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"Between Verses And Virtues: Exploring If Through The Lens Of The Gita"

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Abstract:

The paper aims to explore the philosophical depth of Kipling's poem "If," where it draws strong parallels between Kipling's ideals and the teachings of the **Bhagavad Gita**, especially the qualities of the ideal man in the contemporary world. An effort is made to establish a **cross-cultural spiritual dialogue** between English literature and Indian philosophy; this shows how Kipling's virtues reflect **Vedantic principles**, especially those rooted in **Karma Yoga, equanimity, and self-realization**. Each stanza of the poem is analyzed against relevant **shlokas from the Gita**, highlighting key values such as **detachment, willpower, humility, emotional balance, and oneness**. There is an analysis of the concept of **Sthitaprajna (steady-minded one)** and **Yogi** from the Gita as the equivalent of Kipling's "ideal man." The paper bridges **Western literary expression and Eastern philosophical wisdom** and proposes the integration of such moral-ethical frameworks in shaping current and future citizens and societies through education and literature.

Keywords: cross-culture literature, ideal man, literature and philosophy, ethical values, moral leadership.

Introduction:

Rudyard Kipling's poem 'If' stands as a timeless testament to the modern world, where he offers profound life lessons to his son, where he encourages walking a righteous path with courage, inner strength, and calm composure. It promotes a balanced approach to life, especially in an age where even minimal happiness feels distant. Today's world, echoing the illusions of materialism, often contrasts with the true nature of the self. Yet, the veil of illusion remains over this transitory existence. More than five thousand years ago, the ultimate solution to humanity's inner and outer conflicts was given through the **eternal voice of the Divine**, addressed to a desperate disciple who, in many ways, mirrored the dilemmas of the contemporary world.

Being an Indian-born British poet, Kipling may very well have been influenced by the sacred soil of India and its timeless truths, which likely shaped his understanding of life and its purpose. The poem **If** portrays the kind of character desperately needed by today's youth—especially in a time when values are declining, and society seems to drift toward mechanical living, rather than a life rooted in selfless service and universal love.

As **Bharat**—the land of ancient wisdom—resonates with the ideal of "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*" (the world is one family), Kipling, too, emphasizes in his poem the importance of **non-violence and inner stillness**, even

when one is wronged. He urges us to face life's challenges not with hatred, but with **strength, dignity, and calm resolve**.

The Call to Strength: Kipling and the Gita's Ideal Man

Viewing through the lens of Rudyard Kipling, the opening word of his poem *If* signifies the readiness to face the battle of life, which is often uncertain and unpredictable. Similarly, in the Bhagavad Gita, the Gitacharya (Divine Teacher) prepares his seeker to confront his inner conflicts without being influenced or weakened by the external illusions that veil his true nature.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

कुतस्त्वा कश्मलमिदं विषमे समुपस्थितम् ।

अनार्यजुष्टमस्वर्ग्यमकीर्तिकरमर्जुन ॥ 2.2

śhrī bhagavān uvācha

kutastvā kaśhmalamidam viṣhame samupasthitam

anārya-juṣhṭamaswargyam akīrti-karam arjuna (2.2) BG

The Supreme Lord questions the seeker's weakness in the midst of battle, challenging his emotional collapse. He emphasizes that such despair is unworthy of a noble soul, dishonourable, and destructive to one's spiritual progress. The divine master stirs the seeker's awareness by reminding him of the pain, infamy, and degradation that follow delusion and inaction.

In the same spirit, Kipling uses the word "if" as a gentle but firm challenge—inviting the reader to examine whether they possess the inner strength and discipline to rise above life's adversities. Each "if" becomes a test of potential, guiding one toward becoming a complete individual, just as the Gita guides the seeker toward the state of Sthitha Prajna—a person of unwavering wisdom. Just as the divine master begins his teaching by urging his disciple to awaken from delusion, Kipling too begins with "if, a word that holds within it the seeds of transformation, calling one to grow, endure, and evolve into the ideal human being.

The epitome of triumph and disaster

If you can keep your head when all about you

Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,

If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,

But make allowance for their doubting too;

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,

Or being lied about—don't deal in lies.

Or being hated, don't give way to hating.

And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

What does it take to stay stable even in the midst of chaos?

How can one remain unperturbed even when falsely blamed for no reason? Undoubtedly, one must give oneself the chance to witness all circumstances and undergo them with courage and forbearance.

On this note, both Kipling and the Divine voice guide their seekers in a unique way, highlighting that one must cultivate **mental resilience, calmness, self-belief, patience, integrity, tolerance, and humility**. According to Kipling, these are the key qualities one must develop to become a “Man” in the truest sense—a complete, morally grounded, and wise individual.

