

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION 4

॥ Śrīh ॥

A CRITICAL STUDY OF RĀMANUJA'S GĪTĀBHĀSYA

C H A P T E R F I R S T

(INTRODUCTION)

The Bhagavadgītā represents a landmark in the history of Hindu religion and philosophy. Two parallel strains discernible during the course of ancient Hindu thought, viz. the doctrine of Personal theism on the one hand and the doctrine of Absolute Monism on the other, seem to meet here in harmony. Both these lines of thought are thoroughly ancient from the point of view of their origin and equally prominent from the point of view of their appeal. The Bhagavadgītā incorporates the excellences of both these strains and formulates a harmonious philosophy of conduct based on a metaphysical theory of its own.

Various attempts have been made to study the Gītā from different angles. There are studies which seek to prove that the text of the Gītā as we have it now is incapable of yielding any coherent system of thought.¹ Identifying several heterogeneous strands

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1. The studies of Garbe, Hopkins, Rudolf Otto, Telang, G.V. Ketkar and G.S. Khair may be cited here.

of thought in the Gītā, these studies proclaim that they have got mixed up together to take the present form of the text. This claim has been challenged by some scholars¹ and another set of writings on the Gītā has appeared proving that the Gītā is not an ill-assorted cabinet of ideas and that the integrity of the text has remained unimpaired.

Many have studied the Gītā concentrating on its actual teaching without heeding to the theory of alleged textual interpolations and the suggested reconstructions.² Some others have expounded the text taking it as a gospel of spiritual wisdom. Yet others have expounded it in the light of comparative religion involving a spirit of catholicity.³ There are also those interpretations of the Gītā which concentrate on a particular aspect of its message that has appealed most to the author.⁴

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1. S.C. Roy, S.K. Belvalkar and others.
2. Franklin Edgerton, W. Douglas. P. Hill, R.C. Zaehner and others.
3. Anne Besant, Bhagavan Das, S. Radhakrishnan and others.
4. B.G. Tilak, Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, and Swāmi Vivekananda may be cited here.

Almost all these varieties of writings on the Gītā have received inspiration and guidance in one way or the other from the interpretative material available in the traditional bhāsyas of mediaeval ācāryas like Śāṅkara, Rāmaṅuja and Madhva. They are the native guides of old, whose commentaries are well known for their philosophical worth. Each of the ācārya-s is a propounder of a particular system of thought and his bhāsyā is not merely a secondary literature on the Gītā, but a valuable work of profound originality. In fact, as Prof. Ingalls points out, "the most original and imaginative products of the Indian intellect are given to us in the form of commentaries."¹

That the traditional commentaries have not enjoyed the exclusive attention of modern scholars is a striking fact that has left a serious lacuna in the modern writings on the Gītā. No exclusive exposition of the commentary of any of the ācārya-s has been undertaken by the modern writers on the Gītā. It is true that many scholars have drawn from the bhāsyas for their writings. But their interest in the bhāsyas is ecclectical very often.

It is quite a rewarding endeavour to study the

1. Daniel H.H. Ingalls, "The Study of Śāṅkarācārya",
ABORI XXXIII (1952) p. 3.

traditional bhāṣya-s on the Gītā exclusively so as to bring out its full philosophical message utilizing all the exegetical material available in it. Such studies not only help us in understanding the Gītā, but also they go a long way in providing a clear insight into the particular system of thought propounded by the individual commentator. An attempt is being made in the present thesis to concentrate on one of such bhāṣya-s, viz. Rāmanuja's gītābhāṣya and study it critically.

That the Gītā owes much to the Bhāgavata religion is an admitted fact. The theistic accent of the Gītā is quite manifest. It is not a philosophical treatise dealing with 'philosophy' as understood in the western circles. To seek pure philosophy in the Gītā is to misread its message. At the same time it is not a collection of mere religious dogmas without a sound philosophic basis.

