

ANDERS B. LINDH

## Gāthā — Gītā

### A Genre-Study

The concept of genre has since Hermann Gunkel at the turn of the century received a lot of attention in Old Testament criticism, but has in my opinion been neglected in the study of Indian philosophic and religious literature.

In genre study the difference between the study of a text as a single text unit, and as a representative of a literary type is important. In linguistic theory, talking with de Saussure, this would correspond to the difference between studying the text on the level of *parole* as opposed to studying it on the level of *langue*. In my definition of a *literary genre* I concur with Gunkel: a complex (content) comprised of specific thoughts and moods, particular linguistic forms, and a *Sitz im Leben*.

When discussing the *Sitz im Leben* of a text like the Bhagavadgītā, and also of the Vedic gāthās and the gāthās of Zarathustra, one has to consider the fact that these texts have been transmitted orally for a considerable period of time. Therefore, it is important to make the distinction between the *speech situation* in which a piece of literature representing a certain genre first occurs, which is the original meaning of *Sitz im Leben*, and the *literary type of speech situation* in which a genre is found. What we are able to investigate here is not a *situation*, — since reliable evidence of Indian and Iranian pre-history is quite scarce, and it will be a speculative work to gain such evidence — but a *type of situation*. In the Bhagavadgītā we are in fact faced with a kind of apologetical *type of situation*, while the author gives the impression of a historical *speech situation*. This is a stylistical feature, which actually is nothing but skill in the art of telling a story and making it interesting to the public, thus creating a favourable ground for communicating the message.

Considering a text unit as a genre, then, one has to bear in mind a variety of aspects: content, linguistic form, including style, metre,

grammar, syntax, word-use, etc., life-situation, the history of the text, its function, purpose, and composition.

My analysis of the Bhagavadgītā as a representative of a certain *genre* will show the relationship of this gītā genre to other genres which are related to it. Taking the etymology of the term gītā as a starting-point, we find that the *word* gītā in its original sense is related to the term *gāthā*. In the Iranian sphere the term is a designation of the gāthās of Zarathustra (which have been preserved by being part of the Yasna liturgy (Boyce 1984:2), and in India we find the term in the Vedic literature as representing a certain genre. My aim is to study historical and typological connections, as well as the historical development of these texts with a designation which has its etymology as the lowest common denominator.

The Sanskrit word *gāthā* comes from the root  $\sqrt{gai}$ , to sing, speak or recite in a singing way; relate in metre, and is translated as "song", "verse" or "hymn" (Monier-Williams 1976: 352). The Avestan word *gāthā* means "song" (Bartholomae 1979).

The word *gītā* comes from the same root. "Gīta" is perf. part. "sung", "recited", "praised in song"; "gītā", f. is a verbal noun and means "song", "sacred song" or "sacred poem", "religious doctrine expressed in a metrical form by an inspired sage" (Bartholomae 1979: 356).

The terms *gītā* and *gāthā* are, however, not to be considered as simply meaning song in a general sense, but are terms used for specific kinds of originally oral literature.

Because of the close philosophical relationship between the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavadgītā it is also essential to consider the connection between these texts.

I will give a general description of the Bhagavadgītā, other gītās, Zarathustra's and the Vedic gāthās, and analyse the formal characteristics of those texts, as well as the specific content of ideas which are tied to them.

A model for identification of texts which are part of the genres analysed, and which also may serve as an instrument of analysis for critical evaluation of other literature being part of these gītā and gāthā genres, will close the article.

\*

My source materials consist of the following texts: parts of the Bhagavadgītā which are compared to verses of the Kāṭha-Upaniṣad. Bhagavadgītā and some Vedic gāthās are compared to verses from the gāthās of Zarathustra, especially Yasna 30, which contains fundamental teachings of the prophet (Insler 1975: 159).

## I. THE GĪTĀ GENRE

### The Bhagavadgītā

The Bhagavadgītā, which is part of the Bhīṣma-parvan of the Mahābhārata (Bhīṣmaparvan 1947:23–40), and consists of 700 verses written in the śloka-metre, is the best-known representative of a certain religious poetic genre, the gītā genre. This genre is particularly frequent in the Mahābhārata, with no less than 13 other gītās, and in the Purāṇas with some ten gītās (Bhattacharjee 1926a:537). The opinion of some scholars that the Bhagavad-gītā was a prototype for many of those other gītās (Bhattacharjee 1926b:761) I find quite probable, since it was enormously popular, and a popular text may very well serve as a model for other texts.

### *The Bhagavadgītā as a Prototype*

Scholars like Hauschild and Bhattacharjee consider the Bhagavadgītā to be a prototype for many of the smaller gītās. Bhattacharjee bases his opinion on the fact that these smaller gītās have named their main chapters according to the chapters of the Bhagavadgītā, and that they also have endings of the chapters corresponding to those of the Bhagavadgītā. Examples of such other gītās are the Ganeśagītā, the Śivagītā, and the Brahmagītā (Bhattacharjee 1926b:761; cf. Hauschild 1967:5 f.). The correspondence with the Bhagavadgītā is, according to Bhattacharjee, most striking in the tenth and the eleventh chapters of the Bhagavadgītā (1926b:761). In specific passages of the other gītās there are even word for word quotations from the “original” (Bhattacharjee 1926b:762). Other passages show not only verbal correspondences, but also doctrinal ones, as e.g. concerning Lord Kṛṣṇa’s incarnation, chapter 4, 7–8. These verses have their equivalent in the Devigītā 8, 22–23 (Bhattacharjee 1926b:762 f.; Hauschild 1967:6). Bhattacharjee’s examples can be multiplied. He considers these correspondences to be borrowings, in one direction or the other (1926b:763). Notwithstanding this opinion, I am convinced that gītā as a genre is an old oral tradition which has its roots in a situation of a didactic character, where the intellectual elite were trying to introduce abstract philosophical teachings, especially those of the Upaniṣads, to the masses, using a form, the “song”, which had the qualification of being popular among ordinary people.

### The Relationship of the Bhagavadgītā to the Upaniṣads

The present discussion of the relationship between the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavadgītā is due mainly to the fact that most scholars are of the opinion that it was in the gītā literature that Upaniṣadic thoughts were passed on to the masses (Bhattacharjee 1926b:770). The question is whether this was a deliberate popularising. Has the gītā genre perhaps as old a heritage as the Upaniṣads? Might it have been an established genre for a more common religiosity already at the time of the creation of certain Upaniṣads? Probably yes, and that is the reason why it was used in an attempt to make the truths of the Upaniṣads accessible to the common man.

We will later consider how similar thoughts are expressed and perhaps acquire different forms of expression in the Bhagavad-gītā/gītā-genre and in the Upaniṣads, but first we will look in detail at the connection between the Bhagavadgītā and the Upaniṣads.

There are in the Bhagavadgītā several passages which are exact quotations from the Upaniṣads. Chapter two of the Bhagavadgītā, for instance, is remarkable for its quotations and paraphrases of the Kāṭha-Upaniṣad (Edgerton 1946:6; Bhattacharjee 1926b:765).

The philosophical concepts of the Bhagavadgītā are considered to have their background in the Upaniṣads. According to Radhakrishnan the kṣetra- kṣetrajña-, and kṣara- akṣara- concepts, for instance, are based on the Upaniṣads. The account of the supreme reality also has its basis in the Upaniṣads, and bhakti is a direct development of upāsana in the Upaniṣads (Radhakrishnan 1977/1:525).

Several themes are thus common to the Bhagavadgītā and the Upaniṣads. Franklin Edgerton draws the conclusion that all scriptures that can really be called Upaniṣads contain speculations concerning some or all of a number of themes. These themes are:

- A. The nature of the universe, its source, purpose and leading principle.
- B. The nature of man, his physical and "hyperphysical" nature, his duties, destiny and relationship to the universe at large, especially the leading principle of the universe, irrespective of whether this is considered as personal or non-personal.

According to Edgerton these are also the basic questions in the Bhagavadgītā. The answers vary both in the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavadgītā (Edgerton 1946:6). The Bhagavadgītā, however, does not systematise the teachings of the Upaniṣads, as do the philosophical schools of later times.

Edgerton continues: "... we can usually find in its own text expressions which, in strict logic, contradict its most cardinal doctrines. From the non-logical, mystical viewpoint of the gītā this is no particular disadvantage. Rationalistic logic simply does not apply to its problems" (1946: 7).

Also, in the colophone at the end of each chapter, the Bhagavadgītā is designated as an Upaniṣad (cf. e.g. Glasenapp 1980: 107).

What is the difference, then, between the Upaniṣads' and the Bhagavadgītā's way of expressing an idea? According to Radhakrishnan the gītā emphasises the religious side. Radhakrishnan is of the opinion that the abstractions of the Upaniṣads could not satisfy the manifold needs of the soul: "The author of the gītā found that men could not be made to love logic. So he took his stand on the Upaniṣads, drew out their religious implications, galvanized them into a living system by incorporating with them popular mythology and national imagination" (Radhakrishnan 1977/1: 522). My own view, and here I concur with Lamotte, Zaehner and other scholars, is that the author had a specific purpose in making the concept of Kṛṣṇa the ultimate reality before Brahman come to the fore.

What is the influence of the Upaniṣads on other gītās? Bhattacharjee assumes that no gītā has escaped such an influence. They are all influenced by the Brahma-vidyā of the Upaniṣads and contain ideas of mokṣa or liberation, and the attainment of mokṣa. Besides, most of them refer to the Upaniṣads and quote freely from them (Bhattacharjee 1926b: 765).

In this respect the Brahmagītā of the Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha assumes an exceptional position. Here we find a correspondence with the Upaniṣads which is less obvious, but the more profound in thought and content. Bhattacharjee is of the opinion that the influence of the Upaniṣads on the Brahmagītā is greater than in any other case (1926b: 766 f.).

### Another Category of Gītās

In addition to those gītās which are part of the Mahābhārata or the Purāṇa literature there are a smaller number which are not incorporated in a greater literary work. These gītās must be considered as independent ones. The foremost of these are, according to Hauschild, the Rāmagītā, the (first) Avadhūtagītā and the Aṣṭāvakraḡītā (Hauschild 1967: 6).

The Aṣṭāvakraḡītā consists of 304 verses and is a philosophical didactic poem. It proclaims in verse the advaita-vedānta philosophy (Hauschild 1967: 7). It is considered to be a Vedāntagītā (Brahma-vidyāḡītā) and is

thus occupied with abstract speculations which it intends to popularise (Hauschild 1967:7).

The Aṣṭāvakraḡitā, according to Hauschild, is different from most of e.g. the Purāṇagītās in being a completely independent piece of work. The Aṣṭāvakraḡitā has a purely *philosophical* character, unlike the Purāṇagītās, which are mainly *religious* (1967:8).

Common to the Aṣṭāvakraḡitā and most of the larger ḡitās is the dialogue mode. Moreover, the purpose is soteriological: to put man on the path leading to liberation, mokṣa (Hauschild 1967:7).

Most of the ḡitās have according to Hauschild, a sectarian character: a particular divinity, male or female, is recommended in it, or else the cult of this godhead is advocated. In this case the ḡitā is named after the godhead (Bhagavadḡitā, Rāmagītā, Śivagītā, etc.). The Aṣṭāvakraḡitā belongs to another category of ḡitās which take their name from a specific teacher (Utathyagītā, Vāmadevagītā, etc.). These constitute an exception (Hauschild 1967:7).

## II. THE GĀTHĀ GENRE

The gāthā genre will be discussed first on the basis of the gāthās of Zarathustra. The purpose is to observe whether similarities of form, content and type of situation with the Vedic gāthā genre and the ḡitā genre could be found. These genres may have no connection except for the designation, or two or all genres may have developed from a still older genre, which at one stage has developed in different directions. If this were the case, where are the oldest expressions of this genre to be found, and which are the paths of their development?

### The Gāthās of Zarathustra

The five gāthās are part of the Yasna<sup>1</sup> liturgy, Yasna 28–34, 43–46, 47–50, 51 and 53. Yasna 53 is considered by some scholars to have another author, e.g. the metre is divergent (see e.g. Lommel 1971: 13; Hinz 1961: 239 f.).

Yasna is the name of the Zoroastrian divine service and of the holy texts consisting of 72 chapters read at the principal ceremonial act (Lommel

---

<sup>1</sup> From  $\sqrt{yaz}$ , offer, etymologically related to skt. *yajña*, worship, devotion; offering from  $\sqrt{yaj}$ , to worship, adore; offer.

1971: 13; Hinz 1961: 239 f.). The gāthās mediate visions of a divine nature in an inspired language. They also contain prophecies of future events, both in this world and the other world. Boyce describes them as filled with passionate feelings and convictions. Their import is expressed in subtle and alluding words. It is the opinion of Boyce that the form in which they are expressed belongs to a very old tradition of religious poetry, written by seers, who by way of study and meditation tried to get immediate contact with the divine (Boyce 1984: 1). The style is, according to Insler, imaginative and full of expression (Insler 1975: 159). Humbach, too, is of the opinion that this is a very old tradition. He claims that the correspondences of composition that can be found between separate hymns are too manifold to be explained as having been written in establishable series of time. Rather one has to seek the explanation in the fact that the gāthās are an end product in a poetical tradition having used distinct, delimited formulas, distinct instruments of style and distinct principles of composition. This tradition derives, according to Humbach, from early Aryan times (1959: 74).

Mary Boyce is of the opinion that there are parallels even to the Edda, which would mean that these stanzas represent an old Indo-European poetical tradition, having come into being to give expression to whatever was experienced as solemn, divinely inspired truths (1984: 34).

The affinity with the Ṛgveda is indicated by several scholars, who have found it possible to construe the gāthās of Zarathustra with the help of Ṛgveda (Boyce 1984: 1 f.; Insler 1975: 1). Insler realises that the problems of interpreting the text are numerous, because the grammar, as well as vocabulary and syntax are unique in comparison to the language of the more recent texts of the Avesta. The hymns are made ambiguous by the accumulation of grammatic endings and the compact and often elliptic style. The most difficult problem of all, however, is to disentangle the complicated syntax, a task which makes Insler very doubtful concerning translations (1975: 1 f.). Nevertheless the Ṛgveda has been helpful in the interpretation. It has been possible to disentangle grammatic forms. It has been possible to fix much of the vocabulary of the hymns, and quite a few stylistic figures and syntactic conventions have contributed to the interpretation. The Ṛgveda has in addition served as a counterpart against which it has been possible to compare and judge the most prominent themes in the teachings of Zarathustra (Insler 1975: 1; see also Boyce 1984: 1 f.; cf. Schlerath 1968: Konkordanz C).

The gāthās were used in the liturgy and consequently did not have the purpose of being a teaching of the faith in itself. This is, says Humbach,

emphasized by their lack of dogmatic stringency. Nowhere is there even an indication of definitions of important expressions in the vocabulary of Zarathustra. Neither does he explain how he regards the relationship of Ahura Mazdā to the other Ahuras (Humbach 1959:72). To Humbach the hymns are thus rather a kind of prayer in which God is glorified and asked for gifts. The hymns are supposed to be delivered at sacrificial ceremonies (1959:71).

Yet they are, despite their function, by way of their style, filled with a definite purpose and a homogeneity, which is contrary to the empty, merely mechanical ritual style (Insler 1975:22). In the gāthās there are many recurring stylistic figures, which gives a homogenous impression and we are able to draw the conclusion that this is a completely integrated work (Humbach 1959:33). If we finally consider what comes out concerning the teachings of Zarathustra, even though the purpose was not didactic, we find the expression of a threefold ethic, signifying a message of right thought, word and action (Boyce 1984:12). There is one God, Ahura Mazdā, who is eternal and uncreated. He is the origin of all other divine beings. God created this world and all that is good in it through the holy spirit, Spenta Mainyu, who is both his efficient power and one with him, both inseparable and separate from him.

There is also a minor group of divinities, the Amesha Spentas, who helped God when he created the world. These, together with Ahura Mazdā and his Spenta Mainyu, constitute the Zoroastrian pantheon.

### The Vedic Gāthās

Most scholars agree that the gāthās of Zarathustra have a correspondence in Ṛgveda-hymns. But the fact that there are text units in the Vedic literature which are called gāthās has not been given much attention. There are very few studies on the Vedic gāthās. One such study is, however, the very comprehensive and systematic one by Paul Horsch.

The following presentation of the research situation is mainly based upon Horsch's *Die vedische Gāthā und Śloka-Literatur* (1966).

I here intend to treat the development of the gāthā-concept, the origin of the gāthās, the relation between gāthā and śloka, the metres, the relationship to other genres within the Vedic poetry, and also features of style and function.



*Development of the gāthās*

The syntactic relation to the root  $\sqrt{gai}$  indicates that the gāthās are of a melodious character (Horsch 1966:213). They have according to Horsch no doubt been sung, and not recited, like the ṛc verses (1966:219 f.)<sup>2</sup>. In the Ṛgveda the word gāthā appears only five times, of which three are in the eighth maṇḍala. In the ninth maṇḍala it is said:

tām gāthayā purānyā  
punānām abhy ānūṣata

"To him who purifies himself they have sung with an old song of praise".<sup>3</sup> Here the gāthā is designated as very old (*purāna*). These gāthās, just like the ones of Zarathustra, most likely belonged to an Aryan poetic tradition which goes back to the time before the migration into India (Barr 1954:57).

*The Śloka Replaces the Gāthā*

The gāthās were, even at the time of the recording of the Ṛgveda, already the object of a kind of depreciation. At that time there was a difference in content between gāthā and ṛc. The gāthās were narrative stanzas, whereas the ṛcas were invocations of the gods (Horsch 1966:222). During an early period they were "equivalent" (*sadrśaḥ*). This designation we find in the Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa 3,41, where it is said: "In the beginning ṛc and gāthā were equivalent; the one did not surpass the other. They had a race. Then ṛc took away from gāthā this juice."<sup>4</sup>

Initially the gāthās were simply religious songs. The very first splitting we find in the Sūryāsūkta, Ṛgveda 10,85, where gāthā is directed to the secular sphere (Horsch 1966:229 f.)<sup>5</sup>.

The gāthās lost their status, and became stylistically inferior as well. They were as time went by sent off to a more popular level (Horsch 1966:231, 357). Later, the gāthā concept was gradually replaced by

<sup>2</sup> Ṛc verses are holy verses recited eulogizing a particular divinity (Monier-Williams 1976:225).

<sup>3</sup> My translation. „Dem sich Läuternden haben sie mit altem Gesangeslied zuge-sungen“ (Horsch 1966:214).

<sup>4</sup> My translation. „Am Anfang waren die Ṛc und die Gāthā gleichwertig: die eine übertraf die andere nicht. Sie hielten einen Wettlauf. Da enzog die Ṛc der Gāthā diesen Saft“ (Horsch 1966:223).

<sup>5</sup> "... *Raiḥtī, Nārāsaṃsī, and Gāthā* are ritual verse, eulogistic hymn, and non-Vedic song personified" (Griffith 1976:593).

the śloka concept. This is, according to Horsch, due to the fact that the gāthā concept is burdened by negative associations — the gāthā was unclean, unholy, profane, etc. The Śloka term was neutral, free from any associations whatsoever, and therefore suitable as a substitute (Horsch 1966:233 f.). Besides, these two concepts are already synonymous in the Brāhmaṇa literature. There, one and the same verse may sometimes be designated śloka, and sometimes gāthā (Horsch 1966:225).

Etymologically the term śloka derives its origin from the root  $\sqrt{\text{śru}}$ , to hear, and has the basic significance "sound", which is expanded to "eulogy" and "renown", but later it simply designates a stanza (Horsch 1966:223 f.). Śloka as well became the designation for the metre of the great epics (*itihāsa*) and the Purāṇa literature.<sup>6</sup>

There is a legend telling that Vālmiki, the composer of Rāmāyana, created the śloka when he witnessed the death of a bird, and experienced sorrow (*śoka*) for what he saw.

The metre śloka consists of four pādas or quarterstanzas of eight syllables each or two lines of 16 syllables, where every line offers great freedom (Monier-Williams 1976:1104; see also Horsch 1966:227).

The Rāmāyana as well contains the first mention of the śloka verse. In the Rāmāyana 1,2,17 it is said:

pādabaddho 'kṣarasamas  
tantrīlayasamanvitaḥ  
śokārtasya pravṛtto me  
śloko bhavatu nānyathā

"May the śloka, bound in verse lines, consisting of equal number of syllables, accompanied by the tones of the tantrī (lute), which came forth when I was overwhelmed by sorrow, never change."<sup>7</sup> Here we find an allusion to the situation mentioned above.

From the isolated insertions of gāthās in the older Vedic literature we later on get the epic literary genre, the stanzas of which are called śloka.

#### *Metres in the Gāthā Literature*

Concerning metres, there has been a simplification when it comes to the gāthā: the eleven syllable *triṣṭubh* metre has been superseded by the eight

<sup>6</sup> For the relation between the terms *itihāsa* and *gāthā* see Horsch 1966:313.

