

**EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE THROUGH THE BHAGAVAD-GITA FOR  
CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

Gayathri,N Asst. Prof. (Sr.) and

Dr.Meenakshi,K Asso. Prof.

School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore – 632014, Tamilnadu,  
India

**ABSTRACT:**

*Let's not forget that the little emotions are the great captains of our lives and we obey them without realizing it. ~Vincent Van Gogh, 1889.*

“Emotions are internal events that coordinate many psychological subsystems including physiological responses, cognitions and conscious awareness [7]. Emotions are instinctive which were there with man even before he evolved into what he is today. When man evolved from apes he developed the rational brain which distinguishes him from other animals. This rational brain has helped him to understand and analyze his emotions and given him an edge over the others. But many a time it can be seen that he sadly fails to use his rational brain against the emotional one. It is often rationalization in retrospection. There is an emotional outburst first and the analysis later – often too late for redemption. Thus it can be said that emotions define a person.

*Mano matram jagat; mano kalpitam jagat. (“the world is as the mind sees and feels it; the world is as the mind thinks of it’.[10]*

The recent years has witnessed the immense scope and relevance of ‘Emotional Intelligence’ (EI) in every realm of life. Research abounds in proving the role of EI in bridging the gap between the successful and the talented, but not so successful people. This paper approaches EI from a different perspective – from the perspective of an Indian mind, which is trained and groomed to perceive emotions as the root cause of all evils. The Bhagavad-Gita, which is considered the fifth Veda, talks about not just emotional intelligence, but goes a step forward to discuss emotional stability. The lessons that we can take from this time tested book are innumerable and this paper adds a drop to the ocean by finding effective measures for conflict resolution.

**Key words:** Emotional Intelligence; Conflict management; Bhagavad-Gita

## Emotional Intelligence through the Bhagavad-Gita for conflict resolution

### Introduction

*Let's not forget that the little emotions are the great captains of our lives and we obey them without realizing it. ~Vincent Van Gogh, 1889.*

Emotions are those that define a person. Emotions shape a man's destiny and define the way he perceives life. As the famous Sanskrit saying goes –

*Mano Matram Jagat; Mano Kalpitam Jagat - ("the world is as the mind sees and feels it; the world is as the mind thinks of it"[10].*

A definition of emotion in a dictionary will describe it as a state of feeling involving thoughts, physiological changes, and an outward expression or behavior but, theologians, psychologists, philosophers, scientists and researchers have developed and are still bringing in various theories which attempt to fathom its bottomless expanse of intrigue and fascination. While theologians study emotions or rather control of emotions as means of realizing the Supreme Being, the psychologists and sociologists have discussed emotions against their significance to the individual and society and the natural scientists like physiologists are interested in the origin, evolution and functions of emotions.

Human beings are a complex species of emotions and reason. While reasoning enables them to judge things with mathematical precision, emotions help them to understand and empathize which make them 'human'. Traditionally it was believed and accepted that people with high reasoning skills and a sound logical bend of mind were more intelligent. The IQ tests that were designed to ascertain a person's intelligence and competency tested only the reasoning and the logical aptitude of the person. As Woodworth [13] suggested, IQ tests were considered effective when they tested a person being 'not' afraid or angry or inquisitive over things that aroused emotions. Emotions were regarded as being disruptive in nature that hindered a person's thought process. Erasmus of Rotterdam, a sixteenth century humanist proclaimed:

"Jupiter has bestowed far more passion than reason – you could calculate the ratio as 24 to one. He set up two raging tyrants in opposition to Reason's solitary power: anger and lust. How far can reason prevail against the combined forces of these two, the common life of man makes quite clear." [3]

Thus, emotions were always seen as being disruptive. Reigning in the power of emotions and channelizing them in the right path had always been a challenging task. The recent theory of 'Emotional Intelligence' (EI) brings to the forefront the positive power of emotions which was hitherto unexplored. It brings in the possibility of exploiting this power to the maximum, in every sphere of life. This paper explores the possibility of emotional intelligence helping in conflict resolution. It also brings in the angle of taking lessons from the Bhagavad-Gita, the

fifth Veda, on how an emotionally intelligent person conducts himself during conflicting situations. Before analyzing the EI as it is discussed in the Bhagavad-Gita, an understanding of the theory as it is conceptualized in the west, is imperative. The following literature review discusses briefly the three major models of emotional intelligence and their contribution to the field.

