

**REVISITING *BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ*: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GANDHI AND
AMBEDKAR**

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of*

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in

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by

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Under the supervision of

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DECLARATION

This is to state that the research work embodied in the thesis titled “**Revisiting *Bhagavad Gītā*: From the Perspective of Gandhi and Ambedkar**” submitted to the Department of Philosophy, University of Hyderabad, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Philosophy is original and carried out by me under the supervision of **Dr. Abhijeet Joshi, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Hyderabad.**

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REVISITING *BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ*: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The story of *Mahābhārata*, the great-war, has been transferred from generations to generations in India. Almost everyone is familiar with the names of some of the main characters and some of the major incidents of the story. The *Mahābhārata* is a Hindu epic which is considered as “one of the two *itihāsas*¹ of Hindu religious tradition.”² The story of the *Mahābhārata* helps to understand about the society, politics, ethics and culture of the ancient India. Additionally, the *Bhagavad Gītā* is considered as a part of the *Mahābhārata*. It is accepted that the essence of the *Mahābhārata* lies in the verses of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Consequently, it is also believed that one can understand what the whole epic wants to convey through its different characters and incidents, by understanding the message of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Therefore, the *Bhagavad Gītā* becomes a very significant text for understanding the polity, ethics, culture and history of India.

In nineteenth and twentieth century many discussions took place over the theme and the purpose of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in India as well as in Europe. Western thinkers such as, Hegel, Nietzsche, and even Hitler, were attracted by the *Bhagavad Gītā* and participated in these discussions, then how it could be the case that Indian thinkers would remain silent. Many Indian thinkers participated into the debates and discussions on the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Socio-political thinkers such as, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Tilak, Gandhi, Aurobindo, and Ambedkar, etc. discussed the central theme of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. These debates and discussions show how Indian political thinkers used to think and how the *Bhagavad Gītā* influenced the Indian political thoughts.

This work aims at exploring the influence of the *Bhagavad Gītā* on Indian social and political thinkers in general and on Gandhi and Ambedkar in particular. It also discusses the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gītā* very briefly.

¹*Itihāsa* can be translated as history. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are the two epics of Hindu religious tradition.

²Sharma, Arvind, *The Hindu Gītā: Ancient and classic interpretation of the Bhagavadgītā*, p. x.

What is *Bhagavad Gītā*?

The literal meaning of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is ‘the song of the lord’. It is found in *Bhīṣmaparva* of the epic *Mahābhārata*. Also, it is a text of eighteen chapters and consists seven hundred verses. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is written in the form of a dialogue. The dialogue is mainly between Arjuna and his friend Kṛṣṇa. Arjuna is a prince and a warrior while Kṛṣṇa is considered as the God in the form of human. Furthermore, the dialogue takes place in a battlefield (*kurukṣetra*) when the battle is just about to start. Now, Arjuna tells Kṛṣṇa that he wants to review the army of his opponent at close range, and asked him to station his chariot between the both armies. Though the battle is between the two clan of the same family so on the both sides of battlefield Arjuna finds his own people, his own family and friends. He realizes that if he fights then he has to fight with his own kinsmen (*svajana*) who are very dear to him. Therefore, Arjuna starts doubting whether he should fight with his own relatives or not and thus the question occurs whether he should fight in this battlefield or not.

The doubt arises because of the conflicts between two duties. As a *kṣatriya* (warrior) it is Arjuna’s duty fight when it is needed, but to protect his family and his loved-ones is also his duty. Thus, he becomes confused which duty is superior and should be performed. Also it is noteworthy that Arjuna is not afraid of losing the battle rather he seems sure that he and his brother will win the battle; the reason of his fear is the thought of losing his kith and kin. “Arjuna is sure that his brothers will win the battle; and even if they do, the kingdom which they will gain, he feels, will be one that has been denuded of almost everything that they care for.”³ Therefore, he asks for Kṛṣṇa’s advice. Kṛṣṇa who is not a common man but he is an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu and thus he himself is God in the form of human. Kṛṣṇa tries to convince Arjuna to fight in the battle-field. He says that one should always follow one’s own *dharma* by performing one’s own prescribed duty. He says that it is *karma yoga* (the doctrine of action) and Kṛṣṇa advised him to be a *karma-yogi*. However, even after a long debate Arjuna does not seems to be satisfied by Kṛṣṇa’s argument. Thus, in order to convince him Kṛṣṇa shows him his real nature and reveals his unrevealed form, as the supreme, *Brahman* to Arjuna. Arjuna finds Kṛṣṇa as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of everything. After seeing this form, Arjuna convinced to

³ Ibid, p. x.

submit all actions to Kṛṣṇa (the Supreme) and performs his prescribed duty without being puzzled.

Author and Date of the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

The authorship of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is generally ascribed to the author of the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa Dvāpāyana also known as Vedavyāsa because it is considered as a part of the great epic. “We do not know the name of the author of the *Gītā*. Almost all the books belonging to the early literature of India are anonymous. The authorship of the *Gītā* is attributed Vyāsa, the legendary compiler of the *Mahābhārata*.”⁴

Further, the precise date of *Bhagavad Gītā* is also not known. It is almost impossible to determine the date of any of the ancient Hindu scripture. According to S. Radhakrishnan, “The *Bhagavadgītā* is later than the great movement represented by the early Upanisads and earlier than the period of the development of the philosophic systems and their formulation in sutras. From its archaic constructions and internal references, we may infer that it is definitely a work of pre-Christian era. Its date may be assigned to the fifth century B.C., though the text may have received many alterations in subsequent times.”⁵ “Lokmanya Tilak has cited considerable evidence-7- that of Pali texts and other —to prove that the *Gita* existed before, and exercised considerable influence on, the growth of Mahayana Buddhism, and he has no doubt that the *Gita* must be assigned to the fifth century B.C.”⁶ “Telang holds that the *Gita* belongs to a period earlier than third century B.C. According to R.G Bhandarkar it belongs to fourth century B.C.”⁷

Furthermore, Ambedkar holds that the *Bhagavad Gītā* is “composed after Jamini’s *Purva Mimamsa* and after Buddhism.”⁸ Additionally, according to Zaehner, “...no firm date can be assigned to the *Gītā*. It seems certain, however, that it was written later than the ‘classic’ Upanishads with the possible exception of the *Maitri* and that it is post-Buddhistic. One would probably not be wrong if one dated it something between the fifth and second century B.C.”⁹ Thus, though it is hard to assign a precise date of the composition of the *Bhagavad Gītā* but it is

⁴ Radhakrishnan, S., *Bhagavadgītā*, p.14.

⁵ Ibid, p. 14.

⁶ Desai, Mahadeva, *Gita according to Gandhi: The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p.13.

⁷ Radhakrishnan, S., *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 524.

⁸ Ambedkar, B.R., “Krishna and His Gita” *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, edited by Rodrigues Valerian, p.119

⁹ Zaehner, R.C., *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, p. 7.

hold by many scholars that the *Bhagavad Gītā* is written in pre-Christen era, probably between second to fifth century B.C.

Here, Deutsch comment seems very apt. He says, “Until very recently, Indian scholarship has never been concerned about when or by whom it was written. Westerners are frequently annoyed by the untidy historical consciousness of the Indians, but quite possibly we have much to learn from this disregard for history in matter of the spirit. If there is anything in the poem that is true and valuable, it is true and valuable now and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future”¹⁰

The Significance of the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

The *Bhagavad Gītā* has been recognized as a scripture of the Hindu philosophy and religion for centuries. It possesses equal authority with the *Upaniṣads* and the *Brahma Sūtra* and these three together called *prasthāna-traya*. *Prasthāna-traya* are considered as *mokṣa-śāstra* because they contains knowledge which helps to attain liberation (*mokṣa*). In Indian tradition, attaining liberation (*mokṣa*) is considered as the ultimate aim of human life. Hence, the concept of liberation has a very important place from both the religious and the philosophical perspective. Furthermore, although *Bhagavad Gītā* is a *mokṣa-śāstra* yet it has socio-political significance because of its discussion of the action theory, where it discusses what kind of actions are justified in social and political context. Here, the significance of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is explained from three perspectives, which are as follow:

i) The Cultural Significance of the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is considered as a very important text to understand the culture of India. There are various scriptures such as, Vedas and Upaniṣads and Purānas etc. which can be helpful to understand how the people of ancient India lived and what their thought process and they also play a very important role in understanding about the society and the people of ancient India. However, these scriptures are always studied by the learned persons because they are written in a very difficult language and also large in size. Therefore, the common people are not able to read these texts. However, the *Bhagavad Gītā* contains the knowledge of these scriptures and it is also easier to read because it is written in simple language; the book is smaller in size as compared to

¹⁰ Deutsch, Eliot, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, p. 4.

other Hindu scriptures. The text is written in a very simple and charming style. It is in the form of a dialogue between a common man and the divine, which makes it very interesting and gives to it a dramatic effect.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* shows some important characteristics of Hindu society and culture. If one wants to understand what the structure of the Hindu society was and what kind faith or religion they follow, then one can take help of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. One can find various faiths and beliefs about the nature of the *atman*, of the God, and of the universe etc. It discusses the relation between the soul and the body, the relation between the *ātman* and the God and its relation with the universe. Thus, one can say that the *Bhagavad Gītā* contains the spiritual wisdom of the ancient India. Therefore, the *Bhagavad Gītā* is a very significant text to understand the culture of India.

ii) The Philosophical Significance of the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

The *Bhagavad Gītā* discusses with some of the philosophical concepts like, the nature of universe, the nature of the *ātman*, the process of liberation of the *ātman*, the idea of God and the ultimate reality etc. All these concepts are discussed in *Upanisads* also. Radhakrishnan says, “By its official designation, the *Gītā* is called an *upanisad*, since it derives its main inspiration from the remarkable group of scriptures, the *Upaniṣads*.”¹¹ Therefore, the *Bhagavad Gītā* contains not only the teachings of the *Upaniṣads*, but it is itself an *Upaniṣad*.

Further, the world-view of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is influenced by the concepts of *sāṃkhya-yoga* and *Upaniṣads*. It adopts *sāṃkhya*’s concepts of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* and the *guṇa* theory etc. to explain the nature of the universe and the concept of *svadharma* and *svabhāva*. From *Upanisads* it adheres that the concept of the reality of the supreme, *Brahman*. It holds that *Brahman* is the ultimate reality and it is essentially non-dual. Thus, from a philosophical point of view it is interesting to see how the *Bhagavad Gītā* brings the concepts of different school of thought together. Deutsch says, “The *Gītā* is synthetic (if not eclectic) in its philosophical dimensions. It seeks to harmonize many of the trends and ideas in the thought of its time.”¹²

¹¹ Radhakrishnan, S., *Bhagavadgītā*, p. 13.

¹² Deutsch, Eliot, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, p. 5.

Additionally, through *yoga* philosophy the *Bhagavad Gītā* tries to provide some practical ways of reaching to the *Brahman* or attaining liberation (*mokṣa*). The *Bhagavad Gītā* affirms that there are three paths or *yoga* which help to attain the liberation, namely, *jñāna yoga* (the path of knowledge), *bhakti yoga* (the path of devotion) and *karma yoga* (the path of action). It holds that by following any of these paths one can attain *mokṣa*. Therefore, Radhakrishnan says “The *Gītā* gives a comprehensive *yoga-śāstra*, flexible and many-sided, which includes various phases of the soul’s development and ascent into the Divine. The different *yoga* are special applications of the inner discipline which leads unity and meaning of mankind. Everything is related to this discipline is called *yoga* or such as *jñāna yoga* or the way of knowledge, *bhakti yoga* or the way of devotion, *karma yoga* or the way of action.”¹³ Thus, the different *yoga* are the different ways to the development of the self through inner discipline and to reach to the Supreme.

However, it has always been a matter of debate among the philosophers and thinkers that which one among the three *yoga* is the main theme of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Some holds that the *jñāna yoga* is the main theme of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The *jñāna yoga* attracts many thinkers because it holds that *mokṣa* (liberation) can be attained through knowledge (*jñāna*). They think that there is no dogma in this doctrine. They do not find any dogma in this doctrine because it focuses on gaining the knowledge and realizing the Supreme. For instance, Śaṅkara holds that “liberation can only come through right-knowledge not by knowledge..... When once the right knowledge of identity with Brahman draws and ignorance ceases, all the notion of duality, which are presupposed by the performance of actions and responsibility for them ceases”¹⁴ Thus, he was so impressed by *jñāna yoga* of the *Bhagavad Gītā* that he considers it as the only effective way to attain liberation. Furthermore, Dasgupta says that the commentary of Śaṅkara on the *Bhagavad Gītā* is “the most of the ancient of the existing ones.”¹⁵ He writes this commentary from the Advaitin perspective but it brings the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the domain of serious philosophical discussions.

Later, many other Indian philosophers such as, Rāmānuja, Mādhava, Nimbārka, and Vallabha etc. wrote various commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gītā*. However, they give importance to *bhakti*

¹³ Radhakrishnan, S., *Bhagavadgītā*, p. 50.

¹⁴ Dasgupta, Surendranath, *The History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II, pp. 437-438.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 16.

yoga. So, according to them, *bhakti yoga* is the main theme of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.¹⁶ Moreover, earlier thinkers have not given importance to the doctrine of *karma*. It is the political thinkers of 19th and 20th century who maintain the *karma yoga* as the central theme of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Arvind Sharma rightly pointed out, “None of the early commentators seem to show particular enthusiasm for Karma. From the hands of B.G. Tilak the *Gītā* emerged as a gospel of Karma; and it was interpreted primarily along the lines of Karma-Yoga also by Mahatma Gandhi.”¹⁷ The philosophers and thinkers give importance to the various concepts of *Bhagavad Gītā* because they can interpret it according to their philosophical orientation.

iii) The Socio-Political Significance of the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a socio-politically significant text because it teaches the doctrine of *karma* (action). The doctrine of *karma* maintains that one should perform one’s action without being attached from the fruit of the action. Many social reformers and thinkers find this doctrine very useful to abolish the social evils of Hindu society such as, *sati-prathā*, untouchability, performance of various *karma-kānda* etc.

Furthermore, the doctrine of *karma* of the *Bhagavad Gītā* does not only discuss the nature of individual action but it also deals with the nature of human social actions. This doctrine opens up doors for various debates in social and political philosophy. According to More, ‘it discusses the problems of origin and justification of human action in society and the problems related to individual action.’¹⁸ Arjuna’s dilemma that whether he should kill his own kinsmen in the battle, is “the problem concerning justification of human social action.”¹⁹ He contemplates over his duty towards the society and duty towards his family. His doubt is- which duty he should perform; he seeks for justification of the action he is going to perform. The problem for Arjuna arises only because he is in the battlefield; the battlefield itself is a field of socio-political action. Thus, the *Bhagavad Gītā* discusses how one should act in a socio-political domain.

