Influence of Vedanta on Indian Strategic Culture

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The strategic culture of a country is influenced by its foundational texts that establish its core beliefs, ideational makeup and broad behavioural responses, even if they may emanate from non-strategic sources. In this respect, the article studies the impact of Vedanta scriptures—Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and Bhagvad Gita—as the locus of India's strategic thought and culture through the ages.

Keywords: *Vedanta, Indian Strategic Culture*

While discussing the roots of strategic culture of any country, it is important to understand its core belief systems, enshrined in its spiritual, philosophical, political and military treatises that may have played a fundamental role in shaping its collective psyche and by extension, its patterns of perception and behaviour. Therefore, in addition to reading a nation's traditional treatises on warfare, diplomacy and statecraft for determining its strategic culture, it is also important to peruse thoroughly the endogenous spiritual and ideational literatures that may have shaped its perception of 'Self', as well as the outer world and the proverbial 'Others'.

The difficulty in identifying the locus of Indian strategic culture has been that it has so far largely concentrated on ancient texts dealing solely with strategic matters, that is, treatises focusing only on statecraft, diplomacy and warfare. In this respect, laudatory progress has been made in the study of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Kamandaka's *Nitisara* and even

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Thiruvalluvar's *Kural*. Although much knowledge on Indian strategic orientation has been gleaned from these studies, the literature that has most profoundly influenced the Indian psyche and which consciously and subconsciously guides and informs its strategic behaviour still remains elusive to many strategic thinkers.

Therefore, the time has come to shift the focus to the foundational texts of India's spiritual and philosophical roots, even though these texts may not seem directly related to the strategic domain. In this regard, it is important to note that contemporary experts of 'strategic culture' do not solely delve into a country's historical treatises on strategic warfare, but peruse all the sources of indigenous knowledge that have played a role in establishing nation's self-perception and belief systems—including the spiritual, religious, philosophical, ethical and aesthetic traditions and culture—in order to scan the composition of its collective psyche and by extension, its temperamental ticks and behavioural responses. Thus, we find Alan Macmillan incorporating traditional belief systems in defining the term strategic culture itself: 'The decision making process in matters of defence is not an abstract construct based purely in the present moment but is, rather, steeped in the beliefs, biases, traditions and cultural identity of the individual country—all of which feeds into its strategic culture.'[1]

In fact, theorists like Michael Liebig even apply Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts of 'habitus' (which comprises socially ingrained habits, skills and dispositions) into the study of strategic culture.[2] According to Bourdieu, habitus is a 'system of dispositions—a present past that tends to perpetuate itself into the future by reactivation in similarly structured practices'.[3] Thus, the habitus operates at both the semi-conscious and subconscious levels of behaviour and makes an impact on the ideational make-up of a nation's strategy formulation and conventions on leadership, even if these influences may emanate from a non-strategic domain. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi's mass movements, which were directed against British colonial policies, were derived from Vedantic concepts of *satya* (truth) and *ahimsa* (non-violence)—which, as a pioneering general, Gandhi executed in the strategic domain.

In fact, there is no denying the primacy of the sacred Vedas and their spiritual and philosophical exegeses in the Vedanta texts that have played an influential role in Indian strategic culture down the ages. In fact, some of independent India's central tenets, 'both of creed and strategy', are either derived or show conceptual similarities with Vedantist concepts.[4] For instance, India adopted 'Satyamev Jayate' (truth alone triumphs)

as its national motto on 26 January 1950, which is a mantra from the Vedantic canon of the *Mundaka Upanishad*.[5] Another *mahavakya* (grand pronouncement) is 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (the world is one family) from the *Maha Upanishad*,[6] which has been acknowledged as the cornerstone of India's political and cultural diplomacy on several occasions.[7]

Speaking at the World Culture Festival in March 2016, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, 'Indian culture is very rich and has inculcated in each one of us great values; we are the people who have come from *Aham Brahmasmi* to *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*; we are the people who have come from *Upanishads* to *Upgrah* (Satellite).'[8] Earlier, addressing the United Nations General Assembly in 2014, he had said: 'Every nation's world view is shaped by its civilisation and philosophical tradition. India's ancient wisdom sees the world as one family. It is this timeless current of thought that gives India an unwavering belief in multilateralism.'[9] On these and earlier occasions, Indian heads of state have enunciated Indian foreign and defence policies using Vedantic references. Many of India's rulers, freedom fighters and modern statesmen—ranging from Mahatma Gandhi, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Subhash Chandra Bose and even kings like Akbar (espousing the distinctive *advaita* ideal of *Sulh-e-Kul*, that is, the peace of all-encompassing oneness)—have been proponents of Vedantic philosophy.

