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**Dr. Madhusmita Padhi**

Assistant professor (Guest),  
Rama Devi women's University,  
Bhubaneswar, Odisha

### Bhagavad Gita and Indian Nationalism: The Ethical Foundations of Nation-Building

**Dr. Madhusmita Padhi**

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#### Abstract

The Bhagavad Gita occupies a unique place in Indian intellectual history. Although it does not explicitly discuss nationalism in the modern political sense, its teachings profoundly influenced the moral and ethical foundations of Indian nationalism. During the struggle for independence, leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, and Vinoba Bhave interpreted the Gita as a guide for social responsibility, selfless service, ethical leadership, and national regeneration. The concepts of Karma-Yoga, equality of all beings, and commitment to the welfare of society became central to their understanding of nation-building. This paper examines the relationship between the Bhagavad Gita and Indian nationalism and argues that the Gita contributed to nationalism by providing a spiritual and ethical framework for collective action and national unity.

#### Introduction

The Bhagavad Gita is one of the most influential philosophical texts in Indian civilization. Situated within the Mahābhārata, it presents a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. Faced with a moral crisis, Arjuna hesitates to perform his duty, and Krishna guides him towards an understanding of righteous action, self-knowledge, and devotion.

Although the Gita was composed long before the emergence of modern nationalism, its teachings became highly influential during India's freedom movement. Nationalist thinkers discovered in the Gita a philosophy capable of inspiring courage, discipline, sacrifice, and dedication to the common good. Consequently, the text became a source of ethical guidance for those seeking both personal transformation and national reconstruction.

The relationship between the Bhagavad Gita and nationalism lies not in political doctrines but in the moral principles that encourage individuals to work for society without selfish motives. These principles helped shape a vision of nationalism based upon duty, service, equality, and collective welfare.

#### • Dharma and National Duty

One of the central teachings of the Gita is the importance of performing one's duty. Krishna repeatedly instructs Arjuna to fulfil his responsibility despite personal difficulties and emotional attachments.

स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः।<sup>1</sup>

"It is better to perform one's own duty imperfectly than to perform another's duty perfectly."<sup>2</sup>

#### Correspondence:

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Assistant professor (Guest),  
Rama Devi women's University,  
Bhubaneswar, Odisha

Nationalist leaders interpreted this teaching as a call to fulfil one's responsibilities toward society and the nation. Just as Arjuna was required to act for the protection of righteousness, citizens were expected to contribute to the welfare and progress of the nation. National service thus became an extension of individual duty.

Vinoba Bhave interpreted the Gītā as a guide for constructive social action. His philosophy of Sarvodaya (welfare of all) was influenced by: सर्वभूतहिते रताः (5.25) He believed that national development must benefit all sections of society rather than a privileged few.

#### ● Karma-Yoga and National Service

The doctrine of Karma-Yoga became one of the most significant contributions of the Bhagavad Gita to nationalist thought. Krishna teaches that actions should be performed without attachment to personal rewards.

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि॥<sup>3</sup>

"You have the right to action alone, but never to its fruits."

This verse inspired many nationalist leaders, particularly Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi. Tilak argued that the Gita advocates active engagement in the world rather than withdrawal from society. He viewed selfless action as the moral basis of political participation and national service. He writes: "The Gita teaches us not flight from action but performance of duty with detachment."<sup>4</sup>

For Tilak, the doctrine of: कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन became the philosophical basis for participation in the freedom struggle. He believed that service to the nation was a form of Karma-Yoga.

Gandhi similarly interpreted Karma-Yoga as the foundation of public life. For him, service to the nation was not motivated by personal gain but by a commitment to truth, justice, and the welfare of others.

He referred to the Gita as: "My spiritual dictionary."<sup>5</sup> He interpreted the battlefield symbolically as the moral struggle within human beings. Drawing from: योगस्थः कुरु कर्मणि (2.48) Gandhi developed the principles of Satyagraha, self-discipline, and service.

For Gandhi, true nationalism could never be separated from universal human welfare.

He wrote: "My nationalism is as broad as my humanity."<sup>6</sup>

#### ● Loka-Saṅgraha: Welfare of Society

The concept of Loka-Saṅgraha (holding society together and promoting collective welfare) provides one of the strongest links between the Bhagavad Gita and nationalism.

लोकसंग्रहमेवापि सम्पश्यन्कर्तुमर्हसि।<sup>7</sup>

"One should act with a view to maintaining the welfare and unity of society."<sup>8</sup>

This verse emphasizes that human action should contribute to social harmony and public welfare. Nationalist thinkers interpreted this teaching as a moral obligation to work for the unity and progress of the nation. A nation cannot flourish unless its citizens act responsibly for the benefit of the larger community.

