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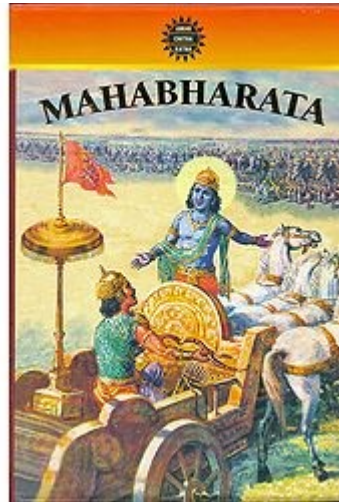
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Arjuna and His Sons - Two Generations of Courage

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The great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are true gems that are relevant through all time and for all ages and generations of people. While most of us know and adore the central characters of both the epics, few of us have information regarding the next generation princes and princesses in those epics. The Uttara Ramayana relates in detail the lives of Rama's twins, Lava and Kusha.

The legend of the Upapandavas too relates the story of the Pandavas' children. However, this tale is not commonly heard and not many know much about the Pandavas' next generation or what happened to them in the subsequent years.



Mahabharata - Set of 3 Volumes (Book)

Here is the tale of the offspring of Arjuna, one of the main characters of the Mahabharata.

Arjuna

Before going into the lives of Arjuna's children, let us go into the life of the Pandava prince. The third of the Pandava brothers, Arjuna was the Son of Indra, the King of the Devas. He was feted as the best archer in the world, during his time. Born to Kunti, the first wife of King Pandu, ruler of the Kuru Kingdom, Arjuna is believed to be a saint named Nara in his previous

birth. Nara was the lifelong companion of another saint, Narayana; an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who manifested in his Krishna avatara.

Arjuna was the most famous of the five Pandava brothers. He was born seven months after Lord Krishna was born and their friendship lasted their entire lifetime. It is believed that even the Gods were eager to take a look at baby Arjuna, just after his birth.

The name Arjuna means "white", "clear" and "silver". He was addressed by many other names as well, including Vijaya, Dhananjaya, Savyasachin, Shwetavahana, Parantapa, Gandivadhara, Gandivadhanvan, Gudakesha, Bibhatsu, Kapidhwaja, Kiritin, Jishnu, Partha, Phalguna and Madhyapandava.

Kunti's Boon

The Pandavas' mother, Kunti had a boon from sage Durvasa that she would be able to call any Deva of her choice and beget a child from them as a gift. Being young and immature, she had decided to test the boon and summoned Surya Deva (the Sun God) with the secret mantra that the sage had given her. Immediately, Surya appeared before her and gave her a son. Shocked and not knowing what to do, Kunti decided to abandon the child. She was unmarried at the time and having a child would cause scandal. She wrapped the child in a blanket and warm clothes, placed him in a basket and let the basket float on the waters of a nearby river.

This was Karna, one of the other mighty warriors of the Mahabharata. Found and raised by a charioteer named Athiratha and his wife, Radha, he went on to join the Kauravas and fought against the Pandavas during the Great War of Kurukshetra.



Veer Karna - The Valiant Son of Kunti (Book)

Pandu was cursed by sage Kindama that he would not be able to have a connubial relationship with his wives, and so, would not have any children as well. Hence, Kunti called upon 3 more

Devas after their marriage. This way, she begot Yudhishtira from Yama (God of Death), Bheema from Vayu (Wind God) and Arjuna from Indra. She then shared the mantra with Pandu's other wife Madri, who called upon the Ashwins, who in turn, gave her the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva.

After Pandu's death, the Pandavas lived in Hastinapura with Kunti and their cousins, the Kauravas. When they came of age, they were all trained in warfare under their Guru, Dronacharya.

Arjuna Becomes Drona's Favourite Shishya

Among all his shishyas (disciples), Arjuna became Drona's favourite and also the most accomplished one. Even his own son, Ashwatthama, was not so brilliant in his eyes. Arjuna had tremendous focus while practicing archery. Drona once hung an artificial bird on a tree, asking his pupils to shoot just the eye of the bird. Arjuna was so focused that, while his Guru queried him as to what he saw, he said that he could see only the eye and not the bird. He let out the arrow and, sure enough, it hit the bird's eye.

