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2. Recontextualizing the Teachings of the Gita to Higher Education in the COVID-19 Pandemic Context

Hari C. Kamali

Abstract

This chapter intends to recontextualize the teachings of the Gita to higher education in the COVID-19 pandemic context and justifies how these teachings can be employed as the guidelines to mitigate the challenges of higher education in the pandemic. This study, as such, is guided by hermeneutics as a method under interpretive design. So the data have been taken from the text, the Gita, and these data have been recontextualized and interpreted in the context of higher education in the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that the teachings of the Gita can be recontextualized to higher education in this COVID-19 pandemic context and that these teachings can help university teachers, students and staff combat challenges in the pandemic and continue their duty like Arjuna in the pedagogy of the Gita which took place in the pretext of the war of the Mahabharata.

Keywords

challenges, COVID-19 pandemic, hermeneutics, higher education, recontextualization, teachings of the Gita

Introduction

The Gita is a scripture, a classic, which has occupied a significant space in Hinduism as well as in many other spiritual pursuits because the teachings of the Gita have been recontextualized in different contexts over time and their significant influence on different areas of knowledge has been established (Pattanaik, 2015). Being guided by the teachings of the Gita, as Arjuna was empowered to manage crises in the war of the Mahabharata and become victorious, teaching and learning in the higher educational institutions (HEIs) can run despite the pandemic of COVID-19 when the teachings of the Gita, as instructed by Lord Krishna to Arjuna in the Gita, can be recontextualized to the present context of COVID-19 pandemic in higher education (HE). Thus, this paper is an attempt to mitigate the challenges in HE posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and look for some possible ways out.

Since the first outbreak of a viral causing pneumonia in Wuhan of China on December 2019, it got so spread that World Health Organization (WHO) declared this case as “a pandemic” on 11 March 2020 because by then thousands of millions of people around the world had suffered (International Association of Universities [IAU], 2021). At present, as of 15 June 2021 the total number of confirmed cases of COVID-19, according to WHO (2021), is 175, 847, 347 and the number of deaths is 3, 807, 176. With regard to the number of students in higher education, European Union (EU, 2021) reported that “approximately 220 million students globally have been affected due to the disruption caused by COVID-19.” This report only concerns the COVID-19 in its first phase; there are some more victims in its second phase, so the total number of students who suffered the pandemic might go above 300 million. Furthermore, combining the number of the faculties and the staff who suffered from this pandemic, this figure will go still higher. Thus, this suggests that this pandemic has unprecedented effects on HE, and this is more likely to remain so for a certain period in future.

With regard to the challenges in HE, Eggins et al. (2021) argue that, besides the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, there are some common challenges which are always prevalent in HE, e. g., massification of higher education, transformation of higher education from a public good to a private good to the knowledge economy, and the impact of new technology. Besides, they have identified some more specific challenges caused by this pandemic, e. g. the inequalities in access to digital technology and online learning, healthcare situations, the economic collapse, and the decline of international student mobility. These are the major challenges faced by higher educational institutions globally and Nepal is no more an exception! The academic programs in Nepalese HEIs were severely affected; as a result, the academic sessions were extended for about a year. It was mainly due to the lack of access of digital technology and online learning.

Despite these challenges in HE, Altbach and Wit (2021) foresee some positive aspects of COVID-19 pandemic on higher education. They argue that this pandemic has added to “an increased recognition of the relevance and importance of distance higher education and accompanying improvement in both the methods and technology related to distance instruction and research collaboration.” This positive prospect of the effects of COVID-19 on HE has also been supported by a survey in which 424 universities and other HEIs were involved from 109 countries. This survey report states: “Many of the respondents see the experience of working and teaching from distance as an important opportunity to learn from this exceptional situation and to propose more flexible learning opportunities, explore blended or hybrid learning and mixing synchronous learning with asynchronous learning” (IAU, 2020, p. 26). Similarly, it was also reported that this unplanned and unprepared experience in distance teaching and learning has led to staff and faculties’

capacity building which is more likely to be fruitful in future academic practices.

Although COVID-19 seems to have some positive effects on higher education in future, it has equally been a challenge for many HEIs at present as they are unable to provide students with the technical assistance required to meet the run of distance higher education. This is what is the most challenging problem at present and may remain so in some HEIs for some years. Eggins *et al.* (2021), in the same vein, stress that the pandemic, like other crisis, might open up new opportunities, for better or worse. For its better side the most significant aspect they have identified with the pandemic is that it fosters the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of our world and the importance of understanding of what is beneficial for the common good of all society. This can be observed in the combined efforts made by global communities to combat the crises in the pandemic and it is the result of this effort that they have been able to mitigate its effects and even produce some vaccines against the COVID-19 virus. They, however, argue that this pandemic has revealed a number of fundamental issues in relation to HE in terms of its purpose, its relation to the world of work and the other domains of life, its role in the wellbeing of society and the making of a greater and more just world. Such challenges in HE are likely to continue even after the pandemic is controlled.

With regard to the practices to face challenges caused by the pandemic and mitigate its effects, the technical and scientific advancements will certainly have most dominant role to bring it under control. However, this may not be sufficient to bring about changes in human nature and behavior as all the scientific and technical achievements by now are insufficient to this case of COVID-19 pandemic. So it is equally essential that these developments be supplemented by other studies related to humanities. In this regard, the hermeneutics of the classics like the Gita will supplement the struggles against such pandemic like this one and make them more effective as these classics contain wisdom deduced from long-standing practices against many challenges like this pandemic faced by human beings in course of their existence. Thus, this chapter intends to explore the teachings of the Gita guided by the hermeneutic approach and contextualize these teachings to HE in the COVID-19 pandemic context.

Literature Review

The Gita has been accepted as a classic full of wisdom in Hindu tradition and has gained a deep respect by scholars from different religious backgrounds due to its universal message. So it has been studied in relation to different pursuits of knowledge enhancement, e. g., education, psychology, politics, management, environment, philosophy, etc. (Kamali, 2021) That is, the Gita has something significant to say in every sector of human pursuits (Pattanaik, 2015). Thus, studying the Gita from educational perspective, Ghimire (2017) has shown its significance in education as it covers

all educational sectors. The key constructs of educational thoughts he has identified in the teachings of the Gita are: awakening of the inner heart; respect to the disciple; artistic teaching; loving and warm behavior of the Guru; exploration of strength of the disciple; frequency in counseling; self-consciousness to duty; knowledge of result; encouragement; assurance of security; solution to doubts and curiosity; practical and divine knowledge; submission and devotion; accountability of the Guru; confession of weaknesses; use of Yoga-Energy and so on. All these constructs have something positive to contribute to present crises in HE as the purpose of the Gita, as Jamwal (2012) discussed, is to remove delusion caused by ignorance, to be victorious in the war of crimes against humanity, and to show the path to the human beings to reach their destination in a disciplined way.

In this pandemic context academics need to play a crucial role to guide students and cultivate ethics in them so that they can behave properly. For this, Sahnil and Rao's (2017) study of the Gita from the ethical perspective will make a sense. In this study they regarded Lord Krishna as a professional teacher and Arjuna as a student and concluded that Lord Krishna is an ideal teacher who has been successful in making his disciple follow the ethical path even in the adverse situation. In this context they suggest that Lord Krishna has played the following roles in the pedagogy of the Gita (p. 718):

- Inculcate holistic approach to a problem;
- State rules and regulations;
- Be a knowledge provider;
- Solve doubts and confusions;
- Probe questions;
- Repeat complex concepts;
- Describe students' duties;
- Motivate students to perform their duties;
- Be a guide; be open to individual differences;
- Instill qualities in students; and
- Give freedom of choice.

These roles are still significant for academics in teaching in the time of the pandemic. Besides, Gayathri and Meenakshi (2012) argue that the teachings of the Gita can help students enhance their emotional intelligence which, in turn, guides them to identify the root cause of miseries and maintain emotional stability even in the time of crises like Arjuna in the war of Mahabharata. This suggests that teachers have leading roles to manage students' emotions in the time of crises.

Like Arjuna being victorious in the war against the Kauravas through employing his emotional intelligence for stress management, the teachings of the Gita can assist faculties and students in HE facing the crises in the time of this pandemic as they are helpful in building up human capital (Satpathy & Muniapan, 2008; Verma & Singh, 2014). Similarly,

Murugan and Jeyakumar (2019) argue that the teachings of the Gita can help people to liberate them from their sufferings from everyday life as they can enhance people's self-realization and help in the "development of virtual knowledge, modification of personality, internal consciousness, intellectual and reasoning ability, adjustment in individual and social aims, [and] establishment of importance of duties in life" (p. 589). Accordingly, when faculties and students in HEIs develop these qualities through self-realization, this will certainly help them manage every crisis in this pandemic and proceed with their teaching and learning.

Regarding how the teachings of the Gita can help faculties and students in HEIs enhance their spiritual intelligence, manage stress and develop leadership qualities, this can be observed in Gandhi's spiritual and political life because in Gandhi's political struggle his spiritual strength guided by the teachings of the Gita has a significant role. To this, Tiwari *et al.* (2019, pp. 7-8) argue that the Gita has helped him to manage crises in his life through the practice of *karma* [duty], *bhakti* [devotion], *jnana* [knowledge], *satya* [truth], *brahmacharya* [celibacy], *aparigraha* [non-possession] and *asteya* [non-stealing]. It was not that easier for Gandhi to fight against the British imperial power, so he had many crises during this struggle. However, he was able to manage them as he was guided by the teachings of the Gita. This suggests that the teachings of the Gita can help HE faculties and students manage the present crisis caused by COVID-19 to a greater extent and continue their duties. Thus, in fighting against crises one needs to act like Gandhi, i.e., a political leader who is capable of managing the challenges and leading them to a position of comfort. Similarly, relating the teachings of the Gita to leadership in the time of crises, Mahadevan (2012) concluded that an inspirational leader can outgrow the vision from the narrow perspective of 'what is in it for me?' to an opportunity to make a difference to the people and the place that they associate with. He further maintains that the leader may not be afraid of anyone and not have any sense of fear in others, and that he/she can have an ability to dramatically transform people and entities that come to his/her contact in a sustained fashion and leave behind an impact that guides a large number of people and organizations for long. It is the need of this time that HE faculties and students need to develop such qualities in themselves in order to combat the crises caused by this pandemic.

The major challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic is the psychological aspect of people in general including the psychology of the academics and students in HEIs. To this, the teachings of the Gita have also been studied in relation to psychology which concerns the nature of suffering, the experience of transcendental consciousness, the development of enlightenment, and the self-interacting dynamics of consciousness (Dillbeck, 1991). As the teachings of the Gita assist the sufferers in understanding the nature of sufferings and finding the ways out to mitigate the causes of the suffering, these teachings can be a great help in the time of this pandemic. Furthermore, Dillbeck (1991) argues that the teachings are

also effective in enhancing enlightenment even in the time of crisis. Thus, he remarks that “the Bhagavad-Gita addresses the cause and elimination of suffering, the levels of the mind, the mechanics of experiencing transcendental consciousness, and the development of higher states of consciousness, or enlightenment, in which life is lived at the highest level of bliss, effectiveness, and universality” (p. 103). This study has shed light on the significance of the Gita for reliving from sufferings and enhancing higher level of consciousness through understanding the individual psychology.

The most relevant study of the Gita in relation to stress management is the study by Deo (2018) who studied the effects of the recitation of the verses of the Gita on the mental state of cancer patients. He experimented with 300 cancer patients at B. P. Koirala Memorial Cancer Hospital, Nepal. The result of this experiment showed that group of the patients who practiced the recitation of the verses from the Gita along with the medicine felt less pain than the group that depended only on medicine. By this he justifies the effectiveness of reciting the Gita on reducing pain in the cancer patients and links it to the psychology of Arjuna in the Gita who was highly disturbed on the battlefield as his mental condition was full of conflicts. However, Lord Krishna empowered him through his teachings. As a result, he was victorious in the war. This study suggests the possibilities that the teachings of the Gita can help the sufferers in the pandemic to manage their stress and proceed with their duties like Arjuna in the battle of the Mahabharata.

All these studies above on the Gita suggest that the teachings of the Gita have wider significance and that they need to be explored further as they contain deep-rooted meanings established through a long practice. In the present context of the COVID-19 pandemic all sectors of human pursuits have suffered as the humanity itself is in crisis. So many efforts have been made from different sectors on how the adverse effects of this pandemic can be mitigated and controlled in time. Similarly, HEIs are gravely concerned with how this pandemic can be controlled and how teaching and learning activities can run as usual. As studies in HE are mainly concerned with these issues, this chapter, in the same vein, is an attempt among many others to explore the challenges in HE in the pandemic context and propose some possible solutions guided by the hermeneutic study of the teachings of the Gita.

