Self-Contradictory, Casteist and Misogynist Gītā

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Abstract

This research article deals with the Marxist commentaries of the Bhagavad Gītā. The study has its relevance to understand the text from the Marxist perspective. The article addresses on the research problems concerning to the validity of the message of the Gītā at the present context. The research approach (methodology) adopted for this study is the review-based analysis of the Marxist commentaries of the text. The study has included the commentaries of Kosambi, Ambedkar, Sardesai, Bose and Desai as they represent the leading Marxist commentators. The study reveals that the most of the Marxist commentators of the Gītā question on the validity of the text at the modern context and highlight the text’s discriminatory notions.

Key Words: Brāhmanism, Cāturvarnāh, Himsā, swadharma, varnasram-dharama, niskāma karma, women

The Bhagavad Gītā has the multiple interpretations from the different angels. The Gītā is celebrated universally as being a perfect philosophical and divine poem. However, the Marxist commentators have analyzed the text historically and found out that the Gītā does not contain the divine voice and it does not speak for the people from all social strata. They have found out that the Gītā is self-contradictory, casteist and misogynist. The Gītā, according to them, exposes the philosophy of Brāhmanism that devalues the lower caste people and the women belonging to all castes. As the Gītā is still popular among the majority of Indian people, they have found the text as an obstacle to establish the egalitarian society in modern India.

Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi (1907-1966) who “was a polymath, genius mathematician, numismatist and scholar of Sanskrit, Pali, Ardhamagadhi, amateur archaeologist and anthropologist, a critical editor of manuscripts, historian and above all a Marxist” (Thapar 20), is chief among the Marxist critics of the Gītā. As Kosambi possesses the knowledge of different disciplines, his interpretation of the Gītā is considered more reliable, scientific and trustworthy. Kunal Chakrabarti asserts: “Kosambi’s originality was primarily derived from his creative application of the Marxist method of analysis, and the amazing breadth of his scholarship, which included a deep familiarity with a variety of sources – archaeological, textual and ethnographic” (10). Kosambi, using his knowledge from the different sources like archaeological, textual and ethnographic, has adopted the Marxist method of analysis.
while interpreting the Gītā. As the Gītā is the part of the Mahābhārata, Kosambi has analyzed the historicity of the Mahābhārata war at first. He doubts whether the Mahābhārata war could have taken place as described:

If a Mahābhārata war had actually been fought on the scale reported, nearly five million fighting men killed each other in an 18-day battle between Delhi and Thanesar; about 130,000 chariots (with their horses), an equal number of elephants and thrice that many riding horses were deployed. This means at least as many camp-followers and attendants as fighters. A host of this size could not be supplied without a total population of 200 millions, which India did not attain till the British period, and could not have reached without plentiful and cheap iron and steel for ploughshares and farmers' tools. Iron was certainly not available in any quantity to Indian peasants before the 6th century BC. ("Social" 17)

Kosambi analyzes the historicity of the war based on the scale of the war as described in the epic. Nobody could imagine such a high number of people, horses, elephants etc. participated in the war and such a large amount of iron and steel was available for weapons in ancient India when the war took place. Kosambi, therefore, regards the Mahābhārata war as a “fictitious great war" ("Aryans" 92).

Kosambi does not find logical that the entire 700 slokas exchange between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna in the Gītā took place live on the threshold of the battle as armies were waiting to begin combat. He argues: “. . . that the older Bhārata epic had a shorter but similar Gītā is most unlikely” ("Social" 21). He believes on the existence of the short Bhārata epic at the beginning and he takes the Gītā as one of the many later additions of the Mahābhārata. He claims: “The most brilliant of these additions is the Bhagavad Gītā, a discourse supposedly uttered by the god Kṛṣṇa just before the fighting. The god himself was new; his supreme godhead would not be admitted for centuries afterwards.” Kosambi believes that “. . . the major function of the Mahābhārata at the first stage of its redaction as a unitary Brāhminised epic was performed by its frame story, long before Kṛṣṇa had any status as a god” ("Aryans" 93). Kṛṣṇa was not established as a God at the time when there was the first Brāhmin redaction of the epic. Therefore, Kosambi believes the Gītā as a later interpolation in the Mahābhārata.

