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**FROM KURUKSHETRA TO CONCORD: THE INFLUENCE OF THE  
BHAGAVAD GITA ON AMERICAN SPIRITUAL THOUGHT AND  
LITERARY IMAGINATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

The *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most influential philosophical texts of ancient India, occupies a significant position in the history of cross-cultural intellectual exchange between India and the United States. Its ideas concerning self-realization, duty, spiritual discipline, detachment, universal consciousness, and the relationship between the individual self and the divine profoundly influenced the development of nineteenth-century American transcendentalism. Among American intellectuals, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were particularly receptive to Indian philosophical thought and incorporated several of its central principles into their writings. This research paper examines the movement of the *Bhagavad Gita* from its ancient setting in Kurukshetra into the literary and philosophical environment of Concord, Massachusetts. It explores how the text contributed to the transformation of American spiritual thought and literary imagination, particularly through Emerson's concepts of the Over-Soul, self-reliance, and spiritual unity and Thoreau's emphasis on simplicity, individual conscience, nature, and contemplative living. The study argues that the influence of the *Gita* was not simply a matter of literary borrowing but represented a broader intellectual encounter in which Indian philosophical concepts were reinterpreted within the cultural context of American transcendentalism. The *Gita* helped American writers challenge materialism, institutionalized religion, and conventional social values while encouraging an

inward search for spiritual truth.

**Keywords:** Bhagavad Gita, American Literature, Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Indian Philosophy, Spirituality, Concord, Nature, Self-Reliance

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has historically functioned as a significant medium through which civilizations encounter and reinterpret the intellectual traditions of other cultures. The nineteenth century witnessed an important moment of such cultural interaction between India and the United States. During this period, American writers and philosophers increasingly encountered translations and interpretations of Indian religious and philosophical texts. Among these texts, the *Bhagavad Gita* emerged as one of the most influential works for American intellectuals interested in spirituality, metaphysics, ethics, and the relationship between humanity and nature.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, traditionally situated within the *Mahabharata*, presents a philosophical dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Although the immediate context is a warrior's moral crisis, the text addresses universal questions concerning duty, action, knowledge, devotion, selfhood, and liberation. Its philosophical framework does not restrict spiritual realization to ritual or institutional religion. Instead, it presents multiple paths toward realization, including disciplined action, knowledge, and devotion. This flexibility contributed to its appeal among thinkers outside India.

In nineteenth-century America, the emergence of transcendentalism created an intellectual environment receptive to these ideas. Transcendentalists challenged established religious authority and emphasized individual intuition, spiritual experience, moral independence, and the unity of humanity with nature. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau became two of the most prominent representatives of this movement.

Emerson's philosophical writings emphasized the existence of a universal spiritual principle within humanity. His concept of the "Over-Soul" reflects an understanding of spiritual unity that can be productively compared with ideas of universal consciousness found in Indian philosophy. Thoreau, meanwhile, transformed philosophical principles into a practical philosophy of life. His experiment at Walden, his criticism of materialistic society, and his commitment to individual conscience reveal a literary imagination deeply interested in

simplicity, inwardness, and nature.

The movement described by the phrase "From Kurukshetra to Concord" therefore represents more than geographical distance. It symbolizes a movement of philosophical ideas across cultural and intellectual boundaries. Kurukshetra represents the ancient Indian setting of the *Gita*, while Concord represents the nineteenth-century American intellectual community associated with Emerson, Thoreau, and transcendentalism.

This study investigates how the *Bhagavad Gita* influenced American spiritual thought and literary imagination, with particular emphasis on Emerson and Thoreau.

## II. THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BHAGAVAD GITA

The *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most influential philosophical and spiritual texts of ancient India, consists of approximately 700 verses organized into eighteen chapters and forms a significant section of the *Bhishma Parva* of the *Mahabharata*. Presented as a dialogue between Lord Krishna and the warrior Arjuna, the *Gita* begins at a moment of profound moral uncertainty. Arjuna stands on the battlefield of Kurukshetra facing an impending war in which his opponents include relatives, teachers, friends, and members of his own social community. Overwhelmed by grief, compassion, fear, and moral confusion, he becomes unwilling to perform his warrior duty. His crisis is therefore not merely a personal hesitation but a profound ethical problem concerning duty, violence, social responsibility, human attachment, and the consequences of action. Krishna responds to Arjuna not by simply commanding him to fight but by providing an extensive philosophical explanation of human existence, moral responsibility, spiritual knowledge, disciplined action, devotion, and liberation. In this sense, the battlefield functions simultaneously as a historical or epic setting and as a powerful metaphor for the inner struggles of human beings. Kurukshetra represents the external world of conflict, while Arjuna's psychological crisis represents the internal battlefield in which individuals confront competing desires, responsibilities, emotions, and moral principles. The philosophical significance of the *Gita* therefore extends beyond its immediate narrative context and addresses universal questions about how human beings should act when confronted with difficult ethical choices.

