# **The Bhagavad Gita in the making of conscious capitalism in India**

## Abstract

The article is a critique of arguments outlined by Mackey and Sisodia (2013). This article is divided into two parts. The first part proceeds from a critical analysis of Mackey and Sisodia (2013) and their narratives of conscious capitalism as manifested in its theological foundations in response to capitalist contradictions, conflicts and challenges. The second part deals with the relationship between Hindu religious consciousness in the making of conscious capitalism. This article argues that Hindu religious consciousness provides philosophical solutions to internal contradictions and challenges of capitalism by outsourcing its systemic problems to individual work ethics, which is *Karma* (duty) in Hindu religion as outlined in the *Bhagavad Gita* (the songs of god). However, these religious solutions are temporary as everyday life experiences generate human consciousness that questions the power of capitalist systems. It also argues that Hindu religious consciousness is concomitant with requirements of capitalism and its compliant consciousness.

## Introduction

Capitalism as a system continues to sustain itself and maintains its dynamism in spite of all its internal crisis and manages to recover temporarily from all its external challenges by shaping both individual and group consciousness. Capitalism creates its own regimes, institutions, structures and regulatory mechanisms to expand capitalist consciousness towards universal appeal. These appeals derives its inspiration from religious philosophies and practices that shape economic, political, cultural, social and material world of everyday lives. One of the unique features of contemporary analysis on capitalism is that religion does not matter in the age of science, technology and free market led society. Mackey and Sisodia (2013)’s work is important that promises to build ethical capitalism with conscious interventions. However, it revived theological lineages of conscious capitalism that this article intends to expand and critique the normative terrain.

Conscious capitalism promises “to collectively awaken to the incredible potential of business and capitalism being conducted much more consciously” and liberate the extraordinary power of business and capitalism to create a world in which all people live lives full of purpose, love, and creativity—a world of compassion, freedom, and prosperity. This is our vision for Conscious Capitalism” (Mackey and Sisodia (2013: 53-54). However, the promises and premises of these lofty ideals are neither new nor unique to capitalist systems. They further argue that “Conscious Capitalism, a more evolved form of capitalism and business enterprise that addresses the challenges we face today and offers the promise of a dramatically better future (ibid: 56). But the question is why capitalism failed to achieve these ideals over centuries of its practice. Why did capitalism produce inequalities and exploitation of human beings and nature in a world scale? Mackey and Sisodia (2013:71) have answered these two questions by arguing that “business-people operate with a low level of consciousness about the purpose and impact of business, they engage in trade-off thinking that creates many harmful, unintended consequences.”. Therefore, it is important for conscious capitalism and its liberating power to focus on human nature, desires and motivations to transcend one’s own self-interests (ibid: 70-71).

Such analysis and prepositions outsource the internal contradictions and negative consequences of capitalism to individuals and their greed for maximising profit. So, virtuous individuals can only revive capitalism and its higher goals by expanding positive consciousness based on values of care for others. The modern forms of ‘training and orientation’ programmes are organised forms of domestication, which owes its origin in religion and religious practices to produce mass morality. Mass morality is not collective morality produced through collective consciousness. Religious mass morality is produced by domestication of both individual and mass consciousness. This problem is becoming more acute with the emerging of capitalism (Borkenau, 1971; Grossman, 2006). The work of Mackey and Sisodia (2013) inadvertently promotes such a praxis to normalise capitalism and give an ethical face to it.

## Religion, capitalism and consciousness

All religions promote mass morality with the help of spiritual socialisation by constructing “norms for the regulation of social life and individual behaviour is a compelling need of capitalism, so long as it wishes to proclaim itself as a universal form of social life” (Borkenau, 1971: 96). Such a universal regulatory process emanating from religion achieves twin objectives. Firstly, it helps in disciplining and domesticating labour. Secondly, it helps in the dissolution of material foundations of consciousness and creates religious, cultural, social, political and economic consciousness among masses that is concomitant with the requirements of the religious, political, social and cultural order of the regime. ‘Religion is an indispensable means of mass domestication’ (Borkenau, 1971: 208) which produces, sustains and expands a form of consciousness that is different from the material foundations of everyday lives of working people. The aesthetic attitude to work and labour based on religious norms helps capitalism to solve the contradictions between capital and labour. In this context, Borkenau has argued that “capitalism was essentially conditioned by religion” (1971: 158).

Religious morality is capitalist morality and religious consciousness is capitalist consciousness. Both are concomitant with each other. Therefore, both religion and capitalism promotes consciousness that domesticates production, consumption, needs, desires and labour power where the goal of life is to seek salvation for religion with the invisible hand of god and ‘fecundity of freedom’[[1]](#footnote-1) with the help of market within capitalism (Nayak, 2018). The capitalist religiosity is the foundation on which Mackey and Sisodia (2013) justify and predict to revive capitalism in its ethical form looks elusive like the idea of salvation in religion. It further individualises the systemic problem within capitalism and the business affiliated with it.

