

BOOK REVIEW

*Review by Annavajhula J.C. Bose**

LIFE IS AS IS: TEACHINGS FROM THE MAHABHARATA

AUTHORS: Kavita A. Sharma and Indu Ramchandani

PUBLISHER: Wisdom Tree, 2018, pp.202

Price: 345 INR

and

THE GITA FOR CHILDREN

AUTHOR: Roopa Rai

PUBLISHER: Hachette, 2015, pp.264

Price: 299 INR

The abovementioned two books are among the very best that I have read in the last few months. Interestingly, the first one is written by an ex-Principal of the Hindu College in Delhi University and a journalist specializing in Hindu philosophy respectively, and the second book is written by a computer engineer—all women writers *par excellence*. The first one has drawn the attention and admiration of the Indian politician, philosopher and poet Karan Singh, and the second one, that of the NITI Ayog economist Bibek Debroy.

As Karan Singh remarks, “To write a new book on the Mahabharata requires a combination of courage, audacity, ability and perseverance, all of which Prof. Kavita Sharma and her co-author Indu Ramchandani, have displayed in full measure. They have gone to great lengths to present the Mahabharata in five chapters which cover the key philosophical and historical events of the great war, the lessons learnt, as well as the words of wisdom from the great personalities whom we came across, such as Markandeya, Bhishma, Vidur, Sage Vyasa, among others, and of course Sri Krishna himself. I warmly congratulate the authors for having undertaken this task which must have required several years of sustained work. Their book presents this great epic with an interesting perspective to a whole new generation of readers in India and abroad in compact and coherent language.... This epic remains a massive memory in

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our cultural tradition and has impacted not only India but many countries in South and South East Asia. In the Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia for example, the largest religious structure in the world, the stories of Ramayana and the Mahabharata are beautifully engraved on the walls. This immortal epic will always remain a major element in our collective memory, and I commend this work to all those interested in Indian culture in the country and around the world.”

For most of us, the Gita which is part and parcel of the Mahabharata, is the most difficult thing anyone could ever read, but as Debroy has remarked, delightfully written by Roopa, it will trigger interest in readers of every age, and in addition as Roopa herself says, it is to discover the Krishna in each one of us.

How we understand our own culture and the other cultures is very essential to building a ‘*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*’, or inclusive communities through peaceful mutual co-existence. These two books serve this purpose by strengthening the Indian psyche without losing compassion towards the others, in a world that is now torn apart by so many man-made differences.

Life Is As Is, is a comment that we can never live perfect lives. All of us, the best of us, are fallible and have moments of weakness and vulnerability. Then, what is the way out and who are the role models? Kavita and Indu explore the longest epic text without any value judgements or complicated theories and hypotheses. There are two eternal truths—the power of self-control and the play of the human mind, both of which, cannot be easily attained or understood. As they put it so beautifully, “The Mahabharata shows life to be a blend or an elixir of good and evil, virtues and vices; strengths and weaknesses, which are found in all the players in this great drama of life—from the wisest sages to the revered teachers, from the powerful kings to the average common people who are leading seemingly mundane lives and who are recipients of neither name, fame, nor wealth. Sri Krishna himself has to resort to ‘deceit’ in order to deal with the world and handle its complexities—a world, which is shrouded in shades of grey, with all codes of ethics and morality being ambiguous. The Mahabharata also shows that a person may have acquired great knowledge but may still succumb to moments of weakness. It is one thing to teach self-control, and emphasize the need to overcome anger, lust, and greed, but it is quite another thing to overcome the driving basic human passions and instincts and acquire mastery over them. ...It does not portray an ideal world; it is a world of myriad colours, an ever-hanging kaleidoscope in which no one is perfect. Most situations reveal that the ideal is only aspirational but the skein is too knotted to move in a linear progression towards it. Yet the ideal emerges through the valuable lessons learnt by the reader or listener who walks with the myriad characters and learns of not only their pitfalls and follies, but also their courage and heroism in the face of all odds, trying to make sense of what they encounter according to their *svabhava* and *svadharma* (one’s nature and understanding of one’s duty). Perhaps, the most valuable lessons are of *karuna* or compassion, which render us less judgemental and more self-aware of what it is to be human.” Nothing can be said more enlightening as this.

The ISKON website lists out various tangible and intangible benefits of reading the Gita. The Krishna in each one of us, as Roopa conveys, is the inner voice that guides us on how to live our lives in the most honest, best possible way! Every time we are in distress or despair,

every time we are unsure about what the right thing to do is, we have no choice but to read the Gita. To be happy, we just have to stay true to our nature. But how? There is no age bar, or gender bar or any bar at all to be calm and unruffled in every situation, to listen to others' points of view instead of only putting forward one's opinions, to speak gently and little, to be tolerant and compassionate, and to live a disciplined life. That is what is meant by staying true to one's nature. And we have to act wisely. But how can we ensure we are acting wisely? "There is no easy answer to that one. But there are some hints, nudges and recommendations in the Gita, some starter-kit tips, as there are in every wise book, to help you along."Roopa has indeed done a wonderfully reassuring interpretation of the Gita for everyone overpowered by troubled times.

To sum up, both the books are gems that goad us to make efforts to discover for ourselves while not giving any restful definitiveness in doing so.