

## MULTIFACETED CRITICISMS OF THE *BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ*

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### **Abstract**

*This research article deals with the multi-dimensional commentaries of the Bhagavad Gītā given by some of the major commentators in the nineteenth century India. The study has its relevance to understand the text through multi-dimensional lens. The article addresses on the research problem concerning to the variant criticisms of the same text the Gītā. The research approach (methodology) adopted for this study is the review-based analysis of the text's commentaries of some of the well-known nineteenth century Indian commentators. The study has included the commentaries of Vivekananda, Gandhi, Desai, Aurobindo and Vinoba. The study reveals that the above commentators of the Gītā give the multilayered criticisms of the text, which are found to be queer and controversial.*

**Key Words:** Upanisads, Brāhmins, Shūdras, stotras, allegory, divine duty, sva-dharma.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* contains multiple criticisms from eighth century to the present day. The text is highly acclaimed in nineteenth century India and the leading commentators interpret it from the different angles. Although the major trend of its criticism is *karmayogic* i.e., action oriented during the period, the commentators question on the origin and the authorship of the text, give it the allegorical meaning and make it the book of *stotras* or hymns. The commentators reveal its philosophical content as the borrowing of the *Upanisads* and interpret its *karmayoga* linking it both with social and divine duties. Some commentators disagree with the *Gītā's* notion of caste hierarchy but others acclaim it as being the *swadharmā* of individuals. The commentators are not unanimous in these issues of the text, though they regard it as being divine and highly philosophical in content, which they find valuable in solving the earthly problems or getting the spiritual salvation.

Narendranath Datta (1863-1902), later known as Swami Vivekananda, questions on the validity of the authorship and the historicity of the *Gītā*. Vivekananda, in his article "Thoughts on the *Gītā*", expresses his doubt:

First, whether it formed a part of the *Mahābhārata*, i.e. whether the authorship attributed to Veda-Vyasa was true, or if it was merely interpolated within the great epic; secondly, whether there was any historical personality of the name of Kṛṣṇa; thirdly, whether the great war of Kurukṣetra as mentioned in the *Gītā* actually took place; and fourthly, whether Arjuna and others were real historical persons. (255)

Vivekananda has a doubt about the authorship of *Veda-Vyasa*, and the historicity of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. He has the doubt about the historicity of the *Mahābhārata* war itself and if the war was real, he has another doubt whether the *Gītā* was written with the writing of *Mahābhārata* or it was interpolated later in the great epic.

Vivekananda does not consider the philosophy of the *Gītā* as an original one; it is the collection of the borrowed ideas from the earlier scriptures, especially from *Upanisads* as he describes: "The *Gītā*

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is a bouquet composed of the beautiful flowers of spiritual truths collected from the *Upanishads*” (qtd. in Tilak "Opinions" xi). Vivekananda has elaborated this idea further in his “Thoughts on the *Gītā*”:

Wherein lies the originality of the *Gītā* which distinguishes it from all preceding scriptures? It is this: Though before its advent, Yoga, Jñāna, Bhakti, etc. had each its strong adherents, they all quarreled among themselves, each claiming superiority for his own chosen path; no one ever tried to seek for reconciliation among these different paths. It was the author of the *Gītā* who for the first time tried to harmonize these. He took the best from what all the sects then existing had to offer and threaded them in the *Gītā*. (259)

The originality of the *Gītā*, according to him, lies only in combining the three different paths *Karma*, *Jñāna* and *Bhakti yoga* for which the preceding scriptures quarreled to each other. The *Gītā* has borrowed the best from each sect and combined them into one as new. Vivekananda appreciates the *Gītā*'s beautiful combination of *Karma*, *Jñāna* and *Bhakti yoga*.

Vivekananda disapproves of the caste system of the *Gītā*. He also expresses his disapproval with all the existing religions of the world like Hindus, Muslims and Christians and he purposes to make a single religion based on the teachings of his Guru Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsas. Vivekananda argues in his discussion of books about Ramakrishna:

From the very date that he was born, has sprung the Satya-Yuga (Golden Age). Henceforth there is an end to all sorts of distinctions, and everyone down to the *Chandala* will be a sharer in the Divine Love. The distinction between man and woman, between the rich and the poor, the literate and illiterate, Brāhmins and Chandalas – he lived to root out all. And he was the harbinger of peace – the separation between Hindus and Mohammedans, between Hindus and Christians, all are now things of the past. That fight about distinctions that there was, belonged to another era. In this Satya-Yuga the tidal wave of Shri Ramakrishna's Love has unified all. (qtd. in Singhania 21)

