

THE GITA IN INDIAN LIFE

Books on the *Gītā*, written in this century are, generally either by philosophers or by non-philosophers, impressed with its ethics or theology. There is not much difference between these two classes of writers since most of them have taken the *Gītā* as a sacred document and written about it with the respect which a sacred scripture generally arouses in the mind of a devoted or committed, individual. Right from Tilak till today almost all such writers have tried to prove the greatness of the *Gītā*, in one respect or another, for its philosophy, ethics, or theology. It is a pity that even professional (Indian) philosophers have not subjected it to a logical examination in a neutral, unbiased, manner. Bazaz's book¹ is not one which can fill in this gap. It is not a philosophical study of the *Gītā*, and therefore it cannot be assessed to be genuinely or poorly philosophical. In fact, Bazaz would not like it to be taken as a philosopher's book. As its title suggests, it is a work on the *Gītā's* actual role in the life of the Indian people.

The presupposition of the kind of study Bazaz has done is that the *Gītā* has played a dominant role in Indian history. Unless it is admitted that it has played such a role, there is no point in evaluating its role as beneficial or prejudicial to the progress of the Indian society. But what exactly is the role which the *Gītā* has played, if it has played any role at all, in Indian history, and how dominant or pervasive it has been, is an empirical matter. Therefore, any true proposition pertaining to it has to be established on empirical grounds. It is pardonable for a layman to hold as true what he has the right only to call a mere belief or opinion, but when one is conducting an intellectual study, he cannot be

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1. Bazaz, Prem Nath, *The Role of Bhagavad Gītā in Indian History*, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1975, pp. 747, Price Rs. 100.00.

permitted to do that. Bazaz has *assumed* that the *Gītā* has played a dominant role in Indian history and therefore has proceeded to give his evaluation of it. I say he has assumed it since, according to me, it cannot be taken as obviously true without an empirical investigation.

It is true that the *Gītā* has been enjoying the status of a widely read religious classic among religious Hindus for several centuries, and has been popular even in modern India, both pre- and post-independent. Many political and social leaders, e. g. Tilak, Gandhi, Aurobindo, Sahajananda Saraswati, Vinoba, etc., have been its ardent devotees. Many Hindus, including some high-level government executives and business magnets, as a matter of routine, read a few Ślokas from it every day after their bath, or before taking their night nap. Many degree dissertations and scholarly books have also been written on it, and every year discourses on it are conducted by some swamies in some part or parts of the country. From all this, Bazaz may say, one can infer the dominant influence of the *Gītā* on the Indian people. But one can do that only if he makes the further assumption that those who have accepted it as a sacred classic have taken its teachings seriously and sincerely and have tried to mould their and their fellow men's lives accordingly. The teachings of the *Gītā* can be given any credit or discredit only if they have been sincerely and seriously put into practice, or at least honest efforts have been made in that direction.

But recollecting that hypocrisy and insincerity are inseparable ingredients of the Indian life, both in its theory and practice, it is not at all reasonable to make the assumption that those who read or study the *Gītā* sincerely use it as a guide in their actual living. Therefore, it is not at all logical to attribute anything good or bad in Indian life to the influence of the *Gītā* (or to that of any other scripture, or even to Gandhism) unless one first empirically establishes that it has been taken seriously by the Indian people.

This is a very fit subject for an empirical, sociological study, and unless one does that, or has such a study, available, he has no justification to assume that the *Gītā* has played a role of this or that type in Indian history. Bazaz has not presented any such empirical study, nor does he cite any set of convincing, decisive, empirical data, in support of his assumption.

To the best of my knowledge, no empirical study of the *Gītā*'s actual role has so far been done, and what Bazaz has done in a rather pseudo-empirical way is perhaps the only study of its kind. I call it pseudo-empirical since he takes the not-too-clear popular belief, or perhaps his own belief, that the *Gītā* has played a dominant role in Indian life as an empirically true proposition and then proceeds to work upon it. But still it is a very welcome study since it may act as a stimulus for, or the beginning of, some genuinely empirical studies. And, therefore, Bazaz has to be congratulated for the giving a start to a much needed kind of exploration. In fact empirical studies of Indian religious is a debt long overdue from Indian social scientists and Bazaz's work may (as it should) act as a reminder to at least some of them.

