

## Why Should Arjuna Kill? The Bhagavad Gitā's Justification of Selective Violence.\*

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**Abstract:** '*Ahiṃsā Parmo Dharma*' (Non-violence is the greatest duty), resounds through the Indian epic Mahābhārata number of times and yet it is full of wars. This dichotomy seems to be a reflection of the conflicting tendencies in human life or does the epic give a message that violence is inevitable?

The epic does not project any stereotypical ideal way of life, but looks at it from different perspectives. It seems to be giving a message that not having a war is probably the best situation, but sometimes one's sincere desire of avoiding a war may encourage evil. If good people withdraw from life, the space will be left open for evil to fill the void.

Probably a part of human psyche is inclined towards renunciation, which is personified in Arjuna's behavior just before the war when he refuses to fight. Kṛṣṇa on the other hand represents an opinion, according to which, leading an active life of a householder without attachment to the world around you is better. He does not condemn the renunciation altogether but says that asceticism should not be an impulsive decision and it is not for everybody.

This paper juxtaposes two conflicting attitudes towards life; Arjuna's self annihilating non-violence vis-à-vis Kṛṣṇa's advocacy of self preservation which may at a time involve selective violence. Blind adherence to non-violence, without evaluating the consequences may lead to the adverse effect. If one should resist the oppressor or surrender to him also depends upon the one's situation in life. A hermit may refuse to fight and accept the violence of the oppressor as his destiny. But if same is done by a soldier and police who are duty bound to protect the state and citizens, anarchy will be let loose, seriously harming the civilization. Arjuna's position was similar.

**Keywords:** *Ahiṃsā, Dharma, Bewildered, Greed, Family, Varṇa.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Kṛṣṇa's justification of war in the epic Mahābhārata is being discussed time and again among the people engaged with the Indian philosophical tradition. The epic is very complex text and does not take a one sided view of the human situations, but looks at it from the different perspectives. While repeatedly stating '*Ahiṃsā Parmo Dharma*' (Non-violence is the greatest Dharma), the epic is full of wars.

The *Bhagavad Gitā* is narrated by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna in a situation when Arjuna was going through moral crises. His kingdom was snatched by his cousin Duryodhana. As a duty of *Kṣatriya* (the warrior clan) he is supposed to fight and take back his kingdom. But the matter was not simple. He had to fight and possibly kill not only his cousin but many relatives who were supporting his Cousin. Arjuna's mind was filled with piety and he asks if the kingdom is really so valuable that he should be killing his kith and kin for it. Overcame with sense of guilt and fear of sin that he might be accumulating during the war, he throws away his bow and arrows and says that it will be better to live on alms than enjoying the kingdom earned by bloodshed.

Taken out of the context, Arjuna's arguments will sound very noble. He thinks self-annihilation is better than killing one's kith and kin. But probably excess of virtue also turns out to be a vice. Surrendering to evil will encourage evil. Arjuna had been born in the family of warriors and was brought up as a warrior. He was a hero of many battles, but now he was flinching from killing in the war, nor because he had renounced the killing altogether, but he was not willing to strike the people that he considered as his own. Kṛṣṇa says that this is an ignorant attachment. If a warrior can kill someone for some reason, he should be ready to kill his own kith and kin as well. In fact the Bhagavad Gitā

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gives a message that our body is a temporary abode where the divine energy resides for time being. It says that our body is like cloth and as we discard the old, soiled cloths, similarly the soul also discards the old body and takes the new one. (Radhakrishnan S p.108) If body is not ours, how the relatives related to the body can be ours?

His friend, philosopher and guide Kṛṣṇa makes Arjuna aware about the evil that may result if Arjuna withdraws from the war. Kṛṣṇa reminds him that as a person from the warrior caste, he should not flinch from the war that is fought for the just cause. It is not right to get bound by the ties of affection and tolerate injustice. For the greater cause one may have to kill our kith and kin. Though the argument starts here, it goes further and elaborates on many philosophical aspect of life like nature of soul and divine, necessity of self restrain and a way towards peace and liberation.

The Bhagavad Gitā, which is a part of the Mahābhārata runs into eighteen chapters and seven hundred verses. Though according to the legend it is Seer Vaiśya , who is the author of the Mahābhārata which includes the Bhagavad Gitā as well. But the scholars say that it is not a work of one person, but grew over a long period of time.(Radhakrishnan, p.14) . As it grew over a long period of time, we find the reflection of the long philosophical churning into it. Arjuna’s desire is manifestation of the philosophy of withdrawal from life and the philosophy of right action with right attitude is personified in Kṛṣṇa’s thinking.

Both the armies were standing face to face. The day had finally arrived for which the preparation was going on for years. There was a lot of tension in the air. Warriors from both the side were aware that they may have to kill their own kith and kin. Arjuna, one of the greatest warriors and an important pillar of strength from the Pāṇḍavā’s side wanted to take a look at his opponents and requested his charioteer, friend, philosopher and guide Kṛṣṇa to station his chariot in between both the armies. (1:21)<sup>2</sup>.

Seeing his grandfather, preceptor and other kith and kin on the other side Arjuna became sentimental and gave up. He throws away his bow and arrows and his condition is narrated in his own words as,

“.....my limbs quail, my mouth goes dry, my body shakes and my hair stands on end” (1:29)

He admits his confusion and psychological weakness as he says,

“My being is stricken with the weakness of (sentimental) pity. With my mind bewildered about my duty” (2:7)

## II. ARJUNA’S JUSTIFICATION OF WITHDRAWING FROM THE WAR

Preaching non-violence Arjuna says,

“Happier far would it be for me if Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s sons, weapon in hand, should strike me down on the battlefield, unresisting and unarmed” (1:46)

Apparently the lines seem to be echoing the very sublime sentiments of non-violence. The argument that Arjuna puts forward appears to be valid from moral point of view! Self-annihilation is better than killing! Arjuna’s justifications for withdrawing from the war can be summarized as;

### 2.1. Sin in killing kith and kin

There is a sin in killing kith and kin for the sake of material gain. The material gains can be enjoyed with the near and dear and not by killing them. Arjuna feels sad that he and his relatives are willing to kill each others for the kingdom.

