

*On the Gunas*. Presented to the OCHS. This is a hurriedly written draft but has the essentials of the author's understanding of Hindu theodicy. 2018.

### ***Tamas and the Problem of Evil.***

In addition to seeing Shakti as twofold, black and white, Hindus often describe her as threefold, the one whose emblem is the trident or, sometimes, the triangle. The high theology of Shakti is found in the fifth or sixth century in the *Devī Māhātmya* and reaches full form in the extensive *Devī Bhagavata Purana* nearly a thousand years later. It elaborates both her utter supremacy and the three aspects or “qualities” (*gunas*) through which she shapes the cosmos. In this vision, the hymnists see the Supreme Reality, Brahman, as Devī. The Goddess is the All—indescribable and ultimately ungraspable. When she takes form, however, she is triple. Manifest as sattva (purity), she is Mahālakshmi; as rajas (power or passion), she is Mahā Sarasvatī; and as tamas (darkness), she is Mahākālī. This theology is sung in a hymn, often recited as a supplement to the *Devī Māhātmya*, called the *Rahasya Traya*, literally, the “Triple Mystery.” In this theology, the goddess is not simply the *shakti* of Shiva, not even the *shakti* of all the gods together. She is not a consort goddess at all. She is the Supreme Being, the ground of all Reality. (Eck 265-6)

Very few Hindus read the *Bhagavad Gita* or listen to the *Bhagavad Gita* in Sanskrit and in the vernaculars unless they are at the point of death or during post-mortem oblation ceremonies. But most Hindus up and down India and in other Hindu nations like Nepal and Mauritius worship Shakti as primarily Mother Kali and thus Eck's understanding of the *gunas* is more relevant now that readily available exegesis by the traditional commentators of the *Bhagavad Gita* to be found online. Eck has unknowingly glossed the *Bhagavad Gita's* three *gunas* both

theoretically robust and practically comprehensible. This understanding of Shakti being “the Supreme Being, the ground of all Reality” is a valid misreading<sup>1</sup> of the Supreme Godhead, Lord Krishna’s portrayal of Himself in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Further the Shakta qua Tantric nature of the *Bhagavad Gita* is attested by the fact that Sri Avinavagupta’s version of the *Bhagavad Gita* conflates Krishna with Shakti. It is within this matrix of Sri Avinavagupta’s exegesis and Eck’s insight quoted above that we shall interrogate the three *gunas*.

The great problem which Indian philosophies face in the hand of Western philosophers trained in the Thomist tradition is the apparent silence of the Problem of Evil encountered and addressed by both Semitic theologians and philosophers. For example, the recently published *Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil* does not have a chapter on Hindu theodicy since either the editors found the topic to be too tough to grapple with within the limitations of a few pages or they found Hindu philosophy to be unable to resolve the Problem of Evil satisfactorily. It is the aim of this paper to revisit the *gunas* to see whether they can satisfy Continental queries about the Problem of Evil since that is the one problem which according to the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev which endures and needs to be resolved. If the Problem of Evil is not resolved through Hindu exegesis and in this case, through the scrutiny of the *gunas*, then Hindu philosophy will always be relegated to departments of religious studies everywhere and will be seen and circulated within Hindu Faith communities. Thus, this paper will foreground the Problem of Evil through a study of the three *gunas*; especially of *Tamas*.

Indian philosophy as found in the *Bhagavad Gita* seems to rob the being struggling in the here and the now of agency and limits the Heideggerian Dasein from self-actualization in this life. It is within these limitations of the human person both within

---

<sup>1</sup> See Harold Bloom’s book in *Works Cited* for the concept of misreading. The term misreading should have been misseeing within the context of this paper. But that would be a neologism.

Samkhya and Yoga that we must scrutinize the action of the *gunas* (which have no real cognates in English or even Latin, or in either Old and New Greek). Tellingly the initial occurrences of the *gunas*, specifically, *Tamas* is not chronicled anywhere in the *Bhagavad Gita*. What stirred *Tamas* in the primordial soup is not to be found in the text. This is the origin of the 'Problem of Evil' as far as Hinduism as defined by the *Bhagavad Gita* is concerned. *Sattva* or *Rajas* do not pose the problems that *Tamas* poses within comparative theodicy. Because sanctity is desired and the moral life in the sense of Aristotle's *eudaimonia* does not have disastrous consequences; yet radical Kantian evil generated by *Tamas* has real-world consequences. Therefore, the rest of this paper will concentrate on *Tamas*.

For instance, the *Bhagavad Gita* does not address why Hari qua Brahman does not annihilate those who abuse children. Pedophilia is nothing less than absolute evil and it is itself evil to analyze child abuse in terms of *Tamas*. Because like the insanity argument in jurisprudence, arguments deriving from a child's past Karma and the perpetrator's present Tamasic nature are themselves reductionist and contrary to natural justice. No restorative explanation of the Unnao rape case this year can be used to explain the brutalizing and the killing of a little nomad girl in Kashmir. It seems that the theories of the *gunas* in the *Bhagavad Gita* is inadequate to deal with the Problem of Evil in the here and the now in India in 2018. In the first place this essayist has not been able to find even one reasonable answer in the *Bhagavad Gita*, in the various *Tantras* and in the *Upanishads* including the *Sannyasa Upanishads* about the cessation of evil. Since according to all existing theologies within Hinduism, dependent origination within the various schools of Buddhism including Vajrayana and Jainism (in which system, karma clings to the Purusha, to use Hindu terminology); decrease in *Tamas* in one sentient being (*Dasein*) means an equal increase in *Tamas* in another. The quanta of Karma remain constant over the eons. Because all beings are subsumed in the primordial mixture at the end of the *Kali Yuga*, only to be evolved out in the

