

## Exploration of *Niskāma Karma* in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata-Gītā*

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### Abstract

This exploratory study deals with the depiction of karma theory from Śrī Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna before the commencement of the Mahābhārata war. The philosophy of *niskāma karma* is a doctrine to consider being the ground stone of the entire Hindu philosophical outlook. The theory of karma is based on the *niskām-karma*. This research article addresses human beings to give up the attachment and the fruit regarding the karma. The objectives of this research are to highlight the importance of *niskāma karma* for human beings and to show how Śrī Kṛṣṇa motivates Arjuna to perform *niskām-karma*. The analysis is primarily based on Swāmī Vivekānanda's karma theory which confirms the realization of righteousness and God from *niskāma karma*. The researcher has used English translation of the Sanskrit text of Franklin Edgerton as the primary text. The findings of this investigation endow with evidences that the text has used *niskāma karma* to motivate human beings to do the same for self-satisfaction, righteousness, and justice in society following the footsteps of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. The conclusion of this article suggests that Śrī Kṛṣṇa is a far-sighted first motivational speaker of the earth to improve the activities of human beings and for the establishment of peace, justice, and righteousness on the earth.

*Keywords:* *Niskām-karma*, philosophy, spirituality, righteousness, perplexion

### Introduction

#### Tracing *Karmayoga* in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Gītā*

"Your right is to work only and never to the fruit thereof. Do not consider yourself to be the cause of the fruit of action; nor let your attachment be to inaction"<sup>1</sup> (*Śrīmad Bhāgavata-Gītā* 2: 47). Aforementioned philosophy of the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* shows that human beings

should give up the attachment to the object of desire and go on performing their activities. This idea attracts the attention of academicians highlighting that this text is not only about philosophy, theology, and spirituality but also instructs us to work as a part of life without any sign of attachment in it. On this ground, one can argue that *karma* (action) is *svadharma* fruit and result is not the matter of concern. Śrī Kṛṣṇa's teaching to Arjuna about the importance of *karma* is universal. In this context, Govinda Bhattacharjee in *Bhagavata Gita* quotes: "supreme duty is action without desire" (10). But action without desire does not mean the unmotivated action but acting with a sagacious thought of submission to God.

The literal meaning of the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* is "The Lord's Song" (Bhattacharjee 10). With the support of this idea, we can argue that Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the first motivational speaker on the earth. It is a precious literary work of the *Hindu* philosophy. The philosophical discussion of Śrī Kṛṣṇa is able to persuade the reluctant Arjuna to participate in the *Mahābhārata* war. Thus, the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* is a part of the *Mahābhārata*. The *Hindus* believe that the voice of Śrī Kṛṣṇa is scattered in the text. The lessons delivered by Śrī Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna before the war of the *Mahābhārata* can help anybody. In this connection, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan writes in confirmation with this opinion: "It is a book conveying lessons of philosophy, religion and ethics.... if the hold which is a work has on the mind of man in any clue to its importance" (519). The word *karma* is derived from the Sanskrit word *kri* (to do) and *Yog* means "union." Thus, *karmayoga* shows the path of union through activities.

If human beings have obligation to violate rules and ethics for the completion of their duty, they are perplexed like Arjuna in the *Mahābhārata*. In this regard, one can say that rules and ethics may be barriers for certain activities. Providing the ground for this opinion, Elizabeth Clare and Patricia Spadaro incorporate their view in *Karma and Reincarnation*: "*Karma* picks up when the golden rule leaves up" (9). To strengthen the argument, we can opine that *karma* is our benefactor and teacher to learn from our mistakes. If we keep on following rules and ethics, it will create problems in our actions. Arjuna's indecisiveness and dilemma in the *Mahābhārata* are the indecisiveness and the dilemma of everyone who has to engage in some form of activity. From the psychology of Arjuna, one postulates that the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* explores different dimensions of humans' life as an individual, as a social being and as a businessman. Here, the argument forwarded by R. S. Garg is considerable. He argues that the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* "deals both with practical life and ideal life" (13). This discussion heads to the analysis of the development of *karmayoga* in the *Bhāgavata-Gītā*.

### **Problems, Objectives and Methodology**

*Karma* theory is one of the fundamental features of the *Hindu* philosophy. Human conduct of the ethical world view is the ground stone of this theory. With the support of this idea, K. Tiwary argues that the *karma* theory "is said to be the entire universe which means that it is applied to both human and non-human beings" (21). Concerning such argument, one can

say that *karma* is the base for human and non-human beings to lead to their destination. Arjuna hesitates to participate enthusiastically in the war of the *Mahābhārata*. This creates problem for the study. In this endeavor, the study seeks answers to the following research questions:

- What is *niskāma karma* and how it is important for human beings?
- Why does Śrī Kṛṣṇa highlight *niskāma karma* to Arjuna in the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* ?

