

## Ethics of Fighting in Ancient Indian Literature

Dr Greg Bailey

The earliest Sanskrit text that contains explicit rules about what is allowed and what is disallowed in battle is the *Mahābhārata* (*MBh*). In studying the *MBh* and what it tells us about the ethics of battles and fighting we are dealing with a text that has as its task to bring together a series of cultural and intellectual traditions that arose over a period of one thousand years. From an historical materialist perspective these ethical teachings have to be correlated with a period where increasing urbanism and rural villages characterised the built and rural landscape. Though there still remains the image of the tribal king and warrior inherited from Vedic literature, this had become almost irrelevant since the beginning of the Mauryan “empire” (320-189BCE). Within these traditions the king lies at the heart of the polity and the *kṣatriya* is the *varṇa* or social class from which the king as protector and defender of his subjects should be drawn. The historical record shows that many kings were not *kṣatriyas*, yet the *MBh* always presents the king as a *kṣatriya*. Accordingly, the connection *kṣatriya* and king is elevated to a great height and in illustration of this there had to be extensive description of battles, above all of duels, and a formalization of the ethics of fighting in battle. Such ethics are very clearly enunciated and seem very fair in terms of most cultural categories.

The primary sources dealing with the ethics of fighting in battle come from the epics and Purāṇas, the *Arthaśāstra*, the *Manusmṛti* and a few other *nīti* texts (*Śukranīti*). In studying the normative ethics of fighting in ancient India one can usefully begin with certain passages in the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> books of the *Mahābhārata*, the 6<sup>th</sup> book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*,<sup>1</sup> a chapter of the *Agni Purāṇa* and ten verses in the 7<sup>th</sup> book of the *Manusmṛti*. There they are laid out with great clarity, if not brevity. Perhaps this brevity is a little surprising given the space the *MBh* gives to the description of fighting, mainly in the form of duels. The normative material is contrasted with many chapters in the battle books where actions are undertaken by certain of the epic heroes—on both sides of the war—who appear deliberately to break these rules and then they and a number of other warriors attempt to verbally justify the breaking of the specific rule. In these passages there is considerable argumentation about the breakages and as such they throw much light on the ethics and the capacity for them to be practically applied or not applied in a battle situation. Accordingly, it is as important to look at these passages as well as those that set out the ethics of fighting without accompanying argumentation.

It is especially in respect of passages which justify the breaking of the rules of fighting that an enormous amount of interpretation has been made by contemporary scholars. They have been used to mount a case for similar ethics to apply in contemporary fighting and also as the basis for comparing fighting ethics in medieval Europe and ancient India, with the intention of determining whether ancient Indian theories of kingship had developed a Just War doctrine. It is not difficult to reproduce the ethics of battle as these are expounded by Bhīṣma and others in the *MBh*, and repeated later in several Purāṇas (meaning that these ethics were considered worthy of adoption by those who composed later texts). Rather, as a number of scholar/commentators have pointed out, the problem is one of correlating ethical guidelines

---

<sup>1</sup> Though there is nothing in the *Rām* equivalent to *MBh*. 6, 1 and 12, 97, for which see below.

essentially pertaining to different historical periods. In the epics and Purāṇas emphasis in the description of battles was given to duels, where warriors directly confront each other when they are fighting. This contrasts with modern day warfare—mainly over the past one hundred years—where warfare is increasingly practised at a distance, with the censoring of actual images of casualties except when it is a case of images of bombed civilians used for propaganda purposes. As such the task before us must be to reinterpret what we find in the *MBh* and later texts in a manner making them relevant to contemporary battle tactics and modes of fighting, especially as they apply to infantry and guerrilla warfare. Of course, they must be applied to air and naval warfare, but this will be more difficult given the distance between the respective fighting forces, to the extent there are such forces. Duels, taking the form of verbal bluster, now occur between heads of state—aided by the media—rather than between individual soldiers or heroes.

I have divided this article into two sections, both very much interrelated. The first presents some of the primary texts as they are found in the *MBh*, the *Manusmṛiti* and in some Purāṇas where they differ from the first two. It also attempts to describe the underlying ethos behind the ethics, an ethos which explains why they were developed at all, how they are shaped by and contribute to this ethos, and how they relate directly to the development of the image of the kṣatriya, the epitome of the warrior in ancient India. The underlying ethos relates to the concept of *dharma* and of its subdivision into *dharmayuddha* and *kūṭayuddha* (or *adharmayuddha*?) as these are developed in the *MBh* in particular and the *Arthaśāstra*. It is essential to have some understanding of these concepts as they provide interpretative frames within the primary sources themselves for judging what action is ethical and what is not. Equally, they provide the hermeneutical frame for contemporary scholarship on ancient Indian battle ethics, scholarship both from Indian and non-Indian scholars, and military men and non-military men, it being mainly men who write about this subject.

### **A Preliminary Difficulty**

The whole notion of battle ethics is completely enframed within the concept of *dharma*, just as is the theory of kingship, because the king is required to embody *dharma* in his rule and to enforce his subjects' adherence to their own class *dharma*. Yet *dharma* is itself a notoriously ambiguous concept, though in much of the secondary scholarship it is treated as if it were a straightforward concept, perhaps to be translated as "righteous" or "right behaviour." The difficulty of understanding it can be seen when one considers that the entire *MBh* is a discourse about *dharma*, its relevance to the human and social condition, and the problems involved in its application to real-world situations.

