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**Cultural Contours of Indic Life: Reading *Bhagavad Gita* as the Civilizational Text**

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**Abstract**

The cultural contours of any civilisation are represented by the thoughts, tradition, belief, practices and values prevalent in that civilisation. Indian culture is one of the oldest in the world with diverse doctrines and belief systems. The beliefs and values of Indic culture are largely influenced by the philosophical tenets of ancient Vedas, religious Scriptures and Upanishads. A study of the Indic civilisation from the perspective of its sacred texts, their interpretation and influences over the civilisation has been attempted through the textual reading and understanding of the *Bhagavad Gita*. *The Gita* being an epitome of all the Hindu Scriptures, explains the art of applying the spiritual truth in practical life. Values of the *Bhagavad Gita* as the civilizational text in regard to its three core philosophical tenets namely *Jnana yoga* (yoga of knowledge), *Karma yoga* (yoga of action) *Bhakti yoga* (yoga of devotion) has been discussed. The article brings out the civilisation values inherent in the understanding of the *Bhagavad Gita* in relation to Indic civilisation considering its diversity, evolution and cultural influences over the period of time. The article proposes that *Bhagavad Gita* can be read as

the civilizational text because of its uniqueness, originality, infiniteness and permanence which is beyond time, space and language.

**Keywords:** Yoga of action, Yoga of knowledge, Yoga of devotion, *The Bhagavad Gita*, Sacred Texts.

**Introduction**

*The Bhagavad Gita*, the sacred text in the Hindu religion is an integral poem layered over and written over a long period of time. It is structured as a dialogue between Krishna, and Arjuna the great warrior. *The Gita* remains the most translated text till date; it has been translated into several major languages of the world. It is a theoretical text which has application value because of its uniqueness, originality, infiniteness and permanence which is beyond time, space and language. It's beyond time in a sense that it covers the circumstances of humanity itself and roots back to ancient Indian History. It's beyond space as Asia, America, and Africa everywhere the principles are universally applied and recognized. It's beyond

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language, originally written in Sanskrit and translated into almost all major languages of the world.

*Vedanta* provides the foundation upon which the building of the whole Indian Philosophy stands. *Vedanta* consists of many other schools of thought such as dualism and non dualism. “The three basic texts of Hindu Philosophy, the *Upanishads*, the *Brahma Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*” (Varma 75) form the core of *Vedantic* teachings. *Advaita Vedanta*, basically known as ‘non duality’ believes in the philosophy of monism or singularity. According to this doctrine the Supreme Reality or Being is only ‘One’/ single, this philosophy discards the distinction between matter and spirit, or (*Prakriti*) and (*Purush*), or (*Atman*) and (*Brahman*). Idealist monism where the *Atman* (soul) is equal or similar or identical to *Brahman* (supreme) forms the core of *Advaita* Philosophy. The *Brahman* is an undivided cosmic consciousness, from which all *Atman* evolves. *Atman* is a non material self that never changes. For Shankara, *Brahman* is infinite energy, pure consciousness, all pervading energy. “Shankara’s *Brahman* is pure being, defined by *satchitananda*” (Varma 94) it is *sat*, supreme in existence, is consistent and beyond time, can be seen as *Brahman*; it is *chita*, the consciousness, can be seen as *Atman* and forms absolute knowledge; it is *ananda*, supreme ecstasy and absolute happiness, where union of

*Atman* with *Brahman* results in *ananda*. The essence of each individual soul (*atman*) is also understood as identical with *Brahman*. The human spirit consists in striving for understanding of that essence.

Religions and their textual study have functioned through human history and surpassed the barriers of time, space and language. The study of sacred texts focuses on how to understand and analyze religious influences in human experiences. The sustainability and viability of religious literature in the twentieth century speaks of its authenticity and evidence in modern times. According to kapil Kapoor, in *Text and Interpretation*, “India has a continuing interpretative tradition mechanism of transferring ideas from one generation to the other” (ix). The ancient scriptures of Hinduism are originally written and recorded in Sanskrit language. The Vedic literature can be divided into three basic classes: *sruti*, *samriti*, *kavya*.