Rāmanuja's school of thought is generally known as visiṣṭādvaita. Curiously the term visiṣṭādvaita is never found used in any of the major works of the system. It is only from the latter half of the sixteenth century that the term visiṣṭādvaita has come to be used to represent Rāmanuja's school of Vedānta.¹ The term,

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1. See V. Varadachari, Visiṣṭādvaita Philosophy and Religion, Madras, p. 112.

however, may conveniently be employed to represent the theory of Reality advocated by the school. Viśiṣṭādvaita is usually explained as cidacidviśiṣṭasya brahmanah advaitam, 'the unity of Brahman containing within itself, as its attributes, the finite selves (cit) and the entire non-sentient physical system (acit)! It upholds the theory of one Brahman qualified with the finite selves as well as the entire material system. Of the three principles, viz. Brahman, cit and acit, Brahman is fundamental and substantive while the other ^{two are} subordinate and adjectival to it. The system gets inspiration in the formulation of its philosophy from the Bhagavadgītā to a very great extent. The cit, acit and Īśvara of the system correspond to the Puruṣa, prakṛti and Puruṣottama of the Bhagavadgītā. These three principles form an organically inter-connected whole wherein Puruṣottama or Īśvara is the source and substratum of the entire existence. In so far as the Individual Selves and the physical world are dependent on and subordinate to the Central Reality, viz. Brahman,¹ Rāmaṇuja asserts that the Reality is only one. Brahman is the only Reality, the world of all other sentient and the non-sentients constituting Its adjectival modes.

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1. Śri Bhāṣya. 1.1.1.

Brahman is given the status of substantive reality while the realities of the rest of the existence are attributive realities. Just as a substance and its attributes can be identified separately though they are one essentially, the Brahman and the rest of the existence can be separately spoken of though they essentially form one Reality comprehensively. Unity of the qualified whole is what is meant by 'advaita' according to Viśiṣṭādvaita.¹

The theistic accent of the Bhagavadgītā and its attempt to combine personal theism with the philosophy of the Absolute make it a very powerful source of inspiration to Viśiṣṭādvaita. Among the existing schools of Vedānta, it is in Viśiṣṭādvaita that Personal theism is established on firm metaphysical foundations. Upaniṣads, Brahmasūtras and the Bhagavadgītā, which form the prasthānatrayī of Vedānta are consistently expounded in Viśiṣṭādvaita on theistic lines, justifying the innate religious consciousness of man.

Writing on Viśiṣṭādvaita, Prof. M. Hiriyanna observes, "Its most striking feature is the attempt which

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1. अशेषचिदचित्प्रकारं ब्रह्म एकमेव तत्त्वम् । तत्र प्रकार-
प्रकारिणोः प्रकाराणां च स्थिः मेदेऽपि विशिष्टैक्या-
दिक्विवक्षया ऐकत्वव्यपदेशः तदितरनिषेधश्च ।

- V.D. in Nyāyasiddhāntajāla.

it makes to unite Personal theism with the philosophy of Absolute. Two lines of thought, both of which can be traced far back into antiquity, meet here and in this lies the explanation of a great part of its appeal to the cultured as well as the common people. It resembles in this respect the teaching of the Gītā, though it naturally shows greater systematization both on the religion and on the philosophical side."¹

"Rāmanuja's doctrines as to the way of reaching the Supreme Soul", says R.G. Bhandarkar, "are the same as, or amplified forms of those of the Bhagavadgītā."²

Rāmanuja did not invent a system of his own. He was just a mouthpiece of a hoary tradition.³ He was systematizer of a living faith that can be traced back to antiquity. Prof. Max Müller's observation is worth noting here: "It must be admitted therefore, that in India, instead of one Vedānta philosophy, we have really two, springing from the same root, but

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1. Introduction to Indian Philosophy, p. 383
2. Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and other minor Religions of India, p. 57.
3. Rāmanuja claims his line of interpretation of the Brahma sūtra-s as 'pūrvācāryasurakṣita'. cf. Śribhāṣya 1.1.1: मन्वद्वेधायकृतां विस्तीर्णां ब्रह्म-सूत्राणां पूर्वाचार्यास्त्रिचक्षिपुः । तन्मतानुसारेण सूत्राक्षराणि व्याख्यास्यन्ते ।

extending its branches in two very different directions, that of Śankara, being kept for unflinching reasoners, who, supported by an unwavering faith in monism, do not shrink from any of its consequences; another, that of Rāmanuja, trying hard to reconcile their monism with the demands of the human heart that required, and always will require, a personal God, as the last cause of all that is and an eternal soul that yearns for an approach to or a reunion with that Being."¹

