WARRIOR ETHICS IN THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ

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The Indo-European warrior ethos is preserved in the epic literature of the Celts, the Romans, the Greeks and the Hindus. In spite of intensive Brahmanic redactions, The Mahābhārata retains a basic warrior ethos that can be traced in both metric and narrative patterns back to Vedic inspiration. The eleventh chapter of the Bhagavadgītā, which is the thirty third chapter of Book Six in the Poona edition of The Mahābhārata, demonstrates an intense warrior sentiment that not only links back to Vedic dispositions, but also relates to spiritual themes of victory over evil in the other Indo-European epics as well. Several modern commentators have realized the importance of the passage which depicts the destruction of the worlds particularized in the persons of the warrior combatants gathered on the field of Kurukṣetra.[1] Warrior concerns, with an inextricable blending of religion and politics, have never received their necessary share of critical attention in determining the Hindu religious ideals. Since the epic shows the religious and moral activity of the warriors in segments like Gītā 11 where warrior religious activity has been generated from warrior moral concerns, it is possible to discern new dimensions of Hindu religious ideals.

The Gītā passage serves as an epitome of the warrior ethos as it portrays the spiritual universe that gives meaning to the hero's action. While the hero serves as the highest expression of warrior ethos in the Indo-European epics he is, nonetheless, subservient to the disposition of the community he serves. It is just this peculiar position of the hero as the individual who

represents the community sentiment that gives rise to the situations portrayed in chapters two and eleven of the Gītā. The passage of the destruction of the world in chapter 11 is a solution that comes in response to the existential conundrum that is raised by the hero, Arjuna Pāṇḍava, in chapter two. In chapter 11, the verse sequence that runs from 15-50 is composed in a non-classical eleven syllable Sanskrit metre (triṣṭubh). By attaching these verses to the triṣṭubh verses in chapter two (2.5-7) an actual narrative sequence develops in the form of the presentation of a conundrum or vexed dharmic situation. Chapter 11.15-50 presents the solution.

The conundrum or dharmic question for the warrior hero arises out of his perception of his duty (dharma) which is to slay his enemies in battle, and his awareness of the unwritten code that governs the Indo-European warrior communities which forbids the slaying of kinsmen and teachers. The verses of chapter two present the conundrum with the poetic economy of Vedic seers:

> It would be better to eat beggar's food
> here in this world,
> Than not to slay the teachers who possess
> great endurance,
> But having slain the teachers whose goal
> is wealth in this world,
> I would be eating food smeared with blood.
>
> And we do not know which of the two were better
> Whether we should conquer or they should conquer us.
> Having slain those Dhṛtaraṣṭra forces who
> are standing
> There in front of us, we would not wish to live.
>
> My mind is confused about the Dharma and
> My being is afflicted with the sin of
> weak-spiritedness;
> I ask you what would be better.
> Tell me that decisively.
> I am your pupil. Teach me who have
> come to you. BG 2.5-7

The slayer is Arjuna who has been designated as champion for his family faction, the Pāṇḍavas, who are warring with their cousins, the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the hereditary ruler of the Kuru clans after the death of Pāṇḍu, father of the five brothers.

Verse five presents the conundrum in terms of the paradox that is often found in the subtlties of dharmic reality (sūkṣma dharma). The idea of the Indo-European warrior as a beggar conveys the most impossible condition that can be imagined. Arjuna testifies that his failure to kill his masters in the Vedic lore that included weaponry would result in a condition that would make begging seem preferable. The significance of such imagery can be seen in The Odyssey when Odysseus returns to Ithaka and assumes the disguise of a beggar in order to reconnoiter his position. Homer leaves no doubt as to the utter degradation of the beggar in the warriors' eyes when he presents the scenes in the palace. Penelope's suitors not only jeer at the beggar, but at the suggestion of his former prowess they actually resort to violence on him. He is struck by a footstool that one of the suitors hurls at him. For Arjuna to even contemplate such a condition for himself would be enough to undo him, and yet he has to face an even worse alternative, the consequences of slaying his teachers (gurūn).

