

SOME EARLY ANTICIPATIONS OF THE
GANDHIAN INTERPRETATION OF
THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ

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I propose to tackle this topic in three parts. Firstly, I shall narrate an actual piece of dialogue between Mahatma Gandhi and one Dr. Kagawa who has been identified as *a student of religion*. Having presented that piece of dialogue we shall next analyze it to identify the basic features of the Gandhian interpretation of the Bhagavadgita. Having done that we shall finally see if the Gandhian frame of reference towards the Gita has any precedents within the Hindu tradition.

I.

We turn now to the first part of the presentation and recount the dialogue between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Kagawa which was reported on 21st January 1939 in the *Harijan*. It runs as follows:

Dr. Kagawa: I am told you recite the Bhagavadgita daily.

Gandhiji: Yes, we finish the entire Gita reading once every week.

Dr. Kagawa: But at the end of the Gita Krishna recommends violence.

Gandhiji: I do not think so. I am also fighting. I should not be fighting effectively if I were fighting violently. The message of the Gita is to be found in the second chapter of the Gita where Krishna speaks of the balanced state of mind, of mental equipoise. In nineteen verses, at the close of the second chapter of the Gita, Krishna explains how this state can be achieved. It can be achieved he tells us, after killing all your passions. It is not possible to kill your brother after having killed all your passions. I should like to see that man dealing death — who has no passions, who is indifferent to pleasure and pain, who is undisturbed by the storms that trouble mortal man. The whole thing is described in language of beauty that is unsurpassed. These verses show that the fight Krishna speaks of is a spiritual fight.

Dr. Kagawa: To the common mind it sounds as though it were actual fighting.

Gandhiji: You must read the whole thing dispassionately in its true context. After the first mention of fighting, there is no mention of fighting at all.⁷ The rest is a spiritual discourse.

Dr. Kagawa: Has anybody interpreted it like you?

Gandhiji: Yes. The fight is there, but the fight as it is going on within. The Pandavas and Kauravas are the forces of good and evil within. The war is the war between Jekyll and Hyde, God and Satan, going on in the human breast. The internal evidence in support of this interpretation is there in the work itself and in the *Mahabharata* of which the Gita is a minute part. It is not a history of war between two families, but the history of man – the history of the spiritual struggle of man. I have sound reasons for my interpretation.

Dr. Kagawa: That is why I say it is *your* interpretation.

Gandhiji: But that is nothing. The question is whether it is a reasonable interpretation, whether it carries conviction. If it does, it does not matter whether it is mine or XYZ's. If it does not, it has no value even if it is mine.²

II

A close review of this dialogue reveals that Mahatma Gandhi changed his response during the conversation from an historical to a rational one. The key question asked by Dr. Kagawa was: *Has anybody interpreted the Gita like you?* Mahatma Gandhi began by saying: *Yes* but then instead of citing the name of any such predecessor, he started to explain how and why the Gita should be understood allegorically. Dr. Kagawa, recognizing Mahatma Gandhi's failure to cite a precedent to his interpretation, then remarked: *That is why I say it is your interpretation.* Again failing to cite a precedent, Mahatma Gandhi appealed to the merit of the interpretation itself as a worthy criterion of its value rather than its author. So the question raised by Dr. Kagawa remained unanswered in a sense.

Let us now try to answer it by asking, has anybody interpreted the Gita like Mahatma Gandhi before Mahatma Gandhi?

Before an answer to the question is attempted, it is helpful to realize that on the basis of Mahatma Gandhi's dialogue with Dr. Kagawa, Mahatma Gandhi's interpretation seems to have two major components:

- (1) that the Gita teaches non-violence, and -
- (2) that the Gita is to be taken allegorically and not historically.

No one denies that the Gita refers to fighting – the question is whether this fight refers to a spiritual struggle in the heart of man or to actual warfare on a battlefield. Thus Dr. Kagawa's question – *has anyone interpreted the Gita like you* - breaks down into two distinct though allied questions:

- (1) Has anyone interpreted the Gita as preaching non-violence before Mahatma Gandhi?
- (2) Has anyone interpreted the Gita allegorically before Mahatma Gandhi?

