

Himsa and Ahimsa in the Bhagavad Gita

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Abstract

This research article deals with the question of himsa and ahimsa mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita. The study has its relevance to understand the Gita's teaching on himsa and ahimsa. The research problem is that whether the Gita advocates himsa or ahimsa. The research approach (methodology) adopted for this study is the textual analysis of the Gita's related verses along with the review-based analysis of the views on himsa and ahimsa expressed by the Gita's commentators Bankim Chandra Chattopdyaya, Lokamanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi and Aurobindo Ghosh. The study reveals that the Gita talks about ahimsa while mentioning the good traits of a Godlike person but the text basically focuses on the justified himsa as essential and obligatory in dealing with the evil persons of the imperfect human society.

Key Words: *Himsa, ahimsa, imperfect society, self-defense, just war, Godlike person, internal duel.*

1. Introduction

Himsa and ahimsa are much debated terminologies of the Bhagavad Gita because Sri Krishna, in the Gita, urges Arjuna to participate in the war of the Mahabharata and he also mentions ahimsa as one of the great virtues of a Godlike person. Based on Sri Krishna's contradictory views on himsa and ahimsa, the Gita is interpreted as the text on himsa and vice versa by the different commentators. This article analyzes the Gita's particular verses that focus on both himsa and ahimsa and the issue is also discussed analyzing the viewpoints of the Gita's four commentators. It aims to dig out the real teachings of the Gita on himsa and ahimsa for its practical implications in the human society.

2. Portrayal of the Issue

Loosely translated, *Himsa* means violence and *Ahimsa* means non-violence. The word is derived from the Sanskrit root *hims* to strike; *himsa* is injury or harm, *a-himsa* is the opposite of this, i.e. cause no injury, do no harm (Mayton 713-16). The *Bhagavad Gita* is basically a text that deals with the question of *Himsa* as "the *Gita* opens with a problem. Arjuna refuses to fight and raises difficulties. . . . To convert him is the purpose of the *Gita*" (Radhakrishnan 71). The words of Sri Krishna in the *Gita* aim to encourage Arjuna to involve in violent war of the

Mahabharata. The *Gita* begins with Arjuna's despondency and unwillingness to fight in the war. In their discussion, Sri Krishna repeatedly tells Arjuna to get up and fight. Sri Krishna makes Arjuna clear about his obligation to involve in the war as a warrior in the *Gita*'s following verse:

*atha cet tvamimam dharmyam
samgramam na karisyasi
tatah svadharmam kirtim
ca hitva papamavapsyasi* (II 33)

(But if thou doest not this lawful battle, then thou wilt fail thy duty and glory and will incur sin – Radhakrishnan's translation). Sri Krishna defines the Mahabharata war as a *dharmayuddha* i.e. the war for virtue. Sri Krishna urges Arjuna to fight for the righteousness. This implies that the *Gita* speaks for the *himsa* (violence) but it clearly speaks for the just *himsa* against the unjust one.

Bankim Chandra Chattopdhyaya has connected the *Gita*'s call for just *himsa* with *swadharmas* of those individuals who seek for justice and equality in the society:

The aim of this part of *Gita* is to prove the essential need for cultivating *swadharma*. . . . But of all the *swadharmas*, to wage war is the most heinous of all. If one can avoid war, it is not the task (*kartavya*) of anyone to do it. But a situation arises when his heinous act becomes inevitable and essential. A Timur Lang or a Nadir Shah is coming to burn and loot your country. Under such circumstances anyone who knows how to fight, to him waging war becomes inevitable and essential *swadharma*. (qtd. in Bose 50)

Bankim regards '*himsa*' or 'to wage war' as the most heinous act of an individual but sometimes the situation makes the same heinous act as essential and obligatory for all if we want to restore justice and peace in the society. He condemns *himsa*, but, as the *Gita* has suggested us, he believes counter-*himsa* is inevitable and essential. As Sri Krishna makes Arjuna ready for the *himsa* against the *himsa* of Kauravas, Bankim wants to make the Indian people ready for the *himsa* against the *himsa* inflicted upon them by the British colonialism.

