

Philosophical Counselling in The Bhagavad Gita: Counselling Problems of the Modern Indian Society

Racheal Nikita Sharma

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, University of Lucknow

Abstract

Contemporary Indian society faces many intricate challenges encompassing complex relationships, career pressures, existential dilemmas, and psychological distress. The transformation of family and society, the ascent of individualism, and shifts in the socio-economic landscape contribute to these challenges. Consequently, issues such as anxiety, uncertainty, mental health problems, and work-related challenges have become the norm.

Addressing these contemporary dilemmas requires a deeper exploration of Indian philosophical roots. The Bhagavad Gita, a revered Indian epic, offers profound wisdom that can be applied to address these modern issues through Philosophical Counselling. The approach entails engaging individuals in philosophical discussions about their emotions, behaviours, and worldviews, fostering personal growth and change. The Gita is a revered Hindu scripture, part of the (Bhishma Parv of the) Mahabharata. It is the longest epic ever written in the world. The Mahabharata is an epic comprising over 100,000 shlokas (verses). It qualifies as an epic, just like Homer's Iliad or Odyssey, because the Gita (as part of the Mahabharata) contains the heroic deeds of characters, primarily Shri Krishna and Arjuna. It is an extremely lengthy text written in a poetic style with complex philosophical ideas.

The Gita's teachings are not confined to religious or historical contexts but encompass a broader spectrum of Behavioural Science because the Gita is deeply rooted in religious and historical contexts. Yet, its teachings have been interpreted and applied in various ways, including within Behavioral Science. They offer insights into emotional control (Gita 2/4), managing thoughts (Gita 4/42), leadership (Gita 3/21), harmony with nature (Gita 15/7), maintaining detachment from outcomes (Gita 2/47), making rational decisions (Gita 3/25), and achieving balance in life (Gita 14/22). This wealth of wisdom transcends religious boundaries and remains applicable to contemporary issues in Indian society.

The Bhagavad Gita is a powerful tool for Philosophical Counselling to address the multifaceted challenges of contemporary Indian society. Its timelessness and universality make it a valuable resource for individuals seeking guidance in their everyday lives, reflecting the influence of its teachings on figures like Robert Oppenheimer, Einstein, and Mahatma Gandhi. Through its principles, the Gita offers a path toward personal growth and empowerment, enabling individuals to navigate the complexities of modern life with clarity and purpose.

In this paper, I attempt to show ways in which the teachings of the Gita can be used in Philosophical Counselling for the modern problems that people face today. Hence, the title of my paper is "Philosophical Counselling in the Bhagavad Gita: Counselling Problems of the Modern Indian Society."

Keywords: *existential dilemmas, philosophical discussions, Behavioural Science, empowerment.*

"The task of a philosopher is to show the fly the way out of the bottle."-Ludwig Wittgenstein

Introduction

A myriad of challenges characterises contemporary Indian society. Relationship

complexities, career pressures, existential dilemmas and psychological distress have become the 'new normal.' Factors that contribute to these changing dynamics are the changing nature of family and society and changes in the socio-economic landscape. This has led to a rise

of anxiety and uncertainty like relationship problems, mental health issues, work-related problems and social capriciousness.

To address these issues that plague our Indian society, we should delve deep into our roots because the Bhagavad Gita addresses fundamental and universal themes that transcend time and cultural boundaries. It explores the nature of existence, duty, righteousness, and the path to self-realisation. These themes are enduring and continue to be relevant to individuals seeking guidance on navigating life's intricacies. The Gita delves into the complexities of human nature, the struggle between good and evil within oneself, and the challenges of making ethical choices. These aspects of the human experience are timeless and apply to people across different historical periods.

The Gita delves into the human psyche, discussing concepts such as desire, attachment, and the importance of mastering one's mind. The Bhagavad Gita can be read as a metaphysical text, as a political text, or even as an ethical text.

The psychological insights provided in the Gita are timeless and applicable to understanding and managing the challenges of the mind in any era. The philosophically relevant analysis, applied with counselling, can be drawn from the teachings of the great Indian epic, the Bhagavad Gita (Jeste & Vahia, 2007).

The Gita is an excellent manual for providing Philosophical Counselling to address our current issues in Indian society. I have stated two examples to show how the philosophy of the Gita can be used as Counselling, citing the examples of social media addiction and conflicting thoughts.

