



Orthopraxis And The Grammar Of Cognitive Freedom: Hermeneutics Of Gandhi's Reading Of The *Bhagavadgita*

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Abstract

It will not be an exaggeration to state that it is the celebrated Hindu *smṛiti* text, the *Bhagavadgītā*, which constituted the very possibility of the radically transformative soteriological life-journey of 'Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi' to 'Mahatma Gandhi'. And it is a truism that the *Gītā* remained the perennial spiritual testament for Gandhi. In his dialectical as well as analytical engagement with experience and rationality and in his pursuit of orthopraxis and freedom from cognitive enslavement, the *Gita* was undoubtedly his indispensable canon. After a prefatory note on the significance of Gandhi's *Gītā-Mahāvākya* (which according to Gandhi was the cluster of the verses 54 to 72 of Chapter II of the *Gita*) that has as its fulcrum the cardinal notion of *sthita-prajña* (the one who is established in the Self), I dwell on the philosophical specificity of Gandhi's interpretative cluster of postulations. And heuristically I call it 'the eclectic hermeneutics.' Further I claim that Gandhi employs his nuanced and sophisticated *advaita*-understanding to weave together a holistic and *mokshaic* paradigm, an orthopraxis that transcends the reductionist binaries of uncritical activism and escapist asceticism. In this Gandhi succeeds empirically, I claim, in holding together in *samanvaya* the centripetality as well as the centrifugality of the embodied Self and thus elucidating the grammar of what I call cognitive freedom.

[The Gītā] is the one open book to every Hindu who will care to study it, and if all the other scriptures were reduced to ashes, the seven hundred verses of this imperishable booklet are quite enough to tell one what Hinduism is and how one can live up to it. And I claim to be a Sanātanist because for forty years I have been seeking literally to live up to the teachings of that book. Whatever is contrary to its main theme I reject as un-Hindu. It excludes no faith and no teacher [1].

I have no doubt that [the central teaching of the Gita] is anāsakti – selfless action. ...And anāsakti transcends ahimsā. He who would be an anāsakta (selfless) has necessarily to practise non-violence in order to attain the state of selflessness. Ahimsā is, therefore, a necessary preliminary, it is included in the anāsakti, it does not go beyond it [2].

What I want to achieve ... is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to the same end [3].

1. Introduction: M. K. Gandhi - A *Mumukshu* and a *Parivrājaka*

In the contemporary predicament it would not be an exaggeration to say that no thinker, arguably no philosopher par excellence, has been the object of threadbare theoretical analysis and inquiry, of critique and narrative as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) or the ‘Mahatma’ as the popular imaginary would address him. I am aware that for some thinkers the term ‘Mahatma’ pertains to a sentimental perception of Gandhi where as a cooler assessment of him would be the term ‘the shrewd politician.’ And I do not intend to analyze this oscillating evaluation of Gandhi at this juncture. To my mind, it was the celebrated philosopher Akeel Bilgrami who ventured to portray Gandhi as ‘the Philosopher’ [4] thereby giving a new embedded insight into Gandhi’s way of life, provided one can justifiably, to my mind, after Socrates in Athens and the Indic forest-dwelling Upanishadic *Rishis*, claim that *philosophia* or *anvīksikī* or *tattva-mīmāṃsā* axiomatically can fundamentally be understood as a ‘way of life’ in which the analytical categories of thought and action, body and soul, immanence and transcendence, being and becoming, life and death are not seen as unbridgeable and ever conflicting contrarian binaries but rather the infused seminal *ātmakshetra* or the field of the embodied Self.

It is significant to note that in reading Gandhi, Bilgrami emphasises the ontological, the conceptual and the thematic integrity of Gandhi’s cluster of ideas. In his own words: “...[B]y the integrity of [Gandhi’s] ideas, I do not mean simply that he was a man of integrity in the sense that he tried to make his actions live up to his ideals, though perhaps in fact he tried more than most to do so. I mean something more abstract: that his thought itself was highly integrated, his ideas about very specific political strategies in specific contexts flowed ... from ideas that were very remote from politics. They flowed from the most abstract epistemological and methodological commitments. [And what] emerges [is] ... the stunning intellectual ambition and originality that this integrity displays [5]. Parenthetically it will be conceptually significant to situate Gandhi’s integrity of thought-world against the canons of Modernity and the European Enlightenment Tradition, which to my mind, has its perceived incorrigible idea that human rationality is infallible and that the citadel of human reason can exhaustively apprehend what the reality is. This can be characterised as ‘cognitive enslavement of a people to a decadent and utilitarian modernity’ [6]. Gandhi, to my mind, radically questions such pretensions of human rationality and thereby offers a civilisational critique of the self-understanding of the humans and in that taking recourse to what one might call the grammar of cognitive freedom. It is not that Gandhi stands alone in this civilizational project: When Achārya Nāgārjuna in his magnum opus *Mulamadhyamakakārikā* takes up the puzzling notion of *pratyaya-parīksā*, that is, the critique of the categories employed in thinking, he is radically questioning the perceived essentialised autonomy or the *svabhāva*, that is, the own-nature of a concept or entity employed in a given discourse [7].

