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## Influence of Shrimad Bhagavad Gita's Concept of 'Sthitapragna' and 'Nishkamkarmayoga' on Kipling's True Man in *If*

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Nobel Laureate Rudyard Kipling's revolutionary and highly inspiring poem *If* possibly motivates the younger generation even today by its stoic notion and definition of an ideal human being. Kipling's prescribed criterion of a true man emits the essence of Zeno's stoicism. The poem itself is a quintessence of Victorian era stoicism. The poem was composed during 1896 and later in 1910; it was published in *Rewards and Fairies*, in a form of parental advice to the poet's son. It is quite surprising that the poem which was embraced by an entire generation for its tremendous inspirational value appears to have a similarity with the Indian epic and also considered a sacred book by the Hindus, *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita*. Khushwant Singh, the famous writer and historian was also of the opinion that the poem *If* comprises the essence of Bhagavad Gita. Actually the poem transmits the message of Gita in English. More precisely the concept of true man developed by Kipling in the poem *If* astonishingly conforms to Lord Krishna's definition of 'Sthitapragna' in chapter-2, sankhya yoga. Even Kipling's propounded theory of 'keeping head when all are losing their' coincides with Lord Krishna's shlokas delivered to prince Arjun while illustrating the art of 'Nishkamkarmayoga'.

The tenets of stoicism captured in the poem may be influenced by Zeno's philosophy. He propounded the theory of stoicism asserting the fact that destructive emotions generated from errors of judgement causes human suffering. But a sage or a person of moral and intellectual perfection remains immune from such misfortunes. The stoics emphasised that 'virtue is sufficient for happiness'. It is also true that there is no historical or literal evidence that proves the fact that Kipling was influenced by Bhagavad Gita. In spite of this there is no denial of the fact that the concept of the poem has undoubted resemblance with the aspects of Gita.

It is quite astounding that the composer of 'The White Man's' burden (where he rhetorically commands the white men to colonise and subjugate other comparatively inferior nations in order to civilize them) seems to be much influenced by a mythological, Indian saga (or may be said subaltern literature?) that the impact can be perceived in his poem *If*. Rudyard Kipling's pride of his race and its cultural supremacy permeates through the poem '*The White Man's Burden*' emitting the reminiscence of Lord Macaulay's assertion-'It (English language) stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the west....whoever knows has ready access to the vast intellectual wealth which all the wisest nation of the earth have in that have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations. It may also be said that the literature now extant in that language is of greater value than all the literature which three hundred years ago was extent in all the languages of all the world together. 'Macaulay also stressed that 'A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. 'Kipling's *The White Man's Burden* reflects the same

perception about native and subaltern people and culture.

Though there is a huge similarity in the context of the poem *If* and Vedvyass' *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita*. Kipling's poetic inspiration was the military actions of L. Starr Jameson, leader of the failed Jameson Raid (1895-1896) against South Africa to overthrow the Boer Government of Paul Kruger some fifteen years prior to its publication. The failure of that mercenary coup de'etat aggravated the political tension between Great Britain and the Boers which lead to the second Boer war. The occasion of *Gita* is also a war resulted from a prolonged feud between Pandavas and Kauravas. Literal meaning of *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita* is the song of God. It is a 700 verse scripture which belongs to Hindu epic *The Mahabharata* and also considered a sacred text.

The *Gita* is written in a narrative framework containing dialogues between prince Arjun and his guide Lord Krishna. Constrained by the dilemma of fulfilling his Dharma and attempting parricide, regicide, and genocide or on the other hand retreating and losing his share of kingdom Arjun surrenders him to his mentor Krishna. Lord Krishna's delivered speech elicits the essence of dharma, bhakti and theistic concepts of yoga, jnana, Sankhya theory and liberation. Basically the poem *If* illustrates the attitude of a true man entangled in a predicament. Kipling's prescribed rules for being a true man conforms to the norms of 'nishkamkarmayoga' and virtues of 'sthitapragna' who utilises sambuddhi karma yoga to serve the purpose.