Bazaz has not simply assessed what he considers to be the role of the *Gītā*. He has also tried to have a critical look on the entire classical Indian thought. In this he has been able to emancipate himself from the orthodoxy of a traditional Hindu as well as that of a traditional scholar of Indian philosophy. This does not mean that Bazaz's approach to Indian thought is completely novel or original. In fact his lack of originality is visible at innumerable places, and perhaps he himself would not claim to have been very original since quite often when he says something very different from what has been said by some respectable authorities, he refers to some other authority or authorities in his support, or concludes with a corroborative quotation from any one of them.

The interpreters of classical Indian thought can be put into two

classes. Those who are more respectful than critical, and try to interpret it in such a manner that its shortcomings cease to look very prominent, who approach it with a sense of devotion and patriotic or religious pride, can be put into one class, and those who are more critical, less devotional, and approach it without any kind of patriotic or religious pride, in another. The majority of recent writings on Indian thought follow in the footsteps of the former. Bazaz, on the other hand, has tried to present in a systematic manner a study of Indian thought in the light of the appraisals of it by the latter class of interpreters. Without prejudging how far their approach is logically and factually correct, it can be said in Bazaz's favour that he has made this approach readily available in a comprehensive form, and this is not a mean achievement. Therefore, his account of classical Indian thought, as presented in this book, can very well benefit a general reader as well as a professional scholar of Indian thought.

Bazaz thinks that it is not only true that the *Gītā* has "in the past played a great role in shaping the mind and character of Hindus and thereby in making the history of India" (Preface XI) but also that "the Indians deteriorated, intellectually and morally, lost freedom, and suffered for hundreds of years after they had given unstinted allegiance" to its doctrines. "Why did this dismal fate overtake the country when it had welcomed and chosen for its guide the exalted doctrines of the *Bhagavad Gītā*?" (VII) This is the most important question, and it has according to Bazaz, neither been clearly raised, nor properly answered. It is this question which he attempts to answer, and his answer is that the Indians deteriorated not in spite of their allegiance to the *Gītā*, but rather because of it. He considers their allegiance to the *Gītā* as a causal factor in their dismal fate. For him there are things in the very content of the *Gītā* which have caused this misfortune. "... its teachings can help (and have helped) only to subvert human progress and nourish social evils. It is a philosophy of the upper classes meant to

be utilised by them as a weapon for maintaining a frustrated society in some sort of stability and equilibrium by inculcating ideas of patience and contentment in disinherited, exploited and down-trodden millions." " Since its appearance the *Bhagavad-Gītā* has been repeatedly invoked to fight against the forces of revolution. If Śāṅkarācārya sought its assistance in the ninth century A. D. to deal a death blow to declining Buddhism, Mahatma Gandhi utilised its teachings to annihilate the rising tide of secular democracy." (IX). The reason why the *Gītā* has even then remained venerable and its proper role not truthfully characterised is the fact that " the history of India written and taught in the past is the history as studied by Brahmin intellectuals "(ibid X).

Bazaz has worked hard in weaving together various strands of his interpretation of Indian culture and history to substantiate his thesis, but he has not been able to prove that there is something intrinsic in the content of the *Gītā* which is a definite cause of the deterioration of the country. This again is an empirical thesis which can be accepted only if empirically established, but he has not done anything to that effect. Further, he seems to have forgotten the conceptual distinction between a mere antecedent and a causal antecedent. Even if devotion to the *Gītā* is a factor in the set of antecedents of the deterioration, it does not follow that it is a causal factor; it is possible that it was just a silent, sleeping, antecedent with no (or not a very important) casual role. I am not saying it is not at all causally connected with the deterioration; it might or might not have been so connected. I am only trying to emphasize that Bazaz has not established his thesis that it has played such a causal role. He may dub me ' a Brahmin intellectual ' (which I am not), but the logical point I am trying to make remains valid even if made by a real Brahmin. If the Brahmins exhibit one kind of prejudice for the *Gītā*, the non-Brahmins exhibit its opposite, and Bazaz's non-Brahmin prejudice

is very clearly visible in the book at almost every place. Still, I consider Bazaz's work laudable since his kind of 'prejudice' has not been in this century given the prominence which has been given to its opposite, and its proper expression is likely to provoke further unorthodox thinking on the subject.

