New Perspectives on Leadership from Srimad Bhagavad Gita¹
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Introduction

I have been greatly inspired by Ancient Indian Knowledge System as such and more specifically by Srimad Bhagavad Gita. Therefore I suggested that I would share some thoughts from the Gita, particularly on leadership. We are in a situation today that the greatest scarcity we have in this country is leadership. We have seen improvements in educational standard, new avenues for education, several new opportunities, new material resources etc. We seem to have everything but I think what is in scarcity is leadership. Therefore I feel it is important to talk about this topic today in the context of whatever is happening. What I found in Bhagvad Gita is some interesting set of ideas on leadership. Today I have chosen to take two contrasting ideas from Bhagvad Gita on leadership and share with you.

The first message is what can cause failed leadership? There is no better place to understand this than Bhagvad Gita. In fact the entire preaching of Bhagvad Gita started there because a great warrior Arjuna, all of a sudden, collapsed in the middle of the battlefield like a pack of cards. What happens when leadership fails? How can leadership at all fail? That’s the first part of story that I want to narrate and the second part is “What are the elements of good leadership?”

Leadership – Today’s Context

I will start with the context for leadership. What are some of the broad challenges that we are going through? At an individual level there is an issue which all over the world people talk about. In the nutshell, people in a number of working scenarios, be it a University, or multinational corporation, or government and even temple or at home, often complain

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that they are deprived of meaning at their work place. This is very loud message that is coming today. We seem to spend a lot of time in our work place. In fact in all these multinational companies people go to work at about 8 O’clock in morning and do not know when they come back, perhaps it may be 10 O’clock. Still they do not find meaning. Many American managers are apparently saying, “give us less money but more meaning”.

The second message we often keep hearing today, especially in the western societies, is that people prefer time affluence over money affluence now. They have reached the stage now that working professionals are saying, “give us less salary, but give us more time with family. Give us little more time so that I can do other things of interest in my life.” Every time I hear management researchers talking about this, I wonder what really is happening in today’s workplace.

Let us turn our attention towards organizational issues. There was a research conducted sometime back on “How long will companies live?” This research conducted by an Executive Director of the Royal Dutch Shell Company, culminated in a book. The book titled, “The Living Company”, which was published about 15 years back had some interesting things to share. According to that research, the average life expectancy of a Fortune 500 company was only 40 years. Compare this with the average life expectancy of every one of us in India today, which is about 78 -79 years. What was more disturbing was that one third of Fortune 500 companies listed in 1970 disappeared in 1983. In some sense, in a matter of 13 years they became the most unfortunate that they had to perish. Another information in the book showed that 40% of all newly created companies die within 10 years. This is the best example for infant mortality. It is hard to imagine that a number of organizations cannot even survive beyond 10 years.

So what are we doing? What is the issue here? Of course the book talks in some details in terms of why it is happening. Most importantly the research pointed out that the workplace is not at all interesting. There is cynicism, too much of control and stress that stifles imagination, it doesn’t promote imagination. The backdrop of management research & practice is such that we do not even know how to make our company live long. This is the management that we have understood and we are teaching. Individual seems to have problem, company seems to have problem because they are not able to live long.
Greatness and Relevance of Ancient Indian Wisdom

Let us look at another aspect that seems to bother us as a society. The figure below has issues listed in two columns. The left column is all about nice things in life, the income level is going up, more material progress, more money. Even the Sixth pay commission has given more money for teachers and government employees and the seven pay commission is going to come soon. Any way some more money, some more goods for consumption, more selling, more buying etc. will all happen. So that is the nice part of it, apparently.

![Figure 1. The two sides of today's society](image)

But if you examine the right side there is some discomfort. The information is not necessarily nice to talk about. Apparently, India is the “Diabetes” capital of the world. Also, India has the largest number of people contracting hypertension in the age group of 20 – 30. Unfortunately the coin seems to have two sides however much one wishes that there is only one side in a coin. So while good things seem to be happening in terms of more selling, more cars, more malls, and so on there are some underlying problems too. Schopenhauer, a German philosopher wrote a book in German which was translated into
English in 1853, called “The World as Will and Representation”. He mentioned, “When men achieve security and welfare now that they have solved all other problem they become problem themselves.” It is not clear whether we sensed this problem or not but the spiritual giant of this country Adi Shankaracharya could sense this imbalance much before Schopenhauer could.

