

MODERN WARFARE AND KSHATRIYA DUTY THROUGH THE LENS OF THE MAHABHARATA

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Abstract

This article raises the question of contemporary Gaudiya-vaishnava attitudes towards war and kshatriya duty, particularly in relation to Ukrainian, Russian, and Indian perspectives on Russia's war against Ukraine. This is viewed in the context of the holy war depicted in the Mahabharata, especially in terms of Krishna's instructions in the Bhagavad-gita. There are four types of symbolic correlation between modern war and the events of the Mahabharata: religious, mythological, ideological, and ethical. The differences between them have led to disagreements and discussions within the Vaishnava community about how to understand the duty of a devotee in the midst of this contemporary hostility in the Russia/Ukraine part of the world. The article substantiates the religious nature of the spiritual-practical position of Ukrainian Vaishnavas, some of them engaging in peaceful service to people impacted by the battle, and others in the performance of kshatriya duty in the ranks of the armed forces.

The Mahabharata narrates the holy war of the Pandavas and Kauravas, which has become an example for the bearers of ancient Indian culture in understanding modern wars and our attitudes towards them. It is natural for a religious person to correlate his daily life with knowledge that is transmitted in their religious tradition. Therefore, such a person spontaneously sacralizes the events of everyday life, i.e., endows them with sacred meaning and turns them into symbols of spiritual events described

in the scriptures. Practitioners of the post-Vedic tradition also see modern wars as a symbolic reflection of the war narrated by the Mahabharata. This symbolic correlation can be of different natures—religious, mythological or ethical. At the same time, the mythological understanding can reveal and supplement the religious one, or, alternatively, it can replace it, which in turn leads to a situation wherein mythological understanding is replaced by an ideological one. In the example of how Vaishnavas in that part of the world try to comprehend the modern war of Russia against Ukraine, one can see all these ways of symbolically relating modern life to the Mahabharata.

Vaishnavism is the predominant tradition in India, and in recent decades, several of its sub-schools spread rapidly outside of India in the countries of Western civilization and in the “post-Soviet space.” Thus, Vaishnavism found itself in a new and different cultural environment, which is characterized by a clear delimitation between the religious and socio-political spheres of life in accordance with the nature of Western secularization. Accordingly, Vaishnavas outside of India also began to clearly draw a line between their sphere of religious life and activities outside social space, while for Indian Vaishnavas these two spheres are inseparable.

In the post-Soviet space, the tradition of Gaudiya Vaishnavism has spread the most, focusing the adept on spiritual life, since it partakes of a Brahminical character. It is therefore quite natural that in the post-Soviet secular society, Vaishnavas tend to distance themselves from political life. For this reason, they sought to remain neutral when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014 and tried to quiet down all political disputes within their midst. However, a new large-scale invasion in 2022 and the subsequent mobilization in Russia made it impossible to further maintain a position of neutrality, and, for many, it is no longer possible to extinguish internal disputes in the Vaishnava environment.

That said, India did not follow the path of Western secularization, and there we find a different attitude towards religion. In particular, there is no such clear delimitation between religious and socio-political spheres. If in Western countries it would be undesirable for a politician to justify his position on religious grounds, for an Indian politician, on the contrary, it is desirable. Accordingly, Indian Vaishnavas form their attitudes toward the war between Russia and Ukraine in accordance with the cultural attitudes of their environment and society, whereas Vaishnavas in the post-Soviet space, by contrast, form their attitudes according to the cultural attitudes of the society in which they now find themselves.

The new large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine required many Vaishnavas to personally participate in the war in the ranks of the armed forces on both sides. In turn, this requires a theological comprehension of the Indic view on the duty of a warrior, a *kshatriya*, and self-determination in terms of one's attitude towards war.

