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Author(s): Lehtonen, Tommi

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Bhagavadgītā and *Mānavadharmasāstra* on war and migration

Tommi Lehtonen

University of Vaasa

Abstract

This article examines the perspectives on war and migration presented in the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Law Code of Manu*, two ancient Hindu texts. The *Bhagavadgītā* promotes warrior ethics which emphasise self-mastery and duty without attachment, framing the justification for war as both a moral and spiritual probe. The *Law Code of Manu* primarily regulates everyday life while also addressing aspects of religious devotion and the social consequences thereof. The *Manu* code of war emphasises ethical conduct, the protection of innocents, and restraint, illustrating a robust humanitarian tradition in ancient Indian thought. The *Bhagavadgītā* promotes a balance between universal compassion and practical responsibility, it acknowledges the necessity for responsible governance and a vision of humanity unified by the shared spiritual essence of all beings. The *Law Code of Manu* does not specifically address immigration, although it delineates rules for individuals travelling abroad, particularly regarding their familial duties and responsibilities.

Introduction

This article discusses the views on war and migration in two classical Hindu texts: the *Bhagavadgītā*, and the *Mānavadharmasāstra* (or *Law Code of Manu*). The *Bhagavadgītā* is a revered spiritual scripture, while the *Law Code of Manu* is the best-known legal text from ancient India. Although neither of these texts is philosophical in a scholarly sense, they include historically, ethically, and philosophically intriguing ideas on war and (to a lesser extent) migration which are also relevant and thought-provoking to a contemporary perspective.

The *Bhagavadgītā* is set against the backdrop of a decisive battle in the *Mahābhārata*, an ancient Indian epic (principally compiled between the 3rd century BCE and the 4th century CE). According to Zuzana Špicová (2023), the *Mahābhārata* combines two streams or schools of thinking about laws of wars in ancient India. The first school—what we could call an idealistic or chivalric school—can be found mostly in the *Law Code of Manu* and in the prescriptive portions of the *Mahābhārata*, especially those by the great Kuru patriarch Bhīṣma. This stream of thought prescribes several rules of war: it specifies whom a hero cannot fight against and which weapons are prohibited; it presents details about when and where one cannot fight; and it prescribes that if an opponent is disadvantaged in any way, a warrior must refrain from attacking him. This school presents the ideal of *dharmayuddha*—fighting according to *dharma*, a fair or just war. The second school of thought, found most prominently in Kauṭilya’s *Arthasāstra* (1st–3rd century CE) and in the *Agnipurāṇa* (7th–17th century CE), presents the means of *kūṭayuddha*, or “crooked war”; it teaches that disadvantages on the opposing side or for one’s opponent must be exploited and that, in warfare, victory is the only goal worth pursuing (cf. Sinha 2005, 287–288; Singh 2021, 308). Špicová states, anachronistically or not, that in the *Mahābhārata*, the *kūṭayuddha* school is

represented most prominently by Krishna, an *avatāra* of the god Viṣṇu who serves as the charioteer to the warrior Arjuna during the Kurukshetra war.

This article focuses on the idealistic school's views on war (and migration), despite parts of Krishna's statements in the *Bhagavadgītā* being considered as non-idealistic views. These views—both idealistic and non-idealistic—have had a significant impact not only in India but also globally, as demonstrated by the vast number of readers of the *Bhagavadgītā* translations in various languages.

Initial remarks on the Bhagavadgītā

The *Bhagavadgītā* consists of a dialogue between the god Krishna and the warrior Arjuna. Set on the eve of a significant battle in the *Mahābhārata*, the text addresses profound philosophical and spiritual questions about duty, morality, and the nature of the self. Arjuna, faced with the moral dilemma of fighting against his relatives, is guided by Krishna, who emphasises the importance of performing one's duty (*dharma*) without attachment to the outcomes, thereby reinforcing the concept of detachment in action.

The *Bhagavadgītā*, or *Gītā*, synthesises various philosophical ideas and themes into a cohesive theistic framework. It presents key Hindu concepts such as karma (i.e., action and its consequences) and reincarnation, and it advocates for loving devotion (*bhakti*) as a means to divine realisation. The text is known for its lyrical beauty and accessibility, which makes it appealing to a wide audience. Moreover, the *Gītā* underscores the significance of selfless action and the spiritual path (which includes devotion to a personal God) while simultaneously recognising diverse spiritual

orientations. This makes the *Bhagavadgītā* not only a philosophical treatise but also a practical guide for living a balanced and purposeful life within the context of one's responsibilities.

