

Bhagavad Gītā and Politics: Ethical Foundations, Political Duty and Contemporary Governance

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Abstract

The relationship between ethics and politics has been a persistent concern in political theory across civilizations. In the Indian intellectual tradition, the Bhagavad Gītā occupies a central place in articulating ethical action, duty, leadership and moral responsibility. Although primarily regarded as a spiritual and philosophical text, the Gītā contains profound political insights relevant to governance, leadership, conflict resolution and democratic participation. This paper examines the relationship between the Bhagavad Gītā and politics by analysing its key concepts such as dharma, karma, nishkāma karma, leadership and moral decision-making. The study situates the Gītā within the broader framework of political theory and compares its ethical vision with classical and modern political thought. It argues that the Gītā provides a normative framework for politics that integrates moral discipline with practical engagement, offering valuable insights for contemporary democratic governance. The paper concludes that the Bhagavad Gītā remains a relevant ethical resource for addressing political apathy, leadership crises and governance challenges in modern societies.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gītā, politics, ethics, governance, leadership, dharma, political philosophy

Introduction

Politics, at its core, involves decision-making that affects collective life. Questions of power, authority, justice and welfare are inseparable from moral considerations. Despite this, modern political practice often treats ethics as secondary to strategy, competition and institutional efficiency. This separation between morality and politics has contributed to declining public trust, political apathy and governance crises in many democracies. The Bhagavad Gītā, a philosophical dialogue embedded in the Mahābhārata, addresses the tension between moral responsibility and practical action in a moment of political and social crisis. Arjuna's dilemma on the battlefield of Kurukshetra is not merely personal; it is deeply political. It raises questions about duty, legitimacy of violence, leadership responsibility and the moral cost of political action. Krishna's response offers a structured ethical framework that balances action with moral intent.

This paper explores how the Bhagavad Gītā contributes to political thought. Rather than

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reading the text solely as a religious scripture, the study treats it as a normative political text that provides insights into leadership ethics, governance principles and civic responsibility. The central argument is that the Gītā proposes a model of politics grounded in duty, ethical restraint and commitment to collective welfare, making it relevant for contemporary democratic societies.

The Gītā in Political and Ethical Thought

Scholarly engagement with the Bhagavad Gītā has traditionally focused on its metaphysical, spiritual and philosophical dimensions. Thinkers such as S. Radhakrishnan, Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi interpreted the Gītā as a guide to ethical living and spiritual discipline. Gandhi, in particular, read the Gītā as a text of action (karma yoga) and moral courage, applying its principles to political resistance and leadership.

In political theory, Indian traditions have often been overshadowed by Western canonical texts. However, works on Indian political thought increasingly recognise the Gītā as a normative political text alongside Arthashastra and Dharmashastra. Scholars argue that while Arthashastra emphasises statecraft and power, the Gītā focuses on ethical self-governance as the foundation of political authority. Contemporary literature links Gītā ethics to leadership studies, public administration and governance ethics. Studies in management ethics have also drawn on nishkāma karma to explain ethical decision-making under pressure. Despite this, systematic analysis of the Gītā as a political text remains limited, particularly in relation to democratic politics. This paper seeks to bridge that gap.

Politics cannot be reduced to institutional procedures or electoral competition. At its foundation, politics involves choices that shape social order and affect human lives. Ethical neutrality in politics is neither possible nor desirable. The Gītā begins with the recognition that moral conflict is inherent in political life. Kurukshetra symbolises a space of political crisis where competing claims to power, justice and legitimacy collide. Arjuna's hesitation represents ethical paralysis in the face of political responsibility. Krishna's guidance reframes politics as necessary action guided by moral purpose rather than personal attachment.

Dharma and Political Duty

The concept of dharma occupies a central position in Indian political and ethical thought. In the Bhagavad Gītā, dharma is not presented as a rigid religious command or a fixed legal rule; rather, it functions as a dynamic moral principle that governs action in social and political life. When applied to politics, dharma provides a framework for understanding political duty as an ethical responsibility aimed at preserving social order, justice, and collective welfare.

In the Bhagavad Gītā, dharma signifies the right course of action arising from one's role, responsibilities and social context. It is neither abstract morality nor personal preference. Krishna emphasises that dharma is situational and must be interpreted in light of changing circumstances. This flexibility makes dharma particularly relevant to politics, where leaders and institutions constantly confront complex and evolving challenges. Political duty grounded in dharma requires decision-making that balances moral principles with practical realities. Unlike legalism, which focuses on procedural correctness, dharma demands ethical judgement.

