Historical Evolution of the *Bhagavad Gītā*

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Abstract

This research article deals with the development of the Bhagavad Gītā in the present form. The study has its relevance to understand the historical origin of the text so that the reader could able to probe its importance in the present context. The article addresses on the research problems concerning to its affiliation with the epic Mahābhārata, the nature of the text in terms of its birth, its authorship and its date of production. Is the Gītā an independent treatise or a part of the epic? Is the text written at a time or it is a developing text? Who wrote it and when it was written? The article seeks answers to the aforementioned research questions by applying the methodological tool of the Marxist concept of historical materialism. The study reveals that the Bhagavad Gītā is found to be a developing text. The scholars are not unanimous regarding to its affiliation with the epic, to its authorship and its date of production.

Key Words : interpolated *Gītā*, original *Gītā*, philosophical discussion, war context

Introduction

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a philosophical treatise of Hindu religion. It is a much-debated text concerning to its affiliation to the epic *Mahābhārata,* its nature in terms of its birth, its authorship and its date of production. The majority of the text contains a lofty philosophical discussion that, despite being viewed as a component of the war epic, has nothing to do with combat-related themes. It is claimed that the text is written by Veda-Vyasa but there is no material ground to prove it. The text's content suggests that it was not all written at once, and its many sections illustrate the traits of the two historical eras of Indian history. This shows that it is a developing text that was written by various authors at various points in time. The text is divided essentially into two sections: the original *Gītā* and the interpolated *Gītā*, which were both composed under early Indian slavery and feudalism, respectively.

Portrayal of the Issue

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is thought to be a portion of the *Bhisma Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, but scholars have differing opinions on the text's place in the epic. Some claim that it is a passage from the *Mahābhārata*, while others insist that it is a later addition to the epic. For instance, S. Radhakrishnan thinks the *Gītā* is a component of the epic: "There are internal references to the BhagavadGītā in the Mahābhārata which clearly indicate that from the time of the composition of the Mahābhārata the Gītā has been looked upon as a genuine part of it" ("Theism" 445-6). The *Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata*,

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according to Lokamanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, are complementary to one another because they were both composed by the same author Vyasa and belonged to the same religion, the Bhagavata (2). The *Gītā*, in Surendranath Dasgupta's opinion, belongs to the Bhagavata School and is a part of the *Mahābhārata*:

> The *Gītā* may have been a work of the Bhagavata school written long before the composition of the *Maha-bharata*, and may have been written on the basis of the Bharata legend, on which the *Maha-bharata* was based. It is not improbable that the *Gītā,* which summarized the older teachings of the Bhagavata school, was incorporated into the *Maha-bharata*, during one of its revisions, by reason of the sacredness that it had attained at the time. (552)

Dasgupta views the *Gītā* as more of a Bhagavata School treatise than an element of the epic. He asserts that the *Gītā*, which contains the more ancient teachings of the Bhagavata School, was sacred enough to be rewritten later on the basis of the Bharata narrative and then included into the *Mahābhārata*.

A long philosophical discussion takes place in the *Gītā* over the imminence of the Great War. Such a protracted philosophical debate is unlikely to take place at this pivotal juncture in the war. Shripad Amrit Dange points out: "Certainly the eighteen chapters of the *Geeta* were not produced between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna right in the middle of the field of battle, as the traditional account tell us. . . . The theoretician of the Mahābhārata war complied that book in some peaceful corner" (160). Dange casts doubt on the veracity of the lengthy philosophical exchange between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna that occurred on the battlefield, but he considers the text as belonging to the *Mahābhārata* since he does not believe the *Gītā*'s philosophy to be distinct from the epic's philosophy. In addition, he believes that the *Gītā* presents an organized theory of the epic's philosophy.

Some academics, however, disagree and claim that the *Gītā* does not belong to the epic in its current form. Regarding the *Gītā'*s protracted philosophical debate on the battlefield, D.D. Kosambi poses the same query as Dange:

> What is highly improbable – except to the Brāhmiṇ bent upon getting his *niti* revisions into a popular lay of war – is this most intricate three-hour discourse on moral philosophy, after the battle-conches had blared out in mutual defiance and two vast armies had begun their inexorable movement towards collision. ("Social" 21)

It is highly improbable that a three-hour moral philosophy discussion would take place on a battlefield when two opposing factions were about to clash. This led Kosambi to believe that ". . . the *Gītā* was obviously a new composition", and it is not the part of the *Mahābhārata*. Kosambi, in contrast to Dasgupta, does not think that the *Gītā* was written beforehand and added to the *Mahābhārata* subsequently. According to Kosambi, the *Gītā* was a later invention by the *Brāhmiṇs*, who had incorporated it into the heroic narratives of the *Mahābhārata* war to persuade and enlist the lower classes into the *Brāhmaṇical* fold: "The lower classes were necessary as an audience, and the heroic lays of ancient war

drew, them to the recitation. This made the epic a most convenient vehicle for any doctrine which the Brāhmiṇs wanted to insert" ("Social" 21). The size and content of the *Gītā* support Kosambi's assertion that it is a *Brāhmaṇical* trick to include the *Gītā* as a part of the *Mahābhārata* since the *Brāhmiṇs* could find no other context for the *Gītā* than the well-known story of the *Mahābhārata*, which had already captured the attention of the majority of the general masses of Indian people.

Meghnad Desai advances a similar line of reasoning when debating the *Gītā*'s admissibility as a component of the *Mahābhārata*: "The Gītā could have been, to begin with, a short, sharp rebuke for Arjuna to get out of his despondence and fight. Time was urgent and people were impatiently waiting to start fighting. This was no time for a long philosophical treatise" ("Arjuna" 63). There might have been a brief *Gītā* that could have provided dejected Arjuna with a quick boost of inspiration, but Desai believes it is impossible for there to have such a *Gītā* on the battlefield that carries such extensive philosophical discourse. This makes him think that the *Gītā*, in its current form, cannot be a component of the *Mahābhārata*. The *Gītā* is an autonomous treatise, not a component of the *Mahābhārata*, according to B.R. Ambedkar's alternative logic: "Who set 18 as the sacred number, the Mahābhārata or the Gītā? If the Mahābhārata, then Gītā must have been written after the Mahābhārata. If it is the Bhagvat Gītā, then the Mahābhārata must have been written after the Gītā. In any case, the two could not have been written at one and the same time" (194). In ancient India, it was customary to hold particular names and numbers in the highest regard. The *Mahābhārata*, *Purāṇas*, and *Gītā* were also associated with the name Vyasa and the number 18. Ambedkar is implied to have said that the *Mahābhārata* and the *Gītā* are separate writings that do not represent the same treatise.

Since the *Gītā*'s extensive discussion of moral philosophy on the battlefield is out of place in the setting of the war, it cannot be regarded in its current form as a component of the epic. However, it is generally acknowledged that there must have been a brief, pointed "original *Gītā*" that could be regarded as the part of the *Mahābhārata*. Kosambi admits: "That the older Bharata epic had a shorter but similar Gītā is most unlikely" ("Social" 21). This line of inquiry into the *Gītā* provides us with a hint that, like the epic, the *Gītā* likewise evolved to take on its current shape. According to R. Garbe and Rudolf Otto, a student of Garbe, the *Gītā* is divided into two parts: the original and the addition. The original *Gītā* contains 118 verses for Otto (21-33). According to H. Oldenburg, *BG* 2.38 marks the conclusion of the "original epic *Gītā*," and the other verses are considered subsequent interpolations. The original *Gītā* by Oldenburg only has 85 verses (328-38). Hermann Jacobi only considers 70 of the verses he collected from chapters 1, 2, and 18 to be original (323-27). Von Humboldt believed that chapters 1 to 11 and the additional 16 verses from *BG* 18.63 to *BG* 18.78 comprised the teaching of the *Gītā*, and he saw the remaining verses more as an appendix to or repetitions of chapters 1 to 11 (46-7). Morton R. Smith revealed that chapters 1 to 12 with *BG* 18.55-78 were written by the first author, chapters 13 to 16 by a second author, and layer *BG* 17.1-18.54 by a third author by analyzing the ratio of types of stems, compounds, and particles to lines (39-46).

