

## « The Ethics of Gita »

By Deepak Bansal

Suspended in the middle of battle, Arjuna cannot fight. Far off, on either side of the battlefield, the two sets of cousins and their grand armies stood, perplexed. Not a single word could be heard, and only figures of Arjuna on his chariot and Krishna as his charioteer in the middle of the field could be seen. In the center of it all, the greatest archer of the world lays down his arc and says, “*na yotsya iti govindam* (I cannot fight, Govind)” (Gita, 2.9).

The Bhagavad Gita often hailed as the "Song of God," began its teachings under dramatic conditions. In an attempt to guide a despondent Arjuna, Lord Krishna delivered a sermon more than 2000 years ago that has since been revered as a masterpiece encompassing the artistic, poetic, philosophical, cosmological, and spiritual dimensions of Indian life.

Notably, the Gita is among the few scriptures set against the backdrop of war, tasked with delivering answers that would alter the course of history. Despite drawing on the philosophical knowledge of its time, the Gita remained practical, offering specific guidance to Arjuna as he grappled with despair. This blend of philosophical depth and practical wisdom is why the Gita is celebrated as a philosophical scripture and a source of pragmatic guidance.

In this essay, we will explore the cultural and historical contexts that shaped the Gita. We will examine the key ethical principles it espouses and reflect on the Gita's enduring influence on the culture of the Indian subcontinent today.

### 1. Cultural and Historical Setting

By the second century BCE, the Indian subcontinent was a mosaic of distinct yet interconnected spiritual traditions. These included the ritualistic formalism of the Vedas, the asceticism of the Upanishads, the world-renouncing teachings of Buddhism, and the practices of Yoga and Sankhya. Alongside these were sects like the Bhagavata, who venerated deities such as Krishna, and texts such as the Dharmashastras, which were societal laws imbued with Vedic symbolism.

Amid this diverse spiritual landscape, the Bhagavad Gita emerged, positioning itself as an Upanishad with Krishna serving as the teacher and Arjuna as the disciple. It highlighted the Bhagavata sect by elevating Krishna as a deity and wove together the philosophies of Sankhya and Yoga, focusing on personal practice. The Gita challenged the prevailing Vedic emphasis on sacrifices and reinterpreted Dharma, not as rigid commandments but as dynamic moral principles. It also introduced the concept of the divine incarnation (avatar), marking a significant evolution in Indian spiritual texts.

The setting of the Gita—delivered as a sermon on a battlefield just before a war between cousins—underscores the societal tensions of the time. It reflects the era's spiritual conflicts and symbolizes a shift from external rituals and commandments to an internal cultivation of moral values and devotion. This transition in the spiritual landscape marked a profound shift in the way divine guidance and righteousness were understood in Indian philosophy.

The Gita is often seen as part of the great Indian epic, the "*Mahabharata*" (*the Great Bharata*), which recounts the conflict between two sets of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, typically depicted as a struggle between evil and good, respectively. The Mahabharata is

believed to have been written between the 3rd century BCE and the 3rd century CE, though some scholars suggest its origins could date back to the 6th century BCE. Pinpointing the exact date of its composition remains challenging. It is one of the world's longest poems, comprising approximately 1.8 million words—about ten times the combined length of Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey."

The Gita itself, a later addition to the Mahabharata, is a concise text with 18 chapters, around 700 verses, and 6,000 words. Despite its brevity, the Gita is regarded as the principal section of this extensive epic, revered for its profound wisdom.

The conflict in the Mahabharata escalates when the Kauravas unjustly dethrone the Pandavas and humiliate the wife of the Pandavas in a rigged dice game. Despite the Pandavas' pleas for peace, conveyed through Krishna as their messenger, the Kauravas reject their overtures and even attempt to imprison Krishna. Left with no choice, the Pandavas are compelled to fight to restore their honor in society. On the eve of the battle, as the armies assemble, Arjuna, the principal warrior of the Pandavas, becomes overwhelmed by the impending destruction and the familial bonds that tie him to his opponents. He relinquishes his bow and confides in his charioteer, Krishna—a divine figure—that he sees no merit in the conflict.

It is in this moment of crisis that the Gita is delivered. As the sermon unfolds, the physical and spiritual divide between the Kauravas and the Pandavas is stark, with Krishna and Arjuna stationed in their chariot at the heart of the battlefield (*Kurushetra*). Eknath Easwaran remarked on the brilliance of embedding such profound wisdom within the chaos of war, challenging philosophy to provide practical answers. Through his teachings in the Gita, Krishna not only offers these answers but also profoundly transforms the understanding of ethics in the Indian subcontinent.

## 2. The Ethics of Gita

Arjun, a warrior renowned for his intellectual prowess and mastery in archery, was well-versed in traditional virtues and sportsmanship. Despite his accolades, he faced a moment of deep despondency and sought guidance from his charioteer, Lord Krishna. Rather than listing virtues to help Arjun decide his course of action, Krishna led him down an unexpected path emphasizing reflection, self-realization, and decision-making.

