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Role of Shreemad Bhagwad Gita in Gandhi's Politics

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Abstract

ShreemadBhagwad Gita is one of the most important books of Hindu philosophy. It is the part of BhismaParva of the Mahabharata. Gita has mainly three basic principles such as Janana Yoga (Knowledge). Bhakti Yoga (worship) and Karma Yoga (Duty). This book is important not only for its philosophical relevance but its social as well as political relevance because during Indian freedom struggle, many political and social thinkers like Aurobindo, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Annie Besant Mahatma Gandhi etc. used Gita's philosophy in their politics.

Gandhi's politics was based on some principles such as truth, non-violence, self-control and morality and these principles were practiced by him in his political career. Gandhi introduces some new terms such as Satyagraha and non-cooperation and popularised the term Swaraj. Gandhi's political thinking was influenced by religious norms. In his childhood, Gandhi's religious understanding influenced by his parents and in his political career, he read some religious books like 'The Gita' which influenced his political understanding. Gandhi came to India in 1915 and travelled in various parts of India to understand Indian social and political condition. Gandhi, at first participated in a peasant movement at Champaran in Bihar where he successfully led the movement and could make government agree to provide some relief to the peasants of Champaran. After Champaran, he again participated in Kheda peasant movement and government accepted the demands of the peasants. In this way, Gandhi successfully started his beginning in Indian national movement. The success of Gandhi in these early movements of his political career was an indication for the acceptance of his philosophical principles and methods.

Key Words:Philosophy of the Gita, Gandhi's Philosophy, Gandhi's politics, Gandhi and Movements, Freedom Struggle.

Introduction:



Mohandas Karamchandra Gandhi, a well-known political leader of Indian national movement is known as Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi became Mahatma because of his political, social and religious understanding. Gandhi's political philosophy was guided by the religion. But Gandhi's religion was not a particular religion but it was the gist of all religions. His understanding of religion was based on ethics and morality. Gandhi was equally influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity. His understanding about truth, non-violence, peace, and duty was guided by the gist of these religions. The book that influenced Gandhi, was the Shrimad Bhagwat Gita.

Gandhi learned this book in his early political carrier. This book played significance role in the development of Gandhi's understanding. It influenced his whole political and social carrier. In this paper, the attempt will be made to understand the significance of the philosophy of the Gita in the construction of Gandhi's political philosophy.

Interpretation of the Gita:

The Gita is one of the most important literary sources to understand Hindu Philosophy. The Gita is a part of *Mahabharata*. Originally, The Gita is a conversation between Krishna and Arjuna. Charles Wilkins translated the Gita into English in 1785 at first and it was published by British East India Company. The first Governor-general of India, Lord Warren Hastings wrote its introduction. Hastings wrote in introduction, "I hesitate not to pronounce the Gita's performance of great originality, of sublimity of conception, reasoning and diction almost unequalled and a single exception amongst all the known religions of mankind" (Sethumadhavan, 2010). The Gita deals with human problems in a human way, therefore, it influenced many thinkers, writers, philosophers and scientists. Some of them were like, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, B.G. Tilak, Albert Einstein, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Annie Besant, Robert Oppenheimer, Carlyle and Sir Edwin Arnold etc. It was AdiSankara who revealed the importance of Gita in the 18th century in India. Sethumadhavan has seen The Gita as a text that has been less understood but a better known text and he further adds that different scholars have understood the Gita differently. The Gita focuses on 'you' and 'your' one the place of 'I', 'Me' and 'Mine' and considers 'I', 'Me' and 'Mine' as bondages in the world. Krishna says detachment as freedom and attachment as bondage. Krishna says, "Your real fight has to be against 'I' and 'My' rather than the fight outside. In this way, the Gita neither concerns with violence nor non-violence. It neither condones nor condemns war (ibid, 2010).

