

Srimad Bhagavad Gita

Ideas for modern management

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Introduction

Bhagavad Gita is one of the most popular of the ancient texts not only among the Indians but also among the westerners. In fact Robert Oppenheimer who successfully exploded the first atom bomb on July 16, 1945, at Alamogordo, New Mexico was greatly attracted by *Gita*. Watching this event from a distance, he was supposedly uttering a phrase from *Bhagavad Gita*². *Bhagavad Gita* has inspired many of our national leaders and provided them strength, moral courage and clarity of thought with which they have led the country in its struggle. Arguably, these are important elements of making a good manager or a leader today. Here lies the motivation for today's talk. But what really is interesting is that the ideas that we will see today are available not only in *Bhagavad Gita* but also in the ten *Upanishads* and for that matter in several ancient Indian texts.

At the outset let me clarify that I do not claim to be an expert in these texts. However, I have been going through the process of reading these texts through appropriate methods. By appropriate methods I mean initially learning from a *Guru* and then reading oneself the *Moola Mantras* supplemented by reading the commentaries by other well known personalities in the subject matter. Before I point to one or two interesting aspects of management from *Gita*, it is important for me to illuminate to the audience here the multi-faceted nature of the ancient Indian texts. We need to get this aspect abundantly clear so that the real value of the ancient Indian texts is fully understood. Further it also informs us that only if we approach the ancient Indian texts with such a perspective we will be able to gainfully understand its usefulness to solve today's problems.

Ancient Indian texts – Multi-faceted perspectives

First of all we must understand that the Ancient Indian texts could be read with different purposes. For example, a true *bhakta* of Lord Krishna may want to read *Gita* as it is a matter of religion to him. He may do a daily *paraayana* of some of the verses. Many of us can identify with this role. On the other hand, a student of philosophy or a person with a deep desire to search the inner truth or meaning of "self" or a spiritual seeker may view *Gita* as a spiritual text. Again some of us may fit into this role. But there is a third aspect to *Gita* and other such texts, which many of us are not aware of. Many of us perhaps did not also think of such a possibility. I want to bring this to your attention. This is what I call as "secular" or a "material" perspective.

¹ This is an edited version of the talk delivered by Professor B Mahadevan, Dean (Administration), Indian Institute of Management Bangalore in a seminar on "Towards a New Paradigm of Business management – Alternative Perspectives from Ancient Indian Wisdom", held at IIM Bangalore on December 12, 2009.

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² http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/ai/aboutopp.htm

What I mean by this is a set of ideas that help us conduct our life sensibly more from a day to day, working perspective. I call it is as secular because in this perspective there is no need to bring in the notion of religion or spirituality. I hasten to add that by bringing these additional dimensions it only makes the utility much better.

Therefore I find in all these ancient texts three distinctive angles. It all depends on how we want to read it. Let me take you through a couple of examples from Gita to drive home this point and bring some more clarity to the idea that I am proposing.

Is Gita a Religious text or a Secular text?

Let us look at a pair of famous *shlokas* – famous because it was a title song for the Mahabharata serial. Therefore most of us are very familiar with these *shlokas*.

- यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥ 4.7.
- परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।
धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय संभवामि युगे युगे ॥ 4.8.

For the first time in *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna manifests himself as God through these two *shlokas*. In the first three chapters he has been engaging in conversation with Arjuna more from a level of a “cousin”. That is what we implicitly infer from a reading of the *Gita*. Quintessentially this is the “*Avathara Purusha*” dimension brought through this Shloka. At a first reading one can easily detect the religious angle.

Whenever there is a deterioration of dharma the God takes one more incarnation (Avathara) to uphold the dharma. The incarnation of God, as the next Shloka suggests, is to protect the good people, destroy the evil ones and restore Dharma in the society once again. That is how the Avathara Purusha tatva manifests here in terms of the context, motivation and purpose of the incarnation.

This is one way of looking at it. I will show you another dimension to it. The same *shlokas* could be understood as a profound management concept because that is what you will find in the instructions of many engineering and management schools. Let me share with you this perspective with respect to these *shlokas*.

*Stability and long term sustainability of the system happens because there are **regenerative points**. When the system attains disequilibrium and shows signs of being unstable and going out of control measures have to be taken to restore the equilibrium in the system. This is a classical systems engineering idea according to which there are*

regenerative points in the system. If the regenerative points are not there, the system will go unstable.

One can easily relate this to some well known concepts in Economics & Management. These could indeed be explained with this. The demand – supply equilibrium, pricing decisions in alternative market structures, the way in which organizations continue to root out bad CEOs or Managers over time, the mechanisms to prevent opportunistic behaviours in the long run (and variations of this such as Prisoner’s Dilemma) could all be explained by this basic axiom laid out in this *shloka*.

Is Gita a Spiritual text or a Secular text?

Let us look at one more example. In chapter 2 of *Gita*, when Krishna begins his set of arguments to convince Arjuna the need to fight against the *Kaurava* army, the first idea he brings into focus is the notion of time. When you read it what strikes you is that this idea is in stark contrast to modern day pre-occupations with quarter-to-quarter guidance ritual that investment bankers are going after. However that is not the point of my discussion now. Let us look at one of the *shlokas* from this argument of time and its impact.

- वासांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय
नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि ।
तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णानि
अन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही ॥ 2.22.

The easy and direct meaning to this *shloka* runs as follows:

Just as a person discards an old and a torn shirt and wears a new one, the soul (Atma) also discards an old body and acquires a new one. What a simple way to explain a complex idea of a chain of birth and death events! There is a spiritual angle to it. It is a profound spiritual thought here and true seekers of knowledge will revel on this idea and deeply contemplate.

Now I will provide another way of looking at the meaning of this *shloka*.

In order to be successful and sustainable organizations need to continuously engage themselves in discarding old ideas (mind set!) & embrace new ones. This is the fundamental building block of innovation and creating competitive advantage.

When I read this *shloka* and tried to interpret it this way, what came to my mind is the recent work by Joseph Schumpeter³ on creative destruction and innovation followed by a number of other researchers. Don't you think the ideas are available in this *shloka*? The most important issue in management of change is one of mind set. The biggest challenge in organizations is mind set inertia. You can discard many things but mindset is very difficult to discard. This puts realistic limits to creating better organizations over time.

Another example can be found in a paper titled "May the Whole Earth be Happy: *Loka Samstat Sukhino Bhavantu*" written by a Canadian, Stafford Beer in 1994⁴ in an Operations Research Journal. In this paper, Beer shows how a *shloka* in Chapter 3 of Gita (3.27: अहङ्कारविमूढात्मा कर्ताहमिति मन्यते) indeed relates to some of the issues related to cybernetics and control theory. He also mentioned several other verses from Gita in the same paper relating them to certain management principles.

The point I want to make is simple. Reading ancient Indian wisdom with a translated book that one picks up in an *Ashram* office or a railway book stall is not going to reveal anything. It can at best confuse one, makes him/her believe that there is a set of dry and uninteresting and perhaps outdated unworkable ideas. Only when we are able to appreciate the multi-faceted nature of the ancient Indian wisdom, we can make any headway. This is especially true of trying to find the relevance of these texts for business management and for solving modern day problems. I request you to keep this cardinal principle in mind before engaging in any such activity.

While making this point I would also like to clarify that by this discussion I am not trying to suggest that the spiritual angle or the religious angle may not be required. In fact, the value that one derives from these texts is much more if only we take a spiritualistic angle to it. That is the primary purpose behind this text. I am merely pointing out that a number of useful ideas are also available even for materialistic world in such texts. As I already pointed out, only when we combine all the three perspectives we will benefit the most.

Relevant thoughts for Management

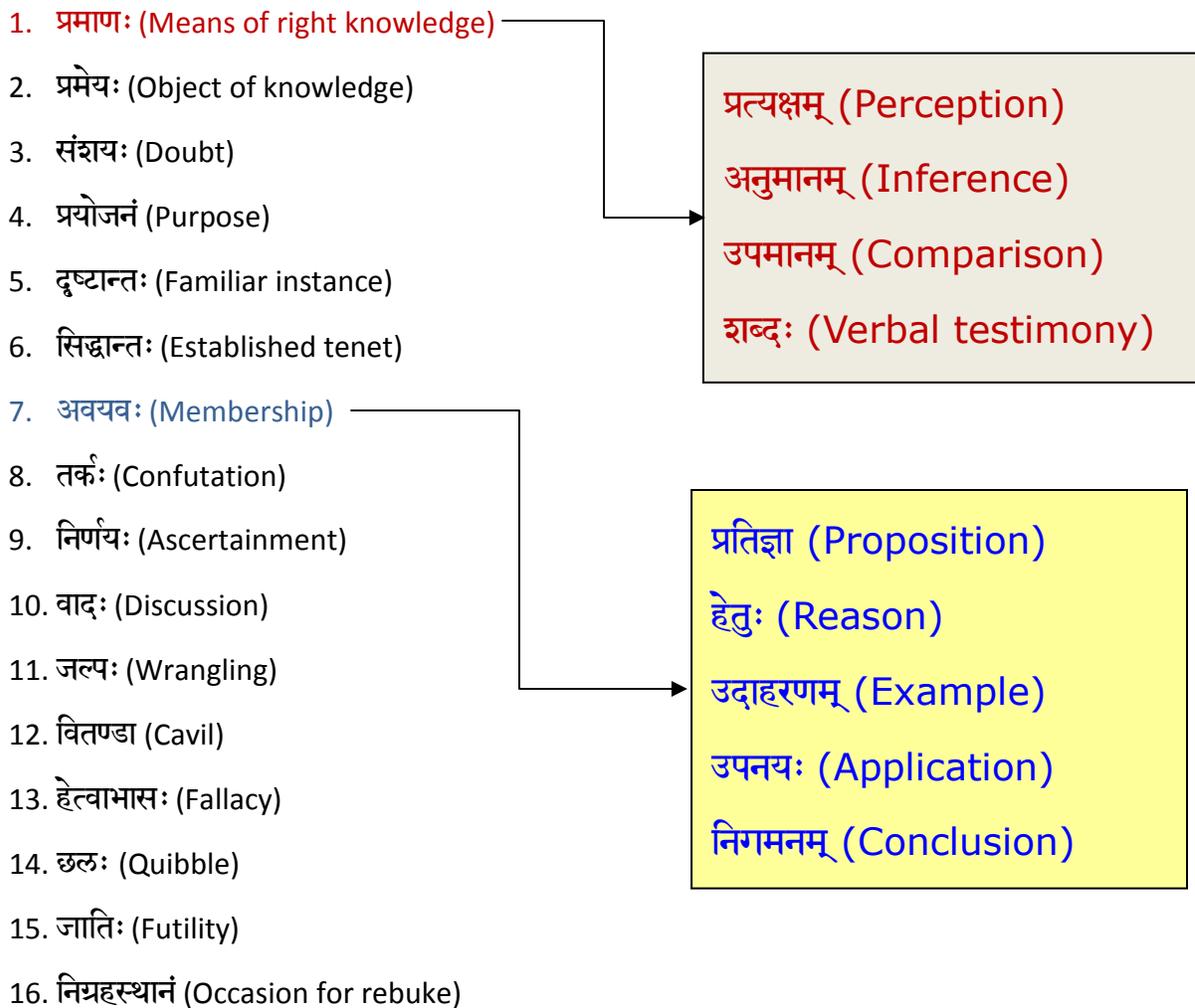
If we develop this skill, orientation and attitude to draw upon the repository of knowledge for our day to day living issues (such as Business Management), then we will realize that the world of ancient Indian wisdom opens up. One may locate a number of direct and relevant thoughts in these texts.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Schumpeter

⁴ Beer, S. (1994). "May the Whole Earth be Happy: Lokasamastat Sukhino Bhavantu", *Interfaces*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 83 – 93.

If you look at *Nyaya Shastra* of Gotama⁵ (550 BC) there is a very systematic description of how knowledge could be acquired. Starting with 16 categories of acquiring knowledge, there is a step by step enumeration of the idea at several levels. As a researcher in Operations Research, I find the broad framework very similar to enumeration algorithms such as branch and bound. I also see ideas that may help a maintenance management team to develop efficient troubleshooting mechanisms. Further it also informs management researchers how taxonomic classification systems could be developed. I just want to show you the basic classification scheme from *Nyaya*:

Figure 1
Nyaya Sutras of Gotama – A first level representation



⁵ Sinha, N.L. (1990). "The Nyaya Sutras of Gotama", *Motilal Banarsidass Publishers*, New Delhi. This work was translated by M M Satisa Chandra Vidyabhushana in 1913 and revised and edited by Nanda Lal Sinha and published first in 1930.

