

Measuring progress in one's life¹

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It is a common and a fair expectation for every individual to aspire to progress in life, find methods by which he/she can measure the progress and take concerted steps to indeed make progress along the expected lines. A child wants to progress and perhaps the context is learning more things about life. Similarly, a student wants to get more qualified, get better marks etc. These are transient aspects of one's life and these measures of progress are fine. The moot question is what do you mean by progress in one's life? By this I mean a more long term understanding of the notion of progress in one's own life. A correct understanding of this aspect of life is crucial to every one of us. It is the sole basis on which we either become agitated about our life or feel so elated that we are indeed progressing. Therefore, a misplaced notion of progress in one's life can lead us to a dead end. On the other hand, even when we are supposed to be progressing we may be morally down thinking we are not leading a worthwhile life. Let us understand this aspect from the perspective of *Gītā*.

Measures of progress

In today's era of rapid economic growth a vast majority of the society seems to have an unambiguous understanding of the word "progress". Intellectuals, think tanks, prominent citizens, policy makers and opinion makers have all rallied around materialistic aspects of life to define and measure growth. For example, more passenger cars on the road (leading to gridlocks, congestions and parking problems) is a good sign of progress of the society. More apartments, shopping malls, more salary (leading to better buying power which triggers inflationary trends in the economy) are several other examples of progress of the society. Therefore, individuals' opinions and ideas about what progress means are shaped by these and are not in variance with these ideas.

Ask an average citizen about what his/her understanding of progress in life means. You will get a variety of interesting answers to the question. For some progress in life is a function of the size of the bank balance. For some others it is the value of assets he/she possesses. Some believe that owning a prime property in a good locality in a big city such as Bangalore is a measure of progress. Working professionals consider the rate at which they get promotions in their job as a measure of progress. A few others measure progress by the number of apartments, farm houses, club house memberships, holiday time share properties etc. as measures of progress. No matter how you construct this list, the common thread to these measures is the quantum of material wealth that one can accumulate in one's life.

Once the measure of progress is identified it becomes a rat race to achieve this. Earlier we achieve the better because we can shift the goal post and move even higher in our journey (modern management uses a term stretch goal). This also becomes the sole basis to decide

¹ Mahadevan, B. (2012). "Gita Way of Life: Measuring Progress in One's Life", *Sadguru's Blessings*, Vol. 9 (5), January, 2012, pp 16 – 17.

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whether we are happy in life or otherwise. Our inability to achieve the desired speed of progress makes us feel that we are a less fortunate person in life. We start thinking that we are worthless, develop some sense of being defeated in life, become demoralized and develop mental stress leading to chronic diseases such as hyper-tension and diabetes. On the other hand, if we achieve the goal faster than expected we stretch the goal in our journey to reach higher levels of progress and work harder. Life will soon become a formula one car race and we are stressed in life. We again find ourselves in the trap of chronic diseases. In both these situations our definition of progress and means of achieving them will only increase the agitations in our mind.

The question, therefore, in front of us is how to escape this vicious cycle? Is there an issue with our measure of progress in our life? Are there alternative measures for progress in life? We shall look at *Gītā* for some ideas on this.

An alternative measure for progress

Lord Krishna provides a different dimension to this issue. According to Him, progress is a matter of increasing the inner peace and not the agitations of the mind. Fixing goals pertaining to the *outside world* of material objects always runs the risk of failures arising out of not attaining them. On the other hand, setting goals pertaining to the *inner self* does not have these risks. He encourages us to get inspired by the greatness of the ocean.

आपूर्यमाणमचलप्रतिष्ठं समुद्रमापः प्रविशन्ति यद्वत् ।
तद्वत्कामा यं प्रविशन्ति सर्वे स शान्तिमाप्नोति न कामकामी ॥ 2.70

*āpūryamāṇam-acalapratiṣṭham samudramāpaḥ praviśanti yadvat
tadvat-kāmā yam praviśanti sarve sa śāntim-āpnoti na kāmakāmī*

Even when the greatest of the rivers such as Ganga and Brahmaputra empty their water into the ocean the ocean is motionless. This is because the ocean is already an embodiment of fullness. Therefore, external events do not seem to affect much on matters pertaining to passing a judgement on its performance or progress. Lord Krishna suggests that in a similar fashion if we engage in the world and consume our material desires and wants then we will get peace. Reaching this state is the ultimate measure of progress for an individual in one's own life.

Aspiring for the state of fullness

The message from Lord Krishna is crisp and crystal clear. Can we make efforts in our life to reach a mental state of fullness that is independent of the endowment of material benefits and wealth that we actually possess in our life? This is a lifetime goal for every individual and we need to make concerted efforts to reach this state. It will require a number of years for us to contemplate on this idea. Once we develop some clarity of thought about this, we need to adjust our behavioural patterns to emerging situations in our own life. First few

years of this practice is quite challenging as we ourselves will not develop conviction about this. There will be pressures from family, friends and peers.

In short we need to practice a way of life which amounts to active *physical engagement* in the world of activities and an *emotional disengagement*. It is a difficult task, however worth the effort as we want to emulate the behavior of a great ocean. Once we become steadfast in this idea, the divine grace will follow.