

THE CONCEPT OF DHARMA IN THE BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ: PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Dr. Anju J*

Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit
Sreenarayanaguru Open University, Kollam, Kerala, India

Abstract

The concept of *Dharma* occupies a central position in Indian philosophical and ethical thought. Among the Sanskrit texts that discuss Dharma extensively, the *Bhagavad Gītā* presents a distinctive philosophical interpretation of Dharma by connecting ethical responsibility, self-knowledge, detached action and spiritual liberation. The Gītā does not treat Dharma merely as a set of external rules or social obligations; rather, it presents Dharma as a principle of responsible action grounded in one's nature, duties, circumstances and commitment to the welfare of the world. The dialogue between Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna takes place in a moment of ethical crisis, thereby making the concept of Dharma particularly significant for the study of moral decision-making.

This paper examines the philosophical foundations of Dharma in the *Bhagavad Gītā* through selected verses, particularly those relating to *svadharma*, *niṣkāma karma*, *lokasaṅgraha*, equality of vision and ethical responsibility. The study also explores the relevance of these concepts in contemporary society, especially in the fields of education, professional ethics, leadership, social responsibility and personal development. The paper argues that the Gītā's conception of Dharma provides a framework for understanding responsible action without reducing ethical life to personal gain or external reward. Its emphasis on disciplined action, self-control and social welfare offers significant material for contemporary ethical discourse.

Keywords: Dharma, Bhagavad Gītā, Svadharma, Karma Yoga, Lokasaṅgraha, Ethics, Indian Philosophy, Contemporary Society

1. Introduction

Indian philosophical traditions have developed a rich vocabulary for discussing human life, ethical responsibility and spiritual fulfilment. Among these concepts, *Dharma* occupies a particularly important position. The term occurs extensively in Vedic, Upaniṣadic, epic, Purāṇic and Dharmasāstric literature. Although Dharma is frequently translated into English as “duty,” “righteousness,” “law,” “virtue” or “ethical order,” none of these terms completely expresses its semantic range.

The *Bhagavad Gītā*, embedded within the *Mahābhārata*, presents Dharma in the form of a philosophical dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. Arjuna experiences a profound moral crisis before the commencement of the battle. His dilemma is not merely personal. It concerns conflicting obligations towards family, society, justice and personal morality. Kṛṣṇa's response develops into a comprehensive philosophical teaching concerning action, knowledge, devotion and liberation. The importance of the *Gītā*'s treatment of Dharma lies partly in its recognition that ethical decisions often emerge from complex circumstances. Arjuna does not lack knowledge of his social position; rather, he struggles to determine how he should act when different values appear to conflict. Kṛṣṇa therefore develops an understanding of action that connects Dharma with *svadharma*, self-discipline, detachment and social welfare.

The present study examines the concept of Dharma in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and considers its relevance to contemporary ethical life. The objective is not to transfer ancient concepts mechanically into modern circumstances, but to identify philosophical principles that can contribute to present discussions of responsibility, education, professional conduct and social welfare.

2. The Meaning of Dharma

The Sanskrit word *Dharma* is traditionally associated with the verbal root *dhṛ*, “to sustain, support or uphold.” In a broad philosophical sense, Dharma can therefore be understood as that which sustains an individual, society or moral order.

The concept has multiple dimensions. At the individual level, Dharma concerns responsible conduct and appropriate action. At the social level, it is associated with order, responsibility and mutual obligations. At the philosophical level, Dharma can refer to a

principle that sustains the ethical and cosmic order. The *Mahābhārata* frequently explores the complexity of Dharma. Dharma is not always easy to identify because human situations may involve conflicting obligations. The *Bhagavad Gītā* develops this problem through Arjuna's crisis.

The opening of the *Gītā* establishes the setting of moral conflict. Arjuna sees his relatives, teachers and friends on both sides of the battlefield and becomes overwhelmed by sorrow. He questions the value of victory obtained through the destruction of those whom he respects.

His famous statement expresses this dilemma:

न काङ्क्षे विजयं कृष्ण न च राज्यं सुखानि च ।
किं नो राज्येन गोविन्द किं भोगैर्जीवितेन वा ॥ (*Bhagavad Gītā* 1.32)

Arjuna states that he does not desire victory, kingdom or pleasures when these are obtained at the cost of those dear to him. This situation establishes the central ethical problem of the *Gītā*: **How should an individual act when personal emotions and perceived moral obligations appear to conflict?**

3. Dharma and Svadharma

One of the most important formulations of Dharma in the *Gītā* occurs in the teaching of *svadharma*. Kṛṣṇa states:

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् ।
स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः ॥ (*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.35)

The verse emphasizes the importance of performing one's own Dharma rather than merely adopting another's Dharma. The same principle appears later:

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् ।
स्वभावनियतं कर्म कुर्वन्नाप्नोति किल्बिषम् ॥ (*Bhagavad Gītā* 18.47)

Here, Dharma is connected with *svabhāva*, one's inherent nature or disposition, and the action arising from it. The concept of *svadharma* should not be interpreted simply as an inflexible

social classification. Philosophically, it raises the question of contextual responsibility: What responsibilities arise from one's role, abilities, circumstances and commitments?

In contemporary life, this principle can be considered in relation to professional responsibility. A teacher, doctor, administrator, researcher, parent or public servant may have different responsibilities. Ethical conduct requires awareness of the responsibilities associated with one's position while simultaneously respecting universal ethical values.

4. Dharma and Niṣkāma Karma

The Gītā's treatment of Dharma is closely connected with the doctrine of *Karma Yoga*. Kṛṣṇa teaches:

**कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥** (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.47)

The verse is one of the most widely discussed passages of the Gītā. It emphasizes commitment to action while discouraging attachment to the fruits of action. This teaching does not mean that the results of action are irrelevant. Rather, it distinguishes between responsible action and psychological attachment to outcomes. A person must perform the appropriate action with sincerity while recognizing that results depend upon multiple factors.

The principle has considerable relevance to professional ethics. A teacher, for example, should focus on responsible teaching, mentoring and intellectual development rather than viewing every educational activity exclusively through the lens of immediate personal reward. Similarly, a researcher should value academic integrity and the pursuit of knowledge rather than allowing publication pressure to determine scholarly conduct. Thus, *niṣkāma karma* may be understood as an ethical orientation in which action is performed conscientiously without excessive attachment to personal gain.

5. Dharma and Lokasaṅgraha

Another important dimension of Dharma in the Gītā is *lokasaṅgraha*, commonly understood as the welfare, preservation or cohesion of the world. Kṛṣṇa declares:

लोकसंग्रहमेवापि सम्पश्यन्कर्तुमर्हसि ॥ (*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.20)

The idea becomes more explicit in the following verse:

**यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवेतरो जनः ।
स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥** (*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.21)

The conduct of influential individuals has an effect upon society. Those occupying positions of responsibility therefore have obligations that extend beyond themselves. This idea is highly relevant to contemporary leadership. Leaders in educational institutions, government, business and social organizations influence institutional culture through their conduct. Ethical leadership consequently requires more than personal competence. It requires awareness of the social consequences of one's actions. The concept of *lokasaṅgraha* therefore broadens Dharma from individual responsibility to social responsibility.

6. Dharma, Self-Control and Ethical Discipline

The Gītā does not separate external action from internal discipline. Ethical action requires control over the mind and senses. Kṛṣṇa states:

**उद्धरेदात्मनात्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत् ।
आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः ॥** (*Bhagavad Gītā* 6.5)

The individual is encouraged to elevate oneself through one's own disciplined mind.

This teaching suggests that ethical responsibility is not created merely through external regulations. Laws and institutional rules are necessary, but sustainable ethical behaviour also requires internal discipline. In contemporary education, this principle has particular significance. Education should not be limited to information transmission. It should

contribute to self-regulation, responsibility, empathy and reflective thinking. In this sense, the Gītā's philosophical approach corresponds with broader conceptions of holistic education.

7. Dharma and Equality

The ethical vision of the Gītā is also connected with the recognition of unity and equality. Kṛṣṇa states:

**विद्याविनयसम्पन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि ।
शुनि चैव श्वपाके च पण्डिताः समदर्शिनः ॥** (*Bhagavad Gītā* 5.18)

The wise person is described as one who sees with equality a learned person, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a person traditionally placed outside the social hierarchy. The philosophical significance of *samadarśana* lies in overcoming narrow forms of ego-based distinction. It encourages a vision in which human worth is not reduced to external status.

In contemporary society, this principle can be related to inclusive education, social dignity and respect for diversity. Educational institutions in particular have a responsibility to create environments in which students from different social, cultural and economic backgrounds can participate meaningfully.

8. Dharma and Social Responsibility

The Gītā presents the individual not as an isolated entity but as part of a wider network of relationships. Action affects others, and therefore personal responsibility has a social dimension. The doctrine of *lokasaṅgraha* is particularly important in this context. Individuals possessing knowledge, authority or influence are expected to act in ways that contribute to social stability. This principle can be applied to several contemporary areas:

8.1 Professional Ethics

Professional life involves specialized responsibilities. The Gītā's emphasis on performing one's appropriate action with sincerity provides a philosophical foundation for professional responsibility.

8.2 Academic Ethics

Teachers and researchers have obligations concerning truth, intellectual honesty and the responsible transmission of knowledge. The spirit of *niṣkāma karma* encourages commitment to scholarly work without reducing knowledge to personal advancement.

8.3 Administrative Responsibility

Administrators exercise authority over institutions and individuals. The principle of *lokasaṅgraha* emphasizes that authority should be exercised with awareness of its wider social consequences.

8.4 Environmental Responsibility

Although the *Gītā* is not an environmental treatise in the modern sense, its broader understanding of interdependence and disciplined consumption can contribute to contemporary ecological discussions. The concept of responsibility can be extended from human relationships to the relationship between human beings and nature.

9. Dharma and Contemporary Education

The educational philosophy implicit in the *Gītā* extends beyond the accumulation of information. The ideal learner is expected to develop discrimination, self-control and responsible action. The *Gītā* states:

न हि ज्ञानेन सदृशं पवित्रमिह विद्यते । (*Bhagavad Gītā* 4.38)

Knowledge is described as something profoundly purifying. Education, therefore, has an ethical dimension. Knowledge should contribute to the transformation of the individual rather than merely increasing professional qualifications. The *Gītā*'s emphasis on self-discipline, responsibility and reflective knowledge can be incorporated into contemporary educational practices through value education, ethical reasoning, experiential learning and socially responsible academic engagement.

10. Dharma and Leadership

The Gītā's concept of leadership is closely associated with personal example. The statement *yadyadācarati śreṣṭhaḥ* indicates that individuals in positions of influence shape social behaviour through their own conduct. Leadership, therefore, involves three interconnected dimensions:

1. **Personal integrity**
2. **Responsible action**
3. **Commitment to collective welfare**

A leader who possesses authority but lacks ethical discipline may negatively influence an institution. The Gītā's model instead connects leadership with responsibility and example. This perspective is applicable to contemporary educational leadership, institutional administration and organizational management.

11. Dharma and Mental Well-Being

The Gītā's discussion of action also has relevance to contemporary discussions of psychological well-being. Excessive attachment to results can generate anxiety, frustration and dissatisfaction. The teaching of detached action provides a philosophical framework for cultivating a balanced attitude towards success and failure. Kṛṣṇa states:

**योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय ।
सिद्ध्यसिद्ध्योः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग उच्यते ॥** (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.48)

The verse associates Yoga with equanimity towards success and failure.

The teaching does not advocate indifference towards performance. Rather, it encourages balanced engagement. Individuals are expected to act sincerely while maintaining psychological stability regardless of immediate outcomes. Such an approach can be considered relevant to contemporary professional and educational environments where performance pressure is often significant.

12. Dharma and Ethical Decision-Making

The ethical crisis of Arjuna illustrates that moral decisions cannot always be reduced to simple rules. Ethical decision-making may require reflection upon intention, circumstance, responsibility and consequences.

The Gītā's approach combines several elements:

- awareness of responsibility;
- disciplined action;
- discrimination (*viveka*);
- control of desire;
- detachment from personal reward;
- concern for social welfare; and
- pursuit of knowledge.

Therefore, Dharma in the Gītā can be understood as a dynamic ethical principle rather than merely a fixed code of conduct. The philosophical value of the Gītā lies in its attempt to integrate action and knowledge. Ethical action becomes meaningful when it is accompanied by self-awareness and responsibility.

13. Discussion

The study reveals that the concept of Dharma in the *Bhagavad Gītā* has several interconnected dimensions. First, Dharma involves responsible action appropriate to one's situation. Second, it requires detachment from excessive concern for personal results. Third, it includes responsibility towards society. Fourth, it presupposes self-discipline and reflective knowledge.

The concept of *svadharma* emphasizes contextual responsibility, while *niṣkāma karma* addresses the psychological orientation with which action should be performed. *Lokasaṅgraha* expands the field of responsibility to include collective welfare. *Samadarśana* introduces an ethical vision that challenges narrow distinctions based upon external identity.

These concepts should not be transferred mechanically into modern social structures. Their contemporary application requires philosophical interpretation and sensitivity to modern principles such as equality, human dignity, constitutional values and social justice.

Nevertheless, the *Gītā* offers a substantial conceptual framework for discussions of ethical responsibility, particularly in education, professional life and leadership.

14. Findings

The major findings of the study are as follows:

1. Dharma in the *Bhagavad Gītā* possesses a broader meaning than the English concept of “duty.”
2. *Svadharmā* emphasizes responsibility in relation to one's nature, role and circumstances.
3. *Niṣkāma karma* provides a model of responsible action without excessive attachment to personal reward.
4. *Lokasaṅgraha* connects individual ethical conduct with collective welfare.
5. The *Gītā* associates ethical action with self-control and knowledge.
6. The principle of *samadarśana* contributes to an ethical vision of equality and respect.
7. The *Gītā*'s understanding of Dharma can contribute to contemporary discussions of education, professional ethics and leadership.
8. Contemporary application requires contextual interpretation rather than literal transplantation of ancient social categories.

15. Conclusion

The concept of Dharma occupies a central position in the philosophical teaching of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Arjuna's ethical crisis provides the context through which Kṛṣṇa develops a comprehensive philosophy of responsible action. Dharma is presented through concepts such as *svadharmā*, *karma yoga*, *niṣkāma karma* and *lokasaṅgraha*, each contributing a distinct dimension to ethical life.

The *Gītā*'s teaching suggests that meaningful action requires more than external compliance. It requires awareness of responsibility, self-discipline, knowledge and concern for the welfare of others. The individual is encouraged to perform appropriate action sincerely while avoiding excessive attachment to its fruits.

In contemporary society, these ideas remain relevant to discussions of professional responsibility, educational values, ethical leadership and social welfare. The significance of

the Gītā does not lie merely in applying an ancient text directly to modern problems, but in engaging critically with its philosophical concepts and examining how they may contribute to contemporary ethical reflection. Dharma, understood as responsible and reflective action directed towards individual and collective well-being, thus continues to provide a meaningful subject for philosophical and interdisciplinary research.

References

1. Bhattacharyya, K. C. *The Philosophy of the Bhagavadgita*. University of Calcutta, 1929..
2. Gambhirananda, Swami. *Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*. Advaita Ashrama, 1997.
3. Radhakrishnan, S. *The Bhagavadgita*. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2010.
4. Sargeant, Winthrop. *The Bhagavad Gita*. State University of New York Press, 2009.
5. Sharma, Arvind. *The Hindu Gītā: Ancient and Classical Interpretations of the Bhagavadgītā*. HarperCollins, 1986.
6. *Bhagavad Gītā*. Critical Sanskrit text with traditional commentarial sources.
7. *Mahābhārata*. Critical Edition. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune.
8. Śaṅkarācārya. *Bhagavadgītā Bhāṣya*. Edited editions published by Advaita Vedānta institutions.