My paper aims to show the philosophical relevance of the Counselling found in the Gita for addressing contemporary issues in Indian society. Therefore, my paper explores the relevance of Gita's guidance as a philosophical tool to address present-day challenges in Indian society, such as issues like social media addiction and conflicting thoughts.

One could analytically question why we should delve deep into our roots. What is the need to seek answers from the past? Such questions would be inevitable to some.

We should delve deep into our roots and learn from the past to address problems that plague our Indian society because teachings and lessons of value should be revered. While the Gita is a book written in the past, its teachings remain relevant for several reasons:

Reason 1: The Bhagavad Gita addresses fundamental and universal themes that transcend time and cultural boundaries. It explores the nature of existence, duty (dharma), righteousness, and the path to self-realisation. These themes are enduring and continue to be relevant to individuals seeking guidance on navigating life's complexities.

Reason 2: The Gita delves into the complexities of human nature, the struggle between good and evil within oneself, and the challenges of making ethical choices. These aspects of the human experience are timeless and apply to people across different historical periods.

Reason 3: The Gita provides profound philosophical insights, presenting different paths to spiritual realisation, including the path of devotion (bhakti), knowledge (jnana), and selfless action (karma yoga). The teachings offer a comprehensive guide to leading a purposeful and meaningful life, irrespective of societal or technological changes.

Reason 4: The Bhagavad Gita offers practical guidance on how to live a balanced and harmonious life. It addresses the challenges of maintaining equanimity in the face of adversity, dealing with conflicts, and fulfilling one's duties with dedication and detachment.

Reason 5: The Gita delves into the human psyche, discussing concepts such as desire, attachment, and the importance of mastering one's mind. The psychological insights provided in the Gita are timeless and applicable to understanding and managing the challenges of the mind in any era.

Reason 6: The teachings of the Gita focus on spiritual evolution and the journey toward self-

realisation. The quest for inner transformation and the realisation of one's true nature are timeless pursuits that resonate with individuals seeking personal growth and spiritual development.

Reason 7: For many people, the Bhagavad Gita is integral to their cultural and religious heritage. It is a source of inspiration, moral guidance, and a touchstone for ethical decision-making. Revering the Gita is a way of connecting with one's cultural roots and drawing wisdom from past traditions.

Coming to Philosophical Counselling:

Philosophical Counselling can be characterised as an approach aimed at helping counsees interpret the worldview expressed by their way of life. The Philosophical Counsellor helps Counsees uncover various meanings expressed in their way of life and critically examine those problematic aspects that express their predicaments. This enriches Counsees to develop worldviews and may also facilitate change. Therefore, it can be rightly said that Philosophical Counselling is a means to show 'a' way, not show 'the' way.

Gerd B. Achenbach, the forerunner of Philosophical Counselling, believed that the essence of Philosophy is in open conversations. Their contemporary Dutch group of Philosophical Counsellors said that the essence of Philosophy is critical or logical thinking (Hagiu, Bortos, & Tamaş, 2023).

Both have the same aim: to find solutions to problems of ordinary people in their everyday lives. Thousands of years of Indian 'Darshan' and Western Philosophy show that Philosophy deals with mundane everyday life issues and addresses major life issues by constructing a network of ideas and theories.

Philosophical Counselling aims to help find possible solutions to ordinary people's problems and empower them. Marinoff highlights the practical aspects of using philosophy to address life's challenges (Marinoff, 1999).

So, it can be said that Philosophical Counselling has two aims: -

- i. Helping to find various probable solutions to the problems of ordinary people
- ii. Empowering a person to face the realities of life

Similarly, 5,000 years ago, a warrior named Arjuna faced a moral dilemma: whether to fight his kin and uphold dharma or choose not to do so. We interpret the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita as a form of Counselling that holds philosophical significance and guides individuals toward action. Consequently, the Gita serves as Counselling directed towards action for an individual confronting moral dilemmas. It addresses the aporia that Arjuna faces on the battlefield.

The Bhagavad Gita's recognition of the universality of human suffering, as exemplified in Arjuna's inner turmoil on the battlefield, forms the foundation for Philosophical Counselling. Acknowledging the depth and diversity of modern challenges, one can apply the Gita's timeless wisdom to illuminate a path towards resolution.

