religions

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Living the Bhagavad Gita at Gandhi's Ashrams

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Received: 16 October 2019; Accepted: 6 November 2019; Published: 8 November 2019

Abstract: The *Bhagavad Gita* is a philosophical Hindu scripture in which the god Krishna imparts lessons to the warrior prince Arjuna about sacred duty (*dharma*) and the path to spiritual liberation (*moksha*). This classical scripture has had a long and active interpretive life, and by the 19th century it had come to be regarded as a core text, if not the core text, of Hinduism. During the colonial period, interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita* considered the relevance of Krishna's lessons to Arjuna in the context of British colonial rule. While some Indians read a call to arms into their interpretation of this scripture and urged their fellow Indians to rise up in armed resistance, Gandhi famously read a nonviolent message into it. This article argues that equally as important as Gandhi's hermeneutics of nonviolence is his commitment to enacting the lessons of the *Bhagavad Gita* as he interpreted them in the daily life of his intentional communities. When explored through the lens of daily life in these intentional communities (which Gandhi called ashrams), we see that Gandhi's interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* emphasized not just nonviolence but also disciplined action, including self-sacrifice for the greater good.

Keywords: *Bhagavad Gita*; Mahatma Gandhi; ashram; intentional community

1. Introduction

In the introduction to Mahatma Gandhi's translation of and commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, he writes:

> It has been my endeavor, as also that of some companions, to reduce to practice the teaching of the Gita as I understood it. The Gita has become for us a spiritual reference book. I am aware that we ever fail to act in perfect accord with the teaching. The failure is not due to want of effort, but is in spite of it. Even through the failures we seem to see rays of hope. The accompanying rendering contains the meaning of the Gita message this little band is trying to enforce in daily conduct. (Gandhi 2000, p. 15)

Two things stand out in this passage: First, the emphasis Gandhi places on putting the *Bhagavad Gita* into practice in his daily life. Second, Gandhi's mention that this effort to reduce to practice the teachings of the *Gita* is not a solo project, but one that he is doing with some companions, his "little band" as he calls it.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a philosophical Hindu scripture in which the god Krishna imparts lessons to the warrior prince Arjuna about sacred duty (*dharma*) and the path to spiritual liberation (*moksha*). Their dialogue takes place in the middle of the Kurukshetra battlefield, with the Pandava and Kaurava armies lined up facing one another, ready to go to war over the throne of Hastinapura. Arjuna, a Pandava warrior, asks his charioteer Krishna to halt the chariot in the no man's land between the two armies, so that he may survey the situation. As Arjuna takes in this sight, looking at beloved friends and family drawn up on both sides of the battlefield, he experiences a dilemma. As a warrior, it is his duty to fight in this battle. But how can he, when it will mean slaying his own kin? Perhaps it is better to throw down his bow and arrow and renounce the world? The charioteer Krishna—who

eventually reveals himself to be the Supreme Lord, a god at once incarnate in human form and omnipotent—instructs Arjuna through a series of lessons in how to understand ultimate reality and his own sacred duty on the path to spiritual liberation.

The *Bhagavad Gita* means "Song of the Lord," and it is often referred to simply as the "*Gita*" in the Indian subcontinent. It dates to the classical period of Indian literature, sometime between the reign of the Mauryan king Ashoka (r. 269–232 BCE) and the Gupta dynasty (320–547 CE). The *Bhagavad Gita* is part of the sixth of 18 books that together comprise the much longer *Mahabharata* epic poem, though over the centuries it has frequently been excerpted from that epic and treated as a stand-alone scripture. As a religious text, the *Bhagavad Gita* has had a long and active life, which Richard H. Davis summarizes in his biography of the *Gita*: "Like many great religious works, the *Bhagavad Gita* has outlived its own time and place of composition. The work has lived a vivid and contentious existence over the centuries since, through readings and recitations, translations and commentaries that have reinscribed this classical Indian work into many new currents and disputes. Medieval Brahmin scholars and Krishna devotees, British colonial scholars, German romantics, globe-trotting Hindu gurus, Indian anticolonial freedom fighters, Western students, and spiritual seekers have all engaged in new dialogues with the *Gita*" (Davis 2015, p. 6).

Within the history of Hindu traditions there is a wealth of religious texts. However, by the 19th century the *Bhagavad Gita* had come to be regarded as a core text, if not *the* core text, of Hinduism. During the colonial period, interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita* considered the relevance of Krishna's lessons to Arjuna in the context of British colonial rule. In India, some prominent anticolonial activists, such as Lala Lajpat Rai, Aurobindo Ghose, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, turned to the *Bhagavad Gita* to make powerful arguments that just as Krishna urged Arjuna to fight in order to fulfill his sacred duty, so should colonial Indians rise up against the British in order to fulfill their own sacred duty.[1] Each of these interpretations shared in common the emphasis on *karma yoga*, the discipline (*yoga*) of action (*karma*), as opposed to the discipline of devotion (*bhakti yoga*) or the discipline of knowledge (*jnana yoga*). In so doing, they stressed the duty to act—and specifically, to fight—in a disciplined way for the greater good of the nation. Perhaps the most influential of these nationalist interpretations was the one offered by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who wrote a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* while he was imprisoned for sedition from 1908 to 1914 titled *Srimad Bhagavadgita Rahasya*. In this commentary, Tilak argued that it is the sacred duty of all Indian citizens to enlist in the battle against foreign occupation, endorsing armed insurrection against the British for all Hindus, not just those of the warrior or *kshatriya* caste (Davis 2015, pp. 131–32).

In this colonial context, Mohandas Karamchand ("Mahatma") Gandhi offered an alternate reading of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Most famously, Gandhi read a message of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) into the *Gita*, asserting—contrary to nationalists, such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak—that the discipline of action (*karma yoga*) taught by Krishna does not endorse violence (*himsa*). According to Gandhi, the war at the center of the text is not to be understood as describing a historical war from the past nor as endorsing violence in the present moment but should be understood allegorically. Thus, in the introduction to his Gujarati translation of and commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi writes: "Even in 1888–1889, when I first became acquainted with the Gita, I felt that it was not a historical work, but that, under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring. This preliminary intuition became more confirmed on a closer study of religion and the Gita" (Gandhi 2000, p. 16). Rather than endorsing military action, Gandhi instead understands *karma yoga* as the path of disciplined action in pursuit of self-realization. This path of disciplined action was one to adhere to in the course of everyday life; Gandhi discusses trying to implement the *Gita* in his own life, experimenting with it, failing occasionally, and trying to do better.

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[1] For an overview of anticolonial and pro-nationalist Indian interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, see Davis (2015, pp. 115–53).

While Gandhi's nonviolent interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* is indeed significant, equally as important as Gandhi's hermeneutics of nonviolence is his commitment to enacting the lessons of the *Bhagavad Gita* as he interpreted them in his daily communal life. For over 40 years, when Gandhi was not residing in prisons run by the British colonial government, he was living on back-to-the-land intentional communities that he founded in South Africa and India. The four primary intentional communities established by Gandhi include: Phoenix Settlement near Durban, South Africa; Tolstoy Farm near Johannesburg, South Africa; Sabarmati Ashram near Ahmedabad, India; and Sevagram Ashram, near Wardha, India. At these communities, which Gandhi first called settlements and eventually called *ashrams* as he realized they had overlapping political and spiritual goals, Gandhi and his co-residents engaged in small-scale experiments with the ideals and methods for enhancing life that Gandhi would then apply to larger-scale social, religious, and political problems.[2] It was at these ashrams that Gandhi and his "little band" of co-residents sought to enact the *Bhagavad Gita* in everyday life.

The vast majority of scholarship within the field of Gandhian studies has focused on Gandhi's political philosophy and legacy while the topic of life at his intentional communities has been overlooked.[3] Recently, however, scholars, such as Ajay Skaria and Karuna Mantena, have begun to recognize the importance of Gandhi's intentional communities to his political philosophy. Mantena characterizes Gandhian nonviolence as a form of political realism and argues that *satyagraha* (which she translates as "nonviolent action") is not simply an ethical stance but a self-limiting form of political action. She writes, "The novelty of Gandhian *satyagraha* (nonviolent action) lies in its *self-limiting* character; it is a form of action that seeks both to constrain the negative consequences of politics and work toward the reform of existing political relations and institutions" (Mantena 2012, p. 457). Although Mantena is primarily interested in Gandhi's politics in the public sphere, she importantly notes that Gandhi's politics of nonviolence—and specifically its self-limiting character—spanned across both public and private realms (including daily ashram life): "He devoted enormous energy to clarifying, calibrating, and outlining the exact conditions of disciplined *satyagraha*; indeed these searching examinations were a central feature of his voluminous writings (especially his in-house journals, *Navajivan*, *Young India*, and *Harijan*). These responses ranged very broadly, from detailing exacting rituals of daily self-discipline; differentiating retaliatory and productive forms of boycotts, strikes, and work stoppages; to distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate grievances of *satyagrahis* in prison" (Mantena 2012, p. 467).

Ajay Skaria turns his attention to Gandhi's intentional communities in greater detail, analyzing the politics therein and arguing that the ashrams present an alternative politics that seek to constitute the nation not through liberal modernity but instead through a politics of nonviolent neighborliness. He argues that whereas liberal politics produces a neutral shared space that seeks to transcend difference, Gandhi's neighborly nationalism instead acknowledges the difference between neighbors and seeks to create relations between them through *tapasya* or "suffering": "The *tapasya* of neighborliness differed depending on the kind of absolute difference being addressed: the equal was met with *mitrata* ('friendship'), the subordinate with *seva* ('service'), and the superior with *satyagraha* ('civil disobedience'). These practices of neighborliness sought to sustain a friendship with the world based on distinctive Gandhian notions of justice and equality" (Skaria 2002, p. 957). Commenting further on the role of discipline in Gandhi's neighborly nationalism, Skaria importantly notes its "extraordinary everydayness": "For what strikes the reader of Gandhi (and what caused much frustration among mainstream nationalists, who complained about his lack of a sense of priorities) is that the politics

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[2] For more on Gandhi's intentional communities, and particularly the evolution of Gandhi's conceptualization of them as ashrams dedicated to the pursuit of *sarvodaya*, or universal well-being, see McLain (2019).

[3] Early exceptions in the field of Gandhian studies that paid attention to the intentional communities include Fox (1989) and Thomson (1993).

of neighborliness is worked out in myriad singular situations, some of extremely local concern. The politics of neighborliness was nothing if not about everyday life" (Skaria 2002, p. 983).

My argument in this essay is twofold. First, that Gandhi's interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* emphasized not just nonviolence, but disciplined action including self-sacrifice. For Mahatma Gandhi, the *Gita* was first and foremost a text to live by, and this text was the primary source of his emphasis on self-discipline in everyday life—which then became a key element of Gandhi's politics as both Skaria and Mantena have argued. Second, that the four primary intentional communities founded by Gandhi were the crucial environment for Gandhi's articulation and enactment of his interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

2. South Africa: Beginning to Live the Bhagavad Gita in Community

In his introduction to his translation of and commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi states that he has been trying to enforce the meaning of the *Gita* in his own conduct for "an unbroken period of forty years" (Gandhi 2000, p. 16). Although Gandhi was born into a devout Vaishnava Hindu family, he was not particularly well-versed in Hindu scripture as a young man.[4] Thus, it was in London, in 1888–1889, while Gandhi was studying law that he first began to reflect on the *Gita*, reading this and other scripture with theosophist friends, and experimenting a good deal with his lifestyle. He confesses in his autobiography that though he read the *Gita* with these friends in London when he was 19 or 20 years old, it did not become a book of daily reading until later in his life (Gandhi 1993, p. 67). Nonetheless, at this young age, he was significantly impacted by the *Bhagavad Gita*, among several other texts. He writes, "My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the *Gita*, *The Light of Asia*, and the Sermon on the Mount. That renunciation was the highest form of religion appealed to me greatly" (Gandhi 1993, p. 69). He began at this time to think about living a simple lifestyle: Reducing the amount of money he spent on food, committing to vegetarianism, and eliminating many of the so-called necessities of Victorian living in London.

After Gandhi passed the bar, he returned briefly to India and then moved to South Africa in 1893 to begin his career as a lawyer. There in South Africa, Gandhi continued to read influential texts from a variety of genres and to experiment with his lifestyle.[5] Some of these texts were religious, including continued study of the *Bhagavad Gita* as well as other Hindu and Christian scripture. In his first year in South Africa, Gandhi interacted closely with Albert Baker, an attorney by profession who was also a Christian preacher and served as director of the South African General Mission. Mr. Baker introduced Gandhi to many other evangelical Christians. Gandhi met with them weekly in 1893 to 1894 and together they had numerous conversations about Christian and Hindu belief and practice. These conversations prompted Gandhi to ask a series of questions about Hinduism more generally and the *Bhagavad Gita* in particular. Seeking greater clarity about his own faith, Gandhi turned to his friend and mentor Raychand in India, writing him a lengthy letter in June 1894. This letter is significant for it reveals Gandhi's early questions about the *Bhagavad Gita* at this stage in his life and allows us to see how Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gita* enfolds during and after his time in South Africa. It also allows us to see how Gandhi begins to enact the lessons of the *Bhagavad Gita* as he understands them in communities in South Africa.

Raj Chandra Mehta (1867–1901), better known as Raychand (or Raychandbhai), came from a jewel merchant family in Gujarat, India, but he was also known for his philosophical thinking and poetry. Gandhi first met Raychand in Mumbai in 1891 and was impressed with "his wide knowledge of the scriptures, his spotless character, and his burning passion for self-realization" (Gandhi 1993, p. 88). Raychand was born to a Hindu father and a Jain mother, and was well-versed in the scriptures and

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[4] For more on Gandhi's religious upbringing and religious exploration in his early years, see Jordens (1998, pp. 19–46).
[5] For more on the significance of Gandhi's 21 years in South Africa, see Guha (2014).

tenets of both Hinduism and Jainism. Gandhi describes in his autobiography how he came to view Raychand as his spiritual guide:

> I was but a briefless barrister then, and yet whenever I saw him he would engage me in conversation of a seriously religious nature. Though I was then groping and could not be said to have any serious interest in religious discussion, still I found his talk of absorbing interest. I have since met many a religious leader or teacher. I have tried to meet the heads of various faiths, and I must say that no one else has ever made on me the impression that Raychandbhai did. His words went straight home to me. His intellect compelled as great a regard from me as his moral earnestness, and deep down in me was the conviction that he would never willingly lead me astray and would always confide to me his innermost thoughts. In my moments of spiritual crisis, therefore, he was my refuge. (Gandhi 1993, p. 89)[6]

