

Chapter 8

An Introduction to the Bhagavadgita

The Epic period refers to the two epics, the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, written by the two sages Valmiki and Vyasa, respectively. Though the epics describe events of an earlier period, they are conjectured to have been written down in the 6th century B.C. For the large part, both epics describe historical events in the literary style of poetry. At the same time, whenever philosophical questions arise, they delve into them deeper and relegate tomes to deal with the various issues. The Ramayana has 25,000 verses and the Mahabharata has 100,000 verses, the latter being considered the longest poem written by any ancient civilization.

The *Rāmāyana* records the life of Rama, one of the earliest examples we have of a philosopher-king. Taught by the sages Vasishtha and Visvamitra, Rama tried to bring the high ideals taught by the sages into the administration of the country. His idealistic rule was successful for some time and one refers to it, even now, as *rāma rājya*, indicating a just rule of the country, in which everyone's voice is heard and a fair decision made. We may view this epic as the first record of an experiment in democracy. However, as one can imagine, such idealism in one person or a few persons alone cannot survive unless that idealism is also shared by the multitude. It is this conflict that is explored in the *Rāmāyana*.

The *Mahābhārata* centers on a conflict between two people vying for the throne. It describes the psychological, philosophical, moral and political struggles of various philosopher-kings who try to put the Upanishadic teachings into practice. In the large, the epic can be regarded as addressing the problem of social justice (*dharma*) from an idealistic standpoint. Apart from the fact that the epic gives us some idea of the culture of the age, the work is often viewed

as the struggle between “good” and “evil.”

After the Upanishadic age, the most challenging question addressed by the philosophers and sages was, how does the teaching of the Upanishads, most notably the omnipresence of *Brahman*, fit into our daily life? How can we explain “good” and “evil” ? Most importantly, is the Upanishadic message only for the recluse in the forest, or can it actually help the individual in daily life? We have already seen some of these issues parenthetically touched upon in some of the later Upanishads. But now, these questions are addressed directly by the *Bhagavadgīta*, a long poem consisting of about 700 verses, and occurring in a portion of the *Mahābhārata*. Over the centuries, the value of the *Bhagavadgīta* (or Gita, for short), has only grown and it now occupies the sacred status of a scripture.

Before we begin, it may help to briefly delineate and describe some of the events that led to the dialogue recorded in the Gita. The clan of the Kurus, led by the blind king Dhritarāshtra, ruled over Kuruksetra (literally meaning, the land of the Kurus), which was a region near present-day Delhi, in northern India. As the king was about to step down, he decides to hand over the throne to Dharmarāja, who was well-known for his virtue and wisdom instead of his own son, Duryodhana. Indeed, the name Dharmarāja, literally means ‘king of social justice.’ Dhritarāshtra’s decision irritates Duryodhana, who feels that the throne should be rightfully his. It is clear that the king would very much like to have his own son on the throne, but to be fair and just, he selects Dharmarāja since it is a choice the people will also accept. Naturally, a conflict arises. Dharmarāja, and his four brothers (collectively called the Pandavas), the most notable of whom is Arjuna, the great warrior, stand firm and consider the king’s decision as final. Duryodhana resorts to various assassination attempts to eliminate them. They all fail. Finally, he beckons the brothers to a meeting of “reconciliation” where together with various scheming friends, he plans to use Dharmarāja’s virtue as a weapon to eliminate him and his brothers. He invites Dharmarāja for a game of dice, and thinking that Duryodhana has finally come around to tread the path of virtue, Dharmarāja accepts. The dice are of course loaded, and the conspirators are relying on Dharmarāja’s penchant for the game, along with his reputed resolve to fulfil any promises he makes. Dharmarāja loses repeatedly, and in the confusion of the game, forfeits his right to the throne and agrees to the banishment from the kingdom of himself and his brothers for a period of 13 years. After the period of banishment, the Pandavas return and Dharmarāja feels that he has a right to the throne. Duryodhana does not accept his offer and declares war. The nation becomes divided. This is the background for the *Mahābhārata* war.

In the course of the thirteen years of banishment, the Pandavas befriend the philosopher- king Krishna. His sage advice and counsel on many issues

are adopted by the Pandavas on numerous matters. In fact, it is clear to the Pandavas that Krishna is one who has inwardly realised the teachings of the Upanishads, not only intellectually, but also as personal experience. The knowledge of *Brahman*, or *Brahmajñāna*, was clearly revered in the scholarly circles. *Abhyāsa* or practice, is a recurrent theme in the Mahābhārata and the sincere seekers of higher knowledge (*parāvidyā*) were well aware that it is through practice, that one enters into the higher realms of the teaching. From the episodes recounted in the Mahābhārata, it is clear that Krishna is not only a knower of *Brahman* and has realised the Upanishadic ideal, but somehow has even gone beyond it. Thus, in the eyes of the Pandavas, he becomes not only their teacher, but acquires the status of a god-like individual. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna becomes the embodiment of its teaching and his presence indicates that the philosophy of the Upanishads can be put into practice in daily life.

When Duryodhana declares war, the Pandavas wonder how to respond. They consult Krishna on how to respond, and Krishna advises them that they must first explore all ways of making peace before any such drastic action is taken. So Krishna offers to mediate and bring about a reconciliation. However, when he goes to the court of Duryodhana, he is captured and tied up. Krishna escapes and returns to the Pandava camp and informs them that war seems inevitable, despite his best efforts to avert it.

A curious episode is related in the Mahābhārata concerning the period just before the war. As Krishna is himself a king, he commands an army and has a formidable force at his disposal. Duryodhana is urged by his mentors that he should somehow acquire Krishna's military arsenal. So he goes to Krishna to ask for his military force. At the same time, Arjuna also approaches Krishna with a similar request. To be fair to both, Krishna makes the following offer. The passage is quite humorous. "One of you can have my military arsenal. The other can just have me. But mind you, I will not fight. I will assume no military position. I will be the charioteer of one of you. Occasionally, I may give you unsolicited advice, and that too if I feel like it. Since Arjuna is the younger of the both of you, I will let Arjuna choose first." Duryodhana protests and says the offer is unfair. He had come there first, he insists, so he should get the first choice. But Krishna is firm and asks Arjuna, "Have you listened carefully? I will not fight. I will merely drive your chariot according to your instruction. I will pick up no weapon. I may give occasional advice and that too if and when I feel like it." Duryodhana muses to himself. "What kind of offer is this? Who would be a fool to refuse the weapons, the armies and the means to secure a victory in war. Arjuna will choose the weapons and I will be left with nothing!" But just then, Arjuna says, he refuses the weapons and chooses Krishna. Duryodhana is elated and of course, Krishna too is elated. Krishna had just given the first test to Arjuna and he has passed it. It is a foreshadow of the teaching about to take place on the battlefield, and the teacher has tested

the fitness of the disciple.

Let us also observe the imagery of the chariot that reappears here reminiscent of the symbol used in the Katha Upanishad. Recall that there, the charioteer was *buddhi* or illumined reason. The mind was symbolised by the reins, the horses, the sense organs and the road the world around us. The rider in the chariot is the *ātman*, or the individual soul, here represented by Arjuna. The fact that Krishna is the charioteer signifies that the Upanishadic teaching can be put into practice by uniting the reasoning faculty to the higher ideal so that it is transformed into *buddhi*, or illumined reason.

The towering personality of Krishna dominates the Mahābhārata. Over the centuries, he has acquired mythic dimensions and even acquired the status of ‘God’ that many religious sects have formed around his name and teaching. On this point, Vivekananda writes, “It is human nature to build round the real character of a great man all sorts of imaginary superhuman attributes. As regards Krishna, the same must have happened, but it seems quite probable that he was a king. Quite probable I say, because in ancient times [in India] ... it was chiefly the kings who exerted themselves most in the preaching of *Brahmajñāna*. Another point to be especially noted here is that whoever might have been the author of the Gita, we find its teachings the same as those in the whole of the Mahābhārata. From this, we can safely infer that in the age of the Mahābhārata some great man arose and preached the *Brahmajñāna* in this new garb to the then existing society.”¹

