

RUKMINI

She who was first among
the wives of Krishna

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Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. While it remains true to the main story of Rukmini and Krishna narrated in the Mahabharata epic, certain fictional characters have been introduced for interest and dramatic impact. All effort has been taken to represent certain facts as accurately as they have been gathered from various sources. Any oversights or errors are genuinely regretted.

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Prologue

Sometime around 3227–3102 BCE

In the kingdom of Mathura in the north of India, a region then known variously as Aryavarta or Bharatvarsha, the Yadav clan has been marginalized. The evil tyrant Kans, overthrowing his aged father Ugrasena, has ascended the throne. Married to the daughters, Asti and Prapti, of Jarasandha, the all-mighty ruler of Magadha, Kans has accepted him as his overlord, and also accepted the presence of a two thousand-strong Magadhan army in Mathura as protection afforded by his father-in-law. The might and power of Jarasandha is evident by the fact that as many as ninety-four other kings, of the surrounding regions, have also become his vassals paying annual tribute in return for his protection.

To appease and prevent the Yadav clan from instigating any resistance to his rule, Kans has, in a diplomatic move, married his cousin sister Devaki to the Yadav chieftain Vasudeva. However, the court astrologers have declared that this marriage bodes misfortune for Kans. They proclaim there is a prophecy that the eighth child, a son born to Devaki, will be the cause of the violent

death of Kans. To forestall any such calamity, Kans immediately has Vasudeva and Devaki thrown into the dungeon. In due course, Devaki gives birth to six sons who, as soon as they are born, are sent to death by her brother Kans.

The seventh child now in the womb of Devaki is also a male child. But with the help of Goddess Yogmaya, who is the primordial power of Sri Hari Vishnu, the child is transferred from her womb to the womb of Vasudev's other wife Rohini living in Gokul across the Yamuna river. This leads Kans to think that the child didn't survive. The boy grows up as Balarama – the elder son of Vasudeva.

When Devaki is pregnant with her eighth child, Krishna, she and Vasudeva contrive to hide the pregnancy from the watchful eyes and ears of the prison guards who have been kept on alert by Kans. It's a stormy night when the hour arrives for the child's birth. Vasudeva is extremely distraught not knowing what to do now. Yogmaya induces a deep stupor in the guards who fall asleep. According to her instructions, Vasudeva places his newborn son in a basket and wades across the flooding Yamuna River to nearby Gokul, to the house of his friend Nand whose wife, Yashoda, has just delivered a baby girl, who is actually Yogmaya herself. He is told to leave his son there and bring the girl child back with him to the prison and proclaim that Devaki has given birth to the eighth child who is not a boy, but a girl.

Relieved but still taking no chances, Kans rushes to the dungeon and snatches the baby girl lying next to Devaki. As he moves to dash the child's head against the prison wall, she slips out of his hand and flies upwards. Attaining her real cosmic form,

Yogmaya laughs scornfully at the tyrant, declaring that the eighth son of Devaki has taken birth and is safe from his clutches, and in time to come, this divine child will be the instrument of his death.

Sixteen years later, in fulfillment of the prophecy, Kans, the tyrant ruler of Mathura, is killed at the hands of Devaki's eighth son, Krishna, who is also his nephew. Following the death of Kans, Krishna frees his father Vasudeva, and mother Devaki, from eight years of imprisonment in the dungeons of the palace. Regardless of the hatred and enmity between the relatives, Krishna and his father Vasudeva know that, protocol apart, righteousness demands that proper funeral ceremonies be performed for his uncle Kans.

News of the death and overthrow of Kans's rule has been despatched and neighbouring kings have already started arriving in person, or through their delegates, to offer their condolences and participate in the rites and rituals accompanying the funeral ceremonies. Chief among the royal personages present, who are relevant to this story and the events that will gradually unfold, are King Bhishmaka of Vidarbha, accompanied by his wife Shudhamati, son Rukmi (a personal friend and ally of Kans) with his wife Suvrata, and Bhishmaka's only daughter Rukmini. The king of Chedi, Shishupala, who is a protégé of Jarasandha, and a close friend of Rukmi, is also present among the other guests.

On visits to Kansa's recently widowed queens, Asti and Prapti, Shudhamati and Rukmini encounter Krishna a couple of times. It is love at first sight for young Rukmini, who is enamoured by the gallant youth. The romantic feelings receive a fillip when Krishna makes a courtesy visit to pay his respects to

King Bhishmaka and Queen Shudhamati in their chambers at the palace of Mathura. Rukmini's attraction towards Krishna hasn't escaped her mother's eye but instead of any attempt at thwarting it, she encourages it by making favourable observations on the regal bearing and handsome appearance of Krishna. Rukmini, however, is pleased by her parents' open praise for Krishna's various valorous acts of daring, bravery and, in particular, the famed lifting of Mount Govardhan on his finger when a deluge threatened the lives of the people of Mathura. In their hearts, they nurture a secret wish that someday he will wed their daughter and become a worthy son-in-law.