“.....Of what use is kingdom to us, O Kṛṣṇa, or enjoyment or even life? Those for whose sake we desire kingdom, enjoyments and pleasures, they stand here in battle, renouncing their lives and riches” (1:32,33)

Overcome with pity for his near and dear he says that I will not kill them for the kingdom of three words<sup>3</sup>, even if they are bent upon killing him (1:35). Arjuna seems to be taking a stand that even if somebody is violent to us, we should not stoop low and react in a similar manner. But Arjuna’s non-violence seems to be confined to his kith and kin. Commenting on the obvious pity that Arjuna seems to be preaching, S. Radhakrishnan writes,

“The pity of Arjuna has nothing in common with divine compassion. It is a form of self-indulgence, a shrinking of the nerves from an act which requires him to hurt his own people” (S. Radhakrishnan 2004:98)

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<sup>2</sup> The verses of the Bhagavad Gitā are taken/referred from Radhakrishnan S, “The *Bhagavadgitā*” HarperCollins, New Delhi, 2004 in Chapter no: verse no. format.

<sup>3</sup> . Heaven, Earth and Hell.

Arjuna had aversion towards fighting against grandfather Bhīṣma and teacher Droṇa whom he described as *pūjārḥāv* (worthy of worship) (2:4).

He does not seem to have any aversion to killing in general, but his main argument is that he cannot kill his own people as he says,

“...How can we be happy, O Mādhava (Kṛṣṇa), if we kill our own people?” (1:37)

He says that it is better to live by begging than slaying honoured teachers and enjoying the world delights which are *rudhirapradigdhān* (smeared with blood) (2:5)

According to him the destruction of the family is sin and they i.e. Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas who understands this should turn away from this, even if the Kauravas who are overpowered by greed do not see any wrong in it. (1:38,39)

## 2.2. Fearful consequences of the war

Arjuna argues that when the families are destroyed during the war, the practice of traditional laws will be stopped leading to lawlessness. (1:40). When lawlessness prevails, women of the family becomes corrupt leading to *Varṇasamkaraḥ* i.e. confusion of castes. (1:41)

If the progenies are born out of union between the man and woman from different *Varṇas*<sup>4</sup> then it is called *Varṇasamkaraḥ*. Arjuna fears that during the period of lawlessness, women will have relations with undesirable men as there will be no control over them. Restrictions that are imposed on the union between different *Varṇa* will be violated and *Varṇa* system may break down. The patriarchal attitude of controlling sexuality and fertility of women is reflected in Arjuna’s fear as he seems to be holding women more responsible for maintaining the purity of *Varṇa*.

*Varṇasamkaraḥ* seems to a very heinous crime from Arjuna’s perspective as he says this leads to various evils like it destroys *Kuldharmaś* (laws of the family) and *Jātidharmaḥ* (laws of the castes). The person as well as his family who has contributed towards this lawlessness will go to hell. During the period of lawlessness, the spirits of ancestors will also fall (from heaven) as they will be deprived of their offerings of rice and water. (1:42, 43)

The importance given to the rituals about the dead ancestors is reflected here. The Hindus offer rice and water to the spirit of the dead ancestors.

After narrating the calamities that may befall as consequences of the war, Arjuna feels sad that he was bent upon committing all these sins by killing his own people due his greed for the kingdom. (1:45). He relapses into the mood of self-annihilating surrender and says,

“Far better would it be for me if the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, with weapons in hand slay me in the battle, while I remain unresisting and unarmed.” (1:46)

Having narrated all the calamities that may befall, Arjuna sank down on the seat of his chariot, casting away his bow and arrows and his condition is described as ‘*Śokasamvignamānash*’ ( spirit overwhelmed by sorrow)(1:47)

Arjuna was one of the foremost warriors on the Pāṇḍavā’s side. It was difficult to win the war without him. Counting on his archery skill the Pāṇḍavās prepared for the war. He had been a hero of many battles earlier and killed number of people earlier. But suddenly he was inclined towards renunciation and justifies non-violence.

Based on above two arguments, Arjun justifies his withdrawal from the war.

## III. KṚṢṆA’S COUNTER ARGUMENTS

Carried away with the affection for his relatives Arjuna could not reflect upon the consequences of his withdrawal from the war and declines to fight. Kṛṣṇa however puts forward following counter points urging Arjuna to fight.

### 3.1. Reminds him of his nobility and Reputation

Kṛṣṇa’s first reaction is surprise and he rebukes Arjuna

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<sup>4</sup> *Varṇa*-literally color, later on became synonym with social stratification in Ancient India when society began to be divided into four *Varṇas* – *Brahmins*, *Kṣtriya*, *Vaiśya* and *Sūdra*. In the course of time different castes were evolved out of this and different tribes who increasingly came under the Brahminical influence were accommodated in the different *Varṇas*. Restrictions were put on the matrimonial alliances across the castes.

“Whence has come to thee this stain (this dejection) of spirit in this hour of crisis?” (2:2).

