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The Bhagavad-Gita

Krishna's Counsel in Time of War

Translated and with an Introduction
and an Afterword by Barbara Stoler Miller

For Gwenn

for her sense
of the ways we are

THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

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Cover painting, "Krishna in Cosmic Battle," by an unknown Mughal artist ca. 1590, opaque watercolor on paper from Akbar's *Harivamsa* manuscript. Used by courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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new translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita***

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—John Stratton Hawley,
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"As an expression of quintessential doctrine, the *Gita* is, as it were, the Sermon on the Mount of Hinduism. . . . Professor Miller's poetic translation presents the teachings of the *Gita* to us in lucid language and strong, rhythmic verse. It is a translation that affords pleasure no less than edification."

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—Ainslee Embree,
Professor of History, Columbia University

the bhagya

KRISHNA'S COUNSEL IN TIME OF WAR

Vivaldi-gita

*With an Introduction and an Afterword by
Barbara Stoler Miller*



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INTRODUCTION

The Bhagavad-Gita: Context and Text

The *Bhagavad-Gita* has been the exemplary text of Hindu culture for centuries, both in India and in the West. The Sanskrit title *Bhagavad-Gita* has usually been interpreted to mean "Song of the Lord," but this is misleading. It is not a lyric but a philosophical poem, composed in the form of a dialogue between the warrior Arjuna and his charioteer, the god Krishna.

As we read the *Bhagavad-Gita* today we can understand the paralyzing conflict Arjuna suffers knowing that the enemies it is his warrior duty to destroy are his own kinsmen and teachers. We can sympathize with his impulse to shrink from the violence he sees in the human condition, and we can learn from the ways Krishna teaches him to understand his own and others' mortality. Krishna's exposition of the relationship between death, sacrifice, and devotion dramatizes the Hindu idea that one must heroically confront death in order to transcend the limits of worldly existence. We may not share Arjuna's developing faith in Krishna's authority or be convinced by Krishna's insistence that one must perform one's sacred duty, even when it requires violence. But if we listen carefully to the compelling arguments and imagery of the discourse, we cannot but hear the voice of a larger reality.

The dramatic moral crisis that is central to the *Bhagavad-Gita* has inspired centuries of Indian philosophers and practical men of wisdom, as well as Western thinkers such as Thoreau, Emerson, and Eliot. Interpretations of the *Gita*, as it is commonly referred to in India,

are as varied as the figures who have commented on it. From Shankara, the great Hindu philosopher of the eighth century, to Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of India's independence struggle in the twentieth century, each thinker has emphasized the path to spiritual liberation that was suited to his view of reality. These various interpretations reflect the intentionally multifaceted message of Krishna's teaching. The *Gita's* significance for Hindu life continues to be debated in India today.

Hinduism is not based on the teachings of a founder, such as Buddha, Christ, or Muhammad. It has evolved over centuries through the continual interplay of diverse religious beliefs and practices: popular local cults; orthodox traditions, including the ancient Vedic hymns, the ritual texts of the Brahmanas, and the mystical Upanishads; as well as heterodox challenges from Buddhist and Jain ideas and institutions. Even the word *Hindu* is a foreign idea, used by Arab invaders in the eighth century A.D. to refer to the customs and beliefs of people who worshipped sectarian gods such as Vishnu and Shiva.

Although the *Gita* exists as an independent sacred text, its placement within the sixth book of the great Indian war epic, the *Mahabharata*, gives it a concrete context. The religious and cultural life of the Indian subcontinent, and much of the rest of Asia, has been deeply influenced by the *Mahabharata*, as well as by the *Ramayana*, the other ancient Indian epic. Both poems have their roots in legendary events that took place in the period following the entry of nomadic Indo-Aryan-speaking tribes into northwestern India around 1200 B.C. The composition of the epics began as these tribes settled in the river valleys of the Indus and the Ganges during the first millennium B.C., when their nomadic sacrificial cults began to develop into what are now the religious traditions of Hinduism.

The Hindu concept of religion is expressed by the Sanskrit term *dharma* ("sacred duty"), which refers to the moral order that sustains the cosmos, society, and the individual. The continual reinterpretation of *dharma* attests to its significance in Indian civilization. Derived from a

Sanskrit form meaning "that which sustains," within Hindu culture it generally means religiously ordained duty, that is, the code of conduct appropriate to each group in the hierarchically ordered Hindu society. Theoretically, right and wrong are not absolute in this system; practically, right and wrong are decided according to the categories of social rank, kinship, and stage of life. For modern Westerners who have been raised on ideals of universality and egalitarianism, this relativity of values and obligations is the aspect of Hinduism most difficult to understand. However, without an attempt to understand it, the Hindu view of life remains opaque.

The epics are repositories of myths, ideals, and concepts that Hindu culture has always drawn upon to represent aspects of *dharma*. As befits their social position as warrior-kings, the figures of the epic heroes embody order and sacred duty (*dharma*); while their foes, whether human or demonic, embody chaos (*adharma*). The rituals of warrior life and the demands of sacred duty define the religious and moral meaning of heroism throughout the *Mahabharata*. Acts of heroism are characterized less by physical prowess than by the fulfillment of *dharma*, which often involves extraordinary forms of sacrifice, penance, devotion to a divine authority, and spiritual victory over evil. The distinctive martial religion of this epic emerges from a synthesis of values derived from the ritual traditions of the Vedic sacrificial cult combined with loyalty to a personal deity.

Most scholars agree that the *Mahabharata* was composed over the centuries between 400 B.C. and A.D. 400. Beyond its kernel story of internecine war, it is difficult to summarize. The work has its stylistic and mythological roots in the *Rig Veda*; its narrative sources are the oral tales of a tribal war fought in the Punjab early in the first millennium B.C. As the tradition was taken over by professional storytellers and intellectuals, many sorts of legend, myth, and speculative thought were absorbed, including the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which belongs to that layer of the epic which took form around the first century A.D. In its present form the *Mahabharata* is a rich encyclopedia

of ancient Indian culture consisting of over one hundred thousand verses divided into eighteen books. The multiple layers of the text reflect its long history as well as attempts to reconcile conflicting religious and social values.

The epic's main narrative revolves around a feud over succession to the ancient kingdom of Kurukshetra in northern India. The rivals are two sets of cousins descended from the legendary king Bharata—the five sons of Pandu and the one hundred sons of Dhritarashtra. The feud itself is based on genealogical complications that are a result of a series of divine interventions. Pandu had become king because his elder brother, Dhritarashtra, was congenitally blind and thus ineligible for direct succession to the throne. But Pandu was unable to beget offspring because of a curse that forbade him intercourse with his two wives on penalty of death. After a long reign he renounces the throne and retires to the forest, where he fathers five sons (the Pandava brothers) with the help of five gods, and then dies.

The Pandava brothers are taken to be educated with their cousins at the court of Dhritarashtra, who has assumed the throne as regent in the absence of another adult heir. The princes' two teachers are their great-uncle Bhishma, who is revered for the spiritual power symbolized by his vow of celibacy, and the priest Drona, who is a master of archery and the teacher chosen by Bhishma to educate the princes in the martial arts. Arjuna becomes Drona's favored pupil when he vows to avenge his teacher's honor at the end of his training. The Pandavas excel their cousins in every warrior skill and virtue, which arouses the jealousy of Dhritarashtra's eldest son, Duryodhana.

Although Yudhishtira, Pandu's eldest son, has the legitimate right to be king, Duryodhana covets the throne, and in various episodes he attempts to assassinate his cousins or otherwise frustrate their rights. After thirteen years of exile imposed on them as the penalty for Yudhishtira's defeat in a crooked dice game played as part of a ritual, the Pandavas return to reclaim their king-

dom. Duryodhana's refusal to step aside makes war inevitable. The description of the eighteen-day-long battle and concomitant philosophizing by various teachers takes up the bulk of the epic. The battle ends with the triumph of the Pandavas over their cousins—the triumph of order over chaos.

The setting of the *Gita* is the battlefield of Kurukshetra as the war is about to begin. It is not only a physical place but is representative of a state of mind. When the assembled troops are arrayed on the field awaiting battle, the sage Vyasa, the traditional author of the *Mahabharata*, appears to the blind Dhritarashtra and grants him a boon. He will be able to hear an account of the battle from Sanjaya, who is endowed with immediate vision of all things past, present, and future, thus enabling him to see every detail of the battle. Vyasa says to Dhritarashtra: "Sanjaya shall see all the events of the battle directly. He shall have a divine inner eye. . . . O King, Sanjaya has an inner eye. He will tell you everything about the battle. He will be all-knowing. Whenever he thinks with his mind, Sanjaya will see everything taking place during day or night, in public or in secret."

Sanjaya, the visionary narrator who serves as the personal bard and charioteer of Dhritarashtra, is thus the mediating voice through whom the audience of the *Gita* learns Krishna's secret teaching. Through Sanjaya's retelling, the mystery of life and death revealed to Arjuna enters into the bardic tradition that preserves it for all to hear. Sanjaya's role in the *Gita* begins with the opening verse, spoken by Dhritarashtra.

Sanjaya, tell me what my sons
and the sons of Pandu did when they met,
wanting to battle on the field of Kuru,
on the field of sacred duty?

This question reverberates through the entire text, equating the field of internecine war with the field of sacred duty, where Arjuna's personal moral struggle is fought. In answer to Dhritarashtra's question, Sanjaya starts his

recitation by recounting the dialogue about the war that he overhears between Duryodhana and Drona. This functions like a dramatic prologue, setting the scene of the *Gita* and preparing the audience to listen to Arjuna's dialogue with Krishna.

When Krishna and Arjuna enter Sanjaya's narrative, the focus shifts from action on the field of war to Arjuna's inner conflict. Arjuna's dejection is the spiritual abyss into which Krishna's teaching pours. In his misery Arjuna rejects the conventional rewards of battle and is filled with pity in face of the horrors of war. The dialogue that follows is aesthetically grounded in the tension between Arjuna's state of pity and his basic heroism. The representation of Arjuna's involuntary physical responses, such as his trembling body and bristling hair, dramatizes the pity he feels before the specter of disorder and impending slaughter. In Hindu aesthetic theory such responses are considered highly significant because they arise from inner feeling and cannot be simulated.

Standing on their great chariot
yoked with white stallions,
Krishna and Arjuna, Pandu's son,
sounded their divine conches.

.

Arjuna, his war flag a rampant monkey,
saw Dhritarashtra's sons assembled
as weapons were ready to clash,
and he lifted his bow.

He told his charioteer:

"Krishna,
halt my chariot
between the armies!"

.

He surveyed his elders
and companions in both armies,
all his kinsmen
assembled together.

Dejected, filled with strange pity,
he said this:

"Krishna, I see my kinsmen
gathered here, wanting war.

My limbs sink,
my mouth is parched,
my body trembles,
the hair bristles on my flesh.

The magic bow slips
from my hand, my skin burns,
I cannot stand still,
my mind reels.

I see omens of chaos,
Krishna; I see no good
in killing my kinsmen
in battle."

For Arjuna, and for the audience of the *Gita*, Krishna is a companion and teacher, as well as the god who commands devotion. Krishna's mythology suggests that he is a tribal hero transformed into cult divinity. In the *Gita*, Krishna is the incarnation of cosmic power, who periodically descends to earth to accomplish the restoration of order in times of chaos. The mundane and cosmic levels of his activity are interwoven to provide the background for his role as divine charioteer to Arjuna. The mightiest warrior in the epic, Arjuna is characterized not only by his physical prowess but by his spiritual prowess, which involves a mystical friendship with Krishna. From the start Arjuna knows that his charioteer is no ordinary mortal; he begs Krishna to dispel his uncertainty, and Krishna speaks with the authority of omniscience. As Arjuna's confidence and faith increase, the power of Krishna's divinity gradually unfolds before him in all its terrible glory, and Arjuna comes to see himself mirrored in the divine. Krishna's revelation of the cosmic spectacle forces Arjuna to accept the necessity of his own part in it.

Krishna directly addresses Arjuna's emotional at-

tachments, uncertainty, and inability to act, and in the process, he enlarges Arjuna's awareness beyond the personal and social values that Arjuna holds sacred, compelling him to recognize why he must fight. Krishna insists that Arjuna's pity is really weakness and that the practice of true duty does not arise from personal passion but is part of a larger order that demands detachment. According to Krishna, Arjuna's objections to killing his relatives are based on the same subjective, worldly desire that blinds his foes to their folly. Krishna's solution lies on another level, one where oppositions coexist within his cosmic knowledge. Krishna, the omnipotent lord, teaches that the warrior's ordained duty (*dharma*) is grounded in the reciprocal relationship between cosmic and human action (*karma*), which is crucial to universal order.

In order to explore the paradoxical interconnectedness of disciplined action and freedom, Krishna develops his ideas in improvisational ways, not in linear arguments that lead to immediate resolution. The dialogue moves through a series of questions and answers that elucidate key words, concepts, and seeming contradictions in order to establish the crucial relationships among duty (*dharma*), discipline (*yoga*), action (*karma*), knowledge (*jñāna*), and devotion (*bhakti*). The concepts are drawn from many sources. Most important are several ancient systems of thought: Sankhya, the dualistic philosophy that analyzes the constituents of phenomenal existence; Yoga, the code of practical discipline based on dualism; Vedanta, the pantheistic doctrine of metaphysical knowledge; as well as Buddhism. Krishna teaches Arjuna the way to resolve the dilemma of renunciation and action. Freedom lies, not in the renunciation of the world, but in disciplined action (*karmayoga*). Put concretely, all action is to be both performed without attachment to the fruit of action (*karmaphalāsanga*) and dedicated with loving devotion to Krishna. Disciplined action within the context of devotion is essential to the religious life envisioned in the *Gita*.

