

ESSAY 1

AN ESSAY ON THE BHAGAVAD GITA

INTRODUCTION

When I look at world history it seems that the human family had to wade through rivers of blood and tears to find the road leading to universal peace and fellowship. Much greater international cooperation in global management and still greater inter-religious understanding are the twin rails on which humanity must further travel to reach the final destination.

Notwithstanding the continuing sway of racial and tribalistic prejudices in the conduct of politics and the misuse of religion for political gains perceptive and honest minds among all religious communities now see different religions as diverse “languages of the spirit”, each valid and spiritually nourishing in its own way. This approach of religious pluralism is likely to spread among the masses and eventually displace the old tradition of religious exclusivism: the belief that there is only one road to salvation.

The plural approach to religion is common to Western liberal Humanism, Vedanta, and contemporary liberal Christianity. Religious pluralism also characterizes the pure *Quranic* Islam without the later gloss of Islamic theology and jurisprudence. *Sufi* poetry in Persian and Urdu greatly extols tolerance and universal love. However, it is the Bhagavad Gita, which teaches, in the most unambiguous and consistent manner, the doctrine of religious pluralism. This feature of the Gita fascinates me most and has moved me to write the present essay.

All irrespective of their professed religion should gather the pearls of wisdom embedded in the Gita.

My study of Indian philosophy is based entirely on the English writings of Indian and Western scholars. For the purpose of this essay on the Gita I have confined myself to Radhakrishnan's celebrated translation and commentary on the Gita. All quotations from the Gita are taken from the above work. Though I have greatly profited from several other works by eminent writers on the subject, my approach to the Gita is my own. I alone am responsible for any shortcomings or errors in my understanding and critical appreciation of the Bhagavad Gita. I crave the kind indulgence of those who are much better qualified than myself for this task.

The purpose of this essay is not to enter into the deeps and eddies of Gita scholarship but simply to explain the basic message and wisdom of the Gita in a modern critical idiom. Ours are times when religion is systematically being used; unconsciously by some, and deliberately by others, in the service of politics, rather than spirituality.

If this modest essay could motivate even a handful of fellow Muslims and others to turn to the Gita and also motivate all sincere truth-seekers to acquaint themselves with pure *Quranic* Islam and *Sufi* wisdom expressed in Persian and Urdu poetry I shall feel rewarded.

1. THE GITA AS SCRIPTURE

The Bhagavad Gita, a long thematic poem, and part of the great Indian epic, Mahabharata, since time immemorial, is the core scripture of Hinduism in the modern age. Millions hold the Gita sacred and normative quite independently of how they may view the great epic or the exact connection between the Gita and the Mahabharata.

According to tradition the Mahabharata was compiled by the legendary sage, Vyasa, who is also regarded as the author of the Gita.

The dates of Vyasa are variously estimated. Radhakrishnan assigns the original composition of the Gita to the 5th century BC. Alterations or additions, if any, took place later.

The poem is in the form of a dialogue between the ruler of the Pandava clan, Arjuna, and Sri Krishna, whom the Gita takes as the incarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu. The occasion of the dialogue is the impending battle between the Pandavas and their kinsmen, the Kauravas. Arjuna is deeply reluctant to shed the blood of his near and dear ones, but Sri Krishna, the Divine Guru of the Prince, exhorts him to fight on the principle that the destruction of life in the defense of right is sanctioned by '*dharma*'. The Gita is a poetic exposition of Sri Krishna's religious philosophy and ethical teachings.

The Gita has 670 stanzas divided into eighteen chapters or sections of unequal length. The longest section comprises seventy-eight stanzas, while the shortest twenty. The Sanskrit meter is short and the language, in the opinion of Sanskrit scholars, is marked by superb elegance. Although each chapter has a primary theme the treatment of ideas and themes is not systematic. Different aspects of the same topic or subject are mentioned in widely scattered verses. This however, is no defect in a poetic composition.

Being a philosophical poem rather than a philosophical treatise the Gita does not seek to inquire or argue on behalf of any truth claim, philosophical or religious. The Gita accepts the Vedantic standpoint, some elements of the *Sankhya* doctrine and of the *Vaishnavite* tradition centered on the divinity of Sri Krishna, and expounds them all in a moving poetic form.

The Vedantic component of the Gita includes the ideas of the primacy and omnipresence of the one eternal Self-existent Spirit (*Brahman*) and its supremacy over mind and matter, the essential identity of man's higher self (*Atman*) and *Brahman*, the ceaseless cycle of birth and death, creation and destruction of the phenomenal world as the cosmic play (*leela*) of *Brahman*, the unfailing and unalterable operation

of the law of just recompense (*karma*) in the cosmic process, the migration and rebirth of individual souls in accordance with the above law, the inherent evil and suffering of finite existence, the possibility and desirability of permanent release and salvation from the cycle of finite existence, the pre-eminent role of higher knowledge (Brahmavidya) and spiritual discipline (*yoga*) in achieving this end.

The strand of Sankya school of thought comprises the doctrines of 'Purush' (Spirit) and 'Prakriti' (Nature), and the three modes (*gunas*) of *Prakriti*: 'sattva', 'rajas' and 'tamas'. The Gita, however, transcends the ontological Dualism and Pluralism of the *Sankhya*.

The component of popular *Vaishnavism* in the Gita comprises belief in a supreme personal God (*Ishwar or Bhagwan*) who, under certain conditions or circumstances, takes on human form and intervenes in history to make good prevail over evil, the divinity of Sri Krishna, the regular ritualistic worship of representative images and symbols of the Divine, personal devotion and supplication to God, as the loving and compassionate Cosmic Father, the belief that the virtuous enter heaven (*swarga*) temporarily as a reward for virtuous conduct and the desirability of complete and permanent salvation through devotion (*bhakti*) to God.

The 'anthrotheistic' belief that Sri Krishna was a divine incarnation, obviously, goes beyond the far more general doctrines of Monotheism, *Brahmanical Monoism* and *karma*. Many who might be in full or part agreement with the Monotheism or Monism in the Gita may feel rather disinclined to accept this 'anthrotheistic' stand in the Gita. In fact, there is no dearth of thoughtful Hindus themselves who cherish the ethical Theism in the Gita, but relegate its *Vaishnavite* components to the domain of myth or legend.

Different sections of the poem expound the above ideas and beliefs in a smooth and spontaneous transition, which however, is not a logical progression. Several serious thinkers, Hindu as well as others, who admire and feel deeply moved by the Gita admit this feature of the work. Some attribute this to the poet's well-meaning desire to

make the Gita appeal to persons with varied attitudes and personality needs. However it is quite plausible to hold that the Gita does not seek to please or appease different sects or groups, but it rather seeks to accommodate the different metaphysical perspectives in a super conceptual space or spiritual perspective.

In other words, we may say that the approach of the Gita is neither conceptually constrictive, nor eclectic, but rather permissive and irenic. The Gita stresses that what leads to spiritual growth and salvation is not any particular belief, symbol or ritual, but the sincerity of the devotee and right conduct for the sake of righteousness. This remarkable tolerance and conceptual permissiveness constitutes the unique charm and perennial relevance of the Gita.

2. THE METAPHYSICAL VISION OF THE GITA

In what follows my purpose is not any synoptic exposition of the entire thought of the Gita. Several eminent scholars and writers have already done this. But all great scriptures, like great poetry, are perennial rivers of the spirit serenely flowing down the ages. And every age, rather every intelligent and authentic soul is required to bring his own conceptual vessel or cup to drink of the nectar. I shall, therefore, attempt to highlight what I hold as the nuclear core of the Gita's metaphysical vision together with my critical appreciation thereof. This core consists of three principal themes;

- (a) The nature of ultimate Reality,
- (b) The essential truth about the human situation, and
- (c) *Vaishnavite Anthro-theism*, i.e. faith in the divinity of Sri Krishna.

I shall proceed in the same order.

