

## **SRI KRISHNA – THE GITACHARYA (\*)**

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The masses of India have been stirred to the very core of their being by two personalities, viz., Sri Ramachandra and Sri Krishna. Indians have been disparagingly termed hero-worshippers and idolators. It is to the credit of the Indians that they have found their ideal and do not hesitate to worship it. Perhaps, it is so for the reason that India has produced more heroes than any other part of the world, heroes whose visions were never blurred as to the verities of life, whose conquests were over the flesh into the empyrean heights of the Everest of spirituality. The citadel they stormed was their own nature and they never relented until the souls door was thrown open to them; until the secret of life was made known to them. And they by their examples and precepts made it known to us as how to bypass this world of unrealities. Why should we not then admire them? Why should we not worship such heroes? And then as regards the so-called idolatry less of it is said the better. For, man if he does not worship an image as a symbol of Divinity, he will worship something else like Mammon or someone else, not with the idea of God but what they stand for. Which is better; to worship the Divine in a symbol or to worship the decayable?

Definitely the former. For, in the perishable there is no fixed ideal, and the conquest of ones own nature is more covetable than the conquest of the external nature. Again is nature a tiny thing that you can know all about it within the span of a few years given to you? Indians, therefore, rightly worship such personages as their ideal as have conquered their own self, own nature. Maybe sometimes the adoration is misplaced, but that quickly dies. Scores of kings have ruled over India in the last few millenniums. But who remembers them all? Who adores them? Even the worthiest of them are not — if at all — remembered more than a few times in the lifetime of a man. Not so Sri Ramachandra or Sri Krishna. They have that eternal charm about them. They eternally attract.

Sri Krishna attracts three types of persons: the believer, the sceptic, and the scholar. To the believers he is their Lord God, capable of protecting them from all calamities or to bestow courage to face boldly all misery. To the sceptic, he is a heroic and symbolic mythical personality, yet with something to impart, something to teach. To the scholar, he is a great philosopher, a great teacher.

His greatest teachings are contained in the Bhagavad Gita, which has been aptly described as the essence of the Upanisads. We need not

here enter into the controversy whether the Gita was actually delivered on the battle-field, when both the armies were poised for fight, or not. We shall confine ourselves as to what message we have from the personality which shines forth through its teachings.

We come across in the Vedas and the Upanisads apparently contradictory statements. With these statements as basis several systems of philosophy have been propounded, each holding its own view, to be perfectly in accordance with the trend of the scriptures. When all these schools of thought claim veracity, at the same time and on the ground of the same scripture, the generality of mankind gets bewildered. It knows not which path is correct and what path it should follow.

Arjuna in the battle-field experiences a similar difficulty though slightly of a different nature. His problem was to decide what his duty was. On the one hand was the pledge, as a warrior, to rid the country of all irreligious and tyrannical elements and establish righteousness, on the other he was faced with the poignant question of killing hosts of his near and dear ones, arrayed and aligned in the enemy camp. What should he do? Confused, and frightened at taking a wrong step, he breaks down completely and refuses to fight. However, he was wise enough to offer himself to be taught and guided by the nobler counsels of his friend and philosopher, Sri Krishna. He says, 'With my natural faculties overcome by (a sense of) helplessness and weakness, and my mind perplexed regarding my duty, I ask you — tell me that which is definitely good for me. I am your disciple; teach me who have taken refuge in you.'<sup>1</sup> Arjuna's despondency thus forms the genesis of the Gita.

Swami Vivekananda in a hymn to Sri Ramakrishna describes succinctly and beautifully the personality of Sri Krishna and the magnificence of his teachings thus: 'He who quelled the uproar, like that of the worlds day of dissolution, of the great battle (of Kurukshetra), who dispelled the natural *tamasic* dark night of deep ignorance (of Arjuna), and roared the sweet and soothing Gita, that person (Krishna) has now been born as Sri Ramakrishna.' Here none of the attributes of Sri Krishna are left out and none repeated. The grandeur, the beauty, the mighty power, and the mellow sweetness, all have found their place and what is not expressed can easily be comprehended. Picture the battle-field of Kurukshetra with the armies arrayed, taut and restive for battle, with the trumpets blowing fiercely and cohorts marching. Picture again the undaunting yet smiling, ready for action yet not anxious, calm and serene yet not yielding nor inactive figure of Sri Krishna as he is seated on the chariot of Arjuna, resplendent in his own glory yet in the humble role of a charioteer. That is the picture, a perfect combination of contradictions.

