

## **The Gītā: Teaching of Value and *Dharma***

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### **Abstract**

The term '*Dharma*' is often taken to mean "religion" or "duty." But these meanings are incomplete. In the Gītā, Lord Krishna refers to *svadharma* in progressively deeper ways, shedding light on the meaning of the term and its importance for personal spiritual growth. The Gītā is not an abstract treatise but a way of life. The reading of this holy book is prefaced by salutation to *dharma* or the law of righteousness and to Krishna — the almighty Disposer. The Maker and His dispensation may well be said to be the theme of this magnum opus of ethico-social guidance. When we speak of value as the value of a thing for some particular subject we mean either that the thing has instrumental value for the subject in question as subserving some need of his or that it has intrinsic value for him as answering to its ideal being, in either sense value is a final inexplicability of experience. The Gītā teaches us that spirit is the most valuable thing to human beings, per excellence. But no finite and limited spirit can be perfectly valuable. On the successive steps of self-realization through self-consciousness and self-determination, we attain more and more valuable status, but the most valuable spirit is a distant goal to us.

Key-Words: The Gītā, value, *dharma*, spirit

The word '*dharma*' in Sanskrit is derived from the root '*dhṛih*' meaning 'to hold', 'to bear', 'to carry' or 'to support'. '*Dhārayat dharmaa* – that which holds together or supports is *dharma*. In this sense *dharma* encompasses all ethical, moral, social and other values or principles, code of conduct and behaviour which contribute to the well-being, sustenance and harmonious functioning of individuals, societies and nations and which prevent their disintegration. In a wider sense it is *dharma* which sustains and supports the whole world. This word has gathered around itself such richness of meaning and wealth of associations that it is impossible to translate it into a single word in any other language, Indian or foreign.

*Dharma* and religion are often used as synonyms but the tame English word cannot give the true significance of the more comprehensive Sanskrit expression. Religion refers to the customary observances of a section of people. It consists of a few laws laid down for believers of a particular creed. Those laws help the moral uplift of a particular sect. But *Dharma* aims at an all-round development of all

individuals. It has as much ethical as physical or material value. By *Dharma* we do not merely understand religion. It is concerned with the whole of our life. Every aspect of life is guided and controlled by *Dharma*. It seeks to make us competent in every field. Not spiritual uplift alone, far less a merely other-perfection is its aim. It has a positive significance for our mundane life. Following *Dharma* as enunciated by the Scriptures we become spiritually advanced as well as perfect human beings in our pursuit of the daily duties of life. With greater competence and better skill we can conduct our daily affairs. *Dharma* means law, the law of life. *Dharma*, for that matter spiritual values should be cultivated if for nothing else, at least for the sake of earthly life.

Indian Philosophical studies, both in the past and the present have emphasized the significance of value in the human life-situation. Indian Philosophical tradition has been value-centric within the background of deep religious-spiritual foundation, with *Dharma* being deeply ingrained in its cultural heritage. *Dharma* is intrinsically ethical. Right from the Vedic period four main values of life have been highlighted in *Purushartha*, which incorporates *Dharma* (righteousness), *Artha* (wealth), *Kāma* (enjoyment) and *Mokṣa* (salvation or liberation). Three main ways (*mārgas*) of Indian life and closely associated with the trio *Satyam* (truth), *Shivam* (good), and *Sundaram* (beauty). These have been considered as basic values of the Indian ethos.

In life we all encounter ethical conflicts, although perhaps less dramatically than Arjuna. As we shall see, the *Gītā* helps us make intelligent decisions by showing how ordinary piety fails to deliver the endless satisfaction of service to God.

*Dharma* is the first word in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. The great work begins when the blind old king Dhritarashtra asks his secretary, Sanjaya, about the battle that was to take place at “the field of *dharma*” (*dharma*- of *dharma*, Arjuna argues *kṣhetra*). Dhritarashtra, knowing his sons to be evil, worried that the spiritual influence of the *dharma* field would favour the pious Pandavas. As the *Gītā*’s first chapter unfolds, Arjuna also grows wary of the influence of *dharma*. He fears that his, and Krishna’s, participation in the war will lead to a violation of *dharma* and perpetual residence in hell.