The opening scene of the Bhagavadgītā is the hesitation of Arjuna the warrior, to go into battle. The armies are lined up and the battle is about to begin, but Arjuna becomes despondent. He has been reluctantly drawn into war and his mind is in turmoil. There is no doubt in Arjuna’s mind of whether he can win the war or whether he is fit to fight. That is not in doubt for him since he is aware that he has won many battles before with opponents more formidable than those arrayed before him. Thus, his abilities are not in question for him. He is wondering of the propriety of the whole thing. “How can I slay these people?” he asks Krishna. “These are the people I have grown up with. Some of them were my teachers in my formative period. I cannot fight them. It is better to live the life of a mendicant than to slay these honoured teachers.” Saying this, Arjuna throws away his mighty bow and arrows and sits down in his chariot, overwhelmed by sorrow.

This opening chapter is extremely important and epitomizes the recurrent predicament of every human being. Often, we find ourselves at crossroads in the journey of life. At every step of our life, we must make choices, we must

¹S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 4, p. 104.

decide what course of action to take. Especially in moments of crises, we must think clearly. The fact that this is the fundamental human challenge is singled out in the opening scene.

At such moments, it is human nature to take the easy way out. The reasoning faculty works overtime to come up with noble and lofty reasons for taking the easy way out. “It is better to live the life of a mendicant than to slay these honoured teachers,” Arjuna says. Thus, the opening chapter brings into bold relief two issues of human psychology. When confronted by a crisis, we often do not think clearly but take the easy way out. We try to run away from the problem. After doing so, we rationalise our behaviour. I think we can all identify with this phenomenon.

Vivekananda writes, “For all of us in this world, life is a continuous fight. Many a time comes when we want to interpret our weakness and cowardice as forgiveness and renunciation. There is no merit in the renunciation of a beggar. If a person who can [give a blow] forbears, there is merit in that. If a person who has, gives up, there is merit in that. We know how often in our lives through laziness and cowardice we give up the battle and try to hypnotise our minds into the belief that we are brave.”²

Krishna now realises it is time for his “advice.” This forms the bulk of the Bhagavad Gita. Krishna begins by telling Arjuna, “Arise. Yield not to despondency. You grieve about people who you should not grieve for. The wise do not grieve either for the dead or the living. Never was there a time when I was not, nor you, nor these people here. Nor will there ever be a time when we shall all cease to be. The drama of life is a process of growth. Just as one grows in this body from childhood, youth and old age, even so, one moves from death to birth, by taking on another body. The sage is not perplexed by this.”

Before we give an explanation of these opening lines, we need to have some background of the philosophic thought current at the time of the Bhagavadgita. The Sāmkhya system and the yoga system are constantly referred to in the Gita. These systems represent the precursors of the systems of philosophy that developed later by that same name. Kapila is said to be the founder of the Sāmkhya and Patanjali of the yoga.

The Sanskrit word *sāmkhya* means ‘enumeration’ and its basic starting point is to analyse perception and resolve it into its component parts. It is an early attempt at a theory of evolution. It begins with the axiom that there are two universal and indestructible principles whose inter-relation is the cause of the universe. These principles are called *Purusha* and *Prakriti* and can be approx-

²S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 1, p. 459.

imately translated as Pure Awareness (inactive) and Creative Energy (active). (Observe that *prakṛiti* and the Latin word, procreatrix, are cognates. Sometimes, *prakṛiti* is incorrectly translated as ‘nature’, but this is incomplete since it includes external nature of matter and the internal nature of thought and mind as well.) In later philosophies, these principles are called *Shiva* and *Shakti*. All experience is said to be a combination of these two, Purusha (the knowing subject) and Prakriti (the known object). Thus, there is an inherent duality in the system. Prakriti is said to be composed of three modes of energy, or three *gunas*: *tamas* or inertia, *rajas* or activity and *sattva* or equilibrium of the other two energies. Everything in the universe is said to be the combination of these three modes of energy. In the Gita, these words are also used to describe the qualities of inertia, activity and harmony respectively. Thus, according to Sāṃkhya, everything in the cosmos is only combination and recombination of these three essential modes of energy. These combinations give rise to twenty-three *tattvas*, or cosmic principles. (It is important to remember that *tattva* in Sanskrit means “thatness”.) They are the five elements of nature, namely, ether, air, fire, water and the earth. These are to be viewed as the subtle conditions of material energy out of which the gross manifestations arise. They are “nowhere to be found in their purity in the gross material world. All objects are created by the combination of these five subtle conditions or elements.”³ Each of these five is again the basis for five subtle energies of sound, touch, form, taste and smell representing the energies the mind uses to cognize objects. In addition to these *tattvas*, there are a further thirteen: Pure Intelligence (*Mahat* or *Buddhi*), Ego (*Ahamkāra*), Mind (*Manas*), together with its ten sensory functions, five of knowledge and five of action.

According to Sāṃkhya, the Purusha has become identified with Prakriti through the “ego-sense” or *ahamkāra*. As there are many individuals, whose experiences are varied, the original Sāṃkhya postulates a plurality of Purushas, and only one principle of Prakriti. This curious arrangement will be discussed later, when we take up Vedānta. For the present discussion, it is sufficient if we understand the sense in which the terms ‘Sāṃkhya’ and ‘Yoga’ are used in the Gita. We have briefly explained the former term above. However, in the Gita, the term is used generally to refer to the philosophy of the Upanishads, and more specifically, the method of *jnāna yoga*, or the yoga of knowledge. Now let us discuss the term ‘yoga’ as it appears in the Gita.

As explained in an earlier lecture, *yoga* is derived from the Sanskrit word *yuj* which means ‘to yoke.’ From the Upanishadic standpoint, any method that enables us to become aware of the *ātman* or *Brahman* is referred to as a ‘yoga’ in that it unites us with the infinite dimension within. However, in the Gita, the term ‘yoga’ refers to a combination of *karma yoga*, or the yoga of work and *rāja yoga*, the yoga of psychic control. The yoga philosophy of Patanjali forms

³Aurobindo, Complete Works, Vol. 13, p. 66.

the basis for the system called *rāja yoga*. The Gita's original contribution may be said to be a delineation of the basic principles of *karma yoga* as well as *bhakti yoga*, or the yoga of love and devotion. It is a masterly synthesis of the entire Upanishadic thought and three systems of philosophy, namely, Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Vedānta.

Krishna begins by delineating the theory of re-incarnation. Life is a process of psychic growth, he says. According to Sāṃkhya yoga, the goal of every individual is to realise the *ātman*. Consciously, or unconsciously, we are all moving towards this goal. The process does not terminate with death.

Krishna continues, "Life is a combination of both cold and heat, pleasure and pain. They come and go and do not last forever. So when pain comes, learn to endure it. The sage is the one who can rise above the duality of pain and pleasure. That which pervades all this is indestructible. Of this immutable being, no one can bring about its destruction. Therefore fight!"

This message must be understood from two standpoints. The first is from the standpoint of Arjuna, to whom the message is addressed. As already emphasized, the philosophy of *dharma*, or social duty, was a dominant framework of thought for the Pandavas, as Dharmarāja, the eldest among them was a strong proponent of it. Thus, in the immediacy of the battle, the strongest argument Krishna could put forward was from the standpoint of one's duty, and the preservation of social justice (*dharma*). He, however, combines this notion familiar to Arjuna, with the indestructible nature of the *ātman*.

Elaborating on this, Aurobindo writes⁴, "The Gita is ... addressed to a fighter, a man of action, one whose duty in life is that of war and protection, war as a part of government for the protection of those who are excused from that duty, debarred from protecting themselves and therefore at the mercy of the strong and the violent, ... and by a moral extension of this idea, for the protection of the weak and the oppressed and for the maintenance of right and justice in the world. ... Although the more general and universal ideas of the Gita are those which are most important to us, we ought not to leave out of consideration altogether the colouring and trend they take from the peculiar Indian culture and social system in the midst of which they arose. That system differed from the modern in its conception. To the modern mind, man is a thinker, worker, or producer and a fighter all in one, and the tendency of the social system is to lump all these activities and to demand from each individual his contribution to the intellectual, economical and military life and needs of the community without paying any heed to the demands of his individual nature and temperament. The ancient Indian civilisation laid peculiar stress on the

⁴Aurobindo, Complete Works, Vol. 13, pp. 45-46.

individual nature, tendency, temperament and sought to determine by it the ethical type, function and place in the society. Nor did it consider man primarily as a social being ... but rather as a spiritual being in process of formation and development and his social life, ethical life, ... as means and stages of spiritual formation. Thought and knowledge, war and government, production and distribution, labour and service were carefully differentiated functions of society, each assigned to those who were naturally called to it and providing the right means by which they could individually proceed towards their spiritual development and self-perfection.”

The second standpoint from which to understand Krishna’s opening message is more cosmic in its scope. The message is for humanity at large. Life is a battle, not necessarily against others, but rather, against our own weaknesses. Each of us has a tendency to shrink from the challenges of life, and then to sanctify our behaviour as moral virtue. An important theme emerges from this message. It is not the action that determines virtue, but rather the motive behind the action. Vivekananda explains this as follows.⁵ “In all matters, the extremes are alike. ... When the vibrations of light are too slow, we do not see them, nor do we see them when they are too rapid. ... Of like nature is the difference between resistance and non-resistance. One man does not resist because he is weak, lazy and cannot, not because he will not; the other man knows that he can strike an irresistible blow if he likes; yet he not only does not strike, but blesses his enemies. The one who from weakness resists not commits a sin, and as such cannot receive any benefit from the non-resistance; while the other would commit a sin by offering resistance. Buddha gave up his throne and renounced his position, that was true renunciation; but there cannot be any question of renunciation in the case of a beggar who has nothing to renounce. So we must always be careful about what we mean when we speak of this non-resistance and ideal love. We must first take care to understand whether we have the power of resistance or not. Then, having the power, if we renounce it and do not resist, we are doing a grand act of love; but if we cannot resist, and yet, at the same time, try to deceive ourselves into the belief that we are actuated by motives of the highest love, we are doing the exact opposite.”

Echoing the famous lines of the Katha Upanishad, Krishna continues, “He who thinks that this slays and he who thinks that this is slain; both fail to perceive the truth; this one neither slays nor is slain. ... It is never born. Nor does It ever die. It is unborn, permanent and eternal. It is not slain when the body is slain. Just as one discards worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul cast off worn-out bodies and take on others that are new. Weapons do not cleave It. Fire does not burn It. Water does not make It wet. The wind does not dry It.”

⁵S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 1, pp.. 38-39

All of this argument is from the standpoint of the Sāmkhya philosophy. “For one that is born, death is certain and for one who has died, birth is certain. This is a process. What is there to grieve about? The *ātman* within is eternal and can never be slain.” Now Krishna changes tone and becomes more pragmatic. He appeals to Arjuna’s sense of duty. “Besides, you are a warrior and it is your duty to defend the innocent. Happy are the warriors for whom a war comes of its own accord. If you abandon your duty, people will forever recount your actions, and this is worse than death. If you fight and emerge victorious, then you can enjoy the victory. If on the other hand, you are slain fighting, you will attain heaven. Therefore arise, and be resolved in battle.”

Thus, in these opening verses, we see Krishna’s argument made from three viewpoints. The first is simply an urge to snap out of depression. But since Arjuna does not comply, he brings in the philosophical arguments of the Upanishads and Sāmkhya. He reminds him that life is a process of psychic evolution and that for the *ātman*, there is no death or birth. Pain and pleasure are part of life and we must receive both with a balanced mind. Then, suddenly, Krishna changes strategy and argues from the standpoint of Arjuna’s reputation, if that would lift him out of despondency. When even this does not seem to work, Krishna begins his marvelous contribution to philosophy, the yoga of work, or *karma yoga*. This we shall discuss in the next lecture.

