

# Relevance of the *Bhagavadgītā*

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The *Bhagavadgītā* is a priceless book that enjoys immense popularity in the world of Indian thought. It is almost an indispensable text to people who value ethics and want to plunge in spiritual practices. It forms part of the *Mahābhārata*, the great Indian epic, authored by the sage Vedavyāsa ('*vyāsenā grathitām purāna muninā madhye mahābhāratam*'). The *Gītā* is counted as one among the five finest gems in the *Mahābhārata*.

Until the 8th century A.D., the *Gītā* remained hidden in the 'Bhishma Parva' of the mighty epic and was accessible only to a few scholars. It is to the credit of Sri Shankarācārya to have lifted it out of the *Mahābhārata* and placed before the general public. Shankara wrote also a great commentary on it in Sanskrit which forms the basis for all later commentaries by several ācāryas. It has also been translated into almost all the languages of the world. When the first English translation by Sir Charles Wilkins was published by the British East India Company, Warren Hastings, who was then the Governor-general of India, wrote an introduction which reads thus: 'The writers of the Indian philosophies will survive when the British Dominion in India shall long have ceased to exist, and when the sources which it yielded of wealth and power are lost to remembrance'. Another Sanskrit scholar, J. W. Hauer, a missionary from Germany, who spent some years in India, observed that

the *Gītā* is 'a work of imperishable significance'.

As the colophon states, the *Bhagavadgītā* is both metaphysics, the science of Reality (*brahmavidyā*) and ethics, the art of union with Reality (*yogashāstra*). By its official designation, the *Gītā* is called an Upanishad ('*bhagavadgītāsu upanishatsu*') since it derives its main inspiration from the great Upanishads. This relation is well brought out in a popular verse recited as one of the *dhyāna shlokas* at the beginning of the text. It states, 'All the Upanishads are regarded as cows, the milkman is the cowherd boy, Sri Krishna, Arjuna is the calf, the wisemen are the drinkers and the supreme nectar *Gītā* is the milk' ('*sarvo'panishado gāvo dogdhā Gopālanandanah; pārtho vatsah □ sudhirbhoktā dugdham gītāmritam mahat*'). In our own times, Swami Ranganathananda, who was the 13th President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, exhorts that 'this milk is meant to be drunk for our nourishment. . . . It will help us to develop character strength, work efficiency, and a spirit of service, and to forge a new national destiny'.

Two great factors which make the *Gītā* an important work for all mankind are, (i) its tolerance, and (ii) its universality. Let us explain these features.

The *Gītā* is written in a simple and charming style and is in the form of a dialogue between the Universal Teacher

(*jagadguru*), Sri Krishna, and the disciple, Arjuna, representing each one of us. It infuses into us a spirit of toleration which is an outstanding feature of Hindu thought. Sri Krishna says clearly in the *Gītā*, 'Whoever with true devotion worships any deity, in him I deepen that devotion; and through it he fulfils his desire'—'*Yo yo yām yām tanum bhaktah śhraddhayārcitum icchati; tasya tasyācalām śhraddhām tāmeva vidadhāmyaham. . . labhate ca tatah kāmān may'aiva vihitān hi tāt*' (7.21-22). And, 'Those that devotedly worship other gods, they also worship Me though only imperfectly'—'*ye'py anyādevatā-bhaktā yajante śhraddhayān'vitāh; te'pi māmeva kaunteya yajanty avidhipurvakam*' (9.23). The difference is only in name (*nāma*) and form (*rupa*) of the deity. It is the same God that resides in all the different forms. It is one truth which they call by different names. It may be noted that Buddha is counted among the ten avatāras of Vishnu.

Vedavyāsa, who inspired all the later Sanskrit poets, does not discuss here the subtle and abstruse details of ethics and metaphysics, but deals only with the broad principles underlying them, relating them to the most fundamental aspirations of man. And this he does by selecting a specific situation involving a moral dilemma on the part of Arjuna just before the beginning of the battle and pointing out how it is overcome.

