Karma Yoga in Tilak, Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo

Introduction

The Gita made a profound influence on the nationalist leadership. It influenced Lokmanya Tilak (1856-1920), Mahatama Gandhi (1869-1948), and Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), all as they struggled for India’s independence. Introduced to it at an early age, each one of them had an occasion to deepen their understanding of it in prison. Of them Tilak was the oldest and he wrote his magnum opus, the Gita Rahasya in 1907 while he was serving a six year prison term in Mandalay. It is interesting that each one of them arrived at different interpretations of karma yoga, the yoga of action.

Tilak was introduced to a Marathi translation of the Gita when he was sixteen years old as the task of reading out a Prakrit commentary on it called Bhasa-vivrtti to his father fell to his lot. Mahatma Gandhi first got acquainted with the Gita when he was studying in England through two English brothers who read it regularly. They asked him to join them which Gandhi did although he did not know Sanskrit at that time. He read its English translation by Sir Edwin Arnold in 1888-1889. Captivated by its message especially that in the last nineteen verses of the second chapter which deals with karmayoga, he started reading the Gita everyday. At first he read as many Gujarati translations of it as possible and then only in Sanskrit. During his imprisonment he studied it in detail and later translated it into Gujarati. Sri Aurobindo was struck by the Gita’s ‘gospel of action’ before he was even thirty; he wrote several articles on it in Karmayogin. Its idea of “desireless duty” or “nishkama karma” was his guiding principle during his revolutionary days. It was, however, during his year of solitary confinement in the Alipore jail that the Gita became a felt experience on his pulses: “I was not only to understand (Gita) intellectually but to realize what Sri Krishna demanded of Arjuna and what he demands of those who aspire to do his work”. 1

Therefore, these nationalist leaders drew inspiration from Gita especially and naturally from its call to action in spite of all odds and after overcoming all attachments thereby acting with a single minded sense of purpose. The crux of the issue with regard to action was the value to be given to violence. Of the three, neither Tilak nor Sri Aurobindo found any absolute value in non-violence. To just give one example, the Sedition Committee Report, dealt in detail with the devastation caused by the plague in 1897.2 It led to the institution of house-to-house visitations in Poona and compulsory evacuation of plague-infected houses. This caused much alarm and resentment. Initially Tilak wrote favourably about the Government’s efforts but later he imputed not only to the subordinate officials but to the Government itself a deliberate direction to oppress people. The plague Commissioner, Mr. Rand came to be gradually regarded as tyrannical. Even while the Plague was raging, the sixtieth jubilee of Queen Victoria’s reign was celebrated. Returning from a jubilee banquet at the Government house in Poona, Mr. Rand was shot dead together with Lt. Ayerat on 27th June 1898. Tilak’s articles in the Kesari that followed finally led to his arrest on charges of sedition as he seemed to present an apology for political assassination.3

During Tilak’s trial, references were made to two incriminating articles in the Kesari entitled “Shivaji’s utterances”. Tilak had been instrumental in getting the Ganpati festival and the Shivaji
coronation festival instituted. The latter was held on the 12th of June, 1897. One of the speakers at the festival was reported to have said:

Every Hindu, every Maratha, to whatever party he may belong, must rejoice at this Sivaji festival. We all are striving to gain our lost independence, and this terrible load is to be uplifted by us all in combination. It will never be proper to place obstacles in the way of any person, who, with a true mind, follows the path of uplifting this burden in the manner he deems fit. Our mutual dissensions impede our progress greatly. If anyone be crushing down the country from above, cut him off, but do not put impediments in the way of others.....All occasions like the present festival which tend to unite the whole country must be welcome. 4

Another speaker observed:

The people who took part in the French Revolution denied that they had committed murder and asserted that they were only removing thorns from their paths. Why should not the same argument be applied to Maharashtra?

