

# Contribution of the Gita to Indian Philosophic Thought

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*(The Gita has become such a conventional scriptural text that we usually do not notice the originality of some of its concepts. Swami Harshananda of the Ramakrishna Ashrama, Mysore, draws our attention in this article to three major contributions the Gita has made to philosophic thought—the technique of Nishkama-karma, the integration of Jnana, Karma, Dhyana and Bhakti into a comprehensive Yoga and the elucidation of the nature and function of the Avatara.)*

It is generally seen in the case of the major religions of the world that each of them has a founder, a book and a church or a commonly accepted way of life. Though Hinduism is the solitary exception to this pattern, the Bhagavad Gita can perhaps lay its claim to be considered as the Book of Hinduism; and most of the Hindus of the modern generation may accept its claim. The importance of this celebrated work does not lie only in its being taught by Sri Krishna who is being worshipped as God Incarnate for millennia or because it forms an integral part of the Mahabharata. It is itself considered as the fifth Veda. Its importance lies rather in its original contribution to the Indian philosophic thought. The main purpose of this article is to highlight this contribution.

Before embarking on the same, it will not be out of place to summarize the philosophical side of its teachings. It accepts God as the ultimate cause and ground of sustenance of this universe. 'Purushottama', 'Isvara' and 'Brahman' are some of the epithets used to describe Him. However, it is to be noted that Sri Krishna often identifies himself with God and freely uses the words 'I' or 'Me' to denote Him. He has a twofold Prakriti or nature—the Para Prakriti and the Apara Prakriti—and creates the universe through them. The former comprises the Jivas or living beings, and the latter consists of the three Gunas, Sattva,

Rajas, and Tamas. The two have also been designated Akshara Purusha and Kshara Purusha. It is in this context that God who transcends them is called Purushottama. Prakriti or nature evolves into this universe under His command and the created universe is supported by Him as the string supports the pearls threaded on it.

The Jivas or Akshara-Purushas are described as His *amsa* or part. However, they are really the Atman, birthless, deathless and eternal. They wear and discard the bodies as a man wears good clothes and discards the ones worn out. The bodies are called Kshetra or the field since the fruits of actions are reaped through them. The Jivas who are essentially the Atman, get themselves identified with the Kshetras through ignorance and hence suffer the agonies of birth, disease, old age and death.

Moksha or liberation variously called as Brahmanirvana, Brahmisthiti, Samsiddhi, Paragati and more often described by Sri Krishna as attaining Him, comes through the direct experience of one's Atman-nature as well as knowing God. The path of spiritual discipline designated as 'Yoga', though one, has four broad aspects, those of Bhakti (devotion), Jnana (knowledge), Dhyana (meditation) and Nishkama Karma (Desireless action). All these aspects of Yoga, either singly or in combination can lead to spiritual perfection.



The Gita also gives a vivid description of the perfect man so that he can be recognized and emulated by seekers of Truth. Though the description has been given in three places, that of the Sthitaprajna (man of steady wisdom) in the 2nd chapter, of the Bhakta (the devotee) in the 12th chapter and of the Gunatita (one who has transcended the three Gunas) in the 14th Chapter, the essence of the characteristics is more or less the same. Equanimity under all vicissitudes of life, absence of passion and rancour, love of God resulting in universal love towards all beings are these characteristics.

We may now attempt rediscovering how Lord Sri Krishna through the Gita has made an original contribution of three doctrines to our philosophic and religious thought. This contribution may be briefly summed up as follows: (1) the doctrine of Nishkama-karma-yoga; (2) the doctrine of Integral Yoga as a comprehensive mode of Sadhana and (3) the doctrine of Avatara or Incarnation of God.

Even a cursory glance at the Upanishads reveals to us that all of them, except the Isavasya, are overwhelmingly in favour of renouncing all actions as a precondition to the practice of contemplation on the Atman. This attitude of the Upanishads was probably due to the fact that Vedic ritualism had grown to unwieldy and morbid proportions stifling all spiritual growth in man, and hence, was a reaction to it. That is why the word 'Karma' was interpreted in a very narrow sense as purely ritualistic action, especially the desire-motivated Yajnas and Yagas. The logic of the Upanishadic thought seems to be that Karma invariably produces bondage of the spirit and hence by abandoning it altogether, we can avoid its consequences.

