



## Language as Knowledge: Exploring lexical representations of Sanātana Epistemology in the Bhagavad Gita

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### Abstract

The growing discourse on decolonising literary studies has foregrounded the importance of engaging with indigenous epistemologies that challenge dominant Western frameworks of knowledge. Within the broader spectrum of Indian Knowledge Systems, the philosophical traditions of Sanātana thought offer a rich epistemic foundation where language functions not merely as a medium of communication but as a repository of knowledge itself. The **Bhagavad Gita**, one of the most influential philosophical texts in the Sanātana tradition, articulates complex metaphysical and ethical ideas through a dense network of Sanskrit lexical units that encode philosophical meanings. This paper undertakes a qualitative lexical analysis of key epistemic terms such as *Dharma*, *Jnana*, *Karma*, *Atman*, and *Yoga* as represented in the *Bhagavad Gita* in order to examine how these terms embody indigenous modes of knowing and understanding reality. The study aims to explore how the semantic depth of these lexical units reflects the epistemological foundations of Sanātana philosophy and how their meanings often transcend or become diluted in English translations. The objectives of this paper are to analyse the epistemic significance of selected Sanskrit lexical terms in the *Bhagavad Gita* and to demonstrate how language functions as a carrier of indigenous knowledge systems within the text. The research addresses questions concerning the relationship between language and knowledge in Sanātana thought and the implications of lexical interpretation for decolonising literary studies. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative textual and conceptual analysis of selected verses from the *Bhagavad Gita*, supported by interpretive readings of philosophical commentaries and translation studies perspectives.



**Keywords:** *Indigenous Epistemology, Sanātan Philosophy, Lexical Analysis, Indian Knowledge Systems, Bhagavad Gita*

## Introduction

The importance of highlighting indigenous epistemologies that contest prevailing Western paradigms of knowledge production has been highlighted by recent scholarly engagements with decolonizing literary studies. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) offer an alternative epistemic framework in which knowledge is experiential ethical and metaphysical rather than just abstract or empirical. They are based on the philosophical traditions of Sanātan Dharma. The idea that language is a carrier of knowledge rather than a neutral medium is fundamental to this framework. This kind of epistemology is profoundly articulated in the Bhagavad Gita a foundational philosophical text that is part of the Mahabharata thanks to its highly sophisticated Sanskrit lexicon. Sanskrit lexical units function as semantic clusters that embody layers of philosophical ethical and spiritual meaning in contrast to modern languages where meaning is frequently fixed or simplified. In order to show how language serves as knowledge in the Bhagavad Gita this paper conducts a qualitative lexical analysis of important epistemological terms including Dharma Jnana Karma Atman Buddhi and Yoga. The study makes the case that Sanātan epistemology which offers an alternative to colonial knowledge frameworks is essentially linguistic experiential and ontological by examining these terms within their textual context.

## Objectives

1. To examine how the Bhagavad Gita's major Sanskrit lexical units—Dharma Jnana Karma Atman Buddhi and Yoga—serve as conduits for native epistemological meanings.
2. To investigate Sanātan philosophical traditions use of language as a site of knowledge production and its consequences for decolonizing literary studies.

## Research Questions

1. How is Sanātan epistemology encoded and transmitted through important lexical terms in the Bhagavad Gita?
2. How are the epistemic meanings ingrained in Sanskrit vocabulary reduced changed or reframed when translated into English?



## Methodology

A Qualitative, interpretive and textual analysis approach is used in this study. It entails close reading of a few verses from the Bhagavad Gita paying special attention to important Sanskrit lexical units. The approach blends:

Lexical-semantic analysis which looks at semantic domains and root meanings.

Contextual textual analysis which involves deciphering words in particular verses.

## Theoretical Framework

The paper intersects at-

- **Indigenous epistemology**- views knowledge as holistic experiential and rooted in culture. Decolonial Theory: Recovering marginalized knowledge systems and opposing Western epistemic dominance.
- **Hermeneutics**- Text interpretation using linguistic and contextual analysis.
- **Sementic Theory**- Understanding how lexical units are used to construct meaning. When combined, these frameworks allow for a sophisticated interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita as a linguistically encoded knowledge system.

