



## UNDERSTANDING GUNAS AS THE ESSENCE OF MAN AND HIS EVOLUTION

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### Abstract:

The generalisation of Gunas in Philosophy occupies a unique place in understanding Man, his constitution as well as his functional nature. Gunas also helps to perceive Man's origin and where he is heading. Derivation of Gunas is one of the biggest achievements of Human mind and plays a key role in some of most influential literature of India. The first fully developed concept of Gunas is found in Samkhya Philosophy. The earliest reference before Samkhya is in 'Atharva Samhita' which is more worldly than other three Vedas. The purpose of this paper is to explore the available literature on this subject such as Maitrayaniya Upanishad, Bhagavad Gita, Samkhya-Karika, Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, Volumes of Letters on Yoga by Sri Aurobindo, Vallalar's Upadesa Kurippugal, Vethathiri Maharishi's Mind and other great thinkers to bring about a holistic approach in its application.

**Key Words:** Gunas, Philosophy, Yoga, Psychology, Mind, Education

### Introduction:

The Divine is defined as a Trinity in different philosophical systems such as 'Transcendental, the Cosmic, the individual Divine' also known as "Father, Son, the holy Ghost". Another view of trinity on the Divine is "The transcendental Divine termed as Irul, Darkness, Absolute Space", from that the manifestation of the "Male" and "Female" aspects. The combination of the male and female aspects giving rise to the next level of trinity as per their qualities and functionality and the various names giving to them are 'Ruthira, Vishnu, Brahma', 'Iccha, Kriya, Jnana', "Will, Activity, Wisdom".

The manifestation of the same aspects in Man are what is termed as 'Gunas' in philosophy namely 'Tamas, Rajas, Sattva'. They may be termed as the three forms of consciousness, in other words, the three strands of the Nature are represented by the three Gunas. Prakriti in Samkhya and Nature are one and the same. The Gunas are the modes or processes of Nature. Vallalar calls the three Gunas as the three children of Karma.

In Maitrayaniya Upanishad, fifth Prapathaka, the text states that in the beginning the universe was darkness alone. In this stage all are in potential state and there is no manifestation and hence termed as darkness. This doesn't mean nothingness, but rather a very high active state, but non-perceivable. This is the force of super consciousness, Inertia, which is the law of matter. This is also termed as "Iccha Shakti", the Will of our consciousness. It is the will in all the dynamic forces of the Universe. It is the will power which brings about one-pointedness excluding everything else. The aspect of the Supreme Being that characterises Iccha Shakti is Shiva, (we have to note that the name Ruthira and Shiva are interchangeably used in Upanishads, where as in Saivism, Shiva is the Supreme Lord).

Further differentiation gives rise to "Jnana Shakti", awareness state, the power to know. It is the force of Conscious mind, which is the force of Intelligence. It is the base for creation and the aspect of Divinity characterising Jnana Shakti is Brahma. This blooms as Wisdom in Man and can be achieved only through Love and Intuition.

"Kriya Shakti", is the force of subconscious desire; Kinesis, which is the Law of Life. This is the base for Preservation and the aspect of Divinity characterising Kriya Shakti is Vishnu. In order to develop will power, one need to act spiritually, this is the 'Kriya-Shakti'.

### Matter Operates by the three Gunas:

From the verse of Bhagavad Gita,

"sattvam rajas tama iti gunah prakrti-sambhava  
nibadhnanti maha-baho dehe dehinam avyayam"

- 'Sattva, Rajas and Tamas, the constituents of matter, bind the embodied and immutable (Spirit).

"tatra sattvam nirmalatvat prakasakam anamayam  
sukha-sangena badhnati jnana-sangena canagha"

- Sattva being the purity, leading to knowledge. It binds the spirit to Pleasure and knowledge. This leads to non-performing of one's duty.

“rajo ragatmakam viddhi trsna-sanga-samudbhavam  
tan nibadhnati kaunteya karma-sangena dehinam”

- Rajas is the source of craving and passion. It binds the spirit with works. When unchecked this leads to greediness.

