

The *Bhagavad Gita*: A Central Cultural Asset of Indian Nationalism

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Abstract

This research article deals with the commentary of the Bhagavad Gita in the post-independent period of India. The study has its relevance to understand the status of the text in this period. The article addresses on the research problems concerning to worldwide scholarly commentaries of the text in this period. The research approach adopted for this study is the review-based analysis of the text's commentaries of different scholars of the time. The study reveals that the most of the commentators of the Gita highly praise the text and establish it as the central cultural asset of Indian nationalism.

Key Words: Cultural asset, spiritual salvation, universal message, practical philosophy, Indian psychology, *sva-dharma*, Hindu religion and Hindu *Dharma*

The *Bhagavad Gita* is interpreted differently in different stages of Indian history. The text invites the sectarian interpretations and it is taken as a combative text by the Indian freedom fighters in the nineteenth century. The *Gita* gains a high prestige and it is taken as a central cultural asset of Indian Nationalism in post-independent period of India. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), the savant-philosopher and president of India, is a pioneer of this school of criticism of the *Gita*. He exposes the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of the *Gita*. Radhakrishnan, in his introductory essay of his translation *The Bhagavadgita*, asserts: "The *Bhagavadgita* is more a religious classic than a philosophical treatise." Radhakrishnan further elaborates:

It [the *Bhagavadgita*] represents not any sect of Hinduism but Hinduism as a whole, not merely Hinduism but religion as such, in its universality, without limit of time or space, embracing within its synthesis the whole gamut of the human spirit, from the crude fetishism of the savage to the creative affirmations of the saint. (1, 2-3)

Radhakrishnan considers the religious side of the *Gita* is weightier than its philosophical side. The *Gita*, according to him, is a sacred text not only for any sect of Hinduism but it is for the Hinduism as a whole and the text is not limited only for Hinduism but it is for all the human beings as a whole from the savages to the creative saints.

Radhakrishnan highlights the religious side of the *Gita*, and he also brings back the philosophical importance of the text. Philosophically, Radhakrishnan has interpreted the *Gita* as a book of action. The *Gita*, the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna in the battlefield of *Mahabharata*, encourages Arjuna to fight in the battle that goes on against the evil forces Kauravas and bring change. Radhakrishnan illustrates: "The *Gita* opens with a problem. Arjuna refuses to fight and raises difficulties. ... To convert him is the purpose of the *Gita*. It raises the question whether action or renunciation of action is better and concludes that action is better" ("Introductory" 71). Radhakrishnan has defined the *Gita* as a philosophical book that takes side with action and duty. According to him, there are discussions on many subjects in the *Gita* that only prove the importance of action for becoming successful in human life. The discussions of the *Gita* have to serve only one purpose i.e., to make Arjuna ready for war or action.

Radhakrishnan notices the difference of the philosophy of the *Gita* from the Buddhist Philosophy. He argues that unlike Buddhist Philosophy, the *Gita* urges humanity to involve themselves in ac-

tion so as to achieve something or to get God. He writes: “While the Buddhist ideal exalts a life of contemplation, the *Gita* attracts all those souls who have a relish for action and adventure. Action is for self-fulfillment” (“Introductory” 80). As the *Gita* takes side with action and adventure, he has taken the *Gita* as a more practical book than the ideal of Buddhist philosophy that gives emphasis to the contemplation and the renunciation of action. Radhakrishnan has taken the *Gita* as an original book and is not influenced by the Buddhist philosophy. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar points out: “. . . Hindutva scholars like Telang, Radhakrishnan and Tilak are most reluctant to admit that the *Bhagavad Gita* is anyway influenced by Buddhism and [are] ever ready to deny that the *Gita* has borrowed anything from Buddhism. . . ” (qtd. in Remski 5). Radhakrishnan does not give any credit to Buddhism for the *Gita*’s composition.

Radhakrishnan takes the *Gita* as a book of revolutionary science that can be applied in the society to bring change. In *Gita*, Krishna, who is a teacher and a political commissioner, teaches and commands Arjuna to go to the war and fulfill his sacred duty given to him by the great time. It was the time of great upheaval and change when the powerful Kauravas were going to be defeated in the great war of *Mahabharata*. Radhakrishnan, in this sense, interpretes the *Gita* as a political manifesto of struggle and change: “The *Gita* belongs to a period of upheaval through which humanity periodically passes in which intellectual, moral, social and political forms are at strife and when these are not properly adjusted, violent convulsions take place” (“Introductory” 75). Radhakrishnan has taken the *Gita* as a political document that describes the problems and solutions of great upheavals of a particular time of history. The *Gita* addresses the intellectual, moral, social and political problems the people faced at the great turning point of history. Radhakrishnan’s interpretation of the *Gita* highlights its importance as a religious text and it also suggests the practicality of the text for social change.

