Contemporary Scholarship on Warfare and Battle Ethics

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There is a surprisingly large— and repetitive— amount of scholarship on warfare in ancient India, including reflection on battles and duels, strategies and armies, and types of weapons. A considerable portion of this is based on the *Mahābhārata (MBh)* as the main source of knowledge, with some reference to the Purāṇas, acknowledged as being dependent on the *MBh* for their content. These writings can be divided into three main categories. Firstly, pre-independence and immediate post-independence writings (Ramachandra Dikshitar: 1948; Bhattacharjee: 1949), which are both descriptive but highly nationalistic in showing that ancient Indian military tactics were as sophisticated as those used in the [then] contemporary West. Within this category there is much description of weapons, military units and strategies. Secondly, writings by both Indian and Western scholars which illustrate the contrast between battle ethics and the well-known occasions in the *MBh*, but less so in the *Rāmāyaṇa (Rām)*, on which these ethics are deliberately violated. These are strongly predicated on the dharmic approach found mainly in the *MBh* in contrast with the “realistic” approach of the *Arthaśāstra (AŚ)* where real-politik and regal self-preservation are given emphasis. Thirdly, a series of more recent studies which explore some of the questions raised in the second type, but go beyond these by introducing Just-war theory (Clooney, 2003; Brekke: 2005, 2006; Balkaran and Dorn: 2012; Roy: 2012; Kosuta: 2020) in order to make comparisons between theories of war and combat in Europe and India. A possible fourth category found in some writings (Bakshi: 2002) demonstrates how underlying attitudes exposited as far back as the *MBh* can be found in contemporary Indian thinking about battle, both theoretically and practically.

There is necessarily much repetition in all of this writing, in part because of the dependence on a particular set of sources, the two Sanskrit epics, some *Purāṇas*, the *Manusmṛti*, the *AŚ* and some later texts on kingship and polity. As such expertise, especially in the *MBh*, and the *Rām* to a lesser extent, is needed as both contain extensive descriptions of actual battles—duels especially—and, importantly, considerable reflection on the king’s role in initiating a war and the conditions of fighting once war has started.

It is really in the *MBh* and the *Rām* that extensive descriptions of battles are to be found. And in many of the scholarly and commentarial studies examined here the *MBh* is a central source. When reading the *MBh* it becomes quickly apparent that there was a strongly concentrated knowledge of warfare, including the weapons of war, strategy, modes of fighting and battle ethics, all exemplified in Books 6-10 and 12. The development of technical terms to describe

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1 An example of which is Kaushik Roy (2012). It provides a good summary of previous scholarship without offering much that is new.

2 Bhattacharjee, (1949: 38), “The epic mind was very critical of war events and their propriety. Ideas of fairness very much advanced—and in some respects they were as high as even the modern man can conceive.”

(44) “The Kṣatriyas about whom we are speaking had a highly developed sense of honour in war. Whatever other defects they might have in their moral habits, their war morality does not appear to be at all defective for people of their time…and might even compare favourably with the latest developments in our war-ideas. It is even permissible to say that in some respects their war morality was superior to ours of the present age.”

Also more recently Subedi (2003).
particular kinds of battle as found in the MBh, though mainly in the AŚ, shows how much reflection had gone into the subject. Some of the material about battles and fighting, but without the technical terms, is also found in middle Vedic literature, but comes to the fore in the MBh as an explicit area of concern. As befitting the status of the MBh as a text about dharma there is much that goes behind the actual description of events, especially descriptions of duels, to explore judgements about the ethical conditions that provide justification or otherwise as to why a king—it is usually a king—, and his representative the warrior, should engage in battle.

Many of the studies alluded to in this article have had to confront some of the fundamental themes of the MBh in attempting to understand the raison d’être of specific subjects such as fighting and war. This means having appreciation of dharma in its various manifestations, the specificities of social class and nīti, a Sanskrit word which conveys what in English might be covered by “polity, political science”, and the very concept of battle itself. And whilst the texts dealing with the ethics of fighting are quite specific, the reason for their development and evolution are found within these broader themes just mentioned.

In addition to the MBh, the AŚ has also received most attention. It presents a view of polity that is predicated not just on dharma as the guiding normative principle, but also offers a more real-politik view of kingship and the ruling of a kingdom. Brekke’s position is typical of how these two texts are and should be used (2005: 70): “Still, the great epics are the most important lasting expressions of an ideology, or several ideologies, of war and ethics in the Hindu tradition. Secondly, in order to balance the mythical and narrative material concerning war found in the epic literature, I intend to look at the tradition of statecraft represented by Kautilya’s Arthaśāstra. Kautilya presents a pragmatic view of war which is very far removed from the epic view.” (Brekke (2005): 70) In this sense it is often contrasted with the MBh, many of the normative recommendations in which seem much more normative in intent.

