

The Bhagavad Gita Casts Its Spell On The West

By Swami Tathagatananda

The *Bhagavad Gita* is universally known in India. It is reported to have been translated into 82 languages and it can safely be said that at least 65 or more of these are foreign languages. There is no missionary zeal behind the publication of the *Bhagavad Gita*. It has been done by the people out of their sheer love for the non-dogmatic philosophy and depiction, in the *Gita*, of the entire human life—of its source and culmination in emancipation. The original attraction for the eternal teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* appealed to the enlightened minds of Western scholars, who took a serious interest in disseminating the *Gita*'s non-dogmatic, scientific description of human life.

In 1945, the *Bhagavad Gita* by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood was published as a Mentor Pocket Book. Definitely, by this time, more than a million copies have been sold. In his lengthy introduction to this rendition of the sacred scripture, Aldous Huxley very beautifully remarked:

The *Gita* is one of the clearest and most comprehensive summaries of the Perennial Philosophy ever to have been made. Hence its enduring value, not only for Indians, but for all mankind. . . . The *Bhagavadgita* is perhaps the most systematic spiritual statement of the Perennial Philosophy.

It is reported that there are 6,500 distinct languages and dialects around the world. The Bible Society, which was founded in England in 1816, has 146 branches throughout the world. The Society took a leading role in popularizing the Bible with Christian missionary zeal in different nations around the world. Recent statistics indicate that it has been able to publish the complete Bible in 392 languages. This may be compared to the manner and practice in which the *Bhagavad Gita* has been translated and disseminated. The history of its spell and its impact on the West begins with the father of Indology, Sir William Jones, and his "dream-child," the *Asiatic Society*.

THE IMPACT OF THE *ASIATIC SOCIETY* AND CHARLES WILKINS' *BHAGAVAT-GEETA* ON EUROPE

The *Asiatic Society of Bengal* was founded in Calcutta by Sir William Jones (1746-1794) on January 15, 1784 and pioneered Indian research and scholarship in particular and Asian studies generally. It was an epoch-making event in the meeting of East and West, on both the intellectual and spiritual levels. The *Society* inspired Sanskrit studies in

Europe, whose literature was permeated and enriched by Jones' numerous translations and the *Society's* journal, *Asiatic Researches*. Western Sanskrit studies and the disciplines of comparative grammar and philology that were subsequently established, are indebted to Sir Jones and the work of the *Asiatic Society*.

The greatest impact on Europe came through the *Bhagavad Gita*. Sir Charles Wilkins (1750-1836) loved the *Bhagavad Gita* wholeheartedly—he compared it to the Gospel of St. John of the *New Testament*. Under the auspices of the *Society*, his *Bhagavat-Geetâ, or Dialogues of Kreesna and Arjoon*, the very first translation of the *Gita* into a European language, was printed in London at the direction of the East India Company upon the special recommendation of Warren Hastings. Hastings had a fascination for the *Gita* and he pursued the Court of Directors of the East India Company until the directors agreed to publish the work at the company's expense. In a learned preface Hastings wrote to Wilkins' work, he praised its literary merits and asserted that the study and true practice of the *Gita's* teachings would lead humanity to peace and bliss. In *Indology and Its Eminent Western Savants*, Sengupta confirms Hastings' great esteem for the *Bhagavad Gita*:

Warren Hastings, while forwarding a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* [by Wilkins] to the chairman of the East India Company, in course of an introduction stated that the work was "a performance of great originality, of a sublimity of conception, reasoning and diction almost unequalled, and single exception among all the known religions of mankind of a theology accurately corresponding with that of the Christian dispensation and most powerfully illustrating its fundamental doctrines." _

Well aware of the *Gita's* universal bearing, Hastings included a prophetic expression in his preface:

The writers of the Indian philosophies will survive when the British Dominion in India shall long have ceased to exist, and when the sources which it yielded of wealth and power are lost to remembrance.

As one scholar has written, "no text could, by its profound metaphysics and by the prestige of its poetic casting, more irresistibly shake the hold of the tradition of a superior race." _

Wilkins also became Librarian of the East India Company's London library in 1799. As a leading Indologist in charge of the famous India Office Library, Wilkins collected a large number of manuscripts from India; these formed its core collection. _ His *Grammar of the Sanskrit Language* was printed from London (after a fire consumed his press) in 1808. In 1815, he also published *Radicals of the Sanskrit Language* containing verb roots, in London. Students of Sanskrit welcomed both grammars. He played a leading role in the formation of London's *Royal Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. His contributions to the research of the *Asiatic Society of Bengal* are memorable. The essence of Hindu thought, as elegantly and concisely put forth in the *Bhagavad Gita*, was disseminated

throughout all of Europe thanks to Wilkins' translation. His *Gita* was later translated into all major languages and reached a universal audience.

FRANCE BECOMES A CENTER FOR INDIAN STUDIES

In 1787, Abbé Parraud retranslated Wilkins' English version into French. Within a short span of time, other brilliant translations of Sanskrit books from the *Asiatic Society of Bengal* became well known in revolutionary France. Louis Matthieu Langlès, curator of oriental manuscripts at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* and its provisional specialist on India, documented Indic research. Langlès was well aware of the importance of the *Asiatic Society*. For the benefit of scholars everywhere, he included the history and bibliography of the early publications of the *Society* in the third volume of the *Magasin Encyclopédique*.

Beginning in 1800, France became a center for Indian studies when the accumulated Indian manuscripts languishing in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* began to be prepared for inventory. The *Asiatic Researches: Transactions of the Society* (published by the *Asiatic Society of Bengal* from 1788) had been published in Calcutta in 1805 and were being translated into French along with the works of both Wilkins and Sir William Jones.

In 1832, a French translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* was made directly from the Sanskrit by Jean-Denis Lanjuinais and published posthumously. Lanjuinais had written of the "great surprise" it was "to find among these fragments of an extremely ancient epic poem from India . . . a completely spiritual pantheism . . . and . . . the vision of all-in-God . . ."

By the late eighteenth century, French writers acquired intimate knowledge of Indian literature. Sensing that India possessed a great richness of spiritual unity, Henri Frédéric Amiel, a contemporary of Victor Hugo, saw the need of "Brahmanising souls" for the spiritual welfare of humanity.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FRANCE IN GERMAN INDOLOGY

France played a unique role in the advancement of Indic studies in Germany when Paris became the "capital of nascent Indology." Together with Wilkins, Jones and others, British Lieutenant Alexander Hamilton (an employee of the East India Company) was among the first twenty-four charter members of the *Asiatic Society of Bengal* and played a very important role in the focus of Sanskrit studies in Germany. While serving in the British Navy, Lt. Hamilton was sent to Paris to collate Sanskrit manuscripts at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* for a new edition of Wilkins' translation of the *Hitopadesha*. Hamilton was the only one apart from Wilkins who knew Sanskrit and who lived in Europe at the time. In 1803, during the war between France and England, the Orientalist Claude de Saint-Martin expressed his enthusiasm for "the numerous treasures that the literature of India is beginning to offer us," in his *Le ministère de l'homme-esprit*. In the same year Hamilton became a paroled prisoner in Paris, but received special treatment due to his scholarly associations. Orientalist Constantine Volney was interested in Hamilton's work and protected Hamilton's right to continue cataloguing the manuscripts. Hamilton expressed his gratitude by teaching Sanskrit to Volney and a few others.

Among them were the father of Eugène Burnouf (a Latin scholar), Louis Matthieu Langlès, Claude Fauriel—and Friedrich von Schlegel. Schlegel was in Paris at the time and began studying Sanskrit three hours a day with Hamilton (he continued to study it on his own for four years). Between 1803 and 1804, Friedrich von Schlegel used the Sanskrit he learned from Hamilton to translate excerpts from the Indian epics and the *Laws of Manu*. In 1804 he taught a private course on world literature in Paris and included Indian works. His influence on his brother, August Wilhelm, who surpassed him in Sanskrit, occurred at this time.

THE *BHAGAVAD GITA*'S CENTRAL ROLE IN GERMANY'S SPIRITUAL LIFE

The *Bhagavad Gita* helped to shape the worldview of Germany. Through their love of ideas, German scholars like Friedrich von Schlegel and Baron Ferdinand Eckstein became Sanskrit scholars. Jacob Wilhelm Hauer (1881-1962), a modern German Indologist, afforded the *Bhagavad Gita* a pivotal role in the spiritual life of Germany. An official interpreter of faith in Germany, Hauer described the *Gita* as "a work of imperishable significance" that offers

not only profound insights that are valid for all times and for all religious life, but it contains as well the classical presentation of one of the most significant phases of Indo-German religious history. . . . It shows us the way as regards the essential nature and basal characteristics of Indo-Germanic religion. Here Spirit is at work that belongs to our spirit.

