

Indian Philosophy: Past and Present

Ramesh Chandra Pradhan

The Philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita

An Analytical Study of Moral and
Metaphysical Foundations

 Springer

Indian Philosophy: Past and Present

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*All Acharyas
Who have thrown light on the Bhagavad Gita
in their immortal commentaries*

and

*My Father
Late Bhikari Charan Pradhan
Who inspired me and gave me the copy of the
Gita as a precious treasure*

and

*My Eldest Brother
Late Bipin Bihary Pradhan
Who led me in life by holding my hand*

Prologue

The present essay is an attempt to understand an ancient text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, in contemporary terms. The Gita is a philosophical text belonging to the Upanishadic tradition known as the Vedanta in Indian philosophy. Though it was composed as a part of the great epic, the *Mahabharata*, it has retained its independence as one of the source books of the Vedantic philosophy. Though it has its origin in the post-Vedic age, it has been hailed as a perennial text having relevance for all times. It has created a niche in the world philosophical and religious literature as a text of immense value. That is the reason why it has been translated into almost all languages of the world, and has been made available even to the common men interested in sacred literature.

In the Indian scholastic tradition many commentaries have been written on the Gita not only in Sanskrit, but also in English in addition to many other Indian languages. The most significant of them have been the commentaries composed by the great Acharyas in the tradition of Vedanta, namely, Sankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Madhvacharya, and so on. The history of the commentarial literature on the Gita is too vast to be counted here. Among the contemporary writers on the Gita are Bala Gangadhar Tilak, M.K. Gandhi, Acharya Vinoba, S. Radhakrishnan, Sri Aurobindo, and many others. The Gita has been in the forefront of the study of Indian Ethics, Metaphysics, and Religion. It has also penetrated into the modes and methods of spiritual practice in many parts of the world.

In this context, it appears an impossible task to add anything new to the already existing literature on the Gita. But it is painful to hear the critics say that the Gita, in spite of its popularity, is an orthodox religious text having nothing to offer to the contemporary life steeped in science and technology, and driven by the present day ethos of rebellion against orthodoxy, blind beliefs, and religious dogmatism. Those who profess to reject all religious beliefs in the name of rationalism, communism, and scientism are out to condemn the Gita as an outdated text having no relevance to the contemporary man.

My effort in this essay is to refute those who attempt to set aside the Gita as of no relevance to the contemporary world. This essay treats the Gita as a profound philosophical text having much to contribute to ethics and metaphysics, the mainstay of its philosophy, apart from its impact on the religious and spiritual life of the people.

The impact of the Gita cannot be measured in terms of the commentaries written on it, but by the impact it has on the spiritual life of human beings everywhere, who have been in need of spiritual solace across cultures and societies. The meaning of the teachings of the Gita can be understood only by going into the depth of its ideas with an open mind and an unprejudiced attitude to the text written in verse by the great sage Vyasa, the composer of the great epic, the *Mahabharata*.

The philosophical meaning of the teachings of the Gita is most of the time lost in its religious and devotional overtone. The underlying philosophy of the text is missed in its outward religious garb. We do not make effort to understand why Sri Krishna, the teacher in the Gita, chooses to deliver to Arjuna, the warrior, the sermons in the battlefield. Besides, we do not care to know why Arjuna needs advice to fight in the war, when he is precisely one of the protagonists of the war. There are many other questions which we may fail to ask when we read the Gita as a religious text.

The writer of the *Mahabharata* included the Gita in the epic, not of course, to write a philosophical text exclusively for a philosophical audience, but for the general public as a moral text, and at best a text to explain the metaphysical intricacies which underlie its moral teachings. The epic intended to establish the supremacy of *dharma* or moral law in the world as the war itself was called a “*dharmayuddha*” or a moral war. It is quite obvious that the Gita expounds the nature of the moral law and its metaphysical presuppositions in a systematic way. Whatever the motives of the author, the text has been composed in a dialogical form as a conversation between Sri Krishna and Arjuna resembling the dialogue between Yama, the Lord of death, and Nachiketa, the spiritual seeker in the *Kathopanishad*. Such dialogues are frequent in the Upanishads. Incidentally, the Gita is also called an Upanishad.

