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Exploring Hindu ethics of warfare: The Purāṇas

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Abstract

What rules of fighting (armed combat) does Hinduism espouse? The sacred texts are the pre-eminent sources, so these need to be summarized and compared to each other. Teaching mostly through stories, the texts describe deeds of people (especially warriors), gods and demons to show how to behave and not to behave in war. While the injunctions in the Mahābhārata and Arthaśāstra are already covered in the literature, including in this journal, this present work examines the Purāṇas in depth. After a thorough search of all relevant passages, we find the Purāṇas to be very similar to the epics in terms of the list of prescribed and proscribed actions in war that they provide. We also make comparisons to international humanitarian law (IHL); as in the epics, we find that the Purāṇas contain many similar provisions to those found in IHL but that they go above and beyond what is required by IHL in urging that fighting be fair at the tactical level (i.e., between individual fighters). Being religious texts, the Purāṇas also deal with the afterlife consequences of both righteous and unrighteous combat.

Keywords: combat, dharma, Hinduism, international humanitarian law, *jus in bello*, Purāṇas, sacred texts, use of force.

Introduction

In 2021, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Global Affairs Department in Asia commenced an initiative to discern the rules of armed conflict in Hindu texts in order to explore convergences with international humanitarian law (IHL), otherwise known as the law of armed conflict. The first results of that enterprise were published in November 2022 in an article in the *International Review of the Red Cross*.[1] The present study supplements that publication. Whereas the previous article paid close attention to the epics, especially the Mahābhārata (MBh), which is the *locus classicus* of rules of armed conflict in the Indic world, this present work takes a closer look at the extensive body of texts produced in the centuries following the epics' completion, i.e., the Purāṇas. As such, this work summarizes and advances our close survey of traditional Hindu texts – the Vedas, Upanishads, epics and Purāṇas – with an eye to the explicit rules of engagement and general attitudes towards violence implicated therein.

Recent scholarship by others has also advanced the general field of study: Zuzana Špicová has written a chapter entitled "Ancient Indian Laws of War" in *The Laws of Yesteryear's Wars 2*, which is part of Brill's International Humanitarian Law book series;[2] and seasoned scholar Greg Bailey has penned two insightful ICRC *Religion and Humanitarian Principles* blog posts on contemporary scholarship on Hindu battle ethics[3] and on Hindu ethics of fighting.[4] In the first of these, Bailey provides an excellent survey and characterization of scholarship on warfare and battle ethics in the Indic context. He classifies such scholarship into four overarching categories:

1. highly nationalistic pre- and immediate post-independence writings discussing the extent to which ancient Indian military tactics were comparable to their modern Western counterparts;
2. studies contrasting righteous battle ethics as extolled in the MBh with the more self-serving Realpolitik approach of the Arthaśāstra (AŚ);

1 Raj Balkaran and A. Walter Dorn, "Charting Hinduism's Rules of Armed Conflict: Indian Sacred Texts and International Humanitarian Law", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 104, No. 920–921, 2022.
2 Zuzana Špicová, "Ancient Indian Laws of War", in Samuel C. Duckett White (ed.), *The Laws of Yesterday's Wars 2*, International Humanitarian Law Series No. 64, Brill Nijhoff, Leiden, 2022.
3 Greg Bailey, "Contemporary Scholarship on Warfare and Battle Ethics", *Religion and Humanitarian Principles Blog*, 26 September 2022, available at: https://blogs.icrc.org/religion-humanitarianprinciples/contemporary-scholarship-warfare-ethics-hindu-traditions (all internet references were accessed in November 2023).
4 Greg Bailey, "Ethics of Fighting in Ancient Indian Literature", *Religion and Humanitarian Principles Blog*, 3 October 2022, available at: https://blogs.icrc.org/religion-humanitarianprinciples/ethics-fighting-ancient-indian-literature.

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3. more recent studies which explicitly inject Just War Theory into the discussion as a means of comparing combat ethics in Europe and India;[5] and
4. examinations of the extent to which "underlying attitudes exposited as far back as the MBh can be found in contemporary Indian thinking about battle, both theoretically and practically".[6]

As Bailey notes, scholarship on the ethics of warfare in the Indic context exhibits a fair bit of repetition owing to authors necessarily returning to the same texts "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".[7] Despite this, however, a thorough review of the Purāṇas, as they relate to IHL, has not been done until now. Unsurprisingly, some of the key concepts are found in the Purāṇas as well as the other works. It is worth reviewing these main recurring concepts.

Key concepts

The key Hindu concept implicated in such deliberations is unquestionable: that of dharma. Having accrued various connotations and idiomatic usages over its vibrant multi-millennia history, this term stems from the Sanskrit verbal root $\sqrt{dhṛ}$ which means to hold together, bear, maintain or preserve. And so, dharma – derived from the older Vedic *ṛta*, sacred order – connotes at its core that which accords with divine order, i.e., divinely ordained duty, conduct, law and ethics. In a word, dharma pertains to righteousness, especially righteous conduct, and so there can be no concept more applicable to the deliberations at hand. Indic tradition itself delineates righteous battle (*dharmayuddha*) from treacherous battle (*kūṭayuddha*). The first of these aspires after ideal conduct and is fleshed out primarily in the chivalrous codes espoused in the epics, especially the MBh. The second is more pragmatic and ignoble in nature, advocating covert and treacherous methods. This view is primarily advanced in the AŚ. As such, "virtually all prohibited actions are recommended in some sources, and all prohibited weapons are used or recommended to use somewhere".[8] But the AŚ does not have nearly as much influence on the modern-day Hindu popular imagination as the MBh. The former remains in the domain of scholars, while

5 Francis X. Clooney, "Pain But Not Harm: Some Classical Resources Towards a Hindu Just War Theory", in Paul Robinson (ed.), *Just War in Comparative Perspective*, Ashgate, Aldershot and Burlington, VT, 2003; Torkel Brekke, "The Ethics of War and the Concept of War in India and Europe", *Numen*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2005; Raj Balkaran and A. Walter Dorn, "Violence in the 'Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa': Just War Criteria in an Ancient Indian Epic", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2012, available at: www.jstor.org/stable/23250720; Kaushik Roy, *Hinduism and the Ethics of Warfare in South Asia: From Antiquity to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012; Matthew Kosuta, "Ethics of War and Ritual: The Bhagavad-Gita and Mahabharata as Test Cases", *Journal of Military Ethics*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2020, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/15027570.2020.1824578.

6 G. Bailey, above note 3.

7 *Ibid*., p. 1.

8 Z. Špicová, above note 2, p. 43.

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stories from the latter continue to be transmitted en masse to Hindus from a very young age, perpetually celebrated in art and culture.

The brilliance of the MBh lies in its weaving together of two structurally opposed religious visions: the world-affirmation of Vedic religion and the world-abnegating wisdom of renouncer traditions. The great epic employs the term *pravṛtti dharma* in reference to the former, and *nivṛtti dharma* to refer to the latter, thereby weaving the double-helical structure that is the lasting vision of virtue in Indian traditions. There is righteous action for the upkeep of the world (*pravṛtti* or material propensities) and righteous action for its transcendence (*nivṛtti* or withdrawal). The first of these entails deploying dharmic warfare when needed, and the second entails abstaining from violence at all costs. Integrating these two poles, India's great epic advances a stringent code of combat conduct that is mindful of the minimization of harm and the spirit of non-violence.

