

## 85 REFLECTIONS ON RANDOM THEMES

### KRISHNA



*Oh Krishna, the Light of our Hindu World  
We remember you on this joyous Day.  
You're more than a person in our lore,  
More than a God to whom we pray.*

*- A Prayer*

This week the Hindu world celebrates the Birthday of Krishna Janmāshtami. Krishna is a divine personage in the Hindu framework. He is worshiped in Hindu temples; his life and deeds are narrated in classical Sanskrit literature, especially in the epic *Mahābhārata*, in a work of sacred history called *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, and in a masterpiece by the poet Kalidasa called entitled *Harivamsha*.

Tradition tells us that King Ugrasena had a son Kamsa and daughter Devaki. Kamsa became a tyrant who imprisoned his own father. Devaki married Vāsudeva. A sage had predicted that Kamsa would be killed by Devaki's son. So the tyrant imprisoned Devaki and her husband, and he killed every new-born child of his sister. The seventh child was stealthily transferred elsewhere. When the eighth child Krishna was born at midnight, he was also secretly carried across the River Yamuna and left with a cowherd named Nanda and his wife Yashoda. Nanda and Yashoda fled to a place called Gokula with the child and it was there on the meadows of the herd-forest Vrindavan, that Baby Krishna with his flute was reared in the company of cowherds and *gopis* (milkmaids).

When youthful Krishna played his Zauberflöte (magic flute), *gopis* thronged around him and danced with joy. Each one of them would want to hold his hand. To satisfy them all, he transformed himself into a thousand Krishnas. Sometimes he stole the garments of the *gopis* when they were wading in water, and hide them up on the tree whence he watched them. The symbolism here is that the *gopis* are individual souls, the cowherds are the physical bodies, and Krishna is the Supreme Soul that is beckoning them.

The Divinity of Krishna is revealed in the Epic Mahabharata in the context of the war between the righteous and the contra-righteous. This war was launched under the direction of Krishna. Prior to the battle there occurred a long exchange between Krishna and Arjuna,

the valiant general of the Righteous side. This dialogue constitutes the *Bhagavad Gita* which discusses a variety of topics of spiritual, metaphysical, ethical, and historical significance.

Arjuna is a robust personage with a very keen mind. Yet, he is baffled by the confusions of right and wrong, of war and peace. This is to remind us that no matter how smart one may be, no matter how much knowledge one has acquired, ultimate questions of proper action and righteousness do not have easy answers. The intellect is surely useful and powerful in many contexts. But it cannot with certitude say what is ultimately good and what is bad. The Gītā stresses that we should not shirk our duties.

That the Gītā is presented as a dialogue with Krishṇa shows the importance of a guru in the quest for understanding. For guidance one needs a master. The reveals to the disciple the roots of esoteric knowledge, the nature of hidden truths. In matters spiritual, the guru is the indispensable instrument for attaining higher experience.

At one point Arjuna pleads with Krishṇa to show him the way to attain the highest good. Krishṇa expounds many modes: ritualism and meditation, action and detachment are recommended, pursuit of knowledge and pious devotion are equally praised. The Gītā reveals that there are various ways to find fulfillment, that no one path is suitable for all.

The Gītā is a spiritual work with the sanctity of the Bible in the Judeo-Christian tradition. It commands all the reverence that scriptural works do. It is read and recited by millions who derive peace and fulfillment in the process. The work may also be read as a work of ideas, perspectives, and insights. Approached thus, one discovers interesting parallel visions among the religious, philosophical, and cultural thought currents in the world.

Many insights contained in the Gītā are relevant and meaningful in this day and age. This suggests that such ideas are multiple expressions of the human spirit. One may therefore embrace human culture as a bouquet rather than as mutually inimical forces.

Over the ages, many revered sages, religious leaders, and competent scholars have commented on the great work that is the Bhagavad Gītā. Most of their commentaries are from bhakti (devotional) perspectives. Some are from spiritually advanced souls.

The the Gītā is embedded in Hindu culture, but it has universal aspects. It is not preached in a Hindu temple but in a battlefield. Problems of philosophy are not mere speculative inquiries whose value and significance are related to the harsh problems of life and death. What can be more universal than war and conflict, confusion and compassion? The dialogue reveals profound insights into the nature of the human condition, as it explains our spiritual dimension. It presents fascinating perspectives on the significance of life here and beyond.

Krishna is a major focal point of worship in the Hindu world. He is what the hero is to history: to be remembered and revered. He is what the library is to the scholar: an immense storehouse of knowledge. He is what nature is to the poet: an inspiration for song and dance. He is what toys are for children: an instrument for mirth and merriment. He is what the beloved is to the lover: the instigator of intense joy.

**V. V. Raman: 12 August 2020**