

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

INDOPHILES • BIBLIOPHILES • ICONOPHILES

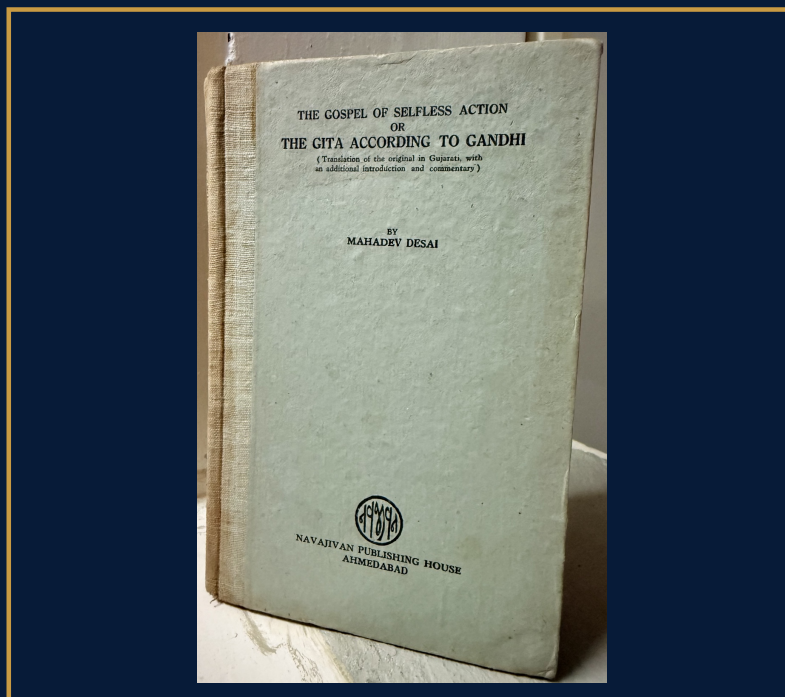
THE GOSPEL OF SELFLESS ACTION

or

THE GITA ACCORDING TO GANDHI

MAHADEV DESAI

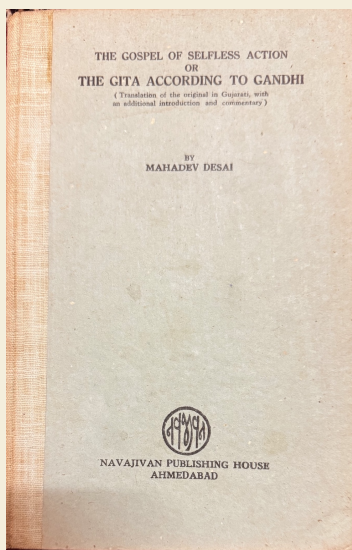
Ahmedabad, 1946 • First Edition



ONE OF 3,000 COPIES • NAVAJIVAN PUBLISHING HOUSE



THE GOSPEL OF SELFLESS ACTION



The present copy: original cloth-backed publisher's boards.

MAHADEV DESAI. The Gospel of Selfless Action, or The Gita According to Gandhi. Translation of the original in Gujarati, with an additional introduction and commentary. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, August 1946.

First edition, first printing. One of only 3,000 copies, as explicitly stated on the verso: "FIRST EDITION, 3000, AUGUST, 1946." Sanskrit text with English translation and extensive commentary. Original pale grey-green paper-covered boards, backed in cloth.

A remarkably evocative survival of the first edition of Gandhi's interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita, prepared and translated into English by his closest literary collaborator and secretary, Mahadev Desai (1892–1942), and published less than a year before Indian independence.



THE GITA THAT GANDHI LIVED

Action without attachment to its fruits.

Few texts exercised a more profound influence upon Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi than the Bhagavad Gita. He repeatedly returned to it throughout his adult life, regarding it not simply as a sacred text but as a practical manual for ethical existence.

At the centre of Gandhi's reading was the principle of anasakti - non-attachment. The Gita's command to act without attachment to the fruits of one's actions became, in Gandhi's interpretation, something much larger than a doctrine of personal spirituality. It provided an intellectual and moral foundation for his conception of public action.

For Gandhi, renunciation did not require withdrawal from the world. The individual remained obligated to act - vigorously, conscientiously and courageously - while surrendering personal attachment to the outcome. Truth, non-violence, service and political action could therefore be understood as manifestations of the same underlying discipline.



GANDHI AND MAHADEV DESAI

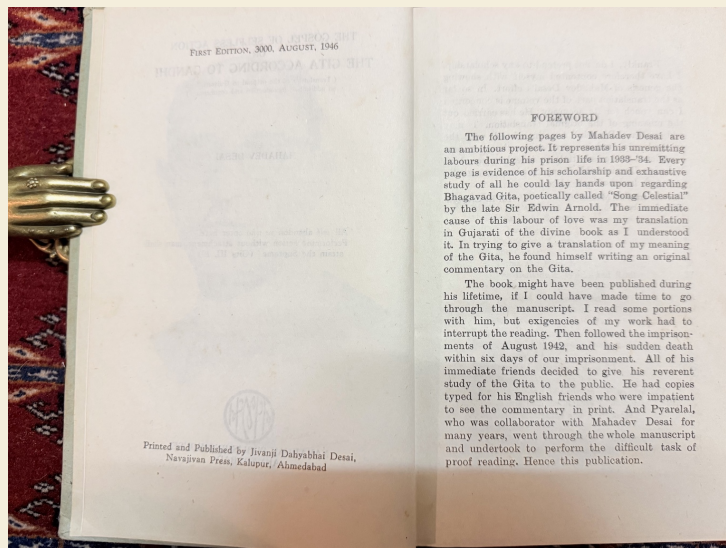
The importance of this edition is inseparable from the extraordinary relationship between Gandhi and Mahadev Haribhai Desai. Desai joined Gandhi in 1917 and became far more than his secretary. For approximately twenty-five years he served as translator, editor, diarist, intellectual interlocutor and one of the principal mediators through whom Gandhi's ideas reached both Indian and international audiences.

The present work grew directly from that relationship. Gandhi had produced his Gujarati rendering and interpretation of the Gita. Desai undertook the formidable task of rendering Gandhi's meaning into English while surrounding it with an extensive introduction, analysis and commentary of his own.

The result was not simply a translation. It preserves something unusually intimate: Gandhi's reading of India's most celebrated philosophical text as interpreted by the man who had spent decades recording, translating and explaining Gandhi himself.



A BOOK FORGED IN PRISON



The first-edition statement and Gandhi's foreword in the present copy.

As Gandhi explains in his foreword, Desai's work represented sustained scholarly labour undertaken during imprisonment in 1933–34. Desai immersed himself in the literature surrounding the Bhagavad Gita while preparing his English rendering and commentary. Gandhi himself read portions of the manuscript.

The project remained unpublished during Desai's lifetime. In August 1942, following the launch of the Quit India Movement, Gandhi and leading members of his circle were arrested by the British authorities and imprisoned at the Aga Khan Palace in Poona. Mahadev Desai died there suddenly on 15 August 1942, only days after his imprisonment. He was fifty years old.

The manuscript therefore acquired the character of a literary testament. Desai's friends subsequently determined that his study of the Gita should be made available to the public, and Pyarelal undertook the difficult task of reviewing the manuscript and preparing the proofs.



AUGUST 1946

FIRST EDITION, 3000, AUGUST, 1946

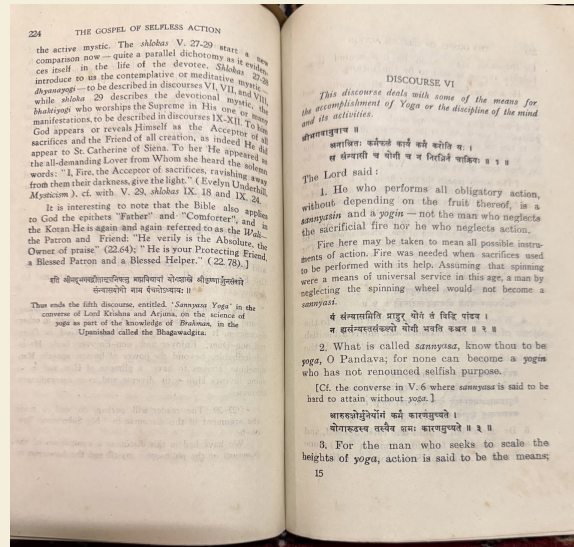
The publication date is itself remarkable. The first edition appeared in August 1946. India was then entering the final and increasingly irreversible phase of British rule. Within twelve months the country would become independent.

The volume therefore belongs to an extraordinary historical interval: conceived through Gandhi's intellectual world, substantially prepared during imprisonment under the Raj, completed after Desai's death following the Quit India arrests, and published on the eve of independence.

Only three thousand copies constituted the first printing. For the collector of Gandhiana, Indian political thought or early editions of the Bhagavad Gita in translation, this statement transforms the present volume from an early copy of a frequently reprinted work into an identifiable example of its original appearance.



THE BOOK



A representative opening: Sanskrit text, English translation and commentary.

The work combines several layers of interpretation. The Sanskrit verses of the Bhagavad Gita are printed alongside their English rendering, followed by commentary elucidating their meaning. Desai's extensive introductory material places Gandhi's interpretation within the broader philosophical tradition surrounding the text.

The physical appearance of the volume is characteristically austere. There is no pictorial dust-jacket or elaborate decoration. The pale paper of the boards, cloth spine, strongly printed typography and simple Navajivan emblem give the book an almost deliberately monastic character.

Its material restraint is particularly appropriate to its subject. This is a book about anasakti - detachment - presented in an object that itself rejects luxury and ornament.



GANDHI'S RADICAL READING OF THE GITA

The intellectual importance of the work lies partly in the apparent paradox at the centre of Gandhi's interpretation. The Bhagavad Gita takes place upon a battlefield. Arjuna faces the prospect of fighting and killing members of his own family. Krishna persuades him that he must fulfil his duty.

How, then, could the Gita become one of the foundational texts of the twentieth century's most famous advocate of non-violence? Gandhi's answer was to read the battlefield at a deeper ethical and spiritual level.

The central struggle was the struggle within the human being. The essential command of the Gita was not violence but the conquest of attachment, ego and desire. Once the individual ceased to act for selfish reward, Gandhi believed, truth and non-violence became possible.

Thus the Gita did not lead Gandhi away from political action. It helped explain why political action could become a spiritual discipline: one must resist injustice because resistance is right, not because victory is guaranteed.



A LANDMARK IN THE MODERN LIFE OF THE GITA

The history of the Gita in English is also the history of dramatically changing interpretations of the text. Charles Wilkins's pioneering English translation of 1785 introduced the Gita directly to an English-reading public. During the nineteenth century it became an increasingly important object of Orientalist scholarship, comparative religion and philosophical inquiry.

By the twentieth century something fundamental had changed. Indian thinkers were increasingly interpreting the text for themselves, in English, and addressing both Indian and international audiences.

Gandhi's Gita belongs emphatically to this later history. Here the text is no longer principally an ancient Sanskrit document presented to Europe through Orientalist scholarship. It has become a living Indian philosophical text employed by one of the central figures of modern history to answer the ethical problems of his own age.

Seen in this way, The Gospel of Selfless Action represents the movement from translation of Indian scripture to interpretation of Indian scripture by modern India itself.



COLLECTOR'S NOTE

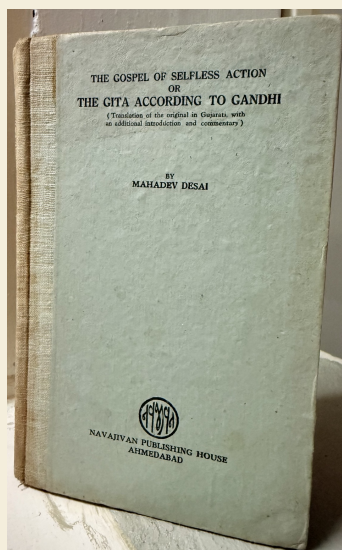
The first edition is immediately identifiable from the explicit statement: "FIRST EDITION, 3000, AUGUST, 1946." Later impressions and editions have appeared repeatedly, but the original 1946 issue belongs to the immediate historical world of Gandhi, Mahadev Desai, Navajivan and the Indian independence movement.

The importance of the book extends across several collecting fields: Gandhiana; Bhagavad Gita; Indian Independence; Indian Political Thought; Hindu Philosophy; Modern Indian Printing; and Twentieth-Century India.

It is particularly attractive as a companion to earlier landmarks in the printed transmission of the Bhagavad Gita. Where the eighteenth-century translations document Europe's discovery of the Gita, this volume documents something very different: Gandhi's reclamation of the Gita as a philosophy capable of shaping modern ethical and political life.



CONDITION



The present copy, preserving the publisher's original cloth-backed boards.

Very good. Complete.

A well-preserved copy in the publisher's original cloth-backed pale grey-green boards, retaining the printed title, author attribution and Navajivan device to the upper cover. The binding remains sound and the volume presents attractively.

The boards show light natural toning, handling and minor surface wear expected of the original utilitarian binding, with modest wear principally at the extremities and spine cloth. Internally the leaves are clean and well preserved, with occasional light age-toning and minor spotting consistent with an eighty-year-old Indian publication.

The Sanskrit and English text remains crisp and clearly printed. Importantly, the volume retains the original first-edition statement recording both printing and date.



BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

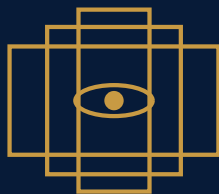
Mahadev Desai

The Gospel of Selfless Action, or The Gita According to Gandhi. Translation of the original in Gujarati, with an additional introduction and commentary.

Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1946.

First edition. First printing. One of 3,000 copies. Published August 1946. English and Sanskrit. Original cloth-backed paper-covered boards.

A first edition from the final year before Indian independence - a book in which ancient scripture, Gandhian ethics and the history of the freedom movement meet.



THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Books and works of art as cultural evidence.

The Eye of the Beholder is a Basel-based gallery and scholarly platform devoted to rare books, Indian miniature paintings, works on paper and objects that illuminate the intellectual and visual history of India. Each work is approached through research, connoisseurship and careful documentation - placing the object within the larger histories of printing, collecting, translation, devotion and artistic exchange.

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