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## Hidden Meanings for World-Weary Princes

Omission as Interpretive Strategy  
in Theghnāth's *Gītā bhāṣā*

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### Introduction

The *Bhagavadgītā* has a long and rich history of being approached as a philosophical, or scholastic, text in premodern India, beginning with the earliest extant commentary by Śaṅkara in the eighth century CE. In premodern South Asia, the Sanskrit commentary exemplified the act of scholastic, religious reading – a genre which was hyper-conscious of its place and predecessors in its circumscribed traditions of reading. The commentary mediated canon-creation, fixed meaning through negotiating prior and opposing interpretations, and imbued the text with authority while simultaneously keeping it in a state of constant dialogic confrontation, always exhaustive but never completely stable. In early modern North India, the emergence of practices of commentary, adaptation, and translation in early Hindi reveals a range of protocols of transmission, allowing texts to reach newer, often non-specialist audiences.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will examine one such rendition of the *Bhagavadgītā* composed in 1500 CE in the Gwalior court, the *Gītā bhāṣā*, written by

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1 See, for just a few examples of recent scholarship on vernacular adaptation and translation, of scholastic and literary texts in North India and early Hindi: Allen 2022; Williams 2018; Cort 2015; Patel 2011.

an author named Theghnāth. Theghnāth claimed to have been writing the work for the benefit of his patron, Bhānu, the son of Kīrti Singh, and uncle to Mānsingh Tomar, who reigned in Gwalior at the time. In considering Theghnāth's remarkably faithful rendition of the *Gītā*, I attend, in this chapter, to his moments of silence and absences in transmission, asking why, and how, he omits concepts from his source text. I argue that omission, in the case of Theghnāth's text, should be understood as a self-conscious interpretive strategy for vernacular adaptation, and further sheds light on what the act of vernacular translation allowed writers like Theghnāth to do with Sanskrit texts. I suggest that Theghnāth employs this strategy to point outside the text, using the logic of the hidden meaning, and the need for spiritual and intellectual mediation, to tacitly highlight or leave space for alternative religious authorities and commitments.

## Theghnāth's Text in Context

A single manuscript of the *Gītā bhāṣā* is housed in the Nāgarī Pracārīṇī Sabhā (NPS) in Banaras.<sup>2</sup> Theghnāth's text is remarkable for a few reasons. First, while there is not a great deal of information to be found about Theghnāth, his own introduction to the work gives us a fair amount of information about the circumstances of the text's composition, including the location of its production, his patrons, and the process of how he came to produce the text. Second, Theghnāth's protocols of translation are significant, since he translates each Sanskrit verse into *bhāṣā*, in sequence, allowing us a closer understanding of his own interventions in the text. Finally, Theghnāth's *Gītā* affords us a glimpse into the culture of vernacular writing that was emerging in the Gwalior court during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, widely acknowledged to have been a significant period and site for the efflorescence of early Hindi literature, due to the patronage of Mānsingh Tomar, as well as broader trends for literary production in the region. This text is likely to be one of the earliest extant renditions of the *Gītā* in early Hindi. The Nāgarī Pracārīṇī Sabhā's catalogue claims that it was in fact *the* earliest *bhāṣā Gītā*, though it would be difficult to confirm this with any certainty.<sup>3</sup>

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2 NPS 783/11. All references following this will refer only to folio numbers. The manuscript is described in an NPS catalogue (Mishra 1944–46: 406–7).

3 Callewaert and Hemraj attest to at least a few earlier translations, including a Braj poetical rendition by Viṣṇusvāmī based on the Jñāneśvarī, dated 1320 CE (Callewaert and Hemraj 1982: 166).

While this text has not been studied in detail, it was nevertheless considered by Harihar Nivas Dvivedi to be a useful source on both the Gwalior court and on sixteenth-century Gwaliyari Hindi.<sup>4</sup> Radheśyām Dvivedi's *Hindī bhāṣā aur sāhitya meṁ Gvāliyar kṣetr kā yogdān* (The Contribution of Gwalior to Hindi Language and Literature) contains a detailed description of sections of this work, suggesting that it is about *nīti* (statecraft) and *dharma*, and that Theghnāth provided, for those who are still attached to *saṁsāra*, simple directions to the *śāśvat mārg*, or the eternal path. He states that Theghnāth's composition was valuable because it addressed *kṣātra dharma* and the destruction of delusion, at a time when Rajputs were enduring and fighting attacks on Hindu culture and needed to be reminded of the Kurukṣetra war and a past *dharmayuddha*.<sup>5</sup> This may tell us more about Dvivedi's concerns than Theghnāth's, however; Heidi Pauwels has argued against the idea that Gwaliyari martial chronicles are to be connected to a new awareness of Hindu *dharma* in the face of Muslim rule. Citing influential scholars like R. S. McGregor and Harihar Nivas Dvivedi, she notes the tendency to interpret these works as the assertion of Hindu identity in the context of Islamic rule.<sup>6</sup> For the moment it would be useful to note Pauwels' conclusion that 'a micro-historical approach proves fruitful to understand the complexities of vernacular epic retellings', particularly as we go on to consider the potential functions of Theghnāth's rendition of the *Gītā* through the lens of his own, very particular, protocols of translation.<sup>7</sup>

I propose in what follows that the nuances of Theghnāth's writing, its emphases and, equally significant, its omissions, come far more clearly into relief when his text is understood in the context of existing interpretive traditions surrounding the *Bhagavadgītā*, forms of epic vernacular production that were prevalent during this time and in this region, and his own possible sectarian position, to the extent that these can be recovered. How, then, may we understand Theghnāth's protocols of transmission in the context of what he was trying to do with the *Bhagavadgītā*? Theghnāth's own introduction is detailed and extremely helpful in understanding and contextualizing his translation: he describes not only the details of where, when, and for whom the text was written, but also lays out in some detail his reasons for writing about the *Bhagavadgītā* for his particular audience. Theghnāth, within the first few verses, refers to his work as both *kabitu* and *kathā*. In the

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4 Dvivedi 1976: 146; see also Dvivedi 1955: 185–90.

5 Dvivedi 1972: 165.

6 Pauwels 2020: 23.

7 Ibid.: 35.

first instance, he frames his text as a sort of poetic composition, or simply a verse rendering of the root text: ‘I meditate upon the feet of guru Rāmdas / through whose blessing [I] completed this poem [*kabitu*].’[1]<sup>8</sup> He also goes on to further characterize his work as a *kathā*, for the *sants*.<sup>9</sup> While a deeper engagement with the questions of genre that these terms raise is outside the scope of the present essay, we may note here that he does not appear in his introduction to be explicitly positioning his work as *ṭīkā* or commentary.

