

"In the wide world outside and particularly when I move into a different cultural matrix I often find myself oscillating between "to do" and "not to do". I turn to the Gita to seek a way out. It fails me. Does it fail Arjuna also?"

Social Action and the Gita

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The teachings of the Gita are triggered by an unexpected turn of events in the battle field at Kurukshetra. The Kauravas and the Pandavas, cousin brothers, are entrenched for a decisive fight to settle their claims for the ancestral kingdom. Just when the battle cry has been let loose, conches declaring the war have been blown, Arjuna breaks down at the sight of his elders, friends and relatives ready to fight and kill and get killed. The bow slips down from his hand and he refuses to fight at any cost. Krishna, his charioteer and guide, is taken aback. He would never suspect such an undignified behaviour on the part of Arjuna, the all time renowned warrior, "the best of the archers" of his time and "the scion of the illustrious clan of the Pandavas." Arjuna's sudden and impulsive decision not to fight appears to him unseemly for a member of the warrior class, a kshatriya.

This in brief is the crisis Krishna is called upon to apply his mind and wisdom. One may ask : Is Arjun free to refuse to fight when all preparations of war, in consultation with him, have been completed ? Can he not be charged of disregarding his obligations to society, the obligations which he has all along promised to fulfill ? Is he entitled to reverse his course of action in the mid stream, particularly when he has chosen to lead a multitude of followers ?

It is not that Arjuna is not conscious of his obligations. He is well aware of all this. But it is the larger interests of the family and race that weighs with him. To him it is clear that his resolve to fight will result in complete dismemberment of society on all scores. It is sure to lead to moral and spiritual deprivation of the clan. He thus resolutely tells Krishna that he has absolutely no intention to pursue that selfeffacing battle which is, to all intents and purposes, a battle fought to gain selfish ends. He would rather be killed than lift his bow to shoot those who stand in the battle front ready to fight against him.

The crisis further deepens. Krishna unmoved by Arjuna's emotional outburst speaks with equanimity, confidence and poise that of a

master mind. He implores and urges him to cast off his melancholy. He reminds him of his *kshatriya* origin and tradition. But his appeal to social obligations cuts no ice with Arjuna. Krishna soon realizes that it is a moral and spiritual crisis. It has thus to be handled differently. He explains to him what killing and death really mean. "The self (atma) is immortal, unborn and eternal, while this body, the temporary habitat of the immortal atma, is perishable." But all this sounds prosaic to Arjuna. He is still not enthused to pick up his bow and fight. *He has to be satisfied on the score that 'killing anyone for selfish ends is not unethical'.*

Krishna now strikes another line of argument. He socializes Arjuna's problem. He discusses it against a broader spectrum of society at large. Here it is claimed that the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, though arising as a consequence of a personal crisis, provides an occasion to Krishna to propound the most sublime and profoundest of philosophy which is believed at the same time to be metaphysically sound and pragmatically unassailable. He dissipates Arjuna's fear of incurring untold sin of killing his respected elders and dear ones. He points out a way of escaping good and bad fruits of one's actions. Thus what is panacea for Arjuna's woe, it is claimed, is panacea for everyone. Arjuna's instance is simply illustrative. It is asserted that the Gita's teachings thus have a message for humanity at large and holds good for all times and climes.

Krishna develops his thesis by pointing out that man is so made that he must be engaged in one activity or the other all the time. "Not even for an instant one can indeed remain inactive." "You cannot even maintain your earthly existence if you desist from work." He recommends thus to Arjuna: "Therefore be always engaged in actions that *ought* to be performed by you (but) without any attachment." "Your province lies to performance of work and never extends to its fruit. Let you not be motivated by the fruit of action, nor let your attachment be to inaction." Krishna stresses on performing one's duty in life disinterestedly. Consequently Arjuna agrees to fight and Krishna thus succeeds eminently in finding out a way to Arjuna's predicament. This has moral for any one of us who are involved in any kind of social action.

But, what is one's duty? How to determine? Who is to decide what one has to do? Is one free initially to opt out for a particular vocation in life? What are the constraints on one's freedom of choice? These are the pertinent questions still left unresolved. Krishna is not bothered about them at all. He simply bypasses them.

However, these make sense only when individual behaviour is viewed against the background of social organization to which the individual belongs. The so-called virtues have no intrinsic values. A Robinson Crusoe, himself constituting the whole society, may comfortably throw overboard, with impunity, considerations of "good" behaviour. But, we know, man is born into a society and therefore, he does not enjoy absolute freedom. Evaluation of his behaviour is meaningful only in social context. Truth, honesty, integrity, selflessness, sympathy, fellow-feelings, etc., are

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social virtues that find expression in the day-today behaviour of an individual. Some of these are *sine qua non* for any human organization while others may be specific to a particular culture. Let us examine the social context in which Arjuna was placed and what social antecedents Krishna keeps in view while recommending to him a specific line of action.

The Gita takes for granted the socio-economic system that obtains then, namely, the division of the society into four classes, the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. And Krishna is further reported to have claimed that he created "these four social classes each characterized by its respective *guna* and *karma*." He thus gives it the semblance of an order ordained by the Creator. Each one of us is born in it. From the very birth one finds himself fitted into the steel jacket of this socio-economic system. Further, where one is to be born is also already determined for him by the actions of his previous birth. This has continued from time immemorial and will continue till eternity. A cycle set in motion by your own karma. The individual thus in the first instance has to recognize the hopeless and helpless situation he is born in. The station in life allotted to you is your own earning from some unknown doings. *No escape*. You must learn to reconcile with it. Why grudge and feel disgruntled then? Learn to make the best of it. "Arjuna! being bound down by your own *karma* born of your nature, you will have to perforce do that which through delusion you do not want to". He makes it more explicit when he observes; "If through conceit you think you will not fight, this resolve of yours will be of no avail since your *prakriti* nature, will engage you." Under the circumstances then one should submit quietly to the order of *caturvarnya*, the caste system, and only thus "engaged in one's own karma, man achieves perfection." Moreover, if a person carries out his actions "forsaking all attachment and having dedicated them to Brahma is not polluted by sin as the lotus leaf by water", Krishna thus urges Arjuna to acquire an attitude of non-attachment in the performance of his duties as a *kshatriya* and dedicate all of them to Him, the God-head. This way he will escape all possible good or bad consequences of his actions. This will also allow him to attain the highest good, unity with Brahman.

To recapitulate, Gita's theoretical framework seems to be based largely on two assumptions, immortality and ultimate unity of individual self (atman) with Brahman, the supreme Creator and inviolable authority of the scripture. The complex problem of the relation between individual and society seems to be oversimplified in the Gita. The world emanates from Him. The design is His. And the scripture is from Him. "Thus let the Shastra be your authority in the matter of what is to be done and what is not to be done. Know this and then undertake only that action which has

the sanction of the *Shashtra*". According to Gita, thus, Arjuna has no reason to feel hesitant in pursuit of his duties as Kshatriya. In fact he has no choice. For Krishna lets him have a peep into the cosmic happenings (in *visvarupa darsana*) : Arjuna sees in the mouth of Krishna his friends and foes being killed in the battle field. After this demonstration it was an easy job for Krishna to impress on him, "Therefore, get up, win glory. Vanquishing your foes enjoy the prosperous kingdom. I have already killed them. O Arjuna, be merely an instrument". And further he prompts him saying. "Kill these who have already been killed by me. Do not fear. Fight. You will conquer your rivals in the battle."

The Gita thus identified *karma* with the specific duties laid down in the socio-economic organization of the four *varnas* prevalent in the Indo-Aryan society of his times. The word *karma* occurs about 150 times in the text and is used both in its technical and non-technical sense. In its broadest meaning it encompasses all activities socially trivial or significant originating from an individual. It is an extraordinary situation in which Krishna is called upon to explain his philosophy of action. Here is an Arjuna overwhelmed with emotion, completely incapacitated to think clearly, and abjectly surrendering himself to his advice. And Krishna does not reason out things with him. He rather intellectualizes and philosophizes the whole issue. He makes out statements after statements which are to be simply accepted without questioning. Krishna for instance, does not stop to explain how this battle is righteous. And if it is righteous for Arjuna why not for Duryodhana also. He nowhere defines what he means by the *shastra*, although the relevant doctrines of the *shastras* appear to be summarised in the Gita where the duties of various *varnas* are enumerated. He appears to be in a hurry to goad him to action. The questionable demonstration of *visvarupa-darsana* leaves Arjuna completely stupified and leaves no option before him except to carry out Krishna's command. It is not Krishna's impeccable logical reasoning but Arjuna's own helplessness that forces him to succumb to his advice. The Gita thus leaves an enquiring reader unenlightened on the vital issue of action : what is one's duty in life ?

Here we wish to take up issue with the Gita on another count also. *The statements of Krishna are dogmatic and authoritarian.* For instance even if we concede, just for the sake of argument, that Krishna speaks as Godhead in the Gita then the system promulgated by Him is supposed to hold good all over. His creation. Obviously it is not so. One has not to go far to challenge it. The primitive societies in India have had altogether different socio-economic patterns. A bewildering diversity of such systems is revealed by a study in other parts of our globe. Krishna's observations are true only of the Indo-Aryan society to which both He and Arjuna belong in antiquity. To acclaim that individual's mundane and spiritual development and welfare entirely depends on acting in conformity with the dictates of the *shastras* which prescribe a hard and bound system of four *varnas*, is to say the least. an ad hoc explanation, not universally

applicable. *Appeal to its divine origin runs against the diverse systems obtaining in different parts of the world, and literal submission to the scheme of things given in Gita will simply allow perpetuation of status quo and permit no change ever. All this goes against human history.* Perhaps even an omnipotent Creator may not feel happy with a system set up once for ever. Pentomimic creatures may bore Him.

Finally one may ask: What lesson does Gita have for us today? Like Arjuna most of us find ourselves most of the time in situation similar to that of his. For him it is simple. He could refer to the *shastra*. It is his ultimate refuge. He goes by its prescription. But what is the *shastra* for us today? Is it the law of the country? Certainly not. Moreover in international behaviour the laws of the lands clash. Is there any international *shastra*? Obviously none. Who respects what depends entirely on what suits whom. In such a chaotic state what will Krishna suggest? It is easy to say, 'Do your duty with selfless devotion.' But the crux of the problem is how to determine what is your duty. Who are the *noble* ones who are to establish norms to be imitated by the common man? Who are the learned, the enlightened ones, selflessly engaged in the performance of their duties, to inspire confidence in the ignorant ones? Does Arjuna discover a model in Krishna to copy? Let us look back again once more. How does Gita enlighten Arjuna? It is at long last that Krishna succeeds in bringing around Arjuna to his view-point with persuasion, argumentation demonstration, not as human but as Almighty Divine. He could extract from Arjuna finally, "O Krishna, through your grace my delusion is gone and I have regained normally. I stand freed from my doubts. I shall abide now by your bidding." And he fights and fights hard, not inspired with an urge to selflessly perform his duties laid down by the *shastra* but like one intent on winning the war by fair or foul means. The course of events is narrated for us by Vyasa, the author of the *mahabharata*. Killings of Bhishma, Ashvathama and Karna, wherein Krishna is actively involved, are not the doing of the one who propounds the holy scripture, the Bhagwad-gita, and the one who listens to it. Arjuna thus is pushed into a course of action—an action logic and ethics of which he is not convinced of. The last verse of the Gita perhaps is more explicit. "It is my conviction", reports Sanjaya, "that wherever is Krishna the Lord of yoga and Arjuna, the wilder of bow there rule undoubtedly, prosperity, victory, glory, and stability of behaviour." In other words physical strength coupled with diplomacy alone pays dividends. *The Gita may be found inadequate and wanting to soothe the burning world today. The modern world may have to find its own remedy. It has to write up its own shastra, a new code of conduct.* To achieve any stability such a code has to be based not on the *shastra* of a particular culture but rather on explicit recognition of equality of man the world over, absolute inviolability of human dignity, co-operative coexistence, involvement of all humanity at large in production and consumption of material gains, unhempered flow of brotherly affection and selfless devotion to pursuit of truth. □