



Reading *Trigunas* in RK Narayan's "Malgudi Days"

Tek Bahadur Chhetry¹

Assistant Professor of English, Pokhara University

<https://doi.org/10.3126/sj.v14i01.64317>

Abstract

This research paper explores the psychological concerns of the personalities in RK Narayan's short stories from "Malgudi Days" where his characters of the upper class and patriarchy predominantly possess the Tamasic qualities while the needy as well as low caste people behold both Rajasic and Sattvic ones. The three stories- "Leela's Friend," "A Willing Slave", and "Wife's Holiday" are purposively chosen from Lawley Road collection to study character personalities in relation to the Trigunas' abstract meaning explicated in the Bhagavad-Gita (Chapters 14-18). The study critically analyzes the characters as to see how one Guna predominates over the other two and makes the personality act through one's intellect, ego and mind. For this, my paper will largely rely on the textual content of the selected stories and their personalities in justifying the issue. Given the Gunas determine the quality of thoughts, emotions and actions in a person, there is a dire need of Sattvic qualities for everyone in the world that eventually opens the spot for self-realization. Nevertheless, the rampant are Rajasic and Tamasic Gunas in human. The study is going to be important because each individual is to be identified with their true qualities of thought to transform themselves into the Sattvic qualities so as to achieve an effortless excellence and lead a happy life with self-complacency.

Keywords: *RK Narayan's stories, Trigunas, the Bhagavad Gita, psychology, effortless excellence, self-realization*

Introduction

Malgudi is a make-believe location projected by RK Narayan to place his character-centric stories of typical middle-class life in newly independent India. Narayan (1982) stated, "All I can say is that it is an imaginary and not to be found on any map...Malgudi seems to be universal...Malgudi characters even in New York... where I have lived for months at a time off and on since 1959" (p.18).

¹Corresponding E-mail: tek@pu.edu.np

The stories penned by Narayan tackle his opinions of the biased upper-middle-class Indians how they behave with the poor and low caste people. Themes such as casteism, ill treatment of the poor, the innocence of the children, patriarchy are some of the prominent themes in his stories. Before we critically analyze the chosen stories- “Leela’s Friend,” “A Willing Slave”, and “Wife’s Holiday” in relation to the *Gunās* the philosophical understanding of the Indian tradition and *the Bhagavad Gita’s* view of *Trigunās* are a must.

The Indian psychology, rooted in the Vedas, has its ground on the fundamental quest for truth, nature of reality and the ultimate goal of human endeavor. There is nothing as such that has been left unanswered by the Veda. The psychological world with vision, insight and intuition (*Darsāna*) and the universe based on personal experience are two different entities under the study of the Indian Philosophy (Safaya 1976). Indian Philosophy is divided into two categories-orthodox (*āstika*) and heterodox (*nāstika*). The former belongs to six chief philosophical systems called Sad-Darshana, namely, *Mimamsa*, *Vedanta*, *Sāmkhya*, *Yoga*, *Nyaya*, and *Vaiśeṣika*. Although the *Mimamsa* and the *Sāmkhya* do not believe in God as the creator of the world, yet they are called *orthodox (āstika)*, because they believe in the roots of the *Vedas*. The latter, the *Cārvākas*, the *Bauddhas*, and the *Jainas*, called *heterodox (nāstika)*, do not believe in the *Vedas*. (Chatterjee and Datta, 1984).

The psychology with respect to *Trigunās* can be examined in *the Bhagvat-Gita* that comes from the *Vedas* and that are again discussed as *Prakriti’s* inherent constituents- *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas* in *Sāmkhya* Philosophy. The Indian tradition has attracted the concept of *Gunās* over the years in the indigenous theories and models of human behavior, specifically personality. (Murthy and Kumar 2007). Though *the Bhagavad-Gita* associates directly the three *Gunās* with personality order, *Sāmkhya* accepts this as a constituent element or component inherent in *Prakriti*, and not an attribute or quality. Major ancient Indian scriptures including the *Upanishads*, *Puranas*, *Yogasturas*, and *the Bhagavad Gita* expanded this understanding of personality (Sharma et al., 2016).

