



## **Bhagavad Gita – The Reservoir of Inspiration for Creative Expression**

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***“Bhagavad Gita is a true scripture of the human race a living creation rather than a book, with a new message for every age and a new meaning for every civilization”- Sri Aurobindo***

A sense of pride, exhilaration and an air of divinity surrounds my heart and soul as I stand and bow my head on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, where Sri Krishna during the course of his most instructive and interesting dialogue with Arjuna, revealed profound, sublime and soul-stirring spiritual truths and expounded the rare secrets of Yoga, Vedanta, Bhakti and Karma. This eternal sermon from Sri Krishna to Arjuna was narrated in the Bhishma Parva of the Mahabharata which comprises of eighteen discourses of a total of 701 Sanskrit verses. A considerable volume of this enlightening material has been compressed within these verses. These teachings of Lord Krishna were subsequently recorded as ‘The Song Celestial’ and the world is under great debt of gratitude to Bhagavan Vyasa<sup>1</sup> who presented this ‘Song of the Soul’ to humanity for the guidance of their daily conduct of life, spiritual upliftment and self-realization through Sanjaya, the trusted counsellor of King Dhritarashtra.<sup>2</sup> Those who have restraint and control over their self and are endowed with disciplined mind, can reap the full benefits of Gita which is the ‘Science of the Soul’. It gives us great pride that in all spiritual literature of the world, Gita is the most elevating and inspiring book because it is the source of all wisdom and a great guide, a supreme teacher and which has an inexhaustible spiritual pleasure- it is a fountain of bliss, an ocean of knowledge and a treasure of divine splendour and grandeur.

It is not surprising that Gita has touched the minds, hearts and collective psyche of this great nation of ours and has its admirers around the globe. The ideals explained in this book have inspired, influenced and propelled the creative impulses and energies of countless writers, thinkers, poets, philosophers, teachers, preachers, artists and sculptors and glories of its wisdom have enamelled their hearts, souls and minds and as we scan a Pan-India scenario to gorge upto what extent different artists, sculptors, painters have been impacted with the content and vision of this great book. We find that artists, craftsmen, builders and other creative persons have devoted their lives in capturing and

demystifying the cultural, religious, social and aesthetic ethos for their own creative satisfaction, promotion and propagation of the divine, eternal and ethereal ideas for the welfare of the human race without discriminating against caste, creed, race, sect or nationality. As the prominent ideas which this book preaches are practical in real life and today we are a proud nation which has innumerable artworks and artefacts created on the content of Srimad Bhagavad Gita. Amongst the most prominent themes which have inspired the artists is the scene of battlefield in Kurukshetra where Lord Krishna is shown delivering the divine and spiritual messages to Arjuna popularly known as ‘*Gita Updesh*’<sup>3</sup>(Plate No.1) and similarly the other important subject which fascinated the imagination of artists is Krishna revealing his *Vishvarupa* (The Cosmic Form or the *Viratrupa*) with countless powers and energies.<sup>4</sup> (Plate No.2) We find the other recurring themes in prevalence of the masterpieces are ‘scenes from battlefield wherein Dronacharya is shown seated in his tent and Duryodhana is pointing to the armies outside’ (Plate No. 3) and ‘a view of the military ranks on the battlefield of Kurukshetra with the chariot of Krishna and Arjuna in the midst of the two armies’. (Plate No. 4) Yet in a stylized version painted by European and American artists in truly realistic and graphic form showing Lord Krishna blowing His transcendental conchshell to herald the battle with Arjuna shown in the background.<sup>5</sup> (Plate No. 5) Artists have also attempted the episode which narrates that when Arjuna saw all different grades of friends and relatives, he became overwhelmed with compassion and said: “*Seeing my friends and relatives present before me in such a fighting spirit, I feel the limbs of my body quivering and my mouth drying up*”.<sup>6</sup> (Plate No. 6) With great mastery and aesthetic competence the artists have successfully brought out the wavering human emotions and how Krishna rejuvenates and kindles a flame of hope in their minds to enable them to cope with the harsh realities and perennial struggles of life. These visual messages in the paintings have the power to demystify the secrets of life and make the weak and helpless masses to stand against the tyranny and to defeat the evil forces. This teaches us the concept of *Dharamayudh* and be ready to take on even the most horrendous and monstrous demonic manifestations we often encounter in real life.<sup>7</sup> The message of *Karma* also finds a prominent place in these paintings as it preaches the real way of life that we have to channelize our energies towards achieving our goals with hard work and fortitude without worrying about the fruit and result of the outcome of our struggle.

