

## QUESTIONING THE FREE-WILL OPTION OF ARJUNA IN THE GITA

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### **Abstract**

*The Bhagavad Gita has been viewed from many perspectives. From the moral perspective many moral issues have been raised and developed. The consideration of free will of an action is a moral postulate and it has also been raised in the context of the Gita that whether Arjuna was free to act as per his own will. In the paper an attempt has been made to focus on this issue.*

*There are two expressions, namely, 'nimitta matra' ('mere dummy one') and 'yatheichhasi tathaakuru' ('do that what you choose') (XVIII/63) found in the Gita being expressed by Srikrishna, create apparent confusion of incompatibility between the two stands. Moreover, there are three factors, namely, i) withdrawal of the agent-hood, ii) surrendering before the lord and iii) acting according to the Lord's desire, which are there in the Gita, stand against the freewill option of Arjuna. In this paper an attempt has been made to examine to what extent the above-mentioned factors are against the exercise of free will of Arjuna.*

### **Keywords**

*Niskaamakarmi, nimitta matra, customary morality, lokasangraha.*

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### **Questioning the Free-will Option of Arjuna in the Gita**

The *Bhagavad Gita* is such a text which has been viewed from many perspectives. In the text many moral issues have been raised and developed. The concept of free will is also raised in the context of Arjuna's decision whether to fight or not. In the present paper an attempt has been made to focus on the exercise of free will keeping Srikrishna's suggestion in mind.

At the very beginning before questioning the utilization of the free-will option in the Gita I would like to deal few words on the concept of free-will. If we look at the presuppositions of an act of free will we find the following four factors which are more or less overlapping conditions.

- i) It should be a deliberate one or a chosen one.
- ii) The agent is accountable (morally) for the consequence of it.
- iii) The agent could have utilized some other option.
- iv) The agent is conscious about that what he is going to do.

The minimum assumption of the karma doctrine is acceptance of reward or punishment for the actions one performs consciously. It is otherwise understood as the moral accountability. If the action is within the purview of evaluation then there is least scope for determinism. An unusual emphasis on the cause of the action which Davidson hinted at by saying 'the primary reason of an action is its cause,' invites a deterministic approach to the issue. We notice the age-old conflict among the supporters of free will and deterministic doctrines. Even though theologians support the deterministic doctrine but many of them are also seen to support the exercise of free will as God's gift to defend God to be the creator of evil. It shows that the supporters of free will doctrine at some times keep scope for deterministic ideas. It also shows that some have avoided the pure deterministic formulation and preferred soft deterministic formulation which considers that 'if at all voluntary actions are caused, they are caused by rational deliberation followed by decision or choice.'

However we have seen that the consideration of free will of an action is a moral postulate. We know the reason is obvious that the concept of free will is raised in the context of human actions taking moral accountability of the action into account. Here the agent deliberately chooses that particular course of action irrespective of psycho-physical conditions or any other compulsion. He is supposed to act taking his reason or rationality as the guide. Here the reason is considered as the sole guide. But when someone is in a dilemmatic state to reason out the proper decision he may seek the guidance of someone else to whom he considers to be

more learned than him. However it is not binding on the agent to act according to his guide's suggestion without realizing the importance of the suggestion.

The question of the use of the free will in the Gita was raised when Arjuna was in a dilemmatic state to reason out whether he should kill his respected people and close relations in the war field. He wanted Srikrishna should help him to reason out properly. Sri Krishna has complied with the request of Arjuna. Since Srikrishna has been understood as the incarnation of the Lord in the religious frame it has been treated that Arjuna's follow up of action is not as per his free will; but rather in obedience to his master's suggestion. Let us see whether Arjuna was free to act or not and Gita's message is in support of free will or not.

Humans are treated as moral agents in the sense they are supposed to be accountable for the right or wrong actions they perform. Such a stand is not tenable for them those who believe in the deterministic theory. There are two views conspicuous to support the deterministic doctrine in two different spheres. Mostly absolute deterministic view is maintained in the religious frame that here it is taken for granted that nothing happens, including human actions against the desire of the Supreme. In this sense everything and action is within the control of the Supreme and man has no freedom of choice. In the scientific frame it is taken for granted that the effect can be predicted in advance if total antecedents are known. In both the frames it is supposed that man (agent) is helplessly driven to act in a definite way having no choice of his own. When such a stand is adopted it curtails the accountability of the agent and keeps human actions beyond moral evaluation. And one cannot find the difference between the action and the event.

Following such a line of thinking question has been raised in respect of the agent-ship of Arjuna's action. Gita's message to this effect is usually understood that when the individual thinks that 'he acts' he is in ignorance. Srikrishna has suggested Arjuna to give up the idea of considering himself to be the 'doer' and to act as per the direction of the divine desire. This line of thinking has been authenticated by the expression '*nimitta Mataram bhava Savyasaachin*' (XI/33). It means: Arjuna (Savyasaachi), you are a dummy only. Arjuna after knowing that Srikrishna is no other than the Supreme he has followed the desire of the Supreme. Without taking into account what was the reason behind such an advice from Srikrishna, if one understands that the Lord has said and Arjuna has followed then there is no scope of attributing the exercise of free will or rational will in favor of Arjuna. We shall see a little later how the possibility of the application of free will can be authenticated by some other scholars.

