Sectarian Interpretations of the Bhagavad Gītā
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Abstract
This research article deals with the sectarian commentaries of the Bhagavad Gītā. The study has its relevance to understand the text from the point of view of its orthodox sectarian interpretations. The article addresses on the research problem concerning to the uniformity of the message of the Gītā outlined by its jñāna and bhakti interpretations. The research approach (methodology) adopted for this study is the review-based analysis of the orthodox jñāna and bhakti interpretations of the text. The study has included the interpretations of Sankarācārya, Ramanujācārya, Madhvācārya, Vallabhācārya, Nimbarkācārya and Prabhupada as they represent the leading orthodox commentators of the Gītā. The study discloses that not all the above commentators of the Gītā are unanimous in revealing the concrete and undisputed message of the text. Instead, they interpret the text according to their own philosophy and find in the scripture the essential source of their own teachings.

Key Words: jñāna mārga, bhakti mārga, Vedānta, Brahman, Ātmā, Vaishnavism

The Bhagavad Gītā is a philosophical text of Hinduism. The scripture is interpreted from the different angles. It has been interpreted through the point of view of jñāna, bhakti and Karma marga outlined in the text. In nineteenth century, the Gītā was highly praised as being the authorial text of Karma marga and it was used by the freedom fighters as a weapon to chase away the British rulers from India. The orthodox commentators from the time of Ādi Sankarācārya, however, have analyzed the text from the point of view of jñāna and bhakti margā. Sankarācārya has interpreted the text through the point of view of jñāna margā and through this interpretation of the Gītā, he has justified his own philosophy of non-dualism. Ramanujācārya and other orthodox commentators have interpreted the scripture through the point of view of bhakti margā but they have founded the different schools of Vedanta philosophy and claimed the Gītā as being an authorial text of their own cult.

Sankarācārya (788 A.D.-820 A.D.) gives commentary on the Gītā for the first time. There might have been numerous other commentaries or criticisms on the Gītā in the interval between the date of the Mahābhārata and the birth of Sankarācārya, these commentaries, however, are not now available and therefore, there are now no means for determining in what way the Gītā was interpreted in those days (Tilak "Introductory" 15). Sankarācārya, commenting on the Gītā, finds the germs of the Vedas in the text: “This scripture called the

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Gītā, which is such, is the collection of the quintessence of all the teachings of the Vedas. The main teachings of the Vedas, according to Sankara, are repeated in the Gītā in a new light. The Rgveda divides the society into Brāhmiṇ, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Sūdra on a functional basis and Sankara takes the hereditary based Cāturvarṇāh of the Gītā as the borrowing of the Rgveda. He finds no difference between the Gītā's Brāhmiṇ dharma and Vedic dharma:

Vishnu, called Narayan, the Prime Mover, took birth--as a part of Himself--as Kṛṣṇa, the son of Devaki by Vasudeva, for the protection of Brāhmiṇhood which is Brahman manifest on earth, and for ensuring the stability of the world. Because, when Brāhmiṇhood is preserved the Vedic dharma becomes well guarded, for the distinctions among castes and stages of life depend on it.

Ṛgvedic Varṇa division is the division of labor and not class division but Sankara finds Ṛgvedic Varṇa division as no different from the Cāturvarṇāh of the Gītā, which is class division, and it only came into existence at a later stage of social development. He keeps Vedic dharma on an equal footing with the Gītā's Brāhmiṇ dharma that arose at a later stage of social development and unlike Vedic dharma, Brāhmiṇ dharma is based on exploitation of one Varṇa or class by another. Sankara, though he misinterprets the essence of Vedic dharma, is right that Kṛṣṇa, in the Gītā, speaks for the protection of Brāhmiṇhood dharma which keeps the majority of toiling masses Vaiśya and Sūdra especially Sūdra in a disrespectful and disadvantageous position.

