

SATYAGRAHI AS STHITPRAGNYA: GANDHIJI'S READING OF THE GITA

Tridip Shurud

I exercise my judgement about every scripture, including the Gita. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason. Whilst I believe that the principal books are inspired...Nothing in them comes from God directly...I cannot surrender my reason whilst I subscribe to Divine revelation.¹

Gandhiji records the deep embarrassment with which he admitted to his Theosophist friends in London that he had read the Gita neither in Sanskrit nor in Gujarati. He said; "They talked to me about the Gita. They were reading Sir Edwin Arnold's translation – *The Song Celestial* – and they invited me to read the original with them. I felt ashamed, as I had read the divine poem neither in Samskrit nor in Gujarati."² These Theosophist friends induced him to read the Gita. The poem struck him as one of 'priceless worth.' The verses 62 and 63 of the second discourse

If one

Ponders on objects of the sense, there springs

Attraction; from attraction grows desire,

Desire flames to fierce passion, passion breeds

Recklessness; then the memory—all betrayed—

Lets noble purpose go, and saps the mind,

Till purpose, mind, and man are all undone.³

made a deep impression and more than thirty years later at the time of writing the Autobiography rang through his

ears. It was perhaps not accidental that what captivated his mind and soul were the two verses, which describe the implications of allowing the senses and desires that the senses give rise to and seek their fulfilment remain unchecked. These verses claim that those-both individuals and Gandhiji would argue civilisations- that make bodily welfare their object and measure human worth in and through them are certain to be ruined. The verses describe a state that is opposed to that of *brahmacharya*. The year was 1888-89 and Gandhiji was far from making *brahmacharya*, even in the limited sense of chastity and celibacy, a central quest of his life. But what awakened in young Gandhiji a religious quest and longing that was to govern his entire life henceforth was the message contained in these two verses, that the only way to *be* in the world was to strive to reach the state of *brahmacharya*.

This reading produced in Gandhiji a keen desire to read Gujarati translations of the Gita and read as many translations as he could lay his hands on. The Gita henceforth became his lifelong companion, he rarely travelled without a copy and it invariably went with him to prison both in South Africa and India. The engagement was deep and continued to deepen over the years. He translated the Gita as *Anasakti Yoga* in Gujarati.⁴ Before he attempted the translation Gandhiji during his imprisonment in 1922 wrote a lexicographic commentary that explained each term of the Gita and its various meanings in the poem. This was published only in 1936 as *Gitapadarthkoshā*. During his yearlong stay at the Satyagraha Ashram in Ahmedabad he gave between February 24, 1926 and November 27, 1926 two hundred and eighteen discourses on the Gita. The imprisonments in 1930 and 1932 provided another occasion to discourse on the Gita, when he wrote a series of letters, called *Letters on The Gita* to the inmates of the Satyagraha Ashram, which were read out during the morning prayer. He also composed a primer on the Gita, popularly called

Ram-Gita as it was composed for his son Ramdas Gandhi. By all measures it was a remarkable engagement.

It was during the non-cooperation movement that this engagement came to be recognised by his closest associates. It was also for the first time that he used the idiom of the *Gita* in his public speeches and writings for a mass movement. He repeatedly argued that his ahimsa was derived from the *Gita* and that non-cooperation was a duty enjoined on all by the scripture. He said during a debate with the liberals led by Sir Narayan Chandavarkar; "I venture to submit that the *Bhagvad Gita* is a gospel of non-cooperation between forces of darkness and those of light."⁵ He argued that Duryodhana had good people on his side, as evil by itself cannot flourish in the world. It can do so only if allied with some good. He said; "This was the principal underlying non-co-operation, that evil system which the Government represents, and which has endured only because of the support it receives from good people, cannot survive if the support is withdrawn."⁶ Gandhiji also had to counter the dominant interpretation that the *Gita* sanctioned war in cause of justice. Gandhiji maintained that the *Gita* was pre-eminently a description of the duel that goes on in the heart between the powers of light and darkness, and it enjoined on each one to do one's duty even at the peril of one's life, while cultivating an attitude of detachment to the fruits of one's actions. The debate about scriptural injunctions to violence was old. It dated back to 1909. The revolutionaries including Shyamji Krishnavarma and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar had challenged his interpretation of the *Gita* and the *Ramayana* in a debate⁷, conducted in the shadow of Sir William Curzon-Wyllie's assassination⁸. Gandhiji was deeply perturbed by the repeated invocation of the *Gita* to justify the acts of violence. He felt that the sage Vyasa had erred in choosing the metaphor of physical war to inculcate spiritual truth and that he should have chosen another more effective metaphor. Gandhiji felt that it was his duty to state that the

