

Gītā's Ethics and Its Applicability

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Abstract

The purpose of Indian Ethics is the spiritual growth of all men. During the present time, the scientific and technological development has reached the top, but the moral and spiritual values are gradually declining day by day. Though people have enriched themselves with regard to economic state, intelligence and technological advancement, still all are morally lagging behind, and spiritually up to mark. At this crucial time of development, it is expected that, it is Gītā's philosophy which is out and out ethical, can really serve the purpose of moral upgradation. Indian Ethics is thus holistic in its approach. As an aspect of Indian Ethics, the Gītā's ethics teaches the way of harmonization among an individual's desires, emotions with his actions which ultimately lead to a harmonious life on the earth alongside self-realization and freedom. The Gītā's ethics is discussed mainly in the concepts like, Svabhāva, Svadharma and Nishkamakarma. This paper shall be discussing all the ethical concepts of Gītā and the interlinkedness among them. However, the concept of nishkamakarma constitutes the central point of the Gītā's ethics and this paper will be concentrating on the theoretical as well as the practical applicability of it.

Keywords: nishkamakarma, svabhāva, svadharma

Introduction:

The *Gītā* is considered as a devotional book of the Hindus, which actually constitutes a part of the Bhishma Parva of the Hindu epic *Mahābhārata*. Though it belongs to the great epic, yet it can be and is in fact treated as an independent work. The *Gītā* is famous as an ethical treatise having pragmatic value. The situation in which the *Gītā* is said to be delivered points out that its vital purpose is to solve the existential problems of life and to resolve the right way of conduct in the moment of crises. No one can thus deny the importance of its workable ethico-religious principles and their significance in motivating its readers to accommodate an ethically sophisticated and a religiously vigorous way of life. The *Gītā* is known as a yogaśāstra. The setting of the *Gītā* in a battlefield has been interpreted as an allegory for the ethical and moral struggles of the human life (Radhakrishnan, 1993).

The *Gītā* starts with Arjuna's despondency regarding to fight or not to fight against his loved ones. This is the moral confusion which was not only faced by Arjuna himself, yet faced by every individual in any step of his life. So Kṛṣṇa's message to Arjuna can be considered as the message to all. Arjuna's dilemma was not regarding the war, but about fighting against his closed ones. Being a prince, he was never against the war, but when the attachment came as a barrier, he was confused. To remove his confusion, Kṛṣṇa was suggesting him to act instead of renunciation of act. "Neither by abstention from work a man attains freedom from action; nor by mere renunciation does he attain his perfection" (Bhagavad Gītā, 3.4, as cited in Radhakrishnan, 1993). The *Gītā* says that only duty can give solution to any confusion. "For no one can survive even for a moment without doing work; everyone is made to act helplessly by the impulses born of nature" (Bhagavad Gītā, 3.5, as cited in Radhakrishnan, 1993). Now what to act or what to decide and which action one should follow? The *Gītā* says that one has no option but to act, according to his nature. Performance with accordance to his nature means the performance of *svadharma*. The *Gītā* founds to be talking about two kinds of *dharma*s i.e. *Varnadharma* and *Svadharma*. *Varnadharma* can be understood as the dharma which is given to someone according to his aptitude and ability and *Svadharma* is explained as the dharma prescribed by one's *svabhāva*. The *Gītā* believes that both *varnadharma* and *svadharma* helps one to decide his action in his life (Date, 1971).

Svadharma can be understood in the *Gītā* as the dharma which is prescribed by one's *svabhāva*. *Svabhāva* here means the nature which is ordered by the proportion of the *gunas* in the make-up of equipment. This *svabhāva* determines what kind of action one should perform. Arjuna by nature was a fighter, so his *svabhāva* determines his action as to fight only. As he was not listening to his *svabhāva*, he was confused about his right action and failed to perform *svadharma*. "Further having regard for thine own duty, thou shouldst not falter, for there exists no greater good for a *Kshatriya* than a war commanded by duty" (Bhagavad Gītā, 2.31, as cited in Radhakrishnan, 1993). The *Gītā* mention that one may not be aware of his *svabhāva* and accordingly what action he has to follow. But it is known to everyone in what *varna* he is belonging. In that situation, the *varnadharma* helps one to know his *svabhāva* and helps him to decide what action he should perform. Being a *kshatriya*, the *Svabhāva* of Arjuna was to fight. So, in this manner, Arjuna's *varnadharma* helps him to become aware of his *svabhāva* and also helps him to perform his *svadharma*. The *varnadharma* helps one to decide his *svadharma* and by performing *varnadharma*, one is actually performing his *svadharma* (Date, 1971).

The *Gītā* was very much particular regarding to perform one's *svadharma* than to perform *paradharma*. *Paradharma* here means to perform the duty of the other *varna*. In the *Gītā*, every *varna* is made up of with some particular duties and everyone is expected to perform his duty according to his *varna*. The *Gītā* believed that a man is born to a particular *varna* as the duties of that *varna* suits him "Better is one's own duty though imperfectly carried out than the duty of another carried out perfectly. One does not incur sin when one does the

duty ordained by one's own nature (*svabhāva*)” (Bhagavad Gītā, 18.47, as cited in Radhakrishnan, 1993). The *Gītā* believes that if one performs his *svadharma*, then it will be better for him. The *Gītā* asks everyone to perform his *svadharma* though sometimes it may find to be not good and satisfactory. Moreover, it is believed that, the performance of one's own *dharma* can rescue him from all kinds of sins (Radhakrishnan, 1993). It means one's *svadharma* though not satisfactory sometimes, yet should not be the excuse of non-performance of it.

The *Gītā* understands the *svadharma* as the way for the realization of Supreme Self and *Lokasangraha*. In the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to contest against his closed ones as it is his *Kshatriya* dharma to indulge in war. Again, for the preservation of societal norm, one is expected to perform his allotted duties (Date, 1971). Otherwise, smooth running of the society is tough to be maintained. The society is made up of different types of individual beings having different abilities and capacities. As the existence of human body depends in the co-ordination of its different body organs, so also the social progress on the harmony works of its classes of people. The entire individual as well as social system will be disturbed if any of these classes fail to co-operate.

So, the *Gītā* suggests that, one should perform his duty or action according to his *svadharma* which is preceded by *svabhāva*. However, the problem with action is that an action by dint of being action is assumed to bind man. For every action, there has to be earning of the consequences of action and thus, one will have to continue on this earth. At the same time, the *Gītā* says that one cannot stay without action: “For no one can remain even for a moment without doing work; everyone is made to act helplessly by the impulses born of nature” (Bhagavad Gītā, 3.5, as cited in Radhakrishnan, 1993). Again, “Do thou thy allotted work, for action is better than inaction; even the maintenance of thy physical life cannot be affected without action” (Bhagavad Gītā, 3.8, as cited in Radhakrishnan, 1993). As actions cannot be avoided, the *Gītā* concentrates on the way of performance of action. On the one hand, the *Gītā* asks for resignation of desire for fruit of action and on the other, resignation of action to God.

Regarding the type of action that is to be performed, the *Gītā* prescribes the assigned duties: “Therefore, without attachments, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment” (Bhagavad Gītā, 3.19, as cited in Radhakrishnan, 1993). However, the additional reason adduced for performance of action by Kṛṣṇa brings forth another important feature. The *Gītā* gives more importance to activities than mere inaction (Date, 1971). “For, if ever I did not engage in work unwearied, O Pārtha (Arjuna), men in every way follow my path. If should cease to work, these worlds would fall in ruin and I should be the creator of disordered life and destroy these people” (Bhagavad Gītā, 3.23–24, as cited in Radhakrishnan, 1993). The verse stresses once more on the activity performed with right mental attitude which finally leads one to God. The *Gītā* affirms that even God performs as without it the world will cease to be. In the language of V.H. Date, “the masses always initiate their superior in their behaviour, in their moral values, in

their actions, in all the branches of their activities. It is the general tendency to measure of perfection always by watching the standard of life of their ideal. So, it is found in the *Gītā* that it is the belief of Kṛṣṇa that if He did not continue to work without any intention, men would also follow His path and indulge themselves into inactivity and so into an unproductive existence” (Date, 1971).

If disinterestedness, relinquishing desire for fruit of an action is the means to be rescued from suffering, then discipline is the way to attain relinquishment: “What they call renunciation, that know to be disciplined activity, O Pāṇḍava (Arjuna), for no one becomes a yogin who has not renounced his (selfish) purpose”. Relinquishment, in the *Gītā* means to give away the desire for fruits of one’s action. One is attached to the results because of his senses. Therefore, he is suggested in the *Gītā* to cease all material sense gratification or renounce all kinds of sense gratificatory activities. This kind of attitude to perform action can be developed only through the disciplinary manner. The *Gītā* declares that the self-control and detachment are indeed pre requisite for relinquishment in all respects. Detachment is impossible unless and until the individual has trained himself to renounce all personal desires and this training is understood in the *Gītā* as disciplinary activities... (Bhagavad Gītā, 6.2, as cited in Radhakrishnan, 1993).

This detachment to the consequence of action develops through the resignation of actions to God. In this regard, we find the *Gītā* saying: “Resigning all thy works to Me, with thy consciousness fixed in the Self, being free from desire and egotism, fight, delivered from ever” (Bhagavad Gītā, 3.30, as cited in Radhakrishnan, 1993). Radhakrishnan understands this resignation as surrender of the action to the Supreme (Radhakrishnan, 1993). According to him, the *Gītā* is expecting one to work by self-surrendering to the Supreme who presides over cosmic existence and activity. Resignation of action is taken as a commitment of selfless service to the Supreme. In resigning the action, one is performing the action in the remembrance of the Supreme. Vivekananda combines disinterestedness in individual enjoyment of fruit of action with performance of action for greater good which for him is nothing else but service to God only (Madhurananda, 2009): “There are some people who work for work’s sake, they work by thinking of good will coming out of it. He believes that unselfishness is not merely moral figures of speech. It forms our highest ideal, because in it lies such a manifestation of Divine power. So, one has to accept the presence of the Ultimate Reality and has to surrender every action to Him.” To Vivekananda, then, non-attachment is neither disinterestedness nor purposelessness. It denotes only the absence of self and motive in actions. It does not imply physical renunciation; it calls for constant engagement with the world. In the pursuit of *nishkama karma*, emotions and passions are not undermined or given up but energised and activated. Vivekananda wishes for a joyous and full life. There is an active civil society implicit in the optimistic vision that Vivekananda outlines. It can be interpreted that, disinterested action is another name of surrendering action to the Supreme. In actuality, all our actions are determined by the Ultimate Reality, but it is our assumed affinity to the body and mind that makes us believe that “I am the doer”. One can resign his action only by realizing the fact that, he is not the real doer of his action. So, the *Gītā* understands resigning or

