

ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE GĪTĀ*

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The Gītā is the highest treasure amongst the spiritual and philosophical possessions of the Hindus. The gospel of the Gītā has been taken from the great ancient epic *Mahābhārata* by the great poet Vyasa, which is preached by the Lord Kriṣṇa on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra to his companion Arjuna. It is a spiritual and religious book. Beside of this fact it is also true that the *Gītā* is the richest philosophical work of our ancient India. It is a beautiful synthesis of diverse values of human life and reveals the way to tackle a difficult situation in any context, at any time. The principal discussion of the *Gītā* is the ethical one, and it also contains a discussion about morality and immorality of action, position of soul, duty and non-duty. The ethical view of the *Gītā* and its philosophical realizations are accepted by every caste and creed. We can say the ethics of the *Gītā* is one kind of motivating ethics which leads us to join some movement; ‘movement’ in the sense of mobility. Each and every part of this universe, more specifically; each and every atom of this universe is mobile in nature. At the same time, we never think life from a ‘static position’. Every living organism or every ‘becoming’ needs some vibration or wave of motivation. Here I want to say that, when we lead a meaningful life, simultaneously we also need a motivating ethics for social development and the *Gītā* provides such vibration in our life. It is our duty to explore that ethics for making life more fruitful and save our future generation.

The *Gītā* has been written in the form of dialogue. From the most ancient period dialogue has its own glory for acquiring true knowledge and to solve problems. *Upaniṣads* and *Smritis* are the living examples of them. But one point is important to note here. In *Upaniṣads* and *Smritis* focus has mainly been given on theoretical knowledge whereas in the *Gītā* focus has been given in practical aspects. I think the proper application of the ethical philosophy of the *Gītā* can solve any problem of our society today. Perhaps keeping this in view the *Gītā* is said as “song of life” (*jīvanagītā*). Mahatma Gandhi describes *Gītā* as a dictionary where we can find out the meaning (solution) of all the problems of our day to day life. ‘Dialogue’ also is called as ‘*samvāda*’, which starts with proper □ □ □ □ or ‘questioning’. ‘*Jīvanagītā*’ comes from such kind of continuous questioning.

Today, our society is running through an acute value crisis, and it happens because at the present time our education and culture are mainly influenced by materialism. So, our thinking and activities are determined by such type of teaching and culture. Our limitless demand makes us highly selfish; we have no scope to think

about social welfare of our near and dear ones or of the society. This darkness gradually grasps our soul and society. We are well known that darkness can be pushed back only by light. Likewise, materialistic teaching and culture can be pushed back only by the help of spiritualistic teaching and culture. It is my conviction that the *Gītā* can provide our society such type of spiritualistic teaching and culture following which all problems mentioned can be solved. The only need is an acute attention to the theories of *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the practical application of the same.

In the very first chapter of the *Gītā* Arjuna is found to face a conflict of duties. He himself cannot find out any solution to the problem. So, he raises a series of questions to Srikrishna in order to overcome this problem. Sri Krishna replies to all of the questions raised by the Arjuna. Apparently we may think that this problem is exclusively the personal problem of Arjuna, but actually this is not the case. In fact Arjuna is the representative of any individual of our society. The problem of Arjuna is the common problem of each of us. Here the war of *Kurukshetra* is a symbolic one. Such type of war is always taken place in our society. Every now and then we come across conflict of duties. We cannot decide which should be done and which should not be done. In all most all of the crucial situations of ethical conflict we can seek the advice of the *Gītā* to resolve our problems. To Arjuna, Srikrishna was a friend, philosopher and guide. In our society we all are Arjuna. So, Srikrishna is a friend, philosopher and guide not only of Arjuna alone but also all of us. In every crucial step of our day to day life we can take the help of the *Gītā* in order to find out a proper guide and solution. So, the *Gītā* is most practical oriented ethical work. Keeping this in view the *Gītā* is said as the *Jīvan Gītā*.

