



Embracing Diversity: The Bhagavad Geeta Way

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Abstract

The globalisation, aided by communication technology facilitating connections across national boundaries, has made the phenomenon of diversity ever more relevant and proximal for organisations. The conversation has progressed from 'Mangement' to 'Acceptance' of diversity. Through this brief review of the message contained in the Bhagavad Geeta³, we argue that this ancient Indian discourse goes a step further and calls for 'Embracing' the diversity through the realisation of the underlying oneness.

Key-words: Diversity, Equality, Oneness, Sattvika Vision, the Self

Introduction: -

Diversity is nature's way of enhancing vitality. Some examples-

- In our genome, diversity enhances disease resistance, adaptability and therefore vitality.
- Diversity in eco-systems, sustains it.
- Diversity in food is essential for nutritional balance.

In an organisational context-

Diversity:- refers to the presence and participation of individuals with varying backgrounds and perspectives, including those who have been traditionally underrepresented(Boyles, 2023). The differentiating factors could be real or perceived physical or socio-cultural differences (Arsel et al., 2022).

Equity: - is fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups.(Minow, 2021).

Inclusion: -refers to creating a culture that fosters belonging and incorporation of diverse groups and is usually operationalized as opposition to exclusion or marginalization.(Arsel et al., 2022).

Research on organisational outcomes have produced mixed findings. Although certain types of diversity appear to be beneficial, studies focused on race and gender have demonstrated both positive and negative outcomes(Ely & Thomas, 2001). Cochran (2024) lists the benefits cited in the literature as enhanced creativity (as determined by higher quality, more effective, and more feasible ideas), increased sales revenue, more customers, greater market share, and greater relative profits etc. On the other hand, Shore et al. (2009) reported that the number of studies reporting positive and negative outcomes of race and ethnicity diversity on

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³ The Divine Song- One of the most prominent of the ancient Indian scriptures, it is a discourse on goal of life and right way to pursue the same, in a war setting. It is also a part of the trinity of the texts (Prasthanas) forming the core literature of the orthodox school of Advaita Vedanta, of Indian Philosophy.

outcomes of performance, process and affect/attitude, were equal. However, the number of null findings were more than the positive and negative findings put together.

While various finer nuances about the relationship between diversity and organisation outcomes continue to be discovered, we argue that diversity is inevitable, especially in a country like India with, for example, 22 officially recognised languages or 8 major religions amongst the factors establishing heterogeneity. Researchers have called for the term 'Diversity Management, to 'Acceptance of Diversity' (Marques et al., 2024). We argue that India has a rich heritage of 'Embracing Diversity'. We go on to interpret select Bhagavad Geeta verses in the context of DEI, in the next section.

Exegesis

The Bhagavada Geeta (and Advaita Vedanta⁴) approaches the subject from a different perspective. Here instead of reconciling differences, we are exhorted to realise the 'Highest Common Factor', i.e. the oneness of all existence. It is stated that underlying all apparent diversity, is one, existence, consciousness and bliss. The metaphors given in Advaita to elaborate this further are-

- As water is the underlying reality of individual waves in an ocean.
- As clay is the reality of pots of different shapes, sizes and colours.
- As gold is the underlying reality of which, necklace, ring or bracelets are different manifestation.

A person of realisation sees this underlying reality underneath all apparent diversity and knows, that there is no one or nothing that is 'other' than his self. S/he therefore, has nothing to fear or be apprehensive of.

This realisation, therefore, works at the most fundamental level i.e. the fear of the unknown, which, in the opinion of the authors, is the biggest barrier to embracing diversity.

However, we must also underline that embracing diversity is not merely negating/denying it. In Advaita the acceptance of transactional reality (Vyavaharic satya) is also accepted and the wise are ordained to work in the transactional world in the same way as those who are yet to attain spiritual realisation-but for the welfare of all. (Bh.Geeta 3.25,3.26)

With this background, We look at the 4 select Bhagavad Geeta verses, which tell us what is the vision of an evolved person, in dealing with diversity, and their interpretation in the context of organisation.

ये यथा मां प्रपद्यन्ते तांस्तथैव भजाम्यहम्।
मम वर्त्मानुवर्तन्ते मनुष्याः पार्थ सर्वशः॥4.11॥

According to the manner in which they approach Me, I favour them in that very manner. O son of Partha, human beings follow My path in every way.(Gambhirananda, n.d.)

In an organisation, everyone is serving the same organisational goal, even if their methods and opinions are diverse. An appreciation of 'all roads lead to Rome' implies acceptance of diversity in approaches and yet the commonality of the purpose. This viewpoint helps create a conducive environment in embracing diversity through equity.

⁴ One of the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy.

सर्वभूतस्थमात्मानं सर्वभूतानि चात्मनि।

ईक्षते योगयुक्तात्मा सर्वत्र समदर्शनः॥6.29॥

One who has his mind Self-absorbed through Yoga, and who has the vision of sameness everywhere, sees this Self existing in everything, and everything in his Self. (Gambhirananda, n.d.)

With reference to the organisation, an equal vision would entail the realisation that the diversity of background etc has no impact on an individual's responsibilities and obligations towards the common organisational goals. It, therefore, would be of no practical value to discriminate or afford privileges based on backgrounds or diverse characteristics. The wise one sees the same existence (organisation) as the underlying purpose through all positions and processes.

मत्तः परतरं नान्यत्किञ्चिदस्ति धनञ्जय।

मयि सर्वमिदं प्रोतं सूत्रे मणिगणा इव॥7.7॥

Here exists nothing beyond Me, O Dhananjaya; all this is strung on Me just as the groups of pearls on a string. (Sankaranarayan, n.d.)

The supreme Self is the ultimate cause of the universe and holds all things and beings as a thread holds the beads of a string together. Applying the same macro vision to the microcosm of the organisation, one needs to realise that all different beads are held together by one common cause i.e. the organisation. Thus while the individuality is accepted, the commonality is stressed upon.

सर्वभूतेषु येनैकं भावमव्ययमीक्षते।

अविभक्तं विभक्तेषु तज्ज्ञानं विद्धि सात्त्विकम्॥18.20॥

That by which one sees the one indestructible reality in all beings, undivided in the divided, know that 'knowledge' as SATTVIC (or Sattvika-Pure). (Chinmayananda, 2008)

Sattvika vision unites and creates harmony. It enables one to perceive the importance of each part as well as the whole. In contrast, a rajasika (passionate) vision perceives differences to be absolute reality and leads to groupism, quarrels and disharmony. A tamasika vision is the lowest as it leads to the perception of part as a whole. (Tejomayananda, 2018)

In an organisational context, a sattvika vision would see unity (of purpose) in the diversity of backgrounds. A rajasika vision would lead to groupism and divisions. A tamasika vision would lead to considering departmental/ team/individual goals as absolute, without consideration to whether or not they contribute to organisational goals.

This offers a very useful metric to align our vision against, to ensure that we stay the right course.

Conclusion:-

The Geeta exhorts us to see beyond the superficial differences of race, ethnicity, physical abilities, personal orientations and other such differentiating factors. This perspective doesn't negate our unique characteristics; rather, it enriches our interactions by adding a layer of profound spiritual awareness of the substratum which holds everything together.

In the words of the Gita, it's about seeing the oneness and unity in the apparent diversity, it is about realizing that while we may tread different paths, our destination – and our true nature – is ultimately the same. (Ramsaran, n.d.)

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