



Women's Roles in Politics and Society According to the Bhagavad Gita

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Abstract

The Bhagavad Gita, one of the most profound spiritual texts in Hindu philosophy, offers timeless insights into duty (dharma), morality, and the roles individuals play in society. While the Gita does not specifically delineate a separate doctrine for women in politics or society, its teachings can be interpreted to highlight their roles and responsibilities. This paper explores the Bhagavad Gita's philosophical guidance on women's societal and political participation, focusing on the principles of dharma, equality, and the universality of the soul (atman). The study underscores how these teachings can empower women to engage meaningfully in public life while fulfilling their societal roles.

New words: Philosophy, Morality, Societal and Political, Dharma, Women.

Introduction

The Bhagavad Gita, a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, addresses the moral dilemmas and duties of individuals. While the text does not explicitly discuss women in leadership or politics, its emphasis on dharma and spiritual equality provides a framework for understanding women's roles in society and politics. In ancient Indian society, women's roles were often confined to domestic and familial spheres. However, interpretations of the Gita suggest that women, like men, have the potential to fulfill their dharma in diverse arenas, including politics and public service.

The Concept of Dharma and Women's Roles

Dharma, a central theme of the Gita, is the moral and ethical duty of an individual based on their role in society. Krishna teaches that one's duty is determined not by gender but



by their inherent qualities and responsibilities. In Chapter 3, Verse 35, Krishna emphasizes that performing one's own dharma, even imperfectly, is better than performing another's perfectly:

"Better is one's own dharma, though imperfectly performed, than the dharma of another well performed."

This statement implies that women, too, must embrace their unique responsibilities in society. If their dharma includes roles in leadership, education, or politics, they should fulfill these with dedication. This perspective aligns with the idea that gender does not limit an individual's capacity to contribute to societal well-being.

Equality of the Soul (Atman)

The Bhagavad Gita asserts the spiritual equality of all beings. In Chapter 5, Verse 18, Krishna states:

"The wise see no distinction between a learned Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, or a dog-eater."

This verse underscores the universality of the soul, transcending physical attributes such as gender or social status. Women, as spiritual beings, possess the same potential as men to attain self-realization and contribute to society. This spiritual equality forms the basis for advocating women's equal participation in politics and governance.

Women in Leadership and Governance

Although the Gita is set in a patriarchal context, its teachings can be extrapolated to support women's leadership. Leadership, as described in the Gita, is rooted in selfless service (karma yoga) and wisdom (Jnana yoga). Krishna advises Arjuna to act selflessly for the greater good, a principle that applies to all leaders, regardless of gender. Women leaders can draw from these teachings to lead with compassion, integrity, and commitment to societal welfare.



The Gita also discusses the qualities of an ideal leader in Chapter 2, highlighting traits such as fearlessness, discipline, and equanimity. These qualities are not gender-specific and emphasize the potential of women to excel in political and social roles.

Women's Contributions to Society: A Gita-Inspired Perspective

The Gita encourages individuals to act in alignment with their dharma and contribute positively to society. Women, as nurturers and caretakers, traditionally play a vital role in shaping families and communities. However, the Gita's principles suggest that their contributions need not be limited to the domestic sphere. By embodying qualities such as determination, wisdom, and compassion, women can actively participate in public life, driving social and political progress.

Relevance in Contemporary Society

In modern times, the principles of the Gita can inspire women to overcome societal barriers and embrace leadership roles. The text's emphasis on dharma, equality, and selfless action aligns with the ideals of gender equality and women's empowerment. Women leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi, and others have exemplified how these principles can guide impactful **leadership**.

The Concept of Dharma and Women's Roles

The concept of dharma in the Bhagavad Gita refers to the moral and ethical duty that each individual must perform to maintain harmony and order in society. Dharma is not uniform for everyone; it is based on one's inherent qualities (guna), actions (karma), and position within society. While the Gita does not explicitly assign specific roles to women, its teachings on dharma provide a framework for understanding the responsibilities and contributions of women in society, both traditionally and in broader contexts like politics and leadership.

Dharma and Gender Neutrality in the Gita

One of the key teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* is that dharma is universal but also personalized, emphasizing actions based on one's unique position and skills rather than on



societal stereotypes. Krishna's advice to Arjuna applies to all individuals, regardless of gender:

"One should not abandon the duties suited to their nature, even if they seem imperfectly performed" (Gita 18:47).

This indicates that women, like men, have their unique roles to play in society, guided by their nature and circumstances. Women are encouraged to embrace their dharma without being limited by traditional roles if their skills and nature point to responsibilities outside the conventional domestic domain.

Women's Dharma in Traditional Roles

Traditionally, dharma for women in ancient Indian society was tied to familial responsibilities, such as care giving, nurturing, and maintaining household harmony. These roles were considered essential for sustaining the family and society. For example:

- Women were seen as upholders of values, culture, and morality within the family.
- They were pivotal in shaping future generations through their role as mothers and educators.

The *Gita* does not undermine these roles; instead, it stresses the importance of fulfilling one's responsibilities with devotion and selflessness, whether in the family or the community.

Expanding the Scope of Dharma for Women

The *Bhagavad Gita* encourages individuals to transcend limiting identities, including those tied to gender. In Chapter 2, Verse 47, Krishna explains that one's focus should be on action itself, not the results of the action:

"You have the right to perform your prescribed duties but are not entitled to the fruits of your actions."

This principle empowers women to expand their roles beyond the home if their skills, interests, or circumstances lead them to contribute in other areas, such as governance,



education, or social reform. It advocates for the pursuit of duty in any form, provided it aligns with the broader good and spiritual growth.

Dharma in Leadership and Public Roles

Leadership is an essential aspect of societal dharma, and the qualities of a good leader, as described in the *Gita*, apply equally to women and men. Krishna emphasizes traits such as selflessness, courage, discipline, and the ability to make decisions for the greater good. Women's dharma in leadership roles involves balancing personal and public responsibilities while adhering to these principles.

For example:

- Women in politics may see their dharma as advocating for policies that uplift marginalized groups, promote equality, and protect cultural values.
- In positions of leadership, women are encouraged to act decisively, with integrity, and in alignment with their spiritual and moral compass.

The Role of Sattva in Women's Dharma

The *Gita* explains that all individuals are influenced by three gunas (qualities): sattva (goodness), rajas (passion), and tamas (ignorance). A person's dharma is best fulfilled when the quality of sattva predominates, as it leads to clarity, wisdom, and selfless action. For women, embodying sattva in their duties—whether as mothers, educators, professionals, or leaders—creates harmony and fosters societal progress.

For instance:

- A woman working in education may prioritize cultivating knowledge and values in students (sattva).
- A woman in politics may focus on creating just policies that promote equality and inclusivity, guided by wisdom and selflessness.

Women as Agents of Change



The Bhagavad Gita encourages all individuals to act as agents of change within their spheres of influence. For women, their dharma might include challenging societal norms when necessary to fulfill their higher purpose. This aligns with Krishna's teaching that one should not shy away from difficult or uncomfortable duties if they serve the greater good.

Historical examples of women fulfilling their expanded dharma include:

- **Draupadi**, from the Mahabharata, who challenged injustice and took an active role in shaping political outcomes.
- **Rani Lakshmibai**, who fought for freedom during India's colonial period, embodying courage and leadership.
- **Indira Gandhi**, who took on the dharma of political leadership to guide the nation during critical times?

Challenges to Women's Dharma in Society

Despite the teachings of the *Gita*, societal norms have historically constrained women's roles, limiting their ability to fulfill broader dharmic responsibilities. Overcoming these challenges requires interpreting the Gita's emphasis on inner qualities, spiritual equality, and moral action in ways that empower women to rise above societal restrictions and realize their full potential.

Conclusion

The Bhagavad Gita, though rooted in an ancient context, offers enduring wisdom on human potential and societal roles. Its teachings on dharma, spiritual equality, and selfless action provide a philosophical foundation for understanding women's roles in politics and society. By interpreting the Gita in light of contemporary challenges, women can find inspiration to fulfill their duties and contribute meaningfully to societal progress.

The concept of dharma in the *Bhagavad Gita* offers a broad and flexible framework for understanding women's roles in society. It encourages women to perform their duties—whether in the domestic sphere, professional fields, or political leadership—with



dedication and selflessness. By aligning their actions with their innate qualities and higher purpose, women can fulfill their dharma in ways that contribute to personal growth and societal harmony. The timeless teachings of the *Gita* thus provide a source of inspiration for women to embrace their responsibilities and transcend barriers, contributing meaningfully to politics, society, and beyond.

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