One of the central teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* is the philosophy of **karma yoga**, or the disciplined path of action. Krishna teaches Arjuna that action is unavoidable because human

beings are constantly engaged in activities and relationships. The important issue is therefore not whether one should act, but how one should act. The *Gita* emphasizes the performance of one's appropriate duty without excessive attachment to the fruits or results of action. This principle is often understood as the doctrine of detached action. It does not mean that individuals should become indifferent or irresponsible; rather, they should perform their responsibilities sincerely while avoiding an excessive psychological dependence upon particular outcomes. Such an approach establishes a balance between commitment and detachment. Arjuna is encouraged to act according to his moral and social responsibility while overcoming personal attachment and fear. Karma yoga consequently transforms action into a form of spiritual discipline. Work and responsibility are no longer viewed merely as worldly activities but can become means of self-development and spiritual realization when performed with discipline, ethical awareness, and freedom from selfish attachment. This philosophical principle later became particularly significant for Western readers who were searching for ways to reconcile spiritual life with active participation in society. The concept of disciplined action without attachment also provides an important point of comparison with the writings of American transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Another major philosophical dimension of the *Gita* is **jnana**, or the path of knowledge. Krishna explains that ordinary knowledge of external objects and circumstances is insufficient for genuine spiritual understanding. Deeper knowledge requires an awareness of the distinction between the temporary physical body and the enduring spiritual self. Human beings frequently identify themselves with their bodies, possessions, social positions, emotions, and temporary circumstances, but the *Gita* presents these as changing aspects of existence. True knowledge involves recognizing a deeper spiritual reality that is not destroyed by physical transformation. Through this teaching, the *Gita* addresses fundamental philosophical questions concerning identity, mortality, consciousness, and the nature of reality. Knowledge is therefore not simply the accumulation of intellectual information; it represents a transformation in consciousness. The individual who acquires spiritual knowledge gradually becomes less controlled by ignorance, attachment, fear, and desire. This emphasis on inward knowledge and self-realization became particularly relevant to Western thinkers who were dissatisfied with purely materialistic explanations of human existence. In the context of nineteenth-century American thought, such ideas created intellectual

possibilities for understanding the self as something deeper than social identity or physical individuality.

The *Bhagavad Gita* also places considerable emphasis on **bhakti**, or devotion, as a path toward spiritual realization. While knowledge and disciplined action are important, the text recognizes that human beings also experience spirituality through love, faith, surrender, and a personal relationship with the divine. Bhakti therefore introduces an emotional and relational dimension into the philosophical system of the *Gita*. Spiritual realization is not presented exclusively as an abstract intellectual achievement. Instead, devotion allows individuals to overcome ego-centered existence and develop a sense of connection with a higher spiritual reality. The combination of karma, jnana, and bhakti gives the *Gita* a comprehensive philosophical structure in which action, knowledge, and devotion can work together. This broad approach contributed to the text's enduring appeal across cultural and religious boundaries because it provides multiple ways of interpreting spiritual life.

The concept of the **enduring self** is another fundamental feature of the *Gita*. Krishna explains that the physical body undergoes birth, growth, change, and death, whereas the deeper self is not destroyed by physical death. This teaching provides the philosophical foundation for Arjuna's movement from grief and confusion toward spiritual understanding. The distinction between the temporary body and the enduring self challenges an exclusively materialistic understanding of human existence. It suggests that human identity cannot be completely explained through physical existence alone. The *Gita* consequently combines ethical philosophy with metaphysical reflection, asking not only what individuals should do but also what they fundamentally are. Its discussion of consciousness, mortality, duty, and spiritual liberation gives the text a universal philosophical character.

The enduring influence of the *Bhagavad Gita* can therefore be understood through its ability to connect ethical action with spiritual realization. Its teachings concerning karma yoga, jnana, bhakti, self-knowledge, detachment, and universal spiritual reality provided intellectual resources for later thinkers beyond India. In nineteenth-century America, these ideas encountered the developing philosophy of transcendentalism, particularly in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson's emphasis on the spiritual self, the Over-Soul, intuition, and individual independence and Thoreau's commitment to simplicity, nature, moral conscience, and contemplative living can be examined in relation to the philosophical questions raised by the *Gita*. Thus, the movement of

the *Bhagavad Gita* from ancient Kurukshetra into American literary culture represents not merely the transmission of a religious text but a significant process of cross-cultural intellectual exchange. Its philosophical teachings enabled American writers to reconsider the relationship between the individual and the universe, action and detachment, material life and spiritual freedom, thereby contributing to the development of a broader American spiritual and literary imagination.