Battle ethics and fighting strategies are always presented in the classical texts in terms of *dharma*, and the breaking of these ethics is considered as an abrogation of *dharma*. It is *dharma* as a socio/cosmic/ritual system that governs the coherence of the three worlds (where Earth and heaven are especially important for the kṣatriya), and should be regarded as an overarching framework of guidance for all behaviour and a standard for incorrect behaviour. In no sense could it be omitted from the details of fighting, given how significant fighting is for the kṣatriya's self-identity. So, in dealing with the interpretation of the ethics of fighting—which are by and large straight forward—we are dealing with the problems of comprehending *dharma* itself.

More precisely, all of this must be seen within the context of the emphasis on *kṣatradharma*, which broadly speaking sets the standard of behaviour by which a warrior should fight and under which he should live. The term occurs about 170 times in the *MBh*, 12 in the *Rām*, 4 in

the *Harivaṃśa* and then in a few Purāṇas as well, though only once in *Manu*.<sup>2</sup> This may be considered to be different from *rājadharmā*, a term applying specifically to kṣatriyas as kings. *Kṣatradharma* defines the aspirations of the warrior and it is within its framework that the specific rules pertaining to the correct form of fighting are laid down.<sup>3</sup> And it is an appeal to *kṣatradharma* that is often invoked in the *MBh*. Above all the *kṣatradharma* defends the warrior as a fighter, asserting that he will win fame in this world if he is victorious, and heaven in the next life if he is killed, a statement occurring many times in the *MBh*. The compound *kṣatradharmarata* refers to a warrior who is especially devoted to the law of the warrior.<sup>4</sup> In addition, it is also something a man can take a vow to follow (*kṣatradharmavrate sthitaḥ*).<sup>5</sup>

The details of this *dharma* are laid out often in the *MBh*, and it clearly overlaps with *rājadharmā*,<sup>6</sup> but is much more specific in its direct relation to fighting in battle.

“And if we, following our own Law, meet our death by the sword in a war, Mādhava, when our time has come, it will mean heaven. This, Janārdana, is the highest Law for us who are barons, that we lie on the battlefield on a bed of arrows. If we obtain a hero’s bed on the battlefield, Mādhava, without bowing to the enemy, we shall not rue it. Who was ever born in a noble house who, abiding by the Law of the baronage, would bow to anyone out of fear, with regard only for his life?... A man like me bows only to the Law and the brahmins and that rule he should obey all his life without heeding anybody. This is the law of the barons and that has always been my view.”<sup>7</sup> (5, 125, 15-18, 20c-21)

“When, roaring his name in battle, challenging enemies in armor, putting a fine army to flight, or killing a great warrior, a hero wins great fame in a good fight, then his enemies tremble and lay low.”<sup>8</sup> (5, 132, 25-26)

And frequently the command is expressed that: “The honoured law of the kṣatra is said to be to lay down his life in battle.” (5, 156, 7) And: “Either rule the earth by defeating us, or, killed by us, go to the heaven of heroes.”<sup>9</sup> (5, 157, 12) And finally, “A proud hero who has some self-respect does not deserve such a death. A kṣatriya who has slaughtered enemies in battle ought to die surrounded by his kinsmen, his body completely mangled by the sharp blades of weapons. The hero suffused with oaths and rage fights hard and does not even notice his limbs being cut by the enemy... he goes to the heavenly world that Indra is in.”<sup>10</sup> (12, 98, 27ff.)

All in all, the *svadharmā* of the kṣatriya is absolutely defined by fighting, which provides his status in this life and the next, as expressed in this verse: “In the three worlds there is nothing that is superior to the hero’s fighting. The heroic warrior protects everything: everything depends upon the heroic fighter.”<sup>11</sup> (12, 100, 18) As such the listing of battle ethics is very

<sup>2</sup> See also A. Hildebeitel, (2011: 528).

<sup>3</sup> See also Hildebeitel, (2011: pp.526-528).

<sup>4</sup> *kṣatradharmarata* 9 times in UdyogaP, 1 in the *Droṇaparvan*, 1 in the *Karṇa-* and *Śāntiparvans* and 2 in the *Anuśāsanaparvan*.

<sup>5</sup> *aviditvā paramāstrāṇi kṣatradharmavrate sthitaḥ* / 10, 16, 14

*śuśrūṣur anahamvādī kṣatradharmavrate sthitaḥ* // 12, 73, 17

<sup>6</sup> Cf. A. Hildebeitel, (2011: 535) “Fortunately or not, then, most guidance on a king’s *svadharmā* is couched as *kṣatriyadharmā*.”

<sup>7</sup> Trans. van Buitenen, (1978: 421).

<sup>8</sup> Trans. van Buitenen, (1978: 434).

<sup>9</sup> Trans. van Buitenen, (1978: 476).

<sup>10</sup> Trans. Fitzgerald, (2004: 425). Cf. also 12, 100, 8cd-10b, and Brekke (2006: 117).

<sup>11</sup> Trans. Fitzgerald, (2004: 419-420).

much a refinement of the activity the warrior leads which precisely defines his life-style as ordained by *dharma*.

