

## BOOK REVIEWS

**The Bhagavad Gita for Millennials by Bibek Debroy**, Published by Rupa Publications India (2020). Reviewed by Vinay Hejjaji, Research Associate, Centre for Civilisational Studies, Rashtram School of Public Leadership

For many, the Bhagavad Gita is a go-to scripture to understand Hinduism and to answer the bigger questions of life, be it resolving ethical dilemmas or finding purpose and meaning to life. However, this might not hold good for the younger generation, and as the cover of Debroy's book (*The Bhagavad Gita for Millennials*) states, "Millennials may consider it too ancient for their use or too complex for their understanding." Further, it is also true that an ancient text such as this runs the risk of becoming more and more obscure with each passing generation. This book by Bibek Debroy, therefore, fills the long overdue gap of providing an accessible introduction to the Bhagavad Gita. Written in a free-flowing style, it is a light but insightful read. It gives a general introduction to the Gita, touching upon its historicity, its literary and poetic features, and the key concepts necessary to appreciate its philosophical ideas.

### Context of the Gita

To quote the author, "[t]he Bhagavad Gita does not exist as a text in isolation, it is set against [the] broader context" of *dharma*. It is here that the book excels. Narrating anecdotes from a wide range of classical texts such as the *Purāṇas*, the *Upaniṣads*, and other independent texts, it situates the Gita in its wider context of the *dharmic* world-view. Second, the meaning and significance of complex concepts such as *dharma*, *varṇa*, and *karma*, etc., which often get shrouded in incomplete and misleading one-word translations, are explained with the help of related stories from classical Sanskrit literature.

### Dating of the text and Historicity

The author begins by discussing the Gita's place in the Mahabharata and reflects on the debate about whether it was originally a part of the Mahabharata or a later interpolation. By giving examples of the usage of pre-classical Sanskrit terms in the Gita and referring to interesting arguments based on certain astronomical details, he concludes that the Gita can safely be regarded as an original part of the Mahabharata. He draws attention to the "very dramatic note" preceding the *Gitopadeśa*, which will surely tempt readers to go back to

the Mahabharatato savor it. The Chapter also discusses the Gita *dhyāna ślokas* and the Gita *māhātmya*, but in a rather cursory manner. Considering that the book is aimed at the millennials, who are likely to be unfamiliar with the traditional scriptures, a more detailed discussion would have been helpful.

In the third chapter, Debroy provides a brief but interesting summary of evidences from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Krishna Charitra* to establish the historicity of Krishna. He states that the fact that Krishna finds a place in the Upanishads, the Jataka tales and the Jaina stories, and more importantly, that the worship of Krishna is mentioned in Patanjali's *mahābhāṣya*, a text dated second century BCE, compels us to reconsider the opinions of some 19th century Western scholars (unnamed in the book) that Krishna was never a real person, and *bhakti* towards him is a recent phenomenon in Hinduism. (Debroy, 2020, p.32).

### **The Beauty of Sanskrit**

The book has an entire chapter titled "Sanskrit and Poetry," which stresses that reading translations of the Gita will not only hide the deeper meaning and significance of several terms and concepts but also deprive the reader of the joy of reading poetry, particularly the charm of Sanskrit metrical poetry which cannot be recreated even in versified translations. It would have been helpful, however, had the author elaborated on the significance of metres and provided examples from the Gita to illustrate his point that change in the metre indicates change in the mood. Second, throughout the book, the author clarifies the etymological meanings of several Sanskrit terms such as *muni*, *sanyāsin*, *mantra*, etc. While these terms may not be unfamiliar to most readers, their understanding may be vague and etymological explanations can thus bring more clarity. Readers, nevertheless, might have to be cautioned that these meanings could yet be just one of the many possible ones. The book itself shows at least one example of how there could be multiple translations or rather interpretations of Sanskrit terms when it mentions three different interpretations of the term *nāsikāgram* (Debroy, 2020, p.45).

