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A CRITIQUE OF ETHICAL CONCEPT OF *NISHKĀMA KARMA* IN THE *BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ*

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to critically evaluate the ethical concept of the *Nishkāma Karma* in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The central doctrine preached in the *Gītā* discourse is that of a life of *Nishkāma* or *anāsakta* (non-attachment) attitude. The *Nishkāma Karma* gives importance to duty without the desire for the fruit of the action/ karma. The *Nishkāma Karma* concept has challenged many of the ethical concepts of *Vedas* and *Upanishads* and has given new definitions to many concepts. The ethical side of this concept tries to address some of the ethical issues in the *Vedas*. The present study tries to evaluate those concepts towards a critical appraisal of the same. The *Gītā* does attempt to redefine *Varnāśrama Dharma*, which is used by Hinduism to oppress the so-called lower caste, though *Nishkāma karma*. Yet, it is favorable to the *Brāhmins*. This study uses critical, analytical, descriptive and comparative methods of enquiry using library resources to decipher the meaning of the selected theme.

Keywords: Dharma Śāstra, Gunas, Svadharma, Upanishad.

Introduction

Nishkāma Karma is one of the significant Ethical concepts of Indian philosophy, which has emerged from the *Bhagavad Gītā* that forms part of *Bhishmaparvam* of *Mahabharata*.¹ This concept has influenced many people all over the world such as Mahatma Gandhi, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, S. Radhakrishnan and the like. The present work is a critical enquiry into the concept of *Nishkāma Karma* using an ethical framework.

Scholars are of opinion that *the Bhagavad Gītā* has both religious and philosophical significances. For Radhakrishnan, it is more religious than philosophical. But at the same time he himself acknowledged the philosophical treatise of the same text.² For Bal Gangadhar Tilak, this is a practical text which teaches the *Karma Yoga* that helps a person to serve the world to attain salvation.³ Sankaracharya perceived this as a philosophical and spiritual guide.⁴

Traditionally, *Bhagavad Gītā* is the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna during the war at *Kurukshetra*. The traditional belief supports those the whole 700 verses of *Bhagavad Gītā* actually emerged at this time. Arjuna (one among the *Pandavas*) was not ready to fight against his brothers (*Kauravas*) and therefore Krishna advised him about the importance of his duty. After that Arjuna got ready for the war. Thus, it is believed that *Bhagavad Gītā* has a divine origin. The orthodox scholars also have the same opinion. Considering the content of the text, A. B. Keith assumes that *Gītā* is part of the *Upanishads*. The Western scholar Richard Garbe divides *the Bhagavad Gītā* into two parts and argues that the theistic part of *Gītā* is from the original *Gītā* and the pantheistic part is added later.⁵ However, it is probable that *Bhagavad Gītā* might have been written after the *Kurukshetra* war. And the teaching of the *Gītā* is not for Arjuna but for the whole humanity, Arjuna is a mere representative of the human.

The concept of *Nishkāma karma* is one of the virtues propagated by Indian Philosophy through the *Gītā*. This concept is not detached from the *Vedic* teaching, rather it is a reformed form of the same. Madan Prasad states: "The *Bhagavad Gītā* is an ethical treatise which claims to provide a metaphysical basis for its doctrine of human conduct."⁶

¹The *Mahabharata*, one of the greatest epics of the world, is the story of *Kauravas* and *Pandavas*. This epic gives information about the religious, social, political, ethical and moral ideals and practices of the people of ancient time, cited by Mallikarajun Patil, *Studies in World Classics* (New Delhi: SARUP Book, 2009), pp. 12-13.

² S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavad Gītā* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948), p. 11.

³ Bal Gangadhar Tilak, *Srimad Bhagavad Gītā Rahasya* vol.1, translated by B. S. Sukthankar (Poona: Tilak Bros., 1935), p. xxvi.

⁴ Sri Sankaracharya, *Sri Sankara's Gītā Bhasya*, translated by C. V. Ramachandra Aiyar (Bombay: Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 1988), p. vii.

⁵ Prem Nath Bazaz, *The Role of Bhagavad Gītā in Indian History* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1975), pp. 164.

⁶ Madan Prasad Singh, *The Ethical Philosophy of the Gītā*, (Calcutta: Punthi-Pustak, 1996), p. xi.