Ultimately, contemporary scholarship encapsulates two contrasting views of battle as found/implied in these texts: dharmayuddha and kūṭayuddha, or “righteous battle” and “crooked battle”. And it is around these two concepts that many scholars and commentators writing on war and battle have presented their ideas and conclusions, as if these are the two fundamental themes defining Indian views around battle and warfare. Here the first is idealistic/normative in conceiving war and warfare only in terms of dharma, the socio-cosmic law designed to produce harmony in society and above all to direct the king to behave in a particular kind of way towards his subject and his enemies. The second might be called a “realistic” approach as it focusses on winning at all costs, irrespective of the methods used. It is in respect of dharmanyuddha that the recommendations on particular modes of combat—that can be compared with what is found in international Humanitarian Law—are laid down.

**Dharma as the Defining Concept**

Both interpretative categories—dharmayuddha and kūṭayuddha—used by contemporary scholars can be and are classified under the broader rubric of dharma. Even the idea of kūṭayuddha really has to be seen to be a derivative of dharma, as a kind of opposite, rather than as an independent concept in its own right. The connection of both terms with dharma means they should not be construed in the manner of “fairness” and “unfairness”. Dharma itself is a broad

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3 Even regarding those who should be considered as combatants. See Singh (1965: 155) “One can detect the embryo of a few moral concepts of the Epics as early as the Rgveda.” An envoy “was considered sacred…. We learn from the later Samhitas that the sīṭa who acted as charioteer, bard, herald or envoy, was regarded physically inviolable.”
concept which must be interpreted in terms of cosmic order, social class (varna) and individual behaviour and in the sense of svadharma it specifically defines the appropriate modes of behaviour and life-style of a person within one of the four classes or outside of it. Bakshi’s understanding of dharma is very idealistic, yet it is an accurate reflection of how many contemporary Indians see it (2002: 131): “The Mahabharata epic however seems to lay a great deal of stress on ‘Dharma’ as the basis of warfighting. Dharma here does not denote religion. Rather it denotes eternal and abiding principles of justice and morality that have a universal and timeless character. To that extent a ‘Dharma Yudha’ is not the same as a jihad or crusade.” In this sense he is right. Whilst dharma is very broad in its basic meaning, it is not specific enough when used in respect of battle ethics to refer to the kind of very specific military campaign, defined by religious goals, described by Jehad or crusade.

The precepts of dharma when followed by everyone in society, under the correct guidance of the king, will ideally guarantee a coherent society where all people can achieve their optimum position within their social/lifestyle class as laid down by their svadharma. The second of the four classes, that of warriors (kṣatriya), from which kings should ideally be drawn, have as their svadharma to fight and protect the subjects, and the king’s role is indeed an extension from this. And the glory of fulfilling this role is repeated constantly in the MBh. It is in regard to this class that the rules for fighting are laid out, because in the orthodox Hindu society fighting in battle is restricted to them, in strong contradistinction to those groups who live outside of Hindu society and to whom these rules seemingly do not apply.

Given the assumption that dharmayuddha and kūtyuddha are taken as defining modes of fighting in Indian literature, it is to be expected that the very idea of dharma looms large in scholarly writing. There are two reasons for this. The first is the centrality of dharma as the system governing normative behaviour in the MBh and the Rām and the normative dharmaśāstra literature. All forms of behaviour are tied into dharma, positively or negatively, given its centrality in defining a particular form of orthopract society predicated on class distinctions and associated functions, as well as the correct functioning of the so-called triple-world of heaven, earth and underworld. Given its centrality, it is fully understandable that it will be taken up as an interpretative category in dealing with warfare in all of its ramifications. This is further supported by its direct connection with kṣatradharma, a compound occurring hundreds of times in the MBh and intersecting directly with the requirements of the class system as a society-wide division of labour, where each class has its own dharma (svadharma).

Second, because it gives scholars an overarching concept that has been dominant in the culture for the past two thousand years. It is both general and specific such that concepts like dharmayuddha can be invented and taken up with svadharma and kṣatradharma in order to define the class distinctiveness of warfare in Hindu/Indian culture and to explain the origin of battle ethics and the need for them. These feed into the view that the division of labour implied in the varna system elevated fighting with weapons and duelling for a particular class, and that those outside of this should not engage in this kind of activity. That is unlikely to have been

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4 For a recent complete treatment Hiltebeitel (2011).

5 As in MBh. 7,131.1-2: “But when his son had been struck by Sātyaki and had entered the prāya state, Somadatta spoke to Sātyaki in exceptional anger. “In the past the Law of the warrior was determined by the great gods, but having given it up, how can you be focused on the Law of the barbarian, Sātvata.”

6 See also Clooney (2003: 117) “It is generally not stated but understood that no one else is eligible to cause pain; no woman, and no one in the lower religious classes, the vaisyas, sudras and outcastes.”

7 Neither it nor the word rājadharma seems to be found in the AŚ. In the Rām kṣatradharma occurs 12 times and 4 times in the Harivansha.
true in practice as early Indian kingdoms were likely dominated by peasant agriculturalists with some small bureaucracies centred around a king, a few religious specialists and an increasing number of people involved with market production and intra-regional trade.

