THE NEW INDIAN INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ

TWENTIETH CENTURY INDIAN INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ: A SELECTIVE STUDY OF PATTERNS

by

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS:

The Bhagavadgītā, the most popular religious text of Hinduism, has become the social and political gospel of India in the Twentieth Century. What is attempted in this study is an examination of the Hindu religious consciousness as reflected in the various recent interpretations of this religious text. In this, we have examined the writings of Twentieth Century national and religious leaders of India and their re-interpretations of the age-old Hindu concepts of dharma, karma and mukti. The main line pursued is to discern the attempt by the moderns to integrate dharma and mukti and to render the message of the Gītā relevant to the problems of contemporary India. We examine this attempt by these national leaders against the background of recent ideologies such as nationalism, socialism and secularism that have made deep inroads into the sub-continent. The "counter-ideologies" (à la Harry M. Johnson) that sprang up from the new interpretations of the Gītā by national leaders such as B.G. Tilak, M.K. Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo and others are examined in depth. The modern commentators also attempt to relate the teachings of the Gītā to the needs of a modern secular society, and in particular

to the problems of religious pluralism which confront modern India. These commentators however, did not limit the relevance of this text to India, but have been eager to point out its relevance for a wider humanity.

This study aims to be both descriptive and critical. I have sought to describe what modern Indian thinkers selected as essential to the tradition and have also sought to understand their determination to come to terms with not only spiritual but also national and social issues. It is clear that they understood that reconstruction work in India could not be envisaged without giving it a basis in religious tradition which in their mind was most succinctly represented by the Bhagavadgītā. The writer after critical study, has come to the conclusion that these commmentaries taken together have successfully pointed out the significance of the Bhagavadgītā as a text that can accommodate varieties, and as a text which, without losing the clarity and rigour of its central spiritual perception, can provide legitimation, for the social and political forces that underlie a secular state.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Bhagavadgītā is the most popular scripture of Hinduism and as such it has been translated into all the major languages of India. Its influence in shaping the religious ideology of India is second to none. The teachers (ācāryas) of various schools of thought wrote commentaries on the Gītā to establish the validity of their doctrines. The Gītā is able to shelter various religious doctrines because its "teaching is universal whatever may have been its origins".[1] The Gītā contains both "the essential principles of a spiritual religion"[2] and "the most outstanding treatises on the Philosophy of Human Conduct"[3] at the same time. Though the Gītā is an episode in the great epic Mahābhārata, which is considered as the fifth Veda, "as a scripture of Hinduism it stands apart from the epic."[4] According to Vinoba Bhave,

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[1] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1966, p. 5.

[2] S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, Allen & Unwin, London, 1970, p. 11.

[3] Shripad Krishna Belvalkar, The Bhagavadgītā, Bilvakunja Publishing House, Poona, 1943, p. XIII.

[4] C. Rajagopalachari, Bhagavad-Gītā, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Bombay, 1964, p. 12.

Vyasa, the mythic author of the epic has taken out the cream of the whole Mahābhārata and put it in the Gītā. "Standing in the middle of the epic", he adds "the Gītā is like an elevated lamp which throws its light on the whole of Mahābhārata".[5]

Authority of the Gītā

The ācārayas of the Vedanta tradition consider the Gītā as a Vedantic text. They interpreted the Gītā from this angle and elevated it to one of the three foundations of Vedanta philosophy, the prasthāna traya, along with the Upaniṣads and the Brahma-sūtras. Of this triple foundation, or "scriptural trinity" as some modern Vedantins call it,[6] the Upaniṣads occupy a place of pre-eminence. According to the orthodox Hindu tradition only the Vedās, the Upaniṣads being part of the Vedas, are revealed scripture (śṛuti). All other scriptures, such as the Brahmasūtra, the Gītā, etc. depend upon the śṛuti, as inference depends on perception. These scriptures are categorized as smṛti and their validity depends on their conformity with the original revelation. In the case of the Gītā, its teachings represent a historical-responsive revelation through an incarnation, avatāra. It is not a total revelation, as Śankara interprets avatāra as only partial (amśena) descent of Viṣnu as Kṛṣna, son of Devaki and Vasudeva. Therefore, Śankara does not grant an independent status to the two latter texts of the prasthānatraya. In his introduction to the Gītā-Bhāsya, Śankara puts in a nutshell the

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[5]Vinoba Bhave, Talks on the Gītā, Sarva-seva-sangh Prakashan, Varanasi, 1964, p. 1.

[6]Swami Chidbhavananda, The Bhagavadgītā, Sri Ramakrishna Tapovanam, Tirupparaitturai, 1969, p. 1.

relevance of the Gītā in these words, "This Gītaśāstra is the essence of the meaning of the whole Vedic teaching in brief . . . a knowledge of its teaching leads to the realization of all human aspirations".[7] The famous verse in Gitādhyānam expresses the same thought through a simile; the Upanisads are the cows, Krsna the milker, Arjuna the calf, and the Gītā the milk.[8] This shows the dependence of the Gītā on the Upaniṣads. However, there is no mention of dependence or subordination in the text itself. Śankara and other Vedantic schoolmen seek to reconcile this question of the authority of the Upaniṣads and the Gītā in their bhaşyas.

The modern exegetes of the Gītā while broadly accepting the position of the Gītā as a smrti text, also present it as the gospel of Hinduism. There are several reasons for this greater emphasis on the Gītā. First of all, there is a deliberate attempt in the Gītā to bring together different strains of Hindu thought and to provide justification for a variety of religious practices. Secondly, the various yogas of the Gītā lend themselves to a socio-centric interpretation which is relevant to the needs of contemporary India. Above all, the spirit of toleration and the call for equanimity implied in the Gītā have found favour with the leaders of Indian thought. These teachings in a way augment the modern Hindu concept of "equality of all religions". Along with this, some authors lay great emphasis on the very nature of the

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[7] taditaṁ gītāśāstraṁ samastavedārthasārasaṁgrahabhutaṁ ... samastapurusarthasiddhim.

[8] sarvopanisado gāvo dogdhā gopāla nandanah partha vatsah sudhir bhakta dugdhaṁ gitamrtam mahat.

discourse in the Gītā. God in the form of Krsna addresses man. Kurtakoti, one of the reigning patriarchs in the four apostolates reputedly founded by Śankara himself, argues that Arjuna symbolises mankind, for his other name is nara, man. He writes, "So there is scriptural sanction for taking the Gītā not as a mere talk to Arjuna, but an object lesson to all humanity throughout eternity".[9] There are some commentators who hold that the Gītā is the only flawless Hindu scripture. C.V. Vasudeva Bhattathiry, a present-day Malayalam writer refers to one of them. This writer argues that the reactionary Brahmins compiled the Vedas to perpetuate their superiority and the epics too, in the main, follow the lines of the Vedas. But, he adds, in the case of the Gītā it is a direct revelation to a non-Brahmin, Arjuna.[10]

Some scholars even elevate the Gītā to the status of Śruti and as the true text of genuine Hinduism or Sanātana Dharma in that it attempts to preserve the social order.[11] Swami Chidbhavananda views the Gītā as a śruti text because it contains an exhaustive collection of spiritual laws. "These spiritual laws when applied to life are called Sanātana Dharma - eternal order and righteousness. The Gītā may therefore be treated as a manual of Sanātana Dharma".[12] One of the

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[9]Kurtakoti (Sri Śankaracarya) "Towards a New World Order - the Gita", Studies in the Gītā, ed. by M.D. Paradkar, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1970, p. 41.

[10]Cf. C.V. Vasudeva Bhattathiry, Srimad Bhagavadgītā, (in Malayalam) H & C. Stores, Kunnamkulam, 1971, p. 3.

[11]Cf. C. Rajagopalachari, Bhagavad-gītā, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Bombay, 1964, p. 12.

[12]Swami Chidbhavananda, op.cit., p. 39.

grounds to support the effort by certain exegetes to place the Gītā at the same level as the Upaniṣads is the colophon at the end of each chapter: "ity śrīmad bhagavadgītāsūpaniṣatsu brahmavidyāyām yogasāstre." V. R. Kalyanasundara Sastri claims that knowledge of Brahman (brahmaśāstra) and yogaśāstra, union with Brahman, are the purports of the Upaniṣads, and the Gītā continues these through its revelation to Arjuna. He also holds that the colophon that describes the Gītā as an Upaniṣad is reliable.[13] B. G. Tilak thinks that although these enunciative words are not to be found in the original Bhārata, they appear in all the editions of the Gītā and therefore "one may draw the inference that, that mode of enunciation must have come into vogue, when the Gītā was for the first time separated from the Mahābhārata".[14] It is clear that one cannot build an argument to support the śruti status of the Gītā from the colophon, for scholars like Belvalkar observes that the colophon is much later than the text.[15]

There is no internal evidence in the text as such where the Gītā claims to be a supra-historical revelation. On the other hand, Krsna speaks of an independent revelation when he says, "This same ancient yoga has been today declared to thee by Me; for thou art My friend; and this is the supreme secret."[16] In handing down this

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[13] V.R. Kalyanasundara Śastri, "The Gītā and the Upaniṣads", The Vedanta Kesari, Vol. LV, No. 2 (June 68) pp. 98-99.

[14] B.G. Tilak, Srimad Bhagavadgītā-Rahasya, Tilak Brothers, Poona, 3rd ed. 1971, p. 3.

[15] S.K. Belvalkar, op. cit., p. XXIX.

[16] The Bhagavadgītā, IV, 3, (In this study, we follow S. Radhakrishnan's translation of the Gītā and the text, unless otherwise stated).

"supreme secret", Krsna does not relate it to the Vedas. Radhakrishnan says that this teaching to Arjuna "is a renewal, a re-discovery, a restoration of knowledge long forgotten."[17] He goes on to add, "Religious revelation is not a past event, it is that which continues to be".[18] We may infer from Radhakrishnan's statements that though the revelation in the Gītā is given through an avatāra, it is the continuation of the Vedic revelation.

A few statements by Indian writers on the Gītā would bring home to us the reverence with which they approach this text. These writers are at one in establishing the authroity of the Gītā "for the understanding of the supreme ends of life"[19] and to serve as "a gate opening on the whole world of spiritual truth and experience"[20]. K.M. Munshi believes that it "is an intensely human document, a guide for every human situation", and in his experience it "has been a pillar of fire leading me from darkness into life".[21] M.K. Gandhi speaks of the Gītā as "a spiritual reference book"[22] and as an "Eternal Mother" who

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[17] S. Radhakrishnan, op. cit., p. 152.

[18] loc. cit.

[19] Ibid., p. 6.

[20] Aurobindo Ghose, op. cit., p. 6.

[21] K.M. Munshi, Bhagavadgītā and Modern Life, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1964, p. 19.

[22] M. K. Gandhi, The Gospel of Selfless Action, or The Gītā According to Gandhi, translated by Mahadev Desai, Navajivan Press, Ahmedabad, 1970, p. 126.

serves him "as an unfailing guide through the trials and temptations of life"[23] Vinoba Bhave speaks in the same vein and affirms that his heart and mind received more nourishment from the Gītā than his body has from his mother's milk. He says, "The Gītā is the Upaniṣad of Upaniṣads because Lord Krishna has drawn the milk of all the Upanishads and given it in the form of the Gītā to the whole world".[24] B.G. Tilak holds the view that there is no other work in the whole Sanskrit literature which explains the principles of Hinduism as succintly and unambiguously as the Gītā[25] and Kṛṣṇa gave this teaching to Arjuna when his (Kṛṣṇa's) mind was in the highest yogic state. For Tilak, Gītā is "as authoritative and venerable as the Vedas themselves."[26]

When we turn to the commentaries on the Gītā by members of various modern monastic orders we see statements extolling the Gītā as the scripture of all religions. Some of them go to the extent of saying that "all we need of spiritual truth for the spiritual life is to be found in the Gītā".[27] A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada categorically states, "...This one book, Bhagavadgītā, will suffice

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[23]M.K. Gandhi, The Teaching of the Gītā, ed. by Anand T. Hingorani, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1971, p. 45.

[24]Vinoba Bhave, op. cit., p. 3.

[25]B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. XXV, cf. p. 1.

[26]Ibid., p. 2.

[27]Quoted by Aurobindo Ghose, op. cit., p. 516.

because it is the essence of all Vedic literatures and it is spoken by the supreme Personality of Godhead".[28] Swami Chidbhavananda holds that because of the Gītā's masterly exposition of the all-absorbing issues of human life "the Bhagavadgītā may be assigned the unique status of the Scripture Universal".[29] The author of the commentary, Bhavārthabodhini (in Malyalam) echoes this view. "The teachings of the Gītā is given to the whole humanity for the attainment of the final goal, salvation".[30] Another Malayalam commentator says, "The Gītā contains all the laws of human conduct, all the principles of worldly transactions and all spiritual sciences for the entire humanity irrespective of caste and creed."[31] Swami Sivananda believes that in the "whole world-literature there is no book so elevated and so inspiring as the Gītā".[32] These are only a few selections from the innumerable statements of modern Indian religious leaders. They indicate the influence of the Gītā on the hearts and minds of millions of Indians. The All India Hindu conference in its session at Calcutta some time back passed a resolution urging the popularisation of the Gītā amongst all sections of Hindus.

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[28]A.C. Bhaktivedanta, Bhagavadgītā As It Is, Collier Books, New York, p. 28.

[29]Swami Chidbhavananda, op. cit., p. 64.

[30]Srimad Bhagavadgītā with the commentary, Bhavarthabodhini (in Malayalam) Ramakrishna Ashram, Trichur, 1970, p. III (translation mine).

[31]Kunhan Menon, Bhagavadgītā (in Malayalam) National Book Stall, Kottayam, 1966, p. 18 (translation mine).

[32]Swami Sivananda, The Bhagavad Gītā, Divine Life Society, Sivanandanagar, 1969, p. XV.

"The resolution also enjoins upon every Hindu to read the second chapter of the Gītā".[33] This is another indication of the growing authority of the Gītā and its acceptance as a "fuller scripture than the Upaniṣads".[34]

The Focus of Indian Thought

In the interpretations of the schoolmen, as we have noted above, the Bhagavadgītā has been treated as one of the three foundational texts of the Vedanta philosophy. In modern times, especially with the publication of B.G. Tilak's Gītā-Rahasya, this ancient text has become the focus of Indian thought for many writers. The leaders of the Hindu renaissance re-discovered the Gītā not only as the kernel of Indian religion and philosophy, but also "as the political and social gospel of Hindu India".[35] In the Gītā they recognized a bold synthesis of philosophy and religion and thus reconciled the claims of the head and heart. In the words of Radhakrishnan, "The Gītā attempts a spiritual synthesis which could support life and conduct on the basis of the Upaniṣad truth, which it carries into the lifeblood of the Indian people".[36] This synthesis follows another synthesis in the Upaniṣads from which the Gītā draws heavily. According to Aurobindo, the Gītā starts from this Vedantic synthesis "and upon the basis of its essential

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[33] G.V. Ketkar, "Gītā-bīja or the Main Portion of the Gītā" in Studies in the Gītā, p. 111.

[34] D.S. Sarma, Lectures on the Bhagavadgītā, N. Subba Rao Pantulu Rajamundry, 1937, p. 20.

[35] K.M. Panikkar, The Foundations of New India, Allen & Unwin London, 1963, p. 36.

[36] S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, Allen & Unwin, London, 1951, Vol. I, p. 531.

ideas builds another harmony of the three great means and powers, Love, Knowledge and Works, through which the soul of man can directly approach and cast itself into the Eternal."[37] This seems to be the overwhelming reason for the shift of focus from the Upaniṣads to the Gītā. As Mahadev Desai puts it, "The Gītā performs the unique function of making what was an esoteric doctrine a living reality for the unlettered, the lowly and the lost, and present the highest form of practical religion to enable each and all to realize his or her purpose in life".[38]

In this synthesis, the Gītā brings together various systems and religious movement and paths to the final goal of man, viz. liberation. While accepting the basic core of the Upaniṣadic philosophy, the author of the Gītā, renders validity to Karmayoga and Bhaktiyoga. In other words, the Gītā opens the portals of salvation without actually renouncing the world to practice austerities. As Radhakrishnan points out, the means of liberation shown by the Upaniṣads and by Buddhism were suitable only for the selected few, the sage and the ascetic. On the other hand, "The Gītā brings deliverance to those fettered by Karma, by opening to them the way of actions which helps them to attain freedom".[39] The starting-point of the teachings of the Gītā is the ethical conflict Arjuna faced in the battlefield. From there the text

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[37]Aurobindo Ghose, op. cit., p. 7 (Aurobindo Ghose seldom used his full name after he retired to Pondicherry and founded the Aurobindo Ashram. He was widely known as Aurobindo or Sri Aurobindo).

[38]Mahadev Desai, "My Submission", in The Gītā According to Gandhi, p. 19.

[39]S. Radhakrishnan, Religion and Society, Allen & Unwin, London, 1959, p. 74.

moves on to other areas of spirituality with a synoptic insight or all-inclusive character. Aurobindo describes this movement of thought in the following words, "(The Gītā) goes boldly beyond all these conflicting positions, greatly daring, it justifies all life to the spirit as a significant manifestation of the one Divine Being and asserts the compatability of a complete human action and a complete spiritual life lived in union with the Infinite, consonant with the highest self, expressive of the perfect Godhead".[40] It is the combination of the social duty, the following of one's dharma, with other spiritual-ethical ideals that made the Gītā the gospel of modern Hinduism. Mahadev Desai considers the Upaniṣads as the "New Testament" of Hinduism and the Gītā which stands in that tradition takes the place of the Gospels.[41]

There are many modern commentators of the Gītā who base their argument for the centrality of the Gītā in Indian thought on this synthesis of various systems of philosophy and religious ideals. The following statement of Jitendriya Bannerjee is very representative. He says, "The Gītā has taken the essence of all these systems of philosophies and propounded its own system of emancipation from the miseries of life, giving a new orientation to the Vedic Philosophy and Sacrifices".[42] If one characterizes this line of argument it would

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[40]Aurobindo Ghose, op. cit., p. 519.

[41]Mahadev Desai, op. cit., p. 19.

[42]Jitendriya Bonnerjee, The Gītā, The Song Supreme, D.B. Taraporevala, Bombay, 1962, p. 7.

run like this: Milk is readily available on the shelves of the super-market. (The Gītā is the milk of the Upaniṣads). Why then go to the farms to raise the cows and milk them? (Krsna has milked the Upaniṣadic cows and given us the milk).

The orthodox pandits would strongly disagree with this approach to the Gītā. For them, the Vedas are of unequalled authority. A summary of the essence of the Vedas, even if the Gītā were that, is no equal of the original revelation.

But the voices in support of the excellence and even sufficiency of the Gītā keep growing in numbers. M. Rangacharya, without minimizing the authority of the Vedas, holds that in the Gītā we have the focus of Indian thought because it is "the greatest harmonizer of human civilization" in the true tradition of India and the wisdom of Krsna imparted through its lines is "in full accord with the history of the development of human civilization and the growth of man's power of thought and moral capacity in all the varied aspects of his life at all times and all places."[43] In his view, sympathetic recognition and appreciation of all forms of religion and systems of thought are central to Indian tradition and the Gītā nobly upholds this.

D.D. Vadekar puts forward another interesting argument to establish the Gītā as the focus of Indian thought.[44] He grants that

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[43] M. Rangacharya, The Philosophy of Hindu Conduct, being Lectures on the Bhagavadgītā, Educational Publishing Co. Madras, 1957, Vol. I, pp. 6-7.

[44] D.D. Vadekar, Bhagavad-Gītā, A Fresh Study, Oriental Book Agency, Poona, 1928, passim.

the Gītā "is the most representative synthesis of Indian philosophic thought" in the sense we discussed above. But, more importantly, it is a synthesis in the Hegelian sense. He says, "...in the history of philosophic speculation in India, the Vedic period represents a thesis, and the Upaniṣadic period represents an antithesis, the Gītā presents a synthesis of the two".[45] In any interpretation of the Gītā, the philosophical context and background, as distinguished from the socio-political must be taken seriously, he urges. The historico-philosophical antecedents of the Gītā are undoubtedly the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. In the Vedic period, rituals dominated life. The desire to please and propitiate the deities found embodiment in the institution of yajña (sacrifice). The end of life was to secure happiness by seeking favour of the gods. According to Vadekar, "The substance of Vedic philosophy was a Theological Pluralism coupled with a practical Hedonism in ethics".[46] The Upaniṣadic search for the one reality, Brahman, behind the phenomenal world and the final goal of realizing the identity of Brahman and Atman was a reaction against the Vedic pluralism; the antithesis. Renunciation of the world in quest for the realization of the self is the highest good prescribed by the Upaniṣads. The Gītā, according to Vadekar, achieves a synthesis of the above two. It stands, "neither for the Vedic Pluralism nor the Upaniṣadic Singularism," but for the "Many which are the One and the One

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[45] D.D. Vadekar, "The Synthetic Character of the Gītā Teachings" in Studies in the Gītā, pp. 54-55.

[46] Ibid., p. 56.

which appears as the Many".[47] The Gītā teaches that it is the "One Lord who presides after the evolution of this varigated world" and "from the one stem the many; and in the many there is but One".[48] The ethical ideal that the Gītā presents is union with this "One", through jñāna (knowledge) bhakti (devotion) or karma (works). In this ideal the self finds its consummation and fulfilment. Vadekar concludes that this "Synthesis of the Gītā represents a high watermark of Indian philosophical speculation on human life and its problems".[49]

Modern Commentators of the Gītā

The Gītā is one of the most widely commented scriptures of the world, in Indian as well as in non-Indian languages. There are innumerable commentaries (bhāṣyas) and notes (ṭīkas) on it in Sanskrit. The earliest bhāṣya which is extant and the one which exerts the greatest influence on the modern writers is the bhāṣya of Śankara (A.D. 788-820). In modern times as Sanskrit has become the language of a few scholarly, the modern commentaries were written in regional languages or in English. Among the many commentaries in the regional languages only a few outstanding ones have been translated into English. This is very representative of the national movements themselves. Most of the movements, political as well as religious, were regional in origin. In the twentieth century as the nation was struggling for independence, the Indian National Congress, which led the movement, promised the

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[47] Ibid., p. 57.

[48] loc. cit.

[49] Ibid., p. 58.

people that Indian states shall be organised on the basis of language. So, as the movement for swaraj, self-rule, spread across the country during the early decades of this century, regional languages became the powerful media of nationalistic and political ideologies. This seems to be the reason for great national leaders like B.G. Tilak and M.K. Gandhi writing their commentaries on the Gītā in Marathi and Gujarati respectively. When we speak of modern commentaries on the Gītā, we do not, in view of the restriction stipulated by the title of the work, include commentaries by non-Indians, though there are some excellent commentaries from this source. These latter commentaries by the very nature of the case do not seek to go beyond the scholarly purpose of historical-critical research and interpretation. The modern Indian works on the Gītā, while taking these aspects seriously, have had something more in view. As K. Damodaran observes correctly: "...The Gītā became a powerful weapon in the hands of progressive national leaders like Tilak, Aurobindo Ghose and Mahatma Gandhi in their fight against British Imperialism".[50] Religious leaders who were not actively involved in the political struggle, saw the Gītā as the text for religious revival and renaissance.

In the classical commentaries, beginning from Śankara, the motif was to fit this text into their system of thought, Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, or whatever may be the case. In the hands of the Advaita schoolmen who followed Śankara, the Gītā became a weapon

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[50] K. Damodaran, Indian Thought, A Critical Survey, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1967, p. 193.

of dialectical warfare. Nevertheless, these commentators interpreted the Gītā as mokṣaśāstra or science of salvation. To them, salvation meant realization of the self, or God-realization as a Viśiṣṭādvaitin would put it. When the Advaitins emphasized gnosis for this end, the Viśiṣṭādvaitins put the accent on bhakti (devotion). There was no movement of thought from this central theme of individual salvation towards dharma, the social duty of the individual.[51] B.G. Tilak was the first Indian writer on the Gītā who ventured to make a departure from the traditional pattern. As a leader of the swaraj (self-rule) movement he sought to stir the Indian intellegentsia and, through them the masses to restive action against the government. "The one scripture", observes D. MacKenzie Brown, "which he found eminently suited to this role was the Bhagavad Gītā ... It was authoritative - recognized as an epitome of Brahmanic theory; it was popular - known to all sections of India; it stressed the doctrine of Karma-yoga (action) - insisting upon the warrior's duty to fight".[52] Tilak's commentary, Srimad Bhagavadgītā-Rahasya or Karma-yoga-śāstra, published in 1915 opened a new path for many other national leaders to tread.

The commentaries that are published in English as well as Indian languages, roughly fall into two categories. First of all there are many commentaries, mostly by members of the various monastic orders,

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[51] Here the term dharma is used in its limited meaning. We will delve into its wider meaning in the following chapter.

[52] D. MacKenzie Brown, "The Philosophy of Bal Gangadhar Tilak", in The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. XVII, No. 2, (Feb. 1958) p. 197.

that are structured in the traditional pattern or leaning heavily on the traditional commentaries. What is new in these writings is, in the main, a response to invading foreign religious ideologies. From the nature of this response, it was bound to become apologetic. However, in the hands of these leaders of religious thought, the Gītā became an instrument of religious revival. Secondly, there are commentaries and studies on the Gītā which are oriented towards national and ideological issues; social, political and religious. The purport of these new expositions was to forge a dynamic ideology that can face up to the challenges of the day. This attempt naturally led to the re-interpretation of certain concepts and to the re-shaping of the notions of dharma by appealing directly to mokṣa or the view of metaphysical Reality that is implied in them. The expositions of national leaders like B.G. Tilak, M.K. Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, K.M. Munshi, and to some extent S. Radhakrishnan fall under this category.[53] In our study of the patterns of Twentieth Century Indian Interpretations, we shall be concentrating on the latter.

In a study like this, there are many limitations. There are scores of modern commentaries on the Gītā in Indian languages, besides those many in English. It is practically impossible to deal however so inadequately with the major ones in each of the language, as the scope is too large even if one possessed knowledge of all the pertinent languages. So, our approach has to be selective. Fortunately for us,

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[53] Radhakrishnan's "Introductory Essay" and "Notes" to his translation of the Gītā, more or less follow the pattern of traditional tīkas.

all the commentaries which acquired a national reputation, have been translated into English. The principle of selection has to be applied to authors as well. We have given priority to the expositions of national leaders, who played a prominent role in the life of the nation in this century. Our need for limitation also applies to the period under study. It is limited to Twentieth Century primarily because the new approach to this religious text was heralded only in 1915 with the publication of Tilak's Gītā-Rahasya, as we noted above. Secondly, it is in this century that India witnessed and is still witnessing a national and ideological struggle of immense proportions. It is also necessary to note what we are not attempting in this study. We shall not enter into a critical or historical study of the text, nor shall we attempt to examine the relationship of the modern commentators to the classical ones. Such a study would no doubt be rewarding, but that will take us too far a-field, and cannot feasibly become a thesis with some unity.

In the following pages an attempt is made to discuss the patterns of interpretations of the Gītā by some modern leaders of Indian thought. That would mean an examination of the modern Hindu religious consciousness as revealed in these commentaries. The question that we shall be asking continuously is this: How do the national leaders of India (monks and political leaders both included) re-shape the age-old concepts and ideologies of this ancient text, to prepare India to face the problems of the present? Our search will touch social, political and religious realms of Indian life. This study of

the patterns of these expositions of the Gītā, one hopes, would be as clear an index as any for the religious and spiritual aspirations of modern India.

CHAPTER II

THE GĪTĀ DOCTRINE OF DHARMA

The transcendental goal Hinduism places before its followers is mukṭi, the final release from the wheel of existence. The way to this ultimate spiritual end of life winds through the rough and complex terrain of social life. Thinkers from the Vedic times onwards took up the problems of this pilgrimage fervently and provided the devotees with elaborate guidelines. These guidelines for social living which is search of the final goal, formed a powerful social ideology that in course of time came to constitute dharma. The concept of dharma has two distinct aspects, viz, individual or particular and social or universal. In the Gītā there was a crystallization of the social ideologies that were in vogue at that time and the concept of dharma was interpreted at length in various discourses. The very context in which the discourses are given is the confusion of Arjuna about his dharma.[1] This is the individual aspect of the concept. The universal aspect is taken up most directly when Krsna argues that the purpose of avatāra (incarnation) is to protect dharma.[2] Thus, the doctrine of dharma, as it has been developed in the Gītā, has a far-reaching significance for both individual and social life. This doctrine, as a powerful social ideology, played a crucial role in shaping the nature

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[1] Prcchāmi tvāṁ dharmasammudhacetah (Bhagavadgītā II.7).

[2] paritrāṇāya sādhūnaṁ vināśaya ca duṣkṛtām dharma saṁsthāpanārthāya saṁbhavāmi yuge-yuge (Bhagavadgītā, IV.8).

and destiny of the Indian society.

The word dharma comprehends a wide range of meanings. In common parlance dharma has come to mean "the path leading to the next-world".[3] Here the path stands for one's religion, whether Vedic, Buddhist or Christian. Tilak rightly points out that this is a very restricted meaning of the word dharma and we have to take into account the wider connotation of the word in such expressions as rājadharma (the duty of kings) prajādharma (the duty of subjects), jātidharma (the duty pertaining to a caste) kuladharma, (the duty pertaining to a clan or family) etc.[4] Kautilya, the great political theorist, enumerates the four ideals of manhood (purusārtha), giving the first place to dharma, the other three being artha, (wealth) kāma, (desire) and moksa, (release). In Kautilya, as well as in Manu, the giver of Law Code (Manavadharma śāstra) dharma has acquired the wider meaning of morality and ethics. As we noted above, dharma was never independent of the final goal, mukti, in any of the Hindu Scriptures.

In the Karnaparva of the Mahābhārata (Ma.Bha. Karna 69.59) the author puts the etymological derivation of the word dharma into the mouth of Krsna himself. He says "The word Dharma comes from the root dhr, i.e., to hold or uphold and all human beings are held together by dharma. That by which the holding together (of all human beings)

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[3] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 88.

[4] loc. cit.

takes place is dharma."[5] It possibly also has the additional meaning of, "to sustain",[6] from which itself, it is clear that the social ideal that is enshrined in the concept of dharma holds the society together and sustains it by the moral law ensuing from it. Tilak draws the right conclusion about dharma as a moral law which maintains the society when he says, "When this dharma ceases to be observed, the binding ropes of society may be said to have become loose, and when these binding ropes are loosened, society will be in the same position as the planetary system consisting of the sun and planets would be in the sky without the binding force of gravitation or as a ship would be on the ocean without a rudder."[7]

Meaning of Svadharma

The teachings of the Gītā center around the predicament in which Arjuna found himself in the battlefield, Kuruksetra. Krsna deals with this concrete human situation, viz. Arjuna's doubts about the nature of his duty, his kuladharma as a Ksatriya, rather than with any abstract problem. It is true that as the teachings develop the discourses lead Arjuna beyond the pale of the immediate problems to the wider problems of man, his relation to Ultimate Reality and to society at large. Having surveyed the lines of the battle, Arjuna was overcome with grief and pity. He thought that a fratricidal war

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[5]Quoted by B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 90.

[6]Swami Nikhilananda, The Bhagavadgītā, Text with Commentary, p. 12, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre, New York, 1944, p. 12.

[7]B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 91.

would destroy all the values that have been cherished by him. The war would destroy the family and with that its age-long traditions and customs, with the disappearance of which the entire family passes under the grip of adharma or unrighteousness. With the rise of adharma the women in the family would become corrupt and when women abandon the path of virtue, there results a licentious intermixture of various social classes (varṇas).[8] So, Arjuna argued, he would rather let himself be killed in the battlefield, "unresisting and unarmed,"[9] than kill his kith and kin for the sake of the Kingdom. To this attitude of pity and faintheartedness, Krsna replies that Arjuna must lead his army into the battle and carry out his dharma as a Kṣatriya. He urges Arjuna, "Further, having regards for thine own duty, (svadharma) thou shouldst not falter; there exists no greater good for a Ksatriya than battle enjoined by duty."[10] Though some of these verses in Krsna's argument amount to insinuation ,[11] the final imperative is to perform dharma through desireless action.[12] The all-important question in approaching the Gītā doctrine of dharma is,

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[8] Bhagavadgītā, I.39-41.

[9] Ibid., I. 46.

[10] Ibid., II. 31.

[11] Ibid., II. 31-38. Verse 37 offers the reward of the righteous war: heaven, if slain in the field of action; kingdom, if the war is won.

[12] Ibid., II. 47.

"What world-view lies behind the divine command to carry out slaughter in a fratricidal war?" To comprehend this enigma is to comprehend the concept of dharma in the Gītā.

Krsna's command to Arjuna to perform his svadharma without any desire for fruits, has had more far-reaching social significance than any other scriptural teaching in the socio-religious life of India. The statement in the fourth discourse, "The fourfold caste has been created by me according to the differentiation of guṇa and karma",[13] supports the view that svadharma specifically means caste duty. We will turn to the various interpretations of this verse later. If one takes the liberty to generalise, the whole burden of the Gītā is to drive home to Arjuna the nobility of kuladharma, caste duty. Tilak has no doubt about the implication of the teaching of the Gītā on svadharma. He writes "...in the Bhagavadgītā the word dharma has been used as meaning 'the duties of the four castes in this world', in the expression: svadharman api caveksya", where the Blessed Lord is telling Arjuna to fight, having regard to what his dharma is, and also later on the expression: "svadharme nidhanaṁ śreyah paradharmo bhayāvahaḥ" (Bhagavadgītā III.35) i.e., it is better to die performing one's caste duties; following the duties enjoined on another caste is dangerous".[14] S.N. Dasgupta is in complete agreement with this understanding of the Gītā doctrine of dharma. He writes,

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[13] cāturvarṇyaṁ mayā sṛṣṭaṁ guṇakarma vibhāgaśaḥ (Bhagavadgītā IV.13).

[14] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 89.

> "The word 'dharma' seems to be used in the Gītā primarily in the sense of an unalterable customary order of class-duties or caste-duties and the general approved course of conduct for the people and also in the sense of prescribed schemes of conduct. The meaning of dharma as 'old customary order' is probably the oldest meaning of the word. Dharma does not mean in the Gītā sacrifices (yajña) or external advantages....but the order of conventional practices involving specific caste-divisions and caste-duties".[15]

Some commentators, while agreeing on the outward aspect of the fourfold division of society, put the stress on the inborn nature of the individual, which really decides his place in the society. Vinoba Bhave says that Arjuna was confused in the battlefield, because "he was at odds with his svadharma". Vinoba goes on to add, "But however unattractive a man's svadharma may be, he has to find fulfilment by persisting in it, because it is only through such persistence that growth is possible."[16] In Vinoba's opinion one's svadharma consists in following one's true vocation.[17] This vocation, according to the Gītā is the natural self-expression of man's character, svabhāva, which is produced by one or more of the three guṇas, satva, rajas and tamas. Both Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo use the same phrase, 'law of action', to translate the idea of svadharma. Radhakrishnan writes, "His (Arjuna's) svadharma or law of action, requires him to engage in battle. Protection of right by the acceptance of battle, if necessary, is the social duty of the Kṣatriya, and not renunciation."[18]

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[15] S. N. Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy, University Press, Cambridge, 1961, Vol. II, p. 486.

[16] Vinoba Bhave, op. cit., p. 7-8.

[17] Ibid., p. 9.

[18] S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 112.

Aurobindo gives expression to the same idea in the following words, "At the very start it (the Gītā) has spoken of the nature, rule, and function of the Kṣatriya as Arjuna's own law of action, svadharma; it has proceeded to lay it down with a striking emphasis that one's own nature, rule, function should be observed and followed, -- even if defective, it is better than the well performed rule of another's nature."[19] The four distinct orders of caste are orders of the active nature, or "four fundamental types of the soul in nature, svabhāva, and the work and function of each human being corresponds to his type of nature."[20] This 'nature' of a person is shaped according to the depth of his participation in one of the guṇas mentioned above.

The Gītā accepts the Samkhya doctrine of the three essential qualities or modes of prakrti, viz. sattva, rajas and tamas. The fourteenth discourse concentrates on these qualities or guṇas. These guṇas, according to the Gītā are "sprung from prakṛti"[21] and they guide the destiny of an individual. Among these guṇas, sattva is the mode of pairs, "light-giving and healing".[22] Rajas is the mode of passion, "the source of thirst and attachment" and it keeps a man bound with the bond of action.[23] Tamas is the source of ignorance and

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[19]Aurobindo Ghose, op. cit., p. 466.

[20]Ibid., p. 467.

[21]Bhagavadgītā, XIV.5.

[22]Ibid., XIV.6.

[23]Ibid.,XIV.7.

inertia; "it keeps him bound with heedless sloth and slumber."[24] No man is exclusively the product of one of these guṇas. Gandhi sees in this mixture of guṇas, the making of human persons, the road to perfection, "the ascent of man". He writes, "We have each of us to rise to a state in which we are governed predominantly by the sattva principle, until at last we rise beyond the three and are 'Perfect Man'".[25] The great discipline given by the Gītā does not stop with the conquering of the lower guṇas, rajas and tamas, but by transcending all the three guṇas. The Gītā says, "The Vedas have as their domain the three guṇas, but do thou become free from these guṇas, (nistraiguṇya) O Arjuna. Free thyself from the pairs of opposites, abide in eternal truth (nityasattvastha), not caring for acquisition and preservation, and be possessed of the self."[26] The ability to transcend the guṇas, to become a triguṇatita, is the mark of the liberated self. According to Vinoba Bhave, we can completely transcend the two lower modes. But when it comes to sattva, we should discipline our souls in such a way that it becomes part of our nature. He writes, "When we are absorbed in svadharma, rajas loses its glamour; for then the mind is one-pointed."[27] In the case of sattva, it should pervade every pore of our beings. "When sattva becomes so much our nature, we should

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[24] Ibid., XIV.8.

[25] M.K. Gandhi, The Gospel of Selfless Action, or The Gītā According to Gandhi, p. 328.

[26] Bhagavadgītā, II.45.

[27] Vinoba Bhave, op. cit., p. 225.

cease to be proud of it. This is the way to make sattva harmless, to achieve victory, over it"[28] Vinoba concedes that,"so long as we have a body, we have to take our stand on something".[29]

The above interpretation of sattva seems to arise from the expression, nityasattvastha, of II.45 quoted above. In this Vinoba is only following the classical commentators, Śankara and Ramanuja. They took nityasattva to mean sattvaguṇa. Radhakrishnan understands the expression not as "the mode of sattva which Arjuna is asked to go beyond, but [is] eternal truth."[30] B.S. Sukthankar, translator of Gītā-Rahasya also takes this meaning, i.e. eternal truth. In a footnote he says, "As sattva is one of the three constituents, and as the Blessed Lord has just asked Arjuna to be 'beyond the three constituents", 'nityasattvastha' cannot be understood as referring to the sattva constituent".[31] Since the Fourteenth discourse clearly says that sattva binds man to his body by conscious happiness and knowledge, liberation, if it is to be real, it must transcend even the highest mode of the three constituents whose interplay account for the diversity of human svabhāva and dharma. Mahadev Desai, the translator and commentator of The Gospel of Selfless Action, sees this injunction in the Gītā and writes, "He who has seen the play and interplay of the guṇas

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[28] Ibid., p. 228.

[29] Ibid., p. 226.

[30] S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 118.

[31] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 889 (footnote).

and who can detach himself from them, he who can isolate himself from them and realize the unity at the basis of this diversity is a seer - a tattvavid who has known the truth of things, he is free, his action does not bind him, his action is no action."[32]

When the guṇas are taken as the constitutive stuff of man, the stuff that determines the svabhāva and thereby the svadharma of man, the Gītā is borrowing the determinism of the Sāṁkhya philosophy. In Aurobindo's view, only the ego-self, the lower self, is under the power of this determinism. He writes, "It is really the ego which is subject to Nature, inevitably, because it is itself part of the Nature, one functioning of his machinery....And so too what we think of ordinarily as the soul is really the natural personality, not the true person, the Purusha, but the desire-soul in us which is a reflection of the consciousness of the Purusha in the workings of the Prakṛiti."[33] But when the individual self is "one with the Ishvara, the master of our nature",[34] man is able to use nature without subjection to the chain of karma, for the purpose of the divine will. In the words of Aurobindo, "freedom, the highest self-mastery begins when above the natural self we see and hold the supreme Self of which the ego is an obstructing veil and a blinding shadow."[35] In the light of this freedom, the modes

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[32]Mahadev Desai, "My Submission", in The Gosepl of Selfless Action, p. 31.

[33]Aurobindo Ghose, op. cit., p. 195.

[34]Ibid., p. 192, Bhagavadgītā, II.51 speaks of this unity with the Divine and the freedom from the bonds of birth.

[35]Aurobindo Ghose, op. cit., p. 202.

of nature form "a principle and will of our becoming". The guṇas become "the law of action determined by this svabhāva (the principle of our becoming), is our right law of self-shaping, function, working our swadharma".[36] We will have to look into the various aspects of the concept of svadharma to see whether it really is the "right law of self-shaping."

Dharma and Its Relation to Mukti

The final goal of all spiritual striving is release or mukti from the cycle of life and death. This position of the Gītā is in line with the general current of Indian philosophical thought. But, this final goal is beyond logical proof. It transcends the realm of mind and language.[37] It has been aptly said that "one who claims to fully know it and starts giving a full description of it does not know it in reality."[38] Therefore, it is not surprising that the Gītā does not give a discourse on the nature of release or the released. However, we have in the Gītā clear references to the state of the final goal in general terms. It (mukti) is spoken of as brahmasthiti[39] (life eternal, as Radhakrishnan has it), 'state of immortality,[40] 'infinite eternal bliss'[41] absence of return, i.e., final liberation from births

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[36] Ibid., p. 476.

[37] Yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha (Taittiryopaniṣad)

[38] G.W. Kaveeshwar, The Ethics of the Gītā, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1971, p. 198.

[39] Cf. Bhagavadgītā, II.72, IV.31, V.6,19,20.

[40] Cf. Bhagavadgītā, II.15, XIII.12, XI.20,27.

[41] Cf. Bhagavadgītā, V 21, VI.27,28, XIV.27.

and deaths,[42] 'crossing of the ocean of māyā,[43] and so on. This same state is also described in clearer Advaitic terms as 'the union of the individual soul with the Universal Being',[44] or of the 'realization of the spiritual identity of all beings.'[45] The classical commentators, because of their preoccupation with the idea of mukti, mokṣa, saw the Gītā primarily as a text which teaches mokṣaśāstra, (science of release). In this undue concern for the final end of life or other worldliness as we may be tempted to call it, they failed to see the relation between the final goal and the steps which lead to it. In other words, only the 'God-ward' aspect of the teachings of the Gītā was discovered and interpreted by the earlier commentators. It was left to the modern interpretor to delve into the this-worldly aspect and bring out its significance.

Mukti is not something to be discovered anew by the mind. It is an intuitive grasping of the identity of the individual soul with the Universal Being. Several steps, such as the control of the senses, renunciation of the fruit of action, pursuit of the good of all, are mentioned as the steps leading to the final goal. But, all these are contained in the concept of svadharma. Though the liberated soul is

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[42]Cf. Bhagavadgītā, II.51, V 17, XII 7, XII.23, XIV.20.

[43]Cf. Bhagavadgītā, VII.14.

[44]Cf. Bhagavadgītā, VI.31, VII.18,19, XI.54,55, XII.4,8, etc.

