

THE DILEMMA OF DHARMA IN THE GĪTĀ

Religious Constraints on Moral Duty

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Abstract: The Bhagavad Gītā demands adherence to its teachings particularly on dharma. One's *svadharma* is prescribed as one's *sādhāraṇa* dharma or one's *varṇa-āśrama* dharma with the latter taking precedence over the former. Performance of dharma with desirelessness for the fruit of the action or *niṣkāma karma* leads one to attain the state of *sthitaprajñā*. Adherence to one's dharma promises Mokṣa to a *sthitaprajñā* and *Loksaṃgraha* to the society. This paper approaches dharma in the Gītā with a critical eye on its obligatory, exclusive and hierarchical perspective on dharma. It questions its goal of *Loksaṃgraha* and explores the hereditary limits it places on individual knowledge and choice.

Key Terms: Bhagavad Gītā, Dharma, *Svadharma*, *Sadharana* Dharma, *Varṇa-āśrama* Dharma, Karma, *Niṣkāma* Karma, *Sthitaprajñā*, Mokṣa, and *Loksaṃgraha*

1. Introduction

The ethical dilemma begins in the Gītā with the refusal of Arjuna to fight against his own kinsmen the Kauravas. The entire discourse in the Gītā basically offers the reasons by which Kṛṣṇa encouraged and persuaded Arjuna to fight. The aim of this essay is to explore the ethical dilemma in the Gītā faced by Arjuna in relation to adherence to scriptural norms and duties by birth, the compatibility between dharma and karma and its end as Mokṣa.

2. Narrative Nature of the Gītā

The factual or historical nature of the Bhagavad Gītā being highly debatable I choose to treat the Gītā in this study as an ethical narrative from an authoritative source in the person of Kṛṣṇa. With due respect to the fact that Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā is projected as an incarnation of Viṣṇu I would like to analyze his discourse from a non-theistic perspective.

Philosophers like Gandhi argue that the Gītā is an allegory of the battle of good and evil that takes place within every human mind, with

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Kṛṣṇa as the voice within that speaks in the purity of the heart and the mind as the battlefield of Kurukshetra.¹ This allegorical approach also shows the importance of dharma not only in the battlefield but in every human mind. The allegorical interpretation of the Gītā offers an inspiration to perform one's *sādhāraṇa* dharma in the fight against evil. As the *Varṇa-āśrama* dharma is highly exclusive in nature, as it is dealt with in the Gītā, it may not be possible to employ this allegorical method to deal with it, especially when we take into account its social impact. Although dharma would be dealt in greater details later in this paper, I would like to argue that analyzing dharma as the ground for division of labour has to necessarily exist in practical life. Kṛṣṇa expects Arjuna to fight the war because he is assigned to fight by virtue of his Kṣatriya dharma. Kṛṣṇa would not expect a non-Kṣatriya to fight the war because dharma does not assign fighting as his duty. Secondly, considering dharma as allegorical is self-defeating as it would lead anybody to consider himself to be a Brahmin, Kṣatriya, Vaishya and Shudra at the same time as everyone is expected to fight the evil within oneself, and not the Kṣatriya alone. The Gītā's foundation in dharma, therefore, annihilates the possibility of considering it as an allegory.

3. Scriptural Basis of the Gītā

The discourse of Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā offers a confirmation to the religious Hindu texts both the Śruti and the Smṛti. Kṛṣṇa requires Arjuna to stay in conformity with the teachings of dharma as explained in the teachings of these preceding religious texts. "What constitutes sin is known through Dharmaśāstra which reveals that a soldier who runs away from the battlefield commits sin."² According to the Gītā, sin is committed neither in relation to one's conscience nor in relation to whom one is fighting but only on the basis of *svadharma*. Arjuna is seen to express his desire to be a mendicant. This, for Kṛṣṇa, is a choice not worthy of consideration as Arjuna's desire lies outside the boundaries of dharma. Kṛṣṇa perceives Arjuna to be a warrior alone in accordance with his dharma. Obligation to *svadharma* is an imperative. It should, however, be taken into account that one does not become a soldier by choice but by birth. Dharma in the Gītā may be seen to establish a deterministic attitude towards life wherein one

¹M. K. Gandhi, *The Teachings of the Gītā*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962, 17-18.

