

## The Cultural Connotation of *Dharma* in the *Bhagavad Gītā*

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**Abstract:** *Dharma* is the preservative and supportive principle of cultural life which encompasses human duties, customs, traditions, religion, and righteousness. It is considered first among the four ends of human life (*Puruṣārthacatuṣṭaya*). Out of all the *yogas* and paths to 'God realization' as described in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (the *Gītā*), three *yogas* – *jñāna* (knowledge), *karma* (action) and *bhakti* (devotion) are considered a trinity in unity where *karma* is the leader. The *Bhagavad Gītā* preaches that *karma* (action) sans *kāma* (desire) with a spirit of sacrifice (*niṣkāmakarma*) can lead one to divinity.

**Keywords:** *Dharma, Karma, Bhakti, Jñāna, Niṣkāmakarma.*

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### I

In the *Bhagavad Gītā* *Kuruṣetra* is considered as *dharmakṣetra*, a place for righteous conduct. Righteousness (*dharma*) as a cultural vehicle at no point of time forsakes service, sacrifice, truth, character, and purity both for the self and the society. Vedic and the epic India considers *dharma* as first among the four *puruṣārthas* or four ends of human life. It protects and preserves life – “*dhriyate loko' nena, dharati lokam vā iti dharmah √dhr +man*” (Apte 522). It promotes growth, ensures happiness and is essential for public well-being (*lokasaṃgraha*). It successfully helps to peruse the other *puruṣārthas* like *artha* and *kāma* meaningfully. The *Mahābhārata* (III.150.28) enumerates that *Dharma* has its origin in good practices, and the *Vedas* are established in the *dharma* – *ācārasambhavo dharmah dharmād Vedāḥ samutthitāḥ* (Pandaya 1368) cf. *Manusmṛtiḥ* (Sastri I.108) - *ācāraḥ paramodharmah* . *Kaṇāda* in his *Vaisesikasūtra* also explains *dharma* as the means for attaining an unsurpassed and elevated state of life - “*yato' bhyudaya niḥśreyasasiddhiḥ sa dharmah* (1.1.1) (*Chakrabarty* 39). *Arjuna's* grief, lamentation and refusal to fight out the enemy in the warfield have given impetus to the *Bhagavad Gītā* or the Song Divine, which got emanated from the mouth of Lord *Kṛṣṇa*. His preaching of *svadharma* - the essence of righteous conduct and duty proper to one's position within the caste structure elevated *Arjuna*, to give up his dejection to destroy the foe in the field. That principle of selfless action enunciated there is known as *gītādharmā* which prompted *Arjuna* from “*na yotsye*” (II.9) (I shall not fight) into “*kariṣye vacanam tava*” (XVIII.73) (I shall obey thy order).

### II

The doctrine of 'selfless action' is sometimes described by the term *Yoga*. *Winternitz* explains it as “the doctrine of absorption, and the methods by which man can withdraw from the sense-world and become entirely absorbed in the deity” (417). It is also called a manual of *yoga* or *yogaśāstra*, which owes its psychological and metaphysical foundations in *sāṅkhya* philosophy. Time and again the *Gītā* explains *sāṅkhya* and *yoga* to be one. One who is firmly established in the either, gets the ultimate fruit of 'God realization' (*Gītā* 5.4). Further it is said that:

yat saṅkhyeir prāpyate sthanamTadyogeirapi gamyate I  
ekam sāṅkhyam ca yogam ca yaḥ paśyati sa paśyati II (V.5)

