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KARNA PARVA:
THE BOOK OF KARNA

BEFORE

Ashwatthama was disgusted by the celebrations in the Pandava camp. Eager to exact his revenge, he requested Duryodhana to make him the commander of the remaining Kaurava army.

DEVIUS PLAN

Ashwatthama knew he would have to come up with a clever plan to eliminate his rivals, even if it went against the rules of war. Aware of the Pandavas' strength, he decided to kill them in their sleep.

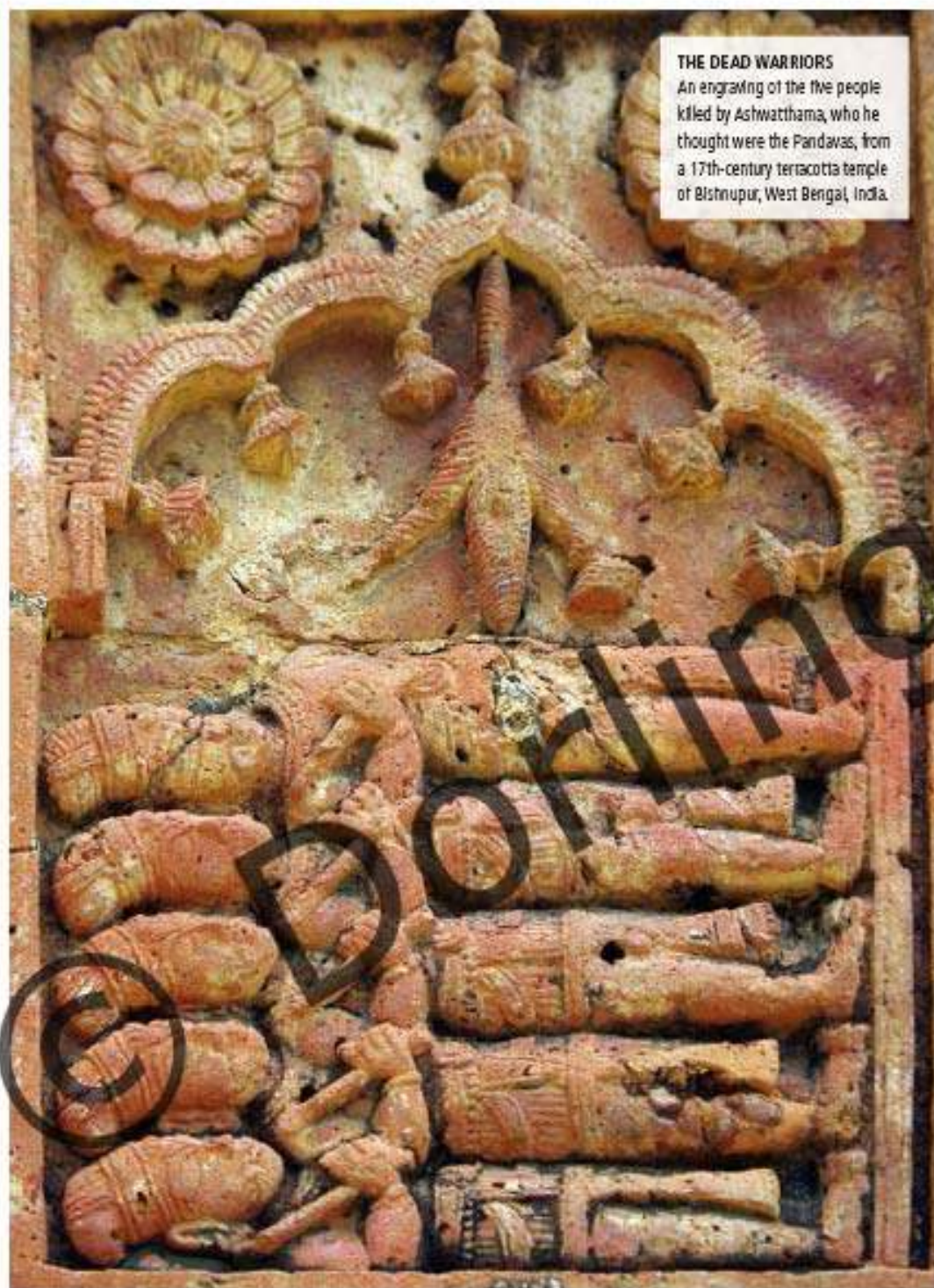
LIST

RULES OF WAR BROKEN

- **No woman shall fight in the battlefield;** the rule was broken by Arjuna, which led to the downfall of Bhishma
- **No single warrior shall be attacked by many;** the rule was broken by Drona, when he killed Abhimanyu
- **No fighting after sunset;** the rule was broken by Arjuna to kill Jayadratha
- **No one shall interfere in a duel;** broken by Satyaki to slay Bhurishrava
- **No killing of animals;** broken by Bhima to spread misinformation that led to the death of Drona
- **No one shall strike below the waist;** the rule was broken by Bhima when he struck Duryodhana on his thigh
- **No killing of people who have laid down arms;** broken by Dhrishtadyumna as he struck a meditating Drona
- **No archer should fight one who has lowered his bow;** broken by Arjuna to slay Karna
- **No attacking people who are asleep;** the rule was broken by Ashwatthama when he raided the Pandava camp while they were asleep

The Final Blow

Now, more than ever, the Kaurava survivors were firm in their resolve to annihilate the Pandavas once and for all. In their determination, they ended up committing a wrong so grievous, it placed them beyond redemption.



THE DEAD WARRIORS

An engraving of the five people killed by Ashwatthama, who he thought were the Pandavas, from a 17th-century terracotta temple of Bishnupur, West Bengal, India.

Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandavas, was born out of a desire for vengeance. Her father, King Drupada of Panchala, was consumed by the desire to take revenge on his foe Drona and his patrons, the Kuru clan. He invoked Lord Shiva and asked him for a son to kill Bhishma, the Kuru patriarch, and a daughter who would marry into the Kuru household and divide it. Draupadi was that daughter, born from a fire built to propitiate Shiva. She is depicted as a beautiful and sensuous woman, and her effect on men is a recurring theme in the Mahabharata.

The shared wife

At Draupadi's swayamvara, many archers tried their luck and failed. When Karna was about to try, Draupadi stopped him saying, "A son of a charioteer cannot contend for my hand." Arjuna won the archery contest and, thus, her hand. But Kunti, fearing that Draupadi's beauty would create discord among her sons, asked all of them to share her equally. The Pandavas had no power until Draupadi came into their lives. With the powerful Drupada as their father-in-law, they were in a position to negotiate. But her entry marked the division of the Kuru land. Her presence thus brought torture but also broke a household.

All the Pandava brothers loved Draupadi equally, and they agreed to have exclusive access to her chamber by turn.

Dignified in humiliation

At the dice game organized by the Kauravas, Yudhishtira staked and lost Draupadi. When

Duryodhana sent a doorkeeper to fetch her, she refused to go, questioning Yudhishtira's right to gamble her away after losing himself.

Dusshasana then grabbed her by her hair and dragged her through the palace into the gambling hall. The gathering was stunned to see Draupadi, the queen of Indraprastha, barely covered, hair unbound, lying in a heap at Duryodhana's feet. Her husbands hung their heads in shame.

No one came to her rescue, even when Duryodhana asked Dusshasana to strip her naked. As Dusshasana grabbed her robe, Draupadi raised her arms towards the heavens and cried to God. Her honour was eventually saved by divine intervention.

Draupadi swore never to forgive the Kauravas and not to tie her hair until she had washed it in Dusshasana's blood. The elders came to their senses and ended the episode. In reply to Dhritarashtra's apology, Draupadi asked for her husbands' freedom and property to be restored to them. Throughout her ordeal, she maintained a dignified calm.

