Review

Philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita: A Contemporary Introduction, by Keye Maitra. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 204 pp., £54 (hb), £17.09 (pb), £13.67 (eBook). ISBN: 978-1-35-004019-9 (hb), 978-1-35-004018-2 (pb), 978-1-35-004017-5 (eBook).

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The religio-philosophical importance of the *Bhagavadgītā* has led philosophers and theologians from most major belief systems in India to produce commentaries and other paratextual (and other) material, such as summaries in verse (e.g. Yāmunācārya's *Gītārthasaṃgraha*), in both Sanskrit and the vernacular languages. Modern times have seen a consistent rise in its popularity, the most visible evidence of which its inclusion among the pivotal texts taught in class across disciplines, philosophy, religion, Sanskrit and so forth.

Since the practice of using this text in a classroom has been around for a while now, why then produce yet another translation for that purpose? This is what the author briefly discusses in her introduction. In the process, she gives a useful overview of existent translations, while pointing out that her main aim is to produce one that strikes a balance between the two different trends which the *Gītā* translations used to teach adopt (i.e. the one that neglects the context and the one that, on the other hand, focuses too much on the details). For example, some translators do not translate the different epithets found in the text, but Maitra decides otherwise, as they are translated and/or explained the first time. For example, *dvijottama* (*Gītā* 1.7) is translated as 'best among twice-born', which is in turn clarified between parentheses as 'Brahmin: member of the priest caste' (p. 34). An endnote explaining why they are referred to as 'twice-born' could have been useful, too, but it is obviously not possible to give all manner of details, which would only distract the reader from the main aim of the book.

This author's other aim is to give 'an overview of the various contexts and philosophies of the *Gita*' (p. xii), something that is crucial for such a book, all the more so since its philosophy is not evident, nor is there any consensus as to what it is, which makes it a challenge to translate the text for philosophy, as Maitra points out. Discussing the approaches used to read the *Gītā*, she defines hers ('multitrack coherentism', p. 5), which acknowledges

the internal diversity of the text, which explains the appeal it has to a wide range of people across time.

The author then proceeds to give the different concepts of the *Gītā*, dealing thus with topics such as the crucial role that it played in the evolution of Hinduism. She situates it within the context of the *Mahābhārata*, of which she makes a handy summary, before proceeding to give the conceptual foundations of the text, including topics like theories of rebirth and karma, the *varṇa* and *jāti* systems and Brahman, which are essential notions to know for a beginner before reading the *Gītā*. And then the author broaches the core topic of philosophy in the *Gītā*, as well as its metaphysics, gently introducing Samkhya concepts and showing how its system of cosmic evolution is adopted and adapted by the *Gītā*. The introduction includes a useful explanation of the doctrine of the *guṇas*, which form the very basis upon which many theories are built in many texts, including this one.

Furthermore, while explaining how the *Gītā* reached the mainstream from the early twentieth century onwards, Maitra draws our attention to the text's relations with the 'periphery', that is, women and the Dalit community, which are interesting points that could be further reflected upon in a classroom. Finally, abundantly referring to prominent scholars of the *Gītā*, the author deals with the other important topic, that of the yogas: she gives (more or less) equal importance on all three of them, while calling out the Eurocentric preference for the yoga of action that neglects the other two.

The translation of the *Gītā* itself is in simple and accessible prose, with no text in Sanskrit, which suits the purpose of the book, nor diacritic marks, which could actually hinder the reading for the non-Indology specialist. Each chapter is preceded by a helpful summary and followed by a 'philosopher's corner', in which Maitra analyses the relevant chapter and poses questions for further reflection. In this part, building upon the concepts that she has presented in the Introduction, she judiciously draws parallels between key *Gītā* points and Western philosophical concepts, something that acts like stepping stones for beginners, especially if they are students of Western philosophy.

The book also has a short, selective glossary of the Sanskrit terms that are used as such in the book.

Right at the beginning, in 'How to use this book?', Maitra spells out the decisions and efforts that she made for achieving the delicate balance between readability and accuracy in a translation, and for bringing out the philosophical concepts of the *Gītā*. And in both, she has been successful: the book is a valuable contribution not just for the teacher and her student in a classroom, but for anyone who seeks a simple introduction to this ancient text.