However, Suvrata has observed with growing irritation this juvenile infatuation of her sister-in-law Rukmini for Krishna. Knowing full well that her husband Rukmi dislikes Krishna, she makes him aware with snide remarks of what is going on behind his back. As a close friend of Shishupala, and by extension averse to Krishna, whom he dismisses as being a mere cowherd and now an upstart leader of the Yadav clan, he is dead set against any possibility of a union between Rukmini and Krishna.

After the thirteen days of State mourning are over for the death of Kans, a convention of kings and political advisors meet to decide upon who will now sit upon the throne of Mathura. The council's view is that Devaki's husband, the sagacious Vasudeva, should be crowned as the new king. But Vasudeva declines the honour averring that he has no experience in statecraft and politics, and after spending close to eight years in rigorous imprisonment, he and his wife would now like to lead a peaceful life. Instead, he proposes the name of Ugrasena, the aged father

of Kans, who was once known as an astute and wise ruler. This proposal is accepted by everyone and subsequently Ugrasena is reinstated as King of Mathura.

With the coronation ceremonies now over, everyone takes leave of King Ugrasena over the next few days and returns to their respective kingdoms. But Mathura is not entirely at peace. The Yadavs fear retribution from Jarasandha for the killing of his son-in-law Kans. The army of Magadha is still stationed at Mathura presumably for the safety of the two widowed queens. The tension between the Magadhans and the Yadavs is palpable. Balarama and Krishna feel that in the best interests of the populace, it would be wiser for them to leave Mathura. Because even with their combined strength and the loyalist Yadavs, they know it would be next to impossible to withstand the might of Jarasandha should he decide to invade Mathura. They also think that if they are not in Mathura, Jarasandha will not have any real grouse to attack and will leave its residents in peace. Therefore, they take leave of King Ugrasena, their parents Vasudeva and Devaki, and relocate to Gurjaradesa (present-day Gujarat) on the west coast of Bharatvarsha.

It's a period of transition. Things are in a state of flux.

What will happen next?

Devaki's six dead sons were named Kírtimat, Sushena, Udayin, Bhadrasena, Rijudasa, and Bhadradeha.

The *Drik Panchang*, an Indian system of astronomical calculations, specifies the birth date as June 23 or 24, 3227 BCE. The Drik Panchang is a Hindu calendar based on *Drik Ganitha* calculations with respect to positions of the Sun and Moon. It reads out daily planetary details, uptill the year 2100.



CHAPTER 1



Decked like a Bride

Kaundinyapuri¹ was a city blushing with pride. Its streets were festooned with pennants ablaze with the royal insignia of the Bhoja-Yadav dynasty that ruled Vidarbha, a kingdom that lay south of the Vindhya mountain range, at the very heart of Bharatvarsha, like a small yet glittering, solitaire diamond. Colourful canopies of pink, orange and red triangular cloth flags strung in rows crisscrossed over the streets. Not too far away, the coppery domes of King Bhishmaka's palace glittered in the midday sun like jewels in a crown.

Bards, jugglers, musicians from nearby Avanti, Chedi, Nishadha kingdoms, and folk entertainers from Vidarbha could be seen in their colourful costumes attracting admiring crowds in the main squares of the city. They cheered tightrope walkers who teetered on the rope using a long stick to maintain their balance;

¹ The capital city of Vidarbha, Kaundinyapuri, was in fairly close proximity to the other Bhoja Yadav kingdoms. Magadha was ruled by the tyrant Jarasandha, Chedi by Shishupala, Avanti lay to its west, to the north east was the kingdom of Kosala and to its east, below Vanga, was the kingdom of Kalinga, while Anartha lay on the coast to its west. Mathura lay to its far north.

dancing bears, who with ghungroos on their feet, pawed the air and stomped their feet to the drummer's beat; fire-swallowing men who appeared to lick the flames off vinegar-soaked strips of cloth tied to the end of a pole; dancing girls whose voluminous, gaily-coloured skirts seemed to billow out in ever-widening hoops as they swirled around faster and faster to the rhythm of a medley of popular folk songs of various regions. Adding to the din and clamour were the high-pitched shrieks of children as the huge ferris wheels soared and dipped as two muscular young men cranked and rotated the handles as fast as they could.