Another important feature of Gandhi’s integrity of his thought-world is the denial of the alleged notion of universalizability as well as the assumed connection between moral judgment and moral criticism. Universalizability brings in a kind of ‘oughtness’ or a kind of imperative for all others to follow in my choosing an action dependent on some specific moral grounds. Gandhi repudiates this understanding, this assumed theoretical connection between values and criticism for on Gandhi’s view, this too can give rise to violence. That is why Gandhi emphasises that a genuine pursuit of moral truth cannot be privy to violence in any form in thought, word and deed. Here one might raise a valid objection: if truth is not a cognitive notion at all in this sense, but an experiential notion, not a cluster of propositions attempting to describe the world as it is and to which truth can be predicated, -- here I find uncanny resemblance between Gandhi and later Wittgenstein-- then how does one recognize that the moral is embedded in one’s life? Here Gandhi introduces an implicit notion: when a person chooses for oneself, one is setting an exemplary witness. And this concept of exemplar as witnessing to the moral truth functions as a unique alternative to the alleged universalizability of moral principles [8].

2. The Conceptual Tool-box of ‘Eclectic Hermeneutics’

The specific methodological analysis Gandhi employs to arrive at a subtle and desired integrity in thinking about the interweaving of reality and all that environs it can be characterized as ‘eclectic hermeneutics.’ The French philosopher Denis Diderot has described eclectic hermeneutics as that which creates its own philosophy from the resources of experience and rationality. In his own words: “An eclectic is a philosopher who tramples underfoot prejudice, tradition, seniority, universal consent, authority, and everything that subjugates mass opinion; who dares to think for himself, goes back to the clearest principles, examines them, discusses them,

and accepts nothing except on the evidence of his own experience and reason; and who from all the philosophies that he has analyzed without respect to persons and without partiality, makes a philosophy of his own, peculiar to himself” [9]. But when ascribing to Gandhi this notion of eclectic hermeneutics, one has to make some sophisticated and nuanced changes so as to appreciate the integrity of his ideas. For example, arguing against the so-called instrumental notion of the political, Gandhi says: “... [F]or me there are no politics without religion. They subserve religion. Politics devoid of religion are a death trap because they kill the soul” [10]. Again, trying to converse with the orthodox Hindus who engendered a kind of suspicion regarding the political, Gandhi says: “I know that many of my *Sanātanist* friends think that this is a deep political game. How I wish I could convince them that it is purely religious” [11].

Further this eclectic hermeneutics Gandhi advocated gives us an insight into the spectrum of philosophical views Gandhi appropriated which in the usual canon are seen to be antithetical or incommensurable. In his theoretical engagement with the nature of the world, Gandhi attempts to synchronise the apparently contrarian philosophical positions by taking recourse to the Jaina ontological doctrine of *anekāntavāda* (the theory that reality or entity is many-sided) and the epistemological doctrine of *syādvāda* (the theory that all truth-claims are relatively true). In Gandhi’s own words: “The world is changing every moment and is, therefore, unreal; it has no permanent existence. But though it is constantly changing, it has something about it which it persists, and is therefore to that extent, real. I have therefore no objection to calling it both real and unreal, and thus being called an *anekāntavādi* or a *syādvādi*. But my *syādvāda* is not the *syādvāda* of the learned, it is peculiarly my own. I cannot engage in a debate with them. It has been my experience that I am always true from my point of view, and often wrong from the point of view of my honest critics. I know that we are both right from our respective points of view” [12].

Notwithstanding the merits of this methodology of eclectic hermeneutics uniquely employed by Gandhi to weave together his theoretical imaginary, one can justifiably raise the question of logical consistency and thematic coherence with regard to the contours of Gandhi’s intellectual and spiritual quest. To my mind, Gandhi was not unaware of this. With characteristic satire and irony, wit and humour, which one may say is the hallmark of any truth-experimenter, Gandhi has this to say: “I must admit my many inconsistencies. But since I am called ‘Mahatma’, I might well endorse Emerson’s saying that ‘foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.’ There is I fancy, a method in my inconsistencies” [13].

In this inter-woven integrity of the abstract thought-world of Gandhi, my contention is that the persisting and over-arching framework is that of *advaita* or the philosophy of nondualism. This as has been convincingly argued out by J.T.F. Jordens in his celebrated book *Gandhi’s Religion* [14]. And more importantly this philosophical oasis is creatively ideated by Ramchandra Gandhi in his workshops and seminars on the interwoven theme ‘Gandhi and Moksha’ [15].

