

Sustainable Leadership through the Lens of Self-transcendence: How Bhagavad Gita's practices fuel Organizational Sustainability

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Abstract

This study delves into how the Bhagavad Gita serves as a guiding framework for sustainable leadership and organizational sustainability through self-transcendence. It emphasizes key concepts in the Gita that involves rising above ego-driven desires and personal ambitions to embrace a higher purpose. The study highlights how the core teachings of the Gita, including nishkama karma (selfless action), samatvam (equanimity), and dharma (righteous duty), provide a valuable framework for ethical and sustainable leadership practices. The research argues that leaders who practice nishkama karma focus on the greater good without attachment to personal gains, aligning their actions with long-term organizational and environmental sustainability goals. Samatvam teaches leaders to maintain balance and composure during challenges, ensuring resilience in times of crisis while maintaining focus on the organization's sustainability objectives. The concept of dharma underscores the importance of ethical decision-making and fulfilling one's duty towards society and the planet, making it an integral part of sustainable leadership. Drawing from Indian philosophers like Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Ramana Maharshi, the study integrates their perspectives on self-transcendence with modern leadership theories. Vivekananda's emphasis on selflessness and service, Aurobindo's focus on the evolution of consciousness, and Maharshi's practice of self-inquiry are linked to leadership qualities essential for creating a sustainable and ethical workplace culture. Hermeneutics method is employed in order to attain the objectives of the paper. The paper concludes that integrating the spiritual teachings of the Bhagavad Gita into leadership practices can foster a resilient, values-driven organization. This holistic approach to leadership aligns personal development with the demands of sustainable growth, ensuring that businesses thrive while benefiting society and future generations.

Keywords: Self-transcendence, Bhagavad Gita, Sustainable Leadership, Sustainable leaders, Yogas, Organizational Sustainability.

1. Introduction

The Bhagavad Gita, signifying "Song of the Spirit," is a conversation of divine truth between man and the supreme being. It enlightens that God exists in everything and the core of all creation is a reflection of the Absolute Being [1]. The Gita promotes the route to sannyasa, meaning, the abnegation of the ego, which is thoroughly engrained in ignorance. To repress this ignorance, one must relinquish desires

emerge from the ego, as these generate a feeling of dissociation between the individual and the divine Spirit [2]. Besides, The Gita can be recognized by three levels: material, astral, and spiritual, each linking with different aspects of mortal existence—body, mind, and soul. The material aspect of the Gita lays emphasis on the physical and social obligations of a person, leading their actions and well-being. The

astral interpretation concentrates on moral and psychological dimensions, underlining how sensory perceptions and energy forces moulds one's character, habits, and desires [3]. At last, the spiritual perspective of the Gita emphasizes the divine nature of the soul, aiming for self-realization and the understanding of the soul's unity with the divine. (Paramahansa Yogananda, 1995) The paper offers a detailed framework for fostering ethical and moral growth in employees through the teachings of the yogas of Bhagavad Gita. Cultivating these core traits shapes an individual's outlook on various aspects of life, including work, ultimately benefiting both organizations and society (Rajeev, 2007). A transcendental mindset not only helps individuals find purpose and fulfilment in their professional lives but also contributes to building a harmonious and ethical workplace culture. This mindset is essential for employees, as it leads to several positive outcomes, such as enhanced productivity (Srirangarajan & Bhaskar, 2011) [4]. In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna explains that true renunciation involves taking courageous actions for the collective good, free from selfish attachments. It means recognizing one's responsibilities and fully committing to accomplishing them, giving the concept of sustainable leadership emphasizing that sustainable leaders should embrace selflessness and strive for the well-being of society as well as the environment [5-7]. By practicing renunciation, sustainable leaders develop traits like honesty, fairness, and loyalty, and avoid exploiting resources or people for personal gain. Sustainable leadership not only nurtures these core values but also promotes organizational sustainability by focusing on long-term well-being instead of short-term gains. Leaders who adopt sustainable practices cultivate a culture of ethical choices, resource efficiency, and environmental awareness. They motivate their teams to consider the wider impact of their actions, encouraging initiatives that benefit both the organization and society. This approach boosts employee engagement, drives innovation, and builds trust, as individuals connect with a purpose beyond profit.

