

Article

The Nonviolence Conundrum: Political Peace and Personal Karma in Jain and Hindu Traditions

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Abstract: Debates on war and peace within Jain and Hindu traditions revolve around the fear of incurring individual bad karma from violence, potentially inhibiting the individual's journey to spiritual liberation. Generally, the religious culture of both Jain and Hindu traditions elevates nonviolence to one of the highest moral principles. Jainism embraces *ahiṃsā* (non-harming) as the central doctrine, and Hindu traditions exalt non-harming as one of the highest disciplines and virtues (*dharma*). However, a personal spiritual commitment to nonviolence creates tension with the humanistic value of striving for an ethic of social justice and peace. Maintaining social harmony sometimes requires confrontation or targeted violence. It is not surprising that while both traditions laud *ahiṃsā* for personal peace, they also deliberate on the challenge of using necessary violence to maintain an orderly society. Despite sanctioning limited violence (*hiṃsā*) in acute situations, various texts and myths express a general suspicion for using war or other aggressive methods to solve social and political problems.

Keywords: *ahiṃsā*; *dharma*; Shrimad Rajchandra; Mahatma Gandhi; Jainism; the *Bhagavad-Gītā*; *Mahābhārata*; Jain *mahāvratas*

To address the tension between the principle of nonviolence and the political and social necessity of violence, this paper will first show how Jain and Hindu texts provide differing positions on the virtue of *ahiṃsā*, notwithstanding their equal concern for violence. It will then analyze select examples that demonstrate a tension between the individual ethic of nonviolence for householders committed to personal liberation and their social responsibility in professions involving law and order. Finally, by engaging with traditional texts and more recent dialogue between Mohandas K. Gandhi and his contemporary Jains, this paper will analyze how the two traditions seek to address the conflicting goals of social well-being and personal spiritual liberation, requiring withdrawal from the situations of conflict. While responsibility for social peace sometimes requires corrective and militaristic actions, the practice of nonviolence demands abstaining from karma that chain the soul to this existence. I propose that Jain and Hindu sacred texts and historical figures, such as Gandhi, seek to resolve the nonviolence conundrum by demarcating modified *ahiṃsā* for the householders (the ideology of *pravṛtti*, societal engagement) and an intensified observance for the renunciators (the inclination of *nivṛtti*, individual withdrawal from worldly engagement). Setting aside the fear of personal karmic repercussions may be a necessity in service of social harmony (nonviolent and just social order), which may require using violent force at times. Ultimately, the Jain and Hindu resources refrain from providing a philosophical and ethical justification for war. While Hindu texts provide space for a necessary war, its repercussions point to the futility of violence. Similar to some just war theorists in western traditions, they remain skeptical of war because it is inextricably connected to violence.¹ Hence, war can be justified in some situations, but it is never “just” because it violates the ethical principle of *ahiṃsā*, perpetuating the karmic cycle of violence and bondage to this existential reality.



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1. Ahimsā as the Highest Dharma for Attaining Liberation

1.1. Ahimsā in Jainism: Disrupting the Flow of Karmic Bondage

The Sanskrit word *ahimsā*, found in the texts of Jain and Hindu philosophy, connotes a negation of the word *hiṃsā*, “killing” or “injury”; hence it is translated as “not-harming” or “non-injury.” One of the most detailed and intricate definitions of *ahimsā* comes from Lord Mahāvīra, the 24th Tīrthāṅkara of Jainism:

All living beings desire happiness, and have revulsion from pain and suffering. They are fond of life, they love to live, long to live, and they feel repulsed at the idea of hurt and injury to or destruction of their life. Hence no living being should be hurt, injured, or killed.

All things existing, all things living, all things whatsoever, should not be slain, or treated with violence, or insulted, or tortured, or driven away.

He who hurts living beings himself, or gets them hurt by others, or approves of hurt caused by others, augments the world’s hostility towards himself.

(Jain 1983, pp. 187–88)²

This mandate by Lord Mahāvīra has led the Jain religious culture to hold non-harming in high regard. The first essential vow for Jain followers involves a commitment to non-harming: “I renounce all killing of living beings, whether subtle or gross, whether movable or immovable. Nor shall I myself kill living beings nor cause others to do it, nor consent to it” (Jacobi 2020, pp. 28–29).

Christopher Chapple provides a glimpse of the exhaustive Jain view of life forms: “Life dwells in rocks, clods of earth, drops of water, flowing streams, radiant sunbeams, flickering flames, and gusts of wind. There are also viruses and bacteria, fungi and plants, birds, and mammals, including humans” (Chapple 2017, p. 112). While Hindu and Buddhist traditions exalt the virtue of nonviolence, Jain texts provide the most detailed scope of what can be termed nonviolence. Nicholas F. Gier rightly notes that “Jainism offers us the first and unarguably the most extreme conception of nonviolence” (Gier 2004, p. 29). For Jains, nonviolence relates to their metaphysics of the sanctity of each soul. Hence, harming any living being, however small, obstructs the spiritual goal of liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Jain metaphysics encompass the belief that each living being—from humans and animals to micro-organisms—possesses a soul, which becomes mired by the force of the consequences of activities (karmas). The goal of human life is to get rid of all karmas to realize the pure state of the soul—liberation. Padmanabh Jaini succinctly elucidates, “If the soul becomes subject to attachment and aversion, it gets tainted by *hiṃsā* and thus becomes harmful to itself and others . . . The orientation of the Jaina discussion on *ahimsā*, therefore, proceeds from the perspective of one’s own soul and not so much from the standpoint of the protection of other beings or the welfare of humanity as a whole” (Jaini 2004, p. 48). Jaini rightly expresses the spiritual focus of nonviolence and how it has motivated the Jain monastic creation of scrupulous rules to avoid harming any living beings. However, this orientation also causes dilemmas for the Jain lay community’s social ethic of self-preservation when faced with aggression and violence. How Jain texts and the community offer nuanced views of nonviolence for householders will be shown in the second part of this article.

