

THE
BHAGAVAD
GITA

Translated from the Sanskrit by
JUAN MASCARÓ
With an introduction by
SIMON BRODBECK

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THE BHAGAVAD GITA I

INTRODUCTION

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a small excerpt of the *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharata* is the larger of the two Indian epics, the other being the *Ramayana*. The period of their composition, 500 BCE–500 CE, was one of extreme textual proliferation. Both epics intriguingly present the kind of esoteric discourse (on various ritual, cosmological and religio-philosophical matters) prevalent amongst the Brahminical priestly-academic elite, within a framework derived from more popular storytelling traditions. Each is a story, a narrative of various characters and their adventures. Other stories are also told within the narrative, and the main characters reflect on these stories in ways which suggest how the reader might reflect on theirs. Although the Sanskrit epics were more or less fixed in their extended, digressional literary format in the early centuries of the Common Era, their stories exist in diverse versions in dramatic, bardic and literary contexts which continue to change and develop in the present day.

The *Bhagavad Gita* takes place at a critical point deep within the *Mahabharata*. Two vast armies stand mustered and almost ready to close in battle. The assembled warriors come from the length and breadth of the known world. The dispute they hope to resolve is one of kingdom and honour between rival sets of cousins, the Pandavas, sons of Pandu, and the Kauravas, sons of Dhritarashtra, Pandu's blind elder brother. Though ineligible for kingship, Dhritarashtra has been regent of the

realm and guardian of the crown princes after Pandu's early retirement and death. He had partitioned the kingdom, but his sons had arranged a gambling match, won a thirteen-year loan of the Pandavas' half, and then refused to return it, precipitating war.

Arjuna, the most distinguished warrior in the Pandava army, surveys his adversaries and expresses to Krishna, his charioteer and great friend, his resolve not to fight. The opposing forces contain many with whom the Pandavas have no quarrel: moreover, these include highly esteemed teachers and elders. Arjuna's scruples centre on the imagined personal consequences of fighting: his guilt for the decimation of his people. Krishna speaks with him — the *Bhagavad Gita* is their dialogue — until he is once more resolved to fight. Subsequently the war is fought for eighteen days, leaving only a handful of warriors alive, and the Pandavas, though outnumbered at the start, emerge victorious due to devious and unchivalrous tactics suggested by Krishna.

Krishna's response to Arjuna's dejection is lengthy because Arjuna does not respond to the methods initially employed to motivate him. Elsewhere in the *Mahabharata*, before other battles, warriors pale at their prospects, but are ordinarily set fighting by charioteers mocking their cowardice, recalling the exploits of previous heroes, and talking up the consequences of victory as well as the noble death and heavenly afterlife of those who fall in battle. Arjuna is not open to persuasion on these terms, and accordingly Krishna holds forth on loftier topics. He outlines a holistic view of the world's functioning, and of the place of human action in general, and Arjuna's martial action in particular, in the grand scheme of things.

It seems that Arjuna is persuaded to fight because Krishna has inspired him to believe that there is an attitude that can be taken by a person towards his or her activities which maximizes the creative benefit of those activities as well as ensuring that psychological and spiritual ill-effects do not accrue to the

individual concerned. Krishna calls this attitude *yoga*, and explains that it is a general attitude, applicable to all activities, not just war, and available to all people, not just Arjuna. This is why the *Bhagavad Gita* is commonly found extracted from its *Mahabharata* context and used by millions of Hindus and many others as a guide to a spiritual way of being and behaving. It is clear from the *Mahabharata* that the text's creators allowed the narrative to be suspended at this dramatic moment partly so that its audience would be encouraged to apply Krishna's attitude in their own activities. Indeed, although revolutionary on an internal level for the person applying it, this attitude is particularly conducive to social harmony and cultural continuity within a diverse, organized and potentially enormous community. The person successfully applying Krishna's yogic attitude is described as behaving traditionally, participating in existing institutions and helping to sustain the community. The process of individual salvation is private, and compatible with all walks of life even in their apparently more unpleasant moments.