A queen in exile

But when Krishna visited the Pandavas in exile, Draupadi could not hold back her tears. Krishna, however, tried to reason with her and blamed her squarely for some of her suffering. He reminded her how she had committed adharma by rejecting Karna on the ground

DRAUPADI'S SWAYAMVARA

A terracotta panel at the Navaratri Chototaraal temple, Bankura, West Bengal, India, shows Arjuna aiming at the eye of a fish at Draupadi's swayamvara.

of his low caste. Draupadi's miseries followed her wherever she went. During the Pandavas' exile, she was harassed by men such as Jayadratha and Kichaka, who desired her and made inappropriate advances at her.

A short-lived vengeance

In the Kurukshetra War, Bhima killed Dusshasana, and invited Draupadi to wash her hair with his blood, helping her fulfil the oath she had made years ago.

But on the last night of the war, Ashwatthama killed Draupadi's brothers and her five sons, mistaking them for the five Pandavas. Burning with rage, she wanted the head of the murderer – but Krishna intervened, putting an end to the cycle of violence.

The final journey

At the end of their rule, when it was finally time for the Pandavas to retire, Draupadi followed her husbands north to the great snow-clad mountain whose peak touched Swarga. But soon, Draupadi slipped and fell. Yudhishtira knew why she had not survived – though she was supposed to love all her five husbands equally, she had preferred Arjuna, desired Karna, and manipulated Bhima.

BIOGRAPHY IN BRIEF

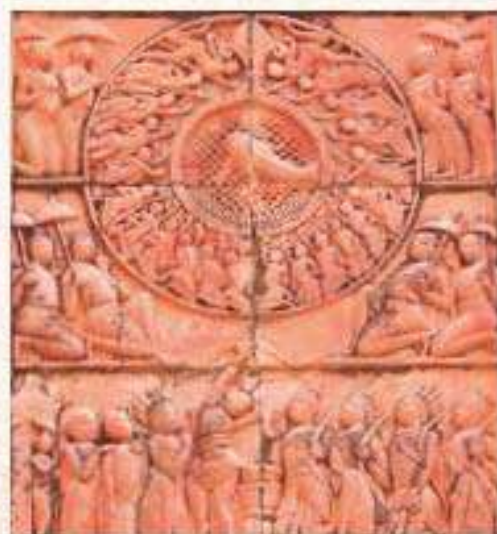
- **Daughter of King Drupada of Panchala, she and her twin brother Chitradityumna, were born out of a sacred fire.**
- **Rejected Karna at her swayamvara by not letting him participate on grounds of his low caste. Arjuna won her hand.**
- **Became the common wife after an unaware Kunti asked Arjuna to share whatever he had won in the archery contest with his brothers.**
- **Had five sons with the five Pandavas: Prativindhya from Yudhishtira, Sat soma from Bhima; Shrutaketi from Arjuna; Shatanika from Nakula; and Shrutasena from Sahadeva, collectively known as the Upapandavas.**
- **Mocked Duryodhana at Yudhishtira's coronation when he fell into a pool. He swore revenge.**
- **Humiliated by Duryodhana after Yudhishtira lost her in the gambling match. Duryodhana asked her to be disrobed in public.**
- **Served exile for thirteen years with her husbands, including a year in hiding in the Matsya kingdom.**
- **Loved Karna secretly, thinking of him as someone who would not have gambled her away.**
- **Fulfilled her oath after washing her hair with Dusshasana's blood after Bhima killed him in war.**
- **Lost her sons to Drona's son Ashwatthama's rage. The Kaurava survivor killed her five children, mistaking them to be the Pandavas.**
- **Became the queen after her victorious husbands came to the throne.**
- **Died after falling on her way to heaven.**

ANALYSIS

DRAUPADI AND KRISHNA

Draupadi shared a special bond with Krishna. In certain traditions, it is believed that Yashoda's daughter, who had been sacrificed to save Krishna, was reborn through the fire in King Drupada's palace, making Draupadi Krishna's sister.

According to a folk narrative, when Krishna was bathing in a river, his lower garment got swept away by the water current. To save his honour, without a second thought, Draupadi gave him her upper garment to cover himself. Krishna repaid that act of generosity by saving her honour when the Kauravas tried to disrobe her.



