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**The Grip of Karma
Last Days of Krishna and the Pandavas**

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The endings of some mythological tales of India hold as much significance; if not more; than the legends themselves. Such are the tales associated with the end of the great epic, the Mahabharata. They relate several incidents that occurred during the last days of the Pandavas and of Lord Krishna, the eighth avatar (manifestation) of Sri Maha Vishnu, one among the Divine Trinity of Deities.

Each and every avatar of Vishnu had a clear mission to perform during the course of their human manifestation. After the completion of that mission, each of these avatars returned to merge with Vishnu, the Supreme Godhead.



Lord Vishnu

In this post, we bring you the story about the end of the Mahabharata and the last days of the life of Sri Krishna and the Pandavas. This story is split into two major parts, namely, the Mausala Parva and the Mahaprasthanika Parva. These are the last days of Krishna and the Pandavas respectively.

Mausala Parva

Mausala Parva, or the "Book of Clubs", is the sixteenth out of the eighteen parvas or books of the Mahabharata. This book is one of the 3 shortest books and has only 9 adhyayas or chapters. Mausala Parva relates the last days of Krishna, ultimately talking about his demise. He left his mortal coil 36 years after the Kurukshetra war ended. His capital, Dwaraka, got submerged under the sea, also drowning many of his loved ones. This Parva further talks about Vasudeva's death and the ultimate infighting between the Yadavas, leading to the end of that entire clan.

Mausala Parva is one of the 8 books, which were discovered in Indonesia. Only 8 out of 18 books were recovered from this region. It is yet unclear if there were only 8 books in the original epic or if some of them were lost in transit, over the past many centuries.

The chapter begins with a declaration made, in the court of the Pandavas, that the Yadava clan had been destroyed in its entirety. They had fought among themselves, with clubs made of eraka grass and had killed each other. Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandava princes, asks for details. The Mausala Parva then relates the details.

Gandhari Curses Krishna

The 18-day Kurukshetra war was over - it had destroyed everything in its vicinity. Bodies of dead soldiers lay strewn on the ground and the site was filled with their widows shedding endless tears for their great loss. The Pandavas had won the war, but were not happy. Quite on the contrary, they too were devastated by the extent of the damage caused and were trying to help wounded soldiers from both the sides. Krishna went to meet Gandhari, the mother of the Kauravas. This incident gets special mention in the Stri Parva.

Gandhari was still very angry and grief-stricken over the death of her 100 sons. She especially could not contain the grief of losing her eldest and favorite son, Duryodhana. She wailed over his body, while her husband, King Dhritarashtra, stood by helplessly.

Seeing Krishna further incensed her, as she was well aware that he was the main person who drove the Pandavas to victory. She had been very devoted to Krishna and had believed that he was God himself. She felt that he could have prevented the war and could have saved thousands of innocent lives; but had instead, chosen to remain a silent witness the whole time.



The Battle of Kurukshetra

She cursed Krishna that, in 36 years, Dwaraka would get submerged under the sea and that the entire Yadava clan would perish the same way her sons had died. Knowing that the Yadavas could not be defeated by any other race, she cursed that they would fight within themselves, eventually destroying each other.

Krishna quietly accepted the curse and tried to explain to her how many times he had tried to diffuse the situation and played mediator between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. He further reminded Gandhari that Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava prince, had made several unsuccessful attempts to kill the Pandavas. Yet, the latter had remained calm and had abstained from attacking him and his army.

After having vented all her anger on Krishna, Gandhari realized her folly. She repented for having hurled curse after curse on her Lord. She then fell at his feet and begged for forgiveness for her sins. Krishna smiled lovingly at her and, gently lifting her up, assured her that she had done nothing wrong. He told her that it was his own human karma that he should leave his mortal frame in this way and asked her not to worry anymore about the incident.

Gandhari's Curse Starts to Take Effect

Days flew by after the war. Yudhishtira was crowned the King of Hastinapura and Krishna went back to his capital, Dwaraka. Krishna's consort, Rukmini, was actually the incarnation of Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. There was hence peace and prosperity everywhere and the Yadavas enjoyed their luxurious life in that beautiful city.

It was the 36th year after the great Kurukshetra war. The Yadavas were so much in bliss in Dwaraka that they started taking things for granted. They forgot the importance of values, morals, humility and good conduct. They were arrogant and spoilt by all the wealth they were enjoying.

