Introduction

Religio-philosophical texts, considered as the sacred texts by the various religious traditions, are of central importance to the respective traditions. In most of the religions, these texts are written in classical languages, like the Vedas in Sanskrit, the Old Testament in Hebrew mainly and the New Testament in Greek. Some sacred texts are widely and freely available, whereas some are exclusively accessible to particular groups of people. Though it largely depends upon the attitudes of the religions towards the texts, the translation of the religio-philosophical text has been in practice for centuries.

In India, the classical language Sanskrit and the knowledge embedded in Sanskrit were accessible and understood only by a particular group of people, predominantly the upper castes. Over a period of time, the relevance of the classical languages started to fade away in the domain of day-to-day conversation and practice. Slowly it became a dead archaic language. With the development of civilization, the importance of the vernacular languages increased. Hence, translation of these texts in vernacular languages became important in the process of imparting the teachings of the religio-philosophical texts to the common mass and also contributed towards the preaching of the religion.

In ancient and medieval periods, the translators had the patronage of kings and other religious institutions like church and temple trust. In modern times, along with the religious institutions like The Ramakrishna Mission, the Chinmaya Mission and ISKCON, publishing houses like the Gita press, Gorakhpur, concentrating only on the religious publications, have become the patrons of these kinds of translators.
Sanskrit is the canonical language for most of the known Hindu religio-philosophical texts, while Pali and Prakrit are identified as the medium of instructions and expressions for the Buddhist and Jain Scriptures. The emergence of the vernacular languages and their literatures, led to the birth of numerous translations including interpretations, commentaries and explanations of the sacred texts into local languages. This practice is very prevalent till date. This kind of work not only contains the religious belief and the philosophical ideas of a society of a particular time, but also portrays the life of the people and contemporary socio-cultural and political scenario.

A translation is done in the language in currency in a society. Generally, it employs current metaphors and not the ones that the readers cannot understand. A society and its culture are reflected in the metaphors. A caveat is in order here. But, at the same time, I do not propose to say that the metaphors are either exhaustive or accurate in their portrayal of a society. However, they do contribute substantively to the portrayal of the dominant forces operating in the society in question. Besides, a translation itself is a product of the various forces that exert themselves on an individual (or a collective of) translator(s). Within a period, one can see multiple translations of a single work, many of which are different from one another in different ways and lend themselves to different interpretations. In a particular location, over a period of time, one sees different translations arise as a result of interaction of various historical forces. Hence, translation can be looked as the representation of the zeitgeist of the society at the time in two ways: on the one hand the fact of publication of a particular translation is indicative of its importance in being chosen over other potential options/texts; on the other, the relative popularity of different translations indicates the relative dominance of these ideas.
Introducing the Area and the Research Question(s):

The *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita*, literally meaning “Song of God”, or *Song Celestial*, as translated by the renowned poet-translator Edwin Arnold, is perhaps the most popular and most profound text among all the great Hindu religio-philosophical writings. It is regarded as one of the three main Scriptures- the *Prasthan-Traya*; the other two being the *Upanishads* and the *Brahma-Sutra*. There is no other scripture which has been so much discussed and commented upon as the *Gita* is in the interest of the different systems of philosophy, ethics and religion, which are again suited to the men and women of different temperaments. The *Gita* has the universal appeal because it is the most systematic spiritual statement of what Aldous Huxley called ‘the perennial philosophy’.

