

The Message of the *Bhagavadgītā*

KARAN SINGH

*Kasturitolakam lalātapthalake vakshasthale
kaustubham
Nāsāgre navamauktikam karatale venum
kare kankanam /
Sarvānge haricandananca kalayan kanthe
ca muktāvalim
Gopastree pariveshtito vijayate gopāla-
cudāmanih //*

—Sri Krishna Karnāmritam

We live in an age of turbulence and turmoil. There seems to be a *samudra manthana*—a churning of consciousness around the world. The old is disappearing and the new is struggling to be born. And we find ourselves precariously poised between a disappearing past and an indeterminate future.

At a time like this we need to look to our cultural and spiritual heritage, not in order to go backwards in time. There is no going back—*caraiveti, caraiveti*—we have to move onwards. But in order to get the requisite courage, the compassion, and the wisdom to deal with the problems we face today, in order to be convinced whether any scripture is significant to the extent that helps us to meet the problems of today. Otherwise, it is alright for research scholars and PhD. students. But a philosophy, to have a meaning for us today, has to be of immediate relevance.

We have a very rich heritage of scriptural literature—the Vedas, Āranyakas, Brāhmanas, the Upanishads, the *Yogasutras* and the *Brahmasutras* which, to my mind, are the supreme scriptures of India. Then we have the Puranas, the *Rāmāyana*, the *Mahābhārata* and so on. Each one of these is a source of great inspiration. There is a

short text embedded in the *Mahābhārata*—only of seven hundred verses—which has a very special significance. Logically, it is not the supreme text. The Upanishads are the supreme texts and the *Smritis* are basically derivatives. It is very special like the pole star, the (Dhruva Tārā) which is not the largest star in the sky, but it is the brightest. Nevertheless, we have in the *Bhagavadgītā* a very remarkable text which always is tremendously important. Āchārya Shankara says in a verse that if a person reads a little of *Bhagavadgītā*, takes a little drop of the Gangā's water and worships Murāri at least once in his lifetime, he does not have to face an interview with Yamarāj (The King of Death).

What does the *Gītā* say? It says:

*N'eh 'ābhikrama-nāsho 'sti
pratyavāyo na vidyate /
Svalpam apyasya dharmasya
trāyate mahato bhayāt // 2.40*

—‘In this faith of Yoga—the path of selfless action combined with devotion—no effort is lost due to incompleteness and no contrary effect of an adverse nature is produced due to failures. Even a little observance of this discipline saves one from great fear.’

It is not just an empty assurance; it is very much true that even a little of this *dharma* saves us from great fear. Therefore, all the great philosophers had to write on the three of the *prasthānatrayas*—the three foundations of Vedānta—the Upanishads, the *Brahmasutras* and the *Bhagavadgītā*. It is only after they had written commentaries on all these three, be he Shankara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, or Dr Sarvapalli

Radhakrishnan of our time, their views have been accepted by many as gratifying.

I remember, one day I met Dr Radhakrishnan at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. He was lying on his bed at that time and talked to us. He said ‘Karan Singh, I am very happy today. I have completed the *prasthānatraya*’. I said, ‘What do you mean Sir?’ He said, ‘I have just completed my commentary on the *Brahmasutras*’. So, you see, everybody had to work on those three texts. Jnāneshwara and Lokmanya Tilak also wrote commentary on the *Gītā*. Sri Aurobindo also wrote masterly in his book *Essays on the Gita*. Gandhiji, and Vinoba Bhave too wrote on it. Krishnaprem, an English man, has written *The Yoga of the Bhagavadgita*. And some of our own swamis such as Ranganathanandaji and others of the Ramakrishna Order have written on the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

The first question that I would like to take up is: Why the *Bhagavadgītā* is so important? What are the reasons? As I see, there are four reasons. The first is that the *Gītā* is a scripture of conflict—it is a *sangharshashāstra*. And today we are in a situation that is ripped by conflicts. The background of the Upanishads are entirely different. There we find a very calm and quite atmosphere. The sages were seated either on the banks of a river, or somewhere in an ashrama of the Himalayan mountains. There were the Guru (preceptor) and his *shishyas* (disciples). We find in the *Mundaka Upanishad* (I.i.3) a disciple asking the question:

*Shaunako ha vai mahāshālah angirasam
vidhivadupasannah papraccha /
Kasminnu bhagavo vijnāte sarvamidam
vijnātam bhavatiti //*

—‘The distinguished householder Shaunaka approached the sage Angirasa in the manner prescribed [for one seeking knowledge of Brahman] and asked, “O Lord, what should a person know so that everything becomes known to him?”’

So this kind of question and answer between a guru and a disciple used to take place in those days. Incidentally, all our great texts are in the form of questions and answers. The Upanishads are dialogues. So is the *Gītā*. Many other texts belong to the same genre.

Now, as I said earlier, we are in a position where various forces are interacting with each other, often in a hostile manner. In a situation like this, the *Gītā* comes to us. It is particularly important for us today because it asks us to fight, not just for individual victory, but for becoming the instruments of the Divine will, for becoming warriors to uphold the Divine cause. That is the battle to which the *Gītā* invites us. Therefore, the first thing for which I think, the *Gītā* is so important for us is that it is a scripture of conflict. And today we find ourselves in that challenging situation.

The personality of the Guru

The second reason is the divine personality of the Guru. The Guru has a very important role in every text. Here Sri Krishna Himself is the Guru. It is interesting, you see, Sri Krishna can be looked upon from many points of view. From one viewpoint He can be the representative of the divine light. The *Katha Upanishad* (2.2.15) says ‘*tameva bhāntamanubhāti sarvam tasya bhāsā sarvamidam vibhāti*’—‘Brahman shining, everything else follows. By Its light all these are illumined.’ Then It could be the *divya surya sahasra*. He is the *Virāt svarupa*. But in the *Gītā*, He comes to us as the charioteer. It is profoundly significant. Why? Because, normally the owner of the chariot is superior and the charioteer is the one who works for him. Here it is the reverse. Krishna Himself comes into our lives as the charioteer to guide us. That is the second reason why the *Gītā* is so important—because of the divine personality of the Guru which is very unique.

The third reason, as I see it, is the integral relationship of the Guru and the

shishya (disciple). The Guru is always important. The ‘Gurustotram’ sings the glory of the Guru in this vein:

*Akhanda mandalākāram vyāptam yena charācaram /
Tatpadam darshitam yena tasmai shrigurave namah //
Ajnāna timirāndhasya jnānānjanashalākayā /
cakshurunmilitam yena tasmai shrigurave namah //*

—‘My salutations to that Guru who revealed to me that truth, which is unfragmented, infinite, timeless divinity, and which pervades the entire universe—movable or immovable. My salutations to that revered teacher, who has opened my eyes, by applying the divine collyrium of self-knowledge in my eyes, which had got blinded by the ignorance.’

So the Guru is centrally important. And all our scriptures always highlight this great glory of the Guru. But the relationship between Krishna and Arjuna in the *Gītā* is integral and this integral bond is best illustrated in one statement of Arjuna after he had the vision of the Lord’s fierce cosmic form (*Vishvarupa darshan*). What does Arjuna say?

*Tasmāt pranamyā pranidhāya kāyam prasādaye tvām aham ishām idyam /
Piteva putrasya sakheva sakhyuh priyah priyāyārhasi deva sodhum // 11.44*

—‘Therefore greeting You with my body stretched in prostration, I beseech You, O worshipful Lord, to be gracious unto me. Bear with me as a father with a son, as a friend with a friend, and as a lover with his beloved.’

