INTRODUCTION

[To South Asia Press Edition of the First English Translation (in 1785) of *The Bhagavad Gita* by Charles Wilkins, New Delhi, 2018. ISBN 13:978-81-936104-3-5; ISBN 10:8193610431, Pp.xxix-liii]

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(The roman figures in brackets refer to those in the published book.)

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The publication of the first direct translation by Sir Charles Wilkins (1750-1833) of the Bhagavad-Gita from the original Sanskrit into English in 1785 in London was a landmark in its 'career'. It was also a landmark in the history of cultural interactions between the East and the West and left a significant impact as we shall just see. The interest in republishing this book after nearly two-and-half centuries by the South Asia Press owes as much to the historical significance of this translation - it was a trend-setter, as to the accelerating interest in and influence of the Gita itself.

Wilkins' translation of the Gita, however, was not an isolated event. It needs to be seen in a proper perspective. The first part of the Introduction here presents this perspective or the background to it, which includes the significance of the Gita itself which attracted the Western mind and made it relevant for the modern times as well. The second part of the Introduction deals with the historical significance and impact of the publication of Wilkins' translation. The third and final part presents some comments on the text of his translation, and states the principle in terms of which this republication was designed. Needless to say that these three parts are interrelated, and are not strict watertight compartments.

I may also add that in writing this Introduction, my having [P.xxx >] worked recently on the book, *The Bhagavad-Gita for the Modern Reader: History, Interpretations and Philosophy,* published by Routledge was very helpful (Nadkarni 2017). Several ideas and points presented here owe to this fact. A little overlap between this Introduction and chapter 3 of the book was thus inevitable. Nevertheless, I have used some new sources for this Introduction which any way is different in focus from my earlier book.

The Background

While we should certainly appreciate the significance of Wilkins' translation, we should also avoid the tendency to exaggerate. It was not the first translation of the Gita into a non-Indian language. That credit probably belongs to Abul Fazl, who was an eminent scholar and historian in Emperor Akbar's court, at whose instance and encouragement, the Gita was translated into Persian in the 16th Century. Interestingly, history repeated itself in the Gita's case. The person corresponding to Akbar in the 18th century was Warren Hastings who was the first Governor General of India from 1773 to 1785 (though of course the latter's regime was much more limited). It was Warren Hastings who encouraged Charles Wilkins to translate

the Gita into English, when he was an employee of the East India Company. But even much before this, there was a Latin translation by an Italian Jesuit Missionary, Fransisco Benci in the 16th century, which was retranslated into Polish by Stanislaw Grochowski in 1611 (Brockington 2002:100). From the Latin translation, there were a few translations into English as well before Wilkin's translation appeared. But they did not prove to be very popular. Wilkins' was the first direct translation from Sanskrit to English , and was taken to be more authentic, and also caught the imagination of contemporary Western intellectuals more than the earlier translations.

There is a loose talk in some circles that the standing of [p.xxxi >] the Gita as a sacred text of Hinduism similar to the Bible in Christianity and the Quran in Islam, was an invention of the West, particularly the Orientalists and was a direct outcome of the publication of Wilkins' translation of it. The Semitic religions, it is alleged, were unaccustomed to the idea of multiplicity of sacred texts which characterised Hinduism, and therefore invented the Gita as the sacred text of the Hindus. In other words, it was claimed that the importance given to the Gita was a creation of the West, which in turn owed to Wilkins, and was a convenient development for the English-reading Hindus who desired a similar status for Hinduism as for Christianity in spite of the British domain in India. Such a stand is not based on historical facts, and amounts to unduly exaggerating the role of Wilkins' translation. In any case, we do not have to convert Sir Charles Wilkins into an *avatar* of Lord Krishna to appreciate the importance of his translation.

The tradition in Hinduism has always recognised the Vedas together with the Upanishads as its most sacred texts, treated as the *Shruti,* in contrast to other texts which are secondary in status treated as the *Smriti.* The great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* come under the latter category, along with the *Puranas* which came much later to take the religion to the masses. The *Bhagavad-Gita* (the Gita in brief) which comes in the *Bheeshma-Parva* of the Mahabharata, is therefore a *Smriti,* a secondary sacred text. Nevertheless, its reputation as one of the most authentic statements of the essence of the Upanishads gave it a special status on par with the Upanishads. The *Brahmasutras* were also treated as containing the essence of Upanishadic philosophy, a text which is almost as ancient as the Gita. The three together, the Upanishads, the Gita and the Brahmasutras, had an honoured place in tradition, known as the *Prasthanatriyee.* Any traditional Hindu Acharya (great teacher) who wanted to expound on the *Sanatana Dharma* or Hinduism had to write the *Bhashyas* or commentaries on each [p. xxxii >] of these three. It is only then that such a person acquired the status of a great Acharya.

