



# For the greater good: Hinduism, selflessness, and social cohesion in South Africa

**Authors:**

Mathias Y. Shunmugam<sup>1</sup>   
Maniraj Sukdaven<sup>1</sup> 

**Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Religion Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Mathias Shunmugam,  
ysshunmugam@gmail.com

**Dates:**

Received: 04 Apr. 2024

Accepted: 30 May 2024

Published: 05 July 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Shunmugam, M.Y. & Sukdaven, M., 2024, 'For the greater good: Hinduism, selflessness, and social cohesion in South Africa', *Theologia Viatorum* 48(1), a245. <https://doi.org/10.4102/tv.v48i1.245>

**Copyright:**

© 2024. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

The heinous ideology of apartheid in South Africa created a citizenry of distrust, disharmony and discord. With the demise of apartheid in 1994, the South African society needed a process of healing. There were and are attempts to bring about social cohesion through various discourses via the South African government and non-governmental organisations. It has been 30 years since the end of apartheid, yet South Africa still grapples with deep-seated distrust, disharmony and discord among its citizens. In 2021, this issue extends beyond the divide between white and non-white citizens to include tensions among other racial groups as well. This article attempts to offer a perspective on social cohesion from a concept known in Sanskrit as Nishkama Karma which means, in its basic form, desireless desire or selflessness. The idea of Nishkama Karma is examined by the researchers by referring to the commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita by Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva to formulate an understanding of Nishkama Karma that can contribute to social cohesion.

**Contribution:** This article contributes to understanding the Hindu concept of Nishkama Karma as a contributor to social cohesion in South Africa and also examines the important role that different religions play in supporting governmental objectives in the country.

**Keywords:** social cohesion; South Africa; Bhagavad Gita; Nishkama Karma; Hinduism; science of religion; Shankara; Madhva; Ramanuja.

## Introduction

The etymology of Nishkama Karma is derived from two Sanskrit words: 'nish' which means 'without' and 'kama' which means 'desire' or 'attachment'. Therefore, Nishkama Karma means 'without desire' or 'without attachment'. Pal (2001) confirms that the Bhagavad Gita endorses the notion that Nishkama Karma contributes to maintaining social goodness with the following statement:

The Bhagavadgita prescribes the doctrine of *niskama karma* as a means not only to attain moksa,<sup>1</sup> the spiritual end, but also to protect and maintain social goodness which consists, according to it, in the doing of *dharma* in detached manner. (p. 215)

Nishkama Karma as 'social goodness', also understood as 'selflessness' can serve as an agent of social cohesion. Since South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, 'social cohesion' has been mentioned and pursued vigorously, with the moral intention of healing the wounds of the past that were created by the apartheid era.

The foundational question of this article is to form an understanding of Nishkama Karma (from the commentaries of the Bhagavad Gita by Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva) that can contribute to social cohesion in South Africa. The subsidiary questions are:

- Is there a need for social cohesion in South Africa?
- How did the three Acharyas understand Nishkama Karma?
- How do the three Acharyas and their understanding of Nishkama Karma contribute to social cohesion in South Africa?

## South Africa's need for social cohesion

In 1994, 30 years ago, South Africa held its first democratic elections. The result of these elections saw victory for the African National Congress (ANC) which claimed to represent the needs of all non-white South Africans. The elections of 1994 marked the end of the apartheid era, and this

1. Moksa, also spelt as moksha, is the ultimate spiritual freedom and liberation from the cycle of rebirth in Hinduism.

brought about a specific focus on terms such as 'born-free generation', 'rainbow nation' and most importantly, 'social cohesion'.

Njozela (2021) notes:

Building social cohesion is perhaps one of the most difficult yet fundamental challenges facing South African society. Social cohesion speaks to the glue that binds us together, forging a common sense of identity and sense of belonging. (p. 30)

The new South Africa, born out of the 1994 elections, found itself with the daunting task of fostering relationships and establishing a new South African identity. This identity had to transcend all racial divisions.

But what exactly is social cohesion and why is it still important for South Africa, 30 years after democracy?

South Africa's Department of Arts and Culture<sup>2</sup> defines social cohesion 'as the degree of social integration and inclusion in communities and societies at large, and the extent to which mutual solidarity finds expression among individuals and communities'.

This definition of social cohesion summarises the broader scholarly understanding of the parameters of social cohesion. It encompasses all efforts made by individuals, communities, institutions and organisations to include people from diverse social circles.

This is particularly important for South Africa as it attempts to create a country free from the racial inhibitors of the apartheid era. To create a society free from racial restrictions, social cohesion is of utmost importance as it speaks to constant efforts made by all people to build relationships and create opportunities for nation-building without racial discrimination.

Social cohesion is still an important construct for South Africa as is evidenced by a social cohesion summit held in 2014 with a feedback summit in 2015 including other related activities such as presentations to the South African parliament (Palmary 2015:62).

Palmary (2015:63) notes that it is not surprising that social cohesion is being emphasised as a tool for nation-building in South Africa, considering the ongoing concerns about unity, racial tension and reconciliation.

The Congressional Research Service<sup>3</sup> notes that while South Africa has the potential for great development and growth, it is plagued by several societal issues:

- The corruption under the administration of former President Jacob Zuma crippled the nation's economy leading to 'several years of low growth' that contributed

2. See [https://www.academia.edu/23989421/Twenty\\_Years\\_of\\_Social\\_Cohesion\\_and\\_Nation\\_Building\\_in\\_South\\_Africa](https://www.academia.edu/23989421/Twenty_Years_of_Social_Cohesion_and_Nation_Building_in_South_Africa).

3. See <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45687.pdf>.

to 'low prices for commodity exports, weak investor confidence, policy uncertainty, and rigid local labor markets'.

- South Africa, in 2020, had the largest coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases added to this saw a rise in socioeconomic challenges such as 'high rates of poverty, social inequality, unemployment, and public service access disparities-problems that disproportionately affect blacks'.

In addition to the great challenges that 2020 added to existing problems that South Africa faced, July 2021 highlighted the major fractures in South Africa's social structures. 09 July 2021 saw the start of a civil unrest that was sparked by the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma that lasted for almost 2 weeks. BBC News<sup>4</sup> describes the civil unrest as the 'worst scenes of violence since the advent of democracy in 1994'.

Much can be said about the civil unrest, including looting, vigilantism and racial tension; however, this article specifically mentions the civil unrest to highlight that even 27 years after democracy, South Africa is still far from achieving social cohesion.

At 'A National Strategy for Developing an Inclusive and a Cohesive South African Society' summit officiated in 2012 by South Africa's Department of Arts and Culture,<sup>5</sup> government officials of South Africa proposed social cohesion as the solution to South Africa's major challenges.

Point 20 of the strategy<sup>6</sup> recommends that:

[S]ocial cohesion and nation-building be retained as medium- to long-term national, provincial and local government priorities couples to an integrated economic, educational, health, human settlement, land and rural development, social development, safety and security, youth development, gender equality, immigration policies and programmes, arts, culture and heritage development and other strategic programmes. (p. 54)

This recommendation is in alignment with a United Nations post on 'Perspectives on social cohesion – the glue that holds society together' which presents a globally agreed upon understanding of social cohesion<sup>7</sup>:

A cohesive society is one where people are protected against life risks, trust their neighbors and the institutions of the state and can work towards a better future for themselves and their families. Fostering social cohesion is about striving for greater inclusiveness, more civic participation and creating opportunities for upward mobility. It is the glue that holds society together.

4. See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57996373>.

5. See [https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis\\_document/201409/social-cohesion-strategy-1.pdf](https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/social-cohesion-strategy-1.pdf).

6. See pg. 54 of <https://www.gov.za/documents/other/national-strategy-developing-inclusive-and-cohesive-south-african-society-07-jun>.

7. Posted by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in 2012: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/policy/perspectives-on-social-cohesion.html>.

For the analysis, social cohesion is built around three key values: social inclusion, social capital and social mobility. Social inclusion refers to the degree to which all citizens can participate on equal footing in the economic, social and political life, including whether people are protected in times of need. Social capital refers to trust between people and in institutions and the sense of belonging to a society. Social mobility refers to equality of opportunity to go ahead. (p. 1)

As the aim of social cohesion is to promote unity among all people by reducing social inequalities, studying Nishkama Karma's contribution to social cohesion enables researchers to understand the value of Hindu concepts in promoting equality in the contemporary era.

By studying the commentaries of Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva on Nishkama Karma in the Bhagavad Gita, this article proposes that Nishkama Karma promotes social cohesion in South Africa – a country in dire need for unity and equality.

## Understanding Nishkama Karma in the Bhagavad Gita

In Hinduism, the soul (atma or jiva) is confined by the Samsara cycle – an endless cycle of rebirth. The goal is not to be reborn in better circumstances instead it is to escape this endless cycle. The process by which one is freed from the Samsara cycle is known as moksha [salvation]. Hinduism teaches that there are four paths that one can choose from to attain moksha: (1) Jnana (the path of knowledge), (2) Bhakti (the path of devotion), (3) Karma (the path of action) and (4) Raja (the path of meditation).

Each path has its own set of teachings and philosophies that guide individuals on their journey to salvation. Towards understanding Nishkama Karma, Satpathy (2008:1) notes that the 'gist of Karma Yoga is Nishkama Karma that means, action conducted with a spirit of sacrifice'.

Satpathy (2008), like most scholars, relies on the Bhagavad Gita<sup>8</sup> to define Nishkama Karma. Specifically, Gita<sup>9</sup> 3.7 and 4.23 teach that one should perform their duty without attachment to the reward – this is the premise of Nishkama Karma, performing one's duty without any concern for rewards (selfless action) (Satpathy 2008:1).

While Satpathy (2008:1) looks to Gita 3.7 and 4.23 for the definition of Nishkama Karma, Muniapan (2018) adopts a broader approach:

The Bhagavad-Gita comprises of 18 chapters, with the first 6 chapters explaining the Karma Yoga [*selfless action*] namely the actions of self-doubt, spirituality of Being, selfless action, and wisdom in action, work sanctification and meditation for full consciousness. (p. 46)

Muniapan (2018:46) accredits the first six chapters as being solely dedicated to explaining the selfless action of karma

8. Hereafter referred to as 'Gita'.

9. This study makes use of the Gita as translated by Prabhupada (1989).

yoga, which is Nishkama Karma. Muniapan (2018:46) is supported by the earlier work of Behura (2017:50) who refers to Nishkama Karma as 'the Geeta's *Nishkam Karma Yoga*'.

