

THE EARLY THEOSOPHISTS AND THE INTERPRETATION  
OF THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ

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The pre-eminence of the Bhagavad Gītā among Hindu scriptures is today so widely acknowledged, by Hindu and Non-Hindu alike, that it is difficult to conceive of a time when it was less universally known and less widely interpreted than it is today. But even the holiest of holy scriptures have their own history, and part of that history has to do with questions of interpretation. We may choose virtually any scripture belonging to any tradition: all have been compiled, transmitted, written and published; and all have been read by different people at different times, prompting different questions and arousing different responses. Commonly people find in holy scriptures what they are expecting to find, or what they have been taught to look for. Commonly, but not always: because there must always be room for fresh insights and fresh discoveries. As the Scottish divine once said of the Bible: "God has yet more light and truth to break forth from his most holy word." The same claim might well be made of the Bhagavad Gītā, and it is up to the student, not only to read the Gītā itself, but to read what the commentators have made of it, in the quest for the fullest possible understanding.

I am sure that I do not need to tell the readers either what the Gītā is, or what it contains. But let me say briefly that the Bhagavad Gītā, "The Song of The Adorable One", is an episode in the vast Hindu epic the Mahābhārata, in which the god Krishna, disguised as a charioteer, instructs

the prince Arjuna in matters concerning dharmā. As a warrior, it is Arjuna's duty to fight. But those he is about to fight are members of his own family, which it is equally his duty to maintain. How is he to escape from this terrible dilemma? Beginning with this question, the Gītā in effect provides a summary of Hindu doctrine, though in the end it does elevate bhakti (loving devotion) to Krishna himself high above the other options. The warrior - and by implication everyone else - must learn to act, not for the sake of the fruits of the action, but in a spirit of submission to Krishna. This is the celebrated doctrine of nishkāmakarma, or selfless endeavour, which is perhaps the Gītā's central teaching. All this is well enough known.

What is perhaps less well-known is that before about the 1880s the Gītā could scarcely be called a popular scripture, even in India. Of course it was known to, and interpreted by, the spiritual élite, alongside the Upanishads and the Brahma Sūtra. In fact it was known as an Upanishad. As such, it was simply too abstract in much of its contents to be widely considered as popular. Ordinary Hindus gained their spiritual sustenance rather from the Epics and the Purāṇas, taught of course orally, than from the metaphysics of the Upanishads and the Gītā. This state of affairs persisted on the whole in India until almost the end of the nineteenth century.

But in the meantime, the Gita had become fairly well known in the West, thanks mainly to an English translation published in 1785 by Sir Charles Wilkins and a Latin translation by August Wilhelm von Schlegel which appeared in 1823. Two years later, Wilhelm von Humboldt was lecturing on the Gītā in Berlin; and for the remainder of the century it was read fairly intensively by a rather small circle of Western literary men, including, for instance, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau in America. There was therefore no real reason why the early Theosophists should not have been very well acquainted with Gītā and its contents before they ever set foot in India, particularly if we regard New England Transcendentalism as one of the roots of the Theosophical Society.

Actually, though, there is very little evidence that H.P. Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott were interested in the Gītā, at least as long as they remained in America. Their focus of interest was elsewhere, centred on the Kabbala, Hermetic writings and the occult generally, and it seems to have been only after their move to India that the Gītā came strongly to their attention.

This is a matter of some importance. The move to India took place in 1879, and Adyar was established in 1883. Now it was precisely at this time that there was taking place in India what has been called the Krishna renaissance, or the neo-Krishna movement. It began in Bengal, but within a very short space of time it had spread to the whole of India and beyond. Precisely how it began is slightly obscure, but it seems that it started as a literary movement, in which certain gifted Bengali writers produced works in verse and prose on the character of Krishna. The most outstanding

of these was undoubtedly Bankim Chandra Chatterji, the father of modern Bengali literature, though there were many others. In these works the Krishna of the Bhāgavata Purāna (the youthful, mischievous Krishna of popular belief) and the wise, philosopher-hero Krishna of the Gītā were brought together into a new composite picture. There is no doubt that the work of Christian missions in India played some part in this process, or that the figure of Krishna was set up quite consciously as an Indian competitor to the figure of Christ.

