

August 2008

A Culture of Competition or Compassion?

On the Relevance of the Bhagavad Gita

S. Painadath SJ*

Competition has become the dynamic factor of today's value system. Greed is the propelling force within it. Natural resources, human beings and even religions are being exploited for the gratification of greed. With this, humanity is facing the threat of total destruction. Is a counterculture possible based on compassion? In this paper I am exploring the universal message of the Bhagavad Gita in this regard.

1. Bhagavad Gita is the most widely known and deeply influential holy scripture of the Indian heritage. As a literary work it is a mystical poem that articulates in a highly symbolic language the dialogue that is taking place between the divine master and the human seeker in the heart of every person. Gita describes the dynamics of the spiritual transformation from a life motivated by greed (*kama*) to a life guided by integrity (*dharma*): the change of consciousness from *ahamkara* to *atmabodha*.

2. Gita opens out a world-view that integrates well the Divine, the human and the cosmic: "See the Self in all and all in the Self." (6, 29). With this integral vision (*samadarsana*), one is brought in harmony with a cosmo-the-andric unity of reality. Everything is part of everything else, and the entire reality is ultimately the body of the Divine (ch.II). The divine presence vibrates at the heart of matter and in every living cell (7, 8-11). Spirituality is the liberative realisation that we are living in a divine ambience.

3. There is a tremendous divine dynamism permeating the entire universe. This is the wheel of *yajna*. It is being turned by the energy of 'the Brahman that permeates everything' (3,15). Humans participate in this movement through sacred rituals and much more through actions free of greed (*nishkama karma*). "Work done in the spirit of *yajna* leads to integration' (4, 23). Work done with greed is actually bondage (3,9).

4. The ethical component of this cosmic process is expressed in the term *dharma*, which means holistic integration. *Dharma* is basically the divine work in the world, for 'the Divine is the ultimate base of dharma' (14,27), and the Divine is at work bringing about 'peace and welfare' (*yogakshemam*, 9,22) and 're-establishing the *dharma*' (4,8). Humans participate in this divine work through the perusal of their *swadharma* (18,45) and much more through actions performed in view of the welfare of the world (*lokasamgraha*) (3,25).

5. It is on this basis that Gita presents the spirituality of *karmayoga*: work done in union with the divine Subject within and all around. Human labour gets a liberative quality and integrative power when it evolves in union (*yoga*) with the divine agent: *yogastah kuru karmani* (2,48). What we do is then divine work. There is a no chasm between the sacred and the secular. The secular becomes the transparent medium of the sacred, the world is the divine abode, the *kurukshetra* is *dharmakshetra*, the human is the channel of the Divine.

6. This dynamic divine presence is not an amorphous force, but the energy of divine love. This is a specific insight of the Gita. The divine Self (*atma*) vibrating in the universe is the divine Master who loves us. Every human person can hear from within the divine depth of his/her being: "You are dear to me, I long for you, you are my beloved and my friend" (18:64,65; 4:3). It is not a God speaking from outside, but from within the heart of reality. The relation with this God is not just at the mental level of I-thou structure, but within a mystical consciousness of mutual indwelling: "I am in you, you are in me" (9,29). This is the deepest mystery of divine-

human relationship (18, 64). The true *bhakta* experiences the Lord as the inner subject (10,8), the true *jnani* perceives the Divine as one's deeper self (7,18).

7. Human life then becomes a response to the divine love permeating the entire universe and filling one's heart. Every bit of reality communicates the vibration of the endemic power of divine *kama* (7,11). One finds oneself and all beings on this eternal stream of divine love. One feels called to a life of compassion towards all beings, human and cosmic, animate and inanimate. "My true devotee does not feel hatred for any being, but is friendly and compassionate towards all, without the thoughts of I-and-mine" (12,13). The hallmark of a liberated person is compassion.

8. Compassion presupposes inner freedom: freedom from the possessive feeling of I-and-mine (*nirmamo nirahamkarah*). Inner freedom makes a person equanimous in all vicissitudes of life: in success and failure, in gain and loss, in honour and disgrace, towards friend and enemy, saints and sinners, relatives and strangers (2,38; 6,9; 12,18; 13,10). A person of inner peace is not easily tossed by conflicting emotions of fear and fascination, anger and attachment, joy and suffering (2,56;5,20).

9. A compassionate person is not a dispassionate being. Sharing one's life and possessions with the needy is the basis of compassion. "The one who cooks food only for oneself, eats poison." (3,13). A passionate concern (*rati*, 5,25) to bring about welfare to all beings characterises the life of liberated person. Intense attraction (*chikeershu*, 3,25) to the work of the integration of the world is the motivation of his/her commitment. Compassion is the total surrender of a person to the cause of the other within the ambience of the divine creativity.

10. Compassion demands an effective critique of the dehumanising behaviour patterns and oppressive structures of society. Gita raises a severe protest against discriminative social traditions, exploitative economic systems, aggressive political structures and dehumanising religious practices (5,18; 16, 13-19; 2,42-44). These belong to the evil (*asureeya*) forces which block the divine work of *dharmā*, for they are motivated by greed (*kama*), which can take structural and communal forms. A compassionate person is a courageous person for his being is firmly established in the consciousness of the Divine(2,56; 6,14).

11. Compassion makes a person realise his creativity. The one who acts from the motivation of the ego (*ahamkara*) has to compete with others in a compulsive way, because his actions are controlled by greed, anger, lust and hate (2,62-63; 3,25). The one who acts out of rootedness in the divine ground of being realises that the Divine Master is the real subject of one's actions (13,3). "Ascribing all works to the Divine, one acts with inner freedom." (5,10). The *sadhaka* remains constantly alert to the inner movements of the divine Spirit. In such a spiritual realisation one becomes more creative, more courageous and more compassionate.

12. Compassion is not just a virtue to practise, but the holistic attitude that binds a person with everything with the bond of divine love. One sees 'reflections of the Self everywhere' (6,32) because 'one realises that one's Self is the Self of all' (*sarvabhutatma bhutatma*, 5,7). All things are bound together on the divine chord of life and love (7,7). No being can be alien and no one a stranger to a realised person. With the things of nature we humans live in the one family of the Divine. There is no room for competition, but only the scope for compassion. "Mutually nourishing one another we all attain real prosperity" (3,11). Such an integral world-view can be very salutary today, when humanity cuts itself asunder through competitiveness, and destroys the cosmic matrix of life.

*After his doctoral studies in Germany, S. Painadath SJ founded in 1986 Smeeksha-Ashram at Kalady, South India. He is engaged in spiritual ministries and inter-religious dialogue in India and Europe as well as in the East Asian countries.