

Some Aspects of Gita and Buddhist Ethics

COMPARING the ethical teachings of the Bhagavadgita with Buddhism, Radhakrishnan in his *Indian Philosophy* makes the following observations : “ Both protest against the absolute authority of the Vedas and attempt to relax the rigours of caste by basing it on a less untenable foundation. Both are manifestations of the same spiritual upheaval which shook the ritualistic religion though the *Gita* was the more conservative and therefore less thorough-going protest. In the descriptions of the ideal man the *Gita* and Buddhism agree. As a philosophy and religion the *Gita* is more complete than Buddhism which emphasises overmuch the negative side. The *Gita* adopts the ethical principles of Buddhism while it by implication condemns the negative metaphysics of Buddhism as the root of all unbelief and error.”¹

The impression that this passage leaves in the mind of the reader is that the *Gita* though less critical of the Vedic tradition than Buddhism nevertheless adopts on the whole the ethical principles of Buddhism and gives them a less extremist interpretation on the background of a more satisfying positive metaphysics.

Now whatever the difference of opinions that scholars have about the origin of the *Gita*, they seem generally to agree that the work in its present form is eclectic in character and contains in it many strands of Hindu thought somewhat loosely knit together. As such it is not surprising that the *juānamārga* (way of intuitive knowledge) of the Upanishads should be well represented. Now it is from these passages that Radhakrishnan quotes² in support of his statement that “ in the descriptions of the ideal man the *Gita* and Buddhism agree.” But this agreement in the content of these passages which idealise the *muni*³ or the “ contemplative seer ” is understandable for there is much in common between the way of salvation in Buddhism and the *juānamārga* of the Upanishads and to this extent the ideal man and the ideal life pictured in each is very much similar. It may also be granted that the *Gita* references to this life have a more Buddhist tone than the Upanishads in that phrases and concepts more typically Buddhist than Hindu such as “ *rāga-dveṣa* ” (II.64), “ *maītri* ” (XII.13), “ *kāruṇa* ” (XII.13), and “ *nirvāṇam* ” (II.72) occur among them, betraying possible Buddhist influence on the *Gita*.

1. pp. 526, 7.

2. i.e. II. 55-72 ; IV. 16-25 ; V. 18-28 ; XII 13-16..

3. II. 56 ; V. 28 ; XII. 19.

But surely the Gita ideal is at variance with the *juānamārga* of the Upanishads, if we go by the main trend of its thought and its special emphases, which show a persistent and distinct preference for the Personal conception of God as against the Impersonal, for devotion (*bhakti*) as against abstract meditation on the Impersonal Absolute, and for the path of disinterested action based on moral imperatives (*karmayoga* and *svadharmā*) as against the way of contemplative knowledge (*juānamārga*). It is true that in this respect the Gita contradicts itself or at least provides only a very loose synthesis of doctrines which are apparently mutually inconsistent. For instance, although it is essential and generally maintained that the worship of the Personal Lord is better than meditation on the Impersonal Being⁴ which is Unmanifested (*avyaktam*) yet it is expressly mentioned earlier that "men of no understanding think of Me, the Unmanifest (*avyaktam*) as having manifestation (*vyaktim āpannam*) not knowing my higher nature."⁵

These two conceptions of God show up the inconsistency of the Gita teaching. On the one hand we are told that the highest intuition of God reveals his Being as Impersonal and without this intuition salvation is not possible. On the other hand it is said that worship of God as Personal (which necessarily entails an erroneous conception of the Divine Being according to the former view) is the easier, the more proper and the natural path to salvation, thus implying that entertaining an erroneous conception is not only no bar to salvation but is in fact the better path to it.

The same inconsistency is manifest where the life of the *muni* or the sage, who on attaining perfection is in no need of work that needs to be done⁶ is represented on the one hand to be the ideal while the life of disinterested action is more often held up as the superior⁷ though both guarantee salvation.⁸

Yet notwithstanding this divergence of doctrines in the Gita we should not overlook the fact that the ideal man as portrayed in the main teaching of the Gita is far removed from the Upanishadic ideal of the contemplative seer even though an Upanishad like the *Iśā* is almost an epitome of the religious philosophy of the Gita while the contemplative seer finds a place, though not an important place, in the total background of Gita teaching. The Gita ideal is the man of action, who performs his social duties purely out of a sense of obligation and devotion to God.

4. XII. 1, 2.

5. VII. 24.

6. III. 17.

7. V. 2 ; VI. 2.

8. V. 5.

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In the circumstances it would be unfair both by the Gita as well as by Buddhism to say that "in the descriptions of the ideal man the Gita and Buddhism agree" merely on the ground of the similarity between the Buddhist sage and the contemplative seer of the Upanishads for whom the Gita finds a not too important place in the scheme of things. If therefore we study the Gita ideal in relation to the Buddhist it is at the level of social ethics that we have to make the comparison, no doubt on the general background of the metaphysics of each.