I would like to show one or two examples from Gita on the issue of relevant thoughts for today. Let me quote one *shloka* from *Gita*, chapter 3:

- अथ केन प्रयुक्तोऽयं पापं चरति पूरुषः ।
अनिच्छन्नपि वाष्णोय बलादिव नियोजितः ॥ 3.36.

In this *shloka*, Arjuna raises a question which is very pertinent to most of us. We have had several occasions in our personal and professional life during which we would have internally asked the same question.

Who is behind all these bad or wrong things that people do? Although I am not interested it appears I am forcibly involved into this.

In fact you ask managers who have erred in their decisions or committed some blunder, you ask fathers who have made blunders of scolding their children or taken wrong decisions about their daughter or son. They will always say something similar to this *shloka*. There is this feeling - I have become a victim of situation as though somebody is pushing me to do wrong things. We have gone through this frame of mind in our daily life. We are going through this frame of mind every now and then in Management. Krishna offers some explanation as to why this is happening in the *shlokas* that follow.

Gita also offers perspectives on how to manage certain things in life, understand complex things that we go through in simple terms (just as the example of birth and death). It also offers direct ideas and sets us in a state of contemplation. One example will help drive this point.

- मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः ।
आगमापायिनोऽनित्याः तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत ॥ 2.14.

The meaning of the *shloka* is as follows:

As long as the five senses are active in gathering the signals that come into contact with them, we will experience the world of dualities – hot and cold, peace and sorrow etc. You cannot runaway from the world of dualities as they happen continuously and are also impermanent. Learning to handle them is important.

Stress management is a big issue today. Most of the knowledge and help we get from the modern day thinking is to suppress or divert our attention from the issue of stress. They implicitly operate with an assumption that stress will be inevitably generated and the solution lies in doing something about it once we are stressed. Let us kill it or run away from it by some

means after it happens is the basis for stress management. We do not seem to address why one should get stressed in the first place.

On the other hand, this *shloka* addresses this issue and truly provides us an idea for “managing” stress. It is all about signal processing. We have to differentiate between signals and noise. That is the idea here. We don’t do so because we don’t have the capability of signal processing. That does not mean we can turn off the apparatus and stop receiving the signals. That happens only when we are in a state of coma. That is not what Lord Krishna is saying. *Gita* never says run away from problems. On the other hand it seems to suggest to us that understanding problems in the right perspective is key to managing them. That is the greatest management lesson that one can learn. The idea of managing the world of duality (समत्वं योग उच्यते) has been one of the key messages in the *Gita* and it has been repeatedly emphasized not only in chapter 2, but also in several other chapters. I believe this could be the cornerstone of developing superior self and people management skills and leadership traits.

