

Bhagavad Gita: Mystic Union with Truth

Bhagavad Gita , the sacred song sung by the Lord, is a part of a great epic Mahabharata, known as *itihasa-purana* or mythical history.

Myths are stories woven around an archetype, images from collective unconscious, having primordial and eternalizing aspects of human thought, and hence an idea, an original model which is indefinitely old as they are forever new.

In the Indian context it is the myth-making function of history (*itihasa- purana*) that underlies its dynamic force in moulding the social life, morality and culture of a people.

As myths have the potentiality of multiple meaningfulness, it is described by many as a book of war and death and at the same time Mahatma Gandhi found in it the message about the man or the self, who is deathless (avyayam) in his long journey to emancipation and got his cue to preach non-violence. There are many who ask the question what is the cue, how one can draw diametrically opposite views from the same text?

Amartya Sen in his book ‘The Argumentative Indian’ says that though Krishna’s hallowing of the demands of duty by showing his *Viswaroop* in 11th chapter wins the argument, at least as seen in the religious perspective yet towards the end of the Mahabharata can even be seen as something of vindication of Arjuna’s profound doubts Arjuna’s contrary arguments are not really vanquished, no matter what the message of the Bhagavad Gita is meant to be. Here is the tussle between two contrary moral positions - krishna’s emphasis on doing one’s duty, on one side, and Arjuna’s focus on avoiding bad consequences (and generating good ones), on the other.

Krishna’s moral position has also been eloquently endorsed by literary and philosophical commentators all over the world, such as Isherwood in his translation of Bhagavat Gita into English or T.S. Eliot in a poem in ‘Four Quartets’, ‘The Dry Salvages’, Eliot summarizes Krishna’s view in the form of an admonishment: ‘And do not think of the fruit of action/ fare forward.’ Eliot explains: ‘Not fare well,/But fare forward,

voyagers.’ Then Amartya Sen concludes that there remains a powerful case for ‘faring well’, and not just ‘forward’. Sen is worried that because of not taking on board Arjuna’s consequential analysis, in addition to considering Krishna’s argument for doing one’s duty, J. Robert Oppenheimer, the leader of the American team which produced the first atom bomb of mass destruction, did not hesitate to quote Krishna’s words (I am become death, the destroyer of worlds’, 11th chapter), and justified it as his duty to kill the enemies and do good for the right side. But it did not give reply to Arjuna’s concern, how can good come from killing so many people.

Amartya Sen did not search for an answer in the text Mahabharata of which Bhagavad Gita is a part. Here let me make one thing very clear that Gita cannot be separated from the narrative of the text as Gita is inextricably fused together, and any one, who is a perceptive reader, can find answers to many of the intricate issues of the text in Gita and similarly many issues raised in Gita have their answers in the narrative of the text.

Let us not forget it is not a theological text but poetry or song and also said by the early 19th century German scholar Wilhelm von Humboldt, ‘the most beautiful, perhaps the only true philosophical song existing in any known tongue.’

Since it is poetry and song it uses poetical devices such as distancing devise to allow the reader to analyze and take out the meaning on her/his own.

Let me explain it a little in detail with reference to the visual setting of Gita. The portion of the Mahabharata entitled Bhagavad Gita, extends from chapter 25 to chapter 42 of BhismaParva.

At the very beginning of Bhisma Parva, we see the countless forces drawn up in battle array facing each other- The war is now not fought between gods and demons as it happened in the Vedas or Ramayana but fought between men, who are not only of the same royal clan but cousins known as Pandavas and kauravas.

The Kauravas facing the West and the Pandavas the East on a fateful agrahayana (pre winter)

morning on which the arc of the sun had arisen while seven planet had come close together in the sky forecasting something very ominous for mankind and we all are tense, waiting for the conflict to begin but there is a suspense as Vyasa brings forth Dhritarastra, the blind king, father of the kauravas on the stage who wants a running commentary on Kurukshetra, the battlefield. His wish is granted and Sanjay is introduced with divine vision to give a commentary of the war from a distance or a distancing device is introduced between the battle and us so that we might interpret the happenings and speculate on them. And in due course we get the answer that if Krishna in Gita is asking to follow his/her duty or dharma and fight the war, Mahabharata , at the same time, is saying that highest dharma is non-injury . It means one who is not cruel, mischievous, base, vile and malicious.

Mahabharata resorts to paradox, another poetic device to shock the reader into an awareness of its deeper meaning and establishes that ever flowing stream of life is the highest truth of Mahabharata

but morality and doing well to others is a part of this flowing stream of life. This humanness is a very important part of these characters.

After the long journey when Yudhisthir along with his brothers reached the threshold of heaven, Indra invited Yudhistir to stay in heaven, but he said to Indra that how could he leave the dog, who accompanied them in their long journey to heaven? This proves amply that humanness, compassion and morality or in other words dharma of Yudhistir or his knowledge of the self: after all dharma resides in the self and in his self, Kendra or locus, the place of dharma is secured.

To conclude this point, a truly religious man can transcend his so-called religious duty and put moral concerns over narrowly religious ones and hence Mother Kunti's parting words of advice to Yudhistir may be taken as the motto of *Mahabharat: dharma te dheeyatam budhirmanstu mahadastu cha*

Let thy reason be fixed on dharma and let thy mind be ever great. With this idea in mind one can easily transcend one's religious duties and

commands and put his moral and humanitarian concerns over narrow religious concerns.

Gita gives utterance to the aspirations of all religions, who seek to tread the inner way to the city of God and hence we found in it the spiritual philosophy in its universality without limit of time and space.

Aldous Huxley calls the Gita as one of the clearest and most comprehensive summaries of the perennial philosophy ever to have been made. Hence its enduring value is meant not only for Indians but all mankind.

After the war Krishna said in his usual symbolical language:

“The sun has set; let us go back to our place of stay.’

Pandavas thought Krishna was asking to go back to the camps but the sad tone and the far away vision of Krishna was hinting at to go back to the centre , to the self so that one may understand oneself. Understanding oneself is the ascending rhythm of life.

Pandavas took 36 years to understand this. Now they have no question. They all leave for the great journey- a lonely journey. Pandavas ultimately leave the world and thereby disclose to us its central myth of the

Self to go beyond self

It is only possible if one follows the path of dharma

Dharma hridisamashrita

Dharma resides in the self.

The most crucial issue of Mahabharata is dharma. The epic moves around this issue of dharma and by the time it comes to the end we find Vyasa, the narrator, with his two hands up in the sky is crying loudly:

“No one is listening to the voice of dharma.” His cry was almost a cry in the wilderness. Let us not forget and as I have already told it that Gita being poetry, it is a fascinating web of interrelated meanings, pairs of opposite meanings complementary to each other. It is the crucial key to our understanding of dharma.

It is said in the Mahabharata again and again” to live in dharma is to live in harmony with one’s purpose on earth.”

The journey of the self beyond self is possible when a person achieves equableness, harmony and balance. But each and every character at some point of time loses his/her balance and also harmony and this is the main theme of Mahabharata. Gita starts with the moral dilemma of Arjuna and he becomes more of a human being before our eyes. But then it is a dharma yuddha – a war to uphold morality to ensure victory for the right side, or negatively, to avoid disastrous consequences of the defeat of the side which was more just than the other. We are all in a world with good as well as evil; there is human rationality; sometimes justice is done, sometimes evil forces try to suppress justice. **But there is the persistent belief that good will win in the end.** But in the end, the narrative imparts a great lesson in tragedy as there was no joyous outcome of victory. It generates an ultimate indifference and disgust in us for all sorts of worldly pleasure, joys, victories,

competition, challenge, love of power, love of wealth and so on. Total war is one where everything ends in this type of tragic nothingness. And we realize it is not bravery but knowledge which is the key to the mystery of life. And then we realize, why Gita is incorporated in this narrative, it is time for us to know our self.

One can realize the self, as Gita says, with the help of knowledge or what Krishna calls samkhyayoga that ‘though the body may be killed, the soul remains untouched.’ Samkhya in the general sense is a metaphysical system but Krishna used it in the general sense of knowledge, knowledge of the metaphysics of a permanent soul. But pure knowledge or knowledge of ‘thatness’ or truth (tattva-jnana) is not enough for achieving them final good of mankind

On the other it can be realized through the way of action, karmayoga;

‘If you are killed in action, heaven will be yours; if you survive, you will rule the world’.