1.2. Ahimsā in Hinduism as the Ethical Principle and the Highest Duty

The *Vedas*, the earliest texts of Hindu tradition, emphasize mutual friendship, amity, and social harmony. According to the *Yajurveda* (XXXVI.18):

May all beings look at me

With friendly eye.

May I look at all

With friendly eye.

May all look at one another

With friendly eye. (Shastri and Shastri 2008, p. 62)

The Vedic teachings do not elaborate on *ahiṃsā* as Jain traditions do, but they certainly offer a socio-ethical framework for maintaining peace, goodwill, and harmony. Later Hindu texts also celebrate the virtue of *ahiṃsā*, and the Hindu Dharma codes of conduct include nonviolence. The yoga philosophy of Patañjali enshrines *ahiṃsā* as the first of five *yamas* (disciplines) in the five restraints. The other four *yamas* are *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (restraint of the senses), and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness).³ Intriguingly, the most extensive praise for nonviolence comes from the *Mahābhārata*, the epic encompassing the tale of an extremely violent civil war. In his post-war instruction in the art of ruling, a mighty warrior Bhīṣma instructs King Yudhiṣṭhira about the value of abstention from harm and cruelty:

Ahimsa [non-violence] is the highest dharma [law, sacred duty]. Ahimsa is the best tapas [religious austerity]. Ahimsa is the greatest gift. Ahimsa is the highest self-control. Ahimsa is the highest sacrifice. Ahimsa is the highest power. Ahimsa is the highest friend. Ahimsa is the highest truth. Ahimsa is the highest teaching. (Mahābhārata XIII: 116: 38–39)⁴

Although the text uses the same Sanskrit term for nonviolence as Jain sources, M.N. Dutta translates *ahiṃsā* as non-cruelty, not non-harming. Perhaps the translation is meant to fit the instruction for King Yudhiṣṭhira. According to the Hindu *dharma* laws (duties) for the warrior class, a king is committed to protecting their kingdom and subjects, which may include using violence against an aggressor. According to the *Mahābhārata*, a *kṣatriya* (a member of the ruling class) “should protect the people. Always trying his best for the destruction of robbers and wicked people, he should always display his prowess in battle . . . There is no greater duty for him than the suppression of robbers” (Mahābhārata XII: 60: 13–16).⁵ Hence, kings may deploy necessary violence, but they are advised to refrain from acts of cruelty, even against their opponents.

Nevertheless, the verses preceding the above praise of *ahiṃsā* in the *Mahābhārata* resemble the Jain notion of karmic consequences incurred by acts of violence. Grandsire Bhīṣma says, “He who acts with hostility towards another becomes the victim of similar deeds done by that other. Whatever acts one does in whatever bodies, he has to suffer the consequences thereof in those bodies” (Mahābhārata XII: 116: 36–37). The law of karma dictates that sustainable inner peace and social harmony cannot be obtained through acts of violence. Prominent Indian philosopher S. Radhakrishnan writes, “All acts produce their effects which are recorded in both organism and environment. Good produces good, evil, evil. Love increases our power of love, hatred, our power of hatred” (Howard 2018, p. 85). This belief that each action connects to its consequences has deterred some followers of the Jain, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions from engaging in a householder’s lifestyle, motivating them to adopt the path of a disengaged renouncer.

However, both nonviolence and karmic consequences have also been interpreted pragmatically in the Hindu texts, such as the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and through various Jain narratives. Philosopher Bimal K. Matilal characterizes the literal definition of karma, which can lead to disengagement, as an “older karma doctrine” because it suggests that all actions create bondage: “The law of *karma* dictated that all such [ritual acts involving animal sacrifice and actions of daily life] activities were creating as well as contributing further to the bondage of moral agent.” He notes that “the śramaṇas [the renouncer tradition] preached a way to break the vicious cycle by their philosophy of ‘non action’” (Matilal and Ganeri 2002, p. 128). While serious seekers of spiritual liberation often adopt a limited involvement and non-confrontational lifestyle, out of fear of the repercussions of actions that may cause violence, various Hindu and Jain texts and authors seek to provide alternative ways to authorize actions, which may include violence, to disrupt violence itself.

2. Debates on Justified Violence and the Question of Karmic Consequences in Jain and Hindu Religious Culture

Both Jain and Hindu traditions, though elevating *ahiṃsā* to a high personal ethical virtue, grapple with social responsibility. An individual may withdraw from acts of aggression to avoid negative karma. However, maintaining a culture of peace in the social sphere requires individual to act, which may include active confrontation, in response to aggression or violence. Hinduism's *varṇāśramadharmā*-based civic structure (duties according to caste and stage of life) traditionally encompassed social responsibility for maintaining peace in Hinduism. Jainism's *Śramaṇic* (striving for spiritual liberation) ethos focused on the non-confrontational social ethic of care for all beings. Notwithstanding their focus on peace and nonviolence, the accounts of warrior kings and concerned laypeople in Jain literature show their awareness of inevitable conflict. Jain and Hindu traditions offer didactic tools to help straddle the individual ethic of avoiding negative karmas and the civic duty of addressing negative actions that create social disorderliness.

