



Chapter 7

An Eternal Partnership

Shiva's entourage had been housed in Ujjain's Brahmin zone, abutting the central Vishnu temple. After a comfortable night's rest, Shiva had just finished breakfast with his family when a Vasudev pandit came over and then escorted him to the Vishnu temple. Shiva had a meeting with Gopal in the morning.

The simple grandeur of the massive Vishnu temple became even more apparent as Shiva approached it. It was built on a circular platform, of polished granite stones that were fixed together using metal. Contiguous holes and channels were drilled into stones and then molten metal poured into them; as the metal solidified, it bound the stones together in an unbreakable grip. Although expensive, this technique ensured strength as compared to the stones being bound together by mortar. There were no carvings on the platform at all, in keeping with its simplicity. In fact, statues and carvings would have been an unnecessary distraction given the marvel of engineering that the structure itself was. Steps had been chiselled all along the sides of the circular platform so that visitors could approach the great seventh Vishnu, Lord Ram, from all directions.

A thousand cylindrical pillars made of granite stood atop the platform, their bases buried deep. Lathe machines

powered by elephants had achieved perfect evenness and uniform solidity in the pillars, which allowed them to efficiently bear the weight of the conical spire on top. The massive black-stone spire looked as smooth from up close as from a distance. Each stone block was of the same dimension, fitted in perfectly and polished smooth. A giant cupola made of black limestone had been placed on top of the spire. The Vasudev pandit remained silent as he watched Shiva climb the steps of the temple in wonder.

As he entered the main temple, he noticed that the spire was completely hollow from the inside, giving a magnificent view of the giant conical ceiling that enveloped a cavernous hall. This temple, unlike the others that Shiva had seen in India, did not have a separate sanctum sanctorum. The inside of the temple was an open, communal place of worship. The ceiling was ablaze with paintings in bright colours depicting the life of Lord Ram: his birth, his education, his exile and eventual triumphant return. Large frescoes on a prominent wall were devoted to the Lord's life after ascending the throne of Ayodhya; his real enemies, the wars he waged against them, his intense relationship with his inspirational wife, Lady Sita, and his founding of Meluha.

A giant pillar made of white granite stood in the centre of the hall. It was almost two hundred metres high, extending all the way to the top of the conical spire. Shiva was aware that granite was amongst the hardest stones known to man and extremely difficult to carve; hence he was surprised to see the detailed carvings on the pillar. They were giant images of Lord Ram and Lady Sita. Dressed simply, with no royal ornaments or crowns, they wore plain hand-spun cotton, the clothes of the poorest of the poor. These were the garments worn by the divine couple during their fourteen-year exile, most of it in dense jungles. Even more

intriguing was the absence of Lord Lakshman and Lord Hanuman, who were normally included in all depictions of the seventh Vishnu. Lady Sita held his right hand from below, as if in support.

‘Why has the worst phase of their life been chosen for depiction?’ asked Shiva. ‘This was when they had been banished from Ayodhya, when Lady Sita was later kidnapped by the demonic King Ravan and Lord Ram fought a fierce battle to rescue her.’

The Vasudev pandit smiled. ‘Lord Ram had said that even if his entire life was forgotten, this phase, the one that he had spent in exile along with his wife, his brother and his follower Hanuman, should be remembered by all. For he believed that this was the period that had made him who he was.’

Gopal stood close to the base of the central pillar. Next to him were two ceremonial chairs, one at the feet of the statue of Lady Sita and the other at the feet of Lord Ram. A small ritual fire burned between the two chairs. The presence of the purifying Lord Agni, the God of Fire, signified that no lies could pass between those who sat on either side. Many Vasudev pandits stood patiently behind Gopal.

Gopal bowed to Shiva and joined his hands in a respectful Namaste. ‘A Vasudev exists to serve but two purposes. The next Vishnu must arise from amongst us and we must serve the Mahadev, whenever he should choose to come.’

Shiva bowed low to Gopal in reciprocation.

‘Every single one of us present here is honoured,’ continued Gopal, ‘that one of our missions will be fulfilled within our lifetime. We are yours to command, Lord Neelkanth.’

‘You are not my follower, Lord Gopal,’ said Shiva. ‘You are my friend. I have come here to seek your advice, for I’m unable to come to a decision.’

Gopal smiled and gestured towards the chairs.

Shiva and Gopal took their seats as the other Vasudev pandits sat around them on the floor, in neat rows.



Ganesh, Kartik and Brahaspati had set off on a short tour of Ujjain, accompanied by a Vasudev Kshatriya. Ganesh was deeply interested in the animal enclosures in the outermost zone. Specifically, the elephant stables.

Pulling his horse close to Ganesh's mount, the Vasudev Kshatriya asked, 'Why are you so interested in the elephants, My Lord?'

