

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, OR SONG OF THE BLESSED ONE

BY FRANKLIN EDGERTON

CHAPTER IV

PREHISTORY OF THE GOD OF THE BHAGAVAD GITA

IT COULD hardly be expected that the popular consciousness would be gripped by Upanishadic thought. It was too intellectual, too impersonal, to appeal to any but a small proportion of the population. The great mass of mankind demanded, as always, a personal, quasi-human god or gods to worship; it could not be satisfied by a refined, mystic contemplation of a nameless Soul, even if it be the Soul of the universe. Some more acceptable outlet for the religious feeling of the people had to be provided; and there is good reason to believe that it was provided. Unfortunately, the evidence about it is mostly indirect and secondary. We can judge of it, for the most part, only from its traces in such later works as the Bhagavad Gītā, which clearly presuppose a considerable development of popular religion, distinct from the higher thought of the Upanishads but contemporary therewith. In the Gītā these two streams are blended. We have no records that show us the popular beliefs of that period in a pure form.

For this reason, it is scarcely possible to attempt any extensive reconstruction of those popular beliefs. The principal thing to be said about them is that they were certainly theistic, and presumably tended towards a monotheism, of a more or less qualified sort. That is, presumably various local or tribal deities were worshipped in different parts of India, each occupying a position somewhat similar to that of Yahweh among the Jews—each being regarded as the chief

or perhaps the sole god of his people or tribe, though the existence of the gods of other tribes was not exactly denied. These local deities were, we may assume, of very different types and origins. Sometimes they may have been old gods of aboriginal, non-Aryan tribes. Sometimes they seem to have been local heroes, deified after death.

Such a local deity must have been the Krishna who appears as the Supreme Deity, the "Blessed One," in the Bhagavad Gītā. He was apparently a deified local chieftain, the head of the Vrishni clan. Indeed, he appears as such, in strictly human guise, in the greater part of the Mahābhārata. In the Gītā he is still both god and man: an incarnation of the Deity in human form. We know nothing of the process by which he attained divine honors, nor of his earlier history as a god, before the Bhagavad Gītā, which is probably the earliest work preserved to us in which he appears as such. In this work he has all the attributes of a full-fledged monotheistic deity, and at the same time, as we shall see, the attributes of the Upanishadic Absolute. In other words, the popular God is philosophized into a figure who can appeal to both the higher and the lower circles of the population. Therein lies the strength of Krishnaism in later India: it is many-sided enough to satisfy the religious requirements of almost any man, whatever his intellectual or social status may be.

The Upanishads themselves are not entirely free from quasi-monotheistic touches, some of which may perhaps be interpreted as concessions to this same popular demand for a personal god. Especially interesting, and important for later Hinduism, is the personalization of the philosophic term Brahman, as a name for the Absolute, which appears even in some of the earliest Upanishads. The word *brahman* is primarily and originally neuter in gender, and remains so usually throughout the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gītā; but occasionally it acquires a personality, as a sort of creating and ruling deity, and then it has masculine gender. It thus becomes the god Brahmā, familiar to later Hinduism as the nominal head of the Triad consisting of Brahmā the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer. This trinity appears only in comparatively late Upanishads, and no clear mention of it is found in the Bhagavad Gītā, although the Gītā at least once refers to the masculine and personal Brahmā, "the Lord sitting on the lotus-seat."⁴⁰ But this grammatical trick was not sufficient to satisfy the craving of the human soul.

⁴⁰ 11. 15.

Even masculinized, Brahman-Brahmā remained too bloodless to attract many worshippers. Later Hinduism pays lip-homage to him, but reserves its real worship for his colleagues, Vishnu and Shiva.

