

MANKIND OCCASIONAL PAPER : 13

GITA SANCTIFIES PASTORALIST SURRENDER TO FEUDALISM

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FOR REVIEW

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GITA SANCTIFIES PASTORALIST SURRENDER TO FEUDALISM

Vinayak Purohit

PROLOGUE

This is the sixth paper in the series that we had presented at sessions of the Indian History Congress. The preceding papers were (i) The Asiatic Mode of Production and Feudalism in Indian History and Historiography (Proceedings of 40th Session, pp. 741-50, 1979; published in *Mankind*, Dec. 95 pp 44-65); (ii) The Pastoralist Class Society in Indian History and Historiography (41st Session, 1980, published in *MK* Jan. - Feb. 96, pp 68-85), (iii) Post – Pastoralist First Phase Sangha Feudalism in Indian History and Historiography (Proceedings of 42nd Session, pp. 95-99, 1981; (published in *MK*, Oct. 95, pp 63-91); (iv) Brahminical Second Phase Samanta Feudalism in Indian History and Historiography (43rd Session, 1982, published in *MK*, Nov. 95, pp 62-85), and (v) The Gazetteers as Records of the Indian Bourgeoisification Process (This is the only paper not read at a session of the I.H.C. It has been published in the *Indian Archives* Vol. XXX, No. 2, July-Dec. 1981, pp. 32-58).

I also published a summary of my views on Indian History in Dec. 1999-Jan. 2000 issue of *MK*, pp 7-14, 40, titled *A Summary of Our Standpoint*.

See also our *Linguistic Eras in Indian History*, *MK* Oct. 1998, pp 51-52

Further elaboration in *World History and National Culture*, Table in *MK*, Nov. 95 p. 68.

In particular, we refer the interested reader to the section on historiography in our 1982 monograph, on Samanta or Brahminical Second Phase Feudalism, (300-1200 AD); *MK* Nov. 95 pp. 62-85; wherein we have defined our historiographical objectives as follows : (a) establishment of primacy of theory; (b) multi-disciplinary and non-specialist approach; (c) historical materialist base; (d) conferment of centrality to issues of periodisation and phasization;

(e) Indian history viewed as autochthonous entity, yet subordinate to the rhythm of world history; (f) use of Sociology of art works as levers of historical analysis; and (g) a reliance on the methodology of cumulative evidence to build up a pattern or *gestalt* of the totality. (see *MK*, Nov. 95, pp 64-68)

Normally, in carrying out our self-appointed and immodest task of rewriting Indian history, we would have chosen the third *Iqta*, fourth *Mansabdari* and fifth *Pendhari* phases of Indian feudalism as subjects for the 44th Session of the IHC. However, we have deviated from this path for several reasons :

1. We believe that our contribution on the pastoralist period of Indian history is of utmost significance. In the present paper, we would like to reiterate and reinforce our arguments.
2. A vigorous attack on the forces of obscurantism, irrationalism, religiosity, communalism and *gurubazi* confronts the Indian historical-materialist as an urgent task. With white sectarian adherents running into hundreds of thousands and with millions of overseas Indians expending hundreds of millions of US dollars in supporting religious organisations and fraudulent miracle men, modernised and refurbished Hinduism has become a new channel of neo-colonial pressure upon India. Conscious rationalists must combat this trend and treat this task as urgent.
3. Within the country too, strange compromises have been made by the so-called progressive forces with religious movements and communal organisations. For instance, in Kerala, the parties of the Left have stimulated and/or sustained the minutest divisions and fragmentations of vote banks on communal and caste lines. Similarly, in Assam, Tripura, Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir, communal and tribal conflicts are approaching a climax. Finally, in every state, casteist and communalist forces are determining the pattern of electoral appeals and victories. Therefore, at this juncture, it becomes necessary to attack religiosity as such. It is, in our humble view, no longer permissible to sidetrack matters on grounds of tactfulness and tactics. The time has come for revolutionary nationalists and socialists in the country to rediscover and re-project their atheistic and materialistic premises boldly and uncompromisingly.

In this context, the fitness and the centrality of the *Gita* can scarcely be doubted. It is the single most important document of Hinduism. The *Gita* or *Bhagavad Gita* "has come to be regarded as the sacred book, par excellence, of the Hindus".¹ Both its historical and contemporary relevance have been stressed in a recent work :

"All prominent authorities on Hinduism considered themselves bound to compile their commentaries to the *Gita*, or at least to proclaim what their views were with regard to the teaching expounded therein. The *Gita* came to be seen as the concentrated expression of the ideology of reformed Brahmanism, and later of Hinduism in general. Prominent thinkers traced their own, utterly original conceptions, back to it, deliberately stressing this or that particular aspect of its content. In recent times, the ideas found in this poem have been incorporated into a variety of theories, some of which are completely opposed to one another. Such prominent figures of twentieth century India as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghosh (the latter in his capacity as a political leader, not a mystic philosopher) alluded to the ideas of the *Gita*. Jawaharlal Nehru stressed the importance of studying the ideas in the *Gita*. *The Song of the Bhagavata* has thus become an intrinsic part of the whole of Indian culture, an undying symbol of the continuity of that heritage linking its earliest roots and the quests of the centuries that followed".²

The same view is reiterated from the traditionalist point of view also :

"But the cream of the *Vedas* is the *Upanishads*. A synopsis and classification of the contents of the *Upanishads* goes by the name of the *Brahma Sutras* or the *Vedanta Sutras*. When the *Upanishads* are compared to cows, the *Bhagavad Gita* takes the position of their milk. **One who has studied and understood the *Bhagavad Gita* may be said to have caught the cardinal teachings of the *Upanishads*.** These three books, namely the *Upanishads*, the *Brahma Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita* are called the Scriptural Trinity *Prasthanatrayam*. There is no conflict of views among these three. If a question is raised as to which is the scriptural authority in Hinduism, the answer is : this trinity. There is not a single

1 Romila Thapar, *A History of India*, Vol. 1, 1972, p.134

2 Antonova, Bongard Levin, Kotovsky, *A History of India*, Book 1, 1979, pp. 148-51

cardinal point in Hinduism that is not touched in these books. If ever a conflict arises between the statements in the : *Prasthanatrayam* and other sacred books, the verdict of the former alone is traditionally accepted as final."

Almost every significant comprador leader of modern India has written commentaries on the *Gita*, e.g., B.G. Tilak (*Gita Rahasya*) M.K. Gandhi (*Gita* in Gujarati), Vinoba Bhave, *Gitai*, in Marathi. For the purposes of this monograph, out of probably thousands of alternative texts and commentaries available, we have opted for the *Bhagwad Gita* by Swami Chidbhavananda precisely because of the latter part of the full title of his work, viz; "Original Stanzas – Split Up Reading – Transliteration – Word for Word Translation – A lucid English Rendering and Commentary".³

TIME HORIZON OF GITA

The *Gita* is a part ---Chapters 25 to 42 --- of the *Bhishma Parva*, a late interpolation to the *Mahabharata*. According to a recent study.

"Textual analysis has revealed that the *Gita* was written later than the early *Upanishads* (seventh to fifth century B.C.) and approximately coincides in time with the co-called middle *Upanishads* (second Century B.C. to fourth Century A.D.)⁴

According to R.C. Majumdar.

