

Inconsistency in the *Bhagavad Gītā* while dealing with Vedic Ideals

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Abstract

This article analyzes those verses of the Bhagavad Gita that deals with some of the major vedic concepts. It aims to highlight the connection between the Gita and the ancient Aryan texts — the Vedas. The article addresses the research problems concerning to the linkages between the Gita and the Vedas and the contradictory aspects of the Gita's interpretations of the major vedic concepts. The Bhagavad Gita and the Vedas are considered the sacred Hindu religious texts but they were not written at the same time. The Vedas were written centuries earlier than the Bhagavad Gita and the Gita, consequently, borrows some concepts from the Vedas. The article examines the verses of the Gita by applying the theoretical framework of historical materialism. Its application to the text reveals that the Gita gives high priority to some of the vedic concepts interpreted by the Brāhmaṇic ideology known as Pūrvamīmāṃsā in some verses, but some other verses minimizes these concepts highlighting the Upanisadic concepts developed later. The Gita also borrows some concepts from the Hindu's sacred texts the Upanisads, compiled later than the Vedas and this makes the Gita self- contradictory while dealing with the vedic concepts. This exhibits the incompatibility of the Gita in its interpretations to the major vedic ideals.

Keywords: Brahman, Mīmāṃsakas, Upanisadas, Vedas, yajña

Introduction

The article explains the connection between the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Vedas*. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is taken as the gist of previous Hindu scriptural texts including the *Vedas* and the *Upanisadas*. The oldest and most influential works of eastern philosophy, particularly Hindu scriptural philosophy, are considered to be the *Vedas*. All the Hindu scriptural texts produced later, have borrowed many from the *Vedas*. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, written later than the *Vedas*, borrows and explains some of the important concepts and ideas of the *Vedas*.

The four *Vedas* were collected over a long period of time, separated by millennia. The early *Vedic* songs, which had materialistic content, were written by ancient Aryan poets. The *Vedic* hymns glorify material things, natural forces, and social forces that directly

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affect their day-to-day existence. The names of the various gods listed in the *Vedas* are not supernatural creatures; rather, they are representatives of the natural and social forces and the manifestations of material objects (Khatri 121). These *vedic* terms retained their original meanings at first, but when private property and social classes evolved, they slowly acquired new meanings. These concepts start to take on otherworldly and spiritualistic overtones, losing their initial materialistic origins.

The philosophy of the *Vedas* gives much emphasis on two terms: *yajña* and *Brahman* and they are recently interpreted as divine terms. Originally, these two terms have materialistic origins. The term *yajña* signifies the collective mode of production of the ancient Aryan commune and *Brahman* denotes the Ancient Commune itself. These two terms were first used by the *Vedic* Aryans when they lived in communal housing, engaged in group labor, and shared in the goods produced. Both of these terms acquired new meanings with the rise of class society. A Brahmanic philosophy, *pūrvamīmāṃsā*, sanctifies the *Vedas*, interprets *Brahman* as an abstract concept, and transforms *yajña* into a ceremonial performance intended to serve the interests of the ruling class (Khatri 131). The original ideas of the *Vedas* were totally lost when the *Brāhmaṇic* philosophy interpreted the books to suit its own purposes and turned them into ideological tools used by the ruling class to repress the governed.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* explains the notions of *yajña* and *Brahman* while adhering to the principles of *pūrvamīmāṃsā* philosophy. The *Gītā* sanctifies the *Vedas*, advises adhering to its rules and directives, and places the highest importance on their spiritual philosophical connotations. The *Upanisadic* philosophy, which had a very different interpretation of the *vedic* concepts *yajña* and *Brahman*, also had an impact on the *Bhagavad Gītā*. This causes the *Gītā* to be inconsistent when discussing the early *Brāhmaṇic* interpretations of *vedic* terms, such as *yajña* and *Brahman*. The various verses of the *Gītā* explain some of the key *vedic* principles in conflict with one another. The article presents the main ideas of the *Vedas* while delving into *Gītā* 's these discrepancies.

Methodology

This article analyzes some of the verses of the *Bhagavad Gītā* employing the theoretical concept of historical materialism. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels explain the basic tenets of historical materialism that deals with the general laws of historical development of human society. Marx and Engels explain this concept in *The German Ideology*: “The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with material activity and the material intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behavior” (24-5). This concept of historical materialism does not accept the divine origin of any written texts. On the contrary, every written texts including the sacred texts of different religions are the production of human endeavor and they represent the ideologies of certain class people of a particular time of human history.