In the most famous and widely read book of the Mahabharata, known as the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna instructs Arjuna about the duty of a *kshatriya*. Arjuna is confused before the battle; he cannot decide whether he should fight, largely because his relatives are on the opposing side. He believes that, in this case, victory would indeed be empty. But Krishna says that Arjuna *should* in fact fight, not for victory or some other self-centered goal, but for the sake of fulfilling his duty as a *kshatriya*, for the welfare of others. Each person has his duty, says Krishna, which is determined by his nature: "Better is [one's] own-law imperfectly [carried out] than another's law well performed. [It is] better [to find] death in [the performance of one's] own-law, for another's law is fear instilling." (Bg 3.35)¹

The nature of a *kshatriya* is such that he cannot and should not renounce activities like a *brahmana*. Rather, his way to salvation is to perform activities in a "disinterested" manner. Only in this way can he break the chain of cause and effect that keeps him in the world of suffering. If in this battle it is his duty to fight, then he must fight not for victory or any other external purpose, but because at that particular moment it is right to do so. Only then is an act right when it is performed solely out of awareness of one's inner duty. If at every moment a *kshatriya* does the right thing, not worrying about the future and not hoping for any personal asset, then he will be invincible, because then—and only then—his fears and doubts will disappear, and all external forces will cease to influence him. This practice of disinterested action is called karma-yoga and leads to liberation: "Therefore, always perform unattached the deed to be done, for the man (*purusha*) performing action [while being] unattached attains the Supreme." (Bg 3.19)²

However, the question arises of exactly how to relate this Mahabharata-driven knowledge to the current situation. The battle of Kurukshetra marked the beginning of Kali-yuga, a dark age of war and suffering. Wars, it might be said, are inevitable in our life and history, which begs the question, "What is the duty of a *kshatriya* for those who are fighting now?" "Does every war call for carrying out a *kshatriya* duty, or only a just war?" And more, "How might a Vaishnava today react to the current war in terms of his practice?"

In the modern context, it is natural for a Vaishnava to look for a religious justification for his attitude towards war. The easiest approach is to liken it to the holy war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas in the Mahabharata. This allows one to interpret all the instructions of Krishna to Arjuna regarding war from within one's own context. In this case, the sphere of the sacred is expanded and the tragic events of our life are endowed with sacred meaning. But even if this is the case, the question arises, How to do it right? After all, the Mahabharata gives no direct instructions on how to correlate the holy war of the Pandavas with the subsequent Kali-yuga wars, like the ones we see today.

Since the Ukrainian and Russian adherents of Gaudiya Vaishnavism focus mainly on the spiritual sphere and distance themselves from politics, they do not have the experience to evaluate social and political phenomena from the standpoint of religious tradition, and they very often do not understand how to correlate spiritual knowledge with secular life in the social space. Instead of renouncing political propaganda, as their spiritual life requires, they, on the contrary, find themselves in the captivity of political prejudices, for which they begin to seek religious justification. However, many of them retain these prejudices from their former life, before they became Vaishnavas. In this situation, religious understanding is easily replaced by a mythological world-view.

The religious understanding of war presupposes that one's attitude towards war corresponds to what God wants each person to do. If the war is sacred, then a person participates in it because he does it for God, fulfilling his duty as a *kshatriya* because God wants it. But if with regard to the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas there were clear indications of its sacred nature and of what God wanted, there are no such indications regarding the war between Ukraine and Russia, and the Vaishnavas are forced to rely on their own religious intuition. A tricky and tenuous situation, to be sure.

On a personal level, a Vaishnava may perceive his participation in the war as a duty to God or duty as a *kshatriya*, but religion suggests that any personal mystical experience be confirmed by tradition, which reveals a common spiritual gauge for legitimacy. In the Vaishnava understanding, this experience is transmitted in succession from teacher to student, a phenomenon known as *parampara*. In an effort to correlate one's religious experience with his or her tradition, a Vaishnava spontaneously begins to

give modern war such a mythological meaning, allowing it to be correlated with the war in the Mahabharata. This is how the transition from the religious to the mythological understanding of war takes place.

Myth presupposes the embodiment of a new meaning in events and phenomena in such a way that it unites them in a contemporary worldview. Such mythological meanings have been called “archetypes” by Mircea Eliade. When life is fully brought into line with mythological archetypes, all questions are removed. Religion can use myth to broaden the understanding of revelation in relation to everyday life. The purpose of religion is to realize the connection of a person with the supreme, which, in the understanding of the Vaishnava, consists of love (*prema*) and devotional service to God (*bhakti*). However, myth has its own task—to give all the phenomena of life true meaning, such that it would be easier to live and to know what to do in all circumstances. Such a mythological attitude to the war of Russia against Ukraine is its sacralization, or its identification with the holy war of the Mahabharata. As soon as the goal of such identification becomes a disservice to God, that is to say, a religious justification for a personal attitude to war, the mythological understanding no longer reveals, but, on the contrary, replaces authentic religious understanding.

In mythological consciousness, the Battle at Kurukshetra is such an archetype, even though it is ostensibly embodied in real events. If a Vaishnava takes one side or another in a war, then, in accordance with mythological logic, he identifies the war with the battle of Kurukshetra, and, further, identifies his side as being the side of the Pandavas. If at the same time his desire to religiously justify his own political position in relation to the war predominates as a motivating factor, then the mythological understanding is transformed into an ideological one. That is, religion is not immediately replaced by ideology, but only after it is replaced by mythology.

Ideology can use mythology, but its purpose is different, namely, to impose on a person a system of motivations so that the person will act in the interests of others, i.e., that of authoritative figures or a group of political leaders striving for power. One of the ideological methods of manipulating people is finding an enemy. An enemy can be created according to the laws of mythological thinking, and any attempt to bring religious justification under such an understanding of the enemy leads to a distortion of religion, since it subordinates religion to the tasks of ideology. In the Indic tradition, this is called the decline of *dharma*, which is today observable in the example of

some representatives of radical Hinduism, who justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine on religious grounds.

In India, as stated, there is no clear distinction between the religious and the secular. This leads to the following: Not only are political phenomena understood in a religious sense, but the religious ones are understood politically, and this sometimes leads to the subordination of religion to the tasks of political ideology. The paradox of modern consciousness is that the desire to follow tradition has led to the emergence of new ideas that were not present in tradition—this is the foible of “traditional/modern” in the context of the opposition “East/West.” That which is traditional and thus Eastern is understood by default as moral, correct, ascetic, and dharmic, while that which is modern is all-too-often associated with opposite qualities, believed to be characteristic of Western civilization. From the standpoint of this way of thinking, the Indic tradition is now interpreted as a political ideology in opposition to the West. With this as a backdrop, the West is declared an enemy, Ukraine is declared an ally of the enemy, and an aggressive war is thereby justified.

There are ideological currents that arise on this basis of condemning the imperialist West and seeing Hindu civilization as the protector of world dharma. Some advocate the revival of “Undivided India” (Akhand Bhaarat)—which, in fact, is not traditional at all, but rather a reconstructionist idea of the Indian empire. Akhand Bhaarat is intended to unite all the lands and cultures that have ever been part of India, even though they have never, in all of history, coexisted simultaneously in one state. Traditional empires cannot exist in the modern world, since, with the loss of reliance on an archaic way of life, they must either be transformed into democratic federations, like the modern Republic of India, or into totalitarian systems based on ideology, like the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany. The emergence of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century was the result of a mutation of imperial consciousness, when reliance on tradition was replaced by reliance on the ideology of the search for an enemy.

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, and Russia opened up to the possibility of transforming itself into a democratic federation similar to India. However, at the turn of 1999-2000, state security services came to power in Russia and embarked on the task of reviving the empire. For this they started a series of wars, first with Chechnya, then with Georgia, and now with Ukraine. However, they failed to revive the Soviet brand of totalitarianism, and this

led to the second mutation of their imperial consciousness, caused by the degradation of society and the oversimplification of their worldview.