BEFORE

With peace negotiations having failed, both sides scrambled to prepare for war. The Kauravas had ten armies on their side, while the Pandavas had seven.

SIDES TAKEN

Karna, despite having been told about the reality of his birth, had decided to stand by his friend Duryodhana and not go to his brothers, the Pandavas. Shalya, the king of Madra, Nakula and Sahadeva's maternal uncle, had been deceived by circumstances to fight on the side of the Kauravas. Krishna, with his Yadava followers, had not yet announced his allegiance. He had a powerful army and both the Kauravas and Pandavas were keen to meet him and get his support.

Krishna and His Narayani Army

Now that war was imminent, both the Kauravas and the Pandavas were gathering as many allies as they could. What neither side knew as yet was which side Krishna would choose. Both Duryodhana and Arjuna went to Dwaraka to ask for Krishna's allegiance

Duryodhana set off for Dwaraka to seek an audience with Krishna around the same time as Arjuna. On entering Krishna's chambers, Duryodhana found him taking a nap. Deciding to wait until Krishna woke up, he sat down at the head of the bed. A little

later, Arjuna entered the room, and took his place at the foot of the bed.

Both cousins were confident of Krishna's support for different reasons. Duryodhana was sure of Krishna's patronage because his daughter, Lakshmani, was married to Krishna's son, Samba. The Pandavas were Krishna's maternal cousins, and Arjuna had married Krishna's sister, Subhadra. This led him to believe that Krishna would give his pleas some consideration.

On waking, Krishna greeted Arjuna and Duryodhana, then looked at his cousin. "What brings you here?" he asked Arjuna.

Nervous that Krishna would grant Arjuna what he himself wanted to claim, Duryodhana interrupted, "I came in before Arjuna. Surely my request gets precedence over his."

ARJUNA'S CHOICE

This 18th-century watercolour from Himachal Pradesh, India, is titled "Arjuna Chooses Lord Krishna As His Charioteer".

Arjuna's choice

Unmoved by Duryodhana's outburst, Krishna replied, "You may have arrived before him, but I saw Arjuna before I saw you. So I shall ask him first." Turning to Arjuna, he asked, "Which do you choose – my army or me unarmed?"

Duryodhana's breath caught in his throat. If he chose the army, Arjuna could amass one hundred million Yadava soldiers, filling the scales in the Pandavas' favour. These soldiers, known as the Narayani army, were said to be equal to Krishna in strength and skill and were unassailable warriors famed for their valour. How could Krishna weigh against all this, especially now that he had decided neither to bear arms nor fight in the battle?

To Duryodhana's deep amazement, Arjuna chose without a moment's hesitation. "You. I want you by my side when I fight the Kauravas, not your army," he declared.

THE WAIT

This terracotta panel on the Gopinath temple in Dasghara in West Bengal, India, shows Arjuna (left) sitting by Krishna's feet as he sleeps, while Duryodhana (right) sits near his head.

"Today, I have come to you first. From ancient times, the virtuous serve those who arrive first ... You always deserve honour. You always follow virtuous conduct."

DURYODHANA TO KRISHNA, UDYOGA PARVA: THE BOOK OF EFFORT

ANALYSIS

THE KAURAVAS' CHOICES

Though the Kauravas lived in wealth, their life was suffused with envy and bitterness. In contrast, though they lived in poverty, in forests, in exile, as dependants in the house of their uncle, the Pandavas' life was rich in learning. This shows that the presence of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, does not guarantee wisdom. On the other hand, Saraswati, goddess of knowledge, brings wisdom as well as prosperity wherever she goes.





Parashurama, the martial-ascetic and Bhishma's teacher.

Parashurama was so shocked to hear Amba's story that he challenged Bhishma to a duel. A terrible fight followed, but ended without a conclusion.

In despair, Amba prayed to Shiva, the god of destruction. "You will be the cause of Bhishma's death in your next life," said Shiva.

Determined to bring about Bhishma's death sooner rather than later, Amba leaped into a pit of fire to kill herself.