2.1. Jainism's Measured Violence to Maintain Peace

Because *ahiṃsā* is the central principle in Jainism, debate about justified confrontation is virtually absent in *Jainaśāsana* (Jain religious theory and practice). Traditionally, the Jain monastic community, dedicated to achieving spiritual liberation, resorts to *mahāvratas* (great vows) requiring extreme self-control and vigilance. Monks and nuns pay attention to every act, word, and thought to avoid violence toward any living being—from invisible micro-organisms to mighty beasts. Anthropologist Lawrence A. Babb provides a detailed description of the Jain ascetic lifestyle:

Ascetics drink only boiled water so as to avoid harming small forms of life that would otherwise be present. Their food must be carefully inspected to be sure that it is free of small creatures. They must avoid walking on ground where there might be growing things, and do not bathe so as not to harm minute forms of water-borne life . . . They may not fan themselves lest harm come to airborne life . . . They may not use any artificial means of conveyance. (Babb 1996, p. 56)

Such careful attention to micro-organisms leaves little room to discuss questions regarding necessary violence against the sentient human beings. Hence, Jain religious literature, unlike Hindu texts, rarely engages with questions related to the ethic of necessary war because Jain spiritual teachers, who are considered experts in matters of Jain doctrines, do not generally endorse any acts involving violence.

However, it is important to note that even though Jainism holds the utmost respect for all life, it is by no means “cloaked in the negation of life” (Tobias 1991, p. 6). Jain laypeople only take *aṇuvratas* (minor or lesser vows requiring modified restrictions in adherence to the five vows), which allow the observant to use necessary violence involved in boiling water, cooking, cleaning, and collecting material for ritual worship. Jain householders also adopt occupations to earn wealth and sustain families, ritual traditions, and, above all, support the monastic community. Jain monks and nuns depend on laypeople's charity to sustain their lives and support their spiritual pursuits. Laypeople incur good karmas because of such sacrifice and service. Nevertheless, in uniformity with the commitment to nonviolence, Jainism prohibits laypeople from taking on trades that may be potentially harmful to living souls. These include agricultural enterprises as well as those involving meat products, armaments, and winemaking. Jains have traditionally selected mercantile professions, such as jewelers, bankers, grocers, and manufacturers, as well as professions in the medical and teaching fields. Chapple, however, notes the instances that show exceptions to this norm: “Jains in the southern part of India are largely agriculturists and in years past many served as generals and warriors” (Chapple 2008, p. 7). Looking more closely, it becomes evident that the Jain tradition is not homogeneous in its practices and holds a variety of views.

It would not be proper to classify Jains as pacifists (strictly avoiding necessary defense). Instead, Jains might be better considered as proponents of nonviolence, which may require standing up to violence. Kim Skoog writes:

Jainas (mendicants and lay followers alike) realize that it is impossible to live a life totally in accordance with the principle of nonviolence . . . There were a number of famous Jaina generals and soldiers, none of whom was condemned by Jaina leaders or followers. Overall, it can be noted that there does not seem to be clear, well established guidelines on how lay Jaina followers are expected to respond to war and terrorism. Though nonviolence is encouraged, it is not an absolute, there are perceivable exceptions. (Skoog 2004, p. 30)

Skoog notes that this “flexibility” poses dilemmas for individuals when deciding on a course for themselves. Historically, the Jain community of about six million practitioners co-existed with its fellow communities of Hindu Dharma traditions. Hinduism and Jainism share many myths, ethical rules, and social laws. Generally, the Jain community has also been influenced by Hindu laws in matters of civic duties for householders and people in power. Padamnabh Jaini writes: “The Jaina lawgivers of medieval times accorded with customary Hindu law in these matters.” He proceeds to provide the example of the tenth-century king, Somadeva, who “stipulated that ‘a king should strike down only those enemies of his kingdom who appear on the battlefield bearing arms, but never those people who are downtrodden, weak, or who are friends’ ” (Jaini 2004, p. 52). Indeed, such a position of Jain lawgivers has been recognized as a deviation, albeit a necessary one, from the law of *ahimsā* within the tradition’s canon and religious narratives. Even a glorious victory on the battlefield leads to feelings of remorse, acts of self-purification, and expiation for violent karmas.

Jain literature sanctions laypeople to address violent conflict with “*virodhi-himsā*: that is countering violence with violence as a final resort” (Jaini 2004, p. 53). In the story told by Lord Mahāvīra himself, a soldier Varuṇa takes the vow to strike the aggressor only after he is attacked. Following the first strike, the mighty Varuṇa courageously obliterates the enemy. Once violence has been committed, Varuṇa, concerned about the consequences in his own afterlife, immediately sits on the ground to venerate Lord Mahāvīra to achieve his own peaceful death. Varuṇa does not rejoice in his victory but fears the adverse repercussions of his deeds. He seeks to abandon all feelings of hostility toward his enemy. Jaini surmises that Jain texts and traditions “appear to have outlined a path of nonviolence that would allow a lay adherent to conduct his daily life with human dignity while permitting him to cope with the unavoidable reality of the world in which violence is all-pervasive” (Jaini 2004, pp. 58–60). Astute awareness of the pervasiveness of violence also helps Jain practitioners uphold social harmony and deters them from perpetuating violence by waging wars for political power.