“tamas tv ajnana-jam viddhi mohanam sarva-dehinam  
pramadalya-nidrabhis tan nibadhnati bhārata”

- Primarily all matter is of Tamas, of darkness and it is shrouded with ignorance. Unless the spirit is moved by right action, it binds with error, indolence and sleepiness.

When one transcends these three constituents, the embodied spirit is liberated from the cycle of birth and death. Such a liberated person remains steadfast in any state either being in sattvic, rajasic or tamasic and do not attach any value to the outcomes in those states. It is clear that these three terms of Gunas has only relative meaning and matter operates by their means. There is no escape from its influence and irresistible power.

#### **Gunās - The Fundamental Constituents of Any Objective Existence:**

Samkhya-Karika by Ishvara Krishna defines the Samkhya philosophy of Kapila. It elaborates the concept of Gunas in the verses 11 to 13. Tamas is shrouded with Ignorance as it is the inner most nature and hence heavy and enveloping. Since this is force of superconscious, it is the most binding of the three, leading to restraint of the Spirit. Rajas is the exciting element and mobile. It is bonded by the subconscious desires. Sattva is the most perceivable truth and defines the fundamental reality behind everything. It is the force of conscious mind/ Intelligence and is the outermost layer of the human mind. Thus there is a wide mistaken notion that this is the real essence of an object and is the formative element of nature which is lighter and subtler than the other two.

“prīti-aprīti-viśāda-ātmakāḥ prakāśa-pravṛtti-niyamārthāḥ  
anyonya-abhibhava-āśraya-janana-mithuna-vṛttayaḥ ca guṇāḥ ”

(Verse 12)

The attributes are of the nature of pleasure, pain and delusion; they are adapted to illuminate, to activate and to restrain. They mutually suppress, support, produce, consort and exist. Usually the three Gunas are termed as qualities, they are also ‘substances’ by themselves, yet called qualities as they reflect precisely the quality aspect of matter. The term Guna is not to be regarded as an insubstantial accidental attribute of Nature, but as a substance perceptible through the medium of physical or mental faculties. It is the essence of Nature and part of its composition. Gunas are not energies, but constituent elements of Nature, each of different virtue. Gunas means primarily a thread or cord, and Prakriti or Nature is a string composed of three varying strands. Every kind of objective existence are formed by the Gunas, in infinite variety of conditions, as the different kind of these elements are blended together in varying degrees. From the Maharishi Nandinatha’s philosophical text, we note that “The Great Ishvara, the Absolute Lord of the universe, having well associated Himself with the three qualities sattva, rajas and tamas which evolve prior to the creation of the worlds, constantly plays, presenting Himself in each embodied being. The three qualities sattva, rajas and tamas evolve from the three letters ष, ष and ष respectively.”

#### **The Basic Principles of Gunas are:**

- Indiscriminate - It does not have the power of discerning the differences between things and deciding upon them
- Objective - It has an objective existence, discernible through the medium of physical or mental faculties
- Irrational - It is only passively receptacle, cannot think
- Productive - It produces the 5 subtle elements, from which the five gross elements are produced.

Each of these three Gunas, may subdue or support the other; they are capable of producing each other, and have mutual existence. That is, they can transform from one into another, or produce the effects of each in different conditions. In their mutual co-operation they are compared to lamp, whose light is produced by the application of flame to the wick and the oil.

#### **Operation of Gunas in the Physical World:**

Tamas is the property of Inertia. Inertia is nothing but the resistance to acceleration due to mass. Inertia is proportional to mass. It sums up the facts that particles of matter or material objects tend to retain their states of motion or rest and offer resistance to any force acting on them. It is the fundamental Law of all Beings (fundamental law of matter) and is the Primary definition of Objective existence.

Rajas is the Law of Kinesis, which is the law of Life. It is that which causes change of motion in other portions of matter; it is not only the object on which force spends itself, it is the seat of force. It is the second fundamental property of matter as it shows itself to our senses.

Sattva is the Law of Equilibrium. It is that by which atoms and molecules, when they are parts of objects act and react on each other so as to reach equilibrium and to hold together and remain as objects.

Thus, we see that, they are the same as Newton's three Laws of Motion, they define matter and indicate conditions of its manifestation.

Vethathiri Maharishi, has explained the expression of consciousness in the physical world as 'Order of Function'. From the infinitesimal energy particle to all inanimate forms, consciousness functions with three dimensions: Pattern, Precision and Regularity.

Pattern is nothing but the arrangement of the physical structure; that which holds all the atoms, elements, all perceptible objects and provides its structural specifications. This can be related to Tamas.

Precision is the quality achieved all along the evolutionary process, sum of all the quality, characteristics accrued up to present. It is the precise reaction of matter when interacting with another. It can be related to Rajas.

Regularity is the timing of every existence and action, example, Earth rotates once a day and revolves around the sun exactly in 365 ¼ days. This kind of timing is applicable from tiniest atom to stars and planets. This can be related to the Sattva.

According to Vethathiri Maharishi, in all living being's consciousness functions with three capabilities. They are Sensing, Experience and Discrimination, this is the act of perception.

Thus, Pattern relates to Structure, will aspect; Precision relates to quality producing precise action, activity aspect and Regularity relates to inherent knowledge of what has to exist in what form/ with what quality, wisdom aspect.

### **Gunās - Mental Events:**

#### **At the Cognition Level:**

At the level of Perception, Tamas is exposed as Ignorance, the reason being it is the most enveloped among the three. It is the inner most layer, hence heavy and dull among the three and its true nature hard to perceive. Due to its strong bondage to objects, perception is seen under the influence of already existing pre-conceived notions resulting in incorrect understanding. It is the failure of its powers of apprehension.

Rajas is exposed as Activity, without the support of right knowledge, it results in Clouded Intellect. This is the next inner level, here there is a force to go beyond the pre-conceived notions and analyse; but not completely free from its influence. It is wrong apprehension.

Sattva is exposed as purity derived from Perfect knowledge; in this condition there is complete freedom from the already existing knowledge and Perception is conceived as it is without any colouring. It is the right apprehension.

#### **At the Desire Level:**

Tamas is experienced as All-compelling desire, in other words as subjection to desires. This is the base for habit formations. When the mind is sufficiently purified, it leads to one-pointedness, leading away from the distraction of other faculties and helps achieving great heights even to the level of Self Realisation.

Rajas is experienced as Struggle for Motives; this is the source of craving and passion. Inner purification leads to the mobility towards higher self.

Sattva is experienced as Vairagya, regulated desire, self-control. It is base for clinging to pleasure and knowledge. At the advanced stage of inner purification, the veil is sufficiently cleared leading to the dawn of higher knowledge, intuition.

#### **At the Action Level:**

Tamas is seen as Automatic action, this is the base for skill build-up. Rajas is seen as Excited action, it is the base for accumulation, expansion, entrepreneurship. Sattva is seen as deliberative action, it is base for strategies, invention. Thus, the mind is Traigunya, conditioned by the three Gunas.

### **Manifestation of Consciousness:**

The word 'Consciousness' is elaborately used in both the fields of Philosophy and Science. The word 'mind' is used to describe the behavioural qualities of bio-consciousness in living beings. In a normal Man, mind includes memory, all feelings and the thinking faculties. In the language of Yoga, the term 'mind' relates to the inner organs of Man comprising of Mind (Intellect), Buddhi, Chitta and Ahamkara. All of this constitutes the Ego of Man. The three inner organs of Man constituting the three gunas are Sattva (Buddhi), Rajas (Chitta) and Tamas (Ahamkara). All the Yoga practices are towards the refinement of these Inner Organs of Man and it speeds up the evolution of Man which might otherwise take several lives. Ultimate refinement results in the modulation of Gunas and thus we say that Gunas denotes the stage of evolution of Man.

From the words of Vethathiri Maharishi, 'All structural values that are perceptible to the senses (that is quantifiable) are determined by force and all the qualities that are imperceptible or imponderable are determined by Consciousness. These two values of quantity and quality are manifestation of force and consciousness.'

Thus, Gunas is the manifestation of Consciousness in Man and his quality. In a Man without spiritual inclination or with no inclination for inner purification, mind is bonded to external objects and it defines his 'Personality', whereas for a Man who diligently work towards the Self-purification and looks for Higher Self, mind is cut off from external bondings and internal travel begins. Then any modification of his Mind defines his Individuality.

### **Essence of Existence, Path for Self-Realisation:**

According to Patanjali's Yoga Sutra,

‘pariṇāma-ikatvāt vastu-tattvam’ (Vibhuti Pada - Sutra 14)

- The essence of the object consists in the uniqueness of transformation of the Gunas.

‘pariṇāma tāpa saṃskāra duḥkhaiḥ guṇa-vṛtti-virodhācca duḥkham-eva sarvaṃ vivekinaḥ’ (Sadhana Pada, Sutra

- Pain, pleasure are relative terms and they are experience as pain and pleasure only due to the unique combination of Gunas at that point of time. Having understood this, people who have developed discrimination (vivekam), consider all experience as misery.

There are 4 stages of Gunas during the involution process of bio-consciousness to achieve Self-Realisation.

‘viśeṣa-aviśeṣa-liṅga-mātra-aliṅgāni guṇaḥ’ (Sadhana Pada - Sutra 19)

- They are ‘viśeṣa’ - the particular, ‘aviśeṣa’ - the universal, ‘liṅga’ - the differentiated and ‘aliṅga’ - the undifferentiated. These 4 stages of the Gunas are denoted by the predominant nature of the mental perception and the activity that characterises that stage.
- viśeṣa - All objects are seen as particular things with forms and names; this is the activity of lower manas where each object is perceived as a separate & independent entity.
- aviśeṣa - The perception is at the level of Universal, archetypes and principles which underly the world of forms and names; this is the activity of higher manas working at a subtler level
- liṅga – This is a state of consciousness in which particular objects and even particular principles are mere marks or signs which serve to distinguish them from other objects. This corresponds to the activity of supra-mental consciousness which transcends intellect and is expressed through Buddhi / intuition. In this stage, all objects / principles are part of the universal consciousness, embedded but still have their identity, distinguishable or recognisable. This is the condition of unity in diversity.
- aliṅga – In this stage of consciousness awareness, objects / principles lose their separate identity; they are perceived without mark, differentiating characteristic.

All objects/ archetypes, everything in the manifested universe is a modification of consciousness, ‘Brahma-Vritti’. In liṅga stage, awareness of the objects exists side by side with the awareness of consciousness, in aliṅga stage former will go out of focus and only awareness of the Divine consciousness remains. This is what is expressed in ‘Sat-Chit-Ananda’, Sri Aurobindo considers sat-chit-ananda to be eternal and unified concept of the Atma, transcending beyond space, matter and time.

‘abhyāsa-vairāgya-ābhyaṃ tan-nirodhaḥ’ (Samadhi Pada - Sutra 12)

- According to Patanjali, Self-Realisation is achieved by Persistent practice and Non-attachment.

The virtue of Rajas is required for the practice, the virtue of tamas is required for the one pointedness and that of Sattva is required for non-attachment.

‘tatparaṃ puruṣa-khyāteḥ guṇa-vaitṛṣṇyam’ (Samadhi Pada – Sutra 16)

- On practicing the highest level of Vairagya, when he ceases the craving for any object seen or unseen, Man is finally freed from the workings of Gunas, the veil is completely lifted and only then awareness of Self is realised.

The three Gunas are refined, purified and changed into their divine equivalents. Sattva becomes Jyotiḥ, the authentic spiritual light. Rajas becomes tapas, the tranquilly intense divine force; the kinetic passion to be replaced by tapas. Tamas becomes Sama, the luminous quietude and peace; the obscure inertia to be replaced by Sama.

### **Conclusion:**

When we understand Gunas, apart from the spiritual journey, the applications in all other parts of life are enormous. To give a sample, Using the Sattvic illumination for guided decision making, force of Rajas for influence and expansion of the selected decision and binding Tamas for staying focused in the selected path. Behavioural modifications can be brought about in the light of this knowledge, it can be the guiding principle for skills-build up, right habit formations and character building in the education systems.

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