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## **AN INTERPRETIVE PROTOTYPE FROM THE BHAGAVAD GITA: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF HARIBAKTH'S *AKSARA BHAGAVAD GITA***

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### **Abstract**

Haribakth's *Aksara Bhagavad Gita* is an unconventional and unorthodox book on the *Bhagavad Gita*. An analysis and its process rather than translation, commentary or purport distinguishes this book from any other on the subject. It simplifies the process of analysis and interpretation by identifying slokas from the Gita which has properties of patterns which are used to generalize a principle underlying the sloka. This generalized principle is termed parameter used in interpreting any slokas or understanding any incident, phenomenon, circumstance, dilemma, etc. in Vedic history or in real life. Based on their nature three elements namely Constants, Variables and dependent variable/ dependent constants are identified. These parameters are grouped according to their functions/ properties and listed below.

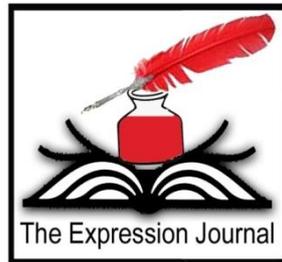
- Qualifier parameter
- Existential parameter
- Principle enunciating parameter
- Guiding parameter
- Derivative parameter
- Implied parameter

With the above, an interpretation prototype is built, which can be used to interpret any scripture /ideology/ philosophy. The Parameters, its usage, its functions, what it does, effect of usage/non-usage of parameters etc. form the subject matter of the book. The logic behind such identification and its justification with examples form the summum bonum of book. Dialog format within a story is adapted to make the difficult concepts intelligible and appreciable.

### **Keywords**

Hermeneutics, Aksara, Parameters, Paradigm, Gita, Bhagavad, Krishna, Omni-Jury.

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India has its unique place in the whole world for its specialty and geographic allocation and religious values. It is the country that has shown the most intrinsic and moral values. It has never invaded any country in its rich history of 100000 plus years. It is stated that the Persian invaders converted it into Hindu. The Hindi name 'Hindustan' is a combination of "Sidhu" and "Hindu". As it is the land of the Hindus, it is known as Hindustan. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism are the four religions that originated from India and are now followed by 24% of the world population. Hinduism can be called the world's oldest religion having its roots around 4000 years back and it has now nine hundred million followers. Sivananda writes about it:

The Bhagavad Gita was originally not a standalone text, but was rather a dialogue embedded within a much larger epic, the Mahabharata....The Bhagavad Gita has been variously dated from 300 BCE to 300 CE, although current estimates tend toward the turn of the millennia or a bit earlier. While the epic itself is undoubtedly quite ancient in its earliest portions, it is also a composite text. Some scholars opine that It is a later addition written in response to the Buddhists, whose message of renunciation is rejected by the divine charioteer Krishna. (Sivananda 2000)

Hinduism is the third-largest religion after Christianity and Islam. Around 95% of the world's Hindus live in India. There is no clear evidence of how it was originated but it embraces the ideas of many religions. It is generally called a "way of life" or "a family of religions". Hindus believe in *samskara* or rituals i.e. the cycle of life, death, rebirth, the existence of an absolute soul, and incarnation. Hindus believe that their thought and action determine their present and future. They believe in the principles of *karma* (action) and *dharma* (religion). Dr. K.

Parameswaran writes that "It is very difficult to assess the full importance of a work that is known as Bhagavad Gita" (Parameswaran 230).

