

Krishna

Who is Krishna?

Krishna is the most enigmatic and fascinating character of Mahabharata. It is amazing to see how many people of all kinds all over the world love him. Even atheists like me are in love with Krishna! His personality is irresistible, full of endearing mischief. He is seen as the epitome of love, friendship, wisdom. He embodies everything that ordinary humans wish for – whether they are intellectuals or simpletons. Krishna is the perfect remedy for all ailments of this world.

Being a non-believer (in the traditional definition of God), I consider Krishna to be a person – imaginary or historical. He is my role model, my inspiration, my symbol of faith.

Krishna's origins are as mysterious as his life. Experts differ on whether he was Vyasa's creation or if he appeared in the ancient Puranas first. There is also no agreement on whether he was a real, historical person, or entirely a fictional character.

It does not matter to me whether Krishna is a figment of imagination of Vyasa (or anyone else) or whether he really existed as a person. In fact, I would prefer it if he were *not* a historical reality, because then it is possible that he had some faults, some cracks in his persona just like every human does.

To make matters easy for me, I interpret Krishna simply how I imagine him to be. Fortunately, I don't have to imagine a whole lot; Vyasa has already done a magnificent job in creating a most wonderful and adorable character in Krishna's form. Where I agree with Vyasa's depiction of Krishna, there is no issue. Where I might find his depiction less than agreeable (entirely from my perspective of course), I decide to ignore it, i.e., drop it from my picture of Krishna. That is how simple it is.

As a result, I don't need to argue with anyone about Krishna's so-called faults and deficiencies or mistakes, because they don't exist in my picture of Krishna!

I am most interested in Krishna's qualities and character and not in the miracles he performed, or the supernatural status bestowed on him, although purely as stories I love every story that Vyasa has weaved around Krishna. Those stories are imaginative, fascinating, inspiring and even enlightening at times.

Krishna's mystique:

People use all kinds of metaphors for Krishna. For some, he is like the blue sky – infinite and omnipresent. For some, he is the musician who brings life to this world.

Krishna defies all norms of ordinariness. Here are just a few aspects of his personality:

Krishna was a free man.

Rama, Krishna's supposed predecessor in the line of Vishnu's reincarnations, was a man who acted within restrictions, limitations. Ram obeyed the rule of law to the letter. He followed Dharma with all its nuts and bolts. As if he was born to set ideals for all. He banished his own beloved Seetha to the forest just to satisfy the whim of a cranky citizen because that's what a King was expected to do!

Krishna, on the other hand, was a free man – free in every possible sense. Throughout the story of Mahabharata, he is shown to roam freely, meeting people, playing his tricks, solving problems. He was a freethinker, unchained by any silly man-made rules, unencumbered by the confines and contradictions of any imperfect Dharma.

He was involved but detached.

Among all Hindu deities or incarnations of Vishnu, Krishna is shown to be the most involved in human affairs. Indeed, he is a constant presence throughout Mahabharata. He touched everyone's life in that story – friends and foes alike. He played practically every role that an average human plays – brother, son, student, friend, lover, teacher, mentor, counselor, and so on. He played each of these roles with full intensity and involvement. And yet, he remained unattached to anyone or to any place throughout his life. He lived every experience fully and opened his heart and his bag of tricks completely to everyone along the way. But like a drop of oil in an ocean he remained unaffected by the people he met or by his experiences. His core remained the same. Unlike ordinary humans or even sages who gain their wisdom through life experiences, Krishna was as wise as a teenager as when he was a ripe old man. He went about offering words of wisdom to anyone who was interested.

Krishna's connection with women:

Krishna is a role model for all men for how he treated all the women in his life. He treated them with unconditional and utmost respect, love, and caring. He responded to each according to her capacity and without any expectation. Contrary to what his critics might say, Krishna was no Casanova – he did not go around chasing women. They came to him spontaneously and he was always open to receiving them with respect and friendship.

Krishna kept each connection away from the world – each in a private, invisible universe in which the woman felt safe, fearless, and in charge of her connection with Krishna. In that universe Krishna was truly and completely all hers and she was all his. Their love for each other transcended all boundaries. All constraints vanished – real and imagined – usually imposed by culture and prejudice. When you were in love with Krishna, there was no half-hearted way!

And once they were outside that special universe, neither of them cared about notions such as exclusivity, possession, or loyalty.

So, what was it like to be Krishna's woman?

Being an ordinary man myself, I cannot claim to know what was (or is) special about being a Krishna's woman. But borrowing perspectives shared by women writers and poets and using my own imagination, I am going to venture to describe this beautiful phenomenon:

A woman who had a deep connection with Krishna was blessed with unique experiences. She found Krishna's qualities very attractive, soothing and heart-warming. She loved his music and his playfulness. She felt truly like a woman, happy about her femininity. He respected her completely, never disparaging her feminine traits with his masculine perspective. She could freely share her most intimate thoughts with him. Through her connection with him, she was inspired to pursue her creativity with full energy. She felt supported to pursue her other roles.

