

GREG BAILEY

THE *PRAVṚTTI/NIVṚTTI* PROJECT  
AT LA TROBE UNIVERSITY  
WITH NOTES ON THE MEANING OF *VṚT* IN THE *BHAGAVADGĪTĀ*

The literal meaning of the root *vṛt* is ‘to turn, to roll on, dreht sich, rollt, kreist’<sup>1</sup>. Usually conjugated in *ātmanepāda* it is intransitive and becomes transitive when used in the causative and then it is conjugated in *parasmaipāda*<sup>2</sup>. Deriving from this root are the two terms *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*, which *assume* a much larger importance in the history of ancient Indian culture than the number of textual definitions of them suggest. Defined several times in the *Mahābhārata* (*Mbh*), the *Manusmṛti* and the great majority of the *Purāṇas*, these two terms arguably designate particular ideologies<sup>3</sup>. It is true they should be

---

1. M. Mayrhofer, *Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen*, Heidelberg, 1956-80, Vol. 3, p. 155.

2. *Mbh*1.1.186ab seems to be a transitive use of *ni / vṛt* in the present indicative. *Daivam prajñāviśeṣeṇa ko nivartitumarhati /*

3. For some definitions see *Materials for the Study of Ancient Indian Ideologies*, Pubblicazioni di Indologica Taurinensia, 19, University of Torino, 1985, Ch.1. Now also see the Lemma-Index in P. Schreiner, et. al, *Nārāyaṇīya-Studien*, Wiesbaden, Harrasowitz, 1997, p. 494 and 511. Note (p. 389) their summary of the first three verses of Ch.327: ‘JANAMEJAYA: Frage danach, wie der Gott die Opfertätigkeit fördert und sowohl den *nivṛtti-dharma* als auch den *pravṛtti-dharma* anordnete. Welche Opferanteile erhalten die Götter gemäss den *pravṛtti-dharma(s)* (Vorschriften für Weltzugewandtheit) und worin bestehen die *nivṛtti-dharma(s)* (Vorschriften für Weltensagung)’. Cf. *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* 16.40, where they are treated as a pair. For *pravṛtti-dharma* and *pravṛttimārga* by themselves see *Garuḍapurāṇa* 3.1.38-40. See also *Manusmṛti* 12, 88-90.

understood in relation to each other (as each ideology is treated as contrastive in those texts where the terms are defined) and, supposedly, as standing at variance with other potential ideological possibilities the texts may throw up<sup>4</sup>. Usually both terms are defined with a high degree of brevity: the norm is for one or two *ślokas*. But given the contexts of the definitions, especially where both terms are listed with other pairs of oppositional terms, we should assume that they were defined more extensively elsewhere in sources now lost to us or that their meaning was so well known as not to require comprehensive definition. I find the latter unlikely.

The main aim of the *pravṛtti/nivṛtti* project is to describe the ideologies - that is, clearly defined and intellectually determined views of the world offering conviction for those who believe in them - defined by both terms and to determine what their practical effect was on the different groups of agents of ancient Indian culture. Other goals are to determine how the respective ideologies have shaped certain Sanskrit texts – especially the *Mbh* and Bhartr̥hari's *Śatakṛāyām* – and to record and catalogue all the variant forms of lexical items derived from *vṛt* in Sanskrit, Pāli, Hindī and as loan words in Tamil. The latter is an enormous task, but the guiding assumption is that all of the possible meanings of *vṛt* need to be determined in order to understand the full dimensions of the two ideologies and what specific feature associated with this root allowed these terms to be chosen.

The intention of a small book<sup>5</sup> on these two words, published in 1985, was to raise the possibility that we were confronted with two ideological positions that were applicable across the whole range of non-tribal religions in North India during the early centuries prior to and after the beginning of the common era. Regarding *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* as technical terms, I had searched out their occurrences in the *Mbh* and some of the *Purāṇas*, searching especially for those particular places where they are found together. In such places they were often defined

---

4. See eg. *Mbh*12.335.75-85. Cf. *Viṣṇudharmāḥ* (ed. R. Gündendahl, p. 171) 105, 91cd-92: *narendra viṣṇudharmāṇām tadāvāpnoti pārāṇe / pravṛttāu ca nivṛttāu ca dharmam dharmabhṛtām vara / nāsty anyad viṣṇudharmāṇām sadṛṣam śāstram uttamam //*. See 62.33: *etat te kathitam rājan māṅsasya parivarjanam / pravṛttāu ca nivṛttāu ca pramāṇam ṛṣisattamāiḥ //*.

5. See n. 1.

and it became clear that really – whether or not there was a tension between the ideologies they enshrined – they made sense only in relation to each other, offering a total world view consisting of two related, if opposite, perceptions of how the world and the person operated.

