

Ancient Indian Wisdom and Contemporary Leadership

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Abstract

Purpose: Personal disciplines, ethical decision-making, strategic governance and service-focused leadership are valuable insights derived from classical texts like the Bhagavad Gita, Arthashastra, and the Upanishads, which are relevant to date. This study therefore focuses on integrating and relating contemporary leadership with ancient wisdom through literature.

Methodology: Secondary qualitative data are collected to perform thematic analysis on the recurring patterns identified in existing literature.

Results: Leadership research has moved beyond technical competence to become increasingly aware of the broader dimensions such as ethical decision-making, emotional intelligence and stakeholder responsibility. Contemporary leadership theories like transformational, transactional, servant and ethical leadership have been dominating management literature, although these theories have concepts derived from ancient Indian philosophies.

Conclusion: In future studies, it is expected that this link between ancient Indian wisdom and contemporary leadership is investigated with empirical evidence.

Keywords

Ancient Indian wisdom, Arthashastra, Bhagavad Gita, contemporary leadership, ethics, Servant, sustainability, transactional, transformational, Upanishad.

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation, technological advancement, workforce diversity, and transforming ethical and sustainable standards of businesses have made leadership more complex. Contemporary leadership theories focus on leadership styles like transformational, servant, transactional, and authentic, which are inspired by many ancient Indian philosophies for centuries. Buddhism in ancient India has taught mindfulness through the cultivation of friendships (metta or maitre), compassion (karuna), selflessness (mudita) and acceptance without partiality (upesha), which are close to the characteristics of effective leadership [1]. It shows how ancient Indian philosophies have a direct link with contemporary leadership to make oneself filled with characteristics to become a positive leader.

Despite being written thousands of years ago, the Bhagavad Gita has remained a leading scripture that provides guidance for achieving managerial excellence, besides personal enlightenment relating to contemporary management themes like vision, excellence, motivation and planning [2]. Similarly, Arthashastra offers sutras on human behaviour that help with shaping leadership strategies around contemporary employment, regulatory mandates, and wellbeing concerns. In the context of modern organisational leadership, which is valuable to ethical dilemmas and sustainability standards, ancient Indian wisdom provides a holistic view on individual development and organisational effectiveness.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This study aims to discuss how ancient Indian Wisdom is applicable to contemporary leadership. The key objectives are:

- To evaluate how leadership concepts are embedded in ancient Indian philosophies
- To identify the connection of ancient wisdom with modern leadership theories
- To investigate the applicability of ancient wisdom in modern organisational management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bhagavad Gita aids understanding of leadership through a non-Western, ethics-focused viewpoint that provides material for self-regulation, reflecting inquiry and presence [3]. In this study, a systematic literature review of 43 papers established predominant themes on ethical leadership principles, governance, self-awareness, inclusion and sustainability, which are relevant to organisations under uncertainty and rapid change.

Similarly, the study identified the Dharma concept of the Gita, emphasising personal ethics in the context of collective duty, which encourages integrity and leading by example [2]. These are the values that are closely related to servant and transformational leadership behaviours, while the qualities of Viveka and Vairagya are related to the negotiation of decisions. While these are conceptual applications of ancient

wisdom in modern leadership, some authors have prioritised considering the practical application of these principles in an organisational context.

On the other hand, the Arthashastra by Kautilya created the Saptanga Theory, where the characteristics of leaders (Swami) emphasise qualities like wisdom, discipline, foresight and welfare [4]. The Tata Group has set an example for leadership that aligns with the concept of Dharma, as Kautilya emphasises having a ruler who is a guiding principle of welfare, which resembles Jamshedji Tata's vision and the philanthropic initiatives of the company. Similarly, this study has outlined how Upanishad lays out the idea of self-realisation (Atman-Brahman identity), interconnectedness of beings and the pursuit of knowledge that is relevant to business leadership.