The first of these well-known Acharyas was Shankara who lived in the 8th century C E (A D). There were a few commentators particularly on the Gita even before Shankara, such as Boudhaayana, but their works are no longer available unfortunately. Shankara was followed by Bhaskara a century after, Abhinavagupta in the 10th-11th century, Ramanuja in the 11th century, Nimbarka in the 12th, Madhva and Jnaneshwar in the 13th century, and several others subsequently like Vallabha, Madhusudana Saraswati, Raghavendra Tirtha, Chaitanya and more, all of whom have left commentaries on the Gita. Of these the most well known are Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva in the Sanskritic tradition and Jnaneshwara in the

vernacular (Marathi). What is noteworthy here is that the tradition of commentaries had continued, though with breaks, almost till the 17th century. Jnaneshwar's *Jnaneshwari,* a detailed rendering of the Gita in contemporary Marathi of the people, inspired translations into other Indian regional languages. For example, Akho and Narahari presented a rendering of the Gita in Gujarati in the 17th century, and Nagarasa in Kannada in the 19th century. Thus the Gita did not remain confined to Sanskrit scholars, but was taken to people at large, thanks to the trend started by Jnaneshwar. His *Jnaneshwari* had been taken up by people for daily recitation in Maharashtra since long.

The greater popularity of the Gita even in the tradition of Hinduism over that of other sacred books like the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and the *Brahmasutras* was already established before Charles Wilkins had come on the scene. It was precisely the reason for Warren Hastings and Charles Wilkins why they took so much interest in the Gita. Stories from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Panchatantra* and the *Hitopadesha* were of course even more popular as a source of moral teaching, and remain so even now. There was really no {p. xxxiii >] competition as such for attention among the sacred books. I have observed earlier in my book on the Bhagavad-Gita (in the 1st section of the 1st chapter) referred above that 'the scriptures of Hinduism are more like a common pool multi-lingual library where you pick and choose a certain book which you find particularly useful and inspiring, without insisting that all other books be destroyed or condemned, nor requiring that all the books must be read equally thoroughly to qualify access to the library. What is more it is not a sacrilege to add to the library.' (Nadkarni 2017: 2).

Nevertheless, the eminence of the Gita has only been increasing in spite of this multiplicity. The reasons are simple. It is a formidable challenge to anyone to go through all the four Vedas, 108 Upanishads, and other sacred texts in one's life time. The Gita, however, provided the essence of all the sacred texts in lucid and relatively easy to understand Sanskrit in compact 700 verses only. The text was easy to recite and even memorise, at a convenient rate of a few *Shlokas* (verses) daily, and derive comfort and guidance. The *Gita-Dhyanam* (Meditating on the Gita), which is ritually recited before the Gita, picturesquely states in its 4th verse that all the Upanishads are like cows, and Shri Krishna – the son of a cowherd – milked them for the benefit of people having a pure mind, with Arjuna being the calf, and the nectar of the Gita is the milk. This verse explains why the Gita was accepted as the most popular sacred text.

There were other strong reasons too for this acceptance. The Gita's God is not the abstract Brahman (which was the case with the Upanishads), but a personal God who loves his devotees and also seeks their love. Krishna tells Arjuna, 'Definitely dear you are to me' (18.64), and further in the next verse, 'I promise, beloved you are to me!' It is as if the Lord invites his devotees to place themselves in the position of Arjuna and enjoy His unbounded love and protection. Arjuna [p. xxxiv >] is only an exemplar of a devotee, who is also a friend treated with love. It is no surprise that popularity of the Gita grew spontaneously without anyone imposing it. For quite a few, the Gita became an icon by itself, to be worshipped without having to understand it. But many such people end up trying to study and understand it, and benefit from its guidance.

The doors of the Gita and its religion are open to all – whether they be rich or poor, man or woman, young and old, and irrespective of caste. Its religion is simple, not requiring any costly rituals. What is more it offers choices of path to God – selfless service, devotion, or pursuit of knowledge or truth, though its emphasis appears to be on work. One can also combine them all, as per one's disposition and ability. The Gita avoids the material elitism of the Vedas and the spiritual elitism of the Upanishads, and brings religion within the reach of a common man. It is non-sectarian in approach. Krishna says, 'I whatever way people try to reach me, I accept and reward them; O Partha (Arjuna), people can follow the path to me from all sides' (4.11). This assurance is repeated again: 'Whatever form devotees choose to worship with dedication and faith (*Shraddha*), I make that Shraddha steady' (7.21). Though there is only one God as per the Gita, it says no where that Krishna alone is the true God and other gods are false. It simply says that whichever God or whatever form of God you worship, it goes to the One and the same God (9.23). Though the roots of this belief is in the Vedas and the Upanishads themselves, the credit for popularising it and making it the basic tenet of Hinduism goes to the Gita.

What is further great about the Gita is that it does not intend to impose its views as God-given. After teaching his message, Krishna tells Arjuna at the end to critically reflect on what all was told to him, and then only do what he is willing to accept (18.63). The Gita provides guidance, but its acceptance [p.xxxv >] is left to the reasoning and will of the seeker. It also hints that shedding egoism and prejudices, and controlling weaknesses like anger and lust, help the seeker to find the correct path.

It is these strengths of the Gita which attracted the Western thinkers too. If The Gita had not already acquired a pre-eminence among the Hindu sacred texts by that time, Hastings would not have taken so much interest in it. It was as if the Gita was already poised for a long jump across the space by the time Charles Wilkins arrived. In the language of the Gita, Wilkins was a *nimitta-matram,* - only an excuse or an instrument for this long jump over the Globe. It is remarkable that this was achieved not through the aggressive strength of the sword, but through the power of the Gita's own appeal. It was not the case of the victor imposing his sacred text on the vanquished, as usually happens, but the victor taking the religious text of the subjected people to his own community. What is noteworthy here is not merely the greatness of the Gita alone, but also the liberal outlook and breadth of vision of Warren Hastings and Charles Wilkins.

Sir Charles Wilkins is said to have come from a poor family and could not have proper education. But the boy was ambitious and enterprising and had the ability to learn on his own. At the age of twenty, he came to India in search of brighter prospects and joined the Junior Civil Service of the East India Company in 1770. After a short stay at Calcutta (Kolkata now), he was posted at Malda as an Assistant to the Superintendent of the Company's Factory. In his leisure hours, he started learning Persian and Bengali. He had a remarkable aptitude for learning new languages. He came in touch with Nathaniel Brassey Halhed who had learnt Sanskrit and induced Wilkins too to study it. Halhed appreciated his diverse talents and commended that Wilkins was a metallurgist, engraver, founder, and printer of types of alphabets so diverse as Persian and Bengali. His Persian and Bengali types were considered as

typographical masterpieces [p. xxxvi >] by Louis Matthieu Langles, a contemporary specialist on India. True to this characterisation, Wilkins started a printing press at Hooghly, probably under the auspices of the East India Company, which became the official Press of the Company. It was at this press that Halhed's *Bengali Grammar* was printed. The laws and regulations of the East India Company were also printed in Persian at this press. His talents and work attracted the attention of Warren Hastings, the Governor-General of India. Hastings had a great interest in Sanskrit and its literature, and came to know of Wilkins' own interest in the language. Hastings already had working contacts with the Sanskrit Pundits of Benares (Varanasi), a traditional seat of Sanskrit learning, and with their help had prepared a *Digest of Hindu Laws,* and got it published in London. He induced Wilkins to stay at Benares for some time and deepen his knowledge of Sanskrit and its literature. Hastings had a fascination for the Gita, which cast a spell on Wilkins too. It was at Benares or the present Varanasi (Benaris as it was then called by the Company) that in consultation with the Pundits there, Charles Wilkins directly translated the Gita into English. Hastings liked it so much that he got it published at London without loss of time in 1785. In his letter to a Director of the East India Company in which he recommended to the Company to publish the Gita, he expressed his admiration for the Gita clearly (see the final part of this introduction below). Wilkins' own attitude to the Gita was *not* one of a detached scientist examining a lab specimen, but that of an admirer. He loved and respected it, and is said to have compared it to the Gospel of St. John of the New Testament (Tathagatananda: 4).

An environment of interest in Oriental Studies had already been created in England, thanks to a few scholars who encouraged the new discipline. The publication in 1768 of *History of Hindostan* by Alexander Dow prefaced with scholarly essays on India's history and culture, was a landmark [p.xxxvii >] development in this regard. Sir William Jones also became prominent as an Indologist through his scholarly publications. He had a great interest in India and its literature, particularly in Sanskrit. His coming to India in 1783 and joining the Supreme Court at Calcutta as a Judge was greatly welcomed by those interested in Oriental Studies here, including Hastings and Wilkins. Soon, after his arrival, he got in touch with the Sanskrit pundits at Benares to deepen his knowledge of Sanskrit literature and set about translating some of the Sanskrit works. He established Asiatic Society in 1784 at Calcutta on the lines of Royal Society at London. In this task, Jones had the active encouragement of Hastings and supportive help from Wilkins. Wilkins too contributed to the success of the Asiatic Society after it was started. Even before his translation of the Gita was published, Wilkins had deciphered the inscription on a copper plate found in Bihar belonging to the 10th century when King Bigrahapala of the Pala dynasty ruled Bengal and Bihar. The translations of this and other stone inscriptions deciphered by Wilkins were published in the Journal of Asiatic Society. Wilkins thus contributed to the reconstruction of the history of the Pala period.

Wilkins sailed back to England in 1786 due to indifferent health, but continued his work on oriental studies there. In 1787, he translated the *Hitopadesha* of Vishnu-Sharma, a book of fables with moral instructions. His work gained recognition, and when a Library was founded at the India House in the initial years of the 19th century, Wilkins was appointed as its first Librarian. A special provision was made in the library for the custody and conservation of oriental manuscripts and their study. The Socie'te' Asiatique de Paris was founded in 1821

and Wilkins became one of its associates. Wilkins played a prominent supportive role in the founding of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, at London in 1823, initiated by Henry Thomas Colebrooke, an Indologist [p. xxxviii >] of repute. Incidentally, Colebrooke was also in India, first as a professor Sanskrit and Hindu Law at the College of Fort William in 1801 and later as the president of the Calcutta Court in 1805. Colebrooke authored a much acclaimed book on the Religion and Philosophy of the Hindus. He also prompted the publication of Wilkins' translation in India for the first time, which was printed at the Baburam Press at Kidderpore, Calcutta, in 1808-09 (Desai 2014:10).

Charles Wilkins was greatly instrumental in spreading the popularity of the Gita throughout Europe and even in USA. His work won wide recognition in his own lifetime. Several organisations honoured him. Doctorate of Civil Law was conferred upon him in 1805 by Oxford University, and he was knighted in 1833. The point to note is that Charles Wilkins played an important role both on his own and also in collaboration with others in developing the discipline of Indology and deepening the interest of the West in India, which greatly contributed to its respect as a great civilization at least in the past.[1]

The Impact

The publication of Wilkins' Gita made an impact both in Europe and America almost immediately. More than others before, Wilkins' translation stimulated translations of the Gita into other European languages. In 1787, Abbe' Parraud retranslated Wilkin's English version into French. A Russian translation appeared a year further, and a German in 1802 (Brockington 2002: 103). Wilkins' translation also induced quite a few scholars to study Sanskrit themselves. The German philosopher and the first German Sanskritist, Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829), translated extracts from the Gita directly from Sanskrit into German in 1808, while another Schlegel from Germany – Wilhelm von, translated it in Latin in 1823, giving along with it the original in Devanagari script. This [p. xxxix >] Latin translation was considered to be not only accurate but also of high literary quality (ibid:104). Jean-Denis Lanjuinais translated the Gita directly from Sanskrit into French in 1832 (Tathagatananda, p.5). Further translations appeared: French in 1846, Greek in 1848, Italian in 1859, Dutch in 1861 (not the full Gita but selected parts), and Czeck in 1877 (Brockington 2002: 104-5). Interestingly, within each language, there were several further translations, particularly in English, French and German.

The reception given to the Gita was particularly enthusiastic in Germany. Johan Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) had been portraying India as the cradle of civilisation. He translated portions of Wilkins' Gita into German along with two other Indic texts in 1792. He declared the Gita to be a great unitary premise of pantheism: One in all, and all into One. He saw it as a theological principle with strong ethical implications. Friedrich von Schlegel, already referred above, who was a poet, philosopher, philologist, Indologist, and a literary critic, was also deeply interested in India and pioneered Indo-European studies on comparative linguistics, and showed grammatical connection between Sanskrit and Indo-European languages. Schlegel was particularly interested in the Gita's *Jnaanayoga,* the intellectual concept of Godhead, and 'the human quest to find union with the Divine'. If India was the birthplace of human civilisation, the Gita came to be regarded as the earliest

expression of the original wisdom with ideas that would remain relevant for centuries to come. (Davis 2015: 84-87, 90). Friedrich Schlegel's contemporary, Wilhelm von Schlegel did not share the former's 'romanticist' enthusiasm for the Gita but preferred its critical study, identifying 'good parts' that cohere with Christian doctrines and dismissing the remaining as myth or superstition (ibid: 92). Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) also studied the Gita and gave two lectures on it in Berlin in 1825 and 1826 respectively, which [p. xl >] were subsequently published. He proclaimed the Gita as 'the most beautiful, presumably the only philosophical poem of all known literatures' (as quoted by Davis 2015: 101).