## Hindu religious consciousness, Bhagavad Gita and capitalism

The idea of salvation is the core of Hindu religious consciousness shaped by the ideals outlined in the Bhagavad Gita (Songs of God). It is not only a significant religious text but also considered as the representative of Hindu religion today. The canonical status of Gita is a product of ruling and non-ruling elites’ patronage to the text and its governing ideals. The British colonisers saw Gita as “a fortuitous combination of play and business, and construed as corresponding to the Christian spirit, the Gita embarked on a journey to bridge cultures” (Rao, 2013: 468). The political formations from all political currents (liberal, left, radical, Gandhian and right-wing leaders) within Indian nationalist struggle have used Gita in their own ways (Davies, 2014). In postcolonial India, industrialists use Hindu religion as: [...] a set of beliefs and a code of ethical conduct than in a set of ritual observances. In this sense, the effect of industry is to change the traditional conception of the essentials of Hinduism from an emphasis on the correct ritual observances and family disciplines to an emphasis on philosophical principles, devotional faith and right conduct (Singer, 1972, p. 342). The current ruling dispensation led by the Hindutva right wing forces and their capitalist cronies demand that ‘declare Gita’ as a national text abandoning the secular values of Indian Constitution (Nayak, 2018). There are more than 6,000 commentaries on Gita (Rao, 2013), and 400 books on Gita are available in Malayalam language alone (Dalal, 2014). Despite all diverse interpretations, Gita managed to synthesise the diverse Smriti traditions of Hindu religion within a structured philosophical outlook with strong tendencies of arbitrary and authoritarian outlook in its unstructured theology (Nayak, 2018).

There are 330 million gods and goddesses registered in different religious scripts. The mythically unregistered number of gods and goddesses are growing every day in India, which reflects the diverse religious practice in the Hindu religion (Fuller, 1992; Mehta, 1996; Radhakrishnan, 2004; Nayak, 2018). The everyday religious practice within Hindu religion looks diverse as it provides space to different religious cults to flourish within its theological framework. The unstructured philosophy of Hindu religious practice and its spiritual traditions provide individuals to practice their faith and beliefs in their own ways. However, such a diverse religious practice comes to an end with the growth of arbitrary and structured philosophical outlooks emanating from the Bhagavad Gita. Despite all diverse religious practices and philosophical narratives, the Bhagavad Gita managed to synthesise the diverse Smriti traditions of Hindu religion within a structured philosophical outlook (Nayak, 2018).

There are unresolved debates on the historical origin and mythical status of the Bhagavad Gita. It is considered that Gita was composed between fifth century to second century BCE (Flower, 2012; Upadhyaya, 1998). Doniger (2013) considers that Gita was composed during ca.100 CE. Adluri and Bagchee (2016) have tried to apply critical historical method to historicise Gita and put it within a historical context, but their research ends up in conforming Bhargava (1977) who argued that “no sober historian” would “concede that the Bhagavad Gita contains the actual words spoken by Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukhetra” (Bhargava, 1977, p. 357). The Bhagavad Gita has structured the cardinal philosophical principles and goal of Hindu religion, which is based on the doctrine of karma (duty), which is based on dharma (religion or righteousness), which can provide artha (wealth/power/fame) and be achieved through bhakti (devotion). These four steps can provide the basis for gyana/vidya (knowledge) for the realisation of the “self” and the “other” which can lead towards punarjanma (reincarnation). But the final goal is moksa (deliverance or salvation) or nirvana (free from the cyclic process of birth and rebirth. This is the state where human body/life unites/reunites with the supreme soul; the God). The final goal can be achieved by following the steps of karma, bhakti and dharma (Nayak, 2018:151-156).

The idea of Karma, Dharma, Artha, Bhakti, Gyana/Vidya and Moksa/Nirvana shapes Hindu religious consciousness. These six formal steps are central to unavoidable steps of Hindu religion. These steps create internal causations and conditions that nothing is external to individuals and their own unquestionable Karma. These philosophical formulations promote Hindu consciousness that sustains caste, gender and class inequalities. The Karma theory normalises inequalities. It also creates both social structures and regimes that help capitalism to grow without any systemic challenges. *The Economic Times* while reviewing Mackey and Sisodia (2013)’s work has argued that “Conscious Capitalism is in keeping with the ancient wisdom of India as it views leadership as trusteeship: focusing on the right actions and not being unduly attached to outcome” (ibid:4).

Similarly, the *Mint* has argued that “Conscious Capitalism builds the case for free market enterprise, driven by a purpose other than profit” (ibid:4). whose purpose is it? Who shapes the purpose? Who decides it and how? These questions are central to understand the material conditions that shapes our consciousness. However, the religious practices completes alienates individuals and their material conditions shaped by the capitalist system today. It further individualises the collective consciousness. The individualisation of consciousness helps to construct an isolated and disconnected individual that is essential capitalist political economy of atomisation (Poulantzas,1978).

The atomisation society, consciousness, and construction of alienated individual identity destroys the collective consciousness formed out of collective marginationalisation within dominant Brahminical social order established by caste hierarchy in Hindu society. The caste based social structure and Brahminical social order finds its philosophical justification from the Bhagavad Gita that plays a central role in establishing capitalist regimes of accumulation. It takes place both in material level and in the spiritual level with the help of consciousness produced by the Karma theory as outlined in the Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita provides both spiritual and ideological foundation to the caste system, which provides social structures of capitalist accumulation in India.

## Conclusion

Mackey and Sisodia (2013)’s work on conscious capitalism and its liberating power is a theological manifesto of capitalism, which derives its lineages from the religious philosophies. The conscious capitalism is concomitant with the ideals of Hindu religious consciousness as outlined in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The philosophical foundations of the Bhagavad Gita creates an ethical foundation, which gives social and spiritual legitimacy to processes of production and regimes of accumulation that is concomitant with capitalism. The Karma theory and its internal causation normalises social and economic stratifications based on class, caste and gender, justifying and naturalising inequalities. The feudal inequalities persists and accelerated further within capitalism in India as the Bhagavad Gita provides normative, spiritual and religious justifications to normalise it by generating individual consciousness based on one’s own Karma.

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1. Friedman and Friedman (1980:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)