

Echoes of *Bhagavad-gītā* in Maharshi Ramana's Poetry: An Answer to the Dilemma of Human Identity

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Abstract

Human identity is a complex phenomenon as we know it—in the form of human body with all its physical aspects. Hardly do we know its spiritual aspects as they are abstract domains. Bhagavad-gītā steps into all these domains and makes explicit the way to live in this world. Bhagavad-gītā is not only a discourse of spiritual awakening for Arjuna who stood dejected in the battlefield pondering on killing his relatives, but also a universal guide to all the generations facing dilemma. Sri Krishna reveals the distinct differences between the physical body which is perishable and the immortal soul which is eternal. He gives us the precise knowledge of the individual consciousness a man has about his body and the ultimate consciousness he should have about his soul. His poetry is replete with the echoes of Bhagavad-gītā which enables man to solve the dilemma of human identity. Directed towards the removal of the delusion in human mind, his poetry helps man to alleviate his mental sufferings. The paper discusses the predicament of the modern man with regards to his identity, seeks resolutions through the

echoes of Bhagavad-gītā in Maharshi Ramana's poetry and finds them socially relevant in the modern age.

Key Words: *human identity, dilemma, Bhagavad-gītā, spiritual concerns, Maharshi's poetry.*

Introduction

Human identity is a complex phenomenon. Caught between time and space, man finds himself to be finite. Body becomes his emblem of an individual consciousness of himself with which he associates his name, rank and status. His identity as a physical body leads him to a consciousness as a separate individual. Man's physical boundaries as a finite entity make him experience the pain, struggle and difficulties of this world. The fear of loss, abandonment and death creates a dilemma between his identity as a body and the inevitability of an end he has to face. Despite all his efforts to prove himself in the world, he lives in constant apprehension of losing all he has. His emotions of fear, anger, guilt and grief make him vulnerable to the problems of external world. The emotional upheavals "*Krodhā*" "*sammohaḥ*", "*smṛti-vibhramaḥ*" and "*buddhi-nāśaḥ*" — anger, delusion, loss of memory and intelligence lead man to material pool (*Bhagavad-gītā* 2.63). Human identity is not fathomed by mind or intellect. If the mind is irresolute, it loses itself in different directions which Maharishi Ramana calls "the srtrumpet mind"(The. Collected Works 83). The need for mind is to cross the jungle of delusion "*yadā te moha-kalilam buddhir vyatitariṣyati*" (*Bhagavad-Gītā* 2.52). Thus, man does not understand his identity in terms of who he is but what he perceives himself to be in the eyes of the world. He spends his whole life in telling people who he is without knowing it himself. Sri Krishna advised Arjuna to seek it only within own self.

Maharshi Ramana, a Saint- Poet addressed the significant question of identity. He was a sage who realized the Self which is manifested in all the creatures of the world. Immersed in this resplendent bliss of knowledge, he made no theoretical propositions but taught the willing seekers a practical way of life. The present paper is an attempt to unfold the valuable lessons of the seminal scripture known as *Bhagavad-Gītā* as perceived in Maharshi's poetry . Born in a South Indian village of Tiruchuzi on 30th December 1879 to an uncertified pleader Sundaram Aiyar and Alaggmal, a housewife, Maharshi Ramana was brought up by his mother and uncles as his father died when he was only twelve. Indifferent to his studies, he did not show any inclination towards spirituality during that period. Another remarkable incident changed the course of his life. In 1895 he heard about

Arunachala from an old couple and felt an inexplicable ecstasy. The hill in South India became a permanent abode for him later on. In July 1896, he had a feeling of impending death which gave rise to many questions regarding dilemma of human life. The eternal truth stated by Sri Krishna (*Bhagvad-gītā* 2.20) that the spirit neither takes birth nor dies— being imperishable “*na jāyate na mriyate vā kadācin*”, it is not killed when body is killed “ *na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre*” , dawned on him quite early and remained with him throughout his life. He realized that the spirit transcends and it is the body which dies.

