

## Introduction

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Dhritarashtra asked: “When my troops and the Pandavas met together, itching for battle, at Kurukshetra, the field of dharma, what happened, Sanjaya?”

—*Bhagavad Gita* 1.1

The *Bhagavad Gita* opens on a field of battle. At Kurukshetra, two massive armies led by the Pandavas and Kauravas have assembled. All the rulers along with the entire warrior class of India are involved, siding with one camp or the other. Leaders blow thunderously on conch shells, while drums and cymbals create a cacophonous roar. Warriors are slapping their arms in eager anticipation. Nearby, packs of jackals and flocks of crows have also assembled, looking forward to a feast of human flesh.

Just as the battle is about to commence, Arjuna, the leading warrior of the Pandava side, asks his charioteer Krishna to station his vehicle in between the two vast forces. “I want to look at the men arrayed here so eager for war,” he explains, and Krishna drives his chariot into the no-man’s-land. At this moment, Arjuna is overcome with anxiety and despair. He drops his bow and threatens to renounce the battle altogether. It is Krishna’s task to persuade Arjuna to overcome his doubts.

The ensuing dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna goes far beyond a rationale for war. It touches on many of the ethical dilemmas, religious practices, and philosophical issues that concerned Indian elites of ancient times. As Krishna instructs Arjuna, he draws on ideas from the many contending schools of thought in classical India, and seeks to integrate them within his own overarching agenda. In the course of their conversation, Krishna reveals to Arjuna that he is the Supreme Lord. Hence this work has long been known by the title *Bhagavad Gita*, the song (*gita*) of the Lord (*bhagavan*).

One can visit the spot in India where this famous dialogue took place. Nowadays a small pilgrimage center, Kurukshetra lies in the fertile plains of Haryana state, in northwestern India, along the course of the dried-up Sarasvati River, once a tributary of the Indus River. In and around the town are numerous sites where significant events in the great battle are supposed to have occurred. At the center of town, overlooking the holy bathing tank used by pilgrims, stands a monumental bronze statue, sixty feet in length and thirty-five feet high, of Krishna and Arjuna in their chariot.

A few miles west of town, the place where Krishna and Arjuna held their conversation is known as “Jyotisar,” the essence of illumination. A wide banyan tree, said to be a descendant of an original banyan under which Krishna parked the chariot, marks the exact “Place of the Gita Teaching.” Under the shade of the tree now sits a small marble statuette depicting Krishna turning to address Arjuna, protected in a modest marble and glass

display case. Also inside the case are two laminated, full-color religious posters and a small booklet of the *Bhagavad Gita* itself. All are adorned with garlands of orange marigolds, white jasmine, and red rose. The tree is surrounded by ponds where one can take a purifying bath, and scattered about the site are several modest shrines dedicated to various Hindu gods and saints. It is a quiet and contemplative place now, like so many former battlefields. When I first journeyed to Jyotisar in January 2010, the only other visitors loitering around the place were young male students from the nearby Institute of Hotel Management.

In India and beyond, one can also celebrate the day on which the *Bhagavad Gita* dialogue happened. The eleventh day of the waxing moon in the lunar month of Margashirsha, which generally falls in December or January, is known as the “Gita Jayanti,” the birthday of the *Gita*. Although the age of the *Gita* has been a long-standing matter of uncertainty and debate, the lunar date of the conversation is clearly established in the text. Today the famous conversation is often observed with collective recitations of the seven hundred verses of the *Gita*, accompanied by acts of worship and devotional singing. At Kurukshetra, the locals celebrate Gita Jayanti with particular verve. In addition to recitations and discourses on the *Gita* at the Shri Krishna Museum, the town hosts a five-day Kurukshetra Festival, which includes a procession of musicians and holy men, cultural performances pertaining to the *Gita* in several great tents, political leaders being felicitated, fireworks, and a

massive crafts fair of over five hundred displays from throughout India. Beyond India as well, Hindus in Malaysia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States commemorate the day on which this sacred text was first spoken.