Vishnu and Shiva, under various names and forms, are the real gods of later India. Shiva-worship, though certainly much older than the Bhagavad Gītā, does not appear therein, and may therefore be left out of consideration in this book. But we must say a few words about Vishnu, since he was identified with Krishna, the Gītā's God, or regarded as incarnate in Him. This identification seems to me to appear clearly in the Gītā itself.⁴¹

Vishnu was one of the gods of the Rig Veda, and, like most of them, a nature-god. He was a personification of the sun. But the Rig Veda contains a number of sun-gods (perhaps originally belonging to different tribes, or else representing different aspects of the sun's power). Vishnu is one of the less prominent and less important ones. He is distinctly a minor figure in the Rig Veda. We hear that he measures the universe in three great strides, which refer figuratively to the sun's progress across the sky. The third stride lands him in "the highest foot-step (or, place; the word has both meanings) of Vishnu," which means the zenith. This is thought of as the highest point in the universe, and at times it is conceived as a kind of solar paradise, to which the spirits of the blessed dead may go. So in post-Rig-Vedic literature, we hear expressions of the desire for attaining "Vishnu's highest place." So, also, in this period, Vishnu is occasionally declared to be "the highest of the gods"; this is doubtless to be understood in a literal, physical sense, because Vishnu's abode is the "top of the world." In the same period, we find very frequently the statement that "Vishnu is the sacrifice." Why he should have been singled out for this honor, we cannot tell; there are other gods whose far greater prominence would seem to us to give them a better claim to be regarded as a personification of the ritual. But the frequency of the statement leaves no room for doubt that the priests of the "Middle Vedic" (Brāhmana) period generally thought of Vishnu in this way. And since, as we have seen, to them the "sacrifice" was the central power of the universe, we see that from their point of view no higher compliment was possible. Evidently Vishnu was acquiring a much more dignified position than he had in the Rig Veda.

⁴¹ A distinguished Hindu scholar, Sir R. G. Bhandarkar, thinks that Krishna is not yet identified with Vishnu in the Gītā, though he was soon afterwards. See his *Vaisnavism, S'aivism and Minor Religious Systems*, page 13.

The Upanishads add nothing to the history of Vishnu. They—that is, the older ones, those which antedate the Gītā—mention his name only three or four times, and quite in the style of the Middle-Vedic period. But suddenly, in the Gītā and other contemporary writings, we find Vishnu recognized as a supreme monotheistic deity, worshipped either under his own name, or in the form of various incarnations, the chief of which is Krishna. This was at a time when the Vedic religion, as a whole, was nearly dead. Its gods no longer had a real hold on any class of the people. Their existence was not denied, but they were reduced to the rank of petty spirits. Even the once all-important sacrifices were largely falling into disuse. But if the ritual religion was perishing, the priestly class was not. By this time it was recognized as a definite and hereditary caste, the brahmanhood, which claimed the headship of human society. With this fact, probably, is to be connected the identification of the god or hero Krishna, and other popular gods and heroes, with the old Vedic god Vishnu. Thus a sacerdotal tinge was given to the thriving monotheism which had such a hold on the mass of the people. Brahmanism stooped to conquer; it absorbed popular cults which it had not the strength to uproot. The simple and ancient device of identification of one god with another furnished the means to this end.

It remains something of a mystery to scholars why Vishnu, rather than some other Vedic deity, was selected for this purpose. Even after the development described in the last paragraph but one, Vishnu is by no means the most prominent god of the pantheon. Many steps in the long process have evidently disappeared from our sight. But probably his frequent identification with the sacrifice, and his growing eschatological importance as the ruler of a kind of paradise for the dead in his "highest place," have something to do with it.

We have, then, finally, a union of at least three strands in the monotheistic deity of the Bhagavad Gītā: a popular god-hero of a local tribe, an ancient Vedic deity belonging to the hieratic ritual religion, and the philosophic Absolute of the Upanishads. The blend is, as we shall see, by no means perfect. Especially the monistic, Upanishadic element is sometimes rather clearly distinguished from the theistic element or elements; the author of the Gītā himself seems to have been conscious of this distinction at times.⁴² But for the most part it is hard to disentangle one from the other.

⁴² See Chapter VI.

CHAPTER V

THE TEACHINGS OF THE BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ

Soul and Body

We saw that the Upanishads center their attention on a search for the central, fundamental, and animating principle of the universe, and of man; that these two objects of research are conceived in them as parallel, the universal macrocosm being compared to the human microcosm; and that this parallelism tends to turn into an identity, which results in an equation between the "soul" or real self of man and that of the universe. So frequent and striking are the expressions of this idea in the Upanishads that it is often, though I think not without exaggeration, regarded as the prime motif of Upanishadic thought.

In spite of the fact that the Bhagavad Gītā is saturated with the atmosphere of the Upanishads, this great idea of theirs is not exactly prominent in it. It is not unknown to it; several passages in which it speaks of the human soul come very close to that idea.⁴³ It would indeed be strange if it had avoided the idea altogether. It is curious enough that it has so nearly suppressed it, in view of its obvious debt to Upanishadic thought. The chief reason for the suppression evidently lies in the fact that this monistic idea is felt to be irreconcilable with the ardent, devotional theism of the Gītā. Even though, as we shall see, the Gītā conceives God as immanent in all beings, and its author hopes for ultimate union with Him, still he seems to shrink from the bold assertion "I am God," which requires more courage than the Upanishadic "I am Brahman," simply because Brahman is impersonal and the Gītā's God is definitely personal. Union with God is projected into the future, and is not conceived on

⁴³ 2.17: "But know thou that That One (the human soul is referred to) by which all this universe is pervaded is imperishable. Of this immortal one no one can cause the destruction."—2.24: "Eternal, omnipresent, unmoved, unshakable, everlasting is He (the human soul)."—13.27: "Residing alike in all beings, the supreme Lord (the human soul), not perishing when they (the beings) perish,—who perceives this has true vision."

a basis of equality between the soul and God.⁴⁴ Once the Gītā speaks of the human soul as a *part* of God.⁴⁵ Generally God is conceived as a personality wholly distinct from the human soul, and infinitely superior to it.

The Upanishadic notion of the human soul is, however, clearly retained in the Gītā as far as concerns its individual nature. It is still the essential part of man, that which does not perish at death. Indeed, the dignity and importance of the soul is brought out if possible even more strongly than is usual in the Upanishads, in one respect: namely, in the contrast that is emphasized between the soul and what is not soul. This contrast is rather a minor matter in most of the Upanishads. They are so charmed by the contemplation of the soul, which they find in everything, that they virtually ignore the existence of everything that is not soul,⁴⁶ or else brush it aside with the summary remark that "whatever is other than that (the soul) is evil."⁴⁷ At any rate, most of them are not enough interested in the non-soul to speculate much about its nature. The Gītā, on the other hand, has definite theories about the structure of the non-soul or body.—largely inherited, to be sure, from older times, and to some extent hinted at in certain of the Upanishads. These are used to contrast the body with the soul; and the comparison, of course, is much to the advantage of the soul. Thus in the opening part of the dialog, Krishna instructs Arjuna that he should not grieve for the soul, because it is immortal, and inaccessible to the sufferings which afflict the body. "It is declared that these bodies come to an end; but the Embodied (Soul) in them is eternal, indestructible, unfathomable."⁴⁸ "He (the soul) is not born, nor does he ever die; nor, once being, shall he evermore cease to be. Unborn, eternal, everlasting from oldest times, he is not slain when the body is slain."⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Some of the Christian mystics seem more courageous. Compare Jacob Boehme's

"Ich bin so gross wie Gott,
Er ist wie ich so klein."

⁴⁵ 15.7: "A part just of Me, which is the eternal soul in living beings," etc.

⁴⁶ Some scholars say that they even *deny* the real existence of anything other than the soul, as the later Vedānta philosophy does. I do not agree with this view.

⁴⁷ Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad, 3.4.2.

⁴⁸ 2.18.

⁴⁹ 2.20. Compare also 2.11, 25, 30. It is painful to have to add that this doctrine is here applied to a justification of war, and of killing in general; since the soul cannot be killed, and the body does not matter (and since, moreover, it must die in any case, 2.26, 27), "therefore fight," says Krishna (2.18). A charitable explanation would be that this is a concession to the dramatic situa-

We find, in fact, that the Gītā's most usual and characteristic position is definitely dualistic. There are two eternal principles, eternally distinct from each other: "soul" (usually called *purusha*, "man, person, spirit"; sometimes *ātman*, "self"; other synonyms also occur), and what may perhaps be called "non-soul" rather than "body," since, as we shall see presently, it includes mental faculties; the usual Hindu term is *prakṛiti*, "nature, material nature, matter." The soul is absolutely unitary, undifferentiated, and without qualities; not subject to any change or alteration, and not participating in any action. Material nature, or the non-soul, is what performs all acts. It assumes manifold forms, and is constantly subject to change—evolution, devolution, and variation.

