



## The Concept of Niṣkāmakarma: An Overview in the Light of Bhagavadgītā

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### Original Article

#### Abstract

*Niṣkāmakarma, or selfless action, holds a central place in the ethical and spiritual teachings of the Bhagavadgītā. It emphasizes performing one's duties without attachment to the results, promoting a balance between moral responsibility and spiritual liberation. Unlike outcome-focused moral systems, the Gītā values intention, detachment, and inner discipline alongside action itself. This principle encourages individuals to act according to dharma with sincerity, integrity, and a spirit of service, while relinquishing ego and personal desire. Through niṣkāmakarma, one develops mental equanimity, emotional resilience, and deeper self-awareness beyond temporary worldly outcomes. The example of Arjuna illustrates how selfless action can transform inner conflict into purposeful engagement. In contemporary life, dominated by material goals and performance pressures, niṣkāmakarma provides a practical framework for ethical living, stress reduction, and meaningful participation in society. This research overview highlights its philosophical foundations, practical relevance, and timeless applicability, demonstrating how the Bhagavadgītā's wisdom continues to guide ethical action and spiritual growth today.*

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## 1. Introduction:

The *Bhagavadgītā*, every so often referred to as the *Gītā*, is one of the most admired and illuminative spiritual manuscripts in Indian philosophy. It is part of the *Mahābhārata*, a great Indian epic, and is obtainable as a conversation between Lord Kṛṣṇa and Prince Arjuna on the battleground of Kurukshetra. Even though it takes place in a war, the *Bhagavadgītā* is not merely about fighting or winning battles; rather, it deals with some of the deepest questions of human life, such as the questions about duty, morality, self-realisation, and the nature of existence. There are so many teachings in the *Gītā*, but the notion of *niṣkāmakarma* is fundamental. As a devotee of the *Gītā*, understanding the concept of *niṣkāmakarma* is essential. The *Gītā* teaches that life should be seen as a field of action, where every individual continuously performs *karma* through thoughts, words, and deeds. It inspires us to cultivate the true attitude toward responsibilities and living a balanced, meaningful life. The concept of *niṣkāmakarma*, from the *Bhagavadgītā*, provides a practical philosophy for everyday life. It further guides us on how to act in the world while remaining free from unnecessary anxiety and inner conflict.

The most important challenge Arjuna went through in the *Gītā* was moral and emotional confusion, which occurs between his duty as a warrior and his fondness for his family members, teachers, and friends who stand on the contrary side of the battleground. This situation mirrors the common human experience of facing difficult choices where personal feelings clash with responsibility. This is where Lord Kṛṣṇa starts explaining the nature of *niṣkāmakarma* and its importance in performing one's duty, deprived of attachment to the results. According to Kṛṣṇa, *right action performed with the right intention* must be the basis of spiritual growth and ethical living. In the battle of Kurukshetra, it is observed that Arjuna in such a state of *moral crisis* because he has to fight with his own relatives, teachers, and friends. As they were from the side of the Kauravas, he felt morally troubled. He then asks question: Is it right to fight and kill my own people, even if the cause is just? Lord Kṛṣṇa, in this situation of emotional and moral crisis, as the companion of Arjuna's charioteer, provided his divine guide and delivered his teachings to Arjuna. Among these teachings from the *Bhagavadgītā*, the concept of *niṣkāmakarma* takes the utmost importance. The concept of *niṣkāmakarma* invites careful philosophical reflection on several fundamental questions. What, in precise terms, does *niṣkāmakarma* signify? Is action without desire genuinely possible for human beings? How is *niṣkāmakarma* different from *sakāmakarma*? Furthermore, does *niṣkāmakarma* fall within the scope of moral evaluation, or does it transcend ordinary moral judgment? Is *niṣkāmakarma* relevant in modern

life? This paper is a sincere and systematic attempt to examine and critically address these issues in a comprehensive philosophical framework.

## **2. Origin and Meaning of Niṣkāmakarma:**

The origin of the concept of *niṣkāmakarma* can be traced primarily to the *Bhagavadgītā*, where it is presented as a profound ethical and spiritual principle governing human action. Although the idea of *karma* itself appears earlier in the *Vedic* and *Upaniṣadic* traditions, the *Gītā* introduces a distinctive reinterpretation by emphasising action performed without attachment to its fruits. In the dialogue between Lord Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, *niṣkāmakarma* emerges as a response to Arjuna's moral dilemma on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. Faced with the conflict between personal emotions and social duty, Arjuna represents the universal human condition of ethical confusion. Kṛṣṇa resolves this crisis by teaching that one must perform one's prescribed duty (*svadharma*) selflessly, without desire for personal gain, success, or reward. Thus, *niṣkāmakarma* originates as a spiritual solution to the problem of action in a world where complete inaction is impossible, yet attachment leads to bondage. It synthesises earlier *Vedic* ritualism and *Upaniṣadic* renunciation into a practical philosophy of disciplined, detached action.

