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Political ideas of B.G. Tilak: colonialism, self and Hindu nationalism

Oak, A.

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7. Religion for Political Action: Karma-yoga-śāstra in the *Bhagavad Gītā*

In the previous chapter I have explored and analysed Tilak's debates with the Congress-Moderates as well as his opposition towards the British colonial state's malicious activities during the Swadeshi movement. Tilak participated in the Swadeshi movement with the hope that the Congress would act as a quasi- Opposition to the government of British India and espouse public interests of Indians. However, the Congress was split on ideological and procedural grounds (1907) and the Extremists were subsequently expelled from the Party. The colonial state instituted a sedition-trial against Tilak which resulted into his incarceration for six years. Other Extremist leaders were either imprisoned (Aurobindo Ghosh) or went into exile (Lala Lajpat Rai). The Swadeshi movement and the momentum for collective political action crumbled.

Tilak's magnum opus- *Gītā Rahasya athavā Karma-yoga-śāstra* [1915] [hereafter, *Gītā Rahasya*] (1986/1936)- was written during his incarceration. The book is an exemplary testament and a culmination of Tilak's contemplations and deliberations upon politics, religion and ethics for over thirty years. Upon its publication the book was hailed as one of the finest critical expository on the *Bhagavad Gītā* [hereafter *Gītā*] Sri Aurobindo called it a "monumental work" and prognosticated that it was "likely to become a classic" (quoted in Bhagwat and Pradhan 2011: 512). Gandhi praised the book and its author in the following words: "The Git enabled the late Lokmanya Tilak, out of his encyclopaedic learning and study, to produce a monumental commentary [...] I believe his commentary on the Gita will be a more lasting monument to his memory. It will survive even the successful termination of the struggle for Swarajya" (Gandhi quoted in Bhagwat and Pradhan 2011: 512-13). Over the years the text has achieved canonical status in the Marathi literati for its rich philosophical content and has been elevated to the status of a 'darshanic text' "[darśana grāṇtha]" (Kulkarni 1991: 379). It has also been praised as one of the finest modern commentaries on the *Gītā* (Radhakrishnan 1971: 20). While translating English and German-language philosophical and normative concepts/ terminologies Tilak coined several words and enriched Marathi language. Subsequent to its publication the book was translated into English and other major Indian vernacular languages which ran into multiple reprints.

The sheer size of the text⁸⁰, written in a remarkably short period⁸¹ and under the duress of punitive confinement, made the text hugely popular and greatly added to the legendary status of its author. *Gītā Rahasya* differs from other commentaries written on the *Gītā* on numerous grounds. Unlike the pre-modern *Gītā* commentaries, it proposes 'Karma-yoga-śāstra' or the 'science of ethical action' as the primary message of the *Gītā*. Unsurprisingly, while the *Gītā Rahasya* invited radical criticism from the Hindu orthodoxy, its heterodox reading of the *Gītā* came to be celebrated by the nationalist-liberal Indian intelligentsia.

I am offering a contextualist reading of *Gītā Rahasya* (1986) by suggesting that Tilak's central concern was in determining a moral philosophy of (political) action. It is a well-known fact that liberal political philosophy, developing from Hobbes up to the 19th century Utilitarian thinkers, regarded political authority of the Sovereign State as the supreme source of Law. Consequently, the task of the subjects (citizens) was to oblige the State and follow its Sovereign Law. Therefore, liberal theory of this period does not, as a general rule, hesitate to prescribe and demand political obligation from the colonized subjects towards the colonial British State⁸². The Partition of Bengal and the accompanying Swadeshi movement, however, had opened up deeply held grievances against the British colonial state and its brutal politics of suppression of 'genuine' political demands by the natives. While Tilak wanted the INC to take up the responsibility of leading mass agitation against the colonial policies factional politics within Congress had dampened all such possibilities. As a result, Tilak and other Congress-Extremists were in search of alternate means to arouse nationalist spirit amongst the natives who were afraid of violent State retaliation. At the same time, Tilak wanted to expose the supposed 'liberal' face of British colonial state which regularly invoked ethical philosophies to justify its activities. For Tilak religion was the best means to evoke free-will amongst Indians and inspire them to participate, organize and agitate against the British government. Both the Moderates and the Extremists craved for recognition from the colonial state and borrowed from each other's political philosophies and praxis. The difference lay in their theoretical approach to nationalism. While the philosophy of the Moderates believed that 'political recognition' would automatically occur once the natives completed their period of apprenticeship the Extremists were anxious to wrest it from the colonial state. *Gītā Rahasya* helped in surpassing the political anxiety harboring amongst the Nationalists. Simultaneously, it helped to inculcate confidence amongst the masses by reminding them

(and indirectly the British State) that India “as a nation, or a civilization” had a philosophy which was “superior to that of the advanced world” (Palshikar 2007: 303).

Through his *Gītā Rahasya* (1986) Tilak invoked the *Gītā*-axiom of ‘desireless action’ (niṣkāma karma), juxtaposed it against the ‘skewed logic’ of Western moral theories, reinterpreted the Hindu darshanīc traditions and reached a final conclusion (Siddhānta), namely, Karma-yoga-śāstra (the science of Unity of Action). Action and not Renunciation was projected as the primary message of Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna in the *Gītā*. Action was formulated not merely as a moral obligation in the form of a Divine commandment but each person’s moral right, an adhikāra, possessed by all. Indeed, Tilak was not the first modern Marathi thinker to invoke an Activist interpretation of the *Gītā* through the path of karma-yoga but followed a longer, albeit obscure, tradition⁸³. What differentiates Tilak’s appropriation of karma-yoga vis-à-vis his predecessors is the ontic moral capacity which Tilak was keen on delivering to the colonized subjects in the face of Imperialist-Universalist ideologies.

In this chapter I propose to treat *Gītā Rahasya* (1986) as a Siddhānta text, that is to say, a conclusive and meta-theoretical document of Tilak’s political philosophy. While I continue to agree with existing scholarship (Brown 1958; Bedekar 1970; Stevenson 1986; Gowda 2011; Kapila 2013; Palshikar 2014; Chousalkar 2014; Kurundkar 2015; Llewellyn 2019) which regards *Gītā Rahasya* as a primal text on ethics and politics, I depart with its teleological findings. Most of these studies do not adequately engage with Tilak’s exegetical methodology. Every philosophical text is “an idea or a self-contained totality” (Friedlander 2004: 4). Such a text aims at introducing the intention(s) of the author while transcending the author’s motives and revealing that which exists beyond/inside the textual-intellectual curvature. Tilak had emphatically declared his intentions for writing *Gītā Rahasya*, namely, to propose a theory of ‘Action’ retracted from the teachings of Kṛṣṇa. However, it would be erroneous to treat ‘Karma-yoga’ as a means to achieve some kind of inter-religious harmony (Kapila 2013) or in service of a figure of a future leader -Sthitaprajña (Gowda 2011). Similarly, he did not regard the Karma-yoga as a finality of Action juxtaposed against the path of Knowledge but, rather, as a ‘means to a higher end’. Karma-yoga was meant to be practiced by all individuals including those who had attained Self-Knowledge. Thus, I propose that the teleological finality of Karma-yoga as an exercise in ascertaining the right form of moral Action for nationalist activities rested in the concept of Lokasaṅgraha.

7.1 *Gītā Rahasya*: A Text on Philosophical Idealism or Political Normativity

Gītā Rahasya has enjoyed popular and scholarly interest in the Marathi ecumene for many decades⁸⁴ and has been subjected to numerous critical analyses in the wider scholarly community. D. K. Bedekar (1970) and Narhar Kurundkar (2015: 235-240) regard the composite teleology of *Gītā Rahasya* in proposition of Karma-yoga-as-Universal ethics. Bedekar argues that the central problematic for Tilak was to prove that the Vedānta philosophy bequeathed to an individual with the ‘freedom to act’, despite its basic axiomatic limitation, namely, bondage of karma (Karma-bandha). In order to justify an individual’s free-will Tilak anxiously challenged the Śaṅkarite-Vedānta interpretation of ascetic renunciation.

Tilak complained that the ethical dimensions of Vedānta philosophy were neglected by the ascetic (Saṁnyāsa) and devotional (Bhakti) interpretations of the *Gītā*. Following the Saṁnyāsa-mārga (the Path of Renunciation) Śaṅkara advocated cessation of Action (Karma) after attaining Self-Knowledge (Jñānoṭtara-karma). Thereafter, for a Self-Realized Being, Action and non-Action becomes a matter of choice. The Dualist school of Vedānta propounded by medieval Acharyas such as Rāmānuja and Bhakti saint poets and scholars such as Jñāneśvara and Vāmana Paṇḍit considered Self-Knowledge inferior to Eternal Bliss which a devotee experiences during Transcendental Devotion (Parā-bhakti). Therefore, all Action (which does not involve devotion towards a deity) accrues consequences upon the agent (Karma-phala) and as such Action must be renounced (Karma-tyāga). Tilak proposed to challenge these two philosophical approaches by arguing that the *Gītā* promoted moral action for all sentient Beings. However, unlike the modern western philosophies such as Utilitarianism and Intuitionism, Vedānta took into consideration the ontological (internal) and phenomenological (external) consequences of Action. Moreover, the final culmination (but not cessation) of Action was in Mokṣa (Absolute Liberation). Tilak, in his reading, collapsed the concepts of Dharma and Nīti (Ethics) into a singular category, rescuing the former from ritualism and the latter from crude materialism (Bedekar 1970).

This fusion of Hindu dharmic discourse with moral philosophy was considered quite a radical idea in the early 20th century. Sadanand More (2005) considers *Gītā Rahasya* an outstanding example of ‘comparative moral philosophy’ where the western (both ancient and modern) and ancient Indian (primarily Hindu) religious philosophies were studied in the context of the

ethics proposed in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. V. R. Karandikar, on the other hand, believes that Tilak should have concentrated either on Western philosophy or Vedic liturgical and epistemological traditions rather than undertaking, a seemingly futile, exercise in comparison. In his bid to read modern principles of moral action in Karma-yoga-śāstra Tilak automatically opened *Gītā Rahasya* up to harsh criticism from the traditional Vedic class (Karandikar 2006).

Major trends in Marathi scholarship on *Gītā Rahasya*, as I have summarized above, lean towards explaining the exegetical uniqueness of *Gītā Rahasya*. The Marathi scholars, informed and invested in the philosophical debates of 19th century Maharashtra, are keen in projecting Karma-yoga-śāstra propounded in *Gītā Rahasya* as an alternative to Brahmin orthodoxy of that period. Thus, Tilak is shown as someone who did not hew to Hindu conformity or orthodoxy but charted a radically different path. The English scholarship on *Gītā Rahasya*, which would be explored in some details below, has followed a different path. Scholars writing in English (perhaps lesser informed in Maharashtra and some of whom possess no facility in Marathi language) are keen in pegging Tilak as a conservative thinker following a reactionary ideology. He is seen to be contributing to militant Hindu nationalism (Seth 2006) and a defender of the Hindu caste system (Llewellyn 2019). Through the enunciation of Karma-yoga Tilak is also seen as challenging the ‘escapist’ politics of the Moderates (Brown 1958; Stevenson 1986).

In recent years, Nagappa K. Gowda (2011: 50-89) has submitted his reading of *Gītā Rahasya* as a nationalist text. Gowda argues that *Gītā Rahasya* projected a messianic figure of Sthitaprajña who would lead India towards Independence. Gowda points to four lines of reasoning adopted by Tilak in his nationalist interpretation of the *Gītā*- first, Tilak established that the pre-modern commentaries on the *Gītā* were trapped in sectarianism and hence incapable of deciphering its authentic teaching. Second, Tilak considered the *Gītā* as a ‘composite text’ where it improved upon and incorporated all the major schools of Vedic philosophy. Third, Tilak rejected the Sāṅkhya path of Liberation (Muktī) since it involved severe forms of self-denial and absolute disenchantment with worldly affairs. Tilak wanted Indians to actively participate in politics without marginalizing the older Hindu spiritual systems. Finally, Indic-Vedic civilization contained superior ‘spiritual values’ which could aid modern India in its material progress. As such the Sthitaprajña, through his actions based

upon higher ethical value-considerations, would lay the path of moral duty for others to follow. Tilak, Gowda suggests, eschewed constitutional democracy in pursuit of such “[...] heroic personality- karmayogi sthitaprajnan [sic]” marking the inception of a “new-brahminism” in Indian politics [Gowda 2011: 53]. The figure of Sthitaprajña conceptualized by Tilak shared an uncanny resemblance with the Nietzschean figure of the *übermensch* (Gowda 2011: 72). Tilak’s notion of the Sthitaprajña for Gowda, therefore, was an elitist project which could potentially alienate the subaltern masses. Continuing in this line of argument, Gowda sees Tilak as imploring the subalterns to follow the path of devotion (*Bhakti mārga*). Such differential treatment between the elite and subaltern communities is seen in tandem with his “manuvadi [sic]” stance towards social reforms (Gowda 2011: 82). Gowda writes, “He [Tilak] defended the supremacy of the Brahmins and other strata in religion and society and opposed the same to other categories” and imposed his “orthodox” vision on nationalist politics (Gowda 2011: 82).

Shruti Kapila (2013) develops a complex relationship between notions of freedom and political duty/ action exhibited through *Gītā Rahasya*. She argues that Tilak’s theory helped create “a new normative language” for the political leaving behind no legatee as such (Kapila 2013: 182). Violence, Kapila argues, has been “[...] central in transforming the meaning and practices of the political in India” (Kapila 2013: 179). Violence, both conceptual and in real-politic, was directed not towards the ‘outsider’ but conceived as a “[...] matter of sacrifice and kinship” (Kapila 2013: 79). Thus, the difference between a ‘friend’ and an ‘enemy’ (concepts borrowed from Carl Schmitt) was replaced with the notion of ‘fraternity’ in colonial India. Violence mediated through fraternity was the political-as-Event leading to animosity among its members. Written in the aftermath of the Swadeshi movement *Gītā Rahasya* searched for an ethical defence in granting legitimacy to violence. Only under exceptional circumstances, when the agent acted out of a sense of moral duty, could violence be justified. For Tilak the great dilemma faced by Arjuna (‘to Act or to relinquish all Action’) was entirely applicable to the India political movement of the early 20th century. Kapila argues that Tilak preferred mass political agitation over passive disagreement with the colonial state. For his mass politics Tilak required the support of the two major communities of India- the Hindus and the Muslims- whose relation was encumbered by mutual animosity. Tilak resolved the tension between the

two communities by reminding them of moral superiority of Action aimed towards a common cause, namely, freedom (Kapila 2013).

Gowda and Kapila's treatment of *Gītā Rahasya* as a political text is well taken. However, I differ with their teleological reading of *Gītā Rahasya*. I do not think that Tilak was interested in imagining a 'heroic personality' to lead India in its fight for Independence. Such a claim runs counter to Tilak's political ideology which was premised upon communitarian consensus and representative democracy. Similarly, while Hindu-Muslim unity was deemed indispensable by Tilak in India's struggle for Self-rule, it entered rather late in his political vision (around the Lucknow Pact of 1916). Therefore, a commitment to violence (symbolic and/or real), seeking inspiration from Kṛṣṇa's diktat to Arjuna, was not central to Tilak's political ideology. Finally, Tilak's politicized rendering of the *Gītā* and his opposition to Śaṅkara's sectarian commentary could not have transpired simply on a differential reading of one verse, as Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (2016) suggests⁸⁵, but rather evoked a whole range of hermeneutical and philosophical justifications which were borrowed from Western ethical and Hindu Dharmaśāstra's canonical traditions.

7.2 Bhagavad Gītā and Moral Action: Tilak's Choice of the Text

Modernists and nationalist commentators were faced with a twin task of appropriating the traditional Vedic exegesis specific to sectarian and geographical differences while simultaneously rendering the text (s) and its embedded philosophy into modern vocabulary suitable to the contemporary political contingencies. Despite the existence of many commentaries and criticisms on religious scriptures, including the *Gītā* over the centuries both in vernacular and especially in the Sanskrit tradition, none of these were capable of responding to the two most seething questions troubling the minds of the nationalists- what is India? And, what is the self? Therefore, the modernist-nationalist mission was to approach the text(s) directly, mostly in its Sanskrit origin, and resuscitate the "fugitive Sanskrit traditions" from the onslaught of the Indological and sanātani scholarship (Vajpeyi 2012: xvii). The established protocol about knowledge and learning had undergone remarkable changes with the introduction of modern Western education. An exposure to the western knowledge systems provided the modernists-nationalists with new exegetical lenses prompting them to

undertake the difficult task of re-interpreting religion as *they saw it* (Chatterjee 1993b; Prakash 1999).

In the context of western India, the *Gītā* was rendered into vernacular archaic Marathi by the 12th century saint-poet Jñāneśvara called *Bhāvārtha Dipīkā*. The non-dualist school of Śaṅkara greatly influenced the early bhakti saint-poets like Jñāneśvara resulting in, what S. R. Talghatti has called, “[...] the Advaita school of Bhakti” (Talghatti 2000: 544). On the other hand, the dualist Bhāgavata sect (sampradāy) which finds its roots in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* became the philosophical backbone for the worship of Lord Vitthala of Pandharpur. A Marathi rendition of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* was undertaken by the 16th century saint-poet Eknath (Keune 2015).

The modernist-nationalist appropriation of religion through Dharmaśāstra texts required a steady process of ‘disengagement’ with its traditional custodians. This task was indeed difficult since complete disengagement would have led to dangerous backlash from the traditional elite sections. Therefore, the modernist-nationalist intellectuals, while appropriating ancient Sanskrit texts, commenced with a ‘polite dismissal’ of its old custodians. This meant that they retained certain parts of traditional textual interpretative dogmas and complemented them with modern philosophical ideals. The primary concern of the modernists was in using ancient Sanskrit and medieval vernacular Bhakti-texts for social reforms and devising new forms of civil culture.

Amongst Tilak’s contemporaries R. G. Bhandarkar tried to interpret ancient Indian darśana-śāstra using Western philosophical and conceptual lenses. Bhandarkar (1933: 62-78) compared Sāṅkhya’s idealism about Nature with subjective idealism found in the writings of Fichte, calling both a ‘system’ which “wanted to explain the world” (Bhandarkar 1933: 71)⁸⁶. Bhandarkar argued that the Abrahamic religions conceptualized God in transcendental terms whereas the non-Abrahamic religions accepted the Immanent nature of the Absolute. However, both set of religions were fundamentally theistic in character allowing them to coalesce through inter-religious dialogue. For Bhandarkar religion did not thrive through prescribed rituals and liturgical interpretations but survived in individual experiences. Despite maintaining lineage with centuries old traditional value-systems theistic religions such as Hinduism could be reinterpreted in rationalist and Universalist terms (Lederle 1976: 95-100). Bhandarkar’s attempt was at reconciling various tenets of traditional ‘Hinduism’ with modern European norms of Universal thought.

Likewise, the religious ideals of Justice Ranade developed in the shadows of British liberalism and the indigenous Bhāgavata tradition. Like Bhandarkar he was enchanted by the ideal of theism found in the writings of Intuitionists such as A. C. Fraser (Lederle 1976:93) and Utilitarian thinkers such as John Stuart Mill (Bedekar 2011: 62-64). In conformity with his position on social reform (discussed in the first chapter) Ranade rejected orthodox interpretations of Vedic scriptures. Ranade followed the Dvaita (dualist) school of Vedānta and sought to interpret the Hindu Bhāgavata tradition through the lenses of medieval Christian Protestantism. Ranade defended the medieval Bhakti system (as an Indian variant of Protestantism) for its progressive role in challenging religious orthodoxy. He regarded Rāmānuja as the pioneer social reformer of India who was followed by a range of saint-poets. These Bhakti Acharyas and saint-poets vigorously fought against caste and gender discrimination perpetrated by the traditional śāstrī class (Ranade 1902: 198-228). Ranade did not believe in the illusory nature (Māyā) of the Cosmos. Borrowing from the dualist tradition of Vedānta he argued that the Cosmos was created by the Absolute Brahman or Īśvara who existed on a supra-temporal, supra-spatial plane and was non-cognizable to human Intellect. Human consciousness (Caitanya) and Nature were separate from Īśvara and lacked free-will. Īśvara, on the other hand, possessed absolute free-will determined by the faculty of rational judgment. Therefore, the desire for action arising in human beings was determined by Divine Will. Īśvara was compassionate and governed over the Cosmos in a just manner. Thus, there was no reason for humans to doubt the Providence's scheme. They ought to have absolute faith in the Divine and devote themselves completely in His service (Phatak 1924: 172-74).

Through his *Dharmapara Vyākhyāne* (Ranade 1915), delivered under the auspices of Prārthanā Samāj during 1890's, Ranade argued that the traditional three paths to Liberation were imperfect. The path of karma diverted the energies of the seeker from the object of worship (Self-Brahman) to the instrument (sādhana) of worship. The path of Jñāna brewed false pride in the mind of the seeker resulting in self-conceit or created endless cycles of doubts destroying inner harmony and peace. The path of yoga was too difficult to practice, required special training and hence could be followed only by a select few. However, the path of bhakti sought to develop the seeker's intellect culminating in him/her reaching higher forms of Wisdom (Vijñāna).

Unlike the śāstrīs, Tilak was willing to critically engage with social reformists as well as members of ‘new sects’ such as Theosophy over their interpretation of Vedic and Dharmaśāstra texts⁸⁷. Tilak wrote three articles in *Kesari* titled ‘Nyāyamūrti Rānade yāncī Brahma-Mīmāṃsā’ in October 1986 engaging with Ranade’s philosophical exposition of Bhakti tradition and Indian Theism. While he appreciated Ranade’s earnest attempt in establishing the superiority of Hindu Bhakti tradition over modern Western philosophies Tilak was critical of his monotheistic belief systems and found a major caveat in the doctrine- The Bliss (Ānanda) experienced by a devotee out of dispassionate devotion and love towards God is dependent upon an external object (the deity) whereas the Advaitin could attain Absolute Bliss (Brahmānanda). Quoting the *Gītā* (2.59) Tilak argued that this Absolute Bliss (Brahmānanda) may appear akin to a bhakti-based rasa but was nevertheless superior. (Tilak 1930: 241- 251).

The established protocols of Moderate politics drew more from the general theistic philosophical principles formulated by Bhandarkar and Ranade. The establishment of a liberal British State was seen as a part of the Cosmic plan to resuscitate the Indian society from the clutches of traditional religious orthodoxy. Therefore, the Moderates remained loyal towards the British Raj with no overt aggression directed towards it. Religion aided in precisely demarcating the limits of individual and collective free-will which would lead to the birth of a harmonious and cooperative ‘native-citizen’ of the British Empire.

From within the Theosophical tradition the *Gītā* came to be projected as an allegorical text for the transformation of the Monad (Arjuna) through active intervention by the Logos (Kṛṣṇa). The Theosophists saw the *Gītā* essentially as a text of universal spiritual significance (Sinha 2013: 41-43). In December 1905 Annie Besant delivered four lectures at the Theosophical Society in Madras in which she projected the *Gītā* as a historical and an allegorical text. It presented a transcendental vision of supra-Consciousness which appeared in the form of an Avatāra-puruṣa (Kṛṣṇa) in order to work out the plan of the Cosmic Logos. According to Besant the principle philosophical discourse presented in the *Gītā* is of the ‘yoga tradition’ which seems to be contradictory with Kṛṣṇa’s insistence on Karma. Besant reinterpreted the yogic discourse not in terms of “seclusion, silence [and] inaction” as the traditionalists propagated but took recourse to *Gītā* (2.50) which defines yoga as “skill of action” (yogaha karmasu kauśalyam) (Besant 1906: 39). Desire of/towards objects is at the

root of all action. The material world of objects is pervaded by the Brahman who conceals Himself in the form of Māyā. Therefore, action oriented towards objects (Māyā) results into pleasurable and painful experiences. Besant argued, “Brahma [sic] represents Kriya [Action] and there is no object in being in the physical universe at all except for the development of the right activity, directed by right thought and right desire; all else leads up to that” (Besant 1906: 40-41).

Invoking the 11th chapter of the *Gītā* Besant argued that only that Action which fulfilled the Divine Will was the right action. “Right activity, then, is the lesson of the Gita, and right activity is acting in harmony with the divine will [...] not for fruit, nor for desire for movement, not from attachment to any object, not to any results of activity, but, wholly in harmony, with the Will that works for universal good”. The Brahman acting out in the phenomenal world (Māyā) encompasses its Ādhibhūta (material) and Ādhidaivata (metaphysical) components. The Avatārī-puruṣa (‘puruṣottama’) exists beyond this mundane world while retaining His existence in each of the two resulting into a “Triplexity” of Existence (Besant 1906: 104-111). A yogī recognizes the tripartite Brahman and performs action in the form of sacrifice (yajñārtha) and seeks Liberation (Mokṣa). Thus, Besant does not see any contradiction between the path of renunciation and the path of sacrifice in the Karma-mārga propounded by the Gītā- in the Yoga Path of Renunciation, the motive of all Actions is directed towards a single object (a Unity with the Absolute) whereas in the Path of Action “[...] what is changed is the motive of action; the change is not in the direction of desire, consciousness dominated by Icchha [sic], but in the spirit in which action is done, consciousness dominated by Kriya. It is sacrifice, action done as sacrifice, which is characteristic of the Karma Marga [sic]” (Besant 1906: 89-90).

Tilak was interested in ascertaining solid basis upon which permissible (political) action could be determined (kartavya-akartavya-viveka). Despite Kṛṣṇa commanding Arjuna ‘to act’ in order to fulfil his caste duty (kṣātra-dharma) Arjuna insisted on continuing with the debate, turning the *Bhagavad Gītā* into a treatise on moral philosophy. For Tilak, the *Bhagavad Gītā* contemplated the notion of moral duty, the nature and conditions for moral action and the ultimate goal which human action entailed. Therefore, the *Bhagavad Gītā* transcended spatio-temporal boundaries and established the fundamentals of Universal ethical thought.

The foremost political action, under conditions of the legal apparatus laid down by the modern nation-state, was towards citizens' duty of obligation. As I have argued in my third chapter invoking Hindu Dharmaśāstras in resisting the modern colonial law (the AoC Bill) was a complicated affair. Due to the variety of opinions and multiplicity of competing Dharmaśāstra textual liturgy seeking authority from one principle shruti or smṛiti text was difficult. The Vedas, despite carrying unquestionable authority amongst Hindus, did not prescribe 'permissible action' nor distinguish between permissible and non-permissible ones. The *Gītā* was arguably the best guide for ascertaining the boundaries of permissive/non-permissive nature of human action. The classic moral dilemma of Arjuna (whether to fight the Mahābhārata War and partake into unspoken violence against one's own kith and kin or to renunciate War and action altogether) was resolved by Kṛṣṇa through his command to 'fight' rather than abjuring action. Not only did the *Gītā* advocate action-as-virtue but it was advised by Kṛṣṇa, the human incarnation of the Almighty. As such, the *Gītā* which superseded worldly authorities (political, sacerdotal and ecclesiastical), was considered an 'authoritative text'⁸⁸. Tilak expressed the greatness of the *Gītā* in Hindu textual tradition in the following words-

“Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā is one of the most brilliant and pure gems of our ancient sacred books. It would be difficult to find a simpler work in Sanskrit literature or even in all the literature of the world than the *Gītā*, which explains to us in an unambiguous and succinct manner the deep and sacred principles of the sacred science of the SELF (Ātman), after imparting to us the knowledge of the human body and the cosmos, and on the authority of those principles acquaints every human being with the most perfect and complete condition of the Self, that is to say, with what the highest manhood is, and which further establishes a logical and admirable harmony between Devotion (bhakti) and Spiritual Knowledge (jñāna), and ultimately between both these and the duties of ordinary life enjoined by the Śāstras, thereby inspiring the mind, bewildered by the vicissitudes of life calmly and, what is more, desirelessly adhere to the path of duty.” (Tilak 1936: 1).

The *Gītā*, Tilak observed, contained the “[...] quintessence of Vedic religion, uttered by the voice of the Blessed Lord [...]” turning its “[...] pre-eminent worth [...]” indubitable (Tilak 1936: 2). For well over 25 centuries, Tilak added, different traditional schools of Vedic religion as well as common Hindu folks of India had regarded the book to be “[...] as venerable and authoritative as the Vedas themselves [...]” (Tilak 1936: 2).

To summarize, his peculiar choice of *Gītā* could be explained in the following ways-a) The *Gītā* was a philosophical tract found in the Ītihāsa text- the *Mahābhārata*; b) It contained a sophisticated discussion on Vedānta and allied philosophies spelled out in a convincing dialogical manner; c) Unlike the sectarian *Brahma-sūtras* (which merely carried pointers about the Absolute) and the *Upaniṣad* which were primarily Śrīti-texts, the *Gītā* was an ‘abbreviated text’⁸⁹ and hence the most authoritative of the Prasthāna-trayī d) the speaker/author of the dialogue was a personification of the Absolute (Kṛṣṇa); e) the text carried democratic impulses while retaining Brahminical superiority; f) The *Gītā* (in part or whole) was a part of daily recitation for many natives and was commonly regarded in Maharashtra as a theological tract propagating Gnosis and Devotion⁹⁰; g) it carried immense potential of politicizing religion for anti-imperialist activities without losing its soteriological roots.

7.3 *Gītā Rahasya*: A Short History of its Making

As mentioned earlier *Gītā Rahasya* (1986) was written in a matter of three months. Tilak informed his nephew Dhondopant Vidwans on 2nd March 1911, -

“[...] I have finished what I call Gita Rahasya, an independent and original book investigating the purpose of Gita and showing how our religious philosophy is applied these into the solution of the ethical problem. For my view of Gita is that it is a work on ethics- not utilitarian, nor intuitionist- but transcendental, somewhat on the lines followed in [T. H.] Green’s *Prolegomena to Ethics*. I have compared throughout the Gita Philosophy with the Western, both religious and ethical, and have tried to show that our system is, to say the least, not inferior to any of the Western methods [...] I believe [the book] will be found to be an entirely original work like the *Orion* [sic.]; for so far as I am aware no one has ventured on such a path before in translating or commenting on the Gita, though I have had this view of Gita in mind for the last 20 years or more” (Tilak 1966: 101-102, italics added)⁹¹.

The copies of his notebooks reveal that the first title of the text was “‘Athāto karmajñāsā’ athavā Śrīmadbhagavdgītārahasya’. It underwent many changes and reached its final title which was *Śrīmadbhagavadgītārahasya athavā karmayogaśāstra*⁹². Upon completing *Gītā*

Rahasya, Tilak embarked upon other researches⁹³ but could only manage to write a short introduction to his work on Vedic chronology⁹⁴, as I have discussed in the fifth chapter.

Tilak was released from Mandalay on 8th June, 1914 and reached Pune via Madras on 17th June, 1914 (More 2014: 338-39). Shortly after his release from Mandalay prison, Tilak gave a long and candid interview to *Kesari* published on 23rd June, 1914. Tilak recounted how he had been thinking of writing a commentary on the *Gītā* before his incarceration and that the incarceration gave him an opportunity to fulfil his long-cherished dream. However, he also lamented that the manuscript of the text had not reached him and that it was being inspected by the government officials. Captain P. K. Tarapore, the prison superintendent had sent the manuscript for inspection to the Bombay government to check for matter amounting to sedition. After the Government received favourable response from S. M. Bharucha, chief of the Oriental Translator, the manuscripts were returned to Tilak in August 1914 (Naik 2005: 44- 48).

Tilak requested his close associates Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar (a prominent Marathi playwright and associate editor of *Kesari*) and Kashinath Lele-śāstrī (editor of the conservative *Dharma* magazine) to read the manuscript and suggest changes. Meanwhile, Tilak delivered a public lecture on 25th August, 1914 followed by four more lectures between 19th and 22nd September, 1914 laying down his theory of Karma-yoga-śāstra. The book was published in June, 1915 and was dedicated to ‘those in favour of Bharat’ and sold at a modest price of Rs. 3. After the book was published, his well-wishers asked Tilak why he chose to write *Gītā Rahasya* in Marathi when his earlier two books were in English. Their suggestion was that if Tilak had written *Gītā Rahasya* in English the Europeans would have celebrated the great message of *Gītā* as well as Tilak’s commentary upon it. Tilak quipped- “Why should I write the book in English? It is not a scholastic book. It is a book for the masses. Since I wish for the welfare of the people, I need to write in a language that they would understand” (Phatak 2006; Modak in Bapat 1928a: 58, my translation). While Tilak wished to popularize Kṛṣṇa’s message of karma-yoga, even a cursory reading of *Gītā Rahasya* reveals its high Brahminical undertones. A reader requires some background in Western ethical theory and some knowledge of Sanskrit liturgical texts. Therefore, access to *Gītā Rahasya*, in all probability was restricted to the elite upper-caste Hindus.

7.4 Gītā Rahasya: Methodological Considerations

In pre-modern India textual practices evolved out of vāda (tattva-nirni-nisu or vijigīṣu) traditions and bhāṣya and/or tīkā traditions. Indian philosophers entered into protracted debates (vāda) with like-minded or opposing philosophers. The principal motives behind vāda were to either listen to the opponent's view- point in order to refine one's belief-system or, to defeat the rival philosophy and convert the debating party into one's sect (Parekh 2015: 5-8). The rules for debate were laid out prior to the contest. In modern India such debates took place between the Christian missionaries and the religious orthodoxy⁹⁵. Debates on Hindu religious exegesis also took place through vernacular newspapers and on public forums between the social reformers and the śāstrīs. Such localized debates were more challenging and attracted wider attention because the disputants "[...] shared a common cultural tradition and knew what the rules of the debate required of them" (Parekh 2015: 21). The śāstrīs, Parekh points out, took too literal meanings out of isolated sentences and entered into their intricate details and explanations. The reformers generally took the totality of the text and argued for a new interpretation of the text for a social cause (Parekh 2015: 24).