According to Špicová, *dharmayuddha* (righteous warfare) pertains more to *jus ad bellum* (righteous reasons to go to war) in the Indic context than to *jus in bello* (righteous ways to fight in war).[9] While this may well be the case in terms of the appearances of the official term *dharmayuddha* in the didactic portions of Sanskrit narrative literature, one gleans a great deal of insight into *jus in bello* when analyzing the narrative fabric itself. For example, the MBh emphatically and repeatedly insists on fair fighting[10] where a verbal assault is met with a verbal assault, chariots engage chariots, elephants engage elephants, cavalry engage cavalry and foot soldiers engage foot soldiers. Moreover, foot soldiers should only engage one another when they are of commensurate ability. A comprehensive examination of the MBh's counsel on this was completed in the predecessor of this paper.[11] In the present paper, we further examine core Hindu Sanskrit texts by briefly looking at what comes before the epics – the Vedas – and then focusing on what comes after them – the Purāṇas.

Vedic voices on violence

Compiled over the millennia (1700–700 BCE) before renouncer religion took hold across the Indian subcontinent, the Vedic hymns exhibit a worldly ethos, one entailing regular clashes between the ancient Aryan hunter-warrior tribes and indigenous peoples. In the words of Scott Dunbar, "an ethos of combat was at the heart of [the Aryans'] social fabric".[12] The works of Jarrod Whitaker, too, explore the Aryan militancy with which the Vedic hymns are imbued.[13] Warfare is

9 *Ibid*., p. 11.
10 R. Balkaran and A. W. Dorn, above note 1, pp. 1171–1173.
11 *Ibid*., pp. 1769–1781.
12 Scott Dunbar, "Classical Hindu Views of 'Righteous Warfare' (Dharma Yuddha) in Light of Michael Walzer's Just War Theory", PhD thesis, University of Saskatchewan, July 2011, p. 168, available at: https://harvest.usask.ca/handle/10388/ETD-2011-07-28.
13 Jarrod L. Whitaker, *Strong Arms and Drinking Strength: Masculinity, Violence, and the Body in Ancient India*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011.

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mentioned in the early hymns by way of extolling the battle prowess of particular gods, especially Indra, or explicitly invoking the aid of a god for an upcoming battle. These hymns bespeak a focus on survival stemming from a culture of raiding and conquest among nomadic tribes. They evidence not only aggression but also the invocation of the gods for the sake of defence, in the face of an aggressive enemy. Some examples are as follows, invoking the god Rudra (considered a form of Śiva) and Agni (the fire god):

> Having rolled over the rivals, over those who are hostile to us,
> stand over the one who gives battle, over the one who is envious of us. [Rigveda (RV) 10.174.2][14]

> Whether one of our own or whether a stranger, fellow or outsider, whoso assails us – let Rudra with a volley pierce those my enemies. [Atharvaveda (AV) 1.19.3][15]

> O Agni, thrust forth my rivals that are born; thrust back, O Jātavedas [Agni], those unborn; put underfoot those that want to fight [me]; may we be guiltless for thee unto Aditi. [AV 7.34.1][16]

And yet even in the Vedic context, we see glimmers of the value of fair fighting through the invocation of Indra, the king of the gods:

> Indra, stand fast! The (enemies') "journey-buckets" [=chariots]
> have come. Do your best for the sacrifice, for the singer, for your comrades.
> The mortals who use dirty tricks, those of evil ways, the cheaters
> wearing quivers are to be smashed. [RV 3.30.15][17]

> Once you had smashed those who rout their allies, and had smashed the
> impious when you were strengthened by the stimulant, O Indra of the fallow bays [fields],
> those who saw before them Aryaman in company with these two [=Mitra
> and Varuṇa], they were shattered by you, taking their progeny along. [RV 10.174.6][18]

Despite the necessity of warfare in this survival-oriented context, we can nevertheless glean a value for harmony:

> Harmony for us with our own men, harmony with strangers – harmony, O Aśvins [celestial healers], do ye here confirm in us.

14 Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel Brereton (trans.), *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, Vol. 3, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 1652.
15 William Dwight Whitney (trans.), *Atharva-Veda Saṁhitā: First Half: Introduction. Parts I to VII*, Vol. 7, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1905, p. 20.
16 *Ibid*., p. 410.
17 S. W. Jamison and J. Brereton (trans.), above note 14, p. 507.
18 *Ibid*., p. 374.

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> May we be harmonious with mind, with knowledge; may we not fight with the mind of the gods; let not noises arise in cases of much destruction; let not Indra's arrow fall, the day being come. [AV 7.52][19]

This final quote perhaps bespeaks the fundamental human need for peace, stability and harmony. We can learn from these divine battles and avoid transferring some of their violence into the human sphere.

It ought to be mentioned that while "Vedic" is a technical term referring to the historical epoch, as well as to texts and cultures pertaining to the Indo-Aryans of that epoch, it also connotes notions of "proper", "authentic" and "sacred" in common parlance throughout the Indic world. For example, vegetarianism may be described as a hallmark of a "Vedic" lifestyle in the vernacular sense. However, modern Hindu ideals – such as vegetarianism – stem from the epoch of the Upanishads (circa 700 BCE), which contain a radically different worldview than that of the ancient Aryan religion. It is in the Upanishads that we first see the now pervasive worldview entailing karma, rebirth and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment (self-realization, *mokṣa*). The Upanishads (along with early Buddhism and early Jainism) emanate from renouncer religiosity, which views the world as to be eschewed and ultimately transcended in pursuit of enlightenment. Hindu tradition therefore benefits from a dual, divergent legacy: that of the world-abnegating Upanishads and that of the world-affirming Vedic tradition. As mentioned, the ethos of the former is conceived broadly as *nivṛtti dharma*, and the latter as *pravṛtti dharma*. Hindu ideals, considered "Vedic" in common parlance, entail homage to both poles of what can perhaps be conceived as the "dharmic double helix". It is in the later epochs of Sanskrit narrative – the composition of the great Sanskrit epics the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, and the multiple Purāṇas – that we see the narrative synthesis of these divergent dharmas.

It is the work of the Sanskrit epics (circa 400 BCE to 400 CE) and the later Purāṇas to integrate ascetic ideologies into a world-affirming platform. For instance, while the Rāmāyaṇa completely legitimizes just combat,[20] it is nevertheless uneasy about violence of any kind,[21] owing to Hinduism's allegiance to non-violent life, the apex of ascetic ideology. Similarly, the royal heir of the MBh throne, Yudhiṣṭhira, needs to be coaxed at every turn to perform his worldly duty, including violently defending the world if necessary. Despite the descent of the divine into the world (i.e., through the *avatāras* Rāmā and Kṛṣṇa), the world itself is transient, and ultimately illusory. It is to be ultimately transcended, variously cast as material nature (*prakṛti*) subordinate to spirit (*puruṣa*), or an illusion (*māyā*) which blinds us to ultimate reality (*Brahman*). The Purāṇas make a similar link between the divine and human realms.

