

Modesty and humility in times of crisis

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OFTENTIMES what looks like a philosophical question requires a historical response. Is modesty in not criticizing others enough to anchor Gandhian nonviolence? To answer this question we need to take a detour and place the question within the context of three strands of the intellectual history of modern India: modernization of the *Bhagavadgita* through the transformation of its categories; changes in the objects and strategies of demonization; and a search for the figure of an exceptional person who can bring deliverance to a people in crisis.

Outside the growing community of Gandhi scholars, the best-known works of Gandhi are *My Experiments with Truth* and *Hind Swaraj*. His introduction to the translation of the Gita, later published as *Anasaktiyoga* (1929), will probably be a distant third. Gandhi's other commentaries on the Gita¹ are barely known among the lay readers today. This is understandable. Originally meant for the *ashram* inmates, they are not short and concise enough. Even academics are not likely to be impressed by the untidy arguments, occasional digressions and the somewhat rambling style of those discourses, especially when they come to us today in the form of books. And yet, these books, if seen in the relevant intellectual context, demonstrate that even as he untiringly opposed the slide of Indian nationalism towards militancy and communalism, Gandhi shared certain intellectual tendencies of nationalist thought. Starting with Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, there is a trend of modernizing the Gita discourse in response to the urgent political needs of the late 19th and early 20th century Indian nationalism. Gandhi did not share this politics in its entirety; in fact he had several serious reservations about it. But along with Tilak and Aurobindo, he made the Gita a central text of modern India.

Over the centuries there have been several commentaries on the Gita. But, going by the available evidence, it did not enjoy pre-eminence in the intellectual life of pre-modern India. Ironically, it was under colonialism that the fortunes of the text changed. The two English translations of the Gita, first in 1785 by Charles Wilkins, a company official, and a century later in 1885 by Edwin Arnold, made it available within India and outside it. What was earlier restricted to the circles of the traditional Indian *pandits* was now being discussed by the Orientalists, the Theosophists, the missionaries, and therefore also by the English educated Indians.

Thus the importance of the Gita – that it contained the essence of Hindu philosophy – was already established by the late 19th century. What remained to be revealed was its meaning. In making the centuries-old text speak to their contemporaries, the Indian nationalists followed the English translators in being selective about the commentarial tradition that had grown around the Gita. In this tradition, the verses of the Gita and its central categories had been understood in the context of the debates on ritual and renunciation. By ignoring that context, the modern translators gave plain meanings to its central categories. With this some verses suddenly shot into prominence, and the message of the Gita changed. From a text on spiritual praxis, it became a philosophical and political text.

This trend starts with Bankim. When, in his truncated commentary on the Gita, he comes to the now famous '*karmany eva adbhikarah te*' verse from the second chapter, he says that the *acharyas* have created confusion over the meaning of the term *karma*. Thanks to them, we take it to mean Vedic ritual. But this is nonsense. It must mean work – *kaaj* – or action. With this, not only the term but the whole Gita is placed in an open hermeneutic field. Sibaji Bandyopadhyay puts it well: 'Freeing the term from

the iron-shackle of meaning given to it by the pre-modern commentaries, Bankim transports the word from constricted signification to that of open, unbound signification.² After this it became possible for the later commentators to use the term 'karma' in the sense of action in general and then to transfer what the Gita says about ritual action to political action. *Karmayoga*, which once meant performance of Vedic ritual, now came to mean the 'yoga of action', and *samnyas*, which meant 'abandonment of all ritual activity', now meant 'abandonment of all desire'. A nation, accused of passivity, now had a creed, a philosophy of action.

This is clearly seen in Tilak's influential commentary on the Gita. He was able to claim that the Gita asks us to work for the welfare of the world, a philosophy of '*lokasamgraha*', because by the time he set out to present his interpretation of the Gita, the new meanings of its categories had been consolidated. '*Lokasamgraha*', literally means protection and maintenance of the '*lokas*' or the worlds. An important text from the late 14th century (*Jivanmuktiviveka*) explains the idea of working for '*lokasamgraha*' thus: 'The world (*loka*) to be served may be divided into three kinds: the world of pupils, the world of devotees, and the world of neither.'³ The world of pupils is served when the yogi teaches them, that of devotees benefits from the penance practised by the yogi, and the unbelievers are rid of their sins by a mere glance of the yogi.