The bhāṣya form, on the other hand, relied heavily upon exegetical formulations laid out primarily in the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā tradition. The core hermeneutical principles of the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā tradition are as follows:

- a) The Mīmāṃsākas accept the supreme and infallible authority of the Vedas. The infallibility clause is applicable due to the pramāṇa status granted to Vedic utterances. Truth is enclosed into words which become meaningful and transcend temporal disruptions;
- b) The Mīmāṃsākas reject all pre-conceived dogmas and implore the reader to make value judgments on the basis of rational enquiry into the text;
- c) The Mīmāṃsākas interpret laws (sūtra) independent of the law-maker's intentions. Therefore, Vedic texts attain deontic authority which propound dharma (code of conduct);
- d) The Mīmāṃsākas argue that the Vedas carry Universal prescriptions about the right conduct, but the moral and religious considerations for right conduct is left to human faculties⁹⁶ (Verpoorten 1987; Hiriyana 2009).

Traditional Hindus consider the *Gītā* to be the fountainhead of Absolute Knowledge. It carries succinct discussion on Vedic theology and incorporates and expands upon various metaphysical and philosophical traditions developed during the Vedic period. Moreover, the protagonist of the text, Kṛṣṇa, is an incarnation of the Brahman (the Absolute) and each word uttered by Him carries supreme authority (equivalent to Vedic injunctions). The ultimate aim of the *Gītā* is sukha (happiness) in the form of śreyasa (good) applicable to the entire human race. The structure of the text is in the form of prescriptive (vidhī) through definite linguistic imperatives (śabda- prāmāṇyam) leading up to a siddhānta (maxim). Thus, Tilak could use the exegetical method of Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā to read the *Gītā* and employed the seven steps of textual interpretation laid out in *Jaiminī-sūtras*: a) Upakrama (commencement), b) Abhyāsa (repetition), c) Apūrvatā (novelty), d) Phala (effect), e) Arthavāda (digression), f) Upopattī (fortification-cum-refutation), g) Upasamhāra (denouement) (Tilak 1986: 19-21).

Tilak was certainly not the first to employ Mīmāṃsā-hermeneutics to interpret Vedānta texts. Śaṅkara, for instance, used the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā method while developing his Advaita system. Vedantins like Śaṅkara accepted Veda-prāmāṇyam (validity of the Vedas), revealing the ultimate ‘Knowledge about the Absolute’ (Brahma-jñāna). The difference between Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā and Śaṅkara’s Advaita system (also known as Uttara-Mīmāṃsā) lies in their approaches towards Knowledge of the Absolute. Thus, Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā relied upon an agent to stick to ritual injunctions prescribed in the Vedas whereas for Śaṅkara, once an individual attains Knowledge of the Absolute, all actions (including rituals) automatically drop putting an end to the cause-effect cycle (Isayeva 1993: 199-204). Thus, pre-modern Vedantins replaced ‘action’ (Mīmāṃsā) with a rigid description of ‘ontology’ (Bilimoria 2008).

According to Tilak the pre-modern commentators on the *Gītā* had bent the rules of Mīmāṃsā exegesis to suit their doctrinal pre-conceptions. If the primary purport of the text yielded contradictory meanings to their core beliefs sectarian commentators rampantly violated the “Mīmāṃsā logic” and completely distorted its central motif. Such distortions of primal meanings were not confined to Hinduism but were found in every world religion including “[...] the numerous sectarian writers belonging to the numerous subsequent sects of Christianity and Mohamedan [sic] religions, [who] twist[ed] in the same way the original works on those religions namely the Bible and Quran, and it is on the same principle that the

followers of Christ have ascribed meanings to some of the sentences in the Old Testament of the Bible, which are different from those given to them by the Jews” (Tilak 1936:22).

Mīmāṃsākaras like Kumarīla and Śābara developed upon *Jaiminī-sūtra* and the evolved a four-fold method of exegesis which involved: a) the subject matter under consideration is laid out, b) the ‘doubt’ regarding the explanation is explained, c) the pūrva-pakṣa is set out, d) after taking into consideration the different interpretations those which do not conform to the rules of interpretations are discarded and siddhānta or final verdict is given (Jois 2000: 577-78). *Gītā Rahasya* follows the argumentative structure of Mīmāṃsā and classifies competing interpretative schools into pūrva-pakṣa and ūttara-pakṣa. The division works on two levels: first, since Tilak considers the *Gītā* as a supreme text on social ethics he divides the Materialist (Ādhibhautika-śāstra) and Theological (Ādhidaivata-śāstra) schools into pūrva-pakṣa and the Karma-yoga Metaphysical school (Ādhyātma-śāstra) into ūttara-pakṣa. Thereafter, Tilak locates the pre-modern Vedānta ascetic traditions (primarily of Śaṅkara) into pūrva-pakṣa and the karma-yoga based interpretation of moral Action into ūttara-pakṣa.

7.5 Karma-yoga as Moral Action: Gītā’s Superiority over European Universal Ethics

Liberal political philosophy in Britain during the 18th and the 19th centuries was dominated by ethical ideals found in Intuitionism (metaphysics), Utilitarianism, Idealism and Social Darwinism (Mander 2014). Liberalism sought justification in these ethical theories, which, developed along paradoxical principles. Individual liberty and autonomy are fundamental to the liberal thought. But liberal philosophers found it impossible to apply the same principles to its colonies, as recent scholarship has brought to fore (Stokes 1959; Mehta 1999; Armitage 2000).

Tilak’s enquiry into the modern ‘western’ liberal philosophy was, on one level, to assess the hollow and paradoxical nature of its claims and debunk the ideological-moral foundation of the ‘liberal empire’. Moral and spiritual superiority, according to Tilak, rested with the Indic civilization found in its ancient texts which pre-dated even the earliest texts on ethical philosophy in ancient Greece. Thus, he wrote-

“As the Gītā was propounded at a time, when whether to ‘act or to renounce’ was considered a question of great importance, to be determined before arriving at a decision as to which act

was good and which bad, many people look upon a considerable portion of it as now unnecessary;[...] Besides some of our new scholars are of opinion that as a result of the present growth of the Material sciences in the West, the deductions laid down in ancient times with reference to the Karma-yoga, on the basis of the Philosophy of the Absolute Self, cannot possibly be fully applicable to modern conditions[...]those people whose eyes are dazzled by the present unheard growth of Material sciences, or who have learnt to consider the Science of Ethics, only externally, that is to say, only in its Material aspect, as a result of the present one-sided methods of education, will be made to see clearly by means of this comparison [between *Gītā* and western philosophy] that, not only has human knowledge not yet gone beyond the doctrines laid down on this subject by our philosophers, for the simple reason that Ethics and the science of Release are both beyond Material Knowledge, but, deliberations are still going on [sic] these questions in the West [...]" (Tilak 1936: xiix).

Tilak classified the Western ideological and epistemological schools of moral philosophy into Materialist (*Ādhibhautika śāstra*) and Theological (*Ādhidaivika śāstra*) whereas the Karmayogaśāstra (*Adhyātma śāstra*) was identified as Metaphysical⁹⁷. The chief characteristics of the *Ādhibhautika śāstra* were described by him as follows:

1. Hobbes and Helvetius: These thinkers believed that self-interest is inherent to human nature and hence they saw all altruistic practices as basically satisfying the Self and were catered towards Self-preservation. In ancient India *Nyaya Sūtra* by Gautama propagated similar ideas (Tilak 1986: 71-74);
2. Henry Sedgwick- Within the English ethical tradition this school of thought called for 'Enlightened Self-interest', which believed that humans were capable of acting altruistically but would, in the final instance, prioritize Self-preservation (Tilak 1986: 74-76);
3. Bentham *et al*- The tradition believed in the 'maximizing the pleasure principle' (Tilak 1986: 76-80).

Tilak found no similarities between the *Gītā* and the Utilitarian thought since the latter conceptualized 'social good' in crass materialist terms and devoid of collective determinism which inevitably left out few people out of its ambit. Tilak accused Utilitarianism of elitism and exhibiting authoritarian tendencies. Its inherent consequentialism did not orient an

action morally justified (nyāyā). If for David Hume actions were indicative of the moral character of the agent J. S. Mill preferred to place the responsibility of the morality of the action upon the intentions of the agent. Herbert Spencer invoked the tenets of Social Darwinism to argue that nature is biologically engineered to act for greater welfare. In opposition to all three thinkers, Tilak rested his case upon the supra-materiality of the desired good. Absolute Good (śreyasa) is attained only with Self-Knowledge. Tilak substantiated this claim by referring to the Upanishadic story of Naciketa who was offered all the riches by Yama but the boy remained unperturbed and wished only for Self-Knowledge. Thus, concluded Tilak, a Utilitarian answer to Arjuna's dilemma would have read- 'Arjuna must fight since it will lead to the benefit of the majority'. But this could not have satisfied Arjuna, who in reality, was interested in knowing the Absolute Good (Śreyas) of human life (Tilak 1986: 76-85).

Tilak was more accommodative of the arguments laid out in the 'Ādhidaivika śāstra'. Adherents of the Intuitionist School believed that one ought to follow the instructions laid down by one's mind. A developed mind is capable of judging the right and wrong. But since the ability to judge lies with the intellect, Tilak referred to the Kantian division of human intellect into pure and practical Reason (Tilak 1986: 124). However, the capacity for rational enquiry and by extension to reach the perfect value judgment is impossible since not all humans have the same level of evolved intellect. And if human rationality was indeed equal for all humans, then, argued Tilak, Arjuna would have never faced the dilemma nor would he have needed Kṛṣṇa's advice to resolve it.

The Sāṅkhya philosophy was the Indian variant of Ādhidaivika śāstra which divided human Intellectual into three parts: Sāttvika, Rājasika and Tāmasika. The task before each individual is to make his/her intellect more Sāttvika which is possible only if one does not succumb to the pressures put up by the senses. The Sāṅkhya -based interpretation of the *Gītā* was followed by the Dualist school which believed in the fundamental disjuncture between Spirit (Purūṣa) and Matter/Cosmos (Prakṛtī). Since the Purūṣa and Prakṛtī were made up of the three qualities an agent's free-will rested only to the extent that he/she could develop the Sattvic quality. Since Arjuna's intellect was not Sāttvika he faced a dilemma which was resolved by Kṛṣṇa. It was also desirable for an individual to develop Pure Intellect but it did not amount to Absolute Good and did not lead up to Liberation (Mokṣa). Thus, Kṛṣṇa's advice to Arjuna

was to develop his Sāttvika qualities were judged by Tilak as a means to a higher path, namely, Karma-yoga-śāstra (Tilak 1986: 112-133).

