
UNIT 3 INDIAN INFLUENCES: EPICS, NARRATIVES, GITA, RAICHANDBHAI, FOLKLORE

Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
 - Aims and Objectives
- 3.2 Influence of the *Ramayana*
- 3.3 Influence of the *Bhagvad Gita*
- 3.4 Influence of other Scriptures and Folklore
- 3.5 Influence of Raychand Bhai
- 3.6 Summary
- 3.7 Terminal Questions

Suggested Readings

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi's very struggle for freedom was the result of the deep impact of Indian philosophy. He was better known as the Mahatma, as he represented a complete accord between his thought, word and deed, and moral and spiritual values against the forces of barbarism. One finds in him a harmonious blend of saintliness and statesmanship in his long career as a social reformer, a political leader, a saint, a true lover of humanity, and an apostle of peace and non-violence. Gandhi was a fine product of Indian culture. He was nurtured and sustained by the perennial inspiration of Indian philosophy, said to represent the confluence of all that is best in the Indian thought from the early Vedic age to the age of the modern Indian renaissance. It has been rightly observed that Gandhi embodied in himself the highest ideals of ancient Indian civilisation.

Aims and Objectives

After studying this Unit, you will be able to understand:

- The various Indian influences on Gandhi, in general
- The influence of the *Ramayan* and the *Bhagvad Gita*
- The influence of other scriptures and folklore; and
- The influence of Raychand Bhai.

3.2 INFLUENCE OF THE RAMAYANA

Though born into a staunch Vaishnava house, and deeply aware of his mother's religious inclination and practices, Gandhi initially showed no inclination for any kind of religious belief. He had not even let himself be tied down to his family's strict vegetarian fare. Influenced by a Muslim friend, he had readily succumbed to meat-eating. Then, all at

once, he was drawn into the reading of the ancient epic, the *Ramayana*. It happened under curious circumstances.

While his father was recovering from an illness in Porbandar, every evening he used to listen to a reading of the *Ramayana* by a great devotee of Rama, one Ladha Maharaj of Bileshvar. It was said of Ladha Maharaj that he cured himself of his leprosy, not by any medicine, but by applying to the affected parts *bilva* leaves which had been cast away after being offered to the image of Mahadeva in Bileshvar temple, and by the regular repetition of the *Ramayana*. His faith, it was said, had cured him of his affliction. Gandhi writes in his 'Autobiography' that listening to Ladha Maharaj's reading of the *Ramayana* was a delightful and fascinating experience. To quote Gandhi:

"Ladha Maharaj had a melodious voice. He would sing the Dohas (couplets) and Chopais (quatrains), and explain them, losing himself in the discourse and carrying his listeners along with him. I must have been thirteen at that time, but I quite remember being enraptured by his reading. That laid the foundation of my deep devotion to the Ramayana. Today, I regard the Ramayana of Tulsidas as the greatest book in all devotional literature."

Yet another experience deserves mention. As a young schoolboy, Gandhi was in perpetual dread of ghosts, thieves and serpents. He could not sleep at night without a light in the room. An old maid in the family, Rambha, offered the suggestion that by frequent recitation of religious verses from the *Ramayana*, he could be rid of those absurd fears. Gandhi relates this experience in his Autobiography:

"I had more faith in Rambha than in her remedy, and so at a tender age, I began repeating Ramanama to cure my fear of ghosts and spirits. This was, of course, short-lived, but the good seed sown in childhood was not sown in vain. I think it is due to the seed sown by that good woman Rambha that today Ramanama is an infallible remedy for me."

Close to his sixtieth year, casting his eyes back to his boyhood days, Gandhi acknowledged his debt to "that good woman Rambha". In his words:

"When a child, my nurse taught me to repeat Ramanama whenever I felt afraid or miserable, and it has been second nature with me with growing knowledge and advancing years. I may even say that the word is in my heart, if not actually on my lips all the twenty-four hours. It has been my saviour. In the spiritual literature of the world, the Ramayana of Tulsidas takes a foremost place. It has charms that I miss in the Mahabharata and even in Valmiki's Ramayana."

