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"The Great Unveiling": Annie Besant and the *Bhagavadgītā*

Abstract. The importance of the *Bhagavadgītā* (*BhG*) in the larger debates on Hinduism that evolved in the nineteenth and early twentieth century has been widely acknowledged in various academic studies. The text became an arena for negotiating Western-style historical and philological analysis, Indian scholastic discourse, and interpretations of individual authors—Indian and Western—pursuing their own philosophical, religious-spiritual, and political commitments. Some of them proved to be quite popular among contemporary audiences and thus constitute an interesting site of the entangled history of the colonial-modern discourse on Hinduism. Theosophist Annie Besant's translations and interpretations of the *BhG* are part of this discourse. At a biographical level they are connected to her moving to Indian and settling down in Varanasi as representative of the Theosophical Society. With respect to her larger engagement with the "ancient wisdom" of the East, these publications indicate her increasing commitment to Hinduism and Indian nationalism. Furthermore, Besant seeks to establish herself as an authority in theosophical circles, wherein several translations and interpretations of the text had been published. By combining historical and allegorical perspectives in her interpretation of the *BhG* she connects the "hidden meaning" of the text to both individual spiritual aspirations and concrete political constellations. In her interpretation the metaphor of "the unveiling" as the *modus operandi* of the Divine plays a central role. The metaphor serves to draw together the history of divine *logos*, the place of individual agency in this history, and the authority of spiritually advanced persons (including herself) in disclosing its meaning.

Keywords. theosophy, modern Hinduism, *Bhagavadgītā*, translation studies, colonialism in India

Introduction

The importance of the *Bhagavadgītā* (*BhG*) in the larger debates on Hinduism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century has been widely acknowledged in various academic studies. The text became an arena for negotiating Western-style text-historical analysis, Indian scholastic discourse, and interpretations of individual authors—of Indian and Western affiliation—pursuing their own philo-

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sophical, religious-spiritual, and political commitments. The authority of the last of these was contested, if not outrightly rejected, as "amateurish" by academic and scholastic authorities alike. Nevertheless, some proved to be quite influential and even popular among contemporary audiences, for example Edwin Arnold's *Song Celestial* (1885). These individualised forms of engagement with the *BhG* constitute a site of entangled history worth exploring, for they entwine not only "Eastern" and "Western" views but also the individual authors in complex interactions (personal, intertextual, etc.). In the following, I shall discuss Annie Besant's translations and interpretations of the *BhG* against the background this constellation. Soon after moving to India and settling in Varanasi, Besant published two translations of the *BhG* (1895, 1905) and two lecture series (1896, 1906) on the text. Concerning her larger engagement with the "ancient wisdom" of the East, these publications indicate her increasing commitment to Hinduism after settling in India first as a representative, then as president of the Theosophical Society. In this period Besant sought to establish herself as an authority in theosophical circles, where several translations and interpretations of the text had been published. Furthermore, her esoteric views were complemented by a reformist agenda that she put into practice in her increasingly anti-colonial commitment to India's "uplift" and various educational projects. Her second translation and the 1906 lectures on the *BhG* are part of this agenda. In what follows I shall discuss the format and purposes of Besant's translations and the interpretative perspectives she uses in her lectures. Particular attention will be given to *Hints on the Study of the Bhagavad-Gita* (1906) since it presents most comprehensively her views on the intrinsic connection between collective history and individual spiritual development. The analysis will also deal with some of the historical and intercultural contexts of Besant's engagement with the text. An important element of these contexts is the general concern for the authority of religious traditions and of its interpreters which interconnected outsider and insider perspectives in complex ways.

1 Contextual considerations

According to Ronald Neufeldt, theosophical interpretations of the *BhG* follow ideas of cosmos and history as formulated by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, who extensively used Indian terms and sources, and only differ from each other regarding the practical application of the text's doctrines.[1] The text is considered to teach an esoteric knowledge found in all systems of thought. It must be understood as an

1 Neufeldt 1986: 11–12. For an analysis of Blavatsky's engagement with Indian themes and issues, see Burger 2014 and the essays in Rudbøg/Sand 2020.

allegory of cosmic evolution and the struggle of the "lower soul" to be liberated from its material fetters.[2] Neufeldt suggests that the divergent views on the text's usage are connected to typically "Western" or "Indian" perspectives. Because of this distinction, he finds Besant's work on the Gītā "difficult to place", although he discusses her in the section on "Western" views.[3] Viewing theosophical interpretations of the *BhG* as a site of religious encounter allows us to grasp better the intentions of individual interpreters. Considering such factors means viewing theosophical interpretations not solely as a closed discursive universe but also as mirroring and propelling colonial-modern entanglements.[4] Religious encounters in colonial India were shaped by newly created political and legal frameworks affecting religious communities,[5] and by debates about which religious texts and practices are authoritative and who is authorised to interpret them. Traditional authorities were challenged by critics and reformers inside and outside the fold. Texts and practices came under scrutiny under the paradigms of "reason" and "science" and were probed with respect to their being a source for social and political practice. The relevance of texts was explored by individuals whose authority in these matters was questioned by other participants in this discourse. New agents were entering a stage that previously was reserved for those "officially" admitted into this field of cultural production.

An essential aspect of this constellation is that the established mechanism lending authority to translations and interpretations of religious texts where challenged by processes of religious individualisation and (de-)traditionalisation that enabled individual, non-expert engagements with foundational texts to find audiences.[6] In the nineteenth century, the public gave considerable attention to interpretations of authoritative texts by individuals who neither belonged to established scholastic traditions in India nor modern Western-style academic institutions authorising their expertise. On the one hand, such religious individualisation was connected to controversies about "traditional" religious authorities. On the

2 Neufeldt 1986: 31–32.

3 Neufeldt 1986: 25.

4 Neufeldt touches upon this when he notices that William Q. Judge (1851–1896), co-founder of the Theosophical Society, was influential in the United States, whereas Besant's publications were influential in India. Judge's translation appeared in 1890 (see Judge 1913), and between 1887 and 1895 he published "notes" on the first seven chapters of the *BhG* in his magazine *The Path*. In 1918 the notes were published in book form together with notes on the remaining chapters by one of Judge's students (Judge 1918). The different spheres of influence point to tensions within the Theosophical Society, which emerged after the death of Blavatsky and the ensuing controversy about Besant becoming president of the Society. See Dixon 2001.

