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BECOMING THROUGH DUTY: REINTERPRETING SWADHARMA IN THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ AND BEYOND

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Abstract: *This paper reinterprets the concept of Dharma in the Bhagavadgītā through the lens of Swadharma—one's personal duty arising from inherent nature (Svabhava). Moving beyond conventional theological and caste-based readings, it argues that the Gītā presents an existential and dynamic ethical model grounded in psychological disposition (Guna) and selfless action (Karma Yoga). The study first traces the evolution of Dharma in Vedic and Upanishadic literature, then analyzes how the Gītā integrates metaphysics, ethics, and social order through Swadharma. Using Arjuna's moral crisis as a case study, the paper explores tensions between individual duty and universal norms. Drawing on classical commentaries and modern interpretations from thinkers like Gandhi, Aurobindo, Vivekananda and Ambedkar, it critiques hierarchical misreadings and affirms Swadharma as a liberating and context-sensitive moral ideal relevant to both spiritual growth and civic life.*

Keywords: *Dharma, Swadharma, Chatur-Varna, Bhagavadgītā, Karmayoga*

1. Introduction

The concept of *Dharma* stands as one of the most foundational yet most misunderstood concepts in Hindu philosophy and religious thought. While often translated into English as "religion," this rendering is not only inadequate but misleading. Dharma is not merely a set of beliefs, rituals, or dogmas—it is a principle that governs cosmic order, ethical behaviour, and individual conduct. P.V. Kane aptly notes, "Dharma is one of those Sanskrit words that defy all attempts at an exact rendering in English or any other language".[3] In Sanskrit texts such as the *Amarakośa*, Dharma

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[3] Kane, P.V. (1930). *History of Dharmasastra Vol.1.* Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

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encompasses a wide spectrum of meanings—law, duty, virtue, truth, and essence.[4] Unlike the Western conception of religion, which typically has a founder, fixed dogma, and canonical scripture, Dharma is *anadi* (without origin), eternal, and pluralistic in expression.

The etymological roots of Dharma—derived from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ*, meaning "to uphold" or "to sustain"—reveal its ontological character. Dharma is that which sustains not only the universe (*ṛta*) but also individual life, community, and society. In the Vedas, Dharma was synonymous with *ṛta*, the cosmic order. In the *Upanishads*, it evolved into an ethical and spiritual principle, one that aligns human behaviour with ultimate reality (*Brahman*). Later, in the *Manusmṛti* and *Mīmāṃsā* schools, Dharma assumed a juridical and ritualistic character. This multiplicity of interpretations illustrates Dharma's capacity to evolve across metaphysical, moral, and sociopolitical dimensions while retaining its central essence as a guiding principle of right conduct.

Against this philosophical backdrop the *Bhagavadgītā* emerges as a revolutionary text that redefines Dharma through a more individualized and psychologically nuanced framework—*Swadharma*. The Bhagavadgītā is the first and the foremost among the sixteen Gītās[5], found in the Mahabharata. Even in the Anugītā of the Mahabharata, the Bhagavadgītā is referred to as the Gītā.[6] Similarly, this paper also depicts *Bhagavadgītā* as Gītā. While the *Mahābhārata*, of which the Gītā is a part, grapples with the complexities of Dharma in various narratives (including morally ambiguous decisions by Yudhishthira, Krishna, and Bhishma), the Gītā distills these tensions into a singular moment: Arjuna's dilemma on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. His internal crisis—whether to fight against his kin or withdraw from battle—symbolizes the broader ethical

[4]Panśīkar, W.L.S. (1940). *The Amarkoṣa with a Short Commentary.* Bombay: Niranya-Śagar Press.

[5] The Sixteen Gītā in the Mahabharata on the basis of their occurrence: The Bhagavadgītā, The Aśmagītā, The Utathyagītā, The Vāmadevagītā, The Ṛṣabhagītā, The Ṣadjagītā, The Senajitgītā, The Mankigītā , The Bodhyagītā, The Vichakhyugītā, The haritagītā, The Vṛtragītā, The Parāśaragītā, The Hamsagītā, The Anugītā.
[6] Nilkantan, R. (1989). *In the Mahābhārata & the Purānas.* Delhi: Nag Publishers.

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predicament that occurs when multiple duties come into conflict, a condition referred to in Indian thought as *Dharma Sankat*.[7]

Krishna's counsel to Arjuna does not present Dharma as a universal or externally imposed law. Instead, it introduces the idea of *Swadharma*—one's own duty, shaped by inherent nature (*svabhava*) and the psychological constitution (*guna*) arising from *prakriti* (material nature). The notion of Swadharma radically personalizes ethics. It asserts that the morally right action for an individual is not what is best according to an abstract standard, but what is aligned with their internal disposition and societal role. This concept challenges both rigid ritualism and moral absolutism.

At the heart of the Gītā's ethics is the integration of *Karma Yoga*—the yoga of action—with Swadharma. Krishna emphasizes that action (*karma*) must not be renounced but performed without attachment to outcomes (*phala*).[8] This doctrine of *nishkama karma*—selfless action—ensures that even duties that are painful or conflicted, as Arjuna's warrior duty certainly is, can lead to spiritual liberation when performed in the right spirit. "To action alone you have a right, never to its fruits" (*Bhagavadgītā* 2.47), Krishna instructs. Thus, the Gītā offers a revolutionary model: liberation (*moksha*) is not achieved through renunciation but through dedicated performance of one's Swadharma.[9]

The tension between *Swadharma* and *Paradharma* (the duty of another) is another key theme. Krishna warns: "Better is death in one's own Dharma than success in another's; Paradharma is fraught with danger" (*Bhagavadgītā* 3.35). This verse underscores the Gītā's emphasis on

[7]Agrawal, M.M. (2014). Arjuna's Moral Predicament. In Bimal Krishna Matilal (Ed.), *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata* (pp.129-142). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

[8] Kashap, S.P. (2014). Reflections on the Concept of Action in the Gītā. In Bimal Krishna Matilal (Ed.), *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata* (pp. 116-128). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

[9] Santina, P.D. (2014). Conception of Dharma in the Śramaṇical and Brāhmanical Traditions: Buddhism and the Mahābhārata. In Bimal Krishna Matilal (Ed.), *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata* (pp. 97-115). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

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authenticity and the psychological cost of living in contradiction to one's true nature. Such insights not only redefine Hindu ethics but also resonate with modern existentialist concerns about self-alienation, moral autonomy, and psychological wholeness.

This paper sets out to investigate this philosophical transformation of Dharma in the Gītā, with a special focus on *Swadharma* and its relationship with *Svabhava*, *Guna*, *Karma Yoga*, and Varna-Ashrama Dharma. It will examine how Swadharma serves as a unifying axis that integrates metaphysics, ethics, and social order, while also providing a liberating path for spiritual realization. The paper will also explore the classical commentarial traditions of Shankara, Ramanuja, and others, alongside modern readings by Tilak, Aurobindo, Gandhi, Vivekananda and Ambedkar.

Furthermore, the paper critically examines the misuse of the Gītā to justify rigid caste hierarchies and fatalism. Through a nuanced reading of key verses and philosophical interpretations, it seeks to recover Swadharma as a flexible, individual-centred, and action-oriented concept that transcends ritual and birth. Finally, it will reflect on the contemporary relevance of Swadharma in contexts such as civic responsibility, vocation, leadership, and ethical decision-making in pluralistic societies. In doing so, this paper not only contributes to a deeper understanding of Hindu ethical thought but also proposes Swadharma as a framework for morally grounded action in the modern world—a world increasingly marked by ethical ambiguity, identity crises, and spiritual disorientation.

2. Historical Foundations of Dharma

The earliest articulations of Dharma in Indian philosophical history are found in the Vedas, particularly the *Ṛgveda*, where the term *ṛta*—the cosmic, moral, and natural order—predominates. *Ṛta* represents a foundational principle of truth and rightness, a self-sustaining force that governs

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not only the physical cosmos but the ethical behaviour of gods, humans, and nature.[10] It is not enforced through divine decree but realized through inner alignment and ritual precision.

Dharma, in this period, was not yet distinct from *ṛta*. Rather, *Dharma* emerged as a derivative or extension of *ṛta*, as the application of universal order to individual and collective life. In this sense, *ṛta* was ontological, while Dharma gradually took on epistemological and praxeological functions. For example, Vedic rituals (yajñas) were believed to maintain *ṛta* and ensure social and cosmic harmony. The prescriptive aspect of Dharma thus began with the idea that moral order must mirror cosmic order.

The Vedic seers viewed reality as layered across three spheres: *adhidaiva* (cosmic), *adhibhuta* (material), and *adhyatma* (individual).[11] Dharma was that which bound these realms together. Truth, sacrifice, speech, and moral behaviour were not only interconnected but mutually sustaining. Swami Krishnananda argues that "Dharma are seen as universal laws by the Indian rishis and sages in their transcendental state. The sages of Vedic age, through their inner realization, plumbed the depth of infinity for all eternity: *Ekam satya vipra bahuda vadanti, indram varunam mitram agni.* It means that the truth is one but has been seen differently by different rishis and all varieties in above fields are manifestation of the supreme being that is *ekam satya* (one being)".[12]

By the time of the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Āraṇyakas*, the term *Dharma* began to displace *ṛta* as the central term of moral discourse. This transition marked a shift from cosmic impersonality to human moral responsibility. The ritual codes in the *Brāhmaṇas* expanded the scope of Dharma beyond universal law into ritual duties and social obligations. V.P. Varma writes that "The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* substantiates the point that due to the fusion with the concept of *ṛta,* Dharma

[10] Varma, V.P. (1959). *Studies in Hindu Political Thought and Its Metaphysical Foundation*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

[11] Devi, P.K. (2012). *Bhagavd Gita: The Global Dharma for the Third Millennium.* Jagannatha Vallabha Vedic Research Center. http://jagannathavallabha.com/pdf_engl/Gita%20chapter%208%20amazon%20template.pdf

[12] Krishnananda, S. (2014). *Commentary on the Bhagavadgita.* Uttarakhand: The Divine Life Society.

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gained a moral content. It calls the king the upholder of dharma".[13] The king, the priest, the householders—all were expected to act according to Dharma to prevent the disintegration of cosmic and social order. It is in this period that the seeds of *Svadharma* (personal duty) and *Varnadharma* (class duty) begin to germinate, though they are not yet conceptually separate. Crucially, Dharma becomes internalized. The external cosmic harmony of *ṛta* is now mirrored by the inner moral harmony of human conduct. This paved the way for philosophical inquiries into the nature of duty, desire, and liberation.

The *Upanishads* reorient the discussion of Dharma from the outer world of ritual to the inner world of consciousness. They retain the importance of Dharma but refocus its significance in relation to *ātman* (self) and *Brahman* (ultimate reality). The well-known injunction from the *Taittirīya Upanishad*—"*Satyam vada, dharmam chara*" (Speak the truth, follow Dharma)—positions Dharma as a lived ethical path rather than a set of ritual acts.[14]

In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad,* Dharma is even described as "the foundation of all that exists." In other words, it becomes a metaphysical category—one that aligns human behavior with the eternal order. Dharma is not imposed; it is discovered through self-knowledge, through inquiry into one's own nature and the nature of reality. According to *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad,* "the ātman is regarded as the essence of everything of Dharma and of Adharma".[15] This internal turn in the Upanishads anticipates the Gītā's eventual linkage between Dharma and *Svabhava* (intrinsic nature). Furthermore, the Upanishads introduce the concept of *Purusharthas*—the four aims of life: Dharma (righteousness), Artha (wealth), Kama (pleasure), and Moksha (liberation). Here, Dharma is not an obstacle to liberation but its precondition. One cannot transcend the world through renunciation until one has fulfilled their role in the world through Dharma (Krishna, 1991).

[13] Varma, V.P. (1959). *Studies in Hindu Political Thought and Its Metaphysical Foundation*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

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The *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* school of philosophy, especially through Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsā Sūtras*, offers a formal epistemology of Dharma.[16] For Mīmāṃsā thinkers, Dharma is not known through perception or inference but through scriptural injunction i.,e., Vedas.[17] Dharma becomes synonymous with ritual obligation (*yajña*), which upholds both cosmic balance and personal merit (*puṇya*). Importantly, Mīmāṃsā does not concern itself with liberation or metaphysics but with *Dharma as duty*. The central question is: *What ought to be done?*.[18] This deontological focus on obligation makes Mīmāṃsā a system of moral action divorced from spiritual ends, a position the *Gītā* critiques directly through Karma Yoga. While Mīmāṃsā emphasizes external acts, the *Gītā* stresses inner attitude. Krishna teaches that it is not mere action that leads to spiritual growth, but action without attachment—action performed in alignment with one's inner nature.

With the *Manusmṛti* and other Dharmaśāstra texts, Dharma becomes codified into a detailed legal, moral, and social framework. The *Manusmṛti* outlines duties for each varna (class) and ashrama (stage of life). It categorizes Dharma as *Sāmanya Dharma* (universal ethics such as non-violence, truthfulness, purity) and *Viśeṣa Dharma* (context-specific duties based on social role and life stage).One of the most cited verses from the *Manusmṛti* reads:

"*Dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ*"– Dharma protects those who protect it (*Manusmriti*, 8.15).
This aphorism illustrates a two-way moral structure: Dharma is both prescriptive and reciprocal. To act according to Dharma is to be protected by its cosmic and social consequences.

However, the Smṛti literature also institutionalizes hierarchy—especially through rigid interpretations of Varnadharma, which later contributed to caste rigidity. Dharma, in this context, became less about inner disposition and more about social identity. Birth began to eclipse *svabhava* in determining duty, a point that the *Bhagavadgītā* would later challenge. By the time

[16] Bhatt, S.R. (2018). *Indian Spirituality: Theory and Praxis*. New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research.

[17] Hiriyanna, M. (2005). *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy.* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

[18] Bhatt, S.R. (2018). *Indian Spirituality: Theory and Praxis*. New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research.

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of the *Mahābhārata*, Dharma had become a contested and layered concept. The epic portrays Dharma not as a set of clear-cut rules but as a spectrum of moral possibilities. The Yaksha-Yudhishthira dialogue, the dilemmas of Karna and Bhishma, and Krishna's morally ambiguous interventions all suggest that Dharma is situational, interpretive, and often hidden:

"*Dharmasya tattvaṁ nihitaṁ guhāyām*" – The substance of Dharma is as deep as a cave (Vana Parva 313. 117, Mahābhārata; Badrinath, 2018).

This aphorism becomes the pivot for the *Bhagavadgītā*. As Arjuna stands on the battlefield, he is not seeking legal prescriptions but moral clarity—*what is my Dharma, here and now?* The Gītā answers not with a fixed code but with a dynamic ethic: perform your Swadharma, grounded in your own nature, in service to the cosmos and without craving results.

3. Dharma in the Mahābhārata

The *Mahābhārata* offers perhaps the most sophisticated and layered treatment of *Dharma* in all of Hindu literature. Unlike the prescriptive clarity found in the *Dharmaśāstra* or the ritual certainties of the *Brāhmaṇa* texts, the epic presents Dharma as a lived experience marked by contextual ambiguity, personal conflict, and interpretive tension. This complexity is no mere literary device but the heart of the epic's philosophical inquiry. Dharma is not something handed down from on high; it is wrestled with in the messiness of political obligation, kinship duty, caste norms, and spiritual aspiration.

At the center of this narrative tension is Yudhishthira, the Pāṇḍava prince celebrated as *Dharmarāja*. His moral dilemma during the dice game—where he wagers his kingdom, his brothers, and ultimately Draupadī—is emblematic of the confusion between personal virtue and social duty.[19] Bound by codes of hospitality and royal conduct, Yudhishthira fails to resist the unjust demands placed upon him, thereby illustrating how Dharma can become distorted when enacted without discrimination. This episode complicates the assumption that Dharma is always

[19] Mookerjee, A.K. (1994). Dharma As Goal: The Mahabharata. In Krishna Sivaraman (Ed.), *Hindu Spirituality Vol.1: Vedas Through Vedanta* (pp. 127- 150). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited.

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evident to the conscientious mind; rather, it suggests that even the most virtuous can falter under pressure, and that Dharma must be discerned rather than followed blindly.

In illustrating *Dharma-saṅkaṭa*—the clash of equally binding but conflicting duties—the epic creates moral complexity through its characters. Bhīṣma, the patriarch of the Kuru dynasty, remains bound to his oath of loyalty to the throne, even as he watches injustice unfold under Duryodhana's reign. Though personally righteous, his unwillingness to challenge *Adharma* in the name of duty exposes a tension between loyalty and justice. His moral authority thus becomes tragically compromised, as he upholds his vow at the cost of broader ethical intervention.

Karna, too, faces profound ethical dissonance. Denied social legitimacy because of his perceived low birth, Karna remains loyal to Duryodhana, whose patronage grants him dignity.[20] This loyalty leads him to participate in the humiliation of Draupadī and later in the war, despite knowing his true parentage and the moral stakes. His personal code of honor—grounded in friendship and gratitude—clashes with dharmic duty to truth and justice. Karna's case illustrates how one's Swadharma, when distorted by resentment or misplaced allegiance, can lead to tragic consequences despite noble intention.

Krishna, by contrast, embodies a pragmatic and contextual approach to Dharma. His strategic interventions—ranging from advising Bhīma to strike Duryodhana unlawfully to misleading Droṇa about his son's death—would be considered *Adharma* by formal standards.[21] Yet Krishna's actions are justified on the basis of preserving the moral fabric of the world (*lokasaṃgraha*).[22] His Dharma is teleological: it seeks the greatest good, even at the cost of violating procedural norms. Such moral flexibility, though controversial, anticipates the Gītā's teaching that actions must be judged not only by rule-following but by intention and outcome.

[20] Narlikar, A. Mattoo, A. Narlikar, A. (2023). *Strategic Choices, Ethical Dilemmas: Stories From The Mahabharata*. Harayana: Penguin Random House India.
[21] Bhattacharya, A.N. (1992). *Dharma-Adharma and Morality in Mahabharata.* Delhi: S.S. Publishers.
[22] Ibid.

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A significant moment of philosophical clarity on Dharma emerges in the *Yakṣa Prashna*, where Yudhishthira engages in a profound dialogue with a divine spirit in disguise. When asked, "What is the path of Dharma?" Yudhishthira responds: "*Dharmasya tattvaṃ nihitaṃ guhāyām*" (Vana Parva 313. 117, Mahābhārata; Badrinath, 2018)—the truth of Dharma lies hidden in a cave. This metaphor of concealment is philosophically rich. It suggests that Dharma is not self-evident, not transparent, and not available through mechanical adherence to rules. Rather, it must be discovered through reflective inquiry, moral imagination, and inner clarity.

The implication here is epistemological: Dharma cannot be fully grasped through scripture or tradition alone, but must be discerned through *buddhi* (intellect), *viveka* (discrimination), and *anubhava* (experience). This anticipates the *Bhagavadgītā's* focus on *Buddhi Yoga*—a disciplined use of the intellect to discern one's path in the midst of moral ambiguity.[23] Yudhishthira's answer is thus not a deferral of moral responsibility but a call to inwardness and spiritual discernment.

The *Mahābhārata*, in its entirety, does not offer a consistent or universal definition of Dharma. Rather, it presents a world in which Dharma is always in motion—contested, refracted through circumstance, and discovered only through lived engagement. This prepares the philosophical and emotional ground for the *Bhagavadgītā*, which crystallizes these complexities into a coherent ethical vision centered on *Swadharma*.

Arjuna's hesitation on the battlefield is not born of cowardice but of ethical dilemma. He recognizes that his Kṣatriya Dharma—to fight—collides with familial affection, the sacredness of life, and spiritual aspiration.[24] His paralysis reveals the inadequacy of conventional moral frameworks when confronted with multidimensional duties. The Gītā, by introducing *Swadharma*, reframes this paralysis as a crisis not of external rules, but of inner alignment.

[23] Sharma, A. (1994). Buddhi Yoga. In Krishna Sivaraman (Ed.), *Hindu Spirituality Vol.1: Vedas Through Vedanta* (pp. 192- 208). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited.
[24] Pradhan, R.C. (1995). *Bhagavadgita: A Primer.* Noida: Bhagavadgita International foundation.

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In offering Swadharma as a resolution, the Gītā does not reject the *Mahābhārata's* ethical tensions; rather, it synthesizes them. The battlefield becomes both literal and symbolic—a space where ethical theories collapse under the weight of life's complexity, and where only a return to self-knowledge and detached action can restore clarity. Thus, the Gītā does not simplify Dharma but deepens it—embedding it in the psychology, constitution, and inherent nature (*svabhava*) of the individual.[25]

4. Swadharma in the Bhagavadgītā

The *Bhagavadgītā* opens amidst crisis—not political, but existential. Arjuna, the Pāṇḍava warrior prince, finds himself psychologically immobilized on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, confronting the terrifying prospect of slaying his kin, teachers, and friends.[26] His reaction—marked by trembling limbs, a parched mouth, and a faltering bow—signals not cowardice but an acute awareness of ethical dissonance. In *Bhagavadgītā* (1.28–31), Arjuna articulates his refusal to fight on moral grounds, citing concerns over familial destruction (*kulakṣaya*), social chaos (*varṇasaṅkara*), and the decline of eternal Dharma (*sanātana dharma*).

This initial crisis is significant because it exposes the breakdown of Vedic and *Smṛti*-based ethical codes when confronted with complex realities. Arjuna's identity as a *Kṣatriya* demands he engage in righteous war (*dharma yudha*), yet his conscience recoils at the violence and moral consequences. As Badrinath argues, Arjuna's paralysis is emblematic of the moment when traditional Dharma, defined by external prescriptions, fails to provide moral clarity in the face of conflicting obligations.[27] It is precisely in this ethical liminality that Krishna introduces the notion of *Swadharma*—a concept that reframes Dharma from a socially fixed rule into a principle derived

[25] Bhattacharya, A.N. (1992). *Dharma-Adharma and Morality in Mahabharata.* Delhi: S.S. Publishers.
[26] Jariwalla, J.S. (1984). *Gītā: The Science of Living.* New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
[27] Badrinath, C. (2018). *The Mahābharāta: An Inquiry in the Human Condition.* Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited.