But more important was the new role which the Gītā came to assume in these years. As you know, the Bhāgavata Purāna is a vast work, hardly in the "pocket book" category. But the Gītā is different, and in a period when Christian missions were producing a great many Bibles, Gospels and tracts to circulate among the products of India's new schools, colleges and universities, the Gītā came to serve as a very effective Hindu alternative, along with such works as The Imitation of Sree Krishna.

In the years around the turn of the century, too, the Gītā came to be regarded as a political, as well as a religious document - so much so, in fact, that it became required reading for budding politicians and anyone possessing more than one copy came to be looked-on with the utmost suspicion by the British authorities. But this is a slightly later development, and I shall return to it in a moment.

During the first decade of Theosophical work in India, the European and American leaders were wisely reluctant to set themselves up as authorities on Indian religion. In an Editorial in The Theosophist in 1882 we indeed find H.P. Blavatsky writing that

We never set ourselves up as teachers of Aryan philosophy and science... Our great desire has been to foster a school of native students of, and writers upon, those majestic themes, and to arouse into vital activity the latent talent which abounds in the Indian race especially. Such will continue to be our endeavour... (Aug. 1882, 236).

This policy explains why the first Theosophical interpreters of the Gītā were all Indians, to whom the Western leaders were for the most part content to defer. But there was clearly a growing interest in the Gītā in Theosophical circles. As yet there was no hint of possible political dimensions, however. Madame Blavatsky's passionate concern was to uncover "occult meanings" in scriptures, and although in the 1880s the Brahmanas seemed to her to be a more promising quarry of occult doctrine (which indeed they were), she had begun to take the Gītā seriously. In August 1883 she announced that since the hidden meaning of what she called the "Aryan shastras" was so important, her journal was about to begin to expound "the estorec meaning of the text of the Bhagavad Gita". (Aug. 1883, 265). "Some of our readers, especially Hindus," she added, "will be doubtless astonished to discover the almost perfect identity between the concealed sense of the immortal epic (the Gita, not the Mahabharata) and the Arhat Tibetan Doctrine..." (Collected Writings, V, 68)

Substantially the same point emerges in a little flurry of words which took place in the following year, 1884. The cause was the publication of Sinnett's Esoteric Buddhism, and a review by W.Q. Judge. I have not seen the review in question, but it seems to have made some disparaging reference to some of the doctrines of esoteric Buddhism being contained in the Gītā. Blavatsky was at all events led to announce that "...positively all the

doctrines given in Esoteric Buddhism, and far more yet untouched, are to be found in the Gītā, and not only there but in a thousand more known and unknown MSS. of Hindu sacred writings". (Collected Writings, VI, 147)

This was of course a matter of principle - that there is one secret doctrine, and that wherever the illuminated mind has been at work, there it is capable of being discovered by anyone who possesses the key. The Gītā is as yet not a special case, and although in The Secret Doctrine we may read that there are "things occult" hidden in "that great Indian esoteric work" (I,620), there is surprisingly little mention made of the Gītā, and when it is mentioned, it is on a basis of the work of T. Subba Row.

#### SUBBA ROW - THE ESOTERIC INTERPRETATION

Subba Row was the first of a number of Indian commentators on the Gītā to work under Theosophical patronage. We may I think pass over Damodar K. Mavalankar, who refers occasionally to the Gītā in his writings, but without breaking any new ground. Subba Row, however, was considerably more influential and already in 1883 we find him expounding in the pages of The Theosophist the "real meaning of the allegory of the war between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas in allegorical terms: the Pandavas (Arjuna's branch of the family) represent the higher, spiritual part of man, and his enemies, the Kauravas, represent the lower, while Krishna is "the only manifested deity, the logos in each man's heart" (V:1 Oct.1883, 322f).