Thus, in June 1894, it was Raychand to whom Gandhi turned for guidance about Hinduism in light of his conversations with his Christian friends in South Africa. In his lengthy letter, Gandhi asked Raychand a series of 27 questions about religious matters. Many of these questions sought clarity on essential beliefs of both Hinduism and Christianity. For instance, Gandhi asks Raychand to define what God is, to discuss the nature of rebirth and spiritual liberation, and to answer whether any one religion is the best (Jordens 1998, pp. 49–53). Gandhi also asks Raychand for particular insight in understanding the *Bhagavad Gita*, including the following questions:

- "Who is the author of the *Gita*? Is God its author? Is there any evidence that He is?"
- "Rama and Krishna are described as incarnations of God. What does that mean? Were they God Himself or only a part of Him? Can we attain salvation through faith in them?"
- "Who were Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva?" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 1, pp. 127–28)

Gandhi's final question to Raychand in this letter is an inquiry about *ahimsa*, or nonviolence. Gandhi asks: "If a snake is about to bite me, should I allow myself to be bitten or should I kill it, supposing that that is the only way in which I can save myself?" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 1, p. 128). This question may seem out of place when compared with the previous 26 questions, all of which are theological. However, it demonstrates Gandhi's interest in going beyond interpreting the *Bhagavad Gita* on a philosophical level, and moving toward implementing its lessons in his daily life. If a key message of the *Gita* as Gandhi understood it was nonviolence, then how do you enact *ahimsa* in your daily life? Here, we see Gandhi thinking about the morality of killing, not only with regard to humans but also with regard to animals. Gandhi was already a committed vegetarian and did not believe it was moral to kill animals for sustenance.[7] But here, he asks, what about killing animals for self-defense? This question was not only a moral exercise, for snakes were not uncommon in the context of rural South Africa or India.

Raychand replied to Gandhi in October, and their conversation continued via an exchange of letters in 1895 to 1896. In his reply, Raychand focused at length on the nature of the self (*atman*) and the goal of attaining self-realization (Jordens 1998, pp. 53–60). Raychand also more briefly addressed Gandhi's other questions. In response to the question about killing snakes, Raychand replied that while killing the snake is not acceptable, for one should adhere firmly to nonviolence, "one hesitates to advise you that you should let the snake bite you" for only those individuals who are already filled with the desire for spiritual well-being could be advised to let the snake kill (Jordens 1998, p. 59). That is, only a person well on the path toward spiritual liberation and fully committed to nonviolence could refrain from harming the snake.

Gandhi notes in his autobiography that in addition to the *Bhagavad Gita*, three modern thinkers also left a deep impression on him: "Raychandbhai by his living contact; Tolstoy by his book, *The Kingdom*

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[6] For more on Raychand and Gandhi's relationship with him, see Gandhi (2015, vol. 32, pp. 1–13).
[7] On Gandhi's diet, see Slate (2019).

of God is Within You; and Ruskin by his *Unto This Last*" (Gandhi 1993, p. 90). While living in South Africa, Gandhi worked to converge all of these influences together: The *Bhagavad Gita*, Raychand, Tolstoy, and Ruskin. This convergence incorporated the philosophical realm of ideas about living a moral life, the theological realm of ideas about attaining spiritual liberation, and the political realm of ideas about gaining civil rights for Indians living under colonial rule. Significantly, this convergence was acted out in Gandhi's residential experiments, beginning with the intentional communities he founded in South Africa.

Gandhi first read Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You* in 1893 to 1894. He notes in his autobiography that his Quaker friend Michael Coates (whom he met through Albert Baker) loaned Gandhi many books on Christianity. Of all of them, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* most impressed Gandhi, who writes: "Before the independent thinking, profound morality, and the truthfulness of this book, all the books given me by Mr. Coates seemed to pale into insignificance" (Gandhi 1993, pp. 137–38). Gandhi particularly appreciated Tolstoy's rejection of church rituals and miracles, and endorsed Tolstoy's emphasis on living a nonviolent and moral life in the here and now rather than focusing on an afterlife. Gandhi and Tolstoy later exchanged correspondence in 1909 to 1910 (prior to Tolstoy's death in November 1910) about their mutual interests in nonviolent civil resistance and living a simple lifestyle in community, and Gandhi sent Tolstoy an English translation of his 1909 treatise *Hind Swaraj* (*Indian Home Rule*).

Gandhi read John Ruskin's essay *Unto This Last* in October 1904, when his Jewish friend Henry Polak gave him a copy.[8] Gandhi read the essay on the overnight train from Johannesburg to Durban, and was so influenced by it that he immediately decided to change his life in accordance with its ideals (Gandhi 1993, p. 298). These ideals Gandhi summed up as the following three points:

1. That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all.
2. That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work.
3. That a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, is the life worth living. (Gandhi 1993, p. 299; also Gandhi 1956).

Gandhi notes in his autobiography that the first point he knew already from his previous study of various texts, and the second point he had dimly realized. But the third point "had never occurred to me. *Unto This Last* made it as clear as daylight for me that the second and the third were contained in the first. I arose with the dawn, ready to reduce these principles to practice" (Gandhi 1993, p. 299).

In the weeks following that fateful train ride, Gandhi sprang into action and founded his first intentional community, called Phoenix Settlement, in 1904. At this time, he was still working as a lawyer in South Africa and pursuing civil rights for the resident Indian community. He had also established a weekly newspaper called *Indian Opinion*, and now decided to move the printing press to a remote location outside Durban, where he and a cohort of like-minded friends—friends from both Indian and European heritages[9]—would live and work together: Growing their own produce, building their own houses, educating their children, and printing the weekly newspaper. Gandhi founded his second intentional community, Tolstoy Farm, in 1910. This second community was located in a rural area outside of Johannesburg so that Gandhi and his co-residents could be within a day's commute of the courthouse and prison as their campaign for civil rights for the Indian community mounted.

It was here at these first two intentional communities that Gandhi sought to put into practice in his daily life, and in the life of the residential community, the *Bhagavad Gita*'s path of *karma yoga*—disciplined action in pursuit of self-realization. To return to Gandhi's question about the morality of killing snakes,

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[8] For more on the relationship between Gandhi and Polak, see Weber (2004, pp. 54–68).

[9] But for an important critique of Gandhi's vision of Phoenix as "conspicuous in its exclusion of Africans," see Desai and Vahed (2016, p. 46). For more on the creation of Phoenix Settlement from the perspective of Gandhi's friend Albert West, who was a founding member of the settlement and editor of *Indian Opinion*, see West (1965).