"The adherents of the view that it is a later addition to the epic hold that the original *Gita* must have been composed as early as the second century B.C. and assumed the form in which it appears in the *Mahabharata* today, in the early centuries A.D."⁵

Taking an overall view, and assigning proper weightage to sociological, literary, political and ideological considerations, which will be further clarified as we go along, we have come to the conclusion that the *Gita* corresponds to the time horizon, when the defeated pastoralist herd-owners of the Vedic period, after a long stay in the wilderness stretching from c. 700 B.C. to c. 300 A.D., arrived at a compromise with the new feudalists, and in return for

3 Swami Chidbhavananda, *The Bhagavad Gita*, Sri. Ramkrishna Tapovanam, Tirupparatturai, 639115 (Pin), India. 1982, pp. 2-3

4 Antonova, Bongard - Levin & Kotovsky, *Op. Cit.*, p. 149.

5 *History and Culture of the Indian People*, Vol. 2, p-249

their services in breaking up tribal and village community solidarity through a hierarchical caste order, were permitted to rehabilitate themselves under a revived brahminical form of Hinduism.

For further evidence, socio-economic and politico-ideological, in support of our assignment of c. 300 A.D. as the date of the *Gita*, we refer the interested reader to "Section IV : Structural Dynamics of Second Phase Feudalism", of our paper "Brahminical Second Phase Samanta Feudalism in Indian History and Historiography", which has already been referred to earlier.

In short, not only does the *Mahabharata* mark the watershed between the pastoralist and the feudalist epochs of Indian history,⁶ but also the major interpolations to *Mahabharata*, viz. the *Bhishma Parva*, and the *Bhagavad Gita* chapters of the latter, mark the turning point between the Buddhist first and Brahminical second phases of Indian feudalism.

Just as, despite hair-splitting arguments, the contents of *Arthashastra* unerringly reveal its fourth century B.C. Mauryan Dynasty moorings, similarly the contents of the *Gita* necessarily correspond to the period, when under the patronage of the early Gupta dynasts, the Brahmins staged a historical come back, and arrived at the classic compromise whereby in return for their integration with the new mode of production, they were allowed to assume social prestige and were used as a lever to exploit the rural agriculturists more efficiently than these masses had been under Buddhist monastic, collectivist system. Thus, the *Gita's* sociopolitical content unmistakably reveals its time horizon of c. 200-400 A.D.

PASTORALIST TRIBE VS. FEUDALIST CASTE IN THE GITA

The plot structure of the *Gita* is very well-known. Arjuna, the Pandava hero, just prior to the opening of the great war, develops cold feet, and Krishna, the pastoralist hero and Arjuna's charioteer-cum-mentor, harangues him for a length of 700 semi-philosophic *shlokas* divided into 18 chapters right in the midst of the battlefield. The occasion and the length of the discourse are obviously absurd. Even if linguistic and stylistic analyses had not independently

6 See *The Pastoralist Class Society in Indian History and Historiography*, already referred to

established that the *Gita* is a late interpolation within the *Mahabharata*, its apparent plot structure makes clear that the *Gita* could not have been occasioned in the manner claimed by its text.

But this apparent lie is on par with so many other exaggerated and fabulous statements made in the *Mahabharata*, like those relating to the enormous number of warriors and war animals involved (18 x 21, 870 chariots, 18 x 21,871 elephants, 18 x 65,610 horses plus 18 x 1,09,350 foot soldiers); the extent of the territorial interests involved; the levitated state of Yudhisthira's chariot in the early stages of the battle, the underground spring tapped to quench Bhisma's thirst, by a single shot from Arjuna's mighty bow, and so on. The *Mahabharata* is after all a heroic saga of epic deeds, and their fabulous nature should not be allowed to obscure the inner core of historical and rational sense contained in the epic.

Thus, there was no reason for Arjuna to stall matters and Krishna never preached on the battlefield. Nevertheless, Arjuna and Krishna existed in history.⁷ The battle of *Mahabharata* was fought by certain kings,⁸ tribal chiefs or pastoralist leaders or agro-feudal transitional lords which marked the watershed between pastoralism and feudalism. The pastoralist forces lost because of excessive militarism and banditry, enormous economic losses arising out of endless *Yajna* sacrifices, and sheer superiority of agriculture to

7 We will not go into the issue of there having been several Krishnas with a thousand different names at different times. For our purposes, this differentiation is immaterial. We are merely concerned with one particular Krishna who was definitely a historical character, and who was certainly a charismatic leader of a pastoralist band, clan, tribe or tribal confederacy.

8 The term 'king' is slightly confusing since some overambitious chief of hunting, fishing and food-gathering communities also claimed this honorific as did pastoralist band leaders, territorial magnates of the typical feudal sort, as well as transitional figures representing a mixture of the above three social formations. Still more recently, "bourgeois kings" have made their appearance who are merely symbolic and constitutional monarchs, though there are some who are mixed up relics of the feudal past, as in the case of Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Thailand, etc.

support more people per square mile as compared to herding. In short, the *Mahabharata* happened, Arjuna and Krishna existed, but the *Gita* was not preached by Krishna to Arjuna on the Kurukshetra battlefield. The *Gita* was put into the mouths of Krishna and Arjuna at a much later date by the Brahminical interests who were concerned with the problem of rehabilitating themselves within the second phase feudal system of the early Gupta period. The terms of settlement with the feudal regime had to be legitimised by attribution to respected historic figures of the past, preferably of that very transitional period, when the pastoralist past was turning into the feudalist present.

Of the historicity of the core happenings of the *Mahabharata* – earlier called simply *Jaya* (Victory) or *Bharata* (the Story of the tribe Bharata) we need have no doubt. Just as the political economy of the *Arthashastra* cannot be conjectured out of whole cloth, similarly the society and polity of the *Mahabharata* cannot be imagined out of nothing. Man's imaginary world operates under severe constraints imposed by the living world in which his imagination functions. Secondly, such a baseless recreation, even if possible, would have no appeal, would not evoke any response, would not survive over centuries, unless the people of India had spiritual links with the real historic conditions from which the poets of the *Mahabharata* text derived their inspiration. The *Mahabharata* has to and does possess experiential links with the real historic past of the Indian people. Otherwise, the poets could not have written the verses, the verses could not have become an epic, and the epic could not have survived many centuries.

Naturally, as far as the interpolated part of the epic with which we are concerned, the *Gita* Chapters of the *Bhishma Book* of the total epic, goes the *modus vivendi* worked out by historic forces represented therein, relate to the time horizon of c. 300 A.D. But what was this *modus vivendi*? What was its precise nature? In other words, what is the meaning of the *Gita*? What is its *rahasya*?

Instead of frantically striking out here and there and attributing all sorts of constructs upon the text, we should examine the essential pattern that the text itself makes. Arjuna repeatedly urges that this fratricidal strife will destroy the Pandavas' own blood relations and tribal connections, that life would become meaningless if the tribal world were to be destroyed and that such a bloody end would be virtually a holocaust where there would be

no victors and no losers. Against this, Krishna urges the inevitability, the necessity and the duty to destroy tribal affiliations. Arjuna should have absolute faith in Krishna's counsel. And that irrespective of the result, Arjuna must do what is demanded of him by his times and his conditions.

There is no other meaning of the *Gita*. This is the only possible one. This is exactly what Krishna urges, and after some dithering, Arjuna ultimately accepts. As instructed by Arjuna, Krishna drives the chariot between the two armies and Arjuna beholds:

1.26 "Standing there Partha then beheld in both the armies, fathers, grand fathers, teachers, maternal uncles, brothers, sons, friends, fathers-in-law and well-wishers".

So clear is the tribal affiliation of the above verses, and so foreign is the tribal sentiment to the modern reader that Chidbhavananda makes one of the very few errors in his otherwise commendable translation. He renders *pitru* as "paternal uncles". Actually, it is the peculiarity and hallmark of tribal social life, well-known to all anthropological investigators, that a whole generation or age-set are identified by members of the tribe/clan/gens as 'fathers'. (Chidbhavananda, for instance, correctly translates 'fathers' for *Pitarah* in 1.34)

The identification by Arjuna of his tribal affiliates is doubly significant as the Pandavas were notorious upstarts. Their mother not only had a pre-marital affair resulting in the birth of the bastard child Karna, but her post-marital liaisons with concocted divinities are openly proclaimed in the *Mahabharata*. Furthermore, not only were all the six children of Kunti, a pastoralist paternal aunt of Krishna, unrelated to Pandu, but two of them, Nakula and Sahadeva, were unrelated to Kunti herself. The five plus one Pandavas were unrelated to Pandu, who himself suffered from such disqualification that a blind brother had to be placed on the throne. Pandavas' claim to a share in power, not to speak of the still more absurd claim of primacy in succession, was obviously untenable. ⁹

9 We do not know the precise nature of the debility from which Pandu suffered, and why such a debility should have necessitated his retirement from active politics. If, as I suspect, he was not merely a tribal "brother" of the Kurus belonging to a yellow "race", i.e. he was a pastoralist nomadic Turko-Mongol-Tungus, who claimed fraternity with Indo-Aryan Bharata-Kuru-Panchals, then his debility of a "yellowing" kind was perhaps leukoderma, possibly jaundice, problematically leprosy. Pandu was certainly a neurasthenic case too, since he died of an agitation caused by the upwelling of sexual desire within him.

Nevertheless, the leading Pandava warrior, Arjuna, perceives at a glance, or at least instantaneously lays claim to, the tribal affiliations spread out in front and behind him. Even if the Pandavas hailed from the Pamir Knot and belonged to a pastoralist nomadic yellow-skinned band with Turko-Mongolo-Tungusic racial affinities, they had certainly adopted Indo-Aryan language and culture, and took their stand on grounds of tribal affiliation and clan brotherhood.

It is precisely the tribal affiliation that is to be overcome and superseded. Krishna is, if anything, most categorical.

"He (the wise man) stands supreme who has equal regard for friends, companions, enemies, neutrals, arbiters, the hateful, relatives, saints and sinners". (6.9)

We shall not burden our text with further quotations in the same vein, wherein Arjuna repeatedly asserts that those opposed to him were his kinsmen, *Svajanam*, that he and his enemies belonged to the same bloodline (*kula*), and that all around him were brothers and relations.¹⁰ Here again, we may note, *en passant*, the mistranslation by Chidbhavananda of *kula* as family. *Kula* is certainly not the bourgeois family however large, it is also not the feudal extended joint family. *Kula* is the pastoralist bloodline or sub-clan.

Arjuna pleads that it is for the tribe that we seek "kingdom, enjoyment and happiness", and it would be an exercise in futility to slay these very "teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law and other relatives" (1.34) for whose sake ostensibly the war is to be fought. Slaughter of "*Svajanam, Sambadhinah, Swabandhavah, Kuldharmit, Jatidharmi*" (1.31, 34, 37, 40, 43 etc.) is not only cruel but meaningless. All that will happen as a consequence would be a shortage of males which would have a further consequence in the "*kulastriyā*", or women of the blood line, becoming "*dushtasu*" or sinful. A terrible calamity would ensue. ("*Adharma abhibhavat Krishna, pradushyanti kulastriyah; Strisu dushtasu Varshneya, Jayate Varnasankarah*". (1.41)

Further, miscegenation will result in non-procreation of full blooded descendents, and as such ancestors will be deprived of manas cakes (*pindas*) and libations.

10 e.g. 1.27, 1.28, 1.31, 1.37, 1.38, 1.39, 1.40, 1.43, 1.44, 1.45, 1.46 etc.

"Patanti pitaran, he shyam, lupt pindodakakriyah" (1.42)

Chidbhanananda's translation again misses the point. It is not "admixture of castes", but "crossing of colours or races" that would spell social doom. The Vedic Aryans functioned under a social order based on *Varna*- they themselves being white or sun-tanned brown, the Pandavas being Turko-Mongol-Tungusic yellow, and the conquered *dasyus* being dark or black.

The pastoralist *Varna* system, as we have argued elsewhere¹¹ was quite distinct from the feudal *jati* system, and as we shall show further on in this monograph, whilst Arjuna is worried about varnasankarisation, Krishna precisely advocates an acceptance of the *jati* hierarchical system.

To return to Arjuna's apprehensions of male shortage leading to indiscriminate cohabitation and promiscuity by Vedic womenfolk, resulting in inevitable racial admixture and degeneration, it is obvious that he abhorred the prospect of dissolution of tribal cohesion through the *Mahabharata* battle. This is the plain meaning of Arjuna's words, and we see no reason to attribute all sorts of subtle, abstruse, esoteric and philosophic meanings to either his words or the *Gita* text in general. Commentators have gone astray, in our humble view, by trying to read meanings into the *Gita* when the plain text is crying out its simple import. Arjuna's fears of varnasankarisation may be crude as is his anticipation that Vedic women will turn promiscuous as soon as "teachers, fathers, grandfathers, fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, maternal uncles, sons, grandsons, relatives and kinsmen" are killed in action. But this crudity belongs to Arjuna's social horizon, and has nothing to do with Arjuna's personal coarseness. He must have been a nice fellow, probably gentle and tender to those near him. But as his times required him to share his principal wife with his brothers, so his society forced him to abhor racial corruption.

'So far Arjuna's apprehensions. Let us now look at Krishna's assurances. Apart from tactful rubbish like :

"The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead. Nor I, nor you, nor any of these ruling princes was ever non-existent before, nor is it that we shall cease to be in the future..... the unreal

11 See Vinayak Purohit, *Pastoralist Class Society in Indian History and Historiography*, read at 41st Session of IHC, Mumbai, 1980.

has no existence, the real never ceases to be". 2.11, 12.16) and similar specious nonsense, the substantive point that Krishna makes is

"there is nothing more welcome to a kshatriya than a righteous war. If you will not wage this righteous war, you will incur sin ... slain you will gain heaven; victorious you will enjoy the earth" (2.31, 33, 37)

Thus warring is a *jatidharma* or caste duty of the kshatriyas. It may be noted that there is no *varnadharma* or race-duty. In the Vedic period, there was merely an insistence that varna (race colour) should not be mixed up and corrupted. But there were no specific religious duties attached to different *varnas*. Following the end of the Vedic period, the feudal society came into being. *Varna* was supplanted by *jati*. *Jatis* were organised in social hierarchy. *Jatis* had duties, obligations and responsibilities attached to them. Thus, Krishna is urging Arjuna to accept the logic of the *jati* system and consider warring as an occupational disease of the Kshatriyas. Krishna concludes with the famous lines.

"*Sukh dukkhe same kritva, labhalabhan jayaajayau; Tato yuddhaya yujyasva, naevam papam eva apsyasi*" (2.38)

"Treating alike pain and pleasure, gain and loss, victory and defeat, engage yourself in battle, you will incur no sin".

