

## THE CONCEPT OF NIŠKĀMA KARMA : TELEOLOGICAL OR DEONTOLOGICAL?

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The purpose of this paper is to maintain the view through analysis that the concept of *niškāma karma* of the Bhagavadgītā is not a deontological concept. It is a teleological concept because it logically rests on the notion of an end, that is, *mokṣa* and *lokasamgraha*. It does not logically rest on itself. Those who interpret the Bhagavadgītā's concept of *niškāma karma* in a deontological sense and compare it with the Kantian concept of duty by delinking it from the concept of an end of any kind do commit a mistake to my understanding. The concept of *niškāma karma* should be interpreted and understood in a teleological sense of the term by taking into account the whole context of the Bhagavadgītā's philosophy and not just on the basis of certain selective verses of it as it is generally done by some of the thinkers. The reason for it is that because the mere selective textual interpretation of certain verses of the Bhagavadgītā does not give us full understanding of the Bhagavadgītā's concept of *niškāma karma*. The whole text of the Bhagavadgītā will have to be understood and interpreted in the light of the context from which it has originated and not in its abstraction. And when we do this, we find that the Bhagavadgītā's concept of *niškāma karma* does logically rest on the notion of some specific ends. The Bhagavadgītā prescribes the doctrine of *niškāma karma* as a means not only to attain *mokṣa*, the spiritual end, but also to protect and maintain social goodness which consists, according to it, in the doing of *dharma* in detached manner. *Niškāma karma* as such is not a kind of duty. It is only a particular mode or manner of the doing of duty. To substantiate all these points, let me first begin with the analysis of the Bhagavadgītā's concepts of *niškāma karma*.

When we reflect upon the concept of *niṣkāma karma* of the Bhagavadgītā, we find that it is not a simple concept. It is a composite concept because it is made up of two different concepts i. e. *niṣkāma* and *karma*. The concept of *karma* is highly an ambiguous concept. It has been used in varieties of senses in different Indian systems of thought. But in the Bhagavadgītā the concept of *karma* has been used without any ambiguity in the sense of action<sup>1</sup> and is action that what is done. The concept of *niṣkāma* is also a composite concept because it is made up of two different concepts i. e. *niḥ* and *kāma*. The concept of *kāma* like the concept of *karma* is highly vague concept. It has been used by the different scholars in different senses in different contexts. But in the context of the Bhagavadgītā, it is generally used in the sense of sensuous desires<sup>2</sup> and not in the sense of the satisfaction of sensuous desires and the notion of desire is conceptually linked with the notion of attachment. In fact, one can say very well that desire always springs from the attachment to the object of pleasure. The prefix *niḥ* is employed in the Bhagavadgītā in the sense of negation or denial<sup>3</sup> (of *kāma*). Following these etymological meanings of the concept of *niṣkāma and karma*, the concept of *niṣkāma karma*, thus, is translated by the different interpreters of the Bhagavadgītā in terms of desireless action and not in terms of desireful action (*sakāma karma*). Although in the phrase '*niṣkāma karma*', '*niṣkāma*' qualifies *karma* but actually it is not an adjective of the *karma*. It is an adjective of the *kartā* because it is only the *kartā* who can be said to be desireless and not *karma*. So when '*niṣkāma karma*' is translated in the terms of desireless action, it should be taken to mean 'an action done by the doer in desireless manner or spirit.'

The concepts of desireful and desireless actions are two complementary concepts of action. And being complementary concepts of action they divide all actions into them exclusively and exhaustively. All actions fall either in the category of desireful actions or in the category of desireless actions but not in both. Which means in other words, that if any action is a desireful action, it cannot be a desireless action; and if any action is a desireless action, it cannot be a desireful action. This is analytically true in the light of their dichotomic relationship itself. Since the concepts of desireful and desireless action divide the whole universe of actions into them exclusively and exhaustively, we cannot say that the concept of action logically rests on the concepts of desireful action and

desireless action; nor can we say that it is identical with either of them. They also cannot be said to be grounded on the concept of action because they stand in the relation of species and genus, and the relation of species and genus is of such kind that the concept of genus does not logically rest on the concept of its species.