'They are important for the impending war. They will play a big role if they are as well trained as I hope.'

The Vasudev smiled and prodded his horse forward, leading the way to the enclosures. He was happy to see the son of the Neelkanth interested in their war elephants. The Kshatriyas amongst the Vasudevs had revived the art of training them, much against the advice of the ruling Vasudev pandits. These magnificent beasts had once formed the dominant corps in Indian armies. However, counter tactics had been developed in recent times that offset their fearsome power; foremost among them was the use of specific drums, which disturbed the elephants and made them run amok, resulting in casualties within their own ranks. Most armies had stopped using them. But it was undeniable that well-trained elephants could be devastating on a battlefield. Ganesh had heard about the skilfully trained elephants in the Vasudev army. But their famous reticence made it difficult to believe whether this was true or in fact just rumours. Kartik leaned close to his brother. 'But *dada*, we've seen their elephants already when we rode them here from the Chambal. They are exceptionally well-trained and disciplined.'

‘Yes they are, Kartik,’ answered Ganesh. ‘But those were female elephants that are not used in war. They are used for domestic work, like ferrying people or material. It is the male elephants that are required in times of war.’

‘Is that because they’re more aggressive?’

‘Notwithstanding their otherwise calm temperament, elephants can be provoked, even trained, to be more aggressive. It is difficult to train a female elephant to be more aggressive though, for she will kill only with good reason, for example when her offspring is threatened. A male elephant, however, can be trained to be belligerent far more easily.’

‘Why is that so?’ asked Kartik. ‘Are they less intelligent in comparison?’

‘Well, I have heard that on average, the female of the species is smarter. But it’s a little more complicated. Elephant herds are matriarchal and it’s usually the oldest female who makes all the decisions in the wild: when they will move, where they will feed, who remains in the herd and who gets kicked out.’

‘Kicked out?’

‘Yes, male elephants are made to leave the herd when they reach adolescence. They either learn to fend for themselves or join nomadic male elephant herds.’

‘That’s unfair.’

‘Nature is not concerned with fairness, Kartik. It’s only interested in efficiency. The male elephant is not of much use to the herd. The females are quite capable of defending themselves and taking care of each other’s calves. The male is only required when a female wants to have a child.’

‘So how do they..?’

‘During the mating season, the female herd accepts a few nomadic male elephants for some time so that the females can get impregnated. Then the males are abandoned once again.’

Kartik shook his head. ‘That’s so cold.’

‘Well, that is the way it is. The female wild elephants have well-defined social behaviour and group dynamics, enforced by the matriarch. The male elephant, on the other hand, is a nomad with no ties to anyone of his kind. Since he is usually a loner, he would have to be much more aggressive to survive. Therefore he is more difficult to break and one needs to catch him young. But once he is broken in, he is much easier to handle and remains loyal to the *mabout*, his rider. More importantly, unlike a female elephant, he will kill without sufficient reason, just because his *mabout* orders him to do so.’

‘My Lords,’ said the Vasudev Kshatriya, interrupting the conversation as he pointed forward, ‘the elephant stables.’



‘I guess you already know what I suspect is Evil,’ said Shiva, looking at Gopal sitting across the small ritual fire.

‘I wouldn’t be much of a mind-reader if I didn’t,’ smiled Gopal. ‘But I suppose you are more interested in knowing if I agree.’

‘Yes. And if you do, what are your reasons?’

‘Well, first things first. Of course we agree with you. Every single Vasudev agrees with you.’

‘Why?’

‘We are faithful followers of the institution of the Mahadev. We *have* to agree with you, once you have the right answer.’

Shiva caught on to something. ‘Once I have the right answer?’

‘Yes. Despite so many challenges, you have arrived at the right answer to the question posed to every Mahadev: What is Evil?’

‘Does that mean you were already aware of the right answer?’

‘Of course. What I did not know were the answers to the questions posed to me. The questions for the institution of the Vishnu are very different. The Mahadev’s key question is: What is Evil? For the Vishnu, there are two key questions: What is the next great Good? And *when* does Good become Evil?’

‘When?’

‘Yes. While a Mahadev is an outsider, a Vishnu has to be an insider. His job is to use a great Good to create a new way of life and then lead men to that path. The great Good could be anything: a new technology like the *daini astras* or a creation like the Somras; it could even be a philosophy. Most leaders just follow what has been ordained by a previous Vishnu. But once in a while a Vishnu emerges who uses a great Good to create a new way of life. Lord Ram used more than one, such as the idea that we can choose our own community rather than being stuck with the community that we are born into. He also allowed for the widespread use of the Somras so that not just the elite but everyone could benefit from its powers. But remember, great Good will, more often than not, lead to great Evil.’

‘I understood that from the teachings of Lord Manu. I’d like to hear your reasons for why this is so.’