Krishna rubs in the message of obligatory caste duty in diverse ways.

"The man who rejoices only in the self is satisfied with the self and is centred in the self, for him verily there is no obligatory duty. Constantly perform your obligatory duty without attachment. Whatever great men do, is followed by others; people go by the example they set up. Let not the wise man unsettle the mind of ignorant people attached to *karma*. By doing all obligatory actions, let the wise induce others in their activities. The man of perfect knowledge should not unsettle the mediocre whose knowledge is imperfect" (3.17, 19, 21, 26, 29)

The climax of feudal obligations is reached in the notorious lines :

"*Shreyan svadharmo viguna, paradharmat su anusthitat; Svadharme nidhanam shreyah, pardharmo bhayavaah*". (3.35)

("One's own dharma, though devoid of merit, is better than the dharma of another however well discharged Death is one's own dharma is preferable, for the dharma of another is abhorrent".)

The same feudal notion is emphatically reiterated elsewhere in the *Gita* too.

"Better is one's own dharma, though imperfect, than the dharma of another well performed. He who does the duty ordained by his own nature incurs no sin". (18.47)

Lest here be any misunderstanding about these nature ordained duties, Krishna is quite categorical :

"The duties of Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas as also of Sudras, Parantapa (Arjuna), are distributed according to the *gunas* born of their own nature. Serenity, self-restraint, austerity, purity, forgiveness, and also uprightness, knowledge, realisation, belief in a hereafter, these are the duties of the Brahmanas born of their own nature. Heroism, vigour, firmness, resourcefulness, not fleeing from battle, generosity and lordliness are the duties of the Kshatriyas born of their own nature. Agriculture, cattle-rearing and trade are the duties of the Vaisyas, born of their own nature; and action consisting of services is the duty of the Sudras born of their own nature". (18.41-44)

The vulgarity and crudity of this elitist point of view makes one rub one's eyes in disbelief. Krishna's sentiments are obviously ridiculous, laughable and utterly reactionary. They are exactly like those of Aristotle who considered women to be almost worthless and slaves to be absolutely so. Krishna is not one who will mince words :

"For those who take refuge in me, O Partha, though they be of inferior birth, women, Vaisyas and Sudras¹² even they attain the supreme goal". (9.32)

Without batting an eyelid, Krishna places half the humanity in the form of women into the inferior category. At the same time, 95 percent of males are also degraded by birth, since they are Vaisyas and Sudras. The horror of this aristocratic viewpoint can only be

12 It may be noticed that upto the time of the *Gita*, Vaisyas were not included amongst the *dvijas* or the "twice-born". And also unlike Vedic or pastoralist women, the feudal women stand degraded.

appreciated by those who have suffered from caste and class oppression. And Krishna is so crudely logical that he unhesitatingly propounds :

"One should not abandon, O Kaunteya, the duty to which one is born; for all undertakings are enveloped by evil as fire by smoke" (18.48)

Thus is oppression and exploitation justified. *Kshatriyas* born to lordliness are to oppress *Sudras* who are born to perform service. Even if this is evil, and Krishna does not consider this to be evil at all, it is to be carried out since it is so ordained by birth.

We have, on earlier occasions, when analysing the contents of the *Rig Veda*¹³ and the *Natyashastra*¹⁴ observed two peculiarities of the Indian intellectual tradition. On the one hand, the more revered is a text, the more likely it is to remain unread. Such texts like the *Rig Veda*, the *Gita* and the *Natyashastra* are almost literally tied up in sacred threads and vermilion powder and rice grains are strewn over them. They are objects of worship as the *Granth Sahib* and the *Koran* are for the *Sikhs* and the *Muslims*. On the other hand, a great deal of sophistry bordering on chicanery is employed to read arbitrary meanings into such texts, and to suppress discussion of the extremely crude and vulgar statements which form the essential parts of such texts. The *Rig Veda* is an unbelievably cruel and horrible text. The Brahmins lust for *dasyu* women, cows, wealth, food and drink most unashamedly, without the slightest compassion for their victims and with a gusto which only mad fascists can emulate. Yet such passages of the *Rig Veda* are brushed aside, glossed over, and overlooked.

In the same way, those intellectuals and academicians who find esoteric meanings, symbols and subtle philosophical insights in the *Gita*, never pinpoint the essential character of the so-called obligatory duties of the different castes born of supposed "caste natures". Krishna openly and unashamedly expresses the most abominable sentiments, which no decent, compassionate and

13 See our paper on the "*Pastoralist Class Society in Indian History and Historiography*" presented to the 41st session of the IHC, 1980.

14 "*Feudal society*", *Indian Dance and Natyashastra*" in *Journal of the Indian Musicological Society*, Dec. 1982. pp. 5-17.

thoughtful person would ever endorse. But on the grounds of "not hurting the religious sentiments of a community", Krishna's horrible and unreasoned pronouncements are passed over without condemnation.

Personally, I do not believe that Hinduism or any other religious ideology can or will survive into the future, except for the transitional period it takes to re-educate the people. However, going along with the liberal bourgeois argument of the believers, one still must demur. Actually in such a case, it is an affront to the Hindu community that it is assumed to be hurt when some of its absurdly reactionary leaders like Krishna and the Vedic *rishis* and Bharata are condemned for valid reasons. If the Hindu community wishes to survive into the future egalitarian, socialist, non-exploitative order; surely the infamous legacy of spokesmen like Krishna must be firmly repudiated. For, how can 97.5 percent ¹⁵ of humanity be of inferior birth? (9.32) How can it be their nature by birth or obligatory caste duty of *Sudras* to serve others? (18.44) How dare *Kshatriyas* presume to lordliness by birth and *Brahmins* to serenity? (18, 42-43)

Furthermore, if the sensitivity of the *Brahmin-Kshatriya* upper castes is to be considered, what about the feelings of the vast majority of the people, of women, *Vaisyas* and *Sudras*? Those who uphold the *Gita's* teachings are cruelly alienating 97.5 percent of the masses who belong to the categories of women, *Vaisyas* and *Sudras*!

The elitist, superior and arrogant standpoint is deeply ingrained in the *Gita*, and stands self-condemned :

"The two-fold path was given by me, O Anagha (=Arjuna), the path of knowledge to the discerning and the path of action of the active". (3.3)

"Whatever a great man does, is followed by the people, the world goes by the example he sets". (3.21)

"Let not the wise man unsettle the minds of the ignorant people attached to actions" (3.26)

15 Assuming that *Kshatriya* and *Brahmins* together compose at the outside five percent of Indians, half of them being women would fall once again into the inferior category.

"The imperishable *yoga* (i.e. the teaching of the *Gita*) was transmitted in regular succession through a line of royal sages" (4.1-2)

"The four-fold caste was created by me through the differential distribution of *guna* (merit) and *karma* (obligatory duties)" (4.13)

"The twice-born are to be worshipped". (17.14)

Jatidharma is supreme. It must be carried out not only to set an example to the lowly but also because death is preferable whilst performing one's *jatidharma* rather than the perfect execution of another's *jatidharma*. As Arjuna is afraid of confusion of *varnas*, similarly Krishna is afraid of confusion of castes.

