

# Servant Leadership in India: A Journey from Past to Present

Adya Mishra ★ Mamata Mahapatra ★ ★

## Abstract

*"A Leader is the one who knows the way, show the way and goes the way; they are the primary of organizations across the various sectors" (quote from John Maxwell: <https://www.toolshero.com/toolsheroes/john-c-maxwell/>). A leader is responsible for guiding his/her followers to achieve the desired goal, make them committed towards objectives of the organization and take care of their personal, professional and emotional efficiency. Some of the aptly used leadership styles followed in organizations are democratic, transformational, transactional, charismatic etc. Servant Leadership style is still rare in practice and unexplored in research. The objective of this research paper is to analyze the concept of servant leadership as developed by Greenleafin (1970) and trace roots of the concept of the servant leadership advocated by Indian spiritual guru none other than Swami Vivekanada and the scripture like Bhagavad Gita. The paper intends to review the existing literature on servant leadership. Researchers will also make an attempt to analyze lessons from Servant Leaders of India in the corporate world viz. Narayana Murthy, Azim Premji, Ratan Tata and Dhirubhai Ambani.*

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Bhagavad Gita, Servant Leadership in India

## Introduction

Organizations today operate in the international market having to compete with global brands. Competition for resources especially human resources is real and all pervasive. Management of human resources involves thoughtful strategies of promotion, recognition, salary increment, and many more. When aspirations of employees are not fulfilled according to their own expectations, they are likely to generate negative emotions such as feeling of envy with fellow colleagues, reduction in the spirit of cooperation or antagonism towards the co-workers (Eslami, & Arshadi, 2016). The competition at workplace demands that the employees constantly chase deadlines. Due to constant pressure of deadlines, employees may experience stress, anxiety and many other emotional

problems. According to a study conducted in 2016 about 88 per cent of the employees feel stressed and among these stressed individuals 40 per cent of respondents feel stressed as a result of work overload (Kumar, 2016). The stress and burnout experienced by the individuals at workplace as a result of competitive work climate generate negative workplace consequences such as lack of motivation, low performance, absenteeism, organizational dysfunction and many more (Colligan, & Higgins, 2006; Latreille, & Sloane, 2011; Bubonya, et al. 2017; Ajayi, S. 2018). Further, workplace stress can result to many other physical problems such as back pain, coronary diseases (Schneider, S., Schmitt, H., Zoller, S., & Schiltenswolf, M. 2005; Steffy, B. D., & Jones, J. W. 1988). It is because of these negative consequences of competitive workplace environment, the role of leadership becomes more dynamic as well as challenging. Leaders are thus required to be aware of such situations leading employees' stress experience in order to create pleasant work environment that is likely to enhance their overall productivity.

★ Adya Mishra, PhD Research Scholar (Psychology), Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Noida, U.P.

★ ★ Dr. Mamata Mahapatra, Associate Professor, Center Head Organizational Psychology, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Science, Amity University, Noida, U.P.

Henceforth, apart from fulfilling the basic human resource requirements, a leader should also take care of psychological and emotional aspects of their followers in order to make them more efficient. Most of the leadership styles only focus on the professional aspects of the followers. However, Servant Leadership has the capacity to take care of holistic well-being of their followers. Their ability to trust, be compassionate and spiritual nature differentiates them from other leadership.

### **Revisiting the Concept of Servant Leadership**

The term “servant leadership” was basically coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in a seminal paper published in 1970 inspired by Herman Hesse’s autobiographical novel, “Journey to the East”.

#### **Greenleaf defined Servant Leadership as follows:**

“It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve and to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference in the quality of leadership manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?” (Giorgio, A. 2010, P. 101; Greenleaf, 1977, P. 13)

The concept of servant leadership can be described as a leader’s intention to serve his/her followers. A servant leader is first a servant to the followers and then a leader. He is empathetic and compassionate towards the followers and has a genuine concern for the well-being of their subordinates (Maula-Bakhsh, R., & Raziq, A. 2016; Coetzer, M. F., Bussin, M. H., & Geldenhuys, M. 2017). They have the natural intentions to serve their followers and to take care

of their emotional and psychological aspects along with the professional ones. Servant Leaders has the ability to create a trusting relationship between their followers and themselves (Rezaei, M., Salehi, S., Shafiei, M., & Sabet, S. 2012; Goh, S. K., & Low, B. Z. J. 2013).

