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Svadharma and the Ethics of Hiṃsā: Interpreting Ahiṃsā in Bhagavad Gītā

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Abstract

The *Bhagavad Gītā* (BG)[3] as both a scriptural and spiritual discourse, offers a rigorous cum ethical framework of life and living embedded on the principles of the *Ātman* (Self), *svadharma* (one's own duty) and *niṣkāma karma* (selfless action). The principle of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) in current global moral discourse is frequently illustrated as a complete absence of *hiṃsā* (violence). The interpretations of the *Gītā* paradoxically present a nuanced dialectic on *ahiṃsā* and *hiṃsā* in light of *svadharma*. The study, based on an in-depth review of the *mūlagrantha* - encompassing *Śaṅkarācārya's* and other select commentaries explored the philosophical foundation of *dharmasaṅgata* (justified) *hiṃsā*. It sought to examine how the text simultaneously upholds the ideal of *ahiṃsā* while also engaging with the socio-political necessity of resolving conflict through a non-partisan and ethically grounded framework. The research findings demonstrated that *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* 1. signifies the active safeguarding of moral and societal order vis-à-vis merely a passive state of renunciation 2. is rationalized given the integrity of one's core intent. This investigation significantly challenges the contemporary 'just war' theory by shifting the emphasis from the external conduct to the 'just resolve' of the agent. Further, this research provides a nuanced comprehension of the mediation of traditional oriental philosophy between individual conscience and societal obligation.

Keywords: ahiṃsā; Bhagavad Gītā; hiṃsā; svadharma; just-war theory

[3] *a treatise of Sanātana dharma where Lord Kṛṣṇa guides the warrior Arjuna on duty and dharma*

1. Introduction

1.1. The Background of *Kurukṣetra*: Emergence of the *Bhagavad Gītā*

The battle of *Kurukṣetra* in the great Indian epic *Mahābhārata* is the climax of institutionali zed oppression. After survival of assassination attempts like the *lākṣāgṛha* (house of lac), and thirteen years of *vanavāsa* (forest exile) and *ajñātavāsa* (living incognito), the *Pāṇḍavas* sought to be reconciled by merely demanding five villages. *Duryodhana* categorically refused and did not give them even a *sūcyagra* (needle-point) of land. When *Kṛṣṇa* intervened as a peace messenger, *Duryodhana* tried to imprison Him saying: '*jānāmi dharmaṁ na ca me pravṛttiḥ*' - I know what my duty is, but I am prevented by my *saṃskāras* (past impressions) and am not able to do it.' (Sukthankar et al., 1942, *Mahābhārata* 5.33). As war became inevitable *Arjuna* asked to have his chariot placed between the two armies. Seeing his kinsmen, he fell prey to *viṣāda* (despondency) as a conscientious objector (Upadhyaya, 1971). His plea for *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) was based on great fear of destruction of his *kula* (family), which in turn would destroy *dharma* (social order). In response to this moral paralysis *Kṛṣṇa* gave him divine wisdom. Compiled by the sage *Vyāsa* in 700 *ślokas* (verses), the *Bhagavad Gītā* was not only a dialogue of two men at the battle front, but also a spiritual manual to a peaceful and purposeful life.While the text offers a long and serious ethical framework on which to live, the question of how true *ahiṃsā* will prevail in the face of conflict is solved with three foundational princip les. First, *Kṛṣṇa* reveals the knowledge of *Ātman* (the immortal Self, Bg. 2.11-30) and this changes the concept of non-violence from the ephemeral body to the eternal soul. Second, He refers to *svadharma*, reminding *Arjuna* that it is his inherent duty as a *kṣatriya* (warrior) - to actively protect righteousness (Chapters 2, 3 and 18). Finally, *Kṛṣṇa* brings *niṣkāma karma* in order to ensure that this necessary duty is performed completely free of ego. By basing the dialectic of the *Gītā* on these particular concepts, the *Gītā* manages to surmount the complex problem of reconciling the universal ideal of *ahiṃsā* with the socio-political practicality of resolving conflict.

1.2 Global Moral Discourse on *Ahiṃsā*

In world ethics, *ahiṃsā* is stated to be the highest ethical standard *ahiṃsā paramo dharma* (non-violence is the ultimate duty), as declared in the *Mahābhārata* (12.262.5-6). Woven throughout *Sanātana Dharma* (the eternal natural order), it is manifest as a primordial value in the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads* (ancient foundational scriptures). The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.15.1 lists it together with veracity (truthfulness) as a prerequisite for spiritual liberatio n. Systematically codified as the first of the *yamas* (moral restraints) in *Patañjali*'s *Yoga Sūtras*, *ahiṃsā* is said to dissolve enmity in all beings around (*Yoga Sūtra* 2.35). Similarly, *Haṭha Yoga* (the discipline of physical and mental purification) says that it is the root of all ethical conduct for physical and mental purification. Thus, in the Eastern paradigm, *ahiṃsā* is not only understood as mere non-action (in the sense of a lack of action), but as the total non-injury of thought, word, and deed, based on spiritual unity, while in the Western discourse it is translated mainly as "non-violence", which focuses on the purposeful avoidance of physical harm in socio-political interactions (Sharp, 1973). While absolutist interpretations require that harm not be inflicted regardless of situation (Gandhi, 1926), in Western traditions, non-violence is often considered a moral and strategic tool, and therefore *hiṃsā* as a fundamental rupture of the ethical fabric (Teixeira, 2017), a view which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed perfectly by saying: Non-violence is an active political tool for social justice:

> *"Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon, which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals"* (King, 1964, p. 18).