The imprint of Vedantist concepts and terminology on Indian strategic culture, therefore, seems more deep-seated than may have been considered thus far. In acknowledgement of this fact, this article emphasises the need for an objective and in-depth study of this foundational corpus of India's strategic thought and orientation. The article can only highlight a few of the spiritual and philosophical concepts with strategic implications from the Vedanta texts because it is merely an introduction to an enormous scholastic preserve. The next section is devoted to explaining the spiritual and intellectual concepts of Vedanta thoughts, while the following sections study the influence and impact of these concepts on India's strategic thought and culture.

Vedanta Literature and Concepts

The Body of Vedanta Literature

Vedanta (also known as *Uttara Mimansa*) constitutes one of the six systems of Hindu philosophy (*darshana*s) that emerged in ancient India

(along with Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshikha and Mimamsa).[10] Although it literally means the 'end or conclusion of the Vedas' (the oldest and most revered scriptures of Hinduism), Vedanta's concepts are viewed as the spiritual and philosophical apogee of ideas contained in the Vedas.

The three fundamental texts of Vedanta (called *Prasthanatrayi*) are:

1. *The Upanishads*: The most prominent being the longer and older ones, mainly the *Brihadaranyaka*, the *Chandogya*, the *Taittiriyya* and the *Katha*.
2. *The Brahma Sutras*: Attributed to sage Badaryana or Vyasa, it consists of 555 verses (*sutra*s) in four chapters. The main themes being *Brahman* (the ultimate reality) and human existence.
3. *The Bhagvad Gita*: This 701-verse religious text is also called *Gitopanishad* (Chapters 23–40 of 'Bhishma Parva' in Mahabharata) and is considered the manual for practical application of Upanishad in everyday life.

The spiritual truths contained in the Prasthanatrayi have been discussed and elucidated by philosophers and founders of several Vedanta schools, with varying ontological interpretations.

Their commentaries are preserved in the *Bhashya* texts, which deal with the varied perspectives on the nature of God (known as Brahman), ranging between the assertions of being essentially *dvaita* (dualistic, 'God being separate from creation') in nature to 'advaita' (non-dualistic, 'Godhead and all of creation being essentially one').[11]

Schools of Vedanta: Hierarchical Harmony of Apparent Divergences

The following are the four main schools of Vedanta:[12]

1. *Advaitavad:* Adi Shankaracharya is considered the chief exponent of the Advaita school of thought, which is the classical theory of monism or non-dualism. The philosophy refers to the idea that there is only one, indivisible and ultimate reality, which it calls Brahman; the phenomenal and ephemeral world we seem to live in is merely an illusion (*maya*); and the innermost soul within every living being (*atman*) is not different from Brahman. Classical advaita, also known as Kevaladvaita (strict monism or non-dualism) as found in Upanishads and works of Adi Shankaracharya, takes the purely 'non-dualist' stance in that it brooks no distinctive attribute or qualification within the cosmic

whole (*nirakar*—Brahman without form; *nirguna*—without attribute; and *nirvishesh*—without distinction or characteristics).

2. *Vashishthadvaitavad* (qualified monism): This school is said to be best enunciated by Sri Ramanujacharya, along with Nathamuni and Yamuna. It advocates qualified non-duality, which believes that there are different attributes (*guna*s) in this world in spite of an all-embracing unity, including the *jiva* (living), the *ajiva* (non-living) and *ishvara* (the God Vishnu Narayana).
3. *Shuddadvaitavad* (pure non-dualism): According to its founding philosopher, Vallabhacharya (1479–1531 CE), there is equality in 'essence' of the individual self with God, like the analogy of sparks to fire. However, unlike Adi Shankaracharya, Vallabha does not deny God as the whole, but calls the atman on the individual as the part.
4. *Dvaitavad* (dualism): Propounded by Sri Madhavacharya in the thirteenth century, this school believes in the duality not only of the *atman* (the soul of an individual living being) from the Brahman (the universal 'over-soul'), but also of matter from God, one individual soul from another, matter and soul, and between various kinds of matter.

In addition to these main philosophical schools of Vedanta, there are other schools, namely, the Bhedabheda (whose Dvaitadvaita sub-school was founded by Nimbarka and Upadhika sub-school by Bhaskara) and Achintya Bhedabheda (propounded by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu).[13]

This diversity of thought among the different schools of Vedanta, paradoxically, does not contradict each other as they are considered by classical Hindu scholarship as different stages on the spiritual and philosophical path, ascending from Dvaita to Bhedabedha, then Vashishthadvaita, Shuddadvaita and ultimately, Kevaladvaita. They may appear different yet part of the same unity of existence at the same time.[14] All these theological interpretations of Hindu seers and scholars are the exegesis of the Vedanta texts.

