



Business Ethics in Bhagavad Gita - An Imperative Study

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ABSTRACT

Bhagavad Gita- The song of the Lord is one of the epic manuscripts written in Indian history. "Gitopnisad" incorporates the extract of supreme wisdom in the form of verses in a poetic manner. It is a descriptive scripture based on a profound conversation between Arjun and almighty Lord Krishna. Lord Krishna enlightened Arjun and all of us with small references and gifted us the most valuable lessons of life which have through centuries helped each one of us in leading a smooth life. Whether you are about to start your college life or start a new business, lessons from Bhagavad Gita can guide you.

The spiritual knowledge and the sagacity that has been disseminated to the world through this single scripture are unique and exceptional. It is one of the most popular scriptures that embody Indian spiritual values and philosophical excellence. Further, it has been an ocean of extensive knowledge not only about the purpose of life, relationships, ethics, and values but also about leadership, management and entrepreneurship. This paper is intended to draw insights into the extracted lessons that are indispensable for the entrepreneurs in the modern business world. An attempt has also been made to connect the contemporary entrepreneurial skills with the ancient day orthodox philosophy. As it is very difficult to understand the Sanskrit language of the scripture, an earnest attempt has also been made to make the subject interesting, easy, and plausible to all.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita, Management, Entrepreneurship, Business Ethics, India

INTRODUCTION

In the modern competitive corporate culture with a rapid change in the business environment, it is very difficult for many to think about starting a business

and try to create an entrepreneurial identity in the globalised economy. Universally entrepreneurship is an acclaimed subject of interest and research. Several pieces of research principally focused on the process of the conception of an entrepreneur, sustainable development and growth of enterprises under varied environmental conditions. Most of the behavioral studies claim that human behavior particularly entrepreneurial behavior is induced and can be controlled by external force.

The popular contemporary belief that economic prosperity is a solution to most current problems amongst political and business leaders world-wide, has led to two crises. First crisis is personal crisis, with individuals facing stress, poor physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being, low happiness quotient, insincerity and dishonesty in work and relationship areas.

Second crisis is social crisis, with leaders, organizations and nations, facing challenges of dictatorship, corruption, nepotism, terrorism, exploitation of masses and destruction of environment.

The above two crises, point to a deficit in ethics, personal and social values. An imperative need for a complete and adequate guiding philosophy is felt, leading to problem definition.

The Problem

Which philosophy, if any, can be a complete and adequate in itself to be applied in the areas of values and ethics to management, such that it can transform the individual (manager) and reform the society (organization), leading to economic prosperity?

The Solution – The Bhagavad Gita

The Gitopnisad was chosen to address the Problem, because –

- The Gita is ancient wisdom and its' philosophy is universal, since it covers everything - individual (vyashti), society (samashsti), nature (srishti) and divinity (parameshti).
- The authority of the Gita is undisputed in Indian Philosophy, as one of the prasthan- traya of Vedanta and "samasta-vedartha-sarasangraha-bhutam" (quintessence of the teaching of the Vedas).
- The philosophy of the Gita is endorsed by management academicians and practitioners - Natesan et al (2009) say, "The Gita's essence of Yoga, Dharma, Dhyana, Samabhava, Nishkama Karma, and Tat-Twam-Asi provides the keys for influencing contemporary management thought and global business practices'. Senge (1990), world-renowned management guru says, "It is not surprising that many are renewing serious study of ancient wisdom traditions of all sorts, including timeless texts like the Bhagavad Gita".
- The Gita as shown by Agarwal (1995) offers solutions to social, political and spiritual problems of large scale and scope.
- The Gita has had such a tremendous influence and impact on mankind that great leaders, scientists, philosophers and intellectuals have looked upon it as a source of guidance.

Values and Ethics in the Gita and its Application in Professionalism

The Gita is interspersed with countless personal values. The key social value of lokasamgraha (social well-being) is given in Chapter III - 20 to 26. An individual or manager relies upon his personal values to guide his however, knowing values without knowing how to apply them in life makes them impractical.

In this context, Swami Vivekananda says, "We hear 'Be good,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not tell a lie,' but nobody tells the child how he can help doing them. Talking will not help him...Only when we teach him to control his mind do we really help him".

Sharma (1995) says, "In the Gita, the focus is on the decision maker's mental state during the moments of decision-making. This can be contrasted with management, which focuses more on decision-making rather than the mental state of decision maker."

With eighteen chapters the Gita offers an individual, eighteen types of yoga, to control the state of his mind for meaningful application of personal values,

thereby transforming him into an able sthitaprajna or responsible rajarsi leader.

