

AMBEDKAR MEETS TILAK: DEBATING THE MEANING OF THE BHAGAVAD GITA

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Introduction

The dearth of interpretation and translation of the Bhagavad Gita followed by the scholastic commentaries of Adi Shankara in the pre-modern era is not only duly compensated in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries but it also surpasses all previously recorded enthusiasms. However, it is not merely the "doubleness of the Bhagavad Gita- its historical specificity and continuing, even eternal life" (Davis, 2015, p.5) or its position of being "freed from the assumption of a central authorial consciousness and intentionality as a sources of textual meaning" (Chaudhuri, 2020, as cited in Chopra, 2021, p.8) that leads to its re-appropriation in the modern times. The resurrection of the Bhagavad Gita during India's struggle for independence seems to be permeated by three specific politico-cultural phenomena. First, the entry of the Gita into the European public sphere takes place through Charles Wilkins's translation of the same at the behest of Warren Hastings. The objective was to ensure a stable colonial apparatus by ruling in tandem with the native Hindu laws and customs. The Gita was chosen to be the repository of such laws and customs as, Wilkins realized, "[t]he Brahmans esteem this work to contain all the grand mysteries of their religion" (Davis, 2015, p. 79). Wilkin's translation of the Gita was also targeted towards the young elite Indians educated in the western missionary model of education with a view to imposing on them a Christian morality. Second, in opposition to such west initiated renaissance was embedded "a pushback of anti-west conservatism and a harking back to Hinduism that formed the core of a parallel, exclusionary nationalism" (Bhattacharya, 2021). Bankim's exclusionary vision of India categorizes him along with Chandra Nath Basu and Bhudeva Mukherji among such "Bengali Bhadrak". Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Aurobindo Ghosh, Swami Vivekanda, Annie Besant all share the vision of Hindu Revivalism. They all drew inspiration from the Bhagavad Gita as they all found among its verses the path to reclaim the Aryan way of life. Bhagavad Gita became the gospel of Hindu revivalism. The third element associated with the re-popularization of the Gita, and also connected to the

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second, is the publishing industry facilitating the distribution of translated versions of the Gita and other Sanskrit texts among the general populace. The most important role was played by the Gita Press which, again, must be understood in association with Hindu revivalism as is clear from its mission: "to promote and spread the principles of Sanatana Dharma, the Hindu religion, amongst the general public" (Robinson, 2013, p. 31). The press focused on resolving ideological conflicts among various Hindu reformist organizations by developing a framework for cultivation of Hindu emotion. The publication as well as distribution of the Gita was a part of such a process. In such a political environment of conflicting interests, the Gita literally became, to borrow Meera Nanda's (2016) phrase, "a magician's hat" out of which the modern interpreters drew any meaning of their choice (p. 39). However, such massive critical responses and commentaries understandably create confusion regarding the "true" meaning of the Gita. The attempt to interpret without taking into account the actual spatio-temporal context of its production and its historical transmissibility often leads to oversimplification, misinterpretation and "a certain flattening of the vocabulary of the Gita" (Palshikar, 2014, p. 10). The present paper is an attempt to critically engage the commentaries of Lokmanya Tilak and Babasaheb Ambedkar on the Gita and interrogate how the interplay of contexts and meaning raises larger questions of agency and politics.

Lokmanya Tilak and Gita's Lesson in Karma-Yoga

Tilak started writing his *Srimad Bhagavadgita-Rahasya* in Marathi during his years in the Mandalay jail and, translated into English by B.S Sukthankar, it was published in 1915. Despite Lokmanya Tilak's (1915) warning against reading his commentary on the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* as a rationalization of some theory and institutional belief, one can hardly help thinking on the contrary. The reason for this is the apparent contradiction inherent in his hermeneutical method of interpreting the great Hindu text. Lokmanya has always upheld his ideological position as unbiased. He (1915) claimed not to be prepossessed by adherence to any "sampradaya" or system of thought (p. liii). However, interesting enough, he (1915) did not fail to highlight the importance of "context" devoid of which no text can be understood (p. xxv). At the same time, Lokmanya stressed upon an initial "doubt" which led him to delve deeper into the mystic world of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Lokmanya (1915) failed to understand how a text which talks about Krishna's message to Arjuna to hold weapon against his relatives can propagate lessons in "Release" by practicing Jnana (Knowledge) or Bhakti (Devotion) (p. xlili). This initial doubt permeates Lokmanya's understanding of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Still he knew with conviction that the *Bhagavad Gita* prefers Karma-Yoga (Action) over both Bhakti-Yoga (Devotion) and Jnana-Yoga (Knowledge) which he propagated

