

philosophical and spiritual poem. It is a dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, just before the beginning of the great *Mahābhārata* war, and is a part of the Bhīṣma Parva of the *Mahābhārata*. The *Gītā* is incorporated in the *Mahābhārata* primarily to give an integrated view of dharma) too speaks of the cutting down of this tree again and again. But how should one chop down the imperishable tree and why? Kṛṣṇa, who descends into the cycle of cosmic history to assist Man in his struggle against the forces of evil, is the root of this tree. In other words, this eternal tree presided over by Kṛṣṇa is a means of livelihood to all creatures. (*Bhagavad Gītā*: II.9). But this is a different type of creation tree. It invites one to “accept it” but expects one not to get tied to any of its part. The tree seems to ask one to see it, understand it, taste its fruit, rest in its shade, and then get up and leave. Knowledge should not become a burden inside one’s mind; knowledge should be the source of movement. In knowledge there is no movement. Movement is in the person. Knowledge tells one how to map one’s action. The one to carry out the mapped actions is the person. One will have to cross the worldly life and renounce it so that the self may go beyond self. It is only possible if one follows the path of dharma and knows the true nature of dharma. Hence, it is said that one needs the sharp edge of detachment to chop down the tree and reach paramārtha, the ultimate destination of the journey of life.

Coomaraswamy (1934:6) gives an excellent explanation of this metaphor of chopping down the imperishable tree. He says that to have felled the tree at the root is to have reached its top and taken wings; to have become the light itself which shines, and not merely one of its reflections. This mythical design with its many complicated facets explains the principle that true knowledge of an object is not obtained by mere empirical observation or reflex registration. It is only when the knower and the known, the seer and the seen meet in an act which Coomaraswamy (ibid.: 36) calls *ananyor advaita* (transcending distinctions), that true knowledge may be attained.

Dharma is the nucleus which also serves as a string holding together numberless legends, episodes, discussions and dialectic portions of the *Mahābhārata*. It is one of the most important socio-ethical concepts which is explained and discussed on various levels by Vyāsa. The most crucial issue of *Mahābhārata* is to understand what dharma is and the issue comes into focus at the very beginning of the epic in the episode of *dyūta*, or the gambling tournament.

The whole story rests on the game of dice, and the humiliation of the wife of the five Pāṇḍavas, Draupadī. In the open court of the Kauravas Duśśāsana tries to disrobe her after she was put at stake by the Pāṇḍava, Yudhiṣṭhir. When Yudhiṣṭhir lost, he gave the Kauravas the right over her. At that time she cries out (*Mahābhārata*, Dyutaparva: chap. XLVI-LXXIII):

- ‘This is monstrous! Where has *dharma* (morality) gone? Or else how can you all be looking so passively at this atrocity?’