

THE ROLE OF HERMENEUTICS IN UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT OF THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ

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ABSTRACT

Hermeneutics plays a very important role in understanding and interpreting the text of the Bhagavadgītā. The Bhagavadgītā has unique hidden and harmonised meaning. But, for the critics, Bhagavadgītā seems to be a text where some verses contradict other verses. The commentators are of the opinion that the verses 2.45 and 15.15 contradict each other and there cannot be a unity of meaning of the whole text. The former verse says traigunyaṣayā vedā nīstraigunyaḥ bhavārjuna which means 'the Vedas have for its subject matter consisting of three guṇas, O Arjuna, be free from the three guṇas, and the latter says vedeḥ ca sarvaḥ ahaṁ eva vedyo vedāntakṛit vedavit eva ca ahaṁ which means 'I alone am known by all the Vedas and also I am the knower of the Vedas.' Again according to the critics 4.13 is contradictory where Kṛṣṇa is the actor as well as non – actor or non – agent. But, if we go deeper into meanings of the words of the verses then we find that they are not contradictory. It is the failure to unify the meanings and to harmonize the text that is creating difficulties unless one is ready to find meaning in the seeming contradiction one cannot understand Bhagavadgītā. Contradiction is not the problem of the Bhagavadgītā, but it is the problem for the reader or the commentators to harmonize. Traditional commentators like Sāṃkarachārya, Rāmānujachārya, Madhvācharya, Abhinavagupta etc. have not claimed the text to be contradictory. It is the only western scholars and under the influence of them the modern Indian commentators, who follow the text critical method of exegesis to find the original Bhagavadgītā and subsequent layers of interpolations who notice so called contradictions in the various portions of the Bhagavadgītā. The problem of the commentators is that they have not yet got hold of the hermeneutics suitable to the Bhagavadgītā. The hermeneutics must follow the part and whole relationship of understanding the text. In this paper focus will be made on how hermeneutic way of understanding involving hermeneutic circle, fusion of horizon and prejudices, can lead us to understand the unity of meaning of the Bhagavadgītā.

Keywords

Gītā, text, Hermeneutics Circle, Fusion of Horizon, Prejudices.

INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutics involves circular relationship or part and whole relationship, prejudices, fusion of horizon and it plays a vital role in understanding and interpreting text. In this paper an attempt is made to discuss how these three processes of understanding and interpretation contribute to understand and interpret a text like Bhagavadgītā.

HERMENEUTICS CIRCLE IS ONE OF THE WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETING TEXT

Hermeneutics circle is one of the ways of understanding and interpreting text. Hermeneutics is not a method and not only one way of understanding text. It is just a beginning. In this way of understanding we understand a text. But the question emerges: why different people understand differently? Why some understand properly; some understand poorly, and even some do not understand at all? The answer is in what Heidegger writes in his work 'Being and Time' regarding the hermeneutic circle (p.153): "it is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing, and we genuinely grasp this possibility only when we have understood that our first, last, and constant task in interpreting is never to allow our fore – having, fore – sight, and fore – conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by

working out these fore – structures in terms of the things themselves" which is a description of the hermeneutic circle. If one insists on understanding a text by his own fanciful fore – conceptions, he cannot understand a text, or he may lead to misunderstanding of the text. So, one must be ready to revise one's projected meaning on the basis of fore – conceptions requiring revision of the latter keeping in view the thing that the text is speaking about. According to the hermeneutic circle, one's fore – conceptions cannot be examined independently from the meaning of the text, i.e. the whole text.

To understand and interpret the text of the Bhagavadgītā, the reader has to apply the hermeneutic circle as a way of understanding the meaning. The commentators who are reading and interpreting the Bhagavadgītā without hermeneutics circle say that some verses of the text are contradictory.

Prejudices and Fusion of Horizon are another ways of understanding and interpreting text. What Heidegger calls fore – having, fore – sight and fore – conceptions, Gadamer calls 'prejudices'. In this way prejudices involve many things, such as fore – conception or fore – meanings or projecting a meaning before understanding and interpretation. So, the person who is trying to read and understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text when there emerges an initial meaning. If the projected meaning does not fit the whole text, he again projects another meaning which is new for the text. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and

interpretation of text.