2. Objectives

- To explore the Bhagavad Gita's teachings as a foundation for Self-transcendence.
- To highlight various sustainable leadership practices in the context of teachings of Bhagavad Gita.
- To explore how self-transcendence and sustainable leadership, as advocated by Indian philosophers, can create a sustainable and values-driven organization.

3. Self-Transcendence

Self-transcendence is the multifaceted concept encompassing the ability to rise beyond the ego and limited self to realize one's unity with a higher, universal consciousness or divine reality. It involves overcoming the material and psychological attachments that bind individuals to the illusion of separateness.

3.1 Definitions of Self-Transcendence by Prominent Indian Philosophers

Swami Vivekananda emphasized self-transcendence as the realization of one's true nature beyond the ego or the physical self. According to him, self-transcendence occurs through the realization that the individual soul (Atman) is one with the universal consciousness (Brahman). The path to this realization involves renouncing attachment to the material world and engaging in selfless action (karma yoga), devotion (bhakti yoga), and knowledge (jnana yoga).

Adi Shankaracharya articulated self-transcendence through the realization of non-duality (Advaita). According to him, self-transcendence is the realization that the individual self (Atman) is not separate from the ultimate reality, Brahman. The ego and the material world are illusions (Maya), and liberation (moksha) is achieved by recognizing the oneness of Atman and Brahman, thus transcending the dualities of existence.

Ramana Maharshi's approach to self-transcendence was through the practice of atma vichara or self-inquiry, where one continuously questions the nature of the "I" or ego. He taught that by investigating the true nature of the self, individuals could transcend their limited ego identity

and realize the pure, infinite consciousness that underlies all existence, referred to as the Self or Atman. As described in Bhagavad Gita, it entails that when a person, through self-discipline and focus, rises above attachment to the physical body. He no longer attributes his actions to his own abilities, nor

does he force his senses to follow the whims of the ego. In this state of supreme ecstasy, he (yogi) is aware of both the Spirit within and the world around him but remains detached from the outcomes of his actions (Figure 1).

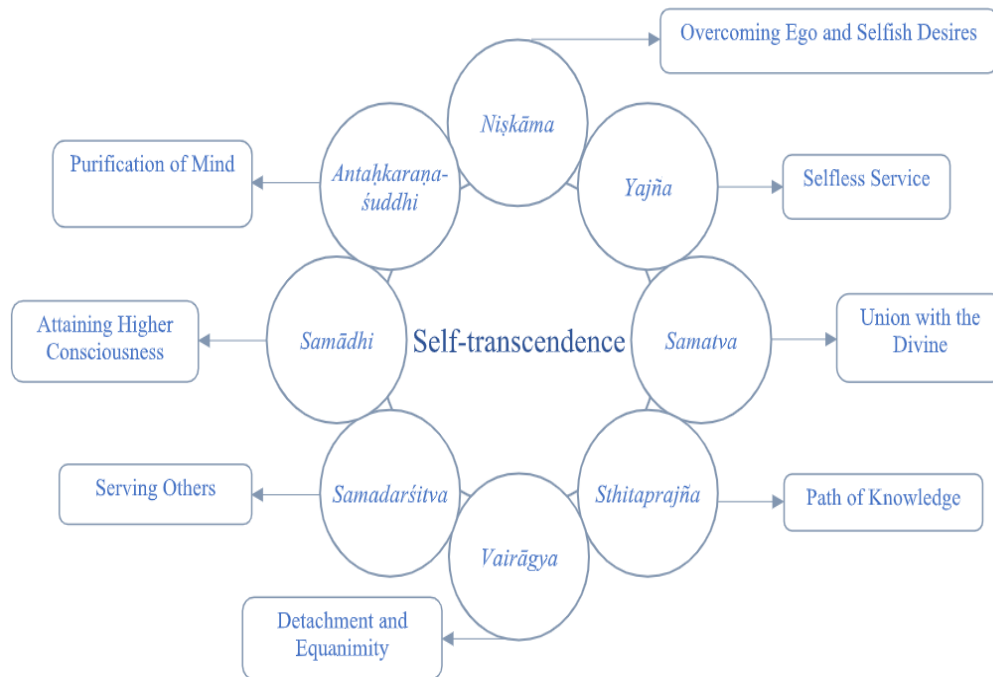


Figure 1 Self-Transcendence Concepts Drawn from Bhagavad Gita (Researcher's Own Work)