5 For instance, legislation granting "freedom" to exercise religion as part of Queen Victoria's 1858 Proclamation, or to promote "reform". See Adcock 2014; Malinar 2015.

6 For a study of the process of religious individualisation in history, see Fuchs et al. (2020).

other hand, new publication technologies and the formation of a public enabled new (mostly middle-class) audiences to engage in these issues. The case of the *BhG* provides an excellent example of this situation as it assumes a central place in colonial-modern debates on Hinduism.[7] The text becomes an arena in which to negotiate the hegemonic claims of modern Western epistemic regimes of historical and philological analysis ("Orientalism") vis-à-vis the Indian scholastic tradition and their modern representatives, as well as individuals pursuing their own commitments.

As mentioned before, an essential aspect of this constellation is that interpreters engage individually with the text independent of established authorities licensing such engagement, such as scholastic training, being part of a teaching genealogy and of academic institutions. This development began with the first translations in English.[8] While early Western translators of the *BhG* required the assistance of Indian pandits, it resulted in translations that disconnected the *BhG* from the established contexts of its study as pointed out by Javed Majeed: "Translation begins to obviate the need for commentary. It produces the Gīta as a text in its own right which is no longer embedded in a succession of abstruse commentaries".[9] This reflects a "protestant notion of the self-evident nature of scriptural truth in translation which can be grasped by the reader's own judgement".[10] While this is undoubtedly one aspect of the "undermining of 'brahmanical' authority",[11] such disconnecting also belongs to the methodological repertoire of historicism and textual criticism which played a leading role in establishing modern academia towards scholastic-theological traditions in Europe. These and other developments, such as new media and audiences, fostered subsequent appropriations of the *BhG* by individuals lacking authorisation by either Brahmanical scholarship or Western academia.[12] This is also true for Besant.

7 See Sharpe 1985 on the range of Western interpretations and translations of the *BhG*. Also see the essays in Minor 1986.
8 Majeed 2006.
9 Majeed 2006: 310.
10 Majeed 2006: 313.
11 Majeed 2006: 310.
12 See the essays in Minor 1986 for analysis of interpretations of the *BhG* by Tilak or Gandhi; on the latter, see also Majeed 2006.

2 Besant's translations of the *BhG*

In 1895 Besant added to the range of theosophical publications on the *BhG* with her translation of the text. She acknowledged the support of four "friends", namely Pramada Das Mitra, Ganganath Jha, Kali Charan Mitra, and Upendranath Basu.[13] The level of Besant's command of Sanskrit is unclear, as is the extent of the contributions by the Sanskrit expert "friends". The collaboration with renowned Sanskrit scholars points to the alliances she sought with representatives of Hindu tradition who engaged in Western academic discourse by drawing on their expertise and command of Sanskrit as pandits.[14] Such alliances were the basis for her lobbying for establishing the Central Hindu College in Benares as a place of learning, combining elements of Western and "traditional" education. Her second translation is motivated by this educational project (see below).

The translation gained popularity when in 1907 Natesan & Co, a Madras based publishing house, republished it, now including the Sanskrit text. G. A. Natesan explains in his note to its first edition that he wanted to "place a cheap edition" of the *BhG* with the original text and the English translation "within the easy reach of the English reading public".[15] He expresses his gratitude to Annie Besant—"that warm and tried friend of India whose services to our land it were vain to count"[16]—for letting him use her translation. The hope that it "will find a place in thousands of homes both in India and elsewhere" seemed not to have been entirely in vain as the first edition (10,000 copies) was soon followed by two others in 1908 (20,000) and 1911 (50,000). Another edition was published in 1922 with fewer copies (5,000) but nevertheless attests to its popularity in this period. The 1895 translation received mixed reactions.[17]

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13 Sharpe 1985: 104 states that Besant's contribution to theosophical *BhG* translations and studies was slightly delayed and refers to a "first translation" published in 1904. Without providing references, Neufeldt 1986: 25 mentions two translations.

14 Pramadadas Mitra was a renowned Sanskrit scholar at the Benaras Sanskrit College and the Anglo-Saxon Government College, Benaras; on his dispute with Sanskritist George Thibaut, see Dalmia 1996. Ganganath Jha (1872–1941) was a famous Sanskrit scholar; an important Indological research institute was named after him (Ganganath Jha Research Institute, Allahabad). Upendranath Basu (1864–?) was, with Bertram Keightley, the first general secretary of the Indian Section of the Theosophical Society until his resignation in 1908, and one of the founders of the Central Hindu College.