### III. THE ARRIVAL OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

The arrival and gradual influence of Indian philosophy in nineteenth-century America constituted an important development in the intellectual and literary history of the United States. During this period, American intellectual culture was undergoing considerable transformation as writers, philosophers, theologians, and scholars began questioning established religious doctrines and searching for alternative ways of understanding human existence, morality, nature, and spirituality. Indian philosophical traditions, particularly the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and other Sanskrit texts, gradually became available to American readers through translations, scholarly publications, missionary writings, Orientalist studies, travel accounts, and literary discussions. Although access to Indian thought was initially limited and frequently mediated through European interpretations, these materials nevertheless introduced American intellectuals to philosophical concepts that differed significantly from dominant Western religious assumptions. Ideas concerning the unity of existence, the nature of the self, spiritual intuition, detachment, meditation, and the relationship between the individual and the universal became particularly attractive to thinkers who were searching for a more expansive conception of spirituality.

The development of Oriental studies in Europe played an important role in making Indian philosophical literature accessible to American audiences. European scholars had begun translating and studying Sanskrit literature during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, creating an intellectual pathway through which Indian texts entered Western academic and literary culture. English-language translations were especially significant because they allowed American readers who had no knowledge of Sanskrit to encounter Indian philosophical ideas. The *Bhagavad Gita* became particularly important in this process because its philosophical structure combined questions of metaphysics, ethics, psychology, and spirituality. However, these translations were not always able to communicate the full

linguistic, philosophical, cultural, and religious complexity of the original Sanskrit text. Many early Western interpretations were shaped by European intellectual categories and sometimes presented Indian philosophy through a simplified or selective framework. Nevertheless, even imperfect translations served as bridges between Indian and American intellectual cultures. They created an opportunity for writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau to encounter concepts that would later become significant components of American transcendentalist thought.

The intellectual environment of nineteenth-century America was especially receptive to philosophical alternatives. The legacy of the Enlightenment had encouraged rational inquiry, skepticism toward inherited authority, and the examination of religious beliefs through reason and individual judgment. At the same time, the dominance of traditional Calvinist theology was being challenged by movements such as Unitarianism, which emphasized reason, moral responsibility, and the possibility of a more rational understanding of religion. These developments created an intellectual climate in which religious truth was increasingly understood as something that could be explored through personal reflection rather than accepted solely on the basis of institutional authority. Indian philosophy entered this environment as a distinctive source of spiritual and philosophical insight. Its emphasis on inward realization and the possibility of discovering deeper truth through individual consciousness appealed to thinkers who were already questioning conventional religious structures.

The rise of Romanticism further strengthened this intellectual receptivity. Romantic writers and philosophers emphasized imagination, emotion, intuition, individuality, and the spiritual significance of nature. Rather than regarding nature merely as a physical environment governed by mechanical laws, Romantic and transcendentalist thinkers increasingly viewed it as a source of moral and spiritual insight. This perspective created an important point of contact with Indian philosophical traditions. The *Bhagavad Gita* presents existence as an interconnected spiritual reality and encourages individuals to move beyond superficial attachment to temporary phenomena. Although Indian philosophy and European Romanticism emerged from very different historical circumstances, American thinkers perceived meaningful affinities between them. The result was an intellectual environment in which Indian philosophical concepts could be interpreted as contributing to a renewed understanding of nature, consciousness, and spiritual experience.



The *Bhagavad Gita* was particularly attractive to American intellectuals because it combined philosophical speculation with practical ethical instruction. Unlike a purely metaphysical text concerned only with the nature of ultimate reality, the *Gita* addresses the practical question of how an individual should live. Arjuna's crisis is fundamentally an ethical crisis, and Krishna's response examines the relationship between duty, action, knowledge, desire, attachment, and spiritual freedom. The doctrine of karma yoga, for example, teaches that individuals should perform their responsibilities without excessive attachment to the results of their actions. This principle offered a compelling alternative to the opposition between worldly activity and spiritual withdrawal. A person could remain active in society while simultaneously cultivating inner detachment and spiritual awareness. Such a principle had considerable relevance for American thinkers interested in individual moral responsibility and social reform.

