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The Iconography of the Bhagavad Gītā

The visual theology of a Hindu scripture

It is well-known that the *Bhagavad Gītā* has assumed a place of central importance in modern Hinduism, closely related to the ongoing debate of what constitutes the main message of this sacred text. Since the late nineteenth century a *Bhagavad Gītā* commentary has become a *de rigueur* exercise for Hindu reformers and missionary writers, including the modern Indian *gurus* preaching in the West. The changing role and reinterpretation of this scripture have been commented upon by many Indian and Western scholars and the cross-cultural influences at work in this reinterpretation have been extensively analysed. But as far as I am aware, nobody has yet studied the iconography of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, especially the existing illustrations of its two main characters, Krishna and Arjuna. This seems extraordinary, given the modern popularity of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

I would like to briefly describe and discuss some of the images associated with the *Bhagavad Gītā* by looking at their traditional representation and context as well as their popular modification and diffusion in modern Hinduism. Most scholars have been content to study the text but it must be emphasized that iconographic data provide an additional primary source of considerable importance for the comparative study of religion, a source which has been relatively neglected, not only in the study of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, but in the study of Indian religions in general. Yet religious images provide an alternative 'visual theology,' to the philosophical and theological ideas enshrined in a text and, moreover, they often express much of the basic religiousness of a people which may not be identical with the ideas expressed by a philosophical, religious and social élite which is mainly responsible for the transmission of sacred knowledge.

Albert C. Moore¹ has described iconography as both the active 'writing *in* images' as well as the 'writing *about* images', that is to say, the study and analysis of what has been written in or expressed by religious images. Religious ideas and experiences find visual expression in many different media. If one considers the case of sacred scriptures alone, they are often, although not always, accompanied by illustrations which may have developed parallel to or separate from the interpretation of the text itself. Thus, the analysis of particular iconographic motifs may provide clues to changes in the understanding, religious importance and cultural function of a sacred text which must be distinguished from the history of the reception and transmission of that text. It is also important to realize that images do not explain themselves, except perhaps to the initiated. Religious images may corroborate, complement or even contradict the ideas expressed in a text but like the messages expressed in words, images have to be decoded and explained. They require an interpretation of their intrinsic meaning and content and their full symbolic value in relation to a wider context. This involves the translation of one symbolic system, namely that of images, into another, that is, that of words and ideas. Thus, several acts of interpretation come into play if one wants to satisfactorily decode the 'visual theology' of religious images. A complex hermeneutic process is at work but it would take us too far afield here if we were to analyse its various stages discussed in the literature on iconography.²

I would simply like to offer a few remarks on the motifs, themes and figures of the *Bhagavad Gītā* as found in actual representational images and relate these to the themes and concepts of the text. To do this satisfactorily, it is necessary to comment on the relationship between text and image in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Text and image in the Bhagavad Gītā

Theology and philosophy, as the history of ideas in general, are always embedded in a wider social and cultural context. To uncover

1. Albert C. Moore, *Iconography of Religions* (London: 1977), p. 21 f.
2. See especially E. Panofsky's pioneering work *Studies in Iconology* (New York: 1939). A more up-to-date treatment is found in the article 'Iconology and Iconography' by J.H.A. Engelbregt, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. VII (New York & London: 1967), pp. 329-33.

the scaffolding with the help of which the building of theological ideas is firmly erected, one has to look at the concrete support given by material culture and the social processes and structure operative in a particular society. If one wishes to illuminate the richness and complexity of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, it is not enough to discuss its ideas or look at contemporary commentaries. One needs to enquire into the rich and varied history of this text and know much more about its transmission from generation to generation. The textual transmission of the *Bhagavad Gītā* before modern times belongs to the wider context of the history of the transmission of Sanskrit manuscripts. Some detailed information on the manuscript tradition and the variants of the *Bhagavad Gītā* text in its different recensions can be found in Belvalkar's introduction to the Poona critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*³ and in Pusalker's *Studies in the Epics and Purāṇas*⁴ yet they leave many unanswered questions about the actual transmission of this sacred text and its religious function down the ages. Manuscript experts also seem to experience some difficulty in trying to explain why Hindu religious manuscripts were illustrated only relatively late in comparison with the much earlier and profuse illustrations found in Buddhist and Jain manuscripts. The date and provenance of the earliest group of Hindu manuscripts is much debated but quite apart from the question when Hindu sacred knowledge was first committed to writing on palm leaves and manuscripts, it is certain that another long period elapsed before these became illustrated.