19 W. D. Whitney (trans.), above note 15, p. 422.
20 R. Balkaran and A. W. Dorn, above note 5.
21 Raj Balkaran, "The Sarus' Sorrow: Voicing Nonviolence in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa", *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2018.

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The Purāṇas

The Purāṇas are compendia of Hindu lore, replete with legends, myths and histories of gods, kings and heroes, interspersed with various teachings, such as on astronomy, ritual, philosophy, theology and ethics. They are thought to have been composed in 300–1000 CE, though they are difficult to date given tradition's effort to elide historicity in presenting this content as "ever ancient", the literal definition of *purāṇa*. As such, rather than viewing these texts chronologically, with each one building on the previous, it is more useful to regard them collectively as a repository of teachings, particularly since that is how they are regarded in Hindu tradition. They essentially operate within the religious idiom of *bhakti* (devotionalism); in fine Indic style, rather than dispensing with the far more ancient religious idioms of sacrifice or contemplation, the Purāṇas integrate these strands as well into the Purāṇic tapestry. Much like the Vedic texts needing scholar-priests (*brāhmaṇas*) to bring to life and apply the Vedic hymns, so too do the Purāṇas traditionally require a *Paurāṇika* (storyteller, bard) to bring the teachings to life and apply them to the cultural and historical circumstance at hand. But unlike the Vedas, which were stringently maintained, each syllable memorized and transmitted with scrupulous care, the Purāṇas evince a dynamism of tradition whereby one might see, for example, different recensions of these tales arise in different locales. The stories contained within the Purāṇas are unassuming in the "heavy lifting" that they must do to propagate Hindu values.

Although one may consider the Purāṇas as appearing relatively late on the Hindu scene (beginning circa 300 CE, a full two millennia after the appearance of the first Vedic hymns), most of them nevertheless pre-date entire world religions such as Islam and Sikhism. While it is in the Sanskrit epics, especially the MBh, that we see extensive descriptions of battles and the accepted norms thereof rehearsed at length, the Purānic body of texts is vital to understanding popular attitudes towards violence that pervade the Hindu world to this day.

Like the Vedas and the epics, the Purāṇas contain many combat scenes – but unlike the Vedas, which are fixed in form, the Purāṇas are multi-formed textual entities, continually adapted to history, geography, class, gender, vernacular language and local custom. They serve as a means of integrating and propagating religious values, reinterpreting old material and, overall, renovating religious tradition as needed. They are compendia of lore (with didactic material interspersed, much as with the MBh) codifying the lifeblood of popular Hinduism. Familiarity with the actual Vedic hymns pales in comparison to familiarity with the popular tales of heroes, gods and kings that are found in the Purāṇas and the epics. It ought to be observed, however, that deities are not held to human standards and thus may not serve as exemplars proper for human conduct. Yet there is still much didactic material on the ethics of human combat to be found in the Purāṇas.

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With eighteen Major (Mahā-)Purāṇas and several Minor (Upa-)Purāṇas, this class of texts is collectively by far the most vast among all Sanskrit works. The eighteen Major Purāṇas are as follows:

- Brahma (10,000 verses);
- Padma (55,000 verses);
- Viṣṇu (23,000 verses);
- Śiva (24,000 verses);
- Bhāgavata (18,000 verses) (Devī Bhāgavata);
- Nārada (25,000 verses);
- Mārkaṇḍeya (9,000 verses);
- Agni (15,000 verses);
- Bhaviṣya (15,000 verses);
- Brahmavaivarta (18,000 verses);
- Liṅga (11,000 verses);
- Varāha (24,000 verses);
- Skanda (81,000 verses);
- Vāmana (10,000 verses);
- Kūrma (17,000 verses);
- Matsya (14,000 verses);
- Garuḍa (19,000 verses); and
- Brahmaṇḍa (12,000 verses).

These texts as a whole continue the work of the MBh in that they integrate worldly and otherworldly aims. This is evidenced, for example, in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa's explicit discussion of *pravṛtti* (world-affirming) and *nivṛtti* (world-denying) dharmas.[22] Dharma is of central significance to the Purāṇas, as the tales are often designed to communicate moral themes, particularly pertaining to the ethics of violence.

Combat ethics in the Agni Purāṇa

The primary place we see ethics of warfare discussed is in the Agni Purāṇa (AgP), a work of 382 or 383 chapters.[23] Like most Purāṇas, the AgP is encyclopaedic in nature, interspersing into its narrative fold discursive content on, for example, iconography, medicine and polity.

The AgP offers instruction on leading military campaigns (AgP Chapter 228)[24] and has a two-chapter exposition on *dhanurveda* – literally, the "science of archery" (AgP Chapters 249–250)[25] – which "is a literary genre dealing with

22 Greg Bailey, "The Pravṛtti/Nivṛtti Project at La Trobe University, with Notes on the Meaning of Vṛt in the Bhagavadgītā", *Indologica Taurinensia*, Vol. 19, 2006, pp. 11–30.

23 For a summary of the AgP and the scholarship surrounding it, see Ludo Rocher and Jan Gonda, *The Purāṇas*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1986, pp. 134–137.

24 N. Gangadharan (trans.), *Agni Purāṇa*, Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology Vols 27–30, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1998, p. 631.

25 *Ibid*., pp. 647–648.

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warfare – from the rules of making a good bow to training of a warrior to military strategy".[26]

Let us now take a closer look at the relevant passages themselves, particularly as they might relate to IHL. Like the epics, the AgP advocates righteous war (*dharmayuddha*), which includes fair fighting. It counsels that

> [i]f the king is righteous he would be victorious. He should fight with men of equal valour. Men mounted on elephants should be fought by men mounted on elephants. Retreating men, spectators, those not having weapons and those that have fallen should not be killed. [AgP 236.56–60][27]

This correspondence of fighting forces does not find a parallel in IHL, but rather showcases the heightened appeal to fairness that is common to Hindu sacred texts. Care for the wounded and respectful treatment of the dead, however, do find parallels in IHL. The AgP states that the wounded and dead should be carried off the battlefield: "Carrying the wounded and the dead from the battlefield [and] offering water to the elephants in each war … are said to be the work of soldiers" (AgP 236.44–48).[28] Caring for the wounded and sick during combat was added to IHL, in contrast, only in the late nineteenth century. Similarly, the AgP lists some prohibited activities, requiring expiation for "abduction of men or women or taking possession of lands or houses or wells or tanks" (AgP 173.44).[29]

While not addressing battle specifically, the AgP has a three-chapter stretch on the duties of a king (223–225) wherein it advocates relevant desirable characteristics like modesty and self-control:

> A king would perish on account of immodesty …. Only a person that has conquered his senses would be able to keep his subjects under control. [AgP 225.22][30]

> A king desiring to conquer righteously should exercise control over the world in such a way that the people do not feel grief-stricken and trust him. [AgP 233.25][31]

The AgP describes and quotes from rulers found in the epics, such as the Rāmayana. Prince Rāma thus instructs his brother Lakṣmaṇa:

> One should show compassion to all beings and practice codes of conduct. Courteous words, compassion, charity, and protection of one that has sought refuge are the acts of good people agreeable to pious men. Which king would

26 Z. Špicová. above note 2, p. 6.
27 N. Gangadharan (trans.), above note 24, p. 614. Also, the Nārada Purāṇa (10.21) echoes this: "Some of them confronted the elephants with their elephants, the chariots by means of their chariots, the horses with other horses." See Ganesh Vasudeo Tagare (trans.), *Nārada Purāṇa*, Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology Vols 15–19, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1995, p. 182.
28 N. Gangadharan (trans.), above note 24, p. 613.
29 *Ibid*., p. 489.
30 *Ibid*., p. 586.
31 *Ibid*., pp. 605–606.