Theghnāth tells us that he wrote his text in vs 1557/1500 or 1501 CE, at the fort in Gopāñcal.<sup>10</sup> He goes on to praise Mānsingh Tomar, saying that he resides in Gopāñcal like Indra in Amarāvati, the first of many comparisons employed in his text to praise royal figures in Gwalior.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, the fifteenth-century court in Gwalior was also the site of composition for Viṣṇudās’ vernacular *Mahābhārata*, the *Pāṇḍavcarit*. Imre Bangha has written at length about Viṣṇudās’ adaptations of both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, noting in particular the relationship of these vernacular epics to the genre of *khyāti* or chronicles of praise. He talks about Viṣṇudās’ choice to identify his patrons with the heroes of these epics, ‘twisting the epic tale to suit contemporary, local concerns’.<sup>12</sup>

Theghnāth appears to employ very similar strategies in his descriptions of his patrons, though arguably, towards a modified end. While epic narratives tended to emphasize battle contexts, the *Gītā* here is a different sort of text, and his descriptions of his patrons tend to reflect this. Mānsingh here is not a fierce warrior, as in Viṣṇudās’ treatment of his ancestor Dūṅgarendra Singh, or even really a connoisseur of literature as in Dhrupad songs, as described by Heidi Pauwels and Eva De Clercq.<sup>13</sup> Theghnāth describes him as having been born to protect the earth,<sup>14</sup> in a manner recognizably like the claims Kṛṣṇa makes of himself in the *Bhagavadgītā*, a point surely not lost on the audience of his text, which likely included Mānsingh himself. Bhānu, Theghnāth’s patron, is described in even more detail: ‘In that house there is the great warrior Bhānu, who is like Bhīṣma in Hastināpura.’<sup>15</sup> He is also likened to Yudhiṣṭhira: ‘He knows the secret of what is good and bad.

8 *rāmadāsa guru dhyāu pāi | jā prasāda yaha kabitu sirāi* || [2] ff. 1a.

9 *taise santa leha tuma jāni | mai ju kathā yaha kahai bakhāni* || [6] Ibid.

10 *padmasau sattāvanu ānu | gaḍhu gopācala uttama ṭhānu* || [7] Ibid.

11 *mānasāhi tiha durgga nirīṁdu | janu amarāvati so hai īnda* || [8] Ibid.

12 Bangha 2014: 369.

13 De Clercq and Pauwels, 2020: 12.

14 *nīta punna saurṇ guna āgarau | basudhā rākhana kau avatarau* || [9] ff. 1a.

15 *tā ghara bhānu mahābharu tisai | hathanāpura mahi bhīṣama jise* || [14] Ibid.

Bhānukumār is like another dharma[rājā].<sup>16</sup> His identification with Yudhiṣṭhira is particularly significant in the context of Bhānu's own impetus to study the *Gītā*, particularly as Theghnāth anticipates the crisis to come: after all, this is *kaliyuga*, and the world is filled with avarice.<sup>17</sup> Bhānu is described as being knowledgeable about the six *darśanas*, merciful, generous, and accomplished in *tantra* and *yoga*, but what truly qualifies him to hear the *Gītā* is that he is deeply conflicted. He recognizes the transitoriness of his worldly connections: the world of family ties is identified as illusory, part of the net of *māyā*, since everyone eventually dies.<sup>18</sup> As a result of this dismal realization, Bhānu places a heavy responsibility on Theghnāth's shoulders: "Tell me that tale quickly", said the prince, "from which the essence and the non-essence are understood".<sup>19</sup>

Theghnāth agrees to teach Bhānu, with the resources at his disposal, namely his devotion to Kṛṣṇa and the teachings of his guru. This is a significant point: the *Gītā* here is cited as a possible resolution to the tension between worldly demands and the demands of *vairāgya*, world-weariness or detachment.<sup>20</sup> This, then, as in the text's epic context, allows it to be understood as directly pertaining to the problems of a royal personality who has a tendency towards asceticism.

Theghnāth, then, allows us a fair amount of insight into the immediate courtly context of production of his *Gītā bhāṣā*, but his location in the sectarian landscape of his time is somewhat less clear. Harihar Nivas Dvivedi has suggested that Theghnāth may have been an ascetic of the Nāth *panth*, which, he claims, had a presence in sixteenth-century Gwalior, suggesting additionally that Theghnāth was an important figure in the Nāth *sampradāy* in Gwalior.<sup>21</sup> However, the extent to which Nāth lineages can be said to have been institutionalized during this time remains far from certain.<sup>22</sup> Imre Bangha and Heidi Pauwels have both discussed the difficulty surrounding claims of a Nāth identity in

16 *bhale bure kau jānai marma | bhānu kubaru janu dūjai dharma* || [25] ff. 1b.

17 *ihī kaliyuga mai hai saba koī/ | dina dina lobha cauganau hoi* || [26]

Everyone is in this age of Kali, and avarice increases fourfold, day by day. Ibid.

18 *mātā pitā putra saṁsāru | yahi saba dīśai māyājāru* || [50] Ibid.

19 *yāte samajhai sāru asāru/ vega kathā kari kahai kumāru*. [55] Ibid.

20 See Pauwels 2020 on the importance of *vairāgya*, which she translates as 'world-weariness,' in Tomar epic narratives.

21 Dvivedi 1976: 90.

22 Though the Nāth tradition traces itself as far back as the ninth and twelfth centuries through the figures of Matsyendranāth and Gorakhnāth respectively, the Nāth *sampradāy* as a distinct and organized entity probably did not come into being until the seventeenth century (Mallinson 2011: 409). Dvivedi's claims seem to arise at least partly from mentions of *siddhas* in Gvālpa in Gopāñcal,

fifteenth-century Gwalior in the case of Viṣṇudās, who was also claimed to have been a Nāth by Dvivedi, as well as by R. S. McGregor.<sup>23</sup> As will become clear through this chapter's analysis of Theghnāth's choices in emphasis in his rendition of the *Gītā*, however, his work clearly displays an interest in bodily practices, *yoga*, and the figure of the guru. As Patton Burchett has recently suggested:

The social, political, and cultural conditions of thirteenth- to fifteenth-century North India generated a religious environment characterized in part by a shared grammar of asceticism that often superseded sectarian religious boundaries. In this context, Sufis, tāntrikas, and yoga practitioners of all stripes interacted with and borrowed from each other.<sup>24</sup>

Equally significantly, Burchett points to the extent to which Vedānta and Nāth traditions assimilated each other's practices and concerns in early modern North India.<sup>25</sup>

Another significant lens through which we may contextualize Theghnāth's writing is that of Michael Allen's conception of 'Greater Advaita Vedānta', which emphasizes, in contrast to what he calls 'Classical Advaita Vedānta', 'a much more expansive and less clearly defined tradition, embracing works not usually included in the classical canon'.<sup>26</sup> Allen classifies Greater Advaita Vedānta into three broad categories: (1) vernacular works, (2) nonphilosophical works (e.g. narratives and dramas), and (3) "eclectic" works in which Vedantic teachings are blended with Yoga, Tantra, *bhakti*, etc.<sup>27</sup> I suggest that Theghnāth's work fits well into the first and third categories delineated here. Indeed, the openness of the question of genre in his text may qualify him for the second as well. Theghnāth's choice to write this work, as well as the details he furnishes of its contexts of production, provides a significant site within which to better understand the range of genres and texts that participated in developments in vernacular Vedānta traditions in the early modern period in North India.