divine sage had erred. He said; "It was impertinent on my part. But what should one seeking to serve truth do? What one must do if one sees an error? It is not wrong to draw attention, in all humility, to what one feels to be an error."⁹ His interpretation that the Gita was a poem that enjoined the duty of non-violence, led to criticism that he not only distorted the meaning of the divine song but that he was a Christian in disguise. He replied to the charge; "My religion is a matter solely between my Maker and myself. If I am a Hindu, I cannot cease to be one even though I may be disowned by the whole of Hindu population. I do, however suggest that non-violence is the end of all religions."¹⁰

This perturbed many. Swami Anand, who had induced him to write the Autobiography also forcefully argued for a need of Gandhiji's own translation and interpretation. He said; "We shall be able to appreciate your meaning of the message of the *Gita*, only when we are able to study a translation of the whole text by yourself, with the addition of such notes as you may deem unnecessary. I do not think it is just on your part to deduce *ahimsa* etc. from stray verses."¹¹ The force of the remark stayed with Gandhiji for almost a decade when he finally translated the Gita with his own commentary.

Before we examine the ground from which this engagement stems, it is necessary to examine the question of *Adhikar*, authority or qualification. Gandhiji was deeply aware of this question of authority. In 1920, during the non-cooperation movement he established a University, which then was called Gujarat Mahavidyalaya.¹² Gandhiji was appointed its Chancellor for life. In his inaugural address as a chancellor he raised the question of *Adhikar*, of authority. "I fulfilled a function of a *rishi*, if a Vanik's son can do it."¹³ The question of authority was more acute in case of a translation of the Gita. He was by his own admission a Vanik's son, had very limited knowledge of Sanskrit and his Gujarati was by his own admission "in no way scholarly."¹⁴

He had accepted the demand for his own translation with some hesitation. He had prepared himself for the task by preparing a lexicographic text and by addressing the ashramites for two hundred and eighteen days. He addressed the question of authority and the legitimacy of his act of reading meanings into the text by a complex set of arguments.

The first was a theological argument. He refused to consider the Gita a divinely inspired scripture. He steadfastly refused to believe in the historicity of the Mahabharat. More significantly he did not consider the Krishna of the Gita as a historical person. He did not say that the Krishna as adored by the people never lived, but the Krishna of the Gita was an incarnation, in a sense contrary to Hindu belief. Incarnation for Gandhiji was an act of perfect and pure imagination. He wrote; "Krishna of the *Gita* is perfection and right knowledge personified; but the picture is imaginary."¹⁵ Krishna was perfect imagination as Gandhiji could not reconcile with him doing many of the acts that the various Krishna Charitra attributed to him. Gandhiji rejected them in no uncertain terms. "I have no knowledge that the Krishna of the *Mahabharata* ever lived. My Krishna has nothing to do with any historical person. I would refuse to bow my head to the Krishna who would kill because his pride is hurt, or the Krishna whom non-Hindus portray as dissolute youth. I believe in Krishna of my imagination as perfect incarnation, spotless in every sense of the word, the inspirer of the *Gita* and the inspirer of the lives of millions of human beings. But if it was proved to me that the *Mahabharata* is a history in the sense that the modern historical books are, that every word of the *Mahabharata* is authentic and that Krishna of the *Mahabharata* actually did some of the acts attributed to him, even at the cost of being banished from the Hindu fold, I should not hesitate to reject that Krishna as God incarnate."¹⁶

Thus Gita for him was a depiction of a spiritual struggle

between the forces of darkness and light within the human heart and Krishna dwelled in each human heart. Krishna as imagined by Gandhiji represented Truth; he was the conscience in each human being, he was the God of Truth, the Satya Narayan. Thus conceived the Gita was subject to reason. He could reject what was inconsistent with his deeply felt convictions and attribute meanings to the poem. His attitude to all scriptures was rooted in a similar ground. He rejected the historical Christ, but was deeply moved by the Christ of the Sermons on the Mount and the felt the passions of Christ on the Cross. Similarly, he felt that the Buddha had erred in making contemplation the only path of self-realisation. He would have liked the Buddha to have given equal importance to bodily labour as selfless service.