Philosophical Counselling of the Gita to address contemporary problems in Indian society

The Bhagavad Gita is a Sanatan Hindu text which has 700 shlokas and is a part of the Indian epic, The Mahabharat. It encapsulates the 'samvaad' or discourse between the warrior, Arjuna and Lord Krishna. The philosophy of the Gita is a Counselling to resolve a moral dilemma.

The Gita is not just a religious book or dharma shastra but is akin to a behavioural science manual. Its teachings are so universally relevant that people of any religion and yuga can practise it. The teachings of the Bhagavad Gita are deeply rooted in the Indian context and can be applied to contemporary societal challenges, corroborating the fact that we can apply the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita to our lives to address problems through Philosophical Counselling (Zaehner, 1973). However, one might inevitably question how this age-old

scripture can solve our contemporary challenges and guide our present-day Indian lives.

The philosophy of the Gita is not outdated. It holds timeless value. Maybe that's why the most influential people of history, like Robert Oppenheimer, Einstein, Gandhi Ji, and many more, have been charmed by the teachings of the Gita. While the Bhagavad Gita is more commonly associated with Eastern philosophy, it has garnered interest and respect from Western scholars, scientists, and philosophers. It's essential to note that interpretations may vary, and not all Western scholars explicitly endorse the Gita as a manual for philosophical counselling. However, some have explored its philosophical and practical dimensions in a Counselling context. The Gita has tremendous philosophical depth which can delve into not only dharmic philosophy but also issues of contemporary relevance (Ingalls, 2006).

Therefore, it can be said that the Gita does not only talk about dharma but also deals with contemporary issues like:

- How to be a leader? (Gita 3/21)
- How can we control our emotions? (Gita verses 2/14 and 6/26)
- How do you manage wavering thoughts? (Gita 4/42)
- How can we live in harmony with nature or sustainable living? (Gita 3/14)
- How do you diligently perform your duties while maintaining a sense of detachment from the outcomes? (Gita 2/47 and 2/48)
- How do you make rational decisions, even while facing problematic situations? (Gita 2/50).
- How to live a balanced life? (Gita 6/16-17).

The list is endless!

By this, we get a glimpse into the idea that the Bhagavad Gita acts as counselling to help us address and solve the problems that arise in contemporary Indian scenarios. For this, I would state two relevant examples.

Case 1: Social media addiction

Consider an example of a youngster who is a social media addict. He comes to a Philosophical Counsellor, complaining that despite seeking the help of a Psychological Counsellor, he is unable to control his internet addiction. So much so that it is affecting his health, his relationships and his entire life. In his translation and commentary, Eknath Easwaran emphasises the practical applicability of Gita's teachings in navigating life's challenges, making it a valuable resource for counselling.

In such a case, the counselee can use the practical applicability of Gita's teachings to provide counselling. Taking inspiration from chapter 6, verse 17 of the Gita, which states the following:

युक्ताहारविहारस्य युक्तचेष्टस्य कर्मसु |
युक्तस्वप्नावबोधस्ययोगो भवति दुःखहा || 6/17

This shloka of the Bhagavad Gita suggests that a person must live a balanced life. To be temperate in eating and recreation, balanced in work, and regulated in sleep. This can mitigate all sorrows by practising Yog or 'samatva', equanimity. Shri Krishna emphasises the importance of moderation and balance in all aspects of life.

He who is temperate in his eating, sleeping, working, and recreation habits can mitigate all material pains by practising the 'yog' or equanimity. Thus, the counselee can be guided along the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, which encourages individuals to adopt a balanced and moderate lifestyle in terms of daily activities, work, rest, and recreation. It reflects the Gita's broader theme of moderation and equilibrium as essential elements in the path to spiritual and personal growth.

Case 2: Conflicting thoughts

In India, considering our present life, we all are so caught up with complexities and aspirations that despite having the internet and an ocean of limitless information, we are still unable to make decisions sometimes. Our minds get so shrouded in confusion that we are left struggling with emotions but cannot make informed decisions due to the restlessness of the mind. We can take

the example of a person struggling with career choices.

योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय |
सिद्धयसिद्धयोः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग उच्यते || 2/48||

In 2/48, the Bhagavad Gita states that we should strive for equanimity, that is, to maintain a calm mind in difficult situations and be self-reflective. Shri Krishna tells Arjuna to be steadfast in victory, loss, happiness, or pain. This equanimity is called “samatva”, or yoga. This enables a person to transcend the confusion emanating from the thoughts.