The task of interpretation, as such, is three-fold: (i) determine and explain the meaning of the text; and (ii) to establish the relevance and significance of, and sometimes to amend, the rules of conduct or the thesis of a Sastra. (iii) to articulate the rational and the rationality of the assertion and defend them against counter philosophies or objections. (Kapoor 43)

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***The Bhagavad Gita as civilizational Text***

“The *Bhagavad Gita* is not only a holy book that includes a concise description of Sanatan Indian philosophy, but it is also a real handbook and a compass to a meaningful life” (Rastogi and Patil 52). According to Sri Aurobindo, the

*"Bhagavad-Gita* is a true scripture of the human race a living creation rather than a book, with a new message for every age and a new meaning for every civilization" (“Famous Reflections on the *Bhagavad Gita*”)

The fundamental teachings of Indian philosophy consist of the concepts of *Jnana* (knowledge), *dharma* (duty), *karma* (action) and *Moksha* (liberation). Knowledge, *Jnana* or *Vidya* is a basic principle of Indian civilization. Knowledge remains the centre of all rational and speculative inquiry right from the ancient Vedic Scriptures to modern Indian philosophy. Indian knowledge Tradition, according to Kapil Kapoor, is the philosophy, which leads to *Jnana* (knowledge), organised for pedagogy or discipline to attain *Vidya*. Indian knowledge system is rooted in deep meditation that seeks to promote happiness and enables man to free himself. Therefore, the basis of knowledge in India is deeply rooted in spiritual and intuitive conceptions which have formed the basis of Indian thought and philosophy over the ages.

*Karma Yoga* being the path of selfless service, being another core principle of Indian civilization that leads to the attainment of higher Self or *Brahman* through action or selfless duty. It focuses upon the meaning of the term ‘duty for duty’s sake’. Any action carried hence must be followed by a sincere and dedicated sense of obligation. Obligation is the necessary prerequisite of any action undertaken. The ancient Indian Philosophy defines the term ‘Action’ with regard to *Dharma*. “*Dharma* is part of the cosmic law that governs the universe and part of this law is that people should strive to live in a virtuous way” (Datta and Jones 21). Thus the basic and primary aim of life according to *dharma* is to live righteously and follow service consciousness.

“*Dharma* is the super ordinate principle of Indian life- the ultimate touchstone of what should be done, of what is right and of what is wrong. *Dharma* is sought because it holds or sustains everything” (kapoor 67).

*Moksha* (liberation) can be defined as an ultimate objective of human existence. It is also referred to as *moksha*, *mukti*, spiritual liberation, *samadhi*, emancipation, *nirvana*, enlightenment. Knowledge is the only direct means to liberation. It also refers to knowledge of self and realization of supreme existence by casting off ignorance and darkness within

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one's deeper self. Liberation is identifying *Atman* with *Brahman* as one unified being. The stage of the 'Self' uniting with the 'Higher Self' is known as *Moksha*. *Maya* (illusion) can easily mislead one in the realization of *Brahman* therefore one needs the help of scriptures in order to attain peaceful liberation.

Therefore, civilization values inherent in the understanding of the *Bhagavad Gita* in relation to Indic civilisation consider its diversity, evolution and cultural influences over the period of time. Indian tradition firstly leads to immense internal diversity, there are a large number of sacred texts in the Hindu tradition which has grown over time and space. With a large number and diversity of voices, Hindu sacred texts challenge us to think anew about the nature of the Scriptures, their authority, and how they influence people's lives. Secondly, the religions evolve within dynasties, geopolitical regions, and historical eras and continue to evolve today. Scriptures are living texts that influence the lives of a large group of people for a truly long period of time. They are carefully preserved in manuscripts, printed books, in recitation, performance and visual arts by people over the period of time. Thirdly, cultural influences play a significant role in understanding sacred texts. Culture is basically the collections of ideas, practices, values, and stories that are all embedded in

local cultures and not separable from them. Just as religion cannot be understood in isolation from its cultural (including political) contexts, likewise sacred texts cannot be understood in isolation too. It is impossible to understand culture without considering its religious dimensions.

