Effective leadership traits from Bhagavad Gita

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Abstract: Bhagavad Gita, according to the Indian philosopher Adi Sankaracharya is a summary of all the Vedic Literatures. Divided into 18 chapters, this Indian scripture deciphers five major branches of knowledge: Isvara (the Supreme God), Jiva (the spirit soul/the living entity), Prakriti (the material nature), Kala (the time), and Karma (the activities) in seven hundred verses. Many important traits of an effective leader emerge from various chapters of this text. The objective of this paper is to describe the attributes and activities of an effective leader as prescribed in Bhagavad Gita. The paper employs the methodology of hermeneutics to do so.

Keywords: leadership; Bhagavad Gita; yoga; material nature; time and karma yoga.


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1 Introduction

Leadership development, in recent times, has emerged as one of the chief aims of business education. To effectively respond to the needs of the evolving business environment, several business schools around the world have revisited their vision, mission, and curriculum to include leadership development (Ghosh, 2015). The importance of developing business leadership can be gauged from the fact that the USA spends one fourth of its annual learning and development budget on developing leadership (O’Leonard, 2010). Leadership as defined by Muniappan (2013) “is the process of influencing the activities of an individual or a group in efforts towards
achieving certain goals. The word ‘influencing’ can be substituted with other words such as transforming, empowering, driving, motivating and inspiring”. To Burns (2012), leadership is “an aspect of power, but is also a separate and vital process in itself”. Power, according to him, always strives to realise the purpose of the power wielders. However, leadership, he goes on to say, “is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilise in competition or conflict with others, institutional, political, psychological and others resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers”. A leader is considered to be good if he/she is effective and ethical (Mulla and Krishnan, 2012). Measuring the effectiveness of leadership is comparatively easier than determining how ethical a leader is (Ciulla, 1995). However, many scholars have strived to identify the effective and ethical leadership traits that are the hallmark of a true leader. Greenleaf (1977), for instance, a couple of decades back, introduced the concept of ‘servant leader’, that is, a leader who is a servant first and gives top priority to serve his/her employees, customers and community (Greenleaf, et. al., 2003). Burns (1978) also talks about transformational leadership, which emphasises on realising the goals mutually held both by the followers and leaders. Greenleaf’s concept of servant leadership has striking similarity to Burn’s concept of transformational leadership (Farling et al., 1999).

Recently, several scholars have turned to scriptures to extract leadership and management lessons, for example, from Jain traditions (Jain, 2013, 2014; Patel and Selvaraj, 2015); Sanatan Dharma traditions (Mulla and Krishnan, 2012; Muniapan, 2007; Muniapan and Satpathy, 2010; Parashar; 2008), Buddhist tradition (Weerasinghe et al., 2014; Marques, 2012); and Islamic traditions (Ul-Haq and Westwood, 2012). Although there is a wealth of research on the subject, a lot still remains to be explored. This paper, thus, explores the effective leadership lessons from the most widely acclaimed text of Santana Dharma, Bhagavad Gita.

Bhagavad Gita, one of the chief scriptures of Sanatan Dharma, is said to be a manual of human life (Knapp, 2016) and a summary of the very essence of the Vedas (Natesan et al., 2009). The text is more prescriptive than proscriptive, although proscriptions are inherent in prescriptions. It contains a summarised explanation of five branches of knowledge, namely, Isvara (God), Jiva (spirit soul/living being), Prakriti (material nature), Kala (time), and Karma (action). These five branches are very closely interrelated. A living being (Jiva) performs appropriate actions (Karma) in the material nature (Prakriti) under the influence of time (Kala) to attain the love of God (Isvara). Out of these five concepts, the concept of Karma (especially Niskama Karma) is frequently used in the management literature as an attribute of a good leader (Kalagnanam and Venne, 2015; Chakraborthy and Chakraborthy, 2006). Along with the concept of Karma, this paper also scrutinises other concepts such as Isvara, Jiva, Prakriti and Kala to derive leadership lessons. This paper begins with reviewing the already existing literature in the field followed by explaining the objectives and methodology of the research. Then it explains, in brief, the subject matter of Bhagavad Gita and derives leadership lessons from its different chapters.

2 Review of literature

Bhagavad Gita has been a source of inspiration for several world leaders including Mahatma Gandhi who regarded it as a book “par excellence for the knowledge of Truth
which afforded him invaluable help in his moments of gloom” (Gandhi, 1927). Several scholars have studied the text from their own perspectives and identified numerous leadership lessons. Roka (2011), in his book *Bhagavad Gita on Effective Leadership: Timeless Wisdom for Leaders*, makes a chapter by chapter analysis of the sacred text and finds valuable leadership lessons in each chapter. Chatterjee (2014), in his book *Timeless Leadership: 18 Leadership Sutras from The Bhagavad Gita*, follows a similar but an extension of Roka’s (2011) approach. He summarises a chapter of *Bhagavad Gita* for a leadership sutra and also discusses the sub-sutras closely related to the major sutra. Discussed below are some of the leadership lessons from literature on themes such as *Iswara, Jiva, Prakriti, Kala and Karma*.

