



Bhagavadgita: An extension of Vedic thought and philosophy

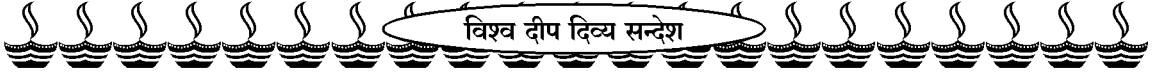
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Sanskrit literature knows of about one hundred Gitas¹. Of these, the Bhagavad-Gita forming a part of the great epic, Mahabharata has no parallel. Most of them have been written in imitation of this great Gita of the epic. Therefore, 'the Gita' everywhere as here normally means the Bhagavad-Gita. This Gita has been presented as a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna. Apparently it is meant to persuade Arjuna to fight at a time when the two armies were standing face to face on the battlefield of Kuruksetra for waging the Great War. Lord Krishna was Arjuna's charioteer, a friend, philosopher and guide. When at the nick of the time, Arjuna flatly refused to fight and set aside his famous Gandiva, the Lord spoke to remove Arjuna's doubts and misgivings and prepare him to perform his duty as a Kshatriya, an Arya and an enlightened fighter for righteous cause.

What Krishna spoke in the entire Bhagavad-Gita is so rich in philosophical thought and spiritual teaching that it has assumed an importance of its own in the entire philosophical literature, not only of India but also of the entire world. As Swami Vivekananda says "when we sum up its esoteric significance, it means the war which is constantly going on within man between the tendencies of good and evil."² This is indeed the secret of the Gita. Everywhere, it is taken to be a guide to man in the hour of the depression and frustration, misguiding him to abstain from his duty on the battlefield of wordly life. In the words of Arnold, it is a 'song celestial' meant to be a divine teaching for humans. Even a cursory look at the verses of the Gita makes one convinced of its close relationship with Vedic tradition which is so apparent, not only in its conceptual contents but also in the abundance of so many names, technical terms, symbols and linguistic usages that are peculiar to the Vedas and Vedic texts like Brahmnas, Aranyakas and Upanishads.

Linguistic Usage:

Most obvious of these factors is what is known as 'arsa- prayoga' or grammatical forms which are essentially Vedic. In this connection, as we move on, we come across a lot of evidence to prove that this famous dialogue between Lord Krishna and His disciple Arjuna is based on Vedic thought. For instance, the Bhagavad-Gita contains a number of archaic linguistic forms which are peculiar to those sacred texts. Here we list some of them in the following statement:



(1) The Vedic practice of using Atmanepada verbal forms in place of those of the Parasmaipada:

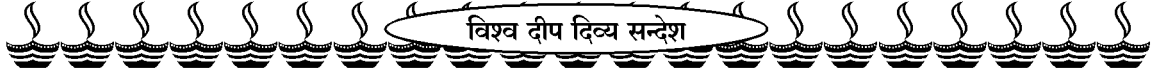
- न काङ्क्षे विजयं कृष्ण १/३२
- ब्रजेत किम् - २/५४
- नमेरन् महात्मन् - ११/३७
- न तु मां शक्यसे द्रष्टुम् - ११/८
- विशते तदनन्तरम् - १८/५५

(२) The use of Parasmaipada verbal forms in place of the Atmanepada forms :

- इषुभिःप्रति योत्स्यामि - २/४
- यदि ह्यहं न वर्तेयम् - ३/२३
- नोद्विजेत् - ५/२०
- वश्यात्मा तु यतता - ६/३६
- कश्चिद्यतती - ७/३
- मामाश्रित्य यतन्ति ये - ७/२९
- युध्य च - ८/७
- यतन्तश्च दृढव्रताः - ७/३१
- रमन्ति च - १०/९
- प्रलये न व्यथन्ति - १४/२
- अवतिष्ठति - १४/२३
- निवर्तन्ति भूयः - १५/४
- यतन्तः, यतन्तः - १५/११
- नैव त्यागफलं लभेत् - १८/८

