Hope

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Wisdom to Survive in a Hopeless World

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juggernaut

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Introduction

Wasn't the world supposed to be a better place in the twenty-first century? But the world we live in feels bleaker than ever. There is climate change, social inequality, mental stress, and the relentless fight on social media on trivial matters between sensible people who insist they are right. We have so many tools to communicate yet feel more disconnected than ever. The COVID-19 crisis has only amplified the sense of hopelessness in many. How can we be resilient and find positivity? How can we develop our mental and emotional strength to live joyfully?

In this book, I want to enable you to hope again by looking at the world with fresh eyes. And I am going to do this through stories you may have heard as a child, but by lending new meanings.

Chapter 1 begins by acknowledging hopelessness as an emotion. Using the mythologies from around the world, I want to show you that despair and devastation have always been a part of the human experience.

Chapter 2 explores how tales of abundance inspire us and establish hope in our minds, even as they shield us from life's harsh realities.

Chapter 3 traces the origins of a crisis and triggers of hopelessness that impact our objective as well as subjective realities. Our mind can make things far worse.

Chapter 4 focuses on what we can do in a crisis, for ourselves and for others.

Chapter 5 takes a long-term view so that we can continue to be hopeful about a better tomorrow while being realistic and resilient enough to handle a crisis, should it come along.

The first three chapters explore ideas that may help you shift your way of thinking. The last two are more practical, giving you coping strategies to manage a crisis.

God is particularly capitalized in the book when referring to divinity in Judeo-Christian-Islamic contexts, as these faiths are monotheistic.

In Hinduism, the divine spectrum can be God, Goddess, god, goddess. The words have myriad meanings depending on the context. They do not always refer to entities but to ideas located within and around us.

Think of this book as a house with many doors. You open the front door of a house and enter a dark room – the first chapter. The room leads to another. This too is dark but perhaps a little less so. The second opens into a third, which is relatively lighter. And so on. From darkness into light. But in that light you will find the strength to face darkness, should you encounter such a room once again.

This book does not claim to be The Truth. It presents coping skills that I have encountered in my reading of Indian and world mythologies over the past twenty-five years. Read them keeping in mind:

Within infinite myths lies an eternal truth
Who sees it all?
Varuna has but a thousand eyes
Indra, a hundred
You and I, only two

1

Feeling hopeless

'I feel hopeless. I spent days trying to find a hospital bed for my uncle. I finally managed to, but he couldn't make it. I failed to find one for my aunt until it was too late for her too. Then my father got sick. I tried everything I could, made all the phone calls, but I couldn't save him. The older generation in my family is gone – in a matter of weeks. I just don't know how to process this.'

'I have lost my job. I am the only person supporting my family. What will I do?'

'I am single, and my aged mother lives with me. I have a salary cut. I need to support myself and her. What is the way out?'

'What about my children? The schools have shut for over a year. What is going to happen to their future?'

'My five-year-old hasn't met a single friend this last year. I worry about the pollution too. What kind of a world are we raising them in?'

'The government is not here to support me in any way, and I'm feeling scared. The country seems so full of anger. So much violence. I don't see hope for this country. Should I emigrate if I can? But where will I go?'

'I lost my wife, who was pregnant with an eight-month-old child. Why did I have to lose her? What happened? She was healthy. I have to now look after our four-year-old boy all by myself. Can I do it? How can I go on?'

'I want to get out of this WhatsApp group, this Facebook group, this society where I reside, this office, this family . . . Everyone seems to be just fighting, arguing, being rude, and disrespectful. No one is listening to anyone. I need to breathe. Just be . . . maybe be with people who care. I just want to feel safe.'

Hopelessness emerges when we are convinced the world does not grant us opportunities, when we feel overwhelmed by challenges and threats, when we feel weak, stripped of all strength,

with no helping hand around, no angel, no guardian, no saviour, no shepherd. When we feel abandoned by family, friends, state, and god.