Maharshi Ramana had a very inquisitive soul as a child. Consequently, he asked two universal questions in his adolescence which are also concurrent in *Bhagavad-gītā* —“Who am I?” and “How can I lead a happy and peaceful life”. Maharshi found the answers and documented them in his verse and prose works . He translated and adapted the essence of *Bhagvad-gītā* in “The Song Celestial”. Other sacred texts like the *Agama-s*, *Upa-Agama-s* and Sankaracharya’s writings have also a discernible bearing on his prose works namely “Self-enquiry”, “Who am I?” and “Spiritual Instruction” and his verses—“ *Five Hymns to Arunachala*”, “*The Essence of Instruction*”, “*Reality in Forty Verses*”, “*Five Verses on the Self*” and some miscellaneous poems like “ *The Song of Poppadum*”, “ *Self Knowledge*”, and “*The Self in the Heart*”. The journey of ‘I’, the body, to ‘I’, the realized Self, was certainly as arduous for Arjuna as it is for the present generation. Sri Sadhu Om traces a similarity between the path of Sri Krishna and Maharshi and comments, “The Teacher, the Man, Krishna the Beloved God and Sri Ramana the Guru do not belong to a particular creed, but are universal.” (xii) Maharshi’s poetry enables man to free himself from the struggles and sorrows of the world. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan in a foreword to Arthur Osborne’s *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge* sums up that Maharshi’s teaching has:

a special relevance to our age with its dominant mood of wistful reluctant skepticism. We are given here a religion of the spirit which enables us to liberate ourselves from dogmas and superstitions, rituals and ceremonies and live as free spirits. The essence of all religion is an inner personal experience, an individual relationship with the Divine. It is not worship so much as a quest. It is a way of becoming, of liberation (vi).

The present paper discusses the way of liberation in the light of three larger poems of Maharshi namely: “*The Essence of Instruction* (*Upadeśa Sāram*), “*Reality in Forty Verses*” (*Ulladu Narpadu*) and “*Five Verses on Self*”(*Ekatmā Panchakam*). These verses suggest that among all the paths to liberation, self –

enquiry is the best. It also forms the crux of Maharshi's philosophy. "*The Essence of Instruction*" is treated like a scripture and is recited in Sriramanasramam even till date. "*Reality in Forty Verses*" is another composition of Maharshi which is the most comprehensive exposition of his teachings. "*Five Verses on Self*" are among the last verses of Maharshi. Only those verses from *The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi* have been selected for the purpose of study in the present paper whose authorship is ascribed to Maharshi.

Maharshi's Philosophy

His poems reveal the misery man is caught in and also reveal the means to attain that state of eternal bliss. Maharshi in his prose work "Who am I?" observes that there is no happiness in any object of the world. Mind is the cause of all actions and cognition; therefore it searches happiness in the world outside. If the world outside could provide happiness, man's happiness would increase with the increase in worldly possessions. In reality it is just the opposite. In deep sleep man is devoid of all possessions, still he feels happy. Happiness is inherent in man and is not dependent on anything outside. If he unties this knot of ignorance, he opens a store of unalloyed happiness (Godman 17).

How to open that storehouse of infinite happiness—is a question that has baffled humanity in large measure. The answer to the question is as simple. Happiness is very much within our own selves. We have imposed limitations on the true nature of infinite being and lament. It is only when we realize our existence as infinite pure being that we gain eternal happiness. An ignorant man thinks that he is in bondage whereas a wise man knows that he is free. These thoughts put so many sheaths on the Self. Once man removes these sheaths, he is eternally happy. Since body associates itself with ego, ignorance, unreality and bondage, it becomes a source of continual misery. Maharshi said, "The cause of your misery is not in the life outside you, it is in you as the ego. You impose limitations on yourself and then make a vain struggle to transcend them. (Godman 209)