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from inner nature and existential calling. The term *Swadharma* (sva-dharma) emerges repeatedly throughout the *Gītā*, perhaps most famously in 3.35:

"Śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt;

svabhāvaniyataṁ karma kurvan nāpnoti kilbiṣam." (*Bhagavadgītā* 3.35)

Better is one's own Dharma, even if imperfect, than the well-executed duty of another. One does not incur sin when performing action born of one's own nature".

Here, *Swadharma* is explicitly linked with *svabhāva*—one's inherent disposition or nature. This marks a critical philosophical shift. Whereas earlier Dharma traditions, particularly in the *Manusmṛti*, emphasized Dharma as codified social duties primarily determined by one's *varna* (class) and *āśrama* (life stage), the *Gītā* reinterprets duty as rooted in psychological constitution and *guna*-karma (qualities and actions). As Krishna reiterates, "*Sahajaṁ karma kaunteya saṁsiddhiṁ labhate naraḥ*" — one attains perfection through the action that arises from one's own nature (*Bhagavadgītā 18.47*).

This reframing offers a more internalized and existential understanding of ethics. Swadharma is not externally imposed but arises organically from *prakṛti*—the interplay of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*—which shapes an individual's temperament and vocation. Each being, in this view, has a unique role to play in the cosmic order (*ṛta*), and fulfilling this role with authenticity, even imperfectly, is preferable to initiating a more prestigious but misaligned duty.

Swadharma, however, is not merely a call to act according to one's nature. Krishna insists that such action be performed without attachment to outcomes—a principle known as *niṣkāma karma*. In *Bhagavadgītā* 2.47, he famously declares: *"Karmaṇy-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana."* It means, You have a right to your action, but never to its fruits.

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This ideal of detached action (*karma yoga*) becomes central to the Gītā's ethical framework. While Swadharma is grounded in psychological and social reality, its spiritual efficacy depends on its performance with equanimity, without craving or aversion. Swadharma thus becomes the axis where existential responsibility meets spiritual liberation. As S. Radhakrishnan notes, the Gītā represents a "religion of the whole man" in which moral action and metaphysical realization are not opposites but mutually reinforcing.[28] By advocating action aligned with *svabhāva* and performed without desire, Krishna harmonizes three dimensions: individual psychology, social function, and cosmic law. This integrated vision allows Swadharma to serve not only as moral duty but as *yoga*—a means of spiritual transcendence.

The *Bhagavadgītā* emphasizes the peril of imitating another's Dharma, however noble it may seem. In 3.35 and again in 18.47, Krishna warns that performing *Paradharma*—the Dharma of another—though flawlessly executed, is spiritually dangerous because it contravenes one's innate disposition. The ethical implications here are striking. Moral authenticity, not moral perfection, becomes the criterion of righteousness.

This insight has resonances with both Indian and Western philosophical traditions. Similarly, the existentialist tradition in the West, particularly the thought of Kierkegaard and Sartre, echoes this emphasis on authenticity and the dangers of role-conformity. In both cases, the highest ethical imperative is to act in accordance with one's own being. Interestingly, a philosophical parallel can be drawn between Swadharma and F.H. Bradley's idea of social station. Bradley argue that moral is not abstract universal principle (Kantian View) instead is grounded in concrete social roles what he calls 'station in life' i.e. parents, citizens and workers. These roles come with duties that define the idea of right and wrong in a given context and here are no universal duties, only the social ones.[29] The Gītā's notion of Paradharma as "dangerous" (*bhayaāvahaḥ*) reinforces the idea that virtue divorced from internal truth can lead to disintegration. Social roles, however exalted, become spiritually sterile when misaligned with one's inner truth.

[28] Radhakrishnan, S. (1948). *Bhagavadgita.* London: Allen & Unwin.
[29] Bradley, F. (1927) *Ethical Studies.* London: Oxford University Press.

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The *Bhagavadgītā* does not treat Swadharma as an end in itself, but as a path toward *mokṣa*, or liberation. In Chapter 18.46, Krishna states:

"Yataḥ pravṛttir bhūtānāṁ yena sarvam idaṁ tatam,
svakarmaṇā tam abhyarcya siddhiṁ vindati mānavaḥ."

"By worship of the Lord, who is the source of all beings and who is all-pervading, a man can attain perfection through performing his own work".[30]

This verse links one's work (*svakarma*) with the divine presence (*Brahman*), reinforcing the spiritual dimension of Swadharma. The performance of duty becomes an act of devotion. In this light, even battlefield action can lead to transcendence if performed with surrender, awareness, and detachment. Thus, Swadharma is not an ethic of conformity but a disciplined pursuit of inner harmony and liberation.

Swadharma, as developed in the *Bhagavadgītā*, marks a paradigm shift in Hindu ethical thought. Rooted in *svabhāva*, and refined through *karma yoga*, it transcends the rigidity of caste-bound ritualism while retaining the importance of individual and social roles. It offers a model of moral action that is inwardly grounded, spiritually oriented, and existentially authentic. Far from promoting fatalism, it calls individuals to self-knowledge and disciplined engagement with the world. In so doing, it transforms Dharma from a code into a path.

Classical commentaries on the Gītā offer diverse readings of Swadharma. Śaṅkara, in his Advaita Vedānta commentary, emphasizes Swadharma as a preparatory stage—appropriate for those not yet ready for *jñāna yoga* (path of knowledge).[31] For Śaṅkara, Karma Yoga, when performed as Swadharma, purifies the mind (*citta-śuddhi*) and leads to higher realization.

[30] Prabhupāda. A.C.B.S. (2011). *Bhagavad-gītā: As It Is.* Revised Edition. Mumbai: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust.
[31] Varma, V.P. (1959). *Studies in Hindu Political Thought and Its Metaphysical Foundation*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

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Ramanuja, representing Viśiṣṭādvaita, views Swadharma as a form of *bhakti*—action offered as service to the divine will.

More recent interpreters have expanded these insights in new directions. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, in his *Gītā Rahasya* (1915), argued that the Gītā advocates *nishkāma karma* not for renunciation, but for active engagement in the world. For Tilak, Swadharma supported a spirit of selfless national service. Swami Vivekananda, in his interpretation of the Gītā, argues that "The greatest men in the world have passed through great suffering to attain this ideal of Swadharma".[32] Mahatma Gandhi, in his reading, identified Swadharma with *ahimsa* (non-violence), seeing the Gītā's emphasis on intention and purity of heart as overriding literalist calls to war.[33] He famously interpreted the battlefield as an allegory for the internal struggle between good and evil within the self.

In contrast, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar critiqued the traditional interpretation of Swadharma as reinforcing caste oppression. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and his unpublished *Philosophy of Hinduism*, Ambedkar argued that aligning Dharma with *varna* and *guna* perpetuated hierarchy and closed mobility.[34] He called for a reinterpretation of the Gītā that emphasized universal dignity rather than fixed roles. These contrasting readings underscore the interpretive flexibility of Swadharma and its potential either to liberate or constrain, depending on its social deployment.