He further says that Arjuna’s this act is *anāryajuṣṭam* (not suitable for an *Arya*<sup>5</sup>), *asvargyam* (does not lead to heaven), *akīrtikaram* (disgracing). (2:2)

Further Kṛṣṇa urges him that this kind of *klaibyam* (unmanliness) does not suit him and he should cast off this *kṣudram hr̥gayadaurbalyam* (petty faintheartedness). Calling him *param̐tapa* (oppressor of the foes) Kṛṣṇa tries to boost his morale. (2:3)

If Arjuna withdraws from the war, people will speak ill of him and his reputation is at stake. Urging Arjuna to fight for honour he says,

“The world will forever recount the story of thy disgrace; and for a man of honour disgrace is worse than death” (2:34)

### 3.2. Gain at both the ends

Kṛṣṇa also tries to motivate Arjuna by saying that he have gains at both the ends;

“Slain, you shall gain heaven, victorious, you shall inherit the earth” (2:37)

It was believed that if a warrior is killed in the war he goes to heaven and if Arjuna wins he will enjoy the kingdom on earth.

### 3.3. Responsibility towards society

Arjuna also had responsibility towards society. He was like a role model for the *Kṣatriyas* and abandoning his *Kṣatrdharma*, (*Dharma*<sup>6</sup> of *Kṣatriya* to fight a righteous war) might have very adverse consequences. It will not only have an immediate adverse result like annihilation of the Pāṇḍavā army, but it will also create a wrong precedent for the coming generations. If he withdraws from the war, other *Kṣatriyas* will follow his examples and thus it will perpetuate evil.

“*Yad-yad ācharti śreṣṭhas tad-tad eve’ taro janah  
sa yet parmāṇam kurute lokas tad anuvartate*” (3:21)

(Whatsoever a great man does, the same is done by others as well.

Whatever standard he sets, the world follows.)

Arjuna’s withdrawal would have also sent the message that it is not wrong to surrender to uncompromising, obstinate aggressor than fighting. Many people have gathered on the battlefield in support of the Pāṇḍavās. If Arjuna suddenly withdraws, it may spread panic among them. It is important for the leader to control his mood swings.

Kṛṣṇa also says that a spiritually evolved person should be a ‘*Sarvbhūhite ratāḥ*’, (12:4) i.e. a person engaged in the welfare of all. Arjuna’s fighting presumably will lead to the victory of good over evil and will contribute to the general well being of the humanity.

Arjuna being from the ruling class of the *Kṣatriya*, is expected to protect the ‘*Dharma*’ and punish those who violate it. If Arjuna can kill someone for the same reason, he should be willing to kill his own kith and kin for the same. Arjuna had already fought number of battles and killed many people before this. Now Duryodhana and his supporters challenged him by not handing him over the kingdom to the Pāṇḍavās even after the Pāṇḍavās had fulfilled their obligation of staying in forest for twelve years and one year incognito. Duryodhana was uncompromising as he says,

“As long as I am alive,.....I shall not surrender as much as a pin-prick of land to the Pāṇḍavas” ” (Buitenen1978:421)

It was obligatory on Arjuna’s part to fight against injustice according to the prevailing *Kṣatriya* code of conduct. Bowing down before the aggressor with the desire of maintaining peace does not always work. Chamberlain tried

<sup>5</sup> *Arya* means noble here.

<sup>6</sup> ‘*Dharma*’ is difficult to translate in English, though law is used as synonym. A detailed discussion on the concept of ‘*Dharma*’ in the epic is given by James L. Fitzgerald in introduction to ‘The *Mahābhārata*, volume 7, book 12. The Book of Peace, Part One’, The university of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004.

his best to avoid war and went on compromising with Hitler, but it further inflamed Hitler's greed leading to disastrous result.

Arjuna should not back off just because the people who are challenging him are his relatives. Fighting to establish justice may even spiral into greater violence. Interpreting Gitā's message Gandhi says,

"If one's kinsmen deserve to be killed, they ought to be killed; and one must not hesitate even if the entire world are likely to be destroyed as a consequence" (Gandhi 2010:25)

Gandhi interprets Arjuna's confusion as,

"...Arjuna falls into the error of making a distinction between kinsmen and outsiders. Outsiders may be killed even if they are not oppressors, and kinsmen may not be killed even if they are" (ibid:21)

Further justifying Kṛṣṇa urging Arjuna to fight, Gandhi says Arjuna should be prepared to kill both Droṇa and Bhīṣma, for they have joined wrong side. Going one step further he says,

"Should it become necessary to cut off, with a sword, one's father's head, one must do so if one is a Kṣatriya and has a sword, and if one would cut off anyone else's head in a similar circumstances" (ibid)

So if Arjuna finds somebody else deserved to be killed for some particular transgression, but he does not want to kill his own kinsman for the same then that is an ignorant attachment. According to Gandhi, Gitā wanted to free Arjuna from this ignorance that some people are his relatives and some are not. Arjuna was an ideal for many, if he gave in to his emotional impulse and withdraws from the war, it might led to the acceptance of such behavior in future, when the warrior will not raise arms against their kith and kin, even if they knew that what they are doing is not right.