The 18 chapters of the Bhagavad Gita are broadly segmented into three primary teachings: action, wisdom, and love. These teachings form the basis of three paths of yoga within the Gita: Karma Yoga (action), Jnana Yoga (wisdom), and Bhakti Yoga (devotion or love). Collectively, they represent the core ethical principles upon which the Gita is founded.

### ***Karma Yoga: Action without Attachment to Result***

One of the Bhagavad Gita's core teachings is to act without attachment to outcomes. This profound and challenging concept encourages shifting decision-making anchors from desires and passions—typically driven by outcomes—to a commitment to righteousness and necessary action. It invites introspection on the fundamental question: "Why are we doing what we are doing?"

To elucidate this concept, Krishna explains to Arjuna the dynamics of the phenomenal world, or *Prakriti* (Nature), which operates through three *gunas* or modes: *Tamasic* (ignorance, inertia, blind driving force of machine), *Rajasic* (desire and passion), and *Sattvic* (goodness or light). The Tamasic mode is likened to a solid—stable but immobile, often leading to inaction due to laziness and is therefore least desirable. The Rajasic mode, similar to a liquid, is dynamic but can become uncontrolled and scattered, necessitating regulation. The Sattvic mode, akin to a gas, is pervasive and enlightening, representing the highest state of mental and spiritual harmony.

Krishna urges Arjuna to overcome his Tamasic state of dejection and inertia and to engage in battle but not driven by the Rajasic impulses of desire and attachment. Such motivations scatter energy and focus on outcomes, leading to frustration and further desire when expectations are not met, trapping one in a cycle of desire and disappointment. Arjuna can master his archery, but he cannot control the variables that might dictate victory or defeat. “*Karmanye Vadhikaraste, Ma phaleshou kada chana,*” claimed Krishna (BG 2.7). You have the right to action but not to the fruits of the action.

Karma is the dynamic force of action that embodies the principles of cause and effect within Nature. It represents the consequence of past actions and the catalyst for future outcomes.. To ensure that his participation does not stick to the Karmic force of Nature, Arjuna is encouraged to fight with detachment from the results, driven by his duty or purpose—his “*Dharma.*” In doing so, even in defeat, he triumphs, for his actions are guided by the righteous and purifying influence of the Sattvic mode, anchoring his decision-making in integrity and purpose. While we believe we are the doers of our actions, these actions are, in fact, performed through us by the *gunas* of *Prakriti*. True liberation is achieved by transcending these three *gunas* to realize and connect with the “*Self.*”

### ***Jnana Yoga: Self-Realization***

Although Arjuna's dilemma of whether to fight seems rooted in practicality, Krishna guides him through an exploration of metaphysical truths. The Bhagavad Gita, while not a purely philosophical text, is a poetic scripture that delves into immediate concerns yet reaches beyond the practical to grasp the essence of the universe.

Our five senses interact with the five elements of Nature: earth, water, fire, air, and ether. The sense-mind (*manas*) processes these interactions, generating emotions. Our intellect (*buddhi*) then steps in, providing the discerning mind that judges what is right and wrong. Behind this intellect lies our self or ego, which shapes our individuality. This ego also represents the seed of the Atman, or Jiva, which has the potential to connect with something behind it, Purusha (the Absolute Consciousness).

In the ultimate reality, Purusha and Prakriti are unified; Prakriti acts as the will and the manifesting power of Purusha, the divine consciousness. Purusha permeates every element of Prakriti, infusing it with its qualities. In this divine form, Purusha is represented by Krishna. He describes his omnipresence in Bhagavad Gita 7.8: “*I am the taste of water, O Arjuna, the radiance of the sun and moon, the sacred syllable Om in the Vedic mantras, the sound in ether, and the ability in humans.*”

Krishna invites Arjuna to connect with this inherent process of becoming, *svabhava*, both within himself and in Prakriti, emanating from pure consciousness. By tuning into this

presence, we can realize the Self. This realization of the Self serves as our true anchor for action. Even if Arjuna must confront and possibly kill his relatives, if it is in alignment with the will of the Self, he will not incur negative karma. This is because Arjuna's actions would be in accordance with his divine purpose (*svadharma*). Death and life are integral parts of Prakriti, with death making way for new life. But when sin overtakes righteousness, it becomes the duty of the virtuous to vanquish evil. Bhagavad Gita (4.7) states, “*Whenever there is a decline in righteousness and an increase in sinfulness, O Arjuna, at that time I manifest Myself on Earth.*”

Krishna, in His divine form, is fulfilling His divine duty (*svadharma*) to restore righteousness—a duty now passed to Arjuna, urging him to embrace his role in this cosmic cycle as he realizes his Self.

