

## Resilience in the Bhagavadgita: a discourse analysis

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### ABSTRACT

The Bhagavadgita is a book of dialogic conversations between Lord Krishna and Arjuna in the battlefield during a time of confusion and crisis. It has since then been adopted by many as a book of spiritual guidance, and known to provide insight into profoundly important aspects of life and death, one of them being resilience. Resilience refers to an individual's responses to stressors that empower him to bounce back from those situations and function efficiently. It represents the dynamics between an individual's risk, vulnerable and protective factors. Research literature has shown innumerable frameworks wherein the interaction among several elements promote resilience as a cumulative effect, making it a multi-dimensional concept. The current study aimed at uncovering the picture of resilience in the Bhagavadgita from a positive psychology perspective. It also highlighted the contrast between traditional research literature and Bhagavadgita in presenting resilience. For this purpose, the method of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis was adopted in order to view resilience as a discursive object, and various constructions of this discursive object were identified in the Bhagavadgita. These were then placed into the wider discourses of attainment, letting go, control and learning. The significance of these discourses, their implications for action and subjectivity were discussed.

**Keywords:** *Bhagavadgita, Resilience, Attainment, Letting Go, Control, Learning.*

The Bhagavadgita is a book of dialogic conversations between Lord Krishna and Arjuna in the battlefield during a time of confusion and crisis. It has since then been adopted by many as a book of spiritual guidance, and known to provide insight into profoundly important aspects of life and death, one of them being resilience.

The term resilience stems from the Latin verb 'resilire', literally meaning "to leap, or spring back". This term has been borrowed from physics, but in psychology, resilience entails to individuals' response to stressors or challenges that empower them to recuperate from the stressful situation and function efficiently (McAslan, 2010). Ever since it has been adopted in psychology, it has been spoken of by Victor Frankl (1985) in 'Man's search for meaning', by Maslow (1965) in explaining the concept of self-actualization, and by Seligman (2011) in his book 'Flourish'.

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## Resilience in the Bhagavadgita: A Discourse Analysis

The concepts of protective, risk and vulnerability factors form the crux of resilience, and have been used by innumerable researchers to showcase their value in explaining the concept. Risk factors are those which increase the probability of inception, maintenance, or worsening of the adverse situation (Kirby & Fraser, 1997). Vulnerability factors are those that make one more vulnerable to adversity as compared to others, thereby increasing the possibility of resultant harm (Lacharité, 2005), and protective factors shield one from the detrimental effects of risk factors (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). However, Worsley (2006) rejected the idea that resilience is a mere summation of protective, risk and vulnerability factors, and therefore described resilience as a dynamic process.

Various models of resilience have been built with the Ecological model as the pioneering stone, which places the child in various contexts, such as family, community, culture and external environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Similarly, Garmezy (1991) also proposed an ecological framework, which described interaction between protective and risk factors at three levels, i.e. individual, familial, and environmental. Also, Ungar (2012) propounded an ecological model wherein several factors play an important role in determining a child's resilience.

While some researchers have emphasized on strengths and personal traits like morality, insight, and initiative (Wolin & Wolin, 1993), others have highlighted characteristics such as hope, religiosity, and spirituality (Ickovics & Park, 1998); In children, "I have", "I am", and "I can" connote three aspects of resilience (Grotberg, 1995); Some models have also spoken of homeostasis, like the Resilience Process Model (Richardson, 2002), which denotes the disruption of biopsychospiritual homeostasis, followed by reintegration as resulting in resilience.

Different models have thus, used a framework wherein interaction among various elements has been accredited to promote resilience, and therefore resilience has been depicted as a cumulative effect.

Bhagavad Gita has been a widely researched text, and researchers have investigated concepts like psychotherapy (Reddy, 2012), action and suffering (Fingarette, 1984), self, work and spirituality (Bhawuk, 2005), leadership (Edler et al., 2010), human and business communication (Mehta, 2016), and many more. However, there has not been much study to explore resilience. Hence, the aim of the study is to deconstruct the concept of resilience in the Bhagavadgita, in a positive psychology perspective. It may provide instances for personal growth, valuable insights into the psychology of resilience in the Indian culture, and may help to build an indigenous conceptual framework (Bhawuk, 2005).

### **METHODOLOGY**

For the purpose of the research, resilience has been defined as "the dual roles of persistence and acceptance, or how people persist in the face of obstacles and, when necessary, accept circumstances that cannot be changed." (Padesky, 2012).

The method of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) has been used on the sample verses extracted from the Bhagavadgita, which directly and indirectly connote resilience. Discourse is a system of representations which result in the creation of power or knowledge through language. Foucault affirmed that things achieve significance through discourse (Foucault, 1972), and therefore FDA is concerned with language and its part in the constitution of social and psychological life (Parker, 1992).

