

The Avanti PRE Curriculum

Teacher Resource Sheet 7.1.5b

“Arjuna’s Dilemma on the Battlefield”

This passage give some background information to the Battle of Kurukshetra and the difficult situation Arjuna faced prior to that great conflict. It also serves to show how the Bhagavad Gita came to be spoken. Towards the end, we analyze Arjuna’s dilemma.

The Mahabharata explains how Dhritarashtra and Pandu were brothers born of the ancient Kuru Dynasty. Because Dhritarashtra, the elder, was born blind, the throne automatically passed to his younger brother, Pandu. Pandu, however, died at an early age, and before his five sons – Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva – were yet of age. The five bereaved princes (known as ‘The Pandavas’) came under the care of their blind uncle who acted as regent. They grew up alongside Dhritarashtra’s own one hundred sons (known as ‘The Kurus’). All the princes were trained in military arts by the expert Drona and were counselled by the revered grandfather of the dynasty, Bhishma.

The two sets of cousins did not get on well. The sons of Dhritarashtra, especially the eldest, Duryodhana, envied and hated the pious Pandavas. The blind king, swayed by affection for his own sons, was also partial. He became implicated in a plot to assassinate the five sons of Pandu and their mother, Kunti, by burning them alive in a specially prepared palace made of inflammable materials. The plot failed, and the Pandavas flourished with the help of their friend Krishna (who was Kunti’s nephew, and thus a close relative also)

Ultimately, however, the cunning Duryodhana challenged the Pandavas to a gambling match. During that fateful tournament, the Kurus tried to insult Draupadi, the wife of all five Pandavas, by stripping her before the entire court. Krishna’s divine intervention saved her, but the Pandavas were forced into exile for thirteen years. During the final year, they were to remain undetected, and if found would have to remain in the forest for a further twelve years.

The five brothers, accompanied by Draupadi, escaped detection by Duryodhana’s spies. They returned to claim their rightful kingdom. Their cousins refused them. Duryodhana arrogantly retorted that he would not give them enough land into which they could thrust a pin.

War seemed inevitable. Yudhishthira sent Krishna as a peace envoy but Duryodhana could not be swayed. The various kings and princes of the vast empire began to take sides. Both Arjuna and Duryodhana went to Dvaraka to see Krishna and to solicit his help, and left at about the same time.

As fate decreed, Duryodhana arrived first. Krishna was asleep and Duryodhana entered his bed chamber and stood next to his head, waiting for him to awake. Arjuna arrived a few minutes later, and upon entering the chamber, reverentially stood by Krishna’s feet. When Krishna awoke, he first saw Arjuna – much to Duryodhana’s frustration – and thus protocol determined that Krishna should first grant Arjuna any request. Krishna explained that he knew why both princes had come there, but that he had decided not to fight in the forthcoming conflagration. One side, he declared, could have his personal bodyguard, and the

other party could have him, although he wouldn't fight. Duryodhana knew of the prowess of Krishna's troops, and was furious that Arjuna, by providence, had been granted the first choice. How surprised and delighted he was when Arjuna declined Krishna's army in favour of Krishna alone! However, Arjuna, knowing of Krishna's greatness, was happy to have his lord on his side, whether or not he fought. In this way, Krishna became Arjuna's charioteer.

Troops from within the vast empire now converged on Kurukshetra. The commanders on both sides arrayed their vast armies; seven divisions on the side of the Pandavas, and eleven on the side of the Kurus.

Arjuna ordered Krishna to draw up his chariot in between the two vast armies, so that he could see who was there and make an estimate of the enemy's strength. As he surveyed both sides, he saw friends and relatives on both sides. Standing opposite him were his 100 cousins, who were inimical to him. But present also was his military teacher, Drona, whom he respected as a guru. At the head of the opposing armies was Bhishma, the grandfather of the dynasty, who has showered affection on all the Pandava princes. Overcome by affection and compassion, Arjuna broke down and asked Krishna to be his spiritual master, and to instruct him as he slumped down on the chariot, perplexed about the right course of action.

Analysis:

The dilemma (Arjuna's options):

1. Winning: gains the kingdom but unable to enjoy it when all relatives slain
2. Losing: not an option, as it would be ignoble to lose on purpose.
3. Not fighting; against the warrior's duty (Arjuna suggested this, but knew it was wrong).

Arjuna's Reasons for not fighting:

1. Appeal to authority (holy books).
2. Pointed out principles "killing elders in always wrong"
3. Considered the results of acting (if he fought, then practically all his relatives would be killed; also, that society would subsequently suffer when women are not protected).
4. Wanted to act with virtue and compassion (caring)
5. Acted out of desire/emotion (to enjoy his kingdom, which he would be unable to do when his relatives had been killed).

Note; we might similarity analyse Krishna response (such as his suggesting Arjuna's compassion was irrational).