The variety of material nature is expressed in two ways. First, it is composed of three elements called *gunas*, that is, "threads, strands," or "qualities":⁵⁰ namely, *sattva*, "purity, goodness"; *rajas*, "activity, passion"; and *tamas*, "darkness, dullness, inactivity." Mingled in varying proportions, these three qualities make up all matter. Preponderance of one or another of these qualities determines the character of any given part of material nature.⁵¹ But material nature also includes what we consider the mental faculties of living beings, particularly of man. This is made clear in one passage in the Gītā,⁵² where we find a second and much more elaborate statement of the constituents of material nature—or rather, this time, of its evolvents; for, though this is not clearly stated here, it is obvious that we are dealing with an evolutionary theory which is very familiar in later Hindu philosophy. According to this, out of the primal, undifferentiated "matter" develops first the "will" or faculty of consciousness (the term, *buddhi*, approximately covers

tion of the poem, as inserted in the Mahābhārata; and this could be supported by various texts in the Gītā which are distinctly hostile to violence. But we shall see that there are other ethical, as well as metaphysical, inconsistencies in the Gītā. See Chapter XI.

⁵⁰ The word seems to me both concrete and abstract in the Gītā; the *gunas* are both material "constituent elements," like strands of a rope, and qualifying characteristics. No clear distinction was made at this time between these two concepts (cf. Oldenberg, *Upanishaden und Buddhismus*, p. 217f.). The later Sāṅkhya philosophy insists that the *gunas* are physical, constituent parts of matter, not what we call qualities.

⁵¹ The results of the preponderance of each of the three qualities in various parts of *prakṛiti* are set forth in some detail in the Gītā, 14.6-18, and the whole of chapter 17. Generally speaking, the theory is that the best and highest forms of matter or nature are those in which *sattva*, "purity," predominates; in the worst and lowest forms *tamas*, "dullness," predominates; the predominance of *rajas*, "activity" or "passion," is found in a large variety of forms whose ethical values are mostly intermediate or indeterminate.

⁵² 13.5, 6.

both of these English terms) ; then the "I-faculty," the organ of self-consciousness (*ahamkāra*) ; then the thinking organ (*manas*, sometimes etymologically translated "mind"), which mediates between sense-perception and the self-consciousness, and is regarded as the function of a special, "inner" sense-organ ; with it the faculties of the ten sense-organs,⁵³ five intellectual (of sight, smell, hearing, taste and feeling) and five organs of action (of speech [function of the larynx], grasping [of the hands], locomotion [of the feet], evacuation, and generation) ; also the five "subtle elements," the abstract essences of the material objects (or as we say, reversing the direction, stimulants) of the five senses (sound, as the object of hearing, etc.) ; and finally the five gross elements, earth, air, fire, water, and ether.⁵⁴ All of these forms of material nature—twenty-four in all, including the "undifferentiated" form—are alike composed of the three above-mentioned "qualities" (*gunas*), in varying proportions. It will be seen that the two classifications are not inconsistent, but cross one another, the one being, so to speak, vertical, the other horizontal.

It is, as I have said, only "material nature" or "matter" that acts. "Actions are performed entirely by the qualities (*gunas*) of material nature. He whose soul is deluded by the I-faculty imagines that he is the doer."⁵⁵ That is, owing to the confusion created by the activity of the organ of self-consciousness—*which is part of matter, not of the soul*—one imagines that "he" himself (his soul, his real self, or *ātman*) performs actions. "But he who knows the truth of the distinction between (the soul, on the one hand, and) the qualities (of matter) and action (on the other), knowing that (in any action it is (not the soul that acts but) the qualities of matter that act upon the qualities, is not enthralled."⁵⁶ "And who perceives that acts are exclusively performed by material nature alone, and so that his soul does nothing, he has true vision."⁵⁷ "The disciplined man who knows the truth shall think: 'I am not doing anything at all,' whether he be seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, walking,

⁵³ The Gītā seems to include both the physical organs and their functions in the same verbal expressions. I shall not here discuss the later Hindu usage.

