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THE INFLUENCE OF THE BHAGAVAD GITA ON HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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ABSTRACT

The late 1820s-30s witnessed a deterioration in the economic and religious condition of America. Corrupt political and religious institutions were deeply impacting the society, as a whole and at the individual level. This scenario forced many intellectuals to seek refuge. The reading of religious texts from varied cultures, provided them with the needed respite and helped steer their philosophical thoughts in a new direction. This gave rise to a new philosophical movement named, Transcendentalism. It established its roots around Concord, Massachusetts, in New England and soon gained prominence with the establishment of the Transcendentalist Club, led by American intellectuals like Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Putnam and Frederic Henry Hedge.

Keeping the “individual” at its centre, the transcendentalists focussed on the overall spiritual and holistic growth of an individual. They enforced ideas such as the intrinsic “goodness” of mankind, unity of all beings and the importance of intuition over experience. They believed in the power of the Divine and its relation with the individual. Several Hindu religious texts, including the Upanishads, Vedas, The Laws of Manu and the Bhagavad Gita, inspired these ideas. Henry David Thoreau, another expounder of Transcendentalism, was immensely influenced by these texts and incorporated their teachings in his works, as well as his life. This paper aims to explore the impact of Hindu scriptures, especially the Bhagavad Gita, on Thoreau’s major works. It also attempts to trace how the Gita transformed his religious philosophy and overall life.

**Keywords:** Transcendentalism, The Bhagavad Gita, Henry David Thoreau, Walden, Spirituality, Karmayoga.

Introduction

The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of intellectual and religious reconstruction in America. The native religious tradition of America had settled into a defence of orthodoxy and its mercantile culture was incapable of sustaining its society. Seeing the existing conditions of America, the sensitive souls of that age grew restive and they tried to find solace in their interaction with the literature of various writers from various lands, for example, Victor Cousin from France, Confucius from China, Coleridge from England, Kant, Hegel and Schelling from Germany, Sadi from Persia, and various oriental scriptures, especially the Hindu

scriptures like Vedas, Upanishads, The Laws of Manu, the Bhagavad Gita and even Hitopadesha by Vishnu Sharma. These thinkers assimilated their philosophical thoughts along with certain distinguishing principles of Christianity as a result of which a new school of thought was born named, Transcendentalism.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), was not only the expounder of the movement, but also an influential factor in bringing the oriental into the American life not as “an idea” but as “an actual science of positive knowledge”; thus ushering in, a new art of living. Henry David Thoreau was also one of the spokesmen of this Transcendentalist Club or Circle which flourished in Concord, Massachusetts from 1836 onwards. Other members of this circle were: James Freeman Clarke, a Unitarian clergyman; Amos Branson Alcott, a teacher, lecturer, and a philosopher; Elizabeth Peabody and Margaret Fuller, writers and teachers; Theodore Parker and George Ripley, both clergymen; and several other occasional participants.

The leaders of the Transcendentalist’s Club, Emerson and Thoreau, were the first ones to indulge with various Asian religious texts. The English translations of these texts made it accessible for them. According to Todd Lewis and Kent Bicknell in their essay ‘The Asian Soul of Transcendentalism’; Emerson and Thoreau got access to the “first translations of the major works of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Islam that were published in Europe” (p. 12). They believed that the spiritual knowledge that they acquired from the works of India, Persia and China “would open up a rich garden of new understandings, with the potential to alter human lives and the American civilization’s destiny” (p. 12). The knowledge of the Asian religious texts helped in shaping up the spiritual and religious understanding of the Transcendentalists and also helped them develop their skill as a writer. Expanding on the importance of Asian scriptures and religious texts on Transcendentalists’ life, Lewis and Bicknell quoted Arthur Christy, a renowned American historian. In his words, the transcendentalists turned to these scriptures of Asia because “they could not live with an absentee God” (p. 14).

Henry David Thoreau, as mentioned earlier, was among the best known and important members of the Transcendentalist’s club who took deep interest in the study of the Asian religious texts, especially Hindu texts, and incorporated the knowledge that he gained from them, not only in his works but also in his life. Although, he had started reading Oriental literature much earlier than Emerson, his interest in the Hindu texts developed as a result of his stay at Emerson’s residence in the year 1841. Emerson’s personal library had a very rich collection of Hindu scriptures which enabled Thoreau to acquire a deep understanding of Hinduism. He read Sir William Jones’s translation of *The Laws of Manu* and of *Shakuntala*; Wilson’s translation of the *Sankya Karika*, and of the *Vishnu Purana*; Wilkinson’s translation of *Hitopadesha* by Vishnu Sharma; Langlois’ French translation of *Harivansa* (which Thoreau later translated into English); and Garcin de Tassy’s *Histoire de la literature hindoui et Hindoustan*; and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Out of all these Hindu scriptures, William Jones’s translation of *The Laws of Manu* and the *Bhagavad Gita* had a deep influence on Thoreau, which was reflected in his works as well.

