

Bhagavadgita and Psychotherapy

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Abstract

This paper attempts to summarise the main postulates of Bhagavadgita a sacred book of Hindus, with reference to their implications in psychotherapeutic context in the Indian socio-cultural set up.

The Bhagavadgita's concept of a mentally healthy person is discussed and finally the relevance of the Bhagavadgita's teaching to current psychological medicine explained.

Key words -

**Bhagavadgita,
Psychotherapy,
Socio-cultural set-up
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Majority of the psychiatric problems are neurotic in nature and need some form of psychotherapy. It has been recognised that psychotherapeutic models developed in the west are largely inapplicable in the context of oriental cultures [1]. There are certain special characteristics in the personality development of an average Indian which are important to note in the psychotherapeutic context. Submission to authority, particularly spiritual, acceptance and even fostering of dependence on elders, readiness to accept overt situational support and reluctance to seek intra-psycho explanation [2], belief in transmigration of soul and fatalism [3] and superiority-inferiority complexes on the basis of castes [4] are some of them. In the west, on the other hand, authority is questioned, independence is fostered and intra-psycho explanation of conflicts is more readily accepted. In this context, there is therefore, an increasing awareness of the need for developing indigenous therapeutic models.

Eminent Indian psychiatrists like Govindaswamy [5], Satyananda [6] and Venkoba Rao and Parvathidevi [7] proposed Bhagavadgita as a source for psychotherapy and suggested to build up psychotherapeutic paradigm on its line.

The Bhagavadgita is now reviewed in detail with special reference to the psychotherapeutic technique available in its teaching. An attempt has been made to interpret those ancient Indian concepts in modern context for their possible application in clinical set up.

Bhagavadgita : The Book of Psychotherapy.

Bhagavadgita forms part of the Bhishma Parva of the Mahabharata written by Vedavyasa in 3101 B. C. [8]. A symbolic representation of a common human conflict and approaches to its solution are succinctly described in this book in a dialog form. The theme involves the war between 'Kauravas' and 'Pandavas', who are cousins, for the usurpation of the kingdom, Arjuna, the commander-in-chief of the 'Pandavas' is faced with an intense psychological turmoil when placed in the predicament of having to kill his own kith and kin in the opposite camp- an immoral act according to him. Amidst the warring forces, he suddenly becomes anxious, confesses to confusion and negative self-evaluation and admits of physical and psychological symptoms (his limbs quailed, mouth dried, body shook and hair stood on end [9]) which threatens his very survival. He pleads that he is incompetent to face the challenge and seeks to avoid it [10]. Thus we have here an example of faulty coping strategy in the face of stress. What follows in the Bhagavadgita is the response of his friend and mentor Krishna, to Arjuna's distress.

(ii)

Krishna as a cognitive therapist

The stress Arjuna faced, as Ramachandra Rao [11] has analysed, was due to an unrealistic cognitive appraisal of himself (viz., the righteous and valiant warrior), the object (viz., the war) and the threat (viz., morality i.e. of the act he was doing). By anticipation of outcome in a negative way, his task oriented behaviour was vitiated and led him to inaction. Krishna resorted to correct his cognitive inadequacy by providing a new framework for the coping behaviour, where the task performance is made independent of the anticipation of the outcome. He focussed Arjuna's attention on the value of his perception of himself in his role status and of the objective environment. He taught that non-anticipation does not necessarily mean inaction, but may actually induce more effective action [12]. Thus, it was not proper of Arjuna, Krishna explained, to abstain from fighting against enemies on account of doubt or result [13].

(iii)

'Sthitaprajna' - a person with positive mental health

But who can act effectively in a conflict free way? Before proceeding further, Krishna describes such a person whom he calls 'Sthitaprajna'. He is one who is unruffled by grief, desire or anger alike [14], has control over his senses and whose happiness wells up from within, being non-contingent upon external gratification [15].

(iv)

Steps in cognitive re-structuring: 'Jnana', 'Karma' & 'Bhakti'

Bhagavadgita provides a specific therapeutic package for distressing problems in which anxiety is of

fundamental importance. 'Jnana' or cognitive appraisal, 'Karma' or appropriate action and 'Bhakti' or faith are the most important of them.

1 'Jnana' or cognitive appraisal

The first task in facing any situation is 'Jnana' or accurate cognitive appraisal, according to Bhagavadgita. Krishna uses the term 'Jnana' in a deeper sense, i.e. to understand not only immediate situation but for a deeper knowledge of the ontogenic and phylogenic nature of the universe and man's place in it [16]. Man is spiritual in nature and his spirit / soul or 'Atman' does not come under the category of any substance, attribute or even an action [17]. Krishna, further appraises Arjuna that the soul passes through childhood, youth and old age and also into another body just as an old cloth is replaced by a new one [18]. Such an understanding makes experiential existence appear as a void. Problems arise only when an individual mistakes himself as the enjoyer or sufferer [19]. In fact, it is the body (body includes ego also) that undergoes these experiences and not the self [20]. Thus the first way to overcome these sufferings, is to know one's spiritual nature.