The Gita: On Startups, SMEs & Entrepreneurs

As an entrepreneur I get to interact with many founders of startups and thus am closely associated with the startup ecosystem. The most frequently asked question which these founders have is, "So, what problem are you trying to solve?" Most founders are able to answer this question by articulating a technology enabled, innovative solution which addresses the chosen problem.

In my experience however I am yet to meet a founder who has the clarity of purpose about why he or she is attempting to solve that problem in the first place. I believe that most startups are created because they are a good vehicle for an entrepreneur to create wealth in a reasonably short period of time compared to conventional businesses. If we ask an SME entrepreneur why he is running his enterprise, the answer might be - "to earn an honorable livelihood." The reasons to run a startup or an SME are both noble, but not inspirational enough.

The Gita says that sole and core purpose of an organization is 'lokasamgraha' or social well-being. Startup and SME entrepreneurs should make 'positive social impact' their business goal, even whilst running their businesses profitably. The inspiration that an entrepreneur can draw from positive social impact can be both - a perpetual source of inner energy and a guiding compass for him. Entrepreneurs must identify real problems faced by people, and attempt to solve them, with the singular success metric being the number of lives positively impacted. Other important goals like 'protection of the environment' are subsumed in the concept of 'lokasamgraha' or social well-being.

Instead of chasing profits alone or doing the bare minimum for the society under mandated CSR duties, entrepreneurs should make 'lokasamgraha' their core strategy - profits will follow as a corollary. In the words of Darden school of management professor and Conscious Capitalism, Inc trustee Ed Freeman, "We need red blood cells to live (the same way a business needs profits to live), but the purpose of life is more than to make red blood cells (the same way the purpose of business is more than simply to generate profits)." While making money is essential for the vitality and sustainability of a business, it is not the only or even the most important reason for a business

to exist. Conscious businesses focus on their purpose beyond profit.

The Gita provides the core guiding philosophy for all Entrepreneurs, and shows us that the purpose of our existence is to work for social well-being through excellence in action, while performing duties that are natural to us –

"Strive for Yoga which is excellence in action, through commerce which is natural to you, for sake of educating people; you should perform your work for social well-being."

10 Business Lessons from Bhagavad Gita

Lesson 1: You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction.

This verse from Bhagavad Gita says that we should not be expecting the results while performing our work. Instead, we should do the best we can to make that work perfect in every way possible.

PS - we shouldn't work for the rewards. You should work hard for yourself and your sanity and the rewards would come as and when they have to.

Lesson 2: Leaders should embrace rather than avoid formidable challenges as it brings out a leader's greatest strengths.

According to Bhagavad Gita, a leader should be determined and focused on what he has to do. He shouldn't be bothered by either obstacles or pleasures on the way. He should follow the right path with willpower and perseverance.

PS - The testing times get the best out of a leader.

Lesson 3: Be steadfast in the performance of your duty, O Arjun, abandoning attachment to success and failure. Such equanimity is called Yog.

There are two aspects of life: success and failure. But when these two aspects become a part of our professional lives, they start influencing our mental health. Success can bring us extreme happiness but failure at the same time has the potential to break us.

PS - The lesson is, we should not let the result of every situation affect our dedication and our mental peace. Both success and failure are a part of our journey.

Lesson 4: Krishna defines three specific disciplines required for effective leadership: the discipline of

learning, the discipline of speaking effectively, and the discipline of equanimity.

A leader should have the following qualities - learning attitude towards every task, delivering his thoughts effectively, organising the squad in an unprejudiced way.

PS - Being a leader is not just about knowledge, it is also about managing a team well.

Lesson 5: Elevate yourself through the power of your mind, and not degrade yourself, for the mind can be the friend and also the enemy of the self.

This verse of Bhagavad Gita suggests us to do some introspection and discover our natural state of mind. It says we should take every decision in a calm and composed state of mind. Neither happiness nor sadness should affect our decisions.

PS - Mind can be a friend or an enemy. Therefore it is always better to think positively and leverage your brain power for the best.

Lesson 6: The real test of a leader is to keep himself cool and calm even in the circumstance of high pressure.

Just like Krishna wanted Pandavas to win against Kauravas but he never lost his patience and guided Pandavas in every aspect so should a good leader do. He should be extremely calm and organized to lead his team.

PS - Everyone is going through tough times but it is the duty of a leader to keep everyone together and get things going.

Lesson 7: Actions based upon sacrifice, charity, and penance should never be abandoned; they must certainly be performed. Indeed, acts of sacrifice, charity, and penance are purifying even for those who are wise.

Bhagavad Gita says we should give back to the world in whatever way we can. Therefore, we should be generous enough to give back.

PS - So if you are someone with a roof over your head and food on your plate, do help others in whatever ways you can. This will keep you grounded and make someone's day.

Lesson 8: A leader should always share his knowledge and should be approachable.

A leader should never seem aloof. He should be a good mentor to teach his disciples and a good friend to take them forward with him.

PS - Never compete with your team. Be ready to teach them whatever you know and help them succeed.

Lesson 9: The intellect is said to be in the nature of goodness, O Parth when it understands what is proper action and what is improper action, what is the duty and what is non-duty, what is to be feared and what is not to be feared, what is binding and what is liberating.

This is the most on-point and valuable lesson to take from this scripture - It says we should give priority to prioritizing. We should set boundaries ourselves and stay clear in our heads about what needs to be handled first.

PS - Ruthless prioritization helps in organization of tasks.

Lesson 10: The steadfast will that is developed through Yog, and which sustains the activities of the mind, the life-airs, and the senses, is said to be a determination in the mode of goodness.

Last but not least, Here is a motivating verse from Bhagavad Gita- We should not be afraid of any kind of obstacle in our way. Instead, we should face everything with a positive attitude and we will be surprised to see the final results.

PS- We all know our potential. But it is the nature of nature to test us every now and then.

Testing the Philosophy the Gita

For the Gita to qualify as an applied philosophy for management, which is poorna or complete and adequate in itself, it has to pass the following tests –

1. The Perennial Philosophy Test

Huxley (1944) says “The Gita is one of the most clear and comprehensive summaries of perennial philosophy ever revealed”. The Gita passes all the three tests of perennial philosophy, as enumerated below

- A. It is closely aligned with the post-modern method of deconstruction, and addresses the manager’s need to continually question her or his assessments.
- B. Consistent reports of practitioners from all parts of the world are so numerous and so closely aligned that they serve as testimony to such reports being not merely a subjective experience.
- C. It not only points to an abstract ‘philosophy of unity’ but suggests that the kinds of perception it brings can radically alter the quality of our experience in everyday life.

2. The Completeness Test

‘Completeness’ is defined as ‘the state of being complete and entire; having everything that is needed.’ The scale and scope of the Gita’s philosophy is unparalleled – its’ impact is universal – it can influence, transform and reform, individual (vyashti), society (samashti), creation (srishti) and Creator (parameshti). Swami Chinmayanada (1999) says - “The Gita is complete because it offers a solution to all problems of humanity – at least this is the repeated claim of all scholars.”

3. The Adequacy Test

The Gita meets the five Criteria of Adequacy of a hypothesis as stated below –

- A. Testability - A hypothesis is scientific only if it is testable and must predict something more than what is predicted by the background theory alone. The Gita passes this test for e.g. yoga can lead to better decision-making by the manager.
- B. Fruitfulness - Successfully predicts new phenomena and opens new lines of research. Makes the most successful novel predictions. The Gita shows how the concept of lokasamgraha can be used innovatively to solve the problem of economic prosperity.
- C. Scope - The amount of diverse phenomena explained and predicted by the hypothesis. The gunas theory in the Gita covers the full diversity of use-cases and application of values, virtues and applied ethics for an individual or manager.
- D. Simplicity- The simpler a theory the more it unifies and systematizes knowledge, the less likely it is to be false as there are fewer ways for it to go wrong. The beauty of the Gita is its’ simplicity of application, which is known by countless examples.
- E. Conservatism - Hypothesis is best if it fits with established beliefs. The Gita is a perennial philosophy in the history of mankind which adapted with the beliefs of the time whenever applied.

4. The Practicality Test

Scholars, academicians, practitioners and business leaders endorse the view that the Gita is a practical philosophy. Kane (1998) says “Managers can look at the Gita, not as an abstract theory that can be tested in a laboratory, but as a way of life that can only be ultimately tested by being lived.” Sharma (1999) has summarized the application of the Gita to management, classifying it in four approaches, viz.

1. Empirical Testing Approach
2. Corporate Shalokas
3. Revisioning the Gita
4. New Age Management Models.

Further, there are many case studies of Indian and multinational companies who have adopted and applied the philosophy of the Gita.

Conclusion

From the above mentioned testimonies it can be concluded that The Bhagavad Gita is a **Poorna** philosophy for management.

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