Manorama B. Trikha in her essay, ‘The influence of the Bhagavad Gita on Henry David Thoreau’ mentions the impact that *The Laws of Manu* had on Thoreau. She quotes Thoreau’s own words from one of his journals stating; “the title, ‘The laws of Manu with the gloss of Culluca’, comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed over the plains of Hindostan.” She further explicates its influence on Thoreau, by citing his later work ‘A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers’ (1849); “It (*The Laws of Manu*) seems to have been uttered from some eastern summit, with a sober morning prescience...and is as superior to criticism as the Himmaleh (Himalaya) Mountains...with that rare kind of wisdom which...comes to us as refined as the porcelain...It is true for the widest horizon...as it proceeds from, so it addresses, what is deepest and most abiding in man.” In this work, Thoreau constantly uses nature related eulogies which, according to David Scott in his article, ‘Re-walking Thoreau and Asia: ‘Light from the East’ for ‘A Very Yankee Sort of Oriental’ (2007); represents his “own ‘Yankee’ leaning to Nature as well as the incoming Indian material” (p. 18). Thoreau believed that an inner spirit flowed through man and his environment alike which unified the world. According to him, this was possible if one led the life of an ascetic. Thoreau was influenced by this theory and he acquired the ascetic habits of living in his life as well. For this reason one can say that he prized *The Laws of Manu* particularly, as writer John T. Reid in his book *Indian influences in American Literature and Thought* (1965) observes; “...for they (Laws of Manu) are in essence not only a “manual of private devotion”(as Thoreau termed them) but also

a handbook of practical living for the righteous man.” Thoreau found in this particular scripture an essence of purity which further influenced him to take to asceticism, to become a yogi in his personal life too.

### Impact of Bhagavad Gita on Thoreau

Although *The Laws of Manu* had quite an influence on Thoreau, it was the *Bhagavad Gita*, another important Hindu scripture, which with its teachings on the theory of “yoga” and spirituality influenced Thoreau’s life as well as his works to a great extent, especially *Walden* (1854). The *Bhagavad Gita* first came to Thoreau’s attention in the year 1845 and eventually became one of his favourite books. According to him, this religious text was a “wonderfully sustained and developed” out of all the various Hindu scriptures, that he was aware of. In his work, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he says, “The New Testament is remarkable for its pure morality; the best of the Hindu Scripture, for its pure intellectuality. The reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a higher, purer, or rarer region of thought than in the Bhagavad Geeta...Its sanity and sublimity have impressed the minds even of soldiers and merchants.”<sup>1</sup> The influence of Gita on Thoreau was clearly evident in this text. Certain extracts from the religious text also made their way to one of his journals (published in 1846), as well as his well-known work, *Walden* (1854).

*Walden* was one of the main works by Thoreau, which talked about the influence of the Gita on his life, in great detail. Commenting on the role that Gita played in his daily life, he wrote; “In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat-Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions” (Thoreau 244). In this work, Thoreau describes his experience of living as a hermit, or “yogi” (which was an influence of his study of the Gita), in the woods near the Walden Pond from July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1845, to September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1847. The book is divided into eighteen chapters, and contains an account of Thoreau’s observation of Nature, and his deliberation on human life and his existence. Sreekrishna Sarma in his article, ‘A short study of the Oriental influence on Henry David Thoreau’ (1956) observes that “he (Thoreau) used this time for close observation of Nature, and for reading and writing. Most of the book was written during his stay in this hermitage” (Sarma 77) To exemplify this point, Sarma mentions William Ellery Channing, who considers *Walden* the “logbook of Thoreau’s woodland cruise at Walden”. He further observes that the main purpose behind Thoreau’s stay in the woods was not only to observe nature but also “to explore the secret regions of life, to make life a laboratory where experiments with Truth could be conducted” (p. 77). For, according to Thoreau, being a philosopher required him “to love simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust”, and not merely “to have subtle thoughts”. Here, he uses Thoreau’s own words, thus stating Thoreau’s purpose for living in the woods; “My purpose in going to Walden pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles” (p. 79). Living in solitude at the Walden Pond enabled Thoreau to commune with God like a “yogi”.