Hence fight

Tasmadu^{thi}sthaKaunteyayudhyayakritanschaya
(II.37)

Many have found this argument immoral; the glorification of worldly power as a just reward for violence has often been cited as an example of Hindu hypocrisy, even by those who admire the essential teaching of Gita.

The answer to this charge is implicit in the text; “acts must be performed without attachment to their fruits and for the sake of educating people and for their welfare one must perform action.”

III.20

Again Mahabharata insists that action should be performed with human welfare in mind. Gita formulates this most important ethical doctrine as follows:

“He, who resigns his activities to the universal self by forsaking attachment to them, and their results, remains unstained by evil –just as the lotus leaf remains unstained by water.”

This theory of action goes against the doctrine of the sramana’s prescription of asceticism and

withdrawal into a state of (1)actionlessness (akarma). (2)The second is ritual acts or karmakanda and by doing it the agent enjoys the fruit of the action, which Gita does not prescribe. Krishna rejects it and goes for a (3) third alternative, which is nishkama karma or ‘desireless action.

In chapter 4th of Gita Krishna says in verse no 16 that even the wise are confused as regards what should be done and what should not be done and emphasizes three things among others, in this chapter

- 1) Permanence of the soul;
- 2) Impermanence of everything else including ordinary pleasure and happiness; and
- 3) The obligation to act in a ‘life of action’ (including the performance of prescribed duties –scriptural as well as moral), but not to cling to the desire for the fruits of such actions.

Krishna says that humans in this state approach the divine stage. This is a very significant statement. Just as the creator God is supposed to have created the universe although he has had no unfulfilled desire from which he should have acted, the person in a desireless state of mind should act (for act he/she must) and thereby action would not create any bondage for him/her.

The real Karmayogin , according to Krishna, gets best of the both worlds.

He must possess perfect knowledge of the nature of things and persons. But this knowledge would not lead him to non-action. He would do whatever is expected of him by society and he would exercise unbiased reason to decide conflicting alternatives, but he would be completely free from any selfish desires, motives and preferences and thus his action would not create further bondage.

The Kantian notion of the categorical imperative that it is something you have to do for the sake of itself, is similar to the concept of desireless

action and not an idealist fantasy. This is opposed to a hypothetical imperative - something you should do because you want to attain some goal. (1)Matilal refers to ritual acts *nitya* (compulsory and daily action) karma by performing these acts nothing is gained but it is the incumbent duty of human beings to perform them and desireless action can be seen as an extension of this type of *nitya* action. (2)Matilal further equates desireless action with moral action (people do not behave morally in the hope of moral reward).

But all said and done it is a big dilemma for people to understand, realize and accept the notion of desireless action. After all

Dharmasya tattavam nihitam guhayaam

The meaning of dharma always lies hidden in the inner precincts of the mind of the self and if one does not understand the inner meaning of dharma, the best course for him/her is to do as says Krishna:

*Sarvadharman paritajyya mamekam saranam
braja*

Come to my protection by leaving all dharma

The excellent design created in Gita by Krishna speaks about the ultimate recourse of man that is to come under God's protection.

The design is like an equation:

Swadharma. Nishkama karma, atmasamarpana

Swadharma i.e. follow one's duty; *nishkama karma* i.e. follow it desirelessly but desire is inevitable in any action and hence one must desire to do a particular work and achieve a result. It can't be always nitya of Matilal or categorical imperative of Kant. One must have a desire to achieve a result but after one achieves it, one must dedicate that result at the feet of the lord. This is the meaning of *nishkama karma* and *atmasamarpana* which is the last part of the equation i.e. to dedicate oneself to the feet of the lord and that makes the design complete. Krishna says this in chapter IX, verse 27 of Gita that

whatever you do dedicate that to me:
yatkaroshi...tatkurushva madarpanam

To dedicate means to be with the Lord and then the Lord says, I will realize you from all sins and therefore grieve not;

Aham tvam sarvapapevhyam mok-shik-shyami maa suchah

But the key of Gita is that this ‘I’ who is speaking is your own self as explained by Krishna:

Ahamatma gudakesha

I am you, o Arjuna! I am the self dwelling in the heart of everything.

