

CHAPTER 67

The Bhagavad Gita as a Guide to Ethical and Sustainable Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The Bhagavad Gita, a respected part of the Mahabharata written by the sage Vyasa over five thousand years ago, serves as a lasting guide for leadership. Its teachings still offer valuable wisdom for today's world. This study uses hermeneutics, which is the way we understand ancient texts, along with other viewpoints from various sources, to explore the Gita's guidance on sustainable leadership. Among its many moral teachings, the Gita focuses on four key ideas: controlling the mind, managing oneself, fulfilling duties, and handling relationships. These ideas offer deep direction for dealing with modern business issues like conflicts, low productivity, and loss of motivation. By looking at the deeper parts of the human mind, the Gita shows how changes in thinking can improve actions and make outcomes better. The findings from this study not only strengthen the theories behind sustainable leadership but also give real-world advice for leaders who want to build resilience, behave ethically, and promote long-term success for their organizations.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita; Sustainable leadership; Ethical principles; Management.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The BHAGAVAD GITA

The name Bhagavad Gita means "The Song of the Divine": It is a philosophical conversation written by the sage Vyasa, who also compiled the Mahabharata. As part of this great story, the Gita is divided into 18 chapters with about 700 verses. It presents a timeless talk between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, two important characters in the Mahabharata, which tells the story of the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The story takes place on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, where Arjuna is deeply troubled by the thought of fighting against his own family members and loses the will to fight. Lord Krishna, who is both Arjuna's charioteer and advisor, guides him on duty, righteousness, and the larger meaning of life. Through this conversation, Arjuna's confusion and sadness go away, and he is able to fulfill his role as a warrior and lead the Pandavas to victory.

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Leadership Lessons from the Gita

The Gita contains messages about leadership and proper behavior:

- Leaders should be aware of themselves and their surroundings.
- Character is the main trait of good leadership.
- Selfishness and anger make it hard to see the bigger picture.
- Challenges are opportunities to discover hidden strengths.
- Resilience is important—true leaders stay calm in both good and bad times.
- Compassion and helping others bring lasting success.
- Leading through fear or anger is not effective or lasting.

The Bhagavad Gita has inspired people all around the world.

Different scholars and thinkers have written about its universal and non-religious nature, making its teachings useful beyond religious beliefs. Mahatma Gandhi, who highly valued the Gita, once said, “I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming external tragedies... I owe it all to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita.” Although short, the 700 verses of the Gita contain deep insights into psychology, ethics, and spirituality.

Vyasa skilfully connects human struggles with higher truths, showing the ongoing battle between material desires and spiritual duties. Arjuna, although meant to uphold righteousness, momentarily forgets his duty—an example of how humans can lose sight of values during tough times. Krishna’s advice shows that leaders must act with honesty, not driven by anger or personal goals, but for the good of everyone. The Gita also makes a distinction between being and doing. For an action to be good, it must come from pure thoughts and intentions. In this sense, the way we do things is just as important as the goal we’re trying to reach. Leaders should avoid feelings like anger or pride as motivators and instead base their actions on higher values that go beyond personal gain.

The Three Gunas: Indian philosophy explains that all of nature, including how people behave, is shaped by three main qualities or gunas, as explained by Swami Chidvilasananda in “My Lord Loves a Pure Heart”:

- Sattva (Purity) – represents clarity, knowledge, balance, and goodness.
- Rajas (Activity/Passion) – reflects energy, ambition, and restlessness.
- Tamas (Inertia/Ignorance) – stands for darkness, confusion, and laziness.

Every person has a unique mix of these three qualities, which can change depending on the situation. At times, one might feel calm and clear (sattva), at other times full of drive and restlessness (rajas), and occasionally weighed down by tiredness or negative feelings (tamas). True leadership is about recognizing these inner tendencies and moving beyond them to act with clarity and balance. As Krishna explains, leaders should connect with their higher selves, perform their duties without depending too much on the

results, and carry out their actions for the benefit of all. Ultimately, the Gita encourages leaders to ask deep questions about themselves: Who am I? Why am I here? The answers determine whether a person lives as a regular individual or as a force for good, helping restore balance and justice in the world.

1.2 Ethics

Ethics involves the standards of right and wrong that guide how people act. It includes a set of moral values or standards that individuals and societies follow. Moral values help determine what is virtuous versus harmful, while ethics tries to organize and explain these decisions. In short, ethics provides a way to make good decisions, ensuring that behaviour is not only effective but also fair and morally responsible.