[45]Cf. Bhagavadgītā, IV.35, VI.29.

no more under the obligation to perform his dharma, "There is such a thing as desireless action which he undertakes for the welfare of the world".[46] The Gītā injunction to perform one's dharma, the work that has to be done, without attachment, is to be understood in this light. "Man attains the highest by doing work without attachment".[47] It is to be admitted that the Gītā does not clearly spell out the relation between the final end of life, mukti, and the dharma which a man has to perform in this world. This ambiguity provides the commentators with enough room to overlook dharma as a means which leads to mukti. Śankara's interpretation of the above verse is a clear example of this. He holds that the performance of duties only helps us to attain purity of mind which leads to salvation. It takes us to perfection indirectly through the attainment of purity of mind.[48] Aurobindo's position regarding dharma and its relation to final release is closer to Śankara's, though in many other aspects he radically differs from the ācārya. Aurobindo writes, "To follow the law of its being, svardharma, to develop the idea in its being, svabhāva, is its ground and safety, its right walk and procedure."[49] Through this path of svadharma, the soul purifies itself by "the pursuit of the impulse of works and service rightly done develops

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[46] S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 138.

[47] Bhagavadgītā, III.19.

[48] Śankara's Commentary on the Bhagavadgītā, III.19.

[49] Aurobindo Ghose, op. cit., p. 477.

knowledge, increases power, trains closeness of balance of mutuality and skill and order of relation."[50] Aurobindo asserts that following svadharma is the surest way "to make our whole life a sacrifice of works to the Highest is to prepare ourselves to become one with him in all our will and substance and nature".[51] It is to be noted that while Śankara sees dharma as purifying the mind, Aurobindo understands its function as preparing us for the final end, i.e. union with the Universal Being.

In Gandhi's thinking, mukti is inseparably related to one's dharma. He has no doubt that "self-realization is the subject of the Gītā, as it is the object of all scriptures", and Gītā teaches "the most excellent way to attain self-realization".[52] He asserts that one can attain liberation through dharma by plunging oneself deep into it but without being attached. Dharma has to be performed for its own sake, without any desire whatsoever for a certain result of fruit or return. Such performance of dharma leads to knowledge which in turn brings release. In his view, dharma is by no means limited to the particular duties of caste at all. All strivings toward salvation, which is "perfect peace",[53] whether it be through devotion, renunciation of the fruits of action, or thirst for the knowledge of God, are different

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[50] Ibid., p. 480.

[51] Ibid., p. 481.

[52] M.K. Gandhi, The Gospel of Selfless Action, p. 129.

[53] Ibid., p. 130.

faces of the dharma. The final goal, according to him is not something apart from the means. "In other words, if the means and end are not identical, they are almost so."[54]

Tilak begins his analysis of the relation between dharma and release by accepting the four goals (puruṣārthas) of life laid down by Indian philosophers. He holds that the principal duty of man "is to discern the essential principle underlying the Body and the Cosmos; and this is what is known as 'Release' in religion."[55] The "usual activities of the visible world" consist of dharma (duty) artha (wealth) and kāma (desire). Release (mokṣa) is the transcendental goal of life. Tilak interprets dharma in this fourfold goal, as worldly, social and moral duty. He pertinently raises the question, whether these four ends of life (puruṣārthas) "are or are not mutually promotive?"[56] In his opinion, the verbal differences about the doctrine that there is no release unless a man has acquired the knowledge of that fundamental principle "which pervades the body and the cosmos"[57] is not fundamental. He is categorical in denying that the Gītā religion teaches only the way of knowledge for salvation. The Gītā clearly accepts the doctrine that if one has to acquire the two parts of the goal, viz. 'wealth' and 'desire', that has to be done according to the dharma

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[54] Ibid., p. 130.

[55] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 657.

[56] loc. cit.

[57] Ibid., p. 658.

(moral principles). The only question which remains to be sorted out is "the mutual relationship between dharma and release".[58] All shades of opinion accept the view that release can be achieved only through the purification of mind by means of dharma. "Therefore, even considering the matter from the point of view of Release, it follows that worldly life has got to be done through consistently with 'dharma' in the period of time before purification of the mind."[59] Tilak argues that if a man is not faithful to his dharma in discharging his worldly responsibilities, how can he be successful in realizing the final goal? In his thinking, the path of knowledge (jñānamārga) which advocates for the highest importance to spiritual knowledge after the abandonment of worldly affairs is not in agreement with the teachings of the Gītā. He writes,

> But the Gītā religion says to the contrary that not only is dharma necessary for the purification of the mind, but it is necessary to continue doing the same actions merely as duties, and as part of one's religion, and desirelessly, and for the good of others, even afterwards, that is, after the purification of the mind, although worldly activities in the shape of enjoyment of objects of pleasure may become unnecessary for one's own benefit.[60]

We have seen above that dharma, performed in the spirit in which the Gītā presents it, leads to the final goal of life. The ends of life, whether related to this world or the next, are mutually encompassing; one gives direction and fulfilment to the other. The

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[58] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 658.

[59] loc. cit.

[60] Ibid., p. 659.

final release which is totally free from dharma is shallow, in the view of most of the modern commentators of the Gītā. Spiritual freedom is by no means inconsistent with duty.[61] The liberated are to follow their dharma, so long as they are in the world. They have to do the works for the welfare of the world.[62] This leads us to the social implications of dharma.

Dharma the Highest Social Goal

Arjuna has been enjoined to fight heroically because it is his dharma as a Kṣatriya to maintain the stability of the social order and the faith of men in that order. The command to perform one's dharma "with a view to the maintenance of the world", goes beyond the purview of dharma as kuladharma, caste-duty. Though the concept of dharma always had the individual and the social aspect, the accent was mainly on the former in the salvation oriented interpretations of the Gītā. The social aspect of dharma goes beyond the caste duty performed for its own sake. Arjuna has to fight, not only to maintain his good name as a soldier,[63] but to maintain the order of the world[64] and to be an example to those who are ignorant of the meaning of dharma.[65]

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[61]Cf. S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 73.

[62]Cf. Bhagavadgītā, III.20.

[63]Cf. Bhagavadgītā, II.34.

[64]Cf. Bhagavadgītā, III.20.

[65]Cf. Bhagavadgītā, III.26.

In verse 20 of chapter III, the purpose of action or duty has been designated as lokasaṁgraha. This word is pregnant with the social connotations of the Gītā concept of dharma. It has been translated as 'maintenance of the world' (Radhakrishnan) 'universal welfare' (Tilak), 'guidance and control of the world' (Rangacharya), 'guidance of men' (Swami Chidbhavananda), etc. Radhakrishnan says that the word stands for the unity of the world and the interconnectedness of society.[66] Rangacharya summarizes the different interpretations of the word as follows: "This word has been somewhat variously interpreted to mean the accomplishment of the good of the world so as to prevent it from going astray, the inducement offered to the world so as to make it adopt the life which we consider to be good for it".[67] This, in Rangacharya's thinking is 'guidance and control of the world'. Referring to verse 25, which also speaks of the welfare of humanity, he says, "The expression lokasaṁgraha really means taking the world along with one".[68] Tilak analyses the word and the concept at greater length. To him, the idea of dharma which is related to the universal welfare, is a central theme of the Gītā, which gives life and blood to his doctrine of the pre-eminence of Karmayoga. He writes, "The word loka in the phrase 'lokasaṁgraha' has a comprehensive meaning, and includes the putting, not only of mankind, but the entire world, on a proper

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[66] S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 139.

[67] M. Rangacharya, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 207.

[68] Ibid., p. 207.

path, and making a 'saṁgraha' of it, that is maintaining, feeding, protecting and defending it in a proper way, without allowing it to be destroyed".[69] This comprehensive meaning of lokasaṁgraha provides us with a new and dynamic social content for dharma itself. It is wrong to read that the role of the 'world-maintenance' is only for the enlightened people like King Janaka of the Ramayana. It is a social doctrine with wider implications for every one who seeks the noble ends of life. But, one has to note that there are some commentators, who think that the special role of serving and guiding the society is for the spiritually enlightened. Swami Chidbhavananda, for example, maintains that the ignorant cannot guide the society any more than the blind lead the blind. Therefore, he holds, "The enlightened are the best servants of the society. The nature of karma is also very well known to them. Efficient work on right can be turned out by them."[70] This argument does not hold water, in the light of the context of the Gītā. Arjuna, to whom the Gītā is addressed, was not an enlightened individual when he was asked to fight the battle for the welfare of the world. It would be more correct to say that both the liberated and the non-liberated have to be in the business of lokasaṁgraha. The "liberated man still do works for the right government and leading on the peoples in these worlds, lokasaṁgraha [for] he is the friend of

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[69] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 927.

[70] Swami Chidbhavananda, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 241.

all existence".[71] For the non-liberated, it is the means which leads him to fulfilment of life. King Janaka attained to perfection," by equal and desireless works done as a sacrifice, without the least egoistic aim or attachment."[72]

Dharma, as we have noted above, not only leads a man to self-purification, but also enables him to be an instrument in serving and guiding the world. Radhakrishnan urges, "The emphasis of the Gītā on lokasaṁgraha, world-solidarity, requires us to change the whole pattern of our life."[73] The social aspect of dharma, requires us to lay stress on human brotherhood, as Radhakrishanan sees it. It is on the basis of this understanding that he calls karma marga, "the path of service" which leads to mokṣa.[74] But, for Radhakrishnan, lokasaṁgraha does not stop with the idea of welfare of the society or human brotherhood. He believes that lokasaṁgraha implies the spiritualisation of society and the control of social action by the principles of religious ethics. He writes perhaps in a romantic vein, "In an age of hope and energy we emphasize active service in the world and the saving of civilization". It is a matter of debate whether the Gītā agrees with him when he goes on to affirm with Boethius that "he will never go to heaven who is content to go alone".[75] P.N. Srinivasachari agrees with

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[71] Aurobindo Ghose, op. cit., p. 217.

[72] Ibid., p. 122.

[73] S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 71.

[74] S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, Vol. I, p. 566.

[75] S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 140.

Radhakrishnan. He writes, "The summum bonum of life is not merely the attainment of spirituality and mukti for oneself, but service to all jivas so that they may also enjoy the bliss of divine life."[76] One has to note, that the important question in this context is, whether the Gītā supports this type of universalism and sarva mukti, salvation of all. If it does, modern Indian commentators do not bring it out clearly.

It is Tilak, more than any one else, who saw in the idea of lokasamgraha, seeds of a dynamic social philosophy. He maintains that individualism defeats the very purpose and plan of human life and should be replaced by the ideal of corporate life and co-operative effort. Those who give up their social dharma, for the sake of seclusion and contemplative life, according to Tilak, violate the rules of cosmic ethics. In his view, lokasaṁgraha means, "binding men together, and protecting, maintaining and regulating them in such a way that they might acquire that strength which results from mutual co-operation, thereby putting them on the path of acquiring merit while maintaining their good condition."[77] He points out that Manu has used the word in the same sense, i.e., 'welfare of the nation'. Even though lokasaṁgraha has this primary meaning of 'welfare of man' it really goes beyond the world of men. There are other lokas (worlds) such as pitṛloka, devaloka, etc. These worlds are also to be maintained

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[76] P.N. Srinivasachari, The Ethical Philosophy of the Gītā, Ramakrishna Math, Madras, 1966, p. 136.

[77] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 456.

properly. So, Tilak thinks that lokasaṁgraha has the wider meaning of maintaining various worlds (lokasaṁgraha=lokānām saṁgrahah). The maintanance of these several worlds, according to the Gītā, "are mutually beneficial, to the gods, as well as men".[78] In other words, the concept embraces cosmic solidarity and welfare.

Tilak has nothing to do with the commentators who interpret the concept of lokasaṁgraha half-heartedly, and who thereby imply that the Jñānins are not bound to act for the welfare of the world. He points out that when a man realizes his identity, he is one with the universe. "I am in all created beings and all created beings are in me." This means that the Jñāni is not free from his dharma to the rest of the world. He quotes a very telling passage from the Yoga-Vasiṣṭha: "So long as the duty of looking after other people (that is, lokasaṁgraha) remains to howsoever small an extent, it cannot be said that the state of the person, who has attained Yoga, has become free from blame."[79] It is pure selfishness, as Tilak sees it, for a man to be "engrossed in the happiness of meditation", while there are millions of people to whom he is bound by an inseparable bond, the bond of the all pervading self. Besides, Tilak maintains, it is natural that noble sentiments of sympathy towards all other beings must arise in the minds of people who know that "there is only one Atman in all created beings and the trend of his mind must naturally be towards

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[78] Ibid., p. 457.

[79] Ibid., p. 460.

universal welfare."[80]

The division of the society into four castes, as Tilak sees it, is a divine plan for the maintenance of the world. Every one in society, whether a Brahmin or Śudra, has one's part to play in the protection of the society. "Therefore", Tilak concludes, "I have to mention here emphatically, that lokasaṁgraha according to the Gītā means, giving to other people a living example of how one can perform desirelessly all the various activities, which are allotted to one, according to the arrangement of castes."[81] The dharma of every individual, whatever may be his social position has to be performed with a sense of dedication, without any hope for the reward. The universal welfare depends on each member of the society and his dharma becomes the worship of the Supreme Lord when he has the welfare of others in mind. All actions, when it is performed in this spirit, "are essentially the same, that the fault if any, lies in the reason of the doer, and not in the action (karma) and that when a man performs all his actions after establishing his reason, he thereby only performs the worship of the Paramesvara, and, not having committed any sin, ultimately attains release".[82] He warns against entertaining high hopes about the results of one's service to the society. Hope for the fruit may lead to unhappiness. "You must perform action, keeping

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[80] Ibid., p. 461

[81] Ibid., p. 462.

[82] Ibid., p. 690.

in sight (saṁpaśyan) public welfares, instead of saying that 'lokasaṁgrahartha' means, for obtaining fruits in the shape of public welfare."[83] Tilak, it would seem, is at pains to limit his interpretation of dharma and service to the teachings of the scriptures, even though he tries his best to bring out the meaning of scriptural injunctions. He does not dare to oppose established conventions. This makes him say, "The chief conclusion of the ethics of the Gītā is, that one must perform all one's duties according to the Śastras, desirelessly and by Self-Identification, and this applies equally well to all persons in all countries."[84] In other words, Tilak's otherwise radical approach has been restrained by his allegiance to the scriptures. This raises the important question, which Kaveeshwar very pertinently asks, "If one feels it imperative to oppose a prevalent custom in the interest of the wider social good itself, what guiding principle should he adopt in such a crisis?"[85] Tilak, in a way, evades this question.

We see in Aurobindo a totally different approach to the concept of dharma as service or universal welfare, as Tilak interprets it. To Aurobindo, the Gītā does not teach human action, but divine action. He completely rejects "the ideal of disinterested performance of social duties", and says that the modern ideal of social service is foreign to the Gītā. He writes, "...not the performance of social duties, but the abandonment of all other standards of duty or conduct for a selfless

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[83] Ibid., p. 466.

[84] Ibid., p. 696.

[85] G.W. Kaveeshwar, op. cit., p. 244.

performance of the divine will working through our nature; not social service, but the action of the Best, the God possessed, the Master-men done impersonally for the sake of the world and as a sacrifice to Him who stands behind man and Nature."[86] Aurobindo agrees that works have to be done "with the same desirelessness after the liberation and perfection", as did the great Karmayogis like Janaka. But he opposes all kinds of pragmatic tendencies "concerned much more with the present affairs of the world than with any high and far-off spiritual"[87] possibilities. He rejects any idea of "a large moral and intellectual altruism" in the concept of lokasaṁgraha as taught by the Gītā, and states that what the Gītā means is "a spiritual unity with God and with this world of beings who dwell in him and in whom he dwells".[88] He is inclined to see patriotism, cosmopolitanism, service of society and other noble expressions of the human soul which may fall under the category of 'universal welfare' as "admirable aids towards our escape from our primary condition of individual, family, social, national egoism into a secondary stage", where the individual realizes his oneness with other beings. But, this is a level, where man cannot entirely do it the perfect way, "the way of the integral truth of his being." Aurobindo asserts, "The thought of the Gītā reaches beyond to a tertiary condition of our developing self-consciousness towards which the secondary is only a partial stage of

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[86] Aurobindo Ghose, op. cit., p. 28.

[87] Ibid., p. 123.

[88] loc. cit.

advance."[89]

Aurobindo puts the welfare of the individual -- that is his integral development -- above the welfare of the society. He takes into task the Indian social tendency to subordinate the individual to the claims of the society. (It is very doubtful, whether such a tendency existed at all, especially in the early twenties of this century when he wrote his Essays on the Gītā.) He is one with the Indian religious thought and spiritual seeking which have been always loftily individualistic in their aims. According to Aurobindo the goal set by the Indian religious thought the Gītā being the embodiment of that for the individual "was to exceed himself,...not by losing all his personal aims in the aims of an organised human society, but by enlarging, heightening, aggrandising himself into the consciousness of the Godhead."[90] From this he moves on to his theory of the superman, which according to many critics, is a notion difficult to trace in the Indian scriptures or philosophical thought for that matter. He claims, "The rule given here by the Gītā is the rule for the masterman, the superman, the divinised human being, the Best, ... the man whose personality has been offered up into the being, nature and consciousness of the transcendent and universal Divinity and by the loss of the smaller self has found it greater self, has been divinised."[91] We can appreciate this position only in the light of Aurobindo's philosophy.

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[89] loc. cit.

[90] Ibid., p. 124.

[91] loc. cit.

The evolutionary movement of nature can be hastened by the dynamic will of man, according to him. "His superman", as Sukumar Azhikode observes, "and supermanhood are the inevitable destiny of man; not an empty dream. It is not to be received as a gift of the evolutionary process in the future, but to be attained by the yogi, by his will".[92] However, it is to be noted that in the scheme of Aurobindo, lokasaṁgraha has a place, when it forms part of the striving of the human soul towards perfection. When the idea of service fits into that wider scheme, it becomes a divine goal. This is to say that universal welfare has no value and meaning apart from the integral experience of oneness with the universal Divinity. He writes, "To act for the lokasaṁgraha, impersonally for the keeping and leading of the peoples on the path of the divine goal, is a rule which rises necessarily from the oneness of the soul with the Divine, the Universal Being, since that is the whole sense and drift of the universal action."[93]

Varnāśrama Dharma and the Limits of Human Freedom

The Gītā doctrine of dharma, as we have seen above, is inseparably linked with the fourfold social order. In the Gītā, Krsna ... himself claims to be the creator of this division. "The fourfold order was created by Me according to the divisions of quality and work. Though I am its creator, know me to be incapable of action or change."[94] This verse has been used by the protagonists of the caste system to

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[92]Sukumar Azhikode, "Aravindante Yogadarsanam" (in Malayalam) in The Mathrubhumi Weekly, Calicut, Vol. L, No. 38, (translation mine).

[93]Aurobindo Ghose, op. cit., p. 190.

[94]Bhagavadgītā, IV.13.

justify the division of the society. Most of the modern commentators try to explain away the system, laying the stress on the quality of men, that is, their ability in relation to a certain work. However, there are a few who dare to question the assumptions behind this kind of compartmentaliztion of the society and placing certain groups of people at the apex of the hierarchy with 'noble' jobs to do and certain others at the lower end to perform menial functions to keep the society going. On the other hand some of the commentators who approach the Gītā primarily as their spiritual guide, see great value even in this division of society and try to seek what is good in it while dissociating the "atomic conception of society" from the cāturvarṇa as enunciated by this verse.

The above mentioned verse relates clearly to the organization of the society on the basis of caste status. It is apparent that the Gītā accepts the legal ritualism of Vedic Brahmanism, which took the caste structure of the society for granted. The author of the Gītā is only strengthening the system in vogue by ascribing divine origin to it. Rangacharya sees two levels in the development of the system. He says that the word varṇa denotes two different kinds of caste, namely, caste by birth and by quality. "The former of these two kinds of caste is sometimes spoken of in Sanskrit as janma-krita varṇa and the latter as guṇa-krita varṇa".[95] He argues that it was perfectly natural in the development of society for caste by birth to come into

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[95] M. Rangacharya, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 357.

vogue. Later, with the advancement of philosophy, politics or religion, the division of society on the basis of natural aptitudes and qualities replaces the status by birth. Rangacharya points out this gradual change that has taken place between the time of the Manu Smṛti and the Mahbhārata. He writes, "According to Manu-Smṛti, he who is born a Brahmin is entitled to perform certain functions in society; while according to the Bhagavadgītā, he who is in possession of certain specified qualites, is entitled to be a Brahmin."[96] He, like many other commentators, argue that the caste status of an individual is largely determined by the qualities, guṇas, which make him. This would boil down in effect to saying that a Brahmin has more satva in his makeup and a Śūdra has more tamas. But, he admits that this theory does not actually correspond to the caste structures as they exist in India today.

Though Rangacharya upholds caste by quality in the light of the teachings of the Gītā, he maintains that one of the important roles of the system is to prevent the mixing up of castes, varṇa-sanikara, which is very dangerous to society. He thinks that inter-caste (i.e. caste by birth) marriages will destroy "the inherited capacity for moral and intellectual culture."[97] He is quick to point out that the 'compartments' thus created by the prohibition of inter-caste marriages are all equal. Vedanta does not recognize the superiority of the Brahmin

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[96] Ibid., p. 363.

[97] loc. cit.

compartment above that of the Śūdra.[98] He admits that the inequality, which is current in practice on the basis of the birth of a man, takes time to be corrected by the doctrine of equality sanctioned by the Vedanta. But he does not see the contradiction in rejecting inter-caste marriages. He says that the necessity of this "prohibition is due to the hetrogeneous composition of the social life", which the community has to regulate with a view to peaceful progress. He writes, "The religion of the Hindus recognises fully in theory the spiritual equality and brotherhood of man in respect of all other relations in life than the one of marriage."[99] Rangacharya holds on to this position in the light of his conviction: "Anything like a too rapid displacement of the unwanted old order is almost, if indeed quite, impossible, and it is moreover utterly undesirable."[100]

Tilak, naturally in line with his karmayogaśāstra, maintains that the "ancient ṛṣis created the institution of four castes, which was in the nature of a division of labour, in order that all the affairs of society should go on without a hitch, and that society should be protected and maintained on all sides, without any particular person or group of persons having to bear all the burdens".[101] He clearly relates this division of labour to the concept of lokasaṁgraha as we have noted above. He does not doubt that the Gītā supports Manu on the

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[98] Ibid., p. 365.

[99] Ibid., p. 364.

[100] Ibid., p. 356.

[101] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 89.

question of caste. He also argues that the system helps to develop the inherent qualities of the individual. If he takes any other business, there is a chance of harm being done to the society. Tilak regards the adhikara of Vedanta Sūtras III, iii, 32,[102] as "this diverse capacity which exists in every person, consistently with the god-given, inherent, natural characteristics" and it has to be used for the welfare of the society. This is not a principle only for those who are supposedly superior, but also for everybody. Society functions on the basis of co-operation between castes. "Just as extremely small wheels are necessary", he observes, "along with large wheels in order that any machine should work properly"[103], in like manner common man co-ordinates his duty with the saints for the sake of the society.

Tilak rejects the contention that the Gītā ethics is based on the arrangement of four castes. The division of people on the basis of their qualties "was the most simple and natural illustration, which applied to the circumstances of that particular age"[104] and that this arrangement is not universal by any means. What is the kernel of the teaching: That would be performance of the duty assigned to an individual according to the arrangement of the society, with courage and desirelessness, for the public good. At the same time, taking up the dharma of some one else, "on some pretext or other is wrong from the point of view of Morality, as also from the point of

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[102] yāvad adhikāram avasthitir ādhikāriṇaṁ (Vedanta Sūtras, III, iii,32).

[103] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 464.

[104] Ibid., p. 697.

view of public good".[105] At times, it seems that Tilak tends towards a deterministic acceptance of the given lot of the individual and the full development of the individual as a human person is subordinated to the established social orders, which have the sanction of the scriptures.

Radhakrishnan looks at the fourfold division of society in the context of dharma, not apart from it. "The traditional rules of dharma are to be followed, because He established them and He upholds the moral order."[106] But he is opposed to the division of the society on the basis of one's birth. "The varna or the order to which we belong is independent of sex, birth or breeding. A class determined by temperament and vocation is not a caste determined by birth and heredity."[107] He upholds the Gītā teaching, which is more or less a division according to quality. This division, according to Radhakrishnan, is designed for human evolution. While admitting that the division of the society into castes and sub-castes created the present morbid condition of India, he maintains that functional groupings will never be out of date. On the question of inter-caste marriages he agrees with Rangacharya. Says he, "...as for marriages they will happen among those who belong to more or less same stage of cultural development." He cites a verse from Mahābhārata in support of his position: "...conduct

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[105] loc. cit.

[106] S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 75.

[107] Ibid., p. 161.

is the only determining feature of caste according to the sages."[108] This conduct, svabhāva, guides us in the pursuit of our dharma and "then God would express Himself in the free volitions of human beings."[109] At the same time he points out that the Gītā "cannot be used to support the existing social order with its rigidity and confusion".[110]

There appear to be contradictory ideas at play in Radhakrishnan's interpretation of cāturvarṇa. He is at once a thinker who is exposed to its evil and one who is bound by the philosophy which upholds the system. He refers to an ancient verse to establish equality of all castes: "the Brahmin and the outcaste are blood brothers".[111] At the same time he speaks of cultural barriers between castes. Again, he gives great importance to svadharma, which is actually caste dharma, when it comes to practical matters. If we do not follow our law of nature, svadharma, "We would sin against our nature."[112] If that is the case, what is the meaning of "free volition of human beings"?

It is to be noted that most commentators see the system of cāturvarṇa as the Gītā present it, as an ideal division of the society in the natural lines, "with the division and co-ordination of functions based on psychological attitudes"[113] or according to the natural

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[108] loc. cit.

[109] Ibid., p. 365.

[110] Ibid., p. 364.

[111] antyajo viprajātiś ca eka eva sahodaraḥ ekayoniprasutas ca ekaskhena jayate

[112] S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 365.

[113] Rohit Mehta, From Mind to Supermind, Manaktalas, Bombay, 1966, p. 68.

dispositions of the individual. Vinoba Bhave says,"The idea behind varṇa-dharma is very beautiful."[114] What he and others object to is the regimentation found in the present caste system. Gandhi, who always stood for the equality of all men, did not think in terms of abolishing the caste system as such. He writes, "It is wrong to destroy caste because of the outcaste, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it, or a crop because of weeds. The outcasteness in the sense we understand it, has therefore to be destroyed altogether... Untouchability is the product, therefore, not of the caste system but of the distinction of high and low that has crept into Hinduism and is corroding it."[115] Thus, Gandhi only attempted to purify the system. He does not agree with Radhakrishnan and others who hold that guṇa and karma are not inherited by birth. "The law of varṇa is nothing if not by birth.[116] Mahadev Desai who has translated Gandhi's Anasktiyoga takes the same position. He writes, "The functions were hereditary, because heredity is a law of nature."[117] But, Desai admits that the system "today is a travesty, a fossil formed out of the incrustations of customs and practices of several centuries" and pleads that no one should "judge the original from the ghost of it."[118]

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[114]Vinoba Bhave, op. cit., p. 297.

[115]M.K. Gandhi, Communal Unity, Ahemadabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1949, p. 7.

[116]M.K. Gandhi, The Gospel of Selfless Action, p. 119.

[117]Mahadev Desai, "My Submission" in The Gospel of Selfless Action, p. 104.

[118]Ibid., p. 102.

Vinoba Bhave links the system of varṇas with svadharma. He says, "The reason why I like the four varṇas is that both naturalness and dharma are found in it. If you give up svadharma nothing will be gained."[119] He mourns the decay of this system, not so much for the compartmentalisation and the evils which go with the system, as for men who give up the trade pursued by their ancestors. He thinks that when a man gives up his traditional trade — svadharma in his thinking — and takes up a new job, so many years are wasted in learning the new job. Thus the most valuable years of one's life are wasted because of the search for a new and different profession and "it is for this reason that Hinduism has discovered for us the system of varṇa.[120]

K.M. Munshi, another interpreter of the Gītā for the modern man, thinks that the fourfold order "is a social synthesis, natural fabric, a creation instinct with life." He goes on to add, "It is a universal and eternal social synthesis based on the nature of man."[121] He admits that the system of varṇa is not the caste system as we know it. Unlike Gandhi, Munshi places the Brahamin at the apex of the social pyramid, for it is he who is dominated by sattva, purity.[122] The Śūdra being dominated by tamas, is at the bottom of the social scale. In this 'low' and 'high' distinction of the social orders, unfortunately Munshi

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[119] Vinoba Bhave, op. cit., p. 223.

[120] Ibid., p. 224.

[121] K.M. Munshi, Bhagavadgītā and Modern Life, p. 62.

[122] Ibid., p. 64.

is not far from the advocates of the rigid caste system. He fails to take into account the fact that those who are at the 'apex' of society with their 'pure nature', live at the expense of the man at the 'bottom'. Though he says that the Gītā "transfers the emphasis from birth to the individual nature of man,"[123] he is quick to point out that one's nature is shaped by hereditary and early influences in the family and the group in which one is born. This amounts to saying that the chances of a Śudra boy acquiring the nature of a Brahmin are practically very meagre. He goes too far in his apology for the cāturvarṇya, when he says, "Under any other arrangement ideals would cease to enoble life; men with 'devilish gifts' would shape social environment."[124] Perhaps this is reading too much into the statements of the Gītā, which simply recognizes the system in vogue. The author of the Gītā claims divine origin to it, "because", as one progressive author puts it, "the transition from a primitive classless society to a class society and the consolidation of the varṇāśrama system had to contend against powerful opposition accompanied by great philosophical activity."[125]

The fourfold division of society, in the opinion of Aurobindo, is totally different from the caste system as it exists today. In his view, the teachings of the Gītā on this division, do not justify the existence of the present system. Says he, "The existing caste system... in no way corresponds to the description of the Gītā...The law of guṇa

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[123] Ibid., p. 59.

[124] Ibid., p. 65.

[125] K. Damodaran, op. cit., p. 187.

or quality is still less a part of the later system. There all is rigid custom, ācāra, with no reference to the need of the individual nature."[126] He takes into task those who insist that it is the law of nature for a man to follow the profession of his parents, without any regard for his personal bent and capacities. This kind of blind acceptance of traditional professions, only leads a man away from his own perfection and spiritual freedom. Aurobindo emphatically points out, "The Gītā's words refer to the ancient system of cāturvarṇa, as it existed, or was supposed to exist in its ideal purity,...and it should be considered in that connection alone."[127] He admits that there is considerable difficulty as to the outward significance of the system.

The four orders of society, as it existed in ancient India, had three aspects: a social and economic one, a cultural one and a spiritual one. The first two aspects were in the line of a division of labour, which brought maximum co-ordination between different groups. As time passed, "an endeavour was made to found and stabilize the whole arrangement of society on the partition of these four functions among four clearly marked classes."[128] Some kind of cultural idea existed along with this economic division, and that gave each class its religious custom, its law of honour and ethical rule. Finally, this system acquired a religious sanction and a profound spiritual use and

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[126] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 468.

[127] Ibid., p. 469.

[128] loc. cit.

significance. As Aurobindo sees it, "This spiritual significance is the real kernel of the teaching of the Gītā."[129] The Gītā saw this system in existence and it recognised both the ideas and the system. The external aspect of cāturvarṇa are "not fundamental division, but stages in the development of our manhood."[130] Man has to strive towards sattva guṇa, with his load of ignorance and inertia. This does not mean, as K.M. Munshi would have it, that we have to go through all the four stages of development in our births, i.e., from Śūdrahood to Brahminhood and then seek salvation from that position at the apex. If this is so, "there would be no room for the Gītā's assertion that even the Śūdra or Chandāla can by turning his life Godwards climb straight to spiritual liberty and perfection."[131] On the basis of this and similar statements of the Gītā, Aurobindo arrives at his fundamental position on varṇa: "What the Gītā is concerned with is not the validity of the Aryan social order now abolished or in a state of deliquescence,... but the relation of a man's outward life to his inward being, the evolution of his action from his soul and inner law of nature."[132] If we realise this secret of the fourfold activity, Aurobindo tells us that it would become a wide doorway to a swiftest and largest reality of the most high spiritual perfection. "This we can do if we turn the action of Swadharma into a worship of the inner Godhead, the universal

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[129] Ibid., p. 470.

[130] Ibid., p. 479.

[131] Ibid., p. 480.

[132] Ibid., p. 481.

Spirit,...and eventually surrender the whole action into his hands, mayi sannyasya karmāṇi".[133]

Thus far we have been discussing the view of writers who wholly support the varṇa system or those who give a spiritual interpretation to make it relevant for our times. The authors we have discussed, see svadharma in relation to varṇa dharma, either on the basis of birth like Gandhi or on the basis of guṇa, like Radhakrishnan, Aurobindo, et. al. Now we will turn to some authors who reject the system, in spite of the divine authority behind it.

Mahdev Desai, while discussing the relation between varṇas and svadharma, admits that the division according to the natural abilities should be flexible and one's allotted task should take new meaning in each age. He quotes James Russel Lowell's lines, "New occasions teach new duties, Time makes ancient good uncouth" to point out the need for change. But, he does not reject the Gītā doctrine of varṇāśramadharma.[134] He too, like Gandhi, is concerned with restoring the purity of the system. So, in general the commentators we discussed above, have been defenders of the Gītā teaching on varṇa vyavastha.

Kakasaheb Kalelkar, who is a Gandhian and a keen student of the Gītā writes, "The arrangement of society according to varṇas is not a necessary corollary of the Vedic philosophy of the Geeta. The development of social virtues mentioned in the sixteenth chapter of the Geeta does

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[133] Ibid., p. 481.

[134] Cf. Mahadev Desai, op. cit., p. 104.

not need the chāturvarṇya at all."[135] He thinks that the very concept of Kuladharma was the result of the over-systematisation of the Aryans and this in the end "choked the very vitality of social existence."[136] He contends that the otherworldly, life-renouncing commentators of the Gītā have concentrated only on the mokṣa of the individual and have missed the message of the Gītā explaining the rise and fall of human cultures. From this angle, it is necessary for us to re-interpret the Gītā. This will force us to understand the injunctions of the Gītā, such as varṇa vyavastha, "in the light of our modern needs and wider ideals."[137] He radically differs with some of the authors we discussed above. Says he, "Any hierarchy of superior and inferior beings can last only so long as the bulk of the population is meek and fatalistic enough to submit to it. Spiritually, this hierarchy is untenable specially as we proclaim that the soul of man partakes of divinity whose attributes are immaculate and equi-minded."[138] Kalelkar strongly opposes the system, primarily because full development of the individual is not assured in the vyavastha, that is the caste system. He points out that the system has not improved the Indian society in any way and we have not got any evidence to show that our progress is greater than

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[135] K. Kalelkar, The Geeta, or Jeevan Yoga, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1967, p. 23.

[136] Ibid., p. 20.

[137] Ibid., p. 21.

[138] Ibid., p. 22.

that of other societies, where such a system never existed. He admits that varṇa of an individual is determined by his birth and notes that all the talk about the division on the basis of guṇa is not real to life. He observes, "The Hindu society fell an easy prey to the attacks of foreigners...because they sadly lacked social solidarity and the understanding of natural forces that govern society."[139] The system is certainly against the spirit of Vedanta, which teaches the dignity and equality of all human beings. Kalelkar observes rightly that even converts to other religions carry with them their Hindu social structures, which have no sanction in their scriptures. He pleads to lay aside varṇa vyavastha, which has nothing to do with the central message of the Gītā. Caste system really makes it difficult "to achieve full national solidarity,"[140] warns Kalelkar.

The Malayalam writer Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai is still more critical of cāturvarṇam. He holds that the mythic author of the Gītā, Vyasa, is putting words into the mouth of Krsna to establish the superiority of the Brahmins. He writes, "Cāturvarṇam is based on the superiority of the Brahmins. Even in a philosophical text like the Gītā, the varṇa-vyavastha has acquired undue importance...The author of the Gītā is at pains to establish the dangers of mixing the races through marriage."[141] Kuttipuzha argues that there is no justification in the interpretation of some modern writers, who see the fourfold

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[139] Ibid., p. 25.

[140] loc. cit.

[141] Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai, Selected Essays, (in Malayalam), National Book Stall, Kottayam, 1969, p. 343, (translation is mine).

division on the basis of guṇa. The text does not warrant this. Maya sṛṣṭam implies varṇa on the basis of birth. He refers to Śankara's interpretation of this verse. The ācārya not only takes varṇa according to birth, but also establishes the Brahmin superiority by quoting the line from the puruṣa-sūkta — brahmaṇo asya mukhamāsīt, i.e., the mouth of the Divine Victim became the Brahmin. The expressions, svabhāvajam, (born of nature, B.G. XVIII, 44), sahajam, born together (B.G. XVIII.48) denote division by birth. He categorically denies the modern view that the fourfold division takes place after birth. "The Gītā has not approved this idea anywhere. On the other hand, the Gītā simply incorporated the age-old blind and cruel system of caste and gave it divine authority."[142] Kuttipuzha also disapproves the rendering of paricaryātmakaṁ karma Śūdrasyā 'pi svabhāvajam or work of the character of service is the duty of a Śudra born of his nature (B.G. XVIII.44). He maintains that paricaryātmakam implies the obligatory work of a slave, not the modern idea of service to others. On the whole, the Gītā's teaching on varṇadharma cannot be re-interpreted to suit our modern needs; they have to be rejected in toto. "We should not be guided by the false idea that whatever is in the Gītā, is eternal truth. Putting the old wine in new bottles, won't change the nature of the wine."[143] Kuttipuzha finds justification for the rejection of certain teachings of the Gītā in the text itself: "...Having reflected on it

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[142] Ibid., p. 344.

[143] loc. cit.

fully do as thou choosest " (B.G. XVIII.63). In his criticism of the varṇa vyavastha, Kuttipuzha is more radical than Kalelkar and says that the Gītā teaching on this social aspect of Indian life has been a curse to this land. He declares quite contrary to the Gītā, "The best means to achieve national integration is inter-caste marriages. That is the surest way to destroy caste altogether".[144]

From the above discussion it is clear that, if we accept the teaching of the Gītā, the freedom of the individual would become very limited, if at all he can be called free. The role of a man in society is determined by his birth. If we reject this idea and accept the shaping of personality on the basis of guṇa, then also we end up in the determinism of nature. Aurobindo echoes this predicament in the following words:

> At any rate, at least nine-tenths of our freedom of will is a palpable fiction, that will is created and determined not by its own self-existent action at a given moment, but by our past, our heredity, our training, the whole tremendous complex thing called Karma, which is, behind us, the whole past action of Nature on us and the world converging in the individual, determining what he is, determining what his will shall be at a given moment and determining, as far as analysis can see, even its action at that moment."[145]

This is to say that we are not what we make ourselves, but what we are made. What then, is freedom, mukti? Freedom, according to the Gītā is mastery of the lower self by the higher; the natural by the spiritual.

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[144] Ibid, p. 345.

[145] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 200-201.

The very idea of freedom itself has to be given up in this spiritual struggle. We realize the meaning of freedom only at that stage when we sacrifice our 'freedom' and "...make our individual being one with it (the Self) in being and consciousness and in its individual nature of action only an instrument of a supreme Will, the one Will that is really free."[146] This is the transcending of all three guṇas, triguṇātīta. Until one is drawn to this lofty preception of freedom, one shall remain bound to his guṇa and dharma. The question remains unanswered whether this is freedom as we understand it in our daily experience. Does the Gītā negate it or fulfil it with a deeper concept?

The Gītā makes it plain that dharma and freedom are inseparably connected. It presents a dialectic, a constant tension and interaction, between man's bondage to his dharma and his freedom. Man deludes himself, if he believes that the choice of dharma is open to him. Each one has his own dharma, the nature formed within him by innumerable births, the accumulated effect of all his karmas, and whether he wills it or not, he cannot act against it. The surest way to freedom is to understand that dharma and comply with its demands. It is this dharma which holds the society together as well as our inner and outer activities. Aurobindo summarises the profound meaning of the Gītā doctrine of dharma in the following words: "Dharma in the Indian conception is not merely the good, the right, morality and justice, ethics; it is the whole government of all the relations of man with

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[146] Ibid., p. 202.

other beings, with Nature, with God, considered from the point of view of a divine principle working itself out in forms and laws of action, forms of the inner and outer life, orderings of relations of every kind in this world."[147] The purpose of avatāra itself is to protect this dharma.

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[147] Ibid., p. 155.

CHAPTER III

THE SCIENCE OF RIGHT ACTION

The commentaries on the Gītā roughly follow two distinct paths, viz. the path of renunciation of action and the affirmation of action. Each school of thought sees in the Gītā, strands of teachings to support its respective position. The ācāryas, whom Kalelkar calls, "other-worldly and life renouncing," took the former line of approach. According to this school, though it is necessary to perform actions by the seeker, the realised soul should relinquish all actions in the post-enlightened stage. Considering action as a useless appendage in the path of liberation, such a one should instead pass the remainder of his earthly life only in the contemplation of the liberating knowledge. These commentators believe that the central teaching of the Gītā supports this position. Over against this school, there are the advocates of action. They maintain that the Gītā urges that not only the seekers, but even the liberated souls should remain performing action till death in an unattached manner and that no attempt should ever be made of an actual renunciation of action.[1] What is to be renounced is not action, but the fruits of action. On the whole, modern commentators try — not very successfully, one should note — to strike a balance between these two approaches. Tilak, who is undoubtedly the

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[1]Cf. G.W. Kaveeshwar, op. cit., p. 10.

champion of works, or activism as most of his reviewers and critics prefer to call, places Śankaracarya as the leader of the former school.[2] Tilak himself, does not hesitate to claim the leadership of the second school of thought. He writes, "there is no reason why this book of mine should not be called the first comparative exposition of the Gītā, in support of Right Action".[3] Undoubtedly, his is the most outstanding and exhaustive commentary which emphasizes Karmayoga, the path of action. In this chapter, we will examine some of the salient features of his doctrine of works, or rather the Gītā doctrine of works as Tilak sees it.

Tilak's New Interpretation of Karma

Tilak belongs to the class of Indian national leaders who are usually called "extremists" by historians of the Indian national movement. These "extremists", — leaders like Aurobindo, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bankim Chandra Catterjee belonged to this group — unlike the "moderates" in the political movement, based their political philosophy not on western concepts, but on the classical values of Indian philosophy and culture. They warned that India should not become the "brown ape of Europe", but should rise to its ancient greatness by following her own traditions and dharma. With this end in view, Tilak, along with other leaders who shared his ideals, embarked on a programme of religious revival. In his thinking, nationalism had no future apart

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[2]Cf. B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 20.

[3]Ibid., p. xxvi.

from a religious awakening. He took initiatives in organizing Ganapati Pūja and other festivals on a national scale. As a result, as Damadoran correctly observes, "Indian nationalism became Hindu nationalism" and "political radicalism and religious revivalism tended to go hand in hand".[4] Though on the surface the Gītā-Rahsya does not betray the political radicalism of Tilak, his political commitments are just below the surface. (It was probably necessary for Tilak not to make his political ideology explicit in the commentary, as it was written in a British prison in Mandalay, Burma). To understand the full impact and import of the Gītā-Rahasya, we have to see it in the light of the nationalist ideology of Tilak.