As early as 1922 Armour, in dealing with the ethics of fighting, focussed on the centrality of dharma in writing about medieval India and beyond (1992: 80): “The ideal Rajput warrior fought fairly and died gamely, not because of any rule of international law, but because it was his duty or Dharma to do… From tales of mediaeval chivalry, from the records of our fighting forces both by land and sea, and now in the air, from the spirit of sportsmanship which is inherent in our people, we have inherited a great tradition of fair play. This is now, so strong that it has become indeed Dharma-a Dharma which, I trust, does not vary from its standards…. In India, in spite of all the obstacles, an idea of Dharma has been kept alive--with intermissions—for thousands of years by a warrior tradition sanctioned by religion and public opinion. It still persists in the Indian Army, partly because the Raj has not crumbled away, and the presence of a settled government allows scope for it.” Thus implying continuity over millennia. Ever since then all writings dealing with war and battle ethics have had to deal with dharma, and several have followed Armour’s strongly idealistic lead in seeing continuity between the past and the present reflected in dharma.

The origin/s of the rules for fighting is not known, but it is clear they are used to buttress the sense of heroism that such rules and the general idea of dharmayuddha are designed to confirm, and, I assume, to denigrate in a kind of racial sense those outside of the varna system who were regarded as barbarians and did not follow these rules. Yet because the brahmin elites used their influence to define the normative condition of society, and because they defined kingship and governance in a manner that would preserve their influence in defining power structures—as political consultants—, as interpreters of dharma it was they who may have set the rules for fighting.

**Dharmayuddha and Kūṭayuddha**

Both these terms have been taken up in most of the scholarship I am dealing with in this article. Justification for wars and individual duels is given within the framework of dharma in its cosmic, social and personal ramifications. Arguably the concept of dharmayuddha, “battle/war in accord with dharma” defines in general terms the justification for battle and how it should be fought, yet this compound appears only once in the MBh, and not at all in the Rām. Nor does kūṭayuddha. But kūṭayuddha, whilst it has tended to be seen as the opposite of dharmayuddha, refers to the means by which the war is fought rather than the end goal, which for Kautilya would have been victory. These kinds of narratives can be divided into two parts reflecting their basic themes: the first is designed to enumerate the explicit and implicit normative conditions under which a king should rule, conditions that would guarantee the most

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9 See 7.123.11

“Son of Rādha, knowing the law of battle (yuddhadharmam), it is against the law what you have said to Bhīma who is fighting without fleeing.” Cf. 10, 9, 23. To my knowledge the term adharmayuddha, opposite of dharmayuddha, does not occur in either of the two epics. For some Purāṇa references see: Bhāgavata Purāṇa, 1, 8, 50; Nārada Purāṇa, 1, 46, 80; Viṣṇu Purāṇa, 6, 7, 3. Nor apparently does it occur in the ĀS, where prakāśayuddha might be taken as an equivalent:

7.6.17 viśramasya prakāśayuddhaṁ kūṭayuddhaṁ tūṣṇīṁ yuddham //

Cf.16, 8
propitious outcome for his kingdom and subjects. The second, is much more specific and defines in a short space of text the conditions under which violence should not be perpetrated against certain kinds of combatants and non-combatants. Such passages are much shorter than the first variety, in part because they are very specific and scarcely open to interpretation. These are regarded by scholars as pertaining directly to the condition of battle, in contrast to the way the king regulates his kingdom, which applies to the first category of text.

Like many other commentators Bakshi makes considerable use of both concepts–which he presents as opposites. Initially, he (Bakshi, 2002: 2) asserts that “The Mahabharata War is called Dharma Yudha even though it was fought for political reasons. Evidences of Kuta Yudha are no doubt available but obviously not much of the Chanakyaniti or Machiavellian tactics were employed. A few instances of deceit like Yudhisthira’s telling a lie or Bhīma’s hitting Duryodhana below the navel are exceptions and not the rule of the war.” And further (Bakshi, 2002: 81), “While the division of the Dharmayuddha and the Kūṭayuddha was in the epic tradition, this kind of division seems to have been an innovation of Kauṭalya, and an improvement on the old systems and methods. Dharmavijaya is an equivalent of Dharmayuddha, while Lobhavijaya and Asuravijaya come under the category of Kūṭayuddha…”

And he distinguishes two meanings of dharmayuddha in a manner taken up by other scholars

“…Dharma Yudha in Bhishma’s dispensation meant that not only the motives or causes of the war had to be ‘just’ and ‘ethical’ but even its conduct. Dharma Yudha, according to him, was the honest trial of strength and military skill. Wars were to be fought with strict adherence to codes of military ethics and chivalry. … What should interest the student of military thought, however, is the fact that these ethical codes of chivalry were often violated by both sides. The Pandavas under the guidance of Krishna often resorted to Kuta Yudha–the indirect approach based on surprise, deception and subterfuge. This is how they won the war.” (Bakshi, 2002: 55)

In most respects this summarizes what most other commentators say about the dharmayuddha concept, and it is within this frame that the actual ethics of fighting are found according to them. Though the term dharmayuddha is not found in the passages where these ethics are laid out, dharma and its opposite adharma appear frequently enough in such passages to confirm that the idea was present in the minds of those who composed those parts of the MBh dealing with the ethics of fighting.