At the best this book is what it claims to be – a pilot study. I did briefly analyse some other instances of verbal forms derived from *vṛt*, as these are found in the *Upaniṣads*, but certainly not in an exhaustive way. At that time I was more interested in ideological formations than lexico-graphical study as the foundation for determining the sources for cultural analysis. As such I contented myself with filling in the details of the two ideologies by drawing extensively upon material from the *Mbh* and the Pāli *suttas*. As ideologies *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* functioned as ideal types, but the opposition – though real and reflected especially in the first fifteen chapters of the *Śāntiparvan* – between them was overstressed and after further reflection and research it seems more accurate to say that both terms make sense only in relation to each other, that they should not just be regarded as oppositional.

The present study is more comprehensive in every way than the previous one. It involves a much larger range of sources and a more systematic study of them. Evidence used will be quantitative (cumulative) as well as qualitative. The quantitative aspect of the study will operate in two ways: (a) A greatly expanded collection of linguistic material, (b) The possibility of locating new texts which might genuinely be described as either reflecting a preponderance of *pravṛtti* or *nivṛtti* in their defining orientation. It is an obvious methodological point that only if a very large and representative body of sources, available for the reconstruction of ancient Indian culture, is drawn upon will the conclusions reached have any real validity. Given that from a very early period<sup>6</sup> explicit attempts were made to place Sanskrit literature within definable generic classifications – known by both composer/reciter and audience alike –, we must determine whether what became known as *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* are, in post-Vedic literature, explored across the entire generic range or are restricted only to certain genres (a situation that would apply irrespective of the

---

6. P. Horsch, *Die vedische Gāthā-und śloka-Literatur*, Bern, 1966.

frequency of occurrence of words derivative of *vṛt* in texts where evidence of the ideology is absent). However, if, as I anticipate, they range across the complete culture as a body of theoretical options, having lifestyle implications capable of being transformed into principles for structuring text content, then we should expect their presence in a substantial portion of literature in Indian languages, except for those branches – astrology and mathematics – so specialized as not to concern themselves with questions of broader cultural concern.

At the beginning of the project five distinctions have been observed. No doubt these will alter and be clarified the further the project proceeds:

- 1) The narrow and clearly defined use of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* as markers of the ideological positions whose content we hope to describe in detail in this project.
- 2) Meanings of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* that cannot easily be related to the specific ideological senses of those words found in 1) above.
- 3) All other occurrences, both verbal and nominal, of *pra/vṛt* and *ni/vṛt* in the range of texts we have selected for study.
- 4) All other derivatives of *vṛt*, both with and without *upasargas*. This is the initial stage of the project.
- 5) Location of entire texts we might initially consider to be exemplars of the teachings of the respective ideologies. They may be as small as several *ślokas*, like some of those listed in my 1985 book and the *Nārāyaṇīya* section of the *Mbh* (12.327, 2; 335.77; 328.34), or complete texts like the *Abhidharmakośa* and parts of the *Mbh* and the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*. These texts go to considerable pains to take up the subject of the ideologies, even if the latter two are more systematic than the former.

The project has both diachronic and synchronic dimensions. Of these, the latter really only falls within numbers one and five in the list included above. Developing the synchronic dimension means we are required at some point to offer a description, as full as possible, of the respective ideologies as they appear at a given time. Initially we have selected one text, the *Mbh*, and one period (400BC-400AD) which we regard as the non-historical standpoint from which historical changes

in the meanings of our words, and the ideologies they represent, will have to be developed. In following this procedure we realize its limitations. To present a description of the ideologies in this way is to offer an artificial picture. It abrogates historical realities because the same ideology undergoes modifications over time, nor does it accurately present the fragmentary manner in which the ideologies are presented in the literary sources. It is always as though there was scarcely a need to define the respective ideologies in an extensive manner, that they were so obvious as to be known by the learned audiences of the texts. Such is the case in the *Bhg*, for example.

Once a working description of both ideologies has been drawn up an historical framework of their development [and influence] can be established. Given that our plan is to work from a provisional description grounded in a particular text, whose dating is undoubtedly contentious, the historical dimension will be a simple linear one. Two procedures are being followed: (1) collection of linguistic and descriptive material in texts we assume to be prior to the *Mbh*. This includes all of Vedic literature and possibly the earliest parts of the Pāli Canon. (2) Tracing the ideologies, but firstly, their respective linguistic markers, through post-Vedic literature in several languages, Sanskrit, Pāli, Prakṛt and Tamil. If we are lucky this may also mean finding and translating late texts (post 1000ACE) that provide extended descriptions of the ideologies. Some of these texts may be embedded in the *Purāṇas* and perhaps only in manuscript form.

The initial part of the historical dimension of the project begins with collection of lexical items in Vedic literature. Here the intention is to build up an inventory, as complete as possible, of all forms derived from *vṛt*, including all prefixed forms and negative (*a-* or *an-*) forms. So far, with little more than a random check of Vedic and post-Vedic literature, I have located instances of *vṛt* with 18 single prefixes and combinations of prefixes (*ā*, *anu*, *anvā*, *upa*, *ni*, *pra*, *prasam*, *prasamā*, *prānu*, *prānvā*, *vi*, *vini*, *vyā*, *sam*, *samā*, *samanu*, *samanvā* and *samāpari*). This does not necessarily exhaust all variants, nor should we necessarily expect all of them to occur in the *Veda*. The potential number of forms is huge because for all the nominal forms, for example, we must look for negative as well as positive forms. We could begin with all forms derived from *vṛtta* (including *vṛtti*), and

simply to begin with *vṛtti*, *āvṛtti* and *anāvṛtti*, offers an enormous amount of material.