Sri Swami Sivananda (1887-1963), founder of the Divine Life Society, in his book entitled *Bhagavad Gita*, gives high esteem to the *Gita*. He has taken the *Gita* as a sacred religious text that should be studied with an attitude of reverence and faith to get the spiritual salvation. He considers the text as sacred because he finds the *Gita* contains “. . . the divine nectar”, “. . . a boundless ocean of nectar” (vii) and “. . . spiritual gems of incalculable value” (viii). He keeps the *Gita* on top position among all the spiritual literature of the world. Sivananda declares: “In all the spiritual literature of the world there is no book so elevating and inspiring as the *Gita*.” Sivananda regards the text as the world’s inspiring book and it inspires all the people belonging to any cult, sect, creed, age or country. He asserts: “The teachings of the *Gita* are broad, universal and sublime. They do not belong to any cult, sect, creed, age or country. They are meant for the people of the whole world” (vii, viii). The *Gita*, according to Sivananda, contains the universal message for all the people of the world.

Sivananda gives credit to the Hindu religion and Hindu *Dharma* for the greatness of the *Gita*: “It [the *Gita*] expounds very lucidly the cardinal principles or the fundamentals of the Hindu religion and Hindu Dharma.” Sivananda accepts that the *Gita* is not the original one but it borrows the ideas from the *Vedas* and the *Upanisads*. He regards the *Gita* as “. . . the cream of the *Vedas*” and “. . . the essence of the soul-elevating *Upanisads*” (vii). Though the *Gita* repeats the message of the *Vedas* and the *Upanisads*, Sivananda finds the speciality in the text that the supreme God Krishna Himself delivers the *Gita*. Sivananda, though he praises the text for its spiritual content, admits that the *Gita* gives the duty (i.e. the *karma yoga*) a prime importance. He argues: “The central teaching of the *Gita* is the attainment of the final beatitude of life—perfection or eternal freedom. This may be achieved by doing one’s prescribed duties of life” (x). The ultimate goal of every man, according to Sivananda, is to achieve perfection or salvation and the *Gita* prescribes the performance of one’s own caste duty is the best path among many. In his interpretation, Sivananda highlights the spirituality and the *sva-dharma* of the *Gita*.

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), introducing *Gita* to the Western audience in an English translation jointly done by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, praises the *Gita* for its universal philosophy applicable not only for Indians but for all mankind: “The *Gita* is one of the clearest and most comprehensive summaries of the Perennial Philosophy ever to have been made. Hence its enduring value, not only for Indians, but for all mankind.” Huxley defines the philosophy of the *Gita* naming it “. . . the Perennial Philosophy” (1). In his lengthy introduction, he reports: “The *Bhagavad Gita* is perhaps the most systematic scriptural statement of the Perennial Philosophy” (4). Huxley has given an overview of the Perennial Philosophy and explained how it is expressed through the various religions of the world throughout history (Dharmadas 7). Huxley’s Introduction to the *Gita*’s translation by Prabhavananda and Isherwood becomes as famous as the book for which it is written because he expounds the principles of a Universalist spiritual tradition i.e., “perennial philosophy” of which he claims the *Gita* to be an exemplar text (M. Sinha 316). Although the context of the *Gita* is the violent war of destruction, Huxley advocates about the universality of the text that is applicable to all contexts. In this regard, Mishka Sinha opines: “Writing in the midst of a war of destruction and violence on an unprecedented scale, Huxley reread and reimagined the *Gita* in a role which not only subverted its prime injunction to kill, and accept the necessity of killing, but converted it into a pacifist manifesto, a means of escape from violence” (316). Huxley’s interpretation of the *Gita* praises the text for its universal philosophy and it finds the text as a manifesto of pacifism and non-violence.

