

## Mind Battles

*Uthaya Sankar SB*

*Translated by Pragalath Kumar*

“Arjunan?” I asked again, to confirm his identity.

“Right,” he replied as he got into the vehicle.

There was an initial silence as our journey began. The young man sitting beside me on the passenger seat was not keen to strike up a conversation. I suppressed my urge to bring up Arjuna and Krishna from the Mahabharata.

“How much further?” Arjunan asked.

“About thirty kilometres,” I replied as I glanced at Waze. “We will arrive in thirty minutes.”

He nodded silently. He wore a white T-shirt and jeans and appeared anxious. He glanced at his watch occasionally.

“Do you have an important meeting?” I attempted small talk, hoping to reduce his anxiety.

“Yes,” Arjunan said briefly. “It is regarding family property.”

“Oh,” I responded. I was not sure whether Arjunan was prepared to continue this conversation.

“I am at a dead end. It has been a dispute since dad’s time. Don’t know when it will be resolved.”

According to Arjunan, the family business began in Taiping, Perak, during the time of his grandfather. The man was born in Jaffna in 1930 and migrated to the Malayan Union when he was 17, several months before Ceylon gained independence from the British colonial masters.

He became a successful entrepreneur as a result of his sheer hard work and the assets that he brought over from his motherland. After a long period of bachelorhood, he married two women — a common practice even in the 1960s.

The first wife's eldest child was named Sritarashtran, whereas the second wife's child was named Paandiyam. Another son, Kreetharan, came as a result of an illicit affair with Sritharashtran and Paandiyam's nanny.

"When grandfather died suddenly in 1984, our relatives were forced to decide who was best qualified to continue the business in Taiping," Arjunan said. He seemed less anxious now.

"By right, Sritarashtran is the most eligible to take over his father's position as the latter was against splitting the business," said a relative from Jaffna who attended the funeral rituals.

A polemic was raised among the extended family members as Sritarashtran was born blind. If the business was handed over to him, he would probably fail to discharge his duties.

"Sritarashtran would definitely be conned by the workers and those dealing with him. A solid business may come crashing down because of his blindness."

These were among the arguments raised boldly by Kreetharan. Sritarashtran kept his mouth shut as he heard the relatives discuss the future of his father's business.

In the end, it was decided that Paandiyam, the younger sibling by a year, would take over the late Dhoraingham's business empire. Even though he just turned 18, Paandiyam was determined to do whatever it takes to expand the business empire.

However, by 1990, Paandiyam made the drastic decision to take a break from business.

"I have requested Sritarashtran to continue the work that dad started and I have continued so far. I will not take anything. One day, when my children have grown up and are prepared, they can receive what is rightfully theirs," he said before deciding to shift to Klang.

Sritarashtran accepted the decision half-heartedly. He managed the business empire with the assistance of his wife, Gangavathi, and his brother-in-law, Sackrapani. Kreetharan assisted as well, even though his presence was disliked by the rest.

"Have you read the Mahabharata epic?" I interrupted him as I could not contain my comedic curiosity.

"Mahabharata? Why?" Arjunan frowned as he looked at me.

"Studied in national school?"

"No."

Both of us were silent for a moment. A couple of minutes later, Arjunan continued his tale and I stopped asking him about the famous Hindu epic. I compared his life story with the Mahabharata in my mind.

Arjunan was born and raised in Klang. Paandiyan did not reveal much information about the family's business empire in Taiping to his son. Paandiyan also did not bring Arjunan to meet the relatives there.

Paandiyan passed away in 2014, when Arjunan was 19 years old. A year later, Kamala Devi took her son to Taiping. It was due to cajoling from Kreetharan, who had also contacted Arjunan via social media. He was the one who revealed the truth to Arjunan — about the business empire that was supposed to belong to him.

“What would be the fate of your children, Gangavathi?” Sackrapani questioned his sister after receiving confirmation on Kamala Devi and Arjunan's return to Taiping. “If your husband returned this business to Arjunan, what would happen to your own children? Dhoraismy would be disappointed. This business empire would fall into the hands of Arjunan's family lineage.”

