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The Liberative Spirituality of the Bhagavad Gita

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The basic concern of all authentic Scriptures of World Religions is the integral liberation of human beings. They show ways of salvation from the existential estrangement of human life. They point to the state of ultimate self-realisation. The process towards this state of *mukti* is not a denial of this world but a transformation of the ambiguities of this world to a liberated state. This soteriological concern is dominant in the Bhagavad Gita. What is significant is that the Gita's way of liberation comprises the diverse aspects of life, personal and social, rational and emotional, historical and cosmic. This becomes evident when the text is read in the religio-cultural context of its composition.

The Theological Context of the Gita

The world-view of the Vedic times (ca. 1500-900 BC) was based on an intuitive perception of reality in its totality and interdependence. The power that preserves this ontic unity of reality is *rta* (RV. 1,24,8. 10,133,6. 7,86). Through *rta* the Divine is immanent in the universe. God's being is being-in-the world; God's being is *becoming*. *Rta* is the cause of integration in human persons, harmony in society and order in the universe. Liberation consists in a life of harmony with others, with nature and ultimately with the Di-

vine. By attuning oneself with the *rta* of the cosmic totality one gets liberated from the ambiguities of life. The Vedic hymns present an integrated attitude to all aspects of life. "The Vedic optimism is not anthropological but on the whole cosmological...It starts from a more holistic perspective which views man and cosmos as a dynamic unity in which both are engaged in the very existence of the Universe."¹ The Vedic hymns are addressed to the *devas*, which are actually personifications of the cosmic powers of life. The cultic performances (*yajnas*) were originally meant to preserve the cosmic order and social harmony. But towards the end of the Vedic period they were manipulated by the dominant priestly class and converted into magical forms of procuring favours for those who perform them.² The immanent power of the Divine thus got reified in the idols of ritualism, and social life was fragmented into a hierarchical caste structure.

The Upanishads evolved as a spiritual protest against this ritualistic culture. The Upanishadic sages (ca 1000-500 BC) in their passionate quest for Self-realisation turned into the depth of their own being. "When we pass from the Vedic hymns to the Upanishads we find that the interest shifts from the objective to the subjective, from brood-

ing on the wonder of the outside world to the meditation on the significance of the self. The human self contains the clue to the interpretation of nature. The Real at the heart of the universe is reflected in the infinite depths of the soul.”³ The major concern of the contemplative pursuits of the Upanishadic masters has been ‘to see the Self in the self through the self’.⁴ Integral liberation is achieved through this introspection (*jnana*). When the inner light of *jnana* shines forth, the veil of ignorance (*avidya*) is removed. The enlightened one is then enabled to ‘see the Self in all things and all things in the Self’ (Isa Up. 6). Hence, the unceasing prayer: “From the unreal lead me to the Real; from darkness lead me to the Light; from death lead me to Immortality” (Brih. Up. 1.3.28). All values of social life are subordinated to this normative experience of achieving *jnana* through mystical introspection. Consequently, the Upanishadic schools gradually became rather elitist in their life and thought. They were insulated from the existential struggles of social life and hence unreachable for the common people.

Buddhism emerged as an ethical protest against the trends of ritualistic objectification in the Vedic circles and of the mystical subjectification in the Upanishadic schools. Siddhartha penetrated right into the root-cause of suffering and discovered that desirous passion (*trishna*) is the cause of all suffering in the world. Desire gives rise to attachment (*upadana*), greed (*kama*), anger (*krodha*), delusion (*moha*), lust (*mada*) and aggressivity (*matsarya*). With these, human life is

bonded to the cyclic process of birth and death (*samsara*). Liberation from this bondage is possible only through a radically new way of life. For this, Buddha proposes the eight-fold path: right grasp of reality, right resolve to follow the Truth, right speech in harmony with Truth, right action with due respect for life and Truth, right livelihood with a morally sound profession, right endeavour to conquer evil, right mindfulness focused on the ideal of life and right meditation.⁵ Emphasis on ethical demands is evident in these elements of liberative praxis. However, Buddhism refuses to relate them to the experience of a personal God or to the transcendent Divine reality. There is, however, a great emphasis on radical renunciation in pursuit of the high ideals of life. The common people still searched for an integrated way of liberation: a spiritual path (*marga*) that would integrate mystical introspection with social commitment, ritual performances with concern for nature, devotion to the personal God with the awareness of the transcendent Divine. It is partly to meet this spiritual need that the Bhagavad Gita was written (ca. 300 BC).

The Gita accepts the holistic vision of reality found in the Vedas and upholds the need for nourishing the cosmic powers of life (*devas*) (3:9-13). But it is highly critical of the ritualistic culture of the later Vedic times (2:42-44, 7:23). However, the Gita advocates the need for rituals in as much as they are genuine expressions of surrender to the divine Lord (9:23-26) and hence means of inner purification (18:5). In fact rituals are ways of deepening one's atten-

tive devotion to the Lord (*sraddha*) (7:21-22). Thus, the Gita bridges the gap between the Vedic extroversion and the Upanishadic introversion.

Much of the mystical insights of the Gita are taken from the *Upanishadic* pursuits of meditation. *Jnana* is extolled as the paramount way of spiritual integration (4:38, 7:18). The goal of meditative introspection is described in Upanishadic terms as 'seeing the Self in the self through the self' (6:20). Such an inner culture liberates the individual from bondage to egoism (*ahamkara*) and awakens the person to integral self-consciousness (*atmabodha*) (4:37-42). With all this, however, the Gita does not advocate an elitist culture in spiritual pursuits. The unfolding of *jnana* is to take place right on the battlefield of life, in the midst of the struggle to determine what is right and what is wrong (2:7). The inner enlightenment is meant to perceive one's proper duty (*dharma*) in society (18:45). Solitude leads to solidarity.

In developing the ethical perspectives on life the Gita owes much to teachings of Gautama Buddha. In *Buddhist* terms the Gita describes the networking of inordinate passions in the psyche (2:62-63) and upholds the need for ascetical practices for getting liberated from bondage to them (2:55-61). A liberated individual is a merciful one endowed with virtues like compassion (*karuna*), friendliness (*maitri*), joy (*tushti*) and equanimity (*samadarsana*) (12:13-19). He is not bound to a stable home, not affected by praise or calumny, not swayed by enmity or attachment but passionately

committed (*ratah*) to the welfare of all beings (12:18, 14:24, 6:9, 12:4). In these attitudes of asceticism and concern for the world some of the basic values of Buddhism find their entry into the Gita. However, unlike Buddhism Gita gives centrality to devotion to the personal divine Lord (*bhakti*) in spiritual life. In unambiguous terms Gita emphasises that 'only through *bhakti* one could know, see and enter into the Divine' (11:54) Hence, the ultimate state of integration is not that of self-extinction (*nirvana*) but that of 'living in the Lord, becoming one with the divine Lord' (12:8, 14:19)

The Cultural Context of the Gita

It is not easy to offer sufficient documentary evidence for an analysis of the cultural milieu in which the Gita was written. Two dominant spiritual movements which significantly shaped the attitudes to life were Buddhist monasticism and Sankhya dualism. In both of them there had been overtones of ascetical values. Buddhism advocated the impermanence (*anitya*) of reality and Sankhya upheld the irreconcilability between the two ontic principles of spirit (*purusha*) and matter (*prakriti*). Consequently, the Buddhist monks found in a life of radical renunciation a higher form of liberated life and the Sankhya preachers motivated seekers to a life of withdrawal from all forms of involvement in *secular* life in order to liberate the spirit from the cave of matter. "The age was dominated by the ideas of renunciation and retirement from active life. ... A school of thinkers preached that spiritual realisation could only be achieved by an intensive

pursuit of that ideal which necessitated the renunciation of all active life. Retirement from active life was necessary for spiritual relaxation, and after the attainment of that goal action was unnecessary. This attitude resulted in the popularity of the doctrine of renunciation. Different orders of monks, ascetics and friars prevailed.”⁶ Under the inspiration and persuasion of these ascetics a trend has developed in various circles to neglect domestic responsibilities and social duties. Any involvement in the realm of *material* life was considered bondage to the principle of *matter*, and hence a block to the liberation of the *spirit*.

The Gita was composed to counteract this world-denying and hyper-ascetical trend of culture. In this sense the Gita could be understood as a book of a spiritual counterculture. The Gita considers matter as sacred and the material universe as the ‘body of the divine Lord’ (7:4, 11:13). Hence, one does not have to forsake the world with all the domestic responsibilities (6:1) and social duties (3:20) in the pursuit of spiritual liberation. The way to liberation consists not in a life of inaction but in commitment to action out of inner freedom from attachment (*nishkama karma*). What is to be renounced is not action as such (6:1) but the greed (*kama*) (6:24) that poisons one’s action and causes bondage (3:9). Positively this would mean that one does one’s duties in the world ‘out of being united with the divine ground’ (2:48), with a sense of responsibility (*adhikara*) and with skilfulness (*kausalam*) (2: 47,50). Instead of turn-

ing one's back on the world one has to get involved in the affairs of the world in view of 'bringing about the integral welfare of the world' (*lokasamgraha*) (3:25). This world-affirming and world-transforming perspective of the Gita has contributed significantly to the formation of an integrated spirituality for generations of seekers in India.

