

Mongol assault in the early thirteenth century. This is an important volume, which is likely to prove as significant as *Islamic Civilisation 950–1150* was in its day.

D.O. Morgan

SOUTH ASIA

RICHARD H. DAVIS:

The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography.

(Lives of Great Religious Books.) x, 243 pp. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014. £16.95. ISBN 978 06911 3996 8.
doi:10.1017/S0041977X17000611

Richard H. Davis' *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography* is part of the pioneering Princeton University Press series "The Lives of Great Religious Texts". Davis – the author of *Lives of Indian Images, Ritual in an Oscillating Universe*, and the highly accessible *Global India circa 100 CE* – is the perfect historian to tell the story of the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s long, rich and genre-defying history. Though the biography proceeds in rough chronological order, Davis seamlessly weaves interpretations of the many dimensions of the text into a temporality that belongs to the *Gītā* alone. He accomplishes this feat through his delicate narration of the various ways historical scholars, poets, and even political leaders have actualized it for their own ends. The result is a smooth, readable, and yet arresting read that will benefit scholars, students and general readers (with an interest in South Asian culture) alike.

Davis begins the first chapter with a summary of the events leading up to and within the *Gītā* (a simple task which scholars surprisingly often forget to do), along with Krishna's original teaching. Davis includes an exposition of the famous three paths to liberation elaborated by Krishna: the path of action (*karmayoga*), the path of knowledge (*jñānayoga*), and the path of devotion (*bhaktiyoga*). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the hotly contested question of the *Gītā*'s authorship. Davis suggests that it is best to view the *Gītā* as the sum of a vast number of retellings, simultaneously within the elaborate story-within-a-story structure of the *Mahābhārata*, the separate time in which the *Gītā* itself was written, and finally in world history itself. In the second chapter, Davis traces the story of the *Gītā* into medieval India, comprising summaries of many disparate interpretations, such as those of *bhakti* texts, the philosophical commentaries of the *Vedānta* school, and various translations of the *Gītā* into vernacular languages. It is a shame that a text with as rich a history as the *Gītā* receives only one chapter dedicated to its long list of pre-colonial commentaries and adaptations: one could get lost in the literature surrounding any one of the topics in this chapter. Unfortunately, the significance of the *Gītā* has been radically changed by India's colonial history, and a summary of its complete history demands such an exploration. Nevertheless, it is a testament to Davis' deep knowledge that he can weave the vastness of medieval Indian thought into one short chapter which leaves the reader wishing for more.

In chapter 3, Davis focuses on the *Gītā*'s translation into European languages and its subsequent reception in Enlightenment Europe and the Americas. Davis shows how the *Gītā* was both admired by Westerners, but also deployed, via moralizing readings, to justify colonialism and Western exceptionalism. Despite the shift in

location, Davis does not truly take his focus off of India. He concludes the chapter with a discussion of Swami Vivekananda who taught the *Gītā* to the people of the United States. Davis pays special attention to how Vivekananda's interaction with the West changed how he approached teaching the *Gītā* when he returned to India, emphasizing the importance of the path of action. Chapter 4 begins from this standpoint of action as Davis explores the lives of India's nationalist figures, including but not limited to Gandhi and Aurobindo, and their respective relationships with the *Gītā*. Despite the breadth of figures explored, Davis shows how they all contributed not just to the establishment of the *Gītā* as a text of nationalistic pride, but also as a continually rich source for theory, often using their own interpretations – violent and non-violent – of Krishna's commandment to Arjuna to fight as justifications for their own political views. Davis's close attention to this aspect of the intellectual history of India is one of the most convincing arguments that the meaning of the *Gītā* expands as history moves on.

Davis concludes with two different views on how the *Gītā* continues to live on in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In chapter 5, he explores various scholarly, philosophical and literary translations of the *Gītā*. In chapter 6, he concludes with a loose summary of various performances of the *Gītā*, mostly taken from Davis' personal experiences. The conclusion re-emphasizes Davis' central thesis, which is that the *Gītā*, from the time of its composition to the present, has lived on in the retellings and interpretations of living people.

Davis' account is in a way part of the very tradition of retellings of the *Gītā* which he analyses: he introduces the reader to the many different interpretations and dimensions of the text, and yet his own interpretation is never hidden. While the text at times appears a dizzying list of various figures and their relationship to the *Gītā*, Davis presents these stories in a careful structure, which leads to a new, and well-argued, position of his own. Anyone with experience with the *Gītā* is sure to have their own reading of it enriched by Davis' book. The book's clear, conversational style makes it accessible to any reader of English, and it should be a great resource especially for introductory courses on Indian history, religion, philosophy and literature. At times, especially in the last chapters, Davis' focus may seem a bit narrow. There is much more to European-Indian relations, and much more to the history of Indian independence than the lives of those figures who happened to interpret the *Gītā*. To fully understand the times Davis describes, would of course require much more history than an analysis of the *Gītā* can offer. Also, one does not have to share Davis' at times clear enthusiasm for complex and problematic nationalist figures like Gandhi. Despite these small shortcomings, Davis always writes with the larger picture in mind, and his sharp focus is rarely an impediment to understanding. Like the great Sanskrit commentaries, this work takes nothing for granted; it has an intimate and complex bond with its source; and yet it is entirely original, thought-provoking and indispensable.

John Allred
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa