An Immersion into the Mahabharata – Part 1

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Madam Blavatsky says in the Secret Doctrine, "…All this is very puzzling, to one who is unable to read and understand the Purana-s, except in their dead letter sense. Yet this sense, if once mastered, will turn out to be the secure casket which holds the keys to the secret wisdom. True, a casket so profusely ornamented that its fancy work hides and conceals entirely any spring for opening it, and thus makes the unintuitional believe it has not and cannot have any opening at all. Still the keys are there, deeply buried, yet ever present to him who searches for them".

How does one discover this key that opens up the secure casket? The mere retelling of the

stories and the aesthetic appreciation of its portrayal through dance and art is not enough. Recently a group of 32 people undertook a search to find the key, a search within, because surely the key is not lying on the ground somewhere!

We set out to explore the meaning of the word *puraNa: pura api navam* meaning ancient yet nascent. How does an ancient story become nascent? It does when it lives in the moment through us. So we set out to share our exploration of the ways in which each of the heroes of the *mahabhArata* lives in us, and through us; how these archetypes arise in various contexts and relationships. We became the subjects and the objects of our enquiry, we agreed to disclose the turmoil and struggle of our lives, the dilemmas we face that are reflected in the many stories of the *mahabharAta*. We dug deep into ourselves and watched the drama unfold as the *daivic* and *asuric* forces within us played out their eternal *mantan*; six days of intense self-enquiry, self-disclosure and sharing threw up a lot of insights. It was a watershed event for me to facilitate the group and watch the space unfold with vibrancy and meaning. We used therukkoothu, inner work, drawing, dialogue, sharing, and enactment to dive deep into our psyche.

It must be emphasized that a laboratory learning space is one where there is very little discourse or interpretation. The participants explore their own self, in their own context based on the triggers provided by the group exploration into the *mahabhArata.* The facilitator enable a deep and intense exploration where catharsis and 'acting out' of long held parts of the self become safe and in fact become the most important starting points of introspection.

Through exploring the metaphor of the *mantan* we discovered that the willingness to watch the flow of energy between the dark and light sides of our psyche is an essential pre-requisite. The moment we judge the dark as bad, we bring in our socialized and conditioned thought into the process and the *mantan* stops. The "good" is elevated; the "bad" is demonized and repressed. The possibility of looking at the two as forms of energy, of befriending one's own violence and thus understanding its structure and nature, is lost. The possibility of looking at our hurts and staying with them so that they do not trigger processes of defensiveness and aggression is lost. The possibility of ending the poison that is generated within our psyche, and discovering *aishwarya* is lost. Is that why there was the *mahabhArata* war?

We explored many turning points in the saga of the pAndava and the kaurava. At each such

turning point, the archetypal human energies are clearly etched out, the outer dilemma and the inner cacophony can be explored, one's own inability to end the ancient war with the "other" and find a space for the emerging vulnerable and fresh life can be confronted.

We explored the archetype of *draupadi* through a dialogue with Jyotsana Narayanan (an accomplished dancer and dance teacher from Kalakshetra). She shared with us her exploration of *pAnchAli* (as she likes to call *draupadi*). Through the day we had explored the various personas that make up our psyche, namely the actor who is like a vessel endowed with many capabilities, the victim who holds hurt and pain, the guardian who is vigilant and ready to fight the world, the judge who evaluates us based on societal rules, the beckoner who searches for escapes, the friend who holds affection and honest appreciation, the dreamer who is the receptacle of our destiny, and the meditator who remains in silent and profound awareness of every nuance of our inner space. Jyotsana talked about the immense shakti of *pAnchAli* as she faces the court and asks each one of her husbands why they are frozen, confronts *bheeshma* with his paralysis, and challenges the *kauravas* from a core of integrity. When every effort to awaken the noble and the compassionate yield no outcome, *pAnchAli* awakens to her divine potential. *pAnchAli* becomes pure aspiration for the Thou; she lets go of all effort sourced in the self, accepts her vulnerability, and discovers *krishNa*, the Thou within.

Every one of us was stirred and touched by the dialogue. The idea that *pAnchAli* was a victim gave way to the realization that it was the vulnerable and the pure spark of atman, born of the sacred fire, a gift from the divine, the purest dream for oneself. When one awakens to this vulnerable self, the *mantan* begins.
Perhaps in this insight into the possibility of *pAnchAli* lies a window for each of us. Could we end our love affair with our victimhood and the vengefulness that it unleashes and open ourselves to embracing our vulnerability? In that baby step there lies an immense possibility for all of us.