in his philosophical venture *Srimad Bhagavadgita-Rahasya*. To understand what informed his understanding of the *Bhagavad Gita* we must understand his *Gita Rahasya* in the context of the political unrest prevalent during Tilak's lifetime. Tilak's understanding of Karma-Yoga as the central message of the *Bhagavad Gita* was based upon his ideas about the motherland which was in need of liberation by dire activism of the countrymen. It is obvious that he would never accept "Renunciation" or "Release" as the central message of the *Bhagavad Gita* as it would dissuade the countrymen from the path of action and activism. The idea of "Renunciation" was adversary to the national interest and "a spirited and active national existence" (Tilak, 1915, p. xxxii). An orthodox Hindu Brahmin pained at the philosophical inactivity of Brahmins and disunity among all the sects of so called Hindu community, Lokmanya spread his own unrest among the youth of the country through a highly organized religio-political activism. He united all the sects of Hinduism- Brahmins, Non-Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Shudras- by appealing to their religious sentiments. But it is not merely that Lokmanya refused to see "renunciation" as the message of the *Gita*. What is interesting here is his argument that *Gita* was written solely to impart the lesson in Karma-Yoga (action) to all and not "renunciation". He blames the "decline of karma-yoga philosophy and the usurpation of its place by the philosophy of renunciation, on the rise of Jainism and Buddhism" (Mackenzie, 1958, p. 200). These two religions engulfed all the castes including the Kshatriyas with its renunciation-based approach to life and world, Ashoka being the most important of them. Tilak was infuriated at the sole sacrifices of the Kshatriyas who with the support of the Brahmin and other Hindu sects could have excelled in the battle against the outside forces i.e., the Muslims and the British. In this sense, Tilak's argument in favor of Karma-Yoga was directed towards the revival of Brahminism as well as the Brahmins.

Lokmanya considered Adi Shankara's idea as a "queer" one which was relevant only in the "Age of Renunciation" i.e., pre-epic time in India. Kaliyuga was an "Age of Karma" and the import of the *Gita* has shifted its focus as well (Mackenzie, 1958, pp. 198-199). It is really interesting to note how conscious Lokmanya was about the intricacies involved in the relationship between meaning and its context while still being adamant about his claim that he was not imposing any meaning of his own on the *Gita*. Lokmanya (1915) invoked Jaimini, the founder of the Mimamsa school, and claimed that "it is nowhere stated either in the *Veda-Samhitas* or in the *Brahmanas* that the Path of *Sanyasa* was essential and that...Release is attained by remaining in the state of a householder" (p. 479). If Buddhist philosophy of Nirvana was responsible for the renunciation-based import of the *Gita*, then, according to Tilak, *Upanishads* were responsible for giving importance to *Jnana* or

Knowledge.

Sanjay Palshikar (2014) in his book *Evil and the Philosophy of Retribution: Modern Commentaries on the Bhagavad-Gita* entitled "Lokmanya Tilak: Hatvapi sa... na hanta ", has painstakingly listed various words and phrases from the Bhagavad Gita that Lokmanya interpreted in his *Gita-Rahasya*. Lokmanya's interpretation of those words and phrases clearly indicate his mobilizing attitude to the countrymen. For example, Lokmanya interpreted Karma not as "rite" as is the case with Shankara but as "action". The phrase "lokasamgraha" is clearly defined in *Brhad Aranyaka Upanisad* as binding or holding (Samgraha) together various "lokas" or realms in the universe by performing specific rites. Palshikar has argued that knowing fully well of this, Lokmanya purposefully interpreted the word "loka" as men and "lokasamgraha" as "binding men together...and regulating them in such a way that they might acquire strength which results from mutual co-operation..." (pp. 100-101). "Lokasamgraha" was all about the benefit of the world for Tilak and the siddha or spiritually advanced person must perform the karma by vanquishing the unrighteous. This militant message was for Tilak the ultimate philosophy of activism to be spread among the Hindus irrespective of castes as the basis of social action in India. Hence, Tilak's (1915) call to the countrymen to "Arise, awake and understand these blessings conferred by the Blessed Lord" (p. lvii).