Since the Bhagavadgītā classifies all actions into the categories of desireful (*sakāma*) and desireless (*niṣkāma*) actions<sup>4</sup>, therefore the question naturally arises: on what ground does the Bhagavadgītā classify all actions into the categories of desireful and desireless action? Does it classify on the ground of the presence or the absence of an element of desire from action? The answer to my mind seems to be negative. If we accept it, it goes against the fundamental thesis of the Bhagavadgītā, that is *karma yoga*. Because the notion of the absence of an element of desire from action involves in its meaning 'having no desire for action' and the notion of 'having no desire for action' involves in its meaning 'the renunciation of action'. The renunciation of action consists in the giving up of action and the giving up of action is equivalent to non-action (*akarma*) which the Bhagavadgītā does not propound anywhere to the best of my knowledge. Instead of propounding the philosophy of non-action or in-action the Bhagavadgītā in fact propounds the philosophy of action. If it were not so, the Lord Kṛṣṇa would not have taught Arjuna the philosophy of *karma yoga*<sup>5</sup> throughout in his discourse of the Bhagavadgītā because the philosophy of *karma yoga* consists in the practice of the philosophy of *niṣkāma karma*. He would have taught him the philosophy of non-action (*akarma*) or the renunciation of action (*naiṣkarmya*) which he did not do. He rather told him that even if one wishes to give up action, one cannot do so<sup>6</sup> because of one's own psycho-physical make up. According to the Bhagavadgītā, every man is bound by his own nature to perform some or the other kind of action. Moreover, *niṣkāma karma* is such a kind of action which a man always consciously intends to do it and the act of intending is just not possible without desiring of it because the notion of the act of intending always conceptually involves in its meaning a reference to the notion of desiring. Thus we cannot say that *niṣkāma karma* is not an intentional action because it is always done with intention of doing it and to intend something means to aim at it. If this be the case, then we will have to admit that the concept of *niṣkāma karma* does not exclude from its meaning an element of desire for the doing of action. If any one

says that the concept of *niṣkāma karma* does not involve in its meaning the notion of an element of desire for the doing of action, then I would say that he does not know the meaning of the concept of *niṣkāma karma* of the Bhagavadgītā at all. Because the concept of action conceptually involves in its meaning the notion of an element of desire for the doing of action and the doing of action is not just possible without performing certain set of conscious activities because to do means to bring about certain changes in the existing states of affair and that is possible only when we make conscious efforts and conscious effort we cannot make without performing certain set of the desired activities. Therefore to avoid the problem we will have to admit that the Bhagavadgītā's concept of *niṣkāma karma* does essentially involve in its meaning the notion of desire for the doing of action.

If there is some grain of truth in what I have just said above, then from this it is quite evident that the Bhagavadgītā does not rest its dichotomy of desireful and desireless actions on the dichotomy of the presence or the absence of an element of desire from action. If the Bhagavadgītā does not rest its dichotomy of desireful and desireless actions on the dichotomy of the presence or the absence of an element of desire from action, then the question again arise: On what ground does the Bhagavadgītā rest its dichotomy of desireful and desireless actions? Does it rest on the ground of 'having or not having the origin of action in desire? This answer also seems to be negative. Because the Bhagavadgītā clearly defines the notion of *niṣkāma karma* in the sense of 'not having any desire for the fruit of action'. If this be so, then the dichotomy of desireful and desireless actions will have to be understood in terms of the dichotomy of 'having or not any desire for the fruit of action.' And to say this is not equivalent to saying that the Bhagavadgītā rests its dischotomy of desireful and desireless actions on the ground of 'having or not having origin of action in desire'. The latter thesis does not logically follow from the former one because without even having any desire for the fruit of action, an action can be said to have its origin in desire. Because the notion of desire for the doing of action is not logically grounded in the notion of the desire for the fruit of action. Furthermore, the notion of action is conceptually different and distinct from the notion of the result of action. And to say this is not to say that there is no logical connection between the two. Both the notions no doubt are logically connected but are quite different and distinct. This is evident from the

fact of their relationship itself. Because the notion of action always comes logically prior to the result of action and what comes logically prior to cannot be said to be grounded on that what comes logically after it. Since the notion of action is not logically grounded in the notion of the result of action, an action can be conceived to have its origin in desire without even the doer's connecting it with the result of that action. That is the reason why I say that giving up the desire for the fruit of action should not be interpreted to mean giving up all kinds of desires including the desire for the doing of action.

