

The Black God and the White Prince: Names of Krishna and Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita

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THE BHAGAVAD GITA (“The Blessed One’s Song”) is the most popular and influential of Hindu religious poems.¹ It is, however, only a small part of the epic Mahabharata (“The Great Stories about the Bharatas”), which is the longest example of its genre, being about seven times the length of the Iliad and the Odyssey combined. The epic recounts the struggle between two branches of the royal family of the Bharatas. The ruling branch, the Kauravas, have displaced their cousins, the five Pandava princes, of whom Arjuna is the champion. When all efforts to settle the quarrel peacefully have been exhausted, the Pandavas and the Kauravas meet in an apocalyptic battle. At the end of the fight, all of the Kauravas are destroyed, and of the Pandava host only the five brothers and their cousin Krishna survive. The brothers set out on a pilgrimage to the heaven of the god Indra; one by one they die on the way, only the eldest reaching the goal. There, however, all the brothers are united with their supporters and former enemies in a final reconciliation.

Like other epics, the Mahabharata uses names in a deliberate and

¹For typographical convenience in transliterating Sanskrit, lingual *s* is represented by *sh*, and all other linguals are spelled like their corresponding dentals. Long vowels are marked in citation forms, but not otherwise. The editions of the Gita used here are those by Annie Besant and Bhagavan Das, *Bhagavad-Gītā* (London: Theosophical Pub. House, 1905), and by R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gītā* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969). Encyclopedic works consulted are those by John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology*, 8th ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), by Benjamin Walker, *The Hindu World*, 2 vols. (New York: Praeger, 1968), and by Margaret and James Stutley, *Harper’s Dictionary of Hinduism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). Dictionaries consulted are those by Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899), and by Arthur Anthony MacDonell, *A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954, 1st pub. 1929). I am indebted to my colleagues Jared Klein and Shanta Ratnayaka for their many suggestions, most of which I have incorporated into this paper; the errors that yet remain are my responsibility.

stylized fashion. There are heroic epithets (like “wily Ulysses” or “rosy-fingered Dawn” of the Greek epic) and epic variation (like that in *Beowulf*, in which King Hrothgar is variously called “maga Healfdenes” [Healfdene’s son] and “wine Scyldinga” [friend of the Scyldings]). These epic naming conventions are used also in the Bhagavad Gita, but that portion of the Mahabharata is especially distinguished by a skillful use of names and epithets for its two principal actors: the prince Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna. There are 26 different names or epithets for Arjuna in the 700 verses of the poem, and 46 for Krishna.² The various names, which in part are needed to satisfy the demands of meter, are used to emphasize the structure of the poem and to support its philosophical theme. Brief descriptions of that structure and that theme follow.

The Bhagavad Gita begins on the morning of the great battle, when Dhritarashtra, the blind king and father of the Kauravas, asks his charioteer Sanjaya to tell him what is happening. The bulk of the poem is Sanjaya’s answer. He tells how Arjuna, champion of the Pandavas, asks his charioteer Krishna, who is also his childhood friend and his maternal cousin, to drive him to the middle of the field between the two armies so that he can survey the enemy and identify his prospective opponents. From that vantage point, however, Arjuna is struck with a sense of the futility and sinfulness of the war. He foresees disastrous social consequences and worries about the guilt of killing his kith and kin. Arjuna is a warrior who has lost the will to fight. Overcome with angst, he sinks down in his chariot in a state of moral paralysis. Krishna thereupon enters into a dialog with his friend, and that dialog is most of the Bhagavad Gita. It deals with Arjuna’s immediate moral dilemma, but quickly expands to consider such questions as the active life versus eremiticism, theism versus monism, and free will versus determinism. In the course of it, Krishna explains that Arjuna must act out his duty, but with dispassion, concerned only to do what he ought and unconcerned with success or failure. Arjuna is also told that he should act with complete devotion to the personal God and with knowledge of the nature of the world and its relationship to the divine.