Adi Shankaracharya wrote a bhashya on Bhagvad Gita in the 8th century which made Bhagvad Gita very popular. I want to share with you the first sentence from the bhashya, because it is indeed insightful and it makes sense today. It says,

ड्विविधो हि वेदोको धर्मः, प्रवृत्तिलक्षणो निवृत्तिलक्षणश्च जगतः
स्थिरतिकारणम्। प्राणिनां साक्षात् अभ्युदय निःश्रेयस हेतुः ...

There are three interesting phrases in this statement. First he says “dvividho hi vedokto dharmaḥ”. Dharma that is being elaborated in the Vedas has two components; and these are “pravṛtti lakṣaṇo nivṛtti lakṣaṇaśca”. He mentioned that there is a set of Dharma for Pravṛtti and there is another set of Dharma for Nivṛtti. Pravṛtti Dharma is all the governing rules pertaining to materialism and the world of action. Of course who says we don’t want money, we want lots of money, who says we don’t want security we want security. So that is Pravṛtti lakṣaṇa. Let us work hard, earn our salary and let us fully enjoy what we want to enjoy. The other part is Nivṛtti lakṣaṇa. Nivṛtti lakṣaṇa is all about peace of mind inside you. Today’s work culture is such that many are able to (rather pressurised to) work hard but they are unable to have a peaceful sleep at the end of the day. Many end up consuming sleeping pills to get sleep. After some time, even the sleeping pills do not seem to get them sleep as they are overpowered by thoughtfulness (of one issue or the other).

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The third part in the statement by Shankarcharya brings this aspect into focus. He says “jagataḥ sthiti kāraṇam”. According to him, the stability of the world happens only when there is right balance between Pravṛtti and Nivrīti lakṣaṇa. Today the nature of choices that we are making in the name of modern living makes us unwittingly and foolishly swing the pendulum towards the Pravṛtti and we seem to have forgotten Nivrīti. This observation of Shankarcharya is so critical for us today. I visited one city in Assam two days before coming to Guwahati to deliver this lecture. I made an observation to the people there that the number of hospitals and diagnostic centres in the city were disproportional to the size of the city. So that is what will happen if we go on the road of Pravṛtti and completely disregard or ignore Nivrīti. We will only end up learning later that that we contracted Diabetes, going through enormous mental stress and eventually become problem ourselves. Finally Shankarcharya concluded with the phrase “sākṣat abhyudhaya niśreyasa hetuḥ”. “abhyudhaya” is a technical word which points to materialism and “niśreyas” is nothing but inner peace.

So the message that we have from the 8th Century writing is challenging our notion of success. Should we call ourselves successful by simply earning more salary or by managing the right balance between Pravṛtti and Nivrīti. Shankarcharya has coaxed us to think about this important issue by one simple sentence. If we can talk for about 15 minutes and make sense to address some of the problems that we are facing today, think about the treasure that is contained in the Ancient Indian wisdom. We may need 100s of Vedanta Vacaspati Radhanath Phukans to guide us into right ways of living. With this general background I want to now bring to your attention some aspects pertaining to leadership from the Gita.

**Arjuna – The Failed leader?**

It is a general practice for many commentators and pravacakas to either skip chapter 1 or gloss over it quickly before they get into the other chapters. The actual teaching of Gita begins in śloka 11 in chapter 2. However, in my own understanding this chapter is very crucial to understand certain aspects of leadership. So I’m going to take you through chapter 1 to illustrate to you an aspect of leadership, which I call as failed leadership.
As we all know, chapter one has 47 ślokas beginning with “Dharma kṣhetre kuru kṣhetre”. The first 19 ślokas are the preamble, it contains a brief description of the size of army, the important leaders on both sides etc. (as narrated by Duryodhana). This is followed by Duryodhana approaching Bhishma and requesting him to blow the conch, thereby signalling the start of the war as far as Kauravas are concerned. Similarly, on the Pandavas side they reciprocate with blowing of their respective conches. All these issues are described in the first 19 ślokas. In the 20th śloka, Arjuna requests Krishna to take the chariot in between the two armies so that he can take a final look at the two warring camps, which Sri Krishna willingly obeys. The entire issue that unfolded after this is a matter of great interest to any student of leadership and it merits more detailed analysis. Let me indulge in it now.