Sankara has given emphasis on the path of knowledge i.e., jñāna mārga among the three main paths of the Gītā: jñāna mārga, karma mārga, and bhakti mārga. Dilip Bose states: “Sankara holds that while karma is essential as a means for the purifications of the mind, when jñāna is attained, karma ceases. He rejects the view of jñāna–karma–samuccaya, that is, a synthesis of the two” (46). Sankara regards karma only as a means for the purifications of the mind “. . . to acquire the capacity of realizing the identity of the Brahman and Ātmā” (Tilak "Introductory" 19) but he does not take the karma as the ultimate goal of human beings. Sankara was the first systematizer of Advaita Vedānta, which is also known as the philosophy of Non-Dualism, and, in his interpretation of the Gītā, he has found the philosophy of non-dualism in the text itself. Sankara’s theological vision of non-dualism is contained in the translated verse "Brahman is real; the world is a false projection; the individual self is exactly Brahman, nothing less" (qtd. in Nelson 310). Sankara holds the view that “. . . the knowledge of the Brahman does not become perfect unless a man has entirely conquered all root tendencies and given up all actions” (Tilak "Introductory" 19). Sankara insists that a person renounces all his rites and duties and becomes sanyāsin, “. . . which makes one fit for steadfastness in that knowledge; removal of ignorance and self–revelation of the supreme Brahman, which is the same as Liberation” (qtd. in Gambhirananda "Introduction" xx-xxi). One can achieve his ultimate goal of liberation after he is able to get the knowledge of the supreme Brahman and
becomes *sanyāsin*. Sankara’s *sanyāsa* or renunciation of action is a complete escape from life because, for him, life itself is pure illusion. If Sankara, and not Kṛṣṇa, was the instructor of Arjuna, he would have advised Arjuna simply to run away from the battle, not because it would have been wrong to kill one’s kith and kin, but because the battle itself was totally unreal (Sardesai "Riddle" 30). Sankara’s interpretation of the *jñāna mārga* of the *Gītā* leads a person to run away from his duty of life as opposed to the suggestion of the *karma mārga* of the *Gītā*.

Srimad Ramanujācārya (1017 A.D.-1137 A.D.) also defends the notion that *Brahman* is the highest and uncompromised unitary reality but in his view, “...this *Brahman* is in fact Lord Narayan, to whom all beings must surrender in devotion if they are to reach liberation” (Clooney 329). Unlike Sankara’s impersonal world soul (Divine), which makes the illusory universe as a sort of sport (*Lilā*), Ramanuja develops the notion of compassionate personal God and his God needs the human being as much as the human being needs God (Chandulal 88, 92). Ramanuja establishes the new tradition, which later came to be known as the qualified non-dualist/monist (*Visistadvaita*) school of *Vedānta* theology. S. Rajamani informs: “His philosophy of *Visistadvaita*, qualified non-dualism, was specially designed by him to suit the trend towards Bhakti which was noticeable in his Tamil country” (107). Unlike Sankara’s *jñāna mārga* of his *Advaita* philosophy, the essential contribution of Ramanuja to Indian thought was to have developed a coherent philosophical basis for the doctrine of *bhakti* to God (Chandulal 87). Ramanuja has interpreted the *Gītā* highlighting its *bhakti mārga* to suit the notion of *bhakti* of his sectarian philosophy of qualified non-dualism. In this regard, Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak asserts: “Ramanujācārya drew the further conclusions that although *karma*, *jñāna* and *bhakti* [Devotion] are all three referred to in the *Gītā*, yet the doctrine enunciated in the *Gītā* is in essence Qualified-Monistic from the point of view of philosophy, and of Devotion to the *Vasudeva* from the point of view of mode of life” ("Introductory" 22). In Ramanuja’s interpretation, “... the *Gītā* (7.13-14) emphatically rejects any idea of illusion (*māyā*), because, for him, Nature is real, and ‘*māyā*’ is the immense and wonderful productivity of Nature in God’s hands as God’s body as it were” (Chandulal 89). As Devotion is looked upon as the highest duty of man, the lifelong performance of the worldly duties becomes an inferior and on that account the interpretation put on the *Gītā* by Ramanujācārya must also be looked upon as in a way in favor of Renunciation of action (Tilak "Introductory" 22). For Ramanuja, the *Gītā* neither gives emphasis to *jñāna mārga*, nor it teaches the *karma mārga*, instead the whole discourse of Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā* is for the resurrection of the spirit of Arjuna to generate *bhakti* to God (Chandulal 92). Thus, it is Ramanuja’s claim that the *Gītā* forms the essential source of his own teachings.