1. It is evident that every interpreter or reader has prejudices while reading or interpreting a text. Prejudices help us to understand and interpret a text. Prejudices cannot be removed, but can be corrected. One must correct the prejudices while reading the text, or one must not approach the text directly relying solely on the fore – meaning already available to him; rather examine legitimacy and origin of the fore – meanings. Therefore, while reading and interpreting a text, one begins with the prejudices or fore – meaning or fore – conception, and then corrects these prejudices in the process of reading the text to integrate the meaning of parts with the meaning of the whole text and the meaning of the whole text with the meaning of the parts. In this process, one must project a fore – meaning and then correct it till the whole and the parts are integrated. But, one thing should be remembered that one must not be stick blindly to his fore – meaning, if he wants to understand the meaning of the text. But that does not mean that he must forget all the fore – meanings which one comes with.

2. On the other hand, horizon means the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, one speaks of narrowness of horizon. For Gadamer, the person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over – values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, “to have a horizon” means not being limited to what is nearby, but being able to see beyond it. The person who has a horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon whether it is near or far, great or small.

Fusion of horizon broadens the limits of knowledge and experience. The knowledge of the past and the knowledge of the present are different, and when both are fused new knowledge emerges. The knowledge of the past and the present are two different horizons of the text and the reader. While reading a text, one finds these horizons as independent of each other to begin with. These horizons, when get fused with mutual revision are the united horizon of the meanings of the text. Therefore, understanding a text means fusion of his past and present horizons or it may be the horizon of the text and the reader. While reading a text, he projects a fore – meaning and after reading a text he gets another meaning. These are two different horizons. And the horizons of the text and the reader change. One must unite the independent horizons for understanding and interpreting a text.

HOW HERMENEUTICS PLAYS ROLE IN UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETING THE TEXT OF THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ

Now, an attempt is made to discuss how hermeneutics plays role in understanding and interpreting the text of the Bhagavadgītā. The Bhagavadgītā is essentially a text in which the meanings to be understood is internally connected to each and every verse and it is important to read carefully from the very beginning of the chapter of the text. The Bhagavadgītā in general is very difficult to understand in ordinary way. But, it can be understood also by the ways of hermeneutics mentioned above. Through the hermeneutics way of understanding any text can be understood and interpreted.

The commentators or interpreters, who have not gone through the hermeneutics way of understanding text, will find Bhagavadgītā contradictory. Therefore, the commentators are of the opinion that the verses II.45 and XV.15 of Bhagavadgītā contradict each other and there cannot be a unity of meaning of the whole text. The II.45 says: “*traiguṇyaviṣayā vedā niṣtraiguṇyaḥ bhavārjuna.*” The literal meaning is that “the Vedas have for its subject matter consisting of three guṇas, O Arjuna, be free from the three guṇas.” On the other hand, the XV.15 says: “*vedeḥ ca sarvaḥ ahaṁ eva vedvo vedāntakrit vedavit eva ca ahaṁ.*” The literal meaning is that “I [Kṛṣṇa] alone am known by all the Vedas and also I [Kṛṣṇa] am the knower of the Vedas and doer of the vedānta.” In II.45, the saṁskṛt word ‘traiguṇya’ is not referred only to person, but it may mean any objects which are triguṇya, like the Vedas also which are traiguṇya.