In truth, the complex world of today has become frightening, with the main goal of their new type of imperialism, as stated, being its simplification. Therefore, if Ukraine cannot be conquered from the position of Russian imperialism, they think, then it must be destroyed in order to make the world easier and safer for all who inhabit it. This, in their minds, justifies the bombing of residential areas, civilian repression, and mass military action against people in general. When the fear of the world's complexity is so strong that the goal of simplification through destruction prevails over the pragmatic goals of war, a necrophilic attitude towards the world is formed. This has led to the degeneration of totalitarian imperialism, whose main task is power and domination, into necrophilic imperialism or necro-imperialism, whose main task is to simplify the world through destruction and ruination.

In the contemporary world, both in India and in Russia, one can observe the strengthening of such trends that replace religion with political ideology, and at the same time, we find leaders who arrogate to themselves the right to speak on behalf of religion. The proximity of these processes leads to the phenomenon of Russian imperial narratives that begin to penetrate Indian informational consciousness. Russian imperialism is even forcibly justified—or, let us say, an attempt is made to justify it—from the point of view of the Mahabharata, and this of course leads to the destruction of Vedic values.

For example, on his YouTube channel, Rajiv Malhotra, author of the book “Academic Hinduphobia” and founder of the “Infinity Foundation,” consistently reproduces narratives of the confrontation between East and West, especially in the context of how he interprets the war in Ukraine. This is particularly seen in his interview with politician and educator Sanjay Dixit, who reproduced the false claims of Russian propaganda that justify Russia's war against Ukraine. Sanjay Dixit endorses the claim that a civil war has been going on in the Donbas for eight years, since 2014, and that neo-Nazi groups that exist only in the imagination of Russian propagandists are allegedly spreading in Ukraine. This is how Dixit justifies Russia's war with Ukraine, comparing it with the Mahabharata war: “But is it justification of the Mahabharata war? . . . the Pandavas were actually coaxed into and persuaded into joining that war, because there comes a time when it is the matter of last resort. The question actually is to ask whether this was the matter of the last resort for the Russians. . . . if you look at it from the point of view of Russians, I

think the way they had been treated by the West, actually when they wanted to be Westernized, they wanted to join the West, and they were spurned, they were actually plundered.”³

By identifying the aggressor with the Pandavas, and the defenders of their country with the Kauravas, Dixit and others give an interpretation of the Mahabharata in which evil is understood as good, and good as evil. Such a replacement of ethical values with the opposite ones occurs in ideologies based on the search for an enemy and is absolutely unacceptable from the standpoint of the Vedic-Vaishnava tradition. Therefore, the negative impact of Russian propaganda on Indian public consciousness leads to a perversion of Vedic ethics—that is to say, it leads to *adharma*. But this only becomes clear if one looks at the situation carefully.

Interestingly, a significant number of Vaishnavas in Russia who believe in Russian propaganda are also influenced by those radical ideological currents in India that reproduce the narrative of opposing the immoral West to the highly spiritual East. In the context of this opposition, they view Russia’s aggression against Ukraine as a global struggle with the West. They see that the Ukrainian people refuse to submit to the aggressor, and based on this they begin to perceive Ukrainians as traitors who have gone over to the side of the West. On this basis, these Russian Vaishnavas justify war crimes against civilians.

There is no doubt that justifying the war of conquest by identifying it with the holy war of the Pandavas can lead to *adharma*. On the other hand, it is true that Ukrainian Vaishnavas also often understand their just war, fought for the protection of their own people from enslavement and destruction, as sacred, and they, too, consequently identify it with the war in the Mahabharata. This has led to the division of the Vaishnavas on different sides of the front line. In other words, both of them, at the same time, identify themselves with the Pandavas, that is, with having God Himself (i.e., Krishna) on their side. In this regard, the question arises, how justified is it in general to identify any modern war, even if just, with the holy war in the Mahabharata? Isn’t the danger of distorting our spiritual perspective always a tangible threat, with each side erroneously thinking that they alone are fighting a righteous battle?