It seems that the *Gītā* attempts to reduce the minimum differences between the *jñāna yoga* of the *Upanisads* with the *karma yoga* of *Mīmāṃsā Śāstra* (III.3-4 & V. 2-6). It also overcomes the hatred and jealousy between various schools of sectarian worship (*upāsānā*) by prompting the prism of knowledge that leads to the same goal of 'God realisation' (VII. 21-22 & IX. 23-25). Various philosophical traits implicit in Vedic hymns developed in the *upaniṣads* and such traits have been reconciled in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Different schools like *advaita* or monistic (XIII.2); *viśiṣṭādvaita* or quasimonistic (VI . 30), *dvaita* or dualistic (XVIII . 66) have also been dealt with a spirit of reconciliation. In a famous dualistic passage the Lord promises to absolve *Arjuna* of all his sins if only he takes refuse in Him:

sarvadharmān parityajya māmekam sarnambraya I  
aham tvām sarvapāpebhyo mokṣayisyāmi mā śuca II (XVIII. 66)

It endeavors to call upon the privileged few to continue their own action and at the same time to lead the ignorant and illiterate mass gradually towards the common goal (Gītā 111.26). Further it claims that by devotion to the Lord (vyakta upāsana) any person irrespective of his birth, sex or social status can meet salvation. The Gītā (IX. 32) speaks:

maṁ hi Partha vyapaśritya ye' pi syuḥ pāpayonayaḥ I  
striyo vaiśyostathā śūdraste' pi yānti parām gati II

Therefore S.K.Belvelkar draws - "Gītā warns people that the stratification of Indian society into various castes and stations was a matter of agreed convenience only, normally representing one's heredity and aptitude, which by persistent effort, it might not be altogether impossible to improve" (Radhakrishna 154).

The Bhagavad Gītā (II.42-44) and Buddhism have raised their voice against the ritualistic religion of the Vedas. Both are averse to extreme forms of austerity or physical torture (VI.16; XVII.5-6), supremacy of birth, and care a little for the authority of the Vedas. In Buddhism dharma refers to the teaching of the Buddha, the Buddhist tradition and the Buddhist way of achieving liberation. In an important sense it refers to the Buddhist soteriology as a whole. Hinduism in general and the Gītā in particular accept dharma as first among the triads (trivarga). They recommend svadharma (varṇāśramadharmā) or performance of duty appropriate to one's position within the caste structure. It is clear from assurance of Lord Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna about the reward for fulfilling his duty as a warrior; if slain in the battle he will have his domicile in heaven and gaining victory he will enjoy sovereignty on earth - 'hato vā prāpsyasi svargaṁ jītvā vā bhokṣase mahīm' (II.37). Therefore the Gītā unlike the Buddha asserts the existence of transcendental reality.

Eighteen chapters of the Gītā entitled as different yogas are popularly divided into three hexads which postulate three ages of unification with the highest potential. The ways are devoted respectively to karmayoga, bhaktiyoga and jñānayoga. Advocates of such view, direct to the summing up of the Gītā the same way in the last chapter whenever summaries of karmayoga (XVIII.46 & XVIII.56-57), bhaktiyoga (XVIII.54-55 & 65) and jñānayoga (XVIII.51-54) set their appropriate evidence.

### III

Swami Ramasukha Das advocates that the ultimate harmony of various ways of philosophy and worship are achieved by this triune unity of karmayoga, bhaktiyoga, and jñānayoga. Since yogasastra means karmasastra, Arjuna is advised to perform duties established in yoga after renouncing attachment. He should remain even minded in success and failure. This equanimity of mind is called yoga.

yogasthaḥ kuru karmāṇi saṅgaṁ tyaktva Dhanani jaya I  
siddhya siddhyo samo bhūtvā samatvaṁ yoga ucyate II (Gītā 11.48)

Further it is explained that skillfulness in action is known as Yogaḥ [tasmāt yogāya yujyasva yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam (II.50)]. In jñāna and bhakti 'yoga' does not rule the roost as both the terms are the epitomes of Yoga. However there can be no perfection in action or karma without Yoga or equanimity. The first half of the term karmayoga stands for 'karma' which always awaits instruments and sincerity, and the second half stands for 'yoga' which embodies un-attachment, equanimity and impartiality in its fold. In a society of order the duty of a human being becomes the right for the others. This may be further enumerated that the duty of the orator is the right of the audience. When the orator protects the right of the audience by skilful speech, the audience protects the right of the speaker by good and patient listening. By protecting each other's rights, men give up their indebtedness to each other and attend yoga. Here protecting others right means unconditional offer of service for the betterment of humanity (Das Introduction).

Like Vivekananda, the New-Vedantist Sivananda provides a dynamic interpretation of karmayoga, which becomes for him the discipline of selfless service where all attachment to the fruit of one's action is renounced. In this context, David M. Miller quotes Sivananda in his article 'Swami Sivananda & the Bhagavad Gītā' - "Ignorant people say that one cannot work without any motive. It is great pity that they have not understood the essence and truth of karmayoga... When the thought of doing good becomes part and parcel of man's very being, he will not entertain any motive at all. He takes immense delight in serving others... The karmayoga gets immense spiritual strength and power by performing motiveless and selfless actions... Look at the stupendous and magnanimous work turned out by Lord Buddha, Sri Saṅkara and other karmayogis of yore... They lived for doing service to others. They were examples of absolute self-abnegation" (Minor 197). The Gītā advocates that man is bound by his own action except when it is performed for the sake of sacrifice (III.9). Here sacrifice is a term for the higher order of human life where one surrenders all precious possessions and achievements like wealth, austerities, sense control, knowledge and work for the sake of common wellbeing.

dravya yajñāstapoyajñā yogayajñāstathāp I  
svādhyāyajñānayajñāśca yatayaḥ samśitavratāḥ II (IV.28)

Which means - some sages perform sacrifice with material things, some sacrifice in shape of penance, others through practice of yoga, while some striving sages observing austere vows perform the sacrifice of wisdom, through the study of sacred texts.

Any work when done with a spirit of sacrifice is called niṣkāmakarma which is the cardinal preaching of the Gītā and the distinct feature of yoga. Lord Kṛṣṇa teaches the performance of action and the ways to its perfection.

karmaṇyevādhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣu kadācana I  
mā karmaphala hetubhūrmā te saṅgo'stvakarmani II (II.47).

Which means - your right is to work only, but never to the fruit thereof. Let the fruit of action be not the object of your pursuit, nor let there be any attachment to inaction.

Here S. Paul Kashap observes that no sensible individual is expected to conduct non intentional work or action without having any desire for it. The desires are emotive in character and are necessarily related to action. They are generated through sense contacts with external objects. So the actions are related to desires and the desires get associated with the emotions. Now it is suggested that the control of such emotions is necessary to check such desires which flow from emotions on the way of performing any action. While propounding niṣkāmakarma the Bhagavad Gītā emphasizes to rule out such 'second order desires' for perfection and completion of any action successfully (Matilal 126). Here the term karma/action is used both as Karma & Dharma and further it is stated that wise men get confused to discern action and inaction successfully - kiṁ karma kimakarmeti kavayopyatra mohitāḥ (Gītā IV.16). For this purpose truth of action (karma) as well as the truth of prohibited action (vikarma) must be known; even so, the truth about inaction (akarma) must be understood as the ways of action are mysterious Gītā IV.17). It shows that philosophically significant poetic utterances connote mystical meaning which is usually expected to be understood by a man of wisdom (buddhimān).

The Gītā says, "He, who sees (discerns) inaction in action and action in inaction is wise among men. He is a yogi who has accomplished all actions" (IV.18). These paradoxical lines show that action and inaction are interchangeable. Here the Gītā holds that a man with buddhi or a man of wisdom is only capable to properly evaluate and discriminate between the pleasant work (conducive to senses) as well as the good work (conducive for the ultimate wellbeing). This idea is also previously vetted by the Kathopaniṣad (1.2.1-1.2.4) where distinction has been made by the sages between śreyas (good) and preyas (pleasant) for a man of discernment (Radhakrishnan, Upanisads, 607-609).