### A Selection of Relevant Texts

Here I focus mainly on the *Mahābhārata* as it is the most comprehensive in its treatment of the ethics of fighting. I also include a relevant passage from the *Manusmṛti* as it too has been very influential in presenting an orthoprax dharmic view of the world and worldly behaviour from the perspective of the brahmins. It differs from the *MBh* (and the *Arthasāstra*) in not presenting arguments for the breaking of ethics in the manner that occurs in the *MBh* many times. Finally, I include a few passages from the *Agni Purāṇa* which add to what is found in the other texts.

The clearest statement of battle ethics occurs in the 6<sup>th</sup> book, *Bhīṣmaparvan*, at a time when the battle is about to begin and so some rules for fighting are laid down. Both sides meet and agree upon the rules which are mutually agreed upon. Here is an abridged version of the first chapter where the rules are listed.<sup>12</sup>

Vaiśampāyana said, “Lord of the Earth [Dhṛtarāṣṭra], hear how the heroes—the Kurus, the Pāṇḍavas and the Somakas—fought on Kurukṣetra, the field of austerities. When the mightily strong Pāṇḍavas with the Somakas had descended to Kurukṣetra they directly approached the Kauravas, wishing for victory. All were thoroughly conversant with Vedic learning, rejoiced in battle, and were hoping for victory in battle, or directly facing death in battle....

Then the Kurus, Pāṇḍavas and Somakas, made an agreement and they established the normative rules (*dharmān*) of battle, bull of the Bharatas:

At the end of the fighting there should be mutual friendliness (*prīti*) just as before and as is proper, and besides there should be no deception. If the battle begins with a challenge to us, the battle against begins with a challenge. A man who has departed from the midst of the battle should not be struck in any way. A charioteer should fight with a charioteer, an elephant driver with an elephant driver, a horseman with a horseman and a foot soldier with a foot soldier, Bhārata.

Having agreed about their fitness, courage, ability and their age one should not strike one who is unsuspecting or very distressed. A man who is occupied with an enemy, one who is inattentive, one who is retreating, one who is without a weapon, and one who is without armour, should not be struck in any way. Neither the charioteers, nor those who are drawing the wagons, nor those bringing the weapons, nor those playing the kettle-drums and conches, should be struck in any way.

As such, having made this agreement, the Kurus, Pāṇḍavas and Somakas became filled with admiration when they were gazing at each other.” (6, 1, 2-4, 27-33)

These are quite specific in their intention and are directly circumscribed by the preferred method of battle as duelling where everyone can visibly witness the fighting of another, enabling adherence to the rules to be tested by the presence of other spectators. What is listed here does not exhaust the totality of rules, but these particular rules are surely significant because they occur right at the beginning of the battle. Sometimes they are repeated elsewhere, and in later passages in the same book some new restrictions are added.

In 6, 82 several verses show that the rules of hospitality were observed:

---

<sup>12</sup> Summarized also in Bhattacharjee (1949: 53-54), Kosuta (2020: 189), Singh (1965: 161).

“As such, great king, your troops, destroyers of their enemies, and the Pāṇḍavas ceased at night-fall. The Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas went to their own war camps and sat down, honouring each other, great king. The heroes guarded themselves and laid aside the accompanying troops and accoutrements according to the rules, having laid aside their spears, and bathed with various kinds of water. All of them received blessings and whilst being praised by the bards, with music and singing, the renowned warriors jested. For a moment all that became like heaven, because the great warriors did not speak of battle there.” (6, 82, 51-55)

Later chapters in the battle books also contain rules dealing with behaviour in battle. They are especially interesting because they are embedded in the actual action of the battle itself. What makes them still more significant is that they are verbally expressed in situations where a particular battle ethic has been broken. Such situations occur conspicuously in relation to the killing of the four fields-marshalls (*senāpatis*), Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa and Śalya, that is at times when a very powerful figure cannot be defeated by legitimate means, so an action which violates the expected battle ethics is applied. Such cases, always observed by the surrounding warriors, give rise to arguments about the un/ethical basis of such an action and offer various perspectives on how an apparently unethical action can be justified by the agent of the act.

Another example of clear rules of combat concerns the kind of arrows that should be used, as opposed to the actual interactions between warriors. Near the end of the seventh book of the *MBh* Nakula and Sahadeva are fighting to protect Dr̥ṣṭadyumna who is attacking Droṇa:

“All these seven great chariot-warriors impatient with rage and filled with strength placed death before them and struck each other. These men were pure in themselves and pure in conduct, King, and they placed heaven before them. They fought a noble battle (*āryaṃ yuddham*), wishing to defeat one another. These kings whose actions were those of pure nobility were filled with integrity, and they fought the righteous battle (*dharmayuddham*), fully aware of their ultimate goal. In that battle no weapon was used that was against the Law, no barbed arrow, no *nālīka* arrow, no poisoned arrow and no *vastaka*.<sup>13</sup> Nor were there arrows with many pointed heads, nor those that were reddish, nor those made of cow bones and elephant bones. There was no arrow which was blended together, nor rusty, not moving crookedly. Desiring the higher worlds and fame by fighting well, all held weapons that were straight and clean.

Then between your four soldiers and the three Pāṇḍavas there occurred a tumultuous battle which was without any flaws.” (7, 164, 8-14.)