15 Cited in Besant 1922: ix.

16 Ibid.

17 While staying in South Africa, Mohandas K. Gandhi arranged in 1905 a reprint of the translation that included Besant's portrait on the title page. When Besant protested the reproduction of her portrait, Gandhi apologised, explaining that "it has arisen from excessive reverence for yourself" (Gandhi 1960, vol. 4: 429–430). On the other hand, Besant and her translation were attacked by Srinivasa Aiyangar in a scornful condemnation of Besant's alleged vilification of Hinduism. He launched his attack in the name of his guru Yogi

It is dedicated to "all aspirants in East and West". On the one hand, the dedication hints at the topic of an East–West synthesis that will become an important goal for Besant in the years to come. On the other it is a text to be used in individual practice that aims, Besant explains, to lift the aspirant from the "lower level of renunciation where objects are renounced" to the "loftier heights where desires are dead" and the "union with Divine Life is achieved and maintained in the midst of worldly affairs".[18] In contrast to other publications,[19] Besant presents yoga here not as a specific philosophical-religious tradition (as it is treated in classical Indian doxographies and current academic accounts) but as a universal method and goal of spiritual development. Accordingly, the *BhG* is "a scripture of Yoga. Yoga is literally Union, and it means harmony with the Divine Law, the becoming one with the Divine Life, harmony with the highest self, divine life".[20] Therefore, achieving harmony is the core of the yoga of the *BhG*; it means recognising that opposite states are part of the Divine. This teaching is presented in the dramatic conflict of Arjuna, who is called to fight against those he owes love to liberate "his nation" from a usurper.[21] Following here the general approach in theosophical interpretations, Besant interprets the *BhG* allegorically. Thus the battlefield of Kurukṣetra represents the "battlefield of the soul", Arjuna the struggling soul, and Kṛṣṇa the "Logos of the Soul".[22] The *BhG* is a lesson for all "aspiring souls" in East and West who have the same goal but approach it differently.[23] Without referring to any of her theosophical predecessors or explaining the motivation for another translation,[24] Besant deals with some technical aspects of the translation. For example,

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Parthasarathy Aiyangar and the "Orthodox Hindu Society whose humble slave I am" (Aiyangar 1915: 8). Says Aiyangar: "Translate the Gītā she must, and Jacob's ladder let down she must! [. . .] 'Enough' says the Orthodox Hindu, turning up his nose at it. Why? Because it is not Krshṇa that he is asked to see in the translation, but Mrs. Besant's ignorance and vanity and audacity compounded. [. . .] Challenging Bishops and Archbishops is easy, but not a mild Brahmana" (Aiyangar 1915: 59). This attack also illustrates the contestation of unlicensed engagements with the text, which was in the case of Besant also fuelled by her reformist agenda and what was viewed as a "scandalous" private life.

18 Besant 1895: v.

19 In her *Introduction to Yoga* (1908), Besant presents yoga as both a universal science and an Indian philosophical-spiritual tradition.

20 Besant 1895: vi.

21 Besant 1895: viii.

22 Besant 1895: ix.

23 Besant 1895: x.

24 This contrasts with Judge's "Antecedent words" to his rendering of the *BhG* (Judge 1913), wherein he acknowledges Subba Row's allegorical interpretation of the *BhG* as laying the foundation for the theosophical interpretation of the text (Row 1921; see Neufeldt 1986: 13–15). Before Row's lectures were published in book form, parts of them appeared as "Notes on the Bhagavad Gita" in 1887 in volume 8 of Helena Blavatsky's journal *The Theosophist*; on the journal, see Burger 2014.

she explains that in some cases, technical terms have been left untranslated—*manas* and *buddhi* are mentioned—"to gain something of keep to the precision of the Sanskrit" and avoid confusion for practitioners.[25] For the sake of clarity, adjectives have been formed from Sanskrit nouns using the affix "ic"—although "its use is sometimes a barbarism".[26] Names and epithets (except for patronyms) have mostly been left untranslated because, says Besant, they would be grotesque in an English translation that takes away the musicality and literary charm they have in Sanskrit.[27]

Ten years later, in 1905, Besant published a second translation together with the scholar and fellow theosophist Bhagavan Das (1869–1958). This translation is intrinsically connected to their efforts to establish the Hindu Central College in Varanasi, an educational institution administrated not by the colonial government but by Hindus themselves. The translation differs from the first only in rendering specific terms and omitting some annotations. However, it is enhanced considerably to serve as a textbook for self-study and in class. It now contains the original Sanskrit text, a "free" and a "word-for-word" translation, a summary of contents, an introduction to Sanskrit grammar, an appendix with alternative readings, and an index. Included are also texts (in original Sanskrit and translation) that place the text more specifically in a Hindu environment: *Bhagavadgītāmāhātmya* (The Greatness of the Gītā)[28] from the *Varāhapurāṇa*; *Karādinyāsa* (The Arrangement of the Hands [etc.] For the Gītā)[29] presented in the table of contents as serving "the Tantra way of practising" the *BhG*, and *Gītā Dhyānam* (The Meditation on the Gītā; according to the table of contents: "The Thought form of the *BhG* for the Purpose of Meditation").[30] The overall intention is to support an independent study of the text for those who engage with the text "mainly for the sake of its priceless teachings".[31] In this way, the edition is symptomatic of the changing status of genealogical transmission as being no longer the only way to authorise individual religious interpretation and spiritual practice. Furthermore, the translation is presented as if unconnected to theosophical views; there is no dedication nor a

25 Besant 1895: xi. Other terms in the translation are also treated in this way. For instance, *dharma* is left untranslated but is commented upon in footnotes (for instance, *BhG* 1.40, 2.6). The only exception is the uncommented translation of *dharmakṣetra* (*BhG* 1.1) with "holy plain" (which is kept in the 1905 translation). The word *yoga* is often translated with "union" but occasionally remains untranslated.