The Difficulty of Decision Making

The battle scene which Arjuna witnessed triggered a process, which resulted in him portraying himself as a failed leader. What Arjuna saw on both sides of the army (senayor ubhaylor api) are fatherly and grandfatherly figures (pīṭhīn atha pīṭmaḥān), sons and grandsons (pūtṛān pautṛān), uncles (mātulān), teachers (ācāryān), brothers (bhrātṛīn), in-laws (śvaśurān) and those who were close to heart (suḥṛdaś caiva).

\[
tatrāpaśyāyaṁ sthitā pariḥ pārthoh pīṭhīn atha pīṭmaḥān \\
ācāryaṁ mātulāṁ bhrātṛīṁ pūtṛāṁ pautṛāṁ sakhīṁs tathā (1.26) \\
śvaśurāṁ suḥṛdaś caiva senayor ubhaylor api.
\]

This very sight was enough for Arjuna to activate his mind. Arjuna went through a series of thoughts in his mind, which are aptly captured in the remaining ślokas in the chapter. The first reaction is that he started losing control of himself as is evident from ślokas 29 - 30. He was tense, had a hair rising (romaharṣaśca jāyate) and a “head spinning” (bhramatīva ca me manah) experience. He lost his grip of Gandhiva, his bow (gāṇḍīvaṁ.
sraṁsate hastā) and finally confessed he is unable to bear this experience (na ca śaknomy avasthātum):

सीदन्ति मम गात्राणि मुखं च परिशुष्यति ।
वेपथुǙ शरीरे मे रोमहषर्Ǚ जायते || 1.29
sidanti mama gāṭrāṇi mukhaṃ ca pariśusyati
vepathuṣ ca śarire me romaharṣaś ca jāyate (1.29)

गाण्डीवं संस्ते हस्तात्तच्चवेव परिपद्धते ।
न च श्रक्रोम्यवस्थातुं भ्रमतीव च मे मनं: || 1.30
gāṇḍīvaṃ sraṁsate hastā tvak caiva paridahyate
na ca śaknomy avasthātum bhramatīva ca me manaḥ (1.30).

His quick assessment of the situation is summarised in sloka 31. He was convinced that the act that of killing one's own kith and kin (hatvā svajanam āhave) cannot give him peace and tranquillity (na ca śreyo 'nupaśyāmi). On the other hand, he concluded that only bad things are likely to unfold (nimittāni ca paśyāmi viparītāni).

निमित्तानि च पश्चाद्विविपरीतानि केशव ।
न च श्रेयो 'नुपर्यायम हत्वा स्वजनमाहवे || 1.31
nimittāni ca paśyāmi viparītāni keśava
na ca śreyo 'nupaśyāmi hatvā svajanam āhave (1.31)

Ladies and Gentlemen, we need to understand one important aspect from this narration. What we are and how we will handle life situations is largely dependent on the condition of our mind. Shri Krishna, has talked about this aspect in several places in Gita, and we may not have time to discuss it today. Arjuna’s mind started working faster and he went into downward spiralling set of thoughts which made it clear to him that the war that he is embarking upon is simply not worth the effort.

He categorically asserted to Shri Krishna that he neither wants this victory (na kāṅkṣe vijayam krṣṇa), nor the pleasures and the kingdom (na ca rājyaṃ sukhāni ca). He asked
Krishna, “Of what avail is this kingdom (kiṃ no rājyena) and the pleasures of life (kiṃ bhogair jīvitena vā)?” His main concern was what they are going to do with all this after winning these by killing all the people, which he enumerated before.

न काकु विजयं कृ ण न च राज्यं सुखानि च।
किं नो राज्येन गोविन्द किं भोगेज्जिवितेन वा || 1.32

na kāṅkṣe vijayaṃ krṣṇa na ca rājyaṃ sukhāni ca
kiṃ no rājyena govinda kiṃ bhogair jīvitena vā (1.32)

Four Arguments for not fighting the war

Arjuna made four major arguments for not fighting. The rest of the chapter 1 of Gita presents the first three arguments and the opening verses in chapter 2 continues with the last argument. These arguments are progressively stronger.

