

Divine Nature: Absolute & Relative

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Is there something called God or Divinity that really exists? The answer to this and the articulation of the idea depends on whether you want to call yourself a theist or an atheist. In order to understand this we shall consider two examples that we could have come across in our real life:

- One person with an ailment causing high fever went to the Doctor in a reputed multi-specialty hospital. Despite doing a number of tests the team of doctors attending to that person could not find out what is causing the high fever. In medical terminology, when all the known ideas are not explaining the cause, they simply say it can happen “sometimes”.
- A person was standing in a road side coffee shop and sipping coffee along with a few of his friends. One truck going by the road rammed into the shop and of the six people, including the coffee shop owner, this person alone was fatally run over by the truck. The others did not even have a scratch on their body but went through the trauma caused by the incident. Apparently the truck driver lost control and the brake failed. If we ask why this happened only to this particular person, we may not be able to answer this.

There are a number of such incidences that we are privy to in our personal lives. Therefore we can neither ignore these events nor plead helplessness about this. A wise person instead of getting bothered about these events indeed seeks to make “sense” of them.

Divine Nature is Universal

If we ask “who” caused this to happen, generally two types of answers are given. One set of people attribute this to “the act of God”. They are called theists and they explicitly acknowledge the notion of Divinity or God. The other group simply says it cannot be explained as it is a “random” event. Modern science has side stepped all problems arising out of its inability to explain several such events by introducing the notion of probability. The people belonging to this category call themselves as atheists or rationalists. It remains to be seen as to what the rationality is behind pushing every unexplainable event in life under the carpet called “probability or random event”.

Notwithstanding these answers, what is common to both is the fact there is some unforeseen, larger force behind several events happening in everybody’s life. This larger force is indeed universal, as the events described could happen anywhere in the world notwithstanding geographical, political and linguistic boundaries. This is the so called “divine nature”. Both an atheist and theist work with a “belief” system to explain this. The only point of difference between a theist and an atheist seems to be in the articulation of the thought. While a theist refers to the supreme as God or some form of Divinity, the

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atheist may at best attribute it to some larger force or in the worst case an unknown aspect adhering to some laws of probability that he/she believes in.

It is therefore natural that human beings average quest is to know how to recognize this divinity. How does divinity manifest? How can one begin to develop an appreciation of the divine nature? Is divinity such a remote substance that it is hard to reach out to it? These are the questions a true seeker will begin to seriously examine. This is a subject that is complex and it requires multiple dimensions to articulate, understand and appreciate. Most part of chapters 7 – 11 in Gita are devoted to this aspect. Sri Krishna begins with some useful ideas in chapter 7 for us to develop this thought by deeper contemplation. We shall look at *ślokas* 4 and 5 from chapter 7.

Divine Nature Manifests at Two Levels

According to Sri Krishna, the divine nature, also known as *Prakṛti* manifests itself at two levels. The first one is at the level that we all witness in this universe. This manifestation happens using eight elements (*prakṛti aṣṭadhā*). The five great forces of nature, the Earth (*bhūmiḥ*), Water (*āpah*), Fire (*analaḥ*), Air (*vāyuḥ*) and the Space (*khaṁ*) are the first five elements. The remaining three include *buddhi*, *manas* and *aḥamkāra*. The first five relate to the macrocosm and the last three the microcosm. This implies that the way the macrocosm as well as the microcosm responds and behaves moment by moment is at a fundamental level an aspect of the divine play only.

भूमिरापोऽनलो वायुः खं मनो बुद्धिरेव च ।
अहंकार इतीयं मे भिन्ना प्रकृतिरष्टधा ॥ 7.04

*bhūmirāpo'nalo vāyuḥ khaṁ mano buddhireva ca
aḥamkāra itīyaṁ me bhinnā prakṛtiraṣṭadhā*

Krishna goes on to mention that there is another version (*apareyam*) of *Prakṛti* apart from the list just enumerated (*itastvanyāṁ*). He refers to it as *Parāprakṛti* (*parām viddhī*). According to him this aspect of *Prakṛti* beholds and supports (*dhāryate*) the entire Universe (*jagat*) and all the living entities therein (*jīvabhūtāṁ*). By this reference to “*parā*”, it is implicitly understood that the first category of *prakṛti* is not *parā* (widely known as *aparā*). The *parā* and the *aparā* respectively denote absolute and the relative aspects of divine nature. What we refer to as the “nature” in Science and common parlance denotes the relative aspect of divine nature.

अपरेयमितस्त्वन्यां प्रकृतिं विद्धि मे पराम् ।
जीवभूतां महाबाहो ययेदं धार्यते जगत् ॥ 7.05

*apareyamitastvanyāṁ prakṛtiṁ viddhi me parām
jīvabhūtāṁ mahābāho yayedam dhāryate jagat*

In simple terms Krishna suggests that the entire world of things that are visible to us or available to us through any of the sense organs and our own experiences arising out of

our actions are nothing but the “relative” aspect of the divine nature but all these are supported by the “unknown” large force which is the absolute form of divine nature. This unknown force is what we call as divine force in our common parlance and attribute many events to this.

Beginning a journey of self-inquiry

This two fold definition of divine nature challenges our understanding of nature and encourages us to contemplate deep on certain aspects that we assume in life. First is that the world of reality is nothing but the relative aspect of divine nature. If we contemplate on this idea, the fallout will be that abusing nature the way we currently do, borrowing ideas and practices from some western societies will be hard to follow. Pollution and environmental degradation will become a thing of past. Instead, we will develop a sense of reverence towards nature.

Since the absolute nature lends support to the relative nature, we will see a gradual shift towards understanding the absolute. Several other questions follow. Relativity of the nature introduces a sense of impermanence while the absolute is permanent. What is the nature of impermanence? Why is this required and what happens after this? Will the universe dissolve forever or will it be re-created? This also leads us to the current scientific quest relating to the origin of the universe. While contemplating all these issues, it becomes inevitable to ask the question, “Where are we in this whole game?”

Whether we get the right answers or not, by mere contemplation of these aspects, we will be on our way to understand our own nature and its relationship to the divine nature, which is omnipresent. Perhaps this is where Sri Krishna wants us to begin our journey of understanding “who am I?” and “How am I connected to the rest of the Universe?”