Maharshi solves the riddle of suffering and asks man to look within for solutions. Sri Krishna suggests to inculcate "*Nirmāna-mohā*"—without false prestige and illusion, "*jita-saṅga-dosā*"—having conquered false association and "*dvandair vimuktāḥ*"—free from dualities. as the way out of this dilemma. The search in the world outside is endless as it does not stop anywhere. Sense organs take one to hear, touch, see, taste and smell which apprehend their respective objects of the world through sound, touch, colour, taste and odour. Maharshi vehemently rejects the view when man accepts this gross body composed of

dhātus- seven humors responsible for happiness and misery. The ultimate source of happiness is a state of *sat-cit-ānanda* –being-consciousness-bliss. The direct experience of this consciousness is a state of unbroken happiness. Maharshi used various terms for this awareness—God, Self, Heart and *Jñāna*.. In a reply to Maurice Frydman quoted in December 2011 issue of *Sarangathi*—e-newsletter from Sriramanasramam, Maharshi speaks of the heart as the seat of Consciousness and identical with the Self, “The question about the heart arises because you are interested in seeking the source of consciousness. To all deep-thinking minds, the enquiry about the ‘I’ and its nature has an irresistible fascination. Call it by any name, God, Self, the heart or the seat of one’s being, the Centre, without which there is nothing whatsoever “(4)..

He gave the characteristics of Self as non-attachment, purity and liberation. Man sees duality because he is attached. This gives rise to the recognition of things as ‘mine’, ‘yours’ and ‘his’ and is the root cause of all misery. The non-attachment will not only bring an eternal state of bliss but also stability. The Self is eternal state of pure consciousness. Only purity will bring and keep him in that state. Maharshi did not mean the ritualistic purity of body as it causes bondage. Maharshi was himself completely oblivious of the same. Man needs to realize the inner truths in modern age. *Avidyā* --nescience, *ahankāra* --egoity, *mala*—impurity, *tārabodham*—self-conceit and *māya*—illusion arise in respect of body. Mind in this body is the source of all thoughts. As long as mind projects it into world outside, it will remain entangled in it. The Self appears only when mind resolves into itself. The Self will shine as Siva or God. Sri Krishna tells Arjuna about the Supreme Godhead alive in the heart of every living entity. Only saintly persons, who can see within and without the same Supreme Lord, can attain the perfect peace.

Na tv evāhaṁ jātū nāsaṁ

Na tvaṁ neme janādhipāḥ

Na caiva na bhaviṣyāmaḥ

Sarve vayam ataḥ param (2.12).

Sri Krishna tells Arjuna that all of them including God himself existed in the past and would continue to do so in future. He refers to eternity of soul transcending time and space.

How to achieve this truth or state of Self—is a question at the heart of human identity. The mind gives rise to many doubts and questions like the waves of ocean when one starts self-enquiry. One has to turn to the source from where the

thoughts arise. Gross body appears because of the gross world. Maharshi quotes from *Yoga Sutras*(1: 37) of Patanjali the characteristics that distinguish a realized soul from a man of the world. “Friendship, kindness, happiness and other *bhāvas* (attitudes) become natural to them. Affection towards the good, kindness towards the helpless, happiness in doing good deeds, forgiveness towards the wicked, all such things are natural characteristics of the *Jñāni*” (Godman 41).

Thus a man who realizes the Self acts for others with detachment and is not affected by these actions. Such a man finds his identity not for himself, for he does not need to do so. Maharshi asks man to detach himself from all such actions as they bring ego. The action also implants seeds for other actions which may give birth to more actions endlessly. Thus he finds himself submerged in the ocean of the world. In verse 17 of “*Reality in Forty Verses: Supplement*”, Maharshi says, “While God sustains the burden of the world, the spurious ego assumes its burden grimacing like an image on a tower seeming to support it. If the traveler in a carriage which can carry any weight does not lay his luggage down but carries it painfully on his head, whose is the fault? (Collected Works 171)

Maharshi further explained in Arthur Osborne’s *Ramanamaharshi and the Path of Self-knowledge* that it was possible to perform all the activities of life with detachment. It is wrong to suppose that if one is fixed in the Self, one’s duties in life will not be properly performed. Man is like an actor. He dresses and acts and even feels the part he is playing, but he knows really that he is someone else in real life. Nothing that the body does should shake one from abidance in the Self. Such abidance will never interfere with the proper and effective discharge of duties the body has. As he is aware of his real status, it never interferes with his acting on the stage (78)..

In Self-enquiry, Maharshi himself refers to this resplendent bliss “In the city with nine gates which is the body, the Wise one resides with ease.”(Collected Works 25) Sri Krishna has already stated in Bhagvad-gītā that one who controls his mind can live happily in the material body which has nine gates “*nava dvāre pure dehī /naiva kurvam na karayan*” (5.13). The fact stated by Sri Krishna was realized by Maharshi at an early age that spirit transcends the body and never gave way to any disturbing thoughts.

