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Semantic Depth and Word Function in the Second Chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā

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Abstract

This research explores the position and function of words in Chapter 2 (*Sāṅkhya Yoga*) of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, with an emphasis on how linguistic choices contribute to psychological transformation and philosophical instruction. The study examines how Vyāsa's deliberate use of epithets, adjectives, and contextual terminology serves not only literary and poetic purposes but also guides Arjuna from despair to clarity through structured counsel. Through a close reading of key verses, the research analyses the layered meanings and psychological implications of words like *Parantapa*, *Arisūdana*, *Klaibya*ṁ, and *Dehi*. It also highlights Kṛṣṇa's role as a counsellor, comparing his dialogic methods to modern psychological practices such as observation, empathetic engagement, and situational reframing. The analysis concludes that the Gītā's second chapter integrates spiritual philosophy with counselling psychology, using precise linguistic positioning to resolve ethical dilemmas and emotional distress. This positions the *Bhagavad Gītā* as not only a spiritual scripture but also a timeless psychological text that uses language as a transformative tool.

Keywords: *Bhagavad Gītā,* Contextual Semantics, Counselling Psychology, *Sāṅkhya Yoga,* Spiritual Philosophy, Vyāsa's Language

1. Introduction

Due to its richness of ideas and abundance of poetry, the *Mahābhārata* is considered one of the foremost epics in world literature. We hear in tradition that this great text is called the *Mahābhārata* because of its greatness (*mahatva*) and its weight (*bhāravatva*). The definition "*Mahābhāratam* is that which tells of the great lineage of the Bharatas" *(Bharatāṇām mahajjanma Mahābhāratam ucyate*)[1] is also found within the *Mahābhārata* itself. Moreover, we can witness the greatness of this epic through the words of Vyāsa himself, who says: "What is found here may be found elsewhere; what is not found here is nowhere else." It can thus be unequivocally said that the *Mahābhārata* is a vast repository of physical, divine, spiritual, and philosophical knowledge. India's four most important philosophical and didactic texts are all found within the *Mahābhārata*: *Vidūra Nīti, Sanatsujātīya, Bhagavad Gītā, and Anugītā*. Among these, the *Bhagavad Gītā* shines at the highest peak of spiritual truth, like the Himalayas."

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a great philosophical scripture that unveils human rational thought, philosophical vision, and psychological insight. According to Swami Vivekananda, the foremost ascetic of the Rishi Bharata tradition, 'The Gītā is the most popular scripture in India and the highest among all teachings[2].' According to William Humboldt, "The most profound subject matter in the *Mahābhārata*, and the only philosophical poem of its kind in world literature, is the Gītā[3]". Will Durant also remarked, "The Gītā is the highest philosophical poem in world literature." Comprising 18 chapters and over 700 verses, the Bhagavad Gītā encompasses the essence of philosophy, psychology, and sociology.

Mammata, in his *Kāvyaprakāśa*, states the following: "While the Vedas command the practice of dharma like a ruler, the *Puranas* and *Itihasas* point to it

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like a friend[4]." In the battlefield of Kurukshetra, when Arjuna is overcome with despair and unwillingness to fight, having forgotten his *svadharma* (righteous duty), Kṛṣṇa delivers the teachings of dharma in the role of a friend. From the Lord's own words — 'O Arjuna! The Gītā is my very heart' — so the language of the Gītā is the language of the heart. When Arjuna says, 'Place my chariot between the two armies,' and the chariot is indeed placed there, he sees both armies filled with teachers, brothers, relatives, and friends and is struck by the thought that he must fight them. This thought weakens the warrior's resolve, and the Kshatriya hero becomes reluctant to wage war. At that moment, the Lord begins his teaching with the words: "O *Parantapa* (scorcher of foes)! Cast off this petty weakness of heart and rise[5]!" In the context of the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s instruction, the placement and usage of words carry great significance. Especially in the second chapter, the choice, derivation, and intended meaning of words used according to the context deserve careful study.

2. Definitions of Words in the Chapters of the Gītā

When each word in the verses of the Gītā is analysed, multiple layers of meaning emerge. The placement and function of words in the Gītā deserve special attention. Even the naming of the chapters aligns with their content, as can be understood through a close reading of the text. The first chapter, *Arjuna Viṣāda Yoga*, describes Arjuna's sorrow and his reluctance to engage in battle. The subsequent chapters — *Sāṅkhya Yoga*, *Karma Yoga*, *Jñāna Karma Sannyāsa Yoga*, *Jñāna Yoga*, and so on — have a particular structure in their titles. The second chapter is named *Sāṅkhya Yoga* because its content is related to the philosophy of knowledge (*Jñāna*). "*Sāṅkhya*" here means knowledge. As a remedy for Arjuna's despair, Kṛṣṇa begins instructing him in a tone of discipline at the start of the second chapter. Through Sanjaya's narration, it becomes clear that it is *Madhusūdana*[6] — Kṛṣṇa, the slayer of the demon Madhu, who gives this teaching. Therefore, this form of address itself indicates that Kṛṣṇa is instructing Arjuna from the warrior spirit of a Kshatriya, ready for battle. Kṛṣṇa had earlier vowed not to take up arms in the Kurukshetra war. Remembering this, and in response to Arjuna's unwillingness to fight, the form of the teaching naturally takes the shape of stern instruction. When Kṛṣṇa sees Arjuna, overwhelmed with grief and sitting in the chariot, he does not respond with compassion alone, but with a shade of anger mixed with empathy. That is why he questions, "How has this dejection—unworthy of an *Ārya* and disgraceful—come upon you at this critical hour?" Moreover, Kṛṣṇa emphasises: "To a Kshatriya, success and failure in battle are equal — if you win, you gain glory and wealth; if you die, you attain the warrior's heaven[7]."

In the fourth verse of the second chapter, Arjuna's evident helplessness and partial readiness for battle are reflected. Arjuna refers to Kṛṣṇa using the term *Arisūdana*[8] — "slayer of enemies." He says, "You, O *Arisūdana*! are urging me to fight against revered gurus who are worthy of worship." In other words, he is questioning, "How can they be my enemies?" This implies that only if he develops a sense of enmity toward them will he be able to prepare himself for battle — a subtle hint embedded in the use of that specific epithet. Moreover, Arjuna must prove that he has not lost the Kṣatriya quality of courage, free from cowardice. Therefore, the placement and choice of the word *Arisūdana* in this context becomes particularly significant.

Arjuna then describes himself as *"Kārpaṇya-doṣopahata-svabhāvaḥ"* (one whose nature is afflicted by the defect of miserliness or weakness) and *"Dharma-sammūḍha-cetāḥ*[9]*"* (one whose mind is confused about dharma). Arjuna laments, saying that he has lost clarity and cannot discern what is right or wrong, what is *dharma,* and what is *adharma*. In such a state, he surrenders himself to Kṛṣṇa, seeking guidance. He wonders: *Is there a just cause for war?* Even if there is, *how can one enjoy pleasures stained with the blood of slain elders and teachers? Will not the kingdom and prosperity gained after the war feel meaningless?* These doubts — whether they stem from a mind clouded by emotion or a lack of true discernment — are not something Arjuna can judge. Hence, the two self-descriptions that Arjuna gives are not accidental or casual; they reflect his deep inner conflict. By saying **"**śādhi *mām***"** ("instruct me"), Arjuna is essentially asking for a remedy to the grief that is draining his five senses — a sorrow that has overtaken his entire being. It is at this point that the true counselling by the Lord begins.

3. Psychological Insight in Kṛṣṇa's Counsel

This text, written centuries ago, serves as a model for modern counselling psychology. Counselling psychology is a significant branch of modern psychology. Counselling is a process that helps individuals understand the social, mental, and emotional challenges they face, enabling them to make better choices and decisions. In reality, counselling is not about giving advice. Rather, it focuses on the individual's unique needs, problems, and circumstances. Through an empathetic and cooperative process of gathering information, counselling empowers individuals to heal themselves. According to Carl Rogers, counselling helps a person become aware of themselves and how they respond to the behavioural influences of their environment[10].

Modern counselling involves several methods:

1. Observation
2. Building a therapeutic relationship
3. Addressing thoughts, emotions, and beliefs
4. Normalising situations and perspectives

We can observe that Kṛṣṇa adopts each of these counselling methods in his unique way. He journeys through the emotional and psychological layers of the mind. Kṛṣṇa's counsel to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā* offers profound psychological insight that closely mirrors the principles of modern counselling psychology. Though composed centuries ago, the text reflects many techniques used in contemporary therapeutic practice. Kṛṣṇa does not impose advice on Arjuna; instead, he carefully observes Arjuna's emotional turmoil, builds a trusting relationship, and addresses his inner conflict with empathy and wisdom, core tenets of modern counselling. Just as Carl Rogers emphasised self-awareness and the influence of environmental factors, Kṛṣṇa helps Arjuna recognise his thoughts, emotions, and beliefs in the context of his duties and identity. Kṛṣṇa's skilful and context-sensitive use of language guides Arjuna from confusion to clarity, ultimately empowering him to make autonomous, meaningful decisions. In this way, Kṛṣṇa exemplifies the role of a counsellor who helps the individual navigate psychological distress and unlock inner resilience.