Because so much of contemporary writing on Indian warfare hangs on the concepts of dharmayuddha and kūṭayuddha, and the contrast between them, it is necessary to explore them a little more. Ramachandra Dikśhitar (1948: 59) provides a very nationalistic interpretation in writing: “Hindu military science recognizes two kinds of warfare—the dharmayuddha and the kūṭayuddha. There is another classification into prakāśayuddha and mantrayuddha. Dharmayuddha is war carried on the principles of dharma, meaning here the Kṣatradharma or the law of Kings and Warriors. In other words it was a just and righteous war which had the approval of society. It was also termed prakāśayuddha, or open battle. There was to be no secrecy about it. The preliminaries of the battle were settled by the belligerents before the war actually began. There was no application of stratagem or artifice in the operations of this war. It was then a straight fight and a regulated fight. On the other hand, the kūṭayuddha was

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10 Bakshi, p.81.

11 For which see below, citing Mehendale, 1995: 1-2.
unrighteous war. It was a crafty fight carried on in secret. It was sometimes effected by the use of *mantras* and of charms and spells. Sometimes it went by the name of mantra-yuddha…”¹²

The disapproval of *kūṭayuddha* is very obvious, though how the *dharmayuddha* idea could receive “the approval of society” is never elaborated upon. *Dharmayuddha* is the foundational concept because it ties the whole idea of battle into the broader concept of *dharma* itself and the narrower subdivision of this, *kṣatrādharma*. *Prakāśayuddha* in the sense that battle/warfare must be visible with agreed upon rules of fighting, falls within the frame of *dharmayuddha*, but is really opposed to the idea of *tūśṇiyuddha* “silent battle.”

This does not exhaust the technical terms used to define *dharmayuddha*. Ramachandra Dikshitar (1948: 81) writes: “There was another division of war—Dharmavijaya, Asuravijaya and Lobhavijaya, as contemplated by Kauṭālya and Aśoka, and occasionally mentioned in the epics and the Purāṇas. While the division of the Dharmayuddha and Kūṭayuddha was in the epic tradition, this kind of division seems to have been an invention of Kauṭālya, and an improvement on the old systems and methods. Dharmavijaya is an equivalent of Dharmayuddha, while Lobhavijāya and Asuravijaya come under the category of Kūṭayuddha…” And he elaborates (Ramachandra Dikshitar 1948: 83) “According to Kauṭālya, Dharmavijaya meant that a conquering king was satisfied with the acknowledgement of his overlordship by the inferior and defeated powers as also by others. The motive was to avoid war as far as possible, and to promote peaceful and diplomatic relations with neighbours and foreigners…. In the Lobhavijaya the aim of the conqueror was to covet the territory and treasure of the enemy. In the Asuravijaya, the enemy is captured and deprived of his kingdom, treasure, sons and wives.”

Roy grounds the distinction between the two concepts entirely in the MBh. as do most other scholars and commentators writing on war and battle. For her, (Roy, 2009: 35) “The Pandavas started *dharmayuddha* against the Kauravas only when the policies of sama (conciliation), bheda (fomenting internal dissension) and dana failed….In the Mahabharata, two military schools exist. The dominant school propagates *dharmayuddha*. This school argues that war must be fought between equals in accordance with the heroic ideals. But Lord Krishna, on the side of the Pandavas, and Aswathama, a Kaurava warlord, supported *kutayuddha*. The Mahabharata emphasizes the importance of commanders for conducting *kutayuddha* successfully.”

And further (Roy, 2009: 36) “The basic components of Kauṭīlya’s *kutayuddha* are intrigues, duplicity and fraud. Kauṭīlya advocates the use of wine, women, poison and spies for achieving victory.” In this sense *yuddha* is not just considered as the actual fighting itself, but also as all the other activity leading up to battle and the advantages that might be achieved through espionage, bribery and dissension.

But note that *kūṭayuddha* is a method for prosecuting a battle just as is *prakāśayuddha* and *mantrayuddha*. *Dharmayuddha* though seems to be broader than this and places *yuddha* in all of its meanings into the broader framework of “correct behaviour” in general. *Dharmayuddha* in this sense is a sub-section of *dharma* itself and I am assuming it has given rise to the other terms for *yuddha* which either place it within *dharmayuddha* or go against *dharmayuddha* in some clearly defined practical sense. As such the obvious conclusion is that the negatively assessed forms of fighting could not have existed without *dharmayuddha*. The latter is

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¹² Similar is Thapliyal (2021: 127-28)
definitely developed as a kind of conventional term reflecting both the idea of kṣatradharma and the heroism attached to this on a class basis, and the possible chaos which may have previously existed in battles, the memory of which was kept over the centuries.

Ultimately dharmayuddha would have been effective only if both sides agreed to observe it. This is the thinking behind Roy’s (2009: 52) assessment that, “The concept of dharmayuddha is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it introduces humane principles that somewhat reduce the lethality of war and moderate the effect of warfare on the combatants in particular and on society in general. On the other hand, the very concept of dharmayuddha prevents technological development and tactical innovations. This proved to be a serious weakness for the Hindu regimes practicing dharmayuddha during the early medieval period. The realist interpretation of statecraft and organized violence has remained at the margins of Hindu philosophy until recent times. As far as the notion of dharmayuddha is concerned, Hinduism is not unique; concepts of just war are also present in other religions.”