Chapter 11 identifies the warriors that Arjuna will be expected to slay. In this number are the Vedic weapons' master Droṇa and Arjuna's grandsire, Bhīṣma. To kill these warriors who are bonded to him in the most sacred way recognizable in the Indo-European world, Arjuna would incur sin that would reach beyond his status in the present world and extend into the world after death. The conundrum is complete. The result of such a vexed situation will be to reduce the hero to inaction. A similar, though seemingly less

poignant, situation occurs in The Iliad when Achilles is deprived of his appointed share of the booty through the overbearing action of Agamemnon. Achilles is reduced to inaction by his deliberate choice, and it is not until Patroklos approaches him with his request to fight in Achilles' armor that Homer discloses the dimension of the conundrum. Achilles says in his response to Patroklos:

> The girl the sons of the Achaians chose out
> for my honour, and I won her with my own spear,
> and stormed a strong-fenced city, is taken back
> out of my hands by powerful Agamemnon, the son
> of Atreus, as if I were some dishonoured vagabond. [2]
>
> The Iliad 16.56-59

Achilles, like Arjuna, recoils from even the notion of beggary. When Achilles allows Patroklos to don his armor he unwittingly marks him for death. The dimension of the conundrum situation moves, as in the Gītā, into the realm of after-life where the consequences of action in life are still apparent. Arjuna's reference to eating food smeared with blood indicates such consequences.

Line three of verse five, hatvā 'rthakāmāms tu gurūn ihai 'va, is translated by Edgerton as "But having slain my elders who seek their ends, right in this world..." I have translated the compound arthakāma in a more directly material sense that would indicate that the warriors who were about to fight one another had the goals of warriors universally. The fact that the conundrum situation is obviously maintained in the warrior tradition as a teaching device is retained in the later tradition that became far more intent on spiritual goals than booty or possession. By considering the triṣṭubh verses in The Mahābhārata in isolation, I have been able to isolate a significant portion of the epic in which warrior concerns are uppermost.[3] In the triṣṭubh portion the cause of the battle of Kurukṣetra is undoubtedly

the failure of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his son Duryodhana to fulfill the oath of returning their portion of the Kuru holdings to the Pāṇḍavas. The violation of the Pāṇḍava wife, Draupadī, is also cited in the triṣṭubh sections as a reason for hostilities. Edgerton's translation of arthakāma, "seeking their ends, right in this world" is more in keeping with the later Brahmanic redaction of the epic. Yet, no matter what their goals, Arjuna's dilemma involves his relationship to the elders, and finding himself opposed to them, his obligation to kill them.

Verse six of chapter two repeats the conundrum in less vivid terms. The consequences of killing their kinsmen would destroy the warriors' whole way of life. Verse seven then seeks an answer to the dharmic confusion. Arjuna adopts the role of student as he asks Krishna to help him find a solution. While the Gītā itself is actually a compilation of many solutions to the conundrum, the matching of the metrical patterns between the three verses in chapter two and the verses in chapter 11 increases the possibility of establishing continuity in the narrative element as well. It may well be that the verses represent a late phase in the oral tradition of the warrior tale, but the essential theme of the passage is rooted in the Indo-European warrior ethos that often includes notions of creation and dissolution attendant on a final battle over justice or rights in the world.[4]

Rudolf Otto in The Original Gita includes the verses from chapter two and verses 17; 19-36; 41-51 from chapter 11. He says, "The Original Gita then... is no doctrinal Text, no doctrinal writ of Bhakti religion, but rather Krishna's own voice and deed, referring directly to the situation in which Arjuna finds himself; intended, however, not to proclaim to him any transcendent dogma of salvation, but to render him willing to undertake the

special service of the Almighty Will of the God Who decides the fate of battles."[5] While Otto's description of Arjuna's service to a deity who seems more Judeo-Christian than Hindu is somewhat off the mark, he none-the-less isolates the peculiar warrior component of the Gītā. In commenting on the verses in chapter 11 that he designates "original," he says: "This portion of the narrative, then, is the very climax of the whole Epic, revealing as it does the guise assumed by the ancient traditional material of an earlier mighty fratricidal struggle to the mind of a profound poet who give it its later form..." Otto is pointing to the internecine conflict that lies at the heart of the epic and that is brought to sharp focus in the verses from chapters two and eleven. The later Brahminization of the epic obscures the more archaic Indo-European issues that once demanded solution in the epic genre.

The scene that unfolds in chapter 11.15-50 takes the form of a religious vision. Arjuna says, "I see the gods in your body, O God."(11.15a). In verse 24 he uses the vocative, O Viṣṇu, and reports that seeing the God with flaming eyes and yawning mouths shakes his inmost self (pravyathitān-tarātmā). The identification of Krishna as the locus of the vision occurs in verse 36, sthāne hṛṣīkeśa, and in verse 47 Krishna addresses Arjuna through the vocative. The religious vision takes place between the two warriors without the aid of seers or Brahmins. Since the religious activity is conducted solely by the warriors themselves, it may be supposed that a community understanding of warrior religious activity is being enacted that actually pre-dates the Brahmanic monopoly on religion in India. The scene in chapter 11 is related thematically to a scene in Book Seven (7.57) of the epic in which Krishna and Arjuna have a vision of Śiva who presents them

with an invincible weapon. The text makes it clear that the vision is related to the warriors' ability in the practise of discipline (yoga) to produce the trance that leads to vision. Krishna without Arjuna offers the assembled Kurus a vision to deter their hostility. (5.129) In Book 16.5 which recounts Krishna's death, he is described as possessing "celestial vision" as he prepares for trance by concentrating his thought and restraining his senses. The relation of the warriors' vision and trance to the practice of discipline has seldom been considered.

