

# Virtues of Wise Leaders: Message from Bhagavad Gita

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## ***Abstract***

*Bhagavad Gita literally means 'The Lord's Song', i.e., the philosophical discourse of Lord Krishna to persuade the reluctant Arjuna to fight. It is the most popular and sacred book of the Hindus and is contained in the Bhishma-Parva of the Mahabharata, one of the greatest Sanskrit epic. In verse 16.1, 2, and 3 twenty six virtues of wise people have been mentioned. In this paper, reasoning is given that in case leaders develop these virtues, in all probability, leaders would be able to perform their leadership role wisely and excellently.*

## **Introduction**

Leadership task is difficult and complex simply because leaders are expected to deliver according to the expectations and aspirations of large number of people. Leaders are expected to provide solutions for the problems of the people. Arguably, the world manifests for the common man largely the way leaders try to unfold it for them. Thereby, leaders influence society and play a major role in shaping the progress of society. This is the reason that the qualities and values of leaders are extremely important for performing the leadership role nobly. Focus on virtues of leaders has gain momentum recently. Virtues are a set of qualities that make humans perform the functions excellently. Good character traits or moral habits, when practiced repeatedly, gets cultured or internalized in the people and become virtues. In a sense, virtues are pre-requisites for 'Excellence in Work'. According to Aristotle, all people do work. But virtues make the difference between just doing a work and doing the work excellently. Virtues constitutes the personal ethics of a leader and are extremely necessary for a leader to act wisely in complex and compelling situations often faced by them. Many scholars (MacIntyre, 1984; Solomon, 1992; Goodpaster, 1991) have strongly emphasized on personal ethics for ensuring morality and excellence in work. According to Whetstone (2005), "Having a good moral character suggests the presence of virtues or moral excellences and the absence, or at least the suppression, of vices. The dispositions of character termed virtue are beneficial to personal actors and to those others affected by their acts."

In this paper, reasoning is given that in case leaders develop virtues as mentioned in Bhagavad Gita, in all probability, leaders would be able to perform their leadership role

wisely and excellently.

Bhagavad Gita literally means 'The Lord's Song', i.e., the philosophical discourse of Lord Krishna to persuade the reluctant Arjuna to fight. It is the most popular and sacred book of the Hindus and is contained in the *Bhishma-Parva* of the Mahabharata, one of the greatest Sanskrit epic.

The Gita tries to build up a philosophy of *Karma* (action) based on *Jnana* (knowledge) and supported by *Bhakti* (devotion) in a beautiful manner (Sharma, 1970). Bhagavad Gita is gospel of humanity and has inspired many great leaders of the world including Mahatma Gandhi.

### Virtues of Wise In Bhagavad Gita

In chapter 16, verse 1, 2, and 3 of Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna explains the twenty six virtues of a wise man to Arjuna.

अभयं सत्त्वसंशुधिः ज्ञानयोग व्यवस्थितिः  
दानं दमश्च यज्ञश्च स्वाध्यायः तपः अर्जवं ॥

-(Bhagwad Gita verse 16.1)

अहिंसा सत्य अक्रोधः त्यागः शान्तिः अपैशुनं  
दया भूतेषु अलोलुप्त्वं मर्दवं हः अचापलं ॥

-(Bhagwad Gita verse 16.2)

तजः क्षमा धृतिः शौचं अद्रोहो नातिमानिता  
भवन्ति संपदं दैवीं अभिजातस्य भारत ॥

-(Bhagwad Gita verse 16.3)

The virtues expressed in the above verses are given in the tabular form below:

| Virtues in Verse 16.1                                | Virtues in Verse 16.2             | Virtues in Verse 16.3  |
|--|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Abhyam<br>(Fearlessness)                             | Ahimsa<br>(Non-Violence)          | Tejas<br>(Radiance)    |
| Sattva-Samsudhhi<br>(Purity of one's Existence)      | Satyam<br>(Truthfulness)          | Ksama<br>(Forgiveness) |
| Jnana Yoga Vyavastithi<br>(Established in Knowledge) | Akrodha<br>(Getting rid of Anger) | Dhrithi<br>(Fortitude) |