Once, the Sapta Rishis (the Seven Sages) decided to visit Krishna and Balarama in Dwaraka. Hearing about their impending arrival, Samba, the son of Krishna, decided to test their powers. The young man dressed himself as a woman and placed a mace under his dress, to make himself appear as a pregnant woman. He, along with two of his friends, approached the rishis. One of Samba's friends went up to the rishis and, introducing himself as the "woman's" husband, requested them to predict the gender of the unborn child.

With their siddhis (spiritual powers), the rishis realized that this was a hoax and were angry at being treated with such disdain. One of the sages, Kanva Maharishi, immediately grabbed his kamandala (little water pot) and, sprinkling some water on the youth, cursed that whatever he bore in stomach would be actually born to him. He further declared that the thing would eventually lead to the extinction of the entire Yadava clan. The youths were stunned for a moment. But being arrogant and foolish, they just laughed it off and left the place, without even bothering to apologize to the rishis for their behavior.

The sage's curse took effect the very next morning. Samba developed labor pains and soon delivered a mace from within him. The Yadavas now realized their mistake and became fearful. They took the mace and rushed to Akroora and Ugrasena. They all then went to Krishna and related the whole story to him. Akroora immediately ordered them to grind the mace to a fine powder and throw it into the sea.

Krishna merely smiled and remained silent. He knew that Gandhari's curse had started working and that Samba was merely a medium for their collective karma to unfold. Thirty-six years ago, Krishna had prayed to Shiva for a son like him. Shiva had bestowed the boon upon him. However, Shiva was the God of Destruction and a son like him would ultimately end up destroying everything around him.

The Yadavas worked hard to grind the mace to a fine powder. They had followed all of Akroora's instructions. However, there was one triangular piece of the mace that simply could not be ground. They tried their level best, but could not grind it. Fed up, they finally threw the powder, plus the triangular piece, into the sea. Once that was done, they returned home, assured that all would be well from then on.

The triangular piece was swallowed by a fish. Jara, a hunter, caught the fish and, upon finding the sharp metal piece in its belly, used it to craft a fine poisonous arrow. In the meantime, the fine powder washed back ashore and settled itself along the impressive coastline of Dwaraka. There, a type of grass, called eraka, grew in abundance, all along the coast.

The Yadava Clan is Wiped Out

The city of Dwaraka started witnessing strange dark omens. Krishna's Sudarshana Chakra (Discus), the Panchajanya (Conch), his Chariot and Balarama's Plough (also his weapon)

suddenly disappeared, as if into thin air. The clean city became infested by various types of pests. People started committing sinful acts; husbands and wives cheated on each other; people started ill-treating senior residents; some people were indulged in theft and looting; yet others had unexplained nightmares.

Seeing all these bad omens, Krishna asked the residents to gather by the sacred Prabhas sea and pray for the well-being of everyone around. The people went to the beach, but instead of sitting in prayer and contemplation, they started drinking heavily and making merry as usual. They were in such an intoxicated state that they had no control over themselves and their actions. They started teasing each other and finding each other's faults.

Satyaki and Krithavarma, who had fought for the Pandavas and Kauravas respectively, were there too. They were the ones who actually marked the beginning of the end. What started with random comments and taunts ended in Satyaki drawing out his sword and cutting off Krithavarma's head. This enraged the latter's friends. They pounced on Satyaki and attacked him. Krishna's son, Pradyumna, was only an innocent onlooker. He too, however, was pulled into the massive brawl that ensued, and was killed by the angry crowd.

Krishna knew that the curse had started to take effect. He plucked the eraka grass that grew by the beach and placed them near the warring Yadavas. Still not quite aware of what they were doing, the Yadavas started throwing the blades of grass on one other.

Kanva Maharishi's curse came into being and each blade of the eraka grass became a mace. These maces hit the Yadavas, killing them instantly. All the Yadavas died within a matter of minutes. Thus, the entire clan lay dead, right in front of their King.

Krishna Sheds His Mortal Coil

Seeing this immense destruction unfold before his very eyes, Krishna decided that it was now time for him to shed his mortal form and end his avatar on earth. Before leaving, he asked Arjuna to take care of all the bereaved Yadava women. Then, along with Balarama, Krishna left for the forest.

In the meantime, Arjuna was taking the Yadava women to Hastinapura. They encountered fierce bandits along the hilly terrain. Arjuna fought hard, but having become old, was no match for the bandits. Eventually, the latter decamped with the women in their custody.

As Krishna left Dwaraka, a huge wave came in from the sea and swallowed the beautiful city into its unfathomable depths. Even today, this region lies submerged under the sea. All the survivors of the land, including Vasudeva, were dragged into the sea by that one mighty wave.

Having traveled deep into the forest, Krishna and Balarama decided to rest. Saddened by all

the destruction, the latter sat down in meditation. Soon, Balarama's breathing stopped - he gave up his earthly life as well. A thousand-headed serpent manifested from his lifeless body. It approached Krishna, offered salutations to him and then glided toward the sea. Incidentally, Balarama is believed to be Adishesha, the Serpent, who supports and protects Sri Maha Vishnu; also the bed on whom Vishnu reclines in the Milky Ocean.



Balarama

Overcome with grief at the loss of Balarama, Krishna rested against a tree, stretching his legs in the front. Meanwhile, Jara, the hunter, was roaming in the forest, on his usual hunting expedition. Seeing Krishna's foot sticking out from the bushes, he mistook it for a deer and shot it down with his poison-tipped arrow. The arrow was the very one he had crafted from the little triangular piece of mace that had not been powdered.

When Jara realized his folly, he was utterly inconsolable. He tearfully begged for Krishna's forgiveness and refused to leave his side. Krishna merely smiled and assured him that it was not his fault and that this was the way things had been designed to turn out. Krishna then blessed Jara, took Vishnu's form and returned to his abode, Vaikuntha.

It is said that Jara was none other than the mighty Vali in his previous birth. At that time, Vishnu had taken the avatar of Lord Sri Rama and had slain Vali, the then Monkey King. Rama had no enmity with Vali and had killed him for no reason; and that too; in a cowardly manner, hiding behind a tree. Vaali later took birth as Jara and was responsible for killing Krishna. This story points out the fact that the laws of Karma apply universally to everyone; and that even God cannot prevent it from impacting his own life.

Significance

The Mausala Parva is a subject that continues to be researched upon, both by philosophers and archaeologists alike. The Archaeological Survey of India and the National Institute of Oceanography have been conducting various tests, since the past many decades, to ascertain if there indeed was a city called Dwaraka, which went under the sea. These studies revealed

several temples in Gujarat, dated around the 9th century, 1st century and 1st millennium BC. Studies conducted in Bet Dwaraka, an island near the present-day Dwaraka (Gujarat), revealed ceramic artifacts and other materials, as also ancient inscriptions in praise of the Sea God. These date back to 500 BC and 1500 BC. Further, excavations carried out at 2 sites along the coast of Dwaraka revealed submerged settlements, a stone-built jetty and stone anchors as well.

Mahaprasthanika Parva

Mahaprasthanika Parva, or the "Book of the Great Journey", is the seventeenth of the 18 books of the Mahabharata. Featuring only 3 adhyayas (chapters), it is the shortest parva in the epic. This parva relates the final days of the Pandavas - their journey across the Indian subcontinent; their climb toward the Himalayas; and then their final ascent to heaven on Mount Sumeru.

After Lord Krishna left his mortal presence on the earth, the Pandavas lost all interest in samsara (worldly life). Nothing held any charm for them anymore - not even the fact that they were the rulers of Hastinapura.

Vyasa Advises Arjuna to Renounce Everything

Before leaving Dwaraka, Krishna had requested Arjuna to protect the women of that region and escort them safely to his own kingdom. But Arjuna, having become old and frail, failed to shield the women and children from bandits, while on the way to Hastinapura. The bandits seized the survivors and went away with them.



Arjuna - Kathakali Mask

Arjuna was depressed at the unfortunate turn of events. He was full of self-doubt and feared that he had lost all his warrior abilities. He met sage Vyasa and narrated all the incidents to him. Vyasa merely smiled and, asking him not to worry unnecessarily, explained that the

Pandavas had served their purpose in life. He further said that it was now time for them to retire and asked them to renounce their kingdom and hand over their responsibilities to the next generation.

