Ethno-ecological Introspection into *Bhagawatgeetaa*:


Sachidananda Padhy

“Anandamaya”, Bhaba Nagar, 1st Lane, Berhampur 760 004, Odisha, India

E-mail: sachi_padhy@rediffmail.com

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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. *Mahattattva* (cosmic intelligence), 2. *Maanas* (principle
of cognition), 3. Ahamkaara (individuating principle), 5. Tanmaatraas (The sense powers-subtle elements) and 6. Mahaabhootas (sense particulars- gross nature). Conjoin of these six Tat\textit{v}\text{\textit{vas}} results in the creation of being-a corporeal frame (ssar\textit{e}era), implied to all creatures (Mohapatra et al. 2001). Out of the above six the first five are metaphysical and the sixth Tat\textit{tv}a-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 Tat\textit{tv}as 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 Gun\textit{as} as a psychological basis (Bernard 1989).

**Guna: A Human Ecological Factor**

In relevance to the analysis pertains to this paper, Gun\textit{as} 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 Gun\textit{as} cannot manifest their qualities. Raajas Gun\textit{a} 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, irregularity in conduct, jealousy, lack of shame, opinion, ostentation, quarreling, remorse, selfishness, skepticism, scandal mongering, suspicion, treachery, thievish, 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 Gun\textit{as}, born of Prakrutii (Adhaya (Chapter) 18 / S\text{\textit{loka}} (Versen) 40”. All the aspects about the Gun\textit{as} 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**

Guna, Raajas and Taamas- these three qualities born of nature tie down the imperishable soul to the body. Sattva, 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 interrelated. 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 Sattvika 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, endured 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 Sraddhha (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 Sraddhha. This is the attitude assumed by mind in the discharge of his duty. The man of Sraddhha has confidence in himself. He adopts always the pure and praise worthy pathway. The Sraddhha in a man mani-

fests itself in various channels. One of the important Sraddhha 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 recognize 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 along with 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, Vaissyas and Ssudra 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 analyzed 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) (Bamshed 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 his 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 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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