The philosophical motives of the Gita are so explicit that the Vedantic tradition appropriated the Gita as one of the *prasthantraya*, i.e. the source books, two other of which are the *Brahamsutras* of Badarayana and the Upanishads. The fact that the Gita is accepted on the same level as the other two philosophical texts proves that the Gita could not but be out and out a philosophical text of great importance. All Acharyas, who wrote commentaries on the Gita, have also commented on the other two Vedantic texts. The Gita, however, is not written in sutra style like *Brahamssutras*, but is a poetic compositions, which can be sung and recited. Hence it is called “Gita” which means “that which is sung”. Its affinity with the Upanishad is explicit not only in its philosophical thought, but also in its compositional style.

In any case, what this essay intends to highlight is the philosophical achievements, especially in ethics and metaphysics, that is, in what the Gita calls “*yogashastra*” and “*brahmavidya*”, respectively. The Gita breaks many new grounds in ethics or moral theory just as it brings out in a new way the basic principles of the Vedantic metaphysics. The *karmayoga* is the central doctrine of the ethics of the Gita, while the doctrine of Brahman is central to its metaphysics. With *karmayoga* many concepts like action, agency, moral law, desireless or disinterested actions, etc., are introduced into the ethical discourse. Besides, the concepts like reason, mind, and consciousness are introduced as the supportive metaphysical concepts in addition to the primary

metaphysical concepts like Brahman, Isvara, atman, and the world. There is an intricate web of moral and metaphysical concepts interwoven with one another, which needs explication and analysis.

My effort is to make transparent the moral and metaphysical concepts with analogues from the contemporary moral and metaphysical discourse, so that the Gita can be looked at from a purely philosophical point of view. The philosophical meaning of these concepts can be displayed without their religious overtones. I have throughout analysed the concepts to make them appear very contemporary, and very relevant to our present day thinking. In this I have taken immense help from the available literature on the Gita. In fact, I have been inspired by Tilak's deep analysis of the purport of the Gita as also by Sri Aurobindo's and Radhakrishnan's philosophical explication of the concepts. Besides, Acharya Vinoba's and Nilakantha Das's penetrating analysis of the philosophy of the Gita have been my guiding lights in reading the Gita from a philosophical point of view.

The essay is divided into two parts: the Part I deals with ethical issues regarding action, agency, desireless action, detachment, rationality, etc., while the Part II deals with the metaphysical issues like the nature of Brahman, atman, consciousness, embodied consciousness, mind, etc. The second part provides the foundations to the first part, because the metaphysical framework of the Gita provides the right framework for the rise of the moral issues. However, there is no doubt that both ethics and metaphysics are interdependent in the Gita. Chapters 1–6 constitute the Part I, while Chaps. 7–12 constitute the Part II of this essay.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the philosophical issues raised in the Gita. The moral philosophy of disinterested action is the central doctrine of the Gita as also the doctrine of the nature of human agency, the rationality of the moral will of the agent, the determining conditions of the moral will, freedom of the will, etc. These constitute the corpus of issues discussed briefly in this chapter. Besides, the metaphysical issues of Brahman, the status of the world, and of the individual selves are discussed in this chapter. It has been argued that the metaphysics of the Gita is derived from the Vedantic metaphysics, but it does not necessarily belong to the tradition of Advaita Vedanta propounded by Acharya Sankara or to any other Vedantic school. The Gita reconciles many metaphysical doctrines within its integral framework, and so it does not belong exclusively to any particular Vedantic tradition. The Gita charts an independent course in metaphysics.