Although the idea of practising selfless action to attain moksha is mentioned in earlier texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads and Brahma Sutras, the Gita discusses Nishkama Karma as a fundamental and liberative practice of karma yoga in the most extensive manner. Due to this, like most Hindu philosophers, Satpathy (2008:1), Behura (2017:50) and Muniapan (2018:46) rely greatly (sometimes even solely) on the Gita for understanding Nishkama Karma.

Like the scholars aforementioned, this article relies on the Gita to gain an understanding of Nishkama Karma. However, it takes an additional step by exploring the contribution that Nishkama Karma makes to social cohesion by studying the commentaries on the Gita by Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva. The purpose of consolidating Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva's thought on Nishkama Karma as found in the Gita is to assess the different ways in which Nishkama Karma is understood – and if those variant understandings enable Nishkama Karma to contribute to social cohesion.

The reason that Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva were specifically chosen is explained by Prasad (2011) who calls them the 'Guru-trio of South India', and adds:

The three gurus or acaryas of south India discussed there are Sankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva. By virtue of commenting on the three basic texts of Vedanta, these great masters themselves originated three major schools within the Vedanta-fold. (p. v)

The referred texts are the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and Bhagavad Gita. The Vedantic schools are Advaita (non-dualism – Shankara), Visistadvaita (qualified non-dualism – Ramanuja) and Dvaita (dualism – Madhva).

Considered among the greatest Hindu philosophical teachers, Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva make invaluable contributions to Hinduism at large. This article explores the comments of the 'Guru-trio' in the Gita on Nishkama Karma.

## Shankara's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita

Born in Kerala, Sri Adi Shankaracharya (788–820 CE) is regarded as one of the greatest Hindu philosophers. Having dedicated his life to Hindu philosophy, Shankara made the most significant contribution to Advaita Vedanta.

Deutsch (2004:161) notes that while Gaudapada might have been the 'first' proposer of Advaita, Shankara is recognised as clearly formulating the doctrine. It is for this reason that Shankara is famous among Indian and Western schools that study Indian Philosophy.

Advaita Vedanta teaches that there is only one true Self, that is Brahman. Brahman is the sole, pure, blissful consciousness that the entire cosmos is comprised of. Therefore, the human soul is not independent from Brahman; it reflects the human

soul (atman/jiva) as disillusioned by Maya (the illusion of the material world). To attain moksha, one must realise their unity with Brahman and detach from the material world. In other words, atman/jiva must realise its unity with Brahman to attain moksha – which is freedom from the cycle of rebirth.

To establish a philosophical school, or strengthen an existing argument, Hindu philosophers are required to study and comment on the Vedantic texts – Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and Bhagavad Gita. Among the commentaries on major Hindu texts, Shankara's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita is widely respected by Hindu scholars.

On Shankara's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, Deutsch (2004:269) explains that because the Gita has a dominant 'theistic' philosophy, which is not coherent with Advaita, Shankara had to 'strain the text rather considerably in order to bring it into harmony with his Advaitic principles'.

Although the focus of Shankara's commentary<sup>10</sup> on the Gita is to establish Advaita Vedanta, Shankara contributes to understanding Nishkama Karma as socially cohesive.

Shankara's understanding of Nishkama Karma is embedded in his understanding of karma and akarma. Karma is understood as the cumulation of all actions performed, and actions performed are often considered as causing attachments to the material world resulting in rebirth. To prevent this, akarma, that is, no action, was provided as the solution.

Shankara disagreed with the notion of performing no actions. Shankara proposed that, instead of performing no actions, one should perform Nishkama Karma – detached action.

In his commentary on Gita 3.8–9, Shankara says:

8. Action is superior to inaction in point of result. By inaction you cannot attain success in life's journey. The distinction between action and inaction is thus seen in our own experience. It is also wrong to suppose that actions lead to bondage and that they should not therefore be performed ... (p. 97)

9. Sacrifice [*Yajna*] here means Isvara, the Supreme Lord. So, the *sruti* says Yajna, verily is Vishnu. 'This world' means those persons who, as qualified for action only, are bound to do it and who accordingly perform it. The world is not bound by action done for the Lord's sake. Perform action without attachment. (p. 98)

Shankara argues that the choice between performing and abstaining from actions is an individual decision to be made from personal experiences. To abstain from action is to deny oneself the full experience of life. Furthermore, sacrificial actions (*Yajna*) are seen as actions performed without any attachments – as they are performed for the 'Lord's sake'.

Shankara's comments display that he understood that there are actions that are performed that lead to attachment and rebirth. However, Shankara argues that inaction is the solution to be freed from attachment. Shankara also mentions

10. This study makes use of the English translation of Shankara's commentary on the Gita as translated by Sastry (1977).

that there are individuals who are prescribed with 'qualified' actions to perform. Based on these comments, Shankara proposes Nishkama as a detached action or action performed for religious purposes.

