

Leadership Lessons from Indian Knowledge System

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Abstract

In a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) world efficiently managing the human resources is highly challenging for this era leaders. Leadership is a powerful enabler that can leverage an organisation to any heights. But bad leadership can downside any organization which leads to destruction. To lead the organization effectively and efficiently leaders follow different types of leadership styles. So, one of the critical challenges is leading the organization and driving towards his vision. Therefore, one of the major issues and the real concern of any organization is identifying great leaders and nurturing the best qualities. Several theories were discussed and deliberated this issue from a multiple perspective. So many different qualities and styles of leadership have been discussed in modern management theories. The interesting observation is our ancient scriptures such as Bhagavad Gita, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Arthashastra and Bhoja Prabandha etc., we get different perspectives of what leadership is and what it can do to an organization. For Instance, Lord Krishna who was the avatar of Lord Vishnu who was a divine soul with a high degree of intelligence, communication skills and ability to influence others and capable of resolving any crises faced by his devotees. In the modern scenario, it can be said that Lord Krishna has acted as the greatest crises manager the world has ever produced. If we look towards Mahabharata, we can say that Krishna was the Finest Strategist. Even though many other characters in Mahabharata have responded to the great challenges at that time. Krishna was also a thoughtful and intelligent leader he adopted different leadership style according to the time; people and situation. Majorly this paper focus on how our Indian ancient scriptures such as Bhagavad Gita, Mahabharata and Ramayana had different perspectives on leadership qualities.

Keywords: Leadership, Indian Knowledge System, Bhagavad Gita, Mahabharata and Ramayana

Introduction

Thou look at thy duty. Nothing can be more welcome to a soldier than a righteous war. Therefore, to waver in this resolve is unworthy, O Arjuna (Bhagavad Gita, 2:31).

Leadership is treated as one of the key elements for the success of any organization. Because this element can leverage the organization to great heights, incredible position and creating benchmarks, on the flip side the same organization can experience the worst performance of their

lifetime because of the leadership (Simson, 2019). Universally every organization faces this challenge of building the organization culture irrespective of change in the leaders. But many modern theories explain that building the organization culture which operates successfully even in the absence of the leader is the best quality for successful leaders (Harvey, 2007). So, it's very difficult for an organization to create sustainable leadership (Greenleaf, 2002). Various western management theories explain this subject from different perspectives. However, if we look at the various Indian ancient scriptures and Puranas such as Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Arthashastra and Bhoja Prabandha etc., we get a unique perspective of leadership and what its implications on organization. So, the paper focuses more on how Indian ancient scripters described the various thoughts and presented various examples (through stories) on meaning of leadership and its types, styles and qualities in a very unique way. Besides some incidents and situations are explained in the paper which depicts the various qualities of leadership.

Corporate Leadership in IKS Perspective

This paper discusses corporate leadership in four different aspects like approach, leading by example, Oneness and leadership styles. Further, each aspect is discussed in detail with a lot of insights from Indian ancient scriptures like Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Arthashastra and Bhoja Prabandha etc.

Power Centric and Responsibility Centric Approaches

The one approach of leadership is “Power centric”, where the leaders having power and position and they disseminate the same to others based on the hierarchy levels. This type of leadership style has the freedom to decide the decision on their own thinking that they are responsible for organization performance. But various theories explain that the success of decision making of leaders depends on their personality and ability and skills (Simpson, 2019). This type of leadership will not yield any best performance because it creates the climate of “Work for the pay”, they are not willing to work beyond their payment (Mahapatra, 2014). The same approach of a leader is explained in the Gita in a unique perspective

प्रकृतेः क्रियमाणानि गुणैः कर्माणि सर्वशः।
अहङ्कारविमूढात्मा कर्ताऽहमिति मन्यते॥

While actions are being done in every way by the Gunas (alities) of Nature, one who is deluded by egoism thinks thus: 'I am the doer. (Bhagavad Gita : 3.27) (Parthasarathy, 2013).

Another leadership approach is “Responsibility centric”, where the leaders provide an opportunity to the followers and nurture the responsibilities and enable them to bring out their best (Rao & Srinivas, 2014). This will create the culture of “Work beyond

norms” among the employees in the organization. These employees own their places in the organization and involve themselves in many activities in the workplace which is beyond the work limits. The following slogan from Ramayana explains the assignment of work according to the people talent and interest from a unique perspective, which will create the work satisfaction.

कञ्चिन्मुख्या महात्स्वेव मध्यमेषु च मध्यमाः।
जघन्याश्च जघन्येषु भृत्याः कर्मसु योजिताः॥

I hope you have employed highly competent servants for important tasks, mediocre servants in mediocre tasks and low people in inferior tasks.

(Ramayana: 2.100.25) (Sattar, 2019)

The Arthashastra also explains the same as follows

सहाय-साध्यं राजत्वं चक्रं एकं न वर्तते ॥
कुर्वीत सचिवांस्तस्मात्तेषां च शृणुयान्मतम् ॥

Rulership can be carried out (only) with the help of associates. One wheel alone does not turn. Therefore, he should appoint ministers and listen to their opinions. (Arthashastra:1.7.9) (Kautilya, 2000; Kangle, 2019))

Bhagavad Gita says that one can only develop himself when there is mutual understanding and respect.

देवान्भावयतानेन ते देवा भावयन्तु वः ।
परस्परं भावयन्तः श्रेयः परमवाप्स्यथ ॥

Worship the god & let them nourish you in return, then supporting each other, you shall attain you the highest welfare (Bhagavad Gita: 3.11) (Parthasarathy, 2013)

Philosophy. It has been reported that many of the top business schools “self-mastery class” (Engardio & McGregor, 2006) using Indian scriptures especially more text from Bhagavad Gita.

This explains in a highly commendable way that if the approach of the leader is to support the subordinates and help them to grow you will reach the highest level of welfare. This is exactly “give respect and take respect” policy.

Leading by Example

The above is clear evidence that the modern leadership approach is explained by the Indian ancient scriptures and Puranas. The interesting observation is that these scriptures wrote these interpretations 5000 years ago which are matching to the modern world theories and approaches. Nowadays most of the corporates in developed countries are learning and teaching the various similar kinds of approaches using Indian

In Bhagavad Gita one of the most important issues that Lord Krishna emphasizes to Arjuna is leadership-factors and that are uniquely quoted and discussed in various chapters. Often leaders derive their credibility, respect and power from their unwavering commitment from the followers by leading an example, so the followers are also willing to follow the footprints of the leader. If the leaders do something which differs from their words, the followers will not take the leadership seriously. This refers to the following quote from Gita Chapter 3 (20-21).

कर्मणैव हि संसिद्धिमास्थिता जनकादयः |
लोकसंग्रहमेवापि सम्पश्यन्कर्तुमर्हसि || 20||
यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवेतरो जनः |
स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते || 21||

Bhoja Prabandha explains the same concept in a different manner. If a leader (King) follows the right path (Dharma) and setting himself as an example means the followers also follow the same

path without any doubts (Ballâla, 1949). If the leader is a sinner, so will be the subjects. People always follow their leader.

राज्ञि धर्मिणि धर्मिष्ठाः पापे पापपराः सदा।
राजानमनुवर्तन्ते यथा राजा तथा प्रजाः ॥44॥

*rājñi dharmiṇi dharmiṣṭhāḥ pāpe pāpaparāḥ sadā.
rājanamanuvartante yathā rājā tathā prajāḥ. (Bhoja Prabandha: 44)*

The great leadership is not possible without creating the successors. The hallmark of the successful leader is to lead by examples (Fleming & Millar, 2019). Various Indian scriptures like Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana explain the same in a very strong manner. This depicts that how strong thought process of our Indian philosophers. Besides this is another evidence of how valuable our ancient scriptures is.

