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## The Triadic Trap and the Transcendent Self: A Study of Gunas and Liberation in the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita

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### Abstract

Shrimad Bhagavad Gita is not just a book but an encyclopedia of the life of man. In eighteen Adhyaya Lord Krishna elaborated the philosophy of man's life, Artha, Dharma, Karma, and Moksha. The human body consists of Panchmahabhutas of Prakriti, these components integrate from the three Gunas. To grasp the intricate teaching of the three Gunas – Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas – as outlined in the Shreemad Bhagavad Gita, and their metaphysical origin in Samkhya philosophy and their integration into Vedanta. It explains how these fundamental modes of Prakriti construct human consciousness, behavior, and perception of existence, ultimately having the soul entangled in the material world – the "Triadic Trap." The study outlines the distinctive nature and binding of each Guna, based on scriptural references from the Gita and comparative observations on the Srimad Bhagavatam. Along with this, it delves into the multi-faceted means of the Gita to moksha, intending to go beyond even the Sattva Guna to realize the Atman, unaffected by the fluctuations of Prakriti. Through Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Bhakti Yoga practices, the Gita offers a guidebook to disidentification from the Gunas and unification with the ultimate reality, while maintaining individual identity in love. This essay emphasizes Gita's unique blend of metaphysical understanding and spiritual realism in overcoming the intricacies of human existence and achieving liberation.

**Key Words:** Gunas, Bhagavad Gita, Liberation, Prakriti, Transcendent Self

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## The Triadic Trap and the Transcendent Self: A Study of Gunas and Liberation in the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita

### Introduction

The Shreemad Bhagavad Gita, commonly known as the Gita, is not only a pivotal work within the larger Hindu scriptural tradition but also a philosophical text of cosmopolitan reach. Written as part of the Indian epic poem Mahabharata, the Gita stands as a philosophical dialogue between the divine charioteer, Lord Krishna, and the prince-warrior Arjuna, who is ridden with moral angst and existential crisis on the field of battle Kurukshetra. Beyond this formal plot structure, the Gita however reveals a richer topography of the human soul and its imprisonment in the phenomenal realm, along with a vision of liberation.

Bhagavad Gita's eighteen chapters drew a broad web of spiritual and philosophical teachings. These chapters present the central questions of existence, duty, and liberation or moksha path. The doctrine of the three Gunas—*Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas* is one of Gita's major teachings. These Gunas, which are commonly translated as 'qualities' or 'strands', are the most basic modes of Prakriti, or material nature. All phenomena in the manifest universe are controlled by these three forces, and all psychological, moral, and behavioral manifestations in the human world originate from their interaction. In contrast to other systems of philosophy, which divide behavior into dichotomous moral absolutes, Gita's division by Gunas brings a triadic continuum that permits a more flexible and subtle understanding of moral psychology.

### Gunas spiritual connection – Samkhya

In Hindu Philosophy, the three gunas are basic qualities that shape the consciousness, behavior, and material world. Metaphorically these gunas serve as a bridge between human experience and spiritual evolution. The Gunas not only exist individually but are ever in motion and competition, and they influence not just the external world but the internal conditions of the Jiva (individual soul) as well. Humans wish to go beyond three modes - Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas to make their minds untarnished to develop an attitude that leads them to inner joy and which will help them to do work effectively and productively in this material world. In the chapter 2<sup>nd</sup>, verse 45 lord Krishna explained to Arjuna about the three gunas of material nature and motivated him to rise above these three gunas to reach the state of pure spiritual consciousness. Further, He said to Arjuna to make himself free from dualities, eternally fixed in truth and without concern for material gain and safety, and be absorbed in his consciousness. The Bhagavad Geeta instructs that self-realization emerges when one discriminates against the gunas' interplay without identifying with them, cultivating detachment and inner stillness. By perceiving these forces within, practitioners learn to navigate life's instability, incremental awakening to the unchanging self or Atman, which exists beyond the ephemeral dance of the gunas. So, the gunas are not just psychological attributes but a cosmic framework of understanding the liberation or moksha, where the soul shades all conditioning to merge with boundless, gunaless Brahman.

### The Philosophical Context of the Gunas

The principle of the gunas are among the most sophisticated and nuanced psychological systems within Indian philosophical schools. These three gunas are described excellently in Shreemad Bhagavad Geeta, the intellectual origins of the Gunas trace back to the ancient Samkhya School of Indian philosophy, and subsequent integration and reinterpretation by Vedanta, primarily in the Shreemad Bhagavad Geeta and the doctrine of Gunas uniquely combines metaphysical lucidity with spiritual realism. Samkhya philosophy is attributed to the sage Kapila muni. This is one of the ancient systems of Indian Philosophy, Sankhya is a dualistic school that has faith in the existence of two fundamental realities, Purusha and Prakriti. In this case, Purusha refers to consciousness and spirit and Prakriti refers to matter and nature. Purusha is certain, independent, and transcending any experience and perception of the

human mind and senses, it is unknowable, whereas Prakriti refers to unconscious, material dogma, the origin of all things manifest and the equilibrium of three the three gunas – Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas.