In the twelfth book, the *Śāntiparvan*, the first section of which contains a long section about the normative duty of kings, Bhīṣma, the aged warrior lying on a bed of arrows, gives specific instructions to Yudhiṣṭhira, the rightful king, who does not want to be king. Included in the more general instructions about the duties involved in ruling a kingdom are general instructions about the king’s behaviour as opposed to the specific rules laid down at the beginning of the Kurukṣetra war. In this set of prescriptions given now the war has been completed it seems there is blending of *dharmayuddha* (*dharmato yudhyed* 12, 96, 9) and *kūṭadharmā*, which here may be implied in the words *nikṛtyā yudhyeta* (12, 96, 9), whereas in the earlier passages this distinction seems not to be present.<sup>14</sup>

“Yudhiṣṭhira said:

---

<sup>13</sup> The meaning of *nālīka* and *vastaka* is not known.

<sup>14</sup> See also Brekke (2006; 117) for a summary.

Now how should one fight against a kṣatriya king who attacks another kṣatriya? Tell me this, grandfather.

Bhīṣma said,

One should not fight in battle a kṣatriya who is not equipped for war, one who is without armour. A single warrior should be addressed by a single warrior, “You shoot,” and “I am shooting.” If one comes who is equipped, then he should be equipped. If one comes with an army, then he, backed with his army, should challenge him. If one should make war against him deceitfully (*nikṛtyā yudhyeta*), then he should attack that one with deceit (*nikṛtyā*). And if he makes war Righteously (*dharmato yudhyed*), then one should oppose him Righteously (*dharmeṇaiva nivārayet*).

One should not attack chariots with cavalry; chariot warriors should attack chariots. One should not assail someone in distress, neither to scare him nor to defeat him. There should be no arrows smeared with poison, nor any barbed arrows—these are weapons of evil people.

War should be waged for the sake of conquest (*jayārtham*); one should not be enraged towards an enemy who is not trying to kill him.

If, upon an outbreak of hostilities among strictly righteous people, a righteous man gets into trouble on the battlefield, the one who is wounded should not be attacked in any way, nor one who has no son, one whose sword is broken, one whose horse has been destroyed, one whose bowstring has been cut, nor one whose vehicle has been destroyed.

One wounded should be given medical treatment in your realm; or he may even be sent to his own home. One not wounded should be released—this is the everlasting Law.

Therefore, Manu son of the self-existent said that war must be waged according to Law (*dharmeṇa yoddhavyam*).<sup>15</sup> (12, 96, 6-14ab JF p.411-12)

These are perhaps more specific than those cited in the previous passage, though there is considerable overlap, and they match the specificity of the rules cited in 7, 168, 8-14. Other prescriptions in this section define the king’s actions after the actual fighting is over:

“If he has captured a man who has discarded his sword, whose armor is broken to pieces, who pleads with his hands folded in supplication, saying “I am yours,” then he should not harm that man. A king should not wage war against anyone who has already been defeated by force. Should he pass a year there, he would be born again from him. A girl that has been taken by force cannot be touched sooner than a year... The king’s enemy should not be abused, nor tortured in any way: even when tortured, a man gives up his life only once... Old men and children are not to be slain in war, nor women, nor brahmins, nor anyone who has filled his mouth with grass, nor anyone who says, “I am yours.”<sup>16</sup> (12, 97, 3-5, 14, 47; JF. pp.412-413)

Ultimately these rules are tied in with the king’s correct conduct which is everywhere required to be centred on *dharma*, as very well prefaced in 12, 97, 1-2

“The king should not try to win land Unlawfully (*adharmeṇa*); having won an Unlawful conquest (*adharmavijayam*),<sup>17</sup> what king would admit to it. The conquest that involves Lawlessness (*adharmayukto*) does not last, and it does not lead to heaven. It ruins the king and the land as well, O bull of the Bharatas.”<sup>18</sup> (JF. p.412)

<sup>15</sup> Trans Fitzgerald, (2004: 411-412) See also G. D. Bakshi, (2002: 56) who refers to the same chapter.

<sup>16</sup> Trans Fitzgerald, (2004: 412-413).

<sup>17</sup> For *dharmavijaya* see also MBh 12, 96, 1, 21; 97, 10; 13, 150, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Trans Fitzgerald, (2004: 412). All these and some more from the *Agni Purāṇa* and later śāstric texts are also

The connection with kingship is, of course, central here. Other contiguous verses I have not cited refer to the king correctly husbanding the land and the people in the kingdom he has conquered and, above all, not alienating them. As this section of the *MBh* is essentially about kingship the intermixture of battle ethics and guidance for ruling an entire country is hardly surprising. Yet the earlier passage from the *Droṇaparvan* differs from this in focussing on the individual warrior as much as on the king himself.