According to the critics, in both the verses “*traiguṇyaviṣayā vedā niṣtraiguṇyaḥ bhavārjuna*” and “*vedeḥ ca sarvaḥ ahaṁ eva vedvo vedāntakrit vedavit eva ca ahaṁ*” contradict each other. For critics, in the first verse, i.e. II.45, Kṛṣṇa is criticising the Vedas and the guṇas, since it is taught in the verse: “*niṣtraiguṇyaḥ bhavārjuna*” which means “be free from the guṇas”, because Vedas have three guṇas. And, in the second verse, i.e. XV.15, Kṛṣṇa is supporting the Vedas which have three guṇas by saying: “*vedeḥ ca sarvaḥ ahaṁ eva vedvo*” which means “I [Kṛṣṇa] alone am known by all the Vedas.” For them, when it is said “I [Kṛṣṇa] alone am known by all the Vedas” means Kṛṣṇa has three guṇas, since He has already taught that “Vedas have for its subject matter consisting of three guṇas” and says Arjuna to be *niṣtraiguṇyaḥ*. But, how is it possible, ask the critics? It is possible. If we go deeper into meanings of the words of the verses then we find that they are not contradictory, since, in III.15 Kṛṣṇa says Arjuna: “*karma brahmōdbhavaṁ viddhi brahmākṣarasamudbhavaṁ.*” In the verse, karma means ‘all actions’, brahmōdbhavaṁ means ‘originated from the Vedas’, viddhi means ‘to know’, brahma means ‘Vedas’, akṣarasamudbhavaṁ means ‘originate from Supreme Person’ i.e. Brahman. Therefore, what it says is, “know that all actions to be originated from Brahma i.e. Vedas and the Vedas originate from the Supreme Person i.e. Brahman.” In this sense, Vedas are traiguṇya, but it should have been *niṣtraiguṇyaḥ*, since Vedas are originated from Him (Brahman), yet they are traiguṇya and Kṛṣṇa is *niṣtraiguṇyaḥ*. Again, in XIII.14 it is taught Brahman’s saguṇa and nirguṇa character. The verse says: “*sarvendriyaguṇabhāsaṁ sarvendriyavivarjitam – asaktam sarvabhṛta ca eva nirguṇam guṇabhoktr ca.*” The literal meaning is that “knowing with all the functions of objects of the senses, yet devoid of the senses. Unattached, yet supports all and devoid of the guṇas, yet enjoyer of the guṇas.” So, it has been seen that He (Brahman) is not attached to the senses though He (Brahman) knows all the functions of the object of the senses, and unattached to all, yet supports all. He is also devoid of all the guṇas, such as sattva, rajas and tamas, but He is also the enjoyer of the guṇas. In the verse, one should understand that saguṇa cannot be nirguṇa, but nirguṇa can also be saguṇa. He (Brahman) is saguṇa, because He (Brahman) is the enjoyer of the guṇas, since all the guṇas originate from Him (Brahman). He is nirguṇa, because He (Brahman) transcends all the guṇas and guṇas do not bind Him (Brahman) though all the guṇas

originate from Him. Therefore, it can be said that the verses XV.15 and II.45 do not contradict each other; rather they support each other.

In the above statements, the contrast is between *traiguṇya* and *niṣtraiguṇya*. Brahman is *niṣtraiguṇya* and Vedas are *traiguṇya*. Since, Vedas are *traiguṇya* and *traiguṇya* is always associated with pointing beyond itself to that *niṣtraiguṇya*. Just as *prakṛti* is associated with *Purūṣa*, *prakṛti* cannot be without *purūṣa*. To reach *purūṣa*, one needs to go through *prakṛti*. Similarly, to reach *niṣtraiguṇya*, one needs to go through the three *guṇas*. Vedas are *traiguṇya* and by this it can be reached *purūṣa* or Brahman. But, once Brahman is attained which is *niṣtraiguṇya* and is beyond *guṇas*, then there is no need of Vedas anymore. But, it does not mean that Vedas become useless and loss its qualities. Just as when there is flood everywhere filled with water, a pond filled with water does not loss its capacity of water and that water is the same as it is in the pond. Water of the pond never loses its qualities though the pond is filled with flood. One does not need to go to the pond when flood is there. Similarly, when Brahman is attained then there is no need of going through Vedas to learn from it. This is the idea in original.

