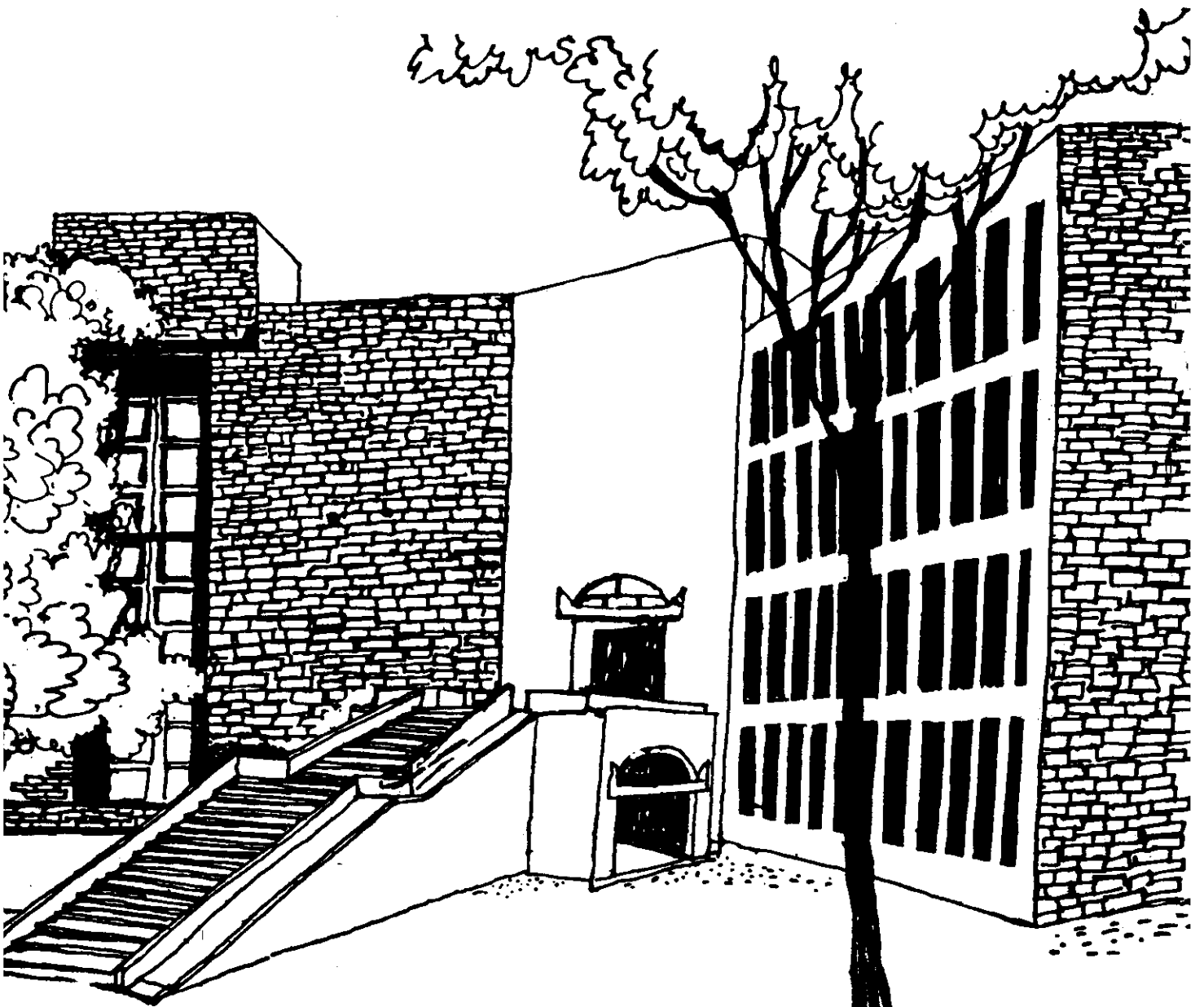




# Working Paper



THE CULT OF VISHNU AND INDIA'S  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

By

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# THE CULT OF VISHNU AND INDIA'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract

The nature of the work ethic of a society may significantly shape the character of its economic development. It is argued that the cult of Vishnu and its associated work ethic have played a notable role in the economic development of India during the past 2000 years or so. The cult of Vishnu appears to be a fusion of the cults of the Vedic god Vishnu, the cosmological deity Narayana, Vasudeva of the Vrishnis who propounded the Bhagvata cult, and the cowherd boy Krishna. Vishnu that has emerged as a fusion of these cults, and elaborated in his avatars or incarnations, appears to have a pragmatic, "business friendly", resourceful manager orientation, who may preach high spirituality but in practice uses pragmatic means to achieve ends. The Bhagavad Gita, the centerpiece of Vaishnava spiritual philosophy, while excoriating greed, provides a powerful structure of the work ethic that upholds the necessity of effort and legitimises every manner of mundane pursuit including commerce provided it is pursued with detachment and is dedicated to God. This work ethic bears some striking similarities to the Protestant Ethic described by Weber and suggested by him to be a major impetus to the rise of capitalism in the West. The emergent cult of Vishnu may have originated in coastal trading communities of Southern and Western India, in view of the many marine associations of Vishnu, and then have spread to the rest of India. It may also have been influenced by contacts with West Asian civilizations. Several hypotheses are stated that follow from the main hypothesis of the cult of Vishnu influencing India's economic development.

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Cults and religions can have major implications for the socio-economic development of peoples. Max Weber held, for example, that Protestantism and the Protestant Ethic provided the ideological basis<sup>1</sup> for the emergence and growth of capitalism in Western Europe, and that the Christian Church and its commitment to converting "heathens" was a force in Western colonialism in the Americas, Africa, and Asia.<sup>2</sup> Some social scientists have talked of the "Hindu rate of economic growth", suggesting that Hindu religious beliefs, particularly fatalism,<sup>3</sup> depresses initiative, risk taking, and entrepreneurship. "Other worldly" religions have been held responsible for poverty and economic stagnation in the world's older societies.<sup>4</sup>

Indian economic development may also have been influenced by the religious cults that held sway at different times and in different parts. In this paper the possibility is explored that the cult of Vishnu may have provided the value orientation that supported trade, commerce and industry and thereby, by about 1000 AD, helped to transform India, particularly Western and Southern India, from a society of mostly hunters, fruit gatherers, primitive agriculturists, pastoralists and craftsmen to one of the commercially most advanced societies of its time.

The foundations of India's economic development were laid by the Harappans, who by 2000 BC had colonized nearly 200000 square miles of North-Western India from Narmada to Kashmir and Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> This

appears to have been primarily a trade oriented civilization rather than an aggressive military power bent on conquest. It had trading links with West Asia, Central Asia, and Central and Southern India. However, as a civilization it appears to have petered out about 3900 years back. Then for over a thousand years little is known of India's economic development except that the Gangetic basin was cleared of forests and colonised, so that by about Buddha's time, 2500 years back, there were powerful kingdoms and "democracies" in Northern and Eastern India, and for a few hundred years this region remained India's political powerhouse <sup>6</sup>.

From that time onwards until about 400 years back (the time of the Moghuls) there was steady industrialisation and growth in international trade, and it was during this period of about 2000 years that the cult of Vishnu grew in India so that Vishnu came to be recognised to be one of the two supreme deities of the Hindus (the other being Shiva).

The centuries immediately preceding and following the onset of the Christian Era apparently saw an extraordinary blossoming of India's trade, commerce, and industry <sup>7</sup>. Earlier the Maurya Empire had laid the foundations of relatively rapid economic development through political unification, security on the main trade routes, and uniform weights and measures. Thereafter trade and commerce grew rapidly not only within the country but also with regions like the Roman Empire, West Asia, China, South East Asia, and East Africa. Within the country strong trade and professional guilds provided technical education and ensured quality of product or service; cooperatives o

workers, craftsmen, and professionals also flourished. From a barter system the economy increasingly got monetised, and increasingly turned to production for non-local trade. Eastern and Northern India developed economically under the patronage of Buddhist kings. In Western and Southern India royal patronage and the patronage of the mercantile community to the cult of Vishnu may have played a similar part. Later, after the eclipse of Buddhism in India about a thousand years back, the cult of Vishnu may have played a part in the further commercialisation of the economy of even Northern and Eastern India.

#### Constituents of the Cult of Vishnu

According to Bhandarkar, four significant cults fused by about 400 A.D. to produce the eventual cult of Vishnu<sup>8</sup>. One was the cult of Vishnu of the Vedas. Son of Kashyap and Aditi, Vishnu was an Aditya (another Aditya being Surya or Sun), and a powerful and bright one at that. Although not in the same class as Indra, Varuna or Agni, Vishnu was regarded with awe for his mysterious power and initiative. His major achievement was the three steps by which he "measured" land and sky. He also won some sort of competition among the gods for completing yagna and was hailed for this feat.