Though Tilak is generally an exponent of Advaita philosophy, he does not consider the world as mere illusion. He affirms the objective reality of the world and says the "the one sole, immortal and qualityless Atman-Element saturates fully and eternally fully both the Body and the Cosmos."[5] The highest metaphysical ideal for Tilak, is to know that there is only one Ātman in all created beings. On the basis of this conviction, he calls for action which would lead to the welfare of the country. He writes, "If a man seeks unity with Deity, he must necessarily seek unity with the interests of the world also, and work for it. If he does not, then the unity is not perfect because there is union between two elements out of the three (man and Deity) and the third (the world) is left out. I

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[4] K. Damodaran, op. cit., p. 409.

[5] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 357.

have thus solved the question for myself, and I hold that serving the world and thus serving His will, is the surest way to salvation, and this way can be followed by remaining in the world, and not going away from it."[6] He does not hide his feelings about the Indian nation. He is inclined to think that the nation has failed because in her eagerness to seek God, she has ignored God's intention for humanity. All through the pages of his commentary, one can see his desire to serve the country and to restore her to a state of absolute well-being having "suffered because it has not been supported by a proper attention to material, mental and social activities in which the spirit has to find its existence."[7]

As P.M. Modi rightly observes, Tilak maintains that the essence of the teaching of the Gītā is "jñānamūlaka bhakti pradhāna karmayoga." That is to say, "all other yogas lead to the path of action."[8] It is this conviction that leads him to take Śankara to task for having begun a tradition of Gītā interpretations in which the Gītā's plain teaching of the science of Karmayoga was bent to make Jñānayoga superior to that of action. He argues, "In short the Śamkarabhāṣya has been written in order to show that the teaching of the Gītā is consistent with a particular Vedic path which — after proving it to be the most

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[6] Ibid., p. xxvi.

[7] P. Nagaraja Rao, The Bhagavad Gītā and the Changing World, Ramakrishna Seva Samiti, Ahmedabad, 1953, p. 52.

[8] P.M. Modi, "Method of Interpreting the Gītā", in Studies in the Gītā, p. 64.

excellent one — was recommended by Śamkarācārya,...to show that the Blessed Lord in the Gītā has preached the Śamkara cult, that action is only a means of acquiring knowledge combined with renunciation of Action."[9] Tilak holds that the apūrvata, newness, of the Gītā is the "philosophy of Energism (karma)." After carefully considering the significance of the sevenfold Mīmāṁsa criterion for interpreting a text, he comes to the conclusion that all these criteria point to the real meaning of the Gītā as consisting in spreading in the gospel of karma-yoga, karma-yoga being the be-all and end-all of its teaching.[10] He argues that the vision of the ācārayas and other commentators has become one-sided because of their doctrinal tilt in favour of their respective cults. Tilak sets before himself the object of thoroughly examining the Gītā and "in detail [to] show how all the statements, deductions or chapters in it can be explained as being connected together on the basis of the philosophy of Energism (karma)."[11] In this attempt, Tilak does not advocate any philosophical, religious or political sectarianism, even though he argues against the classical commentators for maintaining that the Gītā teaches that dharma cannot be transcended by any form of renunciation of dharma.

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[9] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 20.

[10] Ibid., p. 31-32. The Mīmāṁsa criterion is expressed in the following verse: upakramopasaṁhārāv abhyaso pūrvatā phalam arthavādopapatti ca lingaṁ tatparyanirṇaye.

[11] Ibid., p. 39.

Tilak, like any other Vedantin, maintains that release, mukti, is the final goal of human life. The Gītā teaches the surest path to that goal through Karmayoga. Says he, "The chief object of the Gītā is to explain which is the most excellent state of man from the metaphysical point of view, and to decide the fundamental principles of ethics as regards the Doable and the Not-Doable on that basis... the fundamental basis of Righteous Action sadācaraṇa is the change which takes place in the character of the man, as a result of the particular Peace (śānti) which is acquired by the human Atman by the continual worship and direct Realization of that Immortal substance which is at the root of the world."[12] This statement itself establishes Tilak's credentials as a Vedantin. It also makes clear his philosophical scheme to maintain the unity of metaphysics, religion, psychology and ethics.

The context of the Gītā — the battlefield and Arjuna's dilemma to fulfil his dharma in the field — itself points to the nobility and necessity of action. Krsna gives his advice to Arjuna in the nature of a mandate for action. Tilak affirms that man "has a spiritual destiny, and that an individual is not merely a social being."[13] Arjuna's doubts were concerned not only his immediate problems, that is, taking up arms against his cousins, but also his

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[12] Ibid., p. 711.

[13] S.H. Jhabwala, Geeta and Its Commentators, Dhawale Popular, Bombay, 1960, p. 71.

spiritual destiny itself. So, in response to the total need for Arjuna, and by implication all the needs of those who take the conflicts of life seriously, the divine command is given: "Therefore, without attachment, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment."[14] This and similar verses form the central message of the Gītā as Tilak sees it. It is addressed to the confused man who has lost his past. And therefore, "the subject-matter of the Gītā is to show whether or not there are any means for ascertaining what course should be followed by a person on such an occasion and if so, what those means are."[15] Tilak explains at length the meanings of the words karma and yoga in the Gītā. He makes it plain that in the Gītā karma is not limited to the "doctrines laid down by the Mīmāṁsa school regarding the sacrificial ritual etc....The word karma as used in the exposition made in the Gītā must not be taken in the restricted meaning of Actions prescribed by the Śrutis or Smṛtis, but in a more comprehensive meaning. In short, all the Actions which a man performs...are included in the word karma..."[16] It is in the light of this wider meaning that we have to look at his definition of karma-yoga-śāstra. He writes,

> That science by means of which we can decide such questions as: Which is the best and purest of the several 'yogas', means, or process in which a particular Action can be performed; whether it can always be followed; if not what are the exceptions to it, and how they arise;

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[14] Bhagavadgītā, III.19.

[15] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 75.

[16] Ibid., p. 75.

> why is that path which we call good, really good, or that which we call bad, really bad, and on the strength of what, is this goodness or badness to be decided and who is to do so or what is the underlying principle in it etc. is known as the 'karma-yoga-śāstra', (science of Karmayoga) or as expressed briefly in the Gītā 'yoga-śāstra' (the science of yoga). 'Good' or 'bad' are words in ordinary use and the following other words: propitious and unpropitious, or beneficial and harmful, or meritorious and non-meritorious, or sin and virtue, or righteousness, are used in the same sense.[17]

Doubts could be expressed about the comprehensiveness of this definition. It is a matter of debate whether Arjuna's predicament is fully appreciated in this formulation. His problem was not limited to the attitude, egoistic or non-egoistic, with which he should fight, but covered the whole question of war itself and the consequences which ensued. Nevertheless, the definition gives us an insight into Tilak's concept of Karmayoga. It is to be noted that Tilak admits elsewhere that the doubts that assailed Arjuna were not groundless, and that his moral confusion just before the battle was intended by the Gītā as a paradigm of great moral dilemma that only really good and wise men can get into.[18]

Tilak sees the meaning of certain verses which specifically refers to Karmayoga in the light of the above definition. He believes that the true issue is not choosing between acting and not acting, but knowing the science of how to act properly. To prove this point he cites, "He who is steeped in the (equable) Reason remains untouched

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[17] Ibid., p. 83.

[18] Cf. B.G. Tilak, Gītā-Rahasya, pp. 41-54.

both by sin or merit in this (world); therefore take shelter in Yoga. The cleverness (skillfulness or trick) of performing Action (without acquiring the merit or sin) is known as (karma) Yoga."[19] He concludes his comment on this verse by pointing out that when a man performs action in this way with an equable reason, there is no neglect of worldly duties and at the same time the path is open to complete release. This shelter in the yoga gives one power to stand up and perform one's duty.[20] When the doubts are destroyed by wisdom, man realizes the right path of action. Tilak never loses sight of the final goal, i.e. release, when he speaks of Karmayoga. Redemption of Atman is the highest ideal according to the Vedanta and it is claimed to be the special feature of his viewpoint.[21] One's dharma in relation to the society is the outward expression of this dynamic action, oriented towards release. If the science of medicine — āyur-veda, i.e. the veda relating to health — is considered to serve as a means of salvation because it helps to protect the body, Tilak asks, why has karma-yoga-śāstra been divorced from the metaphysical philosophy of release by our ācāryas? He contends that we do not perform our worldly activities without any consideration of spiritual values. He argues therefore, "We consider whether or not these activities are conducive to Atmic benefit, simultaneously with considering their external

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[19] Bhagavadgītā, II.50 (Tilak's translation).

[20] Cf. Bhagavadgītā, IV.42.

[21] Tilak, op. cit., p. 91.

effects."[22] He refers to Aristotle's ethics and asserts that metaphysical perfection is the highest duty of every man and it is improper to speak of doables and non-doables outside the context of metaphysical philosophy. The Gītā, according to Tilak, fulfils this in its teaching of the science of Karmayoga.

Tilak does not consider Karmayoga only as a means to the final end, which can be got rid of after realizing that end. Man has to perform actions with a spirit of detachment as long as he lives, even though he has realized his oneness with Brahman. This action is not in the Mīmāṁsa sense of rituals or as a means of purifying the mind. The Karmayoga described in the Gītā makes it clear that "even a scient who has acquired Knowledge, must perform actions prescribed... with a disinterested frame of mind and it can never be a preliminary preparation for Renunciation: because, in this path, a man can never abandon Action, and the only question is of obtaining Release."[23] He also rejects the idea that both renunciation and action are equally productive of release. When Arjuna thought of becoming a sanyasi he was told, "Though the path of renunciation, and the path of Karmayoga are equally productive of Release (niḥreyasa) yet out of these two paths the worth or importance of Karmayoga is greater (viśiṣyate)."[24] Tilak naturally underscores the latter half of this verse. He claims

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[22] Ibid., p. 92.

[23] Ibid., p. 423.

[24] Bhagavadgītā, V.2. (Tilak's translation).

that while he accepts the plain and straightforward meaning of this verse, many commentators twist its meaning to suit their doctrines.[25]

The delusion of Arjuna in the battlefield is very real and it is symbolic of the spiritual problems of all men. Tilak takes this confusion of duty — which path to choose — very seriously. In fact, the purpose of the Gītā is to clear this confusion. He points out that the ultimate goal of Karmayoga is not going to be specified by dharma, but by metaphysics. This is the reason why Krsna goes on to teach higher truths to Arjuna which were not immediately relevant to him when he put down arms in the battlefield. What does one's dharma specify exactly? This is not as simple a question as it appears to be. When man has to decide what is moral and what is immoral, definitions of dharma do not help him at all. Dharma is sometimes called ācāraprabhava (born of custom); dhāranāt (something which upholds or keeps together); or codanālakṣana (some precept which has been dictated). He writes, "not only is there much difference between customs and customs but, as there are numerous consequences of one and the same act, and also as codana, i.e., precepts of rsis are also different, we have to look out for some other way of determining what dharma is when there are doubts in the matter. Following even the path of venerable men cannot be said to be [a] solution. The venerable men — mahājanah — had their problems and their solutions need not be ideal for others."[26]

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[25]Cf. B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 970.

[26]Ibid., p. 481.

After carefully examining various alternatives, Tilak rejects all of them, for they are all inadequate to guide a confused man. Finally, he finds the solution in the Gītā. He thinks that the following verse provides the seeker with the correct rules for right conduct, "Your authority extends only to the performance of Action: (obtaining or not obtaining) the Fruit is never within your authority (that is, never within your control); (therefore), do not be one who performs Action with the (avaricious) motive (in mind) that a particular fruit should be obtained (of his Action); nor do you also insist on not-performing Action."[27] Tilak's comments on this verse, in a way summarises his interpretation of karma-yoga. He writes, "The four quarters of this stanza are mutually complementary; and, therefore, without their overlapping each other, the entire import of Karma-Yoga is given in a short and beautiful form."[28] Elsewhere he points out that the doctrines contained in this verse are very important and "...from the point of view of Karma-Yoga, the four quarters of the above stanza may be said to be four aphorisms (catuh-sūtri) of the science of Karma-Yoga, or the Gītā religion."[29] Tilak has no doubt that these aphorisms will be a guiding light to those who are confused about their dharma. Besides, when being led by these, man will attain both metaphysical happiness and his share of worldly happiness.

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[27] B.G. Tilak's translation of Bhagavadgītā II.47:
karmaṇy evā'dhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana
mā karmaphalahetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi

[28] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 895.

[29] Ibid., p. 155.

Desireless Action

The idea of niṣkāma karma, desireless action, has been hailed by many as one of the most important contributions of the Bhagavadgītā to ethical philosophy. Tilak holds that this concept is a perfect synthesis of the opposing tendencies in the moral life. Tilak analyses at length the 'categorical imperative' of Kant and concedes that it comes close to the ethics of the Gītā, but fails to do justice to all factors of the moral questions involved. Its formalism and the suppression of sensibility make the system unacceptable to Tilak. On the other hand, as P.N. Srinivasachari puts it, "the Gītā theory of disinterested work is based on a synthetic view of human nature and harmonises its contradictions; it does not suppress the senses and their activities, but sublimates them to spiritual purpose."[30] The concept of desireless action is based on the universality of action, that no man alive is free from performing his dharma, directed towards his own release and the welfare of the world. All human actions are motivated by the desire to attain happiness, whether material or spiritual. It is specifically in this context of natural human tendency, that the Gītā speaks of desireless action. Tilak takes a realistic attitude towards the problem of happiness and unhappiness in this life, and towards the corresponding passions of desire and avarice. He analyses human experience and history and comes to the conclusion that man spends most of his life unhappy and discontented. But this discontentment is at the root of all

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[30]P.N. Srinivasachari, The Ethical Philosophy of the Gītā, p. 50.

human attempts to better his life. He writes, "In short, discontent is the seed of future prosperity, effort, opulence, and even Release; and it must always be borne in mind by everybody that if this discontent is totally annihilated, we will be nowhere, whether in this world or in the next."[31] The Gītā itself encouraged the desire of Arjuna which sprang from his discontentment. But that was a desire to know the manifestation of the Divine.[32] In other words, this was a motivation proper to the dharma of Arjuna. At the same time, if a man's desire for something which ultimately is harmful for his well-being is not checked, he will end up in greater unhappiness. Tilak makes an all-important distinction between dissatisfaction and its attendant desires. The principle he advocates is desireless action. His opinion is that we should distinguish desire into two types, (a) desire for the fruits of our action and (b) desire which motivates us to the right action. He writes, "The device or skill (kauśalam) of giving up only that hope which causes unhappiness and performing one's duties according to one's status in life is known as Yoga or Karma-Yoga."[33]

The ideal act according to the Gītā is subjectively pure, non-egoistic and egoless. This in no way implies that an act which is immoral can be done with a non-egoistic frame of mind. The rightness and the wrongness of the action actually depends on its contents as well

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[31] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 147.

[32] Cf. Bhagavadgītā, X.18.

[33] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 148.

as on the attitude with which one approaches it. It is one thing to be impelled to action by the idea of niṣkāma-karma and another thing to fix an act that will in fact lead to it. Tilak is aware of this problem and also the natural objection that these two types of desires—desire for the fruit and desire that motivates actions — are only separable in thought, not in action. He insists that this separation is possible and the text of the Gītā makes it. He writes,

> Actions in the gross material world, which are lifeless in themselves, are not themselves the root cause of unhappiness, but that the true root of unhappiness is the Hope for result, Desire, or Attachment with which man performs those actions, it naturally follows that in order to prevent this unhappiness, it is quite enough if a person by controlling his mind, gives up attachment, Desire or Hope of result entertained by him towards the objects of pleasure; and it follows logically that it is not necessary to give up all objects of pleasure, or Actions, or Desires as prescribed by the Samnyasa school.[34]

Here we see that Tilak's objections against the school of thought which advocates renunciation is in line with his philosophy of activism or energism as it is sometimes called. But a doubt lingers whether man is capable of performing an action without a goal that gives a meaning to the act. If one were to eschew all consideration of consequences would that not render all voluntary action almost impossible? The absence of any deliberation on the meaning of an action may deprive that action of all meaning. Such activity "can only be of the nature of a mere physiological movement, mechanical response, or what is

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[34] Ibid., p. 151.

known as reflex action."[35] Avatāra itself has a definite goal and it brings about that set goal, "which comes under the meaning of phalam, fruit, that is, the protection of the good and the establishment of righteousness."[36] It seems that Tilak does not take this problem too seriously. He is for a complete and total abandonment of the results of actions. Desire for the results destroys the purity of action. He writes,

> Whatever the nature of the Action, when one does not give up the Desire to do it, nor also one's activity, but goes on performing what one wants to do, being equally prepared for the resulting pain or happiness, with an aloof frame of mind, and without entertaining the hope for the result, not only does one escape the evil effects due to non-control of Thirst or discontent, but also the danger of the world becoming desolate as a result of Action being destroyed in the attempt to destroy Thirst, and all our mental impulses remain pure and beneficial to all created beings.[37]

It is a generally accepted principle in Indian thinking that moral life "consists in the giving up of egoistic, utilitarian and acquisitive instincts, karmabhāva, and kartṛbhāva."[38] The Gītā contains many verses which support this position. Over against this position, there is action motivated by the desire of the fruits. This is the offspring of pathological love seated in the propulsions of the senses and is therefore influenced by the guṇas, which constitute the mental makeup of a man. It is the striving of every moral man to free himself

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[35] G.W. Kaveeshwar, op. cit., p. 208.

[36] Bhagavatgītā, IV.8.

[37] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 153.

[38] P.N. Srinivasachari, op. cit., p. 59.

from the preoccupation with ends and establish the inherent right of the sovereignity of the spirit or moral autonomy, as Srinivaschari calls it. The Gītā's specific advice to assure this freedom is to renounce attachment to the fruit of action. "He who has renounced attachment to the fruit of action, who is ever content, and free from all dependence, he though immersed in action, yet acts not."[39] Tilak's paraphrase of the first part of this verse is worth noticing. He says, "...one who does not possess a Reason, which has taken shelter, āśraya, in the means of obtaining the fruit of action for a particular result."[40] He holds, in the light of this and many other verses, that in dealing with ethical problems, "one must consider principally the Reason of the doer, rather than the external results of his Actions; and that equability of Reason is the true princple underlying an ethically correct mode of life."[41]

Tilak is fully aware that motive is necessary for human actions. Desireless action does not in any way mean that we should perform our tasks thoughtlessly or without a plan or in a manner unrelated to its purpose. Tilak's interpretation of lokasaṁgraha, which we discussed earlier, bears witness to this understanding. What he emphasises again and again is freedom from attachment to the results of action. Even when we perform our duties for the welfare of the world, it

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[39] Bhagavadgītā, IV.20.

[40] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 952.

[41] Ibid., p. 530.

should not be result-motivated, but simply as our dharma. "Lokasaṁgraha is an important duty," he writes, "but it must not be forgotten that the advice given...that all acts should be performed being free from attachment, applies equally to lokasaṁgraha."[42] The acts become meaningful and a source of happiness when they are performed with the desire of dedicating all of it, including the fruits to the Lord. Here, one can say that a desire is at work. This is a noble desire, or motivation, because it is not result-oriented. The peace and happiness which ensues from the act of dedicating it to the Lord is not tied to the fruits of the action. So long as man is not free from the acquisitive sense, he will remain a slave to his actions. Those who are enlightened perform their actions till death with the idea of dedicating them to Brahman. Tilak interprets this as the final culmination of knowledge and action.[43] Mahadev Desai puts the same idea more succinctly, "Make every act of thine a sacrifice unto the Lord, sacrifice even the thought that what is offered is a sacrifice. All is sacrifice that takes you near to the Lord."[44]

Tilak leans heavily on verse II., 49, which we cited earlier in order to establish the right attitude towards the fruits of action.

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[42] Ibid., p. 466, Cf. p. 690.

[43] Ibid., p. 603.

[44] Mahadev Desai, op. cit., p. 67, Cf. Romans 12:1, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God."

He rejects the interpretation of Buddhi-yoga in the sense of Jñāna-yoga. (Here Śankara is with Tilak. Śankara gives the meaning, 'samatva-buddhi-yoga.' i.e., the yoga of equability of reason). Tilak draws the conclusion that those who perform actions fall into two categories: Firstly, there are those who keep an eye merely on the fruit — for example, on the question how many will be benefited thereby and to what extent and so on. Secondly, there are those who keep their reason steady and desireless and remain unconcerned as to the fruits of action which result from the combination of karma and dharma. As the second half of the verse points out, those who perform their actions with their eyes towards its phala, fruits, are of a lower nature while those acting with equanimous reason are of higher nature.[45] The Gītā makes it plain in several verses that action itself is inferior, but becomes a means of release when it has the right motive behind it. It is the spirit of detachment which sanctifies an action, which is otherwise a means that leads nowhere. "Therefore," Tilak concludes, "The Gītā in discriminating the doable and the not-doable, attaches a higher importance to the desireless, equable, and unattached Reason of the doer, than to the external result of the action...and the welfare of all created beings resulting from such a mode of life is the external or concomittant result of that equability of Reason."[46]

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[45] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 531, Cf. B.G. VI.1; V. 2; XVII. 12, 23, etc.

[46] Ibid., p. 531.

Giving up of the fruits of action, as we have seen above, specifically refers to the egoistic attachment to the phalam, i.e., the fruit. Here the fruit of action means the egoistic consequences concerning the agent's personal pleasure and pain. It is doubtful whether the Gītā supports the extension of the scope of 'karmaphalatyāga' to all considerations of the consequences of our actions as Tilak is inclined to think. But Tilak says, for example, interpreting the ethics of the Gītā, "...It is true that the actions, which the Sthitaprajña of the Gītā performs by way of duties, are naturally productive of public good. But the Sthitaprajña of the Gītā does not entertain the egoistical feeling...and all actions which are performed by him purely as duties...are naturally productive of public good."[47] Then Tilak goes on to assert the superiority of the Gītā doctrine against the "Western materialistic path of action." As he sees it, the Western system considers worldly life an embodiment of happiness and speaks of actions which would produce better conditions of life for the masses. If a moral philosophy is based only on the attitude towards work, karmaphalatyāga, there is a danger of relegating the right-wrong consideration of an action to a secondary stage, as another writer, Kaveeshwar, observes.[48] Sometimes, actions performed without any tinge of egoistic attachment can be morally wrong. Likewise, actions performed with selfish goals can turn out to be beneficial to the public

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[47] Ibid., p. 698.

[48] G.W. Kaveeshwar, op. cit.,p. 245.

as well as to the author of such actions. Can such an act be condemned as egoistic and therfore morally wrong? Tilak's position on these questions is far from clear.

The Basis of Social Action

The burden of Tilak's commentary on the Gītā is to establish the superiority of action over other means of realising the ends of human life. In Tilak's view, all actions are, in one way or another, related to man's social life, and man has no escape from his dharma towards society. "The summary of the Gītā religion is that...one should enthusiastically perform all the duties...and acquire benefit of the Atman in the shape of the happiness of all created things."[49] So, broadly speaking, the science of Karmayoga, which Tilak expounds at length, forms a basic philosophy of social action. However, we will discuss some aspects of his philosophy of action as they relate to the national ideology and movements with which he was intimately connected at that time.

We have discussed elsewhere Tilak's interpretation of the Gītā concept of lokasaṁgraha.[50] In relating the Gītā concept of service and action to the needs of the India of his time, he is not very explicit. Perhaps this is the most we can expect in a book which was written in a British prison. The book would never have seen the light of day had he expressed his views frankly. He had already been arrested

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[49]B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 698.

[50]Cf. chapter II (pp. 39-40).

for expressing aspects of his thought derived from the Gītā, others were left implicit in the Gītā-Rahasya. At a Sivaji memorial meeting in 1897 he exhorted his audience:

> No blame attaches to any person if he is doing deeds without being actuated by a desire to reap the fruit of his deeds. Sri Sivaji,...with benevolent intentions...murdered Afzul Khan for the good of others. If thieves enter our house and we have not sufficient strength in our wrists to drive them out, we should without hesitation, shut them up and burn them alive....Do not circumscribe your visions like frogs in a well. Get out of the Penal Code, enter in to the extremely high atmosphere of the Bhagavad Gītā and then consider the actions of great men.[51]

In several of his writings and speeches Tilak advocated political activism on the basis of the scriptures. It was his belief that the Gītā, with its stress on resolute action and steadfast devotion to duty, could be a source of inspiration and courage to the Indian people in their struggle for freedom. As a religious text, the Gītā "was able to reconcile the Activism of the early Vedic doctrine with the Quietism of the Upaniṣads by enjoining men to act without seeking the fruits of action."[52]

We can discern a remarkable sense of history in Tilak's interpretation of the Gītā, as opposed to the writings of many Vedantins. He takes the world as it is a reality, though in the ultimate analysis this 'reality' is only relative. It is this philosophy which made him an 'activist' or 'extremist' in the national movement. The following

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[51]Quoted by D. MacKenzie Brown, "The Philosophy of Bal Gangadhar Tilak", Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. XVII, (1957-58), p. 205.

[52]Ibid., p. 199.

statement becomes very significant when we look at it from this angle. He states, "That man who has in this way Realised the Unity of the Atman pervading all created things, and every atom of whose body and organs is saturated with this knowledge, does not stop to contemplate on the question whether the world is or is not transient, but automatically takes to the work of universal benefit, and becomes the protagonist of Truth."[53] While discussing the question of caste duties, he asserts that the Gītā doctrine is meant to be adapted to various times, places, and unusual situations. If the situation demands, one may have to take up a new duty, of one's own free will, and "should be prepared to die in the performance of this duty."[54] Commenting on verse XVIII.49, Tilak observes that when one has accepted a dharma as one's own, "for whatever reason one may have done so, what matters is the frame of mind with which one executes it".[55] Here he is saying, in effect, that historical circumstances are the primary determinant of one's dharma, and a man is justified in choosing a new 'dharma'. Elsewhere he points out that the fourfold order is only a "simple and natural illustration, which applied to the circumstances of that particular age."[56] It is this sense of history that led him to a radical new understanding of his

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[53] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 688. Cf. p. 357.

[54] Ibid., p. 935.

[55] Ibid., p. 1198. In a footnote, Tilak's translator writes, "This is difficult to understand. There can be only one reason for accepting the Action, namely, that it is 'śāstra-ordained' (nitya)."

[56] Ibid., p. 697.

dharma in the context of the British rule in India. Dharma in that context meant to him a relentless struggle against the British authorities and the forging of a national movement to restore the freedom and the glory of India.

The philosophy of Vedanta in the hands of Tilak, became a philosophy of action and involvement. He fought against all interpretations of Vedanta which spread a spirit of passivity and pessimism. According to him, Vedanta does not prescribe the escapist path of withdrawal into introspection and isolation from involvement in active life, but instead provides man with a path which leads to a life of determined action, strengthened through the power of knowledge. He writes, "Having in this way determined what the highest Metaphysical ideal of mankind is the question as to the basis on which one has to perform all the various Actions in this world, or, as to what is the nature of Pure Reason with which those Actions are to be performed,...is ipso facto solved."[57] The basis of action, in other words, is the knowledge of the unity of Ātman and Brahman and the awareness that the "immortal and qualityless Ātman-Element saturates fully and eternally both the Body and the Cosmos."[58] It is on this Vedantic basis and in the historical context of the freedom struggle in India, that he exhorted his countrymen "to take such retaliatory action for the purpose of pre-

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[57] Ibid., p. 357.

[58] loc. cit.

venting the predominance of wrong-doers and the consequent persecution of the weak in this world."[59] Tilak's speeches and political writings popularised these ideas among the Indian masses. The following statement, at Poona, in 1902, illustrates the radicalism of his political convictions:

> You must realise that you are a great factor in the power with which the administration in India is conducted. You are yourselves the useful lubricants which enable the gigantic machinery to work smoothly. Though downtrodden and neglected, you must be conscious of your power of making the administration impossible if you choose to make it so. It is you who manage the railroad and the telegraph, it is you who make the settlements and collect revenues, it is in fact, you who do everything for the administration, though in a subordinate capacity. You must consider whether you can turn your hand to better use for the nation than drudging in this fashion.[60]

It is to be noted that among the national leaders, Tilak was the first to talk about Swarāj, self-rule. He speaks in the spirit of the Gītā idea of dharma as he said, "Swarāj is my birthright and I shall have it...Our life and our Dharma will be in vain, in the absence of Swarājya." As Damodaran observes, " the attainment of freedom from the British rule was a religious mission for Tilak."[61]

Karmayogaśāstra and the Advaitins

Tilak's interpretation of Karmayoga, as a direct means to the advaitic realisation, where one sees the Self in all beings and

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[59] Ibid., p. 399.

[60] B.G. Tilak, Writings and Speeches, edited and Published by R.R. Srivastava, Madras (n.d.), p. 77.

[61] K. Damodaran, op. cit., p. 394.

all beings in the Self, which entails action for universal welfare, has not found favour with orthodox Advaitins. We will now discuss some aspects of that Advaita criticism of Tilak's metaphysical system.

The Advaitins follow Śankara's interpretation of the Gītā and assert that the path of works is not itself the instrument for attaining the human goal. Man can reach the final goal of release only through Jñānayoga.[62] The sole function of Karmayoga, the Advaitins hold with Śankara, is the purification of the mind and the preparation to receive wisdom, the wisdom that liberates the jīva. In the Vedas, the path of works, pravrtti-mārga, and the path of renunciation were never reconciled. The former was prescribed for those who desire prosperity here and happiness in the hereafter. The path of renunciation offered release for those who long for liberation from transmigratory existence. "The two paths lead to two different goals, one perishable and the other imperishable."[63] But we have to bear in mind that karma in the Vedic sense was, in the main, performance of sacrificial rituals. The Gītā follows the Upaniṣadic teaching and transforms the Vedic concept of karma. As a result, in the Gītā, the discrepency between the two ways has been "removed by making the path of works subservient to and terminating in the higher way" of Jñāna."[64] This Advaita interpretation of karma runs contrary to Tilak's. For him, Karmayoga is the direct path to the final goal, viz., release.

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[62] T.M.P. Mahadevan, The Two-Fold Path in the Gītā, Madras, 1940, p. 8.

[63] Ibid, p. 5.

[64] Ibid, p. 6.

The Gītā elevated karma from its lower status to that of the respectable role of "purifying the mind and preparing the way of wisdom" by removing the string of egoistic desire. (In the interpretation of the Mīmāṁsakas, karma was the means of acquiring merit (puṇya) and the consequent pleasures of heaven. But, as soon as the stock of puṇya is exhausted, one has to return to this world and suffer from the ills of saṁsāra). The Advaitins, while maintaining that Karmayoga and Jñānayoga are not identical and cannot be combined, admit that they are not discontinuous. The former is a first stage in the road to perfection which has to pass through the latter. Tilak's position, that disinterested work is taught by Kṛsna as the one inescapable means of perfection, comes under severe scrutiny by the Advaitin's. T.M.P. Mahadevan examines Tilak's position (without mentioning Tilak by name) and comments, "There is much to be said in favour of this view...But still the Gītācharya recognises the fact that karma has to stop half-way."[65] He takes a cue from Śankara and argues that the command "Do thou fight (yudhyasva)"[66] is really not a command to fight. It refers only to Arjuna's erstwhile resolve, that is, before his delusions were not removed. "Hence the words 'Do thou fight' signify no command, but constitute merely a re-statement."[67] Mahadevan turns to Śankara to reinforce his position and cites the ācārya: "The Gītā-śāstra is intended to remove the causes of saṁsāra such as

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[65] Ibid., p. 10.

[66] Cf. Bhagavadgītā, II.18.

[67] T.M.P. Mahadevan, op. cit., p. 12.

grief and delusion, and not to enjoin works."[68]

Mahadevan contends that if karma were obligatory as Tilak holds, then many passages in the Gītā would be unintelligible. From an Advaitin's point of view, the very purpose of Krsna's teaching ... was to lead Arjuna to a knowledge of the indestructible self, which is eternal and has neither birth nor death. The problems of temporal existence are insignificant from this lofty angle. In the divine command to "surrender all thy works to me,"[69] Mahadevan sees the "need for renunciation on the part of one who seeks release."[70] It is to be recalled that Tilak understands this call to surrender as a call to get rid of all egoistic desires which may bind one's work. Likewise in verse 49 of chapter eighteen,[71] Mahadevan hears the call for renunciation, "The supreme state of freedom from action is stated to be attained by renunciation."[72] On the other hand, for Tilak, freedom in action and not freedom from action is the message of the Gītā. Mahadevan also argues that the Gītā declares: "the fire of wisdom consumes all works, and that for him who rejoices in the self there is nothing to do."[73] The orthodox Advaitins interpret Krsna's advice, "Unselfish performance of works is ...

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[68] Ibid.

[69] Bhagavadgītā, III.30.

[70] T.M.P. Mahadevan, op. cit., p. 13.

[71] asaktabuddiḥ sarvatra jitātmā vigataspṛhaḥ
naiṣkarmyasiddhiṁ paramāṁ saṁnyāsenā dhigacchati, (Bhagavadgītā, XVIII.49).

[72] T.M.P. Mahadevan, op. cit., p. 14.

[73] Ibid., p. 13.

better than their renunciation,"[74] not as an exoneration of Karmayoga. They maintain that this advice is meant for the ignorant. Arjuna's question concerns only those who have not known the self. As Karmasannyāsa can be a dangerous weapon in the hands of the ignorant, Krsna prescribes Karmayoga for them.

As an Advaitin, Radhakrishnan also follows Śankara's line of thought in general. But he does give greater importance to works than Mahadevan is prepared to concede. He maintains that the Gītā does not support an ascetic ethic. "Naiṣkarmya, or abstention from actions, is not the true morality, but niṣkāmata, or disinterestedness.... Work is inevitable till we attain freedom. We have to work for the sake of freedom, and when we attain it, we have to work as instruments of the divine."[75] We have to be free from all works that bind us. Desireless work is worship of God and it does not bind us. But he does not agree with Tilak that the Gītā teaches the superiority of Karmayoga to other yogas as a means of liberation. He says, "Action performed in the spirit indicated by the Gītā finds its completion in wisdom."[76] But Karmayoga is an alternative method of approach to the goal which culminates in the wisdom which liberates.[77] According to Radhakrishnan, all the four yogas — Karma, Bhakti, Jñāna and Rājayoga, —

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[74] Bhagavadgītā, V.2.

[75] S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, Vol. I., p. 568.

[76] Ibid., pp. 571-572.

[77] Cf. S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 73.

are equally efficacious in leading man to his final goal. One has to choose the path on the basis of one's natural inclination, law of being.

Some Advaitins believe that the Gītā teaches the combination of all the four yogas as the means to liberation. One yoga itself will not be an independent means to lead man to his final destiny. As the theme of the Gītā develops, each of these four yogas are discussed and presented as if it is an independent path. But, in fact, "these seemingly different yogas may be said to be various readings of the same phenomenon -- the moral and spiritual growth of the individual."[78] Chidbhavananda objects to any gradation of the four yogas. He says that the four horses yoked to Krsna's chariot symbolise the four yogas. "Their combined effort is necessary to draw the chariot forward. All the four yogas together stimulate life to spirituality."[79] Some others are of the opinion that it is the combination of works with wisdom (jñāna-karma-samuccaya) that leads man to mukti. Both these views are rejected by orthodox Advaitins. Mahadevan writes, "Apart from the fact that it is impossible to combine karma with knowledge, there is no evidence whatsoever for such a view in the Gītā....At the beginning of Chapter II. Sri Krsna teaches the way of wisdom first and then the way of works. At the beginning of Chapter III Arjuna asks his master why he should engage himself in a horrible war if it was the view of

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[78]Swami Chidbhavananda, The Bhagavad Gītā, p. 34, Cf. Swami Sivananda, The Bhagavadgītā, p. XX-XXI.

[79]Swami Chidbhavananda, op. cit., p. 35.

Sri Krsna that wisdom is superior to works."[80] This question, as the Advaitin sees it, implies that the author of the Gītā teaches two distinct paths, and that jñāna is superior to karma.

The Advaitins urge a re-interpretation of the Gītā verses which seem to support the superiority of Karmayoga in a way that sets them in harmony with the entire scheme of the text. Through this re-interpretation of the very verses upon which Tilak himself leans heavily for his science of Karmayoga, the Advaitins arrive at a different conclusion. "It is evident that the Gītā, while advocating karma-yoga as the preparatory means to the dawn of wisdom, does not regard it as the direct instrument of release."[81] The orthodox Advaitins also hold that it is not obligatory to men who have attained perfection to lead an active life. An active and moral life and perfection in the plenary sense of the term are not compatible. Karmayoga as an ethical discipline is useful, but the liberated have already transcended that stage. The following statement of Mahadevan summarises the orthodox Advaitin's stand against Tilak's interpretation of Karmayoga. He says:

> The reason why release is unattainable through works is this. Moksha is not what is accomplished in time. The end which is called in the Gītā by different synonymous names — mukti, brahma-sthiti, naishkarmya, nistraigunya, and brahmabhāva — is not a temporal terminus. It is the realisation of the non-differences between the Absolute and the apparently sundered self. The result of an act may be one of four kinds — origination (utpatti), attainment (prapati), modification (vikāra) and purification (saṁskara). The Absolute is eternally attained and

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[80] T.M.P. Mahadevan, op. cit., p. 20.

[81] Ibid., p. 19.

> devoid of change. It is ever pure and perfect. And so it can never be the fruit of an act. It is ignorance that is the cause of misery and metempsychosis, and karma which is but its offspring cannot remove it. It is through delusion by egoity that man thinks 'I am the doer' (III.27); and this avidya cannot be destroyed by karma.[82]

Aurobindo, who is not really an orthodox Advaitin, also takes Tilak to task for his tendency "to subordinate its [Gītā's] elements of knowledge and devotion, to take advantage of its continual insistence on action and to find in it a scripture of Karmayoga, a light leading us on the path of action, a Gospel of Works."[83] Aurobindo too does not mention Tilak by name. But it is obvious who he has in mind when he attacks the moderns who make the Gītā "a Gospel of Works." Aurobindo's view is that the Gītā doctrine of works is not an independent and all-sufficient law. Works in the Gītā, according to him, are works "which culminate in knowledge, that is, in spiritual realisation 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 works as they are understood by the modern mind, not at all an action dictated by egoistic and altruistic, by personal, social, and humanitarian motives, principles, ideals."[84] He rejects the ideal of disinterested performance of social duties as the central teaching of the Gītā. This interpretation of the Gītā concept of works,

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[82] Ibid., p. 16.

[83] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 27.

[84] loc. cit.

he claims, is telescoping the modern ideal of social service into an ancient book. He also charges that this attempt to make the Gītā a text for social activism and service is the result of a European or Europeanized angle of vision. The Gītā is not a book of practical ethics, but of spiritual life, according to Aurobindo. He contends that the modern mind -- "The modern mind is just now the European mind" -- lives in humanity only, while the Gītā would have us live in God. "Therefore it is a mistake," argues Aurobindo, "to interpret the Gītā from the standpoint of the mentality of today and force it to teach us the disinterested performance of duty as the highest and all-sufficient law."[85]

Aurobindo strongly asserts that the Gītā does not teach the disinterested performance of duties as the highest moral law. On the other hand, "the abandonment of all Dharmas, sarvadharmān, to take refuge in the supreme alone, and the divine activity of a Buddha, a Ramakrishna, a Viveknanda is perfectly in consonance" with the teachings of the Gītā."[86] In these words one can almost hear the echoes of Aurobindo's own life. He began life as a revolutionary. He was actively involved in the political struggles of India. The British police arrested him in 1908, as an accused in a bomb case, but he was acquitted after a year in jail. Life in the jail changed him and he had a very different outlook when he came out. He went to Pondicherry

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[85] Ibid., p. 29.

[86] loc. cit.

in 1910 and thus escaped re-arrest as feared. Though his former comrades attempted to persuade him to return to India, he refused saying that he was engaged in a different quest and only after realising that supreme objective could he return to the field of activity.[87] Thus, he gave up all dharmas to take refuge in the supreme. As opposed to this, Tilak stood firm in performing his dharma. British prisons did not break his indomitable will. He was active in the field until his death. It was his firm conviction, based on the teachings of the Gītā, as he saw it, that through dedicated social action one can reach the supreme goal. When we appraise his Karmayoga-śāstra in the light of his life as a Karmacāri, it takes on an added dimension. Besides, in fairness to Tilak, it should be mentioned that he does not negate the efficacy of the other yogas of which the Gītā teaches. In fact, he believes that the Gītā religion fuses the different means of attaining the final goal and establishes a remarkable harmony. Thus, the Gītā religion does away with "the mutual conflict between Action, spiritual knowledge (jñāna), and Love (Devotion)...and "preaches that the whole of one's life should be turned into a sacrifice (Yajña)."[88] Some of the charges levelled against him by the orthodox Advaitins lose their steam in the

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[87] Cf. K. Damodaran, op. cit., p. 402.

[88] B.G. Tilak, op. cit., p. 713.

light of statements like the following. He says:

> The religion of the Gītā, which is a combination of Spiritual Knowledge, Devotion and Action, which is in all aspects undauntable and comprehensive, and is further perfectly equable, that is, which does not maintain any distinction between classes, castes, countries, or any other distinction, but gives Release to everyone in the same measure, and at the same time shows proper forebearance towards other religions, is thus seen to be the sweetest and immortal fruit of the tree of the Vedic Religion.[89]

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[89] Ibid., p. 712.

CHAPTER IV

TWO RADICAL INTERPRETATIONS FROM TWO EXTREME ENDS: GANDHI AND AUROBINDO

Gandhi and Aurobindo were outstanding leaders of the Indian national movement and they influenced the direction of the movement as no other men did in their times, though they were often poles apart in their approach to the problems India faced. Aurobindo, who left India at the tender age of seven for his education in England returned after fourteen years as a fiery nationalist. He belonged to the generation of Indian nationalists who were raised in an essentially Western tradition and had to initiate for themselves the quest for that which was "really" Indian. This quest, led Aurobindo to the grips of Hindu fundamentalism,[1] which moulded his nationalistic ideas. Aurobindo wanted his political programmes to be based on the classical values of Indian philosophy and culture. This he states very clearly in his famous Uttarpara speech: "The Hindu nation was born with Sanātana Dharma; with it, it moves, and with it it grows. When Sanātana Dharma declines then the nation declines, if Sanātana Dharma were capable of perishing with the nation, it would perish. Sanātana Dharma, that is

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[1] Cf. L.I. Rudolph and S.H. Rudolph, The Modernity of Tradition, Political Development in India, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1969, p. 168.

nationalism".[2] Aurobindo plunged into Indian politics without hiding his religious approach to the national issues. For him nationalism "is not a mere political programme, nationalism is a religion that has come from God. Nationalism is a creed which you shall have to live.... You must remember that you are the instruments of God".[3] But, Aurobindo who has been identified with the "extremists" and "radicals" of Indian politics during the period between 1893-1910, retired from active politics abruptly and crossed over to Pondicherry, then the capital of French India, to devote all his energies to spiritual pursuits. It was alleged that he went to Pondicherry to escape arrest by the British police. To him, this new move was an act of obedience to the Divine command. In his own words: "While I was listening to the animated comments from those around on the approaching event, [Police raid on the Karmaygin office] I suddenly received a command from above, in a Voice well known to me, in three words, "Go to Chandernagore". In ten minutes or so I was in the boat for Chandernagore...Afterwards, under the same "sailing orders" I left Chandernagore and reached Pondicherry on April 4, 1910".[4] In Pondicherry, he established the ashram and shared his new spiritual experiences with his disciples and eventually the rest of the world. For a period of forty years Aurobindo was one of India's

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[2]Aurobindo Ghose, Uttarpara Speech, Aurobindo Ashram Pondicherry, (5th ed), 1950, p. 20.

