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Impact of Gītā on Modern Sanskrit Writings

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Panditā Kşamā Devi Rao (1890-1954) is one of the most celebrated authors of Sanskrit in 20th century. Her father Shankar Pandurang Pundit had been a renowned Sanskrit scholar. Kşamā Rao inherited the love for Sanskrit from her legendary father, and she was drawn to modernity and Europe through her husband, Raghavendra Rao, who was not only one of the most flourishing medical practitioners in Mumbai at that time, he was the first Indian doctor to have earned the degrees of M.D. and D.Sc. from London.

Key Words: Gītā, Satyāgrahagītā.

In one of her articles in Sanskrit, [1] Kşamā Rao has described how she was inspired to create a new Gītā in Sanskrit for her age. On a day during 1928-29, Kşamā Rao had gone for a walk on the beach in Mumbai, when she heard the sounds of the Satyāāgrahis being lathi-charged. Through the outcries of the men being brutally beaten by the police, Kşamā Rao suddenly heard a call within. If $G\bar{\iota}t\bar{a}$ could be created on the eve of the great battle of the Mahābhārata, why does not some Sanskrit poet create a new Gitā for this unique struggle in the world history? - She wondered. With this, the lines from Gita tasmādutthistha kaunteya yuddhāya krtaniścayah (Rise O Son of Kunti, with the resolve to fight) and tasmād yuddhāva yujyasva (therefore be all set for the war) resounded within her. Returning home, she made a resolution, - that she would herself create a new Gitā for the new age. As a result, Satvāgrahagītā was written.

Satyāgrahagītā is a path-breaking work by Kşamā Rao in the history of Sanskrit literature. Like $G\bar{t}t\bar{a}$ and the $M\bar{a}h\bar{a}bh\bar{a}rata$, it has eighteen chapters, called $adhy\bar{a}yas$, though the number of verses is slightly less than the original $G\bar{t}ta$ (659). The Mohana of the new age (Mohan Das Gandhi) spells out the philosophy of Satyāgraha here. The work breathes in revolutionary spirit and a strong feeling of revolt against the British rule. No Indian publisher dared to bring it out. Because Kşamā Rao through her visits to Europe with her husband had developed contacts with the literateurs there- especially in France, she was known to great orientalists like Sylvan Levi, the $Satyagrhagīt\bar{a}$ by her was published from Paris in 1931. It was, and still remains, the only epic poem by a modern Sanskrit poet to be published from Europe.

Beginning *from* Gandhi's *satyāgraha* in South Africa, *Satyāgrahagītā* describes the events up to Gandhi-Irvin-pact. The narrative is weaved around the most wonderful event of those times – the Dāņdimarch by Gandhiji. The spirit to carry on the *dharmayuddha* remains as a strong undercurrent in the most pathetic descriptions of the massacre at Jaliawalan, the opposition to Simon Commission, and the terrors of landlords on the poor farmers.

What exactly is the co-relation between Kṛṣṇa's call to fight against the Kauravas in $G\bar{t}t\bar{a}$ and Gāndhi's struggle against the British rule in India? Kṣamā Rao definitely was visualizing the links. In the wake of the decline of *Dharma*, and the rise of *Adharma*, *she wrote*, *O Bhartata*! I create myself – says Kṛṣṇa in $G\bar{t}t\bar{a}$. Kṣamā Rao makes Gandhi say that India can be ruled by *dharma* alone and not by greed and vengeance.

भारतं शासितुं शक्यं धर्मैणैव हि केवलम् न स्वार्थलोलुपत्वेन, न च निर्घृणभावतः।। 6.7

Kşamā Rao also converts the message of Kṛṣṇa – i.e., whoso- ever is born, is doomed to die, who so ever dies is bound

to re-born in the context to serving the nation. If Who-so-ever is born is bound to die, why not die for the country? - She says.

जातस्य चेद् ध्रुवो मृत्युर्देशकार्ये वरं मृतिः। जीवनं न तु दासस्य देशद्रोहविधायिनः।। 17.60

The publication of Satyāgrahagitā marked a turning point in world. quote Bhārataratna Sanskrit literary То Mahāmahopādhyāya P.V. Kane "This first poem was greeted with applause by Sanskrit scholars and men in public life" (Śrījñāneśvaracaritam, Prologue). Kşamā Rao managed to get it reviewed in some literary journals from Europe and the work was praised for "It's fluent polished Sanskrit' and 'its style and subject matter" (Quoted in Panditā Kshama Rao Ek Sāhityik Mūlyānkana (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis) p. 272). The Times of India referred to it a one of the most noticeable works of modern age (From more than one point of view this is a most remarkable work).