A policy may be legally valid yet ethically questionable; dharma urges political actors to evaluate both intention and impact. The Gītā clearly rejects the notion that authority is a personal privilege. Power is portrayed as a burden of responsibility. Arjuna's reluctance to fight reflects a moral crisis rooted in fear of consequences rather than absence of obligation. Krishna's response clarifies that abandoning one's duty due to emotional discomfort undermines social stability.

In contemporary political systems, holding public office implies a similar ethical obligation. Elected representatives, bureaucrats and institutional leaders exercise authority on behalf of the people. Dharma requires that this authority be used to serve public interest rather than personal, familial or party-based goals. Corruption, abuse of power and negligence are violations of political dharma because they weaken trust and disrupt social order. Justice is a core component of political dharma. The Gītā stresses the maintenance of social balance and fairness. Governance that ignores inequality, exclusion or structural injustice fails in its dharma, even if it follows formal rules. In modern democratic contexts, political dharma demands inclusive policymaking, protection of vulnerable groups and equal application of law. When governance prioritises elite interests or electoral advantage over justice, it departs from the ethical foundation outlined in the Gītā. Thus, dharma acts as a normative standard against which political performance can be evaluated.

Political dharma is not limited to rulers or officeholders. The Gītā extends moral responsibility to all individuals based on their social role. In democratic societies, citizens are not passive subjects; they are active participants in governance. From a Gītā-based perspective, voting, civic engagement, public deliberation, and accountability are expressions of civic dharma. Political apathy, especially among educated citizens, represents a failure of democratic duty. Withdrawal from political processes allows unethical leadership and weak governance to flourish, undermining democratic institutions.

The battlefield setting of the Bhagavad Gītā symbolises political conflict and ethical complexity. Arjuna's dilemma reflects situations where political choices involve harm, compromise or moral cost. Krishna does not deny the tragic nature of such decisions; instead, he provides a framework for action guided by responsibility rather than avoidance. Political dharma requires confronting difficult choices without moral paralysis. Leaders must act with awareness of consequences while remaining committed to justice and collective welfare. Avoiding decisions to escape criticism or responsibility is itself an ethical failure.

Accountability is integral to political dharma. Actions performed in the public sphere carry consequences that affect society at large. The Gītā emphasises that individuals are responsible for their actions, regardless of intention. This principle aligns closely with modern democratic norms of transparency, evaluation and institutional oversight. Governments guided by dharma must remain answerable to the people. Mechanisms such as free elections, judicial review, independent media and civil society oversight serve as institutional expressions of political dharma in contemporary systems.

While the Gītā emerged in a hierarchical social context, its ethical principles are not bound to traditional social structures. For modern application, dharma must be reinterpreted in line with

democratic values such as equality, human rights and pluralism. Political dharma today implies commitment to constitutional morality, secular governance and social justice. It rejects authoritarianism and exclusion, emphasising service-oriented leadership and ethical restraint. This reinterpretation allows the Gītā to remain relevant without legitimising inequality or domination.

In an era marked by political cynicism, populism, and declining trust, dharma offers an ethical corrective. It redefines politics not as a contest for power but as a moral responsibility rooted in service. By integrating duty with ethical judgement, the Gītā challenges both leaders and citizens to engage in politics with integrity and commitment.

Karma and Political Action

The concept of karma is central to the ethical and political philosophy of the Bhagavad Gītā. In political discourse, karma is often misunderstood as fatalism or passive acceptance of outcomes. However, the Gītā presents karma as conscious, responsible action performed within a social context. When applied to politics, karma provides a powerful framework for understanding political agency, accountability and the ethical consequences of public decision-making.

In the Bhagavad Gītā, karma refers to intentional action guided by awareness and judgement. Krishna repeatedly emphasises that inaction is impossible; even withdrawal from public life is a form of action with consequences. This insight is deeply relevant to political life, where decisions, non-decisions and delays all shape social outcomes. Political actors whether elected representatives, administrators, or policymakers cannot escape responsibility by claiming neutrality or helplessness. Policy paralysis, administrative delay and deliberate silence in times of crisis are forms of karma that affect society as directly as active intervention. Thus, political karma encompasses both action and inaction. A key political implication of karma in the Gītā is the rejection of fatalism. Krishna challenges the idea that individuals are merely victims of circumstances or historical forces. Applied to politics, this principle counters narratives that justify injustice as unavoidable or structurally determined.

