



## A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS FOLLOWED BY UNIVERSAL ETHICS IN UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND BHAGAVAD GITA

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### *Abstract*

*This paper explores Universal Ethics followed by Universal Declaration of Human rights and Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad-Gita and UN declaration of Human Rights (1948) are the two pillars on which the research is based on. The Bhagavad-Gita (a part of Indian epic, the Mahabharata) is a well-known Indian spiritual and philosophical text and its teachings are universal, non-sectarian. It inspires universal ethics to follow for the survival of humanity. In this article, the researcher employs hermeneutics, a qualitative methodology which is the interpretation of ancient or classical literature, the Bhagavad-Gita as well. This paper is a qualitative research which involves study, understanding and interpretation of ancient or classical text. The existing findings are interpreted as well as compared by analysing the verse of Bhagavad Gita and Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the end, it is concluded that timeless teaching of Bhagavad Gita has followed Universal ethics.*

**Keywords:** *Universal Ethics, United Nations universal Declaration of Human Rights, Bhagavad Gita.*



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### **Introduction**

The Bhagavad-Gita is a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna in the battlefield, the battle of Mahabharata. The battle signifies both internal and external battles. The internal battle is going inside Arjuna's head if it is correct to fight with his own relatives for the kingdom he does not even want, and the other is the real battle of Mahabharata.

In this process Krishna reveals that it is Arjuna's Dharma to fight, he needs to fight in order to restore his karma. Furthermore, Krishna also explains to Arjuna, there is no death of the soul, as the soul is part of the Supreme Being; we only shed body at the end of each round of cycle of birth and death. The importance of cycle is to get an opportunity to accumulate enough Dharma through one's conduct to obtain moksha at the end. After moksha there is no cycle of birth and death, one attains enlightenment and this is the end of the worldly cycle of life and death. The Bhagavad-Gita ends with Krishna asking Arjuna to choose either the path

of good or evil. By fighting in the battle, Arjuna is fulfilling his Dharma, as it is his obligation to correct the balance of good and evil.

The articles of UDHR are focused upon general human conduct, it address all regardless of groups, nation or boundaries. It articulates that individuals, communities, countries and government should contribute to create an environment through teaching and education so these basic rights of all are maintained.

Every society has its set of rules dictating social customs, rules and duties for an individual, group or community. These rules define notion of ethics, moral conducts and behaviors. In addition, some of these rules are written while others are implied. Moral behavior can be defined as a set criteria derived from culture, religion or law which is defined by code of conduct.

Every human behavior is governed his/her socialization. Our conducts are guided by the pre-learnt moral notion as a member of given society. We set moral standard based upon the ethical notion we learnt from society and on the basis of our learning we judge others. Not only the human actions but also our thinking and judgments are influenced by the moral standards that we learn from our society

### **Objectives**

1. To explore the broad universal ethics Bhagavad Gita and United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights
2. To compare universal ethics Bhagavad Gita and United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights
3. To find out the application of Universal Ethics Bhagavad Gita and United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights

### **Methodology**

This paper is a qualitative research paper which involves a review and analysis of literature and also the interpretation of selected verses of the Bhagavad-Gita . The methodology used for the interpretation is hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is related to the name of the Greek God Hermes in his role as the interpreter of the messages of the Gods. The Hermeneutics method is the theory and practice of interpretation. It is a stimulating and deeply interpretive research approach which can examine complex human phenomena from multiple perspectives to produce rich theoretical and experiential interpretations. In the current context, hermeneutics can be described as the interpretation and understanding of ancient literatures. Hermeneutics

is widely applied in many field of social science such as philosophy, religion and theology, law, sociology and also international relations.

### **Universal Ethics**

Ethics is a socio-political construct, it is constructed with adherence to local political, legal, social, cultural aspects, in fact these are the forces that shape the ethics of the society.

Ethics is divided in three broad categories: meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. Meta-ethics is seeking for validation for normative judgment, it is both theoretical implication and moral referencing based on which a person decides if one has committed moral action or not, whereas, normative ethics is following of compulsory or socially acceptable norms and values. The last one, applied ethics relates to obligatory ethical obligations in given situation for example, medical, business, military ethics.

