

Philosophical Resonances of the *Bhagavad-Gita* in Emerson's *Brahma****Jyoti Nailwal**

Research Scholar, Department of English, MJP Rohilkhand University, Bareilly

****Prof Sumitra Kukreti**

Head, Department of English, MJP Rohilkhand University, Bareilly

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Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), a poet, essayist, and philosopher, was the founder of American Transcendentalism. Although his philosophy drew upon many traditions—including Kantianism, Calvinism, and Romanticism—Hinduism, particularly the *Bhagavad-Gita*, played a central role in shaping his thought. Emerson's engagement with the *Gita* deeply influenced his understanding of Karma, the immortality of the soul, and the unity of the soul with Brahman.

Key-words: Emerson, Transcendentalism, *The Bhagavad Gita*, Vedanta, Brahman, Karma Yoga

Introduction:

Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803–1882), philosophical and literary contributions were foundational to the American Transcendentalist movement. Transcendentalism emphasized the inherent goodness of individuals, the importance of intuition, and the unity of humans with nature and the universe. While Emerson drew inspiration from Western philosophical traditions, his engagement with Eastern spiritual traditions, especially Hinduism, profoundly enriched his thought. Among Hindu texts, the *Bhagavad-Gita* had a particularly transformative effect, providing Emerson with both philosophical depth and a framework for understanding universal moral and spiritual principles. Emerson was an alien and outsider to Indian culture, yet he was captivated by the vast philosophical insights offered by the *Bhagavad-Gita*. After reading the *Gita*, he was utterly mesmerized by its vast philosophical insights and the multiple paths it offers to man for his spiritual elevation. *The Gita* plays a major role in uplifting his philosophical thoughts. The text's emphasis on universalism, karma, detached action, and spiritual self-realisation resonated deeply with him. Key Vedantic concepts, such as the "immortality of the soul and the unity of Atman with Brahman, became central to Emerson's transcendental philosophy" (Gita Daily, 2021). Emerson's philosophical originality lay in his ability to adapt and reinterpret these concepts within a Western intellectual framework. Rather than merely borrowing ideas, he integrated

them with Western metaphysical and literary traditions, creating a unique synthesis that appealed to American audiences. The remarkable characteristic of Emerson is that, despite borrowing many concepts from Indian scriptures, he adapted them to suit his intellectual and spiritual aims while retaining his originality. This synthesis contributed to his recognition as one of the most influential literary figures in contemporary America.

Emerson used his cosmic understanding in a way that he came to be known as the most influential personality in American transcendental literature as well as in the entire literary world. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the first to help popularise the Bhagavad-Gita in the West. He states "*The Bhagavad-Gita* is an empire of thought and in its philosophical teachings Krishna has all the attributes of the full-fledged monotheistic deity and at the same time the attributes of the Upanisadic absolute." (<https://gitadaily.com/the-glory-of-gita-wisdom-reflections-on-the-second-anniversary-of-gita-daily>) He further states about the universality of this text as "it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us." (<https://libquotes.com/ralph-waldo-emerson>)

Emerson was impressed by the lofty ideals of The Gita, particularly its major concepts like Karma Yoga (detached action), the soul's immortality and the realization of Brahma. The oneness of soul with Brahma, the highest God, cast a lasting impression on him. The idea of oneness with Brahma can be seen clearly in his highly celebrated essay 'Over-Soul'. He states, ".....for the soul's communication of truth is the highest event in nature...." (<https://libquotes.com/ralph-waldo-Emerson>). The soul's true aim is to mingle with Brahman and find its eventual enlightenment that may also be termed as "emancipation or redemption" (Kukreti 2021) After taking birth, the divine soul forgets its actual existence due to the Maya, or illusion. The soul permeates itself into this mundane world and gets attached to that very selfish self and leaves behind the actual path of journey and "takes a real, merely apparent world of subject and object, and this error is the cause of bondage and suffering." (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* V.1.:20)

The Gita is in the form of a dialogue between the warrior prince Arjuna and the God Krishna (Nar-Narayan), who is serving as his charioteer. Prince Arjuna was in a moral dilemma in the midst of Dharma-Yudha. He was not ready to lift his weapon against his relatives. Bhagwan Krishna explained to him the fundamental nature of the self, the mystery of human birth and the necessity to do his designated duty. In the same way, Emerson experienced conflict with himself and with his contemporary society. In *The Gita*, Bhagwan Krishna enlightened Arjuna's path by showing him the right way to do Karma and the realisation of his connection with the absolute (Brahman). After that, Arjuna was ready to fight the battle for the sake of Dharma against his own family. Similarly, Emerson was influenced by the Vedantic thought of Krishna and argued for his relationship with the eternal, which shaped his ideas in contrast to his traditional past. He went into the lap of nature and emphatically announced in his famous essay 'Nature':

"Standing on the bare ground,- my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the universal being circulate through me. I am a part and particle of God." (Emerson: Nature 1836)

The principles of Karma explained in The *Gita* have a strong essence. According to this principle, one should do one's designated duty without any expectations of return. The action should be performed in a detached manner. In this immortal world one must be in the state of giver. *The Gita* firmly admonishes one to do one's designated duty without expecting the outcome/ reward of that duty; however, it does not mean to shirk away from action. It lays emphasis on relinquishing everything on God as He "is the only Giver, all the men in the world are only shopkeepers. Get His cheque, and it must be honoured everywhere." (The Complete works of Swami Vivekanand V.7: 5) In *the Gita*, Bhagwan Krishna explains the principle of action in the following lines to Prince Arjuna, " mayi sarvani karmani sannyasyadhyatma chetasa, / Nirashir nirmamo bhutva yudhyasva vigatajvarah. (The Bhagavad Gita III.30) (renouncing all actions to me, constantly meditate on me as the Supreme. Become free from desire and selfishness, fight on, free from mental fever.) Krishna says to Arjuna that every part and particle of this universe has emanated from Him. He is the master of all, and every action is governed by him; surrender the fruits of actions to Him. Following a similar philosophy, Emerson writes in *Brahma*:

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
I am the hymn the Brahmin sings. (Emerson: *Brahma*)

The concept of Brahman resonates throughout the poem, conveying a profoundly intense spiritual message. The *Gita* also has a similar take when it says, "neither credit nor blame, but to give up both to the Lord and be at peace." The same thought is in another verse too as follows, "Karmanye vadhikaraste maphaleshu Kadachana, / Ma karmaphalaheturbhurma te sangostvakarmani." (The Bhagavad Gita II:47) It means one should do only actions without any least "selfish motives"; otherwise, instead of making oneself free, one forges one more chain for oneself. As it is always said, good deeds will result in heaven. This desire for heaven after doing good deeds is a gold chain around one's feet. It is also a barrier to the soul achieving its rapt state. This verse admonishes humans to take action and leave everything in God's hands, becoming a 'Karma-Yogi'. The *Gita*'s principle of Karma Yoga, or action without attachment, had a profound effect on Emerson. Emerson echoes performing selfless duty in his poem *Brahman*, "I am the doubter and the doubt, / I am the hymn the Brahmin sings." (Emerson: *Brahma*). These lines have a close affinity with *The Bhagavad Gita* – "I am seated in the heart of all living entities. I am the beginning, middle, and end of all beings." That will enlighten the path of soul to get salvation.

The concept of Nishkama Karma (desireless deeds) is described in chapter five of The *Gita* as: "Brahmanyadhaya karmani sangam tyaktva karoti yeh, / Lipyatena sapapena padma- patram ivambhasa. (The Bhagavad Gita V:10) (one who performs his duty without

attachment, surrendering the results unto the Supreme Lord, is unaffected by sinful action, as the lotus leaf is untouched by water.) The concept of Nishkama Karma (desireless deeds) is the sole theme of The Gita. This is the only way to unify with 'Braham'. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* there is a verse which states:

Where one's mind is attached- the inner self
Goes thereto with action, being attached to it alone.
Obtaining the end of his action,
Whatever he does in this world,
He comes again from that world,
To this world of action. (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, IV.iv.)

In Indian philosophy the idea of Karma has a broader sense. The principle of Karma is the real essence of the preaching of *The Gita*. It is not "a mere dogmatic belief or a concept; it is a fundamental law and in consonance with the modern scientific law of cause and effect." (Raghupathi: 83) Emerson was acquainted with the concept of Brahman elaborated in Indian scriptures. The ultimate truth of this universe is Braham. Being a Western philosopher, he understood this concept with maturity. In his essay 'Over-Soul' he says, ".....for the soul's communication of truth is the highest event in nature, since it then does not give something from itself, but it gives itself, or passes into and becomes that man whom it enlightens; or in proportion to that truth he receives, it takes him to itself." Brahman is the absolute reality underlying all objects and experience. It is pure consciousness and bliss, almost unexplainable. Every being is a projection and reflection of Brahman. Emerson's essays like 'Immortality', 'Plato', 'Over-soul', 'Self-Reliance' are based on the relationship between Atman(soul) and Brahman (Absolute reality). His poem 'Brahama' expresses the central idea of Hindu philosophy. Brahama is the force that pervades the entire universe. It has no beginning or end. It is the force behind everything. He is the Supreme Consciousness, identical with Supreme Bliss. Therefore, the extent to which the Infinite, the Supreme Existence, is revealed within a man is the extent to which Bliss will also manifest in him. Shankaracharya writes that the greater the presence of God-consciousness in mind, the deeper will be the revelation of God. Bliss is always in proportion to this manifestation of the Divine. God-consciousness and Bliss-consciousness are not two separate realities—they are one and the same. God is revealed and Bliss is also revealed at all times, in all places provided the man is prepared for it.

Emerson also advocates to abandon the pursuit of external objects if one has to seriously devote oneself in search of eternal bliss. He admonishes man to renounce the material objects by directing the movement toward Brahman—the God. The Bliss referred here is not the ordinary pleasure derived from sense objects but a *sāttvic* joy—the Bliss experienced by saints and sages. This Bliss arises only through the renunciation of objects and is entirely free from desire.

In the Essay 'Plato', Emerson conveys that "what is the great end of all, you shall now learn from me. It is soul-one in all bodies, pervading, uniform, perfect, preeminent over

nature, exempt from birth, growth and decay." (Raghupathi: 83) Every *Jivatma* (soul) is a part of that spiritual nectar, known as Brahman. In the Vedas, it is stated everywhere, "*Vayam amritputrah*", meaning we are all the sons of the Supreme God (Brahma). The whole Vedanta theory revolves around this statement that the soul is itself Brahma. The soul is immortal because it is part of the supreme soul; it does not take birth so it is unborn -- utterly unaffected by the cycle of birth and death. This emerges as a source of enlightenment for Emerson as he expresses the idea of soul's immortality in his essay 'Immortality'. Emerson expresses his views, "Brahma the supreme, whoever knows him obtains whatever he wishes. The soul is not born; it does not die; it was not produced by anyone. Nor was any produced from it. Unborn, eternal, it is not slain, though the body is slain, subtler than what is subtle, greater than what is great." (Complete Works of Swami Vivekanand V.II :70)

In the *Gita*, Shri Krishna explains as: "*Nainam chindanti sastrani nainam dahati pavakah/ Na cainam kledayantyapo na sosayati marutah*. (The Bhagavad Gita II:23) (No weapon can cut the soul, nor can fire burn it, water cannot drench it, nor can wind make it dry.) In this verse, Bhagwan Krishna explains to Arjuna that the soul is immortal. The only purpose of the soul is to merge with the supreme soul (Brahman). Emerson also believes in this concept, although he does not emphasise the idea of immortality. He firmly believes that the soul is eternal and will survive, unlike everything else in the universe, which is perishable and subject to change. He writes:

"If the red slayer thinks he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again." (Emerson: Brahman)

Emerson writes that one should find the way of union of the soul with the supreme God. In his essay 'Immortality', he depicts, "It is curious to find the same feeling, that it is not immortality, but eternity, -not duration, but a state of abandonment to the Highest, and so the sharing of His perfection..." "Atman is the ultimate truth, the eternal, indestructible. The Yam – Nachiketa dialogue in the Katha Upanishad states the same as:

"The wise one (i.e. the soul) is not born, nor dies
This one has not come from anywhere, has not become anyone.
Unborn, constant, eternal, primaeval, this one
Is not slain when the body is slain." (*Katha Upanishad*, I. ii.)

The same Vedantic truths find expression in Emerson's poem *Brahma*, which echoes the central teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita* and embodies the essence of the Upanishadic wisdom. 'Braham' is an entirely mirror-like image of Vedic philosophy reflecting the depth of Hindu scriptures. The opening lines of the poem resonate the verse of the *Gita*. "Ya enam vetti hantaram yascainam manyate hatam;/ Ubhau tau na vijani to nayam hanta na hanyate." (*The Bhagavad Gita* II:19) (He who takes the self to be slayer and he who thinks He is slain, neither of these knows. He slays not, nor is he slain.)

In this verse the soul is described; as something that is neither a slayer nor a slain because it is free from every action. It is neither a doer nor an object, neither a destroyer nor

can be destroyed; the soul is immortal. The last stanza of the poem echoes the concept of Brahma delineated in *Vedanta*. *Vedanta* mentions two kinds of Brahma- *Saakar* (formed) and *Nirakara* (Formless). Philosophy of *Vedanta* considers the *Nirakara* form of Brahma, which is the base of this universe. Every creature of this universe is united with the Brahman. In the Upanishads, the nature of Brahman or atman, the reality of the world, its origin and its relation to Brahman are mainly considered. Brahman or atman is mainly considered as the essence and unity of all that is the truth or explanation of all that is empirically experienced." (Zamanlou & Kumar 2018) The all-pervading soul is the only medium that makes our path to unify with Brahman. The soul is immortal in nature, but one cannot perceive and realise it without deep *Prajna* (intelligence) and *Sadhna* (meditation). It is not an object which can be directed by the corporal senses, mind and speech. "Man becomes immortal by knowing and realising this indwelling Atman. Such a man is liberated from the bondage of karma." (Raghupathi: 99) Emerson was equally impressed by the Gita's teaching on the immortality of the soul and the oneness of the self with Brahman. In *Over-Soul*, he asserts:

"...for the soul's communication of truth is the highest event in nature, since it then does not give something from itself, but it gives itself, or passes into and becomes that man whom it enlightens; or in proportion to that truth he receives, it takes him to itself" (Libquotes).

The Gita similarly emphasizes the soul's immortality: "Nainam chindanti sastrani nainam dahati pavakah/ Na cainam kledayantyapo na sosayati marutah" (*The Bhagavad Gita* II:23) (No weapon can cut the soul, nor can fire burn it, water cannot drench it, nor can wind make it dry.) In his essay *Immortality*, Emerson reflects the same:

"In the stars, in the forest, in men and women, he had seen that everywhere, however hidden, the laws of Beauty, Wisdom, Goodness were working, and that the three were One. His belief in the Universal Mind, the *Over-Soul*, of which we were the vessels, or rather channels, if we but kept ourselves open, was satisfying."