The second constituent was the Bhagvata cult of Vasudeva of the Vrishni community, a cult that prevailed in Northern India before the Christian era. This cult preached a sort of monotheism, holding that Bhagvata, Vasudeva, or Hari was the only real God, and that he could be attained through austerities, single minded devotion and love, and ahimsa or non-slaughter. Vasudeva operated through three entities: Sankarsana or Baladeva, representing the individual soul; Pradyumna,

representing the mind; and Aniruddha, representing self-consciousness or ego. This cult was called Ekantika Dharma. It seems to have been the basis of the religion propounded in Bhagvada Gita, whose central tenet was that God could be realised by selfless pursuit of one's duties and by dedicating the fruits of one's actions to God. This tenet is eminently compatible with the dedicated pursuit of worldly excellence, the heart of professionalism. The Ekantika Dharma was not a new religion. It was rather a consolidation of Upanishadi ideas, but in the service of Vasudeva rather than of Rudra-Shiva.

The third cult that fused with the cult of Vishnu was the cult of Narayana. The root Nar denotes manly beings so that Narayana means the resting place of manly beings. But Nara means water, especially primeval waters, and hence Narayana means the place of primeval waters. If we synthesise both the meanings, Narayana can mean the abode of marine heroes. According to Vayu Purana, Narayana preceded matter in an unmanifested form. From this matter sprang the cosmic egg from which arose Brahma the creator. This myth is a distinct echo of the Vedic myth of the first embryo held by waters in which all gods existed in an unmanifested form. The cult of Narayana as the source of all creation was therefore a cosmological cult.

The fourth constituent cult of early Vaishnavism was that of Gopala Krishna or Cowherd Krishna of the Abhira community (modern Ahirs) that had settled, by the beginning of the Christian Era, in Northwestern India from Mathura and Punjab in the North to Saurashtra in Western India. Gopala Krishna was an amorous and adventurous lad but

Bhandarkar speculates that the Abhirs originally worshipped Christ (the corruption of whose name supposedly was Krishna) on the basis of similarities between Jesus and Gopala Krishna regarding humble birth in respectively shepherd/cowherd families, both being brought up by a person who was not a biological father, and the massacre of innocent infants occasioned by a prophecy attending the birth of both.

Why these four cults merged is still unclear; but all four were prevalent in Northern and Western India at about the same time, and spatial and temporal coexistence and economic interdependence of the followers of the cults may have catalysed the merger. The fusion produced a whole that had universal appeal - a powerful and resourceful central deity with impeccable Vedic antecedents (Vishnu, a cosmological being who originated the universe (Narayana), and immanent divine consciousness that could be attained even by ordinary people provided they performed their duties conscientiously without sense of attachment to the fruits of their actions (Vasudeva), and divinity that could be imagined vividly in the form of a lovable and amorous imp (Gopala Krishna). The resulting cult was one that satisfied the palate of the Gyan Margi (the pursuer of the knowledge of "ultimate" reality), the Karma Margi (the noble man of action), and also the Bhakti Margi (the person of total emotional attachment to the persona of God).

### Vaishnava Pragmatism

But there is something more to Vishnu than meets Bhandarkar's eye, and this may be pertinent to the contribution of Vaishnavism to India's economic transformation from a relatively primitive agrarian and



forest based economy to a workshop of the medieval world, with a significant percentage of the global trade of the time<sup>9</sup>. And that is Vishnu's conception as a resourceful manager. The way Vishnu got the gods and the demons to cooperate in churning the sea to extract from the joint venture the nectar of immortality as well as other valuables,<sup>10</sup> the way Vishnu tricked the demons into parting with the elixir of immortality so that the gods, his favourites, could have it, the way he palmed off the cost of the venture - the universe destroying poison - to his arch-rival Shiva to consume, the way Vishnu ingeniously disposed off demons that had grown too strong with the blessings of gullible divinities like Shiva or Brahma, particularly the way he destroyed Hiranyakashyapa and Bhasmasura, his alignment with Laxmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, Vishnu's main function of restoring "dharma" (moral order) whenever it was jeopardised either by ambition or cynicism, his function as a preserver of the social status quo (which to a Marxist would imply the preservation of the dominance of those with means), and above all his incarnation of the spiritually as well as worldly wise, ingenuous, politically clever Krishna who in practice gave primacy to ends over means - allude to the pragmatic, resourceful, system preservationist, managerial character of Vishnu. This character, in conjunction with Krishna's injunction to perform one's duties conscientiously but without being attached to the fruits of action, may have especially endeared Vishnu to the business and professional community of India in the first millenium of the Christian Era, as it continues to endear him to the members of this community even in contemporary India. For, it represents a happy blend of pragmatism and sublimated striving for attainments whatever be one's calling, and thus legitimises not

just spiritual pursuits but every form of mundane pursuit. I represents an Indian form of Protestant Ethic.

From whence came this pragmatic, managerial dimension of Vishnu? Perhaps it came from maritime, trade oriented peoples in Western and/or Southern India who had adopted one or the other of the four cults that later fused into Vaishnavism. This conjecture stems from the marine associations of Vishnu. Consider the following:

1. The Narayana cult points to the ocean as the original abode of Narayana. Vishnu-Narayana resides in Kshirasagara (Ocean of Sweet Milk), and rests on the body of the hooded Shesh or Ananta serpent who with a little imagination can be conceived of as a large vessel of the kind that was prevalent in ancient times with high, wind-filled sails at one end of the vessel.
2. Vishnu's spouse is Laxmi, who originated from the sea. She is also the goddess of wealth and trade.
3. Shankh (conch shell), a marine product, is one of the four chief insignia of Vishnu<sup>11</sup>.
4. Vishnu is portrayed as dark blue in complexion, the colour of dark clouds - but also of the sea.
5. Five of the nine avatars (incarnations) of Vishnu (the tenth is still to come) involved adventures or actions at sea. The first was Matsyavtara, the Fish Incarnation, in which Vishnu assumed the form of a fish and rescued mankind and living creatures from a

devastating flood. This suggests a coastal area being the origin of this myth. Then as Varahavtara (Boar Incarnation) Vishnu raised the earth by his tusks from the bottom of the ocean, a myth that possibly arose from the raising of a sunken vessel in coastal waters with the help of hooks. As Kurmavtara (Tortoise Incarnation), Vishnu became a tortoise and supported Mount Mandara while the mountain was being used by the gods and demons for churning the ocean. As Rama, Vishnu built a bridge on the sea to cross it to reach Lanka, the capital of Ravana to reclaim his abducted wife. As Krishna, Vishnu voyaged on the sea in search of the son of his guru Sandi Pani, who had been abducted by the Panchajanya (Phoenician?) rakshasas (demons)<sup>12</sup>.

It is therefore likely that one or more coastal or maritime people contributed to Vishnu many of his marine associations. These people could have been prosperous traders and possibly traded with West Asia (Sumer, Babylon, Assyria, Phoenicia), for some of the stories of Vishnu have a West Asian feel. The most prominent of such stories is that of the Flood. In the West Asian version, the great god of heaven Anu (compare with Vishnu) was the protector of the gods and saved them from the Flood. The Biblical story of the Flood in which God became a fish to save mankind and other living creatures closely parallels Vishnu's Matsyavtara myth. Like the Shweta Dvipa (White Island) of Narayana - Vasudeva, the original earth of West Asians was a round plateau floating in Apsu, the primordial waters. The goddess Asherah-of-the-Sea, like Laxmi, was a daughter of the sea, and wife of El, the great Phoenician god who dwelt by the sea. Baal (compare with Baladeva, Vasudeva's brother), the next great Phoenician god was the son of El. The West Asians had a demigod called Humbaba, who like

Vamana, an incarnation of Vishnu, was a dwarf. Lakhma and Lakhama (compare with Laxmi) were the first two West Asian gods to originate from the sea<sup>13</sup>. Kosambi has noted the similarity between Narayana who sleeps upon sea water, and Enki the Mesopotamian god who sleeps in his chamber in the midst of waters.<sup>14</sup> He has also noted the similarity between the image of Krishna dancing on the seven-headed serpent Kalinaga and the killing of the seven-headed Hydra depicted in a Mesopotamian seal.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore likely that maritime trading communities on the west and/or southern coasts of India that had accepted the cult of Vishnu and traded with West Asia gave to the cult distinctively maritime and commercial overtones. It is possible that their original obscure sea god and/or sea goddess were merged with Vishnu/Laxmi for greater acceptability by the Hindu communities with which they traded.

#### A Hypothesis and Further Conjectures

A hypothesis is that the acceptance of the cult of Vishnu by aggressively trading oriented maritime people on the west/southern coasts of India contributed substantially to the economic development of India, for as they penetrated the continental hinterland as traders and possibly as colonisers (like the Harappans two thousand years earlier), they proselytised others into accepting the cult of Vishnu and along with it the pragmatic action and trading for profit orientation of the cult. Trade and proselytisation may have reinforced each other, and as more and more people accepted the cult

the more they turned to production for exchange rather than simply for local consumption or local barter. Surpluses got generated that were invested for increased production and partly also in temples and institutions to commemorate Vishnu-Krishna-Vasudeva-Narayana, and the cycle of trade-production-proselytisation gradually expanded to cover practically the entire Indian sub-continent.

