

ŚRĪMADBHAGAVADGĪTĀ INTERPRETATION SUMMARY

Chapter 17: Śraddhā-Traya-Vibhāga-Yoga

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YouTube Link: <https://youtu.be/sfjyv6IIRL8>

“Bhagavān's Insights on Devotion & Nourishment Based on Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas”

The **seventeenth chapter** of Srimad Bhagavadgītā is called '**Śraddhā Traya Vibhāga Yoga - The Yoga of The Threefold Division of Faith.**'

The session began after the lighting of lamps and prayers.

What is Śraddhā?

In this chapter, Bhagavān introduces the concept of śraddhā, which translates to faith. It serves as the essential element on the spiritual journey.

For instance, consider a mathematics class where the teacher states, "Let $x = y$." At that moment, we may not know the actual value of x . However, we place our trust in the teacher's statement, accept $x = y$, and proceed to solve the equation. Gradually, by adhering to the rules, we uncover the true value of x . In a similar vein, on our spiritual path, we start by trusting the guidance of our Guru and the wisdom contained in the scriptures. Initially, we may lack direct experience of the Self (Atma), liberation (Moksha), or the Supreme Soul (Paramātmā), yet we have faith in their existence. This foundational act of trust is what we refer to as śraddhā. Without it, embarking on the journey becomes impossible.

Definition of Śraddhā

According to Vedānta, it is stated: **guru padistha vedanta vakyeshu vishwasah shraddha**, which means faith in the words of the Guru embodies śraddhā.

The Veda is regarded as the ultimate source of knowledge, with its essence known as Vedanta.

The three fundamental texts of Vedanta:

- **Brahmāsutras**

- **Upanishads**
- **Bhagavad Gītā**

offer the core insights into this truth. By placing our faith in these scriptures and in the teacher who elucidates them, we prepare ourselves to absorb this profound wisdom.

The Vedas are regarded as the ultimate source of wisdom, with the essence of the Vedas being Vedanta. Without faith in Bhagavān, our guru, and our scriptures, we face destruction (vinashyati). Bhagavān has stated that **samshayatma vinashyati**. However, this does not imply that we should possess blind faith or accept everything without question.

Faith Versus Blind Belief: It is important to note that shraddha does not advocate for blind faith. The spiritual inquiry follows a defined process:

- **Shravana:** Initially, we listen to the teachings with an open heart.
- **Manana:** Subsequently, we contemplate what we have learned, encouraged to question and seek logical clarity to dispel any uncertainties. This phase involves intellectual understanding.
- **Nididhyasan:** Ultimately, we meditate on the knowledge, internalizing it and weaving it into our thoughts and actions.

This three-step approach guarantees that faith evolves from a mere belief into a solid, realized conviction.

The Significance of Śraddhā

In the concluding verse of this chapter, Bhagavān states:

**“Aśraddhayā hutam dattam tapas taptam kṛtam ca yat |
Asat ity ucyate Pārtha na ca tat pretya no iha ||” (17.28)**

Any sacrifice, charity (daan), or austerity (tapa) carried out without faith, O son of Pritha, is deemed asat. It holds no worth, neither in this life nor in the next.

Genuine spiritual advancement and the successful results of our actions can only be achieved when they are anchored in the strong foundation of Shraddha. It serves as the key that opens the door to the ultimate truths.

Key Insight:

Śraddhā is not mere blind faith, but rather the initial step of trust.

It guides us towards inquiry, comprehension, and ultimately, realization.

In the absence of śraddhā, no action holds significance; with śraddhā, even the tiniest action transforms into something divine.

17.1

**arjuna uvāca
ye śāstravidhimutsṛjya, yajante śraddhayānvitāḥ,
teṣāṃ(n) niṣṭhā tu kā kṛṣṇa, sattvamāho rajastamaḥ. 17.1**

Arjuna said: Those, endowed with faith, who worship gods and others, disregarding the injunctions of

scriptures, where do they stand, Kṛṣṇa,- in Sattva, Rajas or Tamas.

Why Arjuna Raises This Question

This question arises from a specific context: the 16th chapter, titled **Daivāsura Sampad Vibhāga Yoga**. In that chapter, Sri Krishna details the divine (daivi) qualities and the demonic (asuri) qualities, ultimately concluding that the scriptures (**shastras**) are the final authority.

