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Does the Gita Advocate Violence?

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**Abstract:** The question of the relationship between religion and violence has been widely discussed today. Does religion legitimise violence? Does violence find justification in religions? Occasionally passages from religious scriptures are quoted in support of perpetrating violence. Political parties craving for power and commercial groups greedy for money manipulate the religious feelings of people in order to make gains. Religion is often misused and religious scriptures are misinterpreted in this arena. A return to the authentic religious scriptures will show that no genuine religion would advocate violence, but rather communicate the message of nonviolence: peace and harmony, love and compassion.

**Keywords:** Religion and Violence, Gita, Legitimation of violence

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## Does the Gita Advocate Violence?

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The question of the relationship between religion and violence has been widely discussed today. Does religion legitimise violence? Does violence find justification in religions? Occasionally passages from religious scriptures are quoted in support of perpetrating violence. Political parties craving for power and commercial groups greedy for money manipulate the religious feelings of people in order to make gains. Religion is often misused and religious scriptures are misinterpreted in this arena. A return to the authentic religious scriptures will show that no genuine religion would advocate violence, but rather communicate the message of non-violence: peace and harmony, love and compassion.

Here I would like to explore whether the Bhagavad-Gita supports violence or offers the message of non-violence. The Gita, written in the form of a dialogue on the battlefield, gives *prima facie* the impression of advocating a violent attack on the enemies. Arjuna, the commander-in-chief of the Padavas, refuses to wage a war on compassionate grounds. Krishna, the charioteer, tries to persuade him to put off his fine feelings and face the situation

with valour by taking up arms. Had Krishna driven him off the battlefield, the war may not have taken place and much of the bloodshed would have been avoided. Hence, the Gita discourse has been often interpreted as giving a philosophy of violent warfare. Taken in this sense Gita is even today used to justify violent attacks on people who are considered to be enemies.

But here we need a deeper probing into the text and context of the Gita with questions like: who are the real *enemies*? What type of *war* is the Gita speaking about? Which is the *battlefield* that is alluded to? And who are actually *Arjuna* and *Krishna*?

### Gita, a Mystical Poem

The Bhagavad-Gita has reached us as part of the Bhishmaparva of the great epic Mahabharatha. Critical literary studies have proved that Mahabharatha was composed not by one author but by many in the course of the period between 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC and 2<sup>th</sup> Century AD (Radhakrishnan 1957: xviii). Vyasa, the legendary compiler of the Mahabharatha, is a name that means the one who divides, the one who edits. In the corpus of the Mahabharatha one can

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find texts of a rich variety of literary genres, works of various authors and the contributions of different ages. Independent literary compilations of individual sages and poets have been constantly incorporated into the evolving corpus of the epic till it acquired the final shape in which it has reached us. The Bhagavad Gita could be taken as one such text interpolated into the Mahabharatha in the course its textual evolution. Considering several literary and theological factors one may conclude that the Gita was composed around 300 BC as an independent mystical poem by an enlightened sage. In order to *save* his text he inserted it into the evolving epic the Mahabharatha. In doing so, he found an apt space at the crucial moment on the eve of the decisive war between the Paṇdavas and the Kauravas.

However apt the moment of the Gita discourse was found to be, the creation of that space by the author was really ingenious. According to the classical norms of waging a war it is not at all appropriate to conduct a long philosophical discourse on the battlefield just before the clarion call, when the armies are arrayed on both sides. This is not the time and place for doctrinal instruction. Had it taken place much before the war and away from the battleground one could understand its significance. A classroom situation created on the battlefield is in itself something artificial.