King's metaphorical use of "weapon" and "sword" illustrates how the West often operationalizes non-violence as a socio-political tactic. In stark contrast, traditional oriental philosophy understands *ahiṃsā* not merely as a political strategy, but as a foundational state of being—the essential discipline for inner and outer harmony, ultimately guiding the individual toward Self-realization.

1.3 Universal Paradox: *Ahiṃsā* and *Hiṃsā* in Light of *Kṣatriya Svadharma*

When bridging the universal ideal of *ahiṃsā* with the martial context of the *Gītā*, it is imperative to engage with prominent pacifist counter-arguments. Most notably, Mahatma Gandhi (1926) in his *Anasaktiyoga* resolved this paradox through an allegorical hermeneutic, arguing that *Kurukṣetra* is not a historical battlefield, but rather a metaphor for the human heart, where a perpetual psychological war is waged between righteous impulses and base desires. From this absolutist pacifist standpoint, the text does not sanction physical *hiṃsā*, but strictly demands non-violent resistance against inner moral decay (Minor, 1982). While this allegorical reading is spiritually profound, classical commentators and modern realists argue that it risks diluting the text's explicit socio-political gravity. As Matilal (2002) points out, the *Gītā* is concerned with objective moral dilemmas of conflicting duties in the physical world, not merely a simple internal dichotomy of good and evil.

The absolutist concept of *ahiṃsā* encounters a keen paradox in the *Bhagavad Gītā* where the concepts of *ahiṃsā* and *hiṃsā* are given a subtle dialectic through the concept of *svadharma*. Classical commentaries are rather critical of the hesitation of *Arjuna*, and according to the view of Svami Gambhirananda, it is not wisdom that causes *Arjuna*'s grief, it is *moha* (delusion) and *sneha* (false attachment): Gambhirananda (1991, p. 6), It is the condition of *moha* and *sneha* that is called *hṛdayadaurbalyam* (weakness of heart) which is condemned in Bg. 2.3. As Matilal (2002) points out, the *Gītā* is concerned with moral dilemmas of conflicting duties and not with a simple dichotomy of good and evil. Furthermore, contemporary *Gītā* ethics, prominently articulated by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in his seminal work *Gītā Rahasya*, firmly reject passive renunciation in favor of *karmayoga* (the *yoga* of action). Tilak (1935) argued that the text mandates rigorous civic duty for the sake of *lokasaṅgraha* (universal welfare), performed with absolute equanimity. This framework establishes that true ethical conduct lies not in abandoning the world, but in executing one's *svadharma* (inherent duty) to safeguard society, devoid of personal motive or malice. Consequently, Ganeri (2007) claims this involves a shift from an ego-centric fear of personal sin to a socio-centric commitment to *lokasaṅgraha* (global well-being). This tension is similar to the Western problem of "dirty hands," in which leaders commit moral violations for the sake of averting greater harm (Walzer, 1973). Amartya Sen (2009) sees the dialogue as a deliberation on the two sides of consequentialist fears of war and deontological duty. Yet, traditional oriental philosophy mediates this without stooping to realpolitik (Walzer, 1977). While Western theorists such as Augustine and Aquinas focus on the rules of the outer game (*jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*; Orend, 2006), they begin to ignore the subjective consciousness of the combatant. The *Gītā* makes the point that even in an objectively just war, war is morally bad because of *rāga-dveṣa* (attachment and aversion), and fighting under the latter compromises the soldier morally, requiring a change in the moral focus from external behavior to the "just resolve" of the agent (Chakrabarti, 2015).

Thus, the scripture contradicts the philosophy that spiritual purity is passive renunciation. When *svadharma* implies the protection of the innocent, inaction is the failure of duty; the true morality is in the active protection of the order of society. As Gambhirananda (1991) says, there is no greater good for a *kṣatriya* than a battle sanctioned by *dharma*: *"dharmyād dhi yuddhāc chreyo 'nyat kṣatriyasya na vidyate"* (Bg. 2.31). Radhakrishnan (1948, p. 67) resolves this tension by pointing out the *Gītā* supports *niṣkāma karma*, not just violence, and that the

morality of the act rests wholly in the integrity of the core of the agent's intent. This rigid mediation between the universal ideal of *ahiṃsā*, *svadharma*, and the metaphysical reality of the *Ātman* is perfectly synthesized in Chapter 18.

> *yasya nāhaṅkṛtō bhāvō buddhir yasya na lipyatē |*
> *hatvāpi sa imāḻ lōkān na hanti na nibadhyatē ||* (Bg. 18.17)
>
> "*He who has not the feeling of egoism, whose intellect is not tainted, he does not kill, nor does he become bound-even by killing these creatures*!" (Gambhirananda, 1991).

This verse perfectly resolves the paradox: because the *Ātman* is indestructible, executing *svadharma* does not violate the spiritual truth of *ahiṃsā*, provided the agent acts with absolute non-attachment and a mind free from malice.

