Ashok Kumar Malbora *Transcreation of the Bhagavad Gita.*

Michael Andregg
mmandregg@stthomas.edu

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What a splendid book!

Ashok Malhotra’s principal goal was to provide a concise clear path for ordinary undergraduate students to the most central messages and images of the Indian classic, the Bhagavad Gita. At this he has succeeded magnificently, partly through consistent use of well written teaching aids.

Malhotra is an excellent Sanscrit, Hindi and Gita scholar, having nearly memorized the original text in his native India by the age of ten, before moving on through the standard transitions of the academic world, and teaching for over 30 years at SUNY Oneonta and other American universities. There are hundreds of translations of the Bhagavad Gita and I’m sure many are more faithful to the literal Sanskrit text than this effort. But Malhotra’s prime goal was to create a readable text, accessible to ordinary students who can be confused by the many long and exotic names, complex relations, and by the florid and sometimes repetitious prose of the original.

In the past I used another good translation of the Gita by Shri Purohit Swami (The Gospel of the Lord Shri Krishna: The Bhagavad Gita, New York: Vintage Books, 1977). That 175 page book is lavishly illustrated and thoroughly presented in a much more literal and complete translation of the whole text with appropriate and extensive commentaries throughout: great for the scholar with time and a focused interest, not at all easy for the harried undergraduate student working on the side, and maybe managing a family as well.

Malhotra’s book by contrast is less detailed and complete, which is why he calls it a “transcreation” rather than a translation. But it sets itself apart by excelling at being accessible to the students he sees every day. Chapters are short, a page and a half to four, usually. Each is preceded by a paragraph abstract, and other very parsimonious but well written commentaries which help the
student to see the story behind the words, and the philosophical complications within the story. The text ends at a merciful page 68, which is more than a trivial decision when one wants to reach those who find reading a strain. Brevity is essential to the goal of accessibility.

Malhotra and his helpers spent considerable effort simplifying the English words chosen throughout. He follows the text with half page commentaries from 20 scholars through time, including notables like Gandhi, Weber and T.S. Elliot. He provides a page and a half synopsis of the story, a page glossary of the main characters, and his own analytic commentary to these, all helpful, but is economical to the end.

The Gita has been a standard text of Hindu thought for centuries. Malhotra’s book is a clear, simple path to the most central messages of one of India’s main religious texts and cultural templates. It would be excellent for 11th and 12th grade as well, and for gifted students at any level if they are lucky enough to have teachers able to explore comparative religion and philosophy broadly. But it has a broad range of appeal across both age and level of background: indeed I would recommend it enthusiastically and without reservation to anyone.

MICHAEL ANDREGG