

The Bhagavad Gita as a Meta-Narrative Within a Meta-Narrative

Leeladhar Lodhi (Author)

Research Scholar, English

The Bhopal School of Social Science

Bhopal, MP

Dr. Shibani Basu Dubey (Co-Author)

Professor, English,

The Bhopal School of Social Sciences,

Bhopal, MP

Abstract

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a small part of the *Mahabharata*, but it is often read as a complete text on its own. This paper argues that the Gita works like a “meta-narrative within a meta-narrative.” It is a self-contained teaching placed inside an epic that is already very large and morally complicated. Using Jean-François Lyotard’s idea of metanarratives, this paper looks at the Gita’s narrative frame, Arjuna’s doubt, Krishna’s reply, the limits of that reply in the epic, and later readings of the text. The paper argues that the Gita gives a complete answer to Arjuna’s immediate crisis, but the *Mahabharata* as a whole keeps the question of dharma open.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita, Mahabharata, meta-narrative, Lyotard, dharma

1. Introduction

The *Bhagavad Gita* is part of the *Mahabharata*, but people also read it separately as a scripture. It is found in the sixth book of the epic, in chapters 23–40 of the Critical Edition, and it has around 700 verses. This double position makes the Gita interesting. It is both a

small part of a bigger story and a text that claims to give a full teaching about duty, action, and liberation.

Lyotard's idea of the metanarrative can be used here as a lens. He famously defined the postmodern as "*incredulity toward metanarratives*" (Lyotard 1984, xxiv). By metanarratives, Lyotard mainly meant the large stories of modernity that justify knowledge, especially science, through ideas such as progress, reason, or emancipation. He contrasted these with smaller, local narratives. This paper does not say that the Gita is a metanarrative in Lyotard's exact historical sense. Instead, it uses the idea to ask whether the Gita works like a legitimating story inside the larger epic.

The paper has five parts. First, it looks at the Gita's narrators. Second, it studies Arjuna's doubt. Third, it examines Krishna's answer. Fourth, it shows why the Gita's answer does not fully close the larger epic. Finally, it looks at how later readers, such as Ambedkar, Tilak, and Gandhi, understood the text.

2. The Gita Inside a Frame of Narrators

The authority of the Gita depends greatly on its narrative setting. It is not presented as a private conversation between Krishna and Arjuna. It reaches the reader through a chain of narrators: Sauti reports Vaishampayana's recitation to Janamejaya, while Sanjaya reports the war to Dhritarashtra. The Gita is therefore Sanjaya's account of Krishna's teaching. Sanjaya strengthens this chain when he says, "*By Vyasa's grace, I have heard this supreme secret*" (Gita 18.75). The teaching thus appears trustworthy because it passes through Vyasa, Sanjaya, and Dhritarashtra. This resembles Lyotard's view that, in traditional narrative knowledge, the narrator's authority comes from having heard the story and from being able to pass it on (Lyotard 1984, 20–21). At the same time, the frame creates distance: the reader

hears Krishna only through Sanjaya. The Gita's authority is therefore produced through storytelling, not merely through the ideas it contains.

The frame also shapes the moral meaning of the war. The Gita opens with Dhritarashtra's question about the "*field of dharma*" (Gita 1.1) and ends with Sanjaya's claim that victory and righteousness lie wherever Krishna and Arjuna stand (Gita 18.78). These verses frame the Pandava cause in the language of dharma from beginning to end. Yet Dhritarashtra is not a neutral listener. The epic repeatedly criticises him for failing to restrain Duryodhana. The Gita therefore gives a strong moral framing, but it addresses a listener whose own judgement is compromised. This does not cancel its authority, but it shows that the Gita's closure is created within a particular narrative situation rather than standing outside all doubt.

3. Arjuna's Doubt: A Personal Story Against a Large Order

Arjuna's crisis is personal, emotional, and specific. Seeing his teachers and relatives on the battlefield, he feels unable to fight and says that he sees no good in killing his own people (Gita 1.28–35). He finally tells Krishna that he will not fight (Gita 2.9). His objection is not a general argument against all war. It concerns this war, these relatives, and these teachers. In Lyotard's terms, it works like a *petit récit*: a small, situated claim that resists being absorbed into a larger rule. A grand narrative must overcome exactly such particular objections if it wants to provide one answer for everyone.

Arjuna's doubt is also internal to dharma, not opposed to it. He fears that killing kin will destroy family duties and allow adharma to spread (Gita 1.40–44). When he asks Krishna to teach him, he says that he is confused about his duty (Gita 2.7). He is therefore caught between two accepted moral claims: compassion and kinship on one side, and the warrior's obligation on the other. Krishna is not asked to create morality in Arjuna. He is asked to

decide between duties that Arjuna already recognises. This makes Krishna's answer a legitimating one: it provides a principle by which competing claims within the tradition can be ordered.

4. Krishna's Answer: How the Gita Legitimises Action

Krishna answers Arjuna in three movements: metaphysics, duty, and surrender. He first shifts the question from grief to the nature of the self. Teaching that the self is "*never born, nor does it ever die*" (Gita 2.20), he makes bodily death appear less final. This is a powerful philosophical response, but it does not fully answer Arjuna's actual question. Arjuna did not ask whether death is real; he asked whether he should kill his own relatives. Krishna's metaphysics reframes the problem rather than resolving every moral detail within it.

