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A 'DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE TRANSLATION' OF THE BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ*

Translators of the Gītā (into non-Indian languages) and of the Bible (into Indian languages) are facing very similar problems. They write for a reader who belongs to a culture totally different from the source-text, which is religious, ancient and literary. Like the Bible in the West, the Gītā is the most translated book of the Hindu heritage.[1] In English alone, more than 150 different translators have published their translation of the Gītā, often with commentary.

Transcultural translators of the Bible work in a very old tradition : the Jewish Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek before the coming of Christ. They have at their disposal ancient manuscripts, a modern critical mind and the linguistic and literary knowledge required. Are these conditions sufficient to make a transcultural translation successful? We intend to examine these conditions and apply the method of Dynamic Equivalence to the translation of the Bhagavad Gītā. The specific problems with regard to the translation of the Gītā arise mainly from its inspiring message, the mystical content and its literary value.

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*A detailed study about translations of the Bhagavadgitā, by the author in collaboration with the co-author of this article S. Hemraj, Bangalore is forthcoming (Fall 1980): *Bhagavadgītānuvād : A Study in Transcultural Translation.*

1. The most important rival to compete with the Gitā in number of translations (spread all over the world) is the Sanskrit story-collection, Panchatantra.

1. The Message of the Gītā

(*a*) *An Inspiring Message*

The Gītā contains a message which is inexhaustible in its meanings for all centuries and cultures : it is not a ' neutral ' text, but one which plays a significant role in India's religious and philosophical schools as well as in the practical life of the average person. Any scripture, which is called ' inspired ', seems largely to derive its sacredness from the subjective belief of its worshippers. So is the Gītā a tool for a dynamic inspiration which comes on the occasion of reading the text ;

> The common man's interest in the Gītā is purely pragmatic. He is not concerned with controversies about the meanings of subtle phrases or the relative superiority of various disciplines. What he wants is to learn as quickly as possible the principal teachings of the Gītā in order to live by them.[2]

Consequently, for a translator, reading the original text is not a purely linguistic exercise. He should know that the text has been and can be a source of inspiration, that the text itself is the expression of an inspiration. Strictly speaking, the Gītā does not qualify as a ' revealed ' *śruti* text: it is a part of the *smṛti* literature, yet even today " to most good Vishnuites, the Gītā is what the New Testament is to good Christians. It is their chief devotional book: in it many millions of Hindus have for centuries found their principal source of religious inspiration."[3] To the Christian translator too, the Gītā appears as a unique, ' inspired ' text, which ' inspires ' the reader.[4] He should retrace the original meaning of the text, which may be beyond words: this meaning is the self-expression of an individual (or individuals?) who described what arose in his mind or what appeared to him as a communication from the Divine. The translation-event begins, therefore, with a recapturing of the insight which entered the consciousness of the ' seer ' and which he communicated to his disciples, so that they too could participate in his experience. The transcultural translator of an ' inspired ' text can be compared to a good professor of mystical literature, like Svāmī Shankarānanda who " prepared

2. R. L. Lal, *The Gītā in the Light of modern Science* (Bombay : Somaiya Publ., 1970), p. x.
3. F. Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā, or Song of the Blessed One*, (Chicago : 1925), p. 1.
4. See I. Vempeny, *Inspiration in the non-Biblical Scriptures*, (Bangalore : Theol. Publ., India, 1973).

his classes by reflecting early in the morning on the particular aphorism which he was going to expound to us. He then meditated: and at the class he gave not what he had read in the commentaries, but what came out of his heart."[5] As soon as the personal act of speaking has been fixed in words, the message then gets a life and an evolution of its own, on the level of a language developing through different ages and cultures.

(*b*) *The Translation of a Message*

Only after this initial interiorization can the translator render the text as a word-event, in order to let it speak again for the reader in the target language. The end is the formulization in words of an inspiration which can make new disciples, (*i.e.*, the reader), in their own situation, regain the original experience and pre-conceptualized insight. A translation of the Sanskrit Gītā should bring about the dynamic emergence of the inner sense of the Gītā. The inspiration of 2,000 years ago is not just repeated, but mediated by the very modification of the initial formulation. The reader should be able to take distance from the text and not get lost in the context. Was it not the very problem of Arjuna that he was so involved in his situation that he nolonger had insight in the really right cause? "To take the Gītā's words literally would be to fall into the same misconception that led Arjuna to his crisis and the reader to a possible misunderstanding and/or institutionalization of man's hope, faith, charity, and even [to] crisis and despair."[6] Within the context of the epic Mahābhārata, the author(s) of the Gītā has taken a concrete person (Arjuna), in a concrete, historicopolitical setting, and describes his insight against the background of this person's crisis. Therefore, "the translator is bound by what stands there [in the source-text] and yet he cannot simply convert what is said out of the forein language into his own without himself becoming again the one saying it."[7]