However, what kind of action would be justify, is depend upon in what kind of society one is living. Therefore, More observes that the *Bhagavad Gītā* discusses the nature of human action in

¹⁶ Radhakrishnan, S., *Bhagavadgītā*, p. 19

¹⁷ Sharma, Arvind, *The Hindu Gītā: Ancient and classic interpretation of the Bhagavadgītā*, p. xxiv.

¹⁸ More, S.S., *The Gita: A Theory of Human Action*, p. 83.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 83.

relation with the nature of society. He says, “Although the *Gītā* is mainly interested in analysing the foundations of the principles of human social action, it cannot proceed further without having considered the nature of society itself.”²⁰ Thus, according to More, the *Bhagavad Gītā* deals with the nature of social and political action, the nature of society and its relation with the individuals.

Additionally, the *Bhagavad Gītā* attracted most of the political and social thinkers during the independence movement of Indian because it has power to motivate the masses. It is considered that “the Gita speaks only of ‘Strength’.”²¹ Kṛṣṇa stops Arjuna of being weak and persuades him to perform his prescribe duty. Swami Vivekananda also says, “...only the elephant knows the strength of the lion and not the mosquito. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is not meant to soothe us and put us to sleep, but to wake us up from the slumber and lethargy and goad us on to the highest self-realization and self-expression.”²² Thus, the *Bhagavad Gītā* encourages a person to perform his or her duty in every situation. The *Bhagavad Gītā* does not only explains how to attain liberation but it also fills a person with hope and strength. Thus a person can refer to the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the great crisis of the life.

Furthermore, many scholars consider the *Bhagavad Gītā* as only a religious text and maintain that it is not politically significant text because it has included the element of mysticism, revelation and devotion etc. in it to attract the common people. According to Radhakrishnan, “The *Bhagavadgītā* is more a religious classic than a philosophical treatise. It is not an esoteric work designed for and understood by the specially initiated but a popular poem which helps even those ‘who wander in the region of the many variable.’ It gives utterance to the aspirations of the pilgrims of all sects who seek to tread the inner way to the city of God.”²³ The reason why many thinkers consider it a religious text because it teaches *bhakti-yoga*; it supports the worship or devotion to a personal God as well as the devotion to the Supreme. It maintains also that through devotion one could get comfort in the problems of one’s life. Therefore Radhakrishnan says, “*Gītā* teaches a method which is within the reach of all that is, *bhakti*, or devotion to God. The

²⁰ Ibid p. 83.

²¹ Chopra, R.R., *Gita-the song Celestial*, p.14.

²² Quoted in Chopra, R.R., *Gita-the song Celestial*, p.15.

²³ Ibid p. 13.

poet makes the teacher the very God descended into humanity. He is supposed to address Arjuna, the representative man, at a great crisis in his life.”²⁴

However, one can argue that it is not only a book of religion rather it also has political significances because the background of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is itself very political. The conversation between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna takes place in a battlefield. The subject of the discussion is whether one should fight with his own kinsmen, which is a very politically significant subject because it deals with the question— which one is more important duty for an individual i.e. individual’s duties toward his family and friend or duties toward the society. This question is always relevant for an individual. Hence, the *Bhagavad Gītā* does not only discuss ethics and morality but also it deals with warfare as well as polity. V.M. Mohanraj says, “However, the reader hears in those seven hundred verses, not the echo of the twang of the bow-string or that of clank of swords, not the reverberations of the trumpeting of elephants or that of war cry of soldiers, but a long impromptu on ethical and social problems, then agitating minds of the people, veneered with philosophy.”²⁵ Thus, its relevance is not only constrained to the ethics and religion rather it has the capacity to speak on contemporary global issues. As Balay has rightly mentioned, “Gita burst out of its confinement precisely because it spoke to contemporary global concerns on the following issues: violence and non-violence, the individual’s duties to society, the boundary between the spiritual and the social, the significance of individual action as compared with fate, the role of the founders of nations in history.”²⁶ Therefore, *Bhagavad Gītā* is considered as a very significant text to understand the Indian cultural history, society, polity, religion and philosophy.

The purpose of the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

The main purpose *Bhagavad Gītā* is to teach how to maintain a balance between the *dharmakṣetra* i.e. field of duty and the *karmakṣetra* or *kurukṣetra* i.e. field of deeds. In other words, it maintains balance between what we should do and i.e. what we are doing. What ‘we should do’ is related to the moral aspect of a person’s life, while, ‘what we are doing’ is related to practical aspect of a person’s life. Thus, it teaches us that there is no gap between practical life

²⁴ Radhakrishnan, S., *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 520.

²⁵ Mohanraj, V.M., *The Warrior and the Charioteer: A Materialistic Interpretation of the Bhagavadgita*, p. 27.

²⁶ Balay, C.A., “India, the Bhagavad Gita and the World.” *Political thought in action: The Bhagavad Gita and Modern India*, p. 2.

and moral or spiritual life. The problems occur because of the gap between the two. There should always be a proper balance between the two, and the doctrine of *karma* of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is the instrument for maintaining this balance.

According to the doctrine of *karma* one should perform action without being attached to the fruits of the action. The significance of this doctrine is that it guides us to act in a political domain which is a realm for the pursuit of self-interest by the individuals and the groups, in a complete selfless manner. The moral actions can be performed in a political domain. It can be concluded that an action can be regarded as moral action even though it is performed to fulfill a political end, therefore, there is no contradiction between moral and political action if it is done without being attached from the fruit of the action. This doctrine influenced many political thinkers like Gandhi, Tilak and Sri Aurobindo etc. According to Sri Aurobindo, “Bhagavad-Gita is a true scripture of the human race a living creation rather than a book, with a new message for every age a new meaning for every civilization.” Therefore, it is accepted that “the text plays the kind of role in Indian political thinking that Machiavelli’s *Prince* or Hobbes’s *Leviathan* do for its European equivalent, being like them a thoroughly modern work”²⁷ because, it played a very important role in shaping Indian political thoughts in twentieth century.

The Influence of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in Nineteenth and twentieth century Indian Politics:

In nineteenth and twentieth century the *Bhagavad Gītā* attracted many scholars and thinkers both from India and Europe. According to Aldous Huxley, *Bhagavad Gītā* is “one of the clearest and most comprehensive summaries of perennial philosophy ever to have been made. Hence its enduring value, not only to Indians, but for all mankind.”²⁸ It influenced Indian political thinkers because they were looking for something which can become foundation for their social, political, and ethical theories. The social and political theories which Europe introduced, was not completely relevant for India because of cultural, ethical and socio-political backgrounds of both of them are very difference. Therefore, for the nineteenth and twentieth political thinkers of India

²⁷Kapila, Shruti, and Devji Faisal “India, the Bhagavad Gita and the World,” *Political thought in action: The Bhagawad Gita and Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. pp. 14-15.

²⁸*Bhagavad Gita: The Song of God*, translated by Prabhavanda Swami and Cristopher Isherwood (with an introduction by Aldous Huxley), p.13.

the *Bhagavad Gītā* became the foundation to understand the ethics, history, society and polity etc. and they want to develop their own theories on this foundation.

Charles Wilkins first translated the *Bhagavad Gītā* into English in 1785. At that time, though Wilkins' translation made a very little impression in Europe but it also played a significant role in introducing Indian literature to the western readers. "Interpretation of Gita started in West with Wilkins in 1785 and flourished with Edwin Arnold's interpretation in 1885. These interpretations was conducted in west on the basis of the Western concepts and assumptions."²⁹ Therefore, even that time Indian social and political thinkers did not show their interest in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Nevertheless, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a social thinker and reformer, recognizes the value of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and he interpreted it to remove social evils of Hinduism. He wanted to abolish the *satī-prathā*, therefore, he used the teaching of *Bhagavad Gītā* to show that the sati system is itself against its teaching. Thus he also tried to establish that the ritual according which, a woman should immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre because by doing so she would gain honor on the earth and eternal bliss in the heaven, is not according to the *śāstra*. He held that the *Bhagavad Gītā* does not teach to do anything for obtaining honor on the earth or eternal bliss in the heaven.³⁰ Thus he says "Without entirely rejecting the authority of the Geeta, the essence of all Shastrus, no one can praise rites performed for the sake of fruition, nor recommend them to others; for nearly half of the Bhuguvud Geeta is filled with the dispraise of such works, and with the praise of works performed without desire of fruition."³¹ Roy calls *Bhagavad Gītā* as 'the essence of all Shastrus' because he wants to refute his opponents by showing that no *śāstra* promote *satī*.

Tilak also wrote a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, namely *Gita-Rahasya*. His main purpose was to remove the impact of western ideology on Indian minds so it was important for him to find something which could replace western ideas. "The one scripture which he found eminently suited to this role was the Bhagavad Gita. It qualified to various standpoints. It was authoritative- recognized as an epitome of Brahmanic theory: it was popular – known to all

²⁹Sharpe, Eric J., *The Universal Gītā: western images of the Bhagavadgītā: a bicentenary survey*, p. 11

³⁰ Ibid 12.

³¹ Roy, *Translation of several Principal Book, Passages and Texts of the Veda, and some of Controversial Works on Brahminical Theology* Quoted in Sharpe, Eric J., *The Universal Gita*, p. 12

section of India.”³² He was attracted by the *karma* yoga of the *Bhagavad Gītā* because it maintains that one should always perform one’s action to fulfill one’s own duty without worrying about the consequences. Through this theory he wanted to motivate the people to fight against the British rule in India. Thus, Tilak’s *Gita-Rahasya* is a political interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. He wanted to bring a political awareness among the people of India through his interpretation.

Further, Tilak believed that the main purpose of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is to teach *karma* yoga or theory of action rather than renunciation or devotion or knowledge. The problem he encounters with it is that the *Bhagavad Gītā* holds that one should act according to only his/her prescribed duties. For example, only a warrior’s duty is to fight. However, Tilak intended to include every citizen to fight for the nation, no matter which caste or *varṇa* he or she may belong. So, through his interpretation of *Bhagavad Gītā*, he tried to prove that the “social and political action is the duty of all citizens when the nation is threatened by internal decay or external oppression.”³³ Thus, Tilak tries to encourage every citizen to participate in freedom struggle through *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Gandhi and the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

The socio-political theories of Gandhi are influenced by both Indian and Western tradition of thoughts. He was influenced by Tolstoy, Ruskin, Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism etc. Though Gandhi, himself, at various places admits that he was influenced by certain Western sources particularly the Gospel, Tolstoy, Thoreau, and Ruskin. Yet there are certain elements in Hinduism which helped him to construct some of Gandhi’s ideas. Further, he read various texts of Hindu religion but among them, he finds the *Bhagavad Gītā* very important. The text helped him to shape many of his social-political ideas.

The influence of *Bhagavad Gītā* on Gandhi is tremendous; its influence can be seen not only on his ideas and thinking but also on his overall personality. From his childhood he was familiar with the *Bhagavad Gītā* as he always saw his father reading it. Though he came from a *vaiṣṇava*

³²Brown, D. Mackenzie, "The Philosophy of Bal Gangadhar Tilak: Karma vs. Jnana in the Gita Rahasya." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 17, p. 197

³³ Ibid p 198.

family he was already familiar with some of the famous verses of the *Bhagavad Gītā* but he never read it. He also admitted that he never studied Hinduism until 1893. He started some of the text of Hinduism to have better understanding of other religions as well as of Hinduism. He wrote, “When in 1893, I came in close contact with Christen friends, I was a mere novice. They tried hard to bring home to me, and make me accept, the message of Jesus, and I was a humble and respectful listener with an open mind. At that time I naturally studied Hinduism to my best ability and endeavoured to understand other religions.”³⁴

However, his first direct encounter with the *Bhagavad Gītā*, as a reader, was in 1889. He did not read the original text because of his limited knowledge of Sanskrit language rather he read the English translation of Edwin Arnold which is known as the Song Celestial. He was so impressed by it that he admitted in his autobiography that he felt ashamed that he had never read the *Bhagavad Gītā* before. He read the *Bhagavad Gītā* along with other religious the Bible, Arnold’s Light of Asia, and Blavatsky’s Key to Theosophy etc. and always try to compare their teachings. He says, “My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the Gita, The Light of Asia and the Sermon on the Mount.”³⁵ He was so impressed by the *Bhagavad Gītā* that he read many translations both in English and Gujarati.³⁶ Later, in South Africa when he started taking interest in Hindu religious and philosophical texts, he started the regular reading of the *Bhagavad Gītā* including *Yoga Sutras*, *Upaniṣads* and other Hindu scriptures to understand Hinduism as well as other religion better.

Moreover, one can clearly see the influence of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in his autobiography, *The Story of My experiments with Truth*. He quoted the *Bhagavad Gītā* on various occasions in it. Therefore, sometimes it becomes difficult for readers to understand whether it is impact of the *Bhagavad Gītā* on Gandhi’s life or the impact of the *Bhagavad Gītā* on his autobiography. Because ‘Gandhi started writing his interpretation of the Gītā around the same time when he was writing his autobiography in mid-1920s. Gandhi took nine months from February to November 1926.’³⁷ While he “from November 29, 1925 through February 3, 1929, his weekly installments

³⁴ Gandhi, M.K., *The story of My Experiment with Truth*, p. 239.

³⁵ Ibid p. 75.

³⁶ Gandhi, M.K., *Bhagavad Gita*, p. 12.

³⁷ Desai, Mahadeva, *Gita according to Gandhi: The Gospel of Selfless Action*, p. 7.

were a linked set of self-contained articles.”³⁸ Though the influence of the *Bhagavad Gītā* on the early life of Gandhi is not so obvious yet one can clearly see its influence on his later life. He says, “What effect this reading of Gita had on my friends only they can say, but to me the Gita became my infallible guide of conduct. It became my dictionary of daily reference.”³⁹

For Gandhi, the *Bhagavad Gītā* is an “infallible guide of conduct.”⁴⁰ There are so many concepts of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, influenced Gandhi. For example, the concept of renunciation (*sanyāsa*) and the ways to self-realization influenced him most. He also found the idea of non-possession (*aparigraha*) very important. His idea of trusteeship is based on the idea of non-possession. He says, “I understood more clearly in the light of the Gita teaching the implication of the word ‘trustee’...I understood the Gita teaching of non-possession, to mean that those who desired salvation should act like the trustee who, though having control over great possessions, regards not an iota of them as his own.”⁴¹ “Along with ‘*aparigraha*’ and ‘*samabhava*’, the doctrine of ‘*nishkama karma*’ expounded in the Gita appealed to Gandhi deeply.”⁴²

Gandhi, throughout his life, tried to balance with personal and political life. For example, he believed that one should always fulfill one’s duty towards the society, therefore, when he was in South Africa, he did not take fees for public works because he thinks that it is his duty to do those works. Thus “Gandhi turns to the *Gītā* as a source for the very foundational work he saw as prior and leading to the social and political transformations his vision of *svarāj* entailed.”⁴³ He uses the *Bhagavad Gītā* to substantiate his political theories, like, his theory of truth and non-violence, the end and mean theory, the idea of *satyāgraha* and *svarāj* etc. Thus, he admits, “But the memorizing of the Gita had to give way to other work and the creation and nature of Satyagraha, which absorbed all my thinking time, as the latter may be said to be doing even now.”⁴⁴

³⁸Koppedrayar, Kay, "Gandhi's "Autobiography" as Commentary on the "Bhagavad Gītā"." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 6, no. 1, p. 58.

³⁹ Gandhi, M.K., *The Story of My Experiment with Truth*, p. 240

⁴⁰ Ibid 240.

⁴¹ Ibid 241

⁴²Srinivas, M. N., "Gandhi's Religion." *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 25, p. 3.

⁴³Koppedrayar, Kay. "Gandhi's "Autobiography" as Commentary on the "Bhagavad Gītā"." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 6, no. 1, p 50.

⁴⁴ Gandhi, M.K., *The Story of My Experiment with Truth*, p. 241.

Thus, the *Bhagavad Gītā* is also important for Gandhi because it guides an individual to fulfill his or her duties toward the friends and family and also toward the society. People always find a gap between the political acts and moral or spiritual acts; many find these two acts as opposites; they believe that the end of these two kinds are different; political acts are worldly acts that would only help to achieve the worldly goals while moral and spiritual acts help to achieve spiritual goal. Thus, they also believe that as political actions are worldly action, it cannot lead a person to spiritual development. However, Gandhi holds that the doctrine of *karma* is exposed to us through the *Bhagavad Gītā* tries to reconcile the difference between worldly action and religious or spiritual actions, thus, the *Bhagavad Gītā* bridges the gap between these two. Therefore, Gandhi asserts that the author of the *Bhagavad Gītā* “has drawn no line of demarcation between salvation and worldly pursuits. On the contrary he has shown that religion must rule even our worldly pursuits. I have felt that the Gita teaches us that what cannot be followed in day-to-day practice cannot be called religion.”⁴⁵

Though Gandhi, in the introduction of his autobiography, makes the distinction between the worldly and spiritual actions but he maintains that both have the same end. According to him there are two fields of action; one is political field and other is spiritual field. Both the field of action, he asserts, are directed toward the one end i.e. *mokṣa*. For him, every action should be directed to achieve self-realization. He says, “What I want to achieve – what I have been striving and pining to achieve thirty years – is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *moksha*. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in political field, are directed to the same end.”⁴⁶ Thus, the doctrine *karma* persuades to perform political action.

For Gandhi, self-realization must be the goal of every action. Self-realization can be achieved through self-restraint i.e. by having control over one’s passion. For self-realization one should put restraints on one’s lust and passions, and should not act just for sensual pleasure. The actions should be performed selflessly. In order to do so one must have control over his/her senses. Gandhi knows that it is very difficult to control one’s senses; it requires lots of practice. Only through practice one can reach the state. Gandhi’s experiments on food is an example of this

⁴⁵ Desai, Mahadeva, *Gita according to Gandhi: The Gospel of Selfless Action*, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁶ Gandhi, M.K., *The Story of My Experiment with Truth*, p. 13.

practice. He believes that one should eat as much as he or she needs. One should not eat for test and satisfaction. He includes fasting and taking *brahmcharya* too as a practice of having control on the senses but he claims that these practices are fruitful only when their aim is to attain self-restraint. He says, “Fasting can help to curb animal passion, only if it is undertaken with a view to self-restraint.”⁴⁷

Further, he believes that sexual acts should not be performed merely for fulfilling lust. Lustful attachment is the cause of bondage; those who acts by being attached with lust cannot attain self-realization. Hence, it is necessary to control one’s lust and passions for self-realization and one can control them through practices. However, all these practices must be done in full awareness. One should not have control only on senses but on mind also. Therefore, Gandhi says, “Fasting and similar discipline is, therefore, one of the means to the end of self-restraint, but it is not all, and if physical fasting is not accompanied by mental fasting, it is bound to be end in hypocrisy and disaster.”⁴⁸ All these thoughts can be seen as the influence of the *Bhagavad Gītā* on him because it deals with these concepts. The *Bhagavad Gītā* says, “Others, who are interested in achieving self-realization through control of the mind and senses, offer the functions of all the senses, and of the life breath, as oblations into the fire of the controlled mind.”⁴⁹

According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, it is necessary to have control on the senses. Being controlled by senses one gets into bondage. It holds, “There are principles to regulate attachment and aversion pertaining to the senses and their objects. One should not come under the control of such attachment and aversion, because they are stumbling blocks on the path of self-realization.”⁵⁰ Therefore, one who is regulated by the senses cannot achieve self-realization. Gandhi also hold that one should have control on his/her body as the master of body. The person who works for sense-gratification becomes slave of the body. Hence, the person loses self-control and forgets his/her real nature. Therefore, he says, “...by becoming slave of his body instead of remaining its master, loses self-control, and ceases to be a man.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid 298.

⁴⁸ Ibid 299.

⁴⁹ Bhagavadgītā 4.27

⁵⁰ Bhagavadgītā 3.34

⁵¹ Gandhi, M.K., *The Story of My Experiment with Truth*, p. 245.

Further, once Gandhi also finds himself in similar situation like Arjuna finds himself in the battle-field. He went England for a visit but there was a war declared. He started pondering about what should be his duty in the war? That time India was a British colony he thought it is his duty to participate in the war for England. He said that he believed that Indians who were living in England should participate in the war.⁵² He found many objections on this view. He wrote, “A number of objections were raised on this line of argument. There was, it was contended, world of difference between the Indian and the English. We were slaves and they were masters. How could a slave co-operate with the master in hour of the latter’s need? Was it not the duty of the slave, seeking to be free, to make the master’s need his opportunity?”⁵³ Thus, those who believe that British Empire oppressed India and they treat Indians as the slaves, argue that it is not their duty to participate in the war. At that time Gandhi does not believe that Indians are reduced as slaves in British Empire, therefore, these arguments do not satisfy him and he decides to help England in the war.

Additionally, Gandhi finds himself in another dilemma which he calls “a spiritual dilemma.”⁵⁴ Gandhi is a votary of *ahimsā* (nonviolence) and believes that one should not involve in *himsā* (violence). However, war contains *himsā*, therefore, as a votary of *ahimsā* Gandhi’s dilemma is whether he should participate in the war. In this situation he follows the *karma* theory of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and he does what he feels to be his duty. He, at that time, believes that it is his duty to participate in the war for England. Here, also one can see the influence of the *Bhagavad Gītā* on Gandhi when he seems to justify his decision by saying that he did what he thought as his duty, as the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches to fulfill one’s duty no matter what the situation be.

Gandhi did not read the *Bhagavad Gītā* as history in strict sense rather he read it as an allegory of man’s condition in the world, therefore, he became successful in taking help from the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the real life situations.⁵⁵ Hence, the *Bhagavad Gītā* guides Gandhi when he finds himself in dilemma. He says, “...when doubt haunts me, when disappointments stare me at the face and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the Bhagavad Gita, and find

⁵² Ibid p. 311.

⁵³ Ibid p. 311

⁵⁴ Ibid p. 313

⁵⁵ Sharpe, Eric J., *The Universal Gītā: western images of the Bhagavadgītā: a bicentenary survey*, p. 116.

a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. My life has been full of external tragedies, and if they have not left any visible and indelible effect on me, I owe it to the teaching of the Bhagavad Gita.”⁵⁶

Ambedkar and the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

Like other political thinkers Dr. B. R. Ambedkar also wanted to build a firm foundation for political theories to which the country may follow. According to him, any social-political theory must be based on three ideas which are equality, liberty and fraternity. His socio-political philosophy is based on these three principles. He believes that Hindu society lacks these three concepts in it because it has embraced the caste-system. He holds that because of the caste system, there are inequalities, suppressions, lack of freedom to choose, and lack of belongingness. Therefore, his dream is to build a casteless society in India, where, there is no hierarchy and no discrimination.

Ambedkar, who himself belongs to the community of untouchables, became the primary voice of the ‘untouchables’. He wanted to abolish untouchability and caste-based discrimination. Therefore, he wanted to understand the root cause of these kinds of discrimination so that an effective remedy could be brought.

Various Hindu scriptures hold that the Hindu society is divided into four *varṇas* i.e. *Brāhmin*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya* and *Śūdra*. Later these four *varṇas* are divided into various castes. Thus, According to Ambedkar, many of the Hindu scriptures are the foundation for the caste based discrimination and untouchability. For this reason, he read several scriptures of Hindu religion including *Manusmṛiti* and *Bhagavad Gītā*. According to his observation, Hindu scriptures nurture this kind of discrimination because they maintain the idea of *chaturvarṇa*. Therefore, Ambedkar believes that to abolish the discrimination and untouchability one must refuse to read these scriptures. He, further, argues that the *Bhagavad Gītā* is also one of those scriptures which supports this kind of discrimination because it appreciates the idea of the *chaturvarṇa*. Hence, Ambedkar said, “If the idea of the *Varna* survived it was because of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which gave a philosophical foundation to the Varna system by arguing that the Varna was based on the

⁵⁶ Andrews, Mahatma Gandhi’s Ideas, p.73 Sharpe, Eric J., *The Universal Gītā: western images of the Bhagavadgītā: a bicentenary survey*, p. 114.

innate qualities of man.”⁵⁷ Therefore, Ambedkar also joins the debates on themes and purpose of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and responds its various interpretation and commentaries. He admires Garbe and Telang’s views on the *Bhagavad Gītā* but criticized the views of Radhakrishnan, Tilak and Gandhi.

Thus, Ambedkar was not satisfied by the popularity of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which it was getting in twentieth century Indian politics. The reason is – he holds that the politics must be based on the idea of equality, liberty and fraternity but the *Bhagavad Gītā* does not contain these concepts rather it supports the hierarchy in society through the idea of *chaturvarna* and this hierarchy is the root cause that there is lack of equality, liberty and fraternity in the society. Further, Ambedkar does not believe that the *Bhagavad Gītā* is against discrimination with women and *śūdras*, therefore, he chooses to criticize the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Furthermore, Ambedkar does not hold the idea that *Bhagavad Gītā* might help in other kinds of social-reforms like, animal sacrifice, performance of *karma-kāṇḍa* etc. Ambedkar firmly believes that the *Bhagavad Gītā* supports *karma-kāṇḍa*. He says “...in speaking of Karma yoga the *Bhagavad Gita* is referring to nothing but the dogmas of Karma kanda as propounded by Jaimini which it tries to renovate and strengthen.”⁵⁸ Therefore, according to Ambedkar, “the *Bhagavad Gita* is neither a book of religion nor a treatise on philosophy. What the *Bhagavad Gita* does is to defend certain dogmas of religion on philosophic grounds. If on that account if anybody wants to call it a book on religion or a book of philosophy he may please himself. But essentially it is neither. It uses philosophy to defend the religion.”⁵⁹

According to Ambedkar, the *Bhagavad Gītā* was written after Jaimini’s *Purva Mimāṃsa* and Buddhism, therefore, the text was influenced by both the schools of thought. Further, he believes that the *Bhagavad Gītā* was composed to save Hinduism from the attack of Buddhism. It tries to justify war, killing, *chaturvarṇa*, performance of *yajña* etc. on moral and philosophical ground.

⁵⁷ Ambedkar, B.R., “Gandhism: The Doom of the Untouchables”, *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, edited by Rodrigues Valerian, pp.164-172, p. 164.

⁵⁸ Ambedkar, B.R., “Krishna and His Gita”, *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, edited by Rodrigues Valerian, pp. 193-204, p. 196.

⁵⁹ Ibid p. 193.

Thus, the *Gītā*, for Ambedkar, is nothing but “a philosophic defence of the counter-revolutionary doctrines.”⁶⁰

Therefore, he analyzed and criticized *Bhagavad Gītā* on many occasions. Meera Nanda rightly pointed out that “Ambedkar’s Gita does not exist. Library shelves groan under the weight of Gita commentaries—and commentaries upon commentaries— penned by Gandhi, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sri Aurobindo and nearly every other star in the nationalist firmament. But Ambedkar produced no such treatise. He has only left behind some hints on what he thought of this text so revered by his countrymen.”⁶¹ Thus, Ambedkar does not appreciate the *Bhagavad Gītā* rather he gives us some different points of view which enable us to see it from a very critical perspective.

In this work, as it is already mentioned, the *Bhagavad Gītā* would be explored and analyzed from only the perspective of Gandhi and Ambedkar. The reason is to choose particularly these two thinkers is that Gandhi represents all those social and political thinkers who admires the *Bhagavad Gītā* and believes that it could be the foundation for the socio-political theories and it is able to bring social and political reform in India; whereas, Ambedkar represents those thinkers who are critique of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and think that it has no socio-political significance at all. Further, it would also be interesting to see how both the thinkers try to tackle the problem of untouchability and discrimination; one tries to tackle it through the *Bhagavad Gītā* while other by criticizing it. This work would try to discuss how both the thinker understand the *Bhagavad Gītā* and how this understanding contributed in shaping their political thoughts.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 197.

⁶¹ Nanda, Meera, “Ambedkar’s Gita”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 49, p. 39.

CHAPTER 2

The Philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gītā*

“*Dharma-kṣetre kuru-kṣetre samavetā yuyutsavaḥ*

Māmakāḥ pāṇḍavās caiva kim akurvata sañjaya”⁶²

“In the field of righteousness, the field of the Kurus, when my people and the sons of Pāṇḍu had gathered together, eager for battle, what did they do, O Sañjaya?”⁶³

In this first verse of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Dṛtarāstra, the king, asks to Sañjaya what is happening in the battlefield where his sons and his brother’s son are gathered for a battle. Here, the battlefield where the war is about to start is called both *dharmakṣetra* and *kurukṣetra*. The term *dharma* can be roughly translated as ‘duty’ or ‘righteousness’. *Dharma* always refers to what one should do or what right thing is to do. So, *dharmakṣetra* means the field (*kṣetra*) of duty or righteousness. Whereas, the term *kuru* refers ‘to do’ or ‘to act’. Therefore, *kurukṣetra* can be understood as the field of action. Thus, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* the battlefield refers to both the field of duty and the field of action. So, it tries to find out whether there is any gap between the duty and the deeds of a person, that is, it tries to maintain a balance between what a person is doing and what the person should do, which means, a person’s actions should be according to his or her duty.

The problem arises when there is a confusion about the duties in a particular situation. Sometimes one gets confused about what one’s duty is, hence, one also gets confused of what actions should be performed. This confusion arises in the mind of Arjuna when he sees his own relatives and friends as his opponent on the battlefield. Doubts covers his ability to think what the right thing is to do in this situation. He becomes puzzled about whether it is right for him to kill his own relatives. Therefore, he asks Kṛṣṇa to show him the right path. He wants to know what actually his duty is and what action is appropriate to perform. Kṛṣṇa says that it is one’s duty to perform the actions to fulfill one’s duty so he advised him to participate in the war. The battlefield is the *dharmakṣetra* as well as the *karmakṣetra* for Arjuna; he should not escape from it.

⁶² Bhagavadgītā 1.1

⁶³ Bhagavadgītā 1.1

Nevertheless, Arjuna was also baffled which duty he should fulfill i.e. whether he should protect his family or kill them as they are his opponent. Here, the main cause of Arjuna's dilemma was that he made a distinction between his own people and the others. Kṛṣṇa tried to convince him that there is no such distinction and asked him to perform the actions to fulfill his duties as a warrior.

According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, one should always fulfill his or her duty or follow his or her *dharma*. The *Bhagavad Gītā* discusses a very important question i.e. what one should choose between *śreya* and *preya*. The concepts of *śreya* and *preya* have a very important place in Indian philosophy. *Preya* is something which is pleasurable while *śreya* may or may not seem pleasurable in this world but it is the highest good; everyone should work for achieving the highest good. Performing actions for *śreya* leads to the ultimate goal of life. Therefore, the question what *śreya* is, becomes important. The *Bhagavad Gītā* asserts that fulfilling one's duty is to perform the duties which are prescribed without being attached to its consequences. This would lead to the Supreme. "Therefore, without attachment, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment."⁶⁴ Thus, performing actions without attachment, for *Bhagavad Gītā*, is *śreya*.

In *Bhagavad Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa describes what *śreya* and *preya* are. He tries to show that Arjuna's whole dilemma arises only because he becomes confused about what *śreya* is for him, that is, whether it is *śreya* to kill one's own people or to not kill them. Therefore, K. N. Upadhyaya says, "like Upanishadic seeker of knowledge who discards all wealth and pleasure (*preya*) for the sake of what is better (*śreya*), Arjuna also is ready to give up all worldly and heavenly pleasures, gain, victory and even in his life for the sake of the latter. His mind is all the time intent on the knowledge of 'śreya' and since he is himself unable to see, he asks Kṛṣṇa about it."⁶⁵ In *Bhagavad Gītā* Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to act for the highest good and tries to show him the path of achieving the *śreya*. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* Kṛṣṇa shows three paths to achieve the perfection (*mokṣa*) namely, *karma yoga*, *jñāna yoga* and *bhakti yoga*. Before discussing the paths, let us first discuss the goal i.e. liberation (*mokṣa*).

⁶⁴ Bhagavadgītā 3.19

⁶⁵ Upadhyaya, K.N., *Early Buddhis and The Bhagavadgītā*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1971. p. 152-153.

Mokṣa (liberation):

In Indian tradition, *mokṣa* (liberation) is considered as the ultimate goal of human life. *Mokṣa* is the inseparable union of *ātman* to the Absolute, *Brahman* and the liberation from the bondage of death and rebirth process. “Freedom or *mokṣa* is unity with the supreme self. It is called by different names, *mukti*, or release; *brāhmī sthiti* being in Brahman, *naiṣkarmya*, or non-action; *nistraiguṇya*, or the absence of three qualities; *kaivalya*, or solitary salvation; or the being of Brahman. In the absolute experience there is a feeling of the oneness of all.”⁶⁶ According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *mokṣa* is the final destination of the *ātman* where the three *guṇas* of *prakṛti* cannot bind it; it is not born again in this world; it unites with the Supreme Reality.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* maintains that God is the ultimate reality. Even *brahman* is subordinate to God. Everything is ultimately the *brahman*. *Brahman* is without beginning and end, unborn, and infinite; it is the source of everything. It is neither Being nor non being. God is “Para Brahman, the holy, eternal, divine person. He is the supreme person (*parama puruṣa*). He is the foundation of the infinite and eternal of Brahman, the eternal moral order, and supreme supersensuous bliss.”⁶⁷ In the *Bhagavad Gītā* Kṛṣṇa also says:

“For I am the abode of Brahman, the immortal, the imperishable, of eternal law, of absolute bliss.”⁶⁸

“He who knows Me, the unborn, without beginning, also the mighty lord of the worlds, he, among mortals, undeluded and free from all sins.”⁶⁹

“I am the origin of all; from Me all (the whole creation) proceeds. Knowing this, the wise worship Me, endowed with conviction.”⁷⁰

“And further, whatsoever is the seed of all existences that am I, O Arjuna; nor there is anything moving or unmoving that can exist without Me.”⁷¹

⁶⁶ Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* Vol. I, p. 493.

⁶⁷ Sinha, Jadunath, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 207.

⁶⁸ *Bhagavadgītā*, 14.27.

⁶⁹ *Bhagavadgītā* 10.3.

⁷⁰ *Bhagavadgītā* 10.8.

⁷¹ *Bhagavadgītā* 10.39.

Thus, the *Bhagavad Gītā* asserts that God is the origin of everything in the world; nothing can ever exist without Him and one who realizes this truth becomes free from all sins.

Furthermore, the *Bhagavad Gītā* maintains that *prakṛti* (nature) and *ātman* are eternal (neither created nor destroyed) but are dependent upon the Supreme Reality.⁷² *Prakṛti* is the cause of the material world. Though the material world, according to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, dependent on the Supreme Reality yet it is real. Further, it holds that the three *guṇas*, namely, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, are the modes of the *prakṛti*. The *ātman* is the enjoyer of the three modes of the nature. Due to the association with these three modes of the nature, the *ātman* is in the bondage of birth and death cycle. Thus, *ātman* is essentially immortal, unborn, and infinite. It is the body which is subject of destruction. Moreover, the *Bhagavad Gītā* holds when a person becomes free from the attachment of all three modes of nature, becomes free for the bondage of the death and rebirth process. Thus, according to Jadunath Sinha, the *Bhagavad Gītā* holds that *mokṣa* is “transcendental perfection of the individual self, which is not affected by the natural desire due to *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.”⁷³

The Characteristics of a *Yogī*:

Yoga is understood as the union of the *ātman* with God. In *Bhagavad Gītā*, it is said that the union can be completed through actions (*karma*), knowledge (*jñāna*) or devotion (*bhakti*). They are different paths to reach the Supreme. To follow any of these paths, one need to acquire some qualities; these qualities can be understood as the characteristics of a *yogī*; without having these characteristics one cannot follow the path any of these *yoga*.

In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the characteristics of a *yogi* is explained explicitly. A *yogi* is a person who has control on his/her senses; whose mind is disciplined and establishes it in the self. It maintains that through the practice of concentration, thought should be restrained. Thus, the mind becomes pure and one is able to see the Self through the pure mind and gets pleasure in the Self. In this state, the person established in self, never departs from the transcendental truth. One

⁷² Hiriyantha, M., *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p. 132.

⁷³ Sinha, Jadunath, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p. 59.

finds no greater gain than realizing the transcendental truth. There is no pain in this state. *Yoga*, thus, is also disconnection from the miseries which are arises because of material contact.⁷⁴

A *yogī* should be free from the anger, lust, greed, fear, pride, delusion, envy etc. The egoism should be eradicated. There should be qualities such as, purity of mind, fearlessness, self-control truthfulness, tranquility, kindness, modesty, and courage etc. A person who is always contented, has abandoned all the worldly desires and thus have controlled all the senses; whose mind is fixed on the Supreme is true *yogī*.⁷⁵ Thus the *Bhagavad Gītā* asserts, “He, O Arjuna, sees with equality everything, in the image of his own self, whether in pleasure or in pain, he is considered a perfect *yogī*.”⁷⁶ Attraction toward the worldly objects or heavenly pleasures is the main enemy and bind the *ātman*. Therefore, one should always have control on one’s senses and should become situated in the self. “When the mind is purified and egoism is destroyed, the individual become one with the supreme.”⁷⁷ Only with pure mind one can attain the Supreme.

Additionally, in chapter 16 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, there are two kinds of qualities are elaborated; one is divine qualities and other is demonic qualities. The person of demonic nature is full of pride, lust, anger, desires and arrogance; and they are always in delusion. Such a person is always takes rebirth again and again, and cannot attain the Supreme.⁷⁸ Whereas, the person with divine qualities can attain the Supreme. According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, lust, greed and anger are the three gates of darkness, and the reason of the destruction of the soul. A person with demonic qualities is always free from these. Thus the *Bhagavad Gītā* says, “The man who is release from these, the three gates of darkness, O son of Kuntī (Arjuna), does what is good for his soul and then reaches the highest state.”⁷⁹ Therefore, it maintains that being free from lust, anger and greed is very important characteristics for attaining the perfect state.

Karma Yoga:

In Indian philosophical tradition, *karma* (action) refers to those acts which are performed with some desires. So, *karma* can be defined as action with desires. Every *karma* produces some

⁷⁴ Bhagavadgītā 6.18-6.23

⁷⁵ Bhagavadgītā 6.27-6.32

⁷⁶ Bhagavadgītā 6.32.

⁷⁷ Radhakrishnan, S., *Indian Philosophy Vol. I*, p 492.

⁷⁸ Bhagavadgītā 16.10-16.12 and 16.20.

⁷⁹ Bhagavadgītā 16.22

effects which is considered as the fruit (*phala*) or the consequence of the *karma*. To enjoy the fruits of one's past actions one has to be born again. Thus, this *karma-phala* sequence is the cause of the rebirth and death process. Due to the *karma-phala* sequence, the *ātman* is in the bondage of death and rebirth process. To explain it Walli says, "Every action under specific circumstances has its corresponding reaction which is exactly proportionate to it. It is the reason we are constrained."⁸⁰ To liberate from this bondage the *ātman* must escape the rebirth and death process through avoiding *karma-phala* sequence. The *Bhagavad Gītā* provides a proposal to avoid this rebirth and death process through *karma yoga*. It asserts that by following the *karma yoga* one can avoid the *karma-phala* sequence.

The *karma yoga* of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is actually the doctrine of action. It explains the path to avoid the death and birth process through performing the actions. The *Bhagavad Gītā* also affirms *karma* as actions with desires and *karma yoga* is "the path of conduct by which the individual thirsting for service can reach the goal."⁸¹

Now, the question arises, if every action has its consequence which causes bondage, then should one renounce all of one's actions? When Arjuna shows his desire to not kill in the battle and renounce all his actions, the *Bhagavad Gītā* says that one cannot renounce all his/her action.

"For no one can remain even for a movement without doing work; every one is made to work helplessly by the impulses born of nature."⁸²

Thus, the material body, according to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, cannot be sustained without actions. It asserts that no one can escape from performing *karma* and none can live without performing *karma*. Inaction is not possible because to sustain one's life, it is necessary to perform some actions. It also holds that everyone always performs some actions according to his or her *guṇas*. To escape the bondage, the *Bhagavad Gītā* asks us to perform actions in such a way that the actions do not bind.⁸³

Hence, the *Bhagavad Gītā* explains how to perform actions so that it could not bind. Every action has its consequence. However, every actions do not cause bondage. Only those actions

⁸⁰ Walli, Dr. Koshelya, *Theory of Karman in Indian Thought*, p. 1.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 485.

⁸² Bhagavadgītā 3.5.

⁸³ Ibid, p.487.

cause bondage which are performed with the attachment to its consequence. So an action causes bondage because it is performed with the attachment to its consequence. According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a person do not have any control over the consequences but only on the actions. Therefore, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, it is stated that actions which are performed for fulfilling one's duty without being attached to the consequences of the actions, do not bind, whereas, actions done with the attachment to their consequences and for fulfilling one's desire are the cause of bondage as they create *karma-phala* sequence. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, asks Arjuna to perform the actions for fulfilling his duty or to follow his *dharma* without being attached to the consequences of the actions because action performed in such manner, do not cause bondage.⁸⁴ This is *karma yoga* of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Furthermore, it is a widely held view that the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches '*niṣkāma karma*' through its *karma yoga*. Scholars like Radhakrishnan also hold the view that the *karma yoga* of the *Bhagavad Gītā* means the performance of *niṣkāma karma*. The word '*niṣkāma*' contains two terms i.e. *nih* and *kama*; where '*nih*' means 'without' and '*kama*' means 'desire'. Therefore, the word *niṣkāma karma* means action without desires. The doctrine of karma of *Bhagavad Gītā* is, roughly, interpreted as *niṣkama karma*. Now the question arise- does *Bhagavad Gītā* really teach *niṣkāma karma*? Let us consider some of the verses of the *Bhagavad Gītā* on *karma*.

"To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits: let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be thee any attachment to inaction."⁸⁵ (2.47)

"Fixed in yoga, do thy work, O Winner of wealth (Arjuna), abandoning attachment, with an even mind in success and failure, for evenness of mind is called yoga."⁸⁶

"Therefore, without attachment, constantly perform action which is duty, for by performing action without attachment, man verily reach the Supreme"⁸⁷. (3.19)

"The wise who have united their intelligent (with the divine) renouncing the fruits which their action yields and freed from the bonds of birth reach the sorrowless state."⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Bhagavadgītā 2.47, 2.51.

⁸⁵ Bhagavadgītā 2.47

⁸⁶ Bhagavadgītā 2.48

⁸⁷ Bhagavadgītā 3.19

⁸⁸ Bhagavadgītā 2.51.