The Adhyātma śāstra propounded in the *Gītā* rested upon the inter-connectedness of karma, yoga and dharma. Etymologically *karma* means ‘to Act’ which *Jaiminī-sūtra* and the ‘sectarian’ commentaries following Jaiminī took as only ‘alter-sacrifices’ (yajña karma) which accrued puṇya. The Upanishads interpreted *karma* as a ‘pursuit of Self-Knowledge’ (Brahma-jijñāsā). The Smṛti and Puranic literature divided karma into nitya, naimittika and kāmya. Tilak rejected these limited definitions of Action and expanded its scope to include –

“[A]ll the Actions which a man performs, e.g. , eating, drinking, playing, sitting, rising, residing, breathing, smiling, weeping, smelling, seeing, speaking, hearing, walking, giving, taking, sleeping, waking, killing, fighting, meditating or contemplating, commanding, or objecting, giving, performing sacrificial ritual, agriculture or commerce, desiring, deciding, keeping quiet, etc., etc., etc., are all included in the word ‘Karma’ as used in the Bhagavad Gītā, whether those Actions are bodily (*kāyika*), or vocal (*vācika*) or mental (*mānasika*) (Gītā 5.8-9)” (Tilak 1936: 75, italics in the original).

He further added that “[...] the word ‘karma’ (Action) can also be understood in the meaning of Duty (*kartavya-karma*) or proper action (*vihiṭa-karma*)” (Tilak 1936: 75, italics in the original). The word yoga was translated by Tilak as a “means” or an instrument facilitating Action⁹⁸. *Bhagavad Gītā* (2.50) defines yoga in terms of a skill to perform action (yogaha karmasu kauśalyam). Therefore, the śāstra (science) which propounded the science to perform right Action was Karma-yoga-śāstra (Tilak 1986: 55-56). The term dharma had been understood by the scholars under the Judeo-Christian influence as simply ‘religion’. The ancient Indian scholars regarded the performance of Vedic rituals as dharma. Tilak disagreed with such “restrictive meanings” attached to the term and referred to its heuristic ancillary meaning to indicate the “limitations of worldly morality, as in the phrases, ‘*rājadharmā*’ (the duty of kings), ‘*prajādharmā*’ (the duty of subjects), ‘*deśadharmā*’ (the duty of a country), ‘*jñātidharmā*’ (the duty pertaining to a caste), ‘*kuladharmā*’ (the duty pertaining to clan or family), ‘*mitradharmā*’ [sic] (one’s duty as a friend), etc.” and concluded by stating that the moral duty of all individuals towards each other was simply called *dharma* whereas the ultimate form of dharma was in terms of Liberation (*mokṣadharmā*) (Tilak 1936: 88, italics in the original).

However disinterested Action, devoid of any notion of duty and/or obligation, was hopeless. One must be conscious of the right kind of action. The Materialist and Theological schools suggested different means to adjudicate the ethical dimensions of Action which did not necessarily result into Absolute Good (śreyasa). Only an individual following the Karma-yoga-śāstra, as narrated by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna, could perform morally righteous actions while simultaneously attaining Self-Knowledge. The Kantian maxim of categorical imperative was modified by Tilak to mean that one ought to Act with an Intellect-as-Equanimity (sāmya-buddhi), consequential in its ultimate manifestation of Self-Knowledge (Ātmoupamyā-buddhi) and yet desire-less of any personal/collective gains. All Actions emanating out of Self-Knowledge would be governed by a sense of Divine-Will and not be restricted by Self-interest or altruistic motives (Tilak 1986: 373).

7.6 Karma-Yoga: Pravṛttī and Nivṛttī

The 'sectarian' interpretations of the *Gītā* found in *Śāṅkara-bhāṣya* and developed by other commentators argued that the *Gītā* propagated renunciation. The proponents of the saṁnyāsa-mārga believe that karmas must be performed only to cleanse the mind (citta-śuddhī) and thereafter, all the worldly affiliations must be abandoned. They referred to the chapter on the Sāṅkhya-yoga in the *Gītā* in which Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to abjure all actions and contemplate the Self. Furthermore, the moral dilemma of Arjuna arising out of 'the necessity of action' was resolved by the traditional Vedantins by resorting to 'non-action'. If an agent resorts to non-action it would not result into tṛṣṇā and as such all bondages (karma-baṇḍha) would be broken. Bimal K. Matilal explains the Vedantic 'action-non-action' paradox as follows- "If I never touch water, I will, of course, successfully avoid getting wet" (Matilal 2002: 127). Non-action would not only lead to a successful end to all suffering but would also resolve the supposed 'unresolvable' dilemmas.

According to Tilak the Karma-yoga-śāstra put forth by Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā* propounded Pravṛttī (worldly) karma (action) and not Nivṛttī (renunciation) karma as had been suggested by Śāṅkarācārya and other commentators. In any case Kṛṣṇa in the fourth chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā argues that complete non-action is impossible. However, in the fifth chapter (adhyāya) Kṛṣṇa reiterates the greatness of both the paths (saṁnyāsa and karma) confusing an already exasperated Arjuna. Tilak argued that the difficulty in choosing a life of

renunciation and action was resolved by the Pūrva-pakṣa theorists such as Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and by Schopenhauer in favour of non-action. In India the Sāṅkhya philosophy propounded saṁnyāsa (renunciation) as the ultimate path to Liberation. When Arjuna places his confusion between the path to follow between Sāṅkhya (saṁnyāsa) yoga and Karma (action) yoga (*Gītā* 5.1) Kṛṣṇa clearly states that the path of Karmayoga is superior (*Gītā* 5.2). An emphasis of Karma-mārga is seen throughout the text (*Gītā* 2.50, 2.47, 3.7, 3.8, 4.15, 6.46, 8.7 and 18.6 and 7) (Tilak 1986: 274-77). Tilak interpreted these verses in the following manner- while desire-enabling Actions (“kāmya karme”) are opposed to Knowledge and lead to bondage, desireless Action (niṣkāma karma) avoids the trap. However, the difference between desireless Action and cessation of desire through abstinence from Action resulting seems quite trivial considering both result into Liberation. So why choose *Karma-yoga* over saṁnyāsa-yoga? Tilak resolved the issue by stating that the term ‘hope for fruit’ (phalāśā) had been erroneously interpreted by the Ascetic school. He argued-

“Giving up the hope for fruit, does not mean giving up all kinds of Desire, or entertaining the desire that nobody should get the fruit of one’s Action, or that if somebody gets it, he should not enjoy it [...] the words ‘*phalāśā*’, ‘*saṅga*’, or ‘*kāma*’ have been used in the *Gītā* to indicate the ATTACHMENT (*āśakti*) or INSISTENCE (*āgraha*) that ‘I am doing this particular Action in order that the fruit of it must accrue to ME’ [...] It is true that those persons, who do not see anything in this world except their own benefit, and who are continually steeped in performing Actions merely by the ambition of reaping some fruit or other, will not believe that it is possible to perform Actions, giving up the hope for fruit” (Tilak 1936: 451-52, capitalized and italics in the original).

Any individual who performs his/her Action by adhering to the fundamental maxim of ‘desireless Action’ is automatically performing his/her moral Duty.

An ideal situation would be of a world full of Self-Realized human beings. If that were to happen the need for Karma-yoga-śāstra would end and the world would return to the Kṛta-yuga as is suggested in the Nārāyaṇīya dharma (*Śāṇḍilya-sūtra*, 348.62,63). The *Śānti-parva* from the *Mahābhārata* also carried verses which state that such an ideal world once existed in the past and it will be created in the future. Herbert Spencer in his *Data of Ethics* [1879] had imagined ancient Greeks inhabiting such a world where each individual was inherently altruistic. Plato and Aristotle spoke of ‘wise men’ that were deemed fit to rule the city-state.

Epicurus regarded he who was virtuous, in a constant state of tranquillity, unperturbed, innocuous, non-competitive, almost reaching the perfect state of Godliness, who suffers neither vexation in himself nor causes it to others as a 'wise man'. Tilak reminded his readers that such descriptions of 'Wise-Men' resembled the figure of the Sthitaprajña found in the *Gītā* (12.15, 2.55, 14.23, 18.54, 14.24) and the figure of jivanmukta found in *Yoga-Vasiṣṭha*. Kant believed that while an ideal Greek city-state was a figment of imagination it inspired modern societies to attain harmony and prosperity. Tilak joined the older philosophers and argued-

“However difficulty of accomplishment this state of a Sthitaprajña (sthitaprajñāvasthā) or this state of freedom from re-birth (jivan-muktāvasthā) may be, it follows from the description of such a man [found in ancient Hindu scriptures][...] that the man, who has once accomplished this ultimate state, does not need to be taught any laws, about what should be done or should not be done, i.e. of Ethics, because the purest, the most equable and the most sinless frame of mind is the essence of morality, laying down laws of Ethics for such a Sthitaprajña would be as unreasonable as imagining that the Sun is surrounded by darkness and holding up a torch for it [...]. Just as regal authority is vested in one independent person or collection of persons, and as according to some western jurists, the ruler is not governed by any laws, though the ruled are so governed, so also are the sthitaprajña [sic.] vested with authority in the kingdom of Ethics. No Desire exists in their minds; and therefore, they are not induced to perform Action by any motive, except the fact that it is a duty enjoined by the Śāstras; and therefore, the words- sin or meritorious action, morality or immorality- can never be applied to the conduct of such persons, who are filled by a stainless and pure desire. They have gone beyond the bounds of sin and merit” (Tilak 1936: 515-16).

However, such descriptions of the Sthitaprajña found in varying texts such as *Gītā*, *Śāṅkara-bhāṣya*, the *Upaniṣads*, *Dhammapada* and *Bible* best described the time of the Kṛta-yuga when selfish people were indeed rare. In the Kaliyuga, selfless actions are uncommon and hence the characteristics embodied in a Sthitaprajña would also have to be altered. In the Uttama-puruṣa-nirupaṇa found in *Dāśabodha*, Swami Rāmdāsa described such an individual having qualities such as “[...] traditions, stories, stratagem, devices, circumstances, intentness of pursuit, inferences [drawn], cleverness, diplomacy, forbearance, acuteness, generosity, Metaphysical Knowledge, devotion, aloofness, indifference to the world, daringness

[courage], assiduity, determination, firmness, equability, discrimination and numerous other qualities” (Dāsabodha 18.2, quoted in Tilak 1936: 523). Spencer, too, argued that when surrounded by treacherous people absolute morality leads to utter ruin. In such a situation one must abjure absolute ethics and practice ‘relative ethics’ (Tilak 1986: 339). Such behaviour expected from a Karmayogī/ Sthitaprajña is only to serve one purpose- well-being of all living beings (‘sarvabhūtahite ratāha’).

7.7 Karma-yoga for Lokasaṅgraha: Moral Theory for Mass Politics

Could limitless compassion towards all living beings exhibited by a Karmayogī-Sthitaprajña come in conflict with the pride one possesses about one’s nation, community and religion? Tilak accepted the moral superiority of values such as forgiveness and compassion⁹⁹ and referred to *Gītā* (11.55), *Dhammapada* (338) and parts of the *Mahābhārata* (206.44) and *Matthew* (5.44, 5.39) which celebrated compassion and idealized kindness over cruelty. Such position seems to have been taken by Arjuna which prompted him to drop his weapons. And yet Kṛṣṇa constantly advises Arjuna to fight (“Yudhyasva”). Vyasa at another place in the *Mahābhārata* (Vana-parva, 28.8) suggests that the undoubtedly superior moral value like forgiveness also has exceptions. Tilak interpreted this dictum as meaning that absolute equal treatment to two different people is impossible, it is always relative in character and wrote, “Therefore, just as the principle of Non-Violence is not violated by killing an evil-doer, so also is the principle of Self-Identification or of Non-Enmity, which is observed by saints, in no way affected by giving condign punishment to evil doers. On the other hand, they acquire the merit of protecting others by having opposed the injustice of evil-doers” (Tilak 1986/1936: 355/548) and corroborated his argument by referring to the *Gītā* (4.7, 8).