These passages do not exhaust the normative prescriptions for fighting, though combined they do cover most of them. They can be compared with what is found in an entirely normative text, the *Manusmṛiti*, where in 7, 90-93 the manner in which kings should fight is laid out:

“When he is engaged in battle, he must never slay his enemies with weapons that are treacherous (*kūṭair āyudhair*), barbed, or laced with poison, or whose tips are ablaze with fire. He must never slay a man standing on the ground, an effeminate man, a man with joined palms, a man with loose hair, a seated man, a man declaring “I am yours,” a sleeping man, a man without his armour, a naked man, a man without his weapons, a non-fighting spectator, a man in distress, a badly wounded man, a frightened man, or a man who has turned tail—recalling the Law followed by good people.”<sup>19</sup>

These cover most of what we have already seen in the *MBh* itself, and they will be repeated in later Purāṇas. In *Agni Purāṇa* 234 six expedients (elaborated in Ch.240) used by the king are introduced, deriving most likely from the *MBh* and the *AŚ*. These expedients are designed to create dissension in the opposing camp. They would fall under the category of *kūṭayuddha*. Then in Ch, 236 of the same Purāṇa are given details of the military units and their positioning in the battle-field and around the king (vss.44-48). Vss.56-60 list the ethics of battle along the lines of the *MBh* and vss. 62-64 those who are to be protected after the battle: primarily the defeated king and his wives.

MLBD p.614 “It is said that the brave who do not retreat in battle get the benefit of the *aśvamedha* sacrifice. Victory resides in the righteous (*dharmaniṣṭhe*) king. Equals should fight with their equals. Men mounted on elephants should be fought by men mounted on elephants and so forth. Retreating men, spectators, those who have just appeared, those not having weapons and those that have fallen should not be killed. One should use deceptive fighting tactics when one is fatigued, overcome by sleep, is halfway across a river or forest and on bad days, in order to destroy the enemy. One should stretch forth one’s arms and cry out, ‘Defeated! The enemies have been defeated! “We have got an ally with abundant strength, and the general has fallen, (of the enemy forces) and the commander has been slain and the (hostile) king is in disarray.”

62-64ab “After having gained victory in the battle, one should worship the gods and brahmins. In a battle undertaken by the minister, the gems acquired should be made over to the king. The wives of the defeated king should not belong to anyone else and should be protected. Having received him as an enemy in battle the enemy king when freed should be protected like a son. He should not fight with him again. He should honour the customs and manners of that country.” (236, 56-60, 62-64ab)

This rests on earlier expositions of the same rules as can be seen by the sentence :“Men

---

summarized in Ramachandra Dikshitar, (1948: 67-75).

<sup>19</sup> Trans. Olivelle, (2005: 159).

mounted on elephants should be fought by men mounted on elephants and so forth.” Here the “so forth” refers to charioteers, cavalry men and foot soldiers as listed in some of the earlier cited passages.

### **Arguments for Breaking the Ethics of Fighting**

The breaking of some of these rules is highlighted in several parts of the MBh and gives rise to considerable argumentation as to why the ethical breach can be justified. Kosuta’s point is probably right, when he writes: “Kshatriya ethical codes seem to agree. However, most of the transgressions of ethical codes go completely unnoted in the narration as warriors simply fight it out; problems do arise when a main character is involved in a breach of ethics that results in the death of another main character. Here, both sides make charges and countercharges of who broke which rule and who broke it first.”<sup>20</sup>

Also p.49 “And although in the specific case before us, viz. in Bhīma’s encounter with Duryodhana, some of the canons of nobler warfare are not respected, yet, the very fact that an attempt is made to justify these breaches,,,,, shows that the practice was the other way.”

A famous example of the breaking of ethics is found in the tenth book, *Sauptikaparvan*,<sup>21</sup> which details a night raid against the Pāṇḍava camp, now that the Pāṇḍavas have won the battle, a camp in which all the inhabitants are asleep, where the killing of those who are asleep is prohibited. It is carried out by three warriors, led by Aśvatthāman, whose father Droṇa had been killed by dubious means. As the killing of those who are asleep is prohibited this event provides opportunities for presenting battle/fighting ethics and the problem of adhering to them. Kṛpa, one of the three warriors involved in what turns out to be a massacre, warns Aśvatthāman about the course of action he is about to take. He says:

“In this world the killing of those sleeping is not respected as being according to the Law. Similar is the killing of those who have laid down their weapons and who have left their chariot horses. And those who would say “I am yours” and those who would have come for refuge, and those whose hair is dishevelled,<sup>22</sup> and those whose vehicles have been destroyed.

Now, Lord, the Pāñcālas are sleeping without armour. All of them are sleeping unsuspectingly, like the unconscious dead.” (10, 5, 9-11)

This provides the accepted ethics of battle as pertaining to this specific situation, some of which we have already glimpsed. Aśvatthāman responds by pointing out what he considers as a breakage of battle ethics, especially by the famed Pāṇḍava warrior Arjuna who is often considered as displaying moderation in contrast to his rambunctious brother, Bhīma. As if this makes his ethical violation right. In attempting to dissuade Aśvatthāman from his course of action, Kṛpa gives further praise to Aśvatthāman, saying: “You are the best in the world of those who know about all weapons and you are famous. Certainly, in this world you do not have even the most minor fault.” (10, 5, 13) Implying he should not violate battle ethics.

To this Aśvatthāman responds, saying:

---

<sup>20</sup> Kosuta (2020: 190)

<sup>21</sup> Also summarised in Bhattacharjee (1949: 41-42).

<sup>22</sup> “whose hair is dishevelled” (*vimuktamūrdhajā*). This comes up frequently and seems to indicate those who have lost all control of themselves.