Under those circumstances they were of course right. However, this attitude offered practically no choice to the masses who could not afford to perform the cumbersome sacrifices nor renounce their all and retire into the forest for contemplation on the Atman. Was there no way out for them to achieve spiritual

well-being? It is exactly here that the Gita comes to the rescue. What causes bondage is not Karma but the wrong attitude with which it is performed. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, if a cheat forges a cheque in the light of a lamp, it is not the fault of the lamp. Nor does the lamp acquire merit if a devotee reads a holy book in its light! Similarly when Karma is performed without egoism bordering on vanity, without attachment to the fruits thereof, it cannot bind. On the other hand it helps to cleanse the mind, thus paving the way to spiritual enlightenment. Once this standpoint is accepted, there is no reason to limit Karma to ritual actions alone. It can be expanded in scope to include all actions voluntarily undertaken including the so-called secular ones. This gives tremendous hope to all those involved in the world, but aspiring after spiritual progress. They can now convert work into worship by cultivating the right attitude.

While advocating this doctrine of Nishkama Karma or desireless action, Lord Sri Krishna cautions that actions should not be given up, there being no motivation for the same. This relinquishing of actions is neither possible nor desirable. It is not possible for an embodied being to do so, since the very nature of the body-mind complex forces one to work. It is not desirable since man is a social being and has got to fulfil his social and religio-social obligations.

Sri Krishna being an ideal teacher could very well understand the psychology of those who were devoted to the Vedic sacrifices. He could also condone their weakness in using the sacrifices as a 'push-button-system' for fulfilling their desires. Instead of alienating them by opposing them or totally rejecting their methods and claims, he accepted them at their worth but showed them how they could expand their concept of sacrifice and extend it further to all other fields of work, including the apparently secular ones. For instance, a rich man giving away his wealth to the needy, a man of knowledge teaching the ignorant or a man of psychic powers helping those in distress are all



performing Yajna, and for that very reason, can get results of equal value. Sri Krishna has rightly christened them as Dravya-Yajna, Jnana-Yajna and Tapo-Yajna respectively. In fact he has raised the whole concept of Yajna to the highest level in IV.24, implying thereby that all our activities can be converted into Brahma-Yajna, by redirecting our attitudes towards God and that this can result in spiritual enlightenment. In this connection the Lord has also described the Jagat-Chakra or world cycle (III.14-16) in which Yajna is a crucial link. When *anna* (food) or *parjanya* (rain) produces the bodies or food, each gets totally transformed into its effect losing its own name and form in the process. This teaches us that self-effacement in the process of service to the world is the *sine qua non* of Yajna. Even the commonest of common men can adopt this principle in his life of work and easily elevate it to the level of Yajna. This is nothing less than a master-stroke of philosophical insight.

While expounding his philosophy of Nishkama Karma Yoga and expanding the concept of Yajna, Lord Sri Krishna has revealed to us two more allied concepts: Svadharma and Lokasangraha. Arjuna is advised that it is better to die performing Svadharma rather than accepting Paradharma to save one's skin. The latter is dubbed as positively dangerous.

Svadharma stands for the duties and responsibilities that accrue to one by nature and nurture, and hence, by the social status and position. For this very reason, it cannot be and should not be shirked, however unpleasant it may appear to be. One's way to spiritual progress lies through it.

Nor should one take to Paradharma, duties suitable to others and not to oneself, however pleasant they may seem. One thing should be noted here. As Swami Vivekananda puts it, 'Each is great in his own place.' Hence the question of superiority or inferiority of one's Svadharma *vis-a-vis* Svadharma of another does not arise.

Allied to the concept of Svadharma is

that of Lokasangraha. Literally 'lokasangraha' means keeping 'loka' or people within the bound of Dharma, and prodding them to perform their Svadharma. This is of course impossible unless one sincerely follows the philosophy of 'Be and Make' as Swamiji aptly puts it. Unless the physician has cured himself first and is healthy, he cannot induce confidence in his patients. This is especially true in the case of the 'Sreshthas' or leaders of society. Since the flock invariably follows its leaders, tremendous responsibility is vested in the leaders. If they should not mislead their flock, it is their bounden duty to meticulously follow their Svadharma. In fact, they should continue to perform it, as long as they live in the society even though they might have attained enlightenment thereby transcending all duties because they have not been absolved of their responsibilities as 'Sreshthas'. No greater model of this could be there than the Lord Himself.