A daughter for Drupada

Meanwhile, King Drupada of Panchala burned with humiliation after his defeat by the students of Drona, the Kuru teacher. He wanted to destroy not just Drona but also his patrons – Bhishma and the Kuru clan. He invoked Shiva, who granted him the boon to have a son who would kill Bhishma. Drupada's wife gave birth to a daughter Shikhandi. The oracles foretold that she would acquire a male body in due course. Drupada raised his daughter as a man. She was taught the art of warfare and statecraft. She was even

given a wife. But on the wedding night, her wife ran screaming to her father, Hiranyavarna, king of Dasharna, complaining that her "husband" had a woman's body.

In anger, Hiranyavarna laid siege to Panchala. To save the kingdom from war, Shikhandi decided to kill herself. She ran to the forest where she encountered a Yaksha called Sthuna, who offered her his manhood for a night.

Shikhandi took the Yaksha's manhood and proved his manhood to his wife, forcing his father-in-law to retreat. When she went back to the forest to return her manhood, the situation had changed. Kubera, the lord of the Yakshas, displeased at Sthuna's act, cursed him that his manhood would only return at the end of Shikhandi's life. Shikhandi was overjoyed. She had now become a man and would stay so until the day he died. He returned home and informed Drupada of this news. In a moment of playfulness, Shikhandi wore that garland of lotuses that Amba had flung in the palace. Drupada realized that Shikhandi would be responsible for Bhishma's death.

Revenge at last

After nine indecisive days of the Kurukshetra War, it had become necessary for the Pandavas to kill Bhishma. Krishna decided to bring Shikhandi on the battlefield.

When Arjuna expressed his doubt, Krishna said, "If you believe Shikhandi is a man, you will take him into the battlefield

SHIKHANDI AGAINST BHISHMA

A frieze from the 17th-century terracotta temples of Bishnupur, West Bengal, India, depicts Shikhandi taking on Bhishma on the battlefield.

with you. But if Bhishma believes Shikhandi to be a woman, he will lower his bow, giving you an opportunity to overpower him."

So, on the tenth day of the war, Shikhandi mounted Arjuna's chariot and challenged Bhishma to a duel, but he refused to fight. "Born a woman you're always a woman," he said, and roared at Krishna that bringing a woman into the battlefield was adharmā.

Krishna retorted, "You see her as a woman because she was born as a female. But I see her as a man because that is how her father raised her. I see her as a man because she has a Yaksha's manhood. Whose point of view is right? That Shikhandi is an unworthy opponent is your view, not Shikhandi's, who wishes to fight you."

Arjuna stood behind Shikhandi and shot hundreds of arrows at Bhishma. He fell from his chariot, and was suspended on a bed of arrows. With Bhishma's fall, Shikhandi fulfilled his destiny.

Death

On the last day of the war, Ashwatthama, Drona's son, attacked the sleeping Pandavas. He raised his sword and hacked Draupadi's brothers, Shikhandi and Dhrishtadyumna, to death.

BIOGRAPHY IN BRIEF

Born as Amba to the king of Kashi. Her sisters were Ambika and Ambalika.

Betrothed to Shalva, whom she intended to choose as her husband at the swayamvara organized by her father.

Abducted, along with her sisters, by Bhishma, for his half-brother Vichitravilya.

Rejected by Shalva after being sent back to him by Vichitravilya. Rejected by Vichitravilya and Bhishma on return.

Held Bhishma responsible for her misdeeds.

Received a lotus garland from Kartikeya, the god of war. Anyone who accepted the garland would kill Bhishma, but no one did. Threw it in Drupada's palace when he refused to take it.

Helped by Parashurama when he agreed to fight Bhishma to avenge her. The fight, however, remained inconclusive.

Received a boon by Shiva to be the cause of Bhishma's death in her next life.

Died after leaping into fire.

Reborn as king of Panchala, Drupada's daughter, Shikhandi. Oracles prophesied that she would turn into a man later in life.

Raised like a son by Drupada.

Married to a woman, but her wife complained to her father, who laid siege to Panchala.

