

Bhagavad Gita Distribution in Schools

Brief History

This endeavor started in the year 2010 in the form of a competition for school students titled 'Bhagavad Gita Contest' in which students were asked questions based on the Gita. Students from different religious backgrounds appeared for the exam and gave encouraging feedback. However, there have been many improvements in the last 7 years. Many corporate schools did not allow such a contest to be held and hence it was renamed as Value Empowerment Contest (VEC), designed by H.G Vraja Krishna Prabhu, with slight changes in its structure. Now, a VEC book is given to students to study from which contains Questions based on various verses from the Gita. The VEC book contains titles attractive to people from all walks of life like 'Art of Living', 'Self Control', etc. The Bhagavad Gita is given as a supplementary study material along with VEC book.

Methodology and Workflow

- 70% of the questions asked in the exam are from the VEC book and the remaining is from other verses from the Gita. Beside each question, is given the sloka number as a hint. In this way, apart from distribution, it is made sure that students also read the Gita.
- 2 sets of question papers are prepared- one for the cities and another for villages.

Hierarchy

- At present, there is no definite management structure and works only through volunteers. From 2017, there has been a separate Department in place with only a Chairman in place in-charge of all the key functions of making teams, leading & coordinating, planning, creating and designing certificates, pamphlets, etc.
- If there is sufficient manpower, the Book Distribution department, which is otherwise active only during the Gita Marathon month, can be run throughout the year.

Workflow

- Planning of prime importance in this project. Before the exam is held, teams are formed for various functions such as seeking permissions from school authorities, setting the date and time of the exam, transportation of BGs, printing of question papers, certificates, etc.
- To brief-up the students about the features, advantages, fees and other information, announcement is made during morning assembly time. One team member then goes to each class to distribute pamphlets. A Parent-letter is also given to students explaining the features.
- The class teacher is handed over registration forms. The students are given 3 days' time to enroll for the exam and a copy of BG is handed over to them on enrollment.
- Due to time constraint, maximum of 1 week is allotted to a particular city. Hence, team work is critical for timely completion. 1 member of the team makes the announcement, the other takes up pamphlet distribution, etc. and in this way the work is distributed.

- The VEC book, which is the syllabus book, is given to students 1 month before the exam to prepare.
- Then, a notice is sent to all school principals informing them the date and time of the exam (usually Saturday/Sunday). The date and time of the results and prize distribution ceremony are informed to schools on the day of examination.
- All participants are awarded with a Participation Certificate and beautiful calendars and winners with attractive prizes.

Noteworthy Contributions

- Till now, over 5 Lakh students across India have participated. This activity comes under Social Reformation Activity and not religious activity, and hence gets a lot of media exposure. Moreover, students from different religions participate, which enhances unity and communal peace.
- Many Imams, Fathers and other religious leaders attend the prize distribution ceremony along with corporate leaders, Collectors and other dignitaries, making it a mega-event. This event also garners a lot of media exposure. During this event, interviews of students are displayed, key highlights of the whole program are put forth and future plans discussed.
- Interested participants are invited for further programs and classes and their response has been overwhelming.
- Education Minister of Andhra Pradesh asked for this course to be made compulsory across all schools in Andhra Pradesh. He also applauded ISKCON's efforts for growing interfaith unity. In this way, goodwill is created and enhanced in the eyes of Government, other religions and public as a whole.
- Teachers have experienced a positive change in students' behavior. Schools have been requesting ISKCON to conduct such exams and are ready to bear travelling, transportation and other expenses.
- Apart from students, even parents take efforts to read and understand the Gita. In the process, seeds are being sown for a very bright future.

Expenses and Revenue

- The temple provides only with the copy of BG. All other materials such as certificates, pamphlets, VEC book, etc. have to be arranged. Funds are largely contributed by the volunteers. Many banks also contribute as part of their CSR scheme.
- Price charged from students for the exam varies from place to place. In poor villages, a fee of Rs. 100 per student is charged whereas, Rs. 150 per student in metropolitan cities.
- A detailed cost structure is provided to students and the total sums up to Rs. 200 per student. The discount given to the students is due to sponsorships and donations.

Unique Features

- Large scale BG distribution is carried out.
- Very simple booklet (VEC book) which contains important topics for everyone viz. students, corporate employees, secular people, followers of other religions, etc.

- Followers of all religions are reading BG.
- Cost Effective.

Lessons

- Planning is of utmost importance. There have been instances in the past when lack of planning has resulted in huge financial losses. A proactive approach is required.
- The language of the VEC book has been further simplified to be easily understood.
- Earlier checking was done manually, whereas now, it is done through an App, with the help of which, 600 papers can be checked in an hour.

Future Plans

- To create different booklets for different grades from 5th to 10th.
- To create an App through which students can answer their papers. Each student will have a different set of questions. This will save time and resources.
- To conduct similar exams in colleges and corporates to induce more people to read the BG and spread Srila Prabhupada's message.