[3]Aurobindo Ghose, Speeches, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, (3rd ed), 1952, p. 6.

[4]Aurobindo Ghose, Sri Aurobindo on Himself and on the Mother, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1952, p. 95-96.

great spiritual teachers and Pondicherry became the source of a "new light" for many in India. Among his many works, Essays on the Gītā, as K.M. Panikkar points out, has had the greatest influence in shaping the thought of modern India.[5] These essays were originally serialised in his journal Arya over a period of four years, had won immediate recognition as a masterly exposition of the permanent truths of the Gītā in the context of modern life and in the language of modern thought.

Gandhi entered the Indian national movement in 1915 as a seasoned politician, with his long experience in South Africa as the leader of the immigrant Indians, who were discriminated against by the racist white government there. Gandhi, more than any other national leader, was conscious of the strength and vitality of the masses and their role in making history. "Through his intimate contact with them, he had acquired an amazing capacity to feel their pulse and respond to their emotions".[6] This was an advantage Gandhi had over Aurobindo and many other national leaders, who represented the English educated middle class. Soon after his return to India, Gandhi founded the ashram at Sabarmati, in Gujarat, to train volunteers for practising the ideals and method of satyāgraha, passive moral resistance, which he applied successfully against the discriminatory policies of the South African government. For many years, Sabarmati Ashram was the symbol of the new vitality and dynamism which Gandhi brought into Indian politics.

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[5]Cf. K.M. Panikkar, The Foundations of New India, p. 45.

[6]K. Damodaran, op. cit., p. 435.

Gandhi and the Gītā

Gandhi's approach to the national issues was basically "religious". But to him, "religious" had a wider meaning than it had for Tilak, Aurobindo and others. Surely, Gandhi used religious symbols and terminology to communicate his ideas to the masses. This was the only way open to him to present his ideas "in forms comprehensible to the Indian masses, whose support the leaders could not afford to ignore".[7] Unlike his predecessors Gandhi was successful in leavening traditional religious symbolisms with reformist ideas, and tried to find symbols and issues that would avoid communal confrontations. In this attempt even if he did not fully succeed, "he did distinguish himself from his predecessors by infusing these inherited elements with the exceptionally compelling remorseless moral vision of a 'religious'".[8]

Gandhi was deeply religious from childhood and, apart from the teachings of Hinduism, the ethical ideals of Islam, Christianity and Jainism influenced him in the formative years of his life. All his political activities were guided by his spiritual concerns. Nehru, to whom Gandhi was a great paradox, characterizes the spiritual and moral concerns of Gandhi in the following words: "He does not want people to make an ideal of over-increasing comfort and leisure, but to think of the moral life, give up their bad habits, to indulge themselves less and less, and then to develop themselves individually and spiritually".[9]

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[7] Indira Rothermund, The Philosophy of Restraint, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1963, p. 16.

[8] L. I. Rudolph & S.H. Rudolph, op. cit., p. 193.

[9] J. Nehru, Autobiography, Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1962, pp. 517-18.

So much so, one finds Gandhi's autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth, something like the "Confessions" of a saint. The struggle which echoes in this great book, is a struggle to integrate his private life with what he preached to the nation. It is from these "experiments in the spiritual field", Gandhi states, "which are known only to myself, and from which I have derived such power as I possess for working in the political field".[10]

There was an openness in Gandhi's approach to the Gītā which we seldom see in other commentators. This openness is displayed in his approach to scriptures in general. He writes: "I exercise my judgement about every scripture, including the Gītā. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason. While I believe that the principal books are inspired, they suffer from a process of double distillation.... Nothing in them comes from God directly".[11] Unlike many orthodox Hindus, he holds that even in the Vedas there are impurities and "they (the Vedas) contain only fragments of the originals".[12] He did not regard the Mahābhārata as a historical work in the accepted sense. He writes: "By ascribing to the chief actors superhuman or subhuman origins, the great Vyasa made short work of the history of Kings and their peoples. The persons therein described may be historical, but the author of the Mahābhārata has used them merely to drive home his religious

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[10]M.K. Gandhi, An Autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth, Beacon Press, Boston, 1965, p. xii.

[11]Harijan, Dec. 5, 1936.

[12]M.K. Gandhi, The Teaching of the Gītā, p. 44.

theme".[13] Gandhi's Gujarati translation of the Gītā, titled Anāsaktiyoga, and his commentary bear witness to this approach to the Gītā and other scriptures. To him, scriptures, Hindu or other, "can only be concerned with eternal verities and must appeal to any conscience, i.e. any heart whose eyes of understanding are opened. Nothing can be accepted as the word of God which cannot be tested by reason or be capable of being spiritually experienced".[14] Obviously he gave more importance to the latter, for he says elsewhere, "....one's experience, therefore, must be the final guide. The written word undoubtedly helps, but even that has to be interpreted, and when there are conflicting interpretations, the seeker is the final arbiter".[15]

It is rather surprising that even though his family was very religious, Gandhi had no acquaintance with the Gītā in his early youth. He read this great text, which was to become his "eternal mother" and "Solace" in later years, in English translation with theosophist friends in England for the first time. He was constrained to tell them that he had not read the Gītā before. The book struck him as one of priceless worth. He writes of this first reading of the Gītā in his autobiography as a great spiritual experience. He writes, "The impression has ever since been growing on me with the result that I regard it today as the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth. It has afforded

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[13] Ibid., p. 19.

[14] M.K. Gandhi, All Religions are True, Pearl Publications, Bombay 1962, p. 22.

[15] Ibid., p. 20.

me invaluable help in moments of gloom."[16] He studied and meditated on the Gītā for several years; and he would write later, "it has become for me the key to the scriptures of the world. It unravels for me the deepest mysteries to be found in them".[17] He gave greater importance to the Gītā than even the Vedas, which to an orthodox Hindu is the "revealed word". He states, "I do believe in the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, the Smṛti, the Puraṇas. But to me, the Gītā is the key to a knowledge of the Śāstras. It enunciates the principles on which all conduct must be based. It sums up the whole of the Śāstras and, therefore, absolves laymen from having to explore the other books".[18]

In a lengthy article in his journal Harijan, Gandhi explains why he considers the Gītā as the greatest religious text. He writes:

> Early in my childhood, I had felt the need for a scripture that would serve me as an unfailing guide through the trials and temptations of life. The Vedas could not supply that need...But the Gītā...gave within the compass of 700 verses the quintessence of all the Shastras and Upanishads. That decided for me. I learnt Sanskrit to enable me to read the Gītā. Today, the Gītā is not only my Bible or my Quran, it is more than that - it is my Mother. I lost my earthly mother who gave me birth long ago, but this Eternal Mother has completely filled her place by my side ever since.[19]

In this kind of approach, there is a characteristic Gandhian sentiment,

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[16] M.K. Gandhi, An Autobiography, p. 67.

[17] M.K. Gandhi, The Teaching of the Gītā, p. 44.

[18] loc. cit.

[19] Ibid., p. 45.

which he did not forsake even in reference to political issues. Nehru once accused Gandhi for this, which he considered a weakness. Writes Nehru in his autobiography: "I felt angry with him (Gandhi) at his religious and sentimental approach to a political question, and his frequent reference to God in connection with it. He even seemed to suggest that God had indicated the very date of the fast".[20] But that was the ways of the Mahatma, as people of India called him. For a clear understanding of Gandhi's approach and freer interpretation of the Gītā, we have to look at his religious philosophy as a whole and his political actions that had its fount in the former.

Gandhi was essentially a religious man, a Hindu "to the innermost depths of his being".[21] But his conception of religion was not dogmatic. He rejected every text or practice which did not fit in with his idealistic interpretation of what it should be, calling it an interpolation or a subsequent accretion. He expresses this emphatically: "I decline to be a slave to precedents or practice I cannot understand or defend on a moral basis".[22] God, for him, is the moral principle, which he calls the "Law of Truth or Love". In his own words, "To me God is truth and love. God is ethics and morality, God is fearlessness, God is the source of light and life, and all the same He is higher than

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[20] J. Nehru, Autobiography, p. 370.

[21] J. Nehru, The Discovery of India, John Day, New York, 1946, p. 365.

[22] Quoted by J. Nehru, loc. cit.

and beyond all these."[23] Throughout his writings, this conviction echoes and gradually he began to speak of truth as God. Love of man was the only way to realise the truth. Tendulkar quotes him as saying, "When you want to find Truth as God, the only inevitable means is love, that is, non-violence. And since I believe that ultimately means and ends are convertible terms, I should not hesitate to say that God is Love".[24] This interpretation of "Truth as God" had a great impact on the national movement as a whole, and behind it lies "the old pedantic ideal of the life force which is the inner base of everything that exists".[25] Gandhi's understanding of "truth" as the source of life and his insistence that it can be realized only if one lives by it, is really in the Vedantic tradition of India. It was, in many ways, an attempt to re-grasp and re-interpret the Hindu tradition for Twentieth Century India.

The Hindu tradition holds out to man the possibility of ultimate realization of the absolute: the consummation of man's strivings in his identification with the Godhead. This is the basic idea of "self-realization" in the system of Vedanta philosophy. For Gandhi, this striving for self-realization was really the search for truth. This he

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[23] M.K. Gandhi, Young India, March 3, 1925.

[24] D.G. Tendulkar, The Mahatma, Jhaveri & Tendulkar, Bombay, 1952, Vol. 2, p. 312.

[25] J. Nehru, New York Times Magazine, Sept. 7, 1958.

clearly states in his introduction to his autobiography. He writes:

> There are innumerable definitions of God, because His manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a moment stun me. But I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest...But as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must meanwhile be my beacon, my shield and buckler.[26]

The two basic techniques of his political action - satyāgraha and ahiṁsā - were based on this understanding of truth. "Satyāgraha is literally holding on to Truth, and it means therefore Truth-force". How does it become a "force" and how does it relate to man's action in the field of conflict? Gandhi answers: "It excludes the use of violence, because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and therefore not competent to punish".[27] For Gandhi, the techniques of his political action and his religious philosophy developed side by side. Both of them evolved in the field of action. In other words, his ontological or epistemological statements were developed, as J.V. Bondurant observes, "in the course of his action in the field of human interrelationships. As Gandhi pursued his experiments with truth,

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[26] M.K. Gandhi, An Autobiography, p. xiii-xiv.

[27] M.K. Gandhi, Speeches & Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, Natesan, Madras, 4th. ed. (n.d.) p. 506.

the concept settled solidly into the sphere of ethical consideration".[28] He was fully convinced that spiritual law does not work in a field of its own. "On the contrary" he writes, "it expresses itself through ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the economic, the social and the political fields."[29]

In the Upaniṣads we have the ontological equation satya=Brahman[30] and Gandhi's expression "Truth is God" is the unconscious translation of this Upaniṣadic teaching into everyday language. "Sat", or the essence, i.e. the being within, is the transindividual Self, the Brahman, according to the Upaniṣads. The Chandogya formula, "tat tvam asi (that thou art) has been assimilated into Gandhi's understanding of God and truth. In a letter to a friend he explains his view:

> In "God is Truth", it certainly does not mean "equal to" nor does it merely mean, "is truthful". Truth is not a mere attribute of God, but He is That. He is nothing if He is not That. Truth in Sanskrit means Sat. Sat means Is. Therefore Truth is implied in Is. God is, nothing else is. Therefore the more truthful we are, the nearer we are to God. We are only to the extent that we are truthful.[31]

This statement clearly shows that Gandhi was not concerned with abstract

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[28] J.V. Bondurant, Conquest of Violence, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1965, p. 19.

[29] Quoted by Indira Rothermund, op. cit, p. 48.

[30] "He who knows Brahma as the real [Satya]...Obtains all desires" (The Taittirya Upaniṣad, I.1).

[31] From a letter to P.G. Mathew, July 9, 1932, as quoted in Harijan, March 27, 1949, p. 26.

ideas about God. For him, God is the source of ethics and morality. "He transcends speech and reason". At the same time "He is a personal God to those who need His touch".[32] "God to be God", says he, "must rule the heart and transform it".[33] Religion means to accept God for life, as Dutta summarizes Gandhi's thought.

Gandhi's definition of Hinduism as a "search after truth through non-violent means"[34] is very significant and the doctrines of satya (i.e. truth) and ahiṁsā (i.e. love) became the basis of his political and religious philosophy. In the formulation and application of his philosophy, he "used the traditional to promote the novel" and he reinterpreted the religious texts and traditions "in such a way that revolutionary ideas clothed in familiar expression, were readily adopted and employed towards revolutionary ends".[35] People of India readily responded to Gandhi's call for political action, because his language was very familiar to them. Through the traditional precepts such as satya, ahiṁsā, Gandhi successfully introduced "considerations unfamiliar to Indian tradition and reminiscent of the rationalist-humanist traditions

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[32] Young India, March 3, 1925, Quoted by D.M. Dutta, The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1953, p. 30.

[33] Ibid., p. 42.

[34] Young India, April 24, 1924, Quoted by Indira Rothermund, op. cit., p. 40.

[35] J.V. Bondurant, op. cit., p. 105.

of the West".[36] In this re-interpretation of the religious texts in order to drive home his ideas, Gandhi more heavily leaned on the Gītā than on any other text. He declares so himself in his introduction to Anāsaktiyoga, in these words: "...I have felt that in trying to enforce in one's life the central teaching of the Gītā, one is bound to follow Truth and ahiṁsā".[37] He was also convinced that a reverent study of the Gītā will help people to become true servants of the nation and through it, of humanity.[38] It was this condition that led him to a free interpretation of the text, giving greater emphasis to spiritual experience than to the literal meaning of the text.

Orthodox Hindu scholars viewed Gandhi's interpretation of the traditional texts, especially the Gītā, with suspicion and regarded his understanding of orthodoxy with doubt. But he has declared in no uncertain terms his allegiance to Hinduism, in words such as these: "...As for religion, in order to satisfy the requirements of the definition, I must restrict myself to my ancestral religion. This is the use of my immediate religious surrounding. If I find it defective, I should serve it by purging it of its defects".[39] Purging Hinduism of many of its defects he did attempt. Besides, he was prepared to impart new

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[36] Ibid., p. 108.

[37] M.K. Gandhi, The Gospel of Selfless Action, p. 132.

[38] Cf. M.K. Gandhi, The Teaching of the Gītā, p. 40.

[39] M.K. Gandhi, Speeches & Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, p. 337.

meanings which are relevant to the times into traditional concepts. He gives a very pertinent interpretation of the progressive development and transformation of meanings to meet new situations. He writes:

> A poet's meaning is limitless. Like man, the meaning of great writings suffer evolution. On examining the history of languages, we notice that the meaning of important words has changed or expanded. This is true of the Gītā. The author has himself extended the meanings of some of the current words. We are able to discover this even on a superficial examination. It is possible that in the age prior to that of the Gītā, offering of animals as sacrifice was permissible. In the Gītā continuous concentration on God is the King of sacrifices. The third chapter seems to show that sacrifice chiefly means body-labour for service. The third and fourth chapters read together will give us other meanings of sacrifice, but never animal sacrifice. ...Thus the author of the Gītā, by extending meaning of words has taught us to imitate him. Let it be granted, that according to the letter of the Gītā it is possible to say that warfare is consistent with renunciation of fruit. But after forty years' unremitting endeavour fully to enforce the teaching of the Gītā in my own life, I have in all humility, felt that perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observance of ahiṁsā in every shape and form.[40]

In the Gītā doctrine of non-attachment, Gandhi discovered the meaning of ahiṁsā and satya. He also found elements of satyāgraha, his political weapon to reduce the grievances of the people in the scriptures.

Gītā - The Text for Ahiṁsā

The context of the Gītā is martial and all the commentators of the Gītā are at one in admitting this, whether one holds the context as

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[40]M.K. Gandhi, The Gospel of the Selfless Action, p. 133-134.

a historical event or a purely literary creation. On the surface, it may look rather paradoxical that Gandhi found this text as the fountain of the doctrine of ahiṁsā. As Vincent Sheean observes, "...we have to step with care as we approach"[41] Gandhi's interpretation and application of the Gītā in his everyday life as well as the political activities he led. He was not another scholar who attempted his own translation and commentary of this text. His was an endeavour "to reduce to practice the teaching of the Gītā as I have understood it".[42] The claim he makes with respect to the Gītā, is the claim of his life itself. He had made the Gītā "a spiritual reference book" and has accepted its ethical basis and spiritual disciplines. So, he writes with the authority of one who has lived up to the message of the text, "At the back of my reading there is the claim of an endeavour to enforce the meaning in my own conduct for an unbroken period of forty years".[43] His study and practice of the precepts of the Gītā were the means he has adopted for self-realization. "And with him", writes Sheean, "...self-realization was no mythical revelation or cataclysm of the consciousness, but a goal to be reached after a lifetime of steady, hard, unremitting effort".[44]

This struggle for self-realization was not an isolated struggle of his own soul but a struggle along with millions of his compatriots.

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[41]Vincent Sheean, Lead Kindly Light, Radom House, New York, 1949, p. 49.

[42]M.K. Gandhi, The Gospel of Selfless Action, p. 126.

[43]Ibid., p. 127.

[44]Vincent Sheean, op. cit., p. 49.

The rigorous discipline he imposed upon himself and his followers, and the renunciation of the body and all its attachments, combined with the strictest control of his own thoughts were themselves an unceasing battle. This inner struggle must have led Gandhi to believe that Kurukṣetra, the field where the great battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas took place, is the symbolic representation of the human heart. Most of the scholars do not agree with Gandhi's symbolic interpretation of the Gītā. But, his rendering of the Gītā was for the common people and it has a great impact on the lives of many Indians. The Indian national movement which had deep roots in Hinduism, itself to a great extent was influenced by Gandhi's concept of ahiṁsā, in general, and his interpretation of the Gītā in particular. Sheean gives a very telling analogy to drive home 'Gandhi-Gītā's' influence on the Indian people. He writes: "...but if we could imagine a national leader, social reformer and political genius with the personal habits of Francis of Assisi existing in a Christian country, and could further imagine that this unique personage insisted daily for forty or fifty years on a textual knowledge of the New Testament in the original Greek as well as in modern languages, succeeding in some measure, then we might have a notion of what Gandhi in relation to Gītā has meant in India".[45]

Gandhi approaches the Gītā and the Mahābhārata from a totally different perspective than the traditional commentators. He holds

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[45] Ibid., p. 296.

firmly that Mahābhārata(and therefore the Gītā) is not a historical book and the Krsna of the epic is not a historical person. He writes: "...Krishna of the Gītā is perfection and right knowledge personified, but the picture is imaginary. That does not mean that Krishna, the adored of his people, never lived. But perfection is imagined. The idea of a perfect imagination is an aftergrowth".[46] This was undoubtedly a bold step in the interpretation and application of religious texts in the Indian context. When the literal approach to the text was abandoned, new vistas were wide open and that helped Gandhi to free himself from the traditional modes of interpretation, without doing violence to the genuine core of the tradition. Gandhi admits boldly that he had to evolve his own canons of interpretation. His was not one that evolved from the science of reasoning, but from intuition on which he leaned heavily. He says: "...I know that ultimately one is guided not by the intellect, but by the heart. The heart accepts a conclusion for which the intellect subsequently finds the reasoning...I shall, therefore, appreciate the position of those who are unable to accept my interpretation of the Gītā. All I need to do is indicate how I reached my meaning, and what canons of interpretation I have followed in arriving at it. Mine is but to fight for my meaning, no matter whether I win or lose."[47] He also maintains that "a literal interpretation of the Gītā lands one

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[46] M.K. Gandhi, The Gospel of Selfless Action, p. 128.

[47] M.K. Gandhi, The Teaching of the Gītā, p. 11.

in a sea of contradictions. The letter truly killeth, the spirit giveth life".[48]

The "new canon" of interpreting the Gītā gives greater freedom to Gandhi. It is logical for him to interpret symbolically, the descriptions of and exhortations to physical warfare. He sees the Pandavas as the symbol of light and Kauravas as that of darkness. The descriptions of Kurukṣetra represent for Gandhi, the incompatability of light and darkness. To bring home his concept of "non-co-operation", which was a powerful political weapon against the British, he writes: "I venture to suggest that the Bhagavadgītā is a Gospel of Non-co-operation between the forces of darkness and those of light".[49] The predicament of Arjuna in the battlefield is the predicament of every man who quails, "when the dividing line between good and evil is thin and the right choice is so difficult".[50] He points out that the author of the Mahābhārata has not in any way established the necessity of physical warfare but "on the contrary he has proved its futility".[51] The Gītā was not written to inculcate the doctrine of ahiṁsā, Gandhi freely admits. In his understanding, ahiṁsā "was an accepted and primary duty even before the Gītā age."[52] He holds that warlike illustrations are used in the Gītā not because the author of the Gītā condones violence, but because during

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[48] Ibid., p. 4.

[49] loc. cit.

[50] Young India, May 7, 1925.

[51] M.K. Gandhi, The Gospel of Selfless Action, p. 128.

[52] Ibid, p. 132.

that period "nobody observed the contradiction between them (wars) and ahiṁsā"[53]

Ahiṁsa literally means "non-injury" or "non-killing". The term "non-violence" carries the spirit of the concept more than any other English term. ('Ahiṁsā' is one of those innumerable Sanskrit negatives which carries a very positive meaning). The early Christian concept of love comes closer to Gandhi's idea of ahiṁsā than any other. Gandhi never claimed that the concept of ahiṁsā he brought into the social and political movements of India was something new. In fact, the concept was as old as the Vedas. The Chandogya Upaniṣad lists ahiṁsā as one of the five ethical virtues.[54] Mahābhārata couples the aphorism, ahiṁsā paramo dharmaḥ (ahiṁsā is the greatest religion or duty) with satyannasti paro dharmaḥ (there is no religion greater than truth). This aphorism is learnt by every Indianalong with stories from Buddhist and Jaina literature illustrating the significance of ahiṁsā. Gandhi, who grew up in Gujarat where the Jainas had great influence, was in love with these teachings from his childhood. For the Jainas, ahiṁsā constitutes the first vow and their adherence to non-violence reaches extremes in their attitude to other living creatures. In spite of these influences, Gandhi claims a degree of freedom from the religious traditions and texts which moulded his outlook. He writes:

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[53] Ibid., p. 133.

[54] Atha yat tapo dānaṁ ārjavaṁ ahiṁsa satyavacanam iti, ta asya dakṣinaḥ, (Chandogya Upaniṣad, III.17.4).

"...though my views on ahiṁsā are a result of my study of most of the faiths of the world, they are no longer dependent upon the authority of these works. They are a part of my life, and if I suddenly discovered that the religious books read by me bore a different interpretation from the one I had learnt to give them, I should still hold to the view of ahiṁsā".[55] This statement is typical of Gandhi's attitude towards the authority of religious texts. Taking a firm stand on this position, he rejects the traditional interpretations of the Gītā and claims that a closer study of the text reveals that it does not refer to any physical warfare. On the other hand, Gandhi insists that non-violence, rather than violence is the central theme of the Gītā. He asserts that the "whole design (of the Gītā) is inconsistent with the rules of conduct governing the relations between two warring parties".[56] Taking into account the contention that Kṛṣṇa encourages Arjuna to carry on the battle, Gandhi admits, "...it is difficult to reconcile certain verses with the teaching of non-violence". But, he hastens to add "...it is far more difficult to set the whole of the Gītā in the framework of violence".[57]

Gandhi maintains the view that the central teaching of the Gītā is ahiṁsā. He arrives at this conclusion not only from the symbolic interpretation of the context in which the discourses are given but also

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[55] M.K. Gandhi, Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, p. 345.

[56] M.K. Gandhi, The Gospel of Selfless Action, p. 128.

[57] M.K. Gandhi, The Teaching of the Gītā, p. 16.

from the nature of the advice given by Krsna to Arjuna. He writes:

> The central teaching of the Gītā is not Himsa but Ahimsa, is amply demonstrated by the subject begun in the Second Chapter and summarized in the concluding Eighteenth Chapter. The treatment in other chapters also supports this position. Himsa is impossible without anger, without attachment, without hatred, and the Gītā strives to carry us to the state beyond Satva, Rajas and Tamas, a stage that excludes anger, hatred etc.[58]

According to Gandhi, Arjuna refused to fight because of his attachment to his relatives. "He fought shy of killing his own kith and kin".[59] Arjuna was still a warrior and he did not accept the principle of ahimsā, though he was aware of the cruelty of war. Arjuna's predicament was never centered on the question of ahimsā and as such Krsna read his mind and admonished him to be loyal to his dharma. "He, therefore told him: 'Thou hast already done the killing. Thou canst not all at once argue thyself into non-violence. Finish what thou hast already begun'".[60] Gandhi does not consider this advice as opposed to the principle of non-violence. To do so would amount to saying that himsa is the law of life. Gandhi has utmost conviction that "To one who reads the spirit of the Gītā, it teaches the secret of Non-violence, the secret of realizing the Self through the physical body".[61]

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[58] loc. cit.

[59] Ibid., p. 17.

[60] loc. cit.

[61] loc. cit.

In his introduction to the commentary on the Gītā Gandhi states clearly that renunciation of the fruits of action "...is the centre round which the Gītā is woven. This renunciation is the central sun, round which devotion, knowledge and the rest revolve like planets".[62] This is the way the Gītā shows to reach the final goal of liberation. But Gandhi is aware that the human mind is incapable of absolute detachment to the fruits of action unless there is an attachment to a higher principle. This higher principle, according to Gandhi is ahiṁsā. When man gives up his desire for the fruits of his actions, there shall be no temptation for untruth or hiṁsā. "Take any instance of untruth or violence", writes Gandhi, "and it will be found that at its back was the desire to attain the cherished end."[63] This does not in any way mean that one should be totally indifferent to the results of his actions. What the Gītā is concerned with is the "hankering after fruit". The path of renunciation of the fruit is the path of salvation according to the Gītā. "Performing action without attachment, man attains the Supreme".[64]

The Gītā's exhortation to perform actions without desire for the fruits thereof does not involve the idea of "all absence of purpose". Gandhi shows that, on the other hand, there is a supreme purpose for

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[62] Ibid., p. 20.

[63] M.K. Gandhi, Gospel of Selfless Action, p. 129.

[64] Ibid., p. 132.

this renunciation. That purpose is self-realization or attaining the Final Release.[65] This is the true meaning of the yoga of action as well as the yoga of knowledge. Gandhi would agree with Zaehner when he says, "Wisdom, then amounts to detachment from all that is transient and a loving attachment of the immortal self to God, for in that both self and God are eternal they coincide in that both are ultimately not bound by space, time, action and causation".[66]

When a visitor asked Gandhi whether he would consider ahiṁsā or selfless action as the central theme of the Gītā, he admitted that selfless action is undoubtedly the central theme.[67] The very title of Gandhi's translation of the Gītā - Anāsaktiyoga - means this. But Gandhi, after stating this, added "He who would be Anāsakta (selfless) has necessarily to practice non-violence to attain the state of selflessness. Ahiṁsā is, therefore, a necessary preliminary, it is included in Anāsakti, it does not go beyond it".[68] Gandhi's concept of ahiṁsā takes a wider and deeper meaning when we see it in this light as a force which transcends the very fabric of human relationships, a force which compels one to act and think beyond the immediate range of one's narrow world. It is a dynamic force which in the experience of Gandhi, seeks

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[65] Cf. M.K. Gandhi, Gospel of Selfless Action, p. 161.

[66] R.C. Zaehner, The Bhagavadgītā, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1969, p. 162.

[67] M.K. Gandhi, The Teaching of the Gītā, p. 33.

[68] loc. cit.

to change relationships that are evil into good and acts as a bridge to bridge every division. For him the principle of non-violence "implies as complete self-purification as is humanly possible".[69] Gandhi argues that yajña or sacrifice as taught by the Vedas essentially means this self-purification. The Gītā enjoins sacrifice to the gods and promises rewards to those who perform the right sacrifices. Gandhi draws a very logical conclusion from this teaching, as opposed to the conventional interpretation. He writes, "To proceed a little further, sacrifice means laying down one's life so that others may live. Let us suffer, so that others may be happy, and the highest service and the highest love is wherein man lays down his life for his fellowmen. That love is thus Ahiṁsā which is the highest service."[70]

If there is an air of dogmatism in Gandhian philosophy it is in his insistence on ahiṁsā. The validity of any action for Gandhi, even the question of truth itself, has to be decided in relation to ahiṁsā. Ahiṁsā becomes the supreme value, one cognizable standard by which true action can be determined, when it is seen as the "law of our being". At that stage, the test of truth - the relative truths through which one treads to the final Truth - is action based on the refusal to do harm. This is the one principle to which Gandhi adhered to the end, in the life of his ashram community. He held, as Bondurant observes, that

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[69]Quoted by Thomas Merton in Gandhi on Non-violence, New Directions, New York, 1965, p. 24.

[70]M.K. Gandhi, The Teaching of the Gītā, p. 57.

ahiṁsā is "the supreme and only way to the discovery of social truths".[71] This evolution of the concept of ahiṁsā is a natural culmination of Gandhi's religious philosophy which sees "all life as one in a sacred cosmic family in which each member helped to elevate the whole from a selfish and destructive to a spiritual and productive level through sacrificial participation in the common needs and struggles of all".[72] In this, we see a remarkable blending of his political ideas with his understanding of the Hindu dharma.

Gandhi's interpretation of the Gītā, as it turns out in the final analysis, is an honest attempt to augment his religious intentions with the support of scripture. He tried to fulfil in his own life the message of the Gītā as he understood it. As K.M. Panikkar observes, "He was in fact the embodiment of the Gītā ideal of the equable mind devoted to action meant for the benefit of all - the sthitiprajña who unmoved by anger or by fear had his feet planted firmly in the world and directed all action to the benefit of the world".[73] He was a karmayogin and The Gītā According to Gandhi, was his manifesto. In the words of Vincent Sheean: "His interpretation of it (the Gītā) therefore, in terms of non-violence acquires the value of life rather than literature. He lived the Gītā in non-violent terms. That was his interpretation and he proved it by his hero's death. Just as life transcends letters, so

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[71] Joan V. Bondurant, op. cit., p. 25.

[72] Thomas Merton, op. cit., p. 11.

[73] K.M. Panikkar, The Foundations of New India, p. 44.

Gandhi-Gītā triumphs over the unanimous dissent of the scholars by the dramatic perfection of the life given to it."[74]

Sri Aurobindo and the Yoga of the Gītā

Aurobindo's interpretation of the Gītā is far different from Gandhi's, as Pondicherry Ashram, the centre of his spiritual activities, was separated from Gandhi's Sabarmati by hundreds of miles. He does not see Kurkṣetra as a symbolic battleground, but as a literal field of strife, of physical carnage and holds that the entire Gītā proceeds from a concept of nature in which such violent strife is seen to be necessary as an aspect of human activity in general. He writes, "It is self-evident that in the actual life of man, social, political, moral, we can make no real step forward without a struggle, a battle between what exists and lives and what seeks to exist and live and between all that stands behind either".[75] In these words we hear the echo of the political slogans of the "extremist" Aurobindo who left British India for Pondicherry in order to formulate a spiritual basis for the liberation of his motherland. Non-violence had no place in his philosophy. The moralism of the man who preaches love, according to Aurobindo, ignores the fact of life that "Love itself has been constantly a power of death. Especially the love of good and the love of God, as embraced by the human ego, have been responsible for much strife,

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[74]V. Sheean, op. cit., p. 298.

[75]Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 38.

slaughter and destruction."[76] He upholds Hinduism as a religion with great courage to admit "without any reserve...that this enigmatic World-Power is one Deity, one Trinity, to lift up the image of the Force that acts in this world in the figure not only of the beneficient Durga, but of the terrible Kali in her blood-stained dance of destruction."[77]

It is beyond the scope of our study to attempt an exposition of Aurobindo's philosophy and place his interpretation of the Gītā in that context. What is proposed here is only to bring out certain salient features of his interpretation and examine their relation to the religious and national movements of which he was a leader. Aurobindo's Essays on the Gītā is "primarily a work of religion" as K.M. Panikkar observes, "but in view of the author's training and background it has had a wide social significance."[78] This commentary is not a bhāṣya in the traditional sense, but an exposition of truths of the Gītā which are relevant to modern times. In it, we see the gems of Aurobindo's religious philosophy, which has become known in later years as "Integral Advaitism" and "Integral Yoga". We may also observe that the fiery nationalist in him was very much alive when he wrote these essays. Aurobindo exhorts his readers by stating that the Gītā is addressed to the fighter, whose duty is that of war and protection, that is protection

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[76] Ibid., p. 39.

[77] Ibid., p. 40.

[78] K.M. Panikkar, The Foundations of New India, p. 45.

of right and justice.[79] He goes on to say "...but to battle for the right is his (the Aryan fighter's) true object of life and to find a cause for which he can lay down his life or by victory win the crown and glory of the hero's existence is his greatest happiness".[80] In the context of the Indian national struggle, the meaning of these statements are very clear. These expositions of the Gītā are really mild, spiritualised versions of the political ideas which he promoted vehemently. He has advocated passive resistance only as a tactical step and did not hide his real opinion on the subject. He writes:

> Under certain circumstances a civil struggle becomes in reality a battle and the morality of war is different from the morality of peace. To shrink from bloodshed and violence under such circumstance is a weakness deserving as severe a rebuke as Sri Krishna addressed to Arjuna when he shrank from the colossal civil slaughter on the field of Kurukshetra. Liberty is the life-breath of a nation, and when the life is attacked...any and every means of self-preservation becomes right and justifiable[81]

Although Aurobindo is steeped in love of ancient and medieval India, his philosophy gives an altogether new meaning to the conception of Yoga. He has enlarged the scope of Yoga as never before and this ancient discipline which used to mean "negative repression" of the mental activity of man has attained a new significance. For Aurobindo,

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[79]Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 44.

[80]Ibid., p. 58.

[81]Quoted by Karan Singh in Prophet of Indian Nationalism, Allen & Unwin, London, 1963, p. 100.

"All Yoga is a seeking after the Divine, a turn towards union with the Eternal".[82] This union is the supreme purpose of life as taught by the Gītā, according to Aurobindo. Here lies the positive aspect of Aurobindo's exposition of the Yoga. He shows clearly in his writings on the Yoga that a balance and harmony of social obligation vis-a-vis self-realisation is the highest aim of life and whoever is conscious of this implication of Yoga is in fact conscious that Yoga really means "abundant life", to borrow a Biblical (Johannine) expression. He says, "For man is precisely that term and symbol of a higher Existence descended into a material world in which it is possible for the lower to transfigure itself and put on the nature of the higher and the higher to reveal itself in the forms of the lower."[83] Aurobindo visualised the entire creation as a Yoga in a grand and gigantic scale. Personal Yoga of the individual is the only method in which an understanding or rapport with the Yoga in nature can be established. To him "all life is consciously or unconsciously a Yoga".[84] He called his system "Integral Yoga" because he viewed the entire creation as being interconnected. Only a real Yogi can understand this interrelation, through which he himself feels related to everything else. It is an ascent to a higher plane where one grasps the "unitive knowledge embracing both God and the

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[82]Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 308.

[83]Aurobindo Ghose, On Yoga, Aurobindo International University Centre, Pondicherry, 1958, p. 7.

[84]Ibid., p. 4.

universe" and forms the bar and root of final salvation, which means ultimately the healing of the world and healing means making whole.[85]

Aurobindo's 'integral Yoga', as R.C. Zaehner observes, aimed not only "at the discovery of the immortal and timeless within oneself but also sought to harmonize the total human being in and around this immortal core and then concentrate all immortal cores or centres around the core and centre of all things".[86] 'Integral Yoga', conceived on these lines had to make a break with the traditional Sāṁkhya-Yoga and even with Patanjali's classical Rāja Yoga. The Gītā provided Aurobindo with the basic principles for a great synthesis of all Yogas, which were rooted in the classic tradition of India. Aurobindo also gave a social content to the concept of Yoga. Yoga for him is not an individual affair, though the part one plays might for a time be considered very intimate and personal. His concept "progressively developed into Yoga for humanity and ultimately identified itself with universal Yoga".[87] This universal Yoga is integral and synthetic at the same time and it aims at the divinization of the human being. Aurobindo promises the emancipation of the human race through Yoga and emancipation lies in divinising "the whole of humanity by transforming mind, life and matter".[88]

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[85] Nathaniel Pearson, Sri Aurobindo and the Soul Quest of Man, Allen & Unwin, London, 1952, p. 32.

[86] R.C. Zaehner, Evolution in Religion, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971, p. 10.

[87] R.R. Diwakar, Mahayogi Sri Aurobindo, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1967, p. 130.

[88] Ibid., p. 235.

The Essays on the Gītā contains the first stage of Aurobindo's "integral Yoga" which he systematically developed through later works. In these essays, his major burden seems to be a reconciliation and synthesis between different types of yogas, as we noted above. The Gītā is not a philosophical treatise intended to impart any particular doctrine. It is a continuation of the religious tradition of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads and expounds different strands of that tradition. "The Gītā", writes Aurobindo, "starts from this Vedantic synthesis and upon the basis of its essential ideas builds another harmony of the three great means and powers, Love, Knowledge, and Works, through which the soul of man can directly approach and cast itself into the Eternal".[89] Aurobindo observes that the Gītā gives only "a passing and perfunctory attention" to Hatha and Rāja Yogas. His exposition of the Gītā does not adhere to any orthodox schools, Vedantic or Tantric. His whole approach is based on the conviction that the richness and history of the tradition should open new vistas of human experience in the modern context. He recoils from the prospect of our entrenching ourselves in the part or even "within the four corners of the teaching of the Gītā".[90] He shows a remarkable openness to modern philosophies of science and religion. Declares he, "We do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future".[91] At the same time the power of the living past is not

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[89] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 7.

[90] loc. cit.

[91] Ibid., pp. 7-8.

negated in his philosophy. In his re-interpretation of the religious texts, he was fully aware of the dominant theme of inwardness in them and he attempts a bold linking of this "inwardness" with the problems of "this world". He says, "...we have not only to assimilate the great theistic religions of India and the world and a recovered sense of the meaning of Buddhism, but to take full account of the potent though limited revelations of modern knowledge and seeking..."[92] In this spiritual pursuit, Aurobindo believes that a new understanding of the Gītā - the yoga of the Gītā - throws a great light.[93] Even this new

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[92] Ibid., p. 8.

[93] The Rājayoga of Patanjali is different from the yoga of which the Gītā speaks. The basic difference, we may note, stems from the concept of God itself. For Patanjali, God is neither the creator of prakṛti nor of the individual soul. He does not subscribe to the Vedantic concept of Brahman as the ultimate reality. He maintains that those who practice yoga can attain liberation without meditating on God. God only helps an aspirant to practice the art of yoga by removing impediments to it. Patanjali prescribes the eightfold path of yoga for liberation: Yama-niyama-āsana-prāṇayama-pratyāhāra-dhārana-dhyāna-samādhyayo astvavangani. (Yoga-sūtra II.29). While the aim of the Yoga of Patanjali is to transcend the sphere of actions and duties, to rise to a stage in which one could give up all one's activities, mental or physical, the Yoga of the Gītā affirms the ideal of work and knowledge at the same time. (Cf. S.N. Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy, Vol. II, p. 504.)

understanding is essentially a synthesis in the tradition of the Gītā for its philosophy is one of synthesis, "harmonised by a sort of natural and living assimilation".[94]

The Gītā is a Vedantic work in its foundation, though its philosophy is coloured by the ideas of Sāṁkhya and Yoga.[95] Aurobindo maintains that the Yoga it teaches is primarily a practical system and the metaphysical ideas are brought in only as explanatory of this practical system. At the same time the Vedantic knowledge the Gītā declares is not opposed to devotion and works. On the other hand, devotion and works are considered to be of equal importance in the pilgrimage of the human soul. This Yoga of the Gītā, according to Aurobindo "is founded upon the analytical philosophy of the Sāṁkhyas" and takes it as a starting-point and keeps it as "a large element of its method and doctrine".[96] But, Aurobindo makes it clear that the Sāṁkhya of the Gītā is not a system based on Kārikas of Ishwara Krishna nor is its Yoga the Yoga system of Patanjali. The classical Sāṁkhya is atheistic, while "the Sāṁkhya of the Gītā admits and subtly reconciles the theistic, pantheistic and monistic views of the universe".[97] The Yoga of the Gītā, as Aurobindo sees it, does not attempt to adopt any strict and scientific

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[94]Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 62.

[95]This position of Aurobindo is keeping in line with the traditional commentators. Śaṅkara, for example, says, "taditam gītāśāstraṁ sarvavedarthasārasaṁgrahabhutaṁ.

[96]Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 61.

[97]Ibid., p. 62.

gradation as in Rājayoga, but it "seeks by the adoption of a few principles of subjective poise and action to bring about a renovation of the soul and a sort of change, ascension or new birth out of the lower nature into the divine".[98] Here, it seems that Aurobindo's understanding of the Yoga of the Gītā amounts to an action oriented translation of the philosophy of Patanjali.

The term 'yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'yuj', which means to unite, yoke. Patanjali takes this meaning for granted in his formulations of the Yoga sūtras. Commenting on I.2 of the Yoga sūtra, Purohit Swami writes, "It (yoga) joins the personal Self and the impersonal Self".[99] Yoga is also interpreted as keeping "the mind fixed in abstract meditation".[100] These two aspects of the Yoga are implied in the Sūtras of Patanjali.[101] Insofar as the discipline of Yoga is a technique of liberation, it is the act of uniting and becoming one with the impersonal Self. Absolute control of the mind, chitta vritti nirodhah, is an essential step towards this. In Aurobindo's writings we see an attempt to combine these two aspects of the Yoga, viz. union with the impersonal Self through absolute control of the mind.

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[98] loc. cit.

[99] Patanjali, Aphorisms of Yoga, translated into English by Purohit Swami, with a commentary, Faber and Faber, London, 1938, p. 25.

[100] Patanjali, Yoga Sūtras, translated by J.R. Ballentyne and Govind Sastri Deva, Susil Gupta, Calcutta, 1963, p. 9.

[101] atha yoganushasanam
yogash chitta vritti nirodhah
tadā drashtuh svarupe avasthānam, (Yoga sūtras, I.1-3).

R.R. Diwakar says that Yoga for Aurobindo has come to mean, "the method or technique that leads to the union of the soul with the Overself or the Universal Self".[102]

In the Gītā, the term yoga has a wider meaning. Each of the eighteen chapters of the Gītā is named a Yoga. Thus, it applies to all the paths leading to God-realization. But, among these, three paths, or Yogas are pre-eminent. They are Karmayoga Bhaktiyoga and Jñānayoga. According to Aurobindo, the core of the Gītā teaching consists in the harmonisation of these Yogas. Most commentators of the Gītā take one or the other Yoga as the supreme one and place the other two as subservient to the one which fits into their philosophical theme. Aurobindo strongly voices his objection to this kind of sectarian interpretations, though there is room for others to criticize that he too is not completely free from the same pitfalls. He writes, "The Gītā lends itself easily to this kind of error, because it is easy, by throwing particular emphasis on one of its aspects or even on some salient and emphatic text and putting all the rest of the eighteen chapters into the background or making them a subordinate and auxiliary teaching, to turn it into a partisan of our own doctrine or dogma."[103] As against this, the synthesis of these three Yogas, what Aurobindo calls "the triune way of knowledge, works and devotion",[104] is the way that

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[102] R.R. Diwakar, op. cit., p. 131.

[103] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 26.