The *Bhagavadgītā* is not directly identified with any single classical Indian philosophical school or tradition, but it is deeply influential for several of them and is considered a synthesis of many philosophical strands within Indian thought (Garg 2023, 35–36, 41). Specifically, it draws from and harmonises elements of Vedic ritualism (*mīmāṃsā*), Upanishadic philosophy (*vedānta*), *sāṃkhya* metaphysics, and *yoga* practice, as well as devotional *bhakti* traditions. The *Gītā* is regarded as a Brahmanical text which uses *śramaṇic* and *yogic* terminology to reconcile renunciation with action and to propagate the idea of living according to one's dharma. While the *Gītā* is not a foundational text for any of the six classical orthodox (*āstika*) schools, it is especially significant for Vedanta and particularly the *advaita*, *viśiṣṭādvaita*, and *dvaita* interpretations, each of which reads the *Gītā* in light of its own philosophical commitments (Ranganathan 2021). The text is thus a bridge between multiple schools, rather than the sole property of any single tradition.

Despite being spiritual literature rather than a philosophical treatise, the *Bhagavadgītā* offers an interesting philosophical perspective on war and, to lesser extent, migration. Because it provides a nuanced ethical framework which strikes a balance between duty (*dharma*), righteousness, and restraint rather than merely celebrating violence, the *Bhagavadgītā*'s perspective on war is conceptually rich. It integrates spiritual, ethical, and existential reflections into the practical dilemma of fighting a war, advocating for a just cause, disciplined action, and moral restraint (Robinson 2017). This nuanced approach resonates with modern ethical discussions on the conduct and the justification of war (De Brabandere 2014; Aloyo 2015). Although spiritual in nature, the *Bhagavadgītā* addresses the ethical quandaries of war in great detail, which makes it pertinent to philosophical debates over the ethics of conflict.

The *Gītā* frames war as a necessary duty for a warrior (*kṣatriya*) when it is fought to uphold righteousness and justice, not for personal gain or vengeance. To this end, Krishna urges Arjuna to fight because it is his dharma to restore moral order—thus introducing a concept akin to a “just war” theory in an ancient spiritual context. The *Gītā* emphasises that a warrior must cultivate a state of equanimity—i.e., indifference to pleasure and pain, victory and defeat—and act without passion, hatred, or desire for personal gain (2.56, 4.10, 5.3, 5.23–24, 5.26, 12.13, 12.15, 12.17–18, 18.6); this internal calm and self-restraint are essential to preventing unnecessary harm and violence. In this way, it presents a profound ethical stance on the conduct of war rather than only its justification. Krishna teaches that the soul is immortal and that physical death is not the ultimate reality (2.12, 2.19–24, 2.37); in the *Gītā*, this philosophical view is expected to remove fear of death and to encourage performing one’s duty without attachment to the outcome, which reframes the existential stakes of war in spiritual terms. The *Gītā* does not glorify war, instead acknowledging its tragic nature and the suffering it causes. Accordingly, it urges caution and responsibility, arguing that even a just war must be fought with a spirit of peace and ethical restraint. In this way, the *Gītā* promotes an idealistic perspective on war.

Regarding migration, while the *Bhagavadgītā* itself does not explicitly discuss the topic, its broader philosophical teachings on duty, detachment, and the impermanence of the physical body can be extrapolated to understanding human responses to displacement and change. Its emphasis on inner steadiness and focusing on spiritual goals over material attachments can offer a philosophical lens with which to approach the challenges of migration and upheaval.

Even though in this article we focus on the *Bhagavadgītā*, it should be noted that the greater *Mahābhārata*—of which the *Bhagavadgītā* forms part of the sixth book—also offers other material

which is relevant for discussions of a just war (*dharmayuddha*); in fact, the *Mahābhārata* is the first written discussion of a just war in world literature. For instance, in the *Mahābhārata*, one of the five sons of King Pāṇḍu asks if the suffering caused by war can ever be justified. A long discussion then ensues between the Pāṇḍava siblings, establishing criteria such as proportionality (chariots cannot attack cavalry, only other chariots; no attacking people in distress), just means (no poisoned or barbed arrows), just cause (no attacking out of rage), and fair treatment of captives and the wounded (Kaushik 2012; Robinson 2017).

Niṣkāmakarma – a teaching of the Bhagavadgītā

In this section, we provide an overview of the key spiritual and philosophical ideas in the *Bhagavadgītā* which uniquely address the issue of war. First, the *Bhagavadgītā* offers a practical approach to *mokṣa* (or liberation) and to freedom from *saṃsāra*, the cycle of death and rebirth (Bora 2018, 47–48, 51–52). According to this approach, known as *Karma Yoga* (‘the yoga of action’), salvation results from attention to duty and recognition of the past acts which inform the present and will direct the future (Singh 1991, 107). Thus, in the *Karma Yoga* path, dharma and karma—fulfilling one’s duties and responsibilities in life, and retributive justice determined by how well one obeys their dharma, respectively—are assumed to be the basic factors affecting one’s fate and destiny (Chakrabarti & Lehtonen 2020).

The central tenet of the *Karma Yoga* path to liberation is the principle of *niṣkāmakarma*.

Niṣkāmakarma—literally, “action without desire”—denotes an action performed selflessly and obediently, without any expectation of reward or result whatsoever; the *Bhagavadgītā* calls this idea “inaction in action and action in inaction” (4.18). Even if the term itself does not appear in the

Bhagavadgītā (Fowler 2012, p. xliii–iv), *niṣkāmakarma* is arguably the central teaching of the text (Chakraborty 1996, 1998). At the text level, this argument is based on Verse 18.6:

But having relinquished [all] attachment and [actions’] fruits, even these actions should be performed—this is My decided ultimate (*uttama*) conviction (*mata*), O son-of-Prithā. (Feuerstein 2014, 299)

However, one must be vigilant against uncritically adopting the term *niṣkāmakarma* as a shorthand for the central teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā*. The danger lies, first, in the fact that *kāma* is not as broad in its semantic signification as the English ‘desire’. Although there can be pure, sattvic ‘desires’, such as the desire for liberation (18.26, 18.30), *kāma* would generally not be used by pre-modern Sanskrit authors (i.e., *mumukṣā* is not *kāma*). Moreover, the *Bhagavadgītā* is in many ways a difficult text to interpret, not least because it deals with a wide variety of topics relating not only to ethics but also to metaphysics, epistemology, eschatology, soteriology, yogic technique, and more (Sreekumar 2012, 279–280). Therefore, what the “central teaching” of the *Bhagavadgītā* is remains an open question—and depends on one’s point of view.

Nevertheless, what is clear in the *Gītā* is that Krishna advocates selfless action as the ideal path to realising the truth about oneself and about the ultimate reality. According to Krishna, action taken without self-centred expectations or consideration of outcomes tends to purify one’s mind.

Furthermore, action without desire gradually enables one to see the value of mind control and the benefits of renouncing the action itself (2.41, 2.48–49, 6.1–4, 6.7, 6.24–27), which essentially include liberation from an attachment to worldly bonds and suffering.

In the second chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā*, Krishna proclaims that humans are entitled only to actions and not to the results thereof, whether good or bad (2.47–48); therefore, they should not

desire any results. Krishna’s advice that people should not desire any results from their actions can be interpreted in different ways (Sreekumar 2012, 302). What is of utmost importance is that humans are not doomed to idleness or inactivity but instead should act according to the principles of the universal order (*ṛta*). At the same time, because they are not entitled to the results of their actions, they should not be selfishly concerned about outcomes. Although it is admirable to perform good deeds and to participate in well-intentioned activities, the results of those actions should not be associated with their actors; instead, according to the *Bhagavadgītā*, the positive outcomes of actions should be understood as representing “the world’s welfare”—or, as the term *lokasaṅgraha* is often translated, “the common good” (3.19–20, 3.25). Thus, the outcomes of actions are not ultimately under the control of individuals—who, after all, are instruments of the bringing about of the ultimate reality, which is often understood as the fulfilment of God’s eternal designs (*Bhagavadgītā* 11.15–34; Singh, 1991, 107). Consequently, humans have the right to use the outcomes of their actions for good, but they do not own those outcomes, nor do they deserve praise for their good deeds; rather, credit should be attributed to God—or, if a non-theistic framework is preferred, to karma and destiny.

Bhagavadgītā on war

In light of these moral and spiritual principles, especially the principle of *niṣkāmakarma*, it is important to focus on the *Bhagavadgītā*’s narrative framework. Set on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the *Bhagavadgītā* addresses the ethics and necessity of war through a dialogue between the warrior Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna, who is revealed to be an incarnation of the divine. As seen, the text explores not only the immediate question of whether Arjuna should fight but also broader issues of duty (*dharma*), morality, and the inner disposition required in times of conflict.