*Niṣkāmakarma* is one of the most prominent themes of the *Bhagavadgītā* and is often regarded as its central teaching. To understand this concept, it is necessary to examine the meaning of the term itself. The word *niṣkāma* is formed through *sandhi* from *niḥ+kāma*. The prefix *niḥ* means “without,” while *kāma* signifies any “kind of desire,” particularly self-centred or result-oriented desire. The term *karma* literally means “action” or “work” and is derived from the Sanskrit root (*dhātu*) *kṛ* (*kri*), which signifies “to do” or “to act.” Thus, *niṣkāmakarma* refers to action performed without attachment to personal desires or the fruits of action. Let's now address the first query that was raised earlier: What does *niṣkāmakarma* actually mean?

*Niṣkāmakarma* literally signifies action performed without desire for personal gain or selfish reward. However, in the *Gītā*, its meaning goes far beyond mere literal renunciation of desire; it denotes a disciplined, ethical, and spiritually oriented way of acting in the world. This concept is most clearly articulated in *Bhagavadgītā* 2.47–2.48, where Śrī Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna on the true spirit of action. In the 47<sup>th</sup> verse of the second chapter, Lord Kṛṣṇa says-

*“Karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana,*

*Mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stvakarmanī'*<sup>1</sup>

Lord Kṛṣṇa declares that a human being has authority only over action, not over the fruits of action. One should not act with the motive of securing results, nor should one become attached to inaction out of fear of failure. This verse lays the philosophical foundation of *niṣkāmakarma*:

- Action is unavoidable in human life.
- What binds a person is not action itself, but attachment to its results.
- Thus, renunciation does not imply withdrawal from action; rather, it involves surrendering personal claims over the results of one's deeds.

So, *niṣkāmakarma* does not deny effort, planning, or responsibility; rather, it requires that one perform one's prescribed duty (*svadharma*) with full sincerity, while relinquishing egoistic expectations. In the subsequent verse, Lord Kṛṣṇa goes on to declare that—

*“Yoga-sthaḥ kuru karmāṇi saṅgaṃ tyaktvā dhanañjaya,*

*Siddhy-asiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṃ yoga ucyate*<sup>2</sup>

In this verse, Kṛṣṇa further refines the idea by introducing *yoga* as equanimity of mind. To be established in *yoga* means to perform actions while abandoning attachment and remaining balanced in success and failure alike. This mental poise (*samatva*) is identified as the essence of *yoga*. Here, *niṣkāmakarma* emerges not merely as a moral instruction, but as a spiritual discipline:

- Action is done with dedication, not indifference.
- Success does not inflate the ego, and failure does not cause despair.
- The agent remains inwardly free while being outwardly active.

From these two verses, *niṣkāmakarma* can be understood as selfless, detached, and duty-oriented action, performed in a spirit of inner freedom. Therefore, a similar lesson in both verses—that is, verses 47 and 48—is that we must behave without expecting to reap the results of our actions. However, we learn a new lesson in verse 48: we must regard our failures and successes equally. This equitable treatment is often referred to as *yoga*. Additionally, it is mentioned that this equitable treatment is known as *yoga*. This form of action, carried out with inner balance and detachment, is what Lord Kṛṣṇa proclaims as *karmayoga*. At this point,

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<sup>1</sup> *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*: 2/47

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 2/48

“Arjuna inquires of Lord Kṛṣṇa as to who may be called a *yogī* of this kind?”<sup>3</sup> Here, it should be noted that in the *Gītā*, a *yogī* is identified with the *sthitaprajña* person. Here, the supreme Lord Kṛṣṇa replied to Arjuna’s question. “O Parth, when one discards all selfish desires and cravings of the senses that torment the mind, and becomes satisfied in the realisation of the self, such a person is said to be transcendently situated.”<sup>4</sup> One whose mind remains undisturbed by pleasure and pain, success and failure; who has withdrawn the senses from their objects; who is free from attachment, fear, and anger; and who no longer craves worldly enjoyments—such a person is called a *sthitaprajña*. His or her happiness arises from inner realisation rather than from external circumstances. Calm, self-controlled, and firmly established in Self-knowledge, this person continues to act in the world without selfish desire. With the intention of dispelling Arjuna’s mental confusion, Lord Kṛṣṇa speaks in the very next verse- “One whose mind remains undisturbed amidst misery, who does not crave for pleasure, and who is free from attachment, fear, and anger, is called a sage of steady wisdom.”<sup>5</sup>