Jeremiah P. Losty,⁵ a Sanskrit manuscript expert from the British Library, London, has commented at length on the cultural history of the manuscript and book tradition in India and the relative importance of illustrations. He writes :

3. See the introduction to vol. VII of the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, (Poona : Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1947); also the introduction of the separate critical edition of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, (Poona : 1968)². A helpful summary of recent discussions is found in R. M. Minor, "The *Bhagavad Gītā* and modern Scholarship: An Appraisal of Introductory Conclusions", *The Journal of Studies in the Bhagavad Gītā* 1 (1981), pp. 29-60.
4. Bombay : 1963; see especially pp. 163-87
5. *The art of the book in India*, (London: The British Library, 1982); it describes in detail masterpieces of Indian illustrated manuscripts from the 10th to the 19th centuries. The book was produced on the occasion of the British Library exhibition on 'The Art of the Book in India', held during the Festival of India in London during the summer of 1982.

Indian tradition has always accorded higher status to the spoken than to the written word. The Hindus saw no urgent need to write down their sacred books of divine revelation until comparatively late, and hence the arts of calligraphy, illumination and book illustration were not widely practised by them before about the 14th century. But adherents of the other great Indian religious systems, the Buddhist and the Jainas, needed to reconcile the differently remembered versions of the words of their human founders and hence by the 1st century A.D. had written down their complex canonical texts. A tradition records that the Buddhist canon was engraved on sheets of gold, and it is Buddhist texts which comprise the earliest surviving Indian manuscripts with noteworthy calligraphy, from about the fifth century A.D.

However the art of illumination and illustration of manuscripts does not seem to have been practised before about A.D. 1000, and appears to have developed in the Buddhist monasteries of eastern India under the Pala dynasty to add magical protection to manuscripts of the important Buddhist text, the Perfection of Wisdom. . . .

The coming of Islam to India introduced the initially alien book traditions of the Muslim peoples, and especially of the Iranians. The format was the codex, the sewn and bound volume of vertical leaves, and the material was paper. . . . Little is known of the earliest period of Muslim manuscript production in India. . . . No surviving illustrated manuscript of a Muslim text is earlier than the 15th century, and these generally display to varying degrees dependence on the different Iranian centres of book production, particularly that of Shiraz.

Speaking of the influence of Akbar's great studio on the Rajput nobles at Akbar's court, Losty goes on to say that many Rajput courts of the 17th century maintained their painting studios which developed at their own pace with greater or lesser Mughal influence, according to the taste of their individual rulers some of whom reverted to a more Hindu style derived from the pre-Mughal period. For their manuscripts they did not at first adopt the alien codex format but maintained the ancient *pothī* format which had been used for palm leaves. Losty writes:

Rajput manuscripts were usually large-scale *pothīs* of the Hindu scriptures and other Indian classics, with the text on one side of a

folio and the picture on the other. Indian artists had never been happy with the Iranian concept of integration of text and illustration on the single page forming an harmonious whole, but much preferred their separation on different pages. Here in the Rajput studios they were able to do this, achieving by the end of the 18th century volumes which are rather picture books with a minimum of text than illustrated manuscripts. The codex format was adopted for smaller works, with the text usually written in a separate panel at the top of the painting.⁶

It is from this milieu of the 18th century and from these court studios that we possess the earliest illustrated *Bhagavad Gītā* manuscripts. However, illustrations of the *Mahābhārata*, of which the *Gītā* is after all a part, can be found in earlier manuscripts. The lively battle scenes of the great epic are depicted much earlier still in the classical sculptures of many temple friezes where *Bhagavad Gītā* scenes are rarely ever seen. Krishna, the *Gītāchārya* discoursing to Arjuna, could have been sculpted, as he was for example in the 14th century temple at Pushpagiri in Andhra Pradesh,⁷ but this is an exception. Further searches may well bring a few other examples to light but it would still be true to say that by and large the transmission and importance of the *Bhagavad Gītā* was different from that of the *Mahābhārata*. This is further corroborated by the fact that when the *Mahābhārata* stories were transmitted to Indonesia, they provided rich source material for the illustrations of the Indonesian shadow plays, but these plays never seem to include any material from the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Moreover, the numerous traditional representations of Krishna in Indian sculpture and paintings are drawn from *purāṇic* mythology, especially from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and not from the *Bhagavad*

