



# ARJUNA'S PREDICAMENT AT THE THRESHOLD OF KURUKṢETRA WAR

<sup>1</sup>Muralidhar S Dodamani, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Shridevi P. G.

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor

<sup>1&2</sup>Department of Studies in English

<sup>1&2</sup>Karnatak University, Dharwad

## Abstract

Life surprises individuals with many ups and downs. Sometimes people become so hopeless that everything seems working against them. Everyone have to face the dilemma in choosing a right thing or a right action. In such perplexing situations many great personalities seek solutions from ancient Indian scriptures like Vedās, Upaniṣads, Śrīmad-bhāgavatam, Rāmāyana, Mahābhārata etc. A classic of timeless wisdom and the summum bonum of the spiritual truth Bhagavad-gītā stands out in this regard. Its influence on the intelligencia of the world throughout the history marks its significance. Arjuna the first receptor of the knowledge of the Bhagavad-gītā was also in a puzzling dilemma at the threshold of the Kurukṣetra war. Though a kṣatriya, the reasons Arjuna gives for not fighting in the war shows his consideration of different ethical and moral viewpoints, wisdom, farsightedness and compassion. The present article analyses the reasons Arjuna gives to Kṛṣṇa for not fighting the Kurukṣetra war and his subsequent surrender to Kṛṣṇa as a disciple in knowing the ultimate beneficial action.

**Key words:** dilemma, Vedās, Bhagavad-gītā, compassion, surrender

## Introduction

Every individual faces certain difficult situations at particular points of time in life which make her/him perplexed and not come to a decision as to how to proceed further. Sometimes it is seen that people succumb to the adversities of the situation and commit mistakes, and at other times they accept the situation and become hopeless. Often the people in the modern world are frequented with such perplexities. Many great personalities seek knowledge and practical solutions for the problems of both individual and humanity at large from great scriptures like Vedās, Upaniṣads, Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Rāmāyana, Mahābhārata and etc. Spoken in the dramatic background of a battlefield setting, Bhagavad-gītā explores the most fundamental and important ideas relevant for the humanity, in a dialogue format. It is a classic of timeless wisdom and the summum bonum of spiritual truth. It has deeply influenced the thinking of generations of philosophers, theologians, educators, scientists and authors all over the world. Its wide and everlasting popularity are the testimony for its merit.

Caitanya Charana Das in his article mentions that M. K. Gandhi has confessed that, "When doubts haunt me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and I see not one ray of hope on the horizon, I turn to Bhagavad-gītā and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. Those who meditate on the Gita will derive fresh and new meanings from it every day."

Bhagavad-gītā was spoken five thousand years ago by Lord Kṛṣṇa to His friend and devotee Arjuna. This great historical event (Chandru Ramesh in his book *Mahābhārata Myth or History?: A compendium of Evidences* gives evidences for the historicity of the Mahābhārata incidents with scores of evidences from different fields such as Vedic Literature, Buddhist Literature, Jain Literature, Ancient Tamil Literature, Purāṇas, traveler accounts, inscriptions, sculptures, numismatics, petroglyphs, archeology, ancient kingdoms,

Mahābhārata's impact within India and foreign countries and other literary sources.) occurred in Kurukṣetra in northern India before the onset of war between Kauravas and Pāṇdavas. Bhagavad-gītā originally appears in the form of 700 Sanskrit verses, as an episode of the Mahabhārata, a great historical epic, in which it occupies chapters 25 through 42 in the Bhīṣma Parva. After completing the compilation of the four principal Vedās, the Upaniṣads and the Vedānta-sūtra, Vyāsadeva decided to compile the Purāṇas and the Mahabhārata for the benefit of common people who could not sufficiently assimilate the lofty philosophical teachings of the earlier works. Bhagavad-gītā is the essence of all Vedic knowledge and is considered as the cream of Upaniṣads in Vedic literature.

Surprisingly Bhagavad-gītā also starts with perplexed condition of Arjuna who is torn between the occupational duty of fighting for the establishment of peace and harmony in society as a kṣatriya and familial affection for the opposite party. It is astonishing that a personality with stature of Arjuna could be perplexed. In this connection Caitanya Charan in his book *Relishing Bhagavad Gita: Exploring the Personal Interaction amid the Philosophical Discussion* gives the account past ventures of Arjuna as a warrior in regard his prowess, "Might the unfavorable odds of the Kurukshetra war have overwhelmed him? Unlikely. He had fought many wars where the odds had been far worse. In his very first major war fought at Khandava, he had single-handedly held back all the gods. In another major war that he fought during his extra-terrestrial travels, he had single-handedly defeated a gigantic army of ruthless demons or anti-gods named Nivatakavachas – these creatures of the dark had been so strong to resist the gods with all their combined might. Given that Arjuna had single-handedly won against gods as well as anti-gods, both of whom are far more powerful than humans, why would he find an army of humans overwhelming? Moreover, just recently at Virata, he had single-handedly defeated the entire Kaurava army." (24, 25) An intelligent and brave kṣatriya like Arjuna could fail in making his mind and same is the situation with everybody. Arjuna gives 5 reasons for his perplexed situation namely,

