

## The *Bhagavad Gita* in the Hispanic World: A Fusion of Horizons and the Subjective Reader

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### Abstract

The philosophical depth of the *Bhagavad Gita* has historically demonstrated a unique capacity to transcend geographical and linguistic boundaries, asserting the global relevance of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). From the haunting citations in modern cinema (Oppenheimer) to the rhythmic resonance in Philip Glass's opera *Satyagraha*, the *Gita* continues to serve as a cornerstone for global intellectual and spiritual movements. This paper traces the specific genealogical journey of the *Gita*'s philosophy into the Hispanic world, beginning with the seminal English translations by Charles Wilkins and Edwin Arnold. It further examines how these ideas were mediated through the Spanish translations of the Theosophical Society, specifically the influential work of Federico Roviralta Borrell.

The core of this study analyses the profound impact of the *Gita* on the Mexican revolutionary leader Francisco I. Madero. By examining Madero's *Manual Espírita* (1911), this research demonstrates how the concepts of Dharma, Karma, and the immortality of the soul—extracted directly from the *Gita*—formed the moral and philosophical backbone of Madero's political and spiritual convictions. Ultimately, this paper argues that Madero's interpretation represents a significant moment in the global reception of Indian thought,



where the Gita's teachings were utilised to navigate the complexities of revolution and governance in a Latin American context.

**Keywords:** Bhagavad Gita, Indian Knowledge System, Francisco I. Madero, Manual Espírita, Charles Wilkins, Edwin Arnold, Federico Roviralta Borrell, Theosophy, Spanish Translation, Karma, Dharma.

## I. The European Horizon: A Struggle with the Untranslatable

The global intellectual journey of the *Bhagavad Gita* began not as a spiritual quest, but as a complex linguistic and philosophical boundary-pushing exercise for the European Enlightenment. In 1785, Charles Wilkins produced the first English translation, a monumental event that determined the initial view of Indian philosophy for European intellectuals. This was followed by August Schlegel's 1823 Sanskrit text and Latin translation, which ignited a rigorous debate among the few Europeans who possessed the tools to engage with the source material. Wilhelm von Humboldt, who learned Sanskrit specifically to study the poem, recognized that the *Gita* taught the performance of actions without any regard for their "fruit" or results.

However, this early reception encountered significant friction with G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel interpreted the Gita's focus on the universal as a call to "immobility and inaction," arguing that the Indian spirit had not yet reached the stage of individual subjectivity. This critique centered on the "impossibility of translation." Hegel (1827) argued that expressions like Yoga were so culturally sacrosanct that they lacked corresponding expressions in target languages like German, noting that "the words of a language do not stand alone, but are rooted in the entire spirit of a people; therefore, a term like 'Yoga' cannot be replaced by a European equivalent without losing its substantiality" (p. 54). While Schlegel translated Yoga as *devotzio* (devotion), Hegel found such glosses inadequate. Yet, as Hegel himself noted, this "impossibility" actually compels the reader to go beyond the literal text, creating a space for "alternative and creative translations"—a void the Hispanic world would eventually fill with revolutionary fervor.

## II. The Hispanic Horizon: The *Gita* in Latin America

In the 20th century, the reception of the *Gita* in the Hispanic world shifted from technical philology to a vibrant, cultural application. This "fusion of horizons," as described by German reception theorist **Hans Robert Jauss**, allowed Hispanic thinkers to bypass European skepticism. They did not view the **Gita** as a cold academic object, but as a source of heat for a region seeking its own identity.



In Mexico, José Vasconcelos utilized the Gita as a foundational pillar for nation-building. In his work *Estudios Indostánicos*, Vasconcelos argued that the spiritual depth of Indian philosophy was a necessary counterweight to the materialism of the Anglo-Saxon world. He integrated the Gita's monism into his vision of the "Cosmic Race," suggesting that a spiritualized Latin American identity could synthesize all global cultures. Meanwhile, in Argentina, Jorge Luis Borges approached the Gita through a literary lens. For Borges, the text was a metaphysical labyrinth used to explore the unreality of the ego and the illusions of time (Maya). Unlike the German scholars who feared the "loss of philosophical depth," Borges celebrated the text's ability to be creatively re-imagined. As Borges (1984) noted in *Seven Nights*, a book is not a static object but a "relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships," suggesting that the Gita lives not in its Sanskrit past, but in the "changing" mind of the reader (p. 21).