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> do impious acts for the sake of the body that is so encompassed by misery and disease and that is liable to get destroyed today or tomorrow? [AgP 238.11–13][32]

This instruction echoes IHL's respect for common humanity and dignity. After winning new territory, the AgP stipulates that "[a] king should protect the deity of a foreign country once he has [forcibly] entered it, worshipping such deities and refraining from destroying their property, nor should he humiliate the natives" (AgP 236.22–23).[33] This shows not only respect for the conquered but also Hinduism's openness to accepting other deities from other groups, even by worshipping them. Moreover, it parallels IHL's protection of religious places and personnel, and the protection of cultural property more generally.[34] Other respectful actions are advocated post-victory:

> The wives of a defeated king would not belong to anyone else (but to that defeated king). The wives of the defeated king should be protected (by the conquering king). [AgP 236.62–65][35]

> A king should honour a hostile king defeated in battle and treat him as his own son. He should not fight with him again. [AgP 236.62–65][36]

> He should honour the customs and manners (of that country). [AgP 236.62–65][37]

> He should worship the [local] deities and protect the families of the warriors [there]. [AgP 236.62–65] [38]

> He should divide the booty got from the battle among his servants. [AgP 236.62–65][39]

Pragmatic strategies

Despite the emphasis on good conduct, the AgP also offers Realpolitik advice to kings to help them establish their circles of allies and enemy kingdoms.[40] It advocates open warfare from a strong position, and covert warfare when one is weakened. Specifically, it advises that one "have an open encounter (with an enemy) only when the ground and time are favourable and one is strong".

32 *Ibid*., pp. 617–618.
33 *Ibid*., p. 611.
34 Jean-Marie Henckaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck (eds), *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, Vol. 2: *Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005 (ICRC Customary Law Study), Rule 40, "Respect for Cultural Property", available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule40.
35 N. Gangadharan (trans.), above note 24, p. 614.
36 *Ibid*., p. 614.
37 *Ibid*., p. 614.
38 *Ibid*., p. 614.
39 *Ibid*., p. 614. In comparison, IHL outlaws pillage, though permits war booty under certain circumstances. See ICRC Customary Law Study, above note 34, Rule 49, "War Booty", available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule49.
40 AgP Chaps 228–250. See N. Gangadharan (trans.), above note 24, pp. 606–648.

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Otherwise, one should engage in "treacherous warfare when they (enemies) are attacking[;] the bewildered should be killed" (AgP 242.13).[41] At one point, it even advocates attacking those who are sleeping (AgP 242.23).[42] As described by Bailey, it also offers some amount of *kūṭayuddha* counsel:[43]

> 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 battlefield and around the king (vss. 44–48).[44]

The AgP soon returns to the theme of ethics of battle and the importance of protecting certain types of people, including a defeated king and his wives after battle. *Kūṭayuddha* is seldom advocated in any other Purāṇa.

The Padma Purāṇa

This equally encyclopaedic text, named after the lotus coming from Viṣṇu's navel on which the creator god Brahma first arrives, covers the actions of the gods Viṣṇu, Śiva and Śakti (consort of Shiva), often giving them human characteristics and applying human morals. For instance, after accepting Indra's plea to save him, Viṣṇu kills Kavya's (Śukra's) mother, who was protecting demons and was determined to kill Indra: "Viṣṇu determined to do the evil deed of killing a woman" (Padma I.13.242).[45] For this, Viṣṇu would be punished karmically: "Since you [Viṣṇu], knowing dharma, have killed a lady who should not have been killed, therefore you will be born among human beings seven times" (Padma I.13.245–246).[46]

Killing certain other types of people, like *brāhmaṇas* (scholar-priests, anglicized as Brahmins), also incurs karmic responses and requires special remediation: "You should perform the vow (of expiation) for killing a brāhmaṇa; there is no other course. The sinful, cruel murderers of brāhmaṇas who are sinners, should not be talked to" (Padma I.14.132).[47] One passage simply states: "O brāhmaṇa, you are not to be killed" (Padma I.65.67).[48] The killing of *brāhmaṇas* even has a name: *Brahmahatyā*. "For the absolvement of sin, he should perform the holy rite in expiation for the sin of Brahmahatya" (Kūrma II.32.3).[49]

41 N. Gangadharan (trans.), above note 24, p. 630.
42 *Ibid*., p. 631.
43 *Ibid*., pp. 606–608, 622–624.
44 G. Bailey, above note 4, p. 7.
45 N. A. Deshpande (trans.), *Padma Purāṇa*, Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology Vols 39–48, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1988, p. 129.
46 *Ibid*., p. 129.
47 *Ibid*., p. 151.
48 *Ibid*., pp. 820–821.
49 Ganesh Vasudev Tagare (trans.), *Kūrma Purāṇa*, Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology Vols 20–21, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1998, p. 522.

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The karmic result of killing the innocent is illustrated by the story of Rāma, who is an incarnation of Viṣṇu. A Brahmin enters Rāma's court and claims that "the sin of killing a child, a brāhmaṇa, and a woman will accrue to Rāma; there is no doubt about it" (Padma I.35.39–40).[50] The Brahmin alleges that it is because of Rāma's carelessness that his son was killed by an ascetic and that when he and his wife eventually die of sorrow, that sin would accrue to Rāma. Rāma proceeds to find and kill the ascetic who did this act, a *Śūdra* man named Śambūka.

