

The Bhagavd Gita's Message of Harmony in an Inter-dependent World

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Abstract: The great scriptures of the world religions have been consistently speaking of a spiritual power that binds everything together in an evolutionary process. Rta, Dharma, Yajna, Tao and Reign of God are some of the symbols which point to this unifying reality. In the light of that religious sages look at the world as a gift from the divine source and as a responsibility as well. It is a grace to realise that everything is bound with everything else in a divine ambience and it is a responsibility to promote this inter-relationality in a harmonious process. Global spirituality is a matter of mystical experience and ethical demand.

In this study the author explores how the *Bhagavad Gita* looks at the world as a reality of inter-connectedness with the mystical insights and ethical demands that it involves. The author concludes that the contribution of the Bhagavad Gita to the shaping of our life and structuring of our relationships in a *globalised* world that is becoming increasingly conscious of the inter-dependence of things and persons as follows: (i) the realisation that we live and grow in a divine ambience; (ii) the deep bonding between humans and the things of nature within the divine process; (iii) the understanding of human creativity as participation in the divine work of yajna, of dharma (iv) the responsibility to preserve the integrity of the environment and promote harmony in social life; (v) compassion as the characteristic of a person who lives in inner freedom.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita, yajna, dharma, rta, dharma, inter-relationality.

The world is shrinking to a global village in which everyone almost knows everyone else. One's television is like a window open to the larger universe. One's internet gives access to the entire world. Within a few hours one can cross the continents. Within seconds one can reach someone at the other end of the world. Interdependence of nations, interconnectedness of cultures and interrelationship of peoples characterise the new age in which we live. A global consciousness evolves, in which everything is intimately related to everything else. Political policies and market interests seem to determine the dynamics of this evolution. Is there a spiritual awareness that underlies this global consciousness?

The great scriptures of the world religions have been consistently speaking of a spiritual power that binds everything together in an evolutionary process. Rta, Dharma, Yajna, Tao and Reign of God are some of the symbols which point to this unifying reality. In the light of religious sages look at the world as a gift from the divine source and as a responsibility as well. It is a grace to realise that everything is bound with everything else in a divine ambience and it is a responsibility to promote this inter-relationality in a harmonious process. Global spirituality is a matter of mystical experience and ethical demand.

In this study I am exploring how the Bhagavad Gita (ca. 300 BCE) looks at the world as a reality of inter-connectedness with the mystical insights and ethical demands that it involves.

The World as Divine Abode

Gita does not speak of a God who is above the world or outside the universe. God is within the universe. Divine presence vibrates in every atom and enlivens every living cell. The entire universe is permeated by the divine presence and dynamised by the divine energy. God is the creative source, the life-giving abode and the liberative goal of the universe: "I am the beginning, the middle and the end of all beings" (10:20). "I am the origin and the dissolution, as well as the power house of all" (9:18).

Things are born from an unseen source, and merge into an unseen state; in between they manifest the divine presence in a rich diversity.

(2:28). “I am the source of all. Everything proceeds from within me.” (10:8) And “I am the end of everything.” (10:32). The world is the divine abode. The entire universe exists in the Divine. (9:5)

God is in the world as a dynamic, life-giving presence. “All this universe is spun on God” (*protham*, 7:7). “As the mighty wind, blowing everywhere, subsists in the etheric space, so do all beings subsist in me” (9:6). The divine presence is the inner energy that binds everything together to a dynamic *whole*. “All this universe is permeated by me.” (9:4). “All existences abide in God and by him all are permeated.” (8:22). The entire universe is soaked in the Divine. God abides in all.

With beautiful poetic images the Gita describes the immanence of the Divine in all things:

I am the taste in the waters, light in the moon and the sun, sound vibrations in etheric space. I am the pure fragrance in the earth, brightness in fire, life-giving source in all beings. I am indeed the eternal seed of all existences. (7:8-10).

The splendour of the sun that illumines the whole world, the soothing light of the moon and the brightness of the fire – know that as mine. It is I that enters the womb of the earth and sustains all beings with vital energies. I am indeed the life-sap that flows through the entire vegetation. In the bodies of living beings I work as the digestive fire. And in the hearts of all I dwell bringing about clarity of perception, wisdom and the removal of doubts (15:12-15).