Hauer declared the central message of the *Gita*:

We are not called to solve the meaning of life but to find out the Deed demanded of us and to work and so, by action, to master the riddle of life.

The "native land" of Indic studies may have been England, but Germany is the true cradle of the Indic renaissance. In Jena, Weimar and Heidelberg, then at Bonn, Berlin and Tübingen Oriental studies were established during the 1790s "like a rapid-fire series of explosions." The many translations of Indian texts produced by the English in India were available to German philosophers when their interest in India's spiritual philosophy was awakened. Charles Wilkins' translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* had become a favorite book among Westerners throughout Europe, and together with other translations, found its widest audience in Germany.

The brothers Friedrich von Schlegel and August Wilhelm von Schlegel used their own printing press in 1823 to publish August Wilhelm's Latin translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* with the original Sanskrit text. European scholars commended it. This translation was to be an important resource for Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) and, later, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), both of whom gave it their undivided attention.

Wilhelm von Humboldt claimed that his familiarity with the *Oupnek'hat*, the *Manusmrti*, Burnouf's extracts from the *Padmapurana* and Colebrooke's essay, "On the Religion and Philosophy of the Indians," enabled him to comprehend the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He wrote that "this episode of the *Mahabharata* is the most beautiful, nay, perhaps even the only true philosophical poem which we can find in all the literatures known to us" and ranked the *Gita* above the works of Lucretius, Parmenides and Empedocles. After looking into the *Gita*, he wrote to his friend, statesman Frederick von Gentz in 1827:

I read the Indian poem for the first time when I was in my country estate in Silesia and, while doing so, I felt a sense of overwhelming gratitude to God for having let me live to be acquainted with this work. It must be the most profound and sublime thing to be found in the world.

Humboldt wanted to inform the world of the concept of God that he found and appreciated in the *Bhagavad Gita*. With as much capacity to plumb the scripture's depths as could be cultivated at that time, he set himself to broadcast its teachings with an open mind. His lecture on the *Bhagavad Gita* at Berlin's Royal Academy of Sciences to Prussia's intellectual elite in 1825 stirs the reader's mind to this day. It was published in 1826. He appeared again at the Academy one year later, this time with his analysis of the *Gita's* Advaitic structure founded on Samkhya philosophy, and summarized the *Gita's* discourses and poetic value in great detail.

The first Humboldt lecture on the *Bhagavad Gita* caught the attention of George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. He published a review of it in 1827 that contributed a critical and appreciative analysis. Hegel felt Humboldt's lecture to be "an essential enrichment of the knowledge of the Indian way of concepts of the highest spiritual interests" and his penetrating review served to promote Humboldt's work.

Freidrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) was the first German to study Sanskrit and Indian religion and philosophy in depth. His interest in India was greatly influenced by the *Bhagavad Gita*. Schlegel produced his eminent pioneering work, *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians: A Contribution to the Foundation of Antiquity (Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier)*, in 1808. It was the primary publication of nineteenth-century European Indology in the German language, acknowledged for its scholarly translations of extracts from the Sanskrit texts of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana*. His words in *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* hailed the contribution of Vedanta, and were later brought to life by Max Müller in his lecture, "Origin of the Vedanta":

It cannot be denied that the early Indians possessed a knowledge of the true God; all their writings are replete with sentiments and expressions, noble, clear, and severely grand; as deeply conceived and reverentially expressed as in any human language in which men have spoken of their God . . . The divine origin of man, as taught in Vedanta, is continually inculcated, to stimulate his efforts to return, to animate him in the struggle, and incite him to consider a reunion and reincorporating with Divinity as the one primary object of every action and reaction. Even the highest form of European philosophy, the

idealism of reason as it is set forth by the Greek philosophers, seems, when compared to the bounteous light and force of oriental idealism, to be no more than a feeble Promethean spark within the full celestial splendor of the noonday sun, a thin flickering spark always on the point of burning out.

