

Yoga and Transformation of the Inner Self: Implications for Wellbeing

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Abstract- *Jñāna Yoga and Bhakti Yoga help in transforming the inner self, coping with stress and enhancing wellbeing. Jñāna Yoga is the path of wisdom that helps to understand the inner self in relation to the external world. It exemplifies the knowledge of the eternal, omnipresent and immortal self. Bhakti Yoga is the path of devotion to God, focusing on the notion of love, forgiveness and compassion. It helps to identify the inner strengths, morality and positive traits that mediate the experience of true self and emotions. The practice of yoga, as elucidated in the Bhagavad Gītā, helps to understand the experience and regulation the negative disruptive emotions and modifying one's self-awareness. The paper further explains how yoga inculcates positive values and makes life more meaningful. The psychological benefits of yoga on emotional and subjective wellbeing, coping with stress and depression are highlighted. The practice of yoga offers a significant perspective for prevention and treatment of mental disorders and physical illness.*

Keyword: *Yoga, self, wellbeing, Bhagavad Gītā.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Yoga in the West is often referred to as a mind-body practice [6]. Research on yoga has mainly focused on the effects of meditation, pranayama (breathing exercises), mantras, lifestyle changes, spiritual beliefs, and *āsana* [21] on wellbeing. The present study was specifically designed to understand how *Jñāna Yoga* and *Bhakti Yoga* as elucidated in Bhagavad Gītā transforms the inner self to influence health and well-being.

The word 'Yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit root '*yujā*' and '*yujir*' meaning 'to unite' or 'to integrate'. It is one of the oldest theoretical frameworks for understanding the connection between our "individual consciousness and an infinite, all-pervading consciousness" [17]. It is an ancient practice that aims to

bring balance and overall health to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the individual [16]. The cultivation of wellness and well-being is one of the primary functions of a Yoga practice. The dimension of spiritual health has been suggested by the World Health Organization (WHO) in recent times. Indian psychology highlights yoga as the qualitative aspect of health [2] pertaining to the harmony of major and minor energies of psycho-physiological functioning. Yoga is a method of self-analysis or '*swadhyaya*' involving a holistic view of the self. About 37% of the "healthy working years" (WHO) are lost due to mental disorders. Therefore, it is important to find how yoga can work as a complementary and alternative method to prevent and treat mental and physical disorders [1]. Yoga helps to cope with stress by influencing various physiological parameters (such as breathing and heartbeat) and anxiety and depression symptoms [4]. The focus of the present study was to understand how *Jñāna Yoga* (JY) and *Bhakti Yoga* (BY) contribute to health rather than merely treat illness. The insights gained from Bhagavad Gītā can help the reader overcome all tensions and conflicts in life, making life more fulfilling, content, with self-realization and actualization [5].

2. YOGA AND WELLBEING

Subjective well-being incorporates a wide range of domains such as happiness, life satisfaction and reduced negative emotions [8]. Practice of yoga has been found to be beneficial for mental wellness by expanding consciousness and self-growth [22], facilitating positive affect and alleviating mental discomforts [6], helping enhance mental health [3], reduce depression [11], enhancing wellbeing [14] diminish symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder and anxiety [7]. Yoga has

been found to reduce general psychopathology and increase health-related quality of life [11], managing stress [13], reduce stress [15] and enhancing positive mood [18]. Hence the present study intended to examine if reading about yoga was also effective in enhancing wellbeing.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL RELEVANCE OF BHAGAVAD-GITA IN UNDERSTANDING THE SELF

Bhagavad Gītā (BG) exemplifies the cultural psychology of traditional India that is anchored in an ancient system of values, attitudes, and behaviour [10]. It carries immense knowledge and wisdom, which can make the life of a person more enjoyable, without conflict, and confusion. BG offers an individualistic and holistic approach that could lead to development of psychotherapeutic interventions focused on enhancing personal well-being and health rather than just psychiatric symptoms. Bhagavad Gītā explains the practical applications of knowledge and experience by bringing the individual into contact with the field of cosmic intelligence. It not only illustrates the cause of suffering but also ways to eliminate it. It demonstrates how the levels of consciousness can be altered and transcendental states can be achieved via meditation and practice of "anasakti" non-attachment. This study aimed to examine how yoga influences self-awareness and emotion regulation and cognition.

It teaches us to overcome the despondency and resolve the conflict dutifully by overcoming one's fears, feelings of helplessness, negative emotions and thoughts by perceiving the situation in a proper perspective, so that one does not break down or suffers from any kind of mental illness nor to withdraw from life and its struggles. The real enemy of the self-resides within the person and not outside. By destroying the desires, *kamarupam*, *kama*, *krodha* or wrath, we think clearly. When desire is frustrated it leads to wrath. Anger and wrath cause bewilderment and delusion (*sammoha*). Delusion leads to memory loss, which destructs *budhi*, intelligence, and reason. When there is no reasoning ability then one perishes (II, 62-63). Discipline helps to control the mind and gain stability and tranquillity (II, 64-65). One has to take of one's self for lifting oneself, *ātma ātmanamuddharat*. The higher self is the only friend of the self. While the lower self is the enemy of the self. The self becomes a friend to a person who has learnt to

conquer the lower self (sense desires and passion) by the higher self (VI, 5-6). Hence one must learn to control his senses and emotions by *niyatamanah*, of controlled mind (VI, 15). The true self is merely a witness to what the lower self does. When one is able to develop equanimity (*samatva*) under different conditions of life, then one is more likely to have a better mental health and wellbeing.

4. BHAKTI YOGA AND JÑĀNA YOGA

'*Bhakti Yoga*' is the path of exclusive devotion to God with love. The trust is placed in the supreme power. When one worships God, then while practicing his love for God, he becomes sacrificial and also tends to treat others generously. One who devotes his life to worshipping, focusing on *nirguna* contemplation, the absolute truth, knowing the formless, true self, then there is no suffering. To surrender the ego and perform duties selflessly, being non-attached with utmost devotion to the God. When one completely identifies with the God, then there is no confusion, conflict or pain. This has to be practiced regularly with "*dhyana*" or meditation and liberate the self with the higher level of consciousness. '*Jñāna Yoga*' is the path of wisdom. It embodies the knowledge of the eternal, omnipresent, imperishable and omniscient self, knowledge of self. Maslow used *Jñāna Yoga* in defining the peak experiences of self-actualizers and 'transcenders'. *Jñāna Yoga* emphasizes upon deep contemplation to gain wisdom and to be with the God. It is associated with *ātmasākshātkāra*, Self-realization. Meditation is a technique for self-realization that helps the person to raise consciousness from its ordinary working conditions to higher levels till it attains universality (Bhagavad Gītā, p. 192). By concentrating the mind, one is able to restrain it from desires and possessions. Before engaging in meditation or *dhyana*, one has to be temperate in food, recreation and sleep (VI, 17). When the mind is free from wandering, then the thought that comes will rest, and one will find satisfaction in the self by beholding the self. The bliss is beyond the reach of the senses and this is the ultimate that one can gain (20-22). In order to control the mind, one has to practice (*abhyasa*) to restrain the mind and be detached, (*vairāgya*).

4.1 Need for the study

Bhagavad-Gita can become a great source of motivation in improving the quality of life, hence this research was

envisioned with the purpose to understand how reading this Holy Scripture and getting acquainted with yoga will mediate health and well-being. The wisdom gained from Bhagavad-Gita will surely lay the foundation for leading a fruitful and happy life. In today's world of competitiveness and stress, there is dearth of time to look into our meaning in life and what makes our life satisfying. Reading Bhagavad-Gita will help us gain an insight into the working of the world in a meaningful way, more positively and with determination and tolerance. Bhagavad-Gita provides valuable information into the self and its realization and how to transform the negative debilitating emotions into more positive ones. Very little research has been done on its teachings. People across time and cultures interpret the teachings of Bhagavad-Gita in ways to meet their own requirements [19]. It is important to study Gita for its positive methods and teachings.