[104] Ibid., p. 34.

culminates in the final union with the divine Being and oneness with the supreme divine Nature. A.B. Purani, who is an interpreter of Aurobindo's thoughts, summarises the result of this synthesis of the three Yogas in the following words. Purani writes, "When one knows the Supreme by identity with Him, one aspires to serve Him by his actions and one adores Him and loves Him with all his heart".[105] This is the Purnayoga of the Gītā as Aurobindo expounds it.

Aurobindo's conviction that Pūrṇayoga is the only Yoga which will solve the ultimate questions of life leads him to an outright rejection of any system of thought developed from one or other aspects of the teachings of the Gītā. Without naming Tilak, he contends that some authors try to take advantage of the Karmayoga of Gītā and make it a "Gospel of Works". He points out that the works of which the Gītā speaks are works motivated by devotion and thirst for the knowledge of God. What modern mind sees as humanitarian and social has nothing to do with the Yoga of the Gītā. Any idea of service one may read into the Gītā is a modern Europeanized misreading "into a thoroughly antique, and thoroughly oriental and Indian teaching". He continues, "That which the Gītā teaches is not a human but a divine action, not the performance of social duties but the abandonment of all other standards of duty or conduct for a selfless performance of the divine will working through our nature; not social service, but the action of the Best, the

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[105] A.B. Purani, Sri Aurobindo, Addresses in His Life and Teachings, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1955, p. 109.

God-possessed, the Master-men done impersonally for the sake of the world and as a sacrifice to Him who stands behind man and Nature."[106] Judging by this standard, most of the modern commentators of the Gītā, Tilak, Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, et.al. are guilty of some misreading of European ideas into the Gītā. They all consider that the Gītā contains practical guidelines for social behaviour and conduct. In other words, the Gītā for them is a book of practical ethics as well as one of spiritual disciplines. Aurobindo takes the Gītā only as a book of spiritual life. He says that the idea of social service and action comes from the Western Christian tradition which has rejected the philosophical idealism of the Greco-Roman culture and even the devotionalism of the Middle Ages. He thinks that in this process the West has erected society in the place of God. He writes, "At its best it is practical, ethical, social, pragmatic, altruistic, humanitarian".[107] But, the danger of this tendency of the modern mind (he identifies the Western as the modern) is that it has "exiled from its practical motive-power the two essential things, God or the Eternal and spirituality or the God-state, which are the master conceptions of the Gītā".[108] What Aurobindo says is true from one angle, "but it would not be possible", points out R.D. Ranade, "to negate the importance of the ethical element

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[106] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 28.

[107] loc. cit.

[108] Ibid., p. 29.

in the Bhagavadgītā".[109]

It follows as a natural corollary to the above argument that Aurobindo opposes the doctrine of disinterested action, expounded by Gandhi. He says, "...it is a mistake to interpret the Gītā from the stand-point of the mentality of today and force it to teach us the disinterested performance of duty as the highest and all sufficient law".[110] Though he does not make any personal reference to Gandhi, it is obvious who he has in mind. He points out that when Krsna ... commanded Arjuna, "Arise, slay thy enemies, enjoy a prosperous kingdom", he was not preaching any disinterested action. On the other hand, it was given after a great spiritual foundation has been established for action. Performance of one's duties, svakarmani, is only a preliminary stage in the life of the disciple "when he begins ascending the hill of Yoga".[111] Duty, according to Aurobindo, is a relative term depending on one's relation to the community. If there is a conflict between one's duty and moral conscience, the latter commands unconditional obedience. The Gītā calls us to ascend to this higher plane, which is a "supreme poise", leaving behind the mainly practical, and the purely ethical. This ascent leads to the "Brahmanic consciousness". The attainment of this consciousness is the meaning of rising beyond all the

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[109] R.D. Ranade, The Bhagavadgītā as a Philosophy of God-Realisation, University of Nagpur, Nagpur, 1959, p. 171.

[110] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 29.

[111] Ibid., p. 32.

three modes or guṇas, triguṇātīta. Aurobindo points to the carama śloka of the Gītā[112] and says that the call to abandon all duties and take refuge in the Supreme alone, negates the importance of duties which society and custom demand from an individual. He writes: "If that (refuge in the Supreme) can only be attained by renouncing works and life and all duties and the call is strong within us, then into the bonfire they must go, and there is no help for it. The call of God is imperative and cannot be weighted against any other considerations".[113] This statement has a great personal meaning for Aurobindo. He abandoned what he considered as his dharma at one time and went to Pondicherry in obedience to a divine call "to take refuge in the Supreme alone".

The Pūrṇayoga of Aurobindo strives not only at a synthesis of the three Yogas of the Gītā, but also to join hands with the evolutionary, creative effort of nature, through infusion of the eternal in the temporal, the super mind in matter. Writing on the Yoga of Aurobindo, Pitirim A. Sorokin remarks, "It (Pūrṇayoga) endeavours to transform the empirical humanity into the divinized superman; to build progressively the 'Kingdom of God' in this life, on this planet, here and now".[114] The triune path of the Gītā forms the central theme in Aurobindo's

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[112] Bhagavadgītā, XVIII.66.

[113] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 30.

[114] Pitirim A. Sorokin, "The Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo", in The Integral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, ed. by Haridas Chaudhuri and Frederic Spiegelberg, Allen & Unwin, London, 1960, p. 207.

interpretation. He says, "This integral turning of the soul Godwards bases royally the Gītā's synthesis of knowledge and works and devotion".[115] This synthesis leans most towards the side of pure knowledge, but that is the knowledge of the whole Godhead, samagraṁ mām, which Krsna had promised Arjuna. Again, this supreme knowledge, being supraphysical it can be had only through suprarational and supra-psychological experience. In Aurobindo's system, this is the culminating stage of evolution. As S.K. Maitra observes, "...it is that stage which first decisively changes the character of evolution by transforming its character of ignorance and its basis of Inconscience into a movement of knowledge".[116] When this movement of knowledge occurs, our unquiet minds and blinded lives "are stilled and turned towards this many-aspected One and the secret truth of self and God made so real to us and intimate that we can either consciously live and dwell in it or lose our separate selves in the Eternal and no longer be compelled at all by the mental Ignorance".[117] This experience, if it can be called an experience, is a fulfilment, not an annulment. It is to be pointed out that the purpose of all yogas is to attain this fulfilment, and each of the yogas has its own role. Man can only aspire for this experience of "union with the One who has become in Time and Space all that is" through the offering of all Yogas.

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[115] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 296.

[116] S.K. Maitra, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, Banaras Hindu University, Banaras, 1945, p. 70.

[117] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 511.

At this stage, Aurobindo adds, "All knowledge then becomes an adoration and aspiration, but all works too become an adoration and aspiration. Works of nature and freedom of soul are unified in this adoration and become one self-uplifting to the one Godhead".[118]

Aurobindo is one with the orthodox commentators of the Gītā in stressing the importance of sacrifice and self-surrender. The uplifting of our nature, he believes is only possible "through sacrifice by the dedicated heart to the eternal Purushottama".[119] Man's spiritual pursuits will provide him only with limited results, if he does not realize the secret of self-surrender. He writes, "Nothing but the highest knowledge and adoration, no other way than entire self-giving and surrender to this highest who is all, will bring us to the Highest".[120] He calls the realization of this secret the 'great finale' of all Yogas. Rishabhchand summarizes the philosophical basis of Aurobindo's integral Yoga as follows: "The single secret of Sri Aurobindo's quest of truth-consciousness was a complete, unreserved, integral surrender of his whole being to the Divine and His Supreme force - a surrender not only of the mind or the heart or the will and life's activities, but of every part of his being and every movement of his nature".[121]

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[118] Ibid., p. 279.

[119] Ibid., p. 299.

[120] Ibid., p. 302.

[121] Rishabhchand, "The Philosophical Basis of Integral Yoga", The Integral Philosophy of Aurobindo, p. 217.

Universalism in the Gītā

Aurobindo considers the Gītā as the most non-sectarian of all Hindu scriptures. In fact, the greatness of the Gītā lies in its ability to absorb and synthesise opposing systems of thought. Modern Western scholars like W.D.P. Hill, R.C. Zaehner and Juan Mascaro also see the Gītā as a great synthesis. Hill writes, "But never did [an] author compose so widely comprehensive an eirenicon in a spirit of less compromise".[122] Mascaro calls the Gītā a "vast symphony". He explains the nature of this symphony in the following words. "The melodies of vision, love, and work in Eternity become one simple final strain of unearthly tenderness and beauty, the simple call of God to man: 'Come to me for thy salvation'."[123] The Gītā does not attempt to inculcate any particular philosophical dogma or creed. Of course, sectarian commentators always found justification for their doctrines in the Gītā. In the light of this tendency, Aurobindo concludes that it is impossible to derive the exact metaphysical connotation of some of the terms used as they were understood at the time of the compilation of the Gītā. Every scripture necessarily contains two elements; "temporary,

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[122]W. Douglas P. Hill, The Bhagavadgītā, An English Translation and Commentary, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1966, p. 22. (First edition 1928). S. Radhakrishnan echoes the same thought when he writes, "The teacher of the Gītā reconciles the different systems in vogue and gives us a comprehensive eirencion which is not local and temporary but is for all time and all men" (S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 75).

[123]Juan Mascaro, The BhagavadGītā, Translated from the Sanskrit, With an Introduction, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1962, p. 25.

perishable, belonging to the ideas of the period and country in which it was produced, the other eternal and imperishable and applicable in all ages and countries".[124] Aurobindo thinks that the Gītā contains only very little that is merely local and temporal. At any rate, the historical context, that is, if one is inclined to admit the context as historical, forms only the starting-point or outer crust of the Gītā. When one gets beyond this outer crust, the Gītā contains living truths which are relevant for all times. He admits that some of the old expressions and symbols of the Gītā may not make sense to us. But, he goes on to say, "What is of entirely permanent value is that which besides being universal has been experienced, lived and seen with a higher than the intellectual vision".[125]

The Yoga of the Gītā, as we discussed above, has universal significance. It cuts across all the narrrow boundaries of sects and religions. Its aim, as Aurobindo repeatedly points out, is the divinization of humanity. Kṛṣṇa reveals to Arjuna, the human disciple, step by step "the magnificient realities of God and Self and Spirit and the nature of the complex world and the relation of man's mind and life and heart and senses to the Spirit and the victorious means by which through his own spiritual self-discipline and effort can rise out of mortality into immortality..."[126] This discipline is open to all

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[124] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 2.

[125] loc. cit.

[126] Ibid., p. 510.

who surrender "to the Supreme Godhead above and around and within".[127] Aurobindo expresses his conviction throughout his exposition of the Gītā that the teachings of the Gītā will lead the soul of man into its right relationship with God and world existence. He carries the thought of the Gītā into his political writings as well. He writes, "The revelation of God in man is the one eternal ideal that it (India) seeks as much through its attempts to reconstruct the economic life of the Indian people, or through all its arduous struggles for the political emancipation of this subject race".[128]

The picture of Arjuna in the battlefield has a universal relevance. Aurobindo points out that the conflict and predicament of Arjuna is the predicament of all human beings. He writes: "...he is the type of the struggling human soul who has not yet received the knowledge but has grown fit to receive it by action in the world in a close companionship and an increasing nearness to the higher and divine self in humanity".[129] The discourses in the Gītā are given to remove the numbness of Arjuna's soul. He was dejected in the battlefield because he found it difficult to apply the ideal or standard he had been following all his life. Aruobindo does not call this setting of the Gītā symbolical, as Gandhi does. He sees Arjuna as the representative

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[127] loc. cit.

[128] Haridas Mukherjee, "Bande Mataram" and Indian Nationalism, Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1957, p. 95.

[129] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 17.

man of "a great world-struggle and divinely-guided movement of men and nations".[130] Again, Arjuna is the man who needs liberation from his own sense of values and attachment. Finally, when he has the vision of the Eternal, his doubts are cleared and he has been lifted from the lower into a higher consciousness and "out of ego into Self, out of life into mind, vitality and body into the higher beyond which is the nature of the Divine".[131] The ascent of the human soul to a higher plane is the fulfilment the Gītā offers. Aurobindo underlines one particular approach of the Gītā to all spiritual issues, whether it be action, knowledge, sacrifice or liberation. "The Gītā attempts to reconcile conflicting views which were in vogue and at the same time tries the widening of narrow and formal notions to admit the great general truths they unduly restrict..."[132]

In the words of Aurobindo "A spiritual religion of humanity is the hope of the future".[133] But he does not call this "a universal religion" as many universalists would do. He is quick to admit that there is no universal religious system, one in mental creed and vital form. He points out that the Gītā contains guidelines for such a "spiritual religion" without enclosing it in any cage of dogma. On the

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[130] Ibid., p. 18.

[131] Ibid., p. 25.

[132] Ibid., p. 102.

[133] Aurobindo Ghose, The Ideal of Human Unity, Aurobindo Ashram Pondicherry, 1950, p. 378.

other hand, "it lays the philosophical foundation for the unification of the human race".[134] The principal ideas of the Gītā are eternally valuable and valid, as Aurobindo understands them. These principles do not support the exclusive claims of any school of thought. He writes:

> The language of the Gītā, the structure of thought, the combination and balancing of ideas belong neither to the temper of a sectarian teacher nor to the spirit of a rigorous analytical dialectics cutting off one angle of the truth to exclude all the others; but rather there is a wide, undulating, encircling movement of ideas which is the manifestation of a vast synthetic mind and a rich synthetic experience. This is one of those great syntheses in which Indian spirituality has been as rich as in its creation of the more intensive, exclusive movements of knowledge and religious realisation that follow out with an absolute concentration one clue, one path to its extreme issues. It does not cleave asunder, but reconciles and unifies.[135]

The Gītā lays stress on the divine perfectability of man and on dwelling in God. The synthesis of the Gītā is at once spiritual and intellectual and avoids any rigid determination that would limit its universal comprehensiveness. He carries the Vedantic ideas of the Gītā into his formulation of the "ideal of human unity". He writes, "A religion of humanity means the growing realisation that there is a secret Spirit, a divine Reality, in which we are all one, that humanity is its highest present vehicle on earth, that the human race and the human being are the means by which it will progressively receive

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[134] Haridas Chaudhuri, op. cit, p. 232.

[135] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, pp. 5-6.

itself here. It implies a growing attempt to live out this knowledge and being about a kingdom of this divine Spirit upon earth".[136] This is the new gospel of "Integral Advaita", which Aurobindo preaches to the world. He declares: "This gospel which was given only to the few must now be offered to all mankind for its deliverance".[137]

The Gītā concept of avatāra or incarnation (literally descent or coming down) has been one of pivotal significance in Aurobindo's exposition of the Gītā. He says that the figure of Kṛṣṇa "becomes, as it were the symbol of the divine dealings with humanity".[138] It is of little importance, as he looks at the avatāra, whether Kṛṣṇa of the Gītā is historical or not. The controversy among Christian theologians on the question of the historicity of Jesus Christ does not make any sense to him. He writes, "If the Christ, God made man, lives within our spiritual being, it would seem to matter little whether or not a son of Mary physically lived and suffered and died in Judea. So too the Krishna who matters to us is the eternal incarnation of the Divine and not the historical teacher and leader of men".[139] Most of the orthodox Hindu scholars would agree with this view of avatāra. But Aurobindo goes one step further and holds that avatāra is descent and

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[136]Aurobindo Ghose, Ideal of Human Unity, p. 378. Cf. Bhagavadgītā VI. 29 "He whose self is harmonised by yoga seeth the self abiding in all beings and all beings in the Self; everywhere he sees the same."

[137]Aurobindo Ghose, Thoughts and Aphorisms, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1958, p. 33.

[138]Aruobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 15.

[139]Ibid., p. 12.

and ascent at the same time, it is the ascent of humanity into God-head. God descends to uplift the world and Aurobindo couples this with the evolutionary process of matter into spirit and spirit into higher realms of existence. Avatāra is the evolutionary process of divinization of humanity. He says, "The vision of the Puranic legends of Avatāra, however crude and allegorical in manner, is sufficiently suggestive of the ascending order of the gradual development of the world-spirit".[140] He goes on to mention the semblance of evolution in the Puranic avatāras, from Matsya (fish) to Krsna, through Varāha (boar) Nrishimha (lion-man) and so on. He is emphatic on this point of evolution. To him, "Avatārhood would have little meaning if it were not connected with evolution".[141] He maintains that Krsna, Buddha and Kalki depict the last three stages of evolution and they are in fact the three higher stages of spiritual development. Thus, he links the Gītā concept of avatāra with his philosophy of evolution. He writes, "Krsna opens the possibility of Overmind, Buddha tries to shoot beyond the supreme liberation - but that liberation is still negative, not returning upon earth to complete positively the evolution. Kalki is to correct this by bringing the Kingdom of the Divine upon earth, destroying the opposing Asura forces".[142]

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[140] T.V. Kapali Sastri, The Gospel of the Gītā, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1969, p. 16.

[141] Quoted by V. Madhusudan Reddy in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy of Evolution, Institute of Human Study, Hyderabad, 1966, p. 23.

[142] loc. cit.

In his later writings Aurobindo sees evolution, which is the human side of avatāra, both in political terms and in terms of even greater awareness. R.C. Zaehner makes a very pertinent observation on Aurobindo's concept of evolution. Writes Zaehner, "(It is) a progression from apparently inanimate matter to life, from life to consciousness and mind, from mind to what he calls Overmind, and from Overmind to Supermind, which....is pure cit, pure consciousness, operating in the world as śakti, or power".[143] The manifestation of the divine, i.e. avatāra, calls for a human response and that response is "climbing out of the ignorance and limitation of his ordinary humanity".[144] Without this universal human significance, the Gītā teaching of avatāra, Aurobindo contends, "would be only a dogma, a popular superstition, or an imaginative or mystic deification of historical or legendary supermen".[145] He is convinced that the real aim of the Gītā's teaching is to transfigure the human nature itself into the divine".[146]

The human and divine aspect of avatārhood is very important in Aurobindo's system. He does not accept the orthodox interpretation of the famous verses (7 and 8) in the fourth chapter of the Gītā, which set forth the purpose of avatāra for protection of dharma.[147] If it

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[143] R.C. Zaehner, Evolution in Religion, p. 35.

[144] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 141.

[145] Ibid., p. 134.

[146] loc. cit.

[147] paritrāṇāya sādhūnāṁ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām
dharmasaṁsthāpanārthāya saṁbhavāmi yuge-yuge. (Bhagavadgītā, IV.8)

were the purpose of avatāra, he contends that it "would be an otiose phenomenon" since dharma can be protected by human movements and by sages without any actual incarnation.[148] In the larger framework of the Vedanta, especially Advaita Vedanta, this interpretation has a special meaning. For the Vedantin, "...allbeings are even in their individuality unborn spirits, eternal without beginning or end, and in their essential existence and their universality all are the one unborn Spirit of whom birth and death are only a phenomenon of the assumptions and change of forms".[149] However, it should be pointed out that the Gītā does not speak of any ascent or assumption. It understands the divine manifestation only as avatāra, divine descent into human plane. Radhakrishnan's observation on avatāra is very pertinent here. He writes, "An avatāra is a descent of God into man, and not an ascent of man into God".[150]

In his concluding chapter of the exposition of the Gītā, which as he says, is an attempt to "distinguish its essential and living message"[151] for the spiritual welfare of humanity, he gives a stimulating summary of the message of Gītā. This summary, as can be expected, is coloured by his own philosophy - "Integral Advaita". It calls for

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[148] Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 134.

[149] Ibid., p. 136.

[150] S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, Vol. II, p. 545.

[151] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 8.

"a complete surrender of all the ways of your being to the Supreme"[152] and in that surrender the human soul discovers the meaning of existence. That meaning as revealed by the Gītā is this: "Existence is not merely a machinery of Nature, a wheel of law in which the soul is entangled for a moment or for ages; it is a constant manifestation of the Spirit. Life is not for the sake of life alone, but for God, and the living soul of man is an eternal portion of Godhead."[153] The Gītā, as he looks at it, gives a total spiritual direction to the whole life and nature and that is the only hope of uplifting humanity beyond itself. It gives practical means to realize the ultimate unity of humanity.

"A spiritual oneness" he writes, "which would create a psychological oneness not dependent upon any intellectual or outward uniformity and compel a oneness of life not bound up with its mechanical means of unification, but ready always to enrich its secure unity by a free inner variation and a freely varied outer self-expression, this would be the basis of a higher type of human existence".[154] Thus, the Gītā, established as one of the three highest Vedantic authorities, has a message which goes beyond the confines of the Vedantins. Aurobindo sees it as "...a gate opening on the whole world of spiritual truth and experience and the view it gives us embraces all the provinces of that supreme region. It maps out, but does not cut up or build walls or

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[152] Ibid., p. 545.

[153] Ibid., p. 526.

[154] Aurobindo Ghose, The Ideal of Human Unity, p. 379.

hedges to confine our visions".[155]

One of the great features of Aurobindo's commentary on the Gītā is his new synthesis of Advaita, Visistadvaita, Saktaism and Bhedabheda and of the physical and the spiritual. This really introduces a new and revolutionary element into Indian religious thought. But, in this attempt, he reads too much of his own philosophy into the Gītā. For example, the psychological account of the developmental grades of consciousness have no genuine basis in the Gītā, unless one presses certain verses too hard. His vision of the ascent of man into divinity and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth are rooted more in his gnostic ideal than in the Gītā. Though Aurobindo accepts traditional Indian orientations on many basic issues, his interpretation is basically modern. It is to be noted that in his interpretations of the Indian Scriptures, he is eager to show that his doctrine is orthodox by being in conformity with them. To his great credit it must be said that the problems he tries to tackle are universal, though the frame of reference is typically Indian. His answers to these perennial spiritual problems, as Beatrice Bruteau observes, "...while taking advantage of wisdom from the recent and distant past, are characteristically modern".[156] Aurobindo, in his theory of evolution, zest for progress

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[155]Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 6.

[156]Beatrice Bruteau, Worthy is the World: The Hindu Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Rutherford, 1971, p. 254-255.

and undying optimism, is closer to Teilhard de Chardin, than to the Gītā. For, both of them speak in terms of the "transformation of the human race and its unification in and around a central focus of attraction, the sat-cid-ānanda of Aurobindo, the Christ - Omega of Teilhard de Chardin".[157] Aurobindo's success lies in his ability to reconcile and synthesise opposing ideas and in bringing out their relevance to modern times.

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[157] R.C. Zaehner, Evolution in Religion, p. 48.

CHAPTER V

GĪTĀ AND THE NATIONAL REVIVAL

The Hindu Scriptures, both śruti and smṛti, contain many hymns praising the motherland, known as Āryavarta or Bhāratavarṣa. The idea of extolling the land of one's birth as one's mother goes back to the Vedic times. Modern Indian nationalists consider the famous hymn of the Atharvaveda which says, "The earth is the mother, I am her son,"[1] as an incipient formulation of the concept of nationalism. Manu, the lawgiver who is matter-of-factish generally, becomes very emotional when he defines the boundaries of his country. He describes Brahmavarta (India) as "the land created by the Gods." To him, "The Mother and the Motherland are greater than heaven itself."[2] The Viṣṇupurāna hails India "as the best of all countries," where "it is only after many thousands of births, and the aggregation of much merit that living beings are sometimes born as men."[3] These sentiments, though they are a reflection of the times, did not succeed

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[1] mātā bhūmiḥ putroham pṛithivyaḥ. Atharvaveda, XII. i,12.

[2] jananī janmabhūmiśca svargādapi garīyasi. Quoted by Radha Kumud Mookerji in Nationalism in Hindu Culture, Delhi, S.Chand, 1957, p.16.

[3] Viṣṇu Purāṇa, II, iii, 23.

in forging a national unity or a sense of nationhood as envisioned by the Vedic seers. Even as early as the Ṛgvedic times, the seers exhorted the people to live together with love and fraternity, inspired by the spirit of unity and work together with that ideal and ambition.[4] This call for unity was lost when the social institution based on varṇa - the caste system - became very powerful. "The caste system," K.M.Panikkar observes, "originally a process of integration, degenerated early into a system of division and sub-division till at last the broad four castes disappeared into innumerable sub-castes, thereby rendering the development of a common Hindu feeling or a realisation of a sense of Hindu community difficult."[5] Though the Hindu community lived face to face with the Muslim community, for more than 600 years, there emerged no spirit of communal solidarity. These two communities lived in the same area and developed as parallel societies. Most of the Hindus accepted the orthodox interpretation of the śāstras which justified the social institutions and ceremonial practices which thwarted the development of a genuine nationhood.

The Reform Movements of the latter part of the nineteenth century attempted to create a social and religious milieu which could

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[4]Cf. Ṛgveda, x. 191. 2,4.

[5]K.M.Panikkar, Hinduism and the West, A Study in Challenge and Response, Punjab University, Chandigarh 1964, p.13-14.

usher in a new spirit of nationalism. Most of the leaders of the Reform Movements were intellectuals who were inspired by the liberal ideas of the West. They were the people who became the leaders of the Indian National Congress which had its first session in 1885. Leaders such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Surendranath Banerjea, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and others, who were impregnated with liberal ideas of the nineteenth century England, believed in the development of an all-India liberal and secular nationalism.[6] This form of nationalism was considered to be a Western importation by a powerful group within the Congress, known as "the Extremists." Tilak and Aurobindo belonged to this group and they "looked more to indigenous institutions for the development of Indian nationalism and they sought to rely on a reinvigorated and aggressive Hinduism rather than the constitutionalism and liberalism of the West."[7] The national programme of the "Extremists" was to revive the ancient glory of India and to awaken a new national self-consciousness among the people of India. This new thrust of Indian nationalism was a natural continuation of the Indian renaissance of the nineteenth century, according to Aurobindo. He says that the Indian renaissance aimed at a recovery of the old spiritual gospel

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[6] Cf. Sankar Ghose, Socialism, Democracy and Nationalism in India, Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1973, p.134.

[7] loc. cit.

contained in the sacred scriptures of the land.[8] Tilak, who revived the Maratha politico-religious tradition speaks in the same vein on the nature of Indian nationalism. He says:

> The common factor in Indian society is the feeling of Hindutva (devotion to Hinduism). I do not speak of Muslims and Christians at present because everywhere the majority of our society consists of Hindus. We say that Hindus of Punjab, Bengal,. . . are one and the reason for this is only Hindu dharma. There may be different doctrines in Hindu dharma, but certain principles can be found in common, and because of this alone a sort of feeling that we belong to one religion has remained among people speaking different languages in such a vast country.9

It is apparent that the religious character of nationalism became a rallying centre for the majority community. But what united the Hindus created a chasm in the body politic and the religious philosophy of the extremists alienated the Muslims from the national movement. Thus, with Tilak, Aurobindo, B.C.Pal, et.al., Indian nationalism took a religious turn and a moderating influence came only with Gandhi assuming the leadership of the Congress. He "spoke less of religious nationalism or spiritual nationalism and more of the duty of nationalists to remove the woes and miseries of his countrymen."[10] In spreading this message Gandhi turned to the Gītā more than any other religious text.

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[8] Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, The Renaissance in India, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1957, p.32.

[9] Quoted by Stanley A.Wolpert in Tilak and Gokhale: Revolution and Reform in the Making of Modern India, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1962, p.135-6.

[10] Sankar Ghose, op.cit., p. 143.

As a historical generalisation it may be stated that there existed a cultural unity in India for a very long time and one can trace this unity in the literature, art and religion of different parts of India. But nationalism in the modern sense, that is political nationalism, is a new phenomenon in India, if we accept John Stuart Mills' definition of nationalism. He defines nationalism as follows:

> A portion of mankind may be said to constitute a nationality if they are united among themselves by common sympathies which do not exist between them and any others, which made them co-operate with each other more willingly than with the other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire that it should be governed by themselves or a portion of them exclusively.[11]

In the light of this definition India had many nationalities, though under the foreign rule, nationalism in the sense of patriotic anti-foreign feelings united these nationalities. Aurobindo traces this process back into the long history of India and asserts, "This is always a sure sign that the essential nation-unit is already there and that there is an indissoluble national vitality necessitating the inevitable emergence of the organized nation."[12] To establish a religious foundation for this national unity and vitality, almost every leader of the national revival turned to the Vedanta as did Vivekananda in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In the hands of these leaders,

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[11] Quoted by R.C.Majumdar in History of the Freedom Movement in India, Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1963, Vol. 1, p.321.

[12] Aurobindo Ghose, The Ideal of Human Unity,p. 36.

the Gītā became the pre-eminent text of the Vedanta, for in its synthetic philosophy they found a new light to illumine the national movement.

Gītā and the Idea of Nationhood

Commenting on the place of the Gītā in the national revival, K.M.Panikkar writes: "The clearest evidence of the supreme importance of the Gītā in modern Indian life is provided by the fact that almost every national leader of importance excepting Nehru has written commentaries on it and Nehru himself has at least on one occasion quoted from it to confound a Communist who had the temerity to quote the Gītā in support of his views."[13] Though there is an element of exaggeration in this statement, it points out the great influence this text exerted in the national life of India. As we noted above, the political programme of the extremists was oriented towards a Hindu revivalism which could unite the people. So they were keen on using religious faith and pride in the past to rouse the patriotic fervour of the people. Tilak and Aurobindo entered the national scene with great goals for the country. They even displayed an element of messianism in their utterances. Aurobindo, for example, declares the mission of India in the following words:

> . . . . Because God is there, and it is His mission, and He has something for us to do. He has a work for His great and ancient nation. Therefore He has been born

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[13] K.M.Panikkar, Hinduism and the West, p.34.

> again to do it, therefore He is revealing Himself in you not that you may be like other nations, not that you may rise merely by human strength to trample under foot the weaker peoples, but because something must come out from you which is to save the whole world.[14]

Tilak also expresses the same sentiments in his declaration of the purpose of political action. He says:

> To spread our Dharma in our people is one of the aspects of the national form of our religion. . . . Politics cannot be separated from religion.[15]

Through political action impregnated with these ideals Tilak hopes India to be a guru to the world. He believes that a day would come when "we shall see our preachers preaching the Sanātana Dharma all over the world."[16]

About this messianic sense, V.P.Varma observes, ". . . the faith in the mission of India to save the world, has been a very pronounced feature in the writings and speeches of Indian leaders since Ram Mohan onwards."[17] It may be possible to discern certain sociological factors which produced this consciousness. Pride in the past and hope in the future really fanned it and in this the Indian

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[14] Aurobindo Ghose, Speeches, p. 34-35.

[15] Quoted by Theodore L. Shay in The Legacy of the Lokamanya, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1956, p. 90-91.

[16] B.G.Tilak, His Writings and Speeches, Ganesh, Madras, 1922, p. 41.

[17] Vishwanath Prasad Varma, The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. Asia Publishing House, New York, 1960, p. 219.

situation is not very different from that of any other nation subjected to foreign rule and occupation. Hans Kohn's comments on nineteenth century nationalism applies very well to the Indian national situation. He writes:

> The nation transcends the limits of a social or political concept, it becomes a holy body sanctified by God, and nationalism is no longer a political loyalty which can be changed according to social circumstances and convictions but becomes a religious duty full of responsibility towards God and the redemption.[18]

The speeches and writings of Aurobindo and Tilak and to a lesser extent Gandhi's and Vinoba's attest this analysis of nationalism. The patriotic song Bande Mātaram of Bankim Chandra, which was accepted as the national anthem of the Congress identified Bhārata Māta (Mother India) with Goddess Durga. In consonance with this concept of the nation as a divine entity, Aurobindo and other national leaders "looked upon nationalism as a spiritual imperative, a virtually religious practice which was essential for the emancipation of the motherland as well as the spiritual development of the devotee."[19] In the light of this basic concept of the nationalists, their declarations, though they may appear to be excessive, were the

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[18] Hans Kohn, "Messianism," Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences.

[19] Karan Singh, Prophet of Indian Nationalism, Allen & Unwin, London, 1963, p. 76.

agonizing cry of an enslaved nation, which took great pride in its religious and cultural heritage. For example, speaking to a Bombay audience Aurobindo declares:

> What is Nationalism? Nationalism is not a mere political programme; nationalism is a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed which you shall have to live. . . . If you are going to be a nationalist, if you are going to assent to this religion of nationalism, you must do it in the religious spirit. You must remember that you are the instruments of God.[20]

In his famous Uttarpara speech, Aurobindo narrates the vision of Kṛṣṇa he had while he was in the Alipore jail as a political prisoner. He says that Kṛṣṇa placed the Gītā in his hands and so deep and overwhelming was the entire experience that everywhere around him he saw only Kṛṣṇa Vasudeva "His (Kṛṣṇa's) strength entered into me and I was able to do the Sādhana of the Gītā."[21] His commentary on the Gītā testifies that this vision led him to re-discover the message of the Gītā for modern times. In some of his earlier writings Aurobindo regarded Kṛṣṇa as an incarnation whose intention was to establish an all-Indian imperial political system.[22] He believed that

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[20] Aurobindo Ghose, Speeches, p. 6.

[21] Aurobindo Ghose, Uttarpara Speech, p. 8.

[22] Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, Gītā ki Bhūmika (in Hindi) Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1957, p.72.

the very purpose of Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā is to preach the gospel of action, military as well as political, impelled by the highest gnosis.[23] In the Mahābhārata, Kṛṣṇa entered the political stage as a great leader and his mission was to bring about a unity of India. Kṛṣṇa did not lend his support to the Yadavas, though he belonged to that dynasty, because he accepted the claims of the Pandavas as rightful. This is why he installed Yudhistara as the king of Bhāratavarṣa after the battle of Kurukṣetra. Kṛṣṇa persuaded Arjuna to give up his desire for renunciation of the war because it would have frustrated the political aims of Kṛṣṇa.[24] According to Aurobindo, Kṛṣṇa's plans for an all-India imperialism were consummated by the destruction of Kauravas and other Kṣatriya powers.[25] This aspect of Kṛṣṇa as a diplomat was quite different from the traditional understanding of the avatāra as a protector of dharma.

The battle of Kurukṣetra and Kṛṣṇa's advice to Arjuna took an added significance and deeper meaning in the context of the Indian

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[23]Cf. Ibid., p. 8.

[24]Cf. Ibid., p.78-79.

[25]Cf. loc.cit.

national struggle for freedom. More and more national leaders turned to the Gītā for inspiration and guidance. Many Indians saw the national struggle as another Kurukṣetra, a righteous war against the British imperialists, "when the right lay with the former, and some people had belief and faith in the re-appearance of Kṛṣṇa."[26] National leaders exhorted the masses to come forward and fulfil their dharma in this battle. Aurobindo addressed the Indian people in the following words:

> To shrink from bloodshed and violence under such circumstances is a weakness deserving as severe a rebuke as Sri Krishna addressed to Arjuna when he shrank from the colossal civil slaughter on the field of Kurukshetra. Liberty is the life-breath of a nation, and when the life is attacked, when it is sought to suppress all chance of breathing by violent pressure, any and every means of self-preservation becomes right and justifiable -- just as it is lawful for a man who is being strangled to rid himself of the pressure on his throat by any means in his power.[27]

In another context, drawing on the Gītā concept of dharma he declares that nationalism is a dharma and at times struggle, battle and even murder could be part of the dharma,but not hatred and jealousy.[28]

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[26] Vishwanath Prasad Varma, op. cit., p.50.

[27] Aurobindo Ghose, The Doctrine of Passive Resistance, Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, (2nd ed.) 1952, p.29.

[28] Cf. A.Ghose, Dharma aur Jatiyata, translated into Hindi by Deva Narayan Divivedi, Banaras, 1934, p.78.

According to him the Gītā teaches that if a man could realize his spiritual identity with the absolute and feel that all external acts are being performed by the cosmic power or Prakṛti of the Purusottama, he could attain thereby a sense of equanimity; and for the disinterested performance of his actions, swadharma, he could even resort to violence, if that was imperative for the consummation of his enterprise.[29] Commenting on the Gītā view, "He who is free from self-sense, whose understanding is not sullied, though he slay these people, he slays not -- nor is he bound (by his actions),"[30] he writes:

> . . . although the liberated man takes his part in the struggle and though he slays all these peoples, he slays no man and he is not bound by his work, because the work is that of the Master of the Worlds and it is he who has already slain in his hidden omnipotent will all these enemies. This work of destruction was needed that humanity might move forward to another creation and a new purpose. . . .[31]

In another context he declares, without hiding his feelings, that to kill national enemies in a dharma yudha is also part of one's dharma.[32] In all these utterances Aurobindo claims the support of

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[29] Cf. Ibid., p.85.

[30] Bhagavadgītā, XVIII, 17. Śankara's comment on this verse may be recalled here. "Though he slays from the worldly standpoint, he does not slay in truth."

[31] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, 457.

[32] Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, Dharma aur Jātiyata, p. 43.

the Gītā. Quoting the Gītā, he states emphatically, "Better the law of one's being, though it be badly done, than an alien dharma well followed."[33]

Several years before Aurobindo started speaking out on national issues through his articles in the Bande Mataram and through public addresses, Tilak was engaged in vigorous political activities, though mainly confined to the Maharastra area in the beginning. Through his papers, Kesari (Marathi) and The Mahratta (English) he championed the cause of his people against any and all who would be unjust and autocratic. "As the editor of Kesari," observes Theodore L. Shay, "Tilak became the awakener of India, the Lion of Maharashtra, the most influential newspaper editor of his day."[34] He began his battle for swarāj (self-government) which he claimed to be his birthright through the editorial columns of these papers.

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[33] Aurobindo Ghose, The Ideal of the Karmayogin, p.39. Śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt svadharme nidhanaṁ śreyaḥ paradharmo bhayāvahaḥ. (Bhagavadgītā, III, 35) In his commentary, Aurobindo paraphrases this verse as follows: "Death in one's own law of nature is better for a man than victory in an alien movement. To follow the law of another's nature is dangerous to the soul." (Essays on the Gītā, p.466) The political implications of these words are very clear.

[34] Theodore L. Shay, op.cit., p.56.

He relentlessly attacked the Westernising social reformers and the inert spirit of orthodoxy. In all these, Aurobindo and Tilak had a common mind and Aurobindo was known in certain circles as "the lieutenant of Tilak."[35] Tilak entered the political arena with a firm conviction in the future of Hinduism and India. He says, "It has (Hinduism) lasted so long because it is founded on everlasting Truth and eternal and pure doctrines relating to the Supreme Being."[36] He believed that the re-awakening and freedom of India depends on the revival of her religion and the restoration of her ancient glory. These are interdependent, as he viewed history. He asks, "How can a man be proud of the greatness of his own nation if he feels no pride of his own religion?"[37]

Tilak was quick to realize that the causes of India's backwardness lay in the degraded aspects of the spirit of orthodoxy such as lethargy, indolence, exclusiveness and inaction. He was determined to teach the masses the real meaning of Sanātana Dharma. Popularisation of religious festivals like Ganesh Pūja provided him with a forum to reach the masses. Making the Gītā his text, he re-taught the people

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[35]Cf. Vishwanath Prasad Varma, op. cit., p. 168.

[36]S.V.Bapat (ed.) Gleanings from Tilak's Writings and Speeches, p.118.

[37]Ibid., p. 326.

the dharma of action. With all the power at his command he castigated the pundits who preached the philosophy of life-negation and withdrawal from the world in search of mukti. He maintained that atrophied orthodoxy had no religious justification. "Its spirit was in part the perversion and negation of the world and of the classical concept of fulfilment of the purpose of life, the union of man with his creator."[38] From his great knowledge of theVedas and the Gītā, he brings out a new meaning of mukti and dharma for the Indian people. He writes:

> If a man seeks unity with the Deity, he must necessarily seek unity with the interests of the world also, and work for it. If he does not, then the unity is not perfect, because there is union between elements out of the three (man and Deity) and the third (the world) is left out. I have thus solved the question for myself and I hold that serving the world, and thus serving His Will, is the surest way of Salvation, and this way can be followed by remaining in the world and not going away from it.[39]

We see a systematic treatment of these ideas in his Gītā-Rahasya, especially in his concept of lokasaṁgraha.

Gītā-Rahasya, as we have discussed elsewhere, brings out the meaning of Karmayoga. Since it was written in a British jail in Burma, the political message of this great commentary is very

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[38] Quoted by Theodore L.Shay, op. cit., p. 72.

[39] B.G.Tilak, His Writings and Speeches, p.263.

subdued. Throughout this book we see a challenge to face one's battle of life with courage. He says again and again, drawing from the words of Kṛṣṇa, that it is wrong to shrink from one's appointed duty, afraid of the consequences. He writes:

> The Gītā asks us to work in imitation of the Lord, for the purpose of Lokasaṁgraha or the greatest good of the greatest number -- the unification of humanity in universal sympathy. The Gītā is designed to provide a solution to all human problems. It reconciles and harmonizes spiritual freedom with work in the world.[40]

Translated into political terms, this is a clarion call to take active part in the national struggle for Swarāj and for the service of the masses. He also voiced his opposition to the Westernized reformers and the Western system of education in Indian schools. If the reformers and the educational system they championed became successful, he "feared that the classical values of India would be lost, that the moral stamina of the people would be undermined, and the national will would be broken."[41] With this in mind, he writes:

> As the works of purely materialistic philosophers on Ethics are principally taught in our colleges the fundamental principles of the Karma-Yoga, mentioned in the Gītā, are not well understood even by learned persons among us, who have had an English education.[42]

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[40] B.G.Tilak, Gītā-Rahasya, p.688.

[41] Theodore L.Shay, op. cit., p. 65.

[42] B.G.Tilak, Gītā-Rahasya, p.93.

Turning to the social reformers he says, ". . . our present downfall is due not to Hindu religion but to the fact that we have absolutely forsaken religion."[43]

The nationalists were aware that sacrifice would be an important element in the quest for freedom. They turned to the religious concept of yajña (sacrifice) and related it to the political plane. Tilak, expounding the Gītā idea of yajña writes, "Whatever a man does, must be taken to have been done by him for the purpose of the 'yajña' (sacrifice). . . In as much as the Vedas themselves have enjoined the performance of yajña,any Action done for the purpose of the yajña cannot of itself be a source of bondage to man."[44] When the Gītā-Rahasya first appeared in Marathi, its readers very well knew how to read between the lines of statements like this and pick up the political message in the national context. In fact, the editorial columns of Kesari has been teaching the Maharastrians to look beyond the apparent meaning of words. Aurobindo expresses the same idea of sacrifice much more forcefully. He writes:

> Liberty is the fruit we seek from the sacrifice, and the Motherland, the Goddess to whom we offer it; into the seven leaping tongues of the fire of the Yajña we must offer all that we are and all that we have, feeding the fire even with our blood and lives and happiness of our

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[43] S.V.Bapat, op. cit., p.111.

[44] B.G.Tilak, Gītā-Rahasya, p.72.

> nearest and dearest; for the Motherland is a Goddess who loves not a maimed and imperfect sacrifice, and freedom was never won from the gods by a grudging giver.[45]

These political messages, clothed in the familiar religious language aroused the masses for unified action. The religious nature of the sacrifice and the ultimate reward it offered, turned political action into a spiritual experience for many.

When the Indian National Congress launched the programme of boycott, that is boycotting all foreign goods, Tilak and Aurobindo established a philosophical and ethical basis for it, citing the teachings of the Gītā. In his article "The Morality of Boycott" he says, "The Gītā is the best answer to those who shrink from battle as a sin and aggression as a lowering of morality."[46] He refers to the swadharma of the Kṣatriya and reminds that it is his duty to fight in times of war and boycott being a kind of war, violence therein is justifiable. Though the burning of British goods is illegal according to the British law, which is an alien dharma in any case, it has ethical sanction.[47] According to him, justice and righteousness are the atmosphere of political morality not the penal codes created by

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[45] Aurobindo Ghose, The Doctrine of Passive Resistance, pp.77-78.

