# CHAPTER IV

GANDHI AND THE GITA

\ t one time Gandhi lived in the Bayswater district of London.

LA There he organized a neighbourhood vegetarian club and

1 Xbecame its secretary. Dr. Josiah Oldfield, bearded editor of

The Vegetarian , was elected president, and Sir Edwin Arnold vice-

president. Sir Edwin had translated the Gita from Sanskrit into

English and published it under the title of The Song Celestial in

1885, just a few years before Gandhi met him.

Gandhi first read the Gita in Sir Edwin Arnold’s translation

while he was a second-year law student in London. He admits

it was shameful not to have read it until the age of twenty, for

the Gita is as sacred to Hinduism as the Koran is to Islam, the Old

Testament to Judaism, and the New Testament to Christianity.

Subsequently, however, Gandhi read the original Sanskrit of

the Gita and many translations. In fact, he himself translated the

Gita from Sanskrit, which he did not know very well, into Gujarati

and annotated it with comments. His Gujarati translation was in

turn translated into English by Mahadev Desai.

Gita or song Is short for Bhagavad Gita , the song of God, the song

of Heaven. Gandhi ascribed great virtues to it. ‘When doubts

haunt me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and I see

not one ray of light on the horizon,’ Gandhi wrote in the August

6th, 1925, issue of Young India magazine, ‘I turn to the Bhagavad

Gita , and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to

smi-le in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. My life has been

full of external tragedies and if they have not left any visible

or invisible effect on me, I owe it to the teaching of the

Bhagavad Gita .’ Mahadev Desai declared that ‘every moment of

[Gandhi’s] life is a conscious effort to live the message of the

Gita\

The Bhagavad Gita is an exquisite poem of seven hundred

stanzas. Most stanzas consist of two lines; a few run to four, six,

or eight lines. The entire book is divided into eighteen discourses

or chapters; each, according to an appended colophon, deals

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with a specific branch of the science of yoga. The Gita is thus a

book on the science and practice of yoga.

The Bhagavad Gita is part of a much bigger book, the Maha-

bharata , the greatest Indian epic and the world’s longest poem,

seven times as long as the Iliad and Odyssey combined. The

Mahabharata sings of men and wars in the distant past, ten centuries

before Christ. Like European classics, it describes battles in which

gods mix with humans until it is impossible to know who was

historical, who mythological. It contains fables, philosophical

dissertations, theological discussions; and it contains the Gila, its

brightest gem.

The Bhagavad Gita was written by one person. Scholars agree

that it came into existence between the fifth and second centuries

B.C. It is a conversation between Krishna and Arjuna. Krishna,

the hero of the Bhagavad Gita } and of the Mahabharata as well, is

worshipped in India as God; many Hindu homes and most Hindu

temples have statues or other likenesses of Lord Krishna. In the

story of Krishna’s life, legend competes with hazy prehistoric fact.

He was apparently the son of a king’s sister. Lest a rival for the

throne arise, the king had been killing all newborn royal children.

But God incarnated himself in the womb of the king’s sister, and

Krishna, having thus been born without the intervention of man,

was secretly transferred by divine hand to the family of a lowly

herdsman in place of its own infant daughter. As a child Krishna

miraculously defeated all the nether world’s efforts to destroy him.

Later he tended the cows with other youngsters. Once during a

flood he lifted up a mountain with his little finger and held it so

for seven days and nights that the people might save themselves

and their animals. Not suspecting his divinity, all the village

maidens loved him and he danced with them. Grown to young

manhood, Krishna killed his tyrant uncle and won renown

throughout the land. After many adventures, Krishna retired into

a forest where a hunter, mistaking him for a deer, shot an arrow

into his heel. As the huntsman drew near he recognized Krishna

and was stricken with grief, but Krishna smiled, blessed him and

died.

Krishna is Lord Krishna. ‘The representation of an individual

as identical with the Universal Self is familiar to Hindu thought’,

writes Sir Sarvepali Radhakrishnan, a Hindu philosopher and

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Oxford professor who also translated the Gita. ‘Krishna’, he says,

‘is the human embodiment of Vishnu’, the Supreme God.

The opening couplets of the Gita find Krishna on the battlefield

as the unarmed charioteer of Arjuna, chief warrior of a contending

faction. Opposite are Arjuna’s royal cousins arrayed for the

fratricidal fray. Arjuna says:

As I look upon these kinsmen, O Krishna, assembled here

eager to fight, my limbs fail, my mouth is parched, a tremor

shakes my frame and my hair stands on end.

Gandiva slips from my hand, my skin is on fire,

I cannot keep my feet, and my mind reels.

Gandiva is Arjuna’s bow.

I have unhappy forebodings, O Keshava,

and I see no good in slaying kinsmen in battle.

I seek not victory, nor sovereign power, nor earthly joys,

What good are sovereign power, worldly pleasures, and

even life to us, O Govinda?

Keshava and Govinda are among the many names of Lord

Krishna.