²Swami Dayananda, *The Teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā*, New Delhi: Vision Books, 1989, 15.

bears the consequences of non-dutifulness regardless of one’s conscience. Taking recourse in a profession apart from that which is prescribed by birth is itself sinful implying the necessity to attune one’s conscience to one’s dharma. Dharma now becomes dictatorial and imposable in nature such that an individual is cursed for exercising his faculty of reason outside the boundaries of dharma.

They [Hindus] did not need to justify proper modes of behaviour; tradition supplied these. What was needed was a justification for the patterns of behaviour and roles specified by tradition, and this is what dharma accomplished. Dharma reinforced fidelity to tradition and opposition to change, and at the same time provided a motive for obedience to prescribed roles. The society intended stability based on the premise that everything of value has been specified by or to the fathers. The moral decision was whether one would obey his dharma or take exception to it.³

The dictatorial nature of dharma can be understood as resulting from human search for meaning of life. Human beings across cultures have asked fundamental philosophical questions particularly questioning the meaning and purpose of life. The Vedic man was no exception to this phenomenon. They embedded the concept of dharma into scripture in order to settle it for all generations to come. The Vedic man decided on assigning a particular duty to a set of people regardless of their personal choices. The element of divinity created its authoritative magic and people began to adhere to norms as they were perceived as the source of purposiveness in one’s life. Dharma provided only the option of adherence to norms but never the teleological choice for one’s life.

4. The Ethical Dilemma in the Gītā

The ethical dilemma of the Gītā is a question of morality vis-à-vis love for one’s relations. In the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Arjuna refuses to fight due to two main reasons. Firstly, Arjuna has a firm conviction in the futility of the consequences of the war. Secondly, “there is the problem of his emotions and feelings, inclinations and passions interfering with the

³ Austin B. Creel, “Dharma as an Ethical Category Relating to Freedom and Responsibility,” *Philosophy of East and West* 22, 2 (1972), 155-168, 166.

discharge of his duty.”⁴ The discrepancy between the cognitive and affective faculties of Arjuna is not the source of his ethical dilemma but only its by-product. The ethical dilemma truly lies at the root cause of his understanding of the relation of dharma and karma. Arjuna understands dharma as applied only in relation to the larger society and not merely to his own kinsmen. Therefore, the question of ethicality of dharma never arises prior to this particular war for Arjuna because he had never been expected to perform his Kṣatriya duty on his own kinsmen. It is in this context that Kṛṣṇa argues that Arjuna should be treating all humans equally by understanding that they all are equally endowed with souls which cannot be destroyed. “He who thinks him (the Self) to be the killer, and who experiences him (the self) as the killed – both of them know not. He (the Self) neither kills nor is killed” (BG 2:19).⁵ Kṛṣṇa expects Arjuna to look beyond the body and its ability to evoke passion. Passion here is seen as a barrier which prevents one from performing one’s duty.

A major drawback of seeing passions and emotions as barriers to the performance of duty is that dharma constricts itself to the narrow realm of rationality. The ethical cannot, however, be exclusively led by reason but also by the manner in which one feels for the ethical duty. The performance of duty would be incomplete without a strong emotional and psychological compatibility with the necessity to perform the duty. Therefore, in Arjuna’s case, Kṛṣṇa aims at changing Arjuna’s approach to his Kṣatriya duty.

5. Dharma in Relation to Justice in the Gītā

The Mahabharata war is often understood in terms of a war between good and evil, at the end of which the good wins over the evil. Experts argue that war was prescribed in the Gītā because of the necessity of performing one’s duty to fight the war. Kṛṣṇa persuades Arjuna to fight not for the sake of war but for the sake of one’s duty. Arjuna has to fight the war as it ‘happens to be’ his duty. The same would never have been expected of a Vaishya or a Brahmin. Therefore, the reason for the justification of war in the Gītā is that of the dependability on dharma that befalls on a particular individual for a particular duty and to hold him responsible if he has not

⁴ Madan Prasad Singh, *The Ethical Philosophy of the Gita: A Comparative and Critical Study of the Interpretation of Tilak and Ramanauja*. Calcutta: Panthi Pustak, 1996, 52.