The Gītā is based on the concept of Bhakti. The Bhakti concept of the Gītā makes Kosambi to conjecture that the Gītā was composed by the end of sixth century A.D. when feudalism was fully developed:

The essence of fully developed feudalism is the chain of personal loyalty which binds retainer to chief, tenant to lord, and baron to king or emperor. Not loyalty in the abstract but with a secure foundation in the means and relations of production: land ownership, military service, tax-collection and the conversion of local produce into commodities through the magnates. This system was certainly not possible before the end of the 6th century AD. (39)

Kosambi takes the concept of bhakti found in the Gītā is the necessary phenomenon born out of the womb of feudalism. The concept of bhakti i.e., the chain of personal devotion or loyalty was necessary to bind retainer to chief, tenant to lord, baron to king or emperor or the lower class to the upper class people in the feudalism. Therefore, according to him, the Gītā was the literary production of feudalism and it was written by Brāhmīns to please the upper class people of the time. To quote him:

That the song divine is sung for the upper classes by the Brāhmīns, and only through them for others, is clear. We hear from the mouth of Kṛṣṇa himself (G.9.32): “For those who take refuge in Me, be they even of the sinful brands such as women, vaisyas, and Śūdras.”
is, all women and all men of the working and producing classes are defiled by their very birth, though they may in after-life be freed by their faith in the god who degrades them so casually in this one. Not only that, the god himself had created such differences (G.4.13): “The four-caste (class) division has been created by Me”; this is proclaimed in the list of great achievements. ("Social" 19)

Kosambi makes it clear by quoting examples from the Gītā that the text was written by Brāhmins to please upper class Ksatriyas because it devalues the other two Varnas; Vaiśyas and Sūdras who belong to the working and producing classes. The Gītā is also misogynist because it devalues all women belonging to all four Varnas. The Vaiśyas, Sūdras and women are defiled by their very birth. Kosambi does not believe, if there is God, God creates such an ill-reputed the four-caste (class) division, not to mention taking this as God’s great achievement.

Kosambi finds the Gītā, which bring so many variant interpretations from the people belonging to different types of society, highly ambiguous and contradictory. For any moral philosophy that contains so flexible meaning, he questions about “…its basic validity” (17). The Gītā contains such contradictory things; he finds in the text, there is the forced reconciliation between the irreconcilable things:

… the utility of the Gītā derives from its peculiar fundamental defect, namely dexterity in seeming to reconcile the irreconcilable. The high god repeatedly emphasizes the great virtue of non-killing (ahimsā), yet the entire discourse is an incentive to war. So, G.2.19 says that it is impossible to kill or be killed. . . . In G. 11, the terrified Arjuna sees all the warriors of both sides rush into a gigantic Visnu-Krsna’s innumerable voracious mouths, to be swallowed up or crushed. . . . Again, though the yajña sacrifice is played down or derided, it is admitted in G. 3.14 to be the generator of rain, without which food and life would be impossible. (21)

The Gītā reconciles the irreconcilable things together because Kosambi observes there are no novel things in it except bhakti. The Gītā has recollected the incompatible ideas of the different schools of philosophy and put them together into it. He argues:

This function of karma is characteristically Buddhist. Without Buddhism, G. 2.55-72 (recited daily as prayers at Mahatma Gandhi’s asrama) would be impossible. The brahma-nirvana of G. 2.72, and 5.25 is the Buddhist ideal state of escape from the effect of karma. We may similarly trace other—unlabelled—schools of thought such as Sānkhya and Mimamsa down to early Vedānta (G. 15.15 supported by the reference-to the Brahama-sutra in G. 13.4). ("Social" 20)

According to Kosambi, the Gītā has borrowed ideas from Sāṅkhya, Mimamsa, Vedānta and Buddhism. The ideas from the materialistic Sāṅkhya and the idealist Vedānta are put together in the Gītā. Similarly, the ideas of sacrifice (killing or himsā) of Mimamsa and the ideas of non-violence (non-killing or ahimsā) of Buddhism are also put together in the Gītā. Namit Arora emphasizes: “In Myth and Reality Kosambi observed that a ‘slippery opportunism characterizes the whole book’” (4). Kosambi observes no novel and different philosophical ideas in the Gītā, instead, for him, the Gītā appears as an opportunist text that has collected all the old contradictory philosophical ideas and claimed them its own.

