UNIT 3: GĪTĀ'S VIEW OF KARMAYOGA

UNIT STRUCTURE

3.1 Learning Objectives
3.2 Introduction
3.3 What is Gītā
3.4 Gita's view of Karmayoga
3.4.1 Interpretation of the concept of Niskāma Karma
3.4.2 Niskāma karma: Metaphysical and Epistemological concept
3.4.3 Pravṛtti and Nivṛtti
3.4.4 Svadharma
3.4.5 Mokṣa: The Supreme Goal of Human Life
3.5 Gīta's karmayoga and Kant's Deontological Ethics
3.6 Let us sum up
3.7 Further Readings
3.8 Answers to Check Your Progress
3.9 Model Questions

3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this chapter you will be able to

- explain the meaning of karma in the Gītā,
- explain the meaning and significance of niskāma karma,
- discuss the metaphysical ideas behind the activity of Prakṛti.
- distinguish between Gîtâ's karmayoga and Kant's deontological ethics
- explain the relevance of svadharma in the present context

3.2 INTRODUCTION

The concept of karmayoga represents the ethics of the Gītā. The concept of karmayoga is made up of two concepts viz., karma and yoga. The Sanskrit word 'yoga' is derived from the verb root 'yuj' which means

'union' or 'identity' or 'to connect'. When we talk about connection, there arises a question- 'what is to be connected with what?' In the Gītā, These entities are the individual consciousness and the Universal Supreme Consciousness. The Gītā brings about a synthesis of Knowledge (Jñāna), Action (Karma) and Devotion (Bhakti). This synthesis is called yoga, which means the union of the individual self (Ātman) with the Absolute Self (Brahman). This identity is spiritual not physical. The concept of karma is an ambiguous concept. In accordance with its own philosophy, every school of thought derives different meaning of the concept of karma. In the Vedas, karma means yajña karma; in Upaniṣads, it means search of truth; in theistic philosophy, it means worship of the Lord. But in the Gītā, Karma is used in the sense of action. Karma, according to the Gītā, is a mārga or a path to mokṣa or liberation or union with the Supreme Consciousness i.e., the Lord. But any and every kind of karma or action cannot guarantee us liberation. It is the niskāma karma which can link one with the Supreme or the Absolute.

3.3 WHAT IS GĪTĀ:

The Gītā is basically a Hindu religious scripture. With its 18 chapters and 700 verses Gītā occupies the Bhīṣmaparvan of the Mahabharata. The Bhagavad Gītā literally means song of the Absolute. It is a conversation between Arjuna and Lord Kṛṣna, which took place in the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. Kurukṣetra is also called Dharmakṣetra in which the two forces of 'dharma' and 'adharma' were fighting against each other. In the Gītā, Kṛṣna represents the Supreme Being and Arjuna represents an ordinary human being like us. At the very beginning we find that Arjuna had been worried at the thought that he had to fight against his own friends and relatives.

3.4 GITA'S VIEW OF KARMAYOGA:

The concept of karma, in the Gītā, is used in a wide meaning. It means both, Divine service and Svadharma. According to the Gītā, so long we lead embodied lives, we cannot escape from action. Without work life

cannot be sustained (III. 5). The karma yoga of Gītā is based upon the doctrine of karmavāda of Sāṁkhya system. The Sankhya states that Prakṛti is the fundamental stuff out of which the world evolves. Prakṛti is the unity of the three guṇas of sattva, rajas and tamas, held in equilibrium. As Prakṛti and its guṇas are present in human beings, we cannot live a single moment without action. Prakṛti is ever active. So, we are bound to be active.

The Gītā recognizes that it is through action, we are brought into relation with the rest of the world. There is a well-known view that karma binds human beings and they are saved by knowledge. Every action produces its natural effect (either good or bad). It involves embodiment in the world which is regarded as an obstacle in the path of liberation. Every action confines the sense of egoism and separateness of the doer and sets a new series of effects. Therefore it is argued that one must renounce all actions and become a sanyāsin. But Gītā does not accept this ascetic tradition and states that through karma or action, we can attain liberation. Gītā also declares that karma is a mārga or way to liberation. Then there arises a question- 'by what type of action, we can attain liberation?' The answer is Niskāma Karma. Niskāma karma is the basic ideal of Gītā's ethical teaching. Doing work in the spirit of detachment, without fear of consequence is the best form of action because it has more sattva guṇa in it. The karma which is dominated by sattva guṇa or inspired by sattva guṇa is the best karma. Karma is an alternative method of approaching the goal of life, according to the Gītā.