Traditionally any essential of a text is to be determined by identification of its mahāvākya i.e great utterance. This identification varies as the individual perceptions of the seers vary. J.T.F. Jordan notes that according to Gandhiji, last 19 stanzas of chapter II containing the description of the stable mind of the 'God realised' soul constituted the essence of the Gītā, and all the rest was no more than an explanation and elaboration on the basic message (Minor 93) Aurovindo uses verses XV.16-17 as his Māhāvākya and S.Radhakrishna in Indian Philosophy emphasizes the verse II.16 as the basic for the metaphysics of the Gītā. Bala Gangadhar Tilak considered no single verse but the principle of karmayoga, Bhakti Vedanta, considered the usefulness of the principle of Sṛī Kṛṣṇa consciousness and Vivekananda emphasized the reconciliation of all paths of worship to the Divine with karmayoga as the key to the text (Minor 222).

While presenting Bankim Chandra's vision on the Gītā Ajit Ray writes, it is a synthesis of enjoyment and renunciation which provides moral foundation to the regeneration and reconstruction of Hindu society. Here Lord Kṛṣṇa is the ideal, wise and eternal man with richness of human virtues who proclaimed a religion which is elevating and universal. In his admiration Bankim writes: "By strength of his arm subdued the wicked and united India by his wisdom, who by the power of his superior knowledge proclaimed a unique selfless religion, and who in the land of the Vedas, could say Dharma is not in the words of the Vedas, but Dharma is what conduces the wellbeing of man" (Minor 42-43).

The Gītā emphasizes that one must perform duties dwelling in yoga - relinquishing attachment, and by becoming indifferent to success and failure - this equanimity is called Yoga (II.48). It is clarified that turning to inaction or clinging to the path of renunciation is not the solution to the problem of action. Any action that conforms to this standard must be dispassionate, desireless and spiritually dedicated. The action is selfless only when it overcomes greed, hatred, jealousy and other such negative qualities. The highest goal of life is mukti or blessedness which can be achieved by yoga in which there is severance of contact of pain (Gītā VI. 23). This is achieved with an attitude of evenness towards all things and beings:

sarvabhūtasthamātmānaṁ sarva bhūtāni catmani I  
īṣkate yogayuktātmā sarvatra samadarśanaḥ II (Gītā VI.29).

Which means - the yogi who is united in identity with the omnipresent, infinite consciousness and looks at all with an equal eye, beholds the 'Self' existing in all beings and all beings existing in the 'Self'.

#### IV

Common wellbeing is an important criterion of excellence in any pluralistic and conflict ridden society. The Gītā considers unity of mankind as the essence of dharma and calls God as “śāsvatadharmagoptā” (XI.18) (the protector of perennial dharma which is free from manmade meanness). A yogi always visualizes unity amidst diversity as pointed out in the line “avibhaktaṁ vibhakteṣu” (XVIII.20) (that by which human being sees one imperishable Being in all entities, which is undivided among the divided). This knowledge is known to be sāttvika (good). In the Gītā one god is friend to all the beings “suhṛdaṁ sarvabhūtānām” (V.29) and does good to all without expecting any return. So doing good work and rendering good service is as good as participation in the work of God i.e. “mat karma” (XI.55).

The primary path founders who have worked hard for the welfare of mankind like Vivasvān, Manu, Iṣkṣvāku, Janaka etc. have left their footprints to follow. Such commendable conduct of the seers is expressed in the Gītā as “yogarudhavr̥tti” (VI.3,4) which means spontaneous public welfare done with spiritual perfection through any of the yogas like karma (action), bhakti (devotion) or jñāna (knowledge) (Agarwal 238). However, blind following of any path, without appropriate modifications as per the changing needs of the society, has been discouraged with the message “deśe kāle ca pātre ca” (XVII.20). This conveys that dharma has to be relevant to the spatiotemporal needs of people.

