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The *Bhagavadgītā* as a source of psychological well-being: It's relevance to contemporary society

Utpreksha Devi**Abstract**

The *Bhagavadgītā* is regarded as one of the most significant philosophical and spiritual text originating from India. While it forms part of the larger epic the *Mahābhārata*, it's teachings address prevalent mental health concerns such as anxiety, fear, grief, confusion, attachment, stress and self-doubt. The conversation between Arjuna and Lord Kṛṣṇa provides a comprehensive exploration of the human mind and strategies for challenging circumstances. The *Bhagavadgītā* emphasizes self-understanding, emotional regulation, purposeful action, detachment from outcomes, mental discipline, resilience and the fulfillment of duties with clarity of purpose. These principles remain highly relevant in contemporary society, where individuals encounter academic pressure, occupational stress, social comparison, uncertainty, materialism and rapidly evolving lifestyles. This paper discusses selected teachings of the *Bhagavadgītā* from a mental health perspective and evaluates their potential to enhance psychological well-being in the present context.

Keywords: *Bhagavadgītā*, psychological well-being, stress, anxiety, self-awareness, emotional regulation, resilience, contemporary society

Introduction

Psychological well-being has become an important concern in contemporary society. Rapid technological development, academic and professional competition, economic uncertainty, social isolation, changing family structures, and constant exposure to information have created new forms of psychological pressure. People frequently experience stress, anxiety, uncertainty, dissatisfaction, and a sense of meaninglessness. The *Bhagavadgītā*, commonly known as the *Gītā*, occupies a central position in Indian philosophical thought. It forms part of the *Mahābhārata* and consists of a conversation between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. Arjuna faces a profound personal and moral crisis when he sees his relatives, teachers, and friends among those whom he is expected to fight. His physical symptoms, emotional distress, doubts, and inability to act provide the starting point for Kṛṣṇa's teaching. From a contemporary perspective, Arjuna's crisis can be read as a representation of a broader human experience: the difficulty of making decisions when individuals are overwhelmed by fear, attachment, uncertainty, conflicting responsibilities, and concern about consequences. The *Gītā* does not use the terminology of modern psychology, nor was it intended as a psychological textbook. Nevertheless, it's discussion of the mind, emotions, action, self-control, attachment, and inner balance provides rich material for examining psychological well-being.

Understanding psychological well-being

Psychological well-being is broader than the absence of mental illness. It generally includes positive psychological functioning, emotional balance, meaningful relationships, a sense of purpose, self-acceptance and the ability to deal constructively with life's challenges. The modern concept of well-being has been explored through several psychological approaches. For example, positive psychology has emphasized human strengths, positive relationships, and the development of capacities that enable individuals and communities to function well. Similarly, psychological research on resilience examines how individuals respond to adversity and adapt to difficult circumstances. The *Bhagavadgītā* approaches these questions from a philosophical and spiritual perspective.

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It is concerned with the fundamental problem of human suffering and with the transformation of the individual's relationship to action, desire, self, and circumstance. A significant feature of the Gītā is that it does not suggest that a meaningful life is a life without difficulty. Arjuna's crisis occurs in an extremely difficult situation. Kṛṣṇa's teaching does not instruct him to escape from the situation. Instead, it seeks to transform his understanding of himself, his responsibilities, and the results of his actions. This provides an important principle for psychological well-being; well-being may involve developing an appropriate inner response to unavoidable difficulties rather than attempting to eliminate every source of difficulty.

Arjuna's crisis as a psychological crisis

The first chapter of the Bhagavadgītā provides a striking portrayal of psychological conflict. When Arjuna observes the opposing army, he becomes overwhelmed by grief, fear, attachment, and moral confusion. He questions the value of victory and expresses his unwillingness to fight against those whom he loves and respects. His crisis can be interpreted as a conflict between competing values and responsibilities. On one side are his social and moral obligations; on the other are his emotional attachments and concerns about the consequences of action. The Gītā therefore begins not with a theoretical discussion but with a human crisis. Arjuna represents an individual who is unable to determine what action is appropriate because his emotional state has affected his judgment. Kṛṣṇa's response is not simply to suppress Arjuna's emotions. Rather, Krishna attempts to broaden his understanding of the situation. The dialogue gradually moves from immediate emotional distress toward questions of duty, identity, knowledge, action, and spiritual understanding.

From a contemporary perspective, this suggests that psychological well-being involves more than emotional comfort. It can also involve the capacity to examine one's assumptions, clarify one's values and make decisions despite uncertainty.