Krishna then justifies action through duty. He teaches that one's own duty, even done imperfectly, is better than another's duty done well (Gita 3.35), and that action without attachment to results brings no sin (Gita 2.38). This directly answers Arjuna's fear of sin and gives him a practical rule: perform one's duty without acting for personal gain. Yet this teaching has a social cost. If duty is tied to one's place in society, it can support hierarchy. The meaning of Gita 4.13, which refers to the fourfold order, remains disputed: it may refer to quality and action, or to birth. The interpretation chosen strongly affects whether the Gita appears socially conservative or ethically flexible.

The final movement relies less on argument and more on vision and authority. Krishna reveals himself as Time, saying, "*I am Time*" (Gita 11.32), and tells Arjuna that the warriors are already doomed and that he is only an instrument (Gita 11.33). Krishna then asks Arjuna to take refuge in him and abandon grief (Gita 18.66), and Arjuna accepts his instruction (Gita 18.73). Arjuna's doubt is therefore resolved not only through reasoning but also through

revelation and surrender. In Lyotardian terms, this resembles legitimation through a grand narrative: agreement is secured through a larger authoritative account. But this is also the Gita's weakness. Arjuna accepts Krishna's word; he does not fully argue through every moral problem raised by the war.

5. The Limits of Closure Within the Epic

The Gita's closure remains incomplete even within itself. Arjuna continues to question Krishna after the first teaching, saying that Krishna's instructions confuse him (Gita 3.1–2), and later complains that the mind is too restless for the discipline described (Gita 6.33–34). The dialogue therefore retains the form of an inquiry rather than becoming a closed monologue. The ending is similarly layered: Krishna tells Arjuna to reflect and do as he wishes (Gita 18.63), but immediately asks him to take refuge in Krishna (Gita 18.66). Readers can see this either as genuine freedom or as freedom framed so that only one choice appears fitting. The text supports both readings.

The wider epic also refuses to treat the Gita as its final word. After the war, Arjuna asks Krishna to repeat the teaching, but Krishna says that he cannot repeat it in the same form and instead gives the *Anugītā* (Mahabharata 14.16–51). The inability to repeat the Gita suggests that its teaching was tied to a particular crisis and cannot simply be turned into a universal rule. The epic further questions the Gita through Gandhari, who blames Krishna for allowing the slaughter and curses his clan (Mahabharata 11.25), and through Yudhishtira, whose grief after learning of Karna's identity makes victory feel like defeat (Mahabharata 12.1–26). These episodes do not reject the Gita, but they place it within a larger and more painful inquiry into dharma. Hiltebeitel reads the Gita as part of the epic's education of the dharma king (Hiltebeitel 2001), while Matilal emphasises the epic's habit of presenting moral

dilemmas without easy answers (Matilal 1989). From this perspective, the Gita resolves Arjuna's crisis, but it does not resolve the moral problem of the entire epic.

6. Critical Readings and Later Reception

Some critics argue that the Gita supports power and hierarchy. Ambedkar reads it as a defence of war and caste order. He also sees it as a Brahmanical response to Buddhism, not as a neutral philosophical text (Ambedkar 1987). This critique is strong, especially regarding caste. It also supports the idea that the Gita closes down Arjuna's doubt by placing it under a larger order of duty.

But Ambedkar's reading is not the only possible reading. Many readers have found ethical and spiritual meaning in the Gita. Tilak read it as a call to active service in public life (Tilak 1935). Gandhi read the battlefield as an inner struggle and focused on selfless action rather than literal violence (Desai 1946). These readings are very different, but all of them come from the same text.

This shows that the Gita's authority remains strong even when its meaning changes. The text gives readers a powerful framework. But each age reads that framework in its own way. So the Gita's status as a meta-narrative depends not only on the text itself but also on how people have used it.

7. Conclusion

The Gita can be called a meta-narrative within a meta-narrative, but only with qualifications. It creates authority through its chain of narrators, answers Arjuna's personal crisis with a complete teaching on the self, duty, action, and devotion, and brings his hesitation to an end through Krishna's divine authority.

Yet the Gita's closure is not absolute. Arjuna's doubt arises within dharma, not outside it, and Krishna's answer often changes the question rather than answering it completely. The larger epic also keeps reopening the moral issues that the Gita appears to settle. The *Anugītā* shows that Krishna's teaching cannot simply be repeated, Gandhari's curse refuses to accept the war as justified, and Yudhishtira's grief shows that victory does not end moral suffering. These episodes do not reject the Gita, but they prevent it from becoming the epic's final word.

The Gita therefore creates a local closure within a larger epic that remains open. It gives Arjuna a complete answer for one moment of crisis, while the *Mahabharata* continues to ask what that answer costs. This tension is precisely why the Gita remains powerful: it offers certainty within its own narrative frame, while the epic surrounding it preserves doubt, grief, and moral complexity.

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