From the foregoing discussion, one might mistakenly conclude that when the Bhagavad *Gītā* exhorts us to practise *niṣkāmakarma*, it is actually teaching us to abstain from all kinds of action and, therefore, to avoid every form of activity. Śrīkṛṣṇa anticipates and seeks to correct this misunderstanding within the *Gītā* itself. Far from advocating inaction, Lord Kṛṣṇa makes it clear that *niṣkāmakarma* does not mean the renunciation of action, but the renunciation of attachment to the fruits of action. The *Gītā* repeatedly emphasises that action is unavoidable for embodied beings, and that even the maintenance of one’s body is impossible without action. In this context, verse 5 of the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā* is noteworthy, where Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa states—

“*Na hi kaśhchit kṣhaṇam api jātu tiṣṭhatyakarma-kṛit,*

*Kāryate hyavaśhaḥ karma sarvaḥ prakṛiti-jair guṇaiḥ*”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, from the foregoing discussion, it becomes clear that the person who truly practises *niṣkāmakarma*—the one who is genuinely *sthitaprajña*—continues to perform all necessary duties and worldly actions, but does so without any desire for personal gain or enjoyment of

<sup>3</sup> *Sthita-prajñasya kā bhāṣhā samādhi-sthasya keśhava*  
*Sthita-dhīḥ kim prabhāṣheta kim āsīta vrajeta kim* // 2/54, *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*.

<sup>4</sup> *Prajahāti yadā kāmān sarvān pārtha mano-gatān*  
*Ātmany-evātmanā tuṣṭaḥ sthita-prajñas tadochyate* // 2/55, *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*.

<sup>5</sup> *Duḥkheṣhv-anudvigna-manāḥ sukheṣhu vigata-sprihaḥ*  
*Vīta-rāga-bhaya-krodhaḥ sthita-dhīr munir uchyate* // 2/56, *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*.

<sup>6</sup> *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*: 3/5

the results. Thus, through the teaching of *niṣkāmakarma*, the *Gītā* does not promote withdrawal from life or passivity. Rather, it presents an ideal of engaged action grounded in detachment, where one acts fully in the world while remaining inwardly free.

### **3. Nature of Niṣkāmakarma:**

In the foregoing discussion, we have examined certain aspects of *niṣkāmakarma*. Now we come to discuss our second question. We know from our daily experience that it is abundantly evident that every action we take inevitably requires some sort of desire. Without desire, nothing can be done. Then the question arises: how can action without desire be truly possible for a human being? If it is indeed possible, in what sense can such an action be understood? A careful analysis of the *Gītā* reveals that the word *karma* in *niṣkāmakarma* is employed in a technical and specialised sense. Here, not every form of desire is regarded as *kāmanā*. Here, the term *kāmanā* has been taken in a broader sense. In the *Gītā*, the term *kāmanā* is understood in the sense of love. Whatever is motivated and guided by love is therefore considered conducive to the practice of *niṣkāmakarma*. That which is performed for the satisfaction or delight of God is called love. In my point of view, the term love here also implicitly includes the aspiration for the welfare and happiness of society as a whole. Therefore, *niṣkāmakarma* is not absolutely free from all forms of desire. Rather, it is free only from that specific kind of desire which is condemned and ought to be renounced. Action motivated by love belongs to a different order of desire—one that is praiseworthy and worthy of encouragement. Consequently, the objection that *niṣkāmakarma* is impossible on the ground that it presupposes action without any desire at all cannot be sustained.

*Niṣkāmakarma* teaches us that we must renounce the desire for the fulfilment of personal interests and instead cultivate the desire to please God. The underlying reason for this teaching seems to be the recognition that, in the true sense, we are not the real agents of our actions. If I am not the genuine doer of an action, then I cannot rightfully claim ownership over its results either. This naturally leads to an important question: if I perform an action, who is its real agent? In this context, Lord Kṛṣṇa explains that it is *Prakṛti* and its three *guṇas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*—that carry out all actions. A person deluded by egoism, however, mistakenly considers oneself to be the doer. Furthermore, the *Gītā* teaches that the fruits of all actions rightfully belong to God alone. If we observe carefully, we will find that throughout different chapters and verses of the *Bhagavadgītā*, Lord Kṛṣṇa repeatedly emphasises freedom from selfish attachment and urges human beings to offer the fruits of all their actions to the Supreme Self.



In the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, the ideal of action without selfish attachment is articulated through different yet complementary perspectives in Chapters Three, Five, and Nine. In Chapter Three, Verse 30, “Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna to dedicate all actions to Him, perform one’s duties with a disciplined mind, free from egoism, desire, and possessiveness. Here, the emphasis is on inner renunciation—the renunciation of the sense of doership (*kartṛtva*) and personal claim over the fruits of action. Action is not abandoned; rather, it is purified by surrendering its ownership to the Divine.”<sup>7</sup> This teaching is further clarified in Chapter Five, Verse 10, where Kṛṣṇa explains that “one who performs action by offering it to Brahman, without attachment, remains untouched by sin, just as a lotus leaf remains unwetted by water. This verse highlights the ethical and spiritual immunity that arises from detached action. When actions are performed without egoistic motivation and without clinging to their results, they no longer bind the agent, even though the agent remains fully engaged in the world.”<sup>8</sup> The principle reaches its most accessible and devotional expression in Chapter Nine, Verse 27, where Kṛṣṇa declares that “whatever one does, eats, offers, or gives—indeed, whatever austerity one performs—should be offered to Him. This verse universalises the spiritual path by transforming every ordinary act of life into an act of worship. No action is too small or mundane to be sanctified when performed in the spirit of divine offering.”<sup>9</sup>