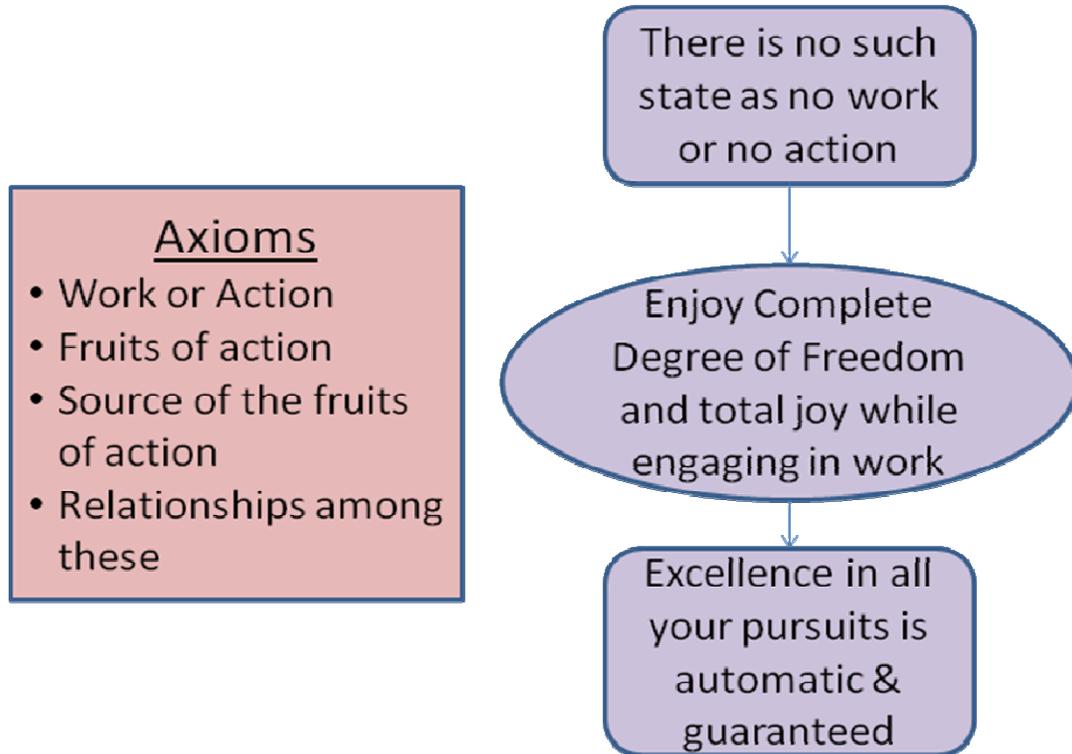
Basic approach to work in Gita

Management is all about doing work, doing it efficiently and ensuring that results follow. Viewed from this perspective, *Gita* offers counter-intuitive ideas on these issues (see figure 2 for a basic framework depicting this).

Work & Its effectiveness as the Core

Often people comment that the central message in *Bhagavad Gita* is about the notion of *karma yoga*. Of relevance to management is the notion of *karma yoga* and its essence in terms of work. It will be very useful to understand how this issue is laid out in *Gita*. First of all Lord Krishna establishes a paradigm that there is nothing called “the state of inaction”. He clearly says in chapter 3 that there is nothing like *akarma* (no action or inaction) (3:5 न हि कश्चित्क्षणमपि जातु तिष्ठत्यकर्मकृत्). There is nothing like a state of inaction. Why did he say that? Because only then we will focus on the issue of how to do work correctly. It is natural then for us to ask how to do work. He says enjoy complete degree of freedom (3:9 यज्ञार्थात्कर्मणोऽन्यत्र लोकोऽयं कर्मबन्धनः । 3:31 श्रद्धावन्तोऽनसूयन्तः मुच्यन्ते तेऽपि कर्मभिः) and total joy while engaging in work. That is the idea. While we are in the thick of work can we enjoy? *Gita* emphatically replies in the affirmative. Krishna goes to the extent of saying that with such a perspective to work, we may realize that even when we do a lot of work, we do not feel like indeed engaging in any work (4:20 कर्मण्यभिप्रवृत्तोऽपि नैव किञ्चित्करोति सः).

Figure 2
Basic Framework in Bhagavad Gita



Do you think this is a utopian idea? I do not think so. Ask a mother tending to her child with great love and dedication. She will relate herself to this *shloka*. If only we could ask some of the greatest social workers and inspiring leaders that this society has produced they might have replied in the affirmative.

This is again in contrast with our understanding of work and its effects on us today. One of the biggest problems that we are facing in our daily life, professional work and personal life is that we don't seem to enjoy what we are doing. Swami Ranganathananda mentions that there was no word like boredom in the dictionary about 400 years - 600 years ago⁶. Today the children say I am bored. Young professionals want to adopt the western model of "weekend get away". We need *week end get aways* if work is perceived as drudgery and an avoidable aspect of our life. Such a perspective can never get the best from work place that modern business management is worried about. What is this boredom? Why does it happen? Because we don't enjoy what we are doing, we get bored.

⁶ Swami Ranganathananda, (2000). "The Universal Message of Gita", *Advaita Ashrama, Kolkatta*, Vol. 1, pp. 430 – 437.

The basic tenet of *Gita* is antithesis to this idea that work could be drudgery. First understand there is nothing like state of no work. We cannot run away from work as there is nothing called “no work”. Further if you enjoy complete freedom of doing work result has to follow. That is the basic line of argument that I see in *Gita*. Lord Krishna says that it is possible that you can have complete degree of freedom and enjoy work. This is the basic thread of argument I see in the text which I think is very relevant for management.

Axioms of work

As I already pointed out, there is no escaping from work. Therefore, let us understand how the axioms of work have been proposed in *Gita*. There are four aspects to this, which is very well brought out in this famous *shloka* in *Gita*:

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूः मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ 2.47.

A direct translation of this *shloka* is as follows:

You have the right to work but never to the fruits of the action. Further you do not have the right to the root cause of the fruits of action. You also do not have the right to remain in the society without performing any work.

As we notice from the above translation, there are four components of the axiom of work defined in *Gita*. It is much easier to explain the rationale of the last component. When one is told that he/she has to do the work, he/she does not ask for results or bother about what causes these results, the normal tendency in some cases is to say, “well in that case, I am not interested in doing the work”. The last component takes away that possibility. Since in *Gita*, the notion of non-work or inaction is not a feasible alternative, the last component makes sense. The most difficult part is the second and the third component. How can someone do the work and yet not have the right for results? This requires some more articulation and understanding of the idea.

Let us see it from the management perspective. The current day thinking and this are in loggerheads. We are told that we need to work for results. Why is then Lord Krishna advocating the antithesis of this? In order to get this clear, let us trace some side effects of working for results. Many of us with some work experience will be able to relate to these side effects:

- Result orientation can make one wary of failures, we may refuse to undertake great activities (modern risk management issue comes into play). Yesterday I read in the paper that an 8th standard student ended her life because she did not clear the exam. What a tragedy and what a side effect that we need to face?

- We have a tendency to excessively focus on ends instead of means. This is what most working in Multi-National Companies are busy doing. Modern day managers spend significant time to manager “performance reports” rather than “performance” itself.
- In order to be good in managing the performance report, “process orientation” must give way for “result orientation”
- What are results at the end of the day? They are issues of the future about which we spend our time in the present. Therefore, we may tend to escape the dynamics of “present” and go after “future”

The apparent confusion that we have in understanding this *shloka* is that when we say you have no right to the results, it merely suggests that take off your pre-occupation with results and have a process orientation. Results must follow automatically. Is it not what the total quality management (TQM) philosophy is also arguing about? Further, you may ask, why do we want to take the fixation from results and instead concentrate on the work itself? The simple answer to it is that by doing do it lets you literally “get lost in work”. When one gets lost into work, the traditional barriers of efficiency and motivation are broken and the individual treads into extraordinary performances borne out of inspiration. Perhaps, that is how a Nobel Laureate or a great scientists or a visionary leader would have spent several years of his/her time.

We often say when we do very interesting things in life that “I never know how time passed?”

That is a good indication of our ability to practice कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन. This is neither an unknown or impossible idea to the mankind. Every day we all practice this when we have a deep sleep. We rise from the deep sleep and remark that we had a sound sleep. By that what it means is no matter what sound others made in the vicinity I continued to sleep. Try to sleep with an objective of having a 6 hour sound sleep and work for the result, you will not get sound sleep. Your mind will work very hard to find out how to ensure 6 hours of deep sleep and in the process you will get tired. May be after some time when the analytical and result oriented mind gets fatigued, you will slip into deep sleep.

The ancient Indian texts such as *Bhagavad Gita* are profound and are meant to open up the horizon in the minds of the people. Therefore I am hardly surprised that we can drawn such alternative ideas and thoughts from such texts. However, in order to benefit from this immensely, in the domain of management, we need to step out of the world of rationality and tread into unknown areas. Perhaps a nearest reference to this idea in modern day is “out of the box” thinking or thinking “without” the box. This in itself is a paradigm shift in perception that we need to make in our own mind.

Sustainability & Mutual Dependence: Pre-conditions for success

The world today is heading towards a sort of crisis unleashed by running the consumption engine to its maximum utilization. The Copenhagen summit is a reference point to the current issue of sustainability. This cardinal principal of sustainability has been dealt with in the Gita.

Lord Krishna argues that only with the basic notion of mutual dependency success and prosperity can be attained:

- देवान्भावयतानेन ते देवा भावयन्तु वः ।

परस्परं भावयन्तः श्रेयः परमवाप्स्यथ ॥ 3.11.

The translation of the shloka suggests that while we take care of the Devas (through the basic act of Yagna), Devas in turn take care of us. This sense of mutual dependency begets ultimate success and prosperity in the long run.