Aside from the rather curious use of the Greek word logos in this

context (which must surely have been as a result of Subba Row's association with Blavatsky), one is most of all struck by the relative simplicity of this approach. Allegory as a method was neither exclusively Hindu nor particularly theosophist. But it does have the advantage of flexibility, as being well-known to Hindus. As K.P. Mokerji was to put it in 1891, every Hindu knows that the shastras have several meanings, aside from the obvious one, and that the Gītā has several occult meanings, one of which is that "...it is an allegory in which the trials, sufferings and different stages of progress of an aspirant are given out in detail". (Lucifer, VIII, 1891, 110).

At all events, for a few years in the 1880s Subba Row was the Theosophical Society's Gītā expert. Sometimes he corrected, and provided tart comments on, other people's Gītā articles. But in 1885 he delivered a lecture on the Gītā to the Theosophical Convention, and in December 1886 he lectured again at much greater length on the same subject. It was the text of these 1886 lectures which went to make up his influential book Discourses on the Bhagavad Gita (1888).

Subba Row's interpretation of the Gītā is thoroughly allegorical. This is not to say that he discounts the historical element, though he clearly regards it as a comparatively little importance, at least when compared with the view that the Gītā is a discourse about the relationship of body and soul, matter and spirit, or (in his own Theosophical terminology) man, the monad (atman) and the Logos (the ultimately Real). In general terms, what the Gītā depicts is the struggle between the human spirit and the lower passions in the physical body (Collected Writings, 93). Vyāsa,

he writes (Vyasa being of course the traditional author of the Mahābhārata), "...looked upon Arjuna as man, or rather the real monad in man; and upon Krishna as the Logos, or the spirit that comes to save the man". (93)

The Gītā, then, is to be seen as a discourse addressed by a guru to a chela determined upon renunciation - though some may find it hard actually to see Arjuna's original troubles in this light. "Krishna is teaching Arjuna what the Logos in the course of initiation will teach the human monad, pointing out that through himself alone is salvation to be obtained." (98)

At this point one can surely see the influence of Madame Blavatsky, who viewed the ancient esoteric writings as an interlocked chain of initiatory instructions, to be interpreted in a Gnostic light, and with the use of Gnostic terminology. (One might perhaps add that the possible initiatory use of the Gītā is an option to which scholars might give much more attention, though initiation into a school of bhakti rather than a Gnostic fellowship.)

When Subba Row goes on to say that this view "implies no idea of a personal God", one may also see a combination of Vedantic and Theosophical-Gnostic ideas - Vedantic because the Real is high above the limitations of personality and nāmarūpa, Theosophical for similar reasons, though with the added polemical edge of a dispute with accepted Judaeo-Christian theology. In either case, the conventional and obvious bhakti interpretation is bypassed, in the implicit belief that it represents an undeveloped and un-gnostic alternative suitable only to the uninitiated. This same point of view is expanded - though one is bound to say somewhat haphazardly - in Subba Row's later lectures.

But there is one further point in his introductory presentation which is at least worthy of a mention, viz., his emphasis on the importance of numerology (esp. 100f). This is not an unimportant point, and adds a dimension of



genuine esotericism, which Western commentators otherwise have totally overlooked.

In his more extended lectures on the Gītā, delivered at the 11th Theosophical Convention in December 1886, and first published in The Theosophist in 1887 on the basis of shorthand notes, Subba Row adds more details, but these often get lost in a welter of generalisations. For instance, one has to read forty-five pages of the subsequent book before coming to the first mention of the Gītā! Again he emphasises the Logos, the monad, and Gnostic (esoteric) initiations:

All the initiations that man ever invented were invented for the purpose of giving man a clear idea of the Logos, to point out the goal, and to lay down rules by which it is possible to facilitate the approach to the end towards which nature is constantly working. (43)

The Gītā, then, is "the book of the philosophy of the Logos" (60).

Krishna actually is the Logos, descending to the plane of the soul in order to accomplish some great purpose (49f). and spiritual development and progress actually entitles one to a union with the Logos, and then "there is, as it were, a sort of reaction emanating from the Logos for the good of humanity" (63) - though this does not appear to be central, when compared with personal spiritual culture. Beyond this Subba Row does not go; it is true that he hints at a deeper mystery hidden in the Gītā, but since he expressly states that he does not intend to expound it (65), we are left guessing as to what it might have been. All he does is to refer vaguely to H.P. Blavatsky's The Secret Doctrine for elucidation - though according to Eek he found the first draft of that book "both diffuse and chaotic" (664). And certainly The Secret Doctrine as we have it, refers to the Gītā only in passing, and

then by way of Subba Row's lectures. Apparently we have here the classical case of two locked boxes, each of which contains the other's key!

On some occult matters, Subba Row's interpretation of the Gītā did not, despite Blavatsky's support, meet with universal approval among Theosophists. I am myself in no way qualified to deal with the details in question, though the main bone of contention appears to have been his espousal (on the basis of the Māṇḍūkya Upanishad) of a four-fold, rather than a seven-fold division of the infinite cosmos. At all events, controversy ensued. He was charged by at least one American Theosophist with "Brahman narrowness", and partly on this account left the Society shortly afterward.

But Subba Row continued to be quoted, and his lectures continued in circulation for many years. Perhaps partly because of the manner in which they had been delivered, there remained a number of points which other Theosophists felt needed further treatment. A Parsi Theosophist, N.D. Khandelvala, for instance, asked for further explanation of the doctrine of the Logos.

As the doctrine of the Logos is the very basis of the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, and as almost every reader of the "Notes" has been startled by hearing of innumerable Logoi, a good deal of explanation is necessary to make this portion of the teaching as clear as possible. What are these innumerable Logoi and what relation do they bear to each other? (The Theosophist, 1887, 746).

My impression here is that this particular difficulty was caused precisely by a failure to take sufficiently seriously the original meaning of the Gītā, as opposed to its esoteric interpretation. In the Sāṅkhya school of Hindu philosophy there are indeed innumerable human souls, or purushas, and this view is strongly reflected in the Gītā. If one insists on interpreting

the Gītā on the basis of a Vedantic (or other) monism, in which there is only one world-soul, then this particular point of doctrine is bound to appear difficult - if, that is, it is noticed at all.

#### CHATTERJEE - THE ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

As well as Damodar and Subba Row, the third outstanding Indian Theosophist of the early days was the Bengali Brahmin Mohini Mohun Chatterjee, a descendent of Ram Mohun Roy and also related to the Tagore family. By profession a lawyer, he lectured widely in Europe and America, and in the 1880s he was regarded as one of the great intellectual forces in the Society. At first he was held in high esteem by H.P. Blavatsky, but things subsequently went sour (for reasons which I do not propose to enter into) and he too subsequently slipped out of the Society - though not before he had made his contribution to Gītā study.

Subba Row, as we have seen, was concerned with the inner meaning of the Gītā. At this time, it seems that for those Theosophists who did not read Sanskrit, reference was still made to the century-old translation of Charles Wilkins, though there were others. Mohini set himself to produce a new translation, which appeared in the late 1880s as The Bhagavad Gita, or The Lord's Lay. I have not been able to discover when or where the first edition appeared, but the second came out in 1887, and it was reprinted in New York as recently as in 1960. It contains little actual interpretation, though it does strongly affirm the transcendental unity of all religion, urges that the

Gītā ought to be read alongside the Bible, and in all essentials follows Śaṅkara, "the spiritual chief of modern India" (p.ii). Its conclusion is that "Human nature is one, God is but one, and the path of salvation, though many in appearance, is really but one". (276)

Whether or not Mohini's translation was intended to become a standard Theosophical version is not quite clear, but my guess is that it appeared under something of a cloud, at least as far as India was concerned. Therefore it was always more important in America than in India.

During the 1880s, then, we have been able to observe a growing interest in the Gītā as a "book of initiations" and a quarry of Gnostic doctrine, which needs to be interpreted not historically but allegorically if its secrets are to be unlocked. We find Theosophical writers (most of them Indians) following a mixture of occult and traditional Hindu lines of interpretation, working out allegories, and occasionally calculating the age and origin of the Gītā on the basis of astrological data. The question of the historicity of Krishna was sometimes dealt with in the same way. Let me give you an example.

#### HISTORICITY OF KRISHNA

In the late 1890s there was a discussion conducted partly in the pages of the Madras Christian College Magazine and partly in The Theosophist about the relative historicity of Christ and Krishna. At this time it was not uncommon for Christians to compare the historicity of the two, not

altogether to Krishna's advantage, and to assert that the New Testament belongs to the area of fact, the Gītā to the realm of fiction. Why Hindu (and Theosophical) writers should have risen to this bait at all is not clear, since on their view, absolute Reality does not belong within the realm of historical cause and effect at all. But challenges are sometimes very hard to resist, particularly if it be felt that an opponent is gaining some advantage out of it. This particular controversy was an excellent example of two parties arguing at cross purposes, using completely different methods, and arriving at opposite conclusions. P.C. Mukherji, the main Theosophical spokesman, spent a fair amount of time being rude to his Christian antagonists, but finally uses astrological data to show "...the date of his incarnation to have been at least about 1400 BC, if not 3120 BC, which is the date still in vogue in our almanacs". (Nov.1897, 109)

One is tempted to comment that a method which can get a variability of 1700 years over the matter of an individual's birth cannot really be called precise. But that is not the point. The point is that Theosophists (and other Hindus) were becoming aware that there are historical problems connected with the Gītā - problems connected with date of composition, the actual personality of Krishna, Arjuna and the other heroes, and the actual context in which the work was first written (or composed). This incidentally was the type of question which had come to fascinate Western scholars. And one may perhaps feel that it was rather a pity that Theosophists at this time were either unaware that these questions were being asked, or were prepared to accept some improbable answers. In this case, the astrological "data" amounted to little more than a single incidental reference in X:35, in which Krishna says: "Mārgaśīrṣa am I of months". The procedure then was to

calculate how long it had been since that particular constellation had coincided with the vernal equinox. The arguments are set out in full in a series of articles published in The Theosophist in 1908, though Mukherji's article of 1897 rests on the same assumptions. Whether they are, or are not, convincing the individual must decide for himself.

#### THE GĪTĀ AS A SYMBOL OF NATIONAL UNITY

As the turn of the century approached, the GĪtā was coming in India to assume greater and greater importance, not only as a spiritual treatise, but as a political symbol. The national movement was now well under way, particularly in Bengal, and national movements always need focal points and powerful symbols. The first generation of Indian Theosophists seem not to have been particularly interested in the political implications of the GĪtā, though Subba Row had concluded his 1886 lectures by asserting that in the light of the GĪtā, much of popular Hinduism had served not to "promote the welfare of the Hindu nation", but had demoralised it and sapped it of its spiritual strength, "...and have led to the present state of things, which, I believe, is not entirely due to political degeneration". (126f.) There are echoes here of Ram Mohun Roy and Dayanand Sarasvati, both of whom saw in their different ways religious renewal leading to moral and ultimately to national renewal. But around the turn of the century, there developed in Bengal particularly a radical movement in which Krishna was elevated into a national hero, and in which some at least of the teachings of the GĪtā were

given a directly political interpretation. Nishkāmakarma, selfless endeavour, for instance, was to be for the sake of the nation. Nationalism itself, in the eyes of Aurobindo Ghose, actually was an avatāra, born to restore Hindu dharma. The Gītā was a political manifesto. The battlefield of Kurukshetra was an image of the nationalist struggle, with Hindu dharma ranged against the false dharma of the British rulers. Not all Hindus approve of this nationalist use of Hindu symbols: Rabindranath Tagore, for instance, disliked it intensely, mainly because he saw extreme nationalism as a denial of humanity, a disease which India had caught from the West. And within a very few years a further shift in emphasis took place, away from the idea of Hinduism as a national religion and toward Hinduism as a universal religion - still Indian, to be sure, but held in trust by India for the sake of the world as a whole.