While classifying various levels of *himsā*, Sulekh Jain, a prominent member of the Jain community in the United States, lists *rajkeeya himsa* (violence related to the matters of state). This form of violence involves an individual’s duty to follow the state’s civil laws (Jain 2016, p. 81). A Jain must resist injustices and work to protect the law and order of a society, which may require violence, such as punishing a criminal and stopping imminent violent acts. While the monastic community stays away from such controversies, this view is consistent with the lay members of the Jain community I recently interviewed. A Jain householder, who resides in the United States, recently told me, “Jains are not cowards.” Although he follows the Jain vegan diet and avoids eating root vegetables (as they cause more violence to the creatures of the soil), he provided examples of Jains who fulfill their civic responsibility by serving in the military and practicing medicine and law. These professions require great vigilance in avoiding unnecessary violence, and they are motivated by the intention to serve, maintain social order, and protect lives.

2.2. Hinduism’s Sanctioning Violence for Disrupting the Cycle of Violence

In the Hindu moral (*dharma*) code, nonviolence is one of five components contributing to the prescribed conduct for all people, irrespective of caste, social status, or gender. According to the *Manusmṛti* (Bühler 1886), this includes, “Abstention from injuring (creatures), veracity, abstention from unlawfully appropriating (the goods of others), purity

[inner and outer], and control of the organs [senses]" (Bühler 1886, X: 63).⁶ As noted above, nonviolence is considered the highest *dharma* in various Hindu scriptures because taking the life of sentient beings leads to dire karmic consequences. However, various Hindu texts and traditions do not hesitate to permit violence in order to (1) stop violence and acts of serious aggression; (2) perform the *dharma* of a warrior (*kṣatriya dharma*) for the defense of the nation and its people; and (3) maintain social order through a legal system. The *Manusmṛti*, while upholding nonviolence as an essential duty, declares in plain terms:

One may slay without hesitation an assassin who approaches (with murderous intent), whether (he be one's) teacher, a child or an aged man, or a Brahmana deeply versed in the Vedas. By killing an assassin the slayer incurs no guilt, whether (he does it) publicly or secretly; in that case fury recoils upon fury. (*Manusmṛti*: VIII: 350–51).⁷

The sanctioning of violence against an assailant when confronting aggression and oppression corresponds with Jain *virodhi himsā*, which is oriented toward disrupting acts of violence. However, Jain religious culture is more reticent about using such violence, while Hindu social stratification makes room for those who take responsibility to defend and punish when duty calls.

The *varṇāśramadharmā* system of Hinduism gives authority to those in ruling and military professions to use force for defending and protecting subjects. In the epic, the *Mahābhārata*, Queen Draupadī makes the case for waging war against those cousins who sexually assaulted her in public and deceived her husband. King Yudhiṣṭhira, the embodiment of Dharma himself, considers violence, anger, and revenge destructive forces, ignoring his duty as a warrior and guardian of the law. However, Draupadī incites her husband, King Yudhiṣṭhira, to take up necessary violence. She pleads: "O king, this [is] to be the time when you should display your might to the avaricious sons of Dhritarashtra who always injure others. This is not the time for showing forgiveness toward the Kurus; when the hour for showing might arrives, it behooves you to display it." (*Mahābhārata*: 3.28.34–36).⁸ Draupadī encourages King Yudhiṣṭhira to deploy the necessary power to confront the destructive and immoral forces represented by their nefarious cousins, the 100 sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Draupadī's insights emerge from Hindu classical *dharma* (legal and civic laws and duties) expositions: "In classical Hindu legal texts, the rule of kings (*rāja-dharma*) and their proper conduct (*rājanīti*) includes their divine right to govern, conquer, and wage war in protection of dharma" (Dunbar 2011, p. 4).⁹ Draupadī reminds her husband about his political and familial duty as a king and a warrior. King Yudhiṣṭhira seemed to be taking on the duty of a renouncer (a person of *nivṛitti*) by hesitating to engage in necessary military conflict against his aggressors. This dialogue differentiates the king's individual ethic of nonviolence from his social ethic of upholding law and justice.

Furthermore, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, which is a part of the *Mahābhārata*, provides a deontological approach and the *dharma* (doing one's duty) ethical framework for engaging with malevolent forces. Lord Kṛṣṇa, a divine incarnation of Viṣṇu, instructs the mighty warrior Arjuna to do his duty as a warrior at the moment when Arjuna becomes paralyzed by seeing his cousins and elders arrayed in opposition on the battlefield. Kṛṣṇa reminds him of his duty as a leader of the army and warns him that if he abandons this duty, he will be considered a coward. Kṛṣṇa recounts the award for performing his political duty of fighting an inevitable *dharma* (righteous) war:

If you are killed, you win heaven;

If you triumph, you enjoy the earth;

Therefore, Arjuna, stand up

And resolve to fight the battle! (*Bhagavad-Gītā*, 2: 37)

This command and promise by Kṛṣṇa could be seen as an act of glorifying war. However, the *Mahābhārata* (the *Bhagavad-Gītā* is a part of the epic) provides gruesome portrayals of post-war suffering. In this way, even though Hindu and Jain sources sanction

necessary war and, at times, glorify it, they do not fail to show the horrible consequences of violence. They may result in personal karmic repercussions in the afterlife or as collective suffering, loss, and remorse in this life.

3. Post-War Suffering in Jain and Hindu Sources: Creating an Awareness for Personal and Societal Consequences

Various Jain resources, from epics to the *Purāṇas*, orient the followers to choose the path of *ahimsā*, despite the narratives' justification of necessary war. In her article comparing Buddhist and Jaina attitudes towards warfare, Juan Wu brings attention to the ways Jain texts deal with the post-war consequences *vis-à-vis* the warrior's future birth. She quotes, *Viyāhapannatti*, a Śvetāmbara text, which contains the dialogue between Gautama Buddha and Lord Mahāvīra: "O Venerable Sir, being devoid of good conduct, [devoid of virtues, unrestrained,] not observing any vow or fast, enraged, wrathful, killed in the battle, with passions unpacified, at the time of death, having finished their lives, where did those men go, where were they reborn?" [Mahāvīra said] 'O Gautama, they were generally reborn in hell or as animals.'" (Wu 2015, p. 102). Even though war was necessary, violence committed by soldiers subjects them to unfavorable rebirths. Wu points out that soldiers who were dedicated to the Jain religious path and values are exonerated from the ill consequences of violence: "In the *Viyāhapannatti*, while Mahāvīra also points out that many soldiers fighting to the death in the 'Battle of the Chariot with the Mace' underwent unpleasant rebirths due to their impassioned mental status and lack of religious piety, he further clarifies that there was indeed one soldier, the Jaina layman Varuṇa, reborn in heaven" (Wu 2015, p. 101).

As noted earlier, Varuṇa exemplifies the ethos of privileging Jain ideals while engaging in necessary military duties. When his end was near, mortally wounded, he withdrew from the battle and spent his last breaths worshipping the *Jinās* (*Tīrthāṅkaras*) and observing ascetic vows. Through such narratives, Jain traditions demonstrate the right way to participate in laypeople's obligations to confront the forces of violent aggression. As Jaini puts it, the story of Varuṇa shows that the Jainas, from early times, permit laypeople "to cope with the unavoidable reality of the world in which violence is all-pervasive" (Jaini 2004, p. 60). The famous tale of combat between Bhārata, the son of the first *Tīrthāṅkara* Ṛṣabha, and his brother Bāhubali corroborates the Jain vision of the futility of war and violence. When Bāhubali was defeated by Bhārata, instead of despairing, he took Jain monastic vows. Bāhubali meditated and was released from the agony of the cycle of repeated death and rebirth. He continues to hold a prominent place of reverence in Jainism (Jaini 2004, pp. 54–55).

While Jainism focuses on individual karmic suffering and unfavorable rebirth caused by violent acts, Hindu traditions bring attention to the pain of survivors of war as well as their remorse during their lifetime on this earth. Following the war of the *Mahābhārata*, the dialogue between Lord Kṛṣṇa and Queen Gāndhārī (the mother of 100 deceased sons) provides the various dimensions of suffering and grief (*śoka*) by surveying the battlefield. She cries out:

Many who were handsome and had good color have been pawed by the flesh-eaters and lie there in their necklaces of gold, their eyes bulging like bull's eyes. Others still wearing their armor and carrying their gleaming weapons, seem to the flesh-eaters to be alive. (*Mahābhārata*, XI.16.38)¹⁰

Furthermore, the *Mahābhārata* shows the post-war suffering from the vantage point of women, a perspective focused on in recent studies on just war and pacifism (e.g., Fiala 2008; Ryan 2020; Chappell 2009). Gāndhārī shows the same battlefield on which Kṛṣṇa asked Arjuna to fight the worthy battle, but now the battlefield resounds with the wails of women, not the shouts of enthusiastic warriors:

Many shriek and wail upon seeing the bodies, and others beat their heads with their delicate hands. The earth seems to be crammed with fallen heads, hands,

and every sort of limb mixed with every other and put into heaps. And thrilling with horror upon seeing headless bodies and bodiless heads, the women, unaccustomed to these things, are bewildered. After joining a head to a body, they stare at it blankly, and then they are pained to realize, “This is not his,” but do not see another one in that place. (*Mahābhārata*, XI.16.50-53)¹¹

These scenes of pain and agony resemble accounts of hell in Jain and Hindu texts. Gāndhārī’s vivid description of mutilation and mourning puts a question mark on the justness of any war. James L. Fitzgerald rightly notes, “The human cost of the Bhārata war is fully registered in the epic only through this mantic vision of Gāndhārī’s” (Fitzgerald 2004, p. 24). The listener of the tale is left to ponder the hollowness of glorifying the warrior dharma to engage in war.

