



## AN HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF GITA

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### ABSTRACT

Bhagavad Gita is one of the most important religious texts of Hinduism. It is commonly referred to as the Gita and was originally a part of the great epic Mahabharata. So its date of composition is closely associated with that of the epic nearby 5th to 3rd century BCE but all scholars don't agree that the original work of this text belongs to this period and date it later than this. Though it is very difficult to fix a certain date of its composition but tried to fix a plausible date on the basis of detailed discussion covering various aspects such as –the language, the philosophical outlook, its treatment of the Vedas and its proximity to the Upanishadas.

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*Bhagavad-Gita* appears to be a part of *Mahabharata* but after complete studying it appears in itself a complete and independent text. Though conversation in Gita is not very lengthy but it became a cause of thousands of commentaries over the centuries. *Bhagavad-Gita* is a very small portion of *Bhisma Parva* of *Mahabharata*. *Bhisma Parva* is the Sixth Parva of *Mahabharata* which contains 124 Adhyayas (Chapters). It has its own value and significance is all parvas of *Mahabharata*. Being a very little part of this parva, Gita has only seven hundred shlokas containing in 18 Adhyayas (chapters) starting from the 25<sup>th</sup> and ending after 42<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the *Bhisma parva*. But its value and significance is immensely huge. In other words we can say that Gita is a little shrine within a vast temple of *Bhisma Parva*.”

Bhagavad-Gita also describes itself as the essence of all the *Upanishadas*. *Upanishadas* contain philosophical and ethical discourses which inform us on the cultural and religious thought of the people. They also present a clear conception of the spiritual learnings of the early Hindus with their views on soul, God and Salvation.

Why the *Gita* adopted an anti-materialist stance? Why it considered materialists fit for universal condemnation and why it advocated their destruction? were the questions which inspired a reconsideration of the *Gita* evidence so as to delineate the purpose, nature and scope of the text. The *Gita* makes two different statements about the reason of its being. It wants us to believe that Arjuna's discovery of inconsistency and the self-defeating aspect of his *svadharma* which insisted on his waging war against his enemies but whose adherence was to result in the destruction of the ksatriya *varna*, a constituent of *varna* society, and was to contribute to ward and the acceleration of *varna-sankara*<sup>1</sup> eventualities which were against the cherished ideals of orthodox brahmanical society, had sparked off Krishna's discourses on ksatriya *svadharma*. But it is equally true that Krishna did not try to refute Arjuna's anti-war argument or answer his question. On the contrary, Krishna made a vague statement in the last discourse by saying that all initiations (or new projects) has defects and were like fire engulfed by smoke at the time of lighting.<sup>2</sup> That is, he conceded that his theory of *varna* obligations was a new theory

which failed to offer any effective way which could avoid *varna-sankara*, the aftermath of war. Thus, Krishna's discourses failed to serve their initial objective. All they were able to communicate was that waging of war against his enemies was Arjuna's *svadharma*.

In another statement, the *Gita* effects on the antiquity of Krishna and his gospel. We are told that Krishna had given his first discourse to Vivasvat. Vivasvat had passed on its oral tradition to Manu who, in turn, had communicated it to Ikasvaku. With the passage of time, Krishna's teachings were destroyed.<sup>3</sup>

Though the *Gita* accuses its materialists for their non-conformist views, it does not make any mention of any ideological group or religious sect known to ancient Indians. The possibility of their being well-known, and needing no specific mention cannot be brushed aside. Perhaps, Lokayata and other materialist ideologies as well as contemporary religious sects were under reference. The *Santi Parva* reference to Carvaka<sup>4</sup> and his charges against Yudhisthira for his role in the Kurukshetra war suggests that materialists of his school were still active in the time of the *Gita*. However, the *Santi Parva* wants us to believe that the brahmanas who had assembled to welcome Yudhisthira told the latter that the fallow was the *raksasa* Carvaka and not a *rishi* and that thereafter they killed Carvaka.<sup>5</sup> Though the *Gita* does not offer even the faintest hint that Buddhism, Jainism, Shavism and other sects were also involved in creating the crisis in the *varna* system, it may not be wrong to assume that they were included among the unnamed ideologies because they allowed the individual the right to shape his own destiny.