One evening, Drona asked all his disciples to assemble at a nearby lake. They all did as they were told. Suddenly, a crocodile appeared from the water and attacked the Acharya. While everyone else stood aghast, Arjuna jumped into the lake and began attacking the huge creature with his bare hands. In a trice, the crocodile disappeared. Drona then told everyone that it was a mere illusion he had created to test his students' devotion and applauded Arjuna that he had shown the courage to save his teacher's life.

Arjuna Weds Draupadi

Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava prince, was always conniving against the Pandavas. Once, the Kauravas sent the Pandavas to Varnavata, to stay in a Lakshagraha, a grand palace, which was actually made of wax. Their plan was to burn down the place, with the princes and Kunti in it. Realizing the impending danger, the Pandavas escaped from there, disguising themselves as Brahmins.

They then went to attend the Swayamvara ceremony of Draupadi, the Princess of Panchala. Her father, King Drupada, announced that the person who would lift, string and fire the Pinakin bow, to pierce the eye of a golden fish, while only looking at its reflection in a pool below, would be able to win his daughter's hand in marriage.

All participants tried their level best and failed. Then, it was Arjuna's turn to fire the arrow. He lifted the bow in one smooth move, strung it, took aim and hit the eye of the fish. He thus wed the beautiful and lissome Draupadi.

Draupadi Weds All the Pandavas

When the brothers returned home with Draupadi, the Pandavas told their mother that they had brought back something precious with them. Kunti was preoccupied at the time and, without looking, asked all the brothers to share it among themselves. In order to obey Kunti's command, Draupadi ended up marrying all the five Pandavas.

She was upset about this in the beginning. Lord Shiva then appeared before her and reminded her of her earlier birth, wherein she had asked for a boon that her husband should have the five qualities of honesty, might, valour, good looks and intelligence. Thus, in this birth, she got all those qualities in each of her five husbands.

Draupadi later had five sons, one from each of the Pandavas. She also had twin daughters from Arjuna. They are collectively known as the Upapandavas.

Arjuna Meets Krishna

The Kauravas were enraged when they realizing that the Pandavas were alive and well. They gave them the Khandavaprastha, an extremely underdeveloped and infertile land. This was the time when Arjuna and Krishna met each other. The latter helped them till the land, along with his brother, Balarama. The friendship between Arjuna and Krishna is the most celebrated bond and comes second only to the relationship between Hanuman and Lord Rama, in the Ramayana.



Balaram - Brother of Krishna (Photographic Print)

While working on Khandava, Krishna and Arjuna saved the life of Mayasura, a demon residing in the area. The grateful Mayasura promised them that he would, in return, build a grand palace for Yudhishtira. Being a brilliant architect of the Asuras, he constructed the stunning Maya

assembly hall. This hall was famous for its visual illusions. Khandavaprastha was then given the name of Indraprastha.

Arjuna Undertakes a Tirtha-Yatra

Once, Arjuna unwittingly violated Yudhishtira and Draupadi's privacy, while they were enjoying a game of dice. He had to retrieve the Gandiva that he had kept in there. Despite the couple forgiving him, Arjuna felt guilty and wished to atone for his sin and so, he set off on a twelve-year tirtha-yatra (pilgrimage).

Arjuna Meets Ulupi

One day, Arjuna was taking a bath a nearby Ganga river. Suddenly, a strong current pulled him down, carrying him to another region. He then saw a beautiful woman standing before him. She introduced herself as Ulupi, the Princess of Nagaloka (the world of the serpents). She also stated that she had caused the current on purpose, so that she could meet him and could marry him. Though initially reluctant, Arjuna finally married Ulupi and then went on to complete his pilgrimage. Ulupi and Arjuna had a son named Iravan.

Arjuna Marries Chitrangada

While on his tirtha-yatra, Arjuna visited many tirthas in India, including Kalinga and the ashrams of the Saptarishis. He then reached the palace of Manipur, where he met King Chitravahana's daughter, Princess Chitrangada. He fell in love with her and requested the King to let them marry. The king was only too happy and immediately agreed to the proposal.

According to the customs of Manipur, the son of the Princess would become the king of Manipura. This was agreeable to Draupadi as well, as she did not want another woman equal to the queen in Indraprastha. Soon, a son was born to Chitrangada and Arjuna. They named him Babhravahana.

