
The Bhagavad-gita as an Inspiration to Enterprise and Guide to Business Management

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Abstract

The *Bhagavad-gita* (Gita) is not just a sacred book for spiritual liberation (*Moksha*). Its importance as a handbook for facing ethical problems of day-to-day struggles in life for individuals, businessmen and leaders alike, has been increasingly realised. This article brings out the relevance of the Gita also as a source of inspiration for entrepreneurship, and a guide to business management. Many of the teachings of the Gita such as for practicing Karma-yoga and about the value of equipoise and detachment are pertinent for managers. The Gita refers to the cycle of mutual support which sustains the world, urging the acceptance of social responsibility for people's welfare (*loka-hita/ loka-sangraha*). The concept of *Yajna*, emphasizing one's right restricted only to the remnant, implies responsibility to nature too, and the need to avoid its reckless exploitation. It also means that business has to duly compensate and rehabilitate victims of negative externalities, before enjoying profits.

Keywords: Gita in management, spirituality, Karma Yoga, social responsibility

The Bhagavad-gita, or, the Gita in short, was traditionally seen only as a source of spiritual guidance, and also as a means of earning *Punya* or merit through daily recitation. It gives a choice to seekers to have a path of spiritual realisation, best suited to their aptitude and nature – the path of knowledge (*Jnaana yoga*), the path of works or selfless service to society (*karma yoga*), the path of love or devotion (*Bhakti yoga*), the path of meditation (*Dhyaanayoga*), or a combination of any or all of these. The Gita also has a philosophy which was interpreted in a variety of ways by the great Acharyas, and distinct schools of philosophy emerged – *Advaita*, *Vishishtadvaita*, *Dvaita*, *Dvaitadvaita* and so on, enriching intellectual debate in India on the nature of Ultimate Truth. The scripture is also valued for its rich ethical content useful in this very life, quite apart from spiritual realisation.

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The original Gita being in Sanskrit, which is not the spoken language of the masses in India, has never hindered its popularity, particularly after Sant Jnaneshwar translated it in Marathi verse in the 13th century, followed by translations in almost all the Indian languages well before the middle of the last century. When the first English translation of the Gita by Charles Wilkins appeared in 1785 in London, it was recognised as the sacred scripture of Hindus, like the Bible to Christians. A hundred years later, after the publication of Sir Edwin Arnold's translation of the Gita in verse in 1885, *The Song Celestial*, it began to be treated as a storehouse of universal values with much general interest, not confined to the Hindus alone. The Gita became global by the end of the 19th century. Many Western thinkers saw it as a source of deliverance from excessive materialism. By now, the Gita has been translated into almost all the languages (if not dialects) of the world, and in English alone there are over two hundred translations.

The Gita, however, is only one of the many books in India considered as sacred. Its teachings are based on the Vedas and Upanishads which preceded it. The Gita has the advantage of being concise, containing only 700 verses, and easier to understand than other texts like the *Brahma-sutras*. It is originally a part of the *Bhishma Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, but can stand alone as an independent text. The text is in the form of a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, which took place on the battlefield just before the battle was to begin. It was the sudden loss of will on the part Arjuna to fight with his teachers, elders, and cousins, after both armies came face to face in the battlefield that occasioned this famous dialogue. It was Lord Krishna's task to inspire Arjuna back into action.

The value of the Gita as a source of inspiration and guidance in mundane problems, both at the national and individual level, was realised only recently since the 18th century, compared to its long recognition as a sacred book. This use had to do with the Gita's practical approach to ethics. Practical approach does not mean that for the sake of practical convenience, ethical principles could be compromised. That would amount to hypocrisy, and the Gita abhors hypocrisy as *mithyaachaara* (chapter III.6) or *dambha* (ch. XVI.10). Practical approach to ethics means having the potential to guide through ethical problems one faces in day to day life. These problems arise at various levels – in the

private lives of individuals, in community or national problems, and of course in business enterprises. The very background of the Gita is set in a battle field. Gandhi and many others have regarded the battlefield background of the Gita as a metaphor for the struggle of life. Struggle is inevitable in life. The triumph of the good over the evil, or of justice over injustice, does not take place automatically, but only through a relentless struggle. During the days of India's freedom struggle, the Gita was taken as a direct source of inspiration for the national movement by such luminaries as Bankim Chandra, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Sri Aurobindo. Raja Rammohan Roy used the Gita as a source of support for reforming the Hindu society and for eradicating such social evils as child marriage and the *Sati* system. He used the Gita even to oppose idolatry and superstition^a. Mahatma Gandhi treated the Gita as his mother, as a source of solace, and guide in all practical problems he faced in the freedom struggle he led and in social reforms he launched. He wrote in 1925:

“I find a solace in the *Bhagavadgita* that I miss even in the Sermon on the Mount. When disappointment stares me in the face and all alone I see not a ray of light, I go back to the *Bhagavadgita*. I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies – and my life has been full of external tragedies – and if they have left no visible, no credible scar on me, I owe it to the teachings of the *Bhagavadgita*.”

--Mahatma Gandhi in *Young India* 1925 (pp. 1078-79); *CWMG*
Vol. 32, p. 195.

It is no wonder that the Gita has now come to be seen as a source of inspiration for business enterprise and guide to management. In a sense, the modern business environment under competitive capitalism also looks like a ruthless battlefield. Starting a new business needs courage, an enterprising spirit, and pride in doing it. The timid cannot start business enterprises, nor can satisfactorily run them as they may buckle down under pressure of competition. What verse can be more inspiring and invigorating than the third one in chapter 2? It says:

*Klaibyam maasma gamah Partha naitat tvaivyupapadyate /
Kshudram hridaya daurbalyam tyaktvotthishtha Parantapa //*

^aFor details, see Nadkarni (2013: 257), and Agarwal (1993: 19: 48).

It means: ‘Yield not to unmanliness, O Son of Pritha! Ill doth it become thee. Cast off this mean faint-heartedness and arise, O Scorcher of thine enemies!’⁸.

Swami Vivekananda considered this verse as containing the whole message of the Gita (CWSV Vol. IV, 1998: 110). He thought it to be particularly relevant to the then mass of Indians immersed in ignorance and superstition who needed to struggle for a respectable place in the comity of nations. They had to fight numerous social evils like untouchability and mass illiteracy. But the verse can be considered to be equally relevant to talented young men inspiring them to start their own enterprises and create new employment instead of tamely being content with being employed by others. An unenterprising or inert nature (*apravritti*) is condemned by the Gita as *taamasika* (of the quality of darkness, dullness, or passivity)² (chapter XIV, verse 13; XIV. 13 henceforth).

However, the enterprising will always find ups and downs, which they have to face with equanimity and patience. ‘Have patience’ (*titikshasva*), says the Gita emphatically (II. 14). An important message of the Gita is: Treat joy and sorrow, profit and loss, success and failure with equipoise, and be ready to struggle (*sukha-duhkkhe same kritvaa laabhaalaabhau jayaajayau/ tato yuddhaaya yujyasya.../!*) (II. 38). How is it possible? The Gita says, through detachment (*sangam tyaktvaa*). A certain amount of detachment even while actively engaged in work, helps one to gain an evenness of mind (*samatvam*) against ups and downs, success and failure (*siddhyahsiddhyoh*) (II.48). Apart from saving from stress and depression, detachment equips one to deal with all vicissitudes calmly and efficiently. Detachment does not mean non-seriousness with work or lack of commitment. The Gita is very emphatic about working with dexterity (*yogah karmasu kaushalam*) (II. 50). It considers working with fortitude (*Dhriti*) and enthusiasm (*utsaaha*) as *saatvika*, the most desired of the three *gunas*^b or mental qualities (XVIII.26). There is no

^bThe concept of *Gunas* is taken by the Gita from the *Sankhya* philosophy. The three *gunas* are *Saatvika*, *Rajasika*, and *Taamasika*, which, loosely translated, respectively mean truthful, emotional, and dull. The concepts were originally applied to natural mental qualities, but can be used in other cases also. For a tabular representation of how the concepts can be applied to various things like individual’s nature, work, devotion etc. see Nadkarni (2013: 59-60). There is a detailed discussion of the *gunas* in the Gita in chapters 17 and 18.

