

SOME REASONS FOR THE POPULARITY OF THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

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SIR Edwin Arnold did a great service to India and also to the English speaking nations of the world when he brought out his unique translation of the Bhagavad-Gita, the most popular religio-philosophical poem of that country written in Sanskrit. As a Scripture the poem may not have for the orthodox Hindus exactly the same antiquity and authority as the Vedas, which are Sruti (revelation), but its outstanding position as the most reliable Smriti (tradition) making a powerful and sweeping appeal to the head and heart of the nation, has remained unchallenged for more than twenty-five hundred years. Many are the languages, castes and customs of the Hindus but there is only *one* Bhagavad-Gita for them all, literate and illiterate. Quote to them a fragment from the sacred dialogue contained in the book and you will know from their reaction that you have touched the pulse of their highest spiritual aspirations. What is the secret of influence throughout the ages of this little book of only seven hundred verses when there are so many imposing volumes of sacred literature scarcely known to the masses by their names?

We will not here undertake the task, by its nature practically hopeless, of establishing with scholarly certainty the authorship of the book or the date of its composition, except to mention a few conclusions. Most Orientalists of the East and West agree that the Gita was known before the second century B.C.; some say, however, for instance, Radhakrishnan, that it was current probably in its earliest form in the fifth century B. C., while a few go as far back as a thousand years B.C.! The eminent scholar Professor Goldstucker has definitely proved that Panini,¹ the great gram-

¹Bankim Chatterji, *Krishna Charitra*. Bhandarkar places Panini in the seventh century B. C.

marian flourished before Buddha, i.e. sixth century B.C. And Panini writes of Arjuna and Krishna (the principal characters of the Gita) as objects of worship (5.3.98). From this it appears that before Panini lived the Krishna-cult had had time to definitely crystallize itself and draw many followers to it. In the Gita, as we shall see, we find that crystallization: Krishna is worshiped therein as Deity Himself. Some scholars following this line of reasoning and strengthening it with other facts think that it is not improbable that the Gita was composed before Panini, i.e. before the sixth century B. C.

Another point to be remembered is that the Gita never mentions Buddha (sixth century B.C.), or Buddhistic religion or thought in any shape or manner, though other important systems of thought or schemes of discipline are referred to in the book. If Buddhism was a powerful religion, which it must have been, assuming the status of a state religion within about two centuries from the death of its founder, it seems plausible that it would find some mention in the Gita, the most unique book of the period, if the Gita was written later. Though argument from silence is unconvincing, nevertheless one is thus led to suspect that the Gita was written before Buddha, i.e. before the sixth century B. C. The word *Brahmanirvana*²—the only word savoring of Buddhism—is now well known as having a Vedantic significance and not at all a Buddhistic one.

Telang in the *Sacred Books of the East* (edited by Max Muller) after a searching examination of facts, however, arrives at a conservative conclusion. He says that the Gita stands between the age of the Upanishads and that of later classical Sanskrit literature and hence must have been written earlier than the third century B. C., though it is altogether impossible to say at present how much earlier.

Tilak³ concludes from internal evidences that the Gita, which occurs in the *Bhishma Parva* (sixth canto) of the great epic *Mahabharat*, formed a genuine part of its earliest and original structure and was not a later interpolation in its text. There are many of course who challenge this statement. On the opposite extreme, however, we have scholars, who blind to the consideration of history and marked doctrinal differences, have gone to the unjustifiable length

²Gita 2.72; 5.24, 25; 6.15.

³See Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*

in asserting that the Gospels influenced the tone and character of the Bhagavad-Gita. That this is not true will appear later from our discussion of its tenets.

The Gita embodies the philosophical and practical counsels which Lord Krishna gave to his friend and disciple, Arjuna, at the battlefield of Kurukshetra when the latter was dejected at the sight of his friends and relatives present in the contending armies and was unwilling to fight for the righteous cause which he espoused after due deliberation and years of unjust and compulsory suffering. Amidst other things in the first chapter we hear the sounds of trumpets, conch-shells and many other martial noises; we also hear the agonized utterances of the divided-self of Arjuna but as the poem proceeds the drama disappears and the din of the battlefield fades into the distance and we are left alone with a God solemnly and yet lovingly talking to a resigned man of the highest problems of conduct and metaphysics. The elaborate dialogue may not have been an actual occurrence on the field of battle, but at a grave crisis like this, pertinent instructions on morality and philosophy, verbally or "psychically" imparted, were perfectly in order, especially in India; and it was these that were probably expanded into the present form of the Gita.