Copies of Wilkins' translation crossed the Atlantic and stimulated the curiosity of many in America and impressed them. For the East India Company which bore the expenses of the publication, it proved to be a good investment well beyond its expectations. The influence of the Gita extended beyond Sanskritists and Indologists and covered other intellectuals too. Several English poets and thinkers were influenced by the Gita as translated by Wilkins – like Robert Southey, William Blake, Wordsworth, Thomas Carlyle and Coleridge in Britain, and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau in America (Brockington 2002:102). When Emerson was on a visit to Britain, he met Carlyle there, and Carlyle is reported to have presented a copy of Wilkins' translation of the Gita then with these words: '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.' (Tathagatananda, pp.5-6). Emerson did read it, and was greatly impressed. It is said that it inspired him to become Transcendentalist and revive that movement. Apart from the thought and works of the famous German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the Transcendentalism as a movement was influenced by the Gita and the Upanishads. Transcendentalists believed in the power and the vast potential of the individual human, and emphasised the inner spiritual strength of the human. While not opposed to the empiricism of science, they were opposed to both to dry intellectualism and traditional religious thought in Europe and America. Emerson believed that man can rise above the material world and discover a sense of transcendental spirituality. The Transcendentalist Movement was also known as the Concord Movement, since it was at Concord that several leading thinkers met, and launched the movement in America. Swami Vivekananda has remarked: [p. xli >] 'If you want to know the source of Emerson's inspiration, it is this book, the Gita. He went to see Carlyle and Carlyle made him a present of the Gita; that little book is responsible for the Concord Movement. All the broad movements in America, in one way or the other, are indebted to the Concord party.' [2]

Thoreau (1817-62) was a leading American poet, philosopher, Transcendentalist, and environmentalist, whose work on Civil Disobedience was to influence Mahatma Gandhi later. Thoreau saw in the Gita a powerful advocacy of the discipline of a *Muni* (sage), 'preferring the cultivation of wisdom through contemplation but not excluding action in the concentration on knowledge', and believed that the Gita epitomized the best of Eastern spirituality and that the West could learn much from the text (Robinson 2013: 104). Thoreau observed further that 'the New Testament is remarkable for its pure morality; the best of the Hindoo scripture [the Gita] for its pure intellectuality' (ibid: 105), and hinted that they were thus complementary to each other rather than rivals. Elsewhere, however, Thoreau does appreciate 'the moral grandeur and sublimity' of the Gita (ibid: 107). Robinson observes that

'the Bhagavad-Gita was hailed [by Thoreau] as an important work worthy of the widest possible readership, while its impact on his own ideas was [also] considerable' (ibid: 107). Both T S Eliot and E M Foster were fascinated particularly by the Gita's message of disinterested action which was reflected in some of their works (ibid: 145).

The influence of Wilkins' Gita as a trend- setter did not stop here. Though Sir Monier Monier-Williams (1819-99) did not need Wilkins' translation to understand the Gita as he was well-versed in Sanskrit himself, he was a part of the trend started by Wilkins and William Jones. Monier-Williams was a Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University and is known for his Sanskrit-to-English and English-to-Sanskrit Dictionaries which are considered as authoritative. He was an admirer [p.xlii >] of the Gita. In his book, *Indian Wisdom,* which shows his familiarity with major Hindu texts, he has remarked that the Gita is 'one of the most interesting and popular works in the whole range of Sanskrit literature, and represents the 'Eclectic school of Indian philosophy' (2001: 145). He says further, that the author of the Gita, 'finding no rest for his spirit in any one system of philosophy, … was led to make a selection … so as to construct a composite theory of his own'. He adds that this was done with 'great perspicuity and beauty of language' (ibid: 147). Several others followed the trend started by Wilkins, a prominent translation of of the Gita into English verse being that by Sir Edwin Arnold – *The Song Celestial* – published in 1885, exactly a hundred years after Wilkin's translation. Arnold's is not a literal translation; instead it tries to bring out in verse form the essence, dignity and grace of the original which also is in verse. It is said that Arnold aimed at bringing the original closer to the readers, rather than bringing the reader to the original, as Goethe had suggested as a principle to be followed while translating (Sinha 2010: 307). It was to Arnold's translation, rather trans-creation, that Mahatma Gandhi was first introduced, before he read the original.

It is interesting that while there is no record of any impact of the earliest cross-cultural translation by Abul Fazl, and the Latin and Polish translations of the Gita which preceded Wilkin's translation had hardly created many ripples, Wilkins' translation proved to be much more influential. Several factors had co-acted together for this to happen. One was that it was a direct translation from Sanskrit; the second was that it was in English, spoken and understood by more people in Britain and America; the third was the intrinsic quality of the translation itself which brought out the philosophical depth and activist message of the Gita; and, equally, importantly, an open-minded and appreciative attitude about ancient Indian literature, [p.xliii >] particularly in Sanskrit, had by then been created resulting from what came to be called as Oriental Studies. Several scholars only some of whom are mentioned above were responsible for this, like Alexander Dow, scholar-statesman Warren Hastings, Sir William Jones, Colebrooke, and Charles Wilkins himself. Edward Said has made a bad word of Orientalism (1994, first published 1979), but most of these scholars even if conscious of the assumed superiority of their race, and even if contemptuous of the then prevalent practice of Hinduism, were genuinely appreciative of at least the past heritage of India if not its contemporary status.