**Textual Analysis of Three Paths in The Bhagavad Gita**

*The Bhagavad Gita* states that the awareness and union with *Brahman* or God, can be achieved by following three major paths – *Karma* yoga- the path of selfless action, *Bhakti* yoga- the path of devotion, and *Jnana* yoga- the path of self-transcending knowledge. According to Sri Aurobindo, in *Essays on the Gita*, "the argument of the *Gita* resolves itself into three great steps viz. *Karma* yoga, *Jnana* yoga and *Bhakti* yoga" (37). The *Gita* reveals a great trust in the text, for teaching discipline, emotional regulation, and the meaning and purpose of life. The relevance of the *Gita* over thousands of years has remained unquestioned. The *Bhagavad Gita* is the infinite storehouse of knowledge, many gems of enlightenment are embedded inside this text. Primary aim of the *Gita* is to lead 'Jiva' (life) by awakening consciousness from ignorance. The art of applying the spiritual truth in practical life has been revealed in the *Gita* by following three fold paths of knowledge, action and devotion.

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Some by meditation behold the supreme Spirit in the heart with the help of their refined and sharp intellect; others realize it through the discipline of Knowledge, and still others, through the discipline of Action, i.e., Karma Yoga. (*Srimad Bhagavadgita* 13.24)

**The Path of knowledge (*Jnana Yoga*)**

*Jnana* yoga or path of knowledge is one of three main yogas described in the *Gita*, with three fold distinctions of *sattvika Jnana*, *rajsik Jnana* and *tamsik Jnana*. This path is referred to as yoga of knowledge, its goal is self realization. According to Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Jnana* is the purest and a discovery of one's *Atman* (soul). Adi Shankra gave primary importance to *Jnana yoga* for the knowledge of the Absolute. *Jnana* signifies self-realization. It defines the character of the 'self'. Intellect is determined and directed simply towards one ideal. Indian thought on intellect focuses more on the internal world and the study of mind. As per Vivekananda "All knowledge is in the mind" ("Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda") and the external world acts only as a stimulus or an instance to uncover that knowledge which is already there in the mind.

Those deeply attached to pleasures and worldly power cannot attain a determined intellect concentrated on God. (*Srimad Bhagavadgita* 2.42)

*The Bhagavad Gita* focuses upon numerous valuable quotes such as, to treat pleasure and pain/success and failure alike and suggest that failure is also a step in one's progress, and throws light on the concept of 'equanimity' to observe calmness and composure especially in difficult times and situations, one who follows equanimity with equipoise mind attains the supreme knowledge or supreme state. The guiding principle of yoga of knowledge can be whatever which appears illusory and transient and has no real existence. Only the one eternal conscious self exists, verse 42 to 51 describe the highest wisdom of Upanishads that is the right action. Knowledge according to Shankracharya is *Nityam antyam viveka vichara* i.e. constant reflection between permanent and impermanent. Knowledge is the only direct means to liberation. Shankracharya further explains, as cooking is impossible without fire, so liberation is impossible without knowledge. Knowledge destroys ignorance, as light destroys densest darkness therefore, the yoga of knowledge can be concluded with this quote below:

Arjuna, know from Me only briefly the process through which man having attained actionlessness, which is the highest consummation of *Jnanayoga* (the path of

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knowledge), reaches Brahman. (*Srimad Bhagavadgita* 18.50)

One can possess equanimity by regulating self-discipline and meditation. Advaita Vedanta emphasises this path of *Jnana* to attain the ‘knowledge of the absolute’ i.e Brahman (supreme reality/power). Dr. S. Radhakrishnan views *Jnana Yoga* as the emancipation from ignorance, darkness and avidya by seeking liberation through vidya, jnana, knowledge and wisdom. According to Radhakrishnan, all human actions are carried out by some form of desire or attachment (kama). Therefore the root cause of desire is ignorance or avidya of the nature of things. Radhakrishnan further states that,

‘metaphysical knowledge is transformed into realization by the means of yoga or the method of concentration, when we recognize the ‘Self’ as distinct and different from the prakriti (matter) and its three gunas (sattva, rajas, tamas) we are released.’ (Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita* 57)

Radhakrishnan further gave importance equally to reason and experience but ascribed the highest value to intuitive knowledge. Intuitive knowledge is one which supports the presence of the divine in man; man has to awaken the divine in oneself to attain the ultimate

liberation. Presence of the divine in man indicates the faith in religious experience.