Now it would seem from the statements of Radhakrishnan (e.g. the passage quoted above) that even at the level of social ethics there is a similarity rather than a disparity in the ethical attitudes and outlook of the Gita and Buddhism. I propose to show that this is by no means the case and that in this respect the ethics of the Gita is to be contrasted rather than compared with the ethics of Buddhism. For this purpose I would like to show that there is a significant radical disparity between the attitude of the Gita and that of Buddhism at least on the problem of war and the belief in caste.

But before we go into the details of these problems it is necessary to point out that the fundamental difference between the metaphysical background of the ethical doctrines of the Gita and Buddhism is not that the metaphysics of the Gita is positive and that of Buddhism is negative as Radhakrishnan has tried to point out but that the Gita metaphysics throughout maintains a deterministic view of the universe and of all events in it, while Buddhism on the contrary vehemently upholds freewill though granting the causal relatedness of events. This seems to be the essential difference between the metaphysical standpoints of the Gita and Buddhism touching ethics.

It would seem that one of the fundamental prerequisites of ethical action is that man should be free to choose between alternative courses of action open to him and should be solely responsible for the decisions he makes. If this is not granted moral injunctions would appear to lose their point. No one would deny that the Gita contains moral advice but this advice, it should be noted, is given in a context in which it seems on the whole to be taken for granted that the actions of men are strictly determined by nature (*prakṛti*) which is controlled by the fiat of God. Nothing is more striking than the advice that Arjuna who has been seeking for an answer to the moral question as to whether he should fight or not, gets in the last chapter, where he is told that he has no choice in the matter for "if indulging in self-conceit thou thinkest 'I will not fight,' vain is this thy

resolve. Nature will compel thee (*prakṛtis tvām niyokṣyati*),⁹ notwithstanding the statement that “he may ponder over it fully and do as he chooseth.”¹⁰

This deterministic role or compelling power of *prakṛti* or Nature over which the individual has no control is one of the basic themes of the Gita and reference is often made to it. Thus in making a case for the necessity for action (*karma*) one of the arguments employed is that for individuals action is inevitable “for no one can remain even for a moment without doing work ; everyone is made to act (*karma kāryate*) helplessly (*avaśāḥ*) by the impulses born of Nature (*prakṛtijaiḥ*”).¹¹ It would appear that individuals cannot help but act and that their actions are the mere working out of impulses generated by Nature (*prakṛti*) over which they have no control whatsoever—a fact which is clearly indicated by the term “*avaśāḥ*” which implies that the individual “has no power of mind” to offset the force of the impulses which dominate his actions. Later in the same chapter it is argued that this dominant power of Nature under whose yoke man can but only humbly submit afflicts even the man of knowledge for “even the man of knowledge (*jnānavān*) acts in accordance with his own Nature (*prakṛti*). Beings follow their Nature (*prakṛtiṃ yānti bhūtāni*). What can repression accomplish.”¹² Samkara here interprets *prakṛti* to mean “the sum total of the good and evil mental dispositions due to past actions manifest in this life.”¹³ Radhakrishnan however explains that this verse seems to suggest the omnipotence of nature over the soul and requires us to act according to our nature, the law of our being and adds that “it does not follow that we should indulge in every impulse. It is a call to find out our true being and give expression to it.”¹⁴ Yet if we take this verse for what it states in the context of the traditional comment of Samkara it is clear that *prakṛti* here does not mean “our true being” as opposed to our false nature but our being as composed of all the modes which have potencies for both good and evil ; and what the verse implies is not that we should not indulge in every impulse but that we cannot help but give vent to our impulses which we are unable to suppress, in that we are under the domination of *prakṛti*.

The relation of this *prakṛti* with the Supreme Being appears to be differently conceived in different contexts. On the one hand the omni-

9. XVIII. 59.

10. XVIII. 63.

11. III. 5.

12. III. 33.

13. *Prakṛtir nama pūrvakṛtadharmādiharmādīsaṃskāro vartamānajanmādāvabhivyaktah.*

14. *The Bhagavadgīta*, p. 146.

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potence of the Supreme Being requires that he should be the ultimate cause and ground for the operations of *prakṛti*. On the other hand since the Supreme Being is transcendent though immanent in every individual it was necessary that his being should be conceived apart from the operations of *prakṛti*. We thus find it stated in one place that the Supreme Being sends forth the multitude of beings fixing the *prakṛti* of each : “ I send forth again and again this multitude of beings who are helpless (*avaśam*) under the power of *prakṛti* (*prakṛter vaśāt*) having fixed the *prakṛti* of each (*prakṛtiṃ svām avaśtabhya.*)”¹⁵ But in another context, *svabhāva* or inherent nature which is same as *prakṛti* in connotation (see below) is said to operate independently of the Supreme Being : “ The Lord does not create for the world agency or acts ; nor does he connect acts with their consequences. It is inherent nature which works these out.”¹⁶

Here the word *svabhāva* is used in a context in which *prakṛti* would have fitted equally well. *Svabhāva* or “ intrinsic nature ” is here regarded as the ultimate agent or cause of all action as well as what brings about the natural consequences of these, very much in the manner in which *prakṛti* was considered to perform this role in similar contexts.¹⁷ But the use of the word *svabhāva* is much more significant in this context, where *svabhāva* is said to function independently of the Lord, since the word seems in its origin to have reference to a theory which gave a purely mechanistic or deterministic account of the universe without theistic assumptions.

