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Nişkāma karma and the psychology of motivation: Reading the Bhagavadgītā alongside self-determination theory

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Abstract
Motivation is among the most consequential constructs in educational psychology, yet contemporary schooling continues to rely heavily on outcome-contingent incentives whose limitations are well documented. This article undertakes a systematic comparative reading of the Bhagavadgītā's doctrine of nişkāma karma desireless or outcome-detached action alongside Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the most extensively researched contemporary framework of human motivation. The paper first reconstructs the Gītā's theory of action on its own terms: the inescapability of action, the entitlement to action but not to its fruits (Bhagavadgītā 2.47), skill in action (yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam), equanimity (samatva), one's own dharma (svadharma), the portrait of the person of steady wisdom (sthitaprajña), and the guṇa-based typology of motivation and śraddhā. It then summarizes SDT's intrinsic-extrinsic continuum, the internalization of regulation, basic psychological needs, and the undermining effect of contingent rewards. Four principal convergences are argued: outcome-detachment and autonomous regulation; svadharma and integrated regulation; kauśalam and competence or flow; and the shared critique of reward-fixation. Equally, the paper insists on divergences: the Gītā's soteriological horizon, its treatment of desire as such, and the duty-construct of dharma resist assimilation into SDT categories. Nişkāma karma, it is argued, is not simply "intrinsic motivation" but a distinct construct—outcome-detached engaged action worth operationalizing, building on Indian work on anāsakti. Implications for assessment cultures, classroom goal structures, teacher discourse, and India's National Education Policy 2020 are drawn.

Keywords: Nişkāma karma, Bhagavadgītā, Self-Determination Theory, intrinsic motivation, anāsakti, educational psychology

Introduction
Few constructs in educational psychology carry as much explanatory and practical weight as motivation. Whether students initiate learning, persist through difficulty, engage deeply rather than superficially, and transfer what they learn beyond the examination hall depends substantially on the quality—not merely the quantity of their motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017) [15]. Yet the architecture of contemporary schooling, in India as elsewhere, remains predominantly reward-centric. Marks, ranks, medals, admission cut-offs, and high-stakes examinations function as the primary levers of student effort, while teacher effort is increasingly steered by performance metrics of its own. A half-century of empirical research has documented the costs of this architecture: contingent rewards can crowd out interest in the rewarded activity itself (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999) [4], performance-focused goal structures can encourage shallow strategies and fear of failure (Ames, 1992) [1], and evaluation-saturated environments are reliably associated with anxiety and disengagement (Ryan & Deci, 2017) [15]. The problem, in short, is not that students lack motivation but that schooling systematically cultivates the wrong kind. In the Indian context the pattern is acute: the cultural centrality of board examinations and competitive entrance tests concentrates enormous contingency on a small number of results, with well-known consequences for adolescent stress, coaching-industry distortions of learning, and the reduction of education to result-production.
Educational psychology's dominant responses to this problem have been developed largely within Euro-American research traditions.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), articulated by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) [14] and consolidated in Ryan and Deci (2017) [15], is arguably the most comprehensive of these responses, distinguishing qualities of motivation along a continuum of autonomy and grounding them in basic psychological needs. What has received far less systematic attention is the fact that Indian intellectual traditions contain a sophisticated, indigenous theorization of precisely this problem: the relation between action, its outcomes, and the psychological orientation of the agent. The Bhagavadgītā's doctrine of niṣkāma karma action performed without craving for its fruits (phala) is, on one reading, a theory of motivational quality. It asks what happens to an agent, cognitively, affectively, and morally, when action is yoked to outcome-craving, and it prescribes a reorientation in which action is performed wholeheartedly while the anxiety-generating fixation on results is relinquished. That this teaching is delivered in a soteriological and ethical register does not disqualify it as psychology; it does, however, demand interpretive care.

The present article is a theoretical and comparative study with three aims. First, it reconstructs the Gītā's theory of action and motivation on its own conceptual terms, resisting both devotional paraphrase and premature translation into psychological jargon (Section 2). Second, it summarizes SDT with attention to the components most relevant to the comparison: the intrinsic-extrinsic continuum, internalization, basic needs, and the undermining effect of rewards (Section 3). Third, it conducts the comparison in both directions identifying substantive convergences (Section 4) while insisting on divergences and methodological cautions (Section 5). The article then turns constructive: it surveys the modest but real empirical literature on non-attachment (anāsakti) in Indian psychology and proposes a research agenda for operationalizing "outcome-detached engaged action" in educational settings (Section 6), before drawing implications for assessment cultures, classroom practice, and policy, including India's National Education Policy 2020 (Section 7).

Two caveats govern the whole exercise. The Gītā is a religious-philosophical text embedded in a specific soteriology; SDT is an empirical theory tested through experiments and psychometrics. Comparing them is legitimate—both make claims about the phenomenology and consequences of human motivation—but equating them would be a category error. Second, the comparative literature in this area is conceptually rich but empirically thin; where evidence is lacking, this article says so explicitly rather than allowing the plausibility of a parallel to masquerade as its demonstration.

2. The Gītā's Theory of Action and Motivation

2.1 The inescapability of action

The Bhagavadgītā's psychology of motivation begins from an anthropological premise: action is not optional. "No one, indeed, can remain even for a moment without performing action; everyone is made to act, helplessly, by the guṇas born of prakṛti" (Bhagavadgītā 3.5; cf. Radhakrishnan, 1948) [12]. The text thereby forecloses quietism as a solution to the problems action generates. Arjuna's opening impulse to withdraw from a repugnant task is rejected not on consequentialist grounds alone but on psychological ones: withdrawal from outward action does not extinguish the inner machinery of craving and aversion (Bhagavadgītā 3.6). If action is inescapable, the ethically and psychologically decisive variable cannot be whether one acts, but how with what orientation, what relation to outcomes, what quality of attention. This move is structurally significant for the comparison to follow: like SDT, the Gītā relocates the central question of motivation from behavioral output to the internal regulation of behavior. Chapter 18 completes the thought by distinguishing saṃnyāsa, the renunciation of actions themselves, from tyāga, the renunciation of the fruits of action, and comes down decisively for the latter: obligatory action "should not be renounced"; what is to be given up is attachment and fruit (Bhagavadgītā 18.5-9). The sāttvika renouncer is defined precisely as one who performs prescribed action because it ought to be done, "abandoning attachment and fruit" (18.9). Renunciation, in the Gītā's mature formulation, is thus a motivational restructuring within action, not an exit from it.

2.2 Niṣkāma karma: entitlement to action, not to fruits

The doctrinal core is Bhagavadgītā 2.47:

karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana / mā karmaphalahetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi //

"Your entitlement is to action alone, never to its fruits; let not the fruit of action be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction" (Bhagavadgītā 2.47; trans. adapted from Radhakrishnan, 1948; cf. Zaehner, 1969) [16].

Four claims are compressed here. (a) The agent has adhikāra rightful jurisdiction, competence, entitlement over the performance of action, that is, over effort, attention, and intention. (b) The agent has no such jurisdiction over phala, the fruit or outcome, which is co-determined by innumerable factors beyond the agent's control. (c) The fruit must not function as hetu, the motivating cause, of action: the verse targets not outcomes as such but outcome-contingency of motivation. (d) The correct response to (b) is emphatically not inaction; detachment from fruits is compatible with, indeed required for, full engagement in action. Niṣkāma karma is thus best glossed not as "desireless action" in a psychologically implausible sense but as action whose initiation and quality are decoupled from craving for particular results.

2.3 Samatva and kauśalam: equanimity and skill

Two adjacent verses give the doctrine its affective and performative dimensions. Bhagavadgītā 2.48 defines yoga as samatva evenness of mind in success and failure (*siddhyasiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṃ yoga ucyate*): one is to act "established in yoga, abandoning attachment." Equanimity here is not indifference to quality of work but stability of the agent across outcome-variance; the person's affective equilibrium and sense of self are not hostage to results. Bhagavadgītā 2.50 then declares, famously, *yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam* "yoga is skill in action." The juxtaposition is deliberate and psychologically acute: the text claims that outcome-detachment, far from degrading performance, is a condition of excellence in performance, because attention formerly consumed by anticipatory anxiety about results becomes available for the task itself. Whether this empirical claim is true is, as Section 6 argues, a genuinely testable question; but it should be recognized as a claim the text makes, not one imported by modern interpreters.

