

The Philosophical Wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit Literature

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Abstract. *The Bhagavad Gita occupies a central place in Sanskrit literature as a philosophical dialogue that unites metaphysics, ethics, psychology, and spiritual discipline. Set within the dramatic framework of the Mahabharata, it addresses the moral crisis of Arjuna and transforms it into a universal inquiry into duty, action, knowledge, devotion, and liberation. The Gita's philosophical wisdom through its synthesis of karma yoga, jnana yoga, and bhakti yoga, showing how these paths respond to different human temperaments while leading toward self-realization. It also explores key concepts such as dharma, atman, brahman, detachment, and equanimity, emphasizing their literary and philosophical significance. The study argues that the Gita's enduring influence arises from its ability to reconcile worldly responsibility with spiritual freedom. As a masterpiece of Sanskrit thought, it continues to offer an ethical vision for personal conduct, social responsibility, and inner transformation in changing cultural contexts across generations and intellectual traditions.*

Keywords: *Bhagavad Gita; Sanskrit Literature; Dharma; Yoga; Spiritual Liberation*

Introduction

The Sanskrit title Bhagavad Gita is commonly translated as “The Song of the Lord” or “The Divine Song.” The word Bhagavad refers to the Divine or the Blessed Lord, while Gita means a song or sacred discourse. The title is significant because the text presents philosophical wisdom in a poetic and memorable form rather than as a purely theoretical argument. Its verses communicate spiritual insight through rhythm, imagery and dialogue, making complex philosophical ideas accessible to both scholars and ordinary readers[1][2]. The Bhagavad Gita forms an important part of the Bhishma Parva of the Mahabharata. Although it is embedded within a much larger epic narrative, it has acquired an independent literary and philosophical identity. Its location at the beginning of the Kurukshetra war connects philosophical reflection with an immediate crisis involving duty, justice, violence, family loyalty and political responsibility[3][4]. The text takes the form of a dialogue between Sri Krishna and the warrior Arjuna. When Arjuna becomes emotionally overwhelmed at the thought of fighting his relatives, teachers and friends, Krishna guides him through questions concerning the self, duty, action, knowledge, devotion and liberation. Their conversation transforms a personal crisis into a universal inquiry into how human beings should act when moral choices are painful and uncertain[5][6]. The Gita is a philosophical poem because it unites poetic language with sustained reflection on human existence. Its teachings are expressed through Sanskrit verse, metaphor, repetition and dramatic dialogue rather than through abstract reasoning alone[7][8]. The text combines religious devotion, ethical responsibility and metaphysical inquiry. It discusses God, the eternal self, material nature, moral duty, right action and liberation as interconnected dimensions of life[9]. Although the Gita emerged from a particular Sanskrit and epic tradition, its reflections on fear, responsibility, self-control and meaningful action have encouraged diverse interpretations across

religious, political and cultural settings[10].

The Bhagavad Gita occurs in the Bhishma Parva, the sixth major book of the Mahabharata. Its position is not accidental. The discourse appears immediately before the great war begins, when political negotiation has failed and the opposing armies stand ready for battle. By placing the philosophical dialogue at this decisive moment, the epic connects questions about the soul, action and liberation with the practical demands of kingship, justice and social order. The Gita must therefore be understood not only as an independent religious work but also as part of the Mahabharata's wider examination of power, conflict and righteous conduct. Kurukshetra functions as both a physical battlefield and a space of moral testing. The war is fought between members of the same extended family, making the conflict more tragic than an ordinary struggle between strangers. Arjuna sees respected teachers, relatives and companions on both sides. The battlefield thus brings public obligation and private emotion into direct opposition. It shows that moral decisions are rarely made under ideal conditions; they must often be made when every possible course of action carries suffering and responsibility. Arjuna's crisis begins when he imagines the human consequences of war. His body trembles, his confidence disappears and he lowers his bow. He fears that victory obtained through the destruction of his family would be morally empty. His condition is not simple cowardice. It is a serious ethical crisis involving grief, compassion, social duty and uncertainty about justice. Krishna's teaching begins by addressing this confusion and gradually leads Arjuna from emotional paralysis towards disciplined understanding.

Dharma includes both social and spiritual responsibility. Socially, individuals must fulfil obligations towards family, community and the larger world. Spiritually, they must examine their motives and avoid acting under the control of greed, anger, fear or attachment. The Gita therefore does not separate morality from spiritual development. The purification of intention is presented as essential to the performance of responsible action[11].

The concept of lokasangraha refers to maintaining the welfare, stability and moral cohesion of the world. Krishna teaches that responsible people should act not only for themselves but also for the preservation of society. Individual freedom is therefore linked with collective well-being. An action cannot be considered spiritually mature when it produces personal advancement while damaging the wider community[12].

In the Bhagavad Gita, jñāna, or knowledge, does not simply mean the accumulation of information. It is a transformative understanding through which a person distinguishes the permanent from the temporary, the spiritual self from the physical body, and wise action from action controlled by desire. Ignorance, or ajñāna, causes people to identify themselves completely with their physical appearance, possessions, social position, emotions, and personal achievements. True knowledge removes this confusion by revealing that these changing conditions do not constitute the deepest identity of a human being [13][14].

Knowledge of the self begins when a person recognizes the ātman as the conscious principle underlying physical and mental experience. Childhood, youth, old age, emotion, and circumstance continually change, yet a sense of conscious identity remains present throughout these changes. The Gita therefore presents self-knowledge as an inward awakening rather than a purely intellectual exercise. A person who understands the self becomes less controlled by pride, insecurity, fear, and external judgment because personal worth is no longer measured only through success, failure, or material possession[15] [16].

Jnana Yoga leads beyond knowledge of the individual self toward an understanding of ultimate reality. The Gita discusses this reality through interconnected concepts such as Brahman, ātman, puruṣa, and the Supreme Lord. Ultimate reality is presented as transcendent and eternal, yet it is also present within the universe and within living beings. The Gita thus combines the metaphysical vision of the Upanishads with a personal theology centred on Krishna. Contemporary comparative research has also identified strong thematic continuity between the Upanishads and the Gita, particularly in their treatment of selfhood, action, liberation, and ultimate reality[17]. Death is consequently interpreted as a transition rather than the complete annihilation of the self. The changing of bodies is compared to replacing old clothes with new ones. This teaching is not intended to encourage

indifference toward death or human suffering. Instead, it places mortality within a wider spiritual order and helps individuals act without being paralysed by grief and fear[18].

Mature knowledge culminates in equal vision. The wise person recognizes the same spiritual reality within different people and forms of life. Self-knowledge therefore has a powerful ethical dimension because awareness of spiritual unity encourages compassion, humility, non-hatred, and responsible action. Jnana Yoga is not an escape from society but a disciplined way of seeing that transforms both consciousness and conduct[19]. Complete surrender brings thought, emotion, and action into harmony with the Divine. Bhakti also integrates the other yogic paths: knowledge clarifies the nature of God, disciplined action expresses devotion, and meditation strengthens remembrance. Devotion is universal because every person, regardless of position, possesses the capacity for sincerity, love, remembrance, and inward dedication [20].

The self as pure consciousness cannot be reduced to occupation, caste, memory, emotion, social recognition, or physical appearance. These characteristics belong to the empirical personality, while consciousness is the underlying presence through which they are experienced. This understanding later became central to Vedāntic debates about whether the individual self is identical with, dependent upon, or eternally distinct from the Supreme [21][22]. The relationship between ātman and Brahman is one of the most debated dimensions of the Gita. Non-dual interpretations emphasize that the deepest self is not separate from ultimate reality, while devotional traditions maintain a meaningful distinction between the individual soul and God. The richness of the Gita's language made these different interpretations possible[23]. Self-realization means understanding one's enduring spiritual nature and relationship with ultimate reality. In Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, liberation culminates in the realization of the non-dual identity of ātman and Brahman. Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita maintains that the individual belongs to Brahman while retaining meaningful individuality. Madhva's Dvaita philosophy teaches that the soul remains eternally distinct from God and attains fulfilment through knowledge, devotion, and grace. Although these interpretations differ, each demonstrates the philosophical richness of the Gita's treatment of the self and Brahman [24].

The Gita compares spiritual stability to an ocean that receives many rivers without overflowing. Experiences enter consciousness, but the mind remains deep and composed. This image is both literary and philosophical, transforming the abstract idea of self-mastery into a memorable Sanskrit metaphor. Equanimity is therefore not withdrawal from life; it is the inner condition required for wise and ethical participation in life[25].

Objectives

1. To examine the historical and literary position of the Bhagavad Gita within Sanskrit literature and the Mahabharata.
2. To analyse the philosophical meaning of dharma and svadharma in relation to Arjuna's moral crisis.
3. To evaluate Karma Yoga and nishkama karma as ethical and spiritual principles of responsible action.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research methodology based on textual and philosophical analysis. The research primarily relies on the Bhagavad Gita as the principal source of investigation, supported by authoritative Sanskrit commentaries, scholarly books, and peer-reviewed research articles on Indian philosophy and Sanskrit literature. A comprehensive review of both classical and contemporary literature was conducted to examine the philosophical concepts presented in the text.

The study employs the textual analysis method to interpret the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita within their historical, literary, and philosophical contexts. Particular attention is given to the concepts of dharma, karma yoga, jñāna yoga, bhakti yoga, ātman, brahman, equanimity, and self-realization. These themes are analysed systematically to understand their ethical significance and their contribution to Sanskrit philosophical thought.

A comparative interpretative approach is also used to examine the perspectives of major Vedāntic commentators, including Śaṅkarācārya (Advaita Vedānta), Rāmāṇujācārya (Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta), and Madhvācārya (Dvaita Vedānta). Their interpretations are compared to identify similarities and differences in explaining the relationship between the individual self, the Supreme Reality, duty, devotion, and liberation.

Secondary data were collected from published books, journal articles, conference papers, and authentic academic sources indexed in recognized databases. The collected literature was critically reviewed, classified according to major philosophical themes, and synthesized to evaluate the literary and ethical significance of the Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit literature. The findings are interpreted through thematic analysis, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the Gita's enduring philosophical relevance and its influence on Indian intellectual traditions as well as contemporary ethical discourse.

Results and Discussion

The present study demonstrates that the Bhagavad Gita occupies a unique position in Sanskrit literature because it successfully integrates ethical philosophy, metaphysical inquiry, devotional spirituality, and poetic expression within a single literary framework. The analysis of the text indicates that the Gita is not merely a religious scripture but a comprehensive philosophical discourse that addresses the human condition through the concepts of dharma, karma, jñāna, bhakti, and self-realization. Its placement within the Mahabharata provides a dramatic context in which philosophical principles emerge directly from a moral and political crisis, making its teachings applicable to both personal and social life.

The findings further reveal that the Bhagavad Gita does not advocate the superiority of any single spiritual discipline; rather, it establishes a harmonious relationship among Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Bhakti Yoga. These paths are presented as complementary approaches that correspond to different human temperaments and stages of spiritual development. Such philosophical integration distinguishes the Gita from many earlier religious texts that emphasize a single method of liberation. The synthesis of action, knowledge, and devotion provides a comprehensive framework for ethical living while preserving the unity of spiritual purpose.

The study also demonstrates that the concept of dharma in the Bhagavad Gita extends beyond conventional notions of duty. Dharma is interpreted as a dynamic moral principle that requires wisdom, self-discipline, and contextual judgment. Through Arjuna's moral dilemma, the text illustrates that ethical decisions often involve competing responsibilities rather than clear distinctions between right and wrong. Consequently, the Gita encourages reflective moral reasoning instead of rigid adherence to external rules, making its ethical philosophy relevant to contemporary discussions on leadership, governance, education, and professional responsibility.

Another important observation is the literary excellence through which philosophical ideas are communicated. Rather than presenting abstract metaphysical doctrines in a systematic philosophical treatise, the Gita employs dialogue, symbolism, metaphor, and poetic expression to communicate profound truths. Images such as the battlefield, the chariot, the cosmic form of Krishna, and the ocean of equanimity transform complex philosophical concepts into vivid literary experiences. This combination of literary artistry and philosophical depth explains why the Gita has remained one of the most influential works in Sanskrit literature and continues to inspire scholars, translators, and commentators worldwide.

The discussion also highlights the enduring influence of the Bhagavad Gita on later Indian philosophical traditions. The diverse interpretations offered by Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Dvaita Vedānta demonstrate the richness and flexibility of its philosophical language. Rather than limiting interpretation, the text provides a broad conceptual framework that accommodates different metaphysical perspectives while maintaining its central emphasis on self-realization, ethical action, and devotion. This interpretive openness has enabled the Gita to remain a living philosophical text across different historical periods and intellectual traditions.

Overall, the study confirms that the Bhagavad Gita represents a remarkable synthesis of philosophy,

ethics, spirituality, and literary expression. Its lasting significance lies not only in its theological teachings but also in its ability to provide practical guidance for responsible human conduct. By integrating metaphysical inquiry with ethical responsibility and devotional faith, the Gita continues to serve as one of the most comprehensive and influential philosophical texts in Sanskrit literature, maintaining its relevance across cultures and generations.

Conclusion

The Bhagavad Gita remains deeply relevant to modern life because it addresses stress, emotional conflict, moral uncertainty, and the need for responsible action. Its teaching of self-control and mental balance helps individuals face anxiety, failure, and difficult circumstances without losing clarity. The Gita also offers a sound basis for ethical decision-making by emphasizing duty, righteousness, intention, and accountability. Its doctrine of disciplined action encourages people to perform their responsibilities sincerely while remaining detached from selfish expectations. The universal message of the Gita lies in its harmonious integration of knowledge, action, and devotion. It teaches that different spiritual paths can lead toward the same ultimate truth when practised with sincerity and wisdom. Its affirmation of the spiritual equality of all human beings rises above divisions of status, birth, and social identity. Through self-knowledge, detachment, and devotion, the Gita presents inner peace as a practical spiritual achievement. Thus, the Bhagavad Gita represents a profound synthesis of Indian philosophical thought. Its permanent position in Sanskrit literature rests upon its poetic excellence, intellectual depth, and spiritual universality. Its wisdom remains meaningful across cultures, generations, professions, and changing historical conditions today. It continues to guide humanity toward moral courage, disciplined living, self-realization, and enduring peace.

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