Methodology

This study is grounded on hermeneutics as it concerns the critical interpretation and understanding of texts (Zweck, 2008) and perceives meaning as “contextually and historically constructed, discovered, absorbed and resisted” (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018, p. 11). So the Gita has been used as the text for interpretation as it is usual for any classic to undergo hermeneutics (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018). This also includes my “deliberate reflection” from the study of the Gita and observation of the pandemic

phenomena in relation to HE (Redekop, 2010). As the HEIs have suffered globally due to this pandemic, there is a grave need of Hermes who can understand the cause of this pandemic and find its solution (Paterson & Higgs, 2005, p. 342). Thus, as an interpreter, I have taken “a heuristic action” (Melchin & Picard as cited in Redekop, 2010, p. 248) against the teachings of the Gita to suggest that they have something significant to contribute to mitigate the challenges of HE in the COVID-19 pandemic context.

As meanings emerge “through a dialogue or hermeneutic conversation between the text and the inquirer” (Koch as cited in Paterson & Higgs, 2005, p. 342), I have used hermeneutics to deduce meanings through recontextualization of the teachings of the Gita so that these meanings could give some guidelines to manage the complex human phenomena due to the pandemic. This is very relevant at present as Paterson and Higgs (2005) maintain that hermeneutics is an “interpretive research approach which can examine complex human phenomena from multiple perspectives to produce rich theoretical and experiential interpretations of these phenomena” (p. 354). Thus, I have analyzed the present complex phenomena caused by the pandemic through recontextualization of the teachings of the Gita and deduced some guidelines to mitigate the challenges in HEIs and assist in knowledge advancement in HE.

Discussion and Conclusion

There are some similarities between the context of the teachings of the Gita and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, both this pandemic and the war of the Mahabharata in which the teachings of the Gita occurred are/were devastating and beyond control for certain period. Similarly, like Arjuna’s unwilling to fight the battle (verse 1.46, *Bhagavadgita As It Is*) people are losing hope to fight against this pandemic. So it is necessary that, along with some scientific advancements to solve the crises related to this pandemic, some instructions, like Arjuna being instructed by Lord Krishna in the Gita, are equally essential in the time of such pandemic because such instructions contain secret knowledge (verse 18.64) which can empower people like Arjuna (verse 18.64, 73) to fight against such pandemic. Similarly, like Arjuna being equipped with the divine eyes (verse 11.8) which helped him see Lord Krishna’s mystical power, the teachings of the Gita can help one perceive both the causes and solutions of a problem from an individual perspective—even in the pandemic like the COVID-19! Thus, being guided by the hermeneutic approach, in what follows are some teachings of the Gita that can be employed to empower academics and students in HEIs so that they can combat the challenges in the pandemic and continue their duties.

The chaotic nature of the COVID-19 pandemic can be compared with the frequent occurrence of the binary oppositions in the teachings of the Gita and the dilemma they have created in Arjuna. Such oppositions

are *sukha* and *dukha* ([happiness and sadness] verse 2.14); *karma* and *akarma* ([action and inaction] 3.8); *siddhva* and *asiddhva* ([success and failure] 4.22); *mana* and *apamana* ([honour and dishonor] 6.7); *sadhu* and *papi* ([the pious one and the sinner] 6.9) *sat* and *asat* ([spirit and matter] 9.19); *bhaya* and *abhaya* ([fear and fearlessness] 10.4); *sattva* and *tamas* ([goodness and ignorance] 14.15); *kshara* and *akshara* ([that which can be destroyed and which cannot be destroyed] 15.16), *pravriti* and *nivriti* [tendency to act and not to act], *karya* and *akarya* [actions which need to be done and should not be done], *bhaya* and *abhaya* ([the state of having fear and without fear] 18.30), etc. All these oppositions, however, have been treated as complementary to each other in the teachings of the Gita. As a result, Arjuna was able to find the way out to his duty (verse 18.73). This suggests that any phenomena contain such oppositions which need to be understood and accepted as they are. That is, one need not be worried with any conditions of adversity as it also contains some points of privilege. This can be observed even in the reports on HE in the COVID-19 pandemic as they have accepted both the challenges and opportunities of this pandemic (IAU, 2020; Eggins *et al.*, 2021; EU, 2021).