26 Besant 1895: xi.

27 Besant 1895: x–xi.

28 Besant/Das 1905: xxiii.

29 Besant/Das 1905: xxviii.

30 Besant/Das 1905: xxxii.

31 Besant/Das 1905: i.

prefaced interpretation, as is the case with the first translation.[32] The edition was used as a textbook in the Hindu Central College (and other colleges) after it was merged with the newly founded Benaras Hindu University.[33]

3 Besant's lectures on the *BhG*

Besant's views on the *BhG* are available in two lecture series held for members of the Theosophical Society in 1896 (Benares) and 1905 (Adyar). Although the lecture series present similar interpretations of the *BhG* as a yoga text, they differ in style and treatment. The first series was published with the title *The Three Paths to Union with God* (1897). In accordance with Besant's translations, the *BhG* is presented as a treatise on three paths of yoga practice that must be followed to obtain *yoga*, union with the "Supreme Spirit". Accordingly, Besant deals in her three lectures with three paths of *karmayoga* (action), *jñānayoga* (wisdom), and *bhaktiyoga* (devotion). The three yogas are not viewed as separate paths but as methods that the perfect yogin must master all. Having obtained this mastery, the yogin "is approaching the state of Yoga, where all paths blend into one, and where the Supreme will unveil Himself to the man who is free from the illusions of matter".[34] The veil metaphor alludes to Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* and is used in the lectures to describe the goal of truth-seeking and the mechanisms of its working.

The just quoted passage already illustrates this emphasis on the goal of "unveiled" truth; in the exposition of the three paths, the metaphor also plays an important role. Following the theosophical variety of evolutionary monism,[35] the three paths are presented as being connected, on the one hand, to the general evolution of the supreme spirit, and on the other, to the qualities of individual consciousness which are classified according to the three *guṇas*, the "dynamic

32 An exception to this rule is the addition of annotations to the translation of the *Bhagavadgītāmāhātmyam* and the *Gītākarādinyāsa*. It is explained, for instance, that the "fruits of reading" (*śravaṇaphala*) the *BhG* listed in *Bhagavadgītāmāhātmyam* may seem "somewhat fantastic", but only if understood as referring to mere reading, or "lip-repetition", and not to the mastering of the *BhG* in "life-repetition". The different portions whose study are said to yield these fruits represent "stages in human evolution" and the achievements connected with them (Besant/Das 1905: xxvi). On the correspondences between text, body, and mind established in the "Tantric" text, Besant comments that they may seem to the "western world [. . .] fantastic and superstitious; to the eastern world, in which the faint tradition of the Great Science lingers, they sound as echoes of a mightier age, when Gods and Men walked familiarly together in the Hidden Ways" (Besant/Das 1905: xxx).

33 See Renold 2005.

34 Besant 1897: 18.

35 See Nanda 2016 on the implementation of evolutionistic ideas in Blavatsky's interpretation of ancient Indian "wisdom" and its impact on Indian intellectuals.

qualities of nature" taught in Sāṃkhya philosophy. These qualities "veil" the higher forms of consciousness every living seeks to obtain, being pushed forward by evolutionary progress.[36] The veil metaphor is also used in the exposition of *jñānayoga*, yoga of knowledge, when it is viewed as being instigated by the drive to seek the inner world that is behind the "veil of objects", to realise the discriminative insight (*viveka*) that discloses the illusionary nature of the object-word. Besant takes modern science as the signifier of this strive when referring to the telescope that "unveils the infinite world of the vast".[37] But there is knowledge beyond the scientific insights, which becomes evident in the persistent dissatisfaction that lingers despite the discoveries. Besant now adds an auditive aspect to the veil; the veiled Self has been "speaking", "whispering" that "[i]t is hidden beneath the veil of Māyā"[38]—an almost occult expansion of the Schopenhauerian trope which Besant does not elaborate further. But there is another shift in the use of the trope, when Besant uses the plural to illustrate the presence of the Supreme Self in all beings and objects, in the "veils" which Nature (*prakṛti*) constantly produces as the "outer semblances", and "visible appearances of the Unity that is the Supreme".[39] Pluralisation and diversification lend the veil a reality that is more than a mere illusion.[40] The veils are appearances, embodiments of the Supreme. This quality makes "veils" desirable and attractive even if this invites the initial misunderstanding of the individual consciousness that the attraction lies in the objects.[41]

In the lectures Besant occasionally quotes from the *BhG*, but more often she draws on other established authorities, referring among other things to the Upaniṣads, Rāmānuja, and Nārada *Bhaktisūtra*, citing puranic narratives, and a story told by Swami Vivekananda at the World Parliament of Religions. This strategy points to a hesitancy on her part to claim authority on the text, which she seems to acknowledge when she declares herself "quite incompetent to lecture on that divine book".[42] On the other hand, she feels confident dealing with a "humbler topic", namely, the three paths of yoga. Thereby, she claims an authority on a par with other theosophical interpreters without adding novel elements (as can also be seen in the relatively conventional employment of the veil metaphor). Furthermore,

36 Besant 1897: 5.
37 Besant 1897: 28.
38 Besant 1897: 30.
39 Besant 1897: 36.
40 Despite the illusionary character ascribed to the outer world, theosophy does not advocate an Advaita type of monism, as is also apparent in the acceptance of the *prakṛti* concept of Sāṃkhya which entails the acceptance of the reality of the world.
41 Besant 1897: 38. In this passage, the connection of the divine veil(s) to the larger history of mankind is not mentioned; this novel element is introduced in the second lecture series (see below).
42 Besant 1897: foreword.

her referring to Vivekananda is interesting since he, like Besant in these lectures, also refrains from engaging with the text of the *BhG* in greater detail. Instead, he expounds the "three yogas" from his Advaitic perspective, using various metaphors (the veil only rarely) and narratives for illustration.[43] In both cases, such forms of treatment point to the growing interest in universalising presentations of religious texts by individuals outside or independent of the scholastic or academic circles that were recognised as the authorities in these matters. Yet the legitimacy of such interpretations was contested by academic and scholastic authorities. Furthermore, the individual interpreters were competing with interpreters seeking to establish themselves as representatives of Hinduism, and this resulted in complex relationships of competition despite shared anti-colonial or reformist agendas.[44] Besant's continuing engagement with the *BhG* can also be seen as indicative of her attempts to consolidate her spiritual authority in the Theosophical Society and to establish herself as championing the cause of Hinduism. The textbook-like character of the second translation with its aim to reach a much wider readership attests to these intentions, as does the second lecture series with its emphasis on the dynamics of history and the importance of individual spirituality for the evolution of mankind.

