Gender and Communication in Bhagavad Gita - Organizing for Inclusivity.pdf

Jon P. Radwan

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jon_radwan/30/
Gender and Communication in the *Bhagavad Gita*: Organizing for Inclusivity

Jon Radwan, Ph.D.

Institute for Communication and Religion – Seton Hall University
Academy of Management 2019 – Boston, MA
Abstract

Twenty-first century research on sustainability and development advises organizations to work toward increased inclusivity and equality. Where modern theory stressed independence and autonomy, global communication and technology revolutions now require a holistic systems perspective stressing inter-dependence and balance. In particular, gendered exclusion patterns and misogyny have been identified as both ethically suspect and organizationally counter-productive. All religious traditions address gender relations, and despite patriarchal histories many wisdom traditions share valuable lessons on gender inclusivity. Within the Hindu tradition the Bhagavad Gita is a spiritual masterpiece with a profound message of unity, including both masculine and feminine manifestations of God. This presentation explores Speech as a feminine dimension of Krishna to yield organizational communication lessons that can help organizations become more inclusive.
Communication Ethics in the *Bhagavad Gita*

- **Ethical Communication** = fundamental organizational act → interpersonal network, holistic system

- **Ethos** -- As Instrumental Tactic (Greco-Roman)? No. As Habitus, mode of living (Hindu). Yes.
  - Let go of the fruits of action. “The idea that there is a goal . . . is wrong. We are the goal; we are always peace.” (Maharshi)
  - “what cannot be followed in our day-to-day practice cannot be called religion.” (Ghandi)

- **Scriptural Validity?** Words about God, The Word of God → *Bhagavad Gita* “Song of the Blessed One”
  - Ancient Misogynists? Avoid Selective, Decontextualized Reading
    - “Those who take refuge in me, Arjuna, even if they are born in evil wombs as women or laborers or servants . . .
    - also reach the supreme goal.” (9.32)
  - Ancient Authoritarians? Self-deprecating scripture undercuts Literal Reading and rigid enforcement
    - “As unnecessary as a well is to a village on the banks of a river, so unnecessary are all scriptures to someone who has seen the truth.” (2.46)
  - Ancient Sages – wisdom, enlightenment; successful long-term systems = sustainability. Two organizing dimensions:
    - **Horizontal:** Humans are . . . Embodied/Gendered Action, Enlightened Speech -- **Action as Worship**
    - **Vertical:** God is . . . ALL → **Speech as Feminine Manifestation of God**
Speech: Organizing as Embodied Action

- Humans are . . . Vedanta Philosophy posits 5 organs of action: hands, feet, speech, genitals, and bowels

- Arjuna the Warrior, Arjuna the Leader – Organizational Standards, Exemplary Leadership
  - “Whatever a great man does ordinary people will do; whatever standard he sets everyone else will follow” (3.21)
  - War as social and relational = horizontal
    - Physical engagement patterns, material/bodily effects, communication as contact

  - “Whatever you do, Arjuna, do it as an offering to me – whatever you say or eat or pray or enjoy or suffer. In this way you will be freed from all the results of your actions, good or harmful; . . .” (9.27-28)
  - Liberation. Any outcomes are not in your hands. This moment is.
    - “without concern for results perform the necessary action.” (3.17-21)

  - Right/Just/Ethical action and the Karmic Cycle
God Is . . . Speech as Feminine Power

• Divine Manifestations (ch. 10) -- Krishna is ALL/INFINITE
  • Arjuna is granted a vision of just “a few of my manifestations, the most glorious ones; for infinite are the forms in which I appear” (10.19).
    • the Self, gods, demi-gods, mountains, priests, generals, the ocean, sages, saints, demons, animals, wind, warriors, monsters, rivers, power
    • eternal and pure undifferentiated energy, power that is creative and destructive and everything in between.

• **ALL = Both/And.** Beyond dualities. **Masculine and Feminine, Creation and Destruction . . .**
  • “I am imperishable time; the Creator whose face is everywhere; death that devours all things; the source of all things to come of feminine powers, I am fame, wealth, speech, and memory, intelligence, loyalty, forgiveness (10.33-34).

• Faithful Speech – embodied relational performance (**Horizontal and Vertical**)
  • “Honoring the Gods, the priests, the teachers and sages, purity, non-violence, chastity, uprightness – all this is control of the body. Speaking the truth with kindness, honesty that causes no pain, and the recitation of scripture – this is control of speech. Serenity, gentleness, silence, benevolence, self-restraint, purity of being, compassion – this is control of the mind.” (17.14-17.16)

• Divine standard. **All components required.**
  • “[w]hen a sentence is used in order to make another understand, if it happens to be devoid of one or two or three among the qualities – truthfulness, agreeability, beneficialness, and non-hurtfulness –, then it is not austerity of speech” (Sankaracarya, 645).
Lessons: Ethical Communication, Feminine Power

- Ethical Communication is the basic organizing/unifying act. *Ethos* is a habit, not a tactic.
  - Unethical communication divides. Exclusion $\rightarrow$ demotivation $\rightarrow$ dissolution.
- Scripture is both human (culturally specific/limited) and divine (wise/infinite).
  - Despite limits, religions have created successful long-term social systems.
  - Strive for contextualized readings acknowledging both culture and God.
- The *Bhagavad Gita*: Two Organizational Dimensions
  - Horizontal: Human ↔ Human
    - Speech is embodied creative action, not ephemeral symbolic play. Lead by physical example.
  - Vertical: God is ALL. Both/And. Infinite unity beyond all dualities. Adopt divine standards.
    - Speech is a feminine power of God. Engagement, Partnership, Fertility, Growth.
- Spiritually enlightened speech unites horizontal and vertical dimensions – embodied relational performance
  - True, agreeable, beneficial, and does no harm. All components are necessary to make speech an act of worship.
- Inclusive Organizations commit to reality, truth, and mutual well-being.