



Mental Health in Pandemic Era – A Study on the Teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā*

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Abstract

The pandemic refers to an ongoing global outbreak of Covid-19. This global outbreak has deeply altered social life, education and the working environment in several ways. This issue in the current scenario is considered to have a significant relation although much has been initiated on *Bhagavadgītā* and the pandemic. But there is still left behind *Bhagavadgītā* and pandemic i.e., how the teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā* leads to mental health in pandemic times. And how the teaching *Bhagavadgītā* and religious beliefs effect of understanding mental health and how to cope with the pandemic through the study of the text *Bhagavadgītā*. This paper is discussed keeping in mind the possible effects of understanding mental health and how to cope with the pandemic through the study of the text *Bhagavadgītā*.

Introduction

This paper attempts to study mental health in the pandemic era through the study of the text *Bhagavadgītā*. This issue in the current scenario is considered to have a significant relation although much has been initiated on *Bhagavadgītā* and the pandemic. The pandemic here refers to an ongoing global outbreak of Covid-19. According to Neeta Kantamneni, the poor and marginalized sectors are most affected by COVID-19 (2020). Abraham Rudnick writes that since “the current pandemic poses social challenges many people across the globe are laid off work permanently or temporally. Unemployment, poverty, crime and more are associated with this pandemic and disrupt mental and social well-being” (2020) and therefore, it is natural to feel stress, anxiety, grief, and worry.

Statement of the Problem

This global outbreak has deeply altered social life, education and the working environment in several ways. Social distancing policies, mandatory lockdowns, isolation periods, and anxiety of getting sick, along with the suspension of productive activity, loss of income, and fear of the future jointly influence the mental and physical health of the citizens and workers (Giorgi, et al., 2020). Although much has been initiated on *Bhagavadgītā* and the pandemic but there is still left behind *Bhagavadgītā* and pandemic i.e., how the teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā* leads to mental health in pandemic times. This paper is discussed keeping in mind the possible effects of understanding mental health and how to cope with the pandemic through the study of the text *Bhagavadgītā*.

The objectives of the study

- To study mental health in pandemic time.
- To study the text of the *Bhagavadgītā* through hermeneutics approach.

- And how the teaching *Bhagavadgītā* and religious beliefs effect of understanding mental health and how to cope with the pandemic through the study of the text *Bhagavadgītā*.

Review of Literature

Much research have been done on pandemic and the *Bhagavadgītā*. But in this paper, the focus will be on the teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā* and religion or religious beliefs that play a pivotal role in sustaining mental health during the pandemic era.

Ashis Prasad, (2013) *Bhagavad Gita and Meditation: Immunity and Times of Pandemic*, makes an attempt to study the *Bhagavadgītā* which is a core teaching of immunity building in pandemic times. Nitin P. Ghonge, (2020), *The Doctor's Dilemma during Covid-19 Pandemic: Solutions From Bhagavadgītā* makes an attempt to study the equanimity of in *Bhagavadgītā*. Equanimity and evenness of mind are the greatest assets for Doctors during the present crisis and can be cultivated with regular meditation and radical change in the attitude.

Research Methodology

Mental and physical health during the pandemic is a much-needed factor since “this global crisis has caused huge mental and physical challenges” (Fardin, 2020). Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It is an important part of our overall health (Mental Health). It affects how we think, feel and act during the pandemic. To be able to study this research the hermeneutic and textual methods have been employed.

Result and Discussion

Religion has many positive impacts on human beings for maintaining mental and physical health by providing health measures. Fardin writes,

“In the current global situation where the number of COVID-19 deaths is updated and published daily, spirituality can be a good sedative in societies facing the outbreak. Several religions, despite all their limitations, create positive emotions in people. Therefore, spirituality and religion can help humans in bereavements and times of crisis” (2020).

In this context, some of the principles of Islamism and *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism* [a branch of Hinduism] will be much more relevant. In Islamism, there are five religious principles called “the five pillars of Islam.” Among these, cleanliness during *namaz* or prayer is a much-needed factor and plays prominently during the pandemic for sustaining physical health. The Islamic tenets of cleanliness pertaining to hand washing have recently been proven to be not merely a religious dogma, but a profound natural law (Maigari, 2016). Fardin writes

ablution (wudhu') is one of the Islamic washing rituals performed before each prayer, five times a day, by doing which a person washes his hands, forearms, mouth, nose, ears, face, hair, ankles, and feet, three times each. Thus, it includes all of the most effective ways of dealing with COVID-19 (2020).