The book consists of three parts. Part I : 'The Rise and Decline of Indian Philosophy', Part : 2 'The Teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*' and Part 3 : 'Influence of the *Gītā* on Indian History'.

Part I contains nine chapters : 1 - The Quest for Knowledge, 2 - Sacerdotal Supremacy, 3 - An Era of Intellectual Dialogues, 4 - The Six Schools of Liberation, 5 - Flowering of Thought, 6 - The Buddhist Revolution, 7 - The Fruits of the Revolution, 8 - Rise of Neo-Brahminism, and 9 - Conflict, Clash and Confusion.

In this part, he traces the rise and decline of Indian philosophy from the Vedic period to that of the various systematic schools. This he presents as a historical process which starts with a primitive form of materialism and naturalism in the Vedas, and through Brahmin ritualism, Upaniṣadic idealism, challenged by the non-Brahmanical revolution of Jainism and Buddhism, returns to a neo-Brahmanism and gets stabilised in several Brahmanical philosophical systems. The end product of the process is the dominance of the Brahmanical tradition and culture.

Bazaz's interpretation of the historical process is not at all original since for almost every significant point he makes, he gives a confirming quotation from some earlier interpreter like Lakshman Shastri Joshi, Winternitz, Apte, Rhys Davids, Radhakrishnan, Dasgupta, Chattopadhyaya, etc. etc. This part of his work is only a summary account of the non-Brahmanical interpretation, given by some others, of the development of classical Indian philosophy. The Vedas, he says, are 'no better than half-formed myths and immature composition' (p.5), their construction to thought is 'in no

way unique in the history of human culture ' (p.19), and the Vedic philosophy ' is not of high order by modern philosophical standards' (p.18). Gradually vedic gods, who are originally personalised natural phenomena, were transformed into heavenly deities, and to facilitate man's rapport with them there emerged the class of priests who used to take all the offerings made to the gods. Since the priests, i.e. Brahmins, monopolised the profession and claimed that they alone could provide liason with the gods, they acquired a dominating position, and also became exploiters of the masses. The Brahmins did also act as the carriers of knowledge, but they later became obscurantists and played an anti-progressive and vicious role. They even ' equated the priests with the gods ' (p.25).

Bazaz maintains that it is Brahmins who divided the then society into four castes, placing themselves at the top. Whether the Brahmins were instrumental in the initiation of the caste system or the product of the caste-system is a debatable point, and many historians may not agree with him. But his remarks about the contributions of the Vedas are not completely untrue, though they may not seem very pleasant to many. Though they do not seem to be the results of his own research, yet he deserves our thanks for restating unpleasant truths which are likely to remain unnoticed. The Upaniṣads represent an era of intellectual dialogues. They emphasize the role of meditation, and not the performance of rituals. Not only the progressive Brahmins, but even some thoughtful Kshatriyas also played an important role in this period, and the result was the advancement of speculative thought. The Upaniṣads are generally said to contain only idealistic and spiritualistic ideas, but Bazaz is not completely wrong when he says, of course on the authority of some other scholars, that in some of them rationalistic-materialistic views are also present.

The Upaniṣadic thought got crystalised in the six systems of philosophy, and the revolt against the Brahmanical thought, began by the Parivrājakas, got its full expression in the rise of Buddhism

and Jainism. Bazaz's discussion of the views of the Parivrājakas, though not very thorough, is quite informative and successfully indicates how they provided a bridge, by way of their views contrary to those of Brahmanism, for the Buddhist and Jain revolution. The views of the Lokāyata movement, specially the contributions of the Cārvākas, should have been discussed more elaborately than it has been done by him.