Such sanctification of war has been criticized by a teacher of the Gaudiya Math tradition, Dandi Maharaja. According to him, the battle of Kurukshetra was sacred because Krishna himself wanted it. But we cannot say the same,

Dandi Maharaja tells us, about modern wars. There have been many wars in history in which the morally right side has been defeated, because these wars were not sacred; they were only part of the disasters that are inherent in Kali-yuga. In this era, Maharaja warns, there can be no holy wars, as in the Mahabharata, because there is no social community that God would unambiguously support or deny. The domain of moral actions has shifted from the social level to the level of personal responsibility. It follows from the position of Dandi Maharaja that the duty of a *kshatriya* cannot be based on the idea of a state. Even at the time of war, most people have a completely different duty, and if someone understands his duty on an individual level as the duty of a *kshatriya*, then, whether he fights or not, he should not substantiate it with the so-called religious or sacred nature of the war.⁴

The stance of Ukrainian Vaishnavas on the duty of protecting the country is manifested differently at institutional and personal levels. Vaishnava communities in Ukraine are actively engaged in peaceful service to people in war conditions. *The Hare Krishna in Ukraine* Facebook group discusses practical issues of helping people and rescuing cows in the war zone.⁵ *The Food for Life in Ukraine* program has spread throughout the country as there are internally displaced persons in almost every city in Ukraine who need help. Reports on the activities of the program in different cities of Ukraine are posted on the website *Food for life Ukraine*.⁶ This is all virtuous behavior, regardless of one's spiritual perspective as outlined above.

On an individual level, however, many Vaishnavas choose to perform the duty of a *kshatriya* and join the army. They see the protection of their country as not only a civic duty, but also a religious one, and therefore they criticize or disagree with the position of Dandi Maharaj. For example, Victoria Gipik, the mother of two sons who died defending Mariupol, said that her sons consciously chose the military profession because they believed that it is necessary for Vaishnavism to have not only those who fulfill *brahmana* and *vaishya* duty but also those who fulfill *kshatriya* duty. Therefore, she believes that her sons died fulfilling not only their civil duty but a spiritual one as well.⁷

Indeed, Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita appeals to all free individuals and their sense of inner duty. Krishna explains his arguments in relation to the individual, and not on the basis of an assessment of the sacred nature of war as a social phenomenon. However, the correlation of the current war with Kurukshetra allows a Vaishnava to better understand his duty to God, particularly in this contemporary context. In a polemic with Dandi Maharaj,

Ukrainian Vaishnavas point out that Krishna's instructions about the duty of a *kshatriya* sets universal moral guidelines, and the Pandavas' holy war itself sets patterns of behavior that anyone with a conscience in the realm of goodness would have to employ.

In other words, the symbolic correlation of the current war with the war in the Mahabharata has dimensions that are not only religious, mythological and ideological, but it also carries an ethical dimension, in which everyone can understand his or her duty. At the same time, representatives of the Ukrainian Society for Krishna Consciousness refer not only to the laws of Manu and other sacred texts, but also to the authority of the founder of their tradition, Srila Prabhupada, who spoke of the moral obligation, if necessary, to kill an aggressor.⁸ This becomes a mandate for those who are inclined to defend the righteous and to come to the aid of those who need protection. Moreover, this moral responsibility does not at all require the recognition of the war as being sacred and its likening to the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas; it is quite enough that the Mahabharata reveals the ethical meaning of the duty of a *kshatriya* in the conditions of an ordinary war in the Kali Yuga.