Governments often attribute policy failures to global markets, inherited conditions or institutional limitations. While such constraints are real, the doctrine of karma insists on moral responsibility within constraints. Political leadership involves navigating limitations without surrendering ethical agency. Political action is rarely taken with complete information. The Gītā acknowledges uncertainty as a permanent feature of action. Krishna does not offer Arjuna guaranteed outcomes; instead, he urges action based on duty and ethical reasoning.

In governance, this perspective legitimises decision-making under risk while emphasising ethical intent. Leaders must rely on evidence, expert advice and moral judgement, rather than postponing action indefinitely to avoid blame. Ethical politics demands informed action, not risk-free action.

Karma implies consequences. In the political realm, actions taken by leaders and institutions produce social, economic and political effects that extend beyond individual intent. The Gītā

reinforces the idea that actors remain responsible for outcomes, even when motivations are ethical.

This principle aligns closely with democratic accountability. Policies must be evaluated not only on intention but also on impact. Welfare schemes, economic reforms and security measures must be assessed through their real effects on citizens. A karma-based political ethic demands continuous review, correction and transparency. While the Gītā addresses individual moral agency, its insights can be extended to collective political action. Governments, political parties and institutions operate through collective decision-making processes. Institutional failures such as systemic corruption, policy neglect or exclusion are forms of collective karma. Political institutions must therefore cultivate ethical cultures, not merely ethical individuals. Administrative procedures, incentive structures and accountability mechanisms shape institutional behaviour. Reforming institutions is an ethical imperative rooted in the logic of collective karma.

Political power amplifies the consequences of karma. Actions taken by those in authority have far-reaching effects. The Gītā implicitly warns that misuse of power generates negative consequences not only for victims but also for the moral legitimacy of the ruler. Ethical restraint is thus essential in political action. Policies driven by revenge, populism or personal ambition violate the ethical framework of karma. Responsible governance requires balancing decisiveness with moral caution. Karma is not limited to leaders. Citizens also perform political karma through voting, protest, public discourse and civic engagement. Political apathy constitutes a form of negative karma, as disengagement allows unethical leadership and poor governance to persist.

The Gītā challenges citizens to recognise their role in shaping political outcomes. In democratic systems, collective civic action determines the quality of governance. Educated disengagement weakens democratic institutions and undermines social accountability. The Gītā encourages reflection on action. Ethical politics requires continuous evaluation of decisions and willingness to revise policies when outcomes diverge from intentions. Rigidity and refusal to acknowledge failure contradict the spirit of karma. Modern governance mechanisms such as audits, policy reviews, impact assessments and parliamentary scrutiny embody this principle. They ensure that political karma remains aligned with public welfare rather than institutional self-preservation.

Contemporary politics is marked by crises environmental degradation, economic inequality, public health emergencies and democratic backsliding. The doctrine of karma underscores the urgency of timely, responsible action. Delayed or symbolic responses often worsen crises and shift burdens onto future generations. The Gītā reminds political actors that ethical responsibility does not end with electoral cycles. Long-term consequences of policy decisions reflect the moral quality of political karma. Nishkāma karma refers to action performed without attachment to personal reward. It does not reject outcomes but rejects ego-driven motivation. Modern politics often rewards short-term popularity. The Gītā challenges this logic by prioritising long-term social good over electoral calculation. Public administration guided by nishkāma karma promotes integrity, impartiality and commitment to welfare delivery. It strengthens institutional trust.

Power, Authority and Moral Restraint

Power is an unavoidable element of politics. It enables governments to make decisions, enforce laws and maintain social order. However, power without ethical restraint often leads to domination, exclusion and erosion of legitimacy. The Bhagavad Gītā offers a nuanced understanding of power by embedding it within a moral framework that emphasises responsibility, restraint and accountability. Rather than rejecting power, the Gītā seeks to regulate its use through ethical self-discipline and commitment to collective welfare.

In the Bhagavad Gītā, power is never portrayed as an entitlement. Authority arises from duty (dharma), not personal ambition. Krishna's guidance to Arjuna makes it clear that leadership is a moral burden that demands sacrifice, clarity, and discipline.

Applied to political systems, this principle challenges the idea that electoral victory or bureaucratic position grants unrestricted authority. Political power is conditional upon responsible use. When leaders treat authority as personal property, they undermine democratic norms and weaken institutional legitimacy. Ethical governance requires leaders to recognise power as a trust placed in them by society. The Gītā places strong emphasis on self-control (samyama). Moral restraint is not weakness; it is the foundation of stable authority. Leaders who lack restraint become driven by ego, fear or desire, leading to arbitrary decision-making.

