

THE CONCEPT OF *DHARMA* IN THE *BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ*

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“I raise my arms and I shout – but no one listens!
From dharma comes success and pleasure;
Why is dharma not practised?” – The *Mahābhārata*, 8:50 & 62.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a manual of war, which guides how we have to perform our duty in the war of life to fight with *adharma* for the restoration *dharma*. The war, here, is understood both in physical and mental senses. The external war waged against the enemy is the physical war for overcoming of the existential threat which violates the natural law. On the other hand, the internal war is the mental struggle to manifest the real nature of a perfect man who has a stable mind, *sthītaprajñā* that explains the nature of that human mind which has achieved perfect equilibrium, perfect steadiness. It contains the essence of all the scriptures. The *Mahābhārata* is all about human actions and so is an epic of action, and the *Gītā* endorses action and prescribes the ways of action. In the *Gītā*, Śrī Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna the importance of *Karma yoga* to attain the liberation from the worldly bondage based on the specific *dharma* of the people belongs to different social groups. *Dharma* denotes a religious meaning and connotes a related moral ideology, which has to be followed to achieve a meaningful life. This paper outlines how moral ideology is embedded in the *Bhagavad Gītā* to explain the duty of an individual and its practical application in life. The work of *Gītā* is highly experimental and pragmatic in form and content.

The term *dharma* is understood in different ways in different scriptures as a principle or moral bindings as the universal imperative command, which has to be followed in our human actions to uphold and sustain the general welfare of the society. In Hinduism, *dharma* implies human behaviours that accord with *ṛta*, the cosmic order that maintains the life and universe. It also implies the various notions of duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues and right way of living. In the *Mahābhārata*, Bhiṣma explains the meaning of *dharma* to his grandsons, particularly to Yudhiṣṭhira. He says:

“It is most difficult to define *dharma*. *Dharma* has been explained to be that which helps the upliftment of living beings. Therefore, that which ensures the welfare of living beings is surely *Dharma*. The learned ṛṣis have declared that that which sustains is *Dharma*.” (*Śānti Parva*: 109, 9-11)

In the *Karṇa Parva*, Śrī Kṛṣṇa teaches Arjuna the nature of *dharma* in the following words: “*Dharma* sustains the society. *Dharma* maintains the social order. *Dharma* ensures well beings and progress of humanity.” (*Karṇa Parva*: 69.58) Jaimini, the authour of *Mīmāṃsā*, one school of Indian philosophical thought on the nature of *dharma* based on a hermeneutics of the *Vedas*, explains *dharma* as: “*Dharma* is that which is indicated by the *Vedas* as conducive to the highest good.” (Jaimini: 1.2) Madhavacārya, in his commentary on *Paraśara Smṛti*, the law book, explains the meaning of *dharma* as: “*Dharma* is that which sustains and ensures progress and welfare of all in this world and eternal Bliss in the other world. *Dharma* is promulgated in the form of a command.” (Madhavacārya: 1.2)

From the above passages, it is known that *dharma* is an ethical imperative that command to all human beings to make sure the well beings of all society in this present life and to attain the highest good that is the liberation from all kinds of bondage in the future life. *Dharma* is an instrument for attaining the *mokṣa*. The Hindu’s conception of *puruṣārtha* or hierarchy of values maintains that the *trivarga* (*dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*) is the temporal value through which the fourth value or the end that is *mokṣa* can be achieved. As J.A.B. van Buitenen has pointed out the three values, *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* are not distinct and independent values, in principle all three are *dharma . . . mokṣa*, as a release from the requirements of *dharma* to achieve ‘self-realisation which is precluded in the realm of *dharma*. (J.A.B. van Buitenen, 1957:36-37) He further remarks that the attitude towards the relationship between *dharma* and *mokṣa* is ambivalence in *Brāhmanism*: one is to follow *dharma* for good of society, yet one is to abandon *dharma* for the good of the soul. (J.A.B. van Buitenen, 1975:161-173)

The famous two verses of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the Chapter Four which are commonly quoted by many for the protection of *dharma* (virtue) in the society and the destruction of the evil, whatever may come, from the society, tell us as follows:

“Whenever, O descendent of Bhārata, there is a decline of *Dharma*, and rise of *Adharma*, then I body Myself forth.” (The *Gītā*: 4.7)

“For the protection of the virtues, for the destruction of the wicked and the establishment of *dharma*, I come into being in every age.” (The *Gītā*: 4.8)

These verses show that the maintenance of *dharma* in the world is much and the objectives of the war in *Mahābhārata* is the divine wish to restore peace and harmony in the world. Śrī Saṅkarācārya's introduction to his *Gītā* commentary, where he refers to this situation that social fabric is getting broken up because there is no cement to unite one human being with another. The purpose of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is to show the *dharma* of all individuals living in the society where they have to follow it in the right way otherwise the foundation of social bound will collapse. Bringing *dharma* or installation of *dharma* in the world, according to the *Gītā*, is to increase *dharma* or ethical and humanistic values in the society by performing their acts following the responsibilities bestowed by the God.