The charm of the Gita lies in its simplicity, brevity and profundity, all worked into a beautiful scheme of salvation that fastens man's attention more to the here and now. Do actions, perform your duties, as determined by nature within (dharma—the law of your being 3.33-35)⁴ and circumstances without—perform them with wisdom, inner aloofness and devotion to the Lord.⁵ He will accept your homage and ferry you over the turbulent sea of samsara (worldly existence) to the shore of eternal peace which is Himself.⁶ This plan is simple and yet profound. It is within the reach of all, the lettered and the unlettered, the pious and the sinner.⁷ It appeals to the heart and yet exercises intellectual, intuitive and active powers that go to make up a whole man. Hence its immediate acceptance is inevitable. Abstruse philosophical concepts were given before in India by the sages, but they must have had

⁴Gita 2.31-33 (see also 3.45)

⁵Gita 2.38; 3.30; 5.10; 9.27-28.

⁶Gita 12.7

⁷Gita 9.30, 32, 33

a chilling effect on the average man; ritualistic subtleties were followed and paraded with pomp and grandeur, but they turned by and by into a dead weight of routine, a weight which the priests bore for profit and the masses tolerated because they did not know better. So when a message like Gita's was given out that was not logic-chopping in philosophy but an attempt to maintain, all the same, logical consistency and clarity in the exposition of its themes, a message that did not become drowned under the many voices of a vast volume of Scriptural injunctions but like a clear bell rang out its truth through only 700 verses, a message that minimized the importance of ritualism and stressed personal piety in thought and conduct, a message that gave God to all and did not reserve Him for the elect few—it is no wonder that when a message of this sort was preached, India's heart was set on fire. Even to this day the flame of devotion for that book is noticeable everywhere.

The unique speaker of the Gita has a great deal to do with its popularity. There is no more elusive and interesting personality in Indian prehistoric times than Krishna. Krishna is an enigma from the standpoint of critical history and from that of personality. There are quite a few Krishnas, the scholars⁸ say; how or whether they are related to one another none knows for certain. Krishna was the name of a Vedic seer, the composer of a Vedic hymn (Rig-Veda 8.74). There was a non-Aryan chief by the name of Krishna ready with a large army to fight Indra (Rig-Veda 8.96. 13-15). We come across a Krishna in the Chhandyogya Upanishad 3.17.6, but nothing is said about him except that he was the son of Devaki and a great pupil of the sage Ghora Angirasa. Most probably that is the same Krishna that we are interested in, in our present studies.

The philosophical colorfulness of the Krishna-cult, however, does not become manifest until the Pancharatra or Bhagavad religion begins after the Upanishad age to work upon it to supply a personal God for the masses and identifies Krishna with the god Vishnu of the Vedas (Rig-Veda 1.155.5) and of the Upanishads (Katha 1.3,9). In the latter, the place of Vishnu is spoken of as the abode of the Highest Reality. The Krishna-Vasudeva-Vishnu-cult starts to bloom in full splendour not so much perhaps in the earlier strata of the great epic Mahabharat as in its later strata.

⁸See Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*

There we find Krishna, the son of Devaki, with his remarkably versatile and in a way enigmatic personality. He is a powerful king, great warrior, world-famous statesman, genuine lover, sincere friend, an exalted champion of truth and virtue, keenest philosopher and—to a few possessing insight—incarnation of the Deity.

The author of the Gita-Vyasa or whoever it was, as there are some doubts as to the authenticity of the authorship—could not use Krishna to a better advantage for popular benefit than when he made him the principal speaker of the divine discourse. Whether the discourse fell from the lips of Krishna himself we do not know, as historical accuracy is a very slippery thing in ancient Indian writing. We like to think that it did, and probably it did. Be that as it may, there is no doubt about the fact that the speaker was a great spiritual genius having the power and vision which only inspired souls possess—if we are to judge from the character of the book itself. However we find that Krishna, who in the Great Epic mainly played the role of an exalted hero and only sometimes that of the incarnation of the Deity and sometimes also that of the Supreme Deity in person (the last two roles under especial circumstances), we find in the Gita that Krishna is completely and without reservation identified with Vishnu or the Deity Himself. The Krishna-cult put off its swaddling clothes which it wore before and is as it were invested in the Gita with kingly robe, staff and crown. The most perfect hero and God Himself the speaker! That is an added reason why the Gita is stamped with such authority in popular minds in India.

Sorrow starts, as a rule, the quest for salvation. Pessimism, whether in its fretful form as in Schopenhauerian outlook or in its cold analytic form as in Buddhist thought, may not be the final attitude of a philosopher, but there is no denying the fact that sorrows and sufferings of the world have often moved great minds to seize great truths. Arjuna's sorrow was the prelude to a perpetual smile that helped philosophy and man.

