

Philosophy of Action and Self Actualization in Bhagavadgita and Shakespeare's Hamlet

Thore Dhanaji Vithalrao

Shri Chhatrapati Shivaji College, Omerga

Dr Yashwant A. Doke

Tuljabhavani Mahavidyalaya, Tuljapur

Abstract: Literature cannot be bound in the region, space or border. The philosophy of each nation is universal. This paper is an attempt to focus on the philosophy of karma as described in The 'Bhagavad Gita' which found afterwards in Shakespeare's tragedy 'Hamlet'. The reasons may not be clear for whether the comparative study is essential but I found the close relationship between these two works. It is not mere a consequence but connectivity between two different cultures. Both Hamlet and Arjuna are princes, Hamlet is the son of the King of Denmark and Arjuna is the son of Indra, king of the gods. Even these two characters reflect the society of their genre it's a need to consider them to symbolize not just one character instead their entire society. Both characters find themselves in situations which require them to kill family members; they are faced with a difficult internal dilemma either in the form of revenge or the concept of dharma. They are portrayed as the representatives of something larger than one person so that the necessity of murdering a relative seems to be an interesting aspect. The supporters of these characters are of course contrary as a ghost of Hamlet's father for Hamlet and Lord Krishna, an *avtar* for Arjuna. I think both of these supernatural powers motivated the characters to kill their relatives. It happened as they expected also not in the very blind manner but by the self actualization.

Keywords: Philosophy, Bhagvadgita, Soul, Salvation, Karma yoga.

Some thinkers consider salvation as a state of permanent bliss. They believe that salvation once attained by soul, lasts perpetually. According to Vedic religion, soul leaves its original body at the time of death and enters new one quite far from the previous place. The salvation depends upon the action somebody has done throughout his life.

Indian spiritualism has undoubtedly a universal appeal; it can be read by different perspectives. There is, in relation to Western thought, a striking difference in the manner in which Indian philosophical thinking is presented as well as in the mode in which it historically developed. Though the objective and the subjective, the universe and the individual, came to be identified according to their true essences. Literary symbolism reflects various ideas to be presented before the society in the form of idealism as Bhagvadgita reflects the message of *karma* of human life. The role of the sacred texts in the growth of Indian philosophy is different in each of the different systems. In those systems that may be called *adhyatma vidya*, or sciences of spirituality, the sacred texts play a much greater role than they do in the logical systems.

The great epic 'Mahabharata' represents the attempt of Vedic Brahmanism to adjust itself to the new circumstances reflected in the process of the ancient Indian beliefs. Many diverse trends of religious and

philosophical thought have thus been synthesized in this work. In the Shanti Parvan (“Book of Consolation,” 12th book) of the Mahabharata, there is also a notable account of the origin of kingship and of *rajadharma*, or the *dharma* (law) of the king as king. The Bhagavadgita forms a part of Mahabharata and deserves separate consideration by virtue of its great importance in the religious life and thought of the Hindus.

As for poetical works many poets of transcendental vision have picked up historical incidents and used them for depicting imperishable visions of the soul of man struggling with grim fact of life. Arjuna insists Lord Krishna to teach him the *dharma* so that he can be able to understand the dilemma of life. He says:

“My heart is overcome by the weakness of pity, and my mind is confused about Dharma. I request You to tell me, decisively, what is better for me. I am Your disciple. Teach me who has taken refuge in You. (2.07)

The master painter of human passions, Shakespeare portrayed the same in his dramas. We see in his dramas men and women through into situations as profoundly tragic as that in which we find Arjuna in the first discourse of the Gita.

As Bhagavadgita is not limited to the Hindu mythology, William Shakespeare’s Hamlet also has reached its sublime peak. Hamlet and Bhagavadgita are the essence works exploring the nature of crisis as experienced within their respective cultures. Through character interaction crisis is portrayed, dissected, and thoroughly resolved in a manner displaying the radical orientation of the culture generating the text. Both Prince Hamlet and Arjuna, the prince whose dialogue with Krishna structures the Gita, suffer from indecisiveness in the midst of a call to action. These characters in the form of human values have within them the best and worst of their cultures. They are noble and flawed but only Arjuna has access to the original vision from which culture itself is generated, and is thus able to extricate himself fully from his dilemma.

The dramatic grip that Hamlet has on western audiences has remained tense through the centuries since Elizabethan England. With countless staging and a swamp of critical literature, few really seem able to, in his own words,

“you would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery.” (Act III, ii, 355-356)

This mystery is born of the very nature of man in crisis. It is a question of what makes people do what they do. Nature itself plays a vital role to build the role of human beings in the society. If the voice of Hamlet’s father in the form of a supernatural power, he acknowledges the duty as a son. I do not compare the power of lord Krishna to the power of Hamlet’s father but I dare to compare their message regarding the princes have to fulfill their duties; as the ghost talks, “revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.” (Act I, v, 25)

Hamlet and Arjuna’s crises are strikingly similar, given the thousands of years and miles separating their inceptions. Both are princes who find themselves trapped in horrible circumstance whose only resolution demands the shedding of family blood. The Sanskrit word best describing the situation is *dharma*. *Dharmic* action is thus that which sustains the culture. This is not the culture of ephemeral trappings, but the groundwork

through which man lives in the world. Both the princes express their dilemma the only difference is Arjuna has a moral supporter in the form of Krishna but Hamlet puts it in soliloquy:

“To be or not to be? That is the question—
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. (Act III, I, 56-60)

Arjuna sees no such golden opportunity before him. Instead, he has particularized his vision into a perspective pitting him against “fathers and grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, companions, fathers-in-law and friends” (Bg-26). He is especially grieved to see his beloved teachers, Drona and Bhishma, armed against him. Pain causes his vision to narrow. Whereas he should see himself as part of a karmically determined circumstance that he is responsible for and must act within, he experiences a subject/object dualism placing him wholly within a body that must war against teachers and cousins whom he has known since birth. They exist in separate bodies “out there.”

Arjuna takes this dualistic vision to heart, and he coalesces into a body that cannot act. He becomes so rigid, his body quivers with indecision. He says,

“My dear Krishna, seeing my friends and relatives present before me in such a fighting spirit, I feel the limbs of my body quivering and my mouth drying up”.
(Bg I, 29-30).

Circumstance arises through activity and demands response within it. This inability for Arjuna to do so literally shakes him to the core. It is the task of Krishna, who is the embodiment of cultural consciousness--culture and history incarnate, organizing and giving rise to the manifest world in the present--to move Arjuna's body out of one frozen as crisis, into a fluid one concordant with an ontological, hypostatic vision. The whole of the Bhagavadgita is an enactment of this process, moving from a stuck perspective to the ability to discriminate many perspectives; from disseminative knowledge to a direct experience of the radical grounding vision; and finally into an ability to live through this vision.

Unfortunately for Hamlet, he has no access to a Krishna to lead him out of crisis. He lives in a society fraught with dead beliefs. The Christian churches may hold political sway, but excepting the rare mystic who would usually be regarded as a heretic, these institutions had long been divorced from the original living vision from which they arose. Hamlet is educated at the University of Wittenberg, a center of philosophic learning. He is a man of intellectual speculation, so much so that he cannot act in the face of a gut-wrenching situation. The play is protracted by his intellectualizations, while the crisis worsens and brutal consequences multiply.

Hamlet creates himself through his own language. He talks himself into frequent vacillations--between resounding affirmation of his duty and elaborate game playing in avoidance of it, between a fiery temper and cold dispassionateness, between madness and clairvoyance. He quickly talks himself into and out of various enterprises during the play. He pretends to don an antic disposition to deflect

attention from his “real” purpose--that of killing the king--but his scenes with Ophelia show him to be more than a little affected. She describes a telling encounter to her father:

“My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac’d,
No hat upon his head, his stockings foul’d,
Ungarter’d and down-gyved to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other...” (Act II, i, 77-81)

Arjuna is the greatest archer alive; when his bow slips he is completely severed from the task he must perform. This is no mere play-acting. Interior and exterior usually reflect each other in Shakespeare. This is where Krishna serves his great purpose. He must do for Arjuna what Hamlet cries out for when he says, “O that this too too solid flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into dew!” (Act I, ii, 130). His task, as is that of any teacher, is to free Arjuna from this limiting perspective, this view which breeds crisis and immobility. Krishna realizes that a man cannot be wrenched from that which he clings to without severe damage; gradual steps and stages are necessary. First Arjuna must realize how he has come to be immobilized.

Here Krishna schematizes the process by which one enters crisis. Anyone who has become angered due to conflicting desires and subsequently “lost control” of him or herself, or of the situation, will recognize this progression. Krishna wants Arjuna to watch this process, to discriminate between an “I” attached to sense objects and that which generates both of these: the eternal, bringing the moment into being.

Once on the battlefield Arjuna dwells on those with whom he must fight; instantaneously an “I” arises, attached to them by opposition in circumstance. The desire takes form as either attraction or aversion to the sense objects; in this case, Arjuna wishes to avoid fighting against people he is attached to. But he forgets how he is attached to them in the first place, how all things are unified through a common ground, and is thus unable to discriminate between correct and incorrect action, between *dharma* and *adharma*. A human immobilized by crisis resides in hell.

When a man dwells upon objects of sense,
Attachment to them is born.
From attachment, desire is born,
And from such desire anger arises.
From anger arises delusion, and from delusion loss of memory.
From loss of memory the destruction of intelligence,
And from this destruction, he perishes. (Bg II, 62-63)

Like Arjuna, Hamlet suffers from immobility; he cannot kill his uncle though he must. Unlike Arjuna, however, his personal crisis is never resolved and reoccurs throughout the play. He thinks himself into and out of acting, and amazingly, sees the process as it happens. He tries to motivate himself through language:

“O, from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!” (Act IV, iv, 65).

He berates himself for this process, over which he has no control. Arjuna, wants to know what “is that by which a man who performs evil, is bidden, even against his will, impelled so-to-speak by force?” Krishna is unconcerned with doctrinal ethics when mentioning “evil” or “sin.” That which is “evil” takes one further from liberation, and the “good” brings one closer to it or sustains it. Arjuna cannot fathom the restraint necessary to overcome compulsive desire. The mind “is turbulent, strong and hard. Its restraint, I think would be as difficult to accomplish as controlling the wind.” Krishna happily repeats throughout the Gita what is required for liberation. In order to help Arjuna recover his warrior’s body, Krishna describes:

“Let him not set his thoughts on anything else.
Having restrained the mind, restless, unsteady,
From whatever it goes out to,
Let him bring it into the control of the self alone.” (VI, 24-6)

Hamlet on the same context describes his actualization at the end of his life saying that all of those who made him the murder are only silent spectators. He expects to have a true account of his actions and his motives. He says,

“Heaven make thee free of it. I follow thee....
Thou livest, report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.” (Act V, ii, 342)

Even noble Horatio falls prey to passion in the final scene as he attempts to follow Hamlet in death. Though Hamlet seems to comprehend how to be in the world, he has no access to the means of embodying this knowledge.

The Gita seems to be saying that this is not possible without a teacher, without someone who embodies a living tradition of knowledge. Krishna spends chapters II through explaining various aspects, or paths of liberation. Meditation, knowledge, renunciation of actions, wisdom and understanding-- these are but worldly facets of an unexplainable, eternal, imperishable vision. Krishna loosens Arjuna’s attachment to sense objects, and exhausts his desire for detailed knowledge. With the words “I give you a divine eye” Arjuna’s vision begins, a terrifying experience of the world of experience collapsing as his body. “The worlds tremble, and so do I.” Arjuna can only wonder at this vision of the world’s manifestation. He experiences Krishna as *purushotam*, the generator and organizer of manifest experience without which nothing of the world can be held together. Arjuna is thus led to the shattering realization that he is merely the occasion for the manifestation of the world, and that the ever-vacillating “I” is a referential construction.

Arjuna cannot last long in this vision of limitless possibility. It will be impossible to move unless he experiences a body in the world. He has seen how the world comes into being and is held together; the difficulty will now be incorporating this vision into the activity of living. During the rest of the Gita Krishna provides Arjuna with a new model for the world so that this is possible. Arjuna gains a new body, one that is fluid in circumstance, one that is fluid circumstance.

References:

1. Talreja, K. M. *Philosophy of Vedas*. Talreja Publication, Bombay, 1982.
2. Desai, Mahadev. *THE GITA ACCORDING TO GANDHI*. Navajivan Publication House, Ahmedabad, 2007.
3. <http://www.krishna.com/>“Bhagavad-gita As It Is” by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada
4. <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamletscenes.html>
5. Dharma, Bariya. *Mahabharata*. Manoj Publication, New Delhi, 2013.