III.

The answer to the first question seems to be that no one appears to have claimed, as Mahatma Gandhi did, that the Gita preached non-violence *explicitly*. It may be argued that the message is implicit in the Gita itself, as Mahatma Gandhi did, but no one seems to have claimed prior to Mahatma Gandhi explicitly that the Gita preached non-violence.

Having said this, however, it may now be pointed out that there are some hints in ancient Hindu literature which, while not reaching the point of articulation they achieved in Mahatma Gandhi, seem to be headed in that direction. To see this it is important to realize that one of the reasons why Mahatma Gandhi thought that the message of the Gita was *non-violence* was because, according to him, that was the message of the Mahabharata itself, of which, as he said: *the Gita is a minute part*.³ Thus he wrote while remarking on the message of the Gita:

The author of the Mahabharata has not established the necessity of physical warfare; on the contrary he has proved its futility. He has made the victors shed tears of sorrow and repentance and has left them nothing but a legacy of miseries.⁴

In this context certain passages of the Bhagavata Purana make interesting reading. Indeed: *it is usually said that the Bhagavata Purana begins where the Mahabharata ends, seeking to correct a story which tells of gambling, dishonouring of women and a devastating war which ends in a pyrrhic victory . . .*⁵ In the fifth chapter of the first canto we actually find Vyasa, the putative author of the Mahabharata, being criticized by Narada:

It was a great error on your part to have enjoined terrible acts (acts involving destruction of life) in the name of religion on men who are naturally addicted to such acts. Misguided by these precepts of yours (in the Mahabharata) the ordinary man of the world would believe such acts to be pious and would refuse to honour the teachings that prohibit such action.⁶

In other words, Narada was complaining that the justification of violence involved in the Mahabharata and especially in the Gita could have disastrous consequences in general and urged sage Vyasa to compose a devotional work to offset this effect, namely, the Bhagavata Purana.

Thus we find that even as far back as 10th Century A.D., the date usually assigned to the Bhagavata Purana, there was a certain uneasiness in certain Hindu minds with the violent nature of the Mahabharata episode. The ancient thinker writing in the name of Narada to be sure, took a different tack than Mahatma Gandhi — he wanted a new work to turn people's minds towards the worship of Lord Krishna and away from the terrible war and its justification.

Mahatma Gandhi thought that the work itself implied condemnation of violence. However, both the pseudonymous Narada and the famous Mahatma were grappling with the same issue: the violent nature of the Mahabharatan narrative and its reconciliation with higher spiritual ends.

The Gandhian solution, however, must be regarded as unique, for Narada explicitly recognised the violence involved in the Mahabharata and *condemned it* but Mahatma Gandhi *commended it as a warning* to others. By virtue of this difference in attitude between using it as a warning rather than as an example, the Mahatma could claim, as none had done, that the *real* message of the Mahabharata and the Gita was non-violence.

How then do we answer the first question: did anyone interpret the Gita as preaching non-violence before Mahatma Gandhi did so? The answer seems to be in the negative. Even though it may be argued that the message of non-violence is implied in the Mahabharata and even though we detect undercurrents of dissatisfaction with the violence involved therein, no one before Mahatma Gandhi seems to have clearly and unambiguously stated the message of the Bhagavadgita - and indeed of the Mahabharata - to have been non-violence.

IV.

Now the second question: did anyone interpret the Gita allegorically before Mahatma Gandhi?

The answer to this second question can be given in the affirmative in view of certain facts which have come to light in the course of an examination of Abhinavagupta's commentary on the Bhagavadgita known as the *Gitarthasamgraha*.