4.2 Importance of this study

The study aimed to investigate how Bhagavad-Gita (BG) was beneficial to the general non-clinical population at large and not to the religious sect that spent most of their time in reading this text, nor the vulnerable people. This has important implications for clinical psychology as it focuses upon the relationship between yoga and transformation of self that involves a spiritualistic approach to integrate the mind and body to achieve health and well-being instead of focusing on the disease, illness or mental health problems. The approach is more preventative than curative, focusing on optimizing health and preventing illness. The focus here is upon the individual realizing his or her own abilities, their ability to cope with the normal stresses of life, working productively and fruitfully, and the ability to contribute to his or her community. Recognizing health as a state of balance including the self, others, and the environment helps communities and individuals understand how to seek its improvement. This study seeks to explore the unique perspective that yoga brings to mental wellbeing and health.

4.3 The Research Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived levels of life satisfaction, meaning in life, health and well-being of Bhagavad Gītā Readers (BGR) from the general population and not from the religious sect that spent most of their time in reading this text.

Bhagavad Gītā provides an insight into the style of life that would be healthy and happy. The observational survey method was used to study a sample population in its natural form without influencing or manipulating it. A case-control group (Non-Bhagavad Gītā Readers, NBGR) were used to compare with the BGR. The empirical data hence collected will provide insight into the lived phenomenon of *Jñāna Yoga* and *Bhakti Yoga* in health and wellbeing. The focus was to reinforce the use of Bhagavad Gītā on maintaining and improving health rather than treating illness.

4.4 Objective of the study

To compare the BGR with NBGR on health, wellbeing, Life Satisfaction and Meaning in Life and observe gender differences on these variables.

4.5 Hypotheses of the Study

H1: Bhagavad Gītā readers will have better health, wellbeing, life satisfaction and meaning in life as compared to Non-Bhagavad Gītā readers.

H2: There will be gender related differences Bhagavad-Gita readers as compared to non-Bhagavad-Gita readers on health and wellbeing, life satisfaction and meaning in life.

5. METHOD

5.1 Participants

200 participants, 100 men and 100 women between the ages of 18 and 65 years (Mean age: 35 years, SD= 2.34) participated in the observation survey. The participants were assigned to Bhagavad-Gita Readers (BGR) and Non-Bhagavad Gītā Readers (NBGR) group depending upon if they had reported reading Bhagavad Gītā or not. Data from 14 participants were excluded, as it was incomplete. The final sample consisted of 100BGR and 100NBGR, with equal number of men and women in each group. All the participants were from middle, income group, from Delhi, well conversant in English language. There were certain ethical considerations such as participants were not drawn from vulnerable population groups, such as children or those seeking medical treatment for mental and physical illness.

5.2 Measures

5.2.1 Interview questionnaire was developed to assess: 1) if the participant had read Bhagavad Gītā and with what frequency on a 5 point scale from 1-never to

5-several times a day; 2) if reading Bhagavad Gītā helped in understanding life better, two options of “yes” or “no”; 3) if *Bhakti Yoga* helped in daily life; 4) how often *Jñāna Yoga* helped in understanding oneself on a 4 point scale of 0-strongly disagree to 3-strongly agree; 5) if it was easier to cope with stress after reading Bhagavad Gītā; (6 and 7) and if the experience of anger and sadness reduced after reading Bhagavad Gītā. The key measure of health was a single item that asked the respondent to rate the current state of health on a scale from poor (1) to excellent (5) and the key measure of psychological well-being was an item that assessed the degree of happiness ranging from not too happy (0) to very happy (5) [12].

