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सह सम्पादक

श्री प्रभूज मिश्र

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Impact of Śrīmadbhagavad-Gītā on the 20th Century Nationalist Movement of India: A Study in the Context of the Transformation of a Text from Spiritual to Political Sphere

Dr. Pitas Das*

Abstract : The Śrīmadbhagavad-Gītā has been a source of spiritual knowledge and inspiration for the people of India. The Śrīmadbhagavad-Gītā is a part of the Mahābhārata's Bhīṣma Parvan. It is a 700 verse narrative framework of a dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. During the emergence of National independence it has been realized that major National leaders have often turned to the Gītā in search of the right path to initialize the process of freedom fight. Different leaders interpreted this holy book of the Hindus differently according to their understanding and their perspective. Some followed the scripture very literally while others took the prescriptions symbolically. There were leaders like Gandhi, Tilak and others who utilized the knowledge derived from the Gītā to put it in action for the struggle against the British imperialism while the leader like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and other Marxist leaders condemned the holy book as mere instrument of the so called upper class Brāhmaṇas to exploit the under privileged. The debate has a long history. The present paper will focus upon the reading and re-reading of The Gītā over the ages and decades to understand it from numerous perspectives.

Keywords: The *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Karma yoga, Gandhi, Tilak, Ambedkar, Aurobindo

Introduction : The *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the most popular scripture of the Hindus, has been translated into all major languages in India. It has a far reaching influence on the religious ideology of this country. The Gītā shelters various religious doctrines. It contains "The essential principals of a spiritual religion" (Radhakrishnan). The Gītā is an episode in the great epic Mahābhārata which is considered as the fifth Veda. The Gītā promotes the philosophy of activism and energies. Gītā has been being interpreted by people according to their purpose whether religious, social, economical, philosophical or political need from the ancient times to the present era. The national leaders were fully conscious about the confrontation between the ancient spiritual ideology and modernity. So they turned to the Gītā for the welfare and progress of the community. The interpretation of the Gītā was carried out by these leaders according to their perspective of understanding. The present paper will focus upon the perspective of the 20th century Indian politics about the Gītā and understand how its interpretation seeks justification from the text.

Objective of the study : The objective of the study is to understand the relevance of the Holy Scripture to the modern day socio political sphere. Being the perennial spiritual knowledge the Gītā surpasses its boundaries and it penetrates in the modern society religious and secular life. It represents the abiding Indian spiritual conciseness. It also represents the quest for the Indian spiritual leaders of the country again and again. They took reference of this spiritual book in their struggle of establishing their philosophy, vision and mission.

Methodology : The present paper is based on various primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include the Mahābhārata, the Śrīmadbhagavad-Gītā, the history of Sanskrit literature, various books written by eminent social Reformers like Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dr. Radhakrishnan, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak and others. Secondary sources include various books and essays of criticism of ancient origin. It also includes information derived from various web sites containing information related to the present subject.

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Modernization and the Gītā : The modern thinkers tried to establish a new code of conduct on the basis of the doctrines of the Gītā. India's response to the Gītā is reformism. From the commentaries of Gandhi, Aurobindo and Tilak the fact of reformism is well understood. The advent of western modernism leads to moral dilemma of giving up the traditional values long preserved by the culture of this country. The Indian leaders were to establish the justification of modern progress maintaining the efficiency, rationality and other was clearly defined modern values juxtaposed with the identity of the community. But the question was how far this modernity goes hand in hand with Indian tradition.

The Gītā never touched the socio economic aspect of Indian life. But Indian national leaders took it to explain the same. Mahatma Gandhi was a great activist and he regarded politics as applied religion. As regards Gandhi, he took the Kṣetra to explain that human body is the battleground between the forces of good and evil. In the Gītā human suffering is depicted as the cause of one's Karma (one has to reap the consequences of what he has done).

"कर्मण्येवधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि॥
कर्मण्यभिप्रवृत्तोऽपि नैव किञ्चित् करोति सः।
श्रद्धावन्तोऽनसूयन्तो मूष्यन्ते तेऽपि कर्मभिः॥
यज्ञार्थात् कर्मणोऽन्यत्र लोकोऽयं कर्मबन्धनः॥"

(Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is – p.162,292,238,207)

Gandhi addressed the poor Indians as Harijana or Daridra Narayana (Human Person Society and State – p.75). The Indian villages were his Dharmakṣetra where he dedicated his life to fight against untouchability. He was inspired by the following line of Gītā – "O Partha, even those who are of low birth, as also women, Vaishyas and Shudras attain to the highest bliss by resorting to me." (Gītā, 1: 32).

"किं नो राज्येन गोविन्द किं भोगैर्जीवितेन वा।
येषामर्थे काङ्क्षितं नो राज्यं भोगाः सुखानि च॥"

(Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is – p.72)

So it is important to notice that he didn't take the doctrines of the Gītā to literally where the concept of Caturvarṇa is prominent. Like many other Indian leaders, the service of man is to him, the service of God. He confronted against the darkness of caste system prevailing in India. Mahatma Gandhi says "The human body is the battle field where the eternal duel between right and wrong goes on" (Gospel of Selfless Action – p.135). Gandhi symbolically interpreted the Bharata War and with non-violence, he initiated the National movement to new moral heights. Action to him was to dedicate oneself to the service of God without hurting anyone². Tilak for the first time brought out the true meaning of righteous war for the modern India. He regarded the whole of India as the Dharmakṣetra (Gītā-Rahasya, Chapter –V – pp.165-171). In order to justify his theory on desire-less action he quoted the following line from the original scripture.... "I have already killed these warriors, O Arjuna, become just an instrument" (Gītā, 11:33), (Gītā-Rahasya - p.852).

