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## **The Concept of Brahman in the Śrīmadbhagavadgītā**

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### **Abstract**

*The Śrīmadbhagavadgītā plays a unique role in the history of religious and philosophical thoughts of India. It is a world gospel which tries to link man with God, enlighten him on the concrete relation subsisting between the world and the Absolute, and solace him that there is a way leading from the finite to the infinite. The Gītā is a detailed accentuation of some of the terse observations made already in the Upaniṣads. Hence, the concept of Brahman, which is an important topic of discussion especially for the Upaniṣads and the Vedānta philosophers, maintains a pivotal position among the topics discussed in the Gītā. According to the Gītā, Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa is described as the Supreme Being or Absolute. Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa is describing himself with those epithets which are used for Brahman. In the present discussion, an attempt is being made to discuss the concept of Brahman as reflected in the Śrīmadbhagavadgītā.*

**Keywords:** brahman, ātman, kṣara, akṣara, saṅga, nirṅga.

**Introduction:** The Śrīmadbhagavadgītā is one of the most remarkable sacred books in the world literary. It is a comprehensive work that speaks of universal religion. The Śrīmadbhagavadgītā is based on Bhīṣmaparvan of the great epic Mahābhārata which is attributed to Vyāsa. It comprises 18 chapters and contains 700 verses. It is in the form of a conversation between Lord Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna in the battle field. Lord Kṛṣṇa exhorts and encourages Arjuna who feels reluctant to fight his own kinsmen in the opposite camp.

Among the Indian religious literatures, the Śrīmadbhagavadgītā occupies a unique position, whose philosophy is in our soul that inspires and drives us to action or duty. The central teaching of the Śrīmadbhagavadgītā is to attain worklessness (*naiṣkarmya*) through work. In entire Indian literature more than twenty five different Gītās are available, such as, Kapila-Gītā, Uddhava-Gītā, Utathya-Gītā, Vāmadeva-Gītā, Rṣabha-Gītā, Brahma-Gītā, Guru-Gītā, Śiva-Gītā etc. Among them, the Śrīmadbhagavadgītā of Vyāsa is the most popular one. So generally when we speak of the Gītā, we refer to the Śrīmadbhagavadgītā of Vyāsa. This Gītā attracts human minds year after year because it leads human to

enlighten their lives. Many well-known scholars have written the commentaries on the *Gītā*, which are widely differing in their views on the essentials. Among them Śaṅkarācārya, Rāmānuja, Nimbārka, Madhvācārya, Ānandagiri, Nīlakanṭha, Dhanapati, Śrīdhara, Abhinavagupta, Madhusudhan Saraswati, Arabinda, Lokamānya Tiloka etc. are remarkable. Moreover, the *Gītā* has been translated into several recognized languages of the world.

The *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* is an inspired poetical treatise with a philosophical theme. It can be interpreted in consonance with all the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy. The metaphysics of the *Gītā* is deeply influenced by two orthodox systems of Indian philosophy, viz., the Sāṃkhya and the Vedānta. Many verses of the *Gītā* cannot be understood without at least an elementary knowledge of the Sāṃkhya system. However, the atheistic dualism of the Sāṃkhya philosophy is absent in the *Gītā*. The *Gītā* is a purely theistic scripture, and speaks that Puruṣottama is the only reality. He is both transcendent and immanent; and present everywhere in creation and extends beyond it. He determines all the activities of Nature. Thus, it can be said that the philosophy of the *Gītā* is closely connected with the monism of the Upaniṣads. The *Gītā* is regarded as one of the three main scriptures (*prasthānatraya*) of Vedānta. The philosophy of Vedānta is based on three *prasthānas* also called *prasthānatraya*, viz., *Śruti*, *Smṛti* and *Nyāya*. The *Śrutiprasthāna* is the inner part of the Upaniṣads; the *Nyāyaprasthāna* consists of the *Brahmasūtra* or *Vedāntasūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa and the *Smṛtiprasthāna* which is also known as *Gītāprasthāna*, the most significant one, which consist of the features of both the Upaniṣads and the *Brahmasūtra*.

**Concept of Brahman in Indian Literature:** The concept of Brahman is one of the most important topics discussed in almost all ancient Indian literatures. The word *brahman* is derived from the root *brh*, which means to swell, expand, grow, enlarge etc. This word simply means eternal purity and ever freeness. In Hinduism, Brahman is the unchanging reality and beyond the world, which cannot be exactly defined. It has been described as *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda* (existence, consciousness and bliss) and as the highest reality. Brahman is the universal fact of life and is present in every man.

