

The Bhagavad Gita – The Politics of Interpretation and its Interpretation in Politics

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Abstract: *The Bhagavad Gita is one of the major sacred texts of Hindu mythology, and is one of the perennial sources of spiritual knowledge. However, during the time of Indian national struggle for freedom, this sacred text was interpreted and re-interpreted numerous times by each prominent nationalist leader, sometimes to justify violence, sometimes to ensure mass participation in the Satyagraha movement. In his interpretation, Tilak found that The Gita teaches the philosophy of activism and energism (Karma yoga). Karma yoga means purging the soul of desires, so that the action performed is free from any materialistic attachments and desireless of its outcome. Gandhi on the other hand, interpreted it as an allegorical representation of the spiritual war going on between the forces of Good and the forces of Evil. Gandhi thus converted the greatest Indian war epic into an elaborate set-up to preach the importance of truth and non-violence. However, to Ambedkar, it was neither a sacred text nor a treatise on philosophy, but a politically motivated “counter-revolution” by the Brahmins to establish their supremacy by defending Chaturvarna, and securing its observance in practice. In my paper, I propose to underline such politics of interpretation of The Gita and understand how each stand has sought justification from the text.*

Keywords: *The Bhagavad Gita, Karma yoga, Tilak, Gandhi, Ambedkar*

"I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." (Gita, 11.32)

These words from *The BhagavadGita* is what J. Robert Oppenheimer had claimed to have thought when he witnessed the world's first atomic explosion at New Mexico desert at the Trinity test site on 16 July 1945¹. Oppenheimer, the father of atomic age, had to constantly draw inspiration from the sacred text in order to justify his creation of mass destruction, and believed that it was only a job that he had to do. Is it just a coincidence that his situation paralleled Arjuna's remarkably? Was *The Gita* then indirectly responsible for the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, just as the Pandavas and Kauravas were directly responsible for the death of thousands on the battlefield of Kurukshetra? Admittedly being born and brought up in a foreign culture could have clouded his understanding and judgement of the true meaning of the text, but arguably was it more partial than Indian interpretations, which came to be written especially during the nationalist struggle, which were then used to justify violence or to ensure mass participation in *Satyagraha*, and were they not construed to serve selfish motives? Are we then saying that there is no absolute truth/reality that is applicable at all times? In my paper, I propose

to underline the politics of interpretation of *The Gita*, and how it had been used in politics during the Indian National struggle for freedom in the early twentieth century.

“Every teacher who wished to claim Vedantic authority for his teachings was obliged to write a commentary on it showing that it supported his views.” - Krishna Prem, The Yoga of The BhagavadGita, p. 8

The ancient philosophers like Shankaracharya, Ramanuja, and Vallabha School interpreted that *The Gita* teaches the path of renunciation and *bhakti* (devotion) to attain *Moksha*; whereas the moderns like Tilak, Aurobindo and Gandhi read it to support *Karma yoga* and *Satyagraha* doctrine. The question raised at this point is that had they introduced ideas into *The Gita* in order to support their own theories, or were the thoughts formed while reading *The Gita* and thus, *The Gita* influenced their philosophies? In case of the latter, we ask the question of what does *The Gita* really preach. Is it action or inaction? Justification of enlightened violence or a call for peace? Is it then a ‘sacred’ book at all, the ‘Word of the Lord’ if we may call it, or only an allegorical work by the great sage Vyasa as a plea for humanistic politics? What we do know is that it acquired an iconic status in the modern times, interrogating the relationship between political thought, religion and modernity, and is thus still applicable as ever due to its limitless possibilities of meanings and interpretations.

Historically, *The Gita* had always been used as a tool of unification and motivation for the Hindus against foreign governance (Mughals and then the Britishers). Ironically, it was actually made accessible to the larger audience by the efforts of the Orientalists, and by subsequent translations into several Indian languages and dialects. Till then, it had always been read as a philosophical discourse, propagating moral and ethical living. It achieved greater prominence in the beginning of twentieth century, beginning with Tilak’s commentary, *Srimad BhagavadGita Rahasya*, written in order to strengthen and rationalise his extremist stance and to gain the political support of the Hindu intelligentsia. Prior to his entrance upon the political stage, Indian leadership under G.K. Gokhale had relied upon protests against government policies consisting of thoughtfully worded petitions, made to appeal to the sense of reason and fair play of the British Parliament. Tilak saw little benefit in such methods, and made his official foray into politics by opposing the British policies which didn’t conform to the dictates of *Dharamshastras*. This attitude won him the support of the orthodox Hindu community, which felt threatened by various reform proposals. He then mobilised the support of the Maratha community through his fiery speeches, pamphlets and his newspapers, *Mahratta* (published in English) and *Kesari* (Marathi). To further strengthen Indian consciousness of and pride in Hindu culture and traditions, Tilak was instrumental in establishing ten-day long celebrations of Ganesh Chaturthi, and Shivaji as the symbol of Maratha power and glory. Unlike earlier reformers, who had tended to stress religious, social and educational reforms before political ones, Tilak held that *Swaraj* (Home Rule) was the first priority, and only then other reforms could be effective in any way. He insisted on non-cooperation, the boycott of British made goods and the use of

Swadeshi goods, and for this he enlisted the help of *Advaita Vedanta* which likened one's country as the manifestation of the *Supreme Brahman*, and service of the country was, in effect, service of god. In his interpretation, he found that *The Gita* actually teaches the philosophy of activism and energism (*Karma yoga*), which had earlier being misconstrued as the path of renunciation/asceticism. Tilak agreed that although *The Gita* points several paths towards *Moksha*, including that of devotion and *samnyasi*, he rejected those on the basis of the *Shastras* which claim that one is bound by duty to save one's motherland, and the path of renunciation is prohibited in the *kaliyug*. (*Gita*, II, 701). Tilak interpreted a Bhakta's goal as realising the true identity of *Brahman* and *Atman*, which was impossible till the soul was bound to the *samsara* (materialistic world). But for this, mental and physical renunciation was not required. What was instead required was to purge the soul off desires, rather than suppressing them through fasting and excessive austerities, so that the action thus performed was free from any materialistic attachments and desireless of its outcome. The true *samnyasin*, then, renounces not action but the desire of its *karmic* effects by dedicating all actions to *Parameshwara*. Tilak here referred to the metaphor of senses being the steeds of a chariot, and the charioteer being the *Brahman* himself who held the reins. (*Gita*, 1:14) In *The Gita*, claimed Tilak, Krishna revived the original *Bhagavata* doctrine, first taught by *Nara* and *Narayana*, and characterised by the attainment of knowledge combined with the performance of desireless action – in other words, the '*Karma yoga*' doctrine.

“The ultimate resolution of devotion is into knowledge; devotion is a means for acquiring knowledge, it is not a goal in itself.”

- Tilak, *Gita Rahasya*²

Thus, for Tilak, the three main paths to liberation, *Karman*, *Jnana*, and *Bhakti*, harmonised in *The Gita*. He often referred to the thirteenth century Maratha philosopher, Jnanadeva, who had already set the precedent of attacking the quietism and renunciation of *Samsara*, and blamed the decline of the *karma yoga* philosophy and the usurpation of its place by the philosophy of renunciation, on the rise of Jainism and Buddhism.

I have already killed these warriors, O Arjuna, become just an instrument. (Gita, 11:33)

Tilak most often resorted to this particular quote from *The Gita*, in order to justify his theory that our *Vedas* and *Shastras* actually teach desireless action, rather than inaction, as the most important text in Hindu mythology is woven around Krishna's persuading Arjuna to take up his arms and fight, because he's bound by his *Kshatriya dharma* (duty of a warrior clan) to defend his state and serve justice.

Unfortunately, Tilak's interpretations has been rejected by scholars and other interpreters as a cynical exercise in political opportunism in his dream of creating a Hindu-only state.