The tears of Arjuna, in the first chapter of the Gita, were however shed not because the world was unkind to him. His sorrow arose out of his troubled conscience, his disturbed mind, the mind that leaned toward affection but was not able to take in the cosmic view of things which Krishna was to inject into him later. He was torn by a conflict of motives, though the one side of the

conflict is hardly mentioned in the Gita. How could he take part in the war that would mean the destruction of his near and dear ones and those whom he respected? Life was not worth living without them. This is the human and sentimental aspect of one side of the conflict. Furthermore, killing is a sin, especially killing one's own friends and relatives, a sin which brings other sins in its train. This is the religious aspect. The other side of the inner conflict, implied rather than expressed in the Gita, present in Arjuna's mind subconsciously, is as follows: How could he, a prince of the warrior caste whose duty it was to protect virtue refuse to take part in the war that was for a righteous cause, a war that he did not bring on himself, but which he tried his best to prevent, a war which his ambitious and crooked cousins welcomed avidly? And who were they but those who trickily deprived him and his brothers of all inheritance even after the latter showed unbounded patience and consideration? So the inner conflict is between personal affection and religious scruple in killing on the one hand, and personal claim and religious duty of caste on the other. So it has a personal issue and a religious issue. However, to a religious mind like Arjuna's the personal issue with its elements of affection and claim takes a strong religious hue and becomes finally blended with the religious issue: that is, it is religiously wrong to kill relatives and superiors and again it is religiously wrong not to engage in a righteous war. If it were not for this mental conflict on the religious plane it is quite improbable that a manly hero of Arjuna's calibre could have felt the depth of unmanly sorrow that he did on the eve of the battle.

Further if it is said that Arjuna's sorrow was not due to any inner conflict but purely and simply because of the thought of killing his relatives and committing a sin, it may be remarked in reply that there is no sorrow in the world that does not arise out of some conflict: sorrow invades us when we have what we do not want to have or when we do not have what we want to have—physically, mentally and spiritually.

Arjuna's sorrow is more than a shedding of private tears. It has a wider appeal because of its deep significance. His sorrow is the symbol of the sorrow of any struggling aspirant. The poignant drama of any devotee's life is derived from divided loyalties, as between affection and duty, the lower and the higher, the immediate

ideal he lives and the grander ideal he dimly senses and unconsciously longs to reach. So this sorrow strikes a psychological note that finds an echo not only in the Hindu devotee for whom the book was written but also in all those that are travelling the moral and spiritual path.

Arjuna was so depressed that he slumped down on the floor of his chariot and tearfully said to his friend, the charioteer, Lord Krishna: "I will not fight. I would rather live the life of a beggar than fight and kill and be victorious and have all the kingdom of the earth." This sounds like a noble philosophy worthy of the great soul that Arjuna was, but Krishna showed him later that this seeming wisdom on his part did not arise from a dispassionate appraisal of all values and all sides of the question but was caused by a form of mental weakness or depression which should be consequently rejected. Even the noblest and most religious resolution that is born of spineless sentimentality and biased judgment is not the sign of true wisdom, which is always begotten of strength and superior nonchalance. Krishna pointed out that the soul is imperishable, it can never be killed even though the bodies of soldiers are killed in the war. He was not however advocating war for the sake of war, but for the sake of righteousness. He was not a believer in "peace at any price"—at the price of justice, self-respect, righteousness. Nor was he advocating the killing of affection, but that attachment that shackles the soul and distorts judgment. He also pointed out that Arjuna should be faithful to the law of his being, to his duty as a warrior and champion of virtue. It was *in* Arjuna to do all these so he could not and should not get away from these.⁹

The eventual complete self-surrender¹⁰ of Arjuna to his friend and guide, Krishna, at his hour of bewilderment and his whole-hearted willingness to obey whatever he advised was an illustration of the age-old attitude of an Indian chela (disciple) to the guru (preceptor), hence so stimulating to the Indian imagination.

The Gita can be said to be an attempt at synthesis and synopsis of the best of what preceded in India in philosophy and religion. This is another reason for its influence with the followers of all the schools of thought that were represented in the book.

⁹Gita 2.31-33

¹⁰Gita 2.7

On the philosophical side, the Gita represents, notwithstanding what some of the scholars may say to the contrary, a reconciliation—the best of its kind—that can possibly be effected under the circumstances between Vedanta, Sankhya and Yoga philosophies that were contending for intellectual supremacy in certain minds at that time. This reconciliation or synthesis between the three systems is not so much on the plane of logic (though it is partly so) as that of life—the life of the Spirit, the life of realization and of intuition which Gita and other literature of India extol so much. It is the dictum of Eastern philosophy, especially Vedanta, that speculative thought can never satisfactorily solve the ultimate problem of the relation between God, world and soul, and so if Gita, following that tradition, wanted to establish a harmony between some widely differing or contradictory concepts of the three systems, it could only do so, not on the plane of thought or argument, but on that of cosmic intuition where Truth is supposed to reconcile all contradictions. Gita's eclectic metaphysic which is dogmatic and not based on arguments and which apparently claims infallibility has either to be supported on this view, or taken as a possible independent gesture at truth having no reconciliatory merit except in the patching up with divergent details. Not considering the Gita's place in history characterized as it was by the custom of making simple and authoritative statements without logical elaboration of their foundation, Gita withholds from giving arguments, it may be conjectured, probably because arguments can be challenged and their force weakened if tested by axioms of the inferior logic-plane or because giving arguments would detract from the infinite dignity of the supreme God who is supposed instead to make only straightforward assertions about profound truths. Whether the grand scheme of reality arrived at by cosmic intuition, which the author or the speaker of the Gita must have possessed, is possible of logical verification the Gita does not say nor can its critics perhaps speculatively gainsay.

