

Anthropology of Texts and Literature

The interplay between texts and publics/counter publics

This essay explains the interplay between texts and publics/counter publics using the text “Discourses on Bhagwad Gita” by Mahatama Gandhi.

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Foreword

While talking about the text “Discourses on Bhagwad Gita,” we speak about people present in the holy war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Arjuna, one of the Pandavas who is the heir of the Kuru Dynasty, is on a chariot with Lord Krishna, an Avatar of Lord Vishnu. Lord Krishna was the best person in the field of politics at that time. Along with the Pandavas, there are the Kauravas, the stepbrothers of Pandavas, and the heirs of the Kuru Dynasty. Lord Krishna addresses Arjun in the middle of a war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas to find a suitable ascender to the kingdom's throne. In the discussion, Lord Krishna discourses with Arjun as he has a wavering mind at the start of the war about fighting against his relatives. Lord Krishna advises Arjun on these matters, which beautifully depicts the interplay between texts and public/counter publics. The text that we are discussing here is a text on the hypertext of Bhagwad Gita by

Mahatama Gandhi that he used during the times of the Satyagrah movement to preach the teachings of Gita to the commoner living in that time, creating a public and a counter-public for the same.

Essay

The text's central theme, “Discourses on Bhagwad Gita,” is not the discourse between Arjun and Lord Krishna but between Lord Krishna and everyone who has read the text. These people, in turn, form the public of the text, which is the main takeaway of this essay.

Chapter - 1

The first chapter starts with the scene of the holy war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas on the battlefield of Kurukshetra(field of Kuru). Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, is marching on the battlefield and naming the leading warriors on each side of the war. Arjun is with Lord Krishna on his chariot, which Lord Krishna steers in between the two armies. On seeing his family members on the other side of the war, Arjun starts questioning himself and his morals. He starts the discourse with Lord Krishna by saying that he was ready to fight the war if it was a war between him and unknown people. However, because it is a war between him and his first cousin, the Kauravas, he is feeling guilt at the thought of fighting his relatives. He adds that they were brought up together, even though Duryodhana has rid the Pandavas of their fair share of the kingdom. He asks Lord Krishna what he will gain from killing them. He further addresses Lord Krishna by saying that he has some little knowledge, but he can differentiate between right and wrong. He says that killing family members is a sin, and thus he will not kill his family members. He is even ready to die by their hands. Here the Kurukshetra is the placeholder for the human heart and Dharmakshetra(the field of righteousness). Here we see the first resemblance between the text and a greater understanding addressed to the text's public. As we will progress, the distinction between the two will become more evident.

Chapter - 2

In the second chapter, Arjun picks himself up a little bit, but he is still staunch on his ideals that do not comply with killing family members. He further adds that it is not worth it to get the kingdom after killing elders and family members. He then concludes that his mind is filled with darkness and asks Lord Krishna to guide him in his path to righteousness, which Lord Krishna reiterates. Now we move to the fundamental premise of this essay, which is Lord Krishna's teachings to Arjun and the public of this text in a more significant viewpoint. Lord Krishna starts discoursing with Arjun saying that, his grief is for nothing, and he talks about wisdom without understanding a single thing. He further adds that Arjun has forgotten the distinction between the body and the soul. He says that the soul is immortal, whereas the body is the thing that ages. The body goes through the phases of youth, adultery, and finally, it perishes. The soul is the one immortal thing. The people that he is calling his relatives are just souls in those perishable bodies. Therefore he is unwise in grieving over them. He further addresses him, saying that it is one's duty that the person has to perform without moving past it. If it were his duty to run away from the battlefield, then the disgrace would not matter to him as his duty encompassed it. However, it was not his duty to run away from the battlefield; in this case, it was the opposite. He further adds that it would justify it for the people to ridicule him as it was the opposite of his duty. Then Lord Krishna proceeds to explain one of the critical concepts of life to Arjun, Karmayoga. He then says that "Your duty(Karmayoga) is the only thing to focus on during life. The desire for fruits of your action, victory or loss, gain or loss are the things that are not in one's control. All these factors are inevitable to come in one's life, and we must learn to put up with them. Without worrying about the fruit, one must devote themselves to their duties with the evenness of temper. The success of an act lies in performing the duty itself and not in its result. Therefore one should be calm and perform their duty clear of consequences." In response, Arjun says that he cannot follow such a path as he cannot stop thinking about his actions' fruits. He further asks Lord Krishna about the behaviour of a person who can attain this state of mind. To this, Lord Krishna explains in detail the behaviour of a person who is free from all desires, pride, and selfishness. He says that the person who is clear-minded and does bulge in times of adversity or in times of

