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Karma Yoga in Nation-Building and the Scriptural Ethos in Atmanirbhar Bharat, Skill India & Make in India

^{*1}Dr. Bhanu M Parmar and ²Darshan Gajjar

^{*1}Principal & Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Nalini-Arvind & T.V. Patel Arts College, Vallabh Vidyanagar, Gujarat, India.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Politics and International Relations, The CVM University, Vallabh Vidyanagar, Gujarat, India.

Abstract

This paper explores the philosophical foundations of three major developmental initiatives of the government of India which are Atmanirbhar Bharat, Skill India Mission, and Make in India, through the lens of the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and modern public administration theory. It argues that these schemes, while economic and administrative in letter, are deeply connected to India's civilizational ethos rooted in self-reliance (Atmanirbharta), disciplined action (Karma Yoga), and skill mastery (kaushalam) in spirit. The Bhagavad Gita provides key ethical principles such as Nishkama Karma (selfless duty), Swadharma (righteous responsibility), and excellence in action, which resonate with the objectives of productivity, empowerment, and self-sufficiency embedded in the schemes. The Upanishadic emphasis on inner potential, holistic development, and self-realization further reinforces the moral and psychological dimensions of national capacity building with the whole of the government approach. From a public policy and public administration perspective, these initiatives exemplify a shift toward a culturally rooted governance model that integrates administrative efficiency with ethical grounding, institutional capacity, and citizen participation. While the synthesis of ancient philosophy and modern governance creates a compelling normative framework, the paper also acknowledges challenges related to implementation gaps, inclusivity, and balancing cultural authenticity with global competitiveness. Overall, the analysis demonstrates that integrating Indian philosophical wisdom with contemporary developmental policy offers a holistic, values-based approach to nation-building in India.

Keywords: Indian Ethos, Public Administration, Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, Atmanirbhar Bharat, Skill India Mission.

1. Introduction

The contemporary landscape of Indian public policy has increasingly sought to integrate indigenous philosophical foundations into its developmental agenda. With initiatives such as Atmanirbhar Bharat, Skill India Mission, and Make in India, the Indian state has attempted to create a self-reliant, productive, and innovation-oriented society grounded in its civilizational ethos. These policy frameworks reflect an aspiration not only for economic resurgence but also for a culturally rooted model of governance, in which the ancient wisdom can lead to modern administrative reforms. Classical Indian texts like the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads provide direct conceptual tools, ranging from self-mastery and duty to excellence and collective welfare, which are increasingly being recognized as relevant for ethical governance and nation-building (Radhakrishnan, 2018; Sharma, 2009) [20, 26].

There is renewed scholarly attention that links Indian philosophy with public administration and public policy, particularly in the areas of administrative ethics, leadership, and capacity building (Awasthi & Maheshwari, 2017) [1]. The

Gita's doctrines of Nishkama Karma (selfless action), Swadharma (duty), and Karma Yoga (skillful action) have been highlighted as foundational to ethical leadership and citizen-centric governance (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 2014) [18]. Similarly, Upanishadic ideas such as self-realization (Atma-Vidya), inner potential (Tattvamasi), and holistic development resonate strongly with contemporary ideas of human resource development, innovation, and institutional capacity (Hiriyanna, 2005) [9]. These parallels provide an interpretive lens to understand how policies like Atmanirbhar Bharat invoke the principle of self-dependence, Skill India reflects disciplined action and excellence, and Make in India embodies industriousness rooted in karma and creative expression.

The significance of anchoring development models in Indian philosophical traditions lies in their ability to offer a moral direction to economic policymaking. This aligns with the evolving understanding of good governance, which emphasizes responsiveness, ethical conduct, skill enhancement, and capacity building within state and administrative structures (Bevir, 2010) [3]. The integration of

Indian ethos with economic strategy may contribute to not only economic productivity but also sustainable and ethical governance. Against this background, this paper examines how these flagship schemes draw ideological inspiration from the Gita and Upanishads, and how this synthesis enriches the discipline of public administration.

2. Theoretical Framework

The exploration of these schemes, Atmanirbhar Bharat, Skill India Mission, and Make in India, through the lens of Indian philosophical traditions requires a multidimensional theoretical framework that integrates insights from Indian Ethos, classical philosophy, and public administration theory. Indian Ethos, as a discipline, emphasizes values such as Dharma (righteous duty), Karma Yoga (skill in action), Samatva (equanimity), and Lokasaṅgraha (welfare of all). These concepts collectively articulate a governance model rooted in ethical duty, collective welfare, and responsible leadership (Bhawuk, 2017) [4]. The relevance of these values has been increasingly recognized in discussions on administrative ethics and leadership, particularly in contexts requiring trust-building and societal participation (Awasthi & Maheshwari, 2017) [1].