3.4.1 INTERPRETATION OF THE CONCEPT OF NISKĀMA KARMA:

Gītā's concept of niskāma karma is not a simple concept. It is a compound concept which is made up of two different concepts. They are- niskāma and karma. The word niskāma is made up of two words viz., 'nih' and 'kāma'. Kāma means sensual desires. The prefix nih is used in the sense of negation. Therefore niskāma karma means desireless action or more precisely an action done by an agent in a desireless manner. Niskāma karma is opposed to sakāma karma or desireful action. Niskāma karma does not mean renunciation of action; rather it means renunciation in action.

It is the renunciation of the fruits of action.

3.4.2 NISKĀMA KARMA: METAPHYSICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONCEPT

Some metaphysical and epistemological concepts are pre-requisite for the concept of niskama karma of the Gita. The metaphysical notion is based on the Karmavada of Sankhya Philosophy. Sankhya makes an ontological dualism between Purusa (self) and Prakrti (matter). But the Gita makes them (Purusa and Prakrti) subordinate to God. The epistemological notion is the possibilities of viveka jyana which can make an individual realize the distinction between Prakrti and Puru?a.

3.4.3 PRAVṚTTI AND NIVṚTTI:

Pravrtti is the ideal which recommends living in the midst of the world carrying out all the obligations thereby; it includes the elements of selfish interest. It is motivated by desire. On the other hand, nivṛtti advocates the giving up of all karma and withdrawing from the world completely. Pravrtti is suggestive of involvement in the external world and nivṛtti means withdrawal from it or renunciation. But the Gita brings about a synthesis of these two ideals by combining action with renunciation of its fruits. The Gitā discovers the golden mean between these two ideals of pravṛtti and nivṛtti. The karmayoga of the Gitā is such a mean. It is impossible for any individual to abstain from action altogether. But he who gives up all the fruits of action, he is said to be a relinquisher (XVIII.11). Thus Gitā does not discard any of the ideal; but by combining them, refines them.

3.4.4 SVADHARMA

Gitā holds that men are the products of Prakṛti. The three gunas of Prakṛti are present in men. According to the presence of the three gunas (sattva, rajas and tamas), human race is divided into four varnas or classes viz., Brahman, Ksatriya,Vaisya and Sudra. A Brahman is one who is predominated by sattva guna and his duty is spiritual investigation. A Kṣatriya is one who is predominated by rajas guna and his duty is to defend the kingdom from enemies and engage himself in martial activities. A Vaisya is

predominated by rajas mixed tamas guna and his duties are agriculture, trade and commerce. Lastly, a Sudra is one who is predominated by tamas guna and his duty is to serve the above mentioned three upper classes. 'Brahman, Ksatriya, Vaisya and Sudras are distinguished, in accordance with the qualities born of their own nature' (XVIII. 41). This division is not hereditary. It is determined by guna and karma. According to the Gitā, karma or action means acting according to one's own varna. Every individual has his inborn nature or svabhaba and to make it effective in his life is his svadharma. People are classified into these four varnas to perform different functions in society. By svadharma Gitā means this varna-dharma. In the Gitā, the word dharma is used in the sense of duty. The Gitā maintains that it is better to do one's own duty even without excellence than to do anther's duty well, svadharme nidhana sreya paradharmo bhayavaha (III.35). It is to be mentioned here that in the Gita, it is stated that the varna system has been established by God Himself.