|                               |                                  |   |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Dana<br>(Service with Love)   | Tyaga<br>(Renunciation)          | Shaucha<br>(Internal and External Purity) |
| Dama<br>(Control over Senses) | Shanti<br>(Tranquil Mind)        | Adroha<br>( Friendliness)                 |
| Yagna<br>(Collectivism)       | Apaishunam<br>(Avoiding Calumny) | Natimanita<br>(Non egoist)                |
| Svadhyaya<br>(Self Study)     | Daya<br>(Empathy)                |   |
| Tapa<br>(Austerity)           | Alolupta<br>(Absence of Greed)   |   |
| Arjava<br>(Simplicity)        | Mardava<br>(Humbleness)          |   |
|                               | Hri<br>(Modesty)                 |   |
|                               | Achapal<br>(Unwavering)          |   |

#### Virtues of Wise Leader

### Importance of Virtues mentioned in Bhagavad Gita

Twenty six virtues mentioned above in Bhagavad Gita have deep meaning for leaders. These virtues take the leader from imperfection to perfection, from doubt to clarity, from mediocrity to excellence, and ultimately from normal to divine like stature among not only the followers but also the extended segment of the society. These virtues raise the leaders consciousness level to a higher plane and also touch the consciousness of the followers resulting in positive energy among them.

Importance of the virtues mentioned in Bhagavad Gita is discussed below:

#### ***Abhayam* (Fearlessness)**

Fear makes a leader weak. It acts as a barrier in leadership and could have multiple effects on leader. Lack of confidence and self-esteem, manipulation, suspicion, timidness, and bullying are some of the major bad effects that could reflect in leaders thinking and behaviour due to fear. Fear often makes leader forgetful of the role he is assigned with. Bhagavad Gita emphasizes fearlessness as a necessary virtue for wise people as with fear

come negativity of thoughts resulting in either inappropriate action or inaction. To cultivate fearlessness coming out of the duality of success and failure is must. Bhagavad Gita also provides solution for becoming fearless. It says that do all the work in the service of God and remain unattached to the fruits of action. This makes a person concentrate only on the goodness of the work as it is in the service of God instead of concentrating on the results of the action before even doing the work. Concentrating on the goodness of work leads a leader towards selecting right objectives and then right effort for achieving the objective in fearless state.

### ***Sattva-Samsudhhi (Purity of one's Existence)***

A leader should have pure heart free from all evils which comes by practicing goodness of thoughts, speech, and action. Bhagavad Gita says that purifying one's existence by purifying heart and the environment in which one live is a virtue of a wise person. A leader should always be surrounded by wise people who could warn him of the dangers of transgressing the limits of good conduct thereby ensuring his pure heart, pure thoughts, and pure action. Further, a leader should also be in constant touch with elders as the experience and advice of elders help in the training of leader. All forms of worldly knowledge such as art, science, philosophy, and spirituality which are necessary for a leader to know are learned from the elders. Realising the transitory nature of physical life like that of illusory mirage, wise people keep company of pious for the purpose of gaining spiritual and material benefits. Company of the pious enhances the glory of the person just as a magnificently white painted palace dazzles in moon beams (Nitisara, 3.14). The holistic knowledge which must be possessed by a leader is achieved by serving the more learned and experienced elder people. A leader who does not have holistic knowledge or wisdom would often be proved wrong in his decision making and would not be able to free him completely from all vices.

### ***Jnana Yoga Vyavastithi (Established in Knowledge)***

*Jnana* means knowledge. The literal meaning of *yoga* is union, i.e., of the individual with the Absolute. It means equanimity or balance of mind (*samatva*). It means the higher perspective of action which comes through detachment (*karmasu kaushalam*). The Yogi is the ideal ascetic who curbs his passions and maintains calmness in cold and heat, in joy and sorrow, in honour and dishonor. *Jnana Yoga* means achieving the state of *Yoga* through the path of knowledge. Bhagavad Gita puts great emphasis on knowledge for a wise man and it says: 'Even the most sinful man can cross over the ocean of *Samsara* (world) by means of the boat of knowledge alone. As a fire well-kindled reduces fuel to ashes, so the fire of knowledge reduces all actions to ashes. The culmination of action is in the knowledge. Having obtained knowledge one soon embraces peace. There is nothing purer than knowledge.' Knowledge is a virtue and a leader should leave no stone unturned for gaining

knowledge of material and spiritual both. The mind which wavers wildly like the tusker elephant in the dense forest of sensual pleasures could be brought under control by means of goad of knowledge.

