

THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

By Mohandas K. Gandhi

A BOOK FOR EVERY HOME

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Edited by
Ram Sahadeo

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“The chief problem facing us today is the reconciliation of mankind. The Gita is specially studied for this purpose, as it attempts to reconcile varied and apparently antithetical forms of the religious consciousness and emphasizes the root conceptions, which are neither ancient nor modern, but belong to the very flesh of humanity, past, present and future.”

- Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan

“When I read the Bhagavad-Gita and reflect about how God created this universe everything else seems so superfluous.”

- Albert Einstein

“The marvel is its truly beautiful revelation of life’s wisdom, which enables philosophy to blossom into religion.”

- Herman Hesse

“A true scripture of the human race, a living creation rather than a book, with a new message for every age and a new meaning for every civilization.”

- Sri Aurobindo

“It is a bouquet composed of the beautiful flowers of spiritual truths, collected from the Vedas and the Upanishads.”

- Swami Vivekananda

“It is the most systematic statement of spiritual evolution of endowing value to mankind. It is one of the most clear and comprehensive summaries of perennial philosophy ever revealed; hence its enduring value is subject not only to India but to all humanity.”

- Aldous Huxley

“It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us...the voice of an old intelligence, which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions, which exercise us.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

“In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavad-Gita, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial...even our Shakespeare seems sometimes youthfully green and practical merely.”

- Henry David Thoreau

“It deals essentially with the spiritual foundation of human existence. It is a call to meet the obligations and duties of life: yet keeping in view the spiritual nature and grander purpose of the universe.”

- Jawaharlal Nehru

PREFACE

The two words **Bhagvad** and **Gita** mean the song of the Lord. However, it is not a lyric but a philosophical poem and represents one of the earliest attempts of Indian thinkers to merge philosophy with religion. While it is one chapter of the great epic **MAHABHARAT**, and a summary of **Upanishadic teachings**, it can stand on its own. Its spiritual truths had a tremendous influence throughout history on religious and social reformers, and many successful world leaders. In India itself the gita was a powerful weapon in the hands of progressive national leaders like **Tilak, Aurobindo Ghosh, and Gandhi** in their fight against British Imperialism. It suggests different ways to the supreme goal, is not rigid or sectarian, and its liberal outlook still makes it universally relevant.

The setting is the battlefield of the ancient Kingdom of Kurukshetra, about 100 miles from Delhi, where the Pandavas and their cousins, the Kauravas, more than 5000 years ago, faced each other on the eve of the **Mahabarat War**. The conflict resulted from a family dispute over the succession to the throne. Arjuna was overwhelmed with grief and refused to fight and kill his teachers, his uncles, cousins etc. but his friend and charioteer, Krishna,

a Hindu incarnation of God, in the philosophical and spiritual discourse that follows, persuaded him to do his duty in a righteous war and detach himself from the results. To confuse this with a lecture on warfare however is a common error of those who have not read the entire text. This immortal dialogue is rather an **instruction manual** telling us all how to live our lives on earth. It is particularly helpful in answering why we are here, what the goal of life is, and how to act when one duty conflicts with another. In short it shows the best way to attain self-realization (Moksha). Four paths (Yoga) are recommended since humans differ in taste and temperament: **Karma** (action), **Raja** (meditation), **Bhakti** (devotion) and **Jnana Yoga** (knowledge). These interrelated paths all lead to the same goal.

There are hundreds of translations and interpretations of this eternal message and in view of our objective we had to struggle to find one version that would appeal to the vast majority of mankind. Consensus led us to the gentle but effective freedom fighter and the apostle of universal peace, **Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi**.

Gandhiji's translation was selected for our purpose of global distribution because his concept of Satyagraha (resistance through mass civil disobedience based upon the foundation of non-

violence) changed the course of world history and his teachings continue to inspire people of every race, religion and nationality. He described the seven sins affecting modern society as:

1. Politics without principles,
2. Wealth without work,
3. Pleasure without conscience,
4. Knowledge without character,
5. Commerce without morality,
6. Science without humanity,
7. Worship without sacrifice.

He practiced what he preached and used these principles in his first struggle to end the oppression in South Africa, put an end to the indenture ship system wherever it existed in the British Empire and finally in the greater struggle of Indian Independence. He was one of the respected personalities of the twentieth century and no doubt will continue to influence the direction of mankind in this millennium.

President Barrack Obama stated that of all people, living or dead, he would have liked to have dinner with Mahatma Gandhi, the man who inspired **Martin Luther King** and his civil rights nonviolent movement in USA. Even **Nelson Mandela** used

the same principles in his lengthy struggle in South Africa. Yet many of our children have not heard of Gandhi or the sublime message of the gita.

Gandhiji was born on **October 2, 1869 in Porbandar, Gujarat, India** and graced this earth until an assassin's bullet ended his life on **January 30, 1948**. Unlike many who write about Vedic principles, the **Mahatma lived the Gita** ever since two Englishmen induced him to read it during the second year of his studies in England. He was ashamed and felt miserable because even though he was born in India he knew nothing about Krishna's message of universal harmony and reverence for all forms of life.

Gandhi, like many great men who are product of their experience, but his courage and convictions developed slowly. There was little in his early life to suggest that this well dressed British trained lawyer would one day become an International hero in a loincloth. The turning point may have been the incident in South Africa when he was physically pushed off the train from Durban to Pretoria because he had a first class ticket and refused to travel third class. In the years that followed he led the opposition to discrimination and injustice and in the process developed and perfected the method of SATYAGRAHA.

Essentially he refused to do what the authorities wished to have done, while abstaining from any positive action of an aggressive nature. Once he had accomplished his task in South Africa he returned to India and his determination inspired his approximately 2500 volunteers who withstood British brutality and suffered broken heads and bodies without even raising a hand in resistance as they advanced to the salt-pans at Dharsana. Gandhi displayed every form of courage to the highest possible degree. He suffered all kinds of punishments and tragedies but these have not left any permanent scars, a fact that he credits to the Gita.

There are still too many who have not been exposed to this spiritual treasure despite all the glowing comments by numerous luminaries on this book. Mahatma Gandhi experimented with the concepts of **TRUTH (SATYA)** and **NON-VIOLENCE (AHIMSA)** but there are many other principles, each of which can light the path to a nobler life and eventually a more humane society.

As a lawyer, I know quite well that one can escape the gates of hell by avoiding lust, anger and greed, (16:21) for these are the vices that flood the courts with expensive, time consuming and unpredictable litigation. All of us, who are influenced so much by peers, need to be reminded that it is the mind, which

is capable of being our best friend or our worst enemy, and therefore must be kept under control (6:05).

World leaders today advise that if we are to survive we have to prevent nuclear war, solve environmental problems, reduce or eliminate poverty and disease, all of which place excessive demands on our limited health and social systems. We can all contribute by following a few prescriptions enshrined in this immortal text.

This priceless gem may still be India's greatest contribution to world philosophy but its inspiration has no geographical boundaries and is still relevant in a world challenged by excessive materialism, violence and fundamental extremists.

Enlightened humanists such as **Ralph Waldo Emerson** and **Henry David Thoreau** may have been the first to refer to this literary masterpiece in the Western World. However it was not until **May 5, 1838** that significant numbers of dharma practitioners took this value system to South America when two ships, the **Whitby and the Hesperus**, transported Indentured Servants from India to British Guiana (Guyana). Indians were already in Mauritius by 1834.

These children of Bharat were later transplanted to many other lands and learnt English, French,

Dutch, and Spanish in order to survive. These countries include Trinidad, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Surinam, Grenada, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, Martinique, St. Vincent, French Guiana, St. Croix, and Cuba. There is evidence suggesting that after the great **Indian Mutiny of 1857** sepoys and their families were deported to British Honduras (Belize).

In the early 19th century it was stated that the **sun never sets on the British Empire** for it had colonies from the Caribbean to South Pacific where Indian indentured laborers were sent to replace the slaves on the plantations. However the British did not recognize that they were also sending Vedic values and thousands of years of Indian culture when their subjects travelled to countries like Fiji, Sri Lanka, Burma, South Africa, and Mauritius. This process continued until 1917 when Mahatma Gandhi and others from the Indian National Congress successfully opposed it. However by that time over one million Indian had been dispersed all over the globe and approximately half a million came to Guyana and the Caribbean. Today a few of these countries have villages which remind one of “**Little India**” while others have surrendered to environmental forces over the years and has little connection with **Bharat Mata**.

It was not until September 11, 1893 (9/11) that North America was introduced to unifying potential of the Gita's universal message when the dynamic Swami Vivekananda addressed The Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

Today the landscape of most major cities in Canada, USA, and Europe are dotted with numerous awe inspiring temples which will hopefully help to spread the message of love and peace. However there is great concern that short sightedness, and the thirst for immediate gratification, will cause many to depart from the wisdom and spiritual values that are the very foundation of the great ancient culture.

The Sanatan Dharma Educational Foundation of Canada Inc. was established to promote knowledge associated with the Vedic Saraswati civilization and to complement the rituals and the practices of the temples. Our aim is to distribute a few basic books like the **Gita and Ramayan**, to which all should have access as this knowledge is not yet readily available in the classroom, or regretfully even in the home. We subscribe to the philosophy of **C. Rajagopalachari**, associate and conscience keeper of the Mahatma, when he states “**no Indian can consider himself as having attained a liberal education if he has not attained a sound knowledge**

of the great religious philosophy for which India is famous throughout the civilized world.”

We recognize that this objective can only be fulfilled if more individuals, businesses, professionals, and organizations contribute to this endeavour. We will supply the materials in bulk, and ask supporters at their private functions to finance and donate copies to relatives, friends, clients, neighbors and particularly to those in their native lands. Gita knowledge is still the best gift and an appropriate one for any occasion e.g. birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, funerals, graduations. In this way we can collectively fulfill **our duty** of sharing this transcendental message with all mankind. (18:68).

Any individual or organization can take advantage of this opportunity to be the change that they want to see in this world by supporting our effort to place a **GITA IN EACH HOME**.

Those who consider this their **duty** can contact the nearest distribution centre listed at the back of this book.

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FOREWORD

The following pages by Mahadev Desai are an ambitious project. It represents his unremitting labours during his prison life in 1933-'34. Every page is evidence of his scholarship and exhaustive study of all he could lay hands upon regarding the Bhagavad Gita, poetically called the Song Celestial by Sir Edwin Arnold. The immediate cause of this labour of love was my translation in Gujarati of the divine book, as I understood it. In trying to give a translation of my meaning of the Gita, he found himself writing an original commentary on the Gita.

The book might have been published during his lifetime, if I could have made time to go through the manuscript. I read some portions with him, but exigencies of my work had to interrupt the reading. Then followed the imprisonments of August 1942, and his sudden death within six days of our imprisonment. All of his immediate friends decided to give his reverent study of the Gita to the public. He had copies typed for his English friends who were impatient to see the commentary in print. And

Pyarelal, who was collaborator with Mahadev Desai for many years, went through the whole manuscript and undertook to perform the difficult task of proof reading. Hence this publication.

Frankly, I do not pretend to any scholarship. I have, therefore, contended myself with showing the genesis of Mahadev Desai's effort. In so far as the translation part of the volume is concerned, I can vouch for its accuracy. He carried out the meaning of the original translation. I may add too that Pyarelal has interfered with the original only and in rare cases where it was considered to be essential, an interference which Mahadev Desai would, in my opinion, have gladly accepted, had he been alive.

On the train to Madras

M. K. Gandhi

20th January, 1946

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction by Mohandas K. Gandhi.....	1
1. Arjuna's Gloom and Question.....	21
2. The Theory of Sankhya and Yoga practice.....	29
3. Karma Yoga: The Method of Work.....	46
4. The Yoga of Knowledge and Renunciation of Work.....	60
5. The Yoga of Renunciation of Work.....	74
6. The Yoga of Self Control.....	86
7. The Yoga of Wisdom and Knowledge.....	96
8. The Imperishable Supreme.....	103
9. The Most Secret and Sovereign Yoga of Knowledge.....	111
10. I am Everything and the Best.....	119
11. Behold My Cosmic Form.....	127
12. The Yoga of Devotion and Contemplation....	139
13. The Field and its Knower.....	145
14. The Three Basic Kinds.....	155
15. The Supreme Person.....	163
16. The Godlike and the Demoniatic.....	169
17. The Three Kinds of Faith, Food, Sacrifices..	174
18. The Yoga of Release by Renunciation.....	180