The next section shows this philosophy of existence in Maharishi’s poetry. This brings us to some basic assumptions of Maharishi Ramana’s philosophy. God is eternal, immanent, formless, and pure consciousness. Sri Krishna says that God is “*avibhaktam*”(which cannot be divided) yet appears divided in all the creatures (

13.17), This is because of the finite boundaries of bodies of individuals. God is “*avyaya*”—indestructible(13.32). Man has an illusion that he has his own individuality. Therefore he does not identify himself with God. Once his illusion is dispelled, what remains is God. Man feels his separate identity because of ego-self. Real Self is unchanging, eternal and pure. Thus individuality in terms of existence is not a manifestation of God. It appears so because of body.

Maharshi's Poetry

Woven around two main ideas of body and Self, Maharshi's poetry avers that human body is subject to the process of change and decay. Hence body is not the seat of consciousness as it was not there before birth and becomes a corpse after death. All the senses and the objects of senses are associated with body. Hence man attaches himself with body as he thinks himself to be the doer of actions. Eventually it leads man to the material pool of the world

The other idea which formulates Maharshi's philosophy is that it is in the body we can attain liberation in true sense. One who controls his mind liberates himself from cycle of death and birth. The ideas in Bhagavad Gīta echo in Maharshi Ramana's poetry. He raises question “Who am I?” and answers in “Spiritual Instruction” that “Self-enquiry” is the only way to solve the riddle of human identity.

Echoes of Bhagvad-gīta in Maharshi's poetry give practical solutions to the question of identity. “Reality in Forty Verses”, “Five Verses on the Self” and “Self-Knowledge” are philosophical yet present practical solutions. The thought that one is a body carries many perceptions. It gives man a name to get recognized in the world. It gives him a status to enjoy a certain hierarchy in society. It confers fame to become well known. Prone to the unpredictable changes of the world man enjoys a happiness which he thinks would last forever. Reality is quite contrary. If body was the reality, where does it go after death? Body has neither been true identity of man nor would be. It is the soul which is *nityah*—eternal and *śaśvataḥ*--permanent (*Bhagvad-gīta* 2.20).

The world is bound to change. Every state, phenomenon, occurrence and entity is subject to transformation. Life ends in death, creation is destroyed, whatever comes goes; even time has its phases—past and present. Although man's intellect has played wonders with all its marvelous and myriad discoveries even in space, the discoveries are continuously being replaced with new ones. What is the ultimate source of happiness in this transient world? It is the Self—unchanging and luminous. The question is how to realize Self? There is a single

immanent reality to be experienced directly. The Self is the source, substance and the real nature of everything. A person who sees Self accompanying all bodies is a real seer.

*amañ sarveṣu bhūteṣu
tiṣṭhantañ paramaśvaram
vinaśyatsv avinaśyantañ
yaḥ paśyati sa paśyati* (13.28).

David Godman quotes Maharshi's benedictory verse from "Reality in Forty Verses":

That in which all these worlds seem to exist steadily, that of which all these worlds are a possession, that from which all these exist, that by which all these worlds rise, that for which all these exist, that by which all these worlds come into existence and that which is indeed all these—that alone is the existing reality (7).

It is not an experience of individuality but a non-personal, all-inclusive awareness. The state thus realized is of unbroken transcendental happiness. "*Antvant ime dehā*", the physical body has to come to an end, says Sri Krishna (2.18).

"The Essence of Instruction"

"The Essence of Instruction" begins with the idea that action yields fruit but leaves behind the seed of another action. One action follows another into an endless ocean of world and leads man to misery. Maharshi's suggestion is neither to abandon action altogether nor to get entangled in it and seek its fruits.

