

# The Bhagavad Gita and Quran: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

**Pramit Goel**

Student, Hill Spring International School

## **Abstract:**

For decades, India has been plagued by communal violence between Hindus and Muslims. This article is a comparative study of The Bhagavad Gita and Quran, the sacred scriptures for Hindus and Muslims respectively, analyzing them from philosophical, social, economic, and political perspectives.

While the Gita and Quran differ in views on charity, sacrifice, education, and social mobility, they share several similarities in the domains of detachment to material possessions, intolerance towards non-believers and monotheism. Additionally, both texts broadly preach similar principles such as peace, unity, and respect. However, there are certain teachings which may be outdated.

## **Introduction:**

India, being a large country, with 1.4 billion people following different faith acts as a potpourri as well as a hotbed of religious beliefs. Growing up in India, one is aware of religious conflicts due to the strong emotions that religion evokes. For a project that I did in Grade 5, “Do Religions Coexist?”, I was exposed to diverse religious perspectives. As part of my research for the project, I visited Kabutarkhana in Dadar, Mumbai where I saw a church, temple, and mosque adjacent to each other with people of all faiths praying to their respective Gods peacefully. It made me wonder why such coexistence couldn’t occur on a larger scale, especially between Hindus and Muslims who have been pitted against each other and have had several religious conflicts in the past.

With this backdrop, I decided to study “The Bhagavad Gita” and the “Quran,” the respective religious texts of Hindus and Muslims which serve as their pillars of wisdom and moral compass. The Bhagavad Gita presents a dialogue between Lord Krishna and the warrior Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. It delves into the crux of Hindu philosophy and prescribes the Hindu way of life. The Quran, which is believed to be the word of God, calls upon all humans to show empathy, justice, and compassion to one another.

While reading the scriptures, I realized that both the texts converge on a large number of principles and beliefs while having their nuanced views on select aspects. Disputes between Hindus and Muslims have obscured the common ground that both the texts attempt to cover. Famous writers in the past have emphasized on the similarities between the two texts. Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, explored the teachings of the Gita and Quran in the Sufi text, Majma-ul-Bahrain, and stressed on their interconnectedness. Through this article, I have tried to bring out my views on select aspects as laid out by these religious books, both in terms of common grounds as well as their unique take on certain aspects of our daily lives.

### **Monotheism vs Polytheism**

Throughout history, several philosophers, including David Hume and Auguste Comte, have criticized monotheism for being less pluralistic and tolerant when compared to polytheism.<sup>1</sup>(Hume 1779, 26-32). Both Hinduism and Islam are monotheistic, claiming that there is only one Supreme Being and Allah respectively. However, unique features in the two faiths circumvent the issues of intolerance associated with monotheism.

The Quran states that assigning a face to Allah is prohibited, or “haram.” Instead, he is omnipresent and a manifestation of his teachings.<sup>2</sup> (The Pen Magazine 2014) The fact that Allah is not attributed any particular physical form allows each follower to develop an individual notion of Allah and mold it in different contexts, while retaining the core principles. This greater personalization makes followers more comfortable with the scripture.

In the Gita, Lord Krishna states that the same Supreme Being has several manifestations. They can be broadly classified into Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, who are responsible for the creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe respectively. This approach of polymorphic monotheism allows followers to worship a divine form with which they relate best. It explains why different geographic regions and states in India often worship different Hindu deities, depending on their unique cultural values and traditions. Commitment to a religion and devotion embeds qualities such as compassion, concern for the disadvantaged and kindness which inspires individuals to do charity and help those in need.<sup>3</sup> (Marrimedia n.d.) Both the Quran and The Bhagavad Gita focus on compassion and charity through different approaches.

### **Generosity:**

In the Quran, “Zakat” is one of the five pillars of Islam. Under this principle, it is mandatory for Muslims that possess a minimum amount of wealth, particularly in Muslim-majority states, to donate a certain proportion of their income annually, as it is believed to purify their souls.<sup>4 5</sup> (National Zakat Foundation 2021) (Sadiq 2022) Akhlaq, an Islamic form of Socrates’ virtue ethics, emphasizes on developing virtuous character traits such as compassion and humility and is one of the foundations for the widespread practice of Zakat. Studies across the Muslim world have shown the positive economic impact of Zakat, with Indonesia witnessing an improvement in its Gini Coefficient (a measure of inequality), Malaysia seeing an increase in aggregate consumption, and Pakistan observing a significant reduction in rural and urban poverty.<sup>6 7</sup> (Ayuniyyah et al. 2022, 924-942) (Suprayitno and Harun 2017, 39-62) However, the unorganized nature of Zakat collection and disbursement leads to various inefficiencies and leakages that can be better addressed by modernizing the system with FinTech.<sup>8 9</sup> (Azizah and Choirin 2019) (Farhan 2017) It encourages contributions through increased transparency and convenience, while improving financial inclusion and accessibility for marginalized and geographically remote communities.<sup>10</sup> (Scaria 2022)