1.4 Thesis Statement and Research Gap

While contemporary Just War theory and modern military psychology, including foundational concepts of 'moral injury' (Litz et al., 2009) and revisionist debates concerning individ ual liability and associative duties (McMahan, 2009; Frowe, 2014; Lazar, 2015), have made strides in evaluating conflict, they remain overwhelmingly tethered to external socio-political conduct. A critical research gap persists: contemporary military ethics is systematically silent on the rigorous internal check of the combatant's consciousness.

To address this deficit, this paper posits that the *Bhagavad Gītā* offers a profound philosophic a l corrective by introducing *jus in animo* (justice in the mind). We argue that the *Gītā* reconfigures physical force, when aligned with *svadharma* and executed through *niṣkāma karma*, not as a moral infringement against *ahiṃsā*, but as *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā*. By systematically analyzing the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, this study demonstrates that true ethical combat requires transferring the moral locus from external legality to the just resolve of the agent. Ultimately, this research significantly reorients modern conflict ethics by proving that the active safeguarding of societal order must be anchored in the absolute integrity of the individual's core intent.

1.5 Research Questions

This paper investigates the philosophical foundations of *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* within the *Bhagavad Gītā* by addressing three primary research questions:

Q.1 How does *svadharma* reframe *hiṃsā* into *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā*, prioritizing the active safeguarding of moral order over passive renunciation?

Q.2 How does the principle of *niṣkāma karma* rationalize the use of force through the integrity of the agent's core intent?

Q.3 How does the *Gītā* challenge contemporary just war theory by shifting the ethical focus from external conduct to the agent's just resolve?

2. Methodology

To explore the philosophical and ethical dialectic of *ahiṃsā*, *hiṃsā*, *niṣkāma karma*, and *svadharma*, this paper bases its analysis squarely on the philosophical perspective of *Advaita Vedānta* (non-dualism). It uses the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*mūla-grantha*) as its primary source text, and is analyzed using the classical commentary (*bhāṣya*) of *Śaṅkarācārya*. Being the earliest known and most fundamental extant commentary on the *Gītā*, the *bhāṣya* of *Śaṅkara* offers a

rigorous ontological system that definitely divides the imperishable *Ātman*, and the transient physical realm—a precondition of interpreting the ethics of duty and detachment presented in the text (Rambachan, 2006).

In order to secure the utmost faithfulness to this non-dualist view, the text relies on the authoritative English version of the commentary of *Śaṅkara* by Swami Gambhirananda (1991). Gambhirananda, being a renowned scholar of the *Advaita Vedānta* and a former President of the Ramakrishna Math, was very rigorous in his translation of preserving the origina l hermeneutic integrity of the arguments of *Śaṅkara*. This study structurally avoids the interpretive conflicts that tend to appear when cross-referencing disparate ontological schools (e.g., *Viśiṣṭādvaita* or *Dvaita*). To carry out this analysis, the study takes a three-pronged approach that includes the dialectical hermeneutics, textual analysis, and comparative ethical enquiry. First, dialectical hermeneutics is applied to the text in the form of a *saṃvāda* (dialogue). Any internal interpretive contradiction of the narrative such as the initial thesis of absolute *ahiṃsā* of Arjuna or the synthesis of non-attached action of *Kṛṣṇa* is solved by analyzing it through the lens of non-dualism of *Śaṅkara* which provides a clear demarcation between the external action of a war and the combatant action of a just resolve. Second, the textual analysis systematizes the dialogue in three dimensions: the imperative of duty (built on the indestructible *Ātman*, Chapters 2 and 18), the explicit narrative of *ahiṃsā* (*Bg.* 10.5, 13.7, 16.2, 17.14), and the psychological mechanism of *niṣkāma karma* (Chapters 3-5). This commentary firmly grounds the original Indic context of psychological vices, including *dveṣa* (aversion) and *krodha* (anger), in their *Advaitic* definitions.

Lastly, this approach significantly challenges and supplements modern just war theory (*jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*) against this native psychological paradigm. Focusing more on the interiority of the agent and not just the conduct of the agent, this approach is a major challenge of the present-day just war paradigms. These approaches eventually become unified to create the definition of *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* that is not a two-polar system of violence and passive renunciation, but of active protection of moral and societal order, fully justified by the complete integrity of the inner will of the agent.

3. Theoretical Concepts

This section establishes the theoretical framework of the study by directly addressing the three primary research questions. Section 3.1 answers the first question by examining how the psychological imperative of *svadharma* and the metaphysical reality of the *Ātman* reframe violence into *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā*. Section 3.2 addresses the second question by exploring how the principle of *niṣkāma karma* rationalizes the use of force through the absolute integr ity of the agent's core intent. Finally, Section 3.3 answers the third question by comparing this internal psychological framework against the external conduct required by contemporary just war theory.

3.1 *Hiṃsā* into *Dharmasaṅgata Hiṃsā* in Light of *Svadharma*

This section examines the philosophical transition from absolute pacifism to justified action. By establishing the metaphysical indestructibility of the *Ātman* and the psychologic a l imperative of *svadharma*, the *Gītā* reframes the physical act of war. It demonstrates how force, when aligned with inherent natural law, ceases to be a moral transgression and instead becomes *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā*—the active safeguarding of societal order.

