

# Philosophy on the Battlefield: The *Bhagavad Gita*

## III. The Development of the Ideal of Renunciation

Prof. K. S. Arjunwadkar

(Figures in brackets refer to chapters and verses in the *Bhagavad Gita* unless stated otherwise.  
For an explanation of asterisked words, refer to the notes at the end of the article.)

### The *Bhagavad Gita* view of renunciation

On the basis of a logical analysis of action into its physical and mental aspects, the *Bhagavad Gita* maintains that *Karma-yoga* (action without involvement) is fundamentally *Karma-sanyasa* (renunciation of actions, V.5, VI.1). It further recommends the adoption of the former in preference to the latter (III.7, V.2). For an understanding of the reasons that elevated renunciation to such a high status, we should have a broad idea about the evolution of thought that led to the emergence of the *Upanishads* in the span of Vedic literature.

### The Vedic literature

The Vedic literature is the oldest in the world that has been preserved intact through several millennia. It reflects the physical and intellectual world of an active, advanced civilisation with India as its seat. It is composed in a language that belongs to the Indo-European family of languages and later evolved into classical Sanskrit. The latter is analysed in detail by Panini (6th c. B.C.) in his *Ashtadhyayi*, still considered to be the most perfect grammar a language can possibly have. The Vedic literature is divided in chronological order into:

- (1) The basic Samhitas\*, which consist mostly of hymns to gods (Rigveda), or incantations for worldly gains (Atharva-veda). They not infrequently exhibit literary excellence and philosophical heights.
- (2) Derivative Samhitaas\* (Yajur-veda, Saama-veda), which are sacrificial manuals and Braahmanas\*, which are commentatorial treatises.
- (3) Aaranyakas\* consisting of the meditative insights of Vedic seers during the reclusive life they led in forests. This phase forms the link between the earlier one and the following.
- (4) The *Upanishads*, treatises devoted mostly to philosophical deliberations. The *Upanishads* came into existence as a revolt against the sacrificial creed championed by the second phase literature. They maintained that no ritual can lead to permanent happiness, for what is produced by an action is bound to come to an end sooner or later. Permanent happiness, otherwise called liberation, is in the very nature of the soul and can be restored through self-discovery.

## The outlook of the Brahmanas

We will leave out the first phase of the Vedic literature, the basic Samhitas, as not relevant to our present topic. The general outlook of the Brahmanas on the aims of life is contained in the observation that a human being owes three basic debts from the moment he is born: to the gods, to the seers and to the manes. He is redeemed of these debts respectively when he performs sacrifices, studies the sacred texts, and begets progeny. In other words, the perpetuation of religion, knowledge and the race were considered the chief aims of human life. Of these, the first relates to and presumes a posthumous life of pleasure in heaven, attained through the performance of sacrifices during life on earth. Thus, the performance of sacrifices, besides paying off the debt to gods, ensures a life of pleasures for the performer after his death. The author of the Manu-smriti endorses the Brahmanic formula of the three birth debts when he says that one should apply one's mind to liberation (*moksha*) and its means after, and never before, one has paid off one's debts. For him, it is sinful to think of liberation before the debts are paid.

One of the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy, the *Mimamsa*\*, supports this view. Following in the footsteps of the ritualists represented by the Brahmanas, it asserts that the sole aim of the Vedic literature is to prescribe ritual. It is in an attempt to substantiate this claim that this school evolved the science of hermeneutics and laid the foundations of a systematic study of the ancient texts. Opposed to the *Mimamsakas*, the Vedantins were champions of the independent status of the *Upanishads* as Vedic texts devoted to philosophical thought, totally separate from ritualistic concerns. The Vedantins had to combat the *Mimamsakas* before discussing their official topics. This 'feud' between two major schools, both asserting the authority of the Vedas, is reflected in Badarayana's Brahma-sutra I.1.4 and Shankara's comprehensive and insightful commentary on it.

