A Study of the Socio-Cultural Perspectives of the Translations
Introduction

From the study of the Bangla translations of the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita by the respective translators, discussed in the previous chapter, it can be understood that while translating, commenting on and explaining the text, they were one way or the other influenced by their socio-cultural backgrounds. Their translations are subtly influenced by their respective philosophical ideologies and political inclinations also. Along with these factors, as extra-literary components, the translator’s education, religious belief, individual worldview, contemporary social and political scenarios have great impact on the translation. Together with this, the patronage in form of sponsorship also plays a major role to control the translations to some extent. The reader-oriented translation will tend to bend in a simplistic direction. In totality, all the above mentioned factors shape a translation through the translator and create the differences between the several translations of a particular text.

The Gita has served as a philosophical base for not only the various religious groups, but has also helped many political institutions such as the Marxists, the Gandhians and the radical fighters for Swaraj to extract their socio-political ideology from this text. A particular text has been used to serve the purpose of the varied groups, sometimes totally opposite in ideology to one another.
Generally the reason behind the several translations of the *Gita* into Bangla can be viewed from two different aspects, i.e. the text-rooted differences and the differences caused by extra literary factors involved in the particular translation.

Inherent contradiction in the meanings of the verses of the text leads to the several translations of the *Gita*. A few facts can be seen as the reason behind text-rooted differences. These facts are listed below:

- Since, in its very texture, the *Gita* is philosophical in character, some verses have different meanings i.e. the apparent meaning and the inner allegorical meaning. For example according to Mahatma Gandhi, the war itself is an allegory.

- Analogical usage implied in terms like “Chakra” and “Dhara” creates differences in understanding the meaning of the concepts.

- The meaning will also differ on the translator’s focus on individual words. The meaning extracted on the basis of etymology may often differ from the meaning conventionally read into words and verses.

- The *Gita* deals with different doctrines of philosophy and it covers a vast range of concepts and theories related to ethics and morality. Too often, the *Gita* itself appears to be full of contradictory ideas. In case of translations and especially in commentaries and glosses, the translator tries to bring about uniformity in meaning as per his/her own ideas and interests. D. D. Kosambi was very much eloquent in pointing out attempts
made in the *Gita* to reconcile the mutually contradictory ideas propounded in it\(^1\).

- Differences in the understanding of the Sanskrit text may often result from grammatical factors: thus the character of the compound-words (the *samasa*) and the syntactical relationship between full-fledged words (the *padas*) determines the exact meaning of any verse. Quite naturally differences will occur in the interpretation and translation of the text.

The differences in naming the chapters in various translations show the difference in basic understanding of the text. Jagadish Chandra Ghosh, in his translation, titled the sixth chapter as “Abhyasa Yoga”\(^2\), where Swami Jagadishwarananda and others retain it as it is the standard Sanskrit version, viz. as the “Dhyana Yoga”\(^3\).

Considering the above mentioned key factors, it can be analyzed how the translations of a particular text, the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita* in the present context of the study, done in the one quartet of a particular century i.e. the first quartet of the twentieth century differs from one another. Placing the translators in their respective socio-cultural-political milieu it could be observed to a great extent the factors, which make the translators working on a particular text again and again, knowing the fact that the text had been translated multiple times.


\(^2\) Ghosh, Jagadish Chandra. *Shri Gita*.

From a Hindu Nationalistic View Point

From the second half of the nineteenth century the literary activities in the then Bengal started increasing gradually. During this time Bangla literature got enriched with new genres of writing like novels, short stories etc. The authors started coming out from highly Sanskritised Bangla loaded with Tatsama words and commenced shifting to the more colloquial forms of modernised Bangla. Simultaneously, the Bat-tala literature emerged. During this period Bengalis started giving importance to the Bangla language and literature. As a result, some of the prominent and eminent socio-cultural-literary personalities have established the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad (the BSP here after). It was started by L. Leotard and Kshetrapal Chakrabarti in 1893 with the name The Bengal Academy of Literature. However, it took as its ultimate shape as the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad after the change of the name in 1894 with the contribution and involvement of many of the prominent aristocrats and literary persons of the then Bengal. The organization started its journey with Romesh Chunder Dutt as the first president and Rabindranath Tagore and Navinchandra Sen as the vice presidents. The BSP started working actively with the aim to promote Bangla language and literature i.e. both the works directly written in Bangla and translations of varied variety of texts, starting from history, philosophy, literature, mythology, scriptures to science, from the world literatures and Indian literatures into Bangla. With this aim, the BSP started assigning its founder members, authors to produce works in Bangla and to translate works of other languages into Bangla. Hirendranath Dutta was one of the founder members, who was assigned to write on Indian Philosophy in Bangla. In the introduction of his Gitay Ishwarvaad, he clearly mentioned that
the BSP has assigned a branch association to come up with books on Indian philosophy.

Hirendranath Dutta by profession a lawyer was well versed in Indian philosophy and Sanskrit scriptures. While growing up as a teenager, Hirendranath was highly influenced by one of the then major literary persons Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who is a key literary figure of the Bengal renaissance, and became one of his followers. Bankim Chandra popularly having the legacy of being the first Bangla novelist is also the forerunner of the Hindu nationalism. His mostly revered literary work is the novel *Anandamath* (1882). The Indian national song “*Vande Mataram*” (literally meaning “I praise mother”) is indeed extracted from this novel after the phrase “Vande Mataram” has become a key instrument of sloganeering used in the freedom struggle against the British rule in the then India. The song “*Vande Mataram*” became the song of the “freedom fighters” all over the Indian subcontinent. Apart from his renowned novels his religious commentaries demand equal mention. Two of his major commentaries *Krishna Charitra* (Life of Krishna, 1886) and *Dharmatattva* (Principles of Religion, 1888) have dealt with the Lord Shri Krishna. Along with the *Anandamath* these two commentaries reflect his ideology of Hindu nationalism.

As elaborately discussed in the previous chapter Hirendranath Dutta was deeply moved by the concept of the “Home-Rule” of Annie Besant and like many of his contemporaries he joined the Indian National Congress. As a nationalist he strongly advocated against British rule in the then India. Nevertheless, he was not

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5 “*Vande Mataram*”, a poem praising mother land as the mother, was tuned by Rabindranath Tagore as a song.

6 Another notable commentary is *Devatattva* (Principles of Divinity, Published Posthumously)
against the British as such. This phenomenon would be clearly evident in his 
*Gitay Ishwarvaad*, especially where he ardently compared the Indian philosophy 
with that of the western philosophy and ultimately venerated the former over the 
latter and regularly he referred to Annie Besant and the iconic scholar of Sanskrit 
in the west, F. W. Max Muller. He believed that the occidental education was 
required for the Indians as well as oriental education.

The commentary *Gitay Ishwarvaad* is a discussion on the Indian philosophy in 
the light of the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita*. Throughout the text he glorified the 
Indian philosophy. While glorifying the Indian philosophy he simultaneously 
compared it with then existing popular western philosophy and ultimately placed 
the former above the later. He deliberately avoided the debates on the *Gita* being 
part of the Mahabharata. He further explicitly mentioned in the introduction of the 
text itself that he is not concerned about the facts like how much the *Gita* 
icorporates the advices of the Lord Shri Krishna⁷. He emphasized on the concept 
of the Almighty and principally discussed in detail the relation and the similarities 
between the *Gita* and the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy. He began the 
comparison with the „concept of suffering“ in all the six schools and the *Gita*. 
While paying minimal attention to the Nyaya and the Vaisheshika schools and 
criticizing Purva Mimamsaa he focused on the Sankhya, the Yoga and the 
Vedanta schools of philosophy. Hirendranath has critically explained the 
similarities and differences of the Sankhya philosophy with that of the *Gita* in his 
text. In a few places of the explanation, he compared with the Herbert Spencer 
quoting the later from the latter’s book the *First Principle: the Instability of 
Homogeneous*. While discussing the concept “homogeneous root matter of nature”

from the Indian philosophy he compared it with the similar concept of Herbert Spencer\(^8\). The previous is one of the many examples of how Hirendranath Dutta dealt extensively on the western philosophy to compare with that of the Indian philosophy.