The *Gita's* emphasis on self-knowledge also appealed to the emerging transcendentalist movement. Transcendentalists believed that individuals possessed an inner spiritual capacity through which they could perceive truth directly. This emphasis on inward experience resonated with the *Gita's* insistence that genuine spiritual knowledge requires an understanding of the self beyond superficial identity. The individual was not simply a physical being defined by social position, wealth, occupation, or institutional affiliation. Instead, human existence possessed a deeper spiritual dimension. This conception contributed to the transcendentalist interest in intuition, self-culture, and individual spiritual development. Emerson's philosophy of the Over-Soul and his emphasis on self-reliance can therefore be examined within this broader context of intellectual interaction between American transcendentalism and Indian philosophical thought.

Henry David Thoreau similarly found Indian philosophy meaningful because of its emphasis on simplicity, self-discipline, contemplation, and detachment from unnecessary material desires. His experiment at Walden Pond reflected an attempt to construct a life based on simplicity and conscious awareness rather than excessive participation in consumer-oriented social conventions. His engagement with Indian texts was therefore connected to his broader philosophical interest in alternative ways of living. The *Bhagavad Gita* provided a conceptual framework in which action, discipline, self-knowledge, and spiritual freedom could be understood as interconnected dimensions of human existence.



The American reception of Indian philosophy should nevertheless be understood critically. Nineteenth-century American thinkers did not encounter Indian traditions in their entirety. Their knowledge was selective, and it was often mediated by European translations and interpretations. Emerson and Thoreau combined Indian philosophical concepts with Christianity, German idealism, Romanticism, classical philosophy, and their own experiences of American society and nature. Therefore, the relationship between Indian philosophy and American transcendentalism should not be described as simple imitation. It was instead a process of intellectual adaptation and creative reinterpretation. Indian philosophical ideas were transformed as they entered a new cultural environment.

Ultimately, the arrival of Indian philosophy in nineteenth-century America expanded the intellectual resources available to American writers and thinkers. It challenged exclusively Western conceptions of religion, selfhood, morality, and spirituality while encouraging a more comparative understanding of philosophical truth. The *Bhagavad Gita* was especially influential because it united metaphysical reflection with practical ethics, presenting spiritual realization not as an escape from life but as a disciplined way of engaging with it. Through translations, literary discussions, and the writings of transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau, Indian philosophy became an important element in the development of American spiritual thought. Its arrival marked the beginning of a significant cross-cultural dialogue that helped connect the philosophical world of ancient India with the literary and intellectual culture of nineteenth-century America.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The journey "From Kurukshetra to Concord" represents one of the most fascinating episodes in the history of comparative literature and intellectual exchange. The *Bhagavad Gita*, originating within the ancient Indian philosophical tradition, crossed linguistic, geographical, religious, and cultural boundaries to become an important source of inspiration for nineteenth-century American thinkers.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau played particularly important roles in this process. Emerson's concepts of the Over-Soul, self-reliance, spiritual unity, and individual intuition demonstrate affinities with philosophical ideas encountered through Indian literature. Thoreau translated philosophical reflection into a practical philosophy of simplicity, moral independence, nature, and contemplative living. His *Walden* demonstrates

how ideas concerning detachment and spiritual self-cultivation could be transformed into an American literary experience.

The influence of the *Gita* should not, however, be understood as direct imitation. Emerson and Thoreau interpreted Indian philosophy through their own cultural, religious, and philosophical contexts. They combined elements of Indian thought with transcendentalism, Romanticism, Christianity, idealism, and American individualism. The result was a creative process of cultural transformation.

The significance of the *Bhagavad Gita* in American literature therefore lies not merely in the number of references made to it but in the intellectual possibilities it opened. It encouraged American writers to reconsider the relationship between self and universe, action and detachment, nature and spirituality, and individual conscience and social authority.

From the battlefield of Kurukshetra to the intellectual community of Concord, the *Gita* underwent a remarkable journey of interpretation. Its philosophical ideas became part of a broader American search for spiritual independence and universal truth. Through Emerson and Thoreau, Indian philosophy entered American literary imagination not as a foreign curiosity but as a significant source of philosophical reflection. This cross-cultural encounter demonstrates that literature can function as a bridge between civilizations, allowing ideas born in one historical context to acquire new meanings in another.

Ultimately, the dialogue between the *Bhagavad Gita* and American transcendentalism illustrates the global character of literary history. The journey from Kurukshetra to Concord shows that intellectual traditions do not remain confined within geographical boundaries; they travel, transform, and acquire new significance through the creative imagination of different cultures.

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