



THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

— *Custodian Papers* —

THE SONG THAT CROSSED THE WORLD

Charles Wilkins's
THE BHAGVAT-GEETA

London, 1785 • First English Edition

With Leeds Library provenance



LEEDS LIBRARY,
Commercial Street.

THIS WORK IS
£3 ALLOWED FOR READING 10 DAYS.

If, after the expiration of 10 days, the work is demanded
by the Librarian and NOT RETURNED, a Fine of SIXPENCE
PER DAY will be incurred.

[See Rule 10.]

N933377

INDOPHILES • BIBLIOPHILES • ICONOPHILES

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

RARE BOOKS • INDIAN MINIATURES

INDOPHILES • BIBLIOPHILES • ICONOPHILES

THE SONG THAT CROSSED THE WORLD

Charles Wilkins's The Bhagvat-Geeta

London, 1785 • First English Edition

The first direct translation from Sanskrit into English, and the book through which the Bhagavad Gītā first entered the English-speaking world.

THE CUSTODIANS

◆ Books outlive their owners. Every collector is merely a temporary custodian in the long journey of civilisation. The privilege of collecting is not possession, but preservation; not ownership, but stewardship. Every volume entrusted to The Eye of the Beholder carries with it the voices of those who created it, those who cherished it before us, and those who will inherit it after us.

INDOPHILES • BIBLIOPHILES • ICONOPHILES

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥

Your right is to action alone, never to its fruits. Let not the fruits of action be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction. — Bhagavad Gītā, II.47

WHY THIS BOOK MATTERS

There are books that enter history because they contain great ideas. There are others that enter history because they carry those ideas across a frontier. Charles Wilkins's The Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon, published in London in 1785, belongs to both categories. The Sanskrit work translated within its pages had already been read, recited, interpreted and revered in India for centuries. Its eighteen discourses placed a warrior in a condition of moral paralysis and asked a question that has never ceased to trouble reflective human beings: How should one act when every possible action appears compromised?

Those whom he must fight include teachers, relatives, companions and elders. Neither courage nor compassion alone can resolve his dilemma. It is in this suspended moment—between obligation and revulsion, action and withdrawal—that Krishna begins to speak. What follows is not merely a sermon delivered before battle. It is a sustained inquiry into duty, action, knowledge, devotion, discipline, the nature of the self, the structure of reality and the possibility of freedom while remaining fully engaged in the world.

It asks whether freedom can be found within action itself. Wilkins's 1785 edition carried this dialogue into English for the first time through a translation made directly from Sanskrit. It was also the first substantial Sanskrit work translated directly into English, making the volume a foundational document in the history of Indology and of intellectual exchange between India and Britain. Before Wilkins, European knowledge of Indian sacred and philosophical literature was largely indirect. Information travelled through Persian versions, missionary reports, travellers' accounts, administrative summaries and theological polemic.

India was discussed constantly, yet its classical texts were rarely allowed to speak in their own sustained voice. For the first time, English readers could encounter an extended Sanskrit philosophical text presented not merely as evidence of Indian customs, but as a serious work of thought. The edition announced that India possessed a literature capable of addressing the same fundamental questions that European readers associated with Plato, Epictetus, the Bible and the great traditions of moral philosophy.

Can one act without becoming enslaved by the consequences of action? How may a person remain inwardly free while performing outward obligations? They were universal questions expressed through an Indian intellectual vocabulary. Wilkins's translation became one of the principal channels through which the Gītā entered European discussion. Later interpreters would challenge Wilkins's terminology and theological assumptions. Collectors value beginnings because beginnings cannot be recreated.

A BOOK BEFORE ITS CATEGORY EXISTED

When the volume appeared in 1785, Sanskrit studies scarcely existed as an organised European discipline. There was no settled scholarly vocabulary for translating many of the concepts Wilkins encountered. Even the idea that Sanskrit might become central to comparative philology lay largely in the future. He had to learn through Indian teachers, manuscript traditions and sustained conversation with pandits. Davis's study of the first English Gītā emphasises that the translation should be understood as a collaborative achievement involving Wilkins, the Sanskrit scholar Kāśinātha Bhattacharya and Warren Hastings, rather than as the solitary production of a European Orientalist.

But behind that name stood an Indian world of scholarship: teachers who explained grammar, commentators who preserved interpretative traditions, scribes who transmitted manuscripts and intellectual interlocutors who made the text intelligible to its translator. A mature account of the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta must therefore hold two truths together. The book is best understood as an artefact of encounter—a meeting between Sanskrit learning and the English printed book, between Indian pandits and an East India Company servant, between a classical religious text and the intellectual culture of the European Enlightenment.

WARREN HASTINGS AND THE AUTHORITY OF PUBLICATION

The translation might never have acquired its historical position without Warren Hastings. As Governor-General of Bengal, Hastings encouraged the study of Indian law, language and literature. Yet Hastings's support for Wilkins cannot be reduced entirely to political utility. He recognised the philosophical stature of the text and used his influence to secure its publication under the auspices of the East India Company. His introductory letter gave the translation a form of institutional authority that no privately printed Oriental curiosity could have possessed.

He suggested that the writings and philosophical traditions of India would survive long after British power in the subcontinent had ceased to exist. That broad argument appears in his prefatory material to the translation and has become one of the most frequently remembered statements associated with the book. The East India Company intended to publish a work useful to an expanding British understanding of India. Instead, it helped release an Indian scripture into global intellectual history. The book it printed became immortal.

THE TITLE PAGE AS A DECLARATION

The full title of the first edition reads: The Bhāgavat-Gēetā, or Dialogues of Krēṣhṇā and Ārjōṇ; in Eighteen Lectures; with Notes. Translated from the Original, in the Sanskreet, or Ancient Language of the Brahmans, by Charles Wilkins, Senior Merchant in the Service of the Honourable the East India Company, on their Bengal Establishment. Nourse in 1785, the

volume announced several claims before the reader reached the first page of the translation. “Translated from the Original.” This distinguished Wilkins’s work from translations mediated through Persian or another intermediary language.

“The Sanskreet, or Ancient Language of the Brahmans.” The phrase introduced many English readers to Sanskrit itself as a language of antiquity and authority. “In Eighteen Lectures.” Wilkins rendered the Sanskrit chapters as “lectures,” giving the work the appearance of a structured philosophical course. Even the orthography—Bhāgvāt-Gēētā, Krēēshnā, Ārjōōn—records an early moment in the history of transliteration, before modern conventions had stabilised the English representation of Sanskrit names. It is the threshold through which the Bhagavad Gītā first entered English print.

INDIA SPEAKS IN THE FIRST PERSON

One of the deepest achievements of the edition lies in its change of voice. After Wilkins, an Indian philosophical text could address the English reader directly. This distinction may appear obvious today, when translations of Indian scriptures are available in hundreds of editions. In 1785 it was revolutionary. The work did not merely tell readers that Indian philosophy existed. It allowed them to encounter its reasoning, paradoxes, tensions and spiritual ambitions across an entire book. It became a speaking civilisation.

THE FIRST GLOBAL LIFE OF THE GĪTĀ

The publication of Wilkins’s translation initiated a new phase in the history of the text. The Gītā had long possessed multiple Indian lives—as scripture, philosophical dialogue, devotional text, commentary tradition and part of the Mahābhārata. From Wilkins onward, the work entered European debates over monotheism, pantheism, natural religion, comparative philosophy and the antiquity of civilisation. It attracted Romantic writers and later influenced major readers in Britain, continental Europe and the United States. The translation helped establish the pathway by which the Gītā would eventually reach figures such as Emerson and Thoreau and participate in modern global discussions of action, selfhood and spiritual discipline.

The precise routes of influence were complex and often involved later translations, but Wilkins’s edition stood at the beginning of the English-language genealogy. The text proved capable of surviving every interpretation without being exhausted by any of them. That is one definition of a classic.

WHY COLLECTORS CARE

From the perspective of the collector, Wilkins’s Bhagvat-Geeta possesses an unusual concentration of desirable qualities. It is: the first English translation of the Bhagavad Gītā; the first major Sanskrit work translated directly into English; a foundational publication in British Indology; a document of collaboration between European and Indian scholarship; a landmark in the history of comparative religion; a significant East India Company publication; and the beginning of the English-language reception of one of the world’s great philosophical texts.

It is collected because it marks an irreversible moment. Before 1785, the Bhagavad Gītā had no printed English life. After 1785, it belonged increasingly to the world. Collector and dealer references have placed attractive first editions well into five-figure sterling or dollar territory, while the Eye of the Beholder’s own catalogue framework identifies Wilkins’s Bhagvat-Geeta as a museum-level, foundational book within the Indian field. A recent specialist catalogue described an attractive copy at £12,500, while public auction and dealer pricing has varied substantially according to binding, provenance, completeness and condition.

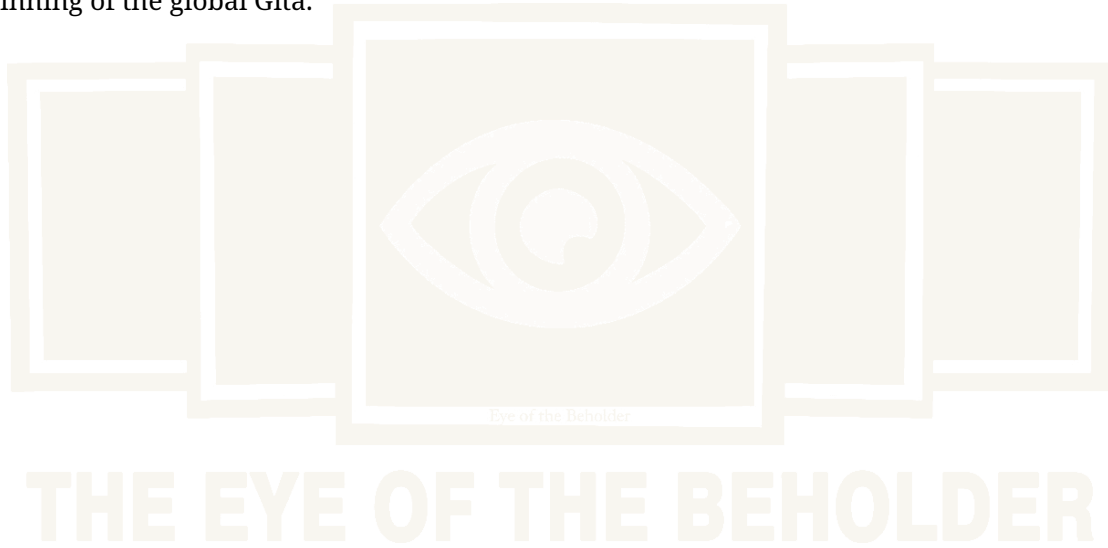
Within a serious collection of printed India, certain works form the foundation: Halhed’s Code of Gentoo Laws for law. The early Asiatick Researches for organised Oriental scholarship.

Among these, the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta occupies the summit. It is one of the books through which India became intellectually present in the modern world.

THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT OF THIS CUSTODIAN PAPER

This paper will argue that Wilkins's 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta should be understood simultaneously as: A sacred text in translation. A milestone in the history of printing and translation. A catalyst in the global reception of Indian philosophy. And one of the supreme cornerstone books of Indian antiquarian collecting. The translation emerged within structures of empire and inequality. Its vocabulary sometimes refracted Indian ideas through eighteenth-century European theological categories. Its publication belonged to a political programme as well as an intellectual one.

The book survives because it records a moment when conquest unexpectedly produced conversation; when administration opened a path toward scholarship; when an East India Company servant, working with Indian intellectual custodians, carried Krishna's dialogue with Arjuna from Sanskrit manuscript culture into the English printed world. It is to hold the beginning of the global Gītā.



Chapter I

Before Wilkins

The Gītā in Sanskrit, Commentary, Vernacular and Persian Worlds

When Charles Wilkins published *The Bhāgavat-Gēetā*, or *Dialogues of Krēēshnā and Ārjōōn* in London in 1785, he did not “discover” the *Bhagavad Gītā*. It had been copied by scribes, recited by teachers, debated by philosophers, interpreted by theologians, translated into Indian vernaculars and rendered into Persian. To understand the significance of the 1785 English edition, we must first return to the worlds through which the *Gītā* travelled before it reached him: the Sanskrit epic in which it was embedded, the commentarial traditions that transformed it into an independent philosophical classic, the vernacular cultures that carried it beyond the domain of Sanskrit learning, and the Indo-Persian scholars who translated it across religious and linguistic frontiers long before Britain attempted the same task. It was already alive.

A Dialogue Before a War

The *Bhagavad Gītā* appears within the *Bhīṣma Parva*, the sixth book of the *Mahābhārata*. It consists of eighteen discourses, conventionally numbering about seven hundred verses, placed at one of the most dramatic moments in world literature. Two armies stand opposite one another on the field of *Kurukṣetra*. Arjuna, the greatest archer of the *Pāṇḍava* brothers, asks Krishna—his charioteer, friend and divine companion—to place their chariot between the armies. Arjuna looks across the field and recognises not an anonymous enemy but a human world to which he belongs.

The language of political necessity collapses before the intimacy of recognition. He declares that victory purchased through the death of those he loves cannot be victory at all. Arjuna is paralysed by the collision of incompatible duties. As a warrior, he is obliged to resist injustice. As a kinsman, he recoils from killing his own people. As a moral being, he fears the consequences of violence. As a prince, he knows that withdrawal will permit wrongdoing to triumph. It begins in the moment when moral certainty fails.

The Battlefield Within

The physical setting of the *Gītā* is a battlefield, but its enduring power lies in the way that battlefield becomes interior. An individual must sometimes act without knowing whether the result will justify the action. It begins by acknowledging that human beings may be obliged to act precisely when complete moral clarity is unavailable. Krishna’s response unfolds across eighteen chapters because no single answer can resolve Arjuna’s predicament. He speaks of the immortality of the self, the transience of the body, the discipline of action, the nature of knowledge, the control of the mind, devotion to the divine, the structure of reality and the surrender of attachment.

The *Gītā* brings together several currents of Indian thought without reducing them to a single narrow system. Action, knowledge, meditation and devotion appear not merely as competing paths, but as dimensions of a larger spiritual discipline. This capacity to hold apparently divergent teachings in creative tension is one reason scholars have continued to debate whether the work should be read as a unified philosophical composition or as a text reflecting multiple historical and doctrinal layers. It demands interpretation.

From Episode to Scripture

Within the narrative architecture of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Gītā* occupies only a small portion of an immense epic. Copied separately, recited independently and surrounded by

commentary, it increasingly came to be treated not merely as one episode within the epic but as a compact statement of philosophical and spiritual teaching. This transformation did not happen because the text was simple. Different readers discovered different centres within the same work. It became the source of the text's extraordinary longevity.

The Gītā offered enough philosophical structure to sustain systematic commentary, enough poetry to support devotion, enough dramatic intensity to attract general readers and enough ambiguity to ensure that no interpretation could close the text permanently. A classic survives not because it answers every question. It survives because it continues to generate better questions.

The Age of the Commentators

For many premodern readers, the Gītā was encountered not as an isolated text but through commentary. In Sanskrit intellectual culture, commentary was not an inferior activity performed after original thought had ended. Demonstrated how the text supported a particular understanding of reality, liberation and the divine. The commentarial history of the Gītā therefore became a history of Indian philosophy itself. Perhaps the most influential early surviving commentary is associated with Śaṅkara, the great exponent of Advaita Vedānta.

In his reading, the deepest truth concerns the identity of the individual self with ultimate reality. Action possesses an important preparatory role, but liberating knowledge occupies the highest position. The human problem arises fundamentally from ignorance: the mistaken identification of the eternal self with the changing body, mind and personality. Rāmānuja, the great theologian of Viśiṣṭādvaita, emphasised a reality in which individual souls and the world remain genuinely related to the supreme divine being. Krishna was not simply an allegorical instructor pointing beyond himself toward an impersonal absolute.

Madhva, representing the dualist tradition, defended an enduring distinction between God and the individual soul. For him, the devotional relationship depended upon difference rather than ultimate identity. Later commentators—including Madhusūdana Sarasvatī—found new ways to reconcile devotion with non-dualist metaphysics. The same Sanskrit verses thus became the ground upon which rival philosophical systems argued their deepest claims. It made them possible.

A Text Made Larger by Disagreement

Modern readers sometimes assume that a sacred book achieves authority by producing uniformity. Its authority expanded because it could sustain disagreement without disintegrating. Each major commentator approached the text with inherited assumptions, institutional loyalties and philosophical commitments. Each sought to demonstrate that Krishna's teaching, properly understood, confirmed the commentator's vision. They linked individual verses to the Upaniṣads, the Brahma Sūtras, ritual traditions, yoga, devotional theology and systems of metaphysics. Through commentary, the Gītā became more than a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna.

Each encountered a text already surrounded by interpretative choices. The meaning of terms such as dharma, yoga, brahman, ātman, prakṛti, karma and saṁnyāsa could not be determined through vocabulary alone. His English sentences were not produced merely through a dictionary. They emerged from conversations with Indian scholars who belonged, directly or indirectly, to traditions of interpretation extending back many centuries.

Manuscripts and the Life of the Text

Before printing established a standardised page, the Gītā travelled through manuscripts. These might be copied as part of the Mahābhārata, reproduced as independent texts or accompanied by one or more commentaries. Sanskrit was a language; Devanāgarī was only

one of several scripts through which it could be written. A manuscript copied in Bengal might look very different from one produced in western India or the south. Modern readers often imagine an ancient text as a fixed verbal object preserved unchanged until printing reproduces it.

Teachers, scribes, monasteries, temples, courts and learned households maintained texts because they believed them worthy of continuation. Every manuscript was the outcome of labour: paper or palm leaf had to be prepared, ink manufactured, script mastered and the copying checked. The physical object carried knowledge because human beings repeatedly chose not to let that knowledge disappear. Behind the printed edition lies a vast, mostly anonymous civilisation of manuscripts. It changed the conditions under which the text could travel.

The Gītā Beyond Sanskrit

Sanskrit gave the Gītā prestige, precision and connection to the wider world of śāstric learning. Across India, the teachings of the Gītā circulated through vernacular exposition, oral instruction, paraphrase, commentary and devotional retelling. A teacher might render a Sanskrit verse into a regional language, expand it through analogy, connect it with local devotional traditions and adapt its significance to the needs of a particular audience. A Sanskrit commentary generally addressed readers trained in a specialised intellectual culture.

A vernacular rendering could reach merchants, householders, artisans, pilgrims and devotional communities whose relationship to the text was not primarily scholastic. One of the great landmarks in this history was Jñāneśvara's Marathi exposition, commonly known as the Jñāneśvarī or Bhāvarthadīpikā. Composed in the late thirteenth century, it transformed the Sanskrit dialogue into an expansive work of vernacular poetry. It opened the philosophical text into imagery, metaphor and devotional feeling accessible to a wider community. A compact Sanskrit verse might unfold into a long sequence of luminous analogies. The Gītā became embedded in regional cultures whose devotional and philosophical vocabularies reshaped its reception. It was another life of the text.

From Philosophy to Devotion

The growing devotional importance of Krishna transformed the way many readers encountered the work. Within the epic, Krishna is Arjuna's charioteer, counsellor and divine teacher. Within developing Vaiṣṇava traditions, he is also the supreme Lord, the source and end of existence. The eleventh chapter, in which Krishna reveals his cosmic form, made this theological power visible. Was Krishna revealing himself as the personal supreme deity? The Gītā could therefore inhabit two spaces at once: the philosophical school and the devotional heart.

This dual capacity helps explain why the text eventually became more globally influential than many longer and more systematically organised Sanskrit works. It could satisfy the philosopher without excluding the devotee. It could speak of metaphysical knowledge while preserving the emotional immediacy of a conversation between a bewildered human being and a divine friend.

The Persian Cosmopolis

Long before Wilkins introduced the Gītā to English readers, Sanskrit works had entered another major language of South Asian intellectual life. For centuries, Persian functioned across much of the subcontinent as a language of administration, courtly culture, historiography, poetry and learned exchange. Under the Mughal emperors, translation between Sanskrit and Persian became an important field of intellectual and political activity. The most celebrated example was the Persian translation of the Mahābhārata commissioned

under Akbar and known as the Razmnāma, the “Book of War.” Completed during the late sixteenth century, it was not a minor linguistic exercise.

Sanskrit scholars explained the text, often through an intermediary vernacular, while Persian writers shaped the material into literary prose. Recent scholarship notes that the Bhagavad Gītā was translated into Persian by at least three authors during the seventeenth century, and perhaps earlier. It occurred within India.

A Muslim Gītā

Among the most intellectually compelling Persian engagements with the work was the translation associated with the Chishti scholar ‘Abd al-Rahmān, commonly known as Chishtī. It approached the text interpretatively, exploring correspondences between Hindu philosophical language and Islamic, particularly Sufi, concepts. Words do not move between religious traditions without changing their resonances. A Sanskrit term could not simply be replaced by an apparently equivalent Persian or Arabic expression. Was brahman to be understood through the language of ultimate reality?

Could Krishna be represented in terms acceptable or intelligible to a Muslim reader? Modern scholarship has consequently described this version as a “Muslim Bhagavadgita,” emphasising the interpretative ambition through which the translator sought to make the work meaningful within an Islamic intellectual world. It was an effort to understand across difference by discovering a vocabulary through which one tradition could become legible to another.

Dara Shikoh and the Meeting of Oceans

No figure embodies the Indo-Persian search for religious correspondence more powerfully than the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh. Dara studied Sufism deeply and became convinced that the great religious traditions concealed related metaphysical truths beneath their outward differences. His best-known work, Majma‘ al-Baḥrayn—“The Meeting of the Two Oceans”—attempted to explore convergences between Islamic and Hindu thought. Dara’s intellectual programme was not modern comparative religion in an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century European sense. This approach could produce illuminating correspondences, but it could also reshape the original according to the translator’s expectations.

When two traditions are declared identical too quickly, difference may disappear under the desire for harmony. By the seventeenth century, the Sanskrit philosophical world was already participating in a multilingual conversation that included Persianate Muslim scholars. The Gītā had crossed a major civilisational frontier more than a century before the English edition.

Translation and Power

The Persian translations also remind us that intellectual openness and imperial power were never entirely separate. Mughal patronage of Sanskrit translation served several purposes. It allowed Persian-reading elites to engage with the traditions of the majority population. Monarchs and princes used translation as part of political self-fashioning, presenting themselves as universal rulers capable of understanding and containing multiple traditions. Recent scholarship on Mughal translation emphasises that rulers commissioned translations not only to access knowledge but also to claim authority over the teachings they made available in a new courtly language.

The Persian history helps us avoid treating this tension as uniquely British. Across empires, translation has often stood between curiosity and control, reverence and appropriation, hospitality and power. The importance of the resulting books lies partly in their refusal to fit comfortably within a single moral category. They are records of genuine encounter produced under unequal conditions.

Persian Readers Before English Readers

One of the most striking claims in scholarship on the Indo-Persian Gītā is that, by the eighteenth century, the Persian-reading audience for the work may have been considerable. Persian was used not only by Muslims but also by large numbers of Hindu scribes, administrators and intellectuals who participated in the Persianate culture of the subcontinent. One scholarly assessment has even suggested that more Hindus in that period may have encountered the Gītā through Persian than through the original Sanskrit, given the size of the Persian-educated administrative class compared with the narrower body of advanced Sanskrit scholars. Sanskrit pandits, Persian scholars, Hindu administrators and Muslim mystics had created a multilingual intellectual environment whose complexities would influence early British Orientalism. He did not invent one.

The European Edge of the Persian World

Persian versions also created indirect routes by which Indian philosophy could move toward Europe. Persian manuscripts circulated through diplomatic, commercial and scholarly networks. Texts translated from Sanskrit into Persian could therefore become available to readers who had no direct access to the original language. Anquetil-Duperron's later Latin rendering of the Upaniṣads, for example, was based on the Persian translation associated with Dara Shikoh. The resulting Oupnek'hat played an important role in the European reception of Indian thought.

Scholarship on its transnational reception notes that an early European version associated with Anquetil-Duperron drew upon a Persian rendering connected to Dara Shikoh. This matters because the familiar narrative—Sanskrit text, English translation, European discovery—is too linear. French and German translations emerged from English and Sanskrit versions. Indian readers subsequently reinterpreted the text partly in response to European interpretations. After Sanskrit commentaries, vernacular expositions and Persian translations, what remained for Wilkins to accomplish? His 1785 edition was the first direct English translation of the Bhagavad Gītā and the first major Sanskrit work made available to English readers through sustained engagement with the original language.

It entered print under the patronage of the East India Company and was distributed within the expanding English-language Republic of Letters. A book issued in London could travel through commercial networks, private libraries and learned societies. It could be reviewed, cited, translated again and incorporated into European arguments about religion, philosophy, language and civilisation. It was between different audiences, institutions and technologies of circulation.

A Text Already Surrounded by Voices

When Wilkins sat with his manuscript and his Indian teacher, the page before him was crowded with invisible presences. The unknown poets and redactors through whom the text assumed its historical form. The translation of 1785 was therefore not a conversation between Wilkins and an ancient text alone. It was the latest intervention in a centuries-old history of interpretation. This is why the role of Kāśinātha Bhattacharya, Wilkins's principal Sanskrit interlocutor in the making of the English Gītā, becomes so important. Through him, part of the commentarial and pedagogical world of the Sanskrit text entered Wilkins's English. Its intellectual ancestry was plural.

Before the Printed Page

It is tempting, when holding a first edition, to imagine that the history of a book begins at the press. The printed volume is powerful because it gathers so much earlier history into a new material form. All stand behind the London title page of 1785. It is the point at which multiple Indian histories of the text entered a new global channel.

Concluding Reflection

Before Wilkins, the Bhagavad Gītā had already crossed boundaries between epic and scripture, philosophy and devotion, Sanskrit and vernacular speech, Hindu and Muslim intellectual worlds. It had survived because each generation found within it a question that remained unresolved. Can spiritual freedom exist within political and social obligation? The devotional traditions heard different accents in Krishna's voice. The Persian interpreters discovered affinities that Sanskrit scholasticism had not formulated in the same way. When Wilkins encountered the text in the late eighteenth century, he was therefore approaching neither a relic nor an untouched original.

The English Bhagvat-Geeta of 1785 would carry Krishna and Arjuna into London drawing rooms, European libraries, Romantic philosophy, American Transcendentalism and eventually a worldwide culture of reading. That encounter—the relationship between an English Company servant, the Sanskrit scholar Kāśīnātha Bhattacharya and the patronage of Warren Hastings—forms the subject of the chapters that follow. In 1785, it was about to cross another ocean.



Chapter II

Charles Wilkins

Linguist, Typographer and the Making of the First English Gītā

Among the men who created the foundations of European Sanskrit scholarship, Charles Wilkins occupies a position of unusual distinction. Sir William Jones would become the more celebrated public figure: the brilliant judge, linguist and founder of the Asiatic Society whose famous observations on Sanskrit helped transform the study of language. Warren Hastings possessed the political authority and institutional imagination required to support Oriental scholarship. Yet Wilkins was the indispensable craftsman—the man who learned the languages, cut the type, examined the manuscripts and undertook the slow labour through which Indian texts first became directly accessible to English readers.

Yet the work that secured his place in intellectual history was published in London in 1785: *The Bhāgvat-Gēetā*, or Dialogues of Krēṣhṇā and Ārjōṇ. It was the first work translated directly from Sanskrit into English and the first English translation of the Bhagavad Gītā. It was the culmination of fifteen years of linguistic apprenticeship, technical experimentation and intellectual transformation. Before Wilkins could translate Krishna, he first had to become someone capable of hearing him.

CHARLES WILKINS AT A GLANCE

1749 — Born at Frome in Somerset 1770 — Arrived in India as a Writer in the service of the East India Company 1778 — Began the sustained study of Sanskrit 1778 — Bengali movable type used in Halhed's *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* 1781 — Appointed translator of Persian and Bengali and associated with the Company press 1784 — Participated in the intellectual circle that founded the Asiatic Society 1785 — Published the first English translation of the Bhagavad Gītā 1786 — Returned to Britain 1787 — Published *The Heetopades of Veeshnoo-Sarma* 1788 — Elected Fellow of the Royal Society 1800–1801 — Entrusted with the East India Company's library collections 1808 — Published *A Grammar of the Sanskrit Language* 1833 — Knighted for services to Oriental scholarship 1836 — Died in London

From Somerset to Bengal

Charles Wilkins was born in 1749 at Frome, Somerset. There was little in his origins to suggest that he would become one of the principal interpreters of Indian civilisation to eighteenth-century Europe. He did not emerge from the aristocratic or university world that produced many of Britain's recognised men of letters. He came instead from comparatively modest circumstances and received training that appears to have included practical experience in printing. In 1770, at approximately twenty-one years of age, Wilkins travelled to India as a Writer in the service of the East India Company.

The title sounds literary to modern ears, but a Company Writer was a junior civil servant—part clerk, part commercial administrator, part apprentice to an institution whose activities were rapidly expanding beyond trade. The East India Company had acquired revenue-collecting powers after the Battle of Plassey and the grant of the diwani. They were administering territories, collecting taxation and attempting to understand legal and social systems of which they possessed only fragmentary knowledge. Contemporary accounts repeatedly remark upon the speed and seriousness with which he acquired linguistic competence. Many Company servants learned enough Persian or an Indian vernacular to conduct business. Wilkins became interested in the structure of language itself.

The Printer Before the Sanskritist

Wilkins's path toward the Bhagavad Gītā passed first through the printing press. We remember him as the translator of a sacred text, but his earliest major contribution to Indian intellectual history was material rather than philosophical. In eighteenth-century Europe, printing the Roman alphabet was a mature technology. The letters were relatively limited in number, and generations of craftsmen had refined their proportions. A successful typeface had to preserve the characteristic horizontal movement of the script while remaining practical for casting, composing, inking and repeated use.

Wilkins worked on the design of Bengali characters for Nathaniel Brassey Halhed's *A Grammar of the Bengal Language*, published in 1778. The actual cutting and manufacture of the types involved the Indian craftsman Panchanan Karmakar, whose skill in metal engraving was essential to the project. Banglapedia records that Panchanan developed the first Bengali printing types under Wilkins's supervision. It emerged from cooperation between European print technology and Indian craftsmanship. The first printed Bengali letters therefore embody the same pattern that would later shape the English Gītā: a British Orientalist; an Indian intellectual and artisanal partner; a difficult act of translation between systems; and a finished object whose title page preserved only part of the labour behind it.

PUNCH, MATRIX AND TYPE

To produce a metal typeface in the eighteenth century, the form of each character normally had to pass through several stages. Molten type metal was then cast into the matrix, producing multiple individual pieces of type that could be assembled into words and lines. The project demanded: linguistic knowledge; calligraphic sensitivity; metalworking skill; mechanical precision; and repeated experimentation at the press. It taught him to consider language simultaneously as meaning, shape and material form.

Halhed, Hastings and the Politics of Language

The publication of Halhed's Bengali grammar belonged to a wider Company effort to acquire usable knowledge of Indian languages and institutions. Nathaniel Brassey Halhed was closely associated with Warren Hastings and had already produced *A Code of Gentoo Laws* in 1776, an English rendering of a Persian translation compiled from Sanskrit legal materials. The work sought to provide British administrators with access to Hindu law, although its multiple stages of mediation inevitably shaped the result.

A government that expected to administer Bengal required officials who could move beyond interpreters and communicate more directly with its inhabitants. It transformed a regional language into a reproducible typographic object capable of circulating through schools, offices and scholarly networks. By 1781 he was appointed to official responsibilities involving Persian and Bengali translation and supervision of Company printing. And he possessed the practical intelligence necessary to turn scripts into printed books.

The Turn Toward Sanskrit

Persian and Bengali opened the immediate world of Company administration. To British officials of the period, Sanskrit remained largely inaccessible. It was known to be a language of Hindu sacred, legal and literary traditions, but few Europeans possessed the competence required to read it directly. Knowledge of Sanskrit texts generally came through Indian interpreters, Persian translations or summaries. Wilkins began sustained Sanskrit study around 1778. Davis's research on the making of the first English Gītā identifies this period as the decisive beginning of his engagement with the language.

No substantial English grammar capable of guiding a beginner through the language's elaborate morphology and syntax. Students learned grammatical rules, inflections, verbal

systems and interpretative procedures through memorisation and oral explanation. It belonged to institutions of learning and to communities that guarded specialised knowledge. He needed trust.

Benares and the Living University of Sanskrit

Wilkins's Sanskrit studies became particularly associated with Benares—Varanasi, or Kāśī—one of the great centres of Hindu learning. Different teachers specialised in grammar, law, ritual, logic, Vedānta, astronomy and other disciplines. Wilkins studied with Indian pandits, including the scholar identified in scholarship on the Gītā as Kāśīnātha Bhattacharya. Older accounts sometimes referred to his teacher under variant forms such as “Kalinatha,” but modern work has clarified the central importance of Kāśīnātha to the translation project. The relationship should not be imagined as that between a translator and a dictionary consultant.

Kāśīnātha helped Wilkins navigate a text whose meaning depended upon grammar, philosophical terminology and inherited modes of interpretation. A technical word might possess several meanings, each associated with a different philosophical school. The relationship between a verse and the larger argument might be clarified only through commentary. Kāśīnātha helped him learn how the text was read.

Learning Without a Dictionary

The difficulties faced by Wilkins are almost impossible to reproduce in the modern world. Today a student of the Gītā may consult numerous Sanskrit editions, word-by-word analyses, digital concordances, historical dictionaries and translations representing multiple philosophical traditions. He encountered words whose meanings had to be established through oral explanation, comparison and contextual reasoning. He could not turn to a standard scholarly edition in which variant readings had already been compared. Was Krishna speaking of action, ritual action, moral action or the metaphysical consequences of action?

Was ātman the soul, the self, the spirit or something for which English possessed no exact equivalent? What did dharma mean in a specific verse: duty, law, righteousness, essential nature, religious order or social obligation? He sometimes used expressions drawn from Christian theology, classical philosophy or eighteenth-century moral discourse. He wished English readers to recognise that they were encountering another intellectual world.

From Language Student to Epigraphist

Wilkins's growing mastery of Indian languages also led him toward inscriptions. A manuscript belonged to a continuous scribal tradition and could often be explained by living scholars. Wilkins succeeded in reading and publishing important early Indian inscriptions, including material written in forms of Brahmi-derived script that had resisted earlier European interpretation. His work on inscriptions demonstrated that he was not merely repeating explanations supplied by contemporary teachers. He was developing the ability to compare scripts historically and reconstruct older forms of written language. He was increasingly recognised as a scholar capable of direct engagement with Indian sources. That distinction was revolutionary.

The Asiatic Society and a New Scholarly Community

In January 1784, Sir William Jones founded the Asiatic Society in Calcutta. The Society sought to create an organised forum for the study of Asian history, languages, sciences, arts and institutions. Its emergence marked a transition from the isolated interests of individual Company servants toward a more self-conscious scholarly community. Wilkins belonged naturally within this circle and was associated with the Society's founding generation. He could survey an entire civilisation and announce its significance in language that captured

European attention. Wilkins had already demonstrated that Sanskrit could be learned, translated and printed. The other supplied its working instruments.

The Unfinished Mahābhārata

Wilkins did not initially conceive of the Bhagavad Gītā as an isolated book. The epic contains approximately one hundred thousand verses in its received form and encompasses mythology, law, theology, political thought, narrative and philosophical debate. No single translator working under eighteenth-century conditions could realistically have completed it. The Gītā, however, formed a coherent and compelling unit within the larger epic. The decision to publish this section separately proved historically momentous. Had Wilkins persisted only with the complete Mahābhārata, the project might have remained unfinished and unpublished.

By isolating the Gītā, he produced a manageable book whose scale invited concentrated reading. Why did Wilkins—and Hastings—believe this particular text would matter to European readers? The Gītā could be presented as evidence that India possessed serious reflections on metaphysics, ethics and the nature of God. It challenged European assumptions that Hindu religion consisted only of mythology, ritual or the worship of images. Wilkins himself read the work partly through an eighteenth-century search for a philosophical core beneath religious plurality.

Like several early Orientalists, he was inclined to distinguish between what he regarded as an ancient, elevated theology and later forms of popular practice. This framework could lead him to see the Gītā as preserving a form of sublime monotheistic or unitarian thought beneath the apparent polytheism of Hindu tradition. It was neither the only Indian reading of the text nor a neutral description of its theology. The Gītā could be introduced as philosophical scripture rather than ethnographic curiosity. The warrior who does not know how to act became India's first great philosophical interlocutor in English.

The Translator's Character

Wilkins's prose reveals several qualities that seem to have belonged to the man himself. And a willingness to remain close to a difficult original even when smooth English might have been easier. Translators adapted foreign works to domestic taste, omitted unfamiliar passages, introduced moral explanations or improved what they considered defective. Krishna sometimes speaks in a register that recalls the elevated language of the King James Bible or English moral philosophy. Yet Wilkins repeatedly preserved strangeness where a more assimilative translator might have erased it. This seriousness distinguished the Bhagvat-Geeta from the numerous Oriental adaptations that treated Asian literature chiefly as raw material for European imagination. He made it possible to read in English.

“Translated from the Original”

The phrase printed on the title page carried enormous authority: Translated from the Original, in the Sanskreet. Earlier English knowledge of Hindu texts had frequently passed through Persian mediation. Halhed's Code of Gentoo Laws, for example, was translated into English from a Persian version prepared from Sanskrit materials. He worked from Sanskrit, but he did so through collaboration with Indian scholars. It was a text embedded in interpretative traditions that Kāśīnātha and others helped Wilkins understand. That distinction makes the book more interesting, not less.

Wilkins and Kāśīnātha

The title page names Charles Wilkins. Davis has argued persuasively that the first English Gītā should be understood through a triad of contributors: Wilkins, Kāśīnātha and Hastings. Kāśīnātha provided the Sanskrit learning and interpretative assistance without which the

work could not have acquired its form. Hastings recognised the political and intellectual significance of the project and secured the institutional support necessary for publication. Hastings could communicate directly with the Court of Directors in London. Kāśinātha belonged to the Indian scholarly world whose knowledge made the entire project possible, yet his name did not appear with comparable prominence in the printed volume. European publication frequently transformed collaborative knowledge into individual authorship. His greatest scholarly virtue may have been his willingness to learn.

The Translator at Work

We cannot reconstruct every conversation that passed between Wilkins and Kāśinātha. But the work itself allows us to imagine the process. The grammatical construction is explained. Perhaps a commentary is consulted. Wilkins proposes an English phrase. A note is added because no brief equivalent will carry the required meaning. The eighteenth-century English edition preserves only the final printed sentences. Behind each stands a more fluid world of pronunciation, explanation, disagreement and choice. The silent page began in conversation.

Hastings Recognises the Book

Wilkins's manuscript required a patron. He had already encouraged the study of Indian laws and languages and believed that the British administration could not govern intelligently without knowledge of the civilisation over which it exercised power. Nourse in 1785. The sequence reveals the unusual chain through which the Gītā entered English: a Sanskrit scripture; an Indian pandit; a Company translator; a Governor-General; the Court of Directors; a London printer and bookseller; and finally the European reader. The path from Kurukṣetra to London passed through empire.

The Return to Britain

Wilkins returned to Britain in 1786, shortly after the publication of the Bhagvat-Geeta. In 1787 he published his English translation of the Hitopadeśa, demonstrating that his interests extended beyond sacred philosophy into Sanskrit literature, ethics and political instruction. In 1788 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, recognition that his work belonged within the highest scholarly culture of Britain. In 1808, after decades of study, he published A Grammar of the Sanskrit Language, a monumental volume of more than six hundred pages and the earliest substantial Sanskrit grammar written in English. He created one for those who came after him.

Sanskrit in Metal

The 1808 grammar also returned Wilkins to the problem that had occupied him before the Gītā: how to make an Indian script printable. The volume required Devanāgarī types capable of representing Sanskrit with precision. Wilkins devoted considerable effort to the design of the characters, bringing together his linguistic knowledge and typographical skill. Modern scholarship is often divided into separate professions. That breadth is one reason he deserves to be remembered not merely as the first translator of the Gītā, but as one of the architects of Indian print culture.

The Librarian as Custodian

Wilkins's later work with the East India Company's library placed him among collections of Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic manuscripts that had travelled from South Asia to Britain. Manuscripts preserved in London were available to European scholars. Wilkins approached these collections with the habits of a scholar and printer. He helped create the institutional framework through which nineteenth-century Orientalism would expand. The India House Library became one of Europe's great repositories of Asian manuscripts. He keeps them in trust.

Recognition

Wilkins's contributions received increasing recognition during his lifetime. He was appointed to responsibilities connected with the teaching and examination of Company servants. In 1833 he was knighted in recognition of his services to Oriental scholarship. Yet fame never surrounded him as dramatically as it surrounded William Jones. The world remembers the sentence that announces a discovery more readily than the years of labour that make the sentence possible. In all these fields, Wilkins worked.

Wilkins Through Modern Eyes

No eighteenth-century Orientalist can be separated entirely from the colonial structures within which he operated. His translations were supported by a government expanding its authority over Indian society. His interpretations sometimes reflected European theological categories and assumptions about the relationship between an ancient philosophical Hinduism and later religious practice. He relied upon pandits and appears to have respected their scholarship. He devoted years to languages that offered no immediate route to wealth or political advancement.

His translations sought to reveal the seriousness of Indian thought to readers who frequently doubted that such seriousness existed. He was a complicated figure at the beginning of a complicated encounter. The knowledge proved larger than the power that carried it.

A Life Organised Around Transmission

The unity of Wilkins's career becomes visible when viewed as a whole. He translated the Bhagavad Gītā so that English readers could encounter Indian philosophy. He translated the Hitopadeśa so that they could encounter Indian literary and political wisdom. He examined inscriptions so that India's earlier written history could become legible. He produced a Sanskrit grammar so that future students would not face the obstacles he had faced. From one generation to another.

The Man Behind the First Edition

For collectors, it is tempting to separate a great book from the life of its translator. In the case of the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta, the two are inseparable. The title page records: Charles Wilkins, Senior Merchant in the Service of the Honourable the East India Company, on their Bengal Establishment. A craftsman whose most important product was not a typeface or press, but a bridge between civilisations. The first English Gītā could have been produced only by someone capable of inhabiting several identities at once.

Concluding Reflection

Charles Wilkins did not possess the public brilliance of William Jones or the political authority of Warren Hastings. He remained with Sanskrit grammar until its apparent impossibilities became intelligible. He remained with Indian manuscripts long enough to understand that translation required more than vocabulary. That apprenticeship made the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta possible. Behind the printed edition stood Warren Hastings and the institutional power of the East India Company. It examines the three figures whose names and authority converged in the first English Gītā: Kāśīnātha, the Indian scholar who helped unlock the Sanskrit text; Wilkins, the translator who carried it into English; and Hastings, the patron who understood that this manuscript should become a book. Together they produced one of the foundational volumes in the history of Indian printing. An encounter preserved in paper and ink.

Chapter III

Kāśinātha, Warren Hastings and the Collaborative Making of the 1785 Gītā

A Translation Made by More Than One Mind

The title page of the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta names Charles Wilkins as translator. There were manuscripts, commentaries, teachers, oral explanations, grammatical traditions and habits of interpretation transmitted across generations. Most important among the identifiable Indian participants was Kāśinātha Bhattacharya, the Sanskrit scholar who guided Wilkins through the language and philosophical structure of the text. Governor-General of Bengal, patron of Oriental learning, architect of an administrative system that sought to govern through an understanding—however partial and politically interested—of Indian law and tradition.

The first English Gītā was therefore not the product of a solitary translator working in isolation. Hastings brought patronage, institutional force and access to the East India Company's publishing machinery. The book emerged where those worlds met.

THE THREE PRINCIPAL MAKERS

Kāśinātha Bhattacharya

Sanskrit scholar, teacher and interpreter. He represented the living Indian traditions through which the Gītā had long been read and explained.

Charles Wilkins

Company servant, linguist, typographer and translator. He carried the Sanskrit text into English and shaped it into a printed European book.

Warren Hastings

Governor-General of Bengal and patron of Oriental scholarship. He recognised the political and philosophical importance of the translation and helped secure its publication.

The Myth of the Solitary Orientalist

Early histories of Oriental scholarship often celebrated individual Europeans as heroic discoverers. No European Sanskritist of the eighteenth century learned the language alone. There were no adequate English grammars, no Sanskrit-English dictionaries and no university courses in Britain. Manuscripts had to be obtained, read aloud, divided into words, grammatically analysed and interpreted within traditions that were unfamiliar to Europeans. The printed translation eventually appeared under one name because European publishing required an authorial centre. It is philosophically compressed, theologically layered and deeply entangled with commentarial traditions.

A translator who knew grammar but lacked interpretative guidance could easily produce sentences that were linguistically plausible yet philosophically misleading. European archives preserved letters, careers, honours and official appointments. Indian scholars who participated in early Orientalist projects often appear only briefly in correspondence or prefatory acknowledgements. Their intellectual contribution may be visible everywhere in the finished work while their biographies remain fragmentary. Kāśinātha Bhattacharya appears to have been a learned Brahmin scholar associated with the Sanskrit intellectual world of Benares.

He assisted Wilkins in his study of the language and in the interpretation of the Bhagavad Gītā. Some older references rendered his name differently, contributing to later confusion, but modern scholarship has restored greater clarity to his identity and role. He was a reader of the Gītā trained within a tradition of Sanskrit explanation. To help Wilkins translate the text,

Kāśinātha would have had to perform several intellectual tasks: identify grammatical constructions; separate compounds; explain technical terms; clarify the relation between verses; distinguish literal sense from doctrinal implication; and situate Krishna's teaching within inherited modes of interpretation. Its intelligibility depended upon Kāśinātha's knowledge.

The Pandit as Intellectual Mediator

The word "pandit" is often translated simply as "learned man." That translation is accurate but insufficient. A pandit belonged to a system of learning in which knowledge was acquired through disciplined study, memorisation, debate, commentary and teacherly transmission. The text contains terms whose meanings shift according to context and philosophical framework. A single word may carry legal, ethical, ritual, metaphysical and devotional associations. It may mean discipline, method, concentration, spiritual practice, integration or a specific path toward liberation.

A translator approaching these words without Indian guidance would inevitably force them into the nearest European category. Kāśinātha's contribution lay partly in preventing that collapse. He made Wilkins aware that the Sanskrit language did not merely label ideas already familiar to Europe. It organised experience differently.

The Oral Life Behind the Printed Sentence

The finished volume gives the impression of stability. Yet before the sentence became fixed in print, it likely passed through a far more fluid process. Wilkins asks for the words to be divided. The relation between subject and object is explained. The final English version emerges only after repeated acts of judgment. What appears in the printed edition as a single authoritative line may therefore be the residue of a long conversation. In the case of the 1785 Gītā, it is especially important because the conversation crossed not only languages but intellectual civilisations. The translation was born orally before it became typographical.

Translation as Negotiation

Translation is sometimes imagined as the replacement of one word by another. If Sanskrit and English organised the world identically, Wilkins's task would have been mechanical. Ātman was not exactly "soul." Brahman was not simply "God." Dharma was not merely "duty." Saṃnyāsa was not reducible to "retirement" or "renunciation." Karma meant action, but also action in its moral and causal consequence. Bhakti meant devotion, but carried theological and emotional meanings not captured by a single English term. The English language available to them was shaped by Christianity, classical philosophy, Enlightenment moral thought and the King James Bible. It was an encounter between vocabularies.

What Kāśinātha May Have Seen

We do not possess a complete record of Kāśinātha's own reading of the Gītā. He would recognise its place within the Mahābhārata, its links to the Upaniṣads, its relation to Vedānta and its history of commentary. He would recognise when Krishna spoke as teacher, divine incarnation, supreme Lord or metaphysical principle. He might prefer one doctrinal interpretation over another, but he would understand that the text already possessed a layered history. Wilkins, by contrast, approached the Gītā with the intellectual expectations of an eighteenth-century European. He looked for a theology that could be made intelligible to readers familiar with monotheism, natural religion and moral philosophy. Wilkins translated toward an external audience.

Collaboration Without Equality

To call the project collaborative is necessary. The English edition was authorised, financed and circulated through imperial institutions. Kāśīnātha's knowledge was indispensable, but the printed book gave him neither equal billing nor equivalent historical visibility. Colonial knowledge often transformed collective intellectual labour into European authorship. Indian scholars explained, interpreted, compiled and translated, while European officials signed, prefaced and published. He took the responsibility of rendering the text into English and exposing his choices to public scrutiny. Wilkins's achievement consisted partly in recognising that he needed Indian scholarship and submitting himself to it. The intellectual bridge was built from both sides.

The Company's Need to Know

The translation was also shaped by the political environment created by the East India Company. Its servants governed populations whose laws, customs and institutions they barely understood. This produced both administrative anxiety and intellectual opportunity. Warren Hastings believed that British authority would be more stable if it worked through recognised Indian institutions rather than attempting to replace them immediately with English systems. His policies encouraged the translation of Hindu and Islamic legal materials and supported the study of Persian, Bengali and Sanskrit.

The same administrative logic that produced Halhed's Code of Gentoo Laws also created the conditions in which Wilkins's Sanskrit studies could flourish. It entered the Orientalist programme because Hastings and Wilkins believed Indian civilisation deserved to be studied beyond its immediate utility.

Warren Hastings

Few British administrators have inspired more contradictory judgments than Warren Hastings. To admirers, he was a statesman of unusual intelligence who recognised the complexity of Indian civilisation and resisted crude cultural destruction. To critics, he was a central architect of Company domination whose policies cannot be separated from extraction, violence and political coercion. He was also a reader capable of recognising genuine intellectual greatness in the traditions of those he governed. It impressed him as a work of philosophy.

Hastings's Orientalist Vision

Hastings's broader vision rested upon a belief that Indian society possessed ancient systems of law, religion and learning that should be understood through indigenous sources. It differed from the Anglicist position that would gain strength in the nineteenth century and argue for replacing Indian educational and legal traditions with English ones. They often believed that India's oldest texts contained a purer and more rational civilisation than contemporary practice revealed. It encouraged Europeans to privilege ancient textual traditions over living social realities. Without Hastings's patronage, Wilkins's *Gītā* might have remained a manuscript.

From Manuscript to Proposal

Once Wilkins had produced a translation, the next question was publication. The text belonged to a religious and philosophical tradition unfamiliar to most British readers. A commercial bookseller might hesitate to invest in it without institutional support. He communicated the significance of the project to the East India Company's directors and recommended that the translation be printed under Company patronage. It became an authorised publication associated with Britain's most powerful institution in India. Kāśīnātha had helped give it meaning.

The Preface as Act of Interpretation

Hastings's introductory letter is one of the most important documents in the history of the European reception of Indian philosophy. The European audience of 1785 knew little of the Bhagavad Gītā. Without a framing voice, many might have dismissed it as mythological curiosity or religious superstition. He asked readers to look beyond unfamiliar names, doctrines and images and recognise intellectual seriousness. He compared the work implicitly with the revered traditions of classical and religious thought familiar to Europe. It was read through Enlightenment interests in natural religion, moral philosophy and the comparative history of humanity. He elevated it by placing it within a European hierarchy of value.

The Famous Prophecy

The most celebrated passage in Hastings's introduction looks beyond empire. He argued, in substance, that British dominion in India might eventually disappear while Indian philosophical works would continue to endure. The precise wording has often been quoted in abbreviated form, but its force lies in the contrast. The statement is remarkable because it was written by the Governor-General of Bengal at the height of Company expansion. The Bhagavad Gītā became one of the most widely translated and discussed philosophical texts in the world. The book he patronised proved enduring.

Admiration and Appropriation

It would be too easy to read Hastings's preface as pure admiration. It would be equally simplistic to dismiss it as cynical imperial rhetoric. By praising the Gītā, Hastings granted Indian literature a status many Europeans denied it. Yet the act of publication also placed the text within a British framework of authority. India's scripture entered English print under the seal of the institution that governed Bengal. The first English Gītā is powerful partly because it preserves this contradiction.

A Book for the Court of Directors

The translation's route to publication passed through the East India Company's hierarchy. The Court of Directors in London represented the corporate authority behind British rule in India. To persuade them to support the book, Hastings had to present the project in terms they would recognise. Yet learned publication has always depended upon patrons—princes, churches, universities, academies, governments and wealthy collectors. In 1785, the patron happened to be a trading corporation with an army.

C. Nourse and the London Book Trade

The printed edition was issued in London for C. Nourse, a bookseller with an established place in the metropolitan trade. A translation produced in Benares and supported in Calcutta entered the commercial and intellectual networks of London. From there it could travel to private libraries, universities, learned societies and continental readers. The book crossed several systems before reaching its audience: Sanskrit manuscript culture. The Company document became a collector's book.

The Title Page and the Hierarchy of Credit

The title page prominently names Wilkins. It identifies him as a "Senior Merchant in the Service of the Honourable the East India Company, on their Bengal Establishment." The wording establishes credibility through institutional rank. He is an official with direct experience of India and recognised standing within the Company. This hierarchy reflects the conventions of eighteenth-century publication and the unequal visibility of European and Indian contributors. Every successful explanation of a difficult verse carries a trace of the teacher.

The Translator's English and the Pandit's Sanskrit

The relationship between Wilkins and Kāśinātha can be understood as a meeting between two forms of expertise. Wilkins possessed English prose, comparative curiosity and the discipline of translation. Kāśinātha possessed Sanskrit depth, oral pedagogy and access to the living commentarial tradition. But he was not preparing an eighteenth-century English book for London readers. Yet without Kāśinātha, the English might have been smoother and less accurate, more familiar and less Indian. The translation therefore emerged through division of intellectual labour.

The available evidence does not permit us to assign every sentence or interpretative choice to one participant. We should resist the temptation to invent a complete record where the archive is incomplete. What can be said responsibly is this: Wilkins's translation required Indian scholarly assistance. Modern scholarship has therefore rightly treated the first English translation as collaborative. It restores historical proportion.

The Problem of Commentary

An additional question arises. Wilkins's notes and choices indicate that he was not working from the bare text alone, but the extent to which particular commentators influenced him remains a matter requiring careful philological comparison. It would be misleading to claim confidently that the translation follows one specific Vedāntic school throughout. The published book is therefore not simply the English form of a single Indian commentary. It is a new composite object.

A Theology for Europe

Hastings and Wilkins were particularly interested in presenting the Gītā as evidence of elevated Hindu theology. They emphasised the unity and supremacy of the divine, the immortality of the soul and the moral seriousness of the text. It challenged European readers who dismissed Hinduism as idolatry or superstition. The Gītā contains devotion, metaphysics, cosmology, social duty, divine incarnation, ritual vocabulary and theophany. To present it chiefly as rational monotheistic philosophy was to make one possible reading dominant. It was curated.

The Eighteenth-Century Christian Ear

Wilkins's readers brought Christian assumptions to the text. Words such as "God," "soul," "spirit," "heaven," "devotion" and "faith" carried theological histories of their own. When used to translate Sanskrit terms, they created affinities while also introducing distortions. The same English phrase might reassure one reader and mislead another. Hastings's preface attempted to guide reception, but the book quickly exceeded its framing.

The Politics of Respect

Hastings's admiration for the Gītā had political implications. Oriental scholarship allowed Company officials to present themselves not merely as conquerors but as protectors and interpreters of Indian civilisation. A government that claimed to preserve indigenous law and learning could portray its authority as culturally sensitive even when its economic and military actions caused profound disruption. The relationship between knowledge and power was compromised from the beginning, but the knowledge acquired could not be reduced to propaganda. The Gītā was stronger than the uses to which empire put it.

The Impeachment in the Background

The publication of the Bhagvat-Geeta occurred near the end of Hastings's tenure in India and before the long impeachment proceedings that would dominate his later life. In Britain, Hastings became the subject of intense political controversy. The man who praised Indian

civilisation was also accused of governing India unjustly. Hastings could possess genuine respect for Sanskrit philosophy and still participate in systems of exploitation. He could recognise Indian intellectual greatness and still exercise coercive authority over Indian society. The first English Gītā emerged from that moral complexity.

The Book as Institutional Theatre

The 1785 publication also functioned symbolically. It demonstrated what the East India Company wished to claim about itself. By publishing the Gītā, the Company gave readers access to a text that could be used to question power, attachment and worldly ambition. A corporation devoted to profit helped disseminate a book that warned against enslavement to the fruits of action. History has a taste for irony.

From Courtly Manuscript to Public Book

Before 1785, access to the Gītā depended largely upon manuscript culture, oral teaching or earlier translations in other Indian languages. The English edition created a different kind of object. A manuscript belonged to a particular lineage, location or owner. The same English Krishna could speak in London, Edinburgh, Paris or Weimar. It was a new mode of existence.

A Collaborative Book with a Single Voice

The paradox of the 1785 Gītā is that it was made collectively but speaks typographically with one voice. The Indian scholarly conversation disappears behind the smoothness of the object. The collector who studies the first edition must therefore learn to see what the page does not display. Behind the English text stand centuries of Sanskrit interpretation. Behind the London imprint stands Benares.

THE TRANSLATION CHAIN

Sanskrit text

The Bhagavad Gītā within the Mahābhārata.

Manuscript and commentary

The written and interpretative traditions through which the text was transmitted.

Kāśīnātha

Oral explanation, grammar and philosophical mediation.

Wilkins

English translation, notes and authorial form.

Hastings

Prefatory framing, advocacy and institutional patronage.

East India Company

Financial authority and publication support.

London book trade

Printing, bookselling and circulation.

European reader

A new audience that would transform the reception of the text.

Collaboration as the True Beginning of Indology

The story of Kāśīnātha, Wilkins and Hastings reveals something fundamental about early Indology. It began when Indian and European systems of learning entered sustained contact. Indian pandits introduced Europeans to linguistic and philosophical traditions they could not have accessed alone. European print and institutional networks carried those traditions into new audiences. The discipline was born through encounter.

The Limits of Gratitude

Wilkins did acknowledge the assistance of Indian scholars in his broader work, but the conventions of his time did not produce a full account of intellectual debt. Modern readers should not expect eighteenth-century acknowledgements to resemble contemporary co-authorship statements. We can, however, refuse to repeat the fiction of solitary discovery. And we can understand the English Gītā as the product of both Indian knowledge and British print.

The Book Belongs to All Three

Each of the three principal makers left a distinct imprint upon the volume. Without Kāśīnātha, the translation may have remained superficial or erroneous. Without Hastings, the manuscript might not have acquired institutional support or immediate public authority. The book therefore belongs historically to all three, though the title page names only one.

Concluding Reflection

The first English Bhagavad Gītā is often described as a milestone in the European discovery of India. Around them stood a larger world of pandits, scribes, commentators, printers, Company officials and booksellers. Its making reveals the central paradox of early Oriental scholarship. It was born within empire, yet depended upon intellectual humility. It converted Indian knowledge into European authority, yet also forced Europe to recognise Indian intellectual greatness. It concealed collaboration beneath individual authorship, yet preserved the results of that collaboration for future generations.

The volume that emerged in London in 1785 carried the name of Charles Wilkins. And the physical evidence through which a first edition becomes not merely a carrier of thought, but a surviving artefact of the moment when Krishna first spoke in English.

Chapter IV

Anatomy of the First Edition

The Physical Book Through Which Krishna First Spoke in English

The historical importance of the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta rests principally upon its text. It entered the world as paper, ink and type: a substantial Georgian quarto printed in London, sold through the metropolitan book trade and made for attentive reading. Its typography gave unfamiliar Indian names an English visual form; its notes bridged conceptual distances the translation alone could not cross; and its handmade paper has carried the work through nearly two and a half centuries of reading, preservation and collecting.

The modern reader usually encounters the Bhagavad Gītā in a compact paperback, a digital edition or one of the many translations that now fill bookshops and libraries. The 1785 volume reminds us that this was not always so. Every page records a beginning.

A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION

WILKINS, Charles, translator. The Bhāgvāt-Geētā, or Dialogues of Krēṣhṇā and Ārjōṇ; in Eighteen Lectures; with Notes. London: printed for C. Nourse, opposite Catharine-Street, in the Strand, 1785. First edition in English; quarto; 156 pages. The present copy is the ex-Leeds Library example later sold by Forum Auctions, with the Library bookplate and title-page stamp retained.

The Full Title

The title page deserves to be read slowly. Its principal phrases were carefully chosen.

“The Bhāgvāt-Geētā.”

The title announced a work whose name would have been unfamiliar to almost every English reader.

“Or, Dialogues of Krēṣhṇā and Ārjōṇ.”

The subtitle translated unfamiliarity into a recognisable literary form. Europeans knew philosophical dialogues from Plato, Cicero and later traditions of moral instruction. By presenting the Gītā as a dialogue, the edition placed it within a category that educated readers understood.

“In Eighteen Lectures.”

Wilkins rendered the Sanskrit adhyāyas, or chapters, as “lectures.” The term suggested structured teaching: a philosophical course delivered by Krishna to his troubled pupil.

“With Notes.”

This short phrase acknowledged that translation alone would not suffice. Indian theology, cosmology, social terminology and philosophical vocabulary required additional explanation.

“Translated from the Original.”

This was one of the title page’s most consequential claims. The work did not come through Persian, Latin or a missionary paraphrase. Wilkins declared that he had translated directly from Sanskrit. In an age fascinated by authenticity and ancient sources, the assertion gave the volume unusual intellectual authority.

“The Sanskreet, or Ancient Language of the Brahmans.”

The formulation introduced Sanskrit through terms intelligible to a British audience. It presented the language as ancient, learned and closely associated with India’s religious custodians.

“Senior Merchant in the Service of the Honourable East India Company.”

Wilkins’s official rank served as a credential. He was not presented merely as a gentleman enthusiast, but as a Company servant with direct experience of Bengal and recognised institutional standing. And it introduces Indian philosophy through forms familiar enough to invite reading without concealing the work’s foreign origin. Nourse in 1785.

The Orthography of First Encounter

Modern readers are immediately struck by Wilkins’s spellings: Bhāgvāt-Gēētā. Wilkins worked before modern conventions had stabilised the representation of Sanskrit in Roman type. It tried to preserve distinctions of Indian pronunciation for English readers using the typographical resources of the late eighteenth century. Double vowels attempted to suggest sounds that ordinary English spelling could not represent precisely. The result is visually elaborate, yet it captures a moment of genuine experimentation. “Kreeshna” would become “Krishna.” “Arjoon” would become “Arjuna.” “Bhagvat-Geeta” would eventually settle into “Bhagavad Gita” or “Bhagavad Gītā.” The first edition preserves the instability of the beginning. Collectors should value this orthographic strangeness rather than regard it as a quaint error. It records the effort required to make one language visible within another.

London, 1785

The place and date of publication matter. The translation had been prepared in India through Wilkins’s engagement with Sanskrit scholars. A manuscript created within the intellectual environment of Benares and Bengal entered the commercial centre of the British book world. From London it could move through booksellers, private libraries, learned societies, university collections and continental networks. Warren Hastings had returned to Britain and would soon face impeachment proceedings. The book appeared before Sanskrit became an established university subject, before comparative Indo-European linguistics and before the great nineteenth-century expansion of German Indology. It was printed before its scholarly field existed.

C. Nourse and the Strand

The title page states that the book was printed for C. The Strand formed one of London’s most important corridors of commerce, law, culture and bookselling. A work sold there entered the metropolitan literary marketplace rather than remaining an internal Company document. The East India Company supported the translation, and Hastings’s prefatory letter gave it institutional authority. It could be purchased by readers with no official connection to India. A Company servant as an aid to understanding the civilisation in which he served. A sceptic might read it to test Christian claims of exclusive revelation. Once sold, it could acquire meanings they had not intended.

Format: The Quarto as Intellectual Form

Forum Auctions catalogued the present copy as quarto, a format that gives the first English Gītā a notably generous and imposing page. The broad margins and open typography lend the text the dignity of a serious work of theology and philosophy while preserving intimacy in the act of reading. Krishna’s teaching enters not as an illustrated spectacle, but through a spacious, disciplined page designed for sustained attention.

What “Quarto” Means

In hand-press bibliography, “quarto” describes the way a printed sheet was imposed and folded to produce four leaves, or eight pages. The resulting gatherings were identified by signatures at the foot of selected leaves, allowing the binder—and later the bibliographer—to reconstruct the book’s manufacture. Signature sequences can reveal missing gatherings, inserted or cancelled leaves, incorrect binding order and differences between copies. Format should be established from the sheet structure and signatures, not from height alone.

Collation: What Can and Cannot Yet Be Said

The first edition is generally recorded as a quarto of 156 pages, and the Forum Auctions catalogue describes this copy accordingly. A final copy-specific collation should still verify the full sequence of preliminary leaves, Hastings’s letter, the eighteen lectures, notes and terminal matter; however, the surviving title page, interior leaves and auction description establish the edition, format and principal physical character with confidence.

THE COLLATION CHECKLIST

Before the present copy is described for publication, it should be examined leaf by leaf for: Preliminaries Half-title, title page, Hastings’s prefatory letter, dedication or introductory matter. Canceled Leaves replaced during publication to correct text or preliminaries. Advertisements Bookseller’s advertisements or terminal matter, when called for. Repairs and supplied leaves Any leaf inserted from another copy or reconstructed in facsimile.

The Preliminary Matter

The preliminary pages of the Bhagvat-Geeta are intellectually as important as the translation itself. The preface converts an unfamiliar sacred dialogue into a work worthy of attention from European scholars. Wilkins’s own introductory remarks establish the textual context and prepare readers for the vocabulary and narrative situation they are about to encounter. Collectors should therefore treat a copy lacking Hastings’s letter or other integral preliminary matter as seriously incomplete, however attractive the binding. The intellectual history of the edition begins before Lecture I.

The Hastings Letter as a Printed Artefact

In manuscript, Hastings’s letter was an act of patronage and advocacy. Its presence announced that the Governor-General of Bengal considered the work worthy of the Company’s attention. A prefatory endorsement placed before the translation influences everything that follows. The reader encounters Krishna after being told that the work possesses antiquity, philosophical distinction and civilisational value. The letter therefore acts almost like a frame surrounding a painting. A first edition retaining its complete preliminary matter preserves that framing in its original historical form.

Typography

The typography of the first edition is restrained. There are no lavish engraved borders, no elaborate frontispiece and no programme of illustration. Excessive Oriental ornament might have encouraged the very exoticism that Wilkins and Hastings sought to overcome. The unfamiliar names are typographically integrated into the conventions of Georgian printing. Chapter divisions appear as “Lectures.” Krishna and Arjuna speak through carefully composed English paragraphs. Notes provide scholarly explanation without transforming the book into a visual spectacle. It is a book of thought.

The Long s

The first edition employs the long s, the character resembling a modern f without the full crossbar, in positions familiar to eighteenth-century readers. Thus “Sanskreet” may visually resemble “Sankfreet” to an unaccustomed modern eye. The long s immediately locates the book within the hand-press era and reminds the modern collector that English itself looked different when Krishna first entered it. The first edition preserves the original encounter in its Georgian form.

Diacritics and Special Types

The title page required characters that ordinary English books did not commonly use. Breves, macrons and other marks had to be combined with Roman letters to approximate Sanskrit pronunciation. The printer therefore faced the practical challenge of sourcing or composing accented type capable of presenting Wilkins’s chosen system. The diacritics turned the title page into one of the earliest English typographical experiments in representing Sanskrit systematically.

The Textual Page

The best eighteenth-century pages possess a rhythm difficult to reproduce in modern commercial printing. The lines are neither cramped nor wastefully open. Margins provide a quiet field around the text. Ink sits slightly within the texture of the paper rather than floating upon a smooth industrial surface. One page may print slightly darker than another. A line may carry a faint impression from uneven inking or pressure. The process was repeated for the reverse side. Its irregularities remind us that the book passed through human hands before it reached the reader’s.

Paper

Quality English books of the period were generally printed on handmade rag paper produced largely from linen and cotton fibres. A serious examination of the present copy should therefore record: the tone and texture of the paper; visible chain-line orientation; any watermarks; variation among gatherings; foxing; staining; edge wear; paper repairs; and evidence of washing or chemical treatment. Paper is one of the most eloquent witnesses to the life of an old book.

Watermarks

Watermarks can be especially valuable. The paper was thinner where the design displaced fibres, producing an image visible when the sheet is held against transmitted light. A watermark may contain: a maker’s name or initials; a date; a heraldic device; a fleur-de-lis; a crowned shield; or another commercial emblem. This may indicate that the printer used available supplies rather than commissioning a uniform batch. A future photographic record should include transmitted-light images wherever the marks are legible. For the bibliographer, they reveal how that teaching became matter.

Deckle Edges and Trimming

Handmade sheets emerged from the paper mould with irregular, feathered edges known as deckles. Most books were trimmed during binding, but the extent of trimming varied considerably. A copy retaining generous margins or occasional deckle edges may preserve more of the original sheet than one repeatedly rebound and cut down. Every visit to the plough could carry the text block closer to headings, catchwords, signatures or marginal notes. They preserve the calm proportions appropriate to the Georgian page and provide evidence that successive custodians treated the book with restraint.

The Notes

Wilkins's notes are among the most historically revealing parts of the edition. They expose the points at which the English reader required assistance. A philosophical expression carries more meaning than the English sentence can contain. The notes reveal the translator negotiating unfamiliarity in real time. Wilkins sometimes explained Indian concepts through comparisons with European religion or philosophy. A term made intelligible through Christian vocabulary might acquire associations absent from the Sanskrit. They are neither transparent explanations nor irrelevant historical curiosities. The notes translate Indian civilisation into eighteenth-century European categories.

The Eighteen "Lectures"

The division into eighteen lectures gives the English edition its internal architecture. Each lecture corresponds to one chapter of the Sanskrit text, yet the English word modifies the tone. The choice strengthens the pedagogical relationship between Krishna and Arjuna. The sequence guides the reader from Arjuna's collapse through action, knowledge, meditation, devotion, cosmic vision and final resolution. The first English Gītā therefore has a rhythm not merely of narrative, but of instruction.

Catchwords, Signatures and Presswork

An eighteenth-century volume usually contains several typographical features that modern readers barely notice. Signatures appear at the foot of selected leaves to guide the binder in assembling gatherings. Catchwords—the first word of the following page printed at the bottom of the current one—helped the compositor, reader and binder confirm continuity. Press figures, where present, might indicate the pressman or press involved in printing a sheet. Signature irregularities may identify a cancel or supplied gathering. The bibliographer sees the history of its assembly.

Errata and Correction

Hand-press books were vulnerable to error. A printer discovering an error after part of the edition had been produced might correct the standing type, creating two states within the same printing. More substantial errors might require a cancel leaf: the defective leaf was cut away and replaced with a newly printed one. For Wilkins's Gītā, such evidence is particularly interesting because both the English prose and the unfamiliar Indian vocabulary presented unusual compositorial risks. A future census of copies should compare: spelling variants; corrected readings; title-page differences; typographical errors; and the presence or absence of any errata matter.

Until that comparison is undertaken, categorical claims about issue points should be avoided. Important eighteenth-century books often generate rumours of "first issues," "second issues" and rare variants. It may reflect: stop-press correction; a cancel; a binder's decision; a missing leaf; a later replacement; or ordinary variation within the press run. Issue concerns the publisher's deliberate distribution of copies in a distinct form. For the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta, a rigorous study should compare multiple institutional and private copies before declaring definitive issue points. Scarcity should never be manufactured through careless bibliography.

Binding: What the Publisher Supplied

Eighteenth-century books were not always sold in the finished binding we now associate with them. A known dealer example has been described in contemporary tree calf, with gilt borders, floral spine compartments and a red morocco label—an indication of the refined bindings in which some early owners housed the work. The question is instead whether a particular binding is contemporary, appropriate, well preserved and historically coherent with the text block.

Contemporary Calf

A good contemporary calf binding can materially strengthen the desirability of the volume. It records an early owner's decision to preserve it. The purchaser considered the translation worthy of permanent treatment. A binding commissioned soon after publication may also preserve evidence of readership through bookplates, shelf marks, inscriptions or heraldic tools. Collectors generally prefer an honest contemporary binding with moderate wear to a heavily reconstructed binding that imitates eighteenth-century perfection. Age should remain visible.

Tree Calf

Tree calf became fashionable in the late eighteenth century. Its branching pattern was produced by applying acidic and colouring solutions to the leather in a controlled manner, creating designs resembling the trunk and limbs of a tree. It belongs perfectly to the Georgian period and often commands a premium when original, sound and well tooled. A tree-calf Bhagvat-Geeta may be highly desirable even with careful restoration, provided the work is honest, minimal and properly disclosed.

Rebinding

A later binding does not make a copy undesirable. Many important books survived only because a nineteenth- or twentieth-century owner replaced a failing earlier structure. An excessively elaborate modern binding may overwhelm the modest character of the book. A poorly executed restoration may trim margins, flatten the text block or conceal evidence of original sewing. It is: Has the physical integrity of the book been respected?

Sewing and Structure

The boards and spine are only the visible surface. The boards were attached through these supports, and the spine was lined to stabilise the text block. Examination of the gutters, endbands, joints and endpapers can reveal: whether the book remains in its original sewing; whether it has been re sewn; whether the boards are original; whether the spine has been rebaked; whether original labels or tooling were preserved; and whether modern adhesive has been introduced. A “remboîtage” may combine a text block and binding that did not originally belong together. The structure tells the truth.

Endpapers

Endpapers often preserve evidence lost elsewhere. They may contain: contemporary ownership inscriptions; booksellers' notes; library shelf marks; armorial bookplates; acquisition dates; prices; pencil collations; or evidence of removed labels. A nineteenth-century inscription may reveal the book's passage through a scholarly library. Offsetting or glue shadows may indicate removed material. They are the book's private archive.

The Spine Label

A spine label on a contemporary binding may carry a shortened title such as:

BHAGVAT GEETA

or

WILKINS' GEETA

The wording reveals how an early owner or binder understood the book. The position and material of the label also contribute to dating. Gold lettering could remain remarkably bright where protected from light and abrasion. Because the printed title itself employed unfamiliar diacritics, the binder usually simplified it. On the shelf, it becomes Bhagvat Geeta.

Provenance

The ideal copy of Wilkins's Bhagvat-Geeta would combine bibliographical completeness with significant provenance. A copy owned by: an East India Company official; a member of the Hastings circle; an early Sanskrit scholar; a theologian engaged in comparative religion; a Romantic writer; or an important collector of Indian books would possess historical interest beyond the ordinary example. But every ownership mark deserves investigation.

Bookplates

Armorial bookplates can often be identified through heraldry. The shield, crest, motto and name may link a volume to an aristocratic family, cleric, scholar or institutional library. This does not invalidate the provenance; it simply places ownership at a particular point in the volume's journey. A book that has lived for nearly two and a half centuries should not be expected to resemble an untouched modern object. Its history appears materially.

Inscriptions and Marginalia

An inscription may record nothing more than a name. A place can connect the book to India, Britain or continental Europe. A note may reveal how an early reader interpreted Krishna's teaching. A Christian reader may compare a passage with scripture. A later Sanskrit scholar may correct Wilkins's translation. An inscription that appears eighteenth-century may be later. A famous name may have been added deceptively. Comparison with authenticated handwriting may be necessary before an association is claimed. Provenance should be demonstrated, not desired into existence.

Condition

The age and importance of the book do not excuse careless condition assessment. A first edition should be examined for: completeness; title-page damage; staining; foxing; worming; marginal tears; paper repairs; ink corrosion; cropped headlines; shaved annotations; detached boards; cracked joints; spine loss; and evidence of washing or bleaching. A few scattered spots in a 1785 volume may be entirely acceptable. It is material integrity.

Washing and Chemical Treatment

Old books were sometimes washed to remove staining and improve appearance. Aggressive washing or bleaching can flatten the paper, reduce sizing, weaken fibres and erase historical evidence. Warning signs may include: unnaturally uniform whiteness; faded ink; loss of paper texture; tidelines around surviving stains; weakened edges; or a title page much whiter than adjoining leaves. Not rejuvenated.

Foxing

Foxing appears as brown or reddish spotting and is common in books from later periods, particularly those produced with changing paper technologies. Heavy foxing affecting the title page or large areas of text will reduce aesthetic appeal and may indicate adverse storage conditions. Not every brown mark is the same.

Worming

Books that spent time in warm or humid climates may show insect activity. A small, inactive worm track confined to a margin may be acceptable in an eighteenth-century book with Indian provenance. A dealer's phrase such as "minor worming" should never substitute for visual examination. One channel through the title and twenty leaves may not be.

The Title Page

The title page is the face of the edition. Collectors judge it closely because it carries the title, translator, imprint and date—the book’s essential identity. Common problems include: ownership inscriptions; library stamps; thinning; tears; loss at the edges; repair at the gutter; trimming; staining; abrasion; or replacement in facsimile. It should be judged by authenticity, legibility and historical integrity.

The Imprint

The imprint at the foot of the title page records: London: Printed for C. It records the moment at which the Sanskrit dialogue became a London publication. The East India Company’s intellectual world entered the English book trade. An Indian scripture acquired a place, publisher and date within European bibliography. It is the book’s historical coordinate.

The Absence of Illustration

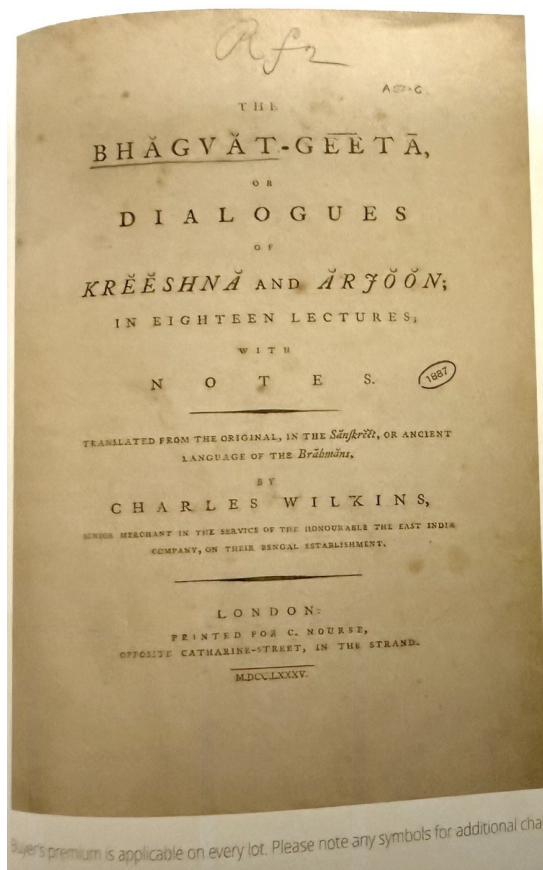
The first edition contains no programme of images. An illustrated Krishna might have encouraged European readers to treat the work as visual exotica or “Hindoo mythology.” The unillustrated page demanded engagement with argument rather than spectacle. The book entered Europe stripped of the devotional and artistic forms through which many Indian readers knew Krishna. The English Gītā arrived first as words.

A European Object Containing an Indian Voice

Physically, the 1785 volume is English. Its paper, type, presswork, format and binding belong to the British book world. This contrast is one of the object’s deepest fascinations. The title page names the East India Company. Its teaching questions the desire for the fruits of action. The book is therefore an artefact of productive contradiction. Its content repeatedly exceeds both.

The Present Copy

The Eye of the Beholder copy is the first English edition of Charles Wilkins’s Bhagvat-Geeta, London, 1785, with a documented provenance from the Leeds Library. The front pastedown retains the Library’s lending label—bearing its Commercial Street address, ten-day loan notice and number N037377—while the title page carries the small oval date stamp “1887.” The book later entered the legitimate antiquarian market through Forum Auctions, whose catalogue expressly described it as an “ex-library copy with bookplate” and small title-page stamp. The Forum Auctions catalogue should remain permanently associated with the volume as part of its provenance record.



162

-. Wilkins (*Sir Charles, translator*) THE BHAGVAT-GEETA, OR DIALOGUES OF KREESHNA AND ARJOON, FIRST EDITION, title and few leaves at beginning and end reinforced at gutter, some spotting and light soiling, ex-library copy with bookplate, small ink-stamp to title, later library cloth, rebacked in modern cloth, covers very slightly bowed and little rubbed, 4to, for C. Nourse, 1785.

.. THE FIRST DIRECT TRANSLATION OF THE GITA, THE MOST REVERED TEXT IN HINDUISM, INTO ANY WESTERN LANGUAGE. Wilkins (1739-1846) was a pioneering Sanskrit scholar and co-founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. A printer by trade, he was instrumental in creating the first typeface for the Bengali language.

£3,000 - 4,000

The catalogue entry documenting the first edition, its ex-library status, condition, modern-cloth rebacking and quarto format. The auction record forms part of the copy's permanent provenance dossier.

The volume is preserved in brown cloth over boards, rebacked in modern cloth and lettered and ruled in gilt on the spine. The binding is firm and serviceable, with only light rubbing and very slight bowing to the covers, as recorded by Forum Auctions. It is not a decorative contemporary calf binding; its appeal lies instead in structural soundness, bibliographical honesty and a clearly documented institutional life.



Upper board: brown library cloth over boards, showing the honest surface variation and light wear of a volume preserved for use rather than display alone.



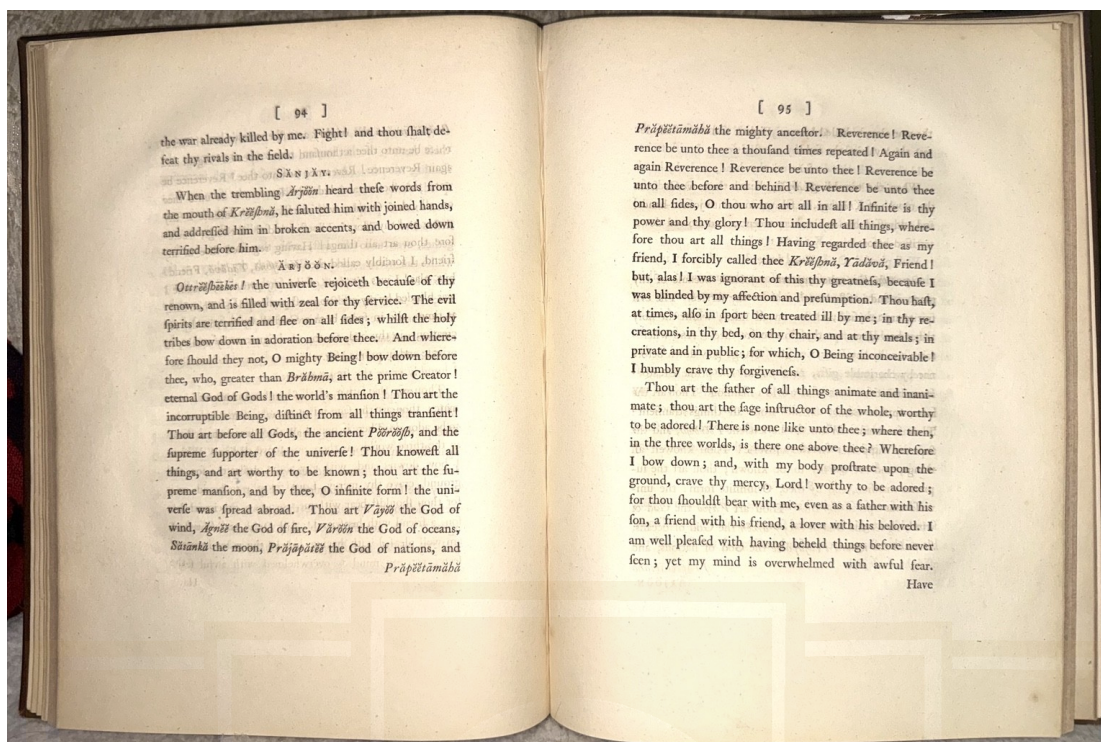
The opposite board, similarly sound and restrained, with the slight tonal variation characteristic of the institutional binding.



Gilt-lettered spine, recording the title, Wilkins, the date 1785 and Leeds Library ownership. The modern-cloth rebacking is firm and visually coherent.

Internally, the book presents attractively for its age. The paper is generally clean and well preserved, with broad margins and strong impressions of the type. Forum Auctions noted some spotting and light soiling, together with reinforcement at the gutter of the title and a few leaves at the beginning and end. These are disclosed signs of use and conservation rather than concealed defects. The photographed interior leaves show no substantive manuscript annotation, and the title page remains complete and legible. Taken as a whole, this is a strong, honest and historically resonant copy of one of the foundational books of printed India.

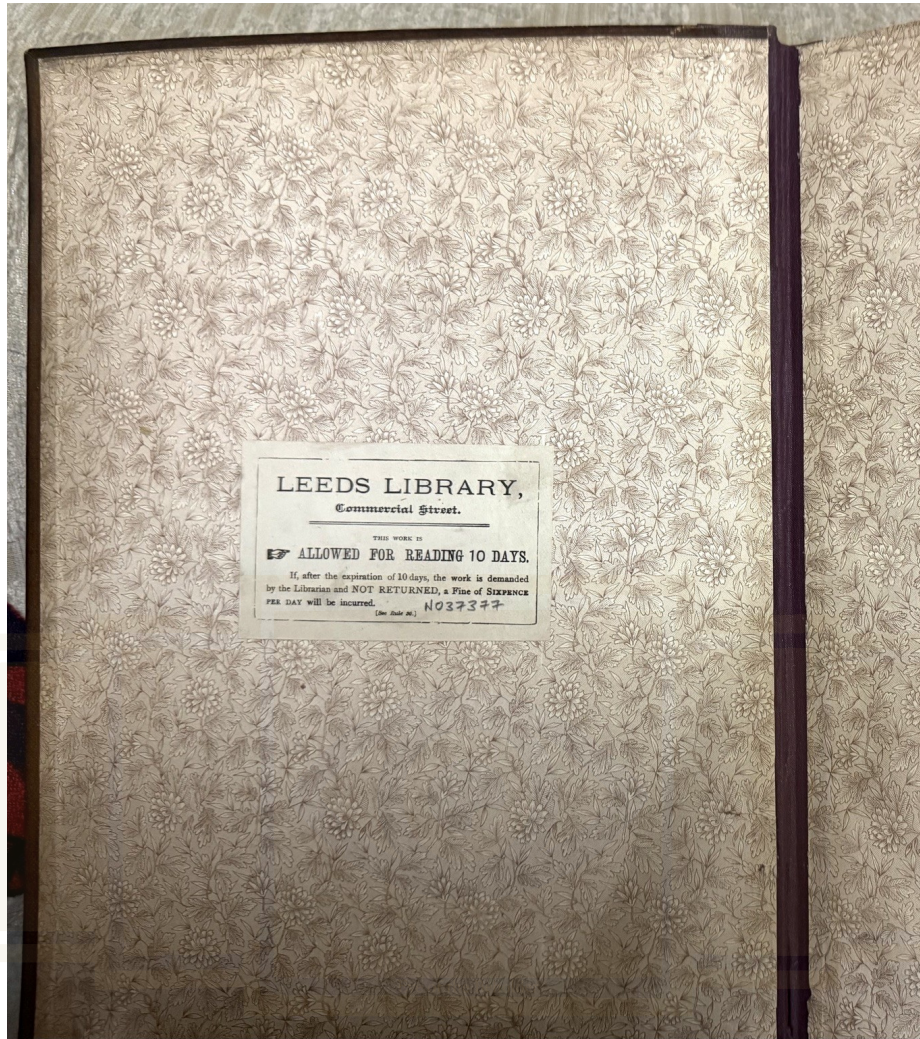




Pages 94-95: broad margins, strong type and a notably clean reading surface. The opening illustrates the generally fresh interior described in the catalogue, with only minor age-related spotting.

The Leeds Library provenance is especially fitting. This was a book that continued to be read and circulated, not merely preserved as a dormant trophy. Its library marks form part of the copy's biography: visible evidence that Wilkins's translation remained a living work within Britain's culture of subscription reading before passing into private custodianship and, ultimately, into the collection of The Eye of the Beholder.

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER



The Leeds Library lending label on the front pastedown, preserving the Commercial Street address, ten-day loan notice and library number N037377. It is the most visible witness to the copy's institutional life.

Photographing the Book

A foundational book deserves more than functional record photography. The images should permit bibliographical examination while conveying the volume's character. The ideal sequence would include: The hero image The book standing or lying at a slight angle, with the spine and upper board visible. The title page Photographed flat and square, at sufficient resolution to inspect type and inscriptions. The opening matter Hastings's letter and the beginning of the translation. Material details Paper texture, watermarks, deckle edges, sewing, endbands and bookplates. Indeed, honesty is one of the highest forms of luxury.

The Book as Evidence

The first edition provides evidence at several levels. Evidence of the East India Company's use of publication as cultural policy. Evidence of the London book trade's role in global intellectual exchange. Evidence of early attempts to represent Sanskrit through Roman typography. And, in every surviving copy, evidence of the individuals and institutions through whose care the book endured. It cannot reproduce this accumulation of history.

Why the First Edition Matters Materially

The text of Wilkins's translation can be read freely in digitised form. Why, then, should the physical first edition matter? The first edition communicates how the work entered history. Its notes reveal the limits of eighteenth-century understanding. Its title page reveals the

Company's institutional authority. The copy is not merely one carrier among many. It is a witness.

A Book at the Beginning of Several Histories

The 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta stands at the beginning of more than one collecting field. The history of global philosophy. A collector may enter through any of these doors. A fine contemporary binding attracts the bibliophile. An association with a Company official attracts the historian. Wilkins's translation attracts the scholar of Sanskrit. Hastings's preface attracts the student of empire. The text itself attracts the philosophical reader. Few books gather so many histories within so modest a physical form.

The Collector's Hierarchy

Within the Indian antiquarian canon, the physical quality of a copy matters because the title already occupies the highest level of intellectual importance. A large, fresh copy with complete preliminaries and distinguished provenance may be exceptional. The hierarchy can be expressed simply:

Textual completeness

before decorative beauty.

Authenticity

before cosmetic perfection.

Early binding

before imitation.

Provenance

before speculation.

Integrity

before restoration. The finest copy is not necessarily flawless. It is the copy in which the histories of text, binding and ownership remain most coherently preserved.

The Quiet Appearance of a Revolutionary Book

One of the most moving qualities of the first edition is its outward modesty. It was not printed on vellum for a monarch. It does not announce itself through colour or gold. Yet within those ordinary-looking boards occurred an extraordinary event. A central work of Indian civilisation entered English for the first time. This contrast between appearance and consequence is characteristic of foundational books. The first edition of Newton's Principia does not depend upon luxury. Its quiet pages altered the intellectual map of the world.

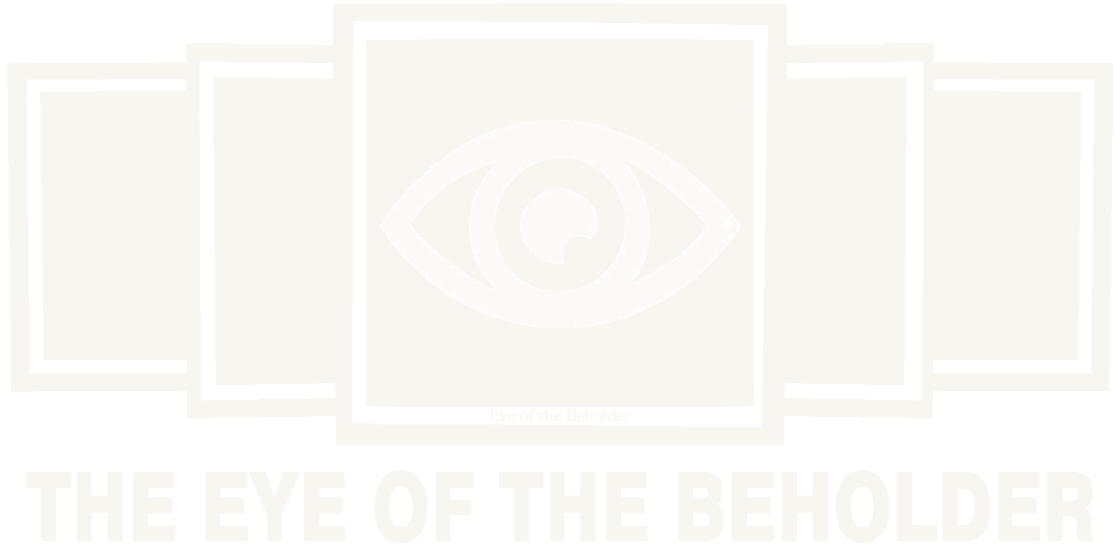
Assessment of the Edition

As an edition, the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta possesses the principal qualities sought in a cornerstone antiquarian book. Its prefatory matter was written by one of the most consequential British administrators in India. Its production reflects the institutional authority of the East India Company. Its text initiated a major European and later transatlantic reception history. Its surviving copies preserve wide variation in binding, provenance and condition, allowing the collector to seek not merely the title, but a copy with individual historical character. It depends upon primacy.

Concluding Reflection

The material book begins where abstraction ends. The Bhagavad Gītā may be spoken of as philosophy, scripture, poetry or revelation. In 1785, those categories became a particular object: a quarto printed for C. Nourse in the Strand. Every surviving copy carries the physical memory of that arrival. Its title page preserves the experimental typography through which Sanskrit first became visible in English print; its binding, library marks and ownership history preserve the custodians through whose hands the work endured.

To study the anatomy of the first edition is therefore to encounter a profound unity. The philosophical teaching concerns the relationship between the eternal and the changing. The next chapter turns from the physical vessel to the language within it: the choices Wilkins made when he attempted to translate dharma, yoga, ātman, brahman, action, devotion and liberation into the English vocabulary of 1785. How does one translate Krishna?



Chapter V

Translating Krishna

Wilkins's English and the Problem of the Untranslatable

Every translation of the Bhagavad Gītā begins with an impossibility. The translator must carry ideas from one language into another even when the receiving language does not possess the same conceptual furniture. A term may refer simultaneously to social duty, cosmic order and inner nature, while the translator is compelled to choose a single word. Charles Wilkins confronted this problem before any English tradition of translating Sanskrit had been established. He could not consult a standard Sanskrit-English dictionary, compare dozens of English versions or rely upon an accepted scholarly convention for terms such as dharma, yoga, ātman, brahman, karma, saṁnyāsa or bhakti.

Those decisions mattered far beyond the immediate success of the 1785 edition. Once a Sanskrit term entered English in a particular form, later readers encountered the concept through the frame Wilkins had selected. His greatness lies in having recognised the seriousness of the problem and resisted the temptation to make the Gītā entirely familiar.

THE PRINCIPAL TERMS OF TRANSLATION

Dharma

Duty, law, righteousness, moral order, social obligation, essential nature.

Yoga

Discipline, method, spiritual practice, concentration, integration, path.

Ātman

Self, soul, spirit, inner principle, true identity.

Brahman

Ultimate reality, absolute being, sacred power, the ground of existence.

Karma

Action, deed, ritual action, moral causation, consequence.

Samnyāsa

Renunciation, relinquishment, abandonment of action or attachment.

Bhakti

Devotion, love, faith, participation in the divine. No single English word exhausts any of them.

The First English Voice of Krishna

Wilkins's Krishna speaks in measured eighteenth-century prose. European readers of 1785 expected sacred and philosophical works to possess dignity. A highly ornate Krishna might have seemed theatrical or exotic. Wilkins therefore sought a tone that could stand beside the Bible, Plato and works of moral philosophy without imitating any of them exactly. Its language possesses metre, compression, repetition, sound and rhetorical balance. The movement from verse to prose necessarily changed the pace and texture of the teaching.

A Sanskrit śloka may hold two balanced lines whose rhythm contributes to meaning. In English prose, the argument becomes more continuous. Attempting to reproduce Sanskrit

metre in eighteenth-century English might have produced artificial verse and greater distortion. Wilkins sacrificed poetry in order to preserve intelligibility. It also helped determine how the work would first be understood in Europe.

Translation Before Convention

Modern English readers are accustomed to words such as karma, yoga and avatar. They may be misunderstood, commercialised or used loosely, but they have entered common speech. A Sanskrit term left untranslated might arrest the reader but communicate little. An English equivalent might communicate something immediately while introducing false associations. Where the Sanskrit identity of a term mattered, he retained an anglicised form. This combination became one of the fundamental strategies of later Orientalist translation. The note acknowledged that both were incomplete.

Dharma: The Word That Refuses One Meaning

No term presents a greater challenge than dharma. He is a warrior facing a war in which the demands of justice conflict with the bonds of kinship. His social obligation, moral conscience, political responsibility and fear of spiritual consequence pull in different directions. Dharma may include that meaning, but it can also signify the sustaining order of the cosmos, the ethical structure of society, the law appropriate to a person's position, the characteristic nature of a being and the path of right conduct.

The Sanskrit term moves between personal, social and metaphysical levels. Wilkins's vocabulary often drew upon words such as "duty," "law," "virtue" and "religion," depending upon context. If dharma is "duty," Krishna appears to command obedience to social role. If it is "essential nature," Arjuna's action arises from what he fundamentally is. The translator's word determines which Gītā the reader receives.

Svadharmā: One's Own Path

The difficulty becomes sharper in the expression svadharmā. Krishna tells Arjuna that one's own dharma, even imperfectly performed, is preferable to another's well performed. This teaching has been read as a defence of hereditary social order, as a psychology of authentic vocation and as a warning against abandoning one's responsibility out of fear. Wilkins translated within a world in which the European language of vocation, station, rank and providential order was still powerful. English society itself possessed inherited hierarchies and strongly differentiated duties. The Sanskrit teaching could therefore appear more familiar to an eighteenth-century reader than it does to many modern ones. It could not prove an identity.

Karma: Action and Its Shadow

The modern English word "karma" often refers loosely to cosmic reward and punishment. They may be performed selfishly, dutifully, knowledgeably or as an offering to the divine. Wilkins frequently rendered karma through the ordinary English vocabulary of "action," "works" and "deeds." These words made the teaching accessible, but each carried existing European resonances. "Works," in particular, belonged to Christian debates over faith, salvation and moral merit. An English reader might therefore hear echoes of the contrast between faith and works even where the Sanskrit text operated within a different religious framework. A word enters the sentence carrying its previous life.

Action Without Attachment

The most famous ethical principle associated with the Gītā is the discipline of acting without attachment to the fruits of action. Nor does it mean that the actor should perform carelessly. What must be relinquished is the possessive claim over results: the conviction that action acquires value only through personal success, reward or recognition. English words such as

“indifference” or “detachment” can imply coldness. Wilkins had to communicate a discipline in which the individual acts intensely while surrendering ownership of the result. That apparent paradox became one of the principal attractions of the text to later European and American readers. A better translation preserves action while removing attachment.

Yoga: More Than One Path

The word yoga appears throughout the Gītā in shifting forms. Modern usage often reduces yoga to physical postures. Should it be translated as “devotion,” “application,” “discipline” or “contemplation”? The titles of the eighteen chapters themselves frequently contain the word yoga. Later English translations might retain terms such as Karma Yoga, Jñāna Yoga and Bhakti Yoga. Wilkins’s “lectures” and explanatory prose often translated or paraphrased these distinctions for readers who would have gained little from unexplained Sanskrit labels. It reduced the reader’s awareness that the text deliberately uses one recurring word to connect different spiritual paths. Translation can clarify each passage while obscuring the architecture of the whole.

Equanimity

Krishna’s description of yoga as equanimity presents another difficulty. The Sanskrit teaching points toward steadiness amid pleasure and pain, success and failure, gain and loss. Wilkins’s English vocabulary of calmness, steadiness and equality communicated much of this ideal. The terms also resonated with Stoic and Christian traditions familiar to his readers. The aim of the Gītā is not identical with Stoic self-command or Christian submission to providence. Perhaps no translation choice shaped the European reception of Indian philosophy more profoundly than the rendering of ātman.

It suggests an individual spiritual entity created by God, morally responsible and surviving bodily death. “Spirit” suggests immateriality and divine association, yet may lack the individuality implied by other usages. In the Gītā, ātman may refer to the embodied self, the higher self, the mind under discipline or the deepest identity that transcends bodily change. The same English word cannot perform every function without confusion. This made the teaching intelligible to European readers, particularly in passages concerning immortality.

Yet the Sanskrit metaphysics does not map perfectly onto Christian anthropology. The relation between ātman, rebirth, brahman and liberation belongs to a different conceptual system. The translation was effective partly because it created familiarity. Its limitation lay in how persuasive that familiarity became.

The Immortal Self

One of Krishna’s first responses to Arjuna’s grief concerns the indestructibility of the self. The passage is poetic, memorable and comparatively easy to translate at the level of imagery. A universal self present in all beings? The consciousness that witnesses bodily change? An eternal principle that appears individual only through ignorance? Different commentators answer differently. An English reader encountering “soul” may assume the question already settled. Even the most literal noun carries philosophy.

Brahman: The Absolute Without an Equivalent

The word brahman posed an even greater challenge. It does not correspond exactly to “God.” The Gītā speaks of Krishna as supreme, of brahman as ultimate reality, of the imperishable and of the divine as present throughout the universe. The relation among these descriptions varies according to philosophical interpretation. It also imports personality, creation, providence and monotheistic assumptions shaped by Christianity. To use “the Supreme Being” sounds more philosophical but remains embedded in European natural theology.

To retain brahman preserves difference but leaves the reader without guidance. His translation often presented the text in language compatible with a sublime and rational theology. This suited Hastings's prefatory framing and the broader Orientalist desire to demonstrate that ancient Indian religion possessed an elevated philosophical core. The result helped European readers take the Gītā seriously. It also encouraged them to identify Krishna's teaching too easily with a form of monotheism already familiar to them.

"Incarnation" evokes Christian theology while also approximating the concept of avatāra. Wilkins's language inevitably encouraged comparison between Krishna and the Christian God or Christ. Early Orientalists frequently sought universal religious truths beneath the apparent diversity of traditions. Krishna could be presented as evidence that India possessed a sublime conception of deity. Yet Krishna is not simply a Hindu version of a European theological figure. The translator must make him intelligible without making him identical. No translation has.

Avatāra and Incarnation

The doctrine that the divine manifests in the world when righteousness declines became one of the most accessible teachings for Christian readers. The Sanskrit concept of avatāra allows repeated divine descents in different forms and cosmic ages. Yet retaining avatāra without explanation would have left the concept obscure. The nearest word is often near enough to communicate and far enough to distort.

Bhakti: Devotion and Love

The devotional dimension of the Gītā presented another challenge. But bhakti can also imply an intensely relational theology in which the devotee offers action, thought and identity to the divine person. Wilkins's English, shaped by the religious vocabulary of his own age, could render this language with dignity. The similarity allowed the later chapters of the Gītā to appear less alien than its cosmology or social teaching. Yet the devotional world of Krishna carried aesthetic, mythological and theological associations not fully present in English Protestant language. It could not reproduce an entire devotional culture.

Jñāna: Knowledge That Liberates

The English word "knowledge" usually refers to information, understanding or justified belief. The distinction between intellectual knowledge and liberating insight is central to Indian philosophical traditions. The Sanskrit ideal often refers to a direct discernment that alters one's relation to action, body, desire and death. One may possess information about immortality and remain terrified of death. Translation must use an ordinary word for an extraordinary state.

Samnyāsa and the Problem of Renunciation

The Gītā repeatedly addresses renunciation. The text distinguishes among several positions and refuses the simple conclusion that spiritual life requires abandonment of worldly duty. Wilkins used English terms such as "renunciation," "abandonment" and related expressions. These words were intelligible, but each carried monastic and Christian associations. The person who withdraws physically while remaining attached inwardly has not achieved freedom. Renunciation is relocated from the visible deed to the structure of consciousness. It is in preserving the argument.

Knowledge, Action and Devotion

One of the Gītā's most remarkable features is its refusal to collapse spiritual life into a single method. This made the work attractive to European readers seeking a universal philosophy. English chapter titles and explanatory categories can create sharper divisions than the Sanskrit text intends. Wilkins had to impose enough structure for readers to follow the work

without reducing its synthetic quality. The success of the translation lies partly in the fact that the English reader can still perceive the movement among these paths. Its limitation lies in the terminology through which that movement becomes more systematic than the Sanskrit may always be.

The Untranslatable Social World

Not every difficulty was philosophical. The *Gītā* assumes a social world unfamiliar to eighteenth-century British readers. His identity is shaped by kinship, lineage, caste, political obligation and the norms of epic warfare. Clergy, aristocracy, military officers and commoners possessed differentiated obligations. Yet the Indian system was not identical to European estate society. Terms relating to varṇa, ritual status and social duty could not be translated without interpretation. Colonial scholarship later treated textual descriptions of social order as fixed accounts of Indian society, even where lived practice was more diverse. It helped produce the English understanding of them.

The Problem of “Religion”

The title page described Sanskrit as the ancient language of the Brahmins, and the edition was readily received as a work of Hindu religion. The *Gītā* combines metaphysics, ethics, devotion, social obligation, cosmology and spiritual discipline without sharply separating “religious” from “philosophical” or “social.” Wilkins’s readers often sought to determine what Indians believed about God, the soul, creation and salvation. Translation participated in the making of that category.

“Hindoo” and the Language of the Age

Wilkins and his contemporaries used terms such as “Hindoo,” “Brahman” and “Sanskreet” according to the conventions of the period. The language reveals the early stage of British attempts to classify Indian society, religion and language. The first edition is valuable partly because it preserves this instability. The collector and historian should therefore resist correcting the book into the present. Its old language is part of its testimony.

The Biblical Cadence

At several moments, Wilkins’s prose acquires a rhythm reminiscent of the King James Bible. Elevated English religious prose of the period naturally drew upon biblical patterns. A reader accustomed to “Thou shalt” and the solemn inversions of biblical language could hear the *Gītā* as sacred discourse rather than foreign anecdote. The Sanskrit teacher began to sound like a biblical prophet or divine lawgiver. Style became interpretation.

Literalness and Dignity

Wilkins is often praised for restraint. He preserved the dialogue, sequence and doctrinal seriousness of the text. A translation may be close to Sanskrit syntax and still alter the conceptual field through its vocabulary. It may use a dignified English equivalent that carries unintended theology. Wilkins’s fidelity should therefore be understood as an ethical posture rather than perfect verbal equivalence. That intention distinguishes him from many eighteenth-century adapters. His limitations arose from the task itself and from the intellectual world available to him.

The Translator’s Notes as a Record of Difficulty

Wilkins’s notes are among the most revealing features of the edition because they show where translation failed to be self-sufficient. The note may identify a deity, explain a custom, clarify cosmology or compare an Indian concept with a European one. We learn which aspects of the text Wilkins considered unfamiliar. Which difficulties he could not resolve through

ordinary English. The notes also reveal the asymmetry between translator and reader. The note attempts to compress an education into a margin. It can never succeed completely.

Transliteration as Respect

Retaining an unfamiliar word can appear to burden the reader. When a translator writes dharma rather than “duty,” the reader is forced to acknowledge that the Sanskrit concept may exceed the English equivalent. Wilkins did not retain Sanskrit terms as extensively as many modern translators do, but his title page, names and explanatory method preserved a degree of linguistic difference. The foreign text becomes a slightly unusual version of familiar thought. The discomfort is evidence of another civilisation.

The Cost of Readability

Every translator must decide how much difficulty the reader should experience. Too much foreign vocabulary and the work becomes inaccessible. The first English Gītā had to persuade readers that the text was worth sustained attention. A densely transliterated and philologically technical version might have reached only a handful of specialists. Later translators could be more exact because Wilkins had first made the book readable. The scholar who follows measures the threshold more precisely.

Error and Achievement

Modern philology has corrected many early Orientalist translations. Wilkins worked without the resources available to later scholars. His understanding of Sanskrit philosophy, though remarkable, remained dependent upon the teachers and interpretative choices available to him. They should neither be concealed nor used to dismiss the achievement. It rests upon the fact that a serious direct English translation became possible at all. It remains the map through which a territory first became visible to a new audience.

The English reader could encounter the crisis of Arjuna, the immortality of the self, the discipline of action, the vision of the cosmic form and the call to devotion. Yet sound, metre, philosophical resonance, commentarial history and devotional atmosphere could not cross completely. It is the Sanskrit text refracted through eighteenth-century English intelligence. That refraction is precisely what makes it historically valuable.

The Translation as an Eighteenth-Century Artefact

Modern readers sometimes judge an old translation solely by current standards. The 1785 edition should be read as a document of two civilisations at a specific moment. Its Sanskrit source carried centuries of Indian interpretation. Its English vocabulary carried Christianity, classical philosophy, Enlightenment universalism and Georgian social hierarchy. But it was real.

A Comparative Example: The Universal Form

The eleventh chapter, in which Krishna reveals the universal form, presents one of the greatest challenges of tone. A translator must preserve scale without collapsing into excess. Too restrained, and the cosmic vision becomes abstract. Wilkins’s elevated prose allowed eighteenth-century readers to encounter something recognisably sublime. The category of the sublime was already important in European aesthetics: vastness, terror and grandeur exceeded ordinary comprehension. The universal form therefore entered Europe through a vocabulary ready to receive it. It connected that image to a European aesthetic category.

“Time Am I”

Krishna’s declaration of himself as time and destroyer would later become one of the most famous lines in the global reception of the Gītā. The Sanskrit kāla may mean time, death and

the power that consumes all beings. Wilkins's treatment belonged to the first attempt to make this terrifying theological claim intelligible in English. It is what causes translation to continue.

The Closing Command

At the end of the dialogue, Krishna asks Arjuna whether his delusion has been destroyed. Arjuna declares that his confusion has passed and that he will act. Yet the nature of that understanding remains debated. The closing English words inevitably favour one emphasis. Wilkins's version allowed European readers to perceive the movement from paralysis to resolved action. The Gītā is not a dialogue that ends in contemplation alone. Translation must return there with it.

Why Wilkins Still Deserves to Be Read

A modern reader seeking philosophical accuracy may prefer a later scholarly translation. A devotional reader may prefer a version rooted in a particular Indian lineage. Because Wilkins reveals the first English encounter. His translation allows us to hear the effort of a language expanding to receive unfamiliar concepts. The 1785 edition is therefore not merely an obsolete stage on the way to better translations. It is an intellectual event preserved in prose.

THE TRANSLATOR'S BALANCE

Too literal

The English becomes obscure and lifeless.

Too free

The Sanskrit text disappears beneath European paraphrase.

Too familiar

Indian concepts are mistaken for Christian or classical equivalents.

Too foreign

The reader cannot enter the argument.

Wilkins's achievement

He created a dignified, readable and recognisably Indian philosophical work for an audience that had never encountered one before.

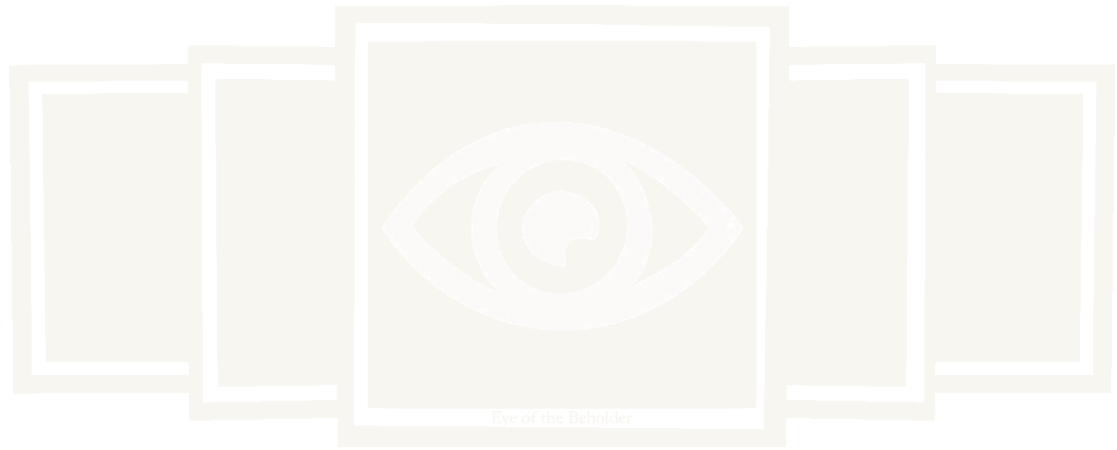
Translation as Custodianship

A translator is a custodian of meaning. He receives it temporarily and passes it onward in altered form. Wilkins performed this custodianship at the beginning of English Sanskrit scholarship. His translation was imperfect because all translation is imperfect. It was great because the imperfection did not prevent transmission.

Concluding Reflection

When Charles Wilkins began translating the Bhagavad Gītā, English did not yet know how Krishna should speak. No agreement about whether the work was theology, philosophy, scripture, poetry or moral instruction. Wilkins had to make every decision under conditions of uncertainty. Should the strangeness be explained in notes or allowed to remain? Every choice opened one path and closed another. The result was neither a transparent window nor a complete transformation. They could hear Krishna for the first time, but they heard him through the cadence of Georgian prose, the categories of European theology and the interpretative mediation of Wilkins and his Indian teachers.

American Transcendentalists read it beside forests and ponds. Indian thinkers later responded to the global interpretations it helped create. The first English translation therefore succeeded in the deepest sense. Wilkins could not make the Sanskrit wholly English. In doing so, he transformed not only the history of the Bhagavad Gītā, but the capacity of the English language to speak about Indian philosophy.



THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Chapter VI

The Gītā Enters Europe

Reception, Retranslation and the Birth of a Global Scripture

No book enters another civilisation unchanged. The moment a text crosses into a new language, it acquires new readers, new enemies, new admirers and new misunderstandings. A sacred teaching may become evidence in debates its original authors could never have imagined. When the book appeared in London in 1785, the Bhagavad Gītā ceased to belong only to its Sanskrit, vernacular and Persian histories. It entered the European Republic of Letters: the transnational world of booksellers, scholars, theologians, antiquarians, philosophers and writers who exchanged texts across borders and argued about the origins of civilisation.

Within only a few years, Wilkins's translation had been carried into French and Russian. By the opening decades of the nineteenth century, it had reached German readers and inspired new editions based increasingly upon direct Sanskrit study. It entered Romantic literature, comparative theology, German philosophy and eventually American Transcendentalism. It then began to escape him.

THE EARLY EUROPEAN JOURNEY

1785 — Charles Wilkins publishes the first direct English translation from Sanskrit. 1787 — A French translation by Parraud appears, made from Wilkins's English. 1788 — A Russian translation follows, also mediated through the English version. 1802 — A German rendering appears in the *Asiatisches Magazin*. 1808 — Friedrich Schlegel includes translated passages in *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*. 1823 — August Wilhelm Schlegel publishes a Sanskrit edition with a Latin translation. 1820s — Wilhelm von Humboldt lectures extensively on the Gītā; Hegel responds critically. 1840s–1850s — The work becomes important to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau in New England.

The English Edition as a European Source

The 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta was not simply an English translation. Even among Orientalists, Persian and Arabic were far more established fields. Wilkins's book therefore served readers beyond Britain who possessed no direct access to the original language. Wilkins had emphasised that he had translated directly “from the Original” rather than through Persian. Yet many of the earliest continental versions of the Gītā were themselves translated from his English. The work moved from Sanskrit into English, then from English into French, Russian and German. It also produced reach.

The French Bhagvat-Geeta

In 1787, only two years after the London edition, a French translation appeared under the title *Le Bhagvat-Geeta, ou Dialogues de Kreeshna et d'Arjoon*. The French title described the work as containing a summary of the religion and morality of the Indians, framing it for readers interested in comparative religion and ethics. (Wikipedia) The speed of publication is revealing. French intellectual culture had long shown interest in India, Persia and China. Enlightenment writers compared religious systems in order to question biblical chronology, clerical authority and European claims of civilisational uniqueness.

Here was an ancient Indian text concerned with the nature of divinity, immortality, duty and liberation. But the French reader encountered the Sanskrit work through two acts of interpretation. Krishna's voice had crossed two linguistic frontiers before reaching Paris. His English was already being treated as a sufficiently reliable surrogate for Sanskrit.

The Russian Translation

A Russian translation followed in Moscow in 1788, only three years after the original English publication. It was based upon Wilkins's version and associated with Alexander Petrov, appearing through the printing world of Nikolai Novikov. (Wikipedia) The Russian edition remains less famous than its English and French predecessors, but its existence is historically striking. Within three years, a Sanskrit dialogue prepared in Benares had travelled through London into the Russian imperial world. The octavo was doing its work.

Retranslation and the Accumulation of Distance

A translation made from another translation is sometimes dismissed as inherently inferior. A Sanskrit term that Wilkins rendered imperfectly might be translated literally into French or Russian, giving the English choice a false permanence. An explanatory phrase introduced for British readers could be mistaken for an exact feature of the original. The French and Russian editions show which features of Wilkins's work appeared most significant to European readers. They show how the *Gītā* was initially classified: as moral teaching, philosophical dialogue and a summary of Indian religion. That is exactly what happened as continental scholars began learning Sanskrit for themselves. Then it sought the Sanskrit behind it.

William Blake and the Vision of Translation

One of the most evocative early responses came not from a professional Orientalist, but from William Blake. In 1809, Blake exhibited a work known as *The Bramins*, depicting Wilkins engaged in the translation of the *Gītā* in the presence of Brahmin scholars. The work itself is now lost, but Blake's description and later accounts make clear that he regarded the translation as an event worthy of artistic commemoration. (beezone.com) The subject is remarkable. Blake's response also suggests that the *Gītā* entered British Romanticism not only as a collection of propositions, but as an image of recovered spiritual possibility.

India represented an intellectual world older than modern European rationalism and potentially capable of reopening dimensions of imagination, unity and cosmic consciousness that industrial and institutional Christianity seemed to have suppressed. Europe looked toward India and saw what it believed it had lost.

The Romantics and the Idea of India

European Romanticism emerged partly as a reaction against the perceived limitations of Enlightenment rationalism, industrial modernity and rigid classical models. India entered the Romantic imagination as a source of antiquity, unity, poetry and spiritual depth. For some writers, India became the childhood of humanity: ancient, intuitive and close to nature. For others, it represented a lost linguistic and religious unity from which later civilisations had declined. The *Gītā* was especially attractive because it combined philosophical argument with poetic and dramatic form. The work therefore entered Europe at precisely the moment when many readers were seeking a form of philosophy that was also poetry, religion and vision.

From English Translation to German Indology

The German-speaking world would become one of the principal centres of Sanskrit scholarship during the nineteenth century. A German rendering based upon Wilkins appeared in 1802 in the *Asiatisches Magazin*. This transition—from Romantic admiration to textual scholarship—is one of the central developments in the European life of the *Gītā*. The Germans sought to establish how it should be edited.

Friedrich Schlegel and the Wisdom of India

Friedrich Schlegel helped give Indian literature a central place within German Romantic thought. His 1808 work *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*—On the Language and

Wisdom of the Indians—argued for the profound importance of Sanskrit and included translated passages from the Bhagavad Gītā. (Wikipedia) For Schlegel, the study of India belonged to a larger search for origins. It seemed to offer evidence of the early history of the peoples and cultures later dispersed across Europe. It also encouraged grand theories of racial, cultural and religious origin that later scholars would sometimes develop in troubling directions. It also risked being removed from its specific Indian histories.

August Wilhelm Schlegel and the Sanskrit Text

A decisive shift occurred in 1823 when August Wilhelm Schlegel published a Sanskrit edition of the Bhagavad Gītā accompanied by a Latin translation. It represented one of the earliest major attempts to apply the methods of European classical philology to a complete Sanskrit text. It also employed newly developed Devanāgarī type and helped establish Indology as a university discipline on the Continent. (journals.warwick.ac.uk) Wilkins had translated the Gītā into English for general learned readers. Latin served as the common language of European scholarship, allowing the edition to circulate among academics beyond Germany.

The Sanskrit text gave readers direct access to the wording Wilkins had mediated through English. The 1823 edition therefore did not displace Wilkins. To a modern reader, translating Sanskrit into Latin may appear to replace one ancient language with another. For nineteenth-century European scholars, Latin was the natural medium of international academic exchange. By presenting the text through Latin grammar and scholarly conventions, European Indology incorporated the Gītā into a classical system that it already understood. Its foreignness was preserved on one page and disciplined on the other.

Wilkins and Schlegel

The contrast between Wilkins and Schlegel reveals the maturation of Sanskrit scholarship. Wilkins worked before reliable European grammars, dictionaries and printed editions existed. His translation depended upon Indian instruction, manuscript reading and extraordinary individual perseverance. The later scholar could improve upon the earlier precisely because the earlier had demonstrated that improvement was worth pursuing.

Humboldt Encounters the Gītā

August Wilhelm Schlegel's edition drew the attention of Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the great linguists and intellectuals of nineteenth-century Europe. Humboldt studied the Gītā intensely and delivered extended analyses of its philosophical structure during the 1820s. His engagement helped elevate the text from Oriental literary curiosity to a central object of philosophical debate. (journals.warwick.ac.uk) Humboldt was fascinated by the relationship between action and renunciation. A text has entered another intellectual civilisation fully only when it is no longer merely praised as exotic wisdom, but criticised, analysed and placed under conceptual pressure. He read it philosophically.

Hegel Responds

Humboldt's interpretation attracted the attention of G. He recognised the importance of the Gītā as evidence of Indian thought, but he resisted the Romantic tendency to idealise India as the source of pure or superior wisdom. The debate surrounding Schlegel's edition and Humboldt's lectures became an important episode in the European philosophical reception of the text. (journals.warwick.ac.uk) Hegel's reading reflected his broader philosophy of history. He tended to assign civilisations particular positions within the unfolding development of human freedom. He often regarded Indian thought as dissolving individuality into an undetermined absolute. The Gītā therefore became evidence within a European argument about history. Arjuna's battlefield crisis had entered the architecture of German idealism.

Praise Is Not Understanding

The early European reception repeatedly oscillated between two extremes. To call the Gītā “another Gospel” might elevate it in European eyes, but it could also force Krishna into Christian categories. To describe it as pantheistic might identify a genuine metaphysical dimension, but the word carried European debates not native to the text. To treat it as the philosophy of all India ignored the diversity of Indian traditions and the historically varied status of the Gītā itself. It constructed an Indian scripture suitable for European thought.

The Invention of a Universal Gītā

One of the most important consequences of translation was the gradual transformation of the Gītā into a “universal scripture.” Within India, the text possessed specific histories: epic, Vedāntic, Vaiṣṇava, devotional, philosophical and regional. They presented it as the distilled essence of Indian religion. This elevation contributed enormously to the text’s global prestige. Its authority, though ancient and considerable, was amplified further through colonial scholarship, print circulation and modern reform movements. Wilkins’s translation was one of the principal acts in that making.

Missionary Readers

Christian missionaries also entered the conversation. A missionary might argue that its highest teachings reflected a partial awareness of truths completed by Christianity. A Hindu intellectual could respond that the text demonstrated an ancient and independent tradition of monotheism, ethics and spiritual philosophy. The book became evidence in debates over revelation, idolatry, monotheism and the moral status of Indian religion. Once Krishna spoke in English, he could be quoted both for and against India.

The Colonial Archive Expands

Wilkins’s Gītā appeared near the beginning of a vast enterprise of translation and textual collection. Over the following decades, European scholars published Sanskrit dramas, legal texts, grammars, dictionaries, epics, Purāṇas and philosophical works. The Asiatic Society and later university departments created an increasingly organised archive of Indian civilisation. Indian chronology, literature and philosophy entered global scholarship. European editors could claim authority over works whose Indian custodians remained marginalised. It was also reclassified.

The Text Returns to India in Print

The transnational movement of the Gītā did not flow only outward. European editions and Orientalist scholarship returned to India, where they entered debates among Indian intellectuals, reformers and religious thinkers. English-educated readers gained access through the colonial language. The Gītā acquired new importance within discussions of religious reform, national identity, ethics and political action. This later Indian history would become central to figures such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo and others. The printed Gītā then travelled back.

Across the Atlantic

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Gītā had entered the intellectual life of New England. His journals show engagement with the Bhagavad Gītā, and Wilkins’s translation formed part of the textual route through which the work reached Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. (yogainternational.com) The American Transcendentalists were not Sanskrit scholars. They selected ideas compatible with their own concerns: the immanence of divinity, the higher self, detachment from reward and the possibility of inward freedom amid outward activity. They recognise what they are prepared to recognise.

Emerson and the Over-Soul

Emerson's engagement with Indian thought contributed to the intellectual atmosphere behind works such as "The Over-Soul" and the poem "Brahma." He found in Vedāntic and Gītā-like ideas a language for unity beneath multiplicity, for the divine presence within nature and for a self deeper than the individual personality. Through Emerson, ideas encountered in translation entered the development of a distinctly American spiritual literature. Krishna had crossed another frontier.

Thoreau at Walden Pond

Henry David Thoreau's relationship with the Gītā was more intimate and memorable. At Walden Pond, he read Asian scriptures as part of his attempt to live deliberately and to test whether simplicity could create a clearer form of consciousness. Scholars of Transcendentalism have emphasised that Emerson and Thoreau seriously engaged with Asian texts as translations became available in European languages. (yogainternational.com) Thoreau did not read the Gītā as an antiquarian document. He treated it as a living manual.

Action Without Attachment in America

The teaching that most attracted many nineteenth-century Western readers was the discipline of action without attachment to results. But action should not be governed entirely by social approval, material reward or fear of failure. It became less connected to Arjuna's specific warrior duty and more associated with the autonomous moral individual. Translation had created another Gītā.

What the West Chose to Hear

European and American readers repeatedly emphasised certain themes: the immortality of the soul; unity beneath multiplicity; the divine presence in all beings; action without attachment; mental discipline; and the reconciliation of contemplation with worldly responsibility. Other dimensions were more difficult to assimilate: caste and social duty; Krishna's specific theological identity; the epic context of dynastic war; ritual assumptions; the authority of inherited social order; and the text's complex relation to sacrifice. The Sanskrit Gītā remained more difficult.

The Problem of Allegory

Many European readers were uncomfortable with the literal setting of the work. Such readings made the text morally acceptable to readers who rejected its martial context. They also had Indian precedents in broader interpretative traditions, though not always in the same form. If Kurukṣetra is only internal, the political and ethical terror of Arjuna's dilemma disappears. Krishna's teaching becomes a general psychology of self-mastery rather than an argument about action within history. The question remains: Is the Gītā powerful because the battlefield is symbolic? Or because the battlefield is real?

The Gītā and European Universality

A central European ambition was to identify universal truths beneath cultural difference. Its teaching could be compared with Stoicism, Platonism, Christianity, Spinoza, Kant or German idealism. Often, the features closest to European categories were treated as essential, while those resistant to comparison were called secondary, mythological or culturally specific. The Gītā became universal partly by being selectively translated. Some of its strangeness was lost.

Corrigibility: Every Translation Invites Another

The reception history of the Gītā demonstrates what might be called the corrigibility of translation. Every version claims to carry the text across. Every version reveals reasons for

another crossing. Schlegel's Latin invited debate from French and German scholars. The Gītā became global because it remained corrigible. Readers believed the previous version had not said enough. So they translated again.

The First Translation Never Becomes Obsolete

Later translations naturally surpassed Wilkins in many respects. They benefited from improved Sanskrit grammar, dictionaries, textual criticism and broader access to commentaries. It ceased to be the best available guide to the Sanskrit. It became the irreplaceable record of the first English encounter. A first translation is not prized because scholarship stops with it. It is prized because history begins with it.

THE RECEPTION PYRAMID

Sacred dialogue

The Gītā within Indian epic, philosophical and devotional traditions.

English translation

Wilkins creates the first direct English version in 1785.

European retranslations

French, Russian and German versions expand the audience.

Romantic interpretation

India becomes a source of poetic, religious and linguistic origins.

Philological edition

Schlegel returns European readers to the Sanskrit text.

Philosophical debate

Humboldt and Hegel argue over the meaning of action, unity and freedom.

Transatlantic reception

Emerson and Thoreau adapt the Gītā to American spiritual individualism.

Global scripture

The work becomes one of the most translated and interpreted religious classics in the world.

The Book That Outlived Its Frame

Warren Hastings attempted to frame the Gītā for English readers. Wilkins attempted to translate it faithfully within the limits of his knowledge and language. Nourse placed it within the London book trade. Modern teachers universalised it. This is one reason Hastings's prophecy remains so resonant. Empires, interpretations and scholarly systems pass. The work continues to generate new readings. The Gītā survives by refusing to belong completely to any of them.

Reception and Power

The European life of the Gītā cannot be separated from colonial power. British rule created the institutions, travel networks and scholarly incentives that made Wilkins's translation possible. European universities possessed the resources to print Sanskrit texts, train specialists and establish Oriental studies as an academic field. The same structures that subordinated India politically elevated selected Indian texts intellectually. The Gītā became globally authoritative partly through an imperial system that denied political equality to the people

whose civilisation had produced it. Nor should it be allowed to erase the genuine intellectual encounters that occurred within the same system. It offers entanglement.

India Answers Europe

The European reception eventually altered the Indian life of the Gītā. English education created a new class of readers who encountered the text both through Sanskrit traditions and Western categories. European praise could be used to defend Indian civilisation against missionary criticism and colonial condescension. If Krishna taught detachment rather than passivity, could the Gītā answer colonial claims that Indian spirituality encouraged withdrawal from the world? The book returned from Europe bearing new authority.

From Global Scripture to National Text

Later Indian thinkers interpreted the Gītā in the context of colonial modernity. Gandhi read the battlefield primarily as an inner moral struggle and made non-attachment central to his ethic of service. Sri Aurobindo treated the work as a synthesis of spiritual paths and an affirmation of divine action in the world. It was shaped by the text's journey abroad.

A Global Book, Many Gītās

By the end of the nineteenth century, there was no longer a single reception of the Bhagavad Gītā. The Sanskrit scholastic Gītā. The German philosophical Gītā. These were not separate texts. They were separate histories of reading. The extraordinary achievement of the work lies in its ability to enter each history without being exhausted by it.

Why This Reception History Matters to the Collector

A collector does not acquire the 1785 first edition merely because it precedes later translations chronologically. The French edition of 1787 descends from it. The Russian edition of 1788 descends from it. The Transcendentalists encountered the Gītā through the translation history it inaugurated. The first edition is therefore not simply an item within reception history. It is the object that made that history possible.

The Meaning of “Influence”

Influence should be used carefully. It is tempting to say that Wilkins's Gītā created Romanticism, shaped German idealism or caused Transcendentalism. Blake, Schlegel, Humboldt, Hegel, Emerson and Thoreau each brought complex bodies of thought to their reading. Sometimes it was used to strengthen ideas already present. Influence is rarely a straight line from text to mind. The significance of Wilkins's edition lies in making those meetings possible.

Reading Through Error

Even misunderstanding can become historically creative. A European reader who identified Krishna too closely with the Christian God may have misunderstood the theology. A Romantic who treated India as pure primordial unity may have projected European dissatisfaction onto another civilisation. A Transcendentalist who detached non-attachment from Arjuna's social duty may have transformed the teaching. It entered productively.

Europe Discovers Itself in India

The European reception of the Gītā often reveals as much about Europe as about India. Enlightenment readers found natural religion. Each reader selected an India suited to a European need. This does not mean the text was irrelevant to their conclusions. Through India, Europe questioned itself.

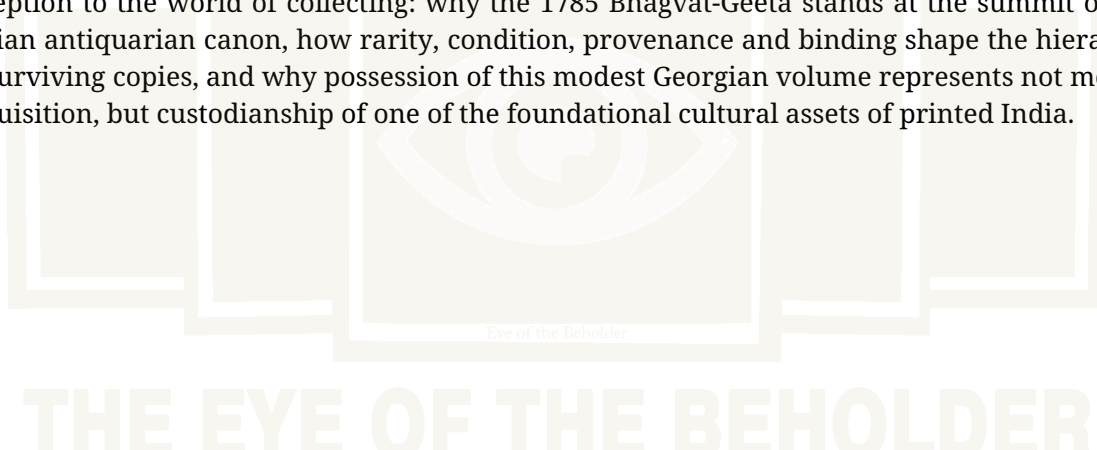
The Global Authority of the First English Edition

The physical first edition carries all these future histories invisibly within it. The volume is a beginning in the strongest bibliographical sense: not merely the first item in a sequence, but the origin of consequences. This is why foundational books command reverence disproportionate to their outward appearance. They contain futures.

Concluding Reflection

When Charles Wilkins's Bhagvat-Geeta appeared in 1785, Krishna spoke in English for the first time. Through Emerson and Thoreau into the literature of the American self. The story of the Gītā in Europe is therefore not the history of a faithful transmission from one fixed origin to a passive destination. The text was translated, admired, corrected, allegorised, universalised, criticised and appropriated. It entered systems of thought that revealed dimensions of its teaching while obscuring others.

The importance of Wilkins's first edition lies not in having answered the Gītā finally. The book that began as an East India Company publication became one of the first great vehicles through which Indian philosophy entered global modernity. The Orientalist world that produced the translation gave way to university Indology. The next chapter turns from global reception to the world of collecting: why the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta stands at the summit of the Indian antiquarian canon, how rarity, condition, provenance and binding shape the hierarchy of surviving copies, and why possession of this modest Georgian volume represents not merely acquisition, but custodianship of one of the foundational cultural assets of printed India.



Chapter VII

Collecting Wilkins's Bhagvat-Geeta

Why the 1785 First Edition Stands at the Summit of the Indian Antiquarian Canon

“Some books preserve a text. Others preserve the moment when a civilisation first became audible to another.” Every mature field of collecting eventually develops a hierarchy. And then there are cornerstone books: volumes so important that the history of an entire collecting field can be organised around them. Nathaniel Brassey Halhed's A Code of Gentoo Laws of 1776 introduced Hindu jurisprudence to the English-speaking world, though through the significant mediation of Persian. Charles Wilkins's Bhagvat-Geeta of 1785 carried a major Sanskrit philosophical text directly into English.

Wilkins's Heetopades of 1787 revealed another India: worldly, strategic and attentive to the difficult art of counsel. The early volumes of Asiatick Researches, beginning in 1788, established a durable institutional forum for the study of India. Among them, the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta occupies the highest position. It is the book through which Sanskrit philosophy first entered the English language in sustained form; the first printed edition of the Gītā; the beginning of an English-language reception that would expand into French, Russian, German and the wider intellectual world; and the material witness to the collaboration of Wilkins, Kāśinātha Bhattacharya and Warren Hastings.

Specialist catalogues describe the edition as the editio princeps of the Bhagavad Gītā, preceding a printed edition in an Indian language by roughly two decades. (FlippingBook) For the collector of India, there may be rarer books. But few possess greater civilisational consequence.

WHY THIS BOOK MATTERS TO COLLECTORS

The first English translation of the Bhagavad Gītā

The first major Sanskrit work translated directly into English

The first printed edition of the Gītā

A foundational publication of European Indology

A landmark of collaborative Indian and British scholarship

An East India Company publication of exceptional intellectual significance

The source from which the earliest French, Russian and German receptions developed

One of the supreme cultural assets of printed India

Importance Before Rarity

New collectors often begin by asking whether a book is rare. A book that survives in a meaningful number of copies may nevertheless be one of the central intellectual artefacts of civilisation. The 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta belongs to the second category. Copies survive in major institutional libraries and periodically appear in the antiquarian market. The edition is not unobtainable in the way that a unique manuscript or a book surviving in only two or three examples might be.

Exceptional copies combining wide margins, fresh paper, distinguished provenance and an honest contemporary binding are rarer still. More importantly, the historical demand for the book is distributed across several collecting fields. A book that appeals to only one narrow specialty depends upon the health of that specialty. Wilkins's *Gītā* belongs simultaneously to several narratives, each capable of producing serious custodians. Its importance is therefore multidimensional.

The Hierarchy of Foundational Indian Books

If one were to assemble a private library devoted to the first printed encounters between India and Europe, a small group of books would form its inner sanctum. Wilkins's *Bhagvat-Geeta* would represent philosophy, sacred literature and the first direct passage from Sanskrit into English. Jones's *Sacotala* would represent drama, poetry and the awakening of European Romantic interest in Sanskrit literature. Together they show Europe discovering that India possessed sophisticated traditions of law, metaphysics, literature, language, science and statecraft.

Within that group, the *Bhagvat-Geeta* has a special authority because the text it introduced eventually transcended the scholarly world that first received it. Wilkins's first edition therefore combines bibliographical primacy with the continuing spiritual life of the underlying work. The translation belongs to 1785. The dialogue belongs to the present.

A Book of Intellectual Firsts

Collectors rightly value beginnings. The first edition of a landmark book is not merely an earlier version of later editions. It is the moment before influence becomes history. When Wilkins's volume appeared, the English-speaking world possessed no established vocabulary for the *Gītā*. No European academic discipline of Sanskrit capable of correcting and refining the translator's choices. The edition therefore records language at the moment of invention. Its experimental orthography, explanatory notes and Georgian prose are not obstacles to collecting interest. A modern critical edition may be more useful for scholarship. One cannot improve upon primacy.

The Book That Created Its Own Audience

Many first editions enter a market in which readers already know the author or subject. The edition required Warren Hastings's advocacy, Wilkins's notes and the authority of the East India Company to persuade readers that this unfamiliar Indian dialogue deserved serious attention. The collectors, philosophers, Romantic writers, theologians and scholars who later embraced or contested the *Gītā* did not exist as a recognisable constituency before the translation appeared. The volume summoned them into being.

Scarcity and Survival

The original print run of the 1785 edition is not securely established in the sources used for this paper. Any confident numerical claim should therefore be avoided unless supported by publisher's records or a reliable census. Others passed through the collections of East India Company officials, clergymen, Oriental scholars and cultivated private readers. Some suffered detached boards, broken joints or damaged title pages. The strongest surviving examples preserve the balance of several kinds of integrity: the complete text; the original preliminary matter; the generous proportions of the page; an early or contemporary binding; and evidence of responsible rather than aggressive restoration. The great copy remains uncommon.

Condition Is Not Perfection

Collectors accustomed to modern luxury goods sometimes approach rare books with the wrong expectation. A fine copy may show rubbing to the corners, slight wear at the head and

foot of the spine, a carefully strengthened joint, gentle toning, an early inscription or the mellowing associated with rag paper. A book becomes problematic when age has been disguised rather than conserved: when margins have been cut excessively, paper has been bleached, leaves supplied without disclosure, bindings rebuilt beyond recognition or surfaces refinished until historical character disappears. Its restoration, where necessary, should support rather than impersonate the past.

CONDITION PRIORITIES

Completeness

All preliminary matter, Hastings's letter, the eighteen lectures, notes and terminal leaves should be verified.

Title page

The title page should be original, legible and honestly described. A facsimile or supplied title materially alters the status of a copy.

Margins

Generous margins preserve the scale and authority of the original page.

Paper

Fresh, unwashed rag paper is preferable to artificially brightened sheets.

Binding

A sound contemporary or early binding is highly desirable, but structural integrity matters more than superficial splendour.

Restoration

Professional, limited and disclosed restoration is acceptable. Reconstruction that erases the book's history is not.

Provenance

An identifiable early owner can transform a strong copy into a historically exceptional one.

The Importance of the Preliminary Leaves

A collector encountering an attractive copy may focus first upon the title page and binding. Hastings's introductory letter forms part of the intellectual history of the edition. It tells the reader why the text matters, frames India as a civilisation of philosophical achievement and records the institutional patronage behind the publication. A copy lacking this material may still contain Wilkins's translation. They document the attempt to make Sanskrit thought intelligible to eighteenth-century English readers. The first duty is always to the text.

Margins as Evidence of Restraint

Collectors often describe a copy as "large," "uncut" or "with generous margins." These expressions are more than aesthetic compliments. The scale of the 1785 edition is particularly important. Specialist catalogues describe examined copies as quarto, including an example measuring approximately 317 by 235 millimetres. Format should ultimately be established through the method of sheet folding and signatures rather than height alone, but the substantial proportions of well-preserved copies contribute materially to their presence. (FlippingBook) A closely cut copy may still be complete. In a philosophical book, space itself becomes part of the reading experience.

Contemporary Binding

A contemporary binding offers one of the most immediate forms of historical continuity. Specialist descriptions record copies in fine contemporary tree calf with gilt borders, floral spine compartments, red morocco labels and coloured edges. One particularly important example retained the bookplate of William Markham, who had served as Warren Hastings's private secretary and later as Resident at Benares. (FlippingBook) Such a copy unites three layers of history: the first edition; a binding of the period; and an owner directly connected to the world of Hastings and Benares. A contemporary binding in sound condition brings the modern custodian materially closer to the book's first life.

Tree Calf and the Seduction of Surface

Tree calf has particular appeal. Its branching patterns resemble the veins of marble or the limbs of an ancient tree. When combined with gilt tooling and a contrasting spine label, it gives a Georgian philosophical book an appearance of quiet splendour. The chemical processes used to create tree-calf patterns could weaken the leather. Collectors should therefore ask: Are the boards securely attached? The ideal copy retains visual beauty without concealing structural history. It lies in integrity.

Later Bindings

A later binding is not automatically inferior in every respect. A complete, wide-margined and fresh copy in an elegant later binding may be preferable to a contemporary-bound example with missing preliminaries, severe staining or extensive paper repair. A modern leather spine added to early marbled boards, for example, may retain part of the volume's historic appearance while sacrificing the original backstrip. A Saffronart copy sold in 2024 was described as having early marbled boards with a modern leather spine; despite that compromise, it achieved the equivalent of US\$23,133 including premium. (Saffronart) The result demonstrates that the market recognises the title's importance even when the binding is not wholly original. It means importance can compensate for imperfection.

Provenance: When Ownership Becomes History

Provenance is not decoration added to a rare book; it is the documented history of the object itself. The present copy carries a particularly legible institutional provenance from the Leeds Library. Its original lending label remains on the front pastedown, with the Commercial Street address, ten-day reading notice and library number N037377, while the title page bears the Library's oval "1887" stamp. Forum Auctions subsequently offered the volume as an ex-library copy, expressly recording the bookplate and stamp in its catalogue. Together, the physical marks and auction record create a coherent chain from institutional ownership to the antiquarian market and onward to The Eye of the Beholder.

Institutional Provenance as a Life of Reading

The Leeds Library association is not an authorial or presentation provenance, and it should not be represented as such. Its distinction is different: it records the book's long public life as a volume made available to readers. The surviving lending label and shelf identity make this history visible. For a work whose importance lies in carrying the *Gītā* into the English-speaking world, provenance from a historic British subscription library is intellectually apt and gives the copy a character that an anonymous rebinding would not possess.

Association Copies

The highest form of provenance is association: ownership by someone meaningfully connected with the author, subject, publication or influence of the work. For the 1785 *Gītā*, a hierarchy of associations might include: a presentation copy from Wilkins or Hastings; a copy

owned by a participant in the translation or publication; a copy belonging to a major early Orientalist; a copy owned by a significant reader in the European or American reception of the Gītā; or a copy from a celebrated India collection. Scholarship separates history from wish.

The Market Is Thin, Not Transparent

The market for foundational Indian books is still comparatively discreet. Unlike Shakespeare, Darwin or modern literary first editions, the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta does not appear in enough transactions to create a perfectly transparent price index. One may be in contemporary calf with important provenance. Another washed, cropped or incomplete. Auction results, dealer prices and private transactions therefore require interpretation. The object is never the same copy.

Public Market Evidence

Recent public evidence gives a useful, though incomplete, indication of the market. A first edition offered by Bonhams Skinner in February 2023 sold for US\$25,500 including premium. (finebooksmagazine.com) In July 2024, Saffronart offered a copy of 156 pages in early marbled boards with a modern leather spine. Estimated at ₹500,000–600,000, it sold for ₹1,920,000, equivalent to US\$23,133 including premium—more than three times the high estimate. (Saffronart) A fine contemporary tree-calf copy with William Markham provenance was catalogued by a specialist dealer at £12,500 and recorded as sold.

The 2024 Saffronart result suggests that serious Indian bidders are prepared to compete strongly for books that define the printed transmission of Indian civilisation. That conclusion is an inference from one public result rather than proof of a complete market transformation, but it is consistent with the expanding visibility of rare Indian books among collectors beyond the traditional Western antiquarian trade. (Saffronart)

MARKET EVIDENCE AT A GLANCE

Specialist dealer example

Fine contemporary tree calf, William Markham provenance. Published price: £12,500. Recorded as sold.

Bonhams Skinner, 2023

First edition. Sold for US\$25,500 including premium.

Saffronart, 2024

Early marbled boards, modern leather spine. Estimate: ₹500,000–600,000. Sold for ₹1,920,000 / US\$23,133 including premium. Prices are historical transaction evidence, not automatic valuations for another copy.

Auction Price and Dealer Price

Collectors often compare an auction result with a dealer asking price as though they represented the same thing. Auction prices may include a substantial buyer's premium. The buyer may also incur tax, shipping, import duties and currency costs. A dealer price usually includes the dealer's expertise, ownership risk, cataloguing, photography, restoration assessment, guarantee of title and the ability to purchase without auction uncertainty. A private transaction may involve entirely different considerations. The responsible collector therefore asks: Was the figure hammer or premium-inclusive? Numbers without copy descriptions are misleading.

The Danger of Auction Estimates

Auction estimates are marketing instruments, not objective declarations of value. It can sell far above estimate because two determined custodians recognised qualities the estimate failed to capture. The Saffronart 2024 result is instructive. The copy's estimate was US\$6,025–7,230, while the premium-inclusive result reached US\$23,133. (Saffronart) The result does not mean that every copy is worth US\$23,133. The collector should study the book, not worship the estimate.

Value and the Present Copy

The present copy can now be positioned more confidently within the market. Its strengths are the first-edition status, substantial quarto format, broad margins, generally clean interior, sound gilt-lettered library binding and fully documented Leeds Library provenance. The Forum Auctions description also provides transparent disclosure of the rebacking in modern cloth, light rubbing and slight bowing, scattered spotting and light soiling, and reinforcement at the gutter of the title and a few leaves. These factors place it below the very highest tier of copies in contemporary calf with major association provenance, but well above an anonymous, incomplete or poorly documented example. It is a compelling institutional copy: honest, structurally secure, historically legible and particularly suitable for a collector who values provenance and the life of reading alongside bibliographical primacy.

Why the Market May Still Underestimate It

Relative to its civilisational importance, the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta remains less internationally famous as an antiquarian object than many Western landmark books of comparable intellectual consequence. The Indian rare-book market is younger and less institutionally developed than the markets for English literature, Americana or European science. Many Indian collectors have historically focused more heavily upon paintings, sculpture, jewellery and manuscripts than printed books. The global antiquarian trade has often classified the work narrowly under travel, Orientalism or the East India Company rather than presenting it as a foundational book of world philosophy. The collector who understands the book acquires before consensus becomes complete.

Collecting as Cultural Positioning

Possession of the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta says something different from possession of a merely expensive object. The book stands naturally beside first editions of the Bible in translation, Plato, Confucius, the Qur'an in European languages and other landmark acts through which one civilisation became readable to another. The 1785 edition is one of the great books of cultural passage.

The Ideal Companion Books

A collector who owns Wilkins's Bhagvat-Geeta may build outward in several directions. The most immediate companion is Wilkins's Heetopades of 1787. The Gītā addresses duty, liberation, divine knowledge and action without attachment. The Hitopadeśa addresses counsel, friendship, deception, strategy and political intelligence. Halhed's Gentoo Laws of 1776 adds the legal dimension. Schlegel's 1823 Sanskrit-Latin Gītā adds the European philological response. Later editions associated with major Indian interpreters can trace the text's return into modern Indian religious and political life. It generates a library around itself.

A COLLECTION BUILT AROUND THE 1785 GĪTĀ

Law

Halhed — A Code of Gentoo Laws, 1776.

Philosophy and sacred literature

Wilkins — The Bhagvat-Geeta, 1785.

Political and ethical wisdom

Wilkins — The Heetopades, 1787.

Institutional Indology

Asiatick Researches, from 1788.

Sanskrit poetry and drama

Jones — Sacontala, 1789/1790s editions.

European philology

Schlegel — Sanskrit-Latin Bhagavad Gītā, 1823.

Modern Indian interpretation

Important editions and commentaries associated with Bankimchandra, Tilak, Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo.

The Collector's Emotional Experience

There is also a form of value that catalogues cannot measure. To hold the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta is to feel the distance between the modest object and its immense consequences: the experimental spellings, the quiet Georgian type, Hastings's introduction, Wilkins's notes, and in this copy the gilt-lettered Leeds Library binding and surviving lending label. Nothing upon the page announces that Emerson will read the Gītā, that Thoreau will carry its thought to Walden Pond, or that Indian reformers and nationalists will reinterpret it. The first edition contains these futures invisibly. This particular copy adds another layer: it was not merely stored, but circulated, read and preserved within a historic library before entering private custodianship.

Reading the Book One Owns

Some rare books are too fragile, too inaccessible or too visually oriented to reward sustained reading. The translation is historically dated, but its datedness is part of its value. To read it is to hear Sanskrit philosophy passing through the English vocabulary of the eighteenth century. Where a Sanskrit idea resists the available English term. This encounter cannot be reproduced entirely through a modern translation. Wilkins tells us what it first became in English. Its meaning deepens as the custodian's knowledge deepens.

Conservation

A first edition of this importance should be conserved, not cosmetically improved. A detached board may require expert reattachment. Leather may require careful consolidation by a trained conservator. What should generally be avoided is transformation for visual effect. No replacement of original endpapers merely because they are stained. No facsimile matter without permanent disclosure. Conservation should preserve evidence. Restoration should never create a false past.

Storage and Handling

The book should be stored in a stable environment, away from direct sunlight, excessive heat and fluctuating humidity. Clean, dry hands are usually preferable to cotton gloves for handling ordinary paper leaves, as gloves can reduce tactile control. Gloves may be appropriate for certain photographic materials, metalwork or exceptionally vulnerable

surfaces. The book should not be displayed open for prolonged periods under strong light. It survives through technique.

Digitisation and Access

Creating a high-resolution photographic record serves several purposes. The digital record should include the complete title page, preliminary matter, first and final pages of each gathering, binding, endpapers, provenance marks and all significant defects. A complete digital surrogate may also allow readers to engage with the translation without repeatedly opening the original. It protects the circumstances under which the book may continue to exist.

Insurance

Insurance should reflect replacement difficulty rather than merely the last public auction result. A copy with unusual provenance or exceptional binding may be impossible to replace at the price paid. The insured value should account for: the current specialist market; dealer margins; taxes and import costs; currency movement; condition; provenance; and the time required to locate another comparable example. An insurance valuation is not necessarily the same as a retail asking price or auction estimate.

Foundational books do not trade frequently enough for automatic annual indexing. For a general bookseller, the Bhagvat-Geeta may be a highly desirable item to place and replace. The maison's intellectual identity rests upon foundational books through which Indian civilisation entered print and crossed cultures. Wilkins's Gītā is almost the perfect embodiment of that purpose. But an anchor book should not be treated as ordinary trading material. The decision to part with it should be strategic, not opportunistic. And which books establish why it deserves to be listened to.

The Difference Between Ownership and Custodianship

Ownership is a legal fact. The owner may sell, lend, insure, restore or transfer the book. Which previous owners deserve identification? How may scholars gain responsible access? What information should accompany the book when it passes onward? A foundational volume becomes more valuable culturally when its custodian adds knowledge rather than merely price. The next owner should receive not only the book, but a richer understanding of it. That is the work of the Custodian Papers.

The Book as a Cultural Asset

The phrase "cultural asset" should not be confused with a claim of guaranteed financial return. A cultural asset possesses value across several dimensions: historical; intellectual; aesthetic; symbolic; scholarly; social; and potentially financial. Aesthetically, a fine copy possesses the restrained dignity of Georgian bookmaking. Socially, it establishes distinction within a serious library. Financially, recent public transactions demonstrate sustained five-figure demand for important examples. (Bonhams) Its greatest value, however, lies in the unity of these dimensions. It is luxurious because it carries consequence.

The Summit of the Canon

Can one reasonably call Wilkins's Bhagvat-Geeta the most important collectible printed book relating to India? Earlier travel narratives record encounters with the subcontinent. Halhed's *Gentoo Laws* precedes it and possesses immense significance in the history of colonial law. Yet within the canon of books that transmitted Indian intellectual civilisation directly into English, the 1785 Bhagvat-Geeta has the strongest claim to primacy. A cornerstone book defines a field not only by what came before it, but by everything that became possible after it. By that measure, Wilkins's Gītā stands at the summit.

From the Curator's Desk

There are rare books one admires because of their age. A very small number possess an atmosphere that cannot be explained by either. It does not overwhelm through illustration, scale or decorative extravagance. For centuries, Krishna had spoken in Sanskrit and in the languages of India. In 1785, through the labour of Wilkins and Kāśīnātha and the patronage of Hastings, that voice entered English print. The East India Company sought knowledge of the civilisation it governed.

In the process, it helped release one of that civilisation's greatest texts into the modern world. The copy that survives today is therefore not simply the first English translation of a sacred book. A custodian of this book does not hold the Bhagavad Gītā itself; no single object can contain a text that has lived through so many languages and centuries. The moment when the Gītā crossed into English.

Concluding Reflections

Charles Wilkins could not have known the full consequence of the book printed for C. Nourse in London in 1785. Hastings believed that the European world should encounter it. The Court of Directors recognised its antiquity and the veneration in which it was held. The first English Gītā travelled into French, Russian and German. It returned to India within a new world of print and colonial debate. It became part of the modern history of reform, nationalism, spiritual universalism and global philosophy.

The first generation of Orientalists became the subject of history. A modern reader no longer needs Wilkins in order to read the Gītā. A modern custodian needs Wilkins in order to understand how the Gītā first entered English history. This is why the 1785 volume belongs in every great collection devoted to the printed heritage of India. Not because every collector must possess the same book. But because every serious history of the field must acknowledge its centrality.

The greatest books are collected because without them, the story remains incomplete. To acquire it is to obtain a first edition. To study it is to encounter the making of global intellectual history. To preserve it is to become, briefly, one of the custodians through whose hands Krishna's first English voice will continue its journey.

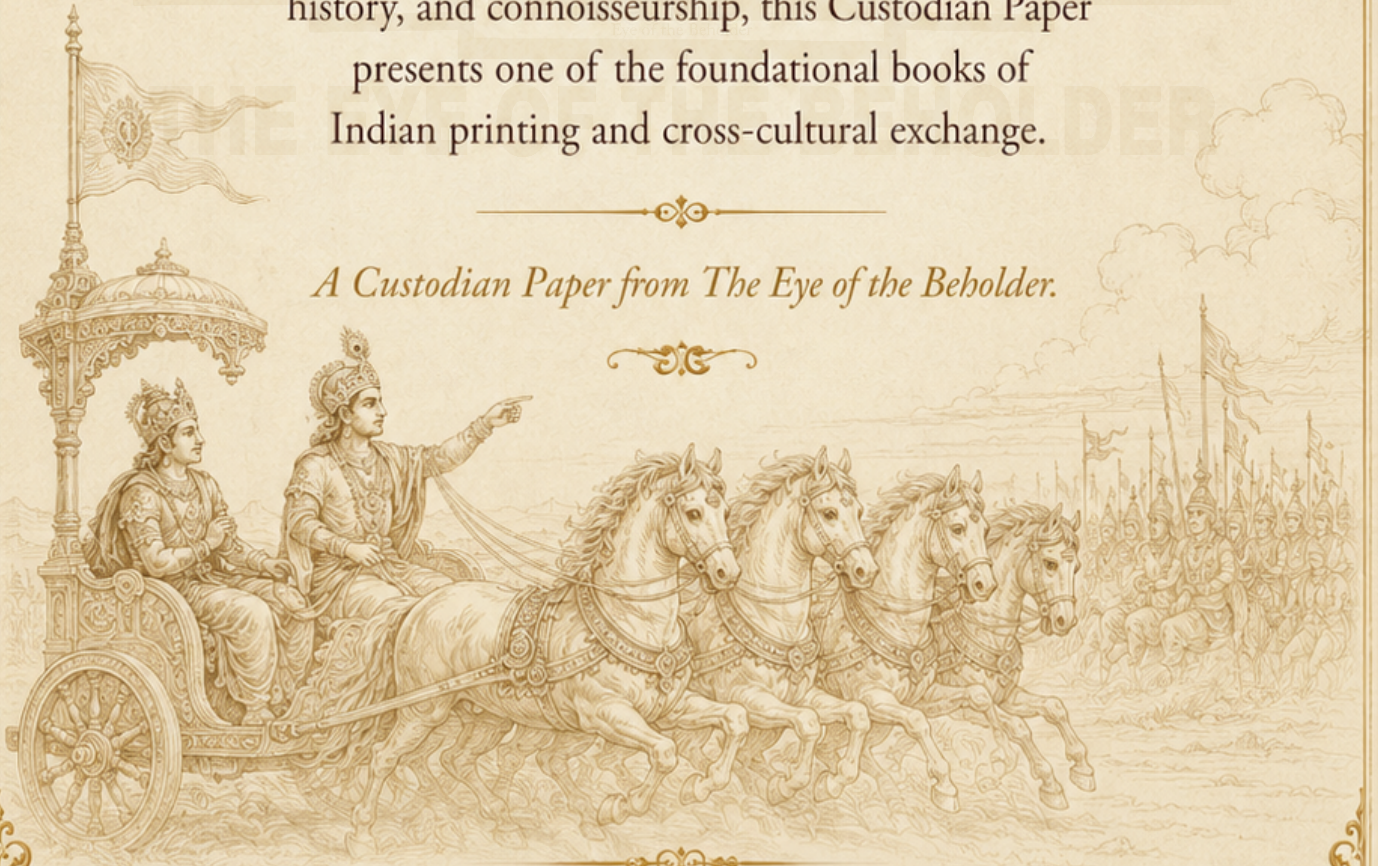


THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

The Song That Crossed the World tells the story of the first English translation of the Bhagavad-Gita, published in London in 1785 by Charles Wilkins.

It traces the Sanskrit inheritance of the text, Wilkins's pioneering achievement, the role of Warren Hastings, the book's European reception, and the specific history of the present copy, preserved with Leeds Library provenance. Combining bibliographical detail, intellectual history, and connoisseurship, this Custodian Paper presents one of the foundational books of Indian printing and cross-cultural exchange.

A Custodian Paper from The Eye of the Beholder.



INDOPHILES • BIBLIOPHILES • ICONOPHILES