Therefore, it has been observed that Kṛṣṇa is not criticising Vedas and the *guṇas* as the critics claim in the above verses, but Kṛṣṇa supports it, because *guṇas* are in everything. *Guṇas* are the essential aspects of performance of action, but at the same time, one can be *niṣtraiguṇya* i.e. free from the *guṇas*. In *Bhagavadgītā*, in chapter XVIII from the verses 20 – 28 Kṛṣṇa taught Arjuna the three kinds of *jñāna*, *karma* and *kartā* according to the division of the *guṇas*. But, at the same time, Veda Vyāsa is trying to convey the fourth kind of *jñāna*, *karma* and *kartā* in the *Bhagavadgītā* though it is not mentioned directly in the verses. And that fourth kind is beyond *guṇas* which is not on the basis of *guṇas*, and that is called *niṣtraiguṇya*. And, this fourth kind can also be known as *guṇātita karma*, *kartā* and *jñāna*. So, the II.45 has significance of saying Arjuna to be *niṣtraiguṇya*, that is, one can be in the world without the three *guṇas* even there are three *guṇas*. Even, in XIV.25, Kṛṣṇa taught Arjuna that, “he who is equal to regards and disregards, friends and foes, who is devoid of the attitude of the agency of action, he is the person beyond *guṇas* or he is *guṇātita*.”

Contradiction is not the problem of the *Bhagavadgītā*, but it is the problem for the reader or the commentators who are unable to understand and harmonize the meaning of the text. Again, the verse IV.13 itself is said to be contradictory for the critics where it is taught about both *kartā* and *akartā*. The verse says: “*cāturvarṇyam mayā sṛtam guṇa karma vibhāgaśa – tasya kartārampī māṁ viddhi akartāraṁ avyayam*.” The meaning of the verse is that “I [Kṛṣṇa] have created four *varṇas* according to the division of the *guṇa* and *karma*. Of that being the agent or doer i.e. *kartā* know Me [Kṛṣṇa] to be imperishable and *akartā* or non – doer. In this verse, for the critics Kṛṣṇa is both *kartā* and *akartā*. But, how is it possible to be both *kartā* and *akartā* which is contradictory for the critics. It is possible for Kṛṣṇa to be both *kartā* and *akartā*. One has to reconcile this idea through the hermeneutics way of understanding a text.

In this verse, Kṛṣṇa is the actor and yet He is not the agent of the action, He is not bound by the action, and He does not have desires for the actions. If somebody knows this idea,

then he is not even bound by the action. That is, Kṛṣṇa has created the four *varṇas*; therefore, He is the *kartā* i.e. actor and yet action does not bind Him; therefore, He is *akartā* (*akartā avyayam*.)

Kṛṣṇa is *kartā* because He performs action through the means of *prakṛti*, since *prakṛti* also originates from Him. He is *akartā*, because He does not perform action directly, because He is distinct from *prakṛti*, but is not separated from the *prakṛti*. *Prakṛti* is His means of performing action. Both *prakṛti* and the Brahman are two sides of the same thing. One should remember that both *prakṛti* and Brahman should be present in the performance of the action. Therefore, it is cleared that He is both *kartā* and *akartā* and there is no contradiction in it. For an easy understanding, it is needed to give an example of *kartā* and *akartā* i.e. how Brahman is both *kartā* and *akartā*? It is considered a university to be an Institution. An institution can be termed as ‘*samaṣṭi purūṣa*’ which is a ‘Collective Person.’ The *samaṣṭi purūṣa* does not perform action directly. Yet, the action of the university is done by itself i.e. the *samaṣṭi purūṣa* or Collective Person. How is it? This is possible by the means of the employees employed in the university. In the institution or in the university all the actions are performed by the employees collectively and yet, it is said that all the actions are done by university or the institution. Therefore, the Collective Person is performing all the actions of the university by the employees, yet He is devoid of all the actions. That is why He is said to be both *kartā* and *akartā*. He is *kartā*, because all these actions are His action and He is *akartā*, because He performs by the employees of the institution.

Besides, the XI.34 of the *Bhagavadgītā*, for the critics seems to be entirely contradictory. The verse says: “*droṇanam ca bhīṣmam ca jayadratham ca karnam tathānyānpī yoddhavirāṇ – mayāhatāntvaṁ jahi mā vyathitshā yuddhasva jetāsi raṇe sapatnān*.” The literal meaning is that “kill Droṇa, Bhīṣma, Jayadratha and Karṇa and also other mighty/heroic warrior who have been already killed by Me [Kṛṣṇa]. Do not grieve, fight. You [Arjuna] will be victorious over the enemies.” Here, there are two problems for the critics. First asking Arjuna to kill who have been already killed and secondly, pre – victory of Arjuna decided by Kṛṣṇa. In the first problem, the contradiction is ‘how is it possible to kill who have already been killed by Kṛṣṇa or how can Kṛṣṇa ask Arjuna to kill who have already been killed by Himself?’ In the second half of the verse, Kṛṣṇa is giving pre – victory and a decided fruits of action and permitting him to expect the fruit of action, but in the verses II.47, III.19, V.10, 12 and 14 of *Bhagavadgītā* Kṛṣṇa is asking Arjuna to abandon the fruits of all action.