The relative chronological priority of either the Gītā or Viśiṣṭādvaita in its attempt to bring Personal theism together with the philosophy of the Absolute is difficult to be fixed at once. According to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, "the religious reconstruction of the epics and the Bhagavadgītā and the theistic emphasis in the Nyāya led to the development of the Viśiṣṭādvaita or modified monism of Rāmanuja."² But Prof. Van Buitenen seems to be more justified when he says "many tenets of Rāmanuja were not so much directly influenced by the Gītā than by the very undercurrent of popular religiosity by which the Gītā itself had been inspired."³

Like all other traditional commentators on the Gītā, Rāmanuja looks at the Gītā as an authoritative

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1. Six Systems of Indian Philosophy, p. 192.
2. Indian Philosophy, Vol. II, p. 31.
3. Rāmanuja on the Gītā, 1968, p. 6.

scripture, being one of the 'triple canons' of Vedānta. He views it as a coherent treatise of well-knit ideas. What is taught in the Gītā is in harmony with what is taught in the upanīśads. Infact, the extent to which a traditional commentator exhibits the confirmity of the teachings of the Gītā with his understanding of the Upanīśads is often taken as a measure of success achieved by the commentator in his interpretation of the scriptures. We see a calculated effort on the part of Rāmanuja to integrate the different parts and phases of the text in order to bring out the harmonious and unitary message of the text in his Gītābhāṣya.

While commenting on the thirteenth chapter of the Gītā, Rāmanuja provides an outline of the general procedure he adopts in interpreting the scriptural texts. Every part of the scripture is equally important. No part of either the upanīśadic literature, Brahmasūtras or the Gītā is to be divested of the primacy of its significance. To negate the truth-value of certain particular texts or to assign lower truth-value to them is to disrespect the scripture as a whole. To glorify certain portions and to stratify certain others as pertaining to lower wisdom is to disregard their scriptural authority. Thus the aikārt̄hya, or the single integrated doctrine of the scriptures is of

supreme importance to Rāmanuja.¹

Aikārthya being the basic assumption, Rāmanuja works out a method of reconciling the conflicting scriptural passages. Certain upanīṣadic texts² proclaim that Brahman is the only Reality, one without the second. Certain others³ proclaim the reality of the physical world and the Individual Selves, and distinguish both of them from the Supreme Lord of the Universe. Yet another group of texts⁴ speak of the Supreme as the Internal

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1. Van Buintenen traces the concept of aikārthya to the principle of ekavākyadhikāraṇa in the karmamīmāṃsā (Mīmāṃsā sūtra 2.1.46). He observes :
"For Rāmanuja, unlike Śāṅkara, all scriptures are equally authoritative, the artha or import of their injunctions being fundamentally the same, it is the task of the commentator to find a method of interpretation by which all conflicting statements may be reconciled and given their proper place in a consistent explanatory system." Ibid. p. 30.
2. Ch.Up. 6,2, 1; 6,2, 3-6; 8,6; Taitt. Ār. 2.6, 2-3.
3. Śvet. Up. 1,6; 1,9; 1,10; 1,12; 4,5; 4,6; 4,7;
4, 9-10, 6,9; 6,73
Nār. Up. 11.1 and Mantr. Up. 1
4. BĀ.U 3,7, 3-22 (M); Subal. Up. 7,
Taitt. Ār. 3,11, 1. etc.

ruler of the Individual Selves as well as the physical Nature. Rāmanuja maintains that all these groups of texts can be interpreted to yield an unitary doctrine, without divesting any of the text of its primacy of import.