The earliest reference we have is possibly the Śvetāśvatara Upanishad¹⁸ where *svabhāva* along with Time (*kāla*), Fate (*niyati*) etc. are mentioned as possible alternatives to the theistic explanation of the universe. Again, Jñānavimala commenting on the *Praśnavyākaraṇa Sūtra* says that “ some believe that the universe was produced by *svabhāva* and that everything comes about by *svabhāva* alone.”¹⁹ Then in the *Tarkarahasyadīpikā*, a commentary on the *Ṣaḍdarśanasamuccaya*, we find Gunaratna quoting from the upholders of the theory of *svabhāva* a stanza which says : “ What makes the sharpness of thorns and the varied nature of beasts and birds ? All this comes about by *svabhāva*. There is nothing which acts at will. What is the use of effort ? ”²⁰ This shows that the term *svabhāva* had reference to a theory which maintained that the universe was strictly determined and

15. IX. 8. Radhakrishnan translates *prakṛtiṃ svām avaśtabhya* as “taking hold of nature which is My own.” Even this translation would grant the ultimate power over *prakṛti* to God but to take *svām* as “ each one’s own ” is more consistent with the Sanskrit idiom.

16. V. 14.

17. cp. XVIII. 59 ; III. 33.

18. I. 2.

19. Comment on *Praśnavyākaraṇa* 7.

20. Ed. L. Suali, Calcutta 1905, p. 13.

that all the processes in it were fully explicable in terms of such determinism and as a result denied freewill and the value of human effort to alter the course of events.

We cannot be certain whether the author of the Gita was trying to synthesise *svabhāva-vāda* as well into its general metaphysic. It is also difficult to determine the exact relationship between the workings of *prakṛti* or *svabhāva* and the Supreme Being of the Gita, since on a monistic or monotheistic interpretation the *prakṛti* or *svabhāva* would be ultimately dependent on Deity, while on a dualistic Sāṅkhya analysis they would be independent.²¹ And the Gita does not seem wholeheartedly to support one interpretation, although the emphasis on a Personal God as the highest reality, lends support to the monotheistic rather than the dualistic analysis. But so much seems to be clear, that whatever interpretation we adopt and whatever the import of moral injunctions in the Gita, the Gita metaphysic is thoroughly deterministic and as such is opposed to the doctrine of freewill and to the possible value of human effort since human beings are helpless (*avaśāh*) in the predicaments in which they are placed.

It is therefore to be expected that in the last chapter after a long winded argument Arjuna should be told that Nature (*prakṛti*) over which he has no control "will compel him" to fight. It is also not surprising that one of the arguments employed to urge Arjuna to fight should be that "his enemies are already slain by God before the event"²² or that "he should kill them and not desist since they are already doomed by him"²³ and that he is not ultimately responsible morally for their death since "he is to be only an occasion (or an instrument) for God's action."²⁴ The metaphysical import and ethical significance of this argument has been well expressed in the words of Rādhakrishnan himself where he says that "the writer seems to uphold the doctrine of Divine predestination and indicate the utter helplessness and insignificance of the individual and the futility of his will and effort. The decision is made already and Arjuna can do nothing to change it. He is a powerless tool in God's hands... Arjuna should feel, 'Nothing exists save thy will. Thou alone art the doer and I am only the instrument.'"²⁵

Very much on the same lines is another argument as to why Arjuna should fight, namely that since salvation is predestined and assured for all

21 v. XIII. 19 : *prakṛtiṃ puruṣam caiva.
viddhyanādyubhāvapi.*

22. XI. 33 : *mayi'vai'te nihitāḥ pūrvameva.*

23. XI. 34 : *mayā hātans tvām jahi mā vyatiṣṭhāḥ.*

24. XI. 33 : *nimittamātram bhava.*

25. op. cit., p. 280, 1.

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beings including Arjuna there is no cause for worry and he should carry out his allotted task whatever this may be. "Beings originate in the Unmanifest (*avyakta*-), in the middle they are manifest and they would be immersed in the Unmanifest in the end. So why worry?"²⁶ Attainment of the state of *avyakta* or the Unmanifest which is the highest state of the Absolute²⁷ is equivalent to salvation, so that what is implied in this verse is that all beings would finally attain salvation in spite of the many vicissitudes they would have to go through in the course of their evolution and this is predetermined or predestined by the fiat of God.

If we compare this deterministic or fatalistic ethic and metaphysics with that of Buddhism we find that the latter is totally opposed to it. Not only do the Buddhist texts repeatedly uphold the doctrine of freewill and the value of human effort in offsetting the burden of the past and altering the course of the future, but they strongly condemn all types of metaphysical theories which give a deterministic or fatalistic account of the universe.

One such metaphysical theory which is often singled out for criticism in the Buddhist texts is that of Makkhali Gosala and this theory is condemned because of its unmitigated fatalism. Now in this respect it would appear that there is much in common between the metaphysics of the Gita and the philosophy of Makkhali. Makkhali denies the value of personal effort or human endeavour (*natthi attakāre. natthi purisākāre. natthi purisaparakkamo*);²⁸ so does the Gita when it says that "mental suppression (of the impulses) can accomplish nothing."²⁹ There is even verbal agreement in the description of the state of man and the processes of nature. "All beings" (*sabbe sattā, sabbe bhūtā*) according to Makkhali, "are devoid of the power of will" (*avasā*), an epithet frequently used in the Gita to denote the same (e.g. *sarvaḥ . . avasāḥ*, everyone is devoid of the power of will³⁰; *bhūtagrāmam . . avasam prakṛter vaśūt*, the multitude of beings helpless without the power of will on account of the power of *prakṛti*). Man is thus impotent in the Gita since he is subject to the power of *prakṛti* or *svabhāva*; in the philosophy of Makkhali all beings are impotent and helpless in that they are "subject to Destiny (*niyati*), Fate (*sangati*) and Nature (*bhāva-parinatā*)." ³¹ As Basham³² says "Bhāva seems in this context to be synonymous with *svabhāva*, i.e. inherent character or nature. It suggests, below the fundamental category of Niyati sets of conditions and characteristics in

26. II. 28.

27. VII. 24.

28. Dīgha Nikāya, P.T.S., I. 53.

29. III. 33.

30. III. 5.

31. Dīgha Nikāya, I. 53.

32. A. L. Basham, *History and Doctrines of the Ajivakas*, p. 226.

each entity which acting as factors subordinate to the great principle, control growth, development and rebirth.” There is yet another significant feature in respect of which the two philosophies seem to agree. Salvation as taught by Makkhali is predestined for each individual “for just as a ball of thread when thrown would unwind itself to the end, the wise and fools alike will attain salvation after journeying through samsaric states.”³³ This view has been called *samsāra-suddhi*³⁴ or salvation through transmigration and has been more explicitly referred to in a stanza in the *Jātakas*³⁵ where the dependence of salvation on Destiny is clearly brought out. “There is no open door to salvation, Bijaka. Await thy Destiny (*niyati*). Joy or sorrow is obtained by Destiny. All beings are purified through transmigration (*samsāra-suddhi*) ; so do not make haste (to attain) what is to come.” It would be seen that these sentiments are very similar to what is found in a stanza of the *Gita*³⁶ where it is said that “the beings who originate in the Unmanifest Reality and live in a manifest state in the middle will eventually attain the Unmanifest Reality. So why worry ?” The context of this stanza of the *Gita* reveals the import of the argument namely that Arjuna should not desist from fighting since his ultimate salvation as well as that of all beings including his enemies is assured. In fairness to the *Gita* however it must be mentioned that this doctrine of the inevitability of salvation appears to go against the grain of the moral advice of the *Gita*,³⁷ although it is implicit in its deterministic metaphysics.

How strongly these doctrines which denied freewill and the value of human effort and proclaimed the inevitability of salvation have been condemned in Buddhism may be seen by the references which Buddha makes to Makkhali and his theories in the Pali texts. In one place the Buddha says that he knows of no other person (than Makkhali) born to the detriment and disadvantage of so many people, comparing him to a fisherman casting his net at the mouth of a river for the destruction of many fish.³⁸ In another passage his doctrines are said to be the worst of all the doctrines of the recluses.³⁹

There is also the pointed reference to and a criticism of aspects of these doctrines when taken up separately. Very often the denial of freewill (*akiriya-vāda*) is denounced. It is said that “the view that there is no free-

33. *Digha Nikāya*, I. 54.

34. *Ibid* ; cp. *Majjhima Nikāya*, I. 81, 2.

35. *Jātakas*, VI. 229.

36. II. 28.

37. XVIII. 64-6.

38. *Anguttara Nikāya*, I. 33.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

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will when as a matter of fact there is freewill is a false view.”⁴⁰ The value of personal effort (*attakāro*) no doubt in making the future course of events different from what they would otherwise be, is often stressed and it is maintained that there is such a thing as initiative (*arabbhadhātu*), enterprise (*nikkamadhātu*), endeavour (*parakkamadhātu*), courage (*thāmadhātu*), perseverance (*thitidhātu*), and human instrumentality (*upakkamadhātu*)⁴¹ against the determinists who denied such a factor in human undertakings. The doctrine that salvation would be attained in due course by faring on in *samsāra* or the empirical states of existence is also severely criticised; it is said that “the goal of existence (i.e. salvation) where there is neither birth nor decay cannot be realised by merely faring on (*gamanena*).”⁴²