3. The Gita Mahāvākya and A Prototype of *Sthitaprajña*

At this juncture one might pause for a moment and ask this very pertinent question: where does one locate the womb of generativity that gives rise to the very possibility of this integrity of thought in Gandhi? My contention is that it is the *Gītā mahāvākya* as interpreted by Gandhi and its necessary corollary, that is, a prototype of *sthitaprajña* - the one who is established in the Self. Gandhi testifies this in this way: “[The *Gītā*] is the one open book to every Hindu who will care to study it, and if all the other scriptures were reduced to ashes, the seven hundred verses of this imperishable booklet are quite enough to tell one what Hinduism is and how one can live up to it. And I claim to be a *Sanātanist* because for forty years I have been seeking literally to live up to the teachings of that book. Whatever is contrary to its main theme I reject as un-Hindu” [16]. Further elaborating his thoughtful position in 1939, Gandhi writes: “I have no doubt that [the central teaching of the *Gītā*] is *anāsakti* - selfless action. ...And *anāsakti* transcends *ahimsā*. He who would be an *anāsakta* (selfless) has necessarily to practise non-violence in order to attain the state of selflessness. *Ahimsā* is, therefore, a necessary preliminary, it is included in the *anāsakti*, it does not go beyond it” [17]. And in his autobiography, Gandhi writes: “What I want to achieve ... is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha*. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to the same end [18]. Undoubtedly this remained the life-long mantra of Gandhi till he was assassinated.

Gandhi's main work on the Gita is the *Discourse on the Gitā* [19]. This was originally given as talks during morning prayers in the Ashram at Ahmedabad over a period of nine months in 1926 which were later edited and published along with the notes taken by Mahadev Desai. During his stay in Yervada jail in 1929 Gandhi undertook the Gujarati translation of the *Gita* along with an introduction and commentary which was entitled *Anāsaktiyoga*. This was later translated into English by Mahadev Desai along with his prefatory remarks and was published under the title *The Gitā according to Gandhi* [20]. While Gandhi was again imprisoned in the Yervada Jail in 1930 and in 1932, he used to send weekly letters on the *Gita* which were to be read out in the Ashram prayer meetings. These letters about the Gita written by Gandhi are collectively titled '*Letters on the Gitā*'. As J.T.F Jordens has shown, Gandhi has written about 360 pages on the *Gita*, and this shows that no other singular text has had such a significance in Gandhi's voluminous corpus of writings [21].

Here it would be appropriate to consider Gandhi's hermeneutical approach to the authority of the *shāstras* and the scriptures. He de-historicizes the scriptures, both the *Sruti* and the *Smriti* traditions, and says that they do not enunciate anew the eternal truths, but show how these were practised at the time to which the books belong. Besides, they suffer from what he calls the process of double distillation. This does not mean that Gandhi rejected the authority of *shāstras* outrightly. He accepted *shāstras* as authoritative in that the sum total of these books were inspired. But for Gandhi that which is opposed to trained reason cannot be claimed as *shāstra*, however ancient it may be. Gandhi's vehement opposition to untouchability arose from such an understanding of the *shāstras* [22]. Commenting up on the *adhikāra* of interpreting the scriptures, Gandhi says that anyone who offers to interpret the *shāstras* must have observed the prescribed disciplines in one's life. Only those who experience in the practice of their truths have the *adhikāra* to explain the real meaning of the *shāstras*. Here to my mind, Gandhi is laying down the *sutra* of what I call orthopraxis: only that person is eligible to interpret the *Gitā* correctly who tries to follow its teaching in practice, and the correctness of the interpretation will be proportionate to his or her success in living according to the teaching of the *Gitā*. And focussing on his own interpretation of the *Gitā*, Gandhi opines that the *Gitā* speaks of the war between the divine and the demoniac, the ceaseless spiritual war going on in the human *Kurukshetra*, the battle field. Further Gandhi notes that *Vyāsa* wrote this supremely beautiful, allegorical epic poem to depict the futility of war.

4. Concluding Remarks

Gandhi often emphasised that the essential *Gitā* is to be found in the corpus of the last twenty stanzas of the Chapter Two. Here we have what one might call the description of the *sthitaprajña*-prototype in Krishna's words, the one whose mind is blessed with equipoise and equanimity, one who has achieved perfect control over his or her inner self. These twenty verses abound in words signifying control, and also in terms referring to the senses and to feelings of attachment, love and lust. It is the portrayal of a self-realised person who has achieved complete mastery over his inner and outer senses and over his desires and dislikes, and who has reached an attitude of total indifference to all that may please or displease him or her. Such a person is at peace with himself, and his attitude to the outside world is one of equanimity and equipoise. This is what I would characterize as the centripetality and the centrifugality of the Self, embodying what I call freedom from cognitive enslavement. This is the fulcrum of self-realisation and for Gandhi this is the subject of the *Gitā* as it is of all the other scriptures too.

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