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INTERPRETATIONS OF THE GĪTĀ

A great paradox of the GĪtā has been the immense diversity of views of the interpreters with regard to the philosophy and central message of this very popular poem. This diversity existed not only among the old commentators before and after Śaṅkarācārya, but the situation has remained the same with regard to the interpretations of modern scholars as well. The poem abounds in sublime views on human life and divine nature, which seems to be the main reason for its popularity. Very few people are able to deduce a coherent consistent philosophy out of the diverse ideas and concepts scattered throughout the book. With regard to scholars, everyone has an interpretation of his own. Consequently there have arisen a number of schools, with their own interpretations, and every school has its ardent followers. This is a very unsatisfactory situation with regard to a small book of about thirty-five pages and seven hundred verses. Time has now come for scholars to sit down together, discuss the diverse interpretations and on the basis of the text, produce a single, faithful and reliable commentary on the GĪtā. With the aid of modern advanced method of research this task is likely to succeed today than at any other period in the past.

The diversity in interpretations may be due to two reasons -

1. Inability or unwillingness to determine the nature of the text: whether the whole book is by one author or whether an original

text was later expanded on the lines of the Mahābhārata, which has been expanded more than thrice.

2. Disregard for the first chapter of the poem or its misinterpretation. The problems of Arjuna were either disregarded or lightly treated by Kṛṣṇa, in the first instance. Only when Arjuna insisted on a solution of his difficulties did Kṛṣṇa start to give a detailed and satisfactory explanation of the relevant questions.

For the sake of this article, I shall confine myself to the second topic - the questions, problems and line of thinking of Arjuna. A great diversity exists among commentators even with regard to this single chapter. Some have neglected it altogether. Without dilating upon the various misinterpretations of this important chapter, I shall try to give an exposition which is related to every part of the poem up to the end, and which the author(s) of the Gītā have continuously kept in their mind during the course of the dialogue. Arjuna's problems are the problems of every man in any age and any country.

#### IMPORTANCE OF CHAPTER I

In a way this chapter is an epitome of the whole Gītā. But some scholars have disregarded it as a description of the battlefield and heroes. The topics raised or suggested in this part are enlarged and expounded in a general way during the rest of the discourse. It is very carefully conceived by the author and artistically presented, with great attention to the implication of every word and every verse. It is like a one-act drama or an operetta. The characters in it are representatives or types of persons we meet in everyday life. They are endowed with tendencies and natures which give rise to their problems, as will be seen

in the rest of the poem. The various characters react in different ways although the situation is the same. The dialogues are eloquent and illustrate the natures of the persons concerned. Important ethical and psychological problems are involved in the situation, which every character looks at according to his own nature. In short, this is a representation of human nature, the problems of life, the root cause of the problems and the probable solution. Whereas Chapter I is a specific illustration of human characters, Chapter XVIII is a general description of such characters and their way of looking at life and behaviour in society. The first word of the first verse in the first chapter is Dharma; and the last word in the last verse of the last chapter is Nīti. Factors in human nature that influence Dharma and Nīti are concretely illustrated in the first chapter and their description occurs in the last and the preceding two chapters.

#### HUMAN NATURES

Dhṛtarāṣṭra has only one verse in the whole poem, although there were occasions for a few more in the following dialogue. The purpose of the author is to show how even in old age persons physically and also spiritually blind, are not able to forget, "I and mine". He is anxious to know how "my" (māmakāḥ) sons fared in the war.

Then Duryodhana appears on the scene, and speaks to Droṇācārya, his preceptor in the martial arts. His speech also betrays his innate nature - arrogance, egoism, conceit, sarcasm, selfishness, greed and disregard for human life. 'These and many other warriors have arrived here to lay down their life for me'. "Me and I" are important, "their life" is insignificant (I. 2-11).

The presence of Bhiṣma is also suggested in the poem to bring out the traits of his character. He was not in favour of this internecine

conflict, yet he has accepted the role of commander-in-chief, and he tries to please Duryodhana by 'a lion's roar and blowing his powerful conch' (I. 12) . Even old, wise, brave persons have to please youth on whom they are dependent.

Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa now appear on the scene in their spacious chariot drawn by white horses. The author now bestows greater attention on depicting the nature of Arjuna and the changes in his emotions and thinking.

Duryodhana and Arjuna have both come to the battlefield for a similar purpose, but barring a few exceptions, their natures and characters are entirely different. With regard to egoism, pride and enthusiasm, both are initially similar. But the nature of Arjuna undergoes a gradual transformation as he studies the war situation, and at the end of the Gītā, he is an entirely different person. Although egoistic, boastful and enthusiastic in the beginning, these tendencies melt away under the stress of the war-situation. He is tender-hearted, sensitive, respectful, introspective, logical, far-sighted, generous even towards enemies, willing to sacrifice his secular prospects, and even life, for maintaining ethical and moral values, willing to learn, yet bold enough to take his own decision, and last but not the least, ready to change his nature. A careful study of the text will clearly reveal these traits.

Kṛṣṇa is a silent observer of human nature and actions. He is calm, balanced, cheerful, and smiling in a situation in which Arjuna has broken down and is weeping with remorse.

These traits, tendencies and attitudes in human nature are presented with a purpose, to show in the poem their influence on the motives and actions of men. The problems of the persons are rooted in their natures, and they can be solved only by changing and sublimating these natures. Chapters XIV, XVI, XVII and XVIII discuss this topic in greater detail.

### ARJUNA'S INTROSPECTION

The author bestows greater attention on depicting the psychology and problems of Arjuna, who is represented as the prototype of man in every age and every part of the earth. When both the armies are arranged for battle, he asks Kṛṣṇa to drive the chariot in the centre so that he could see the warriors on the opposite side, who had the audacity to stand against a renowned archer like him. Without speaking a word Kṛṣṇa took the chariot to the centre of the battlefield and spoke only five words, 'Pārtha, behold these assembled Kurus' (I. 25). When Arjuna looked at both the armies, he was overwhelmed suddenly by a loss of nerve, and for a moment lost his consciousness. But he recovered, described to Kṛṣṇa the effects of the shock on his physical and mental condition, and in a mood of introspection proceeded to explain the reasons for this emotional breakdown (I. 28-30). There is an attempt on the part of Arjuna to analyse the situation logically and arrive at a moral decision. He tries to look at his behaviour in terms of (1) Motives, (2) Action, (3) Results, and (4) far-reaching impact on his life.

### ARJUNA'S LOGIC

'My motives are wrong, oh Keśava. I do not see any good in life by killing my relatives in battle' (I. 31). The word 'nimittam' is explained as 'omens' by traditional commentators. Arjuna is thinking about his 'motives and objectives' in coming to the battlefield. He had come there for 'success, kingdom and happiness'. But when he foresaw the results or consequences of the war, he lost all desire for these personal gains. 'I have no more any craving for victory, kingdom and pleasures in life. What can I do with them?' (I. 31-32). Arjuna could imagine the immediate result of the war and its long-range impact on his personal life.

The war would result in the death of his near and dear relatives; this would be a sinful and evil action on his part. The sin of causing the death of his relatives and friends would prick his conscience during the rest of his life and make it miserable. It would also come in the way of his salvation. Arjuna was unwilling to commit sin in any form, least of all the sin of killing his own relatives, although they were his enemies in this war. 'If they are killed, I shall lose all desire to live in this world' (II. 6).

Sorrow and sin were the two great problems before Arjuna. 'What happiness shall we gain by killing these Dhṛtarāṣṭra brothers? Only sin and evil will accrue to us by killing them, even though they are aggressors' (I. 36, 37).

Kṛṣṇa tried to test the sincerity of Arjuna by holding before him the temptations of name, fame and paradise, and appealing to his manhood and racial pride (II. 2,3). But Arjuna was firm and adamant in his decision not to fight. He appealed to Kṛṣṇa saying - 'Is it not better to resort to the begging bowl rather than enjoy blood-smeared pleasures by killing my preceptors, self-seekers though they are?' (II. 5).

### THREE ISSUES

Arjuna was confused about the right course of action that would avoid sin and sorrow. He could not take a decision either way. He therefore surrendered to Kṛṣṇa beseeching him to show a way out of this moral and ethical dilemma. 'My mind is suffering from the weakness of indecision (kārpanya-doṣa). I am confused about what is moral and what is evil. As a disciple, I submit to you. Show me the way for a good life (śreyas)' (II. 7). This is the third problem of Arjuna - a decision of action that will avoid both sorrow and sin. These three problems of Arjuna are constantly kept in mind by the author of the Gītā, up to the

end of the poem. Every now and then, the argument usually ends by statements like these - 'this will relieve you from sin, this will free you from sorrow. This way you will avoid the bonds and evils of sin and sorrow. This will guide you to decide what is good and what is evil'. The whole discourse ends with the comforting and assuring statement - 'I shall free you from all sins. Abandon all sorrow' (XVIII. 66).

Sin and sorrow are not the problems of Arjuna alone. They are the head-ache of all humanity for all ages. Therefore Buddha tried to show the way out of sorrow and Christ sacrificed himself to show the way out of sin. Gītā has taken up both these problems and suggested rational solutions for them. But commentaries in the Gītā have either neglected this initial chapter or they are confused about the exact nature of the problems posed before Kṛṣṇa by Arjuna. Consequently there is a plethora of diverse commentaries, all going in different directions, with no unanimity of opinion about the exact nature of the problems in the Gītā and their solution.

#### ARJUNA'S ERROR

The attitude resorted to by Arjuna was inaction (akarma). 'I will not fight' (na yotsye) was his decision. In the middle of Chapter II Kṛṣṇa shows him how inaction also would result in sin and sorrow; the sin of avoiding one's duty and the death-like sorrow arising out of infamy for running away from the battlefield (II. 33). It was not the action of war that was wrong; Arjuna's interpretation about the motive and objective of the war was wrong. It was a war for a righteous and moral cause (dharmya saṅgrāma), and not for the personal ends of Arjuna. If he substituted the social purpose of the war in the place of his personal gains, it would not result in sin and sorrow. A war for establishing the

moral and just order of society would not bring sin upon the warrior. It will give him not sorrow, but moral satisfaction, even if it resulted in the death of his relatives. Arjuna was faced with sin and sorrow because he interpreted the purpose of the war from a very subjective, personal, narrow and self-centred point-of-view. His vision could not transcend 'I, mine, my family and my caste'. He lost sight of the social and moral aspect of the war. In the terminology of the Gītā, Arjuna was overpowered by 'āsura, rājasa and tāmasa' nature; Kṛṣṇa reclaimed him to his 'daivī' and 'sattvika' nature, by inculcating in his mind a philosophy which emphasised the good and welfare of all mankind (sarva-bhūta-hita).

### THE SOLUTION

In terms of motive, action and result, Kṛṣṇa advised him to give predominance to the social motive and subordinate personal considerations to it; to do his work with a sense of duty and social mission; and to be equally prepared for success or failure, gain or loss, joy or sorrow (II. 38). This attitude of mind is signified by the term yoga. The advice given to Arjuna in his particular situation is expressed in general terms in verses 48-50 of Chapter II.

'Cultivate the attitude of Yoga and maintain it when doing your duty; let not your motive be influenced by a craving for rewards; calmly accept success or failure, without elation or despair. The Yogic attitude is more important than action when choosing your course of action, therefore resort to Yoga. Motivated by rewards, persons are unable to decide (kṛpanāh) the right course of action. One equipped with Yoga is able to overcome the problems of good and evil. Yoga in action will result in happiness (kauśalam) and avoid sorrow'.

Karma, Dhyāna and Jñāna are means for attaining and strengthening the Yogic attitude. The cultivation of Yogic nature in the intellectual,



mental and active life will ultimately lead to salvation.

This interpretation is faithful to the text of the Gītā and it explains the whole poem up to the end. It brings this valuable discourse nearer to the life of every person, because nobody is free from sorrow and the temptation for sin. The Yogic attitude, with its psychological significance is more relevant for modern life for relieving anxieties, stress and conflicts.

Arjuna was in search of happiness consistent with ethical and moral values. He was also anxious to live a life free from grief, sorrow and misery. He was averse to a life of sin, evil and immoral actions. How to live such a life was his main problem. Avoiding sin and sorrow, and securing happiness and pleasures based on moral values, are topics discussed throughout the body of the Gītā, especially in Chapters II, XIV, XVI, XVII and XVIII.

When the problems faced by Arjuna and their solution as suggested by Kṛṣṇa are considered according to the text of the Gītā, as interpreted in this essay, certain key words in the dialogue assume entirely different meanings than those given by traditional commentaries, old and new. 'Nimittāni' (I. 31) means 'motives, objectives', and not omens. 'Kārpaṇya' (II. 7) means 'inability to decide' and not pity or anything like it. 'Kṛpaṇa' (II. 49) means 'unable to decide', and not wretched. 'Kauśalam' (II. 50) means 'happiness, well-being' and not skill. These new meanings are relevant to the issues raised by Arjuna and they are in accordance with Sanskrit dictionaries.

This new exposition of the very first chapter of the Gītā is the first step towards dissolving the diversities in meanings and establishing a single, faithful interpretation of the poem.