

Classical India

10

“To Fight in a Righteous War”: Varna and Moral Duty in India

The system of social classes in India known as the caste system gradually took shape during the thousand years prior to the beginning of the Common Era. The Aryans, an Indo-European speaking people who may have come from the grasslands north of the Caspian Sea, took the lead in creating a four-part division of social classes in which lineal descent was significant, called *varnas* (a Sanskrit word meaning “color”).

The new social system was strongly hierarchical. Priests (*brahmans*) ranked the highest and warriors (*kshatriyas*) came next. Merchants, artisans, and peasants (*vaishyas*) ranked third. The fourth *varna* was composed of the servants (*sudras*) of the three higher groups. A fifth category, made up of all those who were engaged in occupations defined as “unclean,” stood outside the system of *varnas*; these people were known as “untouchables.” (When the Portuguese arrived in India around 1500 C.E. they translated *varna* as “caste”; the “caste system” is thus a later European term used to describe Indian social realities.)

The *brahmans* taught that each *varna* had its own sacred or moral duty (*dharma*) to perform. The example we consider in this chapter is that of the warriors, whose sacred duty was to fight. A vivid illustration of the *dharma* of the warriors can be found in the famous literary text from early India, the *Bhagavad Gita* (*Song of God*). The *Bhagavad Gita* is a portion of a much longer Indian classic, the *Mahabharata*, the epic tale of a war between two branches of the same family in the distant past. In its present form the *Bhagavad Gita* dates from the second century B.C.E.

The central theme of the *Bhagavad Gita* is the dialogue between the warrior Arjuna, who is on the eve of a great battle, and his chariot driver Krishna, who is actually the Hindu god Vishnu. How do the following passages help us to understand the origins of the caste system?

BHAGAVAD GITA

CHAPTER I

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Arjuna

- 21 Drive my chariot, Krishna immortal, and place it between the two armies.
 22 That I may see those warriors who stand there eager for battle, with whom I
 must now fight at the beginning of this war.
 23 That I may see those who have come here eager and ready to fight, in their
 desire to do the will of the evil son of Dhritarashtra.

Sanjaya

- 24 When Krishna heard the words of Arjuna he drove their glorious chariot
 and placed it between the two armies.
 25 And facing Bhishma and Drona and other royal rulers he said: "See,
 Arjuna, the armies of the Kurus, gathered here on this field of battle."
 26 Then Arjuna saw in both armies fathers, grandfathers, sons,
 27 grandsons; fathers of wives, uncles, masters;
 28 brothers, companions and friends.
 When Arjuna thus saw his kinsmen face to face in both lines of battle, he was
 overcome by grief and despair and thus he spoke with a sinking heart.

Arjuna

- When I see all my kinsmen, Krishna, who have come here on this field of
 battle,
 29 Life goes from my limbs and they sink, and my mouth is sear and dry; a
 trembling overcomes my body, and my hair shudders in horror;
 30 My great bow Gandiva falls from my hands, and the skin of my flesh is
 burning; I am no longer able to stand, because my mind is whirling and
 wandering.
 31 And I see forebodings of evil, Krishna. I cannot foresee any glory if I kill my
 own kinsmen in the sacrifice of battle.
 32 Because I have no wish for victory, Krishna, nor for a kingdom, nor for its
 pleasures. How can we want a kingdom, Govinda, or its pleasures or even life,
 33 When those for whom we want a kingdom, and its pleasures, and the joys of
 life, are here in this field of battle about to give up their wealth and their life?
 34 Facing us in the field of battle are teachers, fathers and sons; grandsons,
 grandfathers, wives' brothers; mothers' brothers and fathers of wives.
 35 These I do not wish to slay, even if I myself am slain. Not even for the
 kingdom of the three worlds: how much less for a kingdom of the earth!
 36 If we kill these evil men, evil shall fall upon us: what joy in their death could
 we have, O Janardana, mover of souls?
 37 I cannot therefore kill my own kinsmen, the sons of king Dhritarashtra, the
 brother of my own father. What happiness could we ever enjoy, if we
 killed our own kinsmen in battle?

- 38 Even if they, with minds overcome by greed, see no evil in the destruction
of a family, see no sin in the treachery to friends;
- 39 Shall we not, who see the evil of destruction, shall we not refrain from this
terrible deed?
- 40 The destruction of a family destroys its rituals of righteousness, and when the
righteous rituals are no more, unrighteousness overcomes the whole family.
- 41 When unrighteous disorder prevails, the women sin and are impure; and
when women are not pure, Krishna, there is disorder of castes, social
confusion.
- 42 This disorder carries down to hell the family and the destroyers of the
family. The spirits of their dead suffer in pain when deprived of the ritual
offerings.
- 43 Those evil deeds of the destroyers of a family, which cause this social
disorder, destroy the righteousness of birth and the ancestral rituals of
righteousness.
- 44 And have we not heard that hell is waiting for those whose familiar rituals
of righteousness are no more?
- 45 O day of darkness! What evil spirit moved our minds when for the sake of an
earthly kingdom we came to this field of battle ready to kill our own people?
- 46 Better for me indeed if the sons of Dhritarashtra, with arms in hand, found
me unarmed, unresisting, and killed me in the struggle of war.

Sanjaya

- 47 Thus spoke Arjuna in the field of battle, and letting fall his bow and arrows
he sank down in his chariot, his soul overcome by despair and grief.

CHAPTER 2

Sanjaya

- 1 Then arose the Spirit of Krishna and spoke to Arjuna, his friend, who with
eyes filled with tears, thus had sunk into despair and grief.