Arjuna Weds Subhadra

Finally, Arjuna reached Dwarka, the abode of Krishna. He was excited to meet his friend and also his sister, Subhadra, who had heard much about. Well aware of his visit and wanting to further their friendship, Krishna devised a plan to get them both married to each other.

Arjuna disguised himself as a Yati and stayed at Krishna's palace. There, he also met Subhadra and fell in love with her. Krishna supported and encouraged their growing feelings for each other. In the meantime, Krishna's brother, Balarama, wanted Subhadra to marry his favourite student, Duryodhana. Subhadra, however, was deeply in love with Arjuna.

Taking the situation into consideration, Krishna advised Arjuna to "abduct" Subhadra. The latter acted as per plan and whisked her away. Balarama was furious when he came to know about

this, but later came to terms with it.

The couple stayed in Dwaraka for a year, after which they went to Pushkar. However, Draupadi did not want any other Pandava wife to stay in her palace. On the advice of Krishna, Arjuna tricked Draupadi into meeting Subhadra as a milkmaid. When Draupadi came to know about this, she was enraged. But she soon forgave Subhadra and let her stay on in Indraprastha. In due course, the couple had a son called Abhimanyu.

Draupadi and Arjuna also had twin daughters named Pragati and Pragya.

The Pandavas Go on Exile

After Yudhishtira lost his all against Shakuni in the infamous Game of Dice, he and the rest of the Pandava brothers were forced to go on exile for a period of 13 years, and then spend one more year in anonymity. In spite of them leaving the palace, Duryodhana was still not satisfied and continued to insult them and taunt them in one way or another.

13 years passed by quickly. It was then time for the brothers for their agyaatavasa (living in anonymity). The brothers visited the kingdom of Matsya, which was ruled by King Virata. Each of them assumed a particular identity and became a part of the palace's staff. Yudhishtira became an advisor to the king and called himself Kanka. Bheema assumed the role of Vallabha, one of the cooks in the palace. Nakula, who called himself Granthika, became an equine expert. Sahadeva tended to the cows and called himself Tantipala. Draupadi assumed the name of Sairandhri and became an assistant of the Queen, Sudeshna.

Arjuna, who was at the time afflicted by Urvashi's curse, had turned into a eunuch. He identified himself as Brihannala and assumed the role of a teacher of arts to the Prince Uttara Kumara. He also taught the King's daughter, Uttara, to sing and dance. Later, he arranged for his son, Abhimanyu, to marry Uttara.

Arjuna's Children

Arjuna had a total of six children from his four wives. They are as follows:

- With Draupadi, he had a son called Srutakarma
- Again, with Draupadi he had twin daughters, named Pragati and Pragya
- Subhadra gifted him with a powerful son named Abhimanyu
- Arjuna and Ulupi shared a son called Iravan
- Chitrangada gave him another mighty son called Babhruvahana

Of these offspring, not much is known about the twin daughters, Pragati and Pragya. In those times, it was the done thing to protect daughters and keep them away from political and other issues affecting a kingdom. They would be given training in the arts and craft and would then be given away in marriage when they came of age.

It is believed that Pragati and Suthanu (Yudhishtira and Draupadi's daughter) were both born during the time when the Pandavas were in exile. After the end of the Great War of Kurukshetra, Suthanu was married to Swarabhanu, the son of Krishna and Satyabhama.

Srutakarma

Srutakarma was born to Arjuna and Draupadi. His name literally means, "he whose deeds are famous" or "he who is famed far and wide". The youngest of the Upapandavas, he too was a mighty warrior, who brought honour to the illustrious family legacy of warriors.

Srutakarma's horses are believed to bear the bright colours of the kingfisher. Though the youngest among the next generation of the Pandavas, he had an important role to play in the Great War of Kurukshetra. He fought long and valiantly against Dushasana and Ashwathama, the son of Dronacharya, both of who were strong and mighty warriors, adept in the art, science and strategy of warfare. On the 16th day of the war, he also defeated and killed Chitrasena, son of Karna.

On the last night of the war, after Duryodhana's death and the Kauravas' ultimate defeat, Ashwathama got together the surviving Kaurava warriors, Kritavarma and Kripacharya. He wanted to avenge the death of his father and his beloved friends, the Kauravas. Together, the trio attacked the Pandava camp on the 18th night, after the war was over and the Pandavas and their army were sleeping in their tents. Ashwathama entered the Upapandavas' tents and killed them all in their sleep. It is generally believed that he mistook the young princes to be the Pandava brothers and ended up killing them.