With these insights the Gita makes it clear that we live and move in a divine milieu. There is nothing that is just *material* in this universe. Every atom is energised by the divine vibration. Every living cell is nourished by the divine life. The entire universe is like a tree: the divine presence is like the life-giving sap that permeates the entire tree. (15:1).

The World as Divine Body

The symbol of the body surfaces in various forms in the Gita in order to describe God as the inner mover, the inner Self. “I am the

Self seated in the bodies of all” (10:20) “I dwell in their bodies” (16:18). “The supreme Self, the highest Spirit, dwells in this body” (13:22). Every being, animate or inanimate, is the body of the indwelling Spirit. In the human body there is a spiritual subject-consciousness: “An eternal divine particle enters the body and functions as the inner source of life” (15:7). From within the *heart* the divine Master “dispels the darkness born of ignorance with the shining lamp of wisdom “(10:11) The supreme Spirit unfolds itself through the individual spirit, which in turn manifests itself through the physical body. God is the ultimate subject of all. Yet the freedom of the individual soul is affirmed (18:63).

Not only the individual bodies, but the entire universe is looked upon as the body of God. “With hands and feet on every side, with eyes, heads and faces on all sides, with ears turned in all directions, He dwells in the world, enveloping all” (13:13). In the revelation of the *cosmic form* of the divine Lord Arjuna is graced with the vision of the universe as the body of the Lord (ch.11:9-13). “Arjuna beheld the whole universe with its manifold divisions converged in the One: in the body of the God of gods” (11:13). Overwhelmed by this magnificent vision Arjuna exclaimed: “I behold Thee, infinite in form on all sides, with numberless arms, bellies, faces and eyes, but I see not Thy end or Thy middle or Thy beginning, O Lord of the universe, O form universal.” (11:16). For Arjuna – who actually represents any human seeker – this is a vision that is frightening and fascinating at the same time. When the Divine touches the human, the human soul recoils within itself in fear and yet it is liberated to soar beyond the limits of its finitude. The fantastic vision described in Gita ch. 11 is an eruption of the cosmic consciousness.

Along the line of the upanishadic description of the divine indweller (*antaryamin*) the Gita speaks of God’s presence within the heart of all beings. “The Lord abides in the heart of all beings” (18:61) “As the inner Light beyond all darkness he is seated in the heart of all (13:17). “I am lodged in the heart of all beings” (15:15). Heart is here the symbol of the innermost divine space from where God acts as the ultimate subject of all. He is the knower, the to-be-known and knowledge as well. (15:15). Just as the individual soul activates the human body, the Divine as the universal Spirit activates the entire universe, which is the body of the Divine, the field of its

self-unfolding. “Know me as the knower of the field in all fields” (*kshetram* 13:2).

The World as Divine Yajna

The Gita describes the world as divine body not in a static sense, but referring to the inner divine dynamism. God’s presence within the heart of the universe is like the dynamic axis of a wheel. The entire universe is like a wheel and God is the axis of it. There is a propelling energy constantly emanating from within the divine centre; this makes the wheel of the universe revolve in the proper direction. On the Vedic and Upanishadic background the Gita describes the entire universe as a God-driven wheel (*yajna-chakra*). On a wheel everything is connected to everything else. This inter-connectedness is the secret of its proper functioning. The divine presence in the universe brings about harmony and well-being of all. (*yoga-kshemam*, 9:22)

Actions evolve out of the divine Centre. “From Brahman work arises; Brahman is born from the Imperishable” (3:15). Here the term *Brahman* could mean both the divine subject and the matrix of nature as activated by the Divine (14:3-4). The entire universe is a divine process activated by works evolving from the divine axis and mediated by finite agencies. Gita calls this process *yajna*. Through *yajna* the divine energy penetrates everywhere (3:15). All beings participate in this cosmic process of divine *yajna*. What really disturbs this process of cosmic harmony is human greed (*kama*). The greedy one strives to keep everything for the gratification of the ego (*aham-kara*). Hence only through freedom from greed (*nish-kama*) can humans participate in the divine *yajna*. Throughout the Gita there is a constant insistence on an attitude of *nish-kama*. “You have responsibility for action alone, but never a claim on its fruits. Let not the fruits of action be the motive; neither let there be any attachment to inaction” (2:47).