What was Arjuna's dilemma? All through his life, he was preparing and equipping himself with divine 'weapons' for the battle to regain their share of the kingdom which had been deceitfully snatched by the Kauravas. Now, seeing his own teachers and elders of the family arrayed up opposite to him, he began debating whether he was justified in killing

them and enjoying the kingdom smeared with their blood. He was for a moment also doubtful whether he would be able to win against those mighty warriors. So he became dejected, abandoned his weapons and sat bemoaning in his chariot. Thus the dilemma for him was whether he should take the course of action for which he was yearning or the path of renunciation which now suddenly occurred.

How did he then overcome this despondency and dither? His teacher, Sri Krishna explained to him that all those who are born must eventually die and death was only a passage for another birth—'*Jātasya hi dhruvo mrityuh dhruvam janma mritasya ca*' (2.27). Only the corporal body is killed but not the soul which abides in it—'*Na jāyate mriyate vā kadācit*' (2.20). And that he would be only an instrument for their death which they have already met from Krishna's hand—'*may'aiv'aite nihatāh purvameva nimittamātram bhava savyasācin*' (11.33). He convinced Arjuna that it would only be proper on his part to take up arms which was his *dharma* as a Kshatriya and enlightened him by removing all his doubts. Then Arjuna got back his good sense and was ready to fight with all his might. He said to Sri Krishna that the delusion was removed and sense obtained by His grace; all his doubts were cleared and he was willing to do as Krishna said—'*Nashto mohah smritirlabdhā tvatprasādān mayā'cyuta; sthito'smi gatasandehah karishye vacanam tava*' (18.73). This way of treatment by the author has widened the scope of the teaching and has made its appeal almost universal.

### Philosophy

The teaching of the *Gītā* contains a philosophy which makes for total human

development. Shankara says that it is directly for *abhyudaya* or prosperity and *nishshreyas* or salvation of all beings (*prāninām sākshāt abhyudaya nishshreyasahetuh*); he did not say that it is only for the Hindus, or only for the people of India, but for all human beings. There lies its universality. The *Gītā* requires us to know the meaning of life before we engage in action. It is ‘*brahmavidyāntargata-karmayogashāstra*’—‘karmayoga within the framework of *brahmavidyā*’. Shankara says in his commentary that the essential purpose of the *Gītā* is to teach us a way out of bondage, ie the cycle of birth and death, and not merely enjoin action—‘*shokamohādi samsārakarma nivrityartham gītāshāstram, na pravartakam*’. The aim of the *Gītā* is the complete suppression of the world of becomings in which all action occurs and achieving salvation (‘*gītāshāstrasya prayojanam param nishshreyasam, sahetukasya samsārasya atyantoparamalakshanam*’). It is an epitome of the essentials of the entire Vedic teaching, a knowledge of which leads us to the realization of all human aspirations (‘*samastavedārthasārasamgrahabhutam . . . samastapurushārthasiddhim*’).

It may be noted that the dialogue between Sri Krishna and Arjuna takes place on the battlefield. What is the reason of giving the teaching on the battlefield? The central teaching in the *Gītā* is action or Karma-yoga. Of the several meanings in which the term Karma-yoga is used, we should think of it here as referring to action performed for one’s own benefit (*svadharmā*) and action done for the good of other members of the society which is his social obligation. In both cases, the individual is asked to do his duty without thinking about the fruit of his action. Sri

Krishna says, ‘one’s sole concern is action, never for its fruit’—‘*Karmanyevādhikāraste mā phaleshu kadācana*’ (2.47). One is asked to serve society without desiring any benefit. Such an attitude is found nowhere more intensely than on the battlefield. There the soldier has to fight for no personal gain; yet he has to exert himself to the utmost. The spirit of unselfishness is well seen on a battlefield. Since individuals are here asked to work without expectation of its fruit, we should not think that the *Gītā* teaches us to abandon activity. Never so. It only exhorts us to work in the spirit of renunciation. He says, ‘*Yogasthah□ kuru karmāni sangam tyaktvā dhananjaya*’ (2.48). So it is not renunciation of action but renunciation in action—‘*Tasmād asaktah□ satatam kāryam karma samācara*’ (3.19).

By nature man cannot renounce activity even for one moment—‘*Na hi kashcit kshanamapi jātu tishthatyakarmakrit*’ (3.5). What then should be the direction for activity? Sri Krishna warns that one should never abandon one’s specific work (*svadharmā*) whether it is high or low. The intrinsic value of work is not important as long as it is one’s own *dharma*, ie the duties incumbent upon the main classes into which society is divided. These duties of each class are not enumerated here. Only the essentials have been pointed out. The details are left to the *smritis* like the *Manusmriti*, *Parāsharasmriti* and so on. In the present situation, however, he tells Arjuna that it is his *dharma* as a Kshatriya to fight—‘*dharmyādhi yuddhāt shreyo’nyat kshatriyasya na vidyate*’ (2.31). And if he did not fight he will not only lose the fame he has gained but will earn sin—‘*tatah svadharmam kirtim ca hitvā pāpam avāpsyasi*’ (2.33).

A distinction is made in another context

between the worthy and the wicked in the society (chapter 16). The good are termed as those having *daivi* qualities such as non-violence, truth, compassion to living beings, forgiveness, purity, etc and the wicked are those with *āsuri* qualities such as arrogance, excessive pride, anger, etc.

Sri Krishna stresses in the *Gītā* that observing one's *dharma* is a must and should not be left as even a little of it saves the individual from great fear, viz, the fear of taking births again. One's own *dharma*, though imperfectly performed, is better than other's *dharma* performed perfectly. Death is better in the fulfilment of one's *dharma* than following another's is because that is perilous. Acts of sacrifice, charity, and penance are not to be relinquished but should always be performed, and by performing one's duties, the individual attains salvation.

Incidentally, we may recount here an incident which happened in recent days. A foreign devotee of Sringeri Swamiji requested the latter to initiate him into Hindu *dharma* so that he may perform such acts which will help him attain salvation. Swamiji told the devotee that it was not necessary for him to change his religion to achieve salvation. He can strive for it remaining in his own religion and following rightly what his religion commands. Since our birth is due to our own good or bad deeds done in previous births, we will not be doing right by changing our religion.

Another important message of the *Gītā* is that we should look upon others as equals to ourselves—'*samah sarveshu bhuteshu*' (18.54), since it is the same God that resides in all beings. One should always think of

himself present in all other beings and all other beings in himself. It may be noted that the use of the word *bhuteshu* refers to all beings, not just human beings. The Hindus believed in the welfare of all beings, humans as well as non-humans. In the daily prayer, a Hindu devotee begs happiness for all, prays for good health of all; he wishes that none should suffer any misery ('*Sarve bhavantu sukhinah sarve santu nirāmayāḥ; sarve bhadrāni pashyantu mā kashcit duhkhabhāg bhavet*').

Finally, it may be observed that the relation between the teacher and the student in the *Gītā* is in the tradition of the Upanishads. The teacher, Sri Krishna, does not thrust his teaching on the student unasked. It is only after Arjuna says that he is perplexed and does not know what would be better for him that Krishna begins clearing his doubts. Arjuna says that he has sought refuge in Krishna's feet and that he should take him as a student—'*shishyaste 'ham shādhi mām tvām prapannam*' (2.7). And at the end, Krishna gives his student full freedom to choose the course he prefers—'*yath'ecchasi tathā kuru*' (18.63). But Arjuna tells his teacher that there is no doubt in his mind and that he would do as Krishna says.

The message of this scripture is not limited to any particular time; it is meant for all times. It is especially so at the present time in which people are becoming so intolerant of each other in all areas—religious, political, and social—and employ unethical means for achieving wealth and power. This world will be a better place for living if we follow the teachings of the *Gītā*. ■

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