People often blame the current widespread state of hopelessness on instant news and the access to social media. If social media did not exist, we wouldn't't have to hear of hospital queues, job losses, and stories of pain from strangers. We want to believe the world is better than the negativity that gets marketed, better than what it was in the past.

Yet the world's mythologies – the sacred stories of ancient cultures transmitted over generations – tell a different story. Many, indeed you could say most, myths are stories about hopelessness and crisis. This current state where the world feels apocalyptic is not unique. It has always been so. Let us take a look at these stories, from India and beyond, from different religions. In this chapter, we will:

- Explore India's oldest scriptures, the Vedas, and meet a boy called Sunahshepa who stands for hopelessness more deeply and poignantly than any character I know.

- Witness the struggle of Gajendra, the mighty king of elephants, in a lotus pond, in Buddhist and Hindu art.
- Learn how prophets and messengers (paigambars) of Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) spoke of hope amid utter despair.
- Read stories of crises from our great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.
- Look at how death has rendered even gods-on-earth (avatars) helpless but not hopeless.

The purpose of this chapter is to make us realize that we are not alone in our misery. Despair and desperation are universal but not eternal.

Abandoned in the Vedas

Hinduism's most ancient texts, the Vedas tell the story of a young boy called Sunahshepa. The story begins with a king who is very ill. He invokes a god and offers to sacrifice his son if cured. The god cures the king, but the ruler now hesitates

to offer his son. He consults his ministers, and they come up with a way out: adopt a son and sacrifice the adopted son. The king likes the idea. Proclamations are sent across the land. The king wants a son, messengers and heralds put out the word.

Everyone is excited. Who doesn't want their son to become a prince? But as soon as they hear what is to follow – the dark condition – they recoil in horror. Give up our son to be executed? No, never! After great difficulty, the king's men find one man who says he is willing to give up his son. When he presents himself at the palace, the king asks, 'Why are you giving your son away?' The man replies, 'I'm very poor and have no food to eat. And you are promising us a thousand cows. It will change our fortunes.'

The king is still dissatisfied. 'But you're giving up your son,' he says. 'Can you live with that?' The man says, 'I have three sons. The eldest son is dear to me, the youngest is dear to the mother. This one in the middle, we can spare.'

And so the boy, Sunahshepa, is taken to the sacrificial altar. But now arises another

complication. The priests refuse to go ahead. They say, 'We cannot sacrifice a human being. We will sacrifice an animal, a plant, but a human, this cannot be done.' 'Why don't you do it?' they ask the king.

And the king says, 'I don't want to do it either.' He decides that he will give another thousand cows to anyone who sacrifices the boy. The boy's father returns and says he would be happy to do it. The king looks at the father in disbelief. 'The first time your excuse was poverty. What's your excuse this time,' he asks.

Sunahshepa is listening to this conversation. He thinks to himself in despair, 'I have been abandoned by my father. I've been abandoned by my king, and a god wants me as sacrifice. Where do I go? Who do I cry out to? Who will come to my rescue? The people who are supposed to take care of me – my family, the state, and even god – seem to be against me.' He feels hopeless.

What happened to Sunahshepa? The story goes that the gods finally intervened and saved his life. I have always found this story deeply powerful – the boy's utter helplessness and

aloneness embody the emotions all of us feel in our time of darkness. Who is there for me? Will anyone help? What can I do?

Sunahshepa embodies the feeling of hopelessness of a child who when abandoned looks for the support of others, especially the almighty, to survive. Is that god within us? Are we to save Sunahshepa? Or are we Sunahshepa?

Elephantine struggles in Jatakas and Puranas

The Buddhist stupa at Barhut, Madhya Pradesh, built two thousand years ago, has an image depicting an incident from the Jataka stories, where a mighty elephant in a lotus pond enjoying himself in the water is grabbed by a crab that threatens to drown him. The bull elephant is being dragged under, and he cannot do anything about it. All the cow elephants who were with him have abandoned him because they are terrified of the crab, and they want to protect themselves. He's on his own. Utterly alone, feeling completely abandoned.