Argument 1: No personal motivation for war: The first argument was that he found no motivation for the war, which was articulated in ślokas 33 – 36. Arjuna’s argument was logical, after all, as it is a catch 22 situation. He wants to fight the war to restore Dharma and keep Bhismä, the Acharyas and all other friends and relatives happy (yeśām arthe kāṅkṣitam no rājyam). However, the first pre-requisite to win the war is to eliminate all those for whose welfare he want to fight. Therefore he tells Krishna then even if he gets killed, he will not kill them, even if the prize is the lordship of the three worlds (api trailokyārājyaśya hetoḥ kiṃ nu mahākṛte). Killing of the sons of Dhrītarāṣṭrā cannot result in any trace of goodness in his heart (nihatya dhārtarāṣṭrān naḥ kā prītiḥ syāt). Instead they may end up with sins only (pāpam evāśrayed asmān). In a way, Arjuna is trying to point to his own ethical standards.
Argument 2: Not proper to engage in war: Arjuna then raised a very practical question to Krishna, “How can one be happy after killing one’s own people (svajanaṃ hi kathaṃ hatvā sukhisyaṃ syāma)?” Therefore, he concluded that it is not proper to engage in the war and kill the Kauravas.

 Argument 3: War creates much bigger problems: Arjuna then goes on to sophisticate his argument and buttress it with stronger points and bigger issues. He brings the evils of a war that can create a certain imbalance in the society (jāyate varnasamkarah). He also reminds that war can create a sense of insecurity to the ladies (praduṣyanti kulastriyah) and result in loss of societal practices (pranaśyanti kulaśārthāḥ). To an extent what he is arguing we are able to see in the war ravaged societies in the post-war era today in different parts of the world. Therefore, it may be difficult to brush aside his concerns as pointless.
Arjuna concludes the entire argument by warning that these acts (of war) may permanently destroy the dharma and societal order and rhythm (utsādyante jātīdharmāḥ kuladharmāḥ ca śāsvatāḥ).

If you go buy this argument of Arjuna, it would have been much easier to conclude that war is not justifiable. That would have heralded the end of the Mahabharata epic. Ladies and Gentlemen, we have to be more discerning in our understanding of these issues and the need for war or otherwise. Let me bring an episode from Valmiki Ramayana to explain this part. This pertains to Ravana visiting Janasthana to take away Sita. Ravana orders Mareecha to play the role of a fake “golden” deer to wean away Rama and Lakshmana from the scene. At this point there is a conversation between Mareecha and Ravana, in which Mareecha advises Ravana against this act. Valmiki brings an interesting observation here when he quotes this as one of the arguments made by Mareecha, “If one poisonous snake enters into a fresh water lake in use by a village, in the process of getting rid of the snake 1000 good fishes will die for no fault of them”. The moot point is 1000 fishes will be sacrificed to restore the larger order in the village. War needs to be also understood from this larger perspective. Restoring dharma is a very important aspect and many other issues will become subservient to this.
Arjuna at the verge of collapse

In the closing sections of chapter 1 of Gita, Arjuna behaved in a manner, which no leader (warrior) will indeed do. He came to the conclusion that on account of greed for the kingdom and pleasure (yad rājyasukhalobhena), they were prepared to kill their own people (hantum svajanam udyatāḥ). He however, felt that if only he gets killed by the Kauravas (dhārtarāṣṭrā raṇe hanyuḥ) who are ready to fight with their weapons in their hand and him being without his weapons (mām apratikāram aśastraṃ) it will be a good thing (kṣemataram bhavet).

अहो बत महत्पापं कर्तुः व्यवसिता वयम्।
यद्राज्यसुखलोभेन हन्तुः स्वजनमुद्यता: ॥ 1.45
यदि मामप्रतीकारमशस्त्रं शस्त्रपाणय:।
धातराष्ट्रा रणे हन्युस्तनमे क्षेमतरं भवेत॥ 1.46

ahoh bata mahat pāpaṁ kartuṁ vyavasita vayam
yad rājyasukhalobhena hantum svajanam udyatāḥ (1.45)
yadi mām apratikāram aśastraṁ śastrapāṇayaḥ
dhārtarāṣṭrā raṇe hanyuṁ tan me kṣemataram bhavet (1.46)

Shri Krishna perceived the loss of credibility and low morale of the great warrior Arjuna and propped him with the opening ślokas in chapter 2 of Gita. But the great warrior was in no mood to face up to the challenge. Rather his mind was fully involved in finding even better reasons for stopping the war. Therefore in chapter 2, ślokas 4 – 5, he advanced his fourth argument.

