

The overlapping principles of Bhagavat Gita and contemporary psychotherapies

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ABSTRACT

The Bhagavad Gita also known as Song of the Lord is a Hindu philosophical sculpture. It is based on a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna that took place at Kurukshetra war. Just like every human being faces dilemma in performing their duties, Arjuna also faced this universal dilemma. To solve this, Gita imparts the knowledge of self and answers the two universal questions, who am I, and how can I lead a happy and peaceful life in this world of dualities. These are also the principles of any basic psychotherapy. The central teaching of the Gita is the attainment of freedom or happiness from the bondage of life by doing one's duty. Just as Psychotherapy aims to improve an individual's well-being following self-actualization, The Bhagavad Gita aims at self-enquiry and happiness of the mind and the heart. The purpose of this study is to draw and discuss the parallels between the Gita and the contemporary psychotherapies. Lord Krishna's teachings had elements of the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Henceforth, we ascertain the analogies between the principles of Gita and CBT (therapist-client relationship, active participation, problem-focused therapy), self-actualization, grief emancipation therapy, self-esteem, unconditional positive regard as well as self-knowledge. The Bhagavad Gita's concept of a mentally healthy person is discussed and finally the congruity of the teachings of Bhagavad Gita to the current psychotherapies is explained.

Keywords: *Bhagavad Gita, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, Self-Actualization, Grief Emancipation Therapy, Unconditional Positive Regard, Humanistic Existential Therapy*

The Bhagavad Gita is a part of the great epic, Mahabharata, a widely popular mythological tale of the Bharata Dynasty, authored by Sage Vyasa and dates back to 2500- and 5000-years BC. The entire 18 chapters and 701 verses (*shlokas*) of the Gita is a discourse between Lord Krishna and Arjuna at the inception of the Kurukshetra war which was narrated to the blind king, Dhritaraashtr, by his charioteer, Sanjay, who senses and cognizes all the events of the battlefield.

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Received: September 05, 2020; Revision Received: September 21, 2020; Accepted: September 27, 2020

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The Gita represents chapters 25-42 of the Mahabharata, which has 100,000 *shlokas*. One of the most renowned discourses in the Hindu philosophy and psychotherapy comes from the Bhagavad Gita. The timeless teachings of the Bhagavad Gita are deeply embedded in the Hindu psyche and continue to serve as a spiritual guide to the vast majority of Hindus around the world.

Faced with the dilemma of a war against his cousins, Kauravas, for the kingdom, Arjun is confused and has no will to be involved in destruction and killing which is against humanity. In this context, Lord Krishna counsels him by putting into light the cyclical nature of birth and death, permanent nature of the soul within the ephemeral human body, duty to righteous action, self-realization and unconditional positive regard, control of the senses, and dangers of attachment to the materialistic objects. He offers three pathways to surpass the predicament of the human nature, through Knowledge, Faith and Action.

The interaction between Arjun and Lord Krishna encompasses many psychotherapeutic principles, especially crisis-oriented, behavioral, motivational, humanistic and existential. Teachings of the Gita as communicated by Lord Krishna provides resolution of conflicts in many ways which is quite similar to the task of a therapist, who while addressing conflicts and anxiety of the patients, paves the path to long term recovery and healing while helping them with the symptom resolution. Henceforth, Psychotherapy in India often incorporates therapeutic pearls from teachings of the Bhagavad Gita.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is a technique which is used to identify the negative emotions, distress and anxiety of an individual and work upon it to relieve the patient from the problems, one of the main reasons why it is also called talk therapy.

Psychotherapy is a field that can only be practiced by professional practitioners or therapist who have the license to practice it as every practitioner or therapist have different areas of specialization.

History of psychotherapy

Sigmund Freud, a neurologist from Vienna gave the concept of psychoanalysis which is still used till date with some modifications. Psychoanalysis included concepts like the three parts of our consciousness or the three parts formulating our mind which are conscious, subconscious and unconscious. It also includes the id, ego and superego concept, along with the defense mechanisms to help coping. Psychoanalysis also focused on the id, ego and superego distinction.

Some psychiatrists themselves are therapists giving medical support with diagnosis and talking therapy (cognitive therapy to humanistic therapy). In today's era, one comes across three main psychotherapeutic schools which are:

Psychodynamic therapies

The main aim of the therapist here is to help the client understand those things that are concealed from the reality like his own feelings, dreams, desires, thoughts and reflect upon himself/herself. Furthermore, the therapist helps the client understanding which way the client's past relationships have interfered or impacted the client's life. Psychodynamic therapy largely focuses on the unconscious part of our mind. This therapy has evolved over 100 years and is still evolving.