There are basically two ways of human participation in the divine *yajna*: rituals and sharing. *Yajna* has a cultic and ethical aspect.

Sacred ritual, according to the Gita, has a cosmic significance. A ritual is performed not to gain any personal benefit but to promote the integral well-being of all. It is a symbolic participation in the

divine sacrifice. God is the ultimate “priest and recipient of all sacrifices” (9:24). Brahman offers Brahman in the fire of Brahman (4:24). “I am the ritual action, I am the sacrifice, I am the ancestral oblation, I am the healing herb, I am the sacred manthra, I am the melted butter, I am the fire and I am the oblation” (9:16). Through a properly performed ritual one enters the divine energy-field. One lets one’s life revolve harmoniously within the divine wheel of life. One is thus liberated from the grips of greed. Ritual action means total self-surrender to the divine master, who is the life-centre of the universe. Human yajna is participation in the divine yajna. Hence the unique power of rituals. Through rituals we humans nourish the divine process of yajna in the universe. “From food contingent beings live; food derives from rain; rain comes from yajna; yajna is born of work; work evolves from Brahman” (3:14). Yajna therefore integrates human livelihood with the divine source, and all things with the divine centre. Yajna relates the spokes of finite realities with the divine axis on the cosmic wheel.

The second inevitable form of human participation in the divine process is sharing. If yajna is born of work, one may ask, what sort of work? Karma (work) in the Gita refers primarily to action done without greed, not to cultic operations. Yajna in the form of ritual is based on yajna in the field of works. Referring to the deeper meaning of ritual offerings (9:26) the Gita says: “Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, or give away in alms, whatever penance you perform, do it all as an offering unto me” (9:27). Here life becomes a yajna. Sacred ritual gives a quality to life. Ritual makes a person God-centred. The way of life is then characterised by sharing: caring for the goods of nature and for the welfare of humans.

The World as Divine Process

Within the divine yajna the world evolves as a process of inter-relationship between humans and the things of nature. “In the beginning the Creator-Lord created all beings along with yajna. He admonished them: By yajna you should bring forth, and this shall be for you that which fulfils all your desires” (3:10). Here yajna means the basic attitude of sharing and caring with an inner freedom

from possessive greed. Only with such an attitude can life be promoted. Hence the next injunction: “With yajna shall you foster the gods (*deva*), so that the gods may foster you in return. Thus fostering one another you shall achieve the supreme good” (3:11). The term *deva* does not mean the iconographic forms of gods and goddesses, but the life-giving powers embedded in nature. The Vedic seers sensed the divine energies communicated through the powers of nature and hence these were praised as divine channels of life and grace. The divine call to foster gods would then mean the human responsibility to sustain the life-giving elements of nature like the fertility power of the earth, the purifying element of the rivers, the refreshing *prana* of air and the awakening energy of the sun. Humans are duty bound not to poison the earth or devastate the forests, not to contaminate the water sources or pollute the air-space. If we poison the earth, the earth will poison our body. If we cause pollution in the air, the air space will pollute our lungs. If we contaminate the water sources we have to bear the consequences of epidemics. When we cause an undue raise of CO2 in the atmosphere we have to expect radical climatic catastrophes. There is a deep inter-connectedness between every reality in the universe. We live in a cosmic web, which is a gift and a responsibility. This is what the Gita refers to when it says: “fostering one another you shall achieve the supreme good” (3:11). Through the intertwining of humans and the things of nature the divine wheel of life in the cosmos revolves. In this process all beings are bonded together. At depth it is a sacred bonding, a divine relationship, a mystical *perichoresis*, for the Divine is the axis of the wheel. The divine energy transforms everything (9:4, 11:38). God dwells in us and we dwell in God (9:29, 12:8).

