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DECODING THE BHAGAVAD GITA TO THE PRESENT CONTEXT

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Abstract

Mahabharata is a historical one. Studying Mahabharata is very interesting and great thing. The Bhagavad Gita is the Gift of Lord Krishna. In this paper, the author presents The Bhagavad Gita as per the present context.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita; Mahabharata; Ethical; Human & Moral.

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1. Introduction

The Mahabharata is venerated for its antiquity and also for being one of the inspiring contributions to the world. It has been an integral part of the Indian culture and civilization and over the years of existence it has been playing a crucial role in the lives of the people of India. The grand narrative is constantly governed by ethical questions and its deep human concern has conserved its universality through all the epochs. The epic conveys a relevant and redemptive message for modern man through the teachings and its discussions. The whole text of *The Mahabharata* is laden with teachings for human beings both to be successful in this world and ways to reach the other world. The main story as well as the stories in *The Mahabharata* are replete with wisdom. In it there are answers for all questions under the sun and how to react in any kind of situation. None of the characters in the epic can claim himself or herself flawless. They are humans with a blend of good and bad qualities. One can learn from them what is right and what is wrong. Bimal Krishna Matilal in his essay “Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics” says that, “The moral dilemmas presented in the *Mahabharata* were in some sense universal, for most of them can be effectively used even today to illustrate arguments in moral philosophy” (5).

The epic contains many lessons from which one can learn how to live and conduct one in various situations. For several centuries it has been serving people well by inculcating in them a deep sense of reverence, devotion, commitment to the path of righteousness and belief and lead them to intense spiritual aspiration culminating in one's salvation. C.P. Varkey in his *A Pilgrimage through the Mahabharata* says thus:

The Mahabharata has succeeded in shaping the culture of India and her people in the past and continues to do so now by its emphasis on the gospel of dharma. This gospel runs through the ups and downs, twists and turns of the complex movements of the epic. Equally highlighted are the lessons that hatred breeds hatred, the greed and violence lead inevitably to ruin that the greatest victory for a man or a woman is the victory over self. (8)

The Bhagavad Gita which is a part of *The Mahabharata* is purely a spiritual document that encompasses everything connected with human beings and life on earth and it helps humanity to attain the goal of enlightenment and self-realization. The entire gist of *The Bhagavad Gita* can be considered as an allegory to explain fundamental truths of life. It is the foremost of all spiritual texts available on earth and the one and only one of its kind in explaining the real spirituality. *The Bhagavad Gita* encapsulates many of the basic tenets of the scriptures. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan in his "Introductory Essay" of *The Bhagavad Gita* opines thus:

With a long history of spiritual power, it serves even today as a light to all who will receive illumination from the profundity of its wisdom which insists on a world wider and deeper than wars and revolutions can touch. It is a powerful shaping factor in the renewal of spiritual life and has secured an assured place among the world's great scriptures. (2)

The Bhagavad Gita contains moral and philosophical teachings that are relevant even today. Being an inexhaustible spiritual treasure, a fountain of knowledge and an ocean of bliss, it serves as a guiding star to human life. Various spiritual tenets have been compressed within the 701 verses of *The Gita* and its each verse is like an aphorism. *The Bhagavad Gita* is an encyclopedia of spirituality which has penetrated human consciousness so deeply. When referring to the greatness of *The Bhagavad Gita* one cannot forget the words of realization recorded by Henry David Thoreau in his *Walden*. After having read *The Bhagavad Gita* he states thus:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvad Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. . . . The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges. (192-93)

The Bhagavad Gita is a book which transcends all religions and reading it as a book of religion does not quite explain its consistence, and is in fact limiting it to a narrow boundary. Roopa Pai in her speech on "Decoding the Gita, India's Book of Answers" expresses her belief that the *The Bhagavad Gita* was written before any religion came into existence. She says "Gita predates organised religion itself. It was written 500 years before Jesus Christ, 1000 years before

Mohammed, the prophet and over 2000 years before Hinduism itself was a thing". So *The Bhagavad Gita* is not necessarily a religious book, but a moral guide to all the people around the world. People refer to *The Bhagavad Gita*, generation after generation for moral guidance, whenever they are in despair. The strength of *The Gita* lies in the fact that its tenets do not stop with the metaphysical but with the physical, it deals not only with the other world but also with this very world, not just with the afterlife but with this life itself.