To conclude this section it is necessary to present the cautionary words of Mehendale about the MBh war as a dharmayuddha. He rightly distinguishes two meanings of it: “The term dharmayuddha may mean: ‘a war fought as a duty (dharma) by a Kṣatriya’…. The expression dharmayuddha can also have a different meaning. It may mean ‘a war fought according to the rules (dharma) of the war’. This meaning is exemplified in the expression gaccha yudhyasva dharmena [“Go! Fight in accord with the Law!”] (5, 180, 17). Paraśurāma’s words to Bhīṣma. … The side which observed these rules during the war could be said to have fought a dharmayuddha, but that would not apply to the violator…. It should now be evident that if we accept the first meaning the issue of dharmayuddha depends on the ends and not the means; since the ends are known before actual combat, whether a war is a dharmayuddha or not can be decided beforehand. In the case of the second meaning, however, the issue depends on the means, not the end, and hence the issue can be decided only after the war is over.” (Mehendale, 1995: 1-2)

Finally, he notes (23) “The conclusion, therefore, can only be that from the point of view of the observance of the rules of war, the Mahābhārata war cannot be called a dharmayuddha, the heroes on both sides having to share the responsibility for this.” That the MBh war is not a dharmayuddha, but that dharma is so fundamental in the text, is surely significant for throwing light on the extent to which any war can be dharmayuddha in either of Mehendale’s two senses. That is, by being a dharmayuddha it establishes the ideal of a dharmayuddha in showing how difficult it is to achieve this in practice, if only because of the ambiguity of dharma in its various forms.

It is necessary to draw a distinction between the idea of dharmayuddha in the broadest possible sense and the individual rules relating to battles between armies and individuals. Because the actual ethics of fighting could still obtain even where the guiding principle of a battle is kīṭayuddha. Though admittedly this would be more difficult to observe if the goal is victory at all costs rather than defense of an existing kingdom governed along dharmic lines.

Most commentators and scholars of the MBh know that there are a number of celebrated occasions where dharmayuddha, understood as the mutually agreed upon correct mode of fighting, is violated. Balkaran and Dorn (2012: 666) argue that even where right conduct in battle is known, “In keeping with the theme of protection, the safety of the collective often

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13 See also Bakshi (2002: 127) who also conflates dharmayuddha with “Just War".
trumps other ethical considerations.” Yet this is so even given that “Engagement in battle is a highly systematized endeavor in these contexts. The Ramayana definitely upholds the necessity for appropriate conduct whilst engaging in battle.” (675) Of course, without notions of dharmayuddha, how would the violations in battle be known, especially given the heroic ethos of much early Sanskrit literature, which ethos is defined by exact rules of conduct?

Class as Opposed to State as a Form of Allegiance

Most commentators and scholars have been fully aware of the class basis of ancient Indian warfare, and even during the medieval period when the role of the Rajputs was taken into consideration. Whilst there is a tendency to conflate “class” (varna) with “caste (jāti) it is not possible to deal with fighting techniques in the MBh without taking seriously the kinds of obligations placed on the warriors who were required to fight heroically and fairly according to the criteria laid down. In relation to the previous section it must be noted that the centrality of svadharma—the occupational rules and social expectations distinguishing one class from another—in defining a man’s role in society both ties the warrior’s role into dharma and requires very specific forms of activities to be laid down which consolidate the individual’s social identity in the eyes of others. it is this demand that surely feeds into the establishment of precise rules for fighting and the criteria by which these can be tested.

The distinction between social class and political/kingly state in differentiating the social basis of contemporary warfare, including in India, from what might have been in India really up until the late eighteenth century, is an important one. The point is that the nation state as we understand it in the contemporary world (and for the past century and a half) did not exist in India. There were kingdoms (janapadas) and other forms of political/economic units, but allegiance was really to a kin-group as part of a social class or a king rather than to any arbitrarily defined political space, and the king would often have been very distant from the peasant farmers who lived in the countryside. And whilst the AS, in particular, does develop the theory of mandala as a set of kingdoms surrounding a given kingdom, that can be classified as friendly or hostile, it is the lineage of kings within these that is fundamental, as well as the fulfilment of expectations of what one might do by virtue of being a member of a particular varna. Yet it is the royal elite and those at the head of any standing army that would have developed allegiance to a particular king, and even the ksatriyas would have been captured as much by the expectations of their svadharma as by commitment to a rule by a particular king. As stated earlier fighting and battle were expressions of very widely known dharmic duties attached to a particular class, not an expression of any kind of nationalistic impulse to protect the integrity of the state.