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1. The Ethical Teachings of Vedas

The Vedas expressed their moral teachings through the *Dharma Śāstra*. The whole ethical concepts of Vedas can be classified into two: *Dharma* and *Karma*. A detailed study of these concepts will help us to comprehend the ethical concept of the Vedas.

1.1. The Concept of Dharma in Vedas

The term *Dharma* is derived from the Sanskrit root *Dhṛ-dharati*, which means 'hold fast,' 'uphold,' 'support,' or 'keep in due order.' Literally, it was meant to maintain the universe in due order. "Dharma is a very complex concept in the religio-ethical literature of India. In India, *Dharma* stands for ethics, religion, morality, virtue, spirituality, truth, good conduct and so on."⁷ The *Dharma-Śāstra* states that the duty of every individual is according to his/her *Varna* and *āśrama*.⁸

1.1.1. Varna Dharma

The Sanskrit term *Varna* for caste literally means 'colour' or 'pigment of the body or complexion'. There are four *Varas*: the *Brāhmins*, the *Ksatriyas*, the *Vaiśyas* and the *Śūdras*. The division of *Varna* is based on the colour. In the colour division, *Brāhmins* are supposed to be white, *Ksatriyas* red, *Vaiśyas* yellow and *Śūdras* black. But later, this division was considered on the basis of birth.⁹ According to the Chandogya Upanisad, the caste of a person in the present life is determined by his/ her work done in the previous life.

Those, whose conduct has been good, will quickly attain some good birth, the birth of a *Brāhmin*, or a *Ksatriya*, or a *Vaiśya*. But those whose conduct has been evil will quickly attain an evil birth, the birth of a dog, or a hog, or a *Chandala*.¹⁰

Among the four *Varnas*, the *Śūdras* are considered as the lowest caste and they are not allowed to hear or to study the Vedas. The *Brahma Sūtra* mentions the punishments, if a *Śūdra* hears or studies the Vedas.

The ears of the *Śūdra* who hears the Vedas is to be filled with molted lead; for, a *Śūdra* is like a cemetery, and therefore the Vedas is not to be read in the vicinity of a *Śūdra*. His tongue is to be slit if he pronounces it; his body is to be cut through if he preserves it.¹¹

On the basis of Scripture, *Śūdras* were treated in an inhuman way and they were oppressed by other caste people.

In *Sāṅkhya*, the division of four *Varnas* is on the basis of three *Gunas* and not based on birth. The three *Gunas* are *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The *sattva* stands for goodness, *rajas* stands for energy, activity and passion, and *tamas* stands for dullness and sluggishness. *Sattva Guna* is dominated in *Brāhmins*, *rajas* in *Ksatriyas*, *rajas* and *tamas* in *Vaiśyas* and *tamas* in *Śūdras*.¹² Each *Varna* has different duties.¹³ But there is no evidence that if the people practiced these concepts which were the determining factors.

1.1.2. Āśrama Dharma

The lifecycle of each person has to cover four stages of life. These stages in life are called *āśramas*. On the basis of each *āśrama*, the *dharma* also differs. The four stages of human life are divided into four *āśramas*, which are *Brahmacharya*, *Grhastha*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa*. The *dharma* of an individual is also related to his/her *āśrama*. In *Brahmacharya*, the person has to spend time in studying Vedas under the guidance of his/her *Guru*. At this stage, the person has to stay with his/her *Guru*. The second stage is of a house holder, *Grhastha āśrama*, in which a person has to live with his wife and children and perform the household duties. In the third *āśrama*, i.e., *Vanaprastha āśrama*, one has to leave his/her family and all the worldly desires and should go to forest and practice austerities. Finally, the person reaches the fourth stage, that is, *Sanyasa āśrama*. At this stage, the person has to cast away everything

⁷ Jacob Kattackal, *Religion and Ethics in Advaita* (Kottayam: CMS Press, 1982), p. 43.

⁸ Jacob Kattackal, *Religion and Ethics in Advaita*, pp. 43-44.

⁹ Jacob Kattackal, *Religion and Ethics in Advaita*, p. 45.

¹⁰ Chandogya Upanishad. v. 10.7, cited by John McKenzie, *The Religious Quest of India: Hindu Ethics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), p. 69.

