

# Philosophical Stoic Approach in Hinduism

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**Abstract:** Shades of almost all philosophical and particularly ethical studies can easily be traced in Hinduism. However, there had been lesser attention paid to arrange them in a proper chronological order or even placing necessary impetus wherever required. Stoicism found in Greece and Rome, had its propounders directly concentrating on all its possible themes which could reflect in daily life. They managed to throw light emphatically on the genuine aspects and therefore provided solutions to the same. There had been a continuity with absolute pragmatism and a defensive mechanism is being suggested to face the challenges in day today and every phase of life. On the other hand, in Hinduism there is a positive outlook, taking into consideration the philosophical as well as psychological facts of human temperament. Hinduism as such goes with religio-philosophical treatment and so at no point it remains rigid or sticking to a particular viewpoint. It manages to sway over the tides of confusion, doubt, pessimism and fatalism.

Moral truths, ethical principles, virtues and human values are universally acknowledged. No religion can afford to deviate from them. The only point of difference might occur is about the level or percentage of emphasis layed down. Therefore, there need not be any debate on who is handling the values more with intensity, efficacy and clarity. Unfortunately, there is always a race for claiming the supremacy in this regard. The major advantage for older religions in East or West had been getting chance early to surmise. However, it should be borne in the mind that the new approaches that are emerging have an advantage to refer to the older one and they can apply more effectively the basic principles to suit the modern mind and life too. This paper envisages to bring forth the stoical outlook in Hinduism to indicate the genre of pragmatic outlook residing though in a dormant state.

**Keywords:** Philosophical shades, Stoicism, Hinduism and Pragmatic approach.

## 1. Introduction

Every philosopher takes on intellectually an adventurous trip to tread on the areas that are unexplored. No doubt there is an underlying desire to reach the summit so as to give the world yet another accessible gallery to view the modes of working of the world we live in. Philosophers do have an adventurous way of thinking, surmising and analysing which a common man would either deliberately overlook or prefer to skip because that seems to him beyond the reach or his level of comprehension and he does not qualify for it. For a philosopher everything causes curiosity and an exciting spectacle too. For an onlooker with personal limitations the critical way of thinking might appear to be merely a metaphysical excursion. To a certain extent in some cases it could be true. However, it should be

noted that although most of the philosophies from East or West have indicated a well-defined premise to proclaim authority, particularly in the field of Ethics there is definitely a sort of intrinsic unanimity of thoughts. For example, the very function of willing is cognized in variety ways by different philosophers working on the intricacies in the areas of Morality and Ethics. "Kant regards good will as practical reason. It is for him the only thing that is good without any reservations. The goodness of other things depends upon the goodness of good will. Good will is, therefore, the basic principle of moral action. Schopenhauer regards will as primary and intellect as secondary. For him will is the thing in itself, and that it reveals itself in all things, whether conscious or unconscious. Gravitation in physical nature is just as real a manifestation of it as is human desire. Nietzsche talks about 'will to power which according to him is present both in Nature and in Man and which is subconscious determinant of impulses which move us to action.'" [1]

We generally doubt the things that theoretically claim to have cent percent efficacy but fail in practice. Psychologically it is but human nature. Apart from this we also suspect the capacity of the authority, which we usually refer to the concept of God, having relation with the Universe and that is supposed to be controlling the world or the events occurring around us. This has been more on rise much because of the advances taking place in Science and more so as they have been drawn on the basis of empirical proofs. It is quite difficult to prove the claims that are much publicized or concluded merely with an overtone of religiosity. It would always be wise to keep a separate province for God and subsequently Godliness because their capacity to function the way they are described from ages have not been quite convincing and at any rate in a methodical manner. Most of the sermons have a psychological grip over the humanity at large and even interrogating with them is equated to a sinful act. Much owing to this the plain fact is that the upcoming generation is confused. It needs a drastic change or a radical shift in the ongoing approach towards leading life. Any philosophical view point that promises comfort and complacency than getting agitated and frustrated in every phase of life, is welcome. We need a simplified and workable theory or a behavioral science which irrespective of the stratum of the society where we are stationed, would work efficiently. Ancient Greek philosophy which progressed considerably and in a steady manner is marked around 6th century BC was engaged more with the problems the humanity which faced against Nature and so it may be viewed as a non-religious approach. In

a way it did a real service to humanity in a practical way. It dealt with variety subjects like Astronomy, Logic, almost all branches of Science and metaphysics. That was really a contribution in its strict sense. Roughly in parallel the Eastern philosophies, particularly Indian philosophy which was very keen on grasping the internal world attracted all. Ultimately we all look to any philosophy for solace and sort of guidance to solve the intricacies of the oft repeated problems on human level.