The Mahabharata which has *The Bhagavad Gita* as a part of it is centered around the war between two sets of cousins. *The Bhagavad Gita* is the conversation between prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna before the commencement of the battle of Kurukshetra. When the great war is about to begin Arjuna loses his nerve and it strikes him like a thunderbolt that he is assigned the task of killing his own family members. When Arjuna lays down his arms and about to leave the warfront, is counselled by Krishna. Nithyananda in his *Bhagavad Gita Demystified Vol.I* explains the reason why *The Bhagavad Gita* is relevant even today, thus:

. . . the questions asked by Arjuna are the same questions that we ask today and the answers of Krishna are relevant even today. The questions are the fundamental quest of the individual and the answers are the eternal Truth. The Truth is neither old nor new; it is eternal. . . . The doubt that Arjuna has raised is even more applicable to the modern man. . . . We have become more complex than our forefathers. . . . (661)

Unlike many warriors and heroes, Arjuna thinks before he acts. He hesitates to kill and wants to retreat from life and responsibility. Krishna tells him that as a warrior it is his dharma to fight. He goes on to explain the samsaric cycle of birth and death. He says there is no true death of the soul, but simply a sloughing of the body at the end of each round of birth and death. The purpose of this cycle is to allow a person to work off his karma, accumulated through his actions. Death is only a small step in the great and endless cycle of life. One neither kills nor is killed. The soul merely casts off the old body and enters the new one, just as a person changing garment and death is a mere illusion.

Krishna presents the main concepts for soul renunciation, selfless service and meditation. Krishna says that a truly divine human never renounces all worldly possessions or simply gives up actions, but rather finds place in completing action without attachment. A warrior can perform his duty without doing wrong and polluting himself with the blood of his enemies. He has to do his duty with detachment without concern about the personal consequences. One has to act without reflecting on the fruits of the act, forgetting desire and seeking detachment. One must always do what is right without desiring success or fearing defeat. Krishna tells Arjuna that good deeds will not get one to heaven if the desire for the heaven is the sole motivation for doing good.

The Gita ends with Krishna telling Arjuna that, it is his duty to fight the Kauravas for his kingdom, and to offer his duties in the deepest form of selfless service. A selfless person never falls for sensual pleasures and he is ever satisfied within himself. No misery can distract him, nor any kind of material happiness. He is without attachment, fear and anger and remains always aloof to the dualities of the world. As his mind is fixed upon the supreme, he is always peaceful.

Arjuna argues and questions Krishna but throughout the conversation Krishna is neither offensive nor aggressive. This makes Gita a primer for an art of civilized life which makes it a book for essential reading. Krishna tells Arjuna to pick up his bow and fight. If he does not do so he would be violating from his duty as a warrior, a king and a leader of his clan. Krishna, as a true friend, points out Arjuna's weaknesses and limitations. He chides, but maintains his poise and patience. He gives recommendations and advice but he respects his friend enough, to let him make the decision whether to fight or not. This may be considered as a best characteristic in a friendship. Any skill can be mastered only through practice. When we do it again and again it becomes a habit. One should constantly think and do right things, so that it may also become a habit.

The Gita can be considered as the best manual of friendship. It is a moral guide which reiterates the fact that one is rewarded for his hard work and commitment. Instead of wasting one's energy on transient matters one should spend his time in finding peace and contentment. *The Bhagavad Gita* is a career guide which teaches that every action has consequences and so it is necessary for a man to choose right actions and also one should think deeply before he acts. *The Bhagavad Gita* which is the flowchart for life, teaches men to consider the entire world as his home and all creatures as his family. This makes it the ultimate life manifesto, not only to individuals but also to governments. *The Bhagavad Gita* teaches us to focus on our efforts and to forego the result and one should play only for the sake of playing and not to win. Universe gives us everything and we must give it back in equal measure. We should always question our intent before acting.