4.1 Varṇa and Svabhāva: Social Duty and Inner Disposition

One of the most debated and contested features of the *Bhagavadgītā* is its apparent endorsement of the *varṇa* system—the division of society into four classes. In Chapter 4, Verse 13 of *Bhagavadgītā* , Krishna declares:

[32] Vivekananda, S. (2013). *Thoughts on Gītā.* Kolkata: Advaita Ashram.
[33] Sukthankar, B.S. (2014). *Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Srimad BhagavadGītā Rahasya.* New Delhi & Chennai: Asian Educational Services.
[34] Ambedkar, B.R. (2003). The Philosophy of Hinduism. In *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3. (pp. 3-92). Maharashtra: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation.

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"Cāturvarṇyaṁ mayā sṛṣṭaṁ guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ;

tasya kartāram api māṁ viddhy akartāram avyayam".

I created the fourfold order (*cāturvarṇya*) based on qualities (*guṇa*) and actions (*karma*); although I am its creator, know Me as the non-doer and immutable (Prabhupāda, 2011).

This verse, along with the Purusasukta[35] of the Rigveda are foundational to the theological justification of caste, has been subject to multiple interpretations.[36] The traditional reading identifies the four *varṇas*—Brāhmaṇa (priest), Kṣatriya (warrior), Vaiśya (merchant), and Śūdra (laborer)—as divinely ordained roles rooted in social order. However, the Gītā's formulation does not ground these categories in birth (*jāti*), as later caste-based *Dharmaśāstra* traditions do, but in an individual's *guṇa* (psychological constitution) and *karma* (action). This subtle focus on functions, based on natural disposition is philosophically significant.

Commentators such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja accept the *varṇa* system as a reflection of natural order (*prakṛti-dharma*), arguing that it maintains social harmony when correctly aligned with *svabhāva*. But the ethical tension arises when this ideal is historically interpreted through rigid caste hereditary structures—thereby transforming a flexible philosophical model into an oppressive social dogma.

The metaphysical foundation of the *varṇa* system in the Gītā lies in its *Sāṃkhya*-influenced psychology of the *guṇas—sattva* (clarity), *rajas* (activity), and *tamas* (inertia). Every individual, according to this doctrine, is a composite of these three guṇas in varying proportions. The

[35] The Purusha Sukta is a famous hymn found in the 10th Mandala (Book 10), Hymn 90 (10.90) of the Rigveda. This is a cosmology hymn that delineates the cosmic entity (Purusha) and the origin of the universe and society from his sacrificial dismemberment. The varna doctrine present here is not found in previous Vedic writings, indicating the rise of societal stratification.

[36] Mukherjee, S. (1986). *The Book of Yudhisthir: A Study of the Mahabharat of Vyas (Trans.)*. Hyderabad: Sangam Books (India) Pvt. Ltd.

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dominance of one guṇa determines one's natural disposition (*svabhāva*) and thereby one's suitable field of action (*karma*).

In Chapter 18, Krishna delineates the duties of each *varṇa* based on these guṇic tendencies:

- Brāhmaṇas are said to possess *sattva*—knowledge, restraint, and serenity (*śama, dama, tapas*),
- Kṣatriyas exhibit *rajas*—valor, leadership, and assertiveness,
- Vaiśyas engage in agriculture, trade, and wealth generation,
- Śūdras perform service duties, oriented more towards obedience and labor.

These descriptions, found in *Bhagavadgītā* 18.41–44, present a psychological and functional basis for social roles. However, they also run the risk of naturalizing inequality if interpreted deterministically. If *svabhāva* is assumed to be fixed or correlated with social background, the system becomes inherently static. Critics have rightly pointed out that the assumption of natural aptitude may easily morph into caste essentialism, undermining the Gītā's own emphasis on inner realization and spiritual equality.

Modern interpreters like Sri Aurobindo defend this system as an early form of vocational psychology. He writes in *Essays on the Gita* (1922) that "Varṇa, as conceived by the Gita, is an inner law of our nature, not an artificial external imposition".[37] The categories are meant to guide self-discovery, not enforce social hierarchy. However, the gap between ideal and historical interpretation remains a central issue in Gītā studies.

A more charitable interpretation of the Gītā suggests that it advocates a dynamic conception of *varṇa*, wherein one's role in society is determined not by birth, but by temperament and aptitude. In this reading, the Gītā anticipates a meritocratic ethos: individuals must discern and embrace their *Swadharma* in accordance with their innate capacities, regardless of caste identity.

[37] Aurobindo, S. (1922). *Essays on the Gita.* Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

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The appeal of this interpretation lies in its alignment with the Gītā's core teaching that all beings are manifestations of the same divine source (*sarva-bhūtāni ekaṁ*), and that spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) is equally available to all. In *Bhagavadgītā* 9.32, Krishna proclaims:

"Striyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrās te'pi yānti parāṁ gatim."
"Women, merchants, and laborers—even they attain the supreme goal."
This egalitarian gesture is striking. It asserts that access to divine truth and liberation is not mediated by caste or class, but by inner devotion and purity of action. Yet, the contradiction between this universal soteriology and the socially hierarchical structure of *varṇa-dharma* has led to fierce debates. Some scholars, like Wilhelm Halbfass, argue that the Gītā contains both liberating universalism and social conservatism, coexisting without full reconciliation.[38] While Krishna's theology of devotion transcends birth and gender, his theory of Dharma sustains social categories that, in practice, became instruments of exclusion.

4.2 Critical Perspectives: Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Beyond

In modern India, the philosophical ambiguities surrounding *varṇa* and *Swadharma* have prompted both reverence and critique. Mahatma Gandhi regarded the *varṇa* system as a spiritually motivated division of labor, not a hierarchy. He praised the Gītā for grounding varṇa in action and qualities rather than lineage, insisting that caste distinctions should be horizontal, not vertical. In his commentary, *Anasaktiyoga*, Gandhi argued that each individual should perform their Swadharma selflessly, as a form of service (*seva*) to society and God .

However, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's response to the Gītā was sharply critical. For Ambedkar, the idealization of *varṇa* in terms of *guṇa-karma* merely veiled the entrenched inequality of the caste system. In his essay *Philosophy of Hinduism*, Ambedkar asserts that the Gītā, while advocating individual action and self-realization, ultimately upholds the social status quo.[39] He

[38] Halbfass, W. (1988). *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*. SUNY Press.
[39] Ambedkar, B.R. (2003). The Philosophy of Hinduism. In *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3. (pp. 3-92). Maharashtra: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation.

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views Krishna's teaching as an ideological justification for caste-based roles under the guise of divine ordination.[40] Swadharma, in this view, becomes a mechanism of submission rather than liberation—an instrument of conformity to caste-prescribed duties, no matter how oppressive.

Ambedkar's critique strikes at the heart of the Gītā's ambiguity: can a theology of liberation coexist with a sociology of hierarchy? Can Swadharma be truly liberating if its application historically confined individuals to inherited professions and denied them access to education or spiritual authority? These questions remain open, particularly in light of Dalit reinterpretations of Hindu texts in contemporary India.

4.3 Reconciling Swabhava with Social Justice

The Gītā's teaching on *svabhāva* and *Swadharma* can, however, be recuperated for emancipatory purposes if reinterpreted through a non-hereditary lens. If we accept that *svabhāva* arises from psychological disposition rather than caste origin, then Dharma becomes a vehicle for authenticity, not social reproduction. In this model, education, spiritual practice, and introspection become tools for discerning one's true nature, enabling individuals to transcend externally imposed roles.

Moreover, by emphasizing that liberation is possible through the performance of any action—if done without attachment and with devotion—the Gītā democratizes spiritual growth. The path to mokṣa is not the exclusive preserve of the Brāhmaṇa or the renunciate, but is open to all who act in accordance with their nature and without selfish desire.