One might here say that the above given argument does not hold good at all because the desire for the fruit of action can also be the source of the origin of desire for the doing of action. If this be so, then the latter thesis, it could be said very well that it does logically follow from the former one. And if the latter thesis does logically follow from the former one, then it would be incorrect to say that the *Bhagavadgītā* does not classify all actions into the categories of desireful and desireless actions on the ground of 'having or not having the source of their origin in desire'. But this line of argument to my mind does not have any logical strength. Because even if we assume that the desire for the fruit of action can also be the source of the origin of action, it does not logically follow from this that the desire for the doing of action always originates from the desire for the fruit of action. Because the desire for the doing of action can also always originate from the mere idea of the intrinsic rightness of an action and the idea of the intrinsic rightness of an action does not logically rest on the idea of the fruit of action. Above all, the fruit of action need not always be the objective of the desire for the doing of action. Because an action itself also can become the objective of the desire for the doing of action. If this be so, then we cannot say that the latter thesis validly follows from the former one. And if the latter thesis does not validly follow from the former one, then it would be incorrect to say that the *Bhagavadgītā* classifies all actions into the categories of desireful and desireless actions exclusively and exhaustively on the basis of the dichotomy of 'having or not having their origin in desire'.

The dichotomy of desireful and desireless actions of the *Bhagavadgītā*, therefore, will have to be understood in the sense of 'having or not having any desire for the fruit of action'. Because it is on the basis of the dichotomy of

'having or not having any desire for the fruit of action' the Bhagavadgītā classifies all actions into the categories of desireful and desireless actions. Desireful and desireless actions the Bhagavadgītā also calls as *āśakta* (attached) and *anāśakta* (detached) actions respectively. Since the concept of *niṣkāma karma* as such does not conceptually in its meaning the notion of desirelessness, we cannot define it in absolutistic sense of the term because the notion of desirelessness in absolutistic sense of the term implies the negation of the desire for the doing of action. To negate the desire for the doing of action from action means giving up of the action which is equivalent to non-action (*akarma*) and this the Bhagavadgītā's concepts of *niṣkāma karma* does not essentially involve in it. In fact, the Bhagavadgītā's concept of *niṣkāma karma* is neither grounded in nor connected with the notions of in-activity and abandonment of action. It is rather grounded in the notion of the activity and the notion of activity consists in the doing of action and action without the desire of doing it is not just possible. What the concept of *niṣkāma karma* in fact excludes from its meaning is the hope or the desire or the attachment for the fruit of action from action and not the element of desire as such. The problem arises when we try to interpret the concept of *niṣkāma karma* in absolutistic sense by de-contextualizing it and not otherwise. The Bhagavadgītā nowhere says that a man becomes bound when he performs action with the desire for the doing of action including the desires for *mokṣa* and *lokasamgraha*. It only says that a man becomes bound when he acts from the desire for fruit of action and the notion of desire is conceptually different and distinct from the notion of the desire for the fruit of action. Their relation is a relation of genus and species. In this regard the Bhagavadgītā in fact assumes that a man has conceptual ability to distinguish between action and its result because without assuming it the performing of *niṣkāma karma* just is not possible at all. The concept of *niṣkāma karma* of the Bhagavadgītā does not exclude from its meaning all kinds of desire. It excludes from its meaning only the notion of the desire for the fruit of action and the notion of desire for the fruit of action is conceptually different from that of the notion of the desire for the doing of action. We can say from the point of view of the desire for the doing of action that *niṣkāma karma* is also a kind of *niṣkāma karma*. But this line of interpretation of the concept of *niṣkāma karma* should not be muddled with that of its 'not having

any desire for the fruit of action'. To say this is not to say that both the senses of *niṣkāma karma* are mutually incompatible. Both the senses of *niṣkāma karma* are mutually quite compatible because not having any desire for the fruit of action can also be the source of the origin of the desire for the doing of action. But the coincidence between the two when if it exists, it exists only as a matter of fact and not as a matter of logic.