⁵ Swami Tapasyananda, *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gita: The Scripture of Mankind*. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2011, 49.

performed his duty. The choice of dharma is never made by the individual but by the very fact of being born to perform a duty.

The war is also argued to be justified in relation to an obligation to justice. “As princes the Pāndavas not only had a right to the kingdom, but also had a duty to see that justice was done.”⁶ The concept of dharma, therefore, included duty as well as ensuring justice established through one’s duty and no other means. The notion was that justice could be established only if one performed one’s duty. While the Kauravas failed in practising their duty of keeping their word and, hence, caused injustice, the Pāndavas, in not fighting the war, would not only fail in performing their duty but would also be responsible for the injustice resulting from it. In this situation, the party that has suffered injustice is the one that is synonymous to ‘good’ or is the representation of ‘goodness’ while the one that causes injustice is to be despised. Although the argument in the case of the latter party can be justified, the same cannot be done with the former. One cannot assume that the Pandavas represent goodness because they were the ones who suffered injustice. This can be analyzed from a few foul means employed by the Pandavas in order to win the war. For example, when Yudhiṣṭhira faced a moral dilemma of choosing between telling a lie and thereby winning the war and, on the other hand, being truthful and suffering unjustified defeat Kṛṣṇa persuaded him to choose the untruth for the sake of victory.⁷ In another instance, when Yudhiṣṭhira, his elder brother, insulted the ‘Gāṇḍiva bow’ Arjuna faced the dilemma of promise-keeping and fratricide as Arjuna had promised the fire-god who had gifted him the Gāṇḍiva that if anyone ever insulted the bow he would be put to death. Kṛṣṇa, however, argued that promise-keeping was not more important than saving an innocent life.⁸ Finally, when the war ended, “both Arjuna and Yudhisthira regretted the loss of millions of lives and doubted whether the throne had been worth fighting for.”⁹ We, therefore, notice the use of foul means to victory which is basically a shift from common dharma to specific dharma according to one’s convenience which will be further explained in the following sections of the paper.

⁶Dayananda, *The Teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā*, 8.

⁷Matilal, “Dharma and Rationality,” in *Indian Ethics: Classical Traditions and Contemporary Challenges*, eds. Purushottama Bilimoria, Joseph Prabhu, Renuka Sharma, 79-102. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, 96.

⁸Matilal, “Dharma and Rationality,” 96.

⁹Matilal, “Dharma and Rationality,” 96.

6. Concept of Dharma

The term ‘Dharma’ can be interpreted in various ways, although its translation is very difficult. The literal meaning of the word dharma comes from the root word ‘dhr’ which means ‘to uphold,’ ‘to maintain,’ ‘to support’ and ‘to sustain.’¹⁰ Dharma is also widely interpreted as religion, duty, law, virtue, etc. In this article, however, I would focus on the interpretation of dharma as explained by Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā who argues as follows: “There is no greater good for a Kṣatriya than what a righteous war offers. O Arjuna! That Kṣatriya must indeed be a happy man to whom comes unsought a war like this, which is an open gate to heaven” (BG 2:31-32).¹¹ Kṛṣṇa clearly states that one’s dharma is equal to one’s caste duties. According to Kṛṣṇa, a Kṣatriya has to necessarily fight the battle regardless of its consequences because his dharma alone can lead him to happiness and to heaven. A Kṣatriya path to heaven, consequently, is determined by the ancient seers. Dharma, then, imposes the necessity on an individual to attain mental and moral development such that one only performs one’s duty and no longer thinks outside its boundaries.

Dharma in the scripture focuses on two types of dharma, namely, *sādhāraṇa* dharma and *varṇa-āśrama* dharma. The former is that which is equally applicable to everyone, i.e., people of all castes while the latter can be understood as duties which change according to one’s caste. The “main purpose... [of *Sādhāraṇa* dharma is] not ethical theory but the guidance of people in everyday life by dealing with the problems of each by reference to his station in society.”¹² *Sādhāraṇa* dharma would include the necessity to follow virtues like non-lying, non-stealing, non-injury, non-violence, truthfulness, purity of the body and mind, sense-control, charity, control of inner mental states, helping the distressed, and tranquillity in the midst of distress and troubles.¹³ On the other hand, *varṇa-āśrama* dharma refers to the specific duties assigned to specific classes of the society, for example, the Brahmin has to perform *pujas*, the Kṣatriya has to fight the war, etc. *varṇa-āśrama* dharma is specific, categorically necessary and limited while *sādhāraṇa* dharma is universal, necessary and eternal. “In case of a conflict between *sādhāraṇa* dharma or universal duties and the particular

¹⁰Creel, *Dharma in Hindu Ethics*, 3.

¹¹Tapasyananda, *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gītā*, 54.

¹²Creel, *Dharma in Hindu Ethics*, 7.

¹³Surama Dasgupta, *Development of Moral Philosophy in India*, Madras: Orient Longman, 1961, 15.

caste duties the latter are to prevail, e.g., the Kṣatriya may violate the principle of non-injury at the time of war; and this has been emphasized in the Gītā.”¹⁴ In Arjuna’s case his *sādhāraṇa* dharma required him to practise non-violence while his *varṇa-āśrama* dharma required him to fight the battle. In such a case, Kṛṣṇa commands Arjuna to fight the battle with no remorse for his *sādhāraṇa* dharma. This hierarchy of dharma, however, has two major drawbacks which can be analyzed by paying attention to the teleology of dharma.

The teleological end of dharma – both common and specific dharma – is establishing universal order. Although this cannot be argued to be the only teleology (as Mokṣa is also the teleos of dharma), it intends to base its universal order on the performance of specific dharma. If the specific duty takes precedence over the common duty as proposed by the Gītā then the question of universal order is an impossibility as in the process of performing one’s specific duty one would endanger the dharma (dharma of the Kauravas, i.e., not to fight the war) and even the life of other human beings (as in the case of war itself). It, therefore, would lead to the fulfilment of one’s own specific dharma by using others not as end in itself but as a means to fulfil one’s own dharma. I would, therefore, argue that the common duties ought to be given greater importance over specific duties. Secondly, the Gītā argues: “do not abandon the duty that is natural to you, even if some imperfections are incidental to it” (BG 18:48).¹⁵ In this context, Koller argues: “[Arjuna’s] nature being what it is, he would be going contrary to his nature if he did not fight this war, thus doing something that would tend to destroy his entire being.”¹⁶ It should be noticed that it is the association of *varṇa-āśrama* dharma to the very nature of one’s being that leads one to believe that one is naturally created to establish universal order. *Sādhāraṇa* dharma, although natural, secondary to *varṇa-āśrama* dharma, creates a contradiction on the fulfilment of the intended universal order as *varṇa-āśrama* dharma is performed at the cost of others’ dharma.

¹⁴Dasgupta, *Development of Moral Philosophy in India*, 15.

¹⁵Tapasyananda, *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gītā*, 452.

¹⁶John M. Koller, “Dharma: An Expression of Universal Order,” *Philosophy East and West*, 22, 2 (1972), 131-144, 143.

6.1. Dharma as Duty

Dharma as duty refers to the imperative placed by the Gītā on an individual to follow his caste specific duties. As the Gītā explains, “The duties of Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaisyas and also Sūdras have been divided according to the qualities born of their own nature” (BG 18:41).¹⁷ Gītā specifically promotes the division of duties among various groups of the society based on their birth. Hence, it projects a naturalistic element to duty which basically is rooted in heredity. The Gītā, therefore, analyses dharma as bounden duty on an individual to the extent that it becomes a part of the individual himself. This would indirectly indicate that Gītā establishes morality on biological factors as that of heredity. It necessitates one to perform duties whose evasion would lead to sin.

Critics argue that morality, consequently, has a biological foundation which is deterministic as human beings do not have the possibility to exercise their freewill and choice in choosing one’s dharma.¹⁸ One, however, misses an essential element in the above argument as it can be explained through the cycle of karma and *punarjanma*. The cycle of karma and *punarjanma* is an aspect that can question the biological foundation of morality though it needs to be rooted in faith or in the authority of scriptures. However, accepting dharma as one’s caste duty itself is rooted in faith in the authority of the scripture. Therefore, one does not need an empirical base to argue for the cycle of karma and *punarjanma* just as one does not have an empirical base to argue for rooting oneself in one’s caste duty.

Dharma as duty is also explained in the Gītā as follows: “One’s own dharma even though not glamorous is better than duty alien to one’s growth (*para-dharmaḥ*), however well performed. For even death in doing one’s duty leads to one’s good while a duty alien to one’s growth is burdened with fear and downfall” (3:35). The Gītā here clearly establishes a hierarchy of dharma on two grounds. First, one must never think of compromising one’s own dharma on account of any reason, as it could be worse than death. Second, one cannot choose to perform anybody else’s dharma because it would be accompanied with fear and downfall. One, therefore, comes to the conclusion that when dharma is understood as duty, it ensures a level of permanence and changelessness in the society. “The spirit of change run riot means social chaos and the spirit of

¹⁷Tapasyananda, *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gītā*, 448.

¹⁸S. G. Sathaye, *Moral Choice and Early Hindu Thought*, Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1970, 62.

conservatism in its extreme expressions means the suppression of most of the highest capacities of human nature.”¹⁹ In identifying dharma with birth and heredity, the Hindu scripture was able to maintain a hold over the society such that people were always within its control and never strayed away from serving their hierarchical dharma. Dharma as duty, therefore, becomes highly derogative to an individual’s growth because duty is not performed only for duty’s sake (*niṣkāma* karma) rather performed regardless of what the duty could have been.

6.2. Necessity of Dharma

Kṛṣṇa, in the Gītā, argues for the necessity of dharma in the following manner: “No man can ever remain even for a moment without performing any action. The impulses of nature deprive him from freedom in this respect and compel him to act” (3:5).²⁰ Human beings cannot live without performing an action may it be virtuous or vicious. Can a vicious action be dharma? If so, he proposes that it would be better for one to perform one’s prescribed duty which would lead to harmony in the society and attainment of Mokṣa. On the other hand, if one does not perform one’s duty ‘a-dharma’ would lead to the disruption of the society and consequent lower births of an individual. Dharma does not only have an individual consequence but also a collective consequence, the responsibility of both of which lies on the shoulders of the individual. Dharma, then, is necessary because of its twofold impact which we shall discuss below.

The understanding of dharma as duty sheds light on its social implications. When an individual performs duty as prescribed by the scripture, it would lead to the realization of the best universal order or *loksamgraha*. By ‘universe’/‘society’ it refers to all those people existing within the four castes. In explaining dharma a principle that upholds or sustains the universal order, the scripture can be seen as interpreting performance of dharma as a principle that leads to the sustenance of a sound and stable society. As observed by Jhingran, “Dharma has no limits. It extends to all spheres of life. It is what sustains the world.”²¹ Dharma as extending to all spheres of life indicates its all-pervasive nature including

¹⁹ John McKenzie, *Hindu Ethics*, New Delhi: Oriental Book Reprint Corporation, 1971, 44.

²⁰ Tapasyananda, *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gītā*, 88.

²¹ Saral Jhingran, *Aspects of Hindu Morality*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1999, 38.

that of one’s daily duties, rituals, practices, and one’s moral decisions, all of which when followed by everyone leads to order in the society. In explaining order in the society, dharma can be understood from two perspectives: “the higher dharma being in accord with the higher reality out of which the lower reality evolved. The lower dharma means being in accord with the lower manifested reality of ordinary experience.”²² In identifying dharma as being higher and lower in nature one is brought to the knowledge of the order being controlled by the divinity present within us. In the performance of duty an individual is able to transcend temporality even when he continually is a part of it.

Maintenance of order in the society is not only for its own sake but also for the sake of individual Mokṣa. The Gītā argues: “Perform actions always without attachment. For by working without attachment a man attains the Supreme” (3:19). The Gītā emphasizes the surety of attaining the Supreme through the performance of duty which is also a collective goal of the society. As explained by Pal, “although *loksamagrha* is a non-personalistic and worldly end and Mokṣa, [it] is a personalistic and non-worldly end, yet, there is no conflict between the two within the Bhagavad Gītā.”²³ When one performs desireless action, one is free from bondages of the world and attains liberation. The Gītā, therefore, tries to emphasize the non-duality between transcendence and imminence.

7. The Karma Theory

“Karma is the moral Law of Causation. It declares that man’s will is free and that he is responsible for all his actions. Nothing that man can do is private.”²⁴ This theory of karma refers to the notion that all human beings are responsible for their own actions and have to perform their prescribed duties or dharma. The performance of their dharma is karma, i.e., action. Every action has its corresponding effects the responsibility of which should be shouldered every human being. The Sanskrit term karma is derived from the root word *kr* which means ‘to do’ and karma has connotations such as the law of causation, and the law of morality. regarding the karma Kṛṣṇa says in the Gītā: “to work alone you have

²² Koller, “Dharma,” 141.

²³ Jagat Pal, “The Concept of Niṣkāma Karma: Teleological or Deontological?” *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* 28, 2 (April 2001), 215-225, 224.

²⁴ Nagaraja, P. Rao, “The Doctrine of Karma,” *Aryan Path*, 30, 1 (1959), 23-26, 23.

competence, and not to claim their fruits. Let not the longing for fruits be the motive force of your action. At the same time, let not this attitude confirm you in indolent inaction” (2:47).²⁵ Karma in the Gītā is based on the underlying fact that every action will have its consequences yet one should not act for the sake of those consequences. This, however, does not free one from the responsibility of the action performed. As long as one falls within the ambit of a karmic life one cannot escape responsibilities which indicates that one has not attained Mokṣa yet. The Gītā argues that since the consequences of the action are not in one’s control one has to perform action without desire for its consequences. This alone can lead one to attain Mokṣa. This leads us to an understanding of *niṣkāma* karma. Kṛṣṇa requires one to perform karma as *niṣkāma* karma, i.e., performance of duty without desire would ultimately lead to Mokṣa. *Niṣkāma* karma is characterized by performance of a duty for the sake of duty itself and not for its consequence. Krishna, therefore, expects Arjuna to fight the war for the sake of his dharma with a perfect attitude of *niṣkāma* karma.

It should be emphasized that *niṣkāma* karma is the best way to perform one’s dharma, according to Kṛṣṇa, because karma itself is natural and inseparable from the nature of human beings as it was explained above. “*Niṣkāma* karma, [therefore,] does not imply renunciation of action but renunciation in action.”²⁶ One is expected to renounce the desire for corresponding fruits of one’s actions and perform one’s prescribed duty without any self-interest or selfish motive.

One, however, may question the consistency of this argument as dharma in the Gītā is oriented towards universal order and Mokṣa. If every action that one performs is desireless, then it would mean that one has to also be desireless of Mokṣa which is contrary to the teachings of the Gītā. *Niṣkāma* karma, therefore, logically cannot be said to be based on desirelessness of action, as the Gītā expects every individual to desire and strive towards Mokṣa. This argument however, cannot stand valid because

The Bhagavad Gītā nowhere says that a man becomes bound when he performs action with desire for the doing of action including the desires for Mokṣa and *loksamgraha*. It only says that a man becomes bound when he acts from the desire for fruit of action and the notion

²⁵ Tapasyananda, *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gītā*, 61.

²⁶ M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993, 121.

of desire is conceptually different and distinct from the notion of the desire for the fruit of action.”²⁷

One has to perform dharma with an attitude of *niṣkāma* karma which is the path to realize Mokṣa. *Niṣkāma* karma, thus, may be also understood not only as a duty but also as a means to perform one’s duty.²⁸ *Niṣkāma* karma, necessarily requires one to possess the desire for Mokṣa as Mokṣa is its teleological end.²⁹

Moreover, the Gītā tries to emphasize the non-duality between transcendence and immanence. In the words of Jagat Pal, “*Niṣkāma* karma is such a kind of action which a man 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.”³⁰ The intention of performing a desireless action itself is a desire, which makes *niṣkāma* karma an impossibility. One cannot attain freedom from desire as that itself is a desire. It is necessary to understand *niṣkāma* karma as a suspension of particular ends alone. This is due to two inevitable aspects, namely, the ontological end of all actions as Mokṣa and secondly, the natural tendency of desire. In conclusion we may say that it is neither dharma nor *niṣkāma* karma that is deontological in nature as both are oriented towards Mokṣa.

8. The Relation between Dharma and Karma

The relation between dharma and karma may be understood from two perspectives, according to Koller, namely, the dharmic view and the *samsāric* view. The dharmic view holds that desireless action according to one’s duty leads one to Mokṣa while the *samsāric* view holds that action is the cause of bondage which fixates one into the cycle of karma and *punarjnama*.³¹ The Gītā propounds that just as incurring a dharma at birth is inevitable, performing actions is also inevitable. This is the dilemma of Arjuna, i.e., performance of action without desire for its fruits, yet one has to bear the consequences of one’s actions. Secondly, though one is called to the performance of duty without attachment to one’s duty, one would be

²⁷ Jagat Pal, “The Concept of Niskama Karma,” 220.

²⁸ Jagat Pal, *Karma, Dharma, and Moksha: Conceptual Essays on Indian Ethics*, Delhi: Abhijeet Publications, 2004, 51.

²⁹ Jagat Pal, “The Concept of Niskama Karma,” 225.

³⁰ Pal, *Karma, Dharma, and Moksha*, 53.

³¹ Koller, “Karma and Dharma,” 249.

accountable if one renounced duty itself. Kṛṣṇa proposes that it would be better if one performed one’s actions in accordance with one’s duty and performed one’s duty for the sake of duty alone both of which together would lead to Mokṣa.

The relation between dharma and karma, therefore, can be understood as two sides of the same coin both of which have their end outside themselves, i.e., the attainment of Mokṣa. Karma and dharma are compatible as the ideal of dharma is the obligation towards one’s duty, while the ideal of karma is *niṣkāma* karma which is performance of desireless duty. Kṛṣṇa argues that one would succeed in performing duty for duty’s sake (*Niṣkāma* karma) only if one performed all actions as an offering to the Supreme as otherwise action itself would lead to bondage. “O son of Kunti! In this world all actions, unless they are done as an offering to God (as Yajna), become causes of bondage. Therefore, work for the sake of God without personal attachments” (3:9).

Action is to be performed because it is prescribed to an individual and not according to one’s convenience, tastes or situations. “Wise men ... abandon the fruits of action, free themselves from entanglement in the cycle of births and deaths, and attain to the state of freedom from all sorrow (liberation)” (2:51). Kṛṣṇa expects Arjuna to model his life after Him: “In all the three worlds there is nothing, O son of Partha, that is binding on Me as duty. Neither is there anything that I have to gain, nor anything that I cannot gain. Still I am always engaged in work” (3:22).

9. Conclusion

The nature of dharma in the Gītā, as it was earlier explained, is based on birth and its obligatory nature. We realize that the Gītā is a firm proponent of the caste system. The hierarchical nature of dharma, established as one’s dharma, forbids one to perform another dharma. One may argue against this view that the relation between one’s dharma and that of others is not superior or inferior but simply distinct. This, however, does not negate the exclusive manner in which one is obliged to stay away from someone else’s dharma as it would be a barrier in the performance of one’s own dharma. Dharma, then, would endanger the growth of basic human faculties of cognition, connotation and affection. Moreover, *varṇa-āśrama* dharma establishes an oppressive society in which every individual is expected to be kept under a check and control system, limiting human beings to people programmed to work alone. It also endangers their ability

to engage in an occupation of their choice on the basis of their aptitude and interest as a result of which the authenticity of a people is lost.

Secondly, Kṛṣṇa places *varṇa-āśrama* dharma or specific duties over *sādhāraṇa* dharma or common duties as it is argued that it is specific duties which lead to universal order. This, however, can be questioned as specific duties can be contrary or exclusive in nature such that specific duties could only lead to specific goods while common duties would lead to common good. For example, if a Kṣatriya has to perform his specific duty of fighting in a war, then he would have to perform his specific duty at the cost of the life of other people which is not common good. Duty in the war, therefore, is not done for the sake of duty; rather duty is fulfilled at the cost of using fellow human beings as a means to fulfil one’s own duty. Mahabharata reveals that the war ends with Kṛṣṇa being doubtful of whether it was worth fighting the war because of the fact that duty has been fulfilled at a higher price which he could have chosen not to pay if dharma was not rooted in obligation.

