

Imbibing the Values of Bhagwadgita in the Corporate World

Ambika Rathi¹, Ankur Budhiraja²

¹Associate Professor, Department of Management, New Delhi Institute of Management, Delhi, India

²Assisatant Professor, Department of Management, New Delhi Institute of Management, Delhi, India

Abstract: One of the most popular holy books across the globe has been fortunately The Bhagavad Gita, written several thousands of years ago, but still relevant in the current times. To help Arjuna in his moral dilemma, lord Krishna preached the Bhagavad Gita, which can be a powerful catalyst for transformation. The story has all the management tactics necessary to achieve mental equilibrium and to overcome any crisis situation. It has all important teachings which can be applied to all stages of human evolution. At job most critical question in every one's mind or managers' minds is how to be effective at work. The answer to such questions is found in the Bhagavad Gita, which repeatedly proclaims that "you must try to manage yourself" (Bhattathiri2011).

Keywords: Nishkam Karma, Karma Yogi, Spirituality, Job Satisfaction

1. Introduction

The main objective of the Bhagavad-Gita is to help people struggling in the darkness of ignorance and crossing the ocean of transmigration and reach the spiritual shore of liberation while living and working in the society. The central teaching of the Bhagavad-Gita is the attainment of freedom or happiness from the bondage of life by doing one's duty. The story is about Arjuna, who became depressed when he realized he had to fight his relatives on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. To help Arjuna in his moral dilemma, lord Krishna preached the Bhagavad Gita, which can be a powerful catalyst for transformation. The story has all the management tactics necessary to achieve mental equilibrium and to overcome any crisis situation. In days of doubt, this divine poem will support all spiritual searching. It will contribute to self-reflection and deepen one's inner process. With it, life can become dynamic, full and joyful, no matter the circumstance. The Holy Gita is a practical psychology of transformation because it offers people the tools to connect with their deepest, intangible essence, teaching them to live with knowledge.

For all achievements, management's task is to make people capable of joint performance, to make their weaknesses irrelevant, as management guru Peter Drucker says. It creates harmony in working together—equilibrium in thoughts and actions, goals and achievements, plans and performance, products and markets. It resolves situations of scarcity; be they in the physical, technical or human fields, through maximum

utilization with the minimum available processes to achieve the goal. Lack of management causes disorder, confusion, waste, delay, destruction and depression. Managing people, money and materials in the best possible way, according to circumstances and environment, is the most important and essential factor in an organization's success.

Following are some thoughts inspired by some of the principles in the Bhagavad Gita:

Management Definition: There is an important distinction between effectiveness and efficiency in managing. Effectiveness is doing the right things. Efficiency is doing things right.

The general principles of effective management can be applied in every field, the differences being more in application than in principle. A manager's functions can be summed up as:

- Forming a vision
- Planning the strategy to realize the vision
- Cultivating the art of leadership
- Establishing institutional excellence
- Building an innovative organization
- Developing human resources
- Building teams and teamwork
- Delegating, motivating and communicating
- Reviewing performance and taking corrective steps when necessary

Thus, management is a process of aligning people and getting them committed to working for a common goal to the maximum social benefit. In other words, it's the search for excellence.

The most important dilemma in managers' minds is how to be effective in their job. The answer to this fundamental question is also found in the Bhagavad Gita, which repeatedly proclaims that "you must try to manage yourself." Unless a manager reaches a level of excellence and effectiveness, he or she will be merely a face in the crowd.

Traditional Sutras in Modern Context: Although it was written thousands of years ago, the Bhagavad Gita enlightens people on all managerial techniques, leading them away from conflicts, tensions, poor productivity, absence of motivation, etc., and toward a harmonious and blissful state. The modern Western management concepts of vision, leadership, motivation, excellence in work, goal achievement, meaningful work, decision making and planning, are all discussed in the

Bhagavad Gita. However, while Western management too often deals with problems at the material, external and peripheral levels, the Bhagavad Gita tackles the issues from the grass roots level of human thinking. Once the basic thinking of humans is improved, it will automatically enhance the quality of their actions.

Western management philosophy is based on materialism and on a perennial thirst for profit, irrespective of the quality of the means adopted to achieve that goal. This phenomenon has its source in the abundant wealth of the West and so “management by materialism” has caught the fancy of all the countries the world over. India has been in the forefront in importing these ideas, mainly because of its centuries-old indoctrination by colonial rulers, which has inculcated in its population a feeling that anything from the Western world is good and anything Indian is inferior.