Krishna

- 2 Whence this lifeless dejection, Arjuna, in this hour, the hour of trial?
Strong men know not despair, Arjuna, for this wins neither heaven nor
earth.
- 3 Fall not into degrading weakness, for this becomes not a man who is a man.
Throw off this ignoble discouragement, and arise like a fire that burns all
before it.

Arjuna

- 4 I owe veneration to Bhishma and Drona. Shall I kill with my arrows my
grandfather's brother, great Bhishma? Shall my arrows in battle slay
Drona, my teacher?

- 5 Shall I kill my own masters who, though greedy of my kingdom, are yet my sacred teachers? I would rather eat in this life the food of a beggar than eat royal food tasting of their blood.
- 6 And we know not whether their victory or ours be better for us. The sons of my uncle and king, Dhritarashtra, are here before us: after their death, should we wish to live?
- 7 In the dark night of my soul I feel desolation. In my self-pity I see not the way of righteousness. I am thy disciple, come to thee in supplication: be a light unto me on the path of my duty.
- 8 For neither the kingdom of the earth, nor the kingdom of the gods in heaven, could give me peace from the fire of sorrow which thus burns my life.

Sanjaya

- 9 When Arjuna the great warrior had thus unburdened his heart, "I will not fight, Krishna," he said, and then fell silent.
- 10 Krishna smiled and spoke to Arjuna—there between the two armies the voice of God spoke these words:

Krishna

- 11 Thy tears are for those beyond tears; and are thy words words of wisdom? The wise grieve not for those who live; and they grieve not for those who die—for life and death shall pass away.
- 12 Because we all have been for all time: I, and thou, and those kings of men. And we all shall be for all time, we all for ever and ever.
- 13 As the Spirit of our mortal body wanders on in childhood, and youth and old age, the Spirit wanders on to a new body: of this the sage has no doubts.
- 14 From the world of the senses, Arjuna, comes heat and comes cold, and pleasure and pain. They come and they go: they are transient. Arise above them, strong soul.
- 15 The man whom these cannot move, whose soul is one, beyond pleasure and pain, is worthy of life in Eternity.
- 16 The unreal never is: the Real never is not. This truth indeed has been seen by those who can see the true.
- 17 Interwoven in his creation, the Spirit is beyond destruction. No one can bring to an end the Spirit which is everlasting.
- 18 For beyond time he dwells in these bodies, though these bodies have an end in their time; but he remains immeasurable, immortal. Therefore, great warrior, carry on thy fight.
- 19 If any man thinks he slays, and if another thinks he is slain, neither knows the ways of truth. The Eternal in man cannot kill: the Eternal in man cannot die.
- 20 He is never born, and he never dies. He is in Eternity: he is for evermore. Never-born and eternal, beyond times gone or to come, he does not die when the body dies.

- 21 When a man knows him as never-born, everlasting, never-changing,
beyond all destruction, how can that man kill a man, or cause another
to kill?
- 22 As a man leaves an old garment and puts on one that is new, the Spirit
leaves his mortal body and then puts on one that is new.
- 23 Weapons cannot hurt the Spirit and fire can never burn him. Untouched is
he by drenching waters, untouched is he by parching winds.
- 24 Beyond the power of sword and fire, beyond the power of waters and
winds, the Spirit is everlasting, omnipresent, never-changing, never-
moving, ever One.
- 25 Invisible is he to mortal eyes, beyond thought and beyond change. Know
that he is, and cease from sorrow.
- 26 But if he were born again and again, and again and again he were to die,
even then, victorious man, cease thou from sorrow.
- 27 For all things born in truth must die, and out of death in truth comes life.
Face to face with what must be, cease thou from sorrow.
- 28 Invisible before birth are all beings and after death invisible again. They are
seen between two unseens. Why in this truth find sorrow?
- 29 One sees him in a vision of wonder, and another gives us words of his
wonder. There is one who hears of his wonder; but he hears and knows
him not.
- 30 The Spirit that is in all beings is immortal in them all: for the death of what
cannot die, cease thou to sorrow.
- 31 Think thou also of thy duty and do not waver. There is no greater good for
a warrior than to fight in a righteous war.
- 32 There is a war that opens the doors of heavens, Arjuna! Happy the warriors
whose fate is to fight such war.
- 33 But to forgo this fight for righteousness is to forgo thy duty and honour: is
to fall into transgression.
- 34 Men will tell of thy dishonour both now and in times to come. And to a
man who is in honour, dishonour is more than death.
- 35 The great warriors will say that thou hast run from the battle through fear;
and those who thought great things of thee will speak of thee in scorn.
- 36 And thine enemies will speak of thee in contemptuous words of ill-will and
derision, pouring scorn upon thy courage. Can there be for a warrior a
more shameful fate?
- 37 In death thy glory in heaven, in victory thy glory on earth. Arise therefore,
Arjuna, with thy soul ready to fight. . . .

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why is Arjuna reluctant to fight?
2. What reasons does Krishna give for urging Arjuna into battle?
3. What clues regarding gender relations in India do you see in these passages?
Do you see evidence of how masculinity and femininity were defined?
4. How did the *Bhagavad Gita* reinforce the system of *varnas*, or castes?

5. Why do you think the *Bhagavad Gita* has fascinated the people of India for 2,000 years? What other religions rely heavily on stories?
6. How would a Buddhist respond to Arjuna's ethical dilemma?
7. How does the advice from Krishna compare with the thinking of Confucius? What does this comparison suggest about how concepts of male "virtue" differed in classical India and China?