

# Hindu Concepts and the Gita in Early Indian National Thought

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This paper is a study of the use of religious concepts and literature in moving a tradition-directed, politically unconscious, agrarian society to political action, and in inculcating among a mass whose value structure directed their identification toward the joint family, the caste, the community, and the village a feeling of nationalism and patriotism toward the nation state. Other segments of Indian society were also expected to respond to this call of nationalism interpreted through the language of religion: the university student exposed to a new cultural impact, who assimilated modern values imperfectly and therefore reacted against them; the industrial worker, rootless and insecure within the complexity of a technological system he did not understand; and some highly placed orthodox caste groups who saw in the growing secularization of Indian society the destruction of their own firmly held religio-cultural beliefs and a threat to their own positions of power and status.

History knows the political elite that led this movement as the Extremists, in contrast to those called the Moderates who controlled the Indian National Congress from its founding in 1885 to 1915. The Moderates represented the new professional Westernized middle class whose outlook was conditioned by the recently inaugurated Western educational system. They sought to transplant within India the social and political philosophies of nineteenth-century England. They valued British rule for having brought India order and security, and for having evolved methods of reform that would preserve this peace: constitutional agitation from the political platform; the training of Indian leaders in the

techniques of parliamentary democracy through making the Congress act as the "loyal opposition" to this rule; and the use of educated public opinion to further a doctrine of social reform. The Moderates also expected the British government itself to create, slowly but surely, the beginnings of democratic institutions and to associate the representatives of "enlightened" Indian thought with them. The Moderates shunned mass participation in the movement, for they believed such action would jeopardize their opportunity of creating an India democratic not only in the realm of politics, but in that of social relations also.

The immediate aim of the Extremists, in contrast, was the expulsion of both Western power and influence from India. Their leaders postulated the superiority of Hindu religion and culture over all others; they attempted to revive what they considered to be the active, ancient spirit of a "golden age" of Hinduism, a spirit which would free the country from its bondage to and imitation of England and the West.

Our aim here is to examine how two of the most respected and influential of this elite—Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Aravindo Ghose—utilized the Hindu concepts of karma and dharma, and the *Bhagavat Gita* to transmit a message of nationalism and political action.

Tilak led the Hindu revival in politics in Maharashtra, Ghose in Bengal. Under their leadership the Indian national movement witnessed for the first time mass political action in the form of strikes, demonstrations, processions, and economic boycott, political action that culminated in the *Swadeshi* movement following Lord Curzon's partition of the province of Bengal, in 1905.

The twin movement of Boycott and Swadeshi constitutes an important landmark in the development of national consciousness. It was the forerunner of the subsequent Non-cooperation movements launched under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. It gave the national movement a truly popular character by providing it with sound foundation in the active support of the masses.<sup>1</sup>

Through their writings and speeches, Tilak and Ghose hoped to arouse village and working-class India; not the India of the already Westernized professional classes which already dominated the Indian National Congress, but the industrial workers of the

mills, the masses who toiled in the fields, the young school boy and university student. As Ghose wrote:

The proletariat is as I have striven to show the real key of the situation. Torpid he is and immobile; he is nothing of an actual force, but he is a very great potential force, and whoever succeeds in understanding and eliciting his strength becomes by the very fact master of the future.<sup>2</sup>

To arouse this proletariat made up often of men who could not read or write, of those to whom the very language of any form of Western political thought was meaningless, it was necessary to speak in understandable terms. Few terms were more familiar to the Hindu masses than *karma*, the law of fate that resulted through one's own actions, and *dharma*, one's religious duty in life.

Tilak and Ghose popularized the concept of nationalism as being the new dharma or religious duty of India. Preaching a doctrine of religion being nationalism, Ghose wrote:

Nationalism is not a mere political programme; Nationalism is a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed which you shall have to love. If you are going to be a Nationalist, if you are going to assent to this religion of Nationalism, you must do it in the religious spirit. You must remember that you are the instruments of God.<sup>3</sup>

Through nationalism would come spiritual transformation; but it would take men of daring and sacrifice like the Hindu *Kshatriyas* to accomplish this task:

The New Nationalism is an attempt at a spiritual transformation of the nineteenth century Indian; it is a notice of dismissal or at least of suspension to the bourgeois and all his ideas and ways and works. It is a call for the men of faith . . . the prophets, martyrs, the kshatriyas, the samurai, the initiators of revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Nationalism was the new dharma because India herself was something divine and mystic; she was the great Mother (*Bharat Mata*), much more than mere earth and stone and people:

It is not till the Motherland reveals herself to the eye of the mind as something more than a stretch of earth or a mass of individuals, it is not till she takes shape as a great Divine and Maternal Power in a form of beauty that can dominate the

mind and seize the heart that these petty fears and hopes vanish in the all-absorbing passion for the Mother and her service, and the patriotism that works miracles and saves a doomed nation is born.<sup>5</sup>