Any rigorous test of this hypothesis may not be possible. But Dwarka on the tip of Saurashtra has been a centre of Vaishnavism since the early centuries of the Christian Era. If we are to believe Professor S.R. Rao, who has discovered a currently underwater 15th century BC settlement at Bet Dwarka which he believes is Krishna's Dwarka, then Dwarka may have been a bastion of Vishnu's cult from perhaps 1500 years earlier<sup>16</sup>. It is very likely that Dwarka was peopled by a flourishing maritime community which probably had trading links with West Asia. Varuna or Samudra Narayana (Sea God) also seems to have been worshipped at Dwarka since ancient times<sup>17</sup> and possibly at some time Samudra Narayana and Vishnu-Narayana got fused together to form an entrepreneurial divinity. Thus Dwarka could have been a major disseminator of the cult of Vishnu that combined a business and voyaging for trade culture with Vaishnavism's other tenets. That may account for the fact that the people of Gujarat, especially the Vaishyas (business castes), are both ardent businessmen and Vaishnavas<sup>18</sup>.

Dwarka may not have been the only port propagating the cult of Vishnu. A number of other coastal cities flourished in the early centuries of the Christian Era and some of them may well have adopted the cult of

Vishnu and propagated the cult of business and trade in the respective hinterlands. Some of these cities were Barbaricum on the Indus delta, Bharukachha (modern Bharuch) on the Gujarat coast, and Kaverippattinam and Arikamedu on the south-eastern coast of India. Both religion and trade must have spread along trade routes, highways and river valleys. Thus, the influence of a religious cult radiating from a port city was likely to be maximum along trade routes connecting the port city with its hinterland, and along routes that connected the port city with other port cities on the sea coast and on river banks with which it traded.

Some further conjectures follow from the hypothesis, and these may be easier to check than the original hypothesis:

1. Given the "business friendly" nature of Vishnu's cult, among the four major Hindu castes, namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, a higher percentage of Vaishyas (business castes) would subscribe to the cult of Vishnu than the percentages of the other three castes.
2. If the cult of Vishnu originated in Western/Southern India, the percentage of Vaishyas subscribing to the cult of Vishnu is likely to be higher in Western/Southern India compared to Eastern/Northern India.
3. If Vaishnavism spread from ports on the western/southern coast of India, then it is likely that the incidence of this cult, especially in the business community (Vaishyas) may be higher in the coastal areas of India than in the deeper hinterland, and in the towns and

cities along the ancient Dakshina Path (Southern Highway) and Paschim Path (Western Highway) than at distances from these highways.

4. There should be greater concentration of Vishnu-Krishna temples in the older cities of Western/Southern India than in the older cities of Eastern/Northern India, in coastal cities as compared to deep hinterland cities, and in towns and cities along the ancient Dakshina Path and Paschima Path than in towns and cities at considerable distances from these highways.

5. The percentage of Vaishyas traditionally active in business, trade, industry, professions who are Vaishnavas is likely to be higher than the percentage of Vaishyas traditionally in the services who are Vaishnavas.

There are at present no reliable data with which to test these conjectures but the impression is that higher proportions of Brahmins and Kshatriyas are followers of Shiva than Vishnu while a higher proportion of Vaishyas are followers of Vishnu-Krishna than Shiva. It is also a curious fact that most of the ancient great temples of Vishnu/Krishna - Dwarka, Guruvayur, Puri, Shrirangam, Vaikuntaperumal, Tirupati - are either situated on the sea coast or close to it rather than deep in the Indian hinterland. But obviously a lot more careful research based on solid data needs to be done before we can accept or reject these conjectures. If research does, however, support these conjectures, then the importance of "business and industry friendly" religious or ideological values for economic development would be reinforced.

## Appendix

### The Work Ethic Propounded in the Bhagavad Gita

Broadly speaking, the work ethic has to do with ideas about the nature of work, what constitutes good work and what is considered bad work, standards of achievement, and so forth. The Gita has some 30 verses scattered over its 18 chapters that seem to relate to the work ethic. <sup>21</sup> They suggest the following picture of the work ethic propounded in the Gita.