Before this evidence is presented, however, it seems useful to emphasize that Mahatma Gandhi's claim that the Gita preached non-violence rests heavily on the anterior claim that the Gita must be interpreted allegorically. Mahatma Gandhi was himself fully conscious of this fact, as is clear from the prefatory note with which he commences his Gujarati commentary, called *Anasakti Yoga*,⁷ on the Bhagavadgita. The remarks translate thus:

No knowledge is to be found without seeking, no tranquility without travail, no happiness except through tribulation. Every seeker has, at one time or another, to pass through a conflict of duties, a heart-churning.⁸

Having thus provided a spiritual rather than an historical orientation, Mahatma Gandhi translates the first verse of the Gita and then follows it up with the following annotation:

The human body is the battlefield where the eternal duel between Right and Wrong goes on. Therefore it is capable of being turned into the gateway to Freedom. It is born in sin and becomes the seed-bed of sin. Hence it is also called the field of Kuru. The

Kauravas represent the forces of Evil, the Pandavas the forces of Good. Who is there that has not experienced the daily conflict within himself between the forces of Evil and the forces of Good?⁹

Thus Mahatma Gandhi equates the Kuruksetra, the battlefield where the Mahabharata war was fought, with the human body, the Kauravas with the forces of Evil in man and the Pandavas with the forces of Good. Fresh evidence, as pointed out earlier, suggests that the tradition of such an allegorical interpretation of the Gita seems to go back at least as far as the 10th Century A.D.

The reasons for making this claim are as follows. Abhinavagupta is a name with which many if not most students of Indian culture are familiar. He is well-known for his commentaries on such familiar works of Hindu prosody and dramatics as Anandavardhana's Dhvanyaloka¹⁰ and Bharat's Natyasastra.¹¹ He is also a well-known exponent of the system of Kasmira Saivism known as Trika.¹² His dates are not known with complete certainty but he is believed to have been born between 950 and 960 A.D.¹³ and is thus assigned to the 10th Century A.D.¹⁴ He also wrote a commentary, on the Bhagavadgita,¹⁵ hitherto untranslated. In this commentary, in his gloss on the first verse of the Bhagavadgita and after making his own remarks, Abhinavagupta refers¹⁶ to a tradition of interpreting the Gita in which the Kuruksetra is equated with the human body, very much in the way Mahatma Gandhi did. The relevant passage runs as follows:

Herein some speak of an alternative interpretation. [They explain the word *kuruksetra* as] the field of the Kurus: *Kurunam* = *karananam* - organs of sense; *ksetra* (field) = that which favours, that is, the field of the senses is the favourer of all the properties of transmigration as being that which helps to bring them about (i.e. the human body). Whereas *dharmaksetra* (the field of *dharma*) is to be understood from the sentence, *This is the highest dharma; to see the soul by means of Yoga*, namely as being the body of the [aspirant for whom the Gita is] intended, a body which offers salvation by its attainment of *apavarga* through the abandonment of everything opposed to *dharma*. [So that the question asked by King Dhrtarastra may be para-phrased thus:] Standing in that [battle] where passion and detachment, anger and forbearance, etc. have come together in mutual conflict – for the senses, etc. always aim at the injury of the body – what have my ignorant volitions, comparable to ignorant men, accomplished and what have (my) wise (volitions), the Pandavas, comparable to men of knowledge accomplished? That is to say, who has defeated whom?¹⁷

The parallels between these remarks on the first verse of the Bhagavadgita recorded in the tenth century A.D. and the remarks made by Mahatma Gandhi in the twentieth century A.D. are quite obvious. This enables us to offer the conclusion that whereas Mahatma Gandhi was certainly original in regarding the message of the Bhagavadgita to be that of *ahimsa* he was certainly not the first to think up an allegorical interpretation on which he based his opinion.¹⁸ To conclude: while the claim by Mahatma Gandhi that the Gita preaches non-violence seems to be unprecedented, the allegorical interpretation of the Gita on which it is based is not unprecedented in ancient Hindu exegetical tradition which grew up around the Bhagavadgita.