This reinterpretation has found support among scholars and reformists alike. Radhakrishnan viewed the Gītā as a "gospel of action" that transcends social fixities.[41] Aurobindo took this further, suggesting that the evolutionary impulse of Dharma must lead societies toward greater freedom, self-expression, and collective unity.[42] In both views, the *varṇa* doctrine is seen

[40] Ibid.
[41] Radhakrishnan, S. (1948). *Bhagavadgita.* London: Allen & Unwin.
[42] Aurobindo, S. (1922). *Essays on the Gita.* Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

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not as a rigid classification but as a flexible framework for cultivating *dharma* aligned with one's inner truth and the needs of a just society.

The *Bhagavadgītā's* doctrine of *varṇa*, rooted in *guna* and *karma*, presents both a psychological typology and a social ethic. While its original formulation gestures toward a dynamic and merit-based model of human duty, its historical entanglement with caste essentialism complicates its legacy. Interpreters from Śaṅkara to Gandhi have sought to harmonize the Gītā's ethical and spiritual vision, but the critique posed by Ambedkar and others demands a reckoning with its social implications. The future of *Swadharma*, therefore, depends not only on fidelity to scriptural language but on its reinterpretation in light of justice, dignity, and inner freedom.

5. Swadharma in Modern Indian Thought

The modern reception of the *Bhagavadgītā* in Indian intellectual history is marked by a powerful tension: between reverent interpretation and radical critique, between spiritual idealism and political pragmatism. The concept of *Swadharma* in particular has undergone profound reinterpretation in response to colonialism, nationalism, caste politics, and modern notions of individuality and justice. Thinkers such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, each engage the Gītā's message of *Swadharma*, yet arrive at markedly divergent conclusions about its ethical and political implications. Their readings illuminate the malleability of the Gītā's philosophy and its continuing role as a site of cultural and ideological contestation.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Gītā Rahasya* (1915), written during his imprisonment by British colonial authorities, is one of the earliest major modern commentaries to recast *Swadharma* in explicitly political terms. Tilak rejected ascetic and quietist interpretations of the Gītā, especially those promoted by Advaita Vedāntins who emphasized *jñāna yoga* (the path of knowledge) as

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superior to action.[43] Instead, he championed *karma yoga*—the yoga of action—as the text's true message, grounded in the imperative of fulfilling one's *Swadharma* through engagement in the world.

For Tilak, *Swadharma* meant the performance of one's social and political duties with detachment and selflessness. He saw this as particularly relevant to India's national struggle: Indians, he argued, must awaken to their responsibilities—not renounce the world, but serve society and the nation through righteous action. As he wrote, "The Bhagavad Gita advocates performance of one's duties… even if they are arduous, unpleasant, or even violent, if done in the spirit of righteousness".[44] In Tilak's hands, *Swadharma* becomes a call to arms—not necessarily for war, but for active participation in national life. Tilak's reading thus instrumentalized the Gītā as a political scripture, transforming Arjuna's battlefield crisis into a metaphor for India's collective paralysis under colonialism. In this transformation, *Swadharma* becomes the foundation for anti-colonial ethics and a spiritual mandate for social reform and resistance.

Sri Aurobindo, philosopher-yogi and visionary of Indian renaissance, offered a more metaphysical reading of *Swadharma* in his *Essays on the Gita* (1922). Writing in the aftermath of his political activism and transition into spiritual life, Aurobindo sought to harmonize the Gītā's ethical, psychological, and cosmic dimensions. He saw *Swadharma* not merely as one's social duty, but as the unfolding of one's inner divine potential in harmony with the evolutionary force of the cosmos.[45]

For Aurobindo, the *Gītā* teaches an integral yoga, unifying *karma* (action), *jñāna* (knowledge), and *bhakti* (devotion). Within this triad, *Swadharma* is not fixed or conventional; it is dynamic, shaped by one's growing awareness of self and world. Aurobindo emphasized that

[43] Nadkarni, M.V. (2017). *The Bhagavadgita for the Modern Reader: History, Interpretations and Philosophy.* London & New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
[44] Sukthankar, B.S. (2014). *Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Srimad BhagavadGītā Rahasya.* New Delhi & Chennai: Asian Educational Services.
[45] Robinson, C.A. (2018). *Interpretations of The Bhagavad-Gītā and the Images of the Hindu Traditions: The Song of the Lord (Reprint).* London & New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

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every individual has a divine essence (*ātmā*) that must express itself in the world. When one acts according to one's true *svabhāva*, one aligns with the universal will and participates in the divine play (*līlā*). Thus, Swadharma becomes a spiritual mode of self-actualization. He writes: "To follow one's Swabhava is to allow the Divine within to determine the form and movement of one's life. It is not social conditioning but spiritual expression".[46] In this sense, Aurobindo deconstructs the association of *Swadharma* with caste or inherited role. Instead, he offers a transcendental, psychological view of Dharma—one that sees the self not as a social artifact but as a unique center of divine evolution.

Vivekananda provided a pivotal reinterpretation of the Gītā. He was examining why India was subjugated for a millennium, why there was a lack of resistance, and why the people did not engage in combat. He contended that the Gita was misinterpreted and that its meaning was erroneously perceived as advocating for renunciation, which is inaccurate (Vivekananda, 2013). Vivekananda in his text *Thoughts on Gita,* gave four principles to understand Gita: the first principle is *Klaibyam,* that means Krishna is saying to arjuna after listening to his all pain and suffering that don't behave like impotent, behave like a Kshatriya. What he meant was that "India should arise and fight poverty, ignorance and other such weaknesses among its masses" .[47] Second, *shudram hriday daurvalya* Vivekananda said that Krishna says to Arjuna leave your inferiority complex.[48] Third, Vivekananda said, in India, atheist are those who don't have the self-confidence and he said instead of being dishonoured it is better to die.[49] Fourth, to understand Gita it is necessary to know what has been said about dharma and brahmavidya.[50]

[46] Aurobindo, S. (1922). *Essays on the Gita.* Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
[47] Nadkarni, M.V. (2017). *The Bhagavadgita for the Modern Reader: History, Interpretations and Philosophy.* London & New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
[48] Vivekvani. (2019, February 9). Swami Vivekananda on Bhagavadgita. Vivekvani. Retrieved on August 27, 2025, from https://vivekavani.com/swami-vivekananda-bhagavad-gita/

[49] Nadkarni, M.V. (2017). *The Bhagavadgita for the Modern Reader*
[50] Ibid.

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According to Swami, "Swadharma in the Gītā does not necessarily mean caste duty. In the course of life, we have to perform different roles with corresponding duties, that of a student, teacher, parent, husband, wife, a soldier, a judge, a doctor, a sanitary worker and so on, which fall to our lot sometimes by choices and sometimes without. But, duty of any kind is not to be slighted. A man should not be judged by the nature of his duties, but by the manner in which he does them".[51]

Mahatma Gandhi's interpretation of *Swadharma* and the *Gītā* stands apart in its radical moral interiority. In his reading, *Swadharma* becomes inseparable from *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *satya* (truth), and *anāsakti* (non-attachment). Gandhi saw the battlefield not as a literal endorsement of violence but as a metaphor for the moral battlefield within. In his translation and commentary, *Anasaktiyoga*, Gandhi emphasized the Gītā as a manual for selfless action rooted in inner purity and love of truth.[52]

For Gandhi, *Swadharma* was the honest and humble performance of one's personal responsibilities in service to the divine and to society—without desire for reward, recognition, or power.[53] He believed that even the smallest act, when performed with pure intention, becomes a vehicle for spiritual growth. "True Dharma," he wrote, "lies in the faithful performance of our everyday tasks with love and humility, even if they seem insignificant".[54]

Crucially, Gandhi redefined *Swadharma* in the register of *seva* (selfless service), positioning it against both selfish individualism and violent nationalism. Though he drew inspiration from Tilak and admired Aurobindo's vision, Gandhi firmly rejected the notion that the Gītā authorized war or political violence. In his view, Arjuna's eventual decision to fight is allegorical—not a validation of warfare, but a surrender to divine will. This reading aligned with

[51] Ibid.
[52] Desai, M. (1946). *The Gospel of Self Action or The Gita according to Gandhi.* Ahmedabad: Navajivan Mudranalaya.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.