Taken together, these three verses present a unified doctrine of *niṣkāmakarma* grounded in dedication to God. Chapter Three emphasises surrender of ego, Chapter Five emphasises freedom from moral bondage, and Chapter Nine emphasises devotional offering. The common thread running through all three is that liberation does not arise from the abandonment of action, but from the transformation of intention. When action is freed from selfish desire and offered to the Divine for the sake of *lokasaṁgraha* (the welfare of the world), it becomes a means of spiritual purification rather than bondage. Thus, the *Gītā* harmoniously integrates action (*karma*), knowledge (*jñāna*), and devotion (*bhakti*) into a single, comprehensive way of life. Thus, the foregoing discussion clearly demonstrates why we should have no desire for the enjoyment of the fruits of action. It is precisely this perspective that transforms all our actions into *niṣkāmakarma*. In fact, our sense of ego, or the notion of ourselves as independent agents (*kartṛtva*), lies at the root of all problems—both individual and social. It is this ego-

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<sup>7</sup> *Mayi sarvāṇi karmāṇi sannyasyādhyātma-chetasā*

*Nirāśhīr nirmamo bhūtvā yudhyasva vigata-jvaraḥ* // 3/30, *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*.

<sup>8</sup> *Brahmaṇyādhāya karmāṇi saṅgaṁ tyaktvā karoti yaḥ*

*Lipyate na sa pāpeṇa padma-patram ivāmbhasā* // 5/10, *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*.

<sup>9</sup> *Yat karoṣhi yad aśhnāsi yaj juhoṣhi dadāsi yat*

*Yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kuruṣhva mad-arpaṇam* // 9/27, *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*.

consciousness, this feeling of doership, that renders our actions *sakāma*. Hence, it becomes evident that the ego is the fundamental problem, and that its resolution lies in the dissolution of ego-consciousness itself.

#### **4. Difference between *Sakāmakarma* and *Niṣkāmakarma*:**

In the *Bhagavadgītā*, *sakāmakarma* refers to actions performed with attachment to personal desire, pleasure, and reward, and Śrīkṛṣṇa explains that this mode of action is the common tendency of ordinary human beings. However, He clearly points out that such desire-driven action binds the individual to *samsāra* and obstructs spiritual clarity. Lord Kṛṣṇa observes that those who are deeply attached to enjoyment and worldly power lose the steadiness of their inner discernment and are unable to attain firm spiritual concentration:

*“bhogaiśvarya-prasaktānām tayāpahṛta-cetasām,  
vyavasāyātmikā buddhiḥ samādhau na vidhīyate”<sup>10</sup>*

He further identifies *kāma*, born of *rajo-guṇa*, as the fundamental force behind *sakāma* action and as the principal enemy of wisdom and self-realisation: “*kāma eṣa krodha eṣa rajo-guṇa-samudbhavaḥ*.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, while the *Gītā* acknowledges the practical reality of *sakāmakarma* in human life, it presents it as an inferior mode of action that strengthens ego, attachment, and bondage, in contrast to *niṣkāmakarma*, which alone leads toward inner freedom and spiritual growth. In this regard, we shall now proceed to our third question. We have discussed several aspects of *niṣkāmakarma* above; however, the concept of *niṣkāmakarma* will become clear to us only when we are properly acquainted with *sakāmakarma*. So, a natural question arises here: what is the difference between *niṣkāmakarma* and *sakāmakarma*? Here, we will be able to understand very clearly how important *niṣkāmakarma* is in human society and in human life. It is undeniable that our civilisation has progressively devolved into a type of hell. All conscious and thoughtful individuals are deeply disturbed by the numerous evils that surround us in social life. Yet we also know that nothing happens without a cause. What, then, is the real cause of this degradation? Undoubtedly, the members of society themselves are responsible. More precisely, it is our *sakāmakarmas*—actions performed with selfish motives and for the satisfaction of personal interests—that have given rise to this condition. This truth becomes even clearer when we look at the present global situation. The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the tense and hostile relations between America and Venezuela, and the persistent

<sup>10</sup> *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*: 2/44

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 3/37



rivalry and aggression between India and Pakistan are not isolated or accidental events. They are collective expressions of the same *sakāma* mentality, driven by ego, power, greed, and self-interest at both individual and national levels. When personal or national gain becomes the sole motive of action, violence, exploitation, and destruction naturally follow. Thus, both social degeneration and global conflicts ultimately arise from selfish action, confirming that *sakāmakarma* lies at the root of our present crisis.

But the question arises: why are we almost invariably motivated to perform *sakāmakarmas*—actions driven by personal desire and self-interest? A careful reflection suggests that the most plausible answer lies in the nature of our prevailing social structure and the mental setup it cultivates. Contemporary society undoubtedly encourages efficiency, ambition, and constant activity, but at the same time, it subtly reinforces an excessive sense of individualism. It shapes individuals who are active and goal-oriented, yet often lacking in social sensitivity and moral responsibility. Within such a social environment, the “self” gradually becomes the centre of all concerns, leaving little space for others in one’s mental and ethical horizon. As a result, although we remain constantly engaged in various activities throughout the day, it is deeply unfortunate that most of these activities revolve exclusively around personal interests—our success, comfort, recognition, and gain. This narrow confinement within the boundaries of self-centred motivation is the root cause of many of the problems that afflict society today. Unless and until we are able to transcend this limited mental framework and consciously enter into the wider realm of impersonal and universal interest, no lasting solution to social problems is possible.

This naturally leads us to a crucial question: what is the way out of this crisis? From thoughtful observation and philosophical reflection, it becomes evident that the most effective solution lies in the proper understanding, teaching, and practical implementation of the ideal of *niṣkāmakarma*, as expounded in the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*. *Niṣkāmakarma* does not demand the abandonment of action; rather, it calls for a transformation of the inner motive behind action—action performed without attachment to personal gain and dedicated to the welfare of the whole. The life and teachings of Swami Vivekananda offer a powerful illustration of this ideal. His tireless service to humanity, especially through the Ramakrishna Mission, was never driven by personal ambition or reward. He worked relentlessly for the upliftment of the poor, the uneducated, and the oppressed, firmly believing that service to humanity is service to God (*Śiva-jñāne jīva-sevā*). His actions were deeply rooted in the spirit of *niṣkāmakarma*—selfless action performed as a duty toward society. Similarly, Rabindranath Tagore’s gradual movement

from an early engagement with nationalism to a mature vision of internationalism is deeply rooted in the ideal of *niṣkāmakarma*. He came to realise that actions driven by narrow national self-interest ultimately limit the moral and spiritual growth of humanity. In contrast, action performed without selfish attachment—aimed at the welfare of all—alone can lead to true human unity. This philosophical insight shaped both his educational experiments at Santiniketan and his broader humanistic vision. For Tagore, education was not meant to produce merely successful citizens of a nation, but complete human beings capable of transcending boundaries and harmonising personal development with universal responsibility. In the course of our discussion, we have seen how the sincere teaching and collective practice of *niṣkāmakarma* in society can gradually dissolve ego-driven motivations and foster cooperation, compassion, and ethical responsibility. Only through such a transformation of our inner orientation toward action can we hope to address and resolve the deep-rooted social problems of our time. We have seen that in the *Bhagavadgītā*, Śrīkṛṣṇa unfolds a comprehensive ethical and spiritual understanding of human action by clearly distinguishing between *sakāmakarma* and *niṣkāmakarma*. What is particularly significant is that *niṣkāmakarma* is not presented as an abstract or unattainable moral ideal. Rather, Kṛṣṇa emphasises it as a form of action that can be genuinely practised in everyday life. Grounded in ethical responsibility and firmly embedded in active engagement with the world, *niṣkāmakarma* harmonises moral integrity with effective action and ultimately functions as a viable means of spiritual realisation.

### **5. Moral Action and Transcendence:**

Now we shall proceed to our next question. The question of whether *niṣkāmakarma* falls within the scope of moral evaluation or transcends ordinary moral judgment touches the very heart of the ethical and spiritual vision of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Far from offering a simplistic moral code based merely on external action, the *Gītā* presents a deeply nuanced framework in which intention, inner disposition, self-knowledge, and surrender to the divine play decisive roles. Within this framework, *niṣkāmakarma* occupies a unique position: it is at once morally meaningful and yet ultimately transformative of morality itself. It neither rejects ethical responsibility nor remains confined within conventional moral judgment; rather, it purifies, deepens, and finally transcends ordinary moral evaluation by relocating the moral centre from action and consequence to consciousness and detachment. At the outset, it is important to recognise that the *Gītā* does not deny the relevance of moral evaluation. On the contrary, Lord Kṛṣṇa repeatedly insists on righteous action (*dharma*) and warns against unethical conduct

(*adharma*). Arjuna's crisis arises precisely because he is morally conflicted: he fears that fighting the war will lead to sin, social disorder, and personal moral degradation. Kṛṣṇa does not dismiss these concerns as irrelevant. Instead, He reframes them by introducing a higher perspective on action—one that preserves ethical responsibility while freeing the agent from bondage.

*Niṣkāmakarma*, as expounded in the Gītā, refers to action performed without attachment to personal desire, selfish motive, or the fruits of action. As we have already seen, Lord Kṛṣṇa asserts that one has a right only to action, never to its fruits, and He warns against both attachments to results and withdrawal from action. This teaching itself signals a fundamental shift in moral emphasis. Traditional moral evaluation often focuses on outcomes—success or failure, reward or punishment, benefit or harm. *Niṣkāmakarma* redirects attention away from outcomes and toward the manner, intention, and inner attitude with which action is performed. However, this redirection does not abolish morality; rather, it refines and interiorizes it. In ordinary moral judgment, actions are typically evaluated on three interconnected grounds: intention, the act itself, and its consequences. *Niṣkāmakarma* engages with all three, but in a transformed way. The intention is purified of selfish desire; the action is aligned with one's duty (*svadharma*); and the consequences are surrendered to the cosmic order (*īśvara*). Because the agent does not act for personal gain, fear of loss, or egoic satisfaction, the moral quality of action is no longer shaped by subjective craving. Yet this does not mean that “anything goes.” Kṛṣṇa is unequivocal that *niṣkāmakarma* must be firmly grounded in dharma. Action that violates righteousness, social responsibility, or divine law cannot be justified merely by invoking detachment.

This point becomes especially clear when Kṛṣṇa criticises those who renounce action outwardly while remaining inwardly attached:

*“Karmendriyāṇi saṁyamya ya āste manasā smaran,  
Indriyārthān vimūḍhātmā mithyācāraḥ sa ucyate”*<sup>12</sup>

Such a person, who restrains the organs of action but mentally dwells on sense objects, is called a hypocrite. Here, moral judgment is unmistakably present. The *Gītā* does not endorse moral relativism or spiritual escapism. Instead, it insists that inner detachment must be authentic and must manifest as responsible engagement with the world. At the same time, *niṣkāmakarma*

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<sup>12</sup> Śrīmadbhagavadgītā: 3/6

transcends ordinary moral judgment insofar as it frees the agent from ego-centred moral accounting. Conventional morality is often structured around notions such as “I am the doer,” “I am responsible,” “I will earn merit,” or “I will incur sin.” The Gītā challenges this framework by questioning the very assumption of individual doership. Kṛṣṇa explains that actions arise from the interaction of the *guṇas* of *prakṛti*, while the Self remains essentially unattached:

*“Prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ,*

*Ahaṅkāra-vimūḍhātmā kartāham iti manyate”<sup>13</sup>*

From this standpoint, ordinary moral judgment—which presupposes an ego that claims ownership of action—rests on incomplete understanding. *Niṣkāmakarma* does not deny responsibility, but it dissolves egoistic appropriation. The practitioner acts not as an autonomous claimant of results, but as an instrument of the divine will, offering all actions to Kṛṣṇa. When action is performed as an offering, its moral dimension is no longer centred on personal merit or blame. Instead, it becomes a form of worship (*yajña*). In this sacrificial vision of life, ethical action is absorbed into spiritual surrender. This is precisely where *niṣkāmakarma* transcends ordinary moral judgment—not by negating ethics, but by elevating it into a discipline of devotion and wisdom.

Moreover, the *Gītā* subtly warns that attachment even to moral merit can become a form of bondage. Just as attachment to pleasure binds the soul, so too can attachment to being “good,” “righteous,” or “virtuous” reinforce the ego. *Niṣkāmakarma* liberates the agent from this subtle trap. The wise person performs righteous action not to accumulate merit or to construct a moral identity, but because action in accordance with *dharma* flows spontaneously from a purified consciousness. This inner equanimity marks a decisive departure from ordinary moral psychology, which often oscillates between pride and guilt. The practitioner of *niṣkāmakarma* neither exults in praise nor collapses under blame. Social moral judgment may persist, but it no longer determines the inner state of the agent. Yet it would be a serious misunderstanding to claim that *niṣkāmakarma* renders moral evaluation irrelevant. From the standpoint of social order and collective well-being, ethical norms remain indispensable. Kṛṣṇa explicitly emphasises that even the spiritually enlightened must continue to act responsibly for the maintenance of the world:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 3/27

“*Lokasaṅgraham evāpi sampaśyan kartum arhasi*”<sup>14</sup>

The spiritually advanced person does not abandon ethical standards; rather, such a person embodies them more fully. Their actions become spontaneous expressions of compassion, justice, and responsibility, free from selfish motives. In this sense, *niṣkāmakarma* deepens moral life instead of abolishing it. What truly transcends ordinary moral judgment is the inner standpoint from which action is performed. For the practitioner of *niṣkāmakarma*, moral action is no longer a means to an external end—whether pleasure, recognition, or even heavenly reward. It becomes an expression of inner freedom and harmony with the cosmic order. The ultimate aim is purification of the mind (*citta-śuddhi*) and realisation of the Self. Kṛṣṇa affirms that such action does not bind:

“*Naiva kiñcit karomīti yukto manyeta tattvavit*”<sup>15</sup>

The knower of truth understands, “I do nothing at all,” even while fully engaged in action. From this highest standpoint, moral judgment as ordinarily conceived—rooted in egoistic doership and personal consequence—falls away. What remains is spontaneous, selfless action grounded in wisdom. In lived, practical terms, *niṣkāmakarma* offers a powerful ethical ideal. In everyday life, individuals continually face moral dilemmas in relation to profession, family, society, and personal ambition. *Niṣkāmakarma* does not advocate withdrawal from these domains; rather, it teaches engagement without attachment. A teacher who educates without seeking fame, a doctor who treats patients without greed or discrimination, or a public servant who works without corruption or hunger for power—such individuals are not beyond moral evaluation, yet their actions reflect a higher ethical quality shaped by *niṣkāmakarma*.

Thus, *niṣkāmakarma* occupies a paradoxical yet profound position. At the empirical level, it remains firmly grounded in moral responsibility, *dharma*, and social obligation, and therefore falls within the scope of moral evaluation. At the spiritual level, however, by dissolving egoic motivation, attachment to results, and identification with doership, it transcends ordinary moral judgment. The *Gītā* does not ask us to choose between morality and transcendence; it reveals how morality itself becomes a path to transcendence when purified of desire and surrendered to the divine. So, *niṣkāmakarma* neither rejects moral evaluation nor remains confined within its conventional limits. It transforms morality from an external system of judgment into an inner discipline of self-purification and surrender. By acting without desire for personal gain

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 3/20

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 5/8

and by offering all actions to the divine, the practitioner lives ethically without being bound by ethical anxiety. In this way, *niṣkāmakarma* stands as one of the most profound moral–spiritual ideals of the *Bhagavadgītā*, integrating righteous action, inner freedom, and ultimate liberation into a single, harmonious vision of human life.

## 6. Concluding Remarks:

After exploring all aspects and the significance of *niṣkāmakarma*, a very natural and pertinent question arises: Is *niṣkāmakarma* at all practically relevant in modern life? Our response would be that *niṣkāmakarma* is not merely relevant in modern life; it is, in many ways, one of the most urgently needed ethical and spiritual frameworks for an age defined by anxiety, competition, and restless pursuit of results. At first glance, the *Bhagavadgītā* emerges from a world vastly different from our own—a battlefield of chariots and warriors, bound by the codes of ancient *dharma*. Yet the inner battlefield it reveals, the struggle between duty and desire, action and attachment, freedom and fear, remains unchanged. Modern life, though technologically advanced, is still governed by the same psychological forces that troubled Arjuna: ambition, insecurity, expectation, success, failure, and the haunting question of meaning. *Niṣkāmakarma*, action performed without attachment to its fruits, offers a timeless response to this human condition.

The *Gītā* does not advocate withdrawal from life, nor does it glorify passive resignation. On the contrary, it insists on engagement with the world, but with a transformed inner orientation. Śrīkṛṣṇa reminds Arjuna that action is unavoidable: “*Na hi kaścit kṣaṇam api jātu tiṣṭhaty akarma-kṛt*,”<sup>16</sup> No one can remain even for a moment without acting. In modern society, this truth is even more apparent. Whether as professionals, students, caregivers, artists, or citizens, human beings are constantly acting. The question is not whether to act, but how to act. *Niṣkāmakarma* answers this by shifting the focus from external reward to inner discipline, from outcome to intention, from ego-driven striving to selfless participation in the cosmic order. Modern life is intensely result-oriented. Success is measured by promotions, profits, recognition, and social validation. Failure is feared not only for material loss but for its psychological impact on identity and self-worth. This obsessive attachment to outcomes generates stress, burnout, ethical compromise, and inner emptiness. As we have already seen, the *Gītā* teaches us that a person’s right lies only in action, not in the fruits of action. Far from

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<sup>16</sup> Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, A. C., *Bhagavadgītā As It Is*, Chapter -3, Verse -5, Second Edition, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Mumbai – 400049, India, 2025, p.148.



encouraging irresponsibility, this teaching deepens responsibility by purifying motivation. When action is freed from the tyranny of results, it becomes steadier, more ethical, and more humane.

In this sense, *niṣkāmakarma* has profound relevance for modern professional life. A doctor who treats patients solely for financial gain or reputation may achieve success but risks moral erosion and inner dissatisfaction. By contrast, a doctor who performs her duty with sincerity, compassion, and excellence, while surrendering the outcome to a higher order, embodies *niṣkāmakarma*. The result may still be success, but it no longer enslaves her mind. Similarly, a teacher who teaches not merely for salary or status but out of dedication to knowledge and students experiences teaching as service rather than a burden. In such cases, *niṣkāmakarma* does not diminish efficiency; it enhances it by reducing fear, anxiety, and egoistic tension.