surrendering to be giving up the assumed identity with the body and forming the real identity with the Supreme Self (Radhakrishnan, 1993). Resignation in the *Gītā* does not imply the abandonment of action, rather it means the surrender of action having been realized that he is not the actual doer of that action. In other words, one has to depart from his ego to be united with the Supreme. Such resignation is asked by the *Gītā* as it considers God Himself as the originator of action.

It is pertinent to mention here that *Gītā*'s ethical teaching has never been lost its value and relevance at any time. Its central principle of *nishkamakarma* illustrates an ethical orientation grounded in duty, sincerity, and inner detachment. This ideal is reflected in modern contexts such as the dedication of healthcare professionals and social workers who serve society despite of personal risks and limited recognition, particularly evident during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the *Gītā*'s concept of *Lokasaṅgraha* finds relevance in ethical leadership and social responsibility today such as leaders who prioritize public welfare, sustainable development, and social justice, embody this principle by acting not merely for personal or institutional gain but for the collective good. Moreover, in professional spheres also such as education, governance, finance, the spirit of karmayoga can be seen in those who perform their duties with integrity, discipline, and a commitment to social harmony. These examples show that the ethical teaching articulated by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna in the *Gītā* through the ethical concepts like *nishkamakarma*, *lokasaṅgraha* transcends its historical context and continues to offer a moral framework for moral as well as responsible action and the promotion of both individual and collective well-being in the modern world.

However, some limitations being found in practice of these ethical principles of *Gītā*. Questions may arise regarding the possibility of *nishkamakarma* as the idea seems almost paradoxical. Human life revolves around outcomes such as rewards, praise, success, security, and emotional satisfaction. If results shape motivation, can a person truly work without attachment to the fruits of work? According to *Gita*, *nishkamakarma* is not the absence of goals, rather it is freedom from slavery to results. Complete *nishkamakarma* is rare, but not impossible. However, it becomes more possible through self-awareness, detaching ego from outcome, focusing on effort rather than reward.

Human suffering often comes from the anxiety of success, failure, rewards, and recognition. The *Gītā* finds out its causes is nothing but the desire attached to the fruits of action. So, *Gītā* is found to be suggesting to focus on the quality of action or effort instead of the outcome so that one becomes calm, efficient, and free from stress. *Gītā* believes that outcomes are influenced by many factors beyond human control, but effort and intention lie within one's hands. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa's advises Arjuna to dedicate himself fully to righteous action, while leaving the results in the hands of the divine or the natural order. This mindset allows a person to work with complete dedication, without being mentally burdened by the fear of failure or the intoxication of success. Though the *Gītā* unfolds on a battlefield, its message reaches far beyond the realm of war. It speaks to the inner struggle every human faces such as the clash between doubt and duty, emotion and reason, weakness and

strength that defines the journey of life. Thus, *Gītā*'s ethical teachings being extended carrying a unique contribution to global ethical discussions. This philosophy is timeless and universally relevant.

Surendranath Dasgupta says that, "The *Gītā* is neither the practical guidebook of moral efforts nor a philosophical treatise discussing the origin of immortal tendencies and tracing them to certain metaphysical principles as their source; but starting from the ordinary frailties of attachments and desires, it shows how one can lead a normal life of duties and responsibilities and yet be in peace and contentment in a state of equanimity and in communion with God" (Dasgupta, 1975).

Conclusion:

This paper seeks to elucidate the ethical vision of the *Gītā* and its contemporary relevance by emphasizing the individual's cultivation of detachment in the performance of action. The *Gītā* provides deep yet approachable framework for balancing individual purpose with universal welfare. It presents an ethical paradigm consisted of the interrelated principles of *svabhāva*, *svadharma*, and *niṣkāmakarma* which redefines ethics as an inwardly grounded practice, where right action is being led by self-understanding and is sustained by detachment from outcomes. Such a perspective transforms action into a means of both inner purification and social responsibility. By practising equanimity and selfless engagement, the individual not only advances towards spiritual fulfillment but also contributes to the preservation of collective harmony, i.e., *Lokasaṅgraha*. Thus, the *Gītā* ultimately affirms that, the path to peaceful and harmonious society lies in the disciplined alignment of inner consciousness with outward action.

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