next aeon. These involutions and evolutions are perennial. Therefore, even *Chapter 16* of the *Bhagavad Gita* cannot provide a satisfactory theodicy. What the entire *Bhagavad Gita* does is that it enumerates the effects of the *gunas* and how to go beyond the *gunas*. But this is more experiential than philosophical. Because to come back to the case at hand, how does a sexually abused child deserve to be abused in the here and the now by any stretch of one's imagination? It will not do to theologize and/or philosophize ahistorically. Philosophy to have an impact must be *ad hominem*. General ramblings have led to the shutting shop of many philosophy departments globally and as the examiner is aware, in the Russell Group of Universities. My stance may be problematic for those within the Faith community of the Hindus, but this non-theological Enlightenment-interrogation of the *gunas* is needed if Hinduism is to survive. For instances, from Adi Shankaracharya to Sri Madhavacharya to Georg and Brenda Feuerstein's notes to their edition of the *Bhagavad Gita* we do not have any empirically tenable scrutiny of the *gunas* in the light of Kantian evil. We do not know why a person overcome by *Tamas* will prefer putrid food over say, milk and honey. The answer is that the marginalized in India have tended to have access to only putrid food. Tribals in India to this day have to eat rat meat as their only sustainable source of animal protein since non-tribal Hindus have socially prohibited the access of high-quality protein to the poorest of the poor in India. One wonders whether the *gunas* are more historical than they are made out to be, more molded by the flow of capital than one would own up in public. This is akin to a random statement that *ahimsa* in both the *Bhagavad Gita* and the more Jaina (in content) the *Yoga Suktas* of Patanjali translates into vegetarianism. How can a tribal afford vegetarianism? In this sense, the effects and the enumeration of the *gunas* in the *Bhagavad Gita* is contrary to current advances in the social sciences and robs the human being in the Third World of the chance of upward aspirational mobility. This understanding of the *gunas* may be construed as being informed by Marxist polemics mixed with Christian liberation

theology's influences on reading the *Bhagavad Gita*. This is partly true because the exegetes of the *Bhagavad Gita* try to posit it as ahistorical and universal again much like Patanjali's universals or ironically, Immanuel Kant's 'categorical imperatives'. The *gunas* in fact, from any rational viewpoint encourage 'nonage' and depend entirely on Karma. But then none of the exegetes answer whence the first Tamasic modification (ripple) of the mind (primordial matter) ever occurred. And if it did, why did it occur? Surely, a family losing a child to cancer is neither dreaming nor can one conceive of Isvara to be cruel enough to cause a child brain cancer because the child had done something heinous in her last life! Even if that is the case, why would not Isvara, or Hari not intervene as He did in the life of Arjuna to annihilate all bad Karma?

This is the tragedy of Hinduism. It cannot satisfactorily explain the terrors of the Third Reich or the xenophobia of Donald Trump's vote-base in the USA. In *The Essence of Yoga* by Georg Feuerstein and Jeanine Miller we have a frank statement of this failure of Hindu theodicies which is applicable to the *Bhagavad Gita* and its description of the *Gunas*. In their Chapter, "The Meaning of Suffering in Yoga", on pages 90-1, they write: "Nescience (avidya), the main cause of suffering, is said to be without beginning, since both Self and nature are eternal entities." Thus, while scouring the *Bhagavad Gita* for answers to the Problem of Evil, we find the concept of the *gunas* in the *Bhagavad Gita* to be inadequate and of little value. How does it help us to know that the *gunas* are hardly ever found on their own; even a child knows that sentient beings are often admixtures of both the good and the bad. It is of little use to know that a rapist has an excess of *Tamas*. Or, for that matter, *Tamasic* wo/men have genes which predispose them to acts of radical evil. This nature of probing then leads on to more slippery territories like which *gunas* and more crucially, why, produce mental ill health? I am aware that the politically correct question within the ahistorical nature of Hindu exegesis would have been, which karma in this and previous births have led to

mental health diseases? But it is precisely the cultural work of this essayist is not to take the *Bhagavad Gita* at face value. That would be a disservice to Hinduism which is threatened by the merciless redaction (sic) critics of the Semitic religions. I have thrown up question to which I have no answers. But these questions need to be answered if Hinduism is not to go the way of the Greco-Roman religions. Those once flourishing religions are reduced to being mere myths now. Unless the *gunas* can explain both radical and banal evil, they are meaningless as objects of scrutiny and intellectual enquiry. Hinduism must accept the contributions of the likes of Hannah Arendt to contemporary human knowledge if it were to thrive in the long future. To return where we began, it seems to this author that to grow out of nonage, we have to gloss Eck's insight quotes at the beginning of this work to work out *Tamas* as a categorical imperative which is not the same as Sattva. May be, the time has come to re-gloss the *Bhagavad Gita*. Because Mahakali is not Tamas as Eck understands Kali to be.

### Works Cited

Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by H. Rackham, Harvard Univ. Press, 1999.

Abhinavagupta. *Abhinavagupta's Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita: Gitārtha Samgraha*.

Translated by Boris Marjanovic. Varanasi: Indica Books, 2004.

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

Eck, Diana L. "Shakti, the Distribution of the Body of the Goddess." *India: A Sacred Geography*, Three Rivers Press, 2012, pp. 257–299.

Kant, Immanuel. *An Answer to the Question, What Is Enlightenment?* Penguin, 2009.

Meister, Chad, and Paul Moser, editors. *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Patañjali. *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: a New Edition, Translation, and Commentary; with Insights from the Traditional Commentators*. Translated by Edwin F. Bryant, North Point Press, 2009.

Subhasis Chattopadhyay Ph.D.