Babasaheb Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), who served as Drafting Committee Chairman for the Indian Constitution of 1947, starts with the same question of validity of a moral philosophy or the gospel of any religion as Kosambi if the Gītā invites divergence of opinion among scholars:
One is forced to ask why there should be such divergence of opinion among scholars? My answer to this question is that scholars have gone on a false errand. They have gone on a search for the message of the BhagavadGītā on the assumption that it is a gospel as the Koran, the Bible, or the Dhammapada is. In my opinion this assumption is quite a false assumption. The BhagavadGītā is not a gospel and it can therefore have no message and it is futile to search for one. . . . the BhagavadGītā is neither a book of religion nor a treatise on philosophy. What the BhagavadGītā does is to defend certain dogmas of religion on philosophic grounds. . . . It uses philosophy to defend religion. ("Essays" 182)

Ambedkar explains the reason behind the flexibility of meanings in the Gītā as the scholars’ wrong conception about the text because they regard the Gītā as a gospel like the Koran, the Bible, or the Dhammapada, which he himself does not accept. He only regards the Gītā as a book of philosophy that is used to defend certain dogmas of Hinduism (i.e. Brāhmanism). The Gītā essentially defends the three dogmas of Brāhmanism, which Ambedkar categorically explains: “The first instance one comes across in reading the BhagavadGītā is the justification of war. . . . Another dogma to which the BhagavadGītā comes forward to offer a philosophic defence is Cāturvarnāh. . . . The third dogma for which the BhagavadGītā offers a philosophic defence is the Karma mārga” ("Essays" 182-83). The Gītā justifies the violence of war. The text works as "... the chariot of Brāhmanism" (B. Singh 1) because there is “... a justification of caste system as the law of Hindu social life” (Kadam 124) and the Gītā “... mentions that the Cāturvarnāh is created by God and therefore sacrosanct” (Ambedkar "Essays" 183). Ambedkar links the Karma mārga of the Gītā with the performance of the observances, such as Yajñas as a way of salvation.

Ambedkar points out the two Hindu texts: Jaimini’s Purva-Mimamsa and Badarayana’s Brahma Sutras whose dogmas the Gītā has defended. Ambedkar has corrected the wrong meaning attached to the words Karma yoga as ‘action’ and Jñāna yoga as ‘knowledge’ of the Gītā:

The BhagavadGītā is not concerned with any general, philosophical discussion of action versus knowledge. As a matter of fact, the Gītā is concerned with the particular and not with the general. By Karma yoga or action Gītā means the dogmas contained in Jaimini’s karma-kanda and by Jñāna yoga or knowledge it means the dogmas contained in Badarayana’s Brahma Sutras. ("Essays" 184)

Ambedkar does not consider the Gītā as an independent philosophical book that espouses the unique philosophy. Instead, the Gītā, as he says, is referring to the philosophy of the earlier literature i.e. Jaimini’s Purva-Mimamsa and Badarayana’s Brahma Sutras and the Gītā tries to renovate and strengthen them.

The Gītā, according to Ambedkar, felt it necessary to defend the dogmas of Jaimini’s Purva-Mimamsa and Badarayana’s Brahma Sutras because they were the counter-revolutionary documents of Hinduism in the fight against Buddhism. Ambedkar believes that the Buddhism brought revolution in ancient Aryan society and later when the Buddhism was defeated and Hinduism was restored again, he calls it as a counter-revolution. Nalini Pandit, in her article, "Ambedkar and the Bhagwat Gītā", remarks:

After making a detailed study of the ancient religious books, Ambedkar came to the conclusion that the Aryan community of pre-Buddhist times did not have a developed sense of moral values. Buddhism caused a moral and social revolution in this society. When the Mauryan
emperor Ashoka embraced Buddhism, the social revolution became a political revolution. After the decline of the Mauryan Empire, the Brāhmins, whose interests had suffered under the Buddhist kings initiated a counter-revolution under the leadership of Pushyamita Sunga. The counter-revolution restored Brāhmanism. The Bhagwat Gītā, says Ambedkar, was composed to give ideological and moral support to this counter-revolution. (1)

Ambedkar considers the Buddha was the first great reformer in ancient India because the Buddha made a code of conduct for the first time to reform the filthy pre-Buddhist Aryan society. Buddha himself had followed the highest standards for a moral life and he inspired others to follow suit. Love, wisdom, universal pity, sympathy for all suffering beings and goodwill to every form of sentient life were the main teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha carried on a campaign against the cruelties of Brāhmanism as Ambedkar points out:

Buddha preached non-violence. He not only preached it but the people at large – except the Brāhmmins – had accepted it as the way of life. They had acquired a repugnance to violence. Buddha preached against Cāturvarnāh. He used some of the most offensive similes in attacking the theory of Cāturvarnāh. The frame work of Cāturvarnāh had been broken. The order of Cāturvarnāh had been turned upside down. Sūdras and women could become sannyasis, a status which counter-revolution had denied them. Buddha had condemned the Karma kanda and the Yajñas. He condemned them on the ground of Himsā or violence. ("Essays" 184)

The Buddha was against every types of violence, he repudiated the authority of Vedas, denounced the Karma-kanda and the Yajñas, which was based on Himsā or violence. Pandit illustrates: “He [Buddha] ridiculed the idea that the sacrificial animal slaughtered according to prescribed rites goes to heaven irrespective of its good or bad deeds. In that case, he asked, why do the Brāhmmins not offer themselves for sacrifice?” (1). The Buddha was against ‘‘graded inequality’ and ‘division of labourers’’ (Jal 44) i.e. the system of Cāturvarnāh. Pandit explains: “Buddhism was open to all, to Sūdras, women and even repentant criminals” (1). The status of Sūdras and women was uplifted equal to the position of the men of Brāhmins. This indicates that the Buddhism had shattered the Brāhmanical social ideals to dust. According to Ambedkar, the Brāhmmins, whose interests had suffered under the system of Buddhism, initiated a counter-revolution. Nevertheless, it was difficult for the counter-revolutionaries to fight against the popular philosophy of Buddhism only by quoting the infallibility of the Vedas. Ambedkar argues:

These things were ordained by the Vedas, the Vedas were infallible, therefore the dogmas were not to be questioned. In the Buddhist age, which was the most enlightened and the most rationalistic age India has known, dogmas resting on such silly, arbitrary, un rationalistic and fragile foundations could hardly stand. (184)

Ambedkar takes the Buddhist age was the most enlightened and the most rationalistic age. The counter-revolutionaries, according to Ambedkar, could not have fought against Buddhism only with Jaimini’s Purva-Mimamsa and Badarayana’s Brahma Sutras unless the Gītā gave them support: “There is no doubt that under the furious attack of Buddhism, Jaimini’s counter-revolutionary dogmas were tottering and would have collapsed had they not received the support which the Bhagvat Gītā gave them” ("Essays" 185). The Gītā, as Ambedkar explains, was the ultimate weapon in the hands of the counter-revolutionaries in the struggle against Buddhism. In this regard, Ranganath R asserts: “BG
provided a tottering Brāhmanism the resilience and vigor to overthrow Buddhism and take Indian civilization back to the dark ages, from which it has never emerged into light” (3). This shows that Ambedkar and Ranganath both accept the strength of the Gītā among the Brāhmanic literatures. Ambedkar recognizes the strength of the Gītā in comparison to other Hindu religious texts, but he finds the arguments of the Gītā given in defense of the dogmas childish. He does not find any justification on the text's defense on violence and the theory of Cāturvarnāh:

The philosophic defence offered by the Bhagwat Gītā of the Kshtriya’s duty to kill is to say the least puerile. . . . Similarly childish is the defence of the Bhagvat Gītā of the dogma of Cāturvarnāh. Kṛṣṇa defends it on the basis of the Guna theory of the Sānkhya. But Kṛṣṇa does not seem to have realized what a fool he has made of himself. In the Cāturvarnāh there are four Varnas. But the gunas according to the Sānkhya s are only three. (185)

The arguments like “the Kshtriya’s duty to kill” and “killing is no killing because what is killed is the body and not the soul” (“Essays” 185) given in the defence of violence and the classification of human being into four varnas based on the Sānkhya’s three gunas, which Ambedkar finds childish. In this regard, Meera Nanda verifies: “The simple truth is that once you put the Gītā to Ambedkar’s test of justice and reason, nothing much is left of it. The ‘soul’ of the Gītā – Cāturvarnāh – fails the test of justice; its ‘philosophical grounds’ – the metaphysics of guna and karma – fail the test of reason” (44). Ambedkar, who “. . . waged a war on the caste structure and became instrumental in abolishing untouchability and elevated the Dalits from the status of slavery to the level of equality” (Raju 250), finds the defence of Cāturvarnāh as the soul of the Gītā. However, as Nanda argues, when we put the Gītā to Ambedkar’s test of justice and reason, “the philosophical grounds” – the metaphysics of guna and karma of the Cāturvarnāh of the Gītā fail the test of reason. Ambedkar finds no validity in the logics given in the defence of the Cāturvarnāh put forward by the Gītā. Nanda further argues: “The Gītā follows Manu’s script and consigns the doubters to ‘devilish wombs’ – providing yet again that Ambedkar was correct to call the Gītā ‘Manusmṛiti in a nutshell’” (43). After examining the defence of Cāturvarnāh in the Gītā, Ambedkar equals the Gītā with another casteist and misogynist Hindu text Manusmṛiti.

Ambedkar does not regard the Gītā as complete text written at the same time when Mahābhārata was written. Although he admits the short original, Gītā was written with Mahābhārata, he regards the other three patches of the Gītā were written in other different times. While he takes the Gītā as the counter-revolutionary document, he is quite sure some patches of the Gītā were written after Jaimini’s Purva-Mīmāṃsā and Badarayana’s Brahma Sūtras: “I propose first to advance direct evidence from the Gītā itself showing that it has been composed after Jaimini’s Purva-Mīmāṃsā and after Buddhism. . . . If the Bhagvat Gītā does not mention Purva-Mīmāṃsā it does mention by name the Brahma Sūtras of Badarayana.” The reference of Brahma Sūtras in the Gītā furnishes direct evidence for Ambedkar to make him sure about the later date of the Gītā than the Brahma Sūtras. He is also sure about the Gītā’s later date than Buddhism because he finds in the Gītā the full of Buddhist ideas. He argues: “The Bhagvat Gītā discusses Bramha-Nirvana. . . . From where has the Gītā borrowed this Nirvana theory? Surely, it is not borrowed from the Upanishads. For no Upanishad even mentions the word Nirvana. The whole idea is peculiarly Buddhist and is borrowed from Buddhism” (“Essays” 187, 189). Ambedkar interprets ‘the Nirvana theory’ of the Gītā as the theory borrowed not other than Buddhism.
Similarly, he finds, the Gītā has borrowed some other concepts and ideology “... from Buddhism and that too word for word” (Ambedkar “Essays” 190). Ambedkar’s interpretation of the Gītā reveals its dependent, Bramanical counter-revolutionary ideologies borrowed from earlier Brāhmanical texts and Buddhist texts as well.

Shriniwas Ganesh Sardesai (1907-1996), popularly known as S.G. Sardesai, has interpreted the Gītā as a literary production of post-Magadha period in Indian history. “From a sociological point of view,” he defines, “the Magadha period is also referred to as the Buddhist period.” This indicates Sardesai also defines the Gītā as a counter-revolutionary document that came into existence after replacing Buddhism in India. He observes: “Within the framework of the basic position of the Upanishads, the Geeta modified and synthesized various subsequent traditions and views to suit the contemporary practical and ideological requirements of the property-owning, governing classes” (“Riddle” 10, 16).