From a public administration standpoint, modern governance operates under principles of Good Governance, New Public Management (NPM), and citizen-centric administration. These models emphasize efficiency, decentralization, human resource development, and participatory decision-making (Bevir, 2010; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015) [3, 7]. However, critics argue that excessively technocratic models often overlook cultural and ethical dimensions essential for long-term administrative legitimacy (Shafritz *et al.*, 2016) [25]. Indian philosophical traditions fill this normative gap by offering a value-based orientation to governance. The Gita's doctrine of Nishkama Karma, for instance, provides an ethical grounding for disinterested, duty-centered administration (Radhakrishnan, 2018) [20]. Similarly, the Upanishadic emphasis on self-realization and the development of inner potential aligns with contemporary theories of human capital and capacity building (Hiriyanna, 2005) [9].

The philosophical framework of this paper draws from two primary sources:

- i). **The Bhagavad Gita**, which advocates disciplined action (karma), ethical leadership, and excellence (karmasu kauśalam). These teachings are directly relevant to schemes focused on productivity, skill, and self-reliance (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 2014) [18].
- ii). **The Upanishads**, which foreground notions of innate capability, self-dependence (Atman as the seat of strength), and holistic development. These align with contemporary initiatives prioritizing innovation, entrepreneurship, and skill development (Radhakrishnan, 1992) [19].

By integrating these streams of thought, the theoretical framework provides a culturally grounded and ethically enriched perspective to study modern policy interventions. It allows for an interpretation and understanding of national development not merely as economic expansion but as a value-driven, people-centered administrative process infused with India's civilizational wisdom.

3. Atmanirbhar Bharat Through the Lens of Indian Philosophy

The Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative, launched amid the covid

pandemic in 2020, represents a comprehensive strategy for enhancing India's economic self-reliance, technological capability, and institutional resilience. While predominantly positioned as an economic reform programme, its philosophical underpinnings reveal deep continuity with classical Indian thought. The central premise of Atmanirbhar Bharat, self-upliftment through one's own effort, closely parallels the Bhagavad Gita's message in 6.5: "Uddhared ātmanātmānam nātmānam avasādayet" (One must elevate oneself through one's own self and never degrade oneself). This verse emphasizes personal agency, inner strength, and independence, suggesting that true progress is enabled not by external support but by self-directed effort. The policy's emphasis on local manufacturing, indigenous innovation, and reduced import dependency echoes this moral directive toward self-dependence.

The Gita's broader framework of Swadharma reinforces this interpretation. Acting in accordance with one's essential nature and responsibilities leads to social stability and individual fulfilment (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 2014) [18]. Applied to national policy, Swadharma translates into cultivating domestic capacities, technological, human, and institutional, rather than relying excessively on foreign systems. This interpretation aligns with scholarly perspectives suggesting that the Gita provides a blueprint for resilient and duty-oriented governance (Sharma, 2009) [26]. Atmanirbhar Bharat can be viewed not merely as an economic imperative but as a manifestation of Karma Yoga, where disciplined, efficient action contributes to collective well-being.

The Upanishads provide further philosophical grounding for self-reliance. The concept of Atman as the source of innate power, knowledge, and self-sufficiency, articulated especially in the Bṛhadāranyaka and Chāndogya Upanishads, promotes the idea that true strength comes from within (Hiriyanna, 2005) [9]. Statements like "Ātmanastu kāmāya sarvaṁ priyam bhavati" suggest that the self is the origin of motivation and capability. In administrative terms, this aligns with public administration theories that prioritize local capacity-building, institutional empowerment, and citizen participation in governance (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015) [7].

Atmanirbhar Bharat reflects the public administration ideal of a responsive and enabling state, one that facilitates innovation, entrepreneurship, and decentralization. This aligns with Indian philosophical notions of governance centered on moral duty, collective welfare, and inner transformation (Lokasaṅgraha) (Awasthi & Maheshwari, 2017) [1]. The initiative represents a synthesis of classical ethical principles and modern statecraft, positioning self-reliance as both an economic and a civilizational aspiration.

