Featured Publication
by Harsh Verma
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The Avatar Way of Leadership: Leadership for the 21st Century from Rama, Krishna, and Draupadi

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Debra DeRuyver, ILA Staff: Why write the book?

Harsh Verma: The book was written to fill a gap in leadership literature in India. Across the world different countries are delving into their own culture and heritage in order to adjust with the present while efforts in this direction have been inadequate in India. There is some amount of indigenous research but most management textbooks in India are either the same as those in western universities or heavily dependent on them.

Very few Indian writers have actually made efforts to understand and imbibe the values and lessons of their own cultural wisdom. Those who have done so have not really looked into the most popular icons of Indian heritage and have focused on obtuse philosophical concepts that are beyond the understanding of many Indians. The icons/archetypes that I have used are widely known across the Indian spectrum and have a commanding influence on the Indian psyche even today.

Where does the book fit in with leadership literature in India?

Contemporary Indian leadership literature can be broadly classified into four groups:

1. Trait based theories derived from studies of contemporary leadership
2. Philosophical treatises based on wisdom of Hindu philosophy
3. Models derived from Indian social institutions
4. Biographical accounts of leaders

The first approach is the most popular one and can be found in academics as well as the popular media. Using the biographies of contemporary leaders they draw out several lessons for successful leadership. The philosophical approach on the other hand is involved in research that shows the importance of Indian philosophy for management. The sociological approach has a few adherents as well though little literature has actually been produced while the fourth is the domain of business journalists who have been involved in producing biographies of business leaders.

My book combines the first and second approaches and builds a model of leadership that is based on Indian sources.

When many think about leadership in India, they immediately think of Ghandhi or Nehru, why go back to Indian heroic leaders to study leadership?

Nehru and Gandhi were political leaders who played an important role in the freedom movement. The circumstances in which they functioned have utterly changed today. Further, the relevance of the two leaders is a matter of debate in India. Liberalization of the Indian economy is the result of utter disenchantment with Nehruvian socialism that kept India backward. Gandhi on the other hand never wanted industrialization and his example does not inspire Indians who want to seize opportunities and build world class organizations.

However mythical figures are grounded in the roots of Indian culture. They have a timeless appeal for all Indians and those affected by Indian culture. Both the young and old even today have resonance with cultural motifs of mythology. Westernization in India has not changed the Indian ethos substantially in the realm of ideas. In fact there is an increasing tendency to search for and evolve models that would be contemporary and yet apply to the Indian context. Thus an effort is being made to explore theories and evolve models that are based on principles tied to the Indian ethos and yet are attuned to the needs of contemporary times.

In this context reverting back to heroic figures from mythology makes excellent sense. This is especially because the life stories of such heroes closely parallel the concept of the hero's journey made famous by Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. Jung and Campbell postulated that the myths of all cultures speak about the hero's

journey wherein an individual left the safety of home to embark on a difficult task, endured a great deal of suffering and then returned to serve the community with the wisdom gained from his travels. These lessons were transmitted to the younger generation in the form of stories and the heroic figure was an expression of the heroic archetype deep within the collective unconscious of the race. Indian heroes in myths are the bearers of archetypal images that are deeply important to the Indian psyche. In order to influence people there is a need to use archetypal imagery to release the energies of the unconscious.

Why did you pick the three heroic leaders that you did?

That is a valid observation. Several Indians have asked me why I did not choose others from a pantheon of several score major and several thousand minor deities. Indian mythology is filled with divinities, avatars (incarnations of deities), heroes and other supernatural folk of significance. While the oft repeated figure of three hundred million deities is apocryphal, the number indeed exceeds a thousand.

The crucial issue here was that I made a distinction between individual heroism and heroic leadership that would involve leading a group. Leading a group involves interactions with the wider society. It is possible to be heroic in an individual level and yet fail to win popular support that is necessary to becoming a leader.

A study of the sacred literature of India revealed that the epics made a distinction between heroes and heroic leaders. They related the stories of many heroes and described their achievements. But the lives of heroic leaders were treated in much greater detail. Among such heroic leaders,

Rama and Krishna were prominent. The epics showed how heroic leaders like Rama and Krishna not only developed heroic character but were able to win the confidence of the people and lead them to victory. Rama and Krishna are the most popular avatars of Lord Vishnu who incarnated as a human being to rid the world of evil. They have the added importance of also being extremely loved deities. Therefore Rama and Krishna were chosen for the model.

Draupadi on the other hand is widely seen as a great heroine for women. A brave queen, she challenged the social order of her time—even her own husbands—while at the same time she was loyal to them. Most of the traditional women activists who worked for women's rights drew inspiration from her role. Moreover, most of the leadership literature has focused on either business or political leaders and has been predominantly male. I wanted to bring in women as well and also include social leadership in this work on leadership.

In your book you examine each leader along three dimensions: character, relationships, and strategies. Why these three?

I conducted an informal study as part of a project in which I was studying the leadership of non profit networks in India. I met the CEOs of several grassroot NGOs and asked them for their decision to join the network of a premier city based NGO vis a vis another. Instead of asking formal questions I asked them to narrate stories which in their opinion showed the leadership qualities of the leader. This was done in

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the case of two networks in north and south India. In both cases I found that the respondents started their description by referring to personal qualities of the leader followed by the actions taken by the leader to keep them within the network. However the main reason for remaining in the network over a long period of time was the fact that in both cases there were distinct advantages in terms of better access to funds and better relationships with the government.

Studying the interview transcripts I realized that the people were really focusing firstly on character and then on the way the leader conducted his/her relationships. Side by side they looked at the efficacy of the strategies of the leader to decide whether or not to stay in the network in the long run. That led me to build this model.

The first stage is building character. Character is important because it attracts people to a leader. Yet attraction is not enough since it is short term and ephemeral. Attraction must be converted into loyalty so that those who are attracted to a leader continue to be attached to him/her in the long run. Often heroes win goodwill but it steadily evaporates when they are unable to develop relationships with their followers. The way to do so is not through great deeds but through a careful attention on building long term relationships. This is the second stage of leadership development. It is through a careful nurturing of relationships that the leader is able to build trust with his followers. Having secured the loyalty of their followers, the lead-

ers must devise successful strategies for the people to follow so that they become successful against their opponents or circumstances. Both goodwill and loyalty are ultimately dependent on success in strategy.

Gleaning leadership lessons within each dimension that the heroic leader exemplified, you provide a brief explanation of the lesson and in most cases provide a contemporary example ranging from business leaders to environmentalists to social activists. Do you think these contemporary leaders were inspired by the heroic leaders of the past? How popular are stories of these heroic leaders in contemporary Indian culture?

Perhaps some of the contemporary leaders have indeed been inspired by the heroic figures. Indian leaders in Indian business magazines often refer to their abiding interest in spirituality while political leaders do hark to events in the epics to explain their policies.
It is also my belief that the study of heroic leadership has led to the emergence of capable leadership on one occasion.

A study of Indian history reveals that the quality of leadership in India died out in the Middle Ages. Indians acquiesced themselves to the rule of foreign invaders who invaded India and settled down here. Islamic rule began in the 13th century which was followed by colonial domination in the 18th century. The relative ease with which the British were able to establish their hegemony is only evidence of the pathetic leadership that was found in India.

However the later part of the 19th century and the early 20th centuries saw a sudden efflorescence of leadership that dazzled the entire world. The entire freedom movement was possible not because of one Nehru or Gandhi

but because of thousands of capable leaders across the country who inspired people to believe in themselves and march towards freedom and progress. What explains the sudden emergence of quality leadership?

One of the major reasons for this phenomenon was that the late 19th century saw the re-discovery of India's glorious past. Ancient texts were found and translated and new archeological excavations laid bare the rich tapestry of Indian culture down the ages. The cultural figures of the period capitalized on the interest in ancient culture and produced plays, stories and musicals that were based on the themes of ancient heroes. These cultural activities had a deep impact on the people and there were many who came to look upon these heroes as role models whose lives could be emulated by them. It was this renaissance that led to a sudden burst of capable leadership at every level of Indian society.

Conversely when India became independent the Indian government banned the mentioning of the cultural heroes in education. The result was that there began a slow slide which accelerated in later years. Today Indians loath their political leaders and the Machiavellian politics of the day.

Perhaps as a reaction there has been a revival of interest in traditional knowledge. In the nineteen sixties a famous sociologist lamented that the younger generation had not heard of the figures of the Mahabharata. That is not true today. The younger generation is well aware of the epics. The interest cuts across generations. More and more corporate figures and leaders from other walks of life are delving into Indian philosophy on the one hand while educational materials based on the heroes of the epics for children are abounding

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on the other. The trend is bound to grow in the coming years.

Do any of the leadership lessons drawn from the three heroic leaders contradict each other? How do they fit in the grand scheme of things?

The three heroic leaders represent three different personality archetypes with extremely different ways of attracting people and retaining their loyalty. Therefore the kind of leadership that comes from each figure is also different. On the surface the leadership lessons may seem contradictory but that is only if we try to fit everyone into a single framework. Given the diversity of people in this world even three archetypes is but a drop in the ocean. But, it is a starting point to show that different kinds of leaders are possible.

The ethos of Hinduism is that dharma or the right path cannot be the same for everyone. An action can be right in one set of circumstances but wrong in another. The fire that cooks one's food has to be kindled and strengthened but the fire that destroys one's home must be doused. Therefore, the three types of leaders represent a framework of leadership in which people must choose to act based on their choice. The path to leadership for someone who favors Rama will be very different from someone who favors Krishna or Draupadi. No one is wrong. Each must respond according to their choice.

How do you envision the book being used by people who are already in leadership positions or who have leadership aspirations?

My book is not just another attempt at role modeling or providing a hagiography for nationalism. It is my belief that these Avatars represent the wisdom of our sages in recognizing unique heroic personality archetypes present in the collective unconscious.

Jungian psychologists such as James Hillman have pointed out that the unconscious or the imaginal realm influences us subtly but powerfully making us choose and act in ways that we are not aware. Awareness of the archetypal forces that govern us can help us understand our motivations and enable us make choices more freely. Rama, Krishna and Draupadi are not just role models but powerful archetypal images in our collective unconscious. Whether or not they were historical figures they are a psychological reality for Indians. By becoming aware of them we can tap into these archetypal forces consciously and use them to develop our own leadership potential.

Let us take the example of some differences between Rama and Krishna and their implications for modern leaders. The role of vision has been held to be crucial to leadership. However vision can be expressed in different ways and Rama and Krishna had their own approaches to vision. In the case of Rama, vision was a function of relationships and was focused more at followers. It served to bind people towards a goal and lead them towards it. In the case of Krishna, vision was a function of strategy and was focused on his own role. It served to help him take the organization from humble beginnings to the status of a powerful state.

An example of the Krishna archetype in contemporary times was India's richest industrialist Dhirubhai Ambani the founder of Reliance industries. He was born as the son of a poor village school teacher and worked as a petrol pump attendant as well as a clerk. He then started his own trading business and moved into textiles.

He soon dazzled the whole of India by his range of fabrics and just when the textile industry was booming he moved into petrochemicals. He changed industrial sectors and very soon he had surpassed all other Indian businessmen in size, might and wealth. Ambani took the decision to go to the public to raise funds which responded enthusiastically. Even within the organization there was a great deal of awe in working for a miracle man like Ambani.

The modern archetypal representative of Rama was JRD Tata of the Tata family. The Tata family is a Zorastrian family of impeccable credentials and has been part of a long line of merchants with philanthropic interests. JRD was a person who promoted talented people irrespective of family and community ties which was unheard of in Indian industry. His sole aim was to raise the name of the Tatas and he enjoined upon his subordinates to do so in every way possible. They responded with enthusiasm and made the Tata group into a powerful behemoth that dwarfed other industrial houses until the arrival of the Ambanis. In an interview JRD actually confessed that his main role was to unite several disparate and independent professionals. He did not have the overarching Ambani vision but he realized his limitation and chose responsible subordinates who would further the interests of the Tatas.

The second major difference between Rama and Krishna is legacy. Rama focused on building institutions. Rama chose to go into exile not only to fulfill a father's vow but prevent damage to the institution of kingship. He was protecting and abiding by the principles on which it was based. Krishna's leadership on the other hand was more personality oriented. This kind of leadership is so enam-

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oured by strategy that it confuses personal achievements with institution building. All the stratagem of Krishna could not prevent the self destruction of the Yadava clan in his absence.

Coming back to the modern counterparts, JRD Tata was succeeded by his nephew Ratan Tata in an orderly system of succession. There were many hiccups in the transfer of power but JRD ensured that his successor was given the cooperation he needed. JRD ensured that his absence would not hurt the Tata group in nay way. Dhirubhai Ambani on the other hand never had a succession plan in place. When he died the market capitalization of Reliance Industries fell dramatically. He was succeeded by his elder son but within a year his two sons were involved in an acrimonious split. After long discussions during which over two million shareholders of Reliance waited with bated breath the Reliance empire was partitioned between the two brothers. Dhirubhai Ambani saw himself as the embodiment of the enterprise and failed to engage in institution building. The result was its partition after his death.

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Thus, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the archetype that influences them leaders can make conscious and appropriate choices.

At a later date I'd like to study whether these personality archetypes have significance for non Indian cultures as well. The question that I would like to answer is whether the archetypes of Rama and Krishna are valid for westerners as well. I see very obvious examples such as Richard Branson who seems to be

manifesting the archetype of Krishna down to the last detail.

Is there anything else about the book that you would like to mention?

My book is about heroic leadership but it does not paint a hagiographical image of the heroes – mythical or modern. In fact it brings out the weaknesses of both Rama and Krishna and shows how these weaknesses continue to have implications for the leaders of today. Thus there is no syrupy account of the 'perfect leader'.

Secondly, it is far more representative. All other studies assume male leadership to be the norm despite the changing gender composition of the Indian workforce. Further, the examples used in the book cross barriers of gender and sexuality. Along with this, the emphasis is not merely on business leadership but covers leaders in all sectors of society and all walks of life. Thus, the book is a celebration of the diversity of Indian leadership.

India is entering the psyche of westerners due to IT prowess and outsourcing on the one hand and the growing interest in the spirituality of the east. Liberalization of the Indian economy has seen American companies flocking to India and Indian companies are now becoming transnational themselves. This is an opportune time for scholars in other parts of the world to acquaint themselves with the Indian situation. This book would be especially useful for those scholars who want to understand the Indian psyche as well as familiarize themselves with the leaders of Indian corporate as well as social life.

Lastly I would also like to point out the trans Asian character of the Indian epics. Indians in the early centuries of Christian era spread Indian culture across east and west Asia. Indian influ-

ences continue to prevail in south east Asia where the Ramayana is the national epic of Thailand and Indonesia whose have adopted it as an integral part of their culture. Knowledge of the Indian epics not only gives an insight into Indian culture but helps one to understand other parts of Asian culture as well.

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