According to him, the Gītā was written in a specific time of history for the benefit of the property-owning ruling classes who mainly belonged to the upper two Varnas Brāhmins and Ksatriyas. The Gītā was a counter-revolutionary weapon in the hands of Brāhmins and Ksatriyas because, in course of fighting with Buddhism, it modified certain concepts of Brāhmanism and renovated and strengthened the core concept of it. Sardesai regards Cāturvarṇāṅh is the core concept of Hinduism as he explains: “What was the origin of Hinduism? It was the ‘Aryan’, Ksatriya-Brāhmin domination over the Sūdras and vaiṣyas in the form of Cāturvarṇāṅh” (“Peculiarities” 90). The Gītā has given the main focus on caste duty, on which Buddhism and the Shaka-Kushana invasions had created confusion, as he claims: “The confusion in the Cāturvarṇāṅh hierarchy created by Buddhism and the Shaka-Kushana invasions was what the writer of the Geeta had in mind when he speaks of ‘Adharma raising its head’” (“Riddle” 16). Sardesai defines the words: Dharma and Adharma mentioned in the Gītā connecting them with the prescribed caste duty of the caste-system.

The next point Sardesai finds interesting in the Gītā is about the door of moksha (liberation) prescribed for the lower orders and women. The only path for moksha advocated by Upanishads was penance, i.e. defined in the Gītā as Jñāna mārga, which was not allowed to the lower orders and women. The rule was made guided by the sheer economical necessities of the Brāhmins and Ksatriyas as Sardesai explains: “... these upper orders also needed the back-breaking toil of the vaiṣyas and Sūdras for their very existence and comfort. So who was going to allow the lowers orders the luxury of retiring into the forests and meditating which was bound to deprive the upper orders of the economic foundation of their ease and comfort?” The lower orders and women were not allowed to retire into the jungle for meditation because they had to work in the field of production for the existence and luxury of the parasitical upper two Varnas, the Brāhmins and Ksatriyas. The Gītā finds a way out for the salvation of the lower orders and women, which the Gītā defines it as bhakti i.e. unconditional surrender to God with profound feelings of love and devotion. Sardesai, however, defines the concept of bhakti of the Gītā as an effective tool in exploiting the toiling masses by the governing, property owning classes. He asserts: “... bhakti towards God strengthened bhakti towards the king, bhakti towards the king strengthened bhakti towards God, and both together helped to consolidate the temporal and spiritual power of the governing, property-owning classes over the toiling masses” (“Riddle” 20, 23). Sardesai has interpreted the bhakti of the Gītā as a new concept added in Hinduism born out of the womb of Indian feudalism which was fully developed in the Gupta period (300 to 500 AD) (“Riddle” 15).
Sardesai admits the usefulness of the Gitā in the struggle against British colonialism in the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century revivalist (Hindu) patriotic leadership had used the Gitā to regenerate self-respect and self-confidence among the Indian people when there was loss of self-confidence and even an inferiority complex enveloped the whole country. The Gitā had encouraged the freedom fighters to participate in the war and accept death happily. Sardesai explains: “No wonder Khudiram Bose embraced the gallows, inspired by the death-defying lines of the Geeta on his lips, ‘weapons cannot pierce Him, fire cannot burn Him, nothing can destroy Him’ (II. 23).” The Gitā’s concept of “the soul never dies”, as Sardesai argues, had averted the fear of the freedom fighters in the struggle against British colonialism. Although the Gitā played the positive role in chasing away the British colonizers from India, Sardesai argues, the Gitā, which is based on Cāturvarnāh and the mysticism of Vedānta, cannot play the positive role in uniting all the laboring masses, Dalits and the people belonging to another religion for the establishment of socialism. He asserts: “… it cannot be forgotten for a moment that crores upon crores of the toiling Muslims, Harijans and Adivasis have to be brought into the struggle for socialism if it is to succeed in India. It is ridiculous to hope that they can be inspired by any interpretation of the Geeta, no matter how we may stretch the rubber.” Sardesai does not have any hope of having the positive role of the Gitā in the modern context no matter how we interpret and highlight some positive aspects of the Gitā. The Indian bourgeoisie, who had used the Gitā as an ideological weapon in the struggle against British colonialism, is now using it as a weapon against progress, democracy and socialism as Sardesai claims: “The Indian bourgeoisie needed the Geeta before independence as an ideological weapon in the struggle against imperialism. After independence, and much more so with the deepening crisis of capitalism, with the rising tide of mass discontent they need it as a weapon against progress, democracy and socialism” ("Riddle" 34, 36, 37-38). This clarifies that Sardesai basically finds the reactionary content in the Gitā. According to him, the text ultimately serves the interests of the ruling property-owning classes in exploiting and dominating the majority of the lower orders of people and women.