He was not only himself immune to all the outside tumult but was in a position to quell the storms raging in the inner mind of Arjuna, to make him see the depth of his ignorance in his misdirected pity and to convince him of the righteousness of the battle. His patience and forbearance at the folly of Arjuna in the nick of time, is something that inspires admira-

tion. He was patient enough to recount the entire Hindu philosophy to teach the disciple, who had approached in the proper way, righteousness and religion. Swami Vivekananda from his personal experience declared: 'Words, even thoughts, contribute only one-third of the influence in making an impression, the man, two-thirds.' That it is so we too may experience in our life, if we but care to note it. We might have listened to grand oratorical performances, couched in the most beautiful language, presented in a cogent manner, and delivered with a logical coherence, only to be forgotten after a while, whereas the words of some lone personality uttered in a rustic tongue and perhaps in an ungrammatical way would have left a lasting impression on us. Swami Vivekananda saw before his very eyes the transformation of scores of people who approached Sri Ramakrishna. Pandits of the old type as well as the scholars of the modern times sat at his feet forgetting all about their scholarship to learn from him, an almost unlettered priest. Likewise it was the personality of Sri Krishna that imparted weight to his words.

What is this personality? It is the life lived to perfection that unfolds the personality. Such a life is a tremendous power. Such a person is a blessing not only to himself but to thousands who come in contact with him while living in the body and millions when he is no more in the physical frame. Some millenniums have rolled on after Sri Krishna preached the Gita, still the influence Sri Krishna wields over the minds of the earnest seekers has not abated in the least. Maybe, only one Arjuna was benefited at that time but that saved the cause of righteousness. Innumerable persons have been saved later, when placed under similar situations, by the precepts of the Gita. 'Sri Krishna can never be understood until you have studied the Gita, for he was the embodiment of his own teaching,' opines Swami Vivekananda. And how true it is! Take for instance the message of unattachment to the fruits of actions. Coming from his lips it has a meaning vast and pro-found, for he was himself an illustration of what he taught. He put down many a tyrant but never cared to rule over any kingdom. What need had he to take on the role of a charioteer of Arjuna and groom the horses at the end of the days fighting? Sri Krishna himself declares: 'O Partha, I have no duty to perform; nor is there anything in the three worlds unattained that I have to attain, still I am engaged in action.'<sup>2</sup>

Arjuna's delusion was very deep. He was ready even to live by begging as a mendicant instead of doing his duty. The task of retrieving him was formidable. Sri Krishna, an expert teacher that he was, points out at the very outset, to Arjuna his folly. First he tackles him on the metaphysical plane. What did he grieve for? For the death of the bodies? They were but changes like childhood, youth and old age. One discarded them like worn out garments, to enter into new ones. The real man was the soul which was eternally present: in the past, present and the future. The soul is immutable and hence there is no cause for grief on its account.

Again, whatever is born must die. And what reason is there to grieve on account of that which is inevitable. These creatures were not manifest in the past and again they will be unmanifest in the future. They have this manifest existence only for a short duration, so why should they be grieved over? Krishna then takes up the cause of dharma, in the name of which Arjuna thought he was making a great sacrifice in renouncing his duty. It is the duty of a warrior to fight a righteous war. There is no other duty for a warrior so sacred than to fight such a war. If he falls in the battle he goes to heaven, and if he succeeds he enjoys the fruits here, in this world. So, one should try to see pleasure and pain, and loss and gain with an equal eye and fight on.

Next Sri Krishna delivers his great message of selfless work, the way of action (Karma Yoga), for getting rid of the bondage of work. He says, 'In this, there is no waste of undertaking nor chance of incurring sin; even a little of this religion saves one from great danger.'<sup>3</sup> And in this Yoga, 'You have the right only to do action and not to claim its results.' For, once a man hankers after the results, the chains of karma are clamped down on him. He becomes miserable, when he does not reap the expected harvest. By following the path of Karma Yoga one is able to attain Self-realization too and thus free himself from birth and death. This, and not going to heaven, is the final aim of all human endeavour.

Arjuna then asks, 'If in your opinion knowledge is superior to action why do you goad me to do work, which is fraught with danger.' 'A two-fold faith has been declared by Me for this human race; the way of knowledge for the Jnanis and the way of action for the Karma yogins,' says Sri Krishna. But all are not fit to adopt the way of knowledge. By mere giving up of action one does not attain to liberation. The human mind and body are such that not a single moment passes without their doing work. Man is forced to work by his inborn propensities. Even for maintenance of one's own body work is necessary, therefore, Krishna asks Arjuna to perform the prescribed duties. The creation depends on sacrifice not in the sense of pouring libations into the fire alone, but sacrifice of self-interest too. What does even a sacrifice signify except offering of the best things into the sacrificial fire, an act of sacrifice of self-interest? Therefore one should incessantly perform prescribed actions, unattached. By that one will attain the highest.