The prohibition against killing children is so strong that even the demon king Hiraṇyakaśipu has reservations about killing a child, Skanda, who has already become very powerful. The king thinks: "… and if I kill this child, I shall unnecessarily be (looked upon as) 'unfit for touch'" (Padma I.44.189).[51]

Like the AgP, the Padma Purāṇa gives examples of fair fighting: "those (who were seated in) the chariots fought with (those who were seated in) the chariots. And the foot-soldiers fought with foot-soldiers" (Padma I.41.211–212).[52] Similarly, "[t]hose brave (soldiers) desiring to fight and occupying chariots struck those (enemies) who had occupied chariots, and the foot-soldiers struck the foot-soldiers (in the enemy's army)" (Padma I.65.84).[53]

The rewards for right conduct are sometimes reaped in the afterlife. Take, for example, this passage from a description of a war between *devas* and *asuras* (i.e., gods and their half-brothers the anti-gods, sometimes translated as demons, though they do not carry nearly the same theological baggage in the Indic context as in the Abrahamic context):

> The brave, dauntless warriors, fighting justly in the war for their lord, fell (just) before their enemies (i.e. they did not run away from the battle-field) and went to the abodes of gods. Others, who were timid and sinful, and who struck those running away from the battle-field, and who fought unjustly went to Yama's [god of death and justice who punishes sinners] abode. [Padma I.65.82–83][54]

Demons often accuse the gods of foul play, which is ironic given that demons commonly engage in foul play themselves – but the critique nonetheless stands, and is often harshly voiced. The demon Madhu says: "O Nārāyaṇa [Viṣṇu], how do you not know here the laws of war? Using a foul means to kill (the demons) unjustly, you will not shine. Due to this sin, and due to not doing (proper) activity, gods would perish" (Padma I.72.3–4).[55] However, the text also provides the commentary: "That fight between the god and the demon was (fought) much justly" (Padma I.65.115).[56]

The text indicates when not to strike a warrior by giving examples: "The brave Gaṇeśa, worshipped by the gods, never attacked one who had turned away

50 N. A. Deshpande (trans.), above note 45, p. 463.
51 *Ibid*., p. 620.
52 *Ibid*., p. 547.
53 *Ibid*., p. 822.
54 *Ibid*., p. 822.
55 *Ibid*., p. 837.
56 *Ibid*., p. 824.

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from the battle" (Padma I.74.22).[57] This is more stringent than required by IHL, which requires that troops surrender before they receive protection. A longer list of prohibitions (and punishments) is provided in this passage:

> The truth supported by Dharma and certainly beneficial in the two (i.e. this and the next) worlds is: He, who strikes (a rival warrior) who is afflicted with the pain due to a wound caused by the stroke of a weapon, who is depressed in spirits, who is fighting with another (warrior), who is broken or thrown away (i.e. defeated), is childish. After having enjoyed (i.e. lived in) the Raurava (hell) he becomes the slave of him (whom he strikes). Therefore, do not fight with him …. Follow the rules of a just war. [Padma I.66.3–5][58]

This passage reflects a number of aspects of IHL – for example, the imperative to protect the sick and wounded – and yet goes beyond to offer consideration for the depressed or those fighting with another. As is the penchant of mythological storytelling, the Purāṇas deal with ideals, some of which will necessarily be impracticable on the ground, but which present a strong example and leave a powerful impression on the audience.

The Varāha, Vāmana, Kūrma and Matsya Purāṇas

Some Purāṇas are named after Viṣṇu's ten incarnations, including four animal avatars. These Purāṇas are (in order of appearance) the Matsya (fish), Kūrma (tortoise), Varāha (boar) and Narasimha (man-lion), coming before the first humanoid Vāmana (dwarf) incarnation. The world (universe) was saved by each of these avatar manifestations, who were often involved in combat. The texts together provide many indications of prescribed and proscribed activities.

For instance, they emphasize the prohibition on retreating from battle. The Varāha Purāṇa expresses the prohibition thus: "Where do you run away giving up your valor, pride, and position? Why don't you remember your calling, family, and responsibility?" (Varāha 21.51)[59] They praise death in fighting: "Can there be anything more happy than giving up life in the midst of the battle which delights the horses and elephants?" (Varāha 116.37)[60]

There is a karmic benefit for staying to fight: "If one dies for the sake of cows or Brahmanas, or if one dies after renunciation, the purity is instantaneous" (Kūrma II.23.59–60).[61] Furthermore, there is a heavenly reward: "The abode of Kṣatriya who do not run away from the battlefield is the region of Indra [a heavenly realm]" (Kūrma I.2.69,[62] similarly stated in Viṣṇu 1.6.34 and Vāyu

57 *Ibid*., p. 844.
58 *Ibid*., p. 825.
59 J. L. Shastri (ed.), *The Vāraha Purāṇa*, trans. S Venkitasubramonia Iyer, Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology Vols 31–32, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2003, p. 77.
60 *Ibid*., p. 269.
61 G. V. Tagare (trans.), above note 49, p. 479.
62 *Ibid*., p. 29.

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8.166). Similarly, the Varāha Purāṇa states: "Let this man have permanent residence in heaven as he died fighting an enemy in battle" (Varāha 205.9).[63] Heavenly worlds are also secured by thinking of God at death: "What place [great worlds] do those warriors attain who die in battle uttering your name?" (Varāha 114.64)[64] By contrast, hell (Yama-loka) is the abode of fallen souls, which include "those averse to battles" (Varāha 195.12).

The prohibition against killing innocent non-combatants is reinforced in these Purāṇas as a sin that requires atonement:

> O excellent sage, in the battle where we clashed with the Kauravas, many innocent persons have been killed by us. It behoves you to recount that remedy whereby we shall be relieved of sin brought about by violence … [Kūrma I.36.13–14][65]

Hindu scriptures unanimously prohibit the killing of Brahmins, which parallels IHL's protection for religious personnel. Unlike IHL, however, Hindu texts explicitly prohibit the killing of women, who are not typically allowed to be warriors. By contrast, in IHL it is not a crime to kill women if they are combatants, but there are some special protections for women in terms of medical treatment and conditions of captivity.[66] In Hinduism, the killing of women is such a sin that even Viṣṇu is cursed by the seer Bhṛgu after killing a woman (as also described in the Padma Purāṇa): "Viṣṇu! You will be born seven times amongst men for the sin of killing a woman, knowing that a woman under no circumstances is to be killed" (Matsya XLVII.106).[67] This is an especially atrocious crime since women are not combatants in Hindu texts, which treat armed fighting as the domain of men alone.

In the Vāmana Purāṇa, a more extensive list is provided of those who should not be killed: "A cow, a brahmin, an old man, an authoritative person whose word is credible, a child, one's own brother, chaste wife, venerable spiritual preceptors, parents, and others, honorable persons, even though guilty" (Vāmana 32.92).[68] While the list obviously condemns the killing of categorical non-combatants (Brahmins, the elderly, children, wives, spiritual preceptors), it also prohibits killing people who could potentially present as combatants – i.e., brothers, parents and credible/honourable persons. With respect to the killing of cows, it is noteworthy that IHL prohibits the killing of livestock given their indispensability for the survival of civilians.[69] Moreover, IHL also prohibits attack on religious personnel[70] (which one may consider Brahmins to be), along with

63 J. L. Shastri (ed.), above note 59, p. 629.
64 *Ibid*., p. 264.
65 G. V. Tagare (trans.), above note 49, p. 267.
66 ICRC Customary Law Study, above note 34, Rule 134, "Women", available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule134.
67 Baman Das Basu (ed.), *Matsya Purāṇa*, The Panini Office, Bahadurganj, 1916, p. 130.
68 Ānandasvarūpa Gupta (ed.), *The Vāmana Purāvarūpa, with English Translation*, trans. Satyamsu Mohan Mukhopadhyaya, All India Kashiraj Trust, Varanasi, 1968, p. 301.
69 ICRC Customary Law Study, above note 34, Rule 54, "Attacks against Objects Indispensable to the Survival of the Civilian Population", available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule54.
70 *Ibid*., Rule 27, "Religious Personnel", available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule27.