August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767-1845) hoped to inspire a new ethics and was the first to publish standard text editions with penetrating commentaries and translations in classical Latin of the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Hitopadesha* and the *Ramayana*. Between 1820 and 1830 he published *Indische Bibliothek*, a collection of Indian texts. He is considered the founder of Sanskrit philology in Germany. His unrestrained praise for the *Bhagavad Gita* elicited this fervent remark:

If the study of Sanskrit had brought nothing more than the satisfaction of being able to read this superb poem in the original, I would have been amply compensated for all my labors. It is a sublime reunion of poetic and philosophical genius.

In 1932, the German scholar and Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) wrote a groundbreaking work on the subject of mysticism in comparative religion. Otto regarded the *Bhagavad Gita* as an excellent example of *mysterium tremendum* and understood the significance of Vedanta for the West. Otto's premise was that within the vast diversity of mystical expression a "deep-rooted kinship . . . unquestionably exists between the souls of Oriental and Occidental."

ENGLAND'S APPRECIATION OF THE *BHAGAVAD GITA* SIR EDWIN ARNOLD'S *SONG CELESTIAL*

England first brought India's spiritual treasures to the attention of Europeans in the eighteenth century with the founding of the *Asiatic Society*. Sir Wilkins' translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* and his authoritative Sanskrit grammar (1787) became the basis for all later work. The destiny of India's radiantly pure sacred texts was to make the miracle of India real to the West.

In the nineteenth century, Sir Edwin Arnold (1832-1904) was mysteriously drawn to India's philosophy through his attraction for the English translations of Indian literature. In 1885, exactly one hundred years after Sir Wilkins' English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* was published, Sir Arnold's blank verse translation of the sacred scripture appeared as *The Song Celestial*. Sir Arnold published a portion of *The Song Celestial* in the *International Review* and dedicated it to the American people "with all gratitude and attachment." It enjoyed wide circulation and many scholars of the *Gita* acknowledged its influence on readers.

Mahatma Gandhi esteemed the *Song Celestial* as the best translation of his beloved *Gita* and laid bare that it inspired his lifelong devotion to its study in his search for truth. In *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* Gandhi revealed his thoughts on this matter:

Towards the end of my second year in England I came across two Theosophists, brothers, and both unmarried. They talked to me about the *Gita*. They were reading Sir Edwin Arnold's translation—*The Song Celestial*—and they invited me to read the original with them. I felt ashamed, as I had read the divine poem neither in Samskrit nor in Gujarati. I was constrained to tell them that I had not read the *Gita*, but that I would gladly read it with them, and that though my knowledge of Samskrit was meagre, still I hoped to be able to understand the original to the extent of telling where the translation failed to bring out the meaning. I began reading the *Gita* with them. The verses in the second chapter,

If one
Ponders on objects of the sense, there springs
Attraction: from attraction grows desire,

Desire flames to fierce passion, passion breeds
Recklessness; then the memory—all betrayed—
Lets noble purpose go, and saps the mind,
Till purpose, mind, and man are all undone

made a deep impression on my mind, and they still ring in my ears. The book struck me as one of priceless worth. The impression has ever since been growing on me with the result that I regard it today as the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth. It has afforded me invaluable help in my moments of gloom. I have read almost all the English translations of it, and I regard Sir Edwin Arnold's as the best. He has been faithful to the text, and yet it does not read like a translation. Though I read the *Gita* with these friends, I cannot pretend to have studied it then. It was only after some years that it became a book of daily reading.

England's George Augustus Jacob (1840-1918) dedicated himself to making Hindu thought more accessible to Western minds. In 1857, at age seventeen, he traveled to India and did not return to England until 1890. In India he became proficient in Urdu, Marathi and Sanskrit and earned renown as a Sanskrit scholar. He compiled an alphabetical index of the main words of sixty-six principal *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* in his *Concordance to the Principal Upanishads and Bhagavadgita (Upanishad Vakyakosha)*. He published it in 1891, after eight laborious years of faithful study and hand-wrote every syllable of Devanagari printed on its 1,083 pages.

Charles Johnston, a retired English civil servant in Bengal and a Sanskrit scholar, brought forth a translation in 1908 in Flushing, New York of the *Bhagavad Gita: "The Songs of the Master."* Johnston paid tribute in his lengthy General Introduction to the historical and eternal significance of the scripture:

The *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the noblest scriptures of India, one of the deepest scriptures of the world. . . . a symbolic scripture, with many meanings, containing many truths. . . . [that] forms the living heart of the Eastern wisdom.

AMERICA'S LOVE FOR THE *BHAGAVAD GITA*

America's poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) wrote in his *Essays*:

In all nations there are minds which incline to dwell in the conception of the fundamental Unity. The raptures of prayer and ecstasy of devotion lose all being in one Being. This tendency finds its highest expression in the religious writings of the East, and chiefly in the Indian Scriptures, in the Vedas, the Bhagavat Geeta and the Vishnu Purana. These writings contain little else than this idea, and they rise to pure and sublime strains in celebrating it.

In 1845, Emerson's *Journal* records that he was reading the *Bhagavad Gita* and Colebrooke's *Essays on the Vedas*. According to Swami Vivekananda, Emerson's greatest source of inspiration was "this book, the [*Bhagavad*] *Gita*. He went to see Carlyle, and Carlyle made him a present of the *Gita*; and that little book is responsible for the Concord [Transcendental] Movement. All the broad movements in America, in one way or other, are indebted to the Concord party." The only book Carlyle showed to Emerson during their first visit together, was an English translation of *The Bhagvat-Geeta* by Charles Wilkins. He told Emerson, "This is a most inspiring book; it has brought comfort and consolation in my life—I hope it will do the same to you. Read it." The *Gita* that Carlyle gave to Emerson is preserved in the Emerson archives in Boston.

Recent research shows that he had borrowed a copy of the *Gita* from his friend, James Elliot Cabot, before going to England and meeting Carlyle, and before getting a copy of his own, sent from London. Several years later he requested a second copy as well. When he wrote to his sister, Elizabeth Hoar on June 17, 1845, to tell her about the "the arrival in Concord of the "Bhagvat-Geeta," Emerson initially thought the *Gita* was a "much renowned book of Buddhism [Emerson's error], extracts from which I have often admired, but never before held . . . in my hands." He held on to Cabot's copy as long as he could: "I have tried to once or twice to send it home, but each time decided to strain a little your courteous professions that you could supply your occasional use of the book from the Library," he wrote to Cabot; he returned it on September 28, 1845, only after his copy from London had arrived from John Chapman, to whom he had written on May 30, requesting the Wilkins translation "at a reasonable price for I do not want it at *virtu* rates."

A catalogue of the books in Emerson's library, compiled by Walter Roy Harding, lists a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* that was published by Trubner in London in 1874 and which is inscribed by S. A. Dorsey of Louisiana. Rod W. Horton wrote in *Background of American Literary Thought* (1952) that, "Emerson's favourite of all Vedantic writings was the *Bhagavadgita* which he read and loaned to his friends until it was worn-out." According to the prominent writer, Franklin B. Sanborn, Emerson's copy of the *Gita* was more widely read than the one at Harvard University, because few Americans besides Emerson possessed it.

In a letter to Max Müller on August 4, 1873 he confessed:

I owed—my friend and I owed—a magnificent day to the *Bhagavat Geeta*. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spake to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us. Let us not now go back and apply a minute criticism to it, but cherish the venerable oracle." _

In 1868, he wrote to Emma Lazarus, "And of books, there is another which, when you have read, you shall sit for a while and then write a poem—[it is] the "Bhagvat-Geeta," but read it in Charles Wilkins's translation." _ On August 4, 1873 (nine years before his death) Emerson had also written to Müller that, "all my interest in the Aryan is . . . Wilkin's [sic] *Bhagavat Geeta*; Burnouf's *Bhagavat Purana*; and Wilson's *Vishnu Purana*—yes and a few other translations" and that he credited a work he had read in his youth for the spark of enthusiasm he received for the *Gita*: "I remember I owed my first taste for this fruit to Cousin's sketch (Victor Cousin's *Cours des Philosophies*), in his first lecture, of the dialogue between Krishna and Arjoon, and I still prize the first chapters of Bhagavat as wonderful." _