Radhakrishnan viewed intuitive knowledge as the highest knowledge which is gained by total self awareness and is much higher than any other experience gained by any part of man’s being. (Radhakrishnan, *An idealistic view of life* 47)

Sri Aurobindo says the *Gita* preaches that *Jnana* helps one to reach a mental equilibrium of behavioral consciousness. Behavioral consciousness according to Aurobindo is the main gist of the *Gita* and can be understood by deep and persistent learning or practice. The goal of the practice is to move inward and discover the ‘Psychic Being’ (Aurobindo’s term for a personal evolving soul), which can bring about a transformation of the outer being or physical body. *Jnana Yoga* therefore is the ability to differentiate between temporary, transient, momentary and that which is permanent, everlasting, eternal, indefinite and perpetual. It is the ability to clearly see the *Brahman* or *Spirit* as a unifying force distinct from matter (*prakriti*).

**The Path of Action (*Karma Yoga*)**

This path focuses upon performing actions/ duties alone, completely renouncing desire for fruits and attachment. Yoga of Action states that duty should be

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performed duly without any attachment. It observes renunciation of desire for fruit and attachment in respect of all actions and worldly objects. It focuses upon action not the fruits of action and avoidance of attractions with detachment to inaction and desires.

Your right is to work only and never to the fruit thereof. Do not be the cause of the fruit of action, nor let your attachment be to inaction. (*Srimad Bhagavadgita* 2.47)

*Karma Yoga* or yoga of action teaches one to act according to *dharma*, without being attached to its consequences that leads an individual towards the attainment of salvation or spiritual liberation through *Karma*.

Your work is your responsibility not its result, never let the fruits of your actions be your motive nor give into inactions. (*Srimad Bhagavadgita* 2:47)

Therefore, yoga of action states a wise man to perform all his duties duly.

Attraction and repulsion are rooted in all sense objects. Man should never allow himself to be swayed by them because they are the two principal enemies standing in the way of his

redemption. (*Srimad Bhagavadgita* 3:34)

Sri Krishna further explains the *yoga* of action by means of imagery in verses 38 and 39. Fire is covered by smoke, mirror by dust and embryo by amnion, likewise knowledge covered by desire, which is insatiable like fire. Therefore, desire is to be removed for attaining knowledge. *Karma* yoga indicates that senses are greater than body, but greater than sense is 'mind', greater than mind is the intellect and greater than intellect is 'the self'. *Karmayoga* with special emphasis on action consists of performing duties which completely renounce desire for fruit and attachment in respect of all actions and worldly objects. Here two points should be noted -first to avoid all actions and second, detachment to 'inaction'.

The senses are said to be greater than the body; but greater than the senses is the mind. Greater than the mind is the intellect; and what is greater than the intellect is He, the Self. (*Srimad Bhagavadgita* 3.42)

The term 'Action' can be defined with regard to *dharma*. *Dharma* is defined in our *Sastras* as a governing principle that conserve balance in the universe. Mythically *dharma* is projected in the form of a bull with four legs comprising truth, compassion, tranquility and non -violence.

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*Dharma* therefore is performing an action at a particular time and place with regard to one's position in society, life, temperament and circumstances.