We find a very similar image in one of the earliest Hindu temples, the Dasavatara temple in Deogarh. Here you have a carving of an elephant being dragged down by not a crab but a Naga, one of the half-human, half-snake semi-divine creatures of Hindu myths. As before, he is bellowing in fear, raising his trunk, holding a lotus flower, begging for help. This tale of drowning is elaborated in the Bhagavata Purana. Here, the snake is replaced by a crocodile.

In Hindu art and literature, the elephant-king is rescued by the four-armed Vishnu, who descends from the sky on his vehicle Garuda, the eagle, and hurls a discus to kill the villain. In the Buddhist art, the elephant is later shown crushing the crab with his foot, with a little help from his chief queen whose wailing, the story goes, distracted the villain momentarily.

Both the Hindu and the Buddhist stories speak of a hopeless situation, in the lotus pond. The crab/snake/crocodile is the cause of hopelessness. The lotus pond is the world of abundance we desire.

Why has the crocodile, Naga or crab decided to grab you and destroy you? It wants to survive;

it has nothing against you. There is nothing personal. COVID-19 is not our enemy, nor is the economic downturn. It's just that we are part of this horrifying situation, standing right in the middle of it. And we are drowning.

The meaninglessness is a central part of our despair. Why were we chosen? If there was a reason – such as this man hates me and he's destroying me, or I have hurt this man and therefore he's hurting me back – it would have helped to understand better. But during the pandemic the questions that came to us were, why is a good person suffering? Why me? Do I deserve such a fate? Why me and not them?

In the Jataka tale, the elephant fights the battle himself and wins against the giant crab. In the Hindu stories, help arrives from outside, from Vishnu the protector. In one case, hopelessness is tackled by the self while in the other, it is resolved from the outside. Must we be independent to survive a crisis? Or can we be dependent? Can we rely on others? Can others rely on us?

Stories of the Prophets

In Jewish, Christian, and Islamic lore, themes of hopelessness and hope oscillate like a pendulum, moving one way sometimes and another the next. Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden for eating the Forbidden Fruit, but hope is sent through angels and prophets who help humanity find their way back to Paradise. There are floods, fires, and the wrath of God, as well as refuge, protection, and the love of God.

Arabic tales tell us how Hagar and Ismael, abandoned in the desert, find the waters of Zamzam to quench their thirst. Yusuf, known in the Old Testament as Joseph, is treated badly by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt. But he forgives them and ends up providing shelter to his entire family during a great famine.

Egyptians enslave the Hebrews, and hope appears through Prophet Moses who leads them across the wilderness and the sea to the Promised Land. Stories describe the resilience and patience of Job (Ayyub) through the worst of misfortunes and of Jonas (Yunus) rediscovering faith in the belly of a whale.

We hear of suffering in Israel, of years of prosecution, before the rise of kings who built temples to the God. Temples are destroyed and resurrected, there are exiles to Babylon and triumphant returns. Noah survives a terrifying flood by holding on to his faith.

To a humble believer, the words of Jesus Christ in the New Testament bring hope. Words of Allah, spoken to Muhammad and communicated through the Quran, inspire faith in the Muslim during dark times.

All this reveals that the experience of helplessness is not unique to us or our times. It has always been so – around the world. The characters in these stories experience death, devastation, hunger, homelessness, loneliness, and complete despair. Think of this literature as the wisdom of our ancestors that we can dip into in times of crisis.

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata

Similar stories abound in Hindu epics. In the Ramayana, Ram is told on the eve of his

coronation that he has to leave the palace and go to the forest in exile for fourteen years. Imagine a situation where we are told that we will not get our inheritance for that long a time or where we are thrown into jail for fourteen years for no fault of ours. How would we feel?