2.4 Svadharma: one's own path of action

The Gītā repeatedly insists that action should be one's own: "Better is one's own dharma, though imperfectly performed, than the dharma of another well performed" (Bhagavadgītā 3.35; restated at 18.47). Svadharma in its original context is entangled with varṇa-based social duty, and a critical reading cannot ignore that entanglement or the hierarchies it presupposes. Yet the psychological principle detachable from that social framework is that action congruent with one's own nature (svabhāva, 18.41-48), even when outwardly modest or "flawed" (viguṇa), sustains the agent in a way that excellently executed but alien action does not. The text further claims that one incurs no fault in performing action determined by one's own nature (18.47), suggesting that authenticity of action bears on its moral-psychological quality independently of its external polish.

2.5 Buddhi-yoga and the sthitaprajña

The instrument of this reorientation is buddhi-yoga, the disciplining of evaluative intelligence (Bhagavadgītā 2.49): it is the buddhi that must relinquish fruit as motive, since craving is a cognitive-evaluative posture before it is a behavior. The outcome of the discipline is portrayed in the celebrated description of the sthitaprajña, the person of steady wisdom (Bhagavadgītā 2.54-72). The portrait is thoroughly psychological: such a person has withdrawn craving-driven projects of the mind (2.55), is "without trembling" amid sorrows and without hankering amid pleasures, free of longing, fear, and anger (2.56), and meets agreeable and disagreeable outcomes without exultation or hatred (2.57). The passage includes a miniature causal model of motivational breakdown (2.62-63): from dwelling on objects arises attachment (saṅga); from attachment, desire (kāma); from desire thwarted, anger; from anger, confusion; from confusion, loss of memory and discrimination; and thence destruction. The sequence is offered as a phenomenological psychology of how outcome-craving destabilizes cognition—an account that invites, without yet possessing, empirical examination.

2.6 The guṇa typology of motivation and śraddhā

Finally, the Gītā offers what is in effect a typology of motivational quality, organized by the three guṇas. Chapter 17 opens by classifying śraddhā the faith, confidence, or basic orientation of a person as sāttvika, rājasa, or tāmasa, and asserts that "a person consists of their śraddhā; whatever a person's śraddhā is, that verily they are" (Bhagavadgītā 17.2-3). Chapter 18 extends the triadic analysis to action itself and its psychological infrastructure (18.23-35): sāttvika action is performed as what ought to be done, without attachment, without craving for fruit, and without excitement of like or dislike (18.23); rājasa action is driven by desire for objects and egoism, performed with strain (18.24); tāmasa action is undertaken in delusion, heedless of consequence and capacity (18.25). Parallel triads classify the agent, the intellect (buddhi), and resolve (dhṛti). The typology is notable for grading motivation by quality rather than mere strength—precisely the analytical move that distinguishes SDT from earlier drive- and reinforcement-based theories. A reward-driven, ego-invested student may be intensely motivated in quantitative terms while exemplifying rājasa motivation in the Gītā's qualitative terms.

The śraddhā construct deserves particular notice from an educational standpoint. It is not "faith" in a narrowly credal sense but the settled confidence and orientation from which a person's efforts flow something closer to what contemporary psychology would distribute across dispositional trust, valuing, and commitment. The claim of 17.3, that a person's śraddhā is formed "according to their sattva" (inner constitution) and that a person is what their śraddhā is, amounts to the claim that motivational orientation is constitutive of character and yet malleable through practice—the entire program of buddhi-yoga presupposes that the quality of one's motivation can be trained. In this respect the Gītā sides with educational optimism: motivational quality is not fixed temperament but a cultivable achievement, an assumption it shares with every intervention-oriented motivation science.

3. Self-Determination Theory

3.1 From quantity to quality of motivation

Self-Determination Theory emerged from experimental work in the 1970s showing that motivation is not a unitary quantity to be maximized but a family of qualitatively distinct regulatory states (Deci & Ryan, 1985) [5]. Its central distinction is between autonomous motivation—acting with a full sense of volition and endorsement—and controlled motivation—acting under internal or external pressure. Intrinsic motivation, the prototype of autonomy, denotes engagement in an activity for its inherent interest and enjoyment; extrinsic motivation denotes engagement for separable outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000) [4].

3.2 The internalization continuum

SDT's most consequential refinement is its differentiated account of extrinsic motivation. Externally regulated behavior is driven by contingencies of reward and punishment administered by others. Introjected regulation occurs when the contingency has been taken in but not accepted as one's own: the person acts to avoid guilt and shame or to secure contingent self-esteem—the reward and punishment are now self-administered. Identified regulation involves conscious valuing of the behavior's purpose, and integrated regulation obtains when that valuing has been assimilated to the person's broader self and value system, so that even instrumentally undertaken action is experienced as fully self-endorsed (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017) [6, 15]. The continuum matters educationally because much of schooling is not inherently enjoyable; the realistic goal is not to make everything intrinsically interesting but to support internalization, moving students from external and introjected toward identified and integrated regulation. Decades of correlational and experimental work associate more autonomous forms of regulation with deeper conceptual learning, greater persistence, higher creativity, and better psychological well-being, while controlled forms predict surface processing, contingent self-esteem, and vulnerability to anxiety and dropout (Ryan & Deci, 2017) [15]. Introjection is especially relevant to the present comparison because it is the regulation of the self-pressuring high achiever: behavior may be vigorous and outwardly successful while remaining internally coercive, sustained by pride and the avoidance of shame rather than by endorsement of the activity's worth.

3.3 Basic psychological needs

SDT explains movement along this continuum through three basic psychological needs: autonomy (the experience of

volition and self-endorsement), competence (the experience of effectiveness and growth), and relatedness (the experience of connection and belonging). Environments that support these needs foster intrinsic motivation and internalization; environments that thwart them—through surveillance, pressure, chaotic feedback, or coldness—yield controlled motivation, ill-being, and defensive functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) [6, 15]. Applications to education consistently find that autonomy-supportive teaching predicts deeper engagement and better-quality learning than controlling teaching (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009) [9].

3.4 The undermining effect

The empirical finding most relevant to the present comparison is the undermining effect: tangible rewards made contingent on engagement, completion, or performance reliably reduce subsequent intrinsic motivation for the rewarded activity. Deci, Koestner, and Ryan's (1999) [4] meta-analysis of 128 experiments confirmed the effect across expected, tangible, contingent rewards, while verbal informational feedback tended to enhance intrinsic motivation. The theoretical interpretation is that contingent rewards shift the perceived locus of causality outward: the activity comes to be experienced as done for the reward, and when the reward is withdrawn, the motivation goes with it. Kohn (1993) [7] drew out the practical indictment of reward-saturated schooling and workplaces. The finding matters here because it constitutes an empirical vindication, within a wholly independent research tradition, of a structural claim the Gītā makes on phenomenological and ethical grounds: making phala the hetu of action corrupts the agent's relation to the action itself.

4. Convergences

4.1 Outcome-detachment and autonomous regulation

The most direct convergence lies between niṣkāma karma and SDT's account of autonomous regulation. Bhagavadgītā 2.47 does not counsel abandoning action or ceasing to produce outcomes; it counsels removing the outcome from the motivational driver's seat. SDT describes precisely this structure in autonomous functioning: the autonomously motivated person acts from interest or integrated value, and while outcomes may occur and even be welcomed, the action is not experienced as controlled by them. Conversely, the Gītā's diagnosis of the phala-driven agent maps closely onto controlled regulation: action performed as a means to contingent outcomes, accompanied by anxiety about their attainment, instability across success and failure, and degradation of the action's quality. Both frameworks, moreover, reject the naïve inference that reducing outcome-focus reduces effort. The Gītā's insistence that detachment must not become attachment to inaction (2.47d) parallels SDT's consistent finding that autonomous motivation predicts more persistence and effort, not less, than controlled motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017) [15].

4.2 Svadharma, authenticity, and integrated regulation

The svadharma teaching converges with SDT's construct of integrated regulation. Bhagavadgītā 3.35 privileges action congruent with one's own nature over superior performance of another's role; SDT holds that behavior regulated by values assimilated to the self is experienced as authentic and volitional even when the behavior is instrumental and effortful. The shared insight is that the fit between action and self is itself a motivational variable, distinct from the action's difficulty, prestige, or external success. There is also a shared warning: performing "another's dharma," however well, resembles introjected or externally regulated functioning behavior maintained by approval contingencies rather than self-endorsement and both traditions predict that such functioning is fragile and costly. The parallel must be drawn with the caveat, developed in Section 5, that svadharma's original social embedding differs sharply from SDT's individualist conception of the self; but as a formal claim about congruence, the convergence is genuine.