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as described in Khadgaray's *Gopācal-ākhyān*, for example, as Bangha also notes (Dvivedi 1980: 57–9; Bangha 2014: 370).

23 Dvivedi 1980: 59; Pauwels 2021: 237 n.3.

24 Burchett 2019: 170.

25 Ibid.: 179.

26 Allen 2022: 8.

27 Ibid.

## Theghnāth's Use of *bhāṣā*

Unlike modern receptions of the text, there is little scholarship about vernacular, in particular early Hindi, receptions of the *Gītā* during this period, and the purposes for which it was read and disseminated. Yet around and following this time, we do see the emergence of commentarial literature in Hindi which was often actively drawing from Sanskrit commentarial traditions, or from specific commentaries in Sanskrit, both formally and substantively. Theghnāth's work needs to be understood in the dual context of a scholastic tendency in *Gītā* interpretation prevalent during his time, as well as his own audience in the Gwalior court who were likely to have been familiar with vernacular retellings of epic narrative. Early vernacular *Mahābhāratas* often left out the *Gītā*, rendering it at best briefly.<sup>28</sup> Viṣṇudās' *Pāṇḍavcarit* glosses over it, focusing entirely on the battle, although Kṛṣṇa takes a moment to talk about the importance of *jñāna* and *dharma*. R. S. McGregor suggests that this likely points to his reliance on Jain epic versions, which would have excluded the *Gītā* as well.<sup>29</sup> As McGregor describes, the *Pāṇḍavcarit* draws primarily from the themes of the first few books of the *Mahābhārata*, and in his *Rāmāyaṇkathā* as well, Viṣṇudās tends to focus on the narrative aspect of Vālmiki's story, 'reducing or discarding expository passages'.<sup>30</sup> The *Gītā*'s exclusion, or compression, in vernacular *Mahābhāratas*, then, raises important questions about the presumed functions of these compositions, and about the status of the *Gītā* itself. In particular, the fact that its exposition was often excluded from vernacular epics suggests a self-conscious cleaving of the *Gītā* from its broader epic context, as well as, perhaps, an awareness of its role in scholastic circles. This makes Theghnāth's choice to render the *Gītā* in full for Bhānu even more intriguing. He raises the question of his writing in *bhāṣā* fairly late in the text: perhaps this was following what he believed to be a particularly difficult section of the *Gītā* – specifically following the eighth *adhyāya* – and called for a reminder of his endeavour to make it more comprehensible or accessible to his audience. Yet it is noteworthy that Theghnāth does not, at the outset of his work, perform humility with respect to his choice to write in the vernacular. This is apparently in contrast with writers like Tulsīdās who, in the introductory section of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, declared his work to be worthy of ridicule, because of his use of *bhāṣā* and his feeble

28 See Pillai 2024: 77–81.

29 McGregor 2003: 913.

30 Ibid.

intellect.<sup>31</sup> Such modesty was common, if frequently disingenuous. For Theghnāth, the brief discussion here of *bhāṣā* is an opportunity to talk about the difficulty of the *Gītā*'s message on the one hand, and to talk about his own interventions on the other, returning to the context of his being asked to produce the text.

Theghnāth uses a familiar formulation, when he describes his decision to write the *Gītā* in *bhāṣā*. Pointing to the absence of a strict terminology for translation in premodern South Asia, John Cort points to this extremely common formulation, in the context of Jain authors, who 'simply said that they were "making it vernacular," using the noun *bhasha* (*bhāṣā*) and a form of the verb *kar*'.<sup>32</sup> Here, it seems likely that Theghnāth raises the question of language choice, not simply to introduce the fact of the vernacular being used, but also to show what he was *doing* with it. He says:

All eighteen of the *adhyāyas* in the *Gītā* are said to be difficult;  
Taking up Bhānukumār's challenge, Theghnāth recited it,  
making it into *bhāṣā*.<sup>33</sup>

The essence of the *Gītā* that is in it is inexhaustible, says Theghu.  
Only a person with experiential knowledge has the ability to  
know its secrets.<sup>34</sup>

The meaning of all its matters do not arise at once in my song.  
Whoever is embraced by the *satguru* understands it.<sup>35</sup>

31 *bhāṣā bhaniti bhoṛi mati morī | haṁsibe joga haṁse nahim khorī |* | Poddar 1956: 40.

32 Cort 2015: 97. Other scholars have considered alternatives to the term 'translation', in the context of interlingual iterations of texts during this period. One significant example is the term 'transcreation'. For example, the editors of a journal issue on 'Transcreating the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*' argue that the term illuminates the extent to which authors of these different iterations 'mean to achieve a new text'. Horstmann and Mishra 2018: 3.

33 I read *vīrā* here as *bīḍā*, betel leaf. On this reading, *vīrā lahai* is here referring to the act of accepting a betel leaf or *pān* as taking up a request or challenge.

34 Here I read *anabhaya* as a *tadbhava* form of *anubhava*, and *anabhaya puruṣa* as referring to a person with experiential or mystical knowledge. Callawaert and Swapna Sharma 2009: 67. Callawaert here cites an attestation from Raidās. Callawaert and de Beek 2021: 427.

35 *Gītā jite aṭhārahi dhyāi | durlabha savai kahyau ko jāi |*  
*Bhānu kuvaru ko vīrā lahai | thegunātha bhāṣā kari kahai |*  
*tāhu mahi jo gītā sāru | theghu tāko lahai na pārū |*  
*koī anabhaya puruṣa jo hoī | vā ke maramahi janai soī |*  
*vā mahi savai ata jhapara vātā | artha na upajai mere gātā |*



Here, Theghnāth uses familiar tropes from the emerging vernacular textual landscape in professing the limitations of his own work. There are a range of issues we may fruitfully unpack here. First is the description of the *Gītā* as *durlabha*, hard to obtain or understand. Theghnāth may here be drawing from formulaic ways of describing the text and pitching his own reading as alleviating some of this difficulty while simultaneously highlighting the ambitiousness of both his project and his patron's motivations.

Śaṅkara's eighth-century Sanskrit commentary on the *Gītā* refers to the text as *durvijñeyārtham* – whose meaning is difficult to ascertain, and whose meaning is understood by people in general as extremely contradictory.<sup>36</sup> Śaṅkara proposes his 'brief explanation' of the text as a way of alleviating this problem of understanding.<sup>37</sup> He also suggests that it contains the essence of the Vedas. Ānandagiri, in his subcommentary on Śaṅkara's *bhāṣya*, clarifies this statement, saying that it dispels the idea of the *Gītā* as being unobtainable, and demonstrates the need for its explication. Ānandagiri further, in glossing Śaṅkara's characterization of the text as difficult, raises the possible objection that the *Gītā*'s meaning is obtainable just from its *akṣaras* or syllables. Why, then, is any further explanation necessary? Here he raises traditional definitions of the functions of commentary, before establishing that the position which is the object of Śaṅkara's critiques – *jñānakarmasamuccayavāda*, the idea that the *Gītā* recommends both action and knowledge – is held by those unfamiliar with the text.<sup>38</sup> All this is not to suggest that Theghnāth may have had precisely this section in mind; I suggest rather that his interjection of this verse here was likely participating

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*jākoṃ sataguru bhaiṭaiṃ āi | | tau vaha vāta kahaī samajhāi | |*  
ff. 16b.

