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Reclaiming Arjuna from a Century of Obedience

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The RSS has sought to replace Arjuna's ethical hesitation with ritualised obedience, recasting the Bhagavad Gita to sanctify unthinking certainty. This is India's present crisis, at the centenary of the RSS: the swayamsevak's unquestioning loyalty pitted against the citizen's conscientious doubt.

Savyam sthir?sthit??! The command cracks through the humid air, not in Hindi or Marathi, but in Sanskrit. Rows of young men snap to attention. This is the daily shakha (training session) of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)-a flag, a field, and a century-old ritual for building a nation one obedient body at a time. The product is the swayamsevak (volunteer), the idealised citizen of the Hindutva project, embodying a specific certainty-the certainty of command, of belonging, and of the enemy.

But on this stage stands another figure. His bow hangs heavy; his body trembles. This is Arjuna of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the text the RSS claims as its guide. The swayamsevak is not his heir but his antithesis. This essay argues that the RSS's core endeavour, perfected over a 100 years, has been the systematic eradication of Arjuna's defining quality-ethical hesitation-and its replacement with ritualised obedience. This is the battle for India's soul-the swayamsevak's unthinking certainty versus the citizen's conscientious doubt.

Genius of the Shakha

The genius of the shakha lies in producing swayamsevaks who will never ask-or even think of asking-*What is right?* Its method is deceptively simple-one dusty park, one saffron flag, one hour a day. No forms, no fees, no tests. Anyone who bows before the flag belongs.

The first to arrive hoists the Bhagwa Dhwaj (saffron flag), then marks the shakha's sacred boundary in mud with his lathi, imposing a sacred order. The dhwaj at the centre of activities commands the ritual space; it is now a deity replacing even the national tricolour. Positioned authoritatively alongside is the *shakha karyavah* (leader), who orchestrates proceedings for the saffron eternity.

> This bhagwa dharma (saffron faith) produces the docile body that obeys not under compulsion alone but under the conviction that obedience itself is eternal truth.

He calls the command: *savyam sthir?sthit??!*-"Be firmly established, steady!" The words are Sanskrit, chosen for its mantle of unimpeachable authority. This is no mere drill order; it is a consecration of power. The language casts a spell, a linguistic alchemy that transforms compliance into a sense of participating in cosmic law.

Then the collective *dhwaj pranam* (salutation to the flag). This is not a mere gesture. It is an alignment with a timeless saffron dharma. This *bhagwa dharma* (saffron faith) produces the docile body that obeys not under compulsion alone but under the conviction that obedience itself is eternal truth.

The synchronised drills begin, *vyayam*. Precise salutes. Rigid postures. Each movement etches a muscle memory of conformity. The body is remade-disciplined, regimented, its individual rhythm extinguished for the collective pulse. This synchronicity is the perfect metaphor-a hierarchical order, purged of individual wills.

The shakha's games are ideology in motion. They are living parables-in *Mitra-Rak??*, boys fuse into a human chain-the individual vanishes, only the collective remains. The *pr?rthana* is not a prayer but an oath, framing doubt as treason and obedience as sacred filial debt.

Then, when the body is drilled and the heart softened, the final tool is deployed. The *baudhik* (ideological instruction) begins. Stories of sacrifice and siege are told. These are not tales-they are injections. The lesson is unambiguous-obedience is strength, doubt is betrayal. Received in a mind opened by sweat and song, the narrative bypasses reason, rendering doctrine instinct and thought obsolete.

The shakha's power lies in rhythm, not reason. When bodies march and voices chant in unison, the rational mind-the prefrontal cortex that asks *why*-is bypassed. The boy leaves his capacity for questioning at the boundary. What remains is a reactive brain tuned to

rhythm and emotion-a liberation swayamsevaks call freedom from the mind. The pleasure of synchrony, the rush of the collective cry-this is how compliance begins to feel natural, even righteous. The ideology is not argued; it is engraved.

> This 'way of life' is a sleight of hand-the contingent is recoded as the eternal; subordination is disguised as patriotism.

Through ritual, rhythm, and repetition, a political project is transformed into righteous habit. The salute, the step, the shout-these cease to be actions and become identity. Over time, the rituals become 'good upbringing'; ideology becomes *sansk?r* (values)-righteousness carried in the bone.

This 'way of life' is a sleight of hand-the contingent is recoded as the eternal; subordination is disguised as patriotism. The shakha's true genius is not in creating soldiers, but in manufacturing souls for whom obedience is the highest dharma.

This is the battle for India's soul. It is fought between the unthinking certainty of the swayamsevak and the conscientious doubt of the citizen who, like Arjuna, asks, *What is right?* The shakha's purpose is to make that question seem unnecessary. Our task is to ensure it is never silenced.

The Dharma of Hesitation

Into this world of martial certainty steps Arjuna. As the armies stand poised to clash, he does not roar a battle cry. He collapses. "My limbs give way, my mouth is parched, my body trembles..." (*Bhagavad Gita* 1.28-31, translation by Barbara Stoler-Miller). This is not cowardice, but conscience. On the very brink of war, Arjuna's hesitation becomes the birthplace of ethics-the refusal to follow *svadharma* (personal duty) when it violates universal morality.

