

## Propounding Bhagavadgita as a Philosophy of Management



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**Abstract :** - Much of the principles of management studied today are considered to have been established in the past three centuries. The very term ‘management’ has been often viewed as a concept of late modernity. However, one may also contend that management principles have existed for millennia and great philosophers and sages from antiquity have to this discipline explicitly and implicitly. One such perennial source of inspiration to all the scholars and practitioners of management could be the Bhagvadgītā (hereafter as the BG), a foundational text of Indian philosophy of Vedānta. In this paper, an attempt has been made to propound the BG as a text of the philosophy of management along with some illustrations and a reflection on the concepts of philosophy and management.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part attempts to provide a working definition of philosophy and investigate the BG as a text of philosophy. In the second part, the BG is also analyzed in terms of the philosophy of management. In the third and final part, followed by the conclusion, the paper puts forwards some of the foundational principles of the philosophy of management that we can learn from the BG.

**Keywords:** bhagavadgita and management, nishkama karma, philosophy, philosophy of management, the allegory of the chariot.

Before we delve deep into the BG as a philosophy of management, it is essential to reflect on the very term philosophy and situate the BG as a text of philosophy (or Indian philosophy). The Oxford Learner’s Dictionary defines philosophy as ‘the study of the nature and meaning of the universe and of human life’. It also describes philosophy as ‘a particular set or system of beliefs resulting from the search for knowledge about life and the universe’.<sup>2</sup> Besides, the term ‘philosophy’ has had many definitions from antiquity till modernity. It seems to be a dynamic and ever-evolving concept. However, one may undoubtedly trace two important general aspects of philosophy. Philosophy can be defined as a *means* as well as an *end* concerning the general questions of Existence (the universe and our place in it). It is both- a process/result as well as an outcome/result. It can be understood as a *verb* as well as a *noun*. To understand it as a process/means, one may consider its etymology. The Greek words *philo* and *sophia* mean ‘love’ and ‘wisdom’ respectively. ‘Love’ has to be understood in the sense of *pursuing* the object of love (wisdom). Further, as a process, philosophy heavily relies on a rational examination of our fundamental assumptions regarding life as a whole.

Now, though philosophy begins in wonder (Plato) but it arrives at certain conclusions also, i.e., to say that it is an end/result also. It is like what most of the books have at their end, certain chapters, somewhat titled as 'conclusion', 'epilogue', 'postscript', 'my personal views', 'comments', 'implications', 'speculations', etc. Philosophy as a noun is precisely that. It is one's worldview, or general perception of Existence, or simply one's vision or perspective. In Indian Philosophy, philosophy as a process may be called as *yoga*, and the unified vision of the whole as *darśana*. The Greeks called this worldview as *kosmotheoriā*, and the Germans as *Weltanschauung*. It essentially involves our set of fundamental beliefs that have examined substantially. Hence, philosophy can be understood both as a means and as well an end, which are also complementary and supplementary to each other.

Now may consider the BG is a text of philosophy. Radhakrishnan has once remarked that "the Bhagavadgītā is more a religious classic than a philosophical treatise."<sup>2</sup> It is true that the BG has been held in high veneration as religious scripture. However, it does not undermine the importance of the BG as a text of philosophy. It is a matter of the level of reflection one can have over the BG. One may classify interpreting the BG at the following three levels in ascending order:

- 1- Literal Interpretation
- 2- Philosophical Interpretation
- 3- Spiritual Interpretation

Now if we reflect over the BG in the light of the above-mentioned definition of philosophy, one can claim that the BG is necessarily a text of philosophy. The BG involves a process, an intensive rational dialogue between Kriṣṇa and Arjuna. The dialogue radically changes the worldview of Arjun from that of passion-driven to duty-driven. As stated above, philosophy is termed as '*darśana*' in the Indian context. Traditionally, the BG constitute Prasthāna Trayī, i.e., the three great sources of Vedānta philosophy. Hence, the BG must not be viewed purely as a text of religious practices or mysticism. The BG, as a text of philosophy, paves the path of any ethico-spiritual transformation whatsoever.

Now, having established the BG as a text of philosophy (or Indian philosophy), we may proceed to a discussion on the nature and definition of 'management' and 'philosophy of management'. The word 'management' is the noun form of the verb 'manage'. The word 'manage' comes from PIE (the Proto-Indo European) or Latin roots, namely, *manus* and *agere*, meaning 'hands' and 'to act' respectively. Originally, it meant controlling or acting through hands, especially to a horse.<sup>3</sup> Oxford Learner's Dictionary also defines 'management' as the activity of running and controlling a business or similar organization'.<sup>4</sup> Management as a discipline may be defined as the process of administering and controlling the affairs of the organization where people work in a group towards the attainment of a common objective.

Now, the philosophy of management is a recent development in the disciplines of management as well as philosophy. They have been merged together, for they have some common grounds. They both deal with "human action, its quality of goal attainment, and with the need for the coordination of human actions. The governing of oneself and the governing of others is the central concern of philosophical ethics and of political philosophy. Managing oneself and managing others is the goal of management. To manage is a newer term

then the term to govern and it also includes a shift in the way governing is done.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, philosophy and management are fundamentally intertwined with each other, and the study of philosophy of management has greater potentiality in terms of both *theoria* and *paxis* of management.