Philology and historical disciplines remain necessary auxiliaries to understand the source-medium and to re-create the atmosphere of the original intellectual and devotional milieu. This is insufficient, however, without an adequate contextual approach. The translator has

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5. Vandana, *Gurus, Ashrams and Christians*, (London : 1978), p. 7.
6. A. De Nicolas, *Avatara*, Inst. for Advanced Studies of World Religions, (New York : 1976), p. 379.
7. H. G. Gadamar, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, tr. (from German) and ed. O. Linge, (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1977), p. 57.

to build a bridge between two contextual situations ; he has to understand fully the original setting and grasp the message as it was worded then and there; at the same time he has to return to his own interpretative situation in order to re-incarnate the message for himself and for his contemporaries.

It would appear that translations of the Gītā on the whole, fail to do justice to the two poles of the contextual field in which they operate, " out of touch with today's as well as the Gītā's context. "[7]

(*c*) *The Mystical Content*[8]

The usual approach to a mystical text is to assume that the initial experience behind it was so deep and mysterious that it could not be expressed fully. Knowing this, the mystic would at least attempt to describe something of his profound experience. In his study about the language of mysticism, Organ contents that we are mistaken in assuming that the mystic is communicating the content of his experience. Communication of ideas is only one of the purposes of language. The statements of the mystic convey an emotional or motivational meaning. He uses language in a non-communicative fashion. When he verbalizes his experience, it is not to communicate some information, but to motivate, to stimulate, to invite others to seek their own enlightenment in their own way.

A ' true ' mystical ' communication ' is not the correct description of an experience ; it is the successful motivation of another to the realization of his own mystical experience. Truth in mysticism is a form of pragmatic truth. If a mystic through his statements woos another to discover his own salvation in his own way, then the mystic may be said to have spoken truly. The way of salvation is unique to each individual..... The Bhagavad Gītā invites the Hindu to select any one of the four yogas (works, thought, meditation, devotion)

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7. De Nicolas, *op. cit.*, p. 167.
8. Edgerton points to the eleventh chapter of the Gitā, entitled The Mystic Vision of God as being particularly hard to translate : " The greater part of the eleventh chapter of the Gitā is devoted to the confessedly vain attempt to describe this indescribable. The ecstatic language of the description is hard to transfer to another tongue. Even in externals the passage differs from its surroundings; instead of the sober meter of most of the poem, it breaks forth into more elaborate lyric measures, which Sir Edwin Arnold imitates in his English version ", *Op. cit.*, p. 155.

and to stay with it, since all roads lead to the top of the mountain. Why should a mystic try to communicate his way of liberation when each man must find his own?[9] Organ makes an interesting comparison with the Indian context ; " The verbalizing mystic is a *guru*, that is, an enlightened man who is primarily concerned about the salvation of his pupil, as distinguished from a *pandit* who is a clever man primarily concerned about the education of his pupil. "[10] A mystical text is not meant to be understood intellectually, but is to help one seek liberation. Consequently, the correct approach to a mystic passage in the Gītā is not the mere linguistic analysis in terms of intellectual understanding. The translator has to captivate the motivational expression which is conveyed through the images in order to invite the listener (or the reader) to a personal surrender. He has to find an adequate form or style to express this invitation. Svamī Prabhavananda and C. Isherwood realized that they had to translate the Gītā in a variety of styles, partly prose and partly verse. For example, the contrast between the first and the eleventh chapter is striking ; " The first chapter is pure epic, continuing in the mood of the Mahabharata. The shouting of the warriors, the neighing of horses and the outlandish names of chieftains are still sounding in our ears as the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna begins. To translate this epic prologue as though it belonged to the philosophical discourse which follows would be to cut the Gītā right out of its historical setting and deprive it of its vivid local colour. "[11]

(*d*) *A Literary Text*

The inspiration of the Gītā comes to us in a work of special literary beauty and the translator has to preserve the literary expressiveness and effectiveness of the original. The embodiment of the initial vision took place on a level which transcends the linguistic context of a mere syntactical string of words. So single words of the Gītā may not be translated as such. Each word has different shades of meaning, often depending on the context. The fact that the Gītā message is transmitted through separate *ślokās* may lead the translator to an exaggerated use of short sentences without inter-relationship. This choppy translation can be avoided by reading the whole context,

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9. T. W. Organ, *Western Approaches to Eastern Philosophy*, (Ohio : Ohio University Press, 1975), p. 167.
10. *Ibidem*, p. 166.
11. S. Prabhavānanda and C. Isherwood, *The Song of God: Bhagavad Gītā*, Vedanta Society, 1944, Translators' Preface.

by considering a longer stretch of discourse and by indicating transitions and inter-connections. Through discourse-analysis the translator marks within the periscope how sections and sentences and minor statements are linked together.