¹¹ *Brahma-Sutra-Bhasya* of Sankara, 1.3.38, cited by Jacob Kattackal, *Religion and Ethics in Advaita*, p. 46.

¹² Jacob Kattackal, *Religion and Ethics in Advaita*, pp. 45-46.

¹³ *Brāhmin-Sacrifice*, study and teaching the Vedas; *Kshatriya*- military service, enforcing the *Dharma* when needed; *Vaiśhya*-trade and agriculture; *Sūdra*-menial service, cited by Jacob Kattackal, *Religion and Ethics in Advaita*, p. 46.



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and 'wander about as a homeless beggar'.¹⁴ In the older *Upanishads*, this fourth stage is considered as a stage in which a person attains knowledge about the self.¹⁵

1.1.3. The Concept of Karma in Vedas

The concept of *karma* is one of the fundamental principles of Hinduism. Etymologically, the word *karma* is derived from the Sanskrit root *kr* which means 'to do'.¹⁶

The word '*Karma*' literally means action. Every action is triple in its nature, that is, it belongs partly to the past, partly to the present, partly to the future, it has come to mean the sequence of events, the law of causes and effects, the succession in which each effect follow its own cause.¹⁷

The term *karma* means mere action, but it reminds us that the consequences of action or *karma* are not separate from *Karma*. Consequence is the part of action, which cannot be divided from action.¹⁸

In *Brahmanas*, the term *Karma* refers to the performance of sacrifice. But in the *Upanishads*, *Karma* is presented as the knowledge that brings deliverance from the bondage of *karma* and death. Here the sacrificial rites are discredited.¹⁹ Our present day *karma* is a standard to calculate our future. "Death does not end the chain of cause and effect. The individual's karmic being is carried over from one life to the next, thus lending continuity to the *karmic* circle."²⁰ This relationship between cause and effect is dealt with by the concept of the law of *karma*. The law of *karma* is an eschatological corollary which gives the fear of punishment and the prospects of reward. *Karma* is one "true companion"²¹ that follows even after one's death. The law of *karma* means that every action has its own consequences.

1.2. Buddhist Response to Vedic Ethics

Vedic ethics was criticized and denied by Buddhism. The *Brāhminical* hierarchy in the Hindu society had made its ethical teachings favorable or them so as to fulfill their selfish motives. Therefore, the so called lower caste people were the real victims of this ethical system. The emergence of Buddhism gave hope to the oppressed and had become a way out from their deprived conditions. Consequently, a considerable number of conversions happened during the time. Lal Mani Joshi points out that: "The present form of *Mahabharata*, with its ethics and philosophy would have been impossible without Buddhism."²² Hence, Buddhism made significant impact on *Bhagavad Gītā*. The ethical teachings of *Gītā* try to answer the questions and criticism of Buddhism against the *Vedic* ethics. Thus *Gītā*, in fact, is an attempt to recall people back to Hinduism. A better knowledge about the ethical teachings of Buddhism will help us to understand the *Gītā* legibly.

1.3. The Ethical Teachings of Nishkāma Karma in the Bhagavad Gītā

The *Nishkāma karma* concept uses the terminologies like *Svadharmā*, *karma* and *lokasamgraha* to express its ethical concern.

1.3.1. The Concept of Svadharmā in the Gītā

Even though the *Gītā* uses *Svadharmā* only in a few places it is a significant ideology. Sri Aurobindo calls this as 'the true law or norm of one's nature'. Shankara compares *Svadharmā* with *Varna Dharma* in his interpretation of the *Gītā*.²³ But a careful analysis of the text (*Gita*) would reveal that, *Svadharmā* understands the ability of a person in par with his/her qualities or *Gunās*. Based on the context of the text, *Svadharmā* included caste duties and family duties, for e.g., Krishna's advice to Arjuna was to do his *Svadharmā*, i.e., to wage war. War is the duty of a *Ksatriya*. As a *Nishkāma karmin*, he/she has to do his/her *Svadharmā*. *Gītā* is not

¹⁴ John McKenzie, *Hindu Ethics: The Religious Quest of India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), p. 80.

¹⁵ John McKenzie, *Hindu Ethics: The Religious Quest of India*, p. 88.

¹⁶ Jagat Pal, *Karma, Dharma and Moksha* (Delhi: Abhijeet Publications, 2004), p. 2.