When Krishna advices Arjuna to fight, it does not mean that He is supporting the validity of warfare. Arjuna does not raise the question of right or wrong of war. His reluctance to fight is not the outcome of spiritual development. He is not dominated by sattva guna but a product of ignorance. We know that one's inaction can also be rooted in desire. Krishna advises Arjuna to fight without desire for kingdom, even without anger or attachment. We should do action devotedly and whole-heartedly without attachment. Krishna tells Arjuna that one can attain perfection in this world even while doing his own duty as an act of niskama karma. Our action must be the result of our own nature. The varva dharma of a ksatriya is to fight against injustice and to establish justice in society. Lord Krisna reminds Arjuna his duty as a ksatriya. After listening to the teachings of Lord Krisna, Arjuna finally decides to fight the war as he has come to know about his own duty. Gita advices us to work in this world and while working we should try to work for the best. It improves our own world. While doing our work, it should be the call of our inner self. This is the highest kind of action stated in the Gita. All works have to be done without any selfish motive.

3.4.5 MOKṢA: THE SUPREME GOAL OF HUMAN LIFE:

According to the Gitā, Moksa is the ultimate goal of human life. Gitā states that with a spirit of detachment to the fruits of action or the niskāma karma, one can overcome joys and sorrows of personal life and reach the highest goal of life i.e. mukti, moksa, liberation or the unity with the Supreme. A karmayogi is one who renounces his fruits of actions and performs his duties in a disinterested way. The yogi is a sthitaprajna (stable in intelligence) who puts away all the desires of his mind and brings all the senses under his control. He attains the highest goal of human life, moksa i.e, a complete union with the Divine. It is to be noted here that the Gita asks individuals to continue to work even after attaining moksa. After attaining spiritual freedom, he works for the welfare and solidarity of humanity or lokasaṁgraha. The Gitā lays stress on human brotherhood. The Gitā also says that duties ought to be performed for the good of all creatures i.e., of man as well as of other beings (XII. 4). Lokasasgraha stands for the unity of the world (III.20). The Gitā prescribes the concept of niskāma karma as a means not only to attain perfect Bliss but also to maintain social goodness which consists in doing the duty in a detached manner. The Gitā tries to synthesize Jyana, Karma and Bhakti; the karma which is based on jyana and supported by bhakti can lead an individual to moksa. According to the Gitā, karma is an alternative method to approach to moksa which culminates in wisdom. But it is to be noted here that moksa or spiritual freedom is not inconsistent with activity.

3.5 GITĀ'S KARMAYOGA AND KANT'S DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS

The Gita's karmayoga emphasizes the performance of duties related to one's own varna without any desire for fruits in a detached manner. The main principle of Kant's ethics is 'duty for duty's sake'. According to Kant, one ought to do his duty for the sake of duty irrespective of consequences. Therefore the karmayoga of Gita resembles Kant's deontological ethics. But there are some major differences between them. The Gita regards moksa or liberation or union with the Supreme Consciousness i.e., the Lord is the Highest Ideal. But Kant does not speak about the realization of

God. Secondly, The Gita asks us to perform our duties for the good of all creatures. But according to Kant, the Highest Good is virtue or good will. It is the good of the individual. Hence, Kant's ethics is individualistic while Gita's karmayoga is universalistic as it lays stress on solidarity of humanity. Moreover, for Kant, the moral law which is imposed by conscience upon itself is a categorical imperative or an unconditional command. Therefore, Kant's ethics is legal. But the karmayoga of the Gitā is not legal. In Kant's ethics, the rightness or wrongness of an action is not determined by its consequences or results. The doer should be guided by reason, not by emotion. Rational will is completely free. Kant's ethics is deontological as he prescribes duty for the sake of duty only, not for the sake of anything else. But Gitā's karmayoga is teleological as the Gita prescribes actions as a means for the attainment of some ends i.e., moksa and lokasamgraha.

In the Gitā, it is stated that God Himself has established the varna-dharma. But it is quite irrational. Division of labour is a necessary requirement for the smooth functioning of a human society. Different classes of people perform different duties in society on the basis of their ability and interest. The varna system is actually a social requirement which is good for a well-balanced society. But the Gitā has unnecessarily given divine sanction to the scientific principle of division of labour in society.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: From which verb root the word yoga has been derived?

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Q 2: How many chapters are there in the Gita?