The main difference between the determinism of Makkhali and that of the Gita is of course the fact that the latter is theistic. Though the Gita would grant that all activity is directed by the operations of *prakṛti* over which we have no control, it would, as we have shown above, submit that *prakṛti* would find its ultimate sanction in the Divine Being, though there were passages betraying the dualistic Sāṅkhya analysis that the Divine Essence was quite separate from the workings of *prakṛti*. Samkara’s comment that *prakṛti* was the sum total of good and evil mental dispositions of actions committed in the past (*pūrvakṛta-*) is more in accord with the latter view and is an attempt to explain the present and the future in terms of the past activity of the individual. On the other view which appears to be the dominant one the *prakṛti* of each individual is fixed at creation in accordance with the prescience and providence of the divine will. Now it is worth noting that Buddhism distinguishes between these two types of determinism though condemning both of them unequivocally. One is the theory that our present actions are fully determined by the actions of the past (*pubbe-kata-hetu*)⁴³ and that we are in no sense free to act. The other is that all our actions are fixed in their entirety by the fiat of God (*issaranimmāṇavāda*);⁴⁴ as Radhakrishnan would say “there is nothing however small or insignificant that has not been ordained or permitted by God even to the fall of a sparrow.”⁴⁵ Now it is significant that both these theories are condemned in the Pali canonical texts⁴⁶ and with it the framework of Gita metaphysics which appears to synthesise both these theories

40. Majjhima Nikāya, I. 405.

41. Anguttara Nikāya, III. 337 ff.

42. Ibid., II. 48.

43. Ibid., I. 173-5.

44. Ibid.

45. op. cit., p. 229.

46. Anguttara Nikāya, I. 173-5.

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In spite of the deterministic background of the Gita ethic there is no doubt that there is much in common between the moral injunctions of the Gita and of Buddhism and this is not surprising considering the eclecticism of the Gita. But it is equally important to stress the differences especially when these differences are fundamental to the philosophy of each and reveal mutually opposed ethical attitudes to the problems of life. I propose to illustrate these differences by taking up the divergent attitudes that Buddhism and the Gita adopt in respect of the problem of war and caste.

I would hold that the attitude to war in the Gita is totally opposed to that of Buddhism. Yet before we could illustrate the differences in the attitudes of each it would be necessary to clarify the Gita attitude to the problem of war. I would hold that the Gita maintains that it is the moral duty of the soldier to fight in the event of any war in which the state is engaged.

Radhakrishnan's interpretation of the Gita appears to be fundamentally different in that he seems to believe that the Gita speaks of war only in a metaphorical sense as referring to the moral struggle in man and nature and not to military action. Thus commenting on the opening verse of the Gita, Radhakrishnan takes *dharma-kṣetre* to refer to the world instead of taking it as an epithet of *kuru-kṣetre*, the classical home of Vedic dharma. He says: "The world is *dharmakṣetra*- the battle ground for a moral struggle."⁴⁷ Then again, commenting on the phrase *māmanusmara yuddhya ca* (remember Me and fight)⁴⁸ he says "it is not a fight on the material plane that is intended here for it cannot be done at all times. It is the fight with the powers of darkness that we have to carry on perpetually."⁴⁹ This metaphorical interpretation is often reinforced by frequent attempts to give the figurative meaning of otherwise literal statements. Thus Gita I.14 which states that "Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna blew their celestial conches when stationed in their great chariot yoked to white horses" is to be taken metaphorically for says Radhakrishnan "throughout the Hindu and Buddhist literature the chariot stands for the psycho-physical vehicle. The steeds are the senses, the reins their controls, but the charioteer, the guide is the spirit or real self, ātman. Kṛṣṇa, the charioteer, is the Spirit in us."⁵⁰

However ingenious Radhakrishnan's attempt may be to give a metaphorical account of the Gita injunctions to fight, it does not appear to be successful, for the greater majority of the passages containing references to war, far from admitting of metaphorical interpretation have sense only when

47. op. cit., p. 79.

48. VIII. 7.

49. op. cit., p. 229.

50. Ibid., p. 85.

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taken literally. On the other hand, the few passages which may possibly be interpreted metaphorically are so interpreted only at the cost of obscuring their meaning especially when we consider their contexts. Thus the fact that Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna are stationed in their chariots is mentioned in a general description of the battle field and the events taking place in it. If we interpret "chariot" here to mean the psycho-physical vehicle and Kṛṣṇa as representing the Spirit in us, as Radhakrishnan does, it would be difficult to explain in similar terms the other paraphernalia of war mentioned as well as the significance of the numerous other personalities besides Kṛṣṇa who are mentioned by name. And again the only passage which Radhakrishnan adduces as not admitting of a literal explanation⁵¹ would be given a more natural interpretation if "sarveṣu kāleṣu" is taken as qualifying the nearest verb "anusmara" rather than "yuddhya" and the stanza translated: "therefore remember Me at all times but fight."

On the other hand an analysis of the positive injunctions to fight would show that it was at least incumbent on a soldier (*kṣatriya*) to fight in the event of a war in which the state is engaged, for fighting in such a war is always part of his *dharma* or social duty as being one of the demands made by the state on the soldier. It is said that "having regard to his own duty the *kṣatriya* should not falter for there exists no greater good for a *kṣatriya* than a war enjoined by duty."⁵² It is true that there are injunctions to the effect that the fight should be undertaken with selfless motives in a spirit of self-denial "free from desire and egoism"⁵³ and that fighting regardless of consequences "treating alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat" brings with it no sin.⁵⁴ Even if we grant that it is psychologically possible to engage in war "free from desire and egoism," the effect of these passages is more or less nullified by the numerous appeals made to selfish reasons as grounds for fighting. Thus moral grounds appear to be set aside when it is said that the refusal to fight amounts to "unmanliness."⁵⁵ Failure to answer the call to fight is "ignoble and un-Aryan and causes disgrace on earth."⁵⁶ Warriors who desist from fighting "incur ill-fame and ill-fame is worse than death."⁵⁷ Could anything be sadder, it is asked, than hearing the taunts of his enemies.⁵⁸ "If you are victorious you enjoy the earth⁵⁹ and if slain you go heaven."⁶⁰ Fighting in a war enjoined as duty by the

51. VIII. 7.

52. II. 31.

53. III. 30 ; VIII. 7.

54. II. 38.

55. II. 3.

56. II. 2.

57. II. 34, 5.

58. II. 36.

59. XI. 33.

60. II. 37.

state is an open door to heaven.⁶¹ The general impression that these passages seem to leave in the mind of the reader is that the Gita is recommending the soldier to fight at any cost in a war in which the state is engaged. If he fights with selfless motives (and the psychological possibility of this many people would be inclined to doubt) he incurs no sin, whereas if he fights with selfish motives he would still stand to profit either by the gain and honour on earth or by the glory in heaven.

This teaching, that the soldier should fight at any cost in such a war is reinforced by the metaphysical arguments in support of war. It is implied that Arjuna should not feel sorry for the death of his enemies among whom were his teachers and kinsmen since "wise men do not grieve for the dead or for the living."⁶² Now it is true that according to the best teaching of the Upanishads and Buddhism those who have transcended and overcome the world do not entertain thoughts of grief. But to argue that the soldier should likewise "not grieve for the dead" is to commit the fallacy that since the wise do not grieve for the dead those who do not grieve for the dead are wise. Then there are those arguments which seem to imply that the soldier is in fact not morally responsible for the act of killing either because he is not a moral agent as he is devoid of freewill and is not morally responsible for his actions (as discussed above) or that since God is finally and solely responsible for the death of Arjuna's enemies in that "his enemies are doomed" Arjuna is only an instrument in God's hands.⁶³ Finally it is argued on metaphysical grounds that physical killing is not in reality killing for the souls of people are eternal⁶⁴ and indestructible⁶⁵ and "one is not slain when the body is slain."⁶⁶

The contrast between the Gita attitude to war and the Buddhist is brought out in the advice that Buddha gave when he was placed in a similar situation to that of Kṛṣṇa on the eve of a battle between his own people, the Sākya and their blood brothers, the Koliyas. The immediate cause for going to battle was that the Sākya and Koliya tribes were both making claims and demands on the waters of the river Rohini which flowed between their territory. The soldiers or kṣatriyas on each side were assembled (as the Kurus and Pandavas had assembled) when the Buddha intervenes and asks them what the war was about. The answer was that it was over water and the Buddha asks them what the water was worth, to which it was replied that it was worth little. It turns out that both sides in their

61. II. 32.

62. II. 11.

63. XI. 33, 4.

64. II. 12.

65. II. 17-25.

66. II. 20.

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folly were prepared to sacrifice the invaluable lives of their soldiers for the sake of water which was of little worth. And the futility of their war becomes apparent when the Buddha advises them in the words "Why on account of some water of little worth would you destroy the invaluable lives of these soldiers."⁶⁷ The merits and demerits of the war as a whole is judged here by its possible consequences and the suggestion seems to be that the causes for which wars are fought and lost are trivial in comparison with the human sacrifices involved. While the Gita held that victory brings in its train honour and the gain of a kingdom⁶⁸ while annihilation secures the reward of heaven,⁶⁹ the Buddha (commenting on the war between Kings Ajatasattu and Pasenadi) is supposed to have said that "victory arouses enmity and the defeated live in sorrow."⁷⁰ Wars result only in further wars, according to Buddhism for "the victor obtains for himself a vanquisher."⁷¹ War as such is condemned as an evil since it involves the destruction of invaluable human lives and such evils, we are told, should not be committed even though it be deemed that it is part of one's duties to one's king (*rañño rājakaraṇīyam kātum*⁷²). It is therefore not surprising that the life of the soldier was looked down upon in Buddhism and even "trading in the weapons of war" (*sattha-vañijjā*) was considered a wrong mode of livelihood.⁷³