Ancient literature encompasses various aspects of wisdom that relate to twenty-first-century leadership qualities such as resilience, team building and self-motivation that are imperative to volatile business environments. However, there are contradicting perspectives as well regarding gender discrimination in leadership that relate to even modern

organisations. Women monarchs rarely accede to power in the traditional route given the presence of social taboos, patriarchy and widespread conviction of men being better capable of leading, as shown in ancient Indian literature, Manu, which prohibited women from the law of primogeniture regarding succession of monarchs [5]. Given that contemporary workplaces often discriminate against women in leadership, these ancient concepts directly relate to deep-rooted gender discrimination in society that extends to the corporate world. However, the example of Queen Yasovati, who became the first female king of Kashmir, is justified through ancient texts like Nilamata that offered full recognition to women in leadership.

Therefore, from the existing literature, it is evident that ancient wisdom is significantly influential in modern leadership because of the similarities in concepts and styles. Ancient literature has outlined the difficulties for gender equality in leadership, which is relevant to current organisations given that multinational firms are incorporating gender equality in their sustainability targets.



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
Source: Self-made

This model represents the correspondence between four old Indian principles and the contemporary leadership theories and organisational performance in conceptual terms. The arrows do not imply historical or causal influence, but an interpretive relationship and the model focuses on ethical behaviour, strategic decision-making, personal awareness, inclusion and sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

The research approach in this study was a qualitative secondary literature review to understand the interpretations

of ancient Indian wisdom in the context of contemporary leadership studies. The secondary qualitative analysis was appropriate as the research dealt with concepts, meanings and theoretical links as opposed to quantifying numerical links [6].

The search was done in a systematic manner using Google Scholar, with assistance provided by the publisher websites, DOI searches and screening of the reference lists. Some of the keywords that were used in the search included “ancient Indian wisdom”, “Bhagavad Gita”, “Arthashastra”, “Upanishads”, “Dharma”, “Leadership” and “management”.

The focus was on publications from 2021 up to 2026 to keep it up to date. The inclusion of sources depended on the availability of sources that touched on ancient Indian philosophy, and leadership, governance, organisational behaviour or management. Records that were duplicated, publications that could not be accessed, non-academic sources and studies that could not be directly related to the research objectives were eliminated.

They were then narrowed down to seven thematically orientated publications that were subjected to thematic synthesis, and two sources on methods were used to justify the research design and analysis. Quality control involved measuring the level of academic credibility of every source, its relevance to the aims, brevity of the argument, publishing date and traceable data. Each publication had to be searched to obtain the information related to the philosophical principle, the concept of leadership, the application of this concept to organisations and the overall conclusion.

Repeated reading followed by initial coding and comparison of recurring ideas and grouping of similar codes were then subjected to thematic analysis [7]. The codes were revisited and narrowed down to four themes, which included ethical leadership using Dharma and selfless service; strategic leadership and governance; self-awareness and emotional intelligence; and sustainable and inclusive leadership. The process made a clear connection between the chosen literature, the reported results, and study aims.

FINDINGS

Ethical Leadership through Dharma and Selfless Service

The literature reviewed has found Dharma and selfless service as critical pillars towards ethical leadership. Bhagavad Gita introduces Dharma as the completeness of moral duty with honesty and not overdependence on the outcome of his/her performance [2]. This principle puts duty over personal reward, and as such, it has significant similarities with servant leadership. In modern servant leadership, the needs of employees, building trust and following development instead of the personal authority of the leader are also similar. It has been shown that such a strategy is capable of enhancing employee engagement when leaders exhibit a feeling of humility, chagrin and care about others [8]. Dharma is, however, a wider moral duty, but servant leadership is primarily used as a leadership strategy in organisations. The evidence then indicates that there is a conceptual relationship between the two concepts, but does not demonstrate that servant leadership evolved out of the Bhagavad Gita. Collectively, the sources highlight the potential of duty, ethical behaviour and service to offer a viable foundation of responsible leadership in organisations.

Strategic Leadership and Governance

The second theme is strategic leadership and governance. Arthashastra introduces leadership as a disciplined practice that consists of planning, gathering intelligence, management of resources, risk awareness and making informed decisions

[4]. It also bridges the power of a leader and his or her accountability to the stability of the institution and the welfare of the people. These concepts are similar to modern strategic leadership, which requires leaders to react to uncertainty whilst safeguarding the long-term organisational stance. One major discovery is that the Arthashastra does not distinguish between ethics and the survival of organisations. Rather, it integrates the tasks of welfare and pragmatism towards competition and security. This provides a broader approach as compared to the interpersonal relationship-oriented leadership approach. However, the evidence available is mainly conceptual, with no evidence that the application of these principles necessarily enhance organisational performance. The literature thus justifies the Arthashastra as being an interpretive approach to strategic governance, but not an empirically tested model of management.

