

Hinduism and Conscientious Objection to War

by

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STATEMENTS often made about Hinduism create the impression that non-violence is an unequivocal and universal principle of Hindu ethics, and, therefore, conscientious objection to war is every citizen's right. These impressions are based on the fallacies that Hinduism believes in the attainment of a common and equal spiritual and, therefore, ethical and moral standard on the part of every individual, so that non-violence can be practised by all equally as a universal principle of life. On the other hand, it might be assumed without careful examination that the state, or a king in the Hindu monarchy, has a right to call upon any citizen indiscriminately to participate in a war, and it is the average citizen's duty to heed such a call. As a check against the state's right, a citizen may declare conscientious objection to war, but the state has the power to question and examine the sincerity of this declaration of conscience. Such fallacies and the impressions developed from them arise from an oversimplification of the positions taken in Hinduism which are, in fact, very complex.

These complex positions and values were developed in another civilization which arose and continued from an ancient past to our times. Universal conscription has never existed in the Hindu states at any time in the thirty-five centuries of its history. Nor does Nepal, the only constitutionally Hindu state in the world, now have such conscription even though the Gurkhas, Hindu by religion, are known among the best fighters in the world. Further, the Hindu king (or state) is not a lawmaker; he only applies the laws of each community and caste group under advice from the *panchayats*, councils of all adults and elders of the given community. Uniform imposition of all laws on all citizens equally is not equitable, and is totally against the principles of freedom of the individual.

Many problems arise when these positions and values of Hinduism have to be applied to situations in states whose own political philosophies, laws on citizens' rights, and rules governing the state's control of citizens are entirely different. It would appear to a Hindu (or Buddhist) observer that universal conscription in some western states is based on the political philosophy that there should be a common standard of moral accomplishment for all citizens and the state may not only call upon any citizen indiscriminately to participate in such violence but can also enforce compliance to the call. While a citizen has the right to object to compulsory conscription, the state retains the power to examine this objection.

In trying to find the Hindu position we have the choice of (a) limiting conscription to a certain caste, (b) support of selected wars, and (c) total non-violence. We shall now attempt to clarify matters by exploring the relevant aspects of the Hindu philosophical and theological background, the political code developed from that philosophy, and the possible applications of the code to the situation in the present western states.

Basic to an understanding of the Hindu approach to non-violence is the Hindu position on understanding human personality. According to Hinduism, all nature has three attributes, *gunas*. The technical Sanskrit terms for these, and other ideas to be used in this article, cannot be translated into English; only approximate indications of their meaning can be given.

The attributes are:

sattva: purity, harmony, peace, light (represented by the colour white);

rajas: activity, movement, energy (represented by the colour red); and

tamas: darkness, inactivity, inertia (represented by the colour black or dark blue).

Before creation, these attributes rest in dormant nature, *prakṛti*, in a state of equilibrium, undisturbed, neutralized, and inactive. In creation, when God's powers of Will, Knowledge, and Action stir them from cosmic sleep, they are agitated, arranged and distributed in various proportions to the different forms and faculties, the phenomena, of creation; this redistribution of the attributes in different proportions gives the different phenomena each its own characteristic nature. All things, faculties, and activities, both in the objective and subjective world, are divided into their categories by the predominance of a single attribute, in whatever degree, over the other two. Here, we are not concerned with the categories of the physical world, and move on, instead, to human personality and its activities. Without going into the nature of self, *âtman*, the principle of Life and Consciousness, the spirit, we start here with an understanding of human mind.

In the Hindu system of psychology, mind is the medium between the self (that is life-force, *jîva*, or consciousness-force, *cit*) and the physical personality. In its finer, inner aspect, mind shares with self a little of life and consciousness, and in its coarser, exterior aspect, it shares with the physical world's stimulus-response patterns. Mind brings to the exterior surfaces and senses the inner life and consciousness from the reservoir of individual self and Universal Self, and, in turn, it brings the physical data, fed to it through the senses, to the inner self. The true self is never tainted by "sin"; the mind, however, is. Whatever type of activity the mind participates in or directs the body to undertake, and whatever experiences are fed into the mind, it gathers their subtle impression, *saṁskâras*, in its own "storehouse", *âśaya*. Since these activities and experiences can only be *sattvic*, *rajasic* or *tamasic*, the impressions, *saṁskâras*, gathered in the mind also fall into these categories alone. The mirror of the mind is covered, as it were, with the fine dust—symbolically white, red or black—to whatever "thickness" depending on the involvement and intensity of the experience. The self looks at its own reflection in this "dust-