Vaiṣṇavism is one of the oldest monotheistic branches of Hinduism. It believes *Viṣṇu* as the Highest Reality. Worship of *Nārāyaṇa* or *Viṣṇu* and devotion to Him constitute the means of liberation. *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism* founded by Śrīmananta Śaṅkaradeva [a prominent religious leader and philosopher and a *vaiṣṇvite* saint of Assam, India] in Assam in the 15th century was a movement that believes in one reality “God” as the creator, sustainer, and destroyer. *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism* calls it either *Viṣṇu* or *Nārāyaṇa* or God. But there is no other God except

Viṣṇu or *Nārāyaṇa*. Therefore, *Neo-Vaiṣṇavites* do not believe in deities or gods. For, Śaṅkaradeva writes: *annya deva nakaribā seva nakhāibāprasādatāra/ murtiko nāsāibā grihu napaṣibā bhakti haiba vyabhichāra// (Bhāgavata, section -II)*

Transliteration: *annya* – other; *devi deva* – gods and goddesses; *nakaribā seva* – do not worship/bow down; *nakhāibā* – do not eat; *prasādatāra* – of that offerings; *murtiko* – statue/image; *nāsāibā* – do perceive; *grihu* – house; *napaṣibā* – not to enter; *bhakti* – devotion; *haibavyabhichāra* – will have deviated.

Translation: “Neither gods nor goddesses should be worshipped in any form; neither should one entrance to the house nor any *prasāda* [offerings] should be taken from those ceremonies performed. Even a devotee should not bow down heads towards statues of those gods and goddesses. If anyone does so his *bhakti* (devotion) will be deviated.”

Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement is regarded as the *bhakti* movement. *Bhakti* plays an important role in Śaṅkaradeva’s religion of *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism*. There are nine kinds of *bhakti* in the *Bhāgavata*. These are *Śravaṇa*, *Kīrtana*, *Smarana*, *Archanā*, *Pada-Sevana*, *Dāsyā*, *Vandanā* and *Deha-Samarpaṇa*. Out of this *bhakti*, Śaṅkaradeva preaches *Śravaṇa*, *Kīrtana*, *Dāsyabhakti* [master and slave] and also *Deha-samarpaṇa* [self-surrender]. Besides, he believes that this world is full of sins, and for the people i.e., the devotees of *kali yugaśravaṇa* i.e., listening to the glories of *Kṛṣṇa* and *kīrtana* i.e., chanting the glories of *Kṛṣṇa* are the perfect *bhakti* for salvation (Sonowal, 2017). These two *bhakti* are not only beliefs for many but also a significant part of our life. And, especially, during the pandemic these two *bhakti* lead to the spirituality through which both physical and mental health is maintained. How is it so? Let us brief it simply. Śaṅkaradeva had installed *Nāmghar* i.e., prayer hall/house and *satras* for the devotees of *kali yuga* to perform prayer/congressional worship to God through *śravaṇa* and *kīrtana*. All of the devotees enter into the prayer hall with good cleanliness. They wash their hand, feet, and mouth with water before entry, to maintain purity mentally and physically. This cleanliness is not only a religious principle but is also a Covid-19 protocol to be maintained during the pandemic.

Another aspect of maintaining physical and mental health is the position of the devotees during the performance of *bhakti*. Devotees at the prayer hall sit in a certain distant place [almost like *āsana* and *prāṇayama*]. By clapping with the palms of the two hands, maintaining a social distance and with certain loud voices devotees perform *kīrtana* and *śravaṇa*. This leads to physical exercise i.e. a movement of the body which helps in circulating blood to the entire body. This makes the body healthy by providing energy and developing the immune system of the body to cope with disease during the pandemic.

By performing *śravaṇa* and *kīrtana* as mentioned above one may attain spirituality. Śaṅkaradeva in his *Kīrtana – Ghoṣā* mentions the fruitions of *Śravaṇa* and *Kīrtana* which he calls *Nāma Dharma*: *paramamangala harināma dharma jāhāra thākoī mukhata// tāra tetikshane bhaṣma huiyājāyo mahāpāpa kutisata// (Kīrtana – Ghoṣā, Chapter V, section IV)*

Transliteration: *paramamangala* – absolute bliss; *harināma dharma* – chanting and listening to the name/glories of Lord; *jāhārathākoīmukhata* – in one’s the heart, mind, and soul; *tāra* – his; *tetikshane* – by that moment; *bhaṣmahuiyājāyo* – gets destroyed; *mahāpāpakutisata* – hundreds of crores of great sins.

Translation: “Absolute Bliss is the chanting and listening to the name of Hari i.e. Lord in his mind, heart, and soul. By doing so it is sufficient to destroy a hundred crores of great sins and

attains Supreme Bliss by him.” But chanting and listening merely like a parrot is not fruitful. It should be from the deepest of heart, voice, and soul altogether (2017). This practice of Śaṅkaradeva can be performed at home during the global crisis to avoid the crowd and spread of the virus.

The Bhagavadgītā

The *Bhagavadgītā* teaches humanity, morality, and dharma in general. This scripture is also considered as the way of attaining spirituality. It is also a discourse on physical and mental health. Therefore, this discourse has much significance during the global outbreak. The *Bhagavadgītā* teaches us how to attain physical and mental health, and spirituality to cope with the global crisis. Let us focus briefly on physical and mental health and how to attain it.

Desireless Action in Bhagavadgītā

One of the major teachings of the *Bhagavadgītā* is the teaching of karma – doing action without desire for fruits. This has been taught in many verses such as Chapter II, verse 47, Chapter III, verse 19, Chapter V, verse 10 & 12 etc.

The discourse teaches that no one can remain without doing any action; for one is compelled to do so because of *guṇas* of *prakṛti*. *Prakṛiti* makes a person compelled to act. By doing desireless action one attains mental health. To attain mental is to attain physical health, and to attain physical is to act as prescribed in the *Bhagavadgītā*. The *Bhagavadgītā* tries to build up a philosophy action (karma) based on knowledge (*jnānā*) supported by devotional service i.e., *bhakti* (Rani, 2013). Now, what is desireless action as taught in the *Bhagavadgītā*? Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna in Chapter II verse 47: *karmaṇevādhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣū kadācana/ mā karmaphalaheturbhū mā teṣaṅgo 'stvakarmaṇi//*

Transliteration: *karmani* – in prescribed duties; *eva* – only; *adhikāra* – eligibility; *te* – of you; *mā* – never; *phaleṣu* – in the fruits; *kadācana* – at any time; *mā* – never; *Karma-phala* – the fruit of action; *hetu* – cause; *bhu* – become; *mā* – never; *te* – of you; *saṅga* – attachment; *aṣṭu* – there should be; *akarmaṇi* – in not doing prescribed duties (Tripurārī, 2010).

Translation: “O Arjuna, you have only right in the performance of action but in the fruits of action; do not be the cause of fruits of action nor be attached to inaction also.” This verse mentions desireless action or *niskāma* karma. The meaning of performing desireless action is that one should not be attached to the fruits at the time of acting. For, one might get deviated from acting if he is attached to the fruits. Even the action might not get completed. It is not said in the verse that action does not cause fruits but at the particular moment of acting, he should be thinking of acting only. This is the meaning. In the verse, it is also taught to Arjuna that a person should not because of fruits of action nor should he be attached to inaction also. For, everyone is compelled to act. This idea of desireless action is supported by verse 19 of chapter III. The verse says: *tasmād asaktaḥ satatam kāryakarma samācāra/ asakto 'hy ācarana karma paramāpnoti puruṣaḥ//*

Transliteration: *tasmāt* – therefore; *asaktaḥ* – without attachment; *satatam* – constantly; *kāryam* – as a duty; *karma* – action; *samācāra* – perform; *asaktaḥ* – unattached; *hi* – certainly; *ācaran* – performing; *karma* – action; *param* – the Supreme; *āpnoti* – achieves; *puruṣa* – a man. (Tripurārī, 2010)

Translation: “Therefore, act constantly without attachment to the fruits of action; by doing action without attachment to the fruits a man attains the Supreme.” Thus, this verse is the

supporting verse 47 of chapter II. These verses which talk *niskāma* karma/desireless action have much significance in the pandemic era. Every action in the pandemic era is to be performed without attachment to the result as the duty which is required of a person to do so. Therefore, a person by performing desireless action attains mental health.

Isolation in the Bhagavadgītā

The most important principle to be retained during the global outbreak is isolation [quarantine] and *Bhagavadgītā* talks of it in a different way. Isolation in general means keeping away oneself from the masses. Isolation in the context of a global outbreak is of two types. One is complete isolation i.e. quarantine for a certain period and isolation among the masses i.e. social distancing. Now let us discuss what Chapter VI verse 10 of the *Bhagavadgītā* says regarding this isolation. The verse says: *yogi yuñjita satatam ātmānam rahasisthita/ ekākī yat chitātmani rāsīraparigraḥ//* (6.10)

Transliteration: *yogi* – a man of understanding/meditation; *yuñjita* – should concentrate; *satatam* – constantly; *ātmānam* – his mind/self; *rahasisthita* – remaining in a solitary place; *ekākī* – alone i.e. without any companion; *yata-citta-ātmā* – mind-body controlled; *nirāsiḥ* – free from desire; *aparigraḥ* – devoid of possession (Tripurārī, 2010).