Not only are the women bereaved by the loss of their husbands, sons, and relatives, but the victorious King Yudhiṣṭhira becomes consumed by grief and guilt for having caused such great destruction. Yudhiṣṭhira, whose army defeated the Kuru army, cries out:

Damn the *kṣatra* way! Damn the power of mighty chest! Damn the unforgiving stubbornness that brought us to this disaster. To get a piece of the earth we totally abandoned men who were equal to the earth, men who we should have never killed. And now we live with our kinsmen dead and our wealth exhausted (*Mahābhārata*, XII.7.5).¹²

The *Mahābhārata* thus shows the other side of warriors’ pride and the consequences of participation in battle. Postwar suffering and anguish pose the question: How can a war be just (righteous) when it results in carnage and the cruel dance of violence and pain? Grief-stricken, Yudhiṣṭhira asks a poignant question in the *Mahābhārata*: “If someone is victorious but grieves like a poor afflicted imbecile, how can he think of that as victory? In fact, his enemies have defeated him.” (Das 2010, p. 234). In his book, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*, Gurcharan Das refers to the inconsolable grief (*Mahābhārata* X.10.13) of the surviving ones after their loved ones have been brutally murdered. He deliberates on the challenge of engaging in necessary violence through the remorse of Yudhiṣṭhira, who was always reluctant to wage war. The victory seems like defeat because of the death and destruction of the loved ones.

Das reaches the same conclusion that Gandhi did, many decades ago, when he read the *Mahābhārata*: “When the Kurukshetra War comes to an end, it becomes clear that the theme of the *Mahābhārata* is not war but peace” (Das 2010, p. 251). Yudhiṣṭhira, as do Varuṇa and Bāhubali of the Jain tradition, sees the spiritual path as the way out of misery. Following his victory, “Yudhiṣṭhira’s sense of sorrow, guilt, and shame was so great, his conviction that the war had been wrong was so deep, he could not accept the fruits of these actions” (Fitzgerald 2004, p. 86).¹³ He announces: “I am going to leave behind the pleasures of society and go. The road one travels all by oneself is peaceful” (Das 2010, p. 234). Although he is persuaded by the elders and Lord Kṛṣṇa to stay and rule the kingdom, Yudhiṣṭhira remains disenchanted and pessimistic. Ultimately, both Jain and Hindu traditions approach the questions of war and violence through the prism of violence and its consequences.

4. Nonviolence Conundrum and Some Resolutions: Insights from Mahatma Gandhi and Shrimad Rajchandra

The following section offers insights from two twentieth-century thinkers: the Jain philosopher Shrimad Rajchandra (1867–1901) and Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948). Gandhi was influenced both by the personal ethic of nonviolence, as propounded in Jainism, and the social ethic of performing one’s duty, as underscored in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Gandhi sought Rajchandra’s council concerning dilemmas of life. Although he was dedicated to nonviolence in his personal life, Gandhi deliberated on questions of necessary war and violence as he confronted situations that tested the limits of *ahiṃsā*. Apparently, Gandhi was influenced by Shrimad Rajchandra’s staunch views on *ahiṃsā*, informed by the Jain commitment to nonviolence. Nevertheless, he creatively forged his own path that navigated

both a layperson's duty of necessary violence and a renouncer's commitment to the Jain and Hindu culture of nonviolence. Gandhi's views on handling venomous snakes and menacing monkeys provide insights into his perspective on addressing violent situations.

While Gandhi was in South Africa, he wrote a series of questions to Rajchandra (he lovingly addressed him as Raychandbhai), including this inquiry: "If a snake comes and bites us, what should we do? Should we remain calm and silent and allow it to bite, or kill it outright to save ourselves?" (Majumdar 2020, p. 113). Rajchandra was a lay Jain householder, but in practice, he followed Jain principles ardently. His response to Gandhi is revealing, "If I reply to this question in the affirmative and say, let the snake bite, it would, of course, become a great problem . . . but those who have realized the truth, that the body is a transient thing, it would not be at all reasonable to kill a creature which is attached to the body" (Majumdar 2020, p. 113). In his response, Rajchandra, as a layperson, acknowledges the "problem" in allowing a snake to bite, but, as a seeker of the Jain path, he privileges the path of absolute nonviolence for the enlightened beings who tread the path to attain liberation. Undoubtedly, his views are consistent with the Jain perspectives on war as outlined above.

While Rajchandra advises Gandhi to sacrifice his transient body to save the snake's life, a close examination of Gandhi's views reveals that he negotiated both paths: the practice of nonviolence in his own life and the social responsibility of maintaining harmony and justice as a social reformer and political leader. He wrote in 1921, "The purest way of seeking justice against the murderers is not to seek it . . . Their punishment cannot recall the dead to life. I would ask those whose hearts are lacerated to forgive them, not out of their weakness—for they are able every way to have them punished—but out of their immeasurable strength" (Howard 2008, p. 139). Gandhi argued for forgiveness and reconciliation, fearing the law of karma. However, he was also aware of the moral dilemmas associated with prohibiting violence in all situations. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* presents the reader with perhaps the direst of all predicaments: the choice between violence and nonviolence against one's own kinsmen in war. Arjuna's cousins had transgressed the limits of humanity, and they demanded war as the only solution for the settlement of the disputed kingdom. Gandhi was cognizant of the limits of absolute nonviolence in social and political contexts. The complexity of sociopolitical issues of defense against terrorism and war caused him to deliberate further on this:

Suppose a man runs amuck and goes furiously about sword in hand, and killing anyone that comes his way, and no one dares to capture him alive. Any one who dispatches this lunatic will earn the gratitude of the community and be regarded as a benevolent man. From the point of view of ahimsa it is the plain duty of everyone to kill such a man. (Howard 2008, p. 141)