Kşamā Devi Rao herself continued her literary experiment by writing two more Epic- *Gitās – Uttarasatyāgrahagītā* and *Uttarayajayasatyāgrahagītā*, forming a trilogy. *Uttarasatyagrahagītā* is a voluminous work in 47 chapters and 1989 verses taking up the history after the event of Dandimarch and updating the history of freedom struggle upto 1945. *Uttarajayasatyagrahagītā* or *Svarājyavijayaḥ* the last in the series has 54 chapters. It ends with Gandhi's death. Like Kṛṣṇa killed by a hunter, Gandhi is shot dead by a madman. Kṣama Rao has portrayed the life and vision of a man who remained fearless to the last moment of his life and who experienced of the presence of God everywhere.

The whole literary oeuvre of Pundita Kşamā Rao was inspired by two things– an unshaken faith in $G\bar{t}t\bar{a}$ and the spirit for freedom. She has authored twelve works in Sanskrit – six epic poems which include the three $g\bar{t}t\bar{a}s$ as referred above, three collections of short stories, one *khandakāvya*, one travelogue and a biography of her father. In all of these works the voice of $G\bar{t}t\bar{a}$ echoes directly or indirectly. In her travelogue *Vićitraparişadyātrā*, she describes how in the moments of crisis the lines from $G\bar{t}t\bar{a}$ came to her as solace.

स्मृत्वा तु भगवद्वाक्यं सुखदुःखे समे कुरु। इत्यर्थबोधकं भूयः सत्वरं सान्त्विताऽभवम्।। 26 स्मारं स्मारं तु गीताया गहना कर्मणो गतिः। इति भागवतीं सूक्तिं चिन्ता दूरीकृता मया।। 10

Gītā remained as a force for her creativity when she was composing her last work - *Jñāneśvaracaritam*- an epic. She repeats the words of Kṛṣṇa from Gītā to describe Jñāneśvara's birth. "Jñāneśavara was born to prove the sayings of the Lord Kṛṣṇa that a Yogin if carried away from the path of Yoga and dies in that state, he is born in the house of pious people.

भ्रष्टो हि यावत् सदने शुचीनां सञ्जायते यत् प्रभुणेरितं प्राक्। कर्तुं तदन्वर्थमहो कुलेऽस्मिन् गृहीतजन्मा स बभूव योगी।। (2.46) Kşamā Rao specially delights on giving a detailed account of the composition of Jñāneśvarī, an exposition of *Śrīmadbhagadgītā* by the sait Jñāneśvara.

Kşamā Rao used to do daily $G\bar{\imath}t\bar{a}p\bar{a}tha$. Before she was married in a rich family, she was leading an impoverished life as her father had expired when she was just three years old. The times of happiness which the marriage brought in her life did not last long. After the sad demise of her husband, she had to face a plethora of problems. Kşamā Rao writes in her memoirs that in every moment of crisis and suffering, lines form the Gītā came to her as solace.

On the other hand, she was drawn to Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi with the same unflinching devotion. With the desire to participate in the struggle for freedom, she had contacted B.G. Kher, a well-known congress leader, and asked him to be assigned some duty in the mission for *Satyāgraha*. Considering her family background, she was given comparatively a light work– that of working with women in villages. She accompanied KasturBa Gandhi in one of her tours to villages in Gujarat. Her experiences of these journeys are inter-woven in her short stories in Sanskrit. The short stories on the life of women in *Grāmajyotiḥ* by Kṣamā Rao is a living epitome of Gandhi's mass appeal and participation of ladies from villages in the struggle for freedom.

By adopting the form of Gītā, Kşamā Rao also created a new literary genre in Sanskrit which has not been defined in the *Alankāraśāstra* (Literary Theory). In the History of Modern Sanskrit literature, the *Satyagrahagītā* continues to be discussed as a *mahākāvya* (Epic poem) though it does not technically confirm to the definitions of a *Mahākāvya*.

