



## **THE BHAGAVAT GITA: THE FOUNDATIONAL TEXT OF INDIAN NATIONALISM**

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**Abstract:** Ever since Charles Wilkins translated *The Bhagavat Gita* in English in 1785, this Indian sacred text has been continuously translated, adapted and appropriated by the Western Orientalists as the finest method of what Edward Said called “to domesticate the Orient and thereby turn it into a province of European learning.” (Said 78) This entire enterprise of Orientalism is based on the famous maxim of Michael Foucault called ‘knowledge is power’. The construction of knowledge about India was essential for the subjugation of India. However, Indians creatively used the same tools of colonization, viz. translation, adaptation, interpretation and re-appropriation of *The Bhagavat Gita* to turn it into the foundational text of anti-colonial Indian nationalism.

**Keywords:** Orientalism, Indian Nationalism, *The Bhagavat Gita 2*

“William Jones who had arrived as a judge during Hasting’s time as Governor General, pioneered the idea that the ancient classical languages of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Iranian have a common root. He labelled this family of languages Indo-European. It was his programme to establish the parallels between

the languages and introduce the classics of ancient India to Western readers...The label Indo-European (rather than, say, Euro-Indian) had a profound significance on modern Indian perception of itself. The idea that one branch of Indo-Europeans—Aryans as they were called before the Nazis devalued the term—had come to India from somewhere in central Europe while others had gone to Greece gave Indians a claim to cousinhood with their masters. The idea of an Aryan ‘invasion’ which then settled and ruled over India took hold. Only the discovery in 1926 of the Mohenjo-Daro shook that idea somewhat. But until then the affinity between Sanskrit and Greek / Latin was a point of exclusive pride for many Indians.

The translation of the *Gita* as the first Sanskrit text in English and later in other European languages confirmed its special status. Its compactness commended itself to foreigners as the best short introduction to Brahmanism. It hitched the star of Indian consciousness away from the rest of Asia and towards the West. The reception of *Gita* was part of the process whereby Indians recovered pride in their ancient culture.” (Desai 11-12)

The above passage illuminates the subtle nuances of the cultural encounter between Great Britain as the colonizer and India as the colonized from 1770s onwards till date. First of all, it foregrounds the role of Sir William Jones in promoting Orientalism as a tool of cultural and psychological subjugation of India apart from her very obvious political and economic colonization. According to Edward Said, Orientalism is a discourse about the Orient (object to be colonized) by the Western scholars (subject / colonizer) aimed at creating a ‘Manichean Allegory’ (Abdul Jan Mohamad’s term) and a tactic hierarchy between the West and the East whereby a binary and implacable discursive opposition between races is produced—white as rational, intelligent, civilized, masculine, powerful, hardworking, dynamic, virtuous, mature and superior; and black as its 3 opposite, irrational, ignorant / emotional, barbaric, feminine, defeated / weak, lazy, static, fallen, immature and therefore inferior. However, the mixed racial heritage of India along with the discovery of Sanskrit as a classical Indian language with

notable affinities with the classical European languages and rich ancient literature posed a problem to the water-tight compartmentalization of black and white. Jones solved this dilemma by creating a family of Indo-European languages which later degenerated into the ‘Aryan’ invasion theory. By focusing exclusively on

Sanskrit and its ancient outdated texts at the expense of contemporary Indian languages and literatures, Jones and his successors constructed an a-temporal, irrational Indian subject against the rational and historical Oriental scholar. According to G. N. Devy, “Jones was the first British scholar to perceive India in terms of a literary culture and his discovery of India as a nation with a literature, and a literature extending to remote antiquity, enthused his readers in Britain to look to India for literary inspiration.” (Devy 78) Through a series of English translations of ancient Sanskrit texts like *The Bhagavat Gita*, Orientalists created an ‘authentic’ textual account of India whereby India had a very rich ancient cultural heritage but had fallen from that grace to the present chaos. To rejuvenation India, her ancient language and literature must be studied and propagated under the able British rule as Indians themselves were incapable to do so. This theory served the purpose of validating British rule in India. Edward Said writes,