"If I did not perform obligatory action, I should be the cause of confusion of castes". (3.24)

It may be noted that as there is no *varnadharma*, similarly there is no *kuladharna*. Or one may say, there is no distinctive *kuladharna*, the *dharma* of all *kulas* (clans) being the same. Only *jatidharmas* are differentiated.

And in order to reinforce his argument that the times have changed, that tribal affiliations no longer count, that Arjuna must surmount those antiquated notions of *varna* and *kula* and surrender to the new parameters of caste duties (*jatidharma*) Krishna utters that famous verse :

"*Yada yada hi dharmasya glanirbhavati bharat
Abhyutthanam dharmasya tadatamanum srujamyaham,
Paritrany Sadhuman, vinashayacha dushkrutam
Dharmasanthapanarthay sambhavami yuge yuge*" (4.8)

(Whenever there is decay of *dharma* amongst Bharata, I recreate myself to rejuvenate *dharma*. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the re-establishment of *dharma*, I am reborn age after age")

Since Krishna was not a historical materialist, we should not attribute a very precise meaning to the term *yuga*, but obviously Krishna meant something more than just any year. *Yuga* may not have meant exactly a mode of production to him, but surely it suggested a **definite and distinct social formation**. In the term *yuga*, a big span of time, a complete change of social climate, is definitely implied. Thus what Krishna is saying in the above verses

is pretty plain.

The notion that a comprehensive change of times is identified by Krishna, is once again emphasised by the use of the term '*kalpa*' in a similar context.

"All beings, O Kaunteya, go into my *prakriti* at the end of a *kalpa*. I generate them again at the beginning of the next *kalpa*. (9.7)

Thus Krishna is reiterating the fact that *yuga* and *kalpa* have undergone a transformation bringing forth new duties, obligations and functions for men.

After enjoining repeatedly upon Arjuna to have total faith in him and to totally surrender to him, Krishna reassures Arjuna that what was valid in a different age may not be equally sanctified in another age. Whenever such gigantic transformations occur, new adjustments have to be made and Krishna himself is re-formed, reborn and metamorphosed, in order to re-enunciate and re-establish the changed *dharna*. The old tribal *varna-kula* system now stands shattered. Arjuna must make the transition to the new *jatidharma* system and accept the new duties imposed upon various castes including the one upon *kshatriyas* to fight.

CASUISTRY AND CONTRADICTIONS

A lot of misunderstanding persists, and is promoted by professional alms-collectors, regarding the alleged philosophical profundity of the *Gita*. In line with all religious tracts, the *Bhagvad Gita* presents very poor philosophy. No doubt, a lot of time, energy and money has been expended by highly intelligent commentators and annotators. However, these well-intentioned souls are neither professional philosophers nor are they serious systematisers of human knowledge. They are reverent and keen on attributing importance to the object of their reverence.

The *Bhagvad Gita* is an electric hotch-potch of Vedic relics, stray *yoga* and *Sankhya* thoughts, grandiloquent rhetoric, *Mimansa* casuistry, megalomaniacal ravings, diplomatic tactfulness and glorious self-contradictions.

This is as it should be, for the *Gita's* purpose is not to propound a systematic philosophy, but to persuade and to convert

Arjuna is in a catatonic state. Krishna's avowed, self-appointed and self-adulatory task is to galvanise Arjuna into a course of action that would fit him for his new role in the feudal *yuga*. The *Bhagvad Gita* is obviously and essentially an exercise in high-flown rhetoric.

That is why the first words spoken by Krishna in the *Gita* (2.2-3), berate Arjuna for his unmanly and petty faintheartedness. Since Arjuna persists in his mulish despondency (2.4-10) Krishna finds it necessary to use tact :

"You grieve for those who should not be grieved for; yet you spell words of wisdom" (2.11)

Thus Arjuna is patted over and mollified, for a rhetor does not confront the recalcitrant with a flat contradiction. His technique is to persuade "Yes, yes, there is much in what you say. You are talking sense, and I agree that your point of view merits consideration. But there are other aspects, facets and issues to which I draw your attention.." And then, with typical rhetorician's flourish, Krishna plunges his adversary into dark pools of casuistry.

The rhetorician's tactics are evident throughout the *Gita*. The Vedic *yajna* ritual is never condemned outright. It is repeatedly upheld, even in its extreme form, as for instance :-

"The good who eat the remains of *yajna* are freed from all sins." (3.313)¹⁶

Krishna's lip-service not only covered pastoralist symbols but also extended to all sorts of little cults and village gods as with.

"Whatever form any devotee with faith wishes to worship, I make his faith steady". (7.21)

"Even those devotees who endowed with faith, worship other gods, worship me alone, O Kaunteya, by the wrong method... Votaries of the Devas go to the Devas; those of the Pitras go to the Pitras; those of the Bhutas go to the Bhutas; my votaries come to me" (9.23, 25)

¹⁶ Also see 3.9, 4.23, 4.30, 17.11, 17.12, 17.13, etc. *Yajna* was comparable to the potlatch of the Kwakwilt, of the Pacific Coast Red Indians of North America. There are many such similarities to the Red Indians of North America. There are many such similarities to in the culture and ethos of pastoralists and fishing communities and the latter may be considered as primitive herders of the sea-creatures and the former as advanced keepers of land mammals.

"Of the Rudras, I am Sankara and of the Yakshas and Rakshasas, I am Kubera" (10.23)¹⁷

This eclecticism is a necessary part of every rhetorician's bag of tricks, but his main weapon is casuistry, as we find again and again in the *Gita*.

"The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead. Nor I, nor you, nor any of these ruling princes was ever non-existent before, nor is it that we shall cease to be in future. As the indweller in the body, he also passes on to another body. The serene one is not affected thereby". (2.11-13)

The above is a fair specimen of a politician's speechifying. Arjuna is told that he should fight and kill because neither he nor his opponents have ever been or shall cease to be. Arjuna is to kill because he cannot kill. His opponents are to die because they are deathless and will be reborn. On top of everything else, Arjuna is not to grieve! All we can say is : Whom is Krishna fooling?

Poor Arjuna is pursued with relentless casuistry.

"He who holds *atma* as slayer and he who considers it as the slain, both of them are ignorant. It slays not nor is it slain. The *atma* is neither born nor does it die. Coming into being and ceasing to be, do not take place in it. Unborn, eternal, constant and ancient, it is not killed when the body is slain". (2.19-20)

After a boring repetition of the above sentiments in the next few verses(2.21-24) Krishna reaches a sort of casuistical climax :

"This *atma* is said to be unmanifested, unthinkable and immutable. Therefore, knowing it as such, you should not grieve". (2-25)

There was a hint of the hysterical heights in 2.20 when *atma* was identified as "unborn". That itself strained credulity to the utmost. However, the statement that the inner self is "unmanifested and unthinkable" is literally beyond the limit. If a thing is "unmanifested", it cannot be discussed. And since it is also at the same time "unthinkable" how can the question of discussion arise? Once again, we must ask ourselves : Whom is Krishna fooling?

¹⁷ *Rakshasas* or *Pisachas*, as Vedic scholars know, were neither devils nor fabulous creatures, but members of particular tribes, hated, feared and held in contempt by *Bharata-Kurus*.