### ***Dana* (Service with Love)**

Service with love is a virtue of a wise person, according to Bhagavad Gita, simply because a possessor of this virtue realize in the mutual interdependence of all existence. With whatever wealth a leader is endowed with such as material wealth or the other form of wealth such as knowledge it is the duty of a leader to give a part of it to others who are needy. The caution is that a leader should give it with love instead of with a sense of proudness. Giving with love is the purest form of *dana* and is considered as a virtue of wise people by Bhagavad Gita. It comes with the realization of trusteeship towards whatever a person has. Giving with selfish motive is not a virtue.

### ***Dama* (Control of Senses)**

Control of senses is a major distinguishing feature between human-beings and animals and so has been the case with successful and failed leaders. Bhagavad Gita says that desires which are uncalled for and lead to human misery should be controlled and suppressed and through practice a person should attain a permanent state where he does not have to exert his will to control the desires rather it becomes a natural phenomenon for him. For this state control over the sense organs is must. Self-control comes by controlling the senses. Senses are controlled by overcoming six enemies of mind which are: lust (*kama*), anger (*krodh*), greed (*lobh*), infatuation (*moha*), arrogance (*mada*) and envy (*matsara*). Arthashastra (Rangarajan, 1992), a masterpiece written by Kautilya also says that a leader who has no self-control and gives himself up to excessive indulgence in pleasures will soon perish, even if he is the ruler of the four corners of the earth. Non-essential attachment to sensual pleasures forces a leader to immoral acts blinding him to the reason (discrimination between right and wrong) and hence invites great calamity on himself.

### ***Yagna* (Collectivism)**

A wise person should perform all his action for the Supreme power of which we all are a part of it. *Yagna* signifies doing right activities collectively with *maîtri bhava* (compassion towards others) and *karuna bhava* (humility towards others) in sacrificial mode in accordance with the *rita* (natural law of the cosmos). Collectivism is a virtue a leader must acquire as it makes a leader realize the role of others in his existence including the environment or nature, thereby, stopping him to do those things that are harmful to other human beings and environment.

### ***Svadhyaya (Self Study)***

Bhagavad Gita says that wise are those people who devote time in studying their true nature which is only a fraction of what it seems at surface level. To realize the true potential of one, a person should have proper education, training and guidance so that he is able to assimilate and reflect material, social, cultural, and spiritual knowledge constituting holistic knowledge and the efforts for gaining this knowledge is a path towards *svadhyaya* or self study. Self study expands the consciousness of a leader making him follow inside-out approach in decision-making.

### ***Tapa (Austerity)***

*Tapa* means austerity or refraining from activities which could give temporary pleasure but later give pain. People want comfort and luxuries of the world and by avoiding austerity they become enslave of them and thereby even do sinful things to get them. According to Bhagavad Gita, wise people practice austerity. Austerity help in developing inner strength and make people steadfast and more capable of handling pains as their material requirements become highly limited to only necessities.

### ***Arjava (Simplicity)***

No false ego, no show off, no crookedness are the qualities of a simple person. Simplicity is a virtue of wise people as they do what they say and say what they think and they don't think bad. Mahatama Gandhi was a firm believer of simple living and high thinking. Outward glory is often misleading as it does not reflect the inner glory of the person. For a wise emphasis is on inner glory.

### ***Ahimsa (Non-Violence)***

Non-Violence means not only the avoidance of doing any harm to others but also nipping in the bud the thoughts of doing harm to others. Violence in thoughts and actions is vice. Non-violence comes through the feeling of love towards others. People do not do harm to their loved ones. Bhagavad Gita says that wise people do not do harm anyone, not even in their thoughts. Wise leaders practice non-violence. Envy, jealousy, hatred, cruelty, injuring, killing are all the manifestations of *himsa* (violence). Even saying harsh words to someone is violence. To go further, even doing something wrong to oneself such as inactivity or excess eating is violence to oneself which wise people should not do. Ahimsa is a virtue which leaders should cultivate. Non-violence increases the will power and make person strong.