Contrast this with Tilak, who takes '*loka*' to mean 'people' or 'society', and '*lokasamgraha*' to mean 'public benefit'. This transformation of the category becomes possible because of another, more momentous, transformation of the category of 'karma' as 'action', already inaugurated by the colonial translations and authenticated by Bankim. (Aurobindo says that the teaching of the Gita is vast, subtle and for all times; 'karma', therefore, cannot be taken in its narrow sense of Vedic rituals and duties.⁴) In fact there is a two-step operation here. Having argued that 'karma' means *any* action, these commentators then focus on specific kind of action so that what the Gita says of ritual action is transferred to political/social action. If the Gita says that you must perform a ritual without attachment, it is taken to mean that you must perform nationalist politics in a selfless manner. Tilak goes one step further to argue obliquely, on the authority of the Gita, that if for the sake of the nation we have to kill, we must carry out the act in a most detached manner, free of hatred and anger.⁵

This process of transformation takes in its unreflective sweep most other major categories of the Gita. '*Samkalpa*', as in '*sarva samkalpa samnyasi*' (6.4), '*Arambha*', in '*sarvarambha parityagi*' (12.16), and '*Adhikara*' in the famous '*karmany eva adhikarh te*' (2.47) verse. '*Adhikara*', as used by the Mimamsakas, meant 'the sum of properties in a prospective performer of a ritual which qualify him to perform the ritual.'⁶ In modern translations it was variously translated as 'right', 'entitlement', 'motive', 'task', and 'province'. '*Arambha*', used in ascetic literature, meant ritual activities;⁷ '*sarvarambha parityagi*' would then mean 'the one who has given up all rituals' and '*samkalpa*' meant intention behind a ritual.⁸ Now '*arambha*' became 'enterprise', 'undertaking', and '*Samkalpa*' was rendered as 'desire' or 'selfish purpose' behind an action.⁹

It should not surprise us that Gandhi too participates in this general intellectual trend of his time. He too uses the pre-modern categories in the plain, decontextualized sense so that they can work for a different philosophical task. How he is still able to take a position against militant and communal nationalism, and do so from within the Gita discourse, remains a minor puzzle. The puzzle is solved if we look at another trend that Gandhi refused to be part of and towards which Bankim, Tilak and Aurobindo were at best ambivalent.

This strand of the intellectual history of modern India, though not new, was one of demonization. Over the centuries it had had various targets. Charvaka and his followers, atheists, those who follow Tantra, perform 'unsanctioned rites', indulge in magic, Buddhists – all had been called *asuras* and their world views *asuri* at some point or the other. The *Puranas* were full of the stories of *daityas*. The story of the evil Vena, who forbids Vedic rites and tries to usurp God, appears in nearly a dozen Puranas across centuries. And the 16th chapter of the Gita vividly describes the asuri people who hate Narayana.

So the figures of the asuras and *rakshasas* were not new. What was new was the way these figures were used in modern India. If earlier they were understood to be mythological figures, they were now seen to have a presence in our midst – in the past as well as in the present. Earlier too political adversaries were freely demonized but this was regardless of the religious identity of the opponent. The depiction in the medieval inscriptions and *kavyas* of the raiding or attacking armies as brutal and destructive *daityas* was part of the literary style. Now these depictions were taken as factual reports and used as sources for writing the history of that Dark Age. *Pauranic* stories were superimposed on select historical events. Whole communities were identified on religious basis and demonized as lustful, given to addictions, prone to vandalism, desecrating temples and idols, committing atrocities. The 'self' was expanded beyond the Brahmanical religion, the asuri 'other' was no longer confined to the category of the denigrators of the *devas* and the Brahmanas. Demonization was now part of the communal polarization that had set in towards the end of the 19th century.

Unlike the other Gita commentators of modern India, who either contributed to this trend or failed to make a decisive break with it, Gandhi took a clear stand against it. What made it possible for him to be different from his illustrious predecessors and contemporaries was *not* that he was not given to stereotyping groups and communities. The reason was something different. In his understanding of the daivy and the asuri he drew upon the *Upanishadic* insight that desire and anger are the roots of what we call asuri. If there is no separate class of demons, and if instead they are inside us all, then the usual question of whether violent means are justified in dealing with them does not arise. But these were important questions for the other Gita commentators. Addressing these questions required some ingenuity because Gita's dualism seemed to sanction a righteous battle between the good and the evil, but it also made it difficult to enact this battle.

To understand the difficulty we must note that the opposite of the asuri, which is daivy, is a person who does not criticize others, is free of hatred, is pure, tranquil, gentle, leads a simple and disciplined life. No doubt he is energetic, steadfast, and persevering. But can such a compassionate and forgiving person undertake the responsibility of vanquishing evil and liberating modern colonial India from the personifications of desire and anger, the veritable asuras? If the dualism of good and evil is to be accepted then what about the dualism of the daivy and the asuri where the persons with godly tendencies are contemplative gentle souls whereas the demonic types are very active but active with the wrong sort of deeds and projects? The problem is how to rescue the dynamism of the asuri from desire and anger – the roots of that dynamism?