The major objectives of this study are to explore *niskāma karma* and its importance for human beings in the *Bhāgavata-Gītā*. It discusses how Śrī Kṛṣṇa motivates Arjuna to participate in the war of the *Mahābhārata* explaining the use of *niskāma karma* in the life of human beings.

To uncover the different dimensions inherent within the idea of *Karmayoga*, the researcher embraces qualitative research methodology. To support the notion of *karma*, there is the application of Swāmī Vivekānanda's *niskāma karma* theory. The theorist stresses on the idea of *karma* theory with his logic: "Give up all fruits of work; do good for its own sake; then alone will come perfect non-attachment" (60). The theorist stresses on the idea of *karma* in the life of human beings. For the analysis of this research, the researcher uses the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* translated and commented by Franklin Edgerton. Vivekananda stresses on the non-attachment like the precepts of Śrī Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna in the *Bhāgavata-Gītā*.

### Review of Literature

#### Place of *Bhāgavata-Gītā* in Sanskrit

The *Bhāgavata-Gītā* is a widely read text for the philosophy of *karmayoga*. Its philosophy draws the attention of many readers, writers and critics. They have expressed their views differently. In the logic of Bhaktivedanta Swāmī Prabhupāda: "Indeed, no work even compares in its revelations of man's essential nature, his environment, and ultimately, his relationship with God" (Xviii). The interpreter highlights the popularity of this text in relation to environment and God. The concept of S. Sharma in *Karmayoga* contradicts with Prabhupāda and he explicates that the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* addresses organizational problems (105). This idea extends the scope of *karmayoga* for modern people. In his counter argument, R.S. Garg discusses in his text *Gītā for Success in Modern Life* that "the *Gītā* does not talk of any religion at all. There is no mention of religion even at a single *śloka* (4). Responding to such claim, one argues that the text does not belong only for the sake of the *Hindus*. This idea extends the horizon of the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* to succeed in various fields in the life of human beings. Of course, it is a manual book to conduct our lives easily and successfully.

Unlike Prabhupāda and R.S. Garg, Franklin Edgerton ponders on the popularity of the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* in the western countries. On the basis of this relation, he opines: "It has even had some influence on European and American literature of the last century" (196). This argument supports that the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* has become a base for the interpretation of human

life. Due to the study of this text in America and the European countries, we can argue that the importance of the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* is realized in the West. It is not only the religious text but also the philosophy of life so that everybody should study it to succeed in his/her life. The evaluation of Swāmī Vivekānanda on Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* supports him as a greatest *yogi*. In his view, he is "the greatest *yogi* as well as the wisest man" (qtd. in Agarwal 26). In this context, it is important to evoke Śrī Kṛṣṇa as a source of knowledge and he establishes himself as a motivational speaker and the philosopher in the text.

Unlike the above writers, critics, and scholars, R. Hogan expresses his attitude on the moral perspective of the *Bhāgavata-Gītā*. In this regard, the critic emphasizes on empathy as the "disposition to adopt a broad moral perspective, to take the moral point of view" (316). Explaining this statement, one can argue that the idea of the critic shows perplexed mind of Arjuna who hesitates to wage war against his kiths and kins in the *Mahābharata*. Moving ahead in this line of logic, Smriti Agarwalla notes that the text instructs readers for "transformational leadership enhances organizational effectiveness" (13). She remarks that the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* is a ground stone to teach the skill of leadership for modern human beings. From the aforementioned reviews of the writers, critics, and scholars show that the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* is the nectarine ocean in which we can get every philosophy of life. Nevertheless, they have left the scope for the researchers to analyze this text from the perspective of Swāmī Vivekānanda's *niskāma Karma* theory.

## Results and Discussion

### Projection of *Niskāma Karma* in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata-Gītā*

The tendency of the body of human beings is to act; the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* states that the activities motivated by desires bind the soul into the cycle of birth and death. In this context, the text highlights the importance of *niskāma karma* from the view of Śrī Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna in the *Bhāgavata-Gītā*. It identifies the dimensions of *niskāma karma* in the absence of desires for achievements. As we go through the text, we can get the evidences in relation to *niskāma karma* from the philosophical ideas of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. In this connection, it is important to recall the precept of Śrī Kṛṣṇa: "But who takes delight in the self alone, / The man who finds contentment in the self, // And satisfaction only in the self, / For him there is found no action to perform"<sup>2</sup> (3:17). Elaborating this statement, one argues that self-satisfaction is more significant than the other activities. In a similar context, Bhaktivedanta Swāmī Prabhupāda incorporates his opinion: "By such clearing of consciousness, one becomes fully confident of his eternal position in relationship with the Supreme" (190). In the general understanding of most readers and writers, everybody works for the fulfillment of his needs and desires but Śrī Kṛṣṇa inspires us to work for self-contentment.

Many scholars and academicians disagree in the concept of *Niskāma Karma* of Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata-Gītā*. *Niskāma Karma* largely remained unexplored in the modern world by academicians. To seek answers to such concerns, Śrī Kṛṣṇa explicates: "Abandoning all desires, what/ Man moves free from longing, // Without self- interest and egoism, / He goes to peace"<sup>3</sup> (2:71). Aforementioned example confirms that human beings should not be the slave of their senses for better result from their activities. If the consequence of a work is negative, the person becomes unhappy. In this regard, Jayadayal Goyandaka remarks that "he regards the body as his self and cannot conceive of his existence apart from the body" (135). From such perspective, it can be argued that the interpreter postulates that a person should not think that his body is everything. If his activities are related to satisfy his body, he has his obligation to be selfish and cruel. On the basis of this relation, Ramananda Prasad notes that one should abandon selfish desire to become free from longing (40). The above discussion throws light about the selfless *karma* as the precepts of Śrī Kṛṣṇa with Arjuna before the commencement of the *Mahābhārata* war.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa has pointed out referring to Arjuna that he should act in *yoga*. Keeping it at the centre of attention, he discusses: "Abiding in discipline perform actions, / Abandoning attachment, Dhananjaya // Being indifferent to success or failure; / Discipline is defined as indifference"<sup>4</sup> (*Bhāgavata-Gītā* 2:48). This argument supports the point that spiritual progress is necessary from the activities of human beings. Satya P. Agarwal has similar finding and the interpreter associates his ideas that "men as well as women are equally entitled to make spiritual progress" (35). This realization of the selfless activities in our lives shows that our *karmas* should belong to our spiritual works. Responding to such claims, Devdutt Pattanaik focuses that "*karma* is both action and reaction" (76). This standpoint justifies that both *sakāma* (action with the intention of result) and *niskāma* (action without the intention of result) are related to actions and reactions. Thus, it is apt to state that our action and reaction should be spiritual for the sake of self-satisfaction.

During the time of motivating Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukṣhetra, Śrī Kṛṣṇa gives an example of King Janaka to clarify *karma*. In his words: "For only through, perfection/ Attained Janaka and others. // Also, for the mere control of the world/ Having regarded, thou shouldst act"<sup>5</sup> (*Bhāgavata-Gītā* 3:20). To strengthen the argument on the selfless *karma*, the motivational speaker expresses that king such as Janaka are conscious kings for the sake of *niskāma karma*. King Janaka is the father of Sitā and father-in-law of Lord Rāma. The king did everything for the sake of righteousness, truth, and justice. In this connection, Śrī Kṛṣṇa convinces Arjuna that justice, truth, and righteousness are better than the personal and familial relationship. In Prabhupāda's words: "One who is situated in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, may not have any interest in the world" (199). In this line of thought, one can argue that Kṛṣṇa consciousness surpasses the familial, personal, and social relationship. *Karma*, which relates to