Translation: “The yogin should constantly fix his mind on Yoga, remaining in a solitary place all alone, controlling his thoughts and mind, free from desire and sense of possession” (Rāmānuja, 2002). The significance of this verse during a global outbreak is that a person by applying his knowledge should concentrate on himself and others constantly for containing the infection. He should be in a solitary place alone by controlling his mind and body. Here solitary place implies being free from masses and free from noise. So free from the masses means complete isolation and social distancing when in a crowd. Another thing is that he should control his desire of going out and attachment to the people i.e. he should not be engaged with people. If this principle is applied it would be possible to contain infection of the virus. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa says at the end of the discourse that the teaching is to be practised by everyone who comes to know of it. He teaches that a person who studies Bhagavadgītā should share this knowledge with others.

Chapter II verses 56 and 62-63 have much significance in the pandemic era which are of means of attainment of mental health i.e. for mental as well as emotional well-being. In the first verse, Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna: *duḥkheṣvunudigna manāḥ sukheṣu vigatasprihaḥ// vita rāga bhaya krodhaḥ sthitadhiḥ muñiḥuchyate//*

Transliteration: *duḥkheṣu* – in sufferings; *anudignamanāḥ* – without being agitated; *sukheṣu* – in joy; *vigatasprihaḥ* – without being deluded; *vita* – gone; *rāga* – passion; *bhaya* – fear; *krodha* – anger; *sthitadhiḥ* – whose mind is steady; *muñiḥ* – a sage; *uchyate* – is said. (Tripurārī, 2010)

Translation: “The person who is neither agitated in sufferings nor overjoyed or deluded in joy; he whose fear, anger and longing has gone he is said to be a person of steady understanding.” The meaning of the verse is that when a person suffers from the separation of a beloved one or grieves for any other sufferings he should not be afflicted and distressed by it. On the other hand, when his object of desire is at hand he is not overjoyed or deluded by it. Because he has no longing for it, he has no fear of losing it; even if he does not achieve he does not get angry. Therefore, whose nature is of such he is a person of wisdom or steady understanding.

In the next two verses Kṛṣṇa says: *dhyāyato viṣayān puṁśaḥsaṅgasteṣu upajāyate/saṅgat sanjayate kāmaḥ kāmat krodho'bhijāyate// krodhād bhavati sammohaḥ sammohāt smrtivibhram/ smrti-bhramśāt buddhi-nāśo buddhi-nāśāt prañāśyati//*

Transliteration: *dhyāyata* – of contemplating; *viṣayān* – sense objects; *puṁśaḥ* – of a person; *saṅgaḥ* – attachment; *teṣu* – in them; *upajāyate* – is born; *saṅgat* – from attachment; *sanjayate* – is born; *kāma* – desire; *kāmat* – from desire; *krodha* – anger; *abhijāyate* – is born; *krodhāt* – from anger; *bhavati* – arises; *sammohaḥ* – illusion; *sammohat* – from illusion; *smrti* – memory; *vibhram* – wandering; *smrti-bhramśāt* – from wandering of memory; *buddhi-nāśa* – the destruction of discrimination; *buddhi-nāśāt* – and from loss of discrimination; *prañāśyati* – one is lost. (Tripurārī, 2010)

Translation: “To the man who keeps on meditating on sense objects there arises abundantly attachment to them. From attachment, desire is born, and from desire springs anger all around.” “From anger, there comes great confusion (about right and wrong): and from (this) great confusion loss of memory. From the loss of memory (there arises) the destruction of (the right disposition of) the mind: and from the destruction of (the right disposition of) the mind he is lost.” The literal meaning of the verses is that to the man, who constantly thinks of the objects of senses, it leads to the attachment and because of the attachment to the objects of senses desire is born out of it. This desire is fatal because if it is not achieved spontaneous anger takes place in him. Therefore, it is very much necessary to control our anger during a pandemic. If a person is unable to control his anger which arises due to the attachment to the objects of senses he cannot discriminate what is right and wrong i.e. he cannot determine what ought to be done or ought not to be done. If this confusion between right and wrong arises then he loses his memory and he cannot hold on right disposition. Thereby he becomes lost.

Conclusion

It is worth mentioning that the teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā* has a connected with mental and physical health and spirituality. By studying the text *Bhagavadgītā* and by applying the principles a person can build mental and physical health. People can recite these verses mentioned above constantly or when in trouble for the attainment of mental and emotional well-being. This would lead to cope-up when one is agitated during a pandemic. Therefore, this teaching becomes one of the strong ways of fighting against the pandemic and staying fit during the pandemic.

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