The word *brahman* is found at first in the *Ṛgveda*,<sup>1</sup> though it is not same as the Upaniṣadic concept of Brahman. In the Upaniṣads, Brahman is described as the Supreme Reality or Absolute. The word *brahman* signifies the truth, knowledge and pleasure.<sup>2</sup> It is eternal, unchangeable and imperishable. It is devoid of any body and is free from birth and death.<sup>3</sup> In many passages of the Upaniṣads, the term *ātman* is used to denote both Brahman or the universal self (*paramātman*) and the individual self (*jīvātman*), because essence or real self of the individual is non-different from the essence of the universe, i.e. Brahman. Thus, the Upaniṣads conclude the whole concept of Brahman as ‘the whole world is Brahman’,<sup>4</sup> ‘I am Brahman’<sup>5</sup> and ‘you are also Brahman’<sup>6</sup>. In the *Muṇḍakopaniṣad*, it is clearly mentioned that one who knows Brahman in reality, he becomes Brahman itself.<sup>7</sup> The Upaniṣads mention the two aspects of Brahman, which are known as *Para Brahman* or the Absolute and *Apara Brahman* or God. The *Para Brahman* is higher Brahman and the *Apara Brahman* is lower Brahman. *Para Brahman* is described as unborn, non-attributed, eternal,

neither gross nor subtle, neither long or short and it is beyond the senses.<sup>8</sup> As contrasted with *Para Brahman*, the *Apara Brahman* is limited, attributed, with name and form and immanent in the world. However, it must be noted that the *Para Brahman* or *Nirguṇa Brahman* and the *Apara Brahman* or *Saguṇa Brahman* are not two different entities, they are only two aspects of the same reality.

The Vedānta philosophers describe variously about the concept of Brahman: Advaita Vedānta holds that Brahman is identical with *ātman*, whereas Bhedābheda and Viśiṣṭādvaita consider *ātman* and Brahman as both different and non-different, and Dvaita sees them as different. The Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkarācārya emphasizes Brahman to be the only reality. Brahman is of the nature of *sat* (existence), *cit* (consciousness) and *ānanda* (bliss). His reality is *nirguṇa*, i.e. Brahman is devoid of any quality.<sup>9</sup> According to Śaṅkarācārya, if any quality is attributed to the Brahman, the reality will be limited. The whole world becomes an illusion or *māyā*. As we mistake a rope for a snake, in the same way we mistake the world of reality. Thus, Śaṅkara's Advaitavāda is known as *Vivartavāda*. *Māyā* arises due to ignorance. The liberated person realizes that nothing is real except Brahman. Even God of religion was rejected by Śaṅkarācārya. For him *Nirguṇa* Brahman is the only reality. According to Rāmānuja, Brahman and the self are identical only in some special sense and hence his view is known as Viśiṣṭādvaitavāda (qualified non-dualism). Rāmānuja advocates *Pariṇāmavāda*, which stated that the world is a real transformation of *Saguṇa* Brahman who is endowed with all excellent qualities. In the philosophy of Rāmānuja, both God and the world become real and morality as well as religion becomes possible. On the other hand, Madhva holds that the self and Brahman are totally different entities and thus his view is known as Dvaitavāda (dualism). Vallabha, the profounder of Śuddhādvaitavāda, maintains that the self is non-different from Brahman, because the effect is non-different from its cause. According to Nimbārka, Brahman is both identical and different from the self for all time and hence his view is known as Svābhāvika-bhedābhedavāda. Bhāskara holds that Brahman is both absolute and relatives; and its relation to the self is one of the both difference and non-difference. Of these two, again non-difference is essential, while difference is created by *upādhis*, i.e. limited adjuncts.

**Brahman in the ŚRĪMADBHAGAVADGĪTĀ:** The *Gītā* is nothing but the whole summary of the Upaniṣads. So it is also known as *Gītapaniṣad*. A well-known verse compares the Upaniṣads to cows (*sarvopaniṣado gāvo*) and the *Gītā* to their milk (*duḡdham gītāmṛtam mahat*). It is thereby admitted that the teachings of the *Gītā* are derived from the older scriptures. The metaphysical side of the *Gītā* is a popular exposition of the wisdom of the Upaniṣads. Thus, the *Gītā* also discusses elaborately the concept of Brahman. The whole 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Gītā* is dedicated to this concept, so that it even has the respective title-*Akṣarabrahmayoga*. The nomenclature of each chapter in *Gītā* has also special meaning and characteristics. The two words *Akṣara* and *Brahma* signify the *Nirguṇa-Nirākāra*, *Saguṇa-Sākāra* and *Saguṇa-Nirākāra* forms of the Supreme God. If one can realize heartily any one of the above mentioned three forms of the Supreme, he can directly link with *Paramātmā*, which means he got release.