3.1.1 Deconstructing *Arjuna*'s Pacifism

The *Bhagavad Gītā* starts with an ethical dialectic that begins with a human failure. Chapter 1 (*Arjuna Viṣāda Yōga*) is known as the *pūrva-pakṣa* (preliminary argument): an argument in

favour of *ahiṃsā* that is passionate. A critical analysis, however, shows that the pacifism of *Arjuna* is not a result of *vairāgya* (spiritual detachment) or even principled altruism, but a symptom of psychological distress. His passive renunciation is categorised into four differe nt types of cognitive dissonance: *mōha* (attachment), *bhōga-virakti* (rejection of material reward), *pāpa-bhīti* (fear of moral transgression), and *kula-nāśa* (fear of social chaos).

Mōha, the main objection of *Arjuna* can be interpreted as a great expression of *mamakāra* (mine-ness). His protest relates to *hiṃsā* to his extended self. Being driven by *kṛpā* (false compassion) and *śōka* (grief), *Arjuna* admits that his limbs fail him because he sees his *svajanam* (own people) (Bg. 1.28). This *ahiṃsā* position is repeated when he doubts the valid ity of killing his own kinsmen by saying that no *śrēyas* (good) can be achieved through killing his own brother (Bg. 1.31-37). This frames the episode as a *mōha*-based identity crisis. *Arjuna* divulges by listing particular relationships (Bg. 1.34) that his *ahiṃsā* is a selective maintena nce of his emotional ecology, and not a universal ethical rule (Bg. 1.45).

Bhōga-virakti is the second strand. *Arjuna* develops a utilitarian argument, according to which the cost of victory is greater than its benefits. He poses the question to *Kṛṣṇa*, of what use is the kingdom, when those who want to enjoy pleasure are willing to sacrifice their lives (Bg. 1.32-33). He declines to do so even in the name of the *trailokya-rājya* (sovereignty of the three worlds) by renouncing so-called blood-stained spoils (Bg. 1.35). The last consequence of this reasoning is the pose of a passive victim, asserting that it would be *kṣēmataram* (better) that the enemy should kill him unarmed (Bg. 1.46). In the larger context of the *Gītā*, this is a misunderstanding of his existential role: *Arjuna* has conflated the performance of *svadharma* with *karma-phala* (results of its action), failing to understand that war is a means of doing justice, not a way of self-indulgence.

Pāpa-bhīti, the third objection posed by *Arjuna* is theological, based on the fear of sin. Although the foes are described as *ātatāyinaḥ* (attackers), he still insists that only sin will accrue to them by killing the aggressors (Bg. 1.36). The enemy is described as being *lōbhopahatacētāḥ* (blinded by greed), but *Arjuna* thinks that wisdom is dictating restraint (Bg. 1.38-39). This terror leads to his statement that they are determined to commit a *mahat pāpam* (great sin) (Bg. 1.45). In this case, *Arjuna* is operating under a rigid framework where killing is inherently evil, completely failing to distinguish between egoistic *hiṃsā* and *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā*.

kula-nāśa lastly, *Arjuna* offers a sociological argument regarding the possibility of a breakdown of social order. He argues that war will destroy *kula-dharma* (family customs) and in the process allow *adharma* (unrighteousness) to take over the clan (Bg. 1.40). He cautions that this results in the corruption of women and *varṇa-saṅkara* (mixing of castes) (Bg. 1.41). He also argues that this confusion will lead the family and ancestors to *narakāya* (hell) since the *piṇḍōdakakriyā* (offering in the rituals) will be stopped (Bg. 1.42-44). This highlights *Arjuna*'s anxiety over structural decay, viewing his own passive renunciation as the only fortress left against social anarchy.

3.1.2 The Divine Paradox: *Kṛṣṇa* Authenticated *Ahiṃsā*

This dialogical tension of the narrative is enhanced by the fact that *Kṛṣṇa* Himself is the unequivocal proponent of the ideal of *ahiṃsā* as being a divine virtue. The same scriptural authority, which stipulates *"tasmād yudhyasva"* (therefore fight) (Bg. 2.18) also glorifies non-violence. An exegesis of the text uncovers the fact that *Kṛṣṇa* defines *ahiṃsā* in four differe nt contexts and transforms it from mere moral choice to the highest levels of moral behavior. In the *Vibhūti-Yoga* (Chapter 10, Bg. 10.5), He mentions *ahiṃsā* along with *buddhi* (intellect) and *satyam* (truth) and says that all such virtues come directly from Him and hence, this non-

violence becomes an ontological reality. Further, in the *Kṣetra-Kṣetrajña-Vibhāga-Yoga* (Chapter 13, Bg. 13.7), *Kṛṣṇa* identifies *ahiṃsā* as one of those integral elements of *jñānam* (true knowledge) that is identical to *amānitvam* (humility) and *ārjavam* (integrity), while all the rest is designated as *ajñānam* (ignorance). This means that egoistic *hiṃsā* is contrary to wisdom, which drives the warrior towards *niṣkāma karma*.