Arjuna sought the blessings of Vyasa and, after reaching his palace, met Yudhishtira and told him about Vyasa's advice. Yudhishtira held a meeting with all the other Pandava brothers, along with Draupadi (their wife), and asked them if they were all ready to follow Vyasa's counsel. They all agreed to this and decided to leave for the Himalayas.

Accordingly, Yudhishtira crowned Parikshit (the grandson of Arjuna and the son of Abhimanyu) as King of Hastinapura and left him in the care of Yuyutsu; the only son of Dhritarashtra, who survived the Kurukshetra war. Once that was done, the Pandavas renounced their kingdom and proceeded on their journey around India.

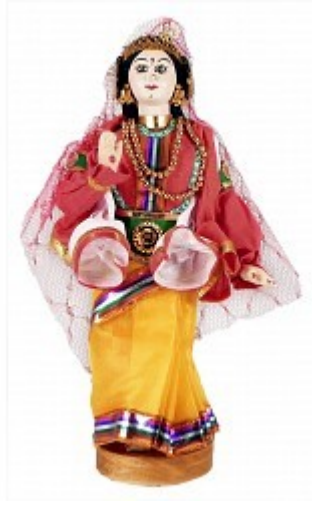
They traveled far and wide and then finally started walking toward the Himalayas. All the way in this long journey, they were accompanied by a stray dog.

The Pandavas first visited the south, reaching the salt sea. At the coast, Lord Agni, the God of Fire, appeared before them and asked Arjuna to return his bow. Agni said that the bow was given to him to fight and destroy evil forces polluting the earth. Agni said that now that his mission was completed, Arjuna should give back his bow. Arjuna immediately did as he was told.

The Pandavas then turned southwest, visiting several regions on the way. They also headed west to visit Dwaraka. Seeing the once-beautiful city being submerged by the sea, they became sad and depressed. They then decided to turn north, visit Rishikesh and then continue toward the Himalayas.

The Pandavas Fall, One By One

After finishing their extensive tour around India, the Pandavas proceeded toward the Himalayas. The first person to fall and die on this journey was Draupadi. Yudhishtira immediately had an explanation for this. He said that though Draupadi had married all the five brothers, she had always been partial to Arjuna.



Draupadi - Kathakali Doll

Sahadeva, followed by his twin Nakula, were the next to lose their lives. Witnessing their death, Yudhishtira mentioned that they had been righteous, but always were proud about their good looks and wisdom. He said that it was their vanity that took away their lives.

It was Arjuna's turn next. Yudhishtira told his only surviving brother, Bheema, that Arjuna had been proud, all his life, about his archery and warrior skills. He mentioned that it was the reason why he died earlier than them both.

Now, only Yudhishtira, Bheema and the dog were left. They continued on their onward journey. After a while, Bheema too collapsed and died. Yudhishtira, as usual, thought that it was because Bheema was always proud about his strength and was also always greedy when it came to food.

Yudhishtira carried on walking with the dog trailing behind him. He had been righteous and virtuous all his life - in fact, he had been the most righteous and noble one among them all. That was probably what kept him alive longer than his wife and all his brothers.

Yudhishtira Reaches the Gates of Heaven

In Chapter 3 of Mahaprasthanika Parva, Yudhishtira and the dog continued to walk up Mount Sumeru. On the way, Lord Indra, the King of the Devas, appeared on his chariot. He suggested to Yudhishtira that he could stop walking all the way and instead, could ride with him on his chariot. The former refused the offer, saying that he could not go to heaven without his brothers and wife. Indra replied that they were already in heaven. To this, Yudhishtira asked if he could take his dog along. Indra refused to oblige to that request. The Pandava Prince stated that, since the dog had been his loyal friend on this long journey, betraying and abandoning him now would be a great sin. Refusing Indra's repeated offers to join him, Yudhishtira proceeded on his onward voyage with his dog in tow.

After what seemed like an eternity, the two of them reached the Gates of Heaven. There, the doorkeeper asked him to enter alone. However, Yudhishtira; being the virtuous person he was; refused to enter alone. He said that he could not abandon the dog, as it had been his most loyal companion on this long journey. It had been with him, even when his own wife and brothers had left him.

