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## Foreword

In professional education today, we place, or misplace, emphasis on getting jobs and pay packages. We miss out on inner development, which is essential to find fulfilment and deal effectively with the demands and challenges of society around us. All around, we see a ‘rat race’ culture: desperation, selfishness, lack of concern for others, greed, corruption, frustration and despondency (including suicidal tendencies). We need a holistic development of the individual, with spirituality at the core. Unfortunately, this is not actively patronised or even discussed in our modern temples of learning, in sharp contrast to our more renowned ancient universities at Takshashila and Nalanda.

In an attempt to fill this vital gap in education, my esteemed colleague, Prof. Devdas Menon, author of this book (and also of *Stop sleepwalking through life!*) has introduced ‘elective’ courses titled *Self-awareness* and *Integral Karmayoga* at IIT Madras. These have turned out to be popular and transformative courses at our Institute, and some of us have had the good fortune of attending them. The teaching notes related to the timeless wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita* have been carefully worked upon by the author to result in this seminal work, titled *Spirituality at Work*. This is a sacred offering of a truly learned person, who has experienced the nectar of the Gita and has chosen to share his insights and joy with those who seek a truly meaningful and fulfilling existence. He is also widely known as a teacher, researcher, consultant and author of popular textbooks in structural engineering.

This book, like the Gita, comprises eighteen chapters, each devoted to a particular theme, based on a careful selection of key verses from the Gita. Each chapter is replete with insights worthy of deep rumination, containing the

essence of the Gita, made relevant to modern times. The analysis of human psychology and the presentation of ancient Indian wisdom is deep and awe-inspiring, particularly because it also includes actionable items of the *yoga* of the Gita for authentic transformation. Clearly, we are all in need of clear insight, self-awareness, inspiration and strong inner motivation to do the ‘right thing’, our *dharma*. The Gita’s *yoga* shows a way to realise complete fulfilment through union with our Divine Source. This book advocates an integral approach, with *Karmayoga* as the fundamental basis, and with our actions supported by the wisdom of *Jnanayoga* and the devotion of *Bhaktiyoga*. It is pointed out that the best place to seek the Divine is in our innermost being, in the cave of our hearts. For it is there that we can truly find an inner delight and ease of being, as well as an inner radiance that can show us with certitude the ‘right way’ amidst all confusions.

We are urged to excel at work, to self-actualise and bring our inherent talents and potential to fruition, dedicating all our work to the Divine, and eventually transcending the ego-centred notion of ‘doership’. We are urged to discover our true inner calling and life purpose, to achieve mastery and serve as instruments of the omniscient Divine. We will then find ourselves frequently in a ‘flow’ state of perfect action. This is referred to as our ‘higher nature’, and it is here that we can find enduring fulfilment and consummation of our life purpose.

But attaining to that state of perfection and union is not easy. We find ourselves pulled down, time and again, by various forces (inner and outer) beyond our control. These can be well understood in terms of the three *gunas* (qualities) of nature: *tamas* (inertia, ignorance), *rajas* (dynamism, restlessness) and *sattva* (lucidity, balance). The inter-play of these three *gunas*, and our total identification with a narrow separate ego-self keep us trapped in ‘lower nature’ (*Prakriti*). In order to see this play objectively (without getting affected) and to discover our hidden True Self (*Purusha, Atman*), we

need to withdraw periodically into the stillness of deep meditation. We can then contact the divinity hidden in our innermost being, and remain free from the tumultuous world around and inside us. This is true freedom.

However, we are likely to lose that freedom when we re-engage with the world. There are cravings that spring up, and we find ourselves getting entrapped again in the *karmic* cycles of action and reaction. Through insight and practice, we begin to gain better control over ourselves. While acknowledging that there are authentic ‘deficiency needs’ in us that need to be satisfied ethically, we realise how easily ‘need’ can change into ‘greed’. We also gain increasing understanding of how the three *gunas* operate, and we work towards increasing *sattva-guna* in our being, becoming more and more selfless in our actions and compassionate in our relationships.

Yet, there are limits to our efforts, because our capacities seem to be limited. We need help, and that help is always available to us in the form of *Divine grace*, which manifests mysteriously, especially when there is a strong aspiration and devotion (*bhakti*). In this regard, the Divine Teacher of the Gita gives a guarantee that regardless of the stage of spiritual evolution of the aspirant, as long as there is steadfast faith and diligence in the practice of *yoga*, the goal will be realised. As we progress along the path of *Integral Karmayoga*, we tend to place more and more reliance on the One Divine Source, and aided by Divine grace, are bound to ascend from our lower nature to the higher nature. This brings to us fulfilment and maximises our contribution to the well-being of the world.

May this book inspire you, dear reader, to discover fulfilment in life in all its dimensions: in *being*, in *doing*, in *knowing* and in *loving*!

– A. Meher Prasad,  
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Thanks to all my dear students, colleagues and friends!

Finally, I offer my obeisance to the Divine Teacher of the Gita!