Being an important part of the religious-philosophical tradition of India, the *Gita* has attracted the attention of several ancient and medieval teachers who have written commentaries and glosses on it in Sanskrit. Scholars have presented the contents of the *Gita* in a simpler and easier language than the original one. There are numerous explanations of it in Sanskrit. In the Advaita Vedanta tradition, Shankaracharya comes first (788-820 CE). In fact, his is the earliest of the extant commentaries available. The preachers of Dvaita Vedanta and Vishishtadvaita Vedanta Madhvacharya (1197-1276 CE) and Ramanujacharya (1017-1137 CE) also contributed to the *Gita* literature with their valuable commentaries. Poet Jnanadeva or Jnaneshwar (1275-1296 CE) explained The *Gita* in Marathi. This very text, containing nine thousand verses, is named as *Jnaneshwari*. The glosses by Nimbarkacharya (12th century) and Vallabhacharya (1473-1531 CE) must be
mentioned. Commentaries by Shridhar Swamin (15th century), Madhusudan Saraswati (1525-1632 CE) and Raghavendracharya (1598-1671 CE) made some original contributions to the *Gita* literature. Most of the ancient commentaries and glosses on the *Gita* followed the path of Advaita Vedanta proposed by Shankaracharya. But, Bengal in the medieval period witnessed a different *Gita* literature. Most of the works accomplished in this period were done by the followers of Shri Chaitanya. They followed the path of Achintya-Bhedabheda Vada. Baladeva Vidyabhushana and Shri Bishwanath Chakravarti are notable among them. All the above-mentioned works related to the *Gita* literature were either a particular religious-philosophical school oriented or done to spread the doctrine of a particular sect. The religious leaders used the contents of the *Gita* in their own way to establish their ideology.

In the Mughal period, the *Gita* was translated for the first time into a foreign language. Emperor Akbar's minister Abul Fazal and his brother Faizi translated the *Gita* into Persian and this translation was carefully preserved and published later.

Indologists of the eighteenth century set a new trend in the *Gita* literature. Charles Wilkins is the first one who, in 1785, translated the *Gita* into English. In 1787, the *Gita* was translated into Russian. Friedrich von Schlegel, with the romantic enthusiasm to spread the Sanskrit knowledge in Germany, translated the *Gita* into German in 1823, and his brother August von Schlegel did the work into Latin. A French translation of the *Gita* was done by Burnof in 1825 and, in 1858, the Greek translation was published. Later on, the *Gita* was translated into several other non-Indian languages.

Translation of the *Gita* into Indian vernaculars is not a recent phenomenon, though most of the old translations of this class are not available in any form.
nowadays. The *Gita* literature, since 19th century, both translations and commentaries, is important for their particular perspectives. Mahatma Gandhi’s translation of the *Gita* along with the commentary into Gujarati is titled as *Anasakti Yoga*, which was again translated into other vernaculars by the followers of Gandhi. *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita-Rahasya* by B.G. Tilak contains not only the translation, but also discussions on many *Gita* related issues. Vinoba Bhave’s *Gita Pravacahne* in Marathi, based on Tilak’s work is also worth mentioning. Shri Aurobindo’s the *Essay on the Gita* in the English language can be treated as translation since the book is all about philosophical explanations of the *Gita*.

The main objective of my research is to look at the socio-cultural perspective of the translations of the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita* in Bangla. As the most popular Hindu religious text, the *Gita* is widely translated into Bangla just as it is in other languages. All the socio-political-cultural changes/reforms witnessed by Bengal and Bengalis, have influenced the discourse of the *Gita* translation in Bangla. Though the day-to-day life of Bengalis does not have much direct connection with the discourse of the *Gita* translation, the intellectual sphere of the Bengali Community has always paid great attention to the various works done on this religio-philosophical text.

As extra-literary components, the translator's education, religious belief, individual worldview, understanding of philosophy, ideology, cultural background, contemporary social and political scenario have great impact on the translation. Along with this, the patronage also plays a major role. In totality, all the above mentioned factors create the differences between the several translations of a particular text. In this context, the primary area that I have explored is how these extra-literary components shape a translation through the translator.
The first translation of the *Gita* in Bangla dates back to the time period of Shri Chaitanya, around in 15th -16th century. Since that time, people have been constructively working on the very text of the *Gita*. My secondary area of exploration is concentrated in the numerous translations of the *Gita* that have occurred till date. Here, I have also tried to find out what makes the scholars, translators and religious preacher cum teachers translate a text again and again when already several translations of that particular text exist.

The *Gita* has served as a religious base for not only the various religious groups, but has also helped many political institutions such as, the revolutionary fighters for Swaraj, the Gandhians and the Marxists to extract their socio-political ideology from this text. This brings me to my final quest to find how a particular text has been used to serve the purpose of the varied groups, sometimes totally opposite in ideology to one another.