Many readers, both ancient and contemporary, associate the *Bhagavadgītā*'s position on war with the concept of duty. However, it is important to understand that the *Bhagavadgītā* does not see war as a duty for everyone, but for those whose social role requires it (4.13, 18.41, 18.47, 18.60); usually, such a role is assigned to warriors or soldiers, such as Arjuna. The *Bhagavadgītā* emphasises the importance of fulfilling one's obligations without attachment to personal desires (2.47–48, 2.71, 3.8–9, 3.19, 3.35, 6.1, 16.24, 17.11, 18.7). Verses 3.8 and 3.19 offer the well-known textual evidence in favour of this viewpoint:

You must do the necessary action, for action is superior to inaction [...] Therefore, always perform unattached the deed to be done, for the man (*purusha*) performing action [while being] unattached attains the Supreme. (Feuerstein 2014, 121, 125)

We should note that Krishna's statement is not solely deontological, or related to duty ethics: it also includes consequentialist tones concerning the positive outcomes of fulfilling one's duties, namely entrance to heaven and attaining divinity (2.32, 2.37, 3.19). By also considering less idealistic aspects of war, Krishna paints for Arjuna a scenario ensuing after a refusal to fight, in which negative social consequences (such as shame, disgrace, and cowardice) are vividly described in consequentialist tones (2.2–3, 2.34–36; cf. *Mānavadharmasāstra* 7.87). Moreover, in the last three chapters—i.e., Chapters 16, 17, and 18—Krishna associates the fulfilment of one's duties with adherence to the principles of sacred writings (specifically the Vedas; 16.24, 2.45–46) as well as to prescribed rites, repentance, and the act of giving alms (17.11, 17.30, 18.5).

As a *kṣatriya* (warrior), Arjuna's duty (*dharma*) is to fight in a just war, particularly when the cause is righteous and necessary to uphold moral order (1.38, 2.31, 2.33, 3.24, 4.7–8, 16.7–24, 18.7).

Krishna tells Arjuna that refusing to fight in such circumstances would be a failure of duty and

could have negative consequences for society, as it would allow injustice and oppression to prevail. The Kurukshetra battle is clearly framed by the *Gītā* as a *dharmayuddha*—a righteous war—where fighting is justified to restore justice and to combat evil (2.33).

While the *Gītā* accepts the necessity of war under certain conditions, it does not glorify violence or carnage; instead, it emphasises minimising suffering and pain. To this end, Krishna advises Arjuna to engage in battle only after attaining a state of inner balance—i.e., seeing pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat as equals (2.15). This detachment ensures that the warrior acts without passion, hatred, or personal desire (2.56, 4.10, 5.3, 5.23–24, 5.26, 6.9, 12.13, 12.15, 12.17–18, 14.25, 16.21, 18.51, 18.53). The *Gītā* also insists that the warrior’s conduct must be marked by restraint, calmness, and self-control (5.25, 6.7, 6.9, 6.36, 10.4–5, 12.13–14, 13.7–11, 16.1–3, 17.16–17, 18.51). Here, violence driven by anger or vengeance is condemned, even in a just cause (16.3–4).

The *Bhagavadgītā* also frames war in moral and spiritual dimensions (see Table 1), which are often taken to represent the core of the *Gītā*. The *Gītā* uses the battlefield as a metaphor for the inner struggle every person faces—the “war within”—between conflicting duties, desires, and ethical choices. Krishna teaches that self-mastery, detachment from the fruits of one’s action, and acting according to one’s dharma without selfish motives are essential for spiritual growth (2.47–48, 5.12, 18.6). The text recognises that war brings destruction and sorrow and that upholding righteousness sometimes requires difficult choices.

Table 1: The *Gītā*'s teachings on war

Aspect	<i>Gītā</i> 's view
Necessity of war	Accepts war as necessary to uphold dharma when all peaceful means fail
Warrior's duty	In a just cause, fighting is a duty for <i>kṣatriyas</i>
Attitude in battle	Must act with detachment, restraint, and without personal desire
Violence	Not glorified; minimise suffering and harm
Justification	War is justified only for righteousness, never for personal gain
Inner struggle	War symbolises the moral and spiritual battles within each person

To summarise, the *Gītā* sets limits of war and critically considers the justification for war. The *Gītā* justifies war only as a last resort, after all efforts at diplomacy and peace have failed (as was the case in the *Mahābhārata* narrative). It cautions that war must never be waged for personal gain, for revenge, or out of uncontrolled emotion, but only to defend justice and restore balance (2.61). In Hinduism, non-violence (*ahimsā*) is promoted, while retaliation and revenge are discouraged, as they perpetuate cycles of violence and hatred. The *Gītā* advises against seeking revenge; instead, it promotes forgiveness and justice, emphasising that the pursuit of peace is more important than vengeance (2.66).