The *Gita* is not a command to a passive soldier, but a dialogue born from this essential doubt. Krishna's discourse, often caricatured as an order to kill, is a philosophical treatise. He guides Arjuna to re-see action through the lens of *ni?k?ma karma*-to act without attachment, to follow one's svadharma not as a mindless imperative but as a conscious choice. The lesson is not *obey!*, but *discern*. Arjuna is taught to act not as a pawn of command, but as a sovereign self. He thus models a higher form of citizenship-the right to hesitate, the courage to question sacred duties, and the practice of relational ethics, which sees the 'enemy' as teacher, cousin, grandfather.

> The selective vision-this deliberate turning away from the Pandava's defining moment-finds its perfect symbol not in the hesitant archer, but in the blind king whose question opens the epic.

Yet, the RSS shakha has no room for this trembling Arjuna. Its pedagogy is engineered to erase the very hesitation that defines him. In the shakha, the moment the armies face each other is not a moment for existential questioning, but for immediate, unquestioning mobilisation. The *Gita* is reduced to a soundbite-*karmanye vadhikaraste* (you have the right to action alone)-stripped of its dialogic heart, wielded as a drill command. The ideal swayamsevak is moulded in the image of Bhima, the strongman, or Yudhishthira, the rule-bound king, but never Arjuna, the thinker.

Where Arjuna trembles, the swayamsevak snaps to attention. The shakha's ritual complex-its salutes, drills, and parables-produces a subject for whom obedience is patriotism and doubt is betrayal. It leaves no pause for the reflection that erupts from Arjuna at the most critical moment.

This manufactured certainty stands in stark contrast to the generative crisis on the Kurukshetra battlefield. Therefore, when the RSS co-opts Arjuna as the obedient warrior, it surgically elides the very tremor that gives his story meaning. The *Gita*'s teaching emerges through the struggle with doubt, not from its suppression.

This selective vision-this deliberate turning away from the Pandava's defining moment-finds its perfect symbol not in the hesitant archer, but in the blind king whose question opens the epic. The shakha, in a sense, chooses Dhritarashtra's blindness over Arjuna's clear-eyed doubt.

Dharmak?etra or Andhak?etra?

The *Bhagavad Gita* opens not on the battlefield, but in a palace of blindness. King Dh?tar???ra's question to Sanjaya-"*Dharmak?etre kuruk?etre […] kim akurvata*" (On the field of dharma, what did they do?)-reveals everything. He does not ask, *What is right?* His concern is only for the fate of his sons, his faction. The king's physical blindness mirrors an ethical sightlessness-without *antard???i*-the inner eye of conscience-the field of dharma becomes *andhak?etra*, a field of darkness, where the Other is rendered invisible and a partisan victory is sanctified as the highest law.

This blindness finds its modern embodiment in the RSS, which re-imagines the shakha as a modern *dharmak?etra*-what its second leader, M.S. Golwalkar, termed a "gymnasium of the soul". Here, the swayamsevak supposedly awakens his inner eye by conquering four enemies. *Tamas* (inertia) is to be drilled away; *vik?r* (ego, desire) sublimated into collective games; *ajñ?na* (confusion) dispelled by the *baudhik*'s singular narrative; and *sv?rtha* (selfishness) dissolved in the *pr?rthana*'s demand for self-effacement. This, they claim, polishes the inner lens, restoring a dharma of national devotion.

A closer examination reveals a perilous inversion-not the cultivation of inner sight, but its systematic blinding. The four enemies of the soul-*tamas*, *vik?r*, *ajñ?na*, and *sv?rtha*-are not conquered; they are collectivised and amplified. The individual's inner darkness is submerged into a collective *tamas* of unquestioning obedience. Personal ego is not dissolved but absorbed into a larger, more aggressive group identity. The *baudhik* replaces individual confusion with collective dogma, and the *pr?rthana* renders doubt sacrilege. The inner battle is outsourced, and the enemies return, weaponised by the collective.

> The ultimate paradox is this-the RSS cloaks its project in Sanskrit and models it on Kuruk?etra, claiming to cultivate dharmic citizens. Yet, its true product is the very opposite.

The result is a monocular *antard???i* that narrows vision to a single, adversarial point. Inquiry is replaced by certainty; hesitation by command. The complex realities of caste, pluralism, and history are simplified into stark binaries: national/anti-national, Hindu/non-Hindu. The self is not illuminated but erased, and obedience is mistaken for insight. What the shakha calls clarity is the rigid focus of a dogmatic lens.

The ultimate paradox is this. The RSS cloaks its project in Sanskrit and models it on Kuruk?etra, claiming to cultivate dharmic citizens. Yet, its true product is the very opposite. It mass produces unquestioning soldiers by sealing shut the inner eye of conscience.

This is not a contradiction but a revelation. The RSS has not preserved an ancient tradition; it has engineered a modern political ideology and sanctified it with saffron. This *bhagwa dharma* is a system built on a simple, brutal logic-the primacy of the faction. Its tenets are unwavering loyalty to the Sangh, the identification of a permanent internal enemy, and the suppression of all doubt as betrayal. It is a dharma of command, not question; of uniformity, not diversity; of power, not balance.

This *bhagwa dharma* violently rebels against the true, ancient bedrock of Indian thought-*?ta*, the cosmic principle of harmony, balance, and relational order. A society in *?ta* practices *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (non-harm), *nyaya* (justice), and *samvada* (dialogue). The RSS model, which thrives on division, aggression, and monologue, is the very definition of a-*?ta*-a state of cosmic disorder.

And this is where Arjuna's tremor returns, not as a failure, but as the highest dharma. His hesitation on the battlefield is the ultimate human expression of *?ta*. It is the psyche's refusal to act until balance is restored, until the relational ethics between cousin and teacher are acknowledged. His doubt is the sound of a conscience trying to align with cosmic harmony. In surgically removing this doubt from its ideal citizen, the RSS is not creating a warrior. It is creating a being deaf to the rhythm of the cosmos itself.

A field that trains for such obedience, not discernment, is not a *dharmak?etra* (field of righteousness). It is an *andhak?etra*-a field of blindness. Their centenary does not celebrate dharma; it celebrates the triumph of adharma. It is a victory parade for a war on the balancing doubt that is Arjuna's legacy, and a war on the cosmic order, *?ta*-a foundational gift to the world.

> This is a rebellion not of force, but of meaning, challenging the saffron saturation of public discourse with the simple, disruptive power of a question.

The decisive contrast is captured in a single question. The trained swayamsevak learns to ask, *What is the order?* Arjuna, in his trembling, embodies the question, *What is right?* One seeks a command; the other undertakes a moral inquiry. One system treats doubt as treason; the other recognises that true dharma is born from doubt.

Arjuna's hesitation is the birthplace of ethics; the swayamsevak's certainty, its burial. The centenary of obedience may be celebrated, but the future belongs to those who still dare to tremble and ask.

Quiet Resistance

If the shakha's project is the manufacture of certainty, then the most potent resistance is the cultivation of doubt. If its method is monologue, the antidote is dialogue. This resistance flickers not in loud opposition, but in the quiet, persistent act of interpretation-the citizen's insistence on asking, *What does this mean?*; *What is right?*

It is found in the evocative prose of small magazines and the patient cadences of reflective voices that reactivate the citizen's right to hesitate. They do not shout; they listen. This is a rebellion not of force, but of meaning, challenging the saffron saturation of public discourse with the simple, disruptive power of a question.

This quiet resistance is the active practice of *?ta* in a world of adharma. Where the regime enforces a brittle uniformity, the resistance upholds *?ta*'s relational harmony through *samv?da*. Where it trades in falsehoods, the resistance insists on *satya*. Where its politics are inherently violent, the resistance embodies *ahi?s?* in its very methodology. And where the system perpetuates injustice, the resistance demands *ny?ya*.

This is not a new ideology; it is the re-alignment of public life with the cosmic order of balance. To hesitate, to question, to interpret-these are not merely political acts. They are the essential human rituals for maintaining *?ta*.

A true celebration of India's dharmic heritage would not be a centenary of the RSS, but of Arjuna. It would be a nation that institutionalises hesitation, protects dialogue, and recognises that the first duty of a citizen is not to obey, but to interpret.

Field of Victory

The centenary of the RSS celebrates a century of obedience. It marks a hundred years of manufacturing certainty, of drilling the tremor from the body and the question from the mind. It is a monument to the swayamsevak-the ideal citizen who asks, *What is the order?* and never, *What is right?*

> Yet, on this field of manufactured certainty, a different memory persists. It is the memory of the dialogue that precedes all righteous action.

This essay has argued that this project is a fundamental betrayal of the *Bhagavad Gita* it claims to venerate. It is not a *dharmak?etra*, a field of righteousness, but an *andhak?etra*, a field of blindness that chooses Dhritarashtra's partisan loyalty over Arjuna's clear-eyed doubt. Its *bhagwa dharma* is a rebellion against the cosmic order of *?ta*, a denial of the balancing doubt through which true dharma is born.

Yet, on this field of manufactured certainty, a different memory persists. It is the memory of the dialogue that precedes all righteous action. The Gita itself does not end with the battle's conclusion, but with a recollection of the moment that made victory meaningful.

"O King, when I keep remembering/this wondrous and holy dialogue/ between Krishna and Arjuna, I rejoice again and again [...] Where Krishna is lord of discipline/ and Arjuna is the archer,/ there do fortune, victory, abundance,/ and morality exist, so I think", says Sañjaya at the end of the *Bhagavad Gita* (18.76, 78, translation by Barbara Stoler-Miller.)

Where Krishna (discernment) stands with Arjuna (the courage to doubt), there will be prosperity, victory, and the establishment of dharma. The RSS centenary commands the present, but the future belongs to that single, enduring question-*What is right?*- the only source of a future worth living for.

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