

# Philosophy on the Battlefield: The *Bhagavad Gita*

## I. Context and Themes

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### The *Mahabharata* background

The *Mahabharata* of Vyasa is a celebrated ancient epic in the Sanskrit language that has influenced the Indian mind for many centuries. Its central theme is the story of a feud between cousins, the Kauravas (descendants of Kuru) and the Pandavas (sons of Pandu), who were rival claimants to the throne of a kingdom whose capital was Hastinapura (near modern Delhi). The seeds of the feud were sown when Pandu, the father of the Pandavas, became king in place of his elder brother, Dhritarashtra, who was born blind. The jealousy of the cousins took root in childhood and was intensified when they grew to manhood. It was fanned by a series of torturous situations contrived by vicious elements on the side of the Kauravas.

Despite goodwill missions of well-wishers, both sides headed towards a war in which most surrounding states also were involved. The day dawned when both armies took their positions on the battlefield. Historians believe that this war took place in 3100 BC. After the end of the war, Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava, ascended the throne. The Yudhishtira Shaka (era), which is still current in India, dates from his coronation and is now in the year 5101.

Fully equipped with weapons, Arjuna makes his entry onto the battleground, standing in a grand chariot driven by an illustrious charioteer, Krishna, who is his best friend and mentor. When the chariot stops, Arjuna surveys both sides. He is gradually overcome with compassion and regret at the thought of being instrumental in the mass destruction the impending war would entail. He bewails the dreadful consequences of war and finally declares his decision not to fight. The task of boosting his crumbling spirit falls on Krishna and the result is the dialogue that we now call the *Bhagavad Gita*.

### The literary form: dialogue

Dialogue was a popular literary form prevailing in ancient times across cultures and countries. In one of its complex forms there is a chain of dialogues, with one dialogue boxed within another. In the *Bhagavad Gita* the main dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna is boxed within the conversation between Dhritarashtra and his aide-de-camp, Sanjaya. Sanjaya gives a running commentary to the blind king on the events on the battlefield as they occur. This dialogue takes place in the cosy atmosphere of the palace. Sanjaya was able to make his report without stirring outside as he had been endowed with divine vision especially for this purpose. This dialogue is finally enclosed within the frame one between the narrator of the *Mahabharata* and his audience: sages

enjoying their leisure seated comfortably under cool shady trees while listening to stories of bygone heroes.

We are concerned here with the innermost dialogue, that between Krishna and Arjuna.

### **The seed of the *Bhagavad Gita***

The *Bhagavad Gita* occurs in the sixth book of the epic called *Bhishma-parvan*, the book of *Bhishma*. It consists of 700 verses divided into 18 chapters. Although conceived as a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna on the background of a battlefield, it deals with a perennial problem of life, that of the conflict of values. It seeks the solution to this conflict by saying that conventional social duties should be followed in a way that would absolve the performer of the evil effects thereof -- the path of action without involvement, or *karma-yoga*. This way of action supports the social set up and, at the same time, raises the performer's spiritual level. This is what the *Bhagavad Gita* offers to someone who possesses both a sense of duty and the spiritual urge.

### **The growth of the seed**

The *Bhagavad Gita* would have ended here, had it aimed merely at a solution of such ethical conflicts and had *Bhagavad Gita* been an integral part of the epic drama. But it does more: it aspires to give full guidance on the journey from a life of action towards total liberation which is freedom from action. The *Bhagavad Gita* is thus a complete guide to the sublimation of the human being. With this aim in view, it harnesses all aids that are of value on the path of spiritual development, viz. knowledge (*jnana*), devotion (*bhakti*), renunciation (*sanyasa*) and meditation (*dhyana*). Designating them by a common term Yoga, it proceeds to explain in a lucid manner how each of them can contribute to spiritual uplift. Thus, to the *Bhagavad Gita*, Yoga is a means, direct or distant, not to a mundane goal but to the highest goal of human existence, liberation from it. This *Bhagavad Gita* concept of Yoga also covers the Yoga of meditation which is the most popular sense of the term. The *Bhagavad Gita* devotes a whole chapter (Ch 6) to this besides making occasional references to it elsewhere.

### **Goals of human existence**

Ancient Indian tradition conceives of four goals of human existence (*purusharthas*): *dharma*, covering religion, ritual, piety, social duties, ethics and law; *artha*, worldly management; all that contributes to the smooth conduct of this-worldly life such as politics, commerce, agriculture; *karma*, the pleasures of life including sex; and *moksha*, liberation from trans-migratory existence. Extensive scientific works have been written on each of these subjects, those on the first and the last far outnumbering the rest. The common view is that one should turn to the last goal in the last stage of life after pursuing the first three. *Moksha* is considered the highest of the four as it is lasting or permanent (because it is considered to be the very nature of the Self) while the rest are impermanent (because they are acquired through means).

The earliest Sanskrit treatises devoted to *moksha* and the knowledge leading to it are the Upanishads. The Upanishads<sup>i</sup> are chronologically the last of the extensive corpus of Vedic literature; they deal with the last goal while the rest of the Vedic literature deals with the first. Of over 200 Upanishads that have come to light, only ten are considered old and genuine parts of the Vedic literature. They are: *Isha*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prashna*, *Mundaka*, *Maandukya*, *Taittiriya*, *Aitareya*, *Chandogya*, *Brihad-aranyaka*.

### **The symbolic framework of the *Bhagavad Gita***

With the *Bhagavad Gita* understood as a complete guide to the sublimation of the human being, it no more forms an essential part of the epic story. Many long discussions and detailed elucidations in the *Bhagavad Gita* would be absolutely irrelevant if viewed as part of the story. This would be the case of the discussion of the fate of a *Yoga-bhrashta*, a fallen *Yogin* (Ch 6), the description of a *Gunatiita*, a liberated one who has transcended the *gunas*, (Ch 14), the classification of many aspects of life on the basis of the three '*gunas*' (in many chapters), and the contrasting of divine and demonic trends (Ch 16). The story element in the *Bhagavad Gita* is universalised to be symbolic of human life as a whole. Then Arjuna is no more the middle brother of the Pandavas known for his skill in archery; he is any and every soul striving towards higher spiritual goals even while fulfilling worldly duties, yet finding himself too small to undertake single-minded spiritual practice. Krishna is his intellect with which he is in constant dialogue on issues of spiritual import.

This view at once takes us to the famous metaphor in the *Katha Upanishad* – the metaphor of chariot. Says the Upanishad:

*'Know the Self to be the owner of the chariot; the body the chariot; the intellect the charioteer; the mind the reins; the sense organs the horses; objects the paths they tread. The wise call that the soul which consists of the self, sense organs and mind.'*

(*Katha* I.3.3-4)

Besides the two already referred to above, the Upanishad offers the following comparisons: chariot-body, horses-organs, reins-mind, paths-sense objects. The *Bhagavad Gita* is so much indebted to the *Katha Upanishad* in borrowing key words, lines and even verses that it is impossible to think that it has not borrowed the metaphor from it and turned it into what has the appearance of a historical event.

### **The *Bhagavad Gita* as an "ology" of Yoga**

The *Bhagavad Gita*'s comprehensive view of Yoga makes it a *Yoga-shastra*, 'a science of Yoga', which is an epithet employed in the colophon of each of its chapters. Thus *jnana*, knowledge of Reality, *bhakti*, devotion, *karma*, action or duty, *sanyasa*, renunciation, *dhyana*, meditation -- are all Yogas provided they are not harnessed to worldly ends. To illustrate: to worship God for obtaining sons, property, wealth, land or victory over enemies is plain *bhakti*; to worship God for His grace to endow one with spiritual knowledge is *bhakti-yoga*. *Karma* becomes *karma-yoga* when performed for the purification of the mind and without the expectation of worldly gains. There is a long

chain of means and ends in which every preceding link is a means to the following one which is its end. Every chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* is therefore designated as a Yoga prefixed by the topic of the chapter. Thus, Ch 2 is *Sankhya-Yoga*, Ch 3 is karma-yoga and so on. The word Yoga is not suffixed to the name of the first Chapter which provides only a background for the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita*, although some editions suffix Yoga to its subject by false analogy, viz. Arjuna-vishada-Yoga, the Yoga of the despondency of Arjuna.

### **The *Bhagavad Gita*: an Upanishad**

Besides being called a *Yoga-shastra*, the *Bhagavad Gita* is also given the status of an *Upanishad*. Each one of its chapters is called an *Upanishad*, so that the *Bhagavad Gita* stands as a collection of 18 *Upanishads* (17, excluding the first chapter). This traditional designation not only raises the status of the *Bhagavad Gita*, an accepted man-made work, to that of the Upanishads which are believed to be God-given (*a-paurusheya*), but also gives a clue to its relation to these oldest Sanskrit philosophical treatises. The *Bhagavad Gita* both epitomises the metaphysics of the Upanishads and freely borrows terminology, concepts and even verses and lines from them. On this score, the *Bhagavad Gita* is most indebted to the Katha Upanishad. Further, there is a marked attempt in the *Bhagavad Gita* to reconcile the views of different philosophical systems such as *Sankhya*, Yoga and *Vedanta* (to be explained later) and make room for simple spiritual aids like devotion in a broader scheme of spiritual development. Though later differentiated as separate systems, the *Sankhya*, Yoga and Vedanta do not so figure in the *Upanishads*. The first two imply the theory and practice aspects of the *Upanishads*<sup>ii</sup>, while *Vedanta* (Veda+anta, meaning the concluding part or final verdict of the Veda) is a synonym for *Upanishad*, implying a class of literature.

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<sup>i</sup> The word is explained as esoteric knowledge to be acquired by a disciple seated close (*upa+ni+sad*) to his teacher. Other explanations are (1) the knowledge which terminates the cycle of trans-migratory existence (Shankaraacharya); (2) the literature set aside from the well defined Vedic parts dealing with sacrifices (KSA)

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. Shankara's commentary on Brahma-sutra II.1.

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