

The Ethics of the Gita

Dr Lakshman Patra

Head, PG Department of Philosophy, Vikram Dev (Auto) College, Jeypore, Odisha, 764001, India

Abstract: *Indian ethics aims at the spiritual growth of all men. The spiritual growth consists in the awareness or consciousness of atma-jnana or Brahma-Jnana. One realizes that the world is pervaded by Brahman. The particulars of the universe are potentially infinite. So everything is divine and every being kindred. Thus the concept of cosmic fraternity is the ethical paradigm, implied by this cosmo-centric ontology. During the present time the scientific and technological development has reached the apex, but the moral and spiritual values are constantly declining day by day. Though we have become economically rich, intellectually sound, and technologically advanced, still we are morally poor, and spiritually bankrupt. At this juncture of time, it is the philosophy of Gita which is out and out ethical, can really save the world from the over-blooming catastrophe. Indian ethics is holistic in its approach. As an aspect of Indian ethics, the Gita's ethics teaches how to harmonize an individual's desires, emotions and ambitions in order to lead a harmonious life on the earth with ultimate end of self realization and freedom. The Gita is a hand book of ethics. Its teachings are rational and scientific in approach. The Gita's ethics is discussed mostly in the concepts like, svabhava, svadharna and niskamakarma. In my paper I shall be discussing the concept of niskamakarma which constitutes the rock-bottom of the Gita's ethics. Niskakarma is the Philosophy of Karmayaga of the Gita which explicates that one has to perform actions with right ideation, having no desire for the consequences. My approach will be critical and analytical. hagavad-Gita, which means 'the songs of the Lord'. The Gita comes to us as a part of Bhisma.*

Keywords: Karma Yoga, niskamakarma, svabhava,svadharna

1. Introduction

The *Bhagavad-Gita* is one of the celebrated sacred works of Hindus. It consists of the spiritual teaching of Lord *Krsna* to Arjuna and thus acquires the name '*B* Parva, the *Mahabharata*, one of the grand Indian epics. The *Gita* is narrated by Samjaya to the blind king Dhrtarastra and it contains seven hundred verses spread over eighteen chapters or discoverers. Not only by virtue of being a part of the *Mahabharata*, but also by its independent character, the *Gita* is considered as an important piece of *Smrti* literature. Keeping in view the significance of spiritual and moral teaching in it, the *Gita* can be described as the heart of the epic. As a *Smrti*, the *Gita* is supposed to contain the essence of *Vedic* wisdom. The *Gita* is often considered as an *Upanisad* by itself. The pronounced theism in the *Gita* makes it a foundational text for Hindu religion in general and Vaisnava sect in particular. However, it enjoys popular esteem not only for its theistic inclinations but also for its practical ethical purport. The ethical teaching of the *Gita* decisively molded the moral consciousness of Hindus over the ages. Even today, the *Gita* is recited with utmost reverence in religious gatherings and one auspicious occasions.

The striking feature of the *Gita* is the way it unified different methods of spiritual development in to a profound ethical vision. This ethical vision is backed up by a host of philosophical ideas borrowed from the speculations on Self, current in the *Upanisadic* period, and the theory of *gunas* which later came down to us as the classical Samkhya system. These philosophical ideas are integrated with the theistic doctrines of Bhagavata tradition which treats *Vasudeva* or *Krsna* as the Lord. The synthesis of philosophical and theistic doctrines makes one hesitant to call the *Gita* a philosophical treatise. Infact, the *Gita* is more a treatise on ethics than a serious philosophical text. As is the case with classical Indian *Smrtis*, the religion is inseparable from the ethical thought in the *Gita*. It lays more

emphasis on moral teaching than on philosophical debates. One may find the philosophical ideas in the *Gita* loosely connected but the moral teaching of it is nevertheless simple, direct and practical. The inadequate theoretical rigour in the text can easily be understood in the light of the fact that it belongs to *pve-sutra* period when the classical systems of philosophy were yet to be crystallized.

1) Different comments on the Bhagavad Gita

Let us go through the different comments on the Bhagavad Gita as given by different thinkers including Eastern and Western. Madhusudan Saraswati's commentary on the Gita is entitled *GudharthaDipika* which consists of forty six verses. To him, the Gita bridges the two extremes of karma and jnana in bhakti. Moreover, bhakti is associated with both karma and jnana. It is dispeller of all calamities. The uniting character of bhakti is the unique contribution of the Gita in understanding Yoga or Sadhana. Another thinker namely Vallabha, interprets Gita in his book *Gitatattva* Granth and *AmrtataraanginiTika* saying that, the Gita advocates the philosophy of theism and it is a book on practical religion and ethics. According to Radhakrishnan, the Gita is nothing but the synthesis of philosophy, ethics and religion. For him, though the text has its base in the religious ethos in the Hindu culture, it defies all sectarian barriers and is utmost catholic and universal in spirit. As he quotes, "it represents not any act of Hinduism but Hinduism as a whole, not merely Hinduism but religion as such, in its universality, without limit of time or space, embracing within its synthesis the whole gamut of the human spirit". Moreover, in his book *Indian Philosophy* Radhakrishnan states "the Gita tries to harmonise the different trends of life current at the time and correct their extravagances".