When the perplexed mind knows not what is dharma, the self has only to commune with his own self since true knowledge in this matters is to be found within the self. Learn to contact with the self.

When pleasure and pain are same to you, when you become indifferent to the success and failure of your little schemes, when you lay no claims to

the fruits of your action, only and only then the self will guide you personally through life, counseling you at each step – metaphorically speaking, will drive your chariot for you.

Then be true to yourself and do as He bids you. We have to dive deeper within ourselves to find the true self, the king of the dark chamber, who resides in the heart of every being:

Iswara sarvabutanam hriddesheorjuna tisthati

In fact all our suffering appears due to the building up of a strong consciousness of our existence as a separate entity and due to our frantic efforts to cling to that personal separateness and identity.

One must transcend that separateness and dedicate oneself to that power from which one proceeds and everything proceeds – to know oneself and realize that in the self resides the lord and hence self and the Lord are one and the same. But this Lord is not Advaita Brahman but personal God for whom we have devotion in our minds. Here enters the

concept of bhaktiyoga (devotional path) in Gita when Krishna says

Bhaktya mamabijananti i.e.

One can understand Me only by devotional service.

Now the message is given that in order to go beyond the self, the grace of God is essential, and the flight is possible only through complete dedication:

Mamekam saranam vraja

Devotion connects man with God and to share the partnership and to continue with it. Continuity of the partnership is possible because as the Lord says:

*manmana bhava madbhakto madyaji mam
namaskurulmamevaishasi satya te pratijane
priyoshi mell*

Turn your mind to me/ be devoted to me, Doing your rituals for me/ bow to me,

You will come to me/ I promise it to you surely/ I love you.

Thus the personal God enters into personal relations with us in worship and prayer.

We have now understood that there are three paths: path of knowledge, action and the path of bhakti.

Here knowledge is different from all the intellectual knowledge because this knowledge comes through realization of the self. In knowledge or in the realization of the self knower, knowable and knowledge, all the three constituents of knowledge become one and one comes to know that

- i) ultimate reality is one;
- ii) this world of multiplicity is just an illusion;
- iii) and the individual soul and the universal soul are one. Knower is just one and it is subjective.

After realization nothing remains as object: everything becomes self, and unity in diversity is established.

The path of action – is selfless action leading one to the union with the self by action. All such actions are uninfluenced and unaffected by the

profit motive. On the contrary, by regarding oneself as an agent (*nimitta*) or instrument in the hands of the super self and dedicating to him accordingly, the fruits of all actions as they accrue.

Lastly is bhaktiyoga, which is union with the super self through devotion or love. It manifests itself as the super delight in being united with the self, from whom one has been divorced during one's selfish separate life.

The complete man is one, who attains to conscious unity with the super self in all aspects of his being, intellectually, reactively and emotionally integrating all the sides of and aspects of man. Gita integrates these three yogas into a single, integrated path. The Gita, Dr S. Radhakrishnan explains insists on the unity of the life of spirit, which cannot be resolved into philosophical wisdom, devoted love or strenuous action. Work, Knowledge and devotion are complementary to each other when we seek the goal and after we attain it. The argument of Gita resolves itself into three great steps:

- 1) Renunciation of desire for the fruit of the action

through karma yoga;

- 2) Not only the desire of the fruit but the claim to be the doer of works has to be renounced in the realization of the self.
- 3) The supreme Self has to be seen as the Supreme Purusha : adoration and seeking of the Supreme Self as the Divine Being and insistence on devotion (*bhakti*) leads to emancipation, a state of extreme blissfulness.

Self moves from self to Self and realizes that He/she and the Self are one and the same. Gita says that one must transcend that separateness and unite oneself to that power from which one and everything proceeds and that power is within us. Only then one understands the meaning of life - what *dharma* is and also one realizes that one will have to go beyond *dharma* to be one with the self.

The final sense is one of coming together. Becoming and being are dialectically united and one becomes that which one loves. It is the mystic union with Truth.