The article employs this concept of historical materialism and discovers the contradictions prevails in the *Bhagavad Gītā* while it elaborates the vedic concepts.

Results and discussions

The *Bhagavad Gītā* elaborates the concepts of *pūrvamīmāṃsā* philosophy in different verses. In III.9–15, the *Bhagavad Gītā* supports the *Mīmāṃsakas* doctrine (143–48). Like the *Mīmāṃsakas*, the *Gītā* places excessive importance on the *yajñas* in these sections, making them esoteric and superstitious. These verses exalt the *yajñas* as being able to produce their outcomes on their own, which carries the philosophic substance of the *Mīmāṃsakas*. The *Gītā* advises us in III.9 to carry out all our actions (*karmanah*) for *yajña* (*yajñārtham*), where *yajña* is a metaphor for God (143). *Yajñas* performances grant the performers wealth and offspring (*prasaviṣyadhvam*) (III.10, 144) and absolve them of all faults (*mucyante sarva-kilbiṣaiḥ*) (III.13, 146). In the *Gītā*, the gods are described as the providers of human coveted pleasures (*devāḥ dāsyante hi vaḥ iṣṭān bhogān*) (III.12) and the nourishers of men (*devāḥ bhāvayantu vaḥ*) (III.11). However, the verses also state that the gods can only provide these benefits after being fed by the *yajñas* (*yajña-bhāvitāḥ*) (III.12, Gambhirananda's translation 145). This suggests that the *yajñas* themselves are the source of the gods' strength. The elevation of the *yajñas* above the gods is the central idea of the *Mīmāṃsakas*' ideology.

In the *Gītā*, the verse III.14 makes the *Mīmāṃsakas*' philosophy more clear. The *Gītā*, in the verse, makes the *yajñas* more obscure and superstitious: “*annād bhavanti bhūtāni parjanyaād annasambhavaḥ / yajñād bhavati parjanyaḥ yajñāḥ karmasamudbhavaḥ*. (From food are born the creatures; the origin of food is from rainfall; rainfall originates from sacrifice; sacrifice has action as its origin)” (147). The verse claims that rainfall originates from the *yajñas* (*yajñād bhavati parjanyaḥ*). Rainfall is the source of food (*parjanyaād annasambhavaḥ*) and the life force of all living things (*annād bhavanti bhūtāni*), as the verse states (Gambhirananda's translation 147). However, it is unclear how the *yajñas* create rainfall. This verse matches with the *Manusmṛiti* III.76: “An oblation duly thrown into the fire, reaches the sun; from the sun comes rain, from rain food, therefrom the living creatures” (Buhler's translation 14). This verse of the *Manusmṛiti* attempts to establish the relationship between the rain and the *yajñas*. Thrown into the fire, the oblation turns into smoke, which ascends to the sky and turns into rain. The scientific truth is not this. It is a general scientific truth that water particles in vapour form from water resources ascend to the sky, cool, and turn into rain. Since there are no water particles in the smoke that emerges from the sacrificial fire, it cannot be transformed into water. In addition, this type of smoke releases toxic gases and pollutes the environment. This just serves to reinforce people's superstitious beliefs and validates the verse's unscientific claim. This is merely an irrational projection of the *yajñas*' might, which is the philosophy of the *Mīmāṃsakas*.

The *Gītā* contends in III.15 that *karma* comes from the *Vedas* (*karma brahmodbhavam*), the *Vedas* from the imperishable (*Brahma akṣara samudbhavam*), and

yajña is the focal point of the all-pervading *Veda* (*tasmāt sarvagatam brahma nityam yajñe pratiṣṭhitam*) (Ranganathananda's translation vol. 1, 275). Here, *karma* stands for the *yajñas* and *Brahma* for the *Vedas*. The essence of the verse is that "... the Vedas have sprung from the eternal Brahman, its eternal and omnipresent character is transmitted to the sacrifices also" (Dasgupta "Philosophy" 474). This mystifies the creation of the *Vedas*, which was composed by the ancient Aryan poets. The verse adheres to the idea of the *Mīmāṃsakas*, who sanctify the *yajñas* by mystifying the creation of the *Vedas*. In all the above verses, the *Gītā* follows the *Mīmāṃsakas* in characterizing the *yajñas* as performed for the rewards of action. The philosophy of *Mīmāṃsakas* is reiterated in XVII.11 and 13 in which the sacrifices are categorized as good (*sāttvik*) and bad (*tāmasic*) (642-43) based on the *Mīmāṃsakas*' theory of *vidhi*, whether they are performed according to the prescribed injunctions and prohibitions of the *Vedas* or not. In X.22, Kṛṣṇa declares himself to be *Sāmaveda*, the musical hymns to be sung at sacrificial rites (Gambhirananda's translation 414). This also reveals the *Gītā*'s strong regard for the *Vedic* ritualism of the *Mīmāṃsakas*.