The denial of rational-will or free-will in the context of the Gita is not acceptable to many scholars. There are some scholars who have attached emphasis on the expression ‘*Yatheichhasi tathaakuru*’ (XVIII/63) of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Arjuna, whether to fight or not, is finally suggested by Srikrishna to choose his course of action (*Yatheichhasi tathaakuru*). This suggestion of Srikrishna makes free from all bindings to follow his course of action.

As we have seen that previously it is maintained in the Gita that Arjuna should know that he is not the real agent of his action, but only a dummy one (*nimitta maatra*). Later it is suggested that he can choose his own course of action. This bipolar approach appears as an incompatibility that lands the Gita’s stand in an indecisive position lacking the precise stand on the karma doctrine. Now let us examine the grounds based on which the applicability of free-will doctrine has been denied. The critics by attaching emphasis on the following three factors, namely,

- i) withdrawal of the agent-hood,
- ii) surrendering before the lord and
- iii) to act according to the Lord’s desire.

These are the claims that do not allow Gita’s stand to be in support of the freewill doctrine. Now let us see how the scholars have pointed out that these grounds are not the genuine grounds and those are formulated due to the misunderstanding of the proper message of the Gita.

- i) Withdrawal of the agent-hood

When it is suggested that Arjuna needs to think that he is not the real agent but the dummy (*nimitta*) of the act and he has to act on behalf of the transcendental agent, then he has no freedom to act according to his will. This stand of Gita seems to curtail the free will of Arjuna. In support of the exercise of the free will of Arjuna, even though he acts as the dummy agent, B, N, Das has mentioned the following explanations. He considers that the determinist gets a long rope from the karmic doctrine. “... the only way to free oneself from the karmic bindings is to act suspending the sense of ‘doers’ and think that Purusottama (transcendental subject) is the doer of all actions. Lord Srikrishna tries to persuade Arjuna to give up the sense of doing and act as a mere instrument (*nimitta*) to fulfill the will of the master ( the divine), i.e. collective welfare (*lokasangraha*). By acting so Arjuna would prove to be a moral agent. This has the apparent suggestion that a *Niskama karma* is not accountable for what he does.”<sup>1</sup> Thus if Arjuna has the right knowledge that he is not the real agent but he is to act on behalf of the transcendental agent as a *nickname Karmi* aiming at the collective welfare (*loka-Kalyana*), then he has chosen

the right course of action that is to perform his *svadharma*. A *niskaamakarmi* has no other choice than choosing his duty. Here Das suggests that Watson's understanding that "Free will involves the capacity to reflect critically upon one's values according to relevant criteria of practical thought and to change one's values and actions in the process."<sup>2</sup> will help in understanding Gita's position clearly.

It shows that there is a difference between Arjuna as an individual and as a *niskaamakarmi*. In the former case his ignorance may reflect on his preference for free will. But in the latter case his knowledge becomes the guide and there is no need of the look for the options. Arjuna is the agent. He will decide his course of action. He will act accordingly. So involvement of the free will cannot be denied. He may utilize his emotions or acquired knowledge (from his master) to make the decision. That is why it has been said that do whatever you like (*yatheichhasi tathaakuru*). Thus the karma doctrine of the Gita appears to be a moral one because of the importance of the factor of free will. Those who deny it they fail to distinguish between the withdrawal of agent-hood and the knowledge that agent-hood can to be suspended (to become a *niskamakarmi*). Prof. Panigrahi has supported this stand by pointing out that Gita's concept of moral agency can be understood in this following new perspective. The consequence of the action is not the incentive for a moral agent while he has the right to act. Referring to "Thou shouldst do work also with a view to the maintenance of the world."<sup>3</sup> he says that "Attachment to the action is not incompatible with the non-attachment with the fruit of action."<sup>4</sup>

ii) Surrendering before the lord

The question of surrendering before the lord, which has been mentioned as abandoning all dharmas surrender before me (*sarvadharmam parityajya maamekam saramam vraja*, XVIII/66) appears to be against the free-will supposition. If Arjuna gives up all his dharmas (including *svadharma*) and decides to surrender before Srikrishna treats him the Lord then there is no scope for his free will at all.