6. The quotations are taken from the exhibition notes of 'The Art of the Book in India', pp. 1, 2 & 4.

7. See C. Sivaramamurti, *Rishis in Indian Art and Literature* (New Delhi: 1981), figures 8 & 9 showing sculptures from a 14th century temple at Pushpagiri, A.P., depicting Krishna as *Gītāchārya*. S. Kramrisch describes another example from a *Mahābhārata* frieze in the Halebid temple (late 12th century): the charioteer Krishna is leading Arjuna, equipped with bow and arrows, on his chariot into battle (which is not shown). In the background one can observe two human figures standing upright with their hands folded in an attitude of adoration. This may be interpreted as evidence of Krishna *bhakti*. See S. Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture*, (London: 1933), p. 197 and plate XLVII. I have not come across any other examples so far.

Gītā. Most pictures which explicitly illustrate figures or scenes from the *Bhagavad Gītā* belong either to the 18th, 19th or farm ore often the 20th century.

How has this come about? How can one explain the relative absence of *Bhagavad Gītā* illustrations in the past and their profusion in the present?

Traditionally, the *Bhagavad Gītā* was primarily a text for meditation and philosophical commentary. It provides comparatively little material for visualisation. Although most of the substance of the poem represents a philosophical discourse, one could say that its setting on the battlefield of Kurukshetra does nevertheless include a minimal narrative. But the *Bhagavad Gītā*, like the earlier *Upanishads* of which it is considered to be the essence, remained unillustrated; it was a poem to be recited and reflected upon rather than to be concretely visualized in the shape of representational images. From an artistic point of view the text of the *Gītā*, like that of the *Upanishads*, provides little inspiring material for a painter. The abstract philosophical themes expounded in the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna would initially have had much less appeal for the court painters and their patrons than the vigorous narratives of the *Bhāgavata Purāna* which was always one of the most popular texts illustrated at the Hindu courts. It seems that the minimal narrative of the *Gītā* is not a sufficient reason for explaining the relative lateness of its illustrations, especially when one considers that the much earlier paintings of Buddhist and Jain manuscripts in no sense illustrated a narrative but were simply images of the Bodhisattva or other divinities added to the text. Moreover, the *Bhagavad Gītā* begins with an opening scene describing Krishna and Arjuna on their chariot amidst the warring armies on the battlefield which surely has powerful image potential. This was probably the first scene to be illustrated in the 18th century, soon followed by other themes depicted in visual form.

The absence of *Bhagavad Gītā* illustrations during earlier periods of Indian history is not sufficiently explained by the general lateness of illustrated Hindu manuscripts when compared with those of the Buddhists and Jains. In any case, many scenes, figures and motifs from other Hindu religious works were depicted from an early period onwards in the rich and exuberant tradition of Hindu temple sculpture. But scenes from the *Bhagavad Gītā* do not belong to the traditional

repertoire of Hindu iconography. It is my contention that the paucity of early pictorial representations of *Bhagavad Gītā* scenes or figures is a proof of the traditional position and function of this religious text in that its primary importance consisted in being one of the classical sources of Vedānta, held in great esteem by a brahmanical minority but relatively unimportant for the widespread *bhakti* cults, in stark contrast to the very different influence of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* which had a wide appeal and nourished much of popular religiosity. F. E. Hardy,⁸ in his detailed study of the *Bhagavata Purāṇa*, has discussed the difference between the 'emotional *bhakti*' of the latter and the 'intellectual *bhakti*' of the much earlier *Bhagavad Gītā*. These two quite separate traditions have not always been sufficiently distinguished in past studies and, moreover, they certainly have become fused (if not confused) in modern popular understanding. In order to understand more adequately the process by which the *Bhagavad Gītā* first came to develop its modern popularity, we need more historical research which could answer questions such as why this religious text was first illustrated at the courts of Hindu rajas during the mid- and late eighteenth century, at what time the manuscripts of this scripture were changed from a *pothī* to a codex format, during which period and for what reasons the text became popular for personal recitation, sometimes on a daily basis. We do not possess this knowledge at present but we can say that the modern mass popularity of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, particularly since the late nineteenth century, is closely connected with important social, political and religious changes. This popularity is not only demonstrated by the mass diffusion of the text, printed and translated in countless versions since the beginning of this century, but it is also shown by the numerous visual representations of the central figures and scenes of this scripture which I shall now briefly discuss.

