# Gandhi’s Thoughts About Bhagavad-gita

Hinduism encompasses many beliefs, theological, philosophical and ontological ideas that are shared across Asia and other religions. “Hinduism is considered to be a collection of religious beliefs that developed slowly over a long period of time and not one singular set of beliefs”. With such an extreme variety of beliefs, several diverse ethical and theological teachings exist. The Bhagavad-Gita (the Gita) is an integral Hindu text which contains several discussions on theological and ethical situations including war, dharma, karma and ahisma. The Gita is said to have had a profound impact on one of the most influential Hindus in history, Mahatma Gandhi, as he proclamed it to be the “eternal mother.” Both the Gita and Gandhi share similar views. At the core of both views is the ethical and practical way of achieving enlightenment and living our lives.

The Gita is an integral part of the Mahabharata. Richard Davis explains that the title, Bhagavad Gita, translated from Sanskrit to English, is The Song of God and should be considered one of the most important texts in eastern philosophy and theology. Much like other important Hindu texts, such as the Vedas and the Upanishads, the author of the Bhagavad-Gita is unknown, but credit is placed on the legendary figure of Vyasa. The book comprises seven-hundred verses of Sanskrit scripture that is framed as a narrative dialogue between Pandeva Prince Arjuna and his chariot driver and guide the God Krishna. The plot of the Gita is centred on a major battle fought between two cousins, the battle is said to be so large it contains

“The entire warrior class of India”. Moreover, Arjuna loses his will to fight and discusses with Krishna the act of war and morality of killing, in particular asking the question, 'How could we be happy by killing our own kinsmen?' At its core, the Bhagavad-Gita focuses on the spiritual teachings of Krishna and on the concept of dharma, which at the individual level is the moral order, duty, code of living and one’s individual purpose.

Arjuna argues for a non-violent approach, it is written that Arjuna is filled with great dismay that his own relatives are on both sides. Within the Gita, Krishna convinces Arjuna that his dharma is to be a warrior and he has to play that role. An important point that Krishna makes is in reference to Atman;

“…If you fight, you will either be slain on the battlefield and go to the celestial abodes, or you will gain victory and enjoy the kingdom on earth. Therefore, arise with determination, O son of Kunti, and be prepared to fight.”

With this argument, Krishna states that there is no act such as killing, as the Atman, will continue to live on. The Atman refers to the real self, the self beyond aesthetics and visuals, referring to the spirit being the real self and not the material being. Krishna’s argument to Arjuna centres around this idea, whether he lives or dies the outcome will be the same, the location will just be different. His Atman will either be free of his material body and enjoy the splendours of the afterlife or it will remain on the material plain and enjoy the splendours of the material world.

Furthermore, Arjuna would only be destroying the material body of his enemies and not their

Atman, meaning that he is not committing acts of murder because, the Atman of his enemies will not be destroyed.

This may suggest that the Gita is in favour of war and killing. However, the focus of this section of the Gita is not on the act of killing but on dharma. Arjunas purpose in life is to be a warrior and Krishna does not necessarily convince Arjuna to kill his kin, but to follow his purpose in life. Krishna states “considering your dharma, you should not vacillate. For a warrior, nothing is higher than a war against evil.” With that, the suggestion from these verses can be understood as violence or killing may be necessary if it is a part of a person’s dharma. Krishna goes on to warn Arjuna about the consequences of straying from his dharma, stating, “If, however, you refuse to fight this righteous war, abandoning your social duty and reputation, you will certainly incur sin.” However, the promotion of violence is dependent on how you read the Gita, literally or allegorically. The latter of which, as stated by Hector Avalos, is favoured by Mahatma Gandhi. The suggestion of an allegorical understanding of the text emerges from a line of the Gita which states the location of the battle is on the “field of dharma.”

Reading it allegorically, the ethical teaching of the text promotes the idea of fighting for the right cause, even when the people you love are against you.

Along with dharma the concept of Karma is raised. Karma simply means action and Karma Yoga refers to the right action according to one’s dharma. The third chapter of the Gita is centred entirely on this concept. Krishna, in this chapter, emphasises the importance of karma in life. What the Gita teachers is that in our material lives actions are unavoidable, but we are given a choice, as teacher of Vedic philosophy Acharya Das states we can either “act in a way that binds us to this material world or liberates us from it.” Moreover, the Gita states:

“You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions…. be steadfast in the performance of your duty, O Arjun, abandoning attachment to success and failure. Such equanimity is called Yoga.”