2 'Karma' being and not becoming as appropriate action.

'Karma' or appropriate action is another mean for facing problems. Appropriate action is determined, according to Bhagavadgita, by one's 'Varna' or endowment and 'Asrama' or state of growth [21]. Four 'Varnas' (viz., 'Brahmin' or priest class, 'Kshatriya' or warrior class, 'Vaishya' or business community and 'Shudra' or labourer) and four 'Asramas' (viz., 'Brahmacharya' or learning stage, 'grahastha' or householder stage, 'Vana.prastha' or retirement from household and 'Sanyasa' or complete renunciation from the worldly affairs) are the two dimensions constituting Hindu Social organisation and determines each person's action within this social fabric [22].

One should therefore:

- (1) derive one's gratification from doing his duty and not from its outcome viz., 'Nishkamakarma' [23],
- (2) perform his task perfectly viz., 'Karmasu Kaushalam' [24] and
- (3) dedicate action for Society's Welfare viz., 'Yajnarthat Karma' [25].

These three aspects of action are technically termed as 'Karmayoga' in Bhagavadgita.

So, Krishna advises Arjuna to overcome his improper refusal of his duty to fight which has come to him by his birth (warrior class), upbringing and temperament. This is his appropriate role, directed by 'Dharama' - the code of conduct, which protects the interest not only of the individual, but of the society at large [26].

3. 'Bhakti' : The path of faith

Faith in God, and dissolving the ego centricities thereby identifying with a universal soul or personal God is a unique step to salvation from problems [27].

4. Other approaches

The Bhagavadgita also refers to other important approaches to better positive mental health. These include 'Pranayama' or deep breathing exercises [28], 'Pariprashna' or discussion [29], 'Sraddha' or devotion [30], 'Ekagraman' or meditation [31] and 'Yuktahara-Vihara' or good nutrition and relaxation [32].

(v)

Relevance of the Bhagavadgita to current psychological medicine.

From the above, it is apparent that the Bhagavadgita is replete with concepts of relevance to psychotherapy in the present day psychiatric context, but these concepts must be viewed with reservation. Obviously, the severely depressed, the confused demented or the hallucinated schizophrenic may not reap much benefit from the Bhagavadgita. The message of the Bhagavadgita however, appeals to the vast, multitude of less severely disturbed people, plunged in competition, frustration and meaninglessness.

The Bhagavadgita's concept of 'Jnana' in wider sense i.e., the understanding of the universal nature of the spiritual self in contrast to the individual ego experiencing pleasure and pain, can be definitely helpful in reducing the impact of life's events as personal stresses. The Bhagavadgita's concept of immortality of the soul is especially soothing for one who is grief stricken with a loss of a loved one. Similarly, the emotional disturbances associated with the advent of adolescence and old age become more tolerable in light of the Bhagavadgita's concept of these as inevitable phases of the life cycle. The principle of 'Nishkamakarma' is appropriate for anxiety states related to action with uncertain outcome, and helps the person to function effectively in this achievement oriented world, where rewards may not be always certain.

Bhagavadgita's explanation on 'Bhakti' gives prominence to the identification of the individual soul with the supreme soul through complete dedication and surrender. Infact, the active religious life of common Hindus today is grounded in the 'Bhakti' and thus, the various rituals such as 'Japa', 'Homa', 'Archana', 'Mudra', 'Seva' and 'Vandana' can be developed as therapeutic tools [33].

Apart from providing a conceptual framework conducive to freedom from psychological conflicts, Bhagavadgita also provides a cookbook approach to positive mental health, using the principles of yoga, the steps of self-disciplining in food and habit and the code of conduct (Yuktaharavihara), physical training through postures (Asanas), autonomic training through deep breathing exercises (Pranayama) and the various stages of meditation (Ekagramana). They constitute a truly effective approach to integration of the mind and body.

For the therapist, in his busy task of catering to the needs of the emotionally disturbed, to deploy these principles, certain pre-requisites are to be borne in mind. The therapist has to cherish the value system of the Bhagavadgita himself, thus maintaining congruence in his therapeutic relation to the patient. Secondly, the belief and value system of the patient must be considered, and the therapist must not impose his values upon the patient.

Finally, it may be useful to seek help from religious teachers who are not necessarily professionals. It may also, in some instances, be necessary to advise the patients to read the Bhagavadgita regularly (Bibliotherapy).

Clearly, the Bhagavadgita has a lot to offer as a psychotherapeutic paradigm in the Indian context. Much work needs to be done in application of these principles to, and evaluation of their utility in specific clinical situations.

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