In contemporary politics, moral restraint manifests as respect for constitutional limits, separation of powers and institutional procedures. When executives bypass legal frameworks or silence dissent, authority shifts toward authoritarianism. The Gītā suggests that true authority is sustained not by coercion but by ethical conduct and public trust. The Bhagavad Gītā does not deny the necessity of force in maintaining order. The battlefield context acknowledges that coercion may be required to protect justice. However, the text frames violence as a tragic last resort rather than a political strategy.

This perspective is relevant to modern debates on policing, military intervention and emergency powers. Ethical restraint requires proportionality, legality and accountability. Excessive use of force erodes legitimacy and generates resistance. The Gītā thus offers an ethical lens for evaluating state coercion within democratic norms. Authority without accountability is ethically indefensible. The Gītā emphasises that all actions produce consequences. Leaders cannot detach themselves from the outcomes of their decisions. Political authority must therefore remain subject to evaluation and correction.

In democratic systems, accountability mechanisms such as legislative oversight, independent judiciary, free media and civil society engagement serve as institutional expressions of moral restraint. Weakening these institutions concentrates power and increases the risk of ethical failure. The Gītā reinforces the idea that restraint must be both internal (ethical self-discipline) and external (institutional checks).

A central warning in the Gītā concerns ego (ahamkāra). When leaders identify themselves with power, they become detached from public interest. Ego-driven politics prioritises image, control and personal loyalty over policy effectiveness. Political corruption often emerges from unchecked ego and desire for dominance. Moral restraint requires leaders to separate personal

identity from institutional role. The Gītā promotes humility as a political virtue, reminding leaders that authority is temporary and conditional. Ethical restraint also applies to policy formulation. Rapid decisions driven by populism or electoral pressure may yield immediate gains but cause long-term harm. The Gītā advocates thoughtful action grounded in duty rather than impulse.

In governance, this translates into evidence-based policymaking, stakeholder consultation and long-term planning. Moral restraint encourages leaders to resist symbolic gestures that lack substantive impact. Sustainable governance demands patience and ethical foresight. Power is not exercised solely by individuals. Institutions wield collective authority. Bureaucracies, security agencies and political parties shape policy outcomes. The Gītā's ethical framework can be extended to institutions, requiring transparency, procedural fairness and internal accountability. Institutional moral restraint involves clear rules, ethical codes and whistleblower protection. When institutions normalise unethical practices, they produce systemic injustice. Reforming institutional cultures is therefore a moral imperative rooted in political ethics.

Moral restraint is not limited to rulers. Citizens also exercise power through voting, public discourse and collective action. Democratic authority ultimately rests with the people. Misuse of civic power through misinformation, intolerance or political violence undermines democratic stability. The Gītā encourages responsible participation guided by discernment and restraint. Democratic citizenship requires engagement without hatred, disagreement without dehumanisation and activism without destruction of institutional norms. In an era of populism, surveillance technologies and executive centralisation, the ethical regulation of power has become increasingly urgent. The Bhagavad Gītā offers a timeless reminder that political authority must be tempered by moral discipline. Unchecked power leads to erosion of rights, decline of institutions and public alienation. Moral restraint, rooted in ethical self-governance and reinforced by institutional safeguards, remains essential for sustaining democratic legitimacy and social stability.

Leadership Qualities in the Bhagavad Gītā

Leadership occupies a central place in political and social life. The effectiveness of institutions, the quality of governance and the legitimacy of authority largely depend on the character and conduct of leaders. The Bhagavad Gītā offers a distinct model of leadership grounded in ethical self-discipline, responsibility and service. Rather than focusing on power accumulation or charisma, the Gītā emphasises inner moral strength as the foundation of effective leadership. Its insights remain relevant for political leadership in both democratic and administrative contexts.

The Gītā places strong emphasis on mastery over the self. Krishna repeatedly stresses that individuals who cannot control their desires, fears and impulses are unfit to guide others. Leadership begins with self-governance (ātma-nīyantraṇa), which ensures clarity of judgement and ethical consistency.

In political life, leaders face constant pressures from interest groups, electoral demands and public opinion. Without self-discipline, these pressures can lead to opportunism or policy

inconsistency. The Gītā suggests that leaders who cultivate emotional stability and self-control are better equipped to take principled decisions even under intense pressure. Moral courage is a defining leadership quality in the Bhagavad Gītā. Arjuna's initial hesitation reflects fear of consequences rather than lack of ability. Krishna's guidance underscores the importance of confronting responsibility instead of retreating from it.

In contemporary politics, moral courage is reflected in the willingness to make difficult decisions, challenge entrenched interests and uphold constitutional values even at personal or political cost. Leaders who avoid responsibility to preserve popularity or power weaken institutional integrity. The Gītā frames leadership as an ethical obligation rather than a pursuit of personal success. Leadership in the Gītā is deeply rooted in dharma. Leaders are expected to act according to their role-based responsibilities, not personal preferences. This duty-oriented approach discourages arbitrary decision-making and reinforces accountability. In democratic systems, duty-oriented leadership translates into respect for constitutional mandates, institutional norms and public interest. Leaders must prioritise governance responsibilities over party loyalty or individual ambition. The Gītā thus provides a normative basis for public service ethics.

One of the most significant contributions of the Bhagavad Gītā to leadership theory is the principle of nishkāma karma action without attachment to personal reward. Leaders are encouraged to focus on the quality of action rather than the pursuit of recognition, power or legacy. In political leadership, attachment to outcomes such as electoral victory or public image often distorts decision-making. Policies may be designed for short-term appeal rather than long-term welfare. The Gītā's approach promotes leadership driven by service, integrity and commitment to collective good. The Gītā highlights the importance of buddhi (discernment). Effective leaders must evaluate options carefully, balance competing interests and act with clarity of purpose. Emotional impulses and ideological rigidity undermine sound judgement.

In governance, balanced decision-making involves evidence-based policy formulation, consultation with experts, and consideration of social impact. The Gītā encourages leaders to combine rational analysis with ethical sensitivity. The Bhagavad Gītā explicitly states that the conduct of leaders influences the behaviour of society. When leaders act ethically, they set standards for public conduct. Conversely, unethical leadership normalises corruption and disregard for rules. In modern political systems, leadership by example is critical for maintaining institutional credibility. Compliance with laws, transparency in decision-making and respect for dissent reinforce democratic norms. The Gītā emphasises that leadership influence extends beyond policy outcomes to moral culture.

The Gītā warns against ego (ahamkāra), which distorts leadership judgement. Ego-driven leaders prioritise personal authority, suppress criticism and resist accountability. Humility, in contrast, enables learning, adaptation and collaboration. Political humility does not imply weakness. It involves recognising limits, acknowledging mistakes and valuing institutional processes. Leaders who remain detached from personal glorification are better positioned to serve public interest effectively. Leadership in the Gītā is oriented toward lokasaṅgraha the welfare and cohesion of society. Leaders must act in ways that sustain social harmony and protect vulnerable groups.

In contemporary governance, this principle supports inclusive policymaking, social justice and equitable development. Leadership that ignores marginalised communities fails its ethical duty. The Gītā thus aligns leadership with social responsibility. The battlefield context of the Bhagavad Gītā highlights leadership under crisis. Krishna exemplifies calm, clarity and guidance during uncertainty. Emotional stability allows leaders to manage crises without panic or authoritarian excess. Modern crises, public health emergencies, economic shocks, environmental disasters demand similar qualities. Leaders who maintain composure and communicate transparently strengthen public trust and cooperation.

The leadership model presented in the Bhagavad Gītā contrasts sharply with contemporary trends of populism, personality-centric politics and short-termism. Its emphasis on ethical self-governance, responsibility and service offers a corrective to leadership deficits in modern democracies. By integrating moral discipline with active engagement, the Gītā provides a framework for leadership that is both principled and pragmatic. Reinterpreted within democratic and constitutional norms, these leadership qualities remain essential for effective governance and public trust.

Comparative Perspectives: Bhagavad Gītā and Western Political Thought

Comparative political theory enables a deeper understanding of political ideas by examining how different civilizations conceptualise ethics, authority and political action. The Bhagavad Gītā represents a distinct non-Western tradition of political ethics that differs significantly from, yet also intersects with, major Western political theories. While Western political thought has often emphasised institutions, laws and rights, the Gītā focuses on ethical self-discipline, duty and moral responsibility as the foundation of political life. This section critically compares key ideas of the Gītā with major strands of Western political thought.

A defining difference between the Bhagavad Gītā and much of Western political thought lies in the relationship between ethics and politics. In the Gītā, ethics and politics are inseparable. Political action is inherently moral and ethical failure leads to political disorder. Krishna does not permit Arjuna to separate personal morality from political responsibility. Action in the public sphere must conform to dharma, regardless of personal emotion or advantage.