*The Bhagavad-Gita* or the *Song of God* is the divine discourse between Arjuna and Lord Krishna. It presents the most transcendental knowledge of the most profound topic related to human life. When the young and brave warrior Arjuna of the royal Pandava family was in the state of dilemma as to how to kill his cousins, uncles, and religious teachers in the battle, Lord Krishna told him that human beings are mortal and He told Arjuna how the universe operates and what is the best approach to human life. Haresh Bakshi in his *Shrimad-Bhagavad Gita* rightly declares that Arjuna symbolizes the entire human race in conflict as to (i) the right action (ii) real human nature and (iii) the means for perfection of action in life. These conflicts make the Gita relevant in today's world suffering from destructive forces of ego, lust, greed, and ignorance. These forces have become stronger over time, and so the relevance of the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* has, in fact, increased with time. Through the themes of the Gita, Krishna addresses the fundamental causes of human suffering, and methods of transformation. He does so by expounding the eternal truths. At the time when the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna took place, there were no religions per se. Therefore, the Gita is truly relevant for everyone at all times. It is five thousand years old and yet quite contemporary. Bhavna Sharma and M. Ramachandran write that:

To motivate him the Bhagavad Gita is preached on the battlefield Kurukshetra by Lord Krishna to Arjun as a counseling to do his duty while a multitude of warriors stood by waiting Krishna gave education to perform his duty as a prince, as a warrior, as a righteous man to fight against evil and restore peace and order. (10570).

It is not tactful on the part of Arjuna to desist from waging war against his close relatives. The story has been written in an allegorical style and the story narrates about the action and non-action of human beings. Arjuna thinks why he should bother to do anything in the wretched world. *The Bhagavad-Gita* teaches us a lesson that everything exists in the world for a reason. Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that he cannot avoid his karma to fight in the battle whosoever be his enemy. All this has been conveyed through the debates in this book. Two fictional characters of this book are Haripriya, an Indian, and Christina, an American. Haripriya and Sudipta argue over different aspects of the *Bhagavad Gita* in Sri Venkateshwara Vedic University, Tirupati. Both the girls are the part of Gita Study Group. During the course of the meeting of the group, a debate ensues as to which version of the Gita is correct and which is wrong and the reasons thereof. A debate is arranged and presided by Justice Parthasarathy, to determine this issue. Everyone had a specific bias towards her ilk and negative bias against other's interpretations, with each quoting their Guru and citing from his teachings in support of their claims. Each of them also made claims that their version is correct to the exclusion of other's interpretation and is in tune with God's intentions. If Guru's words were the final authority to determine correctness, the next question arises, which Guru is correct?

This made the task of Justice Parthasarathy an uphill one. The conservative ones ignored their internal differences amongst themselves and their ideology and formed the “Dharma Rakshak’ group headed by Sudipta claiming that the version of their Guru/s was authoritative and authentic. Christina too harbored such doubts in her mind who represents Arjuna and it is Haripriya, an embodiment of Lord Krishna who dispels the layers of doubts from Christina's mind. Haripriya who leads the debate states that Bhagavad Gita is complete knowledge, “It is a characteristic of God, beginning-less, middle-less, and endless, similarly too it is with Gita” (Haribakth 259). It needs to be understood as understood by Arjuna and willed by the Lord. Lord Krishna told Arjuna that everything in the world is governed by him.

The entire world is pervaded by Me (BG 9:4). (Haribakth 209)

I know all, the past, present, and future (BG 7:26) (Haribakth 210)

Haribakth writes in his book, “TG: God is absolute. It is the voice of God.

Many Acharyas have offered commentaries on the Gita to bring out the true meaning of the Gita, to us lesser mortals” (149).

This called for interpretative skills. This skill of Haripriya is in full display during the entire course of debate occurring from chapter eleven to chapter twenty-nine. The essence of how Haripriya interpreted the slokas, the rationale behind such interpretation, the derivation of authority for such interpretation, and case studies for such interpretation are shared in this book. It is the author Haribakth who is speaking through Haripriya, sharing the results of his research, and proposing the new interpretative model. The Author has so generalized the rules of interpretation such that it holds good for interpreting any scripture, philosophy, or religion. The results of such interpretation can be seen very prominently, because it includes all schools of thought, has a self-checker, and doesn't become obsolete as it is dynamic. This dynamic nature of the interpretative model is achieved by introducing the concept of variables, constants, and dependent variables. This approach is revolutionary and could act as a precursor to further research in the area.