At the near end of the epic, Ram's wife Sita finds herself in the forest, pregnant and abandoned by her husband. The first time in the forest when she is kidnapped by a demon and taken to the island of Lanka, she has faith that Ram will come to save her. But the very Ram casts her out of Ayodhya in the end. Wasn't Ram her guardian? How would you feel if your guardian abandoned you? Why would Valmiki narrate such a story in an epic meant to glorify Ram? What is he trying to teach us?

In the Mahabharata, Karna is abandoned by his mother and subsequently rejected by his teachers because he is low-born. The Pandavas find themselves as refugees in the forest, their palace burnt by their cousins, the Kauravas. Who do they turn to when their family has turned

into their killers? Most dramatically, Draupadi is gambled away by her husbands and dragged in public, stripped of her privileges, security, honour, and her dignity.

Like Sunahshepa, she has nowhere to turn to. 'Do I turn to my husbands? But they have become mute spectators. Do I turn to the king, the one who represents the state? But the state is silent.' It's like those horrible WhatsApp videos of today, of goons surrounding people and beating them up while the police watch doing nothing. There's nobody to help the victims, nobody to come to their rescue. Neither the people watching and filming the scene nor the state, the police, not even you.

The Mahabharata contains many mini-epics, each mirroring the misery of the Pandavas and Draupadi. Take the story of Nala and Damayanti that the Pandavas hear in the forest.

Nala is a handsome king. He marries Damayanti, a woman so beautiful that even the gods want to marry her. Jealous, the gods create all kinds of problems for this couple. Nala loses his fortune and his kingdom in a gambling

match. He's forced to leave his palace with his wife, with just the clothes on his body.

Nala thinks he will run a small business to make ends meet. He's a dreamer. He's always been an entitled prince, someone who has never worked a day in his life. He announces, I will catch birds in the forest and sell them in the market. And the wife says okay, but how do we catch them. He says, don't worry, I've got a dhoti. I'll use this as a trap. He has never caught birds in his life. He spreads the cloth and when the birds sit on it, he thinks he can trap them. But then the birds fly away with his dhoti, leaving the king naked. Nala sees the birds are smarter than him. His self-worth, self-esteem completely collapse. He is a man with nothing, not even a dhoti to cover him.

Damayanti tries to calm him. She tears her saree into two and tells him to wear one half. Her love and support make him feel even worse. At night when she's sleeping, unable to bear the thought that he's so useless, he runs away in the darkness. Damayanti finds herself in the middle of the forest all alone. But she is not worried

about herself. She's worried for Nala. What is going to happen to him? Determined to find him, she makes a plan.

The Nala–Damayanti story shows a man who's completely shattered and the woman playing his saviour. When we talk of despair, what is the gender that comes to our mind? Most would say Sita of the Ramayana, who is abandoned by her husband Ram, the king of Ayodhya, heeding public gossip. We are conditioned to think of Sita as the archetypal character representing the plight of women. And yet, in Nala's story, it's very much the other way around.

Different responses to a crisis

After the gambling match, the five Pandava brothers must leave the city, stripped of their status and fortune. They had entered the city as kings but are doomed to leave as paupers after a single gambling match where they lost everything – wealth, power, status, property, and their dignity too. They are left with no self-esteem because they behaved like louts in the

gambling hall, foolishly betting away everything they had. Bereft of all sense. They lose the respect of their people and feel ashamed of themselves.

As they leave the city, Dhritarasthra asks Vidur and his courtiers to describe how the brothers appear. It's a narrative device to help you see the emotions that run through the Pandavas. Bhima is seen massaging his muscles, warming them up as if indicating he will come back and kill Duryodhana. Draupadi stands caressing her unbound hair, reiterating her public resolve to tie it up only when she has had her vengeance. (In many folk traditions, Bhima and Draupadi are considered to be Bhairava and Bhairavi. They stand for anger and revenge.)