Vivekananda regards his Guru Ramakrishna as the incarnation of God of the modern time. Teachings of the new God Sri Ramakrishna, as Vivekananda calls, do not make any distinctions between *Brāhmin* and *Chandala*, man and woman, the rich and the poor and the people belonging to the different religions. Sri Ramakrishna has brought *Satya-Yuga* with him and has given a new vision, which no religion had given in the past. The vision of Sri Ramakrishna, according to Vivekananda, can only fulfill the loopholes of the *Gītā* and other religions and it helps to establish the egalitarian society, which is the demand of the modern time.

Vivekananda holds the fundamental opposition with the *Gītā*'s concept of caste hierarchy. He does not accept the superiority of the *Brāhmins* and he finds capacity only with *Shūdras*, the downtrodden, for the future rule of the world. Dilip Bose acknowledges:

Swami Vivekananda never accepted this caste division. Throughout in his teachings and utterances, he not only castigated against the caste system but also said in a startling statement that after the rule by the Brāhmins, that is, the elite – the kind of philosopher – kings of Plato – came the rule of the Kṣatriyas, the rule of the powerful, and that while the present ruling class are the Vaisyas that is, the merchants (or one could say the capitalists), the future belongs to the rule of the Sūdras, the rule by the downtrodden. (53)

Vivekananda agrees with the Marxist concept of the progression of history that develops from slavery to feudalism, feudalism to capitalism and goes up to communism. There was the rule of *Brāhmins* somewhat like in the age of slavery and the powerful *Kṣatriyas* ruled in the feudalism. The *Vaiśyas*, the merchant class or the capitalists, are ruling the present world and the *Shūdras* or the

proletarians will rule the future world. Chaitanya Singhania states: “. . . Vivekananda has a plan for propounding his ideas through the Indian mind. In addition to using religion as his means, doctoring an image of Ramakrishna, and controlling knowledge about him, he will spread his ideas through a grassroots movement led by a vanguard – like group.” Unlike the *Gītā*'s emphasis on the *Brāhmins*, Vivekananda's emphasis is on *Shūdras* because he sees the power capable of overthrowing the existing inequalities of society only rests on the majority of Indian People who are *Shūdras* or the downtrodden. Singhania concludes: “Vivekananda is a political innovator because he is the first Bengali nationalist to use four characteristically political tools: i) knowledge control (through his construction of Ramakrishna), ii) religion to political ends, iii) a grassroots movement, and iv) addressing the masses” (22, 18). Vivekananda's interpretation of the *Gītā* and the religion and his construction of Ramakrishna as a new God, served his political ends that he wanted to create the grassroots movement involving the *Shūdras* or the downtrodden Indian masses to empower them and liberate the country from the clutches of the British colonialism.

Mohan Das Karmachanda Gandhi (1869-1948), the apostle of non-violence and the leader of the independence movement of India, makes the *Gītā* as a guide to the ethics of daily life. He makes the text an item of daily reading as the *stotras* or hymns for mental peace and this way of daily reading of the *Gītā* attracts many people in his āshram. He finds the *Gītā* as not only a religious or a philosophical treatise, but he takes it as a daily companion for solace and advice:

I find a solace in the *BhagavadGītā* that I miss even in the Sermon on the Mount. When disappointment stares me in the face and all alone, I see not a ray of light, I go back to the *BhagavadGītā*. I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies— and my life has been full of external tragedies— and if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it to the teachings of the *BhagavadGītā*. (qtd. in Meghnad Desai "Nationalist" 20)

The *Gītā* works as a companion for Gandhi in his moments of disappointments and tragedies. He finds the way out in his difficulties even by glancing a verse here and a verse there in the text.