To authenticate and substantiate his opinion and ideas about the Indian philosophy and the *Gita* on several occasions, in the text, he quoted from the *Indian Philosophy* of Max Muller as reference. This tendency of extensive substantiation and quoting from Max Muller suggests that he is in complete agreement with the latter about the understanding of the Indian philosophy. Surprisingly, he preferred to refer the German scholar than referring to the early commentators of the Indian philosophy. While talking about the atheism of the Sankhya school he just mentioned the opinions of Vijnan Bhikshu and Madhvacharya and substantiated his argument by quoting Max Muller verbatim and mentioned that “it is true that the Sankhya philosophy was accused of atheism but that atheism was very different from what we mean by it. It was the negation of the necessity of admitting an active or limited personal god.\(^9\)”

From the *Gitay Ishwarvaad* it is very prominent that Hirendranath is venerating the *Gita* as the best text of the world and placing the Indian philosophy above all, nonetheless at the same time to substantiate and authenticate the excellence and supremacy of the *Gita* and Indian philosophy he did equate it with western philosophy and heavily relied on the opinions of the western scholars. This paradoxical dichotomy, where the writer is venerating the Indian philosophy

\(^9\) Muller, Max, F. W. *Indian Philosophy*, as quoted in Ibid. Page 94.
against that of the western and completely depending on other western scholars in doing so, exists throughout the *Gitay Ishwarvaad*.

In the very introduction of the text itself Hirendranath Dutta states that “*Gita* is an exquisite text. There is not a single text of such excellence and supremacy in entire world literature except the *Gita*”\(^{10}\). This statement, while venerating the *Gita*, explicitly negates the legacy of all the other religio-philosophical texts of different traditions. This claim about a particular Indian text projects his nationalist approach towards the Sanskrit scriptures of India.

Explaining the universality of the *Gita*, Hirendranath maintains that “one of the attributes of the *Gita* is its universality. There is no sign of communalism or narrowness in the *Gita*”\(^{11}\), whereas though the *Gita* has some universal messages, which can be applicable to the entire human race at the same time it very specific about people of a particular region and religion. The above mentioned partial approach of Hiranderanth can be traced to his ideological affiliation to the Hindu nationalism.

It can be observed from the entire text while praising and venerating the *Gita*, Hirendranath Dutta just mentioned about the early commentators of the Indian philosophy and extensively compared, equated with western philosophy as if to be a great philosophy one has to reach to the mark set by the western philosophy. Paradoxically, to substantiate his own arguments and claims, he completely depended on the western scholars, chiefly Max Muller to such an extent where it appears like that the *Gitay Ishwarvaad* is propagating the thoughts of Max Muller on Indian philosophy. This tendency projects that as per Hirendranath Dutta the


\(^{11}\) Ibid. Translated from Bangla. Page 1.
supremacy of the text and the validity of his arguments depend upon the ideas Max Muller had about Indian philosophy and Sanskrit. This approach indicates that Hirendranath Dutta even though is against the hegemonic rule of the British in India ultimately is surrendering to the hegemonic parameters set by the western intelligentsia.
From a View Point of Revolutionary Transformed as a Spiritual Leader

As elaborated in the previous chapter Aurobindo had elite occidental education and spent his formative years since childhood in the United Kingdom, which made him develop western life style to a great extent. His acquiring of Bangla and Sanskrit occurred during his stays in Baroda as an employee of the Baroda Service unlike other Indian scholars, who worked on the Gita, who have learned Sanskrit since their childhood.