Ambedkar and the Gita's Defence of Religious Dogmas

The chapter "The Philosophic Defence of Counter-Revolution: Krishna and His Gita" in *Revolution and the Counter-revolution* records Ambedkar's views on the Bhagavad Gita as well his methods to understand the same. He starts by invoking the scholarship of Otto Bohtlingk and Prof Garbe and others to locate, through a close reading, repetitions, contradictions, exaggeration as well as absurdities in the text of Gita which lead him to conclude in the words of Edward Hopkins that "despite its occasional power and music exaltation, the divine song in its present state as a poetical production is unsatisfactory" (as cited in Ambedkar, 1987, p.358). For Ambedkar the Gita is "neither a book of religion nor a treatise on philosophy. What the Bhagavad Gita does is to defend certain dogmas of religion on philosophic grounds...It uses philosophy to defend religion" (Ambedkar, 1987, pp. 360-361). This is the central thesis of Ambedkar in "Krishna and His Gita" which leads to subsequent discussion on the question of caste.

The first justification that it provides is for war. Ambedkar notes that the justification of war in the Gita comes along two lines of arguments: first, man is mortal and therefore it should not make any difference to a wise person whether a man dies a natural death or a man dies due to an act of violence; second, the body and soul are not one. They are

distinct. The body dies but the soul is invincible. And "as the soul is never killed, killing a person can never be a matter of any movement" (Ambedkar, 1987, pp. 360-361).

The second dogma that the Gita philosophically defends is that of Chaturvarnya (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudras). The argument it provides is that the Chaturvarnya is ordained by the will of God and therefore must be considered as sacrosanct. It is not at all arbitrary but is based on the idea of "innate and inborn qualities in men" (Ambedkar, 1987, pp. 360-361).

The third dogma that the Gita justifies philosophically is the notion of karma marga or the path of work or action. The Gita defends the dictum of Karma by removing what Ambedkar calls excrescences. There are two excrescences that Ambedkar identifies: blind faith and the motive of selfishness. The Gita removes the first excrescence by introducing the concept of "Stihtaprajna i.e, 'Befitted with Buddhi'" (Ambedkar, 1987, p. 362). This second excrescence is removed by Gita's emphasis on "Anasaktii.e, performance of karma without any attachment for the fruits of the Karma" (Ambedkar, 1987, p. 362). There is no way that a concept like Karma characterized by such altruistic ideas like "Buddhi" and desirelessness would not become the central message of the Gita. These three are the most important dogmas out of many for which the Gita provides justification.

Ambedkar thinks that there should not be any difficulty to accept that the Gita "defends the dogmas of counter-revolution as put forth in Jaimini's Purvamimamsa" (Ambedkar, 1987, p. 362). Ambedkar thinks that the Karma that the Gita talks about is not at all "action" and Jnana is not the "knowledge" in general. Neither has it philosophized on the comparison between these two ideas of general import. The Gita while defending the Karma is basically concerned with the dogmas contained in Jaimini's Karma Kanda. In the similar vein, by Jnana the Gita means the dogmas contained in Badarayana's Brahma Sutras. In other words, the Gita tries to "renovate and strengthen" the dogmas of Karma Kanda propagated by Jaimini (Ambedkar, 1987, p. 362).

As far as the question of necessity to defend the dogmas of counter-revolution is concerned, Ambedkar is of the view that the Gita came into being in order to rescue the counter-revolution from the attack of Buddhism. The rise of Buddhism with its emphasis on morality and reason, according to Ambedkar (2007), was the revolution pitted socially and ideologically against the "degeneration of the Aryan society. It condemned the varna system and gave hope to the poor, the exploited and to women" (p. 24). It attacks the rituals of sacrifice, yajna and above all Karma Kanda i.e, religious observances. It also attacks the philosophical justification provided for the notion of violence and "killing" perpetrated by the Kshatriyas. Brahminism tried to counter this revolution under the reign of Pushyamitra

Shunga by reasserting that all those rituals as well as the system of Chaturvarnya are ordained by the Vedas and therefore its authority is beyond any challenge. Ambedkar (1987) thinks that "under the furious attack of Buddhism, Jaimini's counter-revolutionary dogmas were tottering and would have collapsed had they not received the support which the Bhagavad Gita gave them" (p. 364).