happiness finds peace. Lord Krishna says that the person should devote himself to God, and all his sensory organs should be engrossed in serving god. He says that such a person does not let unnecessary thoughts cloud his judgement, and he indeed has achieved a state of mental peace. Expanding on this profound knowledge, we observe that this is true not only for Arjun but also for every person reading this text. Every person, irrespective of their background or position, can attain true mental peace by this method. By participating in this method, the person directly or indirectly starts to constitute a public for this text.

Chapter - 3

Arjun is confused at this point because he thinks that the teachings given by Lord Krishna point towards inaction, whereas Lord Krishna asks him to participate in action by fighting the war. Then Lord Krishna refutes his point by saying that he is not asking anyone to be in inaction. He asks them to perform their duty with their senses in control and in a spirit of detachment. Lord Krishna emphasises the importance of sacrifice in one's life. He says that even if a person is detached from all expectations, he must not be detached from doing sacrifice as it is the fundamental teaching of Lord Brahma. Lord Krishna further says that to get devoid of all other forms of expectation, the person must dedicate all of his work to the divine. By doing that, he completely rids himself of all other forms of attachment. By doing that, the person will feel that whatever he is doing is an act of God and not his own, and thus the egoism of the person perishes. In this sense, the person develops a sense of "Swadharma," which stands for one's own duty. Moreover, Swadharma is the pathway to attaining Moksha(salvation). The true essence of attaining Moksha is embracing while performing one's duty. At this point, Arjun asks Lord Krishna about the reason which compels a person to sin. He further points out that it is primarily due to an external agent that a person commits sins. Lord Krishna answers this question by saying that desire and anger are the two main reasons for which a person sins. If a person desires something and it is not satisfied, anger is inevitable. He says that man possesses the virtue of passion at this time, which is the worst trait possible for a person to have by pointing out that it causes instability in the person's mind. He further illuminates that anger causes the lustre of knowledge to dwindle and clouds the mind's judgement. A man first

controls his senses and then takes over his mind. At this point, Mahatama Gandhiji addresses the readers for the first time. He says that he calls this chapter the key understanding of Bhagwad Gita. He says that we should sacrifice in the spirit of detachment and not fool ourselves with self motives. He said that when we practice the form of detachment, all controversies lose their meaning for us. Over here is the first instance that we can see the importance of text in creating a public. Thus this discourse beautifully illustrates the point that publics are discursively constituted.

Chapter - 4,5 and 6

Lord Krishna addresses Arjun by saying that he is always on the side of the good. He then defines good. Lord Krishna says that the person who walks on a narrow path without being strayed from his objective, who prays to him and seeks refuge in him, is the definition of good. He then further illuminates the importance of sacrifice in one's life. After this, Arjun asks Lord Krishna about the better alternative between Sanyasa and Karmayoga. To this, Lord Krishna replies by saying that Karmayoga is the better alternative between the two. He says that a Sanyasi is devoid of all worldly pleasures and thus obtains everything in his mind. In contrast, the person who follows Karmayoga constantly works by keeping his senses in check and works without any expectation of any kind. That is indeed the better path to take. In this way, we constitute a public that comprises the readers who read this text and are now discoursing in its context. Lord Krishna further explains why one should abstain from being idle. Lord Krishna says that staying idle leads our minds to desires, and desires are the opposite of the teachings of Karmayoga. Therefore, he preaches meditational teachings for the person to calm his thoughts and freely think on matters without expecting anything in return. Lord Krishna further illuminates that a person is a friend and enemy of himself, depending on whether the person controls his mind and soul. He further says that the person who owns his mind sees himself in others and others in himself. The person, therefore, sees God in others and, in return, god in himself. Such a person cannot sin as he is a manifestation of God himself.