## 2. Stoicism: A general survey

Some of the old religions are stuffed with so many details that the study of even one religion with proper understanding or in a thorough manner is almost improbable. That is the reason as to why the new religions that were introduced remained quite synoptic and could draw attention of all. Further it was the turn of the "isms" which had a greater influence because they restricted themselves to the need of the hour and considering different strata of the society. It should be borne in our mind that not all of us would qualify or prefer to train ourselves to be scientists or philosophers. We do need certain guidance for the common men who just need solace or living with a tolerable and genuine purpose. In past we have seen many isms endeavoured to give workable philosophy or livable principles than exhibiting merely the scholarship. It is indeed a fact that instead of putting forth a philosophy with verbose type of writing it is better that humanity is given the knack of living happily or at least is trained to avoid unhappiness. Much of common man's unhappiness or uneasiness stems out of ignorance of the phenomenal facts which are generally overlooked. There seems to be a sort of eagerness to make sweeping statements in a hurried manner on the part of most of the religions and even philosophies. Stoicism founded in the early third century was practised by many great personalities who had different social backgrounds. Usually we refer to Zeno of Citium, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius and Seneca who strived hard to put forth the principles of Stoicism in a lucid manner so that they could reach the society as a torch of guidance. No doubt there was a tremendous stress on the virtuous life and its influence on one's behaviour but the facts of life were never overlooked. Generally, under enthusiastic tone some of the philosophies have gone theoretical and that is the reason as to why when they are put to the test of validity have failed miserably. Stoicism has no such arrogance of scholarship display but the at the very root it blatantly clears that we cannot control many things or events because they lie far away from us where none of our powers can reach. " That is why Stoic Sage will continually attend to the source of virtue, his voluntary judgements and actions, which renders him unusually self-possessed in any given situation. One of the healthy passions cultivated in stoicism, is called eulabeia, meaning 'caution' or 'discretion' can also be seen as a form of mindfulness." [2]. It is just our approach or response towards the happenings that we can shape up to the best of our capacity. One of the major

handicaps which some of the philosophies have is their complicated theories that have gone more with technical and abstruse type of terms which an ordinary person may never cognize. No doubt they have been scholarly written but their practical applications are doubtful. Stoicism takes care of this and much owing to this tries to present methods which can, not only handle but also to a large extent deal with the destructive emotions residing in us. Many notable personalities have adopted the simple principles of stoicism in various fields. Some of them had been lucky to have a wealthy background while others the opposite and still both have marched with a direction and dignity. On the mental plane it is but natural to have a continuous strife between varied thoughts but Stoicism thinks that one of the worst slaveries is comfort. Anyone who gets tuned to the comfort zone can never get a release and repeatedly same problems will have to be faced. One of the techniques proposed by Stoics is to change the perception while facing a situation. Just as in mathematics the change in geometry would result totally into a different figure as such, one can also get a similar result by changing once viewpoint or the perception. Good and Bad are considered as conventions that are adopted from ages. Therefore, for Stoics there is nothing as conventionally acknowledged as good or bad. By practicing dispassionate nature everything will seem to be merely another shade of knowledge. The next step is to accept the fact that everything is existing on a temporary basis. Nothing remains forever. All situations are bound to end with time. In short everything is ephemeral and therefore there is no sense or intelligence in adhering to any particular situation or getting attached with intensity. The moment anything is born is subjected to death or in the process of dying. Life is not in the custody of any living being on a permanent basis. Therefore, one has to be honest and aware of the phases of life. Further Stoics feel it is always wise to take a bird's eye-view towards life. As Marcus Aurelius had suggested most of our opinions will change about others and the happenings around us. Our quick judgements of people and their activities will have a radical shift. In addition, if we constantly are reminded of the fact of mortality then we may not get attached to anything beyond a certain level. We need to get periodically reminded of this fact so that nothing can surprise or even disappoint us in the mart of life. This would definitely help us to live life meaningfully and to its fullest in true sense. This will also throw light on the harsh realities of life so that we can have the ability to understand or differentiate between the things or situations we can alter and those we cannot. There is nothing to feel pessimistic about this. It may be a little sad reality but then that is indeed a fact. Therefore, it will provide steadily peace of mind and give strength to accept life as it is. This might give a distinctively clear advantage in life compared to those who do not agree with this approach. Continuing with the Stoical temperament it is suggested that one should become a journaler. By practicing this we can have a daily checkup of our spontaneity in life. This is as good as maintaining the routine