The *Vedic* notion of *yajñas* is defined in IV.23–33 of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the context of the *Upanisadic* Philosophy (Gambhirananda's translation 207–22). The *Upanisadas* define the word "Brahman" as "an ultimate differenceless principle" (474) and "an ultimate superior state of realization" (Dasgupta "Philosophy" 475). The *Upanisadas* hold that *Brahman* is the highest form of God, which devalues the status of the *Vedic* deities Varuna, Agni, Indra, and others. The *Gītā* distinguishes between two types of *yajñas*: the *daiva-yajña*, which involves offering sacrifices to the *Vedic* gods, and the *brahma-yajña*, which involves dedicating oneself to *Brahman*, where *Brahman* is the offerer, offering, and fire of oblations. By doing this, one becomes lost in *Brahman* (IV.24-5, Gambhirananda's translation 208, 213). The concept of *brahma-yajña* is applied to various human endeavours, whereas the *Vedic vidhis* are applied to *daiva-yajña*. The endeavor of a person to attain *Brahman* is defined here as the *brahma-yajña*. The *Gītā* also describes sense-control as being a kind of *yajña*. For the *Gītā*, "... the true sacrifice is the sacrifice of the sense delights" (Radhakrishnan "Theism" 489). In the fire of senses, the sense-objects are offered as libations, and in the fire of sense-control, the senses themselves are offered as libations (IV.26, 215). In the fire of sense-control kindled by knowledge, all sense functions and vital functions are also offered as libations (IV.27, 215). The *Gītā* describes the various kinds of *yajñas* (*bahu-vidhā yajñāḥ*) (IV. 32, 220). There are five different types of *yajñas*: *dravya-yajña*, which is a *yajña* that uses material objects as libation; *tapo-yajña*, which is a *yajña* of asceticism or self-control; *yoga-yajña*, which is a *yajña* of union or communion; the *yajña* of scriptural studies, called *svādhyāya-yajña* and the *yajña* of knowledge or wisdom, called *jñāna-yajña* (IV. 28, 216-17). Thus, the *Gītā* expands the use of the term *yajña* beyond its original *Vedic* meaning of *daiva/dravya yajña* to include the various types of *yajñas* performed for the purpose of achieving self-advancement or the attainment of the ultimate realization, the *Upanisadic Brahman*. The *Gītā* defines the *yajñas* as the most essential things for the human beings (IV.31, 219) and takes the *jñāna-yajña* as being

greater (śreyān) than the *dravya-yajña* (IV.33, Gambhirananda's translation 221-22). The *jñāna-yajña* is given a great significance in the *Gītā* due to the impact of the *Upanisadic* influence. In the verses above, the *Gītā* makes a reconciliation between the *Upanisadic* spiritual knowledge and the *Vedic* doctrine of *yajñas*. It explains the *Upanisadic* theory of knowledge based on the *Vedic* theory of *yajñas*.

The *Gītā*, as mentioned above, mystifies the creation of the *Vedas* in the verse III.15 and hence, it accepts the authority of the *Vedas*. In XVI.23, the *Gītā* advises that in order to achieve perfection (*siddhim*), happiness in this life (*sukham*), and ultimate redemption (*parām gatim*), humans should act in accordance with the *Vedic* principles (*śāstra-vidhim*) rather than under the influence of desire (*kama-karatah*) (632–33). In XVI.24, the *Gītā* explains the concept:

tasmācchāstraṁ pramāṇaṁ te kāryākāryavyavasthitau

jñātvā śāstravidhānoktaṁ karma kartumihārhasi

[Therefore, the scripture is your authority as regards the determination of what is to be done and what is not to be done. After understanding (your) duty as presented by scriptural injunction, you ought to perform (your duty) here.]. (Gambhirananda's translation 633)

The verse attributes the ultimate authority to the *Vedas* for determining the right and wrong of every human action. This is how the *Mīmāṃsakas* define virtue (*dharma*) as the obedience to *Vedic* injunctions. The *Mīmāṃsā* schools hold that anything condemned by the *Vedas* is bad and sin, and everything that is encouraged by the *Vedas* is seen as virtue. Things that the *Vedas* neither forbid nor encourage are regarded as neutral (Dasgupta "Philosophy" 483). This means that the *Vedas* can be used as a scale to distinguish between right and wrong behaviour. *Dharma* is restricted to deeds prescribed by the *Vedas*, even though they may occasionally be linked to negative outcomes. Therefore, in XVI.23-4, the *Gītā* adopts the same idea as the *Mīmāṃsakas* on the question of the authority of the *Vedas*.