4.3 Kauśalam, competence, and flow

The declaration that yoga is skill in action (Bhagavadgītā 2.50) intersects with two strands of modern motivational psychology. First, SDT's competence need: environments and orientations that allow absorbed, effective engagement satisfy competence and thereby sustain motivation. Second, and more specifically, Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) [3] account of flow: the state of total task-absorption in which self-consciousness recedes, action and awareness merge, and concern with external evaluation temporarily dissolves. The phenomenology of flow non-self-conscious, outcome-forgetting immersion that paradoxically yields high performance is strikingly congruent with the Gītā's claim that the agent who has stopped monitoring the fruit performs with greater kauśalam, and with the sthitaprajña's undistracted stability. The convergence should not be overstated: flow is an episodic experiential state, whereas the Gītā describes an enduring character orientation; and Csikszentmihalyi's framework carries no soteriology. But the mechanism proposed is recognizably the same—evaluative preoccupation with outcomes consumes attentional and affective resources that outcome-detached engagement releases into the task.

4.4 Samatva, reduced introjection, and the critique of phala-fixation

The Gītā's samatva evenness amid success and failure finds its nearest SDT analogue in freedom from introjected regulation and from contingent self-worth. The introjected student's self-esteem rides on each result; every examination is a referendum on the self, generating the pride-shame oscillation that SDT associates with ego-involvement. The sthitaprajña portrait (2.56-57) describes exactly the contrary condition: outcomes are registered, even acted upon, without triggering exultation or self-castigation, because the self is not staked on them. Finally, at the level of environmental critique, the Gītā's polemic against those who act with phala as motive—pointedly, against ritualists motivated by promised rewards (2.42-44) and the undermining-effect literature (Deci *et al*., 1999) converge on a common structural claim: institutionalizing outcome-contingency as the engine of action degrades the agent's intrinsic relation to the action. The Gītā argues this ethically and phenomenologically; SDT demonstrates a version of it experimentally. The two arguments are logically independent, which is precisely what makes their agreement interesting.

It is worth making explicit what such multi-point convergence does and does not establish. It does not show that the Gītā "anticipated" SDT, a claim that would be anachronistic in both directions, nor that SDT confirms the

Gītā, since the traditions individuate their constructs differently. What it does suggest is that both are tracking a real joint in human motivational functioning: that the contingency structure linking action to outcome and to self-evaluation is a causally potent variable, distinct from effort intensity, with predictable consequences for stability, performance quality, and well-being. When an experimental research program and a contemplative-philosophical tradition, working with entirely different methods and purposes, converge on the same structural variable, the convergence itself is evidence that the variable merits central theoretical status more central, arguably, than reward magnitude or expectancy, the variables around which behaviorist and early cognitive theories of motivation were built.

5. Divergences and Cautions

An honest comparison must now change direction, for the differences are as instructive as the parallels.

5.1 Different projects: empirical psychology versus soteriology

SDT is an empirical theory whose claims are answerable to experiments, longitudinal studies, and psychometric evidence; its criterion of success is predictive and explanatory adequacy regarding wellness, performance, and development in this life. The Gītā's teaching is embedded in a soteriological project: niṣkāma karma is finally in the service of liberation (mokṣa), purification of the agent, and, in the text's theistic register, the offering of action to the divine (Bhagavadgītā 9.27) and surrender of agency itself (18.66). Karma-yoga is one limb of an integral path that includes jñāna and bhakti, and the metaphysics of karma and rebirth frames the whole. To extract a "motivation theory" from this fabric is a legitimate abstraction—texts routinely yield insights beyond their original frame—but the abstraction must be acknowledged as such. Reading the Gītā as if it were a proto-SDT flattens its actual concerns; reading SDT as if it vindicated the Gītā's metaphysics is simply a non sequitur.

5.2 Desire as such versus outcome-contingent self-regard

SDT has no quarrel with desire. Intrinsic motivation is itself a desire an appetitive, interest-driven wanting and SDT's ideal agent is full of vitality and wanting, merely autonomous in it. The Gītā's stance is more radical: kāma is repeatedly identified as the enemy (3.37), and the sthitaprajña has abandoned "all desires of the mind" (2.55). At its strongest, the text envisions the attenuation not only of outcome-contingency but of craving itself, contentment being relocated "in the self alone" (2.55). One may soften this by distinguishing kāma (craving, appetitive grasping) from interest, aspiration, or sāttvika willingness and the text's own admission of "desire not contrary to dharma" (7.11) supports some such distinction but the softened reading is an interpretive choice, not an unambiguous datum. The comparativist should therefore say: SDT problematizes the contingency structure of motivation while affirming desire; the Gītā problematizes contingency and, on a strong reading, desire itself. These are overlapping but not identical targets.

5.3 Dharma without an analogue

The construct of dharma obligatory action whose bindingness derives from cosmic-moral order and social station rather than from the agent's preferences has no direct SDT analogue. The nearest neighbor is internalized value regulation: a person may identify with and integrate a duty until it is experienced as autonomously endorsed. But the mapping is imperfect in both directions. For SDT, a value's authority ultimately runs through the self's endorsement; a duty the agent cannot integrate remains, for SDT, a source of controlled motivation however objectively valid others deem it. For the Gītā, svadharma binds Arjuna antecedently to his endorsement; the dialogue is precisely an effort to bring his endorsement into line with his duty, not to derive the duty from his endorsement. Moreover, the classical svadharma is indexed to a hereditary social order that modern educational thought and the Indian Constitution rejects. Any pedagogical appropriation of svadharma must therefore be explicitly reconstructive: reading it as aptitude-congruent, value-congruent vocation rather than as birth-ascribed station. Such reconstruction has precedent in modern Indian interpretation (Radhakrishnan, 1948) [12], but it should be flagged as reconstruction.

A further, subtler divergence concerns the theory of self-presupposed on each side. SDT's "self" is the developing psychological self of organismic theory an integrative center that assimilates values and regulations over a lifetime. The Gītā distinguishes the empirical psycho-physical apparatus, which is wholly a product of the guṇas, from the ātman, which is not an agent at all: "the one who thinks 'I am the doer' is deluded" (cf. Bhagavadgītā 3.27). On the Gītā's account, the deepest ground of equanimity is metaphysical the realization that outcomes befall the guṇa-apparatus, not the self-whereas SDT's ground is functional, the security of non-contingent need satisfaction. A psychological reading can remain agnostic about the metaphysics while noting that the two accounts propose different mechanisms for the same phenomenological result, a difference that matters for how interventions inspired by each would be designed (Paranjpe, 1998) [11].

5.4 Against the facile equation: niṣkāma karma is not "intrinsic motivation"

These considerations warrant a firm methodological conclusion. It has become common in popular and semi-scholarly writing to equate niṣkāma karma with intrinsic motivation. The equation fails on at least three counts. First, intrinsic motivation is defined by the inherent enjoyableness of the activity; niṣkāma karma is defined by the agent's relation to outcomes and applies paradigmatically to actions that are not enjoyable Arjuna's battlefield duty being the founding case. Second, intrinsic motivation is still a form of wanting; niṣkāma karma, on its strong reading, aims beyond wanting. Third, intrinsic motivation is orthogonal to duty, whereas niṣkāma karma is conceptually inseparable from it: it is precisely dutiful action performed without fruit-craving. The better proposal is that niṣkāma karma names a distinct motivational construct call it outcome-detached engaged action characterized by (a) full behavioral and attentional engagement, (b) endorsement of the action's rightness or fit (a dharmic or value component), (c) low outcome-contingency of both motivation and self-worth, and (d) affective equanimity across success and failure. This construct overlaps with autonomous regulation, low ego-involvement, and task-absorption but is reducible to none of them, and it is sufficiently well specified to be operationalized. That is a research opportunity, not a settled achievement.

6. Empirical Directions

6.1 Existing work: anāsakti and Indian psychology

The empirical literature that bears most directly on the proposed construct comes from Indian psychology's work on anāsakti (non-attachment). In a notable early study, Pande and Naidu (1992) [10] developed a measure of anāsakti explicitly derived from the Gītā's ideal of effort-orientation without outcome-craving and reported that non-attachment was associated with lower strain, suggesting that detachment from outcomes functions as a stress-buffer rather than as apathy. This line of work distinguishing intense effort from outcome-obsession and predicting well-being from the former minus the latter constitutes an existence proof that the Gītā's central psychological claim can be rendered measurable. Broader programmatic statements and reviews within the indigenous-psychology movement, including contributions collected in the Handbook of Indian Psychology (Rao, Paranjpe, & Dalal, 2008) [13] and Bhawuk's (2011) model-building from Indian texts, have elaborated the conceptual foundations, and Paranjpe (1998) [11] has provided the most careful philosophical groundwork for treating classical Indian accounts of self and agency as psychology. It must be said plainly, however, that this literature remains small, that measure development has not undergone the iterative large-sample validation typical of mainstream motivation scales, and that direct empirical studies linking Gītā-derived constructs to educational outcomes achievement, engagement, examination anxiety are scarce. The comparative argument of Sections 4 and 5 is therefore a theoretical scaffold awaiting empirical load-testing, not a summary of established findings. In particular, the author is aware of no adequately powered study that has yet tested the kauśalam hypothesis that outcome-detachment improves task performance in an educational sample, nor any that has formally examined the discriminant validity of anāsakti-type measures against the full SDT regulation battery. Stating these gaps precisely is itself a contribution, since the popular literature routinely writes as though the parallels were established results.

6.2 A research agenda

Three programs of study follow naturally.

First, construct validation. An instrument for outcome-detached engaged action in students should be developed with separate subscales for engagement (effortful, absorbed task-involvement), outcome-detachment (low contingency of motivation and mood on results), value-endorsement of the task, and equanimity, drawing items from anāsakti work (Pande & Naidu, 1992) [10] and from SDT's regulation and contingent self-worth measures for discriminant comparison. The key psychometric questions are whether outcome-detachment separates cleanly from disengagement and low aspiration (the Gītā predicts it must; skeptics predict contamination), and whether it is empirically distinguishable from intrinsic motivation and identified regulation.

Second, outcome studies. If the Gītā's kauśalam claim is right, students high in engaged outcome-detachment should show equal or better performance than outcome-fixated peers with comparable engagement, together with lower test anxiety, less self-worth volatility around results, more adaptive responses to failure, and less surface strategizing. Examination-intensive Indian secondary and higher-secondary contexts, where phala-fixation is culturally explicit, are apt settings; longitudinal designs across board-examination years would be especially informative. Parallel studies of teacher motivation could test whether an outcome-detached orientation buffers teachers against burnout under accountability pressure, complementing SDT findings on controlling contexts.

Third, intervention studies. Brief, secular classroom modules articulating the adhikāra/phala distinction—"your jurisdiction is effort and method, not results"—could be tested against standard study-skills controls for effects on anxiety, persistence after failure, and performance. Such interventions resemble, and should be benchmarked against, autonomy-supportive teaching interventions in the SDT literature (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009) [9], with the specific prediction that outcome-detachment training adds variance beyond autonomy support. In all three programs, cultural moderation deserves attention: the construct may function differently where its idiom is culturally familiar than where it is not, an issue the indigenous-psychology literature has long emphasized (Rao *et al*., 2008) [13].

7. Educational Implications

The implications drawn here are conditional warranted by the theoretical convergence and the SDT evidence base, to be revised as the direct evidence accumulates.

7.1 Assessment cultures

The clearest implication concerns assessment. A system in which a single high-stakes examination determines life-chances is an institutionalization of phala as hetu: it makes the fruit the motive by design, and both the Gītā's analysis and the undermining-effect literature predict its motivational costs anxiety, shallow learning, collapse of interest once the examination passes. India's National Education Policy 2020 explicitly targets this culture, calling for a shift from summative, high-stakes, rote-oriented examinations toward regular, formative, competency-based, low-stakes assessment "for learning" rather than merely "of learning" (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). The present analysis supplies this reform with a dual rationale: an SDT rationale (contingent, evaluative pressure undermines autonomous motivation) and an indigenous conceptual rationale (2.47's decoupling of engagement from fruit-fixation). The convergence is rhetorically valuable in the Indian policy context, where reforms travel better when anchored in both international evidence and Indian intellectual tradition; but it is also substantively valuable, since the two rationales specify complementary mechanisms. Two design consequences follow. Assessment should be frequent, low-stakes, and informational, so that any single result carries little contingency weight and feedback functions as guidance rather than verdict; and reporting practices should foreground process indicators—growth, strategy use, mastery of specified competencies—alongside or ahead of comparative rank, which is the purest institutional embodiment of phala.

