

When Not Fighting Can Become A Cruelty? *Dharmayuddha*¹, The Righteous War In The Mahābhārata

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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.

The epic does not project any stereotypical ideal way of life, but looks at it from different perspectives. Not having a war is probably the best situation, but the evil may grow if not resisted.

This paper juxtapositions 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.

Key words- *Ahiṃsā, Dharma, Bewildered, Greed, Family, Varṇa.*

“The fault in killing one who should not be killed is the same as not killing one who should be killed”²

The Mahābhārata portrays complexities and contradictions of human life quite effectively. While repeatedly referring ‘*Ahiṃsā*’ i.e. non-violence as the greatest *Dharma*, the epic also celebrates the *Kṣatriya* way of life, which involves wars. As human situations are unpredictable, it is difficult to set the rigid, universally accepted code of conduct.

The fratricidal war between the *Kauravas* and the *Pāṇḍavās* sets the background for the ethical debate about violence and non-violence. Arjuna, the hero of many battles, lost his nerves when the situation demanded that he had to strike his own people to regain the kingdom, which was unjustly taken from him. Relapsing into the mood of self-annihilating surrender, he threw his weapons and refused to fight arguing that it will be better to live on alms instead of enjoying the kingdom that is smeared with blood of own people.³

Apparently, Arjuna’s refusal appears to be an act of non-violence. But the epic debates if non-violence should be followed for its own sake or it is a philosophy which needs to be applied with discretion to serve some higher purpose.

The important decisions like war and peace should be taken after lot of deliberations and cannot be changed on an impulse of an individual. Arjuna’s withdrawal was not a result of some sublime thinking; neither was it a gradual evolution towards *Nīvrittī*, i.e. renunciation.

“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”⁴

Arjuna was bound by *Kṣatradharma*⁵ to fight the war, regain the kingdom and rule according to the *Dharma*. If he allows his personal relations to become barrier in the performance of social obligations, that will erode his moral authority to wield the power.

“...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”⁶

Arjuna was probably deceiving himself too.

“....many a time comes when we want to interpret our weakness and cowardice as forgiveness and renunciation.....”⁷

Kṛṣṇa through the dialogue in the *Bhagavadgītā* dispels this emotional weakness of Arjuna and tries to raise him to the level, where he will fight not with the desire of material gain, but with some greater purpose.

Conflicting *Dharmas*?-

“Righteousness sometimes takes the shape of unrighteousness.”⁸

Debate about *Dharma* overshadows the narration of the epic. It says that practicing of the *Dharma*, which is not ours, is also disastrous. A hermit may refrain from using force against the aggressor, but if a Kṣatriya, who have responsibility of maintaining order, does that, it will lead to anarchy.

Though Ahimsa is the highest *Dharma*, it needs to be protected from those who are bent upon destroying it. Duryodhana, under the sway of ego and greed, which are described as demonic qualities in the 16th chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā*⁹ refused to settle the matter peacefully and the

war became inevitable. Tolerating his aggression will have led to further rise of *Adharama*.¹⁰ Dhṛtarāṣṭra tolerated Duryodhana's many transgressions and thus pushed the whole Kuru clan towards destruction.

Arjuna was one of the important warriors on the *Pāṇḍavās* side. To be able to win against Karna, he acquired divine weapons.¹¹ counting on his support the *Pāṇḍavās* prepared for war. Thus Arjuna was practicing the *Dharma* of Kṣatriya for long and if he changes it at a crucial movement, it will be disastrous for him as well for many who had faith in his ability as a warrior. If the leader of the army is fickle minded, he will put to risk many lives, including his own.

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”¹²

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

Can we be completely Nonviolent?-

“.....the living are cannibals.....who in this world does not hurt something alive”¹³

Violence is an inseparable part of existence. Even while breathing we kill numerous microorganisms. However, we can minimize the violence by putting checks on our greed. We can also counterbalance the harm that our existence may cause by making conscious, nurturing contribution to the universe. But completely ceasing to act will led to self annihilation and that

will be violence to us. The epic narrates an episode of sage Viṣhwamitra saving his life by eating dog's flesh during famine, which is otherwise a forbidden food for the sages.¹⁴ In order to follow the greater *Dharma* of preserving one's life, a smaller *Dharma* is compromised.

The epic narrates numerous episodes where the notions of *Dharma* seem to be conflicting and one need to use discretion to take a right decision. The canvas of life cannot be painted as entirely black and white. But the general stand taken by the epic is whatever nourishes life is *Dharma*.

“Dharma is so called because it protects all”¹⁵

Arjuna's *Dharma* of Kṣatriya is apparently conflicting with the '*Ahiṃsā Parmo Dharma*',¹⁶ but his withdrawal would have led to greater *Adharma*. This paradox of need to be apparently violent to protect non-violence sets the background for the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna.

