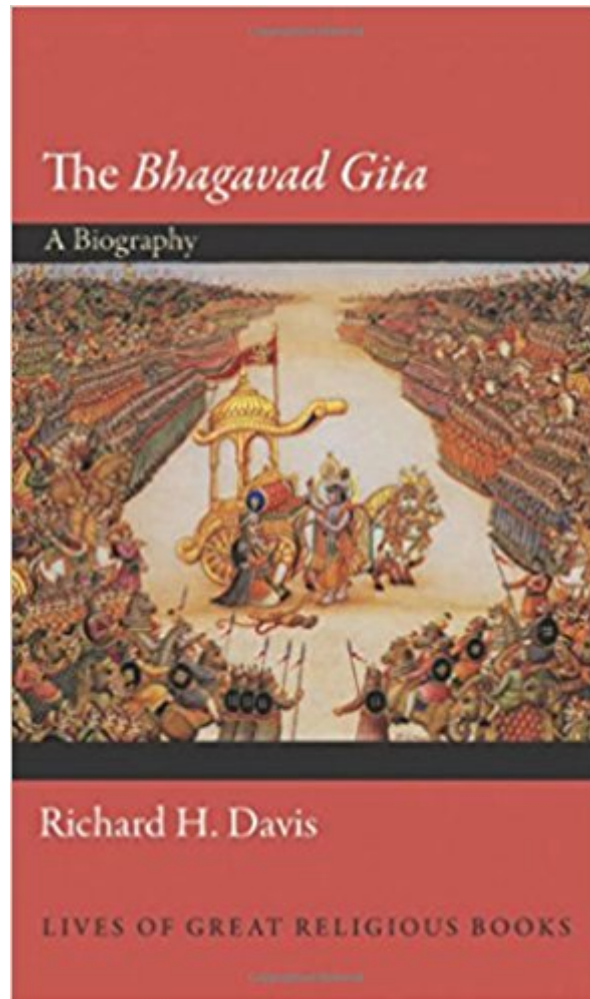


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# The "Bhagavad Gita": A Biography (Lives Of Great Religious Books)



## Synopsis

The Bhagavad Gita, perhaps the most famous of all Indian scriptures, is universally regarded as one of the world's spiritual and literary masterpieces. Richard Davis tells the story of this venerable and enduring book, from its origins in ancient India to its reception today as a spiritual classic that has been translated into more than seventy-five languages. The Gita opens on the eve of a mighty battle, when the warrior Arjuna is overwhelmed by despair and refuses to fight. He turns to his charioteer, Krishna, who counsels him on why he must. In the dialogue that follows, Arjuna comes to realize that the true battle is for his own soul. Davis highlights the place of this legendary dialogue in classical Indian culture, and then examines how it has lived on in diverse settings and contexts. He looks at the medieval devotional traditions surrounding the divine character of Krishna and traces how the Gita traveled from India to the West, where it found admirers in such figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Aldous Huxley. Davis explores how Indian nationalists like Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda used the Gita in their fight against colonial rule, and how contemporary interpreters reanimate and perform this classical work for audiences today. An essential biography of a timeless masterpiece, this book is an ideal introduction to the Gita and its insights into the struggle for self-mastery that we all must wage.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is called *An Essential Biography*, as it examines historically the various ways the Bhagavad Gita has stimulated a large variety of responses and interpretations among its readers.

