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## Understanding The Spiritual Ethos Of Hinduism In The Light Of Bhagawad-Gita's Teachings On Yoga

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### Abstract:

Hinduism, one of the oldest religious traditions of human civilization with over a billion followers worldwide, has been too complex to be contained within simplistic doctrinal definitions and specific religious structure. Due to its diverging theological dimensions, democratically diverse practices, superfluous scriptures that often represented radically different positions and absence of any dogmatic finality in all matters religious, Hinduism has no specific defining elements. Yet, the only inherent characteristics that quintessentially denote this religious tradition are spiritual self-seeking and existential quest. Of all the scriptures associated with Hinduism, the only book that best encapsulates the nucleus of Hinduism and propounds it with profound lucidity is the Bhagawad-Gita. This paper elucidates the spiritual dimensions of the Bhagawad-Gita and attempts at examining the ethos of Hinduism in the light of this linchpin of Mahabharata, the grandest epic on India.

**Key Words:** Hinduism, Spirituality, Jnana-Yoga, Karma-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Moksha.

### Introduction:

The term 'Religion' in the conventional sense, has never been sufficiently able to connote the Hindu Religious Traditions, in spite of the fact that Hinduism is globally recognized as one of the world's major religions and has over a billion active followers worldwide. Often referred to as "Sanatana Dharma", Hinduism has always defied definitive definitions and baffled all such scholars who have attempted at defining it for the very reason that it has no single paramount scripture or school of thought that can be regarded as canonical reference point (as in the case of Koran for Islam and Bible for Christianity), no single founder or fountainhead or Prophet (like Jesus or Mohammad) and no specific rituals or customs that are accepted in unanimity by all Hindus. In spite of having a very stupendous amount of scriptures in the form of Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Smritis, Epics and Shastras, Hindu religious traditions have never accepted any of these religious texts as sole custodian of entire Hindu beliefs and practices. While all these religious scriptures and varied (often mutually diverging) schools of thoughts have been accepted within the

ambit of Hinduism, none of them have gained uncontested paramount doctrinal authority. Rather, there have been numerous sages, saints, intellectuals and reformers who have constantly contributed to re-define, re-interpret, differently interpret or add fresh perspectives to the previously existing scriptures, thereby helping Hinduism to evolve over the ages, avoiding dogmatic stagnation. Consequently, there exists a plethora of beliefs, customs and practices among Hindus ranging from Theism to Atheism, Dvaita (dualism) to Advaita (non dualism). Such complex conglomeration of theological strands, practices and faiths that collectively denote Hinduism have one aspect in common i.e. an underlying element of spiritual quest and existential inquisitiveness; it is this that permeates Hindu Religious Philosophy irrespective of numerous internal variations.

The one Hindu scripture that provides most comprehensive and quintessential understanding of Hindu Spirituality and embodies the core spirit of Hinduism is the Bhagawad-Gita. Termed by Lars Martin Fosse to be a “spiritual monument and an essential scripture of Hinduism, recited daily by millions of men and women for over two millennia”(Fosse p.9 ), the Bhagawad-Gita has held a profound formative imprint upon the psyche, perceptions, beliefs and practices of Hindus for past several generations. Even the three most popular reformers of Modern India – Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi have held this book in high esteem. Ever since its translation in English in 1785 by Charles Wilkins, the Bhagawad-Gita has fascinated Western intelligentsia including Emerson, Thoreau, Schlegel, Humboldt, Goethe, Eliot, Yeats and even the renowned physicist Albert Einstein. Asserting the relevance of this book with relation to Hinduism, renowned Hindu scholar, Swami Sivananda states:

It expounds very lucidly the cardinal principles or the fundamentals of the Hindu religion and Hindu Dharma. The Gita is the cream of the Vedas. It is the essence of the soul-elevating Upanishads. It is a universal scripture applicable to people of all temperaments and for all times. It is a wonderful book with sublime thoughts and practical instructions on Yoga, devotion, Vedanta and action. (Sivananda p.7)

Structured in the form of an extensive conversation between Arjuna and Krishna that took place just before the great battle of Mahabharata, the seven hundred verses of Bhagawad-Gita reflect upon numerous existential as well as ethical dilemmas, with the core emphasis being on achieving “Brahma- Nirvana” or “Moksha”, i.e. liberation from re-birth. As in the words of Dr. Nicholas Sutton: “Bhagawad-Gita in its entirety is a discourse on Moksha” (Sutton, 175). According to the Bhagawad-Gita, the incessantly woeful cycle of Birth, Death and Re-birth can be terminated only when an individual evolves by means of Yoga practices, to transform into a “Yogin”. Contrary to concepts of Heaven, Hell, after-life, Judgement-Day and a punishing God associated with Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism), Hinduism has the concept of transmigration and re-incarnation (birth, death and re-birth) which is again a strong Hindu belief grounded in the teachings of Bhagawad-Gita. This cycle of constant sufferings caused by re-birth of soul after death of body continues incessantly till a person rises to achieve the state of a self-realized being by practicing Yoga, in sync with the propositions made by Bhagawad-