The second lecture series was published nine years after the first, in 1906, with the title *Hints on the Study of the Bhagavad-Gītā*. Compared to the 1897 lectures, they present a more comprehensive treatment of the text, with numerous quotations and "hints" on how to study it. Accordingly, Besant deals with individual doctrines and the *BhG* as a whole, as can be seen in the titles of the individual lectures: (1) The Great Unveiling, (2) A Yoga-Shāstra, (3) Methods of Yoga-Bhakti, and (4) Discrimination and Sacrifice. The double entendre implied in "hints" points to a change in Besant's self-perception as a lecturer. She suggests that she is merely giving "hints" and not a comprehensive interpretation as is the case with scholastic and modern academic commentators. As if repeating the caveat of the first lecture series, Besant declares her "utter inadequacy for the task"[45] because of the complexity of the issues at stake.[46] However, this rhetoric is not mere *captatio*

43 Besant attended this event as a representative of the Theosophical Society. A detailed comparison of Vivekananda's and Besant's views on the *BhG* is beyond the scope of this article; on the tensions between Vivekananda and theosophy, see Emilsen 1984.

44 The tensions between Vivekananda and the Theosophical Society (represented by Besant), and later Gandhi and Besant, are examples of this constellation; on the larger contexts, see, for instance, the studies of Gandhi 2006 and Scott 2016.

45 Besant 1906: 1.

46 In this way she replaces her previous self-declared incompetence (see above) with a piece of advanced knowledge about the text and its message. This move is emphasised when Besant says that she feels this inadequacy "more strongly than it is possible for any one of you to feel" (Besant 1906: 1).

benevolentiae, as it serves to stress her possessing in-depth knowledge of spiritual processes that allows her to give "hints" on how to understand and practise the *BhG*. This deeper knowledge allows her to assume the role of a teacher expounding essential messages of the text. In her exposition Besant employs both insider and outsider perspectives. From the very start both perspectives are enacted in her distinguishing between "inner" and "outer" levels of interpretation. Both levels are connected to her interpreting the *BhG* as both an allegory—as most theosophical interpreters do—and a historical document about the manifestations of the "Divine logos" in the "outer" world.[47] The historical manifestations also affect the individual, the "inner life" of consciousness; this assumption provides the basis for the allegorical interpretation. The interconnection between history and allegory is the novel element in the second lecture series that reshapes Besant's approach to the *BhG*. While her general interpretation of the three yogas does not fundamentally differ from the earlier lectures, it now includes an explicit historical and thus "worldly" orientation that corresponds to her increasing political activism for the "Indian cause". The following thus focuses on this novel element presented in the 1906 opening lecture entitled "The Great Unveiling".

4 "The Great Unveiling"

The dramatic title of the first lecture corroborates the already mentioned function of titling the whole lecture series as "hints". By pointing out that the text is a veil to be unveiled, Besant—as if being simultaneously in front of and behind the veil—hints what is to be seen and known when approaching the *BhG* as a "presentment".[48] In this way, she puts herself into the position of teaching a secret doctrine and claims to have access to esoteric truths in the footsteps of Blavatsky. This positioning as disciple of Blavatsky's teachings and representative of the Theosophical Society is also evident in the lecture title, which alludes to Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (first published, 1877). The *BhG* is included in the "secret doctrines" as a text that helps the continuing historical "unveiling" of the "Divine" (Logos) if approached correctly by knowing teachers and aspiring adepts. Finally, Besant enhances her use of the veil metaphor by connecting the veil(s) with actual history and its temporalisation in enactments of "unveiling".

This enhanced perspective also has repercussions for her reading of the text. The *BhG*'s role in the "Great Unveiling" explains its complexity: "To speak of the Gītā is to speak of the history of the world, of its vast complexity, of that

47 See Neufeldt 1986: 26. in the preface to her 1895 translation, Besant only mentions the allegorical interpretation.

48 Besant 1906: 10.

web of desires, thoughts, and actions which makes up the evolution of humanity".[49] No less complex or even confusing is how this is addressed. For her, to look for straight, logical coherence misunderstands the text's provenance. She vividly describes the confusing features of the text: "many a one who reads it, and would fain understand it, finds it—as indeed did the first hearer—difficult, complex and even confusing, flying apparently from one subject to another, speaking now of one method and then of a method apparently opposed, sometimes seeming to give counsel along one line and then counsel along another".[50] But these features are just typical of "divine instruction" that defies worldly logic.[51] The *BhG* is truth-finding in practice; it enacts the "unveiling" of the supreme, "mysterious" divine Logos. Such unveiling does not follow ordinary conventions of instruction. Says Besant: "the way of the Divine Teacher is not the way of the human pedagogue" as he does not teach in "textbooks written for a boy to learn, exercising his memory rather than unfolding his life".[52] The unveiling of the meaning of the *BhG* thus entails the unfolding of life and vice versa; the adept must live through the teachings "step-by-step".[53] It is not the teacher's task to offer clarifications that only touch upon the "outer things".[54] Instead, the performative, interactive dimension of "true reading" propels an individual's spirituality and is also fruitful for humanity at large since it "marks a point in human progress".[55]

Next, Besant explains the inner and outer dimensions of the "unveiling" that the *BhG* brings about. Criticising the modern tendency to reject the idea that historical truths are conveyed in sacred literature, Besant calls for the acknowledgement of the historical dimension of this literature instead of viewing it as allegory alone.[56] For her, allegory is nothing but history on a smaller scale: at the level of the individual. The interpretation of the historical meaning of the *BhG* follows the theosophical view of history as mirroring the cosmic evolution of the supreme spirit. Theosophy interprets history along the lines of an evolutionary teleology in which Darwinian, Hegelian, and messianic parameters are combined with Indian

49 Besant 1906: 1.
50 Besant 1906: 2.
51 Besant seems to hint here at the shortcomings of Western academic critics, who denounce the *BhG* as a "hotch-potch" of doctrines that hardly makes any sense. For a critical discussion of Western text-historical approaches to the *BhG* vis-à-vis scholars proposing a "holistic" interpretation, see Malinar 2007.
52 Besant 1906: 2–3.
53 "[O]nly as, step by step, the living is accomplished is the profound unveiling of the mysteries possible for the individual heart" (Besant 1906: 5).
54 Besant 1906: 5.
55 Besant 1906: 6.
56 Besant 1906: 6.

ideas of recurrent world-ages and the doctrine of *karman*.[57] Accordingly, Besant states: "History is the working out of the LOGOS plan, His plan, His scheme for evolving humanity; and history is also the story of the evolution of a World-Logos".[58] History is thus the gradual appearance of this plan as history. In this view the *BhG* is both document and part of this process, the "Great Unveiling" of *logos*. When reading the *BhG* as history, "it is the Great Unveiling, that makes you understand the meaning and the purpose of human history, and thus enables you to scan, with eyes that see, the panorama of the great unfolding of events in nation after nation, and in race after race".[59] What is seen is a teleology driven by spiritual progress, which is also marked by reversals, setbacks, and destruction. According to their karman, all human beings are part of this process but individually involved in this. Cosmic history is thus mirrored in individual life, making it an allegory of the larger, historical struggles: "[W]hen we say allegory, we only mean a smaller history, a lesser history, the salient points of which, reflections of the larger history, are repeated in the life-story of each individual Jīvātmā,[60] each individual embodied Spirit."[61] For the advanced adept, the perfected yogin, history means working on unveiling a future evolution that cannot be grasped fully in the present and appears to most individuals as a struggle. According to Besant, all sacred scriptures convey this double meaning of history and allegory and reveal that individual life is a reflection and an enactment of the "greater Life".[62] Having both meanings in view results in steadfastness: "He who thus reads the Gītā in human history can stand unshaken amid the crash of breaking worlds. And you can also read it for your own individual helping and encouraging and enlightening, as an allegory, the story of the unfolding Spirit within yourselves."[63]

Besant next turns to what the *BhG* discloses when drawing away "the veil that covers the real scheme which history works out on the physical plane".[64] It uncovers the historical crisis of ancient India's destruction, but it is a destruction that ultimately results in progress as it helps India to prepare for its future. At such moments of crisis, the ruling *logos* (*īśvara*) of the present world-system appears in the physical form of an *avatāra*. In the *BhG*, Kṛṣṇa assumes the role of *avatāra* and unveils to Arjuna, the individual self, the lesson and drama of history. For the

57 For a general outline, see Wessinger 1988; Viswanathan 1998. For the application of the *karman* doctrine to individual life-history and collective histories, see Malinar 2013, 2018.
58 Besant 1906: 6.
59 Besant 1906: 8–9.
60 The individual is called her using the Sanskrit *jivātman*, the living self, which is ontologically viewed as a part (using the Sanskrit word *aṃśa*) of the higher self, the *logos*.
61 Besant 1906: 6–7.
62 Besant 1906: 8.
63 Besant 1906: 9.
64 Besant 1906: 9.

individual spiritual development, and thus allegorically speaking, Kṛṣṇa represents the *logos* of the supreme spirit that is present in everyone who guides the "lower intellect" (*manas*) represented by Arjuna. These two "presentments" of the Divine belong together and must be understood as such. Besant elaborates firstly on the historical meaning, the decline of ancient India that once was the "world-model of a nation".[65] Echoing nationalist and evolutionist reinterpretations of the Indian classical doctrine of the world-ages, she describes the ancient Aryan civilisation in glowing terms and speaks of a golden yet "infant civilisation"[66] that gave birth to the word Dharma, "Duty, Fitness, Right Order".[67] This word is both a keyword in the history of the Indian subcontinent and the more extensive evolution of humanity.[68] Despite the nationalist overtones of her depiction of the "golden age" of the Veda, Besant does not call for its revival but rather for progressing into a more "mature" future by transposing "ancient wisdom" in a modern framework. India's decline is seen as conforming to a law of nature (and thus divine *logos*) since a civilisation deteriorates "like all things human" once it has served its function. At the same time, the presence of Kṛṣṇa, as the *avatāra* of the currently ruling divine *logos*, discloses India's future role in history as the "World-Saviour".[69] The function of an *avatāra*, the veiled appearance of the Divine in history, is to "unveil" the true significance of death and destruction, to prepare India for a leading role in the future. The price for such a "high office" that any nation has to pay is "treading the valley of the shadow of death [. . .] drinking to the very dregs the bitter cup of humiliation" to prepare the ground for assuming this role; only after the crucifixion is there the resurrection.[70] Besant uses Christian terminology to describe a unique soteriological moment that changes history, as Christians would claim, to illustrate a natural law that serves the "divine plan", "the life behind the veil". Christian terminology is reframed by evolutionary historiography and embedded in the classical Indian cosmological model of repeated descents (*avatāra*) of the divine connected to repeated revelations of religious-philosophical doctrines. This model is an important feature of theosophical historiography wherein it is reinterpreted according to a teleology of the progressive "unveiling" of the divine spirit in various veils.

In putting this into concrete terms for the *BhG* and India at large, Besant adopts Blavatsky's idea to connect the embodiments of the god Viṣṇu with Darwin's the-

65 Besant 1906: 10.
66 Besant 1906: 10.
67 Besant 1906: 12.
68 According to theosophical doctrines, each civilisation contributes an essential term to the evolution of the spirit, a "peculiar word from the Eternal that each one was to speak" (Besant 1910: 1–2).
69 Besant 1906: 12.
70 Besant 1906: 15.

ory of evolution.[71] According to this idea of "avataric evolution"[72] the epochs in history converge with the puranic accounts of the ten *avatāra*s of Viṣṇu. The *BhG* marks the epoch of the eighth *avatāra*, Kṛṣṇa, who appeared to "start the Indian nation on [. . .] the bitter path of humiliation and of suffering".[73] The *BhG* enacts this process when Kṛṣṇa reveals himself in chapter 11 as death-bringing time that resulted in the downfall of the Indian kingdoms, as Besant points out (quoting *BhG* 11.32). The epic battle signifies the end of ancient India as it paved the way for the various conquests India had to endure in the following centuries, such as by Alexander the Great, Central Asian Islam, and European nations, the last of which played "with the dice of war and commerce for the ruling of India".[74] While all this meant India's "crucifixion", it is only half the story because the "waves" of conquest also "fertilised" the land and left "some new thought, some fresh idea, some treasure to enrich her ever-growing thought".[75] Such new thought was, Besant suggests, contrary to purifying, exclusivist ideas of nationhood. At the same time, the foreign invasions weakened the Indian nation; it was also "enriched by the experience gathered from many nations who came to mingle with her own".[76] All this prepared the ground for India's "resurrection" as future world saviour. When read from an allegorical perspective, Arjuna represents the individual's involvement in this history. Seen from a historical perspective, Arjuna's arguments against the war were a realistic but short-sighted diagnosis of the situation: "[H]is ideas of the gradual decay of dharma, which would inevitably follow the slaughter on Kurukṣetra, were all correct. [. . .] His vision was not, then, a blinded vision, only it did not see far enough."[77] Arjuna could not see the India of the future, and therefore he wrongly thought that destruction could be avoided. He had to be taught that nothing can stop the course of history as the divine plan must be carried out (Besant quotes *BhG* 18.59–61, 11.32). This plan also includes taking proper care of the transition from the old system to the new one. This is the reason, says Besant, why Arjuna was told to fulfil his "inborn duty" as a warrior. His task was to serve as a "bridge" between the old and the new: "[T]hose who steadfastly

71 See Blavatsky 1891, vol. 2: 274–275.
72 Cf. Brown 2007a, 2007b; Nanda 2016: 308ff.
73 Besant 1906: 12–13.
74 Besant 1906: 14.
75 Besant 1906: 15.
76 Besant 1906: 15. Besant views such "mingling" as a preferred "shape" for high office, which she also points out concerning Arjuna, whose genealogy attests to the caste confusion he dreads. After recounting Arjuna's mixed pedigree, Besant states that "there were the mingling of strange and diverse currents in the veins of this Arjuna, chosen friend of Shrī Kṛiṣhṇa, chosen tool for the work of transition. On which facts the thoughtful may fitly ponder" (Besant 1906: 22). Later in her life, she presented herself as "mingled" when she claimed to be "Western-Born but in Spirit Eastern"; see Malinar 2013.
77 Besant 1906: 19.

perform the dharma of the older forms into which they were born, although they know them to be dying, until the new are ready, form the bridge over which the ignorant may walk in safety amid the crash of a falling system into a new system."[78] In this way, Besant hints at her political ideas of India's progress to freedom and leadership through reform, not revolution.[79] The inevitability of the destruction and the call to perform his role as an instrument of the divine was the "great unveiling" for the individual represented by Arjuna.[80] In concluding her exposition of the historical meaning, Besant again points to the mechanism of unveiling through which "the life that is behind the veil" manifests itself and becomes visible. If this mechanism is understood, doubts vanish and "in every struggle we can throw ourselves on the right side",[81] which means to cooperate with the ruling *logos* in the "Great Unveiling". With these remarks, Besant turns to a brief explanation of the allegorical meaning as usually propagated in theosophy.[82]

Against the background of the double meaning of the *BhG*, Besant turns in the second lecture to the "nature of the Gītā in its essence"; that is, as a scripture of Yoga (Yoga-Shāstra[83]) given by the "Lord of Yoga himself".[84] The "true meaning of Yoga" and the methods of becoming a yogin constitute the actual teaching of the *BhG* that needs to be understood and practised. The three pathways taught in the *BhG*, namely *karmayoga*, *bhaktiyoga*, and *jñānayoga*, are presented by Besant as aspects of a single spiritual method that are united and transcended by the perfect yogin. Quoting *BhG* 6.46, Besant states that the yogin is "greater than the men who are treading one or the other or the third of these three paths that lead to complete yoga; [. . .], for he sums up their separate characteristics all within himself".[85] Accordingly, Besant defines yoga by quoting *BhG* 11.7–8 wherein Kṛṣṇa answers Arjuna's request to see his teacher's divinity by pointing to his "Sovereign Yoga"; that is, the unity of world as assembled in a single, divine body. Supreme yoga is

78 Besant 1906: 22.

79 At this time, she did not openly commit herself to the political struggle against the colonial rule because her activities were observed with suspicion by the authorities. With her "reformist" positions, she sided with what was called the "moderate" faction of the Indian National Congress. However, she was also criticised for a patronising attitude that was regarded as resembling the imperialist positions she otherwise castigated; see Malinar 2018.

80 Besant 1906: 25.

81 Besant 1906: 27.

82 Arjuna represents the "lower mind" (*manas*) struggling with the passions represented by his relatives, the ties of the past. This lower mind is doubtful and seeks knowledge in the higher Self represented by Kṛṣṇa. When the *manas* obeys the higher self, all doubts and passions are overcome: "The Self without must vanish before the Self within is realised" (Besant 1906: 32).