By contrast, modern Western political thought, particularly after Machiavelli, often treats politics as an autonomous sphere. Machiavelli argues that rulers may need to act immorally to preserve the state. The Gītā rejects this instrumental logic. While it recognises political conflict and necessity, it insists that ethical restraint must guide political action.

However, classical Western thinkers such as Aristotle align more closely with the Gītā. Aristotle's concept of politics as a moral activity aimed at the good life parallels the Gītā's emphasis on welfare (lokasaṅgraha).

The Gītā's notion of dharma shares important similarities with Western deontological ethics, particularly Immanuel Kant's theory of duty. Kant argues that moral action must be guided by duty rather than consequences. Similarly, the Gītā emphasises action in accordance with dharma, independent of personal gain. However, the foundations differ. Kantian duty is

universal and abstract, grounded in rational moral law, whereas dharma is contextual, role-based and socially embedded.

In political terms, the Gītā allows flexibility in applying moral principles depending on context, while Kantian ethics risks rigidity. This contextualism makes the Gītā particularly relevant for complex political environments where moral dilemmas resist simple universal rules. Among Western thinkers, Aristotle's virtue ethics most closely resembles the ethical framework of the Bhagavad Gītā. Both traditions emphasise character, self-discipline and moral habituation. Aristotle's ideal political leader possesses virtues such as prudence, justice and moderation. Similarly, the Gītā stresses self-control, discernment (buddhi) and detachment from ego. Both traditions reject purely procedural views of politics and insist that ethical character shapes political outcomes.

However, the Gītā goes further by integrating inner spiritual discipline with outward political action. Aristotle focuses primarily on civic virtue, while the Gītā links ethical leadership to inner self-transformation. Max Weber's analysis of authority, traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational offers a useful contrast to the Gītā's understanding of power. Weber describes authority sociologically, focusing on legitimacy derived from belief systems and institutions. The Gītā, in contrast, offers a normative framework that evaluates authority ethically. Power is legitimate only when exercised in accordance with dharma and moral restraint. Charismatic authority, central to Weber's theory, can become unstable and prone to abuse. The Gītā warns against ego-driven leadership and emphasises humility and self-control as safeguards against misuse of authority. Utilitarianism, associated with thinkers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, evaluates political action based on outcomes, particularly maximising happiness or utility.

The Gītā differs fundamentally in its approach. While it does not ignore consequences, it refuses to reduce political ethics to outcome calculation alone. Action must be guided by duty and ethical intent, not merely by predicted benefits.

This distinction is important in contemporary governance. Policies driven solely by cost-benefit analysis may ignore justice, dignity, and long-term social harm. The Gītā provides a correction by insisting that ethical integrity cannot be sacrificed for expediency. Western liberal thought, particularly in the tradition of Locke and Mill, emphasises individual rights and freedoms as the basis of political participation. The Gītā places greater emphasis on responsibility and duty. From a Gītā-based perspective, political participation is not merely a right but an obligation. Civic disengagement undermines social order. This contrasts with liberal frameworks that permit political apathy as an individual choice.

However, the two perspectives are not incompatible. Democratic citizenship requires both rights and responsibilities. The Gītā complements Western liberalism by strengthening its ethical foundation. The battlefield context of the Bhagavad Gītā invites comparison with Western just war theory, developed by thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas. Both traditions recognise that violence may sometimes be unavoidable but must be ethically constrained. The Gītā emphasises moral intention, proportionality, and duty in conflict. Violence is not glorified

but treated as a tragic necessity. This aligns closely with just war principles of legitimate authority and moral restraint.

Contemporary Western political theory increasingly recognises the importance of ethics, emotions and identity. Communitarian thinkers like Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor critique excessive individualism and emphasise moral responsibility ideas resonant with the Gītā. The Gītā contributes to global political theory by offering an alternative ethical framework that avoids both moral relativism and rigid universalism. Its integration of self-discipline, duty and political action enriches comparative political analysis. While the Gītā provides valuable ethical insights, it must be interpreted carefully in modern contexts. Concepts rooted in hierarchical social structures require reinterpretation to align with democratic equality and human rights.

Similarly, Western theories benefit from ethical correctives offered by non-Western traditions. Comparative engagement should be dialogical, not hierarchical. A comparative reading of the Bhagavad Gītā and Western political thought reveals complementary strengths. Western traditions offer robust institutional frameworks, legal protections and rights-based politics. The Gītā contributes ethical depth, moral responsibility and leadership discipline. Integrating these perspectives can enrich contemporary political theory and practice. Ethical governance requires both strong institutions and morally grounded leadership. The Gītā, when read alongside Western political thought, provides a holistic framework for addressing modern political crises.