This has been pointed out by Rosen (1996: 70): “Kautalya seemed to accept the central idea of the preeminence of the caste system over the political system, a relationship of social structures to the state that permanently weakened the state and perpetuated conditions that divided Hindu political loyalties.” And (73) “Members of the warrior or princely caste, the Ksatriyas, had the obligation to fight well on the battlefield to satisfy the obligation of their caste. Other than that, there were few moral constraints on their actions in war.” And further (74) he distinguishes between caste obligations and political obligations when he writes, “we can also note the Mahabharata’s emphasis on the caste obligation of warriors to fight well on the battle-field but the absence of any notion that their political obligations constrained their self-interested behaviour in ways that were not related to religious merit.” And further (76): “Forms of warfare that required high levels of cohesion for its conduct are less favoured than covert warfare, which was executed by isolated individuals and which did not require cohesion across caste
lines.” Though the latter would fall under the category of kūṭayuddha, it is likely that the emphasis on duelling as opposed to large-scale troop/chariot warfare would have gone against any kind of allegiance to a political cause as the prime motive for fighting.

The implications of caste as the defining factor for fighting as opposed to protection of the kingdom/state are also developed by Roy (2009: 41) who sees this as a weakness: “One of the principal weaknesses of Hindu philosophy is that it emphasizes caste divisions, whereas Islam focuses on social solidarity and the equality of the faithful. Hence in Islamic philosophy every Muslim is a soldier, but according to Hindu philosophy not every Hindu can be a soldier. Only the Rajputs or Thakurs, i.e. Ksatriyas, who were India’s hereditary class of warriors, were considered true soldiers by the Hindu theorists of ancient and medieval India. The exception was Kautilya, who advocated the recruitment of all castes in the army.”

A similar view perhaps underlies this opinion of Brekke’s (2005: 72): “In sections and discussions about the duties of the king in the Mahābhārata we will not find clear statements about the right authority to initiate war or what constitutes a just cause for war. On the other hand, the way in which the war is fought — the jus in bello — is important in the epic world view because war is the private business of heroes as opposed to the increasingly public war of the embryonic European states of the late Middle Ages.” And these heroes belong to the kṣatriya varna, hence their adherence to their own class as much as to the king, even where he will be of that class.”

Perhaps it was because the warrior’s allegiance was to his caste rather than to the king or other political elites that rules of fighting developed as intensely as they did. It is true that it was the king (and the warrior’s) duty to protect the king and ensure that dharma was observed, but for the caste duties to be seen to be observed, a set of rules for fighting had to be developed. And given that warriors could express some kind of individuality within their class by engaging in individual duelling it was still more crucial to develop standards of behaviour that would allow their mettle and their own adherence to kṣatradharma to be observed.

Duels in Contrast to Large-Scale Wars

This leads onto the next subsection which reflects the expectation raised in the texts that the warrior is required to display his valour by engaging in a duel with another warrior who ideally would be his equal. What we are witnessing here is a two-fold distinction. Firstly, the specific rules of battle applying to kṣatriya warriors when they are fighting each other, usually in duels. Secondly, the rules of non-combat against those groups—the wounded, the retreated, the sleeping, the dishevelled, women and those who seek refuge—against non-combatants and those who are not of the warrior class. The lists of rules considered in the first part of this article tend to conflate both.

Yet as Kosuta says, the idea of dharmayuddha and kṣatradharma means that fighting is desirable, whether it be in a small- or a large-scale war, even within the framework of the rules of combat: “These rules move the Kshatriya toward the [sic] what we would call the Just War camp, for these are just and fair means in war; they are in Hinduism dharma-yuddha. However, a Just War adherent will still not accept Kshatriyan moral codes because of the Kshatriya militarist validation of war as desirable.” (2020:189)

And the implications of this are clear and somewhat negate the kind of spectacular descriptions found in the battle books of the MBh. “Despite dharma-yuddha rules, and even though the
Kurukshetra War is a highly idealized ancient Indian battle, its narration depicts a mass melee where the above rules are routinely broken. For one, mixed fighting amongst the “limbs” appears to be the norm rather than being interdicted. The Mahabharata shows the difficulty of abiding by an ethics of war because this ethic appears, in a realistic sense, to be both counterproductive (they reduce the chance of winning the war) and counterintuitive (they put our own warriors-soldiers at risk in order to treat the enemy fairly).” (Kosuta, 2020:189)

The more idealistic and nationalistic view is reflected in Bhattacharjee (1949: 47) who suggests “The practice of duals and single combats of which there are many instances in the Mahabharata, was based on a theory of personal courage and sense of honour which was peculiar to the epic age and is unthinkable in modern times.” Yet this places the MBh on a pedestal, and leads to the belief there was a kind of golden age of warriorhood during the “epic period”, whenever that was, a beliefs reflected in a number of writings on the rules of warfare.

In relating the practice of duals to a larger-scale battle and in recognition that the MBh is often called a “sacrifice of battle”, Brekke (2006: 137) suggests that “A battle is a sacrifice only if the belligerent is completely detached from the fighting as means to something else, only if he is detached from the fruits of the action (karmaphala). … The fact remains, however, that matters under jus ad bellum receive far less attention in Hindu thought than in the European tradition.

… On the other hand, we saw that the classical Hindu sources on war are preoccupied with the rules of combat as it is clear that ancient India produced an extensive code of ethics for fighting a jus in bello. However, as we have seen, this jus in bello was primarily concerned with conduct of heroes in the duels that were the paradigmatic forms of fighting in the Hindu epics. This focus on the details of the individual combatant seems to have made a larger more generalized, conception of just warfare less relevant for Hindu thinkers.”