In addition to these Upanishadic schools of divine ontology, the corpus of Vedanta literature includes the Bhagvad Gita, which is part of the Prasthanatrayi canon of the Vedanta. In fact, there is reference to Mahabharata—which contains the Bhagvad Gita—as the fifth Veda and it is indirectly referred to in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (7.1.2), which uses its other name *Itihasa Purana* ('historical traditions'). The other major Hindu epic, Ramayana, also makes the claim to be the fifth

Veda. However, as Mahabharata itself contains an abbreviated version of Ramayana, it is considered to have the stronger claim; and as the extended metaphorical enunciation of the Bhagvad Gita, many consider it to be part of the Vedantist canon.

Thus, the larger corpus of literature associated with the standard Vedanta canons, which covers the grand epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata (which every Indian has either read or heard from elders) and is replete with the spiritual teachings as well as tales of diplomatic intrigue and exploits in warfare, should be studied in depth to understand the strategic culture of India. From Upanishads, which guide India's foreign policy at the doctrinal levels, to Bhagvad Gita, which covers doctrinal, strategic and even tactical knowledge and wisdom, Vedanta texts are a treasure trove for understanding India's profound and rich strategic culture.

As has been rightly observed by India's Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar, in his book, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*:

> If you look at the Mahabharata, every conceivable concept in International Relations and Politics and Strategies, the balance of power is there, the concept of frenemies, the regime changes, the nonalignment is there to various degrees. There is a lot of learning out there. In India, we use examples from Mahabharata in our daily conversation.[15]

For the purpose of brevity, this article will only focus on some of the key concepts of the Upanishads (mainly concepts related to Advaita philosophy) and the Bhagvad Gita (both Kevaladvaitavad and Vashishthadvaitavad) as they have had the most profound impact on Indian religion and culture, including its heritage of political, diplomatic and strategic heritage.

Key Concepts of Vedanta's Advaita Philosophy

In order to understand the impact of Advaita philosophy on Indian strategic thought and culture, it would be important to first introduce some of the key concepts of this most profound work on human and divine ontology. However, the length of the article does not allow us to explore these highly esoteric concepts in depth.

Brahman (the Singular, Indivisible, Absolute Reality)

Advaita philosophy, in its purest form, is strictly non-dualist and posits the absolute existence of only one all-pervasive reality. It is best encapsulated in the statement, 'Ekam Evadvitiyam' or 'One without a second'.

The name given to this indivisible and absolute reality in Upanishadic literature is Brahman. Thus, there is essentially only one all-encompassing and non-dual truth (Brahman) and everything is part of it, is same in it and nothing lies outside of it.[16] This ideal is succinctly enunciated as *'Sarvam* khalv *idam brahman'* (*which may be translated as 'All that is here is indeed Brahman'; Chandogya Upanishad*, 3.14).[17] *Any perceived sense of diversity or multiplicity in this creation is false and ephemeral, belonging to the phenomenal and illusive world of maya.*

> In it (Brahman) there is no diversity. He goes from death to death, who sees in it, as it were, diversity.
>
> —*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (4.4.19)[18]

The refrain is also repeated in *Katha Upanishad* (4.11). This non-dualist Brahman is *nirakar*, *nirguna* and *nirvishesh*. It is particularly defined as being beyond the three gunas of time, space and five senses of perception:

> I am other than name, form and action.
> My nature is ever free!
> I am Self, the supreme unconditioned Brahman.
> I am pure Awareness, always non-dual.
>
> —*Adi Shankara, Upadeshsahasri (11.7)*[19]

Atman: Divine Rests within Each Soul

The concept of 'atman' refers to the inner self or soul of every individual being, which is curiously identical with the cosmic Brahman. According to Advaitavad, liberation of the human spirit (*moksha*) comes from self-knowledge (*atma-jnana*) that a person's innermost Self and life force (atman/*jivatma*) is separate from one's ego and cannot be distinguished from the transcendent Brahman.[20] In fact, all souls and entities across space and time are considered integral to the same Oneness (that is, Brahman).

> That Self is indeed Brahman
> (Transliteration: Sa Vā Ayamātmā Brahma)
>
> —*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (4.4.5)[21]

The more celebrated verse highlighting the spiritual insight that the soul is itself the Brahman is enshrined in the Sanskrit mahavakyas: 'Aham Brahmasmi' ('I am Brahman')[22] preserved in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (1.4.10); and 'Tattvamasi' (translated as 'You are That')[23] in *Chandogya Upanishad* (6.8.7).

'Maya' and 'Avidya'—The Phenomenal, Ephemeral, Elusive World

After Brahman and atman, the third important concept of Advaita philosophy is the concept of 'avidya', which refers to the ignorance that is perceived as knowledge derived from the world of sensory perceptions and the seeming multiplicity of entities and rich diversity of the phenomenal world (maya).[24]

In effect, 'avidya' is not different from the illusory nature of the outer world or 'maya', for avidya relates to the ignorance of the individual Self (atman) and maya is the illusive veil that hides the cosmic Self (Brahman).[25] In other words, maya is that cosmic force which creates the illusion that the phenomenal world of sensory perceptions is real.