covered” mirror and mistakes itself to be impure. This mistake is the beginning of *karma*, action and its results that accrue to the personality. The constituents determining the type of human personality, then, are these *samskâras* of actions. The actions may be mental, vocal or physical, directed towards oneself or to another self encapsuled in a physical body. The personality types in the Hindu system of psychology, then, are also the *sattvic*, *rajasic*, and *tamasic*. The interaction between individuals or societies (communities, organizations, states) can fall only into these categories. For details, see Bhagavadgita chapters 14, 17 and 18.

The development of the personality type depends on these factors: the *karma* accumulated in the past life, and further action now being performed and the experiences now being gathered through interaction in the world of phenomena and with other living beings. The sum total of one’s *samskâras* also determines the next incarnation: the type of body in which one is reborn (species), duration of stay (life-span) there, and the sum-total of its pleasure or pain during that stay as a result of the previous *karma*. This is also the theory behind the four *varnas*, human divisions and their duties as well as the place in the society assigned to those born in a *varna*.

It is *not* that one must do certain things because one is born in a certain caste, that the *brahmin* must teach, the *vaiśya* must trade and so forth. It is that because of one’s *samskâras*, the personality traits and predispositions, *vâsanâs*, gathered through the previous flesh-capsule (incarnation), the mental computer is now already programmed so as to be disposed and inclined to take a certain direction. A man does whatever he does because of what he is; he does it well or not because of how intensely and completely he is what he is. To demand of him participation in an activity that is against his basic character traits is to violate his personality. Thus the caste personality determines one’s social duties, including war which thus cannot become the duty of the citizens of all castes and all personality traits indiscriminately. This duty, based on natural disposition, and the sacred law binding an individual to do such duty is called *dharma*. There is no other law but the law of *dharma*. According to *Mahâbhârata*, “when all citizens (indiscriminately) take to weapons, they transgress their respective natural duties, *dharma*s”—*Śânti-parvan* 78.12 (Gita Press edition). “Better death in the discharge of one’s own *dharma*: the *dharma* of another is fraught with danger”—Bhagavadgita III. 35. This limits the war only to a segment of the citizenry, to a volunteer army and not to a conscript army, only to those who are predisposed towards such a life.

Here a dual problem arises which is somewhat akin to the question of predestination versus free will in the Christian religion. How much is a person constrained by his past *karma*, and how much choice for the exercise of free will has he in this life? The answer is that there is always an inexhaustible stream of free will that can flow from the self through the mind into human action. The supreme consciousness is never completely lost. While the personality purges itself of its *karma*, its *sattvic*, *rajasic* and *tamasic* accumulations, by bearing the fruit of seeds planted earlier, and, often by responding to the tendencies and predispositions latent in the mind, the self uses its free will so that the actions undertaken now, *kriyamâna karma*, while responding

appropriately to latent tendencies, may also serve as a means of further purification and refinement. The action in response to a *tamasic* predominance and disposition in the mind may be used to enhance the capacities of the *rajas*, and similarly, the *rajas* to serve the *sattva*. The lower can thus become the instrument of the higher; a war tempered with restraints is more ethical than a war totally unrestrained. So that objection to selected wars is appropriate. One may perform the caste duties, using these actions only as instruments of gradual refinement so that *tamas* may give away to *rajas* and that in turn to *sattva* which, finally, may let the true light of the self through. Thus, the entire personality, and the society composed of such persons may become pure.

If the above argument seems a little strained, let us clarify the metaphysics a little further. The highest aim in life is believed to be the fullest realization of self (which must be freed from the binding impressions gathered in the mind through karma), and the union of that individual self with the Will, Knowledge and Activity of the Universal Self. This is made possible (i) by constant refinements in action and thereby in the constitution of mental personality, and (ii) by definite processes of yoga meditation. Meditation not only brings about refinement of personality, but also helps the self toward its realization as being beyond the grasp of physical and mental experiences, and as one with the non-temporal, non-spatial, unconditioned Self (God).