(A) THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE

Following the Vedanta school the Gita teaches that the ultimate Reality behind the ever-changing plurality of the impermanent physical world is the one eternal Self-existent, changeless Cosmic Spirit (*Brahman*). *Brahman* is the infinite Source and Ground of all finite existents and concepts, of reason and understanding, of good and evil, of beauty and ugliness, of life and death, of creation and destruction, indeed of everything that exists in any form or that can be imagined as existing. However, *Brahman* itself can neither be perceived as an existent among other existents, nor conceived as a concept among other concepts. Any determinate concept applied to *Brahman* will break down or collapse in the very act of being applied to *Brahman*. But the simultaneous affirmation and negation of some concepts will partly illuminate the nature of *Brahman*. This is what we find in the Gita. Here are some instances:

(10:39)

“And further, whatsoever is the seed of all existences that am I, O Arjuna; nor is there anything, moving or unmoving that can exist without Me.”

(10:41)

“Whatsoever being there is, endowed with glory and grace and vigor, know that to have sprung from a fragment of My splendor.”

(9:4-6)

“By Me all this universe is pervaded through My unmanifested form. All beings abide in Me but I do not abide in them. And (yet) the beings do not dwell in Me; Behold My divine mystery. My spirit, which is the source of all beings, sustains the beings but does not abide in them. As the mighty air moving everywhere ever abides in the etheric space (akash), know thou that in the same manner all existences abide in Me.”

(15:12-15)

“That splendor of the sun that illuminates this whole world, that which is in the moon, that which is in the fire, that splendor, know as Mine. And entering the earth, I support all beings by My vital energy; and becoming the sapful soma (moon). I nourish all herbs (or plants). Becoming the fire of life in the bodies of living creatures and mingling with the upward and downward breaths, I digest the four kinds of food.

And I am lodged in the hearts of all; from Me are memory and knowledge as well as their loss. I am indeed He who is to be known by all the Vedas. I indeed (am) the author of the Vedanta and I too the knower of the Vedas.”

(7:12)

“And whatever states of being there may be, be they harmonious (sattvika), passionate (rajasa), slothful (tamasa) - know that they are all from Me alone. I am not in them, they are in Me.”

(13:14-16)

“He appears to have the qualities of all the senses and yet is without (any of) the senses, unattached and yet supporting all, free from the gunas (dispositions of Prakriti) and yet enjoying them.

He is without and within all beings. He is unmoving as also moving. He is too subtle to be known. He is far away and yet is He near. He is undivided (indivisible) and yet He seems to be divided among beings. He is to be known as supporting creatures, destroying them and creating them afresh.”

(10:20)

“I, O Gudakesha (Arjuna), am the self seated in the hearts of all creatures. I am the beginning, the middle and the very end of beings.”

(7:26)

“I know the beings that are past, that are present, O Arjuna, and that are to come, but Me no one knows.”

(2:29)

“One looks upon Him as a marvel, another likewise speaks of Him as a marvel; another hears of Him as a marvel; and even after hearing, no one whatsoever has known Him.”

(B) THE HUMAN SITUATION

The most basic feature of the cosmic processes is the recurring cycle of birth and death and ceaseless flux, the transition from ‘being’ into ‘non-being’, or ceaseless ‘becoming’. Man is an integral part of this cycle of birth and death (*sansar*). The birth of man is however, the temporary conjunction of *Atman* and a living body (*jiva*), while his death an equally temporary disjunction. The *Atman*, which is, essentially, a portion of *Brahman* gets repeatedly conjoined and disjoined with a living body. Says the Gita:

(8:17-20)

“Those who know that the day of Brahma is of the duration of a thousand ages and that the night (of Brahma) is a thousand ages long, they are the knowers of day and night.

At the coming of day all manifested things come forth from the unmanifested and at the coming of night they merge in that same, called the unmanifested.

This very same multitude of existences arising again and again merges helplessly at the coming of night, O Partha (Arjuna), and streams forth into being at the coming of day.

But beyond this unmanifested, there is yet another Unmanifested Eternal Being who does not perish even when all existences perish.”

Now, according to the teachings of the *Upanishads* this process at the human level is something more than a mere biological phenomenon; it is regulated by the metaphysical or ethical law of just recompense (*karma*). This law states that every human action, good or bad, from the trivial to the serious, confers a corresponding merit or demerit

upon the doer. The doer cannot escape just reward or punishment for his actions. If the 'karmic audit' remains incomplete in one lifetime the (*jiva Atma*) is born afresh to clear the *karmic* account of reward and punishment. Pain and suffering burn out the evil consequences of previous wrongs, while inner joy and happiness are the reward of previous good deeds. Only when the *karmic* account becomes fully even does the *jiva Atma* qualify for deliverance from the cycle of birth and death. The actual release from the cycle is called 'mukti'. The person who attains 'mukti' never again gets entangled in the web of 'samsar'. Suicide out of despair is quite different since it does not lead to 'mukti' and the person who commits suicide is reborn in the vale of tears from which he had vainly attempted to escape. Here are some relevant verses on this theme:

(6:40-41)

"O Partha (Arjuna), neither in this life nor hereafter is there destruction for him; for never does any one who does good, dear friend, tread the path of woe.

Having attained to the world of the righteous and dwelt there for many years, the man who has fallen away from yoga is again born in the house of such as are pure and prosperous."

(6:43)

"There he regains the (mental) impressions (union with the divine) which he had developed in his previous life and with this (as the starting point) he strives again for perfection, O Joy of the Kurus (Arjuna)."

(9:21-22)

"Having enjoyed the spacious world of heaven, they enter (return to) the world of mortals, when their merit is exhausted; thus conforming to the doctrine enjoined in the three Vedas and desirous of enjoyments, they obtain the changeable (what is subject to birth and death).

But those who worship Me, meditating on Me alone, to them who ever persevere, I bring attainment of what they have not and security in what they have."

(8:14-16)

“He who constantly meditates on Me, thinking of none else, by him who is a yogin ever disciplined (or united with the Supreme), I am easily reached.

Having come to Me, these great souls do not get back to rebirth, the place of sorrow, impermanent, for they have reached the highest perfection. From the realm of Brahma downwards, all worlds are subject to return of rebirth, but on reaching Me, O Son of Kunti (Arjuna), there is no return to birth again.”

Though the *Upanishads* allows the possibility that human ‘*jivas*’ may be reborn as non-human ones, in accordance with the law of *karma* the Gita does not specifically mention ‘retributive’ regress as a means of educative punishment and subsequent growth of a ‘*jiva*’ in the cycle of life and death (*sansar*).

The question whether ‘cosmic auditing’ is the act of God, the Creator, Law Giver and Ruler of the universe, or the inherent mode of working of the impersonal *Brahman* is not central to Hindu religious thought, including the Gita. What is central is faith in the law of *karma* as such. The ‘faith axiom’ of Hinduism, indeed of all religions of Indian origin, is ‘*karma*’, not God, in the monotheistic sense. The monotheistic belief is optional, though it always has commanded a wide popular appeal. The Gita also favors this belief while the *Upanishads* veer to the concept of *Brahman*.

Following the Vedanta the Gita also teaches that the root cause of all human suffering and evil is ignorance (*avidya*) and uncontrolled desire (*ichha*). The mix of these two turns man into a rudderless boat tossed by the waves of a turbulent sea. The chief desires or passions are fear, anger, greed, and sexual lust. No spiritual development and inner illumination is possible without controlling the above passions.

Spiritual discipline has several dimensions,

(a) Regulated food, sleep and sexual activity,

(b) Regular pursuit of spiritual knowledge (Brahmavidya),

(c) Regular meditation, and

(d) The detached performance of one's duties
(*swadharmā*) prescribed by the scripture.

Those who find the path of knowledge beyond their capacities could turn to the path of devotion (*bhakti*) to a personal God.

(C) ANTHROTHEISM IN THE GITA

Anthrotheism is the belief that God or Deity at times takes on the form of a human being in order to help men in their darkest hour in the perpetual struggle between good and evil. This view obviously, goes beyond the Vedantic concepts of Divine immanence in all finite beings, human as well as non-human. The Gita holds Sri Krishna to be a Divine incarnation (*avatara*). I shall first give some relevant verses on the theme of Divine incarnation, and then pass on to those, which give an enchanting description of Arjuna's mystical experience of the Divinity of Sri Krishna.

(4: 6-9)

“Though (I am) unborn, and My self (is) imperishable, though (I am) the Lord of all creatures, yet establishing Myself in My own nature, I come into (empiric) being through My power (maya). Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Bharata (Arjuna), then I send forth (create incarnate) Myself.

For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age. He who knows thus in its true nature My divine birth and works, is not born again, when he leaves this body but comes to Me, O Arjuna.”

Here is a selection of verses on Arjuna's mystical experience:

(II:7,8)

"Here today, behold the whole universe, moving and unmoving and whatever else thou desirest to see, O Gudakesha (Arjuna), all unified in My body.

But thou canst not behold Me with this (human) eye of yours; I will bestow on thee the supernatural eye. Behold My divine power."

(II:12-21)

"If the light of a thousand suns were to blaze forth all at once in the sky, that might resemble the splendor of the exalted Being.

There the Pandava (Arjuna) beheld the whole universe, with its manifold divisions, gathered together in one, in the body of the God of gods. Then he, the winner of Wealth, (Arjuna) struck with amazement, his hair standing on end, bowed down his head to the Lord, with hands folded (in salutation) said:

"In Thy body, O God, I see all the gods and the varied hosts of being as well, Brahma, the lord seated on the lotus throne and all the sages and heavenly nagas.

I behold Thee, infinite in form on all sides, with numberless arms, bellies, faces and eyes, but I see not Thy end, or Thy middle or Thy beginning, O Lord of the universe, O Form Universal.

I behold Thee with Thy crown, mace and discus, glowing everywhere as a mass of light, hard to discern (dazzling) on all sides with the radiance of the flaming fire and sun, incomparable.

Thou art the imperishable, the Supreme to be realized. Thou art the ultimate resting-place of the universe; Thou art the undying guardian of the eternal law. Thou art the Primal Person, I think.

I behold Thee as one without beginning, middle or end, of infinite power, of numberless arms, with the moon and the sun as Thine eyes, with Thy face a flaming fire, whose radiance burns up the universe.

This space between heaven and earth is pervaded by Thee alone, also all the quarters (directions of the sky). O exalted One, when this wondrous

terrible form of Thine is seen, the three worlds tremble.

Yonder hosts of gods enter thee and some, in fear, extol thee, with folded hands. And bands of great seers and perfected ones cry, "hail" and adore Thee with hymns of abounding praise."

(II:40)

"Hail to Thee in front, (hail) to Thee behind and hail to Thee on every side, O All; boundless in power and immeasurable in might, thou dost penetrate all and therefore Thou art all."

(II:44)

"Therefore, bowing down and prostrating my body before Thee, Adorable Lord, I seek Thy grace. Thou, O God, shouldst bear with me as a father to his son, as a friend to his friend, as a lover to his beloved."

The *yogic* peak experience not only gives inner certitude and peace but also liberates the *yogi* from bondage to the cycle of birth and death, and makes him long for the final merger with *Brahman*. This is the state of spiritual deliverance (*mukti*). The *yogi* who lives and works in this condition is called '*jivanmukta*'. The '*Atman*' residing in the '*jivanmukta*' gets merged with *Brahman* at a time chosen by Him. This is the ultimate destination and also the destiny of all finite existence, but the '*jivanmukta*' embraces his destiny with clarity, courage and grace.

Thus, according to the Gita the cosmic mystery and the inmost secret of the origin, nature and destiny of man in the universe was made known to Arjuna, not through reasoning but through the mystical experience vouchsafed to him through Sri Krishna's Divine grace as an incarnation of Vishnu. The Gita tells how Arjuna clearly saw with his mind's eye that Sri Krishna was not only his boyhood friend but also the "Infinite Primal Person" (*Ishwar/Bhagwan*). This specific secret truth was revealed or manifested to Arjuna much later in the course of his liberating dialogue though he had already come to accept the more general Vedantic view that the *Atman* and *Brahman* are identical in essence and that, in the final analysis, *Brahman* alone is the one and Ultimate Reality (*Sat*).

After Arjuna's liberating experience all doubts, uncertainties and inner perplexities were removed and he tasted supreme bliss and peace. The Gita, thus, represents the convergence of three streams of thought, namely, the idealistic Monism of the *Upanishads*, pure ethical Theism in general, and the Anthro-theistic *Vaishnavite* faith whose epicenter was Mathura in North India. However, the Gita does not explain or explicate the various concepts involved, namely, God Vishnu, Vishnu's incarnation (*avatara*), and the relationship between the incarnation and *Ishwara*. Numerous terms are used without a clear and consistent connotation, and this baffles all efforts, at the conceptual level, to arrive at clear ideas relating to the themes concerned. This however is not a negative criticism or devaluation of the ontological significance or value of the great dialogue in the Gita.

CONCLUDING REMARKS ON THE METAPHYSICAL VISION OF THE GITA

How shall we judge Gita's truth claims relating to *Brahman*, *Atman*, Sri Krishna as a Divine incarnation, *karma*, etc.? Statements containing such highly abstract terms as '*Brahman*', '*Atman*', '*Purush*', '*Spirit*', '*Universal Self*', '*incarnation*' and so on are highly complex in their logical structure and ambivalent in their function. Such statements both illuminate and mislead the listener or reader. Consider the following truth claims: "*The universe is the manifestation or creation of Brahman*", "*Brahman is the Self or Spirit of all beings*", "*Brahman is the seed of all existence*", "*Brahman sustains all things but does not abide in them*", "*He is far away and yet near*", "*Sri Krishna is the incarnation (avatara) of Lord Vishnu*".

We shall completely miss the significance or the function of the above statements if we take them as a descriptive or scientific truth claims and then proceed to ask for their verification. The above truth claims are metaphysical perspectives on the universe, and represent the human quest for relating himself to the cosmic process. Such statements are more evocative than descriptive, more poetic than scientific, and more directive than informative. Their basic function is not to give

information about the universe, as an object, but to transform human attitudes and responses, as a subject, condemned to relate himself, in some way or other, to a mysterious universe.

The cosmos is marked by puzzling and baffling polarities of life and death, purpose and chance, pleasure and pain, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, the benevolence and malevolence of nature, and so on. There is the music of the nightingale, the language of the flowers, the colors of the sunset, the majesty of the mountains, the song of the brook, the silence of the forests, but there is also the redness of the tooth and claw in nature, the enormity of waste and destruction in the struggle for existence, the dead ends and reversals in the evolutionary process, the fury of the flood and storm, the havoc of the epidemic, the scourge of the locust, the viciousness of the bacteria, the aberrations in the womb, the pathos and indignity of incurable insanity, the tragedy of the accident on rail or road, the agony of the victim of rape, the strangulation of equity, the miscarriage of justice, the tragic waste of talent, the recurring arrests and retreats of value in history, and so on.

Humans feel impelled to discover some meaning or purpose, some significance or pattern in the cosmic process in order to form a stable, consistent and fully satisfying way of responding to the mystery of the cosmic process marked by the above polarities. A metaphysical perspective on the universe is a way of viewing and responding to the cosmic mystery. Every specific perspective illuminates the cosmic situation and simultaneously misleads us. It highlights or reveals some significant aspect of the cosmic situation, but tends to ignore or conceal some other side or aspect of a complex totality, and thereby leaves us perplexed and devoid of inner peace.

Every metaphysical perspective, in other words, attempts to fit all the known pieces of the cosmic jigsaw puzzle, as it were, into a coherent conceptual picture. But as soon as a picture begins to take shape some facet of our experience strikes a jarring note, as it were, and refuses to fit into the pattern.

Doubts and problems also arise in the domain of science but the onward march of mathematics and factual knowledge resolves them. Technology makes even faster progress through the method of trial and error. This self-corrective growth is absent in the domain of philosophy and religion. Thus in these fields, unlike science and technology, we continue to grapple with the same problems and perplexities faced by the ancients. In other words, though the area of objective certainty has expanded enormously existential perplexity lingers on in the human breast. This creates and sustains spiritual or conceptual space in which faith, whether religious or philosophical, tries to set at rest our inner perplexities or uncertainties about the nature and destiny of man in the universe.

Let us now try to see how some of the truth claims in the Gita illuminate and also mislead us, even as all metaphysical perspectives must, by the very nature of human language.

We see or experience portions of the gigantic universe but we do not come across any agency at work in the past or living present. Since however, we experience and come across sufficient regularity, structure and order in the universe we feel inclined to attribute them to some powerful but unseen agent or creator. This inclination on our part is rooted in our experience that whenever and wherever regular patterns of events exist there is some doer, who designs and produces the said patterns. In other words, our experience that there is no watch without a watchmaker, or no machine without a designer or manufacturer inclines us to apply the same logic to the universe as such. This is the justification for saying that God is the Supreme Unseen Creator of all that exists.

Further reflection, however, easily leads us to realize that there is a basic difference between the creative activity of finite agents, whether human or non-human, and the inferred creative activity of God, the Supreme Creator or *Brahman*, regarded as the unknowable Self-existent external Being. The difference lies in the fact that finite creators work upon material already given and existing independently of their

creative activity. But it is obvious that we cannot apply this analogy to God's creative activity. The prior existence of matter in any shape or form, independently of God, would obviously compromise and contradict God's absolute supremacy and primacy.

In other words, the analogical discourse in regard to Divine creation is based on a pseudo-analogy, which is extremely misleading. To say that creation by God means absolute creation, or creation of matter out of nothing at all amounts to lifting ordinary words from a context we all understand and transferring them to a context we do not understand at all. Consequently, using the words 'creation out of nothing' produces an illusion that the said expression has a palpable meaning or sense like the expression 'creation out of earth or clay'. But in the strict sense, the expression in question leads only to what may be called 'cognitive vacuity', if not, 'nonsense', as some logical positivists said during the heyday of Logical Positivism and the revolt against all Metaphysics.

Difficulties of the sort mentioned above have, therefore, led Vedantic expositors and others to say that the universe has not been created by God, but that it is the manifestation or outer reflection of the supreme Self-existent eternal Being (*Brahman*). Now the word 'manifestation' is an extremely open ended term. We do understand what it means or refers to in various human contexts, say where a person manifests his anger or love or where something hitherto obscure or doubtful becomes clear or evident. But we can hardly claim to understand what or which situation is referred to by saying that the cosmos is the manifestation of *Brahman*. So, using the word 'manifestation' in place of 'creation' does not really resolve our perplexity.

The *Upanishads*, in an attempt to clarify the nature of the relation between *Brahman* and the cosmos, also give the analogy of a spider spinning its web out of its own body. But this analogy is also a pseudo-analogy. It is obvious that what goes into the original formation, sustenance, and activity of the spider exists independently of it.

Let us offer some comments upon another Vedantic variation on the theme of *Brahman*. The Gita contains several references to this variation, namely, that *Brahman* is the Self or Soul of the universe. It is clear that this analogy is suggested or that we feel inclined to accept this view on the basis of our sense of an enduring personal identity in the flux of fleeting sensations, perceptions, images and numerous other mental acts. In addition we firmly believe or rather have a clear and immediate awareness that I am a person comprising an integrated body distinct from other objects or persons. We can hardly claim to have a similar direct awareness of the self of other human beings. However, everyday contact with fellow humans makes it impossible to doubt that they are persons just like us, that their bodies react to stimuli just like ours, and that they think, feel and behave in more or less similar ways.

Now the point is that we just do not perceive the cosmos in the way we perceive our own body or are aware of our own self or personal identity. Nor do we, or can we deal with the universe as we deal with other human beings. When, therefore, we say that *Brahman* is the Self of the cosmos we again lift words from a known human context and apply them in a context totally different from the human. Indeed, the cosmos is far too differentiated, diffuse and spread over space and time to resemble an organic unity like a human being, animal or plant. The cosmos comprises diverse structures and functions endlessly cooperating, competing, struggling, destroying, building, propagating and dying, so that the cosmos could hardly be said to be an integrated mega-organism. Nevertheless, in some respects the universe bears a better comparison with a self-creative, self-renewing and living organism than with a fabricated giant machine or a lifeless mega-structure. Consequently, there is a point in saying that *Brahman* or God is the indwelling Self-creative Power or Force, and the perceptible world, its expression.

The concept of *Brahman* and its correlate, '*Atman*', becomes emotionally satisfying and ethically fruitful, perhaps to the highest degree, when the individual identifies his '*Atman*' with *Brahman*

without equating the two and without excluding other beings from this identity. This means the awareness of the person's identity with *Brahman*, in essence, but not in existence. This self-view or perspective elevates human status to the highest ontological and creative level without producing any trace of 'hubris' or vicious destructive egoism. Perhaps, this self-image or view of Philosophical Anthropology is the most felicitous way to reinforce or promote moral excellence, compassion and spiritual growth.

Difficulties also arise when we say or imply that this or that was God's purpose in the creation of the universe. We know the meaning of this concept only in the human context of desiring something, which we do not possess. Purpose, thus, necessarily implies some deficiency in being; having or achieving, in short, a condition of imperfection of some sort. But if *Brahman* or God is deemed to be perfect, there remains no point in attributing any purpose, whatsoever, to the Supreme Being.

Let us now turn to the belief in *karma*, which is a central part of Gita's teachings. The theory of *karma* holds that the individual soul (*jiva*) is repeatedly reborn until it gets completely cleansed of all traces of evil through merited suffering in proportion to its guilt in previous births. The belief in *karma* can be divided into two parts or layers,

- (a) The general enunciation of the metaphysical law of just recompense, namely, as the soul sows, so shall it reap in the present birth or future birth/births, and
- (b) The more specific belief that the individual soul (*jiva*) has no fixed material frame (*prakriti*) for its locus in the chain of births and deaths, so that the *jiva* may even migrate from one species to another, depending upon the degree of its cumulative guilt and the requirement of cosmic justice.

The belief in *karma* is a metaphysical perspective on the cosmic process, and not a hypothesis, which could be verified or falsified. Nu-

merous persons who seem to be good and virtuous are made to suffer, while others who seem to be bad and vicious prosper in the world. The belief appears to make this enigma explicable up to a point.

With regard to the first part of the belief in question one may well ask whether looking upon the phenomenon of birth and the subsequent career of an individual as the enforced serving out of a sentence of punishment for guilt incurred in a previous life or lives will promote a positive celebration of life, or whether it will tend to promote a negative sense of life weariness. Leaving aside this issue for the present it may be said that the first part of the said belief deters man from evil doing, even though it does not fully explain the distribution and quantum of pain and suffering among humans or animals.

The second part of the belief in *karma* presents a much greater difficulty. Instead, it becomes almost unintelligible if taken in the literal sense. This part implies that there are no boundaries or genetic identities between different species of living beings, and that the soul in or of an elephant, could migrate in its next birth into the body of a fly, or the soul in or of a human being may take on the body of, say a frog or mosquito. This version of the belief does not make any sense since it obliterates all distinctions of structure, complexity and quality among living beings. Though the Gita itself does not refer to this version of the belief in *karma*, this view is widely held. However, one may interpret this version of the theory of *karma* as a mythical pointer to the belief in the essential oneness of life. This would mean that all living beings, from the meanest microbe of fly to a majestic elephant, have a common sap of life flowing in their arteries entitling them to due respect as living beings. This would mean that one may not irreverently destroy the meanest living being, though one would be justified in eliminating mosquitoes that infect and tics that torment. However, other metaphysical beliefs or perspectives could also lead to this existential reverence for life and mystical sense of its oneness. In the final analysis, therefore, the belief in *karma* and rebirth is a matter of cultural conditioning of the believer rather than of systematic reflection or reasoning as to the origin and justification of pain and suffering in the universe.

The same remarks apply to the belief in the Divinity of Sri Krishna. The enchanting description of Arjuna's mystical experience, as given in the Gita, does not analyze or clarify the structure of this belief. This is quite understandable since the Gita is a poetic testament of faith, not a philosophical treatise. One is, in consequence, left wondering what is the exact connotation of 'Divine incarnation' (*avatara*). Moreover, one is left wondering about the exact identity of the Being which incarnates itself: whether it is the supreme Personal God (*Ishwara*) or some member of the Pantheon? Or is it that *Ishwara* is the same as Shiva or Vishnu? Again, how is one to relate the principal members of the Pantheon with the 'Atman' of the *Upanishads*? The broad view of Divine immanence, in varying degrees, in all finite beings, is affirmed by the *Upanishads*. But the Gita affirms that this Divine immanence reached its peak in the person of Sri Krishna. This claim is, obviously, a dogma or article of faith produced by cultural conditioning or indoctrination rather than a philosophical interpretation formed through pure reflection on or contemplation of the mystery of the universe.

The Gita seems to imply that the inner peace and bliss consequent upon the mystical experience of Arjuna is sufficient by itself and obviates the need of any further query or probe into methodological or epistemological issues. The Gita also seems to imply that the liberated *yogi* penetrates into the secrets of the why and how of the unity and plurality of the universe, its eventual re-absorption or reunification with the Eternal Source (*Brahman*), and also the why and how of the strife and destructiveness, along with the unity and harmony found in the cosmic process. But this is very far from being the case.

Only while the *yogi* is in the exalted state of spiritual illumination can he claim to have overcome the opaqueness, absurdity and contingency found in both nature and history. But as soon as the *yogi* returns to the normal level of conceptual awareness, as indeed he must, can he sustain this claim? Can he deny that no thorns are to be found in the rose of his normal awareness and day-to-day experience? He himself may not be troubled by any sense of disharmony after having once gone through his liberating mystical experience and his inner peace

may be perfectly genuine. But what if someone else points out the disharmony and contradictions, the absurdity and opaqueness, the unjust pain and suffering, the waste and convolutions of nature and of history, the tragedy and evil in society, the injustice and wickedness in personal relations that meet the eye of the sensitive observer of the cosmic scene? Can the *yogi* pull out the thorns of others? Can he make the other see, through reasoning or spirituality, the beauty, goodness, justice and transparency of the cosmic process as he claims to have seen it in his exalted condition?

It seems the *yogi* could partially convince others that there was more to reality than what appears on the surface. But I submit, in all humility, that he would not be able to remove the elements of absurdity and contingency as perceived by others. At best, the *yogi* could prompt and even persuade honest and perplexed seekers of truth to prefer the path of mystical experience to conceptual inquiry or scientific investigation. But the *yogi* cannot resolve the riddles or answer the queries of the inquiring mind or create transparency in the place of opaqueness. Nor can he give competent concrete guidance to others in various worldly matters, though *yoga* may well result in mental peace, courage and hope, and thereby activate man's potential creative powers.

The upshot of the above linguistic analysis of truth claims relating to *Brahman*, *Atman*, Divine attributes, belief in *karma* and the Divine status of Sri Krishna is that no statement which uses ordinary words drawn from the human context in the non-human or transcendental sphere could be said to avoid the distortion of reality or Being. The Gita itself repeatedly points out the utter inadequacy of all human efforts in this regard. The moment we predicate any attribute or state of *Brahman* we are called upon to negate it. However, the conscious use of analogical affirmation and its dialectical negation is the only way in which human communication is possible on the mass scale.

Despite the above-mentioned poetic distortion or even cognitive vacuity necessarily resulting from analogical discourse on transcenden-

tal themes the human existential response to the mystery of the cosmos will and must go on. Man's yearning to seek a 'holistic' significance of the cosmos, is irrepressible. Indeed, this yearning or aspiration is as valuable and precious as the human aspiration for goodness, beauty and love.

The quest for scientific truth must not be permitted to make us insensitive or indifferent to the quest for holistic significance of the cosmos. This search is an integral dimension of the human quest for truth. The themes of the Gita touch a level of reality that is not amenable to the methodology of science based on observation and experiment. This method cannot be applied even to morality and art. So, why should one's scientific conscience be hurt if the truth claim, say, relating to the essential identity of *Atman* and *Brahman* cannot be scientifically established. Spirituality could, well, have its own logic and methodology.

The scientific attitude and temper have come to stay and rightly, so, in the human family. Technology is the daughter of science and the blessings of technology are, indeed, immense. They extend to the human pursuit of moral, social and cultural values, apart from purely material or physical. Traditional religious opinion, perhaps, does not fully appreciate this role of technology in promoting spiritual and moral values. On the other hand, rationalist and scientific opinion does not seem to appreciate that if scientific truth be allowed to become the sole model or paradigm of truth, and if the quest for certainty (in the scientific sense) be allowed to stifle all other quests which do not yield objective certainty neither art, nor morality could flower in human society. Pure scientism will reduce the many colored rainbow of human response to the cosmic process to one single and exclusive strand of scientific knowledge and procedure and, thus, turn humans into one-dimensional creatures of the laboratory. The quest for multi-dimensional growth and excellence will no longer be possible.

The quest for spirituality is the quest for transmuting the base metal of the human state into pure gold (if possible) through discovering

the philosopher's stone (if any). This quest carried on through honest prayerful striving, in the spirit of humility and tolerance, is, to my mind, the most sublime of all human quests for value.

The most remarkable thing about the Gita is that though it has its own metaphysics and mystique it does not make their acceptance a necessary condition of human felicity or salvation. The necessary condition, according to the Gita, is the quest for ultimate truth and the performance of duty for its own sake. In today's idiom, the Gita gives primacy to authentic being and ethical action rather than to any specific philosophical or religious faith, even though it does affirm that authentic being and ethical action will blossom best in the ambience of *Brahman* and *bhakti*.

3. VALUES AND THE GOOD LIFE ACCORDING TO THE GITA

It is almost impossible to define the word 'value' in a manner, which would satisfy every inquiring mind. But, broadly speaking, we could say that any state of affairs (be it an inner state of thinking, feeling or willing, or any objective situation) is a value for the person desirous of creating, preserving or promoting the said states of affairs. Values, in this sense, can range from the bare physical to the moral and the spiritual plane. The Gita is concerned with the inner states of human thinking, feeling and willing. These inner states comprise judgments, feelings, volitions, attitudes, motives, and depth responses in the widest sense.

The Gita holds that these inner states of the mind are the source-springs or seeds of human conduct, which flows from them as the fruit flows from the root. Higher knowledge (*Brahmavidya*) and living at the spiritual (*saatvic*) level purifies the soil or ground, which supports and sustains the habitual external behavior of the individual. In addition to the above the doer must also know or understand the exact nature of basic spiritual and moral values. When all the above three conditions are satisfied the *yogi* develops the power to discriminate right from wrong conduct. He also begins to do what is right and avoid what is

wrong as an inner demand of his purified and illumined inner state, rather than as an act of obedience to any external authority or out of fear or hope of gain. This is obviously, the ideal. In actual practice imperfections (in varying degrees) linger on in every mortal until he finally qualifies for '*mukti*'.

The Gita mentions a large number of spiritual and moral values. Since, however, the Gita is a poem and not an ethical treatise the value terms are not analyzed or explained. Moreover, they find mention in widely scattered verses. A far greater difficulty is met with in giving a one to one translation of the original Sanskrit value terms.

In Radhakrishnan's English translation of the Gita, some values have been positively designated by a single abstract noun in the English language, while others have been negatively designated, as freedom from some 'dis-value', while still others have been designated by a descriptive phrase. The learned translator had to do this in order to convey the exact meaning of the Sanskrit terms. Resort to this method becomes inevitable due to the unique vocabulary and idiom of each language.

It is beyond the scope of the present essay to analyze or explain the spiritual and moral values stressed in the Gita. It is the task of the spiritual teacher (*guru*) or the ethical thinker to illuminate the highly complex nature or structure of values. I shall limit myself to the lesser task of giving a more or less complete catalogue of the values mentioned in the Gita. Since, however, I am using Radhakrishnan's English translation of the original Sanskrit value terms I am clubbing them in three separate lists according to their linguistic form in the English translation, rather than according to their conceptual relationship. The three linguistic forms, as already indicated, are;

- (a) Single abstract noun,
- (b) Compound negative expression and
- (c) Descriptive phrase.

The values in the first category of 'single abstract noun' are as follows:

- Serenity, detachment, contentment (12:17-20)
- Compassion, patience, determination, self-control, universal kindness, purity (12:13-16)
- Fearlessness, charity, sacrifice, austerity, uprightness, truth, non-steadiness, vigor, forgiveness, fortitude (16:1,2,3)
- Liberation, wisdom (4:23)
- Humility, integrity, steadfastness, self-effacement, (13:7,8)
- Understanding, knowledge, calmness (10:4,5)

The values in the second category of "compound negative expression" are as follows:

- Freedom from egoism, freedom from joy and anger, freedom from fear and agitation, freedom from expectation (12:13-16)
- Freedom from covetousness, freedom from malice and excessive pride (16:1,2,3)
- Freedom from jealousy (4:22)
- Freedom from bewilderment (10:4,5)

The values in the third category of 'descriptive phrase' are as follows:

- Indifference to dualities (12:17-20)
- Even mindedness in pain and pleasure, skillfulness in action, unconcern (12:13-16)

- Steadfastness in knowledge and concentration, study of scriptures, aversion to fault-finding, (16:1,2,3)
- Rejoicing in doing good to all creatures (5:25)
- Being without affection on any side, not loathing as one obtains good or evil, remaining the same amidst the pleasant and unpleasant things, firmness of mind, regarding both blame and praise as one, being the same in honor and dishonor, being the same to friend and foe, serving God with unflinching devotion (14:24, 25)
- Service of the teacher, indifference to objects of sense, perception of the evil of birth, death, old age, sickness and pain (13:7,8)
- Absence of clinging to son, wife, home and the like, constant equal mindedness to all desirable and undesirable happenings, resort to solitary places, dislike for a crowd of people, constancy in the knowledge of the spirit, insight into the end of knowledge of Truth (13:9,10,11)
- Equal mindedness among friends, companions, and foes, among those who are neutral and impartial, among those who are hateful and related, among saints and sinners (6:9)

The highest cardinal virtue, according to my understanding of the Gita's value system, may be said to be "the detached, serene, unswerving adherence, at all times and in all matters, to the inner voice of the '*Atman*'."

The *yogi* whose conduct is shaped by the above values will do what is right and avoid what is wrong. However, a proper insight into the ethos of the Gita (proper conceptual understanding of what exactly the said values mean and what pattern of conduct 'the inner states of being' lead to) is provided by the guru, through spiritual guidance, precept and example.

The Gita lays primary stress upon the inner transformation of character through knowledge and spiritual discipline and less on supplying ready-made rules governing right behavior. The accent is on the spiritual autonomy of the illuminated and purified soul. This approach to morality is favored by the doctrine that the *Atman* is a finite limb of *Brahman*.

Says the Gita:
(18:63)

“Thus has wisdom more secret than all secrets, been declared to thee by Me. Reflect on it fully and do as thou choosest.”

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHT AND WISDOM IN THE GITA

The Gita provides us with several remarkable psychological insights and pearls of wisdom. Modern investigations and findings confirm the practical wisdom of the Gita. In what follows I shall attempt to bring out some of its salient features.

1. The Gita mentions that there are three basic personality or temperamental types, which shape and color the thoughts, words and deeds of every individual. These types are the ‘*sattvic*’, the ‘*rajasic*’ and the ‘*tamasic*’. The *sattvic* person naturally inclines to truth and compassion, the *rajasic* to power and glory, and the *tamasic* to physical pleasures and sloth. Individuals are rarely of a pure type. Most belong to mixed types and possess different qualities (*gunas*) in ever-different proportions. However, individuals can be classified on the basis of their dominant quality.

The *sattvic* type is the highest and the *tamasic* the lowest. All thoughts, words and deeds of a person could be graded on this scale. Everything a person thinks, says or does, be it his behavior as a house

holder, giving gifts, performing religious rites, acquiring knowledge, governing a state, fighting a war, punishing a wrong doer, all could be done in the *sattvic/rajasic/tamasic* manner. The Gita implies that every action occupies a position on this scale from the pure *sattvic* to the pure *tamasic*.

The Gita exhorts the individual to rise to the *sattvic* level in every sphere of human activity. All, irrespective of caste, color, creed or gender can reach this level where the individual performs the duties of his station or situation (*swadharma*) without attachment to their fruits. Modern personality psychology calls such a person a ‘spiritually autonomous, self-directing and integrated person’. Says the Gita;

(14:5)

“The three modes (gunas) goodness (satwa), passion (rajas), and dullness (tamas) born of nature (prakriti) bind down in the body, O Mighty-armed (Arjuna), the imperishable dweller in the body.”

(18:26-28)

“The doer who is free from attachment, who has no speech of egotism, full of resolution and zeal and who is unmoved by success or failure - he is said to be of the nature of “goodness”.

“The doer who is swayed by passion, who eagerly seeks the fruit of his works, who is greedy, of violent nature, impure, who is moved by joy and sorrow-he is said to be of ‘passionate nature’.”

“The doer who is unbalanced, vulgar, obstinate, deceitful, malicious, indolent, despondent and procrastinating, he is said to be of the nature of “dullness”.

(18:41)

“Of Brahmans, of Kshatriyas and Vaishyas as also of Shudras, O Conqueror of the foe (Arjuna), the activities are distinguished, in accordance with the qualities born of their nature.”

(9:32)

“For those who take refuge in Me, O Partha (Arjuna) though they are

lowly born, women, Vaishyas, as well as Shudras, they also attain to the highest goal.”

(17:7)

“An action which is obligatory, which is performed without attachment, without love or hate by one un-desirous of fruit, that is said to be of “goodness”

“But that action which is done in great strain by one who seeks to gratify his desires or is impelled by self-sense, is said to be of the nature of passion.”

“The action which is undertaken through ignorance, without regard to consequences or to loss and injury and without regard to one’s human capacity, that is said to be of the nature of “dullness”.

“Even the food, which is dear to all, is of three kinds. So are the sacrifices, austerities and gifts. Hear thou the distinction of these.”

(17:11-12)

“That sacrifice which is offered, according to the scriptural law, by those who expect no reward and firmly believe that it is their duty to offer the sacrifices, is “good”.

“But that which is offered in expectation of reward or for the sake of display, know, O best of the Bharatas (Arjuna) that sacrifice to be “passionate”.

(6:5-7)

“Let a man lift himself by himself, let him not degrade himself for the Self alone is the friend of the self and the Self alone is the enemy of the self.”

“For him who has conquered his (lower) self by the (higher) Self his Self is a friend but for him who has not possessed his (higher) Self, his very Self will act in enmity, like an enemy”.

“When one has conquered one’s self (lower) and has attained to the calm of self-mastery, his Supreme Self abides ever contented, he is at peace in cold and heat, in pleasure and pain, in honor and dishonor.”

2. There is another psychological insight in the Gita, namely, the destructive role of negative thoughts and emotions and the key role

of thought-control in the good life.

Says the Gita:

(2:62-63)

“When a man dwells in his mind on the objects of sense, attachment to them is produced. From attachment springs desire and from desire comes anger.”

“From anger arises bewilderment, from bewilderment loss of memory, the destruction of intelligence and from the destruction of intelligence he perishes.”

(3:43)

“Thus knowing Him who is beyond the intelligence, steadying the (lower) self by the Self, smite, O mighty-armed (Arjuna), the enemy in the form of desire, so hard to get at.”

(16:21)

“The gateway of this hell leading to the ruin of the soul is threefold, lust, anger and greed. Therefore, these three, one should abandon.”

3. The Gita teaches that the faith of an individual is a very personal matter and that it should be respected and not disturbed by others. Those at a higher level of knowledge of Reality (*Brahmavidya*) should give loving help and guidance to others in raising their level through proper striving but must never unsettle the honest beliefs or convictions of others. Help and advice must flow from a heart full of compassionate love rather than stern disapproval and rejection of others. Says the Gita:

(17:3)

“The faith of every individual, O Bharat (Arjuna), is in accordance with his nature. Man is of the nature of his faith: What his faith is, that, verily, he is.”

(3:26)

“Let him (jnanin) not unsettle the minds of the ignorant who are attached to action. The enlightened man doing all works in a spirit of yoga, should set others to act (as well).”

(3:29)

“Those who are misled by the modes of nature get attached to the works produced by them. But let no one who knows the whole unsettle the minds of the ignorant who know only a part.”

4. Another pearl of timeless wisdom found in the Gita is that the individual should overcome any inner doubts, which may linger in his mind, consciously or otherwise, pertaining to the human situation. While extolling the individual’s freedom of choice and of conscience the Gita, at the same time, stresses the importance of a firm commitment, which is essential for the good life. In other word, the Gita stresses what modern existentialist thinkers call ‘authentic’ commitment. Says the Gita:

(4:40)

“But the man who is ignorant, who has no faith, who is of a doubting nature, perishes. For the doubting soul, there is neither this world nor the world beyond nor any happiness.”

(4:42)

“Therefore, having cut asunder with the sword of wisdom this doubt in thy heart that is born of ignorance, resort to yoga and stand up, O Bharata (Arjuna)”

5. The fifth insight is that though the letter of scripture is important, the spirit is even more so. The *yogi*, at the highest level, therefore, should concern himself more with the realization of basic objectives and values taught in the scripture rather than with obeying rules and regulations in the literal sense. Changed circumstances may even require the modification of or rather going beyond such rules, which are instrumental in character. This is a remarkably courageous exhortation and has few parallels in the spiritual history of man. Says the Gita:

(2:42-44)

“The undiscerning who rejoice in the letter of the Veda, who contend that there is nothing else, whose nature is desire and who are intent on

heaven, proclaim these flowery words that result in rebirth as the fruit of actions and (lay down) various specialized rites for the attainment of enjoyment and power.”

“The intelligence which is to be trained, of those who are devoted, to enjoyment and power and whose minds are carried away by these words (of the Veda) is not well established in the Self (or concentration).”

(2:46)

“As is the use of a pond in a place flooded with water everywhere, so is that of all the Vedas for the Brahmin who understands.”

(2:53)

“When thy intelligence, which is bewildered by the Vedic texts, shall stand unshaken and stable in spirit (samadhi), then shall thou attain to insight (yoga).”

6. The sixth basic insight of the Gita is the paramount importance of action in the broad sense. Human life remains essentially futile and meaningless without proper action or purposive striving. The Gita says:

(3:8)

“Do thou thy allotted work, for action is better than inaction; even the maintenance of thy physical life cannot be effected without action.”

(3:12)

“Fostered by sacrifice the gods will give you the enjoyments you desire. He who enjoys these gifts without giving to them in return is verily a thief.”

7. The seventh insight or piece of wisdom is that action done out of the right motive (namely, performance of duty without attachment to fruits) is more important for salvation than having the right theory of reality. However, at other places the path of knowledge is held to be superior to all other paths. It may, therefore, be said that Gita holds that though the path of knowledge (*gyanayoga*) is supreme it could be

substituted by the path of devotion to God (*bhaktiyoga*). Similarly, the path of total renunciation of works could be substituted by the path of detached performance of duty (*niskama karma*). In the final analysis, the Gita seems to imply that it is immaterial whether the *yogi* follows the path of knowledge or the path of devotion, provided he performs his duties without attachment to their fruits.

Here are some relevant verses:

(5: 4-5)

“The ignorant speak of renunciation (Sankhya) and practice of works (yoga) as different, not the wise. He who applies himself well to one, gets the fruits of both.”

“The status, which is obtained by men of renunciation is reached by men of action also. He who sees that the ways of renunciation and of action are one, he sees (truly).”

(6: 1-2)

“He who does the work which he ought to do without seeking its fruit, he is the sanyasin, he is the yogin, not he who does not light the sacred fire, and performs no rites.”

“What they call renunciation, that know to be disciplined activity, O Pandava (Arjuna), for no one becomes a yogin who has not renounced his (selfish purpose).”

(3:19)

“Therefore, without attachment, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment.”

(18:10-11)

“The wise man, who renounces, whose doubts are dispelled, whose nature is of goodness, has no aversion to disagreeable action and no attachment to agreeable action.”

“It is indeed impossible for any embodied being to abstain from work altogether. But he who gives up the fruit of action, he is said to be the Relinquisher.”

(18:8-9)

“He who gives up a duty because it is painful or from fear of physical suffering, performs only the relinquishment of the “passionate” kind and does not gain the reward of relinquishment.

“But he who performs a prescribed duty as a thing that ought to be done, renouncing all attachment and also the fruit - his relinquishment is regarded as one of “goodness”

(7:47)

“To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction.”

(9:27)

“Whatever thou doest, whatever thou eatest, whatever thou offerest, whatever thou givest away, whatever austerities thou dost practice - do that, O Son of Kunti (Arjuna), as an offering to Me.”

8. Finally, the Gita disapproves of asceticism and recommends moderation in eating, sleeping and the satisfaction of other bodily needs as the best means of spiritual growth as well as all round personality development. Modern psychology, once again, has reached the same conclusion. Says the Gita:

(17:5-6)

“Those men, vain and conceited and impelled by the force of lust and passion, who perform violent austerities, which are not ordained by the scriptures.”

“Being foolish oppress the group of elements in their body and Me also dwelling in the body. Know these to be demoniac in their resolves.”

(2:64)

“But a man of disciplined mind, who moves among the objects of sense, with the senses under control and free from attachment and aversion, he attains purity of spirit.”

(6:16-17)

“Verily, yoga is not for him who eats too much or abstains too much

from eating. It is not for him, O Arjuna, who sleeps too much or keeps awake too much.”

“For the man who is temperate in food and recreation, who is restrained in his actions, whose sleep and waking are regulated, there ensues discipline (yoga) which destroys all sorrow.”

CONCLUDING REMARKS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHT AND WISDOM IN THE GITA

The detached performance of duty without any emotional or sentimental involvement of the doer will certainly lead to altruistic and harmonious human relationships. But it seems the ethic of detached living would liberate humans not merely from the evils of egoism, passion and lust, but also from the blessings of friendly warmth of the heart, romantic altruistic love at its best, merriment and wit; in short, not merely from the sufferings and tears of life, but also from the joys and poetry of life.

Imagine a world of saints who (under the Gita's inspiration) are engaged all the time in preparing for merger into *Brahman*. What will happen in such a world to the will to enjoy, to compete in sport, to know the secrets of nature and to control it, to restructure society nearer to the heart's desire, to create beauty, to alleviate suffering, to make life comfortable and congenial for optimum all round creativity? It seems, in other words, that fulfilling the letter of the Gita in man's quest for salvation would lead to a sort of life-negation and would discourage the active involvement of the individual in the mixed joys and sorrows, achievements and failures, cooperation and competition which are the inseparable ingredients of human living.

The above fear seems justified up to a point. However, it will lose its sting if we look at the gospel of detached action in the light of the traditional Hindu concepts of '*ashrama*', namely, that the normal span of human life is hundred years divided into four stages (*ashramas*) each of twentyfive years duration. The first two stages namely, '*brahmacha-*

rya' and '*grahasta*' could well be regarded as periods of life affirmation, the third, '*vanaprasta*', as a twilight period of preparation for entry into '*sanayasa*': the fourth and final stage of life-negation. One could, then, hold that the Gita teaches courageous and optimistic all round life-affirmation in the first half of life, and its gradual tapering in the second. Even the last stage of life could be viewed as life affirmation at the level of transcendence rather than as life-negation. This point needs further clarification.