The President at the festival meeting, Tilak himself said: “Did Sivaji commit a sin in killing Afzal Khan (the Muhammadan General) or not? The answer to that question can be found in the Mahabharat itself. Srimat Krishna’s advice in the Gita is to kill even our own teachers and our kinsmen. No blame attaches to any person if he is doing deeds without being actuated by a desire to reap the fruits of his deeds. Sri Sivaji did nothing with a view to fill the void of his own stomach. With benevolent intentions he murdered Afzal Khan for the good of others. If thieves enter our house and we have not sufficient strength to drive them out, we should without hesitation shut them up and bopurn them alive. God has not conferred upon the foreigners the grant inscribed on a copper-plate of the kingdom of Hindusthan. The Mahareaja (Sivaji) strove to drive them away from the land of his birth. He did not thereby commit the sin of coveting what belonged to others. Do not circumscribe your vision like a frog in a well; get out of the Penal Code and enter the extremely high atmosphere of the Srimat Bhagavad Gita and consider the actions of great men.5

Sri Aurobindo too did not believe that non-violence had any absolute value that had to be followed as the only course of action. In this Gita was a good guide:

A certain class of minds shrink from aggressiveness as it is were a sin. Their temperament forbids them to feel the delight of battle and hey look on what they cannot understand as something monstrous and sinful. “Heal hate by love, drive out injustice by justice, slay sin by righteousness’ is their cry. Love is a scared name, but it is easier to speak of love than to love...The Gita is the bet answer to those who shrink form battle as a sin and aggression as a lowering of morality6

In Bande Matram, too, he said: “The choice by a subject nation of the means it will use for vindicating its liberty is best determined by the circumstances of its servitude.7 One of the courses, “open to an oppressed nation is that of armed revolt...This is the old time-honoured method which the oppressed or enslaved have always adopted by preference in the past and will adopt in the future if they see any chance of success; for it is the readiest and swiftest, the most thorough in its results, and demands the least powers of endurance and suffering and the smallest and briefest sacrifices.8

Hence, all these leaders followed the karmayoga of Gita but each in his own way.

Gita as a Seditious Books
One man’s food is another’s poison. The Gita is a sacred text for Hindus but for Justice S.A.T. Rowlett, who was the President of the Sedition Committee (1908), it was an instrument of subversion and sedition. According to him, the Bengal revolutionaries used the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, as also the teachings of Vivekanand “to create an atmosphere suitable for the execution of their projects”.9 The time was also ripe for it as Justice Rowlett says, “But neither the religious teachings of Bhagavad Gita would have afforded so moving a text to preach from had not the whole world, and especially the Asiatic world, been electrified and amazed by the victories of Japan over Russia…”10

At another place, the report states:

For their own initiates the conspirators devised a remarkable series of textbooks. The Bhagavad Gita, the writings of Vivekanand, the lives of Mazzini and Garibaldi, were part of the course; and in the words of Mr. Justice Mukharji: “such principles as the religious principal of absolute surrender to the Divine Will were employed by designing ad unscrupulous men as potent means to influence and unbalance weak-minded persons and thus ultimately bend to become instruments in the commission of nefarious crimes from which they might otherwise recoil with horror.11

Hence, as Michel Danino has pointed out, the revolutionaries of Bengal and Maharashtra drew such inspiration from the Gita that the colonial authorities came to regard it as the ‘gospel of terrorism’ and it became one of the most sought after evidence in police raids. Sir Aurobindo himself is said to have initiated several revolutionaries by making them swear on the Gita that they would do everything to liberate India from foreign yoke. However, in Karmayogin, he took strong exception to the Gita being regarded as a seditious book: We strongly protest against the brand of suspicion that has been sought to be placed in many quarters on the teaching and possession of the Gita – our chief national heritage, our hope for the future, our great force for the purification of the moral weaknesses that stain and hamper our people.12

**Tilak and Karmayoga**

Tilak was convinced that the Gita was essentially a text that preached karmayoga. The commentaries on it that went before him seemed to emphasize spiritual knowledge, devotion and renunciation and this became so dominant that the yoga of action appeared to recede into the background. This puzzled Tilak. He could not understand why so much stress had been laid on the attainment of moksha through Gyana or Bhakti when the whole aim of Krishna’s teachings to the dejected Arjuna was to motivate him to fight. He decided to put all these aside and undertake an independent reading of the Gita. For him its essence was karmayoga, or desireless action.

