

An Investigation Of Karma Yoga In The Bhagavad Gita

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Abstract

There are a number of doctrines in ancient Indian philosophy that are considered to be the foundation stones for a complete outlook on life that is expressed in the philosophy of karma. The Bhagavad Gita is perhaps the most beloved and enduring scripture in Indian tradition and one of the most important chapters of this scripture is the one titled 'law of karma'. According to this theory, every individual makes profits from what he does and suffers from what he does as a result of his actions. Karma yoga practise is mainly based on Niskam-karma, rather than simply renunciation Karma for the sake of renouncing it. It is necessary for us to let go of attachments and the fruits of our actions in order to become free. Therefore, it is our svadharma to perform action, and not to be concerned with the fruits or results of that action. Bhagavat Gita preaches Karma which should be regarded as natural, intrinsic to man's existence, and that every individual must work hard in order to achieve happiness.

Keyword: Karma, Niskama-karma, Svadharma.

Introduction

The Bhagavad Gita states that the supreme duty of man is to perform action without desire, but this is not only to perform an action without motivation or desire, but to perform an action with a sagacious intention of submitting to God. The Gita represents a unique **synthesis of Action, Knowledge, and Devotion**. Man is a complex of intellect, will and emotion; he is a being who thinks, wills and feels. The intellect has given rise to the philosophy of Knowledge, the will has given rise to the philosophy of Action, and the emotion has given rise to the philosophy of Devotion. Karma yoga is not opposed to Jnana yoga; in fact, the former is possible only when the latter is

attained. The most important presupposition of morality on which entire Indian ethical thought is based is called the law of Karma.

The Philosophy of Karma, deal with the concept of karma and its different classifications. Karma generally means 'to do' something. The law of karma is said to be based on the **law of causation** or the law of karma in the sphere of human conduct. There are different classifications of Karma, as voluntary, non-voluntary, sakama, niskama, etc. Karma in Bhagavad-Gita is explained the concepts of 'karma-yoga', 'niskama karma' and 'lokasamgraha' in the context of Bhagavad-Gita.

Social application of Karma Yoga is seen in the Bhagavad-Gita by contemporary thinkers like Vivekanda, Aurobindo, Gandhi, and Tilak. The Bhagavad Gita does not just represent a Hindu Shastra of universal wisdom, designed to serve as a guidance in all possible situations. Irrespective of age, sex, religion and status it offers varieties of spiritual insights and disciplines, so that everyone at every level of evolution can get nourishment from it to evolve further. The importance of the Gita and its eternal message of Niskama karma is one of the reasons why it is relevant even today. Karma is one of the most important and fundamental principles of classical philosophy and all classical Indian schools of thought except Carvaka believed in the principles of karma unquestionably. The idea of the Gita is not the negation of action, but performance of action with a detached mind.

The Bhagavad-Gita is a part of the Mahabharata; it is regarded as one of the most sacred books of Hindus. If the Gita is regarded as an excellent religious work, it is no less excellent than an ethical one. The Bhagavad-Gita means 'The Lord's Song', the philosophical discourse of Lord Krishna to persuade Arjuna to fight. In order to resolve the situation, relatives, beloved friends, and revered elders stand on both sides. In order to vindicate his claim, Arjuna has to follow his **Svabhava and Svadharma**. In the Gita, different paths are outlined for realizing God, its teaching is universal and intended for people of different temperaments. Some are predominantly men of action and they ought to **follow the path of action or Karma Yoga**. Some are predominantly emotional and they ought to **follow the path of devotion or Bhakti yoga**. And some are predominantly intellectual. They ought to **follow the path of**

knowledge or Jnana yoga. The path to union with God is one of action, devotion, and knowledge.

There have been different uses for karma in different contexts, simply because it can have different meanings depending on where it is used. There is no particular meaning to it. So it may be stated that in order to realize the meaning of the word 'karma' one must go through its different uses found in the explanations of different schools of philosophy. According to the word etymology, the Sanskrit word karma means 'to do', and therefore in essence, karma can be thought of as an action, a work, a deed, etc., which comes from its root word 'kr'.

Explanation of Karma in the Shrimad Bhagavad-Gita is **bhutabhavodbhavakora visargha karmasamjnitha**, i.e., the sacrifice which release the creative forces of the universe is known as karma. In this verse the meaning of the word '**visargah**' is '**visaryan**', i.e., immersed in different substances like ghee, cake, fruits etc. are given up without desire for fruits for the sake of God. To God without desire is a main cause of attaining liberation. So if one performs sacrifices and maintains Vedic commands, he gets heavenly pleasure. Keep on transmigrating from one life to another along with the soul till liberation is attained.

The concept of karma is also used to signify two different meanings, the casual and the ethical. The casual sense transmits, the use of karma as descriptive in character because it describes the casual character of act phenomena and asserts that every action has a natural, casual result and the effect of karma is never destroyed till it is realized by the doer of karma and before its realization it exists in the form of samaskara which cannot be perceived by our sense organs. While the non-theistic karmavadins think that samskara resides in the soul and when it is ripened it automatically starts giving results mechanically without the role of any divine agency.

The karma or voluntary actions of an individual are divided into three classes as described in the Bhagavad Gita as (a) Sancita karma or reserved stocks, (b) Prarabdha karma or actions which bear fruit, and (c) Kriyamana karma or actions currently in progress. **Sancita Karma (Reserve Stock):** Every action performed in the form of a potentially which results in a

pleasurable or painful experience for the doer in a subsequent birth or in the present birth. Sancita Karma or accumulated potentially is responsible for the good and evil impulses of our minds. **Kriyamana Karma (Current Action):** A karma which is being performed with some **interested motive** as well as with attachment, sense of doership and which is being gathered in this life is called kriyamana karma. **Prarabdha Karma (Fruit Bearing Action):** Huge stock of accumulated action, consisting of virtuous as well as sinful deeds, when an action is taken out to serve one's life time. According to Indian thinkers, further divisions of action are sakama karma. **Sakama Karma:** Sakama karma, i.e. attached action is that action when one does not realize that the real essence of the object of the world is and which is performed with some desire. So actions which come under the influence of the law of karma are those which are performed with the conscious desire of achieving worldly pleasure are known as attached actions. **Niskama Karma:** The ideal of niskama karma may be taken as a **synthesis between pravrtti and nivrtti** in the Indian ethical system. This path of active life is referred to as Pravrtti and the aim is to attain heaven through this path. Meanwhile, nivrtti is the path of complete renunciation of all works which is the opposite of nivrtti.

As mentioned above in the Gita, the following is what the Gita says about this: *Karmanyevadhikaraste ma phalesu kadacana! Ma karmaphalaheturbhurma te sangostvakarmani.* Thus niskama karma is neither naiskarma (inaction) nor karma (action) with an eye on the fruit thereof. Thus according to the Bhagavadgita, the ideal of niskama karma is realized by performing selfless actions, surrendering the fruits of those actions to God.

The law of karma is considered to be one of the most fundamental features of Indian philosophy. The theory of karma is a general theory of moral conduct that has been built with an ethical world view. So action means intentional action and this will be its meaning in the analysis of the law of Karma. The domain of operation of the law of karma is said to be the entire universe which means that it is applied to both human and non-human beings.

The law of karma has been emphasized by all interpreters of Indian philosophy. For Radhakrishnan, according to the law of karma there is nothing uncertain in the

moral world. Hiriyana says that the theory of karma signifies not only the events of our life, but also that there is absolute justice in the rewards and punishment that fall into our life. So man as a moral being, endowed with consciousness of ought and ought not, right and wrong, good and evil and moved by the conception of some ideals capable of being by means of his voluntary efforts. It has given rise to the conception of the law of Karma. It is a belief in the principle of justice underlying the course of our life and the world. Man as a moral being cannot stake out this belief and hence cannot but formulate some such law. Thus the rational mind of man finds itself in a position in which it can neither give up belief in the law of karma nor accept it in any definite form.

The word 'Karma' comes from the root 'Kr' which means 'doing', 'affairs', or 'activity' and that same ordinary meaning is intended in the Bhagavad-Gita. It prescribes some action for realizing Isvara in each and every religion. According to the ancient Vedic religion, this action is a sacrificial ritual.

In the Gita, it has been stated that to live for a moment in the world is to do some sort of Karma. We see within ourselves that thirst, hunger and other desires do not leave us so long as our bodies live. If the path of renunciation gives us the liberty of performing a disgraceful action like begging for satisfying desires, then according to Sastras there is no inconvenience to performing all worldly actions with a desire less frame of mind. According to the Gita, all abandonment of actions is made when mental control is not perfect and all abandonment of actions is the result of ignorance.

Some persons raise a further objection that when the mind has become desire less as a result of the acquisition of knowledge and all desires have been destroyed. There remains nothing which moreover, in support of this argument, it has been stated in the Uttara Gita:

Jnanamrtenatraptasyakrtakrtyasyayoginah |
Castikinchitkartavyamasticennasatattvavit | | (Uttaragita, 1.23)

That is, a man who has become jnani (krtakrtya) as a result of having drunk the rector of knowledge, no further duty remains and if further duty remains that man is not a real **jnani or tattvajnani**. So someone thinks that the Bhagavad-Gita

accepts this position that karma leaves a man of its own accord after the acquisition of knowledge. The root cause of our suffering is attachment which is a part of desire and not merely a wish. According to the Gita, instead of killing desires of all kinds, one should only give up the attachment to the object of desire and go on performing all actions. Though one may be free from desires of all kinds, it is not possible that activity comes to an end. We see that whether there is a desire or not, constant actions like breathing etc. go on. Even for a single moment, it is an action by itself. So it is not possible for us to become free from karma after acquisition of perfect knowledge as well as the destruction of desire of all kinds.

In the Vedic religion the two independent paths of karma sannyasa, i.e., renunciation and desire less action, i.e., yoga are equally good alternatives through Karma yoga is superior to the path of renunciation. Thus the synthesis between karma and jnana has been shown in the Gita. It has been drawn that if the main object of the Gita is to harmonise knowledge with devotion to support the path of Karma yoga on that basis, then all these apparent inconsistencies disappear and one cannot but admire the super human wisdom of the Gita in bringing about a fusion among knowledge, devotion and Karma yoga in the most comprehensive way. Whatever it may contain, Karma yoga ultimately remains the main subject matter of the Gita.

Practical Application of the Gita's Ideal (Lokasamgraha): Meaning of Lokasamgraha: The word 'lokasamgraha' is a compound word with two components, 'loka' and 'samgraha.' Here 'loka' means, in different contexts, either a human being or the world. The other word 'samgraha' has more than one meaning ranging from keeping together, to protecting as also to regulating etc. Balgangadhar Tilak has suggested two meanings, one referring to mankind and another referring to various worlds. Tilak is the first commentator to highlight, most forcefully and with a detailed explanation of the concept of lokasamgraha in the Gita.

In Kantian ethics the moral interest is supreme. Immanuel Kant teaches that higher spiritual truths are not intelligible in terms of the concepts and categories of senses and understanding. He emphasises the purity of the will and its freedom from any empirical content. For him, good will is a jewel that shines on its own. The same idea is elaborately and

with frequency of emphasis defined and vindicated in the Bhagavad Gita. Purity of motive is the basis of ethical conduct in both Kant and the Gita and both of them emphasize with equal strength and force the need for the control of the senses and the inclinations, the emotions and the passions constituting the lower self of man. The Gita lays emphasis on regulating and controlling the senses and adjusting and directing them to higher values and purposes in life. On the other hand, Kant also teaches that man is a slave to the senses and inclinations cannot pursue the higher goal and purpose of life. For Kant, the doctrine of categorical imperative which teaches that duty has to be performed for the sake of duty.

The social applications of karma yoga of the Bhagavat Gita can effectively lead to all round development and progress in the social, economic, political and cultural fields. Bhagavad-Gita has played an important role in guiding modern man in the performance of day-to-day duties. That involvement with the world is expressed in the term lokasamgraha expresses the involvement with the world. The term covers the amplitude of social and spiritual forms of behavior and attitudes of mind.

Some great thinkers, religious and political leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghosh, Balgangadhar Tilak, Swami Vivekananda and so many great men have been greatly influenced by the ideals of Karma yoga. The role of Karma yoga has played in the lives and activities of these thinkers and its inspiration and ideal guided their way of life and thoughts. In this section I will discuss (i) The Karma-yoga based Socio-Spiritual approach of Vivekananda, (ii) Aurobindo's Social aspects of Karma-yoga, (iii) Karma-yoga in thought and action of Gandhiji, (iv) Karmayogin Tilak.

The role of the Gita has played in the lives and activities of these thinkers and its inspiration and new ideas guided their thoughts and there is a role of the Gita to achieve success in the social-spiritual, ethical revolution and political independence. These great men of India heartily worked against the social evils mentioned above and they worked for the good of all through the concept of lokasamgraha in the Bhagavad-Gita.

Socio-Spiritual approach of Vivekananda

The socio-religious activities of Swami Vivekananda are marked with diversity and continuity and the elements of diversity are obvious from the fact that the focus of activity shifted from socio-religious reform to social service. Swamiji used the ideal of karma yoga in the Bhagavad-Gita as the only source of inspiration and new ideas to achieve success in the social movements of the day and the fact that the Gita is utilized to help push forward a variety of social movements for a long period.

After a good deal of clarification of his views, he proceeded to give institutional shape to his plan of action under the ideal of Karma yoga. Formally established the Ramkrishna Mission with some specific aims and objectives for actions. The aim of the Mission is to preach those ideal truths which are mainly extracted from the niskamakarma or karma yoga of the Bhagavad-Gita for the good of humanity to demonstrate the practical life of Sri Ramkrishna, to help the poor, diseased etc. To put these truths into practical use in their lives for their temporal, mental and spiritual advancement.

The Bhagavad-Gita has a very significant role in the life and works of Vivekananda. The most significant elements from the teaching of the Gita, which Vivekananda explained to his followers, listeners and readers and himself utilizes in his work are contained in his book entitled Karma yoga, is to become ready to sacrifice himself for others, expecting no personal gain in return. Swamiji recognized that Krishna was the first man who opened the door of religious to every caste.

Gandhi was greatly influenced by the Bhagavad-Gita. Gandhiji was enthusiastic about applying the message of the niskama karma of the Gita to the political problems of the country and his insistence on viewing truth and nonviolence as the basis of all social and political activities. The Gita has become a spiritual reference book and we never fail to act in perfect accord with the teaching (Agarwal, S. P. (1997). Gandhiji's idea of a nonviolent fight for independence of India from foreign rule has closed links with the Gita doctrine of swadharma.

The Contribution of Gandhiji in regard to the application of karma yoga of the Gita to social causes is that he developed the technique of Satyagraha based on Ahimsa.

While Gandhiji was busy experimenting with many applications of Ahimsa to deal with issues of social injustice, discrimination and exploitation, just then Tilak completed his commentary on the Gita emphasizing karma yoga and lokasamgraha as the main teachings thereof.

According to Gandhiji the practical application of karma yoga in the Gita means the voluntary acceptance and enthusiastic fulfillment of duties that naturally come one's way, i.e. Swadharma. The Gita further insists on cultivating an attitude of equanimity, a state of perfection that is represented in the personality of a **Sthitaprajna**. This is also meant as Satyagrahi. So he thought that patriotism was for him a stage on his journey to the land of eternal freedom and peace. Another concept of the Gita which helps Gandhi strengthen the social aspect of the teaching is yajna and he values the approach of the Gita to modify the meaning of yajna. The Gita envisages the possibility of using fire in a symbolic sense, but Gandhi tries to create public opinion in favour of subjecting every religious practice to the test of relevance in modern times

Balgangadhar Tilak, a great freedom fighter, social worker was born in Ratnagiri in 1856. Lokamanya Balgangadhar Tilak had a spiritual and intellectual profile. The common interpretation of kuruksetra is that kuruksetra became sacred because the Mahabharata war was fought there to establish dharma and justice. In the Gita, the word Ksetra, which occurs in the thirteenth chapter, means 'human body'. The word 'dharma' in the Gita has two separate aspects namely, 'individual' and 'social' or 'universal' aspects. The meaning of the individual aspects of dharma is not to determine what is right or what is wrong and the meaning of the social or universal aspect of dharma is to protect justice or dharma. Tilak emphasizes dharma as a moral law that maintains society and warns against the evil consequences of dharma. Tilak said that if this dharma is ceased to be observed, the binding ropes of society may become loose and if the binding ropes are loosened, society will be in the same position as a ship would be on the ocean without a steering. According to Tilak, the whole of India is dharmaksetra, the field of righteousness of modern India.

Tilak recognizes that the Gita advocates at least three paths of conduct for the seeker of perfection and one of them

is *niskama karma* or disinterested work. The concept of *niskama karma* is based on the universality of action and no man is free from performing his *dharma* or work directed towards his own release and the welfare of the world. All human actions are motivated by the desire to attain happiness. Tilak distinguishes between desires of two types (a) desire for the fruit of our actions and (b) desire which motivates us to perform right actions.

According to Tilak, the concept of *niskama karma* may be specifically related to our castes, but that it applies nevertheless to all persons in all societies with or without caste. So, caste rules are not the final source of duty in modern India. The duty which has fallen on one's shoulders may have been taken up by one as a duty of own choice becomes a moral duty. So *niskama karma* provides the technique of performing one's duty.