The text continues harping on the ethical responsibility. “Fostered by yajna the gods will give you the fulfilment of your desires. The one who enjoys their gifts without giving to them in return is verily a thief” (3:12). If we humans take care of the nourishing powers of nature, they will take care of our needs. If however we extract from them in greed without providing for their sustenance and preservation we are exploiters. And this disturbs the revolving of the divine wheel in the cosmos. Destruction of environment is a crime. Economic growth at the cost of environmental crisis is not worthy of being called development or progress. It is rather *theft*, for it devastates

the life-base of peoples and deprives the future generations of their sustenance. Greed (*kama*) is the root-cause of all disorder in the world. (3:37; 2:62-63)

The earth is our mother. Earth nourishes our life with food and water, with fresh air and balanced heat. We humans have the right to take out anything from the earth only after making sure that the life-sustaining powers of the mother earth are secured. “The good people eat only what is left over from *yajna*. Thus they are released from every taint. The wicked ones however cook food only for themselves; what they eat is sin” (3:13). Here Gita makes a clear distinction between two basic attitudes to nature: that of nourishing the life-lines of nature and that of destroying them. It has been a venerable tradition in Indian families to consider eating as a sacred exercise. Food is taken with gratitude to mother earth and with the willingness to share it with the hungry. The one who eats food participates in the generous life of the earth and in the gracious presence of the Divine as well. Food is to be shared generously with others. The guest – *athithi* = the one who comes unannounced – is to be welcomed as God! The Gita’s injunction is inspired by the Vedic precept: “He who does not nourish the guests and eats alone, eats but sin” (Rig Veda, 10:117:6). This is reflected in the ordinance of Manu too: “He who cooks only for himself eats sin” (Manusmriti, 3:118).

Work done without a concern for the welfare of others and the integrity of the environment is bondage. “This world is bound by bonds of work except where that work is done in the sense of *yajna*. Therefore fulfil works with inner freedom and in view of *yajna*” (3:9). Works done out of greed disrupt the cosmic order. Works done as *yajna* (service) promote the rhythm (*rita*) of the universe within the Divine. The central message of the Gita is liberation from the grip of greed to the horizons of spiritual freedom. In this process the entire humanity and the whole universe is involved. “The works of a person whose greedy attachments are overcome, who is interiorly liberated, whose mind is firmly grounded in *jnana*, reach integration, for his/her works are done in the sense of *yajna*” (4:23). *Yajna* is the path to *mukti*, integral liberation, in the life of an individual, in society and in the process of nature as well.

The World as Divine Dharma

The Gita speaks not only of eco-responsibility but also of social concerns. What evolves through healthy inter-personal relationships is harmony (dharma). The term dharma comes from the verbal root *dhr*, which means to hold, to support, to integrate. Dharma is the state of being held together, the process of integration, the situation of justice and peace, the experience of harmony in social co-existence. From within our heart God brings about integration and welfare: *yoga-kshemam*. (9:22). The world is the divine milieu wherein dharma evolves through the participation of humans in the divine work of bringing about dharma.

Dharma is a divine work. Ultimately it is the divine presence that binds human hearts together in love and harmony. God is the ground of dharma: “I am the foundation of the eternal dharma” (14:27). God is not presented here as an external law-giver nor as the Lord of life above the universe, but as the inner controller, the universal Self within the human self (15:15), the Self hidden in the heart of all beings (10:20), the energising axis of the wheel of the universe (3:16). God is actively present in the evolution of nature and in the historical development of humanity. God is the ultimate agent of the establishment of dharma (*dharmasamsthapana*, 4:8). The divine power overcomes the blocks of the negative forces (*adharma*, 4:7) and steers the evolutionary process on the path of dharma. In this divine involvement there is a concern for the liberation of the oppressed (*sadhu*, 4:8). The *sadhus* are those who are victimised by the greedy evildoers and whose strivings (*sadhana*) are blocked by the negative forces. Hence the assurance that God intervenes to remove these and to liberate the *poor*.