83 See also the preface in Besant 1895.

84 Besant 1906: 36.

85 Besant 1906: 60.

"the vision of the union of the many seen in the One".[86] In contrast to many other interpreters, Besant regards *BhG* 11 as the essence of the text, the message that is reiterated throughout the text. The practice of yoga thus necessarily results in seeing the One in everything, transcending with is called "good" and "bad" karman and uniting oneself with the Self. The yogin is "the man who, realising the Unity, lives it".[87] This entails engaging in yoga directed at both levels of seeking such union, the outer and the inner, the historical and allegorical.

Final remarks

Besant's translations and interpretations of the *BhG* are guided by a universalising understanding of yoga as a spiritual science of universal relevance and an integral part of ancient Indian "wisdom". While following the view—formulated in Indian commentarial traditions—that the *BhG* teaches three forms of yoga to obtain liberation from the constrains of corporeal existence, Besant understands them as parts of the one and only yoga as a method to unify oneself and history with the "life of the Divine". This understanding is in accordance with the general theosophical appropriation of yoga as an "ancient science" ready to be employed in the contemporary world. The monistic approach to the diversity of the world championed by theosophy turns yoga into a method and state of inner-worldly harmony with the manifestations of the Divine. For Besant, yoga is a worldly activity open to all and not as an ascetic pathway to be practised exclusively by male renouncers. She is well aware that this interpretation is not in accordance with "orthodox" interpretations, but she defends her position against her critics:

> I have here seen men who claim to speak for Hindu orthodoxy, who claim to defend it against the teaching of the Theosophist, I have here seen it put forward that no man can be a yogī, unless he live far apart from men in cave or jungle or desert [. . .]. I have heard it said that no man can be a yogī who is in the midst of activity, working, labouring, endeavouring to help all good things that are in the world.[88]

In her 1906 lectures she overrules this view by turning the *BhG* into a document of the evolving history of the Divine *logos*. For Besant, the "unveiled" Divine is not a transcendent entity but obtaining knowledge of the whole picture, an insight into an ever unfolding divine drama.

86 Besant 1906: 52.
87 Besant 1906: 56.
88 Besant 1906: 39.

Her use of the metaphor of the veil supports this "non-orthodox" interpretation of yoga and thus its appropriation in championing theosophical teachings. The metaphor also connects the two lecture series and allows tracing the development of Besant's views on the *BhG* and of her assuming authority as an interpreter who can give "hints" to its deeper meanings and practical application. In the earlier lectures, Besant deals primarily, and rather conventionally, with the contrast between "veiled" and "unveiled"[89] states and stages of evolution which apply to both individual consciousness and the Supreme Spirit. In the second lecture series she emphasises the historical dynamics of the unveiling of the Divine. The use of the metaphor is not surprising given the centrality accorded to the veil in theosophy and modern intellectual history and fin de siècle East–West encounters in general. However, it seems that the famous trope of the "veil of Maya", coined by Arthur Schopenhauer as an emblematic expression for "Indian wisdom", has mostly preoccupied Western interpreters. Departing from Schopenhauer's and Blavatsky's employment of the veil metaphor, Besant initially focused on what is behind the veil. In her second lecture series she expands the metaphor by pluralising it. She stresses the significance and appearances of veils at individual and collective levels, with nature and the Divine manifesting in and through them. Therefore, veils are not mere illusions; they are "semblances", "presentments", and they are diverse as unity ("Divine logos") is not present in and as a single homogenous and monolithic entity, but in multiple and manifold forms. Consequently, Besant views chapter 11, Kṛṣṇa's appearance as "All-Form" (*viśvarūpa*) and "Time" (*kāla*) as the core of the *BhG*. Besant pluralises and temporalises the nature and function of veils in casting history and life-histories as enactments of veiling and unveiling: *avatāra* Kṛṣṇa is a veil that serves the unveiling of a future about to happen ("history"). Arjuna's envisions this future, but with a mind "veiled" by doubts and passions which are removed by Kṛṣṇa's yoga-doctrines as pathways to unite and "harmonise" oneself and one's actions with the "life behind the veil". But this life, according to Besant, cannot be separated from its being constantly unveiled in veils. Therefore, both history and individual existence have the quality of drama, of a struggle for something other, which is present as and in veils and yet beyond them. No veil is useless since it has a function in the evolution of the self; thus everyone is involved and called to practise yoga to "harmonise", to engage in history and the political and social circumstances of the present as a form of one's

89 The metaphor of the veil and the various narratives connected to it (about Isis, Salome, and other "veiled" figures) in combination with the trope of "unveiled", "naked truth" at this time had already become a preoccupation in Western literature and philosophy. This preoccupation is also one of the reasons why Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* appears emblematic. The focus of interest was either on what is behind the veil or on the veil itself. This situation is also mirrored in the numerous academic studies on the topic; see, for instance, Assmann 1999; Ziolkowski 2008.

spiritual quest. In this way, Besant appropriates the text to expound a universalising theosophical framework, which she uses to formulate and justify her intensifying sociopolitical commitment to India and Hinduism.

With her translations and lectures Besant sought to establish herself as a spiritual authority in the theosophical circles, but at the same time she propagated the persistent authority of the *BhG* (and, by extension, of "ancient Indian wisdom") when coping with colonial-modern challenges. Such claims to authority received mixed reactions, ranging from ridicule and contempt to praise and admiration. Many such reactions were probably also fuelled by her widely known history of political activism, which also affected her private life in numerous ways. After moving out of the domestic sphere into the political arena, voicing her views in public, she became a theosophist and entered the realm of religion and viewed herself as a spokeswoman for "ancient Indian wisdom" and, later the "cause of India". When reviewing the literature, it seems that her biography has attracted more attention than her intellectual endeavours, which were regarded as dilettante and lacking authority. However, contemporary audiences used her translations, and read the lectures. A study of these texts thus enhances our understanding of the dynamics of the colonial intellectual and sociopolitical discourse and of the participating individuals.

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