Religious, philosophical and spiritual manifestations of this great book has infact drawn the artists to the ever-flowing fountain of creativity and artists in many styles, manners, mediums have embraced and propagated the essence of life, *Dharma*, faith, divinity and eternity in myriad forms using vibrant and varied thoughts and ideas. The incomparable significant contribution of the ISKCON (International Society of Krishna Consciousness) artists is worth mentioning as their wonderful paintings and murals on the philosophical aspects of Gita have reached millions of homes, places of worships and adored the walls of cultural centres through bewitching and captivating appealing calendars and booklets painted mainly in oil on canvas medium. (Plate No. 7) There is an aura of divine love reflected in these aesthetically charged paintings which have covered a plethora of ideas such as ‘The Immortality of the Soul’- the soul changes bodies as a person changes garments (Plate No. 8), ‘The body changes, but the Soul remains the same’<sup>8</sup> (Plate No. 9) and ‘The Soul is covered by Lust’ based on the quote of Lord Krishna: “*It is lust only Arjuna, which is born of contact with the*

*material modes of passion and later transformed into wrath, and which is the all-devouring sinful enemy of this world*'. (Plate No. 10) The message of 'As you sow so shall you reap' is imaginatively portrayed in a number of works that the living entity in the material world carries his different conceptions of life from one body to another as the air carries aromas. (Plate No. 11)

Artists have employed symbols and metaphors according to their vision and imagery and some with elaborate versions and others with deep spiritual insight have devised different genres and presentations to express and portray a similar thought touching the cusp of divine enlightenment. One painting which falls in this category and is a real gem of a work is *Vishvarupa* in which Lord Krishna reveals his true self to Arjuna, a concrete vision of the creator and destroyer, and of time's deadly destructiveness: 'a fearsome explosion of countless eyes, bellies, mouths, ornaments, and weapons, gleaming like the fiery sun that illuminates the world'. Understandably Arjuna is terrified for who which were mortal, can take in the sight of the "12 Adityas, the eight Vasus, the 11 forms of Shiva, the twin Ashvins, and the 49 Maruts", all revealed in one form? Or to be able to bear the "effulgence of a thousand suns blazing forth in the firmament all at the same time"? Before him are suddenly limitless wonders never seen before. That magnificent form, the *Vishvarupa* of Krishna-Vishnu, is however not for everyone to see. When Arjuna sees it, it is only with the divine eye granted to him for that moment. And when the vision ends, Krishna reminds him that '*this form that you have seen/is rarely revealed*'. (Plate No. 12) And yet, generation after generation, and in region after region of India, artists have been attempting to capture that very form in their work. It is a daunting task, for the vision is at once grand, terrifying and wondrous. The brilliance of the words of the eleventh chapter is not easy to match, and to compress everything into one soaring image almost impossible. For how does one bring in nearly all that there is: the 'fiery rays of crown, mace and discus', 'brushing the clouds with flames of countless colours', 'roiling river waters, streaming headlong toward the sea' like 'moths in the frenzy of destruction flying into a blazing mouth', 'the many mouths and eyes, thighs, feet, bellies and fangs seeing which the worlds tremble', 'the throngs of gods entering the great form- howling storm gods, sun gods, bright gods, and gods of ritual, gods of the universe, twin gods of dawn, wind gods, vapour-drinking ghosts, crowds of celestial musicians, demigods, demons and saints', a form that has 'no beginning, or middle, or end'. The descriptions are remarkably dense, and when all the space, as the text says, is filled with this form alone, all space 'between heaven and earth and all the directions', is there any room left, even a little silver of it, for the visual artist to enter it, one wonders?<sup>9</sup>

In a remarkably different creation, a painting from Rajasthan in Rajput miniature style, this magnificent monumental image has been attempted with such fantastic economy that the viewer is enthralled and awe-struck with its simplicity and compositional marvel. Here in this image the master artist have conceived the image of *Vishvarupa*- The Cosmic form of Lord Krishna with just one head and four arms- as different from so many others with multiple heads , arms and legs- nothing is what it initially appears to be: what seem like normal eyes of the Lord have the Sun and the Moon embedded in them; what looks like a golden crown from a distance is an image of the *Vaikuntha-loka*; where there are nostrils, winged angels come rushing out of them. The image teems with forms and figures and symbols, all parts of the body densely packed with them. (Plate No. 13) There are here other works of great ambition and complexity mingling with works that are touchingly simple. Some stay close to the

text, and others depart from it. There are additions to the descriptions and eliminations from them, word-bound renderings and leaps into the unknown. But one thing is certain: in the renderings of the great theme, each artist must have discovered something of himself, gained some glimpse of the mysterium magnum that life is and the universe consists of.