Gandhi and his friend Hermann Kallenbach debated this subject during their time living together at Tolstoy Farm. Kallenbach was an architect by profession, and a member of the Jewish community in South Africa. It was Kallenbach who donated the 1000-acre farmland for Tolstoy Farm.[10] Describing their time together on the farm, Gandhi writes in *Satyagraha in South Africa*:

> Mr. Kallenbach and I had frequent talks on religion, which usually centred on fundamentals like non-violence or love, truth and the like. When I said that it was a sin to kill snakes and such other animals, Mr. Kallenbach was shocked to hear it as well as my numerous other European friends. But in the end he admitted the truth of that principle in the abstract. At the very beginning of my intercourse with him, Mr. Kallenbach had seen the propriety and the duty of carrying out in practice every principle of which he was convinced intellectually, and therefore he had been able to effect momentous changes in his life without a moment's hesitation. Now if it was improper to kill serpents and the like, we must cultivate their friendship, thought Mr. Kallenbach. He therefore first collected books on snakes in order to identify different species of reptiles. He there read that not all snakes are poisonous and some of them actually serve as protectors of field-crops. He taught us all to recognize different kinds of snakes and at last tamed a huge cobra which was found on the Farm. Mr. Kallenbach fed it every day with his own hands. (Gandhi 1928, p. 229)

Here, we gain insight into one of the ways in which Gandhi sought to put into practice in his daily life at Tolstoy Farm the principles of the *Bhagavad Gita* as he understood them. In keeping with Raychand's earlier advice, Gandhi notes that even as they tried to avoid harming snakes at Tolstoy Farm, there was not a strict prohibition against killing them:

> As a result of these experiments we did not fear snakes as much as we otherwise might have, but it must not be supposed that no one on the Farm feared serpents or that there was a total prohibition against killing them. To have a conviction that there is violence or sin in a certain course of conduct is one thing; to have the power of acting upon that conviction is quite another. A person who fears snakes and who is not ready to resign his own life cannot avoid killing snakes in case of emergency. (Gandhi 1928, p. 230)

I highlight this discussion about snakes at some length because it demonstrates not only Gandhi's emphasis on nonviolence in his early efforts to enact the lessons of the *Bhagavad Gita* in his daily life and in the lives of those with whom he lived in community, but it also demonstrates Gandhi's emphasis on the need for disciplined action and—in some situations, even self-sacrifice—in the pursuit of self-realization. While not everyone may be ready to sacrifice their life in order to refrain from killing a poisonous snake, the person who is fully committed to disciplined and nonviolent action on the path to spiritual liberation would willingly make this sacrifice.

Gandhi's interpretation of *karma yoga* was influenced by his reading of Tolstoy and Ruskin, his correspondence with Raychand, and his conversations with his fellow co-residents, and it evolved over time. At Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm, Gandhi was initially focused on dividing the farming and printing press labor equally to live a life of self-sufficiency, simplicity, and equality. Gradually, Gandhi added concepts, such as *aparigraha* (non-grasping or non-possessing), *samabhava* (equability), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and *satyagraha* (holding onto truth, often in the form of nonviolent civil resistance), to his practice of *karma yoga*.

Gandhi describes how he delved deeper into his study of the *Bhagavad Gita* in South Africa through memorizing daily verses and incorporating their study into his daily morning hygienic routine:

> I had one or two translations, by means of which I tried to understand the original Sanskrit. I decided also to get by heart one or two verses every day. For this purpose I employed the

[10] For more on the relationship between Gandhi and Kallenbach, see Weber (2004, pp. 69–83) and Lev (2012).

> time of my morning ablutions. The operation took me thirty-five minutes, fifteen minutes for the tooth brush and twenty for the bath. The first I used to do standing in western fashion. So on the wall opposite I stuck slips of paper on which were written the *Gita* verses and referred to them now and then to help my memory. This time was found sufficient for memorizing the daily portion and recalling the verses already learnt. I remember having thus committed to memory thirteen chapters. (Gandhi 2015, vol. 39, p. 211)

Through this daily immersion in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi began to turn to this text as his "dictionary of daily reference" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 39, p. 211) for his conduct. In particular, he began to think about how to put into practice on his path of *karma yoga* concepts, such as *aparigraha* (non-possession) and *samabhava* (equability). He asked himself a series of questions about the application of these two concepts in his life and the life of the community:

> How was one to treat alike insulting, insolent and corrupt officials, co-workers of yesterday raising meaningless opposition, and men who had always been good to one? How was one to divest oneself of all possessions? Was not the body itself possession enough? Were not wife and children possessions? Was I to destroy all the cupboards of books I had? Was I to give up all I had and follow Him? Straight came the answer: I could not follow Him unless I gave up all I had. (Gandhi 2015, vol. 39, p. 212)

One of the first steps Gandhi took to implement *aparigraha* in his life was to release a life insurance policy he held and to place Phoenix Settlement into trusteeship. "I understood the *Gita* teaching of non-possession to mean that those who desired salvation should act like a trustee who, though having control over great possessions, regards not an iota of them as his own" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 39, p. 212). The decision to release his life insurance policy and designate any future income for the benefit of the community rather than his personal family was not supported by Gandhi's elder brother, but Gandhi went ahead anyway, viewing it as his sacred duty based on his reading of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Gandhi's continued thoughts about enacting non-possession (*aparigraha*) and equability (*samabhava*) led him to undertake a vow of celibacy, or *brahmacharya*, in 1906 as the next step in his effort to put into practice the path of *karma yoga*. Gandhi writes, "the idea flashed upon me that if I wanted to devote myself to the service of the community, I must relinquish the desire for children and wealth and live the life of a *vanaprastha* [renouncer]" (Gandhi 1993, p. 206). Although Gandhi would remain married to his wife, Kasturba, he endeavored to adhere to his vow of celibacy from 1906 until his death in 1948. In taking this vow, he had two interrelated goals: First, the pursuit of spiritual liberation, *moksha*. Celibacy is a traditional means undertaken by Hindu renouncers to lessen attachments to householder life. Second, the pursuit of communal equality at Phoenix Settlement. Through this vow, Gandhi sought to renounce any claim of possession of wife and children, and to more fully treat every co-resident as an equal, without privileging his wife or his four sons.

Shortly after taking his vow of celibacy at Phoenix Settlement, Gandhi also began to link his interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* explicitly with *satyagraha*, his method of nonviolent civil disobedience. In his autobiography, Gandhi writes that just a month after taking the vow of celibacy, "the foundation of *satyagraha* was laid. As though unknown to me the *brahmacharya* vow had been preparing me for it. *Satyagraha* . . . came on spontaneously, without my having willed it. But I could see that all my previous steps had led up to that goal" (Gandhi 1993, p. 208).[11] In 1906, the same year that Gandhi took this vow of celibacy, he began to actively protest British colonial rule through *satyagraha*. That year, the Draft Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance, commonly known as the "Black Act," became law. This legislation required all Indians to register with the Transvaal government, including fingerprinting and body stripping to identify birthmarks. Gandhi viewed this law as discriminatory and humiliating, and

[11] On the relationship between Gandhi's celibacy and his activism, see Howard (2013) and Alter (2000).

began organizing his fellow Indians to protest. In September 1906, Gandhi called upon his co-residents to resist the Black Act and to suffer any punishments for doing so. As their *satyagraha* campaign against this law mounted, so did the number of protestors sent to prison in Johannesburg, necessitating the founding of Tolstoy Farm as Gandhi's second intentional community.

Gandhi was first sent to jail for his own resistance against the Black Act on 10 January 1908, when he received a two-month sentence for refusing to carry the requisite identity card. In jail, Gandhi continued to study the *Bhagavad Gita* and encouraged others to do so. He was permitted to bring his own copy of the *Gita* so that he could read it every morning (Gandhi 2015, vol. 8, p. 159). He wrote letters from his jail cell to his family members and co-residents, encouraging them to read the *Gita*, memorize its verses, and prepare to undergo hardships. When Gandhi and his fellow satyagrahis were released from prison early, prior to the end of Gandhi's two-month sentence, Gandhi wrote in *Indian Opinion* on 8 February 1908 that the early release of the Indian prisoners was a "triumph of truth" and indicated that the Black Act was about to be overturned. He opened this essay by quoting the *Bhagavad Gita* (verse 2.38), and then referenced this verse in the body of his essay, writing about the need to fight on with a calm mind: "He who fights in this manner will fight only in the name of God. He will give no thought to success or failure. He is pledged only to the great task of serving Truth, doing his duty in the name of God. The outcome itself is in the hands of the Lord Almighty" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 8, p. 61). But, Gandhi continues, this victory for truth demonstrates the key condition necessary for *satyagraha* to be effective: "We should be prepared collectively to accept hardships" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 8, p. 62).

Gandhi paid for the printing and distribution of copies of the *Bhagavad Gita* during these years in South Africa[12], and each time he was jailed for civil disobedience he engaged in further study of the *Gita*, seeking to put it increasingly into practice in the daily life at his intentional communities. As Gandhi and his co-residents battled for civil rights for the Indian community, Gandhi wrote repeatedly to his family, friends, and co-residents about the need to not only study the *Bhagavad Gita* but to put it into practice and to prepare to undergo necessary hardships—as he emphasizes in this letter to Narandas Gandhi from 1910:

> Do you know the fundamental principles of our religion? You will, perhaps, say that you are able to recite the whole of the *Gita* and also know its meaning and wonder why I am asking you about fundamental principles. Knowing the fundamentals, as I interpret it, means putting them into practice. The first attribute of the divine heritage is "fearlessness." I hope you remember that verse. Have you attained to the state of "fearlessness" to any extent? Will you do what is right fearlessly, even at the cost of your life? (Gandhi 2015, vol. 10, p. 198)

The *Bhagavad Gita*'s path of *karma yoga*, as Gandhi came to understand it in South Africa, entailed a willingness to undergo suffering in order to rise up in nonviolent action for the betterment of the community, whether that be the micro-community living at Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm, or the macro-community of Indians living in South Africa and India under colonial rule. These intentional communities were the crucial arena within which Gandhi practiced enacting the path of *karma yoga*, and Gandhi came to believe that without these micro-communities of co-residents living according to the ideals of the *Bhagavad Gita*, his political efforts for Indian civil rights in South Africa would not have attained the successes that they did. After eight years of civil resistance, the Smuts–Gandhi agreement was reached in 1914 and the Indian Relief Act was passed, providing some amelioration of previous laws that discriminated against Indians in South Africa. Reflecting on this political triumph, Gandhi wrote:

> Tolstoy Farm proved to be a centre of spiritual purification and penance for the final campaign [against the Black Act]. I have serious doubts as to whether the struggle could have been

[12] On Gandhi's printing and distribution of Annie Besant's Theosophist translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* in South Africa, see Gandhi (2015, vol. 4, p. 429) and Hofmeyr (2013, pp. 104–5).

> prosecuted for eight years, whether we could have secured larger funds, and whether the thousands of men who participated in the last phase of the struggle would have borne their share in it, if there had been no Tolstoy Farm. . . . The Indians saw that the Tolstoy Farmers were doing what they themselves were not prepared to do and what they looked upon in the light of hardship. (Gandhi 1928, pp. 235–36)

Gandhi would carry this belief with him as he returned to India that it took a community of people disciplined in the *Gita*'s path of *karma yoga* and willing to undergo voluntary sacrifice in order to achieve political victory against colonial injustice.

3. India: Living the Bhagavad Gita in Community for the Nation

In 1915, Gandhi returned to India. He spent his first six months there traveling to reacquaint himself with the condition of his home country. Then, he settled down, founding his third intentional community, Sabarmati Ashram, on 25 May 1915 on the banks of the Sabarmati River outside Ahmedabad. At its founding, Gandhi and his compatriots articulated a formal mission statement, which declared: "The object of this Ashram is that its members should qualify themselves for, and make a consistent endeavor towards, the service of the country, not inconsistent with universal welfare [*sarvodaya*]" (Gandhi 1955, p. 65). As this mission statement indicates, here, at his third ashram, Gandhi was now ready to enact the path of *karma yoga* systematically, both in the life of his intentional community and on a much larger political scale than that seen in South Africa, with the twofold goals of attaining political rights for Indian citizens and spiritual growth leading toward universal wellbeing for himself and other ashram residents.

To pursue this path of disciplined action, Gandhi and the founding members of Sabarmati Ashram enumerated 11 observances as essential to enforce in daily community life:

1. Truth;
2. Nonviolence;
3. Celibacy;
4. Control of the palate;
5. Non-stealing;
6. Non-possession;
7. Physical labor;
8. Economic independence;
9. Fearlessness;
10. Removal of untouchability; and
11. Tolerance (Gandhi 1955, pp. 65–69).

They also specified the daily routine, building the recitation of passages from the *Bhagavad Gita* into the mandatory morning (5:00–5:30 a.m.) and evening (6:30–7:00 p.m.) prayer sessions.

During his years at Sabarmati Ashram, Gandhi was deeply immersed in his continuing study of the *Bhagavad Gita*. In the face of Bal Gangadhar Tilak's increasingly popular interpretation of the *Gita* that endorsed armed insurrection against the British, Gandhi continued to insist upon a nonviolent message and an allegorical interpretation of the battle. But Gandhi also urged his fellow co-residents to study the verses of the *Gita* and to meditate upon their meaning, insisting that you can get all the wisdom needed for answers to daily questions and quandaries therein.[13] In January of 1926, Gandhi announced in his periodical *Young India* that he was taking a year-long sabbatical from public work, and would remain fully at Sabarmati Ashram until 20 December. Gandhi described this sabbatical as "both

[13] In his correspondence with friends and family from his base at Sabarmati Ashram, Gandhi regularly gave this advice to meditate on the *Gita* for answers to daily concerns. See, for example, "A Teacher's Questions" in Gandhi (2015, vol. 30, p. 322).

an indulgence and a self-denial. It is an indulgence because I hope to fulfil the long-cherished desire of being in the midst of the boys and girls and the fellow-workers of the Ashram. It is a self-denial because it was a pleasure to me to be with so many friends in different provinces and be the recipient of the affection of the masses" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 29, p. 382). In this sabbatical year, Gandhi intensified his study of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and its enactment in the ashram community.

Gandhi studied multiple translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* during this year as he worked to create his own translation of the text into his native Gujarati language. He revisited Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Srimad Bhagavadgita Rahasya* translation, which he had previously read during a period of imprisonment in the early 1920s (Gandhi 2000, p. 14). He read Lala Lajpat Rai's essay on the message of the *Gita* (Gandhi 2015, vol. 31, p. 396). He also wrote to friends in London in March 1926, asking them to mail him Henry Polak's collation of various English translations of the *Gita*, so that Gandhi could hand copy the work and then return it. During their time together in South Africa, Gandhi and Henry had together compiled this collation, but Gandhi had misplaced his own edition and now wanted to reference it (Gandhi 2015, vol. 30, pp. 140, 529, vol. 31, p. 465).