Gandhi was asked by his colleagues about his views about war against the Nazis. On 11 November 1938, Gandhi writes, "My sympathies are all with the Jews. They have been the untouchables of Christianity. The German persecution of the Jews seems to have no parallel in history. If there ever could be a justifiable war in the name of and for humanity, war against Germany to prevent the wanton persecution of a whole race would be completely justified." Gandhi sees a "problem" with the genocide of the Jewish people, which reflects Rajchandra's hesitation for advising laypeople to submit to violence and aggression (as he showed through the example of the venomous snake bite threat). However, he adds his personal stance, "I do not believe in any war" (Gandhi 1999, vol. 29, pp. 239–40). In this vein, Gandhi interpreted the call to war in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* allegorically. He demonstrated his understanding of the limits of nonviolence in certain situations and argued for using any means to disrupt the suffering of innocent people.

Das recapitulates Gandhi's pragmatic philosophy of nonviolence, "Gandhi taught the world that *ahimsā* is not pacifism. Nonviolence does not come from weakness but from strength, and only the strong and disciplined hope to practice it nonviolence is active and even dangerous, as the British discovered to their discomfort during India's freedom struggle" (Das 2010, pp. 249–50). As a public figure, Gandhi used nonviolence

strategically to fight injustice and reluctantly permitted war against violent forces. As an individual committed to truth and nonviolence, he rejected the notion of war. Instead, he used nonviolence as a “weapon” and asked those victims of the Nazi atrocities to do the same. However, he realized the limitation of nonviolent methods on the face of such acts of hate and senseless murder.

Gandhi’s method of *ahimsā* transforms into this ethical virtue in a technique that can be used to confront structures of violence. Gandhi sought to resolve the nonviolence conundrum by interpreting *ahimsā* as the “mightiest weapon” to resisting evil. He also recognized situations where a nonviolent fight is not a possibility. Gandhi’s words underscore the strength of reconciliation and nonviolence: “By non-violence I do not mean cowardice. I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. But I believe that forgiveness adorns a soldier. And so I am not pleading for India to practice non-violence because she is weak, but because she is conscious of her power and strength” (Gandhi 1999, vol. 27, p. 246). Gandhi transformed *ahimsā* into a weapon and wielded it against violent forces. The *dharma* of nonviolence, when practiced with attention to justice and compassion, can lead to less violence. It is important to address dangerous situations, even if they require violence, to avoid greater suffering, as history has shown. In times of distress, Gandhi’s views are consistent with those rules for the layperson and the ascetic found in Jainasāsana and the *Mahābhārata*: the duty of defending the innocent, which may require violence, and the observance of *ahimsā*, which may require self-sacrifice.

5. Conclusions

Debates on just war within Jain and Hindu traditions emphasize a concern for violence that is often justified during wars—a concern that has been underscored by western pacifist traditions. While engaging with the subject of just war, philosopher Jon Nuttall writes, “If whole-sale death and destruction is permissible in times of war, does this mean that there are no moral limits that can be placed on the actions of those who engage in war or can we still retain some distinction between those actions that are right and those that are wrong?” (Nuttall 1993, p. 161). What Nuttall asks for, Jain and Hindu traditions have sought to do: questioning the efficacy of war as well as holding warriors accountable. Culpability emerges in the form of personal karmic repercussions and the community grief for lives lost in war. For the Jain and Hindu traditions, both forms of culpability became deterrents against the inclination to glorify war.

Predrag Cicovacki, in the preface to a comprehensive two volume treatise on nonviolence, comments on a general sentiment about the war, which can be seen in our current times: “In the frenzy of war, those who are violent are hailed as heroes and saviors. Those who refuse to choose sides, those who do not shoot and murder, those who resort to nonviolence, are regarded as traitors and cowards. There are ‘just’ wars and the ‘right’ to self-defense, which pretty conveniently justifies the use of all means” (Cicovacki and Hess 2017, vol. 1, p. xi). The use of violent means hardly ever results in a positive and peaceful outcome. Gandhi expressed doubt to those who justified any means for a certain outcome. Major General Smedley Butler, a veteran of World War I, writes, “The general public shoulders the bill [of war]. And what is this bill? This bill renders a horrible accounting. Newly placed gravestones. Mangled bodies. Shattered minds. Broken hearts and homes. Economic instability. Depression and all its attendant miseries” (Chappell 2009, p. 71). The path of *ahimsā*, which requires diligent vigilance to preempt situations that may lead to warfare, is always preferable.

Admittedly, at times, traditional Hindu traditions laud the militaristic ethic as a justified means to maintain law and justice. Ultimately, Hindu texts, as in the case of the *Mahābhārata*, show that violent means result in personal suffering and social misery. In current times, any political defense for aggression by some groups, in light of these ancient texts, attests to their selective and contrived interpretations for a very different context. Hindu and Jain traditions do not deny the absolute inevitability of violence when

performing civic duties, but, simultaneously, they draw ample attention to the adverse personal and social cost of war and violence.¹⁴

Among Hannah Arendt's "reflections" on the social-political turbulence of the 1960s, she warns that "The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world" (Arendt 1970, p. 80). From this understanding, it is possible to assume that a religious culture of nonviolence was the reason for the historic lack of a number of violent scrimmages in India's religious cultures, as compared with other countries. Historian A.L. Basham notes, "There was sporadic cruelty and oppression no doubt, but, in comparison with conditions in other early cultures, it was mild. To us the most striking feature of ancient Indian civilization was its humanity" (Basham 1954, pp. 8–9). Historically, both Jain and Hindu traditions have adopted pragmatic approaches to the social ethic of self-defense, defending one's community and homeland, and maintaining social order.