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the elderly and disabled.[71] The Vāmana Purāṇa goes beyond this to extend protection to authoritative and honourable persons in general; it also goes beyond IHL in extending categorical protection to children, who, in IHL, are protected only insofar as they count as civilians, though children in captivity are given special considerations.[72] The Purāṇic ideal also extends consideration to one's brother and one's wife, regarding which no IHL corollary exists.

The Vāmana Purāṇa exhibits natural reluctance about the killing of relatives. When Kārttikeya is asked to fight with Tārakāsura, he expresses his concerns as follows, invoking the ideal of not killing one's own relative: "'How shall I kill the grandson of my maternal grandfather, my brother and the nephew of my mother?' This is ancient Vedic tradition which is glorified by the Veda-knowing venerable seers" (Vāmana 32.90).[73]

These Purāṇas occasionally deal with one of the great dilemmas of war: should the few be sacrificed for the many? The Vāmana Purāṇa's response is an emphatic yes: "The decision of scriptures is that many should not be sacrificed for one. One may be killed for many. No sin is committed thereby" (Vāmana 32.95).[74] This consideration also pertains to the proportionality principle found within the just war criteria.

One dilemma that arises in stories about the gods in the Purāṇas is: should gods abide by human laws? Kṛṣṇa is described as using combat techniques common to humans:

> Nevertheless, he followed the usual practices of mortals, such as allying with the strong and waging war against the weak. He also practised conciliation, bribery, punishment and subversion, and sometimes even took to flight. [Viṣṇu 5.22.16–17].[75]

In general, the gods behave very similarly to humans and as we have seen from the exhortations to the gods above, they are expected to abide by the same laws. By contrast, in the epics, the actions of an avatar are not always comprehensible to the human mind so not all cases of the use of force or weapons can be interpreted as applicable to human affairs.

Common to many Hindu texts, the Purāṇas depict demons as extremely powerful and evil, committing many violations. But the gods also resort to cunning and sometimes deceit to conquer demons (see e.g. Viṣṇu 3.17.9).

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa

This Purāṇa, known as the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, also tells stories about Viṣṇu's incarnations, some of them roughly repeated from other texts, including the

71 *Ibid.*, Rule 138, "The Elderly, Disabled and Infirm", available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule138.
72 *Ibid.*, Rule 135, "Children", available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule135.
73 Ā. Gupta (ed.), above note 68, p. 301.
74 *Ibid.*, p. 301.
75 McComas Taylor (trans.), *The Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, ANU Press, 2021, p. 400, available at: https://doi.org/10.22459/VP.2021.

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epics. This Purāṇa has the feel of an epic and, like the MBh, the authorship is attributed to the sage Veda Vyāsa. Though the emphasis is on devotion, this Purāṇa contains many scenes of battle and fighting by both virtuous and evil characters. Like other Purāṇas, it provides not only guidelines on the use of force but an abundance of examples of fighting, both righteous and unrighteous.

After the Kurukshetra war, the future King Yudhiṣṭhira laments to Kṛṣṇa about the ill effects of the war:

> I have killed children, brahmanas, well-wishers, friends, fathers, brothers and preceptors. Even in one hundred million years, I will not be able to free myself from hell. There are words of instruction to the effect that this does not affect a king who is a master of his subjects and kills enemies in a battle full of dharma. But I do not think this applies to me. [Bhāgavata 1.8.47–52][76]

In the end, King Yudhiṣṭhira performs the horse sacrifice in order to "free himself from the sin of having caused enmity to his relatives" (Bhāgavata 1.12.32).[77]

The list of prohibitions on killing is even longer when Kṛṣṇa addresses Arjuna's qualms about killing Aśvatthāma:

> A person who knows about dharma does not kill an enemy who is distracted, mad, intoxicated, without a chariot, terrified, or one who seeks refuge. Nor does he kill a child, a woman, or someone who is foolish. If a person preserves his life by taking away the lives of others, he is wicked and devoid of compassion. Killing such a man is better for him too. Otherwise, he will be brought down because of what he does. [Bhāgavata 1.7.36][78]

Most notable above is the consideration of the enemy's mental state, for which there is no modern IHL parallel. The story of Aśvatthāma is illustrative of generous compassion after great atrocity. Aśvatthāma had committed the unspeakable crime of beheading the five sons of the Pāṇḍavas, some of whom were warriors, while the children were asleep in their tents. The Pāṇḍavas are the great epic's principal heroes, semi-divine sons of the Queen Kuntī. It is they who wage a cataclysmic war to regain their rightful throne from the clutches of their nefarious cousins, led by Duryodhana; hence the Pāṇḍava children are the epic's would-be royal heirs. Even Aśvatthāma's leader, Duryodhana, was not pleased with this stealthy night-time massacre, which egregiously violated several rules of warfare. After Aśvatthāma is captured, Arjuna must decide whether to kill him or not. At first, Kṛṣṇa says Aśvatthāma should be killed immediately for such a heinous crime. Kṛṣṇa reminds Arjuna of his promise to Draupadī to bring to her the head of the killer of her sons.

When Aśvatthāma is brought before her, however, Draupadī shows considerable compassion. She says she does not want Aśvatthāma's mother to suffer in the same way as she did as a mother. Yudhiṣṭhira "applauded the

76 Bibek Debroy (trans.), *Bhagavata Purana*, Vols 1–3, India Penguin Classics, Gurgaon, 2018, p. 44.
77 *Ibid*., p. 55.
78 *Ibid*., p. 39.

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queen's words, which were just, compassionate, guileless, impartial and great, and in conformity with dharma" (Bhāgavata 1.7.49).[79]

Kṛṣṇa then gives an equivocal order to Arjuna, saying: "A *brahma-bandhu* [brahmana-kinsman] must not be killed. An assassin deserves to be killed. Both of these injunctions have been laid down by me and must be carried out." Arjuna understands the motive of Kṛṣṇa and spares Aśvatthāma's life, punishing him only through humiliation by severing both hair and special jewels from the villain's head. The text also states that Aśvatthāma "had lost his lustre because of the act of killing the children. Without the gem, he lost his energy and was cast out of the camp" (Bhāgavata 1.7.56).[80] This was sufficient: "his head should be shaved, his wealth should be taken away, and he should be exiled from that place" (Bhāgavata 1.7.57).[81] Draupadī's compassion notwithstanding, the situation with Aśvatthāma readily calls to mind the modern need for measures repressing IHL violations, such as criminal sanctions.[82]

In general, killing relatives is not permitted in the text; the acceptable alternative is rejection from the family, as Balarāma states when Kṛṣṇa intends to kill Rukmī, who was the elder brother of Kṛṣṇa's bride Rukminī (Bhāgavata 10.54.39). However, there is contradictory advice in the following passage: "Prajapati determined a dharma for Kshatriyas, following which, a brother must kill his own brother. Nothing is more terrible than this" (Bhāgavata 10.54.40).