Chapter - 7

Lord Krishna says that he is the creator of everything, and his worshippers can be divided into four sections. He describes the first set of worshippers as the people who pray to him for selfish reasons to obtain relief from distress and do not understand any point of his being. Lord Krishna then describes the second set of worshippers as the people who are curious about the point of his being and are in a constant search of answers. He then describes the third set of his worshippers who are aware of his being but worship him for personal gain. Finally, he describes the fourth set of worshippers that pray to him. He says that this set of worshippers know the point of his being and pray to him without any selfish motive, which is why these worshippers are his favourite. These classifications right here are a beautiful example of how a public is constituted. Here we are again led to the belief that the publics are a social totality as here in the text, we are given the totality of the people that worship Lord Vishnu. We also get a beautiful example of how publics are self-organised. Here the people do not need to categorise themselves as they already are a part of the public.

The interplay between texts and Publics/Counterpublics

From the above discussion, we can see how texts constitute a public. The original text Bhagwad Gita has a very varied public. By writing the text, “Discourses on the Gita”, Mahatma Gandhi tried to bring the text back into circulation. He does this by writing the explanation of Gita in layman’s terms and thus actively creating a public for the text. From this, it is made clear that publics are discursively constituted. The people reading this essay are also a part of the public now as by discoursing on the above texts, I have once again brought the texts into circulation and created a public. However, a public for these texts already existed; I have merely brought them into the picture. In the various instances presented in the text, it seems like Lord Krishna is addressing Arjun but in reality, Arjun is just the placeholder for the people that are reading the text. Here the people that are reading the text, form the public of the text. It should also be noted that the people who have not read the text, still exist as the public of the text because they are

encompassed by the text itself. As we know that publics are a social totality, the fact that everyone is encompassed in the text just adds to its beauty. Here we see that the circulation of the text “Bhagwad Gita” gave uprise to several upheavals in the Indian Freedom Act for India. Mahatma Gandhi wrote the text “Discourses on Bhagwad Gita” to bring forward the ideals of the Bhagwad Gita and make everyone conscious of themselves, and boost the morale of the Indian people by giving them a sense of unity. This very beautifully illuminates the point that the publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation. Thus for a text to continue to have a public, it must be circulated again and again throughout the passage of time. As we very clearly see in the above essay the premise of the “Bhagwad Gita” is an imaginary world making, where Lord Krishna addresses the people in the form of Arjun about the various rules one should follow in life to attain mental peace and detach themselves from worldly desires. Here we can see that the public that is formed is just a poetic world making of the text and yet the public exists. In all of the teachings of Lord Krishna the public associates itself with the text, Lord Krishna does not call on a public, the public already exists, therefore publics are self-made. Along with this, a counter-public also exists. The people who are atheists or the people who do not follow the teachings of Lord Krishna form the counter-public of this discourse and the texts. This counter-public in this context of the discourse on Bhagwad Gita is a part of the social totality. The people that form the counter-public of this discourse are more or less aware of it. The people accept their subordinate nature of a counter-public due to two reasons. The first reason is that the people are conscious of their flaws and thus accept their nature of not being able to follow the teachings of the Lord. The second reason is that some people do not believe in God, these people do not experience the world making that is experienced by the public, instead they exactly do the opposite. They live in a reality guided by their own belief and are ignorant of the world of the text itself. Thus the counter-public that exists lives in the exact opposite world that the text creates. But it does not mean that the counter-public is the literal opposite of the public. The people that believe in the teachings of Bhagwad Gita and those who don't form the public and counter-public of the text respectively but there is no fine line between the two. The public and the counter-public keep on changing depending on the way, the place, and the times that the people live in. Everything is subjected to its own background and then we objectify the way we look at things to reach a conclusive answer. In the text, we often see the word