I wish this *shloka* was discussed in some detail in the UN Climate change conference held in Copenhagen in December 2009. Why are we facing the problems of climate change, greenhouse effect, acid rains and the likes? What is the solution for these problems? In order to understand this we must go back to the contrasting perspectives that Indian wisdom (or for that matter the Eastern wisdom) and the modern (Western) wisdom offer on the issue of the relationship between man and nature (universe).

Westerners believe that the nature could be and (perhaps) must be tamed so that it serves the needs of the mankind. One of the ways to do this is to work out an equation of “natural” balance and use this equation to decide what variables must be in what magnitude so that the nature is controlled. This may sound fancy for us but it is one of the methods. It may be even impossible to develop an “all encompassing” equation that can describe what is the optimal level of nature? Despite this, the state of New Hampshire Fishing & Game Department will do an annual exercise of deciding on the number of each species of fauna that they need to eliminate to maintain the natural balance and issue hunting permits⁷. The fact that the hunting permits industry follows American free market principles to maximize revenue is not the story of interest to us now. The moot point is can “man” tame the “nature” by making such interventions or leave it to natural systems to self-correct and restore equilibrium (यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत । अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥). In his book titled *The Turning Point*, the particle physicist discussed in detail the defining characteristics of natural systems⁸. It follows closely the ideas and sentiments expressed by Krishna in this *shloka*.

Western thinking is that everything is under man’s control. Contrastingly as this *shloka* points out the Eastern thinking is to co-exist with nature. The idea of mutual dependence portrayed in this *shloka* is a deeper concept for management. A few specific examples will help understand this better. From a management perspective this is a very real idea. The CEO is dependent on

⁷ For more details on this you may want to visit <http://www.wildlife.state.nh.us/Hunting/hunting.htm>.

⁸ Capra, F. (1982). “Systems View of Life” Chapter 9 in *The Turning Point*, Simon and Schuster, New York, pp 265 – 304.

other people in the organization. If the CEO throws too much of his/her weight, people in the organization will simply leave (the organization into lurch as well!). Similarly, the boss is critically dependent on the sub-ordinates. The moment the boss proclaims he/she had done everything and the rest of his/her team was not part of the success, he/she becomes alone in no time. He/she may try to use outside support to get things done but श्रेयः परमवाप्स्यथ principle would not apply.

The world is full of interconnections. At a gross level the boss – subordinate as I just demonstrated. At the next level it is government - society. If the politicians think they can go scot free ignoring the sentiments of people it is an unsustainable proposition in the long run. At the next level it is man – nature. Instead of understanding this if we resort to market mechanisms such as carbon credits, again it will become unsustainable and we will pay for it with interest. At the ultimate level it is living – nonliving entities.

Given the current tensions and problems in environmental degradation I think we can contribute to addressing this issue with a better understanding of this *shloka*. This country can contribute because we are still cherishing some of the old ideas⁹. We need to develop the importance of these interconnections between man and nature, even go further, living and non living things, bring to the surface our traditional understanding of the value of even inanimate things such as rock, rivers and so on. They all have a huge role to play in this and are important variables in our equation of sustainability. If we don't understand this, then there is no management. I am sure in the next 100 years, we will rediscover this.

Conclusions

There are several other useful ideas in Gita for management. For want of time I may not be able to discuss those in detail. However, I want to merely point to couple of them in quick reference. There are specific ideas for management that addresses issues pertaining to self, self mastery and self assessment. There are also specific suggestions on the leadership traits.

All that I would like to say in conclusion is that there are plenty of ideas in *Bhagavad Gita* and for that matter in several other ancient Indian texts. Please appreciate the value proposition in these texts. You can have spiritual progress, you can have material progress too in a very balanced way. That is the charm I see in knowing ancient Indian scriptures. You can have happiness, not only success. This could be one of the good reasons for us to look at some of these and make our own notes. I see the potential for much larger perspectives in ancient Indian wisdom and much greater propensity to draw out of it and apply in a variety of situations. To me that is superior management and that is where we should perhaps focus more of our attention in the future.

⁹ For example you may want to read **Mahadevan, B. (1999)**. The Economic worth of Indian Austerity, *Hindu Business Line*, August 19, 1999.