– Devdas Menon

## Preface

*Spirituality* may not be a popular word in today's technological world. It is considered 'unscientific' and often viewed with suspicion and scepticism. Whether we are spiritually inclined or not, we all basically seem to want to be happy and successful, be inspired and find fulfilment in our lives. That indeed is the very objective of *Spirituality at Work*, properly understood and lived.

Sadly, the harsh reality is that we are rarely able to find and sustain such fulfilment at work and in our relationships. Stephen Covey summarises this human condition in modern times in his book, *The 8th Habit*, based on decades of research conducted worldwide: 'Despite all our gains in technology, product innovation and world markets, most people are not thriving in the organisations they work for. They are neither fulfilled nor excited. They are frustrated. They are not clear about where the organisation is headed or what its highest priorities are. They are bogged down and distracted. Most of all, they don't feel they can change much.'

Clearly, in order to live life whole-heartedly, and to enjoy what we do, we need to be motivated by some inner inspiration or meaningful purpose in life. Mostly, we are driven by short-term goals, but the motivation is *extrinsic*, and the promise of enduring fulfilment does not come to us. We need to have clarity on the very purpose of our lives, our *dharma*, on *who we are* and *why we are here*. We need *spirituality*.

*Spirit* is what keeps us *inspired* — a word that in fact is derived from spirit! We need daily inspiration to keep us motivated and to sustain our enthusiasm. We also need to develop the unique skills and potentials that lie latent in us, and put these into creative use for a higher purpose. We need to *individuate* and *self-actualise*, so that the unique potential given to each one of us is authentically realised — which means not just being part of the herd, or caught in some rat race. In the process

of growing self-awareness, we will naturally discover the need of our higher nature to *unify* with the universe around us. This is the kind of spirituality explored in this book. Our inner transformation gets increasingly reflected in outer expressions of light, love, joy, beauty and creativity in all our work and our relationships.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a resource that gives inspiring guidance to us on all the above issues. The *yoga* of the Gita reflects a profound spirituality, not only aiming at ego-transcendence and *unification* (called *Self-realisation*), but also authentic *individuation* and excellence in performance at work. The integrated practice of spirituality through work (*karma*), knowledge (*jnana*) and devotion (*bhakti*) — referred to as *Integral Karmayoga* in this book — is the way recommended in the Gita. The Gita does not support the view that spiritual salvation implies abdication of responsibilities in life or doing just the minimal work needed for sustenance, and that too half-heartedly, not seeing any higher purpose in creation. It is not renunciation of work and life that the Gita advocates, but the higher renunciation of ego-centred desire and attachment to the fruits of action. Unfortunately, this fundamental message of the Gita seems to have got lost in the very country of its origin! The message of *Integral Karmayoga* in the Gita is meant for immediate practice, while working and living in the world, and not something to be dabbled with, post-retirement!

Sri Aurobindo referred to the Bhagavad Gita as ‘*our chief national heritage, our hope for the future*’. Composed several thousand years ago, it has been recognised worldwide as a classic text and scripture, giving the gist of ancient Indian wisdom. However, it remains largely unknown to most Indians, and is not easily accessible in education, even in our leading institutions. It is with the objective of rediscovering the inspiring message of the Gita in a modern context that a ‘free elective’ course on *Integral Karmayoga* was introduced in the curriculum at IIT Madras in 2014. The focus is on finding fulfilment in life through the application of conscious will — through *Karmayoga* — in a way that is also integrated with

knowledge and devotion. This book has emerged from the lecture notes prepared for this course, and its contents are based on a theme-wise selection of 162 verses spread across the Gita, which comprises 700 verses. The interpretation is primarily based on Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* and his other writings. In each of the 162 selected Gita verses, the translation is preceded by the original Sanskrit verse (in *Devanagari* script). Corresponding to every line in the 'free verse' English translation, the relevant Sanskrit phrase is also shown in Devanagari.

For a deep and experiential understanding, the Gita needs to be studied and contemplated upon, again and again. Every time, it is likely to reveal a deeper understanding to the sincere aspirant, resulting in a growing inner wakefulness, calm, communion, integral knowledge, harmony, love and compassion, as well as a more purposeful and fulfilling engagement in the world. The spiritual journey cannot be said to be complete until we get to see and feel the One Divine Presence in everything and every being — always, everywhere.

In the spiritual journey, it is helpful to be able to maintain an earnest, humble and ever-learning beginner's mind. This journey is typically full of ups and downs, and often after making seemingly rapid progress initially, we tend to slow down, hit plateaus and sometimes even descend into delusion and cynicism. Spiritual knowledge of the academic or dogmatic kind sometimes proves to be a burden, closing us to fresh learning and giving us a foolish know-it-all arrogance. True knowing is not separate from being; it has to be experiential — as implied by the term, *Self-realisation*.

May we be inspired and initiated by the selected Gita verses in this book into a daily spiritual practice that is likely to unfold uniquely for each of us!



