

"A Web of Interconnections": Review of Damodar Thakur, *Gita: the Song Extraordinary*
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"Thought has followed thought, but has always found something in the Gita"
(Jawaharlal Nehru)

*"A real ascetic or yogi is he who does the work he ought to do without caring for its
consequence" (Bhagavad Gita, 6.1)*

I

The *Bhagavad Gita* is arguably the most famous short philosophical text in the world, certainly comparable in its import to Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* or Plato's *Symposium*. The renown of the dialogue of Krishna and Arjuna has long since spread beyond the book's native India: for the English language alone, the first translation from the Sanskrit, that of Charles Wilkins in 1785, has been followed by over 300 since, and many a student of English literature has been alerted to the *Gita* by the famous lines from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "And do not think of the fruit of action. / Fare forward. ... / So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna / On the field of battle. Not fare well, / But fare forward, voyagers."

The worldwide diffusion of the *Gita* points up both the universality and the accessibility of the 2500-year-old classic. Despite this, it is far from being an unproblematic text. Brief though it is, it is actually part of one of the longest poems in the world, the *Mahabharata*, being generally considered an interpolation into the sixth book of the great epic: it is thus an autonomous text from one viewpoint, but a text-within-a-text from another. It takes the form of a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, but that dialogue is itself embedded in another dialogue of the *Mahabharata*, that between Sanjaya and Dhrtarastra. It prepares the triumph of Arjuna and his fellow Pandavas, yet it is framed within a dialogue between two on the losing Kaurava side; it is full of blazing imagery, yet, again in the frame-narrative, it is a tale being told to a blind man, Dhrtarastra. Krishna, besides, appears - here as elsewhere in the *Mahabharata* - in a very different guise from how he is presented in the other canonic representations of his godhood, the *Puranas*. The Krishna of the *Gita* is a warrior and philosopher, he of the *Puranas* is the lover of Radha, the playful youth who robs the gopis of their clothes, and reconciling the two Krishnas has been the task across time of the many manifestations of the devotional cult of the godhead - including, in our day, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, better known as the Hare Krishnas. Nor can Krishna be viewed as a purely self-contained character even within the *Gita*: he is not merely himself, but an incarnation of another deity, Vishnu. The message of the *Gita*, too, seems to mean different things from different directions. In the context of the *Mahabharata*, Krishna is confirming Arjuna in his role as warrior and (successfully) asking him as a Pandava to go forth and kill his relatives the Kauravas; and yet this book, with its apparently warlike message, has been

interpreted time and again as embodying philosophical calm and sage detachment. The poem's importance for the Indian mind cannot be overestimated: as Professors Vrinda Nabar and Shanta Tumkur say in their introduction to their edition of 1997, "it constitutes a substantial part of the actual sub-structure of present-day thought for most Indians (or at least for the Hindus who form the single largest social group" (Wordsworth Classics edition, ix); yet, at the same time, it is a universal book whose import transcends the Hindu and Indian perspectives of which it remains a founding text. Any reader of the *Gita* is, certainly, faced with a textual experience that proves, just under the surface, to be of enormous and ramifying complexity.

II

The volume under review is a new English-language commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, from the hand of Dr Damodar Thakur, Professor and Chairman of the Department of English at the University of Sana'a, Yemen. Dr Thakur is indeed qualified for such a task, both intellectually and spiritually. He is a disciple of the spiritual master Sri Sri Thakur Anukulchandra, and has been lecturing on the *Gita* for over two decades. He is also an eminent linguist who did his Ph.D. under the celebrated UK scholar David Crystal and has been Director of the regional centres in Shillong and Lucknow of the prestigious, Hyderabad-based CIEFL (Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages). The book comes with a foreword by Karan Singh, Rajya Sabha member and former Indian government minister. All in all, the reader is entitled to expect a study drawing on a lifetime's expertise. Dr Thakur has chosen not to offer a complete line-by-line commentary, thus taking a different approach from, for example, Swami Prabhupada in his *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*: his approach to the *Gita* is selective and thematic. The quotations throughout follow a threefold formula: first the Sanskrit original in Devanagari script, then the same text transliterated into Roman characters, and finally an English translation, made by Dr Thakur's own hand.

The first question that today's reader will expect any study of this kind to answer will surely be: What is the value and importance of the *Bhagavad Gita* for our day? Non-Hindu readers will also ask what this text has to offer to those coming from another belief-system. Dr Thakur thus takes as central the question "whether its message is valid in the context of the ideological concerns and the rational and scientific temper of today" (5). He stresses the high value that has been laid on the *Gita* in recent centuries, and in our day, by poets, philosophers and novelists (William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Aldous Huxley), political figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and, significantly, scientists too, among the most prominent being Abdul Kalam, the nuclear physicist who is today President of India. Dr Thakur, following in the wake of these figures, argues strongly for the living modernity of the ancient text, affirming it as a "powerful message for millions and millions of students studying in scientific and technological institutions, farmers working on their farms, workers working in factories and scientists working in their laboratories" (30). In what, then, does the modernity of the *Bhagavad Gita* consist?