According to the *Gītā*, Puruṣottama is the Ultimate Reality or the Absolute. He has many different phases, as Brahman the Absolute, Hiraṇyagarbha the cosmic soul, Īśvara the personal God, Śakti the creative power, *avatāra* or God in human form, *Jīva* the individual soul, *vibhūti* or particular manifestation, and as *Prakṛti* of the eightfold Nature. The *Gītā* also mentions that Puruṣottama being the highest reality is the foundation of Brahman also.<sup>10</sup> Though Puruṣottama and Brahman are not two different realities or two stages of the same reality, but are two aspects of the same reality. Puruṣottama devoid of qualities and actions is Brahman and Brahman endowed with divine attributes is Puruṣottama. It is found that the words like Paramātmā, Paramapuruṣa, Parameśvara, Vāsudeva, Akṣara etc. are used as synonyms of Brahman in the *Gītā*.

**Nature of Brahman:** According to the *Gītā*, Brahman is the indestructible, transcendental living entity, and his eternal nature is called *adhyātma*, the self. Action pertaining to the development of the material bodies of the living entities is called *karma* or fruitive activities.<sup>11</sup> Describing the nature of Brahman, the *Gītā* says that it is unborn and eternal, neither existent nor non-existent. It is not existent as an empirical being, nor non-existent as a transcendental reality. It pervades the world, but it is not exhausted in it. It is immanent in it, and transcends it.<sup>12</sup> Brahman is described as having no form or attribute. It is also described as having attributes but formless, and again described as having both form and attributes—which shows that the Absolute is both impersonal and personal and yet beyond both. In the impersonal aspect He is called Brahman, the highest imperishable principle, the unmanifest beyond the other unmanifest, *viz.*, *prakṛti*.<sup>13</sup> This unmanifest, imperishable Brahman is the supreme goal, attaining which one does not return.<sup>14</sup> According to the *Gītā*, a liberated human being (*jīvanmūkta*) has realized Brahman as his or her own true self. It is mentioned that one should meditate upon the Supreme Person as the one who knows everything, as he who is the oldest, who is the controller, who is smaller than the smallest, who is the maintainer of everything, who is beyond all material conception, who is inconceivable, and who is always a person. He is luminous like the sun and beyond darkness or ignorance.<sup>15</sup> To those whose ignorance is destroyed through the knowledge of the Self, their knowledge manifests Him.<sup>16</sup>

Like the Upaniṣads, the *Gītā* also mentions that there are two *Puruṣas*, i.e. Brahman, *viz.*, the *Kṣara-puruṣa* (perishable) and *Akṣara-puruṣa* (imperishable). All created materials constitute the *Kṣara-puruṣa*. The immutable *Puruṣa* underlying them is the *Akṣara-puruṣa*.<sup>17</sup> The *Akṣara-puruṣa* is the eternal, inactive, immobile and immutable self of all, yet unmoved and indifferent. It is timeless in time, space-less in space and non-casual in producing effects. The *Kṣara-puruṣa* is the dynamic, active, mutable, immanent, universal soul of the world. The *Akṣara-puruṣa* is the transcendent, inactive, immutable self of all, from which proceeds mutation of things. Some hold that the *Kṣara-puruṣa* means the insentient or material elements, while some others take it in the sense of the bodies of the living beings. The *Akṣara-puruṣa* is explained by some as the *jīva* or the individual self and by some as the Lord or the Supreme Self. We are, however, inclined to take the *Kṣara-puruṣa* in the sense of the individual self and the *Akṣara-puruṣa* in the transcendental

Universal self which manifests itself as the individual selves and is immanent in them.<sup>18</sup> Again, the *Akṣara-puruṣa* has two aspects—conditioned and unconditioned. In the conditioned aspect, the *Akṣara-puruṣa* is called *kṣetrajña*, while in the unconditioned aspect it is called Brahman.<sup>19</sup> The *Kṣara-puruṣa* corresponds to the *Kṣara Brahman* and the *Akṣara-puruṣa* to the *Akṣara Brahman* of the Upaniṣads.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the *Gītā* mentions the different characteristics of Brahman.