Early in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna tells Arjuna that he has given these same teachings from the beginning of time. And accordingly, many observers have maintained that the dialogue narrated in the *Bhagavad Gita* is not merely a historically specific conversation but in fact an eternal teaching that has universal relevance or an event that takes place at all times. Kurukshetra is both a particular field of battle and perpetual field of *dharma*, or righteousness, as Dhritarashtra's opening question suggests. The medieval Hindu philosopher Shankara (788–820 CE) believed that this dialogue restates the essential teachings of the eternal Vedas. Mohandas Gandhi held that the battlefield of Kurukshetra is located in every human soul, where the perennial conflict between good and evil occurs without end. Devotees of the god Krishna like A. C. Bhaktivedanta, founding teacher of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, view Krishna to be the Supreme Personality of Godhead, eternally present in the heavenly realm and at the same time recurrently appearing in our world to reenact his timeless activities. The British novelist and essayist Aldous Huxley considered the teachings of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* as the most systematic scriptural statement of a “perennial philosophy” common to all the religions of the world. And countless other readers and reciters over the

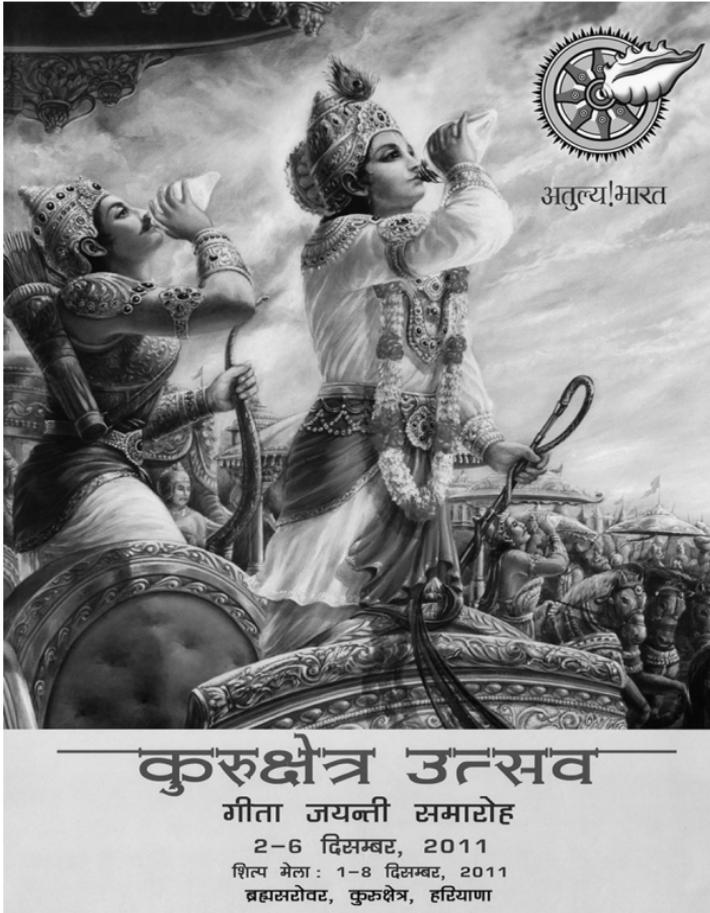


FIGURE 1. *Kurukshetra Utsav: Gita Jayanti Samaroh*, poster, unknown artist, 2011.

Author's collection. The poster advertises the 2011 Gita Birthday Festival at Kurukshetra.

centuries have heard in *Gita's* words something that speaks powerfully to them in their own circumstances.

The doubleness of the *Bhagavad Gita*—its historical specificity and its continuing, even eternal, life—animates this short biography. Whether or not Krishna actually

spoke these words to Arjuna under a banyan tree in the Kurukshetra battlefield on the eleventh day of the light fortnight of Margashirsha, the *Bhagavad Gita* was composed at a certain time and place. Most Sanskrit scholars agree that the *Bhagavad Gita* originated in northern India, sometime in the classical period between the reign of the Mauryan king Ashoka (r. 269–232 BCE) and Gupta dynasty (320–547 CE), as part of a much larger poetic composition, the epic poem *Mahabharata*. The dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, as it has been passed down, was deeply and creatively engaged with the many philosophical and religious currents and disputes of northern India during this period. In the course of this discussion, Krishna articulates a complex new religious formulation that encompasses many other existing schools of thought.