It wasn't easy to be Krishna's woman.

Krishna was no ordinary man bound by ordinary rules. To be Krishna's woman you needed to understand and accept that Krishna was like a lucid dream – you could see him, feel him, experience him while you were wide awake, but you could not hold on to him. He was all yours so long as you did not try to possess him. He fulfilled your every wish and dream and more, if you did not make demands on him. You could not box Krishna inside any traditional role. To be Krishna's woman you needed to be courageous and adventurous. You needed to spread your wings and just let go.

Krishna was a man of the moment, a man in the moment. He was true and genuine and totally present to the person with him at the moment. And he was able to move on when time itself moved on. After leaving Vrindavan, Radha became a part of his past; he never tried to interfere in her life afterwards. Their connection was permanent in their hearts, and he felt no need to burden it with the kind of mundane, earthly expectations ordinary people impose on their connections/relationships.

Krishna has now become a metaphor.

Every woman is looking for a Krishna. And every man has the opportunity to be one for his woman. Krishna is indeed a great role model for men – least of all because of the number of women friends he had. It would be quite an achievement for a man to even make one woman in his life feel as if she had found her Krishna.

In this age of women's great awakening and empowerment, I feel the species of men is in serious trouble. Tolerating centuries of domination and injustice any further is now out of the question. Women have arrived at a stage where they would rather live alone or keep the company of a pet than deal with men's offensive behavior. More than ever, there is a dire need for men to understand Krishna's role model and try to learn from it if they wish to win the affection of women.

Krishna's nature and philosophy:

Krishna defies and confounds many normally expected norms of morality. His unique brand of morality even has a name: कृष्णनीती. Traditional moralists might frown at it: They might call his connection with Radha an affair with a married woman. They might call him a wimp for eloping with Rukmini when she wrote a love-letter to him. They might call him cunning because he employed and encouraged deception to destroy enemies.

Only if you understand Krishna as a whole, understand his true nature and the fundamental tenets of his personal philosophy you will begin to appreciate and even admire कृष्णनीती. I certainly do not claim to have understood कृष्णनीती fully. I have nevertheless tried to understand some of its dimensions.

Krishna lived his life as an inspirer, as an enabler, as a power broker, as a kingmaker. He played small tricks and he also played big games, but never did he do anything for his own personal gain. He had the opportunity to rule kingdoms, but he always put someone else capable in charge and moved on. He moved from one adventure to another, never staying in one place longer than necessary. The only resting place for him – in between his intrigues – was the loving arms of one of his beloveds, where he could truly rest and be at peace without worrying about any worldly problems.

Even when Krishna offered his services, they usually came in the form of advice or ideas and not in the form of brute, violent force. When both Arjun and Duryodhan came to him for help in their war effort, Krishna offered them a choice between his entire army or Krishna himself devoid of any weaponry. Arjun was of course wise enough to go for the unarmed Krishna.

Krishna was kind and generous but not indiscriminate. He did not impose his love, goodness, or help on anyone. Nor did he allow anyone to take advantage of him. He read human character like an X-ray machine and interacted with each person according to his/her capacity and merit. He had an instinctive understanding of what good and bad meant, of the pitfalls of even the great, and of whether someone had the potential to reform. The stories of Krishna's interaction with Mahabharata's numerous characters are simply stupendous and fascinating, each a lesson in Krishna's communication skill and his understanding of people and situations.

Krishna, the strategist:

After reading Krishna's political exploits in the Mahabharata, he stands out as a brilliant strategist and pragmatist. Although, he is painted as "the almighty" who can do anything he wants, Vyasa has kept a lid on Krishna's supernatural abilities in several places where Krishna is shown as a mere mortal simply using his brains.

The story of Jarasandha is a case in point. When the discussion comes up about how to destroy Jarasandha, Krishna advises Yudhishtira to avoid a frontal conflict because "Jarasandha's army is so

powerful, it is impossible to defeat it in a straight war.” Instead, he recommends that a small group make a backdoor entry to Jarasandha’s palace and engage him in a one-to-one duel. Krishna includes himself in that small group. Krishna further says to Yudhishtira, “If, after killing Jarasandha, we are attacked by his soldiers and killed, it is still worth the price, because we would have eliminated a powerful enemy and that is a worthy cause.” In reality of course, Krishna, Bheem, and Arjun return unscathed.

I wonder if this story of Jarasandha was an inspiration to Shivaji, who planned an attack on Shaista Khan by side-stepping a frontal conflict with Khan’s huge army and instead making a midnight entry into Khan’s bedroom with a few select commandos.

In closing:

The dimensions of Krishna are numerous, his magic irresistible. Innumerable artists, writers, poets, and philosophers have tried to capture him using their craft, and still, he seems unfathomable, beyond grasp. This is my own humble attempt to pay tribute to Krishna, to try to explain to myself why I find him so fascinating and adorable.

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