Gita. Verse-24 of Chapter 5 candidly asserts: "One whose happiness is within, whose pleasure is within and whose light is within is indeed a Yogi. Being situated in Brahman, he attains the state of Brahma Nirvana." To facilitate this evolution, the Bhagavad-Gita suggests multiple approaches, that can be broadly (though loosely) categorized into three types of Yogic practices, namely Karma-Yoga, Jnana- Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga. Though these may appear to be different methods or paths, in essence they all are intertwined and intrinsically overlapping.

In the opening chapters, the Bhagavad-Gita recommends practice of Karma-Yoga, which primarily means performing ones duties with a sense of detachment. According to the teachings of Gita, a wise person's actions should not be motivated by any selfish aspirations grounded in greed, lust or personal benefit; rather all actions must be performed merely as dharmic duty. In chapter 3, verse-19 of the Bhagavad-Gita, Shri Krishna tells Arjuna: "Remaining always unattached, you should therefore perform your prescribed duty; for a person, who performs such duty without attachment, attains the highest goal." By performing actions without attachment, the person loses his/her consciousness or conceit of being a 'doer', thereby getting liberated from the effects of his actions. Gita even instructs that an individual should neither harbour desires of enjoying the fruits of one's actions nor possess any fear of an action ending up in failure. The sense of detachment towards actions that the Bhagavad-Gita strongly recommends is firmly rooted in renunciation of all worldly possessions and materialistic aspirations. Bringing the mind under self-control, turning away from all sensuous inclinations and becoming oblivious to the mundane world, a practitioner of Karma-Yoga develops within self, a sense of equanimity towards the results or consequences of his detached actions. In chapter 2, verse-48, the Bhagavad-Gita teaches: "Situated in Yoga, perform your actions giving up all attachments. Remain equal in success and failure, for such equanimity is what is meant by Yoga." Sense of detachment towards actions and equal mindedness towards gain or loss, victory or defeat ultimately pave the way towards salvation from sin and liberation from the bondage of action, thus the Bhagavad-Gita propounds through verses 38 and 39 of the same chapter.

After exposition of Karma-Yoga, the Bhagavad-Gita then shifts focus (from chapter 4 onwards) towards another dimension of Yogic-practices, identified as Jnana-Yoga. It is to be noticed here that all those yogic practices that have been identified with Karma-Yoga, are closely associated with an awakening or realization within a Yogi about one's true nature, beyond the fetters of superficial physicality. Dr. Nicholas Sutton points out that "the Bhagavad-Gita regards the performance of desire-less action as inseparable from gaining knowledge of the true self" (Sutton, 57). Blurring of distinctions between Karma-Yoga and Jnana Yoga, the Bhagavad-Gita projects the two as twin approaches that complement one another. In chapter 6, the focus of Gita gets further concentrated on acquisition of realized knowledge and in this chapter Krishna suggests certain meditational 'asanas' too, that can further enhance mind-control as well as intensify the experience of spiritual self-realization. Self-realization thus becomes indispensable for evolution of an individual to an elevated state of Yogi. In chapter 6, verse 8, Shri Krishna

avers: “Satisfied by his knowledge and realization alone, situated in a higher position, mastering his senses, one who engages in this way is said to be a Yogin”.

Now, to achieve spiritual self-realization, the feasible and easiest path suggested by Bhagawad-Gita is through the practice of Bhakti-Yoga i.e. the Yoga of absolute devotion steeped in pure love towards the Supreme Deity (manifested through Krishna). Calling it the most effective way that leads to knowledge (Jnana) of true-self, Shri Krishna proclaims in Chapter 6, Verse- 47: “He who has faith and who worships me with his inner-self absorbed in me, is engaged in the best practice”. Several other verses of Gita reiterate the relevance of Bhakti (devotion) in obtaining liberation from pains of death and re-birth. With substantial emphasis on Bhakti-Yoga, the Bhagawad-Gita seems to assign paramount status to devotion amongst all forms of Yogic practices. It can be inferred that the Bhakti-Yoga is the quintessence of both Jnana-Yoga and Karma-Yoga because in Chapter 8, verse-14, Krishna reveals to Arjuna: “For a person who always sets his mind on me and never allows his concentration to wander, who is a Yogin, constant in his practice, I am very easy to attain.” Verse 16 of the same chapter bears testimony to Bhakti-Yoga being the key to achieve liberation from re-birth, for here Shri Krishna assures Arjuna: “After attaining Me, Kaunteya, there is no more rebirth”. In the concluding chapter of Bhagawad-Gita as well, Shri Krishna elaborates upon the effectiveness of Bhakti-Yoga in facilitating Jnana-Yoga, thereby enabling an individual to identify with the Supreme Being (Brahman). In verse-55 of chapter 18, Krishna asserts: “It is through this devotion, that he gains knowledge of me, of my greatness and my true identity. When he thus properly understands me, he then immediately enters my being.” In the context of Bhakti-Yoga, it is imperative to outline the close connections between devotion and divine love, as propounded by the Bhagawad-Gita. Bhakti (devotion), as referred to in Gita, is not grounded in fear, awe or obligation towards the Supreme Deity, it is rather a culmination of excessive divine love for him (Krishna). For a heart, mind and consciousness immersed in divine love, there remains no room left for materialistic desires.

The generally perceived dichotomy between theism and atheism is viewed entirely differently in Hinduism, as the Bhagawad-Gita propounds. The undivided absolute devotion towards the Supreme Deity, emphasized upon repeatedly in the Bhagawad-Gita needs to be comprehended appropriately in the light of Shri Krishna’s revelation made in chapter 10, verse-11 that he (as Supreme Deity) is situated in the very being of all life-forms. In verse-20 of the same chapter, Shri Krishna categorically proclaims: “I am the atman, Gudakesha, situated in the hearts of all beings. I am the beginning of the living beings and I am their middle and end as well.” Through these verses, the Bhagawad-Gita not only offers clarity on the nature of Supreme Deity, but also re-defines the concept of devotion. Dr. Nicholas Sutton draws similar inference that “the deity of the Bhagawad-Gita is not a remote entity who exists in a transcendent domain but rather he pervades the world with his sustaining presence” (Sutton, 58). It can be therefore inferred that according to Bhagawad-Gita, the true-identity of each and every living creature is identical with the Supreme Deity, who pervades everyone and everything. Thus, the

practice of Bhakti-Yoga translates into intense meditative engagement with one's own true-self i.e. Atman. The concept of devotion according to Bhagawad-Gita is not based on worshipping, praising, loving some external supernatural being or surrendering to the will of some Almighty God seated in heaven high above, it is all about realizing the presence of God within our own selves, termed as "Atmabodh"( self-realization) in Sanskrit. Expressing similar opinion, Dr. Nicholas Sutton states "We should probably take the idea of thoughts being concentrated on Krishna as meaning that one's meditation should be fixed on the atman at the core of one's own being"(Sutton, 66). Self-realization or realizing ones true nature as "Atman" that is fundamentally the Supreme Being itself, enables an individual to develop a spiritual perspective through which the fundamental unity of all life-forms (notwithstanding physical differences of colour, gender, race, species, etc.) gets revealed and also it releases a person from all attachment with ones physical dimensions thereby liberating such individual from all fears of worldly loses including death. Such a state of being called "Moksha", "Mukti" or "Nirvana" has been the central objective of most Hindu religious practices and general Hindu mindset.

In Chapter 6 of the Bhagawad-Gita, verses 10 to 17 offer a discourse on specific meditative practices that can be implemented to withdraw one's consciousness from external perceptions as well as worldly fluctuations and getattuned inwardly with the Atman. These entail staying alone in a secluded place, shunning all aspirations, anxieties and attachments (both physically and psychologically), sitting erect in a motionless posture with eyes concentrated on a single point of nose and thoughts concentrated on the Supreme Being that dwells within the atman. Verses 18 to 32 of the same chapter further expand upon the practice of intense meditation as processes or techniques that enable a person in attaining realized knowledge of his true self. Some scholars have termed these meditational practices (mentioned in chapter 6 of Gita) as Dhyana-Yoga(the Yoga of Meditation), though these meditational practices are an inseparable component of Jnana-Yoga. Upon attaining the realization of one's true nature, an individual transcends associations with superficial webs of worldly illusions (Maya) that bind a person with innumerable meaningless mortal distractions. Having attained the divine state of a true Yogi, firm in practicing Karma-Yoga, Jnana- Yoga and Bhakti- Yoga, the individual experiences unwavering inner tranquility of permanent nature, limitless joy and profound self-satisfaction. Moreover, after evolving by means of Yoga practice, an individual ascends to achieve the highest spiritual goal i.e. Brahma-Nirvana (liberation from rebirth).Founder of the Hare Krishna Movement, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada points out towards Bhagawad-Gita's stance on renunciation of materialistic tendencies for spiritual liberation in these words:

Bhagavad-Gita was spoken to liberate one from the bodily conception of life, and Arjuna put himself in this position in order to receive this information from the Lord. One must become free from the bodily conception of life; that is the preliminary activity for the transcendentalist. One who wants to become free, who wants to become liberated, must first of all learn that he is not this material body.

Mukti or liberation means freedom from material consciousness. (Prabhupada p.14)

The entire discourse on Yoga practice in Gita emphasizes on attaining realized knowledge of one's true identity for getting liberated from all the superficial worldly attachments and illusions. The Bhagawad-Gita seamlessly blends Karma-Yoga, Jnana-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga as three primary approaches that complement each other in enabling an individual to disentangle oneself from the materialistic web. The confluence of these three collectively brings about transformation of an individual into a Yogi. The Yoga practices recommended by Bhagawad-Gita enable a person to cultivate within, the virtues of detached action, equal-mindedness, self-control and a purified tranquil consciousness. Swami Sivananda points out towards this unique synthesis of three major yogic paths in the Bhagavad Gita stating that it "formulates the theories of the three paths without creating any conflict among them and harmonizes most wonderfully the philosophy of action, devotion and knowledge" (Sivananda p.10).

In terms of functionality and present-day relevance, the teachings of Bhagawad-Gita on Yoga have immense potential to universally augment a 'dharmic' worldview, which is grounded in compassion and empathy towards all living beings. Realization of one's true identity as a part of Supreme Soul that pervades all living beings naturally develops a non-discriminatory perspective, leaving no room for narrow-minded prejudices on the basis of caste, creed, race or gender. Rather, the teachings of Bhagawad-Gita can be instrumental in creating a universal awakening that all of us who inhabit this earth are intrinsically and spiritually same, the differences being nothing more than superficial. Gita's strong recommendation and repeated emphasis upon the virtue of controlling the mind and self-regulating sensuous desires can be an inspiration for people in contemporary times to develop a harmonious balance between worldly material pursuits and inward spiritual progression by means of Yoga practice. Similar opinion regarding the relevance of Bhagawad-Gita's teachings is asserted by a close disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, Mahadev Desai, in these words:

The Gita performs the unique function of making what was an esoteric doctrine a living reality for the unlettered, the lowly and the lost, and present the highest form of practical religion to enable each and all to realize his or her purpose in life. Above all, it blazons forth in an unmistakable manner the truth that life is worth living and teaches how it may be worth living. It is a unique synthesis and reconciliation of the two doctrines which were in those days held to be contradictory — sannyasa (renunciation of action) and yoga (performance of action). (Desai p.18)

A unique feature of the Bhagawad-Gita is that it neither issues any dogmatic dictats nor attempts at making doctrinal impositions. In verse 63 of chapter 18, Krishna tells Arjuna: "Yathechhasi tatha kuru" means after fully considering what you have heard, you should then act as you see fit. It is thus evident that the entire treatise on Yoga revealed through

Bhagawad-Gita, leaves space for interpretation and implementation as per one's individual sensibility and disposition. Ultimately, this book just provides advices without making any impositions. While some scholars have interpreted Bhagawad-Gita with ardent theistic pre-occupations, some others have traced its close connections with the ideology of Advaita (non-dualism). Owing to this element of multivalence that is found in the Bhagawad-Gita, its teachings on Yoga practice have had varied (even radically different) interpretations, yet it is universally agreed upon that the core teachings of this book focus primarily upon the mutually overlapping approaches of Karma-Yoga, Jnana-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga that lead to Brahma-nirvana (liberation from rebirth, also called Moksha) as the common spiritual goal.

### **Conclusion:**

Blending together ideas and concepts associated with devotion, detachment and self-realization, the Bhagawad-Gita encapsulates the essence of Yoga, i.e. liberation of self by means of realizing the divinity within self. Transcending sectarian moulds that exist within Hinduism, this book puts into perspective the entire spiritual belief-system associated with Hindu Religious Faiths and practices. The Hindu concept of God as all permeating 'Divinity', the ultimate goal of all Hindu religious practices to achieve 'Moksha' through self-realization, the all inclusive cosmopolitan stance of Hinduism to recognize all living beings as extended manifestations of the Divine-being, the Hindu belief in 'Law of Karma', the Hindu ethos of equability, renunciation and numerous other ideological, spiritual as well as intellectual tenets that impact Hindu practices and beliefs can be most substantially comprehended through a close careful reading of the Bhagawad-Gita, hence giving it a global recognition of being the spiritual nucleus of Hinduism.

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