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Gender and Communication in the *Bhagavad Gita*: Organizing for Inclusivity

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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**
 - Sophistry? Speech is **not** merely ephemeral and symbolic. Muscular. Waged. Living and Dying and . . .
- How? Worshipfully. Well. Skillfully. Faithfully. Divine standards = **vertical**
 - “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)
- Why? Duty. Enlightenment. Unity.
 - 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 → demotivation → 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.