

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

14 Years of Open Access

Vol. 14 Issue-II April 2023

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

The *Bhagavad Gita*'s Contribution to Indian Philosophy: A Metaphysical Examination

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Article History: Submitted-11/03/2023, Revised-21/04/2023, Accepted-22/04/2023, Published-30/04/2023.

Abstract:

This article provides a comprehensive examination of the metaphysical concerns presented in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a seminal work of Indian philosophy that has made a significant contribution to the global philosophical discourse. The *Bhagavad Gita*, also known as the song of God, has garnered extensive interpretation, critique, and analysis over time. The text has been thoroughly studied and analysed by scholars and literary figures both in the East and the West who have acknowledged its profound philosophical insights and spiritual richness. The philosophical scope of the *Bhagavad Gita* goes beyond theological and ethical matters to encompass epistemological and metaphysical concerns that merit a detailed investigation. Non-duality or Advaita, a key doctrine of Indian philosophy that traces its roots to the Upanishads, holds a pivotal place in the text's understanding of the nature of reality and the self. This research contends that the *Bhagavad Gita* underscores the importance of transcending dichotomies to comprehend the true nature of the self, which is pure consciousness. The text exhorts the reader to recognise the impermanence of all phenomena and emphasises that the eternal nature of the self surpasses the transience of the material body. By offering a comprehensive investigation of the text's metaphysical and epistemological concerns, this study contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse on the *Bhagavad Gita*, advances the scholarship on its contribution to Indian philosophy and emphasises its enduring relevance as a work of literature and philosophy.

Keywords: *Bhagavad Gita*, Indian philosophy, binary oppositions, non-duality, self-realisation, metaphysics.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a work of remarkable significance in the realm of Indian philosophical thought. As a part of the *Bhishma Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, an *Itihāsa*, the text was written by Ved Vyasa, drawing inspiration from various Indian philosophical schools,

including the Vedic cult of sacrifice, the Upanishadic sermon of Absolute Brahman, the Sāṃkhya dualism, the Yoga meditation, and the Bhagavat theism. The *Bhagavad Gita* is deeply rooted in the Upanishadic tradition of Indian philosophy, espousing the attainment of *moksha* or liberation and the establishment of *dharma*. It is regarded as a fountainhead of philosophical, ethical, and spiritual teachings, offering a refuge for the confusion of the mind and contradictions prevailing in the conscience. In Indian tradition, the *Bhagavad Gita* is regarded as a *Śruti*, which is a term for the poetry of the divine heard by the self-realised. The text serves as a point of convergence of a philosophical system and poetic inspiration, elevating the discourse to the realm of the transcendent. The discourse is both universal and objective, offering a transformative journey from delusion and despair to enlightenment and eternal bliss, and therefore this dialogue between Arjuna, one of the five Pandavas, and his mentor and charioteer Shri Krishna warrants critical analysis.

In his seminal work *Indian Philosophy*, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan advocates against relegating the *Bhagavad Gita* to a mere text, and instead regards it as a distinct tradition. He asserts that within the Indian tradition, the *Bhagavad Gita* is considered a *Śruti* rather than a *Smṛiti*. Radhakrishnan defines *Śruti* as “the rhythm of the infinite heard by the soul” representing a revealed scripture. According to Radhakrishnan, the *Bhagavad Gita* combines a philosophical system and poetic inspiration, serving as a source of solace for the perplexities and contradictions found in the conscience. At the same time, in *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, Radhakrishnan and Moore distinguish the *Bhagavad Gita* from a philosophical treatise by regarding it as a religious classic that “has emerged from the religious life of mankind” (101). In this context, religion is understood as *dharma*, which is traditionally recognised in India as a multifaceted concept in Indian philosophical tradition, serving as a guide for ethical behaviour and the pursuit of spiritual liberation.