During this year of serious study of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi gave daily talks at Sabarmati Ashram on the content and meaning of the *Gita* after the morning prayer session from 24 February until 27 November. Gandhi's secretary, Mahadev Desai, along with another ashram resident named Punjabhai, wrote down these talks. This compilation would later be published, with an additional introductory essay, as *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*.[14] In a letter to his friend Hermann Kallenbach in South Africa dated 29 July 1926, Gandhi succinctly describes what his daily life is like at this midway point in his sabbatical year, and includes the mention of teaching three classes a day on the *Gita* at the ashram to residents and to students from the nearby Gujarat Vidyapith, the national college that Gandhi had founded in Ahmedabad in 1920:

> I am immersed in my own work. At the present moment it is all in the Ashram and about the Ashram. I take [teach] three classes daily on *Bhagavad Gita* and *Ramayana*. The work pleases me. Spinning, of course, is done with religious punctuality and the balance of the time is used to editing the two papers and attending to correspondents. We have now established a council for the management of the Ashram. This takes up a vast amount of time. (Gandhi 2015, vol. 31, p. 224)

In Gandhi's commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* from this period, he repeatedly emphasizes *ahimsa*, nonviolence, as a key ethical lesson of the scripture. For instance, he insists that when Krishna tells Arjuna to fight, the intent is not that Arjuna should wage a literal battle on a battlefield, but rather that he should fight and struggle to do his sacred duty, which is to battle against the demoniac side and to bring forward the divine side that is within each of us (Gandhi 2000, pp. 73, 115). Commenting on verse 13.1, Gandhi also insists that the battlefield is not a geographical site but is the perpetual battle between good and evil that takes place within each of us: "Pandavas and Kauravas, that is, divine and demoniacal impulses, were fighting in this body, and God was watching the fight from a distance. Please do not believe that this is the history of a battle which took place on a little field near Hastinapur. The war is still going on" (Gandhi 2000, p. 182).

Gandhi also interprets this lesson of nonviolence in the context of daily ashram life. When he learns that some of the ashram youth had killed a snake, Gandhi directs his commentary on chapter 7 of the *Bhagavad Gita* to this incident, stating:

> This is a difficult matter. We may catch a snake and remove it, but we should do so gently. We should not inflict pain on it. We should think on this matter not because someone wants us to do so, but because we want to put the teaching of the Gita into practice … Do not

[14] First published in its entirety in Gujarati in 1955 but published in serial form in Gandhi's periodicals in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Gandhi 2000, p. 10).

> tell yourselves that you will think about these matters when you have white hair on your heads. You must make the best use of your youth right now. As Lord Krishna said, among thousands only one person strives for self-realization, that is, for self-purification, and among the thousands who strive only a rare person comes to a right knowledge of Him. Hence we should strive hard and long. (Gandhi 2000, pp. 129–30)

Similarly, when Gandhi later learns that one of the ashram boys had beaten a dog with a cricket bat, Gandhi incorporates his admonition of this violent act into his commentary on chapter 12 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, pausing at the statement in verse 12.13 about the devotee dearest to Krishna who "has ill will towards none" to insert his reprimand:

> Friendship can exist only between equals, but one should feel compassion towards all. We cannot throw a cricket bat at a dog to hit it. How would we feel if our parents or teachers did that to us? Even if we are obedient sons of our parents, how would we feel towards them if they threw a bat at us to hit us? We shall not discuss here what our duty towards a dog is. It is certain, however, that it is not right for us to hit one. Forgiveness lies in not being angry even with a dog which may have bitten us. "Tit for tat" is a wrong principle. It is certainly not based on forgiveness. What can we gain by being wicked with the wicked? The good lies only in our showing love and compassion even for such persons. (Gandhi 2000, pp. 179–80)

Throughout his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi emphasizes the need for not only nonviolence and compassion but also discipline in daily life, and he speaks specifically to his audience of fellow ashram residents. He stresses daily discipline in the form of physical work, such as cleaning the lavatory and time spent at the spinning wheel, as well as practicing diet control, celibacy, and meditating upon scripture. After translating verse 2.69, which states "When it is night for all other beings, the disciplined soul is awake," Gandhi comments:

> This should be the ideal for the [Sabarmati] Ashram. Let us pray that we may see light when all around us there is darkness. If we are brave, the whole world will be brave. As in our body, so in the universe—that is how we should feel. We should thus be ready to take upon ourselves the burden of the whole world; but we can bear the burden only if we mean by it doing voluntary suffering on behalf of the entire world. We shall then see light where others see nothing but darkness. Let others think that the spinning wheel is useless, and believe that we cannot win liberty by keeping fasts. We should tell them that we are sure we shall get it. (Gandhi 2000, p. 56)

Here, Gandhi emphasizes to the ashram community the need for voluntary suffering on behalf of the nation of India and the larger world beyond. He expands upon this elsewhere in his commentary on the *Gita* when discussing *yajna*, which is typically understood to refer to the Hindu ritual sacrifice that is offered upon a fire altar. Gandhi instead comments in response to the mention of *yajna* in verse 3.9 of the *Gita*:

> We accept a broad definition of *yajna*. *Yajna* means any activity for the good of others. A man works for the good of others when he spends his body in their service. This should be done in a spirit of dedication to God. The word *yajna* comes from the root *yaj*, which means "to worship," and we please God by worshipping Him through physical labor. (Gandhi 2000, p. 63)

Gandhi is well aware that he is broadening significantly the definition of *yajna* when he redefines it as a sacrifice of physical activity done for the good of others; indeed, he states, with reference to Vyasa as the legendary composer of the *Mahabharata* epic, "There is no harm in our enlarging the meaning of the word *yajna*, even if the new meaning we attach to the term was never in Vyasa's mind. We shall do no injustice to Vyasa by expanding the meaning of his words. Sons should enrich the legacy of their

fathers" (Gandhi 2000, pp. 63–64). Gandhi returns to this theme of disciplined labor done in the service of others repeatedly in his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*. In chapter five, he comments that *karma yoga* is the path of service to others, and that it is a path that anyone may choose to follow (Gandhi 2000, p. 103). This service is even better when it is offered beyond one's circle of individuals personally known; it should ideally benefit the nation and ultimately the whole world (Gandhi 2000, pp. 65, 109).

As Krishna reveals his cosmic form to Arjuna in chapter 11 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi states of this revelation and Krishna's repeated goading of Arjuna to act, "The teaching of the Gita was not meant to be merely preserved in a book. It was meant to be translated into action … what will this knowledge profit us if we merely take down notes and do not put the teaching into practice? (Gandhi 2000, p. 166). Gandhi wanted to convey to the circle of ashram residents seated around him at these prayer sessions that they should put the *Gita* into action in their daily lives. He understood its message to be not only about the ethics of nonviolence, nor strictly about the path to spiritual liberation, but also about the daily embodiment of physical labor, self-discipline, and voluntary sacrifice for the greater good.