Self-transcendence, in terms of Gita incorporates:

- Overcoming Ego and Selfish Desires (Karma Yoga)
- Selfless Service (Karma Yoga)
- Purification of Mind (Karma Yoga)
- Union with the Divine (Bhakti Yoga)
- Path of Knowledge (Jnana Yoga)
- Detachment and Equanimity (Jnana Yoga)
- Serving Others (Jnana Yoga)
- Attaining Higher Consciousness (Dhyana Yoga)

The Gita imparts the wisdom of attaining supreme fulfilment through worldly actions by carrying out one's duties in every situation while striving for spiritual growth. It emphasizes that all actions and their outcomes are inherently material. However, when performed selflessly, these actions help purify the mind, making it receptive to self-knowledge,

which is the sole path to liberation that describes freedom from all the limitations. The Gita reminds us to keep our focus on the ultimate goal beyond personal gain. It also reveals the true nature of the Self, guiding us to face life's challenges with steady composure. It encourages the cultivation of purity and truthfulness (sattva-guna), fulfilling one's duties with detachment and sacrifice (yajna), and dedicating all actions for the welfare of the world (lokasamgraham as mentioned in 3.20 and 3.25). These principles encourage a culture of integrity, selfless service, and a commitment to sustainable growth. Individuals, who embody these values foster an organizational environment that is resilient, adaptive, and oriented towards the well-being of both people and the planet. Thus, self-transcendence is being considered as the root for sustainable leadership that drives the organization towards long-term success and sustainability.