Abhimanyu

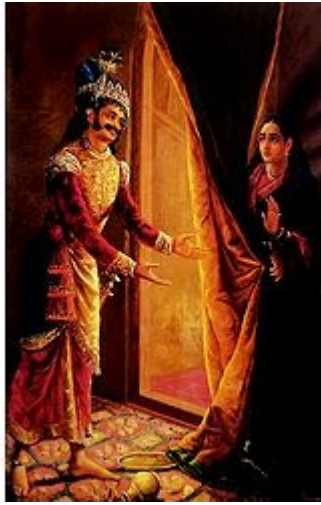
Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna and Subhadra, was believed to be the reincarnation of the son of Chandra Deva, the Moon God. When Chandra was asked to allow his son to take human form and come down to earth, he made a pact with the other Devas that he would permit him to remain on earth only for a period of 16 years, as he could not bear to be separated him for a longer duration.

Like his father, Abhimanyu too was one of the greatest archers in the world. He was also the mightiest and most favourite of the Upapandavas. His other names include Subhadranandan, Soubhadri, Chandraputra, Krishna Sishya, Sarvasreshtha Yodha and Raudra Dhari.

Virata Parva

According to some versions of popular legends, Abhimanyu had a major role to play in the Virata Parva of the Mahabharata. He and Uttara had already met and had fallen in love, while he was in search of his parents who were in exile. Knowing this, Draupadi convinced him to

leave the Matsya kingdom. If their true identity was known to Kauravas, the Pandavas would have had to go on an exile for another 13 years. Draupadi wanted to avoid this situation.



Keechaka Trying to Woo Sairindhri - Poster (Raja Ravi Varma Reprint)

In the meantime, Bheema slayed Kichaka when he tried to repeatedly harrass and molest Draupadi (who was disguised as Sairindhri - a maid servant at the queen's palace). Hearing this news, Duryodhana surmised that the Pandavas were spending their time in Matsya. An army of Kaurava warriors, led by Susharma, attacked the kingdom. At the same time, Kichaka's 100 brothers abducted Draupadi and Bheema, Nakula and Sahadeva went in search of her. Yudhishtira stayed on in Matsya to defend the kingdom from the invaders.

While Abhimanyu was leaving for Dwaraka, Uttara rushed to him, asking for help. Abhimanyu led the Matsya army and defeated Susharma and his army. He then promised the princess that he would come back to her after the successful completion of his parents' exile.

He took Brihannala (Arjuna) as his charioteer - once on the battlefield, Arjuna revealed his true identity and introduced Abhimanyu to everyone. The father-son duo fought the Kaurava army, including Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Kripacharya and Ashwathama and totally routed them. Arjuna also killed Sangramjit, the foster brother of Karna. Karna and the others were finally forced to flee from the scene of battle.

Grateful for the Pandavas' support, King Virata offered his daughter, Uttara, in marriage to Arjuna. The latter, however, refused that offer, as Uttara was then his disciple. He had therefore viewed her only as a daughter and would not be able to accept her as his spouse. He however was agreeable to welcome her into his family as his daughter-in-law and Abhimanyu's wife. Virata happily accepted this offer and got her married to the young prince.

The War of Kurukshetra

On the very first day of the Great War of Kurukshetra, young Abhimanyu faced the mighty Bhishma and engaged in an archery duel with the stalwart. The battle was intense and both the warriors were almost equal. Though on the enemy's side, Bhishma was impressed by the youngster's skill and was proud of this great-grandson of his, who was fighting so valiantly. Not wanting to kill him, he did not use any celestial weapon on the prince.

When he sustained injuries from Bhishma's arrows, the doyen asked him to go away from him. To this, the former replied that he was the student of Arjuna and Krishna and hence, would never flee the scene in fear. Bhishma was proud to see how noble and brave his great-grandson was. Abhimanyu then broke Bhishma's bow and they engaged in a sword fight till sunset, when the battle was called off for the day. The very next day, Abhimanyu challenged Ashwathama and also engaged Drona in a fight. But he was so strong that even the great Acharya could not defeat him.

The Thirteenth Day

Drona, who was the commander-in-chief of the Kauravas, plotted to divert Arjuna and Krishna away to fight a Samasaptakha army. His plan was to trap Abhimanyu and eventually kill him. On his order, the Kaurava army grouped into a Chakravyuha or a discus-shaped battle formation, which was nearly impossible to come out of. The Chakravyuha caused much damage to the Pandava side.