2.1 *Iswara*

Devdutt Pattanaik, while elaborating on the Indian approach to leadership opines that a leader should act like Lord Vishnu or Lord Krishna and not like Indra, the king of heaven. This is because Indra strives for his own satisfaction while Lord Vishnu assumes the role of maintainer and strives to satisfy everybody else (Ravi, 2016). In Pattanaik’s words:

> “Rama and Krishna act for the benefit of others, the larger group. Ravana and Duryodhana are more interested in their glory even if their respective kingdoms are destroyed. The journey towards leadership is a journey from ‘me’ to ‘we’. ……..Just as Vishnu adapts with time (different avatars for different yugas) we have to change with time. Sometimes be rule followers, sometimes be rule breakers. Vishnu is not dependent on people around him. He makes himself dependable for them. That is what makes Vishnu attractive to Lakshmi (customers, investors, talent).” (Excerpts from the interview with Devdutt Pattanaik published in The Hindu) (Ravi, 2016).

Low and Muniapan (2011) draw leadership traits from the Hindu trinity of Lord Shiva, Lord Brahma and Lord Vishnu, and expound that initially leaders have to create an organisational culture by the dint of their knowledge and wisdom like Brahma, who is considered by Hindus as the creator of the universe and has Goddess Saraswati (goddess of learning) by his side. The leaders then have to protect and maintain the core values of the organisational culture in a way similar to Lord Vishnu, who is considered to be the preserver of the whole universe. Finally, leaders have to destroy or eliminate bad corporate practices, similar to Lord Shiva, the destroyer of the universe (Low and Muniapan, 2011).

2.2 *Jiva*

Jiva refers to the living being, the eternal spirit soul that changes body at the time of death and obtains a new body based on his desires, results of actions, and impression on mind at the time of death (*Bhagavad Gita* 2.13–20, Prabhupada, 1986). Muniappan (2013) identifies from this text, some very relevant traits of leadership for sustainability. By imbibing traits such as controlling the mind, controlling the senses, conquering internal enemies such as lust and anger, and being detached and mentally fearless, leaders can achieve sustainable development. These are the traits a *Jiva* that practices *Yoga* should possess (Prabhupada, 1986). Leaders should be *Shitapragyas*, implying that they should remain unaffected by the transient flow of pain and pleasure (Gayathri and
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Meenakshi, 2012). Mehta (2015) also revisits the construct of emotional intelligence through the realm of Bhagavad Gita and claims that modern psychological constructs (especially emotional intelligence) get support from this text. Satpathy (2010) gleams lessons of spiritual intelligence from the sacred text – a trait which is much needed by the leadership for conflict resolution. Kalagnanam and Venne (2015), in their paper ‘Management control in a spiritually charged organisation’ explain that spiritually charged leaders are transformational leaders. They observed that the five practices proposed by Kouzes and Posner (2012) for transformational leadership (model the way, inspire the shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act and encourage the heart) could be very effectively adopted by spiritually charged leaders.

2.3 Karma

The theory and Karma, (especially the Niskama Karma) and the concept of Swadharma contained in Bhagavad Gita have been extensively studied. Pandey et al. (2009), among others, have tried to explore the spiritual climate of business organisations and its impact on customers’ experience. By employing certain constructs borrowed from Bhagavad Gita such as Swadharma (self-dharma, which is the duty/work which gives one maximum satisfaction and joy and finally leads to quietening of the mind) and Loksangrah (working for ‘world maintenance’ or performing one’s job with intent of welfare of larger social and natural environment), they conclude that “enabling the employees to find meaning and purpose in their job may positively impact their service performance”. Muniapan (2015) explores the ethical principles for business management from Bhagavad Gita using the concept Niskama Karma and emphasises its relevance for contemporary business leadership.

Mahadevan (2008), while drawing management lessons from Bhagavad Gita, asserts that by developing a sense of neutrality and embracing the principle of Karma Yoga, the managers can discharge their duty efficiently and improve the quality of management in their organisations.

Natesan et al. (2009) extract six key principles from Bhagavad Gita and explain their implications for modern day management. These are:

a Yoga: disciplining the mind and body

b Dharma (duty): a higher purpose or calling
c Dhyana: meditation or self-introspection
d Samabhava: equanimity of the mind
e Nishkama Karma: selfless action

f Tat-Twam-Asi: that-thou-art – realisation of human interconnectedness

They opine that corporations and business establishments which do not serve and protect the stakeholders by following dharma, may prosper in the short-term, but face the dire consequences of their adharmic actions when they fail in their obligations to stakeholders. They also conclude that:

The Gita enunciates the principles of living. Living is an art which is not specifically taught. The Gita advocates disciplining of mind and body (Yoga), discovering a purpose in life – a higher calling (Dharma), constant
introspection and meditation to ensure staying on the path (Dhyana), interacting with the world with equanimity (Samabhava), engaging in meaningful and selfless action (Niskama Karma), while recognizing that all humanity is interconnected (Tat-Twam-Asi).

Hee and Gurd (2010) identified three key aspects of leadership lessons from the text.

1 First, the individual’s state of readiness: The capability/eligibility and readiness of the student results in finding a proper Guru (teacher) and, consequently, revelation of true knowledge. By using the construct of Swadharma, the authors explain that everybody is uniquely talented and that the talent can be expressed appropriately when an individual has the courage to accept and to adapt to the prevailing circumstances.

2 Second, the individual state of turbulence: The individual’s personality at different points of time is the interaction between three modes of nature (Satva/goodness/bloom, Raja/passion/vroom and Tama/ignorance/gloom).

3 Third, the individual’s state of reflection: The individual has to have the commitment to maintain the link between thinking and doing in whichever way it is possible. One may follow any path delineated in Bhagavad Gita such as Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga or Bhakti Yoga to maintain this link.