The *Bhagavad Gita* has different types of sentences as does any other scripture or literature. These types are listed below. The type of sentence has a bearing on the interpretation and its effects. The response to each type of statement too differs. An interrogative type of sentence gets an answer as a response. Instructive sentences should be responded to with action. This action or non-action has wide-ranging ramifications affecting not just the responder but the community and humanity at large. A good example is a call to Jihad. How to interpret such sentences without harming the society and also without belittling the scripture or its author divine or otherwise is one of the knots of interpretation which this book unties.

- Statement of facts
- Interrogative statements and questions
- Reference to statement of facts
- Instructions
- Parameters

- Benchmarks/conclusions to the correctness of our perception
- Descriptions (Haribakth 469)

The *AKsara Bhagavad Gita* has been written in the form of a conversation between a rival group of students, with the traditional group represented by Sudipta and Haripriya representing the unorthodox and the radical in outlook. This book tells about the role and importance of Guru though not necessarily indispensable. Haribakth gives the illustration of Guru Dronacharya who refused to impart education to Ekalavya due to his love for Arjuna but citing Ekalavya's caste as an excuse. But Ekalavya made a statue of Dronacharya and got initiated into the mysteries of archery from the Guru personified in the form of a statue.

*The Bhagavad-Gita* is a great holy book of the Hindus which teaches the Hindus to do their duty on time. If Arjuna would have become adamant about his decision, he would have learnt nothing. He could see the *Virat Swaroop* of Shri Krishna only after following him. *The Bhagavad-Gita* directs that there are three constituents of human nature: Sattva (light), Rajas (fire), and Tamas (darkness). A Rajas life remains full of work, no rest, a lot of money, and temptation for more money, giving and attaining, etc. Tamas life is full of ignorance, inertia, and care while the Sattva is the life of light, a life of knowledge and enlightenment. Its importance has been highlighted by Haribakth by identifying it as one of the parameters.

To counter these feelings of inadequacy that are based on focusing on others and seeking their approval, *The Gita* teaches that you can achieve a state where you don't need any external commendation to make you feel right; you know you are of real worth. In this way, the book is a brilliant antidote to the feelings of smallness and insignificance that can swamp even the most confident in modern life.

Haribakth has certain motives in writing the *AKsara Bhagavad Gita*. He confides that the Lord inspired him to write this book. It wasn't inspiration but the need of the hour to arrest mayhem due to communal disharmony and divisive tendencies caused by wrongful interpretation of scriptures. The *Aksara Bhagavad Gita* does not have the translation of the original version of the *Bhagavad Gita*. This book has been written based on concepts that are observable or verifiable. Haribakth writes that Gita works as a spiritual guru to us. He writes, "Yes, we too learn from Gita through the medium of Guru" (152). He writes that the Gita is the most important book for Hindus. Dr. J.V. Jeeva and L. Fenci Mary Grace remark:

*The Bhagavad Gita* gives clarity to life. One must train the mind to engage in worldly activities, and at the same time must be able to withdraw the mind inwards whenever needed. Our mainstream education does not give guidance to survive in times of difficulties and depression. It only gives knowledge about the external factors in life. *The Bhagavad Gita* helps the seeker to search for the real treasure within oneself. If one studies *The Bhagavad Gita* along with his mainstream education, then surely it will transform him into an able and courageous person who can help many others to reach that state. (23)

There is a wonderful chapter in the *AKsara Bhagavad Gita* entitled “Earth Dukhalaya: Why Men Commit Sins” in which human karmas and their consequences have been depicted in a detailed manner. All the living beings on this planet are afflicted by sorrows and thus, this earth becomes a prison house of miseries. It depicts how “The very nature of the Earth is to give misery” (Haribakth 263). The human miseries have been mentioned at five places in *Aksara Bhagavad Gita*. There is a beautiful hymn in the *Bhagavad Gita* how human beings can mitigate their sorrows in few simple efforts, “Being temperate in eating and recreation, balanced in work, and regulated in sleep mitigates all sorrows (BG 6.17). When a human being reaches the top of the attainment, even the greatest calamity cannot ruffle a person, he becomes so strong and develops his endurance. *Aksara Bhagavad Gita* narrates how human sorrows and joys have different meanings in different situations. The *AKsara Bhagavad Gita* narrates that “Joy and sorrow in the mundane world are temporary. They have an end. The book distinguishes between the material and spiritual. The joy in the spiritual world is permanent”....That which is permanent is spiritual and which is not is mundane” (Haribakth 268).

The *AKsara Bhagavad Gita* gives a meaningful lesson to human beings that we should do only good deeds which will give us rewards in the long run. Haripriya tells during arguments that “It is stated fact that good deeds direct men to heaven. Their stay herein is determined by the quantum of credit accrued” (Haribakth 269).

The *Aksara Bhagavad Gita* narrates how people are not born on the earth to undergo punishments or to enjoy happiness, instead, they come on the earth to reap the rewards of their actions, “...they are not undergoing punishment, but reaping the consequences of their actions” (Haribakth 269). When human beings dedicate themselves to Lord Krishna and do their actions, then they will be free from their sins, “Dedicate all your works to Me. By doing so, you will be freed from the bondage of good and bad results. You will be liberated and will reach Me” (BG 9.28). In the answer to how the “Earth is Dukhalaya”, *AKsara Bhagavad Gita* narrates, “People are born on to bear the consequences of their sins or merits” (Haribakth 275) and “non-performance of duties cause accrual of sin” (Haribakth 276).

This is a perfect self-help book because it is not scholarly or complicated but remains a source of profound wisdom, offering a path to the steadiness of mind and joy in one's work that could not be more relevant amid the speed and pressure of life in the 21st century.

Bhavna Sharma and M. Ramachandran observe that “One of the greatest contributions of India to the world is Holy Gita” (10570). It is a unique book that teaches us how to maintain a balanced life between the materialistic world and the divine spheres: Swami Sadashiva Tirtha in his *Bhagavad Gita for Modern Times: Secrets to Attaining Peace and Harmony* states thus:

*Bhagavad Gita* discusses the celebration of the Divine bliss of God as it applies to a personal relationship with God in each person's daily life. How does a sincere person balance worldly and Divine spheres? How can one be

a helpful servant in the midst of obstacles and stresses? This is one of the great values of the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* that remains as relevant today as in ancient times. (1-2)

Bimal Krishna Matilal in his essay "Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics" says that, "The moral dilemmas presented in the *Mahabharata* were in some sense universal, for most of them can be effectively used even today to illustrate arguments in moral philosophy" (5).

The *AKsara Bhagavad Gita* gives the message about the universality of God who is the defender of good people and the destroyer of the sinners. The message being conveyed through this book is that different people worship different gods differently in different places but ultimately, they are worshipping the same omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient God. This book gives a message that the *Bhagavad Gita* is not meant for a particular group of people, it is for each and everyone to whatever religion he/she may belong. The other versions of the *Bhagavad Gita* offer word-to-word translations with commentaries but the *AKsara Bhagavad Gita* is quite different in this context because all claims have been backed with the rationale behind such interpretation, based on logic and verifiable by the user. It derives Authority from the *Gita* itself. There are some instances where it seems that this book is being argued in the real court.

This book is a necessary read for the questioning and thinking minds who are believers or agnostics with an open mind but unable to reconcile the books with existing reality. This is due to the fallacies in their thinking. Hermeneuticians, researchers, and theologians would rewire their thinking so as to reconcile reality with scriptures, after reading this book. Humanity would be poorer without this book. Likewise, any library is incomplete without this book adorning its shelf.

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