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The Discourses of the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* in Mahatma Gandhi's Philosophy

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Abstract

Gandhi was a great *Karmayogi*. His life was profoundly influenced by the sacred text, the *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* (hereafter, the *Gita*). Through the discourses and teachings of the *Gita*, he discovered the true purpose of existence and gained a deeper understanding of life. He thought of the *Gita* as a dictionary with all the answers to moral questions written inside. Gandhi believed that the *Kurukshetra* War was a conflict between two forces within each of us, one constructive and the other bad, rather than a historical conflict. The main characters of the *Mahabharata* are also metaphorical manifestations. According to him, the *Gita*'s greatest lesson is to work without attachment. Gandhi did not work for his own gain, making him a true *Karmayogi*. He was not concerned for the outcome. The *Gita* gave Gandhi the idea of a *Sthitaprajna*. Gandhi asserts that a staid or *Sthitaprajna* individual lacks desire. He is, of course, free from all forms of worldly desires. Once more, the notion of a devotee had an impact on Gandhi. According to him, a devotee should be resolute and not envious. Gandhi also borrowed from the *Gita* the concepts of *Satyagraha*, non-violence, love, and welfare, which he applied to everyday issues, be they moral, political, or personal. Gandhi believed the *Gita*'s motto was *ahimsa*. It is initiative of *Anasakti*. Gandhi saw *Ahimsa* as the means to the end and *anasakti* as the ultimate aim. Gandhi's primary goal was to emancipate himself from all constraints by pursuing a religious path. Gandhi learned that religion may be applied to everyday life from the *Gita*. The proposed paper seeks to examine the influence of the *Gita* on Gandhi by exploring how its core principles of *anasakti*, *Ahimsa*, *satyagraha*, and *karmoyoga* shaped his spiritual, moral, social, and political vision.

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Introduction

As an unwavering *Karmayogi*, Mahatma Gandhi is remembered and revered in the history. He remained committed to the path he knew to be the one that led to justice and truth. The *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* (hereafter, the *Gita*) inspired him to battle with unwavering determination. Gandhi, however, began studying the *Gita* in a somewhat different way. He did not read the *Gita* for the first time in Sanskrit or in any of his native languages. He recited Sir Edwin Arnold's poetic rendition of the *Gita* in English at the request of his English acquaintances. This encounter with the sacred Indian text provided him with a new, understanding of his inner mind. He came to realize that every verse of the *Gita* contains a hidden, timeless truth. In his own words, "I devoured the contents from cover to cover and was entranced by it. The last nineteen verses of the second chapter have since been inscribed on the tablet of my heart" (Gandhi, *Discourses* 55). Gandhi was deeply affected by the words in the second chapter, and the idea remained with him. He considered the book to be of immeasurable value. The *Gita* thus became the driving force of Gandhiji's life. Gandhi faced a lot of challenges during his life. He was troubled day and night by the hostile circumstances, grief, and depression. His anguish was all around him due to the burden of numerous judgments. But each time, he triumphed over every challenge and pain. This strength came from the *Gita*.

Gandhi's Interpretation of the *Gita*

The *Gita* depicts Arjuna's inability to determine whether to battle against his family members or renounce his *Kshatriya* duties. This kind of confrontation between what is reasonable and unjust in day-to-day existence is common among human beings. Gandhi looked for the answer in the *Gita* whenever he encountered such challenges, and he found it. Gandhi firmly believed that by continuously studying the *Gita*, one would not only enjoy discovering new meanings in the text but also discover the formula for solving problems in everyday life. This strong belief is reflected in his own words:

And so we read a work like the *Gita* every day and meditate over its teaching. By doing so, we wish to awaken spiritual yearning in us and learn what questions to put to the Lord. Whenever we are faced with spiritual difficulties, we turn to the *Gita* for their solution and obtain peace of mind through it. This is the spirit in which we should read the work. It is as it were our revered guru, our mother, and we should have faith that we shall be safe if we seek shelter in her lap. We can get all our spiritual difficulties solved through the *Gita*. Anyone who daily meditates over the teaching of

the *Gita* in this manner will ever experience new joy in his study and find new meanings. There is no spiritual problem which the *Gita* cannot solve, though it may be that owing to our imperfect faith we do not know how to read and understand the work. We read the *Gita* as daily spiritual practice so that our faith may increase from day to day and we may become vigilant. (Gandhi, *Collected* 33)

Gandhi found inner serenity and contentment in the *Gita*. Thus, he likened the *Gita* to a “mother,” “perfect teacher,” or “*Guru*.” He reasoned that, in the same way that a kid finds comfort and security in his mother’s lap, a person who has been injured experiences similar emotions in the *Gita*.

According to Gandhi, the *Gita* is a spiritual guide that conceals all the answers to moral dilemmas. He stated that he thought of the *Gita* while studying it, “... to me the *Gita* became an infallible guide of conduct. It became my dictionary of daily reference. Just as I turned to the English dictionary for the meanings of English words that I did not understand, I turned to this dictionary of conduct for a ready solution of all my troubles and trials” (*Autobiography* 318).

Many people believe that the *Mahabharata* depicts a historical conflict in which virtue prevails over injustice. However, Gandhi disagreed. The *Mahabharata* war, in his opinion, is not a historical conflict. Gandhi claims that Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata*, made no mention of actual warfare. He described the struggle between humanity’s good and bad forces. Gandhi believed that Krishna, Arjuna, and Bhima, the principal characters of the epic, are truly symbolic and stand for several common facets of human nature. Thus, a symbolic interpretation reveals that Arjuna represents noble and virtuous side of human nature, whereas Duryadhana with his friends has come to represent filthy emotions. Krishna, in this context, is the embodiment of the divine wisdom which guides individuals to distinguish between the conflicting forces.

Every single chapter of the *Gita* forced Gandhi to ponder deeply over human nature and actions. In the first chapter, Arjuna is seen to be prepared to renounce his *Kshatriya* duties after witnessing the Pandavas and the Kauravas engaged in combat. Even though he believes that the Kauravas cannot be forgiven, he has come to the conclusion that suicide is preferable to battling his brothers and his master, Dronacharya. Gandhi believed that Arjuna’s self-criticism and repentance should be traits shared by all truth seekers. According to him, acquiring knowledge is impossible if we lack a strong desire to learn the truth and feel as though we are lacking something. He believed that if a person is not eager to understand the distinction

between right and wrong, s/he cannot recognize the necessity of religion. Gandhi aimed to convey through this that no one can be a truth seeker without spiritual inclination.

Arjuna receives instruction from Sri Krishna not to be biased against his family and non-kin while on duty after surrendering to the duty of fighting against his relatives on the battlefield. Gandhi interpreted Sri Krishna's advice as emphasizing the distinction between the individual "I" and the collective "we." Additionally, there are distinctions between strangers and kin. Gandhi learned from the *Gita* and other scriptures that one cannot live a flawless moral life until one overcomes prejudice, jealousy, or negative passion. Gandhi, however, also understood that following the righteous path and making it workable are two different things. Gandhi received confirmation that the *Gita*'s path is the only way to achieve a condition devoid of jealousy and hate.

Gandhi's Notion on *Anashakti Yoga* and *Karmayoga*

The third and fourth chapters of the *Gita* had a significant impact on Gandhi's ideas. Although he acknowledged the significance of the other chapters, he believed that the second chapter contains the *Gita*'s core ideas, while the third chapter explains how these principles can be put into day-to-day use. Gandhi believed that the *Gita*'s greatest lesson was to work without attachment. Consequently, while annotating the *Gita*, he preferred to call the chapter "Anashakti Yoga". In reality, non-attachment should not be understood as apathy, but rather it is the lack of desire towards the fruit of one's action. He is not indifferent or unmotivated to work. But his lack of desire for fruit creates a sense of tranquility. The *Gita* does not advocate indifference. It instructs one to work responsibly. According to the *Gita*, no one should avoid their obligations. The practice of performing all tasks with accuracy and dedication is known as non-attachment. A "Karmayogi" is someone who does not have a thirst for the outcome or self-interest. Gandhi argues that just as non-attachment does not equate to apathy toward work, it also does not result in nonchalance. The pursuit of non-attachment should not be abandoned. It involves fulfilling one's obligations without any desire while being fully aware of the outcome and being obedient to God. Gandhi described *Anasakti*, or non-attachment, as:

I think that you should not be anxious for the result if your motivation is honest and correct. In fact, if you become conscious about the methods and leave the rest in the hand of the God, the ultimate result will be appropriate. This is non-attachment.
(Gandhi, *Harijan* 72)

He also said, “Success or failure is out of our hand. It is enough to do our duty well. Our duty is to try our best. At last the God’s will must be fulfilled” (Gandhi, *Harijan* 74).

Gandhi considered the *Gita*’s portrayal of the *Sthitapranja*— a staid and committed person— to be the ideal for human conduct. He referred to a such a person, “The ideal of staid person or *Sthitapranja* described in the 2nd chapter of the *Gita* remains in my mind always. I am continuously very careful to reach to the statics of that ideal” (Gandhi, *Harijan* 490). Naturally, a person is referred to as staid if they are able to overcome their impulses and find inner fulfilment. A person who is even-minded does not experience overwhelming happiness or sadness. Fear and passion are absent from his thoughts. Gandhi advised:

This affection creates lust. If lust is prevented anger originates. Anger makes the person mad. He cannot find the purpose of his life. By this he loses his memory power, behaves disorderly and became helpless. When sense organs behave haphazardly, it breaks down like an aimless ship broken by dashing an iceberg. Thus, human being should give up his lust and takeaway sense organs from irrelevant matters. The vision will be simple. The eyes will see pure thing. The ears will hear the chanting of the God or the crying of the distressed. The hands will be associated with hospitality only. Basically, the organs will help him to fulfil the duties and become appropriate for getting the bliss of the almighty. Once he gets the bliss, all his problems, grief will be eradicated. As the sunlight melts the ice, the bliss makes all the dejection uprooted. After that he is called the even-minded person. But if a man cannot be steady how he can think well? Without good will peace cannot be attained. Without peace none can get pleasure. (Gandhi, *Discourses* 11-13)

Gandhi once said that a steady-minded individual is as calm as the ocean. He renounces lust, disregards desire, and achieves God. He receives salvation that lasts until death.

Gandhi was also deeply influenced by the *Gita*’s description of a devotee. Gandhi defined devotion as neither blind respect nor deceptive induction. Those who worship by oblation or apply sandal paste to their foreheads are not considered devotees. Jealousy and conceit should not exist in the devotee. He ought to have a strong resolve. He ought to be able to put up with changes in the weather and the cycle of happiness and suffering.

Gandhi’s ethical strategy was poorly organized. His principles were inconsistent. Actually, he was more of a social reformer than a moral philosopher. He was a dedicated worker rather than a scholarly philosopher. He took the route that looked to be a more moral

way to find the solution. These were the ways of welfare, love, truth, and nonviolence. Gandhi learned about nonviolence, *Satyagraha*, and “*Sarvodaya*” in this way. The *Gita*’s teachings either directly or indirectly influenced his moral beliefs.

The *Gita*’s central idea is essentially about selfless work (*Karmayoga*). Gandhi aimed to put this thought into practice by figuring out how to make the concept work in real life. He conducted a thorough investigation to determine how to apply the concept. Gandhi’s campaign for Indian-origin slaves in South Africa and his movement on behalf of the disadvantaged and oppressed citizens were not merely about politics. In essence, such movements were a moral struggle. *Satyagraha* served as the battle’s motto. *Satyagraha* is the love of truth and the development of a strong bond with it. *Satyagraha* is the practice of patiently and sympathetically diminishing one’s false beliefs. It must be accomplished by enduring personal anguish and suffering. Thus, upholding the value of truth is referred to as the *Satyagraha*.

Integrity is a central theme which is mentioned in almost every scripture. Ancient texts mention the devotion of Harischandra and Prahlada and their self-immolation to preserve the splendour of truth. Gandhi’s passion for truth was deeply influenced by those narratives. The *Gita* also provides a strong foundation for the ideal of truth and integrity portrayed in those tales.

Gandhian Approach to Moral Interpretation of the *Gita*

The *Gita* states that it is our responsibility to defend morals and ethics against immorality and wicked behaviour. Gandhi used this moral conflict as a weapon. When there is an armed conflict, brutal force must be used, and this use is motivated by fear. This application is motivated by jealousy and fear. However, in order to use one’s moral or self-power, one must be brave and fearless. The adherents of this path fight using the tools of morality and never give up. These require a strong intellect, strength, unwavering bravery, and unadulterated loyalty. These traits are retained only by devotees who are even-minded.

The truth cannot be upheld by someone who enjoys pleasure or fears misery. Only those who are unaffected by pain and uninterested in pleasure can uphold the worth of truth. He can be a “*Satyagrahi*” since he exemplifies the *Gita*’s description of a selfless worker and devotee.

The core idea of *Gandhian* philosophy is *ahimsa*. In general, it appears that the *Gita* and the principle of *Ahimsa* are unrelated. In fact, one of the main topics covered in the *Gita* and the *Mahabharata* is the portrayal of violence and conflict. Sri Krishna advised Arjuna to fight rather than to abstain from conflict. Arjuna adhered to the non-violent philosophy, even

though the *Gita* makes no explicit mention of violence. He had no desire to fight his family. It was unnecessary for Sri Krishna to counsel Arjuna to impart the lesson of *Ahimsa*. In addition, the idea of *Ahimsa* and the principle of truth were mentioned in other scriptures prior to the *Gita*. Therefore, the *Gita's* motto of *Ahimsa* is not intended to empower humanity. *Niskam Karma* is essentially the lesson we get from the *Gita*. The *Gita* instructs us to carry out our responsibilities regardless of the outcome. Gandhi was actually aware of this as well. Although the *Gita* describes conflict, it should be noted that the war is not exalted. As Gandhi puts it, "The author of the *Mahabharata* has not established the necessity of physical warfare; on the contrary, he has proved its futility. He has made the victors shed tears of sorrow and repentance and has left them nothing but a legacy of miseries" (Gandhi, *Collected* 167). However, it is important to note that the concept of *Ahimsa* is unrelated to the ideal of *Anasakti*. Even if this *Ahimsa* is the central theme of the *Gita*, it must be acknowledged that *Anasakti* indirectly initiates the ideal of *Ahimsa*. The latter is a prerequisite to the former if the idea of *Anasakti* surpasses the *Ahimsa* principle. *Ahimsa* is the means by which the ideal of *Anasakti* is attained. One cannot be without desire if they do not pursue the path of *Ahimsa*. Gandhi knew it by heart. "When there is no desire for fruit, there is no temptation for untruth or *himsa*. Take any instance of untruth or violence, and it will be found that at its back was the desire to attain the cherished end" (Gandhi, *Collected* 173).

The idea of *Saravodaya* is another interpretation of Gandhi's ideology. *Sarvodaya* primarily expresses a social and political viewpoint. However, Gandhi's moral theory is the foundation of this viewpoint. *Sarvodaya* literally means "to do well to all." The goal is to make everyone happy, not to please as many people as possible. Gandhi acknowledged that his desire for charity blossomed after reading Ruskin's work *Unto This Last*. However, he borrowed the phrase "*Sarvahita*," which means "welfare of all people," from a number of Indian texts, particularly the *Gita*. *Sarvodaya* is a viewpoint that advocates accepting everyone equally and devoting oneself to their well-being. The *Gita* gave him the concept of "*Samadarshita*." Gandhi was particularly drawn to *Samadarshita*, one of the traits of a devotee (*Bhakta*). Everyone has the same emotions. Another important aspect of the *Gita* is the concept of "*Lokasangraha*." This "*loka*" refers to both the inhabitants and the environment. In short, *Lokasangraha* is the act of exalting the inhabitants, humanity, and other scriptures. The goal of this way of living is to preserve *loka's* splendour. In the *Gita*, these kinds of works are referred to as "*Yajna*." The purpose of the sacred sacrifice, called "*Yajna*," is not to obtain one's beloved. Gandhi asserts that this "*Yajna*" is a commitment to the common good rather

than one's own interests. Gandhi's admirer Vinoba Bhave acknowledged the impact of *Lokasangraha* and the ideal "*Bahujan Hitaya–Bahujan Sukhaya*" on Gandhi's *Sarvamukti*.

Ahimsa, *Sarvodaya*, *Satyagraha*, and so forth are the central concepts of Gandhi's moral philosophy. Gandhi's concept of "*Achhitatta*" (Trusteeship) is a novel contribution. It is widely regarded as a theory of politics. The *Gram-Swaraj*, or village liberation, was his original goal. However, this "*Achhibad*" also reflects Gandhi's moral and spiritual beliefs, much like his other social and political stances. To put it another way, "*Achhibad*" is a political theory derived from his moral philosophy. Gandhi uttered, "My *Achhibad tatta* (Trusteeship Theory) is not any contemporary subject. It is supported by spiritualism and philosophy also" (Gandhi, *Harijan* 376).

The *Achhibad* is opposed to the abolition of property. The owner will hold the property, according to this view. However, rather than seeing himself as an owner, he will see himself as the property's guardian. The administrator or *Achhi* will be the owner of the additional property, which should be acknowledged as public property. The *Isaponishad* is truly the source of this notion of enjoyment through sacrifice. Gandhi's "*Achhibad*" was influenced by two concepts of the *Gita* in addition to the "*Upanishad*" or eternal Hinduism ideal. *Samabhaba* and *Aparigraha* are the two values Gandhi said that had influenced him. The cultivation and preservation of *Samabhaba* became his everyday goal. *Aparigraha* refers to the rejection of superfluous issues. We have the right to take whatever satisfies our appetite. Expecting more than is necessary will be akin to stealing. The notion of "*Aparigraha*", which is mentioned in the *Gita*, is the focal point of *Achhibad*. From Gandhi's own words, it is obvious that "...the *Gita*[']s teaching of non-possession (*Aparigraha*) to mean that those who desired salvation should act like the trustee who, though having control over great possessions, regards not an iota of them as his own" (Gandhi, *Autobiography* 318). Gandhi's vision of the *Samabhaba* takes a similar form: "God is the owner of everything and everything came from him. So all those are for his all sons, not for a special one. If someone has any extra proportion, he is only an administrator of that extra amount" (Gandhi, *Harijan* 39). It is therefore clear that *Swaraj*, *Swadeshi*, and *Panchayati Raj*, along with the notion of *Achhibad*, are grounded in ethical responsibility. Gandhi's moral philosophy is derived from the *Upanishad*, and the *Gita*.

Conclusion

Gandhi's political beliefs became moral and humanitarian as a result of studying the *Gita*, and his moral theories became purified as a result of considering religion. Despite the fact that

Dharma, *Artha*, *Kama*, *Moksha*, and other concepts are considered to form the “*Purusartha*,” there is no connection between *Dharma* and *Artha*. *Dharma* is typically associated with eternal bliss rather than earthly enjoyment. It is believed that there is no connection between religion and business. It is believed that religion is the means of releasing oneself from all constraints. However, the *Gita* does not distinguish between practical and eternal lust in the traditional sense. The *Gita* appears to favour religion as a means of achieving happiness in day-to-day existence. Gandhi had this individuality in his day-to-day existence. Gandhi discovered this particular aspect of religion in the *Gita*. He stated emphatically,

The common belief is that religion is always opposed to material good. ‘One cannot act religiously in the mercantile and such other matters. There is no place for religion in such pursuits; religion is only for attainment of salvation’, we hear many worldly-wise people say. In my opinion the author of the *Gita* has dispelled this delusion. He has drawn no line of demarcation between salvation and worldly pursuits. On the contrary, he has shown that religion must rule even our worldly pursuits. I have felt that the *Gita* teaches us that what cannot be followed out in day-to-day practice cannot be called religion. (Gandhi, *Collected* 172-173).

The *Gita* contains this idea.

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