One may observe this change taking place in the wirings of Aurobindo Ghose (Sri Aurobindo). Before his imprisonment in 1908 he was a Hindu nationalist; after his release he was a Hindu universalist. In between he had seen visions of Krishna (and of Swami Vivekananda), and had learned what he called "the Sadhana of the Gita" and the universal message of the Sanātana Dharma.

As we all know, in her early days in India Annie Besant refused to become directly involved in politics, though at what cost to her habitually political consciousness one can only imagine. That she understood well enough the political implications of the Hindu renaissance is very clear; also that in the long run she wished to play a part in it. And how better to do so than by entering into the interpretation of the Bhagavad Gītā, the national scripture par excellence?

Her contribution in this area was slightly delayed, but at the thirtieth anniversary meeting of the Theosophical Society in Adyar she did what Subba Row had done twenty years earlier, and delivered four lectures on the Gītā, published in the following year as Hints on the Study of the Bhagavad Gita.

These lectures retain much of the homiletical style of her rejected past, whether Anglican or Fabian Socialist. Krishna has replaced Jesus Christ, it is true, but the terms remain much the same. There is still faith, doubt, understanding, action, revelation, submission. She sees the message of the Gītā as universal, after the style of the Christian Gospel, addressing itself not to Hindus, or even to those gnostics who are able to unravel its allegories, but to humanity as a whole. To speak of the Gītā, she announces, "...is to speak of the history of the world, of its vast complexity, of that web of desires, thoughts, and actions which makes up the evolution of humanity". (1) If the Gītā appears at first sight complex, this is only because of the complexity of the world - a world in which "...the author of the Gītā is the upholding and the sustaining life" (2). The "author" is of course Krishna, not Vyāsa or an anonymous editorial committee: Mrs Besant has accepted a theory of direct personal inspiration closely akin to that of the Christian fundamentalist. Some intermediate hand there may have been; but the authority of the Gītā could not be sustained by any less support than that of Krishna himself. And Krishna is God.

To God one can do nothing save submit in faith and trust - to do the sadhana of the Gītā. To "understand" the Gītā one must live it (4f) -



and only to those who actually do live it will the final mystery be revealed. For although the subject-matter and message of the Gītā are universal, Annie Besant would not have been Annie Besant (and certainly she would not have been a Theosophist) had she not believed in a final core of mystery and secrecy, revealed only to an inner circle of initiates. But each initiate is henceforth able to instruct others, on a cosmic plan: "Each true reading marks a stage of Human evolution, marks a point in human progress." (6) Again this sounds very like Sri Aurobindo, and again one is left wondering about the possibility of mutual influence somewhere along the way.

There are, she says, two "quite obvious" meanings of the Gītā, which in effect represent macrocosm and microcosm - the world and the individual history and allegory. The first of these is a plain statement of wie es eigentlich gewesen ist, which anyone can learn simply by reading and believing.

The inner meaning, as it is sometimes called, that which comes home to the hearts of you and me, that which is called the allegory, is the perennial meaning, repeated over and over again in each individual, and is really the same in miniature. (7)

The one is not 'truer' than the other: "just as history is true, so is allegory true". (9) Krishna is God. God would not and cannot deceive us. So what he says about the course of events must be so. To the question "How do you know that any of these things are so?" only one answer is possible, viz., "If Krishna is God, then they must be so." And to Annie Besant, Krishna was clearly God - for India.

She had of course not the slightest doubt that Krishna was what the Gītā and the Purānas say that he was - an Avatar, come to turn India into

a world-saviour (12f). In arguing this case, she made much incidental use of Christian imagery, speaking of humiliation, crucifixion and resurrection, though never other than in an Indian context. But now the drama was not that of the avatāra of nationalism, come to expel the foreign daityas and asuras, but the drama of universal human history. The avatāra of Krishna had come down for the benefit of mankind as a whole, and not just for Indians, and hence there is in process of emerging from India's humiliation a universal gospel (15f). Again, one would love to know whether Aurobindo had been studying this book during his imprisonment in Alipur jail!