Duncan Greenlees was a British educator and author who joined the Sabarmati Ashram community and wrote about his experience living there. Describing daily life, he writes that the ashram living was "planned to instill discipline, industry and humility" and entailed waking before dark to converge on the patch of sand overlooking the river that was designated as the prayer ground. There, they sang hymns and then "came the recital each day of a different chapter of the *Gita* until all were completed. Only three or four of us could take part in this feat of memory, and a few others read with the aid of their lamps" (Greenlees 1934, pp. 14–15). After grounding themselves in the daily lesson of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the residents began their chores. Greenlees describes this labor—including the daily chore of cleaning the toilets – as a sacrament for those who were open to absorbing the *Gita*'s teachings:

> Then began the day's work in earnest. Some went daily to the stables to scrub the floors and milk the cows; others swept the Ashram paths with brooms; others again prepared the morning meal in the fine kitchen. All in their turn went to clean the latrines. This was indeed a sacramental, purifying work that, bringing us at once into sympathy with the lowest castes of men, taught us to see God in everything, even in what the ignorant have named unclean. I know of nothing in our life more inspiring than this, to remove the "filth" of others and in its place to leave a room sweetly fragrant with new-drawn water, and those few who shrank from it at first lost much of the beauty that Sabarmati had to give. (Greenlees 1934, pp. 15–16)

Perhaps the most significant way that Gandhi asked his co-residents at Sabarmati Ashram to join him in enacting the lessons of the *Bhagavad Gita* on behalf of the greater good was through the Salt March. On 12 March 1930, Gandhi and 78 of his co-residents at Sabarmati Ashram began a 24-day-long march to the coast of Gujarat, where they would break the 1882 Salt Act simply by collecting natural salt. This Salt March was the start of a nationwide anticolonial civil disobedience campaign.[15] While the Salt March has received much attention in analyses of Gandhi's politics, the central role of the *Bhagavad Gita* as interpreted by Gandhi within the context of the ashram community in the salt *satyagraha* has been largely overlooked. Dennis Dalton makes an important contribution in noting that one important factor that contributed to the success of this campaign was Gandhi's choice of companions from Sabarmati Ashram to accompany him on the march. Gandhi chose to embark upon the Salt March with a cohort of his fellow ashram residents, rather than political activists, because he wanted a group of followers who were already scrupulously disciplined in nonviolent conduct and committed to nonviolence as a moral creed (Dalton 2012, p. 103). Gandhi wanted to ensure that his fellow marchers would be committed to the path of *karma yoga*. This entailed not only being deeply versed in the ethics

[15] For overviews and analyses of the Salt March, see Weber (1997) and Dalton (2012, pp. 91–138).

of nonviolence, but also being thoroughly disciplined in their daily behavior, and being willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good by serving time in jail.

A week before the march began, Gandhi announced at the prayer meeting at Sabarmati Ashram that the campaign would start on the morning of 12 March. He stated that only men from the ashram would march with him while women and children would remain at the ashram to continue running the ashram's affairs. He justified this by stating that it would be cowardice to have the women and children accompany the men on the march, for they anticipated that the British might strike at them physically and would arrest them. Gandhi told the men not to pack food or water, for they would trust in God to provide for them along the way. But he did tell them to pack the *Bhagavad Gita*, which would provide a source of support for them both on the march and also in the jail cell if need be: "Let everyone have a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* with him. In the jail too, if it should be necessary, we shall offer civil disobedience" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 43, p. 12).

The morning of the march, Gandhi delivered a final speech to his fellow ashram residents, wherein he characterized the Salt March as a "life-and-death struggle," and emphasized that only those ashram residents could join him on the march who did not have dependents to care for, who had taken vows of celibacy and poverty, and who could commit to the ultimate sacrifice of dying in this nonviolent struggle. He emphasized the need to adhere strictly to the ashram rules and encouraged the men who were considering marching with him to take a final moment of deliberation to ensure they were ready and willing: "We who took certain vows and pledged ourselves to the Ashram way of life ought to adhere to those vows scrupulously. The seventy-two men joining the march should once again read the Ashram rules and think whether or not they should join the march" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 43, p. 59). Using strong rhetoric, Gandhi further declared that they would not return to the ashram until they had either attained *swaraj* (independence) or died trying:

> This fight is no public show; it is the final struggle—a life-and-death struggle. If there are disturbances, we may even have to die at the hands of our own people. Even in that case, we shall have made our full contribution to the satyagraha struggle. We have constituted ourselves the custodians of Hindu-Muslim unity. We hope to become the representatives of the poorest of the poor, the lowest of the low and the weakest of the weak. If we do not have the strength for this, we should not join the struggle. . . . I do ask you to return here only as dead men or as winners of swaraj. . . . Even if the Ashram is on fire, we will not return. . . . We are entering upon a life-and-death struggle, a holy war; we are performing an all-embracing sacrifice in which we wish to offer ourselves as oblation. (Gandhi 2015, vol. 43, pp. 59–60)

As Gandhi and his fellow ashram residents marched toward their final destination of Dandi, on the coast of the Arabian Sea, he wrote essays in his periodicals wherein he called upon all Indians to join him in support of this *yajna* (sacrifice) for *swaraj* (independence). For instance, he encouraged his readers not only to make salt and distribute it but also to boycott foreign cloth and wear *khadi* (homespun cloth), to spin in every home, and to boycott colonial-run schools and jobs.[16] In all, over 80,000 Indians were arrested during the Salt Satyagraha. Gandhi was arrested on 5 May 1930 and sent to Yeravda Central Prison.

While serving time in prison, Gandhi wrote weekly letters to the residents remaining at Sabarmati Ashram, including a series of new essays on the *Bhagavad Gita*. He was inspired to write these essays after receiving a letter from one ashram resident, Govindji, who says that he has found Gandhi's *Anasaktiyoga*, his 1929 essay that was later incorporated into the introduction to *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*, difficult to understand. In response, Gandhi writes on 4 November 1930:

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[16] See, for example, Gandhi's Hindi essays in *Navajivan* from 20 March and 10 April 1930, in Gandhi (2015, vol. 43, pp. 113, 228).

> Though I have tried to explain the meaning of the verses in a language which everyone can understand, a literal rendering is bound to present difficulties to the reader. If the subject itself is difficult, how much can simplicity of language help? I, therefore, intend here to present the subject itself in a manner easy to follow. A book which we want to consult in every activity of our life and with whose help we try to solve all our spiritual problems—if we try again and again to understand the meaning of this book from all possible points of view and meditate over it constantly, we shall ultimately come to be filled with its spirit. In all my spiritual difficulties I turn to mother *Gita* and to this day she has never failed to comfort me. It is, therefore, not impossible that others who seek similar comfort from her may, if they know what new light I get from it every day, receive further help or see some altogether new meaning in the work. (Gandhi 2015, vol. 44, pp. 276–77)

For the remaining time in his prison term, Gandhi wrote weekly discourses on the *Gita*, which were read aloud at the Sabarmati Ashram prayer meetings.[17] In these letters, Gandhi continued to emphasize *yajna*, sacrifice, in his interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*: "Do your allotted duty, restraining the organs of sense, for that is better than inaction. An idler will only meet his end the sooner for his idleness. But while acting, remember that action leads to bondage unless it is performed in a spirit of sacrifice. Sacrifice (*yajna*) means exerting oneself for the benefit of others, in a word, service" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 49, p. 117).