The *Gītā*, however, does not praise the *Vedas* and the *Vedic* observances in all the verses. The *Gītā* limits the usefulness of performing the *Vedic* observances in IX.20-1. Only those who are knowledgeable about the three *Vedas* (*trai-vidyāḥ*), drink *Soma* (*somapāḥ*), and offer sacrifices (*yajñaiḥ*) are able to enter the world of the gods (*surendralokam*) (IX.20, 386), and they return to the human world (*martyalokam*) once their merit (*kṣīṇe puṇye*) has been used up (IX.21, 387). This suggests that a person's ultimate salvation—being free from the cycles of rebirth—is not attained by following *Vedic* observances. In doing so, the *Vedas* and *Vedic* observances are minimised. Furthermore, the *Gītā* even denounces the *Vedic* texts and the *Vedic* rites and duties in II.42-3:

yāmimām puṣpitām vācam pravadantyavipaścitaḥ

vedavādaratāḥ pārtha nānyadastitvādinaḥ

kāmātmānaḥ svargaparā janmakarmaphalapradām

kriyāviśeṣabahulām bhogaiśvaryagatiṁ prati

(O son of Prtha, those undiscerning people who utter this flowery talk – which promises birth as a result of rites and duties, and is full of various special rites meant for the attainment of enjoyment and affluence –, they remain engrossed in the utterances of the Vedas and declare that nothing else exists; their minds are full of desires and they have heaven as the goal.). (88)

The verses condemn those who are involved in the performance of various special rites (*kriya-visesa-bahulam*) for the enjoyment and prosperity (*bhoga-aiśvarya-gatiṁ-prati*), who have their minds full of desire (*kāmātmānaḥ*), who have heaven as their goal (*svarga-parāḥ*), and who are absorbed in the utterances of the Vedas (*veda-vāda-ratāḥ*) (88-9). The confusion of the Vedic scriptures (*śruti-vi-pratipannā*) should not shock anyone, according to the *Gītā*, which compares the Vedic rituals and responsibilities (*vedesu*) to the water of a little spring (*udapāne*) (II.46, 92) (II.53, Gambhirananda's translation 99-100). The *Gītā* mystifies the creation of the Vedas and acknowledges their power to differentiate between right and wrong actions, giving them much respect. However, it also criticizes them and alerts us to their pretentious rhetoric and confusion. The Vedas and Vedic observances are condemned by the *Gītā* because they are influenced by commonplace cravings and hankerings. This concept goes against the *Mīmāṃsakas*' theory of sacrifice, based on the future reward, which the *Gītā* itself upholds in the verses III.9-15. This illustrates how the *Gītā* is incompatible with the Vedas and the Vedic observances, the *yajñas*.

Conclusion

The *Bhagavad Gītā* sounds contradictory while discussing the Vedas and Vedic *yajñas*. There is nothing divine about the Vedas; they are only the work of the ancient Aryan poets. The first *yajñas* had progressive value when they were performed as the collective mode of production in the original Aryan commune, and the early parts of the *R̥gveda* are materialist in content. Over time, the Vedic *yajñas* are transformed into rituals and the Vedas are elevated to a hallowed status. In order to amass private property and subjugate the *Vaiśyas* and *Sūdras*, the working class, the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Kṣatriyas*, the ruling class, used the Vedas and the Vedic ceremonial *yajñas* as ideological weapons. The early materialistic Vedas were transformed into a text of ritualism by the *Brāhmaṇas*, and the *Pūrvamīmāṃsā* school of thought organised the ceremonial parts of the Vedas. The *Mīmāṃsakas* make the *yajñas* the ultimate instruments for satisfying human desire and mystify the creation of the Vedas. The *Gītā* adheres to the *Mīmāṃsakas*' thought when it comes to the Vedas and the

Vedic ceremonial *yajñas*. In other verses, however, the *Gītā* contradicts the *Mīmāṃsakas* in an attempt to reconcile the *Vedic* theories of *yajña* into the *Upanisadic* knowledge, turning the goal-oriented *Vedic yajñas* into the desireless one, giving the impression that the *Gītā* has contradictory views on the *Vedas* and the *Vedic yajñas*.

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