Argument 4: It is an impractical idea: Arjuna made a final attempt at stopping the war by posing a question to Shri Krishna, “How is it possible to kill people like Bhishma and Drona (kathम bhiṣmam aham saṁkhye dṛṇaṁ ca), who are worthy of worship (pūjārhāu)?”

कथं भीष्ममहं संख्ये द्रोणें च मधुसूदन।
इषुंभ: प्रतिः योत्स्यामि पूजार्थवरिृश्चुन। ॥ 2.04
The Notion of Failed Leadership

This entire narration, my dear friends, has brought out the notion of failed leadership that every one of us could potentially go through in our own personal and professional lives. In order to understand this, we need to first establish why Arjuna is a failed leader? In order to understand this we need to step back into the Mahabharata story and understand the path leading Arjuna into the battlefield where he has finally collapsed. There are two reasons why Arjuna is a failed leader:

(a) The decision to beat the retreat is not sound

The war was not at all a “knee jerk” reaction that Arjuna must hastily or emotionally beat the retreat. Enough room was given, patience was tested to the limits and then the war was announced. The following important aspects merit closer attention:

- Pandavas lost the game of dice and was asked to go the forest. If they successfully completed the term (including one year of living in disguise) they were promised their lost kingdom back
- Pandavas successfully completed the forest living and when returned were not given their kingdom as promised. In a dramatic manner it is mentioned that they were refused, five villages, five house and even the tip of the needle.
- Even then Pandavas were trying to avoid the war. When three rounds of mediation failed, it was finally decided to wage a war.

(b) Huge Erosion of Roles & Responsibilities

The other aspect that stands out in this entire episode is the behaviour of Arjuna, which was unbecoming of a good leader. When Duryodhana refused to return the kingdom, he committed two big mistakes; one was a breach of contract (if I need to use the modern terminology) and the other was being grossly unreasonable. If only
Duryodhana had some sense, he should have given Pandavas at least 5 houses and disposed them off. If the leader or the number one in the organization exhibits such a behaviour that organization has no future. Moreover, others who are rightfully eligible to run the organization are not expected to keep quite or run away citing some emotional issues. This portrays Arjuna as a failed leader.

Ladies and Gentleman please look at this episode differently. There is a kshatriya and there is so much of adharma prevailing in the country. The existing rulers are blatantly violating the rules and are grossly unreasonable. This kshatriya tried everything possible to sort out the situation, which was not happening. After considerable thought he comes to fight the war and suddenly chooses to “run away” from the war citing some emotive issues. This is similar to another modern situation that I want to present. The Chiefs of Armed Forces in a country, after much deliberations with the government chose to wage a war with a neighbouring country to prevent frequent terrorist intrusions. As the marching orders were about to be given, the Chief of Army makes a final inspection at the border and suddenly finds a small boy and an old man at the other side of the border in the village. He chooses, out of emotional outburst, that it is not good to wage a war as these two may be hurt or even killed in the process. How credible is this leadership?

One of the adjectives for Arjuna is सवयसाचिन् (savyasācin), which means someone who can fight his enemies with just his left hand. If such a great leader can collapse anybody can also collapse. If we don’t understand this aspect then we are missing something important. The most important issue is, “Why did Arjuna fail?” or “What generally causes leadership failure”? Chapter 1 of Gita teaches us these aspects more subtly. Every one of us have a “world outside” as well as “a world inside” to deal with. Leadership is not simply about dealing with the “world outside”. It is also about dealing with the “world inside”. In fact the Arjuna episode points to us that it invariably begins with one’s ability to deal with their own “world inside”. If they are not in peace with themselves, there is little hope that they can indeed achieve anything meaningful outside. Therefore, leaders can fail when they are not able to handle “the world inside”. Perhaps this was what Schopenhauer mentioned when he said, “if we solve all our other problems then we become problem ourselves (meaning the world inside).”
A failed leader goes through a chain reaction triggered by a downward spiral of thoughts as Chapter 1 of Gita points out. This is depicted in the figure below. Such leaders will first suffer from a lack of clarity. The lack of clarity will lead him to lack discrimination. Such a leader becomes less questionable about mind-set, becomes more defensive and even becomes faint hearted (*hrudaya daurbalyam*). Eventually he ends up making bad decisions. This is the anatomy of a failed leader as we learn from Chapter 1 of Gita.

