SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF THE BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ *)

BY

D. D. KOSAMBI

The Bhagavad-Gītā, “Song of the Blessed One”, forms part of the great Indian epic Mahābhārata 1). Its 18 adhyāya chapters contain the report by Sañjaya of a dialogue between the Pāṇḍava hero Arjuna and his Yadu Charioteer Kṛṣṇa, the eighth incarnation of Viṣṇu. The actual fighting is about to begin when Arjuna feels revulsion at the leading part which he must play in the impending slaughter of cousins and kinsmen. The exhortations of Lord Kṛṣṇa answer every doubt through a complete philosophical cycle, till Arjuna is ready to bend his whole mind, no longer divided against itself, to the great killing. The Gītā has attracted minds of bents entirely different from each other and from that of Arjuna. Each has interpreted the supposedly divine words so differently from all the others that the original seems far more suited to raise doubts and to split a personality than to heal an inner division. Any moral philosophy which managed to receive so many variant interpretations from minds developed in widely different types of

*) The following abbreviations have been used: G = the Bhagavad-gītā; J = the Jainaṇaṇa; Mbb = the Mahābhārata; Up = Upaniṣad; RV = the Rg-veda; JBBRAS = Journal of the Asiatic Society, Bombay (formerly Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society); ABORI = Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona; A = the Aṣṭādhyāya of Kauṭalya; JRAS = Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, London. For the historical background, my own Introduction to the Study of Indian History has been used without detailed reference.

1) Mbb. 6. 23-40 of the Poona edition, begun under the editorship of the late V. S. Sukthankar, with the Ādi, Svabhā, Aranyaka, Udghoga and Virāṭa parvāns completed under his direction. Succeeding volumes have been less satisfactory, and the edition is not yet completed. For the Gītā in particular, the readings generally assumed to be Śaṅkara’s have been retained against the norm accepted for the rest of the edition. Among the many useful translations of the Gītā are those of F. Edgerton (Harvard Oriental Series), K. T. Telang (Sacred Book of the East), and S. Radhakrishnan (London, 1948).
society must be highly equivocal. No question remains of its basic validity if the meaning be so flexible. Yet the book has had its uses.

If a Mahābhārata war had actually been fought on the scale reported, nearly five million fighting men killed each other in an 18-day battle between Delhi and Thānesar; about 130,000 chariots (with their horses), an equal number of elephants, and thrice that number of riding horses were deployed. This means at least as many camp-followers and attendants as fighters. A host of this size could not be supplied without a total population of 200 millions, which India did not attain till the British period, and could not have reached without plentiful and cheap iron and steel for ploughshares and farmers' tools. Iron was certainly not available in any quantity to Indian peasants before the 6th century B.C. The greatest army camp credibly reported was of 400,000 men under Candragupta Maurya, who commanded the surplus of the newly developed Gangetic basin. The terms patti, gulma etc. given as tactical units in the Mbh. did not acquire that meaning till after the Mauryans. The heros fought with bows and arrows from their chariots, as if the numerous cavalry did not exist; but cavalry—which appeared late in Indian warfare—made the fighting chariots obsolete, as was proved by Alexander in the Punjab.

The epic began, like the early Homeric chants, as series of lays sung at the court of the conquerors. The lament was thinly veiled, presumably by irony; the defeated Kurus survived in legend (e.g. the Kuru-dharmajātaka) as unsurpassable in rectitude and nobility of character. Kṛṣṇa-Nāraṇya had no role to play even in the first connected epic narrative. Should the reader doubt all this, let him read the final cantos of the extant Mbh. The Pāṇḍavas come in the end to disgraceful old age, and unattended death in the wilderness. Their opponents are admitted to heaven as of right, but the heros are only transferred there from the tortures of hell, after a long and stubborn effort by the eldest, Yudhiṣṭhira. It strikes even the most casual eye that this is still the older heaven of Indra and Yama; Kṛṣṇa-Nārāyaṇa is not its dominant figure, but a palpable and trifling insertion in a corner.

Those legendary Utopians, the pure and unconquerable Uttara-Kurus