5.2.2 Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) [9] measures global life satisfaction on five items. Respondents are required to rate each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample items include “I am satisfied with my life” and “If I could live my life over I would change almost nothing”. The scores on the test range from 5 to 35, higher scores indicate higher levels of life satisfaction. Cronbach’s alpha was .91.

5.2.3 Meaning in Life (MLQ) [20] is a 10-item questionnaire designed to measure two dimensions of meaning in life: (1) Presence of Meaning (how much respondents feel their lives have meaning), and (2) Search for Meaning (how much respondents strive to find meaning and understanding in their lives). Respondents answer each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Absolutely True) to 7 (Absolutely Untrue).

5.3 Procedure

Participation was completely voluntary. All efforts were maintained to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in taking the survey. The participants in this study were voluntary, consenting adults. Participants were advised that they could skip any questions that they did not wish to answer and that they were able to withdraw their material from the study at any time. Each participant took about twenty-five minutes to complete the survey. After completing the consent form, they filled their demographic details, followed by the interview questionnaire and the measures.

6. RESULTS

Data was analysed using SPSS software. The Mean and Standard deviation of the BGR and NBGR men and women and total group are presented in Table 1, 2 and 3. Univariate (ANOVA) was used to compare the differences in the Bhagavad-Gita Readers (BGR) and the Non Bhagavad Gītā Readers (NBGR) men and women on life satisfaction, health, wellbeing, and meaning in life. Results indicated that BGR as compared to NBGR experienced higher levels of life satisfaction, meaning in life, health and well-being (Table 4).

6.1 Interview Questionnaire:

The Mean and SD responses on each item of the interview questionnaire was calculated and 2x2 ANOVA revealed that the BGR read Bhagavad Gītā significantly more frequently than NBGR, $F(1, 196)=113.741, p<.01$. BGR also reported that *Bhakti Yoga* helped them in their life as compared to NBGR, $F(1, 196)=109.351, p<.01$. The results also reveal that BGR reported that *Jñāna Yoga* helped them to understand themselves as compared to NBGR, $F(1, 196)=186.182, p<.01$. Further significant interaction effects reveal that men and women BGR were significantly different from NBGR, $F(1, 196)=12.70, p<.01$. Reading Bhagavad Gītā helped in coping with stress and this was evident in the results where BGR reported significantly better coping with stress than NBGR, $F(1, 196)=339.931, p<.01$. Men and women BGR were also significantly better than NBGR in coping with stress, as seen in the significant interaction effects, $F(1, 196)=52.185, p<.01$.

6.2 Life Satisfaction: Results [Table 1, 3, 4] show that there were significant group differences with the BGR reporting greater satisfaction with life as compared to NBGR, $F(1, 196)=544.954, p<.01$. Men and women BGR were significantly higher on life satisfaction as compared to NBGR men and women $F(1, 196)=7.735, p<.05$.

6.3 Meaning in life: BGR as compared to NBGR reported to have a significantly higher presence of meaning in life $F(1, 196)=8.383, p<.05$. There were significant gender differences $F(1, 196)=22.727, p<.01$. Significant interaction effects revealed that men and women BGR reported significantly greater meaning in life than NBGR, $F(1, 196)=14.775, p<.01$. There were no differences in the two groups in searching for meaning in life.

6.4 Health and wellbeing: The analysis revealed significantly better health among the BGR as compared to the NBGR, $F(1, 196)=455.244, p<.01$, and also better psychological wellbeing, $F(1, 196)=256.752, p<.01$. Significant interaction effects also show that men and women BGR had greater health and wellbeing as compared to NBGR, $F(1, 196)=4.757, p<.05$, and $F(1, 196)=8.925, p<.05$ respectively. The BGR also experienced a significantly lower levels of anger, $F(1, 196)=254.093, p<.01$ and sadness $F(1, 196)=232.244, p<.01$, as compared to the NBGR. Interaction effects were also significant showing that men and women BGR had experienced lower anger level, $F(1, 196)=20.605, p<.01$ and sadness $F(1, 196)=40.046, p<.01$ as compared to the NBGR.

Table 1: Mean (SD) for various measures for Bhagavad-Gita Readers

Measures	Men(n=50)	women(n=50)	Total(n=100)
LS	29.32(3.455)	30.22(4.871)	29.77(4.226)
MLP	30.88(3.895)	23.98(7.842)	27.43(7.069)
MLS	25.92(8.417)	23.56(6.510)	24.74(7.579)
FRBG	2.74(1.626)	2.80(1.278)	2.77(1.455)
BYH	3.82(.873)	3.18(1.438)	3.50(1.227)
JYH	4.16(1.037)	3.18(1.351)	3.67(1.295)
CWS	2.92(0.274)	2.26(0.664)	2.59(0.605)
RA	2.56(0.501)	2.24(0.687)	2.40(0.620)
RS	2.56(0.501)	2.08(0.853)	2.32(0.737)
H	4.36(0.663)	4.44(0.733)	4.40(0.696)
PWB	3.74(0.527)	4.32(0.794)	4.03(0.731)

LS: Life Satisfaction, MLP: Presence of Meaning in life, MLS: Searching for Meaning in life, FRBG: Frequency of reading Bhagavad Gītā, BYH: How *Bhakti Yoga* helps, JYH: How *Jñāna Yoga* helps, CWS: Coping with Stress, RA: Experiencing less anger, RS: Experiencing less Sadness, H: Health, PWB: Psychological Wellbeing.

7. DISCUSSION

In this study we sought to investigate the relationship between reading Bhagavad Gītā and various parameters of psychological well-being, mental health, life satisfaction and meaning in life. This research was unique as it focused upon the Bhagavad Gītā readers and non-readers in the general population instead of the clinical population, which has been found to be well documented in the literature. By employing a community sample of participants who were well versed with the *Bhakti* and *Jñāna Yoga* from Bhagavad Gītā in

comparison to those who had never read it helped to understand the benefits of reading the sacred text on the inner psyche, health and wellbeing. The assumed positive relationship between reading Bhagavad Gītā and life satisfaction, meaning in life, psychological well-being, reducing emotions, coping with stress and health was confirmed. Further more, we found empirical support for the positive impact of Bhagavad Gītā on modulating negative emotions and experiencing happiness. Therefore, the results point to the conclusion that the knowledge dispelled in *bhakti* and *Jñāna Yoga* in Bhagavad Gītā may only develop its full beneficial effect on the human psyche when the individual is highly involved in understanding the text and its implications in real life by practicing self-control, discipline, emotion regulation, love for God and compassion for fellow beings. This leads to the transformation of the self that seeks to understand the higher self, which enhances wellbeing having direct consequences on health. Although the survey was not designed to elicit any particular benefits, some respondents may have gained some insight from thinking about and answering questions.

Table 2: Mean (SD) for various measures for Non-Bhagavad-Gita Readers

Measures	Men(n=50)	women(n=50)	Total(n=100)
LS	12.56(3.004)	15.42(6.834)	13.99(5.445)
MLP	25.48(4.301)	24.74(5.767)	25.11(5.075)
MLS	24.76(7.136)	24.72(5.010)	24.74(6.134)
FRBG	1(0)	1.30(0.58)	1.15(.435)
BYH	1.62(1.105)	2.10(.931)	1.86(1.045)
JYH	1.66(0.745)	1.84(0.710)	1.75(0.730)
CWS	0.54(0.762)	1.22(0.790)	0.88(0.844)
RA	0.62(0.725)	1.16(0.738)	0.89(0.777)
RS	0.48(0.505)	1.22(0.790)	0.85(0.757)
H	2.34(0.717)	1.96(0.856)	2.15(0.809)
PWB	2.30(0.886)	2.22(0.864)	2.26(0.872)

LS: Life Satisfaction, MLP: Presence of Meaning in life, MLS: Searching for Meaning in life, FRBG: Frequency of reading Bhagavad Gītā, BYH: How *Bhakti Yoga* helps, JYH: How *Jñāna Yoga* helps, CWS: Coping with Stress, RA: Experiencing less anger, RS: Experiencing less Sadness, H: Health, PWB: Psychological Wellbeing.