According to Tilak, the Gita was propounded at a time when ‘whether to act or renounce’ was considered a question of great importance before deciding whether an action was to be regarded as good or bad. Most commentaries on Gita, he found, highlighted renunciation as the primary teaching and action or karma yoga as secondary. He did not find in the Gita any conflict between knowledge or gyana and right action or karma as imagined by what he called the School of Renunciation. For him the Gita also showed that the fundamental elements in brahmavidya or
the science of Brahman and Bhakti or the path of devotion were the foundation of ethics and good behaviour. Hence, the Gita showed the path to be adopted in life by properly harmonizing Knowledge, Renunciation, Right Action and Devotion. Thus, while it dwelt on Knowledge Renunciation and Devotion, it was essentially in the context of Right or Proper Action. Arjuna had made a clear request to Krishna: “Do not confuse me by placing before me several courses of conduct, but point out to me definitely only one course, which is the proper course”. It was clear, therefore, said Tilak, that the Gita had to be in support of one particular opinion. The rest was only arguments that pointed to the right path after dispelling all confusions that different teachings caused.

For Tilak, the Gita explained the most perfect and complete condition of the Self, or what is the ideal of the highest manhood. In doing so it established a logical and irrefutable harmony not only between Devotion or Bhakti and Gyan or knowledge but ultimately between both these and the duties of ordinary life enjoyed by the Shastras. It thus inspired the mind bewildered by the vicissitudes of life to calmly and desirelessly adhere to the path of duty. The conversation between Sri Krishna and Arjuna was essentially about action, the impending war and hence, karma yoga to fight in these circumstances with detachment without looking at the fruits of action. Even individuals who acquired spiritual knowledge had to still perform duties pertaining to their status of life as long as they lived. Tilak gave several examples from the life of Vyasa himself, the author of Mahabharata. In spite of being an ascetic, a rishi, a sage and a priest, he had to do his duty at every point in the epic whether he was heeded to or not, whether he failed or succeeded.

Tilak felt that the great commentators on the Gita who had gone before him had a doctrine or hypothesis into the framework of which they tried to the Gita. He was thinking chiefly of Sankaracharya, Ramanujacharya and Madhvacharya. Each he felt was trying to interpret the message of Gita from a preconceived theory but he wanted the doctrinal method to be given up. Citing mimansa writers, he said that in order to interpret a work seven factors had to be taken into account and all had to be considered. The first two were the beginning and the end of the book. Every writer wrote with some motive or aim in mind and when that object was accomplished, he completed his book. Therefore, the commencement and end of the book had to be first examined in determining the purport of the book. Once this had been done, he said, it had to be considered what were things that were repeated or reiterated in the work at several placed and times. This was because whenever a writer thought that it was essential to convey something, he naturally repeated it. The fourth and fifth factors were whether the work had anything new to say and what was the impact of it. Unless the author had something new to say, he usually did not write a new book; at least that was the situation before the event of the printing press. Also, it was important to find out what effect had been achieved because obviously that was what the writer wanted to convey if he was successful. The sixth and seventh factors were the means used to establish or prove a fixed fact. The writer dealt with many things as and when the occasion arose whether by way of illustration or comparison to show similarity or difference so that the principal issue or hypothesis could be established. However, these were only supplementary to the main fact sought to be elucidated. Finally the author refuted all things that would prove contrary to his case and then systemically marshaled arguments to support it.

The Gita is Krishna’s preaching to Arjuna at the critical moment before the war actually started with the idea of inducing him to perform his duties, that is, to fight. When Arjuna saw whom he would have to battle and kill in order to win the kingdom of Hastinapur, he thought he
was being pushed into greatest of sins as they were his grandfather, uncles, teachers, brothers, friends and all those he held dear. He became dejected. On the one hand his dharma was to fight and on the other was the devotion to his preceptors, family, ancestors, relatives and others. He laid down his arms and he turned to Sri Krishna to put him on the right path. Naturally in such a situation, Sri Krishna could not be explaining to him moksha through devotion or knowledge of the Brahman. He could not be advising renunciation to him. On the contrary, his purpose was to use every means and every argument at his command to make him fight. But if this war had to be it had to be won it had to be fought in a disinterested frame of mind as otherwise Arjuna’s emotional involvement would paralyze him. He could not be also allowed to focus on the end result because Krishna was aware that victory for him would be as bitter and barren as defeat and defeat would of course be the greatest ignominy after which no life was possible. Contemplation of either would make concentration on the battle impossible.