At this juncture, it must be clarified that Gandhi's *Rama*, the *Rama* of his prayers, was not the historical *Rama*, the son of Dasharatha, the King of Ayodhya. According to Gandhi, "*Rama is the eternal, the unborn, the one without a second. Him, alone, I worship. His aid, alone, I seek.*"

Yet another clarification may be in order here, relating to Gandhi's views on God, Truth and *Rama*. In his words: *Though my reason and heart long ago realized the highest attribute and name of God as Truth, I recognize Truth by the name of Rama.*

God, *Rama* and Truth became, in Gandhi's mind, synonymous, interchangeable terms. It is worth recalling that twice, when confronted with death, he uttered the words, "*He Rama!*" On the first occasion, when he was beaten brutally on a South African street;

he is stated to have fallen down unconscious with the name of *Rama* on his lips! It happened again at the prayer ground in New Delhi on 30th January 1948. Struck by an assassin's bullets, "*He Ram!*" were the last words he is stated to have uttered, with one trembling hand raised in forgiveness and blessing, before falling to the ground.

3.3 INFLUENCE OF THE *BHAGVAD GITA*

A few words about the contents of the *Bhagvad Gita* may be useful here. It is a poem of 700 stanzas of two to eight lines each, and divided into 18 'discourses'. The verses vividly narrate the historic warfare between two royal houses, tied by kinship. The *Gita* is a small part of the epic, the *Mahabharata*. The date of its composition is ascribed to the period between the fifth and second centuries B.C.

Gandhi read the *Bhagvad Gita* in his early youth in an English version, in 1889. As a student in London, he was barely 20 years old. Up to that time, the concept of *Ahimsa* had hardly entered his awareness. He had been strongly moved in his boyhood by a Gujarati poem, the essence of which was that even one's enemy could be won over with love. In London, when some English friends made him read *The Song Celestial*, his reaction was unexpected and quick. He has recorded that he read the entire contents of the book with fascination, and that he was particularly impressed by the last nineteen verses of the second chapter.

It was long after his student days in London that Gandhi, having improved his Sanskrit, read the *Gita* in the original, and even translated it into Gujarati, with his comments and notes. This volume was released on 12th March 1930. This version was re-translated into English by Mahadev Desai.

A word, first, about the impact of the *Gita* on Gandhi deserves mention. He is on record as having stated that this work, along with the *Upanishads* filled his whole being, and that he found in it a solace that he missed even in the deeply stirring *Sermon on the Mount*. The *Gita* was, for him, the key to the world's scriptures. In 1925, he wrote in *Young India*:

When doubts haunt me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the Bhagvad Gita, and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. My life has been full of external tragedies, and if they have not left any visible and indelible effect on me, I owe it to the teachings of the Bhagvad Gita.

Again, in 1936, Gandhi wrote in *Harijan*:

The Gita has become for me the key to the scriptures of the world. It unravels for me the deepest mysteries to be found in them. I regard them with the same reverence that I pay to the Hindu scriptures. Hindus, Mussalmans, Christians, Parsis, Jews are convenient labels. But when I tear them down, I do not know which is which. We are all children of the same God."

Mahadev Desai stresses this point thus: "*Every moment of Gandhiji's life is a conscious effort to live the message of the Gita.*

Orthodox Hindu pundits, however, looked upon Gandhi as a renegade, and they drew from him the following comment:

“For me, Sanatana Dharma (orthodox Hinduism) is the vital faith handed down from generations ... and based upon the Vedas and the writings that followed them. For me, the Vedas are as indefinable as God and Hinduism... The Vedas are remnants of the discourses left by unknown seers ... Then arose a great and lofty-minded man, the composer of the Gita. He gave to the Hindu world a synthesis of Hindu religion, at once deeply philosophical and yet easily to be understood by any unsophisticated seeker. It is the one open book to every Hindu who will care to study it. Even if all other scriptures were reduced to ashes, the seven hundred verses of this imperishable book are quite enough to tell one what Hinduism is and how one can live up to it.”