²These numbers must be understood as approximations because it is impossible to draw a sharp distinction between an epithet and any other descriptive noun phrase. To include every nominal that refers to either protagonist would greatly increase the numbers, especially for Krishna. In fact the epithets considered here were identified more or less subjectively, although every nominal used in vocative function was included in the count. The general conclusions I have drawn about the use of names would, I believe, be only strengthened by the addition of more nominals to the analysis.

As the poem progresses, Krishna speaks with increasing authority and is eventually revealed as an avatar or incarnation of Vishnu, the second person of the Hindu trinity. That great God has ten avatars, of which the seventh was Rama (the hero of the other Indian epic, the Ramayana), the eighth Krishna, the ninth Gautama Buddha, and the tenth yet to come Kalki.³ The Krishna avatar is by far the most popular, having inspired a highly devotional form of theism within Hinduism. In the eleventh chapter of the Gita, Arjuna asks to see Krishna's real form, his imperishable Self. What follows is a transfiguration of the human form of Krishna into an epiphany of the underlying divine reality, the God Krishna. Krishna's body expands to fill all space; the whole universe of man becomes merely a small part of that "Universal Form." Arjuna recognizes that whatever happens in the world comes to pass, not through the separate wills of individual persons, but only because that supreme person has willed it. The transfiguration scene is the emotional climax of the poem—and the onomastic turning point for Krishna, as explained below.

The Gita is perhaps the most widely explicated of all Hindu scriptures, having been the subject of commentaries from the eighth-century theologian Shankara to the modern philosopher and president of India, Radhakrishnan. It is inevitable that there should have been many different and often incompatible interpretations of the poem. Every philosophical tradition in India has attempted an exegesis in support of its own doctrines; therefore we cannot talk about "the" meaning of the Gita. Nevertheless, there is a philosophical theme that seems clear. Krishna teaches Arjuna yoga—not merely the kind of exercise which goes by that name in the West, but a way of realizing unified consciousness and will with God (that is, with Krishna). *Yoga*, cognate with English *yoke*, means 'union, joining.' There are three main varieties of yoga in the poem: union by works, by devotion, and by insight; but also each of the eighteen chapters of the poem is called a "yoga" in its colophon. Thus, a dominant theme of the Gita is the union of the human and the divine, the individual and the oversoul—a reconciliation of apparent opposites.

The Mahabharata is an epic about a civil war, its causes, and its consequences; and the Gita is an episode in that martial history. But in an allegorical interpretation, the conflict is a timeless one, between good and evil, cosmos and chaos, reason and passion. And the Gita is a

³Gore Vidal has written a novel *Kalki*, which has, however, scarcely any connection to the Vishnu tradition other than its title.

Guide to the Perplexed in that conflict. It resolves Arjuna's moral dilemma by teaching him to act without becoming involved with the deed. It presents a view of God that is at once theistic and monistic—a personal God who is also an impersonal absolute. It describes the exercise of free will within a rigidly determined universe. It prescribes losing one's self in order to find one's self. The Gita is a war poem whose message is one of spiritual peace. It is filled with such contradictions, but it reconciles and transcends them.

How the names and epithets of the two protagonists illumine the structure and theme of the Gita is the subject of the following discussion. Many of the terms for Arjuna and Krishna are doubtless traditional ones, rather than inventions of the poet. His skill may lie less in originating than in choosing and arranging—his art that of the mosaicist who, by juxtaposing old bits and pieces, creates a new pattern. Yet the poet's use of names—whether old or new—is a noteworthy part of his craft and adds to the rich texture of the Gita.

NAMES AND EPITHETS OF ARJUNA

The most frequently used term for Arjuna is not his proper name (which occurs only 25 times),⁴ but rather the metronymic *Pārtha* 'son of Pritha' (42 instances). Arjuna's mother, Pritha, is also known as Kunti (after her foster father, Kuntibhoja), and therefore Arjuna is also called *Kaunteya* 'son of Kunti' (24 instances). Of the 26 names and epithets for Arjuna, these two metronymics account for 38 percent of all instances. By contrast, he is called *Pāndava* 'son of Pandu' after his royal father only 8 times (5 percent of all instances). Why should the prince be called after his mother so much more often than after his father? The obvious reason is that, although Pandu was Arjuna's paterfamilias, he was not the prince's biological father, who was instead Indra (if a god can be said to be a biological progenitor). Because Pandu was cursed with childlessness for an impious deed, each of his five sons was fathered by a different god. It has also been suggested that the epic reflects a matrilineal culture. There may, however, be another reason for the prevalence of metronymics.