Oneness Strategy

The leadership is driven by the Vision and which explain the purpose of its existence. As a leader, one should be visionary. Further, it is the primary

duty of the visionary leader to reinforce the concept to the employees at all levels (Battilana, Gilmartin, Sengul, Pache, & Alexander, 2010). Even though the prime responsibility of the departmental / functional heads is to achieve the said targets for their departments, they should work in line with the organizational objectives (Simpson, 2019). In other words, while framing policies and procedures, the management should ensure that the departmental level objectives are in congruence with the vision of the organization. In summary, for any organization to be effective there should be 'unity in diversity' which also can be termed as 'oneness'. The Same thought has been explained in Gita in terms of leadership.

न बुद्धिभेदं जनयेदज्ञानां कर्मसङ्गिनाम् |3
जोषयेत्सर्वकर्माणि विद्वान्युक्तः समाचरन् || 26||

*na buddhi-bhedam janayed ajñānām karma-saṅginām
joṣhayet sarva-karmāṇi vidvān yuktaḥ samācharan (Bhagavad Gita:3.26)*

It is explained in Gita 'The wise should not unsettle the minds of the ignorant who are attached to the fruits of work but should inspire others by performing all works efficiently without selfish attachment. So, the successful leaders were able to communicate their vision clearly to all stake holders. The leader should create a “Unity in

Diversity” culture in the organization (Parthasarathy, 2013)

“Unity in diversity is not just a slogan or buzz phrase. It is a way of explaining the principle of humanity's oneness with itself and the entire creation” (Atkinson, 2016).

Specific Leadership Lesson from the Lens of IKS

Further, it is interesting to know that the concept of leadership is discussed in detail, (though explicitly), in ancient India in the context of different leadership qualities and styles. In the present article we tried to extract the explicitly stated leadership qualities and styles in Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita to present it as qualities and styles of leadership suitable for applying in modern management practice.

Qualities of Leadership

Ramayana is an Ithihasa written by the saint

मा निषाद प्रतिष्ठां त्वमगमः शाश्वतीः समाः ।
यत्क्रौञ्चमिथुनादेकम् अवधीः काममोहितम् ॥

-(Ramayana:1.2.15)

He felt the need to have a good leader to who have all good qualities and is concerned about the welfare of all creatures. In his early conversation with Narada, he had learned about Rama and after invoking the blessing of Lord Brahma, Valmiki wrote about the glories of great King Rama (the protagonist of the epic), through which explicitly he proposed a sustainable model of leadership. The present paper presents this great leadership model –Rama in comparison with the opposite leadership example of Ravana (the antagonist of the epic), and

few other characters with intermediary leadership qualities.

Upon doing the psychographic profiling of few characters of Ramayana we proposed a classification model of leadership with two broader leadership types- daiva and asura. We propose this based on the wisdoms from Brahma Purana (UNESCO collection of representative works: Indian series, 1986), Daivasura Sampad Vibhaga Yoga of Bhagavad-Gita (Lepes, 2008).

बुद्धिमान्नीतिमान्वाग्मी श्रीमान् शत्रुनिर्बर्हणः ।
विपुलांसो महाबाहुः कम्बुग्रीवो महाहनुः ॥

He (Sri Rama) is a great intellectual, adherent to rules, eloquent, handsome, destroyer of foes (sins), broad-shouldered, strong-armed, having conch

shaped neck and prominent cheeks. (Ramayana 1.1.9)

धर्मज्ञस्सत्यसन्धश्च प्रजानां च हिते रतः ।
यशस्वी ज्ञानसम्पन्नश्शुचिर्वश्यस्समाधिमान् ॥

Pious, firm in his vows, he is ever intent on doing good to his subjects. He is, illustrious, wise, and pure at heart. He is obedient to elders (or access to those who are dependent on him) and ever meditating (on the means of protecting those who take refuge in him). (Ramayana 1.1.12)

As per this wisdom the main quality of the leaders is taking care of his team members' welfare in a positive way which will be resulted in creating the successors. This principle is really applicable in present corporate world because most of the organizations, leaders take care only at their level. But the leaders should have holistic view and shall concern about the welfare of everyone in the system for a sustainable development.