Borrowed manhood for a day from a Yaksha called Sthuna and proved that she was a man.

Challenged Bhishma to a duel in the Kurukshetra War. Bhishma refused to fight and Arjuna took advantage of that, pinning Bhishma to the ground with his arrows.

Died at the hands of an angry Ashwatthama, Drona's son, who killed him while he was asleep in the Pandava camp.

ANALYSIS

A QUEER HISTORY

Bhishma, who was invincible on the battlefield, refused to fight Shikhandi, whom he saw as a woman. Though Shikhandi's intervention changed the course of the battle, the warrior's contribution has been given little importance. This has parallels in today's world, where the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) community is fighting hard for the recognition of their rights.

**KRISHNA SLAYS BAKA**

This sculpted panel depicts Krishna pulling apart the beak of the demon stork Baka as the stork tries to swallow him.

and sent the demon Baka, who assumed the shape of a giant stork to attack Krishna with his sharp beak. He tried to swallow the young boy whole, but Krishna grabbed the two halves of the stork's beak and pulled them apart forcefully, killing the bird. Kansa's plan had been foiled again.

Aghasura, the snake demon

The younger brother of Putana, and one of Kansa's generals, Aghasura was sent forth by Kansa to finish Krishna once and for all. The demon transformed himself into a serpent and opened his mouth against a mountain. Thinking it to be a cavern, Krishna's cowherd friends entered the massive hole. Krishna, recognizing that something was amiss, entered the cave to save his friends. As he felt the snake's mouth closing around him and his friends, he began expanding his own body. Within seconds, the snake found it difficult to breathe and expanded his body as well. He

could not, however, match Krishna's size and suffocated.

The wild bull

Frustrated, Kansa sent yet another demon, Aristasura, who took on the shape of a wild bull. He ran amok, terrorizing cows and humans alike as he awaited Krishna's arrival. Upon hearing people cry, Krishna came out to see the bull preparing to attack him. Observing it closely, he realized that the bull was a demon in disguise. Bellowing, the bull charged at Krishna, who grabbed him and squeezed his throat. He then pulled out his horns. The bull fell down, fatally injured, and soon perished of his wounds.

Keshi, the demonic horse

By now, Kansa's worst fears were confirmed. Krishna indeed was Devaki's eighth son. He then sent a flesh-eating demon who took on the appearance of a horse and began killing cows and

FACING THE TORNADO

A 17th-century watercolour from Gujarat, India, shows Krishna caught in the tornado caused by the demon Trinavarta, as the residents of Gokul watch helplessly.

“He sports like a child. But though he assumes the form of a child, these are not the feats of a child.”

KANSA TO THE YADAVA COUNCIL, HARIYAMSHA, THE BOOK OF KRISHNA

cowherds in Vrindavan, eating their flesh and creating mayhem. As the carnage grew, the cowherds ran towards Krishna begging for help.

Krishna came face-to-face with Kansa's latest demon and

a bloody battle ensued. An angry Krishna struck Keshi, killing him instantaneously. When he heard of this killing, Kansa decided that it was time he faced his nephew and put together a plan to bring Krishna to Mathura.





THE ETERNAL LOVERS

These 17th-century brass sculptures are unusual in their depiction of Radha and Krishna. The couple is depicted without the customary finery associated with lovers, and are seen attired in simple clothes.



THE FOREMOST AMONG GOPIS

This terracotta sculpture from the Depara temple, West Bengal, depicts Krishna and the gopis taking a boat ride on the Yamuna river. As his favourite gopi, Radha is seen standing next to Krishna, leaning on him.



A PLAYFUL EXCHANGE

The couple are portrayed wearing each others' clothes in this 19th-century watercolour painting from Himachal Pradesh, illustrating a story that is part of the Radha-Krishna lore.



A LOVERS' TRYST

This Mughal-style painting of Radha and Krishna in a forest grove is full of symbolism. The couples' embrace represents the longing of the male and female to unite, while the creepers on the trees recreate this yearning on a figurative level.