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Q 3: How many verses are there in Gitā?

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Q 4: What are the guGas of Prakṛti?

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Q 5: What is nivṛtti?

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Q 6: What are the four varnas?

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Q 7: What is the varGa dharma of a Brâhman?

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Q 8: Is Kant's ethics is legal?

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Q 9: Is mokṣa inconsistent with activity?

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3.6 LET US SUM UP

- The Bhagavad Gîtâ literally means song of the Absolute. It is a conversation between Arjuna and Lord Krishna.
- The Gîtâ brings about a synthesis of Knowledge (Jòâna), Action (Karma) and Devotion (Bhakti).

- According to the Gîtâ, we cannot live a single moment without action. Without work, life cannot be sustained. As the gunas of ever active Prak[ti is present in human beings, therefore human beings are bound to be active.
- Prakrti is the unity of the three gunas of sattva, rajas and tamas.
- In the Gîtâ, the concept karma is used in the sense of action. Karma, according to Gîtâ, is a way to moksa or liberation or union with the Absolute i.e., the Lord.
- Niskâma karma means desireless action or an action which is done by an agent or a doer in a desireless manner. Actions without attachment to the fruits do not bind. One has to free his mind of egoistic passions.
- The word niskâma is made up of two words- 'nih' and 'kâma'. Kâma means sensual desires. The prefix nih is used in the sense of negation or denial.
- The Gîtâ discovers the golden mean between two ideals of pravrtti and nivrtti. The Gîtâ brings about a synthesis of these two ideals by combining action with renunciation of its fruits.
- According to the presence of the three gunas (sattva, rajas and tamas), human race is divided into four varnas or classes viz., Brâhman, Kṣatriya,Vaiṣya and Sudra.
- Gîtâ says that the varna system has been established by God Himself.
- According to the Gîtâ, mokṣa is the ultimate goal of human life. Gîtâ states that with a spirit of detachment to the fruits of action or the niskâma karma, one can overcome joys and sorrows of personal life and reach the highest goal of life i.e. mokca or the unity with the Supreme.
- After attaining spiritual freedom (mokṣa), the individual works for the welfare of all creatures which is termed as lokasaṃgraha in the Gîtâ.



3.7 FURTHER READING

1. iwari, K. N. (1998), Classical Indian Ethical Thought, Chapter VI, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi
2. Sharma, C. D. (1987), A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, Chapter II, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi
3. Sinha, J. N. (19), Outlines of Indian Philosophy, Chapter III, New Central Book Agency (P) Ltd., Kolkata
4. The Bhagavad Gita (1992), Translated by S. Radhakrishnan, Oxford University Press, New Delhi
5. Satyanarayana, Y. V. (2010), Ethics: Theory and Practice, Chapter II, Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.d.



3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q. No. 1: Yuj

Ans to Q. No. 2: Eighteen (18) chapters.

Ans to Q. No. 3: 700 verses.

Ans to Q. No. 4: Sattva, Rajas and Tamas.

Ans to Q. No. 5: Giving up all karma and withdrawing from the world entirely.

Ans to Q. No. 6: Brâhman, Ksatriya,Vaisya and Sudra.

Ans to Q. No. 7: Spiritual investigation.

Ans to Q. No. 8: Yes

Ans to Q. No. 9: No



3.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions

Q.1: What does yoga mean?

Q.2: How many verses are there in the Gîtâ?

Q.3: What does niskâma karma mean?

Q.4: What is pravṛtti?

Q.5: Who has established the varna system, according to the Gîtâ?

Q.6: What is lokasaṃgraha?

B) Short Questions (Answer in about 100-150 words)

Q.1: Write short not on Varna dharma

Q.2: What is Svabhâba

Q.3: Make a distinction between pravṛtti and nivṛtti

Q.4: Write briefly on the concept Mokṣa

C) Long Questions (Answer in about 300-500 words)

Q.1: Discuss the concept of niskâma karma in the Gîtā.

Q.2: Discuss the concept of svadharma in the Gîtā and show its relevance in the present context.

Q.3: Compare and contrast Gîtā's concept of niskâma karma and Kant's deontological ethics.

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