

The importance of aligning with one's own nature¹

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Indian society today is strongly characterized by a herd mentality. This starts from simple ideas such as how we greet others to the dress that we wear and extends up to the career choices we make. Everybody today thinks that the only appropriate way to greet others is to say "hi". We must strive to dress like westerners, look like westerners and modify our mannerisms and behavioral patterns so that we do not look any different from the westerners. This is a great anxiety most of us, especially the youngsters in the society are going through. We end up spending considerable mental energy in conforming ourselves with this so called "global standards" of societal living. Many call this as aping the west. While this is an issue that needs some attention there is an even greater issue that we are facing.

Is variety the essence of reality?

Let us pause for a moment and try to understand how we make certain important life choices. The most important among them is what do I want to be? If we carefully analyze how we seem to be making this choice, it is obvious that the herd mentality is working at its best. Every parent wants his/her child to first become an engineer. The list of parents includes craftsmen, artisans, goldsmiths, temple priests, government employees, Samskrit pandits, farmers, vedic scholars etc. If people are a little more informed, then the desire is to obtain an MBA so that life is safe and settled. An obvious reflection of this is the number of engineering colleges and business schools functioning in India. For instance, in Tamil Nadu alone there are over 520 engineering colleges. The number of seats available for science and liberal arts courses will pale in comparison with engineering, not to mention of the facility to learn specific crafts.

There is even a much higher level of uniformity that we are heading towards. In the name of modernity and equal rights we have come to argue that "male" and "female" are the same and therefore everything that a male does a female can also do and therefore even this difference needs to be wiped out. Agreeing with this worldview makes us acknowledge that the act of creation of opposite sex is just a mechanism for furthering the human race and serves no more purpose. Is this not a sweeping assumption?

This raises a fundamental question. Are human beings exactly like the products manufactured in a factory where all items "look alike" with exact specifications and behavioural characteristics? Such an assumption takes the wind out of the divine act of creation and reduces it to the level of a Macdonald restaurant producing standard potato chips world over. There must be something fundamentally wrong in our understanding of this issue. Simple common sense tells us that no two individuals will be the same even if they are born in the same family. Since the mental makeup and interests are likely to be

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different between these two, they ought to be doing different things in life. Perhaps, what drives satisfaction to them and bring them a sense of happiness may also be varying. Is it not then important that this is taken into consideration before we make important choices in life such as what should I become in life?

The greatness of India and its cultural heritage is the recognition of the fundamental truth that variety is the essence of reality. It does not require complex thinking to appreciate this aspect. In this country if we travel about 100 kilometers from a place, we find that the food habits are a little different, some of the choices with respect to the dress they wear, the way they build their dwellings, even the dialect of the language that they speak will all be a little different. The religious practices and customs and the deities worshipped also differ from place to place. Such was the expression of this basic concept of reality. This idea was applied not just in social practices but also with respect to occupational choices that people made. There was a diverse mix of trade, arts and craft that people took to in addition to farming and attending to governmental chores. Furthermore, in addition to these occupational pursuits that people took, they also freely pursued other interests in arts, music, crafts etc.

The question in front of us why is this apparent difference in our approach to certain choices in life? Is the earlier approach of variety the right way to go or the current thinking of “one size fits all”? Lord Krishna offers us guidance to resolve this confusion.

Pursuing activities aligned with one’s own nature

Every one of us has an inherent nature and strength. In common parlance we use the word *svabhāva* to indicate this. From a spiritual perspective, the work *prakṛti* denotes this aspect of us. What it means is that human beings have many things in common which make up the physical and structural aspects. For example all human beings have a pair of legs, hands, eyes etc. and are vertically oriented species. Similarly members from a family share the same family name, speak the same language, have similar understanding of life issues etc. However, amidst all these similarity there is a huge difference between individuals which is possible because of the *prakṛti*. The *prakṛti* eventually drives ones *svabhāva* and brings out the individuality into manifestation.

Since this is fundamental to our existence, Lord Krishna advises Arjuna that it is always better (*śreyān*) for an individual to pursue activities in life in alignment with one’s own nature (*svadharmah*) even if that person is not fully equipped in that field of activity yet (*vigunah*). It may not be appropriate to engage in another set of activities inconsistent with one’s own nature even with well-endowed skills in that field. Since this idea may appear counter-intuitive he emphasizes this idea by suggesting that meeting defeat and death in an area very aligned with one’s own nature is better. Alternatively, engaging in activities not aligned with one’s own nature (*paradharmah*) is ridden with fear and challenges (*bhayāvahah*).

श्रेयान् स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् ।
स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः ॥ 3.35

*śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmātsvanuṣṭhitāt
svadharme nidhanam śreyaḥ paradharmo bhayāvahaḥ*

In essence the message is clear and concise. It is important that one must pursue their activities in life in alignment with their own nature. Anything that violates this basic principle is not worthwhile.

Being Successful Vs Wealthy in Life

Lord Krishna's prescription seeks to clarify the apparent confusion that we seem to be going through with respect to educational and other choices we seem to make in life. We all want to be successful in life. While this idea is clear what is unclear is what drives success. We assume that an efficient indicator of success is the material prosperity that we have. If this is the case, then we need to get the best jobs in the market. In order to get the high paying jobs in the market we must have the appropriate qualifications. This logic explains why every Indian would want to become an engineer at the minimum and a MBA graduate if possible. A correct understanding of this *śloka* makes this assumption questionable.

Success is a matter pertaining to the heart and is a measure of how much the heart is fulfilling. On the other hand wealth is a matter pertaining to the *manas*, *buddhi* and *indriyās* and may or may not have any connection to fulfilling the heart. Through this *śloka* Lord Krishna has given us two powerful yet simple ideas to be successful in life. The first is that such activities that we pursue in alignment with our own nature will increase our propensity to succeed in life. Further, such activities that indeed makes us heart filling are those that are close to our own nature. For some it may be teaching, for some others it may be engaging in creative pursuits such as arts and music and for some others it may be engaging in community service. For a few others it may be engaging in intellectual activities or physical activities in helping grow some idea or concept.

Therefore the sooner we make efforts to consciously identify our own nature and make efforts to align our life goals and activities with this the greater is the chance that we will have a peaceful last sleep. In fact we all strive for this in our life. If we miss this, we may end up being a wealthy person but with an internal sense of defeat, conflict, mental stress and agony. Let us organize our life better with the grace of Lord Krishna.