Ksama Rao had already made a name as an author in English and she has been writing in Marathi also when she took up to writing in Sanskrit. Her short stories in English were published in popular and literary periodicals like *The Illustrated Weekly* and *The Amulet*, one of her plays in English, was staged by the Royal Opera House under the direction of Grout Anderson. She has been compared to Sarojinī Naidu for her poems in English. The publication of *Satyāgrahagītā* brought a change in her life. From the year 1937, she became exclusively devoted to the medium of Sanskrit for her creativity. She was advised to write only in Sanskrit by Somerset Maugham. The advice must have come in an earnest spirit from the author of the Razor's Edge, a novel in which Maugham weaves the impact of *Vedānta* philosophy on his protagonist.

The message of Śrīkṛṣṇa's Gītā is inbuilt in the discourse of *Satyāgrahagītā*. Kṣamā Rao derives motifs and lines from *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*. She believes that the God has incarnated Himself in the form of Gandhi. She substantiates this by referring to Kṛṣṇa's assurance in Gītā.

निक्षिप्तं विधिना तेजस्तस्मिन् गान्धौ महात्मनि। जन्मभूमिं तमोग्रस्तां विद्योतयितुमात्मनः।। न परं भारतं वर्षं विदूरा अपि भूमयः। भासिताः सत्यदीपेन ज्वालितेन महात्मना।। तस्मादधर्मनाशाय प्रशान्तेः स्थापनाय च। गान्धीरूपेण भगवानवतीर्णः किमु स्वयम्।। 18.15-18

She also repeats phrases from the Gitā; Viz. – atha cet tāntavam dharmam na karişyatha bāndhavāh (SG, I.35) in the conext of spinning wheel.

Kşamā Rao was emulated by several other Sanskrit authors leading to a vast mass of new literature in Sanskrit visualizing the togetherness of Gitā and Gandhi. The metaphor of Gandhi as the preceptor of a new Gitā (with a pun on the word Mohana) and the Satvāgraha as a new Mahābhārata war reverberated in these writings; some of them also followed the model of Kşamā Rao by the way of prefixing the word satvāgraha or adding the appellation $G\bar{t}t\bar{a}$ in the titles of their works. Rajahamsa wrote Gāndhigītā with alternate title Ahimsāyoga (Lahore, 1945). Gandhīgītā by Anant Vishnu Ane (1959), Mohanagītā by Surendra Sevi and Satyāgrahanītikāvyam (1939) of Satyadeva Vasistha are a few examples. The authors of these works were involved in the struggle for India's freedom and they were using the metaphor of Gītā, Dharmakşetra and the war for deriving strength from the message of Krsna in their own struggle. While Mohanapañcādhyāyī of Bhagavadacharya (1931) also envisages the metaphor of Gandhi a Mohana or Kṛṣṇa. Srinivas Tadpatrikar has changed the structure in his Gāndhigītā, making it a collection of gītas or songs.

More important are the three works by Shridhar Bhaskar Varnekar, one of the most renowned authors of Sanskrit in our age. His $Gr\bar{a}mag\bar{t}t\bar{a}mtam$ is an abridged rendering of the $Gr\bar{a}mag\bar{t}t\bar{a}$ of Tukaojī Mahārāja a well-known saint and philanthropist. Saint Tukdo ji had authored $Gr\bar{a}mag\bar{t}t\bar{a}$ in Marathi in 1954, a work in which he elaborated upon his philosophy of village as a republic and rural development. In the 41 chapters of $Gr\bar{a}mag\bar{t}t\bar{a}$ which have been translated in Sanskrit by Varnekar we find an attempt to correlate the message of $G\bar{t}t\bar{a}$ with Gandhi. Varnekar has made the correspondences between Gītā and the Grāmagītā even more explicit by retaining the phrases from the orginal Gītā in his rendering. Tukdo ji himself visualized his $G\bar{t}t\bar{a}$ as an essence of earlier $Git\bar{a}s$.

रामगीता कृष्णगीतागुरुगीता तथोत्तमाः। भगवद्गीतादयो गीता विद्यन्ते विविधा इह।। तासामेष हि सारांशः प्राप्तुमन्ते शुभां गतिम्। हृन्मन्दिरं शोधयेत सुखयेत चराचरम्।। 1.28, 29 यथा गीतामृतं दोहः सकलोपनिषद्भवाम्। सद्भन्थानां समस्तानां ग्रागीतामृतं तथा।। सहस्रशीर्षा वेदेषु गीतायां विश्वरूपधृक्। विश्वात्मक सतां देवः सोऽस्मिन् ग्रन्थे निरूपितः।। 40.1.3

The concept of *bhakti* (devotion) in $G\bar{t}\bar{a}$ has been expanded in the form of *sevādharma* by him. The philosophy of action (*karma*) is again co-related to the philosophy of labour (*śrama*).