Styles of Leadership

In our ancient Literature the Trigunas – Sattva, Rajas and Tamas are the highly determining personality attributes of our behaviours and temperaments. We can classify leadership also through these three natures. Sattva is luminous and healthy. It binds by attachment to happiness and attachment to knowledge. Rajas are to be the nature of passion, the source of desire and attachment. It binds fast by the attachment to action. Tamas is born of ignorance, deluding all embodied beings; it binds fast by heedlessness, indolence, and sleep. All three Gunas are important for a being but in a natural balance. When they are in a natural balance, Sattva gives the desire to know, capacity to create, think and imagine. Rajas generate action, initiative, and motivation, and express itself in the ability to organize and implement. Tamas supplies the ability to bring, to completion whatever was created through sattva and produced through Rajas. But when they lose their balance it affects human nature. Such as –

- Too much of Rajas creates a reliance on activity
- A predominance of Tamas creates and influence of dullness, confusion and

fearfulness

- A strong influence of Sattva calmly analyses the situation before acting and attempts to create order

Thus, says Lord Krishna –

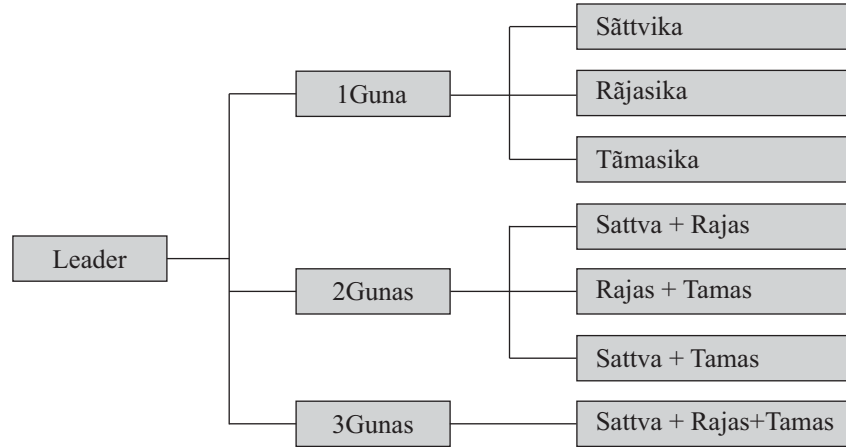
Sattvam sukhe sañjayati rajaḥ karmaṇi bhārata.
Jñānamāvṛtya tu tamaḥ pramāde sañjayatyuta.

The above bullets make this clear that

- Leader with a strong influence of Sattva Guna and balanced Rajas and Tamas can be the best leader. Rama and Krishna are some of the best examples of such leaders.
- The leader with a strong influence of Rajas will be self-centred, autocratic etc. Example – Ravana, Duryodhana
- The person with Tamas influence is not at all eligible to be a leader as he can neither control himself nor his subordinates. Example – Kumbhakarna

The leaders and human being should have all three qualities like Sattva, Rajas, Tamas. But how an individual use all the qualities is differentiated from normal personality and effective leaders. A leader cannot use all three gunas at one time so how gunas are influencing the human being to take decisions. The following diagram explains the three different possible situations when a leader uses these three gunas. These three Gunas (constituents) are present in all the living beings and influence their behaviour and lifestyle. All three dominate over each other, support each other and function jointly similar to the lamp (though all three fire, oil and wick are of opposite properties but still support each other in producing light) (Sankhya Karika - 12) (Isvarakrsna, 2019).

Please refer figure 1 for more details of the leaders with different influences of three gunas.

Figure 1: Three Gunas of Leaders

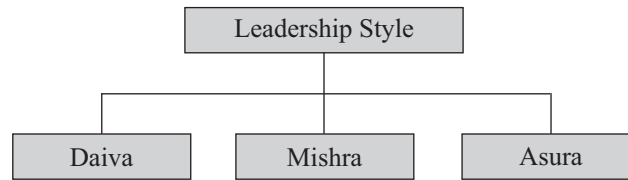
1 Guna – This represents the person or a leader who is influenced highly by anyone Guna and other gunas are in a very low proportion.

2 Gunas – This represents the person or a leader who is highly influenced by any two Gunas and other Guna is in a very low proportion.

3 Gunas – This represents the person with balanced the proportion of all the three Gunas.

Leadership styles expounded in Valmiki Ramayana

In Ramayana, Valmiki elaborated different types of leaders called Daiva and Asura. Daiva and Asura leadership types are defined based on Sattva, Rajas and Tamas qualities as proposed by the Sankhya school of thought.

Figure 2: Types of Leadership

The daiva and Assura are the two types of leadership styles explained in Ramayana. We tried to create a third type called Mishra from the psychographic analysis of few Ramayana

characters. The Deva-Asura Sampad Yoga Sloka of Bhagavad Gita for developing this classification model.

दैवी सम्पद्विमोक्षाय निबन्धायासुरी मता ।
मा शुचः सम्पदं दैवीमभिजातोऽसि पाण्डव ॥

*daivī sampad vimokṣhāya nibandhāyāsūrī matā
mā śhuchaḥ sampadam daivīm abhijāto 'si pāṇḍava (Bhagavad Gita 16.5)*

Daiva Leadership Qualities

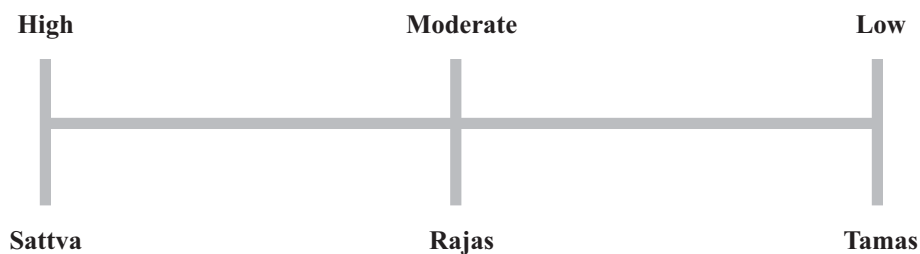
Daiva - means one which belongs to Deva which is derived from the verbal root “div”. “Div” means to play, desirous to victory, behaviour, activity, splendor, delight, passion/inspiration, dream, and movement. The person with high excellence in above is Deva. Bhagavad Gita gives the list of qualities of deva in Chapter 16

Fearlessness, purity of mind, persistence in knowledge and yoga, charity and control of the

external organs, sacrifice, (scriptural) study, austerity and rectitude; Harmlessness, truth, absence of anger, renunciation, peacefulness, absence of crookedness, compassion towards beings, non-covetousness, gentleness, modesty, absence of fickleness, Vigour, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, absence of hatred, absence of pride these belong to the one born for a divine state.

The below diagram explains the Daiva leadership style in the perspective of Valmiki.

Figure 3: Daiva Leadership Qualities in Valmiki Perspective



Daiva leadership styles have a high level of Sattva and a moderate level of Rajas and low level of Tamas. This type of leadership style has a high level of knowledge and best in character and in comparison to others, accepts more responsibilities. Besides, they have passion and desire towards achieving the vision of the organization. The ignorance level of this style is very low because they provide the platform to their followers to grow as the successors. In a corporate life, these leadership styles will produce responsible successors which have been the most challenging task for any organization in a modern era. Moreover, creativity and sustainability are considered as a core competency of this leadership styles which are very highly demanded in the present corporate world. Because these two factors are a very rare combination of qualities in the present era, but if a leader can integrate these two approaches, he will be one topmost leader in the world. So, this is one of the highly acceptable leadership styles because it creates a positive

attitude among the employers and provides the opportunity to prove their talents and makes them work beyond their remuneration with more responsibility.

Asura Leadership Qualities

To understand āsura, one must first understand who is asura? *Asyati – Kshipati devan is asura.* One who opposes *devas* are *asuras*. Bhagavad Gita gives the detail about āsura qualities such as:

Hypocrisy, arrogance and self-conceit, anger, harshness and ignorance, belong to one who is born for a demoniacal state. The demoniacal know not what to do and what to refrain from; neither purity nor right conduct nor truth is found in them. These ruined souls of small intellect and fierce deeds come forth as the enemies of the world for its destruction. Filled with insatiable desires, full of hypocrisy, pride and arrogance, holding evil ideas through delusion, they work with impure resolves.

Bound by a hundred ties of hope, given over to lust and anger, they strive to obtain by unlawful means hoards to wealth for sensual enjoyments. "This has been gained by me today; this desire of mine I shall fulfil; this is mine and this wealth also shall be mine in future. That enemy has been slain by me, and others also I shall slay. I am the Lord. I enjoy. I am perfect, powerful and happy. I am rich and born in a noble family. Who else is equal to me? I shall perform sacrifices. I shall give (charity). I shall rejoice," thus deluded by ignorance. Self-conceited, stubborn, filled with the pride and intoxication of wealth, they perform duties/tasks in name out of ostentation, contrary to scriptural ordinances.

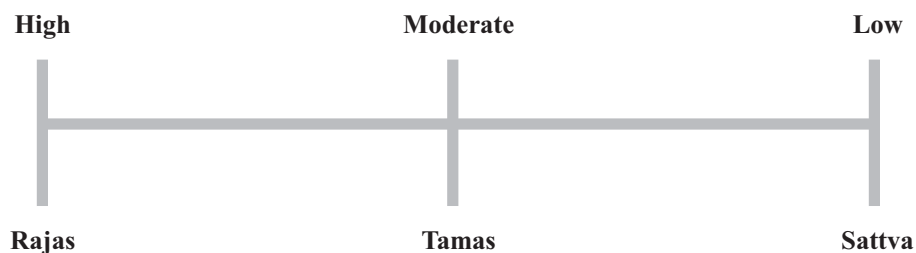
Based on the character analysis of Ravana and Kumbakarna we had classified Asura type into two sub categories- Asura –I and Asura- II. The

following are descriptions of both the categories.

Asura –I leadership type

Asura -I type of leadership consists of high Rajas, Moderate Tamas and low Sattva. They are leaders who don't follow any ethical principles. They consider their interest more than common interest and are ready to do anything to get it. With their high Rajasic qualities they are very active and have high achievement motivation, but with the moderate tamasic qualities they always wanted to finish the task fast and enjoy the benefits. They are the people who are not interested in other growth but involve in manipulating others to their growth and wellbeing. The element of trust is completely absent with them and they possess a high level of Machiavellianism.

Figure 4: Assura (I) Leadership Qualities in Valmiki Perspective



Asura- I leadership styles high level of Rajas and a moderate level of Tamas and low level of Sattva. These combinations are not the right combinations for successful leaders. Since knowledge level is low and the character is also negative the decision making may not be sound. Because the knowledge level of the leader in any organization plays a pivotal role in the process of reaching the vision of the company. But the desire and passion level are very high but which is not supported by the level of intellect. Since the ignorance level is moderate the style of leaders not able to take the positive decisions. The possibility of creating successors also is at a low level. The problem with this type of

style in the corporate is low-level intellect of followers, where they will not be trained to take decision making by analysing the situation with the right approach. So, this not considered as right style of leadership.

