

# In defense of war: the *Bhagavad Gītā*

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India, and especially ancient India, is often imagined as a place of deep spirituality and peacefulness, embodied by characters such as the Buddha, sitting immersed in meditation, or, in modern times, Mahatma Gandhi, who lead India to independence along the path of passive resistance. Indeed, for over two millennia the principle of *ahimsā*, nonviolence, has been central to many of India's religious traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. This focus on nonviolence is related to the belief that living beings are trapped in *saṃsāra*, the perpetual cycle of death and rebirth due to the workings of *karma*. *Karma* is the result of any action undertaken. It adheres itself to the essence or soul of a being and, when the being dies, the soul migrates into a new body and a new birth. The nature of this body, whether one becomes a prince or an insect, is determined by the amount and nature of the *karma* the being collected in its previous lives. Violence generates *karma* of the worst kind and should therefore be avoided. Against this backdrop it may sound all the more surprising that one of the most inspirational treatises from Hindu scripture, a text which is sometimes labelled “the Hindu Bible”, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, in its original context is an encouragement for warfare.

## A warrior's doubt

The *Bhagavad Gītā*, which translates as “the song of the venerable one”, consists of a dialogue of around seven hundred Sanskrit verses between the divine Krishna (Sanskrit: *kr̥ṣṇa*) and the warrior Arjuna. It was probably composed around the beginning of the common era. Though it is nowadays often read and studied as an independent text, it was originally embedded within the classical epic *Mahābhārata*. This gigantic Sanskrit poem of over a hundred thousand verses tells the story of an internecine war of the Pāṇḍavas against their cousins, the Kauravas. In the run-up to the battle both sides mobilized all the kings of the surrounding regions as allies. In the end all the warriors in the world gathered in Kurukṣetra for an ultimate fight. When the great battle is about to begin, with the two armies facing each other on the battle field, Arjuna, the greatest of the Pāṇḍava warriors, looks over the troops. When he observes his cousins, uncles, teachers and former friends on the opposite side thirsting for blood, he is overcome with sorrow and doubt. Deeply distraught by the prospect of the bloodshed that would ensue among his kinsmen, he expresses his confusion about what he should do as a *kṣatriya*, a member of the warrior class: should he engage in a righteous battle, and sow death and destruction among his relatives, or should he ensure that his relatives are safe, and abandon the fight? Opting for the latter, he decides to lay down his weapons, and is ready to surrender his life. His divine charioteer, Krishna, who in the *Mahābhārata* figures as an allied king and long time friend of the Pāṇḍavas, addresses him with a teaching in which ideas from different classical philosophical schools, as well as a new theological trend are integrated. In the end this will convince Arjuna to take up his weapons.

## Body, soul and discipline

Krishna first attends to Arjuna's doubts about killing his relatives, stressing that physical death is not the end. A being's essence or soul is eternal, and migrates from body to body through the mechanisms of *karma*:

You grieve for those beyond grief, and you speak words of insight; but learned men do not grieve for the dead or the living. Never have I not existed, nor you, nor these kings; and never in the future shall we cease to exist. (2.11-12)<sup>1</sup>

Our bodies are known to end, but the embodied self is enduring, indestructible, and immeasurable; therefore, Arjuna, fight the battle! (2.18)

If he fights, Arjuna will only kill the useless bodies of his relatives, not their souls. Therefore, he should feel no remorse over it, since they will immediately be reborn in new bodies.

As for the reason why Arjuna should fight, Krishna invokes the concept of *dharma*, sacred duty, which sustains the cosmic order. This *dharma* differs according to the class and caste into which a person is born. As a member of the warrior class Arjuna has the primary sacred duty of fighting righteous battles. Therefore he must by all means fight.

Look to your own duty; do not tremble before it; nothing is better for a warrior than a battle of sacred duty. (2.30)

If you fail to wage this war of sacred duty, you will abandon your own duty and fame only to gain evil. (2.32)

Your own duty done imperfectly is better than another man's done well. It is better to die in one's own duty; another man's duty is perilous. (3.35)

Krishna further specifies that Arjuna should act in such a manner as to avoid the bondage of *karma*, by performing all action without any desire and by remaining indifferent to the result of his actions:

Be intent on action, not on the fruits of action; avoid attraction to the fruits and attachment to inaction! Perform actions, firm in discipline, relinquishing attachment; be impartial to failure and success – this equanimity is called discipline. (2.47-48)

Eventually such an attitude will lead to liberation (*mokṣa*), the ultimate escape from the anguish of *samsāra*. This discipline (*yoga*) implies practicing detachment of one's senses from the sensuous objects.

## Three paths to liberation

Arjuna then asks Krishna what is the best path to achieve liberation, whereupon Krishna discusses various methods. One prominent path is that of action, more particularly of sacrifice, the old religious practice at the centre of the Vedic faith, the precursor of Hinduism. However, according to Krishna, it is crucial that one executes these sacrifices without attachment or desire to a certain outcome:

Action imprisons the world unless it is done as sacrifice; freed from attachment, Arjuna, perform action as sacrifice! (3.9)

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are quoted from Barbara Stoler Miller (1976)

Always perform with detachment any action you must do; performing action with detachment one achieves supreme good. (3.19)

A second path is the path of knowledge, whereby insight into the structure of the world leads to liberation. Krishna describes ideas from several different philosophical schools. The Sāṃkhya school, for instance, proclaims a dualist view of reality of a soul (*puruṣa*) being completely separate from substance (*prakṛti*). Another school, Vedānta, is monistic, asserting that the eternal soul (*ātman*) is identical to the absolute (*brahman*). Though both schools offer very different ideas, Krishna considers them equally valid, because they both lead to equanimity.

Whereas the first two paths were already well-known from other sources at the time of the composition of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the third path, that of devotion (*bhakti*), is completely new and later became the dominant religious practice in India. This path prescribes disciplined adoration and service to God, that is, Krishna. Here Krishna reveals himself to be the supreme absolute:

Learn that this is the womb of all creatures; I am the source of all the universe, just as I am its dissolution. Nothing is higher than I am; Arjuna, all that exists is woven in me, like a web of pearls on a thread. (7.6-7)

At Arjuna's request, Krishna allows him to see him in his divine form, as the creator and destroyer of all. Out of love for his devotees, Krishna grants liberation to anyone who takes refuge with him. Arjuna realizes that he is a mere instrument of Krishna. He should carry out his sacred duty, for it is also a part of Krishna, and fight.

The battle lasts for eighteen days, during which nearly all the *kṣatriyas* on earth are slaughtered. Only the Pāṇḍavas and a few others including Krishna himself survive. Traumatized by the bloodshed the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas, Yudhiṣṭhira, is reluctant to become king, but at the insistence of Krishna he accepts and is anointed sovereign king.

## ***Bhagavad Gītā* reinvented**

The *Bhagavad Gītā* was one of the first Sanskrit texts to receive attention from Western scholars.<sup>2</sup> Early Indologists critically analysed the text, attempting to identify different strata within it, debating its relationship with the *Mahābhārata*, and discussing its place in the Indian philosophical and religious landscapes. Some have claimed that the *Bhagavad Gītā* as a whole is a later interpolation in the *Mahābhārata*, whereas others argue that it was originally never an independent work and has always been a part of the epic. Right before the onset of battle it discusses the morality of an internecine war and introduces the new religious concept of *bhakti*, devotion to Krishna as the supreme absolute. Others assert that these theological passages in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which focus on devotion to Krishna, are later additions. To this day there is no consensus.

Because the *Bhagavad Gītā* is full of complexities and ambiguities, over the centuries it has lent itself to greatly diverging, sometimes even completely contradictory, interpretations of its teachings by different audiences. This is reflected in the hundreds of commentaries that have been composed on the text.<sup>3</sup> The text became especially popular in the medieval scholarly circles of Vedānta philosophers,

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of past research, see Malinar 2007: 17-34.

<sup>3</sup> For a study of a selection of such interpretations, see Davis 2015: 43-71.

In spite of the great number of commentaries that have been composed, it should be noted that the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s popularity up to the late nineteenth century was limited to a small intellectual elite. Other texts such as the

with proponents such as Śaṅkara (9<sup>th</sup> c.) and Rāmānuja (11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c.), who both belonged to different branches of the school. They composed their commentaries in order to reconcile the content of the *Bhagavad Gītā* with other texts that they considered canonical, thereby focusing on the nature of the divinity of Krishna and on which path to liberation is preferable.

The issue of war and violence in the context of the *Bhagavad Gītā* rose to the fore again at the time of India's war for independence in the early twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> After many centuries of being read only in elite circles, new translations in Indian vernacular languages and the availability of print services spread the text to new audiences. Nationalist political ideologists, such as Lajpat Rai and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, found in this text, more than in any other, an inspiration for their cause. According to them, the primary message of the *Bhagavad Gītā* was not *bhakti*, as propounded by medieval commentators, but activism: Krishna persuades Arjuna to fight. They emphasized that it was the duty of India's citizens to rise up and fight against the British enemy. Whereas Krishna induces Arjuna to fight because it is his sacred duty (*dharma*) as a *kṣatriya*, according to the nationalist ideologists the duty to fight the British concerns all citizens, not just those born in a *kṣatriya* caste. The *Bhagavad Gītā* became the book of choice for activists imprisoned by the British, and many used their time in prison to formulate and publish their own commentaries on it. Some of these nationalist interpretations, such as that of Hedgewar, founder of the main Hindu nationalist organisation R.S.S. (*Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsevak Saṅgh*), and of Shradhdhananda, tended to envisage a new India that was exclusively Hindu, with little room for other religious groups such as Muslims and Christians that have resided in the Subcontinent for centuries. It is for this reason that others, such as B.R. Ambedkar, stressed that the *Bhagavad Gītā* should be read as a composition belonging to a certain time in the distant past, without too much significance for the present.

Of equal resonance to the activist interpretation of the Hindu nationalist, was the reading of the text by Mahatma Gandhi, who compiled his own commentaries and translation in Gujarati, his native language. Gandhi proposed to read the *Bhagavad Gītā* allegorically, as a story of the war between good and evil that is present within each of us. He stressed that Krishna's urging of Arjuna to fight, is to be seen as a stimulation to discipline, hard work and performing one's duty, as against inaction. Although he recognizes that Krishna does not particularly promote nonviolence,<sup>5</sup> according to Gandhi its importance can be taken for granted, because it is inherent to the spirit of detachment preached by Krishna. Gandhi's interpretation became extremely influential among his large following. It is somewhat ironic that Gandhi's murderer, Nathuram Godse, equally found inspiration in the *Bhagavad Gītā* for his act: just as Krishna advised Arjuna to kill his loved ones from the betterment of the world, so did Godse kill Gandhi, for the betterment of the nation, according to him. On the day of his execution, he carried a copy of the *Bhagavad Gītā* on his person.

## Sources and selected further reading

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*Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which focused on the life of Krishna as a cowherd in the context of a more "emotional" *bhakti*, became much more significant for Krishna devotion and popular among the masses.

<sup>4</sup> For a more elaborate discussion, see Davis 2015: 115-153.

<sup>5</sup> *ahimsā* is mentioned in lists of virtues in *Bhagavad Gītā* 10.5, 13.7, 16.2 and 17.14.

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