If we go through very carefully the second chapter of the *Gītā* i.e. *Sāmkhya Yogā*; a number of problems, both practical and theoretical will be solved. Death is one of the most unwanted phenomena in our life. The death of our near one's makes us cripple and barren. We have loss the capacity of our working and thinking. Some of us are found to be mad due to mental shock. This shock even sometimes leads to further death. The lesson of the *Gītā*, in this regard works as a most powerful and fruitful moral medicine in our life. Srikrishna repeatedly teaches Arjuna that soul of us is immortal because it is eternal. Soul is beyond birth and death. It can neither be slain nor be burnt. Birth and death is a cycle process which continues till we attain

liberation. The cycle of birth and death is like the cycle of putting on a new dress by leaving the old and turned one. Our body is nothing but like a cloth. If we learn this lesson taught by the *Gītā* then no mother will get mentally paralyzed, no father will get shocked at the death of their son or daughter. So, no parents can be shocked at the death of their child. The *Gītā* is a solace to each and every old man and women. Death appears as a panic to each and every individual human being. They cannot come out of the knot of the fear of death. In this stage the *Gītā* helps us to overcome the panic of death.

We face so many problems in our life because we cannot accept what is natural and inevitable. The *Gītā* teaches us to accept what is natural and unavoidable. Death, for example, is a most natural and inevitable phenomenon. So, Sri Kriṣṇa advises Arjuna to accept as easily as possible the death of his near ones and dear ones that would take place in the war of *Kurukshetra*. Another important lesson taught to our society by the *Gītā*, is “*Niṣkāma Karma*”. This lesson plays a vital role in our life. We have a tendency to avoid our activities. This tendency is greatly responsible for the backwardness and non progress of our society. Srikrīṣṇa here advises Arjuna to take the lesson of regular and constant activities from the nature and Srikrīṣṇa Himself. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west everyday without fail. The winter season never forgets to follow the summer. Srikrīṣṇa has nothing to attain for Himself but yet He is always engaged in different types of activities. If we follow this lesson then no doubt, the picture of both of our individual and social life will be changed.

Another name of *Dharma*, according to the *Gītā*, is the performance of our “duty” in a proper way. But what is meant by duty? Following the *Gītā* it can be said that “duty” is not other than our action or *karma*. “*Mānavdharma*” is nothing but to render service for others. In fact, *Vedas* lay down a life of *karma* (action). Mere renunciation (*nivṛtti*) without action is undesirable. All the *Purāṇs* and the *Mahābhārata* lay emphasis on an active life. The mediaeval philosophers and saints like: Sri Visnu Swami, Ramanujacarya, Nimbarkacaya, Madhavacarya, Vallabhacarya have propounded such kind of theory of active work and devotion. In modern times Maharshi Dayananda, Lokamanya Tilaka and Swami Vivekananda argued for the practical ethics of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Sri Aurobindo has dealt with

pravṛtti dharma. Ethics of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* laid on *karmayogā* (the path of action) means performance of work without any attachment to the results whether it favorable or not. At the very first glance one may think that such type of “*Niṣkāma Karma*” is impossible to perform. But *Gītā* shows that we can perform this type activity through practice (master of all achievements). So, it is quite legitimate to think that if the teachings of the *Gītā* is implemented properly in our society then, no doubt we can be able to construct a society free from all types of egoistic problems.

Niṣkāma Karma teaches us not only to perform our duties, it also teaches us to perform our duties without self-interest. Motivation for satisfaction of our self-interest is the sole cause due to which most of the unwanted happenings are taken place in our society. Today almost all of the persons are found to satisfy their personal interests at any cost. We are not concerned at all about others. Today we are influenced by materialistic teachings. The more we achieve the more we want. We are never satisfied. Our slogan matches with that of *Cārvāka*, “*Yāvat jīvet sukhān jīvet, Ṛnam krittā ghrītaṃ pīvet*”. Actually desire is something that can never be satisfied. That is why Sri Kriṣṇa advises Arjuna to perform his duty to satisfy the interest of the other (*Lokasamgrahārtha*), not to satisfy his personal desire or interest. The world is becoming a hell only because we are exclusively concerned for ourselves. If we, most of the people, perform our activities following the advice of Sri Kriṣṇa then our society will turn into a heaven and a devil will become a God. Keeping this view in mind it is said, “*ke vole svarga narak āchhe vahu dūr. Māmuṣer mājhe svarga-narak, mānusetē sūrāsūr*”. (Neither the hell nor even the heaven is far away from the world; both of them are within this world. Likewise, neither the devil nor even the God is different from human being; human beings themselves are devil and God). Swami Vivekananda was greatly motivated by the teachings of the *Gītā*. That is why he could speak from the very core of his heart, “The whole world is my family”. Swamiji sacrificed his whole life to ensure the betterment of the whole world. So, if we are taught the lesson of the *Gītā* then we can also become Vivekananda and Mother Teresa and like them we also can sacrifice our whole life for the welfare of the whole society.

The utility of the *Gītā* is not confined only within this life it also goes beyond. Indian Philosophy says of four *Purusārtha* - *Dharma, Artha, Kāma and Mokṣa*.

Among them *mokṣa* is the ultimate one. That ultimate *Purusārtha* can be attained following the teaching of the *Gītā*. The *Gītā* teaches that our *karma* (action) is not the cause of our bondage, the cause that leads us to bondage is the desire for fruit of our activities. So, that desire has to be given up. But that desire comes when we think that we are the real doer. Our *Kartrivābhimāna* is the cause of our desire. That *Kartrivābhimāna* in turn, comes from ignorance. Here the *Gītā* says that we are not the actual doer, actual doer is the God Himself. We are just the instrument at the hands of God. No instrument can be real doer; real doer is the agent by whom the instrument is operated. Since we are not the real doer, we are the dolls at the hands of God, we can not deserve the fruit of actions. God alone is the real doer, so He alone deserves the fruit of all actions. To illustrate the case an example may be taken. We construct our house, but construction is made by mason. Though they construct it they are know very well that they have no right to live in there as they are not the owner of that house. Likewise, we are just like mason. Though we perform our activities like mason we are not the real doer.

So, we cannot be the owner of the fruits of our actions. The actual owner is the God. Consequently, we cannot have any personal desire to enjoy the fruits of our activities. In fact, we can claim nothing as our own. The whole world is created as well as governed by God. So, the only owner of everything of the world is God Himself. If we follow the teaching of the *Gītā* then the very sense of ego cannot take its birth. Our *Sakāma Karma* gives birth two types of problems, one type of problem is Social and another type of problem is individual. If we perform our activities in order to satisfy our ego only then problems come. It will create so many problems in our social life and on the other, we fall in bondage. But if we do the same activities for ensuring the welfare of the whole world (*vahujanahītāya vahujanasukhāya*) or to satisfy God surrendering our ego on the feet of Him, then this world will turned into a heaven on the one hand and we will attain liberation, the highest goal of human being, on the other. In *Chaitany Charitamrita* it is beautifully said, “*Ātmendriya priti ichhā tare kohe kām. Kṛṣṇendriya priti ichhā dhare prem nām*”

In the *Gītā* we can find the harmonization of ascent and descent. It ascends to the transcendental form from the empirical and descends from the absolute stage of realization of supreme self to the practical concerns of everyday life. It gives a

synthesization of the values existing in the spiritual excellence, mental efficiency, and physical fitness. If someone wants to get spiritual excellence then he will have to depend on his mental stability, which, in turn, depends on his physical fitness. All these have some values, as they are ‘valuable’ for giving human pursuit. Another valuable aspect of the *Gītā* is that it gives us knowledge about good food because by eating proper food we can achieve a good health. In India we can see that some of old and saint like people compare body with the temple. There is a great philosophical thinking behind it. Here I wish to drag another view which is equally important for further explanation. We have a tendency to refute body as matter, and we think that matter has no value as it is not permanent in nature. For them spirit is the highest thing and body is nothing but a bondage to the spiritual upliftment.

But I think that we must have the need of matter (body) in order to spiritual morality, like a figure of God in a temple which shows infinity in finite bondage. It is the reality that we can get the best test of freedom in limitation. So, as Sri Aurobindo thinks that our upper ward journey has been started from matter. I also believe that we need a good physical health in order to get morally qualified life, which is reflected by the thought “*tattvamasi*”, to see God in every creation of God. Such ethical enforcement we get from the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, which advises us to serve the humanity, as Swami Vivakananda teaches us. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* makes a systematic synchronization of the process of nutrition, digestive system with the knowledge of matter (body) and spirit (mind) to get a science of healthy living consisting of an ethical society in it-self.

Again following *Gītā* we can know that a particular quality of food generates a particular quality in an individual. In *Gītā* it is advised to take *sāttvika* food but not *rājasika* etc, as it associates an individual with life, energy, vigour, joy etc. The *rājasika* food, not being able to produce joy etc, can produce only pain, grief etc. The *tāmasa* foods are dearer to the ignorant persons in as much as they can produce inertia in them. An individual enjoying the *sāttvika* food will have mental efficiency and stability. Another important issue of the *Gītā* is said to be how a diseased and disorder mind like the Arjuna can be ordered through the development of moral health by the supreme psycho- analyst like Srikrishṇa. It is urged that the disorder in the mind is due to the habitual repression of his impulses from the outside and of the

emotion of mind. The accumulated and suppressed feeling shows itself in perspiration, palpitation, fear, grief etc. Srikrīṣṇa advises Arjuna to cure the disease of his mind by directing it to the attainment of the divine quality (*daivī sampat*). The divine consciousness is then aroused and the mind is said to be cured. The Arjuna in this context claims— *naṣṭo mohah smṛtīrlabdhā* (BG: 18/73), i.e. my delusion is destroyed. I have now regained by memory.

From the above discussion it can be said that there should be harmony between physical fitness and mental tranquility for the attainment of spiritual bliss. The consumption of *sāttvika* food gives rise to the *sāttvaguṇa*; he can have the awareness of *daivīsampat* existing in him, which induces him to do moral action. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā* sacrifice (*yajña*) is taken as the essence of ethical life which is treated as divine quality. ‘Sacrifice’ is a great mile-stone for humanity which we should achieve by heart and soul. Without the sense of it an individual can not able to think of serving others. In a society there can be harmony if each and every individual finds some value in achieving his own ends as well as getting that of others, here comes the question of sacrifice. A self cannot sustain without social help. It can be said that the whole world is a systematic unity in which there is no gap between self and society, all these are inter-connected. It is our duty to perform act to the ancestors (*pitṛyaj* □ □ celestial world (*devayajña*), material world (*bhūtayaj* □ □ society (*nṛyaj* □ □ because each of these are essential for our upliftment and existence.

The *Gītā* teaches that practice of austerity is essential for bringing purification and perfection in an individual’s thought (*mānas*), speech (*vāk*) and deed (*kārya*). The moral self does not become the slave of desire, but it stands as *jitatmā*. An individual, who has *jitatmā* can construct a bridge between individualism and socialism. A true humanitarian is interested in social well being. Peace is not the thing to enjoy alone, no one can attain peace if his neighbors are in distress. The materialists are not justified in the sense that they are not believed in spiritual well-being. Without the acceptance of spiritual values the work for the welfare (*vahujanahītāya vahujanasukhāya*) is not possible. It is only possible through the enlightened self love. The happiness of others should be accepted if the dignity of an individual is maintained. Individuals, who are engaged for the betterment of our society, are called *Dhārmikas*. It has been stated in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* that, “Self” exists in all beings

and all beings exist in “Self”. Moral virtues (*sadguṇas*) make a man’s life fruitful. In *Mahābhārata* it is stated that all these virtues are to be attained for the development of complete harmony. The forgiveness (*kṣamā*), steadiness, non-violence, equality, truth, non-miserliness (*akārpaṣya*), shame etc. are included in the moral virtues. *Kārpaṣya* indicates the lack of sacrifice (*tyāga*) in an individual. If sacrifice does not find room in society, there might be conflict, violence, hatred etc. in society. *Kārpaṇyadoṣopahatasvabhāvah* (BG: 2/7), here selfishness is described as a defect which counters the noble human nature. That is why; it is the injunction of the Divine Teacher to forsake miserly attitude and inertia to enjoy the taste of broadness. “...*apasadāyaibhyo yo bhunkta stena eva saḥ*” (BG: 3/12), i.e. one who enjoys some things from others without giving them anything in return is a thief, because the said synthesization of values is not there.

References:

1. “*Naṣṭo mohaḥ smṛtir labdhā/ tvatprasādān mayā ‘cyuta/ sthito ‘smi gatasamdehaḥ/*
2. *kariṣye uacanān tava//” Srimadbhagavadgita, 18/73*
3. “*Kārpaṇyadoṣopahatasvabhāvah/ pṛcchāmi tvān dharmasānīmūḍhacetāḥ/ yac chreyaḥ syān nīcitān brūhi tan me/ śiṣyas te ‘ hañ śādhi mām tvām prapannam//” Ibid, 2/7*
4. “*Iṣṭān bhogān hivo devā/ dāsyante yajñabhāvītūḥ/ tair dappān apradāyai ‘ bhyo/ yo bhunkte stena eva saḥ// Ibid, 3/12*