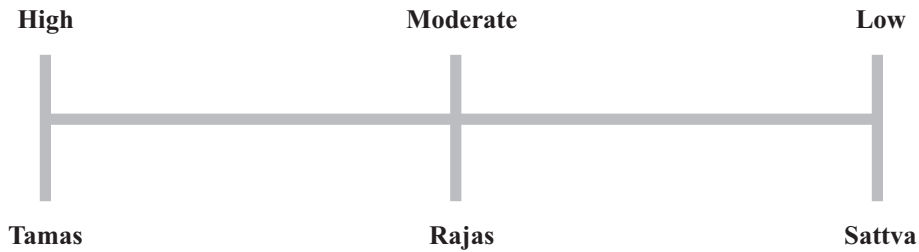
Asura-II leadership type

Asura II is composed of High Tamasa Quality with Moderate Rajas and Low sattva. These leaders are considered people who show less interest in the growth of the system as well as people and like to enjoy the comforts of leadership rather than contributing to a common good. They enjoy the

power and use power to create their wealth and comfort. They are not much worried about the

growing needs and mostly likes to maintain the status quo.

Figure 5: Assura-II Leadership Qualities in Valmiki Perspective



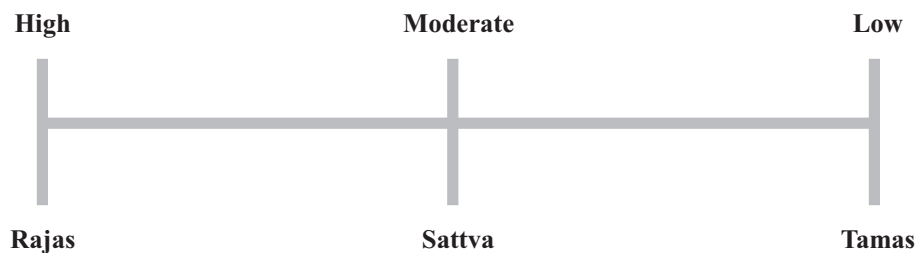
Assura-II leadership styles have high level of Tamas and a moderate level of Rajas and low level of Sattva. The interesting observation in two types of Assura leadership is low Sattva. So, the knowledge level is very low, this reflects in every action of a leader. Because the knowledge level of the leader in any organization plays a pivotal role in the process of reaching the vision of the organization. Low level of desire is reflecting badly on their decision makings. Even though in the beginning they might rise to some extent because of their Rajas qualities they will be failed miserably in their decision making because they don't have a holistic view of the situation. Besides they focus only on personal benefits instead of organization benefits and short-term benefits. The ethics part also will not exist in its approach. These

combinations are not the right combinations for leaders. The possibility of creating successors also is at a low level. The problem with this type of style in the corporate is low-level intellect of followers, where they will not be trained to take decision making by analysing the situation with the right approach.

Mishra Leadership Qualities

Mishra is a word derived from the Sanskrit root “Mishr-Samparke” which means missing, connecting, mingling and blending etc., So, Mishra is a mixture of both Asura and Deva qualities. The combination of High Rajas, Moderate, Sattva and Low Tamas is the characteristic profile of Mishra.

Figure 6: Mishra Leadership Qualities in Valmiki Perspective



They are good subordinates and can be good middle or lower-level managers. They are not good in strategic decision making but are good in implementation of the decision. With their high Rajasic profile they are very good in managing people as well as task, given if there are clear

instructions and targets are provided. They do hard work and are consistent in their performance.