⁴*Arjuna* occurs 25 times within the poem proper. Each change of speaker in the poem, however, is introduced by a rubric with the form "X said"; the prince is regularly called *Arjuna* in these rubrics (and Krishna is called *Shrī Bhagavant* 'the Glorious Blessed One'). Because the rubrics are extrametrical, they are not considered as part of the poem proper and their uses of the names of the two protagonists have not been counted.

Through his mother, Arjuna is related to Krishna as a first cousin. By emphasizing the female line in Arjuna's ancestry, the poet is able to stress the family connection between Arjuna and Krishna. The onomastic emphasis on their relationship supports the philosophical theme of the poem—the substantial identity of the individual soul (symbolized by Arjuna) with the universal oversoul (personified in Krishna).

Arjuna is also called by the dynastic name *Bhārata* 'descendant of Bharata' (20 instances) and, more explicitly, *Bharatarshabha* 'Bull [that is, Head, Leader] of the Bharatas' (7 instances), *Bharatasattama* 'Chief of the Bharatas,' and *Bharatashreshtha* 'Most Excellent of the Bharatas.' Since most of the principals in the epic battle are members of the Bharata clan, the emphasis on Arjuna's membership and preeminence in it highlights his position as archetypal man. Within the epic, the world of the Bharatas is the whole world of mankind, and Arjuna is Everyman.

Although Arjuna is also in the line of Kuru (a descendant of Bharata), he is never called by the patronymic *Kaurava*, probably because that term is used to designate the opposing party of his cousins, the villains of the epic. He is, however, called *Kurunandana* 'Rejoicer of the Kurus' (3 instances), *Kurupravira* 'Great Hero of the Kurus,' *Kurusattama* 'Chief of the Kurus,' and *Kurushreshtha* 'Most Excellent of the Kurus.' Again, the dynastic names emphasize Arjuna's station as archetypal man.

Some of the epithets for Arjuna denote his skill in military action: *Dhanamjaya* 'Wealth Winner' (10 instances), *Paramtapa* 'Destroyer of Foes, Scorcher of Others' (9 instances), *Mahābāhu* 'Great-Armed' (9 instances), and *Dhanurdhara* 'Bow Bearer, Archer.' There is, however, an ambiguity about these epithets to match the ambiguity of the poem itself. In the first, *dhana* means 'booty taken in battle' but also 'prize won in a contest'; the wealth that Arjuna wins is not merely battle booty but also the prize of knowledge that Krishna offers him. In the second, *tapa* means 'scorching, harassing' but is connected with the noun *tapas* meaning 'heat, fire, religious austerity, penitence.' *Tapas* is one of the forms of self-control prescribed in the Raja Yoga of Patanjali, the classic form of Hindu spiritual exercise; the second of the eight "limbs" (or steps) of that yoga is *niyama*, comprising the five virtues of cleanliness, contentment, austerity (*tapas*), introspection, and dedication to God.⁵ Thus, Arjuna scorches his foes (the "others"),

⁵The Yoga-Sutras of Pantanjali, II.32; I. K. Taimni, *The Science of Yoga* (Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Pub. House, 1967), pp. 220-30, esp. 225-26.

but also provides the model of austerity for others. The third term, *Mahābāhu*, is applied also to Krishna and is thus one of the two direct onomastic links between the prince and the God. The use of one name for both persons is an implicit statement of their identity. The fourth term has the literal sense of 'archer,' but nothing is merely literal in the literature of Indian mysticism. The Mundaka Upanishad explains the symbolism of the bow:

Having taken as a bow the great weapon of the Secret Teaching,
One should fix in it the arrow sharpened by constant Meditation.
Drawing it with a mind filled with That [Brahman, the ultimate reality]
Penetrate, O good-looking youth, that Imperishable as the Mark.