What a beautiful expression! I have not come across such an expression of integral relationship in any other texts. Arjuna says in this verse: You have shown me Your grandeur. I prostrate myself in front of You and I demand from you *love*. What kind of love? ‘*piteva putrasya*’—love of a father for his son. A son is considered to be a most treasured pleasure, possession in life,

although the daughters are more treasured now. Then, Arjuna seeks from the Lord the love of a friend towards a friend—‘*sakheva sakhyuh*’. You see, true friendship knows no barrier. A king and a beggar can be friends. Friendship cuts across all barriers of race, creed—everything. Friendship is something which is very special and rare. So Arjuna prays for that kind of friendship that forgives all faults. Not only that he goes even farther and prays for the kind of all-forgiving love of a lover for the beloved—‘*priyah priyāyārhasi*’. Thus the Krishna-Arjuna relationship combines the relationship between a father and a dear son, between a comrade and a dear friend, and between a lover and his or her dear lover. This combination, I think is unique. It touches our heart.

The fourth importance of the *Gītā* is its universal applicability. It is not addressed to any particular religion, caste, or creed or country. Says Krishna,

*Ye yathā mām prapadyante tāmstathaiva bhajāmyaham /
Mama Vartmānuvartante manushyāh Pārtha sarvashah // 4.11*

—‘O Pārtha! Whosoever worships Me through whatsoever path, I verily accept and bless them in that way. Men everywhere follow My path’.

Again he assures us all:

*Yo yo yām yām tanum bhaktah shraddhayā’rcitum icchati /
Tasya-tasy’ācalām shraddhām tam eva vidadhāmyaham // 7.21*

—‘Whichever devotee desires to adore whatever such Deity with faith, in all such votaries I make that particular faith unshakable.’

When He says, Whosoever approaches ‘Me’ He does not mean the son of Vasudeva. He speaks as a representative of the Divine. He says, whoever comes to Me in whatever way, as long as he has *shraddhā*, as long as he has real devotion and concentration, I will strengthen his *shraddhā*. It is a remarkable

statement that echoes the Rigvedic dictum—*‘ekam sat viprā bahudhā vadanti’*. The underlying meaning of this declaration is that whatever your background may be, your devotion goes to the One Divine. So I think that the *Gītā* is by no means the text of a particular group, or a particular religion even. That is why, along with the Quran and Bible, it has become one of the most influential texts in the world.

Teachings of the *Gītā*

Now, what are the teachings of the *Gītā*? Truly speaking, volumes have been already written on this subject. Nevertheless, here again I wish to place four areas which I consider to be the crux of the teachings of the *Gītā*.

The first is *the theory of correct action*. What is to be done in a given situation or context that each one of us faces, no matter if we are students or we are in business, or politics. At times it becomes difficult to decide our *kartavya* (duty). What does the *Gītā* tell us to solve this problem?

The *Gītā* does not lay out a long list of dos and don'ts, that is to say, it does not say do this and don't do that. Indeed, how can you make a list like that? Instead, the *Gītā* gives us one single clue:

*Yatah pravrittir bhutānām
yena sarvam idam tatam /
Sva-karmanā tam abhyarcya
siddhim vindati mānavah // 18.46*

—‘From whom all beings have emanated and by whom all this universe is pervaded—by worshipping Him through the dedicated performance of one's duty, man attains to spiritual competency (*siddhi*).’

The Power that pervades this entire cosmos, *sva-karmanā tām abhyarcya*—if you worship Him, that Power leads man through their work towards perfection—*‘siddhim vindati mānavah.’* If I am a devotee of Lord Shiva, I should be conscious that whatever work I do, is Your worship and nothing else—*‘yat yat karma karomi tat tat*

akhilam Shambho tava ārāadhanam’. Whatever work I do, all that is Your worship, O Shambhu.

