

Introduction to Shreemad Bhagavad Geetaa

Shreemad Bhagavad **Geetaa**, a collection of **700 verses**, is a part of the **Bheeshma Parva** in the epic **Mahaabhaarata**. In these verses Kṛiṣṇa imparts the eternally beneficial knowledge to Arjuna and the entire humanity. The word 'Arjuna' comes from the Sanskrit root word 'ṛiju' which means simple. The word 'Kṛiṣṇa' comes from Sanskrit root word '**Kṛiṣh** vilekhane', which means to **dig deeper**. Another word 'kṛiṣhi', which is derived from the same root, means agriculture, a trade involving ploughing, sowing and cultivating. During this whole conversation between Kṛiṣṇa and Arjuna, **Kṛiṣṇa is cultivating the mind of simple hearted Arjuna and is sowing the seeds of eternal knowledge.**

The dilemma faced by Arjuna is the **conflict between reason and emotion**. For example, let's consider a judge presiding over a criminal court. Upholding the law of the land, this judge has sent many hardcore murderers to the gallows, despite protests from various human right groups calling for a moratorium on the capital punishment. The judge so far has acted with reason and has performed his duty of maintaining the law and order in the society. One day, he finds his own son accused of a heinous murder. Now, the emotion of fear at the prospect of losing his own son takes over. Suddenly, the judge starts singing chorus with the anti-capital punishment protestors. Arjuna has fought several wars during which he has slayed numerous enemies. Now, in this battle he finds himself against his kin. Emotions ruling over him, he does not want to fight the war anymore. The message of Geetaa is about curbing emotions, maintaining consistency and letting reason rule in most difficult circumstances.

This dilemma is a common occurrence for all human beings in their day-to-day life. There is a consistent internal strife between the forces of good and evil. One's conscience guides one towards a virtuous path but the emotions of greed, anger, ego, jealousy, attachment, lust, malice, deceit, laziness, stubbornness etc. mislead him/her towards thoughts and actions that are not so righteous. In this battle there are **one hundred Kauravas, representing numerous evil forces, tendencies and desires**, against **five Paandavas representing the five senses** through which we receive knowledge and perform actions. In order to remain virtuous and victorious in this daily battle, we have to carefully watch the actions. Additionally, we need to ensure that the knowledge we absorb through our senses has come from the credible sources.

The venue of Geetaa is Kurukshetra, which consists of two words (*kshetra*) **the land where** (*kuru*) **deeds are done, where** (*kuru*) **doers reside**. Geetaa essentially is a discourse imploring us to act and act righteously. These verses disburse **eternal knowledge** and are meant to be understood and acted upon. These verses are **not just prayers** to be just sung. Mindlessly chanting these verses without understanding their inherent message, is merely time wasted for nothing.

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Geetaa is not a discourse applicable to just the followers of Hinduism alone. The message it imparts is very secular in its approach and is provided for the entire humanity. Also Geetaa is not justifying violence. On the contrary Mahaabhaarata says “अहिंसा परमो धर्मः | *Ahinsaa paramo dharmah*” Non-violence is the highest duty. Violence is allowed only to protect dharma. The definition of “dharma” i.e. righteousness is, truth, justice and equality for all. Some individuals may say that upholding the faith and tradition of their particular sect is dharma. However, dharma can't be bound by such a narrow definition. For an act to be according to dharma, it has to be beneficial to the entire humanity and other living beings as well. The acts of sectarian or selfish violence are not justifiable under the message of Geetaa.

A prelude to the battle of Mahaabhaarata

For those who are unfamiliar with the story of Mahaabhaarata, here is a short summary of events that led to the war.

The story of Mahaabhaarata unfolds in the city of Hastinaapura, where once ruled a king named Shaantanu. Shaantanu's son Devavrata, an acclaimed scholar and warrior, was appointed as the crown prince. Few years later Shaantanu fell in love with a lady named Satyawatee and wanted to marry her. However, Satyawatee's father laid a condition for marriage that only the sons born to Satyawatee and their descendants shall rule the kingdom. For the happiness of his father, Devavrata renounced his position as the crown prince. He also took a vow of celibacy so that his descendants would never become a problem for the kings from Satyawatee's lineage. Due to this vow Devavrata is popularly known as Bheeshma.

Satyawatee's son Vichitraveerya died after assuming the throne. Vichitraveerya had two sons named Dhritraashtra and Paandu. Dhritraashtra, the elder one, was born blind. Both of the princes were trained to be the king. However, at the coronation, citing Dhritraashtra's handicap, the younger son Paandu was chosen to be the king over the elder Dhritraashtra. Dhritraashtra however, was not happy with the decision and felt that he was denied his rightful place as the king.

Paandu had five sons from his two wives. These five brothers were known as Paandavas. Dhritraashtra had one hundred sons. These one hundred brothers were known as Kauravas. There are two stories prevalent on the birth of one hundred Kauravas.

First: All of the one hundred Kauravas were born to Dhritraashtra's wife Gaandhaaree. Someone may question how one woman could bear one hundred sons. The story goes that Gaandhaaree had a miscarriage during her pregnancy. Rishi Vyaasa happened to be present in the palace at that time. He took the miscarried fetus in his custody and

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dissected it into one hundred and one parts. He placed each part into a separate urn. He then incubated fetal tissue in all of these urns. The tissue in each urn grew into an infant; one hundred boys and one girl. This is one of the earliest examples of cloning and test-tube babies. Such was the level of scientific advancement in those days and age.

Second: Dhṛitraaṣṭra had twelve wives, Gaandhaaree, her ten sisters and another wife from the Vaishya varṇa. One hundred and one children from 12 mothers is plausible.

Paanḍu's eldest son was named Yudhiṣṭhira and Dhṛitraaṣṭra's eldest son was named Duryodhana. Yudhiṣṭhira was also the eldest amongst all of the one hundred and five princes. All of the princes were trained by the best gurus. While the princes were still young, king Paanḍu died due to an ailment. Dhṛitraaṣṭra was appointed as a caretaker king. After becoming the king, Dhṛitraaṣṭra wanted to hang on to the position. He also wanted his eldest son Duryodhana to succeed him as the king of Hastinapur.

Time went by and the princes completed their training. The council of ministers, to Dhṛitraaṣṭra's dismay, decided that Yudhiṣṭhira was a better choice to lead the kingdom. They appointed him the crown prince.

Duryodhana, in his lust of the kingdom, plotted to kill the five Paanḍavas in a fire. The Paanḍava survived the incident and anticipating more attempts on their life, went into hiding. They were however, presumed dead and Dhṛitraaṣṭra seized this opportunity to appoint his son Duryodhana as the crown prince.

When things settled down, the Paanḍavas came out of hiding. This created a turmoil in the palace. Presence of two crown princes meant hatred, jealousy and strife. Dhṛitraaṣṭra, hence decided to divide the kingdom into two parts, relinquishing the control of one part called Indraprastha to the Paanḍavas. Yudhiṣṭhira became the king of Indraprastha.

Duryodhana however, was not happy to have a part of the kingdom taken away from him. He invited Yudhiṣṭhira to a gambling duel. Yudhiṣṭhira, though a learned scholar had a weakness for gambling and couldn't resist the invitation.

In the gamble, Yudhiṣṭhira lost the control of his kingdom for thirteen years to Duryodhana. After spending thirteen years in exile, the Paanḍava returned to reclaim their kingdom. Duryodhana however, refused to yield any portion of land to them and challenged them to a battle to regain the control of the kingdom. All of the attempts to resolve the matter peacefully, failed. The stage was set for a war, at the start of which, Shree Kṛiṣṇa delivered the message of Shreemad Bhagavad Geetaa to Arjuna.

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Doubts that surface from time to time

Questions may arise in the minds of many, about the justification of the war of Mahaabhaarata. Why couldn't the Paandava just relent and avoid all of bloodshed that took place in this war? Why did Kṛiṣṇa insist that Arjuna pick up the weapons in order to regain the control of the kingdom? This goal by itself sounds very selfish. How does the teachings of Kṛiṣṇa in Mahaabhaarata compare to the teachings of Raama in Raamaayaṇa? Both of the epics seem to disseminate contradictory messages.

Raamaayaṇa portrays a wonderful example of the brotherly love. Brothers are happily sacrificing their own comfort and happiness for their brothers. Raama happily abdicates the throne for his brother Bharata while Bharata does not want to take the kingdom from his brother either. On the other hand, in Mahaabhaarata, cousins are fighting and are ready to kill each other for the throne. When Arjuna wants to give up arms and not fight the battle against his cousins, Shree Kṛiṣṇa encourages and guides him to pick up the weapons and continue with the battle. This contradiction is very confusing indeed! Which of them is teaching the correct code of conduct?

However, if we look closely, these contradictions prove out to be superficial. The teachings of Shree Raama and Shree Kṛiṣṇa are actually very much aligned with each other. Both teach us to rise above self interest and perform actions for the greater good of the society. It is the duty of a warrior to protect and ensure the happiness of the masses. Shree Raama knew that his brother Bharata was well versed in the art of nurturing a kingdom, was kind hearted and followed a righteous code of conduct. He hence had no problem with Bharata taking over the kingdom. Bharata also had similar thoughts. He considered Raama to be a better ruler and hence was eager to make him the king.

On the other hand, Duryodhana from the Mahaabhaarata was an evil egotist. He did not even miss the chance of disrobing and insulting his sister-in-law. Such an evil person would only torment the masses if he ever became the king. That is why Shree Kṛiṣṇa asked Arjuna to pick up arms against this oppressor and his supporters.

**yajñāārthaat-karmaṇo'nyatra loko'yañ karmabandhanaḥ,
tadārthañ karma kaunteya muktasaṅgaḥ samaachara.**

Geetaa 3:9

The ninth verse from the third chapter of Geetaa clearly states that we should perform all of our actions with a feeling of yajña. When we rise above self interest and perform all of our actions for the greater good and benefit of the entire society, then all of our actions become a prayer to the God. We realize that the difference between the teachings of Shree Raama and Shree Kṛiṣṇa is just an illusion created by our ignorance. Since this

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illusion is now resolved, we clearly understand that we can follow the teachings of both Raama and Kṛiṣṇa simultaneously as long as we stay away from selfish behavior. A deeper study of Shreemad Bhagavad Geetaa reveals that Kṛiṣṇa is imploring Arjuna to engage in a selfless battle for the sake of dharma and not for any personal gains or glory.

Bhagavaan verses Eeshvara

Geetaa refers to Shree Kṛiṣṇa as *bhagavaan*. Does this mean that he actually is the God? Key to answering this question would be in understanding the differences in the meaning of two words *bhagavaan* and *eeshvara*. Are these two words synonymous or do they have different contextual meaning altogether?

The word *eeshvara* means the Supreme Lord. In the Vedas this word is used to refer to the one and only one God, who has always existed and will continue to exist forever i.e. who was never born and will never die; who is omnipresent and hence does not need to move; who is contiguous and has no physical body or characteristics; who is the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the entire universe; whose laws govern everything in the universe etc.

The word *bhagavaan* means someone who possesses *bhaga*. The word *bhaga* encompasses six qualities, *aishvarya* (wealth and contentment), *dharma* (righteousness), *jñāna* (knowledge), *yasha* (fame), *shree* (intelligence and aura) and *vairagya* (detachment from desires). Anyone who possesses these six qualities can be referred to as *bhagavaan*. These qualities would also mean that this person has a selfless desire for the greater good of others. Any human can acquire these qualities and attain the stature of *bhagavaan*. Shree Kṛiṣṇa had all of these qualities and hence is referred to as *bhagavaan* in Geetaa. It is a common practice to refer the sages as *bhagavaan*. Sometimes the parents or elders of the household are referred to as *bhagavaan* as they selflessly serve the younger generations.

Eeshvara also possesses these qualities and numerous others as well. Hence sometimes, people may refer to *eeshvara* as *bhagavaan* too. However, the inverse is not true. Someone who qualifies to be called *bhagavaan* may not be *eeshvara*.