

The Bhagavad Gita and the Ethics of War

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1. Introduction

The Bhagavad Gita ('the Gita') is one of the most recognised and revered Hindu scriptures across the globe. Though often read and taught as a stand-alone civilisational text embodying the essence of Hindu religious teachings, it is, in fact, a brief tract of 700 verses extracted from Bhishma Parva, one of the 18 books that make up the Mahabharata, a major Sanskrit epic that narrates a power struggle and an eventual war between two families. Despite its deep-rooted religious overtones, the Gita has succeeded in appealing to a global sensibility that is secular in nature. Apart from influencing modern Indian political leaders like Annie Besant, Aurobindo Ghosh, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mohandas Gandhi, the text's admirers also extend to the West and include figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, William Blake, TS Eliot and the more contemporary Philip Glass. The Gita, today, is a truly global text, and its message is said to be of relevance not just to practitioners of Hinduism but to larger humanity.

This essay aims to explore how the Gita contributes to discussions on the ethics of war and argues that, in addition to common interpretations of the Gita as a proclamation for just war, the text can also be read as a commentary on how warriors should conduct themselves during warfare. As such, the Gita can be seen as providing moral and ethical guidance on topics that broadly correspond with the modern concepts of both *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* – *jus ad bellum* being a set of criteria to be considered before engaging in warfare and *jus in bello* being a body of regulations moderating the conduct of parties engaged in armed conflict. Therefore, this essay can also be seen as a humble contribution to furthering our understanding of the interconnections between Hinduism and International Humanitarian Law (IHL), a body of laws that seek, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict.

2. The Gita as a Call for Just War

The war depicted in the Mahabharata, of which the Gita is part, is a battle between two families, the Pandavas and Kauravas, sets of cousins who are both seeking to inherit control over the kingdom of Hastinapur. After many years of enmity, Krishna, ruler of a neighbouring kingdom, offers to mediate a solution between the cousins. As negotiations fail and war between the cousins becomes inevitable, Krishna offers further services to both sides, stating that, to one side, he will give his army, and to the other, he will act as a charioteer. The Kauravas choose the former and Arjuna, the Pandava warrior prince, the latter – and, thus, Krishna agrees to become Arjuna's charioteer during the war. Against this backdrop, the Gita takes the form of a conversation between Krishna and Arjuna, with Arjuna confessing that his body 'trembles' at the thought of going to war with his 'own people'. Unbeknownst to Arjuna, Krishna is a manifestation of God, and Krishna proceeds to offer advice to Arjuna to guide him in battle.

Krishna tells Arjuna that the first thing one must do is to understand his *dharma* – duty or ethic. The next step is to wage a battle, if need be, ‘for the sake of dharma’. Krishna wants Arjuna to know that, being a warrior, Arjuna can never find a ‘greater’ purpose than to partake in *dharmayuddha*, or a righteous war. Underlining the significance of such an endeavour, Krishna announces to Arjuna:

‘If you are killed,
you shall reach heaven;
or if you triumph,
you shall enjoy the earth;
so stand up
Son of Kunti,
firm in your resolve,
To fight!’

- Verse 37, Chapter 2

The remaining chapters delve into the intricate intellectual arguments, religious justifications and ethical considerations Krishna offers Arjuna to convince him that, contrary to what he thinks, it is walking away from the war that is true ‘harm’, for he would be abandoning his *dharma* by not fighting the enemy when called upon to do so. The Gita is, thus, a text about Arjuna’s transformation from indecision and inaction to a man of responsible action. Krishna urges and convinces Arjuna that it is his *dharma* to fight a righteous war, even if it comes with painful consequences, which, Krishna claims, arise out of Arjuna’s limited understanding of the nature of the world and reality. In the concluding 18th chapter, Arjuna declares that the doubts and despondency he expressed initially were a ‘delusion’ and that this conversation with Krishna has given way to ‘wise memory’, thus, announcing his readiness to go to battle, which is his true *dharma*.

