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Defeating the monster without becoming a monster

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By Acharya Prashant

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Though war may sometimes be inevitable, it should not be driven by revenge or momentary outrage. In spiritual terms, war is not necessarily forbidden.

After the terror attack in Pahalgam and the retaliatory action by India, the region is now standing at the precipice of war. Public opinion is getting more jingoistic, and the brute spectre of war stares us in the face. With the growing tension across the border and the media's obsession with inflammatory rhetoric, it is important that we pause for a while and ask: do we honestly understand the character and scope of war? Though war may sometimes be inevitable, it should not be driven by revenge or momentary outrage. In spiritual terms, war is not necessarily forbidden. But like all right action, right war must arise from wisdom and discretion, not impulse or populist sentiment. A nation's real strength lies in its ability to choose foresight over vanity and informed judgment over impulse. Strategic retaliation must serve a higher purpose. We are seeing today a dangerous trend where complicated geopolitical reality is reduced to buzzwords and spectacle. Aggression, even when justified, must be driven by principle, not performance. It is necessary to remember that war is a necessary evil, and must always be avoided from being celebrated, as is often done on TV channels. Even when waged with legitimacy, war still bears a solemn and agonizing responsibility.

Dharma, Not Ego

A most edifying clarification on war comes from the Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna was reluctant to fight, but Shri Krishna implores him to engage in combat for the right cause. When all else has failed, a person can take up arms in pursuit of Dharma, but with clarity, detachment, and modesty. Arjuna was summoned into battle not in the interest of prestige or clan honor, but as a reluctant warrior being persuaded towards the truth.

No action is inherently noble or vile; the intent behind it is what counts. A war rooted in hatred begets destruction and more wars. But a stand taken in defense of justice, without retributive impulses, may fulfill a higher purpose.

War Begins in the Mind

Modern war does not begin with missiles and tanks, but in the domain of public opinion. It is triggered by news, goaded by rhetoric, and fueled further by an unscrupulous media. Nationalism, when manipulated, becomes a cacophony that stifles reflective thought. As war becomes more like entertainment, wisdom stands diminished.

Currently, television studios and websites are platforms for the development and

distortion of public opinion. The audience is confined to the space of passive reception of emotionally charged stories, and truth often stands shrouded behind spectacle. In this scenario, calls for escalation are, for the most part, emotive, and deliberation is rare.

The Hidden Costs of War

The main aim of governance is to enable national development, and war is a major setback. The economic costs are huge. An aircraft carrier costs ₹25,000 crore to build. The purchase of one fighter aircraft can cost ₹2,500 crore. Even a single battle tank costs ₹100 crore. One day of traditional warfare can cost between ₹30,000 and ₹50,000 crore, excluding the loss of life, destruction of infrastructure, and the long-term destruction of capability.

The burden is far higher for Pakistan. With its weak economy and fragile democratic record, the narrative promulgated in that country is one of sustained Indian threat to its very survival. War then becomes an existential compulsion for Pakistan. War, of which the common people bear the costs, while established power structures reap the benefits. After each war, that country declines from one pathetic state to another, and ironically that humiliation gives their army more justification to arrogate itself more political power.

India, in contrast, stands poised at the threshold of global leadership. A full-blown war would take the country away from the developmental path. This would be inimical to both peace and progress. India, as a civilisational nation, has a destiny to meet, and would do well to avoid distractions.

The Nuclear Threat: A Point of No Return

The risk of uncontrolled escalation is severe. Given Pakistan's weak economy and

inferior military powers in conventional terms, it is quite likely that its forces will be overpowered and Indian battalions may advance into their mainland. Pakistan does not have a nuclear no-first-use policy. And the Pakistan army is uncaring of the interests of the common Pakistani. Indian occupation of Pakistani territory would be a big blow to the dominance of the Pakistani army. In panicky imprudence, the army may then use a tactical nuclear weapon on the advancing Indian forces. This would set in motion an uncontrollable exchange of immediate nuclear strikes and counter-strikes between the two countries.

What happens?

l Tens of millions die instantly.

l All kinds of infrastructure stands vaporized.

l Nuclear radiation pollutes large areas of rivers, the air, and land. Water becomes radioactive for decades.

l Agricultural collapse under nuclear winter means several millions die of starvation and others attempt painful migration.

l Future generations would have deformities and illnesses.

l Whole areas, even hundreds of kilometers away, would witness long-lasting environmental and health disasters.

These are not just scary conjurements, but realistically likely outcomes projected and simulated through decades of intense worldwide research. The impacts would spread beyond country borders, creating regional instability and threatening worldwide ecosystems. Simply put, it would be apocalyptic for the entire planet. A pyrrhic victory attained at such cost would be indistinguishable from defeat.

Real Victory

We are fighting against the embedded power structures in Pakistan that resist responsibility and feed upon hatred. We are fighting the Two-Nation theory that is founded on hate, wants separation, and results in continuous wars.

True victory lies not in defeating or annihilating a neighbor, but in the power to inspire them to realise their fundamental folly. Let India be greatly developed. Let our progress, science, economy, peace, art and culture, and institutions mesmerise the common Pakistani. Let the Pakistani citizen ask: how come India has moved so far ahead? How come we do not have the same opportunities that an Indian has, in education, empowerment, and self-expression? Such a thing would be India's biggest and real victory.

The Cold War did not end with military conquest. It ended when institutions, innovation, and intellectual progress made one side incomparable to the other. America's universities, economic progress, and liberal democratic system became way beyond the ken of the Soviet Union. The USSR crumbled under the weight of the USA's progress.

India needs to get so far ahead that the adversary begins to admire her, wants to learn from her, and starts questioning his own dogmas like the Two-Nation theory.

True power lies not in revenge, but in sustained resilience to all that which detracts us from our decided path. When war is inevitable, it must be waged in the ethos of Arjun: sobriety, a sense of responsibility, and an abiding concern with reconciliation.

Eulogizing the glory of destruction is to fall into the trap of backwardness.

Let us strive to build an equitable and vibrant nation that inspires even our enemies to rethink their choices. Let India rise to greatness through wisdom, and develop in

research, innovation, arts and economics. The success of a nation lies in enabling its people to achieve their fullest inner and outer potential.

Peace Is Spiritual, Let Even Our War Be Spiritual

At the heart of the gulf between Pakistan and India is not just political conflict but a continuing spiritual void that reveals a skewed understanding of identity, religion, and nation. The Two-Nation theory, according to which Muslims and Hindus cannot live together, still holds its sway.

Nevertheless, authentic religion emphasizes unity, compassion, and higher states of consciousness. Religion, when exploited in pursuit of politics, gets stripped of its spiritual basis. Only through reconnecting both groups with the higher aspirations embedded in their shared civilizational legacy can lasting peace be achieved.

Countries with no inner direction often seek meaning in outer conflict. But victory in war means little when a nation is economically, educationally and spiritually poor.

Let's make India a nation other peoples want to follow, not because of fear, but because of reverence. Let the measure of our real achievement lie in the lives we touch, the minds we inspire, and the wrongs we right. This is the victory that brings about sublimation, not coercion; inspiration, not indignation.

(Acharya Prashant, a modern Vedanta exegete and philosopher, is a national bestselling author, columnist, and founder of the PrashantAdvait Foundation. An IIT-IIM alumnus, he is a recipient of the OCND Award from the IIT Delhi Alumni Association for outstanding contribution to national development.)