The pranava [sacred syllable *aum*] is the bow; the arrow is the self;
Brahman is said to be the mark.

With heedfulness is It to be penetrated;

One should become one with It as the arrow in the mark.⁶

Arjuna is a 'Bow Bearer' in the army who won his wife Draupadi by a feat of archery, but he also wields the bow of the teachings of yoga, by which he shoots the arrow of his personal self so that it enters and merges with the target of the impersonal Self. Each of the four military epithets has overtones that suggest the philosophical theme of the poem.

Other epithets for Arjuna include three that describe physical attributes: *Gudākesha* 'Thick-Haired' (4 instances), *Kirītin* 'Diademmed,' and *Kapidhvaja* 'Ape-Bannered' (Arjuna's battle ensign shows an ape, suggesting Hanuman, the monkey god who was companion to Rama, the avatar of Vishnu preceding Krishna). Three epithets are superlative terms: *Purushavyāghra* 'Tiger among Men,' *Purusharshabha* 'Bull among Men,' and *Dehabhritāmvara* 'Best of Embodied Persons.' Two epithets are character descriptions: *Anagha* 'Sinless, Blameless One' (3 instances), *Anasūya* 'Uncomplaining, Unenvious One.' Once Krishna addresses Arjuna as *Tāta*, a term of affection used in talking to a child or pupil.

Finally, Arjuna is called *Mahātman* 'Great Soul' once near the end of the poem. That term is the second name he shares with Krishna. As applied to a man, it may be interpreted as 'mighty, illustrious, eminent, high-minded, intelligent, noble,' but the overtones that result from its application to Krishna in the sense 'Great Spirit, Universal Soul' help

⁶Quoted as an epigraph by Sri Krishna Prem in *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), p. ii.

to assert onomastically the philosophical theme of the poem. By the end of the Gita, Arjuna has learned the yoga that Krishna teaches and has realized the union that is the goal of yoga. That realization makes him a mahatma and joins him with Krishna in will as well as in name.

NAMES AND EPITHETS OF KRISHNA

A noteworthy fact about the names of Krishna is the striking change in them near the middle of the poem, in the passages leading up to and especially in the description of the transfiguration of Krishna in chapter 11. Before that, he is referred to by a relatively small number of terms. There are patronymics: *Mādhava* 'Descendant of Madhu' (2 instances), *Vārshneya* 'Descendant of Vrishni' (2 instances), and *Vāsudeva* 'Son of Vasudeva' (3 instances). The last is the only one of the three patronymics that is used in the second half of the poem; it is also capable of a double interpretation. Krishna's human father, Vasudeva, was a King in the Yadava dynasty, but the name is also used in its literal sense 'Beneficent God' as a title for Vishnu. Thus, the patronymics that assert merely human ancestry for Krishna are dropped after his transfiguration, but the one that is interpretable as a divine name continues to be applied. A fourth patronymic, *Yādava* 'Descendant of Yadu,' is mentioned by Arjuna after the transfiguration, but only to apologize for his earlier, unknown use of it.

Other early terms refer to Krishna's occupation. He is twice called *Govinda* 'Cow-Keeper,' with reference to his early adventures among the cow-maids—a favorite romantic theme in the Krishna myth. Consonant with the martial theme of the Gita, however, are the more common warrior epithets. Krishna is *Arisūdana* 'Foe-Destroyer' and more explicitly *Madhusūdana* 'Destroyer of the Demon Madhu' (the demon is only coincidentally homonymous with Krishna's ancestor). Another such term, *Keshinishūdana* 'Destroyer of the Demon Keshin,' is used in the last chapter of the poem. Krishna is also *Janārdana* 'Annihilator of Men,' an epithet whose martial sense takes on a different connotation in the transfiguration scene, after Krishna has revealed that the outcome of the great battle is preordained and that he is in fact the divine destroyer of the opposing army, who has willed their just annihilation.

