

Lessons from the Bhagavad Gita are all around us: Evidence from India's Largest Farmers' Protest



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ABSTRACT: Generally, the farmers are assumed to carry out their obligations in the field. However, the nation has observed their presence on the highways during the passage of three farm-related statutes. After the struggle for more than a year, the farmers succeeded to get these laws revoked by the Government. Rather than being critical of farm bills/acts whether these were good or bad, the present study is an attempt to describe the glimpses of the Bhagavad Gita observed during the largest farm protest. It was observed that various lessons from the Gita comprising the karma-yoga, temporariness of happiness as well as grief and many more had a significant influence throughout the journey of the protest.

KEYWORDS: Farmers, Struggle, Karma-yoga and Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

India's farmers began a wave of agricultural demonstrations in the fall of 2020, against the farm laws 2020, that would become the country's longest and the most widespread since the 1950s. The uprising of the farmers began in Punjab in August 2020 and quickly expanded to other states in North India and beyond. As November came to a close, farmers converged on Delhi in a massive demonstration. At the city's outskirts, when they were halted, they set up massive protest camps. The farmers of India's rural areas rose in open revolt against the national government, notably in the northern regions of Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh (Lerche, 2021). Lerche (2021) also pointed out that underlying structural changes in agriculture and the wider economy include both ongoing transitions in the trajectory of agriculture that differ from the classic approach as well as the economic and political changes outside agriculture. Farmers have reason to assume that the government is siding with financial capital, international and domestic agribusiness, and merchant capital by enforcing these regulations, rather than looking out for the interests of farmers themselves. The present study attempts to describe the glimpses of the Bhagavad Gita observed throughout the journey of farmer protest.

The Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita, which was authored in about 1500 B.C. by a follower of another Indian god, eventually became widely read and revered across the country. A Krishna devotee intended for it to be part of the Mahabharata to prove that worship of Krishna was essential to comprehending the Vedic philosophy (Minor, 1986). Lord Krishna delineated several logical and insightful philosophical ideas, many of which are still pertinent in the modern era.

The Bhagavad Gita is referred as an ancient text that contains the solutions to every one of our issues. It was a book that many of the leaders of the fight for independence found to be inspirational, including Mahatma Gandhi, who regarded it to be a spiritual dictionary¹. The story in the Gita is important because the literal and symbolic meanings of the "psychological battlefield" lead us to the "mental battlefield," which is caused by conflicting emotions, unspoken fears, and a lack of a stable sense of identity. In the first few lines of The Gita, the conflict between "what is right" (dharma) and "what is duty" (kartavya), which has been going on since the beginning of time, is described (Dutta, 2017). Different researchers have highlighted the pertinence of the philosophical ideas of the Bhagavad Gita in various fields, more specifically administration, management and leadership, in the modern era (Singh, 2017; Sharma, 1999). Some of the major sayings from the Gita can be observed throughout the journey of the protest. A glimpse of the circumstance, in which the Gita was preached, was also observed during the protest. It was the responsibility of

Lessons from the Bhagavad Gita are all around us: Evidence from India's Largest Farmers' Protest

the police force to handle the situation at the place of protest considering the orders received from the higher authority. Many police officers belonged to the farmers' families. Thus, this situation corresponds to Arjuna's position, when Krishna preached the Gita, where his *Guru Dronacharya*, *Pitamaha Bheeshma* and his cousins and relatives were in front of him with whom he has to fight with. Both farmers as well the policemen were performing their duties.

The Karma Yoga

The idea of Karma Yoga is at the heart of the Indian way of thinking about work. It talks about how people and work are connected. In his conversation with Arjuna, Krishna talks about the importance of work and the right way to do it. He also says that you can only do well if you do it the right way. Because of this, Karma Yoga is sometimes called the "Science of Human Excellence" (Tenneti, 2021). Verse 47 in the 2nd chapter of the Gita talks about the Karmayoga:

*"karmany-evadhikaras te ma phaleshu kadachana
ma karma-phala-hetur bhur ma te sango'stvakarmani"*²

According to *Karmayoga*, one must give up the attachment to the action and its results. So, one's *Svadharm*a is the action he or she takes; the fruit or result is not his or her business. The Gita said that Karma is natural, that it is part of what it means to be human, and that everyone has to work (Bhattacharjee, 2021; Tenneti, 2021). The situation also indicated the application of verse 44th of chapter 2nd:

*"matra-sparshas tu kaunteya shitoshna-sukha-dukha-dah
agamapayino 'nityas tans-titikshava bhārata"*³

As per the verse the five sensory organs in the human body—sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing—bring about feelings of pleasure and pain when they come into contact with their respective perceptual targets. You won't have to deal with any of these feelings forever. Similar to the seasons, they come and go. Water that is pleasant to the touch in the summer can be a source of great discomfort in the depths of winter. Happiness and sadness are similarly fleeting, as they are both based on sensory perceptions. If we give in to their influence, we will swing wildly from one extreme to the other. A discriminating person trains themselves not to be bothered by positive and negative emotions³. In this context, the farmers remained on the *Tikri Border* (the place of protest) for more than one year and more than 700 farmers lost their lives during this duration⁴.