4. Sustainable Leadership

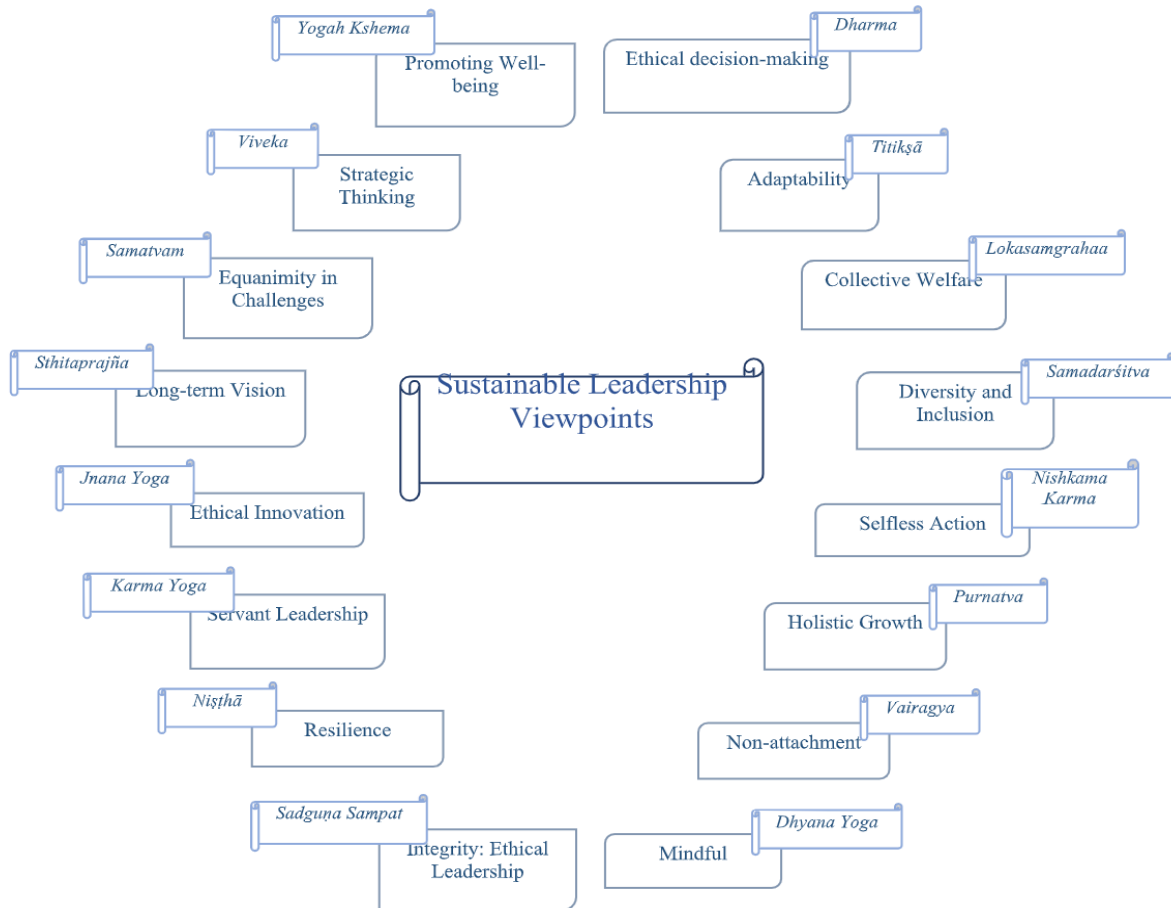


Figure 2 Sustainable Leadership Viewpoints Drawn from Bhagavad Gita (Researcher's own work)

The Gita beautifully amplifies the idea that sustainable leadership can be acknowledged as complying with the principles of long-term well-being, ethical conduct, and collective welfare, both for the organization and the whole environment. Sustainable leaders outweigh personal desires and ego-driven motives, aligning their actions with universal values such as environmental preservation, ethical responsibility, and social justice through self-transcendence. Some fundamental thoughts on sustainable leadership inspired by the Gita by renowned Indian philosophers:

Swami Vivekananda accentuated that true leadership relies on altruism and service to others which reflects the principles of nishkama karma. He

explicated that sustainable leadership must be appeared from an understanding of the uniformity of all beings and the interconnectedness of life. Leaders must perform for the greater good, instead of just for an individual or corporate gain. His teachings on karma yoga encourage the idea that action should be undertaken with a sense of responsibility toward future generations and the planet.

Jiddu Krishnamurti underscored the significance of self-recognition and annihilation of the ego in effective leadership. According to him, sustainable leadership involves self-transformation where leaders acquire a more holistic view of life and release themselves from the constraints of being egoistic. He reckoned that leaders could make

genuine decisions in the utmost interest of the planet as well as the mankind, only by transcending the self. **Sri Aurobindo** beliefs laid emphasis on the evolution of consciousness on leadership. According to him, leaders should strive for a higher and spiritual consciousness to make firm decisions foresightedly and with an immerse understanding of the interconnectedness of the being. Aurobindo's teachings proposed that leaders must focus on the long-term welfare of the planet and society, and rise above material concerns and ego. Consequently, Sustainable leadership is more than just ecological stewardship; if viewed through the lens of the Bhagavad Gita and Indian philosophers, it is a holistic approach that integrates ethical responsibility, self-transcendence, and collective welfare. Leading by the tenets of Gita, leaders pay attention to long-term societal along with environmental sustainability, and make decisions that are beneficial for the present as well as for future generations. On that account, this framework proffers an everlasting inspiration for managing

today's global sustainability challenges.

4.1 Sustainable leadership viewpoints influenced by Bhagavad Gita

In a nutshell, the above chart links numerous aspects of sustainable leadership with the insightful spiritual teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, highlighting how spiritual wisdom can manifest sustainable leadership in various facets of environmental along with organizational sustainability.

Sustainable Leaders: Embracing Ethical Practices

Sustainable leaders guide their organizations toward long-term welfare while incorporating spiritual values, stabilizing self-development with both societal and environmental responsibilities. They focus on the collective well-being, in place of personal ambition or profit. Besides, they lead from a place of self-transcendence and higher consciousness, which indicates ethical practices.

The Gita underlines numerous indispensable attributes for sustainable leaders (Figure 3):



Figure 3 Sustainable Leader's Qualities drawn from Bhagavad Gita (Researcher's own work)

These qualities prepare sustainable leaders to serve the organization ethically and fostering long-term growth that benefit future generations while ensuring alignment with sustainable goals.