The violence is intertwined with the existence and more so with the affairs of the state. If the state machinery refuses to use force, there will be chaos. The evil will suppress the good. Same logic is followed when the criminals, who have become threat the human society, are given death sentence.

But the people who are responsible to regulate the society may themselves become oppressor if they get too much attached to the power. The epic cautions us in numerous ways. Though the *Pāṇḍavās* were victorious, they could not feel joy as they lost almost everyone. Condemning the *Kṣatrdharma*, (*Dharma* of *Kṣatriya*) which compel us to kill Yudhiṣṭhira says,

“Damn the *Kṣatra* way! Damn the power of the mighty chest! Damn the unforgiving stubbornness that brought us to this disaster!”¹⁷

Once we are involved in the intricacies of the state affairs, we may have to do everything possible like scheming and plotting to bring down the enemy, but can we escape the consequences of our Karma? Yudhiṣṭhira, had to spend time in hell for a single lie that he uttered in his life.¹⁸ The epic also says that all the kings have to invariably see the hell.¹⁹ Thus ultimately, the kingdom, wealth, war and its victories are transitory and almost futile. But if the good people withdraw from this necessary business of life, the void will be filled with the evil people and they will not let anyone live in peace.

The gory details of killing in the *Sauptikparvan* and heart wrenching cries of women in the *Strīparvan* seems to be conscious attempts of the epic to create dislike for war and underline the futility of victory. These two *parvas* (books) come immediately after the war *parvas*. The epic does not give time for the victorious Pāṇḍavā army to celebrate, but ensures that they are slaughtered too. Thus underlines the transitory nature of the victories in the affairs of the world.

The debates in the epic suggest that though human being should strive for *Ahiṃsā*, a necessity may arise when in order to preserve *Ahiṃsā*, one may have to fight; kill and be killed. Fighting and withdrawing, both will have its consequences. Thus humanity seems to be trapped in the web of its creation. All endeavors have evil inherent it.

“Nothing in the world is wholly good or wholly evil. Where there is action, there is always some evil”²⁰

Our good intentions may minimize the intensity of divine retribution, but we cannot escape the consequences of our Karma.

Who shall fight and win? –

If the war is a necessary evil and no one is perfect, who shall fight and win? Kṛṣṇa tries to raise Arjuna to the level, where the possibility of misuse of power is minimized; if not eliminated altogether.

Arjuna is reminded that as a Kṣatriya, he is duty bound to fight and regain his kingdom. If a person wielding a power can punish someone for a particular crime but allows his own people to go scot free, that will erode his moral authority to hold the power and sets wrong precedence.

“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”²¹

A hermit may allow an aggressor to kill him and accept it as his destiny, but not a Kṣatriya. It is better for the Kṣatriya to die fighting than surviving by giving up the *Dharma* of Kṣatriya. Bhagavadgītā forbids taking up the *Dharma* of others.

“*swadharme nidhanam śreyaḥ pardhramo Bhayāvahah*”²²

(Better is death in the fulfillment of one’s own *Dharma*, following the *Dharma* of others is perilous)

If a Kṣatriya refrains from killing at the time of war or do not kill the oppressor, it becomes as act of *Adharma*, as this will contribute to the growth of evil. Inaction, which allows evil to grow, is also an act to be condemned. The dialogue does not stop here, but it unfolds and tries to raise Arjuna to the level of an ideal warrior.

Kṛṣṇa makes Arjuna aware of the evil influence of attachments, lust, anger and greed. He also expects him to be a ‘*sthitaprajña*²³, (a person of stable intellect) , ‘*Sarvabhūtahite ratāh*²⁴, (engaged in the welfare of all).

Thus Arjuna shall fight not with the narrow intention of regaining his kingdom, but to uphold the *Dharma*. Yudhiṣṭhira, the leader of the *Pāṇḍavās* himself was known as *Dharma* incarnate.

There were transgressions from the sides of the *Kauravas* and the *Pāṇḍavās* both. But Yudhiṣṭhira had a capacity to introspect and feel remorse for his transgressions, and thus had a potential to minimize the violence that he may cause to the world. Duryodhana do not feel any necessity to control his greed and tame his ego. Hatred for the *Pāṇḍavās* and desire to eliminate them overpowers his judgments. In *Pāṇḍav gītā* he describes his own character as,

‘*Jānāmi dharmam na cha me pravruttitir jānāmi adharmam na cha me nivruttihi*’²⁵

(I know what *dharmam* is, but I cannot abide by it. I know that *adharmam* is, but I cannot revoke myself from it.)

Yudhiṣṭhira on the other hand is always willing to compromise and tries his best to avoid the war. He refused to go to war in spite of the repeated provocations from Draupadī and Bhīma.²⁶ Putting behind the humiliation of Draupadī, poisoning of Bhīma and attempt of burning them alive, the *Pāṇḍavās* were willing to be satisfied with five villages and settle in favor of peace. 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 as he says,

“As long as I am alive,.....I shall not surrender as much as a pin-prick of land to the *Pāṇḍavas*”²⁷

The epic gives the message that this uncompromising behavior led him to his doom along with all those who supported him. Nobody is perfect, but if you are obstinate, uncompromising and lacks compassion you are more inclined towards evil.

Dharma, in the midst of Adharma.

If Duryodhana was evil, why he was supported by so many? And why so many were killed in the war?

Coming of the catastrophic destruction of human lives is repeatedly hinted in the epic. The *Ādiparvan* narrates that the earth was oppressed because of the general decline of *Dharma* and Brahmā ordering other gods to incarnate on the earth ‘to throw off the burden’²⁸. Attempt of disrobing of Draupadī in the assembly hall and most of the people remaining mute spectator is one of the indicators that *Dharma* was weakened. This general decline of *Dharma* is echoed by sage Vyāsa in the concluding section of the epic,

“Raising my hands to the sky I shout that follow *Dharma*, but nobody listens to me”²⁹

The age being an age of evil comes repeatedly in the epic. Sage Vyāsa tells his mother Satyavatī,

“Earth herself is aging. A dreadful time is at hand, confounded by much witchery, beset by many vices, when all the acts and manners of the law shall be soiled”³⁰

He advises her to retire to forest to avoid witnessing of destruction of her own dynasty.

The God incarnating as Kṛṣṇa is also indicative that *Dharma* has declined and needs restoration,

“*dharmasaṁsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge*”³¹

(For the establishment of Dharma, I descend from age to age)

The indication of the coming of mass destruction is also given in the *Ādiparvan* at the time of Draupadī's birth.³² Thus the epic is showing the way of *Dharma*, in the midst of overpowering *Adharma*.

In the carnage very few survives. The *Pāṇḍavās* also lose all their warriors and Yudhiṣṭhira laments that

“The victory looks more like defeat to me”³³.

The epic does not spare anyone. The *Pāṇḍavās* are also punished for their transgressions.³⁴ Everyone has to pay prize of their Karma. The crime of many who were slaughtered was that they allowed *Adharma* to grow. If the injustice is perpetuated and we allow it to grow by remaining passive we also become a party to evil.

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.³⁵ The epic seems to be blaming Bhīṣhma and Droṇa for not intervening decisively and stopping the humiliation. Their inaction became their negative *Karma*. Similarly if Arjuna withdraws, he cannot escape the consequences of his inaction if the evil minded Duryodhana wins the war.

We find numerous sages visiting Hāstinapur and advising Dhṛtarāṣṭra to restrain Duryodhana. They also visit the *Pāṇḍavās* in the exile and gives consolation to Yudhiṣṭhira. They are generally

free from the agonies of life that afflicts the common mortal, who are not able to overcome their attachments. Thus, though on the path of *Nīvrittī*, they do their part in upholding the *Dharma*.

The number of people following *Dharma* are probably always very less as Bhagavadgītā,

“*manuṣyāṇāṃ sahareṣu kaścid yatati siddhaye*”³⁶

(Among thousands of men scarcely one strives for perfection)

Support of majority, is no guarantee that they are on the side of *Dharma*. At times one may have to walk with small number of people and even alone if the need arises to uphold the *Dharma*. Rabindrnath Tagore, a very prominent personification of Indian tradition says in the Bengali song,

“*Ekla cholo re*”³⁷ (Walk alone)

Killing of Bhīṣhma and Droṇa also has a message that taking a favor from the evil is fraught with dangers.

Conclusion-

“When a great emphasis is placed upon *ahiṃsā*, 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.”³⁸

The general decline of *Dharma* is obvious in the narration of the epic. Life on the earth is depicted as punishment for the sins committed in the past lives. Bhīṣhma’s sagacious life was a result of a curse.³⁹

Thus the life in this mortal world will continue with its violence, conflict and deception. The epic however gives us the hope that we could be a part of those who by conscious efforts achieve control over their instincts and thus also make a positive impact on the world around us. We can uphold the *Dharma*, even if there is overwhelming *Adharma* around us. The beginning has to be from ourselves. Arjuna is expected to rise to the higher level of consciousness. It is after his *Moha* (delusion) is removed⁴⁰, he becomes suitable to check those who are bent upon destroying *dharma*. He is supposed to fight while raised to the divine state i.e. *Brāhmīsthiti*.⁴¹

The all destructive war takes place after the narration of the Bhagavadgītā and Arjuna loses his balance on number of occasions. For example his taking of oath of killing Jayadratha or entering fire next day⁴². This goes against the ideal of *sthitaprajña* put forward by Kṛṣṇa. Thus the epic accepts that there will be always dichotomy between what is ideal and what is being practical. But having an ideal, however utopian it might be, is always better than not having it at all. Higher the ideal, higher it will pull the humanity towards its optimum potential. The whole undertaking of the epic seems to be oriented towards creating better human beings by raising their level of consciousness from mundane plane to spiritual plane.