The Gita has been considered the most sacred book in modern Hinduism and some scholars consider it as the best compendium of the prevalent philosophical theories of the [Indian classical] time (W. Doniger's review in The New York Review of Books, December 4, 2014, page 47). Professor Davis offers us a good introduction to this masterpiece and traces the various ways it has been interpreted to deal with the perennial struggle for self-control regarding our duties. He presents the context of the composition of the Gita, its historical and present relevance, and the central place that it has had, not only in India but also in Europe and the United States. The author is a professor of religion at Bard College, and writes about Indian religion. This volume is part of a series of Biographies of great religious books from Princeton University Press. The Gita is the best known piece of the Mahabharata, the longest poem ever written, which literally means "the great story of the Bharatas," the legendary first kings of India, although the poem also deals with the nature and forces that govern the universe, the way humans are organized, as well as about the duties and rituals to be performed. Probably, this epic poem was composed by several different authors. In the Indian culture it is usually stated that "everything in the Mahabharata is elsewhere [and] what is not there is nowhere," and a prominent scholar affirms that "it was like an ancient Wikipedia, to which anyone who knew Sanskrit, could add a bit here, a bit there" (W. Doniger, The Hindus. An Alternative History, 2009, page 264). The Gita was composed in the Indian classical period and although it has many references to historical facts, it is not an historical account, it is rather an epic poem; in his recent book, Why Homer Matters (2014, page 3), Adam Nicholson says that an epic is neither an act of memory, nor an historical account; its purpose is "to make the distant past as immediate to us as our own lives, to make the great stories of long ago beautiful and painful now." The book covers a large variety of subjects related to the Gita, and it provides a summary of the varied interpretations and influences. As an example of this wide variation, he shows how the Gita inspired both Gandhi and his message of non-violence, as well as his assassin, Nathuram Godse, who claimed that he was following Krishna and his teachings. Professor Davis develops the idea that the Gita forms part of what Aldous Huxley used to call "perennial philosophy," providing universal guidance to all humans; and this is the way this masterpiece has been received in Europe and America. Professor Davis also mentions how the Gita has been presented as a Hindu religious book, thus fostering nationalistic and far-right fanatical political views. He includes an interesting chapter about performances in our time, where he mentions poetic and operatic renditions, as well as "visual performances," and movies which found their inspiration in the Gita. In another chapter, he discusses the translations of the Gita; he

mentions that it has been translated over 300 times into English as well as into more than 75 languages. From a select list of 20 English versions, he picks and analyses four exemplary translations from a scholar, a poet, a devotee, and a philosopher; unfortunately, the well-known versions from E. Easwaran, G. and B. Feuerstein, J. Mascaro, and W. Sargeant are not part of his list of 20. Wendy Doniger in her review of the book concludes that this is a masterful new biography of the Gita, but considers the book more than adequately respectful: he leans over backward to avoid offending Hindus who revere the Gita.

This is a worthy entry in this really fine series (I have four of them already), and one of the clearest and most straightforward. I enjoyed it a lot, as someone who has worked on the Gita for years. There is an excellent set of references and bibliography. It is, however, not an exposition or critique of the text in any detail: it is really about the history of the vagaries of the text and its influence. It is interesting in particular how much of the Gita was overshadowed early on by the stories/histories of Krishna as a child, cowherd, etc. as the "bhakti" movement gathered force in the medieval period. A chunk of the book is about the use of the Gita as a political force beginning in the late 1880s, in part as a Hindu "bible" to counter the prestige of Western "bibles". Towards the end of the text there is a discussion of a few recent translations into English (from Van Buitenen to Stephen Mitchell), and a glimpse of various settings where there are oral readings. My study of the Gita was influenced strongly by Zaehner's old Oxford translation and Winthrop Sargeant's valuable word by word translation and exegesis (neither of which are mentioned here) and I have a fondness for Barbara Stoler Miller's elegant translation (which does get a mention).

A master narrative of the life of a famous text by a master scholar. I would recommend this book for anyone interested not only in the Gita but in Hinduism topics generally. Davis is incredibly informative

This is really a wonderful little book. The author bends over backwards to be fair to the many different traditions of interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita. This includes not only medieval interpreters like Shankara and Jnanadeva; Richard Davis also interviews modern Swamis to hear their understanding of the text. Davis is a historian of religions, and this is a book focused on the reception history of the Gita--if you are looking for a spiritual guide to uncover the essential, timeless truth of the Gita, look elsewhere. But to understand the way the Gita has been transformed by its

readers, including modern interpreters like Gandhi, Tilak, and Aurobindo, there is no better book for a general audience.

People interpret scripture according to time, place and circumstance. Although this is not a survey, the 6 essays are about (1) the Bhagavad Gita in the time of its composition (2) its status in Medieval India (3) Gita migrates to the West (4) Krishna, the Gita and India (5) modern Gita translations and (6) the Gita in our time. The Epilogue sums up the Gita as a work that breaks the boundaries of its own time. These are clean concise essays that are sparkling in their clarity with a minimum of technical terms, for example how Mohandas Gandhi and Aurobindo Ghose interpreted the Bhagavad Gita. The professor author is a Westerner long interested in the Gita and traveled throughout India to get local views whether students or faculty. Comments in the footnotes are worth reading and the annotated list of selected English translations is a valuable guide.

This is just what the title says, it's about the Bhagavad Gita, and it is very, very helpful to people who have not grown up in the tradition of Hinduism. I would now like to get other books in the Princeton Press series on great religions.

Enjoyed it very much. It's part of a great series.

it has a wonderful insight of B.G

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