The Gita describes its fundamental moral code, “Dharma”, as a sacred bull with four legs, one of which represents kindness/charity.<sup>11</sup> (Dalela 2018) While Islam believes that the action of charity itself is pure and important, Hinduism places greater emphasis on the giver’s intention and classifies charity, or “Daan”, into three categories: “Tamasic” involves contributing to an unworthy cause, “Rajasic” is done with the aim of receiving admiration and gratification, and “Sattvic” is when one donates from genuine goodness and expects nothing in return.<sup>12</sup> (Bhakti n.d.) Additionally, the Quran and Gita also differ on the type of

charity that they focus on: Zakat predominantly involves the donation of money, while Daan can be in the form of food, shelter, educational support, among others.

### **Sacrifice**

Ritualistic sacrifice plays an important role in Islam. The Quran describes the practice of Qurbani, wherein Muslims slaughter either a goat, sheep, cow, or camel to reflect Prophet Ibrahim's sacrifice of his son in honor of God. The ritualistic sacrifice has also been taken to extremes where individuals practice "tatbir," which is self-flagellation as a display of devotion to Imam Husayn, who went through extreme suffering. The Bhagavad Gita and Vedas suggest that the sacrifice of anything cannot be permanent if there is attachment. The desire to regain an item which one sacrifices will always exist unless we develop a feeling of detachment to it. <sup>13</sup>(Desai 2002, 53-59) Therefore, true sacrifice in Hinduism focuses more on surrendering our desires.

Overall, while the Quran has a more ritualistic notion of sacrifice, Hinduism preaches inner sacrifice, which can be more effective in developing attributes like selflessness, devotion, and empathy. Additionally, the practice of tatbir has been condemned by Islamic scholars globally because it contradicts the Islamic teaching that actions of self-harm are "haram" (forbidden).

Unfortunately, the concept of sacrifice is widely misunderstood today among a large proportion of Hindu followers, who have forgotten about the notion of inner sacrifice and instead resort to more ritualistic means to show their devotion to God. Billions of rupees are slid into the collection boxes before the ornate stone idols, instead of being used to educate and create jobs for the unfortunate. Millions of gallons of milk are poured over deities, instead of feeding the large number of hungry, malnourished children in our population. Instead, one could sacrifice his time and energy towards helping the masses and engage in charitable initiatives that make our society a better place to live in.

### **Detachment**

Inherent to human beings, materialism stems from the desire for social approval, instant gratification, and sense of security. <sup>14</sup>(Szeto 2020) However, psychology studies across diverse social settings, including the US, UK, Chile, and Singapore, have found a negative relationship between levels of materialism and well-being. <sup>15 16</sup>(Wenceslao et al. 2014, 569-585) (Swinyard, Kau, and Phua 2001, 13-32) While the contribution of modern science is significant to this field, these insights have been around for over two millenniums in Hindu and Muslim scriptures.

The Hindu Vedas suggest that one of the five key causes of suffering is attachment to material objects. <sup>17</sup>(Burgin 2020) A fruitful life can only be lived once one lets go of such possessions. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that he must practice self-control and detachment to achieve spiritual liberation and true happiness. Similarly, the Quran stresses on the importance of "Zuhud" (asceticism), which involves shunning the forbidden, avoiding the lawful but unnecessary, and guarding one from everything that distracts him from Allah.

There is a common misconception suggesting that the asceticism and material detachment prescribed in these scriptures lead to monasticism. However, both texts suggest maintaining a balance between spiritual and material pursuits.

### **Knowledge and Education**

While both texts emphasize on the importance of knowledge, they propose starkly different educational

philosophies. In the Gita, education is a means of achieving spiritual understanding, self-reflection, and introspection.<sup>18</sup> (Bala 2022) It involves grappling with philosophical notions regarding the universe and nature, as well as psychological insights into human emotion, cognition, and behavior. Additionally, the major disseminators of information in Hindu education are the “gurus” (teachers), who possess deep spiritual knowledge.