A sudden hush would fall as the crowd audibly gasped at the awesome sight of a colourfully painted and gaily decorated, magnificent elephant that would leisurely amble into the square. Atop the elephant, ensconced in a silver and gold 'hooda', reclined a raja of some distant land, who condescendingly nodded and waved at the crowd below. On either side sat beauteous maidens gracefully fanning him, with silver-handled whisks made of the prized silken hair of mountain goats from the high Himalayas. The accompanying procession, led by flag bearers of the particular kingdom to which the monarch or crown prince belonged, comprised acrobats turning deft cartwheels, young maidens dancing and singing the songs native to their land.

The crowds lustily cheered the visiting dignitary as he rained silver coins to his left and right. As they fell tinkling on the cobbled pathway, children would jostle and scurry to grab as many as they could in their tiny fists and quickly pass them over to their elders, who would first bite the coins to ascertain the quality of the precious metal, and then slip them into the

folds of their clothes. Only then would a loud cheer resound in the air, “Hail to the King of Avanti, *Jai ho, Jai ho!*” followed by a shower of petals that would just as quickly slither off the back of the lumbering elephant.

At the same time, when a chariot rolled in from one of the four directions that led to Kaundinyapuri, carrying a princeling from a smaller neighbouring kingdom, the cheering would be somewhat subdued. Some in the crowd would mutter disgruntledly among themselves when they found that the coins flung by the prince were copper currency. It would mostly be the women, who dazzled by the looks of the muscular, handsome youth, clap and cheer, “*Jai ho! Jai ho!*”

“*Kis ki jai-jaikaar ho rahi hai, Phulwa?*” (Who is being hailed with such gusto, Phulwa?), asked a wizened old crone.

Turning to her, a younger woman replied, “*Maiyaa* (respected mother), one of the palace maids told me that Rukmi’s friend, Shishupala, is expected to arrive.”

“Oh!” sniffed another. “You shouldn’t trust any gossip from the palace girls! They thrive on rumours!”

“But it’s true!” piped in another. “A special pavilion has been erected where our crown prince Rukmi, is going to receive his dear friend Shishupala, the king of Chedi.”

“That’s right,” confirmed a man standing nearby. “I work as one of the bodyguards of the crown prince, and I overheard him talking about a grand reception in honour of Shishupala, tomorrow.”



Rumblings in the Palace

“I will *not* marry Shishupala!

“How many *times* do I have to say it!

“I will *not* marry that boor!”

Rukmini stood her ground and stomped her hennaed feet. Bursting into tears, she rushed out of the room.

King Bhishmaka shook his head sorrowfully and turned to his wife Shudhamati, who sighed deeply, and then dolefully said, “At times, I wish we had never asked that matchmaking brahmin Kritiman to find a suitable bridegroom for our daughter. If he hadn’t sung paeans in praise of Vasudeva Krishna, the Lord of Dwarka, then I would not have planted the seeds about his nobility of character and charming persona in Rukmini’s young, impressionable mind.”

“Well, I am also partly responsible for that,” added Bhishmaka. “You know that Rukmini, always an inquisitive child, has frequently been by my side at court, since she was a young girl – and a very attentive one, mind you. She would always pay close attention to the proceedings and observe how our ministers dealt with visiting dignitaries with great tact and diplomacy. Yes,

she acquired poise and grace at an early age, when most other girls are only interested in innocent adolescent pleasures of playing with their dolls, running around with friends. She has blossomed into a beautiful, intelligent, accomplished young woman under your care and the tutelage of wise men.”

Shudhamati smiled. “Don’t you think it’s time we started looking out for a good husband for her?”

“You think that has escaped my attention? I’ve already sent out feelers for a befitting matrimonial alliance,” answered Bhishmaka. “Just a few days ago Kritiman, the middleman in such affairs, came up with a proposal along with a hand-painted portrait of a young man. I found him rather dark complexioned but his features were very pleasant.”

“Who was the young man in the portrait?” asked Shudhamati.

“It was a portrait of Vasudeva Krishna of Dwarka. Admittedly, he is not a princeling or king, but he looks to be over and above all mortals. There was something in his eyes that held me spellbound. To tell you the truth, I was quite enchanted with him. I was still gazing at it when Rukmini, who entered just at that moment, glanced at the portrait and I could see she had also been mesmerized. Hasn’t she said anything about it to you?” enquired Bhishmaka.

“Oh my dear husband,” said an exasperated Shudhamati. “Do you think any respectable girl will speak of a young man, no matter how much she may fancy him, in front of her parents? But, of late, I have noticed that she seems to be lost in a world of her own. I think that she has, in her mind, already begun to yearn to have Krishna as her would-be husband.”