And this is a view also shared by Balkaran and Dorn (2012: 683) writing about the Rām, “Fourthly, the rules of combat represented in the epic differ from their modern counterpart insofar as only combatants of equal advantage may rightly engage one another, whereas modern warfare stipulates no such standards. Indeed, in epic warfare, one could not even engage a combatant from aboard a chariot unless he is similarly mounted, yet modern Just War discourse does not even prohibit the air launch of missiles on ground targets.” Both of these point to the fundamental differences between contemporary warfare where infantry tend to fight in massed battles, or not at all, and those described in the MBh where the duels are visible to all around them. The invisibility of many of the combatants–drones, for example–in contemporary wars means the possibility of checking on the ethics of fighting is simply not available. But this is also because wars tend now to be fought between nation states, and even if armed forces could be construed as a kind of warrior caste, this is influenced by too many other factors and is a totally different phenomenon than what is found in the two Sanskrit epics.

Application of Western Concepts and Comparisons: Just War

Some scholars have examined ancient Indian views on warfare and fighting in relation to the early European Just-War tradition. This is understandable given the antiquity of the this tradition, and also because it functions as a possible point of comparison with the concept of dharmayuddha. and of instigating and waging battles in general in justification of dharma. Kosuta (2020: 189) informs us that “The Kshatriya have an elaborate religiously based battlefield ethic – jus in bello….These rules move the Kshatriya toward what we would call the Just War camp, for these are just and fair means in war; they are in Hinduism dharma-
yuddha. However, a Just War adherent will still not accept Kshatriyan moral codes because of the Kshatriya militarist validation of war as desirable.”

Brekke (2005) has written as much as anybody on the relevance of just war theory to dharmayuddha: (72) “In sections and discussions about the duties of the king in the Mahābhārata we will not find clear statements about the right authority to initiate war or what constitutes a just cause for war. On the other hand, the way in which the war is fought — the jus in bello — is important in the epic world view because war is the private business of heroes as opposed to the increasingly public war of the embryonic European states of the late Middle Ages.” Corresponding well to the duel-based fighting projected as ideal, if not observed in practice, in both Sanskrit epics.

Yet the role of the king in instigating battles/wars differs considerably from the kind of fighting that the duels imply, because the battle itself need not fall within the frame of the just war tradition. Brekke (2005: 83): “In the classical Hindu world view, the legitimate authority of the king needs no defending or explanation. In the tradition of statecraft, war against another king is an extension of the proper use of violence to maintain order within the realm. The legitimate authority is self-evident in external affairs, as it is in internal affairs where it is part of the social contract where the king must maintain order and punish the evil. In the epic literature, war is never properly differentiated from the private duel between heroes. The distinction between bellum and duellum, which is so important to the just war tradition, is not made. Therefore, an Indian jus ad bellum comparable to the European tradition never existed.” Clooney also elaborates on this, contrasting Yudhisṭhira in the MBh with Rāvaṇa in the Rāmāyana: “A righteous war can be justly pursued to its conclusion, no matter how much pain is entailed….

If Yudhīṣṭhira exemplifies for us the wise king who finally undertakes a just war, then Rāvāna, the demon king and villain of the Rāmāyana, exemplifies the flawed decision-making and psychological blindness that lead to an unjust war.”

Finally, one of the most comprehensive attempts to locate ancient Indian warfare within the context of the just war tradition is the study of Balakaran and Dorn (2012) dealing with the events of the Rāmāyana. They argue that all seven criteria for a Just War can be found in the Rāmāyana. They write (665): “Born into the ksatriya (ruler-warrior) caste as the son of King Dāsarathā, Rāma is authorized to wield violent force in order to combat evil and protect righteousness. Violent means is the privilege, and indeed the duty, of the ksatriya class, to whom, among the four castes, social governance is entrusted. Both protection and punishment are deemed equally vital to social welfare, without which society would decay. Both are accepted as noble causes for violence, as exemplified at several junctures throughout the text.” Here the avatāra doctrine is evoked again as it is in many of these articles to explain why violence is necessary to cleanse the world when dharma is being threatened, a thesis that is also used to explain Kṛṣṇa’s recommendation to break the rules of battle in the MBh.14

And they elaborate this even further: “Thus, the diatribes of Kumbhakarṇa, Vībhīṣana, and Mālāyan constitute a thematic triangulation of critique: Rāvāna, drunk with desire, demonstrates his moral depravity by waging a war entirely ungrounded in sastra (scriptural authority), lacking just cause, and detrimental to the fabric of dharma. His vice also serves to define by contrast Rāma’s unblemished virtue. Valmīki’s concern for just warfare as exemplified in Yuddhakanda is evident, and rings true centuries later, as victory in the battle of Rāma over Rāvāna is celebrated to this day.” (682) And conclude: (683) “All of the Just

14 See also Clooney (2003).
War criteria are present in the text, though not consolidated in one place. In order for violence to be just in the Valmīki Ramayana, there must be adequate cause. These include restoration of cosmic order, punishment of evil doers, protection of those under attack, and self-defense. Although other key Hindu texts go so far as to permit force for the purpose of conquest, the Valmīki Ramayana does not give righteous examples of such.”

Between Normative and Reality

Despite the existence of rules of fighting laid down in many places in Sanskrit texts, and discussed and interpreted in those very same texts when they are broken, both the Rām and the MBh lead us to suggest a considerable gap between reality and the kind of normative behaviour on which the rules are predicted. Kosuta (2020: 190) is certainly right when he writes, “Despite dharma-yuddha rules, and even though the Kurukshetra War is a highly idealized ancient Indian battle, its narration depicts a mass melee where the above rules are routinely broken. For one, mixed fighting amongst the “limbs” [chariots, infantry, bowman and elephants] appears to be the norm rather than being interdicted. The Mahabharata shows the difficulty of abiding by an ethics of war because this ethic appears, in a realistic sense, to be both counterproductive (they reduce the chance of winning the war) and counterintuitive (they put our own warriors-soldiers at risk in order to treat the enemy fairly).”

And Brekke (2006: p.191) “Fighting by the rules for kingship or for your king was perfectly understandable to and righteous for the Kshatriya, but the Kurukshetra War transgressed these norms.”

When one reads the battle books of the MBh, and the Yuddhakhaṇḍa of the Rām, one cannot but agree with these sentiments. Given the number of combatants who are said to be killed, often by single heroes, and the rivers of blood created by the dead, the breaking of the ethical rules of battle was almost a certainty. In part the huge numbers involved reflect the fact that the MBh tells us the Kurukshetra war involved all of the kingdoms in India, yet such huge numbers also act as a kind of backdrop against which the individual duals between the heroes can be fought out and highlighted. But ultimately all our evidence for the violation of the rules of battle involving huge numbers of combatants only comes from the texts themselves. We have nothing outside of this.

Concluding Ideas

What has become utterly apparent in looking at the relevant texts is that Mehendale’s opinion about the Kurukṣetra war not being a dharmayuddha is right in some respects, if not in others. But the retention of a dharmic world as reflected in the actions of the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas complicates everything because both sides appear to act adharmically, illustrating brilliantly the difficulty in conforming in a practical sense to a pure view of dharma, no matter how desirable it might be. What the MBh offers then is a realistic picture of the gap between pure normativity and realistic activity even where the aim of the actors is close adherence to kṣatradharma.

In the case of the MBh, in contrast with the Rām, there is a consistent strategy of juxtaposing homiletic–often called didactic–material, which often sets high ideals, with the actual descriptions of battle scenes and duels. Where the latter come from—in the sense of what inspires them—is not known. We do not know if it was based on actual battle scenes, but they do represent the kinds of belligerent attitudes expressed in boasting and duelling. More
important than this is the unethical behaviour of some of the combatants—though in the case of Yudhishthira it refers to previous karmic events. Above all, it allows all the unethical behaviour to be explored in detail in relation to fate, karma and oaths previously given, as reasons for breaking the rules for fighting.

But the scholarship by most of the military scholars does not consider the ethical misdemeanours—all seemingly about breaking dharma—that interest Indologists like Kalyanov (1984), except for the role of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā in persuading Arjuna to fight when he experiences an attack of dejection on the eve of the great battle. There is a difference here between the attitude of non-violence and resistance to killing expressed initially by Arjuna and within the ascetic tradition (often observed in the breach) and the treatment of just fighting (just war) as a requirement of the king’s and warrior’s dharma. And this also relates to Kṛṣṇa’s justification for breaking the rules, as the larger concern for the preservation of the cosmic dharma tends to outweigh what are considered lesser rules, at least in terms of a totalistic view.

The writing of the military scholars is mainly descriptive as their interest is in the actual empirical data relating to military activity and the weapons of war, the latter of which could be confirmed by archaeological evidence. But this does not allow us to determine empirically the extent to which the ethics of battle were applied. In part, this is a negative interpretation, reflecting the horror of Aśoka’s Kalinga war and his own disgust at this as reflected in some Aśokan inscriptions.

Another seemingly ideological element that comes into play in pre-independence writings is the need to show that militarily speaking India has a very rich history and a tradition of warfare and weaponry as sophisticated as that found in Europe, especially in the imperial powers. Some of this writing seeks to find continuities between what is described in the MBh and the present day. Ramachandra Dikshitar, in particular, seems to give the impression that he must find what is better than British India in the earliest texts, both Tamil and Sanskrit.

A number of Indian commentators enthusiastically suggest that the early ethics of fighting should be applied to contemporary forms of fighting. They make these suggestions in the full knowledge of how warfare has changed over the past century, but still believe that application of these ethical principles would make a fundamental humanitarian contribution to warfare. Whilst nobody could disagree with their intention, the present practical realities would seem to make these ethics very difficult to apply, no matter how desirable. In part this is because the use of armoured vehicles, rockets and aircraft means that soldiers often scarcely see each other, unlike the situation applying in the kinds of duels described in ancient Sanskrit literature where the individual warriors can see each other and fight in the presence of many other warriors. This would, at least, allow some judgement made by other spectators who are not participants.

**Bibliography**


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