To leave no room for misunderstanding, it must be noted that the basic Samhitas have little that would support the presumptions of the Brahmanas and their successors, the *Mimamsakas*, as outlined above. The claim of the *Mimamsakas* that the hymns in the Samhitas exist only for recitation in sacrificial performances has no logical basis. It is an assumption which has been decisively countered by Shankara in the reference stated above as far as the *Upanishads* are concerned.

## The outlook of the *Upanishads*

The *Upanishads* totally disagree with the view of the ritualists. They observe that sacrifices are like leaking boats sure eventually to sink – *plava hy ete adridha yajna-rupah* (*Mundaka* I.2.7). They argue against the concept of three birth debts by introducing asceticism as the way to rise above these debts which are desires in disguise – for progeny, for wealth and for heaven. In an Upanishadic passage, an ascetic wonders what benefit he would gain from progeny in his journey

towards the 'abode of the self' as against the 'abode of the gods', and finally opts for the begging bowl as the way of life leading to immortality (*Brihad-aranyaka* IV.4.22). The Upanishadic thinker raised self-realisation above everything that was considered the goal of human existence. Self-realisation lifts him above such ethical deliberations as 'why did I not do this virtuous deed; why did I do this sinful one?' (*Taitiriya* II.9, see also *op.cit.*). The thought concerning *done* and *not done* never bother him, for he knows the self is unconcerned with them (*op. cit.*). This, incidentally, reflect the Upanishadic view that the concepts of good and bad, merit and sin, do-s and don't-s relate not to reality but to a social system. The Upanishadic thinker asserts in unequivocal terms that the self in its true character is beyond prescriptions and prohibitions (*Katha* II.14).

### Preparatory renunciation

The 'begging bowl' in the exposition above symbolises a strong urge to search into reality, entailing the abandoning of a life of pleasure in favour of renunciation and asceticism. This way of life is exemplified by Yajnavalkya, a great philosopher of Upanishadic times and an outstanding figure in the *Brihad-aranyaka* (II.4, IV.5). He had two wives and considerable property which he wished to share between them prior to renouncing his householder's life. There is proof that, in an earlier phase of his life, he had as strong an ego as any other man of the world: in a philosophers' conference arranged by King Janaka he had killed an adversary with a curse when the latter persisted in arguing with him despite being warned. This shows that Yajnavalkya was an intellectual with normal human weaknesses and failings and not a perfected spiritual practitioner. His renunciation of material goods and ties was preparatory to total renunciation marked by the complete effacement of ego. The purpose of the renunciation was to enable him to devote all his energies to spiritual development.

This survey should furnish a background for the *Bhagavad Gita* view on the subject of renunciation which will be the concern of the next article.

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### Notes

VEDIC LITERATURE: DIVISIONS -- The term 'samhita' (sam=together, hita=put) stands etymologically for a collection, and denotes by usage the basic Vedic texts. The Yajur-veda (YV) and Sama-veda (SV) are termed 'derivative' as they presume the existence of the Rigveda (RV) and Atharva-veda (AV) and display a ritualistic bias. The YV views hymns in the RV as prayers for use in sacrifices, and can thus be regarded as the forerunner of the Brahmana (=commentary) literature which inherits this view and explains sacrifices in detail. This meaning is distinct from the meaning of the word Brahmana implying a social class. They can be regarded as ritualistic commentaries of the RV. The text of SV is a collection of hymns mostly from the ninth book of the RV, set to tunes for being sung at

sacrifices. An Aaranyaka is a text that is composed and studied in forests (aranya) and consists of the musings of seers retired from active life and living peacefully in forests.

*MIIMAMSA* – This is one of the six orthodox systems which specialises in hermeneutics as applied to Vedic literature. It views the Vedas from a ritualistic standpoint. The earliest work on this system is the *sutra* work in 12 chapters by Jaimini (200 BC). It is commented upon by Shabara (57 BC). The two follow the standard pattern of *sutra* and *bhashya* as basic texts, a pattern adopted also by other systems. The hermeneutic tenets detailed in this system, although expounded with reference to Vedic literature, are broadly universal and relevant to the study of any text.

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