The authors also elucidate that leadership is all about self-management, which can be attuned and aligned with one’s inherent calling. One needs a Guru, who can be a guide and companion on the personal journey of self-discovery.

Two significant trends are observed in the already existing literature that draws management or leadership lessons from Bhagavad Gita. One, scholars analyse some relevant verses and extract leadership lessons from them (Kalagnanam and Venne, 2015; Muniapan, 2015). Two, they go chapter by chapter, find out the essence of each chapter and analyse how these represents some effective leadership values (Roka, 2011; Chatterjee, 2014). This paper, however, brings in a fresh dimension different from these two perspectives. It aims to highlight the major themes contained in the text and then analyse the leadership lessons in relations to these.

Majority of the literature exploring leadership lessons or managerial traits from Bhagavad Gita concentrates on the theme of Karma in general and Niskama Karma in particular. Some research touches upon the lessons related to the themes of Isvara and Jiva. The themes Prakriti and Kala, however have not been much explored. This paper discusses all the themes in a comprehensive way and explores leadership lessons from each of these themes.

3 Methodology

This paper employs the qualitative methodology of hermeneutics for analysis. As defined by the OXFORD English Dictionary (OED, 2016), hermeneutics deals with interpretation, especially of the religious or literary texts. A text, however, has two aspects, semantic and structural (Ricoeur, 1981; Rennie, 2000). The structural (i.e., syntactic) aspect of the text is readily apparent and thus objective but the semantic aspect is concerned with the meaning of the text which may need interpretation, especially when the meaning is confusing or obscure to some extent (Ricoeur, 1981; Tylor, 1971; Rennie,
2000). Epistemologically, the term hermeneutics has its origin in the name of the Greek messenger God Hermes, who is not only considered as an interpreter but also a contriver of tales (Prashad, 2002; Muniapan, 2010). The fact that this methodology is named after such a God may signify the difficulty and complexity involved in applying this methodology accurately (Prashad, 2002). One of the early discourses on hermeneutics is contained in Aristotle’s *Perihermeneias* (On Interpretation) (Palmer, 1969). The scope of hermeneutics also extends beyond the interpretation of ancient texts to the interpretation of human behaviour including language and pattern of speech, social institutions and ritual behaviours (Muniapan, 2010). On analysing a body of literature, Prashad (2002) finds that management scholars employ the methodology of hermeneutics in two ways. First, they apply the methodology very loosely as a qualitative methodology of interpretivism, ideographic inquiry, phenomenological inquiry and so on (Van Maanen, 1983). Second, the scholars use the methodology of hermeneutics precisely to interpret texts (and other organisational artefacts and activities) relying on the insights drawn from classical hermeneutic theory, philosophical hermeneutics and/or critical hermeneutics (Prashad, 2002). This paper follows the latter approach and employs the methodology of hermeneutics to interpret several verses from *Bhagavad Gita*, to draw effective leadership traits that are applicable for the contemporary times.

Following Muniapan (2010), this paper follows a four-stage approach of interpretation. The stages are identification, investigation, analysis and integration. In the stage of identification, the relevant themes, chapters, and verses (related to the theme) are identified. In the second stage, selected verses are investigated in detail with respect to their content and context. In the stage of analysis, the modern relevance of the selected themes and verses are identified, and in the final stage, the lessons are adapted for modern context.

**Table 1** Four stages of interpretation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Activities undertaken in each stage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>Five themes, Isvara, Jiva, Prakriti, Kala and Karma were identified. Chapters and verses concerning each theme were identified. For example chapter 7, 14 and 17 of <em>Bhagavad Gita</em> were identified to elaborate the concept of Prakriti or material nature. Relevant verses were selected from identified chapters to discuss leadership lessons for each theme. For instance, verses 14.6, 14.7, 14.8 from chapter 14 exemplify the theme of Prakriti.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigation</td>
<td>Selected verses were investigated in detail with respect to their content and context. In this stage, we first considered the direct meaning. In case it was not appropriate, we analysed for its contextual meaning. In case both were not applicable, we adopted the symbolic/metaphoric meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>The modern relevance of the selected themes and verses were identified. Instructions of Lord Krishna to Arjuna were analysed to sieve lessons for modern leaders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>Lessons were adapted to present context after necessary modification. For example, the incidence of Arjuna observing the armies in the battlefield before the war is adopted as a leader’s taking stock of the situation before responding to a major challenge and involving a systematic thought process into the future course of action.</td>
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4 Subject matter of Bhagavad Gita

Isvara refers to the supreme God, who is supreme in many senses of the term. He is the supreme controller (sarva loka mahesvaram, Bhagavad Gita 5.29), supreme enjoyer (bhoktaram yajna tapsam, Bhagavad Gita 5.29), supreme proprietor (deva-deva jagatpate, Bhagavad Gita 10.15), and source of everything (aham sarvasya prabhavo mattah sarvam pravartate, I am the source of all spiritual and material worlds and everything emanates from Me, Bhagavad Gita 10.8). He is called Bhagavan (Bhaga means opulence, and Van means possessor), the possessor of all the opulence. There are six kinds of opulence: wealth, knowledge, beauty, fame, strength and renunciation. God is described as the possessor of all these opulence to the fullest extent. Vishnu Purana mentions;

The Supreme Personality, who possesses all riches, all strength, all fame, all beauty, all knowledge and all renunciation, is called Bhagavan. (aisvarasya samagrasya viryasya yassah, jnana-vairagyas chaiva sannam bhaga itinginga) (Visnu Purana, Canto 6, Chapter 5 and Text number 47).