Discussion

We should note that traditional Hindu warfare was a very different affair from modern warfare. An attentive reader of Hindu epic literature will find that the warfare depicted in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* is strictly governed by a code of honour, and the duty (*dharma*) of the *kṣatriya*

(warrior) is quite well defined in both these texts and the *Dharmaśāstras*, or Hindu legal literature. Whenever the characters run afoul of this code of honour, they are reprimanded (Long 2009).

As stated, the central tenet of the Karma Yoga path to liberation, addressed in the *Bhagavadgītā*, is the principle of *niṣkāmakarma*. Therefore, it seems important to discuss *niṣkāmakarma*'s relation to war. First, we need to understand the concept of duty without attachment: Krishna urges Arjuna to fight not out of hatred, ambition, or desire for victory, but because it is his duty (*dharma*) as a warrior to uphold justice. Arjuna is instructed to act without attachment to the outcome—whether success or failure, gain or loss—and focus only on performing his duty selflessly. This discussion is related to the idea of war as righteous action (see Table 2). To this end, the *Gītā* does not glorify violence, but it teaches that when war is necessary to protect righteousness, it should be undertaken with a spirit of selfless duty. This approach transforms the act of war from a selfish pursuit to a form of *yoga*, a spiritual discipline.

Table 2 : *Niṣkāmakarma* and war

Principle	Application in war according to the <i>Bhagavadgītā</i>
Selfless action	Fight out of duty, not for personal gain
Detachment from results	Remain balanced regarding victory or defeat
Righteous motivation	War only for justice, not out of anger or greed
Spiritual discipline	War becomes a path to self-purification and liberation

In this context, the idea of inner detachment is central: Arjuna is told to cultivate *equanimity*—to remain balanced in both victory and defeat. This detachment from the fruits of one's action is the

essence of *niṣkāmakarma*, and it ensures that the warrior's mind is not corrupted by pride in victory or despair in defeat. All this paves way to purification and liberation; by practicing *niṣkāmakarma*, even in the context of war, one purifies the mind and moves towards liberation (*mokṣa*), as actions performed without selfish desire do not bind the soul to the karmic cycle of death and rebirth.

Bhagavadgītā and the issue of migration

The *Bhagavadgītā* does not directly address political migration, but its teachings offer relevant philosophical guidance. On this point, the *Gītā* emphasises the universality of the soul and the superficiality of bodily distinctions such as nationality, race, or caste. For example, Verse 5.18 states:

The learned see the same in a *brāhmaṇa* endowed with understanding and culturedness, in a cow, an elephant, even a dog or a “dog-cooker”. (Feuerstein 2014, 153)

This verse and other similar teachings suggest that viewing people primarily through the lens of nationality or bodily identity is spiritually limiting (see Table 3). The *Gītā* criticises a mindset which only sees differences between people based on their bodies, which can be extended to nationalist or exclusionary attitudes towards migrants.

While advocating for compassion and inclusivity, the *Gītā* also recognises the need for practical considerations. It suggests that families or countries should extend care to others, especially the less fortunate, as much as is practically possible; at the same time, it acknowledges the legitimacy of protecting one's own community or nation for economic, social, or security reasons. Thus, the *Gītā*'s approach discourages both extreme exclusion (xenophobia) and indiscriminate inclusion (radical globalism), instead calling for leaders to balance universal compassion with responsible

stewardship. The extremism of the first view is opposed by verses in the *Gītā* which present the universality of living entities based on the soul, as such verses either imply or outright condemn viewing people according to the bodily concept of life (as in nationalism). One of many examples includes Verses 18.20–21:

[The knowledge] by which the one immutable state-of-existence is seen in all beings, undivided in the divided—that knowledge know [*sic*] as *sattva*-natured. But [that] knowledge which recognizes through separateness various distinct states-of-being in all beings—that knowledge know [*sic*] as *rajas*-natured. (Feuerstein 2014, 305) [*sattva*: pure, steady, goodness; *rajas*: active, energy, passion]

According to the *Gītā*'s perspective, we cannot address the situation of illegal immigrants solely through legal principles, without first considering them as living (spiritual) beings; at the same time, we cannot ignore laws designed to protect citizens when dealing with individuals living in a country illegally.