“Actually Narad Muni has been visiting us rather often these past few months,” said Bhishmaka. “And every time he has come, he has regaled us with some or the other outstanding exploits of Krishna in Mathura. A major portion of the credit goes to him for influencing Rukmini’s mind in such subtle ways.”

“That’s quite true, you know,” remarked Shudhamati. “Even when Narad, out of courtesy, came to see me and Rukmini, he would sing praises of Krishna. If you ask me, I think the gods themselves put Narad Muni up to this. Perhaps this is a match made in heaven, for all we know! A better match could not have been found for Rukmini.”

“But there is a stumbling block in this match, my dear wife!” sighed Bhishmaka standing up and pacing with his hands behind his back. “And that is your elder son Rukmi. He has a strong dislike for Krishna whom he regards to be a mere cowherd and not as the great leader he is of the Yadavs in Mathura.”

“What’s irking Rukmi so much, why would he stand in the way of a match between Krishna and our only beloved daughter Rukmini?” questioned Shudhamati.

“Rukmi is looking to make political gains from Rukmini’s marriage. He has told me in no uncertain terms that Rukmini will be wed to Shishupala, king of Chedi, who is his bosom friend and a favourite of the mighty Emperor Jarasandha of Magadha,” answered her husband. “He will not under any circumstances agree to a marriage between Rukmini and Krishna.”

“Why can’t you overrule him? I think you ought to intervene, before it’s too late, and do the right thing that needs to be done!” she pleaded.

“My dear, Rukmi has already sent a messenger to Pragjyotishpur and requested Emperor Jarasandha’s assistance in this matrimonial alliance between Shishupala and our daughter,” Bhishmaka said grimly. “I didn’t want to alarm you but I have received veiled threats that if we don’t agree to this marriage, Kaundinyapuri will be besieged by Jarasandha’s army. Can you imagine what a long siege would do to our city and its people? I had no option but to back down in front of Rukmi. It was then that the invitations were sent out, announcing the forthcoming marriage of Rukmini to Shishupala, to all the kings in the neighboring regions.”

Our son Rukmi was, and is immovable, on this matter! He thinks we are senile, wanting to marry her off to that *gwala* (cowherd) . . . yes . . . that’s how he refers in his dismissive manner to Vasudeva Krishna.”

“You mean we can do nothing at this stage?” demanded Shudhamati.

“My dear, have you quite forgotten that I am now just a king in name? Rukmi’s writ runs in the land and his word is law. He is determined to wed Rukmini to Shishupala,” reminded Bhishmaka. “Ohhh . . . how I rue the day I let the reins of the kingdom slip from my hands.”

“Is there no way Rukmi can be made to change his mind?” she asked.

“Do you think I haven’t tried? In fact, I literally pleaded with him not to ruin his sister’s life by marrying her off to Shishupala. You know what he said to me? ‘Father, don’t interfere in matters of State!’ So my dear, our daughter is now just a pawn on the

chessboard of State politics. Besides, Rukmi has always had a poor opinion of Krishna and will not consider such a match. He gets furious if I say anything against his bosom friend and ally Shishupala.”

“Do you think that I should speak with Rukmi? After all, I am his mother and. . . .”

“Ha! What good will *that* do? You know what a headstrong boy he is. Besides, Rukmi is hell-bent on further strengthening his ties with Shishupala and thereby, in turn, also securing the favour of the mighty emperor Jarasandha – the mentor of Shishupala. This matrimonial alliance is one which Rukmi has waited to formalize as soon as Rukmini came of marriageable age. The political significance of it is not lost on him. He knows such an opportunity will never come again and he will leave no stone unturned to ensure it fructifies. So my dear, you, I, or Rukmini have no say in the matter,” Bhishmaka replied.

Shudhamati pensively tapped her chin. “HMMMM . . . well, I suppose the least we, as a gesture of grace, could do is invite Vasudeva Krishna and his elder brother Balarama² for the wedding, can’t we?” she said with a hopeful sigh.

“Well, I suppose we could, although I don’t see what purpose could be served by that. Still, if not as a son-in-law, we can invite him as a guest along with Balarama,” Bhishmaka mused thoughtfully. “Although the wedding invitations have already been sent out by Rukmi, I can still arrange to have one sent by special messenger to Balarama and Vasudeva Krishna.”

² Balarama’s mother was Rohini, Vasudeva’s first wife. Later, Rohini also bore a daughter called Subhadra, who was hence half-sister to Krishna.

“Hmmm . . . do it at an auspicious *Prahar* (hour). I will check with the *Raj Jyotishi* (court astrologer) to see at what time we should dispatch the messenger. It’s time you got to bed now . . . leave it to me,” saying which, Shudhamati clapped her hands to call her maid-in-waiting and asked her to douse the lamps in their chambers.