The Bhagavad Gitā describes the nature and duties of *Kṣatriyas*,

"Valour, spiritedness, constancy, resourcefulness, not fleeing from battle, generosity and the capacity to rule are the natural duties of a Kṣatriya" (18:43)

In 'the Book of the Effort'(fifth book of the epic) when Kṛṣṇa's peace mission fails, Kuntī sends a very stern message to her sons through him. For Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest of her son who was more inclined towards contemplation she says,

"You have mere rote learning of the Veda without understanding ....the baron was created from his chest, to live by the strength of his arms, to act always mercilessly for the protection of his subjects"<sup>7</sup> (Buitenen1978:429)

Reminding him of the duties of the king she says,

"A king infected by cowardice, who does not act ruthlessly, does not win the reward that result from the protection of his subjects" (ibid:430)

Echoing the traditional expectations about the qualities that the *Kṣatriyas* should possess she says,

"Neither Pāṇḍu nor I nor grandfather have ever prayed that you be blessed with the wisdom you live by; the blessings I asked were sacrifice, generosity, austerity, heroism, offspring, greatness of spirit, and the enjoyment of strength forever." (ibid)

The conflict of the two different attitude towards life, one that is in favor of renunciation and the other that is inclined towards action seems to have found place in the epic. The epic however seems to be more inclined towards the way of action, though not denying the space to renunciation altogether. It seems to be celebrating the *Kṣatriya* way of life. Kuntī appears to be mocking Yudhiṣṭhira for his inclination towards philosophical musing and mild demur. Yudhiṣṭhira is also scolded by Bhīma during the *Āraṇyakaparvan* (the Book of forest, the third book of the epic) for behaving that does not suit the *Kṣatriya*.

"Pray, great king, look to the baronial Law! It is not, great king, the baron's law to sit in the forest! Kingship alone, as the wise know, is the baron's supreme law" (Buitenen 1975;317)

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<sup>7</sup> It was believed that the Brahmins are created from the head of *Purūshā*, the primordial man, *Kṣatriyas* from arms, *Vaiśhās* from the thighs and *Sūdras* from the feet symbolizing the nature of work that these four *Varṇas* are supposed to do.

Later on during the war, Karna mockingly equates him with the 'Brahmin', indicating that the Brahminical behavior of philosophical discourse is not suitable on the battlefield.

"You possess the strength of the Brahman and are devoted to studying and the task of performing sacrifices"  
(Debroy, 2013, Volume 7:161)

In fact among the Pāṇḍavās it was Yudhiṣṭhira, who seems to be indecisive and more in need of motivation to fight. But why the Bhagavad Gitā was narrated to Arjuna and not to Yudhiṣṭhira? Probably, the epic is trying to give the message that the resolute warrior like Arjuna may also face moral dilemma and confusion about the duty! It was not the first time that Arjuna was fighting against his own kith and kin. He had already done this earlier. ((Buitenen1978:63-119)

Kuntī also narrates a story of queen Vidurā and her son Saṃjaya to Kṛṣṇa to be communicated to Yudhiṣṭhira (Buitenen1978:431-438). In the story the spirited queen prods her defeated son to fight and recover his kingdom. It seems like a prelude to the Bhagavad Gitā. The queen scolds her dejected son in a very harsh tone and tells him to be ambitious and enterprising. The *Kṣatriyas* should fight, earn riches. The Brahminical attitude of upholding the 'Cāturvarṇa' (The four *Varṇas*) is reflected in Vidurā's following utterance,

".....rather break in the middle than bend! Proud of heart, you should go about like a rutting elephant, bowing before Brahmins and always to the law, Saṃjaya. Subduing the other classes and striking down all evildoers, a baron should be the same as long as he lives" (Buitenen1978: 435)

In the story the mother tells her son that if you do not fight at the right time,

"you will commit an act of extreme cruelty" (ibid)

Praising enterprise, the queen says that not trying has only one consequence i.e. nothing, but trying can bring result or not. (ibid: 436)

Emphasizing the need of a leader to be fearless she says,

"The king should never be afraid in an emergency; and even if he is frightened, he should not act like a frightened man. For if people see their king frightened, they all become frightened themselves" (ibid: 437)

At the end of the story the son gathers his strength and conquers his enemy. Kuntī also says that this story should be repeated by ministers to their kings and if a pregnant woman hears this she will give birth to a hero, who will be,

"a champion in learning, austerity, self-control, an ascetic, blazing with the luster of Brahman, honoured with applause, fiery, strong, lordly, a great warrior, daring, unassailable, an invincible conqueror. A chastiser of the wicked and protector of the law-abiding that baroness shall bear, a hero whose valor is truth" (ibid:438)

The above utterance of Kuntī gives a list of the qualities that is expected of *Kṣatriyas*. Here learning, austerity and self-control is not ruled out but a *Kṣatriya* should not flinch from the righteous war. Arjuna is described as a warrior who had self control. He could withdraw the divine weapon released by him but not Aśvatthāman. (Debroy 2013, Vol. 8:55)

Kṛṣṇa reminds Arjuna that the duty that has come to his share due to his station in life should be done without attachment and without thinking about the consequences,

"But even these works ought to be performed, giving up attachment and desire for fruits. ....the renunciation of any duty that ought to be done is not right." (18:6,7)

Kṛṣṇa says that a wise man does the duty that he has to perform without any attachment. When the duty demands something is to be done, one should not think about what is pleasant or unpleasant. (18:10)

Killing of kith and kin and preceptor is justified by Bhīṣma in Śāntiparvan as,

".....as giving, studying, and asceticism are law for Brahmins, the striking down of bodies in battle is law for kṣatriyas. It truly was lawful and Meritorious Action that he kill fathers, grandfathers, sons, teachers, affinal and blood relatives who proceeded against him wrongly in the war. The kṣatriya who kills even his teachers in war, when they are greedy and wicked.....he, Keśava, knows what is lawful. The kṣatriya who is called to battle must always fight" (Fitzgerald 2004:290)

Vivekananda interprets Arjuna's weakness as,

“.....many a time comes when we want to interpret our weakness and cowardice as forgiveness and renunciation. There is no merit in the renunciation of a beggar.....we know how often in our lives through laziness and cowardice. We give up the battle and try to hypnotize our minds into the belief that we are brave” (Vivekananda 2009:459)