Swami Gambhirananda (1899-1988) holds a view that the *Gita* is the summing up of the *Upanisads* and the greatest religious book of the world: “The *Gita* is ranked among the greatest religious books of the world, and in India it occupies a position next only to the *Upanisads*. In fact, it is considered as a summing up of the *Upanisads*. . .” The *Gita*, according to Gambhirananda, does not tell the new thing, instead, it only conveys us the gist of the *Upanisads*. He explains about it by quoting the well-known verse made about the *Gita* that says: “All the *Upanisads* are cows, the milker is Sri Krishna, the calf is Arjuna, the enjoyers are the wise ones and the milk is the fine nectar that the *Gita* is” (“Introduction” xviii). The milker Sri Krishna extracts the gist of the *Upanisads* in the form of the milk in the *Gita*. The milk i.e., the knowledge of the *Gita* is enjoyed not only by Arjuna, the calf, but also by all the wise human beings.

Swami Ranganathananda (1908-2005), in his three volumed books *Universal Message of the Bhagavad Gita*, has interpreted the *Gita* as a book of practical philosophy that can be applied for social change. Ranganathananda has a strong objection to those people who use the *Gita* as a book of *stotras* or hymns that is recited every morning as a pious act. He argues: “In the past, people mostly read the *Gita* as a pious act, and for a little peace of mind. We never realized that this is a book of intense practicality, that this is the greatest book of practical Vedanta capable of helping us to create a society of fully developed human beings” (10). There is a general trend of reading the *Gita* among most of the common people as fulfilling the everyday religious act or doing mental exercise for peace. According to Ranganathananda, they do not understand or like to understand the *Gita*’s practical teachings to humanity. He gives emphasis to the *karma yoga* of the *Gita* and argues that the text contains the philosophy of human life and action: “. . . that book is not meant merely to give peace of mind; it is meant to give you strength to serve the people, to make you a responsible citizen. It contains a comprehensive philosophy of life and work.” For Ranganathananda, the text not only gives a person the peace of mind but, more importantly, it teaches a person to be a good and responsible citizen. He claims: “. . . it [the *Gita*] is not meant for putting you to sleep. It is meant to wake you up” (11). For him, the *Gita* is not a passive document that makes you passive and lazy, instead, it is an active document that gives you strength and vigor to move forward for the welfare

of humanity. The setting of the *Gita*, according to Ranganathananda, itself tells us its dynamism and vigor. The message of the *Gita* is delivered not in a temple or a cave or a forest like other teachings but it is delivered in the battlefield and both the teacher and the student are not the ordinary human beings but they are warriors having the heroic personalities:

The message of the *Gita* was given on the tumultuous battlefield of Kuruksetra a few thousand years ago. The *Gita* alone represents such a philosophy. All other teachings were given in a temple, or a cave or a forest. Here the student and teacher, Arjuna and Sri Krishna, were remarkable personalities; they were warriors. And the teacher, Sri Krishna, was a man full of compassion, and endowed with universal vision. The *Gita* is thus a heroic message from a heroic teacher to a heroic pupil. ("Introduction" 12)

The message of the book that gives the passive philosophy cannot be delivered in the battlefield and both the teacher and the student would not be the great warriors like Krishna and Arjuna. According to Ranganathananda, not the words but the setting of the *Gita* alone conveys a profound message.

Ranganathananda reveals that the *Gita* carries essence of the *Upanisads*. He also agrees with the well-known verse written about the *Gita* that compares the text with the *Upanisads*. The milk, the message of the *Gita*, extracted from the cow, the *Upanisads*, by the milker, Krishna is not for worship with flowers, he argues, but the milk is meant to be drunk that gives us nourishment and vigor:

The *Gita* is compared to the milk taken out of the cow, meaning the Vedas, by Sri Krsna, the milkman. What is the milk for? It is not meant for worship, but it is meant to be drunk for our nourishment. Then alone can one get strength. But all these hundreds of years, we took that glass of milk, worshipped it with flowers, and saluted it, but never drank it. That is why we are feeble, physically, mentally, and socially. That will change if we now start drinking this milk and assimilate it. ("Introduction" 10)

According to Ranganathananda, people are weak physically, mentally and socially because they have only worshipped the milk, the message of the *Gita*, with flowers and saluted it for hundreds of years but they have not drunk it. If they start drinking the milk now, this will bring them strength and vigor and change their life. This implies that, according to him, the *Gita* is not the book to be worshipped but it is the book that its message should be applied in people's daily life to bring change and happiness.