Bhagvad Gita: Vedanta's Practical and Strategic Manual

The Bhagvad Gita has been called *Gitopanishad* and *Yogopanishad*, which implies that it has the status of Upanishadic and Vedantic scripture. It has the dual status of being both *smriti* (recollected) literature because it is part of Mahabharata, as well as *shruti* (revealed) knowledge as it is hailed as the Upanishad of the Upanishads.

According to 'Gita Dhyanam' (nine-verse Sanskrit poem that has often been attached to the Bhagavad Gita):

> The Upanishads are the cows milked by Gopala (Krishna), the son of Nanda, and Arjuna is the calf. Wise and pure men drink the milk, the supreme, immortal nectar of the Gita.
>
> —'Gita Dhyanam' (verse 4)[26]

Being placed within the epic war story of Mahabharata, Bhagvad Gita does not read as a purely spiritual treatise like the Upanishads, but rather as a practical manual for people of action (*karamyogi*s) who wish to incorporate Vedantic wisdom into their everyday lives and on yet another level, as a strategic manual for soldiers and generals.[27]

Ishvara (Krishna, the Personal God)

The Bhagvad Gita speaks of Brahma, the impersonal and formless God of Upanishads, but it also refers to the ideal of 'ishvara'—a personal, human-like God in Krishna (an avatar of Vishnu), which is closer in its attributes to Ramanuja's concept of Lord Vishnu Narayana in Vashishtadvaitavad.

> I dwell deep in the hearts of everyone,
> Memory, knowledge and reasoning come from me;

I am the object to be known
Through all sacred lore; and I am its knower
The creator its final truth.
—Bhagvad Gita (15:15)[28]

Dharma—Cosmic Order and the Individual Duty

The first word of the Bhagvad Gita,[29] 'dharma', is a central theme of the text. Signifying all that is accordance with the cosmic order or *rita*, the word has been translated as 'duty', 'law', 'virtue', 'order' and more, all of which cover some aspects of a word with even larger connotations. For general purposes, the word is used in the connotation of the 'path of righteousness' and 'right action'.

In another sense, the Gita also uses the word dharma with reference to one's personal duty. Lord Krishna concludes his teaching on dharma as one's personal duty by saying:

> Now if you fail to wage this war of sacred duty (Dharma), then you will abandon your own duty (dharma) and fame, only to gain evil.
> —Bhagvad Gita (2.33)[30]

Theory of Karma—Salvation through Selfless Action

More than the Upanishads, it is the Bhagvad Gita that gives greater emphasis on proactive and practical approach to life, that is, of engaging with the world of maya than following renunciation of the illusory world. The Bhagvad Gita accords equal importance to all the four yogas in Hindu thought—*jnana yoga* (reuniting with Brahman through knowledge); *karma yoga* (reuniting through righteous actions); *bhakti yoga* (reuniting through devotion); and *raja yoga* (reuniting with meditation)—respecting various individuals as having different aptitudes, who should accordingly have a corresponding path for attaining ultimate spiritual awareness and bliss (called moksha, which is similar to the state of attaining *satchitananda*).

Whereas the Upanishads emphasise more on aspects of jnana yoga (path to the divine through knowledge) and raja yoga (path to the divine through meditation), Bhagvad Gita gives greater emphasis to karma yoga (path to the divine through selfless action) and bhakti yoga (path to the divine through ecstatic devotion), which makes it more practical and popular among common people as well.

The central theme of Bhagvad Gita is the message of 'nishkama karma' (selfless and desire-less karma). It calls for actions to be guided

by the quality of the *sattva* (pure) *guna* (quality), as opposed to *rajasik* (aggression), *vikrama* (bad action) and *tamasik* that relates to darkness and inertia. 'Nishkama karma' means a proactive approach, but driven by the right and purest intention and not out of selfish desire or hideous motive.

Then there is the seminal and most celebrated verse on selfless action, which remains detached even from the motive or desire for a positive outcome or reward and concentrates solely on the performance of righteous deed or duty because it morally needs to be done.

> Be intent on action, not on the fruits of action;
> Avoid attraction to the fruits and attachments to inaction
> —Bhagvad Gita (2.47)[31]

Influence of Vedanta Concepts in the Strategic Domain

Some strategic experts may raise the question on how a spiritual and philosophical system of extreme introversion could have any impact on India's strategic culture. In fact, this line of thinking might have been partly responsible for disregarding the texts of Vedanta from the study of Indian strategic sources, although there is plenty of literature in business management studies these days that claims to draw much practical benefit from this scriptural canon.

'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam': Universalism and Tolerance for Plurality

In Advaita philosophy, the 'Other' is not viewed as an unfriendly alien but as part of an undifferentiated cosmic whole, which emanates from the same essence that one's own 'Self' is made up of. Thus, Advaita philosophy is one which sees an essential unity behind the apparently different. It is this understanding that leads us to the Vedantist ideal of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbukam', translated as 'the world is one family'.