This ground has been analyzed by another scholar, A. Mohapatra, with the consideration that here too the ethical approach is also needed to understand the proper message of the Gita. She considers that the author of the Gita indicates about the possibility of universal morality and suggests that in case of necessity customary morality can be surrendered before the universal morality. She writes that "... by asking Arjuna to surrender all other considerations in favour of him is an exhortation which urges Arjuna to give up the considerations of customary morality in favour of the universal morality i.e., to sacrifice the prudence in favour of virtue. Since *lokasangraha* ought to be the aim of all actions, all actions become actions for the

Lord who expresses itself in the form of multiplicity, Lord Krishna is the divinity personified. So in asking Arjuna to resign completely from him, what he demands is the unconditional obedience to the dictates of *dharma*. Dharma being paramount, all knowledge and action should be in consonance with the fulfillment of dharma (righteousness). So the free-will advocated in Gita is the will which makes one free i.e. attain the state of *svarajya*.”<sup>5</sup>

In a nutshell her stand is that Arjuna’s surrendering is as good as surrendering the prudence for the sake of virtue. Here Srikrishna who has no other interest other than supporting the ‘righteousness’ cannot be expected to be himself unrighteous in suggesting Arjuna to follow him blindly by surrendering before him. He has extended his knowledge to him along with extending the freedom to follow his own decisions. He (Srikrishna) has tried to educate him regarding the supreme nature of ‘righteousness’ to what he represents.

iii) To act according to the Lord’s desire

Now let us look after the third condition that attaches emphasis on the factor of acting following the Lord’s desire. In this perspective of understanding mentioned above the Lord’s desire has to be understood as following the path of dharma in the sense of justice and righteousness. He has made it clear that he has been incarnated from the establishment of dharma only. So the sole ethical message of the Gita is that following dharma is as good as following the Supreme’s desire.

In this respect a rational understanding has been given by Prof. G. P. Das in the following manner. “There are certain tenets in the *Gita* that appear to be very strong in favor of the second view (*deterministic*). That which is generally thought to be the first and the last message of the *Gita* is: “*sarva dharman parityajya mamekam saranam vraja* (delink with all *dharmas* and take refuge in me.” (XVIII-66) There are two other messages in the *Gita* cited in support of determinism. One is: *Sarah sarvabhutanam hrddese tisthati/ sarvabhutani yantrarudhani mayaya bhramayan*, (XVIII-61). A person is depicted as riding a machine implying thereby that all his movements are due to or determined by the movement of the machine. The second one is the avowal of Arjuna: “I shall conduct myself as per your behest” (“*karisyevacanam tava*”, III-73). The whole and sole meaning of this counsel to Arjuna to renounce all religions – it is to all Arjunas as the one of *suklantaratmosvabhavo visuddhantahkarana* is named as Arjuna (XVIII-61, Samkara’s commentary) - is that he should not adhere to this religion or that religion, that is, sectarian doctrines as they are based on psychological, sociological facts and needs; he should, instead, adhere to reason and understanding. It may be pointed

out that *dharma* wrongly translated as religion turns out to be an ambiguous word. We have said further that Sri Krsna is the physical embodiment of reason and understanding and that the reason is unitary. When we try to understand these texts in their proper context and connotation, we find that determinism is what is contested and rejected by the *Gita*.<sup>6</sup> As the *Gita*'s stand he has made it clear that "Sri Krsna appeals to Arjuna's discriminative conscience to adopt any one of the two and says, "yathecchasi tatha kuru" (XVIII-63). When Arjuna avows "karisye vacanam tava", he does it after full understanding of the presuppositions and implications of both the views and accepts the one proffered by Sri Krsna."<sup>7</sup>

### Epilogue

Now let us have a fresh look at the issue in the background of the above-mentioned views regarding the question of whether Arjuna has proceeded with war by using his free will or being dictated by Lord Sri Krishna? At the beginning part of the *Gita* Arjuna has expressed his problem before Srikrishna that he is bewildered (II/7) and unable to decide to continue with the war. He said him that treated me as your student and gave me the proper knowledge regarding my duty in this situation.

Srikrishna in the course of his deliberation tried to clear the doubt rose due to his puzzled mind. Initially he attempted to point out that there are two types of acts performed by the agents, namely one for the self and the other for the society. We can understand the difference between the two by taking two examples from our daily life. Reading seriously for the examination is the former type of act or for the self and donation of a huge amount for the construction of a hospital for the treatment of poor people is the latter type of act or for the society. Both the acts should be performed without attachment (III/19) or the expectation of getting some desired result. He cited his own case that even though He is *kartaa* but he is unattached to karma and he has no interest in *karmaphala*. (IV/14). To this Gandhi explains that even though He is the doer He has no pride or ego that He is the doer as He is unaffected by his actions. In this line of thinking he has mentioned that you are not the doer of any action (*nimitta maatra*- XI/33). Perform your *dharma* (*svadharma*) which is the only choice for anyone. Finally the master said to make analysis of what has been said and do that as you like (XVIII/63). Arjuna obtained the proper knowledge from the Master that he is supposed to perform the *svadharma* which is supposed to be the moral choice. (The choice of becoming moral cannot be treated as compulsory selection.) It is a rational realization that man should act morally. Moral choice is always the supreme choice. After obtaining the knowledge the bewildered Arjuna became the knowledgeable Arjuna said that his doubts had been cleared and he could follow the path suggested by his master (XVIII/73). Truly

considering I do not doubt that the realized/ learned Arjuna has exercised his free-will in choosing his *svadharma* as his proper course of action.

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