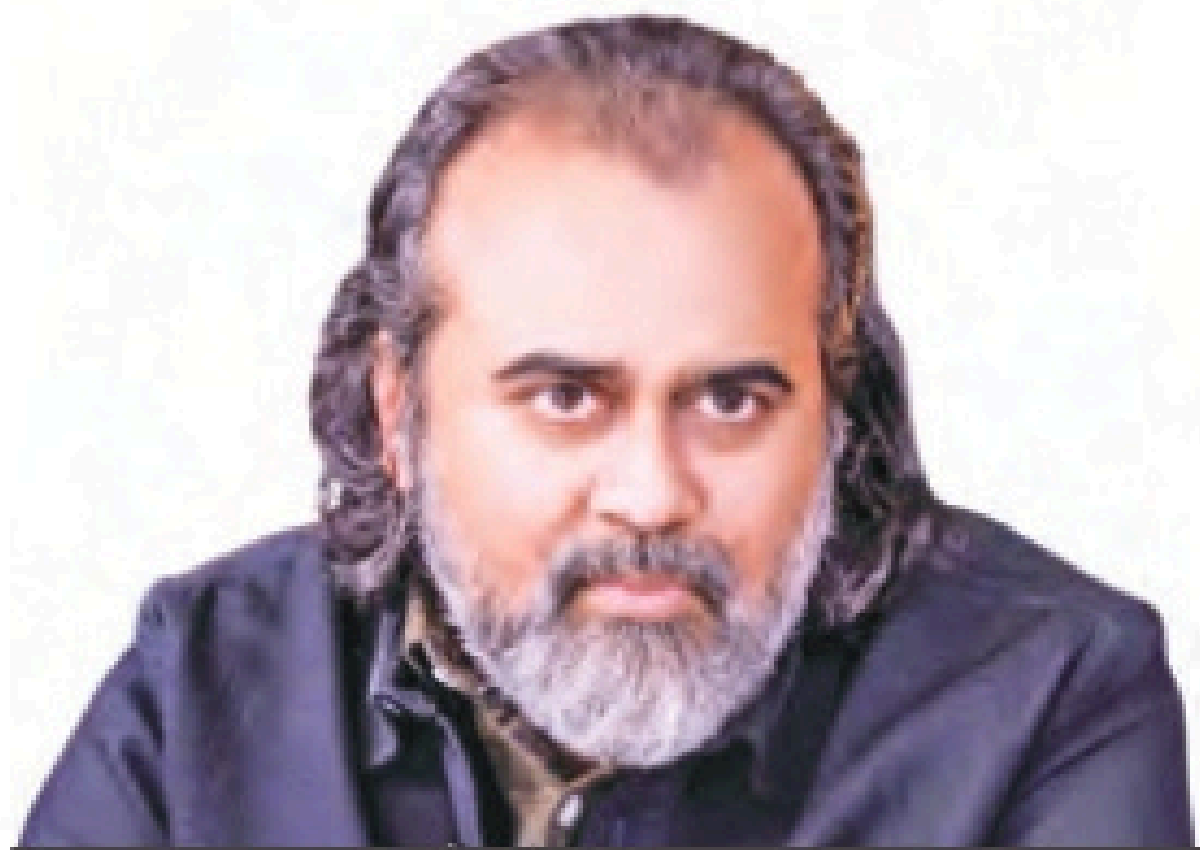




Gita as casteist and misogynist? Strawmanning at its worst



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Last week, I sat through a mock trial of my own making. Three young people played prosecutors and a bailiff, charging the Bhagavad Gita with crimes against caste and gender. I played the accused. The charges were not invented for the occasion. They are the same charges that circulate constantly now, in reels and comment threads, and the kind of confident paragraph that gets forwarded without anyone checking the verse it claims to summarise. Two accusations dominate that circulation more than any other: that the Gita is a casteist text, and that it is a misogynist one. Both charges, when placed next to the verses they claim to be reading, turn out to be built on a method rather than on evidence, the method being to lift a line, strip its grammar, and hand the remainder to an audience that has no reason to check the original.