The next contribution of the Gita is its doctrine of Integral Yoga, as a comprehensive mode of Sadhana. That the Gita is described as 'Yogasastra' in the colophon given at the end of each chapter is a point to be seriously noted. Lord Sri Krishna does not consider the four yogas familiar to us as water-tight compartments. This is very reasonable since Yoga should ultimately lead to unification of the individual self with the Supreme, through proper purification and discipline of the mind. This mind, again, is one, though often described as consisting of the four parts viz., intellect, emotion, will and memory. Actually these are four different aspects of its functions. Hence, the four Yogas which tackle the same mind from four different directions—Jnanayoga tackling the intellect, Bhaktiyoga the emotion, Karmayoga the will and the Rajayoga the memory—and which actually converge at the point of total purification of the same, resulting in spiritual enlightenment, have themselves got to be different aspects or facets of a single discipline. It is exactly this that the Gita describes and expounds as Yoga. However the greatness of Sri Krishna lies in the fact that he has systematically developed Karmayoga



and Bhaktiyoga for the first time, accepting and retaining the other two Yogas also.

Since Arjuna was a man of action, it was but proper that Sri Krishna stressed the aspect of Karmayoga greatly in his case. However, the very fact that he taught the other three Yogas also to the same Arjuna, by implication, leads us to the conclusion that Yoga-samanvaya or Integral Yoga or a harmony of the four different aspects of Yoga (though the relative proportions may vary depending upon the temperament of the particular aspirant) is acceptable to him. This is certainly a great improvement over the emphasis of the earlier teachers on only one aspect of Yoga.

Now we come to the last of the three contributions viz., the doctrine of Avatara or incarnation of God in the human form. Though the Rigveda contains references to some of the Avataras included in the Dasavatara group, there is no specific mention of the Doctrine of Avatara as such. It is only in the Gita that we find it mentioned for the first time and hints given as to its operation. Literally, 'Avatara' is 'one who has come down'. Though the Hindu mythological works seem to accept a physical or spatial dimension to this concept of Avatara, the concept itself is capable of a much higher interpretation. God the Absolute, is beyond all limitations imposed by time, space and causation, though the world created by Him through His inscrutable power of Maya is very much subject to them. When, due to some unknown cause, or due to a cause best known to Him alone, the equilibrium of Dharma and Adharma, or, good and evil, is disturbed,

evil getting the better of good, He decides to 'come down' to restore the balance. This 'coming down' actually takes the form of embodying Himself through His Prakriti or nature voluntarily, even as a master assumes the role of a servant in a play and obeys his own servant playing the role of the master. In other words this simply means setting aside temporarily His transcendental powers and accepting certain limitations necessary to fulfil the role He has chosen to play.

The purpose of the Avatara is twofold: protection of the good who are devoted to Dharma (the eternal law propagated in the Sastras or holy books and expounded by Acharya-purushas or persons of spiritual wisdom) and destruction of the wicked who are opposed to Dharma. But neither of these is the primary purpose. Dharma-samsthapana or re-establishing Dharma is the primary purpose. In achieving this, protection of the good and destruction of the wicked may become inevitable concomitants.

In this connection the Lord has made a very significant declaration that He will embody Himself *whenever* Dharma declines and Adharma triumphs in this world. Since this is an assurance to humanity as a whole, there is no limit either to the number or to the place of appearance of these Avataras.

We thus see that the Gita is not only a Yogasastra and Mokshasastra, but also a Darsana (philosophical system) that has blazed a new and novel trail in the horizon of Indian philosophical thought.

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Religion does not consist in turning unceasingly toward the veiled stone, (referring to Islam), nor in approaching all the altars, (referring to Christianity), nor in throwing oneself prostrate on the ground, nor in raising the hands before the habitations of gods. nor in deluging the temples with the blood of beasts, nor in heaping vows upon vows; but in beholding all with a peaceful soul.

DE RERUM NATURA