Liberation in the Life of the Individual

The Gita describes two different attitudes to life: one motivated by egocentredness (*ahamkara*) and the other enlightened by self-consciousness (*atmabodha*). The ego emerges as the pivotal centre of life when greed (*kama*) becomes the dominant value of life. On the other hand, one lives from a deeper consciousness of one’s true self when life is guided by a sense of integration (*dharma*). Actions out of *kama* bring about bondage, while actions out of *dharma* lead to freedom. Liberation in the life of the individual is therefore the process of being progressively freed from the grips of *kama* and of being integrated with *dharma*. For this Gita proposes the threefold path of knowledge, devotion and action (*jnana, bhakti* and *karma*).⁷

At the *beginning* of this liberative process one needs spiritual inspiration and guidance from outside. One has to study the sacred Scriptures and seek instruction from masters in order to enter upon the path of *jnana*. (4:34, 16:23). Initially *bhakti* needs to find expression in offerings (9:26), worship of gods (7:21-22) and rituals (18:5). Similarly, *karma* starts with a sense

of duty in response to the demands of elders and social customs (2.31-33, 16:24). But the Gita demands that one has to grow beyond this initial stage of spirituality, for 'not by the study of the Scriptures or grim, ascetic practices, not by giving of alms or sacrifice' can one really reach the Lord (11:53).

Growth in the liberative spirituality consists in a progressive interiorisation of what has been learnt from outside or expressed in rituals and works. Through the regular practice of meditation (6:10-46) the initially acquired knowledge is transformed into an experiential insight (*jnana*). The inner eye of the self is enlightened (11:8) and one is enabled to "see oneself in the divine Self, and the Divine in oneself" (6:20). Deep within the core of being (13:18) the devotee experiences the presence of the Lord who loves him/her intensely (18:64). This experience of being loved by God liberates the human self from its bondage to existential loneliness within the grips of the *ahamkara*. The devotee is moved to total self-surrender to the Lord (*bhakti*) (12:8-11, 18:62, 65-66). With this emerges the realisation that God is the ultimate subject of one's self. One finds oneself as an instrument in the hands of the divine Lord. Consequently, actions are performed with the awareness of participating in the divine work of establishing *dharma* in all realms of life. The work (*karma*) that one has to do in the world is done in an attitude of having 'surrendered all actions to the Lord' (12:6, 9:27). When God becomes the sole agent and ultimate goal of one's life, one is freed from 'clinging on to the fruits of actions for oneself' (6:1, 2:47).

Doing one's duty with this sense of inner freedom is the basic dynamics of spiritual growth in the Gita.

Spiritual *maturity* consists in an integrated vision and way of life. The one who perceives the Self in oneself sees the same 'Self in all things and all things in the Self' (*jnana*) (6:29). God is experienced as the source and goal, life and abode of the universe (7:10, 9:17-18). The entire world is permeated by the power and presence of the divine Lord (9:4, 6:30). Once the world is experienced as the 'body and temple of the Lord' (11:13, 13:3) one surrenders oneself to the divine Lord present in all things (*bhakti*) (10:8). Life then becomes an experience of 'actively moving in the sphere of the Divine' (6:31). With this vision a new motivation emerges for working in the world (*karma*): concern for the integral welfare of the world (*lokasamgraha*) (3:25). Not only human beings but all beings come into the orbit of this *passionate* concern (3:11, 5:25). With a keen eco-sensitivity Gita states: 'those who cook food only for themselves are sinners, for they eat sin!' (3:13).

The liberative message of the Gita is therefore freedom from an ego-centred life to a world-oriented, world-transforming life that draws strength from a deep mystical experience of oneness with the Divine. This transition is a process in which all forms of sterile ritualism and life-negating asceticism are overcome. The Gita advocates spiritual discipline and renunciation, not for the sake of withdrawal from responsibilities in the world, but for developing inner freedom and a divine perspective

on the world. The truly integrated person according to the Gita is one who is genuinely committed to the cause of integral justice and harmony (*dharma*) in all realms of life.