Sri Madhvācārya (1238-1317 C.E.) develops a third school after there appeared a contradiction in looking upon the *parabrahman* and the conscious ego (*jīvā*) as one in one-way and different in other ways. This third school led by Madhva, came into existence after the date of Ramanuja, is of the opinion that the *parabrahman* and *jīvā* must be looked upon
as eternally different from each other and that there never can be any unity between them, and, therefore, this school is known as the Dualist school (23). Madhva, in his commentaries of the sacred books including the Gītā, shows that these books are in favor of the theory of Duality. In his commentary on the Gītā, he argues that the desireless action mentioned in the Gītā is only a means and devotions is the true and ultimate cult and when once one has become perfect through the path of devotion, whether one thereafter performs or does not perform action is just the same (Tilak "Introductory" 23). Although Madhva is a dualist, he is similar with Ramanuja in giving preference to the bhakti mārga for attaining salvation (mokṣa). The knowledge of Vishnu, to whom Madhva considers the Supreme God, alone is not sufficient for attaining mokṣa, the devotees must also obtain the grace of Vishnu as he acknowledges: “Direct realization of the highest Lord [comes] only from grace and not [from] the efforts of the Jīvā” (qtd. in Sarma 359). This indicates that, in Madhva's school, the efforts of the jīvā or the performances of an individual do not have any role for attaining the mokṣa. It is needed Vishnu-prasāda (grace) for everybody if they want to attain mokṣa and this comes only through the bhakti mārga i.e., the path to mokṣa through devotion (Sarma 359). As the Madhvabhasya takes such sentences that give emphasis on the desireless action in the Gītā as mere expletives and unimportant (Tilak "Introductory" 23), in his interpretation of the Gītā, Madhva has found the proof of his philosophy of dualism and the bhakti cult in the text.

Sri Vallabhācārya (1478 A.D.-1530 A.D.) establishes the fourth school of Vedānta known as the pure Non-Dualistic school. This school holds the view that the conscious ego (jīvā) when pure and unblinded by illusion (māyā) and the parabrahman are one and are not two distinct things. But, it differs from the Sankara's school in the sense that it looks the various souls as the particles of the Isvara like sparks of fire. In addition, it differs from the Sankara's school in that instead of knowledge of the Brahman that cannot be acquired easily by the conscious ego (jīvā) which has become dependent on illusion; it takes devotion to the Blessed Lord as the most important means of obtaining release or mokṣa (Tilak "Introductory" 24). For Vallabha, the purpose of bhakti is the reorientation of the bhagavadiya away from the ego and toward Kṛṣṇa and this enables the devotees to receive Kṛṣṇa’s anugraha. Vallabha considers that the jīvā earns well-being through Kṛṣṇa’s anugraha and as a result, he suggests people to practice bhakti to Kṛṣṇa or the Pushtimārga, “way of well-being” (Barz 481). This cult of Vallabha is similar with Ramanuja and Madhva school of Vedānta in its suggestion to the bhakti mārga as an ultimate path for attaining mokṣa. The commentators of this school on the Gītā, thus, focus on the bhakti mārga of the Gītā. They argued that after first preaching to Arjuna about the Sāṅkhya philosophy and the karma-yoga, the Blessed Lord ultimately made him perfect by treating him with the nectar of the philosophy of Devotion that entails the abandonment of home and domestic ties – is the most concentrated moral of the Gītā (Tilak "Introductory" 24). In their interpretations, the Gītā authorizes not other than the philosophy of their own cult.
Besides these different cults, another Vaisnava cult was founded by Nimbarkācārya who lived after the date of Ramanuja and before the date of Madhva; that is to say about saka 1084 (1162 A.D.). This school holds the view that “. . . the existence and activity of the Conscious Ego (Jīvā) and of the Cosmos are not independent but depend upon the desire of the Isvara; and that the subtle elements of the Conscious Ego (Jīvā) and of the Cosmos are contained in the fundamental Isvara” (25). In order to differentiate this school from the Qualified-Monism school of Ramanuja, Tilak refers to it as “. . . the Daal-Non-Dual (dixutadvaita) school” (25). This school gives emphasis to bhakti or Devotion and worships Radhakrishna and the commentaries on the Gītā belonging to this school have shown in them that the moral laid down by the Gītā is consistent with the doctrines of this school ("Introductory" 25). This school of Vedānta also uses the Gītā as an authority to make its cult superior than other existing schools of Vedānta.