This seems to be the antithesis of the Gita attitude to war and the fact may be further illustrated if we go into the details. It seems to have been an Epic tradition that "the warrior who falls in the battle ground while fighting attains heaven."⁷⁴ As such it finds expression in the Bhagavad-gita where it is said that "if slain you shall go to heaven"⁷⁵ and "happy are the ksatriyas for whom such a war comes of its own accord as an open door to heaven."⁷⁶ Now this tradition finds mention in the Buddhist texts where a warrior chief (*yodhājīvo gāmaṇi*) tells the Buddha that he has heard from his ancestral teachers in the martial arts that the spirited soldier who fights with zeal and slays his opponents in battle is rewarded by being born in the company of gods in heaven. The warrior chief wants to know whether this is so and Buddha's reply is that, on the contrary, he is born in hell for his actions.⁷⁷

67. Jātaka, V. 412-4.

68. XI. 33.

69. X. 32.

70. Saṃyutta Nikāya, I. 83.

71. Ibid., p. 85.

72. Majjhima Nikāya, II. 188-191.

73. Anguttara Nikāya, III. 208.

74. Mahābhārata, Udyogaparva, 32, 65.

75. II. 37.

76. II. 32.

77. Saṃyutta Nikāya, IV. 308, 9.

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It is therefore not surprising that it is Arjuna's attitude, which is condemned in the Gita, that would appear to be similar to the Buddhist. Although *ahimsā* or non-violence is mentioned in the Gita⁷⁸ as one among a list of virtues, nowhere is the concept woven into the central themes of Gita philosophy and it is difficult to see how a soldier whose duty is to fight and kill as many of the enemy as possible can exercise *ahimsā* in these acts. The injunction to fight is therefore a negation of the ideal of *ahimsā* and the only representative, if at all, of the philosophy of *ahimsā* in the Gita seems to be Arjuna. Arjuna's indecision and anxiety is not due to any lack of courage on his part but arises out of a moral conflict. On the one hand the love of his enemies for whom he feels compassion,⁷⁹ a typically Buddhist virtue, makes him desist from the fight but on the other hand he is not sure whether it is not his duty to fight. The Gita resolves the conflict by dismissing the former and making a case for the latter alternative. As such it would not be fair by Arjuna to call his a "mood of sentimental self-pity"⁸⁰ for in a Buddhist context Arjuna would have resolved the conflict by being a 'conscientious objector' or non-resister who considered it his moral duty not to fight, without blindly obeying the dictates of his king or state and believing them to be part of his moral duties. Left to his own devices Arjuna seems to favour the Buddhist solution for he weighs the consequences of the war as a whole and finds them disastrous.⁸¹ He is by no means impelled by cowardice or selfish motives for "he does not long for victory, kingdom or pleasures or even his own life."⁸² Radhakrishnan accuses Arjuna of "talking in terms of enlightened selfishness"⁸³ but Arjuna on the contrary is prepared to offer non-resistance and sacrifice his life for the sake of what he considers at heart to be right without desiring the gains and glories of earth or heaven. "These I would not consent to kill though killed myself even for the kingdom of the three worlds ; how much less for the sake of the earth ?"⁸⁴ "Far better would it be for me if the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra with weapons in hand should slay me in the battle while I remain unresisting and unarmed."⁸⁵ To do justice to Arjuna one must say that except for his indecision and failure to apprehend clearly that it was no moral duty of his to fight and kill fellow human beings, his general attitude is Buddhist to the core. The Bhagavadgita in condemning

78. X. 5 ; XIII. 7 ; XVI. 2 ; XVII. 14.

79. I. 28 ; II. 2.

80. op. cit., p. 98.

81. I. 38-43.

82. I. 32.

83. op. cit., p. 91.

84. I. 35.

85. I. 46.

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this right along therefore takes up a position which is the antithesis of the Buddhist attitude to war.

Radhakrishnan sums up the Buddhist and Gita teachings on caste by saying that "both attempt to relax the rigours of caste by basing it on a less untenable foundation." He is of course much less explicit when he elaborates on this point for he says that "the Gita recognises the caste divisions. . the Gita broadly distinguishes four fundamental types of individuals, answering to the four stages of the upward ascent. Basing caste on qualities the Gita requires each individual to do duties imposed by his caste. . The confusion of birth and qualities has led to an undermining of the spiritual foundation of caste."⁸⁶

Here again, I would hold that the Gita attitude on caste is the very opposite of that of Buddhism and that while the Gita in keeping with the Vedic tradition gives religious sanction to caste and attempts to provide an intellectual justification for it, Buddhism denies the validity of such a religious sanction and holds that there is no basis whatsoever for holding to caste distinctions. This would be clear if the specific arguments or assumptions on which caste is upheld in the Gita were placed side by side with the relevant arguments against caste as found in Buddhism. It may however be granted that the Gita agrees with Buddhism in holding that people of all castes may obtain the highest spiritual attainments but the important difference lies in the fact that while the Gita upholds caste distinctions on religious and genetical grounds, Buddhism denies the reality and validity of these distinctions on these very grounds.