In his work *Quest for the Original Gītā*, Maharashtrian scholar Gajanan Shripat Khair pursues a similar line of inquiry into the *Gītā*. Khair, based on his own textual examination of the text, came to the conclusion that the *Gītā* comprises three distinct portions written by at least three writers, finding an original *Gītā* of 126 verses from most of the chapters 1 to 6. A total of 119 verses from chapter 8, chapters 13 to 15, 17 and portions of chapter 18 are included in the second section of the text. The third section of the text, which consists of the remaining 455 verses drawn from various chapters, is the longest. He refers to this *Gītā* arrangement as *Trikala Gītā* (205-39). The *Gītā* is divided into different layers by Mislav Jezic. According to Jezic, the lyrical sections of the *Gītā* are older than the didactic sections, the *Sāṅkhya* and *Yoga* layers come before the *Vedāntic* elements, and the *Bhakti* layers come last (125-42). Only 84 verses in the first three chapters, in Phulgenda Sinha's opinion, are original. These 84 verses comprise 11 verses in chapter 1 that address Arjuna's issue, 42 verses in chapter 2 that address Kṛṣṇa's response, two verses that address Arjuna's concern regarding whether action or knowledge is preferable and 29 verses giving the answer of his question in chapter 3 (25-30). The *Gītā* is divided into three parts by Angelica Malinar, two of which correspond to historical periods and one of which serves as a commentary on preceding chapters. The first part, which has 306 verses, dates back to the time when Kṛṣṇa was not considered the highest God. The second part, which has 218 verses, dates back to the time when Kṛṣṇa was elevated to the highest God, propounding a monotheistic doctrine. The remaining verses are found to be the part of the commentary (394-415).

In terms of how the text has evolved, Ambedkar divides it into four sections: the original *Gītā* and three patches that were added subsequently. His original *Gītā* contains the magnificent story told by the bards about how Arjuna was not ready to fight and how Kṛṣṇa pushed him to take part in the conflict. The first addition to the original *Gītā* is the passage where Kṛṣṇa is identified as Ishwara, the deity of the Bhagavat religion. A justification of the *Pūrva Mīmāṁsā* ideas by the *Sāṅkhya* and *Vedānta* philosophy is presented in the second patch to the original *Gītā*. The third patch on the original *Gītā* comprises that part in which Kṛṣṇa is elevated from the position of *Ishwara* to that of *Parmeshwara* (195-6). Ambedkar divides the *Gītā* according to its stages of development. Based on Khair's *Trikala Gītā*, Desai has looked into the issue of the original *Gītā* and its further developments. Although he agrees with Khair's suggestion that the *Gītā* had three writers, he separates the *Gītā* into four *Gītā*s. They are: a) Arjuna's *Gītā* b) the *Veda-Vedānta Gītā* or *Karma Yoga Gītā* c) the *Sāṅkhya Gītā* or *Jñāna Yoga Gītā* and d) the *Bhakti Yoga Gītā* ("Authorship" 126). Desai divides the *Gītā* according to the themes conveyed by all these four *Gītā*s.

