

**THE BHAGAVAD GITA
FOR
THE FIRST TIME READER**

**PREFACE
THE ANCIENT INDIAN PERSPECTIVE ON KNOWLEDGE**

This little book on the Bhagavad Gita is a small attempt to present an ancient Indian spiritual - philosophical text to a modern first time reader. The Gita deals with the large questions of Existence and its purposes, on which ancient Indian texts abound. It would therefore be useful to provide here for the benefit of such a reader, a preface on the Indian approach to these questions within the context of their remarkable and more comprehensive approach to knowledge. This will also at once show to the reader, how much the Indian mind of ancient times anticipated so much of modern thought.

We are readily able today to understand processes and events of the physical world around us in terms of Newton's Third Law of every action having an equal and opposite reaction. We see that this law has a relevance, no less true, in relation to human inter-actions as well. And in considering large questions of existence, we may also be able to see how large spans of space and time can so obscure connections in long chains of cause and effect, that beyond a point, individual events in these chains seem to occur quite arbitrarily, or as we might put it, without rhyme or reason. The only explanation that we may then attempt is that all existence must be governed by some divine version of Newton's law. This is indeed the way the ancient seers of India saw existence, and they gave the law a different name, the Law of Karma. Some of us today would seem to prefer the word of Newton to the word of an ancient seer, who may himself, typically, have stated it to be the word of God. But the ancient Indian tradition even today, remains so deeply embedded in the Indian psyche, that many would still be inclined to say that God may indeed have spoken through Newton.

It is also interesting that many of the findings of Science today point to the seamless continuum that exists between every form of existence, even between its seemingly different categories that we may perceive to be totally unconnected, like the material and the non-material, or the living and the lifeless. Take a solid substance which we consider inanimate. Go down into its inner structure, beyond the molecule and atom and down to the electron. Here modern science tells us that the dividing line between matter and energy disappears to show them as part of one continuous spectrum. How matter and energy at this point appear to us at any time turns upon the context in which we see them. An inseparable dynamic relationship seems to bind the observer and the thing observed and deprive everything of what might be called an absolute state. The buzz word in science today is Relativity.

Proceed now to another aspect of physical phenomena, where matter in association with energy starts exhibiting different forms of behaviour. Here we encounter objects dropping to the ground under the action of gravity (Newton again !). We see attraction and repulsion between magnetic substances. Or matter in the form of solid state electronics stimulated by electricity, simulating near-human functions of memory and logic. We are also now beginning to understand and manipulate the gene to change the character of living matter. Are we then a short step away from bridging the living and the lifeless ? While we are still intrigued by what is the form of energy that brings matter to life, we do seem to be moving gradually from the domain of the lifeless into the domain of the living.

Cross over to the domain of the living, and we encounter life in different forms, with different characteristics, properties or qualities. We seem now to be moving gradually from the domain of the physical to the psychic, from the domain of quantity into the domain of quality. We enter into a vast new intangible area of thought, imagination, intellect, intuition, instinct and emotion and slowly but surely, into a domain beyond of the spiritual. Our knowledge as we go beyond the physical to these onward domains, becomes increasingly vague, increasingly difficult to observe, record, measure, define and analyse, and we need to take the help of new words and symbols. We see here the operation new laws in relation to human nature, different, perhaps more complex, than the laws of Nature as we know them. We see experience here splitting into two domains, subjective and objective. Yet subjective experiences are real enough for many people to assign them an identity, refer to them with descriptive words like metaphysical or spiritual, or descriptive phrases like the “spirit rather than the substance”. The Indian traditional view is, that subjective and objective are existences that are relative, and are but aspects of one Absolute, even as our framework of Time and Space are but relative aspects of one Absolute, that is both Eternal and Infinite !

Let us suppose now, that from within our own imagination we create a form with attributes evolving or developing in the following sequence, suggestive of a progression from the psychic to the physical : Consciousness-Will-Energy-Quality-Quantity. It will then, not be difficult to for us to further envisage an eternal entity of pure consciousness that carries the potential to shape within itself any existence with form of any size, shape, appearance, quality or power, and invest it with the solidity and all other attributes of this worldly existence. Such an entity is the Divine portrayed by the Gita. And when we see that we are ourselves often able to mould matter and energy to create physical form and function to the things we imagine, we may then with a small step of faith beyond reason, be willing to concede that worldly existence itself may well be a creation of that Divine, and that man’s imagination too may be indicative of a small spark of that Divine. We begin to see that when reason is extended by faith, man starts reaching out to the Divine. This is precisely what the Gita teaches.