The sufferings of the Pandavas clearly explain to us the fact or hard truth that the goal of life or perfection can be attained only through suffering. Pain is the means through which man is moulded, disciplined and strengthened. Just as impure gold is turned into pure gold by melting it in the crucible, so also the impure and imperfect weak man is rendered pure, perfect and strong, by being melted in the crucible of pain and sufferings. They are blessings in disguise and also silent teachers. They turn us towards god and instill mercy in the heart, strengthen the will and develop patience and power of endurance which are the pre-requisites of God realization.

Many philosophers compare the battlefield of Kurukshetra to the battleground that lies within each one of us. Gita touches on topics of concern that continue to trouble us even today like confusion, stress, addiction, restlessness, depression, exploitation, greed, anger etc. Swami Sadashiva Tirtha in his *Bhagavad Gita for Modern Times: Secrets to Attaining Peace and Harmony* states thus:

Bhagavad Gita discusses the celebration of the Divine bliss of God as it applies to a personal relationship with God in each person's daily life. How does a sincere person balance worldly and Divine spheres? How can one be a helpful servant in the midst of obstacles and stresses? This is one of the great values of the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* that remains as relevant today as in ancient times. (1-2)

The Bhagavad Gita is a treasure house of eternal truths, and its precepts are completely contemporary. It is universal and above all religions. Even western scholars have been enamoured by *The Bhagavad Gita* and it has inspired western thinkers such as Thoreau, Emerson and Eliot. It provides the teaching that can be applied in all walks of life even in the modern

times. *The Gita* is the most logical scripture that connects man with God. It tells us how we should conduct ourselves in our day to day life, keeping God at the centre of activities performing our duties with a sense of detachment and as a way of sacrificial offering and accepting God as the doer and facilitator and we as mere instrument engaged in the act of liberation and self-realization. Those who read *The Bhagavad Gita* regularly and with sincerity are apt to be benefitted in many ways physically, materially, mentally and spiritually. *The Bhagavad Gita* is relevant today as it was centuries ago and in many ways perhaps it is more relevant today than it was before as life has become more complex and challenging due to pressures of modern life. Haresh Bakshi in his *Shrimad – Bhagavad Gita* rightly declares that:

Arjuna symbolizes the entire human race in conflict as to (i) the right action (ii) real human nature and (iii) the means for perfection of action in life. These conflicts make the Gita relevant in today's world suffering from destructive forces of ego, lust, greed and ignorance. These forces have become stronger over time, and so the relevance of Srimad Bhagavad Gita has, in fact, increased with time. Through the themes of the Gita, Krishna addresses the fundamental causes of human suffering, and methods of transformation. He does so by expounding the eternal truths. At the time when the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna took place there were no religions per se. Therefore, the Gita is truly relevant for everyone at all times. It is five thousand years old and yet quite contemporary. (19)

There is no second opinion about the universality of Bhagavad Gita. Alexander P. Varghese believes that, "The *Bhagavad Gita* reveals the path to perfection, the goal of life that everyone has to attain at one stage or other in life. It is the universality of this truth, which enjoys universal acceptance, exalts *Gita* to the status of a Scripture Universal" (200).

In the present society, success depends on one's ability to make achievements. So people attach less importance to self-satisfaction in job, and they believe that their success and failure depend on how others view their work. Everyone feels convenient to follow the path paved by others and is hesitant to create his own path due to the fear for criticism and non-acceptance from the society. To tread on one's own path, mental strength is required. In fact, a successful person is a person who does not care for failure or success and he works for enjoyment and satisfaction.

The Bhagavad Gita gives clarity to life. One must train the mind to engage in worldly activities, and at the same time must be able to withdraw the mind inwards whenever needed. Our mainstream education does not give guidance to survive in times of difficulties and depression. It only gives knowledge about the external factors in life. *The Bhagavad Gita* helps the seeker to search the real treasure within himself. If one studies *The Bhagavad Gita* along with his mainstream education, then surely it will transform him as an able and courageous person who can help many others to reach that state.

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