The intention of beginning with the *Vedas* is that they are manageable. We have several of the *saṃhitās* and the older *Upaniṣads* in machine readable versions, plus there is the *VVRI* index which facilitates basic research in a tremendously helpful manner. We begin with the first three divisions of Vedic literature, initially excluding the *Upaniṣads* because they show traces of the incipient developments of the two ideologies. The purpose of exhausting the early Vedic evidence will be to provide an initial semantic field for *vṛt*. Once we have this it should be possible to isolate continuities, innovations and disappearances of particular usages of the root. To reiterate: the project does not just focus on *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*, but intends to place them within the much larger context of the root *vṛt* itself with all its derivatives.

It is not by chance that we are focussing somewhat on the *Mbh*. Both researchers on this project have worked extensively on aspects of the epic, but there is another more compelling reason for assigning it some priority. In our view it is probably the most important early Indian text signalling a transition between Vedic and post-Vedic culture, reflecting the dramatic expansion in cultural and material possibilities first noted in the *Upaniṣads* and the older sections of the Pāli Canon. If there is an incipient attempt to define ideological positions using derivatives of *vṛt* as they first appear in the oldest *Upaniṣads*<sup>7</sup>, it is in the *Mbh* that these positions appear to have been worked out in full to the extent where their integrity and coherence is assumed rather than demonstrated. Moreover, especially in the *Śāntiparvan*, arguments for and against both ideological positions are put, a procedure befitting a text purporting to advance and critique all views of culture it has inherited.

The *Purāṇas*, on the other hand, which also contain many definitions of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*, must be considered to present a picture of a society/culture where a complete cosmogony and cosmology has been accepted and the kind of fissures contained in the *Mbh* are absent, ideologically at least. If anything they perform a consolidating function and we would expect them to depict *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* as distinctive ideological positions, complementary with each other and

---

7. See *Materials*, pp. 41-42 and n. 21 p. 42.

providing a total view of culture and life-style opportunities.

Grammatical literature and *kāvya* will also be studied, in a selective manner, as examples of genres, the purpose of which is not to present the kind of integrative or disintegrative position of culture associated with the *Purāṇas* and the *Mbh*. We anticipate they will enable us to trace the semantic path whereby a verbal root having the primary sense of ‘to roll’, extends this to a much broader semantic field encompassing the ideas of ‘movement’ and ‘existence’.

### *Dravidian Material*

In order to test whether these ideologies – as broad as they are, and therefore probably occurring in most cultures – are restricted to literature in Indo-Aryan cultures, we intend to analyse related lexical items in at least one Dravidian language. This will be restricted to Tamil and will, in the first instance, be divided into two areas:

- 1) Loan words from Sanskrit into Tamil. A quick glance at the *Madras Tamil Lexicon (MTL)*, p. 3607) throws up *vārttikam* (in the sense of ‘trade’), *vārttikaṅ*, *vārttai* (with many additions formed by adding verbal forms), *piraviruddi-tal* (v) ‘to exert, to endeavour, to operate, to begin a work’ and *piraviruddi* (n = *pravṛtti* itself).
- 2) Pure Dravidian words such as the various meanings of *naṭa* (*MTL* p. 2138) ‘to walk’ go, pass, proceed, 2. to behave, to happen, occur, ensue, take place, as performance, occurrence or event.’ Cf. *naṭai* (n) p. 2145. Note also the importance of *naṭai peru*<sup>8</sup> p. 606. A speaker of Tamil gave this term the translation of ‘rolling on’, but the dictionary restricts it to various senses of *naṭa*. It is a good candidate for an equivalent to *vṛt*. However, Fabricius<sup>9</sup> does not

---

8. *Kriyāvin Taṛkālat Tamil Akarāti, Dictionary of Contemporary Tamil (Tamil-Tamil-English)*, Cre-A, Madras, 1992, p. 606. Cf. also T. Burrow and M. Emeneau, *A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*, (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984), no. 3582, p. 315.

9. Fabricius, J. P., *Tamil and English dictionary*, (4<sup>th</sup> Ed., Evangelical Lutheran Mission Publishing House, Tranquebar, 1972).

give *natai peru*, nor does the *MTL*, but it does occur frequently in modern Tamil literature.

As in the case of the Sanskrit material, we will utilize texts primarily from the classical and medieval periods. However, we will necessarily be more selective given the absence of much Tamil literature in machine readable form and the absence – apart from Saṅgam literature and early inscriptions – of detailed indices.

### *Vṛt and Cognates in the Gītā: A preliminary Analysis*

Preliminary analysis of the methodology used can be seen most clearly when it is applied to specific texts. These have the obvious advantage of being bounded in terms of size, content and *Wortschatz*. A short text makes it much easier to isolate word concentrations<sup>10</sup> throughout the text and at specific places within the text, both of which may have implications for the way the word is to be understood. The rate of concentration of occurrences, context and juxtaposition with other words all need to be taken into consideration in this form of analysis. By way of illustration of the methodology being utilized and the results – or their absence – that might be gained, I have included a few notes based on an initial survey of the *Bhg*. I have chosen it because of the notoriety of the text, because it has frequently been commented upon and because it is short. Even so, the most I have been able to do is to collect the references to *vṛt* itself in all its forms. I have been unable to compare and contrast its semantic value with two other sets of verbal roots – those pertaining to ‘to be’ and ‘to move’, which fall within the two main semantic fields of ‘movement’ and ‘being’ *vṛt* operates within. To achieve the widest possible amplitude of the meanings of *vṛt* it is, therefore, necessary to contrast all its meanings in the *Bhg* with other verbs designating both existence and movement. Given the generality of these two semantic fields, the size

---

10. Obviously the size of the task and the huge body of Sanskrit literature means the task will be always selective. And whilst we intend to undertake some form of statistical analysis, such analysis is hampered by our lack of word frequencies for entire texts.



of the task becomes immediately apparent, necessitating the placement of limits on those roots with which comparisons will be made. As for questions of translation these will have to be sidelined here, noting that in many extant translations subtleties and shades of meaning are not sufficiently registered.

In total there are fifty-nine references to derivatives of *vṛt*, both nominal and verbal. But how should we attempt to create a semantic field in which all easily fit and how do we deal with those overlapping in other semantic fields? As a preliminary stage of analysis I would suggest the lexical items be divided into six classes:

1) Nominal forms of <i>vṛtti</i> , excluding <i>pra</i> - and <i>ni</i> -	5	
2) Verb forms of unprefixes <i>vṛt</i>	12	
3) Verb forms of prefixed <i>vṛt</i> , but excluding <i>pra</i> - and <i>ni</i> -	9	(4 being <i>anu</i> )
4) Verbal and nominal forms of <i>pravṛtti</i>	17	(inc. <i>sampra</i> and <i>ā</i> )
5) Verbal and nominal forms of <i>nivṛtti</i>	12	(2 with <i>vini</i> )
6) All other nominal forms	4	

Clearly nominal and verbal forms of prefixed *vṛt* provide more than half the instances of the occurrence of this verbal root in the *Bhg*. To determine the significance of this percentage would require us to do comparative statistical analysis with other texts in the light of the chronology of those texts and their genre. Nonetheless, intuitively at least, it seems correct to say that these forms are statistically significant in the *Bhg* in relation to all other forms.

As for prefixes, *pra* and *ni* overwhelmingly outweigh all other prefixes occurring here and if we argue that *ā*, *anu* and *punar*, semantically modify *vṛt* each in the same way, this group of *upasargas* numbers 35 out of a total of 43. To be fully meaningful of course, comparisons will have to be made with other texts, a task intended to be completed later in the project<sup>11</sup>. Obviously the content of the text will have an impact here, especially in texts, such as the present one, the

---

11. One example is the *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* where *pra* occurs much less than *anu*, *abhi*, *upa*, *ni* and *pari*, and then mainly in the causative. See H. S. Ananthanarayana, *Verb Forms of the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, (Deccan College, Poona, 1970), pp. 314-315.

*Nārāyaṇīya*, the *Śatakatrayam*, and other texts where certain terms are strongly ideologically and theologically loaded.

I have included as appendix 2 the initial classification of all individual occurrences of *vṛt* and simply note here some problems that have already arisen in this study. They are axiomatic in portraying the kinds of difficulties associated with defining the precise semantic field for the root and its cognates and in coming to an understanding of the significance of intransitivity in its use.

The initial problem encountered concerns the various semantic fields in which *vṛt* finds itself. A glimpse at either of the two great Sanskrit dictionaries reveals this immediately, as does the *Bhg.* Listed are meanings associated with ‘existence, movement, conduct, origin, action and subsistence’. In analysing *vṛt* within the contexts of these very broad semantic fields, which can be reduced to three – ‘movement, existence and conduct’, it is necessary to compare its usages in each field with other verbs fitting firmly within that field. As an example, we could compare the various verbs ‘to go’ (*yā, i, gā, gam, iṅg, car, cal*, etc.) to specify where *vṛt* overlaps with them or has its own unique meaning. Of these only *car* overlaps with two semantic fields, conduct and movement. If we were to focus on conduct it would be necessary to look at the way *vṛt* distinguishes itself from *kṛ* and *klṛp*, for example, just to mention two. The ambiguity of *vṛt*, as so often expressed in translation, arises already in its first occurrence in the *Bhg.* Consider 3.22

*na me pārthāsti kartavyaṃ triṣu lokeṣu kiṃcana*

O Pārtha, I do not have to do anything in the three worlds.