- i. Compassion for the friends relatives (BG 1.28-30)
- ii. No enjoyment even if victorious (BG 1.31-35)
- iii. Fear of sinful reactions (BG1.36-38)
- iv. Destruction of family traditions (BG1.39-43)
- v. Indecision (BG 2.6) (Gauranga Darshana Dasa 29)

#### **i. Compassion for the friends and relatives**

It was due to the hell-bent obstinacy of evil-minded Duryodhana that the war was being fought and Arjuna had no actual interest in it. As a warrior, Arjuna wanted to know about the personalities he had to fight with to have an estimation of the strength of the opposite army before the commencement of the Kurukṣetra war. He also wanted to know about the members of the opposite army as they were also representing the evil notions of Duryodhana.

Arjuna asks Lord Kṛṣṇa to station his chariot between the two armies and Kṛṣṇa does so by placing the chariot between the two armies facing mainly Bhīṣma, Droṇa and other kings. When Arjuna observes the armies of both sides, he could practically see whole community of his own on the battlefield. As far as soldiers on his side were concerned, he was sympathetic from the beginning, but now he could see his great grandfather Bhīṣma, teachers like Droṇācārya and Kṛpācārya, contemporaries of his father like Bhuriśrāvā, maternal uncles like Śalya and Śakuni, brothers like Duryodhana, sons like Lakṣmaṇa, grandsons like the sons of Lakṣmaṇa and friends like Asvatthāmā, well-wishers like Kṛtavarma on the other side. Five generations of kṣatriyas were ready to give their lives for the sake of the war. Arjuna could foresee the ghastly results of all-consuming war where almost all of them would be losing their lives.

While addressing the members of the opposite party before being stationed between the two armies Arjuna had addressed the opposing party as - persons wishing to please the evil-minded son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra (BG 1.23), but now he calls them *svajana* (BG 1.28). His perception of the result of the war was the loss of near and dear ones, and it affects his emotions to a great degree. Thus, he is overcome with compassion for the lives of all his relatives, friends and well-wishers. When emotions are very strong, one loses her/his control over physical faculties and the resultant symptoms in Arjuna's case are described as quivering of the body, drying up of the mouth, trembling of the body, hair standing on end and slipping of the Gaṇḍīva bow as explained further in 29<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> verses. A. C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda in his purport to the 28<sup>th</sup> verse of the first chapter of the Bhagavad-gītā explains that "such symptoms in Arjuna were not due to weakness but to his softheartedness, a characteristic of a pure devotee of the Lord." (52)

## ii. No enjoyment even if victorious

If the results of the action bring pleasure or some benefit to the performer of the action, the performer feels enthused to go on, but Arjuna foresees no long-term good in fighting the war but only destruction and painful situations. Even if he wins the war he found it difficult to enjoy the royal opulence without his near and dear ones. Baladeva Vidyabhushana in his commentary on the 31<sup>st</sup> verse reveals Arjuna's mind by presenting Arjuna's thinking "I do not desire these things. Because of giving up desire for kingdom and wealth, I have no interest in attaining victory to attain it. Just as a person who has lost interest in food has no interest in cooking. Therefore living in the forest would be a more commendable means of maintaining my life." (35) A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda elucidates this point in purport to the 32-35<sup>th</sup> verses that, "Everyone wants to show his opulence to his friends and relatives, but Arjuna fears that all his relative and friends will be killed on the battlefield and he will be unable to share his opulence after victory" (56)

## iii. Fear of Sinful Reactions

Any sane man feels responsible for his actions and Arjuna also felt responsible for his future actions of killing in the battle. Baladeva Vidyabhushana in his commentary on 36<sup>th</sup> verse, quoting from Vaṣiṣṭha Smṛti points out that

“agnido garadaś caiva śāstra-pāṇir dhanāpahaḥ  
kṣetra-dārāpahāri ca ṣaḍ ete hy ātatāyinaḥ