# 1



## 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?*

धृतराष्ट्रः उवाच  
धर्म क्षेत्रे कुरु क्षेत्रे  
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,

and the will may execute a wrong action that can have disastrous consequences. Thus for example, various forms of corruption — such as giving and taking bribes, for even small matters such as getting a driving licence — are rampant in countries like India, because we succumb to the temptation of easy, quick and sure returns without having to put in the required effort or having to wait, despite knowing that this is wrong. When we tend to feel some prick of conscience about our wrong-doing, the same intellect is now put to use in self-defence and rationalisation of that action.

‘As you sow, so shall you reap’ is a famous Biblical saying. In the same vein, according to traditional Indian wisdom, every karma is bound to generate a reaction. This is believed to manifest as a *karmic force*, which influences the future of not only the *doer* (*karta*), who will reap or suffer the consequences, but also the collective future of others, as well as the environment. Thus, we create our own destiny, individually and collectively! This is depicted throughout the *Mahabharata* story — how the collective destiny of countless people is affected by the actions and decisions made by a few individuals.

Conflicts in our dharma can arise in various ways. Typically, this happens when we feel obliged to do two different things, or cater to the needs of two different persons at the same time, but have to forego one of them. This may cause us and others considerable distress. The conflict takes the shape of an ethical dilemma when we are troubled by a realisation that the action we are about to take up is a violation of some value or ideal that we hold dear. This realisation may even come upon us suddenly, as with Arjuna at Kurukshetra, despite the fact that he was an accomplished warrior who had successfully fought many wars.

Let us consider situations we can relate to in modern times. What happens when we come to realise that the products we manufacture or sell have some seriously damaging effects or clearly violate ethical norms? What

happens to a criminal lawyer, if he were to awaken to a sense of guilt in having to resort to lies in the courtroom, just to acquit his client (whom he knows to be guilty), or worse, to convict someone innocent? More commonly, we feel this dilemma when we end up paying a bribe, either directly or indirectly, to get some work done.

We encounter such conflicts in issues involving technological and economical development versus destruction of environment and ecology and displacement of human habitat — for example, in the construction of a large dam, or in mining of minerals in tribal and forested areas, or in real estate development involving conversion of agricultural land to profitable construction. All such ‘developments’ are generally carried out based on the argument that this is for the ‘greater good’, even if it implies loss or sacrifice by a few. Frequently, such arguments are specious, covering up several inconvenient truths — such as environmental and social costs, the narrow and greedy interests of a few individuals or corporations, and the pressures that are inevitably brought upon the political ruling class who are funded by such groups.

Thus a wide range of *dharmic* conflicts are possible at various levels — global, national, regional, communal, at the workplace, within the family, within the individual. An example of a *dharmic* conflict within an individual occurs with respect to time management. Students typically know that they should be spending more time at studies and self-development, but these priorities give way to lazy ways, to fooling around, watching films, gossiping, excessive playing, etc. — and even worse, they end up cheating, and copying assignments, submitted at the last minute. The conflict, in such cases, is invariably between the pull of some practical necessity, calling for appropriate outer action, and the inner resistance or recoil we feel on account of some ethical sense in us, which perceives inappropriateness or a sense of sin or wrong-doing in the *means* adopted. The ends do not always justify the means! At the same time, if no action is taken or

the action taken is inadequate, the ends may not get achieved, and if they have wider social or global implications, the consequences arising from our inaction could well be disastrous!

How does one resolve this issue of dharma satisfactorily — in such a way that we are left with no doubt that we are indeed doing the right thing? There is no easy solution, as Arjuna indeed discovers. However, he is fortunate to have the guidance of Krishna, whom he later discovers beyond doubt to be the embodiment of the Supreme Divine, called *Purushottama* in the Gita. The Gita points out that there is such a Divine guide ever accessible to us — not outside, but in our innermost being, as the *Antaryami*, who dwells in the very hearts of all beings: *ishvarah sarvabhutanam hriddeshe tishtathi* (verse 18.61). It is this portion of the Supreme Divine, hidden in the depths of our soul, that can not only give us all the knowledge, love and happiness we seek, but can also divinise our lives and actions, so that we live in fulfilment — in being, in knowing, in doing and in loving.

Thus, those of us who have deeply realised the import of the Gita, know that this is not just some spiritual discourse given in the remote past to some historical (or perhaps mythical) character called Arjuna. It is a direct message intended for you and me, from the Supreme Divine, showing us how we can live life in fulfilment, moment-to-moment. Indeed, you and I are the Arjuna of the Gita, and Krishna resides in our soul.

The battlefield setting of the Gita is symbolic of the challenges that life presents to all of us through conflicts. In every instance, we are required to make a choice and to act decisively. What is represented here as a battle between the righteous Pandavas and the evil Kauravas is often interpreted as being symbolic of the eternal conflict between the so-called forces of good and evil. However, that would be a simplistic reading of the true import of the Gita, whose verses ring with a deeper meaning.