Krishna follows up these body blows with a characteristic feudal punch – of caste duty :

“There is nothing more welcome to a *kshatriya* than righteous war. Happy are the *kshatriyas*, O Partha, who obtain such a warfare that comes unsought as an open gateway to heaven. But if you will not wage this righteous warfare, then forfeiting your own (caste) duty and honour, you will incur sin. People will ever recount your infamy. To the great chariot warriors, infamy is surely worse than death. Slain you will gain heaven; victorious you will enjoy the earth”. (2.31-34, 37)

Now Arjuna is badgered with a recital of his caste duty and is proffered a bribe. He will either gain heaven or rule the earth. But, philosophically speaking, what has *kshatriya's* duty to do with man's duty. A man is not necessarily a *kshatriya*. It is only feudal logic which makes some men accept *kshatriya* duties, and other groups of men duties of other castes. The whole structure of segregated duties is irrational and arbitrary.

Once again, we see the sociological force of Krishna's rhetoric. The idea is to make Arjuna forget the tribal duties which he owes to his kinsfolk. Behind a smoke-screen of clouded casuistry, the plan is to induce him to accept the new feudal order of *jatidharma* or caste duties.

The philosophical lore enshrined in the *Vedas* is to be consciously overthrown and surmounted.

“The *Vedas* enumerate the three *gunas*. You transcend the three *gunas*, O Arjuna... To an enlightened *Brahmin*, all the *Vedas* are as useful as a tank when there is flood everywhere”. (2.45, 46)

Having condemned the Vedic pastoralist lore as useless, Krishna now starts on another tack :

“Karmanyevadhikaraste, ma phaleshu kadachan
Ma Karmaphalheturbhurma, te sangostvakarmani”, (2.47)

(Seek to perform your duty; but not lay claim to its fruits. Do not aspire to the fruits of your duty, neither shall you lean towards inaction).

On the one hand, Arjuna is supposed to be entitled to unearthly ecstasies in heaven, or, alternatively, heavenly bliss on earth, by performing this *kshatradharma* or *kshatriya* caste duties; and on

the other hand, he is not to aspire to the fruits resulting from performance of his *kshatrakarma* or his caste tasks. Behind the latter simplistic exhortation, there lies the profound chicanery of the ruling minority. Arjuna is to rule, to oppress and to exploit, since he by birth belongs to the pasto-feudal ruling stratum. The lower castes are perforce condemned to servitude by their respective *jatidharmas* and *jatikarmas*, and this merry rigmarole is spun by Krishna to sanctify a dastardly system of oppression and exploitation. Renunciation of fruits is the camouflage of the ruling elite and the masses are to stand deprived, since their *atmas* are "unborn, unmanifested and unthinkable". What is philosophical about this crude social programme?

Krishna goes on and on about renunciation of attachments, indifference to success and failures, taking refuge in equanimity and evenness of mind and so on (2.48-50 *ad infinitum*)¹⁸

Self-contradictions never faze Krishna. Poor Arjuna inquires :

"If it is held by you, O Janardana, that knowledge is superior to action, why then do you, O Kesava, enjoin upon me this terrible action?" (3.1)

To this, Krishna's reply has already been noted above (3.3), to the effect that for the elite, there is the path of knowledge, and for the masses there is the path of action. In order not to confuse the mediocre masses, it is incumbent on the enlightened to set an example (3.21.29). And not satisfied with this rigmarole which enjoins action upon Arjuna, the elitist, in a roundabout manner, Krishna further confounds the issue—"None can remain really actionless for a moment; for everyone is helplessly driven to action by the *gunas*, born of *prakriti*" (3.5)

18 I suspect that in the land in which the slogan "*Buddham Sharanam Gachchhami*" was being re-echoed from every corner, there is a poetic innuendo in 2.49 wherein "*Buddham Sharanam*" is specifically mentioned. I am not entirely convinced that the latter is an innocuous reference to "*Buddhi*" or intelligence. Poets are fond of these ironical suggestions and Indian literary tradition is replete with many such *vyangas* or indirect hints. In fact the well-known *Dhwani* theory of literary criticism based itself precisely upon such a interpretation of literary texts. In this connection, we may also note that the Buddhist ideal of "Nirvana" is specifically eulogised in 6.15 and the familiar Buddhist catechism "Perception of evil in birth, evil in death, evil in old age, evil in sickness and pain" is referred to in 13.8

"Engage yourself in caste duty for action is superior to inaction, and if inactive, even the mere maintenance of your body may not be possible" (3.8)

Thus the path of action is not merely for the mediocre or the lowly, but also for the elite and for all living beings. Action is superior to inaction, action is inevitable, and action is the choice of the elite who have to set an example to the mass of the people whose caste duty in any case enjoins action upon them. This is not serious philosophy, but cheap casuistry. And not satisfied with this level of absurdity Krishna caps it all with.

"He who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, he is wise among men, he is a *yogi* and a performer of all actions". (4.18)

Arjuna is naturally bewildered and once again naively inquires;

"Renunciation of action, O Krishna, you commend, and again its performance. Of the two, which one is better? Tell me that conclusively". (5.1)

But Krishna, the rhetor, bent upon carrying his point by hook or crook, and confronted with the basic problem of persuading a pastoralist to accept feudal ways and goals, is incapable of conclusively suggesting anything at all. Krishna's path is the path of prevarication and hair-splitting :

"Renunciation and performance of action both lead to freedom; of the two performance of action is superior to the renunciation of action. The state reached by the *gnanis* is also reached by *karmayogis*. He sees who sees *Sankhyayoga* and *Karmayoga* as one". (5.2,5)

Naturally, the author of the *Gita* does not allow Arjuna to pursue the inquiry further. For instance, if action and inaction lead to the same destination why should one be preferred to the other? Secondly, if inaction is embedded within action, and action within inaction, what is the purpose of distinguishing the two? Thirdly, in such an event, why is action the caste prerogative of the humble, and inaction, renunciation and the path of knowledge or *sankhya* or *gnana* reserved for the mighty? The last named division of specialisations may make perfect feudal sense, but as philosophy, it is sheer nonsense.

Bogus mystification is carried to the extreme by Krishna, as in :

"At the coming of the day, all manifest beings proceed from the unmanifested, and at the coming of the night, they merge again in the same which is called the unmanifested. But beyond this unmanifested, there is yet another unmanifested eternal existence. This (further) unmanifested is called the imperishable and the ultimate goal. Those who attain it return not. That is my supreme abode."* (8.18-21)

There cannot be an unmanifested beyond the unmanifested. This is pure balderdash. And to posit that the unmanifested is imperishable is unadulterated mumbo-jumbo, since that which is unmanifested is non-existent, and the perishability or otherwise of the non-existent cannot arise, being beyond reason.

"There are two *purushas* in the world, the perishable and the imperishable. All beings are the perishable, and the *kutastha* is the imperishable". (15.16)

Since all beings fall in the category of the perishable, that which is imperishable falls to the lot of the non-being. Once such category of non-being, that which is not, is posited, it does not matter what it is called, whether unmanifested of the two levels, or *kutastha*, or *jhutastha*. When one takes the Blakeian or Yeatsian path of private fantasy, there is obviously no limit. Any thing can be given any name, and communication through language itself ceases.

That is why Krishna falls back upon the old formula : "*Om Tat Sat*, or Thou Art That", That being unmanifested, non-existent, and either indescribable or describable as *kutastha jhutastha*.