Regarding the authorship and the date of the text, there are conflicting views. Although Radhakrishnan regards the *Gītā* as a legitimate component of the *Mahābhārata*, he is unable to identify Vyasa as its author: "We do not know the name of the author of the *Gītā*. Almost all the books belonging to the early literature of India are anonymous. The authorship of the *Gītā* is attributed to Vyasa, the legendary compiler of the *Mahābhārata*" ("Introductory" 5). Because Radhakrishnan accepts that nearly all ancient

texts are anonymous, he is not even certain that Vyasa is the author of the *Mahābhārata*. According to him, the *Gītā* was written in the fifth century B.C. ("Theism" 447). Tilak believes that both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Gītā* were written by Vyasa ("Introductory" 2). Tilak emphasized about the antiquity of the *Gītā* since he ascribes Vyasa as the text's creator. Dasgupta cannot tell the author of the *Gītā* (443), but he assigns the date of the *Gītā* as pre-Buddhist:

> We are thus led to assign to the *Gītā* a very early date, and, since there is no definite evidence to show that it was pos-Buddhistic, and since also the *Gītā* does not contain the slightest reference to anything Buddhistic, I venture to suggest that it is pre-Buddhistic, however unfashionable such a view may appear. An examination of the *Gītā* from the point of view of language also shows that it is archaic and largely un-Paninean. (551)

Dasgupta categorizes the work as pre-Buddhistic based on his analysis of the language used in the text and whether he discovered Buddhist references within the text or not, although he is not persuaded by his claim in the absence of solid proof.

Kosambi refers to the *Gītā* as "the Brāhmiṇ redaction" ("Aryans" 92), but he is unable to identify the text's true author. He was even unable to provide the correct date for the composition of the *Gītā* as he argues: "The works survive, but the author's date is rarely known. With luck, it may be possible to determine roughly the century to which the writing belonged; often it can only be said that the writer existed" ("Historical" 10). Kosambi has placed the *Gītā*'s composition date as "somewhere between 150 and 350 A.D." ("Social" 20). The *Gītā* is viewed by S.G. Sardesai as the post-Buddhist product of the *Brāhmins* (15), and he places the text's genesis date "somewhere between the beginning of the Christian period and 250 A.D." (6). Garbe dates the original *Gītā* to 200 B.C. and the current form of the *Gītā* to 200 A.D., while R. G. Bhandarkar dates the *Gītā* to the 4th century B.C. (qtd. in Radhakrishnan "Theism" 446). Without mentioning their names, Khair identifies the three writers of his *Trikala Gītā* and dates the first portion of the *Gītā* as pre-Buddhist, the second part as contemporary with the Buddha, and the last section as written between 300 and 200 BCE. Malinar is unable to identify the authors of her three divisions of the *Gītā*. Instead, she dates the first section between the third and second centuries BCE, the second section between the second and first centuries BCE, and the final section to the early Kusana period (1st century CE). Gerard D.C. Kuiken assigns the period between 400 and 100 BCE, to which he discovers chapter 11 was added sometime in the first century CE, despite the fact that he does not specify the authors of "a layered structure" of the *Gītā* (10).

Ambedkar is unable to identify the true writers of his original and the other three patches of the *Gītā*. However, he objects to Vyasa being the *Gītā*'s author: "It is well-known how orthodox writers wishing to hide their identity get better authority for their works by the use of a revered name were in the habit of using Vyasa as a nom-de-plume or pen name. If the author of the *Gītā* is a Vyasa, he must be a different Vyasa" (194). He thinks it was customary for orthodox writers in ancient India to publish all of their works