Given this context, apart from being a treatise on man’s purpose and self-realisation that continues to impart wisdom and inspire its readers, conventional interpreters of the Gita have also advocated a view that the text is a meditation on just war. In this reading, the Gita offers its reader moral and ethical reasons to go to war and is less concerned with one’s conduct during war. Seen from this perspective, the *dharma* called for in the Gita’s *dharmayuddha* is linked to the moral quality of reasoning that inspires the war and has nothing to do with the moral quality of a combatant’s conduct on the battlefield. This view stands on firm ground when we place the Gita within the larger context of the Mahabharata, where the Pandavas employ unfair means, at the behest of Krishna, to defeat the Kauravas, leading to the popular takeaway that Krishna legitimises a Machiavellian realism or the consequentialist proposition that ‘the end justifies the means’.

Such a reading of both the Gita and the Mahabharata advocates for a disconnection between the Pandavas and Krishna’s conduct, which, at times, rely on unjust or dishonourable means, and their overall character, which the epic portrays as ‘good’ and ‘just’. Dissociating the character of the participants of war from their conduct on the battlefield and delinking the cause of war from the acts of warfare ensures the possibility of unjust warfare even during a just or righteous war, and vice versa, a thought that is not specific to Mahabharata or the

Gita, but also forms an important aspect of just war theory. Dissociating acts during war from the cause of war thus helps us use different criteria to judge them separately.

Contemporary just war theory owes its origins to the thoughts and writings of various ancient and medieval thinkers as well as religious traditions that had seriously considered questions pertaining to the morality and legality of wars. Just war theorists are primarily concerned with identifying, understanding and analysing various reasons or causes that can make a war permissible, which are often referred to as *jus ad bellum* conditions. Some of the widely agreed *jus ad bellum* conditions that a just war must meet include the principles of proportionate response, a reasonable chance of success, involvement of legitimate authorities, right intention or cause, war as last resort and a public declaration of war giving reasons or an ultimatum. However, as we have seen, *jus ad bellum* conditions are independent from *jus in bello* conditions, the ambit of which now coincides with that of IHL.

3. The Essence of IHL

An amalgam of international treaties and customary laws, IHL focuses on the conduct of belligerents during armed conflict. A key moment in the development of IHL came with the adoption of Geneva Conventions in 1949. These four treaties, and their Additional Protocols, prescribe global standards for conduct during war, which it interchangeably also defines as 'armed conflict'. So, what are the rules and principles of contemporary warfare that the international treaties and customary laws that comprise IHL recommend?

IHL mandates that warring parties practise war according to three core principles – distinction, proportionality and precaution. The practical implementation of these principles on the battleground means that warring parties must always distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, and use force proportionate to the military objectives to be achieved, thereby minimizing as far as possible the suffering of those involved. IHL keeps alive the possibility of a just fight on the battlefield by enforcing constraints on the means and methods of warfare that protect non-combatants, including civilians, those *hors de combat*, or captured in the course of war. The essence of IHL thus boils down to an attitude to warfare that avoids superfluous harm, protecting and caring for civilians, as well as injured or captured enemy combatants.

Modern IHL has its genesis in religiously inspired traditions of military ethics that have developed over hundreds, if not thousands, of years, and was also influenced by European Enlightenment ideas. French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, for example, reinforced the idea that our participation in war is a mere contingency, the consequence of an 'accident'. In the mid-1750s, Rousseau wrote two essays on the idea of war. The first essay titled *A Lasting Peace* contemplated the formation of a possible European Federation to minimise the chances of war while his second essay *The State of War* was a straightforward attempt to formulate a theory of just war. But his most humanitarian approach to war was outlined in the now canonical book *The Social Contract* published in 1762. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau maintained a nuanced understanding of war not as a 'relationship between man and man' but one 'between states' where men become enemies 'only by accident'. As a result, Rousseau argued that fighting between men is only legitimate when both are in possession of arms but 'as soon as they lay them down and surrender, they cease to be

enemies or agents of the enemies’, something we must keep in mind so that the consequences of war only extend to those who are fighting, and humanitarian suffering is minimised, a sentiment that is also central to IHL’s larger ambitions.