“I agree, maternal uncle. It is just as you say, yet they have previously broken asunder the boundary of righteousness into a hundred pieces. Before the eyes of the kings and very close to you, Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna felled my father who had laid down his sword. And when his chariot wheel had fallen off Karna, best of charioteers, was seated despondently in extreme distress, and was killed by Arjuna. Similarly, Bhīṣma, son of Śantanu, who had laid down his sword and was without a weapon was killed by Arjuna who had placed Śikhaṇḍin before him. Similarly, Bhūriśravas, the great archer who was in the ritual position for dying<sup>23</sup> was felled in the battle by Yuyudhāna whilst the kings were screaming out. And Duryodhana, having encountered Bhīma in the battle, was felled with a club in an unlawful manner before the eyes of the kings. There, having been surrounded by great warriors, quite alone, the tiger of men was felled by Bhīmasena in an unlawful manner. I heard of the lamenting of the king whose thigh was broken, as told by messengers. It pierces my vitals.

As such are these lawless, evil Pāñcālas who have broken the boundaries. Why would you not revile them who have broken the limits? ... No man at all has been born in the world who would turn aside this intention I have made to kill them.” (10, 5, 16-24, 27)

A few moments later Aśvatthāman recollects words earlier uttered by Kṛpā: “Against cows, brahmins, kings, women, a friend, a mother and a teacher, old people, youngsters, one who is dull, blind, one who is asleep, one who is frightened, one who has just arisen, one who is intoxicated (*matta*), one who is insane, or one who is heedless, one should not raise weapons.” (10, 6, 21-22) This is a much broader selection than those mentioned in the passages already cited and seems to be defining a general sense of non-violence against particular groups. It does not relate to battle ethics as such, and is specific to the present situation only in mentioning a prohibition against striking those who are asleep.

And in defence of Arjuna who Aśvatthāman has criticized, when the actual raid is occurring some of those in the camp who were being massacred said: “The prince Dhanamjaya [Arjuna] is devoted to brahmins, a speaker of truth, restrained, compassionate towards all beings, and he does not kill one who is asleep, one who is heedless, one who has laid aside his weapon, one who is saluting him, one who is fleeing, nor one whose hair is dishevelled.” (10, 8, 119) This essentially repeats what is found in the more standardized lists of prescriptions, but is intended to raise the question of the legitimacy of Aśvatthāman’s actions.

What the principal players are fully aware of is that their unethical actions in battle are wrong. This can be seen with great force in the *Sauptikaparvan*, as detailed above, where Aśvatthāman must justify the night raid to Kṛpā. Note that there are two ethical breaks here: (1) The raid is not done in a battle situation; (2) It is done whilst the warriors are asleep and have no chance to respond. Moreover, those killed in the night-massacre were not killed in a duel, the preferred mode of fighting in the *MBh*. It was done secretly so that the enemy was totally unprepared.

So in short Aśvatthāman justifies his action by arguing that since the Pāñḍavas consistently violated battle ethics in the killing of the four field-marshalls of the Kaurava army, it is legitimate [1] for him to break the rules of battle. The point—from the Pāñḍavas’ perspective—is that they could not be killed in any other way and that *dharma* ultimately would not be preserved if they were not defeated.<sup>24</sup> Then a further justification is used, one found frequently: [2] they would be eventually killed by fate (*kāla*) in any case, as it is the strongest force in the

<sup>23</sup> This refers to the so-called *prāya* vow where the warrior casts aside his weapons and enters a meditative state whilst awaiting death.

<sup>24</sup> See also Kalyanov, (1984 p.192).

world.<sup>25</sup>

Hence, these two rationalizations are used to overcome the breaking of ethics in a manner that appears blatant. We might ask who would have accepted these arguments? If they are to be accepted, why bother to have ethics at all? But this is surely the point: not to have ethics would represent an attitude of submission to fate and a denial of human effort (rehearsing one of the fundamental debates pervading the entire *MBh*). Both are in operation in these presentations of battle ethics and elsewhere.

In Book 7, Ch.118 deals with the difficulties in adhering rightly to battle ethics. Here Arjuna's cutting off of the arm of the Kaurava prince Bhūriśravas, who is fighting Sātyaki on the Pāṇḍava side, is being described and is the cause for the subsequent rationalization.<sup>26</sup>

Samjaya said, "His superb arm with the sword and the splendid arm-band fell to the ground and brought extreme distress to living beings. That arm which might have struck someone was quickly struck by the unseen Arjuna and fell rapidly to the ground, like a snake with five faces. The Kaurava seeing that he had now been rendered useless because of Pārtha, released Sātyaki and angrily condemned the Pāṇḍava.

"Damn, son of Kuntī, you have done this cruel deed! Whilst I was not watching, whilst I was not attentive, you have cut off my arm. What will you tell King Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma? What was Bhūriśravas doing that he was killed in battle by me? This weapon was taught to you by the great Indra in person, or by Rudra, by Droṇa or Kṛpa, Pārtha? You definitely know your own Law better than others in the world? Why have you struck someone in battle who is not fighting? Those with integrity do not strike one who is crazed, one who is frightened, one who has no chariot, one who is begging, nor one who is in dire straits. But this is a low act associated with bad people. Why, Pārtha, did you perform this most dastardly deed? On the earth a noble act is easy for one who is noble, Dhanamjaya, but an ignoble act is extremely difficult for one who is noble. A man quickly assumes the moral attitude amongst those who are wherever he moves, Pārtha. This is seen in you. You, a descendent of Kuru, are of an especially royal lineage. You have acted well and observed the vow. Why have you fallen away from the Law of the kṣatriya?