Arjuna’s dilemma is the supreme ethical dilemma and whatever may be the controversy about the Gita being an integral part of the text or a later interpolation, it brings to a head the ethical dilemmas that Mahabharata forces its characters to confront. The Mahabharata within which the Gita is placed is a mine of ethical dilemmas of the kind experienced by Arjuna. It explains to ordinary persons in the simple form of stories how our great ancient personages have behaved in numerous difficult circumstances. The doubts of Arjuna are not groundless and cannot be brushed aside. They are horrifying and Arjuna is a warrior not a rishi. Even great sages in certain circumstances have been puzzled as to what to do and what not to do. But as Tilak points out, the very first advice of Sri Krishna to Arjun is that it is not proper to give up action on the ground that numerous difficulties arise in the consideration of what should be done and what should not be done.

For Tilak, the subject matter of the Gita is to show whether or not there are any means of ascertaining what course should be followed when a person is beset by ethical dilemmas and by what means to resolve them. The word karma comes from the root ‘kri’ which means ‘doing’ ‘affairs’ or activity and Yoga in this context, means some special skill, device, intelligent method or graceful way of performing actions. This is because all methods of yoga given in the Gita are not for the ascetic but for one who continues to perform actions so that he can do them in an equitable frame of mind.

The Mahabharata within which the Gita is set, makes it clear that all life is grey. There can be no absolute value given to non-violence or even for that matter to truth. For example, Arjuna in the Mahabharata says, “there are in this world so many micro organisms invisible to the naked eye, of which the existence can, however, be imagined, that merely by the moving one’s eye-lids, their limbs will be destroyed”. Hence, absolute non-violence is not possible by the very nature of existence. In any case violence or hinsa does not only mean destroying life but includes harming the minds or bodies of others. Therefore, ahimsa means not harming any living being in any way. “Forgiveness in all cases or warlikeness in all cases is not the proper thing. Therefore, O, my son! The wise have mentioned exceptions to the laws of forgiveness”.17 Although at many places, it is reiterated, “there is no religion higher than Truth” and even “when the respective merits of a thousand asvamedha yajnas and of Truth were weighted in the scale, it was found that Truth weighed more”.18 But there were exceptions even to this. The sage Kaushik is punished for speaking the truth as it leads to the death of an innocent man at the hands of bandits. In the “Shantiparva”, even Bhishma tells Arjuna, “If you can escape without
speaking, then do not speak under any circumstances, but if it is necessary to speak, or if by not speaking you may rouse suspicion in the mind (of another) then, telling a lie has been found, after mature deliberation, to be much better than speaking the truth”. 19 That is because the law of truth is not confined to speech. That conduct which leads to the benefit of all cannot be looked upon as objectionable merely on the ground that the vocal expression is untruthful. That by which everybody will be harmed is neither Truth nor Harmlessness. Narada say to Shuka on the authority of Sanat Kumar, “speaking the truth is proper thing; but rather than truth, speak that which will lead to the welfare for all; because that in which the highest welfare of all consists is in my opinion the real Truth”.20

Mahabharata continuously pits choices in front of its protagonists. Tilak himself discusses several of them. There is the sage Vishwamitra ready to eat dog’s meat to save his own life.21 There is Chirkari disobeying his father and protecting his mother.22 Yudhishthira when he insults his Gandiva but is prevented by Krishna who says that deprecating Yudhishthira would fulfil his vow because for respectable persons, deprecation is as painful as death. 23 Tilak’s purpose is to emphasize that whatever action is required has to be performed. However, in order to act like this a person has to become a yogi. Tilak explains what is meant at the end of Chapter 6 of the Gita, when Krishna tells Arjuna, “therefore, O Arjuna, become a yogi”. In the given context, he says it has to mean a person who acts skillfully who is a karma yogi but not an ascetic.24 In chapter 2, Arjuna is advised, “perform action, having become a yogi” and after that, “therefore, take shelter in yoga”. It has to mean karma yoga.25 Chapter 3 of the Gita clearly states, “yogis are persons who perform Actions” ‘Yoga’ is also the name given to equanimity. It is also skill in action. Therefore, yoga that is continually talked about is karmayoga or desireless action. 26