The impact, however, is an intrinsic part of the interpretation. In Gandhi's view, “the canon of interpretation is to scan not the letter but to examine the spirit”. He believes that the *Gita* is an allegory describing the inward conflict in which mankind is perpetually involved. The literal interpretation of the texts is, of course, far simpler. The verses vividly narrate the historic warfare between two royal houses tied by kinship. When Arjuna, the great Pandava warrior, shrinks from the obligation to destroy his own people in battle, he is reminded by Krishna, his divine charioteer and friend that the warrior's duty takes precedence over all else.

On the other hand, treated as an allegory, the fight is between the baser impulses in us (as represented in Duryodhana) and the higher impulses (as in Arjuna) – our own body being the field of battle. Here is a never-ending struggle between the forces of darkness and of light, not the picture of what happened thousands of years ago, but that of what is going on today in every human heart. In Gandhi's words, *“It is the description, not of a war between cousins, but between the two natures in us – the good and the evil. It is the description of the eternal duel going on within ourselves given so vividly as to make us think, for the time being, that the deeds described therein were actually done by human beings.”*

The *Gita*, says Gandhi, presents some basic problems which are hard to solve, but it is free from any kind of dogma and it gives us in a short compass “a complete reasoned moral code”, which satisfies the intellect as well as the heart. Its appeal is universal.

In any case, the author of the *Gita* proves the futility of war. The victories amid the debris of destruction have produced nothing but misery. What difference would it have made, if the vanquished had won? Gandhi stresses that it is wrong to be obsessed with the battles and their result. While some of the verses in the *Gita* cannot be easily reconciled with the teaching of non-violence, it is far more difficult to set the whole of the *Gita* in the framework of violence.

Nevertheless, the central teaching of the *Gita*, according to Gandhi's interpretation, is not *himsa* but *ahimsa*; this is proved mainly in the second and eighteenth chapters. The logic he uses is that while *himsa* is impossible without anger, attachment and hatred, the *Gita* takes us to a state that excludes all petty nuances of violence.

What, then, is the object, the means and the message of the *Gita* as understood by Gandhi? Its object is to show the best way of attaining self-realisation. But what is the means to that end, which is indeed the essence of all religious endeavours? Desirelessness – renunciation of the fruits of action – this is the centre around which the *Gita* is woven. And how is this renunciation to be achieved? In the words of the *Gita*, as quoted by

Gandhi in his article, "The Message of the *Gita*": "By desireless action; by renouncing the fruits of action; by dedicating all activities to God, that is, by surrendering oneself to Him, body and soul."

And for this purpose, right knowledge is imperative, the knowledge based on true devotion. This devotion is no blind faith and does not involve rosaries, offerings and the like. It is no intellectual feat but a "constant heart-churn". The true devotee is selfless, ever-forgiving, unaffected by happiness and misery, sorrow and fear and exultation; he treats friend and foe alike; he is untouched by respect or disrespect, praise or blame; he has a disciplined reason and loves silence and solitude. And finally, devotion of such calibre is inconsistent with strong attachments.

Gandhi quotes the *Gita's* words: "Do your allotted work, but renounce its fruit; be detached and work; have no desire for reward." This, he believes, is the *Gita's* unmistakable teaching. Mahadev Desai has discussed this interpretation ably in his book, the *Gospel of Selfless Action*.

It is from this premise that Gandhi moves forward to *ahimsa*. If there is no desire for fruit, there can be no ground for *himsa*. At the back of violence, there is the desire to attain the desired end. Gandhi, however, is not dogmatic on this point. The *Gita* was not written, he admits, to establish *ahimsa*. In those ancient times, the contradiction between *ahimsa* and warfare was barely visible. Even so, Gandhi had complete faith in the wisdom of the sage who composed the *Gita*.

The Gandhian interpretation of the *Gita* has not been accepted without challenge; in fact, it has been rejected by scholars who take the traditional view. Gandhi, they say, has distorted the meaning of the *Gita*, superimposing on it his own concept of non-violence. Killing under certain circumstances was a duty that the *Gita* affirmed. There was no plausible ground to say that the *Gita* represented the eternal conflict between the forces of good and those of evil.

