

A CASE STUDY OF ISKCON'S BHAGAVAD- GITA: KRISHNA'S SOVEREIGNTY

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Abstract: The International Society for Krishna Consciousness, in the translation of the Bhagavad- Gita As it is, termed as the 'unadulterated version' of the holy book, provides voice to the figure of Krishna but also renders him power which problematizes his function in this version of the text. The purpose of my research will be to focus mainly on the problematic area of authorship in ISKCON's representation of the Bhagavad- Gita and also the politics behind Krishna's emergence as a sovereign figure. The denial of subjectivity of the commissioned author by an objective reading is applied as a means to cast out any kind of doubt or speculation that originates in the interpretation of this text. This paper will trace how *The Song of God* transforms into a cacophonous voice of the personal propaganda of the organisation.

Keywords: Krishna, ISKCON, representation, sovereignty.

Introduction: Throughout the conceptualisation of ISKCON's Bhagavad- Gita, one thing that has been constantly acknowledged is the power of Krishna's voice. Referred to as the Supreme personality of Godhead, Krishna is said to be the director of the Bhagavad- Gita. Krishna occupies the central stage of this religious text and since his voice is showcased as objective, the author as well as the subjective voice of the author is silenced. The Bhagavad- Gita as represented by ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) claims to focus on the will of Krishna unlike other translations, where the ideology of the author is prevalent and thus, Krishna's voice is superseded. In order to centralize the figure of Krishna, his portrayal as an objective entity becomes problematic. My paper focuses mainly on the problematic area of authorship in ISKCON's representation of the Bhagavad- Gita and also the politics behind Krishna's emergence as a sovereign figure. Along with this, my paper will include the reference to an interview I had with Rishi Kumar Das, the Secretary to the Temple Head of ISKCON, Delhi and through that I will try to study the argument placed by him during the conversation.

Among several other translations of the Bhagavad- Gita, Swami Prabhupada's version has remained as the globally accepted translation of the text. ISKCON's understanding of the Bhagavad- Gita is a continuation of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, where Gaudiya is the Gauda region (presently Bengal/Bangladesh) and Vaishnavism that refers to the worship of Vishnu (Krishna). The inculcation of this tradition not only tags Krishna as all-powerful, the original form of God, but, in a way also makes Krishna the centre of the discourse that follows. Krishna now does not remain the passive speaker of the sacred text but participates actively and directly with the reader of the text. What becomes problematic here is the absence of the author within this framework. The author- reader dialectic is now replaced by the objective view through the

involvement of Krishna. ISKCON promotes Krishna as the voice/ author to deny the subjectivity of the commissioned author. The question now arises is why this denial of subjectivity of an individual? Why this absence of the voice of the author? For this we need to understand what an author is. Michel Foucault, a French literary critic, in his essay- *What is an Author*, published in 1969, emphasizes on the definition of the author and the text. He aims to understand the relationship that exists between text and author and most importantly the author who remains outside the text but also moves ahead of the text. The author, according to him does not remain restricted to being the creator of a text but paves way for discourses to follow. He thus becomes the author-function of the text and the initiator of the possibilities of a numerous discourses. It serves as a means to classify and establish relationships among texts.

The function of the author, in the words of Foucault "is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society."

(Foucault 124)

He argues that the analysis of literary texts could not be restricted to the texts themselves or to their author's psychology and background. Rather, the larger contexts and cultural conventions in which the texts were produced needed to be considered. If we see the authorship of the Bhagavad- Gita in the light of the arguments placed by Foucault, we come across the complete absence of the author of the text. Rather the voice that overpowers the text becomes the authoritative too.

During the interview, when questioned about the reason behind Krishna being the voice of the Bhagavad- Gita, Rishi Kumar Das responds by putting up a self- answered question that: The Bhagavad- Gita is whose work? It's Krishna's work. (Phone interview, 8 November 2014)

Here develops the problematic implication of the entire denial of authorship and by providing

centrality to the figure of Krishna, the process of making Krishna the authoritative figure begins and through this process, the subjective voice of the author as well as the subjective understanding of the text itself is shunned. A more objective reading is applied to it as a means to cast out any kind of doubt or speculation that originates in the way of its interpretation. There does not exist any other dimension to the text except the way in which ISKCON has tried to restrict the understanding of the reader to Krishna. In the introduction to the text, Krishna has been mentioned again and again as the supreme personality of godhead and that one should not consider himself equal to Krishna in any manner. The submissive spirit of the reader is also mentioned which should be present while studying the Bhagavad- Gita, failing to which the mystery of the Bhagavad- Gita cannot be understood. Rishi Kumar Das also highlights the fact that someone who doesn't become a devotee of Krishna towards the end, reading the Bhagavad-Gita is either unable to understand purport of the text or the message that has been presented to him is unclear. The message that has been referred to here is surrendering unto the Supreme Godhead, i.e. Krishna. Where survives the voice of the author here? If we analyse the work of Roland Barthes, a French literary critic- *The Death of the Author*, published in 1967, the reader emerges as the prime source of power in a text. Not only does he bear greater responsibility for the text but he also becomes the witness to the multidimensionality of the text. Unlike Foucault's analysis of the author, which took place as a counter argument placed for Barthes' work, here Barthes assigns the reader a bigger role in the interpretation of a text. The author's work is said to be limited to structuring the text but the reader's work is to understand and mould the text in a multiple ways. The authority of text that was said to be present with the author now is placed in the hands of a reader and the whole power politics is reversed.