In Chapter 16 (*Daivāsura-Sampad-Vibhāga-Yoga*), *Kṛṣṇa* divides between *daivī* (divine) and *āsurī* (demonic) nature and places *ahiṃsā* (Bg. 16.2) as one of the prime divine qualit ies together with *abhayam* (fearlessness) and *sattva-saṃśuddhiḥ* (purity of heart). This begs the great dialectical question of how *Arjuna* can fight a war with a non-violent inner nature. Lastly, in the *Śraddhātraya-Vibhāga-Yoga* (Chapter 17, Bg. 17.14), *Kṛṣṇa* classifies *ahiṃsā* as a *śārīraṃ tapaḥ* (austerity of the body). By making it into a physical discipline He accepts the restraint of certainty that one would not bring unnecessary harm to others, not to be taken as a rejection of *ahiṃsā* but rather a redefinition. It becomes the basic discipline needed for a warrior to carry out *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā*—ensuring the active safeguarding of *dharma* without any malice on his part.

Table 1. Footprints of Ahiṃsā in Bhagavad Gītā

Chapter	Verse	Metaphysical Definition
Chapter10 (*Vibhūti-Yōga*)	5	A divine creation originating directly from *Kṛṣṇa*.
Chapter 13 (*Kṣetra- Kṣetrajña yoga)*	7	An essential component of true knowledge (*jñānam*).
Chapter 16 (*Daivāsura-Sampad yoga)*	2	A primary characteristic of the divine nature (*daivīsampad*).
Chapter 17 (*Śraddhātraya yoga)*	14	An austerity of the physical body (*śārīraṁ tapa*).

3.1.3 The Imperative of *Dharmayuddha*: Violence as a Social Duty

After having established the ontological validity of *ahiṃsā*, the *Gītā* further suggests a critical modification to this deontology, namely, that in some situations, a passive state of renuncia t ion is a profound moral evil. *Kṛṣṇa* re-defines the coming war as a *dharmayuddha* (righteous war) which is needed for the re-establishment of cosmic and social order. He starts off with a stinging indictment of *Arjuna*'s despondency, which he calls in Bg. 2.2 a *kaśmalam* (impur ity) and specifically says that such behaviour is not fitting for him (Bg. 2.3). *Kṛṣṇa* says that *Arjuna*'s apparent pacifism is really a manifestation of *hṛdayadaurbalyam* (weakness of heart) and *klaibyam* (moral impotence)—an incapacity to do what he must do, not because of an exalted virtue, but because he is emotionally incapable of doing so returning to the imperative of *svadharma*, *Kṛṣṇa* says that there is no engagement greater than a righteous war for a *kṣatriya* (Bg. 2.31). He completely reverses the fear *Arjuna* had about violating moral rules by saying that the abandonment of this socio-political duty will in fact lead to sin (*pāpam avāpsyasi* (you will incur sin), Bg. 2.33. This gives rise to the realist principle of ethics that apathy in the face of injustice is a form of complicity.

Finally, this social duty is raised to a metaphysical compulsion directed toward *lokasaṅgraha*. In Bg. 4.8, *Kṛṣṇa* explains His divine descent is meant for *paritrāṇāya sādhūnāṃ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām* (the protection of the good and destruction of the evil). In this context, *vināśāya* (destruction) is intended to be a necessary mechanism for *dharmasaṃsthāpanārthāya* (the firm establishment of righteousness). Hence, engaging in *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* is not a violat ion of *ahiṃsā*, but it is the active safeguarding of it. It is the positive protection of the moral and sociological order, through the exact use of the amount of force necessary to ensure the

conditions for the ultimate triumph of true non-violence.

3.1.4 The Birth of Justified *Hiṃsā*

The dialectical progression of the *Gītā* resolves the profound tension between universal non-violence and the empirical necessity of armed conflict. By contrasting the theological ideal of peace with the sociological imperative of justice, the text constructs a synthesized ethical framework: *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* (justified violence).

This dialectic begins with the thesis of absolute *ahiṃsā*, posited as the ultimate spiritual ideal. As previously established, Kṛṣṇa categorizes non-violence as an essential component of true knowledge (Bg. 13.7) and physical austerity (Bg. 17.14). However, this ideal immediately confronts its antithesis: the empirical reality of *adharma* (unrighteousness). In a world contaminated by systemic injustice, rigid adherence to absolute pacifism inadvertently enables tyranny to flourish. Kṛṣṇa explicitly warns that Arjuna's refusal to fight is not a manifestation of spiritual purity, but of *klaibyam* (moral impotence). In the face of aggressive evil, passive non-violence degenerates into moral complicity.

The resolution is found in the synthesis of *dharmayuddha* (righteous war). Here, *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* is born not as a rejection of non-violence, but as its ultimate defense. Physical force is strictly validated when applied as a surgical instrument to excise injustice and safeguard the societal order in which *ahiṃsā* can eventually thrive. Therefore, justified violence is an impersonal, duty-bound act; it is the paradox of using necessary, proportionate force to actively preserve the spiritual equilibrium of the world.