question of the Gita accepting indifference to quality of work as detachment. But the detachment as taught by the Gita is a key both to success and survival. An entrepreneur, whether an industrialist or farmer, has to accept risks and uncertainties as unavoidable facts of life, and be ready to face them with boldness and confidence. The tragic suicides of numerous farmers or even of small businessmen are a consequence of not imbibing this teaching of the Gita. Even if a business goes into liquidation, a business person should not lose cool and equipoise, and be ready to reincarnate himself or herself within this God-given life. There is a famous verse in the Gita (II. 22) which has served as a source of solace in the context of passing away of a dear one. It says: 'Even as a man casts off worn-out clothes, and puts on new ones, so the embodied casts off worn-out bodies, and enters into others which are new'⁸. This verse could as well be applied to situations of failure or liquidation of a business enterprise. An entrepreneur should not lose his or her cool in such situations, but be ready to learn from experience and start a new enterprise. Professor B Mahadevan interprets this verse as teaching the need to discard obsolete ideas and experiment with new ones in business; it is a mantra for innovation⁹.

Hindu scriptures have accepted the goal of earning wealth as a valid *Purushaartha* (human goal). Earning wealth *per se* is not regarded as a sin, but is encouraged on the contrary. It is considered as the duty of a householder to earn, take care of family, be hospitable, and help others. The principles of morality are applicable to all including householders. They have no concessions or exemptions from them just because they need to earn, though sanyasis are subject to even more rigorous moral and spiritual discipline. Similarly, business enterprises enjoy no exemptions from the principles of morality, just because they are in business. They have in fact special responsibilities because they are in a position to control the lives of others. The Rigveda gave a general advice which is relevant even today, both for individuals and business enterprises. Though this essay is on the Gita, the advice from the Rigveda is pertinent in the context of what the Gita also has to say further on the issue. The Rigveda says:

⁸See B Mahadevan, 'Bhagavad Gita: Ideas for Modern Management', talk delivered in a Seminar on 'Towards a new paradigm of business management: Alternative perspectives from ancient Indian wisdom', at IIM, Bangalore, December 12, 2009, <http://www.sanskritbookfair.org.archives/882>, p. 2.

*Parichin marto dravinam mamanyaad ritasya pathaa namasaa
vivaaset /*

*Uta svena kratunaa samvadeta shreyaamsam daksham manasaa
jagribhyaat //*

--- Rigveda X. 31.2

(Let a man/woman ponder well on wealth, earn it through the path of moral law and with humility, consulting one's own conscience, and then heartily gain upright prosperity. Tr. by the author.)

Wealth does not come on its own. One has to consciously ponder (*parichin*) over how it has to be earned through the path of moral law or truth (*ritasya pathaa*), and not by dishonest means. It has to be earned with humility (*namasaa*), since success depends on the grace of God and one owes it to the society at large for making it possible. Ethical dilemmas are bound to arise, which have to be resolved through consulting one's conscience (*kratunaa samvadeta*) or Inner Voice as Gandhi called it. Once these qualifications or conditions are respected and followed, one can heartily (*manasaa*) earn wealth and gain well deserved (*daksham*) prosperity (*shreyaamsam*)^d.

The Gita implicitly accepts this, but also adds that the wealth earned must also be shared and be used for the welfare of humanity (*lokahita*). Earning wealth has to be done in the spirit of a *Yajna*, an offering, and one should enjoy its fruit only after meeting the dues of all; that is, one has a right to eat only the remnants of *Yajna*. The Gita, further explains this by saying that those who cook only for themselves eat sin (III. 13). Even food that one prepares has to be shared, what then of earning wealth through business? A further extension of the idea that one has a right only to the remnants after meeting the dues of all, is that the moral responsibility of a corporate enterprise is not confined only to its shareholders, but extends to other stakeholders as well like employees, customers, suppliers, state, and society^e. Shareholders come last, they are entitled only to what remains after all dues and liabilities are met. The business enterprises have no right also to unsustainable and/or illegal exploitation of

^dThe translation of the verse and its explanation have been taken from Nadkarni (2013: 62).

^eFor details, see chapter 10 on 'Ethics in Business', in Nadkarni (2014: 243-270).

nature. If the business operations cause some negative externalities like depriving some people of their land or livelihoods, they need to be first compensated and rehabilitated. If any pollution is involved, the business enterprise has to honestly take steps to avoid or at least minimise pollution within permissible or acceptable limits, and duly compensate the victims of pollution. All this is implied when the Gita says that one has a right only to the remnants of *Yajna*.

The great thing about the Gita is that it does not stop at teaching ethics, though it is important. It goes beyond and teaches how to be effective and efficient too. As a matter of fact, being ethical in business also contributes to efficiency and effectiveness. There is no conflict between ethics and business efficiency. The management should not be guided by only short term gains, and sacrifice its long term credibility. Micro-economic theory is developed on the premise that a firm has the goal of profit maximisation. A healthy firm, however, aims at maximising profits over a long run, and not tempted by short run gains which harm long run profitability. We often talk about brand value of an enterprise, which is essentially a long term concept. Brand value does not so much depend on profitability of business, as profitability depends on brand value. Brand value depends in the main on the moral integrity with which business is conducted, the confidence the customers have in the product and services of business, the reputation of the enterprise on the treatment of its employees and suppliers, its social welfare projects, and also the extent of eco-friendliness of the enterprise. A good management has to ensure all this for success. The secret of success in business management lies in following the Gita's advice: '*Parasparam bhaavayantah shreyah paramavaapsyatha*' (III. 11). It means: 'Cherish each other, support each other, you gain the highest good'. A little further, in verse 16 of the same chapter, the Gita refers to a cycle (*chakra*) of good works, involving helping each other and gaining mutual benefit, and warns that one who does not participate in this virtuous cycle lives in vain (*mogham jeevati*). But if this cycle is followed, it contributes to the longevity and brand value of the enterprise. Yes, as explained above, ups and downs, and even mortality of business enterprises have to be faced with equanimity. But it does not mean that management cannot do anything about it. Brand value

helps a business greatly to tide over ups and downs, and promotes its longevity. However, brand value is not dropped to an enterprise from the high heavens as a gift; it has to be created and assiduously patiently built. The secret of boosting brand value lies in following the Gita's twin principles of eating only the remainder after sharing, and cherishing each other. It cannot be ignored that cherishing each other covers our natural environment also. When the environment is protected, it nourishes us too!

Another advice which the Gita gives is to have humility, and not only to avoid arrogance but also be cautious about not giving any such impression to others. Arrogance, even an impression of being arrogant, is highly counter-productive. In the old days, many used to think that throwing one's weight around and creating an aura of fear works best in getting work done. But it also creates unconsciously or consciously resistance and an attitude of withdrawing from wholehearted cooperation. A mature way is to prefer being loved rather than being feared. Amiability and exuding warmth in relationships with all are not so much as a way of getting willing obedience from those below, but essentially because it is the person's very nature. Such a person is quick to give credit to others both for small and big things, and not appropriate all credit for oneself. A good manager, even a CEO, is open to suggestions and advice from others, and attends to complaints on time and sincerely, and even when a complaint has to be rejected, it has to be done after due consideration and respect to the complainant. A good and healthy organisation does not depend on the competence of just one or a few persons, but of most. A competent manager creates an environment where all contribute wholeheartedly, and is quick to recognise the role of others. The Gita says that it is the deluded arrogant who thinks that he or she is the only doer (*Ahamkaara-vimoodhaatma kartaaram aham manyate*) (III. 27).

The Gita hints that in taking important decisions or solving problems, it is best to have a total view of things involved, rather than be content with analysing a thing in isolation even if in depth. Verse 20 in chapter XVIII, says: 'Understand that to be the highest or *saatvika* knowledge which sees enduring unity in different things or the common in diversity' (tr. by the author). The very next verse (21st) says, 'Understand that to

be raajasika, which looks at different entities separately, treating each as different and separate' (tr. by author). What is preferred is the holistic view. There is no note of condemnation of analytical approach, since it may be useful in some cases. In taking decisions, however, taking a holistic view is expected to give the most satisfactory outcome, since it recognises that there are several dimensions to an issue all of which may be relevant directly or indirectly. It takes the larger picture into account, which may produce new insights that a purely analytical approach may miss. The 22nd verse in the same chapter describes lack of knowledge or misleading knowledge as *taamasika*. It will be very harmful for an enterprise to take decisions on the basis of what the Gita calls as *taamasika* knowledge^f.

There is a principle of work in the Gita, Karma yoga, which in simple English means selfless service. But if you try to spell it out particularly for general application, it can be seen as intriguing in spite of all the attention and publicity it has received. The essence of Karma-yoga is considered to be as spelt out in chapter II, verse 47. It says: 'you have a right only to doing work (*Karmanyeva adhikaaraste*); but never to its outcome or fruit (*maa phaleshu kadaachana*); don't aspire for the fruit of (your) work (*maa karma-phala-heturbhoo*); but don't abstain from work (*maa te sangostvakarmani*)'. If you take this verse in isolation, it may sound highly unacceptable, even revolting. If a manager goes before his workers with such a harsh injunction, he will be considered as a slave-driver. How can anyone be expected to work without anticipating a reward, be they workers or professionals? Let alone workers, how can a manager, who is supposed to be result oriented and has certain targets to achieve, be indifferent to the outcome of what he or she does? How can you expect an entrepreneur to be indifferent to profits or success of his enterprise, when his or her very motive is to make a surplus at least in the long run and make a success of his enterprise? Even a spiritual seeker is motivated by the desire for *Moksha* or *Nirvana*, and cannot be entirely desire-less.

Actually, however, the Gita does not intend it. Krishna himself motivates Arjuna by saying: 'If you die in the battle, you will attain heaven; if you win, you will enjoy this earth. Stand up, therefore, and resolve to fight' (II. 37). How can he, then, just ten verses later

^fFor details and examples, see chapter 7 on 'Holistic approach to knowledge...' in Nadkarni (2014: 169-195).

in the same chapter ask the same Arjuna not to desire any fruit of his action? Nor does Krishna advise indifference to expected outcome. He denounces work done without heeding to the consequences as *tamasika* (XVIII. 25). The Lord does not expect any work to be done in an 'unengaged' way (*ayukta*), that is, mindlessly or thoughtlessly; nor lazily taking one's own sweet time (*deerghasootri*) (XVII.28). He insists on commitment (*Shraddha*), and treats the lack of it as *taamasika* (XVII. 13). He emphasises dexterity in work (*karmasu kaushalam*) in the very next verse (II. 48) after recommending work without seeking a gain. Work has also to be done with fortitude and enthusiasm (XVIII. 26). It means that one has to enjoy the work. The question is if anyone can fulfil all these expectations without anticipating anything at all in return. What then does Karma-yoga exactly mean? It is easier to do so through illustrations.

First of all, Karma-yoga is meant basically for one's own self to practice, and not for asking others to follow it freeing oneself from the obligation of it. That would amount to hypocrisy and an attempt at slave-driving. Karma-yoga is a mental discipline with practical applications both for efficiency and spiritual advancement. We can think of following Karma-yoga at two levels, primary and advanced. We may illustrate it with the example of a doctor or a surgeon, who may charge a higher normal fee to well-to-do patients, but a much lower fee to the poor. The doctor has to meet expenses involved in giving a good service and also make a living, and cannot therefore afford to give free medical service for all. But having charged a fee, the doctor will not discriminate between a rich and a poor patient, giving a better and careful service to the former and indifferent service to the poor. In giving the medical service, a good doctor is guided by the motive of professional excellence and pride in work, and compassion for all patients, irrespective of what they pay. A more paying rich indoor patient may be accommodated in a special AC room, and a common patient in a general ward. But as far as the medical service itself is concerned, there will be no discrimination between the two, and even the general ward will be kept as clean and hygienic as the special room. This is Karma-yoga at a primary level, doing work with professionalism, pride in the quality of work, with complete care and mindfulness, and also of

course with compassion to beneficiaries of work and to all. The doctor may charge fees, but is not guided only by the pecuniary considerations which in fact are pushed to background. Merely because the doctor charges some fees, does not belittle his being a Karma-yogi. A more enterprising doctor may intensify his or her social service by charging nothing or only a nominal fee, and meeting the expenses involved through donations from the admiring public, without compromising on the quality of service and professionalism. What really distinguishes a more mature or higher level Karma-yogi from the one at the primary level, is that the sense of 'I am doing' totally vanishes in the mature who considers himself or herself as a mere instrument or puppet in the hands of the Divine, carrying out the Divine Will, not one's own will. The selflessness here is on two counts: the person does not work for a personal reward, and, secondly, drops all the feeling of 'I' or 'mine'.

Similarly, a teacher may accept a salary to make a living, but as a karma-yogi, she will be totally lost in teaching, constantly improving herself in the profession, giving her best, enjoying teaching for its own sake, and not working just for a salary. The teacher as a real karma-yogi would feel that she is just an instrument of the Divine, carrying out the Divine Will. Such a teacher cannot be unmindful of the outcome of the teaching, for it has to be ensured that the students absorb the knowledge and skills taught. But a karma-yogi does not judge the outcome in terms of the income gained. To that extent, the teacher is selfless, or desire-less (*anahamvaadi, nispraha*), a requirement for a karma-yogi.

Can we apply the principle of selfless work to business enterprises in general? The bulk of economic activity in the world is assumed to be motivated by the desire for a personal gain or profit. According to Adam Smith, considered the father of economics, self-interest is not necessarily bad for the world. Take his oft-quoted observation: 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love ...'⁷. When each person acts according to self-interest, according to him, there is a mutual balance and natural order as in a market, and the common good is protected. Smith's view has not gone unchallenged. A

natural order produced exclusively by narrow self-interest can be very unfair with a lot of exploitation of the weak by the strong, and can also be environmentally unsustainable. What is needed is to rein in selfishness. This can be done either by the government through regulation and control, or by self-restraint, or through both. What the Gita does is to emphasise voluntary self-restraint. This aspect of the Gita was later developed by Mahatma Gandhi, who asked for treating the surplus wealth as a trust for the benefit of the society. Economic rationality seen narrowly in terms of selfishness would be a case of 'rational fools', and not a sensible or wise behaviour⁶. One is free to earn enough to prove one's self-worth, but it is not necessary that all the earnings be spent on oneself and family only. Just as individuals can, and many do, devote part of their wealth for philanthropy, corporate enterprises can also, and do, devote some of their earnings for the benefit of the larger society. This is a part of their social responsibility⁸.

Social responsibility of business enterprises has several dimensions, and is in addition to their responsibility to their stakeholders. Only some of the social responsibility has direct monetary implications, like contributing to social projects of the country to enhance the welfare and environmental improvement, and promoting education and culture. The company can even persuade their highly paid employees to make similar contributions. It creates an environment of social awareness in the company. The other dimensions of social responsibility are: avoiding any discrimination against women in employment including in top positions, deliberately diversifying the social background of employees so that SCs and STs and religious minorities are adequately represented including in the middle and top positions, and giving some preference and proper facilities to the physically challenged persons in employment. Doing all this would amount to following the Gita's advice of caring for *loka-hita* or *loka-sangraha* (promoting people's welfare). It is no longer left to the sweet will of the companies to do this. The Companies Act 2013 stipulates in Section 135 that every company having a net worth of 5000 million rupees or more, or having a net profit of 50 million rupees or more, shall spend at least 2 per cent of its net profit before distribution (averaged over the preceding three years) on social welfare projects as its Corporate

⁸The explanation of Karma-yoga here is based on Nadkarni (2013: 89-94).

Social Responsibility^h. Do I hear a voice from somewhere that such a provision discourages enterprise and investment? Those having such a feeling should re-read the third verse in the second chapter of the Gita quoted above (*Klaibyam maasma gamah...*).

It is not claimed here that the Gita contains within its 700 verses all the issues of the art and science of management. But the Gita can be quite inspiring and invigorating, when properly understood. The attempt of this article has been to promote such an understanding. It is possible that not only other Hindu scriptures but also the scriptures of other religions may have this potential. But the article is focused on the Gita due to the author's greater familiarity with it.

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^hFor details, see Nadkarni (2014: 264-68).