For centuries, scholars of Indian philosophy have been perplexed by the enigmatic paradox of seeing ‘action in inaction’ and ‘inaction in action’. In his paper on the *Bhagavad Gita*, Herbert Fingarette delves into the profound philosophical implications underlying the concepts of action and suffering. Fingarette suggests that the ordered nature of thoughts in passive and active perspectives on routine mental activities is crucial to understanding the dichotomy between action and suffering. He defines action as “the execution of purpose” (358) and argues that intention and will, as they are commonly understood in the English language, fail to adequately capture this dichotomy. Fingarette also notes that the term “suffering” (361) can have varied connotations in various contexts. He further asserts that the seemingly opposite

ideas of action and inaction can merge and dissolve into each other when joy and misery are appropriately contextualised. Throughout his article, Fingarette advocates prioritising suffering over action, as he believes that “purposeful initiative” (364) is the most meaningful of all. Consequently, by cultivating a concentrated mind, it is possible to dissolve the binary opposition between suffering and non-suffering.

In his article “Bhagavadgita: the Dialectic of an Allegory,” Arvind Sharma offers a nuanced exploration of three distinct perspectives on action. The first perspective equates action with the purpose it serves, while the second, which Sharma terms ‘mis-action’ or ‘mal-action’, refers to the complex form of suffering that results from misguided action. The third perspective, which Sharma describes as ‘non-action’, he identifies as “contentless bliss” (361) Sharma argues that even actions undertaken with a clear purpose can lead to suffering, and suggests that only actions that arise spontaneously and without a predetermined purpose can truly be equated with non-action. He terms such spontaneous actions as examples of “unpurposed purpose” (363). Interestingly, this idea of “unpurposed purpose” finds resonance in Immanuel Kant’s notion of purposiveness without a purpose.

Swami Vivekananda, an eminent philosopher from nineteenth-century India, offers valuable insights into the treatise by raising crucial questions and providing answers. In his view, the *Bhagavad Gita* represents a response to the social, philosophical, and material conflicts of its time, and he elevates it to a supreme pedestal by pronouncing it and a few other texts on Vedānta sufficient for one’s salvation. Swami Vivekananda explores the concept of *gunas* (qualities of nature) that Shri Krishna expounds in the *Bhagavad Gita* and how they relate to human behaviour. He argues that a person with a preponderance of *sattva guna* remains undeterred by adversity and prosperity, while one with excessive *tamas guna* may succumb to emotions and fail to act according to *dharma*. Swami Vivekananda emphasises the importance of being in control of one’s emotions and actions, as well as the need for detachment and Karma Yoga, the yoga of action. In addition, he explains the concept of time and the laws of Karma, highlighting the eternal nature of the soul and the futility of seeking enjoyment or heaven through good works. Ultimately, the goal of human life is to realise one’s true nature as eternal, non-dual consciousness, which can only be achieved through reason and detachment. Swami Vivekananda’s commentary offers a rich and nuanced interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* and its relevance to contemporary life.

Within the Indian philosophical tradition, it is essential to recognise that the concept of the beginning and end of the world pertains to the beginning and end of a cycle, rather than

the entire universe. In Vedāntic Philosophy, the concept of time, or *kāla*, is understood differently than in other philosophical traditions. Therefore, in order to understand the principles that govern the universe in Vedāntic Philosophy, one must consider them within the context of this distinct understanding of time. All phenomena have a beginning and an end, except for the eternal nature of the soul, which transcends the mortality of the physical body. The law of Karma dictates that actions performed for oneself have an effect, whereas actions that are undertaken for the benefit of others do not. The release from Karma's hold can be achieved by undertaking actions without seeking enjoyment. True freedom can only be attained by transcending all worldly conditions. Even virtuous deeds performed with the intention of acquiring a heavenly afterlife bind individuals to the world. Therefore, detachment from work is a crucial aspect of Karma Yoga. The Self is considered to be both infinitely small and all-pervading, signified by the terms *anu* and *vibhu*, respectively.