Vivekananda says that here also Arjuna was trying to fool Kṛṣṇa. Arjuna cannot strike his relatives, but tries to justify himself by bringing higher moral ideas like how non-resistance is better than resistance (ibid 460)

Making analysis of the conflict in Arjuna’s mind, Vivekananda says,

“...there is a conflict in Arjuna’s heart between his emotionalism and his duty. The nearer we are to (beasts and) birds, the more we are in the hells of emotions. We call it love. It is self-hypnotization. We are under the control of our emotion like animals. A cow can sacrifice its life for its young. Every animal can” (ibid)

Elaborating further he says,

“....Arjuna is under the control of his emotionalism. He is not what he should be—a great self controlled, enlightened sage working through the eternal light of reason. He has become like an animal, like a baby, just letting his heart carry away his brain, making a fool of himself and trying to cover his weakness with the flowering names of ‘love’ and so on. Kṛṣṇa sees through that. Arjuna talks like a man of little learning and brings out many reasons, but at the same time he talk the language of a fool” (ibid)

### 3.4. Philosophical argument about body and soul

Kṛṣṇa says that as soul is eternal, non-perishable, by killing his kith and kin Arjuna will be only killing their physical bodies. Explaining the nature of soul, he says,

“nai ’nam chindanti śastrāṇi Nai ’nam dahati pāvakaḥ

Na cai ’nam kledayanti āpo Na śoṣayati mārutaḥ” (2:23)

(Weapon do not cleave this self, fire does not burn him;

Waters do not make him wet; nor does the wind make him dry.)

Arjuna is reminded that the wise person should not mourn either for the living or for the dead (2:11). Death is certain for the one who is born and birth is certain for the dead and so Arjuna should not grieve for that which is inevitable. (2:27).

Slowly Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna the right way of doing work is to act without attachment and remain even minded in success and failure. Trying to dispel Arjuna’s attachment to his kith and kin which was preventing him from raising arms, Kṛṣṇa gives the message that a balanced person should rise above this,

“He who is equal-minded among friends, companions and foes, among those who are neutral and impartial, among those who are hateful and related, among saints and sinners, he excels” (6:9)

Kṛṣṇa prevails that it is the same soul that dwells inside everyone.

“I .....am the self seated in the hearts of all creatures.” (10:20)

By this logic the God is there in the heart of Duryodhana as well, but it was necessary to kill him for the greater good.

### 3.5. Grihasthāshramā is better than Sanyshāshramā

The Bhagavad Gītā also seems to be taking a stand that *Grihasthāshramā* (life of a householder) is better than the *Sanyasāshramā*. (life of an ascetic)

“samnyāsaḥ karmayogaś ca niḥśreyasakarāv ubhau

tayos tu karmasamnyāsāt karmayogo viśiṣyate” (5:2)

(The renunciation of works and their unselfish performance both lead to the soul’s salvation. But of the two, the unselfish performance of works is better than their renunciation)

Though the ascetics have their role in the society in terms of philosophical, spiritual contribution but the *Sanyshāshramā* by itself is not sustainable. It need to be supported by the economically productive

*Grihasthāshramā*. The Bhagavad Gitā does not outright reject the *Sanyshā*, but seem to be taking stand that what an ascetic can achieve by renouncing the world, an householder can also achieve by performing his duties in a detached manner. The spiritual accomplishment that an ascetic can obtain can be obtained by a householder as well and in addition he can be an economically contributory member of the society. A householder also does an important work of producing progenies to succeed as next generation. By urging Arjuna to fight the Bhagavad Gitā also seems to be justifying the necessity of *Grihasthāshramā*. The arguments that Arjuna was putting forward to withdraw from the war may be suitable for an ascetic but not a householder like Arjuna.

Kṛṣṇa also gives an example of king Janaka, who had achieved perfection by detached work with the view of the maintenance of the world.(3:20)

Janaka was the king of Mithilā, who ruled by giving up his personal sense of being the worker. (Radhakrishnan 2004:139)

Ashwāghoshā also in his '*Budhcharita*' gives an example of king Janaka to show how liberation can be achieved by remaining householder. (Dinkar2009:521).During the period that followed Buddha, huge number of young people were becoming monks and it was harmful to the society. (ibid:161).Buddhism looked at life as something evil and preached the philosophy of running away from life and so that philosophy was opposed. (ibid:216)

One has to use the discretion depending upon his situation in life. Had Arjuna lived the life of an ascetic since beginning, his adherence to non-violence would have been justified. Reminding him of *Kṣtriya*'s duty Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to fight in a detached manner as his duty. He also says that each man wins perfection by complete absorption in his duty,

“Better one’s own duty, though uninviting, than another’s which may be more easily performed; doing duty which accords with one’s nature, one incurs no sin” (18:47)

Thus fighting is the duty of Arjuna as a *Kṣtriya*. He should not renounce the world like an ascetic. Everyone doing the duties according to their Varna was also important to maintain social order. Bhagavad Gitā brings sanctity to the '*Cāturvarṇa*' as Kṛṣṇa (the supreme divine now) says,

“cāturvarṇyaṁ mayā sṛṣṭaṁ guṇakarmavibhāgaśaḥ” (4:13)

(the fourfold order was created by me according to the division of quality of work)

Indian religious texts are very often used to bring sanctity to the *cāturvarṇa* system.

Kṛṣṇa reminds him of his innate nature of *Kṣatriya* as he says,

“If obsessed by the sense of ‘I’, you thinkest, ‘I will not fight’, vain is thy obsession; (thy) nature will compel thee” (18:59)

Arjuna since childhood was brought up as *Kṣatriya* and that has become his nature. What one repeatedly does becomes his nature. Even if he now refrains from the war he might jump into it if he sees that his Pāṇḍavā brothers and his sons are being killed by the Kauravas. Sitting quite even in that situation would have been possible had he became ascetic much earlier and remained detached from the world around him.