In the name of nonviolence, to attack and kill so many leading men, nearly all of whom are fathers and husbands, will destabilize the important families and communities for which these men are responsible. The families themselves are vital to the peace and virtue of society. Arjuna's argument, literally translated, proceeds as follows:

On destruction of the family, the perennial family *dharma*s perish. When *dharma* perishes, *adharma* [the opposite of *dharma*] overwhelms the entire family. From the predominance of *adharma*, O Krishna, the family women are polluted. When the women are polluted, O Vārṣṇeya, a confusion of social orders arises. This confusion leads only to hell both for the destroyers of families and for the family. Certainly the forefathers fall [from heaven] since the ritual offerings of food and water are suspended. By these crimes of the family killers, who propagate a confusion of social classes, community *dharma*s and the everlasting family *dharma*s are devastated. We have always heard, O Janārdana, that those men who devastate family *dharma*s have their residence fixed in hell (Bhagavad-Gītā 1.39-43).[1] Arjuna has sounded a familiar theme from many Vedic books, namely that *dharma* protects when it is protected, but injures when it is injured. Arjuna would be killing kings in the battlefield, virtually all of whom protected at least the basic rules of *dharma* in regard to ethics, social order, and traditional, worldly religious rites.

Lord Krishna is about to teach His friend Arjuna that above even *dharma* is God, who, for His own reasons, desires this battle. Lord Krishna rejects Arjuna's argument as mere "weakness of heart" (*hridaya-daurbalyam*) and "impotence" (*klaibyam*) and urges Arjuna to fight. Despite his previous arguments on the basis of *dharma*, Arjuna now admits that he is actually "confused in mind about *dharma*" (*dharma-sammūdhacetāḥ*) (Bhagavad-Gītā. 2.7).[2] Arjuna then gives up his arguments and surrenders to Lord Krishna as his spiritual master, and Lord Krishna begins teaching the Bhagavad-Gītā in earnest.

*Dharma* or sacred-duty or Virtue as scripturally enjoined stands out as its central teaching as also of the vast epic of which it is a part. *Dharma* is a word that occurs

with its opposite — *adharma* and derivative *dharma* about a score of times and everywhere points to social function, moral order and stability *Svadharmā* (one's own duty), *Kuladharmā* (family tradition), *Jātidharmā* (caste duty), *Paradharmā* (alien function) — all these refer to one's appointed task in the social scheme. More specifically fighting is said to be the *Kṣatriya*'s imperative duty. There is besides *śvāśvata dharmā* or perennial rule of rectitude and the divine incarnation for its re-establishment when subverted. Considering the beginning and the end, Arjuna's dejection and doubt and its resolution by acceptance of the divine will and its exposition — the inspired text may well appear to be a vindication of the social pattern and its scheme of duties for the different orders. Passages numerous are strewn all over which bear out this view.

But this is only one aspect of the argument. For the *Gitā* has been valued above all for the rare light and direction it gives to the seeker of the highest good — self-realisation and release from the snares of a merely secular existence. Hence the two *ślokas* — the last one of the 14<sup>th</sup> and of the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter is complementary to each other.[3] Where Krishna, the lord of yoga — the science of spiritual communion abides with Pritha's son, the bowman — there pertain wealth, victory, prosperity, immutable law of rectitude, to my mind. 'For I am the mainstay of Brahman (over soul), of the never-failing elixir, of deathlessness and of the ever-abiding law of righteousness and of the highest bliss.'[4] It is to this topic that this book of books addresses itself for the most part and in so doing rises to summits of spiritual revelation.

Hence co-exist the two kinds of reproach. 'For a *Kṣatriya* there is no good higher than righteous combat (*dharmyārdhi yuddhācchreyaṇyaḥ kṣatriyasya na vidyate-31/2*) therefore apply yourself to fighting whence no sin will accrue to you (*tato yuddhāya yujyasva naibaṁ pāpambāpsyasi 38/2*) therefore O Kunti's son get up determined to fight (*tasmād uttiṣṭha Kaunteya yuddhāya kṛtaniścayaḥ 37/2*). And the colophon to every chapter runs thus: 'This is the secret teachings, the Song of the Lord, the knowledge of the Supreme Reality — the scripture of spiritual communion.'[5] This concurrence of the secular and the spiritual, the good of both

worlds — this and it imparts to this long instructive poem its unique value so difficult to characterise.