So if the work that you do is genuinely dedicated to your *Ishta* (the Chosen Ideal), then you cannot do anything wrong. The moment you do something wrong, you will realize immediately that your work is not worth offering to the Lord, your *Ishta*. So the *Gītā* has given us the correct clue, the right understanding of what the correct *karma* is, and what we should do actually. If our *karma* is a devoted *karma*, a consecrated work, then only we can move towards perfection. This I think is the one very fundamental teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

The second cardinal teaching that the *Bhagavadgītā* gives us briefly relates to *integrated yoga*. As you all know, there are four major paths of yoga. *Jnāna-yoga* is the way of the mind. There is the *Bhakti-yoga*—the way of the heart. There is the *Karma-yoga*—the way of the hands. And, fourthly, there is the *Rāja-yoga*—the way of the breath. There are hundreds of highways, but these are the four main pathways of the yoga. And in a small text like the *Gītā* you will find all the four. About *jnāna* Sri Krishna says,

*Na hi jnānena sadrisham
pavitram iha vidyate /
Tat svayam yoga-samsiddhah
Kālenātmani vindati // 4.38*

—‘Verily there is nothing so purifying as knowledge in this world. One who is perfect in Yoga discovers it in oneself in course of time.’

The Lord says here categorically that there is nothing more sacred and more pure than wisdom. This is the sum and substance of the *Jnāna-yoga*. And then, He talks about the *Karma-yoga*. He says if work is performed properly then it is a powerful medium of yoga.

Then the Lord deals with *Bhakti-yoga*. Krishna, as it were, was born to teach us *bhakti* or devotion. He is one who removes

all our fetters. His father's fetters fell away and the gates of Kamsa's prison opened and he was taken to the house of Nanda. Krishna was born at the midnight, the darkest hour, that is when the birth of the Divine takes place in the human heart. Krishna's whole life was saturated with *bhakti*, so to say. Who can forget His *bāla-lilā* (Childhood *lilā*)? In fact, the whole Vaishnava tradition of *bhakti* revolves around Sri Krishna.

Then comes the *Rajā-yoga*. In the sixth and the seventh chapters of the *Gītā*, there are a lot of fundamental teachings about this *yoga*—how we should sit, how we should breathe, how we should meditate and some such things. So, in a short compass He gives us all the four *yogas*. It is important to remember, however, that these are not mutually exclusive. They are interrelated. My view is that we should try and follow all these *yogas*. Each one of us has to be a bit of a *jnāni* and we should read some scriptures. Then each one of us has to be a *bhakta*. We must have some sort of devotion to God—whatever our religion may be. Then, of course, each of us must practise *Karma-yoga*. That is to say we must work actively in a dedicated manner. And each one of us must have at least some simple *Rāja-yoga* exercises.

This I think is tremendously important. I think perhaps in the earlier age one *yoga* would have been enough; but in the *Kali-yuga* we are living in, it is very important for us to practise all the four *yogas*. And this concept of integral *yoga* given in the *Gītā* is its second great teaching. The first great teaching was the theory of correct action. The second is the integrated *yoga*.

The third, great teaching is the assurance of divine intervention. The famous verse regarding this is,

*Yadā yadā hi dharmasya
glānir bhavati Bhārata /
Abhyutthānam adharmasya
tadātmānam srijāmyaham // 4.7*

—‘Whenever there is a decline of *Dharma* and ascendance of *adharmā* (vice

or unrighteousness), then, O scion of the Bharata race! I manifest (incarnate) myself in a body.’

Then again, He gives the reason why He incarnates and says,

*Paritrānāya sādhunām
vināshāya ca dushkritām /
Dharma-samsthāpanārthāya
sambhavāmi yuge yuge // 4.8*

—‘For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of *Dharma*, I am born from age to age.’

That is one general thing. Also He assures us all through Arjuna—‘*na me bhaktah pranashyati*’ (9.31)—‘My devotee does not get ruined’. Why? Because He is there all the time and protects His devotees.

A word of caution

But here I have something to say, something which you may not have heard before. It is all very fine for Sri Krishna to say that ‘I am coming, I am coming.’ But, in this context, I do remember a verse from the Urdu poet, Ghalib, who said:

*Humne mānā ki taghāful nā karoge,
Lekin khāk ho jāenge hum
Tum ko khabar hone tak.*

—‘I agree that You will not remain indifferent; but I will become a dust by the time you become aware of me’.

