

Bhagavad-Gītā. An Exegetical Commentary. By Robert N. Minor .
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Reviewed by Wilhelm Halbfass

The author opens the preface of his book with a question. "Why should there be another work on the Bhagavad-gītā?" It is a question which also suggests itself to the reviewer. There is no other Sanskrit text which has been translated as often as the Bhagavadgītā, or which has been commented upon and referred to, used and misused, glorified and mystified in a comparable manner. Interpretations of the Gītā exemplify and reflect important phases not only in the development of traditional Hinduism, but also in its modern reinterpretation and in the encounter and dialogue between India and the West. No doubt, much, and perhaps far too much, has been written about the Gītā. But in a sense, and not necessarily in a paradoxical sense, it is the existence of this enormous literature itself which justifies "another work" on this text; and this has at least two different implications:

1. The layers of interpretation and misinterpretation make it more difficult, more challenging and more stimulating to try to discover the "Gītā itself" in its own context; and there is still room for specialized historical and philological investigations.
2. It is the sheer quantity and diversity of the commentaries and the secondary literature that makes a reliable survey and guide very desirable. The interpretations of the Gītā are a phenomenon in its own right which requires clarification and research; and so far, there is no satisfactory survey of the history of research and of the general historical role of the Bhagavadgītā.

How does the author address these issues? How does he define the role and purpose of his book? Referring to the volume of the secondary literature on the Gītā, he states "that the first reason for writing such a work is the need for a text which gathers this literature together in one place so that scholars are able to interact with it" (p.XI). But he adds that there is another reason - the fact that "one misses the historical exegesis of passages" in the existing commentaries on the Gītā. This is something he wants to rectify by interpreting this text as a product of, and in terms of, its own time, and by maintaining "the context as the most important interpretive element" (p.XII). In order to achieve this twofold goal, he first presents an introduction, which addresses problems of authorship, date, etc., and aspects of the history of research and of the general historical impact of the Gītā. This is followed by the "exegetical commentary" which fills 500 pages - a running commentary on each single verse of the Bhagavadgītā; the Sanskrit text is given in transliteration, but without an English translation.

There is no doubt that this book may have a healthy impact upon Gītā studies. It may contribute to a "demythologization" and to a clearer distinction between "creative" responses and scholarly exegesis. Critical discussions of the interpretations given by S. Radhakrishnan or A. Herman exemplify the author's sober approach to Vedāntic or Neo-Vedāntic superimpositions. However, this is primarily of pedagogical value. If we ask whether, over and above this pedagogical contribution, the commentary also breaks new scholarly ground, the answer has to be negative. The linguistic, philological and historical information which it provides is for the most part very elementary. Moreover, the exegetical function of this information remains often somewhat obscure. Is there any rationale behind the presentation

of Sanskrit roots in numerous cases? Whether or not there is such a rationale - the etymological and grammatical information is often simply incorrect or misleading, and the errors are as elementary as the general level of information or discussion. Why does the author say that nivasiṣyasi (root: vas) is "from ni+viś" (p.368; on 12.8)? Why does he derive praveṣtum from veṣ (p.358; on 11.54), a root which does not exist? Why does he say that viparīta (root: i) is "from vi+pari+vr̥t, 'turn around' " (p.476; on 18.32)? It is obvious that the author has problems with some basic features of the Sanskrit language, such as its compounds (specifically of the bahuvrīhi type; cf. p.359, on 11.54: "mat-paramo, 'Me the highest' "). He deals improperly with numerous gerunds (or absolutes; cf., e.g., p.444, on 16.20, where he claims that a-prāpya in mām aprāpya means "unattainable"). Very frequently, he has simply problems with case endings; on p.95 (on 2.69), he refers to a "paśyata muni"(sic!) and obviously does not recognize a genitive as such; on p.305 (on 10.1), he uses the dative priyamaṇāya as if it were a nominative. Inaccuracies of expression, imprecise renderings of Sanskrit phrases, misspellings, incorrect diacritical marks abound. To a certain extent, this may have to do with problems of proof-reading which were beyond the author's control. On the other hand, who is supposed to benefit from a "correct" statement like the following one: "The particle tu functions here in the sense of 'but' " (p.91; on 2.64).

Nevertheless, the "exegetical commentary" provides a considerable amount of information which not only beginners, but also some more experienced readers may find helpful, specifically the convenient collections of references to the views of other scholars or commentators concerning a particular verse or concept. The introduction supplements the "synthetic" work presented by

the commentary, and it has again certain undeniable "pedagogical" merits. Yet, it does not give a reliable or representative survey of the history of Gītā research or of the role of the Gītā in Hinduism. Among the Indian commentaries, only those which are available in English translation have been consulted; but even these have not always been studied in a thorough and comprehensive manner. The brief survey of the commentarial literature (pp.XVI ff.) contains significant gaps and inaccuracies, bibliographical as well as historical and doctrinal.