All of the remaining early terms for Krishna are likewise ambiguous in their connotations and carry over to the second half of the poem with enriched meaning. *Mahābāhu* 'Great-Armed' (2 instances) is an epithet Krishna shares with Arjuna. Its early use suggests military might; its later use, however, suggests another epithet: *Sahasrabāhu*

'Thousand-Armed,' applied to the transfigured shape of Krishna in chapter 11, when he appears with the sun and moon as his eyes, his body filling the universe: "With mouths, eyes, arms, breasts, multitudinous, I see Thee everywhere," as Arjuna says. Krishna is also *Achyuta* 'Firm' or 'Imperishable' (3 instances), the first sense suggesting his prowess in arms and the second his divine nature. *Hrishiksha* (7 instances) is an ambiguous term, interpretable as either 'Erect-Haired' or 'Lord of the Senses.' The first meaning is echoed by another epithet, *Keshava* 'Long-Haired' or 'Radiant One' (7 instances). The emphasis on hair as a symbol of virility is wide-spread if not universal in the world's cultures; the alternative meanings of the two epithets are appropriate to Krishna's transfiguration.

In the traditional iconography, Krishna is usually depicted as a graceful, beautiful youth. One epithet, used at the beginning of chapter 11, recalls that iconographic form: *Kamalapatrāksha* 'Lotus-Petal-Eyed, He Whose Eyes are like the Lotus Petal.' In the Eastern tradition, the lotus has the same richness of symbolic meaning that the rose did in the early Christian tradition.

From the mid point of the poem on, and culminating in chapter 11, many new epithets are applied to Krishna, almost all of them explicit statements of his divinity. He is *Deva* 'God' (4 instances), *Devadeva* and *Deva Devasya* 'God of Gods,' *Adideva* 'Primal God,' *Devesha* 'Ruler of Gods' (3 instances), and *Devavara* 'Best of Gods.' He is *Ishvara* 'Lord,' *Parameshvara* 'Highest Lord,' *Vishveshvara* 'Lord of the Universe,' *Yogeshvara* 'Lord of Yoga' (3 instances), *Mahāyogeshvara* 'Great Lord of Yoga,' *Bhūtamaheshvara* 'Great Lord of Beings,' and *Bhūtesha* 'Ruler of Beings.' He is *Purusha Purāna* 'Primeval Man' and *Purushottama* 'Supreme Spirit' (3 instances). *Purusha* means 'man' in a general sense, but it refers also to a mythological being from whose body mankind was formed, and in one school of Indian philosophy (the Sankhya) it is spirit or universal soul as contrasted with material nature. The latter two meanings are strongly influential in the epithets of Krishna.

Krishna is *Bhagavant* 'Blessed One' (3 instances), an epithet reflected in the title of the poem, Bhagavad Gita.⁷ He is *Prabhu* 'Master' (2 instances) and *Jagatpati* 'Lord of the World.' More particularly, he is twice called *Hari*, which means 'tawny' but is used as a name for

⁷ *Bhagavant* is also the name used in the extrametrical rubrics identifying the speakers in the poem. If those instances were counted, this name would be the poem's commonest term for Krishna.

Vishnu and is familiar to many in this country as part of the Hari Krishna chant. He is also twice directly called *Vishnu*, the second person of the Hindu trinity, of whom Krishna is the incarnation.

A number of other epithets refer to godlike attributes: *Aprameya* 'Boundless,' *Sarva* 'All,' *Ananta* 'Endless,' *Anantarūpa* 'Endless-Formed, He Whose Forms Are Endless,' *Vishvarūpa* 'He Whose Form Is the Universe,' *Vishvamūrti* 'He Whose Body Is the Universe,' *Bhūtabhāvana* 'He Who Creates the Welfare of Living Beings,' and *Jagannivāsa* 'Abode of the World' (3 instances). The last of those epithets emphasizes a frequent theme of the Gita—that the divine does not exist in the world; rather the world exists in the divine—a theme expressed iconographically by Arjuna's vision of the transfigured Krishna, of whose body the whole universe is only a part.

Two other terms for Krishna emphasize his role in the poem as Arjuna's teacher. The teaching Krishna gives is yoga, and he is therefore *Yogin* 'Yogi' par excellence, master of the secret teaching. The other term is *Mahātman* 'Great Soul' (4 instances), a term whose implications have already been mentioned in connection with Arjuna, who shares it.