A few divine experiences and the rigorous practice of Yoga during his imprisonment in the Alipore central jail, transformed Aurobindo from a nationalist revolutionary to a spiritual person. After coming out from the jail in 1909, he wrote the Gitar Bhumika in a span of few months. Though he was active in political sphere, his inclination towards spirituality began changing his ideas and thoughts. This change is reflected in the text to some extent. His Gitar Bhumika can be seen as an elaboration of the essence of the main concepts of the Gita. In most of the chapters he explained the key concepts of the battle, the illusion of Arjuna and the teachings of Shri Krishna. However, there are a few sections where his approach towards the Gita differs a lot from many of his contemporary, who worked on the Gita. First of all Aurobindo did not pursue Shri Krishna as only Lord Shri Krishna, the god. Nevertheless, he projected Shri Krishna as the greatest politician ever existed. This portrayal of Shri Krishna by Aurobindo suggests the influence of the occidental education he had.

Apparently, the Gitar Bhumika reads like a philosophical text, but a few chapters mainly “Shri Krishner Rajnaitik Uddeshya” (the political intensions of
Shri Krishna) and “Shri Krishner Rajnaitir Phal” (the result of Shri Krishna’s politics) hints at Aurobindo’s understanding of the *Gita* at that point of time. In these sections his kind of discussion about the centuries old clashes between two clans i.e. the Yadavas and the Kurus, and the hegemony of the Kurus in the Indian subcontinent would not be seen in any other works done till that time. It should be specially noted that in the above context he used the word “hegemony”\(^\text{12}\) in roman script in the Bangla text. In some places he referred to Shri Krishna as the “practical” and the “revolutionary”. Such usage of some specific English words reflects the revolutionary spirit of Aurobindo. This, in turn, highlights that he was politicizing a religio-philosophical text.

Aurobindo in some places in the text tried to provide scientific justification of some mythological occurrences like clairvoyance and clairaudience. According to him through Indian Yoga only one can attain such supernatural abilities. In a few places like this he was propagating the practice of Yoga. In this regard, he is referring to the concept of the western hypnotism, simultaneously calling it something inferior, which should shred off\(^\text{13}\). This reflects his nationalist inclinations.

Instead of focusing on the discourse of action, devotion and meditation, he emphasized on the concepts of *Vaishnavi Maya* (roughly translated “deceptive illusion”), *Mrityur Asatyata* (roughly translated “falsehood of death”), *Sannyasa O Tyaga* (celibacy and renunciation) and *Sakar O Nirakar* (Form and the

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\(^{13}\) Ibid. Page 16.
formless) etc. It indicates his journey from the revolutionary Aurobindo Ghosh towards the spiritual Shri Aurobindo.

While others emphasized on the universality of the Gita, his focus was on the equality of the Gita.

From the observations that I have made in the previous sections it can be claimed that the Gitar Bhumika is text is open to multiple interpretations. Moreover, it is difficult for one to tag it in a single unitary manner. The phases of Aurobindo’s life and the changes of his ideological stand points have been reflected in this text. Hence, ultimately it can be concluded that, in the context of the Gitar Bhumika by Shri Aurobindo, the individual world view of the translator along with the socio cultural background and the contemporary political scenarios shape the translation through the translator.
From an Indian Philosophical View Point

The commentary, Gitapath by Dwijendranath Tagore is a discussion of the Indian philosophy in the light of the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita unlike that of Hirendranath Dutta’s work on the Gita. The saintly Dwijendranath after demise of his father has shifted to the then Shantiniketan, completely devoting his life to persuasion of knowledge. The text under study is written here in the seclusion from the vibrant city life of literary activities. This text incorporates his lifelong experiences and learning since the septuagenarian Dwijendranath wrote the text a few years before his demise.

This is one of the most scholarly works to have been done on the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita so far in the Bangla. His elaborate explanations of the key philosophical concepts of the Gita and the examples he has provided are mostly drawn from the historical facts and the context of his time which gives this book an importance. His philosophical approach towards the text which is reflected in the comparison between Indian and Western philosophy as well as the comparison of the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy gives a different edge to his work.

