

Mahatma Gandhi's Revolutionary Thoughts on the *Bhagavad Gītā*: A Guide to Moral Behavior and Non-violence

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Abstract:

Mahatma Gandhi, who paved the way for India's peaceful freedom, saw the *Bhagavad Gītā* as more than just a holy book; it was also a living manual and a "eternal mother." This study explores Gandhi's deep and frequently groundbreaking readings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, emphasizing how its major ideas influenced his own moral code, philosophy, and tactics for social and political change. This article examines how Gandhi turned a traditional Hindu text into a universal doctrine of selfless service and moral fortitude. It focuses on his distinctive understanding of *Anāsakti Yoga* (non-attachment to the fruits of action), his controversial but deeply held belief in the allegorical nature of the *Kurukṣetra* war (interpreting it as an internal moral struggle), and his emphasis on *Ahimsā* (non-violence) as the ultimate ethical imperative. It contends that the *Gītā* served as a crucial source of inspiration for Gandhi's political action and personal asceticism since his observations offered a practical spiritual compass for negotiating the complexity of human existence and forging a path of ethical resistance.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Anāsakti Yoga*, *Ahimsā*, Non-violence, *Satyāgraha*, Spiritual Interpretation, Ethical Action, Indian Philosophy.

1. Introduction

With its profound philosophical insights, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a beloved Hindu scripture hidden inside the epic *Mahābhārata*, has inspired countless people throughout ages. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) was one of its most significant interpreters; his interaction with the *Gītā* was not only scholarly but also profoundly personal and life-changing. More than just a religious literature, the *Gītā* served as Gandhi's "spiritual dictionary," a constant companion, a source of comfort, and a source of unflinching conviction in his unrelenting pursuit of truth (*Satya*) and non-violence (*Ahimsā*). He famously stated, "When doubts haunt me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and I see not one ray of hope on the horizon, I turn to *Bhagavad-Gītā* and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow" (Gandhi, 1929). The purpose of this essay is to examine the characteristics of Gandhi's distinct interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and how his understandings—especially of *Anāsakti Yoga* and *Ahimsā*—provided the fundamental ideas for his Satyagraha philosophy and his vision of a just society.

2. The *Gītā* as a Personal Guide and Universal Scripture

Gandhi's connection to the *Bhagavad Gītā* started when he was young and became much stronger while he was living in South Africa. Through Sir Edwin Arnold's English translation of *The Song Celestial*, he approached the text largely as a seeker of truth rather than as a scholar of Sanskrit or theology. His worldview was impacted by this early exposure, which placed more emphasis on its spiritual and ethical aspects than on its historical or factual

context. Gandhi believed that the *Gītā* offered universal principles that applied to all people, transcending denominational borders. He considered it "the Gospel of selfless action" and saw no contradiction between its teachings and the tenets of other great religions. Regardless of religious affiliation, this universalist viewpoint enabled him to derive moral precepts that spoke to his own developing dedication to social justice and non-violence.

3. *Anāsakti Yoga*: The Core of Gandhi's Interpretation

A key idea in Gandhi's interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* was *Anāsakti Yoga*, which he translated as the "Gospel of Selfless Action" or "non-attachment." This theory, which is mostly explained in Chapter 2, stresses carrying out one's obligation (*dharma*) without yearning for or being attached to the outcomes or benefits of that deed. Gandhi saw this as a call to pure, unadulterated dedication to activity for its own sake, motivated by a sense of responsibility rather than ego or personal gain, rather than an invitation to lethargy. He argued that true detachment was not about renouncing action itself, but about renouncing the desire for its fruits. "The *Gītā* is not a gospel of inaction," he asserted, "but of the purest action" (Gandhi, 1929). For Gandhi, this distinction was essential because it gave his active involvement in political and social transformation a spiritual basis. His *satyāgraha* campaigns were founded on his belief that he had to take action against injustice, but he had no personal stake in the outcome, leaving it up to a higher power or the forces of truth itself. This enabled him to remain calm and steadfast in the face of innumerable disappointments and defeats. *Satyāgraha* (pronounced sat-YAH-graha) is a combination of two *Sanskrit* nouns: *satya*, which means truth (derived from *sat*-'being' with the suffix 'ya'), and *agraha*, which means "firm grasping" (a noun derived from the verbal prefix 'a' with the root 'grah'-'seize', 'grip', and the verbal prefix 'to' 'towards'). Therefore, the precise meaning of *satyāgraha* is dedication to truth, holding fast to the truth, and vigorously but peacefully opposing lies. Since Gandhi believed that nonviolence (love) was the only path to the truth, *satyāgraha* denotes a constant pursuit of the truth through nonviolence. *Satyāgraha* according to Michael Nagler literally means 'clinging to truth,' and that was exactly how Gandhi understood it: "clinging to the truth that we are all one under the skin, that there is no such thing as a 'win/lose' confrontation because all our important interests are really the same, that consciously or not every single person wants unity and peace with every other" (Gandhi, Mahatma. Brown, Judith M., 2008: p. 20, p. 60).

4. *Ahimsā* and the Allegorical Battlefield of *Kurukṣetra*

Truth and *Ahimsā* are inextricably linked in Gandhi's *Satyāgraha*. *Ahimsā* embodies the ethical precepts of ancient Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. 'Nonviolence' is typically translated as "injury" plus the negative prefix 'a'. As early as the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, the term *Ahimsā* is used in Hindu teachings. *Ahimsā* is the first vow in the Jain religion. It is considered a Buddhist cardinal virtue. Gandhi's unique contribution, despite its foundation in these religions, was:

To make the concept of *Ahimsā* meaningful in the social and political spheres by moulding tools for nonviolent action to use as a positive force in the search for social and political truths. Gandhi formed *Ahimsā* into the active social technique, which was to challenge political authorities and religious orthodoxy (Jones, 1948: p. 82).

The way Gandhi interpreted the *Kurukṣetra* conflict was arguably the most unique and much studied part of his understanding. Arjuna's predicament on a battlefield, considering fighting his own family, is where the *Gītā* begins. Gandhi strongly disagreed with the literal interpretation, which implies a defense of war in some situations. According to him, *Kurukṣetra*'s battleground was an analogy for the never-ending conflict that exists inside people's hearts rather than a real arena.

He believed that the war represented "the conflict between the good and evil forces in the human breast" (Gandhi, 1929). Krishna's urging of Arjuna to fight was thus interpreted as a call to overcome inner demons, selfish desires, greed, hatred, and ego, rather than engaging in physical combat. Gandhi consistently argued that the *Gītā*'s message was one of *Ahimsā* (non-violence) in its purest form, an absolute ethical imperative. Cowardice for him is "the greatest violence, certainly, far greater than bloodshed and the like that generally go under the name of violence" (Gandhi, 1970: p. 69). Gandhi stressed this when he says; "I can imagine a fully armed man to be at heart a coward. Possession of arms implies an element of fear; if not cowardice but true nonviolence is impossibility without the possession of unadulterated fearlessness" (Gandhi, 2003: p. 254). He has not observed any inconsistency between the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and the *Gītā*., equating the *Gītā*'s message with Christian non-resistance.

Those who saw the *Gītā* as endorsing moral warfare criticized this interpretation because it was radical. Gandhi, however, believed that violence and the spiritual meaning of the *Gītā* could not coexist. He believed that the only way to true freedom and self-realization was through *Ahimsā*, the greatest *dharma*. This interpretation was reflected in his entire philosophy of *Satyāgraha*, which he defined as the force of truth and love. It changed the idea of passive opposition into an active, brave, and unyielding pursuit of justice using non-violent means.

5. The *Gītā* as a Manual for the *Sthitaprajña* (Man of Steady Wisdom)

Gandhi found immense inspiration in the *Gita*'s description of the *Sthitaprajña*, the "man of steady wisdom" (Chapter 2, verses 55-72). This ideal person is defined by a mind that is deeply rooted in the self, independence from attachment, fear, and anger, and equanimity in both joy and sorrow. Gandhi believed that the *Sthitaprajña* embodied the perfect *Satyāgrahi*, one who is unaffected by outside events, who is totally devoted to the truth, and who is not influenced by material cravings.

He fasted, lived in a community, and practiced rigorous self-discipline in an effort to develop these virtues in his own life. His personal behavior and leadership style were modeled after the *Gītā*'s focus on mental discipline, self-control, and steadfast resolution. He felt that in order to take successful outward action, one must first undergo an internal metamorphosis, and the *Gītā* provided the means to attain that inner balance.

6. Practicality and Daily Application

Gandhi's interaction with the *Gītā*, in contrast to many philosophical treatises, was never abstract. He emphasized how useful it was for day-to-day living. For him, the *Gītā* was not meant for esoteric contemplation but for guiding every action, every decision. According to Gandhi the *Gītā* is not a book of metaphysics, but of practical morality. According to him, the ideals of *Anāsakti* and *Ahimsā* must be applied to all aspect of one's life, from interpersonal interactions to political campaigns.

These ideas were implemented in his ashrams, such the Sabarmati *Āśram*, which served as testing grounds. Selfless activity and non-attachment, which the *Gītā* advocated, were fostered by the daily routines, the emphasis on manual labor, self-sufficiency, and communal living.

7. Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts on the *Bhagavad Gītā* show a deep and enlightening interaction with a holy book. He lived the *Gītā*, giving its old passages vitality and proving their applicability today, rather than just interpreting it. The spiritual and ethical foundation of his *Satyāgraha* philosophy was provided by his unique understanding of *Anāsakti Yoga* as selfless action, his allegorical interpretation of the *Kurukṣetra* war that resulted in *Ahimsā*'s sovereignty, and his desire to embody the *Sthitaprajñā*.

In addition to securing India's freedom, Gandhi left behind a potent example of moral behavior and peaceful resistance that still serves as an inspiration for justice movements around the globe. Gandhi turned a sacred text into a universal call to action by reinterpreting the *Bhagavad Gītā* through the prism of non-violence and selfless service. This showed how spiritual principles have the enduring capacity to influence human destiny and direct the course towards a more compassionate and just world.

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