

The Great “Game of Life”

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If you visit a local fair organized during festival time, you will find that the whole village population will be there. Even a number of people from the surrounding areas will also visit the fair. Typically, in the fair some games and challenges will be organized. For example, you can pay Rs. 10 and get two or three rings. If you can throw the ring exactly on an object, the object may be yours. There may be some other game where you are given a single chance. Our approach to these two are very different.

If you have multiple opportunities then you can afford to take some chance, learn from the experience and perhaps hit the jackpot in the next attempt. On the other hand, if you have only one chance, then it is all a combination of skill and luck that help you get the jackpot. The end result is simply you hit the jackpot or not. There are no further opportunities available.

Life: A Game to Play and Win?

Our life is also a similar game, albeit being played in a longer time frame. What exactly are the rules of the game? What happens to us after this life? This is a question that bothers everyone, cutting across religious boundaries across the world. This amounts to asking, “How many opportunities are available to win the game and what do we mean by “winning” the game?”

Since this is a question that concerns everyone, all religious faiths have addressed this as part of their cardinal tenets. All Semitic religions (Abrahamic religions) have taken a position that every one of us get only one chance to play this “life game”. In such a situation it remains to be seen as to what happens to all those who could not win the game in the single attempt. Perhaps, they are eternally condemned for their bad luck or lack of skill. They will not have another attempt to try their hand. On the face of it, it appears to be an unfair and an uninteresting game to play. People have varying skills and interests and therefore need more time and opportunity. If this is not possible, at least there must be an option to stay out of the game. Unfortunately, all are compulsorily required to participate in the life game.

On the other hand, *Sanātana Dharma*, the basis for Hindu way of life proposes that every one of us have multiple chances to play the life game and eventually emerge victorious. Shri Krishna has provided some clues about this in chapter 8 of the *Gītā*.

Life and Death Cycle

Krishna enumerates the list of people and entities that are subjected to the birth and death cycle. He says, “Hey Arjuna (*arjuna*), all living beings starting from those in the *Brahma Lokā* to all the other worlds (*ā-brahma-bhuvanāl-lokāḥ*) are all subjected to the cycle of birth and death (*punarāvartinaḥ*).” However (*tu*), after reaching unto Me, the

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Supreme Brahman, (*mām upetya*), Oh son of Kuntī (*kaunteya*) there will be no more (*na vidyate*) reincarnation (*punarjanma*).

आब्रह्मभुवनल्लोकाः पुनरावर्तिनोऽर्जुन ।
मामुपेत्य तु कौन्तेय पुनर्जन्म न विद्यते ॥ 8.16

*ā-brahma-bhuvanāl-lokāḥ punarāvartino'rjuna
mām upetya tu kaunteya punarjanma na vidyate*

According to our conceptualization, there are seven worlds in the upper region starting from the world we live in up to *Satya Lokā*. Similarly, there are seven worlds in the power region stretching up to *Pātāla Lokā*. What is indeed implied by this *śloka*, for example, is that even Indra, who is the Lord of *Swarga Lokā* is subjected to this universal cycle of birth and death. What is also indicated in the *śloka* is that there is a way to escape from this endless cycle.

Based on our earlier description of life game, Shri Krishna in this *śloka* suggests two rules of the game. Firstly, we have more than one opportunity (in fact several hundred opportunities) to play the game. Further there is also an indication of what constitutes winning the game. Winning the game is nothing but getting out of this endless cycle of birth and death. This closely resembles several modern day video games.

Playing the “Game of Life”

Consider a modern day video game which, let us assume that, we have just uploaded into our mobile or the tablet. Assume that the game involves leading a young girl who unwittingly got lost in a deep forest. The girl needs to be lead out of the forest back to her parents. In the process we encounter a number of challenges, threats etc. When we first play the game, we are likely to fail miserably and we will be out of the game in no time as we would have lost all the credit points and game related gadgets (in some games our power) or capability to continue the game. This often happens because, we do not know the rules, the control buttons, the right things to do, the skill to invoke certain special powers, the smartness to avoid certain pitfalls etc. However, by repeatedly playing the game, we understand the nuances of the game, develop proficiency and eventually master the game and effortlessly lead the girl out of the maze.

Our notion of birth and death is exactly the same. We begin the journey and spend a few *janmas* without even knowing why we are born. We take things that comes on our way, merely enjoy material pleasures and live from one moment to another in this fashion. By merely assuming that life is only for bodily and sensory pleasures and enjoyment we might be unwittingly competing with the animals. We will miserably lose this competition as we are no match to animals when it comes to sensory pleasures. However, while we are in this journey, after several rounds we will realise that it is leading us nowhere. Sometimes we feel that we are back to square one and there is no end to the miseries and challenges that we go through in our lives.

Once this realization dawns on us, the first thought that will emerge in us is to take stock of life and ask, "What for are we born and what could be taken as a reasonable measure of success in one's own life?" This is the beginning of changing the tactics to play the life game. For the first time, the goal post for our life will begin to emerge, albeit very vaguely. But it will bring along with it the need to look for right methods to reach the goal. We will search for right tools and right people who can guide us in the process. As we progress in this fashion, the goal post itself will begin to shift and will become more and more clear. We would pick a number of methods to avoid pitfalls in life, learn to recognize the obstructions in the path, find new techniques and methods to navigate the path as we confront these challenges.

If we carefully look at our vast array of ancestral knowledge, it provides ample ideas for all these issues that we face in the game of life. In our way of life we have *satsang*, scriptural injunctions and recommendations, methods of *upāsanā* and *bhakti*, role of a guru, words of wisdom from *sants* and above all the grace of the Lord to provide us all these inputs to play the life game.

This slow journey and experience gathered through multiple attempts alone brings every one of us near the winning position. As we mature in this process, there will be a great need to understand divinity and its role in many things that happen. Our mental disposition and approach to life would transform to such a level that we will begin to see the final goal post ourselves. As Krishna mentioned, eventually we will reach unto Him and win the game.