The *Gītā*'s vision of liberation (*mokṣa*) is inseparable from this transformed mode of action. Liberation is not postponed to a distant afterlife; it is presented as a state of inner freedom attainable here and now. Kṛṣṇa describes the liberated person as one who acts without attachment, whose mind is steady in success and failure, and who is free from the sense of doership. “*Brahmaṇy ādhāya karmāṇi saṅgaṁ tyaktvā karoti yaḥ, lipyate na sa pāpena padma-patram ivāmbhasā.*”<sup>17</sup> One who offers actions to Brahman, abandoning attachment, is not tainted by sin, just as a lotus leaf remains untouched by water. In modern terms, this suggests a way of living fully immersed in worldly responsibilities while remaining inwardly unbound. This vision directly challenges the modern assumption that freedom lies in control—control over outcomes, people, circumstances, and future plans. The *Gītā* proposes the opposite: true freedom arises from relinquishing the illusion of control and aligning oneself with dharma. In a world where uncertainty is increasing—economic instability, technological disruption, global crises—*niṣkāmakarma* provides psychological resilience. When one accepts uncertainty and performs one's duty without clinging to guaranteed results, life becomes less fragile. Success no longer intoxicates, and failure no longer devastates.

The relevance of *niṣkāmakarma* becomes even clearer when viewed through the lives of sages and realised beings. The great *ṛṣis* of the *Upaniṣadic* and epic traditions did not abandon action; they sanctified it. King Janaka, often cited in the *Gītā*, ruled a kingdom while remaining inwardly liberated. Kṛṣṇa himself presents Janaka as an ideal: “*Karmaṇaiva hi saṁsiddhim*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.248

*āsthitā janakādayaḥ*, ”<sup>18</sup> Janaka and others attained perfection through action alone. This example is especially powerful for modern individuals who cannot renounce worldly life. It affirms that liberation is compatible with leadership, responsibility, and social engagement. In more recent history, figures like Mahatma Gandhi consciously interpreted *niṣkāmakarma* in the context of modern social and political struggle. Gandhi saw selfless action as the foundation of both personal spirituality and collective transformation. His insistence on acting without hatred, without attachment to immediate success, and without ego resonates deeply with the *Gītā*’s spirit. Even when outcomes were uncertain or unfavourable, the moral integrity of action itself remained non-negotiable. This illustrates how *niṣkāmakarma* can guide ethical action in complex modern realities without retreating into escapism.

At a deeper philosophical level, *niṣkāmakarma* addresses the modern crisis of meaning. Many people today experience a sense of futility despite material abundance. Actions feel repetitive, mechanical, and devoid of purpose. The *Gītā* responds by redefining the meaning of action itself. Action becomes a form of worship, a *yajña*, offered to the cosmic order. “*Yajñārthāt karmaṇo ’nyatra loko ’yaṁ karma-bandhanaḥ*, ”<sup>19</sup> Action performed as a sacrifice liberates; otherwise, it binds. When work is seen as participation in a larger harmony rather than a means of personal gain, it acquires intrinsic meaning. Liberation in the *Gītā* is not an escape from the world but freedom from bondage within the world. The liberated person continues to act, but action no longer produces inner slavery. “*Gata-saṅgasya muktasya jñānāvasthita-cetasah, yajñāyācarataḥ karma samagraṁ pravilīyate*. ”<sup>20</sup> For one who is free from attachment, whose mind is established in knowledge, actions performed as sacrifice dissolve entirely. In modern life, this means that one can live amid complexity, competition, and change without being consumed by them. Thus, *niṣkāmakarma* offers a bridge between spirituality and everyday life. It neither denies the reality of ambition nor glorifies it. It neither rejects success nor worships it. Instead, it places success and failure in their proper perspective, as transient outcomes within a larger moral and spiritual journey. In doing so, it cultivates inner peace, ethical clarity, and resilience—qualities desperately needed in contemporary society.

So, *niṣkāmakarma* is not an outdated ideal confined to ancient scriptures; it is a living philosophy capable of transforming modern existence. By teaching us to act wholeheartedly without attachment, to dedicate our work to a higher principle, and to seek liberation not in

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.164

<sup>19</sup> *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*: 3/9

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 4/23

withdrawal but in inner freedom, the *Bhagavadgītā* speaks directly to the modern soul. In a world obsessed with results, *niṣkāmakarma* restores dignity to effort. In a culture driven by ego, it restores humility. In an age of anxiety, it restores balance. Through this path, action itself becomes a means of liberation, and everyday life becomes the very field in which freedom is realised.

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