It sets forth a philosophy to mould and discipline Man in his twofold being — in relation to self and society. It is a cooler and corrective of the assertive, aggressive ego which forgets its minimal place in the cosmic set-up and it prescribes for him a code of conduct in the social scheme. It never lets him forget that by isolation from his fellows he cannot fulfil himself and also that by losing in the round of social calls and duties he cannot attain his proper destiny — an intimate sense of the fullness and majesty of his soul. Hence the special appeal the book has in an age of technological achievement which robes man with a brief omnipotence and blinds him to the infinities that fence him in. The human situation and man's role in life's programme are kept in view throughout. Thus in canto 5 it says that the uninvolved doer — the *karmayogin* who knows the reality (*tattvavit*) must understand that functioning with his senses and active organs he is not the agent but these instruments merely react to object spread out before them.[6] Thus human action is reflex or automatic in character, spontaneous or involuntary — impelled by powers other and mightier than the self. And he cannot be inactive for a moment; he is set working helplessly by the qualities born of Nature. Before him is the example of the Supreme One — who has nought to wish, no desire unfulfilled in the three worlds and is yet unceasingly engaged in work for men ever go. His way everywhere and would perish otherwise.

It is easy to cite verses that enforce this theme that the Gītā is the gospel of Work and not of quiescence and contemplation aloof from the community. This aspect is so obvious and outstanding it does not require any special stress. Herein is the Divine Mentor's message to the foremost *Kurukṣhetra*-fighter and hero as demanded by the immediate occasion. It is, however, qualified by the special psyche bent and attitude enounced in this distilled essence of Upaniṣadic teaching: detachment and desirelessness — work for its own sake — wherein the Self and its craving for the fruit does not meddle. In the last canto renunciation of *sāttvic* or pure quality is declared as the performance of the appointed work from a sheer sense of duty without eagerness for the result or attachment.[7] The renouncer possessed by the pure

impulse is highly intelligent, his doubts dissipated and neither affects what is to his advantage nor resents what is unprofitable.[8] It is not given to a creature embodied to forgo all action, he who eschews the fruit of action is said to be a renouncer.[9] This estimate of the pure quality is repeated in regard to work, its doer — when free from egoism and attachment and the urge of love and hate and unmoved by success or failure.[10] Dispassion, in a word, is the distinction of the agent in the Gītā spirit. He is untouched by the current ideas of the worthy and unworthy, virtue and vice and even in killing incurs no taint of sin nor is bound by the consequences of action [11].

This ethical immunity, this complete freedom of the self-less agent from social norms leads to the highest stage — the emancipated condition which is the goal of spiritual striving, discipline and upliftment. This condition is pictured in the four types of sublimity — the steadfast sage (*sthita prajña*) (Canto-ii/57), the devotee (*bhakta*) (C-xii/13,14), the transcendent being beyond the three inherent natural qualities (*guṇātīta puruṣ*) (C-xiv/23), and the self-realised sage the illuminated renunciant (*tyāgī yogī*) ( C-xviii/51-54). They have in common some traits which are the acme of human perfection: hating no creature, friendly and compassionate to all, without the sense of me and mine, even-minded in joy and grief, forgiving, always contented, communing, self-subdued, of unwavering conviction, devoted to the Lord, his mind and reason dedicated, him the world does not worry nor is the world repelled by him, free from elation and anger, fear and anxiety. He seeks nought, is pure and skilful, indifferent and untroubled, he forgoes all undertakings, he is neither exuberant with glee nor turned away by dislike, neither craves nor grieves relinquishing beneficial and harmful alike, equal to friend and foe, unswayed by honour and dishonour, alike in cold and heat, pain and pleasure, in praise and blame, devoid of attachment, contented with whatever befalls him, silent, homeless and firm in mind.[12]

Varied in phrasing the same description unaffected by the dualities or opposites of life's experience applies to other types of human perfection. Equanimity, detachment and kindness are the features they share in common. Neither averse to company nor attracted by it, they move through life unaffected by its ups and downs

and the turns of fortune. They are not a-social but the very ideals of life in a community. The antagonism which modern politics poses between individual and society, between serene aloofness and social involvement with regimentation melts away in their inner being and the earth would indeed be a paradise free from its routine strife and violence if these were looked up to as examples and models for emulation and if they grew in numbers in the heart of the social hubbub. They may well be called the salt of the earth giving it the much needed savour. They are in the world but not of the earth, earthy. Their presence in isolation and in pursuit of the highest good illumine and sweeten life for all men and instead of weakening the social ties and virtues enrich them with added significance and beneficence. They are indeed Divinity's very own and the wholly devoted.

