

## 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 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.

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.

Explanation of Karma of 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.

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. 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 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 karmavadis 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, 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. 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.

As mentioned above in the Gita, the following is what the Gita says *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 the Shastras 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.

The word 'lokasamgraha' signifies protection which 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.

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 with the 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.

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 the modern man in the performance of day-to-day duties. That involvement with the world is expressed in the term lokasamgraha expressing 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, 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. (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. 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. 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.



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**.

Balgangadhar Tilak, a great freedom fighter, social worker was born in Ratnagiri in 1856. 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.

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 adopted a new approach and boldly stated that the whole of India is a 'dharmakestra' for modern India. According to Tilak, niskarma karma is the main teaching of the Gita which is based on the **universality of action** and where it was said that no man could live freely 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 refuse 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. 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. 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. 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 proposes 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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