This parallels a problem the Gita as a whole presents to modern commentators: how to harness *rajas* – the principle of activity – without greed and anger and ambition that necessarily go with it? This can be done by resorting to the figure of a *jivanmukta* – a liberated person, a *siddha* – someone who has achieved spiritual perfection, who is beyond anger and desire, and who, therefore, cannot commit any wrong. The *siddha* can then be entrusted with the responsibility of ridding the world of evil, if necessary by violent means.

The *jivanmukta* is one who is liberated and yet alive, that is someone who has realized his true self even as his bodily form persists. The *Advaita* School believes in it whereas the critics of the school, Ramanuja and his followers, dispute it. Both Aurobindo and Tilak make use of the idea of liberated action of a liberated person. Since the person is spiritually perfect, his actions cannot be judged by our usual norms or morality. He may seem to be doing something horrible, but that is because we perceive his actions with our limited human understanding. Citing a verse from the Gita (18.17), Tilak says the one who has no ego and whose intellect is unattached does not kill even if he annihilates the whole world. But is it humanly possible for anyone to become such a person, to be wholly without attachments of any sort, and therefore to have the authority to use violence and punish the evil? Tilak says it is, and cites names of mythological figures.

This solution might satisfy some, but the serious issue of recognizing a truly liberated person is not really addressed by Tilak. The problem is more acute for Aurobindo because of the relative and historically variable nature of good and evil in his philosophy: whatever furthers the divine plan is good, whatever hinders it is evil. But ordinary human intellect does not know divine will. How can we then judge the actions of our contemporaries and discern the divine in the human? This would happen in the case of an *avatara* as well. An *avatara* is not a perfect person, Aurobindo says, nor does he always perform miracles. He may even appear to 'fail' in accomplishing his goals. What he does or does not do is what suits the divine. Beyond that there is nothing special about him, no signs by which his contemporaries can recognize him. If they are perplexed, it is their problem. The divine will carry out its plans regardless of their perplexities, or *through* their perplexity.

The drift of these arguments by Tilak and Aurobindo towards the justification of punitive violence is quite clear. It can be countered by showing that the accounts of the 'siddha' or 'the liberated', 'the spiritually enlightened' we get from some of the *Upanishadas*, Puranas and medieval treatises on renunciation are very different from what the modern commentators would have us believe. He is hardly the wise philosopher statesman who guides lesser mortals on the path of righteous political action or takes time off from his spiritual pursuits to punish the wrongdoers. The liberated live a very different kind of life from that of the householder or worldly man. His spiritual accomplishments remain pre-carious, 'like a lamp at a windy place', and he has to follow a special practice to protect it. Involvement with political or social affairs is clearly incompatible with it. Moreover, recognizing the liberated is not easy. The ordinary mistake him for a drunkard, sages are not sure, the liberated himself may have doubts if he is truly liberated. It is difficult to recruit such a person for the project of nationalism.

Gandhi counters the violence-justifying readings of the Gita not by citing pre-modern texts but by questioning the very idea of the *jivanmukta* being ever present in our midst. Liberated and yet alive – that is a contradiction. If a person has absolutely no attachment to the world and to his body, why does his physical existence continue? If our attachment to ourselves has disappeared completely, we cannot remain alive even for a moment. That the body still persists shows that traces of attachment remain. And where there is attachment, there is violence. Conversely, if a person is totally detached, occasion for violence will not arise for him. The ideal of a liberated yet alive person is like the perfection of geometrical figures which in an actual world is impossible to copy. Knowing this, we should follow the royal path of holding all life sacred.

Gandhi's interpretation of the *avatara* doctrine is yet another instance of his vigilant reformulation of every idea that can be used, and has been used, for retributive philosophy. Whenever dharma declines, Gandhi says, God does indeed descend on earth and set things right. But the manner in which this happens is very different from what is commonly imagined. When the world is going through a period of crisis, when, in the words of W.B. Yeats, 'the best lack the conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity', God inspires the good men to do *tapashcharya* and generate goodness in the world. This account of how the world is saved from the wicked must discourage the habitual war cries and slow down the rush of adrenaline. But it is consistent with his allegorical reading of the *Mahabharata* war and with his Upanishadic understanding of evil.

In an important essay on Gandhi, Akeel Bilgrami¹⁰ has suggested that Gandhi replaced moral philosophy aimed at generating universalizable moral principles by moral practice aimed at setting an example. This replacement was crucial because moral principles must lead to criticism of those who refuse or fail to follow them and such criticism in turn is bound to generate within oneself feelings of resentment or hostility towards them. Nonviolence requires we eschew such criticism, not out of the misplaced diffidence about our own moral beliefs but because of the connection of criticism with anger. Central to Gandhi's moral practice is the idea of an exemplar: the one who wishes to bring about change in the world must live and act and choose in such a manner that others will (somehow) follow her.