¹⁷ Pushpendra Kumar Sharma, *Hindu Religion and Ethics* (New Delhi: Asian Publication Services, 1979), p. 108.

¹⁸ Pushpendra Kumar Sharma, *Hindu Religion and Ethics*, p. 108.

¹⁹ K.L. Seshagiri Rao, "Karma in Hindu Thought-I", *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Vol. 10 (New Delhi: Indian Heritage Research Foundation, 2010) pp. 26-28.

²⁰ K.L. Seshagiri Rao, "Karma in Hindu Thought-I", p. 29.

²¹ K.L. Seshagiri Rao, "Karma in Hindu Thought-I", p. 35.

²² Lal Mani Joshi, *Brahmanism, Buddhism & Hinduism* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2007), p. 13.

²³ B. Kuppaswamy, *Dharma and Society: A Study in Social Values* (Delhi: The Macmillan Co. of India, 1977), pp. 22-23.



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offering any gift for doing this *dharma*, as it is one's duty.²⁴ From an ethical perspective, it was assumed that the same will lead to the wellbeing of a society.

Like *Vedas*, *Gītā* also talks about the four caste system. The eighteenth chapter in *Bhagavad Gītā* mentions about the four castes. "The duty of the Brahmanas, Kshetriyas, Vaiśyas and the Śūdras are clearly divided, O Arjuna, According to Gunas, born of their nature." (18: 41) Here, this concept is more related to the *Sāṅkhya* view. If the classification of caste is on the basis of *Gunas*, it cannot be on the basis of birth. This concept has been criticized in various ways. For instance, this view is silent on the question of how to find out the *Gunas* in a person.

The *Nishkāma karma* concept attributes prominence to *Grhastha Āśrama*, where, the *Dharmas* of *Brahmacharya* and *Sanyasa* are also part of this *Āśrama*. A *Nishkāma karmin* should have a thirst for acquiring knowledge and also he/she has to continue with his/her action even after reaching the highest (position). At this point, the *Gītā* deviates from the *Vedic* teachings on *Āśrama Dharma*.

Swami Vivekananda criticized the insistence on doing only the *dharma* of one's own caste. According to him, it is quite possible for one to naturally change from one caste to another. Otherwise how did Vishvamitra become a Brāhmin and Parashurama a *Ksatriya*?²⁵ Kuppuswamy states that the concept of *Svadharmā* in *Gītā* is universalistic. The *Svadharmā* of a person should be considered according to his/ her education and trainings that he/she has got.²⁶ But this is only an escapism from the reality. In a context in which, the lower castes were not allowed to get education, there was no scope for them to raise to the upper level of caste hierarchy. Therefore, the educated Brāhmins used the opportunity of education and maintained their *Svadharmā* at a higher level. Hence, the ethical concept of *Svadharmā* leads us to some ethical issues as well.

1.3.2. Karma and Caste System in the *Bhagavad Gītā*

In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the term *Karma* means action or deed and it should be done free from attachment like performing a sacrifice. The *Nishkāma karma* concept clearly mentions how one has to do one's *karmas*. Even God is cited as a model for such action. Here, one can see the incarnation of God as a *Nishkāma karmin*. *Karma* (Duty) in *Gītā* is performed in the social context. The cause for social disharmony is because of individuals' inaction. Therefore, practicing *karma* is not for the individuals but for the society.²⁷ According to Radhakrishnan, the *Gītā*'s division of society on the basis of *Guna* and *karma* is for the promotion of a stable and ideal society with all its complex characters. Society may be viewed as a functional organization and all functions which are essential for the wellbeing of a society are to be regarded as equal.²⁸

In the *Gītā*, caste system is exposed positively and it gives an explanation as well. According to it, the castes are divided on the basis of the quality of people. These qualities, in turn, determine the capacities of an individual. For the welfare of a society, various duties have to be performed. Thus, according to the *Gītā*, various capacities of the individuals are needed in different areas of a society. The duty of an individual is to perform his/her actions for the sake of social stability. The institution of caste in the *Bhagavad Gītā* contributes to the division of services in the society of such a kind. An individual can function only in accordance with the inherent *Gunas*.