Optimum Resource Utilisation: The first lesson of management science is to choose wisely and use scarce resources optimally. During the curtain raiser before the Mahabharata War, Duryodhana chose Sri Krishna’s large army for his help, while Arjuna selected Sri Krishna’s wisdom for his support. This episode gives us a clue as to the nature of the effective manager—the former chose numbers, the latter, wisdom.

Karma Yoga: A popular verse of the Gita advises detachment from the consequences or results of actions performed in the course of one’s duty. Being dedicated to work means “working for the sake of work, generating excellence for its own sake.” If we are always calculating the date of promotion or the rate of commission before putting in our efforts, we aren’t detached. We’re working only for the extrinsic reward that may or may not result. Working with an eye only to the anticipated benefits means that the quality of performance of the current job or duty suffers (through mental agitation or anxiety for the future). Events don’t always respond positively to our calculations, hence expected fruits may not always be forthcoming. The Gita tells us not to mortgage present commitment to an uncertain future. Some people might argue that not seeking the business result of work and actions makes one unaccountable. In fact, the Bhagavad Gita is full of advice on the theory of cause and effect, saying that all people are responsible for the consequences of their deeds. While advising detachment from the avarice of selfish gains in discharging one’s accepted duty, the Gita doesn’t absolve anybody of the consequences arising from discharge of his or her responsibilities.

Thus, the best means of effective performance management is simply the work itself. Attaining this state of mind, called nishkama karma, is the right attitude for work because it prevents the ego from dissipating attention by speculating on future gains or losses. The mind can be one’s friend or enemy, the cause of both bondage and liberation.

2. Motivation and self-transcendence

It’s been presumed for many years that satisfying basic needs

of workers—adequate food, clothing and shelter, etc.—are key factors in motivation. However, it’s a common experience that the dissatisfaction of clerks and of directors is identical—only the levels of dissatisfaction and composition vary. It should be true that once the basic needs are more than satisfied, directors should have little problem in optimizing their contribution to the organization and society. But more often than not, it doesn’t happen that way. On the contrary, a lowly paid schoolteacher or a self-employed artisan may demonstrate higher levels of self-actualization despite poorer satisfaction of their basic needs. This situation is explained by the theory of self-transcendence propounded in the Gita. Self-transcendence involves renouncing egoism, putting others before oneself, and emphasizing teamwork, dignity, cooperation, harmony and trust; potentially sacrificing basic needs for higher goals.

The ego spoils work and the ego’s the centerpiece of most theories of motivation. People don’t need a theory of motivation, but a theory of inspiration.

3. Organizational culture

An effective work culture is about vigorous and arduous efforts in pursuit of given or chosen tasks. Sri Krishna elaborates on two types of work culture—daivi sampat, or divine work culture, and asuri sampat, or demonic work culture:

- Daivi work culture involves fearlessness, purity, self-control, sacrifice, straightforwardness, self-denial, calmness, absence of fault-finding, absence of greed, gentleness, modesty, and absence of envy and pride.
- Asuri work culture involves egoism, delusion, personal desires, improper performance, and work not oriented towards service.

A mere work ethic isn’t enough. A hardened criminal may exhibit an excellent work ethic. What is needed is a work ethic conditioned by ethics in work.

It’s in this light that the suggestion, yogah karmasu kausalam, should be understood. Kausalam means skill or technique of work, which is an indispensable component of a work ethic. Yogah is defined in the Gita as an unchanging equipoise of mind—detachment. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a leader of the Indian Independence Movement and a social reformer, said that acting with an equable mind is yoga.

4. Work results

The Gita further explains the theory of detachment from the extrinsic rewards of work in saying:

- If the result of sincere effort is a success, the entire credit shouldn’t be appropriated by the doer alone.
- If the result of sincere effort is a failure, then the entire blame doesn’t accrue to the doer.

The former attitude reduces arrogance and conceit, while the latter prevents excessive despondency, demotivation and self-pity. Thus, both these dispositions safeguard the doer against psychological vulnerability, the cause of the modern managers’ sicknesses such as diabetes, high blood pressure and ulcers.

Assimilating the ideas of the Gita can lead people to the wider spectrum of lokasamgraha (general welfare), but there's also another dimension to the work ethic: If the karmayoga (service) is blended with bhaktiyoga (devotion), then the work itself becomes worship, a sevayoga (service for its own sake). Along with bhakti yoga as a means of liberation, the Gita espouses the doctrine of nishkamy karma (pure action) untainted by hankering after the fruits resulting from that action. Modern scientists now understand the intuitive wisdom of that action in a new light.