> One is a relative, the other stranger,
> Say the small minded.
> The world is a family,
> Live the magnanimous.
>
> Be detached,
> Be magnanimous,
> Lift up your mind, enjoy
> the fruit of Brahmanic freedom.
> —*Maha Upanishad* (6.71-75)[32]

The ideal of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' has been a source of inspiration for Indian culture, which is known for its hospitable and magnanimous attitude towards foreigners. This ideal has helped India reconcile with ideological differences, plurality of beliefs, cultures and countercultures, religions and sects, as well as races and ethnicities, over several millennia. In fact, this universalist ideal has not only made us more hospitable in our outlook towards foreigners, it has also made us more accommodating and democratic at home.

'Aham Brahmasmi': Source of Identity, Exclusivity and Rejuvenation

Although Vedantic teachings have universalism ingrained in their philosophical outlook, they have remained the best source for the spiritual and ideational renewal and regeneration of the essential Indian identity and character in times of political, social and cultural crises, that is, during wars, invasions and foreign occupation. With its dismissiveness of the phenomenal and ever-changing world as false and illusory (maya) and faith that true enlightenment lies within its divine essence ('Aham Brahmasmi' or 'I am Brahman'), Indian civilisation has been able to preserve and revive its essential identity and unbroken civilisational heritage over many a millennia.

It is with this Vedantic self-belief that India could successfully shake off the colonial yoke. It all began with 'back to the Vedas' slogan of Hindu revivalist and reform movements, like Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission and others, that eventually laid the ground for the emergence of India's indigenous political identity and freedom struggle. No other scriptural canon, other than Vedanta, could fire up the imagination of revolutionary nationalism, nor render a strategic vision and vitality to empower a nascent national leadership to build the construct of an independent India.

Post-independence, India has pursued a unique blend of universal cordiality and strategic autonomy in framing its foreign and defence policy positions—be it 'non-alignment', the 'Panchsheel' principles of non-interference, developing its own nuclear programme but with 'no-fist-use' policy or having present-day 'de-hyphenated relations' in the complex fudge of a multi-polar world. In fact, behind the veneer of peaceable neutrality, India has preferred to hold its own—much like a practising Advaitin. Its universality has saved it from getting entangled in the 'maya' of dangerous alignments, while its sense of introspective insularity gives it a distinctive freedom and identity in becoming a non-aggressive, yet independent player on the world stage.

Dharma Yudh and the Just War Theory (*Jus Bellum Justum*)

The Vedanta texts are categorical in their endorsement of non-violence (ahimsa). The *Chandogya Upanishad* (8.15.1) bars violence against 'all creatures' (*sarva-bhuta*) and the practitioner of ahimsa is said to escape from the cycle of reincarnation.[33] Even Lord Krishna in the Bhagvad Gita proclaims: 'Ahimsa is among the various qualities of living beings created by Me alone.'[34] He also includes ahimsa as among the virtues that constitute knowledge, besides which whatever there may be is ignorance.[35]

However, Bhagvad Gita does not accept ahimsa as a categorical imperative against self-defence or the preservation of justice and righteousness. In times of extreme perversion, when dharma (righteousness) is subverted, Bhagvad Gita states that God descends to earth to protect dharma (04.09) and if war becomes inevitable, then it becomes incumbent on the righteous to fight for the protection of dharma.

> Whenever there is a decline in righteousness and an increase in unrighteousness, O Arjuna, at that time I manifest myself on earth. To protect the righteous, to annihilate the wicked, and to re-establish the principles of dharma I appear on this earth, age after age.
>
> —Bhagvad Gita (4.7)[36]

There is a very strong tradition of 'just war' in Vedanta texts like Bhagvad Gita, and its source text of Mahabharata, although it is maintained that peaceful resolution of conflicts is essential and that compromises should be made to avert war. Thus, the Mahabharata dedicates an entire section, 'The Udyoga Parva' (the Book of Effort), on how the Pandavas made painstaking efforts to avoid war. But when evil becomes too arrogant and unyielding, then war is allowed as a last resort. Thus, the righteousness of the cause is essential for going to war (jus ad bellum).

In addition to the injunction on the righteousness of the cause for going to war, there are also references to righteous conduct in war (jus in bello). Thus, the five brothers (Pandavas) in Mahabharata discuss the criteria for righteous conduct in war with the principles of proportionality (chariots cannot attack cavalry, only other chariots; no assault on people in distress), just means (no poisoned or barbed arrows), just intentions (no attacking out of rage) and fair treatment of captives and the wounded.[37]

These principles of war are deeply imbibed in the Hindu religious and cultural tradition, which has historically been averse to committing egregious acts of violence and aggression (such as major war crimes and genocide) centuries before such ideals came into currency in international parlance. These values are part of India's great gift to the global norms of warfare and integral to its glorious strategic culture.

Koshas of Buddhi: The Introverted 'Centre of Gravity'

One of the most remarkable insights of Advaita philosophy is that it puts mind over matter, the Self above the situation and the human spirit and imagination as the divine agent, which is capable of physically altering the shape of reality. As a result, India has produced a remarkable number of intellectual luminaries for ages—religious leaders, philosophers, mathematicians, scientist, political thinkers as well as spiritual poets, musicians and artistes. India has also produced great generals and courageous warriors, like Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, Samudragupta, Maharana Pratap, Shivaji and many distinguished generals of post-independence Indian Army.

Many of these successful generals were steeped in the knowledge of Bhagvad Gita and regarded the elusive 'centre of gravity' in war—which Clausewitz defines as 'the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act'[38]—to lie within the strategising mind of a general or officer in command.

Many of them received instructions from their homes that by properly handling the four dimensions of the mind, namely, the *manas* (general consciousness), the *buddhi* (the determinate and the intellectual mind), the *chitta* (the subconscious and the memory resource) and the *ahankar* (the ego, will, self-worth and belief), as described in the *Mandukya Upanishad*,[39] even the most daunting of challenges and adversities can be confronted and defeated. The trick lies in drawing the centre of gravity out of the battlefield of the external reality and into the workshop of one's own consciousness. Thus, the uncertain, transient and mutable flux of external realities is shifted to the more resolute and judicious theatre of the mind. It is through this shift of the macrocosm (maya) into the microcosm (atman) that great intellectual breakthroughs and emotional resolve can be delivered.

> He who has the understanding for the driver of the chariot and controls the rein of his mind, he reaches the end of the journey, that supreme abode of the all-pervading.
>
> —*Katha Upanishad* (1.3)[40]

With this approach towards facing outward threats and challenges, Indian strategic culture has been generally found to be more thoughtful and responsive, as opposed to being impetuously petulant and reactive, in time of crises.

Advaita Emphasis on Objective, Big Picture Overview

Vedantic thought, thus, seeks to elevate the apparent chaos of the phenomenal world by finding unity in its more basic, noumenal state. There is the repeated refrain in Vedantic thought of arriving at 'ekavijnanene sarvavijnanapratijnana', which can be translated as the 'grand principle or strategy',[41] by not getting bogged down in the ever-alternating states of transient changes ('caturtham manyante'), which is essential for arriving at a calm, profound and immutable truth—*Parpancopasamam–santam, sivam, advaitam* (*Mandukya Upanishad*, verse 7)[42]—in a determined and deliberate manner. Thus, there is an emphasis on directing every action towards a clear, underlying purpose, which is the sine quo non for the formulation of any strategy.

The Vedantic vision posits an all-inclusive integrated wholeness in things, and thus a plethora of factors should be integrated into a seamless strategic whole. Thus, the Vedantic vision, particularly that of Bhagvad Gita, would accord well with Clausewitz' famous aphorism, 'War is the continuation of politics by other means', but would cover other domains as well.[43]

Karma and the Satvik Warrior (Duty as Reward, Disciplined Fighter)

It has been posited that the Bhagvad Gita has immense value for military studies and can be read as an excellent military manual for disciplined conduct and the correct motivation for soldiers at war. For the ascetically inclined, the Upanishadic *jnana yogi* attains the blissful state of 'satchitananda' through renunciation of the world. However, the Bhagvad Gita offers salvation through *kama* or action and turns Arjuna into a more committed 'satvik karamyogi', who is not driven by 'rajasik' (selfish passion and aggression) or 'tamasik' (emotions of darkness—passivity or ignorance), but by righteous motivations to reinstate truth and a higher purpose, while remaining in full command of one's lowly desires.

> Perform actions firm in discipline,
> relinquishing attachment, be impartial to fame
> and success—this equanimity is called discipline.
> —Bhagvad Gita (2.48)[44]

The scripture also gives another insightful instruction on the performance of duty, which it states should be in accordance with one's rank and position in the hierarchical structure. This sense of disciplined action is succinctly described in the following manner.

> Your own duty done imperfectly
> is better than another man's done well.
> It is better to die in one's own duty;
> another man's duty is perilous.
>
> —Bhagvad Gita (3.35)[45]

It is these values on the importance of duty that have guided Indian soldiers over several millennia. Even in the modern age, be it as soldiers of the British Indian Army during the World Wars, as peacekeepers in United Nations missions or as heroes on India's formidable borders, the teachings of Bhagvad Gita have inspired Indian soldiers to be among the very best in the world. This satvik leadership, driven by a higher calling, has also produced great generals and leaders in Indian history, from Maharana Pratap to Shivaji, Subhash Chandra Bose to Mahatma Gandhi.

Understanding 'Maya': Trained Threat Perception and Strategic Deceit

The philosophy of Advaita is so profoundly ontological that it suspects all forms of epistemological derivations of truth and equates conventional and normative knowledge with 'avidya'. All empirically derived truths should be suspected. Thus, the processes of rational deduction gain precedence over empirical facts and superficial observations. This aversion towards empiricism (discarded as transient and superficial) has both advantages and disadvantages, which may be the reason why India has produced more mathematicians than scientists over the centuries.

However, the tendency to suspect even the blatantly obvious in the illusory and phenomenal reality (the world of maya) has great advantages in the strategic domain, particularly in honing the skills of threat perception. The ability to detach, hold one's own and act only after calm and considered judgement helps the satvik warrior to act effectively, almost clinically, and creates an adroit, dispassionate soldier.

The dubious nature of war and diplomacy necessitates the questioning of the 'apparent' and the 'self-evident'. It could be posited that the concept of maya in Vedanta contributed a lot to Indian strategic thought and thinkers, who quite understood, like Tsun Zu,[46] Aristotle

and Machiavelli,[47] that deceit is an essential ingredient of war. Indian strategic thinker Kamandaka came up with concepts of *indrajals* (conjuring tricks) and maya (deceitful tactics),[48] among the *upayas* in war and diplomacy. Even Kautilya placed the study of deceit within the purview of his term *bheda*.[49]

The religious epic Mahabharata is said to be the grand allegorical representation of spiritual concepts imbued in the Bhagvad Gita. As a motivating discourse delivered to Arjuna who dithers from confronting his own kin as enemies in the battlefield, the religious book offers the wisdom to navigate through the complex maze of faulty moral arguments and emotional dilemmas in order to remain transfixed on the objective of gaining victory for establishing righteousness (dharma).

In clear pursuance of the *parmartha* (the righteous cause), Lord Krishna permits the use of deceit in order to defeat a much stronger enemy army with virtually invincible warriors, such as Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Duryodhana. Krishna's ploy to destroy the 'invincible' enemies through deceit proved crucial in breaking the morale of the enemy and ending the war decisively, though Indian psyche has struggled to understand this higher wisdom till date.

There is a thin line which differentiates strategy and deceit, and Krishna demonstrates how *vyavaharika drishti* (normative view of morality in the world of maya) should not supersede the 'parmartha drishti' (of the higher cause). Strategic deceit has been an established principle of war employed since the earliest of times, including in the major Alexandrian wars, the Crusades, the American Revolution, the two World Wars and even the recent Russo-Ukranian war.

The Bhagvad Gita does not hesitate from instilling this in the Indian culture of warfare, and for good reasons. In spite of the wily Chanakya and the intrepid Shivaji, few foreign strategic writers have noted Indian warriors ever fully embracing this critical strategic device.

Impact of Vedanta on Indian Political History

The impact of Vedanta on Indian strategic culture has been immense and has played varying roles for statesmen, political leaders, diplomats and military generals in a variety of ways. In medieval times, it was the monism of Vedanta that captured the imagination of Muslim mystics. With pre-Islamic Shamanic affiliations, the Muslim rulers of Mongol-Turkic origins were drawn to the monistic spiritualism of Vedanta, and surprisingly 'advaita' became the philosophy for the possible formulation

of a syncretic culture, right from the fourteenth century, in Bhakti and Sufi saints and poets, like Kabirdas and Amir Khusro. It took a semi-formal shape in Akbar's political doctrine of 'Sulh-i-Kul' (universal peace),[50] which drew on the non-dualist theological strains of Vedantism and Sufi Islam.

There are unmistakable imprints of these spiritual moorings in the writings of Abul Fazal,[51] the most noted ideologue and strategic thinker in Akbar's court. Emperor Akbar is himself reported to have organised a separate quarter for advaita yogis, which was called Jogipura.[52] According to Badauni, Akbar used to visit advaitin yogis, along with close companions, and acquaint himself with Hindu mysticism, their methods of *muraqaba* (meditation) and *mashaghil*s (spiritual practices). The tradition passed on to Jahangir, who is said to have held many discussions on spiritual and religious matters with Hindu scholars, particularly Jadurup, a noted Vaishnavite scholar at Ujjain and Mathura. The discussions are said to have convinced the emperor that the Vedantic philosophy and Sufi thought of 'wahdatul wujud' (the oneness of all existence in God) were more or less identical.[53] Jahangir was also close to the noted saint Akam Nath, and their discussions focused on monism and monotheism.[54] It is well known that Dara Shikoh's Sufi leaning brought him closer to Vedanta. He himself translated the Upanishads, which was titled *Sirr-i-Akbar*. His other work, *Majma Al Bahrain*, highlights the attempt at bringing about a strategic cohesion between Hindu and Muslim communities in a bid to forge a nationalist bond.[55] However, Aurangzeb's extreme fanaticism and bigotry prevented the assimilative process from a much-desired outcome.