Ranganathananda is against to those views that make the *Gita* as a dogma, which you are not allowed to question. He claims that the *Gita* invites our criticisms and feedbacks: "It [the *Gita*] does not give you a few dogmas, which you are not allowed to question. It invites all to question its teachings and then only follow them. Sri Krsna expounds his original philosophy of life for all people who are at work" ("Introduction" 15). According to Ranganathananda, the *Gita* conveys the philosophy of life which makes a person dynamic and critical.

Ranganathananda has the different concept on the Avatar or the incarnation of God. He regards all of them as an incarnation of God who possess the spiritual vitality and can change the course of history with their spiritual power. He does not regard only Krishna as an Avatar but there are many who possess the power like of Krishna. He opines:

The power that is needed to set in motion this tremendous current of spiritual energy comes only from that type of person whom we call an incarnation. . . . It is an extraordinary power . . . which can create a new historical epoch. . . . We treat Sri Rama, Sri Krsna and Buddha as world-moving personalities; a Jesus, and now, in this modern period, we have Sri Ramakrishna. ("Introduction" 43)

Ranganathananda makes no distinction between the Gods belonging to the different religions. He treats Buddha and Jesus equally with Sri Rama and Sri Krishna. As a follower of Ramakrishna, he regards Sri Ramakrishna as an incarnation of God of the modern time.

Ranganathananda speaks for the welfare as well as the spiritual development of society. By quoting the verse of *Vedas*, he says, *pravrtti*, outward action and *nivrtti*, inward contemplation are required for ensuring the true *abhyudaya*, socio-economic welfare and *nihisreyasa*, spiritual freedom of all beings. People need socio-economic development as well as their spiritual freedom, which, he says, will be possible with the combination of *pravrtti* and *nivrtti* and is taught to us by the *Gita*: “. . . this combination of *pravrtti* and *nivrtti*, of *abhyudaya* and *nihisreyasa*, is the great teaching of the *Gita*. It contains a philosophy to make for total human development. That is the speciality of this great book.” Neither the *pravrtti* nor the *nivrtti* is sufficient for the total human development and neither the *abhyudaya* nor the *nihisreyasa* is enough for the total human happiness. There should be the combination between *pravrtti* and *nivrtti* and *abhyudaya* and *nihisreyasa* for the total human development and happiness. While discussing about the combination between *pravrtti* and *nivrtti* and *abhyudaya* and *nihisreyasa*, Ranganathananda argues that the *Gita* gives more emphasis to *nivrtti* and *nihisreyasa*: “It [the *Gita*] says that every human being is spiritual, even when he or she is in the *pravrtti* field of life; one is never outside spirituality. That is a wonderful idea. Spirituality is life encompassing, you are never outside of spirituality. That is the attitude of the *Gita* and the Vedanta” (“Introduction” 29, 33). The *Gita*, according to Ranganathananda’s interpretation, suggests people to involve in worldly affairs keeping in mind the wonderful idea of spirituality.

Dharm P.S. Bhawuk has interpreted the *Gita* connecting it with the tradition of Indian spirituality. His book *Spirituality and Indian Psychology: Lessons from the Bhagavad Gita* has discussed about this issue based on his conviction that Indian people value spirituality and they possess much creativity in this domain (“Preface” xi). Anthony J. Marsella agrees with Bhawuk and suggests reading the *Gita* to understand the wisdom of Indian tradition of spirituality: “One has only to read the more than 4000 year old *bhagavadgItA*, to grasp the wisdom of ages that has been honed by suffering, survival, and also an imaginative and creative quest for meaning and purpose by India’s people” (x). According to Marsella, the *Gita* enriches the Indian tradition of spirituality and the text is also enriched by the imaginative and creative quest for meaning of Indian people. In this connection, Janardan Ghimire agrees with them: “My study revealed that the *Bhagavad Gita* can be taken as an ocean of philosophical thoughts of the Eastern wisdom tradition” (67). Ghimire takes the *Gita* as a unique text that covers all the Eastern philosophical thoughts and wisdom tradition.

Among the different *yogas* suggested in the *Gita*, Bhawuk finds *karma yoga* as superior: “The *bhagavadgItA* recommends *karmayoga* as superior to all other methods of self-realization.” *Karma yoga* brings happiness to people as Bhawuk explains: “The *bhagavadgItA* recommends the practice of *karmayoga*, or the path of work (or doing one’s prescribed duties), as the intervention to avoid the unhappiness resulting from the pursuit of desires” (“Process” 117). The desires bring unhappiness to human beings, so Bhawuk clarifies that the *Gita* suggests the *niskama karma* i.e. *karma* without desires: “We see that the *bhagavadgItA* quickly defines the purpose of work – work is to be performed for its own sake, not for its outcomes. . .” (“Karma” 145). For Bhawuk, the *Gita* is a *karma-sastra* that suggests human beings to involve in work remaining indifferent to its results.

