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The Bhagavad-Gita : Krishna's Counsel In Time Of War (Bantam Classics)



Synopsis

The Bhagavad-Gita has been an essential text of Hindu culture in India since the time of its composition in the first century A.D. One of the great classics of world literature, it has inspired such diverse thinkers as Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and T.S. Eliot; most recently, it formed the core of Peter Brook's celebrated production of the Mahabharata.

Book Information

Paperback: 176 pages

Publisher: Bantam Classics; Reissue edition (July 1, 1986)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0553213652

ISBN-13: 978-0553213652

Product Dimensions: 4.2 x 0.4 x 6.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 3.5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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Customer Reviews

'Bhagavad-Gita' which means 'Celestial Song' or 'Song of the Lord' is an immensely popular sacred text in India.....What makes 'Bhagavad-Gita' so popular? To begin with, its lines are steeped in extraordinary lyrical grace. The eight syllable or occasionally eleven syllable quarters exude a rare poetic energy. Secondly, the text centres around two very popular characters from Indian religion and mythology: Krishna and Arjuna. Thirdly, the context, that is the great war scene of 'Mahabharata' adds to the drama of the narrative. Apart from all these, the most endearing quality of 'Gita' lies in the practicality of its teachings for all times. The great war is about to begin, but the hero Arjuna is beset with self-doubt, hesitation and remorse. Krishna, his charioteer, engages him in a long dialogue, which forms the main body of the narrative. Krishna's counsel not only dispels Arjuna's fears and doubts, it also provides solution to the eternal struggle between the spiritual and material in every human being. It answers all existential questions of man. Each man is facing a battle of Mahabharata within himself in his everyday life. To live, man has to fight, for life is a battle in which forces of good and evil are at constant war. Krishna's advice for man is to be deeply interested in his action and moral duty, yet to remain inwardly unattached, because man's real

enemy is desire due to attachment. This enemy can be overcome by arming oneself with discipline and acting in a manner so as to cross the narrow limits of desire. Man must perform his duty disinterestedly, without selfish desire and without losing sight of ultimate spiritual reality. This reality is surrender to Krishna himself. Krishna says, 'Relinquishing all sacred duties to me, make me your only refuge; do not grieve, for I shall free you from all evils.' (XVIII, 66) 'Bhagavad-Gita' is much more than my summary -- it is in fact the essence of Hinduism. 'Gita' touches upon all the basic concepts of Hindu religion such as duty (dharma), discipline (yoga), action (karma), knowledge (jnana) and devotion (bhakti). Barbara Stoler Miller's translation of 'The Bhagavad-Gita' faithfully retains the charm, lyricality and essence of the original. For the Western reader, the 'Introduction' and the 'Afterword' titled 'Why Did Henry David Thoreau Take 'The Bhagavad Gita' to Walden Pond,' comes as a great help for understanding the poem itself and realising the guiding principles of Hinduism. The section on keywords is in fact an extension of the lucid commentary given in the beginning. I recommend this translated version not only to the new readers of 'Gita', but also to those, who, bogged down by the numerous explanations of the scripture, seek a fresh look at it.

The size and low price of the book make it appealing to assign to college courses. This decision is reinforced by the clarity of the translation, which uses such terms as "infinite spirit" instead of "Brahman," which tends to confuse the reader. The presentation on the page is also satisfactory, especially compared to the Penguin edition's sloppy appearance. To those who think Stoler's translation misses the mark because of an emphasis on war in it, this is incorrect. She properly places Arjuna's dilemma in his supposedly real life situation. This is how Hindu texts operated: put a person in a practical, believable situation the reader can identify with, then respond to it with the message from the wisdom-giver. It makes perfect sense, and Stoler does not miss the warfare of the soul also present in Arjuna. Also recommended is Eknath Easwaran's translation into English.