Among the various schools of Vedānta that use the Gītā to gain authority in their sectarian philosophy, the school of Gaudiya Vaishnavism is the most recently established by saint-reformer Shri Krishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533 C.E.) who was born in Navadvipa, Bengal. ‘Gaudiya’ refers to the Gaudiya region of Bengal and it is also known as Bengali Vaishnavism. Based on the bhakti yoga of the Gītā, “. . . he [Chaitanya] initiated one of India’s most vigorous bhakti movements. Thus he was a major contributor to the flood of bhakti that swept across the plains of northern India, in the period that has sometimes been compared to the Renaissance period in Europe” (Dasa 373). Gaudiya Vaishnavism regards Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme God, not merely an avatār of Vishnu and chanting name of Kṛṣṇa as a way of bhakti to get God’s grace for the mokṣa of an individual. Neal Delmonico points out:

The Chaitanya tradition took quite seriously the idea, drawn from various passages of the Purāṇas, that Kirtana or more specifically, Sankirtana is the proper form of religious practice for the current age . . . Sankirtana often takes the form of congregational singing of Kṛṣṇa’s names with the accompaniment of various kinds of musical instruments . . . . (549)

Kṛṣṇa’s call to Arjuna surrendering on Him in the Gītā provides the basis for Chaitanya’s notion of bhakti to Kṛṣṇa by chanting His name emotionally and going into rapturous states, losing all external consciousness. Chaitanya’s Sankirtana movement influenced the millions of people in India and they began to regard Chaitanya as the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa Himself.

A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977) made Chaitanya’s Gaudiya Vaishnavism popular in India and more specifically to the Western world in the twentieth century. Inspired by his spiritual master Bhaktisidhanta Saraswati, founder of the Gaudiya Math, Swami Prabhupada founded The International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness (ISKCON) also known as the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, in 1966, to transplant Chaitanya’s Gaudiya Vaishnavism to the Western world. Among the many followers of Chaitanya’s
Prabhupada, the follower of Chaitanya’s Vaishnavism, has no doubt on being the Divine words of Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā: “Bhagavad-Gītā should be taken or accepted as it is directed by the speaker Himself. The speaker of Bhagavad-Gītā is Lord Sri Kṛṣṇa. He is mentioned on every page of Bhagavad-Gītā as the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Bhagavan.” Prabhupada confirms Kṛṣṇa of the Gītā as being the Supreme God, Bhagavan himself. According to him, the Gītā is the most important scripture in comparison to other many Vedic literature because the Gītā only contains the words of the Bhagavan Himself: “Because Bhagavad-Gītā is spoken by the Supreme Personality of Godhead, one need not read any other Vedic literature. One needs only attentively and regularly hear and read Bhagavad-Gītā” (3, 37). The theory of Hare Kṛṣṇa movement emphasizes to hear and read the words of the Gītā repeatedly rather than internalizing the knowledge of the text. Prabhupada suggests people to make the verses of the Gītā as the stotras or hymns that should be recited every morning as a pious act.

Prabhupada defines the Gītā as being the best scripture, but he has connected the text with the tradition of Vedic literature: “Bhagavad-Gītā is also known as Gitopanisad. It is the essence of Vedic knowledge and one of the most important Upanisads in Vedic literature.” Prabhupada has accepted that Gītā contains no separate knowledge than of the other Vedic literature and acknowledges it as one of the many Upanisads that conveys the gist of all the Vedic literature. Prabhupada takes Vedic literature as the creation of the great sages and are historical: “The great sages, therefore, have written so many Vedic...
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literatures, such as the Purāṇas. The Purāṇas are not imaginative; they are historical records.” Prabhupada argues that all Vedic knowledge is infallible: “All Vedic knowledge is infallible, and Hindus accept Vedic knowledge to be complete and infallible” (2, 31, 17). Prabhupada even suggests that the Vedic knowledge is beyond the subject of research: “Vedic knowledge is not a question of research.” Prabhupada advises people to accept the message of the Gītā unconditionally, claiming that the text contains the essence of the Vedic knowledge: “We must accept Bhagavad-Gītā without interpretation, without deletion and without our own whimsical participation in the matter. The Gītā should be taken as the most perfect presentation of Vedic knowledge” (18). There is nothing in the world that contains absolute truth that everybody can accept without question but Prabhupada recommends people to keep a blind faith on the Gītā.