We may now look a little more closely at how many of such wide ranging ideas, were articulated and built into a massive and comprehensive knowledge corpus of ancient Indian tradition. The Vedic conception of existence is ultimately in terms of the Brahman, a single Infinite Consciousness or existence, with a continuum that has no beginning and no end, and with seeming discontinuities in between, which we observe, largely arising from the space-time constraints that condition our own faculties and perceptions. The Gita builds on this base and explains how this One all-pervasive spirit uses its all-pervasive energy to fashion bits within itself into an infinite number of finite existences of different levels of consciousness and forms of worldly existence, engaged in constant transitions from one state to another, with these existences driven by their properties or qualities. Any transition or movement must by definition, necessarily occur within a framework of time and space which confer on these existences their cyclic and transient character, of creation and destruction in relation to the world of matter, and of birth and death in relation to the living world. The human personality itself is shaped by its properties, the three Gunas, Satva, Rajas and Tamas, engaged in constant mutual struggle for dominance, till the consciousness in the individual becomes aware of the single higher spirit pervading his existence. That is the point at which the individual starts becoming aware that he is not bound by the limitations of his finite physical existence. He consciously starts seeing his spirit as part of the one Infinite Spirit, and he starts so conducting his actions in life as to fulfill the role assigned to him by the Infinite in its play with the finite.

What the first time reader may find specially interesting is how these ideas got accumulated into a vast ancient corpus of knowledge, which has come intact to us today, through the millenia, not inscribed on stone, coin, paper or other physical medium, but inscribed entirely in human memory and transmitted by the spoken word of hundreds of successive generations, and continue to deeply influence the everyday lives of the people even the present day. One fascinating question then is how this vast corpus of knowledge can be a source of history, especially when modern historians have asserted that tradition is not history. Let us look at this question by looking closely at what the tradition has to say for itself.

Ancient Indian tradition has it that at the dawn of creation of the Universe, Brahma the Creator, gave the corpus of knowledge constituting the Vedas, to the first seers for the benefit of mankind. Passed down the Yugas or ages, through a teacher-disciple chain,, this knowledge got scattered and diluted, and parts of it were even lost with the vast passage of time. The Yugas mentioned here refer to a cosmic time cycle of four Yugas, namely, the Krita, Treta, Dvapara and Kali Yugas, which together last 12000 cosmic years, one cosmic year being equal to 360 human years. We live today in the Kali Yuga, which has a duration of 432000 human years with its commencement placed in the year 3101 BC. This Yuga chronology continues as a living tradition today in India, where the current year 2009 of the Christian era

figures in today's published Hindu calendars as the Kali Yuga year 5110. The ancient Indians did indeed have well defined concepts in relation to the cosmic and the human scales of space and time, where, as in all their concepts, the Finite was always perceived and represented in units reaching into the Infinite.

The tradition then has it that towards the end of the Dvapara Yuga, finding the Vedic knowledge corpus in disarray, the sage Vyasa collected all that remained of it, arranged them into the four Vedas, and imparted them to four of his disciples, to be preserved, propagated and passed down to posterity. Successive generations of teachers and disciples carried the Vedas to different parts of India, and in the course of time, the processes of their observance, propagation and preservation got institutionalised into Sakhas or Schools, each preserving and carrying forward a particular Vedic rescension. The Muktikopanishad has it that at one time, there were 1180 Sakhas in existence. Today, scattered segments remain, of only 8 Sakhas.

Six supporting disciplines were also evolved, namely, Siksha (Phonetics), Vyakarana (Grammar), Chandas (Poesy), Nirukta (Etymology), Kalpa (Ritual procedures) and Jyotisha (Astronomy and Astrology, dealing respectively, with details of the positions and influences of the planets and stars, and used for determining the calendar and timing of all human activities). These disciplines, called the Vedangas (or limbs of the Vedas), were intended to provide the strict framework in which observance, propagation and preservation of the Vedas in their pristine purity would endure for all time, despite a completely oral mode of transmission. In particular, remarkable techniques of memorising and reciting the texts, were designed and prescribed, so that even today, it is common for priests and scholars, who have been trained in this tradition, to pick on any word at any point in any large text, and recite it from memory from that point for hours ! And one can find such testimony in the daily lives of people today in the fact that every prayer and ritual in everyday observance starts with the individual declaring his name and lineage from the ancient Rishis, Clans and Schools, along with details of the place and time of the occasion, the time being in terms of the year, month, day and the ruling star of the day, according to the Kali Yuga Calendar. These facts show a remarkable continuity of a tradition that lives today with the same accuracy and authenticity in which they were set in the ancient past. Surely the element of history cannot be missing in such a tradition.