Again, the question may be asked – how far can we establish the BG as a text of the philosophy of management? The BG itself does not explicitly declare itself to be a text of any discipline as such management. Instead, it presents a unified vision of the whole through a rational analysis of a certain worldview. But, we have also observed that philosophy and management are closely linked together. Hence, we can certainly propound the BG as containing the principles of philosophy of management explicitly or implicitly. The BG is such a vast ocean of wisdom that anyone, from any religion, sect, or any discipline of study, can easily extract the principles that suit him or her. This endeavor has been repeatedly observed in the long history of Indian philosophy. A lover of the highest transcendental wisdom like Ādi Śaṅkara presents *jnāna yoga*, the theory of Knowledge from the BG. A devotee like Rāmānuja, Nimāraka, Vallabhaharya, or Madhva find Bhakti Yoga, the path of devotion, from the BG. A person like BG Tilak extracted Karma Yoga, the path of action, from the BG. Hence, a reader of the BG finds in it the principles, according to his own temperament and personality.

Now, similarly, as stated above, we may receive valuable guidelines from the BG in terms of the philosophy of management. At the same time, it should not be dogmatically asserted that the BG should only be viewed from the lens of the philosophy of management. However, what we may adopt is a different perspective and seek newer interpretations simply for the sake of enhancing our wisdom. An in-depth investigation may reveal numerous principles of management hidden in the BG. It would be fruitful not only to the discipline of management but also to the BG by enriching its diversity and novel applications and by appreciating the profundity hidden therein.

Having established the possibility of situating the BG as a text of the philosophy of management, we may proceed to substantiate our position by providing some illustrations from the BG itself, without which our discussion would be perhaps baseless. There are many principles of management in the BG, but owing to limitations of this paper, we may reflect over at least on the following notions:

1- Life is like Managing a Chariot:

There is a metaphor of Chariot (*ratha kalpanā*) in many Hindu scriptures (especially in Kaṭha Upaniṣad), which synoptically encapsulate the state of human Existence. One could interpret the BG in terms of the allegory of the Chariot where chariot is the body, the charioteer is the Supreme Self, the passenger is the limited individual self, the horses are the sense organs, reins are the mind. With this chariot, we, for ages, wander uncontrolled on the roads leading to the objects of desires. Such a life, where the charioteer is asleep, is full of misery. One can achieve happiness or the state of the Supreme Self when the charioteer is awakened and fully in control of the horses. Management is also like controlling this wild horse. It is also interesting to note here how our allegory correlates with the etymological significance of the term management. Again, in the field of management, one cannot be successful without discipline and self-control. Indeed, life is like the management of a chariot.

2- Choice Making:

Management is about choice making. It constantly tests one’s decision-making skills. The BG, from its very background, renders the message of the importance of correct choice making. One can notice, when Arjuna was given a choice between Shri Kriṣṇa and his vast army, Arjuna, with no doubt chose

Śrī Kṛiṣṇa and Duryodhana on the hand, chose the grand army. And this crucial decision changed the entire course of the battle of Mahābhārata. In the end, it is proved that a brilliant motivator, an enlightened leader as Kṛiṣṇa is far better than gathering thousands of human resources having trivial decision making power with no wisdom. This is one of the most important lessons which we can learn from the BG regarding the philosophy of management.

### 3- Action for the Sake of Action:

In the widely quoted verse from Chapter II of the BG, Śrī Kṛiṣṇa says –

*karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana |*

*mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo'stv akarmaṇi ||*

“You are only eligible to perform your prescribed work, but you have no right to the fruit of your action. You should not consider yourself to be the cause of the result of your actions, nor should you become attached to neglecting your duties.”<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, what is the chief objective of management? It is fundamentally about managing how we perform our actions. More precisely, it is about effective and efficient action, where there is optimum utilization of the various resources that are available to us. This is what the BG calls as *kuśāaltā karma – yoga kammasu kauśalam*. It is noteworthy that our choices and actions can be performed with excellence only when we are totally absorbed in our actions, without getting attached to the fruits of action. The crucial mistake that we often commit is that we continuously think about the results. Consequently, a substantial amount of work energy is wasted in unnecessary thought processes. The mental repercussions of not achieving the results could cause tremendous stress problems also. In addition, the work done in this way would necessarily be unsatisfactory, bringing adverse and unfavorable results. The secret of *niṣkāma karma* is in abandoning the attachment to fruits from. This, in turn, brings about a deep harmony between oneself and the Existence. One knows from the deepest core of his or her heart that whatever one is doing is bound to give results, under appropriate circumstances; but here, innumerable factors act as agents of the fruit over which we have lesser control. Hence, getting stressed over them is not praiseworthy, according to the BG. Moreover, a person rooted in spirituality has the conviction that Nature automatically provides proper and just results. Based on this principle, one can perform an action as a duty or as a sacrifice for universal welfare. If only this principle is pondered over deeply and applied rigorously in our contemporary management system, we may overcome problems related to stress, anxiety, under-productivity, exploitation and strife among the members of an organization.

### Conclusion

From the above discussion, it may be concluded that the field of management has its root in perennial wisdom and philosophy. They are complementary and supplementary to each other. Further, the BG could be an ever-inspiring source for what we today know as the philosophy of management. Based on the above illustrations one can explicitly observe the rich potentiality of the BG as a text of the philosophy of management. The present paper has limitations, but it simply attempts to propound the BG as a text of philosophy of management. Overcoming the limitations of this paper, one can undertake the task of presenting a full-fledged commentary of the BG from a management perspective. It is a much-needed task in

the contemporary management scenario. Further, it will not undermine the philosophico-spiritual value of the BG; rather, it would surely amplify its glory in the novel dimensions of management.

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