Rather than murder members of his own family, Arjuna would

let them kill him: ‘Happier far would it be for me if Dhritarash-

tra’s sons, weapons in hand, should strike me down on the battle¬

field, unresisting and unarmed.’

With a firm ‘I will not fight,’ Arjuna now stands speechless

awaiting Krishna’s reply. The Lord remonstrated:

Thou mournest for them whom thou shouldst not mourn,

and utterest vain words of wisdom. The wise mourn neither

for the living nor for the dead.

For never was I not, nor thou nor these kings; nor will

any of us cease to be hereafter.

The Atman or soul, Krishna explains, is external and unattain¬

able by man’s weapons of destruction. Galling the soul ‘This’,

Krishna says,

This is never born nor ever dies, nor having been will

ever not be any more; unborn, eternal, everlasting,

ancient, This is not slain when the body is slain . . .

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As a man casts off worn-out garments and takes others that

are new, even so the embodied one casts off worn-out

bodies and passes on to others new.

Here, succinctly, is the Hindu doctrine of the transmigration of

This, of Atman, the soul. Krishna adds:

This no weapons wound, This no fire burns; This no

waters wet, This no wind doth dry . . .

For certain is the death of the born, and certain is the

birth of the dead; therefore what is unavoidable thou

shouldst not regret.

Moreover, Krishna insists, Arjuna is a member of the Kshatriya

warrior caste, and therefore he must fight: ‘Again, seeing thine

own duty thou shouldst not shrink from it: for there is no higher

good for a Kshatriya than a righteous war. 5

Interpreting these texts literally, Orthodox Hindus regard the

Gita as the historic account of a battle in which one martial leader

sought to avoid bloodshed but was soon reminded by God of his

caste obligation to commit violence.

Gandhi, apostle of non-violence, obviously had to propound a

different version.

On first reading the Gita in .1888-89, Gandhi felt that it was

‘not a historical work’. Nor, he wrote later, is the Mahabharata.

The Gita is an allegory, Gandhi said. The battlefield is the human

soul wherein Arjuna, representing higher impulses, struggles

against evil. ‘Krishna’, according to Gandhi, ‘is the Dweller

within, ever whispering to a pure heart . . . Under the guise of

physical warfare’, Gandhi asserted, the Gita ‘described the duel

that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind . . . Physical

warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the

internal duel more alluring.’ Gandhi often questioned doctrinal,

and temporal, authority.

The Gita was Gandhi’s ‘spiritual reference book’, his daily

guide, It condemned inaction, and Gandhi always condemned

inaction. More important, it showed how to avoid the evils that

accompany action; this, Gandhi asserted, is die ‘central teaching

of the Gita\ Krishna says:

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Hold alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory

and defeat, and gird up thy loins for the fight; so

doing thou shalt not incur sin.

That is one facet of yoga: selflessness in action.

‘Act thou, O Dhananjaya [Arjuna], without attachment,

steadfast in Yoga, even-minded in success and failure. Even¬

mindedness is Yoga.’

Then has the yogi no reward? He has, Gandhi replies: ‘As a

matter of fact he who renounces reaps a thousandfold. The re¬

nunciation of the Gita is the acid test of faith. He who is ever

brooding over results often loses nerve in the performance of duty.

He becomes impatient and then gives vent to anger and begins

to do unworthy things; he jumps from action to action, never

remaining faithful to any. He who broods over results is like a

man given to objects of senses; he is ever distracted, he says good¬

bye to all scruples, everything is right in his estimation and he

therefore resorts to means fair and foul to attain his end.’ Renun¬

ciation gives one the inner peace, the spiritual poise, to achieve

results.

But Arjuna could renounce fruit and not hanker after fruit yet

obey Krishna and kill. This troubles Gandhi. ‘Let it be granted’,

he wrote in 1929 in an introduction to his Gujarati translation of

the Gita , ‘that according to the letter of the Gita it is possible to

say that warfare is consistent with renunciation of fruit. But after

forty years’ unremitting endeavour fully to enforce the teaching

of the Gita in my own life, I have, in all humility, felt that

perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observance

of ahimsa [non-violence] in every shape and form.’ Gandhi

decides that loyalty to the Gita entitles him to amend it. He

often refused to be bound by uncongenial texts, concepts and

situations.

The Gita says, in effect: since only the body dies and not This,

the soul, why not kill when it is your soldierly duty to do so?

Gandhi says: since we are all bits of God who is perfect, how can

we and why should we kill?

Apart from the summons to action, violent according to the

Gita and non-violent according to Gandhi, the core of the Gita

is the description of the man of action who renounces its fruits.

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Arjuna, still puzzled, asks for the distinguishing marks of the yogi.

c How does he talk? How sit? How move?’

Krishna says: ‘When a man puts away, O Partha, all the

cravings that arise in the mind and finds comfort for himself only

from Atman, then is he called the man of secure understanding/

Gandhi comments: ‘The pleasure I may derive from the pos¬

session of wealth, for instance, is delusive; real spiritual comfort

or bliss can be attained only if I rise superior to every temptation

even though troubled by poverty and hunger/

Krishna continues his definition of the Yogi:

Whose mind is untroubled in sorrow and longeth not for joys,

who is free from passion, fear and wrath — he is called the ascetic

of secure understanding.

