



THE BHAGAVAD GITA

BACKGROUND

The Bhagavad Gita is probably the most famous and popular Hindu text. The words 'Bhagavad Gita' mean 'song of God'. It is part of a much longer set of stories called Mahabarat (which means 'Great Book'). The Mahabharat is very long: about 1.8 million words, compared to The Bible's 800 000 and the Koran's 80 000. It is similar to those books because it is for religious guidance, but also similar to Greek epics like The Iliad and The Odyssey, with their tales of heroes and many Gods. Our story comes from the middle of the whole tale...

STIMULUS

Imagine a hot dusty piece of land. It is flat and plain, with only a few bushes dotted around. You are standing in your chariot in front of your army. If you look to your right, you can see a line of soldiers stretching into the distance, as far as the eye can see. Look to your left, and you see the same in the other direction. Your army is huge.

And if you look ahead, you see your enemy. They too are an immense army, lined up opposite you, ready to fight. Waiting, like your men, to begin the biggest and most bloody battle that the world has ever seen.

There is almost total silence. You can only hear the wind blowing the dust around... and the horses of your chariot chewing at the bit. Now, if you raise your arm above your head and bring it down again, that will be the signal for your men to charge. That's all you have to do. Now is the time.

But you can't do it. Your arm freezes. You think of the many soldiers who will die, the pain they will suffer, and the misery of their families.

This was what happened to a king named Arjuna. He was the third of five brothers, and the best soldier. He was the most skilled archer who had ever lived. And he led this great army.

Because he was so confused, Arjuna called on the Lord Krishna to help him. As Krishna came towards Arjuna, time stood still, and they spoke to each other. Arjuna explained the problem:

'All these people are waiting for me to give the signal. Once I give it, thousands of lives will be lost. When I think of all that bloodshed and pain, I can't bring myself to do it. Wise Krishna, show me the right path.' (1)

Krishna tells Arjuna that he must fight. He gives two reasons. (2)

The first reason is that Arjuna must do his duty. His duty is to be a soldier and a king, and it is more important than his feelings. It would be selfish to put his own feelings first.

The second reason is that Arjuna worries too much because he can't see the real world. True reality is invisible to humans. All we see is part of the picture, whereas Krishna sees all of it. So we think that pain and pleasure and suffering are the only reality, but there is a much bigger and better reality that God can see. Death looks to us like the end, but it is not, so we shouldn't fear our death, or the death of others so much.

So in short:

First reason: do your duty as a soldier and a king.

Second reason: you worry about death and pain because you can't see true reality. (3)

Task Questions

- ✓ What do you think Krishna says?
- ✓ Does Krishna need to ask any questions before deciding?
- ✓ Should Arjuna start the battle? Why?
- ✓ What do you think his reasons are?
- ✓ Are there any reasons that can make it good to fight?
- ✓ Do you agree?
- ✓ Do you understand what Krishna is saying? Is he right?

LESSON COMMENTS

There are two unanswered questions in my version of the story:

- ✓ Who is Arjuna fighting?
- ✓ Why are they fighting?

Only rarely do my classes ask what the reason for the war is! And of course, this ought to have a big impact on our judgment. Why do they forget to ask? One reason why they don't, perhaps, is that as soon as we start to hear a story, we side with the main character and assume they are in the right. (This may also be true when we hear about the actions and history of our own country, which are sometimes utterly different when told from the enemy's point of view!)

The answers are that he is fighting his cousins and that is because they have taken his kingdom. Not only that, but Arjuna and his family previously came to an agreement with them to split the kingdom – even though the cousin's claim to the kingdom was not legal. The cousins ignored the agreement and took everything. Krishna tried to stop them but they didn't listen. So if Arjuna follows Krishna's guidance, he will be following the path of truth, not selfishness.

You could introduce these facts one by one, if you like, to test the class's beliefs: if it is right to fight, does it matter if you end up fighting your family? What if your family have betrayed you?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

SCIENCE – Look at some optical illusions. If we saw these things wrongly, does that mean we don't see the world as it is? How do scientists test whether they have seen the world correctly?

LITERACY – Describe the moment of the battle from the point of view of one of the soldiers, Arjuna, or Krishna. Or, follow the Mahabharat itself and tell the story from the point of view of a messenger who was at the scene.

ART – Make a picture of the scene and/or look at some of the many paintings – easily found on the internet:

[https://www.google.co.uk/search?](https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=krishna+speaks+to+arjuna&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ei=1WA_Vd_XGlziapW4geAG&ved=0CAcQ_AUoAQ&biw=1131&bih=861)

[q=krishna+speaks+to+arjuna&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ei=1WA_Vd_XGlziapW4geAG&ved=0CAcQ_AUoAQ&biw=1131&bih=861](https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=krishna+speaks+to+arjuna&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ei=1WA_Vd_XGlziapW4geAG&ved=0CAcQ_AUoAQ&biw=1131&bih=861)

([https://www.google.co.uk/search?](https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=krishna+speaks+to+arjuna&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ei=1WA_Vd_XGlziapW4geAG&ved=0CAcQ_AUoAQ&biw=1131&bih=861)

[q=krishna+speaks+to+arjuna&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ei=1WA_Vd_XGlziapW4geAG&ved=0CAcQ_AUoAQ&biw=1131&bih=861](https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=krishna+speaks+to+arjuna&source=Inms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ei=1WA_Vd_XGlziapW4geAG&ved=0CAcQ_AUoAQ&biw=1131&bih=861))

The Indian depictions of the scene are highly colourful. Krishna is always blue. One of the reasons offered for this is that blue is the colour of things that are too vast for our eyes to see – the ocean and the sky. He did not have blue skin though. Only those who understood Krishna's power and wisdom would see him as blue. Children could assign symbolic colours to Arjuna or the opposing cousins?

You may also want to look at this 6-minute video, an excerpt from Peter Brook's classic adaptation. This is probably more for the teacher than the class.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_B4Z1PB97KY (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_B4Z1PB97KY)