Fitzgerald believes that Yudhiṣṭhira was designed as refutation of Emperor Aśoka. The *brāhmaṇas* were denied special privileges due to Aśoka’s policy of equality and non-violence. They deliberately portrayed Yudhiṣṭhira as the ideal king who upholds *Cāturvarṇa*, fights wars and performs sacrifices. (Fitzgerald 2004:138)

### 3.6. Concept of Āpaddharma (Law at the time of distress) and Inevitability of violence

“Revenge is not always better, but neither is forgiveness” (Buitenen1975: 276)

The epic elaborates on the concept of '*Āpaddharma*', i.e. Law at the time of distress (Fitzgerald 2004:494-544) and on number of times gives message that all the rules and regulations are made for the preservation of life. Blind adherence to them may lead to undesirable consequences. There is no stereotypical code of conduct that is suitable for everyone and in all the situations.

“When the supreme forms of dharma decay and are transgressed by all the people, adharmā transforms into dharma and dharma goes into adharmā” (Debroy, Volume 8, 2013:542)

Non-violence can be ethical in normal situation, but sometimes situation may demand killing for the greater cause. Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira,



“... tradition teaches that the fault in killing one who should not be killed is the same as not killing one who should be killed” (Fitzgerald;2004;543)

Arjuna was in a similar situation. His withdrawal would have led to greater *Adharma*. But at the same time the Pāṇḍavās could not escape the consequences of their transgressions that they have committed to win the war. They had to spend some time in hell. (Ganguli, *Swargarohanikaparva* 2008:6)

Kṛṣṇa also takes a stand that becoming totally non-violent is impossible. All the actions have evil in it and there is nothing that is absolutely good or bad but at the same time one cannot escape action,

“One should not give up the work suited to one’s nature, O son of Kuntī (Arjuna), though it may be defective, for all enterprises are clouded by defects as fire by smoke.” (18:48)

Renunciation of action altogether may lead to self annihilation, which the *Gitā* does not justify. Preservation of life is very important. The epic narrates a story when Sage Viśhwamitra justifies stealing of dog’s flesh to save his life during famine. (Fitzgerald 2004:541) Dog’s flesh is forbidden food for the sage in normal circumstances. But preserving one’s life is greater *Dharma* and to follow that *Dharma*, the sage breaks the rule. Following the same logic, non-violence can be a principle to be followed in the normal circumstances, but there might be situations when not killing someone may lead to greater violence in future. Same logic is followed by the state machinery when the criminals, whose existences are threat to society, are given death sentences.

So long body and soul is together there will be action and violence. Gandhi, the apostle of non-violence also admits that some violence is inevitable. He says,

“.....ahimsa is an ideal which it is impossible to realize to perfection. It may be possible to realize it in thought, but not always in action” (Gandhi 2010:24)

Elaborating further on the inevitability of violence Gandhi says,

“It is impossible for the human body always to observe ahimsa.....violence is inescapable. In everyday life and activities.....violence of one kind or another unavoidable” (ibid 24)

Tilak also says that though Non-violence is the greatest *Dharma*, if somebody comes to kill you or rape your wife or daughter or burn your house or take away your property and there is no one to protect us, what shall we do? Shall we neglect the apparent threat and still stick to the belief that being Non-violent is the greatest moral law or if he is not listening we should punish him to the best of our capabilities. (Tilak 2006:19). Allowing an aggressor to have his way will be violence towards oneself.

The canvas of life cannot be painted as black and white. Gandhi says,

“Nothing in the world is wholly good or wholly evil. Where there is action, there is always some evil” (Gandhi 2010:37).

The Book of the forest, the third book of the epic, gives the colloquy of the Brahmin and the Hunter, in this the hunter who sells meat for living also says that some violence is inevitable,

“Men who furrow with plowshares kill many creatures that lie in the ground.....fish swallow fish.....creatures live off other creatures,.....the living are cannibals.....who in this world does not hurt something alive”( Buitenen1975:624)

According to above logic, Arjuna cannot but act and cause violence, so it is better to act with right awareness. According to Mukherji, the hunter’s assertion of the impossibility of completely non-violent life appears to be an answer to the early Buddhist and Jaina canonical emphasis on *Ahimsā*.( Mukherji 2014:228)

### 3.7. Necessity for the Pāṇḍavās to win the war.

During the war as well as during the narration of the epic, the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavās both the side engage in some unethical practices. Though the Pāṇḍavās won, Yudhiṣṭhira was filled with the remorse for killing his own relatives and was inclined towards renunciation. Even during the war he was quite uncomfortable while resorting to unethical methods of annihilating Droṇa, his preceptor.(Debroy 2012:456) We do not find similar remorse expressed by Duryodhana for his different acts like poisoning of Bhīma (Buitenen1973: 265)attempt of burning of the Pāṇḍavās (ibid.285-291)and humiliation of Draupadī. (Buitenen1975:141) He is uncompromising and seems to be lacking the capacity of objective introspection. Though there were transgressions from both the side, capacity of repenting makes Yudhiṣṭhira, the leader of the Pāṇḍavās a better human being and so it becomes important that he

should be victorious. Duryodhana refuses to budge in spite of the persuasion of many. The epic had developed over centuries, may be from 400 B.C. to 400 A.D. (Buitenen1973; p.xxv) and the underlying desire of human mind of seeing the victory of good over evil seems to have reflected in it. Had Arjuna abandoned the war, the whole purpose of grand undertaking of human mind over centuries would have been defeated. It would have led to the victory of Kauravas and the generations would have lost the hope that goodness eventually wins. Whether goodness eventually wins in all the cases is again debatable, but the epic reflects hopes, aspirations of the people among whom it grew. Having an ideal (may be difficult to achieve) is better as it keeps the hopes alive.