under the respected pen name Vyasa in order to gain credibility and prestige. Ambedkar acknowledges that the original, unphilosophical *Gītā* is a portion of the *Jaya*, the first edition of the *Mahābhārata*, and that its date must correspond to that of the *Jaya* and he assigns the date of the first patch of the *Gītā* "Sometimes later than Megasthenes when Kṛṣṇa was only a tribal God." According to him, the *Gītā*'s second and third patches were composed "after than the time of Jaimini and Badarayana" and "during the reign of the Gupta Kings," respectively (197). Desai cannot give the valid name and the date of the *Gītā* (Preface XII), but he takes the risk of disclosing the full name of the *Gītā*'s last segment's author: "Badarayana was the third author who gave a shape to the *Gītā* which has made it a classic of Sanskrit literature as well as a philosophic treatise. His theistic gloss on the Upanishads in the *Brahmasūtra* encourages me to think of him as the author of the bhakti chapters in the Gītā "(126). The *Brahmasūtra* is mentioned in the *Gītā* in XIII.4, and Badarayana is credited with writing it. The *Brahmasūtra* expresses a similar theistic worldview to the *Upaniṣads* and the *Gītā*. As a result, Desai comes to the conclusion that Badarayana must be the author of the *Gītā's* concluding section. Desai, like Ambedkar, acknowledges that the original brief *Gītā*, which discussed the conflict, was a part of the first edition of the *Mahābhārata* and dates the other three segments as pre-Buddhist, contemporary with the Buddha, and during the revival of *Brāhmaṇism* ("Authorship" 133).

It is obvious that the *Gītā*, like the *Mahābhārata*, evolves into its current form through several additions and adjustments. The experts disagree on the *Gītā*'s specific split, but they all agreed that the *Mahābhārata* is divided into three parts: *Jaya*, *Bharata*, and *Mahābhārata*. However, the majority of them concurred that there was just one original, brief, sharp *Gītā* that was relevant to the setting of the actual Bharata War. The lengthy philosophical discussion had no place in that *Gītā*, and "it was nothing more than a heroic tale" (Ambedkar 195). The original *Gītā* was mainly concerned with the ongoing war, Arjuna's hesitation to take up arms against his family members, and Kṛṣṇa's brief but powerful warning to Arjuna to join the fighting. The authentic portion of the *Mahābhārata*'s epic tale is found in the original *Gītā*. In terms of the division of the original *Gītā*, Oldenburg's discovery supports mine. The verse II.38 (83) marks the conclusion of the original *Gītā* because the verses that follow it do not focus primarily on the topic of battle. Although several verses even after II.38 address the topic of battle, they do not seem authentic or pertinent to the setting of conflict. For instance, in XI.26–34, the *Gītā* cites the fictitious demises of practically all warriors of the battlefield, entering into the voracious mouth of *Birāt* Kṛṣṇa in an effort to persuade Arjuna to join the fight (Gambhirananda 446–52). However, it is foolish and untrue because no combat commander uses such a strategy to inspire the soldiers on the battlefield. It is only the author of the interpolated version of the *Gītā*'s attempt to link the monotheistic text addressed in this section with the heroic tale of the epic. The essence of various schools of philosophy, including the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Sāṅkhya*, *Yoga*, and *Lokāyata*, is discussed in other verses after II.38. Some of these verses, despite seeming pointless and arbitrary, attempt to connect the essence of the philosophies discussed with the question of encouraging Arjuna to take part in the war. All the lines after II.38 of the *Gītā*, which

depart from the context of the war, were afterwards included into the epic in order to increase its reputation alongside that of the *Mahābhārata*'s heroic tale. This is interpolated *Gītā*, which is primarily focused on the discussion of the various philosophical schools.

Conclusion

The article concludes that the *Gītā* is not a fully developed work that was authored concurrently by a single author. Although different academics have differing views on the text's history and evolution, most of them agree that it was produced in two distinct phases. The minimum verses of the text that relate to the context of the war is regarded as the original *Gītā* and the major portion of the text that is engaged in discussing philosophies is taken here as an interpolated *Gītā*. The two sections of the *Gītā,* according to a historical materialist study of their content, were produced ideologically during two distinct periods in Indian history. The first concise original *Gītā* describes the ideologies of the era when the territorial slave republics were being strengthened and the ancient Indian *Gaṇa-Saṁghas* and gentile civilizations were disintegrating. It is found that the interpolated *Gītā* is a post-Buddhist philosophical construction that captures the prevailing ideologies. The *Gītā* with its interpolated version have become the primary weapon used by post-Buddhist *Brāhmiṇs*' in their war against Buddhist hegemony.

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