Besides linguistic uses of these two kinds, there are many others which may be briefly pointed out in the following manner:

- अशोच्यानन्वशोचः - २/११ (लङ् लुङ्)
- हे सखेति - ११/४९
- निवसिष्यसि - १२/८ (इट्)
- नमस्कृत्वा - ११/३५ (क्त्वा ल्यप्)
- सेनानीनाम् - १०/२४ (नुट् यण्)
- शाश्वते - ८/२६ (टाप् डीप्)



The Vedic Pantheon :

On the conceptual side of the Veda, the Gita mentions the names of Vedic gods like Varuna, Aryama, Brhaspati and Vaiswanara, besides Adityas, Vasus, Rudras and Maruts who form their own different groups in the Vedic pantheon. At several places, we also find the mention of the gods like Asvins, Dyavaparthivi and Aho-Ratrau, representing the twin gods which are peculiar to the Vedas.³ All these gods are, however, to be understood as the multiple forms of the Supreme Divinity (Param Brahman), the eternal Purusa, who is unborn, omnipresent and ultimate and who is none else than Lord Krishna Himself.⁴

The most sacred symbol used for the Supreme Brahman in the Vedas is also found in the Bhagavadgita. It is 'Aum', also known as 'Pranava'. While enumerating His own vibhutis to Arjuna, the Lord Krishna Himself says that He is the Pranava of all the Vedas.⁵ Then He goes on to instruct His disciple, briefly about its significance. Aum is the name of the imperishable Brahman and anybody who utters this mono-syllabic name, remembering God at the time of his death, attains salvation.⁶ In the ninth chapter, Krishna, describing Himself as the father, the grand father, the mother and the sustainer of the world, identifies Himself with the sacred Aumkara, along-with the RK, the Saman and the Yajus, as the knowables.⁷

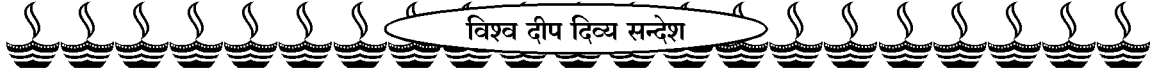
Some Vedic Names :

There are also the words⁸ like Vivaswan, Manu, Ikshvaku and Ushana which, though generally regarded as the names of some historical figures, cannot be properly understood unless we take them as the technical terms of the Vedic metaphysics. For instance, Manu, who is normally conceived as the name of the first man from whom all human beings have descended, is indeed derived from the root man, to think or ideate and connotes the spirit which is conceived as fourfold with regards to the physical, the vital, the mental and the supra-mental stages of human personality. It is for this reason that Gita also speaks of four Manus,⁹ besides a single one.

In the Vedas, while normally the word Manu is used in singular and plural, we also find two words, Manuvat and Manushvat, obviously referring to the two aspects of the spirit, which may be respectively called manava and manushya in the Vedas. In the puranas, each of these two aspects of human spirit is further divided into seven stages, thereby giving rise to the concept of fourteen Manus and Manvantaras. The same fourteen are often compared with the same number of Kulkaras in the Jain tradition and with the fourteen gems obtained from the churning of ocean by gods and demons in the well-known myth of Samudra-manthana.

The Vedic Style :

Here, it will be worthwhile to talk of the characteristic Vedic style which the Gita employs to expound the divine gospel. The most conspicuous in this respect is the use of first person, particularly when Krishna describes what are called His Vibhutis or the multiple



forms of His becoming . This is the peculiar device which has been frequently used by the Vedic poets. In RV. 4.26.1, for instance, the deity is thus speaking: “ I became Manu, the Surya; I am Kaksivana, the seer and the genius. I bring out Kutsa, the son of Arjuna and I am the poet, named Usana.” Again in RV. 4.27.1 the same deity, changing his tone a little, says like this : “While I was in womb, I knew the births of all the gods. Hundred fortresses surrounded me, but as Syena (Lit. Falcon) I flew away with great speed.”

Similarly there are many other hymns where one or the other Vedic God, speaking in first person, describes his or her manifestations and exploits of different kinds. Most noteworthy of these hymns are the four in the Rgveda (10. 47-50) where Indra-Baikuntha gives vent to his own self. In RV. 10.125 also, the goddess Vak in her soliloquy describes in detail how she functions , not only through many groups of gods like Rudras, Vasus and Adityas but also through the dual divinities like Mitra-Varuna, Indra-Agni and Asvinou.

Deva and Asura:

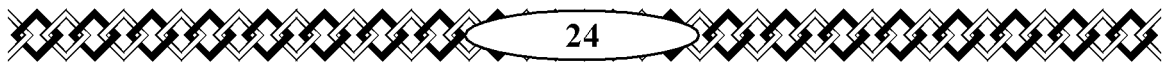
The Bhagavadgita sometimes also uses certain terms of Vedic mythology, bereft of their symbolic cover found in the Vedas. For example, in the sixth verse of the sixteenth chapter, it speaks of the twofold creations as Deva and Asura. In the Veda, the two are often represented as the two descendants of Prajapati, and they are at war with one-another.¹⁰ The Gita, however, does not refer to their war as such, but uses these two terms to signify the two opposite qualities of human nature, namely the Daivi-Sampad (Divine wealth) and Asuri-Sampad (Demonic wealth). This, in fact, points out the conflicting nature of the Devas and Asuras when, in Vedic symbolism they are associated with day and night respectively.¹¹

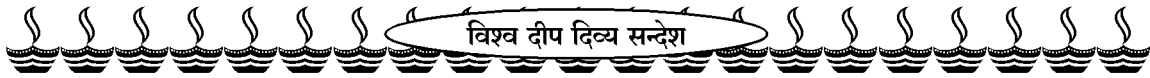
Of the two kinds of opposite qualities, the Daivi-Sampad consists of fearlessness, the purity of sattva, the pursuit of Jnana-Yoga, generosity, self-restraint, sacrifice, self-study, austerity, honesty, non-violence, truth, non-anger, renunciation, quietude, integrity, compassion, the absence of lust, gentleness, modesty, non-fickleness, forgiveness, fortitude, cleanliness, the absence of ego-sense. Opposite to these qualities are those that constitute the Asuri-Sampad or demonic wealth which includes the evils like pretentiousness, arrogance, egoism, anger, cruelty, ignorance and violence.

Gita makes an attempt to revive the original symbolic meaning of the two words Deva and Asura. According to the tradition preserved in the Brahmnas, the Devas were born of Prajapati's 'su' (good) side, whereas Asuras were the product of his 'asu' (not good) side. Therefore, by including all the good qualities in the divine wealth (Daivi-Sampad) and all evils in demonic wealth (Asuri-Sampad), the Bhagavad-Gita has restored the original sense given to the two symbols by Vedic Rishis.

Yajna:

A similar effort is clearly visible in the various references to the Vedic concept of yajna.





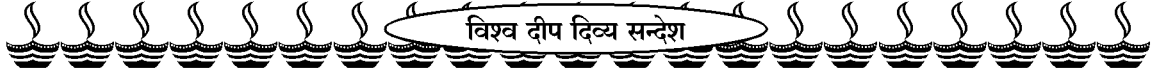
Laying stress upon the works for sake of yajna (3.9), the Gita speaks of the yajna with which all the progenies (Prajah) were created by prajapati, with a clear instruction that yajna is meant for higher product (prasava) and desirable desire (istakama).¹² This is indeed what is known as Prajapatya-yajna, described in the Rigveda (10.130) as pervading everywhere, spread by the hundred and one acts of gods. The Gita, therefore, regards yajna as a joint concern of men and gods (3.11). Pleased by yajna, gods give man the desirable enjoyments which must, therefore, be enjoyed with a sense of charity and catholicity without which one becomes a thief (3.12). To eat what remains after yajna leads man to the freedom from all sins, whereas to cook food with a selfish motive is a sin.¹³