In the last verse of the 16th chapter, Krishna says:

***tasmāc chāstram pramāṇam te kāryākārya-vyavasthitau
jñātvā śāstra-vidhānoktaṁ karma kartum ihārhasi || 16.24 ||***

Therefore, let the scriptures be your authority in determining what ought to be done and what ought not to be done.

This declaration places the shastras as the ultimate evidence (**pramana**) for all actions. However, Arjuna, speaking on behalf of all of us, recognizes a practical problem.

The Genuine Dilemma

Now, Arjuna raises a very practical question: what about those who don't follow the ordinances of the shastras? He is not asking about those with malicious intent, but about a very specific group of people who **don't know** what the śāstras are, yet, they are performing their actions with **immense faith (shraddha)**. Arjuna then asks Krishna: "O Krishna, for these people, who are filled with faith but do not follow the shastras, what is their status? Are they **Sattvic, Rajasic, or Tamasic?**"

This is a deeply relevant question because many people today face similar challenges. They may be unable to follow the shastras due to several reasons, like **no access** to a Guru or teacher who can explain, or have a teacher, but their **intellect is limited**; they cannot understand fully, sometimes, the texts are available, but **too vast or complex** to follow in detail.

Arjuna understands this common man's struggle. He asks about those who, despite these limitations, perform their duties with pure devotion. For example, a person who reads the Bhagavad Gītā daily with great faith may not be following the exact rituals prescribed in the Puranas or other texts. Such a person, Arjuna suggests, should not be deemed a sinner just because they lack access or knowledge. Their faith itself should be a redeeming factor.

To answer Arjuna's question, Sri Krishna explains the nature of the three **gunas** (qualities) that govern all of existence:

- **Sattva:** Represents goodness, purity, and virtue. It is the quality of serenity, clarity, and higher consciousness.
- **Rajas:** Represents passion, attachment, and restlessness. It drives a person to be overactive, aggressive, and constantly seeking material gains.
- **Tamas:** Represents inertia, ignorance, and delusion. It is the state of mind where one is unable to distinguish between right and wrong.

In short, sātṭvika uplifts, rājasa binds through desire and agitation, and āmasa pulls down into delusion and laziness.

By asking whether the person with faith belongs to the **Sattvic, Rajasic, or Tamasic** category, Arjuna is asking Śrī Krishna to define the nature of faith itself when it exists outside the strict framework of scriptural injunctions. The answer to this question will be revealed by Krishna in the verses that follow.

Takeaway: Arjuna's question is universal. He is not asking only for himself, but for all ordinary seekers. When śāstra is hard to follow, but faith inspires action— what is the quality of that faith?

17.2

śrībhagavānuvāca trividhā bhavati śraddhā, dehinām(m) sā svabhāvajā, sāttvikī rājasī caiva, tāmasī ceti tām(m) śrṇu. 17.2

Śrī Bhagavān said :That untutored innate faith of men is of three kinds- Sāttvika, Rājasika and Tāmasika. Hear of it from Me.

Now, building on the previous discussion, Bhagavān provides an answer to Arjuna's question. He begins by making a key distinction: **Shraddha** (faith) belongs not to the body (**deha**) but to the living being (**dehi**), the soul (**jīvatma**) that resides within the body. This faith, he explains, is rooted in one's **Sva-bhāva** (intrinsic nature), and there are three types.

Three Types of Faith

The discourse outlines three sources or types of Shraddha, which can be categorized as follows:

1. **Satsanga-ja Shraddha:** This is faith that arises from association with good company (**satsanga**). When we surround ourselves with people who are devoted to a particular path, like those in the Gita Parivar, their positive energy and shared purpose can inspire a similar faith within us. This type of Shraddha is contagious; it is a faith that develops from the collective consciousness of a group. This can also work in reverse: bad company can lead to a negative form of faith.
2. **Śāstra-ja Shraddha:** This is faith that is born from the study of scriptures (**Śāstras**). As one delves into the Bhagavad Gītā, Upanishads, and other sacred texts, a deeper understanding and conviction can emerge. This faith is a product of knowledge and intellectual inquiry.
3. **Sva-bhāva-ja Shraddha:** This is the most profound type of faith, and it is the one Bhagavan specifically addresses here. **Sva-bhāva-ja** means "born from one's own nature." This faith is not learned or acquired in this lifetime; it is a **tendency or inclination carried over from past lives**. For instance, a child might show an innate interest in spirituality or devotion from a very young age, which is evidence of this type of Shraddha.

Bhagavān then reveals that these three types of Shraddha—which exist within the **sattva**, **rajas**, and **tamas** gunas—determine a person's nature.

The Threefold Division

Sri Krishna says: The faith of the embodied soul is of three kinds, born of one's own nature: sattvic (goodness), rajasic (passion), and tamasic (ignorance). Now hear about them. With this verse, Bhagavān sets the stage for a detailed explanation of how these three types of faith manifest in a person's life, and he will soon reveal the principle by which we can distinguish them.

Takeaways:

- Faith belongs to the *soul*, not the body.
- It may arise from company, scriptures, or past tendencies.
- Ultimately, it reflects the dominance of the three gunas.
- Therefore, the kind of faith we cultivate decides the path we walk.

17.3

sattvānurūpā sarvasya, śraddhā bhavati bhārata, śraddhāmaya'yam(m) puruṣo, yo yacchraddhaḥ(s) sa eva saḥ. 17.3

The faith of all men conforms to their mental disposition, Arjuna. Faith constitutes a man; whatever the nature of his faith, he is verily that.

Bhagavān presents a core idea: **a person's faith (shraddha) is a direct reflection of their inner being (sattva)**. He then says that whatever a person's faith is, that is what they become.

This powerful statement suggests that our faith doesn't just guide our actions; it shapes our very identity. If a person's faith is directed toward acquiring wealth, their thoughts, words, and actions will align with that goal, and they will ultimately become a person driven by material pursuits. If their faith is in goodness, they will think, speak, and act in a **Sattvic** manner and become a virtuous person.

The Four Elements of the Inner Instrument

To understand this concept, we must first understand the "inner being" (**antahkarana**) that determines our nature. The scriptures describe the **antahkarana** as the inner instrument composed of four parts:

1. **Manas (Mind)**: This is the flow of thoughts, the constant stream of desires, doubts, and indecision. It presents different options and possibilities, leading to a state of flux.
2. **Buddhi (Intellect)**: This is the faculty of discrimination and determination. When the mind is presented with various thoughts, the **buddhi** is what makes the final decision, providing clarity and direction.
3. **Chitta (Memory/Consciousness)**: This is the storehouse of all our past impressions, memories, and subconscious tendencies.
4. **Ahankara (Ego)**: This is the sense of "I-ness" or individual identity. It's not pride, but the fundamental feeling of one's own existence.

Relation to Śraddhā: Now Bhagavan says: **according to one's sattva (inner instrument), one's Śraddhā is formed.**

- As our thoughts are, so is our mind.
- As the mind is, so becomes our Śraddhā.
- As the Śraddhā is, so we ourselves become.

If someone's Śraddhā is in wealth, then all his thoughts, speech, and actions will revolve around money. Slowly, he becomes a person shaped by that Śraddhā.

If the Śraddhā is **Rājasic**, thoughts, speech, and actions will be Rajasic.

If the Śraddhā is **Sāttvic**, thoughts, speech, and actions will be Sāttvic.

If the Śraddhā is **Tāmasic**, then the same happens — thoughts, words, and deeds become Tāmasic.

Therefore, **our Śraddhā and our inner instrument (Antahkaraṇa) are deeply connected.**

Takeaway: The teaching becomes clear: **"One is made of one's Śraddhā. As is your Śraddhā, so you are."**

17.4

yajante sāttvikā devān, yakṣarakṣāṃsi rājasāḥ, pretānbhūtagaṇāṃścānye, yajante tāmasā janāḥ. 17.4

Men of Sāttvika disposition worship gods; those of Rājasika temperament worship demigods and demons; while others, who are men of Tāmasika disposition, worship the spirits of dead and ghosts.

The Threefold Division of Worship

Bhagavān now explains how this threefold faith manifests in our worship. Our upasana (worship) is a direct reflection of our inner state.**Sattvic Worship: For the Welfare of All**

Sattvic people have a pure and virtuous nature. They worship the **Devas** (celestial beings or deities). Their worship is selfless and is not driven by selfish motives. While they may still have desires, they are for the well-being of their family, society, and themselves, without harming others. A Sattvic devotee can ask Bhagavān for something, but their prayers are for ethical, beneficial outcomes. They don't seek to accumulate excessively; they simply seek a balanced, fulfilling life.

Rajasic Worship: For Selfish Gains

The **Rajasic** nature is driven by passion and desire. These people have very selfish motives. They'll go to great lengths to get what they want. For example, a student who hasn't studied might want to get 100% on an exam. They know that Śrī Rama or Śrī Krishna, who follow the path of righteousness, wouldn't grant such a selfish wish. Instead, they would turn to **Yakshas** and **Rakshasas** (demi-gods and demons) because these beings have the power to fulfill such desires. Rajasic worship is rooted in a craving for more—more houses, bigger cars, and excessive wealth.

Tamasic Worship: To Cause Harm

Tamasic people are the most dangerous. They worship evil spirits and ghosts. Their rituals are not for personal gain but to **harm and torture others**. They perform dark practices and rituals, such as **Kala Jadoo** (black magic), just to get power over others or to make them suffer. These people, much like demons who destroy sacred rituals and harm saints, find satisfaction in creating fear and chaos. They gain nothing of true value in return for their negative actions.

Takeaway: The type of worship reveals our tendencies.

17.5

aśāstravihitam(ṅ) ghoram(n), tapyante ye tapo janāḥ, dambhāhaṅkārasamyuktāḥ(kh), kāmarāgabalanvitāḥ. 17.5

Men who practice severe penance of an arbitrary type, not sanctioned by scriptures, and who are full of hypocrisy and egotism are obsessed with desire, attachment and pride of power;

The Threefold Division of Austerity is explained in verses 5-6

Bhagavān strongly condemns those who perform severe austerities not prescribed by the scriptures. He says they are motivated by **dambha** (hypocrisy) and **ahankara** (ego), and are driven by selfish desires.

The Motivation Behind Extreme Austerities

Such individuals are not following a **Sattvic** path. Their actions are fueled by three core negative tendencies:

- **Hypocrisy (Dambha):** They want to show off their strength and devotion to others. These people might burn their hand with camphor or endure other forms of pain just to prove they are superior devotees, thinking, "I am the biggest devotee of Bhagavān; you are a mere child in front of me." Dambha (show-off): "Look, I am a great devotee!"
- **Ego (Ahankara):** They are filled with pride and a sense of "I-ness." They believe their extreme acts make them powerful and special, forgetting that true power comes from surrender, not from physical torment.
 - *Ahankāra* (false pride): "I am above all."
- **Desire (Kama) and Attachment (Raga):** They perform these difficult acts to fulfill their excessive desires. They are restless, and their intense cravings push them to do things that are not aligned with a spiritual path. They believe that by performing these rituals, they can get what they want.
 - *Kāma-Rāga* (desires & attachments).

Bhagavan's verdict: such people are **Asuric** (demonic).

17.6

**karśayantaḥ(ś) śarīrasthaṃ(m), bhūtagrāmamacetaḥ,
māṃ(ñ) caivāntaḥ(ś) śarīrasthaṃ(n), tāvīddhyāsuraniścayān. 17.6**

And who emaciate the elements constituting their body as well as Me, the Supreme Spirit, dwelling in their heart- know those senseless people to have a demoniac disposition.

A truly devotional act should never involve harming oneself. The speaker explains that those who perform extremely difficult austerities (**tapas**) do so for misguided reasons, often without scriptural authority. While we may fast or practice a limited form of penance, these individuals engage in severe, self-inflicted pain. They do this because they are driven by a deep sense of restlessness and a desire to gain something extraordinary.

The Demonic Nature of Self-Torture

Bhagavān condemns these actions as demonic. He explains that these people harm their own bodies and sensory organs, which in turn causes pain to Him, as He resides within every living being, in every heart. By torturing the body, they are indirectly torturing Bhagavān Himself. A true devotee would never want to cause Bhagavān any pain. Bhagavān wants devotees who come to Him out of love and devotion, not those who are bleeding and hurting themselves just to prove a point.

Takeaway: True tapa is disciplined, wise self-control done with humility and pure motive — not violent self-torture performed for pride, power, or show.