दुःखेष्वनुद्विग्नमनाः सुखेषु विगतस्पृहः।

वीतरागभयक्रोधः स्थितधीर्मुनिरुच्यते ॥ 2.46

*duḥkheṣhv-anudvigna-manāḥ sukheṣhu vigata-sprihaḥ
vīta-rāga-bhaya-krodhaḥ sthita-dhīr munir uchyat (2.46) BG*

One whose mind remains undisturbed amidst misery, who does not crave pleasure, and who is free from attachment, fear, and anger is called a sage of steady wisdom.

A man with a balanced approach alone can lead a life without much inner turbulence and make the right decisions. It is also said that to progress in life while maintaining a stable state of mind, one must keep a check on the **ego**. How quickly can one return to equanimity without getting deeply attached to any circumstance?

Patience is the only key to great success.

It is only through lived experiences that one can truly understand what society is all about. While the cognitive mind can analyze situations logically, it is **experiential knowledge** that gives us the strength from within to face the challenges ahead.

अद्वेष्टा सर्वभूतानां मैत्रः करुण एव च।

निर्ममो निरहंकारः समदुःखसुखः क्षमी ॥ १२.१३

सन्तुष्टः सततं योगी यतात्मा दृढनिश्चयः।

मय्यर्पितमनोबुद्धिर्मां मद्भक्तः स मे प्रियः ॥ १२.१४

*adveṣṭā sarva-bhūtānāṃ maitraḥ karuṇa eva cha
nirmamo nirahankāraḥ sama-duḥkha-sukhaḥ kṣhamī (12.13) BG*

*santushtah satatam yogi yatatma dridha-nishchayah
mayy arpita-mano-buddhir yo mad-bhaktah sa me priyah (12.14) BG*

Those devotees who are free from malice toward all beings and who are friendly and compassionate are very dear to Me. They are free from attachment and ego, balanced in happiness and sorrow, and ever-forgiving. They are content, self-controlled, firmly resolved, and fully dedicated to Me in mind and intellect.

These divine lines closely **correlate with Kipling’s verse**, where he emphasizes the qualities a man must develop to not engage in lying or hatred, to remain unaffected by hatred from others, and to avoid appearing overly wise or self-important—traits which ultimately protect and uplift one’s character rather than lead to its downfall.

“Stumbling Blocks or Stepping Stones: The Inner Strength to Begin Again”

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;

If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster

And treat those two impostors just the same;

If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken

Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,

Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,

And stoop and build ’em up with worn-out tools:

In the second stanza, Kipling makes the reader, or his son, to whom he is addressing, formulate the idea of being an ideal man. This step rises to a new height in its profundity and embedded knowledge.

The first level is like a toddler’s step, where Kipling, standing in the role of a father, helps his child to crawl through the path of a competitive society. Now, he enriches him with the reality of life and motivates the seeker to stand firm against disaster and persevere till the end by maintaining an equanimous state of mind.

सुखदुःखे समे कृत्वा लाभालाभौ जयाजयौ।

ततो युद्धाय युज्यस्व नैवं पापमवाप्स्यसि ॥ (2.38)

sukha-duḥkhe same kṛtvā lābhālābhau jayājayau

tato yuddhāya yujyasva naivam pāpam avāpsyasi (2.38) BG

“Treat pleasure and pain, gain and loss, and victory and defeat as the same, and then engage in battle. In this way, you will not incur sin.”

Kipling’s “two impostors” align directly with the Gita’s call for equanimity, to treat success and failure, joy and sorrow, as equal, and not let either sway your inner peace.

Next, Kipling subtly emulates the quality of detachment as one of the most important values to imbibe, since attachment only leads to sorrow and misery. Especially when words are spoken harshly, they tend to remain forever. Therefore, being unaffected by others’ manipulation, praise, or criticism is what the poet suggests. In comparison, the Gita advises its seekers along the same lines. Here’s the related shloka from the sacred text:

यः सर्वत्रानभिस्नेहस्तत्तत्प्राप्य शुभाशुभम्।

नाभिनन्दति न द्वेष्टि तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता ॥

yaḥ sarvatrānabhisnehas tat tat prāpya śhubhāśhubham

nābhinandati na dveṣṭi tasya prajñā pratiṣṭhitā (2.57) BG

“He who is unattached to everything, who neither rejoices upon attaining good nor hates when encountering evil, his wisdom is firmly established.”

Barrie Wade also reflects a similar sentiment in his poem “The Truth”

Pain from words has left its scar.

On mind and heart that’s tender.