7.2 Classroom goal structures and teacher discourse

At classroom level, the analysis aligns with the goal-structure literature: mastery-oriented structures, which define success as learning and improvement, outperform performance-oriented structures, which define success as outperforming others (Ames, 1992) [1]. Niṣkāma karma adds a distinctive emphasis: teacher discourse can explicitly mark

the boundary of the student's adhikāra. Feedback of the form "your effort, method, and attention are yours; the mark is downstream and partly beyond you" relocates evaluation onto controllable process variables, which is simultaneously good SDT practice (informational rather than controlling feedback; Deci *et al*., 1999) [4] and a direct classroom translation of 2.47. Equanimity language after results treating both high and low marks as information rather than verdicts on worth operationalizes samatva and targets the introjection-driven pride-shame cycle. The same logic applies to teachers' own professional lives: administrators who evaluate teachers principally on students' examination outcomes reproduce, one level up, the contingency structure the classroom is meant to escape, and SDT research on controlling supervisory climates predicts the familiar downstream costs in teaching-to-the-test and burnout (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Reform of student motivation that leaves teacher-facing incentive structures untouched is, on both frameworks, likely to be self-defeating.

7.3 Character and value education

NEP 2020 also mandates the integration of ethical reasoning and exposure to Indian knowledge systems (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). The Gītā's motivation psychology offers a way to do this that is intellectually serious rather than merely ceremonial: students can study 2.47, the sthitaprajña passage, and the guṇa typology as theory alongside SDT learning both content and the comparative method itself. Such treatment models how an indigenous text can be engaged critically (including its svadharma problem, Section 5.3) rather than devotionally, which is the appropriate register for public education in a plural society.

7.4 Coping with failure and student well-being

Finally, the framework speaks to the grave problem of examination-related distress among Indian students. If self-worth is contingent on results, failure is annihilating; the Gītā's proposal is not resilience-as-toughness but a restructured relation to outcomes in which failure, like success, falls outside the core of the self. This converges with SDT's findings on the costs of contingent self-esteem and suggests concrete counseling content: distinguishing jurisdiction over effort from non-jurisdiction over results, and rehearsing engaged re-application after failure (the refusal of akarman) rather than either rumination or withdrawal. These applications are promising precisely where the empirical agenda of Section 6 would test them.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that the Bhagavadgītā contains a genuine, articulate psychology of motivation centered on the inescapability of action, the decoupling of engagement from fruit-craving, equanimity across outcomes, congruence between action and agent, and a qualitative typology of motivational states and that this psychology rewards systematic comparison with Self-Determination Theory. The convergences are substantial and non-trivial: both frameworks relocate the key motivational question from quantity to quality; both diagnose outcome-contingent regulation as corrosive of the agent's relation to action, a diagnosis SDT has confirmed experimentally in the undermining effect; both link authentic, self-congruent action to sustainable engagement; and both predict, against common sense, that loosening the grip of outcomes improves rather than impairs performance. The divergences are equally instructive: the Gītā's soteriological horizon, its stronger ambivalence toward desire as such, and its duty-construct of dharma resist assimilation, and they expose the popular equation of niṣkāma karma with intrinsic motivation as a category mistake. The constructive proposal is that niṣkāma karma be modelled as a distinct construct—outcome-detached engaged action—whose measurement can build on Indian work on anāsakti and whose educational consequences, from examination anxiety to teacher burnout, are empirically tractable. For educational psychology, the payoff is a candidate construct and a culturally resonant idiom for motivation reform; for the study of Indian thought, the payoff is a demonstration that its classical texts can be read as psychology without being reduced to it. The dialogue proposed here is thus not an exercise in flattering an ancient text with modern approval, but a two-way research program—one in which a twenty-three-century-old analysis of action sets testable questions for contemporary science, and contemporary science supplies the methods by which that analysis can finally be assessed.

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