Interpreting the text from the perspective of Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, Prabhupada finds that the Gītā teaches nothing more than the art of bhakti or service to Supreme God, Kṛṣṇa: “If the mind is engaged in Kṛṣṇa’s service, then the senses are automatically engaged in His service. This is the art, and this is also the secret of Bhagavad-Gītā: total absorption in the thought of Sri Kṛṣṇa” (35). Prabhupada has elaborated the concept of service that is applied not only to the Lord Kṛṣṇa alone but it is also applied to the other sections of living beings in a border term which he takes it as the secret of the Gītā:

When Sanatana Gosvami asked Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu about the svarupa of every living being, the Lord replied that the svarupa, or constitutional position, of the living being is the rendering of service to the Supreme Personality of Godhead. If we analyze this statement of Lord Caitanya’s, we can easily see that every living being is constantly engaged in rendering service to another living being. A living being serves other living beings in various capacities. By doing so, the living entity enjoys life. The lower animals serve human beings as servants serve their master. (22)

Prabhupada defines that the constitutional position of any living being is to render service to another living being. This rendering of service generally goes to the powerful living beings by the powerless ones. This implies that the powerless living beings are ever happy in providing service to the powerful ones and there is no necessary to fight for the establishment of the egalitarian society. Prabhupada’s interpretation of the Gītā, therefore, speaks against the egalitarian society. Prabhupada suggests people to remain ever happy in doing service to the God and to those persons and living beings who are more powerful. The feelings of suppression, exploitation and injustice for anybody are unjustified. This concept goes against the action oriented (karmayogīc) interpretation of the text, according to which, Kṛṣṇa, in the Gītā, suggests Arjuna not to tolerate the suppression, exploitation and injustice done to them by the Kauravas and encourages him to fight against them.

The Sectarian commentators of the Gītā interpret the text through the point of view of jñāna and bhakti marga. They give the divine validity of the text but they are not
unanimous in revealing the concrete and undisputed message of the scripture. This trend of interpretations of the Gītā begins from Sankarācārya of eighth century and continues onwards up to Prabhubpada of twentieth century. Sankarācārya systematizes Advaita Vedānta, the philosophy of Non-Dualism, and in his interpretation of the Gītā, he has found the philosophy of non-dualism in the text itself. Ramanujācārya of twelfth century establishes the new tradition, which later came to be known as the qualified non-dualist/monist (Visistadvaita) school of Vedānta theology. Ramanuja highlights the bhakti marga of the Gītā and claims the text forms the essential source of his own teachings. Madhvācārya of the fourteenth century develops a third school, which is known as the Dualist school, and in his interpretation of the Gītā, he has found the proof of his philosophy of dualism and the bhakti cult in the text. Vallabhācārya of the sixteenth century establishes the fourth school of Vedānta known as the pure Non-Dualistic school. This school of Vedānta also interprets the Gītā through the point of view of the bhakti mārga and finds in the text the philosophy of their own school. Besides these different cults, Nimbarkācārya of twelfth century has established another Vaisnava cult known as the Daal-Non-Dual (dixutadvaita) school and in their interpretations of the Gītā, they find in the scripture not other than the philosophy of their own school. Prabhubpada, in the modern world, establishes the Gītā as an authorial text of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the most recently established school by Chaitanya. In his interpretation of the Gītā, Prabhubpada gives high esteem to the text considering it as the gospel not only of Hinduism but also of the whole world. The above Commentators, though they agree on the text's divine origin, interpret it according to the philosophy of their own cults and give their own different meanings.

Works Cited