Cuts and bruises now

have healed; they’re words that I remember.

The title “The Truth” suggests that truth is the greatest virtue. The pain caused by unpleasant words is far more unbearable and long-lasting than physical injury. Therefore, it is very important to develop the quality of being unaffected by others’ blame and to remain like the lotus—untouched by the mud around it.

The last two lines of this stanza relate easily to every single person who dreams high and puts in strenuous efforts to reach great heights. But the path of righteousness never seems easy. At times, things fall apart where we had invested our deepest efforts. Life brings tests not to break us, but to give us greater strength to soar higher. A true hero is one who does not avoid difficulties but faces them courageously and gathers strength, no matter what. Such a man is the one who truly wins the battle of good over evil.

To support this idea, our Indian scripture, the Kaṭhopaniṣad, states:

उत्तिष्ठ जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत।

क्षुरस्य धारा निशिता दुरत्यया

दुर्गं पथस्तत्कवयो वदन्ति ॥ (Kaṭha Upaniṣad: 1.3.14)

uttiṣṭha jāgrata prāpya varān nibodhata

kṣurasya dhārā niśitā duratyayā

durgam pathas tat kavayo vadanti

“Arise! Awake! Approach the great ones and learn. The wise declare that the path is as sharp as the razor’s edge—difficult to traverse and hard to walk.”

The next stanza of the poem reaches the height of perfection in action, what we refer to as "yoga" in Sanskrit. Here, Kipling conveys four powerful messages: never give up until the task is accomplished in the right manner, endure with patience, and discharge one’s duty without expectation. These ideals reflect the essence of Karma Yoga as taught in the Indian spiritual tradition. India, or Bharat, has been the cradle of great saints, philosophers, writers, and artists. Even today, the country stands tall like a mountain, upholding its timeless values and culture.

One such revolutionary seeker was Swami Vivekananda, who relentlessly pursued self-realization. His journey was marked by rigorous trials and tests put forth by his master, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Another towering spiritual figure, Adi Shankaracharya, revived and spread the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta across the land. Through his disciple Swami Vivekananda, this non-dualistic wisdom reached the Western world. Despite facing criticism and rejection in the early stages of his spiritual mission abroad, Swami Vivekananda did not give up. He risked it all on one bold move akin to Kipling's "one turn of pitch-and-toss" and emerged as a global beacon of Indian philosophy. Today, his name resonates powerfully across the world, a testimony to his willpower and dedication.

If you can make one heap of all your winnings

And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,

And lose and start again at your beginnings.

And never breathe a word about your loss;

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew

To serve your turn long after they are gone,

And so hold on when there is nothing in you.

Except the Will, which says to them, 'Hold on!'

These lines resonate not only with the spiritual path but also with the lives of our freedom fighters and patriots, who endured immense suffering during colonial rule. Many were jailed, tortured, and exiled for years. Yet, they never spoke of their pain or losses. Instead, they channelled their body, mind, and spirit to serve the motherland until their last breath. Such resilience was possible only through unshakable willpower, commitment, and a deep sense of purpose.

Similarly, in the Bhagavad Gita, the Divine instructs the seeker to perform actions sincerely and skillfully, leaving the results to the Divine, without expectations. This state of surrender clears the ego and allows the Divine to work through an empty, receptive body and mind.

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥

karmaṇy-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣhu kadāchana

mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stvakarmaṇi (2.47) BG

The phrase “mā phaleṣhu kadāchana” means one is not entitled to the fruits of action but only to perform the duty without attachment. In the same spirit, Kipling encourages the reader to start over without complaint even after repeated losses, for the results are not ours to claim or expect.

बुद्धियुक्तो जहातीह उभे सुकृतदुष्कृते ।

तस्माद्योगाय युज्यस्व योगः कर्मसु कौशलम् ॥

buddhi-yukto jahātiha ubhe sukr̥ta-duṣkr̥te

tasmād yogāya yujyasva yogaḥ karmasu kauśhalam (2.50) BG

This verse declares that a person endowed with wisdom and equanimity lets go of both good and bad results. Therefore, one must strive for yoga, which is described as skill in action. Kipling's emphasis on continuing even when all strength has been exhausted, using only the power of will, reflects this yogic ideal of persistence with balance.

यं हि न व्यथयन्त्येते पुरुषं पुरुषर्षभ ।

समदुःखसुखं धीरं सोऽमृतत्वाय कल्पते ॥

yaṁ hi na vyathayanty ete puruṣhaṁ puruṣharṣhabha

sama-duḥkha-sukhaṁ dhīraṁ so 'mṛitatvāya kalpate (2.15) BG

The above verse explains that one who is undisturbed by pain and pleasure and remains steady in both is truly fit for immortality (liberation). It mirrors the stoic endurance and emotional stability Kipling advocates, especially in the face of hardship and success alike.