The Gītā and Contemporary Democratic Challenges

Modern democracies across the world are facing a set of interconnected challenges that threaten both institutional stability and ethical governance. These include declining political participation, erosion of public trust, populism, identity-based polarization, leadership crises and the dominance of short-term electoral calculations over long-term public welfare. India, despite its constitutional commitment to democratic values, is not immune to these pressures. The Bhagavad Gītā, though composed in a pre-modern context, offers a normative ethical framework that speaks directly to many of these contemporary democratic dilemmas. Rather than prescribing institutional designs, the Gītā addresses the moral foundations of political life, which remain critically relevant.

One of the most visible challenges in contemporary democracies is the growing disengagement of citizens from political processes beyond voting. While electoral participation in India remains relatively high, sustained civic engagement such as involvement in deliberation, local governance, and public accountability has weakened, particularly among educated and urban populations. The Gītā views withdrawal from public responsibility as a moral failure. Krishna's insistence that Arjuna must act despite personal discomfort directly challenges modern tendencies toward political apathy. From a Gītā-based perspective, democratic citizenship entails active participation grounded in duty rather than convenience. Civic disengagement undermines lokasaṅgraha, the maintenance of social order, which the Gītā treats as a collective ethical responsibility. This framework reframes democratic participation not merely as a right but as a moral obligation essential for the survival of democratic institutions.

Contemporary democracies increasingly face a crisis of leadership marked by opportunism, erosion of moral credibility and personalization of power. Electoral success often rewards charisma and rhetoric over ethical integrity and policy competence. The Gītā offers a contrasting model of leadership rooted in self-discipline, detachment from ego and moral restraint. Krishna repeatedly warns against leadership driven by desire, anger and attachment. In democratic contexts, this implies that political authority must be exercised as service rather than domination. The ethical leader envisioned in the Gītā does not seek power for personal gain but accepts responsibility for public welfare. This model directly addresses the leadership deficit in modern democracies, where ethical legitimacy is often subordinated to electoral strategy.

The rise of populism has transformed democratic politics into a domain dominated by emotional appeals, identity mobilisation and simplistic narratives. While emotions are unavoidable in political life, unchecked emotional politics can weaken rational deliberation and democratic accountability. The Gītā does not deny the role of emotion but insists on buddhi discernment as a regulating force. Political action driven solely by fear, resentment or pride is considered ethically unstable. The text's emphasis on self-control offers a corrective to populist politics that thrives on polarization. In democratic practice, this suggests the need for leadership and citizenry capable of reflective judgment rather than reactive decision-making. Democratic politics often prioritizes short-term electoral gains over long-term structural reform. Policy decisions are shaped by immediate political returns rather than sustainable outcomes.

The Gītā's concept of duty without attachment to results challenges this logic. Political actors are encouraged to pursue ethically sound policies even when immediate rewards are uncertain. This approach promotes policy consistency, institutional stability and long-term public interest. By discouraging excessive focus on electoral outcomes, the Gītā provides an ethical rationale for governance oriented toward intergenerational justice and sustainable development.

Corruption remains a major democratic challenge, eroding public trust and weakening institutional effectiveness. In many democracies, political power is increasingly viewed as a means for private accumulation rather than public service. The Gītā explicitly condemns actions motivated by greed and attachment. Political authority, from this perspective is legitimate only when exercised with moral restraint and accountability. The emphasis on inner ethical discipline addresses corruption not merely as a legal problem but as a moral failure.

This insight complements institutional anti-corruption measures by highlighting the ethical foundations necessary for their effectiveness. Modern democracies are increasingly marked by social fragmentation based on identity, ideology and economic inequality. These divisions undermine social cohesion and democratic deliberation. The Gītā's concept of lokasaṅgraha underscores the importance of social harmony and collective welfare. While the text emerged in a hierarchical social context, its ethical core can be reinterpreted to support inclusive governance and democratic equality. By emphasizing responsibility toward the collective rather than sectional interests, the Gītā offers a moral framework for addressing polarization without suppressing pluralism. Contemporary democratic reform often focuses on institutional design, electoral laws, judicial independence and administrative efficiency. While these are

essential, institutions alone cannot sustain democracy without ethical commitment from political actors.

