Evolving Hinduism: Comparing the Bhagavad Gītā

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Hinduism was a semi-fluid belief system in the medieval period of India. At first it was built around the Brahmin class who were the priests that had the ritual authority to perform elaborate sacrifices for the other three caste levels. There was also then the canon of Vedic literature, one aspect of which was the *Upaniṣads*. The *Upaniṣads* preached a solitary, hermit-like existence which emphasized meditation. This produced a strong ascetic body, but did not contribute to the continuation of society as a whole. The *Upaniṣads* themselves were a reaction to the earlier traditions of priestly worship and predominance of sacrifice as the primary vehicle of worship, (Olivelle, 2002: 126). So, on the one hand there were priests who eventually became corrupt on power and ascetics who withdrew from society, abandoning all obligations to family. What was needed was something which cut a middle line between the ascetic lifestyle and the closely kept secrets of ritual sacrifice. What developed was the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Thus, in the evolving world of Indian religion, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and with it the adulation of Viṣṇu, can be seen as a reaction to previous and concurrent forms of worship. What is of note is the ways in which it both corresponded with other texts, elaborated on them, and frequently disagreed with them.

In its most basic form the *Bhagavad Gītā* is exactly what the title translates to—‘Song of the Lord’. Though in her introduction to the translation Barbara Stoler Miller writes that it is more of a “philosophical poem” than a song, (Miller, 1986: 1). This poem, then, relates the philosophical conversation of Arjuna the warrior and his chariot driver Krishna (an *avatara* of the god Viṣṇu) on the battlefield. Divided into ‘teachings’ the poem moves through the methods in which one can best serve the lord god Viṣṇu.
Almost every teaching reiterates the ones that come before it in miniature and then elaborates the teaching from something old and recognizable into something new and reactionary.

For example, in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, it counsels:

Living endlessly in ignorance, the fools think “We have reached our goal!” Because of their passion, those who perform rites (karmin) do not understand. When their worlds are exhausted, therefore, they fall down wretched, (Olivelle, 2002: 127).

The Upaniṣad teaching here is advocating that those who “perform rites” do so in vain. This is a direct attack on priests who practice the rituals of sacrifice to the exclusion of true belief. Their rituals mask from them the fact that though they follow the rites that lead to release from samsara, they are yet living in ignorance due to the fact that they have not withdrawn from society and are not practicing true renunciation of the world.

In the Bhagavad Gītā, the same sentiment is expressed in the Second Teaching, ‘Philosophy and Spiritual Discipline’:

Undiscerning men who delight in the tenets of ritual lore utter florid speech, proclaiming, “There is nothing else!”

Driven by desire, they strive after heaven and contrive to win powers and delights, but their intricate ritual language bears only the fruit of action in rebirth, (Miller, 1986: 35).

Once again, the text is attacking priests who focus on the transient wants of desire—“powers and delights” (ibid) by utilizing their ritual authority. In this case the only action they achieve is to remain trapped in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Obviously, there must be a better way to achieve mokṣa. The “new ideal of religious living” in the Upaniṣad quoted above was to renounce the world, withdraw from society, and become a
celibate, (Olivelle, 2002: 127). This, however, could lead to a breakdown of familial and societal duties by the dependents that actually make it run. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, therefore, a new model of worship is proposed.

In the Third Teaching, ‘Discipline of Action’, the inability even of the ascetic lifestyle to culminate in success is completely disposed of, “A man cannot escape the force / of action by abstaining from action / he does not attain success / just by renunciation,” (Miller, 1986: 41). The solution?—“perform action as sacrifice!” (42). And thus the central tenet of the poem becomes clear. In order to win free of *samsara* and attain the supreme good, one must act in detachment from desire, secure in knowledge and self, and dedicating every action in perfect devotion to Viṣṇu. The *Bhagavad Gītā* thus introduces the three most important forms of yoga: *jnana* (knowledge), *karma* (action), and *bhakti* (devotion).

The *Bhagavad Gītā* built itself in partial opposition to the older teachings laid down in the *Upaniṣads*, as has been contrasted above, but it can also be compared against the concurrent teachings put forth by the school of followers of the god Śiva. In the Ninth Teaching, stanzas 16-19 all begin with the words, “I am,” (Miller, 1986: 85); and Krishna/Viṣṇu is everything, or, actually, he contains all things, (83). It is in this Ninth Teaching, ‘The Sublime Mystery,” that the *Bhagavad Gītā* sets up Viṣṇu as the ultimate god in the Hindu pantheon who all other gods are merely a rung on the stepladder to:

> When devoted men sacrifice
to other deities with faith,
they sacrifice to me, Arjuna,
however aberrant the rites. (86)

This is a slightly oblique way of saying that no matter whom one worships, all the bounty of such worship will ultimately rest at Viṣṇu’s door because he is the Lord among gods.
In the Tenth Teaching this claim is cemented, “I am the source of all / the gods and great sages,” (89). The title of this teaching aptly enough is “Fragments of Divine Power,” indicating that all other gods are merely lesser vessels of Viṣṇu’s own Ultimate Divine Power. There is, however, a difficulty in accepting Viṣṇu as the Supreme Being. At approximately the same time as Viṣṇu experienced a dramatic increase in followers, Śiva also gained a popular following.