Karmayoga which is one's duty in this world, but the interpretation of one's duty will be different for everyone as all of us are different individuals with a different sense of being. This is where we bring forward the point of "Universality of Literature" and debate upon it. Because we are all individual beings should the same rules be applied to everyone becomes the question that comes to mind. And if we take the answer to be yes, then we will have to redefine the public of the text in the first place. Therefore we have to redefine what one's duty means with respect to the text. One's duty is bound to oneself from the day the person is born. Like Lord Krishna explains to Arjun, the purpose of one's life is decided on the day the person is born. By further elaborating on this point, the purpose of all the Pandavas was decided on the day they were born. Therefore it is simply to be bound by a set of rules that define how you should live but doesn't necessarily mean one always follows the rules. Therefore we have an overlap between the two parts, the public, and the counter-public. The counter-public is constituted of many prominent people who bring out counterintuitive arguments about the Bhagavad Gita. I will take the text "Krishna and his Gita" by "Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar" as a reference for the counter-public formed by Gita. Here Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar explains how a counter public for Gita exists and on what basis are we arguing. The main basis of these arguments given by several prominent scholars who were cited by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar who form the counter public for Gita includes treating Gita as a Gospel of the Hindus. Bohtlingk says: "The Gita contains by the side of many high and beautiful thoughts, not only a few weak points; contradictions (which the commentators have tried to pass over as excusable), repetitions, exaggerations, absurdities, and loathsome points." Whereas Hopkins speaks of the Bhagvat Gita as a characteristic work of the Hindu Literature in its sublimity as in its puerilities, in its logic as in its want of it; an ill-assorted cabinet of primitive philosophical opinions." He believes that "Despite its occasional power and music exaltation, the Divine song in its present state as a poetical production is unsatisfactory. The same thing is said over again, and the contradictions in phraseology and in meaning are as numerous as the repetitions so that one is not surprised to find it described as "the wonderful song, which causes the hair to stand on end." Holtzman says: "We have before us (in the Bhagvat Gita) a Vishnuite revision of a pantheistic poem." Garbe observes: "The whole character of the poem in its design and execution is preponderatingly theistic. A personal God Krishna stands forth in the form of a human hero, expounds his doctrine,

enjoins, above all things, on his listener, along with the performance of his duties, loving faith in Him and self-surrender:..... And by the side of this God—who is delineated as personally as possible, and who dominates the whole poem—stands out frequently the impersonal neutral Brahman, the Absolute, as the highest principle. At one time Krishna says that He is the sole Highest God who has created the world and all beings and rules over it all; at another time, he expounds the Vedantic doctrine of Brahman and Maya—the Cosmic Illusion and expounds as the highest goal of human being that he be freed from the World-Illusion and become Brahman. These two doctrines—the theistic and the pantheistic—are mixed up with each other, and follow each other, sometimes quite unconnected and sometimes loosely connected. And it is not the case that the one is represented as a lower, exoteric, (Text p. 9) and, (p.) as the higher esoteric doctrine. It is nowhere taught that the Theism is a preliminary step to the knowledge of the reality or that it is its symbol, and that the pantheism of the Vedanta is the (ultimate) reality itself; but the two beliefs are treated almost throughout as though there was indeed no difference between them, either verbal or real.” Mr. Telang says: “There are several passages in the Gita which it is not very easy to reconcile with one another, and no attempt is made to harmonize them. Thus, for example, in stanza 16 of Chapter VII, Krishna divides his devotees into four classes, one of which consists of ‘men of knowledge, whom, Krishna says, he considers ‘as his own self. It would probably be difficult to imagine any expression which could indicate higher esteem. Yet in stanza 46 of chapter VI, we have it laid down, that the devotee is superior not only to the mere performer of penances but even to the men of knowledge. The commentators betray their gnostic bias by interpreting ‘men of knowledge’ in this latter passage to mean those who have acquired erudition in the Shastras and their significations. This is not an interpretation to be necessarily rejected. But there is in it a certain twisting of words, which, under the circumstances here, I am not inclined to accept. And on the other hand, it must not be forgotten, that the implications fairly derivable from Chapter IV, stanza 39 (pp. 62, 63), would seem to be rather than knowledge is superior to devotion—is the higher stage to be reached by means of devotion as the stepping stone. In another passage again at Gita, Chapter XII, stanza 12, concentration is preferred to knowledge, which also seems to me to be irreconcilable with Chapter VII, stanza 16. Take still another instance. At Gita, Chapter B stanza 15, it is said, that ‘Lord receives the sin or merit of none.’ Yet at Chapter V, stanza 24 Krishna calls