Despite various environmental as well as political challenges, they hold their determination to be with their fellows in the protest during the different weather conditions including summer, winter and monsoon as well. Apart from that, several interviews with farmers, during the protest, revealed that the farmers were highly determined to be in protest till the revoke of those laws. The largest protest that has remained for more than a year seems to resemble the Karma yoga that suggests focusing on *karma* rather than on its *result*.

Relevance of the Gita in administration, leadership and management of the protest

It is believed that it was the leadership of *Lord Krishna* that led to the victory of the *Pandavas* over the *Kauravas*. Thus the role of good leadership becomes indispensable to get success in every sector. The call to be a leader applies to everything that people do. No matter how big or small a group is or what kind of organization it is, from personal to professional, everyone does some kind of balancing act and keeps things running smoothly. To meet the different needs of short-term and long-term goals, it takes insight, knowledge, and dogmatism to act and stay in balance. The follower is the most important part of a leader-follower relationship, and, surprisingly, followers are always judging their leaders. Beyond the logic vs. ethics vs. emotions debate, the most important thing is for leaders to understand the needs of the people they are trying to convince. Leaders must choose the right mix of logic, ethics, and emotional cues so that they know exactly what hits the bull's eye. When all three ways of persuasion are used together in the right way, a leader has a stronger effect on the people who follow them. Focusing on only one of the modes and carrying out only one agenda creates chaos, and chaos makes the audience upset (Tripathi et al., 2020).

The protests against the three agricultural laws approved in September 2020 began in Punjab but quickly expanded to neighboring Haryana and parts of Uttar Pradesh. However, it only came to the attention of the country on November 26, 2020, when farmers marched to the Delhi gates. Many expected them to return after filing their complaint, but instead, they established a type of township, braving the freezing winter and the scorching summer. Despite the fact that there were several unions and ideologies involved in the agitation, there was a method to the chaos (Sharma, 2021). Apart from that, the entry of any political leader or party was common in the previous demonstrations of the farmers. Despite the political affiliation of some farmer unions, this protest reiterated the stand of farmers to keep the protest apolitical, as quoted by Darshan Pal, a farmer leader, "The support of political parties and leaders to this movement is welcomed, but in no case, the Samyukt Kisan Morcha's (SKM) stage will be allowed for the political leaders." (Mohan, 2021; Sethi, 2020).

Lessons from the Bhagavad Gita are all around us: Evidence from India's Largest Farmers' Protest

Another incident highlighting the relevance of good leadership was observed during the protest when the farmers were "Khalistanis" and "terrorists" throughout the duration of the demonstration to unstable it, as the farmers believed. During his address at the 'Mahapanchayat' in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, the 'Farmer leader' Rakesh Tikait was seen hoisting the chant 'Allahu Akbar.' He asserted that statements like this were being made throughout the administration of his father. In addition, he yelled out chants that said "Har Har Mahadev." Tikait predicted that slogans of this nature would continue to be raised, and that "they" would make an effort to split them, while anti-farm legislation leaders would make an effort to bring them together⁵.

The protest was also marred by various misinformation, false narratives, and propaganda. The Quint's Webqoof, a fact checker organisation, noticed that several false claims came from verified quarters such as political parties, leaders and mainstream media. Between October 2020 and October 2021, The Quint's WebQoof disproved 101 pieces of disinformation and discovered that the most prominent storyline in the items examined was the targeting of as well as the unrelated visuals linked to farmers' protests (see table 1 for more details) (Chandra and Chandra, 2021).

Table 1: Narratives around the farmers' protest

| Sr. No. | Narratives | Percentage |
|---------|--|------------|
| 1. | Targeting/Discrediting Farmers | 39.6 |
| 2. | Unrelated visuals linked to farmers' protest | 26.7 |
| 3. | Targeting the Government/BJP/ Govt Authorities | 7.92 |
| 4. | Politicians supporting farm laws | 5.94 |
| 5. | Politicians opposing govt/ supporting farmers | 4.95 |
| 6. | Corporate angle | 2.97 |
| 7. | Farm laws will help farmers | 0.99 |

Source: Chandra and Chandra, 2021

When false information was spreading everywhere about the protest farmers did not lose their hearts but they stood to combat that situation. As the 11th verse of the 2nd chapter illustrated

"Shri bhagavan uvacha

Ashochyan-anvashochas-tvam prajna-vadansh cha bhashase

*Gatasun-agatasunsh- cha nanushochanti panditah"*⁶

That no possible reason justifies lamentation. Wise Pundits lament neither for the living nor the deceased. Similarly, the farmers boycotted the media persons who were not presenting the true picture of their issues as per the belief of farmers⁶. The farmers launched their own newspaper titled "Trolley Times" in order to deal with the spread of false information (Yadav, 2020). In addition, farmers holding signs that say "Godi Media, Go Back" or "Godi Media Not Allowed" are hard to miss at the Singhu border. When someone from the media tries to talk to them or do an interview, the protesting farmers don't hesitate to ask, "You're not from Godi media, right?" People use the term "Godi Media" to talk about TV channels that are seen as speaking for the ruling party (Ara, 2020).