But, if we study carefully the text through the hermeneutics way of understanding, we find that there is no contradiction. First, there is a significance of saying Arjuna ‘to kill which has already been killed.’ In the III.15 it is said ‘every action is emerged from Him and done by Him.’ In IV.14 it is said Kṛṣṇa is entirely engaged in performing action, all these mentioned in XI.34 are killed by Him, and in XI.33 Kṛṣṇa taught Arjuna ‘to be just an instrument of performing action.’ Kṛṣṇa is here also both *kartā* and *akartā*. He is *kartā*, because He has already killed the heroic warriors, and *akartā*, because He is asking Arjuna to kill all the great warriors, since he is the instrument of performing His action.

Again, for the second half of the verse, it seems to be contradictory; but there is no contradiction in it. Because Kṛṣṇa is not deciding the victory of Arjuna over the enemies and He is not saying about the possible determined fruits of action. He is merely persuading Arjuna to engage in war by saying so. But that does not mean Kṛṣṇa is permitting Arjuna to expect the fruits of action and decided the victory in the war. Because there is fruit or result good or bad in each and every action and a concept that 'fighting in the war does not mean winning.' It does not matter who gets killed or who wins. It is obvious that, there is loss and victory in the war, but one should not think winning or losing in war while fighting in war, but one need to fight while one is already engaged in war. So, Kṛṣṇa's point of saying Arjuna for victory is to engage Arjuna in fighting war, since he has already participated. One must not withdraw from fighting, if he is a mighty warrior. Arjuna is a mighty warrior. Kṛṣṇa's point is that Arjuna must not withdraw because of the despondency.

These contradictions can be removed only through the hermeneutic way understanding text and for that one must focus on the topic or viśaya i.e. what is said in the text. There is a distinction between 'what is said in the text or what the text is talking about and what it is said about by the interpreters or commentators' and this would be different from what one is going to speak about. But by the application of hermeneutics it would be possible to understand the meaning of the text. If one is unable to reconcile then definitely he would find contradiction.

There will be so many verses in the Bhagavadgītā which seems to be contradictory, but that is because one does not understand the text through the hermeneutics way of understanding. But, if one is able to reconcile the verses of the Bhagavadgītā which seems to be contradictory then there would be no any contradiction. Therefore, there is no contradiction in it; rather there is a harmonized meaning in the text of the Bhagavadgītā.

CONCLUSION

In the Bhagavadgītā each single verse is a part of the whole text and the text itself is the whole of the parts. Understanding text in this way is based on the parts and the whole. If each part is understood then whole is understood and if whole is understood then part is understood, likewise, once if each parts of the Bhagavadgītā i.e. the verse is understood then the whole of the text is said to have understood. And only then the reader will be able to harmonize and unify the meaning of the text. But, commentators who have failed to understand the parts and whole of the text say that some verses contradict and cannot unify the meanings of the verses of the text. Even to understand a sentence we have to understand its each structure and the words of the sentence. When each word of a sentence is understood then the sentence is said to be understood.

The problem of the commentators is that they have not yet got hold of the hermeneutics suitability to the Bhagavadgītā. It is the failure to unify the meanings and to harmonize the text which is creating difficulties. Unless one is ready to find

meaning in the seeming contradiction one cannot understand Bhagavadgītā.

Therefore, it is seen that this is not what the commentators have said. The problem is not with the text, but the problem is of the commentators' understanding the verses and unifying the meaning of the verses of the text. And in the text even a single verse is not contradicted. Each verse of the text has its unique meaning which is related to other and does not contradict the meaning of the other verses. The hermeneutics must follow the part and whole relationship, prejudices, fusion of horizon etc. for understanding the text.

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