The arsonist, one who poisons, one who attacks with weapons, the thief, the stealer of property and the stealer of one's wife are considered aggressors." (38) Arjuna as a kṣatriya is duty-bound to execute aggressors and Kauravās were all aggressors in every aspect mentioned above. But as a saintly person in his conduct, Arjuna feels himself to be a sinner, as the aggressors he was going to kill were his own grandfather, teacher, friends, sons, grandsons, etc. According to Śrīla Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura, Arjuna is speaking from the level of dharma-śāstra, not artha-śāstra. Dharma-śāstra, which is more authoritative, propounds that killing one's friends and relatives is never permitted. Therefore Arjuna considered that rather than kill his own kinsmen for political reasons, it would be better to forgive them on grounds of religion and saintly behavior. In this connection A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda also highlights that such injunctions of Dharma-śāstra for saintly persons are more important than any political emergency.

## iv. Destruction of family traditions

A kṣatriya is not supposed to refuse to battle or gamble when he is so invited by some rival party. Under such an obligation, Arjuna could not refuse to fight as he was challenged by the party of Duryodhana. In this connection, Arjuna considered that the other party might be blind to the effects of such a challenge, however Pāṇḍavas could see the evil consequences and could not accept the challenge of the battle. He thought what would happen if all the kṣatriyas were killed? The entire society, which depended on the authority of Vedic kings, would fall into disarray. No sacrifices would be performed for the forefathers or future generations. Young men and women would become unrestrained, frivolous and impure; and act recklessly without proper religious injunctions thereby creating unwanted progeny. Good population in human society is the basic principle for peace, prosperity and spiritual progress in life and vanquishing a powerful royal dynasty would in fact make the future of the entire world dim and bring unlimited misfortune. He had finally concluded that obligations are actually binding when the effect is good, but not when the effect is otherwise.

## v. Indecision

A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda while giving purport to the 4<sup>th</sup> verse of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter explains that "respectable superiors like grandfather Bhīṣma and the teacher Droṇācārya were always worshipable for Arjuna. It is general etiquette that superiors are not to be offered even a verbal fight. Even if they are sometimes harsh in behavior, they should not be treated harshly." (70) Arjuna thought even if they attack, it was not possible for him to counterattack them. But kṣatriyas do not beg; they rule. Without a kingdom, Arjuna would have nothing to rule. The only way for Arjuna to get a kingdom was fighting the war and winning it. He was well aware of that, but he preferred the embarrassment of begging to the sinful reaction of killing his worshipable superiors and he thought by not fighting his present life would be difficult, but his future life would not be stained with the sin of killing his superiors and gurus. In thinking from various angles of religious principles Arjuna could not know what to do. If he could not fight, he would have to beg. If he fought and won, he would kill almost all his friends and relatives. Fighting the battle and losing would mean his death as a kṣatriya. Therefore he was confused about his duty. Thus indecision and confusion took over



the great archer Arjuna and his intelligence got completely bewildered in trying to understand the implementation of Dharma.

### Conclusion

The impediments Arjuna conceived in fighting the war, namely compassion for the friends and relatives (BG 1.28-30), not foreseeing any enjoyment even if victorious (BG 1.31-35) fear of sinful reactions (BG1.36-38) destruction of family traditions (BG1.39-43) and indecision (BG 2.6) were on his calculation of Dharma based on the principle of compassion for the self namely body and bodily relations. This was based on the concept of thinking oneself to be the product of matter and it has made him blind to the higher perspective – spiritual reality. Compassion for the dress of a downing man is senseless. In the same way Arjuna's improper compassion for the outward dress of his relatives, namely the loss physical body was also senseless as the gross material body is always dead whereas the spirit soul within is the animator of the body. In 7<sup>th</sup> verse of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, perplexed yet eager for enlightenment, Arjuna surrenders to Kṛṣṇa by pleading "Now I am confused about my duty and have lost all composure because of miserly weakness. In this condition I am asking You to tell me for certain what is best for me. Now I am Your disciple, and a soul surrendered unto You. Please instruct me." (A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda 72) From 11<sup>th</sup> verse of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter onward Kṛṣṇa starts instructing Arjuna with fundamental knowledge of difference between matter and the spirit soul, thereby starting to remove his doubts and clarifying his misconceptions. In this regard A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda writes in his purport to 6<sup>th</sup> verse of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, however, that Arjuna had the qualities necessary to receive knowledge i.e. his mind and senses were controlled as he rejected the kingdom, happiness and life; his tolerance was shown in his readiness for begging and he was faithful in accepting and surrendering to the guru, Kṛṣṇa. Throughout the Bhagavad-gītā Arjuna asks many questions to Kṛṣṇa and thus the development of the conversation between them leads to a probing discourse on the understanding of human life in relation to the world and the controller.

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