Pointing out the all-pervasive nature of yajna, it is said to be born of annam, the annam comes from cloud-rain, the cloud from the yajna and the yajna again comes from the karma which emerges from Brahman, the growing off-shoot of the immutable Brahman.¹⁴ Thus, the circle of the cosmic-yajna has to be followed by man and to neglect it is to accept the sinful life of the self-centered sensual pleasures.¹⁵ To be free from the fruits of works, one must do them for the sake of yajna, without having attachment for their fruits and with one's mind set on the wisdom that the act of offering the oblation is itself Brahman, and so is not only the oblation itself, but also the fire in which it is offered and likewise the end to which it is directed by what is called the Brahmakarmasamadhi- the growing Brahmakarma resulting in samadhi.¹⁶

The true yajna, according to the Gita, is performed by yogis, It is of two kinds- the one is the 'Daiva-yajna' amounting to worship the plurality of gods, and the second is the yajna that results by taking that Daiva-yajna as the offering of oblations into the fire of Brahman.¹⁷ Besides this twofold yajna of the yogis, the Gita mentions several other yajnas¹⁸ and decries the man, without yajna (ayajna)¹⁹ as unfit for this world. All these yajnas are the product of work (Karmajan)²⁰, but yajna of wisdom (jnana-yajna) is superior to Dravya-yajna involving physical oblations,²¹ because the entire karma ultimately ends in wisdom (spiritual knowledge.)

Seen from this point of view, the concept of yajna is not limited to the offering of oblations into the physical fire alone. Originally it is the divine and spiritual sacrifice of yogis, whereas the popular form of sacrifice performed on the altar is only permissible as a symbolic form of the former. There is also, says the Gita, a sacrifice in which our senses are offered as an oblation into the fire of self-control, whereas there is a different sacrifice where our sense perceptions are offered into the fires of our senses.²²

So, as the Vedic terms that found its full-fledged appearance in the total didactic portions of the great epic is most pronounced and profound in this Gita. Even a cursory look at the verses of the Gita makes one convinced of its close relationship with Vedic tradition which is so apparent, not only in its conceptual contents but also in the abundance of so many



names, technical terms, symbols and linguistic usages that are peculiar to the Vedas and Vedic texts like Brahmnas, Aranyakas and Upanishads.

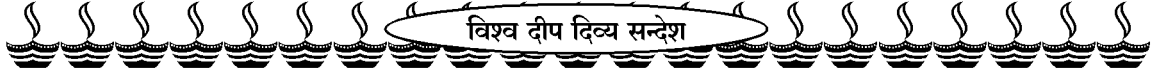
The Cause of Confusion :

In spite of all this, scholars have sometimes tried to seek in the Bhagavadgita a revolt against the Vedas. This is largely due to the misunderstanding about the peculiar nature of the Vedic technical terms which the Gita has used in the traditional sense that is now totally lost. For example, take the word Veda itself. For us today, the Veda is the name of four sacred books, but we often hear of three Vedas or trayi, mentioned in several texts. To explain away this anomaly, some modern scholars imagined that originally there were only three Vedas, and the fourth one, belonging to non-Aryans, was later accepted by Aryans. In ancient India also, it was said that all the four Vedas were called trayi, for they have only three kinds of compositions, namely

- (1) The RKs, meant to be recited.
- (2) The Samans, meant to be sung.
- (3) The Yajus, the prose portions.

Actually both of these conjectures are only meant to hide the ignorance of the traditional concept of Veda and the trayi. On the evidence of Vedic texts themselves, it is said that, from this stand point, Veda is the name of the creative power or the consciousness of Brahman which splits itself into trayi-vidya, named the RK, the Saman and the Yajus signifying respectively the cognitive, affective and connative power. This trinity of creative power in its essential unified form was present in the original Veda which was called Brahma-Veda,²² because it belonged to Brahman, and also Atharva-Veda²³ literally meaning the Veda ' going downward ' by its manifestation into the trinity.