*nānavāptam avāptavyaṃ varta eva ca karmaṇi //*

Nothing is gained which should be gained. However, I operate in action alone.

Zaehner gives ‘yet work [is the element] in which I move.’ for *pāda* d.<sup>12</sup> Given the universality of the teaching in its precise textual

---

12. R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā with a commentary based on the original sources* (Oxford University Press, London, 1969), p. 169.

context, a general truth is being proposed. Is there an ontological dimension here, such that activity is the reason for Kṛṣṇa's existence just as it is for the worlds? That *karmaṇi* is in the locative may be significant as it stresses the intransitivity of *varte*, the noun simply providing the context for this intransitivity. Śāṅkara's commentary provides no gloss on the *pāda* where *varte* occurs.

### 3.23

*yadi hy ahaṃ na varteyaṃ jātu karmaṇy atandritaḥ /*  
If I were never tirelessly to operate in action,

*mama vartmānuvartante manuṣyāḥ pārtha sarvaśaḥ //*  
would men follow my path, prince, in every respect?

Here cognates of *vṛt* occur three times and the verse provides the possibility of contrasting prefixed and unprefixed examples of the verb. *Vartma* is a kind of object of *vṛt* prefixed with *anu*, but even here the verb is not fully transitive as the path is not being acted upon. Rather, as in *pāda* a and the previous verse, it is a context in which something as vague as a particular approach to life is applied. *Varteyam* has the same sense as *varte* in 3.22d and is simply another variant of it. Śāṅkara offers virtually no gloss.

A glance at the nouns and pronouns used with *vṛt* may help us specify the meaning of the verb in its unprefixed use.

Nominatives:

*aham* 3.22 (implied)  
*aham* 3.23  
*guṇā[h]* 3.28  
*indriyāṇi* 5.9  
*brahmanirvāṇaṃ* 5.26  
*ātmā* 6.6  
*sa* 6.31  
*sa* 13.23

*guṇā* [ḥ] 14.23

*yaḥ* 16.23

Locatives:

*karmaṇi* 3.22; 23

*guṇeṣu* 3.28

*indriyārtheṣu* 5.9

*atrutve* 6.6

*mayi* 6.31

*sarvathā* 6.31; 13.23

The absolute predominance of both these cases (except where the locative could be indirect object) is fitting for a verb whose sense is fundamentally intransitive. It compels us to focus on the sense of the word as denoting some kind of synchronic constancy where a particular course of conduct enframes all other specific activities within itself for the purpose of producing a particular result. This would be *saṃsāra* for *pravṛtti* and *mokṣa* for *nivṛtti*.

### *Context and Concentration*

One way to seek for the precise, and perhaps different, meanings of forms of *vṛt* is to analyse those passages where it occurs in a highly concentrated manner in contiguous verses. In the *Bhg* there are at least four such places where such concentrations occur. First is 3.16-3.28, dealing with the wheel of life, whilst the second occurs at 8.21-8.26 which treats of the self traversing the northern and southern paths of the sun, drawing substantially from the *BhU*<sup>13</sup>. Thirdly is 14.12-14.23 and we may also be justified in adding 15.4-15.6 as a fourth concentration. The analysis of these passages that follows is very preliminary indeed and could justifiably be accused of arbitrariness, in so far as it defines concentration purely by locational contiguity and neglects total word counts covering the entire text, not just those passages subject to analysis.

---

13. *BhU*. 6.2.14-16; *ChU*. 5.10.1-8.

*Bhg* 3.16-3.28 This begins where the famous description (3.10-15) of the wheel of life has been concluded. It contains a description of the process of world continuity where the sacrifice provides the basis of continuity and interrelation between the various classes of beings inhabiting the Earth. On completion of this the remainder of the chapter takes up the subject of the necessity of engaging in activity, the location of agency in *prakṛti* and the need to eradicate emotions from the mind.

16a is clearly a concluding statement: *evam pravartitam cakram* ‘As such was the wheel set in motion’ or ‘As such was the wheel set rolling forward’. There is room for ambiguity here because the wheel is ultimately started by the creator, but given its recurrence across the *yugas* it is marked by eternal continuity, except for those individuals who leave it by obtaining *mokṣa*. It is significant that the past tense is used here, indicating that it has a beginning. Also significant is that the process of the wheel’s movement is seen as a network of reciprocal actions undertaken by the principal groups inhabiting the Earth. This much is clear but it does not assist us markedly with the precise mean of *pravartitam*. Unambiguously the word has the sense of ‘moving forward’, and, presumably the more specific meaning of ‘rolling forward’. But it must convey more. Drawing upon the two semantic fields in which it finds its basic meanings, I draw the conclusion that it connotes the idea of existing (in a static sense) within this network of interdependencies and yet moving ever on to the (‘false’) goals put forward in the ideology associated with this network.

The best way to isolate more precise meanings is to contrast all occurrences of *vṛt* with all other verbs, and their nominal forms, found in these twelve verses.

- 16 *pravartitam* (a) *anuvartayati* (b) *jīvati* (d)
- 17 *syād* (a) *trptaś* (b) *saṃtuṣṭas* (c) *kāryaṃ vidyate* (d)
- 18 *kṛtena ... akṛtena* (a-b) *vyapāśrayaḥ* (d)
- 19 *asaktaḥ* (a) *kāryam ... samācara* (b) *asakto ... ācaran* (c) *āpnoti* (d)
- 20 *āsthītā* (b) *saṃpaśyan kartum arhasi* (d)
- 21 *ācarati* (a) *kurute* (c) *anuvartate* (d)
- 22 *asti kartavyam* (a) *anavāptam avāptavyam* (c) *varte* (d)
- 23 *varteyam* (a) *atandritaḥ* (b) *anuvartante* (c)

Of all the derivatives from roots found in these seven verses the following are the most common: *vṛt* (6); *kr̥* (7); *as* (2) [plus *vid* and *ā/sthā* in the sense of ‘to exist’]; *car* (3); *saj* (2); *āp* (3). How to separate these? Three of the roots demonstrating the most frequency all relate to action in some sense or other. Translations of the *Bhg* might suggest each verbal root is interchangeable, but intuitively I think the concentration of the verbs in these passages compels us to nuance the differences as far as the text allows.

*Kṛ* in its gerundive forms and nominal *karma* occurs as the direct object of *car* (19b and c [and often outside of this section of verses]), but not of *vṛt*. As indicated above, it is more usual for *vṛt* to be used with *karma* being put into a locative. *Vṛt* is only used where the most general possible sense of action is to be conveyed. Life-style or ‘operation’ in the sense of operating with a particular mode of consciousness in relation to some broad prescriptions is what is meant here. This is confirmed, I think, by the use of *anu* with *cakram* and *vartma* as the general field in which the activity designated by *vṛt* is to take place.

#### 14.12-23

These twelve verses occur in the lengthy section (14.5-27) dealing with the three *guṇas*, a subject quite different from what we found in the two earlier passages, yet still quite fitting for this strongly theological text. Here the characteristics of the *guṇas*, in their function as determinants of human characteristics, are described. This is hardly cosmological theory, but in analysing *vṛt* here, we do need to ask how it may share meanings with the context of the other two sections just analysed.

12. *pravṛttir* (a) *jāyante* (c) *vivṛddhe* (d)
13. *apravṛttir* (a) *jāyante* (c) *vivṛddhe* (d)
14. (*pralayaṃ*) *yāti* (b) *pratipadyate* (d)
15. (*pralayaṃ*) *gatvā* (a) *jāyate* (b) *pralīnas* (c) *jāyate* (d)
16. [*ahuh̄*]
17. *saṃjāyate* (a) *bhavato* (d)
18. [*ūrdhvaṃ*] *gacchanti* (a) *tiṣṭhanti* (b) ...*vṛtisthā* [*adho*] *gacchanti* (d)

19. *anupaśyati* (b) *vetti* (c) *adhigacchati* (d)
20. [*guṇān*] *aṭīya* (a) ...[*samudbhavān*] *vimukto* (d) *aśnute* (d)
21. [*guṇān*] *aṭīto bhavati* (c) *guṇān ativartate* (d)
22. *pravṛttim* (a) *na dveṣṭi sampravṛttāni* (c) *na nivṛttāni kāṅkṣati* (d)
23. *āsīno* (a) [*guṇair*] *na vicālyate* (b) *vartanta* (c) *avatiṣṭhati neṅgate* (d)

The first two verses simply assert *pravṛttir* and its opposite to be characteristics of *rajas* and *tamas* respectively. Frequently *pravṛtti* is given as an analogy<sup>14</sup> to *rajas*, and here it definitely connotes activity as a lifestyle-disposition, being surrounded by other qualities which must be taken as attitudes defining *rajas*, itself a psychological disposition with many physical expressions. Each of the qualities listed in 12ab could be taken as synonymous with *rajas* in its entirety. But what does *pravṛtti* denote that the other terms do not? *Lobhaḥ* and *sprhā* are definitely psychological attitudes necessary for the performance of actions, whereas *pravṛttir* and *ārambhaḥ karmaṇām* designate the actual field of activity undertaken. The meaning of the latter seems to relate to the specificity of activity, the former to the broad field of activity as movement in the most basic possible sense. Whether it has the sense of ‘a lifestyle of activity’ as it does elsewhere, as well as the specific sense of activity, cannot easily be determined here.

In the next verse *apravṛtīḥ* is simply the opposite of its meaning in 14.12. In both verses the only other verbs are *jāyante* and *vivṛddhe*. Both denote the idea of birth and growth, specifically designating the process of appearance of such qualities as *pravṛtti* or its opposite when *tamas* predominates. Neither overlap with the semantic fields *vṛt* inhabits, except when *pra/vṛt* has the sense of ‘to begin’.