"*Om Tat Sat*, this has been declared to be the triple designation of Brahman. By that were made of old the *Brahmanas*, the *Vedas* and the *Yajnas*." (17.23)

Krishna casts this eclectic net so wide that some materialist nuggets derived from the old Charvakian Lokayata tradition also, on rare occasions, get caught, as with

"God does not create the agency that is to perform actions or the universe of actions; nor does he yoke actions and their fruits. Nature accomplishes all this". (5.14)

"Four types of virtuous men worship me, O Arjuna : The man in distress, the man seeking knowledge, the man seeking wealth and the man imbued with wisdom." (7.16)

We may leave aside the references to the "men seeking knowledge and possessing wisdom", since that is just a self-serving boast. But the other two types are the essence of the matter. On the one hand, there is the man in distress and who has been put in distress by the property-owning, elitist, upper castes. Naturally, being bewildered, the distressed fall prey to any sham suggestion. On the other hand, we have the man hungry for wealth who naturally finds religion highly profitable.

However, these materialist and realistic insights are not genuine and sincere statements. They are merely rhetorical pronouncements. Those progressives who want to go out of their way to find one or two isolated commendable sentiments in the *Bhagwad Gita*, are due for disappointment. The *Gita* is overwhelmingly ideologically biased in favour of the ruling aristocracy; and the rare and odd realistic proposition is vitiated by eclecticism and demagogy.

That is why, at the conclusion of this section of our monograph, we might profitably hark back to Marx's magnificent analysis of 1844:

"Criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism. The basis of irreligious criticism is : Man makes religion, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, the state, society, This state, this society, produce religion, a reversed world consciousness, because they are a reversed world. Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn completion, its universal ground for consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realisation of the human essence because the human essence has no true reality. The struggle, against religion is, therefore, mediately the fight against the other world, of which religion is the spiritual aroma. Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of

a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people"¹⁹

Religion provides solace to the distressed, consoles those in pain, and is the sigh of the oppressed. But pain and sorrow are not the universal human condition as even casual visitors to the locales of primitive tribes are aware. Tourists to such settlements have invariably noticed the carefree, gay and uninhibited lives led by such primitive folk. No doubt fear and terror also are visible, but these apprehensions concern natural enemies and unknown unpredictable forces. On the whole, sorrow, pain, anxiety, deprivation and insecurity are not their lot.

Universal distress is the invariable concomitant of class societies. This distress arises from deprivation that ruling class minorities have forced upon the mass of the people. And in order to obfuscate the true sources of generalised distress, ruling class minorities project the reversed world order of religion.

Criticism of this reversed world order is fundamental to the criticism of this unjust exploitation and class-oriented social order. The *Bhagavad Gita* is the classic Hindu compendium of this reversed world order and is an encyclopedic summation of all eclectic, ruling class projections and strategies that seek to perpetuate the ideological and factual oppression of the masses. This ideological reversed world order of the *Bhagavad Gita* is naturally and necessarily full of casuistry and self-contradiction as we have outlined hereinabove.

The main thrust of Krishna's argument in the *Gita* concerns the rebirth theory borrowed from Buddhism-Jainism coupled with the theory of inescapable, individual fate derived in all probability from Makkala Goshala's Ajivikaism²⁰ There is no mention of either transmigration of souls or of cycle of births in the *Vedas*. Such a notion would be foreign to tribological thinking. The *varna*, colour and race of a tribe are fixed and indelible. The notion of hierarchies of caste orders coupled to cycle of births, with pre-ordained, obligatory caste duties is specifically feudal, and hence repeatedly stressed by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Arjuna is exhorted to give up tribal considerations of fraternity, and is asked to accept the new order of cyclical rebirths in a hierarchic caste order with each

19 "On Religion", n.d., pp. 37,38, from *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.

20 A.L. Basham, *The Ajivikas*, 1951, especially Ch. XII on the theory of *Niyati*.

caste pursuing its own *jatidharma* in order to sustain the total exploitative system. As there is not and cannot be any logic or truth or justice underlying such an exploitative and oppressive social order, Krishna is perforce pushed to resort to eclecticism, casuistry, self-contradictions and confused arguments.

KRISHNA'S MEGALOMANIA

The casuistry and self contradictions in Krishna's rhetorical exhortations are so transparent that he has no alternative except to demand unquestioning faith.

"Surrendering all actions to me engage in battle" (3.30)

"Those who constantly act according to my teachings... are released from all actions". (3.31)

"But those who carp at my teaching and act not thereon.. know them to be ruined" (3.32)

"At all times think of me only and fight" (8.7)

Simultaneously, faith being fickle, Krishna exaggerates his own prowesses beyond all rational limits. A whole chapter is devoted to Krishna's fantastic notions about himself. For anyone not drunk with religious opium, it is sickening to read the exaggerated, egoistical, boastful, super-arrogant and megalomaniacal lies that Krishna purveys about himself.

"Krishna : "Behold my forms, O Partha, by hundreds and thousands, manifold and divine, and of variegated colours and shapes" (11.5)

Krishna : "Behold here today, O Gudakesha (Arjuna), the whole universe of the moving and the unmoving, and whatever else you may desire to see all integrated in my body" (11.7)

Arjuna : "All the sons of Dhritarashtra with hosts of kings of the earth, Bhishma, Drona and Sutaputra (= Karna), with the warrior chiefs of ours enter hurrying into your mouth, terrible with tusks and fearful to look at. Some are found sticking in the gaps between the teeth with their heads crushed to powder ... Devouring all the worlds on every side, you lick your lips" (11.26-27, 30)

This fantastic and horrifying sight is presented to us with the

éclat of a demented, drug-addicted creature projecting delusions of grandeur.

We will not burden our text with this interminable infantilism. But it is not merely in Chapter 11 that this elephantiasis of Krishna's ego is visible. Krishna does not believe in moderation, subtlety or suggestion. He is a crude rhetor who goes on and on hammering his egomaniacal ravings right through the *Gita*.

"There is naught in the three world, O Partha, that has not been done by me" (3.322)

"The universe would perish if I did not act...." (3.24)

"This imperishable yoga I declared to Vivasvat, Vivasvat taught it to Manu, Manu told it to Ikshvaku" (4.1)

"Thus it was transmitted in regular succession through the royal sages". (4.2)

Obviously, Krishna and Arjuna were living in those bygone days when the words of royalty were respected. Today the words of such "royal sages" would be immediately suspect, and even a journalist who is a tyro would cross-examine them to uncover the axes which they may have to grind.

But to continue

"Know me as the lord of sacrifices and austerities, as the ruler of all the worlds.." (5.29)

"Keeping himself steadfast, the self-controlled yogi attains peace that abides in me and culminates in Nirvana". (6.15)

"I shall teach you that.... Which being known, nothing more shall remain to be known" (7.2)

"All worlds including that of Brahma are subject to return, O Arjuna, but on reaching me, O Kaunteya, there is no rebirth". (8.16)

"All this universe is pervaded by me in my unmanifested form; all beings exist in me but I do not abide in them".

"He who knows me.. as the great lord of the worlds, he among mortals is undeluded and freed from all sins" (10.3)

Krishna is no doubt compelled to exaggerate his abilities and

achievements for only then can be expect the blind faith that he requires.

Without such faith, his words of wisdom would reveal themselves to be what they are : the eclectic, egomaniacal ravings of a rhetorician interested in upholding the iniquitous feudal order.

GITA AS LITERATURE

For the vast majority of our people, including those outside the Hindu fold and including even illiterates, the *Gita* has innumerable associations from birth to death. The verses of the *Gita* are chanted on all occasions, private or public, important or otherwise.