For the apostle of non-violence, there arises the problem for Gandhi “. . . to interpret *Gītā* which is patently a call to armed action, an exhortation to Arjuna who like a true votary of non-violence had initially given up his *gandiva* bow and refused to fight. Mahatma Gandhi resolves this dilemma at the very outset by interpreting the battlefield of Kurukhestra as ‘our body’” (Bose 60). Gandhi becomes skeptical about the *Gītā*'s historical base. He is even skeptic on the reality of the Mahābhārata war. He says that the author has written the *Mahābhārata* based on the semi-historical events merely to convey his religions theme. As the *Gītā* is part of the *Mahābhārata*, for him, the *Gītā* is nothing more than a creative poem created by the poet to express his philosophy of life. Gandhi in his article “The Message of the *Gītā*” writes: “. . . 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” (127). Gandhi has taken the *Gītā* as a creative poem that contains the philosophy of life, which deals about the internal conflict between the good and the bad inside the human heart. The war between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas in the *Mahābhārata* is, in reality, the war between the virtues and vices of a person inside him/her. Gandhi claims that Kṛṣṇa does not provoke Arjuna to participate in bloody war, instead, he only talks about the psychic conflict of an individual. Matthew Remski argues: “Mohandas K. Gandhi pushed back against writers like Tilak, presenting the *Gītā* as an uncompromising hymn to non-violence, based upon a debatable argument that one cannot be unattached to the results of a violent action, and therefore Kṛṣṇa must only be speaking about

the internal strife of psychic conflict" (3). This indicates Gandhi has tried to make the *Gītā* as a philosophical book that favors the philosophy of non-violence of Gandhi himself.

Gandhi has a different concept of God. Kṛṣṇa is considered God in the *Gītā*. He says Kṛṣṇa is not the incarnation of God having the supernatural power. Instead, Kṛṣṇa, in the *Gītā*, is the symbol of perfection and knowledge. Gandhi examines: "Kṛṣṇa of the *Gītā* is perfection and right knowledge personified; but the picture is imaginary. That does not mean that Kṛṣṇa, the adored of his people, never lived. But perfection is imagined" (128). Gandhi concludes Kṛṣṇa, who symbolizes the human perfection and knowledge, is the product of the imagination of the poet than a real historical figure.

Gandhi admits that the *Gītā* is a philosophical book that is mainly concerned about the philosophy of action. The *Gītā*, according to Gandhi, teaches the humanity to involve in action to achieve the goal of their life. But, the *Gītā* focuses on selfless action. Gandhi believes: "He who gives up action falls. He who gives up only the reward rises." This, according to Gandhi, does not mean to be indifferent to the result. One can concern about the result but they should not be wholly engrossed on the result. Instead, they should be fully concentrated in the due fulfillment of the task, which brings the good result automatically. Gandhi claims if the people are fully engaged only in getting the good result and they are less concerned about the action, the action would not get the expected result. He argues: "He who is ever brooding over result often loses nerve in the performance of his duty. He becomes impatient and then gives vent to anger and begins to do unworthy things; he jumps from action to action never remaining faithful to any" (131, 131-32). According to Gandhi, the *Gītā* teaches the way to be successful in one's own duty when they perform. Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gītā* gives emphasis to the action/*karma* of human beings that should be fulfilled as their duty without inflicting violence to others.

Mahadev Desai (1892-1942), an Indian independence activist and writer best remembered as Mahatma Gandhi's personal secretary or Gandhi's Boswell, in his *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, gives the *Gītā* a historical as well as a non-historical interpretations. As a historical interpretation, he regards the Mahābhārata war as a historical war and all the participants of the war are the real human beings. He does not take Kṛṣṇa, the teacher of the *Gītā*, as a God having the supernatural power. Instead, Kṛṣṇa possesses the extraordinary characteristics and power that makes people in believing him as an *avatār* or the incarnation of God. Desai Writes:

There can be no doubt, however, that an extraordinary personality combining in himself the qualities of a hero and a statesman, a warrior and a philosopher, did exist at a time of which we have no record, that he grew to enormous proportions in the race-memory of the Aryans, so much so that he came to be revered as an *avatāra* and later on as the Incarnation and countless traditions and legends grew up about "the ideal man" according to the varying psychological and spiritual levels of the ages that followed. (9)

Desai has taken Kṛṣṇa not as a God but as a historical figure. Kṛṣṇa, who belongs to the Aryan race, was a hero, a statesman, a warrior and a philosopher. Kṛṣṇa's extra-ordinary personality made people believe that he was an incarnation of God and as the time passed, the countless traditions and legends grew up about Kṛṣṇa gave him the varying status.