life events and our own responses in varied forms. Therefore, by writing diary and further tutoring self for any of the shortcoming would mean a true spiritual progress in life. Therefore, even if we say Journaling is a backbone of Stoicism, it is in no way exaggeration. Later strengthening self by way of imagining negatively can also make us tough. Generally, we have been trained to think positively and that too very elaborately without having any analytical sense. No doubt positive thinking can also train the mind to view with optimism but at times it turns out to be a mockery. Stoicism does not propose pessimistic attitude. Rather it expects every follower to take on the facts and train mind well in advance to adopt to the worst possible extremity that may befall on us. We know that on an average not everything is fair in the world. Just by our thinking, the events will not change or make a different detour. Finally, Stoicism proposes strongly rather a philosophical outlook which has been a suggestion cum advice given in every religion. Stoicism lays lot of stress on AMOR FATI, that is love everything that is happening to you without any exception. It is always better to embrace the situation as it is than to evade. As Bertrand Russell puts it, "The man who acquires easily things for which he feels only a very moderate desire concludes that attainment of desire does not bring happiness. If he is of philosophical disposition, he concludes that human life is essentially wretched, since the man who has all he wants is still unhappy. He forgets that to be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness." [3].

### 3. Various shades in Indian philosophy

Arthur Schopenhauer was greatly influenced by some of the Vedic writings. He wrote, "Every keen pleasure is an error and an illusion, for no attained wish can give lasting satisfaction. All pain rests on the absence or passing away of such illusory pleasure. Thus both pain and pleasure arise from defective knowledge. The wise man, therefore, holds himself equally aloof from joy and sorrow, and no event disturbs his composure." [4]. Indian philosophy has such a vast canvas and temperament that it covers almost all isms. That is the reason as to why it has also been looked upon as a very accommodative philosophy. It goes without dispute that it is improbable to describe in a nutshell such a philosophy and therefore it would be wise to deal with the salient features only. Ten major Upanishads can be referred to get a total insight into the Indian metaphysics and further a reference to Bhagwad Gita would be worthwhile to have in a simplified form and the essence of Vedic thoughts. It is a fact that Hinduism is more influenced by the rituals and these rituals are practised by the majority devotedly. However, there is a greater control of the philosophical outlook despite this fact rituals at times overtake the philosophical outlook. A brief survey would show that all the four Vedas are divided into two parts: Samhita and Brahmana. The latter is comprised of Karma Kanda, Aranyaka and Upanishads. It is in the Aranyakas that we find a clear shifting of the emphasis from the routine ritualistic to the well-

designed philosophical thought and furthermore this has been fructified or crystallized in Upanishads. Upanishads contain three schools of philosophy viz; Bheda (Dwaita), Abheda (Advaita) and Bhedabheda (Vishishtadwaita). These three have a common and important feature that is they believe in single God. It is only around 500 BC that there was a necessity experienced for the introduction of logical verification of the literature then available. Although Action(karma) was ordained in Vedas yet Knowledge(Jnana) is given a superior placement. With this declaration it was pushed further to make a concrete distinction between the ephemeral and eternal existence sanctioned to the entities by Nature. "Realizing the distinction between Nitya and Anitya, that is, Atma and Dravya, one should renounce the results of rituals that involve the fruits of this world and the benefits of the other world; one must have tranquility, control over senses, withdrawal from all the worldly activities, great forbearance and concentration of the mind and must have an earnest desire for moksha, the liberation." [5].

Therefore, this shows ages back the roots of Stoicism were already growing in Indian Philosophy. There had been much importance given to the Morals, Ethics and living principles along with the final aim of life. The general unjust opinion formed in the society that Indian philosophy is excessively stuffed with scores of rituals continues even today but overindulgence in such practices is least encouraged, rather criticised. It is sad that many who have trained themselves in such practices have indirectly brought disgrace to the Philosophy as it is also bracketed into a mercantile zone. Even primitive man had curiosity to know what happens after death. When death is the final destination impartially for all and most unpredictable, naturally any sensitive person would go on thinking about the best course for leading life. The world as such from the beginning had never been fair in dealings when we take a realistic view. There are very few chances to mend it, a fact one has to accept looking back to the centuries that have rolled down. Therefore, a stoical approach is the only hope that was predicted in Indian philosophy without reservation. The only problem is that in Indian philosophy a proper chronological order, tidiness and systematic documentation have not been maintained owing to which an onlooker may get easily confused.