On the other hand, the Quran suggests that education is essential to becoming a devout Muslim and responsible, empathetic, and productive member of society. Learning objectives revolve around acquiring knowledge in religion, worldly sciences, and practical skills.<sup>19</sup> (Siddiqui 2012) Islam believes that the leading source of this knowledge is the Quran, which is considered the preaching of Allah.

Additionally, Islamic scriptures extensively advocate for the democratization of education, and Hadith literature explicitly states that both men and women have an equal right to education. Therefore, it is indeed shocking that the Taliban government in Afghanistan is using religious justifications to ban girls from attending formal educational institutions. Rather than adhering to true Islamic principles of education, such extremist groups seem to be weaponizing and deliberately misconstruing Sharia Law and other religious doctrines to oppress and spread terror.

### **Social Mobility vs. Social Immobility**

The Gita is a strong proponent of deontological ethics and states that an individual must strive to perform his duties. These are pre-defined by society based on the social class that a person is born into: “brahmana” (intellectuals), “kshatriya” (warriors), “vaisya” (traders and merchants), and “shudras” (unskilled workers).<sup>20</sup> (BBC News 2019) According to the Gita, the caste system is sacrosanct and must not be interfered with.<sup>21</sup> (Pardeep 2023) It resulted in centuries of a highly stratified and unequal society in ancient India. Even today, although the caste system has been abolished by the government, there is widespread mistreatment of and discrimination against Dalits, who were historically members of the shudra class. In fact, the creator of the Indian constitution and a vocal activist for Dalit rights, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has criticized the Gita for endorsing caste-based discrimination and argued that the teaching of “varna dharma” (performing duties in accordance with one’s social class) limits opportunities for social mobility.<sup>22</sup> (Neelakandan 2012)

Islam, like the other Abrahamic religions, is an egalitarian religion and the Quran claims that Satan is the creator of the caste system.<sup>23</sup> (Tanweer 2021) Prophet Mohammed has reaffirmed this ideology in a speech, stating “There is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab”. The Quran also promotes the idea of meritocracy, wherein individuals are judged solely on their abilities and qualifications, rather than social standing.<sup>24</sup> (Ears 2021) While noble in principle, this notion rests on the oversimplified assumption that everyone has the same starting line in the race of life and neglects the structural inequalities pervading society. Therefore, while ability should be the primary criterion while judging an individual, the circumstances in which those abilities were acquired must also be considered. These considerations were taken into account by the affirmative action policies in the context of American university admissions, but the recent ruling against them deals a significant blow to minority and low-income communities.

### **Intolerance**

The Bhagavad Gita and Quran both demonstrate intolerance towards non-believers. The Bhagavad Gita suggests that denying God’s existence hinders spiritual progress and prevents the soul from attaining liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The Quran takes an even harsher position, stating that the purpose of

human existence is to worship God and that the failure to do so will result in punishment in the afterlife.<sup>25</sup> (Reynolds 2020) In today's sociocultural context, such proclamations seem dated, given the emergence of alternate philosophical schools like atheism and agnosticism. In fact, these belief systems can, arguably, instill greater personal responsibility and moral autonomy.<sup>26</sup> (Ratner 2016) When there is no deity, religious scripture or concept of reincarnation, atheists are expected to independently evaluate situations, make their decisions, and live with the consequences.

The Quran is also often criticized for its supposed intolerance against women. It emphasizes on the distinction in gender roles, with men being protectors and providers and women taking on the role of a caretaker and mother. When viewed from a Western perspective on gender equality, the teachings in the Quran seem restrictive and immoral. However, it is important to note that gender equality is a culturally relative concept, rather than the universal idea perpetuated by the West. From the Islamic and Shariah viewpoint, men and women were ordained for different, but equally important, roles to maintain a healthy family life.

### **Afterlife**

The afterlife has been described in opposing ways by the Gita and Quran. The Gita advocates for the idea of reincarnation, while the Quran believes in resurrection.

The Gita teaches us that the soul is eternal and undergoes a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, based on the "karma" (actions) accumulated in previous lives. The aim is to attain "moksha" (liberation), where the soul breaks free from the cycle of rebirth, which can be done by developing virtues such as compassion, selflessness, self-realization among others.<sup>27</sup> (Bora) Interestingly, this ideology helps us understand why people are born into rich or poor families, with high or low intellectual capabilities, in a peaceful or conflict-ridden environment. It reconciles the apparent injustice of the Ovarian Lottery, a thought experiment popularized by Warren Buffet, with the belief that God is fair and just.<sup>28</sup> (Conversable Economist 2022) However, absolute belief in this theory leads to a startling conclusion: we should not help disadvantaged groups like the low-income and physically disabled as they are directly responsible for their situation.

