

War and Non-violence in the Bhagavadgita

By Jeffery D. Long

October 2009

Chapter 1

Does the Bhagavadgita, the ancient and influential Hindu scripture that Mahatma Gandhi called his 'dictionary of daily reference',⁽¹⁾ support war? Or is the Gita's central message compatible with pacifism? This article will argue that projections of Western, Christian-influenced positions on war and non-violence – such as just war theory and pacifism – onto the Gita involve inevitable distortions and misunderstandings about the ways both war and non-violence were understood in ancient India.

Specifically, such interpretations of the Gita operate from a universalist understanding of ethical injunctions regarding war and non-violence: that the same rules of action apply to all people in all circumstances. This particularly Western assumption is largely foreign to Indic traditions, in which the concept of *svadharma* – the particular duty of the individual in particular situations – tends to be of central concern. This paper will also argue that the Gita's complex teachings on war and non-violence can only be understood with the Hindu idea of different stages of life and spiritual evolution, to which different ethical codes are appropriate, and that Krishna's criticism of Arjuna stems not from just a war theory, but from a transcendental conception of reality of which Arjuna's compassionate despair falls short.

The ideal of *ahimsa*, to which the Indic traditions point – including the tradition that finds expression in the Gita – is not an ideal of simply refraining away from harm due to some divine command or injunction. It is both a consequence of and means to the realization of a state of consciousness in which all distinction of 'I and mine' is transcended and in which one makes no differentiation between the suffering of the 'self' and suffering of 'others'. From such a perspective, the compassion of Arjuna for his teachers and relatives on the field of battle is still rooted in the ego and body-consciousness, and so is deficient.

The Context of the Bhagavadgita

For those less conversant with Indic traditions, let me briefly outline the literary context of the Gita and the issues that often arise in the course of its interpretation in a non-Hindu setting. The Bhagavadgita, or 'Song of the Blessed One' – lovingly called the Gita, 'the Song', by many Hindus – is a relatively brief discourse that occurs in a much, much longer epic text called the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is a vast ocean of a text. It can be compared to the Bible in as much as it is very sacred to the community in which it is preserved – the Hindu community – and also inasmuch as it constitutes a whole literature unto itself. Like the Bible, the Mahabharata has been the inspiration for numerous other literary works – poems, plays, philosophical treatises, and songs as well as paintings and sculptures, often displayed in the context of a Hindu mandir, temple. Like the Bible, the Mahabharata contains material spanning a variety of genres, from straightforward narrative to philosophical discourse to legal text. The comparison with the Bible only fails inasmuch as the Mahabharata is only one of the many sacred texts of the Hindu tradition – and not even the most sacred, that status being reserved for the Shruti, the Vedas.⁽²⁾ But it is nevertheless a widely revered and seemingly inexhaustible source of

inspiration for Hindu popular culture. There is even a Mahabharata television series, which was first broadcast in the 1980's and is now available on DVD.

Within the Mahabharata, the Gita would best be classified as a dialogue on the topic of dharma. *Dharma*, one of the most difficult Sanskrit words to translate, is a word with a range of meanings that encompass truth, cosmic law, justice and social duty. This relatively tiny snippet from the Mahabharata came to help in reverence in the classical period of Indian philosophy – from roughly the 2nd to the 12th century of the Common Era – when *bhashyas*, commentaries, were written upon it by such great *acharyas*, authoritative teachers, as Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva. Each one of these teachers was the founder of an influential system of Vedanta, or Hindu theology. (3) It was the regard in which these teachers held the Gita that also contributed to its current high status.

The status is such that the Gita is sometimes called the *Gitopanishad*, a name that places it on the same level as the most sacred of Hindu texts; the **Upanishads**, the final portion of the Vedas, on which Vedanta is based. (4) One possible reason for the high regard in which the text is held is that, despite its brevity, it manages to consolidate and synthesize all of the major trends of Indic philosophy that were current at the time of its composition- right around the turn of the era, some time between the 2nd century BCE and CE. It is also presented as the word of God, its chief interlocutor being a most revered avatara, divine incarnation, Bhagwan Sri Krishna. So in terms of its spiritual authority, the Gita is probably the closest thing to a bible in modern Hinduism.