But the message still had clearly political overtones. In a period of political and cultural upheaval, it was necessary to take Krishna at his word in all things. Clearly it was Arjuna's duty (and by implication, the duty of the new India) to fight, and despite Arjuna's initial doubt, Krishna had manifested himself to teach wiser and above all more effective counsels. "Doubt saps virility, vampirizes the mind... (wrote Annie Besant). Understand in order that you may act." (27) Such was the unveiling of history which she found in the Gītā, and which she assiduously taught to revolutionary India, while reserving the right to point her inner circle toward higher things.

The Gītā is, then, history, "...the Great Unveiling, the drawing away of the veil that covers the real scheme which history works out on the physical plane..." (9) But the Gītā is also allegory.

Here Annie Besant breaks with the Gnostic terminology of Madame Blavatsky and Subba Row, and turns to some more or less equivalent Hindu expressions. The Gītā reveals a conflict between the lower manas, the mind unfolding, symbolised by Arjuna; and kāma, the ties of the past, symbolised by

Arjuna's relatives. The story of the Gītā is then the story of the gradual unfolding of the manas to wisdom and decisive action. Arjuna is the hero, almost the Nietzschean superman, who is the captain of his fate, the master of his soul; "Into the battle he must plunge alone; by his strong right arm, by his own unflinching will, by his own unwavering courage, that battle must be fought to the bitter end." (31) For only thus is the Self formed.

In its essence, the Gītā is a Yoga Shastra, a manual of disciplined action directed to a particular purpose; and only in so far as we are able to learn Yoga from it can it be said to have succeeded in its purpose. "The eleventh adhyaya is the very heart of the Gita, its essence." (52) And she sums up:

Right activity, then, is the lesson of the Gita, and right activity is acting in harmony with the divine will. That is the only true definition of right activity; not for fruit, not for desire for movement, not from attachment to any object, or to any results of activity, but, wholly in harmony with the Will that works for universal good. (46)

Of course, Mrs Besant was to have a great deal more to say about the Gītā. In 1904 she had published her own version of the text, assisted by four or five Hindu pundits, and often in succeeding years she was to urge Hindus to contemplate Krishna as the ideal leader of men, the "active" and "gracious" one, in whom one could discern "half-heard melody" and "elusive fleeting grace, scarce seen but sensed", but also "human greatness as a politician, as statesman, as a guide of nations". (Sharpe: Not to Destroy But to Fulfil, 1965, 195f). At all events, Krishna had a much wider appeal than Shivaji, though perhaps less purely human appeal than Gandhi was ultimately to

demonstrate. But that is another, later story, in which the Gītā continues to play an interesting role. It is perhaps also worth suggesting that the allegorical interpretation in which the early Theosophists excelled was to exercise an unacknowledged influence on the way in which Gandhi read the Gītā - though that is not a matter I am able to go into on this occasion.

In this study we have covered a period of little more than twenty years. We have seen the Gītā brought to the attention of the early Theosophists, and we have seen phases of interpretation - esoteric, allegorical, nationalist and universal - follow one another in rapid sequence. Not that they are in any way mutually exclusive. Every holy scripture, of whatever origin, is capable of being interpreted on many levels more or less simultaneously. But the fact remains, that different individuals ask different questions, and come up with different answers. And one of the great attractions of the Gītā to scholar and adept alike lies precisely in its great variety, and in the ease with which it is capable of sustaining different levels of interpretation, none of which finally rules any of the others out of court. There will for this reason never be a "final" commentary on the Gītā. It will be up to each generation to interpret it as best it can. Currently we are passing through a period in which vague impressionism seems more attractive than hard and sustained study, in Gītā studies as in so much else. If the early Theosophists erred in their labours, it was probably in their lack of concern for the dull textual and historical work which was being done at the same time by scholars in the Universities of the West. It would not have changed their minds on essential issues (or what to them were essential issues), but it might have strengthened some

of their instinct and discouraged them from following some others (particularly those having to do with dating) too enthusiastically.

But when all that has been said, the fact remains that here we have a fascinating chapter in the history of religion, and of the encounter of East and West. If I have succeeded in conveying to you something of that sense of fascination which I feel in the study of scriptural interpretation, I shall be amply satisfied.