There are just two epithets that are applied to both Krishna and Arjuna: *Mahābāhu* 'Great-Armed' and *Mahātman* 'Great-Souled.' Those shared terms span the roles played by the protagonists. At the start of the poem, the two are mighty warriors, heroes in the army of the Pandavas—great-armed ones. By the end of the poem they both appear as great-souled ones: Krishna's real nature as a divine manifestation has been revealed in chapter 11, and Arjuna has realized his essential unity with that divine nature. The movement of the poem is from a carnal battle to a spiritual victory, a movement whose bounds those two epithets represent. The philosophical theme of the poem is the substantial unity of the human and the divine, a unity symbolized by the two shared epithets.

THE NAMES ARJUNA AND KRISHNA

The proper names *Arjuna* and *Krishna* neatly balance one another, just as do the protagonists whom they denote. *Arjuna* (25 instances) means 'white, bright,' and *Krishna* (12 instances) means 'black, dark.' Both names are symbolically fitting.

Although not quite a tabula rasa, Arjuna is a more or less blank slate on which Krishna writes his message. Early in the poem (chapter 2, verse 7), Arjuna says, "I am your pupil; teach me." Arjuna is the

candidate for knowledge, symbolically clothed in white. Though he is, as noted earlier, *Anagha* 'Sinless, Blameless,' his whiteness is a symbol less of purity than of innocent ignorance that is to be replaced by knowledge in the course of the poem. Arjuna is the archetypal golden boy, whose whiteness betokens his youth, his inexperience in the matters that are central to the poem, his guilelessness, his openness to instruction.

Krishna, on the other hand, is the Black One—not, obviously, the symbolic black of evil, but rather the beautiful black of mystery, the unknown, the source of the Secret Teaching. As white reflects all waves of light, Arjuna reflects and mirrors Krishna. As black absorbs all waves of light, Krishna is the abode of the whole universe. He absorbs and includes all beings: "By me, the Formless, all this world is pervaded; all beings subsist in Me, I do not subsist in them" (chapter 9, verse 4). Krishna, the Black, is incomprehensible: "Having pervaded this whole universe with one fragment of Myself, I remain" (chapter 10, verse 42).

At the emotional climax of the poem, when the apparently human charioteer Krishna is transfigured into the God Krishna—avatar of Vishnu, the very Lord of the universe—he says, "Time am I, world destroying, come forth here to swallow up the worlds" (chapter 11, verse 32). The word for 'time' is *Kāla*, which also means 'black.' Thus, Krishna's identity with Time is reinforced by a pun, through the secondary synonymy of *Krishna* and *Kāla* as 'black.' The feminine form of *Kāla* is *Kālī*, the name of the goddess of destruction. In the Hindu tradition, destruction, the effect of Time, does not have the tragic or pathetic implications that it does in the West. The Eastern view of history is a cyclic one, and every end is followed by a new beginning. Thus Krishna says, "All beings enter My Nature at the end of a world-age; at the beginning of a world-age again I emanate them" (chapter 9, verse 7). The black aspect of Krishna as all-devouring Time has no implications of finality. The message of the Gita is, "The Lord taketh away, and the Lord giveth—blessed be the name of the Lord." Krishna-Kāla, the Black One, is not the absence of light but is rather the absolute fullness, the combination of all colors—the void that is the end of being but also the plenum that is the universal source of being.

Black and white, Krishna and Arjuna, the divine and the human are opposites—but only to the uninformed. The Gita calls itself "the scripture of yoga." The aim of yoga is a state of consciousness called *samādhi*, literally a 'putting together,' in which the dualism of subject

and object, knower and known, has been eliminated and all opposites resolved. The “secret teaching” of the Gita is that Arjuna (like all other beings) is an expression, an emanation, of the divine reality that Krishna represents. Arjuna and Krishna, the White and the Black, the Void and the Plenum—all such opposites are reconciled. The names and epithets of the two protagonists of the Bhagavad Gita are onomastic statements of that ultimate reconciliation.

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