However, there were also voices criticism and even opposition, not necessarily to Wilkins' translation but more to the praise which the Gita received. The renowned German

philosopher Hegel (1770-1831) argued that Yoga required withdrawal from the world leading to a passive immersion into the Brahman. Brahman is an inert conception, in contrast with the Christian God who engages in the world process. According to him the introverted and static aspirations of Hinduism articulated in the Gita consigned India to a backward status. (Davis 2015: 102-4). Hegel, however, completely ignored the activist and intervening concept of God very much evident in the Gita, particularly in the concept of Avatar, and also the Gita's advocacy of selfless work in the world.

There were two younger contemporaries of Warren Hastings, evangelical Christian Charles Grant (1746-1823), and utilitarian James Mill (1773-1836), both of whom were opposed to Hastings' orientalist enthusiasm for India and Sanskrit texts including the Gita. For both of them, India was scarcely above savage level, not because of the racial difference but due to 'political and cultural despotism' from which India suffered. Only a profound transformation of society could save India. While Grant would assign a great role for Christian missionaries in this transformation, Mill would vouch for the [p.xiv >] secular process of modernisation. (Davis 2015: 94-95). Mill points out at the account of Krishna's all-encompassing form in the Gita, and observes that this is a 'monstrous exhibition' of a guilty cosmology. In Mill's view, yogis are required to renounce all moral duties to work in the world. Davis rightly observes that Mills failed to notice that the Gita on the contrary requires yogis to work in the world as per dharma which includes moral duties and affection (Ibid: 99). The famous 'Minute on Education' of 1835 by Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) was far more damaging. He did not say anything directly on the Gita as such but his remark in the Minute did much to cool the enthusiasm for the study of the oriental heritage. He observed that 'a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole whole native literature of India and Arabia.' As Mishka Sinha has observed that after this Minute 'the ascendancy of evangelical groups and utilitarian ideas, and the influence of James Mill, shaped the temper of British intellectual attitudes to India' (Sinha 2010: 302). However, scholarly interest in Sanskrit studies continued in the rest of Europe. Friedrich Max Muller (1823-1900) did much to further strengthen interest in India and the East, through his translation of the Vedas and publication of the series of volumes under '*Sacred Books of the East'.* He assigned the translation of the Gita under the series to an Indian scholar, K T Telang, which was published in 1882. Though the British policy on education was shaped by Macaulay, Sanskrit studies continued not only independently but also as a part of the English education system. The influence of Sanskrit in India declined more after its Independence than during the British regime.

We cannot of course attribute all the abundance of the translations of the Gita that have come after Wilkins to his translation alone. In fact the number of translations accelerated during the 19th century, rather than immediately after Wilkins' [p. xlv>] translation. But even then his influence as a trendsetter cannot be denied. The fact that it was a part of he environment of curiosity and interest in India's ancient heritage, boosted the role of Wilkins' translation. But it is not just in the number of translations that his influence is to be counted. His translation helped in seeing the Gita in a fresh light, which was different from the doctrinal interpretation in terms of Advaita, Vishshtadvaita, and Dvaita of the past. Fresh questions were raised, the battle background of the Gita was seen as allegory, and activist

message of the Gita began to be increasingly emphasised. Though these new interpretations and emphases came from eminent Indian interpreters themselves like Gandhi and Tilak (for details see Nadkarni 2017) , they must have been stimulated by the criticisms received from Western critics of the Gita and of Hinduism like Hegel and James Mill. They in turn were provoked by the Orientalist enthusiasm for the sacred books of the East. And Wilkins was one of the founders and inspirers of Orientalism in a good sense of the word.

The Translation

The direct translation of the Gita by Sir Charles Wilkins is presented below as it was originally published, along with the original preliminaries which include the 'Advertisement' (which is really an announcement or a note by the publisher to the effect that it has been published under the authorisation by the Court of Directors of the East India Company and as desired by the Governor General of India), a letter from Warren Hastings – the Governor General of India – to Nathaniel Smith, a Director of the East India Company and also an M P (a Member of the House of Commons), a letter from Wilkins to Hastings, and the Translator's Preface, along with Notes at the end as in the original. Since Wilkins' Translation is of great historical significance in the 'career' of the Gita, [p. xlvi >] these Preliminaries and Notes are also retained. The old spelling of Sanskrit words transliterated into English have also been retained as in the original, though they may look quaint now. The principle followed in the republication is that nothing should be done to damage the historical interest involved. The title of the original is a mouthful and may look amusing particularly because of these spellings: '*The Bhagavat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon; in Eighteen Lectures; with Notes.* Incidentally, there is no attempt here to translate 'Bhagavat-Geeta' as 'Divine Song' or 'Song Celestial' as Arnold did a century later. There is a change only in two respects in the republication of the translation: in the types used and in pagination. The old types could be confusing now.