Disinterested action

Surrendered to the Lord

Purifies the mind and points

The way to *Moksha*. (Collected Works 109)

"*Karmanyavādhikā raste māfaleshu kadāchan*" means that man has a right to act but has no right on its fruits. says Sri Krishna (2.47). Do actions with equanimity and without a desire for success or defeat "*yoga-sthaḥ kuru karmāṇi sañgañ tyaktavā*" (2.48). Maharshi says that a person who makes his mind to stay in the Self renders himself indifferent to empirical matters when he thinks, acts or speaks as he is neither agent nor enjoyer of the action. The actions should not constitute bondage. Sri Krishna says:

Yoga – sannayasta-karmāṇam

Jñāna-sañchinna-saṁśayam

ātmavantarṁ na karmāṇi.

nibadhnanti dhañajaya. (4. 41)

A person is said to be situated in Self who acts in devotional service, renounces the fruits of his actions, has his doubts destroyed by transcendental knowledge and is not bound by the reactions of work. Maharshi also concedes that the sensory pleasures and pains do not affect a person when the mind becomes quiescent (The Collected Works 13).

Worship , praise and meditation are all works of body, speech and mind. All of them are required for ascent into spiritual world but do not take one to the ultimate goal of consciousness. Breath-control is also helpful to control mind in the way a bird is caught in a net. Still it is in bondage .Mind and breath are two branches which come from a single root—‘I’ thought. If one meditates with single-minded devotion, all thoughts in the mind will disappear.

It is true wisdom

For the mind to turn away

From outer objects and behold

And hold its effulgent form.(The Collected Works: 111

Meditation of mind by holding ‘I’ the Self within ‘I’ the body is the noblest of all,says:

Maharshi

Better than spells of meditation

Is one continuous current,

Steady as a stream ,

Or downward flow of oil (Collected Works 110).

The two metaphors ‘current of a stream’ and ‘downward flow of oil’ suggest the way to concentrate on ‘I’ thought. A mind concentrates on ‘I’ the Self like the current of a stream flowing continuously. Oil flows down. Mind also flows down to reach a stage of Self –effulgence. This ultimate goal of human life can release man from bondage of miseries. God is not another being; it is within ‘I’ the body. God remains of the nature of the Self, shining as ‘I’ in the Heart. The universal Self is a supreme consciousness of being one with others and is non-dual. Self itself is the God. The noblest attitude is to hold God as ‘I’ within ‘I’. Maharshi counts three

things essential for this kind of practice: to abide in pure being, to transcend thought through intense love and to absorb in the heart of being (The Collected Works 110). These assertions may sound abstract and vague but they are simple to follow as is made clear in the next part of the paper.

“Reality in Forty Verses”

“Reality in Forty Verses” carries forward the essence of instruction. It expands the concept of reality in spiritual terms. We all know reality to be the pictures of names and forms as they appear in the world. The plurality of the world appears in three entities of Individual, God and World. One has to lose ‘I’ into ‘Self’ which is infinite. After this realization the plurality disappears and one gains knowledge of Absolute .Self the Awareness is the basic matter of which all other things are the offshoots. Bodies are caught in time and space. As long as ‘I’ lives in body, it will die. The Self is beyond death. This ‘I’ shines boundless. One has to turn within and merge in the Lord. It is His light which shines within the mind and also imparts its light to all objects. Maharshi says that mind borrows light from the source God –the Light of Lights. Maharshi enumerates qualities which lead the mind to Self-realization.. These are –charity , penance, sacrifice, devotion, reality, peace, truth, grace, silence, stability, knowledge, renunciation, liberation and bliss.

The next few stanzas of this verse describe ego like a ghost which thrives on other forms. It consumes that form. The source of ego is also deep down within oneself. With the search of ego and its source, ‘I’ as Self appears and ego disappears. All forms of plurality in the world appear because of illusion or *maya*. Maharshi asks to remove this veil of illusion so as to avoid swaying in numerous directions. Renounce that state, urges Maharishi. Man will ever abide in the liberated Self. Maharshi calls this state as *Swarupa nishta*.

Three humorous and interesting similes mark the deep philosophy of Maharshi. Man, who does not realize his own energy of Self, is a cripple who asks his friends to raise him so that he could fight with enemies. Maharshi makes fun of ego which grimaces like an image on a tower thinking that it supports the tower. The traveler in a carriage can lay his luggage down but carries it painfully on head. It is his ignorance which keeps him away from keeping the burden down. Hardly does he realize that the God carries the burden of the world. This is a valuable lesson for modern man. He carries the burden of worries without realizing that he is a mere instrument. He needs to perform all actions dispassionately and with an attitude of indifference. Once that stage is attained, all worries will disappear.