## Sanatan Epistemology and Indian Knowledge Systems

The foundation of Sanātan epistemology is the notion that knowledge (vidyā) is a part of existence rather than something distinct from it. Sanātan thought stresses non-duality (advaita) and the unity of knowledge knower and known in contrast to Western epistemology which frequently divides subject and object. The Indian tradition recognises multiple sources of knowledge (pramāṇa) including: Pratyaksha (awareness). Anumana or deduction. Shabda (oral testimony particularly in sacred texts). The Bhagavad Gita functions in the realm of shabda pramāṇa where language is recognized as an authoritative and legitimate source of knowledge. But this authority is experiential rather than just textual language leads the seeker to understanding. Lexical units are therefore more than just words in the Gita they are epistemic instruments that organize comprehension.

Compared to Western epistemological traditions Sanātan epistemology represents a unique paradigm of knowledge. Sanātan thought incorporates experience (anubhava) intuition (pratibha) and spiritual realization (aparoksha jnana) as valid ways of knowing whereas Western frameworks frequently emphasize empiricism rationalism and objectivity. The non-



dualistic orientation of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) where the distinctions between knower (pramātā) known (prameya) and knowledge (pramā) are fluid rather than fixed is one of its distinguishing characteristics. According to this ontological unity knowledge is realized internally rather than externally. In addition, knowledge in the Sanātan tradition is ethical and teleological it is focused on emancipation (moksha) rather than merely accumulating knowledge.

This contrasts with contemporary knowledge systems which frequently prioritize productivity and usefulness. The idea that the word abda is a valid knowledge source or pramāṇa is another peculiarity. Sanātan epistemology gives language an ontological status in contrast to Western linguistic theories that treat language as representational. Each lexical unit in sacred texts like the Bhagavad Gita serves as a storehouse of philosophical insight making them embodied knowledge systems rather than just descriptive narratives.

The epistemic tradition is also highly interdisciplinary incorporating cosmology psychology ethics and metaphysics. Words like dharma and yoga traverse several levels of meaning at once and cannot be limited to a single domain. Sanātan epistemology is therefore defined as follows. Integration of mind body and spirit is known as holism. Realization over abstraction is known as experiential knowledge. Linguistic depth is the meaning that is ingrained in words. ethical perspective (knowledge as a means of emancipation). Because of these characteristics it is a fundamental framework for reconsidering literary studies from a decolonial standpoint.

### **Language and Knowledge: The role of Sanskrit**

Sanskrit often described as a “perfected language” is uniquely suited to philosophical expression due to its morphological accuracy. depth of meaning. etymological clarity. In Sanskrit every word has root-based meanings (dhātus) which enables it to function as a conceptual universe instead of a fixed label. The word Dharma for example is derived from the root dhūge (to sustain) signifying not only obligation but also the sustaining principle of life. Because translation into English frequently reduces these complex semantic fields into narrower meanings thereby limiting epistemic understanding lexical analysis is especially crucial.

Sanskrit occupies a unique position within Indian Knowledge Systems as a language that is not merely communicative but cognitive and epistemic in nature. Its structural precision and



etymological richness enable it to encode complex philosophical ideas within single lexical units. Unlike English, where meaning is often context-dependent and linear, Sanskrit operates through root-based morphology (dhātu system). Each word derives from a verbal root, allowing meanings to expand across multiple semantic layers. For example, the root “yuj” (to join) gives rise to *Yoga*, signifying union, discipline, and integration simultaneously. Another distinctive feature is semantic density—a single Sanskrit term can encompass philosophical, ethical, and metaphysical meanings. This density transforms language into a carrier of conceptual knowledge, rather than a mere tool for expression.

Sanskrit also employs phonetic and vibrational precision, where sound (*śabda*) itself is considered meaningful. In this sense, language is not arbitrary but intrinsically connected to reality, reinforcing its epistemic significance. Moreover, the interpretive tradition surrounding Sanskrit texts—through commentaries (*bhashyas*)—demonstrates that meaning is not fixed but continuously unfolding. This aligns with the idea that knowledge is dynamic and layered. However, when Sanskrit texts are translated into English, this richness is often diminished. English, shaped by different philosophical assumptions, tends to:

1. Simplify complex terms
2. Separate meaning from context
3. Prioritise literal over conceptual translation

As a result, lexical analysis becomes crucial for recovering the epistemic depth embedded in Sanskrit vocabulary. It allows scholars to move beyond surface meanings and engage with the philosophical structures encoded in language.

## Lexical Analysis of Key Epistemic Terms

### ➤ Dharma: The Ontology of Duty and Order

स्वधर्ममपि चावेक्ष्य न विकम्पितुमर्हसि |

धर्म्याद्धि युद्धाच्छ्रेयोऽन्यत्क्षत्रियस्य न विद्यते || 2.31||

**Meaning:** Besides, considering your duty as a warrior, you should not waver. Indeed, for a warrior, there is no better engagement than fighting for upholding of righteousness (Mukundanand, 2014)

**Lexical Insight-** Dharma cannot be boiled down to duty. It includes:

- cosmic hierarchy



- responsibility for ethics
- role in society
- a spiritual route

As a result, Dharma is a multifaceted epistemic category that connects personal behaviour with universal order. It represents a worldview in which knowledge is relational and contextual. In the Bhagavad Gita, Dharma functions on several levels. Individual (svadharma): one's own responsibility.

- Social: function in the framework of society.
- Cosmic: preserving equilibrium throughout the universe.

This multifaceted interpretation suggests that understanding Dharma is ontological rather than just ethical as it pertains to the fundamental framework of life. Therefore, comprehending Dharma is synonymous with comprehending reality.

➤ **Jnana: Knowledge as Realisation**

न हि ज्ञानेन सदृशं पवित्रमिह विद्यते |

तत्स्वयं योगसंसिद्धः कालेनात्मनि विन्दति || 4.38||

**Meaning:** In this world, there is nothing as purifying as divine knowledge. One who has attained purity of mind through prolonged practice of Yog, receives such knowledge within the heart, in due course of time (Mukundanand, 2014)

**Lexical insight:** Jnana is more than just intellectual understanding.

- Wisdom gained through experience.
- Self-knowledge.
- Insight that transforms.
- Knowing is being in a non-dual epistemology.

Jnana refers to realized knowledge or knowledge that changes the knower and goes beyond intellectual cognition. The following is where its epistemic significance lies-

- Linking being and knowing.
- Prioritizing self-realization over material gain.
- Acting as a purifying force as the shloka demonstrates.

Jnana thus represents a reflexive epistemology in which self-awareness is the result of knowledge turning inward.



## ➤ Karma: Action and Epistemic Responsibility

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन |

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि || 2.47 ||

**Meaning:** You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction (Mukundanand, 2014)

### Lexical Insight:

- Karma envisions:
- Action
- Causal morality
- Responsibility for Ethics

It represents a process-oriented epistemology in which action not abstraction is the source of knowledge. Karma is an ethical consciousness-based system of causality rather than just an action.

- Its lexical structure.
- Moral and deliberate action.

Although unavoidable consequences are not linear. Knowledge is created through active engagement. As a result, knowledge becomes a lived process and epistemology moves from passive observation to active participation.

## ➤ Atman: The Self as knowledge

न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचि

नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः |

अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो

न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे || 2.20||

**Meaning-** The soul is neither born, nor does it ever die; nor having once existed, does it ever cease to be. The soul is without birth, eternal, immortal, and ageless. It is not destroyed when the body is destroyed (Mukundanand, 2014)

### Lexical Insight-

- *Atman* is not merely the Soul, but:
- Mindfulness



- Inner self
- Universal quality

It represents an epistemology in which one's own knowledge is the most important kind of knowledge.

➤ **Buddhi: The faculty of Discernment**

व्यवसायात्मिका बुद्धिरेकेह कुरुनन्दन |

बहुशाखा ह्यनन्ताश्च बुद्धयोऽव्यवसायिनाम् || 41||

**Meaning:** O descendent of the Kurus, the intellect of those who are on this path is resolute, and their aim is one-pointed. But the intellect of those who are irresolute is many-branched (Mukundanand, 2014)

**Lexical Insight:**

*Buddhi* represents:

- Recognition.
- Logical clarity.
- Moral discernment.

It demonstrates how ethical intelligence guides knowledge by bridging the gap between thought and action.

➤ **Yoga: Integration as Knowledge**

योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय |

सिद्ध्यसिद्ध्योः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग उच्यते || 2.48||

**Meaning:** Be steadfast in the performance of your duty, O Arjun, abandoning attachment to success and failure. Such equanimity is called Yog (Mukundanand, 2014)

**Lexical Insight:**

*Yoga*, signifies:

- Union.
- Restraint.
- Combined.

It is an example of a holistic epistemology in which knowledge incorporates the body mind and spirit.



## Translation and Epistemic loss

The loss of lexical richness is a major problem when interacting with the Bhagavad Gita in English. Words like Jnana (knowledge) Yoga (practice) and Dharma (duty) are frequently oversimplified losing their depth of understanding. This creates semantic constriction, distortion in philosophy, knowledge loss. Lexical analysis thus becomes a decolonial tactic recovering native meanings ingrained in language. Although translation is essential to the worldwide dissemination of books such as the Bhagavad Gita it also poses serious epistemic difficulties. Moving from Sanskrit to English entails conceptual transformation as well as linguistic substitution which frequently results in meaning loss or distortion. Semantic reduction is a significant problem where complicated terms like duty or practice or meditation are translated as dharma or yoga. The multi-layered semantic fields present in the original terms are not adequately captured by such translations. The readers access to the texts depth of epistemology is restricted by this reduction.

Cultural untranslatability is another problem. Many Sanskrit terms have no direct English equivalents because they are embedded in particular philosophical and cultural contexts. Because of these translations, frequently force Western conceptual frameworks onto native concepts which results in epistemic misrepresentation. Additionally, translation frequently ignores the symbolic and experiential aspects of the text in favour of literal meaning over interpretive richness. This is especially problematic in a text like the Bhagavad Gita where meaning is frequently dynamic contextual and multi-layered.

Additionally, when indigenous knowledge systems are reframed within Western paradigms their original significance is marginalized. This phenomenon is known as epistemic colonization and translation can contribute to it. Lexical analysis becomes a decolonial tool in this context allowing academics to resist reductive interpretations and recover the original meanings. Therefore, even though translation is essential for accessibility it must be done critically and with an understanding of its implications and limitations.

## Language as Epistemology

The analysis shows that Bhagavad Gita's language is constitutive of knowledge rather than descriptive. Philosophical systems are encoded within Sanskrit lexical units. Knowledge



is ethical, relational and experiential. Sanātan epistemology offers a paradigm of holistic knowledge.

This paper's analysis shows that language in the Bhagavad Gita is a component of knowledge rather than just a means of expressing it. The traditional Western understanding of language as a secondary system that reflects pre-existing concepts is called into question by this. Lexical units serve the following purposes within the Sanātan epistemological framework. frameworks for concepts that organize knowledge. guides based on experience that help people realize who they are. ontological indicators that specify the characteristics of reality. This implies that knowledge is ingrained in language rather than existing outside of it making linguistic analysis essential to epistemological research.

Furthermore, an integrated knowledge system that connects ethics action and realization is revealed by the interaction of concepts like Dharma Karma and Yoga. This all-encompassing method stands in stark contrast to Western epistemology which frequently divides knowledge into discrete fields. The results also emphasize how crucial contextual and interpretive reading techniques are. It is necessary to simultaneously engage with the Bhagavad Gita's lexical structures philosophical context and interpretive traditions in order to fully comprehend it.

From a decolonial standpoint this emphasizes the necessity of- Acknowledge indigenous languages as systems of knowledge, contest reductive translations, take back the power of knowledge from prevailing paradigms.

In the end this study confirms that language is fundamental to Sanātan thought and not just a tool for knowledge. By emphasizing lexical analysis, researchers can reveal the richness and complexity of indigenous epistemologies advancing a more inclusive and diverse conception of knowledge.

## Conclusion

The role of important Sanskrit lexical terms in the Bhagavad Gita as carriers of native epistemology has been examined in this study. It has been demonstrated through qualitative lexical analysis that language in Sanātan philosophy is closely linked to existence knowledge and experience. Decolonizing literary studies and ensuring accurate interpretation both depend on reclaiming these lexical meanings. Scholars can advance toward more inclusive and



pluralistic knowledge systems by emphasizing indigenous epistemologies that are ingrained in language.

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