### ***Bhakti Yoga: Self Surrender***

Connecting through the path of knowledge can be demanding, as it typically involves grappling with abstract concepts. For those who find this challenging, Krishna offers an alternative: the path of love, surrender, and devotion (*Bhakti*). This route is particularly resonant for individuals immersed in music, arts, and dance, where emotional expression and connection are central.

Arjuna boldly requested Krishna to reveal His divine form, seeking a deeper connection with the divine to understand him better. This moment is one of the most profound in the scripture, where Krishna acknowledges Arjuna’s love and devotion to Him and grants Arjuna a vision of the World Spirit. In this vision, Krishna transcends time and space, displaying His consciousness in a form beyond Arjuna's normal sight.

In this celestial form, Krishna embodies both creation and destruction. As the creator, He encompasses all beings, even those yet to be born; as the destroyer, everyone present on the battlefield is already deemed deceased. In Bhagavad Gita (11.19), Arjuna exclaims, “*You are without beginning, middle, or end; Your power is limitless. Your arms are infinite; the sun and moon are Your eyes, and fire is Your mouth. I see You illuminating the entire creation with Your radiance.*” Arjuna met Krishna, the divine consciousness, directly.

Arjuna was granted a vision of the divine cosmos, leading us to wonder how we, too, can connect with this supreme consciousness. This transcendent divine presence can be reached through paths of pure love, surrender, and the quietude achieved by drawing in the mind and senses. Sri Aurobindo illuminates this idea, saying, “When they meditate on him with a yoga which sees none else, because it sees all to be Krishna, he meets them at every point, in every movement, at all times, with innumerable forms and faces.”

This divine connection can manifest in various relationships—be it as a friend, lover, or Master—and he responds in each role when approached with devotion. By surrendering all actions to him, his presence permeates each deed. Krishna encapsulates this in the Bhagavad Gita's concluding verse (18.66), promising, “*Abandon all forms of dharma and just surrender unto me. I will liberate you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear.*”

### **C. Cultural Influence of Gita**

Gita has a prodound impact both in Western and Indian culture.

### *Western Culture:*

According to J.J. Clarke, Charles Wilkins first translated the Gita into English in 1785. Since then, it has been an influential text, not only for the American intellectual traditions including transcendentalists and metaphysicists, but also for English orientalists, and German Romantic traditions. By about 1890, the Gita was accessible to the average European and American and it came to be regarded in India as her national or spiritual symbol.

Many well-known scholars in the Western world, including James Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, H. P. Blavatsky, Thomas Merton, and Rudolf Steiner, deeply studied the Gita and developed their own philosophical understanding of the text. Some Western intellectuals saw the Gita in their own terms, some found it interesting for its implications for modern Western viewpoints, and others considered it to confirm their own viewpoint.

### *Indian Culture:*

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that if one were to select a scripture emblematic of Indian Wisdom Traditions akin to the Quran or Bible, the Bhagavad Gita would be the foremost choice. Shankara, an eighth-century CE mystic, underscored this when he chose the Gita and ten Upanishads from among approximately one hundred other significant texts.

Mahatma Gandhi, a devoted student of the Gita, emphasized its influence during the Indian Independence movement through his advocacy of non-violence. While at first glance this might seem paradoxical, given Krishna's counsel to Arjuna to engage in battle, Gandhi interpreted the Gita as symbolizing the internal conflict between good and evil, our own personal Kurukshetra. C.K. Chester remarked that to truly understand the Gita, one should examine Gandhi's life, which embodies its 700 verses.

While Gandhi championed non-violence in Western India, Subhas Chandra Bose advocated for armed struggle in Eastern India. Both leaders drew inspiration from the Gita, illustrating that its ethics extend beyond simple notions of right and wrong, urging followers to find their personal purpose and divine connection.

Prominent Indian mystics and philosophers like Sri Aurobindo, Paramahansa Yogananda, Swami Prabhupada, Shankaracharya, and Ramanuja have all written commentaries on the Gita, incorporating its teachings into their lives. With its perennial philosophy that the divine is omnipresent, the Gita continues to shape thoughts, discussions, and actions in Indian culture at every turn.

Bhagavad Gita's enduring wisdom transcends mere philosophical discourse; it is a vital spiritual guide that has shaped countless lives and continues to influence diverse aspects of Indian culture. Through its profound teachings on duty, righteousness, and the paths of knowledge, devotion, and action, the Gita offers invaluable insights into the struggle between good and evil within all of us. As epitomized by figures like Mahatma Gandhi and interpreted across various interpretations by mystics and philosophers, the Gita remains a beacon of spiritual guidance. Its message of detachment, duty, and devotion to a higher purpose resonates with a universal appeal, making it not just a cornerstone of Indian wisdom but a global spiritual legacy.

**Reference:**

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- b) Essay on Gita; Sri Aurobindo
- c) The Bhagavad Gita and The West; Rudolph Steiner and Robert Mc Dermott
- d) Timeless Leadership; Debashish Chatterjee