

Holding up Gita as Guiding Light of Governance in Ancient India is Historically Inaccurate

It emerged as a prime candidate for the 'Bible of Hindus' only in the 19th century, after the British forcefully democratised education and vernacular translations were available to the new, educated non-Brahmin classes

Jawhar Sircar, Indian Express, 8th January 2025

This refers to Vinay Sahasrabuddhe's article, ['In with the new, and the old'](#) (IE December 24, 2024). He writes that Indic ideas can contribute to good governance. We are keen to know which Indic ideas he refers to. From the potpourri of statements made by him as a spokesperson of the current regime, we shall restrict ourselves only to his "old Indic" inspiration for good governance, and not contest his many political and contemporary claims. The statement is certainly worth pondering over, but that is where the trouble begins, for we are at a loss to locate which text or example he refers to. We had the same problem in identifying which ancient Indian institution or territory (we avoid the more appropriate term 'kingdom') triggered our leaders to declare India to be "the mother of democracy".

When Sahasrabuddhe mentions the [Bhagwat Gita](#) as the inspiration for good governance, we would like him to enlighten us whether any monarch in ancient India actually acknowledged this. On the contrary, several sections of the Gita, like I.39-41 and XVIII.40-43, express concern about how dystopian the world would be if the patriarchal family organisation was destroyed (*kulakshaya*) as it would encourage "wicked" (*dushta*) "women/wives" (*stri*) to mix up with other varnas (*varnasamkara*), or if the servility of lower castes cannot be ensured.

Interestingly, the complete virtues of the [Gita](#) were made known to educated audiences properly only in the 19th century, when it crossed the barriers of caste, ownership, and communication. After the British forcefully democratised education and vernacular (including Hindi) translations were available to the new, educated non-Brahmin classes.

In the 19th century, the Gita also emerged as a prime candidate as the "Bible of Hindus" — that many were keen to locate — to de-complicate Hinduism, by presenting one neat sacred book. This emphasis on a "political" Krishna, sagacious and ever so exhortative, was rather new. If Parthasarathi, the divine and counselling charioteer of Arjuna, was really a central figure of devotion, one would have found some visual representations — like the numerous

ones of his other two aspects, as the miraculous child and as the ideal lover. We are inundated with sculptures and other evidence of Balakrishna, from the fourth century onwards and of Radha-Krishna, after the Bhagwat Purana introduced Radha in the ninth century. But why do we not see Parthasarathi adulated in the visual and performing arts, until recent times?

It appears that this leitmotif was iconised in the public domain only after “calendar art” swamped the market, in the early 20th century. Then, the Gita Press of Gorakhpur popularised this striking frame all over the Gangetic basin and beyond. The wise Krishna was known through the Mahabharata, but his crystallised wisdom comes across mainly through the Gita — which, we submit, reached even the educated strata rather late. Unless hard proof is made available, we are unable to assume that, as a stand-alone book, the Gita was a manual of Hindu statecraft through the ages.

The last we heard of the Gita as a guide for state policy was in 2014 when the late [*Sushma Swaraj demanded that it be declared, rashtriya granth*](#), whatever that means.

The other text Sahasrabuddhe mentions is the [*Arthashastra, ascribed to Kautilya*](#) – discovered only in 1905, after being lost for some eight centuries. It is claimed (and believed by many) to be Kautilya’s treatise on statecraft for Chandragupta Maurya in fourth century BC, but the world’s most reliable historians in this specialisation declare this book to be a product of the second or third century AD.

During the Gupta period, the narrative was tilted in favour of the Brahmanical establishment and it gained in popularity among sections of the elite. The nomenclatures of officials mentioned in the text hardly match those found in historical records. It may, at best, have been an academic or prescriptive document for scholars to debate on and masticate. The Arthashastra’s advice to the king to ensure the happiness of his subjects (*prajasukha*) for the king’s (*rajnah*) happiness (*sukha*) is overshadowed by its unabashed primacy on espionage over everyone — even the head of the secret service, the *samahartta* —and its ruthless repressive methods. Is this the good governance sought by the writer?

The writer also refers to two terms, *antodaya* (reaching the most backward people) and *raj dharma* or the duty of rulers to uphold righteousness. The first was converted into a government scheme to reach the poorest by PM [*Atal Bihari Vajpayee*](#), not by the present regime, as implied. And *raj dharma* reminds us that the same prime minister, [*pulled up a chief minister*](#) for failing to control riots

in his state or allowing the situation to deteriorate — leading to the loss of innocent lives. He was shown the red *raj dharma* card, but to no avail, of course.

It is, nevertheless, true that many Hindu rulers throughout history had claimed to be upholding dharma, namely the legitimate order of society or the moral equilibrium. This invariably implied, at its core, the rigorous imposition and strict maintenance of *varna-ashrama* or the caste hierarchy.

Yet, the most enthusiastic of *dharma*-abiding and *dharma*-propagating rulers, like the Guptas, did not shy away from flouting *dharma*, by marrying into the Vakataka ruling dynasty. The latter belonged to the higher Brahmin caste and such marriages were illicit and grave offences against *sva-dharma*.

In any case, the author may like to clarify whether the regime he represents would like to draw its enlightenment for good governance from a *raj dharma* that entails the enforcement of retrograde Manusmriti injunctions. They idolise caste hegemony and demand a misogynistic trampling over women's rights. If he is serious about the term "Indic", he may also like to examine non-Sanskrit repositories of ancient Indian wisdom, like the Tamil Thirukkural and Buddhist and Jain texts in Pali and Prakrit, in search of good governance.

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