

# The Bhagavadgita and the Poetry of Robert Browning

**Nisha Indra Guru**

Head, Department of English

Government Autonomous Girl's P.G. College of Excellence, Sagar (M.P.)

## **Abstract :**

*The Bhagavadgita makes out a distinction between body and soul thereby it assumes that the appearance and reality are two distinct entities in their basic constitution yet appearance is the beginning and reality is the consummation of the righteous efforts made by the individual. The poetry of Robert Browning suggests a development along vast and penetrating influence of the Bhagavadgita in that it examines the meaning and significance and thus having liberation in the achievement of the Soul in the first place, and secondly, it comprehensively affirms an utter disregard for decadent body with a view to fix a name in the order of permanence.*

**Keywords :** Body, Soul, Liberation, Identity, Representation.

## **Introduction :**

The Bhagavadgita makes out a distinction between body and soul thereby it assumes that the appearance and reality are two distinct entities in their basic constitution yet appearance is the beginning and reality is the consummation of the righteous efforts made by the individual. What one sees and what one understands; what one feels and what one thinks; what one thinks and what one realises are precisely what we make them to be as such under the limitations of thinking, feeling and realising accordingly each one of these is held to be appropriate if it immediately and at once responds to our expectations. Thus, at the next moment of time, once again, one needs new causes and new effects, and, at that we enter upon a vast and endless chain of seeking and realising. The Bhagavadgita enables us to understand with great impersonality displayed in our efforts that we can come across universal causes and universal effects whereby we have satisfaction whose nature is on par with the Ultimate. Thinking, Feeling and Acting are sensuous embodiments held absolutely in the 'body' and the body is only a limitation - something that is needed to be comprehended seriously and, at that, doesn't allow one to think and act and feel beyond the limits of intellectual and objective assessment of the

All shall be mine! But thou must treat me not  
 As prosperous ones are treated, those who live  
 At hand here, and enjoy the higher lot,  
 In readiness to take what thou wilt give,  
 And free to let alone what thou refuseth;

.....  
 Thou art my single day, God lends to leaven

(Pippa Passes 27-33)

Far off from this world, there is the higher life whose greatness is perennial and eternal and that is only to be acquired. 'All shall be mine' is therefore the enthusiastic supplication for being blessed in the direction of redemption yet poet's humility is remarkable in having been a true seeker of knowledge (But thou must treat me not/ As prosperous ones are treated). In this regard it must be mentioned that the prosperity to be loved by the God is underlain in the completeness of primal innocence abounding in the concerned person. Browning is humble in consummating himself to innocence. 'Prosperous ones' is certainly a stroke of genius and it means a general ignorance that comprehends the lives of everybody who makes this world both beginning and end whereas world is only a beginning. Organic world is foregrounded in illusion and sensation which forestall everybody into uncertainty and confusion. Uncertainty of the pursuits upon Arjun's dilemma is the uncertainty of whole material world. Let us read Browning's argument in harmony with its source in Bhagavadgita:

ahobatamahatpapam

kartumvyavasitavayam

yadrajasukhlobhena

hantumvajanamudyatah (I.45)

(Alas, what a great sin have we resolved to commit in arriving to slay our own people through our greed for pleasures of the kingdom)

Arjun's dilemma with regard to righteousness and unrighteousness is a problem related to crisis due upon body and soul and, for that matter of that, of appearance and reality. In a state of despondency, we are rarely in a position to decide what is good and what is not good for us and it is one of ironies of the human existence that the human beings are perpetually in a state of despondency. Yet, efforts must be made by the act of

profound concentration and deep meditation to retain the most objective cast of mind so much so that we are hardly affected by the extremes of the situation. This would call for a knowledge of what is temporal and what is timeless in existence thus to hold fast to continuous, eternal and timeless forms of existence. In Andrea Del Sarto, such a concern is most explicit wherein Browning suggests an antithesis of body and soul:

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's a heaven for? All silver-grey,  
Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!  
I know both what I want and what might gain,  
And yet how profitless to know, to sigh  
"Had I been two, another and myself,  
"Our head would have o'erlooked the  
World!" No doubt.

