

Gita's View on Ecology and its Maintenance

N V C SWAMY

Gita's Holistic Approach

The Bhagavad Gita is a remarkable scriptural text. Even though it was taught by Sri Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra several millennia ago, it still retains its freshness, because of the universality of its teachings. It is as much relevant today as it was when first enunciated or written down. Millions of people down the ages have benefited by its study and the guidelines suggested by it to lead a purposeful life on this planet.

The Gita is basically a text of Yoga, both theory and practice. Even though it recognizes initially only two branches of Yoga—Jnana and Karma—later it goes on to elaborate the other two branches also, viz., Bhakti and Dhyana. This is because the latter two Yogas can be absorbed into Karma Yoga, since they involve action of some kind. Even the colophon at the end of each chapter of the text recognizes the Gita as *Brahmavidya* [pertaining to Jnana] and *Yogasastra* [pertaining to Karma Yoga].

The Gita is the only book of the scriptural literature of the world that deals with Karma Yoga in a systematic way. So long as we are conscious of our physical bodies, we *have* to perform actions, as otherwise even our survival in the physical body is not possible. Action is, thus, inevitable for all creatures,

especially human beings. Species other than human beings have very limited capacity to make choices, whereas the human being is endowed with the capacity to make choices. Human wisdom lies in making proper choices, so that not only one is benefited in the long run, even the rest of the creatures are helped or at least not harmed. Karma Yoga is nothing but making intelligent choices for the greatest benefit to oneself and to humanity.

Karma Yoga can be practised at three levels—personal, societal [or collective] and global. Sri Krishna touches upon all these levels. The focus of our attention in this article is on the last one, viz., Global Karma Yoga, dealing with the responsibility of human beings to the environment.

The Idea of Evolution

To be able to appreciate the current predicament of humanity and the remedy suggested by the Gita, one needs to know how exactly creation has taken place. It is not the intention to discuss here the Vedantic models, but to understand what modern science has to say about it.

Just as Vedanta, modern astrophysics also believes that the manifestation of this universe is a cyclic process. According to the Big Bang theory of astrophysics, this universe



Dr. N.V.C. Swamy, former Director of the Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai, is currently the Dean of Academic Courses at the Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana, a Deemed University in Bangalore. □

came into existence about 16 to 18 billion years ago. Astrophysicists have worked out in detail how the various galaxies evolved out of primordial energy. According to their calculations, the solar system came into existence about 4.5 billion years ago. Very soon the atmosphere of the earth became stable and the earliest life forms appeared on our planet about 1.5 billion years ago.

Evolution then proceeded at its own pace, giving rise to animal species, invertebrates and later to vertebrates. About 250 million years ago, in what is now called the Jurassic era, huge animals and reptiles, now known as the Dinosaurs, made their appearance. They roamed on the surface of the planet for about 180 million years and became extinct around 70 million years ago. The reason for their extinction is now surmised to be a huge meteor that fell on the Yucatan peninsula, raising a huge blanket of dust covering the planet for almost 100 years. This dust blanketed out the sun, thus killing all plant life and herbivorous animals, that work depending on plant life. In turn, carnivorous animals depending on herbivorous animals for their sustenance became extinct.

The next species to appear on our planet were the Apes, the Great Apes and the Humanoids. Around 100,000 years ago, *homo sapiens*, the thinking human being made its appearance. The discovery of fire led to human settlements and an organized way of life. The last Ice Age ended about 12000 years ago, leading to the great Flood, which subsided after about 2000 years leading to the giant river systems. Great civilizations and cultures came into existence on the banks of these rivers.

Science, as we know it today, came into existence around 2700 years ago in ancient Greece. Technology came into prominence about 500 years ago. In this brief period of

about three millennia, the world is facing a possible annihilation, thanks to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, air and water pollution and the evolution of deadly diseases like cancer, diabetes, hypertension and AIDS!

The first indication that there was something wrong with the human race was the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Since that time, humanity has been teetering on the edge of a disaster. After only a brief span of existence of 100,000 years, the human race is facing a real threat of extinction.

When we compare this with the existence of dinosaurs for a period of 180 million years, we start wondering how such huge animals could survive for such a long period of time. If they became extinct, it was for no fault of theirs. The human race, on the other hand, is bent on committing Hara-kiri!

The answer to this poser has been provided by Daniel Quinn in his book *Ishmael*. This is about a dialogue between a human being and a gorilla, called Ishmael. The gorilla is the teacher and the human being the student. The gorilla asks the human being a simple question: 'Before you started tampering with the environment, did you ever bother to consult other life forms, like animals and plants?' The human being has no answer.

The gorilla classifies all species of life forms into two categories—'takers' and 'leavers'. Takers are those who take things whether they need them or not. Leavers are those who take only as much as they need and leave the rest behind. The human beings obviously fall into the first category. They claim to be masters of this planet and even claim to have conquered nature!

Humanity has produced great philosophers, thinkers, and prophets, who have advocated the cause of a simple life with

minimum consumption of resources. But, the majority of human beings consist of those, who are discovering fancier and more meaningless means of exploiting the natural resources. They have perfected the art of mass killing of animal species and human beings. Anyone advocating restraint is considered a freak and becomes as object of ridicule.