Hastings' letter to Nathaniel Smith intends to recommend the publication and explain why it was justified. It is very elaborate and persuasive though also somewhat apologetic. He briefly gives the story background of the Geeta (using the spelling here as in Wilkins translation) as an extract from the Mahabharata, and admits that the Western readers may find many passages in the translation as obscure, even redundant, and in general unsuited to their taste. An idea like separating or withdrawing the mind from the senses may be even incomprehensible to the Western mind. But he assures that there are persons in India who have practiced it. He also points to difficulties of a cross-cultural translation, whereby ideas of one culture cannot easily be captured by expressions of another culture. Admitting all these qualifications, Hastings says that still, 'I hesitate not to pronounce the Geeta a performance of great originality; of a sublimity of expression, reasoning, and diction, almost unequalled; and a 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.' [p.xlvii >] (p. lx of the text below). Hastings says that the author of the Geeta 'soars far beyond all competitors in this species of composition.' (p. lx).

He even tries to defend the Geeta against possible objections: 'Even the frequent recurrence of the same sentiment, in a variety of dress, may have been owing to the same

consideration of the extreme intricacy of the subject, and consequent necessity of trying different kinds of exemplification and argument, to impress it with due conviction on the understanding. Yet I believe it will appear, to an attentive reader, neither deficient in method, nor in perspicuity.'(pp. lx-lxi).

Hastings then explains why a venture like this has to be supported by the East India Company and its servants. Such studies 'diffuse a generosity of sentiment', and that 'it is on the virtue, not the ability of their servants, that the Company must rely for the permanency of their dominion' (p. lxii). In other words, such a venture will win over the hearts of the subjects. 'It attracts and conciliates distant affections; it lessens the weight of the chain by which the natives are held in subjection; and it imprints on the hearts of our own countrymen the sense and obligation of benevolence.'(p. lxii). Hastings is not comfortable with the prevalent opinion among his countrymen about the Indians, and wants that they be properly understood and not considered as 'scarce elevated above the degree of savage life'. Knowledge of instances of works such as the Geeta by them should help understanding them better. Such works, and he meant particularly the Geeta, he said 'will survive when the British dominion in India shall have long ceased to exist, and when the sources which it once yielded of wealth and power are lost to remembrance' (p. lxiii). This was indeed a glowing and sincere tribute to the Gita and expresses also the regard with which he viewed India.

In the Translator's Preface, Wilkins remarks: 'The Brahmans esteem this work to contain all the grand mysteries [p. xlviii >] of their religion', which explains why it is venerated highly. He also tries to give a summary view of the Gita in these words: 'It seems as if the principal design of these dialogues was to unite all the prevailing modes of worship of those days; and by setting up the doctrines of the unity of Godhead, in opposition to idolatrous sacrifices, and the worship of images, to undermine the tenets inculcated by the *Veds*; for although the author dared not make a direct attack, either upon the prevailing prejudices of the people or the divine authority of the ancient books; … his design was to bring about the downfall of Polytheism; or at least to induce men to believe God present in every image before which they bent, and the object of all their ceremonies and sacrifices' (p. lxx). The Gita does undermine rituals, but it does not mean that it undermines all the *Vedas* or is opposed to them wholesale. It reinterprets the Vedic idea of *Yajna* as sacrifice in the sense of giving up something or an offering, including helping others through charity or work, and not in the sense of a ritual sacrifice. Wilkins had not studied the Vedas and the Upanishads as he himself has admitted, and could not have been in an position to authoritatively compare the Gita with them. Wilkins, however, is dismayed that though the learned Brahmans believed in one God, they at the same time performed all rituals as per Vedic rites, and explains that 'they do this probably more for the support of their own consequence, which could arise from the great ignorance of the people, than in compliance with the dictates of Kreeshna: indeed, this ignorance, and these ceremonies, are as much the bread of the Brahmans, as the superstition of the vulgar is the support of the priesthood in many countries' (p. lxx). Clearly, while Wilkins is impressed with the wisdom of the Gita, he is uncomfortable with the fact that its teachings are not followed in practice.

The Notes at the end are mainly to clarify words and ideas further for his Western audience than to give any comments [p. xlix >] on his own. Wilkins is aware that 'small as the work [the Geeta] may appear, it has had more comments than the Revelations' (p. lxxi). He feels that such comments (or commentaries) have obscured the original which they were intended to elucidate, but he would avoid them and leave difficult passages 'for the exercise of readers' own judgement' (p. 20). He, therefore, avoids taking any stand on such controversies as *Advaita, Vishshtadvaita* and *Dvaita,* and tries to stick to the original and give a faithful translation as per his best understanding.

Nevertheless, he hazards a guess about the time of the composition of the Gita from internal evidence. In the ninth chapter of the Gita (in the 17th verse), Krishna mentions only the first three Vedas – *Rik, Yajur* and *Sama*, and not the fourth *Atharva* or *Atharvana.* On this basis, Wilkins feels that the Gita must have been composed before the composition of the last Veda. (p. lxxi). He remarks that when he mentioned it to the '*Pandeet'* who was consulted in translation, he seemed astonished, and that this observation had 'escaped all the commentators' (p. lxxii).

There is no mention anywhere in Wilkins' Preface or in his letter to Hastings or in Hastings' letter to Nathaniel Smith about the name of Sanskrit Pundit or Pundits of 'Benaris' consulted, nor any word of thanks to them. Probably they may have been paid something, and that was considered more than enough. There is, however, a self-congratulatory mention of the initial resistance of the Pundits in parting with the 'mysteries' of their religion or of the Gita which was overcome eventually thanks to the 'liberal treatment' and 'personal attention' given to them by an 'auspicious' administration the benefits of which they had enjoyed (p. lxix).

Being addressed to his Western audience, Wilkins did not feel the necessity of providing an English transliteration of the original Sanskrit verses, nor any word-by-word meaning – practice which came into vogue later in translations meant for [p. l >] Hindu or Sanskrit-interested audience. Though he gives a verse-by-verse translation actually, there is no mention of the serial numbers of the verses, and provides translation in continuity. This must have been done to facilitate easy reading without any disruption. However, each chapter is organised in to paragraphs.

On the whole, Wilkin's translation is fairly accurate and lucid, even in the case of verses that are relatively difficult. For example, the first half of the 16th verse in the second chapter of the Gita (*Naasato vidyate bhaavo naabhaavo vidyate satah*) is translated by Wilkins as: 'A thing imaginary hath no existence, whilst that which is true is a stranger to non-entity' (p. 6). Radhakrishnan on the other hand translates it as: 'Of the non-existent there is no coming to be; of the existent, there is no ceasing to be' (1998: 106). Prabhupada translates the same sentence as: '… of the non-existent (the material body) there is no endurance and of the eternal (the soul) there is no change' (parentheses as in the original; Prabhupada 1985: 95). Swami Chinmayananda translates it as: 'The unreal has no being; there is no non-being of the Real' (2001: 71). There are thus differences among different translations of even the same sentence in The Gita, though none of them can be termed as inaccurate or wrong.

There are, however, a few instances of Wilkins' translation not being very accurate, if not outright wrong. Take for example, the first half of the 11th verse in the second chapter of the Gita (*Ashochyaananvashochastvam prajnaavaadaanscha bhaashase*). Wilkins translates it as: 'Thou grievest for those who are unworthy to be lamented, whilst thy sentiments are of the wise men' (p. 6). The inaccuracy consists in translating '*prajnaavaadaan'* as 'sentiments of the wise'; there was no question of sentiments of the wise here, but only of seemingly wise talk. Radhakrishnan translates the sentence as: 'Thou grievest for those whom thou shouldst not grieve for, and yet thou speakest words about wisdom' (p. 102). Another instance [p. li >] of inaccuracy occurs in the same chapter of the Gita. The 31st verse in chapter 2 is translated by Wilkins as follows: 'Cast but thy eyes towards the duties of thy particular tribe, and it will ill become thee to tremble. A soldier of the *Kshatree* tribe hath no duty superior to fighting' (p. 7). First of all, Kshatriyas were not a 'tribe'; it was a *varna,* a professional class of soldiers. Secondly, 'tremble' may be a literal translation of '*vikampitum'*, but the correct transalation would have been, 'waver' or 'falter'. Thirdly, Wilkins altogether ignored the word, '*dharmya'* which means 'just' or 'righteous' or 'enjoined by duty', used as an adjective to *yuddha* or fighting. It was not any war that Krishna urged Arjuna to fight in, but a righteous war for a just cause to which he was duty-bound. Radhakrishnan's translation of the verse which is more accurate is: 'Further, having regard for thine own duty, thou shouldst not falter, there exists no greater good for a Kshatriya than a battle enjoined by duty' (op. cit. p. 112).

It is not necessary to quote all such instances of inaccuracy in Wilkins' translation here. The instances above have been cited only to caution the reader against taking his translation as perfect. In case of any doubt, the reader should consult standard translations such as by Dr S Radhakrishnan. The significance of Wilkins' translation is not because it was perfect, but mainly because of its historical interest. It was a pioneering translation into English directly from Sanskrit by an Englishman and was published under the auspices of the East India Company which started the British dominion in India. The translation may have a few limitations but was nevertheless successful in creating more interest in the West about the heritage of India in those early days, and contributed to building a permanent cultural bridge between India and the West. In any case, the translation is a collector's item, deserving an honoured space on the shelf of any one interested in Hinduism or India's heritage.

Notes

1. The details given above about the life and work of Sir Charles Wilkins are based on Swami Tathagatananda (not dated); and Anonymous (not dated).
2. In a lecture on the Mahabharata at the Shakespeare Club, Pasadena, California, February 1, 1900; published in (Vivekananda 1998: 95).

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