

## The Gita And Gandhiji On The U.S. Stage

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### ***Dangers of Mind Pollution***

Air pollution and mind pollution are two dangerous symptoms of our age. One ruins the physical life, the other, the moral life. Violence and hatred are in the air—none can escape from their poisonous effects.

The *Bhagavad Gita* singles out one dangerous passion which mothers all evils—greed (*B. G.*, III: 37). This conviction is shared by UNESCO, which proclaims in its very Preamble that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.”

In his *Eight Capital Sins of Civilized mankind* (1973), Konrad Lorenz highlighted the impact of secularism: “The most terrible aspect of this apocalyptic procedure is that the highest and noblest qualities of man, exactly those of nobilities which we feel specifically human, are apparently the first to perish.” Fortunately, some exceptional individuals try to project the image of idealism and thereby hope to inspire some of us to think in a different way.

### ***Popular Introduction of Gandhism in the West***

Gandhiji is very much talked about today in the West. Many schools, colleges and universities have introduced coursework on Gandhism along with Indian thought. In the 1980s, the musical, *Satyagraha* was presented in New York. The operatic drama in three acts was a great success in 1980. In November 1981, the same performance in a hall seating 2,000 was completely sold out for each of its five-day presentations. This indicates a spiritual hunger whose fulfillment alone can bring relief to the depressing circumstances of our age.

When Mr. Sarup, a friend of the playwright Philip Glass, invited to be his guest in a small Himalayan town in the late 1960s, Mr. Glass found out about Gandhiji’s life quite by accident. Though not one of Gandhiji’s followers, Mr. Swarup nevertheless considered him the living embodiment of Hindu Scripture. His great admiration for Gandhiji made him eager to introduce his foreign guest to Gandhian idealism. Together, they viewed a film of the famous Salt March led by Gandhiji in 1930. Mr. Glass, in his own words, was “moved, thrilled.” Gandhiji was “magnificent” to him in that moment. This initial

association with Gandhiji inspired Mr. Glass to study his noble life with ever-deepening interest. He selected the hectic period of Gandhiji's life between 1893 and 1914 for the central theme of his musical, *Satyagraha*. Gandhiji's experiment with truth as a twenty-three-year old has since been emulated on a worldwide scale to redress grievances. It is a great discovery that outshines all other intellectual discoveries up to that time.

### ***An Epoch-making Year***

It may not be out of place to mention the worldwide significance of the events of 1893. It was a landmark year in India's long history of spiritual evolution. There were three remarkable events in 1893: Swami Vivekananda traveled to the West, Sri Aurobindo traveled to India from the U.K., and Gandhiji went to South Africa. Eighteen ninety-three was an epoch-making year. Gandhiji ended up spending twenty-one years in South Africa. The mighty tide of the *Satyagraha* Movement swept the entire horizon of human development. The definite idea and philosophy of *Satyagraha* has become a most useful instrument for peaceful transformation. "These then were the years," says Mr. Glass, "the quintessential years, the moments of birth, struggle, and promise."

### ***The Need for Moral Values and Gandhiji's Impact in the U. S.***

Mental poverty is a greater danger than physical poverty. Escape from degradation and ignorance depends not on wealth or secular knowledge but on spiritual awakening. "Neither money pays, nor name, nor fame, nor learning," says Swami Vivekananda, "It is character that can cleave through adamant walls of difficulties. Bear this in mind." Gandhiji's illustrious character in recent history vindicates his words. Gandhiji sought to raise the superstructure of a new India upon the bedrock of moral values. Men and women of strong, vigorous character are the real pillars of culture. Technology and expertise can never infuse a morally depraved society with faith and courage.

The escalating syndrome of violence has reached its apex everywhere, including the United States. This explains our desperate search for a new idealism from spiritual, not worldly, resources. Gandhiji's deep involvement in public life did not eclipse his gigantic spiritual stature. His blazing spiritual life inspires those of us who are sensitive spiritually. We commonly believe that our moral evolution from savages to savants involves our passage from passion to reason. Civilization is thought to be the desertion of old habits of violence and hatred and the inauguration of non-violent methods to promote orderly change. The antidote to matter is spirit. *Satyagraha* or Truth-Force will end internal and external hatred and violence. Mr. Glass writes of Gandhiji:

He was the direct inspiration for Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American civil rights movement. . . . That his life and mind have permeated nationalist movement, dissident movements, human rights movements, women's movements, ecological movements, etc. on a global scale becomes apparent with the slightest reflection. And that his life's aims were achieved, wielding the weapon of *Satyagraha* (or non-violence) combined with the force of his personality alone is, for me, Gandhi's message for our time.

### ***The Continuation of Satyagraha in Time***

The first act of Philip Glass's musical depicts Tolstoy's life, whose book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, made a profound impression on Gandhiji. Until Tolstoy passed away in 1910, his letters to Gandhiji were his main source of inspiration. The *Satyagraha* concept, "a fight on behalf of truth consisting chiefly in self-purification and self-reliance," was practiced on Tolstoy Farm. In the second act, we meet Rabindranath Tagore, who, in spite of his differences with Gandhiji, "remained the only living moral authority acknowledged by Gandhiji." Martin Luther King, Jr., who carried the crusade against injustice and inequity through non-violent principles, emerges in the third act. "Thus, in relation to the 21-year struggle that took place in South Africa, these men individually are representatives of *Satyagraha*'s past, present, and future."

### ***Influence of the Bhagavad Gita on Gandhiji's Life***

The tremendous influence of the *Gita* on Gandhiji's life is well known. It was his "infallible guide to conduct," his spiritual dictionary, a book to which he referred himself daily. In his message of the *Gita*, he claimed that he strained his every nerve for the long unbroken period of forty years to enforce the meaning of the *Gita* in his personal conduct. The *Gita* remained for him, "the single most magnificent source in informing his ideas and the guide for actively carrying them in public and private life."

Mr. Glass took immense pains to study this great scripture with an attitude of reverence. His words convey the level of his dedication:

To write the verses in English, I studied the editions of three translators—Sir Edwin Arnold, Dr. C. Zaehner, and Sri Shankaracharya who are, respectively, a poet, a scholar, a saint and therefore represent a spectrum of viewpoints.

The cast sings a phonetic translation of Sanskrit which I wrote after learning the language in transliteration.

Seventy-five appropriate verses from the *Gita* "chosen in coordination with the opera's scene-by-scene action" were musically arranged to highlight the spiritual foundation of the *Satyagraha* Movement. The performing cast of artists, which included twelve actors and actresses and eighty-three orchestral musicians were all citizens of the West.