Profound themes inspired by Bhagavad Gita have seeped into the folklore and folk art of many regions of this country, in Bihar the origin of 'Madhubani painting' (Plate No. 14), generations of folk artists and artisans have created breathtakingly beautiful and fascinating paintings on walls, paper, canvas and textiles and the popularity of these paintings have crossed the boundaries and reached the western shores. In the same vein the works of 'Kalamkari Painting' which elaborately depict themes from Bhagavad Gita specially on textiles for the purpose of making backdrops in the theatrical performances in the rural areas of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka (Plate No. 15) have now been transformed into object d'art with a new vigour infused in them and these creations are attempted on canvas, wood, inlay work and on metal sheets and these adorn the plush houses of connoisseurs of art around the globe. The tradition of 'Patachitra Painting' is vibrant and rich and has successfully delivered the messages of Bhagavad Gita in stylized naive style figurations painted on cloth and paper which are carried from village to village by the *Pat Kala Chitrakars* and balladeers who while displaying the visual images that is scenes from Mahabharata also enrich the performance adding suitable music which appeals to the masses in a big way this tradition is still prevalent in Orissa and Bengal (Plate No. 16). 'Tanjore Paintings' famous for their intricate work and use of bold forms and images of Lord Krishna use precious gems, gold and silver on them taking the works to a new level of aesthetics and beauty. But the treasure of delicate art which one finds in Kishangarh, Mewar, Kota, Bundi, Jaipur and Bikaner School, all offer matchless masterpieces which passionately deal with the teachings of Bhagavad Gita in their own typical linear styles and mannerisms with enchanting colour schemes and bewitching compositions. These were done under the precious patronage of Rajput kings and noblemen (Plate No. 17). Following the footsteps the Rajasthani painters who migrated to hills of Punjab especially Kangra, Basohli, Chamba, Bilaspur, Guler, Jammu and Kashmir regions have given us works of art which are beyond imagination and are lyrical and poetic in substance with refined sensibilities displaying the calm and quite atmosphere of hill states endowed with rich flora and fauna (Plate No. 18). There are countless specimens of paintings on *Gita Updesh* and the Celestial Dance of Krishna with His soul-mate Radha and *Gopis*. These ornamental paintings are priceless and are in collection of all the reputed museums in India and abroad. These paintings are so inspiring that a large number of scholars of art, art historians and critics have come out with impressive and thought-provoking literary works which are both enlightening and offer a peep into the deep philosophy of Hindu mythology and its application in our daily lives.

There is perhaps no household in India which does not have some sort of calendar painted on the theme of Srimad Bhagavad Gita for example 'Kanhai Art' which revolves around Lord Krishna's philosophy and life in stylized ornamental and decorative versions. A large number of artists are involved in the creation of these vibrant works from the time India was initiated into printing techniques. The contribution of Raja Ravi Varma is of utmost importance, who for the first time in India painted in oil on canvas and produced life-like scenes based on this theme. He was the first to

have brought Lithographic Printing Press and produced hundreds of oleographs which are considered rare specimens of Popular Art.<sup>10</sup> (Plate No. 19) The contemporary and modern artists have not remained untouched from the wisdom of Bhagavad Gita and they too have produced paintings and sculptures depicting the essence of this spiritual book. The names of Ram Sutar who created a large metal sculpture on the gate of Jyotisar in Kurukshetra is indeed a monument that can inspire generations of younger sculptors (Plate No. 20). In contemporary style artists including the great M.F. Husain has created scenes from Mahabharata in large murals in which he described that the whole world is a battlefield and all human beings are fighting their daily battles of *Dharmayudhs* in their own inimitable flamboyant styles (Plate No. 21). His coloured Serigraphs and prints are available for sale in many prominent galleries and museums.

Just as a student is coached in a university, Arjuna is coached by Krishna for the attainment of knowledge of the Self in the spiritual university. Arjuna had various kinds of doubts; Lord Sri Krishna cleared them one by one. He pushed Arjuna up the ladder of Yoga from one rung to the next. Eventually, Arjuna placed his foot on the highest rung, attained the supreme knowledge of the Self and exclaimed in joy: “*O my Lord! my delusion has been destroyed. I have attained knowledge through Thy Grace. I am firm. All my doubts have now vanished in toto. I will act according to Thy word*”. Now I know that one can become a liberated sage by annihilating the ego and the currents of likes and dislikes; by annihilating desires and cravings and destroying their residual potencies. Thus, one can rest in one’s true essential nature as Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute and still be active in the affairs in the world. Now one will not be bound by one’s actions since the idea of doer-ship has been destroyed by the attainment of the knowledge of the Self. This is the keynote of the Gita and this philosophical vision will keep on guiding the human races in future as well. Artists and poets will keep on being inspired by the truth revealed in this discourse and it is sincerely hoped that coming generations of artists, sculptors, writers, thinkers and philosophers will continue the process of sipping the nectar of this divine thought.

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