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Duty in Bhagavad Gītā

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Abstract – The Bhagavad Gītā, a jewel of Indian philosophical thought, addresses the eternal problem of human duty (dharma) in the context of worldly existence. Arjuna's moral dilemma on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra becomes a universal symbol of human conflict between personal emotions and social obligations. Śrī Kṛṣṇa, as the divine guide, expounds the principle of svadharma (one's own duty), emphasizing that duties are not mere external actions but sacred obligations aligned with cosmic order (ṛta). The Gītā teaches that one must perform one's duty without attachment to results (niṣkāma karma), offering actions to the Divine. The concept of duty in the Gītā is multifaceted. It speaks of duties towards self, society, and the Divine, integrating ethics, spirituality, and practical life. The Gītā distinguishes between karma (action), akarma (inaction), and vikarma (wrong action), guiding aspirants towards righteous performance. Duties are classified as varṇāśrama-dharmas the prescribed responsibilities according to one's stage in life and nature and sādhāraṇa dharmas the universal duties such as truth, non-violence, and compassion. The Gītā highlights that neglect of duty leads to disorder (adharma) in society. At the same time, mechanical action without knowledge is incomplete, therefore, the synthesis of action (karma yoga), devotion (bhakti yoga), and knowledge (jñāna yoga) forms the holistic duty of human life. By placing duties within the framework of spiritual growth, the Gītā transcends mere social obligations and elevates them to the plane of yoga. Thus, the Gītā presents duty not as compulsion but as a path to self-realization and liberation (mokṣa). The philosophy of duties in the Gītā continues to inspire individuals, societies, and leaders across the world, offering a timeless guide for righteous living amidst complexities of life.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gītā, Dharma, Svadharma, Karma Yoga, Duty, Niṣkāma Karma, Varṇāśrama, Bhakti, Jñāna.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bhagavad Gītā, a dialogue between Arjuna and Śrī Kṛṣṇa, is not only a scripture of philosophy but also a manual of life's duties. The battlefield becomes a metaphor for life itself, where one is confronted with choices, confusions, and responsibilities. Duties in the Gītā are not limited to the external world, they involve inner discipline, moral responsibility, and spiritual dedication. The central theme of the Gītā revolves around action karma. Human life cannot exist without action, yet the way in which action is performed determines whether it leads to bondage or liberation. Duties are the guiding principles that align actions with righteousness. Śrī Kṛṣṇa emphasizes:

śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ para-dharmāt sv-anuṣṭhitāt |
svadharme nidhanaṁ śreyaḥ para-dharmo bhayāvahaḥ ||

(Bhagavad Gītā 3.35)

It is better to perform one's own duty, though imperfectly, than to perform another's duty perfectly. Destruction in the course of performing one's duty is better, the duty of another is fraught with fear. This śloka highlights that duty is not to be measured by external success but by inner alignment with one's nature and responsibility.

2. THE CONCEPT OF SVADHARMA

In the Gītā, svadharma (one's own duty) is rooted in both personal nature (svabhāva) and social responsibility. Each individual is endowed with unique tendencies and capacities, and duty arises as a natural expression of one's being. Arjuna's hesitation was precisely the confusion between his personal emotions (towards his kinsmen) and his social duty as a warrior. Śrī Kṛṣṇa declares:

Saha-jaṁ karma kaunteya sa-doṣam api na tyajet |
Sarvārambhā hi doṣeṇa dhūmenāgnir ivāvṛtāḥ ||

(Bhagavad Gītā 18.48)

One should not abandon the duty born of one's nature, even though it may be faulty, for all undertakings are covered by defects, just as fire is covered by smoke. Thus, duties are not abandoned due to imperfections, they are to be purified through devotion and detachment.