Dilip Bose, in his article “Bhagavad-Gītā and Our National Movement”, also brings out some of the major reactionary contents of the Gītā. Bose has emphasized the swadharma and varnasram-dharama prescribed by the Gītā. He finds it inhuman to Sūdras and he equals this system with the system prescribed by Manusmriti and with Plato’s attitude towards the slaves: “Our law-givers in general, Manu’s and Gītā’s teachings in particular, and their interpretation of swadharma and their eulogies of varnasram-dharama denied any human status to Sūdras almost as Plato looked down upon the slaves as sub-human creatures.” The varnasram-dharama of the Gītā has created the unjust hierarchy of human beings and compelled everybody to perform their prescribed duties as their swadharma. Bose has no doubt that swadharma of the Gītā is inherently linked with the caste duty determined from individual’s birth: “… what is meant by swadharma, that is, task or duty determined by one’s caste or varna which is unchangeable and the fulfillment of which duty through niskāma karma, that is, work done without awaiting or expecting any results is the way to moksha or salvation according to Gītā.” The Gītā encourages everybody to fulfill his or her caste duty without expecting any results telling him or her that it is the only way of his or her ultimate moksha or salvation. According to Bose, this call of the swadharma of the Gītā never allows the lower orders to uplift their status even if they possess the higher qualities than the people do of upper two Varnas. The Gītā not only degrades Sūdras but it has
also downgraded women as Bose points out: “The scrutinizing reader must also note in the text of the Gītā (IX 32) as quoted above that woman is placed in the same position as Sūdras, lowly born…” (80, 53, 79). Bose finds the Gītā not only the casteist but he also reveals its misogynist nature.

Bose, like Sardesai, also admits about the positive role played by the Gītā at the time of British colonialism when the goal of national and political liberation was not defined very clearly. Gītā’s call to action and its attitude towards the soul in the body as indestructible have encouraged Indian people to involve in the struggle in establishing a dharma raj, which, as Bose argues, provided the common ideological basis for the search for national identity, and to deny the satanic rule British colonialism represented (80). However, he does not think the Gītā can play the positive role when “. . . the class question and class demands appear at every stage of our struggle” (Bose 80). On the contrary, Bose argues that the social conservative aspect of Gītā’s teachings provide a handy weapon to the Indian bourgeoisie to preach class peace and harmony and thereby dampen the class ardour and intensity of the class struggle in the country (80). After the Gītā became the weapon in the hands of Indian bourgeoisie to damage the struggle for socialism, Bose suggests not only to avoid the Gītā but he also suggests the laboring masses of India to wage ideological war against the text: “But to attempt to read more, to elevate Bhagavad-Gītā to a revealed knowledge and seek a panacea for world’s ills today only helps the present ruling bourgeois class to prolong their system of exploitation. That needs to be ideologically combated at every stage of our struggle” (82). Although Bose admits the positive role of the Gītā in the period of British colonialism, he regards the gist of the text, a sheer reactionary that serves the oppressing classes for dominating and exploiting the vast majority of laboring masses of India.