There are three aspects of understanding God: Brahman, Paramatma, and Bhagavan (Prabhapada, 2003). Srimad Bhagavatam says;

Learned transcendentalists who know the Absolute Truth call this nondual substance Brahman, Paramam or Bhagavan (vadanti tat tatvavidas tatvam yaj jnana advayam, brahmeti paramatmeti bhagavan iti sabdyate) (Srimad Bhagavatam, Canto 1, Chapter 2 and Text number 11).

Brahman refers to the spiritual effulgence that pervades the whole spiritual and material manifestation. Paramatma refers to the localised existence of the Lord within the heart of every living entity (sarvasya chaham hridi sanivisto, Bhagavad Gita 15.15; hridi sarvasya visthitam Bhagavad Gita 13.18) and within everything in the universe (sarvam avritya tisthati, Bhagavad Gita 13.14; bahir antas cha bhutam acharam evacha, the Supreme Truth exists outside and inside of all living beings, the moving and the non-moving, Bhagavad Gita 13.16). The Bhagavan feature of God implies that apart from God’s existence as Brahman and Paramatma, He exists in his eternal abode with an eternally youthful personal form. Brahma Samhita explains:

I worship Govinda, the primeval Lord, residing in His own realm, Goloka, with Radha, resembling His own spiritual figure, the embodiment of the ecstatic potency possessed of the sixty-four artistic activities, in the company of Her confidantes [sakhis], embodiments of the extensions of Her bodily form, permeated and vitalized by His ever-blissful spiritual rasa (Ananda chinmaya-rasa-pratibhavatathas, tabhiraeva nijarupa taya kalabhah, goloka eva nivatati akhilatma bhuto, govindam adi-parusam tamaham bhajami) (Brahma Samhita chapter 5 verse 37; Saraswati, 2003)

The individual living entity is denoted in Bhagavad Gita as Jiva. Bhagavad Gita says that the living being is not the body. In other words, the body constitutes the dead matters such as earth, water, air, fire and ether. The living force or consciousness that pervades the entire body actually comes from the spirit soul that is situated within the body (yena sarvam idam tatam, that which pervades the entire body, Bhagavad Gita 2.17). That’s why the living entity is termed as embodied soul (dehi) (Bhagavad Gita 2.13). The body is temporary but the spirit soul is ever existing and unchangeable. Bhagavad Gita says:
Of the non-existent [the material body] there is no endurance and of the eternal [the soul] there is no change. (nasato vikdyate bhavo nabhava bidyate satah) (Bhagavad Gita 2.16).

The living entity changes different bodies as we change worn out garments (Bhagavad Gita 2.22). Some of the features of spirit soul/the living entity as outlined in the second chapter of Bhagavad Gita are: it is indestructible, eternal, unchangeable, unborn, immutable, ever-existing, primeval, invisible, inconceivable and immutable, it can never be cut to pieces by any weapon, nor burned by fire, nor moistened by water, nor withered by the wind (Bhagavad Gita 2.17, 2.21, 2.23, 2.24, 2.25). Qualitatively individual living entities have similar nature (Sat/eternity, Chit/all cognisant and Anand/blissful) (Bhagavad Gita 2.20; Bhagavad Gita 15.7) to God, the supreme soul, but quantitatively they can never be equal to God (Bhagavad Gita 15.17-18). This individual living entity performs actions (Karma) under the influence of the material nature and obtains befitting results (prakriteh kriyamanani gunaih karmani sarvasah, all the activities are carried out by the three modes of material nature, Bhagavad Gita 3.27).

In the 7th chapter of Bhagavad Gita, Krishna talks about two kinds of Prakritis, namely, Apara (inferior) Prakriti and Para (superior) Prakriti. Apara Prakriti consists of eight elements: earth, water, air, fire, ether, mind, intelligence and false ego (Bhagavad Gita 7.4). Para Prakriti comprises all the living entities/the spirit souls (Bhagavad Gita 7.5). All created things and beings have their origin in these two natures and these two natures ultimately have their sources in God (Bhagavad Gita 7.6). Nature consists of three Gunas or modes: Goodness (Satva), Passion (Raja) and Ignorance (Tama) (Bhagavad Gita, 14.5). The living entity being conditioned by these modes is forced to perform certain actions (Bhagavad Gita 14.19) and in this process, obtains concomitant reactions. Those situated in the mode of goodness are conditioned by a sense of happiness and knowledge (Bhagavad Gita 14.6). The mode of passion is born of unlimited desires and longings (Bhagavad Gita 14.7). The mode of ignorance creates delusion for embodied living entities and results in madness, indolence and sleep, which bind the conditioned soul (Bhagavad Gita 14.19).

Time is described as the agent of change and destruction (kalo-smi loka-kshaya-krit pravridho, time I am, the great destroyer of the worlds, Bhagavad Gita 11.32). It also refers to the duration of the manifestation of this material nature. Time is above the material nature and also eternal (Prabhupada, 1986). The activities of the living entity are performed by the combined influence of three modes of material nature and the force of time.