“Five Verses on the Self”

Maharishi composed this verse on the request of a devotee Suri Nagamma. These are five verses on Self-realization. The first stanza is on the recurring theme of ‘I’ as body and ‘I’ as Self. As long as one thinks himself to be body, he goes through the cycle of innumerable births till he realizes that he is a ‘Self’. This state can be compared to a person who suddenly wakes up from a dream in which he wanders throughout the world. This state of Self –realization can be compared to waking up from a sleep full of dreams.

Maharshi further compares the enquiry of “Who am I?” to a drunken man’s enquiry who has forgotten his whereabouts in a stupor. In another simile Maharshi compares this idea to the idea of a spectator who supposes that the screen on which a picture is shown is within the picture. Hardly does he realize that the picture is not real but the screen is tangible. In the next verse Maharshi makes use of a metaphor of gold. The ornaments exist because of gold. It is the ingredient of which they are made. Similarly Self is the matter of which bodies are made not otherwise. Body cannot exist without Self. We come to certain predominant assumptions which represent a clear, direct and practical path to the seekers of truth. *Bhakti* (devotion) or *Jñāna* (knowledge) whichever path one may seek to follow, the destination of Self-enquiry is within reach of man. Maharshi main assertions are:

1. Self is not body consciousness. It is Self-effulgent and is known by being-consciousness-bliss.
2. The bodily limitations on the Being cause bondage, the Self brings liberation.
3. Self is Brahman infinite and therefore untouched by hunger, thirst, sorrow, delusion, old age and death.
4. Self is eternal, formless, pure and without parts.
5. Self is beyond time and space. Therefore the body is in the Self not otherwise.
6. Body is overpowered by mental states and is therefore a cause of misery. It submerges one in the sense enjoyments leading to bondage by ego.

Relevance of Maharshi’s Ramana’s poetry in modern age

An important question that comes to mind is –whether Maharishi Ramana’s poetry is an answer to the question of human identity. The answer to this questions is in positive. Almost all of his poetry is an expression of a journey of ‘I’ the body to ‘I’ the Self. Maharshi suggested two ways to attain knowledge which Sri Krishna has already explained in sloka 3.3 in Bhagavad Gīta. A section of people try to realize Self by *Jñāna mārga*—path of devotion whereas others follow *bhakti mārga*--path of knowledge. The first removes the misperception that the Self is

limited to body and the mind. The second removes the delusion that one is an individual person inhabiting a particular body. Both bring a conscious and permanent awareness of Self and remove miseries. Maharishi himself followed all these ideas in his life. *Visuddhya yukto* ---being purified by intelligence, *atmanam niyama*—self regulated, *visayan tyaktva*—giving up sense objects, *raga dvesa vyudasya*—laying aside attachment and hatred, *yata vak*—control of speech—are some of the measures suggested by Sri Krishna.(18. 51-53) . Maharshi suggests “Without thinking of oneself as apart from others, without swerving from one’s true state, if one abides always in one’s Self, who is there alien to one?” (The Collected Works: 129)

This is indeed a message to all the struggling souls of humanity to open the door which he has closed on him. It is a treasure house of contentment, peace and happiness. Maharshi says that subject, object and perception seem to be separate entities. One who does is the subject, agent or doer, for whom it is done is the receiver or object and perception observes all this. What man fails to notice is that Self or God prevails infinitely in all these.

Man has to eliminate the body, intellect and probe deeply into his real Self which illuminates all the three to find his identity. The riddle of identity is easy to solve, but the efforts have to be made, inclination has to be there and desire to reach destination of Self has to be inculcated.. This destination of Self is reachable and viable. Losing his real identity has cost man heavily in terms of happiness, peace and contentment. Finding his identity in his real Self would restore his pristine Self and Self-effulgence. The simple measures accessible to mankind can help solve the other broader conflicts of the human race. We are all human souls with a Super-soul existing within , the only need is to realize this eternal truth. We may belong to different countries, follow different religions and observe different rituals and hence call ourselves Hindus, Muslims or Chritians; but Super-soul, God or Self which prevails in each of us is the same. This and nothing else is our true identity.

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