### ***Satyam* (Truthfulness)**

Truth always prevails in the end. Path of truthfulness is full of pain but in the end it is only truth that is the winner. For a wise person path of truthfulness is must. Calling spade a spade needs courage and strong will power which wise people have. If a leader lies then what will happen to subjects. Truthfulness in a leader develops trust. Success of a leader depends upon the trust he builds among his subjects. In Mahabharata, Pandavs were weak in resources as compared to Kauravs but Pandavs were truthful and ultimately they won. When one is firmly established in truth, the fruits of action become subservient to him. *Satyam* is recommended because untruthfulness causes tensions in the mind, which block a person's realization of their true potential on every level (vitality, intellect, consciousness). These tensions are easy to see when we consider the old saying "oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." Great tension for the person practicing untruthfulness results from telling additional lies to support the original one and from the fear of getting caught in the lie. Such tensions in the mind are blocks to realizing our full potential, blocks to tapping into vast resource of consciousness available to any human being. The practitioner of *satyam* is empowered to know his or her authentic self and can begin to change behavior away from ego driven actions toward behavior more consistent with intrinsic, positive tendencies.

### ***Akrodha* (Getting rid of anger)**

Anger is an expression that manifests when one does not get what he wants or when circumstances are not going as desired by a person. Bhagavad Gita explains the negative effects of anger in the following verse:

*krodhad bhavati sammohah, sammohat smrti-vibhramah  
smrti-bhramsad buddhi-naso , buddhi-nasat pranasyati*

Anger results into discernment (inability to discriminate between correct and incorrect), discernment results in confusion in memory. Confusion in memory results in loss of intellect. When intellect is lost, one falls down from its present level resulting into loss of repute and his perceived position in the eye of his followers.

Saint Kabir once said:

*jahan krodh tahan pap hai*

which means that wherever there is anger there is sin. Leader who follows Akrodha receives respect. If we look deeply, it could be realized that we have conditioned ourselves for anger. Anger is not an event as it is present permanently in almost everybody and just need a slight

fuel to aggravate. Wise person conditioned themselves in a way that even worst of circumstances does not generate anger in them and poise is never lost.

### ***Tyaga (Renunciation)***

Wise people practice renunciation of all the evils of mind. Bhagavad Gita says that wise people abandon all those things that are not worthy. Lust, greed, envy, jealousy, infatuation, anger and all other types of negative emotions need to be abandoned by the wise leaders as they act as a barrier in the proper functioning. People tune their mind on the basis of what senses perceive. This attunement makes the mind slave of senses which is detrimental. Wise people practice purity of mind and do not allow any bad impression to creep in the mind.

### ***Shanti (Tranquil Mind)***

Peace of mind is a pre-requisite for perfection at work. Unstable mind leads to wrong cognition and wrong actions. Tranquil mind results in expanded consciousness, enhancement in vision, positivity in thoughts, and just actions. Wise leaders take action with tranquil mind and create a healthy environment around them. They remain undisturbed, unwavering, and calm even in most adverse situations.

### ***Apaishunam (Avoiding Calumny)***

Calumny or slandering is avoided by wise people, says Bhagavad Gita. One should speak only that which purifies the heart of the person himself and also of the others. Speaking bad words about others only belittle the person instead of raising the status of the person. Words once said can't be taken back. Gautam Budhha has also explained the importance of right speech in the noble eight-fold path for overcoming sufferings. In speech one should always avoid slandering even for worst of people as harsh words even accompanied with gifts cause ill-feeling. Words are just the reflection of what is inside the person and slandering signifies impurity of the heart. One of the main reasons for the downfall of Kauravs in the Mahabharata was the bad words said by Kauravs to Draupadi.

### ***Daya (Empathy)***

*Daya* means empathy of a person for those who are weak and less endowed than him. Many leaders have abused power by showing cruelty on others. Wise leaders have empathy not cruelty. Only those leaders do well for the subjects and society who have empathy. Empathy is basic human nature arising out of love for others and a basis for survival of humanity. Empathy makes the personality of a leader beautiful and lovable. Gentleness in heart expresses itself in the form of empathy for weaker ones.