"The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author." (Barthes 148)

The author becomes little more than a hypothesis, a *person* projected by the critic from the text, whereas the reader is at liberty to see the plurality of the text. Now, where lies the plurality of the text and the liberty of the reader in the Bhagavad- Gita? Neither is the author present, or rather mentioned nor is the reader provided with the space to think, ponder and believe. Even if Krishna has been showcased as the *original* author of the text, there lies hardly any scope for the readers to interpret the text in their own ways. The rigid structuring of the text on the groundwork provided by a certain sect of people glorifies Krishna time and again, brushing aside other concerns.

The power of authorship provided to Krishna by this organisation, ISKCON, in the long run makes him a sovereign figure. In order to legitimize his position, the objective view provided to the translation not only centralizes the figure but also portrays him as the objective entity who has to be made to maintain this unseen authority over his devotees. Though the institutionalization of Krishna's figure, he has been depicted as a king and the rest as his subordinates. The epitomization of Krishna and the constant justification of his sovereignty creates an area of concern. This sovereignty of Krishna remains unquestioned by a set of devotees who regard Krishna as the super most reality. *The Portrait of a King* (1988) by Louis Marin revolves round the realm of power that lies with a king and how that power is preserved in the long run. For the better functioning of a king's rule, he needs to exhibit his power by the means of representation. Marin, in his book talks about the proposal of Paul Pellison to compose the reign of Louis XIV through his work, which he successfully did. The outcome of the composition was quite dramatic and apt for the theatre audience. This in turn, not only locates the king's power but also preserves the memory for future. Thus, here too, the king's power is highlighted but in a different form altogether. The king not directly present in the representation is constantly brought out as a sovereign figure through his people. Marin has tried to accentuate the presence of a king's power purely as a *representation*.

This representation produces the complex *portrait of a king* that carries with itself a convincing power, whether or not the king is present behind it. (Cowart 19)

Similarly, Krishna too, becomes a representation of the personal ideology of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of ISKCON. The demonstration has been done in such a way that Krishna's voice silences all the other voices (if any) around him. Like a king who needs spectators who will believe in him, there arises the need to safeguard his sovereignty in a manner that does not involve either the readership or the authorship of no one except the objectivity of Krishna. The circle of readership that has been created and that is attracted to this perspective of the Bhagavad- Gita consists of the subalterns who do not dare to go beyond the supremacy and the consciousness of Krishna. They blindly follow the one sidedness of an ideology that fails to acknowledge other purposes embedded within the holy text.

If we are giving our own interpretation to the Bhagavad- Gita, we are not glorifying Bhagwana (Krishna) which means cheating. The completeness of life is revived only when we become

the servants of Krishna and surrender totally unto Krishna.

(Phone interview, 8 November 2014)

In this process of glorification, and the articulation of the voice of Krishna, he is rendered an autonomous pattern. The way in which the followers of ISKCON bar any other person take the credit of the authorship of the Bhagavad- Gita is surprising.

“Vyasa, the author... compiler, compiler of the Bhagavad- Gita”

(Phone interview, 8 November 2014)

Instead of being a part of the sacred text, Krishna turns out to become the text itself. He is provided with a new identity; besides being the voice of text, he now becomes the iconic figure who governs the Bhagavad- Gita. By labelling Krishna as the author of the Bhagavad-Gita, ISKCON has expelled the possibility of more than one understanding of the text. The text is not dialogic and like one cannot question the authorship of the Bible or the 10 commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai, Bhagavad- Gita is turned into a pedagogic text. Unlike religious texts like Paradise Lost, that open up endless roads to discourse, texts like the Bhagavad-Gita or the Bible or the Quran serves the purpose of religious dogmatism.

ISKCON prefers certain segments of Hindu philosophy and through the appropriation of the west, exoticizes the Hindu culture. The promotion of their own ideology through the inclusion of certain parts of the text in their translation as well as the exclusion of things they have not focused on, itself seems as way to make it the globally accepted translation of the Bhagavad- Gita. For example, the message of *Karma- yoga* which has been taken into consideration by other translators of the Bhagavad-Gita appears as unimportant in the words of Rishi Kumar Das. (Phone interview, 8 November, 2014).

This translation of Bhagavad- Gita does not underline all the concerns present in the original form of the text but instead transmits their own ideology by

making Krishna's voice in the text the absolute truth. The way in which there remains a distance between Krishna and his devotees, the manner in which one should become the servant of Krishna and serve him, the entire notion of the controller and the controlled, creates an obvious division and hierarchization of one figure against others. In fact worshipping demigods is prohibited in Bhagavad- Gita and the ones who worship them are seen targeted by lust. The voice of Krishna echoes with that of a dictator who constantly uses his authoritative voice to dominate the people around him.

ISKCON's moulding of the subject matter of the Bhagavad- Gita raises questions of authenticity, authorship as well as readership. If the need of one scripture, one god, one religion, and one occupation is stressed in the introduction to Bhagavad- Gita by Prabhupada, why is there no choice left to decide what that scripture, that god and that religion would be? Why is not there an alternative to decide on that one, one mantra, one prayer? The absence of choice leads to a very different interpretation of ISKCON's presentation of the text. Instead of spreading the spiritual wisdom of God, Krishna's consciousness has been imposed throughout the text. Bhagavad- Gita no longer remains as *The Song of God* but transforms into a cacophonous voice of situating the personal ideas of the organisation. In the process of marketability, the whole system of belief present in the text is altered. Though ISKCON claims to have brought an unadulterated form of the Bhagavad-Gita, ironically, the purpose of the text itself is modified by them. Their complaint that the other versions of the Bhagavad- Gita includes the author's own purpose and ideology but their translation itself carries with itself the voice of Swami Prabhupada behind the projection of Krishna. Not only has the Society marketed its own ideology by the means of the text but has the compelling language used in it has been used as an agency to attract devotees across the globe in this *Hare Krishna Movement*.

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