Bina Gupta has examined the ethical conception of the Bhagavad Gita, in the western context of virtue ethics and duty ethics. She defines the distinction among western scholars on 'what ought to do' and 'what ought to be'. She finds that virtue ethics emerges as main alternative to duty ethics. On this ground, she has located the Gita on the distinction between virtue ethics and duty ethics. She argues that the Gita focuses more on duty rather than rights. Gupta has given definitions of virtue from The American Heritage Dictionary and Dictionary of Philosophy. She argues about the opinions of Aristotle and Alasdair MacIntyre on virtue. Aristotle argues that the goal of human life is flourishing. Aristotle argues that virtue is an excellence of a rational person. Alasdair has presented the conception of virtue in three stages such as the concept of a practice, the narrative order of a single human life and moral education. He argues that we have to learn to recognize what is due to whom. In the Gita, *Dharma* is related with duty. Because, Arjuna belonged to Kshatriya Varna, it was his duty to fight (Gupta, 2006. 373-381).

The philosophy of the Gita is based on mainly two principles. One, the soul does not die nor is born and second, the moral order declines through man's inaction. The Gita is not made only for a soldier but for all. The Gita teaches that one can connect with God through performing duties.



Involving in duty is known as *karma yoga* in the Gita. The Gita does not teach only the duty of caste but it teaches the performance of duty with spiritual consciousness. The Gita gives a new outlook to man for performing duty and integrates work, social order and religion. The Gita relates duty with *Dharma*, therefore, each man's work become his particular virtue i.e. *sva-dharma*. The Gita teaches that if one is not performing his duty, it will be considered as inaction i.e. *a-karma*. The Gita teaches that the wise man weeps neither for the death nor for the living (Nikam, 1955. 361-363). According to B. Srinivasa Murthy (1985), the Gita is very much influenced by the philosophy of Upanishads because both, Upanishads and the Gita presents discourse on nature of Self from different perspectives. The doctrine of *Karma* is very much rooted in Indian Philosophy and religious thought. The doctrine of the *karma* is an application of scientific law of causation to the spiritual plane. In the Gita Krishna has encourage, Arjuna to perform *karma* on the place of *akarma*. The Gita teaches that both, birth and death are inevitable in the wheel of *karma* and the only one way to escape ourselves from this wheel is to make ourselves free from attachments. The detachment can be attained through meditation, performance of duty and sacrificial works. The Gita explains three *Gunas*(modes or qualities) such as *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas**Gunas*. Gita explains these three *Gunas* as inherent quality within the human being because of the social or environmental conditions. The *sattvic* possesses the qualities of goodness, the *rajasic* possesses the qualities of passion and the *tamasic* possesses the quality of dullness and ignorance. Myrthy is of the view that a person having *sattvic* nature, is depicted as the superior type of personality. The Gita explains about the importance of Yoga in human life. The main purpose of the yoga is to provide necessary methods for reaching salvation. The Gita teaches mainly three *yoga* that help to attain salvations such as *Jana yoga* (knowledge), *karma yoga* (action) and *Bhakti yoga* (devotion) (Murthy, 1985. 1-35). The social relevance of the Gita can be seen in the field of business and management. The Gita teaches about the performance of duty without attachment to the fruits which is considered to be practical (Acharya, 2015. 73-77).

Gandhi's Philosophy:

Gandhi was one of the most important non-western thinkers whose political theory was grounded in experiences. Gandhi placed new questions on the political agenda and used new methods to tackle old agendas. Gandhi's philosophy was influence by rich Indian tradition of non-violence. Gandhi's philosophy was rooted in both, Indian ways of life and thought and the western thought. Gandhi was a man of thought and action. Gandhi criticized modern British civilization because he was of the view that British civilization could be better in British conditions, not in Indian conditions. Gandhi was of the view that Indian civilization was pluralistic in nature which has unity in diversity. Gandhi was a living example of spiritual soul. For him, religion was mainly concerned with how one should live rather than what one believe. (Parekh, 1995. 1-83). Gandhi is seen either as a saint or a politician. Gandhi could receive world-wide attention among his contemporary leaders. Many scholars consider Gandhi as *mahatma* but he himself denies this view. Some scholars were of the view that Gandhi was a saint among politicians and a politician among saints. Gandhi read *Yogasutra* of Patanjali in 1903 which provided him the basis of the ethical discipline.