<sup>7</sup> My translation; „Möge der Śloka, der, in Verszeilen gebunden, aus gleicher Silbenzahl bestehend, vom Tonmass der Laute begleitet, sich mir entrang, als ich vom Kummer übervältigt war, nie sich ändern“ (Horsch 1966:226 f.).

syllable *anuṣṭubh* metre, the metre of the epics (Horsch 1966:360, 363). Śloka and *anuṣṭubh* therefore designate the same thing, in this respect. *Triṣṭubh* is considered to be a more archaic metre and it is characteristic of sacrificial stanzas. It is also more frequent than *anuṣṭubh* in the R̥gveda (Horsch 1966:359, see also 225, 360 note 1).

Having in the beginning been religious songs to the gods, the *gāthās* in time pass into hymns of most diverse content. Then the gods step back more and more (Horsch 1966:222).

Horsch, in this development, wants to see not only a depreciation, but from the viewpoint of chronology, a splitting as well. The *gāthās* are divided into two main groups: on the one hand we have the proto-epic *gāthās*, and on the other ethical maxims and speculative śloka-verses. The first group, which was originally a poetic-prosaic hybrid form, develops into the epics and the Purāṇas made in verse. From the other group the metrical Upaniṣads and the law books emerge (Horsch 1966:449).

#### *Style of the Vedic gāthās*

It is in the wedding hymn R̥gveda 10,85 that the term *gāthā* is mentioned for the first time as a literary genre. And it is precisely in the household cult, according to Horsch, that it has its place. This conclusion can also be drawn from the great number of *gāthās* in the *gṛhya* ritual, and from the fact that there were *vīṇa* performances and story telling from the Itihāsa in the domestic rites (Horsch 1966:367).<sup>8</sup>

The hymns, *gāthās*, were most probably a kind of speech song, related to the folk-song. They were much simpler than e.g. the complicated melodies of the Sāmaveda (Horsch 1966:221).

Formally it is a dialogue (*saṃvāda*), consisting of statements (*ukti*) and replies (*pratyukti*). These dialogues are usually designated as the historical *vākovākya* genre. This genre also includes the *brahmodyas*, or riddles, together with the epic and dramatic dialogue (Horsch 1966:251).

The *gāthās* contain proportionately many unusual words and forms. This is valid mainly for the Brāhmaṇa literature; the oldest Brāhmaṇas as well have unusual verbal forms (Horsch 1966:364).

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of this branch of poetry, just like the *kāvya* genre, is, however, the very rich occurrence of a metaphorical language (Horsch 1966:358).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Gṛhya* means that which has to do with a household (Monier-Williams 1976:363). A *vīṇa* is a stringed instrument.

<sup>9</sup> An example of a well-known metaphoric expression is Yājñavalkya's comparison of man with a tree in *Bṛhadāraṇyakaupaniṣad* 3,9,28.

*Function and Content of the Gāthās*

The gāthās (*yajñagāthās* or sacrificial hymns) which are found in the Brāhmaṇa literature serve to affirm a viewpoint which has been laid out in the previous prose part. This implies, according to Horsch, on the one hand that they are quotations and accordingly older than the context in which they appear, and on the other that the viewpoint under consideration has already acquired an exact formulation which is authoritative. New ideas are not expressed in them. The gāthās are memorial verses, having been used in teaching. They consist of a significant summary of a definite opinion or teaching which they aim at substantiating (Horsch 1966: 218 f., 250, 306).

A *yajñagāthā* like this is to be found in Aitareya Brāhmaṇa 3,43,5: "Its beginning is its end, its end is its beginning. As the coiling of the snake, so is (the coiling) at the Śakala-rite; you cannot distinguish which of both (ends) are on the other side."<sup>10</sup>

Here we have examples of a metaphor, elliptic style and a chiasm on the first line.

How did the bhāṣya writers Śankara and Sāyaṇa look at the śloka concept? They consider the śloka as equal to the mantra. In his commentary to BAU 2,4,10, Śankara says that śloka comes from the Brāhmaṇa literature. In his comments to BAU 1,5,1, he explains that the śloka shortly concludes a subject.

Sāyaṇa is of the same opinion. To Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa 24,18,4, he says that, to confirm the spirit of a statement, you bring forward a previously established Brāhmaṇa in the form of a śloka (Horsch 1966: 228).

Gāthās, however, can have another function as well. They can be *itihāsa-* and *dialogue-verses* in narratives. Here they are independent and do not refer back to prose parts. The mantras, on the other hand, denote stanzas in the sacred poetry (Horsch 1966: 306).

There is yet another type of gāthās. These are called *brahmodya*, or riddles. Such a riddle we find in the Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa 1,19-20, where Yājñavalkya answers the questions of king Janaka on the subject of Agnihotra (fire sacrifice):

Then he (i.e. Janaka) sang to him (Yājñavalkya): 'knowing what does the conveyer of the Agnihotra leave the house? What is his knowing, what is his

<sup>10</sup> My translation; quote from Horsch 1966: 74, „Was sein Anfang, das ist sein Eende, was sein Ende, das ist auch sein Anfang. Wie das Kriechen einer Schlange, ist (das Kriechen) beim Śakala-Ritus: sie erkennen nicht, welches von beiden (Enden) auf der anderen Seite ist.“

connection to the (sacrificial) fires?' 'Whosoever is the fastest of creatures is designated as one who has knowledge, when he has gone away. That is his knowledge, thus he is connected to the fires.'<sup>11</sup>

Such riddles already occur in the R̥gveda. For instance, a stanza from the riddle hymn, 1,164, has been cited in more recent literature as śloka. Here more esoteric speculations appear, and in the spirit of the Upaniṣads the rites are conveyed a deeper significance (Horsch 1966: 250).

The gāthā performances were most often accompanied, as mentioned above, and usually by the vīṇā, an old string instrument. The śloka was accompanied by a similar instrument, the tantrī. Accordingly, when there was a "reading" from the epics, the text was sung, probably in a kind of chanting scansion, except for the directly lyrical parts. The śloka was never recited — „Wie die Gāthā, ist er *gīta*“ (Horsch 1966: 227).

### Gāthās in the Bhagavadgītā and the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad

Besides being developed from the old gāthā genre, it seems that the gītās and the Upaniṣads contain verses which have the character of Vedic gāthā verses. In this part I will illustrate that fact with a few examples from the Bhagavadgītā and from the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad.

There are, as mentioned above, far-reaching similarities between the different gītās and the Upaniṣads. The former has primarily derived material from the latter with the purpose of popularising it.

The comparison below of verses from the Bhagavadgītā with verses from the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad is from Radhakrishnan's translations, since he has translated both texts. I am, however, of the opinion that other translations of the BhG, such as the ones of Edgerton and Zaehner, are more adequate.

Bhagavadgītā 2,20:

na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin  
nā 'yaṁ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ  
ajo nityaḥ śāśvato 'yaṁ purāṇo  
na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre

<sup>11</sup> My translation; Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa 1,19–20, quote from Horsch 1966: 112, „Da sang er (sc. Janaka) jenem (sc. Yājñavalkya) zu: ‚Was wissend geht der Darbringer des Agnihotra von zu Hause weg? Wie ist dann sein Wissensgut, wie bleibt er verbunden mit den (Opfer-)feuern?‘ ‚Jener, der der schnellste unter den Wesen ist, ist als ein Wissender zu erkennen, wenn er verweist ist. So ist dies sein Wissensgut, so bleibt er mit den Feuern in Verbindung.“

"He is never born, nor does he die at any time, nor having (once) come to be will he again cease to be. He is unborn, eternal, permanent and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain" (Horsch 1966: 107).

Kaṭha-Upaniṣad 1,2,18:

na jāyate mriyate vā vipaścīn  
 nāyam kutaścīn na babhūva kaścit  
 ajo nityaḥ śāśvato 'yam purāṇo  
 na hanyate nayamāne śarīre

"The knowing self is never born; nor does he die at any time. He sprang from nothing and nothing sprang from him. He is unborn, eternal, abiding and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain" (Radhakrishnan 1974: 616).

Both stanzas have an identical conceptual content. Besides, the verses of the Bhagavadgītā seem to have a kind of substantiating function in relation to the preceding verses. Therefore, this could be an example of an old gāthā. These verses are couched in the more archaic triṣṭubh metre in both the Bhagavadgītā and the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad. The verses surrounding them are couched in anuṣṭubh.

A few other stanzas in chapter two of the Bhagavadgītā are couched in triṣṭubh, verses 22 and 29: "Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul cast off worn-out bodies and take on others that are new"; "One looks upon Him as a marvel, another likewise speaks of Him as a marvel; another hears of Him as a marvel; and even after hearing, no one whatsoever has known Him" (Radhakrishnan 1976: 108, 111).

Both stanzas have conceptual similarities to parts of the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad (1,1,6 and 1,2,7 respectively), however not literal correspondences. In the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad 1,1,6, we find a simile that reads: "a mortal ripens like corn, and like corn is born again" (Radhakrishnan 1974: 597). Another metaphor expressing the immortality of the soul and the cycle of birth and death. The same idea is expressed in different images.

Because of the content of these stanzas, the metaphoric language, and the way they are presented, with an anaphoric style, these are probably old gāthās with a very old conceptual content.

We find a practically literal correspondence between Bhagavadgītā 8,11: "... yad icchanto brahmacaryām caranti / tat te padam saṅgrahena pravakṣye... Seeking which men live the life of chastity, that place I shall declare to thee in brief" (Edgerton 1946: 82 f.) and the Kaṭha-Upaniṣad 1,2,15 where *bravīmi* ("I say") replaces *pravakṣye* ("I will de-

clare") (Radhakrishnan 1974: 615). Even here the verse is in *triṣṭubh*.

Stanzas in *anuṣṭubh* also contain similarities. *Bhagavadgītā* 2,19: "He who thinks that this slays and he who thinks that this is slain; both of them fail to perceive the truth; this one neither slays nor is slain" (Radhakrishnan 1974: 107), and *Kaṭha* 1,2,9: "If the slayer thinks that he slays or if the slain think that he is slain, both of them do not understand. He neither slays nor is he slain" (Radhakrishnan 1974: 616 f.). Here too, we find a vigorous timeless expression having the character of a short summary, the characteristic of the *yājñagāthā*.

An interesting image expressed in a slightly different way in the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Kaṭha-Upaniṣad* is the simile of the gates: "The embodied (soul), who has controlled his nature having renounced all actions by the mind (inwardly) dwells in the city of nine gates, neither working nor causing work to be done", *Bhagavadgītā* 5,13; (Radhakrishnan 1976: 179). "(There is) a city of eleven gates (belonging to) the unborn, uncrooked intelligence. By ruling it one does not grieve and being freed is freed indeed. This, verily is that" (Radhakrishnan 1974: 636).<sup>12</sup>

The language of the *Kaṭha* is compact and elliptic, while the language in the *Bhagavadgītā* has a more uncomplicated style and has more the character of explanation.

From this we conclude that Vedic *gāthās*, in addition to having gone through the historical development described above, seem to have been preserved as a universal literary material, used by authors in different situations and periods of time.

## Conclusions

### *Gāthās of Zarathustra-Vedic Gāthās-Bhagavadgītā*

The *gāthās* of Zarathustra, the Vedic *gāthās*, and the *Bhagavadgītā*, were all composed in different environments. There are, however, as stated above, interesting similarities between the texts, especially between the *yājñagāthās* of the *Brāhmaṇa* literature and the *gāthās* of Zarathustra. Vedic *gāthās*, particularly of the *Brāhmaṇa*-period, have proportionately many unusual words and forms, like the *gāthās* of Zarathustra. Another similarity is that there is no explanatory element in either of them. They

<sup>12</sup> The nine gates (eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, anus, and the reproductive organs) are in the *Kaṭha-Upaniṣad* complemented by another two, the navel and the fontanel.

take for granted that the basic thoughts which they express are well-known. But most important is the fact that both had ritual functions (the terms *yājñā* and *yasna* are etymologically related). The Vedic *gāthās* were mostly used in the household cult.

The dialogue, a distinguishing mark of the *gāthā*/śloka-genre, is to be found in the *gāthās* of Zarathustra as well. Zarathustra is engaged in conversation with Ahura Mazda.

The metre of two of the *gāthās* of Zarathustra resemble *anuṣṭubh* in so far as they contain 16 syllables per line. Each line is divided into two half-lines of seven and nine syllables respectively; every stanza contains three full lines of seven plus nine syllables each. Two of the *gāthās*, however, use a metre which is similar to *triṣṭubh*.

The two genres seem to have a common origin in a very old Aryan poetic tradition. Boyce and Humbach have argued like this for the *gāthās* of Zarathustra, and Barr for the Vedic *gāthās*. This points to a historical diffusion. That this old poetic tradition is common to both the Iranians and the Indo-Aryans I consider most likely. (Boyce even considers it to be an Indo-European poetic tradition with parallels to the Edda [see above]).

The similarities between the *gāthās* of Zarathustra and the *Bhagavadgītā* are restricted to the fact that both works are written in the form of dialogue. This dialogue is carried on between God (Ahura Mazda and Lord Kṛṣṇa respectively) and a representative of man (Zarathustra and Arjuna). However, in the *gāthās* of Zarathustra one of the *dramatis personae* is also the author. The purpose of the *Bhagavadgītā* is, as stated above, to present the core or essence of the Upaniṣadic wisdom to a broad stratum of the population. The purpose of the *gāthās* of Zarathustra was to give to the community the experiences of the highest truths which the prophet had. In both cases God instructs the representative of man. The goal is liberation and immortality. The similarities are too general and could be applied to most religious literature, therefore I consider these texts far apart as genres.

A historical diffusion could of course also be traced between the *gāthās* of Zarathustra and the *gītā*, since *BhG* and the *gītā* literature, mostly being part of the *purāṇas* and the epics, are a development of the Vedic *gāthā*. According to Horsch, one branch of the Vedic *gāthās* evolved into the metrical Upaniṣads and the law books, and another into the epics and the *purāṇas*.

As stated above, typological connections between the Upaniṣads and the *gītās* are obvious.

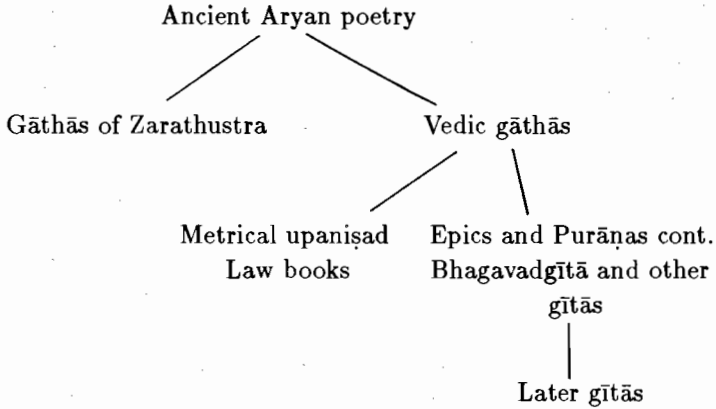
In addition to typological agreements historical relations seem to be



present between the texts of all the genres under investigation. On the level of *culture model*, therefore, I consider it relevant to talk of an historical gāthā-gītā genre. With time and in new situations the genres have undergone changes. In my *research model*, being a non-historical constant, defining genre as stated above (see p. 125), I would consider them as distinct genres. The gāthās of Zarathustra differ from the Vedic gāthās concerning their content (see below), and from the BhG concerning both their form and content. The Vedic gāthās also differ from the BhG regarding both form and content. The fact that there are more far-reaching similarities between the Vedic gāthās and Zarathustra's gāthās could be explained by the relative nearness in time, the BhG is much later.