All this being said, this ethical dimension is questioned by those Russian Vaishnavas who do not want to disagree with the current Russian state authorities, for one reason or another. At first, many tried to take a position of neutrality, based on moral relativism. Its essence was that due to the very nature of empiric reality, we cannot know the truth of the situation and determine who is truly to blame for the war. Thus, when mobilization was announced in Russia, ordinary Vaishnavas began to ask their leaders what to do, whether they should evade mobilization or not. In this way, a definite answer had to be given, which did not come easily.

In one such conversation, Chaitanya Chandra Charan, a guru and member of ISKCON's Governing Body Commission, discussing the question of whether Russian Vaishnavas must agree to be drafted for war in Ukraine, announced: "There are also laws of the state . . . I accept this as the will of Krishna. Because there is law, and I must follow the rules, the law."⁹ It follows from his words that if these laws stipulate that a Vaishnava must go to war, then he is obliged to obey, even if he is a *brahmana* and has his own preferred duty, different from the duty of a *kshatriya*. According to this logic, the law of the state may at times have priority over *dharma*, over ethical and religious law, and over personal conscience.

Interestingly, Chaitanya Chandra Charan does not try to clarify the potential contradictions in his position. What if the president's mobilization order contradicts Russian law? What if the president himself holds his office illegally contrary to the Constitution? What if a Vaishnava who was mobilized into the Russian army ends up on the territory of Ukraine? After all, if he is obligated to obey the laws of the state in which he is located, then, accordingly, in Ukraine he is similarly obligated to obey the requirements of the Ukrainian system. In this example, we see how Russian Vaishnavas replace the ethical understanding of the duty of a *kshatriya* based on the Indic tradition with formal obedience to the demands of the state, even if these demands are illegal and perhaps even criminal. Still, these Russian Vaishnavas cannot supply a non-contradictory substantiation for this position. Therefore, individual devotees will agree with their leader's proclamation, and act on it, while others will not.

The Mahabharata and the ancient Indic tradition as a whole provide the foundations for an ethical understanding of war, regardless of a follower's view on religion. Along these lines, one more dimension can be singled out—spiritual and practical, which brings us back to religious perspective. In this case, a person comes to religious understanding on the basis of his internal practical experience, and not on the basis of general ideas that are enshrined in religious tradition.

It is this spiritual and practical meaning that Krishna reveals to Arjuna, showing that the basis of the duty of a *kshatriya* is the principle of disinterested action, which is the essence of karma yoga—a special path of liberation for *kshatriyas*. Staying in the wheel of *samsara* is due to a causal relationship between actions and desires. It is this conditioning that forces a person to commit evil deeds in order to secure pleasure and adjust to external circumstances. A person begins to do evil because he is not free. A *brahmana* can, ideally, renounce deeds and desires, and therefore can proceed on the path to liberation through knowledge.

A *kshatriya*, on the other hand, can renounce only desires, but not actions, because his nature, *rajās*, passion, is active. Therefore, in order to break the connection between actions and desires, a special spiritual practice of disinterested action is required—karma yoga. If a *kshatriya* performs an act disinterestedly, not for the sake of achieving this or that goal in the external world, but for the sake of fulfilling his inner duty, as mentioned earlier in this article, then he becomes free from all external circumstances, and his involvement in the wheel of *samsara* weakens.

A *kshatriya* intuitively knows his inner duty, for the reason that the duty of a *kshatriya* is inseparable from his nature. However, the desire to adapt to external circumstances suppresses this intuition, and this is true not only among *kshatriyas*. When Chaitanya Chandra Charan substantiated the duty of the Vaishnavas to participate in the criminal war by the demands of the Russian state authorities, he was guided not by his internal duty as a spiritual leader, but by the desire to avoid conflicts with state authorities, and this, it can be argued, led to the substitution of religious understanding for an ideological one.