Gita takes the idealistic monism of the Vedanta that there is One Reality¹¹ and yet does not say that the world is maya or illusion in the sense that it does not exist (as some scholars falsely interpret maya to mean). The world is, but it is entirely dependent upon that Reality. 13.13,27. The Reality is not buried in the world but rather

¹¹Gita 7.7

the world is Its insignificant aspect 10.42. Gita takes the Vedantic position that the soul within us is the same as the Brahma¹² (Spirit) and yet seems to give some concession to Sankhya philosophy when it says that from Brahma come many souls,¹³ though really they are not many (which Sankhya believes they are) as there is One Reality. Creation is caused from unconscious prakriti (primordial nature), it being stimulated to conscious activity by its proximity to Purusha (Spirit)¹⁴—this is merely a grafting of the scheme of Sankhya (which denies Absolute Spirit or Brahma) on the scheme of Advaita (monistic) Vedanta that takes care of creative activity through the hypothesis of aparavidya. The unintelligent pradhana (prakriti of Sankhya) is thus accommodated by conscious Intelligence, Brahma (of Vedanta) in the Gita. The three gunas of Sankhya were pressed into service for supplying the constituent modes of being and also for affording a basis of classification of many mental, moral and spiritual states of man.¹⁵ Gita's theory of detailed evolution of the world is according to Sankhya scheme, also is its theory that the three gunas composing prakriti or primordial nature are the real workers, and the soul is free, actionless. "Those who realize this distinction go to the Cosmic Lord"—this however is Vedanta of the Vishishtadwaita type,¹⁶ and not a Sankhya proposition.

There is maintained in the book a tentative dualism¹⁷ of matter and spirit (Sankhya's dualism being absolute in a sense) which is overcome beautifully with one stroke by passages of idealistic theism in chapter 7 verses 4 and 5 and in chapter 15 verse 18. The para prakriti (self-conscious spiritual principle resident in creation) and apara prakriti¹⁸ (creation with its constituent elements and beings), corresponding to two substances or categories akshara (imperishable) and kshara¹⁹ (perishable) are pointed out in the Gita to be the two aspects of Purushottam, the Supreme Purusha or Lord, who in a sense is beyond both. We meet with another word, kutastha, in that connection. We believe that kutastha (another name for

¹²Gita 13. 2, 22, 31; 15.7 (according to Ramanuja)

¹³Gita 13.30; 15.7

¹⁴Gita 9.10; 13.26, 33; 14.3.

¹⁵Gita 17.4—22; 18.19—39

¹⁶Gita 14.19

¹⁷Gita 13.20

¹⁸Gita 7.4-5

¹⁹Gita 15.16

akshara or para prakriti—the imperishable self-conscious spiritual principle of the universe) which any one would like to identify with Supreme Purusha or Lord God, is added to and yet kept separate by a hair's breadth as it were from Supreme Purusha or Lord, ostensibly with the purpose of satisfying the orthodox philosophic mind who wants an impersonal Absolute, by according this old philosophical concept of *kutastha* an honorable position and also satisfying the devotee's mind who wants a personal God, by establishing its connection with and apparent subordination to the theistic concept (i.e. Supreme Purusha, Lord God). This further proves that theism²⁰ is the last word of religious philosophy in the Gita, and though there are rigid monistic utterances in the book they are thought to be in harmony with the former without any need of further argument. Which is the final truth—theism or abstract monism, a personal God or an impersonal Absolute—is a question which only the cosmic intuition of great sages, the intuition that refuses to be imprisoned in language, can perhaps answer only privately. But somehow or other many sages including the author of the Gita feel²¹ that they are justified in saying that God is both personal and impersonal, as we ordinarily understand these words, at the same time and in the same breath. Thus they seem to imply that in transcendental matters, which are beyond logic, they can take liberty with logic and with impunity contradict the logical Axiom of Contradiction. The Axiom of Contradiction says that a thing can never be its diametrically opposite at the same moment. But in the opinion of the Gita and other Scriptures it appears that that is possible: God can be both personal and impersonal at the same time and in the same breath. Whereas there are others who are suspicious of all language and intellectual concepts. They declare that God is neither personal nor impersonal; He can only be described as “not this”, “not this”.

The concept of God that we find in the Gita is of a more comprehensive kind than the concept of God as given in Patanjali's Yoga Philosophy.²² With Patanjali, God²³ is merely a special kind

²⁰Theistic leaning—Gita 18.56 etc.