The only two people who knew their way out of the Chakravyu were Krishna and Arjuna. Abhimanyu knew a little about this formation. He had learnt it partially, while he was still in Subhadra's womb by listening to a conversation between his mother and Arjuna. But he had not learnt how to come out of it, once he had entered it. This was because Subhadra had fallen asleep while Arjuna was explaining the technique. Abhimanyu convinced his uncles (the rest of the Pandavas) to allow him to break into the formation, while the rest of the Pandava warriors followed him inside to break it. Abhimanyu then bravely proceeded to break into the formation.

As soon as he entered the Chakravyuha, Jayadratha, along with other warriors, blocked the other Pandavas from entering the formation. The Kaurava warriors then arranged themselves in rows, trapping Abhimanyu, who went on a rampage, fighting and killing them as he went along. He killed many major warriors, including Duryodhana's son Lakshmana, Salya's son, Karna's younger brothers and many advisors, Kritavarma's son Matrikavata, Shrutanjaya, Ashvketu, Chandraketu, Mahavega, Suvarcha, Suryabhasa, Rathas from the Brahma-Vasatiyas and Kekayas and many others.

It is said that Abhimanyu defeated Karna four times, till the latter was forced to escape from him. This threatened Duryodhana and he was certain that the young prince would be able to

come out victorious from the vyuha. Hence, he formed a strategy whereby they would all attack him together. Karna broke his arrow from behind, as he knew he would never be able to defeat him face-to-face. Kripa killed his two charioteers. Abhimanyu grabbed a sword and shield, but they were destroyed by Drona and Ashwathama. Left weaponless, he then took up a chariot-wheel and fought with it. However, Kripa again cut the wheel.

The unarmed Abhimanyu was harassed further. All the warriors together shot several arrows at him. But he still continued to fight and kill more Kaurava soldiers. He also attacked Dushasana's son with a mace. Slowly, he started losing his stamina and started becoming exhausted. He finally buckled under the pressure and lost consciousness. Dushasana's son, who was also getting tired, hit him from behind, with his mace - a truly cowardly act by a warrior.

Abhimanyu finally succumbed to this fatal wound and fell lifeless to the ground. In this way, the young warrior was killed most unfairly by the so-called maharathis, including Drona, Karna, Duryodhana, Ashwathama, Dushasana, Kritavarma, Shalya and Shakuni.

Abhimanyu's bravery and immense contribution to the Kurukshetra War stands as a shining example for all time. He is still celebrated as an icon of loyalty, strength and valour.

Legacy

Hearing about the horrifying and cowardly act of the Kaurava army and grief-stricken at the untimely death of his son, Arjuna vowed to kill Jayadratha. The very next day, he decapitated the latter and caused immense damage to the Kaurava army.

Abhimanyu's son, Parikshit, who was born after the end of the war, became the sole heir to the Pandavas and eventually succeeded Yudhishtira to the throne. He was the sole survivor of the Kuru clan, at the end of the Mahabharata.

Iravan

Iravan, also known as Iravat and Iravant, is the son of Arjuna and the Naga princess, Ulupi (or Uloopi). He is also the main deity of the cult of Kuttantavar and has a minor role in the cult of Draupadi as well. Both these are of Tamil origin, in South India. In these regions, he is venerated as the village deity, Aravan. Interestingly, he is also the patron God of the well-known transgender communities of Thirunangais (also called Aravanis in Tamil) and is famous throughout South Asia.

The name "Aravan" is believed to be derived from the Tamil word, "aravam", which means, "snake". He is also known as Kuttantavar, as he killed the demon Kuttacuran.

While the Mahabharata talks about Iravan dying a heroic death on the 8th day of the War of

Kurukshetra, South Indian cults have a tradition of honouring his self-sacrifice to Goddess Kali, as his offering for the Pandavas to win the war.

Appearance

Aravan is often depicted as a crowned male head with big eyes and ears, bushy eyebrows, large moustache, earrings and a Vaishnava tilak on his forehead. His skin is reddish in colour and two large demonic canine fangs hang down lower than his bottom hip. He is usually portrayed with a cobra hood over his crown, cobra heads peeking out through the crown or a snake emerging from behind his crown.

Some paintings depict his sacrifice to Goddess Korravai, who later became associated with Durga or Kali. These show him bowing down to the dark Goddess, while his head is about to be severed. Some others show Aravan holding a sword and his own severed head, offering the latter to the Goddess.



Kali - Brass Statue

The story of Iravan finds a parallel in the Telugu legend of the sacrifice of Barbarika. This is another character in the Mahabharata. Both Aravan and Barbarika sacrificed their lives and both had the boon to witness the entire War of Kurukshetra through the eyes of their severed head.

Aravan's head symbolizes not only self-sacrifice, devotion and loyalty, but also regeneration and continuity, due to his ability to witness the war even after his death.

Krishna Bestows Three Boons on Aravan

According to folk legends, Krishna gave three boons to Aravan. One of them was that he would be married before his death. The Lord appeared before him in his female manifestation of

Mohini, the Divine Enchantress. Some versions of folklore relate that Krishna married Aravan in this female form of Mohini. It is believed that, after his death, Mohini mourned his loss and her resultant widowhood.



Mohini - Poster (Temple Mural Reprint)

Even today in Tamil Nadu, this story is re-enacted during an 18-day festival. The Thirunangais first perform a ceremonial marriage of Aravan and the male villagers and then, after depicting Aravan's sacrifice, they act like his widows.

The Draupadi cult also talks about the second boon, whereby Aravan would be able to witness the entire Kurukshetra War unfolding, through the eyes of his severed head. In a re-enactment of this, a severed head of the warrior is hoisted on a post, as a witness of the war.

This is a common motif in Draupadi temples. Usually, this is a portable wooden head and is placed on the corners of temple roofs, so as to protect the premises from evil spirits. The deity is propitiated in order to cure diseases and also to bless childless couples with offspring. Sometimes, Aravan has his own little shrine within a temple complex.

The third boon he asked of Krishna was that he should be able to die a heroic death on the battlefield, at the hands of a great hero. Accordingly, his body reconstituted and he became whole again, in order to continue fighting the war. He met his end on the eighth day, fighting with the mighty demon Alambusha (Almapucan in Tamil). Before breathing his last, he ravaged the Kaurava army, killing several prominent warriors and soldiers. After that, his decapitated head was witness to all events, until the end of the war.

In Indonesia, he is known as Irawan. According to Javanese traditions, he loses his association with the Nagas. He then marries Titisari, the daughter of Krishna and his death results as a

case of mistaken identity. These stories are narrated through shadow-puppet plays, known as Wayang Kulit.

In the Mahabharata

The Adi Parva (first book) of the Mahabharata mentions the marriage of Iravan's parents and then, both his birth and death are mentioned in the sixth book, the Bhishma Parva. According to this story, Arjuna, while on his tirtha-yatra saw the widowed Naga princess, Ulupi, and fell in love with her. They got married and got a son called Iravan. When it was time for Arjuna to leave, Iravan stayed with his mother. He, however, was rejected by his maternal uncle, who had great hatred for Arjuna.

After coming of age, he wanted to be reunited with his father and departed for Indraprastha, to meet Indra, Arjuna's father. After meeting his son, Arjuna requested to help him during the war. In this way, Iravan entered the battlefield.

On the first day, Iravan fought a duel with Srutayusha, a Kshatriya king. On the seventh day, he also defeated Vinda and Anuvinda, the princes of Avanti. On the eighth day, he faced the princes of Gandhara, and Shakuni. He killed them all, except Vrishava, with the help of his army of Nagas.

Alarmed by the damage Iravan crated for the Kauravas, Duryodhana planned to kill him. He ordered the rakshasa Alambusha, son of Rishyasringa, to destroy him. The latter used his illusory powers in the battlefield. Iravan, however, managed to ward off all his attacks and fought on valiantly. Ultimately, Alambusha assumed the form of a giant Garuda (eagle) and devoured the entire Naga army. He then beheaded Iravan, finally killing him.

According to some versions of the legend, Duryodhana learned from the Pandavas' astrologer that the day of the new moon was the most auspicious time for a kalappali. That happened to fall on the very next day. So the Kaurava prince approached Iravan and convinced him that it would be best for him to sacrifice himself on that day. Some other accounts narrate that Krishna was willing to sacrifice himself to Kali, but Iravan intervened and offered his own life instead. Ulupi was against him killing himself. He, however, did not budge and told her that he was doing this for the greater good and that he belonged entirely to his Divine Mother, Kali.