Chapter 2 discusses in considerable detail the ethics of disinterested action or *karmayoga* in the Gita. The most significant concept in this ethics is desireless action or disinterested action, which is the central concern of the Gita. It has been argued in the text that one can perform the moral actions in which the agent is detached to the results of the actions. The possibility of actions performed according to the moral law or *dharma* is such that the agent is detached to what results follow from those actions.. Actions are performed from duty, as Kant would like us to believe. The Gita defines moral actions as duties according to the sovereign moral law, and for the welfare of the universe (*lokasamgraha*). The welfare of the universe is not a utilitarian ideal, but the necessary component of the moral law which has universal

validity. The ethics of the Gita is primarily deontological as has been shown by many competent authorities on the Gita.

Chapter 3 discusses the nature of reason and rationality in the Gita so far as the latter defines the moral actions and the moral agency. The morality in the Gita is as much action-centric as knowledge-centric, because action and knowledge are interwoven, as action requires knowledge of the conditions of actions, which includes the knowledge of the self, and also as knowledge of the self, its desires and intentions leads to the performance of actions. There is no segregation in the Gita between thought and action as they are implicated in each other. The Gita admits the possibility of the failure of knowledge leading to wrong action because of the intervention of weakness of will following from the ignorance or the unenlightened nature of reason. Human reason is not always free from attachment to the world and its objects. Therefore, there may be imperfect knowledge which may not result in moral actions. So an enlightened reason is the best means for the coordination between knowledge and action.

Chapter 4 analyses the concept of *dharma* or moral law along with the concepts of duty and obligation in the Gita keeping in view its deontological moral theory. In the Gita there is emphasis on the primacy and the sovereignty of the moral law, which is not of empirical origin, but is transcendental in nature by being beyond the natural world. *Dharma* is the universal moral law that upholds the universe and keeps it running according to eternal laws. The duties which the moral agents are required to perform are determined by the moral law. In this sense, the Gita's deontology in ethics comes closer to Kant's deontological ethics as both share the same concern for the supremacy of the moral law. There is a wrong perception that in the Gita the Divine Will is supreme, and, therefore, all duties are fixed by God. But this is wrong, because in no way is God responsible for the moral actions which the human agents choose to do. For the Gita, the Divine Will does not interfere with the moral order of the universe, and so the divine order does not annul the autonomy of the moral order of the universe.

Chapter 5 analyses the concept of freedom of the will in the Gita. The concept of divine necessity is also introduced to contrast it with the free will. There is a visible tension between freedom and the divine determination in the Gita as it defends both freedom and divine determination. However, the Gita reconciles the two, because there is a parallel between the moral order in which freedom is real, and the divine order in which determination rules supreme. Both freedom and necessity cannot belong to the same order. The Gita does not allow this conflict to happen, because it makes free will indispensable for morality, while it also accepts the divine order as the foundation of the order of the universe. The divine order does not cancel the moral order as there is a pre-established harmony between the two.

Chapter 6 discusses virtue ethics in the Gita as the problem of virtues and vices arises in its moral theory. No moral theory is complete without the analysis of virtues and their place in the human character. Though morality in the Gita is primarily deontological, it accepts the importance of the cultivation of the moral virtues in the life of the moral agent. In fact, both deontology and virtue ethics are integrated as being virtuous is essential to being an ardent follower of the moral law. The ideal

of the *karmayogi* is that of one who is not only virtuous but also performs all his actions without any attachment. Detachment is itself a moral virtue which is to be cultivated.

The Part II begins with Chap. 7 which brings in the idea of the divine order in the universe, which is one of the basic metaphysical assumptions of the Gita. The Gita adheres to the Vedantic metaphysical idea that Brahman is the absolute reality, and that the universe is pervaded by it as its essence. Brahman or the Divine, is present in the very order of the universe, which consists of the minutest atoms and the mighty galaxies. In all these Brahman is present. The Gita gives graphic description of how Brahman is present in the universe as *sat* (existence), *cit* (consciousness), and *ananda* (bliss) in all entities, both conscious and unconscious, in the universe. The metaphysics of Brahman or the Divine explains how the order of the universe is finally established, not in the physical order, but the universal divine order.