A wise man established in the Self should not unsettle the mind of the ignorant attached to action, but should get them to perform all their duties, duly performing his own duties. (*Srimad Bhagavadgita* 3. 26)

Essential aspect of duty is the duty to serve others, family, community, society and humanity over all. Besides there are moral and ethical duties and obligations to be carried out by an individual. Therefore each and every duty must be performed with enthusiasm, honesty and with devotion. "*Karma yoga* is made up of two dimensions: a sense of obligation or duty towards others and an absence of desires for rewards" (Mulla and Krishnan 29). In *karma yoga*, duty is an obligation based upon the sense of self-abnegation and sacrifice. According to Swami Vivekanand in book *Karma yoga*, each and every particular duty is great in itself and its own place and one should perform one's duty with full devotion in whatever circumstances one is placed. Further Vivekanand mention,

"Let the end and the means be joined into one." when you are doing any work, do not think of anything

beyond. Do it as worship, as the highest worship, and devote your whole life to it for the time being. (63)

J Krishnamurti in book *The Awakening of Intelligence*, defined the yoga of Action as virtue, that reflects order in life as against disorder and awareness against ignorance.

To be virtuous there must be no battle, no conflict in me or outside ... to be conscious of it is to be aware of all this, aware of where I am : from there I will move I shall work ... I have understood order because I have denied disorder because I have learnt about disorder. (164)

**The Path of Devotion (*Bhakti Yoga*)**

The *Bhakti Yoga* or Yoga of Devotion speaks of God's realization through the practice of meditation and sacrifice. *Bhakti yoga*, aims to provide pure devotional service to Lord Krishna, it is the highest and most expedient means for attaining pure love for Krishna, which is the highest end of spiritual existence. This yoga states that whenever the action is taken it should be in the form of worship and sacrifice, where sacrifice must be rooted in prescribed 'action' appropriate to his Varna in society regarding him as present in the whole universe. Yoga of Devotion can be obtained through two different ways, firstly,

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offering of action to God. Everything belongs to God, complete surrender also known as *Bhagvadarpana*. Secondly, duties performed with the object of God-realization or attainment of Divine love in the form of offering worship to Lord's images, through practice of adoration and meditation also known as *Bhagavadartha*.

I consider them to be the best yogis, who endowed with supreme faith, and ever united through steadfast devotion to me, worship me with their mind centred on me.” (*Srimad Bhagavad-Gita* 12.2)

On the other hand, those depending exclusively on Me, and surrendering all actions to Me, worship Me (God with attributes), constantly meditating on Me with single-minded devotion, them, Arjuna, I speedily deliver from the ocean of birth and death, their mind being fixed on Me. (*Srimad Bhagavadgita* 12.6,7)

Dr. S Radhakrishnan defines yoga of devotion as men who worship God with faith and devotion. There can be four different types of men depending upon their nature and traits, man in distress, man with inquisitiveness, seeker of wealth, man of wisdom. The different persons seek the Supreme Lord for devotional service under various conditions. They are not pure

devotees because they have some aspiration to fulfill in exchange for devotional service. Pure devotional service is without aspiration and without desire for material profit. When an unattached action is driven by knowledge, it equals the act of true devotion (*Bhakti*).

**Conclusion**

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a theoretical text which has application value because of its uniqueness, originality, infiniteness and permanence which is beyond time, space and language. It deals with the fundamental question of human suffering (*dukha*), the primary reality. *The Bhagavad Gita* is unique of all the texts because it examines the nature and cause of human suffering and it investigates the cause of suffering in relation to a real life situation. It is infinite because it provides guidance on almost every aspect of practical life. It is original because it derives the source of philosophical teachings from either divine power itself or through ancient Vedic Scriptures or Upanishads. It has permanence in relation to its valuable teaching which finds meaning and significance across various time periods. According to the *Gita*, of all the three paths of devotion, action and knowledge the path of *nishkama karma* (unattached action) is superior. When an unattached action is guided by knowledge it equals the act of devotion, which indeed is the key to the freedom from suffering and ignorance that

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everyone seeks. Therefore, the *Bhagavad-Gita* is an eternal work of Indic civilization in terms of philosophy, religious practices and literature that consist of the ideas of *Jnana* (right knowledge), *Nishkam Karma* (unattached action), devotion, self-realization, *dharma*, truth, permanency, sacrifice, equanimity, courage, faith, desirelessness, realization, service consciousness and renunciation.

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