The Therukoothu

The Therukoothu, a popular street-play form of Tamil Nadu, depicts in detail the Aravan Kalappali. This is staged annually in the villages of Melattur, Kodukizhi, Yervadi and Karambai. The koothu first depicts his marriage to Mohini and her abrupt disappearance from the scene, to indicate that the marriage was probably not consummated, as Iravan wished it to be.

His act of self-sacrifice is then enacted. Here, the actor playing Aravan is covered with a white

cloth, from the neck down. It is believed that the spirit of the deity may possess the actor at this point. Sometimes, a chicken is offered as sacrifice during this ritual.

Aravan Becomes Kuttantavar

A local legend of Koovagam describes how Aravan came to be known as Kuttantavar. After the war, Krishna asked Aravan who he thought was responsible for winning the war. The latter replied that it was two things: Krishna's discus decapitating the enemy and his conch collecting their blood. This enraged Bheema, who resented that Aravan was giving all the credit to Krishna.

Fearing that Bheema would attack Aravan, Krishna suggested that the latter's head be dropped in the river Caraparika. Once that was done, Aravan assumed the form of a human child and was eventually discovered by the king of Chandragiri, a city along the river bank.

The king named the child Kuvakkam (or Koovagam). He also gave him the name Carapalan. As the child grew up, he went on to kill the demon Kuttacuran, who had wounded his foster father during a battle. Draupadi, the ruling Goddess of the region, blessed him with the name Kuttantavar, the slayer of Kuttacuran. She also granted a temple for him in Koovagam.

Worship

Most followers of Kuttantavar reside in Cuddalore, Thiruvannamalai, Vellore and Villupuram. Apart from Koovagam, there are 32 other prominent temples dedicated to Kuttacuran's worship. In Thanjavur, Kumbhakonam and Pattukkottai, Aravan's head is enshrined in mandapas. The largest known head is found at the Hajiyar Teru temple in Kumbhakonam.

During the first 6 days of the 18-day-long Kuttantavar festival, the deity's head is carried around the streets of Koovagam. He is decked up with flowers, garlands and ornaments and is taken on a procession with music and fireworks accompanying it. Every household offers a pooja to the deity. On the 13th day, his spirit is transferred into a pot and on the 14th day, his head is placed on a 20-foot high post, which is in turn placed on a ratham (ceremonial chariot).

This is followed by male priests, dressed as women, tying thalis (chains round their neck, signifying marriage) around their necks. This represents Aravan's marriage ceremony. Then, the next day, the Aravanis mourn his death as widows would mourn their husbands' death. On the 16th day, his soul is transferred back to his repainted head. His revival is celebrated on the 17th day and, the next day, his head is officially crowned and is reinstated by priests, in a ceremony held in the inner sanctum of his temple.

Babhruvahana

Babhruvahana, also known as Babhnu Vahana, is the son of Arjuna and Chitrangada, the daughter of King Chitravahana of Manipura. Arjuna met her when he was on his tirtha-yatra. He instantly fell in love with her and visited her father, seeking her hand in marriage. The king was ready to marry his daughter, on the condition that a son born of her would become the next successor of the throne of Manipura. Arjuna agreed to the condition and the two got married to each other.

He stayed with her in Manipura for a period of three years, after which, he proceeded to return to his mother, brothers, Draupadi and the rest of his family. During this time, Chitrangada gave birth to their son, who they named Babhruvahana. The young prince was adopted as the son of his maternal grandfather and, when the time came, ascended the throne of Manipura. He ruled wisely, bringing much prosperity to his kingdom.

The Ashwamedha Yagna

After some years, he came to know that Arjuna was his father and wanted to meet him. At that time, Arjuna was visiting Manipura, while wandering with his sacrificial horse selected for his Ashwamedha Yagna. Babhruvahana managed to capture the horse, which traditionally meant that he had to go to war against the Pandavas.

Arjuna tried to convince the youth to let go of the horse, as they had no enmity with each other. The latter agreed on the condition that he wished to defeat Arjuna in a duel, as Guru Dakshina. Arjuna was at first reluctant to fight this young, handsome boy, but later, agreed to the condition.