Vedanta's Impact on India's Freedom Struggle

The evolution of Indian political and strategic culture in modern times begins with the social reform movements initiated by Indian intellectuals and spiritual leaders in the nineteenth century, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy (who founded the Brahmo Samaj based on Vedanta ideals), Swami Dayananda Saraswati (who established the Arya Samaj through his call for 'Return to the Vedas') and the chief proponents of the so-called 'Neo-Vedanta movement', namely, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan, who popularised the philosophy in India and around the world.[56]

This ability to revive and reform Indian society through the power of its ancient religious and philosophical tradition, with Vedanta ideals at its

core, gave a sense of identity and pride to Indian society, which initially brought about socio-religious reforms, but eventually ignited political aspiration in a new generation of political leaders. In latter half of the nineteenth century, the Vedanta-inspired ideals spurred the imagination of young political figures, like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose and even the extreme right Hindu nationalist, V.D. Savarkar. All these leaders were deeply influenced by the Vedas, Upanishads and Bhagvad Gita.

The same ideal of Upanishad inspired Rabindranath Tagore to his views against colonialism and of ultimate unification of mankind that were encapsulated in the logo for his university, 'yatra visvam bhavti ekanidam' ('where the whole world meets in a single nest'), which clearly represents the Vedanta outlook.[57]

Vedanta meant different things to different Indian leaders of the twentieth century. To Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Vedanta philosophy as enshrined in the Bhagvad Gita was more appealing than the outlook of renunciation preached by Adi Shankara and Ramanuja. He opposed some of the liberal and universal interpretations of Vedanta, which alienated him from a section of Hindu, Muslim and British intellectuals and political figures.[58]

On the other hand, for Bhimrao Ambedkar—the great freedom fighter, leader of the untouchables (Dalit) and the principal architect of Indian Constitution—Vedanta ideals like advaita helped overcome the evil of casteism in Indian society and were conducive to India's modern democracy. In his book, *Riddle in Hinduism*, where he criticises many Hindu texts, he praises Vedanta precepts:

> But all the same this theory of Brahman has certain social implications which have a tremendous value as a foundation for Democracy. If all persons are parts of Brahman then all are equal and all must enjoy the same liberty which is what Democracy means.[59]

Mahatma Gandhi was inspired by the ideals of Vedanta, particularly those enshrined in Bhagvad Gita, which he deemed 'a spiritual dictionary'.[60] In a series of lectures on Gita in 1924, the Mahatma said that people belonging to all faiths can read this scripture, as it does not favour any sectarian point of view. It teaches nothing but pure ethics. Clearly, the universalist message of Gita influenced the Father of the Nation to espouse values of non-violence, tolerance and secularism. Similarly, for

Nehru, India always had a distinct outlook on the world derived from its philosophical heritage, especially the advaita.[61] Although an agnostic by faith, Vedanta ideals had a high station in his worldview. His strategic precepts of 'Panchsheel' and 'unity in diversity' arguably spring from the universalist and pacifist ideals of Vedanta.

Although Vedanta philosophy brought out the liberal and universalist outlook among some leaders of the freedom struggle, its message inspired nationalist and far-right political views as well, as in the case of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and V.D. Savarkar.

Conclusion: Vedanta and the World

The Vedanta scriptures are not merely theological texts, but profoundly philosophical works, whose insights have fascinated world's greatest intellectuals and even quantum physicists, like Einstein, Schrodinger, Oppenheimer, Bohr and Heisenberg.[62]

In fact, there was a time when the entirety of Hindu philosophy was confused with Advaita Vedantism in the West, and it became particularly popular after Kant's non-empirical 'subjective aspect of knowing'. Many Western intellectuals, like Arthur Schopenhauer, Aldous Huxley, A.N. Whitehead, Arnold Toynbee, Rudolph Steiner, Wilhelm von Humbolt, Will Durant, Lucian Blaga and Christopher Isherwood, were spellbound by its worldview. There were also its critics among European orientalists, from Hegel to Churchill, who blamed the ascetic introversion of Vedanta teachings to the alleged passivity, fatalism, niggardliness and obsequiousness of the Indian culture.

Conversely, some Western experts falsely charged Bhagvad Gita with racism and accused it of encouraging violence that allegedly even influenced Nazi Germany's leaders, like Alfred Rosenberg and Heinrich Himmler, who were given to reciting the scripture.[63] However, much of this criticism has proven to be highly exaggerated and politically motivated as it came from scholars supportive of Britain's colonial rule. The time has come to set right such misapprehensions about Vedantic tradition.

In recent years, Deepshikha Shahi's impressive work, *Advaita as a Global International Relations Theory*,[64] and the Vivekananda International Foundation's noteworthy book, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: Relevance of India's Ancient Thinking to Contemporary Strategic Reality*,[65] have made a commendable contribution in highlighting Vedanta ideas

within the context of International Relations studies, as well as in the context of Indian strategic culture.

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