Although the *Gītā* certainly speaks about the principle of universality—the underlying value against nationalism—it also promotes the value of reciprocity, a view opposed to indiscriminate globalism. Reciprocity involves caring more for those who depend on one, such as family, or citizens who depend on the government. This “care with distinction” principle is founded on suitably reciprocating with others in one’s care, and such “partiality” transcends selfishness. In Verse 9.29, Krishna also supports “care with distinction,” which challenges the extremism of indiscriminate globalism:

I am the same in all beings. To Me there is none hateful or dear. But those who worship Me with devotion, they are in Me and I am also in them. (Feuerstein 2014, 199)

However, one may ask the following: If Krishna is equal to all, then why does he prioritise those who worship him with devotion? One can argue that this prioritisation is not discriminatory but rather natural. For example, anyone in this material world can be very charitable, but they have a special interest in their own children.

Another famous reference to the principle of reciprocity as being more than bias is found in Verse 4.11:

Just as these [*yogins*] resort to Me, so do I love them [in turn]. Everywhere, o son-of-Prithā, humans follow My “track”. (Feuerstein 2014, 137)

With regard to the issue of immigration, both universality and reciprocity—as espoused in the *Gītā*—can be appropriately applied. Every entity, be it family or country, should understand the superficiality of bodily distinctions and so extend itself as far as possible for all people, taking those less fortunate into one’s fold to whatever practical extent one is capable of. However, it is also reasonable for a country to protect its borders and show special concern for the needs of its own citizens, for economic, social, or security reasons.

Table 3: *Bhagavadgītā*’s principles and migration

Principle	Application to migration
Universality of the soul	Opposes exclusion based on nationality
Compassion and care	Encourages practical help for the less fortunate
Responsible stewardship	Affirms the need for lawful order and protection

Principle	Application to migration
Spiritual migration	Emphasises inner transformation over physical movement
Inclusivity in liberation	Spiritual progress is open to all, transcending social divisions

It is important to remember that the *Gītā* also figuratively employs the idea of migration, especially in relation to the journey of the soul. It draws a distinction between the “material world” and the “spiritual world”, describing the latter as a realm of eternal joy. Through the development of genuine devotion (*bhakti*) to Krishna, one is invited into the spiritual realm, rather than forcing or infiltrating. This symbolic migration highlights the *Gītā*’s focus on spiritual aspiration and internal development over actual relocation. According to the *Gītā*, anyone can achieve spiritual freedom (*mokṣa*), regardless of caste, gender, or race. This spiritual inclusivity further supports the belief that societal or national boundaries are less important than the underlying unity of all creatures (Bora 2018).

Introduction to the Law Code of Manu

The *Law Code of Manu* (*Mānavadharmasāstra*), more famously known as *The Laws of Manu* (*Manusmṛti*), is the best-known legal text from ancient India. Its special status among legal authorities was established by the fifth century CE at the latest, and possibly as early as the third century CE (Olivelle 2005, 3). The *Law Code of Manu* is generally recognised as the defining document of Brahmanical Hinduism.

The concept of dharma or law originally referred to rites and ritual obligations. Ritual activities (especially those relating to the life cycle from conception and birth to death) traditionally played a

central role in the lives of Brahmins, those of the highest *varna* or social class. However, by the time of the *Law Code of Manu*, the term *dharma*—which appears in the title *Mānavadharmasāstra*—had taken on a wider meaning to encompass all that constituted proper conduct and the right way to lead one’s life (Olivelle 2005, 31). This moral dimension of *dharma* plays a central role in the *Law Code of Manu*. In addition, the book includes very detailed rules and regulations pertaining to civil, criminal, and administrative law.

Although the *Law Code of Manu* derived much of its material from earlier sources, the book is not merely an anthology. The eponym ‘Manu’ is an alias or assumed name with a long history: before the *Law Code of Manu*, many proverbs and sayings were ascribed to Manu, who was viewed by later generations as an ancient sage or lawgiver. Manu was also regarded as the first human being—the progenitor of humankind—and, at least according to one tradition, the first king. It appears that the intent of using the name ‘Manu’ was to make this treatise on law more authoritative by connecting it to both the author of famous sayings and the first king of humankind (Olivelle 2005, 19–20). The authoritativeness of the *Law Code of Manu* is further augmented by the statement that the teachings of Manu agree with the Vedas, the oldest sacred texts from ancient India. This is explicitly expressed in Verse 2.7: “Whatever Law Manu has proclaimed with respect to anyone, all that has been taught in the Veda, for it contains all knowledge.”