First of all, the Gita repeatedly stresses the inescapability of effort. Indeed, God Itself must work to prevent the dissolution of the universe (Chapter III verse 24). Verse III.4 says,

"Not by non-performance of actions does man reach 'actionlessness'; nor by mere renunciation does he attain 'perfection'".

And again

"You perform your bounden duty; for action is superior to inaction (III.8)

Further the Gita explicitly castigates indolence:

"He who, restraining the organs-of-action, sits thinking in his mind of the sense-objects, he of deluded understanding, is called a hypocrite" (III.6)



Both action and renunciation lead to spiritual ascent: f

"Renunciation of action and yoga-of-action both lead to the highest bliss" (V.2)

Therefore in combination they may yield best results.

But what is renunciation? Verse VI.1 says:

"He who performs his bounden duty without depending on the fruits-of-action - he is a sannyasin and a yogin".

Or again,

Verily, it is not possible for an embodied being to abandon actions entirely, but he who relinquishes 'the fruits of actions' is verily called a 'relinquisher' (tyagi)" - verse XVIII.11.

And of course the famous verse II.47 makes the same point slightly differently:

"The right is to work only, but never to its fruits; let not the fruit-of-action be thy motive, nor let thy attachment be to inaction"

But paradoxically, while human effort must be undertaken without expectation of reward, it is not aimless or random. It is purposive. The purpose of work springs from duty, not selfishness:

"Better one's own 'duty' though devoid of merit, than the 'duty' of another well-discharged. Better

is death in one's own 'duty'; the 'duty' of another  
is fraught with fear (is productive of positive  
danger). (III.35)

And again

"One should not abandon, O Kaunteya, the duty to  
which one is born though faulty; for are not all  
undertakings enveloped by evil, as fire by smoke?"  
(XVIII.48)

How does one know what one's duty is? The social class  
(caste) one belongs to is an indicator of one's duties:

"The fourfold caste has been created by Me  
according to the differentiation of guna and  
karma". (IV.13)

And again

"Of scholars (brahmanas), of leaders (kshatriyas),  
and of traders (vaisyas), as also of workers  
(sudras), O Parantapa, the duties are distributed  
according to the qualities born of their own  
nature" (XVIII.41)

Verses XVIII.42, XVIII.43 and XVIII.44 describe the  
duties of the scholars (brahmanas), leaders or warriors,  
and traders and menial workers. As the Gita says:

"Devoted, each to his own duty, man attain  
perfection". (XVIII.45)

The scriptures presumably are the ultimate authority for what duties are to be performed by whom:

"Therefore let the scripture be your authority, in determining what ought to be done and ought not to be done". (XVI.24)

These duties based on social classes in turn are linked to innate disposition of nature (gunas) ( see verse XVIII.41).

The Gita speaks of three gunas or dimensions of human nature: the spiritual or sattvic, the ostentatious or rajasic, and the indolent and dull or tamasic. The priestly class is expected to have the sattvic disposition; the warrior and possibly the trading class the rajasic disposition; and the menial worker class the tamasic disposition. The sattvic disposition is thus described:

"The unwavering fortitude by which through yoga, the functions of the mind, the prana and the senses are restrained, that 'fortitude', O Partha, is sattvic". (XVIII.33)

The 'rajasic' disposition is described thus (see also XVIII.34):

"Greed, activity, undertaking of actions,

restlessness, longing - these arise when rajas is predominant, O best in the Bharata family".(XIV.12)

The tamasic disposition is described thus (see also XVIII.35):

"The 'constancy' because of which a stupid man does not abandon sleep, fear, grief, depression, and also arrogance (conceit), that 'fortitude', O Partha is tamasic (XIV.13)

However, irrespective of one's social class, and the guna or human disposition to which it is linked, the human can attain salvation if he or she dedicates effort to God:

"The world is bound by actions other than those performed 'for the sake of sacrifice'; do thou, therefore, son of Kunti, perform action for that sake (for yajna) alone, free from all attachments". (III.9)

"Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever you practise as austerity, O Kaunteya, do it as an offering to Me" (IX.27)

"Mentally renouncing all actions in Me, having Me as the highest goal, resorting to the yoga-of-

discrimination, ever fix your mind in Me".  
(XVIII.57)

The Gita speaks not only of good deeds, but also specifies evil deeds. It says that there are two kinds of humans, the divine and the demoniacal:

"There are two types of beings in this world, the divine and the demoniacal; the divine have been described at length; hear from Me, O Partha of the demoniacal". (XVI.6)

What the demoniacal deeds are is suggested by the following verses:

"Bound by a hundred ties of hope, given to lust and anger, they do strive to obtain, by unlawful means, hoards of wealth for sensual enjoyments". (XVI.12)

"'This has to-day been gained by me' - 'this desire I shall obtain' - 'this is mine' - and 'this wealth shall also be mine in future'". (XVI.13)

Thus, actions that are motivated by greed and an unbridled and unscrupulous acquisitive instinct are evil actions.