36 Śaṅkara's authorship of many texts attributed to him have come under question, but there is relative consensus among scholars regarding his authorship of the *Gītābhāṣya*. See Mayeda 1965.

37 *tad idam gītāśāstrāṇi samastavedārthasārasaṅgrahabhūtaṃ durvijñeyārtham tadarthāviṣkaraṇāyānekair vivṛtapadapadārthavākyaṛthanyāyam api atyan-taviruddhānekārthavatvena laukikair gṛhyamāṇam upalabhya ahaṃ vivekato 'rthanirdhāraṇārthaṃ saṅkṣepato vīvaraṇaṃ kariṣyāmi |*

This *Gītā śāstra*, which brings together the essence of the meaning of the entire Veda, is difficult to understand. Even though many have explained its meanings *pada* by *pada*, the meaning of its utterances, and its logic, for the purpose of making its meaning clear, it is understood by people as having extremely contradictory, multiple meanings; understanding this, I will compose a brief explanation, in order to ascertain its meaning through discrimination.

38 *gītāśāstrasyānāptapraṇītatvam apākṛtya vyākhyeyatvam upapāditam upasamharati |*.

in exegetical conventions in which the act of writing an explication of a text was defended through an appeal to its need for an interpretation. Here, Theghnāth raises the difficulty of the text in the context of his patron, Bhānu, and links it to his decision to write it in, or as, *bhāṣā*.

He asserts, then, that this work contains the *gītā sāra*, or the essence of the *Gītā*, while once more emphasizing its difficulty with another familiar formulation: the idea that the *Gītā*'s essence is inexhaustible, but also that it is contained within his *bhāṣā* work. In the end, he points outside the text, taking recourse to the figure of the *satguru*. His claims about the depth of the *Gītā*'s essence, its presence in his rendition, and the necessity of the guru in understanding it, strongly suggest a statement of an act of interpretation in this work, while also suggesting the existence of ideas beyond what is explicitly presented. The ideas in the *Gītā*, as expressed in Theghnāth's work, cannot be understood all at once, and both the *satguru*'s intervention, and mystical, experiential knowledge, are required to understand its hidden depths.<sup>39</sup>

## Omission as Interpretation

The text of the *Gītā*, in Theghnāth's hands, is rendered verse by verse, largely following the sequence of the verses in Sanskrit. Within these formal boundaries, however, Theghnāth finds space for intervention, and makes significant choices in what he transmits to his patron and broader audience. Large sections of this work are fairly close renditions of the Sanskrit text, using glosses, synonyms, and *tadbhava* forms, and appear, at least on the surface, to be what we might call 'iconic translations'. John Cort notes that 'the practice of faithful iconic translation would appear to have been rare' in premodern Indian literary practice, even as practices are seen to have existed which we would now understand to be acts of translation.<sup>40</sup> In transmitting the 'content' of the *Bhagavadgītā*, then, Theghnāth follows both the structure and, in several instances, stays exceptionally close to the syntax and vocabulary of the verses of his source text, as he renders them in *bhāṣā*.

39 I thank the anonymous reviewer of this paper for their clarifying comments on this section.

40 Cort 2015: 115. Cort in using these terms follows A. K. Ramanujan, who in turn borrows them from Charles Sanders Pierce. An 'iconic' translation is one in which the texts in question are said to bear a 'geometrical resemblance'. In an 'indexical' translation, the plot and structure of one text is used only minimally by the other, while details and contexts are altered. See Ramanujan 1992: 22–49.

However, a closer reading of how Theghnāth renders the text makes its possible characterization as an ‘iconic’ translation somewhat slippery and insufficient. There are several instances in which portions and aspects of the Sanskrit text are simply not included in Theghnāth’s *Gītā*, or glossed over in favour of foregrounding broader issues in the text. In this section, I examine some brief but significant instances in which Theghnāth appears to be actively omitting sections of the source material which involve ideas specific to the *Gītā*’s own contexts. My focus here will be primarily on examining the protocols of rendering that we can see in Theghnāth’s text, and on reading his strategies of making the text intelligible to his patron and larger potential audience. I suggest that looking at what is *left out* of renditions like Theghnāth’s can be a useful tool in understanding, on the one hand, what the purpose and audience of a particular translation may have been, and, on the other hand, the relationship between translation and exegesis or interpretation that this may point to. The practice of omission, moreover, is not limited to Theghnāth, or even to writers in the early modern vernaculars – indeed, choices about what to leave out in interpreting a text are central to practices of both commentary and adaptation, broadly construed. For instance, the earliest extant commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā*, Śaṅkara’s *Gītābhāṣya*, itself displays a wide range of choices in omission – some sections of the text are not commented upon, and some doctrinal aspects of the work are elided through the very act of commentary. Omission in interpretation – in adaptation, translation, or commentary – is therefore a common, because effective, strategy, and yet is often overlooked in analyses of what these forms allowed interpreters to do with the text. In the case of Theghnāth’s *Gītā bhāṣā*, for instance, the Sanskrit root text of the *Gītā* is not included in the manuscript, providing Theghnāth with the opportunity to reframe the text of the *Gītā* through the lens of his reading in *bhāṣā*. While it is uncontroversial to say that an act of adaptation is indeed an act of interpretation, and that the boundaries between commentary, translation, adaptation, and even editorial practices in premodern South Asia were often porous, it remains unclear just what the act of rendering a text like the *Gītā* from Sanskrit allowed vernacular writers to do. Can we think about this form of adaptation, for instance, as an interpretive strategy, reworking and redefining what the source text *is*?<sup>41</sup>

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41 Karen Emmerich asks precisely this question in her insightful study of modern translation practices, questioning the very idea of the ‘stable “source”’, and arguing that practices of translation, rather than edit an already existing

Theghnāth's approach to translation, as I have mentioned above, tends to follow the Sanskrit source text verse-by-verse in the majority of instances, with some exceptions in which he deviates significantly from the source, seemingly in order to prioritize explicating certain verses or ideas over following the *Gītā*'s verse schemes. In the *Gītā*'s second *adhyāya*, Kṛṣṇa talks about those with *vyavasāyātmikā buddhi*, or insight which is of the nature of discrimination or resoluteness. He compares such people favourably with those whose insight is irresolute and many-branched (*bahuśākhāḥ*), referring, most likely, to the different branches of the Veda.<sup>42</sup> This is meant, quite clearly, to connect to the next verse, in which the target of the section's emphasis on ignorance is introduced – people who proclaim flowery words and who delight in the Veda, recognizing nothing else:

Ignorant people speak these flowery words;  
Pārtha, they delight in the words of the Veda, saying 'there is  
nothing else'.<sup>43</sup>

The next few verses (2.43–2.46) elaborate on this theme, describing these Veda-obsessed people: the primary quarrel with them here is that they perform acts with a view to *bhoga* and *aiśvarya*, possessing desire and falling repeatedly into rebirth as a result of their actions, in what Angelika Malinar has called 'a critical summary of the ritualistic worldview'.<sup>44</sup> This section ends with a verse that is taken up variously by Sanskrit commentators seeking to negotiate the *Gītā*'s seeming indictment of the Vedas:

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stable work, in fact 'further the iterative growth of a work in new languages'. Emmerich 2017: 11.