Desai interprets the dialogue in the *Gītā* as a non-historical dialogue and he explains it as a profoundly meaningful poem. He compares the text with the dramas written by William Shakespeare. He finds the situation of Arjuna in the first discourse of the *Gītā* similar to the situations of the characters of the dramas of Shakespeare. He defines the *Gītā* as a creation by the genius of a poet based upon the historical or semi-historical incidents. As he regards the *Gītā* as a creation of a poet, he gives it an allegorical meaning: ". . . the *Gītā* conveys an allegorical meaning: some likening the Pāṇḍavas to the forces of light and the Kauravas to the forces of darkness, and making the human body the field

of *dharmā* . . ." (11). The *Gītā* reveals us about the eternal fighting between the forces of light and darkness inside the human body.

Desai does not consider the ideas of the *Gītā* as an original one, instead, he regards they are the borrowed ideas from the *Upanisads*: ". . . the meadows of the *Upanishads* provided for the author of the *Gītā* a rich verdure which was converted into the nectar-like milk of the *Gītā*." The *Upanisads* are compared with the meadows that provide the green grass to feed the cow that gives the nectar like milk, the message of the *Gītā*. Linking with the *Upanisads*, he further interprets the *Gītā* allegorically: ". . . I would say that the very idea of Kṛṣṇa as Charioteer and guide, philosopher and friend of Arjuna may be traced to the *Kathopanishad* which makes the Ātmā the master of the chariot of the body, the intellect the driver, the mind the reins, and the senses the horses" (15, 18). Desai gives the concrete example that the idea of Kṛṣṇa as a charioteer in the *Gītā* has been borrowed from the *Kathopanishad*.

Regarding the central teachings of the *Gītā*, Desai argues the text presents the highest form of practical religion to enable each and all to realize his or her purpose in life: "The *Gītā* is, therefore, the science and art of Yoga [performance of action] . . ." (20). This shows that Desai's interpretation of the text also highlights the *karma-yoga* of the *Gītā*.

Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950), in his early days, has interpreted the *Gītā* as a text that deals with the practical human problems because he argues ". . . the *Gītā* starts from action and Arjuna is the man of action and not of knowledge, the fighter, never the seer or the thinker" ("Human" 22). The *Gītā*, according to Aurobindo, is a practical book because it deals with the ordinary human being like Arjuna who is the man of action and he is not the seer but the seeker of knowledge. However, in his later days, Aurobindo has defined the words 'action' and 'works' not in ordinary sense but in a divine sense. The *Gītā* urges the human being to be involved always in action and works but he suggests that the people should involve in such action and works that bring not the physical comfort but the spiritual salvation. Aurobindo writes:

Undoubtedly, the *Gītā* is a Gospel of Works, but of works which culminate in knowledge, that is, in spiritual realization and quietude, and of works motivated by devotion, that is, a conscious surrender of one's whole self first into the hands and then into the being of the Supreme, and not at all of works as they are understood by the modern mind, not at all an action dictated by egoistic and altruistic, by personal, social, humanitarian motives, principles, ideals. Yet this is what present-day interpretations seek to make of the *Gītā*. ("Core" 30-31)

Aurobindo argues that the *Gītā* is a Gospel of works but the text does not deal with such works as understood by the modern mind and not with such actions guided by egoistic, altruistic, personal, social and humanitarian motives. The *Gītā* teaches not a human but a divine action and the *Gītā* does not tell us to perform social duties but it tells us to perform the divine duty i.e. to serve the supreme God in order to get the ultimate salvation of human being.

The militant nationalist Aurobindo changes his views at his later days. Meghnad Desai evaluates: "He turned from being a revolutionary to a *sanyāsi* after he sought refuge in Pondicherry (now Puducherry) away from British police. . . . Maharshi Aurobindo's commentary on the *Gītā* took it back to being a spiritual text for meditation and contemplation" ("Nationalist" 23). In his early days, Aurobindo gives the revolutionary interpretation of the *Gītā* as a call for social action or even the justifiable *himsā* against the British occupiers. However, he, later, interprets the *Gītā* as a call for divine action to achieve God or get ultimate salvation. He insists for responding to the imperative call of God as primary. He makes no distinction between action or abandonment of action, *sannyāsa* or *bhakti* if a person achieves God or salvation using any one of these different paths. Aurobindo's

interpretation of the *Gītā* focuses on action that is human and social at first but later he changes his stand and argues that the *Gītā* does not talk about the action in the ordinary sense as a social and human action but it talks of divine action.