17.7

**āhārastvapi sarvasya, trividho bhavati priyaḥ,
yajñastapastathā dānaṃ(n), teṣāṃ(m) bhedamimaṃ(m) śṛṇu. 17.7**

Food also, which is agreeable to different men according to their innate disposition is of three kinds. and likewise sacrifice, penance and charity too are of three kinds each; hear their distinction as

follows.

After explaining the three types of **Upasana** (worship), Bhagavan moves on to the next topic in the 17th chapter: **Ahaara**(food).

He introduces this topic by emphasizing the direct connection between the food we eat and our inner nature. The speaker suggests that we should not judge others for their food choices but instead analyze our own. If we are currently consuming Rajasic or Tamasic foods but wish to become more Sattvic, the solution is to consciously choose to eat Sattvic food. By doing so, our mind will slowly transform, and our faith will also become more Sattvic. This is because, as the saying goes, "As we eat, so our mind is developed."

17.8

āyuh(s) sattvabalārogya, sukhapritivivardhanāḥ, rasyāḥ(s) snigdhāḥ(s) sthirā hr̥dyā, āhārāḥ(s) sāttvikapriyāḥ. 17.8

Foods which promote longevity, intelligence, vigor, health, happiness and cheerfulness, and which are juicy, succulent, substantial and naturally agreeable, are liked by men of Sāttvika nature.

The characteristics of sattvik food are

- increased longevity (**ayuh**)
- purity(**sattva**)- our antahkaran will become more pure
- strength(**bala**)
- health (**arogya**)
- happiness (**sukha**)
- cheerfulness (**priti**)

The sattvik foods are

- juicy (**rasya**) - fresh fruits and vegetables which are juicy
- succulent (**snigdhaḥ**) - ghee
- nourishing (**sthira**) - milk, ghee, fresh curd
- naturally agreeable (**hr̥dya**) - natural sweeteners (honey, jaggery), herbal teas

Bhagavān teaches that our diet is not just about physical health; it is a fundamental part of our spiritual journey. The quality of our food directly influences our thoughts, behavior, and overall disposition. Therefore, if we want to cultivate a **Sattvic** mind and become a more **Sattvic** person, we must first change what we put on our plate.

17.9

kaṭvamlalavaṇātyuṣṇa, tikṣṇarūkṣavidāhinaḥ, āhārā rājasasyeṣṭā, duḥkhaśokāmayapradāḥ. 17.9

Foods which are bitter, sour, salty, overhot, pungent, dry and burning, and which cause suffering, grief and sickness, are dear to the Rājasika type of men.

Based on the discourse, **Rajasic** food is defined by its qualities and the effects it has on the mind and body. It's the opposite of Sattvic food, which promotes peace and happiness. Rajasic food makes us agitated, restless, and aggressive.

What is Rajasic Food? Rajasic food includes anything that is excessively: sour, salty, bitter, pungent, dry and hot. While a little bit of these flavors is fine, consuming them in **excessive quantities** is what makes them Rajasic. Examples might include overly spiced dishes, very salty snacks, or extremely acidic foods.

The Effects of Rajasic Food

A Rajasic diet leads to negative outcomes, both mentally and physically. These foods are said to:

- **Increase agitation and restlessness.** They make us easily irritated and prone to shouting or aggression.
- **Cause pain and sorrow.** The speaker mentions the word "duḥkha," which refers to feelings of pain, shock, and sadness.
- **Lead to diseases.** A Rajasic diet can cause various illnesses and ailments in the body.

The discourse also briefly touches on **Tamasic** food, describing it as stale, tasteless, and something that increases laziness and dullness. This provides a clear contrast, showing how food directly influences the three qualities of the mind.

17.10

**yātayāmaṃ(ñ) gatarasaṃ(m), pūti paryuṣitaṃ(ñ) ca yat,
ucchiṣṭamapi cāmedhyaṃ(m), bhojanaṃ(n) tāmasapriyam. 17.10**

Food which is ill-cooked or not fully ripe, insipid, putrid, stale and polluted, and which is impure too, is dear to men of a Tāmasika disposition.

Bhagavān says that **Tamasic** food is defined by its harmful qualities. It includes anything that is **stale, tasteless, putrid, or rotten**. Leftovers from another's plate and overcooked food also fall into this category. The speaker adds that modern examples of Tamasic food are **alcohol, junk food, noodles, and meat**.