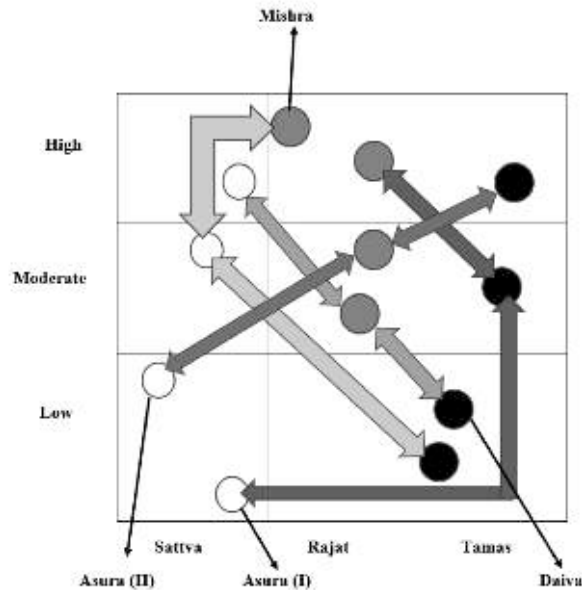
Model of Leadership from IKS

Based on the leadership qualities and styles we

discussed in this paper which are derived from inputs from various ancient Indian scriptures, we propose a new model of leadership styles consist of Daiva, Mishra and Asura styles of leaders. The

asura leadership is further classified into Asura-I and Assura II. All these styles are developed based on Sattva, Rajas and Tamas as the basic personality determinant.

Figure 7: IKS based Modern Leadership Model



Daiva leadership composed of high Sattva, Moderate Rajas and low Tamas. This style of leadership will take care of their team members and other stakeholders like organization, society and environment and ecology. Besides they are highly knowledgeable about the entirety of the system, which has influence on their activities. The moderate desire will keep the leader in the process of reaching the purpose of his/her existence. Entire personality should change if anybody willing to follow this style. Mishra is a new style which is discussed in this research paper where these people are the second level of leaders because they had high rajas, moderate Sattva and low Tamas. The person who will have these combinations are the right people of followers because of moderate knowledge and low laziness. This style is a mixture of an Asura and Daiva qualities, so this type of corporate leaders will be good in execution at any level. Asura is the third style of leadership style where Asura-I had low sattva moderate Tamas and

high Rajat, Since the style has less concern about people and ego towards other team members, they will not create the positive work culture in the organization and they dominate others in nature. Even though they have a knowledge base which will not reflect on their process. Asura-II had high tamas, low sattva and moderate rajas this style is high lethargic, no clear ambition, easy-going and improper decision making. This leadership style is act as namesake leader and this will not suitable for any organization. All these styles had all three Gunas, but style differs on weightage of these Gunas in a corporate world with challenge contexts. Though the context decided the weightage still the inner character of the leader decides a positive approach towards any problem. But the leaders who focus more on high sattva reach the highest level of respect which also explained in Bhagavad Gita as follows

ऊर्ध्वं गच्छन्ति सत्त्वस्थाः मध्ये तिष्ठन्ति राजसाः ।
जघन्यगुणवृत्तिस्थाः अधो गच्छन्ति तामसाः ॥

(Bhagavad Gita 14-18)

People who conform to sattva go higher up (When purity is on high man evolves); those who conform to rajas stay in the middle (When passion is on high man neither evolves nor degenerates); those who conform to tamas, who conform to the actions of the lowest ability, go down (When ignorance is on high man is lost). So, any complex situation for any type of leaders even in any corporate there will be answer in our Indian ancient scriptures.

Conclusion

The study focused on the leadership approach, qualities, besides it compares modern management approaches with Indian ancient scriptures like Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana and Arthashastra etc., Interesting observation is registered that our scriptures addressed the modern theories with apt content which are still applicable for any modern corporate challenges. Further three Gunas are discussed with clear qualities of these Gunas and compared with three different leadership styles. Besides this paper attempted to create an extensive leadership model with a new style called Mishra. In a modern era, the success of leaders depends on how he/she is influenced by these three Gunas. Each leadership style influences most of the stakeholders in the business model. By understanding the inputs from our Indian scriptures, they can take greater steps towards the fear of failures and significantly can increase the competency and success of leadership.

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