

# Military Leadership and Vedic Literature Linkages

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Nations conduct their relations through various means in which diplomacy takes predominance due to the way it shapes these relations, keeping in mind the long term strategic national interests. However, when they want to exert their will, and diplomacy is found to be inadequate; then, the use of force becomes necessary. In this context, the purpose of maintaining a military force is to be always ready to go to war when called upon and come out victorious each and every time. This capability, to a very large extent, depends upon the quality and morale of the leaders and the led. Therefore, it is one of the most observed and studied areas of military science, yet its precise definitions and measurements remain elusive.

In its very basic form, it may be said that leadership stems from the concept of reciprocity. It simply means that every follower at some point of time requires a leader. Hence, when we consider leadership, we are dealing with two quite separate entities; the process that goes on between the leader and the led (which could be mainly emotional and, may be, intellectual content); and the aspect of leadership that concerns itself to the end state: victory. This conflicting demand of the human aspects, on one side, and the war aims, on the other, requires a fine skillful balancing by the leader. Leadership is also perceived by some as a management function; the coordination and use of resources optimally to achieve its objectives. But a deeper analysis tells us that the military leadership is much beyond the management functions; as it has an element of charisma, which is something of an intangible, and inspires idealism from the followers. At micro level, this art of leadership acquires critical dimensions, for it may involve

the ultimate sacrifice by all concerned i.e.laying down one's life for the country. Therefore, the led men have to be trained and motivated to willingly perform their duties. Thus, any definition of leadership has to describe it not in isolation, but in an environment of danger, uncertainty and turmoil. It is of utmost importance that the psyche of a military leader has to understand the philosophy of war, and essence of military leadership in combat conditions.

Military leadership in India was associated with the 'Varna' or Caste System<sup>1</sup> in the older times. The 'Kshatriyas or the Warrior Classes' were the natural inheritors of the mantle of military leadership. Things did not change much with the arrival of the Arabs, Moghuls and other invaders from the northwest. The Moghuls and other contemporary dynasties also perpetuated the tradition of inheritance-based leadership. This was also probably the reason for the decline and fall of many thriving kingdoms and empires wherein the leaders failed to provide the appropriate kind of leadership. With the advent of the British rule, we were first exposed to the classical model of military organisations. The turning point seems to be the Crimean War, after which, the British reviewed and abolished the system of 'purchasing one's commission' for officers. By the mid-19th century, the British had a more or less a standing Army in place. In India, the current model of regimental organisation was fortified after the post Anglo-Boer War Reforms of 1905, which had far-reaching consequences across the British Empire. This also heralded the era, when military leaders in India were inducted and appointed on the basis of qualification in a holistic selection process. It can be argued that the selection process and institutionalisation of leaders in the Indian military has been carried out in a most democratic, logical and fair manner for a long time.

Notwithstanding these developments, there is a strong case for the leadership traits of the Vedic era and the contemporary Indian military thinking also forming the basis of such an evolution. The Vedic period<sup>2</sup> extends from the '*origin of the Vedas to the time of the Bhagwad Gita*'; wherein the *Mahabharata* has been extensively quoted in the present context for the greater wisdom of justification for war (*Dharmyudh*) and selfless sacrifice by the soldier as the greatest virtues of all. The four *Upvedas*<sup>3</sup> that represent distinct branches of knowledge have a separate portion on *Dhanurveda* (military science). The Vedic Indian literature provides core values to many aspects of these developments which still derive their relevance. The *Yajur Veda* has extensively dealt with leadership qualities. They are directly proportional to the dynamic environment and aspirations/behaviour of the persons being led. Finally, we have more popular and well known epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

**Ramayana:**<sup>4</sup> Lord Rama is known as *Maryada Purushottam*,<sup>5</sup> “a person who is excellent in following the righteous norms of the society.” Rama’s fight with Ravana also depicts a number of qualities of a good leader (Seth Ritesh, 2009)<sup>6</sup> – “*Vision and Mission*” (Lord Rama gave a clear vision and a mission to the Army led by him to defeat the Rakshasas and rescue Sita), “*Plans and Strategies*” (sending search parties, building overseas bridges, etc. were chalked out), “*Clarity of Goals*” (it enabled the Army to put its heart and soul in the mission of rescuing Sita), “*Social Responsibility*” (this mission was coupled with nobleness of the cause – freeing people from the atrocities of Ravana), “*Principle of Equality*” (though a king, Rama treated everyone equally and developed relations with the common people like ferrymen, Shabari, etc.), “*SWOT Analysis*” (Hanuman analysed the situation, assessing the strengths and weaknesses and opportunities and threats of the enemy’s camp), “*Lead by Example*” and “*Follow the Code of Ethics*”.

**Mahabharata:**<sup>7</sup> It narrates the roles of innumerable kings, leaders, administrators, sages, advisers, teachers and diplomats connected with the day-to-day affairs of the state conflicts and human society. Two heroes who stand out as wise personalities, selfless performers and dispassionate advisers with a very high degree of situational awareness are Lord Krishna, considered to be an incarnation of God itself, and Bhishma Pitamaha, the eldest of the Kaurava and Pandava families. The Army, as defined in the *Mahabharata*, is the main agency through which the king handles enemies. A military organisation functions best if it is well guided. The Army is blind and ignorant. Hence, far-sighted leaders should guide it appropriately (Mb.2.20.16). Soldiers brimming with enthusiasm for battle is the prime sign of achieving victory (Mb.6.3.75).

**Bhagwad Gita:**<sup>8</sup> It is considered to be the culmination of the wisdom of the entire mosaic of Vedic literature on military science. The teachings of the *Gita* are also for everyone in all walks of life. It addresses the whole of humanity and proclaims that actually you are not this ‘genetic bodily system’. “If you are a leader you will be a better leader, if you are a warrior you will be a better warrior, if you are a manager you will be a better manager, so on and so forth”.

## **Organisational Structures and Vedic Links**

The current organisational structures of the Army too find resemblance to the Vedic period, thus, providing credence to the leadership theories of Vedic times. The strategy or tactics of war-fighting of the military has undergone tremendous changes but the structure of the Army has remained unaltered. The section (smallest sub-unit), organised for basic tactics of fire and move, consists of

approximately ten soldiers and is akin to the *Patti* of the Vedic era. Three Sections/Pattis will constitute a Platoon/*Senamukha* which is capable of occupying the defences of a locality. A company of the modern army can be compared to Gumla (90 men) or Gama (270 men) of yesteryears in their personnel strength and tasking. A battalion (1,000 men), the smallest cohesive unit to fight a battle, is like the *Vahini* (810 men) in organisation and role. Thereafter, brigade/division/corps are similar to the erstwhile *pritna/camulaneekini* respectively in their structure, personnel strength, resources and tasking.

## Conclusion

The emerging concepts of leadership certainly find some of their roots in the scantily documented Vedic literature. The Vedic leadership concepts and principles have relevance for the Indian military leadership, wherein the study of the *Arthashastra* and *Mahabharata* form part of the curriculum in the higher echelon training. In this fast globally changing era, skills related to leadership will not serve their purpose well unless they flow from a value-based pure mind. A person has to embrace the spiritual dimension beyond its physical, social and economic dimensions as it purifies the mind of a leader and a decision-maker. With purity of mind, the leader is able to concentrate, contemplate and mediate to approach ambiguous situations with perfection and divinity.

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## Notes

1. Lt YV Athawale, IN, "Changing Nature of Leadership in the 21st Century", USI, January 1998.
2. Paul Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*. Authorised English Translation by AS Geden, 1906.
3. *Ibid.*, p.542.
4. Valmiki, *SrimadValmiki Ramayana* (Gorakhpur : Gita Press, 1958).
5. GoswamiTulsidas, *Shri Ram CharitManas*, (Gorakhpur : Gita Press, 1962).
6. <https://sites.google.com/site/riteshseth/Home/general-reads/management-lessons-from-ramayana>
7. P. Lal, *Mahabharata of Vyasa*, (Asia Book Corporation of America, 1970).
8. Jayadyal Goyanka, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* (Gita Press).