Description of each *Guna* was compiled from the *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is* (Prabhupada 1986), Chapters 14, 17 and 18, as well as Dasgupta (1961). The *Sattva Guna* is defined by attributes like purity, honesty, seriousness, responsibility, detachment, self-control, mental stability, reverence for authority, satisfaction, keen intellect, restraint, and unwavering resolve. Dasgupta portrays the *Sattvic* attribute as

being “free from attachment and vanity and absolutely unruffled in success and failure” (p. 470). The speech of a person predominantly in *Sattva Guna* is “truthful, pleasing, beneficial, and not agitating to others” and that a *Sattvic* person is characterized by “satisfaction, simplicity, gravity, self-control and purification” (p. 784).

Prabhupada attributes of *Rajas Guna* include intense activity, desire for sense gratification, little interest in spiritual elevation, dissatisfaction with one's position, envy of others, and a materialistic mentality. *The Bhagavad-Gita* describes *Rajasic* activity as “action performed with great effort by one seeking to gratify his desires, and enacted from a sense of false ego” (p.815), and a person predominated by *Rajas Guna* is described as “greedy is always envious, impure, and moved by joy and sorrow” (p. 817).

Qualities associated with *Tamas Gunas* include mental imbalance, anger, ignorance, arrogance, depression, laziness, procrastination, and a feeling of helplessness. Dasgupta (1961) explains “the quality of *Tamas* overcomes the illumination of knowledge and leads to many errors. *Tamas*, being a product of ignorance blinds, all living beings and binds them down with carelessness, idleness and sleep” (p. 462).

In the selected stories, Narayan’s upper-class characters are deceptively simple predominated by the *Tamasic* qualities that makes the world what it appears far apart from the reality. However, a woman is always a subject of victim even in the poor communities under the yoke of patriarchy. The chosen stories are analyzed in terms of the two themes- the class and the patriarchy in close consultation with abstract personalities explicated in *the Bhagavad-Gita*. In the stories, “Leela’s Friend,” “A Willing Slave” and “Wife’s Holiday” *Tamasic Gunas* are critically analyzed explicating the excerpts from the text.

Review of Literature

The concept of *Triguna* is believed to have developed in-*Sāmkhya* system of philosophy albeit it has the roots in Veda. In short review, the concept of *Triguna* has been discussed in authentic English translations for the textual and interpretive analysis. *Triguna* is discussed in the following source books-*Sāmkhya Karika* of *IsvaraKrishana* and *Kapila Sāmkhya*, *Aswamedha Parva* of *Mahabharata*, *Shrimad Bhagavad-Gita*, *Srimad Bhagavatam*, *Purana*.

Isvara krishan, the author of *Sāmkhya Karika*, the most referred scripture describes the nature and characteristics of *Triguna*. In the verses 12 and 13 as translated

by Shastri (1930) writes, “*Sattva* is considered to be buoyant and bright, *Rajas* to be stimulating and mobile; *Tamas* alone is heavy and enveloping; their functioning for the goal (of the Spirit) is like (the action of) a lamp.”(p.38). In other words, *Sattva* is light, purity and knowledge, *Rajas* is energy strength and activity and *Tamas*, ignorance and dark forces of life. In a similar vein. William F. Milcetic (2018) who compiled and edited *Sāmkhya Kārikā with Gauḍapādācārya Bhāṣya*, a commentary means much the same: The attributes are of the nature of pleasure, pain and delusion; they are adapted to illuminate, to activate and restrain. They mutually suppress, support, produce, consort and exist (*Kārikā XII*). *Sattva* is seen as illuminating and pure, *rajas* as stimulating and dynamic, and *tamas* as dark and enveloping. Just like a lamp, their purpose is to achieve a goal. (*Kārikā XIII*). Murthy and Kumar (2007) assert although the author of *Sāmkhya Kārikā* does not give any further explanation as to how the three *Gunas* represent three kinds of human experience and how they are responsible for three functions, the most striking point is that the fundamental constituents underlying the whole manifest universe are described with reference to human feeling.

In the verses 2, 3 and 4 of chapter 25, of Skandha-XI of *Srimad Bhagvata Maha Purana* Tapasyananda (2003) explains how the character of a person is influenced by the three *Gunas* of *Prakriti* when they are in their pure state and not mixed with each other. To illustrate further, the Verse 2 of Skandha-XI of *Shrimad Bhagavata Purana* describes the characteristics of *Sattva* as mental and sensory discipline, patience, discernment, self-discipline, honesty, empathy, recollection, satisfaction, selflessness, lack of desire, belief, aversion to wrongdoing, generosity, and focus on the inner self are indications of *Sattva*. Similarly, Verse 3 asserts on the *Rajas* as:

“Desire, activity, pride, greed, haughtiness, longing for one's selfish ends, sense of difference between man and things, sensuality, enthusiasm arising from excitement, craving for name and fame, indulgence in ridicule of others, demonstrativeness, and aggressiveness-these are the signs of *Rajas*.”

The verse 4 describes *Tamas* as rage, avarice, deceit, brutality, miserliness, insincerity, lethargy, contentiousness, sadness, confusion, hopelessness, misery, fatigue, unrealistic hopes, fear, and lack of drive and energy in work are the traits of *Tamas*.

The translation of *Aswamedha Parva* of *Mahabharata* by Pratap Chandra Roy confirms in the Section 36, 37 and 38 illustrate the concept of the three *Gunas*: *Tamas*

(Darkness), *Rajas* (Passion), and *Sattva* (Goodness). These are referred to as the three attributes. They are intertwined with each other, reliant on one another, seek shelter in one another, and follow one another. They are also linked with one another (MB-AP, 36, 1-4). According to Das (1987), *the Gita* asserts its view that human nature consists of three *Gunas* or qualities, viz., *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*. They are the inherent qualities in every human being. Though the three other qualities vary at times in the same person, one of the qualities tends to be usually more dominant in him. A person may be *Sāttvic*, *Rājasic*, or *Tāmasic* according to pre dominance of the corresponding quality in his nature. However, one may also go beyond all the three qualities by unflinching effort, through a sort of gradual internal elevation and finally attain a state of perfect liberation.

The western philosopher Nietzsche also believes in the ‘higher self’ out of nihilism. As cited by Robert G. Morrison on *Nietzsche on Buddhism* (1999):

The world might be far more valuable than we used to believe. Thus, passive nihilism must be understood what it is: an expression of weariness of spirit and be resisted and overcome. This requires active nihilism, a sign of increased power of spirit (p. 22).

For Nietzsche, nihilism is not anything bad. It lays only a ground for making efforts for ‘higher self’ which is analogous to *Sattvic Guna*. The passive nihilism can be interpreted as *Tamas* which literally refers to the laziness of life.

The chapter 14 of *the Bhagavad Gita* claims *Sattva* implies purity, wisdom, bliss; *Rajas* implies hankering, attachment, and action; and *Tamas* implies bias, heedlessness, and inertia. Essentially the *Sāttvic* are illuminous, the *Rājasic* are passionate, and the *Tāmasic* are inert.

Although various sources claim about the *Trigunas* and their functions in a different way. The explication done by *the Bhagavad-Gita* is universally accepted by all the scholars. The modern philosophers have even exceeded to the extent of measures for identifying personalities from quantitative scales. Not only are these *Gunas* studied in relation to *Tridoshas*, but also are studied correlating with branches of philosophy like *Ayurveda*. The point is to transform every human being beyond the three qualities who does not get affected by joys and sorrows, censure and praise, love and hatred. The *Sattvic* person looks upon honor and dishonor, friendship and enmity as the same, and shuns initiative in all matters, for the person has nothing to ask for. This state of

perfect liberation is hard to attain. Yet, can it be achieved only through long-sustained endeavor and a strong sense of detachment.

Textual Analysis

Leela's Friend

In the short story-“Leela's Friend”, Leela, a five-year-old girl and Sidda are presented as *Sattvic* personalities while the parents are predominated by *Tamasic* qualities.

The exposition part claims that it is Leela who makes the final, innocent, and heart-warming declaration on simply seeing Sidda that she wishes he would stay with them in their home as a housekeeper. She exclaimed with joy, “Oh, father! I like him. Don't send him away. Let us keep him in our house.” (p.198). Leela becomes happy once she notices Sidda as if she knows him for a long time. It is a *Sattvic* quality of an innocent girl who is a light with divine qualities and is able to recognize Sidda, another *Sattvic* person, with her pure consciousness which is why she exclaims with happiness and makes her bold decision of having him. It also makes the sense that how bad she feels about the other servants who must have been *Tamasic* in nature with her. As she trusts Sidda, so is he devoted to her and the work entrusted to him albeit his meager salary. He is dutiful and workaholic coupled with *Rajasic* in nature. Sidda takes care of the garden, cuts wood, runs errands, and takes care of Leela. Thus, he becomes her devoted and trustworthy friend telling her tall tales about the moon, God in the sky, and other stories of the magical realm, the heavens and all. He even is more than willing to play-act as if they were in a school and he is trying to learn writing the alphabet and drawing from her. He has a very genial disposition even though, because of his lower status in society, probably indicated by his economic situation or his caste, he is not treated well by Leela's parents, as they possess the *Tamasic Gunas*.

The twist in the friendship between the two appears when the parents accuse Sidda of stealing a golden chain from a five-year-old girl while actually it was dropped somehow by the little girl in a tamarind pot that does not come to her senses. The parents even do not make a second guess or any inferences but make a claim straight away of theft. The thoughts they bear and their reflections on Sidda all at once make the *Tamasic* qualities upper hand in them. *Sattva*, never gets provoked unlike *Rajas*, and reacts but *Tamas* gets provoked without any rhyme and reason. When the mode of

ignorance defeats goodness and passion, the higher qualities will slip in to delinquency. Sivasanker, Leela's father asserts:

What a risk we took in engaging that fellow. It seems he is an old criminal. He has been in a jail half a dozen times from stealing jewelry from children. From the description I gave, the inspector was able to identify him in a moment (p. 202).

Sidda, the devotee to the house, turns out to be the thief, a looter and even a criminal for no mistake of his own. They even probe into his past with a halo judgment, full of prejudices while his present can be adjudged with a good morale. The inspector's spot at the boy for being accused of jewelry could be either a cooked story to let the poor boy down on his knees or their hasty generalization. The poor are always to be blamed and Sidda is double marginalized; not only poverty stricken but also may be from low caste background. To anyone's surprise, even though the golden chain is found in the end, the *Tamasic* nature of the parents never gets quenched and they still regret keeping the criminal with them. This is where RK Narayan employs the subtle irony and leaves the message in his story. When the knowledge is shrouded by the darkness, *Rajas* and *Sattvic Gunas* fall into delinquency which is clearly seen in the story. When there is an increase in the mode of ignorance, darkness, inertia, madness and illusion are manifested.

The reflection of Leela's parents on Sidda, who is a repentant criminal and humiliated for all his thefts, is thoroughly negative. They not only make him sleep out of the doors and abuse him being rough with them but also refuse him to sit with them on the chair. Nowhere in *the Vedas* nor in *the Bhagavad Gita* is there any inkling of discrimination allowed for the people, be it class or caste.

A Willing Slave

The character Thaiyi, often called as Ayah, can be characterized as having *Sattvic* qualities in the story- "A Willing Slave." She is clean hearted, truthful, dutiful, detached and content. All these traits are *Sattvic* in nature. The story spins around Ayah, the elderly woman who is willing to quit her almost full-time job as a servant, served around sixteen and half years, only to serve her husband after his retirement. Literally, there is no retirement in her life until her last breath. Ayah believes in her *karma*, the tasks entrusted to her. She has already reared five children of her mistress

until they fend for themselves. Ayah is now a slave of Radha, a four-year- little girl. She plays with her like 'train train' or 'house house', a typical Indian games. She is naïve, simpleton, unpretentious yet slow-witted housemaid. She is always workaholic; and for this she receives a disfavor from the other servants as she is the timekeeper. Even the teacher who comes to teach Radha is under her radar. All the same, what she receives all is disregard, ill-treatment and neglect from her mistress.

The class hierarchy is reflected upon Ayah when she doesn't turn up there from her home by her every three month's visit. Radha's family possesses *Tamasic* nature here. Anger, arrogance, imbalance, procrastination and the like are some of the dominant traits run on them. In a fit of anger, Radha's mother said:

She has perhaps been run over and killed. Such a blundering blind fool. I am surprised it did not happen before. She must have taken it into her head to give herself a holiday suddenly. I will dismiss her for this. No one is indispensable. These old servants take too much for granted, they must be taught a lesson (p.195).

The curse for death, her overstay that proves to be the blunder over more than 16 years of her service, abusive language and her decision of punishing her by dismissal from the job not only indicate the class but also reflect how the maids are looked down upon them simply because they are poor. On the other side, the helplessness is caused due to the blindness of the knowledge of the family. It is again a *Tamasic* attribute

The subjugation of the woman under the yoke of patriarchy is intensely projected in the story. It is only her husband who calls her real name *Thayi* of *Ayah*. The *Tamas* family never calls her by her real name. She endures her identity crisis as a *Sattvic* personality she always smiles at what she is said. She does not even utter the name of her husband and shies away. The Indian culture is there on top of her. She calls him 'Old Fellow.' Her earnings are taken away by her ruffian sons every month. Finally, her decision to return home only to serve her retired husband again makes her all the way docile and submissive to the men. Whether she has received any amount of her husband's earning is not given in the text. It is also the indication that the retirement of *Thayi* is literally being retired from the earth. However, *Thayi* forgets all those horrible woes and agonies in the absence of her husband and shows her willingness to serve him. She is like a pure light, detached with her sufferings and above all content to be enslaved again for her husband. This is the essence of *Sattvic* personality.

Wife's Holiday

The story "Wife's Holiday" unfolds the character of a typical unemployed Indian husband-Kannan whose characterization is constructed mostly by presenting his thoughts, actions and attitude towards work, his wife, his son, and gambling. Kannan possesses all the *Tamas Gunas* being dishonest, desperate, selfish, greedy and helpless in the story. He is lazy and defies work. He feels gratified to see his wife off to her parents' home. He dislikes working and finds pleasure in gambling with dice for money. It served as a clubhouse for Kannan and his friends, who gathered there on an afternoon and pursued the game of dice with considerable intensity and fury. "Kannan loved not only the game...; he knew people would call him an idler for sitting there at his door sunning himself. But he didn't care. He would not go to work" (Narayan, 1982, p. 96).

TEXT
13

अप्रकाशोऽप्रवृत्तिश्च प्रमादो मोह एव च ।
तमस्येतानि जायन्ते विवृद्धे कुरुनन्दन ॥१३॥

Kannan is heavily predominated by the *Tamas Guna* bereft of *Sattvas* and *Rajas*. He is an idler and a gambler who doesnot like work. He is quite inconsiderate and thick skinned; meaning that he never bothers about what other people think. In a way, he is aimless in his life and thereby helpless too. Prabhupada (1986), in *The Bhagvad Gita As It Is*, explicates that when there is an increase in the mode of ignorance, then darkness, madness, inertia and illusion are manifested.