Nakula, the handsome Pandava adored by many women, is seen covering his face with soot and dust. There is much anger and blame among the five brothers and Draupadi in the forest. One blames the Kauravas, the other point fingers at Yudhishthira's weakness. **As you try to find explanations for the crisis that has happened, you blame fate, other people, finally even yourself.**

Draupadi's anger never ceases, nor do her quarrels. Arjuna finds he can't be with his family in such an atmosphere. He leaves them to meditate, meets his father Indra, and tries to amass weapons for the future war. He can't bear to see the face of his elder brother, whom he respects a lot. Yudhishthira tries to be graceful but his family do not allow him to stay calm.

The response in the Ramayana is different. There is Lakshman screaming and yelling, saying Kaikeyi is responsible, Bharat is responsible, our father is weak. Sita says nothing, she simply stands next to Ram, in support. Ram doesn't respond at all. Of course, he is the ideal man, a god. As humans, we are more like Lakshman than Ram. But through these stories, the tellers are trying to explain what the graceful reaction to hopelessness is while also presenting the more common, human responses to the crisis.

Hopelessness has different effects on people. Draupadi transforms herself into an angry person. She vows that she will not tie her hair until she can wash it with the blood of the Kauravas. She becomes vengeful, aggressive, and

is always portrayed with her hair unbound. It's a very violent image but also a glamorous one because Draupadi glistens and shimmers in her rage. Those who made me feel helpless, I shall do the same to them. I will avenge myself when the opportunity is right. Revenge in this case manifests as hope. Draupadi believes revenge will end her sense of despair.

Contrast this with Sita in the Ramayana where there is no fantasy of revenge. I have always observed that people glamorize revenge in our storytelling. We don't like characters who are not vengeful. Sita seems boring when compared to Draupadi, with no unbound hair, no eyes flashing fire, no fiery dialogues.

It's significant that Valmiki tells us that Sita is the daughter of Janak of Mithila. She's born of a king who is associated with the Upanishads, the Vedic doctrines of self-reflection and self-realization**.** Now, this is a very important aspect to remember. She is the daughter of a very wise man. That's a code.

By calling Sita the daughter of Janak, the author is telling us that this is a person whose

response is going to be based on wisdom. Draupadi is raw and elemental, born of fire. She emerges as an adult. She has no mother. By contrast, Sita has had a childhood, she is born of earth and raised by a foster father who is an extremely erudite man. She's surrounded by sages through her childhood.

If Draupadi's response to despair is anger, Sita's is disappointment followed by acceptance. The Ram who saved her from Ravana's Lanka was her husband and guardian. The Ram who abandoned her was Ayodhya's king, scion of the Raghu clan, leader of the solar dynasty, who valued royal reputation over marriage and family.

If I had to imagine Sita's state of mind in the forest when she is left behind by her husband, I would visualize this: the first moment, there is shock, and horror, and despair. But soon she would think, 'Let me find food, let me find water. I have life inside my body, I'm pregnant. I will have to feed them.' As she is consumed by the practicalities of life, she would be more analytical about her circumstances.

In the Nala–Damayanti story, we are led

into the story of a man who is in the throes of a complete breakdown. Nala is seen falling in a downward spiral, triggered by misfortune, and Damayanti clinging to him, trying to pull him out. She's the one stretching out her hand to pull the drowning Nala out of the maelstrom. She is the Vishnu rescuing the elephant-king. In Sita's story, she has to fight the crab herself. No one will come to her rescue.

Ram is helpless too, bound by royal rules. The mother of his children is in the forest, and he cannot do anything to take care of them. We imagine that Sita must have lived comfortably with the sages in a sylvan retreat. But in the folk songs in Telugu, her life in the forest is described as harsh as she struggles to provide food for her children and protect them from the wilderness. It must have been a tough life as a single mother. Born a princess, Sita would not have imagined that she would face such eventualities after marriage, that too after supporting her husband through his worst time.