4. The Gita and IHL: Tracing Convergences and Divergences

The conventional reading of the Gita views the great war of the Mahabharata as a just and essential war, necessary for preserving the moral order. And readers of the text are correct in focusing on the passionate call for war by Krishna to Arjuna asking the warrior to be ‘firm’ in his resolve to ‘fight’. But in this celebration of the warrior’s fighting spirit, readers of the Gita often overlook another, equally important, precept Krishna raises immediately after his call to war in verse 37 excerpted earlier. In verse 38, Krishna tells Arjuna:

‘When you have made
pleasure and pain the same –
also gain and loss,
and victory and defeat,
then join yourself to battle;
and in this way you will not cause harm.’

- Verse 38, Chapter 2

When verses 37 and 38 are read together, it is revealed that, though Krishna instils the warrior ethic in Arjuna and announces the latter’s ‘resolve’ to fight in the war as his greatest purpose, Krishna immediately adds that Arjuna must only ‘join the battle’ once he achieves a specific state of mind – a balanced disposition to ‘pleasure and pain’, ‘gain and loss’, ‘victory and defeat’ that perceives these things as one and the same. What this shows is that, though the text is absolutely a call to war, it follows this call to war by prescribing a particular disposition and conduct that the warrior must exhibit in war, without which his actions will only cause ‘harm’, as Krishna notes. This code of conduct that Arjuna is required to follow needs further elaboration and it is in this that the teachings of the Gita and the humanitarian values and principles embodied in IHL come together.

Over the course of the second chapter, the Gita narrates, through various verses, additional dispositions that are essential to Arjuna if he is to enter the battlefield. In another, and perhaps the most celebrated section of the text, Krishna tells Arjuna:

‘Your authority is in action alone,
and never
in its fruits;
motive should never be
in the fruits of action,
nor should you cling
to inaction.’

- Verse 47, Chapter 2

In the above verses, Krishna tells Arjuna that not fighting the war amounts to inaction which cannot settle the dilemma of action Arjuna faces. Instead, Krishna recommends that Arjuna

fight the war by suspending his want for a particular outcome from his act, suggesting that he avoid 'clinging' to the fruits of his actions. This ethic of selfless action is often advocated as one of the core messages of the text and the Gita expresses it in the Sanskrit verse '*Karmanyevaadhikaaraste maa phaleshu kadaachana*'. All action is to be informed by this 'insight' that 'casts off both good and evil' by adopting a disposition of detachment and unclinging. This, Krishna reveals, is so because:

'Clinging is born
to someone
who dwells on
the spheres of the senses;
desire is born from clinging;
and anger is born from desire.'

- Verse 62, Chapter 2

Throughout the second half of the chapter, Krishna continues to offer Arjuna recommendations on the attitude he must maintain when engaging in war. The ideal warrior, Krishna suggests, is one in whom 'rage, passion and fear' are 'gone' and one who 'neither loves nor hates'. By not clinging to the spheres of the senses and desire and anger, the warrior may ultimately succeed in letting go of all 'fruits' of his fight so that he 'let fulfilment and frustration' become one and 'the same', a prerequisite to finding 'equanimity', an essential attribute of a warrior according to Krishna. A true warrior embodying the spirit of the Gita is called on to act with such 'calmness' and 'self-control'.

According to Krishna, Arjuna should partake in war when his conduct in the battlefield is devoid of 'passion and hatred' and instead exhibits a sense of 'restraint' as it is only 'the one who thus restrains the self, and who governs the self, attains peace'. Seen from this perspective, The Gita's message on the combatant's disposition during war is more fundamental to the text than all the justifications it provides for waging a war. This is because, as Krishna suggests, one who does not embody the spirit of peace, restraint and calmness in the midst of war is unworthy of being called a warrior and can only cause 'harm', and hence has no place in waging the *dharmayuddha*.