Hence we have to probe into the real intention of the author of the Gita in using the imagery of a discourse on a chariot on the battlefield. In other words, the *text* has to be interpreted in the *con-*

*text*. In the contextual background of the Gita we come across a classical text, the Katha Upanishad, which is definitely a pre-Gita compilation. In it the rich symbolism of the chariot is described as follows:

Know the Atman as the lord of the chariot,  
And the body as, verily, the chariot;  
Know the *buddhi* as the charioteer,  
And the *manah* as, verily, the reins.  
The senses, they say, are the horses,  
The object of the senses the paths;  
The atman associated with the senses  
and the mind,  
Is said to be the enjoyer

Kaddopanishad, 1.3.3-4.

The Upanishad develops further the symbolism of the chariot and says that there are moments in our life when the senses go out of control like wicked horses as they are not harnessed with the *buddhi* and hence the mind cannot restrain them. The word yoga is derived from the root *yuj*, which originally means to yoke, to harness, and hence is related to the symbolism of the chariot. The person who cannot control his senses and mind is called *ayuktah* (Kath Up. 1.3.5). In Maitri Upanishad 4:4 the embodied atman is spoken of as *radthitha*, the carted one. The author of the Gita takes up this archetypal image of the chariot familiar to the readers of his time in order to describe the dynamics of spiritual transformation. A person who experiences acute disharmony in his life (*ayogah*) surrenders himself to the divine Lord, who enters his *buddhi* (intuitive faculty), takes hold of the reins of the *manah* (discursive mind) and controls the senses. The di-

vine Lord thus becomes the charioteer and guide, teacher and saviour for the human seeker in a crisis situation. The battlefield is in fact the arena of life's ongoing struggles. "Life is a battle and a field of death – this is Kurukshetra. War and destruction are not only a universal principle of our life here in its purely material aspects, but also of our mental and moral existence. It is self-evident that in the actual life of man intellectual, social, political, moral we can make no real step forward without a struggle, a battle between what exists and lives, and what seeks to exist and live and between all that stands behind either" (Aurobindo 1980: 37,39). This is made clear in the opening verse of the Gita: the Kurukshetra is the Dharmakshetra; the battlefield of life is the place where righteousness and harmony prevail. In moments of severe crisis, when humans are at the end of their energy, the divine Lord enters the human chariot of life and takes them out of the crisis. This assurance is given in the salvific message that is something unique in the Gita (4: 7-8). "The life of the soul is symbolised by the battlefield of Kurukshetra and the Kauravas are the enemies who impede the progress of the soul. Krishna stands for the voice of God" (Radhakrishnan 1958: 520-521).

Here we touch upon the central teaching of the Gita. The dialogue between Arjuna and Sreebhagavan is the symbolic expression of the ongoing inner dialogue between manah and buddhi, between the individual atman and the supreme Atman, between the human seeker and the divine Lord (Berg Quoted in Sharma 1987: 31). The entire dialogue has only one aim: to de-

liver the human seeker from the situation of *ayoga* to the experience of *yoga*, from disharmony to harmony, and thereby to make him an effective instrument in the process of transformation from adharma to dharma. An integral inner harnessing of the senses with the mind and of the mind with buddhi, and of the buddhi with the atman, and of the personal atman with the divine Atman takes place in this yoga process (3:42, 6:20-25). The entire spirituality of the Gita may be summarised in the one call: *yogastah kuru karmani*, being harnessed within, get engaged in your works (2:48). The dialogue between Arjuna and the divine Lord on the chariot is therefore the symbol of the inner dialogue that takes place between the human soul and the divine Lord in the cave of the heart. "Bhagavad Gita is not a historical work, but under the guise of physical warfare it describes the dialogue that perpetually goes on in the hearts of all human beings; the physical warfare has been brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring." (Gandhi 1931: 4). "The scene described in the Gita symbolises allegorically the situation which most human beings face some time in their lives, namely, the challenge of decision-making when one is not sure whether what one is about to do is right or wrong. The Gita provides an excellent technique of decision-making" (Singh 1977:3).

Bhagavad Gita should therefore be taken primarily as a mystical poem. There is a personal mystical experience that gave shape to this text, as is the case with many mystical writings worldwide. The author of the Gita finds himself in

an acute crisis: he does not know in which direction he should take his next step. "My mind is totally perplexed concerning what to do; deep sorrow parches my senses; I cannot see things clearly any more!" (2:7-8). Unable to face the situation he is tempted to flee from the battlefield of life. But here he does something salutary: he surrenders himself totally to the Lord. "Oh, divine Master, tell me clearly, what is auspicious for me. I am your disciple. I take refuge in you. Teach me." (2:7) With this he creates space within himself for the saving divine intervention. He surrenders the reins of his mind to the divine charioteer. In his *buddhi* the divine Lord enters his life. And it is in this inner sacred space that the dialogue takes place. In the course of this salvific dialogue the human seeker is 'enlightened and strengthened; at the end he stands up and declares: "My delusion is gone. I have regained clarity of vision, all through your grace, Lord." (18:73) The human person is led out of his crisis and given a holistic vision of reality.

This is the basic mystical experience of the Gita. In order to describe it and communicate it to the successive generations the sage picks out two characters from the evolving story of the Mahabharatha: Arjuna and Krishna, and he clothes his experience in the form a long dialogue between them at Kurukshetra on the eve of the decisive war. By selecting this motif he presents the core of his spirituality powerfully: encounter with the divine Lord does not take us away from the struggles of life, but inserts us deeply into them. What the sage asks for is not the giving up of works, but the renunciation of the greed

(*kama*) that vitiates the works (6:1). The theme of the war is mentioned in chapters I-II clearly but as the dialogue evolves the theme of the physical war recedes and the message of the inner spiritual battle comes to the fore. "The echoes of the battlefield die away, and we have only an interview between God and man." (Radhakrishnan 1971: 521). The motif of the physical war is 'something like a canvas on which the sage paints the process of the inner battle', that goes on in the heart of every person (Nataraja Guru 1962: ix). Hence, as we read the Gita our attention is to be directed to the impressive description of the spiritual liberative process of the Gita; we should not be confined to the epic context, which is only an artificial setting. "Since the Gita's subject is not description of the war and justification of violence, it is wrong to give much importance to these. If, moreover, it is difficult to reconcile a few of the verses with the idea the Gita advocates, i.e., non-violence, it is still more difficult to reconcile the teaching of the work as a whole with the advocacy of violence" (Gandhi, *Bhagavad Gita*: 12)

### Who is the Enemy?

In order to grasp the deeper meaning of the notion of war in the Gita one has to ask: who is the enemy that the text alludes to? If the Gita is not the work of the political history of a people the question regarding the Kauravas is a pseudo-question. Since Gita is a mystical poem, one has to explore the reality of the enemy primarily within oneself. Intrinsic to the human person, according to the Gita, there is an ongo-

ing battle between two attitudes to life: one coming from the ego-assertion (*ahamkara*) and the other evolving out of self-realisation (*atmabodha*). What enslaves a person to the ego is greed (*kama*), and what liberates a person is the sense of harmony (*dharma*). Kama is the destructive force in the fabric of the human psyche. This is the enemy within:

Greed it is, arising from the constituent of the passionate strand of nature, all devouring, mightily wicked – know this to be your enemy on earth.

This is the wise man's eternal enemy; by this is wisdom overcast, whatever form it takes, a fire insatiable.

Therefore strike down this evil element, the sinful destroyer of wisdom and discrimination.

It is really hard to get at this enemy appearing in the form of greed. Having realised the Self beyond the buddhi, having steadied your self in the divine Self, smites this enemy!

(3: 37-43 *passim*)

If the real enemy is the greed within, the real battle takes place within oneself. To get on to this battle one has to stand firm in the inner consciousness of being one with the divine Self. The inner purification demands primarily a deliverance from the grips of kama. "Only by renouncing the desires coming from greed can one gradually get rooted in the consciousness of the true Self." (6:24-25) Hence Gita proclaims the ethics of *nishkama karma*: "do your duty without greedily clinging on to the fruits of the action" (6:1, 3:19: 2:48) One has to liberate oneself from the possessive grip of *I and mine*. "The devotee is the one who is free from

the feelings of *I* and mine." (12:13) "Liberated from all sorts of desires coming from kama he moves about without the feeling of *I do* and *for me*." (2:71) The only motivation for his life and work would then be 'to bring about the integral welfare of the world': "The unwise act out of attachment to the works; the wise however being freed from kama work solely for the integral welfare of the world" (*lokasamgraha*, 3:25).

## Victory of the Self

When through the inner battle one overcomes the narrow confines of kama, the perspectives are broadened. "One perceives the divine Self in all things and all in the Self; one sees God present in all things and all in God " (6:29-30). One experiences 'the divine presence pulsating in the heart of all beings.' (10:20) The entire universe is experienced as a *theophany*: matter is the *body* of the Lord, for everything is *pervaded* by the Lord, who is the *Ground of being* (11:15f, 9:4, 7:8-12) One develops an intense feeling that one lives and moves in a divine milieu (6:31). The work that one does becomes thereby participation in the divine work of establishing universal harmony (*dharma*). When one surrenders one's works to the divine master one finds oneself as instrument in the hands of the divine Lord (9:27). Hence the divine injunction: "At all times muse upon me and get involved in the battle. May your mind and buddhi be surrendered to me" (8:7) Definitely the reference is not to the physical war as is evident in the subsequent verses, which describe the process of meditation.

The goal of the spiritual battle is therefore the individual's inner harmony (*yoga*) that leads to the universal harmony of the world (*dharma*). "If the buddhi is lit up by the consciousness of the Self and makes it the master-light of its life, its guidance will be in harmony with the cosmic purpose. If the light of the Atman is reflected in buddhi in a proper way, that is, if the buddhi is cleared of all obscuring tendencies, the light will not be distorted, and buddhi will be in union with the Atman (Radhakrishnan 1977: 116). When the Lord motivates Arjuna to 'brace himself for the fight' (*yuddhaya yujyaswa*, 2:38), what he means is that Arjuna should 'brace himself for yoga' (*yogaya yujyaswa*, 2:50). And when the Lord asks Arjuna to 'stand up resolute for the fight' (*uttishta, yuddhaya krtanischayah*, 2:37), what he means is that Arjuna should 'stand up resorting to yoga' (*yogam atistha uttishta* 4:42). The challenge in the Gita is, therefore, to get at the inner battle against an ego-centred attitude to life. Then it becomes verily a battle for God's work: for the *establishment of dharma* (4:8)

With the inner freedom won through the inner battle one is enabled to discover one's specific duty in society: "Devoted in joy to one's own duty one attains perfection" (*swadharma*, 18:45). Discovery of one's duty is a matter of inner freedom and maturity. The teaching of the Gita enables a seeker to grow into maturity. "The freed soul is inspired by divine knowledge and moved by the divine will. He acquires the mode of being (*bhava*) of God" (Radhakrishnan *Bhagavad Gita*: 76). Each one has to discern for oneself what

the Lord wants one to do in this world. Then one's dharma becomes an insertion into the universal dharma of the Lord. "By dedicating one's works to the Lord, who is the source of the activity of all beings and by whom this universe is pervaded, one attains perfection" (18: 46). With this attitude one develops a deeper subject-consciousness: I am not the real subject of what I do but the divine Lord is the true subject of my works (*anahamkara* 13:9). "The one who is free of kama and possessiveness, the one who is liberated from the *I do* feeling, is destined to become Brahman" (18:53).

## War and Violence

Here the question of *just war* gets a theonomous meaning. Having gone through the inner battle through which the ego-centredness is conquered, one makes a discernment and may discover that a physical war has to be waged. Such a decision is not motivated by interests evolving out of kama but by concerns coming from an awareness of dharma. In this sense Gita speaks of *dharma-war* (*dharmayuddha*, 2:31, 33). Here the physical war is understood as participation in the divine work of establishing dharma in the world. And the person who gets engaged in it considers it as fulfilling his duty of protecting the rights of people. A person who holds responsibility for a country may have to take decisions which may cause disturbances for some sections of people. But such a decision is preceded by an open search for the well-being of all and a sincere dialogue with all parties concerned (cfr. Mahabharata, Udyogaparvam 126). What the Gita

demands is that no taint of *kama*, no element of egoism, should be at work in such a decision.(18:59). Offensive steps taken out of *kama* leads to violence, which is totally unethical. Only a person who has gone through the hard and assiduous battle within oneself has the freedom and credibility to wage a physical war that may become inevitable from the *dharma* point of view. “It must be remembered that it is war of this kind and under these conditions that the Gita had in view, war considered as an inevitable part of human life, but so restricted and regulated as to serve like other activities the ethical and spiritual development which was then regarded as the whole real object of life, war destructive within certain carefully fixed limits of the bodily life of individual men but constructive of their inner life and of the ethical elevation of the race” (Aurobindo 1980: 46).

However, the idea of the physical war cannot be pushed to the fore in interpreting the Gita. A war may be the last resort in solving a problem because it would inevitably mean a certain amount of suffering inflicted on others. But the ethos that is dominant in the Gita is that of equanimity, non-violence and compassion. A person who is interiorly integrated (*yogin*) is a person of equanimity: “equanimous towards friends and foes, comrades and enemies, saints and sinners” (6:9); “in the selfsame way he looks at allies and enemies” (14:25); “he is unperturbed in success and failure, in gain and loss” (2:38, 48) (“In the language of the Gita I want to live at peace with both friend and foe” (Gandhi 1924)). Such a liberated person has developed a higher consciousness that

keeps his mind above the dualities of the conflicts of life (*dvandvateeta*) (4:22, 2:45). This state of consciousness would not allow him to enter upon a path of violence. He will rather be ‘passionately concerned about the good of all beings’ (*sarvabhutahiterata*), (12:4) He will see reflections of his *true Self* in all beings and thus feel *one* with all (6:31-32) As hallmarks of a liberated person Gita mentions mercy (*daya*) and compassion (*karuna*) (16:1, 12:13):

He who feels no hatred for any being,  
who is friendly and compassionate,  
free from the possessive feelings of *I*  
and *mine*, even-minded in pain and  
pleasure, patient and forbearing...he  
is dear to me (12:13).

This compassionate attitude is the response to the perception of the divine presence in all beings. When the entire realm of reality is seen as the divine realm, one cannot do any form of violence towards any sentient being. In no verse does the Gita advocate violence; the term violence (*himsa*) appears only once in the entire text, and that is to condemn violence: Only those whose mind is clouded by the power of darkness (*tamas*) and whose steps are taken out of delusion (*moha*) inflict violence on others without any regard for the tragic consequences and destruction (18:25). Repeatedly Gita upholds the value of non-violence (*ahimsa*) as the specific characteristic of the person who goes through the spiritual *sadhana* (10:5, 13:7, 16:2, 16:3, 17:14). In this perception Gita stands under the influence of Buddhism (Upadhyaya 1983: 528-539). Non-violence is not the attitude of a



timid person; on the contrary, it is the fearful person who in defence of himself forces violence on others. One who is anchored in the ego and motivated by greed for power and money causes a lot of violence on others (16:13-16). One who does not have self-confidence turns out to be violent in every possible way. A person who is 'firmly established in the experience of the true Self' (2:55f) is a self-confident person and he will

never take to violence. The entire teaching of the Gita is geared to making persons self-confident and interiorly free, and thus non-violent. *Yogathah kuru karmani* – be grounded in the divine Self and get engaged in your works (2:48) – when this central message of the Gita comes across to the nation, individuals and communities can only promote a culture of non-violence. *Ahimsa paramo dharma*.

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