Within the context of the Mahabharata, the Gita occurs just moments prior to the great battle towards which all the previous action of the text has been converging; for the Mahabharata like the *Iliad*, is a war epic. It narrates the tale of two branches of a royal family in ancient Northern India – the Kauravas and the Pandavas – who are fighting for supremacy. The Pandavas are the rightful heirs to the throne and the ‘good guys’ of the epic, despite the fact that they all have very real human flaws, and sometimes fall short of the idea of dharma. The Kauravas, led by their wicked eldest brother Duryadhana, are the villains who have disinherited their heroic cousins, the Pandavas, using deception and trickery. When the Gita is about to begin, repeated efforts to bring about a peace accord have failed and war is inevitable. Each side has assembled a vast army on the battlefield of Kurushetra, where the matter is to be decided. Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers and their greatest warrior, has the job of leading the charge. He directs his charioteer and best friend Krishna to lead him between the two armies. Looking upon the warriors that are assembled on both sides, Arjuna is overcome with despondency. He is not frightened or himself. His heroism has been demonstrated repeatedly throughout the course of the epic. Nor has he suddenly become a pacifist. But realizing that there are good and noble people on both sides of the conflict – many of whom are his dear friends and relatives – he is filled with sorrow, knowing that many of these good and noble people will die.

War and the Gita

Chapter 2

It is at this point that things became controversial in the interpretation of the Gita. For Krishna-rather than shockingly for people who associate Hinduism with Gandhi and his

ideal of non-violence reprimand Arjuna for losing his nerve on the eve of battle. ‘Why this cowardice in a time of crisis, Arjuna? The coward is ignoble, shameful and foreign to the ways of heaven. Don’t yield to impotence! It is unnatural in you! Banish this petty weakness from your heart. Rise to the fight, Arjuna!’ It is precisely in order to console his friend and to inspire him to battle at hand that Krishna begins to engage Arjuna on the fundamental truths of Vedanta. At the end of the Gita we find Krishna has been successful. Arjuna leads the charge and the battle gets underway, almost as if the entire conversation that is the Gita had never happened.

So much at odds with this warlike setting does the spiritual teachings of Krishna appear that some scholars have speculated that the Gita is a later interpolation, that it was slipped into the text of the Mahabharata by subsequent compilers who wished to subvert the popular epic in order to communicate a far more profound lesson in non-violence and detachment – attitudes which, were they to be adopted on a sufficient scale, would prevent wars like the one the Mahabharata describes. (6)

In the minds of many modern interpreters, particularly non-Hindu interpreters, the Gita is a deeply disturbing text. Gandhi’s love for the book, and his well-known and heroic commitment to non-violence as an instrument for political and social change, which has inspired such non-violent revolutionaries as Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez, seem to be at odds. Is there not a contradiction between the ideal of non-violence and a text in which God-in human form-tells a human being to rise up and slaughter the members of his own family on a battlefield? Some Western scholars have been shocked by Krishna’s frank endorsement of combat. And Christian missionaries have made much of contrasting the seemingly bloodthirsty Krishna with the benevolent Jesus, the ‘Prince of Peace’.⁷

I would like to argue, however, that such responses are wide off the mark and, at least in some cases, more than a little hypocritical. When a modern Western reader picks up a copy of the Gita and begins the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna without any knowledge of what warfare meant in ancient India, prior to the large-scale arrival of Christianity or Islam, he will inevitably project onto the text his own, contemporary cultural assumptions, and be puzzled, and perhaps even outraged, by the advice that Krishna gives. ‘I though Hinduism was supposed to be nonviolent,’ he many think. ‘What a terrible religion!’ **Projecting contemporary Western realities onto the text, a completely distorted picture will appear in his mind,** bearing little resemblance to the message that the text is seeking to convey. If our imaginary reader does not throw the text down in disgust, but reads on, his puzzlement will only grow, as he sees Krishna at a later point in the text recommending such virtues as non-violence, truth, absence of anger, disengagement, peace, loyalty, compassion for creatures, lack of greed, gentleness, modesty, (and) reliability’.⁽⁸⁾ Is this the same Krishna from the beginning of the text?