\*

On the next page is a model of the significant features of form, content, and type of situation of the texts presented in the article. The diffusion and historical development of the genres is illustrated in the following diagramme:



Model for Identification of the *Gītā*- and *Gāthā*-Genres

	<b>Vedic gāthās</b>	<b>Gāthās of Zarathustra</b>	<b>Bhagavadgītā</b>
<i>Genre, general view</i>	First a poetic-prosaic mixed form; religious songs to the gods, then narrative, ethical maxims, speculations. Two paths of development: 1. Epics, purāṇas, 2. metric Upaniṣads, codes of laws	Poetry, revelations; religious songs to God; ethical maxims	Poetry, didactic poem in the form of narration
<i>Author</i>	Mostly unknown	Zarathustra	Attributed to Vyasa
<i>Form: Composition</i>	Dialogue; compact, significant statements	Dialogue-form, antiphon	Dialogue on two levels
<i>Style</i>	Metaphors most characteristic feature, elliptical style	The same stylistic figures are recurrent. Elliptic style, metaphors.	Metaphors are frequent. Elliptical style
<i>Stylistic level and degree of difficulty of words</i>	Proportionately difficult and complex word formation, different vocabulary	Proportionately difficult and unusual vocabulary; elevated style	Uncomplicated style, common vocabulary
<i>Grammar, syntax</i>	Very complicated and old forms, with a very complex syntax		Easier grammatically and syntactically
<i>Metre</i>	Mainly anuṣṭubh and triṣṭubh	Variants similar to triṣṭubh and anuṣṭubh	Śloka, i.e. mostly anuṣṭubh, but also triṣṭubh
<i>Content:</i>	Significant outlines of settled views; riddles; legends (ākhyāna); related to folk-song	Prayers, eulogies	Heterogeneous content homogenous form: many religious genres presented here.
<i>Purpose</i>	Praising the gods; in the Brāhmaṇas to substantiate a previously delivered view	Glorifying Ahura Mazdā and asking for gifts from him	Practical instructions for ordinary people to achieve liberation, mokṣa; eulogies; education in the ultimate
<i>Type of situation and function</i>	Memorial-verses; dialogue-verses in narratives. Were used in the sacrificial rites in the household	Prayer-hymns at sacrificial celebrations, glorifies God through decrees of truthfulness and right thinking. Dialogue where Zarathustra is both author and one of the dramatis personae. Part of the liturgy	Popularizing Upaniṣadic thoughts. Sung at feasts of a religious character. Apologetical type of situation, giving the impression of a historical speech situation

## References Cited

**Bartholomae, C.**

1979 *Altiranisches Wörterbuch*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. [1904]

**Barr, Kaj**

1954 *Avesta*. København: Gyldendal. (Verdensreligionernes Hovedværker, 3)

**Bhattacharjee, U. Ch.**

1926a *The Gita Literature and Its Relation with Brahma-Vidya*. *Indian Historical Quarterly* 1926/Sept.: 537-546.

1926b *The Gita Literature and Its Relation with Brahma-Vidya*. *Indian Historical Quarterly* 1926/Dec.: 761-771.

*Bhīṣmaparvan*

1947 *Bhīṣmaparvan*. In: S. K. Belvalkar (ed.), *Mahābhārata*; vol. 7. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

**Boyce, Mary**

1984 *Zoroastrianism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

**Edgerton, Franklin**

1946 *The Bhagavad-gīta*. Translation with Sanskrit Text; 2 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (Harvard Oriental Series, 38-39)

**Glaserapp, Helmuth von**

1980 *Indisk filosofi*. Lund: Studentlitteratur. [1974]

**Griffith, Ralph T. H.**

1976 *The Hymns of the Rigveda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. [1889]

**Hauschild, Richard**

1967 *Die Aṣṭāvakra-Gītā*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag. (Abhandlungen der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, 58/2)

**Hinz, W**

1961 *Zarathustra*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag.

**Horsch, Paul**

1966 *Die Vedische Gāthā- und Śloka-Literatur*. Bern: Francke Verlag.

**Humbach, Helmut**

1959 *Die Gathas des Zarathustra*. 2 vols. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Univ. Verlag.

**Inslar, S.**

1975 *The Gāthās of Zarathustra*. Leiden: Brill. (Acta Iranica, 8)

**Lommel, Hermann**

1971 *Die Gathas des Zarathustra*. Basel: Schwabe & Co.

**Monier-Williams, Monier**

1976 *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

**Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli (transl.)**

1974 *The Principal Upanishads*. London: George Allen & Unwin. [1953]

1976 *The Bhagavadgīta*. London: George Allen & Unwin. [1948]

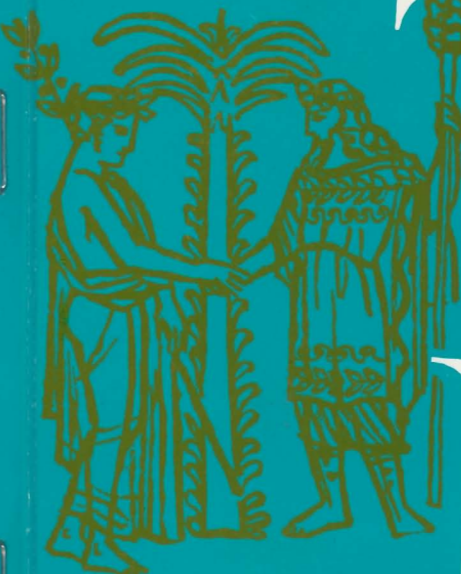
**Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli**

1977 *Indian Philosophy*; 2 vols. Bombay: Blackie & Son. [1923]

**Schlerath, B.**

1968 *Awesta-Wörterbuch*. Vorarbeit 2. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

# TE ME NOS



STUDIES IN COMPARATIVE RELIGION  
PRESENTED BY SCHOLARS IN  
DENMARK, FINLAND, NORWAY AND SWEDEN

Vol. 28. 1992

*Reprint*