> In her remarkable study of the Hindu myth of the pralaya (Biardeau, EMH, 3, BEFEO, LVIII 1971, 17-89) Madeleine Biardeau has provided a new perspective on the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā, in which Krishna reveals to Arjuna the viśvarupadarśana, the sight of his universal form. The celebrated theophany, which most scholars, perhaps judiciously, have left to explain itself, is now appreciated within a ritual context. As Biardeau observes, the text - in particular verses 15-33, which concern Arjuna's description of the vision (15-31) and Krishna's explanation of its meaning (32-33) - is one of two used in the ritual of entry into sannyasa, the life of renunciation. [6]

Alf Hiltebeitel presents the Biardeau theory at the opening of his chapter "Two Theophanies, Three Steps" in The Ritual of Battle. Since he has adapted Biardeau's notion in some of his own thinking on the epic as ritual, he does not focus his attention of that aspect of her theory but rather on the cosmology that her study of pralaya opens up. The notion of the dissolution or destruction of all things at the end of the world or yuga is rooted in Indo-European mythology concerning heroes. At some archaic level the heroic task of ridding the world of evil was the essential religious thrust of the Indo-Europeans.

G. Dumézil and S. Wikander have devoted considerable effort to analysis of myths arising from the Indo-European warrior tales. Most of their work has been shaped by the notion that the Indo-European community was divided into a tripartite structure which shows "intimate and functional connection between social and religious facts." For reasons that often seem more related to later stratifications of Indo-European cultures in India and in Rome, they place the King in the functional category of the priests. The non-Brahmanical triṣṭubh portions of the epic indicate that the chieftains formed assemblies of equals with their warriors. It was out of these assemblies that the dharma decisions could usually be expected to come. The tripartite theoretical framework describes the domain of the warriors, both heroes and the gods embodying the function, under the label "the exercise of physical prowess," while the "maintenance of cosmic and juridical order" is reserved for the priest-king class which "stand at the apex of the respective Indo-European social systems."[7] By considering the conundrum of Arjuna Pāṇḍava and the solution offered by the vision of destruction it is possible to see that under discrete metrical and narrative conditions an archaic system of warrior maintenance of the cosmic and juridical order is still apparent.

The scene of the destruction of the worlds in Gītā 11 presents a mythic situation of clear cosmic ordering which is totally controlled by warriors in their fighting roles as champions of the Dharma. The religious and political intertwining of the aspects of Arjuna's dilemma about killing his teachers and kinsmen is crucial to an understanding of the political and religious aspects of the vision that provides him with an acceptable solution to the conundrum. The flaw in the tripartite function theory is that by limiting the warrior function to "the exercise of physical prowess" it loses sight of the most

creative aspects of the ancient kṣatriya order which finds political activity whether in fighting or negotiation an occasion for religious and moral activity simultaneously. Such situations hearken back to archaic Indo-European modes and there is no doubt that they were later lost in the stratification of classes that certainly reflect a tripartite structure. The tripartite system has been productive in opening unsuspected parallels in the Roman, Iranian, German, Greek, Irish and Indian myths, but, none-the-less, it limits our understanding of existential forms of ancient warrior activity which allowed them to "bring on the Gods," or as in Krishna's case to manifest the God's power and forms. Mircea Eliade has pointed out that there is nothing ordinary or natural about the warriors' fury or magico-religious experience because it belongs to the syndrome of "gaining possession of a sacrality."[8]

The vision of destruction that Arjuna witnesses in chapter 11 has several elements that are related to warriors' fury and the possession by something sacred. The major image of the entire passage is fire.