In chapter-2, sankhya yoga, a detailed definition of 'sthitapragna' can be found, where Krishna asserts that a perfect man always modulates his mind and sensory organs by regular practice and abstinence from the coveted objects. 'sriha' or desire should be abstained in order to achieve steady wisdom and peace in life. Severe self restraint enables a man to get rid of his desires. The Sankhya yoga is considered the most important part of *Bhagavad Gita*. Even Mahatma Gandhi was of the opinion that the last 19 shlokas of chapter 2 contain the basic principle of all religions and are the philosophy of art of living for every true human being. In verse 54 prince Arjun asks the definition of 'sthitapragna' and Lord Krishna replies- 'He whose mind is untroubled in the midst of sorrows and free from eager desire amid pleasures, he from whom passion, fear and rage have passed away- he is called a sage of settled intelligence.' (verse-56, as translated by Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan). Lord Krishna further illustrates the concept- 'But a man of disciplined mind, who moves among the objects of sense with the senses under control and free from attachment and aversion, he attains purity of spirit.'

The definition was further illustrated in this way- 'He who abandons all desires and acts free from longing without any sense of mineness or egotism- he attains to peace. Fearlessness, purity of mind, steadfastness in knowledge and concentration, charity, self-control and sacrifice, austerity and uprightness, compassion to living being and modesty, freedom from malice and excessive pride, these o Arjun are the elements of him who is born with divine nature.'

A 'sthitapragna' inherits these qualities and performs 'nishkamkarma'. Nishkamkarma is a

selfless or desire less action performed without any expectation of results and the primal aim of this yoga is to attain salvation or moksha.' An action executed without any expectation generates no 'karmaphal' or result. In Indian philosophy action or 'karma' has been classified into three categories according to their intrinsic qualities or 'Guna'. They are called 'karma', akarma, and 'bikarma'. Lord Krishna advocated 'nishkamkarma', because a person who performs 'nishkamkarmayoga' could not be detained by 'karmabandhan' and eventually attains eternal peace and moksha. This notion is vividly described in the verses-

'To action alone have thou a right and never at its fruits, let not the fruits of action be thy motive, neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction.'

'Fixed in yoga, do thy work, o winner of wealth, abandoning attachment with an even mind in success and failure, for evenness of mind is called yoga.'

'With the body, with the mind, with the intellect, even merely with senses, the yogis perform action towards self purification, having abandoned attachment. He who is disciplined in yoga, having abandoned the fruit of action attains steady place'.

After a meticulous reading of the poem If, an illuminating fact would be revealed that Kipling's 'true man' is actually a 'sthitapragna' and while advising to perform actions with 'stoic calm', he is possibly advocating 'nishkamkarmayoga'. The lines quoted from the poem If recapitulates definition of 'sthitapragna' -

'If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing their and blaming it on you  
But make allowance for their doubting too.'

The following lines promotes the virtue of patience and unperturbedness of mind, as Lord Krishna mentions that peace of mind is the foremost criterion of a man of balanced personality.

'If you can wait and not being tired by waiting,'

These lines given below comprise the essence of verses- 71 where Krishna emphatically states that a sage is devoid of any feeling of attachment or aversion and rage. He must be steadfast in knowledge but bereft of excessive pride.

'Or being lied about don't deal in lies  
Or being hated, don't give way to hating'  
.....And don't look too good nor talk too wise.'

The following lines incorporate the tenets discussed elaborately by Lord Krishna about controlling 'Mann' or mind.

'If you can dream-and not make dream your master

If you can think-and not make thought your aim.’

In chapter 2 verse-5.11 Krishna exhorts Arjun engage in mortal combat, irrespective of success and failure. He advised Arjun to treat victory and loss as the same as the pivotal objective of the battle is to establish dharma. Likewise in If lines expressing the same notion are perceived-‘If you can meet with triumph and disaster,

And treat those two imposters just the same.’

Performance without expectation, the tenet of ‘nishkamkarmayoga’ has been highlighted in these lines-‘Watch things you give your life to broken

And stoop and build ‘em up with worn out tools.

If you can make one heap of all your winnings

And risk it on one turn of pitch and Toss

And lose and start again at your beginnings

And never breathe a word about your loss.’

Whether Kipling deliberately adapted these concepts of ‘nishkamkarmayoga’ and ‘sthitapragna’ or not is a matter of controversy. Ostensibly the poem delivers norms exactly propounded by Indian mythological God Krishna presumably in 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. It is our part of conjecture to believe it or not.

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