2. The Science of Translation

(i) The science of trans-cultural translation developed mainly because of the efforts of translators of the Bible, long before the great secular classics in the West were rendered into different languages.[12] Scriptural translation, especially from Hebrew poetry, offers particular difficulties which are not very different from those encountered in the Sanskrit texts.

> Hebrew requires far fewer separate words than does English... And this means that a faithful English translation of a Hebrew text will inevitably be more 'wordy' than the original and will, moreover, tend to carry more accented syllables... The translator repeatedly finds himself hard put to it to catch the brevity and the accentual rhythm of the lines without resorting to an English so terse as to be cryptic.[13]

The translator has a double task. First, he must grasp the precise meaning of the words in their original language, and then bring that meaning into the recipient language with equal precision. At the same time he must see to it that the meaning in the original text is rendered as literally as possible in the recipient langauge. Such 'word-for-word' translation protects the recipient text from subjective interpretation. But in spite of its verbal accuracy, this procedure will rather obscure the sense of the original (to say nothing of the literary quality) and thus blocks communication. On the other hand, the translation can aim at greater clarity through a 'sense-for-sense' translation, but this approach could bring him under suspicion for subjective interpretation.

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12. For a good description of these experiences, see E. Nida, *Towards a Science of Translation*, (with special reference to principles and procedures involved in Bible translation), (Brill, Leiden : 1964). Also G. Mounin, *Linguistique et Traduction*, (Dessart, Brussels : 1976); G. Steiner, *After Babel, Aspects of Language and Translation*, (OUP, London : 1975).
13. J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, The Anchor Bible 21, 2nd ed., (New York : 1974), p. cxxxvi.

(ii) *The Dynamic Equivalence Translation*

(*a*) The first approach is the traditional way of Bible translation.[14] The translator assumes that all languages are sufficiently alike in form and, consequently, he translates directly from one language to the other. This direct transfer ignores the fact that languages do not have the same 'shape.' No single word in any language coincides completely in its meaning with some word in another language. Also, the sentence structure of one language differs from that of another language. Idioms and figures of speech must often be changed when being translated. Pronouns in the source language must sometimes be replaced by nouns, in order to make clear who is who.

(*b*) The second approach, of dynamic equivalence, pays due attention to the meaning of the original, and attempts to render that meaning faithfully without adhering to the form.

Languages may lie apart semantically, but they meet on the deeply human level of basic structures. The ordinary language of communication cannot help using its own peculiar and complex formulations, which contain some basic kernel expressions. The scientific method of translation through indirect transfer consists of a process of decomposing the original language into the simplest utterances. After matching these kernel sentences with equivalent kernel sentences in the receptor language, a process of re-composition follows. The message communicated through the basic structures is now expressed in the most dynamic way possible at the required level of interpersonal communication. The message is not reproduced as a string of utterances but with all the dynamic force of the original. In order to produce an equivalent message it is often necessary to depart from the form of the source language. This way of translating is message-oriented. "A translation of dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behaviour relevant within the context of his own culture: it does not insist that he understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context in order to comprehend the message."[15] In this way, a trans-cultural transference is possible. A dynamic-equivalence translation presents the closest possible natural equivalent to the source-language message. Instead of establishing a direct relationship through formal corres-

14. See B. Newman, *The old and the new way*, in *The Bible Translation*, 28, 1977, No. 2, pp. 201–207.
15. E. Nida, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

pondence at the surface structure, the translator descends first to the underlying structure. The source form-and-meaning-composite is analysed. It is decomposed into basic concepts and kernel structures within the source language. Then the equivalent meaning is given all attention and equivalent kernel forms are sought in the receptor language. Finally, these are re-composed in the receptor language at the desired surface level within the cultural world into which one intends to move. Yet, the translator should not radically depart from the form occurring in the source text by bringing his own opinions and altering the message. This would be paraphrasing, not translating, although some adjustments may be permitted. Omissions are rare when translating from an ancient written document, except for over-repetitious wording which may distract the modern reader. Additions are more common ; for example, filling out elliptical expressions, making explicit what is implicit, splitting up succinct sentences, using more generic terms or more descriptive phrases.[16] If necessary, informative footnotes can be added to corrrect wrong impressions given to the reader, due to cultural differences, or to clarify the historical background which was implicitly known to the original reader, living in the cultural context of the source-text.