### **The Vastness of the Bhagavad Gita**

In the fourth chapter, "The Bhagavad Gita Synthesis," the author drives home the point that for many the understanding of the Gita is almost exclusively based on the single verse of 2.47, which expounds the concept of *karma yoga*,

thereby ignoring the “extremely extensive canvas” that it covers. This chapter stands out by providing a panoramic view of the multiple concepts such as *triguṇas*, *yajña*, *tapas*, etc., along with an overview—a rather short one—of the *darśanasin* general and the Pātañjala Yoga in particular. Of the various systems which the Gita relates to, the author draws attention to the lesser-known Pāñcarātra Agamic tradition which centres on *bhakti* towards the incarnations of Vishnu. The author emphasizes the importance of verse 4.7 in the Pāñcarātra tradition, where Krishna declares that he incarnates again and again to restore *dharma*. In other instances, the book emphasises the diverse teachings of the Gita: the approach of Sāṅkhya and Yoga and the practices of *bhakti*, *jñāna*, *dhyāna* and *karma yoga*.

### **Some Contentious Issues**

The fifth chapter, “The Smṛti Background,” sheds light on contentious issues: Is varṇa hereditary? Is brahminhood an ideal attained by conduct or a status obtained by birth? While deliberating on these issues, the author also clarifies the difference between *śruti* and *smṛti* texts, and quotes relevant teachings from the *dharmaśāstras* to deepen the understanding of these concepts. By narrating the story of Satyama and Jabala from the *Cāndogya Upaniṣad* and quoting certain *ślokas* from the Bhagavad Gita, the author argues that Brahminhood is an ideal attained by conduct rather than by birth. The chapter also includes some thought-provoking stories pertaining to the concepts of *satya* and *dharma*, such as the story about Kaushika’s vow of speaking only the truth, the *Dharma Vyādha Gita*, and the incident of a starving Vishvamitra willing to eat dog meat. These stories are likely to challenge any simplistic understanding of *dharma* and *satya* and illuminate how they are understood in the source texts.

### **Profundity of the Gita**

The author expresses displeasure over the numerous books on the Gita related to topics such as leadership and corporate success; he laments that they are mostly about how we “can manage the external world” while the Gita is all about changing “our own selves.” (Debroy, 2020, p.98). Debroy affirms that, more than anything else, the Gita seeks to set the reader on a quest for *ārohana*--evolution from lower to higher planes of existence. The chapter “Who am I?” nudges the reader to introspect on the notions of identity and self, and to

reflect on the teachings of the Gita from that perspective. The subsequent chapters too discuss important metaphysical questions and introduce the reader to basic concepts and ways in which the Gita addresses them--the explanation of *karma* as the cause of “innate differences among individuals” (Debroy, 2020, p.167), the discussion on the “*dharma* and *karma* dilemma” (Debroy, 2020, p.177) to demonstrate the subtle nature of *dharma* and the resultant ethical dilemmas that it engenders in life, to name just two. The concept of rebirth (Debroy, 2020, p.163) and the transient nature of the material world are presented as some of the important themes of the Gita, and these are further elaborated through narratives from the *Aṣṭāvakra gita* a plain-speaking spiritual text dealing with the subject of *mokṣa*. Finally, the last chapter emphasizes the centrality of *bhakti* and posits it as a powerful *sādhana* for countering *ahaṃkāra*. As a result, it stresses that the practice of *bhakti* is necessary even for those on the path of *karma* and *jñāna yoga*. (Debroy, 2020, p.195). These discussions ensure that the Gita is introduced to the millennials without diluting its key message.

The book makes other valuable suggestions. It directs the reader, for instance, to refer the *Mokṣa Dharma Parva* of the Mahabharata to better appreciate the meaning of Yoga as used in the Bhagavad Gita. This suggestion can open new ways for understanding the purport of the Gita besides the direct commentaries written on it.

### **Conclusion**

The book may leave the reader asking for more in a number of places. For instance, the discussion on *śaḍdarśana* is way too brief and feels incomplete. As stated earlier, providing an example of how a change in metre communicates change in mood of the text would have greatly aided in appreciating the poetic elements of the Gita. While the author specifies that the Gita should be understood in the broader context of *dharma*, the concept of *dharma* itself could have been discussed in the light of popular but ill-informed arguments that liken the Gita to a text justifying violence and war.

Overall, the book succeeds in giving a fairly deep insight into the diverse teachings of the Gita. Particularly for those uninitiated into the study of Gita, the book is an essential read before they plunge into a deeper study of the original text. That said, it is a valuable read even for those who are acquainted with

the scripture but are looking to deepen and broaden their understanding of the text.

### **References**

Debroy, Bibek. (2020). *The Bhagavad Gita For Millenials*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications.