

Bhagavad Gita's vision for a Harmonious Society: Ethics, Values and Social Justice

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Abstract: Gita emphasizes on the necessity of ethics and deals with moral order maintaining peace, harmony and social order- It highlights the notion of desireless action- In its message, the Gita advises individuals to take up a life of action and recommends renunciation in action rather than renunciation of action- Gita insists that a man should shape his ideals according to the station of his life in society or follow his Swadharma - The central point of the teaching of Bhagavad Gita is Nishkama karma - this ideal is realized by performing selfless action- In Gita, we can see the description of the man who has attained perfect state or sthitaprajña - A yogi is sthitaprajña who is firmly rooted in higher reason and unmoved by passions and emotions - This karma yogi has to work for the benefit of humanity in a spirit of detachment- Here the yogi has no selfish motives but works for the preservation and welfare of society- This is called Lokasamgraha - This philosophy of action advocated by Gita holds that every individual has to be engaged in some action and in the absence of it, life becomes meaningless.

Keywords: Swadharma, Nishkama karma, Sthitaprajna, Karma yogi, Lokasamgraha

The Bhagavad Gita is the most popular exposition of Indian Philosophy, religion and way of life. Its ethical part, have decisively influenced the Indian Philosophers to the extent that they have called it the 'Fifth Veda'. It is one among the Prasthanatrayi, the other two being Upanishads and Brahmasutra and together they are referred to as the basic texts of Vedānta.

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According to Swami Prabhavananda, “To understand the place of the three works in modern Indian Philosophy, we recall once again the three steps to attain self –knowledge prescribed by the Upanishads. We must first hear of the truth of the self; we must reason upon this and we must meditate upon the self. The Upanishads speaks to us of the truth of the self. The Vedānta-sutras aid us to reason and understand. Finally, the Gita affords us practical ways and means of living and prescribes details of conduct and methods of meditation.”² The ethics of Gita intends to ensure to ensure the proper development of all aspects of man. It has synthesized both social and individual interests. The ultimate end, no doubt, is absolute perfection of the individual, but his perfection can be attained only through consolidation of society on the one hand and God-realization on the other. According to Gita, the only way of freeing the soul from its various limitations is social service and devotion to God. This is a humanistic ideal which is attainable either through knowledge, devotion, or action. The focus of this paper is to analyze these concepts of ethics, social justice and humanistic implications of Bhagavad Gita.

The philosophy of action advocated by the Gita holds that every individual has to engage in some action or the other. In the absence of action, his life becomes meaningless. Gita emphasizes on the necessity of ethics and deals with moral order maintaining peace, harmony, and order in society. The most important element in Gita is the doctrine of Nishkama karma. It highlights the notion of desireless action. In its message, the Gita advises individuals to take up a life of action and recommends renunciation in action rather than renunciation of action. From this view point let us now analyze the ethical and social aspects of Gita through the concepts of Swadharma, Nishkama karma, Sthitha prajna and Lokasamgraha which are the important facets of it.

² Swami Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981), 268-269.

Swadharma

As per one division, dharma is divided into *samanya dharma* and *swadharma*. *Samānya dharma* elucidates the duties of an individual towards society. By performing *samānya dharma*, one contributes towards preserving a self-sustaining society. *Swadharma* guides individuals to perform their duties in accordance with time and situation. It has been believed that one cannot evade dharma in life as it is associated with a person's life eternally. The ethics of Gita can be considered the ethics of Nishkama karma and *Swadharma*. While counseling Arjuna to fight in the battle of Kurushetra, Krishna was always emphasizing the importance of *swadharma*. According to the Bhagavad Gita, the observance of *swadharma* has been emphasized to such an extent that at the time of a possible conflict between *swadharma* and *sadharana dharma*, it is *swadharma* that is given preference. It is because of this that Krishna advised Arjuna to fight without any hesitation. As a Kshatriya, it is the appropriate dharma to be observed by Arjuna. Gita emphasizes on *swadharma* and urges Arjuna to fight rather than retire to the forest as a hermit as it holds that *swadharma* leads to supreme good. We can say that the word *swadharma* has a wide significance and it is social obligations mainly that are asked here to be discharged so as to secure and preserve the solidarity of society. The Gita insists that man should shape his ideals according to the station of his life in society, endeavour to follow his *swadharma*, and do his duty according to the state of his growth. According to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, "*Swadharma* is the work in agreement with the law of one's being. We worship God by doing our ordained duties. God intends every man for some work in connection with society."³ The aim and the true goal of karma yoga is the union of one's self with God through action. We can accomplish this through the performance of *swadharma*, i.e. doing the particular duties proceeding from the law of one's individual nature.

³ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 489.

Nishkama karma

The central point of the teaching of Gita is Nishkama karma. This indicates that we have to perform duties just for the sake of duties. We should not be inactive in any stages of our life. It stands for action with no selfish gain or for no desired end. It is action for action sake alone. Nishkama karma is not inaction, but action par excellence. By following this path, the individuals can reach their goal of realization through service. Gita recognizes that it is through work that we are brought into relation with the rest of the world. So, the lesson that Gita gives us through Nishkama karma is that the spirit in man is satisfied only when it sees the spirit in the world. Nishkama karmas are actions done without any conscious intention of achieving an end or any attachment. It means desireless actions. However, in Indian thought, desireless indicates only absence of narrow egoistic desires. According to Bhagavad Gita, the ideal of Nishkama karma is realized by performing selfless actions. It clearly says that actions are to be done and nobody can remain without being active or performing actions. In spite of doing actions, one should not be involved in the fruit of action. What is required is not renunciation of but renunciation in action. According to Tiwari, "The ideal of Nishkama karma may be taken as a synthesis between what has been called *pravrtti* and *nivrtti* in the Indian ethical system. *Pravrtti* is the path of active life and the object of attaining heaven or some such state of happiness. Thus, *pravrtti* refers to desireful actions, the desire being happiness in the present life or happiness in heaven. Such acts include all the rituals and ceremonies prescribed in the Vedas or other Sastras. Such acts are definitely attached actions. As opposed to *pravrtti*, *nivrtti* is the path of total renunciation of works. It is a quietist path, taking *sadhana*, Samadhi etc. as the sole pathway to salvation. The essential thing involved herein is that, for salvation, one has to take recourse to what is known as jñana-marga or the path of knowledge. The doctrine of Nishkama karma cuts a middle course between the above two extreme pathways. It holds that what is required for liberation is not the renunciation of world or worldly actions, but the renunciation only of *kama* (passion or egoistic desire). The Gita clearly says that actions are to be done; nobody can remain without performing actions. So, renunciation of works is not required. What

is required is renunciation in action. That is even in spite of doing action; one is not to be involved in the fruit of the action.”⁴ Nishkama karma refers to action without attachment to the fruits thereof. Duty is to be done only because it is duty and for no other consideration. The performance of duty will certainly bring its reward now or later, but that must not be the impelling force for the duty. The reward is not man's concern that is rather God's concern. So, man should perform his duty with sense of devotion without any concern for the result. Here, it is to be noted that Gita is totally against inaction. It prohibits inaction also along with attached actions.

Renunciation of fruits of action to God is true renunciation. The performance of one's specific duties without attachment and desire for fruits is true renunciation. One attains perfection by doing one's specific duties with detachment and worships God by dedicating them to him. Whatever action is done should be dedicated to God. Actions which are motivated by desires for fruits lead to bondage. But, if they are performed without such desires, and desires are surrendered to God, they will yield permanent peace. So, Gita stresses the performance of duties as service to God. As stated by Sinha, “A karma yogin should dedicate all his action to God. Whatever he does, whatever he eats, whatever he offers in a sacrifice, whatever gifts he takes gifts he takes, and whatever penance he undergoes, he should dedicate to him. His acts of duty are consecrated to him. They bring him in complete union with God. Divine energy flows into him and actuates all his actions. He becomes an instrument of divine action.”⁵ It follows from the above account that extinction of egoism and attachment is an indispensable condition of Nishkama karma. Karma yoga thus unites the human will with divine will when all our actions are done without desire and it dedicates to God.

Hence, we can say that karma yoga has two faces: secular and religious. The secular aspect arises from the fact that karma yoga requires selfless dedicated action or Nishkama karma. For

⁴ Kedar Nath Tiwari, *Classical Indian Ethical Thought* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), 129.

⁵ Jadunath Sinha, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2006), 627.

this, it is necessary to go along the path of religious belief with the conviction that there is a Supreme Power, that the authority of the scriptures is unquestionable and so on. All that is required is the belief in the equality of every member of society and natural respect for human dignity. On the other hand, the religious facet of karma yoga stands for the dedication of all our actions to God and this attitude would require a belief in God. All works should be done as service to God while dedication of his actions to God leads him to Moksha or liberation. When he does the actions without selfishness and desire, it will not bind him. Such actions are the summum bonum of karma yoga.

Sthithaprajña

In Gita, there is more than one beautiful description of the man who has attained the perfect state. Gita teaches us that karma yoga is the basis of the foundation for jñana as well as bhakti. It transforms the ideal of *sanyasa* by stating that perfect man also should continue in work. There is no period when activity when may be wholly renounced. Passivity is equal to wrong activity. The perfect man (karma yogi) has to work for the benefit of humanity in a spirit of detachment. He who performs actions in a detached manner is the ideal man. He is not contaminated by sin just like a lotus leaf living in water is not contaminated by it. The yogi is *stithaprajña*, one who is firmly rooted in higher reason and unmoved by passions and emotions. He curbs his passions and maintains calmness in heat and cold, in joy and sorrow, and in honor and dishonor alike. He is happy within himself after having cast off the desires arising in his mind. Neither desire nor fear nor anger can upset him. He is neither overwhelmed by grief nor excited by pleasure. He receives experiences as they come- whether pleasurable or sorrowful. The one does not enthuse him and the other does not depress him. Just as a tortoise withdraws its head and all its limbs under its shell, he withdraws his sense organs from their trivialities of sense perception. Such a person goes about the world desireless, rid of all egoistic concepts of mine and thine, ever peaceful and happy. He is called sthitha prajña, one of firm wisdom. Jadunath Sinha explains this concept of sthithaprajña or karma yogi as, “A person who has transcended the three *gunas* is not

moved by them and remains an indifferent spectator of their functions. He becomes devoid of positive action (*pravṛtti*) and negative (*nivṛtti*). He does not exert himself to realize an empirical end or abstain from an action to avoid an undesirable end. He transcends empirical knowledge derived through the sense –organs. He abides in the essential nature of his self (*svastha*) free from pleasure, pain, and delusion. He is unperturbed by joy and grief, praise, and blame, honor and dishonor. He is free from love and hatred, and equal to friend and foe. He is free from greed and makes no distinction between a stone and a lump of gold. He gives up all actions for the fulfillment of egoistic desires.”⁶ A true karma yogi may appear to be immersed in activity, but he practices inner detachment like the water on the lotus leaf. He is in the world, but not of it. As stated by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, “So long as he continues to live in the world, he is committed to some action or other. Sankara sees in his activity the modes of nature’s working, and Ramanuja the actions of the supreme. These are two different ways of expressing the impersonality of action. His work is done in a freedom of the soul and with an inner joy and peace which does not depend on externals for its source or continuance.”⁷ The karma yogi is not elated by success or depressed by failure but enjoys mental equanimity. Neither the utility of an act nor its futility can affect the good will and its disinterestedness. This attitude of *samatva* or equanimity is stated to be the differentia of yoga.