Ambedkar Meets Tilak: the Agon

Tilak considered the Gita as a "self-contained" text without any history of its textuality. The method of ahistorical approach was also propagated by Gandhi. Ambedkar (1987) calls it his patriotic trick which he seems to have used intentionally for mass mobilization (p.363). Ambedkar with his stress on the idea of history stands in contrast to both of them. Ambedkar is aware of the objections to be raised against his thesis of revolution and counter revolution and foremost among them concerns his view that the Bhagavad Gita is posterior to Buddhism and Jaimini's Purva mimansa. One of the problems in determining the exact date of composition of texts like the Gita is that it is "an article of faith" endowed with "so high an antiquity" that all critical discussion comes to an end (Ambedkar, 1987, p. 366). However, there are still probabilities in favor of the thesis of Ambedkar. The first of these is the idea acknowledged even by Tilak that the Gita does indeed examine and modify the doctrine of Karma of Purva Mimansa by turning it into "anasakti karma". But we do not find any discussion on anasakti karma by Jaimini proving that Jaimini's text precedes the Gita. Ambedkar (1987) thinks that the similarity is not merely in the concept but also in the language: the Bhagavad Gita's discussion on "Brahma-Nirvana" is derived not from the Upanishad but from the Buddhist text called Mahapuri-nibbanaSutta (p. 369). The Gita also borrows the characteristics of "true devotee" from Buddhism as there is a stark linguistic similarity between the Gita and the Mahapadana Sutta and the Tevijja Sutta.

Tilak's counter revolution to Ambedkar's revolutionary idea is that there are two strands of Buddhism- Hinayan and Mahayan- out of which the Mahayan Buddhism is a later composition and it has derived the ideas and concepts from the Bhagavad Gita which precedes it. Tilak's understanding of the composition of the Gita is characterized by the notion that the text being an inevitable part of the Mahabharata was written in one go by Vyasa. In claiming so, Ambedkar argues, Tilak refuses to acknowledge the textual tradition in India which identifies that there are three stages to the composition of the Mahabharata namely, Jaya, Bharata and Mahabharata. Therefore, it is impossible to claim that the text was written by one person only. Additionally, at the very initial stage, the Gita was a heroic ballad on which is endowed "patches" in subsequent historical ages. The first patch elevated Krishna to the level of "Ishvara, the God of the Bhagvat religion". The second patch

"introduces the Sankhya and the Vedanta philosophy as a defence to the doctrines of PurvaMimansa" and the third patch endowed in the Gupta period elevated Krishna from the "Ishvara to that parameshwara" as "the Gupta kings made Krishna-vasudev their family deity" (Ambedkar, 1987, pp. 377-78).

As is quite evident, Ambedkar's interpretive method is one which takes into consideration the question of historical transmissibility of text which poses a problem to the Brahminical theology that considers the Hindu scriptures including the Gita as "sanatan" and therefore beyond any change.

Ambedkar's discursive agon with Tilak is not merely related to the methods of understanding the Gita. Rather it concerns the very materialist and existentialist conditions of being. Tilak's interpretation poses two grave problems on these grounds: One, Tilak's advocacy for righteous killing of the "body". Second, Lokmanya's advocacy for turning the Kshatriya code of militant activism into a conduct for the people of all castes. This indeed can lead to an anarchic situation. Tilak's (1915) solution to such anarchy is that counsel regarding proper conduct must be sought from the just leader because "though a danger of anarchy may exist, the danger of slavery is greater" (as cited in Mackenzie, 1958, p. 202). But Ambedkar finds in these precepts the seed for a greater form of slavery. The identification of the buddhi or intellect with the Brahmin and the body with the body politic (Shudras), where the latter will always be vulnerable to "killing" will result not only in systematic formation of hierarchical society but in crude classification where specific lives would be rendered unimportant. Again, Tilak's second advocacy of the Kshatriya code of conduct to be followed by the Shudras in a moment of "crisis" has the dangerous potential of turning the same body politic into weapon of mass destruction in the hands of the Brahmin leaders who can use them for their "righteous" war. In both the cases, the agency of the body politic will always be at stake. It is their altruism to others that would determine their right to exist. Ambedkar was afraid of the certainty of this slavery that might stay even after the colonizers left India.

Conclusion

It is beyond doubt that the foundation of a modern nation has its roots in the past. However, the understanding of the past as a fixed unchanging bolus poses the problem of misrecognition of heterogeneous factors that forms the genesis of present time. Within this hermeneutical complexity is located the discursive battle between the two of the founding figures of modern India. To ponder merely whether one is wrong and another right or vice versa would betray the larger objective of this debate i.e., to understand how our "thrownness" into this world already interpreted for us, in the Heideggerian sense, colors the views we

uphold in the public sphere. While Tilak chose to participate in the hermeneutic circle of Brahminical militancy he was thrown into, it was Ambedkar's corporeal understanding of the body politic he was representing that made him question the same circle. Both envision a future the import of which will certainly be realized in due time.

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