Gandhi's developed his political methods in South Africa and almost all of his concepts such as *Satya*, *Ahimsa*, *Satyagraha*, *Swaraj* and *Swadeshi* were formulated in his mind before his participation of Indian national movement. His moral and political thought was influenced by his religious and ethical beliefs. Gandhi's moral and political philosophy developed because of five reasons. The first reason is that Gandhi's personality attracted the scholars to write on him on the



place of his writings. Second, Gandhi's philosophy can be understood after reading his thirty years activities in India from 1915 to 1948. Third, Gandhi was not an intellectual and academician. He himself accepts, 'I am not build for academic writings. Action is my domain.' Therefore, Gandhi could not write any systematic book which could give very clear picture about his political and ethical philosophy. Fourth, his moral and political thoughts are influenced by his religious and ethical beliefs. Lastly, very few serious attempts have been made to understand Gandhi's moral and political ideas both in India and outside of India. Gandhi was critique of modern civilization. He has explained his view about civilization in his book 'Hind Swaraj'. Gandhi was in the favour of moral and ethical politics. He was of the view that politician should have some ethics (Iyer, 2000. 1-39).

Influence of the Gita on Gandhi's Politics:

Gandhi writes his view on the Gita in his book, 'the Message of the Gita'. Gandhi read the Gita in 1888-89 for the first time and found that the Gita was not a historical work but it focused on physical welfare. The Gita explains about the rules of conduct which govern the relationship between warring parties. Gandhi writes about the incarnation of lord Krishna. He gives example of an Urdu saying which means one whose behaviour is religious, is having divine qualities. Body and action, both are inter-related. According to Gandhi the body is temple and God lives in the body. Gandhi quotes the Gita, "By desire less action, by renouncing the fruits of action; by dedication all activities to God, i.e. by surrendering oneself to Him body and soul". Gandhi is of the view that desirelessness and renunciation do not come only by talking but those who want to attain them should have a constant heart-churn and knowledge of devotion. Describing about devotee Gandhi argues that a devotee should have the following qualities such as free from jealous, mercy for others, without egotism, selfless, happiness and misery, forgiving nature, firm resolutions, dedicated mind and soul to God, pure hearted, unaffected by situations renouncers of all fruit etc. Gandhi writes about the methods of getting salvation. The Gita teaches that without action the goal cannot be achieved. The Gita argues about the religion that the things that the religion the practice of day to day life actions. The Gita teaches about truth and *ahimsa*. Though, Gandhi read the Gita in 1889 for the first time yet his mature understanding about the Gita could develop in England when he read it after the suggestions of his two friends. According to Gandhi the main theme of the Gita is self-realization. Gandhi is not agree with the view that the Gita teaches about fight and justifies violence. The Gita explains about *sattwa*, *rajas* and *tamas*. It teaches the science of sacrifice and fearlessness. Gandhi argues about *Bhakti Yoga* that it is the way of realization of God through devotion (Gandhi, 1959. 1-48).

Gandhi talks about self-realization, seen God face to face, and attaining *moksha*. Gandhi was of the view that for getting *moksha*, one should have control on impression and passion. He felt that he was not fit for getting *moksha* because he could not control on his passion. Gandhi believed in the practicality of his thinking. He claimed that his experiments were spiritual, moral and had essence of religious morality. Gandhi was deeply influenced by the Bhagawad Gita. He wanted to live at peace with both, friends and foes. Gandhi considered *bhakti* as an important instrument for patience. He was of the view that one cannot do every think, therefore, one should know their limitations and limitations can be understood by *bhakti*. Gandhi talked about *bhajan* which was sung in his *Ashram* daily. Gandhi was of the view that instead of talking about *mukti* one should focus on *bhakti*. Gandhi wrote in Young Indian on 3rd November 1927 about the message of the Bhagawad Gita. According to Gandhi, The Gita teaches about *karma* (duty), *bhakti* (devotion),



jnana (knowledge), *satya* (truth), *brahmacharya*(celibacy),*aparigraha* (non-possession) and *asteya*(non-stealing) (Brown, 2008. 1-27).