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Gandhi's own life of disciplined action—fasting, spinning, marching—not for personal salvation, but for ethical integrity and collective justice. In Gandhi's hands, *Swadharma* was simultaneously deeply personal and universally accessible.

In stark contrast to these spiritually affirmative readings, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of India's Constitution and a fierce critic of caste, viewed the *Gītā*'s theory of *Swadharma* as ideologically dangerous. While he acknowledged the Gītā's philosophical subtlety, he believed its teachings had been historically weaponized to perpetuate caste-based oppression. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and his posthumous work *The Philosophy of Hinduism*, Ambedkar argues that *Swadharma*, when tethered to *varṇa*, legitimates inequality under the guise of divine order.

Ambedkar saw the verse *"Śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt"* (*Bhagavadgītā,* 3.35) as deeply problematic. By glorifying the performance of one's "own" duty—even if flawed—and condemning the assumption of another's, the Gītā, in his view, sanctified the caste hierarchy. For Dalits and Shudras, who were historically denied access to education and dignity, *Swadharma* became a cruel theological cage. Ambedkar writes: "The doctrine of Swadharma as interpreted by the caste system is the most vicious form of social tyranny ever conceived".[55]

His critique was not merely sociological, but philosophical. He rejected the deterministic metaphysics of *svabhāva* and *guṇa*, insisting instead on reason, human dignity, and universal rights. For Ambedkar, a just society could not be built on inherited roles or metaphysical essentialism. The Gītā's vision, however internally coherent, was insufficient for the egalitarian and democratic future he envisioned. Later in life, Ambedkar renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism, embracing its ethical rationalism and commitment to equality. His rejection of

[55] Ambedkar, B.R. (2003). The Philosophy of Hinduism. In *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3. (pp. 3-92). Maharashtra: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation.

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Swadharma was thus not just intellectual, but existential—a break with a system he saw as fundamentally unjust.

The divergent readings of *Swadharma* in modern Indian thought reveal its complexity and ideological plasticity. For Tilak, it was a doctrine of national action;[56] for Aurobindo, a spiritual trajectory of becoming;[57] for Gandhi, a moral discipline rooted in nonviolence;[58] and for Ambedkar, a mask for oppression.[59] Each thinker responded to different aspects of the Gītā's philosophical structure and historical legacy, bringing their personal experiences, political commitments, and ethical concerns to bear on its interpretation.

What unites them, however, is the recognition that *Swadharma* is not a static doctrine but a living ethical idea—one that must be reinterpreted across time, circumstance, and social reality. The richness of the *Gītā* lies in its invitation to self-inquiry: *What is my Dharma? What is my true nature? And how can I act in the world in accordance with it?* Yet as these modern thinkers show, answering such questions requires more than scriptural fidelity—it demands engagement with injustice, history, and conscience.

6. Swadharma in Contemporary and Global Ethical Discourse

The ethical model of *Swadharma*, as articulated in the *Bhagavadgītā*, continues to provoke scholarly and philosophical engagement in the 21st century, both within and beyond Indian traditions. While rooted in ancient cosmology, its emphasis on self-aligned action, contextual morality, and the inner determinants of duty invites fresh dialogue with global ethical paradigms. In contemporary discourse, *Swadharma* intersects meaningfully with existentialist notions of

[56] Sukthankar, B.S. (2014). *Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Srimad BhagavadGītā Rahasya.* New Delhi & Chennai: Asian Educational Services.
[57] Aurobindo, S. (1922). *Essays on the Gita.* Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
[58] Desai, M. (1946). *The Gospel of Self Action or The Gita according to Gandhi.* Ahmedabad: Navajivan Mudranalaya.
[59] Ambedkar, B.R. (2003). The Philosophy of Hinduism. In *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3. (pp. 3-92). Maharashtra: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation.

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authenticity, psychological theories of vocation, decolonial critiques of moral universals, and debates about moral pluralism and identity ethics.

The *Gītā*'s framing of *Swadharma* as "better performed poorly than another's well" (*Bhagavadgītā,* 3.35) resonates with the existentialist idea of authentic existence as found in the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. For these thinkers, the individual must define meaning through personal choice in a world lacking fixed certainties. Like Arjuna's battlefield, the existential condition is marked by moral anxiety, the impossibility of absolute guidance, and the need for inner resolution.

Heidegger's notion of *Eigentlichkeit* ("authenticity") parallels the Gītā's conception of action grounded in *svabhāva*. Heidegger contends that to live authentically is to own one's being and act in recognition of one's finite and thrown condition (*Geworfenheit*).[60] Likewise, Krishna insists that acting according to one's *Swadharma*, even amid doubt or imperfection, constitutes genuine spiritual action.

However, existentialism diverges from the Gītā in key respects. Where the Gītā grounds *Swadharma* in a cosmic order (*ṛta*) and metaphysical Self (*Ātman*), existentialists reject such metaphysical underpinnings, emphasizing radical freedom and self-creation. Still, both traditions converge in affirming that ethics must be internalized rather than imposed—a view increasingly relevant in a world of fragmented moral authorities.

In Western moral theory, particularly within deontological and utilitarian traditions, ethics tends to be framed in universalist terms. Kantian ethics prescribes duties derived from the categorical imperative, while utilitarianism calculates actions based on aggregate happiness. In

[60] Heidegger, M. (2001). *Being and Time.* Trans. By John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

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contrast, *Swadharma* offers a pluralist ethic in which right action is relative to the individual's psychological disposition and social context.

Martha Nussbaum (2001), while critical of ethical relativism, acknowledges the necessity of culturally grounded moral reasoning. She notes that "context-sensitive virtue ethics," like those found in Indian and Aristotelian traditions, help mediate between absolutism and cultural specificity. *Swadharma* falls into this category: it resists ethical relativism by grounding duty in *svabhāva*, yet avoids absolutism by rejecting one-size-fits-all prescriptions.[61]

This pluralism aligns *Swadharma* with non-Western models of ethics, including Confucian *li* (ritual propriety) and African *ubuntu* philosophy, which emphasize relational obligations over abstract rules. It challenges liberal frameworks that treat the individual as autonomous and choice-maximizing, offering instead an understanding of personhood as embedded, shaped by social, psychological, and cosmological factors. In an age of ethical globalization, such models may serve as correctives to moral homogenization, reminding us that justice, authenticity, and virtue may require different articulations across cultural terrains.

Postcolonial and decolonial theory introduces an important complication to the romantic embrace of *Swadharma*: who defines one's *svabhāva*, and how is it shaped by structures of domination? Scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Walter Mignolo have shown how colonial systems internalize hierarchies that masquerade as "natural". In this light, *Swadharma* may be problematized as a concept susceptible to ideological capture—where individuals come to identify with roles that actually reinforce subordination.