After Gandhi was released from prison on 26 January 1931, he negotiated a settlement with the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, and then sailed for London to negotiate with the British Government for the terms of India's independence at the Second Round Table Conference. However, this conference ended in a failure to make progress in negotiating the terms of India's future constitution due to significant disagreements about the question of separate electorates; the struggle for independence would last another 15 years until 1947. Yet, when Gandhi departed for the London conference in 1931, he had optimistically vowed that he would not return to Sabarmati Ashram unless they had won *swaraj*: "Even if the Ashram is on fire, we will not return" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 43, p. 60). Thus, in fulfillment of this vow, Gandhi disbanded the ashram on 22 July 1933. In 1928, there were 277 ashram members; by 1933, only 107 residents remained (mainly women and children) who were not in prison. In a long letter to the Home Secretary in Bombay, Gandhi offered the ashram land to the colonial government and described its closing as a sacrifice for independence, writing, "Time has now arrived for the Ashram to make a greater sacrifice in the face of the existing situation—on the one hand the growing terrorism by the Government and on the other the equally growing demoralization among the people" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 55, p. 302). He goes on to explain that since the Viceroy had rejected Gandhi's proposal for *swaraj*, the *satyagraha* struggle must continue, with even greater sacrifices:

> The struggle therefore is bound to be prolonged and calls for much greater sacrifice than the people have hitherto undergone. It follows that the greatest measure of sacrifice is to be expected of me as the author of the movement. I can therefore only offer that which is nearest and dearest to me and for the building of which I and many other members of the Ashram have labored with infinite patience and care all these eighteen years. Every head of cattle and every tree has its history and sacred associations. They are all members of a big family. What was once a barren plot of land has been turned by human endeavor into a fair-sized model garden colony. It will not be without a tear that we shall break up the family and its activities. (Gandhi 2015, vol. 55, p. 303)

Gandhi called upon the residents of Sabarmati Ashram to enact the lessons of the *Bhagavad Gita* once again, this time by abandoning their ashram home as an act of *yajna*, sacrifice for the greater good

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[17] See "Letters on the Gita" in Gandhi (2015, vol. 49, pp. 111–49) for the full correspondence of Gandhi's essays on the *Gita* to the Sabarmati Ashram residents sent from Yeravda Central Prison; also Gandhi (1932).

of the nation of India. Duncan Greenlees was one of the residents at this time, and he writes about accepting Gandhi's lesson that this closing of their communal home was an important act of sacrifice in keeping with the lessons of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He likened the lifecycle of the ashram to that of the four stages of life that a Hindu passes through in the pursuit of liberation (student, householder, forest hermit, renouncer):

> Sabarmati had already passed three stages of its life. The early years were mainly study, study of the poor and how to help them in spinning and in many other ways. Then came the time of family life, and the ashram became a home, a school, a training-ground of candidates for service of the nation. Time passed, and in the crisis it existed but as a temporary shelter for active workers in that service—apart from worldly aims, and wholly dedicated to the Cause [of independence]. Now, last of all, the call had come to take *sannyasa* [renunciation]; its Founder sent his family on to the roads of life, to wander penniless, relying wholly on their God to furnish every need. (Greenlees 1934, pp. 69–70)

After closing Sabarmati Ashram, Gandhi spent the next two years moving throughout rural India as he focused on caste reform work. In the spring of 1936, he decided to settle down near Wardha, in eastern Maharashtra, where he founded his final intentional community—Sevagram Ashram. Meaning "village of service," Gandhi founded Sevagram as the home base from which he would both simplify his life further and dedicate himself to the work of liberating India. Here, Gandhi lived in a hand-built hut. He advocated self-control, simplicity, and discipline in all aspects of everyday life. Here, Gandhi and his fellow residents continued to conduct prayers in the open air, as they had at Sabarmati Ashram, using the *Bhagavad Gita* in their daily prayer meetings.

And it was here, far from the capital of New Delhi, that Gandhi planned the famous Quit India movement, which he launched on 9 August 1942, engaging in a nonviolent civil disobedience campaign against the British to demand complete political independence for India. The American journalist Louis Fischer spent a week at Sevagram Ashram from 3 to 10 June 1942, where he interviewed Gandhi as well as Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, and other Indian politicians who had come to the rural ashram to plan the campaign. Fischer records what life at the ashram was like in those days, describing the simplicity of the huts and meals, the morning and evening prayer sessions, the political debates then underway, and the politicians' varied dreams for the India of the near future. Gandhi emphasized that the independent India of his vision would not be centered in the big cities of New Delhi, Calcutta, and Bombay. Rather, its government should be decentralized, distributed among the 700 villages of India, with each village living a simple life in keeping with the ideals of the *Gita* as at Sevagram (Fischer 1942). Gandhi and Nehru disagreed significantly on this matter, with Nehru expressing concerns that the villages were backward both intellectually and culturally, and reservations about grounding a pluralistic nation in scriptural values from one religious tradition.[18] Nonetheless, they came to agreement on the political tactics for the Quit India campaign.

As the Quit India movement was launched, Gandhi emphasized the mantra "do or die" (*karenge ya marenge*). As he was arrested, he issued this message to the nation, calling upon all Indians to non-violently rise up against British imperialism, and to be willing to sacrifice their life for this cause:

> Everyone is free to go the fullest length under *ahimsa* [nonviolence]. Complete deadlock by strikes and other non-violent means. Satyagrahis must go out to die, not to live. They must seek and face death. It is only when individuals go out to die that the nation will survive. *Karenge ya marenge* [do or die]. (Gandhi 2015, vol. 76, p. 403)

At his intentional communities, Gandhi sought to cultivate a group of people disciplined in the *Bhagavad Gita*'s path of *karma yoga*, fully committed to nonviolence (*ahimsa*), and willing to undergo

[18] For an overview of the political disagreements between Gandhi and Nehru, as well as their friendship, see Baird (2003).

voluntary sacrifice (*yajna*) not only for spiritual liberation but also for the pursuit of civil rights. With this "do or die" mantra, Gandhi now called upon all Indians to join his community in following the path of *karma yoga* for India's independence.

4. Concluding Remarks

Gandhi opened his 1929 essay *Anasaktiyoga* with these words: "It is more than forty years since I have been reading, pondering and following the *Gita*. Friends expressed a desire that I should put before the Gujaratis my understanding of that work. I embarked upon translating it. From the point of view of scholarship my qualifications for attempting this translation would seem to be nil, but as one following its teaching I may be considered to be fairly well qualified" (Gandhi 2015, vol. 43, p. 85). Gandhi understood his authority as an interpreter of the *Bhagavad Gita* as deriving not from any scholarly credentials but instead from his ongoing efforts to enact the lessons of the *Gita* in his daily life at his intentional communities. While Gandhi is well-known for his nonviolent interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, equally as important as this hermeneutics of nonviolence was Gandhi's effort, spanning over four decades, to enact the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* in his daily life. This enactment took place at the four primary intentional communities that he founded in South Africa and India: Phoenix Settlement, Tolstoy Farm, Sabarmati Ashram, and Sevagram Ashram. Here, at these intentional communities, Gandhi sought to follow and to teach the *Bhagavad Gita*'s path of *karma yoga*—disciplined action in pursuit of self-realization. This path of *karma yoga* as Gandhi understood it evolved over time, coming to entail not only nonviolence but also disciplined action, including physical labor, meditative prayer, *aparigraha* (non-grasping or non-possessing), *samabhava* (equability), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and *satyagraha* (nonviolent civil resistance). Beyond self-control in these forms, Gandhi also emphasized self-sacrifice, calling upon his ashram co-residents and ultimately upon his fellow Indian citizens to practice self-sacrifice in their everyday lives for the greater good of the nation and beyond.

Funding: Research for this article was supported by an Enhancing Life grant through The University of Chicago in collaboration with Ruhr-University Bochum/Germany and the John Templeton Foundation.

Acknowledgments: The author is grateful for the feedback received from the cohort of Enhancing Life grant recipients on an earlier presentation of this material. The author is also grateful to Signe Cohen for the invitation to contribute to this special issue of *Religions*, to the anonymous peer reviewers, and to Richard H. Davis for his invitation to present an earlier version of this article at the NEH Summer Seminar he organized at Yale University in 2018 on "The Bhagavad Gita: Ancient Poem, Modern Readers".

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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