“Language and race seemed inextricably tied and the “good” Orient was invariably a classical period somewhere in a long-gone India, whereas the “bad” Orient lingered in present day Asia, parts of North Africa and Islam everywhere. “Aryans” were confined to Europe and the ancient Orient... the Aryan myth dominated historical and cultural anthropology at the expense of “lesser” peoples.” (Said 99)

Thus, it was the ancient Sanskrit texts through their translations in English that defined the Indian ethos and pathos not only for the Europeans but also for the Indians. So, it is necessary to understand how subtly the entire enterprise of Orientalism distorted the perception of Indians about themselves. Let’s understand this point in the context of translation, adaptation and

appropriation of *The Bhagavat Gita* by the Orientalists, focussing on how *The Bhagavat Gita* became the battle ground between British colonial and Indian anti-colonial forces whereby *The Bhagavat Gita* was constantly adapted and interpreted as the source text of Indian nationalism. 4

*The Bhagavat Gita* was the first sacred Indian text to be translated in English by Charles Wilkins in 1785. It was the first translation directly from Sanskrit and created “a fine, philosophical other-worldly view of the Orient” which Warren Hastings considered “an ideal means of propaganda to make a case for an Indianized administration” (Kothari 12) arguing,

“Every accumulation of the knowledge and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the State ...it attracts and conciliates distant affections; it lessens the weight of the chain by which the natives are held in subjection; and it imprints on the hearts of our own countrymen the sense and obligation of benevolence.” (Qt. Hastings; Kothari 12)

The choice of *Gita* was significant as it suited the European notion of Semitic religion: “Central to it are the notions of the Revelation, the Prophet, and the Book... Krishna and his Song Celestial seemed to meet the Semitic notion of a revealed religion. Here was an incarnation, a saviour who...revealed Himself through His Words. He seemed to fit into the Semitic pattern the Europeans knew of. Krishna became to Hinduism what Jesus was to Christianity, and the Bhagavad *Gita* the Hindu Bible.” (Gowda 2-3) Unaware of the colonial motivation of the Orientalism, Indians interpreted the study of *Gita* by Europeans as the positive evidence that “the west began not only to make efforts to understand, but value India and her culture” (Kejriwal 21) thereby turning *Gita* into “a symbol of Hindu conscience” (Gowda 4).

As Nagappa Gowda shows in his seminal book *The Bhagavad Gita in the Nationalist Discourse* (2011), *Gita* was adapted and interpreted (frequently in contradictory ways) by various Indian scholars and leaders as the source text inspiring anti-colonial Indian nationalism. For Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay,

the *Mahabharata* was “unquestionably historical” (Gowda 13) and application of scientific-rational method of history to the text could discard the imaginary episodes and bring forth the ‘genuinely historical’ material. He considered Sri Krishna as “the role model for the nation and the citizen” (Gowda 20), nation being essential for the protection of self and the society and violence for the protection of one’s rights justified as ‘*Svadharmā*’ by Krishna himself in *Gita*. Thus, while Hastings considered *Gita* as a tool to ‘lessen the weight of the chain by which the natives are held in subjection’, Bankimchandra considers *Gita* as a tool of anti-colonial struggle. Gowda comments, 5 “Nationalism developed as a response to colonial rule, and not necessarily as a reaction against it. The response largely hovered between a critical admiration for the West and a growing awareness of one’s own foundational heritage which could be critiqued but not repudiated, although sometimes we stumble upon uncritical acceptance of both.” (Gowda 45)

In his *Gita-Rahasya* (original Marathi 1915; English translation 1935), Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak rejected all the pre-modern interpretations of *Gita* by various Acharyas such as Shankara, Ramanuja,

Madhva and Jnaneshwara. In his contemporary context of freedom movement, he interpreted “the central theme of *Gita*” as “Karmayoga”, its “central figure” as “Sthitaprajna” (Gowda 53) and condoned the use of violence against the colonial oppressors for “self-protection, the protection of innocents and general welfare” (Gowda 65). He considered the religion of *Gita* not only as superior to that of Christianity but as a source of Greek philosophy as well, whereby he drew the parallels between Sthitaprajna in *Gita* and the ‘philosopher-king’ in Plato’s *Republic*. For him, “nationalism is not an ultimate object to be realized by mankind; the final goal is ‘universal welfare’.” (Gowda 72) However, it is to be noted that “in politics and in matters of social reforms he was an arch conservative... a champion of social orthodoxy” (Gowda 82) which he defended on the basis of *Gita* and advocated “an all-India Hinduism as the basis of Indian nationalism.” (Gowda 84)

