

B A N T A M C L A S S I C



The Bhagavad-Gita

Krishna's Counsel in Time of War

TRANSLATED BY BARBARA STOLER MILLER

INTRODUCTION

The *Bhagavad-Gita*: Context and Text

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

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

The dramatic moral crisis that is central to the *Bhagavad-Gita* has inspired centuries of Indian philosophers and practical men of wisdom, as well as Western thinkers such as Thoreau, Emerson, and Eliot. Interpretations of the *Gita*, as it is commonly referred to in India, are as varied as the figures who have commented on it. From Shankara, the great Hindu

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Bhagavad-Gita

The BHAGAVAD-GITA has been an essential text of Hindu culture in India since the time of its composition in the first century A.D. As one of the great religious classics of world literature, it has inspired such diverse thinkers as Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, T. S. Eliot, and Thomas Merton.

Set on an ancient battlefield where the armies of rival cousins stand ready to do battle, the GITA recounts the epic tale of the warrior-prince Arjuna as he confronts a life-or-death moral dilemma. What is the purpose or justice of war? Where does the right path of action lie when one duty conflicts with another? Gradually, through the intercession of his charioteer, the god Krishna, Arjuna is led to a higher understanding of the spiritual nature of man and the world. Encompassing both the personal and the transcendent, Arjuna's dialogue with Krishna has resonated through the ages with the terrible beauty of ultimate revelation.

A new verse translation by Sanskrit scholar Barbara Stoler Miller, with an Introduction, and an Afterword on Thoreau's response to the GITA

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