Not only does he steal his son's saved money and lose it all in dice, but also proves himself to be selfish as he crushed his son's aspirations with his recklessness. The way he thinks about his wife is very rough and abusive in manner. His loyalty and integrity towards his family have slipped into delinquency. Shrouded by knowledge, he lives in delusion unable to distinguish the right and wrong things for him. Literally his intellect fails, and his ego gets upper-hand and acts whimsically. He claims, "God is kind to me" (p.96) but it is a malicious conclusion for his bad act. He blames his wife for carrying all those that he does not figure out at home. All these qualities qualify Kannan with *Tamasic* personality.

Conclusion and Implication

Characters in RK Narayan's stories are not a new subject of study on Indian mindset. They apparently deal not only with the physical features, people, life, customs, habits, manners, traditions, languages and life style of imagined real spot of Malgudi, but also with their psychological details with the themes such as inequality, class, caste, innocence, patriarchy and the like. Nevertheless, the characterization of the personalities in relation to *Trigunas- Sattvas, Rajas and Tamas* from the typical Indian psychological lens through the teachings of *the Bhagavad-Gita* is new dimension to venture into one's self-awakening, though better late than never. As humanism is a pressing subject of the modern era, as to keep all the atrocities at bay, there is a dire need of understanding the personalities within people only to reach in some higher existence of detachment, way to self-actualization. Although the enigma of fluent performance is unknown in the west, the eastern tradition explores it through *the Bhagavad Gita*. Spiritually same as all the humans and materially different in terms of body-intellect, ego and mind, Narayan's stories are didactic to unfold how the *Tamas* predominantly blind fold the *Rajas and Sattvas* and make one helpless, shrouded by the darkness of his intellect. After all, every human is combined by these *Trigunas*, but the point is to strive for a journey from ignorance (*Tamas*) to knowledge (*Sattvas*), a way ahead to self-realization. Only then, can we ensure the effortless excellence of life kissing every pan success, devoid of mediocrity.

References

- Chatterjee, S., & Dhiren, M.D. (1968). *An introduction to Indian philosophy*. Calcutta: Calcutta University Press.
- Das, R.C. (1987). The Gita typology of personality-An inventory. *Journal of Indian Psychology*, 7-12.
- Das, R.C. (1991). Standardization of the Gita. Inventory of Personality. *Journal of Indian Psychology*, 47-54.
- Dasgupta, S. (1961). *History of Indian philosophy*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press.
- Milcetic, W. F. (Ed.). (2018). *SāmkhyaKārikā with GaudapādācāryaBhāṣya*: Revised Edition with Commentary by Brahmishi Vishvatma Bawra. USA: Brahmishi Yoga Publications.

- Morrison, R. G. (1999). *Nietzsche and Buddhism: Study in Nihilism and Ironic Affinities*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Murthy, P. K., & Kiran.K. K. (2007). The concept of Triguna: A critical analysis and synthesis. *Psychological Studies*, 103-113.
- Narayan, R. K. (1982). *Malgudi days*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Prabhupada, B. S. (1986). *Bhagvad-Gita as it is*. Mumbai: The Bhakti Vedanta Book Trust.
- Roy, P. C. (n.d.). *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, (English Translation): Vol-XII-Aswamedha Parva. Calcutta: Oriental Publishing Co. 68-73.
- Sharma, N. R., & Yadava A. (2016). *Prakriti and Wellbeing: Psychology of Well-being*. New Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 361-372.
- Raghunath, S. (1976). *Indian Psychology*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Pvt. Ltd.
- Shastri, S. S. (1930). *The Samkhya Karika of Isvara Krishna*. Mylapore: The Madras Law Journal Press.
- Tapasyananda, S. (2003). *Srimad Bhagvata-The Holy Book of God (Vol. IV)*. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math.