8. SIGNIFICANCE

Research may contribute to society by deepening the understanding of the contribution of Bhagavad Gītā as it

relates to a range of wellness measures. This research is significant as the findings validates the role Bhagavad Gītā plays in the transformation of the inner self by reducing negative emotions as anger and sadness and enhancing life satisfaction, meaning in life, health and well-being of participants. This could be beneficial as an alternative therapeutic technique in reducing the

Table 3: Mean (SD) for various measures for men and women participants

Measures	Men(n=100)	Women(n=100)	Total(n=200)
LS	20.94(9.017)	22.82(9.496)	21.88(9.284)
MLP	28.18(4.902)	24.36(6.859)	26.27(6.247)
MLS	25.34(7.785)	24.14(5.808)	24.74(6.877)
FRBG	1.87(1.44)	2.05(1.24)	1.96(1.34)
BYH	2.72(1.484)	2.64(1.322)	2.68(1.403)
JYH	2.91(1.545)	2.51(1.267)	2.71(1.423)
CWS	1.73(1.325)	1.74(0.895)	1.73(1.127)
RA	1.59(1.156)	1.70(0.893)	1.65(1.032)
RS	1.52(1.159)	1.65(0.925)	1.59(1.048)
H	3.35(1.226)	3.20(1.477)	3.28(1.356)
PWB	3.02(1.025)	3.27(1.34)	3.14(1.196)

LS: Life Satisfaction, MLP: Presence of Meaning in life, MLS: Searching for Meaning in life, FRBG: Frequency of reading Bhagavad Gītā, BYH: How *Bhakti Yoga* helps, JYH: How *Jñāna Yoga* helps, CWS: Coping with Stress, RA: Experiencing less anger, RS: Experiencing less Sadness, H: Health, PWB: Psychological Wellbeing.

Table 4: F values (η²) for Factor (A) Bhagavad Gītā Readers (BGR) and Non-Bhagavad Gītā Readers (NBGR), Factor (B) Gender and (AB) interaction effects on various measures

Measures (η ²)	A (η ²)	B (η ²)	AB
LS	544.954** (0.735)	7.735* (0.035)	2.102 (0.011)
MLP	8.383** (0.041)	22.727** (0.104)	14.775** (0.07)
MLS	1 (0)	1.522 (0.008)	1.422 (0.235)
FRBG	113.741** (0.367)	1.404 (0.007)	0.624 (0.003)
BYH	109.351** (0.358)	0.26 (0.001)	12.750** (0.061)
JYH	186.182** (0.487)	8.08* (0.04)	16.990** (0.080)
CWS	339.931** (0.634)	0.012 (0)	52.185** (0.210)
RA	254.093** (0.565)	1.348 (0.007)	20.605** (0.095)

RS	232.559** (0.543)	1.819 (0.009)	40.046** (0.170)
H	455.244** (0.699)	2.023 (0.010)	4.757* (0.024)
PWB	256.752** (0.567)	5.12* (0.025)	8.925* (0.044)

LS: Life Satisfaction, MLP: Presence of Meaning in life, MLS: Searching for Meaning in life, FRBG: Frequency of reading Bhagavad Gītā, BYH: How *Bhakti Yoga* helps, JYH: How *Jñāna Yoga* helps, CWS: Coping with Stress, RA: Experiencing less anger, RS: Experiencing less Sadness, H: Health, PWB: Psychological Wellbeing. η² = partial eta squared; **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05; df=1, 196. impact of terminal illness on mental health and wellbeing and preventing psycho-physiological and mental illnesses.

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