Any amount of service with genuine motivation (dharma) done with regard to one’s pauruṣam (both mental & physical capability) begets wonderful results. Limitations of the individual capability of any karmayogi is suggested by the term svadharmā (II.31,33; III.35; XVIII.47 – Shastri 624) and svakarma (XVIII.45-46) repeatedly. Despite such limitations the Gītā inspires to contribute to the ideal of ‘sarvabhūtahitam’, (V.25: XII.4) as a key expression for good of all beings. The other term for the purpose is lokasaṁgraha (good of the world and maintenance of world order) which establishes strong link with term niṣkāmakarma. The verse “saktāḥ karmanyavidvaniso...cikirṣulokasaṁgraham” (III.25) suggests strong relationship between niṣkāmakarma (q.v.) and lokasaṁgraha (q.v.) when the former represents the technique of the work, and the latter represents the purpose of it (Agarwal 239).

The public work undertaken with a spirit of dedication ought not to be vitiated by the possessiveness and egotism of the individual (II.71: XII.13). This philosophy behind doing common good is influenced by the Vedantic vision of atman and paramātman. When paramātman pervades all the beings one should cherish equal vision for all- “samadṛṣṭiḥ” (V.18:VI.29: cf. “īśāvāsyam idaṁ sarvaṁ” in Iśa Upanisad (I. Radhakrishnan, Upanisads 567). Besides, some important aspects of human vision for common good is reflected in the lines like “samaloṣṭāśmakāncanaḥ”- to whom earth, stone and gold are all alike (VI.8:XIV.24), “samabuddhiḥ” - eye of equanimity to all (VI.9:XII.4), “samaduḥkhasukhaḥ” - taking pain and pleasure alike (XIV.24), “samacittaḥ” - constant equipoise of mind both in familiar and unfamiliar circumstances (XIII.9), and “sarvabhūtaḥite ratāḥ” - promoting welfare of all beings (XII.4).

A society always remains a mixture of good, average and bad components known as sattva, rajas, and tamas. The tāmasika elements known as āsurisampat promote insurgency, hatred and such other fisciparous tendencies that cut down the social solidarity. They are to be eliminated completely by the promotion of daivisampat (glorification of virtuous elements) for universal welfare. Thus the Gītā advocates for the promotion of ten notable aspects of human vision - unity in diversity (avibhaktaṁ vibhakteṣu), God’s work (matkarma), spontaneous service of the saints (yogarudhavr̥ttiḥ), adaptability of religious practices for spatiotemporal needs (deśa-kāla-pātra), doing good to all (sarvabhūtahitam), maintenance of world order (lokasaṁgrahaḥ), going beyond possessiveness and egotism (nirmamonirahaṁkāraḥ), evenminded vision (samadṛṣṭiḥ), not to succumb to the forces of evil (āsurisampat), and promotion of virtue (daivisampat) as the message for the elevation of the society and universal welfare (Agarwal 241).

#### V

The cultural wisdom of the Gītā is communicated with simple and moving poetic utterances. Here deep philosophy and moral musings enkindled the diminished spirit of a great warrior (Arjuna) and inured him to perform his svadharmā (duties of his caste) for the sake of keeping up the order of social life (varṇāśramadharmā). In course of his teaching Lord Kṛṣṇa advised Arjuna to remember him and fight – “Māmanusmara yudhya ca” (III.7) after relinquishing fruit of action on Him. He made clear that by performing one’s specific allotted duty with a spirit of equanimity one can attain perfection and Godspeed.

As Lokamānya Tilak states in the Gītārahasya - Gītā teaches jñānamūlaka-bhaktipradhāna-karmayoga - a life of activism grounded upon knowledge and centralized around the adoration of the Lord which paves the highest way to salvation (Radhakrishna 149). In this way the Bhagavad Gītā preaches selfless action for the common wellbeing as the principle of human life (mānavadharmā) in general, and divine life in particular.

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