4. Skill India Mission and the Scriptural Emphasis on Skill & Excellence

The Skill India Mission, launched in 2015, seeks to enhance India's human capital through large-scale vocational training, upskilling, and the creation of a workforce capable of meeting the demands of a rapidly evolving economy. By emphasizing competence, refinement of abilities, and mastery of one's craft, the initiative reflects a rich lineage of Indian philosophical thought that places considerable value on skill, discipline, and excellence. The Bhagavad Gita offers one of the clearest articulations of this ethos in verse 18.46: "By worshipping Him from whom all beings originate, a man attains perfection by performing his own work." This line emphasizes the importance of Swadharma, where individuals perfect themselves through the dedicated execution of tasks

aligned with their innate dispositions (Radhakrishnan, 2018) [20]. Skill development, in this sense, becomes not merely an economic activity but a path to self-realization and social harmony.

Another pivotal teaching from the Gita is the principle “Yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam” (Excellence in action is Yoga), found in 2.50. This dictum frames skill as a spiritual and ethical pursuit rather than a purely technical one (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 2014) [18]. It aligns well with the Skill India Mission’s objective of fostering discipline, precision, and continuous improvement. Scholars have noted that this approach to skill, rooted in intentionality and mindfulness, offers a holistic model for workforce development, particularly in societies undergoing rapid structural transformation (Sharma, 2009) [26].

The Upanishads also reinforce the pursuit of excellence, most prominently in the Muṇḍaka Upanishad, which distinguishes between para vidyā (higher knowledge) and apara vidyā (practical, worldly knowledge). While the former leads to spiritual liberation, the latter equips individuals to function effectively in the world (Hiriyanna, 2005) [9]. The Upanishadic framework acknowledges the necessity of practical skill and craftsmanship as essential components of human development, validating the mission’s emphasis on vocational empowerment.

From a public administration perspective, the Skill India Mission reflects modern theories of human resource development, capacity building, and institutional strengthening (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015) [7]. The mission supports a governance model where the state acts as an enabler, facilitating training ecosystems, forging public-private partnerships, and ensuring quality assurance. This reflects NPM’s focus on efficiency but also integrates an ethical dimension grounded in Indian philosophical traditions, thereby merging administrative effectiveness with culturally informed notions of excellence.

5. Make in India and the Ethic of Action

The Make in India initiative, introduced in 2014, is a strategic intervention aimed at transforming India into a global manufacturing hub by promoting domestic production, encouraging foreign investment, and enhancing industrial competitiveness. At its philosophical core lies an emphasis on productive action, innovation, and disciplined effort; such values profoundly resonate with the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. Among the Gita’s most relevant teachings is the injunction found in 3.8: “Perform your prescribed duties, for action is superior to inaction.” This verse captures the Gita’s broader doctrine of Karma Yoga, which frames action not only as necessary for societal functioning but also as essential for personal and collective progress (Radhakrishnan, 2018) [20]. Make in India embodies this ethic by calling upon multiple stakeholders, government, industry, and citizens, to actively engage in nation-building through innovation, enterprise, and industry.

Similarly, the Gita’s verse 3.19, “Therefore, without attachment, always perform actions that should be done; by performing action without attachment, one attains the supreme.”, starkly highlights the ideal of detached yet purposeful action (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 2014) [18]. Within an economic context, this principle translates into fostering an entrepreneurial culture driven by intrinsic motivation, discipline, and excellence rather than mere profit-seeking. Modern scholarship notes that such an ethic supports sustainable industrial growth by aligning economic incentives

with socially responsible production models (Sharma, 2009) [26].

Indian philosophical thought beyond the Gita also contributes to understanding the values underpinning Make in India. The Taittiriya Upanishad affirms the dignity and sacredness of work through the idea of “Karmani eva adhikaraste”, which suggests that purposeful labour becomes a form of worship when performed with sincerity and dedication (Hiriyanna, 2005) [9]. Creativity, craft, and innovation, which are particularly pivotal to manufacturing, are framed as manifestations of human potential aligned with cosmic order. From a public administration perspective, Make in India exemplifies the transformation toward a facilitative state. It aligns with NPM’s emphasis on deregulation, efficiency, and public-private partnerships, while also embedding cultural values of discipline and collective welfare (Bevir, 2010) [3]. The initiative requires administrative reforms, such as improving ease of doing business, modernizing regulatory frameworks, and strengthening institutional capacity, that reflect the Gita’s ethic of continuous, responsible action (karma) oriented toward national development. Make in India represents not only an economic strategy but also a philosophical expression of disciplined, ethical, and purposeful action rooted in Indian knowledge traditions.

6. Comparative Analysis: How the Three Schemes Reflect Indian Ethos

A comparative examination of Atmanirbhar Bharat, Skill India Mission, and Make in India reveals a shared philosophical foundation grounded in Indian civilizational ethos, particularly as articulated in the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. Although each scheme addresses different dimensions of national development, such as self-reliance, skill formation, and industrial productivity, which ultimately converge in reflecting core principles such as self-mastery, disciplined action, inner potential, and collective welfare. These values embody the broader Indian worldview in which economic progress is seen not only as material advancement but also as an ethical, spiritually informed undertaking (Bhawuk, 2017) [4].

Atmanirbhar Bharat aligns strongly with the Gita’s doctrine of self-upliftment (ātma-vikāsa) as expressed in 6.5, where individuals and societies are urged to rely on their inherent strengths rather than external support (Radhakrishnan, 2018) [20]. Skill India Mission reflects the Gita’s injunction “Yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam”, that excellence in action is central to human fulfillment (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 2014) [18]. Meanwhile, Make in India embodies the ethic of purposeful action (karma yoga) articulated in Gita 3.8, emphasizing productivity, industriousness, and innovation as pathways to national prosperity. Collectively, these initiatives echo the Upanishadic idea that human potential is inherently divine and capable of transformation when pursued with discipline and knowledge (Taittiriya Upanishad; Hiriyanna, 2005) [9].

Thematically, the three schemes converge on three key pillars: self-reliance, skill mastery, and sustained action. Each initiative approaches empowerment from a different vantage point, Atmanirbhar Bharat focuses on macroeconomic independence, Skill India on human resource refinement, and Make in India on industrial strength, but all are unified by the Indian philosophical understanding that progress emerges from disciplined, conscious effort (karma) aligned with one’s responsibilities (dharma) (Sharma, 2009) [26].

From a public administration perspective, the convergence of these schemes reflects a shift toward a culturally embedded

governance model where administrative efficiency is enriched by ethical and philosophical grounding. This complements global theories of good governance and human development while offering a distinctly Indian approach that prioritizes inner capability, ethical conduct, and collective well-being (Awasthi & Maheshwari, 2017) [1]. The three initiatives collectively exemplify how ancient wisdom can structure modern policy frameworks in a coherent and holistic manner.

7. Implications for Public Administration

The integration of philosophical principles derived from the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads into contemporary governance initiatives such as Atmanirbhar Bharat, Skill India Mission, and Make in India carries significant implications for the study and practice of public administration in India. Central to this integration is the emergence of a governance paradigm that combines administrative efficiency with ethical grounding, aligning with global frameworks of good governance while remaining anchored in India's civilizational ethos (Bevir, 2010) [3]. This dual approach strengthens both the operational and moral dimensions of governance, offering a holistic model for public sector functioning.

A major implication is the reaffirmation of ethical administration, where public officials are guided by principles akin to Nishkama Karma, duty performed without attachment to personal gain (Radhakrishnan, 2018) [20]. This encourages administrators to prioritize public welfare, transparency, and fairness, aligning with modern standards of accountability and responsible governance (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015) [7]. By infusing administrative roles with the ethos of Karma Yoga, the framework positions public servants as facilitators of collective progress rather than mere bureaucratic actors.

Another implication concerns capacity-building and human resource development, which echo the Upanishadic emphasis on inner strength and skill refinement. The Skill India Mission provides a practical example of how state institutions can promote individual excellence, a concept deeply embedded in Indian thought (Hiriyanna, 2005) [9]. This resonates with public administration theories that argue for continuous training, professional development, and institutional learning to enhance administrative performance (Shafritz *et al.*, 2016) [25].

Furthermore, these schemes highlight the importance of a facilitative state, one that enables entrepreneurship, innovation, and self-reliance rather than merely regulating or controlling. Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat showcase a transition toward a governance model where the state acts as a catalyst for economic growth through simplified procedures, decentralized decision-making, and public-private collaboration (Sharma, 2009) [26]. This aligns with New Public Management's emphasis on efficiency but is enriched by indigenous values of discipline, duty, and welfare orientation.

This synthesis of Indian philosophical principles with modern administrative frameworks suggests a distinctive model of governance, one that is efficient, ethical, participatory, and culturally grounded. It offers a pathway for reimagining public administration as a value-driven and transformative discipline suited to India's socio-economic realities and civilizational depth.