Such a spirituality of integration brings about liberation from the cycle of rebirth too. The Gita accepts the fact of rebirth as a natural course of life's evolution towards the Divine (2:13,22,27). But it also announces a supernatural way of salvation from the 'ocean of birth and rebirth' (8:15). Even if a person is considered to be 'born of sinful wombs' (9:32), and looked down upon as 'the worst of sinners' (4:36) liberation from bondage to the process of rebirth is possible, if that person pursues assiduously the integral way of *jnana*, *bhakti* and *karma*: "Those who cast off all their works on me (*karma*), totally dedicated to me (*bhakti*) and meditate on me with single-mindedness (*jnana*), these will I lift up high out of the ocean of recurring death, and that right soon, for their thoughts are fixed on me" (12:6-7).

Ultimately liberation is a work of divine grace. The human person can only dispose the self to receive the divine light and grace. It is the divine Lord who confers on the human intellect the light of wisdom (10:10), moves the heart with the divine power of love (18:65) and transforms all works into the means of final integration (18:56). Only with the *divine eye* can one truly see the cosmic form of the Lord (11:8) and only with divine grace can one reach the 'final abode of peace' (18:62). With this perspective the Gita relativises all religious practices in favour of a life of

inner freedom and outer commitment.

Liberation in the Evolution of Society

The basic fabric of society at the time of the composition of the Gita was shaped by the caste system with all its cohesive and divisive ingredients. The Gita unfolds the inner contradictions of the prevailing caste system. As a *kshatriya* Arjuna was duty-bound to fight for safeguarding the caste (2:31-33). However, he found that war would only ruin the integrity of the caste (1:39-45). Fulfilling the caste duty leads to the destruction of the purity of the caste! This paradox was the deeper cause of the 'utter confusion' that Arjuna felt on the battlefield of *dharma*. (2:7). The Gita tries to resolve this ambiguity by offering an integral world-view. The role of an individual in society has to be determined not by birth (*jati*) as is the case with the rigid caste system, but by the inherent quality of the individual (*guna*). It is a fact of life that people are born with different temperaments and talents. The differentiation of roles in social life is to be determined by these qualities born of one's being (18:41). Accordingly, everyone has to discover his or her proper role (*swadharma*) in society and thus pursue the personal way of integration (18:45). The traditional caste system that is based on a rigid pattern of birth-bound stratification is a block to this new perception. Hence, the Gita demands that the truly liberated person should actually 'consider in the selfsame way the Brahmins and the outcasts' (5:18). No social distinction is to be made between the elite and the downtrodden for 'even those who are

considered to be born of sinful wombs reach the Lord through genuine *bhakti*' (9:32). A spiritual vision of life takes one beyond the distinction between 'saints and sinners' (6:9)

One might ask if this social perspective is effective enough to overcome the alienations caused by the traditional caste system. The spiritual vision of the Gita, however, contains a great amount of liberative potential for the transformation of social life. The individual is enabled to overcome the narrow confines of social aristocracy and religious elitism. One finds oneself as part of the totality of reality. The Gita strongly criticises all forms of alienation coming from social or political, cultural or religious patterns of domination and exploitation (16:13-20). Each one is called to a life of freedom; social life is the orbit wherein this free-

dom is made possible. At the same time the social fabric is created anew by liberated individuals. It is a freedom that comes from the realisation that the evolution of the life of individuals and of society takes place within the horizon of the unfolding of the divine Self. The individual *karma* of human beings is inserted within the universal process of *dharma*. The divine Lord is the ultimate *subject* of the liberative actions of human individuals (5:9-10) and the ultimate *ground* of the social reality of *dharma* (14:27). The entire message of the Gita may be summarised in one verse:

Being grounded in the divine Self
 fulfil your work in the world without
 any sort of greedy attachment;
 Be equal-minded in success and failure:
 Equanimity is spirituality (2:48).

Notes

1. R. Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, London: Darton, 1977, p.238
2. Satapadabrahmana, 9,5,1,12; 2,2,8-14; 8,6,1,10
3. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, Delhi: Oxford, 1991, p.49
4. Ibid. P.73
5. A. Fernando, *Buddhism Made Plain*, Indore: Satprakashan, 1985, pp.64ff
6. G.S. Khair, *Quest for the Original Gita*, Bombay: Somaiya, 1969, 144
7. For a detailed reflection on the threefold marga: Sebastian Painadath SJ, "Bhagavad Gita's Contribution to the Future of India," *Jnanadeepa* 1(1998) 1, pp.19-23