न विना कर्मणा देही लोके शक्नोति जीवितुम्।

प्रयत्नतः कृतं कर्म तदहङ्कारकारणम्।। मन्यमाना भ्रमादेवं गीतासिद्धान्तमन्यथा। विपर्यस्यन्ति सन्मान्यं परिश्रममहाग्रहम्।। 28.1-2 शरीरार्थं कुटुम्बार्थं नित्यनैमित्तिकानि हि। कर्माण्यपरिहार्यत्वान्नैवार्हन्ति श्रमाभिधाम्।। 5 श्रमः परोपकाराय महाधर्मः सतां मतः।। 6 न येन सेव्यते जातु जनतात्म जनार्दनः। कर्मयोगमहासंज्ञां तादृशं कर्म नार्हति।। 8

Referring to Gītā's dictum that a person cannot shun the *karma*, he or she is forced to perform the karmas (*kāryate hi avašaṃ karma sarvaḥ prakṛtijaḥ guṇaiḥ*) the author says that this statement can be misconstrued by some to avoid hard labor, under the presumption that any action performed with effort would lead to ego. He finally says that the real *karmayoga* lies in the doing labour.

स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः। गीतावाक्यमिदं तथ्यं विज्ञातव्यं यथार्थतः॥ सम्प्रदायात्मका धर्मा येऽद्य सर्वत्र संस्थिताः। तानभिप्रेय नैवेदं गीतावचनमुत्तमम्॥ क्वचिज्ज्ञानं क्वचिच्छक्तिः युक्तिः सेवा क्वचिज्जने। यः स्वभावाद् गुणो यस्य स्वधर्मः खलु तस्य सः॥ स्वभावजं परित्यज्य धर्ममन्यस्वभावजम्। स्वीकर्तुं यतमानस्य परधर्मो भयावहः॥

29.1-5

A person doing his duty by performing *karma* for the benefit of all has understood the message of Gītā (XVIII.9-11). A novel interpretation is given to the concept of *svadharma*. Svadharma in $G\bar{t}t\bar{a}$ does not mean religious sects. There are three inherent tendencies in every human being – knowledge, power and service. A *svadharma* for a human being is formed by the tendency which is natural for him. The maxim '*paradharmo bhayāvahaḥ*' stands for those who accept the other's *dharma* in contravention to their own *dharma*.

कामीसुरम्यया वाचा बद्धोऽसौ विबुधोऽपि सन्। निष्कामस्तु तया मुक्तोऽतस्तेभ्यः खलु संसृतिः)।। शुद्धत्वेऽप्यस्य पादानां पादेन निखिलं जगत्। व्याकल्पितं तदीशेन भोगमोक्षाय देहिनाम्। देहात्मना सदा दुःखी बद्धोऽहमिति सङ्कया। देहधर्मैर्वियुक्तस्तु मुक्तौऽसौ सततं सुखी।। ब्रह्मात्मभावनादार्ढ्याद् देहात्मधियमुत्सृजेत्। नित्यमुक्तश्चिदानन्दस्वरूपोऽस्मीति भावयेत्।। रेण्वीकृत्याण्डं वाऽजातं वा कूटहेमभूषणम्। चाधिगम्याथ तद्ब्रह्म न किञ्चिच्चिन्तयेत् सुधीः।। क्षणेनैवेदमेवं यः प्रविलाप्य नभोऽङ्गणे। संस्थितः सहजालिङ्गी जीवन्मुक्तः स उच्यते।। 6 अहिकुण्डलवत् स्वस्मिन् ह्येकं ब्रह्मास्ति केवलम्। नातः परतरं किञ्चिदेतावद्ध्यनुशासनम्।। 7 Saint Tukado ji has derived his conceptual framework from Śrīmadbhagavadgītā. The translator has rendered many of his expressions by bringing them close to Śrīmadbhagavadgītā. The stanza vāsāmsi jīrnāni yathāvihāya..' is reflected in his rendering as under

विहाय वसंन जीर्णं नवीनं गृह्यते यथा। विमुच्य मरणाद् देहः देहिना गृह्यते नवः।। 34.44