Viṣṇu and Śiva share many attributes in common, yet are quite distinct in personality as evidenced by the religious writing that surrounds them. One can see an example of this in Richard H. Davis’ article on “The Origin of Linga Worship”. In his introduction to the ancient text, Davis explains how originally the story was a Purāṇa told by worshippers of Viṣṇu, but it was appropriated by Śiva’s followers in the early 8th century C.E., (Davis, 2002: 150). This relationship of borrowing from a pre-existing religious ideology allowed a chance to rework the text to fit the borrower’s own religious goals. In fact, Davis mentions that in their appropriation of a pre-existing text, the Śiva sect (Pāśupatas) inserted an extremely important account called the “Isvara Gītā (Song of the Lord Śiva), evidently a Pāśupata reply to that preeminent Vaiṣṇava [Viṣṇu sect] catechism, the Bhagavad Gītā,” (151).

The Pāśupata text (called the Kūrmapurāṇa) is told with an eye on the ultimate deification of Śiva, granting Viṣṇu place as a secondary character with no purpose other than as a foil to Śiva. Particularly in the excerpt included in Religions of Asia in Practice, Viṣṇu is put in the role of assuming, in human form, the person of Śiva’s wife. Then while Śiva converts a forest full of sages to his worship, Viṣṇu is merely a puppet who follows in his wake. Davis writes, “Though they still allowed a substantial role in
the text to Viṣṇu, his position in the Pāśupata recension has clearly been subordinated to Śiva’s,” (Davis, 2002: 151.) He also mentions that just as Viṣṇu has claimed to be the source of all other gods in the Bhagavad Gītā, in the Kūrmapurāṇa, “both Viṣṇu and Brahma are also revealed as aspects of Śiva,” (151). It is made clear then, that in this text Śiva is the greatest god.

Another similarity that the two stories share is the mistake that normal people can make in not recognizing the gods. In the Bhagavad Gītā, Viṣṇu tells Arjuna, “Deluded men despise me / in the form I have assumed, / ignorant of my higher existence / as the great lord of creatures,” (Miller, 1986: 84).\(^1\) As people are unable to recognize the divine in everything, they treat Krishna as a servant, or someone base. The same thing happens to Śiva in the forest when he goes to instruct the sages. They cast him out because they too are “fooled by appearances,” (Davis, 2002: 155). However, the two stories then diverge in their resolution of the enigma of appearances and the separation of truth from illusion (maya).

In “The Origin of Linga Worship,” Brahma berates the sages:

Yogis and ascetics constantly exert themselves, seeking the treasure that you have obtained and foolishly neglected. Vedic experts perform myriad sacrifices to attain that great treasure…” (Davis, 2002: 155-156).

Knowledgeable men, renunciates, and Vedic ritualists can never view that treasure which is reality in all its glorious form. That the sages achieved it was a sign of their “good conduct” and “auspicious rites” (155). In order to regain such beneficence, they are instructed by Brahma in the proper form of regimented worship that they should follow.

\(^1\) Fascinatingly, Davis mentions that the Pāśupata “were particularly devoted to Śiva in his aspect as Paśupati, the ‘Lord of Animals,’” (Davis, 2002: 150). This just points out again how both sects would claim the very same characteristics for their head divinity.
It includes repeating Vedic mantras, consecrating the linga, chanting, celibacy, attentiveness, and reverence, (157).

A completely different course of action is advocated by Viṣṇu in the Eleventh Teaching of the Bhagavad Gītā, “The Vision of Krishna’s Totality”:

Not through sacred lore
penances, charity, or sacrificial rites
can I be seen in the form
that you saw me.

By devotion alone
can I, as I really am,
be known and seen
and entered into, Arjuna. (Miller, 1986: 108)

Śiva required “sacred lore” and “penances,” Viṣṇu requests only pure devotion, (ibid).

Even though, according to Davis, the Kūrmapurāṇa contains reactionary elements to the Bhagavad Gītā, it still remains faithful to the ritualized forms of worship from the early Vedas. It even advocates remaining true to the original Vedas, as they are the most divine texts, (Davis, 2002: 157). The Gītā, on the other hand, enumerates a new form of worship built on top of the more traditional forms, but emphasizing the utilization of bhakti yoga predicated on karma yoga being used in conjunction with jnana yoga.

Early on in the Gītā, Krishna imparts the knowledge to Arjuna that this teaching is older than anything else, “I taught this undying discipline / to the shining sun, first of mortals / . . . / but over the course of time / it has decayed,” (Miller, 1986: 49). Whether this is true or not is debatable, but it does provide a solid grounding for everything that Krishna says if he claims at the outset that the devoted worship by action based in discipline and knowledge is an ancient tradition. Ultimately, the Bhagavad Gītā was a revolutionary text which grew out of the Hinduism which came before it and compared
favorably with emerging traditions in its own period. In the end, it gave a new sense of purpose to many and has had a lasting impact not only on the Indian subcontinent, but the Western world as well.
List of Works Cited