Nida recommends the Dynamic Equivalence, for the specific reason of greater fidelity to the source meaning, which paradoxically a Formal Equivalence translation does not convey properly because of mechanical adherence to the source-form :

> In practice F.E. translations tend to distort the message more than D.E. translations, since those persons who produce D.E. translations are in general more adept at translating, and in order to produce D.E. renderings they must percieve more fully and satisfactorily the meaning of the original text. For the most part a translator who produces D.E. renderings is quite aware of the degree of distortion, and because of greater conscious control of his work is able to judge more satisfactorily whether or not the results seem to be legitimate. On the other hand, a translator who produces strictly F.E. rendering, is usually not conscious of the extent to which his seemingly ' faithful ' translations actually involve serious distortions. "[17]

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16. See J. Loewen, *Form and Meaning in Translation*, in *The Bible Translation*, 22 (1971), pp. 169–174.
17. E. Nida, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

3. Illustrating the Theory

An analysis of the translation of a few key-words may help to illustrate how very difficult it is to produce a dynamic-equivalent translation, climbing up from the etymological kernel structures to find a proper dynamic equivalent at the surface level of the target language, without adhering to the form.

(*a*) *Gītā*

Reviewing Edgerton's commentary, Belvalkar corrects the common misinterpretation of *gītā* as ' song ' ; " There is no Sanskrit word like *gītā* (fem.) meaning a song. It is either *gīt* (neuter) or *gīti* (fem.). *Gītā* is the feminine of the adjective, and it means ' sung ' or more accurately ' recited ' or ' taught. ' It qualifies *upaniṣad* understood with it. The full name of the poem is then *bhagavadgītā upaniṣad* and the root *gai* originally meant not 'singing' but 'solemn declaration.[18]

It has been argued that the term *gītā* in the sense of a song, would also not fit the context of the Mahabharata war, just as the troops are confronting each other. The term is rather a respectful reference to the inspired instruction given by a divine soul. In spite of the poetical beauty and the musical flow of some passages of the Gītā, its philosophical content prevails and would, therefore, suggest the meaning of *gītā* as a solemn instruction rather than a real song. Modi is also of the opinion that the meaning of the book is not to underscore the dramatic character of a sung dialogue between Shree Krishna and Arjuna. The *itishri* of the Gītā means that it is a collection of a number of *upaniṣads* or " keys of doing action " and that these *upaniṣads* have been sung by the Lord.[19]

Whatever the original intention of adding the title *gītā* might have been, it should remind the translator that he is working on a piece of literature, which was composed in verse-form and that the original recitation was meant to be listened to and not only to be read. The actual text before us now does not indicate the special intonation in which it was to be recited. Thus, shades of meaning may escape us.

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18. S. K. Belvalkar, *Review of Edgerton's Bhagvad Gītā*, Ann. BORI 6, 1925, p. 109.
19. P. M. Modi, *Method of Interpreting the Gita*, in M. D. Paradkar, *Studies in the Gītā*, (Bombay : Gitā Mandal, 1970), pp. 59–66.

(*b*) *Dharma*

The very first word of the Gītā poses serious problems to the translator. *Dharma* " stands for religious observance, righteousness, justice, conformity to law, conformity to custom, obedience to the social order, sense of duty, etc. Thus it has a religious, moral, as well as legal significance. This is one of the important reasons why it is impossible to translate the term *dharma* into any other non-Indian language. "[20] Starting his new translation of the *Mahābhārata*, Van Buitenen had to decide whether he would opt for a uniform rendering of the word *dharma* throughout the immense work. Being aware that the *Mahābhārata* terminology may reflect different stages in the evolution of the word, he chose one elastic term, which would be consistent enough to allow the social historian to recognize the original word. Since no perfect equivalence is possible, and only an approximation can be arrived at, Van Buitenen hopes that the best can be made of a bad job by choosing Law as host term for the problematic guest term *dharma*.[21]

(*c*) *Yoga*

This term occurs throughout the Gītā and is used in nearly all chapter headings or in the colophons at the end of a chapter. Zaehner explains the word when commenting on *śloka* 2·38 ;

> The root *yuj*, from which *yoga* is derived, is perhaps the keyword of the Gītā. Here [v. 2·38] it is used in the non-religious part of