We can now go a little further into the question of whether the ancient Indian texts can indeed serve as sources of formal history, a claim discounted by modern historians. Extending beyond the Vedas and Vedangas is yet another large corpus of texts which include the Itihasas which are detailed histories with geneologies of Kings and Nations, and the Puranas which tell likewise of Gods and the Worlds that they ruled. Pride of place among the Itihasas is held by the Mahabharata epic, the centre piece of which, in turn, is the Bhagavad Gita. This epic of around 100000 verses of delectable Sanskrit poetry is attributed to Vyasa.

The Mahabharata text is replete with astronomical details related to events, that unfortunately did not receive sufficient attention for their possible relevance to the historical chronology of ancient India, from the first generation of modern historians of both West and East. Their Western mind-set and methodology, led them to a preference for and reliance on limited and much later evidence of inscriptions on stones and coins and accounts of ancient travellers, involving unreliable interpretation of names of persons and places. Their assumptions tended to discounting of any major civilisational advances in India predating the Greeks from whom they derived their baseline chronologies, and this resulted in their bringing the chronology of the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions forward by several millenia, thus doing great disservice to the building of a true formal history of ancient India.

The treating of the Mahabharata as Literature and not as History by the early historians is now being called into question by modern scholars on several counts. At the outset, the Mahabharata and Ramayana are seen as part of the corpus of texts referred to as the "Itihasas", The translation of the Sanskrit word "Itihasa" is "It was thus", or "It happened thus", indicative of a reference to factual history. Surely the use of this word by men of clarity of thought and expression and intellectual integrity, of ancient times, merits acceptance of its meaning at face value, which suggested and that the works were indeed intended as historical works, though they were, like all subjects compiled in those times, set in literary compositions of high excellence, and tended sometimes to invest great kings and personalities with divine or near-divine status.

More importantly however, it has now become possible to use powerful computer tools available today to analyse the ancient texts in ways not available to the earlier historians, and which are providing new insights and surprising truths. Ancient Indian texts set vast geneologies and events, interlocked with considerable internal consistency, in a time framework of references to astronomical events that can now be verified with these tools. This would certainly invest the ancient texts with as much, if not more credibility than partial data from inscriptions on stone and coins, or other sources, that earlier historians have relied on. It would appear that the heavens can provide evidence when the earth fails to do so !

To take a specific example that is relevant to the subject of the present book, a significant reference is made by the Sage Vyasa in the 3rd. Adhyaya (Chapter) of the Bhishma Parva (Section) of the Mahabharata, to a very rare astronomical event indicative of an impending catastrophe, obviously referring to the outbreak of the Mahabharata war soon thereafter. This was a very rare occurrence within the same lunar month, of a solar eclipse and a lunar eclipse. The rule was always for a solar eclipse to occur at the new Moon and the lunar eclipse to occur at the full Moon, and always for the new Moon to fall on the 14th

or 15th day following the full Moon. This occasion however, was marked by an extraordinary interval of 13 days between the two eclipses and the corresponding phases of the Moon.

Vyasa's words and with a rough translation are reproduced as follows :

चतुर्दशीं पञ्चदशीं भूतपूर्वां च षोडशीं

इमां तु नाभिजानेऽहममावास्यां त्रयोदशीं

चन्द्रसूर्यावुभौ ग्रस्तावेकमासे त्रयोदशीं । ॥ ३२ ॥

अपर्वणि ग्रहेणैतौ प्रजाः संक्षपयिष्यतः

मांसवर्षं पुनस्तीव्रम् आसीत् कृष्णचतुर्दशीं

शोणितैर्वक्त्रसंपूर्णा अतृप्ताः तत्र राक्षसाः । ॥ ३३ ॥

TRANSLATION : FOURTEENTH DAY, FIFTEENTH DAY OR IN THE PAST, THE SIXTEENTH DAY, BUT I HAVE NEVER KNOWN THE AMAVASYA (NEW MOON DAY) TO OCCUR ON THE THIRTEENTH DAY; OR A LUNAR ECLIPSE FOLLOWED BY SOLAR ECLIPSE ON THIRTEENTH DAY IN A SINGLE LUNAR MONTH; THAT WOULD ENDANGER PEOPLE; WITH A RAIN OF FLESH FROM THEFOURTEENTH DAY FROM THEFULL MOON; WITH BLOOD-DRENCHED BODIES STREWN EVERYWHERE, AND THE DEMONS \STILL NOT SATISFIED.

This reference to a unique astronomical event, in the Mahabharata text is clearly a profound statement of fact resting on a profound state of knowledge of astronomy that obtained at that time. Such references in ancient texts have therefore prompted efforts by scholars in recent years, to use advanced computer facilities to compute dates of human events from the astronomical events that were said to have accompanied them.

One study, by Dr.S.Balakrishna, (1) arrives at August 3129 BC (reckoned on the Julian calendar) as the most plausible timing for this particular astronomical event. And by inter-locking of dates ascertained similarly for other events, it has become possible to place much of the Mahabharata chronology at the close of the Dvapara Yuga. The start of the next Yuga that followed, the Kali Yuga, is placed at 3101 BC (reckoned on the Julian calendar) which ties in with the estimate of the great astronomer Aryabhata (CE 476–550 AD). The starting year of the Kali Yuga, incidentally, is also considered to be the year of Krishna's passing away. One other study, (2) has gone so far as to state that the Mahabharata commenced on the 22nd November, 3067 BC, also considered to be the date of commencement of the teaching of the Gita by Krishna.

Further such studies continue today and fuller pictures with greater chronological accuracy and consistency may yet emerge. But while questions may remain open for now on the chronology or the historicity of the Gita, few will doubt that its teaching has a relevance that will endure for all time.

Internet references :

- (1) <http://www.geocities.com/dipalsarvesh/datingMahabharat.html>
- (2) <http://scienceinvedas.wordpress.com/2006/11/30/historicity-of-mahabharat/>

Introduction

The reader of the modern world would seem to have little time or patience for religion or philosophy. He readily accepts Physics, not Metaphysics, the reality of the material world, not the abstractions of the spiritual world. Yet every now and then, he encounters questions and situations that defy his understanding and he begins to sense that answers may be available in religion and philosophy. He then turns to books like the Bible, the Koran and the Gita. But there he often finds their language, intent and content difficult to understand. He would appear to need help for understanding them. This book tries to meet that need in respect of the Gita.

In many ways, the Gita is an interesting and unique book. It is not a scripture in the conventional sense of a revelation of a seer or proclamation of a prophet. It is part of a monumental, ancient work of Sanskrit historical literature, the Mahabharata epic of India, comprising stories that tell of men and nations and human situations of ancient India. Nevertheless the Gita's content compels the attention of a scripture, and has come to be regarded, along with the Brahma Sutras and Upanishads, as constituting the three fold scriptural foundation, the Prasthanthraya, of the highest religious, philosophical and spiritual experience of ancient India.

It is an unusual scripture too, because its teaching is set in a worldly context of a human crisis where all established values and standards of conduct come into question. This is the Kurukshetra war, where the Pandavas and Kauravas are ranged against each other, where man is in conflict as much with himself as with his fellow men. The teaching of the book addresses the problems of worldly existence by placing them in a higher spiritual context, in a way that appeals to the needs of any reader whatever his approach or objective might be, practical, intellectual or spiritual. This is indeed because the approach follows our own development from the practical, through the intellectual to the spiritual. The book teems with profound ideas with subtleties of context, concept and word usage that sometimes defy even scholars, yet retains an appeal even at the simple level of practical and literal meaning. This handbook is an attempt to explain and interpret the substance and value of the teaching at this simple level, indeed in a consciously oversimplified way by restricting the narrative to the central essentials of the teaching and avoiding its more difficult esoteric aspects.

The Gita takes two schools of thought that then prevailed as the starting point of its teaching. Existence was then considered to consist of two eternal entities, a passive intangible Spirit, the Brahman, and an active tangible Nature, the Prakriti. The Sankhya school supported a life of renunciation of action and the Yoga school, a life of acceptance of action. The Gita reconciles the two schools through a new interpretation and goes beyond them to a larger synthesis through new perspectives. The Gita's teaching is of one Supreme Divine, the Purushothama, immanent as much in the passive Brahman as in active Prakriti,

and providing to the individual a bridge across them to the Supreme Divine, that could be reached if all human activity in the framework of Prakriti were purged of its egoistic motivation and consecrated as service of and for the Supreme Divine, This is the substance of the teaching of the Gita.

The central point of the teaching that would have direct appeal to every reader is that within each person resides a spark of the Divine that confers an unlimited potential for both individual and collective human advancement, and it is up to the person to discover and realize that potential. Krishna appears here as the Avatar, a descent of the divine into human form, to affirm by his presence, that that God is no distant unrealizable goal, but a living presence that is ever present within and around each of us, to help us for an ascent from the level of the human to the level of the divine. Very simply, Krishna's teaching is an affirmation that divine help is always there but man can and must use the potential within himself and so engage in action as will transform his existence from a state of conflict with himself and with others to a higher state of universal harmony, which is the central purpose of existence.

Several other points of practical importance spring from the teaching of Gita. The teaching is that the same Divine pervades and supports everything, living or lifeless. In mankind, the Divine confers faculties and skills of varying type and degree to individuals to enable them to participate in and contribute to harmony and progress in society, without prejudice to their fundamental equality before or equal access to the Divine. But the teaching also warns us against letting our natural propensities to hanker after lust, wealth and power, which lead us to exploit our fellow beings, other forms of life or nature, and thereby create inequalities, imbalances and conflicts. It warns that these conflicts will rebound on him, that he who sows the wind, will reap the whirlwind. It teaches us to control these baser instincts and respect and serve everyone and everything around us because they represent equal creations of the Divine. And it tells us to follow the examples set by the best of men and the highest standards set by them in the best ethical codes that prevail. There is clearly something in the Gita for everyone, whatever his station in life or level of attainment, in terms of objective to be pursued or method to be followed.

The Gita unfolds its teaching through 700 verses, set in 18 Chapters. Each Chapter bears the title of a Yoga. The word Yoga has several meanings. The first time reader may find "path" or "process" as meanings that are simple and adequate. The meanings of the Chapter titles also suggest a logical sequence and structure on which the entire teaching of the Gita rests. By a graduated back-and-forth progression of its unfolding, the Gita goes beyond the teachings of earlier schools which were ridden with conflicts that arose from their rigid approaches of differentiation and analysis, to arrive at a vast new integration and synthesis. Many are the later systems and schools that have built on one or other of the ideas that the Gita highlights or emphasizes as it develops its presentation, to proclaim those to be the core of teaching. It is important therefore to understand

the teaching in its universality and totality This will become apparent to the reader as he proceeds from Chapter to Chapter to its final and explicit conclusion.

Commentators regard the Gita teaching as proceeding in a three part sequence. Chapters 1 to 6, are considered to comprise the core of the Gita teaching of how to handle worldly existence, with Knowledge and Action as the first two starting paths. Chapters 7 to 12 are considered an elaboration of these two paths, with addition of a third path, that of Devotion to the Supreme Divine, the Purushottama, who manifests himself as both the Eternal Passive Brahman and the Eternal Active Iswara who supports worldly existence through his power of Prakriti or Nature. Chapters 13 to 18 carry further elaborations of the three paths that lead on to the final message of the Gita, The final call is to rise above the egoistic hold of the three Gunas of Prakriti, give oneself up in surrender to the Supreme Divine and thereby attain to Moksha or final liberation from the limitations or bonds imposed by worldly existence. Another viewpoint of the Gita is that its teaching is really an elaboration of the three words of the Mahavakya, the Great Upanishadic Saying, TAT TVAM ASI, translating as That Thou Art, and meaning that You Are the same as That Infinite Existence. In other words, you are an instrument of the Divine to fulfil. not your, but His purposes, in worldly existence.

This book covers 100 key verses of the Gita, and these are presented in the original Sanskrit, and a transliteration in English, supported with translations of the verses, along with their word-by-word meanings, in both English and Hindi. Background materials are provided in the Preface and the Introduction of the book, and are also supported with brief explanatory introductions to each Chapter. Some may consider the selection of verses as arbitrary and their treatment as inadequate. But this has been done so as to retain the central thread of the teaching, and present it in a simple way that may be adequate and appealing to the first time reader. It is hoped, that this will then encourage the reader to be drawn into a study of the Gita in its full version, and at its higher intellectual or spiritual levels.