Acharya Vinoba Bhave (1895-1983), one of the freedom fighters, gives the *karmayogic* interpretation of the *Gītā* and makes use of it as a weapon in the struggle against British colonialism. However, Vinoba, being a traditional spiritual seeker, ultimately moves towards the traditional home of social conservatism. He does not define the *karma* (action) of the *Gītā* in the sense that we ordinarily perceive, instead, he defines it as the profession or vocation of an individual that he/she inherits from his/her birth. He clarifies: "The *Gītā* uses the word '*karma*' (action) in the sense of *swadharma*. We eat, drink, sleep; these are all actions. But these are not the actions that the *Gītā* refers to when it talks of *karma*. *Karma* refers to the performance of *swadharma*" ("*Vikarma*" 48-49). For him, the *karma* of the *Gītā* is *sva-dharma* that he defines as a *dharma* or duty of an individual that is inborn and immutable: "Our *swadharma* thus takes birth along with us. . . I would rather say that *swadharma*, like one's mother, is not chosen but pre-determined. No matter what sort of person she is, there is no denying her motherhood. This is precisely the case with *swadharma*" ("Teaching" 22). Vinoba's comparison of *sva-dharma* with the mother suggests that an individual is incapable in changing his *sva-dharma* even if he/she desires to change it and it would be improper if anyone endeavors to change it too. It would be perilous if one attempts to change his/her *sva-dharma* i.e. the inborn profession or vocation. Ramesh Bijlani points out:

Acharya Vinoba Bhave, in his talks on the *Gītā*, explains this through a few striking analogies. The frog who tries to blow himself up in order to grow as big as a bull explodes itself to death because the *swadharma* of a frog is to remain a frog. The *swadharma* of a fish is to live in water. Milk may be better than water, but a fish that insists on living in milk will die. (1)

This clarifies that Vinoba's interpretation of *sva-dharma* is inherently connected with an individual's heredity, which is pre-determined, unchangeable and fixed. Vinoba's such an interpretation of the text gives an impetus to the caste-system of Hindu society.

Vinoba, while linking *sva-dharma* with an individual's heredity, does not think about the exploitation, inequality and dominant-subordinate relations that the caste-system has given rise to in the present society. Far from giving solutions to the problems created by the caste-system in the contemporary society, he conversely argues that the problems of the contemporary society are the result of disregard and inattention paid to this caste-system:

At present, everywhere there is talk of social reform. . . . On the one side, wealth is piled up and for the rest there is a bottomless depth of poverty. How can we remove these vast inequalities in society? There is only one natural way for everyone to get the necessities of life; that is for everyone to shake off laziness and work hard (as per the *varṇa* system). ("*Gunas-Building*" 198-99)

Vinoba, thus, endeavors to endorse the traditional social structure in India and makes it as the moral basis of the Indian nation, ignoring the large-scale protests against the caste-system. The characteristics of *sva-dharma* and *varṇa-dharma* that Vinoba highlights are no different from the characteristics of the modern day caste-system of India. Although Vinoba gives emphasis to the *karma yoga*, his notion of *sva-dharma* and *varṇa-dharma* of the *Gītā* has attempted to reinforce the traditional oppressive structure of India.

The leading nineteenth century commentators give the variant criticisms of the *Gītā*. Vivekananda questions on the validity of the origin and the authorship of the text and disapproves the notion of caste and caste hierarchy of the scripture. He finds the philosophical content of the text as the

borrowings of the *Upanisads* but admires it for its beautiful combination of *Karma*, *Jñāna* and *Bhakti yoga*. Gandhi and Desai give the allegorical interpretation of the text and question of its historical interpretations. They have the different concept of God and interpret Krishna not as a God but as a symbol of perfection. Though Gandhi finds the *Karmayoga* as the core of the text, he converts it as the book of *stotras* or hymns that provides him solace and advice in his loneliness. Aurobindo, though he gives the revolutionary interpretation of the text at first, changes his stand and interprets it as being the Gospel of works for divine action. Vinoba, a freedom fighter in the struggle against British colonialism, justifies the *Gītā*'s notion of caste and caste hierarchy by linking the *sva-dharma* of the text with an individual's heredity, which is pre-determined, unchangeable and fixed. His emphasis on the heredity-based *sva-dharma* of the text gives impetus to the unjust and inhuman modern day caste system. The above commentators, though they praise the philosophical content of the text and give the *karmayogic* interpretations, observe the scripture from the multiple angles giving it the queer criticisms, which are varied and contradictory to each other.

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