Tilak also taught that the karma of those who worked in observance of this law of national dharma would be the aid of God himself. Action performed was destined to bear its just fruit, even though the performer himself might not be present to witness the result of a free, independent India:

The effect of action (*karma*) cannot fail to take its place in this world. The effect of this action may not be obtained so soon as I say, may not be obtained before my eyes. But this action must have its fruit . . . According to the law of action, when a certain action is done, another results from it, and a third one results out of that. Such succession goes on . . . Make the effort that is to be made. Be ready to do this work with the thought that it belongs to you. I am sure that by the grace of God your next generation will not fail to obtain the fruit of this work, though it may not be obtained in your lifetime.<sup>6</sup>

Tilak also appealed to the *Rigveda* to justify this call to action:

If perils overtake us we are prepared to bear them. They must be borne . . . Then God will not abandon you: such is my conviction. These things will be achieved by the grace of God. But we must work. There is a very old principle that God helps them who help themselves. The principle occurs in the *Rigveda*. God becomes incarnate.<sup>7</sup>

However, no one single piece of scripture was of greater aid to Tilak and Ghose in transmitting their message of political activism than the text of the *Bhagavat Gita*. For though Hinduism has no central canon such as the Bible or the Koran, the *Gita* has come to be looked upon "as the most authoritative expression of Hindu thought."<sup>8</sup> Nikhilananda in his translation of the *Upanishads* comments, "Sri Krishna, in his dialogue with Arjuna, presented through the *Bhagavat Gita* the essence of the *Upanishads*."<sup>9</sup>

It appears in the great epic of Hinduism, the *Mahabharata*. However, the *Gita* itself is considered an addition to the actual text. Most commentators are generally agreed that by the sixth

century A.D. the *Mahabharata* was known throughout India. Through the services of Brahmin storytellers who wandered through the land, even the poorest farmer in his isolated village came to hear of the epic war between the Pandavas and the Kurus. The *Gita's* setting is the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Arjuna, the hero of the Pandavas, is despondent, for on the morrow he will war against the Kurus, who are not only enemies but also his kinsmen. The *Bhagavat Gita* (the Lord's Song) itself is in the form of a dialogue between Arjuna and Lord Krishna, who appears before him to tell him what man's duty in this world is. As K. M. Panikkar writes:

The *Gita* is primarily religious in its teaching. Its context is man's dejection in the face of duty which seems to him not only unpleasant but wholly abhorrent to his being. Its surrounding is a battlefield on which two mighty armies are arrayed; but the person who asks for advice is the first man of the age, *nara* the representative human being, and the Preceptor speaks with the voice of supreme authority, of God.<sup>10</sup>

Krishna urges Arjuna to perform his duty or dharma through battle, even if it means death for the Kurus; for they have already been slain by God, and he, Arjuna, is no more than an instrument of the Divine. Krishna also expounds, during the course of the dialogue, on the three great paths to union with God: the path of *Bhakti* or devotion; the path of *Gnana Yoga* or knowledge; and the path of karma Yoga or the path of right action without expectation of reward or result. Traditional commentaries on the *Gita*, like that of the eighth-century sage Sankaracharya, supported a theory of renunciation: man, upon achievement of union with God, gave up the world and lived in the life of the spirit. The path of action, therefore, was secondary and of lesser importance.

This paper is not really concerned with the question of the correct religious interpretation of the *Gita*. However, it seems fairly clear that taken literally and in a historical sense, it can be made to justify violence and war, if such is done through a feeling of righteousness, through action uncommitted to its fruits or rewards. Later in the national movement Gandhi used the *Gita* in support of his theory of nonviolence, holding that the work had to be taken symbolically, that the battlefield of Kuruk-

shetra was in reality man's soul. But to Ghose and Tilak, who both wrote long and learned commentaries on the *Gita*, the sacred text justified the use of violence in a righteous cause. As Tilak said: "We may kill even our teachers and our kinsmen and no blame attaches if we are not actuated by selfish motives."<sup>11</sup> And Aravindo Ghose in his commentary on the *Gita* wrote:

War and destruction are not only a universal principle of our life here in its purely material aspects, but also of our mental and moral existence . . . It is impossible, at least as men and things are, to advance, to grow, to fulfil and still to observe really and utterly that principle of harmlessness which is yet placed before us as the highest and best law of conduct . . . Even soul-force, when it is effective, destroys . . . Therefore the command of God (Krishna) to the Aryan: 'Destroy when by destruction the world must advance, but hate not that which thou destroyest.'<sup>12</sup>

Tilak actually held that his was the definitive interpretation of the *Gita*, for his study was motivated solely in discovering the real truth, and in vindicating no preconceived theory:

Various commentators have put as many interpretations on the book, and surely the writer or composer could not have written or composed the book for so many interpretations being put on it. He must have but one meaning and one purpose running through the book, and that I have tried to find out. I believe I have succeeded in it, because having no theory of mine for which I sought any support from the book so universally respected, I had no reason to twist the text to suit my theory.<sup>13</sup>

He then goes on to state the conclusion at which his study arrived:

The conclusion I have come to is that the *Gita* advocates the performance of action in this world even after the actor has achieved the highest union with the Supreme Deity by *Gnana* (knowledge) or *Bhakti* (Devotion). This action must be done to keep the world going by the right path of evolution which the Creator has destined the world to follow. In order that the action may not bind the actor it must be done with the aim of helping his purpose and without any attachment to the coming result. This I hold is the lesson of the *Gita*.<sup>14</sup>

Tilak does not deny the path of gnana Yoga or bhakti Yoga. For him, however, both are subservient to the path of activism

and action—the path of karma Yoga. Further justifying this conclusion, he refers to the *Gita's* historical context. Unlike Gandhi, he does not choose to treat Kurukshetra as the battlefield of the soul:

If the *Gita* was preached to desponding Arjuna to make him ready for the fight—for the action—how can it be said that the ultimate lesson of the great book is *Bhakti* or *Gnana* alone.<sup>15</sup>

Following almost the very same line of argument, Aravindo Ghose, in his *Essays on the Gita*, wrote:

' There are those who make the *Gita* teach not works at all, but a discipline of preparation for renouncing life and works. . . . It is quite easy to justify this view by citations from the book and by certain arrangement of stress in following out its argument. . . . But it is quite impossible to persist in this view on an impartial reading in face of the continual assertion to the very end that action should be preferred to inaction and that superiority lies with the true, the inner renunciation of desire by the giving up of works to the supreme Purusha.<sup>16</sup>

Action in this world was important since union with God without a concern for the good of one's neighbour was imperfect. The world itself was created by the Universal Will; and on becoming part of that very Will, Man could not disregard this creation; it was part of the divinely ordained plan that he continue to serve it:

Man strives to gain union with God; and when this union is achieved the individual Will merges with the mighty Universal Will. When this is achieved will the individual say: "I shall do no action, and I shall not help the world."—the world which is because the Will with which he has sought union has willed it to be so? . . . If man seeks unity with the Deity, he must necessarily seek unity with the interests of the world also, and work for it. If he does not, then the unity is not perfect, because there is union between two elements out of the 3 (man and Deity), and the third (the world) is left out.<sup>17</sup>

Had Tilak and Ghose interpreted the *Gita* traditionally, had they held that once Man achieved union (*Moksha*) he renounced the world, since he now realized that it was nothing more than *Maya* or illusion, it would have been impossible for them to have used the text as a call to political action. But if action dedicated

to God was the message of the *Gita*, if the text could be interpreted in a historical context so as to sanction war and violence, and if the new dharma demanded service and sacrifice for Mother India, then all action directed against the new Kurus—the British government of India—was justifiable, no matter what form it took. And the age-old law of karma assured final victory in this just cause, for the seed of such action, once planted, was cosmically ordained to bear fruit.

Indian history gives no true example of large-scale political action on the part of the mass of the people. For politics and government were the tasks of the ruler and his chosen advisors. Village India lived its own life. Men like Tilak and Ghose succeeded in giving these very people a form of political consciousness, a desire for independence, a feeling of patriotism and nationalism, a motivation to participate in the liberation of their country. They showed for the first time how it was possible to arouse a poor, tradition-bound, politically unconscious mass of people to political action through the use of cultural techniques of appeal that were understandable to them.

#### NOTES

1. K. R. Bombwall, *Indian Politics since 1885* (Delhi: Atam Ram, 1951), p. 85.
2. Aravindo Ghose, as quoted in S. Mitra, *The Liberator* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1954), p. 38.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
6. B. G. Tilak, *His Writings and Speeches* (3rd ed., Madras: Ganesh and Co., 1922), p. 192.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
8. K. M. Panikkar, *The Indian Revolution* (Bombay: National Information and Publications, 1951), p. 17.
9. Swami Nikhilananda, *The Upanishads* (New York: Harper, 1908), pp. 10-11.
10. K. M. Panikkar, *The Indian Revolution*, pp. 17-18.
11. B. G. Tilak, as quoted in K. R. Bombwall, *Indian Politics since 1885*, p. 82.
12. Aravindo Ghose, as quoted in S. Mitra, *The Liberator*, p. 124.
13. B. G. Tilak, *His Writings and Speeches*, p. 232.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
16. Aravindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gita* (Calcutta: Arya Publishing House, 1926), p. 41.
17. B. G. Tilak, *His Writings and Speeches*, pp. 234-235.