[46] Ibid., 81.

[47] Cf. loc.cit.

the rulers to protect their own interest. Tilak too emphasized the meaning of swadharma in many of his speeches and writings. For him Swarāj is his dharma and any means to achieve it is a moral means. In one of his speeches at a Shivaji festival, he justified the murder of Afzal Khan by Shivaji, the leader of the Marathas, on the basis of the ethics of the Gītā. He says,". . . Shrimat Krishna preached in the Gītā that we have a right even to kill our own guru and kinsmen. No blame attaches to any person if he is doing deeds without being actuated by a desire to reap the fruits of his deeds."[48] He developed these ideas much more systematically in the Gītā-Rahasya, expounding different aspects of this philosophy of the Gītā in relation to the Indian context of the twentieth century. After discussing in detail the meaning of dharma and swadharma he says, "The Blessed Lord had to show the importance and the necessity of performing at all costs the duties enjoined by one's Dharma while life lasts."[49] As a deeply religious person he was aware that political action alone will not usher in swarāj. He writes, ". . . we are doing good work and God is helping us and the religious instinct and the blessings of saints are at work."[50] Some statements like the above from Tilak and

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[48] Quoted by Stanley A.Wolpert, op.cit., p.71.

[49] B.G.Tilak, Gītā-Rahasya, p.37.

[50] S.V.Bapat, op.cit., 121.

Aurobindo lend covert support to political violence and subversion. In fact, as V.P.Varma observes, "The use of the teachings of the Vedanta and the Gītā for the support of political violence has been a fairly common feature of modern Indian political thought, except in the mighty antithesis of the Gandhian Ahiṁsā."[51]

Though there is a remarkable similarity between Aurobindo's earlier ideas of political action and those of Gandhi, the ultimate difference between them is significant. This difference is pronounced in their interpretations of the Gītā. It was the idea of lokasaṁgraha in the Gītā which inspired Tilak, Aurobindo and Gandhi. While Tilak and Gandhi emphasise the social and political aspect of service with supreme insistence on non-attachment, Aurobindo moves towards the doctrine of transfiguration of man into a willing agent of the divine, and hence he preaches spiritualized, divine action. But Gandhi stands apart from both Tilak and Aurobindo in his application of the concept of non-violence to national issues and the symbolic interpretation of the Gītā. Gandhi, in many ways, was the political heir of Gokhale and he had more in common with the "Moderates" than with the "Extremists." But, as we have seen above, he tried to establish an identity of interests between religion and politics. His insistence on the purity of the means for attaining

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[51] Vishwanath Prasad Varma, op.cit., p.232.

swarāj and ethical consistency gave a new direction to the national movement. Though he used the Gītā to impart his doctrines of ahiṁsā and satyāgraha, he was very careful not to isolate religious minorities from the political movement. Thus, he was a force of moderation in carrying the minority communities with the freedom movement.

Gandhi entered politics, with the conviction that it is his moral and religious duty. In all his political campaigns, ahiṁsā was his ethical creed. He was against all forms of violence, "not on grounds of efficacy, but on grounds of moral indefensibility."[52] To him, ethical purity was as important as political success. In his writings we do not find any pleas for swarāj on the basis of natural right, which was a strong element in Western nationalism at an earlier period. On the other hand, basing on the teachings of the Gītā he says that "the true source of right is duty"[53] and "the right to perform one's duties is the only right worth living for and dying for. It covers all legitimate rights."[54] Gandhi's development of the Gītā concept of yajña in relation to the national movement had a wider meaning than what we find in Tilak and Aurobindo.

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[52] Theodore L.Shay, op.cit., p.155.

[53] M.K.Gandhi, Young India, (Selections) Vol.II, p.479.

[54] M.K.Gandhi, Harijan, (May 27, 1939) p.143.

To him "yajña is laying down one's life so that others may live."[55] He boldly applies this idea to nationalism and says, ". . . My idea of nationalism is that my country may die so that the human race may live. There is no room for race-hatred here."[56] As Gandhi admits, "politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion."[57] His religion drew no line of demarkation between salvation and worldly pursuits. He writes, "I have felt that the Gītā teaches us that what cannot be followed in day-to-day practice cannot be called religion."[58] His application of the ethical principles, especially the teachings he derived from the Gītā, elevated the national movement into a higher plane. Gandhi's theory that the end could not be separated from the means, as Nehru observes, has been "one of his greatest contributions to our public life." He continues, "The idea is by no means new, but this application of an ethical doctrine to large-scale public activity was certainly novel."[59]

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[55] M.K.Gandhi, Young India, (Sept. 8, 1927) p.28.

[56] Quoted by Gopinath Dhawan in The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1957, p.326.

[57] Quoted by Chandrashankar Shukla in Gandhi's View of Life, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1956, p.133.

[58] M.K.Gandhi, The Gospel of Selfless Action, p.132.

[59] J.Nehru, The Discovery of India, John Day, New York, 1945, p.17.

Religious Revivals and the Gītā

The cultural and religious changes of recent centuries which are sometimes called a revival of Hinduism or an Indian renaissance, were the direct result of the encounter between two civilizations. India stood face to face with Europe for almost two centuries. In this encounter there was also a subsidiary encounter, although along very different lines between Indian spirituality and the religion associated with the West. According to Arnold Toynbee's interpretation of history, this long encounter and the interaction should have served as the chrysalis of "a higher civilization" and "a higher religion." But this was not to be the case in the subcontinent, though the early reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj showed signs of assimilating the best in the two cultures and religions. By the end of the nineteenth century, Indian renaissance exhibited two different tendencies. The moderates in the national movement joined hands with the social reformers and insisted that the salvation of Hinduism lay in eradicating the evil customs of the society through legislation and other means. R.G.Bhandarkar, who was president of the Social Conference describes social reform as "a complete scheme of national regeneration for India rather than as a partial scheme for carrying out repairs in some part of the social structure."[60] The nationalistic extremists, on the other hand, were strongly opposed

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[60] Quoted by K.Natarajan in A Century of Social Reform in India, Asia Publishing House, New York, 1962, p.109.

to the programme of the reformers. Tilak and Aurobindo, completely identified themselves with the revivalists like Bepin Chandra Pal and Lajpat Rai. K.Natarajan observes that these leaders came to the political limelight through their vigourous campaign against the social reformers.[61] In Tilak's view reforms must not "be inspired by a small group of reformers and enforced upon the community by the power of an alien state."[62] Aurobindo was equally suspicious of the reformers. He felt that they "aimed at a successful reproduction of Europe in India."[63] He writes:

> They [the reformers] sought for a bare, simplified and rationalized religion, created a literature which imparted very eagerly the forms, ideas and whole spirit of their English models. . . would have revolutionized Indian society by introducing into it all the social ideas and main features of the European forms.[64]

By the beginning of this century, the reformers became a small minority and Indian renaissance turned toward revivalism. Neil J.Smelser's definition of revival very well applies to the

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[61] Cf. Ibid., p.117.

[62] Theodore L.Shay, op.cit., p.66.

[63] Aurobindo Ghose, The Ideal of the Karmayogin, p.25.

[64] Aurobindo Ghose, The Renaissance in India, p.35.

twentieth century phase of Indian revival. He defines, "A revival as we use the term involves an enthusiastic re-definition of religious methods, but not a challenge to basic religious values."[65] What Tilak, Aurobindo, Gandhi et. al. attempted was a "re-definition of religious methods" with a view to deal with the modern problems "in the light of the inspiration of a re-discovered Indian spirit."[66] Behind this religo-national urge to grasp the past, there was a powerful psychological factor which should be taken into account. Most leaders of the revival were subjected to "widespread internalization of Western norms," as Ashis Nandi observes. This created a crisis of identity. Nandi writes, "As values began changing in the exposed sectors of the community, individuals began judging themselves in terms of newly acquired standards and found themselves wanting."[67] It is this deeper level of personality crisis that led to the split between the moderates and the extremists in the national movement. The aggressive nature of revivalism also represents an attempt to deal with national problems. Nandi says:

> Identification with the nation here helps one to restore self-esteem by projecting one's unacceptable self on to scapegoats within and outside the system. The major

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[65] Neil J.Smelser, Theory of Collective Behavior, Free Press, New York, 1963, p.173.

[66] Vishwanath Prasad Varma, op.cit., p.173.

[67] Ashis Nandi, "The Culture of Indian Politics: A Stock taking" in the Journal of Asian Studies Vol. XXX, No. 1 (1970) p.59.

> elements of this style are the imageries associated with the nation: the conception of a motherland by identifying with whose aggressive motherliness one could restore the sense of infantile omnipotence.[68]

The Śakti cult of Bengal provided the most conspicuous religious imageries for these particular expressions of patriotism and revivalism.

The leaders of revivalism turned to the Gītā for the "re-definition of religious methods" and for the "recovery of the spiritual gospel of the land," than to any other text. The reasons for the elevation of this non-śruti text "as the supreme scripture of Hinduism"[69] have to be sought in the very nature of the evolution of Neo-Vedanta or Vedantic spiritualism, as Aurobindo would have it, in this century. Beginning from Vivekananda, who is considered by many as the prophet of new India, the old ideas of the Vedanta has been interpreted for social and political purposes. He considered the Vedanta as the philosophical background of Hinduism and took upon himself the task of preaching it to the world. The Gītā being a Vedantic text, provided ample room for a new interpretation of the Vedantic ideals, in relation to the modern world. Besides, the synthetic philosophy of the Gītā was considered by the revivalists as an ideal matrix for a new synthesis of various schools of Hinduism.

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[68] Ibid., p.78.

[69] K.M.Panikkar, Hinduism and West, p.33.

Though Vivekananda did not write a commentary on the Gītā, he has given several talks on it. He acknowledges its greatness in the following words: "Compared with that (the Upaniṣads which contain many irrelevant subjects) the Gītā is like these truths beautifully arranged together in their proper places -- like a fine garland or a bouquet of the choicest of flowers."[70] He observes that the reconciliation of the different paths of dharma, and work without desire or attachment are the two special characteristics of the Gītā.[71] It is precisely on these characteristics that later commentators built their situational interpretation of this text.

Though the main thrust in Aurobindo's commentary is to "distinguish its [the Gītā's] essential and living message. . . on which humanity has to seize for its perfection and its highest spiritual welfare,"[72] it shows a strong undercurrent of situational interpretation. His discussion of Kurukṣetra may be taken as an example. When we read his arguments and statements, against the background of his articles in Bande-Mātaram, they acquire a new meaning. He writes, "Evil cannot perish without the destruction of much that lives by the evil, and it is no less destruction even if we personally are saved the pain of a sensational action of violence."[73] One cannot but recall that it is the same Aurobindo

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[70] Swami Vivekananda, Thoughts on the Gītā, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1963, p.8.

[71] Cf. Ibid., p.10.

[72] Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p.8.

[73] Ibid., p.38.

who was once involved in political terrorism who makes this statement. A call to spiritual, that is religious, and national revival echoes all through his commentary. The concepts of "integral yoga" and "integral Advaitism" he develops through these essays find their culmination in his later works. But, basing on the Gītā, he lays the groundwork for the development of a new philosophy which was to make great contributions to national, cultural and religious revivalism in later years.

Tilak's commentary on the Gītā, with its great emphasis on Karmayoga has awakened the people to the ethical and moral aspects of religious life. He believed that revival of Hinduism can be achieved only through educating the people in the great cultural traditions of India. In his view the classical values were thoroughly inter-mixed with popular religion and therefore "religious education will first and foremost engage our attention."[74] The popularisation of religious festivals in Maharastra was part of this plan. These festivals provided him with a platform to resurrect the philosophy of activism from the verses of the Gītā. He was successful in establishing close contact with the masses and through these contacts he strengthened Indian consciousness and pride in Hindu traditions among them. Expounding the Gītā he points out that religion and practical life are not different.

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[74] Quoted by Theodore L.Shay, op.cit., p.70.

He declares, "To take saṁnyasa (renunciation) is not to abandon life. The real spirit is to make the country your family instead of working only for your own. The step beyond is to serve humanity and the next step is to serve God."[75] Since Tilak had not finally identified himself with any particular revivalist movement he had a wider appeal among the Hindus. It is clear that through all his political and literary activities, Tilak "is storming," as D.MacKenzie Brown observes, "primarily against contemporary 'escapist' Hinduism which, he believes, offers the false ideal of renunciation of all worldly activity by the seeker after mokṣa, or self-realization."[76]

Another national leader who turned to the Gītā to authenticate different facets of Hindu revivalism was Annie Besant. She came to India in 1893 as a Theosophist leader and remained so till death, but she soon after arrival plunged into the national movement. While recognizing the divisions that existed in India she urges that all religions be merged "by the theological recognition of all religions."[77] Unity of religions being a central theme of the neo-Vedantins, Mrs. Besant soon gained popularity among the revivalists. Like the extremists of Bengal she writes, "If there

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[75] Quoted by D.P.Karmarkar in Bal Gangadhar Tilak: A Study, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1956, p.165.

[76] D.MacKenzie Brown, op.cit., p.200.

[77] Annie Besant, Nation Building, Theosophical Society, Madras, 1917, p.22.

is to be an Indian nation, Patriotism and Religion must join hands in India."[78] In her earlier writings and speeches she extols the virtues of Hinduism without any reservations. "Her chief target," writes C.H.Heimsath, "for ridicule were social reformers, whose influence she regarded as debilitating."[79] The Reformists and their organ Indian Social Reformer took Mrs. Besant to task for her claims of spiritualism and her irrational approach to religion. After a few years her views on social reform began to change to the surprise of her admirers among the conservatives. She founded the Madras Hindu Association, "to promote Hindu social and religious advancement on national lines in harmony with the spirit of civilization." Later she took an active part in the National Congress and was elected to its presidency in 1918. But when Gandhi entered the political arena with his new techniques of agitation "she opposed the movement with unflinching courage."[80] This was very typical of Mrs. Besant, for most of her convictions and policies were subject to change. As Natarajan puts it, she ". . . was herself too much of a rebel to afford much satisfaction for any sustained period to the orthodox of any society."[81]

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[78] Quoted by Charles H.Heimsath in Indian Nationalism and Social Reform, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1964, p.315.

[79] Ibid., p.327.

[80] K.Natarajan, op. cit., p.81.

[81] Ibid., p.79.

Though Annie Besant's translation with commentary of the Gītā was not published until 1923, she had been lecturing on the Gītā for a number of years. Her approach to, and interpretation of, the Gītā is in a way conditioned by her Theosophical motifs. She looked for the "unity of all religions" and finds support in this text. She held that the paths that are known as karma, bhakti and jñāna would lead ultimately to the realization of God. So she writes, "We see the three paths within the one and according to the dominant temperament will be the path that is chosen."[82] She thought that the separative instincts, whether of these three paths or of the diverse teachings of different religions, are born of the asuraprakṛti, the demoniacal nature. She says, "All that tends to division, all that is of hatred, all that is of separation, takes on the aspect of evil to the evolving man."[83] Commenting on Bhagavadgītā VII.12, "The natures that are harmonious, active, slothful, these know as from me,"[84] she challenged India to move towards the path of unity. For, "That becomes evil which has in it the principle of separation, because the time for separation is over, and the time for working towards unity is come."[85]

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[82] Annie Besant, Hints on the Study of Bhagavad-Gītā, Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, 1906, p.79.

[83] Ibid., p.117.

[84] Ye cai 'va sāttvikā bhāvā rājasās tāmasās ca ye
matta eva 'ti tān viddhi na tv ahaṁ teṣu te mayi
(Bhagavad-Gītā, VII,12)

[85] Annie Besant, Hints on the Study of BhagavadGītā, p.116.

Mrs. Besant presents the Gītā as a "Great Unveiling" of history, "the drawing away of the veil that covers the real scheme which history works out on the physical plane; for it was that which removed the delusion of Arjuna and made him able to do his duty at Kurukshetra."[86] She sees in the revelation of the Gītā "the preparations for the India of the present" as well as "the preparation for the India of the future."[87] Like her great contemporary, Vivekananda, she extols the greatness of Hinduism and India. Thus, "It [India] had served as the model, the world model, for a nation. This was its function. A religion, embracing the heights and depths of human thought, able to teach the ryot [peasant] in his field, able to teach the philosopher and the metaphysician in his secluded study, a world-embracing religion, had been proclaimed through the lips of the Ṛṣis of this first offshot of the Race."[88] She declares, like the neo-Vedantins, that the Gītā provides a particular path, a yoga, for each one according to one's temperament and inclination.[89] As a Theosophist, she finds the oneness of Godhead and oneness of humanity in the message of the Gītā. So she writes, "One Lord and therefore one

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[86] Ibid., p.9.

[87] loc.cit.

[88] Ibid., p.11.

[89] Ibid., p.96.

humanity; one Lord and therefore oneness through the entire body of the Lord, one Lord, one world, one brotherhood, that is the outcome of our study. . . . Thus on from age to age, from universe to universe, and where, I say again, where is grief, where delusion, when thus we have seen the Oneness."[90]

S.Radhakrishnan, whose services to Hinduism and Indian Philosophy have been immense, observes in his commentary that the Gītā is a "powerful shaping factor in the renewal of spiritual life and has secured an assured place among the world's great scriptures."[91] His presentation of the Gītā as a "valuable aid for the understanding of the supreme ends of life"[92] has contributed in no small measure to a new self-understanding of Hinduism. His commentary by and large expounds the philosophy of the Gītā in the Vedantic mould. But, its special feature lies in his attempt to assimilate and integrate modern thought, that is Western thought, into the system of the Gītā. He says, "The rules are not ends in themselves, for union with the Supreme is the final goal. The teacher of the Gītā reconciles the different systems in vogue and gives us a comprehensive eirenicon which is not local and temporary but is for all time and all men."[93]

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[90] Ibid., p.130.

[91] S.Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p.12.

[92] Ibid., p.6.

[93] Ibid., p.75.

The patterns we have seen in these commentaries of national importance have been followed by scores of commentators in various regional languages. On the religious level the recurring themes of their writers are unity of religions and the synthesis of the various yogas of the Gītā. C.V.Vasudeva Bhattathiry, a Malayalam commentator writes, "There are a number of scriptures which deal with jñāna, bhakti and karma yogas. But it is only in the Gītā we see a harmonious blending of all these yogas."[94] Discussing the universality of the Gītā, Puthezhath Rama Menon says, "The Gītā does not insist on the acceptance of any particular doctrine or means for salvation. . . . What matters is not the particular way of worship, but the mentality with which one approaches the Lord. . . . No prophet or founder of religion ever ventured to declare like Kṛṣṇa, 'In whatever way men approach me, even so do I reward them; My path do men tread in all ways, O Arjuna' (Bhagavadgītā IV, 11)".[95] He contrasts the "universalism" of the Gītā with the scriptures of other religions which claim exclusiveness.[96] This has been the general trend of the revivalists who turned to the Gītā as an instrument of national

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[94] C.V.Vasudeva Bhattathiry, Śrimad Bhagavadgītā,p.4. (Translation is mine.)

[95] Puthezhath Rama Menon, Gītāprāntangalil (Malayalam) Sri Ramakrishnasrama, Trichur, 1967, p.52-53.(Translation is mine.)

[96] Cf. loc.cit.

and religious revival in this century. They are one in affirming that the Gītā provides the greatest degree of freedom of thought and action.[97]

Gītā - The Gospel of Modern Hinduism

The classical commentators of the Gītā, Śankara, Ramanuja, et. al. approached the Gītā as a smṛti text which confirms and expounds the teachings of the śruti. In this, the relationship of the Gītā is one of dependence on the śruti, as inference depends on perception. For the Vedantins, śruti is the only source of knowledge of Brahman and dharma and the texts which expound this original revelation are secondary. Most modern commentators of the Gītā do not take into serious account the non-canonical position of the Gītā among the Hindu scriptures. On the other hand, an attempt has been made to present the Gītā as the gospel of Hinduism. Among the modern revivalists, Dayananda Saraswati is the only possible exception to this trend. His call was to return to the Vedas. He holds that the excellence of the Vedas had been obscured by the accumulated untruth of the bulk of post-Vedic smṛti literature.[98]

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[97] Cf. Ibid., p.54.

[98] H.B.Sarda, (ed.) Dayananda Commemoration Volume, The Vedic Yantralaya, Ajmer, 1933, p.407.

The leaders of national and religious revival whom we have been discussing chose the Gītā as their doctrinal vade-mecum. They were fully aware of the canonical status -- which is less than the highest -- of this book and yet presented the Gītā as the text which deals with the essence of Hinduism. Gandhi treats the Gītā as the key to understand all other scriptures, including the Vedas.[99] He considers the Gītā as his spiritual mother. He writes, "The Vedas and the smritis are of no avail to me. I then approach the Mother [the Gītā] and say, 'Mother these learned Pandits have put me in a predicament. Help me out of this perplexity'."[100] In many of his writings we see an insistence that the Gītā is the gospel of Hinduism. "The main reason for his insistence," observes A.Bharati, ". . . should be sought in the homogeneous applicability of its tenets: for whereas it is quite impossible to interpret the Upaniṣads and the other canonical texts socio-centrically, the Gītā lends itself to social moralizing."[101] The same reason, in varying degrees applies to the approach of Tilak, Aurobindo and others. Tilak, in his preface to the commentary

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[99] Cf. M.K.Gandhi, Teachings of the Gītā, p.44.

[100] Ibid., p.45.

[101] A.Bharati, "Gandhi's Interpretation of the Gītā, An Anthropological Analysis," in Gandhi, India and the World, An International Symposium, ed. by Sibnarayan Ray, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1970, p.60.

makes his position clear on the authority of the Gītā. He writes:

> . . . . the Gītā expounds the root principles of the present Vedic Religion. . . . it may well be said that there is no other work in the whole Sanskrit literature, which explains the principles of the present Hindu religion in as succinct and yet as clear and unambiguous a manner as the Gītā.[102]

He attests the popular saying "it is quite enough if one thoroughly studies the Gītā, what is the use of dabbling in other śāstras."[103] Aurobindo also contributes to the pre-eminence of the Gītā. He calls the Gītā, "the world's greatest Scripture, a powerful shaping factor in the revival of a nation and a culture."[104]

This approach has been followed by every commentator of the Gītā who takes his stand in the revivalist line. Some of them carry it even farther and place the Gītā above the śruti in their enthusiasm for the Gītā. K.M.Munshi whose contribution to the religious revival in the post-independent era has been great, writes, "The essence of the Word spoken by the masters all over the world is found in the Bhagavad Gītā, the inspired Word of Sri Krishna."[105] He sees the Gītā as the Word (vāc) which keeps the flame of Dharma alive in India. He asserts, "India has survived because millions

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[102] B.G.Tilak, Gītā-Rahasya, p.xxv.

[103] gītā sugītā kartavyā kim anyaiḥ śāstra vistarih. (loc.cit.)

[104] A. Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p.5.

[105] K.M.Munshi, Bhagavad Gītā and Modern Life, p.24.

in this land, inspired directly or indirectly by the idea enshrined in the Bhagavad Gītā,have tried age after age to capture it afresh by personal experience."[106] Vinoba Bhave also takes this approach to the Gītā. He says, "From ancient times the Gītā has been given the status of an Upanishad. . . . Almost every idea necessary for the flowering of a full life occurs in the pages of the Gītā."[107] He sees the Gītā as a text which contains saving knowledge, knowledge which dispels "the dark illusion that covers the heart of humanity."[108]

Statements such as the above by leaders in the context of religious and national revival produced a generation of Gītā commentators and writers who found in the Gītā every conceivable idea, religious, philosophical, political and even economical. For want of a better term we may call them "the Gītā alchemists." This trend towards "the Gītā alchemy" is evident in the writings of Gandhi himself. He found support in the Gītā for his doctrines of non-violence, equality, bread

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[106] Ibid., p.20.

[107] Vinoba Bhave, Talks on the Gītā, p.3.

[108] Ibid., p.10.

labour, swadeshi and even fasting.[109] The elevation of the Gītā to the position of a "super scripture" also created a tendency among Indian leaders to cite it in and out of context. Let us take one example to illustrate this. V.K.R.V.Rao, a former minister of the Government of India, in his paper "Some Problems confronting Traditional Societies in the Process of Development" discusses the conceptions of human equality and social responsibility and notes that these concepts are finding progressively more extensive recognition in practice. Then he observes, ". . . it is also a fact that we have outbursts of savagery that set the clock back from time to time, though scientific progress proceeds without interruption." In this context he tries to relate the Gītā doctrine of avatāra and cites the famous verse.[110] He says, "That is perhaps the reason for the Hindu theory of avatārs, the Divine Being appearing in human form from time to time to re-expound the moral law and to restore its recognition in human society."[111] Here is a case of an eminent Indian economist and educationalist turning to "the Gītā alchemy."

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[109] Cf. Gandhi interprets the verse "viṣayā vinivartante nirāhārasya dehinaḥ" (II.59) to support his idea of fasting. This verse really refers to the person who abstains from the objects of senses, viṣaya. The Gītā does not refer to fasting in the sense Gandhi used in his political campaigns.

[110] Bhagavadgītā IV. 8 (quoted above).

[111] V.K.R.V.Rao. "Some Problems confronting Traditional Societies in the Process of Development," in Tradition and Modernity in India, Edited by A.B.Shah and C.R.M.Rao, Manaktalas, Bombay, 1965, p.61.

Monks and sādhus of the various religious orders in India and not a few teachers of Indian Philosophy have played their parts in popularising the Gītā as the gospel of Hinduism. Some of them present the Gītā as "the universal scripture for all people of all temperaments and for all times."[112] Swami Sivananda says, "The Gītā is the cream of the Vedas. . . He who drinks the nectar of the Gītā through purification of the heart and meditation attains immortality."[113] Haridas Chaudhuri agrees with Aldous Huxley that the Gītā is "the most systematic scriptural statement of the Perennial Philosophy"[114] and goes on to assert that the Gītā "formulates the universal guiding principles of human conduct, shows us how we can resolve our spiritual crises and ethical conflicts with reference to the ultimate goal of life, and thus transcends in its central message, the boundaries of East and West."[115] The monastic orders popularised the Gītā through commentaries as well as through their periodicals. One has only to turn the pages of The Vedanta Kesari (Madras), Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture (Calcutta) etc. to see the importance given to the Gītā.

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[112] Swami Sivananda, The Bhagavad Gītā, p.xvi.

[113] Ibid., p.xvii.

[114] Aldous Huxley's "Introduction" to The Song of God: The Bhagavad-Gītā, translated by Swami Prabhavananda, Harper, New York, 1951, p.18.

[115] Haridas Chaudhuri, "The Gītā and Its Message for Humanity" in Philosophy East and West, Vol. V.No.3 (Oct.1955) p.245.

Another means adopted by certain monastic orders to popularise the Gītā has been the annual conducting of "Gītā Gyāna Yajña" in different centres of India. The Chinmaya Mission of Swami Chinmayananda has been the pioneer in this movement. The present writer attended one of the "Gītā Gyāna Yajñas" in Bangalore in 1972. These yajñas are meetings resembling "evangelistic crusades" with the colourful touch of Indian ceremonies, such as the ceremonial reception of the chief Sevak (literally servant), The Swamis who deliver discourses are called sevaks. Bhajans (hymns) are sung by the congregation and the discourses are really sermons based on the verses of the Gītā. The meetings go on for several days at a place and the enthusiasm with which hundreds of people attend these yajñas are a demonstration of the popularity of the Gītā among the Indian masses. The speakers at these meetings take special pains to relate the teachings of the Gītā to the everyday life of the people. The souvenirs published in connection with the Gītā yajña carry testimonies from people who have "found light" through the mission of the swami. The 1962 souvenir of the Bangalore yajña contains the testimony of a Roman Catholic. From time to time individuals spring up claiming to embody the Gītā teaching in practical life completely. A recent such phenomenon is Sri Chinmaya of whom M.S.Gnansoundari writes:

> Jesus Christ preached religion. Sri Chinmaya is metamorphosing the minds of men and women to 'Practice' religion. He has made the verbal Vedanta

> of our times from the realms of theory, more living, intense and practical.[116]

This again, is a new trend of the Hindu revivalism based on the teachings of the Gītā.

Though most of the leaders of the national revival speak of the Gītā as the text of Hinduism or the gospel of Hinduism, they have not made any serious attempt to theorize on the higher position even over the Vedas to which they have in practice elevated the Gita. The Vedas have been accepted as revealed scriptures on the strength of the most authoritative tradition. The Hindu tradition, as we have seen above, ascribes to the Gītā the status of smṛti only. V.R.Kalyanasundara Śastri through his series of articles on "The Gītā and the Upaniṣads" (The Vedanta Kesari, Vol.LV, No.1 - Vol.LVI.No.12) advances the argument that "the Gītā has the supreme status of an Upaniṣad."[117] His arguments may be summarised as follows. The Gītā is related to the Mahābhārata in the same way as the Upaniṣads are related to the Vedas. The Gītā has been rightly characterised as the Upaniṣad of the Mahābhārata. The expression, Bhagavadgītāsu upaniṣatsu at the end of each chapter of the Gītā is significant. The word Upaniṣad means Brahmavidya or Ātma-vidya, i.e. the knowledge of Brahman or Atman. The Gītā being the Upaniṣad of the Mahābhārata, it too deals with Brahma-vidya and therefore deserves to be placed

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116 M.S.Gnanasoundari, "I am the Way," in 103rd Geeta Gyana Yajna Souvenir, Bangalore, 1962, p.45.

117 V.R.Kalyanasundara Sastri, "The Gītā and the Upaniṣads" in The Vedanta Kesari, Vol.LV. No.1 (May 68) p.60.

in the status of other Upaniṣads. "Just as the Upaniṣads are the utterances of the Lord, so is the Gītā the utterance of the Lord."[118] He cites Śankara's statement that the Gita has, in a condensed form, the essence of the Vedas,[119] to support his argument. It is certainly not the case, however, that Śankara and other ācāryas consider a "summary" of the teachings of the Vedas as important as the Vedas themselves.

In the Indian national revival, political, social and religious, the leaders demonstrated a sense of national pride which the late M.N.Roy seeing through his Marxist-internationalist eyes used to describe as "cultural imperialism."[120] Roy was prejudiced in favour of internationalism and hence could not probably see the genuine Indian heritage sympathetically. But he is still probably right in calling for acknowledgement of debt to ideas from other cultures and to a halt to the practice of regarding however revered a text to be all-sufficing. As V.P.Varma observes, the statement that "the Indian classics contain the climax of philosophic wisdom"[121] may be true in the metaphysical sense. But when this in turn creates "a strong belief that the key to political progress and social organization

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[118] loc.cit.

[119] tadidam Gītāśāstraṁ samastavedārthasārasaṁgrahabhutaṁ

[120] Cf. Ashis Nandi, op.cit., p.77.

[121] Viswanath Prasad Varma, op.cit., p.267.

lies in the ancient classics of India,"[122] the foundations would seem rather shaky. This would only lead to cultural stagnation. Aurobindo himself acknowledges at one stage that one of the important aspects of Indian renaissance is accepting whatever is sound and true. He writes:

> [Renaissance] is rather a process of new creation in which the spiritual power of the Indian mind remains supreme, recovers its truths, accepts whatever it finds sound or true, useful or inevitable of the modern idea and form, but so transmutes and Indianises it, so absorbs and so transforms it entirely into itself that its foreign character becomes another harmonious element in the characteristic working of the ancient goddess, the Shakti of India mastering and taking possession of the modern influence no longer possessed or overcome by it.[123]

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[122] loc.cit.

[123] Aurobindo Ghose, The Renaissance in India, p.31.

CHAPTER VI

THE GĪTĀ AND IDEOLOGIES

The impact of the West upon India embraced all aspects of the national life. The assault extended to the religious realm also, although here the inroad was subtler but nevertheless threatened to erode the foundations of India's traditional life. In the secular field the invasion was more overt and it affected both ideas and social organisation. To a great extent India accepted and assimilated the ideas and the ideologies which the West represented. At the same time, this assault on the soul of India by Western culture and values through Western education[1] and the British paramountcy created a sense of genuine threat among the Indian people. Dhirendra Narain, an Indian sociologist, sees even the rise of an inferiority complex. Whether he is right or not is a matter of debate. He observes:

> The most pervasive impact of English rule (and, previously, of Muslim rule) on our character was to create a feeling of national inferiority and inadequacy. Without this backdrop of our sense of national inferiority, nothing contemporary in India can be understood.[2]

The new leaders felt the need for strengthening the foundations of Indian life, which called for a new self-consciousness. This latter

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[1] Edward Shils, "Culture of the Indian Intellectual," The Sewanee Review, Vol. LXVII, p.255.

[2] Dhirendra Narain, "Indian National Character in the Twentieth Century," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, Vol. 370, (March 1967) p.127.

end could be achieved only by forging sufficiently forceful ideologies raised on interpretations of sacred scriptures of the land. In this effort many things from the West had to be accepted. The Indian national leaders, the conservatives and the radicals alike, required some ideological stands that would allow them to criticize those aspects of western civilization which were responsible for the subjugation of the Indian people. These, they hoped, would serve to liberate the Indian people from the new threat stemming from the many-sided imperialism, and at the same time arm them in their struggle for the liberation of India.[3] While some of them turned to Marxism, leaders like Tilak, Aurobindo, Gandhi, Vinoba and others turned to the Gītā to reshape the ideology of dharma by appealing directly to mokṣa and nirvāṇa and the view of metaphysical Reality that is implied in them. These leaders turned to the Gītā primarily because it provides the framework for the development of religious, social and political ideologies which could meet the challenges of the West and by implication that of modernity. It also provides greater freedom of interpretation than any other text, because by its very nature it is synthetic.

Ideology: Towards a Definition

The use of the term "ideology" may be misleading because the word has meant many things to many people. In the popular usage, the

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[3] Cf. Dennis Dalton, "Gandhi and Roy: The Interaction of Ideologies,"in Gandhi, India and the World, An International Symposium, edited by Sibnarayan Ray, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1970, p.160.

best known "ideologies" are socialism and communism "each of which refers to a highly organised system of beliefs and values about society as it is and as it should be."[4] Ideology in this sense, as Scott points out, "is apart from individuals and has an independent existence regardless of whether it is accepted in whole or part by any individual."[5] J.C.Scott makes a distinction between this form of ideology -- which he calls "formal ideology" -- as against "personal ideology". He defines personal ideology as "an organization of opinions, attitudes and values -- a way of thinking about man and society."[6] This definition vastly differs from David E.Apter's exposition and definition of ideology. Apter sees an affinity between ideology and outrage and goes on to assert that the "vaguest of ideologies can be made to shine in the reflected glow of moral indignation."[7] To him, each place and nation has its own mood and special problems and these are expressed in ideologies. Apter says that ideology links "particular actions and mundane practices with a wider set of meanings and, by doing so lends a more honorable and dignified complexion to social conduct."[8] This, according to Apter, is a

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[4] James C.Scott, Political Ideology in Malaysia, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1968, p.31.

[5] loc.cit.

[6] loc.cit.

[7] David E.Apter (ed.) Ideology and Discontent, Collier-MacMillan, London, 1964, p.16.

[8] loc.cit.

generous view. Here is one of the not-so-generous definition of ideology by Apter:

> Ideology is a generic term applied to general ideas potent in specific situations of conduct: for example, not any ideals, only political ones; not any values, only those specifying a given set of preferences; not any beliefs, only those governing particular modes of thought. Because it is the link between action and fundamental belief, ideology hopes to make more explicit the moral basis of action. It is not a vulgar description of something more noble and sacred than itself, like a cartoon of a stained glass window.[9]

This definition, in our view, applies only to "formal ideologies," and that too in a very narrow sense. Apter becomes dogmatic just like the ideologue whom he criticizes when he asserts, "Any ideology can become political" and "Political ideology is an application of particular moral prescriptions to collectivities."[10]

In our use of the term "ideology" to discuss the "systematic scheme or co-ordinated body of ideas about human life and culture" (this is the dictionary definition of the term) which evolved from the Gītā, we will have to take a much wider view. Patrick Corbett's definition brings out this wider meaning of ideology. Corbett does not impose any restriction "upon the content of the beliefs that make

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[9] Ibid., p.17.

[10] loc.cit.

up the ideology; on this usage ideologies may therefore be moral, religious or political, or these and any others mixed together."[11] He defines ideology as follows:

> By 'ideology,' therefore, is meant here any intellectual structure consisting of: a set of beliefs about the conduct of life and the organization of society; a set of beliefs about man's nature and the world in which he lives; a claim that the two sets are independent, and a demand that those beliefs should be professed, and that claim conceded, by any one who is to be considered a full member of a certain group. (An ideologist will therefore be a man who makes it his business to put such structures forward.)[12]

In the light of this definition, Gandhism, Aurobindoism, Sarvodaya are all ideologies, all of which to a great extent draw their strength from the religious and moral teachings of the Gītā. Before we turn to these specific Gītā-inspired ideologies, we should take note of certain aspects of ideology brought out in the studies of Edward Shils. This would also help us to locate the growth of different ideologies in India which are basically religious in their orientations.

"Ideology," writes Shils, "is one among the variety of comprehensive patterns of beliefs -- cognitive and moral, about man, society and the universe in relation to man and society -- which exist in differentiated societies."[13] Shils distinguishes other

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[11] Patrick Corbett, Ideologies, Hutchinson, London 1965,p.12.

[12] loc.cit.

[13] Edward Shils, The Intellectuals and the Powers and other Essays, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1972, p.23.

patterns of beliefs such as outlooks, creeds, movements of thought from ideologies. He characterizes ideologies with a high degree of explicitness of formulation over a very wide range of the objects with which they deal "for their adherents there is an authoritative and explicit promulgation."[14] "Ideologies" according to Shils, "speak for a transcendent entity - a stratum, a society, a species, or an ideal value - which is broader than the membership of the corporate entity."[15] Those who espouse ideologies, claim to act on behalf of an "ideal," and the beneficiaries of which always go beyond the members of the particular ideological group. Ideologies strive for the fuller realization of the "ideal" or for the realization of particular cognitive and moral values that exist in the society in which the ideology obtains. Shils holds that ideologies are responses to insufficient regard for some particular element "in the dominant outlooks and are attempts to place that neglected element in a more central position and to bring it into fulfillment."[16] Since the dominant outlooks are those that prevail in the environing society, ideologies have a natural affinity with the value systems and the creeds that produce those value systems of that society.

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[14] loc.cit.

[15] Ibid., p.25.

[16] loc.cit.

One important feature of ideology which Shils brings out is the moral and ethical principles for which it stands. These principles are placed very high by the charismatic leaders who create ideologies. Thus, ideology "Seeks to sacrilize existence by bringing every part of it under the dominion of the right principles."[17] Along with this emphasis on "what is ultimately right and true," ideology seeks to intellectualize man's social, political and religious behaviour. "An ideology" says Shils, "is the product of the need for an intellectually imposed order on the world. The need for an ideology is an intensification of the need for a cognitive and moral map of the universe, which in a less intense and more intermittent form is a fundamental, although unequally distributed, disposition of man."[18] This must be the reason that in most traditions and cultures, the intellectuals are disposed towards an ideological outlook. An intellectualized religious philosophy like the Vedanta provides the ideal pre-condition for the emergence of ideology since it contains "explicit propositions about the nature of the sacred and its cultivation, which is what ideologies are about."[19] In this respect, the resources of the Gītā to provide a matrix for ideologies are enormous and the charismatic leaders of India turned to this text to articulate their visions of man and society.

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[17] Ibid., p.27.

[18] Ibid., p.29.

[19] Ibid., p.30.

There are four types of ideology as Harry M.Johnson lists them. They are conservative, counter-, reform and revolutionary.[20] Ideologies which evolved from the Gītā, or constructed in reference to the basic religious orientations of the Gītā fall into all these types. According to Johnson the basic function of ideology ". . . is to define a particular program of social action as legitimate and worthy of support."[21] This is a rather narrow role of ideology as we shall see later. However, it should be pointed out here that the main function of Indian ideology is to strive after salvation. Social or political action is only a part of this striving. "The supreme means of salvation," as J.G.Arapura points out, "in the Indian ideology is knowledge, gnosis."[22] Many Indian writers, while admitting that India today has to accept the whole body of Western social and political thought, would point out that spirituality has been the core of Indian thought, though in the day to day life of the Indian people this spiritual ideal is far from realized.[23] Discussing the impact of Modern ideologies on Hindu social system,P.R.Srinivas asserts that

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[20] Harry M.Johnson, "Ideology and the Social System" in The International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, Vol.7,p.81.

[21] loc.cit.

[22] J.G.Arapura, "The Hindu Philosophy of Work," A CBC talk in the series Ideas in Feb. 1970 (unpublished).

[23] Dhirendra Narain, an Indian sociologist, analyzing the Indian character frankly admits the gap between ideals and performance in India. He writes "Truth is extolled, but all kinds of falsehoods are practiced; honesty is valued, but dishonesty is rampant, kindness is a virtue, but Indians laugh at others' physical deformity or discomfiture, the cow is sacred as mother, but is subjected to inhuman treatment; Indians eat beef abroad, but subscribe to the image of the sacred cow at home; Indians are spiritual, but their greed for material things is insatiable." (op.cit., p.130).

the Indian society was able to withstand the onslaught of Western ideologies because of the "comprehensiveness of the social thought that lay behind the design and structure of the ancient Hindu society."[24] This comprehensiveness of the social thought, according to Srinivas, springs from the Vedantic ideology which declares the unity of Brahman and Ātman. This is a broader view of ideology than many sociologists are willing to concede. Nevertheless, we will follow these broad lines in our discussion of the Indian ideology.

National Ideals and National Ideology

During the long years of the Indian struggle for freedom, Gandhi projected the doctrines of Truth and Non-violence or Love as the national ideals. He insisted that every step in the national movement must be in tune with these great ideals. He clarifies his position vis-a-vis the British in the following words:

> Hatred will kill the national spirit. . . For my part I don't want the freedom of India if it means extinction of England or the disappearance of Englishmen. My love of nationalism is that my country may become free, that if need be the whole of the country die, so that the human race may live. There is no room for race hatred here. Let that be our nationalism.[25]

In the development of these national ideals Gandhi was really chanelling the religious ideals, especially that of the Gītā, into the realm of politics. The implication of this was to raise politics from the realm

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[24] P.R.Srinivas, "Hindu Sociology and Modern Ideologies," Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Vol.VI,No.5,p.117.

[25] Quoted by Damodar P.Singhal, op.cit., p.16.

of vulgar scramble for power to a spiritual pursuit, a spiritual pursuit which links political action with the "eternal dharma" of Hinduism. Gandhi's success in this, though very limited, left an aura of idealism to Indian national movement. In the post-Gandhian period the Indian government itself tried to transform this idealism[26] in politics into a national ideology. The transformation of ideals or idealism into an ideology was affected by applying the same set of religious and ideological assumptions about the moral nature of man and society to governments and nations. This was the beginning of a new foreign policy based on a religious ideology, though not fully acknowledged, for India and a large group of Afro-Asian nations.

After India won her freedom under the leadership of Gandhi, the mood of the politicians was one of idealism and the national policies took an idealistic trend. "Idealism," as J.G.Arapura puts it "when applied to society is too simple an attitude to things."[27] Idealism being basically a state of mind, Indian leaders cast it into a rational mould, drawing heavily from Gandhian ideology and the religious motifs of India. In the field of foreign policy this took the form of "Panchashila," the five principles of mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignity, non-aggression,

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[26] We use the term idealism not in the metaphysical sense of Plato but in the popular sense of moral perfection.