Bazaz's discussion of Buddhism and Jainism is also very short and not scholarly. But that is not to be treated as a short-coming, since his main purpose is to bring to light their revolutionary character and that he has quite successfully done. As a result of the Buddhist revolution, Bazaz says, far-reaching changes were introduced in the then society, e. g., the caste system got loosened, republican forms of government were introduced, the other-worldly attitude got subjugated to the this-worldly one, etc., etc. But Buddhism was not completely materialistic and rationalistic, and the Brahmins thus found loopholes in it. Gradually the hold of Buddhism loosened, and there occurred the revival of Brahmanism. Some Brahmins had entered the Buddhist order, and played an important role in the advent of neo-Brahmanism. Jainism also did not fare better. The decline of the Kshatriyas effected by the Mahābhārata war caused 'a fatal blow to the revolution' (p.148). Bazaz refers to Rhys Davids to support his claim that neo-Brahmanism 'exalted Tapas (self-torture) into a great value. Release from rebirth, and not control of nature, became the aspiration of all (p.149).

Part 2 has 11 chapters : 10. The Author and His time, 11. Bewildered Intellectual 12. The Skilful Mentor, 13. Synthesising Diverse Concepts, 14. Contradictions and Inconsistencies, 15. War on Non-believers. 16. Complete Surrender to God, 17. Stand up and Fight, 18. Brahmanism by Backdoor, 19. Desireless Work, and 20. Murder with Impunity.

The objective of the *Gita*, Bazaz says, was to help Neo-Brahmanism strengthen itself, because though it had returned to the scene, the Buddhist revolution had not yet become extinct. There were still many people who did not fully accept Neo-Brahmanism. Krishna, for Bazaz, is the leader of Neo-Brahmanism, and Arjuna, a hesitant, questioning, intellectual, who does not feel like accepting Brahmanism, but is so poor in logic and argumentation that he finally has to bow down to Krishna. Bazaz is not completely mistaken in characterising Arjuna's questions as 'mostly frivolous and superficial' (p.170).

Bazaz is also not very unfair in charging Krishna of having used more non-logical than logical means to convert Arjuna to his own view. The initial question of Arjuna 'Why should he fight when fighting is going to cause so much blood-shed?' was not answered by Krishna and very cleverly he diverts Arjuna's attention to different topics. Krishna is a poor logician but a clever politician, and although he succeeds in making Arjuna accept whatever he wanted him to accept, he does so more by trickery than by logical fair play. Bazaz is also right, according to me, in maintaining that the *Gita* does not offer a synthesis of the various prevailing philosophical systems, though many scholars have said that it does. Nor does the *Gita* provide a reconciliation of the three paths to salvation, namely those of Action, Knowledge, and Devotion. Bazaz calls it 'a mosaic of various primitive and developed religious concepts' (p.200), containing innumerable contradictions and inconsistencies. Even ethically it is not all perfect, as it upholds the doctrine of the divine origin of the four caste system, which goes against the equality of man.

In Chapter 14 Bazaz lists several inconsistencies and incoherences of the *Gita* and also such authorities as Khair, Winternitz, Kocambi, etc. in his favour. As is clear from his quotation from Gandhi, one cannot explain these incoherences and one can even explain them away only if he becomes a blind devotee of the book. Even Krishna

wants people to be blindly devoted to him, as he very strongly condemns those who do not accept, or are sceptical of, his doctrines, and insists on people's complete surrender to him. All this indicates, according to Bazaz, that Krishna was trying to rehabilitate Brahmanism against materialism and rationalism, and hence he wanted to persuade Arjuna to fight because he thought that 'without reducing the unity and strength of the warrior caste to minimum, neo-Brahmanism could neither be secure nor stable' (p.239). In spite of its spiritual talk, the *Gītā* did bring back Brahmanism. The *Gītā* has been praised for enunciating the doctrine of desireless work. But Bazaz says that it is not only impracticable, it has never been really practised. It was enunciated only to keep the labour class contented so that they may not press their demands for rewards in return of their work.