He left and sent a small troop of his army to convince Babhruvahana to give back the horse. The young prince effortlessly defeated the contingent of soldiers. He also routed Bheema. This enraged Arjuna, who vowed to kill Babhruvahana, or self-immolate if defeated. He then proceeded to battle against the young warrior.

Babhruvahana Kills Arjuna

As the fight proceeded, the two were almost equal and no one could gain an upper hand. Finally, Babhruvahana shot Arjuna with a special arrow, which was a gift from Goddess Ganga. The arrow found its mark and killed Arjuna on the spot.

Babhruvahana then repented his deed, as he came to know that Arjuna was actually his own father. Not able to forgive himself, he wanted to take his own life. At that time, Ulupi came to the scene and gave him a gem called Nagamani. This magical gem brought Arjuna back to life, with the help of Krishna as well.

The Pandava Family Reunites

When Arjuna came to, he too was filled with remorse that he was the one who caused Vrishaketu's death, as he had ordered the latter to engage in battle. Vrishaketu was the son of Karna and the only survivor of the Mahabharata war. After Karna's death, the Pandavas came to know about his true identity, that he was actually Kunti's first son. Filled with remorse, they took Vrishaketu under their wing and trained him in warfare and all other related activities.

Krishna consoled Arjuna and brought Vrishaketu back to life as well. Babhruvahana lauded Vrishaketu's valour and asked him to forgive him. With the family happily reunited, the Pandavas and their army returned to Hastinapura, along with Ulupi, Chitrangada, Babhruvahana and Vrishaketu.

Meo Muslims: Are They Descendants of Arjuna?

While much is said about the Pandavas and the first and second generation of the Upapandavas, nothing is known about the later generations of the Pandavas. Parikshit, for example, was the great grandson of Arjuna. However, the Puranas or other similar treatises make no mention of a Vansha or an extended clan of the Pandava princes. So, what happened to them? Does a bloodline exist even today?

There is a conjecture that the lineage of Arjuna indeed does exist in the present time. What is more, some scholars actually believe that these direct descendants of Arjuna are not Hindus, but Muslims!

In a country as diverse as India, the Muslim population here lives in an equally diverse cultural milieu.

Meo Muslims

The Meo Muslims are the living example of this diversity of Islam in India. They observe every nuance of Islam, but also mirror many Hindu traditions and customs. Meo is an ethnic Muslim Rajput community from North-Western India, including regions such as Mewat, Alwar and Bharatpur in Rajasthan. They have been residing there for as long as a millennium or so. According to one theory, they were originally Hindu Rajputs, who converted to Islam between the 12th and 17th centuries.

Many Rajasthani Meos still retain Hindu-Muslim names, such as Ram Khan, Kailash Khan and so on. This community celebrates all the major Hindu festivals such as Holi, Dusshera and Diwali with the same fervour that they celebrate Eid. Just like the Hindus, they do not marry within the same Gotra. The members of this community believe that they are direct and high-caste descendants of Rama, Krishna and Arjuna; while also adhering to principles laid down by Islam

and the Quran.

Known for their rich and diverse traditional folklore, epics and ballads, this 400,000-strong community has created a unique niche for themselves in North India. Interestingly, most of their narrative type and structure are derived from Hindu legends and folklore. Their most popular tale is the Pandun ka Kada, which is the Mewati version of the Mahabharata.

The Meos are neither regular Muslims, nor regular Hindus. They have their own distinct identity and weave a different tradition into the fabric of Indian society. Even their weddings are a mix of the Muslim Nikah and traditional Hindu rituals. Due to their practices of singing ballads from this epic, they are believed to be the direct descendants of Arjuna.

Another fascinating fact is that the Meos trace their genealogy through Hindu genealogists, called Jaggas. The Jaggas are central to their lifecycle ceremonies.

Present State of Meo Muslims

Sadly, due to the current rise in incidents of Hindu-Muslim upheaval, many Meos are giving up their Hindu side and are focusing on maintaining Islamic culture and tradition. They have been constantly facing flak from orthodox Muslims and Mullahs and are sometimes even referred to as "bad Muslims".

In order to prove their solidarity to Islam, they have built many mosques in their areas. In the past, they never visited Masjids and openly claimed to be Arjuna's descendants. However, now, with political and social pressure, they now revere the Shamsheer Pathan and Behram Badshah epics, which connect them to Arabia.

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