The Samkhya perspective is that the universe begins to emerge when the Gunas become unbalanced due to the closeness of Purusha. Prakriti remains unmanifest in their equilibrium. Yet, when Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas unite in discord, they create Mahat (universal intelligence), Ahamkara (ego), the senses, the mind, and the elements. So, the cosmos itself is a dance of these three strands. Each Guna has a role to play in keeping the cosmic and psychological operation going: Sattva lightens and reveals, Rajas energizes and propels, Tamas conceals and steadies. Even liberation is described as the awareness of the soul of its distinction from Prakriti and the Gunas. So the goal is disidentification with all forms of the Gunas. In Advaita Vedanta, the gunas are interpreted as a part of Maya, the illusory power of the cosmos that offers the emergence of multiplicity in a non-dual world. In Advaita Vedanta, the three gunas represent the transparency of Maya, projection power, and veiling power and the Self represents a Nirguna means, beyond all gunas, the pure consciousness, untouched by the movement of Prakriti and the liberation is the result of piercing through real and unreal, between gunas and immutable self. Thus, Samkhya philosophy maintains the multiplicity of souls and Advaita keeps unity, all souls are finally non-differentiated from Brahman. Exceeding of gunas in Advaita involved the total separation of individuality, whereas Shreemad Bhagavad Gita's devotional nature keeps individuality intact in a pure state to relate in sympathetic relation with the divine power.

#### **Analysis of Gunas in Shreemad Bhagavad Gita and pathways of transcendence self and liberation:**

Shreemad Bhagavad Gita is a spiritual encyclopedia of the human race to attain freedom from all worldly things. It has been written in the discourse of lord Krishna and Arjuna. Shreemad Bhagavad Gita covers the different dimensions of spirituality, ethics, and philosophy. On the Kurukshetra battlefield, when Arjuna was trapped in a moral and emotional dilemma at the start of the Kurukshetra war. The Bhagavad Gita, also referred to as the 'Songs of God', its eighteen adhyayas are divided into two parts, in the first part of the Gita, integrated with the first to nine adhyayas addresses Arjuna's emotional turmoil and spiritual confusion before the Kurukshetra war. These chapters explained Arjuna's conflict between his warrior duty and his reluctance to hurt his family members, in this dilemma lord Krishna imparted to him the wisdom of Dharma, Karma, and the nature of the self. The second half of Gita comprises the next nine chapters and these are the counterpart of Gita, where these chapters deal with the different aspects of divine knowledge, divine manifestations, and the means of liberation. Particularly in these chapters, Arjuna discusses Lord Krishna's transcendent wealth, the importance of devotion the nature of duty, and the ultimate reality.

सत्त्वं रजस्तम इति प्रकृतिसम्भवा गुणाः ।  
 निबध्नन्ति महाबाहो देहे देहिनम् अव्ययम् ॥ 5 ॥

This sloka is from chapter fourteen. This chapter of the Bhagavad Gita is devoted to the three modes of life, Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. Here, in the sloka, Lord Krishna explained in detail about these Gunas. The origin of these Gunas from Prakriti and these Gunas are the cause of the soul's entanglement within the material world. Atma is not covered by these gunas and without these qualities. In the deception of these Gunas, human beings forget their self, and their Atma and bind themselves to this dying body, and under the influence of these Gunas, humans lose to be free from this body from the cycle of life and death. This is occurring because of the control of the Tamas Guna, the atman overlooks the real purpose of his life. The function of the Atma is to transcend to integrate with the final reality and this is achieved by the Sattva

Guna. In the impact of Sattva Guna, a man realizes the world beyond the material realm and this is the state of Nirvikalpa Samadhi in which a human liberate himself from three gunas and enjoy the experience of Paramatma. Here, Lord Krishna is an ultimate reality and the Arjuna is a jiva atma, So, the parmatma directly speaks with the jiva atma to free himself from this perishable body and surrender to him.

तत्र सत्त्वं निर्मलत्वात् प्रकाशकम् अनामयम् ।  
 सुखसङ्गेन बध्नाति ज्ञानसङ्गेन चानघ ॥ 6 ॥

In this verse, Lord Krishna explained the significance of Sattva Guna. Because these three Gunas are made up of the Prakriti, the material illusion. The Sattva Guna is also a part of Prakriti, but a clean element of Prakriti. Sattva Guna explains a clean intelligence and clean thoughts, and it has a white aura which symbolizes Jiv Atma's merger with a higher entity. A sattvic nature is a seeker of unadulterated knowledge, gratification, and generosity. Sri mad Bhagavt Purana, Chapter 2nd, canto 1st, and Verse 24th also describe the importance of Sattva Guna in spiritual life.