‘We have a philosophical book in our community that answers this question beautifully. It contains the teachings of great philosophers who we have revered over the centuries, like Lord Hari and Lord Mohan. It also contains the teachings of the chiefs of the Vasudev tribe, beginning with our founder, Lord Vasudev. The book is called the “Song of our Lord”.’

‘Song of our Lord?’

‘Yes. It is called the *Bhagavad Gita* in old Sanskrit. The Gita has a beautiful line that encapsulates what I want to convey:

Ati sarvatra varjayet. Excess should be avoided; excess of anything is bad. Some of us are attracted to Good. But the universe tries to maintain balance. So what is good for some may end up being bad for others. Agriculture is good for us humans as it gives us an assured supply of food, but it is bad for the animals that lose their forest and grazing land. Oxygen is good for us as it keeps us alive, but for anaerobic creatures that lived billions of years ago, it was toxic and it destroyed them. Therefore, if the universe is trying to maintain balance, we must aid this by ensuring that Good is not enjoyed excessively. Or else the universe will re-balance itself by creating Evil to counteract Good. That is the purpose of Evil: it balances the Good.’

‘Why can’t there be a Good that does not create Evil? Why can’t we establish a way of life that does not imbalance the universe?’

‘That is impossible. Our being alive itself creates imbalances. In order to live, we breathe. When we breathe, we take in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. Aren’t we creating an imbalance by doing so? Isn’t carbon dioxide evil for some? The only way we can stop creating evil is if we stop doing good as well; if we stop living completely. But if we have been born, then it is our duty to live. Let us look at it from the perspective of the universe. The only time the universe was in perfect balance was at the moment of its creation. And the moment before that was when it had just been destroyed; for that was when it was in perfect imbalance. Creation and destruction are the two ends of the same moment. And everything between creation and the next destruction is the journey of life. The universe’s dharma is to be created, live out its life till its inevitable destruction and then be created once again. We are a downscaled version of the universe.’

‘These are just theories, Panditji.’

‘Yes they are. But they explain a lot of things that otherwise seem abstruse.’

‘Even if I were to agree with you, how would it work at our level? We are minuscule compared to the universe.’

‘Yes, that is true, but the universe lives within us in a minute model of itself. Good and Evil are a way of life for every living entity, including us. Our creation and destruction is through Good and Evil; through balance and imbalance. This is true for animals, plants, planets, stars, everything. What makes us humans special is that we can choose how to control Good and Evil. Most creatures are not given that opportunity. There were giant creatures that lived on Earth many millions of years ago. Climate change made them extinct. We have good reason to believe that they were not responsible for this but were victims of the “Evil” which suddenly reared its head. Humans, however, have been blessed with intelligence, the greatest gift of the Almighty. This allows us to make choices. We have the power to consciously choose Good and improve our lives. We also have the ability to stop Evil before it destroys us completely. Our relationship with nature is different from that of other living creatures. Others have nature’s will forced upon them. We have the privilege, at times, of forcing our will upon nature. We can do this by creating and using Good, like we created agriculture. What is forgotten, however, is that many times the Good we create leads to the Evil that will destroy us.’

‘Is that where the Mahadev comes in?’

‘Yes. Good emerges from creative thinkers and scientists like Lord Brahma. But it needs a Vishnu to harness that Good and lead humanity on the path of progress. Paradoxically, imbalance in society is embedded in this very progress. At other times, a Vishnu arises and intervenes to move society away from the Evil which Good may be leading it to; he creates an alternative Good. By diluting the potency and hence the toxic effects

of the Somras waste, Brahaspati was attempting just such an intervention. Had he succeeded, we Vasudevs would inevitably have helped him fulfil that mission. A new way of life based on a benign Somras would have been established. Alas, Brahaspati did not succeed and that path is closed. There exists only the path of the Mahadev now; to confront and then lead people away from the Good that has now become Evil.’

‘So a Vishnu can make people move away from a Good that has turned Evil, by offering an alternate Good. But a Mahadev has to ask people to give up a Good without offering anything in return.’

‘Yes. And that is not an easy thing to do. The Somras is still Good for a lot of people. It increases their lifespan dramatically and enables them to lead youthful, disease-free and productive lives. But it is evil for society as a whole. We are asking people to sacrifice their selfish interests for the sake of a greater good, while giving them nothing in return. This requires an outsider, a leader, who people will follow blindly. This requires a God who excites fervent devotion. This requires the Mahadev.’

‘So you always knew the Somras was Evil?’

‘We always knew it would eventually become Evil. What we didn’t know is *when*. Remember, Good needs to run its course. If we remove a Good too early from society, we are obstructing the march of civilisation. However, if we remove it too late, we risk the complete destruction of society. So in the battle against Evil, the institution of the Vishnu has to wait for the institution of the Mahadev to decide if the time has come. In our case, a Mahadev emerged and his quest led him to the conclusion that the Somras is Evil. Therefore, we knew that it was time for Evil to be removed. The Somras had to be taken out of the equation.’