Images of Krishna and Arjuna based on the *Bhagavad Gītā*

The literary form of the *Bhagavad Gītā* text has remained the same throughout many centuries but its meaning has been interpreted quite differently. Advaita Vedānta always emphasized the primacy of *jñāna*, and modern Advaitins still consider this to be the essence of the *Gītā*. However, most modern Hindu writers have singled out *bhakti* and especially *karma-yoga* in the form of disinterested action as the central

8. *Emotional Krishna Bhakti* (Oxford University: 1976).

teaching of the *Gītā*. In his recent study on Hinduism Arun Shourie⁹ has called into question this activist interpretation of the text. He speaks of the ambivalence and equivocation of its teaching on action, an ambivalence which 'has enabled our reformers to infer different messages from the *Gītā*. . . it has also forced them into sleights-of-hand whenever they have insisted that the *Gītā* advocates their message to the exclusion of other messages.'¹⁰ Shourie sees quite rightly that, traditionally, the supreme goal in the *Gītā* remained the same as in the *Upanishads* and that its activist reinterpretation introduced an element of novelty which cannot be adequately derived from the text alone. He asks with some justification :

And why is it that Shankara's construction of the *Gītā*'s message . . . is the one that exercised such a dominating influence for so many centuries ? Simply because it is the one that follows most naturally from the basic texts, the *Upanishads*. The only way in which his interpretation could have been dislodged would have been to repudiate the texts themselves and this his combatants, barring the aberrant *Charvakas*, were never prepared to do.

And so it came about that the argument for works and deeds that the author of the *Gītā* tried to graft on to the tradition was quietly set aside.¹¹

But it is precisely this teaching about works and deeds which modern reformers have highlighted above all else. Since Vivekananda at least, if not before, the Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gītā* has become the *karmayogin par excellence*, engaged in ceaseless activity, working in total selflessness for the wellbeing of all. One can trace the emergence of this *karmayogin* figure in the writings of Hindu reformers, as I have done elsewhere,¹² but one can also chart its development as a new iconographic motif in the world of religious images.

Ideally, this development needs to be demonstrated through the showing of pictures but my ongoing research can only be summarized

9. *Hinduism: Essence and Consequence*. A Study of the Upanishads, the *Gītā* and the Brahma-Sutras (Delhi: 1979); see especially pp. 190-210.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

12. See U. King, "Who is the ideal karmayogin? The meaning of a Hindu religious symbol", *Religion* 10 (1980), pp. 41-59.

here in words. I am still engaged in the collection of images drawn from such different sources as Sanskrit manuscripts of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in various libraries, early printed versions of the text in either Sanskrit, Indian vernaculars or western translations; modern oleographs and book illustrations; Indian calendars, bazaar- and inlaid wood pictures. I also include some observations on *Bhagavad Gītā* scenes found represented in many different media during a recent visit to South India.

No unilinear development can be discerned in the iconography of the *Bhagavad Gītā* but a number of different themes can be noticed and subtle changes can be traced in their representation. The illustrations revolve almost exclusively around the two main characters of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, namely, Krishna and Arjuna. In most illustrations they are shown together, often with their chariot. The emphasis is quite definitely on Krishna although very occasionally Arjuna is depicted on his own in some manuscripts, showing him in a situation of despondency and grief, refusing to fight (see the end of chapter I). In the representations of Krishna emphasis is placed on one of two different models :

1. *The human model* : there is Krishna, the charioteer of Arjuna, who originally belongs to the wider setting of the *Mahābhārata* and who becomes in the modern interpretation of the *Gītā* the ideal model for human action. He is represented with Arjuna on the chariot in a number of different scenes, either simply leading the horses of the chariot, with or without the warring armies in the background or on both sides of the chariot, or turning back to Arjuna with one hand raised in teaching or in the traditional 'fear-dispelling' attitude (*abhaya mudra*). Alternatively, Krishna and Arjuna may be depicted seated on a terrace facing each other in dialogue, without any chariot or armies in sight.
2. *The divine model* : Krishna, the personal God, object of man's love and devotion, as gradually revealed to Arjuna but culminating in the great theophany of chapter XI of the *Gītā*. This model is prominent when Arjuna is shown with folded hands, in a *bhakti* attitude, showing loving devotion and surrender to Krishna. Sometimes Arjuna is shown dismounted from his chariot, kneeling on the ground before Krishna whose head may be surrounded by the golden glow of a halo. The greatest expression of this divine

model is found in Krishna's cosmic form, the *viśva rupa*, linked to the theophany of chapter XI. However, this motif draws on the ancient and very rich iconographic tradition of Vishnu and has been represented in Indian sculpture independently from the *Bhagavad Gītā* since the 5th century A.D. The development and diffusion of the *viśva rupa* in classical Indian art has been studied in great detail by T. S. Maxwell.¹³ One could develop a separate study on its recent illustrations in the *Bhagavad Gītā* but I shall concentrate here on the far more frequent representation of Krishna and Arjuna on the chariot which often fuses the human and divine aspects of Krishna.