1.3 Leadership ethics and ethical principles

Leaders in organizations often face tough ethical choices, where they need to decide between right and wrong or between what is acceptable and what is not. A truly fair leader is someone whose actions always reflect ethical values. The main goal of ethics has always been to develop leaders who show honesty, responsibility, and proper behavior. In today's time, ethical leadership is even more important because without awareness and control, there is always a chance that leaders might act unethically. Examples of unethical practices like corruption, dishonesty, and deceit are common in leadership and are some of the main reasons behind social problems. Cases include leaders making big promises to gain power, only to ignore the needs of those they lead once in position.

1.3.1 Ethical Principles

Ethical principles serve as guiding frameworks for examining and addressing moral challenges. They help leaders evaluate dilemmas where the right course of action may not be immediately clear. Based on Beauchamp and Childress (1979), five fundamental principles can guide leadership ethics:

Respect for autonomy: Every individual has the right to make decisions about their own life, as long as those choices do not harm others. Autonomy includes freedom of thought and the liberty to act independently.

Non-maleficence (doing no harm): Human interactions should never result in harm. Leaders should avoid activities that could damage others' physical, emotional, or social well-being.

Beneficence (promoting good): Ethical leadership requires active contributions to the welfare of others. Decisions should be made to improve conditions for individuals, communities, and society.

Justice (being fair): Justice demands impartiality, fairness, and reciprocity. Leaders must ensure that the rights of individuals and groups are protected equally, based on neutrality, equity, and the principle of treating others as one would want to be treated.

Fidelity (Being Trustworthy): Fidelity emphasizes honesty, loyalty, and respect for commitments. Breaking promises undermines trust and restricts the autonomy of others by denying them the opportunity to make informed choices. The Bhagavad Gita further reinforces that selfish desire is often the root cause of unethical practices. Lust and greed, once transformed into anger, push leaders toward unethical decisions. Practicing renunciation, as described in the Gita, helps leaders embrace altruism, stay detached from personal gain, and align themselves with these ethical principles.

1.4 Sustainable leadership

Concept of sustainability: Sustainability refers to the ability to maintain processes, resources, and systems at a certain level without depleting them. Leadership, in this context, involves guiding others responsibly while ensuring that actions today do not compromise the future. A landmark definition of sustainability was given in 1987 by the United Nations Brundtland Commission: “Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This definition emphasizes the balance between current human needs and preserving resources for future generations. Both individuals and organizations share the responsibility to limit over-consumption, reduce waste, and adopt responsible practices. Environmentally and socially conscious behavior not only supports long-term ecological balance but also reduces costs, strengthens stakeholder relationships, enhances reputation, and provides a competitive advantage.

Three dimensions of sustainability: Sustainability is often understood through John Elkington’s triple bottom line framework, which highlights three interdependent dimensions:

- Environmental (Planet): Protecting ecosystems and minimizing environmental damage.
- Social (People): Promoting equity, well-being, and community development.
- Economic (Profit): Ensuring financial viability while balancing social and ecological responsibilities.

According to Elkington, society relies on the economy, while the economy in turn depends on the health of the global ecosystem. Thus, environmental sustainability represents the foundation upon which social and economic systems rest.

1.5 Principles of sustainable leadership

Sustainable leadership integrates ethical values with long-term responsibility. Its key attributes include:

- Justice– Ensuring fairness and avoiding harm to people or the environment.

- Diversity– Embracing inclusion and fostering social cohesion.
- Resourcefulness– Practicing efficiency and minimizing unnecessary spending.
- Conservation – Learning from the past while preserving resources for the future.

In essence, sustainable leadership reflects a global perspective that acknowledges the connections between human society and the natural environment. Through conscious choices, leaders can drive both social and environmental transformation, while securing long-term growth and well-being for all.

1.6 Principles for ethical leadership

- Understanding Systemic Interconnections: Leaders must recognize how people, processes, resources, and technologies are linked, and how changes in one area can affect the others.
- Thinking Globally with a Future Orientation: Decision-making should consider present and emerging circumstances, and their wider impact on societies, communities, resources, and international relations.
- Safeguarding Nature and Humanity: Leaders are responsible for evaluating how their choices affect both people and the environment, and for adopting practices that minimize harm to ecosystems, economies, and social well-being.
- Transforming Business Practices: Positive change starts with small, conscious actions within one’s control, such as reducing waste, embracing digital tools, or adopting more sustainable processes.
- Leading by Example: Ethical leadership demands accountability in personal and professional actions.
- When leaders and organizations model responsibility: by reducing waste, improving efficiency, and acting transparently—others are inspired to follow.

2.0 Objectives of the Study

- To examine and integrate the ethical principles of the Bhagavad Gita within the framework of leadership.
- To present guidelines for effective mind management, self-management, duty management, and relationship management.
- To derive insights that promote success, inner contentment, and lasting happiness.

