

The Core Concept of Purusa in the Bhagavad Gita

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Abstract: *The Purusa which resides in the body-mind complex is non-material and is the reflection of Purusa in the individual. Transcendental Purusa is one and on account of its reflections in different psycho-physical habitats (ksetra) appears to be many just as the moon in the sky reflected in different pots appears to be different. The Purusa which is beyond the gunas of prakrti (gunatita) appears to be bound up with gunas because of its intimate association with the body-mind complex. In Bhagavad Gita, the body-mind complex is termed as ksetra (field) constituted by the gunas of prakrti. The Purusa residing in the material structure is termed as ksetrajna (knower of the field). The Purusa continues to live in the body-mind coordinate (ksetra) till the karmic potency is exhausted. After the dissolution of the body the Purusa doesn't enter into the cycle of birth and death.*

Keywords: Bhagavadgita, Gunas, Jnana Metaphysics, Purusa,

1. Introduction

Metaphysics (worldview) is the key to the understanding of epistemology (theory of knowledge) and ethics (theory of morals). Metaphysics provides a holistic view of the reality, place of man and his ultimate destination. The Bhagavad Gita is, essentially, a treatise on Philosophy of action. It is presented in form of dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. It begins with the pessimism of Arjuna who is reluctant to the fight against his own kith and kin. He is in a moral dilemma. On the one hand, he is convinced that the Kauravas are on the path of evil and on the other hand, he has the prick of the moral conscience to fight against his own kindred. He reflects on possible consequences of war i. e. victory or defeat. Since the consequence of victory over his kindred is more dreadful, he prefers to not to fight the war. As a *ksetriya* it is his dharma to fight but the personal considerations makes him follow the path of inaction rather than action. At this point, Lord Krishna intervenes as his counsellor and engages himself in rational dialogue with Arjuna. At the end, Arjuna is able to overcome his misgivings and takes up the arms to fight.

Before explaining what Arjuna should do Krishna in *jnanayoga* explains him the nature of reality. The nature of reality expounded by Him shows the distinct influence of Samkhya metaphysics. According to Samkhya, there is a transcendental *Purusa* which is beyond the *gunas* of *Prakrti*. It is neither the cause nor the effect. It doesn't enter into the creation process. But because of its very existence *Prakrti* which is constituted by three *gunas* namely; *sattva*, *raja* and *tamas* evolves into the world of diversities. A person is a body-mind-spirit coordinate. Body and mind are constituted by *gunas* of *prakrti*. Therefore, they are material (*jada*) in nature. The *Purusa* which resides in the body-mind complex is non-material and is the reflection of *Purusa* in the individual. Transcendental *Purusa* is one and on account of its reflections in different psycho-physical habitats (*ksetra*) appears to be many just as the moon in the sky reflected in different pots appears to be different. The *Purusa* which is beyond the *gunas* of *prakrti* (*gunatita*) appears to be bound up with *gunas* because of its intimate association with the body-mind complex. In Bhagavad Gita, the body-mind complex is termed as *ksetra* (field) constituted by the *gunas* of *prakrti*. The *Purusa* residing in the material structure is

termed as *ksetrajna* (knower of the field). Lord Krishna says that the *ksetra* is mortal and is subject to birth, growth and extinction. But the soul is immortal. So, there is no room for worry or despair for Arjuna in thinking of the possibility of the horrors of death. Death is nothing but a point of transition between one life and another. Just as an individual changes the clothes when they are worn out, the soul remaining the same, it takes up different bodies at the time of death. The soul which is eternally free enters into bondage when it forgets its essential nature and identifies itself with the evolutes of *prakrti*. The individual *Purusa* (self) is not qualitatively different from another, but they appear to be different because of the way they become functional through body and mind. In other words, *ksetrajnas* are qualitatively alike with one another and are essentially the same as the transcendental *Purusa*. Bondage is caused by ignorance. Therefore, liberation can be attained by proper knowledge. Though Ignorance is conceived as the cause of bondage and suffering in different schools of Philosophy they differ in respect of the details with regard to the nature of bondage and liberation. 'Ignorance' in Samkhya consists in the incapacity of the Self (*purusha*) to distinguish itself from the not-self which is constituted by the *gunas* of *prakrti*. Thus, ignorance is of the nature of non-discrimination (*aviveka jnana*) whereas knowledge is of the nature of discrimination (*viveka jnana*). When action is performed with ignorance one remains subject to the influence of the *gunas* of *prakrti*. Every *guna* has its characteristic nature.

No one can remain even for a moment without doing work. Everyone is made to act helplessly by the impulses born of nature. (B. G. III.5)

So long as actions are prompted by *gunas* one remains subject to the repeated birth and death. When the same action is performed with proper knowledge it helps one to progress on the path of liberation. Action as such is not the cause of bondage. The moral worth of an action depends neither on 'action' nor on the 'consequences of action' but on the 'intention' behind action. If 'action' is taken as a criterion for the determining the morality of the act, then the Mahabharat war involving violence can never be considered as morally acceptable. The war of Mahabharat is taken as the war for the cause of righteousness (*dharma*). On the other hand, if consequences are taken into account then the

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battle which led to large-scale death of people cannot be taken as a moral act. Lord Krishna himself declares that whenever there is degeneration of goodness and predominance of evil over good he appears embodied for elimination of evil in order to make room for rule of righteousness.

