

## Ethno-ecological Introspection into *Bhagawatgeetaa*: 5. *Guna* (Quality): The Metaphysical Factor of Nature, Responsible for Diversity

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**ABSTRACT** The *Prakruti* (Nature) consists of three essential constituents called *Gunas* (Quality) named *Sattva*, *Raajas* and *Taamas*. The existence of *Prakruti* can not be realized in the absence of *Gunas*. The diversity of the *Prakruti* is a resultant product of interaction of *Gunas*. Lord Srikrishna says: “There is no being on earth or anywhere else, which is free from these three *Gunas* born of *Prakruti*”.

### INTRODUCTION

The ancient Indian theories on origin of life postulate on two ultimate realities of the universe: (1) *Purusha* and (2) *Prakruti*. *Purusha* means the ‘soul’ of the universe, the animating principle of nature, the source of consciousness, the subjective aspects of nature. It is the universal spirit, the eternal, indestructible, all pervasive and the ultimate principle of intelligence, that regulates, guides and directs the process of cosmic evolution. It is the background that gives us the feeling of persistence, the silent witness of nature. *Purusha* is neither produced nor produces.

The second principle called *Prakruti* (*Pra* : the first + *kruti* : to produce) is also not produced (like *Purusha*) but it produces. It is the primary source of all things. It existed before anything was produced. It is the original substance out of which all things have come and into which all things will finally return. It is the primal nature or the cosmic substance.

*Prakruti* consists of three essential constituents called *Gunas* (Quality), named *Sattva*, *Raajas* and *Taamas*. *Gunas* are the property and essence of all things. The existence of *Prakruti* can not be realized in the absence of the *Gunas*, as one can not expect the presence of fire in absence of heat. In the process of cosmic evolution the *Gunas* never separate from each other nor function separately. They coexist in everything, they support one another and are intermingled with one another. But one of them or the other may predominate and the variegated arrangement of the *Gunas* accounts for all the diversified manifestations of nature.

In the *Bhagawatgeetaa* a separate chapter (XIV-*Gunatraya Bibhagayoga*) is devoted to a discourse on the effect of *Gunas*. In other chapters also the *Gunas* are talked about in different contexts. The importance of the *Gunas* in the universal condition of nature for manifestation, as revealed in *Geetaa* are discussed in this paper. The methods of study are as reported earlier (Padhy 2013 a, b, c, 2014).

### Manifestation of Nature

Before creation, the primal nature (cosmic substance) was believed to have in existence with the homeostatic balance of the *Gunas*. Initially, it was in an unexpressed condition (*Abyakta*). For some reason the balance of the *Prakruti* was first disturbed. When, how and why this disturbance was caused, is still a mystery for ancient and modern science. In course of time, the *Gunas* started interacting for manifestation (*Byakta*) and functioned in the order of *Sattva*, *Raajas* and *Taamas* with their activity as follows:-

1. Their function in the universal condition of nature is to reveal, move and restrain;
2. In the phenomenal world they signify adhesion, cohesion and disintegration;
3. From psychological point of view they illuminate, activate and obscure;
4. On the moral plane they are emancipation, affinity and sin respectively.

Disturbance and interaction of the *Gunas* led to manifestation of six *Tattvas* (abstract principles-cosmic substances) such as :- 1. *Mahattatva* (cosmic intelligence), 2. *Maanas* (principle

of cognition), 3. *Ahamkaara* (individuating principle), 5. *Tanmaatras* (The sense powers-subtle elements) and 6. *Mahaabhootas* (sense particulars- gross nature). Conjoin of these six *Tattvas* results in the creation of being-a corporeal frame (*ssareera*), implied to all creatures (Mohapatra et al. 2001). Out of the above six the first five are metaphysical and the sixth *Tattva-Mahaabhootas* is physical. The *Mahaabhootas* are *Aakaassa* (Ether), *Vaayu* (Air), *Tejas* (Fire), *Aapa* (water) and *Kshiti* (Earth) which are recognized as ecological factors in modern science as (1) Climatic (2) Physiographic and (3) Edahic factors. The ancient Indians are the pioneers of the comprehension and scientific perception of ecological factors as *Mahaabhootas*. In fact, the process of living (Biotic factor of modern ecology) is possible due to addition of earlier five metaphysical *Tattvas* with the physical *Mahaabhootas*. So in any living system (may be an microorganism, a plant, animal or man) which is a product of the nature, must carry the *Gunas* as a psychological basis (Bernard 1989).

#### **Guna: A Human Ecological Factor**

In relevance to the analysis pertains to this paper, *Gunas* which are to be analysed from mental point of view are an expression of human characters. They can be studied directly as follows:

##### ***Sattva Guna***

It is the abstract principle of illumination or the power of the nature that reveals all manifestations with qualities like compassion, concentration, courage, detachment, enlightenment, faith, forbearance, forgiveness, humility, indifference, gay, modesty, pure action and valour.

##### ***Raajas Guna***

It is the abstract principle of activity or the power of activating or exciting without which the other two *Gunas* can not manifest their qualities. *Raajas Guna* has qualities like argumentation, attachment, abusiveness, animosity, back biting, braggadocio, craving of the senses, desire to afflict and kill, desire to buy and sell, deception, doubt, disrespect, drudgery, egoism, envy, frenzy, falsehood, gambling, habit of evil thoughts, heedlessness, insulting criticism, ir-

regularity in conduct, jealousy, lack of shame, opinion, ostentation, quarreling, remorse, selfishness, skepticism, scandal mongering, suspicion, treachery, thievery, wreath, all temptations and fancies.

##### ***Taamas Guna***

It is the abstract principle of restraint or the binding potency of nature. Its function is to resist motion with qualities like avarice, carelessness, delusion, deluded connection, fear, grief, ignorance, indecision, insolence, laziness, lewdness, lassitude, pride, sleepiness, stolidity and want of faith, discrimination, knowledge, memory and liability.

Towards the end of *Bhagawatgeetaa*, in the eighteenth chapter *Srikrishna* expounds:

“*There is no being on earth or in the middle region or even among the Gods or anywhere else, which is free from these three Gunas, born of Prakruti (Adhaya (Chapter) 18 / Ssloka (Versen) 40*”. All the aspects about the *Gunas* narrated by *Srikrishna* in different chapters (of *Geetaa*) pertaining to various aspects of human life are divided into seven parts. They are discussed as follows:-

##### ***1. Guna is Responsible for Bondage***

*Sattva*, *Raajas* and *Taamas*- these three qualities born of nature tie down the imperishable soul to the body. *Saatva*, being stainless, is luminous and unobstructive. But, it binds some one by creating attachment to happiness and attachment to knowledge. A hearty enjoyment of a pleasure in its turn breeds an inordinate attachment to it. He who enjoys pleasure greatly next tries to increase his knowledge of the object of enjoyment. Pleasure derived from an object and the knowledge of that object is inter-related. Accordingly the attachment to the pleasure is also an attachment to the knowledge; and both of them cause bondage.

The quality of *Raajas*, which is of the nature of passion, the source of thirst and attachment; binds the soul through attachment to action and their fruit. The *Raajas* quality instills desire and excitement someone into undertaking new projects. It causes thirst or hankering of the mind after things not yet acquired; develops attachment, the act of clinging on to the objects already acquired. *Raajas* encourages greed for sense-objects, visible and invisible.

The *Taamas* quality is born out of ignorance. It is the deluder of all those who look upon the body as their own self. It binds the soul by heedlessness; sloth and sleep (13/19; 14/5-8).

## 2. Working Efficiency and Expression of Gunas

*Sattva* drives one to joy and *Raajas* to action; while *Taamas* covers up the wisdom and binds one to heedlessness. When *Sattva* emerges it gives pleasure ranging from physical to the intellectual and ethical. *Raajas* activates some one and engages him in all sorts of enterprises. The man who is callous about his duty, who wastes time without proper utilization, who spends his money foolishly; is a person immersed in *Taamas Guna* (14/9).

All the three *Gunas* inherited by man can be compared to the three sides of a triangle. When one side is placed in the forefront, the other two get behind forcefully. *Srikrishna* has narrated overpowering *Raajas* and *Taamas*, *Sattva* prevails; *Raajas* predominates over *Sattva* and *Taamas*; and *Taamas*, over *Sattva* and *Raajas* (14/10).

*Sattva* nourishes aesthetic joy and wisdom. When the light of knowledge beams through all the gateways of the body, then the predominance of *Sattva* can be realized. The sense organs are the gateways for the light of self (*Aatman*). All the senses function pleasantly and perfectly at their best due to predominance of *Sattva* (14/11).

With the predominance of *Raajas*; Greed, activity, restlessness, undertaking of action and longing for enjoyment make their show (14/12). Attempt to make the property of others as one's own, increasing one's unnecessary activity, oscillation of mind at various stages due to unrest and impatience, (the motive to complete a work immediately); are the traits (that are) born of *Raajas*.

Under the predominance of *Taamas*, indiscrimination, inertness, heedlessness and delusion arises. The darkness of the mind lands one into indiscrimination. Lethargy and Heedlessness adversely effects prosperity and progress in life. That man with excess of *Taamas* becomes depraved (14/13).

The reward of a righteous act for *Sattavika* is faultless in the shape of joy, wisdom and dispassion. The fruit of a *Raajasika* act is sorrow. And ignorance is the fruit of a *Taamasika* act

(14/16). Wisdom follows from *Sattva*; greed from *Raajas*; (obstinate, error), stupor and ignorance follow from *Taamas* (14/17).

## 3. Guna Based Division of Jnaanam (Knowledge), Karma (Action) and Kartaa (Performer)

*Srikrishna* says "The knowledge by which man perceives one imperishable divine existence as undivided and equally present in all individual beings- is the knowledge of *Sattvika*. But that knowledge by which one sees manifold entities of various kinds as a part from one another in all beings, is *Raajasika* knowledge. The *Taamasika* clings to one body as if it were the whole. He believes that individuality is confined to the physical body frame made of the five elements. Being ignorant, he thinks that the image worshiped, made of metal, wood or clay is to be God. Such thinking is irrational, without foundation of truth, and baseless (18/20-22)".

The *Sattvika* action is performed without attachment and without love or hatredness. There is no desire for the return of fruit. The best example of such action is breathing, which is indispensable to life. But the action which is done by one craving for desires associated with ego is known as *Raajasika*. Of course desire for the divinity and self realization does not come under this category. The action which is performed with ignorance and delusion without looking to the consequence, loss and injury and without one's own capacity, is declared as *Tamasika* (18/23-25). Such endeavours are harmful both to him and to others. 'Own capacity' refers to ignorance of the loss of energy, property and time.

Accordingly *Srikrishna* has divided the quality of the agents who perform the action based on *Gunas*. An agent who is free from attachment, non-egoistic, endued with firmness and vigour and unaffected by success and failure, is called *Sattvika*. He who is full of attachment, desiring to obtain the fruit of actions, greedy, cruel, impure and much affected by joy and sorrow- is said to be *Raajasika*. The *Taamasika* is unsteady, uncultured, arrogant, deceitful, malicious, lazy, desponding and procrastinating. Such agent suffers from all types of evils (18/26-28).

#### 4. Three-fold Division of *Buddhi* (understanding), *Dhrti* (Firmness) and *Sukha* (Happiness)

*Buddhi* is the faculty of understanding and distinguishing between the good and bad. The intellect which knows the paths of work and renunciation, right and wrong action, fear and fearlessness, bondage and liberation is known as *Sattvika*. The *Raajasika* intellect does not truly perceive what is *Dharma* and *Adharma*, i.e. what ought to be done, and what ought not to be done. The intellect which imagines even *Adharma* to be *Dharma*, and sees all other things upside-down, enveloped in darkness is *Taamasika* (18/29-32).

*Dhrti* means firmness. The functions of mind with answering firmness achieved through regulated *Prana* (breath) and control of senses through Yoga is *Sattvika*. The *Dhrti* desirous of the fruit of action from attachment and holds fast to *Dharma*, *Kama* (sensual pleasure) and *Artha* (property) is *Raajasika*. Through *Taamasika* firmness of evil-minded person clings upto sleep, fear, anxiety, sorrow and vanity (18/33-35).

*Sukha* (joy)-happiness is also of three kinds based on *Guna*. This rejoice is achieved through long practice and reaches at the end of sorrow. That happiness which is like poison at first, but like nectar at the end brought about by meditation and self-realization is known as *Sattvika*. That happiness which arises from the contact of the senses with their objects and which is nectar like at the beginning but works like poison at the end is *Raajasika Sukha*. The happiness which deludes the self both at the beginning and at the end, which are derived from sleep, sloth and miscomprehension is declared to be *Taamasika* (18/36-39).

#### 5. Division of *Sraddhaa* (Faith), *Yajnya* (Sacrifice), *Tapasya* (Austerity) and *Daana* (Charity)

Free will plays a significant role for the existence and evolution of a being. The higher the being, the more its free-will is in evidence. The destiny of man is shaped by the use of his free-will, which is called *Sraddhaa*. This is the attitude assumed by mind in the discharge of his duty. The man of *Sraddhaa* has confidence in himself. He adopts always the pure and praise worthy pathway. The *Sraddhaa* in a man mani-

fest itself in various channels. One of the important *Sraddhaa* that he makes, is in the adoration for the Almighty.

*Srikrishna* says :

“*Man of a Sattvika disposition worship Gods; those of a Raajasika temperament worship demigods and demons; while others, who are men of Taamasika disposition, worship the spirits of the dead and groups of ghosts (17/14)*”.

Further He says :

“*Men who practice violent austerities not sanctioned by the scriptures, and who are full of hypocrisy and egotism, excited by the force of lust and attachment are fools, they torture their bodily organs and as well as Me, the Supreme spirit, dwelling in their heart- known that these senseless people are Aasurika (demoniac)*” (17/5,6). Austerity is of three types- austerity of the body, austerity of speech, and mental austerity. Worship of the Gods, the *Braahmanas*, of teachers and wise men, purity, straightness, continence and harmlessness- are called bodily penance. The speech which causes no excitement, which is truthful, pleasant and beneficial, the study of the *Vedas* and other *Saastras* and the practice of repetition of the Divine name are known as austerity of speech. Cheerfulness of mind, gentleness, silence, self control and purity of inner feelings are called the mental austerity (17/14-16).

The above three- fold austerity practiced by steadfast men with utmost faith is called *Sattvika*. The austerity which is practised with the object of gaining respect, honour and reverence, and with ostentation is called *Raajasika*. This is unstable and gives momentary fruit. The austerity practiced with a foolish obstinacy, with self-torture or is intended to harm others is declared as *Taamasika*.

The *Sattvika Yajnya* (sacrifice) is the work performed selflessly for its own sake, not for reward. The *Raajasika* sacrifice is the work for reward, performed for the sake of fame and success. A sacrifice performed with no respect to scriptural injunctions, without any kind of dedication and goes against moral principles is known as *Taamasika*.

The Charity (*Daana*) which is made for the sake of giving, without expecting any return and done at the right time to the right person is *Sattvika*. *Raajasika* Charity is given with a view to receive in return, (in the hope of obtaining) a

reward, being reluctant. *Taamasika* charity is given to wrong people at the wrong time (given without concern, without respect and with insult).

#### 6. Three Kinds of Food Based on Guna

The food habits, traditions and usages are many among nations and countries. In India, *Aayurveda* presents *Hita bhuk* (eat good), *Mita bhuk* (eat not more) and *Rita bhuk* (eat piously earned), if some one is in urge of a long life. Much emphasis have been given in *Manusmruti* to recognise the source of food (Padhy et al. 2001) and to regulate some one in food and eating habit. Ancient Indians have realized that the ingestion process alongwith the improper food used to contaminate the body from physical and spiritual point of view.

According to the *Geetaa* foods which promote longevity, intelligence, vigour, health, happiness and cheerfulness, and which are sweet, bland, substantial and naturally agreeable, are dear to *Sattvika* type of man. *Raajasika* type men prefer foods which are bitter, acid, salty, overhot, pungent, dry and burning. Foods that cause suffering, grief and sickness; half cooked food or half ripe, insipid, putrid, stale and polluted, are dear to men of *Taamasika* disposition.

#### 7. Four-fold Classification of Society Based on Guna

In Indian scenario, the four fold classification (*Chaturvarna*) of the society as *Braahmana*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaissya* and *Sudra* as presented in *Manusmruti* is very much misunderstood and misinterpreted, belittled as a source to propagate caste and class hatredness. But, this division of the society is depicted as a natural phenomenon (*Manusmruti* I/87-91) which is attributed *ipso facto* to the divine creation (Nature) in *Geetaa* (4/13); rather than *Manu* as the classifier and follows the principles of *Guna* and *Karma* (action) of a person; but not a matter of birth right. For further details, see an earlier review (Padhy 2010).

A genetic study has analysed the mt DNA (which is passed on by mothers to children) and 'Y' chromosome (exclusively male sex chromosome) variation in 250 individuals from different castes (*Varnas*) (Bamshad et al. 1996, 1998). The pattern of 'Y' chromosome studies showed that

men have tended to remain within the caste in which they are born. On the other hand mt DNA patterns of closely related castes shows that, women have been socially more mobile than man, moving up in the social ladder by marrying to castes higher than their own. All these work support the genetic relevance of *Chaturvarna* classification. *Srikrishna* has defined the duty of four *Varnas*, born of their own nature as follows.

*"The four fold Varna was created by me by the different distribution of Guna and Karma (4/13). Serenity, self-restraint, austerity, purity, forgiveness, uprightness, knowledge, realization, belief in God-these are the duties of a Braahmana. The qualities of Kshatriya are heroism, vigour, firmness, resourcefulness, steadiness in battle, generosity and lordliness. Vaissyas are born of their own nature with interest in Agriculture, Cattle-rearing and trade. Service to the other classes is the natural duty of a Ssudra. Devoted each to this own duty, man attains the highest perfection (18/41-46)".*

The diversity of human characters discussed above shows that the human ecology is strongly influenced and controlled by the variegation of the *Gunas*. *Srikrishna* has further discussed about the effect of *Gunas* on the death and birth cycle of the beings (13/21, 23; 14/14, 15,18). He has opened the doors of knowledge how to overcome the effect of *Gunas* (14/19-26). Discussion of these facts are beyond the scope of this paper. The *Gunas* are none other than the *Prakruti*. They are the agents for all the activities, no matter where they take place. The senses and the objects of the senses are all nothing but the modifications of the *Gunas*.

Gaining the pure *Sattva* is the climax of the earthly life. But this state has to be transcended and one must reach the state beyond the three *Gunas*, that is, *Nirguna*. Getting into that absolute state is the goal of life because, *Srikrishna* says :

*"The Gunas have evolved from Me; I am not in them, they are in Me" (7/12).*

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