So we find these stories moving into different emotions: from helplessness some move into

vengeance as in the case of Draupadi, some like Nala wish to just hide and disappear from the world. Then there is Ram bound by unfair rules, holding on to his dignity and the principles of kingship, while Sita focuses on practicalities, not judging Ram.

In the face of death

Ram as a king encounters a father in front of his palace, holding his dead child. The grieving father says, 'I thought in Ram Rajya, everything would be predictable, fathers would die before sons. But here is my son, lying in my lap. Should a father have to ever witness the death of his child? Is that orderly? Is this Ram Rajya?' It's a very moving image because you see that Ram is unable to do anything about it. The king has been shown his place. Ram may be god on earth, but even he has to accept the rules of the earth and submit to the reality of death.

A similar story is found in the Mahabharata where Arjuna the great warrior says, 'I can defeat every monster.' Krishna takes Arjuna to a young

couple in distress. 'Every time their baby is born, it dies. Can you keep death away so that they can have a child?' he asks. Arjuna builds a fortress of arrows, ready to kill Yama, the god of death. But he cannot, the child is again born dead. In front of death, even the greatest of heroes fade into nothing.

In the Stree Parva of the Mahabharata, when all the soldiers are dead, there is a powerful description of the women flooding into the battlefield, wailing for their sons and husbands and brothers. Gandhari, weeping for her hundred sons, curses Krishna bitterly. 'You are supposed to be divine. What have you done? You didn't spare a single child of mine.' Gandhari blames Krishna and the Pandavas. Not once does she hold her children responsible for not settling for peace when it was within their power.

In the face of death, we wonder what's the point of it all. But the world continues silently, whether we find meaning or not. The world exists. It owes us no explanation.

I think Krishna is the most helpless character in the Mahabharata. Because here is the most

powerful man who cannot stop a war and prevent the death of millions. Even the god on earth cannot convince the Kauravas to make peace. Stories such as these remind us there is no escape from hopelessness, even for the divine. We have to submit to the harsh realities of life. Not everything is in our control.

Think of Krishna walking away from the Kaurava court after negotiations fail. God could not stop the Kauravas from fighting the Pandavas. And he could not convince the Pandavas to not hate the Kauravas. He said to them, 'You can fight for your wealth, I can understand that, but why do you hate them? Don't confuse fairness with revenge.'

But who heard what Krishna said? We think Krishna promotes revenge and rage when he supports Draupadi but he does nothing to save her children who die in the war that enables her to finally tie her hair, drenched in the blood of her enemies. Everybody is angry and upset, despite being none the wiser.

In the Mahabharata, Krishna dies alone in the forest, after witnessing his own family, the Yadav

clan, fighting and killing each other at Prabhas Teerth. He was not able to stop the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Now he's not able to stop the war between the two factions of his own family. All his talk on dharma and living together peaceably falls on deaf ears. His brother Balaram is bitter and angry with him and walks away. A hunter aims, mistaking him for an animal. The poison spreads through his body slowly. The world continues as before.

Can we change the world? Krishna before dying gives his final discourse to Uddhava, his old friend. Many of those teachings are the same as in the Bhagavad Gita, which he narrates before the war breaks between the Kauravas and Pandavas. We find the same ideas in the Upanishads. These are considered Sanatan and Shaswat, timeless ideas that will not change. It is the foundation of Hindu wisdom. Krishna is not bitter despite his apparent failure to prevent wars. Why? Should he not be frustrated?

Shouldn't the Ramayana and the Mahabharata end in triumph, a glorious climax? Yet, the stories end as tragedies. And in these tragedies,

the gods on earth, Ram, Sita, and Krishna, are visualized as calm and graceful. Krishna is even envisioned as a cherubic cosmic child, cradled by a leaf on stormy waters, ready to experience life once more with the same enthusiasm as before.

There must be a lesson here, which we will unravel in the next four chapters.