Chapter 8 focuses on the cosmic form (*vishvarupa*) of Brahman which is one of the best features of the Gita, which was displayed by Sri Krishna to Arjuna in the battlefield. The Gita makes an effort to make Brahman, the absolute reality, manifest in concrete forms the details of which are poetically described in verses. The philosophical import of this is the way the Divine makes itself present to the reflective eye (*divyadrishti*) of human beings. Besides, it shows that the Vedantic Brahman is not only abstract and without form, but also concrete and formed. The concrete manifestation of Brahman in the diverse forms such as mountains, rivers, stars, etc., and also in the form of conscious beings, both human and animals, speaks of the all-pervasiveness of the absolute reality in the world.

Chapter 9 discusses the nature of mind, reason, and consciousness as these are the ways Brahman as absolute consciousness expresses itself in the world. Mind expresses consciousness in terms of its control over the senses, and its passionate attachment to the external world. Above it, stands in hierarchy reason which controls the activities of the mind and the passions involved in them. Reason is the gateway to the reality of Brahman as it has access to consciousness in its purest form. Reason presupposes the supremacy of consciousness in the form of the *atman* as pure consciousness. Reason itself is conscious as it is an instrument of the self or *atman*. The Gita believes in the hierarchy of consciousness in the form of mind, reason, and *atman*.

Chapter 10 discusses the metaphysics of integral non-dualism in the Gita as Brahman is both *nirguna* and *saguna*, that is, both without quality and with quality in an integral fashion. Brahman integrates all aspects of reality in the sense that what is abstract is also concrete, and what is formless is also with form, thus making an integration of the transcendent nature of reality with its immanent nature. Brahman and world, universal self and individual self, and man and Divine are integrated into one reality, thus making non-dualism as the metaphysical theory that satisfies all aspects of reality. The Gita aspires to explain reality without excluding anything from the totality with the help of a single reality, namely, Brahman.

Chapter 11 attempts to understand the nature of *moksa* or release which is a dominant spiritual ideal of man in the Gita. All Vedantic systems along with many other non-Vedantic systems discuss the nature of the highest spiritual ideal of mankind.

This ideal of liberation is discussed in the Upanishad as immortality (*amritatva*) of man. This is a state of existence of man in the timeless dimension, which is supposed to be free from sorrows and sufferings of the mortal existence. The existential condition of man is discussed in the Gita, not in exactly pessimistic terms, but in a way so as to lead man from his temporal and limited existence to the existence in the timeless and unlimited state in Brahman (*brahmisthiti*). This is reflected in the Upanishadic prayer: “Lead me from mortality to immortality” which is captured in the Gita’s ideal of spiritual freedom (*moksa*).

Chapter 12 makes an attempt to make the philosophy of the Gita relevant to the modern world in view of the unsympathetic criticism of thinkers who see no relevance of the Gita’s message to the modern man. That the Gita stands for the moral and spiritual values, which are eternal cannot be doubted. Such values as action without attachment, the life of selfless service to the world, and, above all, aspiration for spiritual freedom have an eternal appeal to mankind. The Gita gives importance to human reason above human passions of greed and attachment, and thus it pleads for the redemption of mankind from ignorance and blind beliefs. The value of the Gita lies in its moral and spiritual message which must be taken seriously.

This essay concludes with an appeal to mankind to understand the moral and spiritual teachings of the Gita with an open mind without any ideological prejudices and beliefs.

Acknowledgements

The *Bhagavad Gita* has been my constant companion from my early life both as a book of inspiration, and as a spiritual guide. I happened to get a copy of the Gita with a commentary by Pandit Nilakantha Das in my mother tongue, Odia, which was with my father, Late Bhikari Charan Pradhan. I got this book from my father as an inheritance for which I am ever grateful to him. Later in my High School days, a friend gave me a copy of the Gita with translation in English. I am grateful to this friend whose name now I forget. During those days in High School, I got from our school library Acharya Vinoba's *Gita Pravachan* translated into Odia by Annapurna Maharna. I got immersed in this book for some time because of the absorbing style of Acharya Vinoba's exposition, and his deep understanding of the Gita. Later on, of course, I got to read Mahatma Gandhi's *Discourse on the Gita* followed by Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan's *Bhagavadgita*, Adi Sankarachary's *Bhagavad Gita Bhasya*, and B.G. Tilak's *Srimad Bhagavad Gita Rahasya*. I express my deep reverence to all the great Acharyas who have guided me to the wisdom of the Gita.