42 *vyavasāyātmikā buddhir ekeha kurunandana* |

*bahuśākhā hy anantās ca buddhayo 'vyavasāyinām* | | 2.41 | |

This is a single resolute insight, descendant of the Kurus  
While the insight of those who are irresolute is many-branched and endless.  
(van Buitenen 1981: 77). Only the Sanskrit text here is from the van Buitenen edition. All translations are my own, unless otherwise specified.

43 *yām imāṃ puṣpitāṃ vācaṃ pravadyanti avipaścitāḥ* |

*vedavādaratāḥ pārtha nānyad astīti vādināḥ* | | 2.42 | | Ibid.: 79.

44 *kāmātmānaḥ svargaparā janmakarmaphalaprādāḥ* |

*kriyāviśeṣabahulāḥ bhogaiśvaryaṅgatīm prati* | | 2.43 | |

They are constituted by desire, taking heaven as their goal; [these words] offer up rebirth as the result of acts;

Full of different kinds of rituals aimed at pleasure and power. Ibid.

See Malinar 2007: 72.

As much use as there is in a well when there is water flowing  
everywhere,  
That much is there in the Vedas for the *brāhmaṇa* who knows.<sup>45</sup>

Van Buitenen tells us of this verse that it is ‘a metaphor for the plenitude of spiritual experience transcending the ephemeral consequences of a strict Vedic ritualism’.<sup>46</sup> This is a complex verse, with some debate as to its meaning, and a survey even of its modern renderings serves as an important reminder of the fundamentally interpretive nature of translation, and how choices in translation underlie high doctrinal stakes.<sup>47</sup> Malinar provides a succinct and detailed analysis of both the implications of this verse and of what other scholars have made of it. She notes that some scholars of the *Gītā*, including Jacobi, Garbe, and Deussen, read this verse as approving of the Vedas, understanding it to mean that a wise Brahman collects wisdom from the Vedas as one would collect water from a pond being *filled from* all directions. Others, like Schraeder, Zaehner, and Edgerton, have noted that this verse in fact suggests the opposite – while not a wholesale rejection of Vedic knowledge, it suggests that such knowledge is only useful insofar as one lacks true wisdom.<sup>48</sup> Drawing from Schrader’s work, Malinar suggests that this verse can be located in the context of discussions in the *Sanatsujātiya* in the *Mahābhārata* and in Buddhist texts about who can truly claim to be a Brahman, and whether this should be on the basis of inherited texts.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, Malinar concludes that verse 2.46 is in fact meant to be a critique of those who rely too heavily on the Vedas – this is quite clearly in keeping with the verses that occur immediately prior, which are more obviously critical of those who follow the Veda. Additionally, as Malinar also notes, Arjuna in these verses is tacitly being accused of being one of these people himself, after a fashion, since he is concerned with the fruits of acts: this is then clearly laid out in the following verse, 2.47.<sup>50</sup>

A closer reading of some canonical commentaries on this verse in the non-dualist tradition gives us a more nuanced picture of how

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45 *yāvān artha udapāne sarvataḥ samṛplutodake | tāvān sarveṣu vedeṣu brāhmaṇasya vijānataḥ |* | 2.46 | | van Buitenen 1981: 79.

46 Ibid.: 163.

47 See Malinar 1996: 141–2, for an extended discussion on the history of translation and interpretation of this verse.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.: 143.

50 *karmaṇy evādhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣu kadācana | mā karmaphalahetur bhūr mā te saṅgo ‘stv akarmaṇi |* | (van Buitenen 1981: 79).

premodern thinkers negotiated the *Gītā*'s position on Vedic texts. For Śaṅkara, writing the *Gītābhāṣya* around the eighth century CE, a *brāhmaṇa* who renounces has access to the fruits of the rituals in the Vedas, but a performer only of ritual cannot access the knowledge of the renunciant, just as the utility of a well is contained within an overflowing body of water, but not vice-versa.<sup>51</sup> This is an argument for the performance of *karma* only by those not yet qualified for *jñāna*, in keeping with Śaṅkara's broader argument in his *Bhāṣya* that the *Gītā* recommends the path of knowledge alone as superior, with ritual activity only prescribed for those who are not qualified for renunciation.<sup>52</sup> In Śaṅkara's reading, then, the verse sets up a hierarchy between Vedic ritual practice and Upanisadic knowledge – the knowledge of the Vedas is represented by water in a well, whereas the knowledge of ultimate reality is like flowing water, in that the Vedas are useful, but limited relative to Upanisadic wisdom. Śrīdhara Svāmin and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, writing around the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively, follow Śaṅkara's argument closely. Śrīdhara clarifies that a single well may not meet all of one's needs, and one may have to go to several smaller sources of water. But a vast source of water that is overflowing meets all of one's needs. Similarly, the bliss of *brahman* is so

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51 *yathā loke kūpataḍḍāgādyanekasmin udapāne paricchinodake yāvān yāvat parimāṇaḥ snānapānādīḥ arthaḥ phalaṁ prayojanaṁ sa sarvaḥ arthaḥ sarvataḥ samplutodake 'pi yaḥ arthaḥ tāvān eva sampadyate tatra antarbhavatītyarthaḥ | evaṁ tāvān tāvatparimāṇa eva sampadyate sarveṣu vedeṣu vedokteṣu karmasu yaḥ arthaḥ yatkarmaphalaṁ saḥ arthaḥ brahmaṇasya saṁnyāsinaḥ paramārthatattvaṁ vijānataḥ yaḥ arthaḥ yat vijñānaphalaṁ sarvataḥsamplutodakasthānīyaṁ tasmin tāvān eva sampadyate tatraivāntarbhavatītyarthaḥ |*

Just as in the worldly sphere, as much use as there is – the extent of use that there is, for things like drinking and bathing and so on – in a well or a tank and other such places where water is confined, that much use is there in flowing water as well, since the value of the former is included in the latter. In the same way, the value contained in all the Vedas – the value which is the fruit of the rituals given in the Vedas – exists for the renunciant *brāhmaṇa* who has knowledge of ultimate reality, the fruits of knowledge, represented (in the verse) by flowing water. The fruits of the Vedas are thus contained within the fruits of knowledge. Paṇaśīkara 2012: 105–7.