Resurrection in the Quran states that the body is physically raised and reunited with the soul on the Day of Judgement, when Allah decides whether a soul is sent to "jannat" (paradise) or "jahannam" (hell) depending on the individual's actions during his life on Earth. The idea that one has to experience the consequences of his actions in the same life could be more effective in encouraging kindness, when compared to the Gita's notion of receiving karma in a next life when most people do not even remember their past actions. However, when dealing with sinners, reincarnation in the Gita could be considered more constructive than resurrection in the Quran. While the former gives sinner souls another chance to improve themselves and takes a rehabilitative approach, the latter sentences them to eternal damnation and is more punitive in nature.

Both religions suggest that one's behavior on Earth has consequences in the afterlife. However, this conflicts with the idea that God is prescient, as noted by Augustine, Boethius, and countless other philosophical theists. If God already knows what will happen in the future, humans cannot make any decision that contradicts his foreknowledge. Since human actions are deterministic and not a product of free will, it can be argued that it is unjust to reward good behavior and punish malice in the afterlife.



## Conclusion

The two scriptures evidently share several similarities in terms of their teachings however unfortunately, have been at times manipulated and weaponized by individuals and groups to serve their vested interests. Such manipulations deviate from the true essence of the sacred texts and undermine their genuine message of peace, harmony, and compassion.

The two scriptures offer valuable insights, most of which are relevant even today to society. However, some parts may seem dated, and it is imperative for us to adapt these aspects to the modern world while preserving the wisdom they contain.

In a world where rigid cultural viewpoints divide us, it is imperative to view other religious texts in an inclusive and open-minded manner, rather than blindly disregarding them. Embracing the best teachings from the Gita and Quran such as empathy, love and moral responsibility can lead individuals towards a happier life and contribute to a more inclusive and harmonious society.

## Bibliography

1. Hume, David. Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. 1779.
2. The Pen Magazine. "Does Allah have any physical form or shape?" The Pen Magazine, December 5, 2014.
3. Marripedia. "Effects of Religious Practice on Charity." Marripedia. [https://marripedia.org/effects\\_of\\_religious\\_practice\\_on\\_charity](https://marripedia.org/effects_of_religious_practice_on_charity).
4. National Zakat Foundation. "Who has to pay Zakat?" NZF. Last modified October 11, 2021. <https://nzf.org.uk/knowledge/who-has-to-pay-zakat/>.
5. Sadiq, Luqman. "What does the Quran say about Zakat?" The Invitation. Last modified June 1, 2022. <https://www.invitation-magazine.org/what-does-the-quran-say-about-zakat/>.
6. Ayuniyyah, Qurroh, Ataul H. Pramanik, Norma Md Saad, and Muhammad I. Ariffin. "The impact of zakat in poverty alleviation and income inequality reduction from the perspective of gender in West Java, Indonesia." International Journal of Islamic and Middle Eastern Finance and Management 15, no. 5 (February 2, 2022), 924-942.
7. Suprayitno, Eko, and Azhar Harun. "The Impact of Zakat on Aggregate Consumption in Malaysia." Journal of Islamic Economics, Banking and Finance 9, no. 1 (September 8, 2017), 39-62.
8. Azizah, Ummu S., and Muhammad Choirin. "Financial Innovation on Zakat Distribution and Economic Growth." In INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF ZAKAT 2018 PROCEEDINGS. 2019.
9. Farhan. "PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF ZAKAT IMPLEMENTATION AND ITS MANAGEMENT TO REDUCE ECONOMIC GAP." In International Conference and Workshop Series 2017. n.d.
10. Scaria, Seban. "Islamic Finance: Fintech Developments Could Spur Growth in Zakat." ZAWYA - Your Trusted Source for Business and Finance News. Last modified October 4, 2022. <https://www.zawya.com/en/islamic-economy/islamic-finance/islamic-finance-fintech-developments-could-spur-growth-in-zakat-bmpj739n>.
11. Dalela, Ashish. "The Four Legs of Dharma." Shabda Journal. Last modified January 2, 2018. [https://journal.shabda.co/2018/01/02/four-legs-dharma/#The\\_Third\\_Leg\\_of\\_Kindness](https://journal.shabda.co/2018/01/02/four-legs-dharma/#The_Third_Leg_of_Kindness).
12. "What is Daan?" Eshwar Bhakti. n.d. <https://pujayagna.com/blogs/facts-about-hinduism/what-is-daan-donation-in-hinduism>.