Another good quality of the Pāṇḍavā's side (apart from repenting) was their willingness to compromise which stands out in contrast to the obstinate Duryodhana. The Pāṇḍavās fulfilled their promise of staying in exile in forest for twelve years and one year incognito. Yudhiṣṭhira refused to go to war in spite of the repeated provocations from Draupadī and Bhīma (Buitenen1975:275-295) The Pāṇḍavās were willing to be satisfied with five villages and settle in favor of peace. They were willing to put behind the humiliation of Draupadī, poisoning of Bhīma and attempt of burning them alive. Bhīma was willing to forgo his oath of killing the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. This makes them to stand out as better human being than the Kauravas. Duryodhana stands in contrast with his utterance that he will not give a land equal to the point of needle to the Pāṇḍavās. Probably epic gives the message that this uncompromising behavior led him to his doom. Nobody is perfect, but if you are obstinate, uncompromising and lacks compassion you are more inclined towards evil. Killing of Bhīṣhma and Droṇa also has a message that taking a favor from the evil is fraught with dangers.

Hypothetically, Arjuna's withdrawal from the war would have probably led to the annihilation of the Pāṇḍavā army. There was no archer who could stand against Bhīṣhma, Droṇa and Karna. After annihilating the Pāṇḍavā army, what kind of treatment they will give to the Pāṇḍavā women? Duryodhana's attempt of burning the Pāṇḍavā and Kuntī alive, Draupadī's humiliation and the helplessness of Bhīṣhma and Droṇa, are indicative that to what extent the situation can go. Intoxicated with pride and revenge he and his supporters (mainly Karna and Duṣṣāsana) did not fear that the Pāṇḍavās might take revenge if they humiliate Draupadī in the assembly. Once that fear is removed (after the killing of the Pāṇḍavās) there was a possibility of greater atrocities. In contrast the Pāṇḍavās treated Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gandhari with respect. (Ganguli, *Ashramvasparva* 2008:1)

### 3.8. Facing the consequences of the past action

Arjuna's past Karma i.e. acquiring divine weapon (Buitenen;1975;299-305) and supporting the war efforts had contributed to the situation when now both the armies were standing face to face. Had Arjuna and other Pāṇḍavās adopted the advice given by Saṃjaya (the messenger from Dhṛtarāṣṭra) of becoming mendicant (Buitenen;1978;222-224) probably the war situation would have not risen.

Though the Pāṇḍavās explored all the possibilities of peace, they were probably aware that war is inevitable. That is the reason that Arjuna collected divine weapons and the Pāṇḍavās maintained contact with the possible allies. This was a prudent policy and not an approach of the simpleton indulging in the wishful thinking that everything will eventually turn out to be better.

Now with all the options of peace exhausted, the war preparation was done, huge army was collected and now if the Arjuna backs off, the people who had gathered in support of the Pāṇḍavās will loose their faith. Arjuna being one of the important leaders from the Pāṇḍavās side needs to control his mood swing. If the leader of the army is fickle minded, it is disastrous for the army.

Mahatma Gandhi describes Arjuna's situation as,

“If a passenger travelling on a train running at a speed of forty miles an hour suddenly feels an aversion to travelling and jumps out of the train, he will only have committed suicide.....Arjuna is in similar condition” (Gandhi 2010:6)

As journey had already started long back, he should finish it this time and later decide if he wants to refrain from further journeys altogether.

### 3.9. Inaction can become negative action

The epic on number of occasion gives a message that one cannot escape the consequences of his inaction if he chooses to sit on the fences when injustice is perpetuated. Immediately after Draupadī's molestation, Vidura says that if unlawful act is done in the assembly, the half of the responsibility goes to the leader, a quarter goes to the culprit and the last quarter goes to those in hall who do not condemn the culprit. (Buitenen1975;147) The epic seems to be blaming Bhīṣhma and Droṇa for not intervening decisively and stopping the humiliation. Thus their inaction became their negative *Karma*. Similarly if Arjuna withdraws, he cannot escape the consequences of his inaction of remaining ideal if the evil minded Duryodhana wins the war.

The epic also seems to be conveying the message that there is a limit to forgiveness. Draupadī while trying to encourage Yudhiṣṭhira to fight against the Kauravas narrates a story of king Prahlāda. About revenge and forgiveness the king says,

“Revenge is not always better, but neither is forgiveness” (Buitenen1975:276)

The king further elaborates the harmful results of always forgiving like people may snatch his property, servants rebelling and somebody demanding his wife. Similarly if he is always angry, that also finally leads to harmful effects like people may drift away from him. (ibid)

### 3.10. The war, inevitable evil?

The narration of the epic does have an undertone message about the futility of war. The *Souptika Parva* which comes at the end of the war is full of gory details of killing of the victorious Pāṇḍavā army by Aśvatthāman (Debroy, Volume 8,2013:3-64). The *Strīparvan* (the book of the women) describes the lamentation of women whose husbands, fathers, sons and brothers were killed in the war and also portrays the horrors of the war. It describes that the hand (of Bhūriśravas, one of the slain warrior ) that used to remove his wife’s cloth and caress her body during love making is now severed from his body and having put her husband’s arm in her lap she is mourning pitifully. (Fitzgerald 2004;68) The description seems to have been a deliberate attempt of creating dislike for war as it juxtapositions pleasure of love making and sorrow of death. But immediately after this chapter, Kṛṣṇa tells Gandhari,

“A Brahmin woman brings forth a baby destined for ascetic.....a vaiśya woman a cowherd- but a kṣatriya woman like you brings forth a baby destined for slaughter” (Fitzgerald 2004:72)

This seems to be reaffirming the necessity of war and *Varṇa* system and significance of pre-destination in human life.