> In modern India, the Mohammedans believe that a man in communication with God becomes "burning hot." Anyone who performs miracles is called 'boiling.' By extension, all kinds of people or acts involving any magicoreligious power are regarded as burning. This sacred power, which causes both the shaman's heat and the heating of the warrior, can be transformed, differentiated, given various colorings, by subsequent efforts... The "wrath" and the heat induced by a violent and excessive access of sacred power are feared by the majority of mankind. [9]

The terrible transformation of Krishna into Vishnu is described by Arjuna as "a mass of radiance, glowing on all sides" (11.17b) and having "the glory of flaming fire and sun" (11.17d). In 19cd the face is equated with flaming

fire which burns the whole universe with its radiance. The description in verse 24 posits that the God's form touches the sky as it burns with many colors and flames shoot from the eyes. The epic hero is sometimes described as having flames shoot from his eyes, nostrils and even his ears.[10]

> Then Zeus no longer checked his rage, for now
> His heart was filled with fury, and he showed
> The full range of his strength. He came from
> Heaven and from Olympus, lightening as he came,
> Continuously; from his mighty hand
> The bolts kept flying, bringing thunder-claps
> And lightening-flashes, while the holy flame
> Rolled thickly all around. The fertile earth
> Being burnt, roared out, the voiceless forest cried
> And crackled with the fire... [11]
>
> Hesiod, Theogony. 690-697

The description of Zeus in rage bringing the fire of destruction to his rivals for rule of the worlds bears an unmistakable analogy to Krishna-Vishnu's appearance in the Gītā. In the vision that Krishna creates in Book Five (5.129) after he is enraged that Duryodhana has planned to abduct him, the seers and Kuru elders who are able to sustain the vision because of their own wealth of tapas or "heat" witness sparks of fire mixed with smoke pouring from Krishna's eyes, nose, ears and even the pores of his skin. The meaning of techniques for 'mastering fire' indicates the attainment of a certain ecstatic state, a non-conditioned state of spiritual freedom.[12] Arjuna's ability to sustain the vision of the flaming divinity testifies to the abundance of his own tapas or ascetic merit. He is described in the passage as a true "seer." In verse 31 he seeks the identity of the flaming form. The answer he receives in the next three verses can be read as the epitome of the solution to his conundrum.

Verses 15-30 show Arjuna the destruction of his enemies as they are devoured by the flaming form of Vishnu. In Verses 32-34 Krishna identifies

himself as the cause of the destruction of the worlds, Time or Death (kālo 'smi). The fact that kāla can also mean "fate" further ties the passage to Indo-European epic themes. Achilles is apprised by his divine mother that he can make a choice of his fate by his decision to stay at Troy and fight thereby dying young and earning great fame, or he can return home to live a long life without fame. Arjuna is told by Fate to stand and fight since his enemies are all marked for destruction. While such a solution certainly seems to be a product of a deus ex machina it is none-the-less related to archaic Indo-European warrior notions that must have arisen as the warrior cultus began to educate itself in its own attitudes toward life and death. The decision to kill or be killed is a major part of the anguish in Arjuna's conundrum. Krishna's message to Arjuna is that he is merely an instrument of the divine plan that numbers the enemy as already dead.

The verses from 36-50 present Arjuna's reactions to the vision experience as he tries to integrate the visionary form of Krishna with his companion in arms. These verses do not actually bear on the conundrum situation itself, but they do bear on the ability of Krishna to create a theophany. Krishna is seen to release "all classes of beings from his own person."[13] It is clear that the later tradition in India seized on the remarkable qualities associated with Krishna's visionary skills in order to multiply and expand the quality of the extraordinary. Such activity need not detract from the political involvement of Krishna if the conundrum situation of the Gītā serves as a realistic basis for considering the warriors' religious activity. A religio-political interpretation of Krishna's involvement with Arjuna and his forces increases our understanding of archaic modes of living in the universe.

The inter-relatedness of the political and religious questions about the Dharma, as well as consideration of ecstatic techniques used to obtain weapons or prowess, provide a unique opportunity from which to approach the other Indo-European warrior lore. The theophany in the Gītā has an immediacy and dramatic relation to the actual war that far surpasses the appearance of the gods in the Greek epics. When Krishna predicts the success of Arjuna in the battles he is also signaling the inauguration of the new rule in which justice or dharmic righteousness will prevail. The scene at Kurukṣetra is memorialized for accomplishing a universal understanding of the warriors' destiny as it serves to rid the earth of evil-doers and allows the cause of right action to prevail. Because the later tradition lost sight of the warrior ethos does not detract from its powerful message in the Gītā and in the epic itself.