**Conclusion:** From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the three types of Brahman have been explained in the *Gītā* –

- (i) Brahman is both existent and non-existent (*sadasaccāham*)<sup>21</sup>
- (ii) Brahman is beyond the both (*sadasatat param yah*)<sup>22</sup>
- (iii) Brahman is neither existent nor non-existent (*na sat tannāsaducyate*)<sup>23</sup>

It may be observed that Puruṣottama, as He is in Himself is an impersonal Absolute and designated Brahman, and that Puruṣottama, as He is in relation to the individuals and the world, is a personal deity and designated Īśvara. The former is a scientific conception and the latter a poetic one. At the beginning of the twelfth chapter of the *Gītā*, the question is raised whether we should meditate on the impersonal Absolute or the personal Īśvara. The answer of the Supreme Lord is that both methods lead to the same result, but that the former is naturally more difficult for the embodied beings than the latter. Elsewhere He goes further and says, “Whatever may be the form which each devotee seeks to worship with faith- in that form verily do I make his faith steadfast. Possessed of faith, he worships that form, and his desires are fulfilled, granted, in fact, by me alone.”<sup>24</sup>

There is always a conflict among the followers of the path of knowledge and the followers of the path of action and the followers of the path of devotion. According to the *Gītā*, one who believes in the path of knowledge (*jñānayoga*) accepts the *Nirguṇa-Nirākāra* Brahman as the Supreme Reality or Absolute. Again, the believers of the path of action (*karmayoga*) consider the *Saguṇa-Nirākāra* Brahman as the Ultimate Reality and according to the followers of the path of devotion (*bhaktiyoga*), the *Saguṇa-Sākāra* Brahman is the Ultimate Reality. *Saguṇa* and *Nirguṇa* or *Sākāra* and *Nirākāra* etc. whatever name it may be called, the Supreme Being is same, i.e. Puruṣottama or Vāsudeva.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the Lord Kṛṣṇa says in the *Gītā* ‘*nirguṇam guṇabhoktr ca*’.<sup>26</sup> He is both *Saguṇa* and *Nirguṇa*, *Sākāra* and *Nirākāra*. The Purāṇas also mention that Kṛṣṇa is Bhagavān Himself.<sup>27</sup> He is the Soul of all beings. He is the Supreme Being concealed in the human form. The Puruṣottama is superior to the immanent soul and the transcendent self, the mutable and the immutable. Again, it is said that a devotee attains similarity with Puruṣottama, while a *jñānin* attains *nirvāna* and merges into Brahman.<sup>28</sup> The *Gītā* has repeatedly mentioned that Lord Kṛṣṇa, the Divine person is higher than the Absolute.<sup>29</sup> The whole world is pervaded by Him.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the *Gītā* sings,

“*param brahma param dhāma pavitra paramam bhavān /  
puruṣam śāśvataṁ divyaṁ ādidevaṁ ajaṁ vibhum //*”<sup>31</sup>

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yūnjimte brahmaṇā keśinā hari.... Ibid., 1/82/1
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3. na jāyate mṛyate vā .....na hanyate hanyamāne śarīra // KU, 2.18
4. sarvaṁ khalvidaṁ brahma ...CU, III.14 .1
5. ahaṁ brahmāsmi ...BU, I.4.10
6. tattvamasi ...CU, VI.16.3
7. brahma veda brahmaiva bhavati....MU, 3.2.9
8. KU, 1/3/25; MU,1/1/6; 2/1/2; 3/1/8 etc.
9. CU, 6.2.11
10. brahmaṇo hi pratisthāham....BG, 14.27
11. akṣaraṁ brahma paramaṁ svabhāvo'dhyātmanamucyate /  
bhūtabhāvodbhavakaro visargaḥ karma saṁjñītaḥ // Ibid., VIII.3
12. Ibid., VII.19; XII.13.
13. Ibid., VIII.18, 20.
14. avyakto'kṣara ityuktastamāhuḥ paramāṁ gatim /  
yaṁ prāpya na nivartante taddhāma paramaṁ mama // Ibid., VIII.21
15. Ibid., VIII.9
16. jñānena tu tadajñānaṁ yeśāṁ nāśitamātmanaḥ /  
teśāmādityavat jñānaṁ prakāśayati tat param // Ibid., V.16
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kṣaraḥ sarvṣṇi bhūtāni kūṣastho'kṣara ucyate // Ibid., XV.16
18. vide, Sinha, K.P., *The Self in Indian Philosophy*, p.9
19. BG, XIII.1-2
20. KU, I.2.16.
21. BG, IX. 19
22. Ibid., XI. 37
23. Ibid., XIII. 12
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28. idaṁ jñānamupāśritya mama sādharmaṁ māgataḥ / BG, 14.2
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mayi sarvamidaṁ protam.... Ibid., VII.7 etc.
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