***Alolupta (Absence of Greed)***

Greed is non-essential craving for something and is a symptom of weakness in a person. Greed opens the gate of hell. It entangles a person into those material pursuits, actions and behaviours which are sinful and results in degradation. Greed arises out of craving for something such as money, fame, power, sensual gratification etc. Greed leads the leader toward abuse of power as the leader becomes more engrossed in satisfying his selfish desires instead of devoting efforts for the benefit of his subjects. Erich Fromm has said that greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction. No wise person gets dominated by greed for material pleasures (of damaging potentialities) which slip away as clouds driven by strong wind.

***Mardava (Humbleness)***

Humbleness is a virtue that comes by developing a feeling that 'I am in no way bigger than others'. Humbleness has a power to develop love and respect of others for a person and vice versa. The purpose of all knowledge is to make a person humble. Wise people have a reverent behaviour towards others. Humble leader gives credit of the success to others and take the blame of failure on him. Power inherent in leadership often makes the leader filled with inflated ego forcing him to deviate from the path of humbleness. But wise leaders endowed with true knowledge see no discrimination between them and their subjects and are firm believer of shared vision, shared purpose and we-consciousness.

***Hri (Modesty)***

Modesty comes from a gentle heart and balanced mind. No superiority is felt or expressed by a modest person. Success of a modest person does not affect his poise and neither he gets dejected in failures. Also there is always pleasantness in speech of a modest person.

***Achapal (Unwavering)***

Circumstances keep on changing. They could be favourable or unfavourable depending upon how a person look at the circumstances. Bhagavad Gita calls for a steady and unwavering mind of a person to be considered as wise. Unwavering mind allows a person to be calm in all situations keeping him on the right path. Leaders are destined with serious responsibilities and it is must for them to be unwavered by any event without deviating them from performing the responsibilities.

***Tejas (Radiance)***

Every person has a soul or spirit which is his purest form. Its essence is consciousness. The

degree of consciousness in any individual depends upon karma (actions). To bring the consciousness to the highest level one has to traverse the journey through karma from gross, to subtle and ultimately to infinite where the subject-object duality is lost. Tejas or radiance is a virtue which makes a person internalized where he can experience the subtle. In other words, a person having the consciousness of the internal world is the possessor of the virtue called tejas. Tejas is identified as a state where senses don't function and mind gets a new experience apart from the experience of the gross or material world and this experience is more aligned and directed towards realization of pure form of consciousness. A leader could be endowed with this virtue. The mantra is that he should not always act on the basis of the gross which he experience through his senses and thereby putting those impressions of the experience on mind. He should develop the power of observing the subtle by realizing that there is a higher reality, higher knowledge, and higher purpose.

### **Ksama (Forgiveness)**

Leader should be tolerant and excuse the minor offenses of others. As said by Rahimdas:

छमा बड़न को चाहिये, छोटन को उत्पात ।  
कह 'रहीम' हरि का घट्यौ, जो भृगु मारी लात ॥

Narrow-minded people do mistakes whereas great people forgive them. Poet Rahimdas says God Vishnu did not mind when Sage Bhrgu kicked him. As such incident did not reduced the lordship of Vishnu. In the same manner, leader should forgive the minor mistakes of his subjects. In the long run this graces the personality of the leader.

In Choupai 80 of Lanka Kand in Ramcharit Manas, Lord Rama explains to Vibhishana about the chariot which is suitable for victory.

सुनहु सखा कह कृपानिधाना । जेहिं जय होइ सो स्यंदन आना ॥  
सौरज धीरज तेहि रथ चाका । सत्य सील दृढ़ ध्वजा पताका ॥  
बल बिबेक दम परहित घोरे । छमा कृपा समता रजु जोरे ॥

He said that chariot is fit for victory if valor and fortitude are its wheels; truthfulness and good conduct are its enduring banner and standard; strength, Discretion, self-control and benevolence are its four horses and these four horses are joined with chariot using cords of forgiveness, compassion and evenness of mind.