Furthermore, the notion of 'not having any desire for the fruit of action' is conceptually different from that of notion of 'the fruit of action'. The act of desiring for the fruit of action is the characteristic feature of the mind. It is not the characteristic feature of the action. While the fruit of action is a casual characteristic feature of the action and not of the mind. Since the act of desiring for the fruit of action is the characteristic feature of the mind, it is always possible to control it by controlling the mind. But this is not possible in case of the fruit of action. That is the reason why the *Bhagavadgītā* said that one should do duty for the sake of duty and the result is not thy concern. Not only this, the act of desiring for the fruit of action is logically independent of the actual fruit of action. Because the act of desiring for the fruit of action always comes logically prior to that of the actual fruit of action and what comes logically prior to cannot be said to be grounded on that what comes logically after it. This is analytically true. Even if we assume for the sake of argument that the notion of the fruit of action originates from the desire for the fruit of action, it does not establish the thesis that the notion of the desire for the fruit of action is logically grounded in the existence of the fruit of action. What it in fact establishes is that the notion of the desire for the fruit of action conceptually involves in its meaning the notion of the fruit of action. And to say this is not equivalent to saying that it is grounded on the existence of the fruit of action. There is no doubt that the philosophy of *Bhagavadgītā* does causally connect the fruit of action with the act of desiring of it. But to say this is not to say that the desire for the fruit of action is not conceptually different from and logically independent of the existence of the fruit of action. If it were so, the act of desiring for the fruit of action would not have been just possible without having the realization of the fruit of action which is not the case. Above all, to say that the act of desiring for the fruit of action is conceptually different from and logically independent of the fruit of action is not to say that

there cannot be any casual relation between the two. The act of desiring for the fruit of action no doubt does involve in its meaning the notion of the fruit of action. But the notion of the fruit of action, which it involves in its meaning, is not the notion of the actual fruit of action. What it involves in its meaning is the notion of the intended fruit of action which the doer thinks before performing of the action that it would be resulting from his action if it is performed and this is quite different from the actual fruit of action. But to say this, however, does not amount to saying that what is intended cannot be the actual fruit of action. What is intended can also be the actual fruit of action. This is logically quite possible. But the coincidence between the two when if it exists, it exists only as a matter of fact and not as a matter of logic.

An objection may be proffered against my view put forward by saying that if we include the notion of desire for the doing of action, including the desire for not having any desire for the fruit of action into the meaning of the concept of *niṣkāma karma*, the Bhagavadgītā's concept of *niṣkāma karma* becomes a self-contradictory concept because it goes against the notion of *niṣkāma* contained in it and consequently it becomes impossible to act on it. But this problem to my mind does arise only when we interpret the notions of *sakāma* (desireful) and *niṣkāma* (desireless) karma in absolutistic sense of the term and not in relativistic sense. If we do not interpret it in relativistic sense, we cannot surely incorporate the notion of desire for the doing of action including the desire for not having any desire for the fruit of action into the meaning of the concept of *niṣkāma karma*. And this point my analysis of the concept of *niṣkāma karma* does take care of because I have tried to analyze the concept of *niṣkāma karma* in relativistic sense and not in absolutistic sense, that is, in the sense of 'negation of the desire for the fruit of action from action' and not in the sense of 'negation of all kinds of desires including the desire for the doing action'. That is the reason why I say that the proffered objection does not hold good against my analysis of the concept of *niṣkāma karma* of the Bhagavadgītā.

But my analysis of the concept of *niṣkāma karma* is not yet complete because the notion of 'not having any desire for the fruit of action', in terms of which the Bhagavadgītā defines the concept of *niṣkāma karma* requires further analysis. The phrase 'not having any desire for the fruit of action' could be



interpreted in two different ways: relativistic and absolutistic. When it is interpreted in absolutistic sense, it is understood in the sense of 'having no desire for the fruit of action whatsoever'. The phrase 'having no desire for the fruit of action whatsoever' is interpreted to mean 'being completely indifferent or unattached to the fruit of action of all kinds, positive and negative'. But when the phrase 'not having any desire for the fruit of action' is interpreted in relativistic sense, it is understood in the sense of 'having no desire for the fruit of action of some specific type'. The phrase 'having no desire for the fruit of action of some specific type' is interpreted to mean completely indifferent or unattached to the fruit of action of some specific kind. Those thinkers<sup>8</sup> who interpret the phrase 'not having any desire for the fruit of action' in absolutistic sense say that the doctrine of the *niṣkāma karma* of the *Bhagavadgītā*, like the Kantian doctrine of duty, prescribes actions for the sake of actions and not for the sake of any thing else. In other words, according to them the doctrine of *niṣkāma karma* of the *Bhagavadgītā*, like the Kantian doctrine of duty, enjoins actions upon the individuals categorically and not hypothetically. In their view, the concept of *niṣkāma karma* thus, is essentially connected with the notion of unconditionality. But those thinkers who<sup>9</sup> interpret the phrase 'not having any desire for the fruit of action' in relativistic sense say that the doctrine of *niṣkāma karma* of the *Bhagavadgītā*, like the Kantian doctrine of duty, does not prescribe actions just for the sake of actions. It prescribes actions as a means for the attainment of some specific ends i.e. *mokṣa* and *lokasamagraha*. In other words, according to them the doctrine of *niṣkāma karma* prescribes actions hypothetically but not categorically. In their view, the concept of *niṣkāma karma*, thus, is essentially connected with the notion of some specific end. Both the interpretations no doubt are conceptually different. The first interpretation, that is, the absolutistic interpretation dismisses completely the idea of result or end from the idea of *niṣkāma karma*. While the second interpretation, that is, the relativistic interpretation does not dismiss completely the idea of result or end from the idea of *niṣkāma karma*. It dismisses only the idea of some specific type of the result of action from the idea of *niṣkāma karma* i. e. selfish ends and to say this is not equivalent to saying that the idea of *niṣkāma karma* excludes completely from its meaning the idea of result or end of an action which the first line of interpretation does. But then the question arises : Which interpretation is