So if Krishna is going to fulfil His promises He better hurry up or all will be reduced to dust pretty soon because of the way we are going. The moot point that I am making is that if we need the Divine, the Divine also needs us in same way. Otherwise Krishna had the *sudarshan chakra*. He could have used that in the war at Kurukshetra against the Kauravas. But He did not do that. Why? Why was He after Arjuna? Why did He tell Arjuna to stand up and fight—‘*nimitta-mātram bhava savyasācin*’ (11.33)? He assured Arjuna that He had already killed the formidable heroes on the Kaurava side. Yet He said, stand up and fight. Why?

Because without human cooperation the Divine Will cannot be actualized. That may be a revolutionary statement, but I believe that. I believe that we are not just 'dust' to be scattered hither and thither; we have the Divine within us—'Ishvarah sarva-bhutānām—Hrid-deshe 'rjuna tishthati' (18.61)—Krishna Himself says that. And if we have the Divine within us, then we also have the capacity to cooperate with the Divine. The Divine needs our cooperation to fulfil His Divine plan. I would say this is the third important point—Krishna's repeated assurances of divine intervention, but we have to actively cooperate with the Divine plan which we can do in our own small ways.

The fourth and the last point which I would like to place before you is *the gospel of total surrender* to the Divine. At the end of the whole dialogue covering all topics, including the three *gunas* and all sorts of other elements, Sri Krishna says,

*Sarva-dharmān parityajya
mām ekam sharanam vraja /
Aham tvā sarvapāpebhyo
mokshayishyāmi mā shucah // 18.66*

—'Abandoning all forms of rites and duties, take refuge in Me alone. I shall free you from all sins. (Therefore) do not grieve.'

It is a great statement. Ultimately, He says 'sarva-dharmān parityajya', take my refuge. What is *dharma*? *Dhāryate iti dharmah*—that which supports us is *dharma*. Some people think that their wealth will give them support. Some think that their scholarship will give them support. Some people think that political power will give them support. But ultimately, none of these will work. So the Lord tells us to give up all such false supports and go to Him, the Divine. What will happen if we can go to the Divine in totality? The Lord says, 'Aham tvā

sarvapāpebhyo mokshayishyāmi—I will save you from all sins, 'mā shucah'. The last two words that He spoke are the most significant words of the *Gītā*—'mā shucah'—fear not.

Today we are afraid, afraid of everything, afraid of what is happening around us. We are afraid of problems, of old age, of illness, of death; we are afraid of a lot of things. But Sri Krishna says, 'mā shucah'. Because if you have real faith in the Divine who is *nikhila bhayaharam*—the Destroyer of all fears, you cannot be afraid of anything. Fear is a big disease that has grabbed the human race today. Hence the last words of the *Gītā* are 'mā shucah'—'F-E-A-R N-O-T.'

Sri Krishna is playing His flute still now. But we are so enraptured and occupied with the noise and bustle of our lives we are unable to hear it. But He is still there. He is still playing the flute. He is still in our chariot. He is there to help us. So with the voice of the Divine Charioteer ringing in our ears, in our deepest consciousness, with the cosmic dance of the Shiva Natarāja, which we see around us, let us push on despite all difficulties, all problems, with our faith in the Divine. Human life is an opportunity. It is not a meaningless journey from the womb to the tomb. It is a unique opportunity for the growth of our consciousness.

Therefore I would end with a prayer to Sri Krishna:

*Krishna tvadiya-pada-pankaja pinjarāntam
adyaiva me vishatu mānasa-rājahamsah /
Prāna-prayāna-samaye kapha-vāta-pittaih
kanthāvarodhana-vidhau smaranam kutaste //*

—'O Krishna let my soul (or swan-like mind) take refuge into the hutch of Your lotus feet this very day. Otherwise, how will it be possible to remember You at the time of death when my voice will get choked with excessive phlegm, bile and wind?' ■

* This article is based on a lecture Dr Karan Singh, eminent scholar and former Union Minister, delivered at the Institute on 30 January, 2019.