However, by dint of karma-yoga, the *kshatriya*'s intuition about his inner duty, which is not conditioned by any goals, including the goal of pleasing state authorities, becomes clear. Therefore, this intuition reveals the falseness of the ideological interpretation of the Mahabharata, made for political purposes, and reveals the truth of the more universal Vaishnava understanding of the symbolic correlation of war in the Mahabharata with contemporary wars in general. From this perspective, the fulfillment of the duty of a *kshatriya* in the conditions of modern war acquires not only an ethical meaning, but also a religious one, as one of the paths of liberation that Krishna speaks about in the Gita.

Thus, an adequate attitude to war from the Vaishnava point of view is revealed in two dimensions—ethical and religious.

The modern war itself, as such, should not be endowed with sacred character. However, the Vaishnava tradition gives underlying principles of relating to it from an ethical position. Religious meaning is given not to war itself, but to the spiritual practice that leads to liberation—karma yoga—which determines the duty of a *kshatriya* in this and in any war, taking into account its ethical evaluation from the standpoint of the Vaishnava tradition.

But here a final question arises. Is it possible to perform the duty of a *kshatriya* on the side that wages an unjust war? After all, the Mahabharata says that many worthy people honestly fulfilled their duty as a *kshatriya*, even while fighting on the side of the Kauravas—Bhishma, Drona, Karna, and others. Is it possible to perform the duty of a *kshatriya* in the same way on the side of Russia, which is waging an unjust war against Ukraine? If the answer is yes, then Chaitanya Chandra Charan is right when he says that Vaishnavas must submit to the demands of the Russian government if it sends them to war. The fact is that Bhishma, Drona, Karna, and so on, had a legitimate opportunity to fulfill the duty of a *kshatriya*, fighting on the side that waged

an unjust war, but those who are now fighting on the side of Russia against Ukraine do not have such an opportunity, either from an ethical or practical point of view. I will now explain why.

From an ethical point of view, it is impossible to fulfill the duty of a *kshatriya* on the side of criminals who unleashed a war of conquest for no purpose or reason. Moreover, Russia is not only waging a war against Ukraine, but also conducting a separate special military operation, as Putin called it, which has resulted in mass terror of the inhabitants of Ukraine and which makes no sense from a military standpoint. That is, anyone who fights on the side of Russia becomes involved in crimes against civilians. There are discussions on this issue among Vaishnavas on social networks and references to scriptures prove that participation in a criminal war cannot be justified by fulfilling the duty of a *kshatriya*.

From the point of view of spiritual practice, it is impossible to carry out the *kshatriya* duty on the side of Russia due to the peculiarities of Russian military philosophy. In the spiritual domain, one needs to follow one's path in a conscious way, which is the condition under which it is even possible to advance along the spiritual path. Therefore, in the Bhagavad-gita, the performance of the duty of a *kshatriya* is considered to be a path to liberation only on the condition that it becomes a conscious choice. The differences between the Ukrainian and Russian armies lie in different military philosophies. In the Ukrainian army, a soldier is a subject of military action, who must make his own decisions according to the situation. This corresponds to the philosophy of war in the Mahabharata, where all the warriors, regardless of which side they fought on, independently made decisions and were responsible for them, that is, they acted as subjects both on the battlefield and in the dramatic history of the Mahabharata as a whole. The success of the Ukrainian army is ensured by the initiative shown by the military at all levels. Therefore, for the Ukrainian army, the life of a soldier is of the highest value, and the entire military strategy is built in such a way as to save the lives of soldiers as much as possible.

In the Russian army, on the contrary, a soldier is not a subject, but an object of military action, he is perceived only as a resource that has a certain life span, just like military equipment, which also has its own calculated life on the battlefield. Moreover, this period of life is entered in accounting calculations from the outset, so that the planned death of soldiers is perceived as a necessary condition for the normal supply of the Russian army.