Emerson's profound harmony with the Indian scriptures is best illustrated in his poem "Brahma," (Brahman) derived from Kalidasa, and in numerous essays. According to his *Journals*, the theme for "Brahma," composed in 1856, came to him after he read the *Upanishads* in the *Bibliotheca Indica*. He was clearly influenced by the *Katha Upanishad* and by the second discourse of the *Bhagavad Gita*. His poem "Brahma" reached the highest level of American Vedantism. The higher truths of non-difference between the illusory opposites, the contrasting descriptions of the Absolute and their ultimate transcendence in the Unity of Brahman, are all reflected in Emerson's poem:

If the red slayer thinks he slays,
Or if the slain thinks he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near ;
Shadow and sunlight are the same ;
The vanished gods to me appear ;
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out ;
When me they fly, I am the wings ;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

The description of Unity in his poems "The Celestial Love" and "Wood-Notes" reflects the description of the immanence of the Supreme Being in the tenth discourse of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Emerson's *Essays* includes his comments on the role of Warren Hastings, in the dissemination of the *Bhagavad Gita* through Wilkins' translation:

By the law of contraries, I look for an irresistible taste for orientalism in Britain. For a self-conceited modish life, made up of trifles, clinging to a corporeal civilization, hating ideas, there is no remedy like the Oriental largeness. That astonishes and disconcerts English decorum. For once, there is thunder it never heard, light it never saw, and power which trifles with time and space. I am not surprised to find an Englishman like Warren Hastings, who had been struck with the grand style of thinking in the Indian writings, depreciating the prejudices of his countrymen while offering them a translation of the *Bhagavat [Gita]*.

The sun of Vedanta in Emerson found youthful reflection in Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). He lived in Emerson's household during his early twenties and was absorbed with the Indian literature he found in Emerson's study. In *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*, Romain Rolland offers some details of their mutual love for Vedanta and of Thoreau's significant influence on Emerson in this regard:

Thoreau was a great reader; and between 1837 and 1862, he was Emerson's neighbour. In July 1846, Emerson notes that Thoreau had been reading to him extracts from his *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Now this work (section, Monday) is an enthusiastic eulogy of the *Gita*, and of the great poems and philosophies of India. Thoreau suggested a "joint Bible" of the Asiatic scriptures, Chinese, Hindus, Persians, [and] Hebrews, "to carry to the ends of the earth." And he took for his motto, *Ex Oriente Lux* [Light from the East].

His lifelong inspiration from the *Bhagavad Gita* began when he read Charles Wilkins' English translation. A young English scholar, Thomas Cholmondeley, who visited Thoreau, later expressed his gratitude by sending him a crate of forty-four Oriental books that included a copy of the *Gita*, and the *Upanishads*. Thoreau's gift collection became one of the first Oriental libraries in America. "How much more admirable the *Bhagavat-Gita* than all the ruins of the East," he wrote in *Walden*. The first record of Thoreau's experience of Indian thought was in 1841. He wrote in his journal that he could not

read a sentence in the book of the Hindoos without being elevated as upon the table-land of the Ghauts. It has such a rhythm as the winds of the desert, such a tide as the Ganges, and seems as superior to criticism as the Himmaley Mounts. . . . The great thought is never found in mean dress, but is of virtue to ennoble any language.

Thoreau paid ardent homage to the *Gita* and the philosophy of India in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*:

Most books belong to the house and streets only, . . . But this . . . addresses what is deepest and most abiding in man. . . . Its truth speaks freshly to our experience. [the sentences of *Manu*] are a piece with depth and serenity and I am sure they will have a place and significance as long as there is a sky to test them by.

Pondering the *Gita* deeply, he ever favored it, for "the reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a higher or rarer region of thought than in *Bhagavad Geeta*." The force from

the *Upanishads* that Thoreau inherited emerged in *Walden* and inspired not only those who pioneered the British labor movement, but all who read it to this day. Meandering in northeastern Massachusetts, his reverent outer gaze fell upon Walden Pond. He alluded often to water—the metaphor is clear—the *Gita* wisdom teachings are the purifier of the mind: "By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent." He had found his sacred Ganges. Living by it and trying to "practice the yoga faithfully" during his two years at Walden, he wrote:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma, and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water-jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.

At Walden he put the *Bhagavad Gita* to the test, while proving to his generation that "money is not required to buy one necessary for the soul."