In a letter to his friend H. G. O. Blake (1849) Thoreau pronounced; “Depend upon it that, rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the Yoga faithfully...To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a Yogi.” He regarded himself to be a true practitioner of Yoga and credited the Bhagavad Gita and other Asian religious texts for the same. The Gita defines a yogi in Shloka 18<sup>th</sup> of Chapter 6 as; “when the disciplined mind is established in the self alone, liberated from all desires, then he is said to be harmonized (in yoga). Thoreau comprehended the meaning of the term “yogi” as one who “apprehends the ‘pure self’ that can progress towards the enlightenment leading to the beatific vision but never commits himself to the method prescribed by Hinduism”, says Manorama B. Trikha in her article ‘The influence of the Bhagavad Gita on Henry David Thoreau’. From both definitions provided by the Gita and as understood by Thoreau, one thing becomes clear that ‘yoga’ is an activity of the mind, an enlightenment from within, which Thoreau did practice in his life.

Thoreau was a firm believer in the theory of ‘Karmayoga’ - ‘the yoga of action’, which was an integral part of the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The theory of ‘Karmayoga’ enabled Thoreau to understand the various

<sup>1</sup> As quoted by V. Meenakumari in her article, ‘Thoreau’s India- An outsider’s view’ (published 2011), p. 5.

dimensions of the same such as- the importance of finding your own duty, or Dharma, despite the influence of popular culture or external influences, a Yogi's balance between action as inaction, the renunciation of desires and material attachments, as well as the notion that the Yogi should recognize the self in everything around them, most specifically—in nature. The influence of this theory is well depicted in his novel, *Walden*.

The *Bhagavad Gita* defines a 'Karmayogi' as someone "who understands that his concern is with action alone; that he has no concern with the results; that he should not entertain the motive of giving a fixed fruit for a given action; and that these ideas do not mean that he should sit back courting inaction." A 'karma yogi' followed yoga and was pure at heart. He subdued his self and conquered the sense; making his self, the self of all beings and such a person was never considered to be tainted." Krishna further elaborated on the practice of yoga in the Gita, "the yogi should be constantly absorbed in self-contemplation, in solitude and alone, self-controlled, without desire and without possessions...he should focus his mind on one point, control his mental and sensual activities and practice yoga for self-purification." Thoreau considered himself to be a 'karmayogi' whose whole life was an unprecedented example of this sort of yoga. He believed in doing his duty; focussing himself only on his work, whatever might be the nature of it. Whether it was tending Emerson's garden at his residence or building his cottage by the Walden Pond on his own, he completed his work with full dignity, without thinking about the fruits of his hard labour in doing those works. In her article, Manorama B. Trikha uses Thoreau's own words to show the readers how he embraced the principles of 'karmayoga'; "The aim of the labourer should be, not to get his living, to get a 'good job'; but to perform well a certain work." Such work leads to one's "self-improvement" and "self-culture". For Thoreau, performing his duties well meant his access to salvation which was his ultimate goal, and not any other material end. He propounded this theory in his new 'Labour Doctrine' where, as Manorama Trikha puts it, "the work done per se could import liberal education leading to self-improvement'.

The *Bhagavad Gita* emphasizes in its theory of the 'karmayoga', that a karmayogi should be emancipated from all worldly attachments and desires for his self-purification. Thoreau worked on this theory in his *Doctrine of Simplicity*, where he believed that an individual should only focus on fulfilling the "necessaries for survival". This practice would help the individual by "keeping him away from the damaging effects of industrial civilization that promotes materialistic desires and by giving him enough time for self-improvement in solitude." Thoreau further believed that in order to fully achieve the goal of salvation and self-purification it was essential for a 'karmayogi' to have the "perfect correspondence with nature, so that he is at home with her", as nature was the reflector of the Supreme Soul, according to the Gita. Thoreau's novel *Walden* proves that he was a "sojourner in nature" as he "acquired self-knowledge by tearing of the garb of so-called civilization and realizing God through his creation." In the novel, he suggests to his readers that one should live in moderate circumstances as "most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life are not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind" (Thoreau 15).

Thoreau also believed that the mode of diet contributed significantly for the self-growth and improvement of an individual; a theory also professed by the Bhagavad Gita. In *Walden*, he discusses how abstaining from non-vegetarian food helped him improve his poetic faculties; "I believe that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food, and form much food of any kind" (Thoreau 177). This proves that Thoreau's longing to become a "yogi" not only included his self-purification by self-contemplation in solitude but also involved leaving of non-vegetarian food which according to the Gita was a symbol of indolence, madness and negligence of duty.

## Conclusion

The *Bhagavad Gita*, through its teachings and spiritual beliefs, thus, played a pivotal role in transforming Thoreau's intellectual and spiritual identity. It was in this key text of Hindu thought, that Thoreau found a nutritious food for meditation and even some patterns of living that he incorporated in his personal life. Whether it was his desire to live the life of a "yogi", or his search for truth in solace, or his understanding of the importance

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of his duty as a writer or as an individual; the Gita greatly influenced his life, which was reflected in most of his major works as well.

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