According to these verses, one should perform his/her duty without being attached to ‘the fruit of the action’. Actions attached with their fruits, cause of bondage whereas, actions which are not attached with their fruits do not bind rather they liberate. By being not attached to the fruits of the actions or without bothering of whether the consequences are good or bad, a person should fulfill his/her duty or follow his/her *dharma*.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* also maintains that there is a purpose for following one’s *dharma* without being attached to the consequences of the *karma*, that is, to be free from the bondage of death and rebirth process or to attain liberation (*mokṣa*). The *Bhagavad Gītā* says, “Those men, too, who, full of faith and free from cavil, constantly following this teaching of Mine are released from (the bondage of) works.”⁸⁹ Thus, there is always a desire or a motive, that is, to be free from the bondage of rebirth and death process and to attain liberation. Without this desire or motive there is no other reason to perform the prescribed actions without being attached from the fruits of the action. M. Hiriyanna in his *Outline of Indian Philosophy* also identifies two motives; *ātma-śuddi* (purifying the self), and serving the purpose of God. He maintains, “But whether we look upon the work as duty or as divine service, it is not ‘disinterested’ in every sense of the term. The first keeps self-conquest or subjective purification as the aim; the second looks forward to the security that has been guaranteed by God—that no godly man will perish.”⁹⁰

Furthermore, the *Bhagavad Gītā* maintains that the actions should not be motivated by selfish or worldly desires. It asserts that the actions must not be performed for sense-gratification or for fulfilling the lusts. It also admits that one should control one’s passions and fulfill one’s duty. In this sense, *karma yoga* of *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches to perform *niṣkāma karma*; because, here, the meaning of *kāma* can be understood as lust or passion and the meaning of *niṣkāma karma* is the performance of action without lust or for sense gratification. Hiriyanna, thus, rightly points out that “karma-yoga is disinterested only so far as it turn our mind from these results and sets it on the path leading to the true goal—not that it has not end at all. It does not thus do away with motives altogether; only it furnishes one and the same motive for whatever we may do, viz. the betterment of our spiritual nature.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Bhagavadgītā, 3.31

⁹⁰ Hiriyanna, M., *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p. 125.

⁹¹ Ibid, p.125-126.

Nevertheless, the main thesis of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is the performance of *karma* without and attachment. So, the action must be performed without thinking whether it would lead to good or bad consequence. Though the *Bhagavad Gītā* instructs to work without the attachment of its result, hence, the teaching of *Bhagavad Gītā* should be explained as *anāsakti yoga*; where ‘*anāsakti*’ means ‘without any attachment’. Gandhi also considers it *anāsakti yoga*. It is probably a closer explanation of the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

According to the *Gītā*, one should control one’s passion; one should not act for sense gratification, and fulfill one’s prescribed duty as *yajña* or sacrifice.

“Save work done as and for a sacrifice this world is in the bondage to work. Therefore, O son of Kuntī (Arjuna), do thy work as sacrifice, becoming free from all the attachments.” 3.9

“He who does not, in this world, help to turn the wheel thus set in motion, is evil in his nature, sensual in his delight, and he, O Pārtha (Arjuna), lives in vain” ⁹²

The *Bhagavad Gītā* says that the actions should be performed as *yajña* to the Supreme by controlling the senses, passions and without being attached to the consequences of the actions, otherwise the actions do bind. “All work is to be done in a spirit of sacrifice, for the sake of the divine. Admitting the Mīmāṃsa demand that we should perform the action for the purpose of sacrifices, the *Gītā* asks us to do such action without entertaining any hope of reward. In such cases the inevitable actions has no bidding power.”⁹³ This implies that the *Bhagavad Gītā* maintains that the action should not be performed for sense-gratification or for fulfilling one’s lusts or desires.

Radhakrishnan also maintains, “Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to fight without passion or ill-will, anger or attachment.”⁹⁴ Non-attachment to the fruit of an action implies that a person should not be affected by whether the fruits of the actions are good or bad, and should always fulfill his/her own duty.

⁹² Bhagavadgītā 3.16

⁹³ Radhakrishnan, S., *The Bhagavadgītā*, p.135

⁹⁴ Ibid, p.68.

“The man who is not troubled by these, O Chief of Man (Arjuna), who remains in pain and pleasure, who is wise makes himself fit for eternal life.”⁹⁵

According to *karma yoga* of *Bhagavad Gītā* one should perform actions to follow one’s *dharma*. In order to understand *karma yoga*, it is also very important to understand the meaning of *dharma* according to the *Bhagavad Gītā*. It is also important to know what determines the *dharma* of a person. *Dharma* is generally understood as moral obligation or as duty. It, usually, deals with the question – what one ought to do and what one ought not to do. It is the doctrine of duties and rights for every member of the society. According to the *Bhagavad Gītā* one’s duties or *dharma* is determined by the *varṇa* of the person. One must fulfill the duties of one’s *varṇa*. The *varṇa* of a person is determined by the *guṇas* and actions.

Further, the *Bhagavad Gītā* maintains that the duties each *varṇa* is ascribed to is appropriate to the nature of the person. There are four *varṇas* i.e. *Brahmin*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya*, and *Śūdra*. “Their specific duties, which accord to their innate psychological dispositions constitutes their *svadharma*. They are prescribed for them. They are their natural duties... An individual attains fulfilment of his being by performing his own specific duties. Dedication of them to God leads to his liberation.”⁹⁶ So, *dharma* refers to the duties associated with a particular *varṇa* and one, according to the *Bhagavad Gītā* should always follow one’s own *varṇa-dharma*.

However, actions done for merely fulfilling the duties or following one’s *dharma* is not enough for coming out of the bondage of *karma-phala* sequence. The *Bhagavad Gītā* maintains that the actions for fulfilling one’s duties should be performed without the attachment of the consequences of the actions. That means, whatever may be the consequence of the action, one should always perform the actions to fulfill one’s duties. One should remain in the same state whether the consequences are good or bad. This implies that one should always fulfill his or duty given by the society without considering the personal advantages. “This teaching that we ought to engage ourselves in our work as members of a social order the usual way and yet banish from our mind all thought of deriving any personal benefit therefrom is the meaning if *karma-yoga* and constitutes the specific message of the *Gītā*.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Bhagavadgītā 2.15

⁹⁶ Sinha, Jadunath, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p. 54.

⁹⁷ Hiriyanna, M., *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p. 120.

Another question that the *Bhagavad Gītā* discusses, is whether action or the renunciation of the action is better. What is the meaning of renunciation in the *Bhagavad Gītā*? The *Bhagavad Gītā* says, “Not by abstention from work does a man attain freedom from action; nor by mere renunciation does he attain to his action.”⁹⁸ According to *Bhagavad Gītā*, one cannot renounce one’s action, therefore, the attachment to the consequences of the action should be renounced. This, according to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, is the real meaning of the renunciation. It also holds that action is better than renunciation (*sannyāsa*).⁹⁹ According to S. Radhakrishnan, “the *Gītā* is therefore a mandate for action. It explains ought to do not merely as social being but as an individual with the spiritual destiny.”¹⁰⁰ Engaging in an action to fulfill one’s duty is required but without any attachment to its consequences. Thus, according to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *karma yoga* means the renunciation of attachment to the consequences of the actions. Hence, Jadunath Sinha maintains, “The *Gītā* ethics is ethics of activism (*karmayoga*). It is not ethics of inaction or renunciation of action (*sannyāsa*). It does not teach antisocial escapism. Both renunciation (*sannyāsa*) and discharge of duties with detachment are conducive to the highest good. The life of action is better than renunciation. The ethics of *Bhagavad Gītā* is not ascetism but perfectionism.”¹⁰¹

Jñāna Yoga:

The *Bhagavad Gītā* also proposes a path of liberation from the death and rebirth cycle through knowledge. This path is called the path of knowledge or *jñāna yoga*. “*Jñāna* means “knowledge,” “intuition,” “spiritual understanding,” and often used as an conjunction with *yoga* to the spiritual path by means of which men of strong intellectual or philosophic (*sattvic*) disposition seek self-realization.”¹⁰² Thus, the path of knowledge is for rational and intellectual persons who are seeking liberation or self-realization through knowledge.

Further, the *Bhagavad Gītā* also asserts that the cause of bondage is the ignorance or *avidyā* and the liberation can be achieved through knowledge. “To escape from bondage we must get rid of ignorance, which is the parent of ignorant desires and so of the ignorant actions. Vidya or

⁹⁸ Bhagavadgītā 3.4.

⁹⁹ Bhagavadgītā 5.2

¹⁰⁰ Radhakrishnan, S. *Bhagavadgītā*, p. 66.

¹⁰¹ Sinha, Jadunath, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 219.

¹⁰² Deutsch, Eliot, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, p. 15.

wisdom is the means of liberation from the chain of *avidyā kāma karma*.¹⁰³ It is due to the ignorance the self becomes attached to the three modes of nature. Thus it also holds that the ignorance is the cause of the attachment, lust, anger and greed etc.

Here, it is noteworthy that knowledge does not mean merely knowing something rather it refers to realizing or experiencing it. Radhakrishnan says, “Wisdom is not to be confused with theoretical learning or correct beliefs, for ignorance is not intellectual error. It is spiritual blindness... Wisdom is direct experience which occurs as soon as obstacles to its realization are removed. The effort of the seeker is directed to the elimination of the hindrances, to the removal of the obscuring tendencies of *avidyā*.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, due to some obstacles a person is not able to realize the truth. To remove these obstacles, according to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, one requires the purification of the self. Therefore, Radhakrishnan also points out, “For knowing the truth we require a conversion of the soul, the development of spiritual vision. Arjuna could not see the truth with his naked eyes, so he was granted the divine sight.”¹⁰⁵ Through this divine sight all obstacles are removed by Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna is able to see the truth. When all the obstacles are removed, one realizes the truth, consequently, attains *mokṣa*. “Wisdom is enveloped by ignorance; thereby creatures are bewildered. But for those in whom ignorance is destroyed by wisdom, for them wisdom lights up the Supreme Self like the sun.”¹⁰⁶

Now the question arises what kind of knowledge one requires to realize the ultimate truth or attain *mokṣa*. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, knowledge refers to the knowledge of God, the supreme reality. That, it is the source of everything; everything rests in it; it is the beginning and the end of everything. Everything is created under its will and everything will be annihilated again according to the will of Supreme reality, God.¹⁰⁷ Also, knowledge, here, means knowing the distinction between the field of knowledge and the knower. Here, the embodied self is the knower and the Supreme Reality is the real object of knowledge. It is the foundation of everything.¹⁰⁸ The self in the body is eternal part of the Supreme Reality. Here, the knowledge

¹⁰³ Radhakrishnan, S. *Bhagavadgītā*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 52.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 54.

¹⁰⁶ *Bhagavadgītā* 5.15-16.

¹⁰⁷ *Bhagavadgītā* 9.4-9.8.

¹⁰⁸ *Bhagavadgītā* 9.18-9.19

also refers to knowing the separateness of the *ātman* from the body and all its actions; the knowledge of *guṇas* of *prakṛti* which causes bondage.

Moreover, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* the whole creation is compared with an imperishable tree (*aśvattham*); it has its roots upward and its branches is down. The leaves of this tree is compared with Vedic hymns. The branches are extended above and down. It gets nourishment from the *guṇas* of the *prakṛti*. The object of sense are its twigs. The roots of the tree followed by actions, spread downwards in the world of humans. The *Bhagavad Gītā* maintains that person who knows this truth, cuts the branches of this tree through the weapon of detachment.¹⁰⁹

According to *Bhagavad Gītā* knowledge is of three kinds, *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamasa*, according to the modes of nature. Sattva knowledge is one through which the undivided Being is seen in all existence. Rajasa knowledge by which one sees multiplicity in creature without any unity. Tamasa knowledge is that by which one clings to one single effect without grasping the whole.¹¹⁰ But the supreme reality can be realized only if one acquire the complete knowledge by transcending all three kinds of knowledge. “This intuitive knowledge can be acquired by complete transcend of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamasa* and complete mastery over senses and *manas*... Firm wisdom or integral knowledge leads to abiding in God (*brāhmī sthiti*). It brings extinction of egoism in Brahman (*brahmanirvāṇa*) after death. It leads to intimate union with God.”¹¹¹ Thus, one who has this complete knowledge of the true nature of God, the ultimate reality, becomes free from the bondage.

Bhakti Yoga:

According to the *Bhakti yoga* one can achieve liberation from the bondage of death and rebirth process through following the path of devotion. The path of devotion emphasizes on the emotional aspect of a person. It expresses the emotional attachment or love of a person to God.¹¹² In the words of Radhakrishnan, “*Bhakti* or devotion is a relationship of trust and love to a personal God.”¹¹³ The term *bhakti* is derived from the root *bhaj* which means ‘to serve’ or the

¹⁰⁹ Bhagavadgītā 15.1-15.4.

¹¹⁰ Bhagavadgītā 18.19-18.22.

¹¹¹ Sinha, Jadunath, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 224.

¹¹² Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I. p. 478.

¹¹³ Radhakrishnan, S. *Bhagavadgītā*, p. 58.

service of the God.¹¹⁴ Thus, according to bhakti yoga one can attain liberation through service of God. To follow the path of devotion, the *Bhagavad Gītā* asserts, the mind of a devotee should always be fixed in God. A devotee should always concentrate on God.

“Those who fixing their minds on Me worship Me, ever earnest and possessed of Supreme faith—they do I consider most perfect in yoga.”¹¹⁵

Therefore, the *bhakti yoga* of *Bhagavad Gītā* advocates the importance of *śraddhā* (faith). For concentrating constantly on God, the devotee must have faith on God. The faith must be undivided and unswerving. Thus, faith is the foundation of *bhakti*. However, it also asserts that the faith must be compatible with *buddhi* (intelligence). Hence, it does not support blind faith. The *Gītā* explains that there are three different kinds of faith on the basis of the *guṇas* acquired by the self, namely, *sāttvika*, *rājasika*, and *tāmsika*.

“The faith of every individual, O Bhārata (Arjuna), is in accordance with his nature, Man is of the nature of his faith; what his faith is, that, verily, he is.”¹¹⁶

Thus, for the *Bhagavad Gītā*, one’s faith is according to one’s nature or *guṇas*. The devotees who are dominated by *sattva guṇa* worship the gods; those who are dominated by *rajas* worship demons; and those who are dominated by *tamas* worship the spirits and ghosts. The eating habits, the object of sacrifice and the faith of a devotee all depends on the *guṇas* which s/he is dominated by.¹¹⁷

Radhakrishnan also observes that faith, for the *Bhagavad Gītā*, is the foundation of devotion. He says “Faith (*śraddhā*) is the basis of *bhakti*. So the gods in whom people have faith are tolerated. Some love is better than none, for if we do not love we become shut up within ourselves.”¹¹⁸

The *Bhagavad Gītā* also maintains that a firm faith in God is required. Those who have unshakable faith, can worship God truly and abandon all their action; and God takes them out from the ocean of death and rebirth. Therefore, the *Bhagavad Gītā* says, “But those, who, laying

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 60.

¹¹⁵ Bhagavadgītā 12.2

¹¹⁶ Bhagavadgītā 17.3

¹¹⁷ Bhagavadgītā 17.4-17.15.