Amos Bronson Alcott (1799-1888), Louisa May Alcott's saintly and intellectually shrewd father, believed children were endowed with a purer intuition than adults and taught them through his method of innovative conversation. *The Journals of Bronson Alcott* record that after Thoreau died, Emerson brought him some Oriental books that Thoreau bequeathed to Alcott, including the *Bhagavad Gita*. Alcott wrote in 1846 that Wilkins' *Bhagvat-Geeta* was "superior to any of the other Oriental scriptures, the best of all reading for wise men." He was deeply moved by the last discourse of the *Gita* and hoped to transcribe it entirely into his *Journal*. Alcott and Emerson agreed that "the Oriental Scriptures . . . are to be given to the people along with the Hebrew books, as a means to freeing their faith from the Christian superstitions." Edwin Arnold had sent Alcott a gift of his *Light of Asia*, which he also recorded in his *Journal*. As dean of the Concord Summer School of Philosophy (which met fifty yards from his home at the Hillside Chapel) Alcott influenced the reading habits of Boston readers. Lectures on the *Bhagavad Gita* and Hindu philosophy were delivered there in 1882.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) inherited the transcendental spirit of Emerson and Thoreau and shared their concern for the common good without laying claim to any system of philosophy. Critics remain inconclusive about the extent to which the *Upanishads* and the *Gita* influenced the poet. Edward Carpenter, who found parallels between *Leaves of Grass* and the *Upanishads*, believed the influence of the Hindu scriptures was limited. Some evidence of their direct influence on Whitman exists, however. There is documentation of his English friend Thomas Dixon sending Cockburn Thomson's translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* to Whitman at Christmas time in 1875. Whitman

underlined parts of it and wrote in its margins. In *Reminiscences of Walt Whitman* (London, 1896) William S. Kennedy reported Emerson's remark to the prominent writer Franklin B. Sanborn that *Leaves of Grass* was a "mixture of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *New York Herald*." Whitman himself reminisced in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" (1889) that he read "the ancient Hindu poems before writing *Leaves of Grass*," but that [perhaps in deference to Thoreau's greater knowledge of the Orient] he claimed ignorance of "the Orientals" before asking Thoreau to tell him something about them.

On the first page of her unpublished doctoral dissertation, "*Leaves of Grass* and the *Bhagavad Gita*: A Comparative Study," Dorothy F. Mercer wrote: "Whitman's own prose reveals an immediate knowledge of Sanskrit literature acquired before the publication of *Leaves of Grass*." Malcolm Cowley and others express similar views that Whitman was absorbed in the Vedantic transcendental philosophy that had penetrated American literature in the 1840s and 1850s. In the introduction to Whitman's first edition of *Leaves of Grass* Cowley wrote that "most of Whitman's doctrines, though by no means all of them, belong to the mainstream of Indian philosophy." Whitman was also associated with intellectuals of the American Transcendental Movement who had a specific interest in Hinduism.

THE ROLE OF THE *AMERICAN ORIENTAL SOCIETY* AND THE *HARVARD ORIENTAL SERIES*

In 1842 a "crucial chapter in America's cultural history" was born when the *American Oriental Society* was formed in Boston. The first American Sanskritist, and "father of American Oriental studies," Edward Eldridge Salisbury (1814-1901), established an Oriental Library and the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. The work of eminent American Oriental scholars, including Salisbury, William Dwight Whitney (1827-1894), Josiah Royce (1855-1916), Edward Washburn Hopkins (1857-1932), and Charles Rockwell Lanman (1850-1941), who became the founding editor of the *Harvard Oriental Series*, proved their receptivity to the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. Hopkins' books containing information on the *Mahabharata* are still an authoritative resource.

Franklin Edgerton (1885-1963) the American linguist and educator, was a well known authority in Sanskrit, Hindu philosophy and culture, Indian art, economics, education and literature. Edgerton advocated the unity of the text of the *Bhagavad Gita*, calling it "India's favourite Bible." The French mystic Simone Weil also found in it a "Christian sound, put into the mouth of an incarnation of God." Edgerton's book, *The Bhagavad Gita*, appeared in two volumes in 1944; the *Harvard Oriental Society* also published it in 1949. Dale Riepe, in his *Philosophy of India and Its Impact on American Thought* wrote that Edgerton's second chapter of *The Bhagavad Gita* is "one of the most elegant accounts of the development of Hindu speculation" and gave equal praise to the third chapter, "The Upanishads and Later Hindu Thought."

