A CONVERSATION ON THE *BHAGAVAD GITA*

Sharada K Eswar is a playwright, storyteller, and educator based in Brampton, Canada, who translated and adapted the text of the Bhagavad Gita. *She is also the* Khana and Kahani *storyteller and has been an artistic associate on* Mahabharata *throughout its development.*

What was your role in creating the *Bhagavad Gita* operatic aria sung during *Dharma*?

Sharada K Eswar: As the artistic associate on this project, my role was to make sure that factually things were in place and that the core story was intact. The *Bhagavad Gita*, or the Celestial Song, is a very important part of the *Mahabharata*. It takes place on Day 1 of the battle, and it is a discourse between Arjuna and Krishna. Until then, Krishna has taken a back seat in the story. It is only here in act 7 of the *Mahabharata* that he plays a key role.

When Vyasa wrote the entire epic, it was not considered a religious text. It's just the *Bhagavad Gita* that has become sacred. It encompasses the key principles of what Hinduism is. When I say Hinduism, I mean a Hindu philosophy of life.

I was tasked with curating the *Bhagavad Gita* into a sixteen-minute libretto. What I essentially did was to take the key points that the *Gita* touches upon and that are relevant to the show itself.

One of the things the *Gita* talks about is detachment, which is not about renouncing materialism or going away to the Himalayas and meditating. It is about, 'How does one be part of a society and yet be apart from it?' The *Gita* says that happiness is not defined by who you are or how you are viewed by others. Happiness is contained within you. We look for happiness everywhere but within ourselves.

You have a background as a classically trained musician. How were you musically engaged with curating the *Gita*?

SKE: When we learn these shlokas from the *Gita*, or hymns as they're sometimes called, there's a certain rhythm, like a chant. The very first

shloka I learned from my grandmother. So there is always musicality to it – that is how I was hearing it. I've heard Meher sing it so many times in the show, but I hear it in my head as a child sitting in the audience.

I'm trained in Carnatic South Indian classical music. I know Suba [Sankaran] has her grounding in South Indian classical music as well. So to hear those melodies was absolutely delightful. I think it's very different from the arias one would normally hear.

Especially toward the end, the notes that she's singing – that's the foundation of Carnatic music, the seven notes, the seven swaras. They're like scales. It's like do-re-mis, those are the building blocks. Any South Asian – you go for dance classes, you go for music lessons – they would've all recognized that.

Meher (the performer of the aria) mentioned that she consulted with you every day while she was preparing the aria. What did you discuss?

SKE: Basically, we were working on pronunciation. It was interesting for me because I take these verses for granted. There are layers and layers to each word. So you have to look beyond what that word literally means to know what it means at an emotional level, a spiritual level, a metaphysical level.

Also, it was exciting to go back to a language that is very different from any of the European languages. The Sanskrit language has no clear opposites. As we discuss in the *Khana* part of the production, dharma and adharma are not the same thing as right versus wrong. They're two sides of the same coin.

Suba Sankaran is a composer and musician based in Toronto, Canada. Suba Sankaran and John Gzowski were the co-composers of the Bhagavad Gita *opera.*

What was the brief that you received from Ravi and Miriam to create this aria?

Suba Sankaran: They gave us many, many sheets of paper that had the verses of the *Bhagavad Gita*, both in Sanskrit written phonetically and the English translation beside it. John [Gzowski] and I thought, 'Let's choose

the ones that still give a good arc for the story so that we're not missing some crucial element.' We skipped a few, and then there's a big gap toward the end.

To set it to music, we divided up the verses and settled on a key. We decided we were going to use different constructs that happen in both South and North Indian classical music.

The opening, the first four verses, is free from the rigours of time. It's meant to be floating and sort of elastic, so you're not going to hear any rhythm in that part.

Ravi had said he really liked certain Baroque operas, and I have a few of my own favourites, like *Dido and Aeneas*. In the orchestration, we added in some harpsichord, but still with all these Sanskrit lyrics.

We had a debate about language. Eventually, they went with the surtitles in English and sung in Sanskrit, which I think was a great move. It loses something of its ancient nature in English translation if you were to sing it, but to have it in the surtitles gives this deeper meaning, especially for a Western audience.

Then we went through and explored different ragas. Sometimes we were within the rules of the raga, and sometimes we were not; we had the freedom to go either way.

Close to the end, there's a big climax, and we have Meher singing in sound syllables that are relatively meaningless. She's riffing on that and does the same thing three times. It takes a left turn because she does this amazing climax, and then we get some text spoken by Arjuna, and then it goes back full circle, where the opera singer goes into a three-tone chant. These were all ideas that we had in order to stay true to the culture it's coming from, but still working in a way where harmony, which doesn't exist in Indian music, can play a huge role.

Meher Pavri is an actor and singer based in London, Canada, who performs the Voice of Krishna.

How well did you know the *Bhagavad Gita* before this production?

Meher Pavri: If you walk into any yoga studio, they have a copy of it there. But my first encounter with the text was through this aria. And it blew

my mind, even just singing in Sanskrit. It's so close to what I pray in, a language called Avestan. It's not a spoken language anymore, but it has similar words and sounds.

It was moving because it reminded me of my dad, who is a Zoroastrian priest. He would be praying and chanting at home all the time, and I would hear him in the background. It sounded similar to what I'm singing now. A lot of people ask me, 'How long did it take you to learn this Sanskrit?' But there was already something so natural about this for me.

Was learning the *Gita* different than other operatic texts?

MP: I've never sung some of these sounds before. I've sung in about ten different languages for opera purposes, but never in Sanskrit. To be able to sing the *Gita* in its original text is so special. Especially for those who have this religious affiliation with it.

Do you believe an operatic rendering is a good fit for the *Gita* text?

MP: Totally. I remember thinking, 'This is such an important part of *Mahabharata*. How are they going to do it?' To keep the grandeur of the emotion, and to portray something so epic, they thought of opera.

Getting to collaborate with Suba and John was a dream, because they literally had my voice in mind when they composed it. And with all of us being in the room together, they would ask me things like, 'How does that feel for you?' I can't go back and have a conversation with Mozart about an aria. I got to pick their brains about why they made musical choices.

How do you understand this character? Who is this singer?

MP: I am Krishna. There's only one verse where I sing as Arjuna; I'm essentially a version of Krishna the whole show. Right before I come on, the Storyteller says, 'Krishna unravels the mysteries of the universe.'

After the intermission, I'm still a version of Krishna. I'm watching everything unravel. And I am adding sounds, I'm humming throughout the whole second half of the show.

And then at the end, the last thing that I say in English is, 'Nothing and no one lasts,' which is another composition from Suba and John. The

whole song didn't make it into the show, but we added that one verse. And it just encompasses everything.

During the performance, you have tremendous focus and energy. How did you work on characterization?

MP: I got musical notes from Suba and John all the time. And I would tweak it every day with Sharada. She would have a list of Sanskrit words for me to fix. And I worked with Ravi on the direction and the movement of the staging.

And then I had walking classes with Brandy, the choreographer. It was a revelation to work on slow-motion walking. A lot of mornings, as a group, the other actors and I would do slow-motion movement. We worked on getting slower, and slower, and slower. I have to practise it every day – to also be able to sustain long notes on one foot sometimes is a challenge. But I think it's important because it transports everyone into a different state.