The Gita also mentions "alertness" in performing duties (XII.16), the welfare of mankind as a purpose of the

wise (III.25), etc; but the emphasis on these is distinctly weak. The Gita exalts not particular types of work but the mental state in which it is performed. Thus, officiating as a priest is not intrinsically superior to doing menial work. Whatever the nature of effort, it is sublime if it is performed in a sattvic manner and with a spirit of renunciation:

"The abandoner, soaked in purity, being intelligent, with all his doubts cut asunder, hates not disagreeable action, nor is he attached to an agreeable action".(XVIII.10)

The Gita emphasises rebirth a great deal (eg. verses IV.5, VI.41, VI.42, VI.45, VIII.15, VIII.16, VIII.19, IX.3) but the doctrine of predestination very little. That is, our deeds and experiences of this life are not declared to be wholly or even mainly determined by our actions in previous lives - except, however, that a strenuous effort begun in a previous life to attain perfection may be facilitated in the next by a birth which can facilitate its completion:

"Having attained to the worlds of the righteous, and having dwelt there for everlasting (long) years, he who had fallen from yoga is born again in the house of the pure and the wealthy." (VI.41)

"Or, he is even born in the family of the wise yogis; verily a birth like this is very difficult

to obtain in this world." (VI.42)

"There he comes to be united with the knowledge acquired in his former body and strives more than before for perfection, O son of the Kurus." (VI.43)

Except for the above there is virtually no fatalism in the Gita. On the contrary, the stress is on effort at perfection.

The Gita's stress is on personal salvation, not by escaping from work but engaging in it selflessly and attributing the fruits of effort to Self (God in man) rather than to one's personal efforts. How selflessly the work is done determines its quality, not the gains that accrue from it, nor the social prestige the work enjoys.

The Gita's work ethic is compatible however, with professionalism because professionals are expected to stress duty over gain. Also, it democratises work by de-emphasising social class differences and instead stresses the potential divinity of any kind of work, even the most menial work. Greed, as in capitalist societies, is not to be the motivator of effort; rather, it is duty prescribed by scriptures, which in turn is based on division of effort in society based on the intrinsic nature of the doer and the done.

The work ethic of the Gita is comparable in important ways with the Protestant Ethic described by Max Weber. He suggested that this Protestant Ethic laid the foundations of the spirit of Western capitalism.<sup>22</sup> The central idea of the Protestant Ethic, according to Weber, is that work is worship: conscientious labour, not in the pursuit of leisure and enjoyment, but undertaken as a calling of God, increases the chances of receiving God's grace without which salvation (ascent to heaven) from eternal damnation is not possible. For, constant hard work is a defence against temptations, including sexual ones, and is in keeping with the Biblical notion that the lazy and the idle pleasure-seekers are worthless and do not have God's grace. Wealth and opportunity are symptoms of God's grace and should therefore be pursued, not, however, for the sake of material enjoyment but as a calling. Thus, ostentatious living for the wealthy is taboo, but not industry and innovation to increase wealth. Similarly, to gain God's grace, labourers must work hard even at low wages. Division of labour and specialization of functions are acceptable, even desirable, because they lead to less confusion and waste of time, and these latter are not pleasing to God. "What God demands is not labour in itself but rational labour in a calling".<sup>23</sup> The ethical pursuit of wealth as a God's



calling, large savings by the wealthy because of the taboo on material enjoyments, efficiency through division of labour and specialisation, and hard toil even at low wages generate the surpluses that fuel investment and economic growth, and thus lay the foundations of capitalism. Weber noted, however, that these religious values tend to get replaced by more utilitarian values with the progress of capitalism, and the pursuit of leisure and materialistic comforts tend to supplant the pursuit of salvation. But that comes later. In the formative years of a capitalist Christian society, duty in the form of calling plays a decisive role: "It is obvious how powerfully the exclusive search for the Kingdom of God only through the fulfilment of duty in the calling, and the strict asceticism which Church discipline naturally imposed, especially on the propertyless classes, was bound to affect the productivity of labour ....."<sup>24</sup>

The above suggests that the work ethic enshrined in the Gita and the Protestant Ethic of Max Weber share several features: the emphasis on working rather than leisure, renunciation of greed and worldly pleasures, work and performance of duty as a calling to reach God, and work organized on the basis of some form of division of labour and specialisation of functions. There are differences also. The Gita emphasises far more

detachment from the fruits of one's actions and the finality of scriptures in determining one's duties. The Gita also emphasises more a typology of action based on guna (basic disposition) and caste or class. The Protestant Ethic more strongly emphasises frugality, hard work, and the pursuit of wealth and opportunity (although not for increasing material pleasures).