Pride about one’s community (kuḷābhimāna), religion (dharmābhimāna) and nation (raṣṭrābhimāna) are justified if one acts out of a sense of genuine moral duty and without harming the interests of others. A morally and monetarily superior nation could never prosper in the company of inferior nations. Depending upon the moral evolution of a society the saints and Karmayogī of that society must set an example for their descendants. The ultimate aim of Karma-yoga-śāstra is moral evolution and emancipation of the entire human race. But if a contradiction were to arise between the pursuit of moral emancipation and Self-aggrandizing pride then the latter must be sacrificed. Such a magnanimous and charitable gesture was

expected from the British colonizers towards India as well as by the European powers which were eager to wage a World War. Tilak, quite smartly, quoted Vidura's advice to Dhṛtarāṣṭra on the eve of the Mahābhārata War in support of his argument: 'Sacrifice an individual for the family, family for the sake of the village, village for the sake of the community and even the earth for the sake of the Ātman' (*Mahābhārata Ādi-parva*, (115.36), quoted in Tilak 1986: 362).

Indians, on the hand other, were supposed to draw different conclusions about their moral duty. A Sthitaprajña continued to participate into the worldly affairs for one purpose, namely, Lokasaṅgraha (mass gathering). In the *Gītā* (3.20) Kṛṣṇa urged upon Arjuna that just as Karmayogī Janaka continued to work with a single agenda, namely, for Lokasaṅgraha so should Arjuna. Tilak calls Kṛṣṇa's insistence on Lokasaṅgraha as "[...] the last and the most important direction of the Blessed Lord to Arjuna in support of the doctrine of Karma-Yoga" (Tilak 1986/1936: 297/ 456). Lokasaṅgraha meant having equal regard for public welfare which did not mean "[...] 'making society of men' or 'making a farce of performing Action like other people, though one has the right to abandon Action, in order that ignorant people should not give up Action, and in order to please them' [...]" since such actions would add to ignorance of the masses (Tilak 1986/1936: 297-456). Tilak expanded the scope of the term Lokasaṅgraha thus:

"[T]he word 'saṅgraha' which has been defined in the dictionaries to mean 'protecting', 'keeping', regulating', etc, has to be taken in all those meanings according to the context; and when that is done "*Lokasaṅgraha*" (public benefit) means "binding men together and protecting , maintaining and regulating them in such a way that they might acquire that strength which results from mutual co-operation , thereby putting them on the path of acquiring merit while maintaining their good condition". The words 'welfare of a nation' have [sic.] been used in the same sense as in the *Manu-Smṛtī* (7.144) and the word "*Lokasaṅgraha*" has been defined in the *Śāṅkara-bhāṣya* as meaning [...] 'weaning men away from the tendency to take the path of wrong'" (Tilak 1936: 456-57, italics in the original).

The word loka in the Sanskrit compound Lokasaṅgraha means all domains of life, including the sphere of other-worldly existence. Rituals and rites which take care of the ancestors and deities and the entire paraphernalia which constitutes a religion also came under the ambit of the term loka. This conflict between the path of renunciation and the path of action is seen

throughout the *Gītā*. In chapter 18, considered a significant chapter by Tilak, Arjuna returns to the conflict one final time and requests Kṛṣṇa to differentiate between renunciation and sacrifice. Kṛṣṇa explains that a Karmayogī, after attaining Self-Knowledge, abandons desire for the fruits of the action. This abandonment of the desire is sacrifice. Saṁnyāsa, on the other hand, meant suspension of the kāmya aspect of the karma. But actions do not, *ipso facto*, cease to exist (*Gītā*, 18.1-6) (Tilak 1986: 314). This principle, Tilak points out, lies at the core of the Bhāgavata tradition and can be seen repeated in Nārada's advice to Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Bhāgavata Purana* and is identified by Vāmana Paṇḍit in his commentary on the *Gītā* entitled *Yathārtha-dīpikā* (Tilak 1986: 314).

As I have suggested earlier, the moral dilemma of Arjuna was considered to be synonymous with, metaphorically, the moral dilemma faced by India in the aftermath of the Swadeshi movement. For Tilak, the *Gītā* became a means, not only to address this central question, but also to 'settle his scores', as it were, with the contending philosophies of his time. Thus, Tilak places the Arjun dilemma in front of each of the important philosophical schools of the time, Utilitarianism, Intuitionism, Empiricism, German Romanticism and Śāṅkara Vedānta and argues that none of these traditions could provide an adequate solution to the dilemma before the India- namely, whether to oblige the colonial state under all circumstances or to resist colonialism through mass political action. While in prison he had learnt of the collapse of the Swadeshi Movement. Most of the important Extremist leaders were either in exile or were in prison. The strength of the Moderates was increasing and they continued with their old agenda of mending ties with the British government and seeking favours in return. In such a context the Indian nation, which was prone to passivity due to the extraordinary influence of the path of renunciation, had to be kept active and hence Tilak's choice of the 'Arjuna dilemma' was impeccable¹⁰⁰. Tilak used this opportunity to also disprove western theorists' claims that Indian knowledge systems lacked the science of ethics. J. S. Mill, for instance, in his essay *Theism* had accused Hinduism- the "most degraded form" of polytheistic worship- of being incapable of comprehending and conceptualizing a morally superior life (Mill 1923: 132). In Maharashtra, popular newspapers like *Sudharak* were making similar claims about Hinduism, ridiculing the basis of the Vedic rituals and interrogating the existence of the Divine. Tilak ended up criticizing all these sceptics by keeping the *Gītā* as the prime signifier of Divinely sanctioned moral norm for nationalism. It must be noted that while *Gītā* acted as the

supreme basis of knowledge and wisdom for Tilak, he also borrowed from other texts from within the darshanic and epic traditions¹⁰¹. Tilak was quite aware of the basic difference between the Vedic and post-Vedic philosophies and the modern Western philosophy. Unlike in the Western tradition 'liberation' was thought of in the Indian systems of Knowledge not only from social constraints but also at an ontic level. However, Tilak could not fall into the trap of Sanātana-discourse in refusing the role that western thought had played in realizing the potential of an individual or a community to be free. And in the context of colonialism and nationalism this was indeed of immediate consequence.

The second part of the disagreement is more crucial because the Saṁnyāsa- mārgis propagated renunciation from the worldly affairs. But Tilak asserts the necessity of action even after gaining Self-Knowledge (Jñānoṭtara Karma). For an Enlightened Being such Action will automatically be 'desireless' and will be directed towards one goal and hence consequential, the goal being, Lokasaṅgraha. This is an advice given by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna in the *Gītā* (3.20).

Tilak was well aware that the philosophical exposition found in Hindu epistemological knowledge systems were beyond the grasp of lay population. A thick philosophical system like the Vedānta propagates Knowledge as the only means to Liberation. However, Love and Faith are as important as Knowledge. Faith (śraddhā) is necessary when Knowledge reaches its limits. In the *Gītā* (6.47) Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna that even amongst the Jñānī and Karmayogī the one who has Faith in Him (śradhāvāna) is most dear to Him (Tilak 1986: 367-69). If 'desireless action' is ingrained in the mind and behaviour of a Karmayogī then by the same logic since a true bhakta surrenders his will to the Divine and acts, as a Divine agent and offers all the effects of his/her action as ablution to the God the bhakta too becomes a Karmayogī. In the *Gītā* (7.7, 7.14, 9.29, 9.4, 14.27, 15.18, 18. 66) Kṛṣṇa refers to himself in the first person and in the form of the Brahman. Bhakti path, since it rests upon duality (Dvaita) turns the nirākāra (Formless) Brahman into a God. However, Tilak cautioned that such transformations had led to different deities and places of worship and therefore had given rise to multiple sects and doctrines resulting into violence. He referred to the sectarian strife throughout the history of Europe and India (Tilak 1986: 378-82). Following this trajectory of thought, Lokasaṅgraha still remained the final purpose of a bhakta and Tilak gave the examples of

Hanūmāna and Bhīṣma who were devotees of the Lord and yet continued to perform their duties at the royal courts, dispensing justice and helping in the State activities.

Finally, Tilak turned to the contentious issue of who can become a devotee and whether women and Shudras have a right to attain moksha through bhakti. Since Vedas were not accessible to women and Shudras, the Mīmāṃsākas had maintained a stoic silence on the matter. *Vedānta Sūtras* (1.3.34-38) vehemently reject the right to perform shruti-based *yajnas* to these two communities. Bādarāyaṇa argues that Mokṣa is possible only by the Grace of the Divine (*Bādarāyaṇa Vedānta Sūtras* 3.4.38). Bhagavad Gītā (9.32) emphatically states that if women, Vaishyas, Shudras or even the Antyaja castes submit their actions' merits and sins to the Lord then they attain Mokṣa. Similar verses are also found in *Mahābhārata* (*Aśvamedha parva* 19.61 and *Vana parva* 206-14 and *Śānti parva* 260-63). From such statements Tilak inferred as follows-

“[That] man whose Reason has become equable towards all [Sāmya-buddhi], is the highest of men, whether he is a carpenter, or a merchant or a butcher by profession. It is clear that, according to the Blessed Lord, the spiritual worth of a man does not depend on the profession followed by him, or on the caste to which he belongs, but entirely on the purity of his conscience. When in this way, the gateway of Release has been opened to all people in society, there arises in the hearts of all such persons, a strange self-consciousness, of which the nature can be gauged from the history of the Bhagavata [sic] religion in Maharashtra” (Tilak 1936: 615).

7.8 The Sanātani Criticism of Gītā Rahasya: There is no Karmayoga!

Tilak's *Gītā Rahasya* was reinterpreting and rejecting the traditional Dharmaśāstra injunctions. *Gītā Rahasya* elicited unprecedented scholarly and critical responses from the native scholars and professors. The text was immediately exposed to numerous articles in newspapers and magazines eulogizing or criticizing it and its author (Kelkar 2012c: 519-537). In the following years numerous independent studies pertaining to *Gītā Rahasya* were written¹⁰². For the present purpose I have divided criticisms levied upon *Gītā Rahasya* into two ideological camps- the Sanātani and the Liberal.