Each of the eighteen teachings that comprise the *Gita* highlights some aspect of Krishna's doctrine, but there is

much repetition throughout them as the central themes are developed and subtly interpreted within the text. The text also has a broader triadic structure. In the first six teachings the dramatic narrative modulates into a series of theoretical and practical teachings on self-knowledge and the nature of action. The third and fourth teachings develop the crucial relation between sacrifice and action. The fifth and sixth teachings explore the tension between renunciation and action; Arjuna's query is resolved in the ideal of disciplined action. It is Arjuna's probing questions and his dissatisfaction with the apparent inconsistencies in Krishna's answers that expose Arjuna's state of mind and open him now to more advanced teachings. In the seventh teaching, focus shifts toward knowledge of Krishna. The language of paradox intensifies and hyperbole heightens, culminating in the dazzling theophany of the eleventh teaching. The theophany ends in a cadence on devotion, and the twelfth teaching develops this idea. Arjuna is transformed, not by a systematic argument, but by a mystical teaching in which Krishna becomes the object of Arjuna's intense devotion (*bhakti*). The representation of Arjuna's mystical experience of Krishna is poetically structured within the dialogue form to engage the participation of the audience in its drama.

In the final six teachings, the dialogue recedes as Krishna emphatically recapitulates the basic ideas he has already taught and integrates them into the doctrine of devotion. Devotion allows for a resolution of the conflict between the worldly life of allotted duties and the life of renunciation. By purging his mind of attachments and dedicating the fruits of his actions to Krishna, Arjuna can continue to act in a world of pain without suffering despair. The core of this devotion to Krishna is discipline (*yoga*), which enables the warrior to control his passions and become a man of discipline (*yogī*).

Arjuna can dedicate himself to Krishna only after his delusions about the nature of life and death have been dispelled and he has the power to see Krishna in his cosmic form. Once he has been instructed by Krishna in the most profound mysteries, Arjuna asks to see Krishna's

immutable self. In the eleventh teaching, Krishna gives him a divine eye with which to see the majesty of his cosmic order. The aspect of himself that Krishna reveals to Arjuna on the battlefield embodies time's deadly destructiveness: a fearsome explosion of countless eyes, bellies, mouths, ornaments, and weapons—gleaming like the fiery sun that illumines the world.

At this juncture Sanjaya reenters the drama, interrupting the dialogue he is recounting and speaking in his own voice, as the bard who shares with the blind king and the audience what was revealed to Arjuna:

If the light of a thousand suns
were to rise in the sky at once,
it would be like the light
of that great spirit.

Arjuna saw all the universe
in its many ways and parts
standing as one in the body
of the god of gods.

Then filled with amazement,
his hair bristling on his flesh,
Arjuna bowed his head to the god,
joined his hands in homage, and spoke.

Sanjaya speaks twice again within this teaching, each time intensifying the theophany for his audience. Then the text continues in Arjuna's stammering voice of terror:

Seeing the many mouths
and eyes
of your great form,
its many arms,
thighs, feet,
bellies, and fangs,
the worlds tremble
and so do I.

.

Seeing the fangs
 protruding
 from your mouths
 like the fires of time,
 I lose my bearings
 and I find no refuge;
 be gracious, Lord of Gods,
 Shelter of the Universe.

Arjuna begs, "Tell me—who are you in this terrible form?" Krishna responds:

I am time grown old,
 creating world destruction
 set in motion
 to annihilate the worlds;
 even without you,
 all these warriors
 arrayed in hostile ranks
 will cease to exist.

Therefore, arise
 and win glory!
 Conquer your foes
 and fulfill your kingship!
 They are already
 slain by me.
 Be just my instrument;
 the archer at my side!

Here the divine charioteer reveals his terrifying identity as creator and destroyer of everything in the universe. As destroyer, he has already destroyed both mighty armies. As creator, his cosmic purpose is to keep order in the universe, as well as in the human world. Although the sight of Krishna's horrific power is too much for Arjuna to bear and he begs to see him again in his calmer aspect, the experience brings Arjuna to the realization that his duty to fight is intimately linked to Krishna's divine activity. Overwhelmed by the vision of