Humanity is, thus, facing a deep crisis and is desperately looking for solutions. It is an interesting fact that, not finding any suitable remedies in the modern culture, humanity is looking back in time, trying to find solutions in ancient cultures. There is now great interest in ancient remedies like Ayurveda, Yoga, Meditation and Tai chi. One sure source in which some of these solutions can be found is the Bhagavad Gita. We will now examine what the Gita has to say about these problems, especially the one facing the environment.

The Gita's Way to Ecological Balance

The Gita recognizes two kinds of Yoga—Jnana and Karma. In the third verse of the third chapter, Sri Krishna says: 'There are two paths in this world, as I have already described. The path of Knowledge is for the intellectuals and the Path of Action is for the Yogis.' Hence, in the colophon to all chapters, the Gita is described as Brahma-vidya (the Knowledge of Brahman) and Yogasastra (the Science of Yoga).

There is a very elaborate description of Karma Yoga in the Gita from the beginning to the end. Selfless action without attachment to the results is the secret of Action. The Gita calls it the attitude of *Yajna*. Elsewhere in the Gita (3:9), Sri Krishna says, 'Action done selflessly, with the intention of serving others, is a liberating force, whereas all other kinds of actions bind us to the world.' It is precisely the lack of this attitude that is responsible for

the human race finding itself in a miserable plight. The human being is the only creature that has been given the intelligence to make choices. Time and again, humanity has been found wanting in making wise decisions. The reason for this is the arrogance that the whole creation is meant for the enjoyment of human beings, as if they have no responsibility towards the rest of creation.

Following this verse, Sri Krishna tells us in the following four verses what is expected of us humans. These verses have till now been interpreted in the traditional way, by invoking the duties of human beings towards the gods. But, there is another contemporary view, which is applicable to modern times.

The meaning of these verses (3:10-13) is as follows:

In the beginning of time, the Creator created all creatures along with human beings, and also gave them the gift of *Yajna* or mutual co-operation. He then told the human beings, 'By this gift of *Yajna* and its proper use, all of you will prosper. *Yajna* is like *Kamadhenu*, the celestial cow, which will fulfil all your needs. Nourish the Devas and they will protect you in turn. Thus, nourishing each other, both of you will prosper. The Devas thus nourished by you will bless you in return. But, he, who having taken from the Devas, gives nothing in return is verily a thief. He, who breaks this chain of mutual cooperation, leads a life of no use either to himself or to the rest of creation.'

The traditional meaning of the word *Deva* is a celestial being residing in heaven. But, the etymological meaning is the *shining one* that enlightens us. It means a life-giving principle.

The most important factor sustaining human life is Oxygen. No human being or animal can survive without it. We take in oxygen and release in return carbon dioxide,

which is used up by plant life. When there is a proper balance between these two, the atmospheric air is pure and clear, conducive to good health. But, when there is excessive consumption of oxygen and equally excessive emission of carbon dioxide, the recycling capacity of the atmosphere is overloaded, leading to accumulation of carbon dioxide, raising the temperature of the atmosphere and causing global warming. Is that not what is happening today? Hence, Sri Krishna admonishes us to lead our lives in such a way that the balance is restored. In this way, we will be nourishing the life-giving atmosphere and will in turn be blessed by it with a healthy life. Our ancients, hence, considered air as Divine and called it Vayu.

All cultures and civilizations had their origins on the banks of rivers, since there was an unlimited supply of water available. But, due to overexploitation of water resources and pollution of existing sources by industrial effluents, pure drinking water has become a luxury. One has to purchase chemically purified water in bottles to survive. Is this not a parody of modern life? Our ancients, again, considered water, a life-sustaining substance, as divine and called it Varuna.

Life in tropical countries becomes endurable by rainfall occurring at the proper time and in proper quantities. According to meteorologists, the pattern of weather has changed so much for the worse, that we have rainless rainy seasons in tropics and snow-less winters in cold countries. All this has happened in living memory. Again, our ancients had recognized the importance of weather and had always prayed to the weather-god for rains at proper times. The name they had given to the weather-god was Indra.

There are many people today who consider the divinization of air, water and rain

as rank superstition, without realizing what harm we are causing by not recognizing the truth that lies behind them.

Conclusion

Our planet is the only piece of real estate so far known in the universe. It is also true that the human being is the most intelligent of the species on this planet, since he knows how to choose between options. So, it goes without saying that the future of the planet lies in his hands. Is he aware at all of his great responsibility or has the Good Lord handed over the planet to the wrong species?

The most immediate need today is to spread the awareness about the disaster facing us in the not-so-distant future. This should commence at the school level and continue to the college level. Modern youth is dazzled by the Internet, cellphones, jazzy automobiles, and the likes. They are like condemned people who snatch at any available means of enjoyment, however fleeting it may be. It is high time they are woken up by proper education. It is not that human beings have no remedy for this problem. Only the awareness about the seriousness of the problem is missing. There must be a concerted effort on the part of the media to play the role of educator, rather than frittering away their efforts on cricket, movie stars, etc.

It is indeed remarkable that the Gita had addressed itself to a situation that lay so much in future. Is it likely that such problems were faced in the past also and that Sri Krishna had suggested this remedy? After all, it is said that history repeats itself. Whatever it may be, this remedy supports the contention of the title of a book by Swami Harshananda [the present President of Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore]—*Ancient Solutions to Modern Problems*. □