**Methodology**

My work deals with the Bangla translations of the *Gita*, which demanded an in depth study of the *Gita*, the text itself and the several translations of the *Gita* in Bangla. Here the translations, including interpretations, explanations, commentaries and glosses on it have been subjected to scholarly scrutiny. I have used the broad umbrella term ‘translation’ to talk about the translations of the *Gita* into Bangla along with various interpretations, explanation and commentaries on the *Gita* in Bangla. The literature on the *Gita* in other languages, like Tilak’s the *Gita-Rahasyam*, Gandhi’s *Anasakti Yoga*, and Shri Aurobindo’s *Essays on the Gita* have also been also
helpful to understand the dynamics of translation and commentaries/ explanations on the *Gita* in other cultures and languages.

The books dealing with the translations of the religious and philosophical texts, e.g. *Translation and Religion: Holy untranslatable* edited by Lynne Long, David Jasper’s *Translating Religious Texts: Translation, Transgression and Interpretation*, Nikolas Wolterstorff’s *Divine Discourse: Philosophical reflections on the claims that God speaks*, and the books dealing with the cultural components of translations and extra-literary factors involved in the practice of translation have been helpful to come up with a methodology for my research.

Bengal Studies had been very important domain for my research. The history of Bangla language and the Bengali race as a homogenous linguistic community have been of prime of importance. The social, cultural and political scenario of Bengal in different ages, especially from the time of Shri Chaitanya to the 20th century has been my key areas of looking at. The books containing the history of Bangla literature, especially the translated literature have been of much importance to locate the *Gita* translations done into Bangla.

I have visited the libraries situated in Kolkata. The *Gita* Library of Central Kolkata had been of much help for my work. Apart from this I have visited the library of Asiatic Society Kolkata, founded by the Indologist William Jones in 1785. Many early published Bangla translations of the *Gita* have been available there. A few other libraries, especially Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Sanskrit Sahitya Parishad and Sanskrit college Library are worth visiting. Jayakrishna Library, the public library of Uttarpara, has been resourceful for availing good resource materials for this work. Serampore College Library and Carey Library should not be neglected in this regard.
These two libraries have preserved the earliest printed Bangla texts as the first printing press of Bengal was set up there in Serampore by William Carey, Marshman and Ward, who later founded Serampore College in 1818. I have paid the town Navadwipa a special attention as it was the cultural centre of Bengal since the time of Shri Chaitanya. It has a long and rich tradition of Sanskrit scholarship. A few traditional gurukulas still exist there. These gurukulas and other centers provided me with much resource for my research.

Among the Bangla translations of the *Gita*, I have focussed on those particular works, which reflect the changes that took place in Bengal. The translations which portray the socio-cultural landscape of that particular time have provided me with the answers for my research questions. Among the first few known Bangla translations done during the period of Shri Chaitanya, are the works of Baladeva Vidyabhushan and Madhusudan Saraswati, the former followed the Gaudiya Vaishnavism and the latter was the follower of Shankaracharya. *Gitay Ishwaravad* by Hirendrantha Dutta is the first translation done with a modern approach. Dwijendranath Tagore, one of the prominent figures of the Brahma Samaj, came up with new explanations in his *Gitapath*. *Gitar Bhumika* by Shri Aurobindo is an important text because of its spirituality. The revolutionary groups of freedom fighters were inspired by the Trailokyanath Chakrabarti’s *Gitay Swaraj*. The works of Jagadishwarananda, one of scholar monks of the Ramakrishna Mission, and Bhaktibedanta Prabhupada, the founder of ISKCON, on the *Gita* show the new religious movements of Bengal. Rajshekhar Basu's translation contains a new literary style. Jagadish Chandra Ghosh was the one of the eminent scholars of the *Gita* discourse in 20th century Bengal.

One more important point that I would like to mention is that I have not used the comparative method to compare the various translations, commentaries and
explanations of *Gita* in Bangla. I have tried to look at how historically translations, commentaries and explanations of *Gita* have come into existence in Bangala. I have tried to find out how at different historical junctures various interest-groups appropriated the *Gita* molding its meanings to their respective ideologies. In that sense, this work would be an attempt to make a historiography of Bangla translations of *Gita*. I have also explicated in the following chapters the time-period I have focused on to indicate the scope as well as limitations of this study.