## References

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2. See J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism : A Study* (London : George Allen & Unwin, 1938), especially chapter III of Part II, "Moral and sentimental factors" , pp 196 - 222. Also see Charles Borges, "Shipping the gospel", *Journal of Marine Archaeology*, vol.1, Jan. 1990, pp 45 - 51.
3. Professor Raj Krishna popularised the notion of "Hindu" rate of growth. See L.K. Jha, *India's Economic Development* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1991, p.7), Arun Shourie, *Hinduism : Essence and Consequences* (New Delhi : Vikas, 1979). Also see B.M. Richman and M.R. Copen, *International Management and Economic Development* (Bombay : Tata McGraw-Hill, 1972).
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5. See S.R. Rao. *Dawn and Devolution of the Indus Civilization* (New Delhi : Aditya Prakashan, 1991).
6. See Romila Thapar, *A History of India, Vol.I*, (London : Penguin, 1966), chapters 3,4, and 5.

7. See Thapar, *ibid*, especially ch.6; Dietmar Rothermund, *An Economic History of India* (New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 1988), ch.2; Simon Digby, "The maritime trade of India", pp. 125-259 in Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (eds), *Cambridge Economic History of India Vol.I C.1200 - C.1750* (Bombay : Orient Longmans, 1982)
8. R.G. Bhandarkar, *Vaisnavism Saivism and Minor Religious Systems* (Varanasi : Indological Book House, 1965).
9. See Thapar, *op.cit.*; Rothermund, *op.cit.*; Digby, *op.cit.*
10. See Joanna Williams, "The churning of the ocean of milk - myth image and ecology", pp 145-155 in Geeti Sen (ed), *Indigenous Vision : Peoples of India; Attitudes to the Environment* (New Delhi : Sage, 1992).
11. See Kalpana S. Desai, *Iconography of Vishnu* (New Delhi : Abhinav Publications, 1973)
12. See Bhandarkar, *op.cit.*, pp 41-42
13. See Pierre Grimal (ed.), *Larousse World Mythology* (London : Hamlyn, 1965, 1989) pp 55 - 96; F. Guirand, "Assyro - Babylonian mythology" and L. Delaporte, "Phoenician mythology", pp 49 - 86, *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (London : Hamyn, 1959)
14. See P.D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962), pp.20-21.
15. See Kosambi, *ibid*, p.26

16. S.R. Rao, "Excavation of the legendary city of Dvaraka in the Arabian Sea", *Journal of Marina Archaeology*, Vol.1, January 1990, pp 59-98.
17. See Rao, *ibid*, p.93.
18. Milton Singer has noted the combination in South Indian industrialists of pragmatism and belief in the tenets of the Bhagvad Gita. See Milton Singer, "Industrial leadership, the Hindu Ethic, and the spirit of socialism" in N. Sheth (ed.), *Industrial Sociology in India* (New Delhi : Allied, 1982).
19. See Thapar, *op.cit.*, ch.6. It is significant that according to one authority Vishnu was not only an "Aryan" god but also a Dravidian deity. See S.K. Chatterji, "Race-movements and prehistoric culture" in *The Vedic Age* (edited by R.C. Majumdar, A.D. Pusalkar and A.K. Majumdar, Bombay : Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1951).
20. See A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* (Calcutta : Rupa, 1989), pp 225-233; also Thapar, *op.cit.*, ch.5, pp 105-108. See also I.K. Sarma, "Ancient Andhra ports, religious centres and sea faring", *Journal of Marina Archeology*, vol.1, Jan.1990. pp 19-23, for the link between religion and trade in Andhra Pradesh; Vipin Garg, *Trade Practices and Traditions : Origin and Development in India* (New Delhi : Allied, 1984), ch.3.
21. All the translations of the verses in Sanskrit into English have been taken from *The Holy Geeta*, commentary by Swami

Chinmayananda (Bombay: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, year of publication not mentioned in the book).

22. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* op.cit.
23. Weber, op. cit., pp 161-162.
24. Weber, op.cit., p.178.