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Cognitive behavioral therapy

This therapy centers on how our thoughts affect our behaviors. The client is made to realize and understand the negative thoughts which have been leading to the negative or unwanted behaviors. This method is scientific. The therapist by encouraging the client and using positive reinforcement helps the client to identify the behavior, change it and the change the way they feel about it with positive thinking.

Humanistic-existential therapy

This Therapy believes that every individual has a potential hidden waiting to be identified. This Therapy focuses on bringing about self-awareness to bring that potential out, bring out wellbeing and help them take positive decisions as a whole person. Humanistic-existential Therapy was an alternative to psychodynamic and behavioral therapies with counseling under it as it goes along with the client's terms.

Every approach is different in its needs and methods. Some approaches focus on some aspects and others focus on some others. Some approaches need the long-term support and the others need a short-term support. They also differ in their processes and how they go about it.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

Listening skills

Being very attentive when the client discusses the problems, the emotions related to it, give reasons for why it happened and not judge or interpret anything before. The therapist should be much focused and should try to analyze the reasons because of which it could happen.

Respect

Judgmental thoughts and comments should be put aside. No matter how different the individual's side of the story is there should not be any judgmental comments and the client should be respected at all times.

Empathy

Trying to understand the client's point of view by standing in their shoes. Trying to understand how they perceived the Situation, how they felt and what all happened from their own point of view. It also paves a way for the client- therapist bonding essential for the therapy.

Unconditional positive regard

Completely supporting the person, no matter what the person says. This is a sign of acceptance which shows the client that s/ he is not judged whatever he says and is accepted with complete positive regard. This is shown to all the patients equally to have them say whatever they want without any filter.

Clarification, confrontation and interpretation

Clarification is a process in which the therapist completely rephrases what the client has said to help him better understand what all is going on so that s/ he learns something or some things get cleared out.

Confrontation is when the client is made to face that part of his/ her psyche which was conflict provoking or distressing. This focuses on the defense mechanisms or the resistance shown by the client.

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Interpretation is when all the above processes are done and the psychotherapist focuses on the hidden feelings, thoughts and ideas which were conflict provoking or lead to the client's distress.

Client- therapist relationship

Therapy is not just about solving the issues and problems it's also about establishing a certain level of trust and bonding with the client to help make him more comfortable in sharing such aspects or hidden conflicts without any filter. This relationship is built on reciprocal trust which means trust from both the sides. Proper confidentiality of the client and the whole process should be maintained.

PSYCHOTHERAPY AND BHAGAVAD GITA

Psychodynamic Psychotherapy

According to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory, the three conflicting forces of personality, id, ego and superego are settled through the healthy ego defense mechanisms. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna helps to provide a successful resolution of conflicts faced by Arjun between three internal forces (*gunas*) of human nature, i.e. *sattv* or goodness, *rajas* or passion, activity and *tamas* or ignorance, which are broadly akin to the id, ego and superego. The psychodynamic therapies have its roots in the unconscious mind, in a similar way Gita too describes the several layers of conscious, subconscious and unconscious which ultimately blend together to the 'Atman'.

The Gita talks about how lust (*kaam*) is the origin of sin and how the unrestrained senses of *krodh* (unadaptive anger), *moh* (insatiable attachment), *lobh* (greed) and *ahankar* (self-glorification) are dangerous and *tamsic* in nature and can eventually lead to self-destruction, which have noticeable similarities with the functions of the id. Also, the Gita describes the superiority of mind over the power of the senses which is similar to how the ego and the superego interacts to control the functions of the id.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

The Cognitive Behavioral Therapy believes that the way we perceive our surroundings, the way we look at the world and ourselves influence our behavior and emotions. It addresses negative patterns and distortions in our thoughts.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna was the therapist and Arjuna was the patient. How Lord Krishna removes the cognitive distortions from the mind of Arjuna and re-motivates him to fight the battle is depicted in the Gita. A good relationship between Krishna and Arjuna is maintained through unconditional positive regard, the basic acceptance and support of a person regardless of what the person says or does, just like the client- therapist relationship. It involves active participation from both the sides just as the Krishna- Arjuna enthusiasm. Cognitive behavior therapy emphasizes on the present just like Krishna focussed on solving the distress related to the battle and how perfection can only be achieved through Action. CBT aims to teach the client to be his/her own therapist just like Krishna taught Arjuna how to calm himself and how to realize his duties.

Lord Krishna is as sympathetic to Arjuna as a therapist is to a client in distress. Arjuna unfairly holds himself accountable for the destructions which reflect his depressed state of mind. The way CBT tries to work with patients to identify, evaluate and respond to their dysfunctional thinking, Krishna makes Arjuna understand his delusional thinking and how

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to change it by stating that how all events occur due to a natural course and association to oneself to it is mere illusion.

Arjuna while being on the battlefield is much tensed and worried which stresses him out. He is worried about how is he going to stand against his own family. At that Krishna explains how this stress is not permanent and will end soon. Krishna helps to calm his state of mind through imparting the knowledge of importance of Duty and Karma Yog which is the most important concept of The Gita. Krishna says that this stress is very temporary just like the therapist explains it to the client, how all the anxiety is not permanent. Arjuna, just like any other client shows the self-blame guilt and blames himself for whatever is happening. Krishna explains that all this is not true just like a therapist consoles the client about his/her false beliefs.

Krishna explains the importance of karma yoga by telling him not to expect any rewards in return and just keep doing karma which helps relieve one from stress or guilt which in turn tells one not to think of unreal goals as told in the cognitive behavior therapy. Deep breathing and meditation are some of the relaxation techniques used in Bhagavad Gita by Krishna as well as CBT to aid calming anxiety and change one's own thinking and behavior to establish tranquility within.

Humanistic-Existential Therapy

While Humanistic and existential approaches highly focus on the individual as a whole, and stress on the importance of self awareness and self understanding to achieve personal growth by stressing on current reality, Gita too talks about self knowledge that leads to the attainment of peace and hence one's personal growth. Lord Krishna advises Arjuna to focus on the reality and fulfill his duty as a warrior when Arjuna was unwilling to fight the war. Krishna shows unconditional positive regard to Arjuna so as to help him with the resolution of his conflicts similar to the therapist who shows unconditional positive regard towards the client.

The Gita also puts forward the idea of self realization or a 'self realized person' which is akin to the modern day idea of self actualization or a 'self actualized person' as described by Abraham Maslow in his theory of hierarchy of needs.

Grief Emancipation and Mindfulness

Grief refers to losses in the mourner's life of relationships. In the context of fighting a war against his most revered guru, very dear friends, close relatives and many innocent warriors, Arjuna was overcome by grief. In the discourse that follows Lord Krishna talks about the inevitability of death and the reincarnation process which states that even after death, the soul which is eternal acquires another physical form and hence thrives.

The soul is eternal and the physical body is just a carrier which goes through the cyclic nature of life and death. This thereby helped Arjun to come out of his grief and confusion and perform his duty by fighting the war. Addressing these concepts from the Gita can help with the grief process of a client by increasing the understanding of life and nature and thereby reducing the intensity of the grief.

The state of awareness, attention, acceptance and independence of thoughts refer to the practice of 'mindfulness' that draws essence from the teachings of Bhagavad Gita which prescribes mindfulness as a way of being detached from the desires of the senses in order to

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attain tranquility or peace of the mind. It also focuses on the importance of meditation and maintaining the self in calm and tranquil state.

CONCLUSION

The teachings of the Bhagavad Gita help one to understand the distinction between the real self and the mere self. While the mere self is subject to change and destruction the real self is not. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna narrates that the mind is restless and difficult to control but it can be conquered through regular practice and detachment. It is useful for therapists to study the Bhagavad gita in order to understand a way Lord Krishna counsels Arjuna.

Arjuna like many patients who seek therapy is in a state of despair and feels unable to cope with the situation before him, so he seeks Krishna's advice and guidance who in turn presents a foundation for understanding the purpose of life and the way to live harmoniously and cope with the world. Krishna shows the skills of the therapists, unconditional positive regard and receptiveness, trust, devotion and complete surrender by Arjun to Lord Krishna are the characteristics of the therapist and the patient required to deliver prompt results after CBT sessions.

Both the approaches of Bhagavad Gita and psychotherapy talk about emancipation and liberation from the attachments which lead to the attainment of peace and tranquility of mind. The key aspects influencing the process of psychotherapy are trust and communication and through the knowledge of Gita, one can potentially improve both. Self realization or self actualization is the goal of human life, and both psychotherapies and the Bhagavad Gita surely aim to fulfill that goal.

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Acknowledgements

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process and our understanding of the current topic in picture.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Phogat P., Sharma R., Grewal S.& Malik A. (2020). The overlapping principles of Bhagavat Gita and contemporary psychotherapies. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(3), 1902-1908. DIP:18.01.197/20200803, DOI:10.25215/0803.197