Here, Kṛṣṇa understands Arjuna's emotional state and, according to the context, reveals the vast potential of counselling. In counselling, the context-appropriate use of language is vital, and it is precisely this that inspires Arjuna toward clarity and action.

4. The Positional Significance of Terms in *Sāṁkhya-Yoga*

At the beginning of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, before Lord Kṛṣṇa begins his counsel, Sanjaya attributes certain epithets to Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. Among these, the title *Hṛṣīkeśa* given to Kṛṣṇa deserves special attention. *Hṛṣīkeśa* means "Lord of the senses" (*Hṛṣīka* = senses; Īśa = lord). This connects to a verse from the *Kaṭhopaniṣad*, which likens the senses to horses[11]. Just as a charioteer controls the horses, the master of the senses can perceive and understand the emotional fluctuations of the disciple. Sanjaya refers to Arjuna as *Guḍākeśa* and *Parantapa*. *Guḍākeśa* means "one who has conquered sleep or laziness", and *Parantapa* means "one who scorches or vanquishes his enemies"[12]. By highlighting these attributes, Sanjaya is indirectly questioning Arjuna's current state. If you possess both these qualities, why this aversion to war now? Kṛṣṇa, with a smiling face, begins his counsel, subtly pointing out the contradiction. How did laziness — unbefitting of a Kṣatriya — take hold of *Guḍākeśa* at the very onset of battle? Moreover, where did the valour of *Parantapa*, the destroyer of foes, disappear? These epithets — *Guḍākeśa* and *Parantapa* — are not merely ornamental; they hold deep positional and contextual significance.

In the third verse of the second chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa's heartfelt anger also serves to remind Arjuna of his true self. The word *Klaibya*ṁ[13] in this verse is a term that, in modern society, often sparks controversy. However, *Klaibya*ṁ in this context cannot be interpreted as gender-based discrimination. Biologically, gender variation may exist (such as trans male or trans female), but in terms of identity or essence, only two genders are fundamentally recognised: masculine and feminine. *Napumsaka* (neuter) refers to the absence of both these qualities. Since biological variations often exhibit traits of both genders, it is appropriate to say, without ambiguity, *alam vivādena* — "enough of the argument." Kṛṣṇa

uses the word *Klaibyaṁ* to mockingly point out that Arjuna displays none of the qualities of either gender. In doing so, he reminds Arjuna of his inherent identity as *Parantapa* — the one who scorches his enemies. This title is significant in that moment, conveying that Arjuna is, indeed, a destroyer of foes. However, a deeper question arises: who exactly are the enemies? Here, the "enemies" are to be understood as *rāga-ādi* — attachments, desires, and similar inner afflictions. In truth, Arjuna's real enemies are these internal passions and delusions. By calling him *Parantapa*, Kṛṣṇa is reminding Arjuna of his duty to conquer these inner enemies and attain self-realisation.

5. Contextual Use of Adjectives and Their Deeper Significance

Adjectives are often used contextually. Sometimes, they are applied to a person's appearance, nature, or life background. The adjectives that Vyāsa uses for Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna reveal profound layers of meaning. The teachings of Lord Kṛṣṇa begin with a respectful acknowledgement of Arjuna's capabilities. Keśava says, 'Though you grieve for those who should not be grieved for, you speak words of wisdom.' True knowledge (*prajñā*) is defined as wisdom free from emotional turmoil. This quality of wisdom rightly belongs to the wise. One who has attained real spiritual insight will not entertain thoughts like 'I kill' or 'I am killed' in the context of the physical body. It is also said that Arjuna speaks in the language of a scholar (*Paṇḍita*)[14]. A subtle question is then raised—if he is truly a scholar, how can he even think of abandoning his duty (*dharma*)? Scholars are those who see with equanimity. Moreover, the wise are those who have burnt their actions in the fire of knowledge[15]. Here, the Lord argues that this quality of equal vision is firmly rooted in Arjuna. It is this affirmation that opens the path to war.