Whenever virtue (dharma) declines and vice (adharma) predominates, I incarnate as an Avatar. In visible form I appear from age to age to protect the virtuous and to destroy evil doers in order to reestablish righteousness (B. G. IV.7).

As other alternatives failed to prevail on the Kauravas war was the only option available. Unless evil (*adharma*) is eliminated good (*dharma*) shall have no place. So, war was the only alternative left for bringing about the collective well-being (*lokasamgraha*). In order to restore dharma elimination of Kauravas who stood for evil was the only means. So long as the moral agent acts with *lokasamgraha* as the end action doesn't bind. As long as the individual self (*Purusa*) acts under the influence of *gunas* one acts with personal end in view. An ideal action has to be performed without being influenced by the *gunas* of *prakrti*. As is the nature of *gunas* so is the nature of action. Since *gunas* are the evolutes of *prakrti* they are material (*jada*). When the *Purusa* acts having been influenced by *gunas* it cannot separate itself from the body-mind complex i. e. *ksetra*. In other words, *Purusa* acts with ignorance. When *gunas* influence *Purusa* to act in a particular way it forgets its real nature and identifies itself with the body and mind. Such actions always go along with the sense of doership i. e. 'I do' (*karttabhava*). As long as the self (*Purusa*) thinks that it is the doer of action it reaps the consequences of action. Even the actions prompted by *sattva* also bind one to the consequences and individual has to be born to reap such good consequences because of the sense of doership. That is why Lord Krishna asks Arjuna not only to fight with *lokasamgraha* as the ultimate goal but also to fight the war thinking himself as a mere instrument (*nimitta*).

Therefore, stand up and obtain glory. Conquer the enemies and enjoy the flourishing kingdom. Verily, by me they have been already killed. Be you a mere instrument. (B. G. II.33)

But now the question is: If Arjuna is to fight the war, how can he consider himself as an instrument. Here, the notion of individual *Purusa* and transcendental *Purusa* become significant. In relation to the body-mind complex (*ksetra*), self (*ksetrajna*) is the subject. But, the individual *Purusa* (*ksetrajna*) is an instrument in relation to the transcendental *Purusa* i. e. *Purusottama*. When such knowledge dawns on the individual the moral agent acts with sense of instrumentality (*nimitta*). As a result, there is non-attachment for the fruits of action. Consequences, good or bad, which follow the action are offered to *Purusottama* who is the real agent. The enactment of cosmic vision points to the ultimate truth that the will of the divine eventually prevails. Interestingly, in cosmic vision Arjuna witnesses the aftermath of the war before the battle is really fought. It means that Truth (*satya*) ultimately prevails (*satyameva jayate*) and those who tread the path of truth eventually come out victorious. This doesn't rule out 'freedom' of the

moral agent. Individual has freedom either to follow the path of good or evil. But each path has its necessary consequences which follow from the very nature of reality. The suffering which follows the commission of 'evil' awakens one to the nature of 'evil' and goads one to follow the path of 'good'. So, by living contrary to the will of *Purusottama* one subjects oneself to suffering and eventually, it coerces one to the path of good. One begins to realize the truth that the ultimate good of the individual and society consists in doing everything small or big to promote the well-being of all. There is no incompatibility between individual good and collective good. The individual good is taken care of in the collective good. So, one really lives, only when one lives for the other. This is the quintessence of morality. This is the state of *niskama* which makes one free from the *karmic* bondage. While doing an action the moral agent i. e. the individual *Purusa* has to think that it has to fulfill the will of God. As an instrument it has nothing to will for oneself. The body-mind complex is like a temporary habitat into which the *Purusa* enters while passing from life to another. It is as good as the same body changing the cloth when it is torn and unfit to be worn. Since *Purusottama* is present in form of *Purusa* in every individual everyone is related by way of kinship. This points to the Upanishadic underpinnings in the Bhagavad Gita. There is no qualitative difference between one *Purusa* (*ksetrajna*) and other *purusas*. The different *Purusas* are essentially non-different from *Purusottama*. Thus, the duality between *Purusottama* and *ksetrajna* is transcended in favour of monistic conception of reality in the Advaita Vedanta. The observations in the Bhagavad Gita in the analogy of the inverted tree with its root above and branches below are unmistakable expression of the monistic vision of reality in the Upanishads which states that it is the One which appears in form of many.

Individual can attain liberation here and now only when it cultivates the discriminative knowledge which enables it to understand its true nature as the expression of *Purusottama* in form of *Purusa*. When action is performed by ascribing agency to *Purusottama* and is directed to fulfil the will of *Purusottama* in form of *lokasamgraha* the *Purusa* acts without being bound by the consequences of action. This is the state of liberation here and now (*Jivanamukti*). A *jivanamukta* like water on the lotus leaf, remains in the world, but no part of it belongs to it nor does it have belongingness for anything or anyone. The *Purusa* continues to live in the body-mind coordinate (*ksetra*) till the *karmic* potency is exhausted. After the dissolution of the body the *Purusa* doesn't enter into the cycle of birth and death.

Where no sun, no moon or fire shines. That is my supreme abode. 'Having reached there, men are never reborn. (B. G. XV.6)

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