Unlike others he did not discuss much about Shri Krishna by making him a „God“ but still he focused on the profounders of the philosophical schools, especially Kapil Muni of the Sankhya tradition. While discussing the importance of Kapil Muni and his philosophy, he referred to a few Western scholars (like Bentham
14 and Kant) and some ancient schools (Sophists and Stoics
15) of Greek

philosophy. His affiliation to the Bramho Samaj and its ideology got reflected in his approach towards Shri Krishna and Kapil Muni.

More than devotion, his emphasis was on the discourse of „action“ and „meditation“. He terms the *Gita* as journey from Kapil”s Sankhya towards Patanjali”s yoga. While discussing the key concepts of these two mentioned schools, he systematically discussed some concepts of Western philosophers, viz. Kant”s “Thing-in-itself”, Schopenhauer”s “Blind will” and Mill”s “Permanent possibility of sensation”. In some places he came up with geometrical examples while explaining difficult theories. This kind of attempts projects his diverse scholarship in various areas.

To project the supremacy and excellence of the Indian philosophy, he has valued his own thoughts. In case of negating the Western philosophy he was methodical and logical. This shows his critical approaches towards his contemporaries, who had been nationalist enough to reject Western philosophy without substantial logic and reason. He never succumbed to the so called parameters of the then intelligentsia set by the Western scholars. Though, he was active in many literary and social movements he was never a part of, hitherto, nationalists of the then Bengal. The contemporary trend of identifying with the Aryan identity, which he termed as Aryyami, was heavily criticized by him because of their dual nature i.e. claiming colonial modernity and following orthodox traditions at the same time. This particular stance of him is reflected in his personal life as well as in his *Gitapath* from the beginning till the end.

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15 Ibid, Page No. 8.

16 Ibid. Page No. 127.
He explicitly mentioned the important sections of the *Gita*, which should be studied. While concluding he wrote about the path shown by the ancient propagators of the Brahmo theories to attain salvation. He emphasized on the *Brahma nirvana*. His philosophical ideology, academic background and his Brahma affiliation have been instrumental in shaping the work.
From a View Point of a Religious Organisation

As the first president of Ramakrishna Mission, Saradananda took up the teachings of Ramakrishna and dedicated himself in disseminating the ideologies of Ramakrishna Math and Mission. He used to visit moffusils and sub-urban areas adjacent to Kolkata to interact and deliver his preaching amidst a not-so-literate crowd who used to gather in the congregations like Harisabha. The series of lecture used to be delivered to a rural/ semi-rural exclusive set of crowd who had been starting to get inclined to the ideologies of Ramakrishna.

The book under discussion the *Gitatattwa* can be considered a religious explanation of the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* without much philosophical lingering or critical approaches. In the beginning itself Saradananda mentions that he has taken care to be impartial unlike other available commentaries on the *Gita* but soon he glides into making the translation motivated by religious ideology of Shri Ramakrishna.

In order to cater to the varied audiences, the language of the translation (the *Gitatatwa*) has been made lucid. Keeping his audiences in mind, he avoided philosophical complexities in explaining the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* and used to connect it with the religious expiations and connotations.

His lectures had drawn many youths to him. Keeping them in mind he used to suggest them ways about understanding or interpreting the essence of the text by avoiding early heavy/scholastic commentaries. It’s quite apparent from most of the sections of the text that the lectures were designed to educate the
youths with Ramakrishna’s ideology and mould them to consolidate a group of followers.

In some places his references about Christ and Buddha may hint that he was trying to maintain a secular image. He even talked about the caste oppression by criticizing the four strata of caste discrimination.

In order to substantiate his commentaries, he used to cite references from Ramakrishna’s life, and in many a places he quoted Vivekanada. In many a place using the famous line of the Gita “Sarvadharman Parityajya Mamekam Sharanam Vraja/ Aham tvam sarvapapahyeho mokshayishyami ma shuchah” hints that he is calling for utter submission from the followers of Ramakrishna which in a way would help them to overcome earthly sufferings and attain „moksha” (liberation).