### III. The Revolutionary Dharma: Francisco I. Madero as "Bhima"

The most profound humanization of the **Gita** is found in the life of **Francisco I. Madero**, the leader of the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Scholarly research has established that Madero authored the *Manual Espírita* (1911) under the pseudonym "Bhima", the name of the warrior-hero from the Mahabharata. This choice of pseudonym was a deliberate act of "subjective reception," as defined by German reader-response theorist ,Norman Holland. Holland posits that we do not read a book with a "blank slate" mind. Instead, every reader possesses an Identity Theme—a unique psychological structure formed by personal history, traumas, desires, and values—which dictates how they "transact" with the text (Holland 1989). By adopting this pseudonym, the author effectively filters the Gita through their own psychological needs, transforming the ancient text into a personal instrument of self-expression.

When we encounter a text, we engage in a process of transactive reading. We project our own identity theme onto the work, effectively "re-creating" the story or philosophy to fit our internal needs. Therefore, the "meaning" of a text like the Gita isn't something found on the page; it is something produced within the specific mind of the person reading it. according to Madero, the *Gita* did not a call to the 'inaction' like Hegel instead, he used it as a manual for revolutionary struggle.

Madero's reception was unique because it synthesized the *Gita* with Spiritism. He leaned heavily on the "straightforward reading" identified by Humboldt—the performance of duty without attachment. Madero believed that since the soul is immortal and cannot be killed, a revolutionary could face the battlefield with



a sense of *Dharma*. "It is never born, nor does it die at any time, nor having once come to be will it again cease to be. It is unborn, eternal, permanent and primeval. It is not slain when the body is slain" (Bhagavad Gita 2.20). He reconciled his Christian upbringing with Hindu philosophy, viewing Krishna and Christ as part of the same lineage of "Great Spirits." By transforming the *Gita* into a call to arms, Madero proved that the "non-translatable" spirit of the text could be translated into lived, political action.

#### IV. Synthesis: Reception Theory and the Greatness of Indian Knowledge

The transformation of the *Gita* in the Hispanic world illustrates the power of Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory. Jauss (1982) argues that the meaning of a work is not a fixed, timeless essence but is realized through its "history of influence," asserting that "the historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees" (p. 19). The "Horizon of Expectations" in Latin America—defined by a search for social justice and spiritual identity—allowed Madero and Vasconcelos to see truths in the *Gita* that remained invisible to Hegel. Furthermore, Norman Holland's analysis suggests that these readers used the *Gita* to fulfil their own internal identity themes (Holland 1989). For Madero, the *Gita* became a "transactive" space to embody the "Bhima" warrior archetype, while for Vasconcelos, it served to reinforce his role as the "Cosmic" educator, illustrating how readers "re-create" a text to match their own psychological unity.

Ultimately, the Hispanic reception highlights the immense greatness of the Indian knowledge system on a global spectrum. The *Gita* has proven itself to be a "living" text, capable of crossing linguistic and cultural barriers to offer a universal language of duty, soul, and action. Whether it served as a scholarly puzzle for a German philologist or a revolutionary manifesto for a Mexican president, the *Gita* remains a testament to the enduring, global relevance of Indian philosophical thought.

#### Conclusion

The journey of the *Bhagavad Gita* in the Hispanic world proves that the meaning of a text is never finished. While 19th-century European scholars struggled with the "impossibility of translation," Hispanic leaders and writers found in the *Gita* a living *Dharma*. By moving the text from the library to the street and the battlefield, they achieved a "fusion of horizons" that redefined both the *Gita* and the future of the Hispanic world. This cross-cultural dialogue underscores the universal nature of Indian knowledge, showing that its core truths resonate just as powerfully in the heart of Mexico as they do on the banks of the Ganges.



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