Early on in the same essay, Bilgrami says that Gandhi's nonviolence is 'situated in an essentially religious temperament as well as in a thoroughgoing critique of ideas and ideologies of the Enlightenment....'¹¹ What he calls 'religious temperament' is actually a lot more than that. It is from his sustained engagement with Indian religious and philosophical texts, beliefs, customs and practices that Gandhi found the confidence and the basis for an alternative view of moral practice.

Taking these sources seriously, we realize that for Gandhi the exemplar is indeed 'setting an example', but also, and more importantly, generating a force of such potency that no falsehood can survive in its vicinity. Bilgrami is right in pointing out that Gandhi's 'modesty' is not born out of any radical doubt about having attained truth.¹² But again to understand what this 'modesty' is and where it comes from we must look at the various ways in which in his commentaries on the Gita, he deflates the idea of agency.

Gandhi speaks approvingly of becoming incapable of doing evil by becoming a eunuch, of becoming God's slave, of going about one's daily life in the manner of an inert but diligent part of a machine like the spinning wheel. The attitude of such a person is more than that of modesty; in fact we are not speaking of modesty here. It is humility. A person who has ceased to think of himself as the doer not only refrains from criticizing others for their moral failures. He no longer believes that he, or any human being, can bring about change in the world entirely on his own.

An unfortunate (but by no means philosophically unavoidable) consequence of this rejection of agency and choice is a defence of the *varna* based division of labour: I must earn my living by accepting the *varna* I am born into, by following the occupation of my family, by doing my *swabhavajanya karma*. But the same discussion also yields the concept of *sahaja prapta karma*, an action or a 'choice' that comes to me when I have emptied myself of all traces of ego. When I have no sense of 'I', no desires, no pride, God will prompt me to do what He, in His divine wisdom, thinks fit for me. I act, but only as an instrument of God. Living this way, I spare myself the alternations of hope and disappointment, I spare myself of a lot of needless *dhandhal*.

This way of living is not possible without a very different sense of time. Reformers and extremists alike act with a sense of urgency, sometimes tinged with desperation. Both progress and revolution are, quite understandably, accompanied by a fine calibration of historical time. But the man who always carried a pocket watch and was famous for his anxious punctuality reminded them of many such historical worlds that come into existence and are destroyed in cosmic time.¹³

* This article is based on my *Evil and the Philosophy of Retribution: Modern Commentaries on the Bhagavad-Gita*. Routledge, New Delhi, 2014. For an account of the process of demonization, see my, 'Asuras Through the Ages', in Nivedita Menon, Aditya Nigam and Sanjay Palshikar (eds.), *Critical Studies in Politics*. Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2014. Both the works were supported by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla.

Footnotes:

1. *Gitashikshan* or *The Discourses* (1926) and *The Letters on the Gita* (1932).
2. Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, 'Translating Gita 2.47 or Inventing the National Motto', *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* 16 (1 & 2), 2009, p. 53.
3. Subramanya S. Sastry and T.R. Srinivasa Ayyangar (tr. and eds.), *Jivanmuktiviveka (Liberation in Life) of Vidyaranya*. The Adyar Library and Research Centre, Madras, 1978, p. 380.
4. *Essays on the Gita*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, Pondicherry, 1977, p. 110.
5. *Srimad Bhagavadgita Rahasya or Karma-Yoga-Sastra*. Volume 1. Low Price Publications, Delhi, 2002, p. 550.
6. J.A.B. van Buitenen, *The Bhagavadgita in the Mahabharata*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981, p. 163.
7. Patrick Olivelle, *Renunciation in Hinduism: A Medieval Debate*. Volume 2. De Nobili Research Library, Vienna, 1987, p. 16.
8. Buitenen, op. cit., p. 165.
9. Modern day critics of Brahmanism will welcome this freeing of the categories of the Gita from the medieval debates that are now irrelevant. But the same modernization of the Gita has also made it available for recreational spirituality on television!
10. Akeel Bilgrami, 'Gandhi's Integrity: The Philosophy Behind the Politics', in A. Raghuramaraju (ed.), *Debating Gandhi: A Reader*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010, pp. 248-266.
11. Ibid., p. 249.
12. Bilgrami seems to have cognitive truth in mind judging by his discussion of J.S. Mill's epistemological argument in favour of modesty.
13. The important thing to look at would be how successful Gandhi was in reconciling historical time with the cyclical time of the *yugas*.