

SUSHIL MADHAVA PATHAK

THE *BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ* AND ITS EVALUATION
IN MODERN TIMES

The first Englishman who acquired a knowledge of Sanskrit was Charles Wilkins. In this effort, he had been urged by Warren Hastings to take instruction from the Pandits in Benares, which was then, as now, the chief seat of Sanskrit learning. As the first fruit of his Sanskrit studies, he published in the year 1785 an English translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* which became the first Sanskrit book to be translated directly from Sanskrit into a European language¹. Two years later, he translated the *Hitopadeśa*. In 1808, he published his *Sanskrit Grammar* for which Sanskrit type was for the first time used in Europe. This type had been cast and carved by Wilkins himself. These admirable works and specially his translation of the *Gītā* established his reputation as the pioneer Sanskritist in Europe. He was followed in his Sanskrit studies by Sir William Jones, Colebrooke and Alexander Hamilton. These three learnt Sanskrit in the last two decades of the eighteenth century.

Sir William Jones became famous on account of his English translation of Kālidāsa's drama *Abhijñāna-Śakuntalam* in the year 1791. This English translation was translated into German in the year 1791 by George Foster. This German translation of the *Abhijñāna-Śakuntalam* awakened in the highest degree the enthusiasm of great literary figures of Germany like Goethe and

1. M. WINTERNITZ, *A History of Indian literature*, translated into English by Mrs. S. Ketkar, Vol. I, Delhi, Munshi Ram Manoharlal, 1972, p. 11.

Herder². Sir Jones was also the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal which greatly promoted Oriental learning. In 1794, Sir Jones translated the *Manusmṛti* into English entitled the *Ordinance of Manu*. H.T. Colebrooke was the father of Indian Philology and Archaeology³. His interests lay not so much in the poetic as in the scientific side of Sanskrit literature. He contributed pioneer essays on Indian Philology and religion, grammar, astronomy and arithmetic of India, in Europe⁴. Alexander Hamilton returned to England in 1802. Travelling through France he was detained in Paris under orders from Emperor Napoleon. In the year 1802, the German poet Friedrich Schlegel had also just come to Paris to stay there till the year 1807. When he made the acquaintance of Alexander Hamilton in Paris, Friedrich Schlegel at once seized the opportunity of learning Sanskrit from him. He also utilized his stay in Paris to study in the Paris library, which contained at that time about two hundred Manuscripts. As a result of these studies, Friedrich Schlegel became the founder of Indian Philology in Germany. He published his first book on Indian Philology in 1808 entitled *Über die Sprache Und Weisheit der Inder*, which contained translations of some passages from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Manusmṛti*, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and from *Śakuntalā* episode of the *Mahābhārata*⁵. These were the first translations from Sanskrit into German.

It was August Wilhelm Von Schlegel, Schlegel's brother, who was the first in Germany to develop an extensive activity as a Sanskrit scholar by editing texts, translations and other philological works. He was also the first Professor of Sanskrit in Germany⁶. August Schlegel also learnt Sanskrit in Paris in 1814 from a French man A.L. Chezy, who was the first French scholar to learn and teach Sanskrit as well as the first Professor of Sanskrit at the College de France⁷. In the year 1823, August Schlegel published the first vo-

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

lume of the periodical «Indische Bibliothek», containing numerous essays on Indian Philology. In the same year he also published a good edition of the *Bhagavad Gītā* with a latin translation⁸. Another scholar who showed enthusiasm for Sanskrit studies during this period was Wilhelm Von Humboldt. In the year 1821, he began to learn Sanskrit because he looked upon the study of Sanskrit as the key to philological studies. Schlegel's edition of the *Bhagavad Gītā* had directed Humboldt's attention to this poem. He devoted special treatises to it and in its appreciation he wrote to his friend Frederick Von Gentz in 1827.

«It is perhaps the deepest and loftiest thing the world has to show»⁹.

Hegel (1770-1831), the German Philosopher welcomed Wilhelm Von Humboldt's essays on the *Bhagavad Gītā* and replied to them in 1827 with two very extensive reviews which revealed his highly critical attitude towards the *Gītā*. In his view, Hinduism is the most typical and most illustrative example of the «religions of substance». There is an immense sublimity and grandeur in the idea of Brahman — but it remains negative with regard to the particularities of the Finite World¹⁰.

The Absolute, be it Brahman or Krishna of the *Gītā* is either principle of an abstract negation of the finite or principle of an abstract combination of negation and identification. The Divine Being of the *Gītā* is discovered in all finite beings; it permeates them — but only as their indeterminate self-identity, as the «Being of their existence». The «immanence» of God in the World and the «immanence» of the World in God, remains the immanence of the abstract in the abstract¹¹.

Hegel further criticised the idea of Moksha as an abstract and negative liberation¹². Hegel also failed to appreciate the Philosophy

8. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

9. *Indische Bibliothek*, Vol. I, p. 433.

10. WILHELM HALBFASS, «Hegel on the Philosophy of the Hindus», *German Scholars on India*. Vol. I, Varanasi, The Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1973, p. 112.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

underlying desireless action as preached in the *Gītā* and called it «the devaluation of purposeful action»¹³.

Hegel was a son of his time. The amount of factual information available to him on Indian thought was not sufficient for a true assessment of the systematic manifoldness and historical variability of Indian Philosophy. In 1828, Humboldt reacted to Hegel's criticism in the following words:

«However indifferent I may be to Hegel's Judgement, I greatly value the Indian Philosophical poem. I read the Indian Poem for the first time in country in Slesia, and my constant feeling while doing so was my gratitude to fate for having permitted me to live long enough to become acquainted with the Book»¹⁴.

He placed the *Bhagavad Gītā* for above Lucretius and even Parmenides and Empedokles. He declared:

«The episode of the Mahābhārata is the most beautiful, nay perhaps even the only truly Philosophical poem which we can find in all the literatures known to us»¹⁵.

He dealt in detail with the *Bhagavad Gītā* in a long dissertation of the Berlin Academy (1825-26) entitled: *Über die unter dem Namen Bhagavad Gītā bekannte Episode des Mahābhārata*. He also reviewed Schlegel's edition and translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā*¹⁶.

As a result of his hefforts, the *Bhagavad Gītā* received wide publicity as it was translated repeatedly into European languages. For example, C.R.S. Peiper, F. Lorisner, P. Deussen, R. Garbe and L.V. Schroeder translated it into German in the Years 1869, 1869, 1870, 1905 and 1912 respectively. In English, J.C. Thomson, John Davies, Edwin Arnold and C.C. Caleb translated it in the years 1855, 1882, 1885 and 1911 respectively. Edwin Arnold's translation in Verse entitled *Lord's song* attained immense popularity both in India and abroad. In India, the first English translation in Verse by K.T. Telang was published from Bombay in 1875. The next English translation in Prose with Sanskrit text by Mrs. Annie

13. *Ibid.*

14. Quoted by WINTERNITZ, *History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I, p. 18.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 247.

16. *Ibid.*

Besant and Dr. Bhagavan Das appeared in 1905.

The *Gītā* has been both admired and criticised, although the number of its admirers has always been greater than its critics. The greatest Indians who have spread its message both in India and abroad have been Swami Vivekananda, Tilak, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Radhakrishnan. These have been the greatest admirers and interpreters of the philosophy of the *Gītā* in the modern age.

The outstanding emphasis according to Tilak in the *Gītā* is on Karma being Nish-Karmathat is without fruit. Tilak propounded his theory on the *Gītā* in his famous work — *Gītā Rahasya*, first published in 1914.

John Davies, F.T. Brooks and Mrs. Annie Besant have been eloquent of the greatness and mastery of hold the *Gītā* exercises on the mind of the reader. Mrs. Annie Besant alongwith Dr. Bhagwan Das published an English translation of the *Gītā* in 1905.

According to Maharshi Raman, peace as the *Gītā* assures is a continuous process of self-purification and «Bhakti» an unbroken love.

To Mahatma Gandhi, the *Gītā* is a book of permanent guidance for spiritual uplift¹⁷. Dr. S. Radha-Krishnan believes that the *Gītā* represents not any sect of Hinduism, but Hinduism as a whole¹⁸.

The Buddhist Bhikshu Bhadant Anand Kausalyayan thinks that the *Gītā* is sufficient to explain the nature of Hinduism which developed in the post-Buddhist period. Although he opines that the *Gītā* is deeply influenced by the ethics of early Buddhism, yet he regards it as a defender of the caste-system, Hindu ritualism, the theory of soul and God, the theory of Karma and rebirth as well as the incarnation of God on earth¹⁹.

17. M.K. GANDHI, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, New Delhi, Orient Paper Books, No date, pp. 12-14.

18. S. RADHAKRISHNAN, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, New Delhi, Blackie & SVA, 1977, p. 10.

19. BHADANT ANAND KAUSALYAYAN, *Bhagavadgītā Ki Buddhivadi Sameeksha*, Allahabad, Hans Prakashan, 1958, pp. 9-25.

The Marxist thinkers have been the most outspoken critics of the *Gītā*. D.D. Kosambi has concluded that the extra-ordinary success of the *Gītā* was due to its new doctrine of Bhakti-Unflinching loyalty to Krishna. Absolute devotion to a personal god perfectly suited the feudal ideology. Precisely with the dawn of the final stage of Indian feudalism, Adi Śāṅkarācārya appeared on the scene and promoted the *Gītā* to its summit. Therefore, Mahatma Gandhi who led the bourgeois — national — liberation movement to success relied profoundly on the *Gītā*²⁰. One Prem Nath Bazaz, a Journalist who has written a monograph on the *Gītā* entitled: *The Role of Bhagavadgītā in Indian History*, opines that it has retarded social progress and promoted social evils in India. Although it contains some lofty ideals and lays certain noble precepts for success in mental discipline, it is primarily a philosophy of the upper classes to be utilised by them as a weapon for maintaining a frustrated society in some sort of stability and equilibrium by inculcating ideals of patience and contentment. It has always been used to resist the forces of revolution. Mahatma Gandhi utilised its teachings to annihilate the rising tide of secular democracy²¹.

Despite these adverse remarks by Buddhist and Marxist thinkers, the continuing popularity of the *Gītā* both among Hindu intellectuals and foreign scholars proves that there is something in it of enduring value. According to Adi Śāṅkarācārya, the purpose of the *Gītā* is to free human minds from sorrow, grief and illusion which are the root causes of this world of suffering²².

The unique appeal of the *Gītā* to those who know Sanskrit are due to its beautiful language and lucid style. As the great German Indologist M. Winternitz has beautifully summed up:

It is on the strength of its poetic value, the forcefulness of its language, the splendour of the images and metaphors, the

20. D.D. KOSAMBI, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1975, pp. 127-128; also B.S. UPADHYAY, *Bharatiya Samaj Ka Aitihasik Vishleshan*.

21. PREM NATH BAJAZ, *The Role of Bhagavad Gītā in Indian History*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers, 1975, pp. 20-21, also p. 565.

22. *The Bhagavad Gītā - Shankar Bhashya*, Gorakhpur, Gītā Press, 1974, p. 40.

breath of inspiration which pervades the poem, that it has made such a deep impression on the impressionable minds of all ages»²³.

23. M. WINTERNITZ, *A History of Indian Literature*, Part I, p. 430.