Sri Aurobindo saw the Gītā as synthesizing:

- Jñāna (Knowledge)
- Bhakti (Devotion)
- Karma (Action)

He argued that India's freedom was not merely political but spiritual.

Inspired by: लोकसंग्रहमेवापि सम्पश्यन् कर्तुमर्हसि (3.20)

Aurobindo maintained that individuals must act for the welfare of society and humanity. He regarded nationalism as a divine force working through history.

The ideal of Loka-Saṅgraha transformed nationalism from a political aspiration into an ethical project aimed at social integration and collective advancement.

#### ● Equality and National Unity

Another significant contribution of the Gita to nationalist thought is its emphasis on spiritual equality. Krishna teaches that the wise perceive the same divine reality in all beings.

विद्याविनयसम्पन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि।

शुनि चैव श्वपाके च पण्डिताः समदर्शिनः॥<sup>9</sup>

"The wise see with equal vision a learned Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and an outcaste."

This principle challenged social divisions and inspired nationalist leaders to promote unity among diverse communities. Swami Vivekananda drew extensively upon this teaching to advocate social equality and human dignity. He believed that the strength of the nation depended upon recognizing the inherent worth of every individual. He famously declared:

"Strength, strength is what the Upanishads and the Gita speak to me from every page."<sup>10</sup>

Inspired by: क्लैब्यं मा स्म गमः पार्थ (2.3) he urged Indians to overcome weakness and rebuild the nation through education, service, and self-confidence. For Vivekananda, nationalism was rooted in the spiritual unity of humanity rather than political power.

The idea of equality helped nationalism move beyond narrow identities and foster a sense of common belonging among the people of India.

#### ● Ethical Leadership and Nation-Building

The Bhagavad Gita also emphasizes the importance of exemplary leadership.

यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवेतरो जनः।

स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते॥<sup>11</sup>

"Whatever a great person does, others follow."

Nationalist leaders regarded this teaching as a reminder that political leadership must be grounded in moral integrity. Gandhi, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo believed that the transformation of society begins with the ethical transformation of individuals. The leader becomes an example whose actions inspire collective progress.

This understanding contributed to the emergence of a nationalism based on character, sacrifice, and public responsibility rather than political power alone.

#### ● Influence on Nationalist Thinkers

Bal Gangadhar Tilak interpreted the Gita through the doctrine of Karma-Yoga and argued that active participation in public life was a sacred duty. His work *Gita Rahasya* presented selfless action as the foundation of national regeneration.

Swami Vivekananda emphasized strength, fearlessness, and service to humanity. He viewed the masses as the true foundation of the nation and believed that the teachings of the Gita could awaken India's dormant spiritual energy.

Mahatma Gandhi regarded the Gita as his spiritual guide. He derived from it the principles of non-attachment, self-discipline, and service. His philosophy of Satyagraha reflected the Gita's insistence on acting without selfish motives.

Sri Aurobindo interpreted the Gita as a synthesis of knowledge, devotion, and action. He envisioned India as a spiritual civilization whose freedom would contribute to the moral advancement of humanity.

Vinoba Bhave applied the ethical teachings of the Gita to social reform and community welfare through the Sarvodaya movement, emphasizing the upliftment of all sections of society.

#### ● Contemporary Relevance

The teachings of the Bhagavad Gita continue to be relevant in contemporary society. In an age characterized by social divisions, political conflict, and ethical challenges, the Gita offers a vision of responsible citizenship based on duty, selfless service, equality, and collective welfare.

Its message encourages individuals to place public good above personal interests and to participate actively in the development of society. Such values remain essential for strengthening democratic institutions and promoting national unity.

#### Conclusion

The Bhagavad Gita did not formulate a theory of nationalism in the modern political sense. Nevertheless, it

provided the ethical and spiritual principles that influenced the development of Indian nationalist thought. Through its teachings on duty, selfless action, social welfare, equality, and moral leadership, the Gita offered a framework for imagining the nation as a community united by shared responsibility and common purpose.

The interpretations of Tilak, Vivekananda, Gandhi, Aurobindo, and Vinoba Bhave demonstrate how the Gita became a source of inspiration for national awakening and social transformation. Its enduring significance lies in its ability to connect personal morality with collective welfare, thereby offering a humanistic foundation for nation-building and responsible citizenship.

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#### Footnote

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- <sup>2</sup> Talks on the Gita
- <sup>3</sup> Bhagavad Gita 2.47
- <sup>4</sup> Srimad Bhagavad Gita Rahasya (1915)
- <sup>5</sup> Anasakti Yoga
- <sup>6</sup> The Story of My Experiments with Truth
- <sup>7</sup> Bhagavad Gita 3.20
- <sup>8</sup> Essays on the Gita
- <sup>9</sup> Bhagavad Gita 5.18
- <sup>10</sup> Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda
- <sup>11</sup> Bhagavad Gita 3.21