“*na hi jñānena sadṛśam, pavitram iha vidyate*”⁴³

(There is nothing as purifying as wisdom)

Here wisdom (i.e. *jñāna*) is state of self-realization and not theoretical knowledge. Bhagavadgītā tries to purify Arjuna and expects him to conquer the enemies within, before he conquers others. The strife and conflicts that we see outside are probably enlarged, amplified versions of the conflicts that we have within.

“Our states, being ourselves multiplied, are what we are; they write our natures in bolder type, and do our good or evil on elephantine scale”⁴⁴

If we want to establish peace, it should be first created in the minds of men, and the beginning has to be from oneself as Mahatma Gandhi says,

“Be the change you want to see in the world”⁴⁵

The creators of the epic thought deeply about the life and showed the ways to contribute positively to humanity and thus it has become a timeless text, having eternal relevance.

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End Notes and References-

1. *Dharmayuddha*-(*Dharma* + *yuddha*). ‘*Dharma*’ is difficult to translate in English as the meaning changes with the context. It is translated differently as righteousness, law, expected behaviors and sacred duty. The expected *Dharma* also changes with the situation in life. For example it is *Dharma* of the ruling class to ensure that justice is delivered. It is a *Dharma* of the sages to study and impart spiritual knowledge. A detailed discussion on the concept of ‘*Dharma*’ in the epic is given by James L. Fitzgerald in introduction to ‘*The Mahābhārata, The Book of Peace*’, the University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004 and also in ‘*Dharma, studies in its semantic, Cultural and Religious History*’ Patrick Olivelle (Ed.), Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2009. *Yuddha* means war and *Dharmayuddha* means the war that is fought to protect *Dharma*.

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3. Radhakṛṣṇan S, 'The *Bhagavadgītā*' HarperCollins, New Delhi, 2004.(2:5) (All verses quoted from the *Bhagavadgītā* are taken from this book.)
4. Ibid P. 98
5. *Kṣatradharma- Kṣatriyas* were the ruling class in the four fold division of Hindu society. It was considered to be their *dharma* to protect the citizen, deliver the justice and fight just wars.
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9. Radhakṛṣṇan S. (Pp 334-341)
10. *Adharama-* Evil, Undesirable, Apposite to *Dharma*.
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16. Dutt M.N., 'Mahābhārata, Vol. 9, Parimal Publications, Delhi, 2013. p.479.
17. Fitzgerald 2004:p.180.
18. Debroy Bibek, 'The Mahābhārata, Volume 10', Penguin, New Delhi, 2014, p.675.

19. Ibid,p.677.
20. Mahatma Gandhi, p.37.
21. Ibid, p.25.
22. Bhagavadgītā, 3.35
23. Ibid, 2.54
24. Ibid, 12.4.
25. Khemka R. '*Pāṇḍav gītā*', Gita Press, Gorakhpur, verse No. 58.
26. Buitenen1975:Pp275-295.
27. Buitenen J.A.B. van, 'The Mahābhārata, Volume 3', The University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 421.
28. It refers to burden of evil and not physical burden of humans. (Buitenen J.A.B. van, 'The Mahābhārata, Volume 1', The University of Chicago Press, 1973, p.138.)
29. Dutt M.N., 'Mahābhārata, Vol. 9, p.1014.
30. Buitenen 1973:264
31. Bhagavadgītā 4.8
32. Buitenen 1973: p. 318
33. Fitzgerald 2004:p. 168
34. Debroy, Vo.110, 2014. : p. 677.
35. Buitenen1975: p.147
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38. Chaturvedi Badrinath, 'The *Mahābhārata*, An inquiry in the human condition', Orinet BlackSwan, Hydrabad, 2013, p. 114.
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 40. Bhagavadgītā 18.73
 41. Bhagavadgītā 2.72
 42. Debroy Bibek, 'The Mahābhārata, Volume 6', Penguin, New Delhi, 2012, p.54.
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 44. Durant Will & Ariel, 'The Lessons of History', Simon & Schster, New York, 2010, p.19.
 45. (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/ed-and-deb-shapiro/be-the-change-you-want-to_b_569349.html on 19/02/2018)
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