The *Bhagavad Gita* presents a complex interplay in the dichotomies of right and wrong and duty and freedom. It is difficult to reconcile the requirement of performing one's fundamental duties in society with the idea of individual agency and spiritual liberation. This tension between duty and freedom is illustrated through the character of Arjuna, who is initially hesitant to fulfil his duty as a warrior and fight in a war against his own kinsmen, but eventually comes to realise that it is his duty to do so, as it is necessary for the preservation of the social order. D. C. Mathur, intrigued by the metaphysical uncertainty of the paradoxical notions, in his article "The Concept of Action in the Bhagavad-Gita" offers a critical examination of the doctrine of Nishkama-Karma or disinterested action and puts forth his own theory to address the shift in social paradigms. Mathur contextualises this doctrine within contemporary society by grounding the advice given by Shri Krishna in purely logical terms. According to him, the *Bhagavad Gita* puts great emphasis on social order, and idealises attributes such as detachment, equipoise, and unperturbability in the midst of intense activity, allowing the Self to remain unfettered by desires for the fruits of action. However, Mathur also recognises the limitations of Nishkama-Karma in contemporary society, particularly with regard to the problem of self-importance that arises when performing actions that have social and moral implications. He argues that the doctrine can "encourage a kind of spiritual self-consciousness that is inimical to moral action" (36).

Here, it needs to be understood that the *Bhagavad Gita* recognises the need for freedom from the constraints of ego and desire, and advocates for a detachment from the fruits of one's actions. However, this is possible only when one has transcended into the realm of

oneness. As long as one identifies with the body and mind, it is highly improbable to have a fine balance between right and wrong and duty and freedom in society. An egoistic attitude cannot be escaped but only accepted as long as one has not realised the true nature of the Self. According to Vinoba Bhave only when one becomes aware of the all-pervading eternal Self, true egalitarianism can be practised. He emphasises the significance of detachment, action without desire, and the pursuit of steadfast wisdom (*Sthitaprajna*) for the desireless pursuit of *Swadharma*, which leads to *moksha* or *Brahmanirvana*. He stresses the importance of understanding one's *swadharma* or predetermined purpose of birth, which involves transcending the body and mind and recognising one's true nature as the imperishable, all-pervading Self. He emphasises the need to follow one's *swadharma*, being swayed neither by *adharma* nor *parādharma*.

The *Bhagavad Gita* has been a subject of much scholarly discourse for its allegorical nature and its reflections on the human condition. Arvind Sharma, in his article "Bhagavadgita: the Dialectic of an Allegory," argues that the *Bhagavad Gita* is not just a religious text, but also a work of literature that uses allegory and symbolism to convey its message. He delves deeper into the allegorical interpretation given by Gandhi in which the Kurukshetra has been compared to the Dharmakshetra, that is, a parallel is drawn between the actual physical war fought in the battleground between Pandavas and Kauravas, and the one fought on an everyday basis between right and wrong or good and evil inside the body-mind complex of the individual. In this allegory, the Pandavas are akin to the higher impulses, that encourage spiritual enquiry, and the Kauravas represent the baser ones, which delude one and cause one to remain worldly. At a higher level of awareness, the field of the body can be recognised as the field of war. Many a time, it has been emphasised by critics and commentators that the *Mahabharata* is not simply a rendition of a story of a war fought between good and evil, rather, it is a metaphorical treatment of the war that goes on in the mind of every individual. The doubts about *dharma* arising in the mind of Arjuna are universal and ubiquitous. Arjuna's inner conflict represents the human struggle to find meaning and purpose in life, and the various characters and events in the *Mahabharata* serve as symbols for different aspects of human nature and the universe.

Even though a cultural and historical context surrounds the *Bhagavad Gita* and the understanding of the ideas and concepts appear to be specific to the Indian tradition, one can find various points of convergence between the Eastern and Western philosophies as one delves deeper into this text. However, this concern has been a matter of debate and different scholars

have presented various perspectives on this concern. In his article “The Gītā: East and West,” Paul Weiss argues against the notion that the *Bhagavad Gita* serves as a bridge between Eastern and Western ideologies, struggling to understand its underlying rationale. To substantiate his claim, Weiss foregrounds the paradoxes within the text, particularly in the domains of morality, naturalism, valuation, metaphysics, theology, and religion. Weiss questions the inclusive depiction of duties in the moral domain and the ethical implications of killing someone in the naturalistic domain. He also inquires why refusal to fight is considered wrong in the valuational domain. As for the metaphysical and theological domains, he underscores the paradoxes surrounding crime and sin. Finally, in the religious domain, he struggles with the concepts of good and evil. However, despite his criticisms, Weiss provides his own ways of reconciling the binary oppositions he identifies. However, he notes that the limitations of the *Bhagavad Gita* as a philosophical text make it challenging to read without proclivities towards the philosophy, and he finds Shri Krishna’s logical justifications to be lopsided and biased. Overall, Weiss grapples with the paradoxes presented in the text and struggles to understand their underlying rationale.

In response to Paul Weiss’s criticisms of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Haridas Chaudhari argues in his article, “The Gītā and Its Message for Humanity,” that the text presents a universal message that is not restricted to any “particular class or section of humanity” (245). Chaudhari emphasises the importance of using one’s intellect to comprehend sensations and perceptions and to systematise one’s life, warning against preconceived notions that cloud one’s vision. Chaudhari condemns fanaticism, iconoclasm and emotionalism as “signs of an unconscious lack of integrated truth-vision” (251). He also disputes Weiss’s claim that detachment from the fruits of action is the sole factor in determining one’s duty. Instead, he argues that one should consider the situation in which they find themselves to understand the paradoxes presented in the text and decide what to do based on their dharma. Chaudhari endorses the practice of yoga and meditation as a means of achieving an “undistorted truth-vision of an integrated personality” (253). He also emphasises the importance of critical thinking and self-examination in understanding the text and its message for humanity. Ultimately, Chaudhari presents a more optimistic view of the *Bhagavad Gita's* potential as a bridge between Eastern and Western philosophy, arguing that its universal message has relevance for all of humanity.

Adi Sankaracharya’s commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* probes into the dichotomies of weakness and courage, *Sankhya-buddhi* and *Yoga-buddhi*, and the Self and the body. According to him, evil influences overpower individuals weakened by grief and delusion.

The *Sankhya-buddhi* school does not consider the Self as the doer, while the *Yoga-buddhi* school considers the Self and body as separate entities, with the Self being the actual doer and enjoyer. The attainment of knowledge of the Self is crucial to eradicating misery, and salvation can only be achieved through the attainment of knowledge, not through knowledge conjoined with works. Adi Sankaracharya emphasises that the Self, or Atman, is eternal and persists through all past, present, and future, even after the death of the body. The wise person is undeterred by the binary of Self and body and attains Moksha or immortality by staying calm in all states.

Adi Sankaracharya further discusses the binaries of pleasure-pain, heat-cold, and the real and the unreal. He argues that since pleasure-pain and heat-cold are born out of contact with senses, they are inconstant in nature, while the Self is permanent. The real does not cease to exist, and the unreal never comes into existence. The wise person knows that every experience comprises a two-fold consciousness of the same substratum, one of the real, called *sat*, and the other of the unreal called *asat*. The consciousness of existence corresponds to the attributive, but it cannot exist in the absence of the consciousness of substantive. The Self is real, while the body is unreal, a mere mirage. The Self is indestructible and immutable, as it does not fall within the confines of existence, non-existence, birth, growth, transformation, renewal, and death.

The *Bhagavad Gita* presents a profound philosophical discourse that provides a detailed examination of various metaphysical aspects, such as the nature of self, action, suffering, reality, and time. It offers a comprehensive analysis of the philosophical implications of these aspects and explores diverse perspectives from different schools of thought within Hinduism. It serves to bring together various philosophical traditions like *Karma* and *Jnāna*, and *Sāmkhya* and *Yoga*, which had been confusing for the masses, under a single umbrella and resolves to reconcile the issues emanating from misinterpretations and lack of precise knowledge. In Chapter II of the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the discourse is officially said to begin, there is a discussion on various binary opposites like the slayer and the slain, self and body, knowledge and action, and true and untrue. The text presents a complex interplay between dichotomies such as duty and freedom, right and wrong, and action and inaction, which are difficult to reconcile. The engagement with the system of differences is what unsettles the mind. It shows a single path to be followed for a confused mind to attain the state of a *Sthitaprajna*. The *Bhagavad Gita* offers a path towards spiritual liberation by advocating detachment from the fruits of one's actions and the cultivation of an unwavering concentration

that can dissolve the binary oppositions and lead one to the realisation of the true Self. The Self is eternal and unchanging. Only the pure consciousness that transcends the body and mind is real and all things in the universe are ultimately manifestations of this one reality, which is beyond time, space, and causality. The ideas put forth in the text have fascinated scholars for centuries and continue to inspire reflection.

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