*dharma* (righteousness), is better than other works. On this ground, R.S. Garg incorporates his notion: "Problem arises when one desires the result" (154). This idea further points to the reality that the activities of human beings should not be initiated with certain motive. If yes, they feel dramatic tensions in their minds. Thus, the presentation of king Janaka for the clarification of a good ruler is a model to establish him as an ideal king for the modern readers.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa claims what *karma* is in the *Bhāgavata- Gītā*. He states that *karmas* of human beings should be separated from their minds and senses. In the similar beliefs, he highlights: "Disciplined in discipline, with purified self, / Self-subdued, with senses overcome, // His self become the self of all beings, / Even acting, he is not stained"<sup>6</sup> (5:7). The argument of *karma* turns out to be valid when Kṛṣṇa advises humans to control senses for better result of their *karmas*. In this connection, B.G. Tilak expresses his opinion: "Hence, the *Gītā* recommends that we keep our organs under control and allow them to perform the various activities, not for a selfish purpose, but apathetically, without desire, and for the welfare of others" (3). From this standpoint, what he argues seems to be plausible and believable. It proves that the *karma* which is related to the satisfaction to our senses creates problems for others. The aforementioned example confirms that there should not be the sign of selfishness in our activities. Elaborating this argument, Ashish Rastogi and Surya Prakash Pati are apt to state that "A *karma yogi* does not expect even a return of love, appreciation, gratitude or admiration from the people he is serving" (57). Explaining this statement, we note that a *karma yogi* should perform his activities without expecting anything from others. It shows the characteristics of a real *karma yogi* in the *Bhāgavata-Gītā*.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa gives another example of a *Sanyāsī* (renouncer) to Arjuna to highlight *niskāma karma* in the *Bhāgavata-Gītā*. Basing his interpretation on such idea, he points out: "Not interested in the fruit of action, / Who does action that is required// He is possessor of both renunciation and discipline; / Not he who builds no sacred fires and does no acts"<sup>7</sup> (6:1). It proves that *Bhāgavata-Gītā* presents sufficient evidences to prove the validity of *niskāma karma*. A *Sanyāsī* realizes that he is free from the material duties. In this line of thought, Parahansa Yogananda remarks: "The *Sanyāsī* emphasizes the external conditions of desirelessness and nonattachment in order to maintain the consciousness of God in his activities" (586). To add more bricks to this line of argument, one can say that human beings should follow the activities of *Sanyāsī* for the performance of selfless *karmas*. In this regard, Elizabeth Clare and Patricia Spadaro stress on the same idea with their logic that "Your soul knows why you are in *karmic* relationship" (95). The analysis of this text discussed in this subject shows the importance of *niskāma karma* citing an example of a *Sanyāsī*. Like the *Sanyāsī*, everybody should realize from soul the distinction between goodness and badness.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa reaches the level of thinking everything from the level of *niskāma karma*. Arjuna represents all human beings who are reluctant to perform actions against ethics. It is

important to remember that Śrī Kṛṣṇa does not show crave for the fruits of actions. Concerning such argument, he elaborates: "Actions do not stain Me, / I have no yearning for the fruit of actions./Who comprehends Me thus/ Is not bound by actions"<sup>8</sup> (*Bhāgavata-Gītā* 4:14). During the time of teaching about the importance of *karma*, Śrī Kṛṣṇa notes his attitude to *karma*. He expresses that he is not responsible in the activities of human beings and other creatures. He claims that he is the creator of the material world even though he is not affected by the activities of this world. With the similar belief, Mackenzie Brown focuses on the fact that one must not neglect established duties (199). This view highlights the idea that everybody should do his *karma* selflessly. In the general understanding of most people, every action has certain motif but the view of Śrī Kṛṣṇa contradicts this notion in relation to *niskāma karma*. In this context, the idea of Bimal Chandra Gogoi is reliable. The analyst argues: "A true *karmayogi* offers the fruits of action to God and works for the benefit of the society without any pride"(72). If one dedicates his actions to God, there is no sign of selfishness in his *karma*. In the same way, Śrī Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna to participate in the war thinking that it is his selfless work. To fight in the war for righteousness is also the selfless work.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa, being the spokes person of the *Bhāgavata-Gītā*, gives continuation in his selfless *karmas* in the cosmos. In his words: " And Me these actions do not/ Bind, Dhananjaya, // Sitting in as one sitting out/ Unattached to these actions"<sup>9</sup> (9:9). Commenting upon this argument, we can say that Śrī Kṛṣṇa is not attached to his *karma* and he suggests Arjuna and other human beings to follow him. In this connection, Kṛṣṇa establishes himself as a role model in favor of selfless *karma*. Responding to such claim, Ricardo Sousa Silvestre argues:"Our actions have also moral and psychological effects, which might occur either in this life or in future ones" (4). With the support of this idea, one can opine that the *karmas* of human beings should relate to morality for the well-being of others. If *karma* has its relation to *dharma*, it may not create problems in the life of human beings. Basing his argument on such idea, Mikel Burley opines that *karma* and rebirth describe the situation of human beings (965). Aforementioned argument confirms that the *karmas* of human beings are not related to their lives and their effects become the base for the sake of next birth. In this situation, one can elaborate on *karmas* without the sign of selfishness which make a person happy in this life and may have its connection to the next birth.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa highlights the superiority of *karmayoga* to *jñānayoga* to Arjuna in the *Bhāgavata-Gītā*. Elaborating on his argument, he states: "Renunciation and discipline of action/ Both lead to supreme weal./ But of these two, rather than renunciation of action,/ Discipline of action is superior"<sup>10</sup> (5:2). In this context, it is interesting to say that good *karma* surpasses *jñāna* (knowledge) so that modern human beings are encouraged to perform fruitive activities. With this idea at the centre of attention, Prabhupāda intensifies:"But action in Kṛṣṇa consciousness automatically helps one to escape the result of fruitive action so that one needs

not descend to the material platform" (294). This argument supports the point that humans should be more conscious about Kṛṣṇa from their actions in relation to him than to have knowledge about him. It reveals that good *karma* is the root of *dharma* as the precept of Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata-Gītā*. In the same line of argument, Zubin R. Mulla and Venkat R. Krishnan are apt to state good *karma* as the basis of "moral development" (2). With all these logical descriptions, one can remark that Śrī Kṛṣṇa motivates Arjuna to participate in the war of the *Mahābhārata* considering that it is his *karma* to fight for truth, justice, and righteousness of the Pandava Brothers.

### Conclusion

The *Bhāgavata-Gītā* is not only the scripture of the *Hindus* but also the *sāstra* of all religions, ages, sexes so that everyone at any level can get nourishment. The problem faced by Arjuna at the beginning of the *Mahābhārata* war, is the problem human beings face at every moment of their lives. Like Arjuna, if a person takes shelter of Śrī Kṛṣṇa (*budhi*), by surrendering his ego, then *viveka* (wisdom) is sure to care him, leading him to the right direction. The welfare of good humans should be the object of all *karmas* like the precepts of Śrī Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna. *Karma* theory of the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* provides the social content to religion and the objective of our actions should be the welfare of the world. The significance of the *Bhāgavata-Gītā* and its instructive precepts of *niskāma karma*, is relevant and useful even at present. *Niskāma Karma* shows a realization of different aspects of spiritual life. The text indicates that human beings have obligation to participate in a battle as a part of life. In this condition, he should fight for the sake of justice, truth, and righteousness.

The *Bhāgavata-Gītā* traces that everybody should perform his prescribed duty to have good fruits of actions. The universal appeal of this text is *niskāma karma* should be motto of modern humans. If someone gives priority to work rather than its achievement, he realizes satisfaction while doing works. Human beings are directed for the performance of certain activities and they should not show the sign of attachment to their *karmas*. The lesson of this text is having universal value, which does not only protect our society from spiritual deadlock, but also saves the universal brotherhood and peaceful co-existence on the earth. In this way, *niskāma karma* operates in the entire domain of the universe. Non-attached activities are essential for human beings for attaining freedom from the impediments of *karma*.

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### Appendix

1. कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।  
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ २-४७ ॥
2. यस्त्वात्मरतिरेव स्यादात्मतृप्तश्च मानवः ।  
आत्मन्येव च सन्तुष्टस्तस्य कार्यं न विद्यते ॥ ३-१७ ॥
3. विहाय कामान्यः सर्वान्पुमांश्चरति निःस्पृहः ।  
निर्ममो निरहङ्कारः स शान्तिमधिगच्छति ॥ २-७१ ॥
4. योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय ।  
सिद्ध्यसिद्ध्योः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग उच्यते ॥ २-४८ ॥
5. कर्मणैव हि संसिद्धिमास्थिता जनकादयः ।  
लोकसङ्ग्रहमेवापि सम्पश्यन्कर्तुमर्हसि ॥ ३-२० ॥
6. योगयुक्तो विशुद्धात्मा विजितात्मा जितेन्द्रियः ।  
सर्वभूतात्मभूतात्मा कुर्वन्नपि न लिप्यते ॥ ५-७ ॥
7. अनाश्रितः कर्मफलं कार्यं कर्म करोति यः ।  
स संन्यासी च योगी च न निरग्निर्न चाक्रियः ॥ ६-१ ॥
8. न मां कर्माणि लिम्पन्ति न मे कर्मफले स्पृहा ।  
इति मां योऽभिजानाति कर्माभिर्न स बध्यते ॥ ४-१४ ॥
9. न च मां तानि कर्माणि निबध्नन्ति धनञ्जय ।  
उदासीनवदासीनमसक्तं तेषु कर्मसु ॥ ९-९ ॥
10. संन्यासः कर्मयोगश्च निःश्रेयसकरावुभौ ।  
तयोस्तु कर्मसंन्यासात्कर्मयोगो विशिष्यते ॥ ५-२ ॥