The Gita, thus, proposes a nuanced approach to war and conduct therein. While it accepts the reality and necessity of war, it does not valorise the violence and carnage that accompanies war and instead advocates for minimising the pain and suffering it brings about. It is precisely to limit the harmful effects of war that Krishna recommends Arjuna that he engage in war only after he builds up an internal constitution that nurtures calmness and peace over the passions of anger, hate and vengeance as well as the urge to win or express his strength and superiority, all of which, Krishna says can only lead to careless use of unrestrained force that will eventually lead to more harm.

The central message of the Gita is then one of maintaining an attitude of restraint while engaging in war. It recommends that this spirit of restraint seep into the being of the warrior so that he is not led astray by his desires in the face of chaos, and advocates for a cautiousness and watchfulness in the battleground to prevent unnecessary harm. Even a fight to create a just order without a spirit of restraint is to partake in an unjust battle, and that too in an un-

warrior like spirit. The triumphalism of minimum necessary violence can only take place amid the ethic of unflinching restraint that every participant of war must ideally display on the battlefield. The Gita seems to suggest that violence, detached from a spirit of restraint, goes against the spirit of warrior ethics.

Discussions on IHL have often focused on devising and implementing rules that will limit the negative consequences of armed conflict. It advocates a spirit of restraint amongst the warring parties so that the suffering of those not actively partaking in war, yet severely impacted by it, can be minimised. In this ambition, the modern laws of war echo the ancient sentiment of restraint that the Gita itself proclaims. But unlike IHL, the Gita does not discuss in detail the means and methods of warfare that one can employ and does not prescribe any limits to it. However, this is not to be interpreted as the Gita's lack of interest in devising or enforcing rules of conduct during war. Rather, the reason for this is that the subsequent sections of Bhishma Parva, the book in Mahabharata of which the Gita is a small part, delve in detail into *jus in bello* conditions that are of relevance to IHL. Thus, the Gita, which takes place before the war begins, serves as a focused meditation on righteous war, and the warrior's attitude to war, while the later sections of the epic, narrated during the middle of the war, elaborate further on appropriate conduct during warfare.

5. Further Themes for Exploration

The idea of restraint that is central to the warrior ethic in the Gita can be manifested on the battleground by a combatant only when their wartime actions are informed by an absolute commitment to shedding emotions of passions and rage as a prerequisite to minimising harm, an ambition essential to the ways of a true warrior, according to Krishna. This oft-overlooked spirit of restraint that informs the Gita's ethical outlook can serve as an excellent entry point through which to begin an exploration of the interconnections between forms of restraint outlined in the Indic traditions, such as *ahimsa*, or non-violence, and the more contemporary laws of armed conflict focused on reducing suffering during war. Originally propagated by ancient *dharmic* religions, including Hinduism, as a key virtue that one must embody if they are to live the 'good life', the idea of *ahimsa* has over the years evolved into a secular political and humanitarian ideal that advocates for peace in the face of the seemingly violent ways of the world.

Among all the practitioners of *ahimsa*, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi, has been instrumental in expanding this idea in a way that could be central to facilitating this further exploration. On the one hand, conventional interpretations of *ahimsa* outlined in the Buddhist, Jain and Hindu teachings define non-violence as the absence or negation of violence, meaning the concept may, at first glance appear to be of little relevance to situations of war. In contrast, the Gandhian framework suggests that it is in the most violent of contexts that the real significance and utility of *ahimsa* arises. For Gandhi, one cannot negate harm or violence, which he perceived to be the natural order of the world. Indeed, according to Gandhi, one must not withdraw in the face of inevitable violence, but proactively engage with it so that its harmful consequences are minimised. Ultimately, Gandhi calls for courage to situate ourselves amidst violence with an attitude of restraint, to ensure that our conduct is not driven by passions and emotions, especially anger, which, he says, can force us to rely on unnecessary violence and cause more harm. This understanding of *ahimsa*

could be a useful starting point through which to further elaborate the interconnection between the approach to war outlined in Hindu religious texts, such as the Gita and the Mahabharata, and modern conceptions of restraint in IHL.

6. References

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