correct of the two? When we judge this question on the background of the whole philosophy of the Bhagavadgītā, we find that the first interpretation cannot be said to be valid at all. Because if it were so, the Bhagavadgītā would not have said in the Chapter III that one ought to perform actions obligatory upon him as a member of the society for the sake of *lokasamgraha*<sup>10</sup> and the concept of *lokasamgraha* does involve in its meaning doing good to others. Instead of saying this, it would have said that one ought to perform actions obligatory upon him just for the sake of action which the Bhagavadgītā did not do so. The very fact that the Bhagavadgītā advocates the view that one ought to perform actions obligatory upon him for the sake of *lokasamgraha* shows that obligatory actions i. e. *svadharma*, *sāmānyadharmā* and *varṇa dharmā* are not conceptually unconnected with the notion of the end. They are covertly teleological in character. But to say that the Bhagavadgītā does connect the concept of *dharma* with the notion of *lokasamgraha* is not to say that *lokasamgraha* is the only end with which the Bhagavadgītā connects the notion of *dharma* as a means. Because the Bhagavadgītā also connects the notion of *dharma* (duty) with the notion *mokṣa*<sup>11</sup> (liberation). The entire teaching of Bhagavadgītā rests on the notion of *dharma* and the notion of *dharma* the Bhagavadgītā logically rests on the notions of *mokṣa* and *lokasamgraha*. In other words, the individual and social well-brings are structurally inbuilt into the Bhagavadgītā's conception of *dharma*. But both the ends are characteristically different. *Lokasamgraha* is a non-personalistic and worldly end while *mokṣa* is a personalistic and non-worldly end. But in spite of their being characteristically different there is no conflict between the two in the philosophy of Bhagavadgītā. So it does not matter whether we relate the concept of *niṣkāma karma* with the notion of *lokasamgraha* or with the notion *mokṣa*, it does rest on the notion of an end. If this view of mine is correct, then the concept of *niṣkāma karma* cannot be interpreted in absolutistic sense of the term at all without putting certain conceptual restriction on its use. It cannot be said to be a deontological concept. It is a teleological concept. The doctrine of *niṣkāma karma* of the Bhagavadgītā is not a formal doctrine which can be said to be devoid of the individual and social contents. The doctrine of *niṣkāma karma* is a doctrine of action which was advocated by the Bhagavadgītā to protect *dharma* in the society.

And the theory of *dharma* was being formulated keeping in view the goodness of both the individual and society. When we understand the concept of *niṣkāma karma* of the Bhagavadgītā from this angle, we find that it is a teleological concept. It is not a deontological concept as it is generally understood by the thinkers both Indian as well as Western.

### NOTES

- 1 *Srimad Bhagavadgītā* Chapter III 6.7.8.9.
- 2 *Ibid.* Chapter XVIII 24.34.
- 3 *Ibid.* Chapter 49.
- 4 *Ibid.* Chapter XVIII 23.
- 5 *Ibid.* Chapter III 7.
- 6 *Ibid.* Chapter 4.5.
- 7 *Ibid.* Chapter IV 19-21.
- 8 Rajendra Prasad; *Karma Causation and Retributive Morality*, New Delhi, 1989. p.245.
- 9 R. K. Gupta; 'A look at the Ethics of the Gita', *J.C.P.R.* Vol.XI, No.2, 1994, p.122-125.
- 10 *Srimad Bhagavadgītā* Chapter III. 20.
- 11 *Ibid.* Chapter III. 19

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