Because Arjuna agrees to fight after hearing Krishna's speech, we suppose that he is convinced by the *Bhagavad Gita*'s exposition of the yogic attitude. However, it is not clear from the *Mahabharata* whether or not he managed to fight in the manner suggested. He does not seem as troubled in the wake of the battle as his eldest brother Yudhishtira, but we would expect this since it is Yudhishtira, the story's central character, who must rule in the new, changed world. But just as the yogic method is a private affair, so are its individual results. The epic, unlike the modern novel, does not enter the internal worlds of its characters. It describes them exclusively from without, and so is unable to comment on whether or not Arjuna receives the subtle existential, psychological and spiritual benefits which would follow from successful *yoga*. Later on in the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna tells Krishna that he has forgotten what was said just before the battle, and asks for a repeat performance, which

Krishna is scarcely able to provide. This could suggest that Arjuna has not become a *yogi*, or, equally, that he has already done so in part and now wishes to perfect his art.

Knowledge of Dehin, the 'One in the Body'

Krishna's presentation of the yogic method is built upon his revelation of certain truths concerning the composition of the universe as a whole and of the individuals within it. With respect to Arjuna's specific fears about killing, Krishna introduces the idea of *dehin*, the 'one in the body' ('spirit', 'soul'), which cannot be killed, and which will repeatedly take another body after the death of the current one. The essential aspect of a human being is thus radically recontextualized. The unit under consideration is no longer an individual, whose life is short and precarious and may be suddenly ended despite protective efforts. Instead, it is an extended sequence of individual lives. Each life in the sequence is connected directly to the immediately preceding and following lives, and indirectly to every other life in the same sequence. The *dehin* represents the unity of any particular sequence of lives. In each life, it witnesses whatever takes place physically within the range of the senses and sensations of a particular individual's body. It also witnesses the mental world of that individual, its thoughts and emotions.¹ The apparent self-consciousness of the individual is in fact the *dehin*'s consciousness of the individual. But the *dehin* only witnesses. It cannot make the individual act, think or feel in any one way rather than another. From its point of view, all actual events, thoughts and feelings take care of themselves, as it were. They follow their own laws: they are causally related to each other, but not to *dehin*. But it may be misleading to talk here of *dehin*'s 'point of view', since *dehin* has no point of view of its own: at any particular time it has the point of view of a particular individual. It is proposed as a hypothetical subject only in order to modify the simple, single-bodied subject identity of

the individual. It witnesses what the individual feels and thinks to itself, but it cannot think anything about those thoughts to itself, or have any reaction or response. Reaction and response there are, but these are the business of the individual and its world of process, not of *dehin*. If the idea of *dehin* comes within the range of an individual, and is thought about by that individual, then, Krishna suggests, the response within that individual will be a reduction of attachment and trauma, and an ability to cope with all activities and eventualities, even those involving the death of its loved ones or of itself.

This *dehin*, also known in the *Bhagavad Gita* as *atman* ('self'), *purusha* (literally 'person') and *kshetrajña* ('knower of the field'), was widely theorized in ancient India. The Jains called it *jiva*. The Buddhists, though they did not theorize such an entity, accepted the idea of sequences of abutting lives, conceiving these as chains of links with no common core, rather than as strings of beads. The idea of salvation emerged in various milieux, centred on the possibility of *moksha* or *nirvana*, an end to a sequence of lives. Special mental and physical activities were pursued in order to help ensure, for a particular individual, either that this life be the last in the sequence, or, at the very least, that the last in this sequence might be imminent. Now, Arjuna is not involved in this pursuit of *moksha*. Until Krishna begins to hold forth, he has barely heard of the *dehin*. He is not trying to bring about the end of the sequence of lives he might be part of. His objection to fighting is not that it may hinder such an objective. Rather, he is worried about how he will live with himself for the rest of his current life, and fearful that his actions will produce an unpleasant afterlife for himself and his family. However, the pursuit of *moksha* was known to the text's audience, and thus the text expands the scope of the yogic method, which is said not only to remove the immediate psychological ill-effects of drastic actions, but also to remove the tendency of those actions to elongate a sequence of lives. This extension of the method's results beyond the scope

demanding by Arjuna's situation was required because of the prevalence of the pursuit of *moksha* and its combination with the theory of *karma*. As theorized within renunciant groups and ideologies, another birth after death, that is, the prolonging of a sequence of lives, was only effected through outstanding *karma* or *karmabandha*, the 'bond of action', which was generated in particular by violent or passionate activity, such as that involved in war, ritual sacrifice, the production and protection of offspring, and the maintenance of social structures. The pursuit of *moksha* thus threatened social, cultural and economic continuity. The *Bhagavad Gita* attempts to remove this threat by proposing that actions, even apparently terribly destructive ones, will not result in the accumulation of any *karmabandha* at all if performed with a yogic, non-attached attitude (3-9, 9-28).

Knowledge of Prakriti, Material Nature

Krishna's yogic method is a powerful tool for personal transformation, since it is based on the truth that *dehin* is a quality or substance – neither word really fits – fundamentally set apart from *prakriti*, the natural world of physical, mental and emotional process, the coming to be and passing away of causally linked items, forces and phenomena. It is as if the idea of ending the sequences of lives in *moksha* or *nirvana* has been hypothesized to provide an opportunity for thinking about what the inactive, witnessing *dehin* could possibly be in and of itself, separate from anything it might witness. This is a daunting philosophical task, which the *Bhagavad Gita* does not attempt directly. Instead, the understanding of the truth of *dehin* is allied to the yogic method by the text's exploration of what *dehin* is not, that is, *prakriti*, the world of process, which may be studied and shown to account for its own permutations, as if it contains them all, even future ones, within itself. Conceiving of *prakriti* in this way is correlated with non-attachment and peace of mind in active individuals, for any actual activities an

individual may undertake or be subject to are then known to be subsections of a causally sufficient network of forces extending immeasurably before and beyond that individual in time as well as in space.

As this is so for actual activities, it is so also for imagined activities, such as Arjuna fighting and dying in battle, or Arjuna playing no part while his brothers and allies fight without him. These imagined activities are to be seen as the actual mental activities of someone's imagination. *Prakriti* governs the private psychological and existential aspects of the individual, all the things it says only to itself, as exhaustively as it governs the physics of visible behaviours. Krishna reveals (18.59–60, 11.34) that Arjuna's participation in the war, and a Pandava victory after the destruction of almost all the mustered warriors, are events that simply will come to pass. They are already contained within the world. Arjuna cannot help but fight, just as, by implication, he could not help but think, briefly, that he would not fight.

It seems to us, reading the text, that Arjuna agrees to fight only because Krishna has performed the *Bhagavad Gita*, persuading him to do so. We identify Krishna's speech as the cause of Arjuna's fighting. We can then say to ourselves that if Krishna had not spoken, Arjuna would not have fought. According to the logic of the text, however, there are problems with this conventional approach. Krishna did perform the *Bhagavad Gita*, so any suggestion of him not doing so is imaginary. If, given the circumstances (which include Krishna's speech), Arjuna cannot help but fight, then likewise Krishna, given the circumstances (which include Arjuna's refusal to fight), cannot help but speak as he does. The text explains any action to be the only possible outcome, given the current disposition of the person concerned (which includes their perception of the situation). If we then ask what exactly it is about the person's disposition and perception that makes the outcome unavoidable, we can answer in many different ways. We can

make a list of hypothetical causal factors. Just now, when we identified (Arjuna's perception of) Krishna's speech as the cause of Arjuna's fighting, the list was a short one, because that speech was seen to be reason enough on its own. The list will end when we think sufficient reasons have been given to account for the event. But this list depends on what kinds of things we view as explanatory, rather than on the actual causes of the event. Many events happen, after all, without anybody offering explanations for them. Causal antecedents may discharge their function without being obvious to anyone or observable by anyone. A distinction must be made between, on the one hand, the actual reasons why an event occurs, and, on the other hand, the reasons we might give to ourselves to explain that event to our satisfaction. In light of this distinction we can see that, in an important sense, all reasons identified by words or thought are partial, biased, and largely imaginary. They do not refer to the external world, only to our internal world. Identified antecedents do not properly represent the pure, rational flux within which any event is embedded, which fills all space and time. At most they indicate the activity of identifying antecedents, that is, the production of a narrative, a supposedly descriptive mental or verbal text.

The inability of descriptions properly to represent the world is pointed out in the *Bhagavad Gita* through Krishna's idea of *maya* (the 'cloud of appearance', 7.14-15), the natural predicament of individuals in matters of knowledge. We attempt to represent reality, reifying subsections of *prakriti*'s flux through an interplay of signs, but we find that we cannot be properly expressive, either to ourselves or to each other, because our conscious expressions can do no more than rearrange existing symbolic forms and dualisms. We are bound by existing linguistic conventions of description and explanation. Arjuna's verbal expression demonstrates this. He describes the war in conventional terms: it is obligatory, since warriors must preserve their honour, avenge treachery, and oppose tyrants; but it is also

forbidden, since relatives and teachers may not be killed. So his participation in the war is simply inexplicable, and this is why he cannot countenance it. Krishna's point is that conventional explanations of Arjuna's fighting need play no part at all in Arjuna's actually fighting. Why should what happens be explicable? The very fact of it happening is explanation enough. Since there are conventions which urge that the battle must be fought, as well as equally strong ones which urge the opposite, these conventions themselves have been shown to be of no use. They demonstrably fail to represent reality, and so the conventional distinctions between correct and incorrect behaviour, and between true and false descriptions, will have to dissolve. This is why Krishna gives no direct answer to Arjuna's dilemma. He does not supply any ethical arguments to explain that, in this case, the reasons to fight outweigh the reasons not to. He bypasses conventional explanations. The actual reasons for Arjuna's fighting cannot be known. They do not exist in any language.

The Individual Ego

Krishna's proposal of action without attachment is specifically concerned with attachment to the consequences or fruits of action. Though actions do have consequences, these need not be represented or known. *Prakriti* automatically connects every event to others, but its workings are impenetrable to us. In particular, our knowledge of the past and the future is notoriously deficient, reduced to stories told in the present. Both the causes and the results of an activity are unavailable. Krishna makes it clear that focusing on imaginary results creates great suffering, and suggests that it be minimized. He stresses that present actions are fully taken care of. They are contained by the unique present state of the world. The future is taken care of, moment by moment, in the same way: it need not and will not correspond to anything imaginable, and the proliferation of imagined visions of it may severely affect the attitude with

which actions are performed, causing suffering in the short term and rebirth in the long term.

Imaginary futures within an individual's mind tend to cluster around an idea of 'I'. The 'I' is supposed to serve as the recipient of the individual's past, present and future experience, and also as the agent of its conscious activities. However, as we have seen, the recipient of experience can only be *delhin*. In any case, the vast majority of physical and mental events, being subconscious, are no more experienced than is the rain by the earth, even though they clearly happen to the individual and have an effect upon it. Yet the individual's conscious activities are regulated by *prakṛiti* no less than its unconscious ones, and so, if an agent is to be isolated, it must be *prakṛiti*. The agent of action is thus as different as it possibly could be from the recipient of experience, and the conflation of the two into an ego is a fundamental mistake. Krishna shows how natural such a mistake is for individuals, who are spatially discrete, independently mobile, sense-dependent, short-lived, preoccupied with their own survival and that of their offspring, and who furthermore refer to themselves and to each other in discourse using specific names and pronouns. But the individual is only unitary at a structural level from certain points of view and for certain purposes, and so 'I' is no more than a sign amongst others: it denotes no metaphysical entity. Nonetheless, in the context of a highly populated and genetically diverse society, institutions of accountability take this strange 'I' very seriously, making judgements not just on the basis of actions performed, but also on the basis of the story the acting individual may tell of its actions. From the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s point of view, the story told by an acting individual about its actions, even the story told to itself alone, is irrelevant to those actions themselves: it does not govern them. The text suggests that actions be undertaken without intention ('fanciful thought', 4.19; 'earthly will', 6.2 and 4), that is, without any story being told to link an 'I' to a set of imaginary consequences. Such stories denote the operation

of desire and aversion, the mental ingredients of attachment. The *yogi* is said to act without imagining the action's success or failure (however these might be construed), offering all actions, even mental ones, in an attitude of sacrifice or consecration. Now, this constraint on the *yogi*'s mentality towards actions performed, effectively places that mentality beyond the reach of our conventionally comprehensible descriptions, which are teleologically oriented by the conventional 'I'. Accordingly, all statements which purport to describe the *yogi*'s mentality of action directly – rather than obliquely, in terms of what it does *not* involve – must be taken in a more or less metaphorical sense.

The Bhagavad Gītā's Authorial Agenda

The *Bhagavad Gītā*'s choice of metaphors can be shown to correlate with certain specific discourses prevalent in ancient India. The text demonstrates a high degree of intertextual awareness on the part of its creators, quoting, it seems, from Upanishadic sources,² and appropriating technical terms from many discursive ritual, cosmological and religio-philosophical traditions. To this extent, the text cannot be understood without an awareness of what its creators and transmitters may have sought to do by means of it: we must observe whose interests were served, and in what ways, by the text's production and nurture. It is clear that, around Kurukshetra where the battle is set, the Brahminical ritual economy, based on the authority of the Vedic tradition,³ was in disrepair following the rise of renunciant, *mokṣha-* or *nirvāna-*oriented groups and ideologies, principally those of the Buddhists, Jains and Ajivikas. Furthermore, the political function that the great rituals had discharged in earlier, more volatile times was not quite to the point in a cosmopolitan culture now connected through trade and through the Sanskrit language and its literature. The *Bhagavad Gītā* paints a jaded picture of some of the rituals' more unsavoury contemporary adherents, 'who have no vision, and yet they speak

many words. They follow the letter of the *Vedas*, and they say: "There is nothing but this." Their soul is warped with selfish desires, and their heaven is a selfish desire. They have prayers for pleasures and power, the reward of which is earthly rebirth. Those who love pleasure and power hear and follow their words . . . (2.42-4: 'power' here is no more than local celebrity). But the text nonetheless seeks to safeguard the ritual economy. Despite having already suggested that the free will of the 'I' is meaningless, and that the 'correct thing' always happens, the text repeatedly insists that Arjuna – and, by implication, people in general – follow the established ritual texts as a guide to behaviour, and comply with the duties set down by male Brahmins as appropriate to his gender and social class, not least amongst which is paying male Brahmins for their services. Krishna explains in Chapter 3 that the institution of ritual sacrifice is required in order to safeguard the very regularity of nature upon which individuals depend for their existence. Thus the *yogi* is said to act 'for the good of all the world' (3.25). Now, if this is taken to mean that the *yogi* acts deliberately, motivated by desire for a certain universally beneficent state of affairs, then this would contradict what has already been said about the *yogi*, for 'the good of all the world' is then a likely candidate for ego-centric attachment. Rather, this must be taken as an external description of what the *yogi* is doing; that is, it must be taken as a conventional recognition that his or her activities do, in practical reality, help to sustain the mechanisms and institutions of cosmic and social order. We are not told if or how the *yogi* consciously relates to those particular activities, beyond his or her knowing, generally, that all actual activities are absolutely necessary, and that no 'I' owns any of them.

The Personification of the Cosmic Process as Krishna

The *Bhagavad Gita* follows a tradition of analysing the human individual and the cosmos as a whole under the same structural

pattern, drawing correspondences between the microcosm and the macrocosm. This tradition is common to the *Upanishads*. They equate *atman*, the individual's soul, with *brahman*, the cosmic soul. They also explain ritual activity in terms of the cosmic efficacy it embodies, identifying a structural equivalence between items of ritual apparatus and items of cosmic apparatus. Likewise the *Bhagavad Gita*, having identified *delhin* and *prakriti* as separable aspects and explanations of the individual, proceeds to apply the same structural analysis to the cosmos as a whole. Insofar as Arjuna represents the human archetype, Krishna represents the cosmic one. His *delhin* is the 'Spirit Supreme' (*purushottama*, literally 'highest person': see 8.1, 15.17-19) and his body is the totality of all *prakriti*. The prakritic individual comprises both the gross physical body and the subtle mental and emotional realm, and Krishna's *prakriti* is similarly subdivided. What to us is *delhin* is contained within Krishna's body as his higher *prakriti*. He calls it 'my invisible Spirit', 'the fountain of life' (7.5) and 'a spark of my eternal Spirit' (15.7). The destinies of our different *delhins*, each with its own particular sequence of lives, are, as it were, the inner mental events of the cosmic person. And just as the *delhin* leaves the body at the end of an individual's life, returning in another one only if there remains with it the residue of actions performed with attachment, so at the end of the cosmos, when the manifest play of *prakriti* ceases, the *purushottama* rests separate until the next 'day of Brahma', that is, the next cosmos (8.17-19, 9.7-10), which is brought about due to there remaining unmanifest *prakriti* (including, presumably, the karmic residues carried over by *delhins* from the previous cosmos).

The elegance of this analogy is considerable, and allows Krishna to speak both as the personification of the cosmos and as the personification of the *purushottama* which every cosmos depends on and has in common. However, if we question the analogy closely we can see a few rough edges. The individual body differs from the cosmic body in a very important way. As well as being connected to other bodies at its birth and death, the

individual body is also spatially connected to a wider world, comprising inert and living bodies which it moves amongst and acts in response to. The cosmos, however, is always the only current item of its kind. This means that, though the agency of individuals may be dissolved into the wider prakriti environment, as suggested at 3.27 and 5.8-9, this option is not there for the personified cosmos, which must explain its actions – or have them explained by us – solely in terms of internal necessity. So when Arjuna is told that Krishna always acts with a yogic, non-attached attitude (3.22, 4.14), it is difficult to believe that this is the same yogic attitude recommended for Arjuna himself. It can only be the same attitude if these references are to Krishna the man, Arjuna's charioteer, not to the personified cosmos. Here, then, is the danger of a speaker using himself or herself as an analogue of the cosmos. One and the same pronoun – 'I' or 'me' – has to stand sometimes for the speaker, sometimes for the cosmos, sometimes for a particular element of the cosmos, be this manifest *prakriti* as a whole or the collection of *delims* witnessing it, and sometimes for the extra-cosmic *purushottama*. It is not always clear which of these is being invoked. This problem occurs for us, as we read or hear the text, in a way that it would not have for Arjuna, since he knew Krishna far better than we do. Not only were they great human companions, but Arjuna also received the boon of 'divine sight' (11.8) and experienced Krishna's cosmic form directly, including, as it did, a preview of the future. Without having this experience ourselves, and without knowing the details of Arjuna's personal relationship with Krishna, it is difficult for us to know quite what to make of the frequent exhortations for Arjuna to exercise exclusive devotion or love (*bhakti*) for Krishna in all his thoughts and deeds.