Though ideological differences between orthodoxy and heterodox and other ideologies dated back to the sixth century B.C. – the time when the latter had emerged as anti-Vedic ideological protest movements.<sup>6</sup> Orthodox Brahmanism maintained a low profile because of the absence of political patronage during the period ending with the close of the third century A.D, with the exception of the brief spells of Sunga<sup>7</sup> and Satavahana<sup>8</sup> rule-the periods of brahmanical revival. During the first three centuries A.D, rulers of foreign origins dominated the political scene. They found Buddhism<sup>9</sup>

and Saivism<sup>10</sup> willing to accept and accommodate them within their fold. The inability of orthodoxy to see things in proper perspective made it ascribe *varna-samkara* status to the rulers in the *dharmasutras*.<sup>11</sup>

By the time of the *Manu Smriti*, the situation had gone beyond control and the *smriti*'s attempt to allow for the foreigners the status of ksatriyas, provided they accepted brahmanism<sup>12</sup>, proved of no avail. Those rulers had neither faith in orthodox Brahmanism nor could they understand why a person was to be assigned higher or lower status in society simply on the basis of his birth in a particular *varna*. On the contrary, they patronised people engaged in crafts, industry, trade and commerce and promoted their upward social mobility. The idea of free mixing of *varnas* was not acceptable to orthodoxy which considered it as transgression of *varna* rules. The first reference to *varna-samkara* in early Indian epigraphs occurs in the Nasik cave inscription of Pulamavi, regnal year 19 corresponding to A.D. 149. According to that inscription the Satavahana ruler Gautamiputra had not only destroyed the pride of the ksatriyas, destroyed the Sakas, Yavanas and Pahlavas but had also reversed the process of transgression of the four *varnas* (*vinivaitita-catuvana-samkara*).<sup>13</sup> It may not be wrong to infer from this statement that, according to Pulamavi, insolence of ksatriyas and rule of foreigners like the Sakas, Yavanas, Pahlavas etc. had contributed to the acceleration of *varna-samkara* situation and that the Satavahanas were convinced that irresponsible behaviour of ksatriyas and foreign rule were the key factors responsible for the spread of *varna-samkara*. But, by the time of the *Manu Smriti* the situation had drastically changed. Foreigners had been in possession of political authority and could no longer be declared *varna-samkara* people.

Thus the *Manu Smriti* made amends in the erstwhile brahmanical position on foreigners and declared that the Yavanas, Sakas, Paradas, Pahlavas and Cinas were originally ksatriyas but they became degraded because of their non-adherence to the dictates of orthodoxy (*brahman-adarsana*).<sup>14</sup> Kusana rule saw unprecedented and unsurpassed material prosperity of Northern Indian. Kusana patronage to crafts, industry, trade and commerce provided job opportunities to talented skilled workers and contributed to upward social as well as economic mobility of vaisyas, sudras and mixed caste categories. This situation was labelled as *varna-samkara* condition by orthodoxy. This upsetting of the social balance had distressed the orthodoxy most. In the eyes of the orthodox, the situation had devolved into what Yudhisthira had lamented in the *Aranyaka Parva* - "it is difficult to ascertain parentage of people because of *varna-samkara*. All type of men beget children from all sorts of women;<sup>15</sup> According to the *Visnu Purana*, the situation had become very grim. Brahmanas and ksatriyas had become *sudra-praya* and vaisayas and sudras had started behaving like the former.<sup>16</sup> Arjuna's assessment of the increasingly worsening *varna-samkara* condition and his discovery of war as an additional factor which accelerated *varna-samkara* made him decline to wage war against the Kauravas<sup>17</sup> because he did not want to become a willing party to the accentuation of that crisis by participating in the Kuruksetra war.

The confidence with which the *Gita* launched its

anti-materialist tirade is indicative of the fact that it was written in the post-*Manu Smriti* and post-Kusana period and not before the closing years of the third century A.D. D.D. Kosambi seems to be right in suggesting a date around A.D. 350 for the writing of the *Gita*.<sup>18</sup> But our analysis of the purpose of the *Gita* does not allow us to agree with the learned scholar when he says: "writing the *Gita* was possible only in a period when it was not absolutely necessary...To treat all views tolerantly and to merge them into one implies that the crisis in the means of production is not too acute."<sup>19</sup> "On the contrary, we feel that the acute stage of crisis in the means of production was, no doubt, on decline, but it was very much in existence. Classes were desperately trying to regain social control on the masses, so that productive classes could be compelled to remain subservient to the upper classes of society. For achieving that end, the *Gita* had invented its new *sahaja-karma* theory<sup>20</sup> which asserted that *svadharma* obligations were congenital duties of the individual and were as real as the body of persons along with which they were born. That *sahaja-karma* theory was thoroughly exploited by orthodoxy for convincing the lower classes to follow the dictates of *varna* system is suggested by the evidence of Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*<sup>21</sup> which belonged to the period of the Gupta ruler Candragupta II.

The phenomenon of multiple interpretations of *Gita* has continued over the long centuries. At different phases in the history, fresh interpretations of the 'true' message of the *Gita* sprang up, each in the context of its own times, environment and preferred attitude. Each successive interpretation of *Gita* was at variance with its previous one. And yet, what is most amazing is that each of those varied interpretations is valid in its own context.

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