⁵⁴ I shall refrain from describing the precise stages of this evolutionary process as set forth in the later Sāṅkhya philosophy. It is not clear to what extent they had been formulated in the time of the Gītā. One verse of the Gītā (3.42) lists a few of these "evolvments" in climactic order, but without asserting any genetic relationship,—in fact, perhaps implying rather that none exists, since the "highest" member of the series is there—the Soul—which is elsewhere clearly stated to be unrelated to matter.

⁵⁵ 3.27.

⁵⁶ 3.28.

⁵⁷ 13.29.

sleeping, breathing, speaking, evacuating, seizing, opening or closing his eyes; he holds fast to the thought that it is the (material) senses that are operating on the objects of sense.”⁵⁸ “When the Beholder (the soul) perceives that no other than the qualities (of matter) acts and knows that which is above the qualities, he attains unto My estate.”⁵⁹

What, then, is the function of the soul? As the passage last quoted indicates, it “beholds” the activities of matter, passively, and without participation. “Passively” in the sense that it has no relation to those activities at all; not in the sense that it is affected by them, for its true, fundamental nature is just as free from the effects of action as from its performance. “The Lord (the soul) does not receive (i. e., reap the fruit of) any one’s sin, nor yet (of) his virtuous action.”⁶⁰ “Swords cut him not, fire burns him not, waters wet him not, wind dries him not. He cannot be cut, he cannot be burnt, he cannot be wet, nor yet dried. Eternal, omnipresent, unmoved, unshakable, everlasting is he (the human soul).”⁶¹ Elsewhere the soul is called the “knower” of matter: “This body is called the Field. He who knows it (i. e., the soul), him those who know the truth call the Field-knower.”⁶² The soul, then, merely looks on and “knows” matter and its acts, but has no real connection with them.

And yet, inconsistently as it seems at first sight, the soul is spoken of as experiencing pleasure and pain, which result from material contacts and processes. “Know that both material nature and the soul are eternal; know that both the evolvents (will, I-faculty, organ of thought and other sense-organs, and subtle and gross elements) and the qualities (*gunas*) spring from material nature. Material nature is declared to be the cause of things to be done, of action, and of agency; the soul is declared to be the cause of enjoyment (i. e., experiencing) of pleasure and pain. For the soul, residing in material nature, enjoys the qualities (*gunas*) that are born of material nature. The reason is its attachment to the qualities, in its various births in good and evil stations.”⁶³ The key to the seeming inconsistency (which is really due to a certain laxity or inaccuracy in the passage just quoted) is indicated in the last sentence, the thought of which is more fully expressed in another passage, where it is said that the soul “draws to itself the (five) senses, with the organ of thought as the sixth, which spring from material nature. . . .

⁵⁸ 5. 8, 9.⁵⁹ 14, 19.⁶⁰ 5. 15.⁶¹ 2. 23, 24.⁶² 13. 1.⁶³ 13. 19-22.