Bhawuk defines the *Gita*’s concept of *karma yoga* connecting it with the deep rooted Indian psychology: “In the Indian worldview, concept of self and work are closely linked, and this is captured in the *bhagavadgItA* . . .” (93). As defined by the *Gita*, the Indians are habituated to link everybody’s work with their four castes. Bhawuk explains:

The physical self gets integrated with the social self in the social system that prescribes duties according to one's caste (or *varNa*) and phase of life (or *varNAzram dharma*). In this system, people are postulated to be different from each other from birth, and they take the social identity provided by their caste. With the caste comes the strong tie with work, and what is defined as *svadharm*a in the *bhagavadgItA* is primarily prescribed work for the four castes. (96)

The Indian people classify their work according to their different castes, which the *Gita* termed as *sva-dharma* or one's prescribed duties of an individual by birth. Though Indian people are inclined to define the individual's work in terms of their caste i.e. *varnasram dharma*, Bhawuk finds this impractical and irrelevant in the modern context: "I am sure there will be very few people in South Asia who would pass the test of strictly following the prescribed *varNAzram dharma*, especially because of the creation of many new jobs that do not fit the classical typology, which makes the model apparently irrelevant" (Paths 98). Bhawuk finds *varnasram dharma* advocated by the *Gita* as classical and argues the creation of many new jobs now makes it irrelevant to most of the people of South Asia. Bhawuk interprets the *Gita* connecting it with the Indian tradition of belief system, which he finds its strength with some weaknesses.

Bhuchandra Baidya, professor of Economics at Tribhuvan University, in his *Essence of the Gita*, has highlighted the practical aspects of the *Gita* that one should apply to live better and successful life so as to attain the ultimate goal of human beings. He believes: "The *Gita* basically deals with the most fundamental question in human life, which is, the best way to live and end our life, reminding us of the goal of the human life, the hurdles in reaching the goal and the ways to overcome these hurdles." Baidya acknowledges the text with high esteem and argues that the *Gita* works as "a wise companion" (167) for everyone as it helps him/her to point out and tackle with the obstacles come between him/her and his/her ultimate goal of spiritual salvation. He does not give the special emphasis to the *Gita*'s any one of the three paths to liberation – the path of knowledge, the path of action, and the path of devotion. Instead, he finds that the *Gita* gives an equal value to all of these three paths and the text brings out the interrelationship between them:

. . . all the three paths are one in essence; all the three lead us to the same post in the end. While knowledge needs to be complemented with work, action has to be backed by wisdom. With knowledge we trace out God, right action takes us closer to Him, and devotion instills in us the unswerving love for Him. This is how we win the grace of God and attain eternal union with Him. This is the state of *total* liberation. (182)

According to Baidya, the knowledge of the Supreme God, disinterested action and the devotion to God as explained in the *Gita* lead the human beings to the same ultimate goal of liberation. He finds there is no contradiction between the three different paths, instead, they have interrelations and are complementary to each other. For him, ". . . the *Gita* is to be read, but more than that, it is to be lived" (182). For Baidya, the *Gita* is the book of recitation the name of God i.e. devotion to God and more than that, it is the book of practical philosophy that teaches the humanity about the right action with wisdom which brings their total spiritual liberation.

The critics belonging to the post-independent period of India highlight the positive aspects of the *Gita*. They do not find any inconsistent messages of the *Gita* while the text deals with the three self-contradictory paths of spiritual salvation, i. e., the *jnana marga*, *karma marga* and *bhakti marga*. They interpret the *Gita*'s three paths as self-complementary and essential for an individual's total spiritual liberation. Although some commentators of this period give emphasis to the *karma marga* of the *Gita*, they give no less importance to the other two paths, the *jnana marga* and *bhakti marga*

too. They find the perfect combination of these three *yogas* in the *Gita* and, therefore, they interpret the text as a Gospel not only of the Hindu religion but also of all religions and of the whole world. They establish the text as the central cultural asset of Indian nationalism in this period.

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