

India as a country of virile Hindus engaged in service to motherhood. In contrast, Gandhi emphasized the allegorical nature of the *Gītā* and saw an internalized battle between good and evil. While nationalists were busy privileging the *Gītā* one way or another, Dalit leader Ambedkar criticized it for its assertion of Brahmanical tyranny. It is refreshing to read about Ambedkar's negative appraisal of the text otherwise celebrated in indigenous accounts. Through such stories the two chapters aptly illustrate how the *Gītā* was understood not so much through what it brought to the readers as through what the readers brought to it.

But then isn't the very act of reading mediated through the translations that the reader uses? The penultimate chapter investigates the interpretive choices that inform four distinct translations of the *Gītā*: one from a noted Indologist from the American academy, one from a poet well known for translating religious work, one from an Indian Vaishnava teacher and renouncer, and one from a modern Indian Vedantin. Two consecutive verses from the *Gītā* serve as a sample that aptly illustrates the differences in the translations. Arguably the best chapter in the book, it has immense value for the burgeoning number of students who rely on translations. It will encourage them to read the translation of their choice critically. The final chapter ties the past of the *Gītā* to its present. How do contemporary practitioners who see themselves as inheritors of past legacies collectively further the life of the *Gītā*? The chapter answers this question by looking at four different sites: *Gītā* recitations in Gandhi's ashram at Vardha, where they remind the community of both Gandhi and the values he espoused; a live Marathi commentary on the *Jnaneshvari* that a university-educated devotee offers at Alandi, a holy place where Jnaneshvar is believed to have entered the ultimate meditative experience; a discourse that a modern Vedantin offers in English to address the anxieties of the urban elite; and finally a protestant-style sermon with ecumenical sensibilities from a swami based in the Vedanta society of New York, who reminds his Western audience of the perils of materialism. The observant anthropologist in Davis brings out the differences—both subtle and obvious—among the settings, styles, messages, and goals underlying these divergent performances. The reader gets a sense of the loose ends of the past getting tied to the present. An ensuing exploration of the contemporary visuals and events in India remind that the *Gītā*'s journey will continue.

In his *S/Z*, Roland Barthes distinguishes between what he calls a readerly text and a writerly text. In readerly texts—which include what we call classics—readers are passive, idle recipients of meaning that the author creates. They may accept or reject the meaning but rarely create it. The writerly text, in contrast, is what the reader or readers create anew in the process of reading and understanding. A writerly text rests on “a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds” and resists any determination. Is the *Bhagavadgītā* a readerly text or a writerly text? If the goal of a literary work is to “make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text,” as Barthes argues, then the *Bhagavadgītā* acts as a writerly text, and the *Biography* must get the credit to make the readers aware of this. Acknowledging the continuous evolution of the *Gītā* promises to counter textual determinism and its attendant conflicts especially in the political world of which we are a part. Precisely for this reason, no biography can be a final word on the *Gītā*. Rather, it must serve as an introduction to further exploration. Without a doubt, *The Bhagavadgita: A Biography* will be an indispensable resource for the students as well as general, curious readers. It will encourage them to hear the many voices of this classic with a critical sensibility, and perhaps to understand their own.

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The Bhagavadgita: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism. Tr. GAVIN FLOOD and CHARLES MARTIN, ed. GAVIN FLOOD. Norton Critical Editions. New York: W. W. NORTON & CO., 2015. Pp. xviii + 206.

What could a new translation of one of the most translated religious texts possibly offer? *The Bhagavadgita: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism* by Gavin Flood and Charles Martin reminds

the readers that no matter how many translations of this influential narrative exist, there is always scope for a fresh perspective, choice of words, style, and presentation. This joint endeavor between a scholar and a poet combines academic and literary sensibilities in the translation, providing novice readers with a reliable and accessible rendition. For those with more advanced interests it supplies commentaries of influential thinkers in history and criticisms from contemporary scholars and thus offers a glimpse into the interpretive and historical aspects of the life of the *Gītā*. This accompanying textual material is an instance of what Gerard Genette calls paratext, a liminal framework that mediates the meaning of a text for the readers. As paratext, the selected commentaries and criticisms act as a commentary that shapes the way the readers understand the text of the *Gītā*.¹ The text and the paratext of this translation complement each other and make this a sound textbook for the study of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

The translators retain the poetic character of the *Gītā* by emulating its principal metrical arrangement, i.e., the śloka meter. Each stanza contains thirty-two syllables, divided equally between four lines of eight syllables each. To achieve this lyrical success, however, the authors acknowledge that they must limit the complexity and the precision of the original. Their self-aware approach is “analogous rather than imitative” and their translation is “not word to word or line for line, but stanza for stanza.” New readers and students, the primary audience of this translation, will appreciate the clarity and poetic elegance of the stanzas. Those who know the original Sanskrit work and prefer a more literal approach may notice some imprecision and gaps. For instance, in II. 45 the term *niryogakṣema* (“neither acquiring nor keeping,” as Laurie Patton translates it) is left out entirely. Similarly, the translation of the term *smṛtivibhrama* (lit. straying of memory) in II. 63 as “loss of mindfulness” seems to be a stretch. Likewise, the first line of IV. 29 translated as “Having restrained the double paths of breathing in and breathing out” misses the sacrificial overtone of the line, which is better rendered in Patton’s translation, “Some offer the in-breath in the out-breath. Others offer the out-breath in the in-breath.” Furthermore, the term *buddhi* is inconsistently rendered as ‘higher mind’ and ‘intellect’. However, we must remind ourselves that the translators do not intend this to be an exact translation. The immediately accessible footnotes appearing at the bottom partially make up for the lack of literalism by explaining the numerous mythological, philosophical, and theological Sanskrit terms and offering glosses where necessary. These excellent notes are particularly useful for understanding the metaphysical concepts in chapter II, III, and VII and the mythological references in chapter X.

The introduction succinctly summarizes the teachings of the *Gītā* and provides adequate information on the textual, sociopolitical, and religious context. Thus we read about the orthodox Brahmanical religion, the rise of the Kṣatriya class, devotionism, and asceticism and renunciation in Buddhism and Jainism. Notably, the authors mention the often-overlooked commentary on the *Gītā* by the Śaivite scholar Abhinavagupta. However, the description of medieval commentaries could have included a note on medieval vernacular renditions such as the *Bhavarthadīpikā* by Jnaneshvar. Similarly, a brief description of the continuing vitality of the *Gītā* tradition in the contemporary period in the form of religious discourses, festivals, visual culture, and public performances would have further enriched the reader’s understanding of the *Gītā*’s continued significance.

The sections entitled “Contexts” and “Criticism” are the most distinctive and valuable portions of the book. These sections contain an array of excerpts from primary and secondary sources that provide a ready reference for a deeper understanding of the various views related to the *Gītā*. Under “Context” we encounter a sampling of discursive responses to the *Gītā* within the Indic tradition. An excerpt from Patrick Olivelle’s translation of the *Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad* enables us to explore the discursive connections between the *Gītā* and the Upaniṣads. Excerpts of Śaṅkara’s and Rāmānuja’s commentaries on chapter thirteen of the *Gītā* effectively bring out the key differences in the interpretation of these two important scholars with regard to the nature of the self, the Absolute, and the interrelationship between them. This will be useful to those interested in Vedānta philosophy. In B. G. Tilak’s preface to his commentary on the *Gītā* we see undertones of nationalism in his comparison of Indic and Western

1. Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, tr. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 1–2. For a brief discussion of the notion of text and paratext in the context of the *Bhagavadgītā*, see Richard Davis, *The Bhagavadgita: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2015), 157.

philosophies and his privileging of violent action as the central message of the *Gītā*. Aurobindo's essay likewise lets us explore his attempt to present the *Gītā* as a universal text full of mystical symbolism. However, what is missing in this section are the interpretations by Gandhi and Vivekananda that continue to be read with avid interest even today.

A selection of essays appearing under "Criticism" gives the reader a glimpse into scholarly excursions surrounding the textual, conceptual, and historical aspects of the *Gītā*. Brockington's essay investigates the structural relationship between the *Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata*, the date of the *Gītā*, and the thematic connections between its chapters. Sharma's essay explores the lesser-known yet significant literary genre of *Gītāmāhātmyas*. Rudolf Otto's investigation into the transitions in the meanings and uses of the term *yoga* in the Sanskrit textual tradition provides broad relevance and significance. Eric Sharpe's examination of Romantic and Transcendentalist responses to the *Gītā* brings out the historical and intellectual framework within which Western thinkers conceptualized what they understood to be Eastern and Western modes of thought. Finally, the brilliant essay by C. A. Bayly examines the "transnational" movements and intellectual trends in religion and philosophy that impinged upon how the *Gītā* was understood in the West as well as in Indian politics under colonialism. Although it is unrealistic to be exhaustive in the selection of analyses, the ones selected here offer the readers a diverse and rich interpretive aid in uncovering some of the significant textual, historical, conceptual, and political layers surrounding the *Gītā*.

In a nutshell, although this new translation compromises precision in favor of elegance, the supplementary material in the form of footnotes and excerpts from primary and secondary literature enhances the academic value of this volume. It will be a good addition to the existing translations and textbooks on the *Gītā*. New and veteran readers, students as well as instructors, will appreciate the convenience of having the translation, the contexts, and criticisms in one volume. The juxtaposition of these three is also a subtle reminder that the act of reading a primary text, especially a religious text, must never be an isolated but a complex and continuous hermeneutical process drawing upon external references. In the age where textual determinism often leads to violent consequences, it is a welcome reminder.

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Readings of the Vessantara Jātaka. Edited with an introduction by STEVEN COLLINS. Columbia Readings of Buddhist Literature. New York: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. Pp. x + 216. \$90 (cloth); \$30 (paper); \$29.99 (ebook).

In a series meant to address ongoing interpretations and productions—broadly conceived—of historically significant Buddhist texts, surely *Readings of the Vessantara Jātaka*, the third volume of the series, has a rightful place. For the legend of Prince Vessantara,¹ the man destined to become the Buddha Śākyamuni in his next human rebirth, has for centuries been critically important in virtually the entire Buddhist world. Indeed, the *Vessantara Jātaka* (hereafter abbreviated as VJ) has probably been the most popular Buddhist tale traditionally for Sri Lanka and much of Southeast Asia. Steven Collins, the editor of this volume, is therefore not unjustified in his opening claim that if "one approaches Buddhist textual traditions as civilizational-literary achievements . . . then the story of central historical and ethnographic importance will be that of Vessantara . . ." (p. 1).

This collection of essays on the VJ is very much in line with the welcome shift in Buddhist Studies, perhaps most notably marked by the 1995 publication of *Buddhism in Practice* (which could arguably

1. Proper names from (and the very title of) the *Vessantara Jātaka* will be referred to in their Pali form. This is only out of convenience, and it should be kept in mind—in the spirit of this volume—that these names varied, through translation or transliteration, as Buddhist textual traditions were transmitted through various Asian languages.