Resorting to hearing, sight, touch, taste, and smell, and the organ of thought (all of which are really material), it pursues the objects of sense. Fools do not perceive that it (the soul) is attended by the qualities (*gunas*, of matter) when it is passing out or remaining fixed (in the body) or enjoying (the objects of sense). Those whose eye is knowledge see this."⁶⁴ It is only because the soul is associated with matter that it "enjoys," or rather (it would be more accurate to say) *seems* to "enjoy," material processes. "Those who are deluded by the qualities (*gunas*) of material nature are enthralled in the actions of the qualities."⁶⁵ In other words, it is, strictly speaking, not the soul that "enjoys"—experiences—anything. That it seems to do so is due to the confusion caused by the organ of self-consciousness, the "I-faculty," which is a product of material nature and really quite disconnected with the soul, and from which in turn spring all the sense-organs and their objects. Were it not for this, the soul would perceive that it has no relation whatever to the activities and sufferings of matter. Since to the *Gītā* the general Hindu pessimistic view of life is axiomatic, it follows that this "enjoyment" is in reality naught but evil and suffering, and that the association of the soul with matter is a bondage. "Purity (*sattva*), activity (passion, *rajas*) and dullness (*tamas*),—these qualities, springing from material nature, bind in the body the immortal soul."⁶⁶ It is only the unenlightened man whom they *can* bind. When one attains true enlightenment, that is, realization of the true nature of the soul and matter and their fundamental independence of each other, then, by virtue of this perfect, mystic knowledge, he obtains release: his soul transcends matter and is freed from it for good and all, and he is freed from the chain of rebirths. "Who thus understands the soul and material nature together with the qualities (of the latter),—in whatever state he may be, he is not (to be) born again."⁶⁷ "Transcending in the body these three qualities (of matter) that spring from the body, freed from birth, death, old age, and sorrow, one attains immortality (here a poetic expression for *nirvāna*)."⁶⁸ Mentally abandoning all actions (that is, taking no interest in any action which the body may perform), the Embodied (Soul) sits at peace, self-controlled, in his nine-doored citadel (the body), and neither acts nor causes action at all."⁶⁹

⁶⁴ 15.7-10.⁶⁶ 14.5.⁶⁸ 14.20.⁶⁵ 3.29.⁶⁷ 13.23.⁶⁹ 5.13. We shall have more to say of the various means of salvation found in the *Gītā* in Chapters VIII and IX.

Note that this is a distinctly anthropomorphic dualism. As we have already seen, it is characteristic of Hindu speculation that it thinks of the whole universe in human terms; this was particularly true of the Upanishads, and remains true, generally speaking, of all later systems. This attitude assumes various forms. The Gītā says: "All creatures whatsoever, motionless (inanimate objects and plants) or moving (animals), are produced by the union of the Field (material nature) and the Field-knower (the soul)."⁷⁰ This seems to attribute to all nature not only mental faculties,—will, self-consciousness, and thinking organ,—which are parts of material nature and its primary evolvents, but also a soul that is distinct from material nature. Some Hindu sects—particularly the Jains—clearly and definitely accept the extreme implications of this theory, and believe that even inanimate objects are inhabited by souls, which are subject to transmigration like animal souls. Most Hindu systems do not carry it as far as that, at least in definite statements. But to all of them man is the only part of the universe that really counts. Animals (usually plants also) are to them potential humans; and the rest of the world they virtually ignore in their speculations. We need not consider here the extreme idealistic monism of Shankara's Vedānta philosophy, according to which there is only One that truly exists, namely Brahman, the world soul, with which the human soul is really identical; all else is illusion (*māyā*), existing only in appearance, as a mirage, and not in reality. This system developed long after the Gītā, as it seems to me, although it claims to be founded on the Upanishads. In a sense it is founded on them; it is only the logical conclusion, or extreme application, of their doctrine that the essential part of man is one with the essential part of the universe. But the Upanishads did not say "the non-soul does not exist." They only tended to ignore its existence or its importance—to wave it aside as unworthy of their consideration; they were not interested in it. This explains why the Upanishads could be made the basis for such diametrically opposite systems as the monism of Shankara's Vedānta on the one hand and the Gītā's dualism on the other. The latter was worked up into more systematic forms by the Sāṅkhya and Yoga philosophies, both of which recognize the reality and independence of soul and matter. They differ on the existence of God, which is accepted by the Yoga but denied by the Sāṅkhya. The Gītā agrees with the Yoga in this respect. All of these views derive from the

⁷⁰ 13.26.

Upanishadic speculations centering about the human soul; and all agree that the non-soul, or material nature, is something from which the soul should utterly detach itself, whether it really exists (Gītā, Sāṅkhya, and Yoga) or is merely illusory (Vedānta).

(To be continued)