

# Bhagavad Gita: The Love Story

Papri Sri Raman

**M**ANI RAO worked in television advertising in India, Hong Kong and New Zealand for 20 years and is now a Ph.D student of religious studies at Duke University. On a visit to India, Mani spoke about her poetry writing, translation and philosophy in an exclusive interview to *Book Link*.

**Q: From your interaction with western scholars and the ordinary people there, what do you think is the West's perception of the relevance of a text like the *Bhagavad Gita* in today's world?**

**A:** For those even slightly familiar with the *Gita*, Arjuna's dilemma feeds into the current debate about military deployment, and whether war is justifiable against injustice.

But there is a growing population of readers/seekers who—whether through yoga, gurus, reading or cultural exchange—are



Mani Rao was recently in Bangalore for the launch of her translation of *Bhagavad Gita*.

never actually read the entire *Gita* in Sanskrit, has not experienced just how lively and enjoyable it is. Also the reader who has never made it through the more difficult translations. I am told my translation will appeal to the younger readers in particular, because it is lively to read and can be read aloud in English as a poem.

**Q: You have explained the *Gita* as a love poem. Large sections of India perceive Krishna as the eternal lover. Despite the *Gita*, very few perceive Krishna as the dispenser of ethics and code of conduct, the destroyer. It is easier to view Krishna as the lover. Is there a certain amount of escapism in that?**

**A:** I guess a didactic speech will always be less entertaining than a love story. Also, the *Gita*'s canonization is recent compared to the legend about Krishna's love-play. In fact, the Krishna of the *Mahabharata* is quite different—in the *Mahabharata*, Krishna's word cannot be taken at face value; in the *Gita*, Krishna's word is God's word. There is room for all these personae, and for more. It speaks to the depth of our culture. Whether Krishna is advising Arjuna, or stealing butter, or hearts -- he embodies divine love, and by that is meant the love that is at the heart of all religion, the driving force in creation, the love that manifests as creation. You may consider this love as the essence of everything, or call it the "Love of God."

**Q: In India, the publishing industry is supposed to be booming. And prose from a new India is flourishing. Why did you choose poetry at such a time, for the medium of your conversation with the world?**

**A:** The *Gita* is a poem—my translation reflects that. By that I don't only mean the stanzaic structure, I mean the texture of poetry. In the *Gita*, word-pairs play off each other to explain philosophical concepts and it all flows rapidly, making it easy to memorize. Large sections of it such as Chapter 11 are emotionally charged and exuberant. The narrative is complex, dramatic and dynamic. Translating this into metrical poetry will result in compromises about the content, so free verse is suitable for the translation. Then using space flexibly suits the flexible syntax of Sanskrit and results in a dynamic poem. Besides this translation, I mostly write poetry—I have eight books of poetry. You may think poetry marginal, a non-conversation, but I think I am conversing with the world. Whether one is writing prose or poetry, the world is always a reader, one reader at a time.

## The Song of God

In the translator's note Rao writes, "Gita's status as a holy text has held back the translator's hand," which "retard the pace of communication in

English," this an observation on the umpteen previous translations of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The *Gita* is, of course, sung as the Song of God, His word, to be recited aloud as opposed to the *Samaveda*, which is the monologue of the devotee (Ravana), akin to a litany.

"The *Gita* is not only a poem, it is a love poem. May fidelity, then be deep, complex and lively," says Rao. It was as fellow at the Iowa University (2005-2009) that this translation took shape.

Particularly read-aloud-able is the section 'I AM', where this universal dialogue goes on:



*The origin the end  
the entire universe there is no thing higher  
...water's flavour light in moon sun om in  
all Vedas  
sound in etheric space spunk in humans  
the nice fragrance on earth...  
always attuned I love her &  
noted for singular devotion she loves me  
and continues later:  
& most secret of all again my last word  
you are loved for sure by me...  
heart be full of me be devoted to me  
do the rites for me do homage to me  
you'll come to me I promise truly you are  
my love*