The dog, in actuality, was Lord Yama, the God of Death. Happy to see Yudhishtira's strict adherence to the Dharma, Yama emerged in his actual divine form and blessed Yudhishtira and gave him admittance into heaven.

Yudhishtira Meets the Kauravas in Heaven

The moment Yudhishtira entered heaven; he met Duryodhana and all the other Kauravas there. He also noticed that the Pandavas were not there. He was both surprised and angry that the adharmis (unrighteous people), who were the sole reason for the death and destruction of so many, should have been accepted into heaven.

He expressed his anger and disappointment to Lord Yama, asking him why his righteous brothers; as also the great Karna, who was known for his kindness, valor and philanthropy; were not to be found here. Yudhishtira was then taken to the place where they all resided - to Hell!

Why the Pandavas and Karna Were Sent to Hell

Yudhishtira was taken aback to see his brothers, Draupadi and Karna in Hell. When he asked Yama the reason for this, the latter explained the reason for it, saying that this was the result of all the wrong that they had done during their lifetime.

Karna had insulted Draupadi during the game of dice; Bheema had killed Duryodhana and Arjuna had killed Karna - both had used unfair methods; and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva had helped them in carrying out those adharmic deeds.

Really annoyed by now, Yudhishtira asked Yama how the Kauravas had been admitted into heaven. He had a surprisingly simple explanation for it. He said that the Kauravas were kshatriyas, who had merely carried out their duties; fighting for their homeland. Karna, on the other hand, had not fought for his homeland, but for the sake of maintaining Duryodhana's friendship. He had been well aware that his friend was adharmic, and yet, he took his side.

The Lord further told Yudhishtira that he must undergo the torture of touring through Hell, as he had committed the sin of deceiving his own teacher, Dronacharya, during the course of the war. Knowing that he would not be able to defeat the great master by fair means, he had lied that Ashwatthama (his son) had died on the battlefield. In actuality, an elephant by the same had fallen at that time. This false news broke Drona's will, ultimately leading to his death.

A humbled Yudhishtira fell at the Lord's feet, asking forgiveness for all his sins. Yama then revealed to Yudhishtira that his sin had been washed off and so also for his brothers and Draupadi and that he could take his place in heaven along side his loved ones. Yama then explained that every being has to endure hell before reaching heaven, based on the balance of sins and good deeds of a person. Since the number of sins that the Pandavas committed were much less than their share of good deeds, they had to endure only a few moments in Hell unlike others who are tortured there for ages before being allowed to proceed to heaven.

This episode emphasizes the inescapability of the consequences of one's actions and choices. Good and bad deeds will not cancel each other out and one will need to suffer the consequences of one's negative actions, come what may.

English Translations

Originally composed in Sanskrit, Mahaprasthanika Parva now has various translated versions in English. Out of these, 2 English versions created in the 19th century, by Kisari Mohan Ganguli and Manmatha Nath Dutt are most popular. Both these versions differ from each other, based on the translator's perception and interpretation.

Mahabharata and Achilles Heel: A Parallel

A detailed study of the Mahabharata reveals the incredible similarity between Indian and Greek mythology. The great epic narrates the story of several people - each having one weak, vulnerable spot; eventually succumbing due to that soft spot. The Greek story of Achilles Heel, in that sense, is very similar to the Mahabharata.

The Story of Achilles Heel

According to the Greek legend, a nymph called Thetis fell in love with Peleus, an ordinary human being. Peleus was a much-married man. However, he could not resist Thetis' charms. They had a long-standing affair and eventually had a son called Achilles. Being a nymph, Thetis was immortal. She wanted her son to be immortal as well. So she took the newborn Achilles to the River Styx and dipped him in its waters. River Styx separated the land of the living from the land of the dead. Thetis knew that dipping the child in its waters would make him immune to all weapons, thus making him invincible.

Unfortunately, while dipping the infant in the water, Thetis held him by his ankles. Hence, that part of his body was not touched by the magical water. This made his ankle; particularly the heel part; vulnerable to weapons.

Achilles grew up to be a valiant warrior, who was impossible to defeat during war. But that was the case only till the time his enemies were not aware of his weak spot. Once they knew about it, they decided to take advantage of it. Paris, the Prince of Troy, shot a poisonous arrow,

targeting Achilles' heel. This eventually led to his death on the battlefield.