3. KARMA YOGA-THE PATH OF DUTY

The doctrine of karma yoga is the heart of the Gītā's teaching on duties. Performing one's work without attachment to fruits, dedicating it to the Divine, purifies the mind and leads to liberation.

karmaṇy-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣhu kadāchana |
mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi ||

(Bhagavad Gītā 2.47)

You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of actions. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction. Here, Śrī Kṛṣṇa balances duty with detachment. Action is inevitable, but freedom lies in offering it selflessly. This ideal transforms duty into yoga a spiritual discipline.

4. UNIVERSAL DUTIES (SĀDHĀRAṆA DHARMA)

Beyond individual roles, the Gītā recognizes universal duties that bind all human beings. These include truthfulness, non-violence, compassion, forgiveness, and self-restraint.

Ahiṁsā Satyam Akrodhas Tyāgaḥ Śāntir Apaiśunam |
Dayā Bhūteṣv Aloluptvaṁ Mārdavaṁ Hrīr Acāpalam ||

Bhagavad Gītā 16.2

The Non-violence, truthfulness, absence of anger, renunciation, tranquility, freedom from fault-finding, compassion for beings, freedom from greed, gentleness, modesty, and steadiness these are divine qualities. Thus, duties in the Gītā transcend societal limitations and extend to universal ethics.

5. VARṆĀŚRAMA DUTIES

The Gītā acknowledges the traditional system of varṇāśrama, prescribing duties according to one's natural qualities (guṇa) and work (karma).

brāhmaṇa-kṣhatriya-viśhāṁ śūdrāṇāṁ cha parantapa |
karmāṇi pravibhaktāni svabhāva-prabhavair guṇaiḥ ||

Bhagavad Gītā 18.41

The duties of brāhmaṇas, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas, and śūdras are distinguished according to the qualities born of their own nature, O scorcher of enemies. Here, duty is not rigid birth-based caste but the natural inclination and qualities of the individual. This gives a dynamic and psychological foundation to duties in society.

6. DUTIES TOWARDS GOD

For the Gītā, the ultimate duty is devotion (bhakti) to God. All duties culminate in surrendering to the Divine will.

sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekaṁ śaraṇaṁ vraja |
ahaṁ tvāṁ sarva-pāpebhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucah ||

Bhagavad Gītā 18.66

Abandon all varieties of duties and simply surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear. This verse crowns the philosophy of duty: when performed in devotion, all duties are sanctified and liberating.

7. DUTY AND LEADERSHIP

Śrī Kṛṣṇa warns that the neglect of duty by leaders causes disintegration of society. Therefore, the duty of exemplary conduct is emphasized:

yad yad ācarati śreṣṭhas tat tad evetaro janaḥ |
sa yat pramāṇaṁ kurute lokas tad anuvartate ||

Bhagavad Gītā 3.21

Whatever action a great person performs, common people follow. And whatever standard he sets, the world pursues. Thus, duty in the Gītā is not only individual but collective, ensuring harmony in society.

8. PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF DUTY

The Gītā integrates duty with metaphysics. Since the ātman (Self) is eternal and actionless, duties belong to the body-mind complex. Yet, when duties are performed with realization of the Self, they cease to bind. Thus, duty becomes the ladder to transcendence. Śrī Kṛṣṇa explains:-

na māṁ karmāṇi limpanti na me karma-phale spṛhā |
iti māṁ yo 'bhijānāti karmabhir na sa badhyate ||

Bhagavad Gītā 4.14

Actions do not taint Me, nor do I desire the fruits of action. One who understands this truth about Me is not bound by karma. This transforms the meaning of duty from social compulsion to spiritual liberation.

9. CONCLUSION

The Bhagavad Gītā presents duty as the guiding principle of human life. It harmonizes personal inclinations, social responsibilities, and spiritual aspirations. Duties in the Gītā are not mechanical obligations but conscious acts aligned with righteousness, detachment, and devotion. From Arjuna's crisis, humanity

learns that true duty lies in balancing worldly obligations with spiritual surrender. The synthesis of karma, jñāna, and bhakti culminates in liberation, making duties in the Gītā a timeless philosophy for all ages.

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