The next occurrence is at 18c where those beings dominated by *tamas* are said ‘to stand in the modes [or movements] of the lowest quality’. I assume *vṛtti* is a collective noun designating the qualities of *tamas* listed in 14.13. Other verbs in the same *śloka* are *sthā* and *gam*, where the former almost has an ontological sense, it and derivatives occurring three times in the verse to indicate the condition of being dominated in one’s behaviour by any one of the *guṇas*.

---

14. See Greg Bailey, *The Mythology of Brahmsā*, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1983), Ch. 6.

These verses continue with an explanation of the process of going beyond the influence of the three *guṇas* and here too, having transcended the three, a person enters (*adhigacchati*) a different state. In 20 the condition of transcending (*aītya*) the *guṇas*, which constitute (*samudbhavān*) the body, equals escape from birth, death and old age and results in immortality. This assumes interest for the present paper because in the next verse *ativartate* is used in the same meaning as *aītya*. Zaehner translates this as ‘step out beyond’ which would seem to be more appropriate for *atīkrāmati* (Ś simply giving *aītya vartate*)<sup>15</sup>. The need to nuance the different terms leads me to think *aītya* refers to the transition between a state of living immersed in the *guṇas* and then beyond the *guṇas*, whereas *ativartate* refers simply to the condition of being beyond them, once the transitional process has been completed.

Verse 22 begins the description of the state where the person has transcended the *guṇas*, and as such could be said to fill in the semantic details of *ativartate*. The immediately following verse may complicate the overall sense of *vṛt* in this section, as variants occur three times:

*pravṛttim* (a)  
*saiṅpravṛttāni* (c)  
*(na) nivṛttāni* (d)

Certainly the first is a synonym of *rajas*, along with its other two nouns, designating the *guṇas* as a totality. Likewise the other two verbal nouns can only mean ‘arisen’ and ‘disappeared’ respectively. They are objects in their own right or specific emotional attitudes, or are they processes charting the arising and falling of the *guṇas*? If so why are these verbs used rather than some others? Is it because they encompass the habitual understanding of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* as ‘movement’ and ‘return’, ‘activity’ and ‘renunciation’, the latter being, at a metaphysical level equivalent to the rising and the falling away of the influence of the *guṇas*?

Finally, in vs 23 direct allusion is made to the attitude of the individual who has transcended the *guṇas*. It simply says that the *guṇas*

---

15. Zaehner, *op. cit.*, p. 356.



are present, whilst he, the subject, sits indifferent from them, not acknowledging his agency over them. Here the shade of meaning falls down to the choice of assessing whether this means ‘the *guṇas* occur’ or ‘the *guṇas* are present’. Again the sense is synchronic and obviously intransitive. Note the other verbs occurring here are all intransitive and two of them indicate movement, the other two the condition of remaining stationary. ‘The one seated, not moved by the *guṇas*... stays stationary, not moving’, knowing ‘Only the *guṇas* are moving.’

### Conclusion

At this stage in the life of the *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* project we have little more than a large body of lexical data, consisting of all occurrences of *vṛt* and derivatives found in the Critical Editions of the *Mbh* and the *Rām*. By the end of the year it is hoped that the Vedic material will also be collected and a beginning will be made on the Pāli Canon.

In analysing usages of *vṛt* in the *Bhg* it is to be noted that the present tense is used overwhelmingly and largely because of the context. This judgement of the importance of the present or synchronicity holds, for although there is a fundamental transformation in the condition of Arjuna (and his perception of Kṛṣṇa) across the complete narrative, the two parts of the narrative focus on the present conditions of Arjuna in his states as non-*bhakta* and *bhakta*. Both categories are also conceptualized in terms of *ajñānin* and *jñānin*. In short, although a diachronic transformation defines the *Bhg* emphasis is placed on the synchronic conditions from which the changes begin and to which they move. *Vṛt* seems to denote both of these in the highly religious contexts where it appears.

## Appendix One

Table 1. Occurrences of *vṛt* in the *Bhagavadgītā*<sup>16</sup>

1.20	<i>pravṛtte</i>	‘began’	<i>pra</i>
1.39	<i>nivartitum</i>	‘to turn aside’	<i>ni</i>
2.59a	<i>vinivartante</i>	‘disappear’	1. <i>vi</i> 2. <i>ni</i>
2.59d	<i>nivartate</i>	‘disappear’	<i>ni</i>
3.16a	<i>pravartitam</i>	‘in motion set’	<i>pra</i>
3.16b	<i>anuvartayati</i>	‘to match his turning’	<i>anu</i>
3.21c	<i>anuvartate</i>	‘follows’	<i>anu</i>
3.22c	<i>varte</i>	‘move’	
3.23a	<i>varteyam</i>	‘to busy myself’	
3.23c	<i>vartma</i>	‘footsteps’	
	<i>anuvartante</i>	‘follow’	<i>anu</i>
3.28c	<i>vartante</i>	‘act’	
4.11c	<i>vartma</i>	‘path’	
	<i>anuvartante</i>	‘follow’	<i>anu</i>
4.20	<i>abhipravṛtto</i>	‘embarked’	1. <i>abhi</i> 2. <i>pra</i>
5.9c	<i>vartante</i>	‘busied’	
5.14c	<i>pravartate</i>	‘initiates’	<i>pra</i>
5.17c	<i>apunarāvṛttim</i>	‘there’s no return’	1. <i>punar</i> 2. <i>ā</i>
5.26c	<i>vartate</i>	‘is’ ?	
6.6c	<i>varteta</i>	‘will act’	
6.31c	<i>vartamāno</i>	‘state he be’	
6.31d	<i>vartate</i>	‘abides’	
6.44d	<i>ativartate</i>	‘transcends’	<i>ati</i>
7.26b	<i>vartamānāni</i>	‘present’	
8.16b	<i>punarāvartino</i>	‘evolve again’	1. <i>punar</i> 2. <i>ā</i>
8.21c	<i>nivartante</i>	‘returning’	<i>ni</i>
8.23a	<i>anāvṛttim</i>	‘to return’	<i>ā</i>
8.23b	<i>āvṛttim</i>	‘never to return’	<i>ā</i>
8.25d	<i>nivartate</i>	‘back he comes’	<i>ni</i>
8.26c	<i>anāvṛttim</i>	‘no return’	<i>ā</i>

16. The translations are taken from Zaehner. Usually they do not nuance the translations of *vṛt* sufficiently to distinguish it from other semantically related verbs.

8.26d	<i>āvartate (punar)</i>	‘returns’	
9.3c	<i>nivartante</i>	‘return’	<i>ni</i>
9.3d	<i>...vartmani</i>	‘path’	
9.10d	<i>viparivartate</i>	‘revolves’	1. <i>vi</i> 2. <i>pari</i>
10.8b	<i>pravartate</i>	‘proceed’	<i>pra</i>
11.31d	<i>pravṛttim</i>	‘doing’	<i>pra</i>
11.32b	<i>pravṛttaḥ</i>	‘resolved’	<i>pra</i>
11.51c	<i>samvṛttaḥ</i>	‘returned’	<i>sam</i>
13.23c	<i>vartamāno</i>	‘he be’	
14.12	<i>pravṛttir</i>	‘waxing strong’	<i>pra</i>
14.13a	<i>(a) pravṛttiś</i>	‘surging up’	<i>pra</i>
14.18c	<i>...vṛtti...</i>	‘the modes’	
14.21d	<i>ativartate</i>	‘step out beyond’	<i>ati</i>
14.22a	<i>pravṛttim</i>	‘activity’	<i>pra</i>
14.22c	<i>saiḥpravṛttāni</i>	‘these arise’	1. <i>sam</i> 2. <i>pra</i>
14.22d	<i>nivṛttāni</i>	‘they cease’	<i>ni</i>
14.23c	<i>vartanta</i>	‘are busy’	
15.4b	<i>nivartanti</i>	‘come not back’	<i>ni</i>
15.4d	<i>pravṛttih</i>	‘flowed forth’	<i>pra</i>
15.5b	<i>vinivṛtta...</i>	‘supressed’	1. <i>vi</i> 2. <i>ni</i>
15.6c	<i>nivartante</i>	‘come not back’	<i>ni</i>
16.7a	<i>pravṛttim</i>	‘creative action’	<i>pra</i>
16.7a	<i>nivṛttim</i>	‘return to rest’	<i>ni</i>
16.10d	<i>pravartante</i>	‘are’	<i>pra</i>
16.23b	<i>vartate</i>	‘lives’	
17.24c	<i>pravartante</i>	‘begin’	<i>pra</i>
18.30a	<i>pravṛttim</i>	‘activity’	<i>pra</i>
18.30a	<i>nivṛttim</i>	‘its cessation’	<i>ni</i>
18.46a	<i>pravṛttir</i>	‘activity’	<i>pra</i>

Table 2. *Upasargas with vṛt*

<i>ā</i>	<i>ati</i>	<i>anu</i>	<i>abhi</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>pari</i>	<i>punar</i>	<i>pra</i>	<i>pari</i>	<i>vi</i>	<i>sam</i>
							1.20			
				1.39						
				2.59					2.59	
				2.59						
		3.16					3.16			
		3.21								
		3.23								
			4.20				4.20			
							5.14			
	6.44					5.17				
						8.16				
				8.21						
8.23				8.25						
8.26										
				9.3						
					9.10				9.10	
							10.8			
							11.31			
							11.32			
										11.51
							14.12			
							14.13			
	14.21									
							14.22			
				14.23						
				15.4			15.4			
				15.5					15.5	
				15.6						
				16.7			16.7			
							16.10			
							17.24			
				18.30			18.30			
							18.46			
2	2	3	1	12	1	2	16		3	1