Dharma demands human participation in the divine work. Humans are creative agents in the process of bringing about dharma in all realms of life. Hence the call to work for the welfare of the world. “The witless ones perform their works out of attachment to the works. The enlightened ones do their works out of an intense concern for the integral welfare of the world” (*lokasamgraham*, 3:25). When one is intent on gaining fruits for the gratification of the desires of the ego, the works performed are in fact bondage to the ego. This is the root cause of *adharma* prevailing in human societies. When, on

the other hand, works are done only with the motivation of bringing about integration and welfare in society, they contribute to the process of dharma. In the latter case justice and peace, freedom and fellowship are promoted. The Gita makes a strong critique of the manifold forms of greed in human life: economic craving for wealth (16:13), political craze for power (16:14), social claim of nobility (16:15) and religious rituals performed for personal favours (16:15). These aberrations degrade human life and destiny (16:20).

World as Human Responsibility

In the light of these reflections we can understand human life as active participation in the divine process of life. Human endeavours have a creative role in the revolving of the cosmo-theandric wheel of life. Human yajna evolves in the divine yajna. Inter-human relationships unfold in a world that is inter-dependent within the divine ambience. What binds the *I* and the *thou* to an integral *we* is the divine power of love that permeates the universe. God is experienced as the power of love (7:11) for the deepest mystery of the Divine is that God loves us. (18:64). The mystique of cosmic inter-dependence blossoms forth in the ethic of human inter-personality. What are some of the characteristics of shaping one's life out of the divine Centre? The Gita mentions certain basic attitudes of a liberated person.

The primary perspective is that of *equal-mindedness* (*samatvam*, 2:48). When one looks at things with a divine eye (11:8) one is endowed with the grace of seeing God in all things. "One sees me everywhere, and sees everything in me" (6:30). One experiences the world as the temple of God, permeated by divine energies. The inter-connectedness of realities gets a theonomous dimension. The consequence is equanimity. "One sees the Self in all beings, and all beings in the Self; so does one see the same in all" (6:29). This spiritual vision renders inner freedom: freedom from greed. One is thus enabled to be equanimous towards friend and enemy (12:18), to respect the saint and the sinner alike (6:9), to welcome generously the comfortable and the disturbing ones (14:24), to remain undisturbed in distress and non-elated in gain (2:56), to be content in favourable and adverse circumstances (6:7). There is an inner freedom from being swayed between dualities (5:3). A basic *indifferentia* characterises one's attitude to life.

This does not mean that one becomes callous towards the struggles of life. Sensitivity to the divine presence in all things makes one deeply sensitive to the sufferings of people. The hallmark of a liberated person is *compassion*. While listing the traits of a person who lives in love with God (*bhakti*) the Gita first mentions compassion: “The one who hates not any being, but is friendly and compassionate towards all, free from the greedy thoughts of *I* and *mine*, equanimous in joy and suffering...that one is dear to me” (12:13). In inner freedom one commits oneself to the work of the integral welfare of the world with *great enthusiasm*. (*chikeershu*, 3:25). Life is then motivated by a passionate concern for the well-being of all beings (*ratah*, 12:3). Inter-personal relationships in an inter-dependent world are characterised by genuine love.

A third characteristic of a liberated person is genuine *inner joy*. The classical insight is that the Divine is bliss (*ananda*). Life shaped from the divine Centre would then be a joyous life. There is a deep-rooted peace and contentedness which gives rise to a joyful attitude to life. “When one sees the Self in the self through the Self, one rejoices in the self; it is a joy that is experienced at the deeper buddhi level; it transforms one’s life even in the midst of suffering” (6:20-23). It is a joy that is expressed in sharing and caring, for the world is experienced as the abode of the Divine. One does one’s work with joy due to the conviction that it is participation in the divine work. This makes the person free from the grips of fear and anger (2:56). “My devotee is a person with an unfailing joy in life” (12:14).

What then is the contribution of the Bhagavad Gita to the shaping of our life and structuring of our relationships in a *globalised* world that is becoming increasingly conscious of the inter-dependence of things and persons? Five insights seem to be important: (i) the realisation that we live and grow in a divine ambience; (ii) the deep bonding between humans and the things of nature within the divine process; (iii) the understanding of human creativity as participation in the divine work of *yajna*, of *dharma* (iv) the responsibility to preserve the integrity of the environment and promote harmony in social life; (v) compassion as the characteristic of a person who lives in inner freedom.

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