The man who sheds all longing and moves without concern,

free from the sense of T and ‘Mine\* — he attains peace.

Yet a person might ‘draw in his senses from their objects’ and

‘starve his senses’ and nevertheless brood about them. In this

case, attachment returns; ‘attachment begets craving and craving

begets wrath’. Hence, Krishna teaches, ‘The Yogi should sit

intent on Me.’

‘This means’, Gandhi notes, ‘that without devotion and the

consequent grace of God, man’s endeavour is vain.’ Above all,

Gandhi says, there must be mental control, for a man might hold

his tongue yet swear mentally, or curb sex and crave it. Repression

is not enough. Repression must be without regrets; ultimately

repression should yield to sublimation.

‘He, O Arjuna,’ Krishna teaches, ‘who keeping all the senses

under control of the mind, engages the organs in Karma yoga,

without attachment — that man excels.’

Soon after reading the Gita , and especially in South Africa,

Gandhi began his strivings to become a Karma yogi. Later,

defining a Karma yogi, Gandhi wrote, ‘He will have no relish for

sensual pleasures and will keep himself occupied with such

activity as ennobles the soul. That is the path of action. Karma

yoga is the yoga [means] which will deliver the self [soul] from

the bondage of the body, and in it there is no room for self-

indulgence/

Krishna puts it in a nutshell couplet: ‘For me, O Partha, there

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is naught to do in the three worlds, nothing worth gaining that I

have not gained; yet I am ever in action.’

In a notable comment on the Gita , Gandhi further elucidates the

ideal man or the perfect Karma yogi: ‘He is a devotee who is

jealous of none, who is a fount of mercy, who is without egotism,

who is selfless, who treats alike cold and heat, happiness and

misery, who is ever forgiving, who is always contented, whose

resolutions are firm, who has dedicated mind and soul to God,

who causes no dread, who is not afraid of others, who is free from

exultation, sorrow and fear, who is pure, who is versed in action

yet remains unaffected by it, who renounces all fruit, good or bad,

who treats friend and foe alike, who is untouched by respect or

disrespect, who is not puffed up by praise, who does not go under

when people speak ill of him, who loves silence and solitude, who

has a disciplined reason. Such devotion is inconsistent with the

existence at the same time of strong attachments.’

The Gita defines detachment precisely:

Freedom from pride and pretentiousness; non-violence, for¬

giveness, uprightness, service of the Master, purity, steadfastness

self-restraint.

Aversion from sense-objects, absence of conceit, realization of

the painfulness and evil of birth, death, age and disease.

Absence of attachment, refusal to be wrapped up in one’s

children, wife, home and family, even-mindedness whether good

or evil befall. . . .

By practising these virtues, the yogi will achieve ‘union with the

Supreme’ or Brahman, ‘disunion from all union with pain’, and

‘an impartial eye, seeing Atman in all beings and all beings in

Atman’.

Gandhi summarized it in one word: ‘Desirelessness’.

Desirelessness in its manifold aspects became Gandhi’s goal and

it created innumerable problems for his wife and children, his

followers and himself.

But there is a unique reward. The great yogis, the Mahatmas

or ‘Great souls’, Krishna declares, ‘having come to Me, reach the

highest perfection; they come not again to birth, unlasting and

an abode of misery’. Thus the yogi’s highest recompense is to

become so firmly united with God that he need never again return

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to the status of migrating mortal man. Several times during his

life Gandhi expressed the hope not to be born anew.

In the end, having learned the art of yoga from Krishna, the

Supreme, who is ‘Master of Yoga’, Arjuna abandons doubt.

Now he understands the innermost secrets of action without

attachment. Now therefore he can act. ‘I will do thy bidding,’

he promises.

There are devout Hindus, and mystic Hindus, who sit and

meditate and fast and go naked and live in Himalayan caves.

But Gandhi aimed to be ever active, ever useful, and ever need¬

less. This was the realization he craved. Like everybody else,

Gandhi had attachments. He sought to slough them off.

Hindu detachment includes but also transcends unselfishness;

it connotes the religious goal of auto-disembodiment or non¬

violent self-effacement whereby the devotee discards his physical

being and becomes one with God. This is not death; it is Nirvana.

The attainment of Nirvana is a mystic process which eludes most

Western minds and is difficult of achievement even by Hindus

who assume, however, that mortals like Buddha and some

modern mystics have accomplished the transformation. Gandhi

did not accomplish it.

Gandhi did, however, achieve the status of yogi. A yogi may

be a man of contemplation, or he may be a man of action. Both

yogi and commissar may devote their lives to action. The

difference between them is in the quality and purpose of their acts

and the purpose of their lives.

The Gita concentrates attention on the purpose of life. In the

West a person may ponder the purpose of life after he has achieved

maturity and material success. A Hindu, if moved by the Gita ,

ponders the purpose of life when he is still on its threshold. Gandhi

was very much moved by the spirit of the Gita .

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