Tilak was one of the commentators who gave a new interpretation to the overall message of the Gita. Tilak thought that the Lord taught the Gita not only to Arjuna but to all of us. Tilak extended the meaning of 'Arjuna' so as to include everybody and he also explained the word 'kuruksetra', the place where the Pandavas and Kauravas were fought. The Gita speaks of kuruksetra as *dharmaksetra* or sacred ground. Many commentators before Tilak tried to explain the same. But Tilak adopted a new approach and boldly stated that the whole of India is a 'dharmakestra' for modern India. According to Tilak, *niskama karma* is the main teaching of the Gita which is based on the universality of action and where it was said that no man can live free from performing activities of *dharma* directed towards his own release and the welfare of the world. The Gita itself encouraged to arise the desire of Arjuna which sprang from his discontentment, but that was a desire to know the manifestation of the divine. Tilak interpreted this as the final culmination of all *yogas* as *karma*, *jnana* and *bhakti*. From an ethical point of view, under any circumstances evil doers should be punished by the Lord in the interest of general welfare. God himself appears as an avatar or incarnation to destroy evil doers and to protect virtuous people.

Conclusion

The Bhagavad Gita is not a mere Hindu sastra of universal wisdom, meant for all possible situations. Irrespective of age, sex, religion and status it offers varieties of spiritual insights

and disciplines, so that everyone at every level of evolution can get nourishment from it to evolve further. The problem faced by Arjuna, at the outset of the Mahabharata battle, is the problem we face at every moment of existence. Like Arjuna, if one takes refuge to God (buddhi) by surrendering his ego and ignorance, then the Lord (viveka buddhi) will take care of him, leading the right way out. While *niskama karma* provides the technique of performing duty, *lokasamgrah* provides the goal, the direction and therefore also the content of actions that constitute duty. Tilak was the first commentator on the *Bhagavad-Gita* who identified and highlighted this important concept which occurs in the third chapter of the *Gita*. The word *Lakasamgraha* means social harmony and welfare and world preservation. The welfare of the world as the motive and the object of all action is a particular contribution of the *Gita* to Hindu religious and social thought. If action is to be selfless and is to be without reference to the fruits thereof, then the question naturally arises, why should anyone persist in a course of action? The theory of *yajna* or sacrifice has given a simple answer: action is to be performed to please God and to derive worldly benefits through them. But the *Gita* rejected it and provided the answer that the object of all actions should be the welfare of the world. For the first time the *Gita* gives a social content to religion and emphasizes the welfare of the world as the purpose of all actions. The doctrine of sacrifice is thus given a completely different meaning in the *Gita*, where every action is dedicated to God.

Practical Relevance of Niskama Karmayoga of the Bhagavadgita: The importance of the *Gita* and its eternal message of *niskama karma*, we think, is relevant even today. It needs more propagation and review. The *Gita* contains very rich and multi-sided thought. It manifests the realization of different aspects of ethical and spiritual life. It can even be said that it contains most of the main clues to the secret of the reconciliation of the supreme state of consciousness. It demands the battles of life in which we find ourselves all the time but particularly at critical moments. The *Gita* is a great religious book of the world and it is given as an episode in an epic history of the nations and their wars and deeds. The *Bhagavad-Gita* declares that we have the right to perform our prescribed duty only but we are not entitled to have the fruits of our actions. We should never consider ourselves the cause of the result of the activities. Inaction is sinful so we should never attach ourselves to not doing our duty. We should

perform our duty equipped, abandoning all attachment to success or failure and such equanimity is called yoga. That is to say, we should act in accordance with the principles of yoga. Yoga means concentrating the mind on the Supreme by controlling the ever-disturbing senses. The Supreme is Lord. We have nothing to do with the result of our prescribed duty. Gain and victory are God's concern. We are directed to act according to the advice of God. It is universal in its appeal. It is relevant for all mankind at all times to come. It helps the man to know himself, that is, to know his real nature, his duties and responsibilities for self and society, the concepts like svadharma, svabhava, paradharma, varna, niskama karma etc. These are key concepts discussed in the Gita to make one aware of his duties, to lead a better life in society with freedom here and hereafter. It also commands and inspires man to devote himself to lokasamgraha, i.e., to work for the betterment of fellow beings. Thus it contributes to social harmony and peace. It is sacrifice (tyaga) which constitutes the quintessence of the Gita. One has to sacrifice his ignorance, attachments for worldly enjoyment and egoistic blindness so that his divine nature like love, fellow-feeling, and feeling of oneness will shine. The teaching of the Gita has universal value, which not only protects society from spiritual deadlock, but also propotes universal brotherhood and peaceful co-existence across the globe. According to all classical Indian systems of thought except the Carvaka, whatever is done by an individual leaves behind it some sort of potency which has the power to produce happiness or pain either in the present life or in the future life. The Law of Karma operates in the entire domain of the universe-human and nonhuman-in an inviolable manner and causes bonding. They consider knowledge and non-attached action as the necessary conditions for attaining freedom from the obstacles of Karma.

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