Though I read the Gita all these years, I do not claim that I understand it fully, or even partially. The Gita is an ocean of wisdom which is beyond my limited understanding. But in order to make clear to myself what I understand about it, I have ventured to write this book explaining the ethical and metaphysical doctrines of the Gita. I have attempted to bring out the philosophical ideas of the Gita in order to make them clear to the general philosophical audience. I have been pained by the unsympathetic comments on the Gita by the ideologically blinded so-called rationalists and atheists who say that the Gita poses a danger to the modern society and that it has not much relevance to the modern man.

My book is a response to those philosophers who see only devotional piety and religious dogmatism in the Gita. I have shown that the Gita has a philosophy of the highest order, and that it is one of the mighty sources of the Vedantic wisdom. No philosopher and thinker worthy of high thinking can miss the greatness of the book.

While writing the book I have been immensely helped by my wife, Jhansi, my sons, Nachiketa and Sabyasachi, and their family. I owe gratitude to all of them, especially to my grandchildren, Rohin, Nivriti, and Sanya for their love and affection for me.

I am thankful to Springer, especially Ms. Satvinder Kaur, Senior Editor, for undertaking the publication of the book.

My book is dedicated to all the great Acharyas who have commented on the Gita and made it accessible to the common man, to my revered father from whom I received the copy of the Gita as a precious inheritance, and to my revered eldest brother Bipin Bihary Pradhan who was the constant source of inspiration and guidance in my life.

Contents

Part I Moral Foundations of the Bhagavad Gita

1	The Central Philosophy of the <i>Bhagavad Gita</i>	3
1.1	Introduction	3
1.2	The Dialogue Between Man and the Divine	4
1.3	Arjuna’s Moral Dilemma	5
1.4	Sri Krishna’s Advice	6
1.5	The Moral Motive of the Gita	8
1.6	The Ideal of <i>Dharma</i> in the Gita	9
1.7	The Divine Order of the Universe	11
1.8	The Primacy of the Divine Order	12
1.9	The Divine “I”	13
1.10	The Man-Divine Relationship	14
1.11	Metaphysics of Brahman	15
1.12	The Philosophy of Life	17
1.13	Action, Agency, and Freedom	17
1.14	Ethics and Metaphysics in the Gita	19
1.15	Conclusion	20
	References	20
2	Ethics of <i>Karmayoga</i>	21
2.1	Introduction	21
2.2	The Structure of Action	22
2.3	Actions, and Freedom of the Will	23
2.4	Disinterested Actions	24
2.5	Surrender of the Ego in Action	25
2.6	Perfection in Action and <i>Lokasamgraha</i>	27
2.7	The Idea of Action as <i>Yajna</i> or Sacrifice	28
2.8	Inaction-In-Action and Action-In-Inaction	30