Karma or action is one of the primary subject matters of Bhagavad Gita. The text discusses three kinds of actions, namely, Sakarma, Vikarma and Akarma. Sakarma or pious action is according to the scriptural injunctions or principles (Bhagavad Gita 3.15). Vikarma or sinful action is just opposite of Sakarma, i.e. against the scriptural injunctions or principles. Akarma or transcendental action is devoid of any material motivation and performed only for the satisfaction of the Supreme Lord (Bhagavad Gita 3.16). Sakarma and Vikarma are performed in material realm and thus have material results, and they bind the living entities to the cycle of birth and death in this material world. Akarma, is performed at the spiritual level and thus it does not have any material consequence. Rather it frees a living entity from the bondage of birth and death (Bhagavad Gita 3.9). Pious and sinful activities never cancel each other. However, sinful activities are completely destroyed by the performance of actions in complete surrender to Krishna (Bhagavad Gita 18.66). These actions are devoid of the desire to enjoy the result of
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actions (*Bhagavad Gita* 3.19) and are also free from the attachment and aversion (*Bhagavad Gita* 3.24). These transcendental actions are otherwise known as *Yoga*, which means addition or connection. Thus, the activities that connect the soul with the Supreme Soul are known as *Yoga*. When prescribed duties are performed for the satisfaction of the Lord, they are called *Karma Yoga*. When one establishes the connection with God by dint of acquiring transcendental knowledge, it is known as *Jnana Yoga*. When meditation is the means to establish this connection, it is known as *Dhyana Yoga*. Reviving this relationship by the performance of direct devotional service to the Supreme Lord is termed as *Bhakti Yoga*.

**Figure 1**  Interrelationship among five aspects (see online version for colours)

These five aspects are very closely interrelated in numerous ways. A graphical presentation of some of these relationships is presented in the above diagram. When the living entity (*Jiva*) performs any activity under the influence of material nature, it is known as *Karma* (either Sakarma or Vikarma). When the same living entity performs activities for the satisfaction of God (*Isvara*), it becomes Yoga. God (*Isvara*) interacts with material nature (*Prakriti*) through time (*Kala*), which is also a manifestation of God. This diagram, of course, attempts a partial explanation since the relationships are much more complex than we can perceive.

5 Relevance of Bhagavad Gita for leadership

The principal characters in *Bhagavad Gita* are leaders par excellence in their respective field of activities. *Arjuna* was the greatest among the warriors of his time who had never lost a war. Krishna, in His human manifestation on this earth, though never became a king, was a kingmaker. After killing Kamsa, He made *Ugasena* the king. After the war of *Mahabharat*, He established *Yudhistira* as the emperor of *Hastinapur* and *Indraprastha*. After killing *Jarasandha* (killed by Bhima), He made *Sahadev* (the son of *Jarasandha*) the king of *Magadha*. Krishna is regarded as the *Adi Guru* (the pre-eminent teacher). *Arjuna* was overwhelmed by the weakness of heart (*hridaya draubalya*) and wanted to put down his arms rather than go for the war (Prabhupada, 1986). It was Lord *Krishna*, who at this time, motivated and instructed him with the finest and timeless principles of
human behaviour that are relevant to all people in general, and the leaders of all walks of life and of all the times in particular.

Traditionally the focus of the majority of research in the field of behavioural ethics has been on proscriptions (actions one should not perform) and not prescription (the behaviour one should engage in) (Mayer, 2011). However, emphasis on prescription which Mayer (2011) calls ‘prosocial behaviour’ and Treviño et al. (2006) call ‘positive behaviours’ is necessary to broaden the domain of behavioural ethics. Emphasis on prescriptive behavioural traits also enhances positivity and reduces negativity in the organisational and work environment. Leadership lessons outlined in this paper are mostly prescriptive since Bhagavad Gita primarily is a book of prescription.


6 Leadership lessons

6.1 Isvara

Etymologically, ‘Bhagavad Gita’ means ‘the song of God (‘Bhagavad’ means ‘of God’ and ‘Gita’ means ‘song’), Bhagavad Gita is primarily a conversation (in the form of questions and answers) between God (Krishna) and a Jiva (Arjuna) although there are a few verses which are spoken by Sanjaya (the secretary and charioteer of the king of Hastinapur) and Dhritarashtra (the king of Hastinapur). Of the total of 700 verses in Bhagavad Gita, Bhagavan Krishna speaks 574 verses, Arjuna speaks 84 verses, Sanjaya speaks 41 verses and Dhritarashtra speaks one verse. Krishna in all these verses speaks about himself and instructs a Jiva on how to act. In the 29th verse of the fifth chapter, Krishna proclaims that He is the supreme enjoyer, supreme controller of the whole existence and the ever-well-wisher (Suhrud) of all living entities. Although He is the supreme God, He happily accepts the position of a chariot driver of His devotee, Arjuna. A leader has to imbibe these qualities. Although a leader is in the position of controller, he should always be eager to prioritise to serve the followers and be their well-wisher for ever. Greenleaf et al. (2003) also emphasise this through the concept of ‘servant leadership’ and Burns (2012) through the concept of ‘transformational leadership’. The leader should be free of exploitative traits.