Ultimately, Jain traditions use martial vocabulary to define their goal of spiritual liberation: a *Jīnā* (conqueror) or *arihanta* (destroyer of enemies) is the highest spiritual state in which all malevolent desires are overcome by an individual. In Hinduism, an individual seeking the ultimate end of *mokṣa* (freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth) observes the restraint of all selfish desires and cultivates amity toward all (regardless of their caste, ethnicity, and relationship). Although there are differences between the Jain and Hindu social ethic of conducting necessary warfare (as Mahāvīra never glorifies war), the ethical principle of *ahiṃsā* and the doctrine of personal karma helped create a framework that allows violence only as a last resort, without losing sight of the spiritual goal of liberation. What we can today garner from Jain and Hindu traditions' rich engagement with the nonviolence conundrum is that the dharma of nonviolence, when practiced with attention to justice and compassion, has the incredible capacity to reduce the everyday violence so prevalent around us. Indeed, attention must be paid to confront the extremist forces in religions that selectively use ancient texts to serve their modern goals of political power through aggression.

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Notes

- ¹ Western thinkers, starting with Augustine, Hellenic expositions on war, and western scholars, such as Michael Walzer, John Rawls, and Ramsey Paul theorize the idea of just war. See: (Walzer 1977; Fiala 2008).
- ² Jyoti Prasad Jain cites the *Jain Sūtras* that underscore the centrality of nonviolence in the religious culture of Jainism.
- ³ *ahiṃsāsatyāsteyabrahmacaryāparigrahā yāmaḥ* (II Sutra 30). Hindu yoga system's five disciplines (*yamas*) are similar to Jain Dharma's five *aṅguvratas* or limited vows for laypeople, namely nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*), truth (*satya*), non-stealing (*achaurtya* or *asteya*), control of the senses (*brahmacarya*), and non-attachment non-possession (*aparigraha*).
- ⁴ In the translation of *Mahābhārata* by M.N. Dutt, the word *ahiṃsā* is translated as "abstention from cruelty" (Dutt 1994, vol. 9, p. 479).
- ⁵ The translation is from *The Mahābhārata* (Vol. 7) by M.N. Dutt. In this section, Grandsire Bhīṣma describes the duties of all four castes.
- ⁶ *The Laws of Manu* (Ch. X) states: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu/manu10.htm> Accessed 29 October 2022.
- ⁷ *The Laws of Manu* (Ch. VIII) lists the duties for a king. <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu/manu08.htm> Accessed 29 October 2022.
- ⁸ The translation is from *The Mahābhārata* (Vol. 2) by M.N. Dutt. In this section, Draupadī expresses her concern regarding Yudhiṣṭhira's lack of anger in the face of atrocities inflicted by their cousins. She incites him to use necessary force abandoning "forgiveness" toward their aggressors.
- ⁹ Dunbar adds: "Both the *Manusmṛiti* and the *Arthaśāstra*, therefore affirm that war is unavoidable in life but the former insists on regulating war through principles of human conduct, which are known as the rules/conduct of war (*yuddha-nīti*)" (Dunbar 2011, p. 4).
- ¹⁰ This passage and the following passages are from James L. Fitzgerald's translation of the *Mahābhārata* (Fitzgerald 2004, vol. 7, p. 56).

- ¹¹ The *Mahābhārata*, trans. and ed. James L. Fitzgerald, p. 9.
- ¹² The *Mahābhārata*, trans. and ed. James L. Fitzgerald, p. 180. Śānti parvan, Chapter 7, Verses 5–7: “*dhig astu kṣātram ācāraṃ dhig astu balam aurasam dhig astu amarṣaṃ yenemām āpadaṃ gamitā vāyam sādhu kṣamā damaḥ śaucam avairodhyam amatsaraḥ ahimsā satyavacanaṃ nityāni vanacāriṇām.*” The *Mahābhārata* devotes many pages that recount the suffering from the post-war perspective of the surviving ones. These passages show not the dispassionate militaristic side of war, but the traumatic and painful affective aftermath of violence.
- ¹³ James Fitzgerald comments on Yudhiṣṭhira’s postwar grief that “he even announced his intention to end his life by sitting and fasting (*prāya*)” (Fitzgerald 2004, p. 86). Yudhiṣṭhira cries out (XII: 1. 15): “I have conquered this whole Earth relying on the strength of Kṛṣṇa’s arms, the favor of the brahmins, and the strength of Bhīma and Arjuna. But ever since finishing this tremendous extermination of my kinsmen that was ultimately caused by my greed, a terrible pain [*mahād duḥkham*] aches in my heart without stopping” (Fitzgerald 2004, p. 169).
- ¹⁴ Dunbar cites various Hindu religious texts and scholarly sources that support Hindu warriors’ ethos of protectional dharma. Dunbar writes, “If killing was committed for the sake of dharma, then it was seen as a noble act. Furthermore, brave Hindu warriors who died in battle were promised the reward of heaven (*Vrasvargam*) . . . ” (Dunbar 2011, p. 9).

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