Brahman alone is the Reality in so far as It comprehends everything that exists, material as well as spiritual, as Its modes. This is the import of the abhedaśruti-s. The texts that declare the reality of the Individual Selves and the physical Nature as distinct from Brahman (bheda śruti-s) proclaim that the Reality comprises of cit, acit and Īswara which, though organically integrated, can be mutually distinguished. The third class of texts (ghatakaśruti-s) provide the clue as to how the bheda śruti-s and the abheda śruti-s are to be understood without any contradiction between them. They speak of Brahman as the Inner Ruler, the innermost Soul, sustaining, activating and utilizing the finite Selves as well as the physical Nature. Brahman is the Central Reality. It is the being-imparting Soul of existence. The Individual Selves and the physical Nature exist only because Brahman exists. Just as in the case of any living being, the reality of the body is a derivative of the reality of the Individual Self that ensouls it, all the Individual Selves and the entire material order of existence derive their reality from

the Central Reality, Brahman, and exist for Its sake as Its adjectival modes. Thus the unity of existence is a fundamental truth and the reality of the finite Selves and the physical system is equally true. Comprehensive Unity of Reality is what is taught by the Upaniṣads. That the Brahman alone exists is not to mean that the world is non-existent. Infact the assertion of the existence of Brahman as the foundation of existence asserts the existence of the other finite orders of existence as well.

Brahman is the cause of the Universe. The process of cause turning into Effect in the case of Brahman does not presuppose any mutation in Brahman. Cause and Effect are substantially one. Brahman remains changeless both in its causal as well as its effected state of existence. When the universe of the finite Selves and the material system subsist in Brahman as Its modes in a subtle state of mere possibility, Brahman is in Its causal state. When the Brahman wills to be 'many' and transforms Its modes into manifest manifoldness, Brahman is in Its effected state. Thus both as the cause as well as the Effect, Brahman alone exists and the process of 'creation' or causation is nothing but the transformation of the modes of Brahman, viz. the cit and the acit from their state of subtle possibility in Brahman into the gross state of manifold manifestation as the modes of

Brahman. Thus the names of all objects in the effected world ultimately signify Brahman, the central Principal of existence. This is the principle of sāmanādhikarānya, application of terms with diversity of connotation to one and the same object.

'One knowledge' being the source of 'all knowledge' is the watchword of Vedānta. This is thoroughly consistent with the theory of Reality as outlined above. Since Brahman is the all-inclusive source and substratum of all that exists, both in Its causal as well as in Its manifest state, knowledge of Brahman is the knowledge of everything.

The Upaniṣadic declaration that the Brahman is nirguṇa is not to be misconstrued as the absolute denial of all attributes of Brahman. Existence of an entity without any attributes is only a contradiction in terms. Positing a Reality in one breath and denying its defining characteristics in the other is quite incorrect. The nirguṇa texts deny imperfection of Brahman. Since the upaniṣads attribute several perfections to Brahman, the texts which speak of Brahman as nirguṇa are to be construed as denying the material guṇas of the nature of imperfections, on the guidelines of the celebrated utsargāpavāda nyāya of the Mīmāṃsā tradition.

Knowledge is such an essential characteristic of Brahman that the Upaniṣads often identify Brahman with knowledge. The essential characteristic of a substance

standing for the substance itself is not an uncommon usage.

Thus the scriptural statement 'prajñānam brahma' () does not mean that Brahman is impersonal 'knowledge'.

Brahman is a spiritual Being with a divine personality of His own. He is the benevolent God who creates the universe, sustains it and withdraws it into Himself.

Rāmanuja maintains that the central point of assertion in Viśiṣṭādvaita, viz. the comprehensive unity of Reality comprising of Īśwara, Individual Selves and the physical world, receives ample support in the Bhagavadgītā. That the Selves are only the modes of Brahman is borne out in passages like mamaivāṃso jīvaloke jīvabhūtassanātanaḥ (BG XV.6), while B.G. VII 4-7 bear out the two fold Nature of Īśwara comprising the jīva-s and the jagat. Prakṛti is an ontological verity and not a mere phenominal presentation. Both the physical world and the Individual Selves form a part of the total realm of divine glory.¹ Īśwara is the fundamental and the substantive Reality² while cit and acit are dependent and attributive.³ The derivative nature of the cit and the acit and their teleological subordination to Īśwara are illustrated by such suggestive phrases as Śarīra-sarīribhāva, aṃsāmsibhāva, śeṣaśeṣibhāva