52 Śaṅkara makes this explicit as he introduces the next verse:

*tasmāt prāk jñānaniṣṭhādhikāraprāpteḥ karmaṇy adhikṛtena kūpataḍḍāgādya-arthasthānīyaṁ api karma kartavyam |*

Therefore, before being qualified for being established in knowledge, acts are to be performed by one who is qualified for action, even though these acts are [merely] equivalent to the value contained in a well or a tank [as opposed to flowing water]. Ibid.

vast as to contain the lesser bliss of ritual action.<sup>53</sup> Madhusūdana takes this analogy further, saying: 'Just as mountain streams flow everywhere but meet at a single valley, there the function of the water of each one comes together and becomes much more, because all the streams are part of one lake.'<sup>54</sup> Here, the implication of prior commentators persists, but with a slight shift in the terms of the analogy. The Vedas – here specifically the *karma kāṇḍa*, ritual texts – whose knowledge is limited, are represented by smaller mountain streams, flowing *into* the source of supreme knowledge. Here, the hierarchy of sources of knowledge is made abundantly clear, as is the idea that, while *karma* can be said to have some value, its results are ultimately contained within *jñāna*.

Theghnāth renders this section as follows:

Arjuna, bear firm insight in your mind; do not agitate your mind.

Know all this to be one; understand knowledge which is the essence. [2.41]

Arjuna, there will never be accomplishment from bad insight. As many indiscriminate fools as there are, there are that many false words that they will speak. [2.42]

Acts which are born of desire [*kāmya karma*] result in being born again and again in a body.

If the mind [*mana*] remains with enjoyment and pleasure, the mind [*citta*] wanders, says Nārāyaṇa. [2.43]

These people do not attain *samādhi* anywhere, the Lord says to Arjuna.

Arjuna, listen to me – obtain understanding of your body. [2.44]

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53 *evaṁ yāvān sarveṣu vedeṣu tattatkarmaphalarūpo'rthas tāvān sarvo'pi vijānato vyavasāyātmikābuddhiyuktasya brāhmaṇasya brahmaṇiṣṭhasya bhavaty eva brahmānande kṣudrānandānām antarbhāvāt.*

Similarly, the value contained in all the Vedas – the fruits of this or that ritual – *all* that value exists for a *brāhmaṇa* who knows, who is established in *brahman*, who possesses resolute insight. This is because lower blisses are contained in the bliss of *brahman*. Ibid.

54 *yathā hi parvatanirjharāḥ sarvataḥ sravantaḥ kvacid upatyakāyām ekatra milanti tatra pratyekam jāyamānam udakaprayojanam samudite sutarām bhavati sarveṣām nirjharāṇām ekatraiva kāsāre 'ntarbhāvāt.* Ibid.

When you have your mind on action born of desire, then how, Partha, will you be released? Abandon happiness and sorrow, brave Pārtha – know this well, who it is that bears the body. [2.44]

Give up the objects of the three *guṇas*, leaving aside duality, bear one thing in your mind.  
One thing is the essence in all things; know the rest to be just worldly activity. [2.45]

Arjuna, as much *dharma* as a man performs, he should surrender all those acts.  
Then he will not be reborn; surrendering acts is the way to liberation. [2.45]

Wells, stepwells, lakes, and reservoirs are all filled with water, says the Lord.  
As streams arise, Arjuna, it absorbs them. [2.46]<sup>55</sup>

Seemingly here Theghnāth manages to encapsulate the sense of ‘*puṣpi-tām vācam*’ or ‘flowery speech’ in addition to the sense of non-discriminating thought as being ‘many-branched’. What is notable, however, in Theghnāth’s treatment of this entire section, is the complete absence of the Vedas themselves as the primary issue or site of concern in which the section is rooted. In the verse just referred to, then, this is glossed

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55 *arjanu niścala budhi citu dharahi* | | *cañcala mana jina kā ū karahi* | |  
*tū saba yaha ekai kari jāni* | | *samajhāvai tihi sāra gayāni* | |  
*arjana jo ya dukhati dukha buddhi* | | *tāte kabahu hoi na siddhi* | |  
*abibekī mūrakha hai jite* | | *jhūṭho bādu karahige tite* | |  
*kāmya karma jete barabāra* | | *janma janma phala deha sarīra* | |  
*bhoga vilāsa lāgi mana rahai* | | *hāñṭai citta nārāyani kahai* | |  
*lahai samādhi na kisahūñ thāna* | | *arjana sarisa kahai bhagavān* | |  
*arjana sunahi hamārī bāta* | | *lījai samajha āpane gāta* | |  
*jau tū kāma karma budhi karahi* | | *pañṭhani tūñ kau nistarahi* | |  
*sukha dukha chāḍi pañṭha barabāra* | | *bhalī budhi kin dharahi sarīra* | |  
*tīno gunani viṣayani paraharai* | | *chāḍi du dae ekai cita dharai* | |  
*ekai bāta sabana mahi sāru* | | *dūsarī bāta jāni vyauhāru* | |  
*arjanu jite dharma naru karai* | | *te sava karma samarpanu karai* | |  
*tau vahurau nāhi avatāru* | | *karma samarpaiñ mokha dūvāru* | |  
*kuvā bāvarī tāli nivāna* | | *sava jala bharai kahai bhagavāna* | |  
*jāi asargahi āñvai jite* | | *arjanu lai so varatte tite* | |  
ff. 5b.



as a general condemnation of those who speak false words. The same is true of verse 2.45, where the *Gītā* in Sanskrit explicitly states:

The scope of the Vedas is the three *guṇas*; be free of them,  
Arjuna.

Free of oppositions, fixed in constant purity, free from acquisition and preservation, and self-possessed.<sup>56</sup>

Here, Theghnāth both extends this to two verses, and removes the referent for the compound *traiguṇyaviṣayā*, leaving behind a slightly modified exhortation to avoid the objects of the *guṇas*. He then seems to gloss the second half of the verse, simply by reiterating that the essence of all things is one, and that everything else is worldly activity, or *vyavahāra*. Finally, we see that in his rendering of verse 2.46, he takes up the metaphor of the well and the reservoir, but omits some critical context – namely, again, the matter of the Vedas. Yet his rendering of the second half of the verse appears to be in keeping with his emphasis on oneness in the prior verses, and the assertion that all things have a single essence. Theghnāth here, as in other parts of the text, effectively does away with the Vedas as the object of the *Gītā*'s discussion, choosing instead to focus on the larger question of desire and oneness. What, in the tradition of non-dualist Sanskrit commentaries on the *Gītā*, is understood firmly as a discussion on the relative values of knowledge and specifically ritual action, is broadened in Theghnāth's text to provide a critique of worldly action and desire, generally speaking. Relatedly, in the absence of a reference to the Vedas, it is unclear whether Theghnāth's audience would have understood *kāmya karma* in the context of ritual actions based on desire. Theghnāth's use of the metaphor of water is, therefore, similarly fascinating – he emphasizes a common essence, without the argument of a hierarchy between forms of knowledge.

This is just one example of a strategy Theghnāth uses frequently in the text, particularly in portions of the *Gītā* which are theologically loaded or, notably, some of those dealing with Sāṃkhya ideas, even in sections where he appears to at least be aware of prior interpretive interventions. Theghnāth often skips these sections entirely, in favour of reiterating the values of detachment, the problems of action and desire, and emphasizing bodily practice. Gregory Clines, in his work on Jain Rāma

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56 *traiguṇyaviṣayā vedā nistraiguṇyo bhavārjuna | nirdvandvo nityasattvastho niryogakṣema ātmavān | | 2.45 | | van Buitenen 1981: 79.*

narratives, points to ‘multiple strategies of abridgment’ in Jinadāsa’s fifteenth-century retelling of Ravisena’s seventh-century *Padmapurāṇa*. In particular, he notes that Jinadās makes explicit a shift of genre in his project – he moves from *kāvya* to *kathā* or *ākhyāna*, and part of this process involves a range of strategies, including reformulating the text’s structure, using simpler language, and discarding wholesale any content from the original that he deems too complex and repetitive.<sup>57</sup> Yet, Clines rightly notes that ‘it is not enough simply to point out that Raviṣeṇa’s and Jinadāsa’s texts belong to different traditional literary genres. The importance of this analysis lies in the fact that these two literary genres anticipate different consumers.’<sup>58</sup>

In the case of his omission of the reference to the Vedas in the section of the text just discussed, it is possible that Theghnāth was reluctant to gloss what may have sounded like a condemnation of either the Vedas as texts, or of ritual more generally. While commentaries as a genre allowed scholars to finesse a qualified critique of the Vedas, the limitations of a verse-by-verse rendition like Theghnāth’s, may have been less forgiving. Alternatively, however, we may also consider the very real possibility that Theghnāth did not believe it necessary to provide such a context for his readers, and chose, instead, to focus on these broader questions, for what may have been a courtly, knowledgeable, but nevertheless non-specialist audience. What kind of interpretive move is Theghnāth making in these sections of the text? In leaving behind some of the specificities of the *Gītā*’s arguments, Theghnāth is clearly making choices in transmission. Yet, the act of translation allows him to reframe what he thinks the text is really saying, and then provide further explanations based on this reframed source text.

## Theghnāth’s Textual Interventions

While Theghnāth’s instances of omission as illustrated above are noteworthy, there are instances in which he appears to add to the text of the *Gītā*, subtly suggesting alternative commitments in reading the work. Theghnāth’s engagements with the *Gītā* afford us opportunities to consider what his doctrinal commitments may have been, and how they may have impacted his reading and transmission of the text. While caution around reading a coherent Nāth identity into Theghnāth’s work is certainly warranted, it is nevertheless worth

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57 Clines 2019: 355.

58 Ibid.

considering aspects of Theghnāth's rendition of the *Gītā* that gesture towards the kinds of practices and commitments he may have been bringing into the work. Given how closely Theghnāth follows the text of the *Gītā*, and his reticence in adding substantial material to the text, indications as to his doctrinal and sectarian commitments are necessarily inconclusive. As we will see briefly below, Theghnāth repeatedly interpolates the figure of the guru into the root text. This is not unusual, given the emphasis on the figure of the guru in pre-modern Hindi literatures more generally, in addition to the suggestion that the intervention of the figure of the guru is necessitated, as we saw above, by the nature of the text, and the difficulty of obtaining its secrets. In the remainder of this section, I will briefly consider a few instances in which Theghnāth brings vocabularies to the *Gītā* which suggest further acts of explication or exegesis.

Theghnāth repeatedly renders verses in ways that suggest that he highlights the role of the body through addition of the words *sarīra* and *gāta* in the text. He does not necessarily do so in ways that are introducing new ideas to the text – indeed, the choices may be purely stylistic, as he uses them most frequently to rhyme with words like *barabīra* and *bāta*, respectively. Yet, the frequency with which these instances come up are noteworthy, particularly when seen against the backdrop of the ideas he introduces into the text from the larger world of premodern Hindi *sant* poetry. When Kṛṣṇa first responds to Arjuna in what roughly corresponds to verse 2.11, he says:

Your body should not despair, now.  
Listen to the knowledge I speak about.  
When a man has *ahaṁkāra* (egotism),  
Sorrow and delusion are produced.

Furthermore, in an extension of 2.11:

Be without sorrow, brave Arjuna.  
Know this well; you are not the body.  
When you want to take up the *paramārtha*,  
Then there is nobody who belongs to anybody.<sup>59</sup>

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59 *abahi viṣāda karai jina gāta | mopai sunahi gyāna kī bāta | |*  
*ahaṁkāru naru koṁ bhairiṁ jabahi | soka moha e upaje tabahi | |*  
*tū asoca bhau arjanu bīra | bhalī vudhi tuhi nāhi sarīra | |*  
*jaba paramāratha lījai cāhi | kāhū ko taba koī nāhi | |* ff. 4a.  
The Sanskrit is as follows:

These are just a few examples of the numerous instances in which terms denoting the body, like *śarīra* and *gāta*, are interpolated in the text, in verses that do not, in the Sanskrit, explicitly mention the body, even as the body is arguably a locus of many of the *Gītā*'s teachings.

Indeed, the importance of 2.11 in traditions of reading the *Gītā* can hardly be overstated – most Advaitan commentators following Śaṅkara reference this verse at the very start of their commentaries, and Śaṅkara himself only begins his analysis here, suggesting that 2.11 was considered the beginning of the *Gītā*'s real argument. It is noteworthy that Theghnāth expands this verse into two, and adds an additional layer of interpretation to this important verse. It appears that for Theghnāth, the body is an important site for the tensions that the *Gītā* lays out, and the locus for much of what it has to say about renunciation and practice.

However, it is significant that sections of the *Gītā*'s eighteenth *adhyāya*, which engage with ideas of the body, in particular Sāṅkhya ideas of the body, are largely sidestepped by Theghnāth. For instance, verses 18.13–17 discuss the factors that determine action – this has a strong bearing on the *Gītā*'s understanding of the agency of the self, identified in 18.13 as belonging to Sāṅkhya. Theghnāth says:

Great armed one, listen to the factors.  
I explain these five matters to you.  
That which is said by the *sāṅkhya veda*,  
Only the wise know, and understand the body.<sup>60</sup>

The Sanskrit verse that follows lays out the factors, namely – *adhiṣṭhānaṁ* (material basis), *kartā* (agent), *karaṇa* (instruments), *ceṣṭā* (motions), and *daivam* (fate). This was, by all accounts, an important site of interpretation for numerous commentators in Sanskrit, who glossed these various terms differently, depending on their different commitments. Theghnāth, however, does not engage with the substantive matter of these distinctions – he simply says:

The senses, Brave Pārtha,  
Of various kinds, fill the body.

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*asocyān anvaśocas tvam prajñāvādāmś ca bhāṣase |*  
*gatāsūn agatāsūmś ca na anuśocanti paṇḍitah | |*

You mourn that which is not to be mourned and you speak words of discrimination.