Ganesh, Kartik and Brahaspati stood at the entrance to the elephant stables. There were ten circular enclosures, built of massive stone-blocks. Each enclosure could house between eight hundred to one thousand animals. Five of the enclosures were for the female elephants and their calves. The remaining five were reserved for the male elephants that were regularly trained for war.

The female elephant enclosures had massive pools of water at their centre, allowing the beasts to submerge, have a mud bath, and spray themselves with water. The area around the pools was also a social meeting point for the animals. Piles of nutritious leaves around the central pool catered to the voluminous appetites of the animals. The female elephants were also taken to the jungle in small herds to feast on fresh vegetation. These outings also allowed the beasts to rub their skin against trees, which would scale off their dead skin. The resting areas in the female enclosure did not have partitions and they were allowed to mix freely. They usually grouped into herds, led by their specific matriarchs.

The enclosures for the male elephants though, were completely different. To begin with, the shelters were partitioned into separate sections for each elephant. The animal's individual *mabout* lived just above the elephant's enclosure, spending practically all his time with the beast under his control. This developed an attachment on the part of the elephant, for his *mabout*. The beasts were not expected to do any work. They did not rub their skin against rocks and trees to scrub the dead skin off; instead, the *mabouts* bathed them daily. They did not walk to a central area for their meals; instead, freshly-cut plants were supplied to them outside their own specific shelter. The male-elephants had only one task – train for war.

The central area of the male elephant enclosures had been

suitably prepared for that purpose. There was a pool of water in the central enclosure, just like in the female enclosure. But the pool was much deeper. Here the elephants were taught to put their inborn swimming skills to better use; they were taught to ram and sink boats. Around the pool were massive training grounds where the elephants were trained for specific tasks like mowing down opposing army lines. They were also toughened to survive the heat of battle. The Vasudevs were aware of the recent wide-spread use of drums with low frequency sounds to trouble elephants and drive them crazy. To combat this, the Vasudevs had developed an innovative ear plug for them. Furthermore, the elephants were also subjected to a daily bout of low frequency war drums, to help them get used to the sounds.

Ganesh, Kartik and Brahaspati were led into one of the male elephant enclosures. The Vasudev led them directly to one of the animals that he was personally proud of. As he reached the enclosure he called out to the *mabout*, instructing him to bring the elephant out of his shelter. The *mabout* immediately did so, sitting proudly on top of the beast, just behind its head. To Ganesh's surprise, the elephant's eyes had been covered by its head gear. The Vasudev Kshatriya clarified that the covers could be removed easily by the *mabout* from his position. It was used when they wanted the elephant to act solely on the *mabout's* instruction and not based on what it saw. A metallic cylindrical ball was tied to its trunk with a bronze chain. The Vasudev then proceeded to set up a round wooden board as a target. It was roughly three times the size of a human head.

'You may want to step back,' said the Vasudev to the assemblage.

As the visitors stepped back, the Vasudev looked towards the *mabout* and nodded. The man gently pressed his feet into the back of the elephant's ears, in a series of instructions.

The elephant stepped languidly up to the wooden target and shook his head, acknowledging the orders. Then all of a sudden, with the speed of lightning, it swung its mighty trunk, hitting the wooden board smack in the centre with the metallic ball, smashing the target to smithereens.

Kartik whistled softly in appreciation.

Ganesh looked towards the Vasudev. ‘Can we make the target a little more interesting?’

The Vasudev was so confident of his elephant that he immediately agreed. Another wooden target was brought in, but placed on a board with wheels at the bottom, as Ganesh had instructed. He painted a smaller circle on the wooden board as a target; it was the size of a human head. In addition, Ganesh asked for the metallic ball tied to the elephant’s trunk to be painted a bright red; thus they’d know exactly where the ball would hit the target. The *mabout* was tasked with ensuring that the elephant struck the smaller circle with his metallic ball, even as two other soldiers moved the board around with long ropes. The target simulated a man trying to avoid the elephant’s blow. If the elephant could be used to kill a specific man rather than for mass butchery, then one could target the leader of an opposing army, rendering it headless.

Everyone stepped back. The *mabout* kept his eyes pinned to the board as he issued instructions through his feet, making the elephant move slowly towards the target. The soldiers with the ropes were alternately pulling and releasing their lines, keeping the target in constant motion. Suddenly, the *mabout* dug in deep with his right foot and the elephant swung his mighty trunk. The metallic ball hit the centre of the wooden board. It was a killer blow.

Ganesh smiled and swore in the name of the legendary *Lord of the Animals*. ‘By the great *Pashupatinath* himself, what an elephant!’