Like many great religious works, the *Bhagavad Gita* has outlived its own time and place of composition. The work has lived a vivid and contentious existence over the centuries since, through readings and recitations, translations and commentaries that have reinscribed this classical Indian work into many new currents and disputes. Medieval Brahmin scholars and Krishna devotees, British colonial scholars, German romantics, globe-trotting Hindu gurus, Indian anticolonial freedom fighters, Western students, and spiritual seekers have all engaged in new dialogues with the *Gita*.

My own dialogue with the *Bhagavad Gita* began in the early 1970s, when I was a college student majoring in the history and philosophy of religion. A wave of counter-cultural fascination with Eastern spirituality had brought

the *Gita* to a large, new US audience, and new translations by both scholars and Hindu teachers proliferated. The first version I read was the translation by Bhaktivedanta, Swami Prabhupada, an Indian guru who traveled to the United States in 1965 and established a following of Krishna consciousness. Though intrigued by the work, I was puzzled by its unfamiliar terminology and complicated discussion. Little did I expect that this was the beginning of a lifelong dialogue. A few years later, as a neophyte student of Sanskrit, I tried my hand at reading the *Gita* in its original language. And now, over the past twenty-five years, I have taught the work in college courses on Indian religions, almost as regularly as the *Gita Jayanti* is celebrated.

Sometime in the nineteenth century, the *Bhagavad Gita* acquired the label of the “Hindu Bible.” While the designation is misleading in important respects, since the *Gita* has never enjoyed the canonical authority over the Hindu community that the Hebrew Bible holds for Jews or Christian New Testament has for Christians, it does point to a crucial similarity. Like those more extensive bibles of other traditions, the *Gita* is internally complex and ambiguous enough to have spoken differing truths to different audiences, as suited to their diverse situations and expectations. Like them, it has given rise to two millennia of dialogues, readings, and interpretations. The medieval poet Jnanadeva compared the *Gita* to the legendary multifaceted “wish-granting gem” Chintamani. For centuries new readers have glimpsed the wish-granting *Gita* through its different facets,

seeking to bring their own desires toward fulfillment. My book explores those glimpses.

The life of the *Bhagavad Gita* cannot be separated from the identity of its principal speaker, Krishna. Throughout the *Mahabharata*, Krishna appears as a human warrior and ruler, a friend of Arjuna and the other Pandavas, who also has a mysterious other side. For one thing, his upbringing among a tribe of nomadic cowherders is most unusual for a member of the Kshatriya class. More significantly, he reveals his divine nature in the course of the *Gita*. Krishna's own doubleness as a god in human incarnation introduces another layer of complexity to the work. How a reader understands Krishna—as a literary character, historical ruler, wise teacher, incarnate god, or Supreme Lord of All Creation—has crucial bearing also on how one responds to his words in the *Gita*.

The primary aim of this book is to examine the ways that the *Bhagavad Gita* has continued to live through the responses and interpretations of its subsequent readers. This will necessarily be highly selective. The full life of the *Gita* is much too diverse to allow for any comprehensive treatment. The brief seven-hundred-verse poem has been the subject of hundreds of written commentaries in Sanskrit and other Indian languages. It has been translated into more than seventy-five languages worldwide. In English alone, well over three hundred translations of the *Gita* have been published. The *Gita* is a vital text for modern Hindus of many persuasions. Public recitations and oral exegeses are regular events in homes, temples, and auditoriums in India and wherever in the world

Hindus now live. Outside India, the *Gita* is frequently taken as the first and most representative work for those first seeking to understand Hinduism. It appears regularly as a primary reading in hundreds of college courses on Hinduism and Asian religions throughout North America and elsewhere.

To gain some purchase on the sprawling life of this text, we will look at the broader devotional cult surrounding the divine character of Krishna, and briefly examine some of the ways medieval Indian commentators emphasized different core “disciplines” (*yoga*) and different ontological positions articulated within the *Gita*. We will trace how the *Gita* traveled from India to the West, through translations into English and other European languages, and how it was appropriated into new areas of concern. We will explore how Indian nationalists utilized the poem in their struggle against colonial control—a new Kurukshetra battlefield, as they saw it—and how they debated the *Gita*’s fundamental directives. And we will look at a few of the ways contemporary translators and teachers reanimate the classical poem for modern audiences in India and beyond. First, though, it will be valuable to situate the *Bhagavad Gita* in its own original context: its compositional birthday.