I want to walk through how each of these charges was built in that room, because the building is more instructive than the verdict. A strawman needs raw material, and the raw material here was always real, a real verse, a real word, sometimes a real silence. What got added to that material, every single time, was an inference the verse itself does not support.

Arjuna, early in the first chapter, panics at the thought of the coming war and offers Krishna a list of reasons not to fight. Among them is a fear that the killing will cause what he calls vama-sankar, the corruption of women leading to mixed, impure offspring. Krishna spends seventeen more chapters correcting nearly every fear Arjuna raises, yet never specifically refutes this one, and a teacher who corrects everything except a single prejudice has, by that silence, endorsed the prejudice.

That standard collapses the moment you apply it consistently. Krishna also never specifically refutes Arjuna's fear about ancestral rites going unperformed. Nobody is building a case that the Gita therefore endorses ancestor worship. What Krishna does instead is dismantle the centre from which every one of Arjuna's fears was generated: the conviction that Arjuna is the one who acts. Once that centre is shown to be unreal, the fears stacked on top of it do not need individual rebuttal; they fall together.

The harder charge was that the Gita makes caste a matter of birth and then commands obedience to it, with the line "death in one's own dharma is preferable to a foreign dharma" read as a divine endorsement of dying in service to whatever varna a person was born into. The eighteenth chapter does list out the work associated with each varna, and that list was read as proof. But four chapters earlier, the Gita had already defined how a varna is determined, and it says guna and karma, disposition and chosen action, with no mention of the household a person is born into. Disposition is only half the definition. The other half, karma, is choice, and choice can run against disposition as easily as with it. What actually fixes the varna, by the Gita's own definition, is the choice, not the womb it was made from.

This also means the category the Gita is describing was never meant to sit still. The Gita's varna, on its own definition, is volitional and it is fluid, neither of which describes the caste system that calcified later in its name. Somewhere between the text and the centuries that followed it, this fluid, chosen category hardened into a fixed, inherited one, and walls went up where the text had only described a choice.

The misogyny charge sat almost entirely on one verse from the ninth chapter, the line about women, vaishyas, and shudras attaining the highest goal even though born of papa-yoni, a sinful womb. Read fast and stripped of its grammar, this sounds like Krishna is calling womanhood itself a sin. The actual sentence has two parts joined by the word api, which means even. The first part is complete on its own: even those of sinful birth who take refuge in Krishna find liberation. Only then does the second part add that even women, vaishyas, and shudras attain the highest goal this way. The list of who is included is not the definition of the sinful womb; it is the next example in an expanding circle of people the verse insists are not excluded.

Papa-yoni itself is being misread as a slur when it is closer to a diagnosis. Yoni means origin, source, the conditions a person is handed before they have had any say in the matter. A child raised inside cruelty and superstition has, in this sense, been born into papa-yoni, regardless of caste and regardless of sex. What the verse is actually doing is declaring that not even the worst possible start disqualifies a person from the highest end, and that those society had already pushed to its margins, women very much among them, were being told that no door was closed to them.

The case for caste cruelty being a corruption of scripture rather than a teaching within it is not new, and not mine alone to make. Dr. Ambedkar, no friendly witness to organised Hinduism, gave an entire chapter of Riddles in Hinduism to the argument that the Upanishads stood opposed to the very Vedic hierarchies later generations claimed scriptural cover from.

Every one of these charges depended on stopping a sentence early, or assuming a silence does the work of a verdict. The accusation that the Gita is casteist and the accusation that it is misogynist both rest on roughly the same move: take a verse out of the sentence it lives in, and the sentence out of the chapter it lives in, and the chapter out of the text's own stated definitions, and almost anything can be made to say almost anything.

None of this means every traditional reading of these verses has been faithful to them either. Custom has, in places, claimed scriptural cover for cruelty the scripture itself does not supply, and that is a separate failure. But a separate failure is not the same failure as the one being charged here. The discipline this calls for is not loyalty to a text. It is the discipline owed to any sentence before judgment is passed on it: read it whole, in its own sequence, before deciding what it was made to confess.