The Bhagavad Gitā seems to be reaffirming that fighting and dying is *Dharma* of the *Kṣatriya*.

“Happy are the Kṣatriyas O Pārtha (Arjuna), for whom such a war comes of its own accord as an open door to heaven.”(2:32)

Karna also compares the great battle to sacred sacrifice and says that let the *Kṣatriyas* die with honour.

“May these barons, old in learning and days, O bull among barons, not die a useless death....Let the full circle of the baronage find their death by the sword” (Buitenen1978: 447)

Aware of his transgressions, he seems to be demanding honourable death. He tells Kṛṣṇa

“The insults I heaped on the Pāṇḍavās, to please Duryodhana, those I regret. When you see me cut down by the left-handed Archer, it will be Re-piling of the fire of their sacrifice” (Buitenen1978: 447)

He seems to be underlining the inevitability of war by refusing to change the side.He says that neither joy nor fear, nor all of earth can make him traitor. Relying on him Duryodhana prepared for the war and not fighting now will bring disgrace to him and Arjuna. (Buitenen1978: 446)

According to Mukherji, the *Mahābhārata* foregrounds the inevitability of war in the affairs of state. There are situations which can be resolved only through violent means and in *Brāhmaṇic* traditions main aim of life is preservation of *Dharma* rather than practice of *Ahiṃsā* (Mukherji 2014:220)

The *Kṣatriyas* code of honourable death in the war is also reflected in Bhīṣhma’s words,

“It is not right that a Kṣatriya should die upon his bed, coughing up phlegm and bile, weeping pitifully.....A Kṣatriya who has slaughtered enemies in battles ought to die surrounded by his kinsmen, his body completely mangled by the sharp blades of weapon” (Fitzgerald 2004:415)

Though the Pāṇḍavās were victorious, they achieved victory at what cost? All their children were dead. Yudhiṣṭhira’s felt remorse after the war and was inclined towards renunciation. Condemning the *Kṣatrdharma*,(*Dharma* of *Kṣatriya*) which compel us to kill he says,

“Damn the Kṣatra way! Damn the power of the mighty chest! Damn the unforgiving stubbornness that brought us to this disaster!” (Fitzgerald 2004:180).

Aśvatthāman, before proceeding to kill the sleeping Pāṇḍavā army at the end of the war laments the *Kṣatrdharma*.

“I have been born in the brahmana lineage that is greatly revered. However, because of misfortune, I am engaged in the dharma of kshatriyas” (Debroy, Volume 8,2013:12)

#### IV. CONCLUSION

“When a great emphasis is placed upon ahimsā, or not to do violence, and upon satya, or truth, it can be safely concluded, from that emphasis alone, that both violence and falsehood must be widespread in human relationships.” (ibid)

The belief that we are leading a life on the earth is a result of past sins had also found place in the epic. Bhīṣhma’s life is personification of this. He was one of the eight Vasus (the demigods) who stole the cow of the sage and were cursed to lead life on the earth. The Vasu who actually stole it was punished with a longer life on the earth was born as Bhīṣhma and the other Vasus who supported him escaped the life on the earth very quickly. (Buitenen 1973:220-222). Thus the life in this mortal world will continue with its violence, conflict and deception.

During the war both the side suffered heavy losses. Was it worth to fight a war for the sake of kingdom? While the war preparation was on, this possibility of losing the near and dear one was not ruled out. Probably the epic gives a message that preserving life is important but there could be situation when we have to disregard the life and be ready to make a supreme sacrifice. Be ready to kill or get killed! As the Bhagavad Gītā says,

“swadharme nidhanam śreyaḥ” (3.35)

(Better is death in the fulfillment of one’s own law)

The ideal is to escape, but it is not possible to escape so long body and soul are together. We will continue to breath and think. So it is better to do ‘Karma’ consciously and avoid violence to the extent possible. Probably human being will continue to act, continue to feel remorse and continue to search for justification of his action and existence.

Does the epic gives the message that sometimes the situation may force us to act unethically as not resorting to it may have disastrous consequences, but at the same time we cannot escape the consequences of our action! The situation is quite paradoxical and at a time skeptical as it seems to be suggesting that there is no way of leading a pure life and what fate had written for us is bound to happen. Are we just a pawn in the hands of destiny? Does human endeavor have any role in shaping our life or everything is predetermined?

“The lord abides in the hearts of all beings, O Arjuna, causing them to turn around by his power as if they were mounted on a machine” (18:61)

Does the divine play with mortals? Shakespeare also echoes the similar sentiments in ‘King Lear’

“As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods; They kill us for their sport.” (Shakespeare:173)

The *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata* seems to be taking stand that renunciation and non-violence are virtues, but if they are practiced at the wrong time without evaluating the implications, it may lead to disastrous consequences. *Sanyāsa* i.e. asceticism should not to be a sudden, impulsive decision, neither it should be taken because the world has disappointed you.

Does the epic gives a message that if a war is thrust upon you and all the possibilities of the peaceful settlements have proved failure, it is better to fight to the best of your capabilities? But desire of avoiding war should remain at the back of one’s mind and one should constantly do self analysis if he/she is responsible for violence. Arjuna was filled with self doubt and Yudhiṣṭhira’s self censor is obvious at many places in the epic.

The epic shows that everything in life is relational, everything concerning man is discussed relationally, and, in that in the pair of opposites. (Chaturvedi 2013:114)

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