In Indian philosophy Bhagwad Gita attracts the attention of all readers very easily because it has remained as the main source of inspiration and an open guide for the confused minds. In fact, psychologically speaking, none can claim a permanent tranquility of the mind howsoever well placed in society or well-read and informed. Learning can make us learned but not necessarily wise. Only intelligent people are expected to be happy. Even then there are so many traps, temptations due to which one may easily miss the required pragmatic sense on time and then as commonly observed would be ensnared by confusions, uneasiness and finally landing into even chronicle depression. Gita has been one of the most important scriptures in Indian literature. Sometimes an onlooker may feel why there

was a need to reintroduce the teachings in Gita when the philosophical thoughts are so clear in Upanishads! The truth is that Gita does not have any aim to establish supremacy of the three paths viz; Knowledge, Devotion and Action over others but its central theme is NISHKAM KARMA YOGA. Herein there is rather a synthesized form presented which covers all the yogas and furthermore the intellect and emotional shades of human personality are also given fullest consideration. In fact, many philosophers had dealt with this problem but Gita has unique way of handling. Formerly it was very common to consider the two juxtaposed paths or approaches in life dealing with materialism and spiritualism. Gita although aims at the latter path tries to discover a via media than dismissing the former. If we delve more into the details to catch the crux of the whole spirit over which there is marked emphasis then we realize that Gita presents a spiritual synthesis. Spiritual viewpoint is always to hold on to the whole and integral. No doubt there could be apparent contradictions in the paths of knowledge but they are to be treated as complementary to each other. At any rate there is no divorce between these approaches. It should be looked upon as a deliberate spiritual unity than any forceful or a pragmatic compromise nor even a golden mean purposefully presented. All the aspects of humanity are merged to cause a transformation so as to yield Divinity. Hence the central teaching of Gita is Nishkam Karma Yoga. It does not mean inaction. It never insists on actions without any motive. This is because psychologically it is not possible to sunder action and motive. It means remaining with a detached feeling. Leaving or handing over the result of our efforts to the Divine is a philosophical theme. There is no feeling of renunciation or remorse towards the actions or one's own duties. It is only a stoical outlook towards the different phases and subsequently the sades of life." The highest end of life, for a rational man, should, therefore be the enjoyment of the greatest amount of pleasure here in this life, of which alone we are sure. It is foolish to forgo the pleasures of life simply because they happen to be mixed with pain. It would be as though one would reject the kernel because of its husk or cease sowing crops for fear of cattle. We should try to get the best out of this life by enjoying it as best as we can and avoiding as far as possible the chances of pain." [6]. Therefore, one need not be an ascetic to practice the stoical principles. All that is desirable is to develop a sportive outlook and understanding Life in toto without getting disturbed. This can truly lead us to a tranquil mind and nothing would surprise us or no event can take a control over our even approach.

#### 4. Conclusion

Indian Philosophy discusses the different problems of Metaphysics, Logic, Ethics, Human Psychology and Epistemology but always clearly in a unified form. These are

reckoned as the necessary shades of what has been pursued as the ultimate reality. This could also be considered as a Synthetic Outlook which covers all necessary philosophical aspects and in addition the isms that are related to human behaviour. There is a division made into two broad categories serving the Orthodox (accepting the Vedic authority) temperament and the Heterodox (refuting the Vedic authority) tendency. As some of the followers believe in the ritualistic approach totally they are not interested in the speculative philosophy. Stoicism is mostly concerned with day today problems that are faced by all of us. In fact, we all need a simplified and perfect format which can provide guidance for living happily without getting stuck up due to unnecessary philosophically coined technical terms. A summarized view is sufficient to lead a life with purpose than getting scholarship which promotes more intellectual acrobatics and confusions in mind. Every decade poses different problems or same problems differently. Despite having knowledge of various subjects there is no assurance of complacency. Therefore, a little deliberate shift towards Pragmatism is badly needed. The main point of uneasiness or problem is our failure in dealing properly the ground level problems which are periodical. Therefore, an understanding of the course of human life is necessary. In most of the philosophies, with due respect to the propounders, it is clearly visible that there is too much of importance placed on metaphysical, logical and epistemological problems which are not faced at least by the majority in the society. Therefore, Stoicism and the specific parts of Gita emphasizing on Nishkam Karma Yoga- an outlook of detachment can be the correct prescription for the modern restless souls. This has been clarified in Bhagwad Gita and Dhammapada as, "The general influence of this outlook on metaphysics has been to regard the present world as the outcome of the past one and explain the former partly by reference to the latter. Besides it sets metaphysics on the search for the eternal. On the ethical and religious side, it helped the Indian mind to take a wider and detached view of life, prevented it from the morbid desire to cling to the fleeting as the everlasting and persuaded it always to have an eye on what was lasting, rather than momentary, value." [7].

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