One may say that the Gita holds different values and their corresponding duties as appropriate for the different stages of life. All these different values and duties can be subsumed under one master-value or 'master-duty', appropriate for each stage of life. This master-duty is the '*ashramadharma*'. We may look at the '*ashramadharma*' not as a single atomic duty but as a 'spectrum of duties' appropriate to the individual's stage of life. This spectrum would change at different stages of life, so that each stage will have a specific structure of duties, together with an accent on some of them, rather than any monolithic or exclusive duty.

Likewise, we may not understand '*varna*' as hereditary caste but rather as the inner constitution or personality type of each individual irrespective of the family of his birth. On this view total renunciation may become the master duty of some people in the last stage of life. However, even '*sanayasa*' need not be a total 'flight from life'. It could be viewed as transcendental living with a constructive social purpose. Perhaps, this is the implication of the following verse of the Gita:

(4:18)

"He who in action sees inaction and action in inaction, he is wise among men, he is a yogin and he has accomplished all his work."

We may well conclude that the Gita says that the dominant concern of the good life, in the first half, must be morally regulated all round creative development of the individual as a specific personality type. In the second half the accent should shift to progressive contemplation and transcendence. Each stage of life entails a characteristic spectrum

of duties. The figure of Arjuna, 'the archer', represents self-assertion and purposive action in the first half of life; while the figure of Sri Krishna, 'the charioteer' represents wisdom in the second half. These two activities complement each other in the flowering of the good life. What is required is a proper blending of the two in optimum proportions during the different stages of life. Vigorous action, symbolized by the shooting of the arrow, must be guided by wisdom and morality symbolized by the 'charioteer' in control of the movement and direction of the vehicle. This interpretation makes the classical Hindu doctrine of '*varnashrama*' practically synonymous with the modern Western values of 'Self-Realization' and 'authentic being'.

Says the last verse of the Gita:

(18:78)

"Wherever there is Krishna, the lord of yoga, and Partha (Arjuna), the archer, I think, there will surely be fortune, victory, welfare and morality."

5. CONCEPTUAL PERMISSIVENESS AND TOLERANCE IN THE GITA

Conceptual permissiveness within a religious tradition means that the acknowledged custodians of the tradition allow fellow-believers a measure of freedom to redefine the basic concepts and values of the religion without attracting the charge or guilt of being disloyal or inimical to the tradition. Conceptual permissiveness is, thus, the willing acceptance of plural interpretations within the tradition, while 'conceptual strictness' imposes a rigidly uniform commitment.

The Gita stands for conceptual permissiveness. It says that God can be worshiped in different ways, and that all lead the sincere worshippers to the Supreme. The plural approach fosters tolerance and cultural inclusiveness, while the stress on uniformity to proselytism and exclusiveness. The Gita prescribes that willing adherence to one's

own duty (*swadharma*) is the best means of spiritual growth. The stress of the Gita is on spiritual discipline and detached action, not on any particular metaphysics or theology. Says the Gita:

(4:11)

“As men approach Me so do I accept them: men on all sides follow My path, O Partha (Arjuna).”

(7:21-23)

“Whatever form any devotee with faith wishes to worship, I make that faith of his steady.”

“Endowed with that faith, he seeks the worship of such a one and from him he obtains his desires, the benefits being decreed by Me alone.”

“But temporary is the fruit gained by these men of small minds. The worshipers of the gods go to the gods but My devotees come to Me.”

(9:23-24)

“Even those who are devotees of other gods, worship them with faith, they also sacrifice to Me alone, O Son of Kunti (Arjuna), though not according to the true law.”

“For I am the enjoyer and lord of all sacrifices. But these men do not know Me in My true nature and so they fall.”

(9:26)

“Whosoever offers to Me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, that offering of love, of the pure of heart I accept.”

(9:29)

“I am alike to all beings. None is hateful or dear to Me. But those who worship Me with devotion they are in Me and I also in them.”

The Gita does hold Sri Krishna as a Divine incarnation. But the Gita does not reject other beliefs. Says the Gita:

(12:2-5)

“Those who fix their minds on Me, worship Me, ever harmonized and possessed of supreme faith - them do I consider most perfect in yoga.”

“But those who worship the Imperishable, the Undefinable, the Unmanifested, the Omnipresent, the Unthinkable, the Unchanging and

the Immobile, the Constant.”

“By restraining all the senses, being even-minded in all conditions, rejoicing in the welfare of all creatures, they come to Me indeed (just like all the others).”

“The difficulty of those whose thoughts are set on the Unmanifested is greater, for the goal of the Unmanifested is hard to reach by the embodied beings.”

The above verses seem to imply that the monistic or non-theistic approach to Ultimate Reality is also permissible, though its difficulties are stated to be much greater for ordinary mortals. The only view, which the Gita categorically repudiates is Nihilism: the rejection of all values and of the doctrine of *karma*, and the consequent unbridled amoral pursuit of impulse or passion. The following verses make this explicitly clear:

(16:7-8)

“The demoniac do not know about the way of action or the way of renunciation. Neither purity, nor good conduct, nor truth is found in them.”

“They say that the world is unreal, without a basis, without a Lord, not brought about in regular causal sequence, caused by desire, in short.”

(16:10-12)

“Giving themselves up to insatiable desire, full of hypocrisy, excessive pride and arrogance, holding wrong views through delusion, they act with impure resolves.”

“Obsessed with innumerable cares which would end only with (their) death, looking upon the gratification of desires as their highest aim, assured that this is all.”

“Bound by hundreds of ties of desire, given over to lust and anger, they strive to amass hoards of wealth, by unjust means, for the gratification of their desires.”

(16:18-20)

“Given over to self-conceit, force and pride and also to lust and anger, these malicious people despise Me dwelling in the bodies of themselves and others.”

“These cruel haters, worst of men, I hurl constantly these evil-doers only into the wombs of demons in this cycle of births and deaths.”

“Fallen into the wombs of demons, these deluded beings from birth to birth, do not attain to Me, O Son of Kunti (Arjuna), but go down to the lowest state.”

Now, though Mahavira and Buddha denied *Brahman* and the sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, they both accepted basic moral and spiritual values and the principle of *karma*. It is therefore, reasonable to hold that the followers of Mahavira and Buddha, or for that matter, the followers of any other religious tradition (provided they eschew the moral evils or vices mentioned above) do not come under the purview of the above verses of the Gita.

In other words, the approach of the Gita is so catholic that notwithstanding its own commitment to *Vaishnavite Anthro-theism* (faith in the divinity of Sri Krishna), it seems to permit the conceptual elimination of even God/*Brahman* from one's value system for agnostics and others.

Possibly, this is the explanation of how and why both Jainism and Buddhism, after an extended period of conflict with *Brahmanical* orthodoxy, and even a measure of persecution by the custodians of the Vedic tradition, eventually came to be regarded as unorthodox schools or sects of Hinduism in the larger sense.

Blessed are the good and simple and authentic believers in a caring Personal God. Blessed are they who can plumb the depths of their being and can hear ‘the music of the spheres’ and see ‘the light of a thousand suns blaze forth all at once’, and act dutifully without attachment to fruits. Blessed too are they whose journey in inner space brings them to ‘*Brahman without attributes*’, and fortifies the ‘*Atman*’. But what about those whose honest and sustained quest for truth meets with a bewildered inner silence and the darkness of an unending night of the soul, and yet they remain sensitive to truth, goodness and beauty, and go on responding to the call of duty for its own sake? This is the crucial question facing and dividing humanity today.

"They too are blessed", seems to be how Gita implicitly answers the crucial question. And this, to my mind, is tolerance at its best and the perennial wisdom of the Bhagwad Gita.