The Gītā complements institutional approaches by emphasizing internal self-regulation. Ethical governance arises not only from external constraints but from moral self-discipline. This perspective strengthens democratic resilience by addressing the human element of political power. Democratic politics frequently involves conflict between parties, interests and ideologies. The challenge lies in managing conflict without undermining democratic norms. The Gītā acknowledges conflict as an unavoidable aspect of political life but insists on moral limits. Political struggle must be guided by duty, proportionality and concern for social order. This approach resonates with democratic norms of peaceful competition and constitutional restraint.

In the Indian context, the Gītā offers a culturally resonant ethical vocabulary for democratic renewal. It bridges moral philosophy and political practice without rejecting constitutional secularism. When interpreted normatively rather than theologically, the Gītā can enrich civic education, leadership training and public ethics discourse. Contemporary democratic challenges cannot be addressed solely through legal or procedural reforms. They require ethical renewal at both individual and collective levels. The Bhagavad Gītā contributes to this renewal by emphasizing duty, moral restraint, and responsible action. By reconnecting political action with ethical responsibility, the Gītā offers a valuable framework for strengthening democratic culture in an era of political uncertainty.

Conclusion

This article has examined the Bhagavad Gītā as a significant ethical and political text whose insights remain relevant to contemporary democratic theory and practice. Rather than treating the Gītā as a religious scripture detached from public life, the study has approached it as a normative framework that addresses the moral foundations of political action, leadership and civic responsibility. Through an analytical engagement with concepts such as dharma, karma, moral restraint, leadership ethics and collective welfare (lokasaṅgraha), the article has demonstrated that the Gītā offers a coherent vision of politics grounded in ethical responsibility rather than power accumulation.

One of the central arguments advanced in this study is that political life cannot be sustained solely through institutional mechanisms, constitutional provisions or electoral procedures. While these elements are essential for democratic governance, they remain insufficient in the absence of ethical commitment from political actors and citizens alike. The Gītā addresses this gap by emphasizing self-discipline, duty-oriented action and moral accountability as the basis of political authority. In doing so, it shifts the focus of political analysis from external structures to internal ethical dispositions, a perspective often underemphasized in modern political discourse.

The article has also shown that the Gītā's understanding of political duty does not promote passive obedience or political withdrawal. On the contrary, it explicitly condemns disengagement from public responsibility. Krishna's insistence that Arjuna must act, despite moral anxiety and personal discomfort, serves as a powerful ethical critique of political apathy.

In democratic contexts, this translates into a normative obligation for citizens and leaders to participate actively and responsibly in public life. Political disengagement, particularly among the educated sections of society, weakens democratic accountability and undermines collective welfare.

Through a comparative analysis with Western political thought, the study has further demonstrated that the Gītā complements rather than contradicts modern democratic theory. While Western traditions provide robust frameworks for rights, institutions and procedural justice, the Gītā contributes an ethical vocabulary that emphasizes duty, restraint and moral intention. This comparative engagement highlights the possibility of an integrated political theory that combines institutional safeguards with ethical leadership. Such a synthesis is particularly valuable in addressing contemporary democratic challenges such as populism, corruption, polarization and short-term governance.

The discussion on power and authority has underscored that the Gītā does not reject political power but subjects it to moral limits. Authority is legitimate only when exercised in accordance with ethical responsibility and concern for social order. This perspective challenges instrumental and opportunistic approaches to politics that prioritize electoral success or personal gain over public welfare. In an era marked by declining trust in political institutions, the Gītā's insistence on moral restraint provides an important corrective to the crisis of democratic legitimacy.

At the same time, the article has acknowledged the need for careful reinterpretation of the Gītā in modern democratic contexts. Concepts rooted in hierarchical social structures must be critically re-examined to align with contemporary values of equality, pluralism and constitutionalism. The relevance of the Gītā lies not in literal application but in normative reinterpretation. When read as an ethical guide rather than a theological command, the text offers insights that are compatible with secular democratic principles.

The Bhagavad Gītā emerges from this study as a valuable resource for rethinking the ethical dimensions of politics in contemporary democracies. Its emphasis on duty-oriented action, moral restraint and collective welfare addresses some of the most pressing challenges facing democratic governance today. By integrating ethical responsibility with political action, the Gītā contributes to a richer understanding of democracy, one that recognizes that the strength of democratic institutions ultimately depends on the moral character and civic commitment of those who sustain them. As democracies confront crises of participation, leadership and legitimacy, revisiting ethical frameworks such as the Gītā can play a meaningful role in democratic renewal.

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