Krishna is the source of everything (the whole material and spiritual manifestation) and everything emanates from Him (Bhagavad Gita 10.8). He is also the supreme proprietor (Bhagavad Gita 5.29) but He is detached from everything (Vishnu Purana, Canto 6, Chapter 5 and Text no. 47). As a case point, Krishna leaves his capital city Mathura and shifts to a new place called Dwarka in response to the call of the time. His love for Mathura does not prevent him from answering the call of duty. Similarly, a leader should also be detached from his immediate surroundings even though he exerts substantial or complete control of them. At the time of need, a leader has to leave the empire he has created and move forward to his next destination or assignment. He also has to create the next generation leadership to continue the legacy in a way similar to how Lord Krishna created leaders like Yudhistira, and Sahadeva (the son of Jarasandha).
6.2 Jiva

Jiva, the eternal spirit soul, is represented by Arjuna. Bhagavad Gita begins with the chapter Visada Yoga where Arjuna is faced with a dilemma of whether or not he should kill his close relatives to obtain the kingdom of Hastinapur. War seemed to be a natural progression of the actions that had led to the current situation, that is, Mahabharata, or the battle of righteousness that was to be fought at Kurukshetra. Besides, Arjuna was amongst the greatest warriors of his time who had won many battles and had many laurels to his credit. In the Vasistha Samhita III.XI beginning: agnido garadas caiva sastra-panirit, it is stated that six types of aggressors can be slain.

1. one who administers poison
2. one who commits arson
3. one who attacks with deadly weapons
4. one who steals another’s wealth
5. one who usurps another’s property
6. one who kidnaps another’s wife (Vidyabhusana, 1998).

Duryadhan and his associates had tried to disrobe Arjuna’s wife, set fire to his house, plundered all his wealth by usurping the kingdom of emperor Yudhistira by deceitful means (gambling), and had poisoned his brother Bhim. At the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Duryadhana was positioned in front of Arjuna with lethal weapons with an aim to kill him. All these factors together meant that Duryadhan needed to be punished and the war was the only way to do so. Even in the face of these circumstances, Arjuna was not convinced about going to war, because he was worried about the consequences and the destruction in terms of lives and relationships it would unleash. It is in this indecisive state of mind, he approached Krishna, his mentor, philosopher, and guide, for clarity of vision. Arjuna’s thought process exemplifies the difference between reacting and responding. He did not react to the situation rather he tried to respond to it. The reaction is instinctive, but the response is a reaction coupled with thought and deliberation. Leaders accomplish excellence by taking action (responding), not by reacting to the situation (Natesan et al., 2009). Instinctive leadership many a time invites trouble, but deliberation and a mentor’s guidance make the leadership decision-making more robust and suitable. This principle has universal application and works as effectively for present day leaders as it did for Arjuna in the days of Mahabharata.

The second chapter explains the concept of self and makes a distinction between the false sense of self and the true sense of self. An individual assumes many roles and positions in life and tends to identify himself with some of these major roles, or at best, with his physical body. But Krishna dismantles this concept of the self and affirms that the living entity is the eternal, indestructible and immutable spirit soul (Bhagavad Gita 2.15-25). The soul is not slain when the body is slain. This fragmental spirit soul is a part and parcel of Supreme Soul (Bhagavad Gita 15.7). Parts are meant to serve the whole. For instance, hands and legs are parts of the body and these parts always serve the whole body. Therefore, the prime duty of every living being is to serve the supreme personality God and to serve the other living entities as well since each living entity is a fragment of the same supreme whole. This concept of “self” frees oneself from the false sense of
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concentrated selfishness (i.e. thinking about the welfare of his own body only) and extended selfishness (i.e. thinking about the welfare of other bodies which are related to one’s own body such as family, relatives, locality, nation etc.) (Prabhupada, 1986). It arouses in him the true sense of selfishness, that is, thinking about the welfare of the spirit soul that he is. This ultimately leads to selfless actions since welfare of the spirit soul lies in serving the supreme soul, the God, and his other parts and parcels. This kind of selfless action brings the best out of a leader which in modern management literature is referred to as servant leadership. In one of his public speeches, Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India, mentions that he prefers to think himself as the Pradhan Sevak (prime servant) rather than Pradhan Mantri (prime minister). In one of his speeches in the Indian Parliament, he asserts that his worship is the welfare of 1.25 billion people of India. It seems from these statements that he does not want the spotlight on himself, rather he desires to keep others in the centre, and thus he is a fearless leader. Keeping his political affiliation aside, he is no doubt acclaimed worldwide as a good leader.

The fourth chapter delineates the importance of right knowledge for a Jiva in order to perform purposeful actions. For acquiring such knowledge, a Jiva (especially a leader) should be inquisitive and humble (Bhagavad Gita 4.34). By dint of such knowledge, a leader has to overcome the traits of attachment, fear and anger (Bhagavad Gita 4.10) that are destructive to the personality of a leader.