The Law Code of Manu (1.57–58) presents a textual history of itself, wherein it ascribes the original treatise to Brahmā, the Hindu god of creation and the father of Manu (1.102). In this way, the *Law Code of Manu* seeks to present itself as an eternal document, parallel to the Vedas and composed by the Creator himself (Olivelle 2005, 65). According to the frame story, Manu taught the treatise to his pupils, including Bhrgu, who was appointed to act as the spokesman who recites the treatise to

other sages. Tradition presents the existing version of the *Law Code of Manu* as the edition proclaimed by Bhṛgu.

Patrick Olivelle argues that a close examination of the *Law Code of Manu* and its systematic structure makes it clear that the text is an original composition written by a single individual (Olivelle 2005, 6–7). However, the name of the author is unknown, as are any details of his life; according to Olivelle (2005, 20), the most we can say is that the author was a learned Brahmin from somewhere in northern India. In addition, based on the structure of and emphases in the text, the author was quite politically conservative and intent on protecting the rights and privileges of Brahmins. The *Law Code of Manu* is dated between the first century BCE and the second century CE (Olivelle 2005, 21–24).

A central concern of the *Law Code of Manu* is the social relationships among the king, Brahmins, and other social classes. According to the book, the task of the king is to protect “people belonging to all social classes and orders of life”; in addition, the king’s subjects, “according to their rank, are devoted to the Law specific to them” (7.35). This class and caste division, reinforced by the law, is considered to be very important for society, and it is warned that the mixing of social classes would create a “deviation from the Law that tears out the very root and leads to the destruction of everything” (8.353).

The Law Code of Manu on war

Chapter 7 of the *Law Code of Manu* provides principles for the conduct of war in detail in two separate sections: 7.87–98 and 7.181–205. The principles cover the issues of a just war quite broadly, to the point that they can be referred to as warrior ethics. Emphasising restraint, humanity,

and fairness, these principles of warrior ethics establish norms which closely parallel many modern humanitarian standards.

There are six key principles of warrior ethics from the *Law Code of Manu* (see Table 4). First, there is a distinction between combatants and non-combatants (7.92). The *Manusmṛiti* explicitly forbids harming civilians, non-combatants, or anyone who has surrendered; ordinary people and those not involved in combat are not to be targeted (7.91–93). Furthermore, the *Law Code of Manu* (10.63) stipulates a universal dharma (non-violence, truthfulness, purity, etc.) for all four *varṇas* and, according to Medhātithi (a famous commentator of the *Manusmṛiti*) for all humans (Jhā 1992, 332–333; Aktor 2008, 197).

Second, there are rules of engagement and prohibited weapons. Warriors must not use concealed, barbed, poisoned, or fire-tipped weapons. Striking with unfair means or from behind is condemned. In short, combat should occur openly and with honour (7.90).

The third principle is the protection of the vulnerable. According to this principle, those who surrender, are unarmed, are sleeping, are fleeing, or are otherwise incapable of fighting must not be harmed (7.92–93). This principle is in line with another one, namely that for a *kṣatriya*, the highest law is to protect his subjects (7.144). The *Law Code of Manu* also emphasises that the king should always honour the sick, the afflicted, children, the elderly, and the poor, among others (8.395).

The fourth principle is fairness and proportionality. To this end, the use of force should be proportionate, and excessive violence is discouraged. Collective attacks on a single warrior and striking a disadvantaged opponent are forbidden (7.92).

The fifth principle addresses conduct after victory (7.201–205). The conqueror must treat the vanquished humanely, offer amnesty to those who surrender, and avoid vengeful acts. Looting is discouraged; instead, the conqueror should grant tax remissions and seek to win over the populace.

Finally, the sixth principle underlines that war should only be used as a last resort. War should be avoided, since both victory and defeat are unpredictable; however, if all other strategies fail, the king should wage war in such a way that he will defeat his enemies (7.198–200). This latter view in the *Law Code of Manu* can be seen to represent the school or stream of thought called *kūṭayuddha*, which teaches that disadvantages on the side of one's opponent must be exploited and that, in warfare, victory is the only goal worth pursuing (Sinha 2005, 287–288; Singh 2021, 308).