Shankara's commentary on Gita 3.8–9 argues for the performing of Nishkama Karma as detached action and service to the lord. To understand Shankara's thoughts on Nishkama Karma as socially cohesive, his commentary on Gita 3.25 is of utmost importance:

The ignorant expect the result of their action thus: 'The result of this action shall accrue to me'. The wise man: he who knows the Self. For Me,<sup>11</sup> or for any other person who, knowing the Self, thus seeks the welfare of the world, there is nothing to do except it be with a view to that welfare of the world at large. (pp. 107–108)

In this comment, Shankara distinguishes between ignorant and knowledgeable action. After having argued that action is better than inaction, Shankara explains that there is knowledgeable and ignorant action. In this sense, Nishkama Karma is a knowledgeable, selfless action that is performed for the 'welfare of the world at large'.

Much of his commentary in Chapters 3, 5 and 18 circles around his thoughts on Nishkama Karma being actions performed unto the lord.<sup>12</sup> Shankara argues that all actions performed are to be performed not for selfish motives and gains but rather as service unto God.

While this presents Nishkama Karma with the contradiction of having a desire (that of performing actions for the lord), Shankara argues that any action performed for the lord is desireless.

Reflecting on Shankara in Gita 3.25, actions surrendered unto the lord are actions that are knowledgeable, and this is Nishkama Karma. Additionally, actions qualified as knowledgeable are enlightened as the motive behind them is the welfare of the world.

Shankara's contribution to Nishkama Karma as a socially cohesive concept is based on his understanding of Nishkama Karma as a selfless practice that is motivated solely by the will to serve God. Practising Nishkama Karma is characterised by the will to serve God and the fruit of such actions being for the welfare of others rather than the self.

According to Shankara, Nishkama Karma is socially cohesive as it places the needs of the masses (global welfare) above the needs of an individual. Shankara supports this notion by

11. Being Shankara.

12. Within the context of the Bhagavad Gita, the term 'lord' is often used in reference to Krishna, although there are Hindu sects that would argue that it refers to Vishnu, with Krishna's function as an avatar of Vishnu in the text. However, in the commentaries of Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva – as their commentaries and notes on the text form part of a larger narrative that explores the relationship between Brahman (the supreme transcendental God) and atman/jiva (the human soul) – the term 'lord' functions as a reference to Brahman. As such, the three Acharyas use Brahman and mention of the term 'lord' to draw attention to the importance of an individual devoting their life to the service of Brahman (who is referred to as 'lord') – to factor in the different Hindu sects and interpretations of who Brahman is (either Vishnu, Shiva, Krishna, etc.). Considering this, this study uses the terms 'lord' and 'god' in the same way, that is a general sense which is regardless of background, to emphasise selfless action and devotion to the divine for anybody.

adding that practising Nishkama is 'devotional service unto God' and is the only action where the motive has no negative repercussions, that is rebirth and suffering.

### Ramanuja's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita

Sri Ramanujacharya was born in 1017 CE in the Tamil town of Sriperumbudur. Today a temple is constructed on what is believed to be the exact location of the birthplace of Ramanuja.

Ramanuja is described as one of the most important Hindu philosophers of medieval India (Carman 1974:1). Ramanuja's work incorporated the devotional Puranas with Vedanta philosophy to create a new Hindu sect that sought to unify people through Bhakti (devotional service) (Adluri 2015:1).

Ramanuja is known for making profound contributions to Vishishtadvaita, a sub-sect of Vedanta philosophy that explores the nature of God as it relates to humanity. On Vishishtadvaita, Veliath (1993:35) says:

[I]t explains the ultimate relationship between the two entities, the finite and the infinite, and insists on total self-surrender on the part of the finite as a means to attain salvation.

According to Veliath (1993:35), the finite is human existence, and the infinite is God, which, in this case, would be Vishnu. Vishishtadvaita proposes that the relationship between god and the human soul is that of a dependent and independent – humans, being dependent, rely on God, the independent, for their existence and liberation from rebirth. Furthermore, the success of this relationship is determined by the devotion of the dependent to the independent.

Like all other Hindu philosophers, Ramanuja commented on the major texts of Hinduism to establish and argue for Vishishtadvaita. In Ramanuja's commentary on the Gita, Rama (2013:4) says:

1. 'Apart from the archaic language, the other problem with Ramanuja's Bhashya is that he frequently launches into technically detailed refutations of the Advaitic position of Shankara Acharya'.
2. 'Throughout the Gita Ramanuja quotes extensively and exhaustively from the Upanishads, Vedas and Puranas to support his particular interpretation of knotty points'.

Although Ramanuja's commentary<sup>13</sup> on the Gita is mainly to reject Shankara's Advaita philosophy and establish Vishishtadvaita, Ramanuja comments on Nishkama Karma as a practice that contributes to social cohesion.

In his commentary on Gita 2.13, Ramanuja says:

The eternal jivas being conditioned by beginningless Karma, become endowed with bodies according to their particular Karmas.