Then the inevitable took place. As feared by Gangavathi and Sackrapani, Sritarashtran was willing to hand over the business empire to his nephew.

This turn of events instigated fury and despair within Dhoraismy.

“Didn't his father leave and hand over the business to my father? Why does the son appear now and dispossess the property which rightfully should be mine?” The young man said in anger while discussing the matter with Sackrapani.

Sackrapani and Dhoraismy's joint attempts to convince Sritarashtran were fruitless. The blind man felt that Paandiyan's son had the right to claim his father's property.

“Since the beginning, I have been ineligible. Hence, all this while, I am nothing more than a trustee. That is why I have always felt that this business empire would not last with me,” said Sritarashtran as he attempted to hold back his tears.

In the end, it was decided. The late Dhoraisham's business empire would be split up.

“This move goes against the request and hopes of my late father, but it has to be done as a last saving grace. The situation has changed and we should be prepared for a transformation in our minds due to the current developments,” said Sritarashtran. He was well aware of the power struggles between Dhoraismy and Arjunan on social media.

The assets were partially liquified and the cash was handed over to Arjunan. He used it as capital for his new venture in Kamunting. This was among the conditions imposed by Dhoraisamy, who did not want Arjunan to interfere in the day-to-day operations of the family business.

Within the next three years, Arjunan successfully developed his own business empire. It became on a par with Dhoraisamy's. The achievement left the public astounded with the young entrepreneur's talent and skills. They also compared Arjunan's achievement with Dhoraisamy's, who merely inherited a thriving business empire.

"I can't stand being insulted again and again!" Dhoraisamy shouted as he stood next to Sackrapani, who acted as his personal advisor. "I should not have allowed my father to give anything to Arjunan. I envisioned him taking a decade to develop in this industry. However, he is competing within three years!"

Through surveillance and espionage, Dhoraisamy found Arjunan's key weak points: his fondness for gambling. That weakness was exploited thoroughly by Dhoraisamy, via proxies who invited Arjunan to gamble every day.

Add Arjunan's other weaknesses – women and booze – and it was not that difficult to send him spiralling downwards. Little by little, Arjunan began losing his assets. The more time Arjunan spent on liquor, women and gambling, the more adverse the effects on his business empire.

"I can't blame anyone else in this matter. I was too foolish to fall into Dhoraisamy's trap. A lack of guidance and advice made me fail to differentiate between the good and the bad. And here I am, taking a Grab to attend an important meeting."

I did not react to Arjunan's words, but I felt a sense of calmness in his voice that wasn't there earlier. Waze indicated that we were 4 minutes from our destination.

"What should I do now?"

I turned to my left and realised that Arjunan was looking at me.

"You are attending a meeting, right?" I assumed that the meeting would help him make a legally-informed decision of what to do next.

"It is not a meeting. I am meeting a lawyer who was recommended by a friend. This great lawyer can apparently help me regain what is rightfully mine. His name is Krishnan."

“Oh!” I smiled upon hearing the name.

“Why? Do you know him?” Arjunan asked, curiously.

“I don’t, but my name is Krishnan, too.”

“Oh!” Arjunan was surprised now. He immediately checked his Grab and smiled. “It looks like Krishnan became my driver to meet Krishnan.”

He laughed as he pulled out his wallet. He seemed very calm now.

“I am sorry for bothering you with my story,” he said as he paid for the ride. “Any advice from Mr Krishnan after hearing my story?”

“Read the Mahabharata.”

“Mahabharata?” He frowned.

“Yes. Try reading it and you will find something very useful there.”

Arjunan left, still frowning. I watched him walk into a large building.

I envisioned Arjuna in the Mahabharata, meeting Lord Krishna for advice on how to handle the feud between the Pandavas and Kauravas.

Arjunan turned and waved at me before stepping into an office. I saw the signboard above and was rendered speechless: Dr Krishnan Psychiatric Specialist Clinic.