The Bhāgavatam contains the story of the meeting of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa before the battle of Kurukshetra, as does the MBh (Bhagavad Gītā part). The discourse is about the reasons for fighting rather than the ways to fight, so it is not reviewed here.

The Bhāgavatam does contain other prohibitions. For instance, the demon Vṛtrāsura chastises Indra: "Those who pride themselves on being brave do not strike people from the rear, or kill those who are frightened. That is not praiseworthy. Nor does it lead to heaven" (Bhāgavata 6.11.4).[83] These considerations go beyond current IHL requirements. The injunction against killing a king is reinforced by Paraśurāma's father: "The king's head is sprinkled in a consecration and killing him is more serious than the killing of a brahmana" (Bhāgavata 9.15.41).[84] It should be noted that rules of combat in the Indic context generally pertain to members of the ruling, warrior class, the *kṣatriyas*. In terms of parallels to IHL, assassination of leaders of the state is prohibited under certain circumstances, particularly in light of treachery.[85]

79 *Ibid*., p. 40.
80 *Ibid*., p. 40.
81 *Ibid*., p. 373.
82 ICRC Customary Law Study, above note 34, Rule 144, "Ensuring Respect for International Humanitarian Law Erga Omnes", available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule144.
83 B. Debroy (trans.), above note 76.
84 *Ibid*., p. 44.
85 ICRC Customary Law Study, above note 34, Rule 65, "Perfidy", available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule65. For helpful background information, see also Michael N. Schmitt, "Assassination in the Law of War", *Articles of War*, 15 October 2021, available at: https://lieber.westpoint.edu/assassination-law-of-war/.

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Given that the Purāṇas show violent force wielded by, and for, the Hindu preserver god Viṣṇu, it is unsurprising to see it also employed by the destroyer god Śiva (sometimes seen as a transformer rather than a destroyer) and also by the lesser Vedic gods like the wind god Vāyu.

The Śiva and Vāyu Purāṇas

Like other Purāṇas, the Vāyu Purāṇa places particular emphasis on not fleeing from the battlefield and suggests heavenly rewards for those who stay to fight:

> The world of Indra [king of the deities] is the region for Kṣatriyas who flee not in battle. [Vāyu 8.166][86]

> One can obtain through one Mātrā the fruit which accrues to the warriors fighting for their master without turning away from the battlefield. [Vāyu 20.19][87]

> From king Rukmakavaca were born five very strong sons of great prowess who killed heroic enemies without turning away (from the battlefield). [Vāyu 33.27][88]

The Śiva Purāṇa similarly emphasizes this theme when Jaladhara, an *asura* born of Śiva, states:

> Of what avail is your boasting about the pedigree of your mother if you flee back on being attacked? To die cowardly while you profess to be heroes is not commendable, nor does it yield heaven. [Śiva 22.15][89]

And Śiva echoes sentiments of disdain for deserters, though still showing fair play by not slaying someone who is *hors de combat* in IHL terms:

> You are wicked and excessively roguish. You have offended me by harassing Pārvatī [Śiva's wife]. Now both of you have deserted the battle ground. A person fleeing the battle ground shall not be killed. So I do not kill you. Since you have escaped from a fight with me you would be killed by Pārvatī. [Śiva 24.16–17][90]

86 GaneshVasudev Tagare (trans.), *Vayu Purāṇa*, Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology Vols 37–38, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1960, p. 72, available at: http://archive.org/details/VayuPuranaG.V.TagarePart2.
87 *Ibid*., p. 121.
88 *Ibid*., p. 735.
89 J. L. Shastri (trans.), *The Śiva-Purāṇa*, Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology Vols 1–4, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1950, p. 901. This sentiment is echoed in Śiva 53.34, where running away from the battlefield is considered worse than death. Śiva 1.19 states that *kṣatriyas* who do so have ceased to be valorous.
90 *Ibid*., p. 910.

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While there is no parallel to this in IHL proper, these injunctions accord with modern mandates for utmost exertion and prohibitions against desertion found in the military laws of numerous nations.

Religious renovation via the Devī Māhātmya

While feminine figures are typically described as victims, not combatants, throughout the Purāṇas, there is a fascinating strand of the Purāṇic corpus exalting divine feminine forces to the status of superlative combatants. This strand speaks to the integration of ancient indigenous Great Goddess traditions into the Sanskritic fold, most notably in the revolutionary Devī Māhātmya (DM) and later Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

The DM is a self-contained, thirteen-chapter text couched in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa. Composed some fifteen centuries ago, it exhibits a radically different cosmological vision: it is the first Sanskritic articulation of a Great Goddess reigning supreme over the universe. Various consort and nature goddesses have been known since Vedic times – such as Uṣas, the goddess of the dawn, and Vāc, the goddess of speech – but the DM advances a supreme feminine face who lies beyond the Vedic gods, and even beyond the Hindu great gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. The DM features three episodes where the Goddess destroys the demonic enemies of dharma – i.e., righteousness, not the god of the same name – who have usurped heaven's throne and cast out the gods. The Goddess leverages her colossal martial prowess in order to restore order to the cosmos. However, the blood-soaked battles she fights do not involve human actors, but divine and demonic hordes:

> Then there began a battle between the Goddess and the enemies of the gods,
> With the atmosphere illuminated by the weapons and missiles that were hurled in abundance.
> The great Asura Cikṣura, Mahiṣāsura's general,
> Fought, and Cāmara, outfitted with an army of four divisions, along with others …
> (All the) great Asuras fought there in battle with the Goddess.
> With countless chariots and elephants
> And horses surrounded, Mahiṣāsura was there in battle.
> With iron maces and javelins, with spears and cudgels,
> With swords, battle-axes, and pikes they fought with the Goddess in battle.
> Some threw spears, while others (threw) nooses.
> They attacked the Goddess in order to slay her with blows from their clubs.
> These weapons and arms the Goddess Caṇḍikā
> Broke as if in play, showering down her own weapons and arms. [DM 2.38–49]

While its depictions of battle are fantastical, the DM nevertheless enriches the discussion at hand with its radically world-affirming vision. Despite the intense and gory battle descriptions found in the text, the work of the Goddess is that of

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preservation, protecting the imperilled from evil forces that are invading heaven and usurping the power of the gods.[91] While not directly related to IHL, this world-affirming stance is crucial for *jus ad bellum* considerations – i.e., when and why one goes to war to begin with. That the Goddess manifests in the DM when the throne of Indra is conquered is telling: defending one's domain is ample cause for violent exertion when necessary. The Goddess violently defends creation. She is referred to as sovereign throughout the DM and restores the throne of heaven in two of its three episodes.

The frame narrative of the DM is quite telling: the tripartite episodes showcasing the magnanimity and martial prowess of the holy Mother are told in a forest hermitage by a Brahmin sage to a disenfranchised king and merchant. Upon hearing the episodes of the DM, the duo go off to worship the Goddess for three long years in hopes of summoning her grace. She appears in a vision before them to grant the boon of their choosing. The merchant, disenchanted with worldly existence, asks for liberation, which the Goddess grants.

