Politics in Action: The Bhagavad Gita in Modern Times

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In a recent essay the agent provocateur and philosopher, Slavoj Zizek, remarked that the Bhagavad Gita represented the perfect philosophy for post-capitalist society. By no means the first reaction to the text from outside the field of Indian studies, this is only the most recent and arguably most controversial understanding of the philosophical content of the Gita, whose previous commentators have ranged from Nietzsche to Hitler. Less controversially, the modern composer Phillip Glass opened his opera ‘Satyagraha’ with the dramatisation of the discourse between Krishna and Arjuna that seems to mark out the Gita as a plea for a humanist politics. Though the text does not offer limitless possibilities for interpretation, what is certain is that the Gita has acquired an iconic status in modern times as a set of reflections on ethics, war, justice, freedom and action.

Over the last decade, intellectual and political historians have become increasingly interested in the global spread and transformation of western ideas in the context of 19th and 20th century empires (cf. Armitage, Pitts, Mehta, etc). Much less attention has been paid, however, to the converse process by which the major traditions of non-western political thought have been transformed and used to interpret modernity, confront colonial rule and, in some cases, to transform western political and ethical ideas themselves. This is because few scholars have the requisite understanding, much of the social and political theory remains resolutely Eurocentric and many of the key philosophical texts have been interpreted simply as productions of ‘religion.’ After the Koran, arguably the most influential non-western philosophical text in Asia and across the wider world during the last two hundred years has been the Bhagavad Gita, ‘The Song of the Lord’ the central drama of the great Indian epic, the Mahabharata.

This project aims to bring together an international group of major intellectual and social historians to discuss modern interpretations of the ‘Gita’ as a philosophical and ethical text both within South Asia and also on its ‘outward journey’ into western political debate. Though part of the epic tradition, the Gita, as the early modern historian Sheldon Pollock has argued, did not achieve its current pre-eminence until the end of the Mughal period. Its resurgence and reinterpretation is therefore coterminous with the formation of modern life and politics.

The proposed workshops and the resulting volume provisionally entitled Politics in Action: The Gita and Modern Indian Thought will interrogate the relationship between political thought, religion and modernity. Unlike the classical Sanskrit text on politics, the Artha-Shastra (‘science of power’), it was instead the Gita that came under repeated scrutiny and reflection during the colonial period and thereafter. It acquired an unparallel status as a constant reference point and a site through which a number of key modern political concepts were formulated. It is a striking fact, but one hitherto unexamined, that a range of public intellectuals in the colonial period and up to the present day have felt obliged to broadcast their own interpretation of the Gita. Prominent thinkers and political actors such as Vivekananda, B. G. Tilak, Aurobindo Ghose, B. R. Ambedkar, Annie Besant and Gandhi took the Gita as a site to elaborate upon and argue about the nature of political conduct and to imagine
their own versions of the future accordingly. In particular, the major concepts of Western political thought were grappled with and were recast in the context of differing interpretations and commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita. As a form of modern political discourse, the iconic status of the Gita as a political text could be compared to the role of Machiavelli’s ‘Prince’ and the Old Testament in the European context.

This proposed set of discussions on the Gita will build on and enhance the project of locating the history of connections between Indian intellectual history and imperial and global history. Initiated by the essays in the well-received special volume entitled ‘A New Intellectual History for India’ of the journal Modern Intellectual History (CUP, April, 2007), this project opened a new set of historiographical interventions in the study of both global and South Asian history. One of the guiding intellectual principles of the project is to de-nationalise Indian history without absorbing it or flattening its distinction within global/world history. At the same time, it seeks to examine the power of ideas that have had a profound effect in the historical transformations of the past two hundred years. Often subsumed within the narrative of the nation or seen as derivative of Western intellectual practices, an examination of Indian intellectual history points instead to the virtuosity of public ideologues in straddling interest and ideology, theory and practice, the global and the particular.

The proposed volume on the Gita will be the first attempt at a sustained study of the changing meanings, interpretations and uses of this critical text and its relationship to history and politics. The workshops will examine the relationship between liberal ideologies and their critiques. It will consider religion and nationalism, duty, sacrifice and individuality, political action, freedom and independence, equality and justice. It will examine the place of the globalised languages of modern politics and their transformation in particular historical and cultural contexts. The proposed volume will situate these concepts within the emerging political languages of liberalism, Marxism, humanism and nationalism, thus addressing both the emancipatory and also the coercive ideological potential of the Gita. It will revise received notions of the relations between religion and the politics of modernity.

Format of Meetings

Drawing on the experience of the success of a two-leg meeting format that resulted in the publication of the MIH volume (republishing as a Cambridge University Press book, 2008), we will follow the same format. The MIH issue developed as an outcome of a meeting at Tufts University, Mass., followed by another meeting at the Centre for History and Economics, King’s College, Cambridge. These meetings facilitated the project by inviting discussants (as opposed to presenters) from the host institutions. With this project, we aim to take a similar approach. The first meeting took place in Cambridge, UK, on 6-7 June, 2008. The second meeting will take place in 2009 at the New School University, New York. This will enable the two co-organisers and editors Shruti Kapila (Cambridge) and Faisal Devji (New School/Oxford) to invite discussants from their respective institutions. We will aim to submit the manuscript of the volume in the summer of 2009 for publication.