The connection of the Gītā triṣṭubh verses with some 2000 other non-classical triṣṭubh verses in the epic serves to bring the warrior ethos of ownership and possession into vivid focus. Warrior ethos is rooted in notions of acquisition. The final stanzas of many Vedic hymns with their supplication for treasure, gold, booty, cows, sons and knowledge only set the warrior goals into inspired song. Throughout The Mahābhārata, The Iliad and the Táin Bó Cuailnge the desire for possession of someone else's property causes warfare that consumes whole generations of men, and is seen symbolically as "the end of the world." While the archaic groups of Indo-Europeans, including the Vedic peoples, were intent on pillaging the settlements of the foreign peoples they were invading, by epic times the warfare has become internecine. Arjuna laments that condition in the opening of the Gītā, and to a real degree the Trojan war was fought among peoples who were related by alliances and other forms of ancient bonding practices. The very system of

bonding which Paul Thieme identifies in the contract or mitra is based on the ethos of ownership whether of cows, the land, gold, bronze or of people especially women.

Paris abducted Helen and set the Trojan war into motion. In tales from The Mahābhārata, Draupadī is abducted by Jayadratha of Sind (3.248-256) and Sītā is ravished by Rāvaṇa (3.257-276). Arjuna himself creates the initial alliance with Krishna after he has abducted Krishna's sister. Moreover, the epic retains a version of the winning of Draupadī by abduction on the chariot of Bhīma and Arjuna. The humiliation of Druapadī in the Kuru court involves an outrageous attempt at seduction, and some verses of the epic attribute the final conflict to this scene. The battles that result from the rapes of Draupadī by Jayadratha and of Sīta by Rāvaṇa are fierce and bloody, as is the final slaughter in the Táin which involves the abduction of a bull. When Arjuna's conundrum is set out in the Gītā there is a tendency to forget the brutal patterns of rape and slaughter that have led up to a situation that finally causes him to question his role as killer. It took many centuries of Indo-European expansion before the stage could be set for internecine conflict that for the participants is virtually "the end of the world." The avenging of right over wrong may become spiritualized into conflicts of good vs. evil, but the base cause of all the epic conflicts involves systems of property rights.

The need to recover the warrior ethos lies in the tendency of the later tradition to gloss over the violence and bloodshed in search of "higher" forms of intellectual and spiritual attainments while still preserving the ancient sources of death and destruction. Madeleine Biardeau's observation that Gītā 15-33 is one of the texts used in the ritual of entry into the life

of renunciation (saṃnyāsa) illustrates the development of the tradition around the sources of violence themselves.[14] Ironically, the warrior ethos of acquisition is itself called into question by the very act of renunciation. The retention of the vision of destruction including Krishna's injunction to fight because the enemy is already fated for death provides a strange correlation of renunciation to the very sources of archaic acquisition patters. Without an ideology of ownership and possession there is no real impetus to renounce the world.

The very world-denying aspect of Hindu religion can be traced to the archaic Indo-European warrior practices themselves. Warrior ethos demands a constant awareness of death. In such an ethos death is an enemy to be overcome since it is the ultimate agent of loss of property and life itself which become the chief possession. The Gītā reflects the constant attempt of the Hindu thinkers to arrive at solutions to the ultimate conundrum of warrior ethos. In some ways, Buddhism and Jainism, both growing from founders of kṣatriya lineage, were locked into renunciation systems because of their inherited understanding of the world. The Buddha's observation that desire is the root of all suffering provides a significant comment on the ideology of ownership and possession. Understanding the warrior ethos as it informs the philosophy of the Gītā opens unsuspected paths for new inquiry.

Endnotes

[1]Alf Hiltebeitel, The Ritual of Battle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), p.114 ff.

[2]Richmond Lattimore, trans. The Iliad of Homer (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1964), p.331.

[3]Mary Carroll Smith, "The Mahābhārata's Core" JOAS, vol.95, No.3, pp.479-482.

[4]Hiltebeitel, p.299ff.

[5]Rudolf Otto, The Original Gītā (London: Allen & Unwin, 1939), p.14.

[6]Hiltebeitel, p.114.

[7]C. Scott Littleton, Introduction to G. Dumezil, Gods of the Ancient Northmen (Berkeley: University Press, 1973) xi.

[8]Mircea Eliade, Rites and Symbols of Initiation (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), p.85.

[9]Ibid., p.86.

[10]The Mahābhārata, Sabhā Parvan, 2.63.15. "And as he raged, flames of fire burst forth from all the orifices of his body, as from the hollows of a tree that is on fire." J.A.B. van Buitenen, trans. (Chicago: University Press, 1975), p.151.

[11]Dorothea Wender, trans. Hesiod's Theogony (New York: Penguin Books, 1973) p.45.

[12]Eliade, p.95.

[13]Hiltebeitel, p.126.

[14]See p.38.