Equanimity: The principle of Samatva

One of the most important teachings of the Bhagavadgītā is the principle of equanimity. In the second chapter, Kṛṣṇa describes yoga as a state of balance and advises Arjuna to remain steady in success and failure. The famous teaching states-

Samatvaṁ yoga ucyate | Bhagavadgītā, 2/48

The concept of samatva does not mean emotional indifference. Rather, it refers to maintaining inner stability despite changing external circumstances. Human life inevitably includes success and failure, praise and criticism, gain and loss, pleasure and pain. If psychological stability depends entirely on external outcomes, the individual becomes vulnerable to continual emotional fluctuations. This idea has considerable relevance to contemporary life. Students may experience intense anxiety about examination results. Employees may define their self-worth through promotions or professional achievements. Individuals may experience distress when social approval changes. Social media can intensify these

tendencies by encouraging constant comparison with others. The Gītā's teaching of equanimity provides a different orientation. It suggests that individuals should act sincerely while avoiding excessive psychological dependence on external results. Such an approach can be understood as an invitation to develop internal stability rather than allowing every external success or failure to determine one's sense of worth.

Niṣkāma Karma: Action without excessive attachment

The doctrine of karma yoga is one of the central teachings of the Gītā. Kṛṣṇa encourages Arjuna to perform his prescribed duty without attachment to the fruits of action. The principle is expressed in the second chapter of Gītā-

Karmaṇyevādhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣu kadācana |

Bhagavadgītā, 2/47

The teaching is commonly understood as emphasizing one's responsibility for action rather than an attempt to control its ultimate results. This principle is particularly relevant to contemporary performance-oriented culture. Modern individuals are frequently evaluated according to grades, salaries, professional achievements, social status, and measurable outcomes. Such evaluation can create fear of failure and excessive concern about results. The Gītā does not suggest that results are irrelevant. Rather, it emphasizes that human beings have greater control over their actions than over all the circumstances determining their results. Recognizing this distinction can reduce excessive anxiety concerning factors beyond one's control. For example, a student can control preparation, discipline, and effort but cannot completely control examination questions, evaluation, competition, or unforeseen circumstances. Similarly, a professional can control the quality of work but cannot completely control organizational decisions or economic conditions.

Thus, niṣkāma karma can be interpreted as an orientation toward responsible effort without excessive attachment to outcomes.

Desire, attachment and emotional disturbance

The Bhagavadgītā provides an important analysis of how attachment and desire can contribute to emotional disturbance. The second chapter describes a sequence beginning with contemplation of objects, followed by attachment, desire, anger, confusion, and loss of discrimination. This passage is significant because it presents psychological disturbance as a process rather than an isolated event. The underlying idea can be illustrated as follows:

Repeated attention → attachment → intensified desire → frustration → anger → impaired judgment → disturbed action

Contemporary individuals may encounter similar processes in everyday life. A person may repeatedly compare themselves with others through social media, develop a strong desire for a particular lifestyle, experience frustration when it is not achieved, and subsequently experience dissatisfaction or anger.

The Gītā therefore encourages awareness of the relationship between attention, desire, attachment, and

emotional reaction. However, the Gītā's philosophical understanding of desire should not be reduced to a modern clinical explanation. Its ultimate concern is spiritual liberation as well as psychological balance. Nevertheless, its analysis provides a valuable framework for reflecting on the consequences of excessive attachment.

Controlling of the mind

The Gītā repeatedly emphasizes the importance of disciplining the mind. In the sixth chapter, Kṛṣṇa describes the mind as capable of functioning as both a friend and an enemy. It states-

**Bandhur ātmātmanastasya yenātmaivātmanā jitaḥ
Anātmmanstu śatrutve vartetātmaiva śatruvat ।।**

Bhagavadgītā, 6/6

For one who has conquered the mind, the mind is the best of friends; but for one who has failed to do so, the mind itself acts as an enemy. The statement emphasizes the importance of one's relationship with one's own mental processes. An undisciplined mind may intensify fear, desire, anger, or distraction. A disciplined mind can support clarity and purposeful action. The Gītā does not suggest that controlling the mind is simple. The sixth chapter 6 acknowledges the difficulty of mental discipline. Arjuna himself points out that the mind is restless and difficult to control. Kṛṣṇa responds that the mind can be disciplined through practice and detachment. This emphasis on sustained practice is relevant to contemporary discussions of attention and psychological self-regulation. Mental well-being is rarely achieved through a single act of will. It generally requires habits, reflection, discipline, and repeated practice.

Self-knowledge and the concept of the self

Another central theme of the Gītā is self-knowledge. Kṛṣṇa distinguishes the deeper self from the changing body and temporary psychological conditions. The Gītā's understanding of the ātman belongs to the broader philosophical and religious traditions of India and should not be equated directly with the modern psychological concept of the self. Nevertheless, the emphasis on examining one's identity has contemporary relevance. Modern individuals may define themselves through occupations, social roles, academic achievements, possessions, relationships, or social status. When one of these identities is threatened, psychological distress can arise. The Gītā invites a deeper inquiry into identity. Who am I beyond my temporary roles and circumstances? What does remain stable when external conditions change? Such philosophical reflection may encourage a broader and less fragile sense of self. It can also help individuals distinguish between temporary experiences and their entire identity.