![Figure 2: The downward spiral of thoughts of a Failed Leader](image)

**Current thinking in Leadership**

So far we have seen how leadership can fail. Let us now turn our attention towards another aspect of interest today. This is about the leadership lessons in Gita. Before we understand the leadership lessons from the Gita, we need to know how leadership is dominantly viewed and practised today. One way to understand leadership is from a perspective of responsibility and ownership. In such a perspective leaders believe that they have the freedom to take decisions the way they think is right and have the authority to execute things accordingly. Such a viewpoint is taken because often leaders feel that it is “their” responsibility to get the right performance for the organization. They further feel that it is very important to get the tasks done by monitoring the subordinates in the organization.

This model of leadership presents a picture of leaders having position, power and endowment of resources at their disposal. With the power that the leader enjoys in the system, and the endowment of resources at his/her command, the leader feels he/she can deliver the intended results. Unfortunately, such a leadership style creates a climate of what is known as “market contract” for others working in the system. In a market contract people work for the pay and no more. They feel that additional work is not worth
unless they are compensated more. This model of leadership is not very promising in bringing the best performance in an organization.

There is a second approach to leadership practiced by many today. In this approach, leaders believe that the unique position that they have obtained and the endowment of resources at their command provides them a great opportunity to enable others do their best. Such leaders believe strongly in nourishing leadership talent around by creating space and agenda for others. They derive their joy by becoming irrelevant in many day-to-day matters pertaining to running the institution. This approach will help create a climate of “psychological contract” for others working in the system. In a psychological contract people respond to the call of duty and work beyond the norms if situations demand such a response. They own their place of work much more and feel more involved in many things in their work place.

**Leadership Lessons in Gita**

For the most part, our management literature and practice has tuned us towards “What is in it for me?” If a person is not going to get any direct benefit from the activity he/she is supposed to engage in, then his/her motivation drops dramatically. The motivation literature, the promotion polices and several other practices have cultivated this deep habit in us. Therefore, not surprisingly, leaders are inclined towards a “What is in it for me?” mode of operation.

**Going beyond “What is in it for me?”**

In Bhagavad Gita, the first message I found in terms of leadership is that true leadership is about our ability to outgrow our vision from a narrow perspective of “what is in it for me?” to one of an opportunity to make a difference to people and places that we associate with. In chapter 3 of Gita, Shri Krishna said to Arjuna that he has nothing to really do (na me kartavyaṃ kimcana) in the three worlds (triṣu lokeṣu). This is because there is no such thing that he has not yet attained (nānavāptaṃ) and there are no future wish lists (avāptaṃ) also. Nevertheless, he says, he will continue to engage in work (varta eva ca karmanī). This is the ultimate of working without any sense of “What is in it for me?”
The second aspect of leadership that I find in Gita is that leaders are not afraid of anyone (lokanannodvijate yaḥ), but at the same time does not generate any sense of fear in others (yasmānnaṇodvijate lokāḥ). A leader generally is not afraid of others in the organization because of the position and power that he enjoys. However, the reverse is not easy to practise. In order for both to happen, a person must have two seemingly opposite attributes together. Strength and gentleness must co-exist in such a person. In the same way fearlessness and compassion must co-exist.

The third attribute of leadership is one’s ability to dramatically transform peoples and entities that come into their contact. Great leaders are enormous bundle of live energy (like a 10,000 KVA live wire). When you come near them they will energise and transform you. This is what you find when you read about Swami Vivekananda or Ramakrishna Paramahamsa or a Ramana Maharishi.

**Leading by Example**

In recent management literature, there is a frequent reference to the phrase “Leading by example”. Shri Krishna points to the importance of this aspect of Leadership. He says, whatever a leader practices (yadyad ācarati śroṣṭāḥ) (not what he preaches!), other will follow that (tattad itaro janah) only (eva). Whatever he does (sa yat kurute) others follow it (lokastad anuvartate) as they feel that is the right way (pramāṇaṁ) to do things. This is
the toughest part of leadership. The CEO of a company cannot give a long lecture to his company employees about the need for cost cutting and take an expensive first class air ticket back home. The employees will never take the need for cost cutting any seriously. Similarly, the Finance Minister of the country cannot talk about need for austerity measures and still have a lavish 20 car pilot to accompany him whenever he goes out to attend any meetings. These are fundamental principles of leadership which Krishna is reminding us.

यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवते जनः ।
स यत्त्रमाणं कुरूते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥ 3.21
yadyad ācaratī śreṣṭah tattad eva itaro janah
sa yat pramāṇam kurute lokastad anuvartate (3.21)

According to Krishna, leadership is not an easy going or a cushy thing. Leaders may be thinking that they are sitting in a concrete, covered room. The fact of the matter is that they are as though sitting in a glass cabin with a 360 degree view. Every one of their actions are closely monitored, commented up on and inferred by the other employees in an organization. This is true of parents with very young child (age of 2 – 6). The child will not listen to the parent but learn lot more by closely watching their behaviour. If the parents talk loosely, use in appropriate language etc. the child will pick them up very well and use it at the next occasion. We have seen all these in our own families. This is why Shri Krishna emphasises the importance of leading by example.

**Importance of Equanimity**

Throughout the Gita, Krishna has emphasised on a very important attribute of leadership. It appears in several chapters and in different context and I felt that it is important to discuss this aspect of leadership. The first introduction of this concept called तितिक्षा (titikṣā) was done in chapter 2. As long as we have the five basic elementals (mātrāḥ) pertaining to the sensory aspects of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling, they will be in touch (sparśatu) with the outside world and send signals through these sensory organs into the mind for processing. The net result of this would be that it will blow hot or cold (sītoṣṇa) and we will continue to experience good and bad (sukha-duḥkhadāḥ). It
is important to understand these are transitory and impermanent (āgamāpāyino’nityāḥ) and therefore we must develop a sense of mental equipoise (titikṣasva) with respect to these happenings. This is a fundamental requirement to be a good leader. The problem with Arjuna (as we saw in chapter 1) was that he could not develop this mental equipoise. A person who does nor develop this sense of equanimity will soon realise that the mind over powers everything and the “world inside” goes out of one’s control.

The good and the bad things come and go in our lives. Somehow we do not understand this well. We tend to feel that bad things are staying for a long time and good things quickly fade away. Ladies and Gentlemen I want to narrate a story to illustrate the impermanent nature of these things. There was a bright student who studied in a gurukula. He was brilliant, well-mannered and respectful to his guru. After his graduation he got married and was living happily. Very soon, one day his wife passed away and he was in great grief. The guru came to know of this and visited his beloved student who was profusely crying by the side of this dead wife. The guru educated him the transitory nature of life and that all of us will pass away one day. The student was a bit annoyed with this and told his guru that while he was grieving the death of his young wife how could vedanta make sense to him. On seeing the plight of the student, the guru silently went back home.

After this episode, the student was feeling that he has been a little disrespectful to his guru when he came to see him. This issue was bothering him for long and one day, after a few months, he paid a visit to his Guru. He apologised to the guru for his disrespectful behaviour when he came to see him. The guru sported a gentle smile at the student and told him not to bother about that event as he has not even taken cognisance of this. The guru asked the student if he would do him a favour, which the student readily agreed. The guru told him, “On the day your wife was dead you were profusely weeping. Could you sit in the corner of this and repeat it once again for me?” The student could not cry, not even
a drop of tears rolled out of his cheek. Dear friends do not come to the conclusion that he did not love his wife or all that were lost now. It merely shows that even the effect of worst happenings in our life cannot stay too long with us. This is what Shri Krishna is pointing out.

Krishna elevated those who developed this sense of equanimity to the level of immortality (so’mrutatvāya kalpate). He also therefore defined yoga as a way to develop this sense of equanimity (samatvāṃ yoga ucyate).

We all engage in a variety of activities in our life and the most important issue for leadership is our ability to handle the activities and outcomes with a sense of equanimity. Shri Krishna brought out this idea very nicely using war as an example. If war is taken as an activity then, the outcome of the activity is win or lose. Mere outcome does not tell us much. We need to have some performance metric or yardstick to measure the outcome. Using the measurement yardstick we can conclude that it is gain or loss. Finally this leads us to either happiness or sadness. Krishna uses this framework and tells Arjuna that in order to be a good leader, we must be able to treat activity outcomes (jayā-jayau), measurement outcomes (lābhā-lābhau) and feelings (sukha-duḥkhe) with a sense of oneness (same krutvā). Then the activity will not bother us (naivam pāpaṃ avāpsyasi) and we will be able to lead from the front without any botheration.

Let me given another example from today's situation. In companies they check performance based on the assessment. Say I am a marketing executive and bagged 30 orders for this month. Whether I would be happy or sad depends on the target given to me. If the target is 100 and I made only 30 then I will be sad. If the target is 20 and I did 30 then I will be happy. The performance measurement is used to assess the outcome.
Gain and loss is what determines happiness or sadness not merely positive or negative outcomes. Sometimes even positive outcomes may not lead to happiness, as they say in medical parlance, “Operation successful, patient died”. So what Shri Krishna is pointing to is that when you step out into the world of activities, you will always confront with duality of outcomes, assessments and feelings. A good leader must be able to handle this world of duality with ease.

This is the crucial aspect of leadership. If you want to be a leader at home, at your society, at your neighbourhood, at your organization, to get this समत्व भावः (sense of equanimity) we all have to be like a thermostat not like a thermometer. Thermometer means at 20 degree it will go up, at 40 degree it will go up even more and at 10 degree it will go down. On the other hand, thermostat means it always maintains stable state by adjusting the temperature to the desired level, which you set.

**Mutual Dependence**

Leadership is also about the ability to appreciate and honour the principle of mutual dependence. Shri Krishna says that only those who are able to appreciate and practice the principle of mutual dependence (परस्परं भावयांतः) will be in a position to reach the pinnacle of success (स्रेयः परां वा प्रयत्नं). In an organization the boss and the sub-ordinate must honour the principle of mutual dependence. The same principle applies in situations involving the government and the civil society and man and the nature. This is not to be dismissed as a simple idea. In recent times, we have seen how this principle has powerfully operated on certain matters in our country. When the civil society expressed its unhappiness about the elected union government it culminated in overthrowing the political party out of power. Similarly, it required about 3 hours for nature to wind up the clock in Kedarnath back by about 150 years by causing huge floods.

देवान्भावयतानेन ते देवा भावयतु वः |
परस्परं भावयतः: श्रेयः परमवाप्यथ ||3.11

*devän bhāvayatānena te deva bhāvayantu vah
parasparaṃ bhāvayantāḥ śreyāḥ param avāpsyatha (3.11)*
Conclusions

Ladies and Gentlemen, in conclusion I want to make this important point. The entire discussion of leadership that we see in Bhagavad Gita is all about the state of the mind and our ability to handle it. This is what I meant by using the phrase “the world inside”. This perspective is completely absent in today’s management literature. Modern discussions on leadership is excessively tilted towards handling the “world outside”. As we have seen in the case of Arjuna in the battlefield, his collapse had nothing to do with the “outside world”. It was indeed due to actively processing “inside” the information that he saw outside by his mind. Unless we understand and address this seriously, we may not be able to make much progress in leadership. We may create leaders who may appear to be great for the outside world, but may be “silently” weathering a huge storm inside and eventually destroy themselves.

Gita has such wonderful ideas to take away for all of us and I have merely culled out a small portion from this huge repository. I believe that every one of us are required to play a leadership role, in the society, in the family, in our neighbourhood and of course in our work place. We do not need a CEO card for this, but these principles from Gita to do an effective job.

I take this opportunity to thank Justice S N Pukhan and his family members for organising this Memorial Lecture and to Vivekananda Institute of Culture, Guwahati for inviting me to deliver this Eighth Vedanta Vachaspati Radha Nath Pukhan Memorial Lecture. Let Lord Krishna shower his blessings on all of you present here in this beautiful auditorium.

Thank you!