Robert Ernest Hume (1877-1948) was the only American Sanskritist native to India (he was born in Bombay) and taught in India as well as at Oxford. His correct appreciation

of the *Upanishads* as the first written evidence of a philosophical system in India resulted in the publication of his *Thirteen Principal Upanishads* in 1921. It has been reprinted many times since then. With skillful imperative he included his estimation of the *Upanishads* in a lengthy introduction:

In the long history of man's endeavor to grasp the fundamental truths of being, the metaphysical treatises known as the *Upanishads* hold an honored place . . . they are replete with sublime conceptions and with intuitions of universal truth. . . . The *Upanishads* undoubtedly have great historical and comparative value, but they are also of great present-day importance. It is evident that the monism of the *Upanishads* has exerted and will continue to exert an influence on the monism of the West; for it contains certain elements, which penetrate deeply into the truths which every philosopher must reach in a thoroughly grounded explanation of experience.

"The earnestness of the search for the Truth is one of the more delightful and commendable features of the *Upanishads*," Hume wrote in a footnote to that work.

Hume's second revised edition of *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads* was published in 1931. A favorable, authoritative review by R. D. Ranade gave prominence to Hume's work. This edition included an appendix with a list of recurrent and parallel passages in the major *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The list, prepared by Hume's co-author George C. O. Haas, was printed earlier in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*.

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), whose respective novels, *The Near and the Far* and *Island*, explored the concepts of *moksha* and *nirvana*, was transformed by his association with Vedanta. He wrote the introduction to *Bhagavad Gita, the Song of God* (1944), translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Isherwood.

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) had some knowledge and regard for the *Upanishads*, which are the storehouse of the invaluable perennial treasures of human wisdom, and some of his poems reflect the message of the *Upanishads*. It is interesting to note Eliot's great esteem for the *Bhagavad Gita*. When he wrote his monograph on Dante (1974), he dared to place the sacred scripture next to *La Commedia Divina* of the Italian poet: "The *Bhagavad Gita* . . . is the next greatest philosophical poem to the *Divine Comedy*, within my experience."

The *Bhagavad Gita*'s revelations about the function of ego in human affairs deeply influenced Eliot. In his drama, "Murder in the Cathedral," the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, is horrified to discover the underlying motive impelling his actions. The otherwise noble and right deed of self-sacrifice for his church that he is contemplating, is actually guided by the desire of his ego to enjoy the fruits of glory that martyrdom would offer. Through Becket's speech at the height of his spiritual crisis, Eliot proved his understanding of *nishkama karma* as Shri Ramakrishna explained it:

To do the right deed for the wrong reason.
Ambition comes behind and unobservable. Sin grows with doing good.

For those who serve the greater cause may make the cause serve them, still doing right; and striving with political men may make that cause political, not by what they do but by what they are.

RUSSIA'S INTEREST IN THE *BHAGAVAD GITA*

The *Bhagavad Gita* was introduced in 1787 by its first Russian translation by N. I. Norikov, whose work relied on Charles Wilkins' English version. Count Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy (1828-1910), the mystic literary voice of Russia, was also a herald of Indian thought. He was greatly influenced by the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Tamil *Tirukkural* and the modern Indian spiritual literature of his time. Milan Markovitch, author of *Tolstoi et Gandhi*, wrote that "there is not one of Tolstoy's works written after this period" of his life referred to in the *Confessions* "which is not inspired, in part, by Hindu thought . . . His was a Christianity underpinned by the great Hindu doctrines." He was familiar with Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East* and with Swami Vivekananda's writings, which left a profound impression upon his mind and heart.

THE *BHAGAVAD GITA*: A WORLD SCRIPTURE

This magnificent poem, with its dramatic background, its psychologically convincing arguments, its universality and rationality, has been appreciated by the enlightened minds of the West. It is regarded by westerners as a "World Scripture." Mascaro, a Spanish scholar and admirer of the *Upanishads*, said, "If Beethoven could give us in music the spirit of the *Bhagavad Gita*, what a wonderful symphony we should hear."

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