The scriptures according to him had to confirm to what he described as 'first principles' of moral conduct. Anything that was inconsistent with the first principles of morality could not have for him the authority of the Shastra. Shastra, he said, "are designed not to supersede, but to sustain the first principles."¹⁷ This opened up the scriptures to reason. A Christian visitor asked him, "Where do you find the seat of authority?" Pointing to his breast Gandhiji said; "It lies here. I exercise my judgement about every scripture. including the *Gita*. I cannot let scriptural text supersede my reason. Whilst I believe that the principal books are inspired...Nothing in them comes from God directly...I cannot surrender my reason whilst I subscribe to Divine revelation."¹⁸

But this was not said as a non-believer. Gandhiji claimed that he had earned the authority to interpret the scriptures by his faith and incessant striving to feel the presence of God that is Truth, in every moment of wakefulness and even sleep. This ever present sense of being in His midst that gave Gandhiji his loving devotion to God, his humility and a sense of the spirit of dharma, or rectitude and righteousness within him, guiding his path.

The second ground stemmed from a literary argument. He said; "A poet's meaning is limitless."¹⁹ When a poet composes his work in a moment of inspiration he does not have a clear conception of all its possible implications. He argued that the beauty of a great poem is that it is greater than the poet. Gandhiji gave the example of the author of the Gita. He argued that the Gita had given new meanings to both philosophical reflections and social practices. He cited the example of the idea of Sanyas or renunciation. The Sanyas of the Gita would not tolerate complete cessation of all activity. As he put it; "The *Sannyasa* of the *Gita* is all work and yet no work."²⁰ He argued that the author of the Gita by extending the meaning of words taught us to do that. Yet, this was not to be construed as a free licence; it was not a pure hermeneutic exercise. The act of interpretation required two other qualifications.

He wrote; "The truth which the poet utters in a moment of his inspiration, we do not often see him following in his own life."²¹ Gandhiji opened up a new ground. He claimed that those wanting to interpret the Shastras must practise its truth in their own life. The practice of truth required a deep moral sense. He said; "For understanding the meaning of the Shastras, one must have a well-cultivated moral sensibility and experience in the practice of their truths...Hence anyone who offers to interpret the Shastras must have observed the prescribed practice in his life...Those, however, are devoid of this spirit and lack even faith, are not qualified to explain the meaning of the Shastras. Learned men may please themselves and draw seemingly profound meanings from the Shastras, but what they offer is not the real sense of these. Only those who have the experience in the practice of their truths can explain the real meaning of the Shastras."²² This was his real point of departure with the tradition of scholastic interpretation of the Shastras. He made faith, a moral sense and incessant practice of the truths of the Shastras central to the act of interpretation.

It was on this claim of practice that he based his translation and interpretation. He was aware, he said, in his introduction of his translation of the many translations and commentaries available of the sacred book. But no author had hitherto made a claim of practice. He in fact described the literary output in Gujarati as 'unclean' and of 'questionable character.' It was unclean as it had not been a result of an incessant striving for purity in thought and conduct. He described the Gita as a 'spiritual reference book' for him and his companions. It was their attempt to lead their lives in accordance with the teaching of the Gita. He did not wish to suggest any disrespect for other renderings, they had their own place; but he boldly declared; "But I am not aware of the claim made by the translators of enforcing the meaning of the *Gita* in their own lives. At the back of my reading there is the claim of an endeavour to enforce the meaning in my own conduct for an unbroken period of forty years. For this reason I do harbour the wish that all Gujarati men and women wishing to shape their conduct according to their own faith, should digest and derive strength from the translation here presented."²³

Gandhiji was to use this claim that the truth of the scriptures is revealed not through mere contemplation on the meanings of the words but primarily through a steadfast observance of the truth of contained therein most effectively in his political debates with Lokmanya Tilak. Tilak was apart from being the most important political leader of India in the second decade of the 20th Century, he was the celebrated commentator on the Gita. His *Gitarahasya* composed during his six years of imprisonment at the Mandalay Prison in the Andaman remains a seminal work till date.

From 15th to the 18th March 1918 Gandhiji observed a fast. This was his first public fast after returning to India from South Africa in 1915. The fast was intended at one level to remind the mill-hands of their pledge. But through the fast Gandhiji wanted to demonstrate the moral power

of suffering. For him the nation was predicated upon the moral character of the people. People who did not have faith in God, did not have the capacity to undergo suffering for the sake of truth could not constitute themselves as a nation. Nation for him thus became a moral category. The fast at one level was intended to awaken the morality that lay dormant in his countrymen.

It was this 'great idea' that he wished to share with the countrymen through the fast. On March 17, 1918 he spoke to the Ashramites, who were his closest associates and people he had the greatest faith in. The occasion was one of the most sacred rituals of the Ashram life- the Morning Prayer. Like many other occasions he opened his heart before the Ashramites. The prayer discourse he said; "is indeed the best occasion for me to unburden my soul to you." The decision to fast, he said, was a grave one but behind it stood a great idea. The fast was a means of conveying this beautiful idea; an opportunity he could not miss. This beautiful idea was the truth that he had gleaned from the ancient culture of India, which even if mastered by a few he felt, would give them the mastery over the world.

The fast according to him was not just aimed at the mill-hands of Ahmedabad, the fast was an occasion for a dialogue with the people of India through a conversation with two of her finest leaders.

One of them was Tilak Maharaj, on whom according to Gandhiji, "whom millions are crazy, for whom millions of our countrymen would lay down their lives."²⁴ The other leader was Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, a man Gandhiji described as possessing "the holiest character."²⁵ The fast, Gandhiji said was an attempt to converse with these two great leaders and through them with the country.

Tilak Maharaj had written on the inner meaning of the Gita. But, despite this he had not understood India and her people. Gandhiji said; "But I have always felt that he has not understood the age-old spirit of India, has not understood

her soul and that is the reason why the nation has come to this pass."²⁶ At the root of this failure was Tilak's desire that India should be like Europe. Gandhiji said that Tilak Maharaj had undergone six years of internment to "to display a courage of the European variety."²⁷ He likened Tilak Maharaj's internment to the great men of Russia who were wasting their whole lives in Siberia. Gandhiji was saddened that our greatest treasure was expended to no purpose. He felt that if Tilak Maharaj's imprisonment had spiritual promptings and spiritual motives its results would have been far different.

It was this absence of spiritual motive that Gandhiji wanted to convey to Tilak Maharaj. Gandhiji had written and spoken about this to him with greatest of respect. But it was not something that could be captured in some words, though Gandhiji was certain that with his sharp intellect Tilak Maharaj had understood Gandhiji's criticism. Gandhiji wanted to convey the true meaning of the soul of India and of spiritual suffering to him. Gandhiji said; "This is, however, no matter to be explained orally or in writing. To give him first-hand experience of it, I must furnish a living example. Indirectly, I have spoken to him often enough but, should I get an opportunity of providing a direct demonstration, I should not miss it, and here is one."²⁸

Pandit Malaviya was of holy character was learned and well informed on points of dharma. But, he too had failed to understand spiritual basis of India. Gandhiji said of him, "he has not, it seems to me, properly understood the soul of India in all its grandeur."²⁹ Gandhiji felt that Pandit Malaviya with whom he was tied with bonds of affection and had for that reason frequent wranglings with him might get very angry with him and consider him swollen-headed for having said so. But it had to be said because what he had said was quite true. The fast was an opportunity to convince Pandit Malaviya regarding the truth of India. "I have this opportunity to provide him, too, with a direct demonstration. I owe it to

both to show now what India's soul is."³⁰

The second debate arose in 1920 during the non-cooperation movement. Tilak despaired at Gandhiji's insistence on non-violence both as a strategy and as a moral frame. He argued for a policy of *shatham prati shathyam* (wickedness to the wicked). He wrote; "Politics is a game of worldly people and not of sadhus, and instead of the maxim *Akodhen Jine Krodha* (anger is vanquished by non-anger, compassion) as preached by Buddha, I prefer to rely on the maxim of Shri Krishna."³¹ Gandhiji replied that he was diffident about joining issues with Lokmanya Tilak on the question involving the interpretation of religious work, but in some cases instinct must rise superior to interpretation. He argued that there was no conflict between the two authorities quoted by Tilak. He wrote; "The Buddhist text lays down an eternal principle. The text from the *Bhagavad Gita* shows to me how the principle of conquering hate by love, untruth by truth, can and must be applied."³² He contested the charge of Tilak that politics was not for sadhus. He said that the Gita was a guide essentially for the worldly and not the unworldly. He charged Tilak with mental laziness, he said; "With deference to the Lokamanya, I venture to say that it betrays mental laziness to think that the world is not for sadhus. The epitome of all religions is to promote purushartha, and purushartha is nothing but a desperate attempt to become sadhu, i.e., to become a gentleman in every sense of the term."³³ In conclusion he said that the true law was and will ever remain, *shatham prati satyam* (Truth even unto the wicked).

He argued that, "Only he can interpret the *Gita* who tries to follow its teaching in practice and the correctness of his interpretation will be in proportion to his success in living according to its teaching."³⁴

Therefore, in order to understand the true meaning of the Gita according to Gandhiji one has to understand what does living according to the teaching entailed.

Ashram, or 'community of men of religion' was essential

to Gandhiji's strivings in spiritual and political realms. The Gita was central to the life of the Ashram. Gandhiji emphasised that, "The *Gita* has for years been an authoritative guide to belief and conduct for the Satyagraha Ashram. It has provided us with a test with which to determine the correctness or otherwise of our conduct in question."³⁵ It was for the only true measure of the truth of his actions. "The *Gita* for me is a perennial guide to conduct. From it I seek support for all my actions and, if, in a particular case, I do not find the needed support, I would refrain from the proposed action or at any rate feel uncertain about it."³⁶ In order that the Gita becomes the spiritual guidebook for the ashramites it was necessary that the Gita was ever present as an object of contemplation. Each ashramite was urged to commit the Gita to memory. It became an essential part of the ashram prayers; both in the morning and the evening. The day at the ashram began with the congregational morning worship at 4.15 am to 4.45 am³⁷; and closed with the evening prayer at 7 pm to 7.30 pm. So central was this worship to the life of the community that Gandhiji could claim; "Ever since the Ashram was founded, not a single day has passed to my knowledge without this worship."³⁸ During the morning prayers the recitation of the Gita was so arranged that the entire Gita was recited every fourteen days, later this was changed so that the recitation was completed in seven days.³⁹ The 19 verses of the Discourse II of the Gita that describe the characteristics of a sthitpragnya became part of the evening prayers.

But recitation of the Gita and committing it to memory hardly constitutes following the truth of the Gita. The framework for conduct was provided by the ashram vows; a set of obligatory observances. These eleven observances drew their philosophical core from the Gita; the idea of selfless, detached action. Gandhiji said; "The Ashram life is conceived in the light of comprehensive and non-formal sannyasa of the *Bhagvad Gita*."⁴⁰ The sannyasa of the Gita, where there

is work and action and yet no action, was to be attained through the daily practice of truth, non-violence and brahmacharya.

Truth as God was the root of the ashram, its primary observance; Ahimsa or love was the means to Truth. Violence and practice of Truth are opposites of each other and cannot co-exist; "the more he took to violence, the more he receded from Truth."⁴¹

But it was the practice of brahmacharya that gave the ashram its character as a 'community of co-religionists.' The idea of brahmacharya as understood and practised by Gandhiji and the ashramites was derived from the Gita, more specifically the 19 verses of IInd Discourse that describe the characteristics of a sthitpragnya; a person whose understanding is secure. Brahmacharya in its limited and restricted sense constitutes observance of chastity and celibacy, including celibacy in marriage. The true meaning of brahmacharya is conduct is quest of Brahman; Truth. The Gita describes this state as a condition of sthitpragnya. A sthitpragnya is one who puts away "all the cravings that arise in the mind and finds comfort for himself only from the *Atman*,"⁴² and one "whose sense are reined in on all sides from their objects,"⁴³ so that the mind is "untroubled in sorrows and longeth not for joys, who is free from passion, fear and wrath;"⁴⁴ who knows attachment no where; only such a brahmachari can be in the world "moving among sense objects with the sense weaned from likes and dislikes and brought under the control of the atman."⁴⁵

The state of sthitpragnya, Gandhiji would confess, is impossible to attain so long as one is imprisoned in a mortal frame, as our pleasures in the objects do not disappear so long as the body persists. He argued that it was impossible to attain deliverance so long as one lived in the body, the need for deliverance remains so long as the connection with the body remained. Thus, "no one can be called a *mukta* while he is alive."⁴⁶ And yet it was enjoined upon everyone as a

duty to strive for this state as it was possible to become fit for moksha; in the sense that one would attain deliverance after death and one would not be born again. Therefore Gandhiji made this quest central to his life. He said; "What I want to achieve-what I have been striving and pinning to achieve these thirty years- is self-realisation, to see God face to face, to attain *moksha*. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal."⁴⁷ The path shown to him by the Gita to attain moksha consisted of unattached, selfless action; control over the senses, faith, devotion and constant vigil.

Gandhiji knew that according to the Gita, "when a man starves his senses, the objects of those senses disappear for him, but not the yearning for them."⁴⁸ The yearning disappears when one has a vision of the Supreme Truth. Gandhiji argued that this verse in fact advocated fasting for self-purification. Fast as self-purification is Upvas (to dwell closer to Him), upvas can be done only when fasting of senses is accompanied by a desire to see God; as "there is no prayer without fasting and there is no real fast without prayer."⁴⁹

The path of Gita was neither contemplation, nor devotion; the ideal was a *sthitpragnya*, a yogi, who acts without attachment either to the action or the fruits thereof. Gandhiji adopted two modes of self-practice to attain this state where one acts, and yet does not act. These two modes were *yajna* (sacrifice) and *satyagraha*.

The Gita declared that; "Together with the sacrifice did the Lord of beings create,"⁵⁰ and the world would sustain so long as there was sacrifice, as "sacrifice produced rain."⁵¹

Gandhiji found the word *yajna* full of beauty and power. He interpreted the word to mean sacrifice, an act of service. He saw this idea of sacrifice as basis of all religions. His ideal was of course Jesus Christ. It was he who had shown the path, Gandhiji said that the word *yajna* had to be understood in the way Jesus lived and died. It was not sacrifice when other lives were destroyed, the best sacrifice was giving up one's own life. He wrote; "Jesus put on a crown of thorns to win

salvation for his people, allowed his hands and feet to be nailed and suffered agonies before he gave up the ghost. This has been the law of *yajna* from immemorial times, without *yajna* the earth cannot exist even for a moment."⁵² Clearly, Gandhiji's interpretation of the word *yajna* was radically different from all previous interpretations that had emphasised the aspect of worship and ritualistic performances. *Yajna* for Gandhiji was service to others and in the ultimate sense sacrifice of self. He said; "This body has been given to us only in order that we may serve all creation with it. And therefore, says the *Gita*, he who eats without offering *yajna* eats stolen food. Every single act of one who would lead a life of purity should be in the nature of *yajna*."⁵³

But how does one perform such a sacrifice in daily life? Gandhiji's response was two fold; for one he turned once again to the Bible and the other was uniquely his own.

"Earn thy bread by the sweat of thy brow," says the Bible. Gandhiji made this central to the life of the ashram and borrowed a term 'bread labour' from Tolstoy to describe the nature of work. "This was an eternal principal; it was dharma, duty, to perform bread labour, as those who did not perform this form of *yajna* ate according to the *Gita* stolen food. The other form of *yajna* was according to Gandhiji peculiar to his times, as every age may and should have its own particular *yajna*, this was the *yuga-dharma*. Gandhiji said that the *yajna* of his times was spinning; it was the *yuga-dharma*. Spinning was an obligatory ashram observance; each member was required to spin 140 threads daily, each thread measuring 4 feet."⁵⁴ This spinning was called *sutra-yajna*; sacrificial spinning.

Gandhiji's characterisation of spinning as obligatory *yuga-dharma* deeply perturbed Poet Rabindranath Tagore. In a series of memorable essays the Poet and the Mahatma debated the significance of this 'cult of the charkha' as the Poet called it. Gandhiji responded with an essay called the

'Charkha in the Gita,' and asserted that his belief in the spinning wheel had come to him from the Gita; he knew that the author of the Gita did not have the spinning wheel in mind while enjoining upon all the duty of *yajna*, but the Gita had laid down a fundamental principal of conduct; "and reading in applying it to India, I can only think of spinning as the fittest and most acceptable sacrificial body labour."⁵⁵ He clarified further; "I know full well that the meaning I have read into them will not be found in any of the commentaries of the book, interpreted literally...If here we understand the meaning of *yajna* rightly, there will be no difficulty in accepting the interpretation I have put upon it...Spinning is a true *yajna*."⁵⁶

