

COUNSELLING IN AN ANCIENT HINDU TEXT: A CASE FOR CBT IN THE *SRI MADBHAGAVAD GITA* FOCUSING ON ARJUNA'S DISTRESS



Aditya Angiras^{a*}

^a *Department of Vishveshvar and Vishwa Bandhu, Institute of Sanskrit and Indological Studies, (Panjab University, Chandigarh), Sadhu Ashram, Hosharpur Punjab, India*

Abstract

CBT or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, introduced in the western world in early 1960s, is a well-known counselling technique employed in behavioural therapy in the field of psychiatry on patients suffering from depression and emotional instability rendering them incapable of making rational decisions. This paper is part of a larger study which seeks to establish that the genesis of CBT lies in ancient times and is not a recent offshoot of psychiatry as is presently believed. Through an exhaustive content analysis of the ancient Hindu epic Sri Madbhagavad Gita, the author has identified a patient-counsellor relationship akin to CBT practice between the main two characters, Arjuna and Krishna. Due to a climatic situation, Arjuna displays typical psychosomatic symptoms and is then counselled by Krishna with the appropriate lingual strategies to deal with the climatic situation calmly and rationally. This paper deals with the typical psychosomatic symptoms displayed by Arjuna and the causal factors.

Keywords: Counselling, Sri Madbhagavad Geeta, CBT

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*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: angiras0001@gmail.com; angiras@pu.ac.in

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1. Introduction

1.1. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (hereafter CBT) is a psychosocial intervention which is the most widely used evidence-based practice in the contemporary world for improving mental health of a subject (Field, Beeson, & Jones, 2015; Hollon & Beck, 2013). Guided by empirical research in the field of psychiatry, CBT focuses on the development of personal coping strategies that target solving imminent problems and changing the troubled patterns in cognitions e.g. thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes, behaviours, and emotional regulation. This specific technique, used for a number of mental health conditions in the contemporary world of psychiatry, was originally considered a remedy to overcome mental conditions such as depression and the inability of subject to think in a positive manner. It was primarily developed through an integration of behaviour therapy (Zhu, Zhang, ..., and Li, 2014)

Edward Thorndike (Cherry, 2020; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019) used the term “Behaviour modification” with cognitive psychology research and Donald Meichenbaum (American Psychological Association, 2007; Cognitive-Behavior Modification ..., 2016) and several others started using the label cognitive-behaviour modifications in 1960s. This tradition thereafter merged with earlier work of a few clinicians, labelled as cognitive therapy, which was developed by Aaron Beck and Rational Emotive Therapy (RET), developed by Albert Ellis. The effectiveness of CBT has been scientifically tested in number of clinical trials for various psychological disorders and found to be quite effective in the cases of CBT/dialectical behavioural therapy (henceforth DBT). Basically, CBT is problem-solving oriented counselling process which focuses on the present; an attempt to identify the distorted thinking, followed by attempts to modify beliefs and thinking, behaviour and emotional response of the clients. The counselling is based on the cognitive model; the way we perceive situations, and their influence; how we feel and respond emotionally or thoughts generated by the unwanted situation affecting emotional behaviour of a subject.

1.2. Introduction to Sri Madbhagavad Gita

It has long been advocated that religion and spirituality, when engaged together, can help overcome dysfunctional beliefs, feelings and behaviour. The value of spirituality in the mental healing process is a time-honoured concept especially in times of negative mental distress. The contemporary field of psychiatry has seen a recent surge of interest among western psychologists in the eastern philosophies to cure negative mental and these teachings have been quoted in one way or the other, during their sessions with the subject since discovering the usefulness of Zen principles and various ancient Indian philosophies. Many

modern western philosophers posit that these ancient Eastern philosophies have been found to be more effective during the counselling process where the human mind is afflicted with dwindling mood disorders as well as those who need to change patterns of behaviour. The eastern philosophies of India and China have been mostly applied in the CBT sessions with the subjects having mental disorders.

The most renowned discourses in Hindu philosophy and psychotherapy comes from the Hindu scriptures known as the Bhagavad Gita which has been often quoted in Western psychiatry due to increased awareness of the effectiveness of the teachings in the Gita to alleviate mental disorder.

The Sri MadBhagavad Gita, authored by the poet Vyasa dates back to 2500 to 5000 years BC, comprises 18 chapters and 701 verses (shlokas). The Sri MadBhagavad Gita is a part of Bhishma Parva of the great epic poem the Mahabharatha and is based on the dialogue between two individuals i.e. Lord Krishna and Arjuna (the protagonist) who are on the battlefield of Kurukshetra to fight a righteous war.

The crux of the conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna in SriMadBhagavad Gita is based on Arjuna's anguished mental state because he will have to battle and kill those people whom he loves. His mental condition reveals symptoms of neurosis, hallucination and other psycho-derma symptoms which are relevant in the field of contemporary psychiatry such as hallucination (SriMadBhagavad Gita, v. 1.30-31) and a state of emotional suffering (v.1.35-39) with a profound sense of guilt. He is ready to be killed by his own kinsmen for the sake of love. All of this mental anguish is alleviated by Lord Krishna solely through counselling. This counselling process adopted by Lord Krishna is akin to present day practices carried out in the field of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) in modern psychiatry.

Sri Madbhagavad Gita adopts the teacher-taught relationship in the process of counselling with such features as complete state of surrender, questioning endowed with devotion and exercise of free-will. The cognition, connotation and effect of mind are elevated to the status of first six chapter known Jnana Yoga, another six chapters known as Karma Yoga which focuses on the consequences of actions. The final three chapters, the Bhakti Yoga focus on doing good deeds.

2. Importance of word/language in the field of CBT

The most important aspect in counselling is the choice of words and usage of language. A human being has only one faculty to express his/her emotions, feelings and thoughts and that is through choice of words and usage of language. Arjuna has chosen the exact words to describe his problem and express his feelings. Lord Krishna, being the expert in the art of

communication, uses those words which could depict the exact possible consequences. Much of the attempt made through Indian philosophy to elaborate the importance and impact of shabd or words. The prime reason for the battle of Mahabharat was the usage of the wrong words leading to miscommunication. Eventually, the usage of righteous words plays a crucial role in the field of CBT counselling.

3. Analysis of the relationship between Arjuna and Lord Krishna

It is not proper, at this juncture, to discuss and comment on the meanings along with other notions and popular beliefs about the teachings of Sri MadBhagavad Gita since everyone is at liberty to think about this holy text in a way he or she may like, although, it is important to note Arjuna being a human, has a compassionate nature because he opines about the vanity of war. Yet, the most important and relevant point in Sri Madbhagavad Gita, for the purpose of this paper, is the analysis of the situation Arjuna is in, and how Lord Krishna transformed Arjuna in those 701 verses embedded in the 18 chapters of Sri MadBhagavad Gita. How Arjun emerged from the situation and fought the battle with dexterity to win the war, despite his earlier misgivings is the crux of this discussion. The usage of the right language and words during the counselling process with its possible application value to contemporary psychological therapies is pivotal in this context. However, the findings of this discussion need not be limited to only the Indian context since the counselling by Lord Krishna has a universal appeal considering how the words chosen by Lord Krishna during the counselling process had a soothing impact on Arjuna.

3.1. Arjuna and Krishna's relationship

It is important here to understand the personality of Arjun and Lord Krishna from the perspective of patient and counsellor respectively. Before waging war, Arjuna does not show any neurotic traits, psycho-lingual maladjustments, any signs of hallucination or distorted mental disorder. In fact, he is depicted as a great warrior; a man of valour and a veteran who had fought many battles before coming to the battle ground of Mahabharata. Before coming to the battle ground, he has a proactive role in the preparation for the current war and he has driven himself into the battlefield with great enthusiasm to win this righteous war. This Pandava prince is also the greatest archer of his time. However, after viewing the warriors on the field, he filled with guilt, anxiety and doubt because the so-called enemies are his own

kinsmen. Hence, his attachment towards his loved ones causes him to drop his weapon and quit the battlefield.