Servant Leaders are spiritual in nature, their altruistic love, hope, trust, active listening and selfless nature towards their followers make them spiritual; there exist congruence between servant leadership and spiritual leadership as both the leadership styles have the capability to intrinsically motivate their followers, a servant leader creates meaningfulness at workplace through their service (Freeman, G. T. 2011). Servant leaders are prophetic in nature and be described in spiritual terms. The prophetic nature of servant leaders facilitates the formation of a new vision that unites and transforms individuals as well as organizations. The prophetic and spiritual nature of a servant leader provides a vision to their followers by serving and empowering them (Bekker, C. J. 2010). Spirituality is the major construct of servant leadership by including four components: interconnectedness, clarity of purpose, sense of wholeness and religiousness (Sendjaya, S., & Pekerti, A. 2010). This model of servant leadership lists ten characteristics as mentioned mentioned below:

- **Listening:** A good leader is the one who has good listening skills. Listening can be very helpful in maintaining good interpersonal relationships with subordinates. Listening to their problems and suggestions can help the employees, the leader as well as the organization to grow.
- **Empathy:** This characteristic of servant leaders distinguishes them from other leaders. Being empathetic towards the subordinates creates the environment of trust. The servant leader is humane towards employees and empathizes with them. The willingness to be receptive to colleagues,

employees, and teammates does not mean that a servant leader accepts either bad behavior or shoddy work product.

- **Healing:** The choice to heal instead of being destructive when we deal with each other in the workplace, is an essential feature of the relationship between servant leader and follower. Leaders who see themselves as servants first are approachable and open to discuss difficult topics and emotionally charged issues. Healers are interested in their staff members as whole people.
- **Awareness:** Servant Leaders are self aware, they are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and they also make their followers to be aware of the opportunities and threats in the business world.
- **Persuasion:** The ability to lead by persuasion, instead of by the power of one's position, is another commendable quality of the servant leader. A leader who spends time talking to followers; usually does not need to rely on coercion.
- **Conceptualization:** In addition to persuasion and influence, servant leaders must have the ability to conceptualize. A servant leader has to be able to conceptualize a goal, hold it, work toward it, and also focus on the day-to-day issues.
- **Foresight:** Foresight is another quality necessary for an individual who wishes to lead an organization. Moving toward a goal requires leaders who are acutely aware of the present, able to learn from history, and able to derive possible consequences of proposed future actions. Greenleaf wrote that the abilities to "know the unknowable" and to "foresee the unforeseeable" (Zimmerman, 2018, P3) are intellectual capacities that are not academically taught. These qualities are developed by experience and exposure to different situations.
- **Commitment towards the Growth of People:**

Servant leaders are committed to the growth of others and do not treat employees as exchangeable instruments to be used. The servant leader sees and cares for followers in a way that reaches beyond each person's contributions as an employee of the organization. The servant leader appreciates the professional, personal, and spiritual dimensions of each person's life outside of the tangible everyday efforts of the individual in the workplace. On a more global level, the servant leader is well aware that the growth and complex nature of society and the creation of large and caring institutions have made the need to build community more exigent than ever.

- **Stewardship:** Servant leaders do not coerce or manipulate staff members into compliance. They serve their staff by enabling them to do excellent work. In cases where the leader/follower relationship is not coalescing, the servant leader has the courage to act and the fortitude to have meaningful dialogues with negative staff members for whom responsibility and accountability do not matter at all. To be empowered, a follower must first be willing to accept the responsibility of accountability and the servant leader should be able to transform them through intervention.
- **Building Community:** Servant Leaders not only themselves feel obligation to serve the community and give back, but they also need to promote this kind of activity and help followers understand the value of giving back and what that means for an organization and for the community and people they are supporting.

Since the term servant leadership was coined by Robert K Greenleaf in the year 1970, theory of this leadership style was formulated in the west. However, if we try to look into the roots of this theory, it originated in India, basically from the leadership lessons of Bhagavad Gita (Sharma, A. 1948) and the teachings of great Indian leader

Swami Vivekananda (Chaudhuri, A. 2016).