One of the arguments of Arjuna was that among the undesirable consequences of war was the possible danger of the "intermixture of castes" (*varṇa-śankara*). Since the prohibition of intermarriage as between castes was one of the principles of caste theory it shows that according to the author of the Gita the "intermixture of castes" was a disastrous consequence. In Buddhism on the other hand intermixture of castes considered both as an historical fact and as a possibility was adduced as an argument against the reality and validity of caste distinctions. It is said that even those who claim caste purity have had mixed ancestors, the implication being that the hereditary distinctions of caste are unreal.⁸⁷ If this is an argument to show the historicity of caste mixture, the biological possibility of the mixture of castes, it may be mentioned, is also brought forward as an argument against the reality of caste distinctions.⁸⁸ Arguing for the

86. *Indian Philosophy*, p. 570, 1.

87. *Digha Nikāya*, I. 92-7.

88. *Majjhima Nikāya*, II. 153, 4.

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unity of mankind as against the distinctions of caste, Buddha says, there are differences of species and genera among plants and animals "that although such distinctions are not found among humans" (*evaṃ n'atthi manussesu liṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ puṭhu*).⁸⁹

Now the crucial passage in the Gita which according to Radhakrishnan undermines the traditional Hindu basis of caste is the one which says (to follow Radhakrishnan's translation) : "The fourfold order was created by Me according to the divisions of quality and work" (*cāturvarṇyam mayā sṛṣṭam guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśah*). Commenting on it Radhakrishnan says, "the emphasis is on *guṇa* (aptitude) and *karma* (function) and not *jāti* (birth). The *varṇa* or the order to which we belong is independent of sex, birth, or breeding. A class determined by temperament and vocation is not a caste determined by birth and heredity."⁹⁰ If this interpretation is intended for the two lines of the stanza quoted above its absurdity would be apparent if its full implications are worked out. For if it is correct what is meant by these two lines is that there are four and only four types of individuals each with a special aptitude for performing a special type of social duty which is obligatory on his part. Now the references to the four types (as is evident from the word *cāturvarṇyam*) is obviously a reference to the four castes, viz. the brahmins, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas and śūdras. But if as Radhakrishnan says "the *varṇa* or order to which we belong is independent of *birth*" then what is meant is that there may be brahmins who have the aptitude of śūdras and śūdras who have the aptitude of brahmins, so that it becomes the duty of these people who have been born in the wrong castes to do the work for which they have a special aptitude ! This would cut the ground beneath the concept of *svadharma* in the Gita.

Now if the individual types were created in accordance with their *guṇas* or aptitudes and *karmas* or social functions, it is difficult to see why the number of types should be *four* and not less or more, for if the types represented the *guṇas* there would have been three types corresponding to the *guṇas* of *sattva*, *rajas* and *taṃas*, while if they represented the *karmas* or social duties, surely many more.

But these two lines could be interpreted without absurdity in the general background of Gita thought if they are construed as an attempt to give a religious sanction as well as a justification for the hereditary basis of caste. On such an interpretation it would appear that the fourfold caste structure of society (based on heredity) is fundamental, absolute and divinely ordained as being the creation of God himself, and is not a

89. Sutta Nipata, 118.

90. op. cit., pp. 160, 1.

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product of human conventions. The purpose of such a creation would be to ensure the stability and maximum efficiency of society since each caste had a special aptitude for performing the social duties they were expected to perform and it was the specific duty (*svadharma*) of the members of each caste to perform the duties for which they were so created.

This appears to be the more natural interpretation but if so it means that the Gita not only holds that caste is a creation of God but attaches special sanctity to the four castes *qua four*. Now both claims have been contested in Buddhism. The Brahmin claim was that the Brahmins were created from the mouth of God (*mukhato jātā .brahmanimmitā*⁹¹), a theory which goes back to the Puruṣa Sūkta of the R̥gveda⁹², which says that the Brahmin was the mouth of God (*brahmaṇo'sya mukham āsīt*) and that all castes were created out of the Divine Person. This claim to a special association with Divinity was criticised by Buddhism on the grounds that the Brahmins like the people of all the other castes were evidently born of human parents.⁹³ But it is equally important to note that Buddhism held that there was nothing absolute even about the quaternity of castes. The Buddha argues that "among the Yonas and Kāmbojas and others living in the bordering territories there were *only two castes (dveva vaṅṅā)*, namely the lords and serfs."⁹⁴ In fact it is asserted that caste names have only an occupational significance⁹⁵ and that birth is no index to caste,⁹⁶ thus denying the hereditary basis of caste altogether, while the theory of caste as promulgated by the Vedic Brahmins is referred to as "a false and immoral view" (*pāpakam dīṭṭhigataṃ*⁹⁷). It would thus appear that while the Gita tries to uphold, justify as well as give a religious sanction to the caste theory, Buddhism in countering these very arguments is presenting the opposite view so that it would be neither fair by the Gita nor by Buddhism to say with Radhakrishnan that "both attempt to relax the rigours of caste by basing it on less untenable foundations."

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91. Majjhima Nikāya, II. 149.

92. X. 90.

93. Majjhima Nikāya, II. 149.

94. Ibid.

95. Sutta Nipāta, 119.

96. Saṃyutta Nikāya, I. 166.

97. Majjhima Nikāya, II. 154.