

# TIMELESS LEADERSHIP: 18 LEADERSHIP SUTRAS FROM THE BHAGAVAD GITA

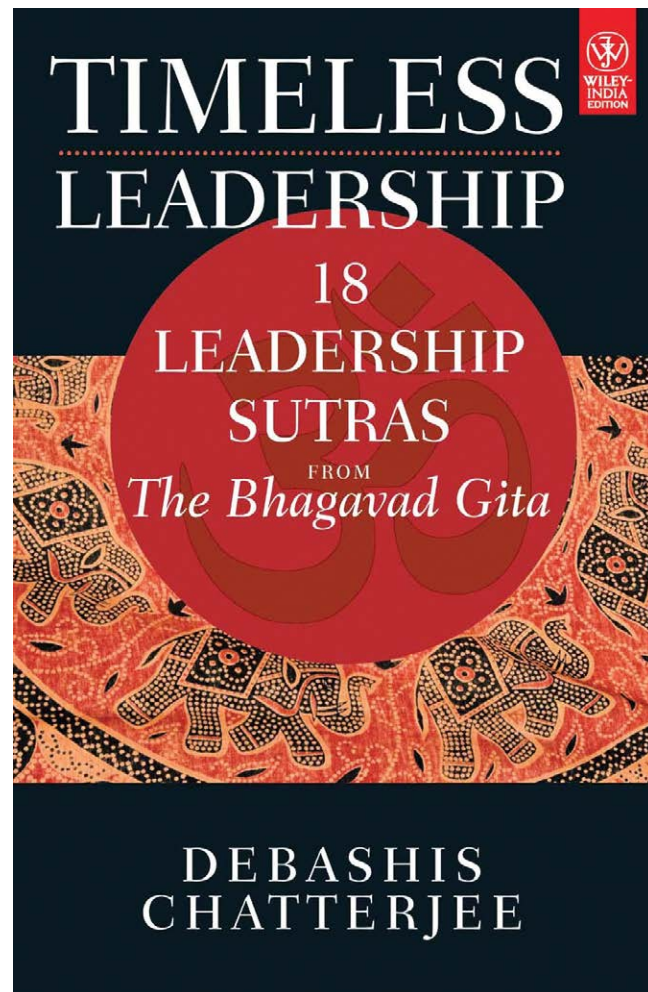
OVER TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO 'BHAGAVAD GITA' PREACHED THE TIMELESS WISDOM OF THE NOW WESTERN MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS OF VISION, MOTIVATION, LEADERSHIP, PLANNING AND DECISION MAKING

Text: Ramya Srinivasan Photos: Various Sources

Debashis Chatterjee uses the spiritual classic Bhagavad Gita as a source of management lessons for corporate leaders in his book "Timeless Leadership: 18 Leadership Sutras from The Bhagavad Gita". The author, who served as the director of Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode from 2009-2014, deftly combines his experience in the field of management education and research with his insights on the Gita.

The book was originally published in 2012, aligning comfortably with the growing popularity of Indian mythology in fiction and non-fiction works. Writers such as Devdutt Pattanaik, Ashwin Sanghi, Amish Tripathi and Anand Neelakantan have been exploring the possibilities of mythological characters and tales in today's world. While some of these works are adaptations, others are a different take on timeless epics.

Perhaps it is the chaos in today's times that has led these authors to go back to the board and look at the basics - in this case, at epics which arguably fictional or otherwise have a nuanced portrayal of good and evil, of actions and consequences, of dharma and karma. Today's audience is also seemingly mature enough to accept variations and even grey shades in their gods - like a marijuana-smoking Shiva or a not-so-



perfect Ram in need of more spunk. This is a refreshing approach to an otherwise stale repetition of general folklore. It looks like this trend is here to stay.

#### UNFOLDING A SUTRA

In this kind of literary climate, "Timeless Leadership" manages to pique the reader's interest with its discerning references to the Gita. Chatterjee presents 18 chapters, and in each of them, he defines a particular sutra and

goes on to explain its import with anecdotes, quotes from the holy text and its relevance to leadership.

A few examples of sutras in the book include "leadership is the art of undoing", "leaders are integrators" and "leaders are masters of their minds". Some of these appear intuitive and are not completely new concepts in the domain of leadership manual. However, the frame of reference here, that of the Gita, adds an interesting dimension. For example, in presenting the sutra on 'Invincible Wisdom', the author says that 'leaders create alternative reality.'

Another excerpt from the Gita reads - Arjuna stands befuddled in front of Krishna and says, "My mind is confused about whether to fight or to give in. Tell me decisively what I should do." Chatterjee equates this to how our turbulent minds are caught in their own GPS (Grief, Pity and Shame) system. "Fear of the boss,

pressure of deadlines, grief over job losses, long hours of separation from family, self-pity and shame resulting from underperformance - all of these could paralyse a person at work."

And just like how Krishna guides Arjuna through his confused state of mind by, presenting an alternate reality, a true leader has the capability to introduce a perspective which is worth fighting (or working hard) for.

#### BOOK FACTS

**BOOK:** Timeless Leadership: 18 Leadership Sutras from the Bhagavad Gita

**PUBLISHER:** Wiley  
**AUTHOR:** Debashis Chatterjee  
**YEAR:** 2012

**GOODREADS RATING :** 3.89/5

**OUR FAVORITE LINE:** "All wars are first fought in the mind. Therefore, it is in the mind that all wars must first be won."

**REVIEW:** "Non-Indian businessmen who wish to do business in India, may find here keys to their counterparts' way of thinking: a short-cut to the Bhagavad Gita, one repositioned in the shared experience of business and leadership"-Peter Gordon, Inaugural Chair of the Man Asian Literary Prize and editor of The Asian Review of Books.

In this sutra, Chatterjee further explains how leaders succeed in creating an alternative reality. One of the solutions the author derives from the Gita is "nishkama karma" which translates to "unselfish commitment that yields best possible results at work". The 'Invincible Wisdom' here is that unselfish work provides equanimity of the mind, facilitating easier execution.

#### WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK FOR YOU?

Unlike some of the other mythological works in the market, this one caters to a niche segment. It is not for someone who wants to just dip their feet in, but for serious seekers of advice and those who want to be able to completely understand the poignant observations in the Gita. The author's immense research to produce this material is apparent. Shifting comfortably between the corporate and the mythological worlds, he manages to blur the boundaries between the two, and



making the transition seem effortless.

So, does it succeed as a self-help management book? It depends on who the self-help is for. If you are someone stringing along the corporate ladder, ideas in the book will resonate in parts. However, if you are expecting an easy-read of points to quickly brush through, you will be disappointed. These sutras are not instant solutions - they are a way of life. They are not quick fixes, but a kind of corporate disciple which readers are encouraged to practice over a period of time and require a change in the mindset.

Sample this: "Motivation is another form of slavery," the author says. He quotes the maverick president of a media house to support this phrase, "I do not believe in motivation because any form of motivation makes me dependent on whatever it is that motivates me."

In the days of simple techniques and instant solutions, concepts such as these may come across as a tad overwhelming and hard to apply. The sober tone of the writing does not make it any easier to absorb the ideas either. However, if you are a corporate leader who is already quite successful, the book could serve as an acknowledgement and validation of a certain style of detached, holistic and long-term thinking.

One might question the global relevance of the book given the copious amount of Indian, and specifically Hindu references. A quote by Professor Nitin Nohria, dean of the Harvard Business School sums this up nicely, "What Emerson is to America and Confucius is to China, Krishna is to India."

Well, the source may be Indian, but the application is universal ■