Align to the above; following are the objectives of this paper:

- To analyze the concept of Servant Leadership, beyond Greenleaf's theory.
- To examine the Indian roots of servant leadership construct.
- To review the existing literature on servant leadership with reference to text of Indian origin.
- To study servant leadership with special reference to Bhagvad Gita and the life of Swami Vivekananda.
- To extract the leadership lessons from great Indian corporate leaders having Servant leadership style like N. R. Narayana Murthy, Azim Premji, Ratan Tata and Dhirubhai Ambani.

### **The History of Servant Leadership**

When if we try to understand the servant leadership construct beyond the Greenleaf's concept with special reference to Bhagvad Gita and leadership lessons from the life of Swami Vivekananda, it has been discovered that this leadership style existed in India many years before Greenleaf actually gave the concept.

Many of the scholars including Herman Hesse has quoted Bhagvad Gita in their writings. Many of the contemporary management issues like emotional intelligence, situational leadership and servant leadership has been discussed in philosophical context Bhagvad Gita (Sharma, A.1948). Bhagvad Gita contains many useful messages for better understanding for many complex managerial issues. (Sharma, A.K., Talwar, B 2004). Bhagvad Gita delivers many fruitful lessons related to Servant Leadership. Bhagvad Gita preaches that a leader should be proactive in order to be successful. The foresight of a leader combine with wisdom is

very essential for a leader to be proactive (Rarick, C. A. 2007). Being proactive requires a leader to have a foresight, to be able to think beyond the arena of immediate future. Foresight is one of the characteristic of a Servant Leader (Spears, L. C. 2010). This historical and philosophical text mentions that a leader can achieve lasting power and glory only by practicing selfless service and compassion towards the followers and selfish desires can ruin the effectiveness of the leader. A well-organized leader is the one who can maintain his/her level-headedness in the time of pain as well as pleasure (Sharma, A.1948). Bhagvad Gita also lays emphasis on the significance of self-sacrifice; a leader should sacrifice his/her own interest so as to promote the well-being of the followers. A leader should act in a role of a servant who is kind, compassionate, the one who is able to work selflessly, having great concern for the followers and is capable to be calm and composed even in difficult situations. A leader's behavior should be directed towards the welfare of the followers. The goal of an efficient leadership should be to serve the followers in helping them to attain desired performance level (Rarick, C. A. 2007).

Therefore, the servant leadership approach was visible in the managerial lessons of Bhagvad Gita that existed centuries before Robert Greenleaf proposed the concept.

This leadership style was also followed by the contemporary leader of Indian history Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda believed that a leader is always born, a leader must be *dasasya dasa*- a servant of servants, and must accommodate thousands of minds. A leader must be devoid of jealousy or selfishness (Chaudhuri, A. 2016).

The importance of Servant Leadership was clearly visible in the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, through the letters he wrote to his disciples. Swami Vivekananda realized the importance of

servant leadership concept around hundred years before Greenleaf actually gave this concept, when in 1894 he once wrote to his disciple “Do not try to lead your brethren, but serve them. The brutal mania for leading has sunk many a great ship in the water of life”( A letter written to his disciple in 1894). The concept of servant leadership was deeply embedded in his mind and he repeatedly mentioned it in his letters. He always taught his disciples that like a servant, a leader should take care of his followers by utmost trust and empathy. Vivekananda was probably the first one to introduce the concept of servant leadership and also practiced it. He was an exemplary servant leader as he had natural inclination towards understanding others and empathizing them. His empathy was also manifested in his compassion and fairness. Swami Vivekananda had the capacity to empower his disciples and he chose “empower and facilitate” philosophy over command and control”. Trust plays a significant role here, the leader should have trust on his followers to empower them. Empowerment simply means helping people to become more powerful, that’s what Swami Vivekananda did to his followers by trusting them.

As mentioned previously, Greenleaf’s formulation of the concept is rooted into Eastern spirituality as articulated in the “Journey to the East”, a novel by Herman Hesse (1932). Hesse visited India in 1911, his subsequent literary work reflected religious and spiritual ideas of the east and he was quite familiar with the teachings of Bhagvad Gita (Chaudhuri, A. 2016). He quoted Bhagvad Gita in his writings (Sharma, A.1948). To develop the concept of servant leadership, Greenleaf had to rely on inspiration he drew from fictional character of Leo in the novel Journey to the East. Vivekananda’s life could have provided him a real life model of servant leadership. Greenleaf first read about Leo in 1958, but first edition of the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda was published in 1907 and its

ninth edition in 1954.