To overcome this bondage [of transmigration caused by Karma], embodied beings should perform their duties like war and other

13. This study makes use of Ramanuja's commentary on the Gita as translated by Rama (2013).

vocations and rites prescribed by the Scripture, and which are appropriate to their social circumstances without attachment to the results of those actions. (p. 17)

Ramanuja explains that the human soul (jiva) is eternal; however, it is trapped in an endless cycle of rebirth where the 'new' birth is determined by the actions of the past life. The cycle of reincarnation is described as 'bondage' to emphasise the enslavement that occurs when one is attached to the material world. Ramanuja proposes Nishkama Karma by advising that one should perform their prescribed duties without attachment to, or desire for, the fruit of their actions.

An interesting aspect of Ramanuja's comment on Gita 2.13 is that he understands prescribed duty as actions that are contextual – 'appropriate to their social circumstances'. Ramanuja understands 'war and other vocations and rites prescribed by the Scripture' as relative to the social circumstances that he was exposed to.

Therefore, applying Ramanuja's comment about performing actions that are relative to social circumstances (without attachment to the results of these actions) to the current South African context implies advocating for societal change without any ulterior motives. This means that prescribed duty is contextual. Within the South African context, prescribed duty according to Ramanuja would be advocating for social cohesion, justice, equality, peace, harmony and the addressing of gender-based violence, to name a few.

Renowned Indian nationalist and political leader, Mahatma Gandhi agrees (see Gandhi 1987) with this application of Ramanuja's concept of being 'appropriate to their social circumstances' by quoting Canon Sheppard:

Hinduism no doubt holds the spirit of compassion and love as the very highest duty for me. (p. 145)

Although Gandhi (1987:145) mentions Sheppard in the discussion of the Gita and violence (and the Gita's seemingly pro-war and/or violence stance), Gandhi (1987) says:

Hinduism, not to speak of other religions, is ever evolving. It has no one scripture like the Koran or the Bible. Its scriptures are also evolving and suffering addition. The Gita itself is an instance in point. It has given new meaning to Karma, Sannyasa, Yajna, etc. It has breathed new life into Hinduism ... (pp. 145-146)

Gandhi (1987:146) explains that Hinduism and the interpretation of Hindu texts are ever-changing based on the context. Different contexts, living in different time periods of Hindu history, display the reinterpretation of Hindu scriptures to match the social circumstances of the context in question.

Therefore, reflecting on Gita 2.13, 'war and other vocations' should not be interpreted as Ramanuja endorsing violence but rather as encouraging people to be aware of their contextual issues, understand their duty in addressing that societal issue, and performing that duty without attachment to the result of the action.

Complementing his commentary on Gita 2.13, Gita 6.1 and 6.36, Ramanuja repeats his view of Nishkama Karma as performing one's duty without any attachment or desire for the fruit of those actions.

Ramanuja also relates his understanding of Nishkama Karma to Vishishtadvaita in his commentary on Gita 6.1 by saying that Nishkama Karma is a form of worship of the Supreme Being. For people who struggle to perform selfless actions, they should consider Nishkama Karma as a form of worship – perform actions as service unto God; this way, the rewards of those actions do not belong to the individual but to God.

Nishkama Karma as defined by Ramanuja is to perform the duties required of you, as determined by your social context, without attachment to the rewards that may be attached to the performance of those actions (be it monetary or fame). Nishkama Karma is also a practice that is performed by what Ramanuja calls the 'real *Sanyasin*'<sup>14</sup> – one who practises Jnana and Karma yoga.

### Madhva's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita

Sri Madhvacharya was born in Karnataka around 1238 CE. At an early age, Madhva developed a reputation for himself by studying Sanskrit and Vedanta philosophy resulting in him becoming a sannyasi in his teenage years. This led to Madhva being awarded several different names: Purna-Prajna (abundant wisdom), Vasudeva (Lord Krishna's father – a name attributed to individuals that are believed to possess divine attributes) and Ananda Tirtha (sacred happiness).

Madhva is also regarded as an incarnation of the Hindu god of wind, Vayu – a deity associated with Vishnu (Char 1909; Shunmugam 2022). Many tales of Madhva glorify his life as someone with immense physical strength, agility and a good physique. Some of the details of Madhva's life include stories of him killing demons, and fighting a tiger and bandits.

Prasad (2011:113) accredits Madhva as an influential Vaishnavite philosopher who founded Dvaita philosophy within the Vedantic school and as an important 'proponent' of the Bhakti movement.

Explaining Dvaita philosophy, Whitehead (2019) says:

Dvaita Vedanta suggests that there are three types of entities that exist: Brahman; souls; and matter. Souls and matter are dependent on Brahman in order to exist, while Brahman is independent. (p. 66)

Like Shankara and Ramanuja, Madhva wrote extensive commentaries on Hindu texts which also included critiques of Advaita and Vishishtadvaita – to establish Dvaita as the superior philosophy.

14. A term used to describe the process whereby Hindus (typically religious leaders) renounce the world in the pursuit of Dharma.

Madhva is attributed with two commentaries on the Gita: (1) the Bhagavad Gita Bhashya (BGB) and (2) the Bhagavad Gita Tatparya Nirnaya (BGTN). According to Sangha (1999:26), the Bhagavadgita Bhashya starts with Chapter 2.11 and only comments on 'about 250 to 300 stanzas'. As a result, the Bhagavad Gita Tatparya Nirnaya<sup>15</sup> 'supplements' the Bhagavad Gita Bhashya<sup>16</sup> in providing a full and complete commentary of the Bhagavad Gita<sup>17</sup> (Sangha 1999:26).

The essence of Madhva's thought on Nishkama Karma (selflessness or desirelessness) in the Bhagavad Gita Bhashya is encapsulated in his comment on Sankhya Yoga (BGB 2.47), where he mentions the following:

- [E]ven for the wise, the desire for fruits is not advisable. (p. 42)  
 Only those actions (prompted by desire for fruit) is prohibited ... (p. 43)  
 Persons are entitled only for performance of action. (p. 43)  
 [A]ll desires should be given up except that for the Lord ... (p. 43)

In his commentary on BGB 2.47, Madhva describes Nishkama Karma as performing actions without the desire for the fruit of those actions. According to Madhva, Nishkama Karma is characterised as renouncing all desires except the desire to perform actions dedicated to the Lord. The desire to perform actions for the Lord is seen as a form of worship by Madhva because actions performed in service of the Lord mean that all the fruit of those actions are renounced – as they belong to the Lord.

Madhva adds to this in the BGTN 2.47 where he says that Jivas are 'entitled' to their actions alone, and the fruits of their actions belong to the Lord; he also mentions to not 'have the feeling that you are the Lord' by desiring the fruits of action.

Therefore, Madhva sees Nishkama Karma as a form of worship. Being a fervent advocator for the Bhakti movement, Madhva emphasised the importance of complete surrender to the will of Vishnu. Madhva uses Nishkama Karma to support the Bhakti movement by defining it as a complete surrender to the will and service of Vishnu.

Towards applying Madhva's understanding of Nishkama Karma as socially cohesive, in BGB 12.5, he comments:

Therefore the path adopted by the worshippers of the *unmanifest* is difficult; this is the purport. Intense penance and meditation, ceaseless restraint of the sense, equitable attitude towards all, being ever engaged in the welfare of beings, pure in personal conduct, complete union in *Sri Vishnu* – without these, there could never be realization of the *unmanifest*. Without grace of the *unmanifest* [Sri Tatva], the grace of *Sri Vishnu* would not be possible. (p. 181)

As Madhva sees Nishkama Karma as a form of worship, the path of renunciation (Nishkama Karma) is the same as the

15. Hereafter referred to as BGTN.

16. Hereafter referred to as BGB.

17. This research makes use of both the BGTN and the BGB as translated to English by Sonde (2011).

path adopted by the worshippers of the unmanifest. Madhva explains that unmanifest is Sri Tatva – ‘Sri’ being a title of respect given to what is regarded as holy and sacred by Hindus, and ‘Tatva’ meaning ‘reality’, ‘truth’ and/or ‘principle’ in Sanskrit, denoting Vishnu. For those who choose to follow the path of Nishkama Karma, one of the requirements for attaining the grace of Vishnu is ‘being ever engaged’ in activities that are for the welfare of others.

In BGTN 18:12, Madhva engages Nishkama Karma and social cohesion or awareness directly:

With no expectation of fruits for themselves, the renouncer performs actions desiring welfare of the others. (p. 230)

The renouncer is one who performs actions selflessly and is, therefore, a practitioner of Nishkama Karma. In this comment, Madhva teaches that Nishkama Karma is not about renouncing all desires – but rather desiring actions that are for the welfare of others.

In his comment on BGTN 18:12, Madhva also differentiates between the ‘renouncer’ and the ‘relinquisher’, and he defines the ‘relinquisher’ as one who completely renounces all action (even that of welfare) and is considered superior to the ‘renouncer’. This puts Madhva in a contradictory position because he says that Jivas are entitled to take action and encourages them to engage in desireless action<sup>18</sup> (BGTN 2.47) while saying that one who relinquishes all actions (including those that are for the welfare of others) is superior to the one who renounces all selfishly motivated action.

The point of conflict between Madhva’s ‘relinquisher’ and ‘renouncer’ is part of a larger discussion – that of desirelessness within Nishkama Karma. Framarin (2005) comments:

Most scholars have argued that a literal interpretation of the Bhagavadgita’s advice to act without desire ought to be abandoned for this reason, because it contradicts the obvious fact that desire is a necessary condition of action. (p. 143)

Madhva seems to acknowledge this in his differentiation of ‘relinquisher’ and ‘renouncer’; however, he sees the ‘renouncer’ as one who forsakes all desires, except the desire to perform actions for the welfare of others, and he seemingly falls prey to the contradiction<sup>19</sup> as described by Framarin (2005:143).

Similar to Shankara and Ramanuja Madhva’s understanding of Nishkama Karma (as found in their commentaries of the Gita) is characterised by:

- Surrendering oneself (specifically, desires and actions) to the Supreme.
- Worshipping the Supreme.
- Performing selfless actions.
- The welfare of others.