But what you have done for the sake of Kṛṣṇa is really poor. It was approved by Kṛṣṇa, but it is not right of you. For who fights heedlessly with an enemy? Would he give way to this evil, were he not a friend of Kṛṣṇa's? The vrātyas, the Vṛṣṇis and the Andhakas, did not distinguish between good and bad actions and are reprehensible by nature. Pārtha, how can you have used them as an example?" (1-15)

... Then all the troops in the army condemned Kṛṣṇa and Dhanamjaya and praised the bull of men, Bhūriśravas. As these two Kṛṣṇas were being condemned they said nothing that was unpleasant. And yet Bhūriśravas being praised did not rejoice. (19-20)

Then Arjuna himself speaks, "All the kings know this great vow of mine, 'Not one of those on my side can be killed as long as he is in range of my arrows.' Bhūriśravas, considering this, you should not condemn me. Because not knowing the Law it is not right to criticize another. Whilst you seized a weapon wishing to kill a hero of the Vṛṣṇis in battle, that I cut off your arm does not violate the Law. Would any righteous person applaud the killing of Abhimanyu, whose weapon had been cast away, who was a boy, without a chariot, without

---

<sup>25</sup> An opinion very commonly expressed in the *MBh*. See also 5, 156, 4 and 15, amongst many. Cf Ramachandra Dikshitar (1948: 63) "To earn a victory was the ruling passion. It was believed that it could not be effected by mere physical strength or assertion of might. But if the human endeavour was backed by divine power (*daiva balam*), then it was thought that success would attend on him."

<sup>26</sup> See also Kosuta (2020: 190) for a brief discussion of this.

armour?”

When this was said to him by Pārtha he touched the ground with his head and with his left hand he let go of his right arm. And when the splendid Bhūriśravas had heard these words he remained silent, his face down.

Arjuna said, “My good feelings towards Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma best of speakers, and to Nakula and Sahadeva, I have those towards you. Given permission by me and the great Kṛṣṇa, go to those worlds of good merit just as Śibi Auśīnara.” (19-29)

Finally, Sātyaki cuts off his head, his right arm having already been cut off. (36)

Samjaya said, “His warriors did not applaud Sātyaki for that act, when he killed the offspring of the Kurus who had been struck by Arjuna. The Siddha, Cāraṇas and men seeing the Indra-like Bhūriśrava struck in battle, now in the *prāya* vow, praised him and the gods were amazed by his deeds. Many times his soldiers uttered the opinion that it was not the fault of the Vṛṣṇi, because it was fate. Therefore we should not be angry as anger causes distress for men. (40) But he should be killed by a hero. There should be no reservations about that. Because Dhātṛ had ordained that Sātyaki was his death in battle.” (41)

Finally Sātyaki speaks to the assembled Kaurava warriors, “He must not be killed, he must not be killed!” You declare that to me with righteous words, you who do not stand in the Law, who have adopted the armour of righteousness. When Subhadrā’s son, a boy was without a weapon, you then struck him in battle. Where has your righteousness gone? (43)

With a certain degree of recklessness I had promised that, ‘Whoever having injured me in battle and, still living, would strike me angrily with his foot, that enemy must be killed by me, even if he has taken the vow of a sage.’ (44) When I was struck down with my arms and eyes moving, in a fit of levity you thought, ‘He is dead.’ So, powerful Kurus, it was proper for me to strike him back. Since by affection for me and for keeping his own promise, his arm holding the sword was taken by Arjuna. I was cheated by that. And since that was what had to be and as though what will be seemingly impels fate, he was killed in that battle. Is there unrighteous behaviour in that? Wasn’t this verse once sung by Vālmīki on the Earth. ‘That which causes pain to enemies should definitely be done.’” (36-48)

The next chapter goes onto to outline that fate and a boon given by the god Śiva were responsible for the circumstances leading to Bhūriśravas’ death. So, despite the violation of battle ethics, other rationalizations are given which might appear to undermine the very rationale of these ethics.

In responding to this and other examples Kosuta (2020: 191) argues that:

“Yet, why were all these transgressions of the Kshatriyan warrior code taking place? In the end, all of the major Pandava transgressions lie at the feet of one hero – Krishna, that very Krishna who preached proper Kshatriyan duty to Arjuna in the Bhagavad-Gita before the start of the Kurukshetra War. At one point Krishna flatly stated that the Pandavas cannot win if they fight by the Kshatriyan ethics. For Krishna, his end or goal of maintaining the cosmic balance was for him as God of the ultimate importance, and thus the Pandavas could not lose.”

Here he is invoking the avatāra theory that the god Viṣṇu descends to Earth whenever dharma, the socio-cosmic law, is in serious decline, and to restore it anything is acceptable. That is, long-term gain outweighs short-term gain. But this still does not vitiate the fact that

the breaking of the ethics of fighting was taken seriously in the world where the *Mahābhārata* had, and still has, considerable currency.