²¹13.14

²²And this without undertaking to establish the anteriority of either the Gita or Patanjali's Yoga Philosophy. If the Gita is prior, which most evidences tend to show it is, Patanjali's concept of God may be well supposed to have been prevalent then in some circles.

²³Patanjali 1.24-26

of Self or Purusha, Immortal, Omniscient, uncontaminated by space, time or samskara, Teacher of ancient teachers. But it was not mentioned by him as to whether God is the creator, or whether He pervades and holds everything and every being in his unmanifested form. This position Gita, however, states explicitly and it is a more satisfactory concept of God than Patanjali's 7.7; 9.4-6. Whether Patanjali's position is due to his lack of explicitness or deliberate omission because of his different philosophical view of God cannot be told. The scholars think, and perhaps justly, that the latter alternative is true. However, this has not been the case with all Yogi Philosophers since or before, as some of them seem to have held views similar to Gita's.

The author of the Gita has thus picked out different concepts from previous fields of philosophy and gathered and built them into one magnificent superstructure in his own way, but he has not attempted to fortify his steps or conclusions with any impenetrable wall of logic. There are gaps left in thought, and sometimes the same words are used at different places in such a way as to admit of different interpretations. For instance, the words jnana and yoga are employed without any warning sometimes to signify jnana method and yogic method and sometimes the goal or the perfected state of jnana and yoga. Further when Gita deals with a particular train of thought or subject of discourse it lays exclusive emphasis on its elaboration without always trying, according to a system, to link it up with or fit it into other trains of thought or subjects of discourse. Also, the ultimate synthesis, as we pointed out before, is left to be made not on the plane of logic, but on that of the highest religious experience. These are some of the reasons why the Gita has yielded to so many interpretations at the hands of the greatest Indian philosophers of every age. Any book that can thus stimulate the brilliant minds of history and impel them to unravel its meaning and make it a support of their systems must have some uniqueness and some claim to popularity.

On the religious side, the Gita has carried over to its age the spirit of the Upanishads. The spirit of "upasana" (worship) has become devotion (bhakti) in the Gita and is emphasized. Hunger for Reality is manifest in the messages of both, only the philosophic exclusiveness of the Upanishads has given place to a cos-

mopolitan inclusion in the Gita. It was the thinker-devotee that was entitled to brahmajñana, (knowledge of God), now even the sinners and people occupying lower strata of society²⁴ were promised salvation. Brahma was a stupendous Reality, awesome in Its transcendence and elusive in Its immanence, but now in the Gita Brahma has become the God of love. The cry of the masses was answered by the author of the Gita with a gift of the God of the heart. Some of the thin abstractions that had satisfied the Upanishad philosophers had to be replaced by a concrete Reality for the benefit of the average man. Though the Gita is a philosophic poem, its appeal is popular. Its composition was thus an answer to a vital need of society.

The Gita is cautious in its boldness. It wants to strike out new paths and yet not offend the past. In the stronghold of orthodoxy it has the courage to say that the revealed Vedas, the most sacred Scriptures of the Hindus, deal with (or may we say, are contaminated by) three gunas (substantive aspects of Nature, which are inferior to the soul), "Be thou free, O Arjuna, from the triad of gunas."²⁵ yet it does not definitely ask people to look upon old sacrificial acts of Vedas as worthless and specifically turn away from them. It rather encourages rites and ceremonial actions according to injunctions of Scriptures. It wants to retain them for those that may be benefited by them and at the same time point out the higher method. The Gita takes old orthodox concepts and breathes into them a larger and stronger life. Ceremonial sacrifice (jajna) is enlarged in its connotation to include any act done to the glory of God²⁶ or for the sake of liberation.²⁷ Renunciation (sannyasa, tyaga) which to many originally meant giving up *all* actions, means for Gita eschewing only attachment to fruits of action and maddening thirst for them. 18.3, 5, 6. The caste system was taken for granted and tolerated, and yet there is no mention of the caste being determined by birth but rather that it is governed by "merit and action."²⁸

Gita's observation on Vedas and caste must have satisfied the

²⁴Gita 9.30, 32

²⁵Gita 2.45 Subordinate position of the Vedas accorded in 2.46; 6.44

²⁶3.9; 4.23 (According to commentators, Sankar, Madhusudan, Sridharswami)

²⁷4.24-32

²⁸Gita 4.13; 18.41-44.

liberal non-conformist element in the community whose worthy mouthpiece appeared later in the person of Buddha who disregarded the authority of the Vedas and abolished caste altogether. The liberal tone of the Gita shows that it must have been composed either at a time when "modernistic" ideas came to be regarded as not too revolutionary as the faintly heard rumbles of new religious demands presaged the later rising of a reforming faith like Buddha's or when a certain sensible adjustment of social and religious ideas within the pale of Hinduism became a necessity for its own preservation after the storm of early Buddhism blew over, tearing away many of the Hindu believers. The first alternative seems to be correct, as the Gita seems to give more the impression of certain spontaneity of expression than it would give if written under any circumstantial pressure.