Resilience in front of adversity

Resilience refers broadly to the capacity to adapt to adversity, recover from difficulties and continue functioning despite challenging circumstances. The Gītā's teachings can be interpreted as encouraging resilience through several interconnected principles:

- acceptance of the inevitability of change.
- disciplined action.

- equanimity in success and failure.
- reduction of excessive attachment.
- self-knowledge.
- cultivation of mental discipline.
- commitment to meaningful responsibility.

The Gītā does not promise a life without suffering. Instead, it presents suffering as an unavoidable dimension of embodied existence and asks how a person should respond to it. This distinction is important. Psychological well-being should not be understood as permanent happiness. A psychologically resilient person can experience grief, disappointment, fear, or uncertainty while still retaining the capacity for constructive action and reflection.

Relevance to students and young people

The teachings of the Gītā have particular relevance for students and young people who frequently face academic competition, career uncertainty, social comparison, and pressure concerning future success. The principle of focusing on action rather than excessive attachment to results can help create a healthier approach to academic performance. A student can concentrate on preparation, regular study, time management, and learning rather than allowing fear of results to dominate the entire educational experience. Similarly, the teaching of equanimity can encourage young people not to interpret every success as proof of superiority or every failure as proof of worthlessness. The Gītā's emphasis on self-knowledge may also encourage young people to distinguish between their own values and expectations imposed by family, society, peers, or digital culture.

Relevance to the workplace

Contemporary workplaces can involve intense competition, deadlines, uncertainty, and performance evaluation. Burnout and work-related stress have therefore become important areas of public discussion. The Gītā's philosophy of action offers a useful perspective on professional life. It encourages sincere and disciplined performance while warning against excessive attachment to outcomes. This does not mean that organizations should ignore working conditions or place the entire responsibility for stress on individual workers. Psychological well-being also depends on organizational structures, economic conditions, interpersonal relationships, workload, job security, and access to appropriate support. Nevertheless, at the individual level, the Gītā's emphasis on purposeful action and emotional balance may provide a philosophical resource for coping with professional uncertainty.

Relevance to family and social relationships

The Gītā's teachings can also be applied to interpersonal relationships. Attachment, expectation, anger, and possessiveness can create conflict in families and communities. The Gītā encourages self-control and the reduction of excessive attachment. This can be interpreted as encouraging individuals to care for others without attempting to control them completely. Healthy relationships require emotional involvement, but excessive dependence on another person's behaviour for one's own psychological stability can create distress. The cultivation

of equanimity may therefore help individuals respond to disagreement with greater reflection rather than immediate anger.

The contemporary significance of the Bhagavadgītā

Despite these limitations, the Bhagavadgītā continues to be relevant because many of the fundamental problems it addresses remain part of human life. People continue to experience uncertainty, fear, attachment, ambition, grief, conflict, failure, and questions about purpose. Technology may change the form of these experiences, but it does not eliminate them. The Gītā's response is to cultivate an inner orientation based on knowledge, disciplined action, self-awareness, equanimity, and meaningful responsibility. Its message can therefore be interpreted as a call to shift attention from complete control over external circumstances toward responsible control of one's own response to those circumstances.

For contemporary society, this is particularly relevant in an environment in which people often have access to unprecedented information but may still struggle to find inner stability and meaning.

Conclusion

The Bhagavadgītā is an ancient Indian philosophical text, but the questions it addresses remain deeply relevant to contemporary human life. Its central concern is not simply how to achieve worldly success but how an individual should live, act, think and respond to inevitable challenges. Arjuna's crisis demonstrates that even a capable and responsible individual can become overwhelmed when confronted with conflict, uncertainty, attachment, and moral confusion. Kṛṣṇa's response provides a comprehensive philosophical framework based on self-knowledge, disciplined action, equanimity, meditation, devotion, and understanding. The principle of samatva similarly encourages stability in the face of changing circumstances. The Gītā's discussion of desire, attachment, anger, and mental discipline provides further material for understanding the relationship between internal states and human behaviour. In contemporary society, where individuals frequently experience performance pressure, social comparison, uncertainty and an excessive orientation toward external achievement, these teachings invite reflection on alternative ways of understanding success and well-being. They encourage people to cultivate inner resources rather than depending exclusively on external circumstances. Thus, the Bhagavadgītā may be understood as a continuing source of reflection on one of humanity's enduring questions; how can a person remain inwardly balanced while responsibly engaging with a changing and uncertain world? Its emphasis on self-knowledge, purposeful action, equanimity, and disciplined attention makes it a significant philosophical resource for contemporary discussions of psychological well-being.

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