[61] Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Revised Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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This critique parallels Ambedkar's objection that *Swadharma*, once entangled with *varna*, becomes an instrument of caste control. In the modern world, where identities are often racialized, gendered, and commodified, discerning one's authentic *svabhāva* is fraught. Decolonial ethics urges a deeper interrogation of whether what one perceives as "inner nature" has been constructed by centuries of epistemic violence.

Yet, *Swadharma* can also be read against this grain—as a concept calling for radical introspection and the deconstruction of socially imposed identities. In its original *guna*-based formulation, *Swadharma* offers a potential bridge between inner freedom and outer transformation. When decoupled from caste and essentialism, it supports an ethics of liberation: individuals and communities reclaiming the authority to define their purpose on their own terms.

The Gītā's vision of *Swadharma* also anticipates contemporary psychological theories of vocation and personality. Carl Jung's concept of *individuation*—the lifelong process of becoming one's true self—closely parallels the Gītā's emphasis on acting in accordance with *svabhāva*. Jung regarded personality as an expression of archetypal patterns unfolding uniquely in each person.[62] Likewise, Krishna encourages Arjuna not to adopt an alien code, but to realize his inherent calling—even if fraught with suffering.

However, unlike much of contemporary psychology, the Gītā's view is deeply spiritual. Swadharma is not only a matter of personal fit, but of cosmic alignment and liberation. When one performs one's true duty without desire (*niṣkāma karma*), the Gītā teaches, one becomes free from bondage and egoic distortion. Thus, the psychology of *Swadharma* points beyond therapeutic adjustment toward a deeper transformation of the self.

In applied ethics and leadership studies, *Swadharma* has gained traction as a framework for ethical leadership, responsible citizenship, and sustainable vocation. Scholars such as Satinder

[62] Ladkin,D. Spiller, C. Craze, G. (2016). "The Journey of Individuation: A Jungian alternative to the Theory and Practice of Leading authentically. *Sage Journal*, Vol. 14 (2). https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715016681942

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Dhiman and Muniapan have proposed Gītā-based models of spiritual leadership, wherein leaders align their organizational roles with inner clarity and ethical restraint.[63] Swadharma, in this context, helps avoid both burnout and moral compromise by rooting professional action in integrity and non-attachment.

Moreover, Swadharma encourages a rethinking of work ethics. In contrast to capitalist ideals of performance, profit, and competition, it promotes *anāsakti*—detachment from outcomes. This fosters resilience, ethical boundaries, and intrinsic motivation, attributes increasingly emphasized in 21st-century management theory. The Swadharmic worker is not a careerist but a *karma-yogin*: one who serves their dharma with discipline, care, and mindfulness.

Despite its enduring relevance, *Swadharma* cannot be uncritically universalized. Its applicability depends on how its core premises—*svabhāva*, *karma*, and *guna*—are interpreted. When treated as static or essentialist, the model risks reproducing rigid identities. But when viewed dynamically—as a philosophy of becoming—it provides a supple framework for ethical action in a pluralist, globalized world.

In interfaith ethics, *Swadharma* offers a dialogical alternative to rigid moral absolutism. It affirms moral diversity without collapsing into relativism. In secular contexts, it can be translated into the language of vocation, responsibility, and meaning-making. In activist and ecological frameworks, *Swadharma* may inspire localized, embedded models of action that honor cultural knowledge and psychological wholeness.

As the world faces unprecedented ethical challenges—climate crisis, social polarization, digital alienation—the Gītā's invitation to act in accordance with inner truth, beyond ego and reward, holds profound promise. *Swadharma*, as an existential ethic of duty without desire, offers

[63] Muniapan, B. & Satinder, D. (2014). "Spirituality in Management from the Bhagavad Gītā." In *Spirituality and Sustainability*. Springer.

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not easy answers but a compass: inwardly anchored, outwardly responsible, and spiritually grounded.

7. Conclusion

The doctrine of *Swadharma*, as articulated in the *Bhagavadgītā*, stands as one of the most profound and multifaceted contributions to Indian ethical philosophy. It reflects a vision of duty that is not merely institutional or societal but deeply personal, psychological, and spiritual. Situated at the confluence of metaphysical cosmology and practical ethics, *Swadharma* challenges its interpreters to consider action as a vehicle not only for social order but for self-realization and liberation.

Across the preceding sections, this study has examined *Swadharma* in its original textual context, in relation to *varṇa*, and in its dynamic interpretations by modern thinkers. In the *Gītā*, Krishna's insistence that "better is one's own Dharma, even if imperfect" (*Bhagavadgītā,* 3.35) affirms that moral action must be grounded in *svabhāva*—the intrinsic constitution of the self. This represents a fundamental shift from external duty (as ritual obligation or caste prescription) to an ethic of existential authenticity and spiritual discipline. The performance of *Swadharma*, when undertaken without attachment to outcomes, becomes a form of *yoga*, an inward path to transcendence through action.

Yet the concept is not without tension. The *Gītā*'s linkage of *Swadharma* to *varṇa*—and its ambiguous relationship to caste—raises pressing ethical and political questions. As explored in Section 4, the philosophical ideal of a *guna-karma*-based social order has historically been misappropriated into rigid, hereditary structures that contradict the very fluidity and moral introspection the Gītā elsewhere advocates. This tension came under critical scrutiny from B. R. Ambedkar, whose rejection of *Swadharma* as a legitimizing force for caste oppression remains a pivotal counterpoint in the ongoing interpretive history of the text.

The modern Indian thinkers examined—Tilak, Aurobindo, Gandhi, Vivekananda and Ambedkar—each reimagined *Swadharma* in light of their philosophical, political, and spiritual

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commitments. For Tilak, it became a call to national duty and moral courage (Sukthankar, 2014); for Aurobindo, an instrument of cosmic evolution and inner growth (Aurobindo, 1922); for Gandhi, a principle of moral nonviolence and humility (Desai, 1946); and for Ambedkar, a doctrine to be rejected unless radically severed from caste ideology (Ambedkar, 2003). These diverse interpretations underscore the Gītā's elasticity and enduring relevance—its ability to support both radical liberation and conservative legitimation, depending on its framing.

In contemporary global ethics, *Swadharma* offers an intriguing alternative to dominant moral paradigms. Its grounding in *svabhāva* opens dialogue with existentialist ideas of authenticity and individuation, while its emphasis on situated action challenges universalist frameworks that ignore context and character. Moreover, its compatibility with pluralist, decolonial, and psychological models of vocation allows *Swadharma* to be fruitfully reinterpreted in fields ranging from leadership studies to spiritual psychology.

However, the usefulness of *Swadharma* in the modern world depends on one crucial caveat: it must be disentangled from essentialism. If *svabhāva* is treated as fixed or socially assigned, the doctrine risks entrenching identity and curtailing freedom. If, instead, *Swadharma* is seen as a dynamic, evolving response to one's inner truth and social context, it becomes a vital ethical principle for cultivating responsibility, resilience, and moral clarity in a fragmented world.

In conclusion, *Swadharma* stands not as a doctrine to be blindly followed but as a reflective principle to be continuously reinterpreted. Its deepest value lies not in its prescriptive force, but in its question: *What is the right action for me, here, now, in accordance with my nature and my truth?* This is not a question the *Gītā* answers definitively—it is one it poses with enduring urgency. And it is precisely in this tension between certainty and choice, role and freedom, action and detachment, that the ethical and philosophical richness of *Swadharma* continues to unfold.