The teaching of Lord Krishna here is understanding that the effort in our actions is just as important as the result. With this in mind, one is only concerning themselves with their duty and not the result. If the result is not one which we expected, then it is the will of God and must be accepted.

There are, however, to a western audience, moments where the Gita appears to contradict itself. Lord Krishna even states that from him, emerge a variety of qualities including non-violence.

Which is a core concept to the Hindu religions. It is described as ahimsa, the ethical principle of not causing or wishing harm to living things. How can a book support both violence and non-violence? Professor of theology Jeffery D Long argues that questions like this are nothing more than a projection of our own contemporary cultural assumptions. Through a literal translation of the Gita one could argue that ahimsa is not a part of everyone’s dharma, but simply that ahimsa should be observed so long as it does not impede on one’s own personal dharma. Furthermore, Jeffery D Long argues that warfare in Hindu epic literature is strictly governed by a code of honour and purpose, dharma.

The Gita played a vital role in shaping the beliefs and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi describing

it as a “a voice that forever changes the way you understand things”. Arguably the biggest and most well-known of Gandhi’s teachings is Satyagraha, non-violent civil resistance and protest. Due to Gandhi’s non-violent teachings, many questions are raised about his relationship with the Gita, which is centred around a violent conflict. However, as stated above, Gandhi reads the Gita allegorically, as a literal meaning of the Gita creates several interpretations and “it was difficult to be pleased with any of them”. Further, Gandhi explained: “The fact is that a literal interpretation of the Gita lands one in a sea of contradiction. The letter truly killeth, the spirit giveth life”.

Gandhi understood that the conflict that Arjuna is a part of, against his relatives, stands as a symbol. Signifying the war that we face within ourselves, the battle of our purpose, character and state of mind.

Arguably the attribute that is most commonly associated with Gandhi is his belief in ahimsa, translated from Sanskrit to mean, non-violence. The doctrine of ahimsa that Gandhi believed was something he learned from the Gita, despite it being centred on a conflict. Gandhi argues “…to say that the Gita teacher’s violence or justifies war, because advice to kill was given on a particular occasion, is as wrong as to say Himsa is the Law of Life…” Gandhi would implement this belief into his future endeavours. To prove his point and spread his beliefs and teachings, Gandhi would rely on peaceful protest and boycotts throughout India. Additionally, he followed a strict vegetarian diet, believing non-violence should be implemented in all aspects of life.

Much like Lord Krishna, Gandhi believed that the action is just as important as the result. He states: “It may not be in your power, may not be in your time, that there'll be any fruit. But that doesn't mean you stop doing the right thing”. By believing the action is more important, one is concerning themselves with their duty as much as they are with the result. However, Gandhi argues that one’s duty contributes to the growth and prosperity of society and the individual, arguing that classic Hindu scripture must be interpreted as per the needs of the society.

Additionally, Gandhi interpreted dharma as a form of ethics stating “…as there can’t be an ideal higher than truth similarly there can’t be any duty higher than non-violence”. The highest ideal which Gandhi discovered through reading the Gita was anasakti, non-attachment. He believed that in every chapter, the concept of amasakti was discussed, stating:

The third, the fourth and the following fifth chapter should be read together, as they explain to uswhat the Yoga of selfless action (anasakti) is and what are the means of practising it..... The remaining chapters deal in detail with the ways and means of achieving anasakti.

The Gita’s teachings of both ahisma and anasakti for Gandhi culminated into his biggest weapon against colonialism, Satyagraha. This was his concept of non-violent civil resistance which involved, ahisma and seeking the truth through spirit and love. Fulfilling his dharma, contributing to the growth and prosperity of the wider society.

As mentioned, the Gita is a dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna which discusses many concepts that are integral to the Hindu faith, including, dharma, karma, and ahisma. moreover, the Gita is a text that contains several different meanings depending on your point of view. It is difficult for western society to read the Gita and gain a full understanding of its message as we project our own contemporary cultural assumptions onto it. However, the teachings of the Gita influenced one of the most profound figures in human history, Mahatma Gandhi. It is clear that

he thought very highly of the text which has shaped his views and teachings, in particular, his views on karma and ahisma. These views guided him towards his own concept, satyagraha, which was his main weapon against colonialism. All of his teachings, at their core, involve the practical way of achieving enlightenment and living our lives in peace.