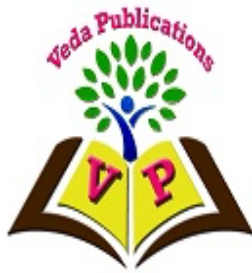




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**GANDHI'S INTERPRETATION OF THE GITA**

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This paper is an attempt to bring into focus the highly contentious question as to what kind of text the Gita is in supporting Mahatma Gandhi's campaigns of Satyagraha (nonviolent resistance) and Ahimsa (non violence) which sought salvation for India. He perceived that the Gita was a Parable of selfless activity, non attachment and sacrifice. He thought the spirit of the message is ghost warfare, not ghostly physical warfare; in his mind non-violence is actually an active form and not just one of piety. Gandhi stressed that one should situate his reading of Gita into the greater historical context of war rather than take it as excuse for violence, but instead as one break from war, which is nonviolent action based on love and truth. Though this view has been contested, with many critics saying it does not give a fair representation of the youthful-romantic nature of the text. Critics such as KWK Bolle and KN Upadhyaya hold that Gandhi's interpretation, as a piece regarded in his life and world view, is coherent on the whole philosophically but more an altogether political--or even business--reading than an interpretative reading of text per se. Bhikhu Parekh has argued that a selective reading this Gita does violence to the Gita, for it fails to take into account the call of the text for duty or to recognize its own sanction of violence. This paper returns to these critiques in order to explain, how Gandhi's interpretation of the Gita mean was conditioned by his autobiographical and political circumstances. This analysis is an attempt at a supplementary description of how Gandhi's interpretation does in fact correspond with and departs from the received version, how that affected his political strategy of pursuing Swaraj (self-rule) without violence.

Keywords: *Mahatma Gandhi, Bhagavad Gita, Ahimsa, Satyagraha, Non-violence, Selfless Action, Hinduism, Political Philosophy, Non-attachment Swaraj*



The Bhagavad Gita, an essential sacred scripture of Hinduism, lies within the larger epic called the Mahabharata. Even though the Gita was the work of one author, many facets of interpretation have revealed how that one writing can be seen in so many different ways (Desai 23). Mahatma Gandhi has lived the Gita, and his nonviolence is rooted in it to the core. His personal interpretation of standard words like nonviolence and omniscient redefined them in a unique way. Clearly, Gandhi believed that action is must, although it should be right, and has to entail quitting attachment and being satisfied with the consequences (Gandhi 45). To comprehend his commitment to nonviolence, it is essential for us to acquaint ourselves with the central concept in this significant Hindu scripture. In the Gita, we are commanded to be of equal mind, and one who achieves this—what is called a sthithaprajna (a being who stands firm in wisdom)—is someone above joy or sorrow (Prabhupada 126). Krishna suggests that actions should be carried out without attachment to the results, as the soul is immortal and cannot be killed or destroyed (Easwaran 198). Arjuna's notion of killing and being killed results from a misconception of the soul as the divine self (Prabhupada 107). The Gita also outlines four types of Yoga: Karma Yoga (the Path of Action), Bhakti Yoga (the Path of Devotion), Jnana Yoga (the Path of Knowledge), and Raja Yoga (Mechanical Discipline, mental or mundane). In order to cope with the difficulties of the present age, these goals were elaborately presented in the Gita by Krishna (Radhakrishnan 149).

In the Gita, he is Krishna, not the Arjuna of his own selfhood. Krishna, the charioteer of Arjuna, is identified as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and is the son of Devaki. How long would such a figure exist if

there were nobody to carry him on his shoulders? (Dor 22). After some reference to time later in Chapter 11, he stretches out this unknown form until it refolds at the close (Desai 84). One of the scholars mentioned on the previous page was almost certainly a Buddhist; his name, Jnaneshvar, indicates that it is probable he belonged to that faith. The 12th-century poet-saint Jnaneshvar's Jnaneshvari is an important literary and devotional interpretation of the Gita (Ranade 67). It is no wonder then that a culture carrying this heritage under its skin produced not only a unique way of life but also an aesthetic system. Modern interpretations have been offered by figures such as Tilak, Gandhi, Aurobindo, Vinoba Bhave, Vivekananda, and Ramana Maharshi (Sharma 34). In shaping the ethos for the education system of a nation still heavily imbued with colonial values, the Gita was an important factor (Ranganathan 121). Even Western writers like T. S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, and Christopher Isherwood have also found inspiration in the Gita (Huxley 12). Bal Gangadhar Tilak echoed this viewpoint in his famous Gita-Rahasya, where he noted that the text is a call for action and that Hindu devotion had weakened resistance against foreign invaders (Tilak 91). Revolutionaries saw in the Gita an injunction by Krishna to Arjuna to fight, and thus took it literally (Tilak 97). Mahatma Gandhi, on the other hand, believed that the Bhagavad Gita was a metaphorical battle between virtue and ignorance. He elaborated on this by paraphrasing the Gita's message of doing work and duties without attachment as the "Gospel of Selfless Action" (Gandhi, Collected Works 45: 57). Arjun Appadurai provides a sensitive reading of the ethical framework Gandhi ascribes to the Gita (117–22), while Margaret Chatterjee establishes the



originality of his allegorical interpretation compared to those that preceded it (35–40). However, Gandhi's poetic allegories proved too abstract for some researchers; K. N. Upadhyaya criticized Gandhi for making clarifications (Upadhyaya 69), and Kees Bolle condemned his interpretation as superficially problematic (Gillespie 82). On the other hand, J. T. F. Jordens scrutinized Gandhi's use of the Gita in key episodes of his life (Jordens 142). Bhikhu Parekh indicated Gandhi's appeal to nonviolence and non-possession from the Gita, which he felt was a necessary response to violent nationalists seeking support for their actions (Parekh 98). Scholars such as T. S. Devadoss have looked into the influence of the Gita on Gandhi's activism (Devadoss 74), and A. K. Ananthanathan has investigated the religious implications of Gandhi's interpretation (Ananthanathan 105).

Jordens also notes that it was about 300 pages long (on the Gita). We are also told that during his stay in South Africa (147), Gandhi did not concentrate on the Gita more than any other source of scriptural wisdom or guidance. In 1909, while in South Africa among prisoners condemned for violence, Gandhi turned to the Gita to point out how, in the midst of violence, life should be no less luminous than ever. The following year, Gandhi wrote in a letter about his meditation on the teaching of self-mastery presented by the Gita, which precipitated his turn from passive resistance to what he termed "soul force"—achieved not by giving in to the oppressor's violence but rather by drawing on one's own hardships and purifying oneself (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 16: 65). He quotes the Gita on overcoming defects and desires that

weaken us in life. Themes such as fearlessness, equanimity, and self-knowledge also find place in it.

Gandhi wrote to his son Manilal in 1914 that he should learn "self-reformation (...) by studying the third verse of Chapter i of the Gita (it is not written iii.37 but life being a narrative and not an eulogy, it would be better for everyone if, while poring, we see) thus: desire, the enemy of man, becomes wrathful too as born of passion" (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 12: 428). Gandhi was unequivocal in asserting that the Gita provided the bedrock for his socio-political philosophy. He advised Indians to read the Gita during preparations for the Rowlatt Satyagraha (Gandhi, *Satyagraha Leaflet* 18, 1919). Part of this was its treatment in the Gita, which, although it did not make any *tamasika* statements for war itself, depicted war in a way that made some patriotic Indians express concern. These individuals argued that the text had been adopted by violent extremist groups and was unsuitable, fearing it could inspire radical movements like those endorsed by Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Gandhi said that the Gita speaks of a war in spirit, which starts from within and only then manifests externally. Considering good and evil forces as two opposite poles, he allegorized the battle of the Pandavas and Kauravas as a symbol of inner struggle between virtues and vices, advocating that "the latter have to be uprooted" (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 28: 576). The epic, he declared in 1926, is a "struggle between dharma (righteousness) and adharma (unrighteousness), the real Kauravas being vices and the Pandavas virtues" (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 29: 645).



Gandhi mostly considered the Gita as a scripture in which he espoused his views on ethics and what constitutes duty in the inner struggle. The entire second chapter of the Gita, he wrote in 1925, constituted "the whole of the best teaching Gita could or did give," with the final nineteen verses still "written on the tablet of my heart" (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 23: 341, 27: 512). These are the verses that portray the Sthitaprajna, another concept that had an abiding impact on Gandhi right from his very first acquaintance with the Gita during 1888–89 through a translation by Edwin Arnold. In his autobiography, Gandhi writes in praise of Arnold, noting that he had been true to the spirit of the original text (Gandhi, *My Experiments with Truth* 141). The second chapter, "The Yoga of Knowledge" (Vibhuti Yoga), describes the way to freedom from passion, fear, and wrath, and emphasizes the discipline of the senses. According to Gandhi, the essence of the Gita is self-purification through ethical actions, mental discipline, and ego-transcended service (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 25: 528). Gandhi's approach was to read the Gita "word by word," but this was also selective; he saw the Gita as delivering divine messages, and where discrepancies existed between his worldview and that of another scholar like Tilak, he considered those differences interpretive issues best left to individual believers. He went so far as to say that he would reject any portion of the Gita that did not harmonize with his message, and in practice, this caused him to skip over portions that others considered essential to understanding the text (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 25: 531).

Therefore, Gandhi's expounding of the Bhagavad Gita can only be characterized as both periodic and

idiosyncratic. Sometimes he would put specific questions to particular people; at other times he simply addressed the general reader with no further identification. This is an event-distinct hermeneutics than the preceding positivism; it should also be said that in this way Gandhi too reads his readers—he reacted to their reactions, in whatever fragments bore some odor of their perspective without violation of the principles involved, incorporating these into his argumentation. To the mass audience Gandhi confined himself to the role of oracle, speaking to them words of institutional wisdom rather than commands warp almost as an exhortation. His ideas were an amalgamation of economic, political and esoteric thinking. Depending upon whom he spoke to, his arguments would vary yet again. In support of his thesis, Gandhi never tired of quoting from the Gita—sometimes a verse or sometimes a whole passage, on occasion even just a concise overview was given. On one occasion, he quoted Gita II: 62-63 to mollify an irate correspondent (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 12: 76). What is more, he did this not for oneself but in order to lift up the whole debate onto a higher moral plane.

Gandhi frequently cited the Bhagavad Gita as a key scriptural authority to bolster his socio-political philosophies, deeply rooted in classical Hindu traditions. The Bhagavad Gita served as a authoritative source for Gandhi's socio-ethical and political views, deriving these from the classical traditions within Hinduism. In Gandhi's eyes, just be a spiritual text. It had to be aimed at moral action, for the betterment and self-purification of man. Gandhi shifted the discourse away from personal arguments by quoting the Gita, asking others to engage directly



with its teachings rather than just arguing about his own views. By doing so, he presented himself not as an authority but as a humble receiver of divine wisdom and, in each case, sought in his political and moral teaching to reecho the spirit of the Gita (Gandhi, Collected Works 23: 341). This interpretive approach allowed Gandhi to broaden the terms of his arguments. His language could draw upon the spiritual gravitas which the Gita gave (TorAved 22).

Thus, the method was different compared to other nationalist leaders who used the Gita—particularly its emphasis on Karma Yoga (the path of action)—in order to persuade their people that resistance and struggle for life against the colonizer were both right and proper (Desai 18). Although they both revered the Gita, their interpretations were significantly different. In the Gita, Tilak saw a call to fight against oppression; Gandhi took another course, focusing on its message of nonviolence and inner moral struggle (Tilak 97).

Since he interpreted the Gita in his own way, Gandhi was distinct from every other individual. Even in the first instance, Gandhi interpreted the text politically and interpersonally. In his articles of 1926, every now and then he would make connections between this unflagging school of nonviolence (ahimsa) and the political pursuit for swaraj (self-rule). "Swaraj and Swaraj: me Asatta Tar" (Gandhi, Collected Works 29: 110). The fusion of individual moral self-restraint with organically linked political action defined Gandhi's interpretation of the Gita as unique among others. Also, reviewing the Non-cooperation Movement of 1921, which he conceded had failed, Gandhi wrote: "In 1921 we strode forth as purifiers of the self but later deviated from that path

and got into trouble" (Gandhi, Collected Works 31: 243). And the failure of the campaign, Gandhi contended, came about because its participants had failed entirely to internalize and live by the central principles of the Bhagavad Gita—principles he himself deemed vital. He repeated this in his exegesis of the Gita, saying, "you can take up a successful campaign of satyagraha only if your mind is resolute" (Gandhi, Collected Works 31: 247). Nonetheless, we must add that the necessary antecedent of political change is philosophical: non-cooperation by those very drives embodied in the imperial system. And in a letter to his nephew, Gandhi said: "Detach yourself. The liberation of India is the freedom of you" (Gandhi, Collected Works 12: 102). For Gandhi, self-objectification was central to his approach—his ultimate goal was not merely an end to British rule but a more profoundly experiential ideal of nonviolence swaraj. Gandhian nationalism is the position of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in Indian nationalism as opposed to the thinking of Nehruvian Nationalism. Gandhi first expresses this in *Hind Swaraj* (1909), where he conceives of an identity whereby an Indian person ought to be linked to everyone else in the world—indeed, he is everybody else—through the fact that as human beings they are all fundamentally the same. In this, he envisioned the rebirth of a genuine Indian state—not merely a political body or one resulting from political components, but one that had the profound and social inheritance which was India. This, for Gandhi, meant a resurgence of the old India of yore—she had been like paradise where people lived in virtue and self-mastery (Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 67).



As Arjun Appadurai observes, Gandhi made his case philosophically and tactically: "the way to control the English and claim freedom for India was for Indians to rule themselves by controlling themselves" (Appadurai 112). Gandhi understood British rule as societal violence and as a crime against Indian society, but also as self-estrangement and the product of having lived for generations under Western establishments. As Judith Brown puts it, for Gandhi, freedom was not a political matter; swaraj had to be a way of life and constituted only the return of Indians to their traditional civilization uncorrupted by the modern. Brown writes, "He believed that the duty of Indians was to renew their own lives and thereby regenerate India as a nation" (Brown 85).

However, in his belief that the Bhagavad Gita was both the truth and reality, Gandhiji went a step further than Aurobindo. He stressed Anasakti (selfless action), maintaining that those who walked this path would not commit sin, probably since they accompanied their actions with renunciation of the fruits of those actions. Gandhi believed that the highest state of an individual is called the sthithaprajna, one who has no attachment or aversion. He who works in the world gets attached and does not get qualified for moksha (Gandhi, Collected Works 34: 312). Also, according to Gandhi, "the highest knowledge of all is the knowledge of self-mortification for the highest realization" (Gandhi, Collected Works 34: 321). He frequently quoted Krishna: "Renounce all work and act for me alone, your only sure refuge"; but he would always add that the renunciation enjoined was a renunciation of

personal interest in what is done, not of doing or even of its fruit (Gandhi, Collected Works 34: 329).

Gandhi read the Gita not as a historical text but as a religious one, which depicted the Mahabharata war allegorically to symbolize the ceaseless spiritual conflict between good (Pandavas) and evil (Kauravas), with the human body serving as the battlefield (Kuruksheetra) (Gandhi, Collected Works 34: 334). Gandhi used metaphors and terminology from Indian religious traditions—such as Ram Rajya, a kind of ideal state in which prince and pauper alike enjoy equal rights. Political power served the interests of individuals who rule over themselves as well as others, thus forming a kingdom of righteousness throughout his life. In the ideology developed by Gandhi, dharma served as the ligament for society, with each person responsible for protecting their own dharma in the name of lokasamagraha, or the welfare of all (Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, 52).

Gandhi took the same idea, but he also worked hard for a living, essentially creating his own meaning—except that Gandhi was reading the Gita and concluded a person should fight self for others. He said gnana (knowledge) is required to understand situations and find opportunities for action, bhakti (devotion) is the principle of love, and karma is not just work but service, transforming society in line with the idea of Ram Rajya. Gandhi, by contrast, thought the moral of the Gita was to be more like God (Gandhi, Collected Works 34: 345).

Gandhi faced the most radical and militant views when he dealt with the issue of violence, a perspective rooted in Hindu thought and practice.



While some agreed that the Hindu tradition places great emphasis on ahimsa (nonviolence), they argued that it didn't mean violence could never be justified, since history has seen Hindus fight when necessary. Gandhi conceded that this was a correct "terrorist reading" of Hindu texts, which could be encouraged by aspects like animal sacrifices, wars, and the harshness with which dharma shastras prescribed conduct in ancient times. For previous generations of leaders, such readings of the Bhagavad Gita had been accepted (Gandhi, Collected Works 36: 512).

According to Gandhi, the Gita did not preach violence. His argument was that while the Gita was set during a war and Krishna encouraged Arjuna to fight, this did not equate to an endorsement of violence. Gandhi stated, "Krishna did not commission violence in the Gita. It speaks to a higher law, uniting every deed with justice. The Gita does not bring the war up, and it is never suggested anywhere that fighting or violence is a good idea. It is a sermon of nonviolence" (Gandhi, Collected Works 78: 37, 78: 521). He admitted, however, that ahimsa was not the central point of the Gita, as it had been a well-known idea long before. He believed the essence of Hinduism was the search for truth through nonviolence, and the Gita taught renunciation of desires and detachment from the results of one's actions (Gandhi, Collected Works 37: 527).

To Gandhi, inaction on Arjuna's part wasn't an act of compassion but cowardice and attachment. According to Krishna's teachings, Arjuna was bidden to do his duty and leave any results behind, unmoved by either praise or blame. He frequently reassures Arjuna that he will not be culpable for any wrongs he does because his acts serve the law and not malice.

Such attachment, for Gandhi, led to mundane entanglement, thwarting spiritual freedom (moksha). These attractions had to be overcome. That violence (himsa) was impossible if one was free from anger and detached. The Gita, in Gandhi's view, was aimed at raising human character above these emotions, and his stress on *asakti* (detachment) in the end destroyed the basis of moral and psychological violence (Gandhi, Collected Works 38: 535).

Gandhi saw in the author of the Mahabharata, Vyasa, a sage (muni) who thought deeply about senseless human slaughter. The Kauravas were killed, and the Pandavas survived as he pointed out, but did victory bring happiness to those who won? Gandhi argued that Vyasa did not expound the necessity and justification for warfare so much as its foolishness. The aftermath of war brought disgrace and sorrow (Gandhi, Collected Works 39: 558). It caused the victors to weep in their shame and left them with memories of woe to treasure in place of forgotten glory. Gandhi believed that in Krishna's teaching to Arjuna, service was to be rooted in love and conducted nonviolently (Gandhi, Collected Works 39: 564).

The Gita was intended primarily to be a philosophical text, also conveying moral principles and offering guidance on how one might put these principles into practice to resolve life's practical problems. Gandhi's point in particular is that violence is justified only when a person has what he calls a social dharma to fight, is out to right what he sees as an egregious wrong, and does not bear any personal animus toward his targets. According to Gandhi, the Gita actually demands that we judge both violence and nonviolence in light of where our head and heart



are at the time of the act (Gandhi, Collected Works 39: 568).

Gandhi dismissed the notion that the Bhagavad Gita is just something sectarian or of trivial historical consequence. Krishna's advice to Arjuna, Gandhi felt, was not limited to that particular military conflict, but expressed universal concerns about moral duty. Arjuna raised no general objections to killing. It was only the slaying of his kinsmen that he found difficult to accept, and this moral dilemma is where his own problem lay (Gandhi, Collected Works 39: 573).

To Gandhi, the Mahabharata preached the endless war between man's animal passions and his ego, calling for ahimsa in that struggle. To him, the Gita was recommending a mode of life that urged people to "Act Equally and Unattachedly." That tranquillity, he said, had no retrospective deliberation but simply followed along with Dalit barefootedness once people were already discerning where the taste of milk comes from (Gandhi, Collected Works 39: 74). He also contended that this attitude was the basis of all modern forms of violence. It follows, as he points out later, that if somebody happens to hit you with a stone and then another person joins in, you must stand there without flinching or dodging, even when water is poured down your throat. Gandhi would likewise argue that what he explains as "equanimity," emerging from complete mental detachment and self-denying pleasures, is the precursor of all violence (Gandhi, Collected Works 39: 75).

Gandhi, however, did not believe that this showed Arjuna was anything but attached and afraid. But although Arjuna did not wish to injure the yarume (those possessing dhimmi, ahimsa), Gandhi

says that it's not because of his belief in ahimsa, but attachment to them. At that very moment, according to Gandhi, Krishna was only trying to persuade Arjuna. His teaching about fighting could only be elucidated by examining the individual situation that Arjuna found himself in and should never provide a license in more general terms to fighting with jus. As Gandhi answered a questioner who said that he was selling out to a spirit of ahimsa by not putting up any defense against the German murder of Indians: "Arjuna did not refuse to fight because he was a man who believed in the principle of ahimsa. He had fought many battles. In the place of his birth, he wished only not to be killed" (Gandhi, Collected Works 40: 583).

Gandhi wrote, "Physical struggle, potentially, is not entirely impossible. The Gita is wrong in conveying hopelessness to those who have not yet embraced nonviolence." The one who is afraid, seeking selfish ends, and addicted to pleasure, though he has fought or will fight: none of these is his Dharma (ibid., 791). Dharma is not divided. Nonviolence leads to moksha, and moksha is only the realization of Truth itself. Don't be a coward; don't let despair make your destiny. Better for the man than to be craven is just to throw and to be slain" (Gandhi, Collected Works 40: 634). In Gandhi's thought, Arjuna was not making a moral judgment solely out of fear; therefore, leaving the battlefield didn't represent any kind of valid moral teaching at all.

Gandhi always argued against the critics who accused him of preaching passive resistance, reminding them that ahimsa (nonviolence) and soul force are not so much weapons to be made use of, as



weapons in themselves. According to Gandhi, there are two types of ahimsa: nonviolent action out of weakness, driven by fear of one's opponent; and nonviolent action out of strength, where both moral and physical courage are present. This strategy placed the guilt of violence on the oppressor, not the resister who opposed it nonviolently (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 43: 639).

In the hope of eliminating brutality, Gandhi advised people that when they wish for such a nation, a hard-core slave has scarcely been more than has already become free. Rather, he said, violence produces only further destruction and that struggle was on the minds. Gandhi was against revolutionaries for practical reasons, pointing out that while it might get rid of the rulers, the system they represented and influenced would still be maintained by violent revolution: "Violence will kill one or some of its worst rulers, but the ten-headed Ravana that lies buried deep within us will find itself reincarnated time and again. The root lies in our own hearts. Once we change ourselves, rulers will just change automatically" (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 44: 647).

Gandhi believed that through violence, no one would ever achieve Swaraj (self-rule). While violent methods could put an end to British rule, they offered no prophecy for any possible future for mankind. In Gandhi's opinion, Swaraj would have to be achieved through the encouragement of national leaders, not by imposing ideas through violent means. He maintained that Swaraj must include every Indian—men, women, and children. This could never be accomplished through violent methods (Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 53).

"If the Indians lived by good principles," Gandhi would tell the British, "they would have no weapons. No doubt the British would be so weak by then as to bow to fate, be under the control of India even more than now, and just suffer their loss of power. Indeed, Europe is morally allowing Indians to live off British interests—remotely—and to make the British into scapegoats for everything. However, if people whose ancestors had lived there from time immemorial committed murder, then would there be peace? The Indian government is British in origin, physically as well as morally; accordingly, under British rule it can only end up at variance with itself. This should make for disaster internally as well as externally" (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 46: 66).

Both the Buddha and many Hindu Indian texts of those times insisted that without awareness, no one could escape death any sooner than life itself. Non-awareness was equivalent to groundlessness, or a total void, which must be attacked by being aware. Even then, one can achieve nothing—no matter what you do (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 47: 469). In the end, it was pity that brought all religions together; how then could hurting one man be both wrong and hateful (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 46: 625)? Gandhi saw that victory through violent means would bring only more suffering and oppression. He warned the revolutionaries, "A successful bloody revolt can bring no light to anybody; it is something that will be an exceptional government... still foreign rule over them" (Gandhi, *Collected Works* 46: 651).

Concerning Swaraj, Gandhi said that it "is founded on love of the enemy and rejection of evil." These nonviolent measures may be slow in taking effect,



but they are the only means of progress. Although he admired the love people had for their countries when they fought as revolutionaries, Gandhi called it "blind" and said that India must be regained through total self-sacrifice without revenge (Gandhi, Collected Works 48: 655).

He described Hitlerism: "I have seen violence gain that much glory and do this very thing—the countries Germany, Italy, and Imperial Japan, which once placed such great hopes in violence, have now gone to rack and ruin! Even so, can't we tell from the atom bomb the failure of violence? Still, we have the enormous arrogance to suppose that Swaraj might be achieved by bashing in a few brains and burning property, all these isogradicts about belonging to us. Nonetheless, when all the killing is over, men will surely follow Non-Violence" (Gandhi, Collected Works 61: 367). In his response to the violent war, his main three ideas from the Bhagavad Gita—action, sacrifice, and non-attachment—served him as pillars. They formed the basic elements of the philosophy underlying his nonviolent response.

Gandhi himself was the first to admit the complexities—for, as he stated clearly in *Anusakti Yoga: Introduction to the Gita and Two Source Studies Appended Thereunto*, "Bhagavad Gita was neither a gospel of organized non-violence nor born from aversion to war" (Gandhi, Collected Works 87: 816). Throughout the entire history of Hinduism, warfare has been accepted as an institution. However, Gandhi argued that within the Gita, war does not truly take place at all (Gandhi, Collected Works 87: 820). Gandhi went so far as to explain that Gita chapter 2 is about what an ideal human being looks like, and those attributes are in no way

compatible with engaging in wars. To Gandhi, the Gita is about the inner struggle, in which a battle is fought by the soul (Gandhi, Collected Works 87: 825).

The Gita is everywhere war-entrenched: the wars of that Gita time were brutal in extremis, and nearly continuous discussions took place on ways to end war. However, whether the text preaches against war is a matter of some confusion. Gandhi observed that in the Mahabharata, once again, all victors looked back only at sorrow and hardship engendered by their great war. He insisted on every occasion that every victory in warfare is essentially a false celebration (Gandhi, Collected Works 90: 825).

The Gita, he argues, contains references to indecision from the very start. Gandhi likened many complex themes to warfare and recognized that he often used war analogies in his descriptions of self-control. "As a matter of fact," he wrote in his notes on Thomas à Kempis' Christian writings, "one individual reported eight or nine wars many years ago about washing hands before eating" (Gandhi, Collected Works 90: 830). However, Gandhi also observed that the Gita does not outright forbid fighting. On the basis of ahimsa, he argued that if one does not learn to disdain violence, or "non-violence" as he called it, it is impossible to make a true renunciation of life—this is a core teaching from the text. He contended that violence and non-violence were not two juxtaposed things. Three principal teachings were distilled by Gandhi from the Gita: Nishkama Karma (non-attachment to the fruits of works), Jnana (the knowledge that works are not for personal gain), and Karmaphalatyaga (the sacrifice of deeds themselves) (Gandhi, Collected Works 90: 830).



For Gandhi, action in the path of God was obligatory. The Gita asserts that peace results when one identifies with God. Krishna in the Gita is "perfection and right knowledge personified," leading people to realize themselves. Gandhi viewed the body as an instrument made for the satisfaction of desires, which drags actions into perdition. The Gita offers a way to escape this impasse by disobeying the dictates of your desires to act and practicing non-attachment. Gandhi clarified, "The Gita answered with finality and simplicity: 'He achieves peace, who lets himself surrender any affection and do without desire.' The Gita went on to say that this man 'getting rid of the fruits of action,' (practically) handed over all his activities into the hands of God" (Gandhi, Collected Works 90: 835). Gandhi's ethical and political thought soon made central to itself the doctrine of action without desire for results. He said you had to do things without expecting any return in order to do something. This selfless action, which led to the spiritual rebirth of a life for Gandhi, was the bedrock upon which his politics were cast. For Gandhi, liberation lay in unselfish service (karma) and in sacrificing for the welfare of others—both of which involved the discharge of one's duties to society. The teaching on renunciation from the Gita and Gandhi's own experience became the basis of his Satyagraha or civil disobedience (Gandhi, Collected Works 90: 837).

In shaping both his own philosophy and public policy, Gandhi used the Gita. He looked on the purification of the individual soul as moral redemption for society. Gandhi felt the Gita taught men to subjugate their wills and carry out duties in detached commitment without questioning. These

internal disciplines were necessary for him to create an ideal type of nonviolent social change. Each fight of his own making was a spiritual practice or penance as described in the Gita. Along with his plea for nonviolent struggle, people could infer that he was also asking them psychologically to join his battles (Gandhi, Collected Works 90: 91).

Critics abounded, naturally, of Gandhi's interpretation of the Gita. Few approved. Some say his way is too poetical, thus understating the importance of the text and its encouragement to righteous violence on behalf of duty. K. N. Upadhyaya and Kees W. Bolle accuse Gandhi of projecting his own non-violence onto the text, maintaining that a textual analysis of related verses supports just war under certain circumstances. Some point out that Gandhi's reading of the Gita simplifies or overlooks the ethical content and philosophical dimensions of the work that teach men, through their works (action), to bring about a just society.

Though originally derived from the Bhagavad Gita, this worldview played a significant role in the Indian freedom movement. His philosophy of non-violence, rooted in the Gita's teaching of renunciation of action, enabled thousands of Indians to take part in their own liberation. This reading of the Gita by Gandhi focussed on individual responsibility and moral order, offered a way for his followers to enter the movement not towards tangible goals but as part of a spiritual cleansing.

The clear meaning of Gandhi's Bhagavad Gita involves giving extremist freedom to speech and actions while preserving the spiritual integrity and mental restraints required for non-attached



consequences. Gandhi's interpretation of the text as a metaphor for the universal internal spiritual battle that rages within us all deeply impacted his political philosophy, forming a basis from which he could argue for India's independence. While some scholars felt Gandhi had moved too far away from the literal sense of the text, his reading supplied a compelling moral foundation for nonviolent resistance. Gandhi's reading of the Gita is a unique contribution to political theory and a profound meditation on the confluence of personal and political ideals.

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