The Sanātani response to *Gītā Rahasya* was spearheaded by Vishnu Vaman Bapat-śāstrī and Yashwant Vyankatesh Kolhatkar. Both defended the orthodox interpretation of *Bhagavad Gītā* and challenged the notion of Karma-yoga-śāstra and the accompanying reinterpretation of Lokasaṅgraha. Bapat-śāstrī's '*Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītārtha-bhāṣya: Mūla śloka, anvayārtha, Śāṅkara-bhāṣya, śabdaśaha bhāṣyārtha ani Gītā Rahasya parīkṣaṇārtha vistṛta tipā, koṣa yāṇsaha*' [*Gītārtha Bhāṣya*, hereafter] (1921) was a tenacious response to Tilak's translation of the Bhagavad Gītā in terms of Karma-yoga through a word-by-word defence of Śāṅkara's *Gītā-Bhāṣya*. Bapat-śāstrī used an extraordinary repertoire of ancient shastric texts to relocate the renunciation-based explanation of *Bhagavad Gītā* as authentic¹⁰³

Bapat-śāstrī rejected Tilak's interpretation of the *Gītā* and his attack on the Shankarite tradition. He accused Tilak of attempting to create a new sect - "sampradāy"- of Karmayogī by using his popularity for such baneful activities. Tilak's expertise and "natural right" (naisargika hakka) was restricted to the field of politics and Bapat-śāstrī suggested that it would of great public benefit if he remained confined to that field. He compared Tilak with Gautama Buddha who had rebelled against the Vedic religion. He believed that had Tilak not been incarcerated for six years and found leisure he would not have written *Gītā Rahasya*. The book, therefore, was a non-serious work on theology which had garnered undeserved popularity. Śāṅkara, Bapat-śāstrī argued, wrote the *Gītā bhāṣya* with the sole intention in spreading Advaita Vedānta and, thereby, show the right path for people to follow. Bapat-śāstrī believed that in the present scenario "[...] Tilak must be a partial reincarnation of Gautama Buddha" and proceeded to ridicule the pilgrimage centres built around the reliquaries of the Buddha. Bapat-śāstrī fears that in the years to come one may find such deification of Tilak, due to his extraordinary popularity, turning him from a mere mortal to mythical figure with divine qualities or even worse he may be reinstated as an 'Acharya'! (Bapat 1921: 9, my translation). Bapat-śāstrī's criticism of *Gītā Rahasya* is extremely elaborate. He considers *Śāṅkara-bhāṣya* as the pramāṇa text and evaluates *Gītā Rahasya* against it. Karma, according to Bapat- śāstrī, meant exclusively alter-rituals (yajña-karma) based upon shastric injunctions (śrouta-smārta karma) and not regular worldly activities. Therefore, a Vedic Smṛiti text such as the *Gītā* would always advise its readers to carry on with their karmas for attaining Knowledge and never for mundane activities such as Lokasaṅgraha. Bapat-śāstrī finds fundamental flaws in Tilak's interpretation of Yoga as 'skill in action'

(karmasu kauśalyam). The term kuśala is interpreted in the *Śāṅkara-bhāṣya* as the ‘condition of acting with an intellectual equanimity’ (samatva-buddhi-yoga). However, Śaṅkara regarded it of inferior quality compared with śāstra-based Jñāna-yoga because Intellect is incapable of determining right and wrong action.

Yashwant Vyankatesh Kolhatkar, a lawyer by profession, was asked to write a critical response to *Gītā Rahasya* which was published by Aryabhushan Press in 1916. Kolhatkar had immense respect for Tilak and the sacrifices which he had made for the national cause. However, Tilak’s interference in the domain of religion (śāstrārtha) was unpardonable. ‘All that glitters is not gold’ was Kolhatkar’s response to *Gītā Rahasya* (1916: 1). Moreover, Kolhatkar believed that Tilak had no right to declaim the *Gītā* or any other Dharmaśāstra text since traditionally the domain belongs to the Rishis. He cited the examples of medieval saint-poets like Ramdas, Tukaram and Eknath who did not write commentaries on the Prasthāna-trayī and hence, although respect-worthy, were not ‘creators of religion’ (dharmākāra). Tilak was not an Ācārya. He never studied the Vedas under the mentorship of a guru, he was not ordained into the circle of ‘Śrīti-Smṛiti’ studies by any ecclesiastical order, nor did he meditate in isolation, nor had he mastered Patanjali’s Yoga nor, finally, unlike his fellow revolutionaries like Sri Aurobindo had he the good fortune of the Cosmic Vision. Thus he, along with other modern intellectuals like Bhandarkar, Annie Besant or Justice Telang had no right to interfere in the practices or interpretations of the Sanātana Dharma (Kolhatkar 1916: 3-8).

Kolhatkar identifies Tilak’s intentions behind writing *Gītā Rahasya*, and particularly his karma-yoga-based interpretation, and attributes them to the on-going nationalist fervour. Each individual who was participating in nationalist activities needed to be enticed in sacrificing his/her selfish interests and act with a desireless mind (niṣkāma bhāvanā) for the larger social good. Kolhatkar ridiculed this idea by stating, “[S]hould a lawyer fight his case with no desire, a nationalist participate in political activities with no desire, a mendicant seek alms with no desire, a party/ faction fight its opponents with no desire [and] a person [full of] lust fulfil his desires with no desire?” (Kolhatkar 1916:2-3, my translation). The entire edifice of Karma-yoga-śāstra constructed by Tilak was based upon the co-relation between Vyavahāra and Kriyā. Karma, then, meant all human action (speech-acts, mental, bodily) bound by a common and superior motive of duty (kartavya-karma) and righteousness (vihita-karma) (Tilak 1936: 75). Kolhatkar finds fault in the hypothesis with which Tilak was working, namely,

pravṛttipara-karma-yoga. Tilak's propositions about karma-yoga would have made perfect sense if Arjuna had raised doubts about violence and war in general before the commencement of the Great Battle. But the *Mahābhārata* text does not mention any such moral dilemmas troubling Arjuna before the commencement of the War. In fact, Arjuna is quite ready to engage in the battle. He asks his charioteer Kṛṣṇa to move the chariot at the centre of the battlefield so that Arjuna could observe the military- formations of his enemies and strategize retaliation (*Gītā*, 1.21-23). Thus, the sudden urge by Arjuna for renunciation instead of fighting the War is explained by Kolhatkar as a *raison-de-etre* to know the nature of gnosis found in the Vedānta from Kṛṣṇa. Hence, he persists with his enquiry into Self-Knowledge despite Kṛṣṇa's stern commandment to abdicate all doubts and fight. Kṛṣṇa does not prioritize karma-yoga over other paths to reach Knowledge, but codifies it depending upon an individual's caste- based rights (*adhikāra*) [Kolhatkar 1916: 31-34].

However, in the "new interpretation" offered by Tilak transgressions of caste boundaries was justified in the Karma-yoga-śāstra. Tilak regarded the famous verse (*Gītā* 2.47) propounding the core philosophy of Karma-yoga-śāstra. In his short comment on the verse Tilak wrote that the short verse reflected "the entire import of the Karma-Yoga" which could be called its *catuh-sūtrī* which are divided into the following four propositions- a) An agent's authority extends only to the performance of Action; b) An agent's authority does not extend towards the Fruit (resulting from the Action); c) The Action-Fruit (Result) are interconnected and yet the agent must abdicate the 'desire' for Fruit; d) Thus, the agent need not forfeit Action but just the 'desire' for results (Tilak 1936: 895-95). In the fifth chapter of *Gītā Rahasya* (1986) Tilak explored the origin and nature of happiness and suffering (*sukha-dukhḥa-viveka*). According to Vedānta the source of all suffering is in *tṛṣṇā* (desire) which is produced by human sensory perceptions (*Gītā* 3.34). The external/environmental factors perceived by the senses produce misery. Therefore, when an individual performs his/her duty (*svadharma*) without any 'desire for results' the resulting action-consequence cycle does not affect the agent. Such an agent is called 'Sthitaprajña' in the *Gītā* (2.56) (Tilak 1986: 101).

The same verse was interpreted by Kolhatkar differently by pointing to *Svadharma- sthāpanā*, that is, establishment of (and the right knowledge about) one's true caste duties as the central message of the *Gītā*. Based upon the Mīmāṃsā method of 'Upakramopasaṃhāra' Kolhatkar lays out an alternative 'catuh-sūtrī' based upon *Gītā* 3.35 namely- a) the well-being of any

Hindu is to follow his/her duties (Varṇa-dharma), b) transgression of one's duties (Parā-dharma) may seem enchanting but must be avoided diligently, c) moksha is guaranteed to the one who succumbs to death while performing one's dharma, d) Parā-dharma leads to catastrophe (Kolhatkar 1916: 38). As for the term yoga found in the *Gītā*, Kolhatkar argued that it alludes to the different systems of post-Vedic thought such as Samkhya, Upanishads, Jñāna, Saṁnyāsa, Bhakti and (Patanjali's) Aṣṭāṅga-mārga, all of which, prophesized renunciation over 'Activism' to attain Liberation. Therefore, Tilak's interpretation of yoga in terms of 'expertise in Action' (karmasu kauśalyam) was improper and reflected his 'sectarian' mindset.

According to Tilak renunciation did not necessarily end desires (vāsanā or tṛṣṇā). Desires are essential for human survival. He thus urged people to continue to perform their household activities. But instead of remaining stuck at the mundane activities which produced base-level thoughts one must strive to evolve to higher levels of consciousness which will help in redefining one's existence. Tilak took recourse to *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, *Jābāla Upaniṣad*, *Aṣṭāvakra Gītā* and *Avadhūta Gītā* and the *Śānti-parva* from the *Mahābhārata* as well as the Jain tradition and the Tibetan branch of Buddhism to substantiate his claim (Tilak 1936: 87-89) and drew an analogy of a child who gets happy if someone pops a sugar cube in her mouth. Thus, the *Gītā* (3.34) states that the source of human happiness or misery, to some extent, is dependent upon the human sensory perception and that desire is not the cause of suffering. The transcendentalism entailed in the *Gītā* is to act with a harmonious intellect and energy (Sāmya-buddhi). For this an acute sense of dissatisfaction (asantoṣa) towards the present conditions of existence must be harboured by a human being. Dissatisfaction, here, was not to be construed in terms of material prosperity. Tilak believed that rebellion against the present conditions is the seed which carries the future of prosperity, efforts, progress and even Mokṣa. Kolhatkar responded to the Tilak's idea of 'dissatisfaction leading to Activity' by giving the same example of a child who desires after a sugar cube despite never having tasted it before which makes her happy. Misery and happiness, argued Kolhatkar was a "hereditary acquisition" (vaṁśa-paramparāgata) and had nothing to do with dissatisfaction or the path of renunciation. The 'hereditary acquisitions' were qualities which an individual carried forward through multiple reincarnations and therefore were unrelated to external conditions (Kolhatkar 1916: 60-61).

Kolhatkar was frustrated with Tilak's comparison of the Indian Knowledge system with the western ethical discourse and finds it unnecessary, simply because the Vedic corpus had already prescribed many moral injunctions for its followers. But Tilak wanted to create an indigenous ethical discourse and he seems to have invented it, by taking recourse, to the ancient texts and come up with the trio-concepts: practical reason, harmonious intellect and well-being of all sentient beings. Any individual following these three rules in his/her action performs karma-yoga. Tilak misunderstood 'right conduct' prescribed by the śāstras, laments Kolhatkar, because he based his thesis on a Shruti like the *Bhagavad Gītā* which is inferior to Vedas and the Smriti texts and hence misjudged the focal point for ethical discourse in the Vedic religion (Kolhatkar 1916: 68-80). Kolhatkar added-

"There was no reason for him [Tilak] to seek refuge in the western philosophy. The Vedicists are taught ethics right at the beginning of their studies. Vedicists know that without following ethics no action, ritual or gnosis can bear fruit. We Vedicists have been advised to move beyond Intellect since Intellect is considered inferior. Adherence to Śrīti and Smṛti texts followed by right conduct is in descending order of importance" (Kolhatkar 1916: 84, my translation).

He goes on to state that principles such as compassion, abstinence, non-violence, meditation, end of ego are followed by all the Vedicists and hence any cause for separately conceiving the science of ethics becomes redundant (Kolhatkar 1916: 84). Kolhatkar went on to explain that in the 19th century, the Western philosophy branched out into three conflicting schools of thought known as Intuitionism, Utilitarianism and Social Darwinism. Western thought since Socratic times was concerned with the 'why' question and Tilak seems to be interested in questioning the rationale behind the shastric 'moral codes of conduct' rather than following them *ad verbatim*. Needless to say, that for Kolhatkar the instructions of 'right conduct' could be found elsewhere and he puts forth his arguments by invoking textual authorities like *Yājñavalkya* and *Manu Smṛtis*, the *Brāhmaṇa* texts and retorts-

"In the Kaliyuga, or to put it in today's language in the age of revolutionary thought, if the writer of Rahasya [Tilak] wishes to propound a new religion then I will not interfere in his endeavour. All I wish to say is that dharma is not to be found in the utterances made by Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavad Gītā. True dharma is Vedic and eternal, it is based upon Shrutis and Smritis and is śāstra-based. Just as Jesus Christ distorted Judaism to give birth to a new religion called

Christianity one does not find any alterations made to the Vedic religion in the Bhagavad Gītā and hence Kṛṣṇa has not pronounced any new religion” (Kolhatkar 1916: 161, my translation).

Kolhatkar’s greatest fear was that the Karma-yoga-śāstra, as developed by Tilak, would be interpreted by the later generations as an exercise of absolute free-will and that if one is merely doing one’s occupation with a desireless resolve then one is performing the ‘right conduct’. Kolhatkar puts his fear quite bluntly when he states that if a Brahmin were forced to go to Africa to work as an indentured labourer and was forced to clean the toilets then he ought to commit suicide rather than following Tilak’s advice of ‘desireless action’ (Kolhatkar 1916: 172). He submitted his frank opinion in the concluding pages of his criticism by arguing that Gītā Rahasya was not a text of religious exposition but merely a piece of literature because “[...] the author of this text does not possess any knowledge of Vedānta or the Sanātana Vedic dharma, neither through preponderance on treatises nor through knowledge handed down in the lineage of the gurū-śiṣya tradition” (Kolhatkar 1916: 246, my translation).

7.9 The Liberal Defence of the Gītā Rahasya:

The three sources of frustration which Kolhatkar seems to have faced with *Gītā Rahasya*, namely, new interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, imposing science of ethics upon the text and defiance of the Sanātana dharma, were regarded as the great achievements of the text by Vaman Malhar Joshi. For Joshi *Gītā Rahasya* was “[...] a systematic, thorough and detailed interpretation of the Gītā, done in a severely scientific spirit, expressed in an attractive style, embodying all that was valuable in previous commentaries, ancient as well as modern, sifting all arguments and above all *exhibiting the doctrine of the book as an organic and artistic whole with its several parts in their proper position*” (Joshi 1983: 168, emphasis in the original). He compares *Gītā Rahasya* with Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* [1859] and stated that although the idea of Evolution was known since the times of Aristotle, it was Darwin who first systematically theorized it. Thus, he found the chief value of *Gītā Rahasya* not in its “[...] *brand newness* or otherwise of the theories propounded in it but by the *character of the treatment*. If the latter be exhaustive, comprehensive and scientific and if it, moreover, succeeds in presenting the teachings of the Gītā in such a way as to make of them a logical, rational and organic whole, then surely it would be a carping and too fastidious a nature which could deny

the high need of praise which he [Tilak] deserves for his work” (Joshi 1983:169, emphasis in the original).

Through his *Nīti-śāstra praveśa* (1919) Joshi tried to explore the right method for conducting action (*kārya-akārya kasoṭī*) within the context of a modern civil society and a nation-state. Joshi was deeply dissatisfied with the traditional Vedic determinant-doctrines for right action partly because of their exclusivist character, an over-reliance on metaphysical idealism and negative connotation to sensory perceptions. While some of the modern Western philosophies such as Utilitarianism gave significance to human sensibilities others such as Immanuel Kant favoured morality of Action in terms of Universal Moral Law. Utilitarian thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and Henry Sidgwick gave too much importance to individual conscience, consequentiality and the moral worth of an agent. Ipso facto the purpose of modern Western ethical theories was limited to ‘sensory pleasure’ or ‘material happiness’ (Joshi 1919: 140-197). Joshi agreed with Tilak’s criticism of the *Ādhibhautika* (Materialist) and *Ādhidaivika* (Theological) but argued that the *Gītā Rahasya* got engrossed into complex theological explanations. Moreover, Tilak’s insistence on ‘Karma-yoga-śāstra’ based upon a singular textual tradition (Vedic) did not take into consideration the quotidian articulations of morality. As with the Western ethical philosophies the complicated Vedantic principles invoked by Tilak were deemed incomprehensible to quotidian masses whose notions about right and wrong action were humble in orientation.

The quotidian notions about morality are articulated in simple customary ideals such as truthfulness (*satyam vade*), respect towards elders and deities and a shared sense of responsibility towards all sentient and non-sentient beings. Human morality is governed by laws of nature, which, if broken, result in dire consequences. Similarly, human society and inter-personal relations are governed by socio-religious ethics and State laws. While the transgression of the former result into a reduction of personal esteem, the contravention of the latter leads to criminal proceedings. Thus, humans develop virtues such as obedience, compassion, harmony, serenity, etc. out of a dual focus on deriving ‘common material-social-spiritual good’ and fear of the modern State-Laws (Joshi 1919: 245-48). Joshi argued that every human being wishes to lead a good life and sees his/her welfare in the overall prosperity of the nation. A humble farmer who “works hard, feeds his family, remains loyal to his wife, does not cheat anyone of their possessions, helps his neighbour, shares amicable relation

with his peers, is humble and keeps his house and surroundings clean is in a way contributing to the nation's welfare" (Joshi 1919: 217, my translation). Joshi called the inculcation of simple ethical values 'Saujanya-sadbuddhivāda' or Civic Rational Intellect where one would witness a simultaneous growth in the collective intellect of all human beings complemented by advancements in science leading to an evolution of overall collective ethical behaviour. In such an evolved society, moral dilemmas such as saving the life of a child or protecting a valuable piece of art would not arise because the ethical behaviour of an individual caught in such a dilemma would act in tandem with his senses and aesthetic sensibilities. One need not wait for a Karmayogī to lead the nation since each individual who is virtuous and adds beauty to his life and those around him is worthy to be called as a Karmayogī. Such a behaviour grants immense satisfaction and peace to human heart. Joshi wrote, "Love is a part of human soul. Aestheticism and beauty make up the other part of the human heart" (Joshi 1919: 218, my translation).

Joshi clearly spelt out the intricate relation between personal morals with the ethical disposition of modern nation-states. Invoking Aristotle's notion of virtue-ethics Joshi argued that all citizens in modern nation-states must inculcate values such as self-respect, liberty and equality. While desirable in themselves such values articulated in modern Western ethical doctrines did not take into account the holistic growth of an individual and/or a community. Therefore, the transcendental approach to 'common good' prescribed in the Vedānta tradition was certainly superior (Joshi 1919: 187-192). However, the discourse was covered in thick metaphysics and articulated in archaic Sanskrit which is not accessible to all human beings either because he/she does not carry the (caste) authority to gain such Knowledge or because she is genuinely disinterested in it.

Therefore, Joshi proposed a democratic and simpler version of ethics. Each individual can follow simpler ethical dictums such as social welfare, welfare of the nation, public welfare, altruism, education, development of aesthetic sentiments, emerging out of an ethical harmonious Intellect (Naitika sadbuddhi). For these elements to function in a coherent manner Joshi suggests that each individual must act with civility (saujanya) with each other. Such a civilized intellect will be able to recognize the differences in humans and would respect these differences. Finally, on a macro-level, Joshi suggests (reminiscent of the Romantic Ideal of the time) that the future State(s) would consist of citizens who would be Artists-as-

Karmayogī. The State would help in disseminating this Knowledge to people and its incapacity to do so would allow the citizens to replace it with a new government (Joshi 1919: 219-291).

Vaman Malhar Joshi's approach to ethics is evidently different from Tilak. Tilak reached the concept of the Karma-yoga through his repeated readings and analyses of the *Gītā* and the corroborative evidences from other ancient texts. Hermeneutical devices belonging to the Mīmāṃsā School as well as modern comparative linguistics was extensively used by Tilak. Joshi on the other hand, reached Knowledge out of its scientific validity and experience-based acknowledgement. The inferences drawn out of such critical exposure to the ethical theories prohibited Joshi from turning into a Sanātani. But he also knew that knowledge (both ontological and epistemological) had its limits and thus he could not completely separate himself from some aspects of the Hindu ancient wisdom. He exhibited, unlike Kolhatkar or Bapat-śāstrī, a deep sense of scepticism towards Vedic texts but at the same time his conservatism stopped him a few steps short of being a radical. His belief in the Vedānta metaphysical truths prevented his being able to reach the higher truth of aesthetic experiences typical of the European Romantic tradition of his time.

7.10 Conclusion:

The varied reception and responses to Gita Rahasya, from sanātani and liberal traditions, points towards an extraordinary intellectual ferment in late colonial Maharashtra. Tilak tried his best to respond to some of his critics and reiterated his reading karma-yoga based reading of the *Gītā* (Tilak 1976d: 845-872; Tilak 1995: 794-798). He held regular discussions with Dr. Kurtakoti (chief priest of the Śāṅkara-maṭha at Karveer) and also enticed Swami Satyadhyantirth- a renowned Vedic scholar and the chief priest of the Mādhva-dvaitī school- to enter into a debate over the Dualist interpretation of *Gītā* (Satyadhyantirth and Tilak 1917). He hoped to rope in Hindu ecclesiastical support for his activist-based *Gītā*-reading. In subsequent years debates around Dharmaśāstra reached new heights in Maharashtra through the production of significant textual corpus¹⁰⁴. Tilak's reformed and repurposed reading of the *Gītā* exhibited 'polite dismissal' of its sanātani defenders but stopped short of provoking a 'radical dismissal' of its contending western philosophical tradition. The debate, to put it in other words, is a signifier of the classic dilemma internal to the unfinished project of modern India.

Around the time that the liberals and the sanātani sections of Maharashtra were debating over *Gītā Rahasya* Tilak applied his theory of Karma-yoga-śāstra and Lokasaṅgraha to nationalist politics. Tilak spent his final six years regrouping the scattered Extremist faction, establishing the Indian Home Rule League, and agitating for Self-Government. He regularly invoked the message of desireless Action during his speeches delivered in different parts of India and England. For instance, in a speech delivered at Amravati in 1917 (Tilak 1919: 258-63), Tilak reminded his audience of the Karma-yoga-śāstra propounded in the *Gītā* and added- “[...] there is a fundamental unity underlying the Logos (Ishvara), man, and world. The world is in existence because the Logos has willed it so. It is His Will that holds it together. Man strives to gain union with God; and when this union is achieved, the individual Will merges in the mighty Universal Will. When this is achieved will the individual say; “I shall do no action, and I shall not help the world”- the world which is because the Will with which he has sought union has willed it to be so? It does not stand to reason.” (Tilak 1919: 262).

Tilak repeatedly stressed through his writings and speeches that India claim to Svarājya (Self-Government) was Divinely Willed and did not arise out of Egoist Self-interest. Just as an individual had the basic right to Liberation (Mokṣa) so was it the right of every nation and its citizens for Self-determination (Svarājya). Therefore, each individual was expected to exercise the right (in the twin sense) to Svarājya (Liberation), unite in a common cause and act in a morally righteous manner to achieve it.