

The Bhagavadgītā: Doctrines and Contexts. By ANGELIKA MALINAR. Cambridge: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007. Pp. xxi + 296.

The Bhagavad Gītā: The Original Sanskrit and an English Translation. By LARS MARTIN FOSSE. Woodstock, New York: YOGAVIDYA.COM, 2007. Pp. xxiv + 109. \$14.95 (paper).

We are in the midst of a rather surprising flurry of new scholarly translations of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (hereafter *BhG*). In English alone there have been at least four significant ones since 2007, and others, I know, are on the way. Inevitably the question arises whether there is a genuine need for yet more translations of this already much-translated text. One answer to this question, all too frequently encountered, is that the classics of world literature need to be translated anew in the voice and idiom of each new generation. Another answer, also well-worn, is that, as the scholarship on such classics as the *BhG* grows and new insights and interpretations emerge, new translations must be made to reflect these new developments in the relevant scholarship.

I made it clear in the introduction to my own translation of the *BhG* (2008) what my reasons were for producing it: when using translations of the *BhG* in my courses over the years I have restricted my choice to translations produced by scholars with a good record of scholarly publication, in standard academic journals like this one. While many translations in English have been produced by good and even profoundly learned scholars, these translations are generally less than satisfactory as literary products that make the *BhG* accessible to a general, non-specialist audience. In my view, the best way to translate the Sanskrit of the *BhG* is to adopt a vigorous rhythmic prose in which the basic poetic and semantic unit is the individual stanza. The *BhG* is composed after all in an Epic Sanskrit that is much closer to the contemporary vernacular, i.e., spoken Sanskrit, than are either the highly esoteric and very difficult poetry of the *Rigveda* or the highly refined and equally difficult courtly poetry of classical *kāvya*. Translators of the *BhG* who adopt a metrical stanza attempting to mirror the four eight-syllable lines of the *anuṣṭubh* śloka invariably fail to produce effective poetic versions of the text. To successfully employ a metrical stanza that imitates the *anuṣṭubh* form requires a poetic skillfulness, or art, that, frankly, few Sanskritists possess.

Another element often lacking in translations aimed at a general audience is adequate attention to the historical and social context. The *BhG* is a foundational text in the development of post-Vedic Hinduism. Its importance and its general appeal, both to a scholarly and a general audience, is based on the fundamental role that the *BhG* has played (and continues to play) in the growth of three profoundly important and influential social and religious movements that shaped and defined what we think of as classical Hinduism: (1) not so much the invention of the practice and philosophy of yoga within India, but rather the popularization of yoga traditions not only among the social and religious elites but among all castes (at least in theory); (2) a successful, i.e., a generally persuasive, counter-argument against the Śramaṇa traditions—especially Buddhism and Jainism—which posed a serious challenge to the Hindu view of social and caste dharma; and (3) the elevation of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa as a pan-Indian deity, thus contributing also to the spread of bhakti devotionism.

The scholarly literature on the *BhG* is enormous, as reflected in the bibliographical essays of Callewaert & Shilanand (1982) and Kapoor (1983), in which hundreds of translations are cited and discussed. In her recent translation of the *BhG* (2008), Laurie Patton asserts that there are over eighteen hundred translations in more than seventy-five languages, as well as more than three thousand articles on the *BhG* over the past two hundred years. There is also a journal devoted solely to the *BhG*: the *Journal of Studies in the Bhagavadgītā*. Obviously this flurry of new translations is a response to two facts: first, that the *BhG* is now well entrenched as a “world classic” that is taught and will continue to be taught in a wide range of college and university courses; and second, that there is a general sense among Sanskritists who teach the *BhG* that earlier translations have not been entirely successful.

The first book under review here, by Angelika Malinar, provides a detailed commentary on the major doctrinal themes of the text, chapter by chapter, citing much of the most recent research on the *BhG*, particularly what has been written in English and German. It also provides in its first chapter a brief but valuable “history of research” on the *BhG*, and a second chapter devoted to debates over war and peace in the Udyogaparvan (Bk 5) of the *Mahābhārata*, which provide parallels with the *BhG*, thus

demonstrating that the *BhG* was composed as a commentary on these debates. Thus, as Malinar argues, the insertion of the *BhG* into the *Bhīṣmaparvan* (Bk 6) was not at all arbitrary (which in fact has often been argued). The book concludes with very useful chapters on general doctrinal themes of the *BhG* (ch. 4) and a summary discussion of its historical and cultural contexts (ch. 5).

Malinar has performed a very valuable service with this book, an updated revision of *Rājavidyā: Das königliche Wissen um Herrschaft und Verzicht. Studien zur Bhagavadgītā* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996). As she points out at the outset, "the consideration of previous research is not the strongest aspect of *BhG* studies" (p. 1). She has usefully and insightfully provided the epic context of the *BhG* (especially the *Udyogaparvan* of the *MBh*), and on many occasions the Vedic context as well, although not nearly as fully. She also gives a good, detailed survey of the history of research on the *BhG*, especially with regard to the dispute between the unitarians and the text-critical historians who attempt to sort out the theistic from the non-theistic layers of the *BhG*.

Its epic context shows that the *BhG* arose out of perennial epic debates concerning kingship and power, the dilemma between *kuladharma* (family-duty) and *kṣatriyadharma* (warrior-duty), and fatalistic notions of fate typical of epic cultures or genres. Malinar has done an excellent job of placing the *BhG* within its *MBh* context and thus provides a valuable counterbalance to the main trend in *BhG* studies, which is to interpret the text through the prism of the later commentators. Influential though they have been, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Bhāskara et al., all bring a perspective to the *BhG* that is their own and not necessarily that of the author(s) of the text. The *BhG* has inspired and continues to inspire an enormous, largely sectarian, commentarial literature. Instead of treating this commentarial literature, Malinar has chosen to give a well-informed and insightful interpretation of the *BhG* within its own epic context. Thus this book is a valuable corrective to the ahistorical/theological approaches to the *BhG* that have tended to dominate the field.

Regarding the perennially vexed issue of dating the *BhG*, she makes a good case for the view that in its final redaction the *BhG* is to be dated to the first century of the Common Era. She supplements evidence from traditional text criticism with iconographical, epigraphical, and numismatic evidence. She sides with those scholars who see, and attempt to tease out, the layers of textual stratification in the *BhG*, against text unitarians like Biardeau and Hillebrandt who are inclined to regard the *BhG* as the work of a single author. Overall, she sees three major layers in the development of the text of the *BhG*: briefly, (1) an initial layer espousing the doctrine of disinterested action that uses the *Sāṃkhya*-*Yoga* schools of the second–first centuries B.C.E. to present an image of the ideal king as exhibiting dispassion and yogic self-discipline; (2) to this initial text layer she adds the image of Kṛṣṇa as "the model of ideal royal and yogic activity" (p. 267), a king who is intimately linked with his followers through *bhakti* devotionism; and (3) a final text layer which comments on or re-interprets the earlier layers. This last text layer consists of chapters 12–18, added in the first century C.E., influenced by the *Kuṣāṇa* kings, composed in the highly condensed and telegraphic *sūtra* style of classical Sanskrit, and frequently resorting to *Sāṃkhya*-like classifications and lists. She sees chapters 7–11, as well as the early sections of 4, as the central portion of the *BhG*, the portion, that is, that celebrates what she calls "Kṛṣṇa monotheism."

The second book under review here is a recent translation of the *BhG* by Lars Martin Fosse, published by YogaVidya.com, and intended, according to a rather hyperbolic publicity sheet, for the yoga and New Age markets, as well as Hindus and neo-Hindus worldwide, and for relevant college and university courses. The sheet asserts that this is the "best Gita ever," and that it "speaks with unprecedented fidelity and clarity." While there is no doubt that Fosse is a competent Sanskritist and that this translation is a competent one, the bold assertions of this publicity sheet are certainly unwarranted and probably embarrassing to the translator.

The sociolinguistic register of the book's introduction, and of the translation as well, is, in my opinion, too colloquial. Although Fosse is a "most experienced" translator, as the book tells us, his English is clearly not that of a native speaker, but rather a kind of internationalese English that often sounds awkward and unidiomatic to the native speaker of English. One example, among very many, is *BhG* 4.17, where *vikarman* is translated as 'misaction'. In this passage a distinction is made among action (*karman*), inaction (*akarman*), and wrong action (*vikarman*). His translation of this last term as 'misaction' is understandable, but in terms of idiomatic English it is clearly a non-native translator's

misjudgment. Consider also 6.25, where Sanskrit *buddhyā dhṛtigṛhitayā* ("with insight that is held firmly") is translated as "with his mind grasped by resolution." Another example of his difficulty with finding apt English equivalents for the verb *grah*, a more serious one, occurs at *BhG* 6.35 where he translates *gṛhyate* "one can get a grip on (the mind that wanders)." Here he is clearly unaware of the non-standard American English idiom "to get a grip" attested on college campuses since the 1970s.

The introduction begins: "You are about to have the profound pleasure of reading one of the truly great books in the history of the world," and it closes with the same statement. The tone of this introduction is for the most part just as casual as the tone of the translation. Some examples: "Knowing a couple of things will make your reading easier. The first is that the Gita is a conversation within a conversation. Dhritarashtra begins it by asking a question, and that is the last that we hear out of him" (p. xv). "Sanjaya pops up now and again throughout the book . . ." (p. xvi). On p. xviii Fosse asks a rhetorical question: "Who would've written such a complicated book (as the *BhG*)?" The introduction is too brief, in my view, for a general non-specialist audience (this fault, however, may be attributed to the publisher, rather than to the translator). Fosse recommends that the reader visit the publisher's website for further material. There is no bibliography at all anywhere in the book, and footnotes are excluded as a distraction from the high drama of the conversation between Krishna (*sic*) and Arjuna. Returning again to this book's intended audience, I am puzzled by two of the book's design features. On the one hand, it includes the Sanskrit text, not in transliteration but "in the beautiful Devanagari script" (p. xx). One would reasonably conclude from this that this edition is aimed at yoga students with a serious interest in reading, or learning to read, Sanskrit in Devanagari. On the other hand, throughout the introduction and in the translation itself no attempt is made to transcribe Sanskrit terms and names correctly. Instead, dismissive reference is made to "ugly transliteration" (p. xxi). The book fetishizes Devanagari on its covers, with a running loop of multicolored Devanagari. It seems to me a strange pedagogical practice to highlight the Devanagari so extravagantly while completely ignoring the correct transliteration of it.

Fosse is a good Sanskritist, but this edition of the *BhG* is not quite a success. It fails to serve its intended audiences, in spite of the fact that Fosse has made many good decisions in presenting it. His scholarship is for the most part reliable and his decision to translate the *BhG* into straightforward prose was wise. There are no glaring errors of interpretation (but let it be noted that 3.15 is only half translated; apparently lines *cd* have been lost in transmission, without a trace, somewhere between the translator and the editors). The *BhG* is a proselytizing missionary text that very much wants to be understood, like the also eagerly accessible Greek of the New Testament Gospels. But the Sanskrit of the *BhG* is not a koine like the often clumsy Greek of the Gospels. It is a good colloquial Sanskrit of its time. Good scholarly translations should reflect this fact, and Fosse's version does this.

GEORGE THOMPSON
MONTERRAT COLLEGE OF ART

Vedic Ideals of Sovereignty and the Poetics of Power. By THEODORE N. PROFERES. American Oriental Series, vol. 90. New Haven: AMERICAN ORIENTAL SOCIETY, 2007. Pp. 167.

This brief monograph consists of four chapters: "Introduction: Politics and Liturgical Poetry" (pp. 1–22); "Ritual Fires and the Construction of Sovereignty" (pp. 23–76); "Fire in the Waters and the Alchemical Ring" (pp. 77–113); and "The Universal Sovereign as a Paradigm for Spiritual Freedom" (pp. 114–52). It also contains a brief bibliography, an index of Sanskrit words and phrases, and an index of cited passages. Its thesis is clearly stated in its opening paragraph:

This monograph examines a number of motifs central to the expression of the ideal of sovereignty as it is articulated in Vedic liturgical poetry. It argues that, because the qualities and privileges of a sovereign leader were coveted even by those for whom there was no possibility of