The sole aim of maintaining a social structure is to help each individual in this constant practice of ethical refinement, meditation and self-realization. Any political or economic philosophy, any law or action of the state or of the individuals that goes against this aim is to be regarded as unethical. Any action that would lead the *sattvic* personality to commit actions or gather experiences that are *rajasic* is, thus, totally against basic Hindu ethics. Also, since the oneness of all life is an important principle in Hinduism, it is the sum total of all pain in the universe that needs to be reduced, not just that of specific individuals, specific communities and states as against others. Hence, total non-violence becomes the ethical principle to aspire for. In other words, an ethical system is consistent with Hindu philosophy because each individual can overcome his “deterministic” *karma* through his choice to exercise the free will of the self in striving towards liberation. The principle of a limited war can be accepted only because not all people can be equally non-violent but they may use their *rajasic* tendencies in the service of the non-violent, who are otherwise often attacked by those who cannot curb their violence.

This would seem to echo exactly the arguments of the war-mongers of all times who attempt to justify their wars as righteous. However, the Bhagavadgita is very clear on this. Even though the Gita is preached in a battlefield and is an admonition to Arjuna to fight, the main argument is a spiritual one. “Even here on earth the entire creation is conquered by those whose mind is ever in a state of equilibrium” (v. 19). “The supreme Self is in harmony with him who is self-conquered” (VI.7). One is advised to maintain equanimity through all experiences whether pleasant or unpleasant, towards honour or dishonour, fame and ignominy (V.20, VI. 7). “He who

regards impartially lovers, friends, and foes, strangers, neutrals, aliens and kinsmen, also the righteous and unrighteous, he excels” (VI. 9)—so that any strong feelings of revenge in a battle must be avoided; there must be no ill-will towards any being (XII. 13) because “he from whom the people do not get perturbed (and draw away) and who does not draw away from the people, free from the anxieties, joy, anger and fear, he is dear to me” (XII. 15). Even though Arjuna has declared his intention not to fight (II. 9), this declaration is to no avail because his innate tendencies, his nature, *prakṛti*, will constrain him sooner or later to engage in a battle. “Bound by your action (which is) born of your own nature, that which from delusion you desire not to do, even that helplessly you will perform” (XVIII. 57-60). Since this *rajasic* nature is present, it must be directed to act in a restrained and spiritually refined manner. Arjuna is thus advised: “Surrendering all actions to me, with your thoughts resting on the supreme Self, freed from expectations and egoism, with your mental fever cured, engage in battle” (III. 30). He must fight, regarding pain or pleasure, loss or gain, victory or defeat as immaterial (II. 38). The way of the Bhagavadgita then, is certainly not the way of a warmonger justifying his ill-will and greed. It is not an advice to fight for one’s country and commander whether right or wrong. Each individual’s conscience must be his own witness. The decision to fight must be taken after one has totally freed oneself of all agitation, with no selfish aims or ego, no mental fever. When one has reached such a state of equilibrium, a battle can be fought only as an act of devotion to a duty to protect and guard and not to win and conquer others. The only true conquest is the conquest over oneself; he who has not conquered the self is not qualified to fight others. In other words, one may fight a battle within the macrocosmic Self as one fights for good against evil within his own microcosmic self. Such a war can be undertaken only after serious introspection, and if the national pride is an extension of one’s personal ego, such a pride must be checked and balanced with higher considerations. A righteous war, then, will be extremely difficult to embark upon, and then only as a last resort.

The limited wars in which a person only of the *kshatriya* caste may participate are termed *dharma-yuddha* for which the principles and rules are laid down in the Law Book of Manu:

When fighting in the battle one must not attack the enemies with secret weapons, nor with barbed arrows, nor with the poisoned ones, nor with flaming ones.

From a vehicle, one must not hit an enemy who is on the ground, nor a eunuch, nor one who is clasping his hands (in submission or greeting), nor one whose hair is in disarray, nor him who is sitting down (weary), nor who (surrenders) saying “I am yours”.

(One must not attack) a sleeping enemy, nor a naked one, nor one who is weaponless, or whose armour is broken, nor one who is merely watching without fighting.

(Nor should one attack an enemy) whose weapons have broken down, or who is in grief, or is badly wounded, or is scared, nor one who is turning his back. VII. 90-93.

The rules laid down in the Mahabharata are even more lucid (Gita Press edition, *Śānti-parvan* Ch. 95):

One is not to fight against a *kṣatriya* who is without an armour. A single (soldier) should battle another single one (challenging) '(shoot your weapon)' and 'I shoot (mine)'. 7.

If (the opponent) comes armoured, one should become armoured; if he comes with an army, one could challenge him with an army. 8.