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20. B. Kuppusvamy, *A Modern Review of Hindu Dharma*, in *Journal of Dharma*, 1 (Nos. 1 and 2), 1975, p. (118–136). See also T. M. Manickam, *Manu's vision of the Hindu Dharma*, in *Ibidem*, p. 101–107.
21. " For *Dharma* my choice has been a capitalized Law, in the hope of evoking other instances like Judaic Law, not only because Law is approximate in its evocative connotations, but also because in practice it allows for syntactic variations : according to Law, by, under, for the sake of, on behalf of, with Law; and law-minded, law-spirited, law-abiding, law-like and even lawly-—the last on the analogy of lovely. Obviously, therefore, the word Law will occur in odd and unidiomatic contexts. But what is the alternative rendering ? One might adopt ancient Indian Law to the English context and freely dispense such meanings as order, justice, morality, righteousness, virtue, custom, ritual and so on. In that case a social historian, or a historian of religion would lose completely track of the real scope of the concept of *dharma* because of my very helpfulness in providing Christian-European paraphrases. " J. A. B. Van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, 1973, p. xli.

> the epic in a purely secular sense ; get ready for battle. The basic meaning of the word is 'unite'... The noun *yoga*, then, means first 'yoking', then 'preparation'. These are, however only the primary meanings ; there are many, many others. The Gītā plays on all of these with extraorinary skill and this makes it almost impossible to convey the various nuances in translation. In the commentary, however, I will do my best to relate and co-ordinate the different meanings and uses of the root and its derivatives with what seems to me to be the basic doctrine of the Gītā."[22]

In one passage, Edgerton opts for the translation of *yoga* by 'discipline', but adds that the term cannot always be rendered in the same way.[23] Though the end intended in the Gītā is emancipation, yet the way it teaches, is that of wordly action without interest in the fruits of one's action. Hence *yoga* is a strange kind of practical method, which abstains from any 'disciplined' action that would look for the greatest efficiency. The term *yoga* is also used for the Sāṁkhya method, which is elsewhere called *jnān-yog* or 'discipline of knowledge.'

Quoting passages from the Gītā, Feuerstein leaves the original *yoga* untranslated, but tries to play on its meaning through English equivalent expressions, *e.g.* "He (whose) self is yoked in yoga" or "For those men who, reflecting on Me (with) undiverted (mind), love (Me) ever full-yoked, I hold out security in Yoga."[24]

It is not advisable to make verbal consistency a strict rule, *viz.*, that identical words in the source-text have to be rendered always by identical expressions. Shades of meaning vary according to the context ; the same word in Sanskrit may have to be translated by several terms in English: and the same English word found in a good translation may even derive from different terms in Sanskrit (which abounds in synonyms). "I have not tried to render key Sanskrit words by one single English equivalent."[25]

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22. R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, (Oxford : 1969, 1972), p. 138.
23. F. Edgerton, *op. cit.*, p. 141 and p. 165.
24. G. Feuerstein, *Introduction to the Bhagavad Gītā*, (London : Anchor Pr., 1974), p. 141 and p. 145.
25. R. C. Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures*, (Dent, London : 1966), p. xxi.

Sometimes the Sanskrit word is left untranslated or the origina word is added between brackets (square brackets are used for clarification). Scholarly versions can permit these niceties, but how shall translators present literary versions meant for the larger public ? Roy explains his solution to the problem ; he does not want the original wording to spoil the English dynamic presentation of the message in verse. He noted that the Oxford Dictionary meanings of some fitting equivalents often cover the meaning of the original. For example 'trance' for *samādhi*, 'askesis' for *tapasyā*. How does he render mystic terminology without spoiling the five foot iambic verses ? "A happy device occurred to me ; to put in my translation of Sanskirt metres into English blank verse, the Sanskrit words in apposition, as for example ; '*Gunas* or modes of Nature, Prakṛti' But '*tamas* (inertia) stems from ignorance': 'Abandoning all codes of conduct (*dharma*)'."[26]

4. Conclusion

A good trans-cultural translation cannot be made once and for all. The target languages are constant by developing and translators have to keep renewing their interiorizing understanding of the source-text and the dynamic expression in their target-language. The Gītā text is a good and short-sample of a case-study which could give worthwhile information to all trans-cultural translators, and a study of the existing translations of the Gītā is a rewarding enterprise. All kinds of methods have been tried (free or literal translations, prose or verse, paraphrases, with or without commentary) and the would-be translator can draw his conclusions from the successes and failures of his predecessors.

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26. Dilip Kumar Roy, *The Bhagavad Gītā : A Revelation*, (Delhi : 1974), p. 72. See also A. De Nicolas, *op. cit.*, p. 420.