It can also be inferred that his mention about the lives of the incarnations in the Hindu religion indicates to his attempt to establish Shri Ramkarishna as another incarnation of Vishnu like the lord Shri Krishna, which again was the manifest ideology or belief of Ramakrishna Mission and its followers.
From the View Point of a Gita Scholar

Known as the “Gitashastri”, his work is scholarly translations of the Gita along with the commentaries. Though as a nationalist by principle, his work does not propagate the idea of nationalism. Philosophically also his work is inclined to any particular school of thought. So it can be seen as one of the most accurate and impartial extensive works, done on the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita in Bangla so far.

In the introduction of the text he wrote about the Hindu religion tagging it as the “Sanathana Dharma”. Under this rubric, he elaborately discussed how the Sanathana Dharma has transformed from the Vedic period to the Bhagavat period. He tried to establish in totality that the Gita is the congregations of all the religions. He attempted to show the equal universality of the text. He discussed about the teachings of the Gita also. From these above mentioned points it can be stated that though his translations and commentaries are not directly inclined to any particular group or sect, his approach towards the text is very much religious. In the introduction itself he has propagated Hinduism. Though he explained the theories of many Sanskrit canonical texts, even quoted also, but his preference was towards the Smriti text. All though, he wrote about the philosophical texts of the Sankhya tradition and the Upanishads, nonetheless, many a places he has stressed upon “devotion” and “the complete submission” to the almighty. In the context of Indian philosophy, the Upanishads are considered the philosophical texts devoid of any religious connotation and the Sankhya Darshan, called as the
Nirishwar Yoga (roughly translated Yoga sans the god), is considered as the atheistic school of philosophy.

At some point the Shri Gita in some places it seems to be very complicated as the translator seems to be oscillating from his stances from the philosophical aspects of the Gita to the religious aspects and tries to draw uniformity among all these Indian canonical texts. In his attempts it appears that Jagadish Chandra Ghosh is desperately trying to jumble all the Indian philosophical schools and trying to explain the Gita with the help of the unified „Indian philosophy”. At the end of the “Introduction” while mentioning about the available commentaries and glosses on the Gita till then, he divides them into two sections i.e. “Sampradayik” (roughly translated “Traditional”) and “Asampradayik” (roughly translated “Non-traditional”). Strikingly, he classified Gandhi’s Anasakti Yoga in the traditional section while classifying Bankim Chandra, Dwijendranath Tagore, Hirendranath Dutta, Aurobindo Ghosh as non-traditional. Being a Gandhian, placing Gandhi’s work in the traditional group confuses the reader about Jagadish Chandra’s understanding of the Gandhian ideologies. He is claiming that the theory of non-violence of Gandhi and the non-violence propagated by the Gita are two completely different ideas.
From the View Point of a Literary Person

The humourist author Rajsekhar Basu was an expert in translating Sanskrit texts like *The Mahabharata* and the *Meghdut*. His translations of the *Gita* were published posthumously as he was reluctant to publish it in his lifetime. A chemist by profession, Rajsekhar’s approach too was scientific towards interpreting and translating the text. Unlike other available translations of his time which were kinds of commentaries and explanations, his translation method was almost word-by-word.

Although his translation is very precise; he nevertheless wrote an elaborate introduction to it.

In the introduction he begins with the kinds of knowledge, viz. theoretical and practical. His opinion is that though the *Gita* contains some theoretical knowledge, it’s a book of practical usage. This particular point about his approach towards the text differs a lot from the existing commentaries of the *Gita* by different schools and individuals of his time. In present-day scenario one can interpret or extract the practical knowledge in the *Gita* may be very easily through their rationality but this particular approach by Rajsekhar taken hundred years back was quite strikingly fresh in this context. In his introduction it is manifest that the *Gita* is not only an ethics to him but a way of life. Unlike other religious, spiritual and philosophical approaches which propagate the concepts of “meditation” and “devotion”, Rajsekhar’s emphasis was on the discourse of “action” and “knowledge”. Rajsekhahar has generally avoided talking about the
religious aspects of the Gita in any part of his „Introduction” except towards the end.

It can be understood that his approach to the Gita was rational, logical and at the same time practical.