"तस्मात्त्वमुत्तिष्ठ यशो लभस्वजित्वा शत्रून् भुङ्क्व राज्यं समृद्धम्।
मयैवैते निहताः पूर्वमेव निमित्तमात्रं भव सव्यसाचिन्॥"

(Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is – p.662)

Gandhi accepted Tilak's view on Karma Yoga but he eliminated the path of violence to achieve the destination (Gītā-Rahasya, Chapter –IV – pp.113-125). According to him Tilak translated the Gītā too literally. He learned the art of estimating value of

scripture on the basis of the ethical teaching. To him the Gītā was an allegorical representation³. But Aurobindo had a different notion and his interpretation of the Gītā was different. As Krishna coax Arjuna to fulfill his dharma, Aurobindo installed manliness on the Indian people (Essays on the Gītā – pp.36-37). Tilak thinks that no one can escape responsibility of working for the society and the nation. He writes “*Gītā does not.... admit the position that the Jnanin has a right to give up action; and lokasamgraha is the most important reason ...*” It is a sheer contrast with the ācāryas and also with many idealistic approach of many modern writers (Gītā-Rahasya – p.459). In Pandit Nehru activism exists divorced from religion. Jawaharlal Nehru declared that the new temples of India are the electric system of this country.

Raj Krishna opines that Tilak attempted to convey the philosophical truth while Gandhi showed that in order to liberate the World we need to involve in the action. The modern Indian thinkers introduced a new code of conduct in order to free man from the constrains of the evils of modern civilization which include capitalism, imperialism and materialism (Human Person, Society and State – p.3). According to Radhakrishnan the central purpose of Gītā is to solve the problem of life. In his own words, “The Gītā is an application of the Upaniṣad ideal to the new situations which arose at the time of Mahābhārata” (Indian Philosophy, Vol. I – p.532).

“यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत।
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम्॥
परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम्।
धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे॥”

(Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is – p.269, 271)

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar raised his voice against the interpretation of The Gītā by Tilak and Gandhi. He belongs to the ‘*Harijans*’. He interpreted the Gītā in his own way. He regards the Gītā to be a politically motivated ‘*counter revolution*’. He also refused to acknowledge the authorship of Vyāsa and it was, as he said, been composed as a heroic ballad which later got religious color during the Gupta empire. He sees Kṛṣṇa as a mere counselor of Arjuna and not as an avatar. Ambedkar even goes further by raising question on the fact that it is said Arjuna being a fighter has not done any sin by killing people for he is not destroying the soul because the soul is imperishable whereas the body is perishable. Marxists question the social relevance the Gītā. Kutti Puzha Krishna Pillai remarks that the Gītā has nothing to do with equality for the social background for the Gītā is feudalistic (Selected Essays – p.344). Some of the modern critics dismiss the Gītā as a religious text being the instrument to dominate the weaker section of the society.

Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to protect the four sections of the society and to protect the society from the threat of inter class marriage (Varna, Śaṅkara). Some progressive author’s take it as a hurdle to national integrity. It is very important to notice that no national leader ever raised questions against the prescription of Varna Śaṅkara. Gandhi explained the Varna as the law of heredity.

It is to be noted that Gandhi took the doctrines of the Gītā symbolically. He turns to the Gītā to learn the lesson of non-violence. The national leaders like Gandhi and others turned to Gītā because no other Indian scripture provided them with the extent of socio-centric interpretation. According to Gandhi and Bhave the Gītā went beyond nationalism and religious differences. Kabir the fifteenth century prophet of Hindu Muslim unity embodies the liberal spirit of the Gītā. The following utterance of Kabir is truly in line with spirit of the Gītā. “*The Hindu God lives at Banaras; the Muslim God at Mecca. But he who made the world live not in a city made by hand. There is one Father of Hindu and Muslim, one God in all matter*” (Hinduism and Secularism, in Religion and

Society, Vol. IX, No. 1 – p.16). According to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad the difference of thought and action leads to mutual warfare and bloodshed in a spirit of compromise and toleration (Speeches of Maulana Azad – p.21). Rabindra Nath Tagore Sings:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!
Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner
of a temple with doors all shut?
Open thine eyes and see thy god is not before thee!
He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground
and where the path- maker is breaking stones
He is with them in sun and in shower,
and his garment is covered with dust.

(Gitanjali, Verse 11).

Conclusion : The teachings of The Gītā has been interpreted and reinterpreted in the 20th century India by eminent scholars and political leaders. It is very important that the possibility of this interpretation is paramount. Poet Laureate Rabindranath Tagore expressed his belief in Karma in his 'The Gitanjali'. Likewise Gandhi, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Aurobindo Ghose and other renowned Political personalities of India have frequently referred the teaching of Gītā to inspire people of this country to plunge into the noble mission of freedom fighting. Since the prescriptions made in the Gītā may appear confusing and often seem contradictory, regarding the concept of Karma, the National leaders sincerely interpreted it according to their perspective. While doing so, again the contradiction became prominent as because, it has been mentioned earlier that the possibility of this interpretation is paramount. Some raised their voice to instruct people to follow it for self consciousness while others condemned it showing their own logic. We must know everything about what these people think about the Gītā while developing our own impartial point of view to get the most of it for the benefit of our society and the country as a whole.

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