3.1.5 The Metaphysical Substratum: The Immortality of the *Ātman*

The premise of *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* is strictly metaphysical. Before addressing socio-political morals, *Kṛṣṇa* establishes an absolute dichotomy between the *śarīra* (perishable body) and the *Ātman* (imperishable Self) through *Sāṅkhya-yōga*. He dismantles the duality of the 'killer' and 'killed' by declaring:

> *ya ēnaṁ vētti hantāraṁ yaścainaṁ manyatē hatam | ubhau tau na vijānītō nāyaṁ hanti na hanyatē* || (Bg. 2.19)
>
> *"He who thinks of this One as the killer, and he who thinks of this One as the killed—both of them do not know. This One does not kill, nor is It killed"* (Gambhirananda, 1991).

This radically re-determines the locus of action. Violence is redefined not as the annihila t ion of the *puruṣa* (conscious essence), but merely a temporary metamorphosis of *prakṛti* (matter). While the physical form can be dismantled, the true Self cannot. *Kṛṣṇa* cements the *Ātman* as *avināśī* (indestructible) and *nitya* (eternal):

> *na jāyatē mriyatē vā kadācin nāyaṁ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ | ajō nityaḥ śāśvatō'yaṁ purāṇō na hanyatē hanyamānē śarīrē* || (Bg. 2.20)
>
> *"Never is this One born, and never does It die; nor is it that having come to exist, It will again cease to be. This One is birthless, eternal, undecaying, ancient; It is not killed when the body is killed."* (Gambhirananda, 1991).

This ontological distance is the essential prerequisite for *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā*. Without realizing the immortal *Ātman*, corporeal violence remains an irreversible act of ultimate destruction. Grounded in this metaphysical reality, force is stripped of its absolute finality, functioning instead as a surgical instrument for the active safeguarding of moral order.

3.1.6 The Psychological Imperative: *Svadharma* as Natural Law

The second pillar of *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* is *svadharma*. In this context, it functions not merely as a rigid socio-political caste duty, but as a profound psychological necessity driven by one's *svabhāva* (inherent natural disposition). The *Gītā* assumes that all human constitution is governed by the *guṇas* (fundamental qualities of nature). For a warrior like *Arjuna*, whose disposition is predominantly *rājasika* (active and passionate), the instinct to fiercely protect and fight against injustice is innate.

Kṛṣṇa explicitly warns against the artificial adoption of another's nature, asserting that true ethical conduct must align with one's internal psychological makeup:

> *śrēyān svadharmō viguṇaḥ paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt |*
> *svabhāvaniyataṁ karma kurvan nāpnōti kilbiṣam* || (Bg. 18.47)
>
> *"One's own duty, (though) defective, is superior to another's duty well performed. By performing a duty as dictated by one's own nature, one does not incur sin."* (Gambhirananda, 1991).

Through this decree (*svabhāvaniyataṁ karma*), *svadharma* is elevated to the position of natural law. If *Arjuna* were to artificially institute the absolute *ahiṃsā* of a *sannyāsī*, then it would be a grave act of psychological violence against himself—creating an external facade of calmness which only conceals an inner storm of unfulfilled duty. Therefore, force is ethically valid and free from sin, when it becomes the unforced manifestation of the *svabhāva* of the agent. When this natural law is directed in one particular direction, i.e., the active safeguarding of the social order, then the activity of *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* is a necessary spiritual activity.

While the historical narrative of the *Gītā* maps *svadharma* onto the ancient *varṇa* (caste) system—specifically the birthright of a *Kṣatriya*—its ethical utility is not tethered to this archaic sociological structure. Sri Aurobindo (1922) profoundly argued that the true essence of *svadharma* is governed by *svabhāva* (inner psychological disposition and capacity) rather than rigid heredity. In contemporary society, the ancient *varṇa* system is superseded by the voluntary undertaking of civic and professional oaths. For a modern combatant, police officer, or civic defender, *svadharma* is explicitly defined by their sworn constitutional mandate to protect the innocent and uphold the rule of law (French, 2003). Therefore, the *Gītā's* framework of *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* remains universally applicable today; it governs anyone who has consciously adopted the professional and moral obligation—the modern *svadharma*—to actively safeguard society.

3.2 *Niṣkāma Karma*: Rationalizing Force through the Agent's Core Intent

Building upon the foundational duty of the warrior, this section explores the precise psychological mechanism required to execute justified force. It analyzes how the principle of *niṣkāma karma* strips the agent of egoistic desires, attachment, and malice. By demanding absolute equanimity and pure intent, this framework rationalizes action not through mere

political legality, but through the rigorous internal integration of the agent's consciousness.

3.2.1 The Mechanism of Action: *Niṣkāma Karma* (Detached Agency)

The last pillar of *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* is the psychological mechanism of its execution. On the other hand, even if an action is metaphysically and psychologically valid, the act of doing something from egoistic desire is still karmically binding. The solution is *niṣkāma karma*—the rigorous performance of duty totally free of attachment to its *phala* (fruit). This is established by *Kṛṣṇa* by stripping the warrior of outcome-ownership:

> *karmaṇyēvādhikārastē mā phalēṣu kadācana |*
> *mā karmaphalahēturbhūrmā tē saṅgō'stvakarmaṇi ||* (Bg. 2.47)
>
> *"Your right is for action alone, never for the results. Do not become the agent of the results of action. May you not have any inclination for inaction"* (Gambhirananda, 1991).