For instance, if a person comes to a Philosophical Counsellor and tells them that despite taking the help of a Career Counsellor, they are confused as to which career choice to make. Then, in this scenario, the Counsellor can refer this shloka of the Gita to the Counselee and put it into perspective.

The counselee should be made to collect their thoughts and calmly think, irrespective of momentary gain or loss. By delving into philosophical questions such as "What is the purpose of work?" or "What kind of legacy do I want to leave behind?", the client can gain clarity and make choices that align with their true selves.

By incorporating the teachings of the Gita, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of themselves and make more informed choices that align with their authentic selves (Ranganathananda, 1988, pp. 8-10).

The Bhagavad Gita is a scripture of the Indian tradition that teaches us how to live. It is an existential treatise which is to be carried all through one's life. The Gita presents before us a number of archetypes which can be effectively used by a philosophical practitioner. Though the Gita begins with an account of the state of despondency of Arjuna who is the main character of the book, to explicate the Gita as a psychological treatise will be as good as limiting its philosophical depth dimensions (Iyer, 2010).

The philosophical import of the Gita finds manifestation through the eight archetypes which are:

1. The method of self-correction
2. Freedom and choice
3. Building up Self-confidence
4. Equanimity (samatvam)
5. Emotional stability
6. Steadiness of wisdom (sthithaprajna)
7. Integrity of mind and intellect (buddhi yoga) and
8. Skill in action (karma kausalam).

They are the best models that a philosophical counsellor can use. The author, Vyasa, chooses a battlefield as the context for conflict resolution to impart the principles of philosophical counselling. Arjuna expresses his mental conflicts and emotional despondency, which Krishna immediately addresses most endearingly through interpersonal dialogues. The methodology for psychological cure is rooted in philosophy. Krishna tells him about the real nature of a human being and the importance of discharging one's duties most selflessly. The weakness of the mind is only a temporary aberration which the power of will can strengthen. Arjuna can choose his course of action at the end of the whole discourse. The Gita helps us to learn lessons for philosophical practice.

Conclusion

In the labyrinth of moral dilemmas, the Gita stands as a beacon, offering guidance akin to Arjuna's struggle on the battlefield. It serves as a manual for Philosophical Counselling, addressing human suffering's universal nature and providing timeless wisdom for navigating contemporary challenges in Indian society.

Beyond religious and historical contexts, the Gita embodies behavioural science principles, offering insights into emotional control, leadership, and sustainable living. It teaches detachment from outcomes, rational decision-making, and balanced living, transcending religious boundaries to offer practical guidance for modern issues.

In an era of rapid technological advancement and societal complexity, the Gita's profound

philosophical wisdom offers invaluable insights into addressing contemporary predicaments through Philosophical Counselling. It illuminates pathways to emotional equilibrium and strategies for navigating the complexities of modern life.

As we grapple with our collective destiny, the Bhagavad Gita urges reflection and action guided by wisdom and compassion, providing solace and insight amidst uncertainty.

References

- Hagiu, A., Bortoş, S., & Tamaş, I. (2023). A new method in philosophical Counselling (IPAA). *Postmodern Openings*, 14(1), 46-61. <https://doi.org/10.18662/po/14.1/603>
- Ingalls, D. H. H. (2006). *The Bhagavad Gita: An Annotated Translation and Commentary*. Harvard University Press.
- Iyer, L. R. (2010). The Bhagavad Gita: A handbook for philosophical practice. *Philosophical Practice: Journal of the American Philosophical Practitioners Association*, 16(4), 40-50.
- Jeste, D. V., & Vahia, I. V. (2007). Comparison of the conceptualization of wisdom in ancient Indian literature with modern views: Focus on the Bhagavad Gita. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 22(8), 757-763. <https://doi.org/10.1002/gps.1739>
- Marinoff, L. (1999). *Philosophical Practice*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Ranganathananda, S. (1988). *An Exposition of the Gita in the Light of Modern Thought and Modern Needs* (Vol. I, pp. 8-10). Advaita Ashrama.
- Zaehner, R. C. (1973). *"Hinduism."* Oxford University Press.