

The Bhagavadgita: A Biography. By RICHARD H. DAVIS. Lives of Great Religious Books. Princeton: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2015. Pp. xii + 243. \$24.95.

If books could talk, they would have astonishing stories to tell. Especially timeless classics would tell us of the moments of their creation, of their authors engrossed in making them, and of the readers—both known and unknown in history—that re-created them in thoughts and actions. Luckily for the *Bhagavadgītā*, the widely read magnum opus of Hindu theology and philosophy, its life is succinctly and lucidly captured in Richard Davis's *The Bhagavadgita: A Biography*. Anyone familiar with the deep history of the text knows how daunting the task of writing its biography is. As someone who has taught the text for more than twenty-five years, Davis overcomes the challenge by choosing wisely. From the key themes intrinsic to the text regarding authorship, date, and the immediate narrative context of the *Mahābhārata* to the relationships it developed with well-known ideologues in medieval, colonial, and post-colonial epochs, to the living sights and sounds of the *Gītā* in contemporary times, the *Biography* conveys the rich life of the *Gītā* through telling samples. The engaging and jargon-free narrative makes it eminently enjoyable as well.

At the heart of the *Biography*, Davis tells us at the outset, is attention to the double life of the *Gītā*: its historicity as well as its continuing vitality. The paradox of this double life is made possible by the various ideological and discursive layers that surround the *Gītā* not only historically but also through the lenses of the readers of today. The rest of the book peels these layers one by one. The first chapter situates the *Gītā* in the contextual narrative matrix of the *Mahābhārata* and lays out the complex situation facing two equally complex protagonists, Arjuna and Krishna. Davis explains the core teachings of Krishna involving knowledge, selfless action, and devotion with an eye to what they mean to Arjuna and to their place in the larger landscape of contemporary philosophy and theology. Those unfamiliar with the semantic complexity of Sanskrit terms such as *yoga* and *yajña* will find their explanation accessible and useful. An experienced reader will agree with the astute observation that Krishna is not so much after conceptual accuracy of the various systems of knowledge but rather after their "heuristic validity" in leading one towards a calm wisdom.

The second chapter discusses the medieval period and the distinctive ethos of devotion that came with it. As might be expected, a comparison between the intellectualism of the *Gītā* and the emotional bhakti of the *Bhagavata Purāṇa* is a major theme here. Yet another obligatory theme—the soteriological, ontological, and theological differences that undergird the commentaries to the *Gītā* in the Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta traditions—is presented clearly without succumbing to formidable technicalities. The discussion of a relatively underexplored but no less important commentary by the Kashmir Śaivism scholar Abhinavagupta would have brought more depth to the account and possibly challenged the preferential treatment of Vedānta that still persists. However, the exploration of the *Gītā*'s "narrative metamorphosis" in the *Jnaneshvari* written in vernacular Marathi by the twelfth-century mystic Jnaneshvar is an important inclusion, as it familiarizes the readers with a regional linguistic and religious ethos of Hinduism.

In chapters three and four the narrative arc of the *Biography* rises remarkably as it explores the dramatic encounter between the *Gītā* and the West starting in the eighteenth century. It is an exciting epoch where the text evokes diverse sensibilities among readers with distinct intellectual, ideological, religious, and political commitments. We read about the dreamy German romanticism and its quest for pure human wisdom through the *Gītā*, the intellectual rigor of German Orientalists, and the German philosophers' criticism of India's civilizational inertia for which they blamed the *Gītā*. We meet early British Indologists such as Charles Wilkins who were fascinated with the *Gītā*, colonial administrators such as Hastings who looked to the translation of the *Gītā* as an act profiting the colonial control of India, and Utilitarians such as Mill, who saw in the *Gītā* the irrationality, monstrosity, uselessness, and disorder that he believed plagued Hinduism. We are able to contrast these views with the positive but no less diverse estimations of Indian spiritualists and nationalists. If Vivekananda presented the *Gītā* as a core text of Hinduism preaching the value of universal tolerance, Aurobindo (in his early days), Tilak, and ideologues of Anushilan Samiti found in it justification for armed violence as the nationalistic fervor thickened in the twentieth century. Hedgewar gave the text a communal twist and imagined

India as a country of virile Hindus engaged in service to motherhood. In contrast, Gandhi emphasized the allegorical nature of the *Gītā* and saw an internalized battle between good and evil. While nationalists were busy privileging the *Gītā* one way or another, Dalit leader Ambedkar criticized it for its assertion of Brahmanical tyranny. It is refreshing to read about Ambedkar's negative appraisal of the text otherwise celebrated in indigenous accounts. Through such stories the two chapters aptly illustrate how the *Gītā* was understood not so much through what it brought to the readers as through what the readers brought to it.

But then isn't the very act of reading mediated through the translations that the reader uses? The penultimate chapter investigates the interpretive choices that inform four distinct translations of the *Gītā*: one from a noted Indologist from the American academy, one from a poet well known for translating religious work, one from an Indian Vaishnava teacher and renouncer, and one from a modern Indian Vedantin. Two consecutive verses from the *Gītā* serve as a sample that aptly illustrates the differences in the translations. Arguably the best chapter in the book, it has immense value for the burgeoning number of students who rely on translations. It will encourage them to read the translation of their choice critically. The final chapter ties the past of the *Gītā* to its present. How do contemporary practitioners who see themselves as inheritors of past legacies collectively further the life of the *Gītā*? The chapter answers this question by looking at four different sites: *Gītā* recitations in Gandhi's ashram at Vardha, where they remind the community of both Gandhi and the values he espoused; a live Marathi commentary on the *Jnaneshvari* that a university-educated devotee offers at Alandi, a holy place where Jnaneshvar is believed to have entered the ultimate meditative experience; a discourse that a modern Vedantin offers in English to address the anxieties of the urban elite; and finally a protestant-style sermon with ecumenical sensibilities from a swami based in the Vedanta society of New York, who reminds his Western audience of the perils of materialism. The observant anthropologist in Davis brings out the differences—both subtle and obvious—among the settings, styles, messages, and goals underlying these divergent performances. The reader gets a sense of the loose ends of the past getting tied to the present. An ensuing exploration of the contemporary visuals and events in India remind that the *Gītā*'s journey will continue.

In his *S/Z*, Roland Barthes distinguishes between what he calls a readerly text and a writerly text. In readerly texts—which include what we call classics—readers are passive, idle recipients of meaning that the author creates. They may accept or reject the meaning but rarely create it. The writerly text, in contrast, is what the reader or readers create anew in the process of reading and understanding. A writerly text rests on “a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds” and resists any determination. Is the *Bhagavadgītā* a readerly text or a writerly text? If the goal of a literary work is to “make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text,” as Barthes argues, then the *Bhagavadgītā* acts as a writerly text, and the *Biography* must get the credit to make the readers aware of this. Acknowledging the continuous evolution of the *Gītā* promises to counter textual determinism and its attendant conflicts especially in the political world of which we are a part. Precisely for this reason, no biography can be a final word on the *Gītā*. Rather, it must serve as an introduction to further exploration. Without a doubt, *The Bhagavadgita: A Biography* will be an indispensable resource for the students as well as general, curious readers. It will encourage them to hear the many voices of this classic with a critical sensibility, and perhaps to understand their own.

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What could a new translation of one of the most translated religious texts possibly offer? *The Bhagavadgita: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism* by Gavin Flood and Charles Martin reminds