The wise do not mourn those who are dead and alive (van Buitenen 1981: 75).

60 *Mahābāhu kāruna suni leha | pañca bāta samajhāu eha | |*  
*sāṅkha beda kahī jo bāta | budhina hī jānai samajhai gāta | |* ff. 29a.

Those people understand all these matters,  
Whose guru shows it to them.<sup>61</sup>

Theghnāth, therefore, does not list the factors from the Sanskrit, leaving the question of the ‘senses’ largely open in terms of their content. His intervention once more points the reader outside the text, to the teachings of a guru. This continues through the next two verses:

When you walk, talk, perform acts,  
In truth the senses perform these acts.  
One to whom this is explained  
Obtains knowledge within.  
There are five sense-objects; as for the self,  
Know it, Arjuna, to be a non-agent.  
He who obtains the secret of the guru’s favour  
Does not obtain foolishness, and is called a god.<sup>62</sup>

In these two verses as well, Theghnāth stays close to the general sense of the verse, while interpolating the material about the guru. This is significant both in terms of what Theghnāth chooses to leave out, as well as what he chooses to add to the text, namely the identification of the guru as an important source for knowledge, specifically of the body. Is Theghnāth reserving comment on the *Gītā*’s understanding of the senses, in favour of a more personal, or esoteric, practice? Theghnāth’s protocols of rendering and transmitting the ideas of the *Gītā*, additionally, served to open up the text, allowing the possibility of populating it with other kinds of meaning.

This may be related to Theghnāth’s own commitments: if he was indeed an ascetic of the Nāth *panth*, as Dvivedi has suggested, this may perhaps indicate a reference to yogic or other practices.<sup>63</sup> Yet, while Theghnāth does not explicitly indicate specific bodily practices, it is nevertheless telling that his sparse additions to the text of the *Gītā* draws from conventions specific to premodern Hindi poetry, as for instance when Arjuna describes his crisis to Kṛṣṇa:

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61 *indriyana paṁtha barabīra | nānā vidhi bhari rahī sarīra | |*  
*e saba bātai samajhai tāhi | guru hai bāṭa dikhāi jāhi | | Ibid.*

62 *bolai calai karai jo karma | yaha satya idrī karai ju karma | |*  
*yaha jāko samajhāvahi gyāna | tihi abhyantara pāyau gyāna | | (18.15)*  
*pañca viśai ātmā jo āhi | arjanu jāni akarttā tāhi | |*  
*guru pasāi jo liye bheu | durmati lahai na volai deu | | (18.16)*  
*Ibid.*

63 Dvivedi 1976: 146.

I worry a great deal about my body,  
Like a fish in shallow water.<sup>64</sup>

Verses 2.4–8 in the root text of the *Gītā* present Arjuna’s statement of his dilemma. He does not know whether it is better to kill his teachers and elders, or to be vanquished by them. He complains that his *svabhāva*, or nature, is overwhelmed by *kārpānyadośa*, or the flaw of despair or pity, and that his senses are overwhelmed by grief. Theghnāth renders these verses but expands on them a little. Just preceding the verse cited above, Arjuna says, in Theghnāth’s version, that he is confused by two paths (*moko duhu pathya sandehu*), and uses the imagery of a fish in water. This is a common image in *sant* poetry, often used to evoke the idea of worldly bondage. Sundardās, on at least one occasion, uses a similar image of a fish in water, thinking of its own well-being but oblivious to the more profound dangers of death, in the form of a heron waiting to eat it.<sup>65</sup> Theghnāth’s interest in highlighting the problems of *vairāgya* – to the exclusion, perhaps, of some specificities of the *Gītā*’s doctrinal and textual contexts – enable him to frame Arjuna’s dilemma, and refocus the root text for his world-weary prince.

## Conclusion

If it is indeed true, as many scholars have asserted, that premodern readers and audiences of the *Bhagavadgītā* tended to be in large part scholastic readers intent on understanding the *Gītā* as a theological, soteriological text, we begin to see, in the early modern period, a shift not only in the *Gītā*’s audiences through increased vernacular production, and shifts in doctrinal emphasis, but also in its presumed functions. In Theghnāth’s case his location within emerging conventions of epic literary production in classical Hindi allows him to draw literary resources from this specific local context, even as he engages with the *Gītā* as a work dealing with *vairāgya*. We have seen in our brief analysis of Theghnāth’s introduction that he frames his readership through the figure of Prince Bhānu – an elite reader, described as scholarly and devout, yet not, perhaps, at home with the scholastic audiences of

64 *moko cintā bahuta sarīra | janu ki macharī ūmchai nira* || ff. 4a.

65 *sundar macharī nira maim bicarata apane khyāla | bagulā leta uṭhāi kai toi grasai yaum kālā* ||

The *bagulā*, heron, often refers to a false devotee or hypocrite. Callawaert and de Beek 2021: 520.

Sanskrit commentaries. He was keenly aware, in Theghnāth's telling, of both the *Gītā*'s difficulty and its promise. He characterizes the text as a source of discrimination, and explicitly as a guide to his conflicts, yet requires clarification through Theghnāth's act of textual production. It seems likely, then, that Bhānu, and Theghnāth's audience more broadly conceived, anticipated certain shifts in meaning and emphasis through Theghnāth's performance of writing the text.<sup>66</sup>

Theghnāth's modes of transmission, then, must be understood through the lens of these shifts in genre, and the likelihood that he was speaking to a knowing, or informed audience. I have chosen the term 'omission' here to describe what I have argued is a self-conscious strategy of interpretation. For this reason, I have chosen not to characterize Theghnāth's interpretive strategies in terms of loss in translation, or even as a selective rewriting of the *Bhagavadgītā*. As previously mentioned, it is not remarkable to suggest that there is an editorial or interpretive aspect to practices of interlingual transmission more generally. Yet, as I have argued, Theghnāth's acts of omission, coupled with evidence of his own interpolations in the text, suggest a more self-conscious approach to the act of *leaving out* sections of the text, or ideas contained within it, which function to highlight external sources of authority, through the presence of a guru, or the obtaining of mystical knowledge. I suggest, further, that such attention to the idea of the hidden – to absences, or silences – in vernacular transmission, in addition to asking what is transmitted by these texts, can be a helpful tool in more clearly understanding the functions and stakes of acts of vernacular transmission of canonical texts in early modern South Asia. In the case of the *Gītā*, whose role in the textual landscape of modern India has been widely discussed, attention to early modern strategies of reading additionally enables us to conceive of alternative genealogies of these receptions.

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66 Here, Linda Hutcheon's conception of the 'knowing', as opposed to the 'learned' or 'competent' audience, is instructive, in trying to understand an audience's relationship to an adaptation and its source texts, and accounting for both the receiver's ability to 'fill in any gaps' with some knowledge of the original, as well as the adapter's reliance on the receiver's possessing this ability. Hutcheon 2012: 121.

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