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1. B.G. X.42.
2. B.G. IX.18; XV.17.
3. B.G. VII.4,5; XV.7.10; XIII.22

etc. A special relation, viz. aprthaksiddhi is recognized to bring out the mutual relation among the three constituents of Reality. The reality of the constituents is factual. Souls retain their individuality. Mayā is not Illusion.¹ The equality of Selves in their essential nature is a fundamental postulate. Inequality among them is only apparent (prakṛta) caused by anādikarma. The two-fold distinction in jñāna viz. dharmabhūtajñāna (Consciousness as an attribute) and dharmibhūtajñāna (consciousness as a substance) is peculiar to Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Rāmaṇuja finds support to the same in B.G. V.16.

Īśwara is both transcendent and immanent.² Kṛṣṇa's declaration 'Viśtabhyāhamidaṃ kṛtsnaṃ ekāṃsena sthito jagat' (X.42) and Arjuna's immediate avouchment in 'sarvaṃ samāpnoṣi tatosi sarvaḥ' (XI.40) splendidly sum up this position.

Freedom of will is an inalienable feature of the Individual Self according to Rāmaṇuja. Ethical initiative on the part of the Individual Selves has its due importance ~~and the significance of~~ⁱⁿ the teachings of the Gītā in as much as it is concerned with formulating a philosophy of conduct aiming at spiritual perfection,^{and it} gets due recognition in Rāmaṇuja's Gītābhāṣya.³

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1. B.G. VII.14 अतो माया शब्दो न मिथ्यार्थवाची

RBB.VII.14. Also see W. Douglas P.Hill, the Bhagavadgītā, Madras, p. 32.

2. B.G. X.19; VII.7.

3. R.G.B. XVIII. 13-15. See also Śrībhāṣya 2.3.19-23, and the remarks of John McKeen, Hindu Ethics, 2nd Edn, Delhi, 1971- p.16

Bhakti is the immediate and the final means for the realization of the Supreme Reality according to Rāmanuja. Gītā repeatedly stresses the efficacy of Bhakti.¹ While karmayoga marks the beginning of spiritual endeavour and provides the psychological equipment for further pursuits, jñānayoga provides a vision of the true nature of one's Self. This gives rise to the realization of the truth that one's being is only a mode of the Supreme Being. The realization of this truth gives rise to parābhakti. Bhakti of this character is in itself an Ideal, next in importance only to Mukti,² described sometimes as the 'salvation in becoming'.

Following the interpretation of Rāmanuja, karmayoga, jñānayoga and bhaktiyoga together constitute a successive scheme towards spiritual perfection one leading to the next in order. Bhakti in such a scheme is not an emotional ecstasy or abandon, but intense meditation on the Supreme Reality with deep adoration and spontaneous love.³ It is equated with dhyāna or upāsana of the upaniṣads:⁴

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1. VII.29-30; VII. 5-7; VIII.22; IX. 22, 26-34; XI.54,55; XII, 13-20; XIII.18 & e.,
2. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, Vol. II, p. 705.
3. cf. Hill, op. cit. p. 56.
4. See Rāmanuja's introduction to III and the VII chapter of the Gītā.

"What is enjoined in Vedānta texts such as 'I know this great person of sunlike lustre who is beyond the prakṛti He who thus knows Him becomes here like unto a released self: there is no other path for the attainment of final release' (Taitt. Ār. III.12.7), is knowledge (Vedana); it can be expressed by the words meditation (dhyāna) and worship (upāsana); it is of the form of direct vision; in it is continued remembrance; and it is inexpressibly dear. This (knowledge) is enjoined here (when the direct means to final release has to be taught)".¹

Rāmanuja's Gītābhāṣya suggests yet another path towards God-realization. It is one of complete self-surrender to God with total self-abnegation. What is adumbrated in the Gītā in passages like 'manmanābhava madbhakto madyāji mām namaskṛu' (B.G. IX.34 & XVIII.65) is worked out into a full-fledged doctrine of surrender by the Viśiṣṭādvaitins. Significantly this line is repeated twice in the Gītā. The celebrated B.G. XVIII.66² also upholds the doctrine of prapatti. It is called the caramaśloka (the final verse) and enjoys great importance and authority in the religious life of the followers of Rāmanuja. It is

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1. वेदान्तेषु वेदाहमेतं पुरुषं महान्तं आदित्यवर्षं तमसस्तु पारे ...
तमेव विद्वानमृत जिह भवति नान्यः पन्था अस्माय विद्यत
अित्यादिषु विहितं वेदनध्यानोपासनादिवाच्यं दर्शनसमानाकारं
स्मृतिसन्तानमत्यर्थप्रियम् जिह विधीयते । RGB. XVIII.65.
2. सर्वधर्मान् परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज ।
अहं त्वा सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः ॥

hailed as one of the three rahasya-s, the great secrets to be known in the religious life of an aspirant.

Bhakti, which is the immediate means of God - realization is the main message of the Gītā according to Rāmanuja. The doctrine of Bhakti, which leads to the attainment of the highest Reality is the fundamental theme for the delineation of which all other doctrines are dealt with propaedeutically.

Rāmanuja analyses the structure of the Gītā into a progressive scheme of spiritual development starting from the Sāṅkhya-Yoga description of the Self and culminating in the glorious revelation of the Godhead. He is indebted to Yāmuna in his structural analysis of the Gītā. He faithfully follows Yāmuna who provides an outline of the scheme of interpretation of the Gītā in his Gītārthasaṅgraha. Rāmanuja elaborates the same further focussing on the distinctive contribution of each of the chapters in his Gītābhāṣya.

Rāmanuja divides the Gītā into three groups of six chapters each. The first group of six chapters concentrates on the understanding of the true nature of the Individual Self, and delineates karmayoga and jñānayoga, a successive pursuit of which provides a direct vision of the true nature of the Self. Realization of the true nature of the Self gives rise to love and adoration towards God, the sole source and substratum of

all beings.

The second group of six chapters describes the nature, attributes and the glories of God which are intended to develop and strengthen Bhakti that has taken birth in the aspirant. It provides a magnificent exposition of bhaktiyoga.

The third group of six chapters reiterates the teachings of the earlier chapters by way of providing further clarification regarding the true nature of the Individual Self, the material world and God, the Supreme Being. It delineates further the significance of Karma, jñāna and bhakti. Emphasising the value of Bhakti as the supreme means of God-realization, it concludes with a call to make His grace as the basis of our lives.

An attempt has been made in the following pages to show how Rāmanuja assimilates the doctrines of the Gītā into his system of thought, carefully focussing on the his exposition of the doctrines of Nature, the Individual Self and God. Apart from an analytical exposition of the bhāṣya and a comprehensive appraisal of its arguments, the study also aims at clarifying the tenets of viśiṣṭādvaita in the light of the commentary on the Gītā by Rāmanuja. The subject matter in the 18 chapters of the Gītā is treated under three heads, viz. (i) Tattva (Reality), (ii) Puruṣārtha (the good) and (iii) Hita (the path). A consolidated appraisal of the work as a

whole is provided in the concluding chapter. At appropriate places, care has been taken to point out the distinctness of Rāmanuja's interpretation in comparison with the other commentaries on the Gītā. Generally Sāṅkara's commentary is made use of for this purpose and occasionally the commentaries of Madhva, Madhusūdana Saraswati, Sridharaswamin and Venkatanātha are utilized. Vedānta Deśika's Tātparyā Candrikā is relied upon in clarifying Rāmanuja's position. Yamana's Gitārthasaṅgraha and Varavaramuni's Gitārthasaṅgraha Dipikā are also pressed into service. For translation of the bhāṣya passages, generally the translation of M.R. Sampathkumaran¹ is relied upon.

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1. The Gitābhāṣya of Rāmanuja, Published by M. Ranga-
 charya Memorial Trust, Madras, in 1969.