Lord Krishna is considered a divine being in Hinduism, one of the avatars (reincarnation) of Lord Vishnu, the preserver of life. Being divine, he has supernatural powers and is highly respected in the community even by the elders and Kauravas (the enemy of the Pandavas). Lord Krishna possesses excellent interpersonal skills, negotiation skills and hypnotic skills which he uses to defuse tense situations.

The bond of friendship between Lord Krishna and Arjuna is the most celebrated bond in Hinduism. Krishna himself admits that nobody in the whole world is dearer to him than Arjun for whom he would sacrifice anything. It is clear that Arjuna and Lord Krishna are long-time friends and enjoy an intimate relationship based on mutual respect and responsiveness. However, when we analyse their relationship at the battleground, we find the addition of a new dimension to their bond where Lord Krishna acts as a compassionate teacher who teaches and counsels his best friend. Thus, the role of Lord Krishna in this situation that of not only, companion but also compassionate mentor, guide and teacher.

3.2. Arjuna's despondency

At this juncture, it is important to consider the perspective of our subject Arjuna. At the outset, Arjuna does not show any kind of despondency related to mental, psycho-dermal or neurotic traits before he requested Lord Krishna to place his chariot in the middle of both of the armies. The problem with Arjun only starts when his chariot is placed in the middle of the armies where he beholds his teacher and kinsmen are lined up against him to wage a war along with *Kauravas*¹. Upon beholding these kinsmen, who are up against him in the war, Arjuna becomes despondent, expressing his sorrows, anxiety, fear and guilt and displays symptoms of neurosis which leads him to a state of inaction. In this context, fighting the war at Kurukshetra means battling against and killing his own kinsmen. Arjun's dialogues reveal a deep respect and love for his elders like Bhishma Pitamah and his teacher, *Guru Drona* who are now part of the enemy army. Overwhelmed by his acute state of guilt, Arjun drops his weapons and turns to Lord Krishna, his charioteer, for assistance and guidance, because he is unable to decide between righteousness and wrong. Arjun faces a great emotional dilemma as to proceed with the war would mean killing his respected teacher and elders, which goes against his personal code of honour. In this situation, he displays the typical psycho-somatic symptoms associated with this panic, such as failing of limbs, parching of mouth, quivering of body,

¹ Swami ChidBhavananda(Commentator)(1974).*The Bhagavad Gita. (1st Ed. 7th reprint)*
Tirupparaaiturai (Tamilnadu), Sri RamaKrishnaTapovanam 1.23, p.95

burning sensation in the skin and other similar symptoms. The more typical neurotic symptoms associated with the problem includes losing control of the mind, seeing adverse omens. Arjuna is unable to even stand² and he sits in his chariot with a gloomy mind. His despondency raises various pertinent questions regarding his objectives in the war such as what good could ensue from the slaughter of his own kinsmen in battle³. Arjun further adds “Those for whose sake we seek kingdom, enjoyment they stand here in battle, staking life, property⁴” and he even says “Though myself slain by them, I would not, O Madhusudan, seek to slay them even for the sake of domination over the three, how then for the earth⁵”. Arjun does not see any good in killing his own kinsmen in the battle ground. In fact, he says he is willing to be killed by them rather than kill them for any kind of material rewards.

He laments over the ignorance of his kinsmen and asks Lord Krishna to withdraw from the battle⁶. Arjun provides other valid logical objections to engage in this war to Lord Krishna enumerated in *slokas* from 41 to 47 which specifically state his concern for the common soldiers. Consequently, overwhelmed by his despondency, he sits down in his chariot after laying down his arms. Arjuna’s despondent mood is further aggravated as he will commit an unforgivable sin for killing his kinsmen⁷. He opines that it would be better than he be killed⁸. Similar woes are repeated in *slokas* 4 to 6 of the second chapter. He requests Lord Krishna to advise him on making the right. Arjuna’s thinking is the best example of faulty co-location of ideas. An analysis of the above expressions of thoughts reveal that Arjun is beset by three major concerns which are;

1. His great concern over his grandfather Bhisma and respectable teacher Guru Drona due to his personal affinity, utmost personal concern and reverence.
2. His overall concern for the common soldiers who would forsake their life although they did not have any kind of personal involvement in the war.
3. His concern for his kinsmen.

² Swami ChidBhavananda (Commentator)(1974). *The Bhagavad Gita. (1st Ed. 7th reprint) Tirupparaitturai (Tamilnadu), Sri RamaKrishnaTapovanam.* 1.29-30, p.100

³ Swami ChidBhavananda (Commentator)(1974). *The Bhagavad Gita. (1st Ed. 7th reprint) (Tamilnadu), Sri RamaKrishnaTapovanam.* 1. 31, p.101

⁴ Swami ChidBhavananda (Commentator)(1974). *The Bhagavad Gita. (1st Ed. 7th reprint) Tirupparaitturai (Tamilnadu), Sri RamaKrishnaTapovanam.* 1. 33, p.103

⁵ Swami ChidBhavananda (Commentator)(1974). *The Bhagavad Gita. (1st Ed. 7th reprint) Tirupparaitturai (Tamilnadu), Sri RamaKrishnaTapovanam.* 1. 35, p.104

⁶ Swami ChidBhavananda(Commentator)(1974). *The Bhagavad Gita. (1st Ed. 7th reprint) Tirupparaitturai (Tamilnadu), Sri RamaKrishnaTapovanam.* 1. 39, p.105

⁷ Swami ChidBhavananda(Commentator)(1974). *The Bhagavad Gita. (1st Ed. 7th reprint) Tirupparaitturai (Tamilnadu), Sri RamaKrishnaTapovanam.* 1.36, p.106

⁸ Swami ChidBhavananda(Commentator)(1974). *The Bhagavad Gita. (1st Ed. 7th reprint) Tirupparaitturai (Tamilnadu), Sri RamaKrishnaTapovanam.* 1.36, p.107

His conversation with Lord Krishna reveals that Arjun was well aware of the catastrophic outcomes of the war and its effects on later generations. In such a situation, Arjuna is forced to think twice before waging a war, even a righteous one with his kinsmen. To Arjuna, with his deep rooted sense of honour, the consequences of a family feud are more far reaching made especially worse with the involvement of respected elders like his grandfather Bhishma and teacher Drona, for whom he has the greatest love and respect. This very fact has been verbalized by Arjuna himself in verses no. 4, 5 and 6 Canto/chapter 2 of the *Gita* and it is self-evident in this context. In such a given situation, it is inarguable that, not only Arjun, but anyone with a normal mental operation and intellect would be upset leading to the imbalance in mental operations.

If we critically evaluate the situation Arjun is in, we find that he is in a fit of frenzy, which is typically known as hysterical delirium⁹. In CBT terms, this would refer to cognitive behaviour distress where the subject, under intense emotional pressure, is unable to comprehend the real problem resulting in a state of lurch rendering the subject unable to make any definite and positive decision or generate any strategy to cope with the situation or the problem.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first and second chapter of the *Sri MadBhagavad Gita* reveals the unravelling of Arjuna's mental and emotional condition caused by the dilemma of being involved in a lose-lose situation, which is a war in which he would have to kill his own kinsmen. His psychological duress is made all the worse when he considers that he would be involved in killing those who did not have any kind of personal enmity or grudge with either of the warring sides. He knew the terrible consequences of such a war on all the families involved and the coming generations.

Arjuna, indeed, has the insight to consider the war as a catastrophe both on a personal and societal level. Due to the nature of the text as an epic poem, the nature of Arjuna's mental, emotional and psychological distress covers a grander more epic scale compared to an ordinary person's distress. Nevertheless, the point of this investigation is that Arjuna has revealed, through his dialogue with Lord Krishna, psychosomatic symptoms of mental, emotional and psychological distress which call for counselling. The form and consequences of counselling undertaken by Lord Krishna will be identified and elaborated on in the next paper as part of this study into CBT practice found in the ancient Hindu text the *Sri MadBhagavad Gita*.

⁹ Cf. Dictionary.com

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