Like *Vedas*, *Gītā* also regards God as the creator of the four castes. But it goes several steps ahead to state that all these four castes are the representation of the *Guna* and *karma* in each human being. Every action will have its own result, and even if we do the action without the desire for its fruits (*Nishkāma karma*), that action produces some result. However, the question of 'who will enjoy or experience the fruit' is absent in the *Nishkāma karma* concept.²⁹

Patanjali, in his *Mahabhashya* mentions, "Do not do any action; inactivity or inaction is conducive to supreme welfare."³⁰ The *Nishkāma karma* concept of *Gītā* criticizes such ideologies and promotes unselfish action for the welfare of the society. It implies

²⁴ Israel Selvanayagam, *The Dynamics of Hindu Traditions* (Bangalore: ATC, 1996), pp. 57-58.

²⁵ Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works* Vol. V (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1970), p. 377, cited by B. Kuppuswamy, *Dharma and Society*, p. 126.

²⁶ B. Kuppuswamy, *Dharma and Society*, p. 132.

²⁷ Madan Prasad Singh, *The Ethical Philosophy of the Gītā*, p. 54.

²⁸ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, p. 366.

²⁹ Yuvraj Krishan, *The Doctrine of Karma* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1997), p. 122.

³⁰ *Mahabhashya* 6.1.154, cited by Yuvraj Krishan, *The Doctrine of Karma*, p. 403.



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that the desireless performance of one's caste duties brings about changes in the society. And these changes are ultimately intended for the welfare of all beings.

1.4. Critical Analysis of the Ethical Teachings of *Nishkāma Karma*

The *Brāhminical* ideology of hierarchy is very much evident in the *Nishkāma karma* concept of *Bhagavad Gītā*. Verse 35 (Better is one's own duty (Svadharmā), though worthless than the priority in another's duty well performed; Better is death in one's own duty; the duty of another is dangerous) of the third chapter is a problematic statement. This verse seems to limit one's capacities and possibilities of growth and development. A human person, because of his *Svadharmā* is forced to move within his/her own moulds, and he/she cannot step into another's.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* attributes divine origin to the caste divisions. Moreover, various duties of each caste are also affirmed to be divinely sanctioned. *Gītā* upholds the validity of caste division and justifies it on religio-theological ground.³¹ The *Gītā*, therefore, insists that a person should always follow his/ her caste duties and should serve the higher castes. According to the *Gītā*, the caste is considered on the basis of three *Gunas* of each individual. All three *Gunas* are present in every individual, but one prevails over other two and becomes dominant in its effect. But even the *Gītā* is not clear as to how these *Gunas* are balanced by the individual.

Ethics of *Nishkāma Karma* lays more emphasis on the absence of attachment. But it is silent about the virtue of the duty to be performed. Further, the concept of justice is denied in the ethical dimension of *Nishkāma Karma*. According to *Gītā*, all are not equal. They are divided either in accordance with their heredity or qualities. The concept of justice finds its clear expression in the concept of *lokasamgraha* or welfare of the world. But this is also limited in its scope, for *lokasamgraha* has to be observed in relation to *Varna Dharma*.³² Not only justice but also freedom of an individual is also denied by *Gītā*. The *Gītā* understands freedom in terms of duty and duty in conformity with the *Varna Dharma*. While the *Gītā* favours freedom of will and action, it again limits itself to the *Varna Dharma*. It is freedom in a restricted sense.

1.5. Conclusion

The ethical teachings of *Gītā* are influenced by *Vedic* and Buddhist background. Buddhism is a response to the *Vedic* ethics and it challenged the *Brāhminic* hierarchy. Therefore, the ethical teachings of *Gītā* are attempts to respond or to challenge Buddhism and to reinforce caste system based on *Nishkāma karma*. But the *Brāhminic* influence of *Gītā* again gives divine sanction to the caste system and argues that fulfilling one's duty is important for attaining salvation. The *Varna Dharma* was misinterpreted by the dominants and was used to exploit the poor. Further, they justified the caste system by distorted exegesis and simply reinterpreted caste on the basis of the *Gunas* of each individual. Hence, they demanded the people to stick to their *Svadharmā* that would ultimately lead the society again back to the same dubious traps of caste discrimination.

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³¹ Kashi Nath Upadhyaya, *Early Buddhism and the Bhagavad Gītā*, p. 498.

³² B. Kuppuswamy, *Dharma and Society*, p. 63.