2.9 Action and Knowledge 31

2.10 The Secret of Action and Knowledge 32

2.11 The Primacy of the Practical 33

2.12 *Karmayoga* and the Metaphysics of the Self 35

2.13 Conclusion 36

References 36

3 Knowledge, Reason, and Enlightenment 37

3.1 Introduction 37

3.2 Knowing One’s Self 37

3.3 Self-Knowledge and Self-Purification 39

3.4 The Primacy of the Soul 40

3.5 Self-Awakening and the Rise of *Prajna* 41

3.6 The Highest Wisdom 43

3.7 *Buddhiyoga*, or the Yoga of Enlightened Reason 44

3.8 Reason Divinized 45

3.9 Reason and Beyond Reason 46

3.10 The Enlightened Reason in Action 47

3.11 The Logic of *Karmayoga* 48

3.12 Renunciation in Action 49

3.13 Enlightenment and the State of *Brahman-Nirvana* 50

3.14 Conclusion 51

References 51

4 Dharma, Moral Duties, and Social Obligations 53

4.1 Introduction 53

4.2 The Concept of *Svadharmā* in the Gita 54

4.3 Moral Duties and Social Obligations 55

4.4 The Moral Good and the Cosmic Cycle 57

4.5 Deontology in the Gita 58

4.6 Morality and Metaphysics in the Gita 59

4.7 Man and Divine: The Bridge in Morality 60

4.8 Morality and Spirituality 62

4.9 The Divine Life 63

4.10 The Divine Being 64

4.11 God and the Moral Order 65

4.12 Autonomy of Morality 66

4.13 The Two Orders: Moral and the Divine 67

4.14 Conclusion 68

References 69

5	Free Will and Divine Necessity	71
5.1	Introduction	71
5.2	Human Agency and Free Will	72
5.3	Metaphysics of the Free Will	73
5.4	The Embodied Self	74
5.5	Freedom from Bondage	75
5.6	Whose Freedom?	75
5.7	The Higher Self	77
5.8	The Empirical Self or the Individual Consciousness	77
5.9	Transcendence of Agency	79
5.10	Freedom, Agency, and Divine Necessity	80
5.11	The Place of Man in the Universe	82
5.12	The Individual Self and Its Destiny	83
5.13	Freedom as the Essence of Human Beings	84
5.14	Conclusion	85
	References	85
6	Virtue Ethics: The Morality of the Divine Qualities	87
6.1	Introduction	87
6.2	Two Types of Qualities: The Divine and the Non-Divine	87
6.3	The Divine Qualities	88
6.4	The Demoniatic Qualities	90
6.5	The Possibility of Redemption	91
6.6	The Dawn of Wisdom	92
6.7	The Nature of Enlightenment	93
6.8	The Enlightened Reason	94
6.9	Theory of Yoga	95
6.10	Moral Perfection	96
6.11	Spiritual Liberation	98
6.12	The Ascetic Virtues	99
6.13	Conclusion	99
	References	100
 Part II Metaphysical Foundations of the Bhagavad Gita		
7	The Divine Principle and the World Order	103
7.1	Introduction	103
7.2	Metaphysics and Morals	104
7.3	The Two Natures	105
7.4	The Cosmic Panorama	106
7.5	Being and Becoming	107
7.6	Time and World	108
7.7	Evolution of the World	109
7.8	Matter and Mind	111

