He is Shakuni, Prince of Gandhara. I know you will kill him. That is the dharma of the Kshatriya, is it not? I know all about the code of the warrior. But I beg you not to do it in front of me. He is my little brother...please have mercy...” Gandhari begged.

Bhishma stood up, embarrassed and unable to look at the haughty Princess in distress or the small boy who lay wheezing at his feet. His sword trembled in his hand. He slowly knelt and put down the toy cart near the boy, who grabbed at it, clutching it to his heart. Bhishma felt tears flood his eyes. He was irritated at himself for his weakness and pushed the boy away. Shakuni let out a howl of pain. “I will not kill him. I can see how much you love him. Take him with you to Hastinapura. He shall grow up there as a Prince of the Kurus,” Bhishma said, hating himself every moment for giving in.

Gandhari let out a shuddering sigh, relieved at having the life of her young brother saved. Bhishma stood up and looked at them. The wind had become stronger and he shivered in the cold. Gandhari picked up the little boy in her arms, stumbling under his weight. Bhishma reached out and took Shakuni from her. As the Grand Regent lifted him, the boy spat into his face with all the hatred he could muster. Bhishma wiped the bloody saliva with the back of his hand and walked on, his face set like granite.

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They rode back to the dusty plains of the Ganges, to the palace in the eternal city of elephants, to the famed capital of India – Hastinapura. Shakuni lay limp across the saddle of the mighty warrior as the beautiful Princess of Gandhara galloped behind. Throughout the journey, Bhishma was preoccupied with thoughts of finding a bride.
for his other nephew, the albino Pandu. Experienced warrior that he was, he would not else have missed the hatred burning in the eyes of the little boy. It was the gravest mistake the Regent of the Kurus made in his long and illustrious life.
Genealogy as relevant to the main story of the Mahābhārata
“Beware!” the young captain shouted and Aswathama pulled on the reins of his horse in the nick of time. A massive boulder missed him by inches and crashed onto the narrow path with a thud. It bounced down the cliff face and disappeared into the river deep below, felling a few trees on its way. When the dust cleared, Aswathama was still trying to steady his panicked horse. One misstep and he knew he would follow the path made by the boulder and splatter like an eggshell, a thousand feet below. The splash of the boulder hitting the water sounded unusually loud.

Aswathama’s heart pounded in his chest. Had the boulder been an accident or was someone following them? He looked around; the place looked desolate and forlorn. Nothing stirred. Far below, the Deodar trees in the valley had turned white with snow. The eerie silence when the wind stopped howling, was frightening. The mountain crouched painfully, like a wounded beast. He had undertaken this mission thinking it would be an adventure. He had always longed to see the ivory-tipped peaks of the Himalayas. It had been so inviting and he had jumped at the opportunity.

Far away, he could see the mountain ranges dissolving into the sky. He wanted to rub his hands to get the circulation back, but was afraid to let go of the reins. It was freezing cold. The chill pierced his skin and
gnawed at his bones. But more than the elements, it was the inaction and boredom that was killing him. “Where are the bastards hiding?” Aswathama asked, more of himself than the captain.

“Sir, I think we have lost our way again.” He heard the pain and frustration in the captain’s voice and his anger returned in a flood.

“No, we have not!” He watched the words escaping his mouth in white puffs. An argument would have been welcome, but his captain refused to oblige.

When silence crawled back, Aswathama loosened the reins and the horse started walking forward. His army of twenty men dragged themselves behind him, through the treacherous mountain path. It had started snowing again.

Boom! A scream followed the crash and Aswathama almost fell from his saddle. They had been hit. In that instant he knew, the first boulder had been no accident and that more were on the way. The second one hit the rear of the column and carried away two men, along with their horses. Aswathama knew that all his arrogance about being a great archer was futile in this battle. He was not fighting on the vast and dusty plains of India. This was Gandhara and the country had the reputation of teaching reigning superpowers and empires hard and unforgettable lessons. The next boulder crashed down just behind him, hitting the captain and his horse. He saw them topple over the cliff and vanish into the depths below. The agonized screams of the man and his beast echoed around them, making the survivors edgy. He could sense the fear of his companions. He had to do something.

What was that moving there? Rather, who was it? Aswathama peered painfully towards the top of the mountain, shading his red-rimmed eyes with his right hand while the left gripped the reins convulsively. He had seen someone moving. Or was the snow playing its usual games of illusion? As he kept staring at the point high above, a silent scream began rising from his belly. The warrior in him sensed it long before his eyes could see. The enemy had waited until they reached this narrow path, with the towering mountain on one side and the deep abyss on the other – the perfect ambush spot for the Gandharans.

Carefully, Aswathama’s right hand went to his sword. At that moment, the entire mountain began to reverberate as mounted warriors began descending on them at great speed. “Forward!” he
shouted, galloping like a mad possessed. He had to get off the narrow path. It was now or never. The mountainside began exploding behind them as the Brahmin warrior and his daredevil companions rushed across the perilously narrow mountain path. Boulders rolled down, frightening the horses and threatening to dash them all into the waters far below. Behind, men, their faces masked with their turbans, were chasing them towards their deaths.

“Either we get that bastard Durjaya today or we all perish. We owe ourselves at least a warrior’s death in service of Suyodhana and our country.” Aswathama shouted over the din, trying to motivate his companions. He could not be sure they heard. But his next action inspired them to follow suit. It was one of reckless courage, yet the very insanity of it made them delirious. Aswathama let go the reins and stood up in his saddle, facing the Gandharans, his back to his galloping horse. Balancing perilously, he drew his bowstring. His men did the same. His first arrow pierced the throat of the man leading the attack, while those of his companions took out others.

“Shoot to kill... shoot... shoot!” Aswathama yelled as he showered lethal arrows on his foes. They had slowed down their pursuers but Aswathama knew they could not continue holding them off. A misstep by one of the horses or a hit by any of the boulders falling around them would finish everything.

And then he saw him and he almost slipped from his saddle. It was just for a moment, as the cloth covering the face of one of the pursuers slipped. Yet there was no mistaking that face...
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I WAS BORN IN A QUAINt little village called Thripoonithura, on the outskirts of Cochin, Kerala. Located east of mainland Ernakulam, across Vembanad Lake, this village had the distinction of being the seat of the Cochin royal family. However, it was more famous for its 100-odd temples, the various classical artists it produced, and its school of music. I remember many an evening listening to the faint rhythm of the chendas coming from the temples, and the notes of the flute escaping over the rugged walls of the music school. However, Gulf money and the rapidly expanding city of Cochin, have wiped away all remaining vestiges of that old-world charm. The village has evolved into the usual, unremarkable, suburban hellhole – clones of which dot India.

Growing up in a village with more temples than was necessary, it was little wonder that mythology fascinated me. Ironically, I was drawn to the anti-heroes. My own life went on… I became an engineer, joined the Indian Oil Corporation, moved to Bangalore, married Aparna, and welcomed my daughter Ananya, and son, Abhinav. However, the voices of yore refused to be silenced in my mind. I felt impelled to narrate the stories of the vanquished and the damned; and give life to those silent heroes who have been overlooked in our uncritical acceptance of conventional renderings of our epics.

This is Anand’s second book and follows the outstanding success of his national #1 bestseller, ASURA Tale Of The Vanquished (Platinum Press 2012). AJAYA Book II, Rise Of Kali, is due for release later in 2014.

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