himself 'the Lord and enjoyer,' of all sacrifices and penances. How, it may be well asked, can the Supreme Being 'enjoy that which he does not even receive?' Once more at Chapter X, stanza 29, Krishna declares that 'none is hateful to me, none dear.' And yet the remarkable verse at the close of Chapter XII seems to stand in point-blank contradiction to that declaration. There through a most elaborate series of stanzas, the burden of Krishna's eloquent sermon is 'such a one is dear to me.' And again in those fine verses, where Krishna winds up his Divine Law, he similarly tells Arjuna, that he, Arjuna, is 'dear' to Krishna. And Krishna also speaks of that devotee as 'dear' to him, who may publish the mystery of the Gita among those who reference Supreme Being.¹ And yet again, how are we to reconcile the same passage about none being 'hateful or dear' to Krishna, with his own words at Chapter XVI, stanza 18, and following stanzas? The language used in describing the 'demoniac' people there mentioned is not remarkable for sweetness towards them, while Krishna says positively, 'I hurl down such people into demoniac wombs, whereby they go down into misery and the vilest condition.' These persons are scarcely characterized with accuracy 'as neither hateful nor dear' to Krishna. It seems to me, that all these are real inconsistencies in the Gita, not such, perhaps, as might not be explained away, but such, I think, as indicate a mind making guesses at truth, as Professor Max Muller puts it, rather than a mind elaborating a complete and organized system of philosophy. There is not even a trace of consciousness on the part of the author that these inconsistencies exist. And the contexts of the various passages indicate, in my judgment, that a half-truth is struck out here and another half-truth there, with special reference to the special subject then under discussion; but no attempt is made to organize the various half-truths which are apparently incompatible, into a symmetrical whole, where the apparent inconsistencies might possibly vanish altogether in the higher synthesis." Mr. Tilak says that the Gita does not teach about Jnana Yoga but Karma Yoga. At this point, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar steps in and says that all of these inconsistencies exist because we take the Gita as a Gospel of the Hindus. He says that Gita is neither a Gospel nor a treatise on philosophy. He says that Gita is a text which explains religious dogmas using philosophy. It basically uses philosophy to defend religion, which is the clear existence of a counter-public for the Bhagwad Gita. He says that the Bhagwad Gita exists as a counter revolution to the ideals brought on by the spread of Buddhism during the time of the spread of Buddhism. He brings out the inconsistencies in the

Gita by using the citations mentioned above as well as talking about the verses of Gita and how they counter each other as well Lord Krishna citing a theory on Guna from the text “Sankhya” but it has mentions of 3 types of vernas while Lord Krishna mentions 4 vernas. He further illuminates that killing others devoid of feelings because the soul and body are different is still murder. In a sense, Bhagwad Gita was present to create a counter public to Buddhism and vice versa, which again beautifully explains the point that publics are always pre-existing and just need to be looked at for a textual work. Furthermore the reason behind re-creating a public for the text “Bhagwad Gita” had a deeper reason which needs to be explored here. Gandhiji at the time of writing the text “Discourses on Bhagwad Gita” had been following the teachings of Gita for about 10 years. He published the text at the day of the Dandi March for a very specific reason. The reason was that every single person that was accompanying him on the March would be able to read the text. The text for him for a way of living for the Ashram Members and his followers. He advocated non-violence through the text. He succeeded in making his followers follow the path of non-violence, as a part of the non-violence movement that followed the Dandi March. He needed to re-create the public of the Gita in such a way that he could emphasize the importance of non-violence and thus create a public that can follow his ideals. Here the public was originally aimed to be the Ashram members living with him so that they can live according to his ideals. Mahatma Gandhi emphasized so much on the ideals of non-violence and service because he needed the followers to follow those ideals if he wanted to win against the British. He used the pretext of Bhagwad Gita because as pointed above, most of the general population believes that it is the Gospel of the Hindus and it is regarded in high respect throughout the nation. At that time he had started to gain recognition and respect as the person who can free India from the clutches of the British. He needed a way to propagate his ideals by ensuring his ideals in the pretext of Gita. Even in the essay by Dr. B R Ambedkar, he says that the Bhagwad Gita was necessary to create a counter-revolution or else it would have just died of. Here two points are beautifully explained. The first point again emphasizes on how publics and counter publics overlap as witnessed very beautifully from the above given example. And the second point being that due to the circulation of the text of Discourses on Bhagwad Gita there also exists a counter revolution which again shows that publics and counter publics are discursively constituted. Thus the text

“Discourses on Bhawad Gita” beautifully represents the interplay between texts and publics/counter publics.

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