I shall now describe in greater detail some examples of these illustrations. As mentioned before, manuscript illustrations of the *Bhagavad Gītā* exist since the 18th century but they are relatively few in number when compared with manuscripts of the text alone or with a philosophical commentary. The earliest illustrations seem to be a literal representation of the chariot scene described at the opening of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. However, the text allows for a number of variations in depicting this scene whose description unfolds progressively in chapters I and II :¹⁴

Then too did (Krishna,) Madhu's son and Pandu's (third-) born
(Arjuna),
Standing erect on their great chariot
Yoked to (snow) white steeds,
Their godly conches loudly blow. I, 14

Then (Arjuna,) whose banner is an ape,
Gazed upon the serried ranks
Of Dhritarashtra's sons. The clash of arms
Began. He lifted up his bow. I, 20

To Krishna then
these words he spake :
"Halt thou my chariot (here),
Between the armies twain. . ." I, 21

13. See T. S. Maxwell, "Transformational Aspects of Hindu Myth and Iconology: Vishvarupa", AARP 4 (December 1973) and "The Deogarh Vishvarupa: A structural analysis", AARP 8 (Dec. 1975)

14. The quotations are taken from R. C. Zaehner's translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in his *Hindu Scriptures*, (London: 1966).

So saying Arjuna sat down
 Upon the chariot-seat (though) battle (had begun),
 Let slip his bow and arrows,
 His mind distraught with grief. I, 47

So speaking Arjuna, scorcher of the foe,
 To Krishna said :
 "I will not fight" :
 And having spoken held his peace. II, 9

And Krishna faintly smiled
 Between the armies twain,
 And spoke these words to Arjuna
 In his (deep) despondency. II, 10

The Blessed Lord said :

This change-over from 'Krishna' to 'Blessed Lord' in chapter II emphasizes the wider *bhakti* context and from now on, the spiritual instruction begins in the text. Thus, modern reproductions of older manuscript illustrations of the chariot scene, even when they include the warring armies, are sometimes entitled 'Krishna delivering the sermon of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.'¹⁵ This title makes sense from verses II, 10 ff. onwards but the earlier verses quoted allow for a number of variations : Krishna and Arjuna might be depicted standing on their chariot blowing conch-shells (I, 14), or Arjuna might be shown with his bow drawn with armies in action (I, 20), or Arjuna might be seated with his bow beside him or lying on the ground (I, 47). All these options were exercised in the illustration of the chariot scene and some of the motifs were fused or elaborated on. Arjuna is often shown in the full armour of a warrior but may be dressed in the rich fineries of a raja whereas Krishna is always painted in blue, garlanded, dressed in fine garments or simply a *dhoti*, with his crown and peacock feather, now and then shown with some of the emblems of Vishnu.

A further elaboration of the chariot scene occurs through the incorporation of an explicit *bhakti* motif when Arjuna discards his bow and arrow and presents his *namaskār* to Krishna with his hands folded

15. As in J. Leroy Davidson, *Art of the Indian Subcontinent from the Los Angeles Collections* (Los Angeles: 1968), p. 87, showing an 18th century Kishangarh painting. See also the late 18th century Kangra painting "Krishna delivering the message of the *Gītā* to Arjuna in the battlefield" in P. Banerjee. *The Life of Krishna in Indian Art* (New Delhi: 1978), p. 48.

and sometimes his head bowing down in an attitude of surrender and devotion, sitting in the chariot or standing or kneeling beside it.

The dialogue situation between Krishna and Arjuna is best illustrated by what may be called the 'terrace scene', not as such described in the *Bhagavad Gītā* text but representing an imaginary visualization on the part of the painter. Krishna and Arjuna simply sit opposite each other on some cushions on a terrace, with no one else present. Here Krishna's leading role as a teacher is underlined and the *bhakti* aspect may be emphasized through Arjuna's folded hands. This terrace motif has earlier precedents in the Indian tradition, in Moghul portraits and also later in representations of Guru Nanak teaching on the terrace, usually accompanied by some attendants.

