

## Theme 1B: Religious figures and sacred texts (Part 1): Krishna and Arjuna

### Key concepts

- The story of Krishna and Arjuna and the conversation between them forms the content of the Bhagavad Gita. It was spoken on the battlefield as two armies were getting ready for war. They were in fact two sets of cousins competing for the throne, the Pandavas and the Kurus. Krishna was friendly with both sides and although he had agreed not to fight, he offers to drive the chariot of Arjuna. Arjuna the great archer was a member of the kshatriyas - the warrior/ruler varna and therefore his duty was to fight. He looked out towards his opponents and recognised friends and family members on both sides. So, he throws his bow down and decides to withdraw from the battle, preferring inaction to being responsible for the death of the people he loved. Krishna sees Arjuna withdrawing and begins to persuade Arjuna that he should stick to his duty as a warrior and engage the enemy.
- The varnas were a way of structuring society that originated in Vedic times and members of each varna had specific duties to perform. This was their varnadharma. Krishna addresses the issue of varnadharma and argues that action done out of a sense of duty, without attachment, has no karmic effects. The source of evil is not in actions, but in the intentions behind the actions.
- Samkhya is one of the oldest and most prominent Hindu philosophies and is based on the Upanishads. Samkhya philosophy combines the basic teaching of Samkhya and Yoga. Samkhya philosophy explores the nature of the physical world and the relationship between the objective world and the subjective self. Prakriti, nature, is made up of the three gunas: sattva (purity), rajas (passion) and tamas (inertia).
- In his advice to Arjuna, Krishna says there are ways to act where a person can do what they have to do without getting bad karma. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna explains three paths: the path of knowledge (jnana yoga), the path of action (karma yoga) and the path of devotion (bhakti yoga).
- Jnana means knowledge or wisdom and understanding kshetra (the body) and kshetrajna (the soul or atman) and the relationship between them. Karma yoga is the yoga of unselfish action. Bhakti is the belief that a personal relationship with God is possible based on love and devotion and it is expressed through service.

### Key quotes

*“Now I am confused about my duty and have lost all composure because of weakness. In this condition I am asking you to tell me clearly what is best for me.” (Bhagavad-Gita 2.7)*

*“Not by non-performance of actions does a man attain freedom from action; nor by mere renunciation of actions does he attain his spiritual goal...Do your allotted work, for action is superior to non-action...Therefore, without attachment, always do the work that has to be done for a man doing his work without attachment attains to the highest goal.” (Bhagavad Gita Chapter 3)*

*“He who has gunas is a doer of deeds and enjoyer of what he has done.....he roams about in successive rebirths according to his actions.....He is released from all bondage when he comes to know Brahman.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 5:7, 12-13)*

*“They, who understand the difference between the creation and the creator know the technique of liberation from the trap of Maya, with the help of knowledge, attain the Supreme, who is devoted to Me, is dear to Me.” (Krishna)*

### Key words

Krishna	varnadharma	Vedic	yoga
Samkhya	Upanishads	Arjuna	jnana
three gunas	varna	prakriti	Bhagavad Gita
karma	kshatriyas	bhakti	

### Issues for analysis and evaluation

#### Key arguments/debates

Some would argue that the Jnana path is the most important path to liberation. Others would argue in favour of the Bhakti path. Some would argue that all paths to liberation are of equal value.

#### Key questions

Is the relationship between Krishna and Arjuna a central feature of Hinduism?  
 Could it be argued that the jnana path is the most important path to liberation?  
 Is Arjuna a role model in his own right?