And then Krishna asks Arjuna: Has your ignorance & confusion been destroyed? Rao's new translation of the *Īśāvāsya Upanishad* can be found in the new international translation journal *Asymptote* dedicated to literary translation and bringing together in one place the best in contemporary writing. *Just what is amratam? Deathlessness? Immortality? Fame? Ambrosia? Does crossing mean to go through, or to go past? To die, or to overcome death? (12.)*

familiar with such ideas as rebirth, *ātman*, and liberation, and once they read the *Gita* in its entirety, they seem to take a more holistic view of the text, its ideals of equanimity and detachment, its recommendations on diet, lifestyle and meditation. For them the *Gita* is directly relevant, a practical guide to living well and evolving spiritually. Just as in the 19th century, the *Gita* became dear to Emerson and Thoreau and shaped transcendentalism, today the *Gita* has a role as a universal spiritual text. Meanwhile, the culture-curious and heritage-learners see the *Gita* as a medium through which they familiarize themselves with Hindu beliefs.

**Q: In India, there are now two generations of people who are affluent, tech-savvy, highly mobile, how do you think can the *Gita* influence them? Do you think your adaptation can bring them closer to the philosophy inherent in the *Gita*?**

**A:** All translations, adaptations and retellings help sustain the life of the original they represent. Everyone knows the story of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* but who has read them in Sanskrit? The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* continue because they have been assimilated into languages, been performed in dance and drama, became a part of the folk tradition. *Gita* already has hundreds of translations, and each translation finds its audience. Mine speaks to the reader who may know some *shlokas* and concepts but has

## The Beautiful & the Damned sans the opening chapter

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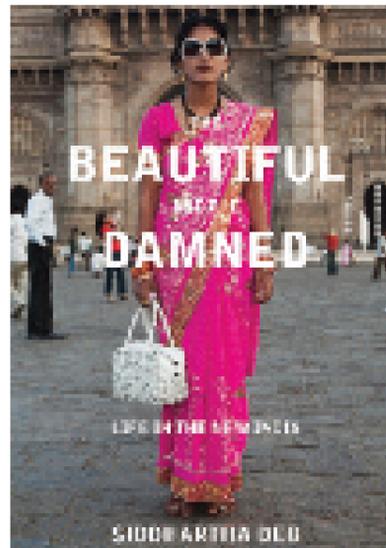
SIDDHARTHA DEB'S book *The Beautiful and the Damned* is a narrative non-fiction account of contemporary India. It was published in the UK earlier in the year, but, writes Deb in the *Guardian*, "The same book will now come out in India, but without its first chapter. Instead, there will be a note explaining that an injunction was issued against the chapter by a small provincial court in India, making it legally impossible to publish it until the matter had been resolved in the courts."

The proscribed chapter was published in the February issue of the *Caravan* magazine. On 30 April, a court in Silchar, a small town in the north-eastern state of Assam issued an injunction against a the *Caravan* article and the chapter. No notice was received by any of

the defendants before the injunction was issued. The suit, for which court fees of Rs 11,000 (£150) were paid, claims damages of 50 crore rupees (£7m) for defamation from the publisher and editor of *Caravan* magazine, Deb, Penguin and Google India.

Deb writes that in a sequence of five narratives that looks at the lives of Indians from the very rich to the very poor, the first chapter focused on Arindam Chaudhuri, a tremendously successful management guru who runs a group of companies that includes a cluster of business education schools. Deb says, his story on Chaudhuri is based on "a series of interviews with Chaudhuri, a flamboyant, pony-tailed figure who is chauffeured around Delhi in a Bentley."

Deb describes his portrayal of Chaudhuri as a "nuanced portrait of the man and his business. It looked at the aspirations



unleashed in the new India, both in figures such as Chaudhuri, whose face stares out at one from advertisements in virtually every newspaper and magazine of note, to the largely provincial middle-class students who flock to his schools."

Deb also recalls the fate of another book, on another Indian business magnate in another decade. It was the book *The Polyester Prince* written by Australian journalist Hamish McDonald, a biography of Dhirubhai Ambani, "a shrewd investor who built a vast business empire that was inherited by his feuding sons Anil and Mukesh, two of the wealthiest individuals in the world. McDonald's book was published in India last year in an updated version under the title *Ambani and Sons*, but the original book, to be brought out in 1998, faced injunctions from Dhirubhai Ambani's company.