Bhagavad Gita has had and continues to have a great influence on different types of people from several cultures around the globe

- The Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, stated that the Gita was a call to humanity as a whole, to surrender mind, body and soul to purity.
- Sri Aurobindo averred that the Bhagavad Gita always had a new message for people of any age, from any part of civilization.
- Albert Einstein stated that he was so deeply moved by the Gita that once he started contemplating on how God went about creating the universe, he found everything else false and of no consequence.
- Dr. Albert Schweitzer said that the Gita is so profound that it deeply influences the whole spirit of mankind by its attitude of devotion to God.
- Aldous Huxley stated that the Bhagavad-Gita is the most complete statement of perennial philosophy
- Prof. Ganweshwar Mishra opines that Gita “ demarcates the boundaries of theoretical and practical reason and expounds the fundamental principles upon which reason on these two spheres proceeds”.
- Prof. Satyabadi Mishra portrays Bhagavad Gita to be individualistic and other worldly since liberation is the ultimate goal of human life.
- Prof. Ganesh Prasad Das opines that “ when we study the Gita closely and carefully, we find that there is in it ontology of ethics as well as ethics of ontology and epistemology of ethics as well as ethics of epistemology. The Bhagavad Gita is a text par excellence in applied ethics or rather applied philosophy.”

The moral values in life hold great importance from the point of personal, social and spiritual development. Values, morals and ethics are inextricably tied together. Values are what we learn from childhood; the 'stuff' we acquired from our parents and immediate surroundings. Values are the motive power behind purposeful action. Moral values are meant for making the quest to find the higher self an easier. Unfortunately, many amongst us may find it difficult to follow values such as truthfulness, honesty, forgiveness in our lives because we have not perceived the subtle gains that come to us by following these values. Or, maybe, we are careless to realize the importance of values in life. Ethics, on the other hand, are how we actually do behave in the face of difficult situations that test our moral fiber. Ethics are the code or principles on which one's character depend. Ethics and character are closely related. Values are essential to ethics develop at an early age and can be instrumental to building character.

Ethical conduct is the foundation-stone of every religion. As per Sikhism there are five basic elements of ethics. These are: Wisdom, Truth, Temperance, Humility, Courage, Justice, and Contentment. Four of the eightfold path of Buddhism — right speech, right action, right livelihood and right effort — are all about ethical conduct. Chapter 13 of Bhagvat Gita elaborates the 20 values that Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna. These values are fundamentally necessary for a seeker to prepare the mind for the knowledge of the Self. One of these values is 'Arjavam' which means straightness, it means conducting oneself accordance with one's ethical standard. 'Arjavam' means an alignment of thought, word and deed. These are the rudimentary requisites for proper practice of any religion. Ironically our

concern for religion is conveniently oblivious of these elementary requisites.

Spirituality can help us become better human beings if we follow the general moral codes with devotion. It prepares our body and mind, to receive God's inspiration. It also transforms our thinking, speech, and our actions that form virtuous habits that determine our moral character. One cannot be spiritual without good character. Character is a combination of qualities that make an individual ethically admirable.

People in the Western countries may not be very religious, but by and large, they are honest in daily life. They have a high sense of integrity and they take pride in that. Whereas, in India majority of us have lost faith in our religious leaders so called professional gurus who are only after gaining prominence and luxurious living without divine realization. Should we lose faith in ourselves also and be carried away by the stream of unethical practices or stand upright? We ought not to forget that unselfishness, honesty and humility are more paying regarding contentment and spiritual fulfillment. If we follow this path that represents the true spirit of any religion, then we can serve our nation in a better way. Why should we follow professional gurus, who have lost moral values and are only interested in 'name & fame' and acquiring assets without any sense of responsibility? Believe me with adequate integrity, sincerity, devotion to duty and humility; we can improve our community as well as our quality of life. I can say that when we live our lives according to moral values that are based on honesty, compassion, courage, modesty, and forgiveness, then we can also form positive bonds with other people.

2) The Central Teaching

Gita's ethics is different ethics of activism. It is not supporting the ascetic ethics. Action without any hope of reward or feedback is called true action. It is not renunciation of action. Gita's concept of the division of works among four classes of men can be compared to plato. Gita advocates to act according to the prescribed works for Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vaisya and Sudras. Plato states three classes of men and advises them to act according to prescribed works for different classes for the highest social good. Gita's concept of the performance of specific duties (svadharma) is comparable to F.H Bradely's famous dictum "my station and its duties". But there is difference between them for the aim of Gita is social goodness; where as Bradely's aim of the performance of duties according to one's station is self-realization. Bhagavad Gita,s ethics of Niskama Karma has similarly with Immanuel Kant's ethics of "Duty for duties sake" The ethics of both advises us to perform our duties without any desire for fruits or any consideration of ends and consequences. But kant regards good will as the highest good where as Gita's goal is the attainment of God. Moreover , Kant's ethics is legal but Gita's ethics is teleological. Hence, it is clear that Gita's ethics of Karmayoga is unique although there are some similarities with Bradely, Plato and Kant.

The Bhagavad Gita is one of the important religious treatise of Hinduism which gives impetus on Karmayoga or function of divine service. Inaction is equal to death and therefore one should act according to his own nature. Gita advises us

to perform action as a duty without expecting its results. It is philosophically significant to regard action as divine action. Gita prevents illegal action in the name of religion. Action are to be performed as a service to humanity which will lead to liberation or to the ultimate goal of human life. Niskama Karma can be regarded as the ethical also.

Bhagavad Gita is a valuable and rare work of Indian Philosophy. It is an intellectual wealth of Indian culture. The teachings of the can help anybody. As Dr. S. Radhakrishnan says, "...It is a book conveying lessons of philosophy, religion and ethics....if the hold which a work has on the mind of man is any clue to its importance, then the Gita is the most influential work in Indian thought"

Karmayoga explained in the third chapter of the Gita. The word "karma" is derived from the Sanskrit "kri" which means "to do". "Yog" means union. So, karmayoga literally translates to the path of union through action. Actually a karmayogi experience union before action. On the other hand, the prescribed by Lord Krishna is also called karma. Karmayoga is a way of acting. Thinking, and willing by which one orients oneself towards realization by acting in accordance with his duty without selfish desires. The work done without selfish expectations purifies one's mind and gradually makes an individual fit to see the value of reason.

3) Karmayoga in Gita-

According to Bhagavad Gita, karmayoga is a way to union of the finite soul with God through action. It unites the human will with the divine will. Man can't remain inactive for a single moment. one has to act for the preservation of his for he is compelled to act by his organic needs and physical impulses. It is clear in the following sloka of Gita-
"Na hi kascit ksanam api jatu tisthatya karmakrti
Karyate hyavasah karma sarvah prakritijair gunaih.."

This sloka translates as: For none ever remains inactive even for a moment; For all are compelled to action by the Gun (qualities) inherent in prakriti (the fact in nature). Hence, to live in this world one has to act according to his nature because inaction is death. Here thinking, talking and any kind of physical work is included in karma only proper action can help us to continue our life cycle. Karma as divine service is beginning less and through such action we can also reach the highest goal of human life. Every individual is born with certain aptitudes and predispositions which constitute his innate nature and determine his station in the society. His special vocation in life is determined by his native endowment. He ought to perform his specific duties for the sake of duty, which fit in with his abilities. In Bhagavad Gita Lord Krishna advised Arjuna to do his allotted task for action is superior to inaction. It is because with inaction even life's normal course is not possible. In this regard Gita states: "Niyatam Kuru Karma tvam Karma jyayo hyakarmanah. Sarirayatrapa Ca te na praiddhyed."

Since none can remain inactive for a moment we should perform action as divine service and all work should be regarded as worship. We need to do our specific duties. It is better to die in performing one's appointed duties than to perform some other's specific duties. It is dangerous to arrogate to oneself some other's works. One is bound to

prove amiss in another's field of action. Gita accepts ancient Indian division of works according to man's nature. Brahmanas or teachers and priests have to study and teach together with prayer. Ksatriyas or soldiers have to fight a just battle. Vaisyas or the peasants and traders have to work in the fields and keep them busy in trade and commerce. Sudras or the servants have to serve the three higher classes. These four classes of men have their own specific duties. By performing their duties they can attain their highest goal. Because man's specific duties are strictly determined by his particular station in the society.

4) Types of Karmas

According to Gita, karmas or actions are of two types- (a) Sakama karma or action with expectations of fruits and (b) Niskama karma or action without any selfish desires. An action done with some expectation about the outcome is called sakama karma. On the other hand the action done without being attached to the fruits and done simply as a matter of duty is called niskama karma. In order to perform niskama karma we have to give up selfish expectations about the outcome, to give up the proprietorship of the action and offer all actions to God. A true karmayogi offers the fruits of action to God and works for the benefit of the society without any pride. "The yogi conquering attachment to the fruits of works, attains to enduring peace. Those who impelled by desire, are attached to the fruits of their action do get bound as though by chain."

Gita gives light to the fact that sakama karma is the cause of bondage and niskama karma paves the way to liberation from birth and death. So, one ought to perform his duties in a disinterested spirit without egoistic desires. One who is attached to fruits of his actions is bound by his attachment. Renunciation of action to God is essential to get freedom and peace. We should avoid to be actuated by love or hatred, anger or fear, joy or sorrow for these are belong to mental being and are foreign to spiritual being. One should conquer egoistic desires. But we can't eradicate all desires and therefore we have to change our egoistic desire in to altruistic desire. Gita is against the renunciation of one's specific duties without attachment and desire for fruits is true renunciation. The Gita tries to build up a philosophy of Karma based on jnana and supported by Bhakti.

The *summum bonum* of the Gita's ethics is union with the supreme Self or God. This is called liberation or ultimate freedom. The liberated Self is in constant communion with God and stays in the God's essence. Samkara attempts to graft the Vedantic conception of liberation on the Gita. According to him, liberation is necessarily the result of philosophical knowledge of the Self and there is no other means to it. All other means are only instrumental in gaining the philosophical wisdom. However, the Gita widely differs from the Vedanta in this respect as far as it understands liberation is possible through alternative means. Even on the nature of liberation the Gita differs from the Vedanta philosophy. Liberation in the Gita does not mean absolute cessation of body, mind and all physical phenomenon. It is not necessarily an after death achievement. It can be attained in the earthly life itself. The Gita conceives liberation as union with God and cessation of rebirth and all that follows. The idea of cessation of transmigratory life needs a bit of

discussion. Lord *Krsna* time and again states that those who reach Him will never return, while even the heaven is subject to return. Those who follow the *Vedic* prescription of sacrifices attain the heaven as a result but will be back to mortal world after experiencing the fruits of those sacrifices. Even the heaven is said to be pervaded by *gunas* and thus does not mark cessation of rebirth. But the union with God, which transcends *gunas* and their afflictions, leads to the cessation of transmigratory life.

2. Conclusion

The *Gita* does not advocate a strict code of moral discipline like the law-books but encourages a definite mental inclination in all actions. Though it does not give a rigorous scheme of individual and social behaviour, it distinguishes three kinds of worship, austerities, food, worshippers, gifts, abandonment, knowledge, action, agents, intellect, firmness, pleasures etc., in accordance with *Sativa*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*. Here, everything *Sattvic* is acclaimed as desirable, *everything Rajasic* as marginally acceptable and everything *Tamasic* is to be rejected as despical. All actions and phenomenon which are characterized or predominated by *Sativa* are helpful in the process of ethical perfection. Man has to consciously chose *Sattvic* things in order to be morally perfect. Hence, man is volitionally free to opt for anything even though he is conditioned by his *svabhdva* to an extent. He has to deliberately attempt to demystify his faculty of judgement, *Prajna* through self-control and employ his moral freedom in the right path.

What can we take to be the ethical teaching of the *Gita*?. To put it very precisely, it is to transcend our self-regarding attitude to other-regarding attitude. The message of *Gita* is universally comprehensive and everlasting. In today's atomic age when human society is grievously endangered by excessive materialism some of the message of the *Gita*, like *niskama karma* have assumed an ever greater importance. The supreme value of the *Gita* as the divine song is the note of harmony. It is free from the defects of *naturalism*, *monadism* and *absolutism*. Its ethics and spiritual philosophy enquire into the nature of the *purusa* or atman and the means for realizing it. Its moral theory evolves out of it. Its ethical philosophy has the foundation in the ontology dealing with the nature of Brahman as the Absolute. *Ahimsa* as an ethical value of the *Bhagavadgita* integrates human experience in all its levels and satisfies the logical test of coherence and all the comprehensiveness as well as the ethical and spiritual needs of human perfectibility.

The *Gita* teaching has a profound influence on each and every individual. It is the cream of Hinduism. The *Gita* is the divine song of love. *Narayana* and *Nara* are inseparable. *Krisna* and *Arjuna* are one as *Nara* represents universal man or the whole of humanity. Its ethics, values, spiritualism, philosophy are meant for the whole world. It is the call to the spirit of humanity to shed its ignorance and sinfulness and enjoy the hospitality of divine life and love. In conclusion, we can say honestly that if one properly follows the instruction of the *Gita*, then he can be freed from all the miseries and anxieties of life. A *Ksetriya* performs his duties by doing his *Ksetriya-dharma*. One's performance of

Ksetriya-dharma influences ones next life and the next life will be spiritual.

References

- [1] Walli, Koshelya, *The Conception of Ahimsa in Indian Thought*.
- [2] *Srimadbhagavadgita*, XVI-2 & 3.
- [3] P.N.Srinivasacari, *The Ethical philosophy of the Gita*
- [4] Radhakrishna, S. ,*Indian Philosophy*, Vol-1, New Delhi, Oxford University Press