(Andrea Del Sarto, 157-165)

This is exactly what the God tells Arjun in Bhagvadgita

evampravartitamcakram

Nanuvartyati ha yah

Aghayurindriyaramo

moghapatha so jivati (III, 16)

(He who does not, in this world, help to turn the wheel thus set in motion, is evil in his nature, sensual in his delight, and he, O Parth (Arjun) lives in vain)

Were one to live just for the sake of body, life to be lived would be full of darkness and suffering thus knowledge that enables us to become steadfast is extraordinarily imminent. Even knowledge would bear two-fold classification. In the first place, there is the knowledge that is pure, illuminating and of the nature of primal innocence and secondly, the acquired knowledge shows the overbearance of ego and reflection. The knowledge of the first type is the preoccupation of the steadfast and through it he sets himself upon the path of liberation. In "Bishop Bloughram's Apology", Browning's arguments are simply brilliant:

Pure faith indeed - you know not what  
you ask!

Naked belief in God the omnipotent  
Omniscient, omnipresent, sears too much  
The sense of conscious creatures to be  
born

It were the seeing of him, no flesh dare

True knowledge thus is knowledge of God who lives in pure conscious in the form of soul - there isn't any other knowledge that is there to be acquired. Browning understands that in the man, predilections for worldly joy and pleasure is unusual and extraordinary yet urge for evolution for the sake of maturity so much so that one comes to understand the distinction between beginning and end has to be seriously kept up. For existence around body is limited and chiefly discernible in pleasure, joy, sorrow, prosperity, loss in which each is only the characteristic of a fragment, by no means, of the whole. Units and parts describing the life of an organic entity are rendered into decay and degeneration, thus deeds on which permanence is proffered must be acquired. Browning expounds that we must live for liberation, for Soul, for God and for Immortality. In 'Rabbi Ben Ezra,' the authenticity of the observation is proven:

For thence, - a paradox

Which comforts while it mocks, -

Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:

What I aspired to be,

And was not, comforts me:

A brute I might have been, but would not

sink in the scale.

(VII)

And now look at God's exhortations in Bhagavadgita:

ragadvesaviyuktaistu

Visvyamindriyaiscaram

atmavayairvidheyatma

Prasadamadhigacchati

(II. 64)

(But a man of disciplined mind, who moves among the objects of sense, with senses under control and free from attachment and aversion, he attains purity)

We can go on looking at the solemnity of discourse in the Bhagavadgita:

mayadhyaksenaprakrtih

Suyatesacaracaram

hetunanenaKaunteya

jagadviparivartate

(IX. 10)

(under my guidance, nature (prakrti) gives birth to all things, moving and unmoving  
and by this means, O son of Kunti (Arjun), the world revolves)

Browning, on the other hand, concedes that without having known Him, the life  
doesn't have a purpose and to have known Him would be due upon how far are we now in  
a position to substantiate the worth of righteousness within. In 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' Browning  
reads the Bhagavadgita with similar enthusiasm:

Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be

The last of life, for which the first was  
made:

our times are in His hand

whosaith 'A whole I planned

Youth shows but half; trust God: See all  
nor be afraid

(II)

Fullness has to be the goal of endeavour and purpose of the pure consciousness  
and 'fullness,' of necessity, doesn't suffer any contradictions hence it is eternal and  
continuous. Now question arises as to what is full and who is full? And the answer is only  
the God and only the soul, and only the Brahman are full, everything else other than these  
is dross and null. describing the life of an organic entity are rendered into decay and  
degeneration, thus, deeds on which permanencies proffered must be acquired. Browning  
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visvyamindriyaiscaran

almavayairvidheyatmaa

prasadamadhiyachati

(II 64)

(But a man of disciplined mind, who moves among the objects of sense, with senses under control and free from attachment and ..... he attains purity)

yajnyacaratah karma

avinasitu tad viddhi

yen sarvam idam tatam

(Know thou that by which all this is pervaded is indestructible. Of this immutable being, no one can bring about the destruction)

### III

Now, we can understand that Browning's readings into the metaphysics of the Bhagavadgita are splendid and exemplary. In fact, it would be little better to say that he reads the Bhagavadgita for his English audience in that the ideas due upon the conflict between body and soul in which body is held to be decadent and the soul to be eternal, immortal and continuous, the conceptualisation of the continuity of the Soul, the configuration of Devotion, Action and Knowledge, universality and pre-eminence of the absolute Godhead are distinctly borrowed from the Bhagavadgita. Every now and then, Browning makes it out that human existence is insignificant unless and until it draws upon the purity and truth of the Divine consequently life, love and knowledge for which the human pursuits are intended must be restored finally in the continuity of the Soul, omniscience of God and bliss of the Supreme.

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