The king, on the other hand, seeks the restoration of his royal power. Is he chastised for being yet attached to his post? Quite the contrary: the Goddess not only blesses him to be victorious upon encountering his enemies and reclaiming his throne, but also blesses him to be reborn in his next life as the son of the Sun, as the Manu Sāvarṇi. The Sun and Manu both engage in the work of Indian kings: preservation.[92] And this work is shouldered by the Goddess on the cosmic sphere, exerting force when necessary to quell the enemies of dharma. As such, while the epics and Purāṇas strive to synthesize royal and ascetic ideologies, thereby entwining the strands of the dharmic double helix, the DM exalts royal ideology and world-affirmation above and beyond the pursuit of *mokṣa* (liberation). For, as the very body of the holy Mother, the world is as divine as that which lies beyond it.

The Goddess Warrior in the Purāṇas

Variously dated between the ninth and fourteenth centuries CE, the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa is another important work featuring India's feminine divine. This work – consisting of 18,000 verses divided into twelve books (*skandhas*) – recounts various battles between the Goddess (Devī) and demonic forces. As is to be expected, the Goddess prevails in each encounter. Interspersed throughout the narrative dimensions of the work are philosophical teachings on the nature of reality and the path to liberation.

The provisions on rules of armed conflict in the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa are similar to those found in other Purāṇas. For example, it encourages warriors not to

91 Raj Balkaran, *The Goddess and the King in Indian Myth: Ring Composition, Royal Power, and the Dharmic Double Helix*, Routledge, London, 2019.

92 Raj Balkaran, "The Essence of Avatāra: Probing Preservation in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa", *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2017.

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flee from battle: "besides you are a hero very powerful, honoured and never showing your back in battles" (Devī Bhāgavata excerpts from II.5.41–59).[93] It also emphasizes the prohibition on killing of women: "If I kill my daughter, vicious and unchaste, I will incur sin due to killing a woman and moreover my daughter" (Devī Bhāgavata VII.6.12–25).[94] Similarly, it cautions against killing Brahmins as follows: "Had Indra, who killed in disguise Vṛtra relying on his words, to suffer any punishment for the sin that he incurred in killing a *brāhmaṇa*?" (Devī Bhāgavata VI.1.1–12).[95] This may well find a corollary in IHL's discussion of perfidy.[96] Furthermore, the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa cautions not to kill without reason:

> Indra said: "…O Fortunate One! The wise men, clever in polity, say that enemies must be killed by any excuse whatsoever." Takṣa then replied: "O Maghavan! You are doing this sinful deed out of your avarice; but, O Lord! I have no cause whatsoever; how then without any cause, can I engage myself in such a vicious act?" [Devī Bhāgavata VI.II.16–18][97]

In both the DM and the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa, we see the descent of the feminine divine into the world for the sake of preservation, a divine duty necessarily entailing the wielding of deadly force in order to safeguard the collective welfare.

Comparisons and conclusion

The bifurcation we see in Indic traditions between idealized combat ethics and pragmatic tactics mirrors the underlying tension between what we see in these texts. Indeed, the Indian epics "suggest a considerable gap between reality and the kind of normative behaviour on which the rules are predicated".[98] The dance between idealistic and pragmatic approaches to battle has been well rehearsed within Indian traditions themselves.

Scriptures on combat can be interpreted in opposing ways. Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi famously interprets the fighting in the Bhagavad Gītā figuratively, in staunch support of his ascetic lifestyle, avowed to non-violence and chastity. By contrast, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, as made evident by his commentary on the Bhagavad Gītā (*Gītā Rahasya*, written in 1911), adopts a literal interpretation and as such condones the use of violence in certain situations. However, he does not ignore the ethical superiority of non-violence. He regards *ahimsā* – i.e., "that no harm of any kind … be done to any living

93 Swami Vijnanananda (trans.), *Srimad Devi Bhagavatam – English Translation*, 1922, p. 120, available at: http://archive.org/details/SrimadDeviBhagavatamEnglish.
94 *Ibid*., p. 613.
95 *Ibid*., p. 481.
96 ICRC Customary Law Study, above note 34, Rule 65, "Perfidy", available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule65.
97 Swami Vijnanananda (trans.), above note 93, p. 621.
98 G. Bailey, above note 3, p. 12.

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being in any way" – as "the highest duty" of his "religion as also in other religions of the world". However, he notes that "in the case of a desperado threatening life, honour or property, [Manu] sanctions the immediate killing of such a reckless person". Tilak further argues that while "forgiveness, peacefulness and compassion" stem from non-violence, the MBh provides exceptions to these ethical principles.

The tension between idealism and pragmatism that we see in Hindu literature has a real-world corollary in modern humanitarian concerns, and to the balance in IHL between military necessity and humanity. As Bailey notes,

> 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.[99]

He goes on to question the humanitarian contribution of applying early combat ethics to modern warfare entailing armoured vehicles, rockets and aircraft, precluding combatants from meeting eye to eye, as it were.[100]

While such considerations are sobering, the Purāṇas themselves are not naive enough to assert that the ideals they advocate are fully attainable, even within their own storyworlds. Even within religious ethics, we see that adopting *dharmayuddha* in a steadfast manner is no easy thing.[101] Like international law, the standards must be enunciated based on a consistent moral code, one which is quite broadly shared across the Purāṇas, as we have seen above. In addition, the Sanskrit epics share this set of rules for armed conduct, even if the rules are broken at times in the stories, sometimes by the most virtuous characters.

It is the role of the various sacred texts to set the ideals without which societies morally run amok. While the Sanskrit epics wrestle between the aims of worldly (*pravṛtti*) and otherworldly (*nivṛtti*) ethical concerns, we see the pendulum swinging further towards the welfare of the world in the Purāṇas. These texts are indeed sure to advocate the ethos of world-denouncing ascetic ideals, but their overarching preoccupation is with the lineages of kings and divine descents into the world for the sake of its protection, using violence if necessary. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the Purāṇas pertain to the religious idiom of the Hindu masses, squarely ensconced within the world. The rules of combat laid out in the Purāṇas are remarkably consistent with those articulated in the epics, rules reviewed in the present authors' earlier work in this journal. The Purāṇas reinforce the rules that are found across a wide range of Hindu sacred texts.

As in the epics, the Purāṇic passages above suggest a higher value placed on fairness of fighting in the Indic context than in modern laws of armed conflict (i.e., IHL) that are rooted in Western thought. Like IHL, these Hindu ideals may at times

99 G. Bailey, above note 4, p.12.
100 *Ibid*., p. 12.
101 Z. Špicová, above note 2, p. 44.

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be impracticable, particularly while engaging others with different ideals – but the importance of standards of behaviour remains in both Hinduism and IHL as guidance and to promote justice. That Indic culture holds such high ideals is not inconsequential. Ideals are akin to an asymptote, which, though fundamentally unreachable, may nevertheless be fruitfully pursued. And, as evidenced in the scriptures examined as part of this work, Indic culture provides a rich means of reflection on humanitarian dilemmas and moral considerations amid the bloody enterprise of war.

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