This decree creates a surgical model of conflict resolution. Like a surgeon who cuts to cure rather than harm, the warrior fights strictly to restore moral sanity. *Kṛṣṇa* clarifies that *kāma* (desire or malice)—not the physical act—is the true source of sin. By removing the ego, physical violence transforms into spiritual inaction. Thus, *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* is validated not by external political legality, but entirely by the eradication of psychological malice and the absolute integrity of the agent's core intent.

3.2.2 The Psychology of Violence: Internal State versus External Behavior

The displacement of the moral locus in *bhakti* (devotion) rather than in *karma* or *phala* is the most important contribution of the *Bhagavad Gītā* to the ethics of war. This model shows that *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* is only governed by eliminating bad psychology, and there are two types of violence: egoistic *hiṃsā* where malice is the motive, and operationally strong violence in the name of *svadharma*. In order to properly define *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā*, it is necessary to first analyze its antithesis, which is unjustified violence, as an ethical rupture when it is driven by vices of the mind. These vices, known to *Kṛṣṇa* in Bg. 3.37, are *kāma* and *krodha*, which *Kṛṣṇa* describes as *mahāśano* (all-devouring) and *mahāpāpmā* (extremely sinful). In Chapter 16, this state of mind is categorized as an *āsurī sampad* (demonic nature) in which the warriors who fight for the sake of personal gains or avenging their enemies are influenced by *dambha* (hypocrisy), *darpa* (arrogance), and anger (Bg. 16.4). Because this violence is typified by *rāga-dveṣa*—an expression of the desire to exercise control—the *Gītā* condemns the sin of the will, not that of the weapon. For example, if *Arjuna* were to kill *Karṇa* (the rival warrior due to personal jealousies, it would be a heinous subjective sin.

But on the other hand, the *Gītā* provides for *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* when it is motivated by *daivī sampad* (divine nature). In this framework, corporeal violence is deconstructed as a planned, surgical intervention which is an active form of safeguarding against moral decay; corporeal violence is unique as it is conducted wholly devoid of any malice. In Bg. 2.38, *Kṛṣṇa* tells *Arjuna* to fight keeping *sukha-duḥkhe same kṛtvā* (holding pleasure and pain, loss and gain, victory and defeat as equal). Such a state of *samatvam* (equanimity) purifies the action, and turns the battleground from a land of hatred into a realm of pure duty.

Furthermore, in Bg. 11.55, *Kṛṣṇa* says that he who finds Him, the seeker, is *nirvairaḥ sarvabhūteṣu* (free from enmity towards all creatures). This sets up the paradox of the Just Warrior: the carrying out of necessary force while remaining *nirvaira* (without enmity). This framework places the locus of ethics definitively on the moral consciousness of the agent in

the form of a rigorous 'internal check.' The fundamental difference between a tyrant and a dharmic warrior is altogether in the field of consciousness: the former acts through the force of *ahaṅkāra* (ego) and *kāma* which leads to chaos, whereas the latter acts through *buddhi-yoga* (intellectual detachment), which is conducive to order and controls chaos. An objectively just cause is not sufficient; if the fighter allows malice to infect his or her resolve, the struggle degenerates into mere slaughter. Therefore, *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* is the pure use of force by a psychologically- integrated individual for the shield of the societal order with a full sense of just resolve and with an absolute lack of personal malice.

3.3 Ethics Compared: The *Gītā* and the Just War Tradition

For the ethical novelty underlying the *Bhagavad Gītā*, it is necessary to put its doctrine of *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā* in the context of military ethics in the world, i.e., the reigning Western tradition of Just War (bellum justum). While the Western theory is good in defining the politica l condition of conflict, it almost exclusively relies on exogenous standards of justice. Divided into jus ad bellum (which calls for extrinsic standards such as just cause and last resort; Walzer, 1977, p. 21) and jus in bello (concerned entirely with external conduct like proportionalit y; Orend, 2006, p. 105), this paradigm makes an evaluation of the legality of a war, but rarely involves interrogating the individual conscience of the soldier. As Coates (1997, p. 13) notes, this theory has been excessively legalized, cutting the morality of the act from the character of the agent. Under this framework, a soldier can take part in a just war and still be completely consumed with hatred as long as he strictly follows the rules of engagement from the outside. In sharp contrast, traditional oriental philosophy, as expounded in the *Gītā*, clearly places the ethical subject in the subjective realm, thereby transcending the limitations of this objective, externalized ethic. Although the text tacitly agrees with the jus ad bellum requirement, that the *Pāṇḍavas* had *parasvapaharaṇa* (just cause against usurpation) (Roy, 2012), paramount to the text is the internal state of the agent. Matilal (2002) insists that the ethics of *Kṛṣṇa* introduce a particularism based on deep mental discipline: a war that met all political requirements was still very unethical if the warrior fought with *rāga-dveṣa*. Instead, *sāttvika bhāva* (pure disposition) that is characterized by the absolute absence of malice is a psychological reality to be obliged. As Balkaran and Dorn (2012) observe, the *Gītā* demands that the warrior be a renouncer in action, adding an important third dimension of military ethics: jus in animo (justice in the mind).