The reader, living in the atomic age, having in mind a situation like that of the US during the time of the Vietnam War, in which many protested at having to participate in war they regarded as unjust-or war of any kind, for that matter-or the situation that we living through today, of gain being involved in a modern war in which innocent life is inevitably destroyed, will recoil from the Gita as a text that fails to question or to

condemn such activity. Arjuna will remind such a reader of himself, recoiling from the intrinsically horrible nature of war. Krishna's advice will neither anger or puzzle such a reader, who expects to find support for the ideal of non-violence in a Hindu text that Gandhi held in higher esteem than any other scripture. The reader who has lived through the terrible events of 9/11 may even be disturbingly reminded of terrorism and suicide bombers who believe that their crimes are divinely ordained. 'The doors of heaven open for warriors who rejoice to have a battle like thrust on them perchance,' Krishna says.

But traditional Hindu warfare was a very different affair from modern warfare. If one is an attentive student of Hindu epic literature, one will find that the warfare depicted in the Ramayana and Mahabharata is strictly governed by a code of honor. The duty, dharma, of the *kshatriya* warrior, is quite well defined in these texts and in the *Dharmashastras*, Hindu legal literature. Whenever the characters in the heroes, run afoul of this code of honor, they are reprimanded. In some cases, they are even cursed. Not unlike the Christian conceptions of just war and Islamic conceptions of jihad, the war fought by the *kshatriya* must be fought for just reasons and must be fought only between combatants. Attacking on non-combatants, innocent civilians – is forbidden, and a matter of grave dishonor. The degree to which this code of honor is not merely literary device, but was actually observed in ancient Hindu society, is attested to in the story of a foreign traveler – the Greek ambassador, Megasthenes. Seeing two armies fighting a fierce battle, Megasthenes noticed, in the adjacent field only a few yards away, a farmer with his ox, ploughing his field, to all appearances completely unconcerned with the fierce battle raging nearby. (9) The farmer was safe. As a non-combatant, he knew the fighting warriors were not interested in him. Nor, apparently, was he interested in them!

The *kshatriya* code is, in fact, far more circumscribed than either the Christian idea of just war or the Islamic idea of jihad. Christians and Islam, religions of the Abrahamic family of monotheism, typically see injunctions as having a universal character. So a just war is a war for all Christians. A Christian who accepts the just war theory is at least implicitly accepting responsibility for fighting such a war, should the occasion arise. Similarly, in Islam, the obligation to fight a jihad, a war of defense against enemies seeking the eradication of Muslim faith, is an obligation that binds all able bodied adult Muslim men. **But only the *kshatriya* is obligated to fight a just war**, by just means, against other *kshatriyas*. A non-*kshatriya* does not have to agonize about whether to accept a just war theory or to be a pacifist. Not being a warrior, he is a pacifist by default. So also, and more to the point, a good *kshatriya* has no point in agonizing about whether or not to engage in a just war. He has no choice in the matter. This is his duty, his dharma, and this is precisely what Krishna is reminding Arjuna.

In terms, then, of the perennial debate in peace and conflict studies in the West between pacifism and just war theory, the Gita can be said to endorse both-and neither-of these approaches to the question of war. In keeping with the Dharma-shastras, it recognizes that different duties obtain for different people in different times and places.

The Western reader needs to bear the whole of this cultural context in mind when reading the Gita, in order to avoid a cruel and distorting interpretation of the text and the religion

in which it is a sacred scripture. Krishna is not encouraging Arjuna to fight a modern war, where he has to drop incendiary bombs on centers of civilian population. He is not encouraging him to fight in a war like that in Vietnam or Iraq – or even like World War II, in America the so-called ‘good war’-waged against the entire populations without regard for age, gender, or disability. By the standards of Hindu war epics, there is nothing good to be said about such dishonorable conduct. An ancient kshatriya of the Hindu epics would say that modern warfare is *adharmika*-contrary to duty, and against the grain of natural order. The war in which Arjuna is being encouraged to fight is, by comparison, akin to an athletic context-albeit a contest fought to the death-a fair fight, involving only consenting adults.

Polemically minded Western authors seeking to criticize Hinduism by pointing to the warrior ethos in the Gita would do well to play attention to the kind of warfare it enjoins. **Not only is Arjuna’s battle a far cry from modern warfare,** it is also a far cry from that in the Hebrew Bible – the Christian Old Testament – in which God commands the armies of Israel to kill every man, woman, child, and animal in the cities of the promised land that he giving to them. (10) Arjuna is not being told by Krishna to slaughter unarmed men, women, children, and animals. He is being told to combat other armed warriors – some of whom, like the mighty Bhishma, are more than a match for him.