In the sixth chapter, Dhyana Yoga, Krishna teaches that befriending the mind, disciplining the life, regulating the eating, sleeping and recreation, unwavering focus, suitable practice, and detachment from sense enjoyment are essential features of a real Yogi (Bhagavad Gita 6.16, 6.17 and 6.35). A great leader also has to imbibe these qualities. A controlled mind is a great friend, but an uncontrolled mind is the worst enemy (Bhagavad Gita 6.6). A leader’s mind has to be controlled to take the right decision. If a leader is controlled by the mind instead of controlling it, the senses drag him in different directions. Thus, the actor’s focus from obligatory actions will be diverted. Because the mind is restless, turbulent, obstinate and tough to control (Bhagavad Gita 6.34), Krishna suggests suitable practices and detachment from sense enjoyment (Bhagavad Gita 6.35) as the keys to control the mind. The practice includes withdrawing the senses from the objects of senses (Bhagavad Gita 2.58) and remaining undisturbed in the face of incessant flow of unbridled desires (Bhagavad Gita 2.70). This is clearly evident from the life of the great contemporary leader, Radhanath Swami, the governing body commissioner of International Society for Krishna Consciousness, who has delivered leadership lessons in British Parliament, Ford Motor’s world headquarter, Confederation of Indian Industry, etc. to name a few. He has mentioned in his autobiography (Swami, 2010) that during his journey from Europe to India, he vowed to remain a celibate and a vegetarian all his life. In Greece, he was tempted by a same-age girl to be in a relationship and in Iran he was tempted into a physical relationship with a beautiful young lady. However, since he had complete control over his senses, he could overcome such temptations. He then went on to become a world-renowned saint and a very successful leader of the spiritual organisation.

### 6.3 Prakriti

Prakriti consists of three modes which have tremendous influence on the personality or character of an individual. The 7th, 14th and 17th chapters of the sacred text talk about the character ethics which are different from the personality ethics that exist in the
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modern times. Personality ethics teaches one to wear a mask, that is, present a face that is not actually his. Character ethics tries to build a person from within and minimises the gap between front stage and back stage (within and without) (Goffman, 1959; Gardner and Avolio, 1998). Bhagavad Gita teaches that the character of an individual is influenced by three modes of material nature, namely, Satva, Raja and Tama. Satva conditions one to knowledge and happiness (Bhagavad Gita 14.6), Raja conditions one to unlimited hankering for sense enjoyment (Bhagavad Gita 14.7), and Tama conditions one to laziness, sleep and indolence (Bhagavad Gita 14.8). The psychological symptoms of Satva Guna (mode of goodness) include: contentment, knowledge, happiness, purity, cleanliness, patience, peacefulness, self-control, enthusiasm, clear understanding, intellectual pursuit, etc. The psychological symptoms of Raja Guna (mode of passion) include intense emotion, desire for more and hankering for sense pleasure, restlessness, dissatisfaction, false pride, enviousness, anger, lust, too much affected by joy and sorrow, etc. The psychological symptoms of Tama Guna (mode of ignorance) include apathy, indifference, hypocrisy, laziness, confusion, madness, fearfulness, sleep, lamentation, procrastinating, etc. Mode of passion helps in creation, goodness helps in maintenance and ignorance helps in destruction. Considering the psychological symptoms of the persons dominated by different modes, a leader is supposed to be in the mode of goodness although a little amount of passion is needed for creativity. Whenever it is required, a leader has to be associated with mode of passion for a limited period and then quickly return to the mode of goodness. Since the mode of passion instigates lust and anger, remaining in the mode of passion for a longer time than necessary is very detrimental. To imbibe mode of goodness, one has to cultivate habits pertaining to the mode of goodness and be associated with things and beings in the mode of goodness. Since everything in this universe is a product of these three modes, everything can be categorised under these three heads. Lightly spiced, boiled and fresh foods are in the mode of goodness; too bitter, too hot, too cold and too spicy foods are in the mode of passion; and decomposed, meals prepared more than three hours before eaten, alcoholic drinks, animal flesh, etc. are in the mode of ignorance. Among the drinks, fruit juices are in the mode of goodness; packaged soft drinks are in the mode of passion and alcoholic beverages are in the mode of ignorance. Among the places, clean countryside, gardens, natural parks, etc. are in the mode of goodness, Cities and modern workplaces are in the mode of passion; and night clubs, casinos, etc. are in the mode of ignorance. To develop the dominance of Satva in life, one should eat food in Satva Guna, be associated with people who are in Satva guna, read Satvik literature and entertain himself in the mode of goodness.

6.4 Kala

Time is the greatest destroyer (Bhagavad Gita 11.32) of everything. Contrary to the western notion of time as a passive phenomenon, Bhagavad Gita describes time as an active agent of change. Therefore, a leader has to accept change and tolerate the non-permanent appearance of pleasure and pain that come and go just like winter and summer come and go waiting for no one’s likes or hatred (Bhagavad Gita 2.14). A leader too has to set an example for the society since “whatever action a great man performs, common men follow and whatever standards he sets by exemplary acts, all the world pursues” (Prabhupada, 1986, Bhagavad Gita 3.21). Leadership system at Tata steel thus
incorporates ‘leading by example’ as one of the business purposes/missions (Jha and Arora, 2013).