Krishna-bhakti

The Krishna of popular legend and iconography is a blue-skinned, flute-playing boy-God. This Krishna, a subject of

theology and widespread devotion, is not the Krishna of the *Mahabharata* but of other texts, most notably the *Harivamsha*, a late appendix to the *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranas*, particularly the *Vishnu Purana* (300-600 CE) and the *Bhagavata Purana* (800-1000 CE). The equation of these two Krishnas began whilst the *Mahabharata* was as yet unfinished. Though they form no part of its action, the earlier exploits of Krishna-as-a-boy are occasionally mentioned by some of its characters, thus grafting Krishna's epic activities on to a growing body of stories about a single divine figure, and enabling Krishna-*bhakti* in the *Bhagavad Gita* to be interpreted theologically within the Indian tradition. Within the European tradition, too, theological interpretations have been the norm. This is hardly surprising given that the *Bhagavad Gita* was approached by Europeans primarily as a religious text, and was understood by comparison with Judaeo-Christian theology, just as it had previously been understood by the Mughal emperors by comparison with Islamic theology. However, it may well be that theological interpretations are unnecessary, and that the scope of *bhakti* in the *Bhagavad Gita* can be fully exhausted by the text's narrative, cosmological and socio-political contexts.

In the narrative context, Krishna is the saviour of the Pandavas. It is only through his encouragement that they have the wherewithal to stage a concerted effort to reclaim their kingdom and redress the indignities that they have suffered. In danger at every stage of being distracted from their purpose by their family connection to their opponents, Arjuna and his brothers are deeply dependent on Krishna to maintain the focus of their resistance, and they loyally carry out his tactical suggestions even when deeply shocked by them. In fact, Krishna seems to have a political agenda of his own. His desire to see the Kauravas vanquished is based on anti-imperialistic principles which are evident in his dealings with other tyrants elsewhere in the *Mahabharata*. In an important sense the Pandavas are serving his interests rather than the other way round. Though to

them the battle is a personal business, to him it is about long-term political stability across north India, which will affect them and their descendants in ways they do not necessarily appreciate. These considerations, which are not evident unless the *Bhagavad Gita* is considered within its *Mahabharata* context, can go a long way towards explaining why Krishna demands Arjuna's devotion through action.

In the cosmological context, Krishna-*bhakti* would allude to the *yogi's* acting in full knowledge that all actions are as governed by Krishna's *prakriti* or Krishna-as-*prakriti*, and thus to the *yogi's* offering, devoting or sacrificing those actions back to Krishna rather than appropriating them for a mistakenly postulated ego (5.8-10).

In the socio-political context of the text's early audiences, the idea of Krishna-*bhakti* facilitated and stabilized local power structures. Krishna is present in person within the world in many different forms as a protector of righteousness (4.6-8), and he is the recipient of all sacrifices and offerings no matter who these might ostensibly be intended for (9.23-4). When he lists 'some manifestations of my divine glory' (10.19-41), many of these are powers or personages held sacred by different communities in different milieux, which are now subsumed under an umbrella religion. The erection of such an umbrella may have eased inter-communal tensions, whilst allowing different rulers in different localities to maintain order and receive donations using the same symbol of authority and legitimacy. This technique is visible also within the *Puranas*. Though it gives the appearance of a theology, it may be understood in mundane terms.

The Bhagavad Gita in its Indian and International Context

Originally, the *Bhagavad Gita* was embedded within the context of the *Mahabharata*. However, as far as the use and interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* is concerned, it has usually functioned

as a separate text. An enormous number of commentaries have been written on it. The status of the text within the Hindu tradition is such that thinkers have often sought to establish their spiritual authority by showing that their views can be derived from it. Accordingly, there is hardly a doctrine that it has not, at one time or another, been claimed to espouse. The earliest commentaries still extant are from the medieval period, most notably those of Shankara (788-820 CE) and Ramanuja (1017-1137), but the tradition of commentary is still very much alive. Only a small subsection of commentaries are public, however: millions of Hindus, and an increasing number of non-Hindus, use the *Bhagavad Gita* as a spiritual guide within their own lives, reading or hearing it regularly and bringing it to bear on their own situations by commenting on it to themselves.