Therefore, much of the literary value of the *Bhagavad Gita* arises out of nostalgic memories embedded in the collective Indian psyche. It is the repeated reinforcement of this societal associative mnemonic linkage that induces us to impute literary merit to every line and verse of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Also, amongst progressives and Marxists, there is both a tendency to mask deep-rooted conservatism and also to guiltily lean over backwards with reference to the *Gita*. Those who should be mercilessly attacking the *Gita*, find it necessary to applaud at least the literary facet of the *Gita*. There are in addition, those who want to build bridges towards mass sentiments, and therefore go out of their way to shower accolades on the poetic genius who wrote the *Gita*.

Therefore, in our view, the literary merit of the *Gita* has been overrated.

Yet, some literary features of the *Bhagavad Gita* do deserve mention. First of all the device of the "frame within the frame" is ingenious. Sanjay is the apparent narrator whose reportage, attentively heard by blind king Dhritarashtra, includes direct transmission of the Arjuna - Krishna dialogues and other dialogues between Duryodhana and Drona, and so on, and this device enables the poet to present a multiplicity of standpoints, tones and echoes.

Secondly, there is the startling and sonorous use of chains of proper nouns designating the great warrior heroes of the Kauravas and the Pandavas. This is particularly effectively done

in stanzas of the first *adhyaya* when certain named conches are blown by particular warriors :

"Panchajanya was blown by Hrishikesha (Krishna) and Devadatta by Dhananjaya (Arjuna). Vrikodara (Bhima) of terrible exploits blew his great conch Paundra. The kind Yudhishtira, the son of Kunti, blew Anantavijaya; Nakula and Sahadeva blew Sughosha and Manipushpaka. And the ruler of Kashi, the adept archer, and Shikhandi, the great chariot warrior, Dhrushtadyumna and Virata and Satyaki the invincible; O ruler of the earth. Drupad and the sons of Draupadi, and the mighty armed son of Subhadra, all these as we'll blow their several conches". (1.15-18)

These conches with their strange names blow and reverberate from within the text sending ripples of excitement through the reader's mind. An atmosphere of immediacy, of the impending doom resulting from the ferocious clash of warriors is created by a few deft strokes of true epic poetry.

Thirdly, there are those imaginative bold flights of charged thought which sweep over us and flood our senses :

*"Yada Yada hi dharmasya glanirbhavati Bharat
Abhyutthanam dharmasya tadatmanam srujamyaham*

*Paritrany sadhunam vinashayacha dushkrutam
Dharmasansthapanarthay sambhavami yuge yuge"* (4.7-8)

"Sthitapradnyasya ka bhasha samadhistasya Keshava

Sthitadhih prabhashet kimasit vrujethim

Prajahati yada kaman sarvan Partha mangatan

Atmane vatmanatushtah sthitpradnya tadochchyate"

(2.54-55)

"Karmanye vadhikaraste ma phaleshu kadachan

Ma karmaphal heturbhuh ma te sangostavikarmani

Yogasta kuru karmani sangam tyaktva Dhananjay

Sidhya sidhyoh samobhutva samatvam yoga uchchyate"

(2.47-48)

"Dhyayato vishayanpunsah sangasteshupajayate

Sangat sanjavate kamah, kamat krodhah abhijayate

Krodhat bhavati sanmoha, sanmohat smritvibhramah

Smriti bhranshat buddhinasho buddhinashat pranashyati"

It is verses like these that stamp the *Bhagavad Gita* with a degree

of poetic merit, making it a document of not only great sociological significance, but of literary value.

EPILOGUE

The *Bhagavad Gita* relates to the time horizon of the immediate pre-Gupta and early Gupta period of C 200-C 400 A.D., when the pastoralist Vedic Brahmins thrown into wilderness for several centuries as a result of the rise of the triumphant feudal ideologies of Jainism, Buddhism and Ajivikaism of c.600 B.C., staged a comeback through a new compromise with the newly established victorious and relatively progressive feudal regime. Collective congregational worship now made way for an ideology of supra-tribal individual salvation and a concept of hierarchised obligatory caste duties coupled to a theory of cyclical rebirths.

The Pandavas led by Arjuna were related to the pastoralist clans through their mother, Kunti, and were claiming their pastoralist patrimony. This resulted in a dispute with the partially agriculturised Kaurava faction, and was the cause of the ferocious war known as *Jaya* or *Mahabharata* in c. 900 B.C. As was inevitable, the feudal forces triumphed and the first territorial states of Indian history, the sixteen *Mahajanpadas* came into being as the aftermath of the Great War.

The pastoralist class society was already deeply divided and was disintegrating as evidenced not only by the Kaurava-Pandava factional fight, but also by the fact that Krishna's brother, Balaram-Sankarshan, the plough bearer, was a neutral, leaning towards Kauravas, and also by the fact that Krishna pledged his entire Yadava army in support of Kauravas. He and Satyaki alone joined the Pandavas.

Krishna convinces Arjuna in the course of the *Bhagavad Gita* to give up his pastoralist tribal affiliations, to place absolute faith in Krishna, to surrender all initiative to Krishna and to accept the demands of the new *yuga* that is to say to the new era of hierarchised castes with their birth-determined obligatory duties, functions and obligations. Much of the text of the *Gita* is made repellent by the megalomaniacal ravings of Krishna, who, as a clever and adept rhetorician, with eclectic abandon, uses any and every argument to subvert Arjuna's tribal loyalties, which have their

roots in the pastoral, nomadic life of herd-owning clans. Personal salvation was placed above tribal welfare, and individual worship in the structural temple replaced pseudo-collectivist congregational prayers of the Buddhist Sangha centered upon the *stupa-chaitya* - *vihara* - *torana* - *lat* complex.

The *Gita* was a late interpolation in the epic *Mahabharata* text. The *Mahabharata* itself marked the watershed between two epochs of Indian history, viz., the era of the pastoralist class society that stretched from the *Rig Veda* times to the period just prior to the formation of the Sixteen Mahajanpadas. The *Gita* was injected into the *Mahabharata* text as a popularisation and sanctification device, and marks the divide between the first phase monastic Buddhist feudalism spanning the centuries lying between the Sixteen Mahajanpadas and the Sunga-Kanva-Satavahana dynastic period, and the rise of the imperial Guptas.

Instead of attributing all sorts of esoteric, symbolic, philosophical and magical meanings to the *Gita* text, it is necessary to read it as a plain statement of socio-historical reality. **Krishna is the quintessential idealised prototype of a pastoral-tribal charismatic leader who has accepted the values and world-vision of the new feudal order, as conceived by a seminal poet, or group of great bards. He is trying to help Arjuna to adjust to the new feudal order. Arjuna is not the eternal acolyte but a pasto - tribalist trying to defend to his dying breath the values of the old pastoralist class society plunged into a cataclysmic crisis.**

Their end, as traditionally described, is of considerable social significance. Krishna was shot down by a "hunter", who was probably nothing more than a rising tribal chief in transition to feudalism. Arjuna was first robbed by "roving bandits" whilst escorting Yadava princesses from Dwarka to Hastinapur. Ultimately he fell on the slopes of the Himalayas where he and his brothers were forced to retire. The land and the kingdom that they had left behind was now agricultural and feudal. Their anomalous pastoralist existence thus came to a bitter end.

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