Only through the teaching of the true nature of the Self (*ātma-tattva*) can the motivation for war be made possible. Here, the terms '*asmach*' (we) and '*yuṣmad* ' (you) should be understood in the context of the awareness of the individual self (*jīvātma*) and the Supreme Self (*paramātma*). It is not the literal meaning, but the intended or deeper meaning that should be grasped. The Self does not perish over time because it is beyond temporal limitations; hence, the notion that it will be destroyed later does not arise. Therefore, the person who remains unaffected by pleasure and pain, who is steady and courageous, is worthy of immortality (*amṛtatva*). The Lord suggests that you (Arjuna) are indeed such a courageous one (*dhīra*), and that this understanding will dispel your reluctance to fight. In the scriptures, the distinction between Self and non-Self is seen as the distinction between the real (*sat*) and the unreal (*asat*). In worldly terms, '*sat*' refers to the living (conscious) and '*asat*' to the inert (non-conscious). The definition of '*sat*' as 'that which is unaffected across all three periods of time (past, present, and future)' is well established in Advaita Vedanta. *'Asat'*, on the other hand, is that which is subject to change in all three times[15]. Hence, the unreal has no true existence, and the real has no non-existence. That which is non-existent cannot be born. How can that which truly exists undergo birth and death? The usage of *'sat'* and *'asat'* in the second chapter of the Gītā consists of logically sound statements that are meant to dispel Arjuna's doubts.

In the verse *'Antavanta ime dehāḥ'*[16] (These bodies are perishable), attention must be paid to the contextual meaning of the word *'antavantaḥ'* (having an end). Though it means 'perishable', it should be understood in a broader sense—referring to that which was not there before, exists for a while, and eventually perishes. Since the self (ātman), which inhabits the body, is eternal, there can be no notions like 'not existing before' or 'perishing later' in its case. The self is affirmed here through various attributes such as eternal *(nitya)*, beyond the effects of time (*trikālabādhya*), indestructible *(avināśi)*, and incomprehensible (*aprameya* – beyond sensory perception). Elsewhere, the word *'puruṣa'* (man) is also used as a descriptor for the self. Since the self is beyond gender distinctions, one might wonder how the masculine term *'puruṣa'* is appropriate. After all, *puruṣārtha* (the goals of human life) is not meant only for men. When understood in a collective or universal sense (samaṣṭi), the word *puruṣa* should be taken to mean 'human being'. In other contexts, the term *puruṣa* is also used to refer to a discerning or wise individual. In this context, it is appropriate to understand *puruṣa* as 'the wise one who has awakened to self-knowledge'

Elsewhere, the terms *dehi* (the embodied one) and *shariri* (the one with a body) are used about the soul. The term *dehi* can sometimes be understood as

the soul with body-identification (ego), and at other times as the pure soul without such identification. In the verse beginning with *'Vāsāṁsi jīrṇāni'*[17] and in the one starting *'Dehe'smin yathā dehe*[18]*'*, *Dehi* refers to the soul that is identified with the body (the ego-bound being). However, in the part that says *'Nainaṁ chindanti śastrāṇi*[19]*'* (weapons do not cut this), *dehi* must be understood as the pure soul. Similarly, in the verse *'Dehī nityam avadhyo'yam*' (the embodied soul is eternally indestructible), *Dehi* again refers to the pure soul. In this way, numerous attributes are described for the *jīvātman* (individual soul) who is free from all limitations: inconceivable (*achintya*), immutable (*avikārya*), uncuttable (*achhedya*), unburnable (*adāhya*), unwettable (*akledya*), existent (*sat*), eternal (*nitya*), immeasurable (*aprameya*), everlasting (śāśvata), and ancient (*purāṇa*). Understanding the true place and state of all these attributes is indeed astonishing.

In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the term *yoga* in the contexts of *Sankhya* and *Karma Yoga* is explained by the Lord with great subtlety. In the definition '*samatvaṁ yoga ucyate*'[20] (equanimity is called yoga), it is clearly stated that yoga refers to performing actions with knowledge and a sense of equanimity. It signifies a state where one does not dwell on the outcomes of actions, whether gain or loss. The term *buddhiyuktaḥ* (endowed with wisdom) also implies a yogi who possesses this sense of equanimity. The *buddhiyuktaḥ* is none other than the *sthita-prajña* (one of steady wisdom). This *sthita-prajña* is a sage who is free from attachment, fear, and anger. He is the one who has transcended the threefold suffering caused by the divine *(adhidaivika)*, material *(adhibhautika)*, and internal *(adhyātmika)* factors.

6. Conclusion

In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, each word—especially the adjectives and forms of address—is arranged by Vyāsa in a manner that suits the context and astonishes the reader. It is not just the close relationship between the words and their meanings that matters, but also their placement and context. These contextually placed words are what make the teachings effective. It can be said without doubt that all the essential elements of modern counselling are present in Kṛṣṇa's words. Therefore, it is evident that to create a sense of purpose, words must be contextually and meaningfully placed.

7. References

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