The *Bhagavad Gita* was of particular use to Hindu intellectuals and public figures as Indian nationalist ideas began to emerge under British rule from the late eighteenth century onwards. The Hindu intellectual past was re-presented, to Hindus and colonialists alike, in an attempt to show that Christian criticisms of Indian religion and culture were unfounded. In this context Hinduism was made to conform to Western ideas of what would constitute a religion, and the *Bhagavad Gita* was presented as its Bible. This resurgence of interest in the *Bhagavad Gita* in the Hindu tradition occurred at the same time as translations and discussions of the text began to appear in European circles. Whilst many such discussions were from an explicitly Christian perspective and were critical of what they perceived as the text's pantheistic and amoral outlook, many poets and philosophers in Europe and America were deeply inspired by it.

As the Indian nationalist movement grew, the *Bhagavad Gita* was interpreted in radically different ways by Hindu politicians. Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), an extremist, wrote a commentary on it whilst imprisoned by the British. He stressed its rejection of quietism and its justification of violent action

against tyrants, and used it to encourage revolutionary activity. Whilst Tilak's interpretation is very much in keeping with the *Mahabharata* context of the *Bhagavad Gita*, it does not tally with what we might expect of a so-called spiritual or religious text. Gandhi, on the other hand, read the text daily and saw the *Mahabharata* war as an allegorical representation of the internal struggle between the human soul and worldly temptations. For him, there was nothing in the text which contradicted his principles of non-violence and his politics of passive resistance. On the contrary, he saw his principles and politics as derived from the text.

Juan Mascaró's introduction to the text unites many of the interests which have moved interpreters ancient and modern, Indian and Western. He stands the *Bhagavad Gita* alongside the Greek and English literary classics, and introduces ideas derived from Christian morality ('sin' and 'forgiveness'), from European mysticism, and from post-Enlightenment rationalism (translating *buddhi* as 'reason'). He also uses the terminology of Vedanta (the Hindu school of philosophy based on the *Upanishads*), with its focus on *brahman* as *sat*, *cit* and *ananda* ('Being, Consciousness and Joy'), and shares Gandhi's view of the battle as allegorical. He expounds the text from many different angles with sustained and heartfelt passion. But he is misled when he suggests that it is pre-Buddhistic. Sections of it may be, and 'Buddhism' is a very vague term, but the *Bhagavad Gita* certainly responds to the anti-Vedic, anti-Brahminical discourse that Buddhism was part of.

Scholars increasingly view the *Bhagavad Gita* as narrowly as possible within its ancient historical and narrative context. At the same time, it continues to be used as a spiritual guide by readers from all walks of life. Moreover, it may be that the text has still more of a role to play in the future. Its deterministic natural philosophy has yet to be fully acknowledged, and may provide a liberating counterpoint to the ideological burden of freedom, choice and responsibility. What Arjuna and Krishna,

if they ever existed, might have thought about this state of affairs, is anybody's guess. We can be sure, however, that if the creators of the *Mahabharata* had known the future of their text, they would have been delighted.

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NOTES

1. I have used the impersonal pronoun 'it' to denote the individual because the individual is not necessarily a person. Though the individuals that the *Bhagavad Gita* concerns itself with are human ones, Indian traditions view even the lowliest of creatures as enlivened by *dehii*.
2. The *Upanishads* are a genre of speculative texts: see Translator's Introduction, below. There are particular similarities between sections of the *Bhagavad Gita* and sections of the *Katha* and *Shvetashvatara Upanishads*. These may be direct borrowings in one direction or the other, or common borrowings from other, lost texts.
3. The *Vedas* are predominantly concerned with rituals, containing hymns for use during them, instructions for their performance, and explanations of their necessity and meaning. See Translator's Introduction, below.