In Śramagītā by Varnekar, Mahatma Gandhi gives a discourse on the importance of *śrama* (manual labor) in replies to the queries by Nehru and others. Nehru here becomes like an Arjuna, and the Mahatma is naturally the Kṛṣṇa of this new *Gītā* also. In the original *Gītā*, Arjuna is in a dilemma and he is unable to decide the line of action. He therefore approaches Kṛṣṇa with an ardent desire to understand the nature of action. Similarly, Nehru with the desire to understand the nature of manual labor here approaches the Mahatma. Like Kṛṣṇa in *Gītā*, the Mahātmā is viewed as the *Jagadguru*, who can see things can unravel the mystery of action and can show the right path –

क्रान्तदर्शी रहस्यज्ञस्तथ्वाक् पथ्यबोधकः। त्वादृग्जगद्गुरुर्लोके त्वमेव खलु साम्प्रतम्।। 15 दारिद्र्यदैन्यमगनस्य राष्ट्रस्यास्य महीयसः। सर्वंकषोत्कर्षमूलं महामन्त्रं निवेदय।। 16

Varnekar very dexterously combines the message of Kṛṣṇa with Gandhi's perception of *svāvalambana*, i.e., God helps them who help themselves -

आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः। भगवानपि लोकेऽस्मिन् बन्धुरात्मावलम्बिनाम्।।

Śramagītā by Varnekar is glorification of physical labour. Like the works of Kşamā Rao, Varnekar also finds linkage between Gandhian ideologue and Gītā discourse. The third Gītāby Varnekar is *Sanghagītā* – a message to the volunteers of the Rahtriya Svayasevaka Sangha.

Kurtakoți Lingesh Sharma has written Samatvagītam in 364 verses in rendition to the samatyvayoga of Gītā. Some of the modern authors and poets in Sanskrit went to the extent of composing parodies like Cahāgītā (Chintamani Ramachjandra Sharma) or Kāngresagītā.

Saptaślolikīgītā by Avadhūta Swami Vishveshvaranand Saraswati makes yet another departure in this line of creativity inspired by Kṛṣṇa's Gītā. The seven verses [14] seen by Swami in a vision form essence of Gītā and Upanişads in an entirely new diction. They are terse and loaded with esoteric and philosophical suggestions, so that a long commentary in Sanskrit like Śāṅkarabhāñṣya on Gītā has to be written. This small Gītā is published with Sārabodhinī Sanskrit commentary and SubodhiniHindi Commentary. Locating his speculations on the premises of the Advaitvedānta, Swami Vishveshvaranand Saraswati gives an exposure of his view of the world, bondage and liberation and the spiritual pursuit.

It is enigmatic to note that Gandhi read $G\bar{\imath}t\bar{a}$ as a text advocating non-violence, and all these Sanskrit poets who have

created the new $G\bar{\iota}t\bar{a}s$ invariably stand with Gandhi in his interpretation of $G\bar{\iota}t\bar{a}s$. Strangely enough none of them refer to Tilak, who was not only an outstanding Scholar of Sanskrit, he was already known for his magnum opus on $Git\bar{a} - Karmayogarahasya$.

These new *Gitās* in Sanskrit form a class apart – they create a different genre which we may call $G\bar{t}a\bar{k}a\bar{k}vya$. The format of original Gitā is adopted – the metre is invariable anuştup, the discourses assume a dialogic nature. All of these $G\bar{t}t\bar{a}s$ spell out the message of *karma* (action) with *anāsakti* (detachment) and seek a contemporary relevance of $G\bar{t}t\bar{a}$. There is a common tendency in all of them to see the Mahatma as an *avatāra* and a new '*jagadguru*' seeing a re-affirmation of Kṛṣṇa's message in his deeds and discourses. All the authors of these *Gitās*, beginning from Kṣamā Rao to Varnekar or Viśuddhānanda have been stalwarts, they are pioneer in their fields; and also, they are either great nationalists, or saints or social workers. They have actually lived the philosophy of *Gītā* in life and have cast an impact on the contemporary society.

The authors of the new $G\bar{\imath}t\bar{a}s$ were inspired by $Sr\bar{\imath}madbhagavadg\bar{\imath}t\bar{a}$ in a unique way. $G\bar{\imath}t\bar{a}$ proved a fresh ground for their creativity on Sanskrit. This shows that a classic like $Sr\bar{\imath}madbhagavadg\bar{\imath}t\bar{a}$ with its spiritual vision and a view for a *dharmic* life can manifest in new *avataras*. They also show $G\bar{\imath}t\bar{a}$ became a unique source of inspiration in India's struggle for freedom and national renaissance.

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