Table 4: Law of Manu on war

Principle	<i>Manusmṛti</i> teaching
Non-combatant immunity	Civilians, non-combatants, and those who surrender must not be harmed
Prohibited weapons	No concealed, poisoned, barbed, or fire-tipped weapons
Protection of vulnerable	No harm to unarmed, fleeing, sleeping, or incapacitated persons
Fairness in combat	Prohibits collective attacks, unfair strikes, and attacking the disadvantaged
Humane treatment of defeated	Amnesty and granting exemptions for conquered people
Last resort	War should only be used when all other options have failed

To summarise, the *Law Code of Manu* prescribes a code of war which prioritises ethical conduct, protection of the innocent, and restraint, thereby reflecting a strong humanitarian tradition in ancient Indian thought. These principles were designed to limit the destructiveness of war and to safeguard human dignity even amidst conflict. According to the *Law Code of Manu*, war should be a last resort: negotiation and peaceful resolutions should always be sought first. Furthermore, the use of violence must be limited to what is necessary to achieve the intended outcome, and without excessive harm to innocents. On this latter note, the use of force should be directed solely at combatants, not civilians, women, or children. The laws prohibit attacks on people who are vulnerable, such as those who have surrendered or are unable to defend themselves. However, one should also keep in mind that, in general, the goal of warfare is to defeat one's enemy.

The Law Code of Manu *on immigration*

The Law Code of Manu does not directly address the issue of immigration as it is commonly understood today—i.e., the movement of people across national borders for long-term residence. However, the text discusses the family and social responsibilities of individuals who travel abroad. Chapter 9 discusses the responsibilities of a husband planning to travel abroad, stipulating that a man should not leave his wife behind without ensuring her subsistence during his absence (9.74–76). The *Manubhāṣya* by Medhātithi (about 1000 CE) clarifies that the injunction is meant to ensure that the wife is provided for with food, clothing, and other necessities while the husband is away (Jhā 1992).

There is no explicit mention in the *Law Code of Manu* of rules or laws governing the admission, rights, or treatment of foreign immigrants or travellers entering the community or polity. The text focuses more on maintaining social order and family responsibilities, rather than regulating the

movement of people into or out of a region. While the text discusses the concept of *varṇa* (social class) mobility and the possibility of individuals changing their social status based on merit or circumstances (10.62–73), this is not framed in terms of immigration or migration between territories. In short, the administrative and judicial structures described in the *Law Code of Manu* are concerned with local governance and do not reference policies for newcomers or immigrants.

Conclusion: Idealistic views on war and migration in classical Hindu literature

In conclusion, we can summarise the idealistic views on war and migration in the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Law Code of Manu*. The *Bhagavadgītā* presents a nuanced view of war: it acknowledges the tragic necessity of violence in defence of justice, but it insists that such action must be guided by duty, restraint, and a spirit of detachment. The text ultimately advocates for a warrior ethic which values self-mastery and the minimisation of harm, turning the justification for war into a moral and spiritual question. The *Bhagavadgītā* teaches that even in war, actions must be performed selflessly, without attachment to outcomes, and solely out of a sense of duty. This is the heart of *niṣkāmakarma*, and it transforms the battlefield into a ground for spiritual growth rather than personal ambition.

The *Law Code of Manu* seeks to regulate everyday life while also addressing religious devotion and its social implications. As a specific regulation of life, the *Law Code of Manu* prescribes a code of war which prioritises ethical conduct, protection of the innocent, and restraint, reflecting a strong humanitarian tradition in ancient Indian thought. These principles are aimed at limiting the destructiveness of war and safeguarding human dignity even amidst conflict. The *Law Code of Manu* emphasises that war should be a last resort, with negotiation and peaceful resolutions being

prioritised. Violence should be limited to achieve the intended outcome without causing excessive harm.

The *Bhagavadgītā*, while not addressing migration in the modern political sense, advocates for a balance of universal compassion and practical responsibility. It challenges attitudes of exclusion based on bodily identity, encourages care for all people, and recognises the need for responsible governance. Its teachings ultimately point towards a vision of humanity united by the common spiritual essence of all beings. The *Law Code of Manu*, for its part, does not offer guidance or laws on immigration as such, but it does provide rules for individuals travelling abroad, especially concerning their family duties and responsibilities.

Based on these two texts, the idealistic outlook regarding war and migration in classical Hindu literature takes two perspectives: a spiritual (and dutiful) endeavour, and the chivalric law of just war.

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