Sri Krishna makes Arjuna ready for the bloody war of the *Mahabharata* but in the *Gita*, he also mentions *ahimsa* as a great virtue of a Godlike person. Among the many virtues of Godlike persons, Sri Krishna points out *ahimsa* as one of them in the *Gita*'s following verse:

*ahimsa satyamakrodhas
mtyagah santirapaisunam
daya bhutesvaloluptvam
mardavam hriracapalam* (XVI 2)

(Non-violence, truth, freedom from anger, renunciation, tranquility, aversion to fault finding, compassion to living beings, freedom from covetousness, gentleness, modesty and steadiness (absence of fickleness) – Radhakrishnan's translation). As Sri Krishna has outlined the highest

virtues of Godlike persons, he considers *ahimsa* (non-violence), truthfulness, forgiveness etc. as having the highest ethico-moral values but while analyzing the purpose of the *Gita* as to make Arjuna ready for battle, this cannot be accepted as the absolute and permanent ethico-moral principles applicable at all times and in all circumstances. The *ahimsa*, mentioned in the *Gita* as a moral virtue of Godlike person, is applicable only in a relative sense i.e. for particular persons and for particular circumstances.

Lokamanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, in his book *Gita-Rahasya*, has interpreted the *ahimsa* mentioned in the *Gita* in relative sense. He believes the existence of absolute *ahimsa* is possible only in a perfect society i.e. an ideal society where every people are *sthitaprajnas*, ethico-spiritual giants. In his opinion, a certain degree of involvement of *himsa*, untruthfulness, non-peacefulness and non-forgiveness etc. are essentially needed for an imperfect society which is full of internal contradictions. Tilak never thinks that *ahimsa*, truthfulness, peacefulness, forgiveness etc. are universal ethical principles in a substantive sense or these principles should always be followed and everywhere to be followed without any qualification. He insists that these principles are followed and should be followed only in a society where internal conditions are perfect or at least in a society where one considers others interest as of having greater value than his own. Tilak considers that the application of these principles in its absolute form in an imperfect society would be destructive consequences: "So long as every human being in this world has not started living according to these rules, should virtuous people, by their virtuous conduct, allow themselves to be caught in the nets spread by rascals or should they give measure for measure by way of retaliation and protect themselves?" (Desire 42). If virtuous people follow these principles in its absolute form in a society full of rascals, they cannot protect themselves from the conspiracies of the rascals. Tilak suggests the wise ones to retaliate against them to protect themselves as Sri Krishna, in the *Gita*, has suggested Arjuna to retaliate against Kauravas to protect Pandavas.

For Tilak, the *Gita* favors violence, untruthfulness or non-forgiveness under certain specific circumstances and conditions. Tilak categorizes between justified *himsa* and unjustified *himsa* (violence), between justified non-violence and unjustified non-violence (*ahimsa*) and takes justified *himsa* (violence) and justified *ahimsa* (non-violence) as part of *ahimsa*. According to him, the principles of *ahimsa* or truthfulness do not work in cases, which involve self-defense and just war. In these cases, Tilak regards the conscious *himsa* as *ahimsa* in the ethical world of non-violence:

But, assuming for the sake of argument that some villain has come, with a weapon in his hands to kill you, or to commit rape on your wife or daughter, or to set fire to your house, or to steal all your wealth, or to deprive you of your immovable property, and, there is nobody there who can protect you, then should you close your eyes and treat with

unconcern such a villain (*atayin*) saying: ‘*ahimsa paramo dharmah?*’ or should you, as much as possible, punish him if he does not listen to reason? . . . On these occasions, self-protection is considered to be of higher importance than Harmlessness. The killing of tender infants (*bhruna-hatya*) is considered to be the most objectionable of murders; but, if the child is being born by transverse presentation, is it not necessary to cut the child and deliver the mother? (Desire 43)

This clarifies Tilak’s concept of *himsa* and *ahimsa*. For self-defense, punishing the villain and at the time of delivery, in order to save the life of the mother, killing the child both are also considered *ahimsa*.

Tilak argues that the principles of non-violence would not be violated if one commits violence for the protection of the general welfare of the society: “But, though I may have no object to achieve for myself, I nevertheless commit the sin of helping evil-doers or undeserving persons, and of harming deserving saints and even society itself to that extent, if I allow someone to take that which he ought not to get” (State 548). Tilak even considers it is a sin if one helps the evil-doers instead of retaliating with them. He further argues that the principle of non-violence or truthfulness is not violated if one commits violence or untruthfulness for self-protection:

If stealing or taking away by force that wealth which a man has lawfully acquired is permitted, then people will stop accumulating wealth, and all will suffer; and chaos will reign as a result of the arrangement of society being broken up. But, there are exceptions to this rule. When such a calamity (*apatti*) arises that food cannot be had, whether for money or by labour or for charity on account of a general famine, shall we look upon as a sinner, some person who thinks of saving his life by committing theft? (Desire 54)

In such a situation when a man involves in the act of stealing, Tilak argues that such a man is totally excused and his action would be considered ethically just. According to him, the principle of non-violence would not be violated if one commits violent action or involves in the act of untruthfulness for the protection of the innocent people from possible massacre. Tilak clarifies it with an example:

Suppose, you have seen persons escaping from the hands of marauders and hiding in a thick forest; and the marauders, who follow them with naked swords in their hands, stand before you and ask you, where those people are! What answer will you give? Will you speak the truth or will you save the lives of unoffending and innocent people? I ask this question because preventing the murder of innocent people is according to the *sastras* a

religion, as highly important as Truth itself. (Desire 46-7)

If the act of untruthfulness of a person can save the life of many innocent people, Tilak considers it morally right. For him, the question of morality has the relative value.

When the question of general welfare is involved, Tilak considers, it is the moral duty of an individual to punish the evil-doers without the slightest hesitation because in that case neither the principle of ‘non-violence is violated by killing an evil-doer’ nor does he entangle himself in the net of the bondage of sin (state 548). On the other hand, according to Tilak, the *Gita* morally allows him to follow the course of “counter-kick for kick” (State 549), “thorn by a thorn” or “measure for measure” (State 554). Tilak argues that ethically unjustified violence should be met with ethically just violence and not with unjustified non-violence and he regards morally just violence as ethical non-violence. Tilak’s argument is that the unjust should not expect from the just to be just towards them: “. . . it must be borne in mind that, that man who has come forward to cut the throats of others by his own evil-doings, has no more any ethical right to expect that others should behave towards him like saints” (State 554). This implies that Tilak tries to justify the *Gita*’s teachings of the just *himsa* as being the ethical *ahimsa* by applying ‘the natural justice’ or ‘counter kick for a kick’ principle.

Mohan Das Karmachanda Gandhi has found the *Bhagavad Gita* basically a text on *ahimsa*. On the basis of the *Gita*’s teaching of *niskamkarma* i.e. the desireless action, he argues that the *Gita* teaches not about such actions that generate desire. According to him, *himsa* generates desire, so the *Gita* teaches us to follow the path of *ahimsa*: “. . . I have felt that in trying to enforce in one’s life the central teaching of the *Gita*, one is bound to follow Truth and *ahimsa*. When there is no desire for fruit, there is no temptation for untruth or *himsa*. Take any instance of untruth or violence, and it will be found that at its back was the desire to attain the cherished end” (132). Gandhi expresses different views than Tilak, presenting the *Gita* as an uncompromising hymn to non-violence, based upon a debatable argument that one cannot be unattached to the results of a violent action, and therefore Krishna must only be speaking about the internal strife of psychic conflict (Remski 3). Gandhi does not have further proof to call the *Gita* as a text on *ahimsa* because Sri Krishna, in the *Gita*, makes Arjuna prepare to involve in the violent war of the *Mahabharata*. As Gandhi himself is the leader of the non-violent movement of India against British colonialism, there arises the problem for him “to interpret *Gita* which is patently a call to armed action, an exhortation to Arjuna who like a true votary of non-violence had initially given up his *gandiva* bow and refused to fight. Mahatma Gandhi resolves this dilemma at the very outset by interpreting the battlefield of Kurukhestra as ‘our body’” (Bose 60). In order to prove

the non-violent content of the *Gita*, Gandhi doubts on the historical base of the Mahabharata war: ". . . it was not a historical work, but that, under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring" (127). By doing the allegorical interpretation of the Mahabharata war, Gandhi tries to limit the duel of the war as the duel between right and wrong inside an individual. He takes *himsa* in an absolute sense and does not find the message of any types of *himsa* in the *Gita*.

For Gandhi, the *Gita* is basically a text on non-violence. For Tilak, although, the *Gita* justifies ethical non-violence, in the final analysis, he substantially supports violence on ethical grounds. Aurobindo Ghosh goes far beyond Tilak and argues that the *Gita* is basically a text on violence because he believes violence or destruction as a natural phenomenon:

. . . this is certain that there is not only no construction here without destruction, no harmony except by a poise of contending forces won out of many actual and potential discords, but also no continued existence of life except by a constant self-feeding and devouring of other life. Our very bodily life is a constant dying and being reborn, the body itself a beleaguered city attacked by assailing, protected by defending forces whose business is to devour each other: and this is only a type of all our existence. (40)

Aurobindo argues that for the *Gita* material life of human beings was a clash of vast and obscure forces, such as good and evil, light and darkness as symbolized by the Pandavas and Kauravas. He thinks that such clashes of contending forces are absolutely essential for the cosmic development. According to him, everything in the universe finds its meaning and place only in its relation with the opposite forces. Peace and construction are not possible without the existence of violence and destruction.

Aurobindo finds the concept of *himsa* of the *Gita* as universal phenomenon that is applicable to the material aspects of existence and it is also applied to our mental and moral existence:

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. (42)

Aurobindo believes there is no development in the every sphere of human life without the struggle or battle between the opposite forces. He thinks it is natural to have the continuous struggle between power holder and power seeker. His belief on struggle or battle between the opposite forces, justifies the war between the Pandavas and Kauravas in the epic *Mahabharata*. This implies that Aurobindo has interpreted the *himsa* of the *Gita* as essential and obligatory. For him, Sri Krishna, in the *Gita*, speaks no other than *himsa* or violence and specially the just *himsa* of Pandavas against the Kauravas unjust one.

3. Conclusion

The *Gita* opens with a problem of Arjuna's despondency in involving in the violent war of the *Mahabharata*. The whole teachings of the *Gita* make Arjuna prepare to involve in the war. However, Sri Krishna mentions *ahimsa* as one of the great virtues of the Godlike persons and he has praised the word *ahimsa* in different verses of the *Gita*. This makes the reader confusion about the *Gita's* teachings on *himsa* and *ahimsa* whether the text advocates *himsa* or *ahimsa*. Bankim has interpreted the *Gita* as the text that favors the counter *himsa*. Tilak agrees on the *Gita's* concept of *ahimsa* as one of the great virtues of an individual but he categorizes both *himsa* and *ahimsa* as just and unjust one. Tilak's interpretation of the *Gita* reveals that the text advocates both justified *himsa* and justified *ahimsa*. He argues the *Gita* speaks against both unjustified *himsa* and unjustified *ahimsa*. As an apostle of non-violence, Gandhi takes the *Gita* as a text of *ahimsa*. He tries to justify non violent content of the *Gita* based on his assumption that the text deals not with historical war between Pandavas and Kauravas but it deals with the internal duel inside an individual. Aurobindo regards the *Gita* basically the text on *himsa* because he philosophizes the *Gita's* concept of *himsa* with the dialectics of construction and destruction. According to him, Sri Krishna, in the *Gita*, motivates Arjuna for *himsa* because there will be no peace without *himsa* as he accepts there is no construction without destruction.

The study concludes that the *Gita* basically advocates *himsa* but it favors particularly the justified *himsa*. The text regards *ahimsa* as a great virtue of a Godlike person but it accepts there is no place of the Godlike person in an imperfect society full of evil persons. Therefore, the *Gita* regards the justified *himsa* is obligatory and essential until the society comes to the perfect state.

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