

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 marga*. Sankarācārya has interpreted the text through the point of view of *jñāna marga* 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 marga* 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* . . .” (5). The main teachings of the *Vedas*, according to Sankara, are repeated in the *Gītā* in a new light. The *R̥gveda* divides the society into *Brāhmiṇ*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśyas*, and *Sūdras* on a functional basis and Sankara takes the hereditary based *Cāturvarṇāh* of the *Gītā* as the borrowing of the *R̥gveda*. 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 Krsna, 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. (4)

R̥gvedic Varṇa division is the division of labor and not class division but Sankara finds *R̥gvedic 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 *Vaiśyas* and *Sūdras* especially *Sūdras* 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 (*Viśiṣṭadvaita*) school of *Vedānta* theology. S. Rajamani informs: "His philosophy of *Viśiṣṭadvaita*, 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 devotion 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 Madhvabhāṣya 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

Vaishnavism, Prabhupada is the first major commentator of the *Gītā* who gives its commentary in the light of the philosophy of Chaitanya's *Vaishnavism*. In *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is*, his English translation of the *Gītā*, Prabhupada has interpreted the text as their chief philosophical treatise that serves their *Hare Kṛṣṇa movement* to gain its height:

In this present day, people are very much eager to have one scripture, one God, one religion, and one occupation. Therefore, *ekam sastram devaki-putra-Gītām*: let there be one scripture only, one common scripture for the whole world – *Bhagavad-Gītā*. *Eko devo devaki-putra eva*: let there be one God for the whole world – Sri Kṛṣṇa. *Eko mantras tasya namani*: and one hymn, one mantra, one prayer – the chanting of His name: Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. *Karmapy ekam tasya devasya seva*: and let there be one work only – the service of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. (38-39)

Prabhupada has suggested the humanity to adopt one scripture-*Bhagavad Gītā*, one God-Sri Kṛṣṇa, one prayer-Hare Kṛṣṇa, one work-the service of the Supreme God, Sri Kṛṣṇa and this implies the one religion-Chaitanya's *Vaishnavism*. Prabhupada's interpretation of the *Gītā* has no place to the *jñāna mārṅa* as suggested by Sankara and it is totally indifferent to the *karma mārṅa* because he does not give any value to worldly performances that people do except one work i.e. the service of Lord Kṛṣṇa.

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*

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 Mahabrabhu 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 Prabhupada 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 (*Viśistadvaita*) school of *Vedānta* theology. Ramanuja highlights the *bhakti mārga* 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 *Vaiṣṇava* 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. Prabhupada, in the modern world, establishes the *Gītā* as an authorial text of *Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism*, the most recently established school by Chaitanya. In his interpretation of the *Gītā*, Prabhupada 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.

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