Part 3 has 23 chapters, 21 to 43 : 21-Supreme Among the Scriptures, 22-Acute Differences over the Doctrines, 23-Emergence of Hinduism, 24-A False Prosperity, 25-Plunge into Darkness, 26-A Pleasant Interlude, 27-Anarchy and Callousness, 28-Old Wine in New Bottles, 29-The Golden Epoch, 30-Bharat Mata Comes into Her Own, 31-34 Revolt of Godmen, 25-27-Triumph of Hindu Nationalism, 38-41-Under the Congress Raj, 42-What is Indian Culture?, and 43-The Perspective.

Because of its inner incoherencies and equivocations, the *Gītā* has been interpreted in very many different ways, every interpreter concentrating on such aspect or aspects of it which were more acceptable to him than the others. This is true of Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja, and all the others, including modern interpreters. Gradually the *Gītā* emerged as the manual of new-Brahmanism, it became the Bible of the Hindus (p.288), though the kind of life its preceptor, Krishna, led, as is evident from the *Mahābhārata*, cannot be, morally speaking, the proper ideal of any one. Krishna succeeded in defeating progressive forces, and consequently human values like rationality, love of truth, tolerance for dissent, etc.,

fostered by the Buddhist revolution, degenerated into rituals or mere slogans (p.301). According to Bazaz, the *Gītā* philosophy 'dominated Indian mind for fifteen centuries to the ruin of the country and its people, until the process was temporarily checked by the impact of Western culture in the beginning of the nineteenth century' (p.302).

In chapters 24-29 Bazaz presents a developmental survey of the social, cultural and even economic history of India from the Maurya period through the Gupta and the Muslim periods to the British. His account of Indian history here (and also elsewhere) is no doubt refreshing, but his thesis about the *Gītā's* influence in the history of India cannot be said to have been empirically established in a conclusive manner. His conclusion that 'if there ever was a golden age in Indian history', it was 'under the British in the nineteenth century' (p.411) also needs much more historical substantiation than he has given.

Bazaz's statement that the unification of the Indian sub-continent was for the British a means 'for the achievement of a laudable goal : to awaken the people spiritually and make them tolerant, progressive, self-reliant, brave, democratic and happy' (p.414) cannot also be accepted as an unqualified empirical truth. His claim (p.434) that the Indians would not have rebelled against the British had the latter not tried to interfere with their undesirable traditions and to make them progressive cannot also be considered unquestionable. His interpretation of the 1857 movement as a revolt of the anti-progressive elements against the progressive efforts of the British Government which had made the down-trodden and the progressive educated sections fully satisfied (p.436), again, cannot be accepted as an unmitigated historical truth. Bazaz's views may be said to provide a corrective to the prevalent belief that the British rule in India was an unmixed evil, but it is also true that he has gone to the other extreme when he holds that those who opposed the rule were mostly antiprogressive, neo-Brahmanical, and revivalist. His interpretation

of the Indian Renaissance is coloured by this bias and therefore it is not completely objective. According to him Keshabchandra Sen, under the influence of Ramakrishna 'ended the progressive role of Brahmosamaj and gave a fatal blow to the Renaissance movement', (p.448) and the Arya Samaj led by Dayananda, propagated Vedic revivalism, again going against progressivism, Vivekananda, too according to him was, a champion of neo-Brahmanism, and so were Ram Tirth, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Tilak, Anne Beasant, and Aurobindo. The Indian National Congress is said to have had (and to have still) a strong revivalist group, and the formation of the Muslim League is attributed to a large extent to the domination of the revivalists in the Congress. According to him, after the 1857 movement, anti-progressive forces became powerful, and after Lord Curzon's leaving India in 1905, there ended the Golden epoch of Indian history (p.498). Bazaz's discussion of the Indian Renaissance and revivalism, in chapters 31-34 is appetising, unorthodox, and rather different from what one generally comes across in books on Indian history. However, his discussion of the works of Tilak, Aurobindo, and Gandhi on the *Gītā* is very scanty though the main aim of his book is to study the influence of the *Gītā*.