Consuming this type of food has very negative effects on the mind and body. It is said to increase **laziness, dullness, and inertia**, making one feel sluggish and unmotivated. The speaker notes that these foods increase our **Tamas** (inertia and ignorance), hindering our spiritual and intellectual progress.

Question and Answers Session

Q1. What should be our first priority — nation, family, or dharma?

Answer: This is subjective. In the ideal stage, like in the life of Shri Rama, the larger community (*samasti*) is given priority over family. In Indian tradition, the welfare of the collective is always considered higher. However, in practical life, circumstances may require compromises.

Q2. Is anyone 100% sāttvic, rājasic, or tāmasic?

Answer: No. Bhagavad Gītā itself says all three guṇas are always present. For example, even tamas (inertia) is necessary for sleep, which is vital for survival. Great personalities are mostly sāt̥tvic, but traces of rajas and tamas remain.

Q3. Śāstras mention six tastes — how do we balance them with sattvic food?

Answer: Bhagavān doesn't prohibit the six tastes. The word "*sītiṣṇa*" (moderation) is key. All tastes can be included, but not in excess.

Q4. Please explain once again the three types of upāsana.

Answer: Worship of devatās → Sāt̥tvic; Worship of yakṣas/rākṣasas for selfish desires → Rājasic; Worship of spirits/black magic at night → Tāmasic

Q5. If someone is born with tamasic tendencies, how can they change?

Answer: By slowly improving daily routines, food habits, and practices. It's a gradual process, but with continuous effort, one can move toward sattva. Perfection (100%) is rare, but even 80–90% sattva is excellent.

Q6. What is the difference between buddhi and chitta?

Answer: Manas (Mind): Flow of thoughts, doubts, options. Buddhi (Intellect): Decision-making faculty. Chitta (Memory): Storehouse of impressions. Ahankār (Ego): Sense of "I" or identity. These are four functions (*antahkaraṇa-vṛtti*) of the same inner instrument.

Q7. Are idlis/tamarind/fermented foods tamasic?

Answer: Not inherently. In normal quantity, they are fine as daily food (especially in South India). Only when excessively spicy, stale, or heavy, they may lean toward tamasic.

Q8. Does the Soul Get Affected by Karma?

Answer: Atma is pure, but due to *dehābhimān* (false identification with body), it appears affected — like in dreams, where unreal events still cause fear or joy. Discipline helps dissolve this illusion and free us from bondage.

Q9. Which Aspect Carries Chitta to Next Birth?

Answer: It's not a separate "object." Just like water takes the shape of its container, the flow of thoughts takes different forms: mind, buddhi, chitta, ahankār. These impressions (*saṁskāras*) continue with the subtle body into the next birth.

Q10. If I chant Gajapati Stotra and Hanuman Stotra while going to work, is it considered worship?

Answer: Yes, absolutely. Reciting while walking, sitting, or working purifies the mind. Bhagavad Gita recommends remembering God in all states (*pashyan, shr̥ṇvan, jigran*).

Q11. Why Did Arjuna Win and Karna Lose?

Answer: TV often misrepresents Karna. In reality, he made many wrong choices: abandoning battle against Gandharvas, advising humiliation of Draupadi, siding with adharma repeatedly. Difficult circumstances don't justify wrong actions. Authentic sources (like discourses of Swami Gokulananda or author Ami Ganatra) give the true picture.

Q12. Why are these considered tamasic?

Answer: Onion & Garlic: Strong odor, heavy qualities → tamasic. Avoided in devotion, though used in Ayurveda medicinally.

Involve *himsā* (violence), hence tamasic. Better to fulfill nutrition needs with vegetarian alternatives. In extreme medical necessity, exceptions may be made, but one should strive for non-violence.

Q13. Sāttvic People Eating Eggs?

Answer: Eating eggs adds tamasic influence. Since no one is perfectly sāttvic, occasional lapses may happen. But if we aspire for more sattva, we should avoid eggs.

Q14. What Is Rājasic Food?

Answer: Very spicy, oily, junk, or Chinese fast foods — foods that agitate passion and restlessness.



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Jai Shri Krishna!

Compiled by: Geeta Pariwar - Creative Writing Department

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