The creative consciousness in man working at mental, vital and physical level, appears in the multiplicity of cognitive, affective and connative creation, whereas the undifferentiated form of this trinity may be seen in the unitary consciousness of the supramental level, appearing in mental peace, sound sleep, unified vision and the like. Now, when seers composed poems with reference to the working of this fourfold creative power, called Veda, they naturally classified them as belonging to one supramental Veda and the three of its lower dimensions, thereby also calling them respectively the Atharva-Veda, the Rigveda, the Samaveda and the Yajurveda after the names of the creative consciousness in its aforesaid four dimensions. This is the reason why a deliberate attempt seems to have been made in presenting the four samhitas as the symbols respectively of the four dimensions of the aforesaid creative power. Thus, the Rigveda is jnanakanda representing the cognitive aspect of creative power, whereas the Yajurveda symbolizes its connative aspect and the Samaveda its affective aspect, harmonizing both cognition and connation. The Atharvaveda, known as the Vijnana-



kanda, refers to the quintessence of all the three as found in its outward expression, whereas the jnana-kanda symbolizes only its inward aspect which is essentially cognitive (jnana), pure and simple. Thus, the Rigveda may be, in a sense, called a book on the jnana-yoga, that is, the integration of jnana (wisdom).

REFERENCES :

- 1). For details, see 'The Gitas in the Mahabharata and the Puranas' by Dr. R. Nilakanthan (Naga Publisher, Delhi)
- 2) "The complete works of Swami Vivekananda" page 101.
- 3) In the Gita : Varuna (10/29), Aryama (10/29), Brhaspati (10/24), Vaiswanara (15/14), Adityas (11/6), vasus (11/6), Rudras (11/6), Maruts (11/6), Asvins(11/6), Dyavaparthiv (11/20), Aho-Ratrau (8/17).
- 4) परं ब्रह्म परं धाम पवित्रं परमं भवान् पुरुषं शाश्वतं दिव्यमादिदेवमजं विभुम् ॥ Gita : 10/12
- 5) प्रणवः सर्ववेदेषु. ७/८
- 6) ओमित्येकाक्षरं ब्रह्म व्याहरन्मामनुस्मरन् । यः प्रयाति त्यजन्देहं स याति परमां गतिम् ॥ ८/१३
- 7) पिताहमस्य जगतो माता धाता पितामहः । वेद्यं पवित्रमोँकार ऋक्साम यतुरेव च ॥ ९/७
- 8) इमं विवस्वते योगं प्रोक्तवानहमव्ययम् । विवस्वान्मनवे प्राह मनुर्दिक्वाकवेऽब्रवीत् ॥ ४२१
- 9) चत्वारः मनवः १०/६
- 10) Gita : 4/1-4
- 11) देवाश्च वा असुराश्च प्रजापतेर्द्वयाः पुत्रा आसन् । तां १८.१.२
अहर्वै देवा आश्रयन्त रात्रीमसुराः । ऐ.४.५, गो २.५.१
अहर्वै देवानामासीद्रात्र्यसुराणाम् । काठ ७.६; क ५.५.१
- 12) सहयज्ञाः प्रजाः सदृत्वा पुरोवाच प्रजापतिः । अनेन प्रसवियध्वमो वोऽस्त्विटकामधुक् ॥ ३/१०
- 13) यज्ञशिष्टाशिनः सन्तो मुच्यन्ते सर्वकिल्बिषैः । भुञ्जते ते त्वघं पापा ये पचन्त्यात्मकारणात् ॥ ३/१३
- 14) 3/14-15
- 15) 3/16
- 16) 4/23-24
- 17) 4/25
- 18) 4/26-32
- 19) 4/31
- 20) 4/32
- 21) 4/33
- 22) ब्रह्मवेद एव सर्वम् गो. १.५.१५; मूलं वै ब्रह्मणो वेदः काठसंक ४.५
- 23) तद्यदब्रवीदथाव्वाडे नमेतास्वेवाप्स्वन्विच्छेति तदथर्वाऽभवत् तदथर्वणोर्ध्वत्वम् । गो.१