Sri Aurobindo’s attitude to the use of Violence

For Sri Aurobindo, too, non violence could not be an absolute value. His articles from 1905-1910 in the Bande Matram and Karmayogin showed that he admired the sacrifices and the revolutionary fervour of the terrorist youth seized by the government and condemned as criminals. In Bande Matram he said that violence could be used by a nation to free itself but circumstances demanded. He, of course, knew that random acts or terrorism could not bring about the country’s freedom but he blamed the government for driving these patriotic young men to such activities.27 Hence, up to the withdrawal from active politics Sri Aurobindo led a double political life. On the one hand he was the outspoken leader of the Nationalist party and on the other, he was the secret leader and inspirer of the violent, underground terrorist movement designed to utterly demoralize the British. This is because both methods led to the same goal, that is, of an independent India. In the “Doctrine of Passive Resistance”, distinguishing between “Passive or defensive and active or aggressive resistance,” Sri Aurobindo says that while the method of the aggressive resister is to do something by which he can bring about passive harm to the Government, the method of the passive resister is to abstain from doing something by which he would be helping the Government, the time of attach is different. The passive method is especially suitable to countries where the Government depends mainly for the continuance of its administration on the voluntary help and acquiescence of the subject people 28 He faced the problem of violence squarely:
Unless we have the honesty and courage to look existence straight in the face, we shall never arrive at any effective solution of its discords and oppositions. We must see first what life and the world are.....Our very bodily life is a constant dying and being reborn, the body itself a beleaguered city attacked by assailing, protected by defending forces whose business is to devour each other.....War and destruction are not only a universal principle of our life here in its purely material aspects, but also of our mental and moral existence...It is impossible, at least as men and things are, to advance, to grow, to fulfil and still to observe really and utterly that principle of harmlessness which is yet placed before us as the highest and best law of conduct.29

What struck Aurobindo in his study of Gita was its bold “Gospel of action” and its stress on the kshatriya’s “duty to protect the world from injustice”.

The Christian and Buddhistic doctrine of turning the other cheek to the smiter”, he scribbled in his notebooks, “is as dangerous as its is impracticable. (It is) a radically false moral distinction and the lip profession of an ideal which mankind has never been able or willing to carry into practice. The disinterested and desire less pursuit of duty is a gospel worthy of the strongest manhood; that of the cheek turned to the smiter is a gospel for cowards and weaklings. Babes and sucklings may practice it, because they must, but with others it is a hypocrisy.30

Arrested in 1908, he was sentenced to one year of solitary confinement in the Alipore jail. The imprisonment led to profound spiritual experiences. Soon after his unexpected acquittal in May 1909, in his famous speech at Uttarpara he recounted something of his experience: “He placed the Gita in my hands. His strength entered into me and I was able to do the Sadhana of the Gita”.31 He whose self is harmonized by yoga seeth the self abiding in all beings and all beings in the self; everywhere he sees the same.

He who sees Me every where and sees all in Me; I am not lost to him nor is he lost to me . 33 This realization made him see the Oneness described in the Gita: It transformed the prison for him and the entire experience of imprisonment.

I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned ; no, it was Vasudeva who surrounded. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell but it was not the tree, I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Sri Krishna whom I saw standing there and holding over me his shade. I looked at the bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door and again I saw Vasudeva. It was Narayana who was guarding and standing sentry over me. Or I lay on the coarse blankets that were given me for a couch and felt the arms of Sri Krishna around me, t he arms of my Friends and Lover....I looked at the prisoners in the jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers, and as I looked at them I saw Vasudeva, it was Narayana whom I found in these darkened souls and misused bodies.

When the case opened...I was followed by the same insight. He said to me, “When you were cast into jail, did not your heart fail and did you not cry out to me, where is Thy protection? Look now at the Magistrate, look now at the Prosecuting Counsel”. I looked and it was not the Magistrate whom I saw, it was Vasudeva, it was Narayana who was sitting there on the bench. I looked at the Prosecuting Counsel and it was not the Counsel for the prosecution that I saw; it was Sri Krishna who sat there and smiled. “Now do you fear? He said, “I am in all men and I overrule their actions and their words.33
In spite of this moving experience, speaking on the Gita at Khulna immediately after his release, he emphasized that a person had to act according to the duties demanded of the position that he found himself in his life.

The virtue of the Brahmin is a great virtue: You shall not kill. This is what Ahimsa means. (But) if the virtue of Ahimsa comes to the kshatriya, if you say, “I will not kill”, there is no one to protect the country. The happiness of the people will be broken down. Injustice and lawlessness will reign. The virtue becomes a source of misery and you become instrumental in bringing misery and conflict to the people.34

The teaching of the Gita, he said in his concluding words, “means perfection of action. It makes man great. It gives him the utter strength, the utter bliss which is the goal of life in the world”.35

Gandhi and Non-Violence

What, for Gandhi, was the essential message can be seen in his introduction to his translation of the Gita which he completed in Kosani in Almora in 24th June 1929. It appeared in Young India in August 1931. He categorically stated that it had been his “endeavour, as also that of some companions to practice the teaching of Gita as” he had “understood it”.36

Gita for Gandhi was not a historical work but under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind. The physical warfare was only brought in to make the description of this internal duel more alluring. His study of Mahabharata confirmed this to him. The “Adipurva” ascribed superhuman or subhuman characteristics to the chief actors making it a story, a fable rather than a history. Thus Vyasa, the author of Mahabharata he felt was only using these people to drive home his religious theme. The text itself did not establish the necessity of war. It rather showed its futility. Vyasa had made the victors shed tears of sorrow and repentance and had left them with nothing but a legacy of miseries. Hence, for Gandhi, the second chapter of Gita did not teach the rules of warfare but rather elucidated the characteristics of a perfected man. Its whole design was inconsistent with the rules of conduct governing the relations between warring parties.37

Krishna of the Gita was perfection and right knowledge personified, but the picture thought Gandhi, was imaginary.38 It did not mean that Krishna never lived but that his perfection was an imagined one and the idea of a perfect incarnation was an aftergrowth. The belief in incarnation was a testimony to man’s lofty spiritual ambition. Man could not be at peace with himself till he became like God. The endeavour to reach this state was the supreme, ambition of a human being and it was the only ambition worth having. And this self-realization was, for Gandhi, the subject of all Gita. But the author of Gita, conceded Gandhi was not trying to establish this doctrine. His object to show the way to attain self-realization; the matchless remedy being renunciation of the fruits of action. This was the center round which the Gita was woven and around which devotion, knowledge and the rest revolved like planets.

The body had often been likened to a prison because wherever there was body, there was labour as no embodied being was exempt from it. The question then was how could the body be made into a temple of God? That is, how could one be free from action, and thus from the taint of sin? The Gita thought Gandhi had answered the question in decisively “By desireless action; by renouncing fruits of action, by dedicating all activities to Gods, i.e by surrendering oneself to Him body and soul”.39
Renunciation however did not mean that the renouncer did not get any fruits of his action. The \textit{Gita} did not warrant such a meaning. Renunciation means the absence of hankering after fruit. As a matter of fact, he who renounced reaped a thousand fold. The renunciation demanded by the \textit{Gita} was the acid test of faith. He who was ever brooding over result often lost nerve in the performance of his duty. He became impatient, gave vent to anger and then began to do unworthy things. He jumped from action to action never remaining faithful to any. He who brooded over results was like a man given to objects of senses, and like him he was ever distracted. He then said goodbye to all scruples, Everything became right in his estimation and he therefore resorted to means fair or foul to attain his end

Thinking along these lines, Gandhi felt that if he had to enforce the central teaching of \textit{Gita} in his own life, he was bound to follow Truth and Ahimsa. When there was no desire for fruit, there is no temptation for untruth or ahimsa. But he freely admitted that the \textit{Gita} was not written to establish ahimsa.\textsuperscript{40} It was an accepted and primary duty even before the age of \textit{Gita}. The \textit{Gita’s} message was the renunciation of the fruit of action. This was clearly brought out as early as the second chapter.

Accepting the complexity of the \textit{Gita’s} message, Gandhi went on to say “Nor is the \textit{Gita} a collection of Do’s and Don’t’s. What is lawful for one may be unlawful for another. What may be permissible at one time, or in one place, may not be so at another time, and in another place. Desire for fruit is the only universal prohibition. Desirelessness is obligatory”\textsuperscript{41}

But renunciation or sannyasa of the \textit{Gita} did not mean the cessation of all activity. The sannyasa of the \textit{Gita} was a paradox: it meant “all work and yet no work”. “Thus the author of the \textit{Gita},” said Gandhi, “by extending the meanings of words, has taught us to imitate him. Let it be granted, that according to the letter of the \textit{Gita} its possible to say that warfare is consistent with renunciation of fruit. But after forty years’ unremitting endeavour fully to enforce the teaching of the \textit{Gita} in my own life, I have in all humility felt that perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observance of ahimsa in every shape and form”.\textsuperscript{42} This is an amazing idea to arrive at from a text exhorting war.