Self-Awareness and Emotional Intelligence

The third theme came out to be self-awareness and emotional control. Bhagavad Gita and Upanishadic thinking underline self-control, maintaining mindfulness, maintaining emotional stability and constant self-improvement [2]. Similarly, mindful leadership literature relates the concepts of compassion, acceptance and less attachment to the capacity of a leader to answer the needs of other people in a reflective manner [1]. These attributes can be compared to emotional intelligence and true leadership, when leaders should be aware of their feelings, their weaknesses and act in the same manner as they act according to their principles. The synthesis shows that personal mastery is capable of guiding us in making calm decisions and positive communications in times of uncertainty in organisations. Nevertheless, the studies reviewed primarily describe the similarities of philosophies and give little organisational evidence regarding quantifiable results, including the minimised conflict or enhanced engagement. As a result, old rules of self-regulation can guide modern development of leadership, but their implications on organisational performance have yet to be evaluated empirically.

Sustainable and Inclusive Leadership

The last theme is the connection between collective welfare and sustainable and inclusive leadership. Lokasangraha proposes leadership as a duty to enhance social wellbeing and not for individual or financial gain [9]. This principle correlates with stakeholder-oriented leadership, where the employees, communities and other groups of people are taken into account in making organisational decisions. Nevertheless, it is clear in the literature that there was tension also in ancient traditions. Certain customs of the past limited the opportunities of women in becoming leaders, and the story of Queen Yasovati gives a different scenario of female rule being recognised [5]. This juxtaposition indicates that ancient Indian literature cannot be considered as a single homogeneous model of leadership. It must be critically interpreted and applied to modern-day inclusion. All in all,

the evidence indicates that informed leadership by collective welfare, responsible governance, and a wider consideration of stakeholders can be informed, but more robust organisational research is necessary to establish the practical impact.

DISCUSSION

From the overall findings, it is evident that ancient Indian wisdom is highly relevant to modern leadership, given that the concepts of managing, leading and decision-making relate to ancient texts like the Bhagavad Gita, Arthashastra, and Upanishads. The modern leadership concepts like transformational, servant, authentic and ethical leadership are closely linked to ancient wisdom, where dharma, selflessness, morality and self-realisation are prioritised across literature to date. In organisational settings, leaders must possess the right skills and capabilities to guide people for the welfare of all, which increases accountability of organisations towards stakeholders. The findings of this study indicate that a servant leadership mindset is beneficial for all, where leaders must prioritise others' wellbeing rather than their own interests [8]. On the other hand, strategic leadership revealed by Kautilya in Arthashastra is applicable to modern strategic business endeavours where competitive threats are high.

The findings of this study also emphasise the emotional maturity or intelligence for leaders to have a strong sense of their own flaws in order to better themselves [2]. Therefore, it is evident that without having the skill of criticising oneself, one cannot become a good leader in the contemporary period. The concepts of Manu have reinforced the gender discrimination deeply rooted in ancient practices, which is relevant to today's organisations, where Lokasagrha mentions the inclusive wellbeing of all [9]. Therefore, the steps taken by leaders to eliminate bias from workplaces regarding gender discrimination are a step towards sustainable leadership, which links with ancient wisdom.

Overall, from this study, it is understood that contemporary leadership is greatly adapted from the ancient Indian philosophies where not only spiritual but also strategic and practical guidance is provided that can be integrated in modern governance and sustainable initiatives. However, there are some limitations in this study due to the conceptual focus and philosophical interpretation rather than empirical validation. Despite developing strong relevance with ancient wisdom, there is a need for strong evidence to support direct impact on contemporary leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that ancient Indian wisdom is strongly related to present leadership styles by outlining the importance of ethics, self-realisation, strategic thinking and stakeholders' interests. Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads and Arthashastra have comprehensively discussed the role of leaders by considering them as guiding principles of welfare, as well as strategic and disciplined individuals. The gaps in

existing studies are meant to be filled in future studies where philosophical principles of ancient India are applied to different organisational contexts with the use of empirical evidence.

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