Scientists at the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland, have found that laboratory monkeys that started out as procrastinators became efficient workers after they received brain injections that suppressed a gene linked to their ability to anticipate a reward. The scientists reported that the work ethic of those monkeys wasn't all that different from that of many people: "If the reward is not immediate, you procrastinate," an investigator told The Los Angeles Times.

Multiple dimensions of work: In general, Bhagavad Gita is full of advice of cause and effect of karma dharma and moksha. Lord Krishan told Arjun that all of us are responsible for the consequences of our deeds. The Gita, while advising detachment from the selfish gains by discharging duty, does not absolve anybody of the consequences arising from discharge of his responsibilities (Sethumadhvan 2002). To pull Arjun out of his state of inaction Krishna appealed him to perform without attachment and reach the supreme (Parthasarathy1992). In general, Krishana updesha in Gita revolves around the philosophy to assess individual strength and develop inner faculties so that one can face and conquer the challenges in life. Each one of us needs to develop a strong intellect to withstand the onslaughts of an agitated mind and to direct actions properly (Parthasarathy1992).

The phrase "Don't worry, be happy" may well be a modern term but the secret of achieving this lies in the Gita. The Gita explains the theory of "detachment" from the extrinsic rewards of work in saying: If the result of sincere effort is a success, the entire credit should not be appropriated by the doer alone. If the result of sincere effort is a failure, then too the entire blame does not accrue to the doer. The former attitude mollifies arrogance and conceit while the latter prevents excessive despondency, de-motivation and self-pity. Thus both these dispositions safeguard the doer against psychological vulnerability, the cause of the modern managers' companions of diabetes, high blood pressure and ulcers (Sethumadhvan 2002).

Lord Krishna said: "Fearlessness, purity of inner psyche, perseverance in devotion of Self-knowledge, charity, sense restraint, sacrifice, study of scriptures, austerity, honesty, nonviolence, truthfulness, absence of anger, renunciation, equanimity, abstaining from malicious talk, compassion for all creatures, freedom from greed, gentleness, modesty, absence of fickleness, splendor, forgiveness, fortitude, cleanliness, absence of malice, and absence of pride are some of the qualities of those endowed with divine virtues, O Arjuna."

(16.01-03 Bhattathiri 2011)

"The wise, united to knowledge, renouncing the fruit of action, liberated from the bond of birth, indeed reach the state beyond evil"(2.51 Parthasarathy1992). Assimilation of the ideas of the Gita leads us to the wider spectrum of "loka samgraha" (general welfare) but there is also another dimension to the work ethic - if the "karma yoga" (service) is blended with "bhakti yoga" (devotion), then the work itself becomes worship, a "seva yoga" (service for its own sake.) Along with bhakti yoga as a means of liberation, the Gita espouses the doctrine of nishkamy karma or pure action untainted by hankering after the fruits resulting from that action Modern scientists have now understood the intuitive wisdom of that action in a new light (Sethumadhvan 2002).

5. Corporate social responsibility

Gita also offers perspectives on how to manage certain things in life, understand complex things that we go through. Krishna helped Arjun understand the importance of working with the spirit of sacrifice, its importance for the welfare of human beings. It comprises actions performed selflessly in a spirit of surrender and sacrifice to a higher goal in life. Such actions set the wheel of progress moving towards the ultimate destination of peace and bliss (Parthasarathy1992). It also offers direct ideas and sets us in a state of contemplation.

Lord Krishna said "treat alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, then get ready for the battle (2.38 Parthasarathy1992). Krishna prepared Arjun to look at the battle scene as an opportunity to serve the great cause of resurrecting righteousness in his country. The fact remains that while doing great work, all of us needs a great amount of energy and motivation. A person may run out of energy and motivation when he is doing something for personal gains, but he will always be driven by higher energies when he is able to see the larger interests of the world. Krishna taught Arjuna to fight against his elders not with the intention of sheer personal pursuits of materialism, but for Lok-kalyan: the good of many, with a firm belief in the virtue of ethics (dharma) over unethical actions. Moreover, work done for personal gains delivers a certain set of benefits which may outweigh the cost but works done for the common good reaps a quantum of benefits so great that it overthrows all the costs. Thus, the margin always remains high in the actions of Lok-kalyan. Sensing the responsibility of the work, a manager should ideally be able to evade negative mental states like greed, anger, jealousy, hate, and suspicion (Pratap2011).

Manager's mental health: Sound mental health is the goal of any human activity. Sound mental health is that state of mind that can maintain a calm, positive poise—or regain it when unsettled—in the midst of all the external vagaries of work life and social existence. Internal constancy and peace are the prerequisites for a healthy, stress-free mind.

Some of the impediments to sound mental health are:

- Greed—for power, position, prestige and money

- Envy—regarding others’ achievements, success and rewards
- Egotism—about one’s own accomplishments
- Suspicion, anger and frustration
- Anguish through comparisons

The driving forces in today’s businesses are speed and competition. There’s a distinct danger that these forces cause erosion of moral fiber, that in seeking a goal, people encourage immoral means (i.e., tax evasion, illegitimate financial holdings, hiding the truth, deliberate oversight in an audit, etc.) This unethical behavior is what I call the Yayati syndrome.

In the book *The Mahabharata*, there’s a king by the name of Yayati who exchanges his old age with the youth of his obliging youngest son for a thousand years to revel in the endless enjoyment of flesh. However, he found the pursuit of sensual enjoyments ultimately unsatisfying, and came back to his son pleading him to take back his youth. This Yayati syndrome shows the conflict between externally directed acquisitions (extrinsic motivation) and inner value and conscience (intrinsic motivation).

6. Conclusion

The despondency of Arjuna in the first chapter of the Gita is typically human. Sri Krishna, by sheer power of his inspiring words, changes Arjuna’s mind from a state of inertia to one of righteous action, from the state of what the French philosophers call *anomie* (alienation), to a state of self-confidence in the ultimate victory of *dharma* (ethical action).

When Arjuna got over his despondency and stood ready to fight, Sri Krishna reminded him of the purpose of his new-found spirit of intense action, which wasn’t for his own benefit, nor for satisfying his own greed and desire, but for the good of many, with faith in the ultimate victory of ethics over unethical actions and of truth over untruth. With regard to temporary failure, Sri Krishna says, “No doer of good ever ends in misery.” Every action produces results. Good action produces good results, and evil begets nothing but evil. Therefore, if you

always act well you’ll be rewarded. The *Bhagavad Gita* expounded thousands of years ago, enlightens us on all managerial techniques leading to a harmonious and blissful state of affairs. We all have grown up, listening to our teachers and parents narrating same stories: ‘concentrate on your target like Arjun’ ‘do not get attached to the results’ ‘don’t be greedy’ ‘do your duty efficiently without being attached to or affected by the results’ or ‘always remember the glory and greatness of the creator’. *Bhagavad Gita* is a (scripture) great book to learn and implement management and managerial strategies

Our motive is to highlight the importance of teachings of *Bhagwad Gita* and isn’t to discard the Western model of efficiency, dynamism and striving for excellence, but to tune these ideals to India’s holistic attitude of *lokasangraha*—for the welfare of many, for the good of many. There is indeed a moral dimension to business life. What we do in business is no different, in this regard, than what we do in our personal lives. The means don’t justify the ends. Pursuit of results for their own sake is ultimately self-defeating.

References

- [1] Bhatnagar A (1997), “Ten Sutras for Corporate Success” available from <https://www.lifepositive.com/ten-sutras-for-corporate-success/>
- [2] Kaipa P (1998), “The Art of Accomplishment: Six Principles from Vedanta”. <http://mithya.prasadkaipa.com/learning/sixprinciples.html>
- [3] R. Prasad, (2010), “Introduction to Bhagavad Gita”. http://www.gita-society.com/bhagavadgita_englishch1.html
- [4] Pratap K B (2011), “Practicing Five Teachings from the Gita in Management”. <http://tdapdm.wordpress.com>
- [5] Parthasarthy A (1992), *Srimad Bhagvat Gita*, published by Parthasarthy Bombay
- [6] Ram (2008), “Metro turns to Gita for management lessons”. <http://www.gitaonline.com/metro-turns-to-bhagavad-gita-for-management-lessons/>
- [7] Sethumadhvan T N (2002), “Bhagvat Gita: A Framework for Managerial Effectiveness 2002”. <http://www.tirumala.org/sapthagiri/122002/philosophy.htm>
- [8] Bhattathiri M P (2011), “Bhagavad Gita a Motivational Management” http://sanskritdocuments.org/article/Bhagavad_Gita_a_motivational_Management_book_M.P.Bhattathiri.pdf