



Sustainable Development and Environmental Ethics In Shrimad Bhagavad Gita: A Geo-Historical Perspective

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Abstract: Shrimad Bhagavad Gita is the core of Vedic philosophy which emphasizes knowledge and understanding, deeply connected with principles of sustainability, ethics and timeless wisdom. The research paper showcases the vitality and philosophical ideas of the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, which was remarkably progressive in terms of sustainability and ethical integrity. It corresponds to the current dimensions of sustainable development goals propounded by the United Nations and several other important international organizations. Shrimad Bhagavad Gita considers the environment as a whole .i.e all the living beings are mutually dependent on each other. The contemporary environmental challenges pose a threat to human existence to which solution is clearly enshrined in the holy text of Shrimad Bhagavad Gita. It also highlights the key role of balance and moderation in the relationship between humans and nature. It shuns the idea of attachment to material things in contrast advocating the cycle of give and take .i.e. the duty and responsibility of the humans is to offer back to Mother Nature for sustaining us. Thus by examining the essential verses from Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, the paper investigates how its philosophical and psychological teachings are intricately related to sustainable development and environmental ethics.

Index Terms: Balance, environmental ethics, prakriti, purusha, selfless service, Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, sustainable.

I. INTRODUCTION

The build-up of the concept of sustainable development has a long history, building on the collaboration of different countries and the United Nations (UN). The 1972 Stockholm conference and 1987 Brundtland report provided the initial framework for this concept. It was in the 1992 Earth Summit that introduced the major first move through Agenda 21 and the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDG) that framed the true essence and

vitality of sustainable development. Embracing the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the Paris Agreement marked a significant milestone towards environmental consciousness. Various sacred scriptures of India already informed the cruciality of these concepts, ahead of its time. Shrimad Bhagavad Gita aligned to the sustainable goals which the UN has framed much later in its 17 SDG goals. Shrimad Bhagavad Gita is a magnum opus showcasing a timeless response to the environmental crisis,

emphasizing a revolutionary philosophy of selfless action and a futuristic approach to sustainable development. It undoubtedly encompasses the targets of water management (SDG 6), selfless and responsible human action (SDG 12), prominence to mother earth (SDG 13) and altogether embracing every form of ecology (SDG 14,15). Shrimad Bhagavad Gita's teachings portray nature and environmental components not just as a biological concept but beyond in terms of spiritual liberation. It sheds light on various dimensions of sustainability in terms of elements of creation, sacrifice without attachment, balancing knowledge and action, ecological stewardship and selfless sacrifice. Shrimad Bhagavad Gita's principles and existential framework also acts as a beacon for environmental ethics. It transcends from the ideology of controlling self-desires to the altruistic way of living. Similar principles are also emphasised in other sacred texts like Vedas, Upanishads, which promote the integrated nature of the life of human beings with mother nature, such as the concept of Rta or cosmic order in Vedas, which focuses on the significance of harmony and balance. On the other hand, Taittiriya Upanishad and Brihadaranyaka Upanishad also centre on the notion of spiritual presence in all living forms. Thus, this book of books, Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, is the timeless testament for generations to come, which not only deals with different concepts and themes in isolation but sustainable human values as a whole.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to examine the concept of sustainable development through the

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philosophical lens of the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, supported by insights from the Upanishads. The primary framework employed is hermeneutics, which facilitates the interpretation of scriptural texts beyond their literal meaning, enabling their relevance to contemporary environmental concerns. In addition, the study incorporates cultural ecology to understand the intrinsic relationship between human beings and nature as reflected in ancient Indian thought. A geographical perspective is also utilized, particularly in analyzing the concept of Panchamahabhuta (five elements), to highlight the spatial and ecological dimensions of existence. Furthermore, the study aligns these philosophical insights with modern sustainability discourse through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby establishing a connection between traditional knowledge systems and contemporary global frameworks.

II. SHRIMAD BHAGAVAD GITA AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

A. SHRIMAD BHAGAVAD GITA 2.31-33 (DUTY AND RESPONSIBILITY)

स्वधर्ममपि चावेक्ष्य न विकम्पितुमर्हसि ।
धर्म्याद्धि युद्धाच्छ्रेयोऽन्यत्क्षत्रियस्य न विद्यते ॥31॥
यदृच्छया चोपपन्नं स्वर्गद्वारमपावृतम् ।
सुखिनः क्षत्रियाः पार्थ लभन्ते युद्धमीदृशम् ॥32॥
अथ चेत्त्वमिमं धर्म्य संग्रामं न करिष्यसि ।
ततः स्वधर्मं कीर्तिं च हित्वा पापमवाप्स्यसि ॥33॥

EXPLANATION: The efforts to save the environment till date by the international organizations as well as countries on individual basis can be broadly attributed to the concept of shallow ecology. Humans have even assigned monetary value to ecosystem services provided by Mother Nature (The economics of ecosystem and biodiversity TEBB). It's a sad reality that something as fundamental as conservation is linked to market economics. But in contrast, Shrimad Bhagwat Geeta underscores the importance of Deep ecology .i.e. the moral responsibility of humans to protect the Earth and not because of certain selfish interests or economic losses. Similarly it is manifested in Mundaka Upanishad which distinguished transcendental insight from empirical knowledge. It supports the idea that development in its truest sense is not purely economic, but arises from elevated consciousness and ethical insight. Thus abandoning moral duty equates to allowing environmental degradation to persist unchecked, which compromises the well-being of current and future generations.

B. SHRIMAD BHAGAVAD GITA 3.10 (SACRIFICE AND MUTUAL SUPPORT)

सहयज्ञाः प्रजाः सृष्ट्वा पुरोवाच प्रजापतिः ।

अनेन प्रसविष्यध्वमेष वोऽस्त्विष्टकामधुक् ॥10॥

EXPLANATION: The verse emphasized on yajna (sacrifice or selfless work) as a means to sustain life. To align it with the principles of sustainable development means humans need to respect and maintain the Earth's natural cycles, such as preserving biodiversity and preventing pollution. This concept is reinforced as cosmic ecological law in Taittiriya Upanishad[†], where imbalance disrupts the natural cycle. Humans should act as facilitators in the environmental cycles rather than impeding the process. We must try to reciprocate to nature for providing liveable conditions on the planet earth by sacrificing our ego and hyper consumerism. This will be the most resounding form of *yajna* that could be performed for the entire mankind

C. SHRIMAD BHAGAVAD GITA 16.1-4 (QUALITIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY)

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

अभयं सत्त्वसंशुद्धिर्ज्ञानयोगव्यवस्थितिः । दानं दमश्च यज्ञश्च
स्वाध्यायस्तप आर्जवम् ॥1॥

अहिंसा सत्यमक्रोधस्त्यागः शान्तिरपैशुनम् । दया भूतेष्वलोलुप्त्वं
मार्दवं हीरचापलम् ॥2॥

तेजः क्षमा धृतिः शौचमद्रोहो नातिमानिता । भवन्ति सम्पदं
दैवीमभिजातस्य भारत ॥3॥

दम्भो दर्पोऽभिमानश्च क्रोधः पारुष्यमेव च । अज्ञानं चाभिजातस्य
पार्थ सम्पदमासुरीम् ॥4॥

EXPLANATION: In ancient scriptures like *Rig Veda*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and others there is always a struggle between positives and negatives. The virtues mentioned are those of divine nature (*deva*) and those of demonic nature (*asuras*). It is immensely obscure to form a distinction between two in the real world. Utmost the divine qualities must outnumber the demonic qualities in humans to follow a balanced approach in his life. This rationality is needed in sustainable development. As sustainable development can't be seen in silos it is a multifaceted concept which has social, environmental and economic dimensions. The divine qualities like self-control, cleanliness, compassion, sharing of knowledge, moderation, non-violence, unembittered, forgiveness and others are synonymous with the sacred-eco-qualities (qualities required to conserve nature). The equitable sharing, freedom in every sense without discrimination and sacrifice for the good could lead to the social and economic development of marginalised and underprivileged. The denouncement or at least limiting of *asura* qualities like excessive ego, anger and ignorance will lead to environment friendly development. Similar qualities of truth,

[†] भयादस्याग्निस्तपति भयात्तपति सूर्यः (Taittiriya Upanishad 3.1)

righteous conduct and disciplined conduct are enshrined in Tattariya Upanishad[‡].

D. SHRIMAD BHAGAVAD GITA 18.23-25 (ACTIONS ALIGNED WITH NATURE)

नियतं सङ्गरहितमरागद्वेषतः कृतम् ।
अफलप्रेप्सुना कर्म यत्तत्सात्त्विकमुच्यते ॥23॥
यत्तुकामेप्सुना कर्म साहङ्कारेण वा पुनः ।
क्रियते बहुलायासं तद्राजसमुदाहृतम् ॥ 24॥

अनुबन्धं क्षयं हिंसामनपेक्ष्य च पौरुषम् ।
मोहादारभ्यते कर्म यत्तत्तामसमुच्यते ॥ 25॥

EXPLANATION: The course of action is classified into three genres. In the light of sustainable living the first action can be interpreted as the purest form of action in which the man lives in complete harmony with its surroundings which includes both living and non-living. It's the non-violent and pious way to inhabit the planet earth. The second form of action is the driving force behind every action of humans which are motivated by desires. It's behind all the activity and creativity going on the planet. It is the key reason behind the development of the human race but it should be restricted and limited to a certain level. Beyond a point it becomes destructive in nature. It's this unruly action derived from wild desires that led to the degradation of the environment to an irreparable extent. If we master self-control it's easy to constrain these actions to a certain limit and further streamline to spot the processes which are causing harm to nature and invent low environmental impact technologies. This is the kind of middle path best suited which without hampering development can foster conservation also. The last form of action is the inactivity .i.e. maintaining status quo. That humans focus on short term benefits and carry on the current process without caring about nature and future generation(Shreya vs Preya). The *shreya* is long term ecological balance and *preya* short term consumption[§]. It will only lead to darkness and destruction of the planet and make earth inhabitable for human life. The Brihadarayanka Upanishad^{**} works like an elixir for self control, moderation and discipline. It adds a clear moral framework to Gita's three genres.

[‡] सत्यं वद । धर्मं चर । स्वाध्यायान्मा प्रमदः (Taittiriya Upanishad 1.11.1)

[§] श्रेयश्च प्रेयश्च मनुष्यमेतस्तौ संपरीत्य विविनक्ति धीरः ।
श्रेयो हि धीरोऽभिप्रेयसो वृणीते प्रेयो मन्दो योगक्षेमाद्वृणीते । (Katho Upanishad 1.2.2)

^{**} damyata, datta, dayadhvam (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 5.2.3)

E. SHRIMAD BHAGAVAD GITA 7.4-5 (ELEMENTS OF CREATION)

भूमिरापोऽनलो वायुः खं मनो बुद्धिरेव च ।
अहंकार इतीयं मे भिन्ना प्रकृतिरष्टधा ॥4॥
अपरेयमितस्त्वन्यां प्रकृतिं विद्धि मे पराम् ।
जीवभूतां महाबाहो ययेदं धार्यते जगत् ॥5॥

EXPLANATION: Earth's overshoot day^{††} has shifted to the month of July in 2025 from December in 1970's. This indicated the extent to which overexploitation of natural resources is done by our species "Homo sapiens". Climate change is one of the consequences of this and it may worsen because of initiation of a *positive loop* in nature .i.e. when nature's ability to regenerate the status quo ends and it enters into a destructive cycle. Shrimad Bhagavad Geeta focuses on the idea of interconnectedness .i.e. we are not different from nature indeed humans are indispensable part of nature. It not only includes physical aspects .i.e. our body but also the consciousness part .i.e. thoughts as a part of nature's cycle. It is indeed the thoughts which provokes the action. Most of the environmental efforts focus on the external actions but Shrimad Bhagwat Geeta focuses on a much deeper notion of spiritual interconnection with nature. This interconnectedness is supported in Isha Upanishad^{††} also, which further strengthens the idea of interdependence through sacred unity .i.e. entire universe is preceded by the divine. In Chandogya Upanishad, Shrimad Bhagavad Gita's idea of unified origin is reinstated as "All this was one being in the beginning"^{§§}. In the modern context the tribal idea of *Man- spirit complex* resonates with the attitude and philosophy of Shrimad Bhagavad Geeta and Upanishads which emphasized on a balanced ecosystem.

F. SHRIMAD BHAGAVAD GITA 7.6,8,9 (UNIVERSAL CONNECTION)

एतद्योनीनि भूतानि सर्वाणीत्युपधारय ।
अहं कृत्स्नस्य जगतः प्रभवः प्रलयस्तथा ॥6॥
रसोऽहमप्सु कौन्तेय प्रभास्मि शशिसूर्ययोः ।
प्रणवः सर्वविदेषु शब्दः खे पौरुषं नृषु ॥8॥
पुण्यो गन्धः पृथिव्यां च तेजश्चास्मि विभावसौ ।
जीवनं सर्वभूतेषु तपश्चास्मि तपस्विषु ॥9॥

EXPLANATION: Nature follows a rhythm that spring creates and winter decays means there are several cycles ongoing which are continuously creating and destroying matter which

^{††} It is the day on which the human demand for natural resources .i.e. ecological footprint exceeds the bio capacity or regeneration capacity of earth.

^{§§} ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् । (Isha Upanishad 1)

^{§§} सदेव सोम्य इदमग्र आसीदेकमेवाद्वितीयम् (Chandogya Upanishad 6.2.1)

includes both the mechanical cycles and cycle of karma. In both of these cycles the matter which decay leads to creation of another thus energy is conserved. These verses suggest that God itself is a creator and a destroyer which means both the mechanisms are equally important and divine. This implies to restrict environmental intervention to minimum levels and let nature perform its task.

We are not only species which nature nurtures, there are several other species which are part of the food web. Eliminating certain species like pests and deforestation for selfish use led to the alteration of natural cycles. This will further simplify the food web and diminish the biodiversity which eventually will lead to *ecosystem collapse*. Environmental degradation doesn't only lead to scarcity of resources but also loss of aesthetic value and feel which connects our soul to the nature to which we all belong. This can't be measured economically on any index. Forests are rightly treated as sacred and rivers revered as gods, in Shrimad Bhagavad Geeta and other ancient scriptures which are needed at this hour to avoid any further degradation.

III. SHRIMAD BHAGAVAD GITA AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

A. SHRIMAD BHAGAVAD GITA 2.47 AND 3.39 (DESIRE AND CONSERVATION OF NATURE)

आवृतं ज्ञानमेतेन ज्ञानिनो नित्यवैरिणा ।

कामरूपेण कौन्तेय दुष्पूरेणानलेन च ॥3.39॥

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥2.47॥

EXPLANATION: The above verses propound that we can control the *karma* (call of duty) but not the outcomes. It is not possible to perform unmotivated action. It's always backed by desires. These desires are broadly divided into three categories based on Buddhist philosophy and similar inclination of thoughts were also expressed by early modern thinkers like Benedict Spinoza. These are *Kama Tanha*, *Bhava Tanha* and *Vibhava Tanha*. All these desires are discussed in one form or another in Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, whose renunciation will lead to attainment of peace (Shrimad Bhagavad Gita 2.62 and 2.71). Further Isha Upanishad *** also teaches to enjoy through renunciation and advice restraint in material persuades. These notions are in harmony with Sustainable development goal 12^{†††} also. Our desires lead to overconsumption which is the primary cause of increase in *ecological footprint*. Environmental ethics demand moderation and restraint which is also the core of

*** तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्यस्विद्धनम् (Isha Upanishad 1 continuation).

††† SDG12- Ensure sustainable consumption and production pattern.

Shrimad Bhagavad Gita (Chapter 2.71). The manifested path will ensure that natural resources will be used responsibly and in a balanced way. Practically desires are unavoidable in this *anthropocene* epoch where humans have considerable impact on the earth. They are not always bad. It's the desires of mankind only which have led to such a scientific revolution on the earth but problem surfaces when the desire turns into greed. Even absence of desires will lead to idleness so the most pragmatic approach would be to maintain a balance between acquisitiveness and inaction. This unquestionably is the essence of the vedic philosophy.