They are the *Ekāntins* held up to the highest esteem and honour in the *Śānti Parva* in these verses:

*Yadaikāntibhirastonamjagat syat kurunanadana/ahimsakairātmabidbhiḥ  
sarvabhutahite rataiḥ. (12/358-62),*

*Bhavet kṛiayugaprāptirāśiḥkarma vivarjitā/ ekāntino hi puruṣā durlabhā bahavo  
nṛipa. (12/358-33),*

*Sāṃkhyayogena tulya hi dharma ekāntisevitaḥ/ nārāyaṇātmake mokṣe tato yāti  
parām gatim. (12/358-34),[13]*

Translation: If the world abounded in Ekantins, O kuru scion, men who hurt nobody and are intent on self-knowledge and the good of all creatures, then would the Golden Age come purged of desire prompted, motivated action. Hard to find, O King; are these dedicated souls in large numbers. The law of Rectitude they pursue is equivalent to the knowledge of the Ultimate(*Sāṃkhya*) and yoga — the practice of communion with the Supreme. One to the end of liberation which merges in Nārāyana and ensures the attainment of the highest goal.[14]



This way of life held up in the Lord's Song therefore conforms to the aphorism *yato abhyudaya niḥśreyasa siddhiḥ sa dharmah*. Success in this life and sumum bonum — the highest good of the soul result from *Dharma*.

Nor forgetting and forsaking the world but making fullest use of the unique privilege, human life with the power and opportunities it provides, of knowing the universe within and without and resignation to the Power that rules all---such is the discipline and philosophy taught in this All-time Gospel for humanity.

## References

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2. *ibid*, p-17.
3. ‘*Brahmaṇo hi pratiṣṭhām amritasyābyābyayasya ca/ śāśvatvasya ca dharmasya sukhasaikyāntikasya ca*’. (27/14) P-200.  
‘*Yatra yogeśaraḥ kṛiṣṇo yatra pāṛtho dhanurdharaḥ/ tatra śrībījyayo bhūtirdhrubā nīrtirmatirmama*’. (78/18)P-263. Śrīmadbhāgavat Gītā. Bengali Trans. By Gayatri Bondopadhyā. Gita Press, Gorakhpur. Bangabda 1412.
4. ‘*yasya nāhamkṛito bhābo buddhīryasya na lipyate/ hatvāpi sa imāṁllokān na hanta na nibadhyate*’(17/18) P-239. *Ibid*.
5. Omkarnath, Sri Sri Sitaramdas “The Mother” p-62, A Monthly Journal, vol xv: no-1. Old Court House Street, Kolkata-1, September 1968.
6. ‘*kāyena manasā buddhyā kebalairindrīyirapi/ yoginaḥ karma kurbanti samjñam taykttvātātmaśuddhaye*’. (11/5) p-73. Śrīmadbhāgavat Gītā. Bengali Trans. By Gayatri Bondopadhyā. Gita Press, Gorakhpur. Bangabda 1412.



7. *‘Kāryamityeba yat karma niyatam kriyatearjjna/ sanjñm tyakttvā phalancaiba sa tyāgaḥ sāttivko mataḥ.’* (9/18) p-236. Ibid
8. *‘Na devṣtyakuślaṁ karma kuśale nānuṣajjate/ tyāgī sattvasamābiṣṭo medhābī chinnaśaṁsayah’.* (10/18) p-237, ibid.
9. *‘Na hi dehabhṛitya śakyam tyakttum karmānyaśeṣataḥ/ yasattu karmaphalatyāgī sa tyāgītyabhidhīyate’* (11/18) p-237, ibid.
10. *‘Tatrybam sati kartāramātmānam kevalam tu yaḥ/ paśyatyakṛitabuddhitvānna sa paśyati durmatih.’* (16/18) p-239, ibid.
11. *‘Yasya nāhaṁkṛito bhābo buddhiryasya na lipyate/ hatvāpi s aimāmllokān na hanti na nivadhyte’.* (17/18) 239, ibid.
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