As a result of what happened on January 26th, 2021, farmer organisations faced moral pressure, which pushed the protest into retreat. On January 26, a planned tractor march deviated from its designated route, leaving a trail of anarchy in Delhi on Republic Day, marking a violent turn in the over two-month-long peaceful farmers' protest that had been organised at various borders of the national capital by various farmers. Before approaching the Red Fort complex, the protesting farmers engaged in violent confrontations with the police destroyed barriers and damaged police cars. After two of the farmer unions called off their protest due to the violence, serious cracks have been developed in the ranks of the remaining farmer unions⁷. The incident also hit the morale of the farmers who were associated with the protest and it was assumed to be the end of the protest. The dishonor was on the side of the farmers because of that incident of violence. As the 34th and 35th verse of the 2nd chapter of the Gita referred that respectable people

"akirtim chapi bhutani

kathayishyanti te 'vyayam

sambhavitasya chakirtir

*maranad atirchayate"*⁸

(Verse 34th Chapter 2nd)

place a high value on their reputations in the community. They value honor above life itself and will not tolerate any form of public shame.

*"bhayad ranad uparatam mansyante tvam maha-rathah yesham cha tvam bahu-mato bhutva yasyasi laghavam"*⁹

Lessons from the Bhagavad Gita are all around us: Evidence from India's Largest Farmers' Protest

(Verse 35th Chapter 2nd)

Furthermore, the people who believed in them will lose respect towards them. Rakesh Tikait, a Farmer Leader, stood in solidarity and asked to own the responsibility of the protest and decided to not leave the place. A video that showed Rakesh Tikait crying while declaring "they (the government) want to destroy farmers" spread throughout the states and gave new life to the protest (Lerche, 2021). As Tripathi et al. (2020) quoted that emotional cues should also be a tool for a good leader to persuade the followers, *Rakesh Tikait's* tears acted as the glue to the halted farm protest.

CONCLUSION

India evidenced the largest protest by the farmers against the farm laws introduced in 2020. The study aimed to describe the resemblance of the Bhagavad Gita throughout the period of the protest. It was observed that many lessons from the Gita seem relevant in the management of the protest. Especially, the implication of the Karmayoga, which emphasizes performing duties without being worried about the results, has been quite evident. Moreover, the glimpses of various other lessons about the temporary nature of happiness as well as grief and one should never lament the situation. The farmers remained in protest for more than a year without being affected by challenges created by the weather. Over 700 farmers lost their lives during the protest. Throughout the protest, farmers were quoted as Khalistanis and terrorists. They did not get support from the mainstream media. But they did not lose hope and finally, on 19th November 2021, the Prime Minister announced the revoke of these farm laws.

NOTES

1. "[Bhagavad Gita Quotes by Lord Krishna on Life Lessons & Success \(indiatimes.com\)](https://www.indiatimes.com)"
2. "[Chapter 2, Verse 47 – Bhagavad Gita, The Song of God – Swami Mukundananda \(holy-bhagavad-gita.org\)](https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org)"
3. "[Chapter 2, Verse 14 – Bhagavad Gita, The Song of God – Swami Mukundananda \(holy-bhagavad-gita.org\)](https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org)"
4. "[Watch | Tikri Border: 'We Have Not Gained Anything, We've Suffered Big Losses' \(thewire.in\)](https://www.thewire.in)"
5. "[Tikait chants 'Allah-u-Akbar', attracts Islamists disguised as farmers for Muzaffarnagar mahapanchayat \(hindupost.in\)](https://www.hindupost.in)"
6. "[Chapter 2, Verse 11 – Bhagavad Gita, The Song of God – Swami Mukundananda \(holy-bhagavad-gita.org\)](https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org)"
7. "[Timeline: How two months of peaceful farmer protests turned violent in Delhi on Jan 26 | India News, The Indian Express](https://www.indianexpress.com)"
8. "[Chapter 2, Verse 34 – Bhagavad Gita, The Song of God – Swami Mukundananda \(holy-bhagavad-gita.org\)](https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org)"
9. "[Chapter 2, Verse 35 – Bhagavad Gita, The Song of God – Swami Mukundananda \(holy-bhagavad-gita.org\)](https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org)"

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Lessons from the Bhagavad Gita are all around us: Evidence from India's Largest Farmers' Protest

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