FDA follows the social constructionist paradigm, which states that knowledge is created through active interaction between individuals (Burr, 1995). It demands a critical position towards taken for granted methods of comprehension of the self and the world. Since FDA can be performed “wherever meaning exists, be it text, symbols, or a dialogue” (Willig, 2001, p.108) and the Bhagavad Gita consists of text that has materialized into a meaningful discourse, FDA best served the purpose of analyzing this text. The method of FDA given by Willig (2013) has been adopted owing to its comprehensible nature.

### ANALYSIS

**Stage 1: Discursive Constructions.** In the Bhagavadgita, resilience as a discursive object has been depicted as a state that can be attained by various ways (numbers in brackets denote the verses): overcoming “infatuation” (2.2), gaining “wisdom” or “knowledge” (2.11,2.16, 4.18,4.19,4.38, 5.22, 13.2, 13.7, 13.8, 13.9, 13.10, 13.11, 14.17, 14.24), overcoming grief and guilt (2.21, 2.27, 2.30), considering work as “duty”, conducive to spiritual good (2.31), maintaining equanimity, and detachment from result of work (2.38, 2.47, 2.48, 2.49, 2.50,2.57; 4.20; 5.13; 6.8; 18.10), “dismissing all cravings of the mind”, giving up “desires”, or “mastering the senses”, and “self-control” (2.55, 2.56, 2.58, 2.61, 2.64, 2.71, 3.7, 5.13, 5.21, 5.28, 6.7 ,6.8), freeing oneself from “passion, fear and anger” or “lust”(2.56,5.23), attaining “placidity of mind” (2.65), surrendering to Him (3.30; 5.29), attaining the state of “Yoga” (4.18; 6.17,6.19,6.22,6.23), and maintaining “austerity of mind” (17.16).

**Stage 2: Discourses.** Resilience can be placed within the wider discourses of attainment, letting go, control, and learning.

**Stage 3: Action Orientation.** This stage aims to understand what the various discursive constructions aim to achieve in the text.

Under the discourse of attainment, the Bhagavadgita speaks of attaining a placid mind, state of Yoga, and austerity of mind. These manifest as resilience in the form of emancipation from sorrows (2.65, 6.17, 6.22, 6.23).

Letting go describes freedom from anger, fear, passion, attachment, infatuation, grief, guilt, and detachment from result of work (2.48, 18.10). It also focuses on equanimity, i.e. treating opposite pairs of outcomes alike, like victory and defeat (2.38, 2.49). All these talk of overcoming obstacles in personal growth, leading to resilience.

The discourse of control talks of regulating the pleasures of the senses and lust (2.58, 2.61, 5.23). Here, resilience is portrayed as freedom from the sorrows caused by the domineering nature of these needs, leading to the experience of success, happiness and stability of mind (2.58, 2.61, 2.64, 2.71, 3.7).

Learning implies attuning oneself to practicing a more meaningful life, which leads to wisdom. Knowledge has been spoken of as a ‘purifier’, which helps understand the truth of life (4.38).

**Stage 4: Positioning.** These offer subject positions to the readers, which can be understood by comparing with Arjuna’s state of mind during the battle.

Under the discourse of attainment, man has been seen a being, whose purpose is to acquire the zenith of emotional as well as spiritual progress, but which has not yet been acquired. Thus, the need to attain explains the state of not having acquired it; the discourse of letting go

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symbolizes human beings as holding on to many negativities in life, which make them waver when they experience turbulence in life, but also projects them as capable of overcoming them; under the discourse of control, man has been projected as needy of sensual gratification, and also very likely to fall prey to the demands of his senses. However, man has also been pictured as capable of exercising control if enough will power is gathered, so that he may excel (3.7). Finally, learning projects man with a more favorable tone of being more capable and more receptive to knowledge. It talks about opportunities a man can take in order to purify himself and “see the light of truth in the self” (4.38). Man is shown as containing a force within himself (4.38) which is latent, but which can be aroused by means of knowledge and wisdom.

**Stage 5: Practice.** This stage describes what can be practiced and also what is prohibited. For example, the description of the ‘state of Yoga’ calls out for the readers to detach themselves from the result of their work, and have an equal eye for achievement and failure. It demands the reader to be disciplined, calm, and serene so that he is unshaken during difficult times. ‘Getting rid of grief’ needs a person to understand that the physical form of the body is transient, and therefore one need not experience sadness. ‘Wisdom’ calls out to people to practice a way of life that has balance (neither overexert oneself, nor give in to lethargy), compassion (taking care of others in need), generosity, equanimity (treating opposites alike), and discipline (constant striving).

**Stage 6: Subjectivity.** This describes one’s view of the world after taking up the aforementioned subject positions. The world would be viewed as a distraction in spiritual practices as it is full of temptations, as a place full of people who are consumed in their own realities and are not able to see beyond, but also as an opportunity to develop oneself, to learn and acquire wisdom from experiences, to understand human nature and practice compassion. Hence, it is opportunistic as well as hostile.

Hence, the Bhagavadgita offers a valuable understanding of the concept of resilience, and outlines minute issues which are probably taken for granted in the process of achieving resilience.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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