The Vulnerable Spot

In the Mahabharata, Gandhari's son Duryodhana was preparing to fight unto death with the mighty Bheema. Knowing how strong and invincible the latter was, Gandhari feared for her son's life. Determined to save her son at all costs, she hatched a plan.

Since Gandhari's husband, Dhritarashtra, was blind, she had decided to tie her own eyes with black cloth, ever since the day they got married. She had thus spent the better part of her life being blindfolded. But due to this, her eyes contained great power. She knew that, if she removed her blindfold, that power would be transferred to the first thing that she laid her eyes on.

She called for Duryodhana and told him about her powers. She further asked him to rid himself of all his clothing and then stand before her, so that she could see every part of his body; thus making him invulnerable to external attack. Duryodhana did as he was commanded. However, being embarrassed to come before her totally naked, he tied a wide banana leaf around his waist. This covered his groin, hips and thighs.



Duryodhana - Kathakali Mask

Gandhari untied her blindfold to look upon her son's body for the first ever time in her whole life. On seeing the leaf tied around his waist, she was utterly devastated. All that she did to save him would now go in vain, because that covered portion of his body would be his vulnerable spot.

Krishna already knew about this episode. During the duel that ensued between Bheema and Duryodhana, he asked the former to strike his mace on the latter's thighs. It is considered unethical to attack a kshatriya (warrior) below the waist. However, Bheema carried out Krishna's orders, as he knew that there was no other way in which he could eliminate the adharmi. Duryodhana fell weak and eventually, bled to death.

The Mahabharata is filled with several other similar characters, who fell after receiving a hit on their vulnerable spot. Dronacharya's vulnerable spot was his son Ashwatthama, who he loved more than life itself. On hearing the news of his son's death in the battlefield (that never really happened - Yudhishtira had lied to him), he lost all interest, fell weak and eventually met his end. Lord Sri Krishna was killed with that one arrow that pierced his toe - that too was his vulnerable spot.

Karna and Achilles

Karna and Achilles, in particular, share many similar qualities. They are as follows:

- Both Karna and Achilles fought a war which had almost nothing to do with them. Karna fought to support his close friend, Duryodhana. He was well aware that he was Kunti's eldest son from Lord Surya (the Sun God). That made him the eldest Pandava. However, he owed undying allegiance to Duryodhana, who had supported him through all his struggles. Achilles, on the other hand, had given his word to Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army, to join the Greek contingent in its fight against Troy.
- Karna was barred from fighting the great Bheeshma Pitamaha. It was only after the 10th day, when Bheeshma fell on his sharashaiya (bed of arrows), that Karna was permitted to join in the battle. Achilles, on the other hand, was insulted by Agamemnon over a slave girl, Briseis. Incensed, he withdrew from the battlefield, till Patroclus was killed by Hector, the eldest Prince of Troy. He then re-entered the battlefield in order to take revenge on him.
- Karna and Achilles were mighty warriors, who could induce fear in the hearts of the bravest and most experienced soldiers. Karna, however, was vulnerable due to Parasurama's curse, that he would forget all his skills when he most needed them. Besides, fearing his son, Arjuna's safety, Indra disguised himself as a poor Brahmin and begged Karna to give him his armor and earrings, which he had received as a divine gift of protection. Karna, large-hearted that he was, immediately gave them to the Brahmin. This made him even more vulnerable to physical attack. Achilles' only vulnerable spot was his heel. He fell when his enemies shot his heel with a poisonous arrow.
- Karna and Achilles fought for honor and glory. They both left an indelible mark on history and on the cultural heritage of their respective countries and are known for their loyalty and valor. They are both adored and considered heroes, though they were actually fighting for the "wrong" side in their respective wars.

Conclusion

The Mahabharata and the story of Achilles Heel are two stories from two different parts of the world. Maybe the story originated in one country and was passed on to the other, via the bygone Indo-Greek connection during the time of Alexander and after. Or maybe they are merely two different cultural expressions of the universal tendency of ambitious parents trying to make their children immune and invulnerable to external factors.

Whatever the connection, the two tales teach us that no matter how hard we try, we can only support others (even if they are our own children) and hope that their lives turn out well. We do not possess the power to entirely shift the course of their lives and reshape their destiny as per our preferences.

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