



Bhagavad Gita's Svadharma: An Overview

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Abstract:

The concept of svadharma occurs in Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita opens with perplexity in the mind of Arjun, a representative of the moral agents. The perplexity is whether to escape from the battle or to kill one's kith and kin. Arjun chooses to escape from the battle. Lord Krishna's advice to Arjun is different. He advises Arjun to accept the path prescribed for him as a warrior. In this context, Lord Krishna innovates the idea of svadharma. The Bhagavad Gita, a timeless Hindu scripture, is revered for its profound philosophical teachings and spiritual guidance. One of its central themes is the concept of "Svadharma," which refers to an individual's unique duty or righteous path in life. This paper provides an overview of the significance and implications of Svadharma as elucidated in the Bhagavad Gita. It explores the context in which the concept arises, its philosophical foundations, and its relevance in contemporary society.

Introduction:

The Bhagavad Gita, part of the Indian epic Mahabharata, is a dialogue between Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna, who serves as his charioteer and divine guide. As Arjuna faces a moral and existential crisis on the battlefield, Krishna imparts timeless wisdom, addressing various aspects of life and duty. One such crucial concept is Svadharma, which holds relevance not only in the context of the Mahabharata but also in navigating life's complexities today. Svadharma literally means "own dharma" and has been translated as "own duty" and particular responsibilities. The word 'dharma' is sometimes translated into the English language as religion. But so far as the Sanskrit derivation is concerned, it comes from the root 'dhr' which means to hold on or to sustain. In this sense dharma is the way of life. Different kinds of dharma such as Kuladharma, Jatidharma, Varnashrama dharma have been mentioned in the Gita. But the corner stone of the entire discourse on 'dharma' is the concept of 'svadharma'. However, it must be remembered that 'svadharma' is not actually a separate dharma. 'Dharma' generally rendered as 'duty', righteousness. Dharma does not stand for tradition, custom and ritual. Tradition, custom and ritual vary from person to person and from place to place. Dharma stands for those regulative and constitutive principles, which are eternal in nature. It guides man to action. Dharma stands for action, it does not stand for discrimination.

"sve sve karmanya bhirata sansiddhi labhate nara".

Perfection can be attained through one's action assigned to him in the particular station of his life.

The term 'Svadharma' refers to an individual's inherent duty, as determined by the varnashrama

system, or the social order based on caste, and the gunas, or qualities, that arise from human nature. Each individual possesses distinct obligations and responsibilities, referred to as "own dharma" or "svadharma", which are exclusive to them due to the inherent variations in their capacities for moral conduct.

Historical Context of Svadharma:

This section delves into the historical and cultural context in which the Bhagavad Gita was composed. It outlines the Kurukshetra War, Arjuna's dilemma, and the significance of the dialogue taking place on the battlefield. Understanding this context helps grasp the gravity of Arjuna's moral predicament and the need for spiritual guidance. The concept of svadharma is established based on the distinctive characteristics of an individual's psychological orientation, known as svabhava. Engaging in activities within the limits of one's abilities is more likely to result in optimal outcomes. On the other hand, engaging in actions that are inconsistent with one's inherent characteristics and abilities is prone to result in a discord between one's internal and external aspects. The Gita emphasizes the importance of aligning one's volition and action, specifically referring to svabhava (inherent nature) and svadharma (individual duty). It is noteworthy to observe that the categorization of society into four distinct classes is not exclusive to Hindu society, but rather a phenomenon observed in various societies in different manifestations. The division is predicated upon the socio-economic exigencies of the society. Therefore, the indispensability of the four functions implies that an individual's course of action is determined by their svadharma. The four castes in the Hindu social system are known as Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra. The duties

of a Brahman, derived from their inherent nature, encompass various virtues and practices such as patience, purity, faith in a higher power, forgiveness, selflessness, adherence to truth, cultivation of wisdom, engagement in the study and teaching of the Vedas, participation in sacrificial rituals, and providing guidance to others. The responsibilities of a kshatriya, derived from their inherent nature, encompass qualities such as courage, generosity, steadfastness in the face of conflict, leadership aptitude, safeguarding the welfare of the populace, and the pursuit of knowledge through the study of the Vedas. The duties of a Vaishya, as determined by their inherent nature, encompass ploughing, safeguarding cattle, engaging in trade, practicing charity, studying the Vedas, participating in commerce, and pursuing activities related to finance and agriculture. The obligation of a Sudra, by virtue of their inherent nature, is to dutifully and selflessly attend to the needs of all castes. In the event that a Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, or Sudra fails to fulfill their respective duties, a significant aspect of societal functioning experiences a setback.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge another case in this context. The determination of svadharma is contingent upon svabhava, which denotes an individual's inclination toward engaging in specific activities. It is important to note that svabhava does not have a genetic basis. The offspring of a Kshatriya may not inherently possess the status of a Kshatriya, should their inherent disposition not align with the qualities typically associated with a warrior. Guna and karma can be understood as representing the inherent qualities and actions of individuals. In order to comprehend the reasons behind an individual's behaviour and the factors that influence their actions, it is necessary to consider the concept of samskaras. The concept being discussed is intrinsically connected to the principles of karma and reincarnation. The psychological constitution of individuals is determined by samskaras, also known as karmic influences. The svabhava, or inherent nature, is believed to be influenced by an individual's past conduct and actions. The current disposition of an individual is determined by the cumulative effect of their past samskaras. The endorsement of sraddha, a spontaneous psychic inclination driven by internal compulsion, is only granted to actions that are executed in mere belief. Sraddha accordance with one's svabhava. Sraddha can be differentiated from a can be defined as an inherent and compelling inclination towards engaging in a specific way of living. Hence, it is the concept of sraddha that materializes in the manifestation of svadharma. The concept of svabhava gives rise to the development of sraddha, which in turn leads to the understanding and adherence to svadharma.

Analysis: From the above discussion, it should not be taken for granted that the Bhagavad Gita believes in the rigidity of the caste system. Some critics also says that Gita has encouraged caste system in India. But, this criticism is based upon a wrong understanding of the spirit of this great religious scripture. In fact, Gita advocates difference in profession, but this difference is not determined by birth; but by one's ability or qualification. Lord Krishna, in Gita says,

“Chaturvarnya maya srstam guna karma vibhagasah”.

According to Bhagavad Gita, it is better to die in discharging one's assigned duties rather than playing the role of others. An artist should seek perfection in drawing an art and a teacher should try to attain perfection in teaching. It is dangerous to adopt the business of others.

“svadharme nidhanam sreya, paradharma bhayavaha”.

The question now is, if at all an individual attains perfection, how does his perfection help betterment of the society? How does his perfection serve the divine purpose? The answer as given by the Bhagavad Gita is, whatever is to be done, is to be done for the divine purpose only. An action has to be done or a duty has to be discharged in such a fashion that it becomes sacred, pure, and at the same time good for all. If a singer sings only for money, it pays her, but it cannot have a universal appeal. But, once the artist sings with a view to attain perfection, without any hope for material prosperity; it not only becomes perfect, it serves the society as a whole. When everybody is pleased with the song, God is also pleased. The minimum requirement is the purity of heart and mind.

Conclusion:

Thus, the real significance of the concept of svadharma is to elevate the moral quality of actions above their contexts. What is valued is the moral worth of the action, the freedom of intellect, and the purity of the heart. An action performed in this manner is a divine action. Social well-being can be maximized only when every individual performs his svadharma. Today svadharma can be more liberally interpreted according to one's personal understanding of the position reached in life and the best course to take in the future to achieve the final goal.

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