Meghnad Desai observes the Gītā as being a Brāhmanic text as it conveys the basic tenets of Brāhmanism ("Introduction" 1). He finds “. . . the message of the Gītā is casteist and misogynist and as such profoundly in opposition to the spirit of modern India” ("Preface" xiii). There is the caste hierarchy and the women are not given the due value in the Hindu society. The Gītā, which is a sacred book of Hindu thought, explicitly offers a divine sanction for the caste-system. The Gītā says Cāturvarnāḥ is created by the God Himself. The Brāhmins and the Ksatriyas are kept on top and the Vaiśyas and the Śūdras are kept below in hierarchy. This division into the four Varnas is not done according to their qualities, which Desai claims is not justifiable: “. . . the two top varnas are described by their qualities- gunas – as constituting their svabhava. But when it comes to the lower two– ‘the working classes’– they are described not by any qualities but by the work they perform.” The Brāhmins and the Ksatriyas are classified according to their qualities but even if they possess the high qualities the working class people cannot be promoted to the upper two Varnas. All the working class people are classified either to the Vaiśyas or the Śūdras. This is why Desai claims: “. . . the Gītā is at best a text for a small minority – men of the two upper castes and no one else.” The Gītā speaks only for the men of the upper two Varnas and it keeps not only the Vaiśyas and the Śūdras into the lower ranks but it also keeps the women of all the four Varnas into the non-prestigious position. Desai verifies: “. . . there are those who get to do the karma-yoga and jñāna-yoga, etc., but they are the two top varnas, and, of course, all of them men. But those whom the God has not endowed with any gunas– Vaiśyas, Śūdras, all women of whatever varna, outcastes, those born of a womb of sin. . . can get to their highest goal
via bhakti” ("Contemporary" 142, 150, 143). The God has given no qualities– good or bad– to Vaiśyas, Sūdras, all women and outcastes and they are not even allowed to involve in the karma-yoga and jñāna-yoga to achieve their highest goal. This clarifies the position of Vaiśyas, Sūdras, all women and outcastes in Varna system.

Desai has interpreted the Gītā as a self-centered and asocial document. The Gītā speaks nowhere about the welfare of others. He argues: “One would be hard to find a matching sentence in the entire Gītā which exhorted Arjuna to look after other people’s welfare” ("Contemporary" 165). In the Gītā, Arjuna is not instructed to do any action that helps others, instead, Kṛṣṇa instructs him to fulfill his duty to achieve his ultimate goal of salvation. Desai further argues: “It [the Gītā ] is all about myself and how I can by yoga of one kind or another better myself.” This reveals the self-centeredness of the Gītā and it is also asocial because it speaks nothing about others. He highlights: “The Gītā says nothing about action to mitigate misery of others around you, duty to your parents or to your wife and children, let alone about loving your neighbor . . .” ("Contemporary" 163). Because of the casteist and misogynist nature of the Gītā, Desai admits the Buddhist philosophy is better than the philosophy of the Gītā. The Buddhist philosophy does not divide the human beings into the Varna system and it also treats the women with respect. This is why, Desai argues, the Buddhism attracted many Hindus of the lower ranks in the past including Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, one of the architects of India’s constitution, in its fold: “Ambedkar was opposed to this but conceded, and later took the Dalits out of the fold of the Hindu society itself when he joined Buddhism.” As Ambedkar could not fight with the caste-system of Hinduism, he ultimately changed his religion with many Hindus of the lower ranks. Hinduism cannot give the feelings of equality to the every stratum of people living in India. Desai, however, admits “. . . the Gītā as a central text of Indian culture” ("Contemporary" 139), because the Gītā has a great influence on Indian people. But, Desai suggests that it should be re-examined the message of the Gītā in establishing the egalitarian society in the independent Republic of modern India.

The Marxist commentators highlight the dark side of the message of the Gītā. They reject the divine validity of the text and question on its historical origin as being the genuine part of the Mahabharata. They observe the gist of the Gītā as being highly ambiguous and contradictory. In their observations, the Gītā advocates the violence of war and it is a self-centered and asocial document. They have found it as a central text of Brāhmanism. They have observed the text as being casteist as it advocates the graded inequality of varna system and they also found it as being misogynist as it downgrades the women being equal to Sūdras. When interpreted through the Marxist parameters the Gītā is found to be Brāhmanic text that advocates violence and justifies the caste and gender inequalities. The text is ambiguous and self-contradictory in its content and it is found to be selfish and asocial document too.

References


Part 2