Besides, Gandhi was reading the *Gita* in the light of the *Sermon on the Mount*. Commenting on this, Vincent Sheean writes: "An assumption that this was a Christian interpretation of the *Gita* is, it seems to me, an unjustifiable step. If you grant him the initial bold leap, in which Kurukshetra becomes the heart of man, all the rest of his interpretation is well within the framework of the *Upanishads* and the text of the *Gita*. His reasons for making that bold leap were all based upon his perception of self-evident truth (i.e. self-evident to him) as shown by the long study of the *Gita* itself.

Answering adverse comments, Gandhi confirmed in the strongest terms that non-violence was a tenet common to all religions, and that, in India, its practice was reduced to a science. Even if that practice was now nearly dead, "the eternal law of answering anger by love and of violence by non-violence" could well have a revival.

Apart from *ahimsa*, the second great principle that Gandhi derived from the *Gita* was that of *Karma Yoga*, the path of action.

After the publication of his Gujarati translation of the *Gita* in 1930, Gandhi in Yervada Jail, received a complaint from an Ashram member that the book was difficult to understand. In reply, Gandhi wrote a series of letters to the Ashram, each of which dealt with a particular chapter of the *Gita*. The first letter was written on 4th November, 1930. These letters were translated into English by V.G. Desai and released in book form in 1960 under the title *Discourses on the Gita*.

The essence of *Karma Yoga* was expounded in Gandhi's *Discourses*. Krishna explains to grief-stricken Arjuna, who views with horror the vast carnage at Kurukshetra, that his sorrow was baseless, arising from a delusion. Besides, only their bodies would perish, as they must, but not the souls inhabiting them. "The soul cannot be wounded by weapons, burned by fire, dried by wind or drowned in water." Then Krishna proceeds to *Karma Yoga*, the way of action. "It is up to us to do our duty without wasting a single thought on the fruits of our action ... Unworried about the fruits of action, a man must devote himself to the performance of his duty with an evenness of temper. This is Yoga, or skill in action. The success of an act lies in performing it, and not in its result, whatever it is. Therefore be calm and do your duty without fear of consequences."

This Discourse ends thus: "*The river continuously flow into the sea, but the sea remains unmoved; in the same way, all sense-objects come to the Yogi, but he always remains calm like the sea. One who abandons all desires is free from pride and selfishness and behaves as one apart, finds peace.*"

In the next discourse, Krishna again urges Arjuna to do the "terrible deed": "*Freedom from action cannot be attained without action; wisdom never comes to a man simply on account of his having ceased to act. Man does not become perfect merely by renouncing everything. One who sits with folded hands is a fool.*"

Gandhi's comment on this chapter is that life is meant for service alone, and must have a "sacrificial character". And real service, he defines, is the one rendered with the spirit's detachment.

In the next three chapters of the book, Gandhi expounds the *Gita's* message of *anasakti*, selfless action, and the means of practising it. One must be unaffected by pleasure or pain, success or failure, and have no hankering for the fruits of action. The remaining chapters dwell on the ways by which *anasakti* is to be achieved.

What did Gandhi mean by '*anasakti*'? To quote his very utterances:

1. *Anasakti* means the renunciation, to move towards the planets of devotion, knowledge and work that individual good merges in the common good.
2. *Anasakti* is *Ahimsa*. He remarks: "*After forty years of unremitting endeavour, I feel perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observation of Ahimsa in every shape and form.*" *Anasakti* is the coin of which *Ahimsa* and *Satya* are the obverse and reverse sides.
3. *Anasakti* consists of these points:
 - (a) Desireless action;
 - (b) Dedication of all actions to God; and
 - (c) Surrendering oneself to God, that is, by surrendering oneself to His body and soul.