7.9 Human Beings and Their Inner Nature 112

7.10 The Three *Gunas* 113

7.11 The *Trigunatita* 115

7.12 The Divinity in Man 115

7.13 Conclusion 116

References 117

8 The Metaphysics of the Cosmic Form 119

8.1 Introduction 119

8.2 The Human Versus The Divine Point of View 119

8.3 Everything as Brahman 121

8.4 Time, the Great Devourer 122

8.5 The Limits of the Human Points of View 124

8.6 Brahman Without Qualities 124

8.7 The World 126

8.8 The Infinite Forms 127

8.9 Integral Metaphysics 128

8.10 Metaphysics of Consciousness 129

8.11 Primacy of Consciousness 130

8.12 The I-Consciousness 131

8.13 I and Thou 132

8.14 Conclusion 133

References 133

9 Mind, Reason, and Consciousness 135

9.1 Introduction 135

9.2 The Laws of the Mind and Reason 135

9.3 Reason in Moral Actions 137

9.4 Reason and Freedom 139

9.5 Desireless Actions 140

9.6 The Moral Agency and the Principle of Consciousness 141

9.7 The Embodied Self 143

9.8 The Primacy of Consciousness 144

9.9 Absolute Consciousness 145

9.10 The Three Purushas 146

9.11 The Absolute Reality and the Cosmic Tree 147

9.12 The Final Release 148

9.13 Conclusion 149

References 149

10 In Defence of Integral Non-dualism 151

10.1 Introduction 151

10.2 The Ultimate Reality 152

10.3 Two Faces of Brahman 153

10.4 One and Many 154

10.5	The Many as Non-Illusory	155
10.6	The Universe as a Law-Governed System	156
10.7	The Moral Order	157
10.8	Unity of the Universe	159
10.9	The Grades of Consciousness in the Universe	160
10.10	Union of Man and Divine	160
10.11	Morality and Spirituality as the Goals of Life	162
10.12	“I Am Brahman” (<i>Aham Brahmasmi</i>)	163
10.13	Metaphysics of Integral Experience	164
10.14	Conclusion	165
	References	165
11	The Quest for Immortality	167
11.1	Introduction	167
11.2	Life in Time and Beyond	168
11.3	Time as the Essence of Existence	169
11.4	Brahman as Non-Temporal and Non-Historical	170
11.5	Metaphysical Necessity of the World in Time	171
11.6	Being and Time	172
11.7	The Timeless Being	173
11.8	The Divine Life	174
11.9	The <i>Karma Yogi</i>	175
11.10	<i>Lokasamgraha</i> as the Ideal of <i>Karmayoga</i>	176
11.11	The Community of the Enlightened Human Beings	178
11.12	Morality and Spirituality of the Enlightened Beings	178
11.13	The Spiritual Vision of the Gita	180
11.14	Conclusion	181
	References	181
12	The Gita in the Modern World	183
12.1	Introduction	183
12.2	The Modern World	184
12.3	The Core Values of the Modern Civilization	185
12.4	The Value-System in the Gita	186
12.5	The Spirit of Enlightenment	187
12.6	The Enlightened Reason	188
12.7	Reason and the Freedom from Desires	189
12.8	Ethics, Agency, and the Moral Will	190
12.9	Beyond the Instrumental Reason	192
12.10	Reason and the Moral View of the World	193
12.11	Rationality of the World-Order	194
12.12	The Veil of Ignorance	196

12.13 Absolute Knowledge, and the Idealist Standpoint 197

12.14 The Postmodernist Challenge 198

12.15 Modernism of the Gita 199

12.16 Conclusion 199

References 200

Epilogue 201

Index 203

Part I
Moral Foundations of the Bhagavad Gita

Chapter 1

The Central Philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*



1.1 Introduction

The *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the most significant texts in the history of Indian religion and philosophy. It has occupied a central place in the ethical and spiritual life of the Indians because of its profound teachings on the way how we should live and how we ought to achieve perfection in life. The Gita is quintessentially a philosophical text that discusses and reflects upon the intricate problem of life (Sankara 2001; Sri Aurobindo 2000; Radhakrishnan 1971). The Gita is not a text on religious rituals, nor is it a text of religious worship. It brings into discussion the purely philosophical ideas concerning life, world, and the ultimate reality. It does not offer a mere intellectual discourse, but provides a practical way of putting those ideas into action.

The Gita has travelled a long way in the intellectual history of India from the post-Upanishadic period to the present day spanning a time of many thousand centuries. It has remained a guiding star in the firmament of the religio-philosophical ideas in India never losing its relevance to human life. There have been many interpretations of this profound text giving rise to many new schools of Vedanta, such as Advaita, Dvaita, Vishistadvaita, and so on. But the unity of the text composed in eighteen chapters has remained the same over centuries and has made itself amenable to multiple interpretations without losing its own inner core of spiritually uplifting divine song (Arnold 1865). The text is at once a divine poem, a philosophically rich discourse, and a document of the journey of the human spirit from the mundane to the transcendental.

In this chapter I will place the Gita as a work of deep philosophical significance detailing the nuances of a spiritual life in the world, while pointing beyond the mundane world of suffering to the divine life of bliss. The Gita begins with a depiction of the human situation of conflict, doubt, dejection, and dilemma personified by Arjuna, and ends with the resolution of the conflict and dilemma. The journey of the Gita is from ignorance to knowledge, from death to immortality, and from the bare worldly existence to the existence of a spiritually free individual.