6.5 Karma

As stated in the previous section, Karma can be Sakarma, Vikarma or Akarma (Karma Yoga). Bhagavad Gita, however, prescribes that a leader has to be Karma Yogi. In the second, third and fifth chapters of Bhagavad Gita, Krishna instructs on the principles of Karma Yoga. He teaches Arjuna not to focus on results but on the action itself (karman evadhikaras te ma phalesu kadacana, you have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action) (Bhagavad Gita 2.47) and to perform the task being equipoised forsaking all attachment to success or failure (Bhagavad Gita 2.48). Detachment from the fruits/results of action does not necessarily mean indifference to the result. This implies the indifference towards success or failure, or praise or blame born out of an action that is selfless (Peter, 2001; Natesan, et al., 2009). Too much focus on the result of the action distracts one from the proper course of action and sometimes prompts one to take shortcuts to achieve the end, which compromises the accuracy of a result. In contrast, performing obligatory actions religiously without thinking too much about the outcome will lead to excellence (Chatterjee, 2014). Attachment to the fruits of actions leads to inefficiency because non-attainment of the desired goal leads to lamentation and attainment of goal leads to greed which can never be satiated, thus making the attached actor miserable. Not only attachment but aversion is also a deterrent in the performance of obligatory action. Therefore, an actor has to be free from both attachment and aversion (Bhagavad Gita 3.34). In this context, the late Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, former president of India, in one of his speeches at IIM Indore in June 2013 narrated his encounter with a great leader, his mentor, Dr. Satish Dhawan. In 1975, when Kalam was the project director of the SLV space mission which had failed, Satish Dhawan faced the media, took the responsibility of the failure and said that he had complete faith in his team and that the next time they would surely be successful. In 1980, when the mission became successful, he sent Kalam to face the press. This shows the sign of equanimity of Satish Dhawan in success as well as failure and his ability to handle both success and failure effectively. When one is free from extreme attachment and aversion, handling success and failures becomes easy.

7 Conclusions

The modern world is full of challenges. Leadership in the modern era is becoming more and more complex. Bhagavad Gita offers some of the finest lessons of leadership values following which leaders can transform their character and change the world outside. A transformation outside is, in fact, the extension of the transformation within. Leadership values from Bhagavad Gita hold much relevance in this respect.

7.1 Contribution to body of knowledge

The systematic explanation of the five aspects of knowledge extracted from the Bhagavad Gita is an addition to the existing body of knowledge. Thematically organised
leadership lessons from the sacred text are also a novel contribution to the available literature.

7.2 Implications

The leadership lessons presented in the paper are particularly relevant for the practicing and aspiring leaders. Trying to be free from both attachment and aversion from the results of action, a leader will be equipoised. It would help the leader to achieve excellence rather than pursue immediate success. A leader who is in complete control of his mind and senses will not waste time in pursuing sensory pleasure. In a detached frame of mind, a leader would be able to take decisions guided by the principle of service rather than by the desire of sense gratification. By imbibing the mode of goodness, a leader can add more clarity to the decision making process, develop patience for maintaining the core organisational values and eliminate negative organisational culture.

7.3 Limitations of the study and future research

The paper adopts the methodology of hermeneutics for analysis. Since hermeneutics is an art, or more specifically, the art of interpretation, it is always difficult to construct fixed guidelines for valid interpretation of a text (Abulad, 2007). There is also a chance that interpretations are influenced by researchers’ own subjectivity and creative ability.

Though the leadership lessons presented in this paper are substantiated by suitable examples, the empirical testing of these traits has not been conducted. Future research may be undertaken to measure the effectiveness of leaders by conducting a before and after study taking these leadership traits as independent variables.

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References


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Notes

1 This is mentioned in the sixth verse of Sankaracharya’s Gita Mahatmya which says sarvaponishado gaavo, dogdha Gopala-nandanah, partho-vatsah, sudhir bhokta, dugdham gitamritam, mahat, which means “all the Upanishads are the cows, the one who milks the cows is Krishna, Arjuna (Partha) is the calf. Men of purified intellect are the enjoyers; the milk is the great nectar of the Gita.” www.salagram.net/gita_mahatmya.htm, accessed on 20th November 2015.

2 I prefer the term Sanatan Dharma over Hinduism for the simple reason that the term Hindu never appears in any Vedic religious texts nor does it have its root in any of the official Indian languages. The term is believed to be coined and popularized by Europeans. Etymologically it originates from the mispronunciation of the word Sindhu, the name of a river situated in the western part of Indian subcontinent, and syntactically it denotes the people living in the bank (or adjoining area) of river Sindhu but not to the people following a particular religion. On the other hand Vedic scriptures, monks and scholars agree on the term Sanatan Dharma, which may mean eternal religion.

3 OED originally writes it as Bible, but I have used the term religious text in place of bible for the purpose of wider applicability of the concept, so that it may include non-biblical religious texts as well.

4 Bhagavad Gita 5.29 refers to Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2 and Text number 25. It applies to all other citations from Bhagavad Gita.
Yet Bhagavad Gita has been passed down unchanged for thousands of years delivering great insights and realizations to those who study it with devotion to Lord Krishna and under a suitable teacher. There are many editions of Bhagavad Gita which have an impersonal slant to them, while they still deliver invaluable knowledge, the real essence is lost because Krishna is misunderstood to be an extremely elevated and self realized human being instead of the Supreme Personality of Godhead Himself appearing in His eternal transcendental two armed form to deliver knowledge of the highest caliber for. Most effective way would be “Learn Sanskrit first and then read Bhagwat Gita. If not, read the unabridged translation of the text. 4. THE BHAGAVAD-GITA— The Bhagavad-Gita (BG) is a dialogue between Sri Krishna & Arjuna, before the commencement of Kurukshetra war (more than 5,000 years ago).— The background for the BG is the epic Mahabharata. The Mahabharata with 100,000 verses was composed by Sri Vyasa Muni & was written by Sri Ganesa (the longest epic in the world).— The BG appears in 700 verses (of which 575 are uttered by Sri Krishna) in Bhisma Parva of the Mahabharata and consists of 18 chapters. Bhagavad gita & the dharmic approach to leadership development. Dr. Balakrishnan Muniapan. The bhagavad gita & leadership warfare. Dr. Balakrishnan Muniapan. Effective interviewing techniques. Dr. Balakrishnan Muniapan. English.