This unique leadership style came naturally to Swami Vivekananda because of his Eastern thought process, and his moral, cultural and spiritual underpinnings. It is truly incredible that among the great leaders in modern times Vivekananda was probably the first one to introduce the idea of servant leadership; that too was almost forty years before Hesse’s introduction of servant leadership character in his novel, and eighty years before Greenleaf’s conceptualization of this leadership style (Chaudhuri, A. 2016).

### **Exemplary Servant Leaders from India**

**N.R. Narayana Murthy** the founder of Infosys in India is one of the greatest entrepreneurs; he is widely admired business leader. He was the Chief Executive Officer of Infosys for twenty one years from 1981-2002. Murthy’s approach towards his followers is always nurturing and supportive, this approach signifies that he is practicing Servant Leadership style and he displays qualities like trust, simplicity, honesty and integrity. (Barnabas, A., Anbarasu, J., & Clifford, P. 2010; Varughese, S 2004). Over the years Murthy has skillfully groomed future leaders at Infosys, he believes that a leader should put the priorities of their team members, employees as well as customers beyond his own interest and should serve them with compassion and humility as a servant leader. Narayana Murthy presumed that a leader should rise above the day to day organizational role and should serve their followers. Under his leadership Infosys became first Indian company to receive the Capacity Mutuality Model certificate (CMM Level 5) at this point of Murthy, unlike to other kind of managers who keeps secrets of his own success, decided to share his certification process with his Indian competitors. He believed that by helping the Indian competitors to receive the certificate will

help the Indian Information Technology sector to become globally competent. This clearly shows the wisdom of Narayana Murthy who is willing to think beyond the day to day organizational tasks. Despite being a billionaire Murthy lives a simplistic life, he has donated tens of millions of Dollars to charity, this definitely shows his compassionate behavior and his capacity to rise above his personal needs. (Kaipa, P., Radjou, N. 2013). Narayana Murthy is a true servant leader and has created other great leaders like Nandan Nilekani who is a non executive chairman of Infosys. This is a sign of an efficient leadership style. A leader must always create his/her successor who is capable enough to carry forward the legacy. The contribution of Narayana Murthy is doubtlessly great, especially in growing the IT sector of India and making our country capable of competing with international level competitors.

**Azim Premji** is the chairman of Wipro Ltd, he has held the position since late 1960s. Under his leadership, Wipro has transformed from a hydrogenated cooking fat company into IT, BPO and R&D services and has established their presence in fifty seven countries. In 2001, Mr Premji established Azim Premji foundation, a non-profit organization, with the vision to improve quality and equality of education in Indian schools. Today, this foundation works with the school system of seven states covering over three lakh schools. In 2013, Azim Premji was presented with Asia House Asian Business Leader Award. The annual Asia House award recognizes those individuals who embody the 'Servant Leader' – economic success and professional excellence accompanied by moral leadership and service to society. This award itself proves the fact that Mr Azim Premji is an exemplary servant leader, and has outstanding success as a global leader. He has expressed a life time commitment towards social and educational issues; Azim Premji foundation shows his concern towards the education system of India. Azim

Premji provided new vision to the organization and completely transformed the organization, his true concern towards the education system and this visionary personality made him a true servant leader. Under the leadership of Azim Premji, Wipro has become first company in the world to attain CMM-Level 5 certification from Carnegie Mellon University's Software Engineering Institute, the highest possible rating for a software development organization. This is the great achievement of IT sector of India. This was only possible because of the visionary leadership style of Azim Premji.

**Ratan Tata** is the chairman of India's second largest automobile manufacturer. He started his career with Tata group in 1961, at that time the business of Tata group was only limited to India, he helped the organization to go global, under his leadership Tata has acquired the brands like Tetley, Jaguar Land Rover and Taj Boston. Ratan Tata is known for his humility towards the employees and there are many examples of his down to earth nature. When Mumbai was under the aftermath of 26/11 attacks, he personally visited the families of eighty employees who were affected by the attacks. He treats people with high degree of warmth and calls the employees with their first name and openly listens to people with a lot of patience (Khadelwal, T 2016). If Ratan Tata wants to talk to any employee, he directly calls them without taking help from a secretary, unlike many other leaders (Gujral, R 2013). As a leader Ratan Tata always makes sure that the huge conglomerate sticks to the Tata values. The mission of the company is "to improve the lives of the communities we serve globally." (Khadelwal, T 2016). Indeed Ratan Tata reflects the characteristics of Servant Leader including the altruistic love, trust, compassion and visionary nature. He is also a previous recipient of the Asia House Asian Business Leader Award, an award that recognizes the leader who embodies the qualities of

a Servant Leader.

**Dhirubhai Ambani**, whose original name was Dirajlal Hirchand Ambani was the son of a school teacher in a remote village in rural Gujarat. He is the founder of Reliance Industries is an extraordinary leader; he is a perfect example of a leader who has gone through the journey from rags to riches. He was a leader who never missed the opportunity to help others and express his generosity, be it people within the organization or outside the organization. He was full of compassion and was concerned about others. Rather than flaunting his kindness, he preferred to keep silent about and never used charity as a platform of publicity. Apart from his kind and generous nature, he always trusted his team and was fond of listening to the ideas of people working with him, Dhirubhai firmly believed in the fact that one should take care of their team members in order to gain their trust and make them more capable (Kothari, Y. 2016). He used to donate huge amount for charity, his interest to do something for the society was evident from the institutions he set up during his life time like Dhirubhai Ambani Foundation for brilliant students, Reliance Rural Development Trust. He expressed his concerns for the sufferers during 1988 cyclone in Jamnagar and 2001 earthquake in Kutch and contributed to village development around Jamnagar refinery (Nathwani, P. 2011). All these qualities of Dhirubhai Ambani reflected that he was a servant leader, his gratitude, concern and trust towards the people he worked with exhibited his servant leader attitude.

The servant leadership style was not only present in the history but is still practiced by many of the corporate Indian leaders exhibiting the practical applicability of servant leadership style in today's work organization. The hassles like cut throat competition and workplace stress present at workplace demand the leadership style to be more dynamic and capable of handling challenging

situations. The characteristics like empathy, love, compassion, altruistic love, spirituality and trusting nature makes the servant leader more capable of combating the organizational problems like low productivity, workplace stress, absenteeism.

### Implications and Suggestions

- There exist a cut throat competition at the global level, while chasing these challenges the employees are likely to experience negative emotions that makes them inefficient and inaptitude to meet the desired objectives.
- Therefore, leadership style is required to manage the workforce despite the existence of demanding market situations.
- Henceforth, the leadership style is only effective when a leader can not only motivated the workforce and take care of basic human resource requirement but can also take care of their holistic well- being, and empower them by creating trusting climate and exhibiting empathy, compassion and altruistic love towards their followers.
- Servant Leadership is such a style that encompasses all the above qualities, therefore, this leadership style is much needed for the ongoing era of globalization
- The exemplary servant leaders like Swami Vivekananda from history as well as from the living history like Narayana Murthy, Azim Premji Ratan Tata and Dhirubhai Ambani shows that this leadership style not only exists in the theory but can also be applied practically and can help the organizations to achieve beyond imagination.
- By analyzing the managerial lessons from Bhagvad Gita and from the life of Swami Vivekananda it has been understood that the servant leadership construct has Indian origin as it existed centuries before Greenleaf gave the concept in from of philosophical scripture and the life of contemporary leaders.

## Conclusion

In the scenario that exists today expects the organization as well as the employees to face many challenges at the global level; facing these challenges has not only become necessary but compulsory in order to attain competitive advantage. While achieving the targets at the global level, the employees may experience many emotional and psychological problems like: stress, depression, anxiety, lack of motivation and boredom. These problems can make them inefficient and can also deteriorate their overall productivity. Role of a leader become very crucial here, a leader must be capable of managing not only the professional aspects but also the emotional, mental and psychological aspects. The Servant Leadership style can solve these problems and make the workforce more efficient by taking care of their well-being, empowering them and creating an environment of trust among the employees. The servant leaders like Swami Vivekananda, Narayana Murthy, Azim Premji and Ratan Tata has the capability to express empathy and compassion and trust towards people they are working with. These exemplary servant leaders from Indian history as well as from leading industries prove the practical applicability of servant leadership.

The concept of servant leadership existed in India much before Greenleaf proposed it in the teachings of Bhagvad Gita and the leadership lessons of Swami Vivekananda who firmly believed that a leader must be a servant first and should take care of their followers like a servant. The fact that the formulation of the theory of servant leadership started in west, however the concept itself existed centuries before the formulation of theory explains the Indian origin of the servant leadership construct.

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