18. And desireless action that is for the welfare of others (BGTN 18:12).

19. The discussion on the contradiction of desirelessness is endless, one that cannot be fully engaged in this study – as this study explores the contribution that Nishkama Karma makes to social cohesion.

## Nishkama Karma as a contributor to social cohesion in South Africa

In 2008, the Department of Basic Education of the South African government<sup>20</sup> launched the Bill of Responsibilities, highlighting the responsibilities of South Africans in protecting the livelihood of people and living a healthy life:

South Africa is a diverse nation, and equality does not mean uniformity, or that we are all the same. Our country’s motto: !KE E: / XARRA //KE, meaning ‘Diverse people unite’, calls on all of us to build a common sense of belonging and national pride, celebrating the very diversity which makes us who we are. It also calls on us to extend our friendship and warmth to all nations and all the peoples of the world in our endeavour to build a better world. (p. 1)

Additionally, the US Supreme Court Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg describes South Africa’s constitution as<sup>21</sup>:

[A] deliberate attempt to have a fundamental instrument of government that embraced basic human rights, had an independent judiciary ... It really is, I think, a great piece of work that was done ... (p. 1)

Praise for the South African constitution extends far beyond this with several references to its progressive, inclusive and harmonious efforts.

Where then does South Africa get it wrong? How is it possible for a country with a globally acclaimed constitution to face vast, dire economic equality? Racial tension? Alarming high cases of unemployment, gender-based violence, and crime? Social cohesion refers to the addressing of all South African challenges in promoting a democratic, peaceful and equal society. So, how does Nishkama Karma address this (through acts of selflessness) to promote a socially cohesive South Africa?

The answer to this question is contained in a statement made by the 11th President of India, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam<sup>22</sup>:

When there is righteousness in the heart, there is beauty in the character. When there is beauty in the character, there is harmony in the home. When there is harmony in the home, there is order in the nation. When there is order in the nation, there is peace in the world. (p. 1)

Peace, harmony, equality and social cohesion at large are attained (both in South Africa and globally) when righteousness exists in the hearts of individuals.

Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva<sup>23</sup> agree that practising Nishkama Karma enables one to liberation from the cycle of rebirth. As such, the three Acharyas’ description of Nishkama Karma is that of a righteous, liberative practice that glorifies the Lord by performing actions centred on the welfare of others.

20. See <https://www.gov.za/about-government/government-programmes/bill-responsibilities>.

21. See <https://africasacountry.wordpress.com/2012/02/16/praising-the-south-african-constitution/>.

22. See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/pracin-jain-academy/where-there-is-righteousness-in-the-heart-there-is-beauty-in-the-character-28088/>.

23. In their commentaries of the Gita.

The three Acharyas propose that by forsaking all selfishly desired actions, one is able to selflessly work towards contributing to social welfare and cohesion. For example, when it comes to South Africa, this approach suggests that addressing gender-based violence (and/or other societal problems) should not be pursued solely for personal gain, such as political power, money or fame. Instead, the sole motivators for addressing gender-based violence should be that: (1) it is our duty as responsible humans and citizens of South Africa and (2) by practising Nishkama Karma, all self-gain is surrendered to ensure complete dedication to the upliftment of social welfare.

As Nishkama Karma is essentially the Hindu concept of selflessness, applying it to religiously diverse communities is not a challenge. Encouraging religiously diverse communities to practise Nishkama Karma would simply require basic knowledge of lessons on selflessness that exist within the different religions' sacred texts. This further allows for religious communities to agree with the three Acharyas on selflessness (Nishkama Karma) being a form of worship to God – whichever god that may be. Again, the motivation for uniting religious communities (through the principles of Nishkama Karma) is for social cohesion and the welfare of others instead of any self-benefits or the will to convert people.

Outside of religious affiliation, Nishkama Karma as selflessness can be applied to South African communities as the concept of altruism. On Altruism, Kerr (2004) says:

Altruism is generally understood to be behaviour that benefits others at a personal cost to the behaving individual. (p. 135)

Kerr's (2004:135) definition of altruism aligns with the three Acharyas' notes on Nishkama Karma as they all agree on performing actions for others without concern for personal cost.

Fonseca (2019) comments that prosocial behaviour is measured by:

[A]ltruistic giving, public good contributions, investment in trust-based transactions, and willingness to reciprocate trust-based investments. (p. 238)

Therefore, social cohesion in South Africa can make us aware of the three Acharyas' comments on Nishkama Karma as a form of prosocial behaviour that encourages altruism and genuine concern for social welfare and community-based development.

## Conclusion

South Africa's major challenges rely on the lack of social cohesion and genuine concern for social welfare. Selfishness and greed, in the form of pursuing political or monetary gain, serve as the primary motivators behind the actions of South Africans in various ways.

The first democratic President of South Africa, Mr Nelson Mandela says<sup>24</sup>:

24. [http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela\\_speeches/2005/050203\\_poverty.htm](http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/2005/050203_poverty.htm).

Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom. (p. 1)

Mr Nelson Mandela illustrates that South Africa's societal challenges are not a result of natural phenomena, instead, it is caused by the collective actions of mankind. Similarly, the solution to these challenges resides in the actions of mankind.