¹¹⁸ Radhakrishnan, S. *Bhagavadgītā*, p. 63.

all their actions on Me, intent on Me, worship, meditating on me, with unswerving devotion. These whose thoughts are set on Me, I straightway deliver from the ocean of the death-bound existence, O Pārtha (Arjuna).”¹¹⁹

Additionally, for the *Bhagavad Gītā*, one can achieve liberation by worshiping both the manifested (or personal gods and goddesses) and unmanifested form of the Supreme. One can be devoted toward any of the forms; it totally depends on one’s understanding the Supreme. “The Gita assures that whatever form any devotee wishes to worship with *shraddha*, the Lord strengthens that *shraddha* and grants his or her desires.”¹²⁰ God accepts anything offered to Him with *śraddhā*. If a person submits everything as offerings to God, s/he will be free from bondage. God not partial toward anyone. No one is dear to God nor does God hate anyone. But those who submitted themselves to God with devotion, God is in them and they are in Him. The *Bhagavad Gītā* also maintains that even a very vicious person who worships God with firm determination must be considered as saint and the person attains ever-lasting peace quickly.¹²¹ Thus, the path of devotion is open for everyone.

In order to surrendering oneself to God, one is required to be free from pride, anger, lust and attachment. Every possession, including one’s actions, must be submitted to the God. “When the devotee truly surrender himself to the Divine, God becomes ruling passion of his mind, and whatever the devotee does, he does for the glory of the God. Bhakti, in *Bhagavadgītā* is an utter self-giving to the transcendent.”¹²² Thus, those are in bondage due to the ignorance, through the grace of God, get the understanding by which they achieve the abode of God, thus, God shows special mercy to them and removes their ignorance through knowledge.¹²³ “Devotion generates knowledge of God. The devotee knows God through devotion and enters into him... Devotion brings about complete union of finite spirit with infinite spirit.”¹²⁴

Furthermore, the *Bhagavad Gītā* holds that there are four kinds of devotees, the distressed, the desirer of wealth, the inquisitive and the seeker of knowledge of the Absolute. The distressed devotee prays because he or she wants to come out of the distress. The devotee who desires

¹¹⁹ Bhagavadgītā 12.6-7.

¹²⁰ Nadkarni M.V., “*The Bhagavad Gita for the Modern Reader: History, Interpretation and Philosophy*”, p. 196.

¹²¹ Bhagavadgītā 9.26-.29, 9.30-32.

¹²² Ibid. p. 65-66.

¹²³ Bhagavadgītā 10.10-11.

¹²⁴ Sinha, Jadunath, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 222-23.

wealth devotes to God to gain wealth. The inquisitive devotee devotes to God to know Him according to his/her nature. And the devotee who seeks for the knowledge of the Absolute prays for knowing His true nature. Of these, the one who has undivided devotion to Him, has always engaged in His devotional service is dear to God.¹²⁵ “When the soul surrenders itself to God, He takes up our knowledge and our error and casts away all form of insufficiency and transforms all into his infinite light and the purity of the universal good.”¹²⁶ Thus, a person who completely submits himself/herself to God; dedicates all his work to Him; such a person overcomes all the difficulties through his grace.

This path is considered suitable for those who find difficulties in following *karma* or *jñāna yoga*. It is considered as the easiest path because everyone can follow it; what one requires is unshakable faith and unswerving love for God. According to Radhakrishnan, the path of devotion “is open to all, the weak and the lowly, the illiterate and the ignorant and is also the easiest. The sacrifice of love is not so difficult as the turning to the will to the divine purpose or ascetic discipline, or the strenuous effort of thinking. It is quite as efficacious as any other method, and is sometimes said to be greater than others, since it is its own fruition, while other are means to some other end.”¹²⁷

The *Bhagavad Gītā* affirms that the three *yogas* are the three ways to attain the Supreme or *mokṣa*; one can attain liberation from the bondage of rebirth process through practicing one of these three *yoga*. One should choose the *yoga* according to one’s own capacity and will. If a person is not able to acquire knowledge through concentrating on the Supreme or by performing actions without the attachment to their consequences, s/he can attain liberation by devotion.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Bhagavadgītā 7.16-17.

¹²⁶ Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 62.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p 478.

¹²⁸ Bhagavadgītā 12.9

CHAPTER 3

The *Bhagavad Gītā* and the Socio-Political Thoughts of Gandhi and Ambedkar

There are many similarities in the background of Gandhi and Ambedkar apart from their differences. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar are hated by Hindu extremists because of their views and stands on the problems of Hindu society. Both are aware of the social evils like untouchability, caste-hierarchy, superstition and practices of religious rituals. Both accept that there are various problems in Hindu society and both want to remove them. However, their solutions are very different in nature from each other. On one hand, Gandhi believes that the reformation of the Hindu society is possible only if one follows the teachings of Hindu scriptures correctly and act accordingly. For him the main cause of the social evils in Hindu Society is the misinterpretations of those scriptures and not following them correctly.

On the other hand, Ambedkar believes that the structure of the Hindu society is such that its reform is almost impossible within its structure. He holds that the teachings of various scriptures of Hindu tradition are the cause of the social evils of Hindu society. They promotes caste based hierarchy and performance of religious rituals etc. He, thus, argues that these social problems are the very part of the Hindu society. Hence, he searches for an alternative society or an alternative of Hindu religion.

For Ambedkar, caste system is one of the most evil systems. He considers it as the basis of various social evils of Hindu society. Moreover, Ambedkar believes that the reform of Hindu society is possible by abolishing the caste system. Therefore, he criticizes every text of Hindu tradition which supports *varṇa* and caste system in any form. For him, society must be based on the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. He says, “That the Hindu society must be reorganized on a religious basis of which would recognize the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity... That in order to achieve this object the sense of religious sanctity behind caste and *Varna* must be destroyed... That the sanctity of caste and *Varna* can be destroyed only by discarding the divine authority of *Shastras*.”¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Ambedkar, B.R., “Reply to the Mahatma”, *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, edited by Rodrigues Valerian, pp. 306-319, p. 307.

Thus, both Gandhi and Ambedkar are dealing with the same problems, which are—how to reform the Hindu society, how to abolish discrimination and untouchability but in addressing these problems, their approaches are totally different. The differences in approach are there because of the difference in the backgrounds of the both thinkers. An understanding of the differences of backgrounds is important here to understand the development of their thought and their understanding of these issues.

Both Gandhi and Ambedkar faced some kind of discrimination in their lives but the nature of discrimination Gandhi faced was different than the discrimination was faced by Ambedkar. Gandhi faced discrimination in South Africa which was not his own country; those who discriminated him were not his own people. He was discriminated because of his skin color or because he belongs to a different race. Whereas, Ambedkar was discriminated in his own country by his own people throughout his life and he was discriminated just because he was born in particular community and belongs to a particular caste. Ambedkar always felt that the reason of this kind of inequality and discrimination is that they (untouchable communities) are part of the Hindu society and related to the Hindu religion. Therefore, he reads some important scriptures of Hindu religion to understand the cause and to find the remedy of this kind of discriminations. He comes to the conclusion that Hindu scriptures supports these kinds of inequalities and discriminations; the problem of discrimination can be solved only if people do not follow these scriptures. However, Gandhi knows the pain of discrimination but the kind of discrimination Ambedkar was facing Gandhi was unaffected from that; he wanted to abolish discrimination but not the cause. Thus, Gandhi also read the scriptures of Hindu tradition to understand the Hindu society and its problems. He believed that a correct interpretation and understanding can help to remove these problems. Thus, both Gandhi and Ambedkar went back to the scriptures of Hindu tradition and tried to reinterpret them.

Among various scriptures Gandhi and Ambedkar both read and interpreted the *Bhagavad Gītā*. However, their purpose was different. Ambedkar chose to criticize the *Bhagavad Gītā* because it supports the idea of *varṇa* and Ambedkar believed that though it supports *varṇa*, it also maintains the caste system because caste system, for him, is based on the *varṇa* system. Gandhi, on the other hand, chose the *Bhagavad Gītā* because he found its various concepts helpful to motivate people for participating into the freedom fight and also for bringing social

reforms. Gandhi believes *Bhagavad Gītā* as very important text of Hindu tradition. He also maintains that the *Bhagavad Gītā* “has given a new meaning to *karma*, *sannyasa*, *yajna*, etc. It has breathed new life into Hinduism.”¹³⁰ In this chapter, we would try to examine how Gandhi and Ambedkar interpret the *Bhagavad Gītā* and how their interpretations have shaped their socio-political thoughts.

Gandhi and Ambedkar both reflect over the theme and purpose of the *Bhagavad Gītā* but they hold a contradictory view over it. Gandhi claims that the *Bhagavad Gītā* essentially teaches non-violence, *karma-yoga*, *dharma*, etc. whereas Ambedkar maintains that the *Bhagavad Gītā* is only a philosophical justification of war and killing. He, further, holds that *Bhagavad Gītā* also teaches *karma-kāṇḍa* and supports *varṇa* based caste-system.

According to Ambedkar the *Bhagavad Gītā* is nothing but a justification of the war and killing. He argues that even Arjuna denies to fight and kill the people; Kṛṣṇa persuades him to fight and kill. He says, “Arjuna had declared himself against the war, against killing people for the sake of property. Krishna offers a philosophic defence of war and killing in war.”¹³¹ It seems that Ambedkar reaches to this conclusion by analysis of many verses from chapter II of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Further, Ambedkar claims that the *Bhagavad Gītā* presents two kinds of arguments for killing. He says, “The philosophic defence of war offered by the *Bhagavad Gita* proceeds along two lines of arguments. One line of argument is that anyhow the world is perishable and man is mortal. Things are bound to come to an end. Man is bound to die. Why should it make any difference to the wise whether man dies a natural death or whether he is done to death as a result of violence?”¹³² Further he adds, “The second line of argument in justification of war is that it is a mistake to think that the body and the soul are one. They are separate. Not only are two quite distinct but they differ inasmuch as the body is perishable while the soul is eternal and imperishable.”¹³³ Ambedkar also maintains that the *Bhagavad Gītā* argues that the *ātman* can

¹³⁰ *Harijan*, 3 October 1936; CWMG, Vol. 63, p. 339.

¹³¹ Ambedkar, B.R., “Krishna and His Gita”, *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, edited by Rodrigues Valerian, pp. 193-204, p. 193.

¹³² *Ibid*, p. 194.

¹³³ *Ibid*, p.194.

never be killed, therefore, killing a person is not possible. Hence, Ambedkar claims, “War and killing need therefore give no ground to remorse or shame, so argued the *Bhagavad Gita*.”¹³⁴

Before discussing these verses on the basis of which Ambedkar may have come to the above conclusion we must take the context into which the verses are expressed. Here, it seems that Arjuna’s dilemma is about participation in a war, that is, whether one should participate in the war or not. However, it should be noted that Arjuna is not against the idea of killing others. He does not think that killing is wrong. His doubt is about whether one should fight or kill one’s own relatives. So, he is in dilemma of killing his own relative in the battlefield.

Thus, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the main reason of Arjuna’s distress and dilemma is that his mind is filled with the thoughts of losing his own relatives and well-wishers. He is afraid of losing them. He has made the distinction between people whom he thinks as his own (*sva*) and people whom he thinks as others (*para*). Therefore, he argues that there is no good in fighting with them and he tries to establish that by doing so he will only do harm and nothing else. What Arjuna sees there that he has to fight with his fathers, grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, friends and also his fathers-in-law and well-wishers, therefore, he becomes sad.¹³⁵ In this situation the doubt i.e. whether he should fight or not, occurs in his mind. Further, the doubt occurs because he is fearful of losing his great grandfather Bhiṣma and his teacher.¹³⁶ Both are dear to him. It is the love and attachment with them which make him weak so he starts searching other arguments so that he may escape from the battle. Thus the Arjuna’s dilemma is whether he should fight with his own kinsmen. So, the *Bhagavad Gītā* says, “He was overcome with great compassion and utter this in sadness; when I see my own people arrayed and eager for fight, O Kṛṣṇa, My limbs quails, my mouth goes dry, my body shakes and my hair stands on ends.”¹³⁷

Furthermore, Gandhi also holds that the context is important to understand the verses of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. He also raises a very important question which is, “... had Arjuna’s obstinate refusal to fight anything to do with non-violence? In fact, he had fought often enough in the past. On the present occasion, his reason was suddenly clouded by ignorant attachment. He did not

¹³⁴ Ibid, p.194.

¹³⁵ Bhagavadgītā, 1.26, 27.

¹³⁶ Bhagavadgītā, 1.25.

¹³⁷ Bhagavadgītā, 1.28, 29.

wish to kill his kinsmen. He did not wish to kill even if he believed that person to be wicked.”¹³⁸ Thus, Gandhi argues that Arjuna’s denial of fighting and killing in the battle has nothing to do with *ahimsā*. The only reason to this refusal is his attachment with his own relatives and friends.

Additionally, Arjuna says to Kṛṣṇa that he is not able to understand the benefit of this battle. It seems to him that there is no difference between victory and defeat in this battle. He also claims that it will be sinful to fight with and killing one’s own relatives and friends and thus he will be thrown into the hell.¹³⁹ Thus, Arjuna does not declares himself against war and killing rather he was against the war with his own friends and relatives. He does not have any problem to fighting with whom who are not his relatives (*svajans*), or whom he thinks as others. Therefore, Gandhi says, “The first thing to bear in mind is that Arjuna falls into the error of making a distinction between kinsmen and outsiders.”¹⁴⁰ Hence, the verses of second chapter should always be read in the light of the first chapter.

In second chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa tries to argue why Arjuna should fight in this battle. The main reason of Arjuna’s dilemma is fear, grief and guilt of killing his relatives, therefore, Kṛṣṇa, wants to make Arjuna fearless and guilt-free and also he wants to take him out from the grief of the thought of killing his own relatives. Arjuna laments because he thinks that if he fights he would be the cause of the death of his friends and relative. Gandhi also holds that Arjuna “is unhappy not at the thought of killing, but at the thought of whom he was required to kill. By putting the word kinsmen repeatedly in his mouth, the author of the *Gita* shows into what darkness and ignorance he has sunk.”¹⁴¹ Thus, to take out from this darkness and ignorance Kṛṣṇa wants to assure him that the death of one who is born, is inevitable. He is told that all the relation is attached because he sees everybody as the body. Kṛṣṇa tells him that the body is not the real nature of person it just like a cover or cloth. The real nature of a person is *ātman*.

Therefore, the *Bhagavad Gītā* describes the difference between the *deha* (the body) and the *dehi* (the *ātman*). Through this difference Kṛṣṇa tries to convince Arjuna that there is no *svajan* (kinsmen) in the real sense because the body is not permanent so the relation which is attached to the body is also not permanent. Moreover, even if you kill them, according to Kṛṣṇa, you would

¹³⁸ Gandhi, M.K., *The Bhagavad Gita*, p. 13.

¹³⁹ *Bhagavadgītā*, 1.38.

¹⁴⁰ Gandhi, M.K., *The Bhagavad Gita*, p. 24.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 18.

kill only their body not the soul which is what they really are. Hence, Kṛṣṇa advises him to fight without any guilt of killing his own kinsmen and to follow his *dharma* without being attached to the consequences of the actions.

Thus, the purpose here is to convince Arjuna that there is no such distinction between one's own relatives and others. It is due to the ignorance that Arjuna makes such a distinction. Therefore, Gandhi believes that the objective of these verses is to take Arjuna out of this ignorance. So the *Bhagavad Gītā*, for Gandhi, does not motivate Arjuna for war and killing rather it helps Arjuna to come out from the attachment with his relatives and from the distress of losing them and fulfill his duties. Thus, these verses without this context may seem that they support war and killing and may convey a very different meaning. Therefore, they should never be taken into isolation. The context must always be kept in mind. Hence Gandhi says, "We can, therefore, understand the teaching of the *Gita* aright only if we give careful thought to the author's aim and the attendant circumstances."¹⁴² While, in Ambedkar's explanation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* it seems that the context and the purpose of the verses are neglected. He has not given much attention to the context therefore he reaches at conclusion that the *Bhagavad Gītā* supports war and killing.

According to Gandhi, the main thesis of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is non-violence. He also argues that the central teaching of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is *ahimsa*. Gandhi's interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is an attempt to substantiate his idea of non-violence. He tries to prove that non-violence is the sole theme of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Now, the problem how can *Bhagavad Gītā* teach *ahimsa*. The background of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is the battlefield. There is going to be a war and the *Bhagavad Gītā* discusses whether Arjuna should fight in this war. Then, how can its central theme possibly be *ahimsa*? In order to answer this question, Gandhi takes the *Bhagavad Gītā* as an allegory. He says, "The *Mahabharata* is not history; it is *dharma-grantha*."¹⁴³ So he believes that it is not description of an actual battle rather the battle must be taken in symbolic sense. He asserts that the actual war is going on within us. He says, "...the epic describes the battle ever raging between the countless Kauravas and Pandavas dwelling within us. It is a battle between the innumerable forces of good and evil which becomes personified in us as virtues and

¹⁴² Ibid, p.19.

¹⁴³ Gandhi, M.K., *The Bhagavad Gita*, p. 15.

vices. We shall leave aside the question of violence and non-violence and say that this *dharmagrantha* was written to explain man's duty in this inner strife."¹⁴⁴ Therefore, he says that the *Bhagavad Gītā* is not about actual war; the war is symbolic here.

According to Gandhi, the *Bhagavad Gītā* guides us to fight the internal war within ourselves. He believes that good and bad are within us and we always are in some kind of dilemma to choose between good and bad. He believes, "One should not believe that Gita is the history of a battle which took place on a field near Hastinapur; the battle is still raging. The Pandvas and the Kauravas represent the divine and demonical impulses we fight within this (our) body. We must remember this, only then will we understand the term *dharmaksetra* (physical body is the *kshetra* — the field)."¹⁴⁵

"To those who insisted on taking the story of *Mahabharata* literally. Gandhi pointed out that even if the story was taken at its face-value, the *Mahabharata* had demonstrated the futility of violence: the war had ended in universal devastation in which victors had been no better off than the vanquished."¹⁴⁶

Further, Gandhi argues that it seems that the *Bhagavad Gītā* advocates war and violence because of our ignorance. He thinks that if a person finds non-violence inconstant from the teaching the *Bhagavad Gītā*, he must think, "it is the imperfection of my own intellect that today other stanzas seem inconsistent with these. In the course of time, I shall be able to see their consistency."¹⁴⁷ Thus, according to Gandhi, it is our ignorance that we are not able to understand the actual meaning of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, that is, non-violence.

Now, what is the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and why is it hard to reconcile it with the advocacy of violence even if the main question is whether one should kill one's own kinsmen in a battle? Gandhi answers this question by saying that the main aim of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is to show how one can attain *mokṣa* or realize the *Brahman* or the Truth. For Gandhi, the main aim of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is the realization of the *Brahman*. The battle is used only as an occasion or

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 15.

¹⁴⁵ Gandhi, M.K., *The Bhagavadgita*, p. 249.

¹⁴⁶ Nanda B.R. "Gandhi and Religion", *Gandhian Alternative: Socio-Political Thoughts Vol. 3*, Mishra, Anil Dutta, Yadav Sushma (ed.), Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2005, p. 26.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid p. 10.

a background for its teaching.¹⁴⁸ The realization of *Brahman* is the ultimate end of a human life and this end is spiritual in nature. Now, if attaining *mokṣa* or realizing the ultimate Truth is the spiritual goal then, according to Gandhi, one need the spiritual means also. Spiritual means cannot contain violence in them; they must be non-violent in nature. He says, “‘Violence comes from illusion; it avails not. Non-violence alone is true.’ Without non-violence, it is not possible to realize truth.”¹⁴⁹ Hence the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, for him, cannot go with the advocacy of violence. He says, “Since the *Gita*’s subject matter is not description of the battle and justification of violence, it is perfectly wrong to give much important to these. If, moreover, it is difficult to reconcile the teaching of the work as a whole with the advocacy of violence.”¹⁵⁰ Thus, he argues that if one takes the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gītā* into the consideration then one might find hard it to reconcile the teachings with the concept of violence.

Furthermore, the *Bhagavad Gītā* maintains that for attaining the *mokṣa* one need realize one’s own inner self and to realize one’s own inner self one need to practice to become a *sthitaprajña*. Gandhi also believe that the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches the way to self-realization and to become a *sthitaprajña*. Gandhi holds that if we look at the qualities of a *sthitaprajña* then we find that a person cannot be violent if he is a *sthitaprajña*. To understand it more clearly, it is important to understand what the qualities of a *sthitaprajña* are. The *Bhagavad Gītā* asserts, “*The Blessed Lord* said: When a man puts away all the desires of his mind, O Pārtha (Arjuna), and his spirit is content in itself, then is he called stable in intelligence.”¹⁵¹ Further it says, “He whose mind is untroubled in the midst of sorrows and is free from eager desire amid pleasures, he from whom passion, fear and rage have passed away, he is called a sage of settled intelligence.”¹⁵² Thus, according to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, “Having brought all (the senses) under control, he should remain firm in yoga intent on Me; for he, whose senses are under control, his intelligence is firmly set.”¹⁵³

Gandhi, through the concepts of *sthitaprajña* of the *Bhagavad Gītā* deduces his idea of non-violence. For Gandhi anger, greed, lust etc. are the cause of violence. Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad*

¹⁴⁸ Gandhi, M.K., *The Bhagvadgita*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 11

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 12.

¹⁵¹ Bhagavadgītā 2.55.

¹⁵² Bhagavadgītā 2.56.

¹⁵³ Bhagavadgītā 2.61.

Gītā advises Arjuna to give up them and live and like a *sthitaprajña*. The person who is a *sthitaprajña* does not possess anger, greed, lust etc., thus, he or she cannot act violently. Therefore, he holds that “the overall teaching of the *Gita* is not violence but non-violence is evident from the argument which begins in Chapter II and ends in Chapter XVIII. The intervening chapters propound the same theme. Violence is simply not possible unless one is driven by anger by ignorant love and by hatred.”¹⁵⁴ Thus, Gandhi holds that the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches nothing but non-violence. If a person wants to be *sthitaprajña* or to realize the Supreme, he or she must practice non-violence.

Ananthanathan in his *The Significance of Gandhi’s Interpretation of the Gita* says “To many this may seem very startling as the *Gita* was delivered on the battlefield. But the contradiction is only apparent and Gandhi’s logic is unassailable. He does not say that *Gita* teaches non-violence directly but that non-violence is only the inevitable result if its teaching is inevitably followed.”¹⁵⁵

Further, Ravindra Kumar pointed out that for Gandhi “the study of the *Gita* and the process of self-introspection brought him face to face with the true meaning of ahimsa (non-violence) - no violence in thought, speech and action. He came to the conclusion that the realization of truth was impossible without adherence to the supreme conduct of man – ahimsa.”¹⁵⁶

According to Gandhi, if Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to be *sthitaprajña* then how he can advise Arjuna to be violent at the same time. Here Gandhi gives a very unique definition to non-violence. He says that those acts which have no selfish motive, are non-violent. There is no violence if the action is performed for the welfare or benefit of others. Further, for him, performing action as *yajña* means working for the welfare of others selflessly. He says that one should abandon the attachment to things and should engage in work for the benefit of others.

Gandhi believes that a person should mentally renounce all the karma, thus, the persons becomes free from the attachment of ‘I’ and ‘mine’. Such a person completes his/her actions only in the spirit of *yajna* and for the welfare of others.¹⁵⁷ For Gandhi, actions performed in the

¹⁵⁴Gandhi, M.K., *The Bhagvadgita*, p.12.

¹⁵⁵ Ananthanathan, A.K., “The Significance of Gandhi’s Interpretation of the *Gita*”, *Facets of Mahatma Gandhi: Ethics, Religion and Culture*, Vol 4, Mukherjee Subrata and Ramaswami Sushila (ed.), pp. 188-201, p. 192.

¹⁵⁶ Kumar, Ravindra (ed.), *Mahatma Gandhi in the Beginning of 21st Century*, pp. (17-29), p. 20.

¹⁵⁷ Gandhi, M.K., *The Bhagavad Gita*, p. 288-289.

manner of *yajña* is *ahimsā* or nonviolent actions. But these actions must be considered nonviolent only when they fulfill two conditions: 1) there should be no element of selfishness in the motives of the action; 2) they should not be performed for fulfilling one's self-interests. Gandhi maintains that actions should be performed for the good and the benefit of the world.¹⁵⁸

Thus, according to Gandhi the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches to renounce the fruits of action and to act for fulfilling one's duties only. This teaching can only be followed if one follows *ahimsā* in his life. Therefore, B.R. Nanda says, "He had, he said, endeavoured to enforce to the teaching of the *Gita* in his own life and come to the conclusion that perfect renunciation was impossible without perfect observance of *ahimsa* in every shape and form."¹⁵⁹

Here, it seems that Gandhi has given importance to the purpose of an action. It seems that he tries to determine the nature of an action from its purpose. So, for him, the motive or intention behind an action determines whether it is violent or non-violent. However, it can be argued that the nature of an action can be decided by the action itself. For instance, killing someone is always a violent act, whatever may be the motive or purpose behind it. According to Gandhi, *ahimsā* means not harming anyone in thought, speech and action. So when Gandhi talks about *ahimsā* he says that it should be followed by at three levels; *mana* (thought), *vacan* (speech), and *karma* (action). He says, "Violence means injuring a creature through bodily action or speech or in thought, with the intention of injuring it. Nonviolence means not injuring any creature in this manner."¹⁶⁰ So, it is obvious that Gandhi has given more importance to the intention behind the action rather than the action itself. Furthermore, it can be argued the *Bhagavad Gītā* does not hold the idea of non-violence. Even though Gandhi deduces the concept of non-violence from the *Bhagavad Gītā* we do not find any verse to support his view in it.

Thus, it can be said that both Gandhi and Ambedkar have taken a very extreme position here. The *Bhagavad Gītā* neither supports the war and violence nor deny it. Though the question whether a person should kill in a war at all, is not discussed in this text, so the question of supporting violence or non-violence does not arise. The main thesis of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is that

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 289.

¹⁵⁹ Nanda B.R. "Gandhi and Religion", *Gandhian Alternative: Socio-Political Thoughts Vol. 3*, Mishra, Anil Dutta, Yadav Sushma (ed.) p. 26.

¹⁶⁰ Gandhi, M.K., "The Bhagavad Gita", *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Raghavan Iyer (ed.), pp. 77-99, p.87.

no matter what one needs to do, one must always fulfill one's duty without being worried about its consequences.

Furthermore, both Gandhi and Ambedkar accepts that the *Bhagavad Gītā* holds the idea of four *varṇa*. For Gandhi, the *varṇa* system is based on the idea of *swadharma* of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. He says, “*Varnashrama* had its origin in the idea of *swadharma*. We do not see today the true idea of *varna*. It is limited now to restrictions about inner-dining and inter-marriage... *Varna* does not consist in customary practices regarding inner-dining and inter-marriage; the division of society is division of functions. The idea of pollution by touch was a later accretion.”¹⁶¹ He admires the *varṇa* system and says that it is the division of labor to maintain order in the society.

Further, Ambedkar also holds that the *Bhagavad Gītā* supports the division of the *chaturvarṇa*. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* Kṛṣṇa asserts, “The fourfold order was created by Me according to the divisions of quality and work. Though I am its creator, know Me to be incapable of action or change.”¹⁶² However, this division, for Ambedkar, is problematic because he considers it as the foundation of caste system. Ambedkar says, “The *Bhagavad Gita*, no doubt, mentions that the *Chaturvarṇya* is created by God and therefore sacrosanct. But it does not make its validity dependent on it. It offer a philosophic defence of the theory of *Chaturvarṇya* by linking it to the theory of innate, inborn qualities in men. The fixing of the *Varna* of man is not an arbitrary act says the *Bhagavad Gita*. But it is fixed according to his innate, inborn qualities.”¹⁶³

Thus, Ambedkar criticizes the concept of *chaturvarṇa* because it asserts that men are born with some innate, inborn qualities which, according to him, does not makes it different from the idea of caste or *jāti*. Consequently, he sees the *varṇa* system as a foundation for the caste system. He says that “the idea of *Varna* is the parent of the idea of *caste*. If the idea of caste is a pernicious idea it is entirely because of the viciousness of the idea of *Varna*. Both are evil ideas

¹⁶¹ Ibid p. 301.

¹⁶² Bhagavadgītā, 4.13.

¹⁶³ Ambedkar, B.R., “Krishna and His Gita”, *The Essential Writings of Ambedkar*, edited by Rodrigues Valerian, pp.193-204, p. 194.

and it matters very little whether one believes in *Varna* or in *caste*.”¹⁶⁴ Therefore, he chooses to criticize the idea of *varṇa* as well.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the caste is based on the birth while the *varṇa* is based on the concept of *guṇas* and *karma* whereas caste or *jāti* is based on birth or *janma*. Then how caste system could be based on *varṇa* system. For Ambedkar, “The Indian word for “caste” is *jati*. Jatis are hierarchically arranged endogamous groups within varnas. Jati membership is decided by birth. Social contact between jatis, especially when it comes to marriages and sharing food, is regulated by rules of purity.”¹⁶⁵ Thus, various castes and sub-castes, for Ambedkar, come within the four *varṇas* and their duties and roles are determined accordingly.

