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The Setting and Purpose of the Gita

धृतराष्ट्र उवाच |
धर्मक्षेत्रे कुरुक्षेत्रे समवेता युयुत्सवः |
मामकाः पाण्डवाश्चैव किमकुर्वत सञ्जय ||1.1||

*Dhritarashtra said:
At Kurukshetra, the field of dharma,
Where my folks and the Pandavas
Have assembled, eager to fight,
What did they do, O Sanjaya?*

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मामकाः पाण्डवाः च एव
समवेताः युयुत्सवः
किम् अकुर्वत सञ्जय

Thus begins the *Bhagavad Gita*.

It is indeed a most unusual setting for one of the most celebrated and timeless scriptures of India to begin! The setting is a battlefield at Kurukshetra, where a terrible and violent war is about to begin. The theme of *dharma* is invoked in the very first lines of the Gita, spoken by Dhritarashtra, the blind king in the great Indian epic, *Mahabharata*. Dhritarashtra is stationed within the confines of his palace, but he is constantly updated about the happenings at the distant battlefield, through his assistant, Sanjaya.

In the opening verse, Dhritarashtra refers to the conflict between his sons (whom he openly refers to as ‘my folks’) and the Pandavas, the five sons of his late brother and former king, Pandu. It is ironic that Dhritarashtra should talk about *dharma* (law of righteousness). Blinded by his affection for his sons (especially the eldest one, Duryodhana), he finds himself

helpless in correcting their evil ways, having no control over their criminal nature. The Pandavas had to face a series of many acts of injustice, but it is the final act of driving them away from the kingdom (based on Duryodhana's insistence) that led to the war. It was to be a disastrous war, afflicting many kingdoms in North India. Thousands of inter-related family members and friends, along with their armies, had to choose sides between the Pandavas and the Kauravas and take part in this war.

The main protagonist in the Gita is Arjuna, one of the five Pandavas, recognised to be perhaps the greatest warrior of his time. At the battlefield of Kurukshetra, just before the battle is about to commence, he finds himself challenged, unexpectedly, by a terrible conflict in terms of his dharma. Unlike Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana, here is a heroic man, who strives to live according to the highest ideals of his age and culture. He sincerely wants to do the right thing, but is now bewildered and disturbed by the enormity of the destruction that this war is about to unleash on his own people — an ethical dilemma or *dharma sankatam*! He is so disturbed, that he is tempted to drop everything and quit the battlefield.

Fortunately, Arjuna is aware of his confusion and dejection, and intuitively knows that it would be wrong to make impulsive decisions in his confused state. He is wise enough to seek the advice of Krishna, who happens to be a cousin and mentor of the Pandavas, now serving as Arjuna's charioteer at the battlefield. However, unknown to most people of his time, Krishna was also a great *Avatar*, the Supreme Divine descended in human form.

The replies given by Krishna to Arjuna's many queries take the form of a spiritual discourse, in poetic verse. This constitutes the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* (literally, the *Divine Song*). Spread over 700 verses, it contains the essential spiritual wisdom of the ancient *Upanishads* (synthesised with *Sankhya* philosophy), referred to as *brahma vidya*. Yet, the

Gita has much more to offer than theoretical knowledge leading to Self-realisation. It is also a manual of practice (*yoga shastra*) that demonstrates how spirituality can be, and should be, practised in our day-to-day lives.

Spirituality is something that is commonly associated with peace and non-violence: with temples, ashrams, monasteries, churches and mosques, and with serene landscapes. We feel uplifted in such sublime settings, which provide an ambience that feels significantly different from the hustle and bustle of our daily lives. Yet, we find it difficult to invoke that sublime peace in our habitual circumstances. Especially, when we find ourselves placed in challenging situations. So, for the majority of us, spirituality and living in the world seem to be rather mutually opposed. It is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to be *spiritual* in our day-to-day work and relationships. Even in those precious moments when we do get a glimpse of what it means to be spiritual, we find that we are not quite rightly engaging with the world! Paradoxically, we need to retreat from the world outside, physically and psychologically, especially from any kind of ugliness or violence, in order to contact the Spirit.

Indeed, traditionally, spirituality has been often associated with renunciation and asceticism, with abandoning this world, and thereby its ugliness and miseries in order to seek and hopefully find, the 'other' world of heavenly bliss. In the Gita itself, there is a clear acceptance of the harsh reality of living in this world, the very nature of which appears to be transient and unhappy, *anityam-asukham lokam* (verse 9.33). Yet, the Gita does not advocate outer renunciation. It points to a way of living spiritually in this world through day-to-day activities and relationships, and especially while facing critical moments in our lives.

Perhaps, for this very reason, the most unlikely of all places and occasions has been chosen for rendering this unique spiritual discourse. For, if spirituality can be practised in a living battlefield, with one's inner being remaining

supremely at peace, in communion with the Divine, amidst the most difficult turmoils and violent happenings in our outer circumstances, then it certainly can be practised easily anywhere and at any time. It is this that makes the teachings of the Gita so significant and relevant for all of us. Although it dates back many thousand years ago, its appeal is universal, immediate and untiringly fresh.



Dharmakshetra and Kurukshetra

The term *dharma* refers to the basis or principle or law of being, which sustains and regulates the functioning of everything in this cosmos. The term *kuru*, which is closely linked to and derived from the same root as the term *karma*, refers to any work or action, including the underlying intent. Thus, *dharmakshetre kurukshetre* refers to a generic human setting, a *kshetra*, where we are all required to perform our respective *karma* appropriately — for sustaining ourselves and the universe in a right and harmonious manner, for *dharma*. For harmony and order to prevail in this evolving universe, all beings need to conduct themselves in accordance with *dharma*, which simply put, means doing the right thing. However, what is this *dharma*? This points to a fundamental question in life: *What indeed is the purpose of all existence, of creation? What is the purpose of our life, of my life?*

We shall see in the chapters to follow, how the theme of *dharma* is unravelled in the Gita, leading to a climax in the closing verses. Although Arjuna's concerns are primarily limited to his own *dharma* and are based on the anguish that he personally feels at this critical moment in his life, the very nature of his questions calls for a deeper and wider understanding, as brought out in the 700 verses of the Gita. Naturally, the questions and answers span over a wide spectrum of topics, covering spirituality, philosophy, psychology and work ethics.

Indeed, in line with all other scriptures all over the world, the Gita does urge us to purify ourselves of all evil and to be good and to do good. It does uphold, for example, non-injuring and non-killing — *ahimsa* — to be of extreme importance in spiritual conduct. It also upholds ascetic renunciation as a valid way of spiritual salvation, for those who are so inclined. Equally, it upholds the social dharma of all individuals living in the world. In the case of Arjuna-like *Kshatriya* warriors, this dharma would be to fight for the protection of the good and destruction of evil, whenever this is required — something that Arjuna himself was well aware of, and extremely skilled at.

However, all actions have consequences, and hence it is important that our karma be aligned to our dharma. When we act in violation of dharma and engage in *adharma*, we tend to generate chaos and disorder, within us and outside us. The misalignment between our karma and dharma occurs typically when we are driven by our selfishness and self-interest, by lust and greed, to transgress on the rights and well-being of others (including the environment), and when we fail to carry out our responsibilities and obligations. Often we do this, even when we know that this is *adharma* — out of a sense of helplessness, driven by habits, impulses or cravings over which we seem to have little control. The personal cravings are characteristically driven by self-centred feelings of ‘I’ and ‘mine’.

Each one of us is made up of many parts of being (physical, vital and mental), which often pull us in different directions. There is a need for proper governance, for kingship, and ideally this should come from an awakened intelligence in us. Unfortunately, very often, we are confused with regard to our dharma, and even when doing the right thing stares at us clearly in the face, like Dhritarashtra, we succumb to the pulls of our lower nature, over which we have little or no control. In the absence of integrity and self-mastery, knowledge and will are not aligned with each other,