[27] J.G.Arapura, "Some Afterthoughts on Buddha Jayanti," Panchshila, Vol.1. No.1,(Aug.1956), p.31.

non-interference, equality and peaceful co-existence. These principles were accepted by a group of nations of the third world which met at Bandung in 1955. At home, a group of Gandhians committed to his ideology embarked on a programme of rural re-construction. We will discuss some salient features of this movement led by Vinoba Bhave later.

Indian leaders are at one in asserting that the policy of peaceful co-existence in accord with the spirit of India's genius and the Gandhian ideology which evolved from this genius. Radhakrishnan says that the alternative to international anarchy is a world-wide system of justice, law and order. Then he goes on to add, "Dharma in Indian thought means a gathering in, a binding together, integration; adharma its opposite. . . ."[28] By implication this means that the Indian concept of Dharma is a binding force which the community of nations need. He cites a verse from the Gītā to show that the policy of peaceful co-existence has the sanction of the scripture.[29] Many Indians proudly claim that India has introduced great ideals of conduct and moral principles in the field of international relations.[30] It is interesting to note, as

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[28] S.Radhakrishnan, Religion in a Changing World, Allen & Unwin, London, 1967, p.157.

[29] Cf. Ibid.,p.173.
ye yathā mām prapadyante tāms tathai 'va bhajāmy aham
mama vartamā 'nuvartante manuṣyāh pārtha sarvaśah
(Bhagavadgītā, IV,11.)

[30] Sometimes these claims go too far.J.G.Arapura observes, "We are absolutely prolific in our idealistic utterances, so much so that almost every one of us sometimes unconsciously assumes the role of an apostle of Truth and Non-violence." (J.G.Arapura, "Some Afterthoughts on Buddha Jayanti" Panchshila, p.30).

an example, the statement of an eminent Indian diplomat, G.L.Mehta, who was India's ambassador to the United States. He says:

> Without having military strength or economic power, India has attained an important international status. India has also brought into international affairs the Gandhian concept of mediation and reconciliation which is embodied in the principles of Pancha Sheela. . . India's policy of non-alignment or non-involvement is, therefore, not by any means negative or sterile.[31]

Panchshila was considered to be the embodiment of the cardinal principles of India's foreign policy in the fifties. The term was borrowed from the Buddhist ethics which laid down five principles of conduct. The ethics of the Gītā in a sense assimilated and widened the Buddhist principles. The Gītā concept of dharma covers individual as well as social goals. At the same time it incorporates some essential elements of the Buddhist dharma such as ahiṁsā. As we discussed above, this was the central teaching of the Gītā as understood by Gandhi. In the formulation of a policy of peaceful co-existence, the Gītā ideology of dharma plays a pivotal role, though the pragmatic policy makers do not very often speak of this for reasons of expediency. It may be said that this principle of conduct in international relations is largely built on the rational basis of mutual self-interest. However the success of this policy depends on the innate goodness of man and his ability to respond to goodness. "Thus the Panchsheel idea of goodness derives from the faith in the good sense of all people and from the

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[31] G.L.Mehta, Understanding India, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1961, p.74.

trust that peoples and nations will observe the sanctity of contract and mutual agreement." [32] This is an extension of the Gandhian technique of satyāgraha and ahiṁsā from the domestic front to international relations. In Gandhi's hands ahiṁsā became the "power of the powerless" and sacrificial goodness was the abiding fulcrum in the lever of negotiations between the opposing parties.

The national ideology, which expressed in the policy of Panchashila and non-alignment, soon became a dogma for many Indians. One had to concede that dogmatic rigidity is in the nature of any ideology. But, this rigidity of approach led to a failure to recognise the full realities of the diplomatic chessgame and the power struggles. Along with this dogmatism, the idealism which was rationalized still remained entangled in idealistic illusions. As Arapura puts it, ". . . it would be a worse and more unpractical species of idealistic illusion to assume that we must or can give up idealism. . . . The trouble is that idealism can never rationally comprehend either the full-dimensional scope or the irrational implications of the very rationality that it may have evolved in relation to the socio-political situation of a given epoch."[33] This excessive idealistic element convinced the Indian policy makers that history has ordained them as peace makers. As a result of all this, the moral and spiritual strength of the Gandhian concept of

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[32] J.G.Arapura, "Presuppositions of India's Foreign Policy," Religion and Society, Vol.VI,No.4 (Dec.1959).p.12.

[33] J.G.Arapura, "Some Afterthoughts on Buddha Jayanti," Panchshila,p.31.

ahiṁsā and reconciliation was drained off from the principles of Panchshil. Finally, the confrontation with India's big neighbour China, in the icy wastes of the Himalayas, drove home to the national leaders the naivete and powerlessness of their ideology.

Sarvodaya -- A Counter Ideology

Gandhi used the term sarvodaya for the first time in his Gujarati translation of John Ruskin's Unto This Last. Later it has become a synonym for Gandhian ideology. This Sanskrit term is a compound of sarva and udaya, meaning respectively all and uplift. So, literally sarvodaya means "upliftment of all." As S.K.Ramachandra Rao correctly points out, for Gandhi sarvodaya meant the universal welfare of the entire humanity. "It refers not primarily to material objects but to the total personality of the individual and to the cultural contents of a nation."[34] Gandhi in his first book, Hind Swaraj, advocated that real rights "are a result of performance of duty"[35] and real happiness is "that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty."[36] This book is said to be the quintessence of Gandhi's ideas, outlines some of his fundamentals -- soul-force, individual reform, self-sacrifice, re-construction of India on the lines of ancient Indian village. The sarvodaya ideology incorporates all these on the basis "of the value

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[34] S.K.Ramachandra Rao, The Idea of Sarvodaya,Bangalore 1951,p.39.

[35] M.K.Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, Navajeevan Publishing House, Ahmedabad 1958, p.72.

[36] Ibid., p.61.

system of the Indian society and culture which Indians consider as eternal (Sanātan Dharma)."[37]

During the days of the national struggle, Gandhi visualised the reconstruction of the Indian society on "the foundations of the old spiritual and moral values of India."[38] In his mind, this was the only way to meet the challenges of the contemporary ideologies like communism and capitalism. For the realization of this ideal, Gandhi believed that the power of the state should be devolved to the villages. He called this grāma svarāj, self-rule of the village. He was very suspicious of the power of the state and other centralised political organizations. "The state represents violence in a concentrated and organised form. The individual has a soul but the state is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned away from violence to which it owes its very existence."[39] He saw industrialisation as a threat to human values and as a road that would eventually lead man to slavery. In his ashrams, volunteers were trained to propagate the values of manual labour and cottage industries. "The underlying principle is," as S.K.Ramachandra Rao observes, "that not only material goods must be produced but the

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[37] K.C.Panchanadikar,"Religion, Social Forces and Historical Periods in India -- An Analysis of Social & Cultural Dynamics" in Towards a Sociology of Culture in India, ed. by T.K.N.Unnithan, Prentice Hall, New Delhi, 1965, p.160.

[38] Vishwanath Prasad Varma, The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvodaya. L.N.Agarwal, Agra, 1965, p.356.

[39] Quoted by Jayaprakash Narayan, "Gandhi and the Politics of Decentralization" in Gandhi, India and the World, An International Symposium, p.240.

growth and development of the workers personality must be assured."[40] The development of human personality, as Gandhi conceived, consists in appreciating values such as non-violence, honesty, simplicity, service of the people and the sanctity of labour. As he demonstrated in his own life, the first step towards a sarvodaya society is to find happiness in a simple and frugal life.

The final goal in the Gandhian scheme of social evolution is the attainment of Rāma Rājya or the Kingdom of righteous rule.[41] Only in such a society, Gandhi believed, that every one can realize the ultimate end of life. This, to Gandhi, is the realization of God as all-pervasive truth. All of Gandhi's political, economical and social endeavours were oriented towards this goal. They were steps to guide the society through progressive enlargement of moral consciousness in and through the service of the down trodden, whom he called daridra nārayana (God, the poor). In the evolution of this Gandhian ideology, we can clearly trace the influence of the Gītā. We may say that the theoretical roots of sarvodaya are in the Vedanta philosophy of the Gītā though Gandhi derived some aspects of his economic ideas from Ruskin and Tolstoy. Many Indian writers ascribe Gandhi's rejection of

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[40] S.K.Ramachandra Rao, op.cit., p.45.

[41] Rama, the hero of the epic Ramayana was an ideal king and his subjects knew no want, spiritual or material. Gandhi evoked the golden age of Rama as the ideal to be pursued by India.

the principle "the greatest good of the greatest number" to his Vedantic moorings. In their analysis, sarvodaya aims to serve the good of all and "not only the numerical majority because all beings are reflections or manifestations of one Supreme Reality."[42]

It may be assumed that Gandhi planned to translate his sarvodaya ideology into the social and economic life of India after independence. With this view, he issued a call to transform the Indian National Congress, the political party which led the freedom struggle, into a non-political organization to serve the people. He was opposed to Congressmen seeking political power. But the political situation following independence was chaotic and Gandhi himself became a victim of the violence he tried to overcome. The orthodox Gandhians kept the torch of Gandhi's idealism burning and they published "the Sarvodaya Plan" on January 30, 1950, the second anniversary of Gandhi's assassination. Jayaprakash Narayan recalls how this plan came into being:

> When Gandhi was still alive, it had been decided. . . that the constructive workers should meet at Wardha (Gandhi's ashram) towards the end of February 1948 and prepare a programme embodying the Gandhian principles of national reconstruction to be placed before the country and the Government. Mahatmaji himself was to guide this meeting, but history willed otherwise.[43]

The Gandhians, according to "the Sarvodaya Plan" engaged in the service of the people through the same constructive programme which Gandhi had evolved during his lifetime. However, sarvodaya acquired the character

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[42] Viswanath Prasad Varma, p.363. Cf.Vasant Nargolkar, The Creed of Saint Vinoba Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1963, p.57.

[43] Jayaprakash Narayan, Socialism, Sarvodaya and Democracy, Asia Publishing House, London, 1964, p.91-92.

of a movement only when Vinoba Bhave started the Bhoodan movement as a counter-point to the communist activities in Telangana.[44] Under Vinoba Bhave's leadership the sarvodaya has become a living ideology which has given new dimensions to Gandhism.

The situation in Telangana acquired the characteristics of a class struggle when the tenants, under communist leadership seized land from the landlords. Violent clashes took place between the peasants who tried to retain the land, and the police who were employed in suppressing the revolt. Vinoba Bhave was concerned with sufferings of the people and introduced the Bhoodan (land gift) movement as a peaceful solution to the land problem. This was the first introduction of the Gandhian ideology of social transformation, through peaceful means on a national scale. Rejecting the method of revolutionary seizure of land adopted by the peasants under communist leadership, he also rejected the method of bringing about agrarian reforms through legislative measures adopted by the Congress government, in place of both these methods, he advocated the method of voluntary parting of the land by those who owned it.[45] In Bhave's thinking both of these methods, in its own way involved violence in the solution of social problems. The first was mass action and thus involved direct violence.

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[44] Ganesh Prasad, "Sarvodaya -- A Critical Study," Indian Journal of Political Science, Vol.XXI, No.1, p.39.

[45] Cf. E.M.S.Namboodiripad, The Mahatma and the Ism. People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1959, p.124.

On the other hand, the second involved the use of the state machinery which, after all, is the use of organised force by the majority against the minority. Bhave entered the troubled area of Telangana with the plea that all land belongs to God and those who hold it in trusteeship must part with one-sixth of their land to be distributed among and landless.

The relevance of the Bhoodan movement is not so much in its application as an alternative solution to the socio-economic problems, but is in its attempts to build a spiritual and moral basis to the social life. The real aim of this movement, in the words of J.G.Arapura, "is to put humanity through a spiritual discipline calculated to humanize it and to cure the basic ills that mar the spiritual image of man in the context of social existence."[46] Bhave is very emphatic about this and he presents his programme as a sacrificial sharing of one's wealth with the needy. This sharing of land, he believes, is the first step towards a spiritual society. Bhoodan movement to Bhave is Bhoodānayajña. He does not take dān as gift, though literally it means gift. Following Śankara's interpretation of dānaṁ as equal division or sharing (dānaṁ saṁvibhagaḥ) Bhave says that when he accepts land on behalf of the poor, he is not accepting it as charity from the rich.[47] On the other hand, he is offering an alternative to the rich to save themselves from a violent revolution. The yajña aspect of his movement speaks of its religious characteristics. In this sacrificial rite of

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[46] J.G.Arapura, "Sociological Alienation and Gandhian Philosophy" Panchshila, Vol. I, No. 4(1956) p.24.

[47] Cf. Vasant Nargolkar, op. cit., p.200.

offering a portion of one's land, one is acquiring merit as in Vedic sacrifices. According to Bhave, it is also an act of expiation for the sins committed. It is by sinful covetousness that society developed the system of private ownership of land and the means to mitigate the weight of this sin is to share it, in the spirit of a sacrifice, with the poor.[48]

Vinoba Bhave applied the teachings of the Gītā in a direct way to solve the socio-economic problems of India more than any other national leader. His Bhoodan movement, as K.C.Panchanadikar puts it, is "a social movement to reconstruct Indian society on a revolutionary re-interpretation of Geeta ethic."[49] Panchanadikar goes on to add that sarvodaya aims to institute all that the Gītā had merely stated as social ethic. He says, "After a lapse of centuries the traditional Indian ethic enunciated in the Geeta is sought to be instituted in social living."[50] Bhave acknowledges that his movement which he characterizes as "the new ideology of collective ahiṁsā" is a result of the fusion of science of the West and the ethics of India.[51] But Bhave is explicit in stating that his movement is a contextual expression of the Vedanta ideology. While accepting Śankara's basic assumptions, he makes a very important addition to Śankara's position on the status of the world. In his preface to Gurubodha, selections from Śankara, he presents his views about God, man and the world in the form of a couplet. It may be translated as follows:

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[48] Cf. S.K.Ramachandra Rao, op.cit., p.50.

[49] K.C.Panchanadikar, op.cit., p.157.

[50] Ibid., p.162.

[51] Quoted by Ganesh Prasad, op.cit., p.43.

"Vinu has extracted this essence of the Vedas, the Vedanta and the Bhagavadgītā that Brahman is truly existent, the world is a vibrant manifestation and that life consists in the pursuit of Truth."[52] This is an obvious imitation of the famous statement of Sankara: "Brahman alone is truly existent, the world is an illusion and the jīvātman is none other than Brahman himself."[53] Justifying this position, Bhave adds: "I do not think I have made any great departure from the general teaching of the Vedanta philosophy. On the contrary, my statement brings about a happy reconciliation between Vedanta and the age of science."[54] By ascribing a relative reality to the world as opposed to total unreality, Bhave is building a metaphysical basis for his ideology of serving the poor.

Bhave's Talks on the Gītā, though delivered as early as 1932, long before he launched Bhoodānayajña, contains the idea of service. He says:

> All the Vedas are in your palm and they say 'serve.' Consider whether your hands worked yesterday, whether they are fit to work again today, and whether they carry the marks of service. When the hands are worn out with service, then the destiny that Brahma ordained for you becomes clear. . . . We have to build our lives on the foundations of service, love and knowledge.[55]

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[52] Vedavedāntagītanaṁ vinunā sāra udhṛtaḥ
Brahma satyaṁ jagatsphurtirjīvanaṁ satyaśodhanaṁ
(Quoted by Vasant Nargolkar, op.cit., p.62).

[53] Brahma Satyaṁ, jaganmithyā, jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ.

[54] Quoted by Vasant Nargolkar, op.cit., p.62.

[55] Vinoba Bhave, Talks on the Gītā, p.247-248.

This is a new aspect of the Gītā which Bhave has brought out. In his various lectures and writings he further related the teachings of the Gītā to his movement. He says that the final goal which the Gītā places before humanity is salvation and sarvodaya attempts to bring this salvation on the socio-economic plane.[56] The Gītā prescribes three ways -- yajña (sacrifice) dāna (equality) and tapas (austerity). Bhoodānayajña stresses all these aspects in its search for re-construction of rural India.

A new content to Indian spirituality is traced from the Gītā by Bhave. The attribute of God looking upon all creatures with an equal eye,[57] is fundamental to his ideology. He argues that to unite with God, which is the final aim of human life, is to become like God. "To become like Him amounts to being able to look upon all creatures with an equal eye or to meet all situations with equanimity."[58] While accepting the traditional yogas of the Gītā, Bhave finds another yoga, sāmyayoga, the yoga of equanimity, as the supreme yoga of the Gītā. He borrows the expression paramasāmya from Mundakopaniṣad and demonstrates that the Gītā has elaborated this upanisadic goal. In the upanisad paramasāmya stands for supreme identity, that is Brahman. In this age of social, economic and political equality, Bhave interprets sāmya as

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[56] Cf. Ganesh Prasad, op.cit., p.45.

[57] Cf. ihai 'va tair jitaḥ sargo yeṣāṁ sāmye sthiaṁ manaḥ
nirdoṣaṁ hi samaṁ brahma tasmād brahmani te sthitāḥ.
(Bhagavadgītā, V,19.)

[58] Vasant Nargolkar, op.cit., p.57.

equality. Sāmya in every day life, according to Bhave, is a preparation for reaching paramasāmya. In his collection of aphorisms entitled Sāmyasūtras, the first aphorism is "abidheyaṁ paramasāmyaṁ." This, to a great extent speaks of the content of his ideology. Addressing a group of Bhoodan workers he explains his meaning of the aphorism in the following words:

> Parama Sāmya is to be meditated upon and longed for as the goal of life. . . . I have named the Gītā Sāmyayoga which is both the art and the philosophy of equality, equanimity and identity. Other commentators have given other names. . . . It is possible that the present age or the nature of the work that I have undertaken might have been the influencing factor behind my decision to name the Gītā as Sāmyayoga. I have chosen that title also because the very secret of life is the practice of equality and equanimity. . . . Parama Sāmya does not include the economic or the social equalities alone. They are, of course, desirable. But there is another kind of sāmya namely, equanimity or balance of mind, which is also implied in it. But this too is not adequate. The state that transcends all these sāmyas is the Supreme Identity, Parama Sāmya . . . . It takes its stand on the spiritual ground beyond the realms of science or even morality. And that is Brahman.[59]

In this statement we can see the Vedantic foundations of the Bhoodan movement in a nutshell. Time and again, Bhave claims that spiritual gnosis and compassion for human beings are the two cardinal principles of Hinduism. He has no doubt in his mind that his movement is an extension of the Vedantic metaphysics as interpreted by Śankara.[60]

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[59] Quoted by Vasant Nargolkar, op.cit., p.58-59.

[60] Cf. Vinoba Bhave, Bhoodan Ganga, Sarva seva-sangh, Kashi, 1957, Vol. II, p.151-156.

As the Bhoodan movement made its mark throughout India, Bhave extended the ideology to other areas of life. It included the surrender of whole villages to common ownership, (grāmdān) gift of one's wealth, (sampatti-dān) partial dedication of one's intellectual capacities, (buddhi-dān) voluntary labour for projects of public utility (śrama-dān) etc. The ultimate social aim of these programmes was to drive home to the Indian people the value of aparigraha, non-possession. According to Bhave, to possess material goods in surplus of one's basic needs is a sin against society. But to give up private possessions is not an easy task for any man. The sarvodaya leaders are aware of this, and they believe that a trans-valuation of the present values of the society is necessary for the success of the movement. To this extent, the success of any ideology depends on the change of attitudes on the part of the people. Jayaprakash Narayan who came to sarvodaya through a winding road which passed through Marxism, Socialism and Democratic Socialism, says, "This movement [Bhoodan] is based on the principle of change of heart. It is being conducted in the belief that man is amenable to change. That is so, because all of us are essentially one, fragments of the same Almighty Father."[61] As we noted above, sarvodayans believe that social and economic problems cannot be solved through legislation. The reason being that (1) sarvodaya wants to bring about a moral revolution which cannot be effected by laws and (2) it accepts the Gandhian maxim that legislation without conversion is a dead letter.[62]

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[61] Jayaprakash Narayan, A Picture of the Sarvodaya Social Order. Sarva Seva Sangh, Tanjore, 1955, p.6.

[62] Cf. Ibid., p.9.

The programmes of sarvodaya are presented as a counter-ideology to socialism and communism. While sarvodaya lays stress on the development of virtue by an individual as the real path to social progress, socialism turns to the state to control the means of production and distribution. Sarvodaya is against all kinds of centralised authority. So it speaks of loknīti, rule of the people, in place of rājniti, rule of the state. The village is the centre of power in the sarvodaya scheme. The consensus of the representation of the village in running their affairs is the real democracy. There is an element of anarchism in the sarvodaya ideology, in that it speaks of "village republics" without granting any place to nation-states. It is one thing to check the Leviathan state from becoming a super Leviathan. But it is against the very human nature to speak of abolishing the power of the state at this stage of human evolution. Jayaprakash Narayan speaks the language of the Utopians when he says that to realise the sublime goals of freedom, equality, brotherhood and peace, socialism has to be transformed into sarvodaya.[63] Nevertheless, Narayan's warning that "to apotheosise material happiness and encourage an outlook on life that feeds on an insatiable hunger for material goods"[64] would eventually lead to the submersion of equality, freedom and brotherhood is too grave to be ignored by any serious-minded person. The emphasis on spiritual values and methods in solving socio-economic problems makes sarvodaya a significant movement of our times, though

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[63] Cf. Jayaprakash Narayan, Socialism, Sarvodaya and Democracy Asia Publishing House, London, 1964, p.152.

[64] Ibid., p.155.

admittedly its practical success is rather limited. Bhave remains very optimistic about the future of sarvodaya. He says, that if there is going to be any real trial of strength between two ideologies for world-wide acceptance, "it will be between Communism and Sarvodaya and not as is commonly supposed, between Communism and Capitalism."[65]

Vedantic Socialism

Some modern interpreters of Vedanta philosophy are concerned to discern a strong basis for equality, fraternity and socialism in that system. These exponents of the Vedanta, who are usually referred as Neo-Vedantins, believe that their interpretation is truly in line with the great texts of the Vedanta, prasthānatraya, and that of the ācāryas. Vivekananda, who is acclaimed as the prophet of New India, declares that only the Vedanta can furnish all the modern communistic or equalizing theories with a spiritual basis.[66] This is made possible, according to Vivekananda, by the superiority of the Vedanta in that it preaches "the divinity of man, and not his sinfulness as Christianity does."[67] Aurobindo Ghose expresses the same thought in the following words:

> The union of liberty and equality can only be achieved by the power of human brotherhood. But brotherhood exists in the soul and by the soul. . . . When the soul claims

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[65] Vasant Nargolkar, op.cit., p.181.

[66] Cf. Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1959--1963, Vol. V, p.212.

[67] Ibid., Vol. II, p.138, Cf. Vol. I, p.426.

> freedom, it is the freedom of its development, the self-development of the divine in man in all his being when it claims equality, what it is claiming is that freedom equally for all and the recognition of the sameness of all, the same godhead in all human beings.[68]

Rabindranath Tagore's famous formula, "the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man the Eternal"[69] echoes the same Vedantic idea.

Gandhi, Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, Bhave and others affirm the Vedantic contributions towards the development of democracy and socialism. It is commonly assumed that dignity of man is one of the corner-stones of democracy. Gandhi finds the philosophic basis for this assumption in Advaita Vedanta. He says, "Advaita reveals the truth of the inherent equality of all men."[70] Aurobindo argues that the spirit of democracy which stands for the brotherhood of man, travelled from the East to the West in the form of Christianity, while admitting that ancient Indians failed to give expression to this spirit in their social life.[71] But Aurobindo is emphatic in affirming that "The dignity of human existence, given to it by the thought of the Vedantic and classical ages of Indian culture, exceeded anything conceived by the noblest idea of humanity."[72] The principle of "one man one vote" accepted by democracy, according to Bhave expresses

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[68] Aurobindo Ghose, The Ideal of Human Unity, p.368.

[69] Rabindranath Tagore, The Religion of Man, Allen & Unwin, London, 1961, p.17.

[70] M.K.Gandhi, Hindu Dharma, p.360.

[71] Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, Selections from the Bandemātaraṁ, p.125-126.

[72] Aurobindo Ghose, "The Indian Conceptions of Life." Silver Jubilee Commemoration Volume of the Indian Philosophical Congress (1950), p.173.

the "Vedantic doctrine of the oneness of the human soul."[73] Radhakrishnan sees democracy as an expression of religion, nay, "it is the highest religion." He writes, "The human individual is the highest, the most concrete embodiment of the Spirit on earth and anything which hurts his individuality or damages his dignity is undemocratic and irreligious."[74] This conviction springs from faith in the one Supreme. It means ". . . that we, His offspring, are of one body, of one flesh -- the Brahmin, the Harijan, the black, the yellow, and the white whose prayers go up to one God under different names."[75] Radhakrishnan lays stress on the Vedantic formulas such as Ayamātmā Brahma (this self is Brahman) sohamasmi (I am He) to drive home the Vedantic foundations of democracy. He holds that the utterance sohamasmi in the Chadogya Upaniṣad declares the universal brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God at the same time.[76] Radhakrishnan is aware of the difficulties in translating these ideals into every day

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[73] Vinoba Bhave, Bhoodan Ganga (Hindi) Sarva Seva-Sangh, Kashi, 1957, Vol. IV, p.261 (translation mine).

[74] Quoted by Humayan Kabir, "Radhakrishnan's Political Philosophy," in The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, ed. by P.A.Schilpp, Tudor Publishing Co., New York, 1952, p.690.

[75] Ibid., p.694.

[76] Paramahansa Yogananda interprets sohamasmi as the goal towards which humanity must be striving. He says "Soham: I have found the vast Cosmic Spirit reflected within me as the Soul, the little Myself, the little I." (Paramahansa Yogananda, "The Bhagavad-Gītā -- Spiritual Interpretation," in Self-Realization, Vol. XLV, No. 3 Summer 1974, p.38.)

political life. Nevertheless, he is optimistic about the perfectability of man. "There must come a time when all individuals will become sons of God and be received into the glory of immortality."[77]

There are many Indian leaders who subscribe to the ideologies based on the Vedanta, believe that the acquisitive society can be transformed into a socialist society by spiritualising the creeds of Western socialism. This means a baptism of those schools of socialism that hold materialistic view of life and strive for material prosperity at the expense of spiritual values. The "Vedantins aim at achieving the goal of socialism through limiting human wants and desires."[78] Swami Ram Tirth, who has been known as a Practical Vedantin, says "Domestic, social, political or religious salvation of every country lies in the Vedanta carried into effect."[79] This "applied Vedanta," according to Ram Tirth, ". . . implies in active practice my neighbour to be my own self, feeling myself as one or identical with all, losing my little self to become the self of all. This is crucifixion of the selfishness, and the resurrection of the All Self."[80] Ram Tirth agrees with the Marxists in the abolition of private property, for he holds that possession of property is the most sacrilegious deed against one's Atman.[81] Here he goes one step further

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[77] S.Radhakrishnan, An Idealist View of Life, Allen & Unwin, London, 1952, p.245.

[78] S.L.Malhotra, Social and Political Orientations of Neo-Vedantism, S.Chand, Delhi, 1970, p.144.

[79] Ram Tirth, In the Woods of God-Realization,Ram Tirth Prakashan, Varanasi, 1957, Vol. III, p.259.

[80] Ram Tirth, Gospel of Work,Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1963, p.39.

[81] Cf. Ram Tirth, In the Woods of God-Realization,Vol.III, p.94.

than Gandhi and Bhave. The sarvodaya demand for common ownership is based on the idea that "all wealth, even though we may acquire it with our individual effort and skill, is not for us alone, but has been granted to us by God for all of us."[82] Bhagvan Das, though a Theosophist, falls in line with the Neo-Vedantins and asserts, "True Socialism can be founded only upon the sense of the Oneness of all life, which means the realization of Supreme Self."[83] In these assertions we may trace a trend towards employing the Vedanta to counter any ideology or even scientific discoveries. Vivekananda stretches the Vedanta to its limits when he comments that the electro-magnetic theory was advancing science in the direction of the Vedanta.

The exponents of the Vedantic ideology of equality lean heavily on certain verses of the Gītā. One reason for this, it can be safely assumed, is the popularity of the Gītā as a religious text. The Gītā in fact carries on the incipient monistic formulations of the Upaniṣads. But it is debatable whether the Gītā actually advocates equality as we understand the concept today. The verse often cited to support the view, reads as follows: "Sages see with an equal eye (samadarśinaḥ)a learned and humble Brahmin, a cow, an elephant or even a dog or an outcaste."[84] Commenting on this verse, Radkrishnan observes, "This view

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[82] Vinoba Bhave, Bhoodan Yajña, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1957, p.64.

[83] Bhagavan Das, The Essential Unity of All Religions, Kashi Vidya Pitha, Banaras, 1939, p.589.

[84] Vidyāvinaya saṃpanne brāhmaṇe gavi hastini
śuni cai 'va śvapāke ca panditāḥ samadarśinaḥ.
(Bhagavadgītā, V,18.)

makes us look upon our fellow beings with kindliness and compassion. The wise see the one God in all beings and develop the quality of equalmindedness which is characteristic of the Divine."[85] There are a few statements in the Gītā which can be interpreted as supporting this concept of equality of all men. For e.g. Kṛṣṇa describes himself as "the friend of all beings" (suhṛdaṁ sarvabhūtānāṁ),[86] "abiding in all beings" (sarvabhūtasthitam),[87] "The same in (alike to) all beings" (samo 'haṁ sarvabhuteṣu),[88] "the seed of all existence" (sarvabhūtānaṁ bijaṁ)[89].In IX.32, final salvation is offered to all those who take refuge in Kṛṣṇa, irrespective of caste distinctions.[90] However, it is rather difficult to reconcile the overall position of the Gītā on dharma as Kuladharma (caste duty) and the insistence on the protection of varṇa system, with these not too clear statements on equality.

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[85] S.Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, Allen & Unwin, London 1970, p.182. Cf. M.K.Gandhi, The Teaching of the Gītā Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1971, p.81-82.

[86] Bhagavadgītā, V.29.

[87] Ibid., VI.31.

[88] Ibid., IX,29, Cf. XVIII.54.

[89] Ibid., X.39.

[90] Māṁ hi pārtha vyāpāśritya ye 'pi syuh pāpayonayaḥ
striyo vaiśyās thathā śūdrās te'pi yānti parāṁ gatim.
(Bhagavadgītā, IX.32.)

V.P.Varma makes a very pertinent observation on the Vedantic claim of equality. He says:

> I think that the Vedanta does not teach the gospel of equality relevant in a political and social context, but advocates the concept of equality only to the extent that it teaches either identity with, or merging into, the absolute, as the transcendental destiny of all human beings regardless of all mundane differences.[91]

As an extension of the ideology of equality of all men, Neo-Vedantins apply this concept to religions as well. Beginning from Ramkrishna Paramahamsa, the Neo-Vedantins propound the creed that all religions are the same, meaning thereby not only the samaya and margas within Hinduism, but also other creedal systems outside Hinduism. Vivekananda developed a philosophical basis for this affirmation of the validity of all religions and popularised it even in the West. The new exponents of the Vedanta, therefore proclaim that all religions lead to the same end. Gandhi, Bhave, Radhakrishnan and others take this line in their approach to religions. Commenting on Bhagavadgītā IX 23,[92] Radhakrishnan says, "The author of the Gītā welcomes light from every quarter of the heaven. It has a right to shine because it is light."[93]

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[91] Viswanath Prasad Varma, The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, p.228.

[92] ye 'py anyadevatābhakta yajante śradhayā 'nvitāh
te 'pi mam eva kaunteya yajanty avidhipūrvakam.

[93] S.Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p.248.

Radhakrishnan carries this thought further in many of his works.[94] In his commentary of Brahma Sūtra I. i.4, tat tu samanvayat, he says, "Today the samanvayat on harmonisation has to be extended to the living faiths of mankind. Religion concerns man as man and not man as Jew or Christian, Hindu or Buddhist, Sikh or Muslim."[95] We have to point out here that the view of these Vedantins is not in harmony with the orthodox Hindu traditions. The views of Śankara, Jaimini, Kumarila, Ramanuja and other ācāryas clearly indicate that the Vedic faith is exclusive. It is a "once for all"revelation for them. In his bhāşya of Brahma Sūtra II.i.3. Śankara says: "The final beatitude is not attained by the mere knowledge of Sāṁkhya smṛti or the path of yoga, without reference to the Veda. The scriptures obviate the possibility of any other means of attaining the final beatitude except through the knowledge of the self referred in the Vedas."[96]

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[94] Radhakrishnan strongly believes that Hinduism has been tolerant and non-dogmatic in its approach to other religions. He even claims that Śankara held this position. He notes that Śankara "did not believe in a God who denied the existence of his rivals," and adds that "this non-dogmatic attitude has persisted in Hindu religious history." (Eastern Religions and Western Thought, Humphrey Milford, London, 1939, p.311) This generous attitude of Hinduism, in his view, "is bound up with its religion and its policy." (Ibid., p.316). Radhakrishnan continues, "The Bhagavadgītā, with a clear grasp of the historical, warns us against taking away the psychological comfort of people by unsettling their faiths. We are required to confirm the faith of others even though we may not have any share in it." (Ibid.,p.328)

[95] S.Radhakrishnan, The Brahma Sūtra, the Philosophy of Spiritual Life, Allen & Unwin, London, 1960, p.249.

[96] Śankaracarya, Brahmasūtra Śankarabhasya. Tr. by V.M.Apte, Popular Book Depot, Bombay, 1960, p.282.

He holds firmly to the position, "No one who does not know the Vedas, knows the Great One."[97]

Interaction of Ideologies

The twentieth century Indian mind has been a battleground of ideologies, scene of a battle primarily between western ideologies and Indian world-views. In this, Hinduism has demonstrated its ability to absorb alien ideologies and then develop new ideologies and even counter-ideologies evolved from the cultural and spiritual heritage of India. As we discussed above, the search in India's heritage for the foundations of nationalism, socialism, democracy and so on testifies to this tendency. Bhoodan movement which aims "the establishment in India of a non-violent, non-exploitive social order"[98] has been acclaimed as the "real communism." The ideology of a secular state, which the Indian nation has accepted, is another instance that speaks of India's power to assimilate non-Indian ideologies. While K.M.Panikkar categorically declares that the roots of the secular state has to be sought in the West,[99] Radhakrishnan takes an opposite view. For him, secularism is nothing but the expression of Hindu tolerance and affirmation of the unity of all religions. With him, this is as much a dogma as the assertion that one religion is superior to all others. He writes, "Secularism here does not mean irreligion or atheism or

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[97] Tait. Bra. III. 12. 9.7

[98] Vasant Nargolkar, op. cit., 247.

[99] Cf. K.M.Panikkar, The State and the Citizen, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1956, p.28.

even stress on material comforts. It proclaims that it lays stress on the universality of spiritual values which may be attained by a variety of ways."[100] In a report by the University Education Commission of which he was the chairman, this concept comes out. The report states:

> The absolute religious neutrality of the state can be preserved in state institutions, if what is good and great in every religion is presented, and what is more essential, the unity of all religion.[101]

This, we may note, is advocacy of one view of religion and may come into conflict with the principles of the secular state. Nevertheless, the attempt to integrate an ideology like secularism with India's spiritual heritage has an advantage. It helps to create an intellectual greenhouse, so to say, where this transplanted ideology can thrive.

In the long history of Hinduism, this process of adoption and assimilation is nothing new. Philosophic systems such as Sāṁkhya, which denies the existence of God, Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika, which propounds atomist rationalism, were accommodated along with other orthodox systems. Of course, attempts have been made to re-interpret these systems in line with the main current of Indian thought. K.Damodaran observes that the shortcomings of these systems "were cleverly exploited later by idealist thinkers."[102]

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[100] S.Radhakrishnan, "Foreward" in S.Abid Hussain, The National Culture of India, Jaico Publishing House, Bombay, 1956, p.8.

[101] Report of the University Education Commission, Government of India Press, Simla, 1950, p.302.

[102] K.Damodharan, Indian Thought, A Critical Survey,p.165.

In Damodaran's view, idealist thinkers of the feudalist era distorted and misinterpreted the original rational and materialistic outlook of these schools.[103] In the context of this adoption, assimilation and re-interpretation (misinterpretation as Damodaran and other Marxists would have it) we have to raise the question whether there has been any genuine interaction between ideologies at all. Do the ideologies of Gandhi, Bhave, Radhakrishnan et. al. bear the marks of a genuine interaction? Or, is it only another phase in the all-embracing nature of Hinduism? The answer is, yes and no at the same time. In the writings of these leaders of thought we can discern an earnest attempt to come to grips with modern ideological issues, without sacrificing what they consider to be vital in the Indian heritage. On the other hand, in their eagerness to assert the supremacy of Vedantic idealism, they got themselves entangled in certain dogmas of their own creation and this tinted their windows of vision.

The intellectual leaders of conservative persuasion attempted to fortify the nation from the influence of "western materialistic ideologies" by bringing out the external message of the Gītā and other texts. The following exhortation by Kurtakoti, alias Śankaracarya represents this position.

> This [samatva,equality] is the refrain of the Gītā and it is the message that has a direct bearing on the present conflict and unrest and tension. . . . Therefore, the ideal life taught to him [Arjuna] may be looked upon, as the ideal existence and the way of living prescribed to him may be regarded as the Path of Progress destined for all.[104]

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[103] Cf. Ibid., p.158.

[104] Kurtakoti, "Towards a New World Order -- The Gītā," in Studies in the Gītā, p.40-41.

Puthezhath Rama Menon goes one step further and calls for the rejection of the Western concepts such as democracy and political freedom. In his view, these concepts are mere frauds. He writes:

> Is there anything in democracy that is able to touch and save the masses? What is called political freedom is merely the pride and delusion of the elite. The so called democracy is only the rule of the few 'little smarties.' It was Lord Krsna who preached real 'communism'; communism that is based on mutual love and trust and on faith in God, not on violence, injustice, selfishness and jealousy. The communion of the Gītā that teaches respect and compassion and faith in the universality of the soul, is the alternative to Marxism and Capitalism.[105]

To our disappointment, neither Kurtakoti nor Rama Menon give us any specific references to the Gītā on which they base their assertions. This kind of interpretation of the Gītā, we may note, comes from an intellectual quest that is satisfied only with total solutions to any problem.

Those Indian intellectuals who accept Marxist interpretations of history take the opposite pole. Some of them write off the Gītā as an attempt of the priestly-feudal class to perpetuate caste-system and slavery.[106] M.N.Roy, the great Indian revolutionary and ideologist, contends that the philosophy of the Gītā, i.e. Vedanta, is not philosophy proper as such, but theology. To Roy, only those systems that "tried to

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[105] Puthezhath Rama Menon, Gītāprāntangalil (in Malayalam) Sri Ramakrishna Ashram, Trichur, 1967, p.139 (translation mine.)

[106] Cf. Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai, op.cit., 1969, p.344.

explain the origin, evolution and phenomena of nature independent of an assumed supernatural agency"[107] fit into the definition of philosophy. Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika and Sāṁkhya fall under the definition of philosophy as love of knowledge. They do not enter into speculation about the unknowable, relying on the authority of scriptures. Roy observes, ". . . criticism must doubt the philosophical validity of a system which draws authority from scriptures."[108] From fragmentary evidence Roy reconstructs the forgotten chapter of Indian philosophy and concludes, "As everywhere else, so in India also, philosophy was originally materialistic."[109] The genuine nature of this philosophic quest was lost, because it was done mostly by the Brahmins, who earned their living by performing the rituals and ceremonies of natural religion. "Therefore, the evolution of thought in ancient India was a headlong plunge into theological speculation."[110] Roy takes Radhakrishnan to task for presenting the "post-Buddhist Vedanta system as the Hindu view of life."[111] In Roy's view the spiritual evolution

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[107] M.N.Roy, "Radhakrishnan in the Perspective of Indian Philosophy" in The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, p.551.

[108] Ibid., p.548.

[109] Ibid., p.555.

[110] Ibid., p.549.

[111] Ibid., p.548.

of India was choked by Śankara who was "the ideologist of Brahmanical reaction and patriarchal society which were re-established on the ruins of the Buddhist revolution."[112] Therefore, Roy implies that the Gītā and its Vedantic interpretations do harm to the development of genuine philosophy. Roy obviously accepts the Pythagorian definition of philosophy as "contemplation, study and knowledge of nature."

It is interesting to recall that Roy was a prominent communist leader in the Soviet Union. While he was working in Bokhara, Central Asia, he studied Islamic scriptures to further the cause of revolution. He recollects, "With this purpose, [to win the poorer Muslim priests] I made a careful study of the Koran and other classics of Islamic theology. In public meetings I could justify the Revolution on scriptual authority."[113] It is not clear whether he has made such a study of the Gītā for the sake of revolution. When he returned to India in 1930, after he fell out of favour with Moscow, he was arrested and the five hard years in jail witnessed a substantial change in his ideology. This change in Roy's concept of revolution is evident in his preference for the term "Indian renaissance," which means for him a "philosophical" and "spiritual" as well as economic revolution. Roy's quest for an ideology finally led him to a synthesis of materialism and liberal humanism, which he calls "Radical Humanism." For Roy, true spiritual freedom is freedom from the

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[112] Ibid., p.556-557.

[113] M.N.Roy, Memoirs, Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1964, p.447.

tyranny of religion. He writes: "The desire for freedom in social and political life, being an expression of the basic human urge for spiritual freedom, can be satisfied only by. . . a world-view which does away with the necessity of assuming a supernatural power or metaphysical sanction."[114] Jayaprakash Narayan, whose ideological pilgrimage was almost parallel to that of Roy's ended in a different ideology, sarvodaya, an ideology that springs from the Vedanta which Roy rejects. Narayan acknowledges Roy's influence on the evolution of his own thought.[115] But, Gandhi's influence prevailed and he accepted the Vedantic way. He writes, "The root of morality lies in the endeavour of man to realise this unity of existence, or to put it differently, to realise his self."[116]

Ponjikara Rafi, the author of Kaliyugam[117] takes an entirely different approach to the Gītā. This book is acclaimed by critics as an outstanding contribution to the study of philosophy in Malayalam. The author says that his concern is to seek what solutions, if any, can be found in the teachings of ancient ācāryas to the problems that confront the

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[114] M.N.Roy, Reason, Romanticism, and Revolution, Renaissance Publishers, Calcutta, 1955, Vol.2, p.298.

[115] Cf. Jayaprakash Narayan, Socialism, Sarvodaya and Democracy, p.240.

[116] Ibid., p.154.

[117] Ponjikara Rafi, Kaliyugam (in Malayalam) National Book Stall, Kottyam, 1971 (translation mine).

modern world. In his words:

> From the horizontal facts we move to the vertical truth in search of an answer to these vital questions: 'Where do we come from?' and 'Where do we go from here?' That will lead us to a vertico-horizontal correlation which harmonizes time and space, cause and effect. The method used, to bring out the hidden truths of historical events, is the yogaśāstra of the age, i.e. Hegel's dialectics.[118]

The third question raised is, "What are we to do next?" The answer, as Rafi understands it, lies in the correlation and integration of the three manifestos given to humanity by the great ācārayas. These manifestos are, The Ten Commandments, The Bhagavadgītā and the"Communist Manifesto."