13. Desai, Usha. "The concept of sacrifice." *Nidan: International Journal for Indian Studies*, no. 14 (2002), 53-59.
14. Szeto, Lauren. "4 Reasons Why Humans Are Materialistic | Nova." *Nova\_website (blog)*. August 19, 2020. <https://novamoney.com/blog/17-4-reasons-why-humans-are-materialistic/>.
15. Unanue, Wenceslao, Helga Dittmar, Vivian L. Vignoles, and Maarten Vansteenkiste. "Materialism and Well-Being in the UK and Chile: Basic Need Satisfaction and Basic Need Frustration as Underlying Psychological Processes." *European Journal of Personality* 28, no. 6 (April 16, 2014), 569-585.
16. Swinyard, William R., Ah-Keng Kau, and Hui-Yin Phua. "Happiness, Materialism, and Religious Experience in the US AND SINGAPORE." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 2001), 13-32.
17. Burgin, Timothy. "The Cause of Suffering: The 5 Kleshas." *Yoga Basics*. Last modified July 14, 2020. <https://www.yogabasics.com/learn/the-cause-of-suffering-the-kleshas/>.
18. Bala, Raj. "Educational Aspects in Bhagvad Gita." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts* 10, no. 1 (January 2022).
19. Siddiqui, Mujibul H. "Objectives of Islamic Education in Muslim School Curriculum." *Global Research Analysis* 1, no. 7 (December 2012). [https://www.worldwidejournals.com/global-journal-for-research-analysis-GJRA/recent\\_issues\\_pdf/2012/December/objectives-of-islamic-education-in-muslim-school-curriculum\\_December\\_2012\\_1599037829\\_17.pdf](https://www.worldwidejournals.com/global-journal-for-research-analysis-GJRA/recent_issues_pdf/2012/December/objectives-of-islamic-education-in-muslim-school-curriculum_December_2012_1599037829_17.pdf).
20. "What is India's Caste System?" *BBC News*. Last modified June 19, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35650616>.
21. Pardeep. "Caste in the Bhagavad Gita – Satanic Verses of Bhagavad Gita." *Velivada*. Last modified March 7, 2023. [https://velivada.com/2018/03/07/caste-in-bhagavad-gita/#google\\_vignette](https://velivada.com/2018/03/07/caste-in-bhagavad-gita/#google_vignette).
22. Neelakandan, Aravindan. "Dr.Ambedkar, Dr.Elst and Bhagavad Gita." *Swarajyamag*. Last modified October 31, 2012. <https://swarajyamag.com/longform/dr-ambedkar-dr-elst-and-bhagavad-gita>.
23. Tanweer, Ayan. "» Islam Calls Out Caste-Based Discrimination, But Reality Is Far From Otherwise." *Youth Ki Awaaz: Where Young India Writes*. Last modified July 15, 2021. <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2021/07/caste-based-discrimination-among-indian-muslims/>.
24. Ears. "The Myth of Meritocracy." *European Academy on Religion and Society*. Last modified July 5, 2021. <https://europeanacademyofreligionandsociety.com/news/the-myth-of-meritocracy/>.
25. Reynolds, Gabriel S. "Heaven, Hell, and Non-Muslims in the Qur'an." *Yale University Press*, March 2020. <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2020/03/19/heaven-hell-and-non-muslims-in-the-quran/>.
26. Ratner, Paul. "10 Reasons Atheists Do It Better." *Big Think*. Last modified April 19, 2016. <https://bigthink.com/thinking/10-benefits-of-atheism/>.
27. Bora, Manashi. "THE CONCEPT OF LIBERATION (MOKSHA) IN THE BHAGAVAD GITA." *MSSV Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (n.d.). [www.mssv.ac.in/media-library/uploads/LxnLSBQpiUMYP3Oiq3eBJzoDZINSEYmJxqxYIEzj.pdf](http://www.mssv.ac.in/media-library/uploads/LxnLSBQpiUMYP3Oiq3eBJzoDZINSEYmJxqxYIEzj.pdf).
28. Conversable Economist. "Warren Buffett on the Ovarian Lottery." *Conversable Economist - In Hume's Spirit, I Will Attempt to Serve As an Ambassador from My World of Economics, and Help in "finding Topics of Conversation Fit for the Entertainment of Rational Creatures."*. Last modified November 25, 2022. <https://conversableeconomist.com/2022/11/25/warren-buffett-on-the-ovarian-lottery/>.