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,

Or walk with kings—nor lose the common touch,

If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,

If all men count with you, but none too much.

If you can fill the unforgiving minute

With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,

Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it.

And—which is more—you'll be a man, my son!

The concluding lines of the poem offer a fitting representation of an ideal man—someone who is self-absorbed in inner truth yet remains humble among both the masses and the elite. Such characteristics are seen only in a person who is complete in knowledge, not in one whose understanding is half-baked. Another profound message Kipling conveys is the need for a balanced relationship with both friends and foes.

As the saying goes, "Live every moment as if it were your last." This spirit can be observed in true leaders and masters—those who stand for the ignored, run with time, and dedicate their success not to themselves, but to the whole of humanity. It is only selfless individuals, those who possess unconditional trust within, who can achieve the impossible. To them, opportunities naturally open doors.

ज्ञानविज्ञानतृप्तात्मा कूटस्थो विजितेन्द्रियः ।

युक्त इत्युच्यते योगी समलोष्टाश्मकाञ्चनः ॥

jñāna-vijñāna-trīptātmā kūṭa-stho vijitendriyaḥ

yukta ityuchyate yogī sama-loṣṭāśhma-kāñchanah (6.8 BG)

Kipling's references to “crowds” and “kings” represent the polarities of society—the ordinary and the elite. The Gita verse above describes the true yogi as one who sees no difference between mud, stone, or gold—a person who treats all people and situations equally, without arrogance or inferiority. Where Kipling speaks of virtue and humility despite status, the Gita speaks of equality, contentment, and detachment from material distinctions.

यस्मान्नोद्विजते लोको लोकान्नोद्विजते च यः ।

हर्षामर्षभयोद्वेगैर्मुक्तो यः स च मे प्रियः ॥

yasmān nodvijate loko lokān nodvijate cha yaḥ

harṣhāmarṣha-bhayodvegair mukto yaḥ sa cha me priyaḥ (12.15) BG

“The one who does not disturb others and is not disturbed by anyone—who is free from joy, envy, fear, and anxiety—is very dear to Me”.

This directly mirrors Kipling's idea that one must remain unhurt by both friends and enemies, maintaining emotional steadiness. This is the hallmark of a truly ideal man, embodying wisdom and love in action, who treats both praise and criticism, joy and sorrow, as equal.

तस्मात्सर्वेषु कालेषु मामनुस्मर युध्य च ॥

tasmāt sarveṣhu kāleṣhu māmanusmara yudhya cha (3.19) BG

Therefore, always remember Me and perform your duty. This reflects Kipling's exhortation to make every moment count, acting mindfully and purposefully—the essence of Karma Yoga. Truly, it is rare to find a poet who so perfectly aligns his thoughts with the highest spiritual wisdom yet expresses it in a language accessible to the common man.

एषा ब्राह्मी स्थितिः पार्थ नैनां प्राप्य विमुह्यति ।

स्थित्वास्यामन्तकालेऽपि ब्रह्मनिर्वाणमृच्छति ॥

eṣhā brāhmī sthitiḥ pārtha nainān prāpya vimuhyati

sthitvāsyām anta-kāle 'pi brahma-nirvāṇam ṛichchhati (2.72) BG

This is the state of self-realization. Once attained, the person is never deluded and, even at the time of death, attains liberation. Kipling's phrase “You'll be a man, my son!” mirrors this very idea—the emergence of a spiritually complete and liberated being, a sthita-prajna (one of steady wisdom). These profound lines echo the truth of non-dualistic philosophy, pointing toward the oneness of all creation. They provide a roadmap for every individual to embrace this oneness and to attain the highest truth of the Self. Kipling's final phrase, “you will be a man,” subtly delivers the same message that Lord Krishna imparts in the Gita—through the simple word “man,” Kipling points to the ideal spiritual human being.

To conclude, this is the richness of literature and philosophy—where virtue and wisdom merge, laying the foundation for a society that thrives on right understanding, shaped through righteous guidance. It is only through such grounding that we can build a world that is united in diversity. All divisions dissolve when we embrace the one conceptual theme of becoming ideal inspirations—by drawing from the lives of saints, seers, humanitarians, philosophers, and educators. The concept of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,” the world is one family, is the essential message for every individual to absorb and live by. There is no true distinction in the creation of our body, mind, or spirit. What differs are habits and value systems, which can always be aligned with the ultimate goal of oneness through virtues learned from sacred verses.

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