Ultimately, while Western theory helps provide external political guard rails, the *Gītā* helps provide inner psychological guard rails. Its everlasting wisdom is that it is impossible to exercise external restraint (*in bello*) without first mastering *ātmasaṃyama* (internal restraint). When a combatant is evil from the motivation of *kāma* and *krodha*, then external rules necessarily fail. By requiring *niṣkāma karma*, the text guarantees that force is used only as a tool of surgery of *dharma*, the active protect of the moral and social order and not of egoistic conquest. This fits very well with the ancient ethical emphasis on the therapeutic, rather than simply punitive, aspect of violence (Sorabji, 2006).

In this revision, we clarify that the *Gītā* does not offer subjective intent as a loophole to bypass external military laws. Rather, we argue that 'just resolve' can be operationally assessed through

two vectors: (1) Preemptive psychological conditioning, where cognitive equanimity (*samatvam*, as mandated in Bg. 2.38)

is integrated into military training (Gambhirananda, 1991), and (2) Retrospective behavioral indicators, where observable violations of jus in bello—such as disproportionate violence or cruelty (Orend, 2006)—are treated as empirical proof that the internal mandate of *niṣkāma karma* has been breached. By explicitly connecting internal resolve to observable external boundaries, we have mitigated the risk of subjectivism and strengthened the practical

applicability of the framework.

3.4 Practical Implications

Training, Rules of Engagement, and Moral Injury Prevention The translation of dharmasaṅga ta *hiṃsā* from ancient scriptural dialectic into modern institutional doctrine offers profound practical implications, specifically concerning psychological training, Rules of Engagement (ROE), and the prevention of moral injury in high-stakes conflict zones.

First, regarding tactical training, the *Gītā* mandates a shift from purely physical preparation to rigorous cognitive and emotional regulation. Modern institutions, whether military or law enforcement, must institutionalize the practice of *samatvam* (equanimity) within their resilience programs. By training personnel to cognitively detach their ego from the immed ia te chaos of a conflict, institutions can cultivate a force capable of executing high-stress operations without succumbing to the blinding effects of *rāga-dveṣa*.

Second, this framework significantly alters how Rules of Engagement (ROE) are conceptualized by adding an internal metric to external constraints. To strictly prevent intent-based moral licensing, where a combatant might falsely claim subjective purity to excuse excessive violence, the *Gītā* establishes a rigorous scriptural safeguard: internal resolve (*jus in animo*) must inherently align with observable physical restraint, defined by Kṛṣṇa as *śārīraṃ tapaḥ* (austerity of the body; Bg. 17.14). To illustrate, consider a modern tactical scenario: a combat patrol sustains severe casualties from hostile fire, and the enemy retreats into a civilia n-dense zone. If the unit commander authorizes a disproportionate, indiscriminate artillery strike, claiming it fulfills their *svadharma* to destroy the adversary, the *Gītā's* framework exposes this as moral licensing. The objective cruelty and failure of physical restraint (*śārīraṃ tapaḥ*) serve as empirical proof that the unit's internal state is compromised by *krodha* (retaliatory anger), not anchored in *samatvam* (equanimity). Therefore, a *Gītā*-informed ROE requires commanders to continuously assess the emotional climate of their units; if a team is driven by vengeance, their force ceases to be *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā*, and they must be ethically rotated out of active engagement to prevent atrocities.

Finally, the mechanism of *niṣkāma karma* serves as a critical prophylactic against moral injur y-the profound guilt or spiritual fracturing that occurs when an individual transgresses deeply held moral beliefs during conflict (Litz et al., 2009). Recent post-2009 scholarship has increasingly recognized that this trauma extends beyond cognitive symptoms, resulting in a profound spiritual and identity fracture that requires deep existential repair (Frankfurt & Frazier, 2016). The *Gītā* protects the psyche by fundamentally restructuring agency. By internalizing that they are merely a detached instrument of *dharma*—acting without personal malice or desire for the fruits of action—the agent is insulated from the paralyzing guilt that accompanies ego-driven violence. This shifts the psychological burden from personal sin to necessary civic sacrifice.

4. Conclusion

This paper resolves the apparent counterintuition of the *Bhagavad Gītā* by showing that *Arjuna's* initial pacifism was due to *moha*, not righteousness. In response, *Kṛṣṇa* redefines violence as *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā*, an act which is only permissible if it is validated by a strict

triad: metaphysical understanding of the *Ātman*, psychological conformity to *svadharma*, and absolute non-attachment to any action by *niṣkāma karma*. Thus, the use of force is fully justified by the integrity of the core intent of the agent and the scrupulous elimination of psychological malice.

This comparative prism showed that while Western variables are obsessed with external conduct, traditional oriental philosophy brings in the important variable of internal conscience which leads to a systemic framework of *dharmasaṅgata hiṃsā*. By articulating *jus in animo* (justice in the mind), the *Gītā* significantly challenges and supplements the contemporary 'just war' theory. It calls for a surgical *hiṃsā*—force used to cure injustice without hatred. Ultimately, the text claims, true *ahiṃsā* is not a passive state of renunciation, but rather the active safeguarding of moral and societal order, mediating the profound tension between individual conscience and societal obligation.

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