Gandhi was of the view that almost all religions believe on any super power which is God. The Jews believe in *Messiah* or the messenger, the Christians believe in the son of God, the Muslims believe that the prophet is the messenger of the God (Allah). But Hinduism believes that the God descends as man. Gandhi is of the view that all human beings are the incarnation of the God but because of engagement in mortal activities, they cannot understand their power. *Avatara* theory believes that the God was born before and will born again. In *karmayoga*, Gandhi argues body and mind, both are active. Sometime, body becomes inactive but mind is always in active mode. Gandhi is of the view that *Jnanayoga* (philosophy of mysticism) makes us understand that what we have to do and *karmayoga* forces us to do action. While explaining about *dhyanyoga* and *bhaktiyoga*, Gandhi is of the view that *dhyanyoga* is more difficult than *bhaktiyoga*. In *dhyanyoga*, the devotee has to see himself and absorbed himself for the welfare of all. *Dhyanyoga* needs spiritual and moral thinking. *Bhakti* is devotion of devotee to the God. Gandhi is of the view that the Gita teaches selflessness, detachment, knowledge, self-sacrifice etc (Desai, 1946. 1-117).

Gandhi dominated in the history of Indian national movement during 1920 to 1947. The reason behind his success was his firm belief on peace. Gandhi emphasized on the discovery of right mind, so that, some values such as ethics, spirituality and universality can be developed within the human being that help to create unity, love and peace in society. Gandhi's view regarding war was, 'war cannot be avoided as long as the seeds of it remain in the man's breast and develop in his social, political and economic life' (Bose, 1981. 159-160). Gandhi considered the Gita as an allegory in which human body is *Kurukshestra*. Gandhi considers body as the battle field. Krishna has been considered as knowledgeable person. According to Gandhi, Krishna was the master (teacher) of Arjuna. Sharma estates that Gandhi's understanding about incarnation developed just after reading the Gita (Sharma, 1978. 146-150).

Gandhi's life, work and politics were application of religion. But Gandhi's understanding about religion changed after passing the time and he himself accepted that his religious understandings were the subject of changes. In first phase Gandhi considered himself as a Hindu and described the greatness of Hinduism and had pride on Hinduism. But, Gandhi did not accept Hindu system blindly and criticized many inhuman practices within the Hinduism such as Untouchability, blood sacrifices to deities and the practices of 'phuka' (a kind of nail that was used to drive bullocks to make them faster). Gandhi gave up drinking milk. Gandhi's understanding of kindness was different than Hinduism and Jainism. Once Gandhi shot a calf to end its pain. Gandhi believed on the practical aspect of the religion therefore, Srinivas considers Gandhi as real *karmayogi*. Gandhi condemned many inhuman practices within the Hinduism such as child-marriage, inhuman practices against widows and dowry. Gandhi supported equal rights of women in Satyagraha movement. Srinivas has explained about the sources that influenced Gandhi's religious understandings. The Gita had great influence on Gandhi and he considered it as a 'mother's milk' Gandhi's understanding of non-violence and truth were influenced by the Gita, the Bible and the Koran. Gandhi was of the view that all religions have the same goal. Gandhi was not in the favour of religion conversion. He had firm faith in God (Srinivas, 1995. 1489-1491).