Significantly, Gandhi held the unorthodox view that any book, however sacred, could not be interpreted in one way alone. The meanings of great works were subject to a "process of evolution". In the words of Gandhi: "*The Gita is not an aphoristic work; it is a great religious poem. The deeper you dive into it, the richer the meanings you get. With every age, the important words will carry new and expanding meanings. But its central teaching will never vary. The seeker is at liberty to extract from this treasure any meaning he likes, so as to enable him to enforce in his life the central teaching.*"

Gandhi adds that the “*Gita is not a collection of do’s and don’ts. What is lawful for one may be unlawful for another. What is permissible at one time or in one place may not be so at another time and in another place. Desire for fruit is the only universal prohibition.*”

A final word about the *Gita’s* doctrine of *Karma Yoga*, which Gandhi made the keynote of his life. Writing in the *Harijan* under the caption, “The Gospel of Bread Labour”, he said: “*If I had the good fortune to be face to face with one like him (the Buddha), I should not hesitate to ask him why he did not teach the gospel of work, in preference to one of contemplation. I should do the same, if I were to meet these saints (Tukaram, Gyaneshwar and others).*”

3.4 INFLUENCE OF OTHER SCRIPTURES AND FOLKLORE

Gandhi was also influenced by *Manusmriti*. He learnt from it that truth underlies morality, and that leading a moral life was absolutely essential. In Gandhi’s own words:

“But the fact that I had learnt to be tolerant to other religions did not mean that I had any living faith in God. I happened about this time to come across ‘Manusmriti’, which was amongst my father’s collection. The story about creation and similar things did not impress me very much, but, on the contrary, made me incline somewhat towards atheism. But one thing took deep root in me – the conviction that morality is the basis of things, and that truth is the substance of all morality. Truth became my sole objective. It began to grow in magnitude every day; my definition of it also has been ever-widening.”

Gandhi was also influenced by the *Upanishads*, the scripture said to be the first to give the message of non-violence. The *Chhandogya* declared that non-violence was an ethical quality of man. Patanjali held out non-violence as one of the five cardinal disciplines of man’s life; he did not believe that it was merely a negative doctrine of avoidance of violence, but stressed that it manifested goodwill towards all.

Hindu ethics, since the time of the *Upanishads*, had always laid stress on the virtue of *ahimsa* towards all living beings, human and non-human. According to some, *ahimsa* is expressly mentioned for the first time in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, “where five ethical qualities, one of them being ‘*ahimsa*’ are said to be equivalent to a part of sacrifice of which the whole life of man is made an epitome”.

Gandhi was influenced by the story of Harishchandra. As a boy, after getting permission from his father, he once witnessed a play on ‘*Satyavadi (the ever-truthful) Harishchandra*’. He remarked that Harishchandra captured his heart. He said, “Why should not all be truthful like Harishchandra, was the question I asked myself day and night. To follow truth and to go through all the ordeals Harishchandra went through, was the one ideal it inspired in me.”

Gandhi was also deeply influenced by the story of Shravana’s devotion to his parents. He read the play ‘*Shravana Pitribhakti*’ with intense interest which left an indelible impression on his mind. He learnt the lesson of ‘selfless service and devotion’ from the pictures depicting Shravana carrying, by means of slings fitted to his shoulders, his blind parents on pilgrimage. Shravana became his model.

3.5 INFLUENCE OF RAYCHANDBHAI

Gandhi writes in his autobiography: “Three moderns have left a deep impress on my life and captivated me: Raychandbhai by his living contact; Tolstoy by his book, ‘The Kingdom of God is Within You’; and Ruskin by his ‘Unto This Last’. I have said elsewhere that in moulding my inner life, Tolstoy and Ruskin vied with Kavi (Raychand Bhai). But Kavi’s influence was undoubtedly deeper if only because I had come into closest personal touch with him.”

Rajchandra Ravjibhai Mehta *alias* Raychand (Raichand) Bhai was a jeweller and a poet. He was spotless in character; had a vast knowledge of the scriptures and a burning passion for self-realisation. He was also known as *Shatavadhani*, that is, one who can remember or attend to a hundred things simultaneously. Born of a Vaishnava father and Jain mother, Raychand dedicated himself towards Jainism and showed a deep leaning to Vaishnavism towards the end of his life. To him, God is self and self is God. God has no abode outside the self which is a conscious substance. It is permanent and eternal. In its contact with the earthly things, it gets polluted in *Karmic* veils. But a sound knowledge of its true nature leads to *Nirvana*. Perfection, non-attachment, truth, non-violence, universal benevolence and the like are cardinal virtues which deemed universal observance.