\textbf{Karmayoga and its Diverse Meaning:}

Hence, it can be seen that three great nationalists all interpreted the karmayoga of \textit{Gita} in their own ways and arrived at three different interpretations and three different courses of action. Gandhi took the path of non-violence and led the country to freedom through it. However, neither he nor his followers could prevent the violence of partition and finally he himself met with a violent end. Sri Aurobindo left the national movement and went to Pondicherry declining even Tilak’s requests in 1919 after his return from his long incarceration in Mandalay sent through one of his lieutenants, Joseph Baptista, to return to lead the nationalists. He wrote a long letter in reply declining the offer as he said he was busy in spiritual activity of great import in Pandicherry which he called his “cave of tapsya”\textsuperscript{43}. For him true karmayoga or desireless action could only be achieved after the consciousness had been properly prepared for it. As he explained:
The ordinary life consists in work for personal aim and satisfaction of desire under some mental
or moral control, touched sometimes by a mental ideal. The Gita’s yoga consists in the offering
of one’s work as a sacrifice to the Divine, the conquest of desire, egoless and desireless action,
bhakti for the Divine, an entering into the cosmic consciousness, the sense of unity with all
creatures, oneness with the Divine.44

As for Tilak, he was released from the jail in Mandalay in June 1914 and once again
plunged into action. He said that six years of separation from the people had not lessened his
affection for them and that he had not forgotten the concept of swaraj. There had been a rift in
the Congress and he tried to unite the two groups but failed.45 He, then, built his own powerful
separate organization the “Home Rule League” with swaraj as its goal. The government was
again alarmed by Tilak’s activities. In 1916, Tilak’s sixtieth birthday was celebrated but the
government, ironically, demanded a surety of Rs. 20,000 for his good behaviour of one year. His
body gradually grew weaker. At this time, a journalist called Valentine Chirol visited India and
charged him with being the leader of a violent revolution in India. Tilak claimed that this was an
insult to him and asked for damages. He went to England to fight his case and stayed there for
thirteen months. Although he lost the suit, he befriended several leaders of the Labour Party and
also intensified the Home Rule movement.46 The Rowlat Act was promulgated and was
opposed in India leading to the Jalianwala Bagh massacre. Tilak rushed back to India at once and
exhorted his countrymen to continue the movement till their demands had been met. By this
time, his health was poor but he undertook tours to awaken the people. In July 1920 his
condition worsened and on the 1st of August, he passed away. He had truly lived a life as
enjoined by the Gita, the life of a Karmayogi.

Conclusion:

The question arises why and how did the same concept of karmayoga lead to three different
paths? The answer, perhaps, lies in the fact that our interpretations are based on our own life’s
experiences and the paths that we choose to take in the light of these. Or, to use the words of Sri
Aurobindo,

All action is determined by the effective state of our being, and the effective state of our being is
determined by the state of our constant self seeing will and active consciousness and by its basis
of kinetic movement. It is what we see and believe with our whole active nature ourselves to be
and our relations with the world to mean, it is our faith, our sraddha, that makes us what we
are.47

Hence, the three great leaders of the national movement, all read, the Gita, were
profoundly moved by it especially during their incarceration and inspired by it, chose such
different paths from each other.

Endnotes:
1. Sri Aurobindo, On Nationalism: Selected Writings and Speeches, Pondicherry: Sri
3. Stanley A. Wolpert, Tilak and Gokhale: Revolution and Reform in the Making of
5. Ibid. pp. 2-3.
7. See also Michel Danino, “Sri Aurobindo and the Gita”, Keynote address delivered at a seminar on “Relevance of Bhagavad Gita in the New Millennium” on January 12, 2000 at Kottayam’s Mahatama Gandhi University.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
15. Ibid., pp.15-32.
16. Ibid., p.44
17. Ibid., p.45
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p.47
20. Ibid., p.48
21. Ibid., p.55
22. Ibid., p.58.
23. Ibid., p.53
24. Ibid., p.78
25. Ibid., p.79.
34. Cited by Michel Danino, “Sri Aurobindo and the Gita”.
35. Ibid.
36. Gita According to Gandhi,” [http://members.aol.com/jainism/anasa.html](http://members.aol.com/jainism/anasa.html).
37. Ibid
38. Ibid
39. Ibid
40. Ibid
41. Ibid
42. Ibid