According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the realization of God through realizing the self (*ātma*) is the ultimate human end. It is the sole end of all actions. Thus, it has preached the *dharma* of *Varṇāśrama*, but the fulfilment of this *dharma* becomes a duty only because God has ordained it. In the *Gītā*, Lord Kṛṣṇa himself has said that he has created all the four *Varṇas* according to the distinction of qualities and actions. The ontological positioning of the objects in the world including animate and inanimate are manifested following the values internally inherited. Human beings are endowed with different qualities. Some are born with a talent for art, sports, teaching, etc., while, some are embedded with the qualities of active service. *Dharma* is the manifestation of man's hidden potential in conformity with the inner law of being. Thus, the flowering of human beings to enable to play their roles in society is also *dharma*, that is, *svadharmā*.

The realization of God, as an undeniable belief in the existence of universal laws, is the only way, which leads to knowledge of the nature of the soul (*ātma*) because the individual soul is only a form of God, that is, the ultimate soul (*paramātmā*). This soul is to be experienced internally as well as in the external world. An ideal yogi or one who knows the principle, which explains the very existence of the world, according to the *Gītā*, experiences God in every state. Therefore, the soul is permanent and unchanging. It is indestructible while all other physical objects of the universe are transient. God (the ultimate soul) is the controller of the individual self and physical objects. He is the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world. He is omnipotent and omniscience.

Performing actions for social sake without any interest of its own is given much importance in the *Gītā* as means to God-realization given they are postulating that soul and society are parts of the universe. Śrī Kṛṣṇa said in the *Gītā* that *Yogi* who is engrossed in the benefit of all beings goes to him. The social action propels man towards God. Duty should be done not merely for duty but for the sake of consolidation of society. We must work because others are in need; we are there to help them. That is called *lokasaṅgraha*, ensuring the stability of human society. The ethical concept of *lokasaṅgraha*, the welfare of the world is the supreme end of the *Gītā*.

According to the *Gītā*, the action is superior to inaction. It has been said that liberation from the pains, sufferings and bondage due to worldly attachment cannot be achieved by fleeing from an action or taking leave from the activity in the present life. (*The Gītā* 3.4) The natural actions being indispensable even to the learned people or *yogin*. Action must be carried out according to one's nature. (*The Gītā* 3.5-13) Human actions are necessary for the body and actions are the law of creation. To consolidate the society and to bring peace and harmony amidst the social life, actions are necessary to be done. (*The Gītā* 3.20)

Even God himself acts to set an example to people and to protect society from dissolution. (*The Gītā* 3.21-24) As an incarnation of the Divine, Śrī Kṛṣṇa is speaking: "Look at me, Arjuna, I have nothing to attain in the three worlds, and yet I am constantly engaging myself in action". For a learned person, the result of activity and inactivity is similar, but the person who is actively engaged in action is more superior to the inactive one. The *Gītā* has indisputably accorded to *Karma Yogi* in preference to *Karma Sanyāsa Yogi*. Śrī Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna, "To work is better than not to work . . . Your duty is to work . . . Do what must be done".

In the *Gītā*, the daily activities or duties of every individual have been discussed elaborately, according to which every man has a determined set of action to perform. He can achieve his personal and the social ultimate end by preferring these determined actions. The distinctions of quality and action have been utilized for the division of society into four *Varṇas* – *Brahmana*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya* and *Sūdra*. These four social classifications are based on the internal quality and individual skill of the

person concerned. The quality of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* determines the actions, which have to be assigned to the individuals. The quality of *sattva* abounds in the *Brahmana*, while *rajas* dominate *sattva* in the *Kṣatriya*, in the case of *Vaiśyas*, the *rajas* overpowering *tamas* and the reverse being the case of the *Sūdra*.

Accordingly, the ethics and moral teachings of *Gītā* resemble that of Bradley in the imagination of every person having a particular station to fill in society. The only point where they differ is that while Bradley treats self-realization to be the motivating cause, the *Gītā* considers the aim to be the attainment of God or consolidation of society.

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