The Higher Teaching

Chapter 3

But can the question of war and non-violence in the Gita be resolved – or rather, dissolved-so easily though? The issue does not arise at all in the commentaries of any of the great pre-modern acharyas. This is presumably because they shared the Gita’s view on Dharma – that there is no such thing as a ‘question’ of warfare versus non-violence in our modern times because every non-kshatriya in ancient Hindu society was expected live a life on non-violence, and every kshatriya was expected to be prepared to engage in warfare, with other kshatriyas, should the need arise. This state of affairs was so taken for granted in ancient India that in those places where we see *ahimsa* - non-violence in thought, word, deed - emphasized, it means far more than simple non-engagement in warfare or non-killing of other human beings - a universal expectation from non-kshatriyas - but non-violent behavior towards animals, insects, and even in some cases, plants. Non-violence in the modern Western sense, typically seen as a heroic act of refusal to participate in warfare, as embodied in such phenomena as conscientious objection, is simply the way good and civilized people were expected to behave in ancient India.

The issues does arise, however, in modern Hinduism, where the notion of *jati*, caste by birth, has become the object of widespread – and I would say justified – criticism. In any case, Hindu scriptures say that in the *Kali Yuga*, the period of history through we are now living; caste is no longer a valid category, since castes have become mixed, and people no longer follow the profession of their ancestors. In such a situation the question of just war as a universal option begins to emerge, for anyone could conceivably fulfill the kshatriya dharma, regardless of birth caste. Gandhi argued, as have other Hindu reformers, that although birth caste may no longer be a category, caste can be seen instead in terms of innate qualities, particular to an individual, as described in the Gita.

(11). A *kshatriya* is anyone who is, among other things, courageous, constant and resourceful.

In my view, though, the kind of war that Arjuna was enjoined by Krishna to fight is no longer an option. Modern warfare is utterly *adharmika* by the standards set by the *Dharmashastras* and the epics. This means, therefore, that non-violence is enjoined for all. This was the view that Gandhi held as well. The devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or of 9/11/ in the US, is not something that a truly dharmic civilizations can countenance. Humanity has reached a point of technological development in which its moral, dharmic imperative is to find a peaceful solution to many of its disagreements. The idea here is not that people have no right to defend themselves from violent attack, or that nations do not have a duty to protect their citizens. But humanity as a whole needs to work towards creating a set of conditions that minimizes – and ideally eliminates – the occurrence of such situations. Otherwise, we risk self-annihilation.

Gandhi addressed the issue of war raised by the Gita essentially by setting it aside as irrelevant. He famously said: ‘Try following the teaching of the Gita. Live as it teaches you to live. Then see if you are capable of harming any living being’. Gandhi believed that someone who practiced the yoga of *karma-phala-vairagya*, the discipline laid out in the Gita of ‘detachment from the fruits of action’ of seeing and serving God in all beings, and of regular meditation and devotional activities such as *rama-nama*, chanting the names of God, would inevitably and naturally become a being endowed with moral purity, non-violence and compassion.

Other contemporary Hindu thinkers, such as Swami Jyotirmayananda, have read the Mahabharata, and therefore the Gita, as a symbolic text, describing not a physical war, but the war ‘within’-what Muslims scholars have called the ‘greater jihad’ and what I have heard Christians call ‘spiritual warfare’ – the inner struggle with ignorance and the ego that all aspirants on the path to God realizations must undergo. (12) In fact, there are a variety of hints in the text of the Gita that suggest such an interpretation. The 13th chapter opens with a straightforward assertion that ‘the field (*kshetra* – also the word used to denote the field of battle) is the body’. (13)

Krishna also tells Arjuna to arise and slay his true enemies: greed, hatred and delusion. Finally, the entire discourse takes place in a chariot. The *Katha Upanishad* presents the detailed image of a chariot as a metaphor for the physical body, which carries the rider, who is the soul, and a driver, who is the mind, and is drawn by horses, which represent the senses. Gita, chapter two, verse 19th, is virtually identical to *Katha Upanishad*, chapter two verse 19, which may be a hint at link between these two texts. Significantly, the verse reads, in its Gita version: ‘He who think his Self is a killer and he who thinks it is killed, both fail to understand; it does not kill, nor is it killed’. If the warfare of the Gita, and indeed the entire Mahabharata, is metaphorical and spiritual, then the question of warfare is again dissolved, or at least deferred, against an assumption that the way of life enjoined for all human beings is one governed by the principle of ahimsa.