III

For Dr Thakur, the philosophy of the *Gita* is ultimately summed up in a single notion: the classic text "presents life as an endless journey from being to becoming" (5). He believes the poem needs to be disentangled from its literal, surface meaning, and should be read above all symbolically, not as a manual for warriors but as an extended metaphor of the journey towards enlightenment: "the *Gita* was intended not to exhort Arjuna to do well in the battle of

the *Mahabharata* but to tell every one of us how we can give a good account of ourselves in the journey of life" (93). Here and with regard to the poem's ethics, Dr Thakur follows the traditional line in taking the *Gita's* central message to be the need to act without regard to the fruit of action: "On action alone let thy interest be fixed, never on its result: getting too much attached to the idea of the fruit will lead you to inaction" (*Gita*, 2.47). He glosses Krishna's advice as follows: "if we are fully and firmly convinced that there is something that we ought to do, we must take a bold and courageous stand and go ahead and do it (117) ... if we creatively and energetically respond to the present, the future will automatically take care of itself ... when we help someone, we must do it without expecting a calculated return" (119). The *Gita* thus appears as a fundamentally ethical text and a source of right action.

The metaphysic of the *Gita* is interpreted in terms of the concept of cosmic unity: Krishna by his very nature transcends all binary oppositions. Dr Thakur argues that "the semantic constraint arising from binarity applies to a logical discourse but not to a supra-logical discourse" (135). Thus, Krishna both is and is not Arjuna; as the Universal Form, he is both beautiful and terrifying; and beyond Krishna himself, the ultimate reality, or Brahman, is both existent and non-existent. Moving beyond the transcendence of opposites, Dr Thakur finds in the *Gita* a deep sense of connectedness, of how everything in the universe is intimately related to everything else: "What this great scriptural text emphasises is not the separateness between people, things and philosophies but the underlying connections that often go unnoticed" (149). Arjuna's vision of Krishna in his divine attributes is a privileged glimpse into an active and dynamic universe - a reality which, Dr Thakur concludes, is, "in its ultimate analysis, nothing but a web of interconnections" (195).

IV

Dr Thakur finds a powerful convergence between the insights of the *Gita* and the most advanced concepts of modern science. As he puts it, there are numerous "striking similarities between the observations made by the *Gita* and some of the epoch-making discoveries of theoretical science" (34). He believes that no commentator has yet fully explicated all those "similarities", and in this respect offers his book merely as a starting-point, meantime reading Krishna's concept of *jnanavijnana* (9.1) as a fusion of science and spirituality. In a bold speculative leap, the author likens the *Gita's* principle of connectedness to the discoveries of quantum physics, quoting the scientist Daniel Bohm, who wrote: "we say that inseparable quantum interconnectedness of the whole universe is the fundamental reality" (241), alongside which observation Dr Thakur places Krishna's words in verse 7.7: "All that is here is strung on me like multitudes of gems upon a string." Further, the commentator links the *Gita's* message that subject and object are one to Einstein's theory of relativity and its rejection of the "atomistic, reductionist and mechanical view of reality" (248). If "the distinction between the subject and the object was denounced ... by quantum physicists and supporters of the theory of relativity," the *Gita* too has been saying for 2500 years that Arjuna (the subject) and Krishna (the object) are, in the ultimate analysis, "essentially the same" (250-51). Dr Thakur thus firmly lays his cards on the table, proposing a scientifically alert *Bhagavad Gita* for our times.

V

As well as the *Gita's* philosophical and scientific world-view, the volume highlights its literary and linguistic aspects: it is part of Dr Thakur's task to elicit how the ideas expounded by Krishna bear fruit in a poem of celebrated beauty. He thus explicates aspects of the poem's

structure, as well as delving into the most important of its recurring metaphors and symbols. He reminds us that the *Gita* is a poem of 700 lines, of which 574 are spoken by Krishna and 84 by Arjuna, with the rest belonging to the framing narrative. He reveals the text's density of imagery through statistical analysis: in the 658 lines that form the Krishna-Arjuna dialogue, the commentator calculates that there is "an image for every 56.5 words," contrasting, he tells us, with a count of 120.5 for Shakespeare (43). Further, Dr Thakur lays great emphasis on what he sees as a neglected aspect of Krishna, both here in the *Gita* and in the *Mahabharata* as a whole, namely that of *master of language* - "a personality with extraordinary capacities for the use of language and with a highly sophisticated concern for the basic technicalities of language" (51) (indeed, in the *Gita*, 10.33, Krishna compares himself with the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, thus placing himself at the point of entry to systematised language and its wisdom).

In this context of heightened language use, the commentator draws special attention to a number of the poem's key metaphors. One is that of life as a journey (*yatra*): recurrent in the text are "the Sanskrit verb forms for *go* or *move to(wards)*" (*gam* and *ya*, whose various forms combined occur a total of 39 times in the text), as in 5.6 - "He who is actively attached to an ideal goes soon towards the eternal," or 13.35 - "Those who know how to transcend nature go to the absolute" (79-81). Closely linked to the metaphor of the journey is another image, that of Krishna's chariot (*ratha*) - an object moving towards a goal, purposively guided by the divine charioteer ("the chariot on which both Arjuna and Krishna were seated ... should be understood not as a mere physical object but as an image and a symbol" - 87). For Dr Thakur, "the journey as projected by the *Gita* is a journey towards endlessness in the sense that there is no end to the heights that man can attain" (85). Other key images include the wheel (*chakra*) - related to both chariot and journey - symbolising the ever-flowing, cyclical nature of existence; and the crown (*kirita*, of the type "worn by kings and emperors in ancient India"), emblem "of success, of achievements, of accomplishments" (107) - the sense of ever-evolving fulfilment that accompanies the journeyer towards enlightenment. Envisioning the poem's imagery as a whole, Dr Thakur concludes that "the *Gita* achieves a great height of rhetorical excellence by weaving a network of images superbly linked to one another" (111). In keeping with the principle of connectedness, attention too is paid to the intertextual dimension: Dr Thakur is careful to link the ideas and images of the *Gita*, where appropriate, to the *Rig Veda*, the *Upanishads* and to other writings outside the Hindu tradition, including such lesser-known jewels as the Buddhist text *The Perfection of Wisdom* (55). Krishna is a master of the image in his pursuit of the dominion of language, and one of the great merits of Dr Thakur's book is, precisely, its sensitivity to the classic text not only as a source of ethics and metaphysics, but also as a radiant and resonant creation in language.

VI

The *Gita*, as we know, concludes with Arjuna's acceptance of Krishna's counsel: to go out and fight the Kauravas is part of his dharma. At the end, the *Gita* declares, famously, that "wherever there is Krishna, the lord of Yoga, and wherever there is Partha [Arjuna] as well, there is always a blessed victory" (18.78). For Dr Thakur, this "blessed victory" refers not so much to the triumph in war of the Pandavas as to the spiritual and material triumph that awaits those who give themselves to an ideal: "whenever a person ... is attached to a great Ideal, the attachment certainly leads to a blessed victory" (179).

Dr Thakur concludes his own text with a resounding affirmation of the significance of the *Gita* for our day and its compatibility with the scientific view of the world: his closing

sentence declares that the "spiritual insights and flashes of illumination" of Krishna and his time are "valid even now" (272). Throughout, and in keeping with the philosophy of permanent evolution, Dr Thakur views his own book as no more than a point of departure, and highlights areas of study where, he believes, much still remains to be done. These include, for instance, intertextuality ("how much ... the *Gita* has borrowed or creatively assimilated ideas and images from early scriptural texts" - 45); the issue of the poem's title (*Bhagavad Gita, Song of the Blessed*): "why this scriptural text with a positive message of being and becoming was called *Gita*" (25); - and the whole question, as adumbrated in the commentary, of the resemblances between the ideas of the *Gita* and recent advances in science. What might usefully be added would be cross-reference to a *complete* English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* from the hand of Dr Thakur himself: such a translation unfortunately does not at present exist, and if there is a serious lacuna in the author's work it is surely this. His already very strong arguments would convince even more if the fragments he quotes in his own English rendering could be sourced to a full English version by his hand that operated the same translational choices: it is to be hoped that Dr Thakur's translation will indeed be offered to the world in the near future.

VII

In the meantime, perhaps the greatest service this commentary has done for our time is to point up *connectedness* as a vital theme of the *Gita*. As we have seen, Dr Thakur strongly emphasises that in this ancient text reality is seen as a "web of interconnections" (195). Indeed, in the remarkable tenth chapter Krishna as Universal Form takes on the most extraordinary diversity of vestments, human, animal, inanimate, conceptual and divine - from Mount Meru to the river Ganga, through elephant, lion and eagle, through such qualities as victory, resolve and constancy, to sun and moon, to gods like Indra and Yama, to, finally, the divine Vishnu whose incarnation Krishna is, and, indeed, Arjuna, the listening subject himself. As the unifying presence behind such disparate appearances, Krishna thus embodies the principle of connection: "Behold, O Partha, my various celestial forms, of different colours and shapes, by hundreds and by thousands" (11.5). This principle of connection is of particular significance for our times and our technology. India's ancient mathematicians invented the zero, and, therefore, the binary thinking which the *Gita* both embodies and transcends, as a dialogue between two entities who are ultimately one. Today's Internet, comparably, employs the binary logic of computer technology, yet goes beyond it by weaving a "web of interconnections" that traverses the planet. Had the *Gita* been written in our day, it surely would not be irreverent to suggest that Krishna might have said: "Among IT phenomena, I am the Internet": as modern India assumes an ever-growing role on the world stage, the ancient text may yet prove a vital document for the future of evolving humanity. Meantime and independently of such speculation, Dr Thakur's book will have succeeded if it induces readers to return to the *Bhagavad Gita* - be it to read it cover-to-cover or to dive into its wisdom at random - and thus, whether for their own illumination or that of others too, to begin to spin out the yarn of their own commentary on this timeless book.

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