In sharp contrast to Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi believed that the core message of *Gita* is non-violence. “Gandhi recognized the fact that Tilak’s interpretation appealed to the revolutionaries. He seemed to be rejecting both the philosophy of the revolutionaries in theory and practice and interpretation of Tilak.” (Gowda 170) Gandhi derived his core concepts of *Satya* (Truth), *Ahimsa* (Non-violence), and *Swaraj* (Home-rule) from *Gita* and considered *Gita* not as a historical narrative but as a ‘great allegory’:

“The *Bhagavad Gita* is not a historical work...The poet has seized the occasion of the war...on the field of Kurukshetra for drawing attention to the war going on in our bodies between the forces of Good (Pandavas) and the forces of Evil (Kauravas)...” (Gandhi CWMG, Vol. 15: 288-89; Vol. 18: 115) 6 Gandhi considered the concept of ‘*Avatar*’ not as a descent of God but as a “man’s ascent to the state of God by wholly divesting himself of all his earthliness through engaging in selfless actions.” (Gowda 182) For Gandhi, *Gita* was the ‘*Dharma-Granth*’ and Krishna *Avatar* “the personification of right knowledge” (Gowda 181). Therefore, he endorsed and vehemently defended the *Varna-Dharma* based on *Guna*

(one’s inborn qualities based on one’s birth) and *Karma* (one’s castebased duties according to one’s birth) as “a useful institution for the organization of contemporary society” (Gowda 194) propounded by Krishna in the *Gita*. However, he condemned the social hierarchy inbuilt in the caste system and instead wanted it to be based on equality, never realizing the inherent contradiction in his proposal.

It was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who pointed out the contradictions in

Gandhi’s views about *Gita*. Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar considered *Gita* as a historical text, a later post-Buddhist interpolation into the *Mahabharata* providing the philosophical support to Jaimini’s *Purvamimansa* which strongly advocates Vedic *Karma-Kanda* and *Chaturvarna* system. Ambedkar writes,

“The soul of *Bhagavad Gita* seems to be the defence of Chaturvana and securing its observance in practice, Krishna does not merely rest content with

saying that Chaturvana is based on Guna-Karma but he goes further...Krishna tells that...a Sudra however great he may be as a devotee will not get salvation if he has transgressed the duty of the Sudra—namely to live and die in the service of the higher classes.” (Qt. Ambedkar; Gowda 228)

According to Ambedkar, Buddhism emerged as a revolution against Vedic *Karma-Kanda* and *Chaturvarna* system based on violence and inequality. To counter the growing influence of Buddhism which preached non-violence and equality, Brahmanism appropriated the central doctrines of Buddhism but superimposed on it the graded inequality of *Chaturvana* through divine sanction of Krishna in *Gita*, making “the system more cruel, unkind, inflexible and binding.” (Qt. Ambedkar; Gowda 229) This counter-revolution used certain concepts like *Swadarma*, *Sthitaprajna*, and *Anasakti* (foregrounded as the basic principles of *Gita* by Bankimchandra, Tilak and Gandhi respectively) “as mere reinforcement of the Chaturvana...*Gita* primarily offers a defence of Brahmanical priesthood against democratic and emancipatory striving of the masses 7 that Buddhism upholds.” (Gowda 234) As a result, Ambedkar rejects *Gita* as the foundational text of the Indian nation.

Thus, we find that as a part of anti-colonial struggle for independence, nation-building and social reforms between 1880 to 1950, *Gita* was used as the foundational text, often contested regarding its core content by the various nationalist leaders; but at the same time, generating mass support for the “essentially a secular project” of nation-building through frequent invocation of the “divine sanction”. (Gowda 246) Once, the Indian nation materialized as a political entity, *Gita* receded back into the realm of religion, making way for the other modern concepts related to nationalism.

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