If he resorts to trickery, one may fight back with trickery. If he fights according to (the rules of) *dharma*, one should turn him away (in a battle following the rules of) *dharma*. 9.

A horseman should not attack a charioteer; only a charioteer may assail another charioteer. No attack should be made when (the enemy is) in difficulty nor when he is scared or already has been defeated. 10.

An arrow should not be poisoned or barbed; such are weapons only of the evil men. One should fight straight and should not get angry at (the enemy who) is trying to kill. 11.

...(An enemy) who has already lost his vitality (is weary or faint) should not be killed, nor one who is without an offspring. 12.

(An enemy) whose weapons are broken, who is in a state of helplessness, whose bowstring is cut, whose vehicle is destroyed (or mount is dead), should be given a (medical/hospitable) treatment in one's own realm, or should be escorted to his own home. 13.

After the wounds have healed he must be released. This is the ancient law... 14.

Again, in Chapter 96:

Only a *kṣatriya* ought to battle a *kṣatriya*... 1.

If a *brahmin* (educator/priest) seeking to bring peace comes between two armies that are in battle array, the fight should be stopped. 8.

If a so-called *kṣatriya* were to break such a rule, he then no longer counts (as a soldier or a citizen) and cannot be allowed to take a seat in a council. 9-10.

It is obvious, then, that any war in which non-combatants and civilians suffer is not a *dharma-yuddha* and any *kṣatriya* would be violating his religious and moral obligations; furthermore, under a constitution based on Hindu principles, he would lose his right to sit in any council, especially if the specific war was disapproved of by the educators and clergymen of the country. There is, of course, no question of anyone participating in war who is primarily devoted to pursuits of knowledge and intellect (a *brâhmana*), to trade, industry, and agriculture (a *vaiśya*) or even to mere physical labour (a *śûdra*). In practice *only those may participate in a war who prove themselves to be personalities of the rajasic type*.

In a society where this principle is observed, the conscientious warrior alone will be recruited, after demonstrating his inclinations in psychological tests and in social/educational

situations. For this reason, ancient Indian kings often ordered violent criminals to fight in the army under the respectable *kṣatriyas*. The theme of the motion picture, “The Dirty Dozen”, comes very close to this idea. In a society accepting such a principle everyone is a conscientious objector unless proved otherwise. The contradiction between the ethics of total non-violence on one hand and limited wars and police activity on the other is resolved by giving everyone the right to follow the path of yoga to the extent to which his personality is ready for it. The moment a *kṣatriya* feels that his mind is no longer inclined towards *rajasic* activity, he may at once take to the path of renunciation, *nivṛtti* and, accepting universal non-violence (see Patanjali’s *yoga-sūtra* II. 31) declare a monastic vow, “let no creature fear me henceforth” (*Manu* VI. 39). Here all caste distinctions disappear and all contradictions are resolved. The total approach is realistic in that the possibility of evil perpetrated by the unscrupulous throughout history, and the possible need of physical resistance to such evil, is not denied. But it is curbed and controlled with rigorous application of moral principles and codes of action, maintaining total non-violence as an ideal within the reach of the majority. The moral dilemmas suffered by the British pacifist during the second world war are thus easily resolved.

The superiority of the *sattvic* pursuits is always to be recognized. Even a king, or a government official, must enter a hermitage, monastery or an educational institution in a humble garb, not exhibiting the insignia of secular and state power (see Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñāna-śākuntala*, Act 1). A university graduate has the right of way over a king (*Manu* II. 138-139).

In conclusion, the principles applicable to modern western states are that total non-violence should be the aim of any civilized society. It is the responsibility of the state that its citizens put this theory into practice and only those of *rajasic* tendencies may volunteer for army service, since citizens do not have uniform duties to the state. Those engaged in intellectual and economically productive pursuits are exempt from army duties. Education should be the fourth separate principle of power along with the executive, legislative and judiciary. Educators should have the power of veto on infringements of such moral principles as non-violence. The sum total of the pain and pleasure in the whole world should be the primary concern of all citizens who should be able to challenge a war that threatens the world community. Finally, the question of conscientious objection cannot be resolved in isolation. It is interwoven with the moral and political philosophies and constitutional structures of modern states. The Hindu views regard only the meditative union of individual self with the Universal Self as the goal of all aspects of life; all that goes against this goal is regarded as unethical and a person’s engaging in war does not lead him to such a meditative union.