5. Organizational Sustainability

The Bhagavad Gita can be viewed as a powerful tool

for organizational sustainability by emphasizing self-transcendence and sustainable leadership. This journey begins with self-awareness and culminates in living our deepest values for the common good at personal, team, and organizational levels. The Gita starts with self-knowledge, understanding our true

Self, which remains unaffected by the ego's demands. The spirituality of the Gita is deeply rooted in ethical values, insisting that there can be no spiritual progress without harmony between our thoughts (vichara) and actions (achara). Rooted in the Gita's wisdom, sustainable leaders can cultivate the welfare of society and the environment, ethical conduct, and transcending personal desires and ego to focus on universal values that are essential for sustainable legacy.

Nishkama Karma: The Gita's concept of nishkama karma (selfless action) is central to sustainable organization. In Chapter 2, Verse 47 (Karmany vadhikaraste ma phaleshu kadachana), Krishna guides Arjuna to perform his duties free from attachment to the outcomes. For leaders, this refers giving preference to the welfare of the workplace as well as its people over personal benefits. By practicing nishkama karma, leaders transform the organization into one that appreciates collective growth over individual pursuits and give rise to a culture of selflessness, determination and dedication.

Samatvam: The Gita emphasizes equanimity (samatvam) as a crucial feature for leaders for sustainable organization. In Chapter 2, Verse 48 (Yogasthah kuru karmani), Krishna advises Arjuna to remain stable in success and failure. Leaders embodying this principle serve as role models who remain uninfluenced by external fluctuations, and they can deal obstacles with tranquillity. This inner perseverance empowers employees to maintain focus, and fosters a workplace culture that can adapt to change and uncertainty.

Dharma: The Gita outlines dharma (righteous duty) as the essence of sustainable leadership. In Chapter 3, Verse 21 (Yad yad ācarati śreṣṭhas), Krishna mentions, "Whatever actions a great person performs, others follow." Leaders who perform duties according to their svadharma (one's unique duty) maintain ethical standards and also motivate others to do the same. They prioritize ethical behaviour and moral integrity that becomes the cornerstone of a sustainable organization, assuring that actions align with values like honesty, fairness, and compassion.

Lokasamgraha: The Gita promotes lokasamgraha (the welfare of the world) in Chapter 3, Verse 20. Leaders foster a spirit of teamwork and unity within the organization when they act for social welfare. By implementing the qualities of a karma yogi (one who acts selflessly for collective benefit), leaders can guide the organization towards attaining higher sustainable goals, ensuring its success is spiritual and moral, not just material. Conclusively, the Gita recommends sustainable leaders to practice self-transcendence, ethical action, equanimity, and selfless service. When they apply these spiritual principles in their leadership practices, they can inspire a sustainable organizational that ensures growth, oneness, and a values-driven culture. This modification connects the organization with a deeper purpose, making it resilient, ethical, and fulfilling for everyone.

6. Highlighting Existing Evidence and Literature Survey

- **Goyal et al. (2024)** examined "Investigating the Role of Sustainable Leadership in Driving Organizational Sustainability." He investigated the connection between sustainable leadership practices and organizational sustainability, and brought forth that leaders play a vital role in promoting a values-driven culture along with carrying out strategies that prioritize long-term environmental, social, and economic goals. The research pointed out key attributes of sustainable leadership like ethical decision-making, long-term vision, and adaptability. These traits aided leaders to align organizational goals with sustainability principles, fostering a balance between profitability and responsibility. Additionally, organizations could achieve resilience, stakeholder trust, and a competitive advantage through implementing sustainable leadership, eventually driving comprehensive sustainability efforts.
- **Sharma & Garg (2022)** studied "Ethical Principles of the Bhagavad Gita for Sustainable Leadership." They examined the

ancient text's relevance to contemporary leadership, specifically in the context of sustainability. Using a hermeneutic approach, the study found key principles from the Gita, including mind management, self-management, duty management, and relationship management. These principles highlighted solutions like self-awareness, ethical action, and the importance of duty to ordinary organizational constraints such as disputes, low productivity, and demotivation. Furthermore, it inspired leaders to foster long-term organizational success while benefiting society and the environment.