In the Bhagavad Gita, the three Acharyas' comment on Nishkama Karma as a reformative practice that shifts the focus of an individual from self-beneficial motivated actions to altruistic behaviour that are solely for the collective good.

Therefore, Nishkama Karma can contribute to social cohesion in South Africa by encouraging individuals to undergo a process of self-reflection – to reflect on all actions performed and consistently aspire for selflessly motivated actions that benefit society at large. This can be achieved by the promotion of interfaith dialogue as a platform that affords different religions the opportunity to share principles within their religious traditions that can contribute to social cohesion in South Africa. In the case of Nishkama Karma, it is proposed as a Hindu contribution. By assessing the potential of Nishkama Karma as a concept that can contribute to social cohesion in South Africa, this article highlights the importance of religion in addressing societal challenges in South Africa and also advocates for the use of interfaith platforms to thoroughly explore key concepts from various religions in South Africa that may align with governmental initiatives. As such, this article functions as a contributor to understanding the different ways in which religious customs, beliefs and practices may contribute to social cohesion in South Africa – either by the encouragement of participation in interfaith dialogue or by creating awareness of religious beliefs towards promoting social cohesion. In this manner, further research related to different religious concepts in dialogue with one another and other disciplines is envisioned for evaluating new innovative ways in which the religious landscape of South Africa can contribute to the nation's development.

## Acknowledgements

This article is partially based on the author's thesis entitled 'The contribution of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva on social cohesion' toward the degree of Doctor of Philosophiae in the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, South Africa, with supervisor Prof. Maniraj Sukdaven, received April 2022, it is available here: <https://repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/86453>.



## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Authors' contributions

M.Y.S. conceptualised, investigated and wrote the original manuscript. M.S. assisted with the conceptualisation, development of the methodology, supervision, review and editing of the draft. Both authors reviewed and edited the final draft of the study.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

## References

- Adluri, S., 2015, *Textual authority in classical Indian thought: Ramanuja and the Visnu Purana*, Sucharita Adluri, New York, NY.
- Behura, A.S.P.S.N., 2017, 'Linking professionalism to Nishkam Karma and how it can reshape the world we live in', *IOSR Journal of Business and Management* 1, 50–53.
- Carman, J.B., 1974, *The theology of Ramanuja: An essay in interreligious understanding*, Yale University Press, London.
- Char, P.M.C., 1909, *The life and teachings of Sri Madhvacharya*, Progressive Press, Madras.
- Deutsch, E.D.R., 2004, *The essential Vedanta: A new source book of Advaita Vedanta*, World Wisdom, Inc, Indiana.
- Fonseca, X.L.S.B.F., 2019, 'Social cohesion revisited: A new definition and how to characterize it', *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 32(2), 231–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2018.1497480>
- Framarin, C.G., 2005, 'Taking desirelessness (Niskama Karma) seriously', *Asian Philosophy* 15(2), 143–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09552360500123758>
- Gandhi, M.K., 1987, *The essence of Hinduism*, 2nd edn., The Navajivan, Ahmedabad.
- Kerr, B.G.-S.P.F.W.M., 2004, 'What is altruism?', *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 19(3), 135–140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2003.10.004>
- Muniapan, B.S.B., 2018, 'The philosophical dimensions of social responsibilities from the Bhagavad-Gita', in C.R. Baker (ed.), *Corporate social responsibility (CSR)*, pp. 37–66, Nova Science Publishers, Inc., New York, NY.
- Njozela, L.S.I.B.J., 2021, 'Towards measuring social cohesion in South Africa: Lessons for nation branding developers', *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 39(1), 29–64. <https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v39i1.320>
- Pal, J., 2001, 'The concept of Niskama Karma: Teleological or deontological?', *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* 2(28), 215–226.
- Palmay, I., 2015, 'Reflections on social cohesion in contemporary South Africa', *Psychology in Society* 49(49), 62–69. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-8708/2015/n49a5>
- Prabhupada, A., 1989, *Bhagavad-Gita as it is*, 2nd edn., Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Botany.
- Prasad, M.N., 2011, *Three acaryas and Narayana Guru*, DK Printworld, Verkala.
- Rama, R.U.V., 2013, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita with Gita Bhasya of Bhagavad Ramanujacharya*, Motilal Banarsidas, New Delhi.
- Sangha, V.M., 1999, *Beginners guide to Sri Madhvacharya's life and philosophy*, Vishwa Madhva Sangha, Rockville, MD.
- Sastry, M.A., 1977, *The Bhagavad Gita: With the commentary of Sri Shankaracharya*, V. Sadanand, Madras.
- Satpathy, B., 2008, 'Transformational management and Karma-Yoga linkage', *Sri Lankan Journal of Human Resource Management* 2(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljhrm.v2i1.5101>
- Shunmugam, M.Y., 2022, *The contribution of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva on social cohesion*, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.
- Sonde, N., 2011, *Sri Madhvacharya Bhasya and Tatparya Nirnaya on Bhagavad Gita*, Nagesh D. Sonde, Mumbai.
- Veliath, C.S.J., 1993, *The mysticism of Ramanuja*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi.
- Whitehead, J., 2019, *An understanding of Maya: The philosophies of Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva*, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.