Surprisingly, Tilak's influence on Gandhi has been most decisive, and in the words of a contemporary,

... it is Tilak's mantle that has fallen on Mahatma Gandhi and not that of Gokhale, though the Mahatma regards Gokhale as his political guru.

- Collected Works.³

Gandhi accepted Tilak's view of *Karma yoga*, but refused the means of violence to achieve the noble end. He felt that Tilak had translated the text too literally, and had missed the point of "wisdom teaching" of Vyasa completely. Gandhi's authoritative stance emerged out of his conviction of the historical character of the *Shastras*,

"Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas and Itihasas... do not enunciate anew the eternal truths, but show how these were practised at the time to which the books belong." (CW)

He further added that,

"I learnt the art of estimating the value of scriptures on the basis of their ethical teaching... any conduct that is contrary to truth and ahimsa is to be eschewed and any book that violates these principals is not a Shastra." (CW)

Consequently, he stated, that it was not surprising that they abound in contradictions, and even worse, that "... there is hardly an immoral practice for which it would be difficult to find *Shastric* sanction." (CW). This is because they suffer through a

"process of double distillation ... First they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters. None of them comes from God directly." (CW)

Here we touch upon the central nerve of the Gandhian approach: religion is about action, "what cannot be followed out in day to day practice cannot be called religion..." (CW) and thus, *The Gita* became the infallible touchstone of the *Shastras*, because "in a short compass it gives a complete reasoned moral code... [and] the essence of *Dharma*." (CW). Gandhi, the staunch champion of non-violence, interpreted *The Gita* as an allegorical representation of "the ceaseless spiritual war going on in the human Kurukshetra" (CW), commented thus:

"I felt that it was not a historical work but that under the guise of physical warfare it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring." (CW)

To substantiate, he further added,

“The poet has seized the occasion of the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas on the field of Kurukshetra for drawing attention to the war going on in our bodies between the forces of Good (Pandavas) and the forces of Evil (Kauravas) and has shown that the latter would be destroyed and there should be no remissness in carrying on the battle against the forces of Evil, mistaking them through ignorance for forces of Good.” (CW)

As to why the poet Vyasa chose the occasion of a battle to preach the value of peace and non-violence, Gandhi replied in a letter,

“Vyasa wrote his supremely beautiful epic to depict the futility of war. What did the Kauravas’ defeat and the Pandavas’ victory avail? How many among the victors survived? What was their fate? What was the end of Kunti, mother of the Pandavas? What trace is left today of the Yadava race?” (CW)

In other words, Gandhi converted the greatest Indian war epic into an elaborate set-up to preach the importance of truth (*satya*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*). Not only that, he rejected all the references of progressive self-revelation of Krishna as a mere “idiom of common speech”, and completely omitted the passages which distinguished the body-soul-being-different stance. He said that the *Atman* can only assimilate into the *Brahman* upon death, and the theory of incarnation was entirely “a matter of imagination as well as of faith” to which he didn’t ascribe. However, he did ascribe to the message of renunciation, which he boldly claimed to be “... impossible without perfect observance of ahimsa in every shape and form.” He argued that here ‘renunciation’ meant complete mastery over senses, control over feelings of attachments, love, anger and lust, and total indifference towards the performance of tasks of the outside world. Only those who have disciplined their minds and bodies alike could be called as ‘*sthitaprajna*’ (like Krishna himself) and deserved god’s grace (*prasada*) and eternal knowledge (*jnana*). The thread of Gandhian logic finally culminated into his political endeavours where he used *The Gita* to support a mass program of resistive action which demanded participation by all sections of the society. He even found his opposition to untouchability sanctioned by *The Gita*, and thus calls them “*harijans*”:

“O Partha, even those who are of low birth, as also women, Vaishyas and Shudras attain to the highest bliss by resorting to me.” (Gita, 1:32).