This means that from the very beginning a Russian soldier is forced into a position not of a subject, but of an object. Accordingly, under such conditions he cannot carry out the proper duty of a *kshatriya*. Krishna instructs Arjuna in his *kshatriya* duty as a living being who is endowed with freedom of choice and therefore responsible for his own actions. But Krishna does not call Arjuna to be a thoughtless cog in a military system.

In conclusion, Vaishnavas in the West, particularly in Russia and Ukraine, are exploring the contemporary war in that part of the world in terms of the religious, mythological, ideological, ethical and spiritual-practical understanding of war through the lens of the Mahabharata. In accordance with the Vaishnava tradition, each person has his own duty, and this determines his place in the war. The duty of a *kshatriya* stems from the inner nature of a person and is realized in the spiritual practice of karma yoga, which leads to liberation in the religious sense. The ethical meaning of *kshatriya* duty is revealed under certain social conditions as a duty to one's country or a duty to protect one's people. At the same time, one's religious duty can be understood as an inner relationship with God that allows one to act without the influence of external circumstances. All of this said, in the end, it can be argued that there is neither ethical nor practical possibility to fulfill the duty of a bona fide *kshatriya* if one fights on the side of Russia against Ukraine. On the contrary, if one fights on the side of Ukraine, the possibility of fulfilling such a duty is not only available, but beckoning.

Endnotes

1. The Bhagavad-Gita. (2011). A new translation/Georg Feuerstein with Brenda Feuerstein. Boston & London. Shambhala Publications, Inc., 129.

2. *Ibid.*, 125.

3. Dixit S. (2022). Is the Russian invasion of Ukraine Justified? With Sanjay Dixit URL: <https://youtu.be/COPFGDXcm1w>

4. Dundee Maharaj and Nikolay Karpitsky. On the assessment of the war between Russia and Ukraine from the perspective of the Mahabharata. Discussion, August 2022 // War with the view of Vaishnavism URL: <https://vaishnavaandwar.blogspot.com/2022/08/2022.html>

5. Hare Krishna in Ukraine URL: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/harekrishnai-nukrain>

6. Food Life Ukraine. URL: <https://foodforlife.org.ua/>

7. Angels of Mariupol. Bogdan and Yaroslav Gipik. Interview with the mother of the dharma protectors. 04.01.2023. URL: <https://youtu.be/t0WRttb6LPk>

8. Prabhupada refers here to the standard Indic concept of the aggressor (*atayai*). There are six acts for which lethal retaliation is considered justified: (1) administering poison, (2) setting fire to another's home, (3) stealing, (4) occupying another's land, (5) kidnapping another's wife, and (6) attacking with a deadly weapon. See *Vasiṣṭha-smṛti* 3.19. Prabhupada says, "What is religious fight? Religious fight means you have got right to kill your aggressor. If somebody takes your property, if somebody sets fire in your house, if somebody kidnaps your wife or somebody is trying to kill you, they are called aggressor. So aggressor should be killed immediately. It is not that somebody has become an aggressor, and if I say, 'Now I have become a Vaiṣṇava. I'll not be violent. I shall tolerate. Caitanya Mahāprabhu has taught us to be tolerant like the tree or the grass. So I shall become tolerant. Let him do.' Just like Gandhi used to say. Somebody questioned him that 'If somebody comes and violates the chastity of your daughter in your presence, what will you do?' He said, 'I shall remain nonviolent.' But that is not śāstric injunction. This is foolishness. If somebody is aggressor, he must immediately be killed. Dharma-yuddha. Yudhiṣṭhira Mahārāja is thinking that 'Although there was fight, the fight was between our own men—my brother, my nephews, my grandfather. So they are family members. I have killed them for my kingdom.' He is thinking in that way. He is a pious man. Violence is required." —Lecture on Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.8.50, May 12, 1973, Los Angeles.

9. Meeting and answering with ISKCON leaders – secrets of Sadhana Bhakti. 01.10.2022. URL: <https://youtu.be/iVL4or7YVIE?t=5349>

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