For the ordinary seeker of religious life Gita has attempted a synthesis of four traditional paths to the supreme goal (1) the path of discrimination (path of jnana), the path of knowledge involving analysis and integration from plain and practical concepts to the highest and most fugitive philosophical ones, the path of following an impersonal Absolute;²⁹ (2) the path of devotion, love and worship (path of bhakti), of prayer to a personal God, the Lord, not so much characterized by intellectual hair-splitting;³⁰ (3) the path of energetic action (path of karma), of ceremonial sacrifice, of duty and service in the name of the Lord, neither marked so much by intellectual acrobatics nor by the irresistible overflow of the heart's feelings as in the second path,³¹ (4) the path of meditation (dhyana yoga or abhyasa yoga³²), a whole-hearted plunge into the contemplation of the soul, mystic syllables as Om or of inner psychic facts and experiences; control of one's own recalcitrant nature through a rigid course of discipline, with the help of definite psycho-physical methods (as breathing etc.). There were times in India when many people were exclusive followers of one or the other of these paths.³³ But an ordinary man, no

²⁹Gita 3.3; 4.24, 25, 27, 38; 9.15

³⁰Gita 8.22; 9.13, 14.26, 27, 34; 10.8; 11.54, 55; 14.26

³¹Gita 3.3, 4, 5.

³²Gita 4.29; 5.27; 6.10-32, 35; 8.8, 10, 12, 13, 28; 12.9.

³³Some recognize in the Gita only the first three paths, the path of knowledge, the path of devotion and the path of action, identifying the fourth one, the path of dhyana-yoga or abhyasa-yoga, either with the first or with

matter how much he wants to tread exclusively the path of his choice, cannot help crossing other paths at times. For him to be, for instance, a strict philosopher and a mute devotee of the impersonal Absolute and not at times of mental stress to feel a yearning to pray to a personal God for protection or love, is difficult, if not impossible. One cannot always be a stoic or absolutist in the sense of a cold calculating juggler with abstract concepts, positing an august Reality that is indifferent to the cries of the human heart. That is what some of the jnanis in India (the followers of the first path) practically made themselves to be.

The author of the Gita seems to be aware of the psychological needs of humanity. The above four paths may be said roughly to correspond to the four faculties of human nature: the path of knowledge to the faculty of thinking, that of devotion, to the faculty of feeling, that of action to the faculty of willing, that of dhyana and abhayasa yoga to the faculty of intuition.³⁴ The implication of the Gita is that religion, rather than starve or suppress the above four natural faculties, would encourage them and tend and feed them on the pasture of God. As God is the reconciliation of highest ideals, so true religion is the harmony and proportionate development of all our faculties. Man can not do without thinking any more than he can do without feeling, willing or intuiting, hence the plan of four paths that is given to him by Gita, thus encouraging him to exercise his four faculties in the right way, is quite a natural suggestion. But when it comes to the prescription of the degree or amount of exercise needed for each faculty in the direction of God, Gita is silent. In that matter Gita's intention has to be gathered from its scattered hints. Gita makes allowance for great diversities of human nature, the diversities that have necessarily to be moulded and shaped, each in its own way. So the fourfold attempt may lead to many permutations and combinations according to the inclination of individuals—one may energize more the third. But for the sake of clarity and to be faithful to the spirit of emphasis on yoga in its technical sense as laid by the Gita (6.10-32 etc.), separate treatment of the fourth path seems to be more than justified.

³⁴The orthodox psychology of the West, however, does not recognize the last one, intuition, except in the sense of an ordinary form of instinct, and the reason being for this that it does not yet fully understand the mystic perceptions belonging to a different unexplored province. Consult, however, Bergson and others of intuitionist school and also recognized Christian mystics for Western treatment of intuition.

on the path of knowledge than on the path of devotion another more on the path of work or devotion than on the path of knowledge or yogic practice etc., etc. This is in line with the principle of modern pedagogy—to let the learner follow the bend of his mind rather than to force him into a particular curriculum.

The four paths meet, cross and re-cross one another very often in the Gita. In truth, there is a certain mutuality between them all. Performance of duties and selfless work without any inner psychological attachment³⁵ to results is held up as an ideal in the Gita—and this in order to purify one's own self³⁶ and to draw others to the cause of virtue by setting a good example³⁷ (the social bearing of an individualistic religion). This is karma marga (path of action). But what is the spiritual technique of work and the performance of duties? The technique is to work by being equilibrated,³⁸ by being grounded in contemplative life, to work with understanding or discrimination between self and not-self, good and bad.

If you do not meditate on inner life, nor discipline your outer and psychic forces, attachment to work, which should be avoided, will steal into you in spite of yourself and selfishness will overcome your resolve to be selfless; the aim of work will be forgotten and unhappiness will be the final outcome. Certainly, meditation is a needed corrective of the mechanical habit of work turned in many sections of the western world into a gospel without a goal. This is dhyana marga or abhyasa yoga in its narrow and technical sense (the path of meditation).

But mystic meditation is to be coupled with and helped by the attitude of discrimination in and dispassion for everything.³⁹ Also, the objects of meditation are often furnished by inner philosophic discrimination e.g., the concepts of the imperishableness of soul, transcendence and immanence of God, the severing of identification between soul and body etc., etc. These and such-like concepts have to be known through study of Scriptures and from teachers and firmly fixed in the mind by daily, nay hourly effort. This is jnana marga (the path of knowledge). But knowledge can truly be established through perfection in yogic discipline and contempla-

³⁵Gita 3.19; 18.5, 6

³⁶Gita 5.11

³⁷Gita 3.20

³⁸Gita 2.48, 50

³⁹Gita 6.35

tion 4.38. And again, yogic contemplation becomes steadfast when it is combined with knowledge. 6.8. They are interdependent.

The Gita goes farther. It says,⁴⁰ "Those who fixing their mind on Me (God), worship Me (God), ever steadfast endowed with supreme devotion, are the best yogis". This implies Gita's desire to combine yoga practice with love of God. It appears that without warmth of heart and strong devotion of the soul, attempts made along the other paths seem to remain incomplete. The God of love has to be approached with real love,⁴¹ as love is the unction of the Infinite. This is bhakti marga (the path of devotion). The whole tone of Gita is dominated by the consideration of theistic worship⁴² and bhakti (devotion and love) and of its combination with action, knowledge and yoga.

Thus the Gita, on its religious side, has tried to synthesize the above four ancient paths, showing the necessity of *each in a measure in the life of all*. This attitude has given sanction to all the paths and showed their mutual dependence; it is also a step to its broader outlook which we will mention in conclusion.

In the meantime let us note in passing that, even after all we have said, Gita in one passage⁴³ seems to give preference to the yogi, calling him superior to those that tread the path of action and austerities and those that stress learning, knowledge or discrimination (jnana). On the surface this looks like a contradiction of the spirit of synthesis we found in the Gita. But as a matter of fact this accords with its deeper purpose. Since yoga, not in the sense of preliminary inner perceptions but in that of *full* intuitional realization of Reality, is better than all the methods and ways, whether of action or discrimination, much the same as reaching the goal is better than going toward it. This verse does not mean however that ways of yoga or its kindergarten realizations are superior to the higher states of consciousness attained by a man of action or discrimination. It should be remarked here that in the Gita and Upanishads dhyana-yoga or abhyasa-yoga in one of its technical senses (i.e. in the sense of a means to reach the goal and not the goal itself) is closely allied to jnana-yoga and is in a way the foundation of the rest of the paths, since without a contemplative or equi-

⁴⁰Gita 12.2. See also 6.47

⁴¹Gita 12.14

⁴²Gita 11.54, 55; 8.22; 9.14, 26-29; 12.14; 18.55.

⁴³Gita 6.46

brated state of mind (dhyana or yoga) no path mentioned in the Gita will lead very far. The highest state of knowledge and highest state of yoga are the same.⁴⁴

The above verse further implies that the ability to catch intuitional glimpses of truth as thrown up to the surface of our minds while we are serving or doing our duties or deeply plunged in philosophical thoughts is better than not to have such perception and do deeds and think thoughts mechanically. The pure mysticism of Gita, a fact which has given it the name of Yoga Shastra, voices the genius and spirit of mystic India and hence establishes one more reason for its popularity in that country. Sometimes the whole of Gita is interpreted esoterically by some, signifying an inner war on the battlefield of the human body, a war between the forces of discrimination and self on the one hand and the opposing forces of senses and mind on the other.

The whole trend⁴⁵ of the Gita as we have pointed out, is strongly toward a reconciliation of all the above paths in the life of a devotee, a reconciliation which is more a matter of realization "in spirit" than an eclecticism "in letter", yet the Gita is not dogmatic even about that. It admits the necessity of distinctions and particular emphasis if they help and suit the devotees. It speaks in the fourth chapter, verses 24 to 29 of many forms of sacrifice or course of action adopted by different persons: Knowledge as sacrifice, sacrifice to Gods, renunciation and self-control as sacrifice, legitimate fulfilling of desires as sacrifice, ritualistic sacrifice according to Vedas, sacrifice through yogic breathing—all forms of sacrificial acts leading finally to superior knowledge and realization. In chapter 12, verses 9 to 11, it also suggests different ways to suit different capacities. So notwithstanding its eagerness to harmonize and reconcile four different paths for the sake of an average person the Gita has no intention of standardizing the moving flow of spiritual life, or putting diversified human nature in the straight-jacket of a religious scheme. Gita leaves it to the devotees to emphasize any paths or methods according to their own inclinations.