Whether one takes Gandhi's practical approach of simply living the teaching of the Gita – setting aside the question of war and non-violence as irrelevant – Or Swami Jyotirmayananda's approach of regarding the conflict as symbolic of the struggle to live that teaching, the point is that both modern Hindu masters direct the attention of the reader away from the conflict that forms the setting of Krishna's teaching and towards the teaching itself. If we are attentive to that teaching, yet another level of Krishna's advice to Arjuna emerges.

It is significant that the first truth which Krishna directs Arjuna in order to cure him of his despondency is the truth of the immortality and immutability of the Atman, the Self. Again: 'He who thinks this Self a killer and he who thinks it is killed, both fail to understand,; it does not kill, nor is it killed.' Arjuna's words seem wise, Krishna at one point says, because he is speaking from compassion. He does not want to see these brave warriors killed, especially his family members. But from the perspective of Vedanta such compassion is ultimately defective, being based on the ego and false consciousness born of maya, which identifies the Self with the physical body. This is why Arjuna is said to be deluded. (14)

Arjuna is compassionate towards these people because they are his biological relatives. In other words, their bodies are related to his. But what about all the warriors and wild animals and demons and other creatures that Arjuna had slain in the Mahabharata up to this point? Are they not also worthy of compassion? True compassion, paradoxically, is the fruit of detachment – detachment from this body and temporary identity in which the Atman resides in this lifetime. True ahimsa is impartial, encompassing all beings. It comes from seeing God everywhere. It is not the ultimately egocentric and superficial compassion that arises because a particular person is related to me – which really means 'that body is related to my body'. Are not all beings interrelated? Is the Self not ultimately one? This is the higher truth to which Krishna's teaching directs Arjuna – and the reader. Arjuna's despair in the face of battle arises from a noble sentiment, but not noble enough for an aspirant on the spiritual path. It is this higher, universal compassion to which Krishna's teaching directs him. The battle is merely the occasion for its expression.

Notes and References

1. M K Gandhi, Gandhi: An Autobiography (The Story of My Experiments with Truth) (Boston: Beacon, 1957), 265.
2. It should also be pointed out that, at 100,000 verses, the Mahabharata is four times longer than the Bible.
3. Why do I see the term theology and not philosophy? To be sure, each of these thinkers was a great philosopher. But in the context of writing commentarial literature on works of scripture, and taking the received tradition as the starting point for reflection, I use the term theology, to contrast such reflection, I use the term philosophy, to contrast such reflection with reflections that begins from a more abstract starting point. It is not a pejorative term, although I have encountered scholars who have taken it as such, as implying something less scientific or

- rational than the term philosophy. But that is not my understanding. As a reflection on the Gita, this essay is itself a work of theology.
4. According to Swami Vivekananda, Vedanta is ultimately based not on any text, but on the experiences of the enlightened sages who wrote those texts. The Gita itself makes a similar claim for the priority of direct experience. (Bhagavadgita, 2.46). The Upanishads were widely regarded in the various Vedanata traditions, though, as pre-eminent among the texts that communicate the insights of the realized sages.
 5. Gita, 2.2-3. All translations from the text of the Gita are my own.
 6. Beyond the seeming contradiction between the Gita's teaching of non-violence in some sections and apparent endorsement of war in others, scholars have cited linguistic and stylistic differences between the Gita and the larger portion of the Mahabharata, of which it forms a part, to argue that the Gita, atleast in its current form is a later composition. See C Jinarajadasa, *The Bhagavad Gita* (Madras: Theological Publishing, 1915) and S Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavad Gita* (Harper Collins, 1993).
 7. An excellent collection of articles that explore this issue from a variety of perspectives is the volume edited by Steven J Rosen: *Holy War: Violence and the Bhagavad Gita* (Hampton: Deepak Heritage, 2002).
 8. Gita, 16.2
 9. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), 14-16.
 10. Joshua, 6.21: 'They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it-men, women, young and old cattle, sheep and donkeys'.
 11. Gita, 18.41-4.
 12. Swami Jyotirmayananda, *Mysticism of the Mahabharata* (Miami: Yoga Research Foundation, 1993).
 13. Gita, 13.1
 14. M K Gandhi, *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi* (Berkeley: North Atlantic, 2009), 36-7.

Source

www.esamskriti.com/essay-chapters/War-and-Non-violence-in-the-Bhagavadgita-1.aspx