Thus did Krishna gradually and slowly lead Arjuna out of the maze of delusion, answering all his queries and anticipating the pupil's doubts until Arjuna finally surrenders: 'Dispelled is my infatuation. I have gained back my steady wisdom by your grace, and freed from all doubts as I am, I shall do your bidding.' That, a true teacher never lets down his disciple, whom he has accepted, has been proved by Sri Krishna. Sri Ramakrishna likens such a teacher to a first rate physician who, if necessary, will force the medicine down the throat of the patient.

What is the speciality of Sri Krishna's teaching? It appears that by the time of Krishna's preaching the Gita, there were two antagonistic

sections in the Hindu society, who vied with one another to establish their own view of religion as final — one party claiming that religion meant only performance of sacrifices as enjoined the Vedas, relegating to a secondary position all the other portions. Sri Krishna paints a picture of these in the following words: 'People of feeble intellect, with minds full of desire, regarding heaven as their ultimate goal, enamoured of the panegyric statements of the Vedas and asserting that there is nothing else (higher than this), speak flowery words about numerous kinds of rites giving rise to birth, actions, and their results, as the means to enjoyment and power.'<sup>4</sup> The other party were those who followed the path of knowledge condemning all karma as of no use in the way to liberation. Sri Krishna however, saw the impracticability of the views of both the sections. What was one, who was satiated with the pleasures of the worlds, to do if the heaven was accepted as an ultimate goal? This proposition, therefore, precipitately falls to the ground. Such a man has a right for a higher life of liberation. Are we then to force others into one camp or the other? The answer is no. Those who want to enjoy will follow the first and those who are satiated with pleasures will renounce. But there will still be a great many who will like to be liberated but have not that strong renunciation. What were they to do? Sri Krishna showed them the path of Karma Yoga.

They were not to give up their sacrifices and their duties, but only had to sublimate them by being unattached to the fruits of their actions or to perform them as an offering to God. In this way, they will gradually rise higher and higher until all desires drop away. The process may be gradual but sure. And this is the greatest message of the Gita.

One other contribution of Sri Krishna was, to harmonize all the Yogas, to reconcile all the paths, imparting equal importance to each one of the pathways. All paths, he said, lead to the same goal. The different paths existed only to suit the aptitudes of the aspirants. Arjuna raises the question: 'Among those devotees who worship you, being ever devoted to you and those who worship the Imperishable, the Unmanifest, who are better versed in Yoga.'<sup>5</sup> Sri Krishna says, 'They who worship Me alone endowed with supreme faith, they are of course the best yogins,'<sup>6</sup> but he immediately hastens to add, 'those who worship the Imperishable, Changeless, Unmanifest also attain Me alone.'<sup>7</sup> So there is no question of one path being superior to another. Sri Ramakrishna in his inimitable way expressed the same thought: 'The cake tastes sweet whether you eat it straight or side ways.' The main thing is to attain the Goal. There is a significant saying of Sri Krishna wherein he affirms that all sects, knowingly or unknowingly, worship Him alone. 'All truths are strung in Him as pearls upon a string.'

The exquisite passages depicting a man of established wisdom, one who has transcended the three gunas, a knower of Brahman, a real bhakta, are some of the highlights of the Gita, wherein all other considerations of what path the aspirant follows, are completely left

behind. The one crucial test applied in all cases being whether the aspirant satisfies these descriptions. There is no essential difference in the descriptions of the various perfected souls. Everywhere stress is on the conquest of desires, control of the senses, the annihilation of the ego, mental equipoise in pain and pleasure, and same-sightedness towards all creatures. 'Such people,' says Sri Krishna, 'whose minds are in equipoise, have conquered rebirth here and now. For, they have attained that pure state of Brahman.' Reaching this state man does not come under the spell of delusion or nescience. So it is a wonder that leaving aside the essentials, man fights over the non-essentials such as dogma, form, and creed, and gets hopelessly lost and leads others too astray.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhagavadgita, II.7.

<sup>2</sup> Bhagavadgita, III.22.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., II.40.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., II. 42-43.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., XII.1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., XII.2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., XII.3 and XII.4.