Unfortunately, Gandhi’s views had been unfavourably received by the scholars who accused him of promoting Hindu nationalism and creating communal disharmony by favouring the teachings of one religion over the other.

One of the strongest critiques of both Tilak and Gandhi’s interpretations had been voiced by Ambedkar. Being a champion of the *shudras* and *atishudras* in the society, he naturally

evaluated *The Gita* in an entirely different way. His comments on *The Gita* essentially summarised his critique of the Hindu religion and society. According to Ambedkar, *The Bhagavad Gita* is neither a book of religion nor a treatise on philosophy, but a politically motivated “counter-revolution”. To elaborate, he traced the history of the Indian society since Aryans, who had no recognisable code of moral and ethical conduct, and were flourishing under the protection of *The Vedas* and *Manusmriti*. Upon the conversion of Ashoka into Buddhism, the social revolution took upon the political character, and Brahmins were usurped from their privileged position. After the decline of the Mauryan Empire, the Brahmins, whose interests had suffered under the Buddhist kings, initiated a counter-revolution under the leadership of Pushyamitra Sung to restore Brahmanism. *The Bhagavad Gita* was thus composed to give ideological and moral support to this counter-revolution. Further, Ambedkar even refused to acknowledge the authorship of Vyasa, since the authorship of *Puranas* and *Brahmasutra* had also been attributed to him, and it is humanly impossible to have survived the span of several centuries. As Ambedkar saw it, *The Gita* had originally been composed as a heroic ballad, which later adopted the religious overtones during the Gupta Empire when their family deity (*Ishtadevata*), Krishna Vasudeva, was accorded the position of the *Parameshwara*. To support this theory, Ambedkar pointed out several discrepancies in *The Mahabharata* where Krishna was not accepted as an *avatar*, but a mere councillor of the Pandavas. Also, Krishna’s role in *The Mahabharata* has always been understood as that of a master strategist and shrewd politician, and the sudden philosophical defence of war seems to have been added at a later stage, when viewed in its totality. The soul of *The Gita* seems to be the defence of *Chaturvarna*, and securing its observance in practice. For this, the two line of arguments in itself seems to stand in quicksand: Arjuna belonged to the *Kshatriya* caste, and thus it was his duty (*dharma*) to fight; and humans are mortals and body is perishable, so Arjuna is not committing any sin because he’s not destroying the soul, which is eternal. Ambedkar asked which of these cases could stand in a court of law.

Modern scholars of Jainism and Buddhism found discrepancies in Arjuna’s remorse, since he was worried about committing sin, and preferred to live a life of ascetic than enjoy the fruits of victory smeared with the blood of his own clan; however surprisingly there was no trace of pity on the part of Arjuna, since he was worried about everything else but the pain he would inflict upon those he wounds or kills. It is therefore not appropriate for Krishna to give him an extended answer intended to alleviate worries about the pain he might produce. Extending the argument further, shouldn’t Krishna have convinced Arjuna of the superior worth and righteousness of fighting the war in order to win it? Unless a warrior is fully committed to achieve the goal of winning the war and unless everything was staked for bringing it to a successful conclusion, there is no point in fighting it and no hope for re-establishing *dharma* on earth. But again, doesn’t it go against the dictates of “desireless action”?

Furthermore, when we cross refer Immanuel Kant’s ‘duty for duty sake’ philosophy in reference to *Shastras* and then situate it in the contemporary politics, we are appalled by the results. We have established so far that *The Gita* sanctions the concept of ‘righteous war’

(*dharma yudha*). Are the religious crusades also justified because they are fighting to protect their culture and religion (Hindutva or Islam or Jews)? Or armed revolution (say, the Naxalites or Israel and Palestine) because they are protecting their own lands? Do the war-ravaged countries of Middle East also have the right to avenge its perpetrators? Is there actually any justification for mass murders, destruction, plundering of wealth and property, all for the sake of power-play, sanctioned by *Shastras/ Quran/ New Testament* notwithstanding?

END NOTES

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