3.0 Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research method called hermeneutics, which is based on the idea of interpreting texts. The word “hermeneutics” comes from the Greek god

Hermes, who was seen as a messenger and interpreter. Today, hermeneutics refers to the skill of understanding and explaining texts, especially those that are important in history, culture, or philosophy. As a research method, hermeneutics helps in understanding human actions and the results of those actions, especially in written form. It is used in many different fields such as philosophy, religion, law, sociology, and international relations. In this study, the Bhagavad Gita was looked at using this interpretive method.

The analysis was done in four main steps:

- *Identification:* Finding verses or parts of the Bhagavad Gita that are either directly or indirectly related to the theme of leadership.
- *Investigation:* Studying these verses in detail, paying attention to their background and meaning.
- *Interpretation:* Explaining why these verses matter and how they can be relevant in today's leadership settings.
- *Integration:* Using the insights gained from these verses and presenting commentary that focuses on ethical leadership.

Through this process, the study shows that ethical principles act as guides for making decisions in the face of moral challenges. These principles are useful not just in personal relationships but also in professional environments. By basing their actions on these principles, individuals and leaders can deal with challenges in a way that is honest and ethical.

4.0 Ethical Principles in Bhagavad Gita for Sustainable Leadership

The Bhagavad Gita, often called the “Song of the Lord,” gives timeless advice for personal growth and ethical leadership. While India is known for its fast-growing economy, its deeper value is found in its spiritual heritage, values, and culture. The Gita provides teachings not only for self-improvement but also for modern leadership, especially when it comes to responsibilities towards different groups. Krishna’s advice to Arjuna reminds us of the importance of adapting to situations, which connects with ideas like situational leadership, emotional intelligence, and acting with integrity. This study highlights four leadership principles that support ethical and sustainable practices:

- **Mind management:** The mind controls thoughts, emotions, and how we see things, which in turn affects our actions and leadership.
 - The Gita gives three important lessons: Steady Mind (Sthitpragya): A leader should stay calm even when things are good or bad, and should not be afraid, angry, or driven by personal desire.
 - A steady mind leads to focus, peace, and fair decision-making. - Focus on Efforts,

Not Results: Leaders should be more concerned with doing the right thing and helping the group than with getting personal rewards.

- This leads to less stress and better long-term results. - Overcoming Mindset Inertia: Good leadership needs letting go of old ideas and embracing new changes to gain a competitive edge. Being resistant to change limits both individual and organizational growth.
- Self-management is about taking responsibility for one's own behavior and well-being. The Gita says:
 - Right Knowledge: Leaders should keep learning, be open to changes in technology and society, and make decisions based on accurate information.
 - Virtuous Character: Qualities such as being fearless, honest, compassionate, forgiving, humble, and self-controlled are the basis of ethical leadership.
- Duty Management: Leaders should take responsibility for the good of the group, not just for themselves. The long-term success of an organization depends on leaders who evaluate their actions regularly and keep things balanced. Ignoring ethical duties breaks harmony and trust, which can cause leaders to lose their positions.
- Relationship Management Leadership isn't complete without caring for relationships.
 - Mutual Dependency: Success comes when leaders care about the people they lead, creating a positive environment across teams, departments, and society.
 - Equality and Empathy: Real leaders are free from ego, treat everyone with kindness, and balance their professional and personal lives by being compassionate and forgiving.

5.0 Conclusion

The Bhagavad Gita offers a “vision of total life” that goes beyond the more limited idea of vision found in Western thought. In advising Arjun, Lord Krishna emphasizes the importance of having a wide perspective that leads to real success and happiness. The Gita explains that the quality of our actions and responses is influenced by how we see life.

For leaders, following the ethical principles of the Gita means overcoming personal weaknesses, gaining the trust of honest followers, and maintaining respect and loyalty without compromise. This kind of leadership is not selfish but selfless. Interestingly, this selfless approach does not stop people from being themselves; rather, it encourages team members to be creative and contribute to shared goals. What it stops is the kind of individualism that puts personal ambition for control and power above the well-being of the group. The Gita also highlights the importance of duty. When a leader remains committed to fulfilling responsibilities with integrity, they achieve perfection in their actions.

Additionally, a true leader should be a role model, ensuring that values are reflected in their behavior. As the Gita reminds us, people naturally follow those in positions of influence. Therefore, a leader who talks about one set of values but acts differently falls short of being ethical and true to the Gita's vision. Authentic leadership requires keeping words and actions in line, with a constant commitment to values and duties.

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