## Conclusion

In the *MBh* and the *Rām* it is often said that masses of people are said to be killed in the battles that occur, and the descriptions of headless bodies and rivers of blood confirm this.<sup>27</sup> No class description is ever provided as it is supposed to be *kṣatriya* fighting against *kṣatriya*—What we do find is that the individual against the unindividuated masses is being emphasized in the strongest possible terms. In such a scenario, how can we know that the ethics of fighting were applied to all *kṣatriyas* (though that is what is suggested in *MBh.* 6.1), and to those who are killed by the thousands of arrows released by the mightiest of archers? Those categories of warriors listed in the battle ethics are certainly not the elite whose fighting capacities are so strongly celebrated in the battle books. This means we still have no real knowledge as to how these ethics were applied in actual practice. As they stand they are simply recommendations, but fundamentally important for the detail of the narrative as they allow the reader/hearer to assess the quality of the particular warrior highlighted.

To place an historical perspective on this we can ask whether these rules may have been developed on the basis of actual observation of battles and duels. Insight into this might be derived from the fact that the duels between the principal warriors were watched by large numbers of other warriors, such as this one at a self-choice (marriage) where fighting always occurred: “But Somadatta was forcibly felled to the ground, having picked up his sword, and seized by the hari, he was struck with his foot. In the midst of thousands of kings who were watching this from everywhere. But finally he released him, saying compassionately, “Live!” (7, 119, 13-15)

In this sense they may have been developed in order to highlight the image of the *kṣatriya* as both hero and fair fighter. We hear nothing about other *varṇas* fighting, except in the case of a celebrated brahmin like Droṇa. The question I am asking here is whether the rules preceded the occurrence of large-scale battles or followed them as a means of providing some guidance. Given we have no evidence of fighting outside of the texts—does archeological evidence provide anything of worth in this regard? Are we restricted simply to arguing these battle ethics are theoretical constructs that enables the reader/hearer to be able to assess a particular fighter’s commitment to *kṣatriya* values? This makes sense in consideration of the emphasis on dueling in the descriptions of battles given in the *MBh*. In almost every cases it is individual fighting against individual, where they are almost all related to the Pāṇḍavas or the principal Kauravas.

How, finally, we might ask does all of this—the ethics in fact are all predicated on non-violence of a particular kind and directed at particular types of people—fit in relation to the conspicuous non-violence ethos—often observed in the breach—coming from the ascetic traditions? Are the battle ethics a reflection of that—with a narrowing of warfare only to those who belong to a particular class—the *kṣatriya*? That there are specific examples of people who are noncombatants being protected from attack suggests such people were attacked and subjected to violence. Further to this, may have been an attempt to restrict fighting to *kṣatriyas*, where it may have moved far beyond this in a class sense, though our evidence for this is severely restricted. That aside, it is clear the rules were fighting were designed to regulate the activities

---

<sup>27</sup> *MBh* 7, 165 gives an example of the large number of people killed on the battlefield. These just provide a backdrop to the main duels. The *Rām* has many similar passages.

of trained warriors

Why were the ethics introduced in the first place? Was it because with duels being the principal form for kṣatriyas to demonstrate their heroic ability in a manner that was conspicuous some rules had to be applied? Or was it to demonstrate that *dharma*, being universal, also had to apply here as well? From the perspective of epic *dharma* Kurukṣetra was a field of *karma/dharma* and where *dharma* is present so is *jaya* or victory.

Yet we—and this is surely an important rider—only see the ethics of fighting being applied or misapplied in relation to the heroes. This may be fully understandable when it is considered that it is heroes who exhibit the greatest skill and yet are flawed in some way (Karna and Drona). But it is also because of the tremendous fighting skills these people exhibit that enables the ethics to be applied correctly or denied. Yet—and this is surely significant—when they are listed as prescriptions in the text, they are only applied to particular types of people, none of whom fit the characters' qualities of those against whom the ethics are seemingly broken.

## Bibliography

- Bakshi, G. D., 2002. *The Indian Art of War: The Mahabharata Paradigm*, Sharada Publishing House, Delhi.
- Bhattacharjee, U. C., 1949. "Rules of Warfare in Epic India", *Bharatīya Vidyā* 9, 1948, Shri K. M. Munshi diamond jubilee volume. Part 1, 37-61.
- Brekke, T., 2006. "Between Prudence and Heroism. Ethics of War in the Hindu Tradition," in Brekke, T., ed. *The Ethics of War in Asian Civilizations, A Comparative Perspective*, Routledge, Oxford, 113-145.
- Fitzgerald, J. F., 2004. *The Mahābhārata, Volume 7*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Hiltebeitel, A., 2011. *Dharma. Its Early History in Law, Religion and Narrative*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Kalyanov, V. I., 1984. "On the military code of honour in the Mahābhārata," in Joshi, S. D., ed. *Amṛtadhārā: Prof. R. N. Dandekar Felicitation Volume*, Ajanta Publications, Delhi, 187-194.
- Kosuta, M., 2020. "Ethics of War and Ritual: The Bhagavadgita and Mahabharata as Test Cases," *Journal of Military Ethics*, 19/3, 186-200.
- Olivelle, P., 2005. *Manu's Code of Law. A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Ramachandra Dikshitar, V. R., 1948. *War in Ancient India*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Madras, Macmillan & Co.
- Van Buitenen, J. A. B., 1978. *The Mahābhārata 4. The Book of Virāta. 5 The Book of the Effort*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.