पार्थिवात् दारुणः धूमः तस्मात् अग्निः त्रयीमयः ।  
 तमसः तु रजः तस्मात् सत्त्वं यत् ब्रह्मदर्शनम् ॥

Shri mad Bhagavatam, the second chapter is one of the most important chapters in the whole Bhagavatam, as here the basis of Devotion or bhakti is described as an ultimate goal in life. The above shastra was a spiritual query posed by the sages of Naimisharanya to Suta Gosvami and he explained the constant development of consciousness through the experience of three modes of nature and finally reaching pure devotion. The three modes of nature are a platform to attain divinity, to attain salvation. The current verse depicts the development of the three gunas Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas, narrating the significance of each gunas and their qualities. Rajas means a passion is superior to Tamas that is ignorance but the sattva Guna is superior to Rajas and Tamas as it takes jiv atma to the discovery of the absolute truth. So to make things simple they adopted the metaphor of smoke, earth, and fire. Similarly, smoke produced from the ground symbolizes Rajas guna signifies passion produced from Ignorance Tamas guna's passion is superior to ignorance, but the fire is superior because it guided Atman to Brahma, the supreme reality. Fire symbolizes the Sattva Guna, Fire itself a clean and radiant and is also utilized in holistic ceremonies that call forth the supremacy of the cosmos. Thus, These three ways of nature reveal the upward movement of consciousness. Tamas is marked by ignorance, unawareness of reality, the Brahma, and false perception regarding the world of matter that provides the doorway to Rajas Guna, which stirs the passion, and activity and steers the action which is karma, due to all these gunas activities the Sattva guna obtains that reflect the cleanliness, goodness and brightness that provides a base for spiritual perception and knowledge. Finally, Satt brings the human soul to the Moksha, or the ultimate reality.

रजो रागात्मकं विद्धि तृष्णासङ्गसमुद्भवम् ।  
 तन्निबध्नाति कौन्तेय कर्मसङ्गेन देहिनम् ॥ 7 ॥

The present verse describes the Rajas Guna. Lord Krishna explained to Parth regarding Rajas Guna. Rajas Guna means Trishna or a passion that leads human beings to chase the material in their entire life. With the supremacy of Rajas Guna, human beings are attached to the material things that they are obsessed with and want to achieve. So, the Rajas Guna became the reason for passion and attachment in human life. With the effect of this Guna, humans want to gain name, fame, power, wealth, and position. In today's time, the Rajo guna is manifested by the entire human race, wherever you can see, people are running to earn material things and, in this

activity, they are forgetting to meet the Parmatma. They are working to complete their unfulfilled desires and dreams and Rajo guna provides the fuels in the form of ambition, competition, and madness for power and pleasure. Rajo guna creates traps for an individual in the form of a Karma cycle which leads one act to another act and the individual becomes the prisoner of this trap. The quality of Rajo guna is fiery, passionate, transmutation, and attachment and the color of this guna is red which also represents the passionate activity to live in this material world, which becomes the reason for inner peace and it hasn't able to connect soul with the higher spirit.

तमस्त्वज्ञानजं विद्धि मोहनं सर्वदेहिनाम् ।  
 प्रमादालस्यनिद्राभिस्तन्निबध्नाति भारत ॥ ८॥

The above verse gives information about the Tamas Guna. In chapter fourteen, verse eight, Lord Krishan explained about the Tamas Guna, this quality of nature is the reason to be born of darkness, indolence, and ignorance obliged through sleep, omission of duty, and inertia. Those who are dominated by Tamo guna often face a problem in identifying the purpose of their life. Lord Krishna further said to Kunti Putra that their laziness cultivates carelessness, confusion, disconnectedness from reality, and lack of motivation. This Guna highlighted pramada means negligence, alasya means laziness, and nindra means excessive sleep and lack of real knowledge. Every human being is affected by this quality of nature, only Jivanmukta is not affected by these qualities of nature.

#### **Conclusion:**

In short, the Bhagavad Gita suggests the significance of the three Gunas and their functions in human life. Gita offers a general means of liberation that mandatories go beyond even the enlightening nature of Sattva guna to grasp the eternal and untainted transcendent atman. The description unveils how these fundamental modes of nature or Prakriti play an essential role in designing the human soul for the material world. It educates how humans attain salvation from the trap of this illusory world and commit their souls to the ultimate reality, Parmatma. Ultimately, the Bhagavad Gita acts as the profound understating of human nature and an actual framework for leading the complexities of life to achieve ultimate liberation.

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