B. SHRIMAD BHAGAVAD GITA 10.20 AND 14.3 (ENVIRONMENTAL COMPASSION AND REVERENCE FOR MOTHER NATURE)

अहमात्मा गुडाकेश सर्वभूताशयस्थितः ।

अहमादिश्च मध्यं च भूतानामन्त एव च ॥10.20॥

मम योनिर्महद् ब्रह्म तस्मिन्नाहं दधाम्यहम् ।

सम्भवः सर्वभूतानां ततो भवति भारत ॥14.3॥

EXPLANATION: There is one self in all beings (living and non- living including plants, rivers and mountains). The similar expression is found in *Isha Upanishad* *** that whosoever perceives all existence in self and self in every entity is freed from enmity. This should form the foundation of environmental ethics. Thus the matter in all is exactly identical so actually safeguarding the environment would be equivalent to guarding our own self. This compassion is being canvassed in the verses. This affinity forms the most important part in environmental ethics .i.e. treating all other species of flora and fauna as we regard ourselves. This will enlarge the vision of environment consciousness in our mind. Further it suggests that there is presence of divine in all forms thus conserving the environment is not restricted to physical level but it becomes sacred as we are preserving innumerable incarnations of divine self. This inferred the resemblance between self- respect and environmental stewardship. The reverence for nature can be further fostered as it is the progenitor of all beings on earth (Mother Nature). The rationality behind it is even backed by modern science as matter in any form is made up of cells and subdivided into three sub atomic particles i.e. protons, electrons and neutrons. Hence it encourages viewing nature as nurturing and essential for life, urging its protection.

C. SHRIMAD BHAGAVAD GITA 3.3 AND 3.35 (BALANCING KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION)

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

लोकेऽस्मिन् द्विविधा निष्ठा पुरा प्रोक्ता मया नघ ।

*** यस्मिन्सर्वाणि भूतानि आत्मैवाभूद्विजानतः ।

तत्र को मोहः कः शोकः एकत्वमनुपश्यतः ॥(Isha Upanishad 6,7)

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ज्ञानयोगेन साङ्ख्यानां कर्मयोगेन योगिनाम् ॥3.3॥

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् ।

स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावह ॥3.35॥

EXPLANATION: The most discussed idea of the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita is performing one's duty without anticipating anything in return is explicated as man's *Dharma*. It's not only *Karma yoga* which can lead to salvation but the path of *Jnanyoga* is also delineated. Both these paths are not mutually exclusive but treated as harmonious to each other. The same consonance between action and knowledge can pave the path for sustainable development. Humans have even measured the value of *ecosystem services* averaged at \$33 trillion a year approximately. This implies that there is no dearth of knowledge about the amount of services which nature provides to mankind. The dilemma lies in reciprocating them as our self-ego obstructs us. Those who are taking benefits from nature without contributing are considered as robbers (Shrimad Bhagavad Gita 3.12). It might appear as a hindrance in the development but making sustainable living will not only conserve the environment but also satiate our souls which eventually bring us closer to the divine energy. The simple alterations to our daily lives like getting rid of single-use plastics, using pre owned goods and exiting the rat race in which we are bonded.

IV. CONCLUSION

Shrimad Bhagavad Gita gave a profound vision of the interconnectedness of humans and nature. Integrating the concern on all the essential five elements of life, i.e. water, Earth, fire, air and Ether, with human deeds insists on the positive balance between worldly and divine aspects. Through its teachings and principles, it stresses maintaining the bionomic order. Shrimad Bhagavad Gita asserts that in order to maintain ethical Integrity and sustainable development, the two aspects of existence, i.e. *Prakriti* and *Purusha* should be in proper harmony. The key propositions highlighted in Shrimad Bhagavad Gita emphasize devotion to one's duty (*Dharma*), selfless service, epistemology (*Jnana*), and discipline towards one's life (*tapas*), which all directly or indirectly give insight into environmental ethics. Thus, the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita is a philosophical discourse that not only discusses the role of nature as a guiding force but also, through its verses and parables, forewarns the consequences of uncontrolled manipulation. So, to conclude, Srimad Bhagavad Gita is a key to unlocking the past, infinite wisdom for the most approachable panacea to the current environmental issues prevailing in modern society.

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