### **Universal Ethics in Bhagavad Gita**

Ethics is often considered as Western innovation but Hindu texts for centuries have been prescribing notion of Dharma that is a moral and social order to all its followers.

Dharma also demarcates right and wrong, good and evil additionally also enlightening on customs and traditions. Dharma is multifaceted as it has multiple applications. Dharma is not compulsion upon individuals rather it is a notion that need to be understood and realized by individuals willingly. The etymology of the word Dharma is Sanskrit's dhri meaning to 'form, uphold, support or to sustain'.

The fundamental characteristic of Dharma is behaviour, *achara*, meaning the manner one ought to behave. And if one has good behaviour or character than one can earn Dharma which raises the quality of life. By accumulating Dharma one can obtain both spiritual and material benefits in both present life and after life. Hence, the highest form of Dharma is having right behaviour and good conduct. It is basis for austerity, *tapas*. And if one follows in the path of Dharma with good conduct one can gain power, virtue, wealth and good life.

According to Bhagavad-Gita without good conduct Dharma is inconceivable. It not only leads to spiritual path but it is also a step towards realization of the God. If one is not careful with one's conduct it is impossible to advance in spirituality and realization of God or salvation is out of context. Moreover, good conduct does not only mean action, it also means to be honest, to have purity of thought, speaking truth and right action. Furthermore, one should not hurt or injure anyone even in one's thought, by words or action. One who has good conduct should abstain from bad thoughts, negative action and vile words. Bhagavad-

Gita is also one of the smritis in Hindu, the text which can be remembered and are infused with code of conducts.

purushah prakritistho hi bhungte prakritijaan gunaan  
kaaranam gunasango'sya sadasadyoni janmasu // 13.22 //

Purusha seated in Prakriti, experiences the qualities (gunas) born of Prakriti. It is attachment to these qualities is the cause of His birth in good and evil wombs.

The individual consciousness situated in the material energy certainly experiences the three modes of material nature produced by the material energy; the beguiling infatuation of these three modes of material nature is the cause of beings innumerable births superior or inferior in the wombs of variegated life forms.

To live righteous life one need to live moral life and furthermore living a righteous life and moral life is living happily and harmoniously with all beings, be it humans, animals or nature. Through this kind of living one can achieve Moksha (liberation). But followed by ethical life one should also have purity in one's heart and clean conscience.

A virtuous individual has all these merits and follows the path of Dharma strictly regardless of obstacles and impediments. Under no circumstances that individual will budge from the path of moral living, therefore, following the path of Dharma requires persistence and patience. According to Bhagavad Gita was the epitome of Dharma as under any influences he never left the path of righteousness.

“The intelligent renunciate endowed with the nature of goodness, freed from all doubts, neither disdains disagreeable actions nor becomes attached to agreeable ones.” (Bhagavad-Gita, Chapter 18:10 bhagavad-gita.org, 12th April, 2015)

nehaabhikramanaasho'sti pratyavaayo na vidyate  
swalpamapyasya dharmasya traayate mahato bhayaat // 2.40 //

In this no effort is ever lost and no harm is ever done. Even very little of this discipline (Dharma) saves a man from the Great Fear.

“Even a very small amount of this Dharma saves one from great danger, for there is no loss in such an endeavour, and it knows no diminution.”

The meaning of right conduct in Bhagavad-Gita is therefore not necessarily not committing any sinful act but rather it is to be on right path and be reflexive of one's action and learnt from past wrong. The essence is to one should not do to other what one does not want for oneself. For that reason, the action which brings happiness, good and rejoice to others is

good. And it is not good conduct if one's actions bring unhappiness, pain and injury to others. The principle is to treat others the way you like to be treated by others. If one is able to follow this principle then it consequently generates bliss and one is on the path of Dharma. From the basics, the ideal is to spread happiness through correct actions and it is right, that means Dharma and spreading pain and hatred is wrong, a Dharma. By doing this one can be one with the Supreme Being. Moreover, there is also assurance that being on the right path brings goodness, positivity and one is safe as good karma attracts good. In addition, any action which brings peace of mind is right and action that brings restlessness, agitation and suffering is wrong.