Gandhi's Politics:

Gandhi entered in Indian national movement in 1917 when he led a peasant movement at Champaran in Bihar. After this peasant movement Gandhi participated in many peasant



movements such as Khera peasant movement and Awadh peasant movements and Ahmedabad mill worker's movement. His first national movement was non-cooperation movement which started in August, 1920. Dennis Dalton, in his book, 'Nonviolence in Action Gandhi's Power' (1993), argues about the mass political movements around the world in 20th century such as, Mao's Communist movement, Lenin's Bolshevik movement, Hitler's Nazi movement and Gandhi's nationalist movement. Regarding Gandhi's movement, Dalton argues about the use of the ideology of non-violence and non-cooperation. He argues about Gandhi's role in organization, ideology and leadership in non-cooperation movement. Gandhi transformed Indian National Congress and made it mass leading organization. In non-cooperation movement, Gandhi influenced Indian masses particularly poor people. In this movement, Gandhi used certain words such as *Ahimsa*, *Karmayoga*, *Ram*, *Rajya*, *Tapasya* and *Moksha*. According to Dalton, Gandhi drew these ideas from Hinduism. Dalton has also argued about the different opinion of Gandhi and Tilak on boycott of government councils. Gandhi was against whereas Tilak was in the favour of council entering. Dalton has also explained Gandhi's opinion on the Satyagraha which was, for Gandhi, based on truth and non-violence. Gandhi was of the view that only power of Ahimsa could transform the psychology of the country (Dalton, 1993. 30-47). Ravindra Verma, in his book, 'The Spiritual basis of Satyagraha' (2001), defines that Gandhi was described as *Mahatma* and prophet by some of his followers but Gandhi never accepted such descriptions. Gandhi wanted to be considered as *Satyagrahi* or seeker of Truth. For Gandhi, *Satyagraha* was spiritual exercise or *Sadhana*. For Gandhi, *Satyagraha* was a method of purification of oneself. In this way, for Gandhi, *Satyagraha* depends on a spiritual force (Verma, 2001. 5-6).

Experiments of the Gita's philosophy in Gandhi's Movements:

Gandhi's understanding of society was influenced by the Gita, therefore, he tried to pass his life according to the path, shown in the Gita. He failed many times to pass his life according to the Gita but he did not leave hope. Gandhi was of the view that the Gita does not teaches physical war but it teaches the irrelevance of the physical war. Gandhi said that those who believe on the philosophy of the Gita, they follow the truth and non-violence in their nature. The follower of the Gita follows truth and non-violence because it teaches the philosophy of detachment from the result. In the presence of detachment form the result, one does not need to tell a lie or to do violence (Gandhi, 1967. 8-15). Gandhi followed the philosophy of the Gita in his personal as well as political career. Gandhi actively participated in Indian freedom struggle. If we see his movements, it becomes clear that he emphasized on truth, non-violence and duty.

A movement may be based on violence or non-violence. As far as the peasants movements are concerned which happened under the Gandhian ideology, they were based on non-violence. If Gandhi saw that any movement was going on violently, he withdrew that movement. Gandhi had a very clear view about non-violence. Indian National Congress, under the leadership of Gandhi, tried to initiate the movement through non-violent way. Gandhi focused on non-violent methods because he was of the view that violence took us away from the truth. So for him, everyone should follow the non-violent path to know the truth (Tiwari, 2019. 25).

Conclusion:

Gandhi's political as well as social life was based on philosophies of non-violence, truth, *Karma*, *Satyagraha*, non-stealing etc. Gandhi's understanding on these issues were guided by religion. He himself accepted that his all actions and ideas were guided by the religion. But, Gandhi did not



followed any particular religion. He was influenced by almost all religions. But he had deep faith in Hinduism. His understanding about Hinduism was rooted in ancient Hinduism which was known as *Sanatana dharma*. The Gita is one of those books that Gandhi read in his early life. This book influenced him more and he used philosophy of the Gita in his political understanding. Gandhi was deeply influenced with the philosophy of *Karma*, and *Bhakti*. His understanding of the philosophy of *Karma* and *Bhakti* was taken by the Gita. Gandhi had different view on the teachings of the Gita than the other leaders of the Indian freedom struggle. Many leaders were of the view that the Gita teaches to perform violence against violence but Gandhi was of the view that Gita does not teach violence against violence but it teaches the purification of soul within the body. The Gita, according to Gandhi, teaches to remove all kind of hatred and violent thinking within the body. In this way, Gandhi interpreted the philosophy of the Gita in different way.

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