⁴⁴Gita 4.35 "When thou hast this knowledge (i.e. highest knowledge) never again shalt thou thus come to delusion, O Son of Pandu; by this thou shalt see the whole of creation in thyself and then in Me." This is where jnana and yoga coalesce. Also 4.38; 6.29-31; 8.8, 28.

⁴⁵18.57

This is the most unique point about the author of the Gita which we will notice now in conclusion: his spirit of universal religious tolerance and understanding of the scope and meaning of religion. Other religious leaders have claimed for themselves, either because of their own self-sufficiency or some historical necessity, the exclusive right of pointing out to their followers the *only* way to salvation. But the thunderous declaration of the divine speaker of the Gita on the other hand is "In whatever way men worship Me (God) in the same way do I fulfill their desires. My path men follow in all ways" 4.11. This is a sublime utterance and its value is supernal, and ramification infinite. Here there is no distinction between easterner and westerner, rich or poor, literate or illiterate, common folk or brilliant leaders, Christian or non-Christian religionist. In every shape or manner, in every action, religious and so-called non-religious man is treading the path that leads him to the Infinite. But man does not know that. His ignorance has been responsible for all his fetters. A pious man is on the path of God, so is a sinner; the sinner may be a little behind, but it is the path of God just the same, and because he is behind, his sufferings are perhaps a little more. His desires of sin will be fulfilled, and that, by the law of God; his desires of sin will bring their own punishment on him, and that, too, by the law of God. Then he will march forward on the path, not through the mud and mire and thorns through which it lay before and which made him suffer and bleed but through the sunny avenue of God's perfumed garden.

All religions are God's; but to say that all ways, all faiths are His, hence there is no need of quarrel, does not justify on our part any of that sickly tolerance, or better, indifference, to other people's faiths that we entertain for the sake of convenience. Allowing different religions or paths of religion to exist side by side because the goal of all religions and paths is the same, is for the Gita not based on that safe attitude of "letting the other fellow's religion alone." It has a deep psychological reason. Whether we follow this religion or that, one path or another, do this duty or that, we cannot ignore Gita's immortal advice about the following of the law of one's being. "Better is one's dharma (nature, or law of being), though imperfectly followed than that of another well-performed. He who does the duty *ordained by his own nature* incurs no evil 3.45; 18.47. In *Hamlet*, Polonius seems to have meant the same

thing when he concluded his instruction to his son by saying "Above all, to thine own self be true." One should not relinquish action (duty)⁴⁶ that springs from his own nature (that which is innate), imperfect though it be, 18.84. This applies to the performance of an ordinary duty as much as the following of a particular religious path. "Devoted each to his own duty man attains highest perfection." 18.45. We already spoke of Gita's technique as to how duty is to be performed and action done. All the passages quoted above mean that if one is true to his own inner nature and also to the law by which his nature operates and evolves, he is traveling a religious path, no matter what particular religious beliefs, dogmas or ways he has adopted. This is a universal message of religion and morality based on the deepest psychology of human nature and not simply on the utterances of any particular prophet. It is here that the Gita goes beyond all the paths and all the gods and teachers of the East and West and erects a superstructure of religion and morality that houses all faiths and recognizes all human diversities. "From Whom is the evolution of all beings, by Whom all this is pervaded, worshipping Him with his own duty, a man attains perfection."⁴⁷ If we are pardoned an anachronism, Gita has thus in its own singular way linked up Kant's "categorical imperative" with his "thing in itself" about which Kant prefers to be silent. Gita has tied morality to spirituality with the golden cord of psychology. Highest perfection is thus shown by it to consist in the full knowledge, expression and mastery of our own individual potentiality, and it is this individual potentiality, be it remembered, that determines to a large extent our specific line of duty and responsibility.

The philosophy of action and duty is what stands out boldly in the religious scheme of Gita. It is noteworthy that this philosophy of action was born in a tropical country whose inhabitants are condemned as inactive and lazy, and it is equally noteworthy how, due to close contact with the West, in recent years this philosophy has

⁴⁶Though the orthodox commentators interpret action, dharma or duty to mean caste action, caste dharma or caste duty, there are enough hints given all through the Gita to enable us to realize that action refers to all action, not simply to caste action or caste duty. All action flows from universal prakriti or nature 5.14. This operates through the medium of our individual nature.

⁴⁷18.46

discovered itself and inspired some of the greatest leaders there and is finding an outlet in their national aspirations. Conversely, it is safe to remark that, notwithstanding the fact that many in the Occident are unwilling to accept the theory of reincarnation which the Gita takes for granted, if the Gita is taken out of its otherwise orthodox setting and interpreted in modern terms and not in a patronizing or dogmatic way, it is one Scripture of the Orient that will storm the religious heart of thousands of action-loving Westerners by its dynamic message of organic life and "self"-regulated activity. Western urge for work and Christian spirit of service will find an additional technique and balance in the Gita's philosophy of dispassionate action and re-discovery of the Self.