Thirdly, analyzing dharma from the social perspective, its ultimate aim was to maintain order in the society by allocating duties to every individual. The extent to which this social order was possible highly depended upon the extent to which people accepted the idea that they were born in a particular caste due to their past actions. Since our empirical experience does not reveal any karmic history of our previous lives, this cycle of karma and *punarjanma* could be known only through the teachings of one’s own dharma as prescribed in the scripture. The scriptures were the prized possessions accessible only to the upper castes. Therefore, it was the upper castes which made known the negative karmic history of the lower castes to whom they owe their own social status. Dharma, therefore, did not create social harmony rather it created and perpetuated divisions. Dharma presented itself as the teleological end of the society which one need not search for as the westerners do. This understanding of Dharma led to a creation of a mechanistic society in which people followed their duty for the sake of duty. The Kantian principle of duty is often admired, for its deontological nature. Kantian duty, however, is the performance of duty, firstly, by choice and, secondly, by conviction. On the other hand, the dharmic understanding of duty was regardless of choice and conviction. One, therefore, was obliged to bear the consequences of an action that does not involve choice. I do not intend to propose a blame-game theory; however, one should understand that if my occupation, for example, does not involve a choice of at least two

options, it is then an imposition along with its consequences that determine the course of the rest of my life.

Finally, Kṛṣṇa argues that “An enlightened man should not cause confusion in the minds of ignorant people (by his conduct). Himself working with equanimity, he should make them interested in all activities” (BG 3:26).³² Knowledge here is spoken of as a source of confusion. An enlightened man is one, according to the Gītā, who has attained knowledge of the non-duality of his soul and that of the Supreme. According to the caste system and the teachings of Manusmṛti, it is only a Brahmin who can be an enlightened person which, in the Gītā, is also extended to the Kṣatriya (an upper caste). On the other hand, it would be a lower caste person who has never come across scriptural teachings who would generally be understood as an ignorant man. If one sees knowledge as a source of confusion, the enlightened man then has an obligation not to pass on this knowledge to an ignorant man as it could lead to confusion. Swami Tapasyananda’s translation brackets “the conduct” of an enlightened man as a source of confusion which is not specified by the Gītā. The point, however, being that the Gītā advocated the classification of humanity into those capable of enlightenment and those incapable of it and, hence, according to it, the latter should remain unenlightened for the rest of their lives. This is clear in the following statement of the Gītā: “Even a wise man acts in accordance with his nature. All beings follow their nature. What can repression do?” (BG 3:33).³³ This teaching of the Gītā is derogatory in itself to all human beings as the aptitude of an individual is pre-determined by birth, thus, not allowing one a chance to prove oneself. Moreover, it limits knowledge to the realm of a biological and religious basis both of which are authoritative in determining one’s boundaries of knowledge. Dharma not only sets a limitation on action but also to the realm of one’s knowledge. One is expected to know only one’s dharma as knowledge of others’ dharma might corrupt one’s zeal for one’s own dharma.

The understanding of dharma in the Gītā, thus, helps us to understand the narrative and scriptural foundations of the Gītā and also its obligatory and dictatorial nature. Dharma is explained as the foundation of the caste system, thus, determining our karma and the course of the rest of our life. The analysis of *niṣkāma* karma helps us to understand that it is

³²Tapasyananda, *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gītā*, 96.

³³Tapasyananda, *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gītā*, 96.

possible to suspend only particular ends and not the ultimate end, Mokṣa. Moreover, one cannot suspend all one’s desire as *niṣkāma* karma is also rooted in the desire for desireless action. The relation between dharma and karma is explained as both heading towards Mokṣa.

The criticisms on the ethics in the Gītā explain that the obligatory and hierarchical nature of dharma lead to the formation of an oppressed individual and an oppressive society. Secondly, common duties can lead to common good while the Gītā proposes specific duties as a means to common good. Specifications on duties offered by the Gītā lead to social divisions rather than social harmony. Moreover, in presenting itself as the teleological end, dharma prevented the growth and development of human thought in general as one was not permitted to think outside the boundaries of the Gītā. Lastly, the view that there would always be a section of people who would perennially live in darkness, as enlightenment was against their very nature, should be abandoned in order to offer them dignity that everyone rightfully deserves by virtue of being human.