The state of Arjuna's fear and unwillingness to fight the battle in the very beginning (verses 1.29, 46) refers to the chaotic condition as can be seen in the pandemic. Similarly, Lord Krishna's equivocal and confusing (*vyamisreneva vakyena*) teachings (verse 3.2) can be compared with different perceptions on the causes and solutions of the COVID-19 virus. However, despite all such chaos, Lord Krishna has advised Arjuna to take part in the battle as it is his duty. This suggests that despite the pandemic we need to continue our duties the way it is possible because being involved in duty one can be truly protected as Lord Krishna affirms that he will manifest whenever and wherever there is turbulence in the practice of his/her duty/dharma (verse 4.7). This affirmation can be compared with the finding of vaccines against the COVID-19 virus. Thus, this teaching of the Gita suggests that although it is natural to have fear, confusion and inaction in the time of crisis like pandemic, it is also important for people to remain hopeful for the positive outcome and continue their duties/action. This teaching of the Gita ultimately empowers academics and students in HEIs and helps them combat any challenges cautiously.

The case of this pandemic can also be compared with *asvattha* ([a banyan tree] verse 15.3) as described in the Gita. This tree is so mysterious that its real form cannot be perceived. The COVID-19 virus has been like this tree without any specific identification. Similarly, this pandemic can also be compared with Lord Krishna's Universal Form as described in the Gita (verses 11.5-7, 10, 11, 16, 19, 20) because both are equally terrifying in their initial stages. So people at present are so terrified with the COVID-19 that they are feeling like Arjuna who witnessed the Lord's inconceivable destructive form! Upon Arjuna's request the Lord again appeared in the ordinary form which normalized his awe-struck condition. This suggests that this pandemic can be brought into a normal condition as there are

some scientists, like Arjuna (verse 11.8), who are equipped with the divine eyes that are likely to produce and enhance the working of the vaccines effectively. As implied by this, some countries like America, China, the United Kingdom, Russia and India have been able to develop some vaccines which are likely to be effective against the COVID-19 virus (WHO, 2021). Similarly, the universities, faculties, staff and students in HEIs are taking this pandemic as an opportunity to transform teaching and learning into different modes—online and blended (Eggins *et al.*, 2021) so that teaching and learning in HE can be made effective even in the time of the pandemic. This posits that like Arjuna in the war of the Mahabharata, HEIs can be victorious in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another important teaching of the Gita that can be fruitful for academics and students in HEIs is to possess *sattvik jnana* which refers to the knowledge by which one undivided spiritual nature is seen in all living entities though they are divided into innumerable forms (verse 18.20; Prabhupada, 1986, p. 717). This is the most confidential and secret knowledge (verses 18.63-64) which is the result of the practice of *sattvik buddhi* which Prabhupada (1986, verse 18.30, p. 723) explains as the understanding by which “one knows what ought to be done and what ought not to be done, what is to be feared and what is not to be feared, what is binding and what is liberating.” Such practice of *sattvik buddhi* is an effective guideline for academics and students to keep themselves safe in the time of the pandemic like COVID-19 and pursue the goal of HE as they ought to know what is to be done, how, when and where.

Implications

The Gita is accepted as the classic that contains “an eternal intellectual and spiritual resource of humanity” (Nadkarni, 2017, p. 26). So it has been studied over time in relation to different fields of inquiries like education, psychology, politics, management, environment, health and wellbeing, etc. (Kamali, 2021). Besides being read as a scripture for salvation in life by Hindus, its significance has been established in different contexts by the researchers—it can, thus, be regarded as a storehouse of wisdom which can be explored over and over. This chapter, in the same vein, has explored the teachings of the Gita guided by hermeneutic approach and interpreted these teachings with regard to HE in the COVID-19 pandemic context. As interpreted above, it is suggested that the teachings of the Gita can guide university faculties and students to their duty [*karma*] of teaching and learning despite all challenges like Arjuna guided by Lord Krishna to his duty in the time of the war. Thus, in both the contexts it is their duties that drive them into action; however, the modes of action can differ from context to context. As the teachings of the Gita guides one to achieve *sattvik jnana* [the most secret knowledge] through the practice of *sattvik buddhi* [the scientific knowledge] in the time of chaos and conflicts, academics and students in HEIs are more likely to overcome this pandemic and succeed

in their teaching and learning if they follow the teachings of the Gita. This can, however, be a case of dispute among researchers, which is likely to open the door for further research in this issue.

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Author

Hari C. Kamali, Ph. D., is an Associate Professor of English Education at Far Western University, Nepal. He has proposed ‘deconstructionist’ as the role of a teacher in postmethod pedagogy in his PhD dissertation. His primary research interests include deconstructive pedagogy, higher education, post-modern spirituality and peace education. Email: hckamali2019@gmail.com