A similar thought pervades the Gita as the basic essence that lies in this text, "Brahma the supreme, whoever knows him obtains whatever he wishes. The soul is not born; it does not die; it was not produced by anyone. Nor was any produced from it. Unborn, eternal, it is not slain, though the body is slain, subtler than what is subtle, greater than what is great" (*The Bhagavad Gita* II:70). In *the Bhagavat Gita*, such a state of mind is defined as the state of '*Sthitpragya*' (steady wisdom). Bhagwan Krishna says, "One whose mind remains undisturbed amidst misery, who does not crave for pleasure, and who is free from attachment, fear, and anger, is called a yogi (sage)." Krishna emphasises on getting freedom from duality and train one's mind to treat pain and pleasure as one. Emerson's following lines from the poem 'Brahma' come very close to this belief:

"Far or forgot to me is near;

Shadow and sunlight are the same.

The vanished gods to me appear;

And one to me are shame and fame." (poetryfoundation.org)

Only a *Karmayogi* can realize the supreme soul; he is unattached to everything; knows all the truth, he does everything for others and "has no desire, he gets detached from

all actions and objects etc., because all objects and materials etc., such as the body, senses, mind, intellect and life-breaths are of the world, not one's own as these have been acquired from the world." (Sadhaka Sanjivani V.1 pp.548). This world is mere a stage for him to perform his duty because he knows the mysteries of Karma. Therefore, "when a striver performs all actions (service, adoration, chant, meditation entrances also) for the welfare of the world the flow of action is towards the world and the striver, remains detached and untainted. This is 'seeing inaction in action.'" (Ramsukhdas V.1: 548) The *Gita* provides a progressive order where one yoga leads to another; Karma Yoga leads to Bhakti Yoga, which in turn leads to Jnana Yoga. Without attachment to actions, continuous seeking of devotion leads to the path of knowledge, wisdom, and direct realisation of Brahman (God), and experiencing Atman (Self) as one with eternity (Moksha). The Vedanta philosophy often describes Brahman by the term '*Sachchidananda*', a compound consisting of three words: Sat (existence), Chit (consciousness or knowledge), and Anandam (bliss). This state can be realised by the highest man (Yogi) who is calm, silent, unknown, and free from all bondages of the material world. A *Karmayogi* can achieve everything in his life, without being attached to the fruits of actions. In The *Gita* Lord Krishna says to Arjuna, "Buddhiyukto jahatiha ubhe sukritadushkrite;/ Tasmadyogaya yujyaswa yogah karmasu kaushalam" (*The Bhagavad Gita* II:50) (A man engaged in devotional service rids himself of both good and bad actions even in this life. Therefore, strive for yoga, O Arjuna, which is the art of all work.)

These lines emphasise that action is above everything. A *Karmayogi* fixes his mind on the goal and is free from anxiety about the outcome of his actions. Then he becomes free of virtue and vice; his mind is still, and his body engages in dynamic action, which is dedicated to the goal of remembering Atman and enlightens his path towards self-realisation. One should not take any action solely for the sake of positive outcomes and a little satisfaction from that particular action.

"Understanding the right way of living can make a change; when understanding becomes the guiding factor in our life, then we do our duty without thought of reward. Until we reach this attitude of mind, however, all our actions will create new bondage for us." (Swami Nityanand 2016)

The *Gita* emphasizes Nishkama Karma, or desireless action, as the path to union with Brahman. Emerson internalized these principles in his essays and poetry, emphasizing the soul's immortality, the unity with the divine, and the transcendence of material attachments. Ralph Waldo Emerson's engagement with *The Bhagavad-Gita* profoundly shaped his transcendental philosophy. By integrating the *Gita*'s teachings on Karma Yoga, immortality of the soul, and unity with Brahman, he developed a unique synthesis of Eastern and Western thought. His essays and poetry, including 'Brahma', 'Over-Soul,' and 'Nature', reflect a deep assimilation of Vedantic principles, illustrating the universality and enduring relevance of the *Gita* in cross-cultural philosophical discourse. The transcendental philosophy of Emerson is treated as his greatest contribution in initiating and popularising this philosophical and spiritual tradition in the Western world.

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