The chapters discussing the triumph of Hindu Nationalism and the Congress rule emphasise that in this part of the Indian history also progressive forces have been vanquished by revivalism or neo-Brahmanism. In 1916-17 the revivalists became most powerful in Indian National Congress and the character of the freedom movement was also dominated by revivalism. Tilak, Aurobindo, Gandhi, Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, all, for him, are revivalists. Gandhi is the modern Krishna and Nehru the modern Arjuna, and Nehru was ultimately converted by Gandhi to his revivalism against rationalistic and progressive influences. "The educated classes and intelligentsia who were baffled by Gandhi's inner and medieval views, supported by religious shibolleshs eventually fell into step, or maintained silence merely because he generated mass hysteria which was commonly

but erroneously recognised as political awakening among the people" (p.508). Nehru got 'awe-struck and terrified by the leader's (Gandhi's) personality', and became his docile follower (p.530). Even for the stand which Jinnah took as a leader of the Muslims, and the methods he used in organising them, Bazaz makes Gandhi and his followers' Hindu revivalism responsible (pp.548, 552). According to Bazaz, it was not the struggle of the Congress but several political and circumstantial factors which brought back India's political freedom.

Bazaz finds the domination of revivalism or neo-Brahmanism in the post-Independent period also. "The *Gītā*-style is the national style; loud acclamation of reason, knowledge, peace, human brotherhood and social justice; at the same time, defiance in practice of these very principles whenever need arises to defend or expand the stagnant Brahmin system" (p.565). The post-Nehru India also does not exhibit any significant change for the better (p.622). It is no wonder that the post-independence India is in a deplorable state under the revivalist rule. "Brahmin scriptures do not forbid resort to violence, corruption or immoral means for achieving worldly aims: even *avatāras* and sages are said to have taken recourse to murder, dupery, falsehood and cheating when need for them arose to fulfil a desire" (p.652). The four principles of democracy, nationalism, secularism and socialism, the four-fold basis of the present Indian policy, has taken the place of the four-caste system, and have become the basic principles of the modern Brahmanism (p.673). Whether it is caste animosity, linguistic enmity, communal discord or provincial antagonism, the source is the same, namely, the divisive philosophy on which the structure of Hindu nationalism is raised." (p.675) The Congress, which is still Gandhian, offers no hope to Bazaz. 'We can cherish either the *Gītā* philosophy and Gandhism, or reason, science and modernism. It is impossible to have both' (p.680). The three rationalist parties, according to him, are those of the Communists, Radical Humanists, and Dravid

Kazhagam, but even they are not found fit enough to bring about the needed revolution, or even to check the march of revivalism (p.689). So his final conclusion is in effect pessimistic (p.697). There cannot be a better India, he says unless we 'choose science and technology in place of *Gītā* and Gandhism' (p.703), but he is unsure of the chances of our making the needed choice, nor does he offer any suggestion as to how we can be motivated to do so.

It is rather too simplistic to ascribe to revivalism the dominant share in the deplorable state of the country, and Bazaz seems to be so obsessed with this idea that he does not explore the actual or probable causal role of other factors. But though I feel that he has presented his thesis about the dominance of revivalism in a somewhat exaggerated manner, he has put his finger on an important truth about the evolution of Indian culture and thought. Revivalism still persists not only in our religious, social, cultural, and political life, but also in our intellectual life. For example, there are innumerable people who still hold that the all-time perfect philosophy, science, literature, etc. were given by the ancient Indian sages, and all that the modern Indians should do is to recount them. Such people rush to locate in some ancient Indian work whatever good thing they find in any modern enquiry, Indian or non-Indian,

Bazaz rightly says that 'to declare that India's past has been solely religious or so-called spiritualistic or that rationalism or materialism is exotic to us is to be partial, if not wholly untrue to the past' (p.661).

Bazaz's style is journalistic yet (or consequently) enjoyable. But we must admit that his work fills in a long-felt gap in the tradition of historical writings on India, and presents a critical, unorthodox, free and frank interpretation of India's past and present. It may not contain only truths, still it deserves to be read by all those who want to have a critical understanding of India's history.

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