- **Widodo & Suryosukmono (2021)** examined "Spiritual Leadership, Workplace Spirituality, and their effects on Meaningful Work: Self-transcendence as a mediator role." They explored the relationship between spiritual leadership, workplace spirituality, and self-transcendence. They emphasized the impact of spiritual leadership on self-transcendence, which in turn influenced the meaningfulness of work. Additionally, they highlighted the favourable effects of spiritual leadership and workplace spirituality on employees' attitudes and organizational performance, where self-transcendence playing as a mediator.
- **Dhiman (2019)** investigated "Bhagavad Gita and Leadership: A Catalyst for Organizational Transformation." He explored how the Bhagavad Gita's teachings could be implemented to contemporary leadership practices by emphasizing self-mastery, self-knowledge, and ethical conduct as necessary qualities for leaders. The Gita recommended selfless service, equanimity, and a duty-bound approach to leadership, highlighting how these principles could harmonize personal as well as organizational goals. The text also provided insights for leaders, suggesting that true leadership involved managing oneself effectively before leading others.
- **Dhiman (2019)** carried out "Managing by Bhagavad Gita." This book integrated the timeless teachings of the Bhagavad Gita with modern management practices. It mentioned Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Bhakti Yoga, advising action with detachment to outcomes, knowledge-driven leadership, and devotion in professional conduct. Key management principles acquired from the Gita including purpose-driven performance, equanimity, and self-mastery. The text also highlighted how the Gita's teachings could enhance business performance, stress management, and ethical leadership. Moreover, leaders could stimulate holistic well-being and attain substantial performance during Industry 4.0 by the alignment of personal values with organizational objectives.
- **Mukherjee (2017)** studied "Bhagavad Gita: The Key Source of Modern Management." He explored how the Bhagavad Gita impacted modern management by emphasizing self-knowledge, duty, and inner peace which is significant for effective leadership. He showed how the Gita's teachings have encouraged leaders by suggesting self-discipline, ethical behaviour, and spiritual wisdom. These principles applied to contemporary management practices that enhanced leadership effectiveness, resulting organizational transformation. The Gita's guidance on integrating thought and action, maintaining ethical standards, and achieving inner fulfilment highlighted a way to promote personal and organizational growth. Overall, the paper positioned the Gita as a key source for developing transformative leadership and management strategies.

Conclusion

The Bhagavad Gita presents an insightful framework for self-transcendence and sustainable leadership that can drive meaningful organizational sustainability. It guides sustainable leaders to master

themselves, act selflessly and with integrity to inspire others. By applying principles like ‘nishkama karma’ (selfless action), ‘samatvam’ (equanimity), and ‘dharma’ (righteous duty), the Gita inspires sustainable leaders to prioritize the collective well-being over personal gains. The text fosters a culture rooted in ethical values and spiritual growth, and emphasizes the significance of aligning actions with a higher purpose. As articulated by the Gita, self-transcendence in sustainable leadership involves overcoming the ego and adopting attributes like humility, self-control, and the ability to endure life’s challenges with steady composure. Leaders who inculcate such qualities can create a sustainable environment where employees feel valued, united, and motivated contributing to sustainable organizational goals. The Gita’s focus on ‘Lokasamgraha’ (the welfare of the world) encourages sustainable leaders to serve not just their organizations, but also society as a whole. Incorporating the Gita’s teachings into sustainable leadership practices, mutate a transformative workplace culture that is resilient, ethical, and dedicated to collective growth. By exercising spiritual wisdom, leaders can inspire their teams to pursue excellence, resilience, and work with a sense of shared purpose. In this way, the Gita serves as a timeless guide, showing how self-transcendence and sustainable leadership can drive not just organizational sustainability, but also environmental as well as societal welfare.

Future Scope

Future researchers can lay emphasis on developing sustainable leadership training programs based on the Bhagavad Gita’s teachings and assessing their impact on team dynamics, employee motivation, and job satisfaction. Cross-cultural studies could explore the Gita’s principles in diverse organizational settings. Additionally, the Gita’s insights could inform ethical decision-making frameworks, addressing issues like corporate social responsibility, diversity, and inclusion, contributing to organizational transformation.

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