Footnotes

- ¹This statement, though substantially true, is not entirely accurate as later chapters do contain references to fighting (e.g. IX.34). However: *in thirteen out of eighteen chapters of the Gita (viz. Chap.IV-X and Chap. XII-XVIII) we do not meet with a single reference to the scene of the battlefield of Kurukshetra, nor to the epic story or incidents of any kind which might remind us of the fact that Krishna and Arjuna had anything to do with the Bharata war or that the object of the teaching of the Gita was to induce Arjuna to fight, so preoccupied and deeply absorbed are both the speakers of the dialogue in topics relating to modes of spiritual culture, the ethical ideal and subtle metaphysical concepts.* S.C. Roy, *The Bhagavadgita and Modern Scholarship*, London: Luzac & Co., 1941, pp.146-7.
- ²M.K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1958, p.p. 178-179.
- ³M.K. Gandhi, *op. cit.* p.159.
- ⁴*Ibid.*, p.140.
- ⁵T.S. Rukmani, *A Critical Study of the Bhagavatu Purana*, Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1970, p.6.
- ⁶*Ibid.*, Bhagavata Purana I.5.15.
- ⁷Mahatma Gandhi, *Anasakti Yoga*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Prakasana Mandira, 1970.
- ⁸Mahadev Desai, *The Gita According To Gandhi*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1946, p.132.
- ⁹*Ibid.*,
- ¹⁰See Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World Vol.II*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1968, p.221.
- ¹¹Kanti Chandra Pandey, *Abhinavagupta: An Historical and Philosophical Study*, Benaras, 1935, p.9.
- ¹²See A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1956, p.335.
- ¹³Kanti Chandra Pandey, *op. cit.*, p.8.

¹⁴A.L. Basham, *op. cit.*, p.335.

¹⁵See Kanti Chandra Pandey, *op. cit.*, pp.52-55.

¹⁶K.S. Ramaswamy Sastrigal seems to attribute this view to Abhinavagupta himself when he remarks: *Abhinava Guptacarya says that ksetra means the body and that the war referred to is between the righteous and the unrighteous tendencies in man. (The Bhagavad-gita With Translation And Notes, Vol.I, Srirangam: Sri Vani Vilas Press, 1927, p.47)*. But Abhinavagupta introduces this discussion with the remark: *ATRA KECIDVYAKHYAVIKALPMAHUH* and hence seems to be citing an alternative interpretation rather than developing his own (see Wasudev Larman Shastri Pansikar, ed., *Srimad-bhagavadgita*, Bombay: Niranayasagar Press, 1912, p.8).

¹⁷Translation by the author.

¹⁸The allegorical interpretation of the Gita became quite current around the turn of the century (see W.Douglas Hill, *The Bhagavad-gita*, Oxford University Press, 1928, p.99) and continues to be popular (see A.L. Herman, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Translation And Critical Commentary*, Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1973, pp.107-8). It is important to realize however that Mahatma Gandhi seems to come by the allegorical interpretation on his own, for he says quite clearly that *Even in 1888-89, when I first became acquainted with the Gita, I felt that it was not an historical work, but that, under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring* (Mahadev Desai, *op. cit.*, p.127). It should be further noted that according to Mahatma Gandhi his *first acquaintance with the Gita began in 1888-9 with the verse translation by Sir Edwin Arnold known as the Song Celestial (ibid., p.126)*. This translation does not project the Gita as an allegory (see Edwin Arnold, *The Song Celestial Or Bhagavad-Gita*, Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1888, p.9), unlike the translations or studies by Annie Besant (*The Bhagavad Gita or The Lord's Song*, London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1904, preface; *Hints On The Study Of The Bhagavad-Gita*, London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906, p.6ff). Hence it is potentially misleading to state, as some have done, that Mahatma Gandhi was first introduced to the Gita through Annie Besant's translation (see Agehananda Bharati, *The Hindu Renaissance And Its Apologetic Patterns - The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol.XXIX, No.2*, February 1970, pp.274-275). Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi refers to his attempts to read Bal Gangadhar Tilak's commentary on the Gita (Mahadev Desai, *op. cit.*, p.122) which again does *not* espouse an allegorical interpretation of the Gita. It seems that the similarity in the exposition of the Gita referred to by Abhinavagupta and its exposition by Mahatma Gandhi provides a case of exegetical convergence which spans several centuries.