Therefore whatever strengths a leader may hold he should be able to balance them by avoiding giving attention to the minor mistakes of others (forgiveness), showing sympathy towards them (compassion) and maintain calmness of mind. This makes a leader more

successful and acceptable in long run. By this virtue one succeeds in winning enemies and getting the respect and cooperation from others. It leaves a permanent effect on the people who could be more antagonistic and harmful in future.

### **Dhrithi (Fortitude)**

Things do not always go the way a person wishes. In practical life, a person set many goals for him and make efforts to achieve it. Many obstructions and unexpected situations occur in achievement of these goals. This virtue in a person makes him always follow the right means and stops him from deviating from the righteous path even if obstructions come in between the fulfillment of goal. A person should practice fortitude and should not adopt the wrong path which can act as a short cut of fulfillment of objective. Fortitude makes a person internally strong and stops a person in deviating from the path of righteousness. Leaders often have this tendency to lose patience when the desired results are not coming and often resort to unethical ways. So, it becomes imperative for a leader to cultivate fortitude or courage for not deviating from the path of righteousness.

### **Shaucha (Internal and External Purity)**

*Shaucha* means purity which includes inner purity as well as external purity. External purity has several dimensions. As elaborately explained in Bhagavad Gita (verse 13.7), it involves earning the money (earthly resources) by truthful and righteous conduct, getting food out of such money, good character made-up of virtuous behaviour along with physical cleanliness and hygiene by using water and other similar ways. In totality, all such actions can be termed as external purity. A leader who is taking care of external purity may results into distinctive personality in comparison to other humans. Therefore leader will be able to make a mark of his personality on others and his leadership will also be more effective.

Internal purity is also important component of *Shaucha*. Internal purity involves leaving the bad virtues like *Raga* (affection), *Dvesha* (jealousy) and *Kapat* (one who only looks at self-interest against loss of others). Leader who does not provide any undue benefit to any specific individual (means who has surpassed *raga*), not jealous of other's success (absence of *dvesha*) and targets win-win situation for various stakeholders of society (free from *kapat*) is fit to be called as internally pure. Such leader are not only liked by his followers but also appreciated by rivals.

### **Adroha (Friendliness)**

Hatred towards others is a vice. Whenever something or someone causes a person pain or discomfort or could cause pain in future then this emotion of hatred arises. This emotion is not for a wise person. The message from Bhagavad Gita is that feeling of hatred towards

anybody weakens the person and he himself burns in the fire of hatred. Friendly behavior with others empowers the person. One should focus on his own karma or actions by cultivating love for others. Only then others also become a part one's good karma. Everyone have control only on themselves. In an effort to try the uncontrollable aspect of others behavior, a person often see himself filled with hatred when others don't act according to his wish. It is foolish on the part of a person to assume that whole world would move as per his wish. Wise people only focus on their own good actions with a friendly approach towards others. One of the best ways to be friendly with others is to respect the freedom of others.

### ***Natimanita (Non-egoist)***

People have desires to be appreciated, admired, loved, respected and adored. It is more so with unwise leaders. Respect and love from others should be a natural phenomenon of good deeds done by a person. But unwise people filled with false ego expect it and demand it. All the merit of good action reduces to ashes when one expects or demand appreciation or admiration for it. There is a clear message from Bhagavad Gita that focus on fruits of action bring only misery. All the actions done in non-egoist state as an instrument of God enhances the merit of the action to the highest level. Wise leaders focus only on the goodness of the work. For them goodness of work is more important than the doer who is doing that work.

### **Conclusion**

The wisdom of Bhagavad Gita has been a source of inspiration for wise leaders across generations. In this paper only a few drops from the ocean of Bhagavad Gita wisdom have been taken and presented which are highly relevant for developing wise leadership. The virtues explained in the paper could serve as an ideal repository or benchmark for analyzing the wisdom quotient of a leader. Any leader by cultivating the virtues mentioned in Bhagavad Gita conquers his enemies (including the inimical sense organs), wins permanent friendship of the honest people, and never loses an inch of his position and loyalty of his subjects. Limitation of the paper is that how to develop these virtues has not been discussed in detail. Moreover, the virtues in Bhagavad Gita have been mentioned in Sanskrit language and most of the Sanskrit words when converted into English often lose the soul of the word. Authors have tried their best to be as close to the meaning as possible.

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