It is interesting to see how these three motifs, the chariot scene on the battlefield, the *bhakti* scene (on or next to the chariot) and the terrace scene are carried over from the manuscript tradition to the printed versions of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The earliest printed version of the *Bhagavad Gītā* was Charles Wilkins' famous English translation published in 1785 whereas the first printed Sanskrit versions only appeared in 1805 and 1808. It seems that some orthodox brahmanical circles were opposed to the idea that this sacred text should appear in print rather than be copied by hand.¹⁶ Indian Sanskrit and vernacular versions of the *Gītā* printed during the nineteenth century often carry one outline drawing as a frontispiece whereas none of the early translations into western languages seems to be illustrated. However, the outline drawings in the Sanskrit and vernacular versions appear only after 1850, and in the 1860s and 1870s several printed versions strongly emphasize in their illustrations the presence of the armies and the theme of active battle. Arjuna himself now takes active part in the combat, arrows are flying across in both directions and some victims are lying slain in the foreground of the picture.

This emphasis on the activist interpretation of the chariot scene is carried over into modern times. For example, Sri Aurobindo chose this chariot scene, with the armies ready for battle and Arjuna equipped with his bow, for the title page of his journal *Karmayogin*. *A Weekly Review of National Religion, Literature, Science and Philosophy* (1909–

16. Such opposition is quoted in A. K. Priolkar, *The Printing Press in India* (Bombay: 1958).

10) which he edited during his active political period.¹⁷ The margin of his illustration carries quotations from the *Bhagavad Gītā* in Sanskrit quoting verses II, 50 ('Yoga is wisdom in work') and III, 30 ('Offer to me all thy work and rest thy mind on the Supreme'). During that time Sri Aurobindo interpreted the message of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in a wholly activist way. Krishna, the ideal *Karmayogin*, now calls his countrymen to battle. Aurobindo wrote in his journal: "The recurrent cry of Sri Krishna to Arjuna insists on the struggle: 'Fight and overthrow thy opponents!' 'Remember me and fight!'"¹⁸

This activist symbol of the ideal *karmayogin*, of Krishna encouraging Arjuna to engage in active combat, provided a powerful inspiration for the development of Hindu nationalism and the religious legitimization of the Indian independence movement. I have already referred to the process of textual reinterpretation¹⁹ but here it is important to note that the symbol of Krishna at Kurukshetra as the human-divine model for action in the midst of battle, as the encouraging leader and guide in the turmoil of struggle, has also found permanent visual expression and is currently still reproduced in many oleographs,²⁰ calendar pictures and cover illustrations of *Bhagavad Gītā* editions.²¹

Far more frequent today, however, is the simple, more quiet chariot scene showing only Krishna and Arjuna, emphasizing the teaching and *bhakti* aspect. The '*Gītācārya*' representation has become truly ubiquitous in recent years, especially in South India where it is illustrated in many different media. I have found recent carvings of it in ivory, sandalwood or pith, wooden inlaid pictures of various artistic merit, especially in Bangalore and Mysore, mainly illustrating the *bhakti* aspect but sometimes with added armies drawn up for battle. Other representations have included paintings of this scene in *batik*,

17. This title page is reproduced in the *Sri Aurobindo Centenary Library*, vol. II.

18. Quoted in *Sri Aurobindo Centenary Library*, vol. III, p. 346.

19. See footnote 12.

20. One of the very popular ones, simply described as "The battle of the Mahabharata", is reproduced in V. G. Vitsaxis, *Hindu Epics, Myths and Legends in Popular Illustrations* (New Delhi: 1977), p. 57.

21. A very activist picture of this scene with Arjuna engaging in combat illustrates for example the contemporary cover of the *Bhagavad Gītā* translation published by the International Krishna Consciousness Movement.

on bamboo and textile wall-hangings, *appliqué* work in wool or silk. The chariot scene has been found as a repeated pattern woven on a Chamimalei bedspread, on greeting cards, and even on a monumental scale decorating the front of a Madras cinema. The same chariot scene decorates the title page of innumerable *Bhagavad Gītā* editions and commentaries.

The contemporary influence and diffusion of *Bhagavad Gītā* themes and images can also be observed in temples, although examples are still comparatively rare. The chariot scene, which is by far the most frequent of all *Bhagavad Gītā* illustrations, was only recently added as a painted, framed wall-picture to the Agarcoil temple in Madurai where it hangs in a series of many paintings relating to Vishnu and his *avatāras*. A small stone sculpture of the chariot scene can be seen as part of a temple frieze in the Agastya Ashram in Madras, built in the 1940s, but there must be quite a few examples in modern temples elsewhere. I gather that cities in Gujarat, especially Ahmedabad, Baroda, Porbandar and Dvarka, possess a modern Gita Mandir where texts and illustrations from the *Bhagavad Gītā* can be found around the walls of the temple. More than that, a book representing the *Bhagavad Gītā* is reproduced in silver, bronze and gold and a new goddess, called the goddess Gita, is given a central place of honour. She holds the four Vedas in her hand of which she is said to be the sum.²² Free-standing stone sculptures of the *Gītā* chariot can also be found, for example at Kurukshetra and in the temple complex of the Birla Mandir in Delhi.

The figure of Krishna from the *Bhagavad Gītā* also provides a central focus of devotion for overseas Hindus and their temples. Here, the aspect of *bhakti*, of loving surrender to the Lord, is emphasized above all else and the aspect of battle and action has receded into the background. For example, a recent painting produced by an Indian painter for the Hindu mandir at Bradford in Yorkshire (England) shows Krishna standing up beside the chariot, painted in an elongated manner in flowing robes almost reminiscent of some paintings of Christ, with Arjuna kneeling on the ground before him with his arms and hands raised in adoration. The same motif, painted in a somewhat more

22. I owe this information to the field-work notes of Ms. Kim Knott who collected comparative data in Gujarat for her research on Gujaratis in Leeds. See her Ph.D. on "Hinduism in Leeds", University of Leeds, 1982.

traditional Indian style, can be found in a modern temple of Indian Tamils in Singapore where Krishna raises his hand blessing Arjuna.

Religious and secular meanings of the *Gītācārya* motif

The theism of the *Bhagavad Gītā* can be explored by studying its text or even by examining the stylistic features of its language, as Norvin Hein has done,²³ but one can gain an additional insight into its theology by analysing the visual images of Krishna in modern Hinduism based on the *Gītā*. Traditional representations of Krishna in Indian religious art do not draw on the *Bhagavad Gītā* as a source for the visualization of the divine. This is a modern development which, interestingly, began in the painting studios of Hindu courts rather than among the popular painters of the great pilgrimage centres who produced a wealth of religious images for wide distribution among devotees.²⁴ From the early images illustrating *Bhagavad Gītā* manuscripts and books we have now arrived at a situation where the motif of the *Gītācārya* or Krishna, the ideal *karmayogin* instructing Arjuna about right action, is found widely distributed quite independently and separate from the scripture of the *Gītā*.

What began as the illustration of a text has developed into a religious image in its own right which, on the one hand, has become a true icon, that is to say, a focus for religious worship and devotion, and on the other is even more widely found in a secular context outside home and temple *pūja*, as a religiously based image which can inspire work and action. Just as quotations from the *Bhagavad Gītā* have been used to encourage positive attitudes to modern work in a factory in a publicity film of Hindustan Lever, the image of the *Gītācārya* has been included in the advertisement of such a modern product as a television

23. "Monotheism in the *Bhagavad Gītā*: A Stylistic Clue", International Association for the History of Religions, Uppsala, *Proceedings*, (Leiden: 1975. pp. 250-60.

24. Particularly good examples are the *picchavāi* from Nathdwara in Rajasthan and the development of Kalighat paintings in Calcutta. See R. Skelton, *Rajasthani Temple Hangings of the Krishna Cult*, (New York: 1973); W. G. Archer, *Kalighat Paintings*, (London: 1971). A most helpful survey of the rich Krishna iconography is found in W. Spink, *Krishnamandala. A devotional theme in Indian art* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: 1971).

set.²⁵ These instances might justifiably be described as the contemporary 'secularization' of the *Gītācārya* but then one must remember that the 'sacralization' of this motif, too, is only of a comparatively recent date.

What do both processes tell us about the religiosity of modern Hinduism? Here one needs to be reminded that the popularization of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is not only a modern, but primarily an urban phenomenon with little impact on village Hinduism. It is the literate urban élite which has been most influenced and formed by the universalizing interpretations of modern reform Hinduism, sometimes aptly described as 'neo-Hinduism'. Agehananda Bharati has pointed out that in modern Hindu preaching Krishna is always presented as *Pārthasārathi*, as the stern moral, military and masculine mentor of Arjuna whereas the traditional puja ritual in temples and homes did not refer to this but rather to the bucolic and amorous pursuits of Krishna the lover, rooted in *purāṇic* mythology. Yet in modern Hinduism moulded, as Bharati maintains, by a Protestant work ethic and puritan Gandhian ideals, it is not Krishna the lover but always Krishna the wise charioteer who is put into the foreground, a figure which belongs to quite a different context and tradition than the Krishna of the *gopis*.²⁶

Whilst this is true, it provides no satisfactory explanation for the religious attraction of the Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. There is much continuity and change in the *Gītācārya* motif, as understood today, but there is also a mutual reinforcement and fusion of these different Krishna figures drawn from diverse textual and iconographic traditions. It seems to me important to decode the different levels of religious meaning implicit in the imagery of Krishna associated with the *Bhagavad Gītā* for it allows us to obtain a better understanding of the modern Hindu vision of God.

The convergence of forms and images in Krishna occurs at its most complex in the radiant theophany of chapter XI, displaying the univer-

25. Such an advertisement appeared recently in the *Deccan Herald* on 17 March, 1982, showing a Crown 'Chariot 24' television set. Its screen shows Arjuna holding bow and arrow, Krishna standing upright leading 4 galloping horses, with a Sanskrit and English caption about Krishna's incarnation.

26. See A. Bharati, 'Ritualistic tolerance and ideological rigour: the paradigm of the expatriate Hindus in east Africa', *Contributions to Indian Sociology: New Series* 10:2 (1976), pp. 341-65.

sal form of the *viśva rupa*. But this image belongs much more to Vishnu than to Krishna and is less exclusively connected with the *Bhagavad Gītā* than that of the divine charioteer. Looking at the modern illustrations of the *Gītā* in terms of the very specific chariot scene showing Krishna and Arjuna at Kurukshetra, one can conclude that, although there is no clear-cut chronological development in the iconography of this scene, there is a systematic widening out in its understanding from a scene of literal description and philosophical instruction to one where the major emphasis is on *bhakti* surrender and loving devotion which in certain cases might even be fused with the idea of action in battle.

The symbolic multivalence of the *Gītācārya* motif centres around the fusion of different traits in Krishna as seen by the beholder. Here is a God who speaks to man and also leads him in his actions, even if it means aggressive action, as was required during the movement for political independence. The dialogue situation is also of great importance for, in the midst of battle, Krishna is close to the concerns of human beings and their daily struggles; he is not an abstract God of metaphysics far removed from the daily preoccupations of the multitude. The impact of the image is thus not only about Krishna as both human and divine but it closely involves Arjuna in his doubt and fear with whom many devotees can closely identify. It is thus the mutuality and interdependence of these two figures which makes the symbolic value of their representation doubly powerful. Thus, the visual expression of the *Gītācārya* motif, so widely diffused in India today, reinforces the double sense in which the scripture of the *Gītā* has been understood in modern times: on the one hand, it has been interpreted as a *colloquium de rebus divinis*,²⁷ a dialogue about things divine, but on the other, it has been for many 'a handbook of practical wisdom' to live and act in the world understood as 'a battlefield on which we have to perform our duty.'²⁸

The religious importance of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is evident not only from the many editions and commentaries of this scripture but even more from its recitation in a context of prayer and worship, from the exposition and preaching of its message by many religious figures of

27. A description of the *Bhagavad Gītā* used by T. Aufrecht, *Catalogi Codicum Manuscriptorum* (Oxford: 1864).

28. Shri Shri Prakas in the introduction to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, (Bombay: The Limited Editions Club, 1961.)

contemporary India, brought even closer through the concretely embodied forms of the ideal *karmayogin* and *Gītācārya* which have found a strong visual expression in widely distributed images.

The God of whom the *Bhagavad Gītā* speaks discloses a vision of universal convergence but the way he is portrayed equally strongly expresses his nearness and help to men. The Krishna of the *Gītā* thus possesses both a human and divine face and the response to his image can draw on the rich emotional resources of the long and varied *bhakti* tradition. The literary, visual and emotional associations of the Krishna image endow the *Gītācārya* motif with a powerful appeal for the religious imagination and provide a particularly effective call for action. The visual imagery of the *Gītācārya* integrates modern and traditional meanings. A strong focus for theistic and actively oriented aspirations, it is capable of nourishing and enhancing the dual human search for action and contemplation.