Additionally, Gandhi holds that the *varṇa* of a person is hereditary. Now, what is heredity mean? It is something which is passed on child to parents i.e. decided by birth. *Varna*, for Gandhi, is division of labor but this division is based on heredity, that is, one’s occupation is decided by the occupation of one’s ancestors. This interpretation of *varṇa* seems similar to *jāti* or caste, even though in his later writings he discards the idea caste and holds the *varṇa* system only. Gandhi maintains “But I do regard *Varnashrama* as a healthy division of work based on birth. The present idea of caste are a perversion of the original. There is no question with me of superiority and inferiority. It is purely a question of duty. But I have also said that it is possible for a Shudra, for instance, to become a Vaisya. But in order to perform the duty of a Vaisya he does not need the label of a Vaisya.”¹⁶⁶ Gandhi argues that the cause of discrimination and untouchability is the feeling that one superior or inferior because of his *varṇa*. For him, the system is not problematic rather the practice is.

According to the *Bhagavad Gītā* an individual is a combination of three *guṇas*, namely, *satva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The combination of these *guṇas* determines the *varṇa* of a person. Which *guṇas* are dominated in a person determines the *varṇa* of the person. It also holds that the prescribed duties of a person is determined by the *varṇa* of the person because the domination of *guṇas* decides the nature of the person. A person acquires his or her nature (*svabhāva*) from the three *gunas*. Therefore the *Bhagavad Gītā* says, “Even a man of knowledge acts according to his own

¹⁶⁴ Ambedkar, B.R., “Gandhism: The Doom of the Untouchables”, *The essential writings of Ambedkar*, edited by Rodrigues Valerian, pp. 149-172, p. 164.

¹⁶⁵ Nanda Meera, “Ambedkar’s Gita”, *Economic and political Weekly*, Vol. 49, p. 45.

¹⁶⁶ Gandhi, M.K., *Hindu Dharma*, p. 64.

nature, for everyone follows the nature he has acquired from the three modes. What can repression accomplish?”¹⁶⁷

Ambedkar criticizes by arguing that the *chaturvarṇa* (four *varṇa*) cannot be based on three *guṇas*.¹⁶⁸ He maintains that if we accept that *varṇa* determines by the combination of *guṇas* then there would be more than four combinations, hence, there must be more than four *varṇas*. Thus, the concept of *chaturvarṇa* cannot be based on the concept of *guṇas* of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* says that the prescribed duties are those duties of a person which are decided by one’s *varṇa*.¹⁶⁹ *Varṇa* is determined by the *svabhāva* of a person. And the *svabhāva* of person is decided by the three *guṇas*. Thus, it says, “Brāhmaṇas, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas, and śūdras are distinguished by the qualities of their own nature in accordance with the material modes, O chastiser of the enemy.”¹⁷⁰ It does not hold anywhere that one’s *svabhāva* can be changed, therefore, it always maintains that one should always fulfill only those duties which are prescribed. Thus, it says, “It is better to engage in one’s own occupation, even though one may perform it imperfectly, than to accept another’s occupation and perform it perfectly. Duties prescribed according to one’s nature are never affected by sinful reaction.”¹⁷¹

Moreover, Ambedkar criticizes the *Bhagavad Gītā* because he believes that the *Bhagavad Gītā* does not discuss whether one can acquire different *guṇas* or change one’s *svabhāva* or *swadharma* by one’s *karma* in this life, therefore, for him, it is not different from caste system. Furthermore, even though, the *Bhagavad Gītā* asserts that every one, irrespective of his or *varṇa* or gender, can attain self-realization¹⁷² but it also maintains that in order to achieve self-realization, one should always fulfill the duties prescribed by one’s *varṇa*. Hence, for Ambedkar, it does not give liberty to a person to choose his or her *varṇa* it is, like caste, already decided.

Additionally, in his interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Gandhi says that the *varṇa* is based on *swadharma*. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* Kṛṣṇa asks Arjuna to follow his *swadharma* and to fulfill

¹⁶⁷ Bhagavadgītā 3.33

¹⁶⁸ Ambedkar, B.R., “Krishna and His Gita”, *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, edited by Rodrigues Valerian, pp. 193-204, p. 197.

¹⁶⁹ Bhagavadgītā 2.31

¹⁷⁰ Bhagavadgītā 18.41

¹⁷¹ Bhagavadgītā 18.47

¹⁷² Bhagavadgītā 9.32

his prescribe duty as a *kṣatriya*. So, one's *swadharma*, according to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, is determined by one's *varṇa* and one's *varṇa* is determined by the three *guṇas*.¹⁷³

Further, Gandhi does not believe that there is equality in the world. He also does not seem to be interested in maintaining it, rather, he believes that by following one's *swadharma* one can attain *mokṣa*, only there one can attain equality. According to Gandhi, the idea of *swadharma* in Bhagavad Gita is not the cause of discrimination rather it helps to achieve equality. He says that “following one's *swadharma* one attains perfection; that is, following one's *swadharma* one attains equality with all. In this transitory world we see equality nowhere. No two leaves are equal. But the Gita shows the way to equality.”¹⁷⁴

Gandhi believes that *varṇa* system is very important to maintain order and harmony in the society. For him, a person should always work for the society; a person is not completely free in the society. He says “If a man seek moksha and still believes that he is independent, he will utterly fail in his aspiration. One who seeks moksha behaves as society's servant... We are but germs in society. That word signifies our subordination to it. We are, in truth, free in such subordination to it. We are, in truth, free in such subordination. Our duty is what society assigns to us. The definition (of *swadharama*), then, is that one must do the work assigned to one by one's superior. From this, we shall by and by rise to a higher stage.”¹⁷⁵

Thus, both Gandhi and Ambedkar believes that the idea of *varṇa* does not have the idea of social equality. However, Gandhi do not criticize the *varṇa* system. Gandhi tries to defend the *varṇa* by saying that caste and *varṇa* are two different things. For him, the practice of untouchability and caste system is not related to the *varṇa* system. He says, “Let us not degrade varnashrama by mixing it up with untouchability or with caste. My conception of varnashrama has nothing in common with its present distinction of untouchability and caste. Varna has nothing to do with superiority or inferiority. Varna is the recognition of a definite law that governs human happiness... You will therefore see that this conception of varna has nothing in common with caste. And, therefore, I would ask you to gird up your loins in order to fight this curse of untouchability and caste, and all the influence that you might have at your command in

¹⁷³ Bhagavadgītā 2.31, 3.33, and 4.13.

¹⁷⁴ Gandhi, M.K., *The Bhagavad Gita*, p. 299.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 301.

order to see that every temple is thrown open to all irrespective of caste.”¹⁷⁶ So the problems of discrimination and untouchability, for Gandhi, occurs because people think themselves superior or inferior because of their *varṇa*. He also believes that one should not assume oneself or others superior or inferior because of the *varṇa*. Therefore, he maintains, “What I would like my correspondent to join me in is a fight against an arrogant assumption of superiority whether it is assumed by Brahmins or others. It is the abuse of *Varnashrama* that should be combated, not the thing itself.”¹⁷⁷

Here, it is also noteworthy that the purpose of Gandhi is only to remove the practice of discrimination and untouchability, therefore, he tries to show that the *Bhagavad Gītā* does not hold the idea of pollution and superiority or inferiority. For him, these practices are not according to the *Bhagavad Gītā* or any other *śāstra*. Thus, Gandhi does not feel the need of criticizing the *varṇa*. On the other hand, Ambedkar criticizes the concept of *varṇa* of the *Bhagavad Gītā* because his aim is to abolish not just the untouchability and discrimination but the caste system altogether. For him, the caste system is the root of untouchability and discrimination and *varṇa* system is not different from it.

Thus, Gandhi and Ambedkar both hold that the *Bhagavad Gītā* maintains *varṇa* system. But Gandhi accepts that it is not the basis of practice of caste-discrimination and untouchability. For him, the sense of superiority and inferiority is the root cause of these problems. However, Ambedkar tries to show that *varṇa* system maintains a hierarchy among the various section of society, which becomes the basis for discrimination in the society. Gandhi does not question this hierarchy; he believes that it is important to the proper function of society. Whereas, Ambedkar believes that a society must be based on the principal of equality so he questions the hierarchy itself. Therefore, he also question the *varṇa* system of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Furthermore, Ambedkar argues that the *Bhagavad Gītā* offers a philosophic defence of *karma-kāṇḍa*. He believes that the *karma* theory of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is actually a theory for practicing *karma-kāṇḍa*. He says, “By Karma marga the *Bhagavad Gita* means the performance of the observances, such as Yajnas as a way to salvation. The *Bhagavad Gita* most stands out for the Karma marga throughout and is a great upholder of it. The line it takes to defend Karma

¹⁷⁶ Gandhi, M.K., *The Hindu*, CWMG, p.206.

¹⁷⁷ Gandhi, M.K. *Hindu Dharma*, p. 65.

Yoga is by removing the excrescences which has grown upon it and which had made it appear quite ugly. The first excrescence was blind faith. The *Gita* tries to remove it by introducing the principle of *Buddhi yoga* as a necessary condition for Karma yoga. To become *Sthitaprajna* i.e., ‘befitted with *Buddhi*’ there is nothing wrong in the performance of Karma Kanda. The second excrescence on the Karma kanda was the selfishness which was the motive behind the performance of the Karmas. The *Bhagavad Gita* attempts to remove it by introducing the principle of Anasakti i.e. performance of karma without any attachment for the fruits of the Karma. Founded in *Buddhi yoga* and dissociated from selfish attachment to the fruits of Karma what is wrong with the dogma of Karma kānda? This is how the *Bhagavad Gita* defends the karma marga.”¹⁷⁸

So Ambedkar reaches at this conclusion because he understands the meaning of *karma yoga* of the *Bhagavad Gītā* as rituals or *karma-kānda*. He believes that in order to defend the *karma-kānda* the *Bhagavad Gītā* tries to make its foundation on *jñāna yoga* and *karma yoga*.

Now, is the doctrine of *karma* of the *Bhagavad Gītā* actually *karma-kānda*? What does *karma kānda* means? *Karma-kānda*, generally, refers to some performances of rituals in order to get worldly objects for the satisfaction of senses or to get heaven after death. If this is so, then, the question arises whether the doctrine of the *karma* has anything to with the satisfaction of the senses or with getting heaven. The *Bhagavad Gītā* says that in order to become a *karma yogī*, it is obligatory to perform one’s prescribed duty without any attachment to the consequences of the action.¹⁷⁹ It holds, “To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruit of action be your motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction.”¹⁸⁰ As an ordinary persons we always concern get attached to the consequences. But we do not have any control over the consequences. We have right only on our actions, therefore, one should not make fruits of the action one’s motive.

Furthermore, for performing the prescribed duty without the attachment to its fruits, according to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, one need to be free from lust, false ego and desire for the satisfaction of the senses. Hence, it asserts the concept of *sthitaprajña*. Now, if this is so then

¹⁷⁸ Ambedkar, B.R., “Krishna and His Gita”, *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, edited by Rodrigues Valerian, pp. 193-204, p. 195.

¹⁷⁹ Bhagavadgītā 2.47, 3.7, 3.9

¹⁸⁰ Bhagavadgītā 2.47

how the actions performed for fulfilling desire of worldly objects can be considered as *karma-yoga*.

“Treating alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, then get ready for battle. Thus thou shall not incur sin.”¹⁸¹

“Fixed in yoga do thy work, O Winner of wealth (Arjuna), abandoning attachment, with an even mind in success and failure, for the evenness of mind is called yoga.”¹⁸²

Therefore it says that all *karma* should be guided by *Buddhi* i.e. and free from both the good and bad reactions about the result. Thus, the doctrine of the *karma* of the *Bhagavad Gītā* cannot go with the concept of the *karma-kānda* because the purpose of the *karma-kānda* is to get worldly objects while the purpose of *karma-yoga* is attaining self-realization by being *sthitaprajña*. If a person follows this path then he is practicing *yoga* and the aim is to achieve self-realization. Though the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches to be equipoised in every situation, so, how can it hold *karma kānda* for seeking worldly or heavenly pleasures?

Sinha also points out, “The *Gītā* does not enjoin the performance of ritualistic acts. Prudential duties are intended for the fulfilment of egoistic desires. They aim at enjoyment and prosperity. They lead to happiness in heaven. They lead to rebirth. They are not means of liberation. The Vedas prescribe duties relating to *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. But *mokṣa* is a state of the soul, which transcends the *guṇas*. It cannot be attained by Vedic rituals.”¹⁸³

Nevertheless, Ambedkar observes that the *Bhagavad Gītā* says one should perform his prescribed duty as *yajña* otherwise it cause bondage. So he thinks that in the *Bhagavad Gītā* *yajña* is a way to liberation. Generally, *yajña* means performance of rituals to get something. Ambedkar also takes the meaning of *yajña* in this sense. Whereas, for Gandhi *yajña* means performing any action for the good of others or society without harming any other creature, thus, he rejects the idea of animal sacrifice as *yajña*. He also discards the performance of rituals.

However, it should be noticed that the term *yajña* is used in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is used in the context of *karma yoga*. “Save work done as and for a sacrifice this world is in the bondage to

¹⁸¹ Bhagavadgītā 2.38

¹⁸² Bhagavadgītā 2.48

¹⁸³ Sinha, Jadunath, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p. 52.

work. Therefore, O son of Kuntī (Arjuna), do thy work as sacrifice, becoming free from all the attachments.”¹⁸⁴ It says that all actions should be done as a sacrifice for the Supreme; otherwise the actions would cause bondage. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa asks Arjuna to perform his prescribed duties as sacrifice to Him.

Here, the term ‘*yajña*’ is just used as a metaphor. This term is used in the context of *karma yoga*. Though through *karma yoga* Kṛṣṇa tries to teach Arjuna how to prepare to perform actions without any attachment to the fruits of the action, he suggests to perform one’s actions as *yajña* and not to bother about the result of the action. However, K.N. Upadhyaya says, “For an objective survoyer, it is not difficult to see that the B.G., though it undermines the value of the rituals and sacrifices, it does not reject them *in toto*.”¹⁸⁵ Because, though the *Bhagavad Gītā* maintains that sacrifice done for self-realization is better than that of getting worldly or heavenly pleasures, yet it does not say anything against the rituals and observance done for getting worldly and heavenly pleasure. Thus, the *Bhagavad Gītā* neither support the performance of rituals nor discard them altogether.

¹⁸⁴ Bhagavadgītā, 3.9.

¹⁸⁵ Upadhyaya, K.N., *Early Buddhism and The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 107.

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