A closer analysis would reveal that the ‘living contact’ between Gandhi and Raychand Bhai was very short, since they first met in 1891 and Kavi died in 1900. During this short period, they had scanty correspondence and very few meetings. Gandhi described his relationship with Raychand in Gujarati as *gaadha parichay* (deep acquaintance), and not *angata mitrata* (intimate friendship).

The influence of Raychand Bhai on Gandhi was not so deep as he claimed. Both of them understood it clearly that their paths were different. D.K. Bedekar observes: “*Raichand came to have a tremendous influence on Gandhi, though the two youths were so dissimilar in their lifestyles and urges.*”

Here, the mental disposition of Gandhi when he first met Raychand is noteworthy. On that very day, his elder brother disclosed the news of his mother’s death, which caused him a ‘severe shock’ and ‘shattered his cherished hopes’. He was also then physically exhausted due to seasickness. So Raychand Bhai cast a mystical spell over Gandhi at a time when he was exhausted, both mentally and physically. The later correspondence between the two was when Gandhi was in South Africa, undergoing some sort of a ‘spiritual crisis’ owing to the scant knowledge of Hinduism amongst people of other faiths. After that correspondence, Gandhi came to India in 1896. So far as it is recorded in Raychand’s biography, the two friends did not meet again. Hence the ‘living contact’ between the two was a dim and bloodless one.

The influence of Raychand Bhai on Gandhi is perhaps best summarised by Jalandhar Pal:

“*The fact is that the ‘Mahatma’ was then just sprouting in the Gandhi of flesh and blood, who fervently looked for a guideline and found it in Raychand for the moment. Raychand Bhai initiated Gandhi in a zealous quest to know the inherent potentiality of human beings. He acted as a midwife of Gandhi to deliver his own being. In this sense, Kavi’s influence on Gandhi is remarkable. It should not, however, be stretched too far.*”

3.6 SUMMARY

No individual, however great he may be, can ever transcend his surroundings. It is through participation in his surroundings that he realises his true self. Gandhi is a living incarnation of this. He did not attain his extraordinary power from any extra-terrestrial source. He derived his mental and physical nourishment from the spatio-temporal relations, from the traditions of human civilisation, both Oriental and Occidental, and above all, from his ceaseless and varied experiments with Truth in the course of his life. He acknowledges his debt to the forerunners without hesitation. His writings, especially his 'Autobiography', brilliantly bring out the roots and the influences which gave shape to his thought.

With Tennyson's 'Ulysses', Gandhi could boldly declare: "*I am a part of all that I have met!*" Of the thousand roots and influences, we have taken into account only a few, the salient ones. As he was an ardent and ceaseless experimenter with truth, his eclectic yet sceptic mind tested all ideas which he came across, in the hard grindstone of his own experience, and modified, changed, enriched, and sometimes abandoned them. What we have tried to do in this Unit, is to study the effect of these ideas in the form of influences.

3.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. "God, Rama and Truth became, in Gandhi's mind, synonymous, interchangeable terms." Explain.
2. What is the object, the means and the message of the *Bhagvad Gita*, as understood by Gandhi?
3. What were the other scriptures and folklore that influenced Gandhi?
4. Examine the view that 'although Raychand Bhai's influence on Gandhi is remarkable, it should not be stretched too far'.

SUGGESTED READINGS

1. M.K. Gandhi., The Story of My Experiments with Truth, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 2007-recent edition).
2. Bhabani Bhattacharya., Gandhi, The Writer, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2002.
3. Ramesh Betai., Gita and Gandhiji, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2002.
4. Jalandhar Pal., The Moral Philosophy of Gandhi, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1998.
5. K.S. Bharathi., The Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1998.