Lokasamgraha

As we noted earlier, the Gita exhorts on action in the world, and exhorts men never to turn away from activity and the doing of good to others. Even when he has reached a perfect state and everlasting peace with nothing more to gain from his work, the yogi still works and does not stop his actions. According to Swami Prabhavananda, “Those who reach *samādhi* and attain Brahman return to the lower plane of consciousness and then realize that it is he who has become man and the universe. The singer cannot hold to the highest note

⁶ Jadunath Sinha, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 2006), 210.

⁷ Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, 496.

longer. He comes down to the lower notes. Similarly, the man of realization comes back from the transcendental consciousness and perceives the world of relativity and, though he sees the world, he sees Brahman everywhere.”⁸ A liberated man overcomes the karma, and though he continues to live and work, he is not bound or tainted by it. The perfect man/karma yogi, according to Gita, has to work for the benefit of humanity in a spirit of detachment, disinterest, and selflessness with no desire for the fruits of his action. He simply acts for the good of the people. He has nothing to accomplish for himself but acts for the benefit of humanity (*lokasamgraha*). It holds that only such a person can set moral ideals for us, who have won over the fire of passions, have no selfish motives, work only for the preservation and welfare of the society. This is called *lokakalyana* or *lokasamgraha*. As it is stated by Hiriyanna, “The point to which it is necessary to draw special attention in this connection is that the Gita requires man to continue to work even in this perfected state, there being nothing in outer activity which is incompatible with inner peace. Here we see the exalted position assigned to work by the Gita. It contemplates no period when activity may be wholly renounced. Passivity, in its view, is almost as reprehensible as wrong activity.”⁹ Bhagavad Gita holds that the liberated person or the karma yogi has to work for the good of humanity without moral obligation. According to Gita, the doer of good of mankind never suffers here or hereafter. Karma yoga consists of the selfless pursuit of the moral good of mankind as service to God. It follows from the above account that moksha in Gita is transcendental state of immortality and life eternal or *amaratva*. It is inseparable union with God. The yogi of this state no longer identifies himself with the limitation of body, the senses, and the mind. He united in consciousness with the all-pervading divine being which is the transcendental consciousness. But he cannot dwell continuously in that state of complete absorption and so, he returns to normal consciousness. Here, we can say that Gita through this concept of *lokasamgraha* insists on social duties and holds that even though the karma yogi is aloof from the society, he

⁸ Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, 112.

⁹ M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), 127.

has compassion for all and works for the benefit of the whole mankind.

Humanism in Bhagavad Gita

The central issue of Gita is the development of the self of man and its realization of the divine. Its emphasis was on work without concern for the fruit or reward. The Bhagavad Gita laid down the norms of Indian humanism through its concepts of the effusion of the empirical self with the divine self, divine or *Paramātmān*. Indian humanism best embodied in the Gita. Thus, in Gita, we see that humanism does not embrace a particular group of people, any religion or culture, but mankind as a whole. It is universal humanism unprecedented in its depth and intensity. Hence, we can say that Gita can be considered a handbook for practical living and a guide for spiritual attainment. If we rightly pursue the practical life, it also leads to the paths towards the spiritual goal. These paths are called 'Yogas' or the ways of life according to Gita.

Gita tries to build up a philosophy of karma based on jñāna and supported by bhakti. Its teachings cover the entire spectrum of paths to spiritual perfection. Gita, hence, contains teachings for people at various stages of growth, in different stations of life, and having diverse temperaments. It has much philosophy to teach and has many practical hints for solving issues that we confront in our daily lives. Its message is universal, comprehensive, and everlasting. In today's atomic age, when human society is grievously endangered by excessive materialism, its messages of Nishkama karma (karma yoga), Lokasamgraha, Swadharma etc have assumed an even greater importance.

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