As his conviction that sacrificial spinning was the only true *yajna* for his times deepened, he along with the ashramites resolved to change the name of the Ashram itself. Ashram, hitherto called Satyagraha Ashram was re-named Udyog Mandir (literally, Temple of Industry); explaining the term Udyog Gandhiji said; "Udyog has to be read in the light of the *Bhagvad Gita*."⁵⁷ Spinning came to occupy for him the place of Gita; he was convinced that for the millions the only true way of following the truth of the Gita was to practice sacrificial spinning. In 1932-33 while he was at the Yeravda prison Mirabeau asked him for an English translation of his commentaries on the Gita. Earlier he had translated the entire *Ashram Bhajanavali* for her, so the demand was not out of place. Gandhiji wrote to her that he would like to do that and the prison was the most appropriate place to undertake such a task; but if he were to do it, it would take him away from spinning. He wrote; "For the spinning is the applied translation of the *Gita*; if one may coin that expression."⁵⁸

If Gita and the state of *sthitpragnya* informed and guided his spiritual quest to attain self-realisation, to see God face to face, to attain moksha, satyagraha was his chosen means to attain swaraj.

The origins of satyagraha were in a pledge, a pledge made to oneself with God as witness. Gandhiji believed that the true ideal of a satyagrahi is a sthitpragnya; who performs all actions with purity of heart and mind; unattached to both the actions and fruits thereof. He claimed that the first glimpses of satyagraha had come to him not on 11 September 1906 in that fateful meeting at the Empire theatre in Johannesburg but way back in 1899 when he read the Gita for the first time with his Theosophist friends. He wrote; "It is certainly the *Bhagvad Gita's* intention that one should go on working without the attachment to the fruits of work. I deduced the principal of satyagraha from this. He who is free from such attachment will not kill the enemy but rather sacrifice himself...As far back as 1889, when I had my first contact with the *Gita*, it gave me a hint of satyagraha, and as I read more and more, the hint developed into a full revelation of satyagraha."⁵⁹

The condition of sthitpragnya and the ideal of satyagrahi were the same. The quest of a satyagrahi like that of the sthitpragnya is to know oneself. Satyagraha is not only a method based on the moral superiority of self-suffering; but it is a mode of conduct that leads to self-knowledge. Without self-knowledge satyagraha is not possible; as it is based on the inviolable relationship between means and ends, and its essence is in the purity of means. Pure means are not only non-violent means but means adopted by a pure person; a person who through a constant process of self-search cleanses and purifies the self; whose only true aim is to be a seeker after Truth. Thus, satyagraha, pure means and purity of the practitioner share an immutable relationship. In absence of the later two satyagraha is not possible. Satyagraha is fundamentally an experiment in Truth in the sense that it allows those who practice it to know themselves. Satyagraha as a mode of self-recognition is directly linked to swaraj. "It is swaraj, when we learn to rule ourselves."⁶⁰ The idea of ruling the self is fundamentally different from self-rule or

Home-Rule. To rule ourselves means to be moral, to be religious and to have control over our senses. Gandhiji's idea of true civilisation is based on this self-recognition. True civilisation must lead to self-knowledge. He says; "Civilisation is that mode of conduct that points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves."⁶¹

In this we have measure of Gandhiji's quest. His quest is to know himself, to attain moksha, to see God face to face. In order to fulfil this quest he must strive to be sthitpragnya, he must be an ashramite, a satyagrahi and a seeker after swaraj. He said; "If we can achieve self-realization through fasting and spinning, then self-realization necessarily implies swaraj."⁶²

This he hoped would allow him and his fellow ashramites to attain the perfect ideal of sthitpragnya because; "when it is night for all other beings, the disciplined soul is awake."⁶³ This was the ideal for himself and the ashram. He said; "Let us prey that we shall see light when all around us there is darkness...we should thus be ready to take upon ourselves the burden of the whole world, but we can bear that burden only if we mean by it doing *tapascharya* on behalf of the whole world, we shall then see light where others see nothing but darkness."⁶⁴

NOTES

1. CWMG, vol. 70, p. 117.
2. Gandhi, M.K., *An Autobiography Or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Translated from the original Gujarati by Mahadev Desai (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1999 reprint), p. 57
3. Sir Edwin Arnold's translation. Gandhiji's own rendering reads: "In a man brooding on objects of the senses, attachment to them spring up; attachment begat craving and craving begets wrath. Wrath breeds stupefaction, stupefaction leads to loss of memory, loss of memory ruins reason, and the ruin of reason spells utter destruction." Discourse II:

- 62, 63. Desai, Mahadev; *The Gospel of Selfless Action or The Gita According to Gandhi*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1946, 2004), p. 163.
4. The translation was done in 1926-1927, he wrote the introduction to the translation two years later at Kosani in Almora. The introduction was finished on 24 June, 1929. The Anasakti Yoga was published on 12 March 1930, the day he left the Ashram at Sabarmati on his historic march to Dandi. It was translated in Hindi, Bengali and Marathi almost immediately. Mahadev Desai translated the Anasakti Yoga as The Gospel of Selfless Action in English. This translation was done during his imprisonment in 1933-1934. The translation could not be published till January 1946, as Gandhiji could not read the translation. Mahadev Desai died as a prisoner in the Aga Khan Palace prison on 15 August 1942, and as a tribute to his memory Gandhiji hastened the publication soon after his release from prison.
 5. *CWMG*, vol. 21, p. 116.
 6. *Ibid*, vol. 37, p. 77.
 7. This debate took place on 24 October 1909 on the Dussehra day in the Nizamuddin Restaurant in London.
 8. On 1 July 1909, Madanlal Dhingra assassinated Sir William Curzon-Wyllie, political aide-de-camp to Lord Morley, Secretary of State for India, while he was at the reception hosted by the National Indian Association at the Imperial Institute in South Kensington, London.
 9. *CWMG*, vol. 37, p. 82.
 10. *Ibid*, vol. 28, p. 47.
 11. Desai, Mahadev; *The Gospel of Selfless Action or The Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 125.
 12. The Gujarat Mahavidyalaya was established on 18 October 1920 and functions till date. It is now called Gujarat Vidyapith, which in 1963 was notified as a Deemed University, the University Grants Commission of India.
 13. *CWMG*, vol. 21, p. 482.
 14. Desai, Mahadev; *The Gospel of Selfless Action or The Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 126.
 15. *Ibid*, p. 128.
 16. *CWMG*, vol. 33, p. 32.
 17. *Ibid*, vol. 58, p. 9.
 18. *Ibid*, vol. 70, p. 116.
 19. Desai, Mahadev; *The Gospel of Selfless Action or The Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 133.
 20. *Ibid*.
 21. *CWMG*, vol. 33, p. 87.
 22. *Ibid*, p. 85.
 23. Desai, Mahadev; *The Gospel of Selfless Action or The Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 127.

24. *CWVG*, vol. 16, p. 339.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, p. 340.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, p. 341.
31. *CWVG*, vol. 19, p. 331, fn. 1.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 331.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, vol. 39, p. 142.
35. *Ibid.*, vol. 56, p. 156.
36. *Ibid.*, vol. 32, p. 71.
37. The time of the morning prayer was subject to much experimentation and change but was finally fixed at 4.20 am, a time when the tiller of the soil and a true devotee of God woke up.
38. *CWVG*, vol. 56, p. 152.
39. The recitation of the various discourses of the Gita was distributed among the days as follows: Friday, 1 and 2; Saturday, 3, 4 and 5; Sunday, 6, 7 and 8; Monday, 9, 10, 11 and 12; Tuesday, 13, 14 and 15; Wednesday, 16 and 17; Thursday, 18.
40. *CWVG*, vol. 42, p. 110.
41. Gandhi, M. K.; *From Yeravda Mandir*, translated from original Gujarati by Valji Govindji Desai, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1932, 2005), p. 5.
42. II:55.
43. II:68.
44. II:56.
45. II:64.
46. *CWVG*, vol. 37, p. 116.
47. *Ibid.*, vol. 44, p. 90.
48. II:59.
49. *CWVG*, vol. 53, p. 259.
50. III:10.
51. III:14
52. *CWVG*, vol. 20, p. 404.
53. Desai, Mahadev; *The Gospel of Selfless Action or The Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 177.
54. Initially spinning was time bound, half an hour; later the measure was changed to threads spun.
55. *CWVG*, vol. 24, p. 435.
56. *Ibid.*, pp. 464-465.
57. *Ibid.*, vol. 43, p. 203.
58. *Ibid.*, vol. 49, p. 357.