According to the Bhagavad-Gita, Sri Krishna explains to stick to these virtuous traits is not only good for all but also bring one's liberation for the cycle of birth and rebirth. Though it is hard to stick by, it if one practices one succeeds. Neither should one leave the path of righteousness for instant gains because right conduct brings eternal gains, happiness and liberation.

According to Bhagavad-Gita,

na jayate mriyate va kadacin nayam bhutva bhavita va na  
bhuyah ajo nityah sasvato 'yam purano na hanyate hanyamane sarire"

Sri Krishna said: The soul is never born nor dies at any time. Soul has not come into being, does not come into being, and will not come into being. Soul is unborn, eternal, ever-existing and primeval. Soul is not slain when the body is slain. Even though, the rivers are many but they all flow to one ocean.

In Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna clarifies to Arjuna that,

yada yada hi Dharmasya glanir bhavati bhārata  
abhyutthanam aDharmasya tadatmanam sṛjamy aham "

Whenever and wherever there is a decline in virtue/religious practice, O Arjuna, and a predominant rise of irreligion—at that time I descend Myself, i.e. I manifest Myself as an embodied being." (Bhagavad Gita: 4.7)

Therefore, even in chaos there is an order and at metaphorical level, it all comes to one collective and good of those collective individuals.

### **Universal Ethics United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

After the devastation of two World Wars, the institution of United Nation and UDHR was the need of the time. UDHR is focused upon the national and societal role for the protection of

human dignity. The declaration was formulated on December 1948 at the Palais de Chaillot, Paris and was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. It was drawn after the devastation of Second World War, and it was the first legal document which adorned every human with inalienable rights. The declaration promotes basic rights of freedom of speech, freedom to belief, freedom of movement, freedom from fear to all. The United Nations Charter, “reaffirmed faith in fundamental human rights, and dignity and worth of the human person” and it also instructs its member states to uphold “universal respect for, and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.” (www.un.org)

The declaration consists of 30 varied articles elucidating on political, economic and social rights of every human on globe. Therefore, it is considered universal as it acknowledges every human no matter where we are, who we are or to whom we are born to.

**The preamble of UDHR** states: Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people, Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law. (www.un.org:2015)

**Article 1 of UDHR** states, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” (www.un.org:2015)

**The UDHR, Article 2** mentions, Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

In addition, in democratic system there is also protection of human rights and this is considered to be good for both the people and the states as it gives freedom to act. As a result, both Human rights and democracy promotes equality to all. In both, citizens are free to practice political rights, which are the following: freedom to express ideas and opinions

without any reservation or fear, get access to information, freedom to protest in peaceful manner, discuss public affairs. Likewise, both promote inclusion of minorities and their views are also one of the fundamental principles of the basic human rights. Hence, human rights endorses democratic system and governance which prioritize the equal human standard to all individuals. The core of human rights, namely, freedom and equality is assured in democratic society.

**Article 25.1** states that: Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (www.un.org:2015) Furthermore, it does not segregate humans into categories, from the position of UDHR all are equals. Moreover, it has proved basic standard for judgment upon which any nation can be judged in case of humanitarian crisis. Human rights does not differ according to race of a person or leverage of the nation rather it is an international standard based on which all nations, institutions and communities can be scrutinized. According to Bhagavad-Gita, Dharma symbolizes good w

According to human rights, the human dignity of all should be recognized by all nations, governments no matter what. Hence, all humans are free and equal.

Accreditation of UN declaration of human rights is one of such examples, which is synchronized in legal system of many nation-states. The nations that have endorsed UDHR acknowledge human rights as an inalienable right, which is endowed to every human. "People from all regions of the world and all religious and cultural backgrounds, have been able to appropriate the language of human rights, and use it to articulate their ethical concerns." (Kymlicka, 2008: 3

### **Analysis and Interpretations of study**

Bhagavad-Gita defines two kind of order being born in this world, one divine another demonic. The following actions are considered good conduct and are possessed with one born in divine order: Lord Krsna, the possessor of all opulence said: Fearlessness, pure heartedness, established in the wisdom of discrimination of spirit and matter by the science of uniting the individual consciousness with the Ultimate consciousness, charity, self restraint, performance of sacrifice study of Vedic scriptures, austerity, uprightness, nonviolence, truthfulness, aversion to fault finding, compassion to all being, absence of avarice,

gentleness, modesty and determination. O Arjuna, radiance forgiveness, fortitude, purity, freedom from malice, absence of pride arise in one born of the divine nature.

. According to Bhagavad-Gita without good conduct Dharma is unachievable, only through Dharma or good conduct one can progress towards the realization of the god or obtain moksha (liberation). The righteous living is a gateway to attainment of moksha, autonomy for the cycle of re-birth and death.

The foundation of Dharma is both purity in one's mental and physical actions, it is withdrawing from lust and greed which is generated by sense. According to Bhagavad-Gita all evil arises from desires, it can manifest it in multiple forms from over ambition to greed to achieve more. Because of these factors, a person develops negative attitudes of hatred, betrayal, flattery and deceit. To distance oneself from these negative energies one has to rise above bodily needs and abstain from attraction of senses, practice good conduct with eventually lead to realization of supreme. Besides that, evil actions only generate unhappiness and discontent, to be free from misery one ought to follow the path of Dharma.

.However, in Bhagavad-Gita, the moral behavior or Dharma is how one executes one's conduct, *achara*. It is defined and elaborated in terms of an individual; it may differ person to person as how much Dharma one has accumulated depending upon one's behavior. Good behavior or conduct equals to more Dharma which increases quality of life with material and spirituals benefits. Therefore, it tries to implement notion of Dharma on individual basis.

The conduct is an activity of an individual in order to achieve something which is driven by will, to be concise it is the way how one acts, behaves and thinks as only after realizing one is driven for action. The conduct defined by UDHR is directed toward nation and concerned groups. It asks international communities and nations to guard human dignity. Further, it has a public dimension to it as it is not about one single individual rather the concern is for the human being all over the world regardless of their class, ethnicity, gender or nationality.

### **Recommendation of Study**

Universal ethics based upon Bhagavad-Gita equates to Dharma, which has multiple meanings according to context, nevertheless at its basics it is right conduct. It is voluntary following of Dharma that helps one to follow in the path of spirituality which ultimately leads to self-realization leading to moksha: the complete freedom.

Moksha is the state of being one with the Supreme Being, away from the cycle of death and rebirth. Furthermore, one of the important ethical aspects of Hinduism is realizing god in all

creation of god. Even though, we have different physical appearances and aspirations, nevertheless, the soul that lives inside us all is the same. It is a part of the Supreme Being, as result if you hurt others you get harmed, if you love others you get love.

The conduct is an activity of an individual in order to achieve something which is driven by will, to be concise it is the way how one acts, behaves and thinks as only after realizing one is driven for action. The conduct defined by UDHR is directed toward nation and concerned groups. It asks international communities and nations to guard human dignity. Further, it has a public dimension to it as it is not about one single individual rather the concern is for the human being all over the world regardless of their class, ethnicity, gender or nationality.

### **Educational Implications of Study**

UDHR asks nation-states to create an environment where individual rights are valued as its primary manifesto is to protect human rights whereas Bhagavad-Gita focuses upon the way of living of each individual and it asks one to create and work on ones character to obtain more Dharma.

UDHR promotes democratic conduct as the member nation have pledged to secure the basic right of every individual which is done by the inclusion of human rights in the constitution of the country. It is a rule of law to protect human rights; everything that violates the human rights is wrong and is punishable by the law. Not only democratic governance always protects human rights, it also stops power to be accumulated in the control of few which leads to tyranny.

Democracy is the system of the people where citizens of the nation are the true rulers and decision makers. The UDHR is democratic which means it is equal for all regardless of class, gender, or race.

### **Conclusion**

UN declaration of Human Rights also tries to establish wisdom wherein basic rights of each individual is applauded. It affirms four basic freedom to all individuals, that is, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear, and freedom from want. Democracy is the system of the people where citizens of the nation are the true rulers and decision makers. The UDHR is democratic which means it is equal for all regardless of class, gender, or race. The universal teaching of Bhagavad Gita integrates various dimensions of ethical teachings. It calls upon moral action and instigates one to perform duties of life, keeping in consideration spirituality and Dharma, 'good conduct'.

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