### **Literature Review**

'Intelligence' has traditionally been associated with cognitive abilities such as memory and problem solving [2]. However, this belief was challenged upon as early as the 1930's when Thorndike spoke about 'Social Intelligence' – "an ability to understand men and women, boys and girls – to act wisely in human relations" [9]. This was followed by David Wechsler in 1940 as he brought attention to the 'non-intellective' elements having equal significance as the 'intellective' elements in predicting a person's success in life [2]. Though unfortunately these concepts were not given serious thought and research, interest in these areas was revived with Howard Gardner's theory of 'Multiple Intelligence' in 1983. By 1990, Peter Salovey and John Mayer two professors of psychology from Yale University and University of Hampshire respectively, introduced the concept of 'Emotional Intelligence'. They coined the term 'Emotional Intelligence' [11, 3] and presented it as a subset of social intelligence [6]. They defined EI as an – "ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and use this information to guide one's thinking and action" [6, 5] and went ahead distinguishing EI from other types of intelligences and presented a framework, a set of skills they believed that helped people in regulating emotions – in one's own self and others.

Mayer and Salovey's four branch model understands emotional intelligence as a cognitive ability and presents the four levels through which a person becomes emotionally intelligent. The first step is emotional perception – an ability to be self-aware of emotions and to express them accurately. When a person is aware of the emotions he is experiencing, he moves on to the next level – emotional assimilation – to distinguish between the different emotions he is undergoing and also identify those emotions that affect his thought process. This understanding leads him to – emotional understanding – an ability to understand complex emotions and also to recognize the transition from one emotion to another. By then he becomes adept in dealing with his emotions and thus is able to manage his emotions – to connect or disconnect from any emotion at any given situation. This gives him complete control over his impulses and thus is able to think, analyze and behave rationally in any situation. The entire process is purely an intellectual procedure. Emotions are understood and controlled through intellectual prowess. In contrast, Reuven Bar-On and Goleman propose the mixed ability models which include certain personality traits as well. Bar-On's [1] model of emotional intelligence relates to the potential for performance and success, rather than performance or success itself, and is considered process-oriented rather than outcome-oriented. It strives to identify in a person the latent capability of being emotionally intelligent. His model outlines five components – intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, stress

management, and general mood components [1]. They are similar to Mayer and Salovey's model on emotional self awareness, self control, self expression, and empathy, but along with these aspects, Bar-On includes reality testing, - the ability to assess the relation between the emotionally experienced and the actual nature of an object – stress tolerance, and the strength to stay happy and optimistic in the face of adversity. Goleman's model deviates slightly as he includes organizational awareness, leadership and teamwork and collaboration along with self awareness, self control and empathy, as his focus is on workplace success.

Daniel Goleman's bestseller 'Emotional Intelligence – Why it can matter more than IQ?' has shaken and questioned the conventional belief that a person with a better IQ (Intelligent Quotient) is more successful in all his endeavors. This has led to immense research on this theory and has been established that EI is as important as IQ or in certain situations more important than IQ to succeed in any endeavor. It has been researched and proved that EI is vital for a person's success in any sphere of life – academic or corporate. But the fact remains that all this research is in its early stages of conception, whereas the Bhagavad-Gita (also referred to as the 'Gita') stands tall as an authority on the importance of controlling and channelizing the emotions in the right path. While the theory of EI is still at a stage wherein the power of emotions and the necessity to control them are realized, it has to come a long way in finding the means for achieving its goal. The advocates of the theory insist on self awareness and self control of a person's emotional responses, but have not come out with an effective means for regulating the emotional side of a person. The experts are still charting out effective tests to gauge the EI of a person. They are still diagnosing the malady whereas the Bhagavad-Gita, on the other hand has prescribed effective medicines for the problem. Lord Krishna shows us three different paths which eventually lead us to emotional stability – the Bhakti Yoga, the Gnana Yoga and the Karma Yoga. Through devotion (Bhakti), knowledge (Gnana) and duty (Karma), one can realize the supreme truth and attain bliss, the never ending state of happiness. Such a person who traverses the path of any of these options enables himself to anchor his thoughts and actions on the Supreme Being – the Paramatma – is unperturbed by neither pleasure nor pain, and treats them equally ('samadhukka sukam dheeram'), and accepts the trials and tribulations with an equanimity of mind. He thus becomes the 'Sthithapragnya' – a person of steady intellect. How does one attain this state? The 'Gita' discusses in detail the factors that lead the mind astray and the means of controlling it as well.

### **The Methodology:**

The paper takes on a two dimensional approach, as it first asserts the theory of emotional intelligence as discussed in the Bhagavad-Gita and based on this, moves on to explore how an emotionally intelligent person is better equipped to face any conflicting situation, be it in life or in his workplace. It is a theoretical approach. Emphasis on emotional intelligence had been there in India as early as in the period of Bhagavad-Gita and the Indian philosophers saw it as a means to realizing one's self. This paper brings out the theory of EI through the eyes of

Bhagavad-Gita and then explores the practicality of applying the concept of emotional intelligence as discussed in the Bhagavad-Gita, in resolving conflicts.

### **Emotional Intelligence and Bhagavad-Gita**

*Krodhadhbhavathi sammohah sammohathsmrthivibhramah*

*Smrthibhramshadbuddhinasho buddhinashathpranashyathi*

(Bhagavad-Gita, Ch. II, verse 66)

Attachment is the root of all misery, says the 'Gita'. Attachment leads to desire; desire when not fulfilled leads to anger; anger to delusion; delusion to indiscriminate action which in turn leads a man to his ruin. Attachment is the web that snares a person in this materialistic world which is not real. This world is nothing but an illusion or 'Maya' which blinds a person and prevents him from realizing the Supreme Being. A person who has realized this eternal truth severs his attachment with this 'unreal' world - 'unreal' because, nothing in this world is permanent. It is constantly changing. If this world is unreal, then what is 'real'? The 'Atman' or the soul which is the embodiment of the Supreme Being is the 'real', the unchanging and the permanent. A sthithapragya has the knowledge that distinguishes between the 'real' (the permanent; the Atman or the soul) and the 'unreal' (the impermanent). He has firmly anchored himself in the realization of this immovable, unchangeable, indestructible 'self' or the 'Atman'. This enables him to detach himself from this 'unreal' world and steer his thoughts towards the 'real', the Atman. But this detachment is not renunciation. Detachment does not mean distancing oneself or renouncing one's duties, rather distancing oneself from the outcome or the fruits of one's labour. When a person is detached, he is able to think clearly which in turn enables him to act wisely. Thus, while attachment is the root cause of all evils, detachment is the answer to many of the maladies that shroud mankind. But, where does the theory of EI fit in here? As mentioned earlier, the lessons of Bhagavad-Gita are a prescription to the malady and not a diagnosis. Krishna has already diagnosed the problem Arjuna faces and the entire text is with the sole purpose of rejuvenating and strengthening him from within.

At the threshold of the great Kurukshetra war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, Arjuna, flounders. He hesitates to face his cousins, his guru and the most respected grandsire Bhishma. Arjuna is unable to fight not because he lacks the courage or the expertise but because he lacked the emotional stability to stay firm in the face of a crisis. His weakness is a testimony to the importance of emotional intelligence because none of his skills as a warrior helped him in facing his opponents, when he was not emotionally strong. When he says that he will not fight, it is not because he shuns violence; it is not the first time he is facing a battle. The reason for his confusion is his attachment - his attachment to his kith and kin. Thus we see that an emotionally weak person falters and the reason for this emotional instability is attachment. The Bhagavad-Gita, by addressing this problem establishes itself as an authority on giving an effective answer to the challenge of reigning in the all powerful

emotions in a person which in turn strengthens him from within to face any kind of situation and come out successful.

### **The Bhagavad-Gita for Conflict Resolution**

If a conflict can be defined as two opposing forces which create confusion and strain in a person, who are those who face conflicting situations in life? Why is it that only Arjuna faces the dilemma of whether to fight or not, when neither Duryodhana nor Yudhishtira have any second thoughts about the war? Osho [8] in his book 'The Inner war and peace' explains beautifully how conflict is a blessing; how only persons who can 'think' face conflict. When Osho quotes Nietzsche - "... Unfortunate will be the day when man will be satisfied with just being a man", he exemplifies men who face an inner conflict, because, this conflict is the fire which purifies them and elevates them to the state of godliness. Thus, conflict is a blessing. It is not to be confused with indecisiveness such as suffered by a Hamlet who fails to take action against his mother and stepfather even after knowing their involvement in his father's murder, but a state of bewilderment that comes before enlightenment. That is, if the person chooses to ask the right questions to the right person to dispel the confusion engulfing his thoughts. Arjuna is in such a state and he is fortunate enough to have Krishna to answer his queries but, he is also humble enough to seek an explanation. On the other hand, Duryodhana has no such qualms about fighting his brethren. The reason being as Osho says, he is still in the mindset of an animal which does not pause to think before acting. He can be termed as a 'thoughtless' person. The state Arjuna is in can be said as a bridge that leads to realization.

Conflict is a blessing provided the person is able to choose the right path. Not everybody is fortunate to have Krishna by their side at times of difficulty, but, they do have the 'Gita' which serves as a beacon light to all those who grope in the darkness of confusion and indecisiveness. It gives a simple but a very effective solution 'Do your Duty'. This seemingly uncomplicated idea is the key to the most complicated, intriguing problems of life. How does a person know what his duty is? How does doing one's duty show the way through the darkness of confusion?

*Karmanyevadhikarasthe maphaleshu kadhachana*

*Ma karmaphalahedhurbuh ma the sangosthvakarmani*

(Bhagavad-Gita, Ch. II, verse 47)

The duty of a person says 'Gita', is to act according to his dharma. Upholding this dharma of his without getting attached to the fruits of his action is the best way to tackle any conflicting situation. One should not claim the fruits of his actions because the moment he does that, he is bound. This bondage will cloud his sense of right and wrong and thus lead him to misery. Thus, negating or ignoring the fruits of one's actions, one should focus on one's duty alone. When a person firmly anchors himself to this principle he is not swayed by

any confusion or dilemma. His mind is clear; his judgment is not muddled; he takes the right decisions; he succeeds in life.

How does one do his duty? What are the governing rules? Let us take the example of Karna (from Mahabharata) and Kumbakarna (from Ramayana). They are classic examples of men who uphold their dharma in the face of extreme adversity. Kumbakarna, Ravana's (the king of Lanka who abducted Rama's wife Sita) brother was no less a righteous person than Vibhishana (another brother of Ravana) who condemned Ravana's act of abducting Sita. While Vibhishana leaves Ravana and takes refuge in Rama, Kumbakarna stays with his brother Ravana till the end. Now, does this mean that Kumbakarna supports evil? No, because, he was merely upholding his dharma as a brother who owes his support to Ravana and his dharma as a subject of the kingdom who owes his allegiance to his king. He does advise Ravana to give back Sita to her husband and tries to make him understand the severity of his actions which will ruin him and all those with him. But once he fails to make Ravana understand, he does not think twice and fights for his brother, knowing that defeat and death were certain. The consequences did not perturb him. This selfless action of Kumbakarna has earned a place for him in our hearts whereas Vibhishana fails to impress us though he stood on the side of righteousness. Similarly, Karna stands by his dharma of friendship and loyalty to the one who helped him during a crisis and supports Duryodhana till the end. Even when Krishna reveals the secret of his birth and tells him that he is the eldest son of Kunti he remains steadfast. He too, like Kumbakarna had no misconceptions about Duryodhana's conduct. He knew for certain that the war against Pandavas was not going to be victorious. Still, he sticks on to his dharma and lends unstinting support to Duryodhana. Thus, it becomes clear that once a person does not attach himself to the fruits of his action, he is able to decide and take the appropriate decision even at the face of most trying situations.

## Conclusion

In spite of such a wealth of information and guidance from our ancient literature, it is a pity that people run behind theories given by the western culture. It is unfortunate and disheartening that the Indian philosophy which covers and offers solution to every conceivable challenge is not as popular as the western philosophy. Maybe, because when the western philosophy and theories tackle with tangible factors of life, the Indian philosophy focuses on intangible factors like the 'Self' and the 'Atman'. It is for the individual to seek and realize. Though he can share his experiences with others, it is a question of either faith or practical experience. Also, once a person attains that state of wisdom which transcends the problems of this materialistic world, an unexplainable peace and serenity descends on him that he realizes the futility of words. Thus, it becomes the prerogative of every individual to search for and obtain that permanent state of bliss and stand above the concerns of this world. 'Sravana, Manana, Nidhithyasanam' is the way. One comes to know the philosophy of life as Arjuna learns from Krishna. But, from there on he is on his own. He has to practice (Nidhithyasanam) and apply the knowledge that he has got constantly that it becomes his nature. The state of emotional stability or 'Sthithapragnya' is also one such wherein the

individual strives on it every waking second of his life. Only then can he reach that sublime state of equanimity of mind. One more reason why people go for western theories. The Indian philosophy is a way of life, whereas the western philosophy is for a specific purpose or a particular achievement in life. It stops there. But, one must realize that the very fact that the Vedas and the Upanishads have stood the test of time immemorial is a testimony to their relevance and importance to any person at any period in time. They are an eternal source of knowledge and wisdom, the only precondition being one must approach them with faith and reverence.

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