In a world where faith in the Supernatural was taken for granted, it was natural for Moses and Vyasa to present their manifestoes as God-given. But, Rafi contends, in the twentieth century, "God is dead" and the style of life has been transformed according to this conviction. Therefore, man has to find answers to his questions without any help from God. In other words, man is the hero of the new manifesto. He is his own law-giver and charioteer. The central point in the Gītā, according to Rafi, is Kṛṣṇa's challenge to Arjuna to take up the sword to protect the dharma. This is expressed in about ten verses. All other yogas are secondary and they are given to prepare Arjuna to face this great task. Dharma is interpreted as the right of Arjuna and his comrades, the right to govern the kingdom. The battle of Kurukṣetra is really the battle between the exploiters and the exploited. Arjuna is the representative

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[118] Ponjikara Rafi, "About Kaliyugam" (in Malayalam) Mathrubhumi Weekly, Vol. LI, No. 18, (July 15, 1973) p.48 (translation mine).

of the latter. The author of the Gītā presents Kṛṣṇa as the avatāra because it gives moral strength to Arjuna to lead the struggle of his people. In the stories of Mahābhārata, Rafi sees a prophetic warning about the class war of which Marx wrote several centuries later.[119] After a lengthy discussion of the similarities in outlook between the Gītā and the Communist Manifesto, Rafi concludes, "To put it differently, Marx was forced to unsheath that sword which was kept sheathed by the author of Mahābhārata and handed it over to the working class."[120] Marx's advocacy of class war for the establishment of a classless society, is in the same tradition of Kṛṣṇa who urged Arjuna to stand up for his rights and fight.[121] We cannot enter into a critique of Rafi's thesis, but suffice is to say that he selects those aspects of the Gītā which fit into his scheme of interpretation.

The ideological struggle in India, as we have seen above, is basically a struggle to accommodate and integrate modern western ideologies with the Indian ideologies. This means a radical re-orientation as to the goal of ideology: from salvation through knowledge, gnosis, to salvation through a concept of equality, samatva, from the salvation of the individual self to the salvation of the community. It is a different question, whether these new attempts to tilt the emphasis from

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[119] Cf. Ponjikara Rafi, Kaliugam, p.436-452.

[120] Ibid., p.497.

[121] Cf. Ibid., p.498.

the transcendant goal of personal salvation to the transient goal of social salvation, socialism as some idealogues would have it, would result in a revolution of the world. A revolution is difficult to foresee, for the major burden of the ideologists is to re-interpret the past so that it may meet the challenges of the present. Thus, the ideology in India, as in many other developing nations, resembles "that of Ataturk more than that of Marx -- an ideology of development--. . . based in national culture and tradition and related to local conditions."[122]

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[122] Paul E.Sigmund, Jr. "Introduction" to The Ideologies of The Developing Nations, ed. by him, Praeger, New York, 1963, p.39-40.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing pages we have discussed how the Gītā has been interpreted by the leaders of Indian thought to make the message of this ancient religious text relevant to the needs to Twentieth Century India. At the risk of generalization, we may say that in the various commentaries of the Gītā one can see Hindu India's response to the challenges of modernity. This response has been primarily one of turning back to the conserving power of orthodoxy: orthodoxy as represented by the synthesizing and assimilating ideology of the Gītā. The power of tradition to preserve the essence of spirituality - dharma as Gītā would have it - is one of the central themes of the Gītā. The divine interference for the preservation of dharma[1] assumes deterioration of the social institutions and the moral fibre that holds the society together. Thus the Gītā foresees the need for revolutionary changes to restore the harmony of life. K.M. Panikkar is right when he says that the Gītā "...does not give support to the doctrine that what exists is always the best and that change in itself is something to be resisted".[2] The historic context in which the Gītā came to be written also points to the pre-occupation of the author to

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[1] Bhagavadgītā IV.8. See our discussion of dharma in Ch. II. (pp. 21-30).

[2] K.M. Panikkar, Hinduism and the West, p. 43.

preserve and protect the right view of dharma. The 'Philosophical Compromise' reached in the Gītā can be understood, according to Belvalkar, "...as an effort on a great scale put forth by the older Śrauta religion with its institutions of Yajña and Varṇāśrama to hold its own and to stem the gathering tide of heretic and agnostic speculations".[3] The compromise of the Gītā, as Belvalkar points out, is a readiness to reform from within. The modern commentators of the Gītā, more or less stand in the tradition of its author, in their attempt to re-interpret its message and launch reformist movements on the basis of that message.

Challenge of Modernity

Robert N. Bellah lists four types of religious response to modernity and modernization. They are, conversion to Christianity, traditionalism, reformism and neo-traditionalism.[4] All these are mutually exclusive alternatives, although they may shade into one another. India's response, as we have seen in the commentaries of the Gītā is basically reformism. Bellah defines reformism as "a movement that re-interprets a particular religious tradition to show not only that it is compatable with modernization but also that, when truly understood, the tradition vigorously demands at least important aspects of modernity".[5]

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[3] S.K. Belvalkar, The Bhagavadgītā, p. lxxxv.

[4] Robert N. Bellah, "Epilogue" in Religion and Progress in Modern Asia, ed. by him. Free Press, New York, 1965, p. 215.

[5] Ibid., p. 207.

The commentaries of Tilak, Gandhi, Aurobindo et. al. fit very well into this definition of reformism. The typology we see in the works of these authors is one of re-interpretation of the Hindu traditions as represented by the Gītā. Panikkar attests this when he says, "Hindu Reformation... was indeed a significant fact, but it would have remained basically a religious movement but for the rediscovery of the Bhagavad Gītā as the political and social gospel of Hindu India".[6] Historically, Indian reformism dates from Rammohan Roy in the early nineteenth century. But the culmination of that movement, touching all aspects of Indian life, was certainly in the person and work of Gandhi. This movement is still alive in the works of Vinoba Bhave, Jayaprakash Narayan and other Gandhians. Neo-traditional response is based on an ideology that is designed to keep change to a minimum and defend the status quo as far as possible. K. Damodaran sees this kind of response in the writings of leaders like K.M. Munshi,C. Rajagopalachari and Sampurnanand. They use Vedantic texts to uphold the sanctity of private property and attempt to thwart all kinds of social changes.[7]

In most of the developing countries of Asia and Africa, modernity is associated with the technologically advanced West, and the religion which gave impetus to this advancement, viz. Christianity. Most of the leaders of the new nations of these two continents look to the West for scientific and technological help so that they also can enjoy the

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[6] K.M. Panikkar, The Foundations of New India, p. 36.

[7] Cf. K. Damodaran, Indian Thought - A Critical Survey, p. 489.

the fruits of modernity. This transition entails a serious moral dilemma, the dilemma of giving up the traditional way of life and the values that preserved it. In India, leaders like Tilak, Gandhi and Aurobindo were aware of this dilemmma and theirs was an attempt to preserve the traditional values of Indian culture and spirituality without being blind to the possibilities of modernity and modernization. Edward Shils points out that the main pre-occupation of leaders in the newly independent nations has been or is how to preserve the unique identity of their traditional culture without sacrificing any aspect which is of value in accordance with universal standards.[8] So, the task of the Indian leaders has been reconciling the imperatives of modern progress with their stress on efficiency, rationality and other less clearly defined modern values with a continuity of tradition which maintains the identity of the community. The redeeming feature in this difficult task, as C.D. Deshamukh observes, is that the philosophic concepts of the Indian tradition, especially as revealed in the Gītā, are in no sense antagonistic to these modern values. Deshmukh points to the "...reforms of the saints and religious leaders, who sought to propogate philosophical concepts more in harmony with modern values... for instance human brotherhood, equalitarianism, etc."[9] as the forerunners of the modern leaders.

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[8]Cf. Edward Shils, "The Intellectual Between Tradition and Modernity: The Indian Situation", Comparative Studies in Society and History, Supplement I, p. 37.

[9]C.D. Deshmukh, "Discussions" in Tradition and Modernity in India, ed. by A.B. Shah and C.R.M. Rao, Manaktalas, Bombay, 1965, p. 98.

Broadly speaking, modernity is not quite new in India; it is more than a hundred years old and has been making a steady headway. The introduction of Western system of education in 1857 and the advent of a free press may be located as the beginnings of modernity. Marx locates the beginnings of modernity in India with the introduction of railways in 1853. He ventured to prophesy that the "railroads along with the multiplication of roads...will destroy village isolation and its accompanying 'self-sufficient inertia' by supplying that intercourse with other villages without which 'the desire and efforts indispensable to social advance' are absent".[10] Marx obviously identifies modernity with the industrial society of the West. Marx assumed that the "social advance" created by modern industry and transportation would eventually lead India to socialism. Indian intellectuals, from the days of the introduction of the above elements of modernity live in a state of tension, tension between tradition and modernity. The means to overcome this tension as evidenced in the writings of the Indian leaders we have discussed in earlier chapters is that of transvaluing tradition itself.

In the context of the challenge of modernity, Indian intellectuals address themselves to these questions. What is the meaning of modernity? How far is Indian tradition reconcilable with modernity? "What can we do with our theories of Karma or incarnation, or the Varṇāshrama, to solve the problems that face us today?"[11] Indian intellectuals locate

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[10] L.I. Rudolph and S.H. Rudolph, The Modernity of Tradition, p. 22.

[11] V.K.N. Menon, "Discussions", Tradition and Modernity in India, p. 136.

the heart of modernity in the universities, "for modernity has to be identified with the liberal spirit in its broadest sense and, above all, with the restless search for truth which is science".[12] A.B. Shah and many others accept this definition primarily because, in their evaluation the technical and economic progress of the West is a by-product of this engagement with truth. Shah also makes a distinction between modernity and modernization. The latter refers "to civilization and mainly implies a high level of literacy and urbanization with vertical and geographical mobility, a high per capita income and a sophisticated economy that has gone beyond the take-off stage."[13] Western scholars do not make this distinction. It is interesting to recall George Grant's description of modernity. He says, "The first public movement of modernity was in the English-speaking world. This movement brought into being the worlds of liberal constitutionalism and capitalism. To do so it had to demolish the world of the throne and the altar which had been the public expression that the pre-suppositons of Athens and Jerusalem had generally taken in their strange blending in Western Europe. This English speaking modernity began that public enucleation of the modern with its exaltation of motion over rest, of potentiality over actuality, of interest as detached from virtue".[14] The question

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[12] A.B. Shah, "Introduction", Tradition and Modernity in India, p. 19.

[13] loc. cit.

[14] George Grant, "Revolution and Tradition", in Tradition and Revolution, ed. by Lionel Rubinoff, McMillan of Canada, Toronto, 1971, p. 88.

that is not asked by the post-Gandhian leaders of India is this: Can the world of Vyasa, Śankara and Gandhi stand up to face the powerful onslaught of modernity without demolishing the essential values of that world? In their enthusiasm to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, this question is not raised at all.

Gandhi and other national leaders whose ideology we have discussed, were fully aware of the dangers of this confrontation with modernity. That is why Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, and others were opposed to large scale industrialization, that is the accepted synonym of modernization.[15] Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan present Sarvodaya as an alternate ideology that can save the community from the dehumanizing powers of industrialization. All these men turned to the Gītā, for they knew the role of religion in paving the way for the welfare and upliftment of the community. For them, that was progress, and progress had a different meaning than it has in the industrial society. By turning to a religious text, Gandhi and others were not shunting their responsibility to face the present. On the other hand, they tapped the possibilities of this religious text to make changes meaningful in the

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[15] David E. Apter opposes this identification of modernization and industrialization. He writes, "Modernization and industrialization are not the same. Failure to recognize their differences is a common weakness among many contemporary political leaders, who see the need to restructure the roles primarily as these are functional to the industrialization of society" ("Political Religion in New Nations", Old Societies and New States, The Quest for modernity in Asia and Africa, ed. by Clifford Guntz, The Free Press, New York, 1963, p. 60). Apter takes this position, because he does not make any distinction between modernity and modernization as we have discussed above.

final analysis. One of the conditions for modernization (in the wider sense) according to David E. Apter, is "a social system that can constantly innovate without falling apart, including innovation of beliefs about the acceptability of change."[16] Through their commentaries on the Gītā, Tilak, Gandhi et. al. prepared the Indian society for change and even asserted that the Gītā calls for change. The great influence of these commentaries on the Indian people demonstrate the power of traditional and religious ideologies over other ideologies. As Robert N. Bellah observes: "They (religious symbols and ideologies) state or suggest what reality ultimately is, what the source of order (and often of disorder) in the universe is, what sort of authority in the most general terms is acceptable to men, and what sort of action by individuals make sense in such a world."[17] This realization of the enormous power of religion and religious ideology on a nation must have been the reason that prompted many a national leader to write commentaries on the Gītā.

The New Dharmakṣetra

Kṛsna delivers the message embodied in the Gītā in the field of the Kurus (Kurukṣetra). This field was known as dharmakṣetra (field of righteousness). It cannot be clearly stated whether the field of Kurus was known as dharmakṣetra before the Bhārata war was fought there to establish righteousness and execute justice. Tilak refers to a story in

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[16] Ibid., p. 62.

[17] Robert N. Bellah, op. cit., pp. 171-172.

the Mahābhārata and says that according to the blessings given to Kuru by Indra, "all those who die on that field in war or while performing religious austerities would obtain Heaven...As a result of this blessing, this field came to be called 'dharmakṣetra' or sacred ground".[18] Radhakrishnan and Gandhi see dharmakṣetra more symbolically than historically. To Radhakrishnan the whole world is dharmakṣetra, the battleground for a moral struggle. He writes, "The world is dharmakṣetra, the nursery of saints where the sacred flame of spirit is never permitted to go out."[19] Gandhi individualized the symbol and states, "The human body is the battlefield where the eternal duel between Right and Wrong goes on".[20] Aurobindo has no difficulty in accepting the actual context of war. The field of strife and destruction turns into a sacred field because so many lives were sacrificed for the cause of justice.[21] In the final analysis, it may be futile to excavate the field of the Kurus to establish or discount the historicity of the Bhārata war. For, as Ernest Cassirer puts it, "What we call 'historical consciousness' is a very late product of human civilization".[22] The Gītā contains many mythical elements, and as such it cannot be viewed as a historical document at all. Mythical or pre-logical it may. But the author of the

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[18] B.G. Tilak, Gītā-Rahasya, p. 852.

[19] S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 79.

[20] M.K. Gandhi, Gospel of Selfless Action, p. 135.

[21] Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, pp. 36-37.

[22] Ernst Cassirer, An Essay on Man, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1944, p. 172.

Gītā addressed himself to his contemporaries and it is a valid truth of experience that the voice of those who spoke to their contemporaries echo in the corridors of the future. That is how the message of the Gītā becomes meaningful in the Twentieth Century. Again, to cite a very pertinent observation of Cassirer: "To be sure all attempts to intellectualize myth...have completely failed. They ignored the fundamental facts of mythical experience. The real substratum of myth is not a substratum of thought but of feeling".[23] The modern exegetes of the Gītā in spite of their attempt to intellectualize the context and content of the text, have not lost sight of this important aspect of hermeneutics.

Tilak was the first Indian national leader to bring out the meaning of the righteous war (dharmayuddha) in the dharmakṣetra, for modern India. He boldly stated that not only one's immediate field of activity but the whole of India is the dharmakṣetra of modern Indians.[24] Following Tilak's lead, Aurobindo quickly related the message of the Bhārata war with the militant Indian nationalism. Drawing out the lessons of the ancient Bhārata war had widespread repercussions in the national life, and the direction of the national movement itself was affected not a little by this. The exhortations of Tilak, Aurobindo and others aimed to instill manliness on the Indian people as did Krsna coax Arjuna to fulfil his dharma. In the new field of righteousness, dharmakṣetra, every Indian has to heed the message of Krsna and follow

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[23] Ibid., p. 81.

[24] See chapter V, (pp. 165-171).

the steps of Arjuna. Tilak believed that this was the only way of salvation for India. Gandhi, through his symbolic interpretations of the Bhārata war and his commitment to ahiṁsā raised the national movement to new moral heights. His creed of ahiṁsā, as we have seen,[25] was not one of inaction, but action with a greater meaning. To him, action must be Brahmayajña, dedication to God, and it must not injure any other being. The secret of this action, as Gandhi tirelessly preached to India and the world, is non-attachment to the results of action.

The national leaders, whose commentaries on the Gītā we have discussed above, share the central aspect of the doctrine of activism or energism as Tilak presented.Hinduism has been described as a "world and life negating religion" by such people as Albert Schweitzer. [26] The Indian writers were aware of the Upaniṣadic orientations towards monism and mysticism. They grasped the affirmative aspects of Vedanta as articulated in the Gītā. Thus, the Karmayogaśāstra of the Gītā became a reply to the critics of Hinduism. This was aimed not at the non-Hindu critic but even at the village Indian who is passively resigned to his humble lot. The pathetic contentment of the pious Indian finds a great challenge in the writings of Tilak, Aurobindo and others. Indira Rothermund refers to the new possibilities of the Karamayogaśāstra, when she says, "The Indian farmers could be persuaded to put in greater effort to improve their lot by pointing out to them,

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[25] See chapter IV, (pp. 113-125).

[26] Cf. Albert Schweitzer, Indian Thought and Its Development. al paccim.

for example, that Lord Krishna in the Gītā had emphasized this type of of activity".[27] The Gītā as mokṣaśāstra never before touched the socio-economic realms of Indian life as it did in the expositions of the modern national leaders.

The Gītā gives another meaning to Kṣetra, the field. The human body is called the field and he who knows the body is called Kṣetrajña.[28] "Kṣetrajña", says Radhakrishnan, "is the supreme lord, not an object in the world".[29] This supreme lord dwells in the individual as the light of awareness, the knower of all objects. The Hindu temple is also called Kṣetraṁ, for there dwells God in the form of the idol which is ritually dedicated; Kṣterajña dwells in the Kṣetraṁ. The Gītā also speaks of the divine character, (daivi sampat) and demoniac character (asuri sampat) of a human person. These are acquired according to the guṇas that constitute a person.[30] Here one can see support for the Gandhian interpretation of the human body as the battlegound between the forces of good and evil. However, the concept of the human body as a sacred temple where the supreme Puruṣa dwells is something novel in the Hindu understanding of the human person. "As a subject", writes Radhakrishnan,

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[27] Indira Rothermund "Discussions", Tradition and Modernity in India, p. 125.

[28] idaṁ śarīraṁ kaunteya kṣetram ity adhidhīyate
etad yo vetti taṁ prahuḥ kṣetrajña iti tadvidaḥ. (Bhagavadgītā XIII.1).

[29] Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 301.

[30] Cf. Bhagavadgītā, Ch. XVI, 1-10 See also Chapter II, (pp. 26-30).

"he enters into infinity and infinity enters into him. Kṣetrajña is the universal in an individually unrepeatable form. The human being is a union of the universal-infinite and the universal-particular".[31] This new understanding of the human person renders meaning to service. In the traditional view, human suffering has been understood as the result of one's Karma and that person has to reap the consequences of what he had sowed. As against this, the recognition of God's presence in the afflicted man, brings a new dimension to social life itself. Gandhi called the poor of India, Daridra Narayana, God the poor. To him, the village India was his new dharmakṣetra where he fought against untouchability and other evils. It may be said that the new interpretations of Kṣetra and Kṣetrajña led many Indians to appreciate "the dictum that service of man is service of God, that mānava seva is Mādhava seva".[32] Partly under the inspiration of this new social consciousness generated by the Gītā, Rabindranath Tagore sings:

> Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!
> Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner
> of a temple with doors all shut?
> Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!
> He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground
> and where the path-maker is breaking stones
> He is with them in sun and in shower,
> and his garment is covered with dust.[33]

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[31] S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 301.

[32] P. Sankaranarayanan, "Human Person, Society and State; The classical Hindu Approach" in Human Person Society and State, ed. by P.D. Devanandan and M.M. Thomas, Committee for Literature on Social Concerns, Bangalore, 1957, p. 75.

[33] Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali, verse 11.

To the Neo-Vedantins, this song is an expression of the Vedantic doctrine of God's all-pervasiveness. Jawaharlal Nehru, who has not professed any religious faith, goes one step further and declares that the new temples of India are the dams and the hydro-electric schemes which irrigate the fields and light the streets.

Evolution of a New Ethics

Many western writers, Albert Schweitzer, Henri Bergson, et.al. viewed Hinduism as an otherworldly religion. Bergson points out that Indian mystics are lost in contemplation or vision of God and fight shy of action which is said to be a weakening of contemplation.[34] Schweitzer holds the view that monistic Indian thought has perfected mysticism and it has the courage to stand apart from ethics and to realize that ethics cannot be won from the knowledge of the universe. This is one of the major themes of his book Indian Thought and Its Development. The union with the Absolute of which the Upaniṣads speak is not ethical, but spiritual. Schweitzer writes, "Of this deep distinction Indian thought has become conscious. With the most varied phrasing it repeats the proposition: Spirituality is not ethics...'Mysticism is not a friend of ethics but a foe. It devours ethics'."[35] The commentaries on the Gītā we discussed in the early chapters may be considered as an attempt on the part of the Indian writers to correct these views. Surely enough,

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[34]Referred by S. Radhakrishnan, "Reply to Critics," The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, p. 802.

[35]Albert Schweitzer, Civilization and Ethics, p. 234.

there is a mystic approach in the Upaniṣads. Renouncing the world in search of spiritual pursuits has been a dominant theme of the Indian scriptures. Modern writers such as Tilak believe that the ācāryas placed less emphasis than it was necessary on this aspect of the religious life. Tilak's major burden in his commentary is to show the validity of Karmayoga to attain the final liberation.[36] With the possible exception of Aurobindo (he gives supreme importance to gnosis)[37] the commentators we discussed attempt to derive ethical principles for modern man from the teachings of the Gītā.

The re-interpretation of dharma and svadharma[38] has been the first step in creating a new concept of ethics for the Indian people. The idea of lokasaṁgraha, welfare of the world, brought to light a hitherto hidden relationship between religion and secular pursuits. Arjuna, who wanted to lay down arms and to renounce the world, has been coaxed into action for the sake of lokasaṁgraha. Tilak attaches great importance to this. He holds that no one can escape from the responsibility of working for the welfare of the world. He writes, "The Gītā does not...admit the position that the Jñānin has a right to give up Action;and lokasaṁgraha is the most important reason...for the Jñānin not doing so...Man has not come to this world merely for his own benefit."[39] This is a great departure from the teachings of classical

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[36]Cf. chapter III above (pp. 65-89).

[37]Cf. Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gītā, p. 27ff.

[38]Cf. chapter II above (pp. 22-30).

[39]B.G. Tilak, Gītā-Rahahasya, p. 459.

Hinduism. Tilak's (Gandhi's and Radhakrishnan's to a lesser extent) enucleation of the Gītā concept of lokasaṁgraha is in sharp contrast not only with the ācāryas but also with the purely idealistic approach of some modern Indian writers, who are indifferent to the problems of every day life. Surama Das Gupta's following statement may be taken as an example of the idealistic approach. She states, "If we have faith in the true abiding nature of our self and attribute highest value to it, we can take in the worldly happenings as mere appearances which have no value in themselves...Of what consequence can be the reward, or insult, wealth or poverty, success or failure, to us when we, as immortal spiritual beings, are striving to open up the secret of treasure of all spiritual delight and blessings?"[40] T.M.P. Mahadevan makes a statement in the same vein, "The mortal illness which affects modern man is excessive outwardness. If he should be saved, he must be made to turn back from his meaningless race for material power...True happiness lies within. It can be attained only by him who is not misled by the outer look of things, but succeeds in getting out their soul and rediscovers then his true self".[41] In spite of the protest of the thorough-going Advaitins, the dynamic philosophy of service and action forged by Tilak on the basis of the Gītā continue to influence Indian national life.

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[40]Surama Das Gupta, The Development of Moral Philosophy in India, Orient Longman's, Calcutta, 1961, p. 99.

[41]T.M.P. Mahadevan, "The Re-discovery of Man", Indo-Asian Culture, July 1956.

It may be said that Tilak signalled the descent of Vedanta from metaphysical plane to the ethical plane. Raj Krishna rightly observes that Tilak tried to supply the philosophical proof and Gandhi the practical demonstration that action for the welfare of the world could be direct means of liberation.[42]

Modern Indian thinkers have tried to establish, on the basis of the ethics of the Gītā, a new code of conduct for the nation that assures man freedom from the evils of modern civilization such as imperialism, capitalism, gross materialism etc. In this they have to draw new meanings from the old theological concepts. Radhakrishnan holds that the central purpose of the Gītā according to the context of its birth, is to solve the problem of life and conduct. Thus, it is an ethical treatise, a yoga-śāstra. He says, "The Gītā was formulated in a period of ethical religion and so shared the feelings of the age".[43] But, the ethics of the Gītā sprang from the metaphysics of the Upaniṣads it shares. In the words of Radhakrishnan, "The Gītā is an application of the Upaniṣad ideal to the new situations which arose at the time of the Mahābhārata".[44] This application is extended to the twentieth century India by our authors. That is how the message which enthused Arjuna to fulfil his caste-duty became a new ethical philosophy potent

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[42]Cf. Raj Krishna, "Vedanta and Social Reform, A Contemporary challenge" Human Person, Society and State, p. 3.

[43]S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, Vol. I, p. 532.

[44]Ibid., p. 530.

to save the world. Radhakrishnan is very emphatic on this soteriological purpose of the Gītā. According to him, "The Gītā is interested in the process of redeeming the world",[45] and it urges us "to live in the world and save it".[46] We may note that the Neo-Vedantins as a whole based their ethical philosophy on the doctrine of the identity of the human soul with Brahman and this doctrine has been pressed into the service of nationalism, democracy, equality and sarvodaya, upliftment of all. In this process, a new ethics has been evolved as against the passive acceptance of the power of Karma on human lives.

Limitations of a Religious Text

An ancient religious text by its very nature suffers many limitations when applied to solve the problems of contemporary society. The Gītā is no exception to this, for it was not written with our problems in mind. This "Battlefield version" of Vedanta was enunciated to deliver Arjuna from his predicament and thus he may lead the righteous war. This is not to say that the Gītā has no message for New India or that the modern expositions of this text have not influenced the directions of the national life. What is meant is this: All the ideologies that are related to the teachings of the Gītā are not simply there. They have their origin elsewhere and the Indian writers in their love and respect for tradition (This was an expedient move in the religious and cultural climate of India) telescoped many a modern

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[45] S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 26.

[46] Ibid., p. 67.

concept into the verses of the Gītā. The hermeneutical principle of viewing a text against its philosophical and historical context has not been scrupulously followed by the modern Indian commentators of the Gītā. Radhakrishnan has a very revealing answer to this criticism. He says, "In the interpretation of history, although we should not take liberties with the text, we should not be satisfied with a mere collection of data. History of philosophy requires the employment of sympathetic imagination and creative insight...I do not regard the past as a fossil for scientific curiosity of the excavator".[47] He is right in asserting the application of imagination and creative insight, but there are many instances of transporting modern concepts into the Gītā. This is what we called the "Gītā alchemy" in our discussion on nationalism.

While Gandhi, Radhakrishnan, Vinoba and others turn to the Gītā in support of the Vedantic ideology of equality,[48] there are present-day writers with a Marxist orientation who question the social relevance of the Gītā. Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai, for example, contends that the Gītā has nothing to do with equality.[49] He maintains that the social background of the Gītā is feudalistic and the author is concerned with the preservation of the social system that was in vogue.

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[47] S. Radhakrishnan, "Reply to Critics", The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, p. 821.

[48] Cf. Chapter VI, (p. 217-219 above).

[49] Cf. Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai, op. cit., p. 344.

As Kuttipuzha, Ponjikara Rafi, and others who subscribe to the Marxist interpretation of history, see it, the Gītā is another religious text used by the dominant classes to perpetuate exploitation of the weaker classes. The Gītā teaching on cāturvarṇa comes under severe attack by these authors. They point out that kuladharma, according to the Gītā, is nothing more than caste duties. The Gītā's reference to the dangers of varṇasaṁkara (mixing of castes) and the call to Arjuna to protect the fourfold order of society[50] are viewed by these "progressive" authors as stumbling blocks to social solidarity and national integration. These authors may have a point in exposing the evils of the caste system which traces its origin to the Gītā concept of cāturvarna. On the other hand, these writers betray a lack of appreciation for the spiritual significance of varnāśramadharma embodied in the Gītā. Aurobindo's approach to the problem clearly demonstrates the positive aspects of this concept for social and spiritual life.[51]

It is to be noted that none of the national leaders who commented on the Gītā questioned the validity of varnāśramadharma for modern India. They were fully aware of the power of tradition on society and therefore tried to explain away, perhaps rather apologetically, the evils of the hierarchial system. Let us cite Gandhi's statement once again on this social question.

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[50] The Bhagavadgītā, I.43. See also M. Rangacharya, op. cit., Vol I, p. 363.

[51] Cf. Chapter II, (pp. 56-58).

> Varṇa means pre-determination of the choice of man's profession. The law of varṇa is that a man shall follow the profession of his ancestors for earning his livelihood....Varṇa, therefore, is in a way the law of heredity. ...It is not a human invention but an immutable law of nature - the statement of a tendency that is ever present, and at work like Newton's law of gravitation.[52]

Gandhi's position is paradoxical in the light of the fact that he was in the forefront of the campaign against the evils of the caste system. This demonstrates the power of tradition on him. From the ultimate Vedantic position, there is no difference between the self of a śūdra or that of a Brahmin. The commentators who attempt to build a doctrine of equality on the basis of certain verses of the Gītā[53] do not take into account this contradiction. Even the oft-quoted verse, IX.32[54] does not speak of samatva, equality, as we understand it today. The derogatary reference to the low-born (pāpayonah, literally those of sinful womb) here, is not an indication of equality at all but of non-difference. A Vedantin sees all creatures with an equal eye (samadarśinah). Viewing a Brahmin, a cow and a dog with an equal eye[55] is not the same as equality. What most of our commentators failed to accept is this: The Gītā, like any other scripture, contains the social prejudices, if we want to call the social customs in vogue prejudices, of its time. These prejudices are not part of the religious message

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[52] M.K. Gandhi, Hindu Dharma, p. 365.

[53] Cf. Chapter VI, (p. 225-228).

[54] Cf. footnote on p. 228 above.

[55] Bhagavadgītā, V.18.

of the text. There is no point in torturing the text to yield our ideas, however noble they are. The principles of equality, fraternity, socialism etc. are modern and the Gītā is not a scripture that is written to bring out democratic or socialist ideas.

As we have seen above, Gandhi takes several aspects of the Gītā symbolically. To be sure enough, symbol systems and structures are of great importance to religious life. Radhakamal Mukherjee writes, "...the social order and culture that the symbol system constructs are essentially values, sensibilities and aspirations that symbolically and consistently lead human behaviour and society into new dimensions of experience."[56] But Gandhi goes too far when he interprets the Bharata war symbolically and turn to the Gītā to learn the lessons of ahiṁsā, non violence. This is to cut off the Gītā completely from the great epic Mahābhārata whose chapter it is. The story of Mahābhārata revolves around the righteous war between Pandavas and the sons of Kuru. We have to state with all respect to Gandhi's integrity, that the roots of his doctrine of ahiṁsā lay elsewhere and he found the Gītā a useful peg to hang his idea. We do not imply that Gandhi's insistence on "desireless action" also belong to this category. On the other hand, when Gandhi turns to the Gītā to drive home to the Indian people the dignity of labour, he is again importing non-Indian ideas into the Gītā. Agehananda Bharati is right when he says,

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[56]Radhakamal Mukherjee, The Symbolic Life of Man, Hind Kitabs, Bombay, 1959, p. 79.

"The importance and dignity of physical work is a western ideological import into nineteenth century India. There is no support in any Indian text-religious or secular - for this notion previous to contact with the modern West".[57] It seems that Gandhi and other commentators turned to the Gītā because it provides them with greater freedom for socio-centric interpretation than any other Hindu scripture.

It is interesting to note that there are some modern Indian writers who acknowledge the source of reformistic and modernistic ideas which play a crucial role in the Indian life today. D.S. Sarma observes, "It cannot be denied that in every period of decadence, especially after we lost our political independence, we sought refuge in asceticism and other-worldliness and preferred a life of renunciation to a life of healthy action".[58] He notes that the new interest in the Gītā as evidenced by the commentaries of Tilak, Aurobindo, Gandhi, et.al. is an indication of a changed outlook. But, he goes on to add, "And it must be confessed that the emphasis which our religous leaders,... have laid on social service is due to the object-lessons provided by the Christian missions".[59] There is no doubt that ideological revolution has been taking place in India ever since the British started to break up economic and social set up of India. M.N. Srinivas calls this "a

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[57] Agehananda Bharati, "Gandhi's Interpretations of the Gītā", Gandhi, India and the World, p. 65.

[58] D.S. Sarma, Studies in the Renaissance of Hinduism, Banaras Hindu University, Banaras, 1944, p. 638.

[59] Ibid, p. 639.

sea-change in the minds of the Indian intellectuals as far as the activity in this world is concerned." He explains the content of this change as follows:

> A certain lack of faith in the ability of human effort to relieve human suffering seems to have characterized Indian intellectuals in pre-British times....The idea of Māya and the stress on the need to achieve one's own salvation are related to the collective helplessness. Prolonged contact with the West, however, resulted in the Indian elites becoming activist and this-worldly. It is a matter of common knowledge that Lokamanya Tilak spent the eight years of his incarnation in the Mandalay jail writing the Gītā-Rahasya in which he gave an activist interpretation. It is significant that he should have sought sanction for action in the world from the Gītā. Mahatma Gandhi was a great activist and he regarded politics as applied religion. In Pandit Nehru activism exists divorced from religion.[60]

Though this statement betrays a lack of appreciation for the religious factors that promoted the winds of change, its frankness is worthy of respect. There is nothing to be ashamed of in borrowing ideas from other cultures and traditions. On the other hand, it is not a healthy tendency to turn to the ancient texts to dig out modern ideas which are not there.

The national leaders of India faced the thorny communal problem when they presented the Gītā as the political vade-mecum of modern India. The minority communities were not prepared to accept the liberal ideas of the Gītā as national ideas. For them, the Gītā was primarily a Hindu religious text. The Indian national movement when it joined

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[60]M.N. Srinivas, Economic Weekly, Annual Number, Feb. 1962, p. 37.

hands with Hindu revivalism, lost its universal appeal. There are Indian writers who believe that the excessive application of Hindu religious concepts into the national movement led to the birth of Muslim league and eventually the partition of India. E.M.S. Namboodiripad writes, "The organisation of Ganesh Pooja and other celebrations of a political-cum-religious character by Tilak;...the adoption of Bandemātaram as national song etc., were just a few of the instances showing the inseparable connection between nationalism and revivalism".[61] Thus, the very ideas introduced into the political programes to unite the nation, became causes for division. M.N. Srinivas gives a sociological reason for this. He writes, "The concept of the unity of India finds expression from very early period, but it is obvious that in a multi-religious country this is not enough. In fact, any symbol or idea that binds together the members of a particular religion divides them at the same time from members of other religions".[62] This sociological aspect has been overlooked by many national leaders who turned to the Gītā to forge a national unity.

The Secular Possibilities of the Gītā

What we have pointed out above as limitations of a religious text in its application to the social, political and economic life of the nation by no means exhaust the secular possibilities of the Gītā.

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[61]E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Economics and Politics of India's Socialist Pattern, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1966, p. 385.

[62]M.N. Srinivas, Caste in Modern India, p. 12.

We have seen these possibilities revealed in the writings of the Indian national leaders and leaders of thought. It is true that early revivalists like Tilak could not separate India and Hindu Dharma and thereby revivalism has to be grounded in the Hindu tradition. To this extent the Gītā was invariably seen as a theological text. But, in Gandhi and Bhave, it is not so much a theological text. For them, the Gītā is a text that went beyond nationalism and even beyond religious differences. If a religious text has to be chosen with the potentiality for overcoming the differences between religions and with an appeal to all human beings on a strictly ethical basis, the Gītā was the text as Gandhi saw it. This point of view is shared by Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, Kalelkar and others. It is also considerably re-inforced by a number of commentaries on the Gītā written by non-Indians. The interest of the Western scholars from Edwin Arnold onwards demonstrates the wider spiritual appeal of this text. So, the effort on the part of Gandhi and others was to make the Gītā more than a scripture of Hinduism. On the part of these commentators there was a deliberate and dedicated attempt to explore the enormous secular potentalities of this religious text.

In the twentieth century Indian context secularism and secularisation do not mean opposition to religion as it is sometimes understood in the West. In the cultural and religious history of the West, as Charles C. West observes, "the word [secularism, derived from the Latin saeculum] was used for centuries to designate participation in the world

as distinct from living in a strictly religious realm".[63] In the Marxian communist tradition secularism means an active hostility to religion and religious practices. Secularism in India has more in common with the liberal democratic tradition of the West than the two concepts mentioned above. Jawaharlal Nehru, the architect of secular state in Indian defines it as follows: "It is a state that protects all religions; does not favour one at the expense of the other; does not adopt one as State Religion."[64] For Nehru and the Indian constitution, this meant a divorce of state from religion comparable to the separation of the state and the church in the tradition of certain Western democracies. Donald E. Smith re-formulates Nehru's definition of the secular state in the following words: "The secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion, is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion".[65]

Some aspects of secularism as promoted by Nehru and envisioned by the Indian constitution, are certainly new to India. Nehru claimed that his outlook on life is pagan and added that "secularised paganism"

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[63]Charles C. West, "Towards an Understanding of Secularism", in Religion and Society, Vol. IX, No. 1 (March 1962), p. 47.

[64]Quoted by P.K. Sundaram, "Hinduism and Secularism", in Religion and Society, Vol. IX, No. 1 (March 1962), p. 16.

[65]Donald E. Smith, India as a Secular State, p. 4.

is the best possible basis for an open society. He says, "I have a pagan outlook on life. Paganism has been used as a term of abuse, but I like it. It is an outlook of 'live and let live'. In ancient Rome, there were alters for many gods, and there was one for the unknown god lest some god must be left out".[66] The attitude of toleration and to some extent acceptance of other forms of faith prevalent in India springs from the teachings of the Gītā, according to many modern commentators. Nehru obviously has the spirit of toleration in the Gītā in mind when he says, "The outlook of peace, toleration and co-existence is in tune with Indian thought and philosophy".[67] The spirit of the Gītā, though at times engulfed by the evil forces at work in history, exerted great influence on the Indian nation. There are writers who trace the influence of the Gītā on the liberal policies of emperor Asoka. P.K. Sundaram writes, "Asoka made it known that harmony is good, sanvaya eva sudhuh, and that all faiths of men are to be respected".[68] The twelth edict of Asoka clearly incorporates this spirit of toleration. It says, "His sacred Majesty the King does reverence to men of all sects, whether ascetics or house holders". It may be said that Kabir the fifteenth century prophet of Hindu Muslim unity embodies the liberal spirit of the Gītā. The following utterance of Kabir is truly in line with the spirit of the Gītā. "The Hindu God lives at

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[66] Hindu, July 8, 1955.

[67] R.K. Karanjia, The Mind of Mr Nehru, Allen & Unwin, London, 1960, p. 57.

[68] P.K. Sundaram, op. cit., p. 17.

Banaras; the Muslim God at Mecca. But he who made the world live not in a city made by hand. There is one Father of Hindu and Muslim, one God in all matter".[69]

In order to bring out the relevance of the Gītā in the modern Indian context, the commentators had to go beyond the traditional stand of treating the Gītā as a strictly theological text. Obviously, this does not amount to saying that these efforts actually bore fruit in overcoming the immense religious conflicts rampant in India or to win acceptance of sizable religious communities like Islam. However, there have been influential leaders in minority communities who shared the spirit of toleration taught by the Gītā. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad speaks with a sense of complete identification with this tradition: "In other countries, differences of thought and action led to mutual warfare and bloodshed but in India they were resolved in a spirit of compromise and toleration. Here, every kind of faith, every kind of culture, every mode of living was allowed to flourish and find its own salvation".[70] There are many Indian Christian leaders who treat the message of the Gītā with great reverence. The writings of A.J. Appaswamy, P.D. Devanandan, Anjilvel V. Matthew and others bear witness to this. Matthew, as a Christian maintains that Jesus Christ "was the fulfilment of the law and the prophets and similarly also of

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[69] Ibid., p. 18.

[70] Abul Kalam Azad, Speeches of Maulana Azad, Publications Division, Government of Indian, Delhi, 1956, p. 21.

the Upanishads and the Gītā".[71] This is clearly a deviation from the traditional Christian approach to other scriptures. Matthew acknowledges the universality of the Gītā in the following words: "...This lesson of the universality of God's concern for all people and His willingness to accept all who turn to Him in true adoration is presented in the Gītā in characteristic Hindu religious language".[72]

The generosity and the liberality with which the Gītā has been interpreted in this century created a climate for the creation of the secular state in India. It is the religious text which called upon the believers to go beyond sectarian barriers and work for the welfare of the world. Its spirit of toleration provided a theoretical basis for secularism. "A theory which has strong roots", writes Donald E. Smith, "in the indigenous thought and culture of India, as this one has, is an invaluable asset in creating a deep sense of acceptance of the secular state. Intellectually, psychologically, and religiously, the theory is a powerful one in developing the broad-based conviction that secularism belongs in India."[73]

The modern commentaries of the Gītā added a greater significance to secular pursuits as opposed to the virtues of renunciation extolled in the traditional commentaries. The essential quest in contemporary

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[71]Anjilvel V. Matthew, The Message of the Gītā, Ecumenical Christian Centre, Bangalore, 1969, p. 4.

[72]Ibid., p. 20.

[73]Donald E. Smith, op. cit., p. 152.

India is to discover a religious basis for secularism that has been accepted as a national ideology. Many Indians find that basis in the Gītā and they maintain that this great text lends its support to earthly pre-occupations calling "for active involvement in purposive plans, for the development of long-neglected natural resources, the re-ordering of time-honoured social institutions and for a determined effort to concentrate attention more on present welfare of all men (lokasaṁgraha) rather than the realization of the ultimate destiny of the individual."[74] A deliberate attempt is made to integrate the sacred and the secular, in the writings of Gandhi, Vinoba, Radhakrishnan and others. Radhakrishnan writes, "...a recognition of spiritual realities not by abstention from the world, but by bringing to its life, its business (artha) and its pleasures (kāma), the controlling power of spiritual faith. Life is one, and in it there is no distinction of sacred and secular. Bhakti and Mukti are not opposed".[75] We may say that this is the implication of the divine command to Arjuna, "Do thou fight". It may be assumed that the spiritual values ensued from the liberal interpretations of the Gītā would probably help Indian secular ideology from becoming anti-religious as it happened in some other countries.

From our study of the patterns of interpretations of the Gītā,

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[74] P.D. Devanandan, "Contemporary Hindu Secularism", Religion and Society, Vol. IX, No. 1 (March 1962), p. 22.

[75] S. Radhakrishnan, Religion and Society, pp. 105-106.

it is clear that the religious consciousness of India is reflected in them as in a prism. At the same time these commentaries serve as windows to discern the patterns of concepts that shape the spiritual and secular life of a nation that gave birth to three major religions of the world. This discernment itself is ultimately a religious act. As E. Spranger puts it "...in so far as it (understanding) always refers to the whole man, and actually finds its final completion in the totality of world conditions, all understanding has a religious factor...We understand each other in God."[76] It is in this perspective that we realize that it is no accident that the Gītā happens to represent the abiding Indian spiritual consciousness, its varieties and multiform possibilities, and it is no accident of history that in the quest for an Indian spiritual identity, national and spiritual leaders have, particularly in modern times, increasingly turned to this immortal book.

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[76]Quoted by G. Van Der Leeuw, Religion in Essence and Manifestation, Harper & Row, New York, 1963, Vol. II, p. 684.

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