8. Challenges

While the integration of Indian philosophical principles with contemporary policy frameworks provides a compelling model of ethical and culturally grounded governance, it is not without challenges and criticisms. One major critique

concerns the risk of over-philosophizing policy, wherein the invocation of scriptural ideas may be perceived as symbolic rather than substantive if not supported by measurable institutional reforms and empirical outcomes (Bevir, 2010) [3]. Although the Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads offer rich ethical insights, critics argue that translating these metaphysical concepts into concrete administrative procedures can be complex and may sometimes oversimplify the nuanced realities of governance (Shafritz *et al.*, 2016) [25].

Another challenge lies in implementation gaps, a recurring issue in Indian public administration. While schemes like Atmanirbhar Bharat, Skill India, and Make in India articulate ambitious goals, their effectiveness depends heavily on administrative capacity, interdepartmental coordination, and long-term institutional stability (Awasthi & Maheshwari, 2017) [1]. Without robust monitoring systems, adequate funding, and bureaucratic accountability, the philosophical underpinnings of these programs may not translate into tangible outcomes. This implementation deficit is exacerbated by regional disparities, uneven skill distribution, and structural constraints within the manufacturing and training sectors (Sharma, 2009) [26].

A further criticism concerns the inclusivity and equity of these initiatives. Although self-reliance and skill development are universally desirable, scholars argue that marginalized groups, informal sector workers, and rural populations may not benefit equally unless policies specifically address structural inequalities (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015) [7]. The Upanishadic and Gita-oriented focus on individual self-improvement risks overlooking systemic barriers such as limited access to technology, education, and capital (Hiriyanna, 2005) [9]. Without complementary social welfare mechanisms, the philosophical emphasis on self-effort may inadvertently reinforce existing hierarchies.

There is also a concern about balancing cultural authenticity with global competitiveness. While culturally grounded governance can strengthen national identity and ethical conduct, policy frameworks must also align with international economic norms, trade regulations, and technological standards (Bevir, 2010) [3]. Overemphasizing indigenous models without engaging global best practices could limit India's global integration.

Although the infusion of classical Indian ethos enhances the normative appeal of these national initiatives, their success ultimately depends on administrative capacity, inclusivity, structural reforms, and pragmatic engagement with global frameworks. Addressing these challenges is essential for realizing the full potential of a philosophy-driven developmental model.

9. Conclusion

The examination of Atmanirbhar Bharat, Skill India Mission, and Make in India through the philosophical frameworks of the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads highlights the deep interconnections between India's ancient intellectual traditions and its contemporary developmental aspirations. These initiatives collectively embody a governance model that balances economic pragmatism with ethical grounding, demonstrating how classical ideas of self-reliance, skill mastery, and purposeful action continue to retain relevance in the modern administrative context. By drawing upon teachings such as "Uddhared ātmanātmānam" (self-upliftment), "Yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam" (excellence in action), and the Upanishadic emphasis on the inner potential of the individual (Atman as the seat of capability), the

schemes articulate a vision of nation-building rooted in both competence and character (Radhakrishnan, 2018 [20]; Hiriyanna, 2005)^[9].

From a public administration perspective, integrating Indian philosophical ethos into policy not only enriches administrative ethics but also enhances institutional resilience and citizen engagement. As scholars suggest, embedding normative values within administrative processes can strengthen accountability, legitimacy, and trust in governance (Awasthi & Maheshwari, 2017; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015)^[1, 7]. In this sense, the philosophical underpinnings of these national initiatives offer a conceptual bridge between efficiency-oriented administrative models and value-driven governance frameworks. Such a synthesis reflects an evolving paradigm in which governance is not merely a technical enterprise but a moral and cultural undertaking aligned with the broader societal good.

However, the analysis also reveals inherent challenges. Without robust institutional capacity, inclusive implementation, and sensitivity to structural inequalities, the philosophical ideals of self-reliance and excellence may only partially translate into practice (Shafritz *et al.*, 2016)^[25]. Ensuring that marginalized groups benefit equally from skill development, industrial growth, and self-reliance efforts remains a critical consideration. Likewise, aligning culturally inspired governance with global competitiveness requires a careful balance of indigenous values and international best practices.

Despite these challenges, the convergence of Indian philosophical wisdom with contemporary policy initiatives presents a promising framework for a uniquely Indian model of development. It underscores that national progress is not solely dependent on material growth but is deeply tied to ethical governance, empowered citizens, and a shared civilizational consciousness. In doing so, it invites a reimagining of public administration as a transformative, culturally rooted, and ethically grounded discipline capable of guiding India's future trajectory.

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