Professor Miller's is not one of the better translations of the Gita. We can see this immediately by her choice of subtitle, "Krishna's Counsel in Time of War," which works against the real significance of what Krishna is saying and misses the profound message of the Gita entirely. If the Gita were only advice about how to act during war, it could hardly have even a minuscule part of the world-wide and timeless significance that it has. Regardless of how literally one may want to read the Gita, it is an unmistakable truth that Krishna's counsel is not about war, per se, but about how to live life, and how to face death. We can also see in her introduction and in the "key words" section following the text that her understanding of the Gita is mostly academic. She has not practiced (at

least not to any great extent) any of the yogas central to the Gita. It cannot be emphasized enough that a true understanding of the Bhagavad Gita requires not only study but practice in one or more of the four yogas presented by Krishna, namely bhakti yoga, karma yoga, jnana yoga or raja yoga. To illustrate some of the problems in the text, let's look at the beginning of Chapter Five as an example. Miller calls this, "The Fifth Teaching: Renunciation of Action," which is not exactly right since what is renounced are the fruits of action, not action itself, which according to the Gita, is impossible to renounce. We always act; even in inaction we are acting. Just "Renunciation" would be a better title for the chapter. Miller uses the word "Simpletons" in the fourth verse as the converse of "the learned"; but this is just poor diction. The intent of the Sanskrit is "unlearned" or "immature." Swami Nikhilananda, in his translation (1944; 6th printing, 1979), even uses the word "children." The natural word is "fools" which Miller avoids for no clear reason. In the next verse, Miller has: "Men of discipline reach the same place/that philosophers attain;/he really sees who sees philosophy/and discipline to be one." She certainly has the spirit of the meaning correct, but "Men of discipline" is not only needlessly vague, it is misleading since discipline alone does not work at all, which is one of Krishna's main points. While hers is a literal translation of the Sanskrit "yogair," a more meaningful translation would be "Men of yoga." R. C. Zaehner, who translated the Gita for the Oxford University Press (1969), uses "men of practice" although that too is not entirely agreeable. Eknath Easwaran (1985; 2000), who really knows yoga, has Krishna simply say, "The goal of knowledge and the goal of service are the same; those who fail to see this are blind." Easwaran can deviate from a strict literal translation because he really understands the purport of the Gita. Swami Prabhupada, whose translation serves the further didactic purpose of promoting "Krishna consciousness," is also a man who has a deep understanding of the Gita. He puts it this way: "One who knows that the position reached by means of renunciation can also be attained by devotional service, and who therefore sees that sankhya and yoga are on the same level, sees things as they are." Another disagreeable choice made by Miller is the epithet, "Lord of Discipline" that she has Arjuna use in addressing Krishna in 10.17. This unhappy phrasing comes about because of Miller's reluctance to use the proper and natural word "yoga." Easwaran has "supreme master of yoga," while Nikhilananda has simply, "O, Yogi...O, Lord." Prabhupada has "You...O Blessed Lord," and Zaehner tries to explain with "athlete of the spirit...You, Blessed Lord." Stephen Mitchell's recent translation (2000) has the eminently sensible, "Lord of Yoga." I think Miller was overly influenced by the very literal and also largely academic translation by Franklin Edgerton from 1944, a translation admired in academic circles since it was the one included in the prestigious Harvard Oriental Series, but a translation neither poetic nor especially insightful. It is difficult to make strictly literal

translations true to the spirit of the Gita because the Gita is poetic and is profound in a way not immediately apparent. Miller worked hard at a literal rendition of the text, but she also sought to make it contemporary for a particular (young) American generation. Ainslee Embree, Professor of History at Columbia University, is quoted on the cover as saying, "Miller's is the translation for her generation." Unfortunately, it is not clear that Embree meant that entirely as a compliment! Having said all this, Miller's is a sincere effort, and captures most of what the Gita is about. No reasonable translation of this great spiritual work is in vain.--Dennis Littrell, author of "Yoga: Sacred and Profane (Beyond Hatha Yoga)"

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