Organizational Leadership - A Learning from the Indian History

By

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Abstract: *The future of a country is dependent to a very great extent on its leadership. An insight into the history reveals that empires have been built and disintegrated due to effective and weak leadership respectively (Rao, 1991). In the context of India, it is found that leadership is a very popular issue in this country and it is discussed often among people of different sections of the Indian society (Chhokar et al., 2008). Be it the political leaders, military leaders, or leaders in their respective careers; leadership has always attracted the Indian masses to throw their reactions. India has been the birthplace of many great leaders who established themselves as the global examples of leadership. This paper discusses a few such examples of great leaders in the history of India and identifies their specific traits or leadership styles which led them build great dynasties. In particular, the paper sheds light on the different leadership styles of the leaders of Mauryan and Maratha empires, and identifies the general characteristics of a good leader.*

Keyword: Indian History, Learning, Organisational Leadership

Introduction

Leadership is said to be one of the most discussed ideas in research yet it is also among the most elusive ones (Kusluvan, 2003; Ambrose, 2003; Bennis and Nanus, 1986 cited in English, 2011). Kouzes and Posner (1996) establish that there existed more than 225 definitions of leadership in literature by the end of the last century (Kouzes and Posner, 1996 cited in Qutob, 2013). In the recent past also, the concept of leadership has been defined by a number of experts and this has resulted in a variety of definitions of the term making it difficult to correctly conceptualize the term (Kusluvan, 2003). Even till date there is a lack of consensus upon the concept of leadership (Qutob, 2013). In spite of so many definitions of leadership, there seems to be gaps in both theory and practice of leadership (English, 2011). It is no exaggeration when Bass and Bass (2008) state that concepts and definitions of leadership are still evolving and expanding. They further assert that in the first several decades of the twentieth century, leadership was all about the leader's will and the followers' obedience however in present times, leadership has emerged as consulting and shared decision making.

As far as the history of the term 'leadership' is concerned, English (2011) asserts that the history of leadership thought in it is very complicated. Bass (1990) attracts attention to the irony that the term 'leader' has been in use since 1300s but the concept of leadership did not emerge until the 19th century (Bass, 1990 cited in Kusluvan, 2003). Rost (1991) also confirms that the word 'leader' was first used in the English language in 1300s and further adds that it has developed from the root word 'leden' which means 'to travel' or 'show the way.' Couto (2007) provides the location of its origin and claims that the concept of leadership had first emerged in the United States. The concept of leadership has developed starting with the traits theory in the early twentieth century, to the behavioral leadership theories, cognitive theory, and the full range leadership theory to the final emotional intelligence model of leadership (Qutob, 2013; English, 2011). Bass (1990) makes an effort to help the conceptualization of leadership by suggesting that there are four main paradigms that have been used to define leadership: leadership in terms of group, leadership in terms of power and influence, leadership in terms of traits, and leadership as a situational demand.

Objective of this paper

The paper aims at exploring the Indian history for examples of great leadership and identifying the specific traits and leadership styles of these leaders which led them to build great dynasties (organization). The paper takes into consideration the examples of great leaders of the Mauryan and Maratha Empires besides discussing in brief the Rajputs and others for the purpose.

Characteristics of a good leader

As discussed in the introduction section, the thought of leadership emerged initially in the form of trait theory which lays stress that leaders are born with certain traits or characteristics. Various experts as such provided their different opinions on what characteristics a good leader should possess. As it is the case with definition and concept of leadership that it is viewed differently by different individuals; similarly, due to difference in conceptualizations of leadership, there is no consensus about characteristics that a good leader must possess. Buckingham and Coffman (1999) for example, state that a good leader: must be able to manage change, have self-knowledge, have a clear vision and must establish plans for the same, must be able to inspire others, have the capability to take risks and set practices, must be able to manage diversity and maintain calm in all situations, must be result-oriented and share interpersonal sensitivity (Buckingham and Coffman, 1999 cited in Huber, 2010). As the result of a research conducted by Kouzes and Posner (1996), they established that an admired leader is honest, forward-looking, inspiring, competent, fair-minded, supportive, broad-minded, intelligent, ambitious, loyal, self-controlled and independent (Kouzes and Posner, 1996 cited in Haydon, 2007). However, the debate on leadership does not end here also and it is frequently argued whether leaders are born with such qualities or they are made. Adeleken (2007) concludes that the good leaders are those born with some desired qualities and on the basis of these qualities, they acquire the other desirable traits. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) however, question the whole idea of trait theory and claim that research has failed to confirm any strong relation between traits and leadership (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991 cited in Levi, 2011).

Popular leadership styles/ techniques through history

Every leader has a leadership style i.e. the approach or manner in which one provides direction, implements plans and motivates people (Hansen and Zenobia, 2011). Kurt Lewin, a popular management scientist had first worked on the leadership styles through a team of researchers. The study identifies three popular leadership styles which are still the most common ones: *autocratic* or authoritarian leadership style, *participative* or democratic leadership, and *laissez-faire* or delegative or free rein leadership (Iqbal, 2011). However, later several other leadership style classifications have also been provided by various other experts; some classify leadership as: transactional leadership and transformational leadership (Dwyer and Hopwood, 2011) while a few classify these as: charismatic leadership, pragmatic leadership and visionary leadership (Gill, 2006).

If one looks at the Indian history and explores the similarities and differences in their leadership traits, the leadership patterns and styles of great leaders can be identified. Shivaji, the founder of the Maratha Empire, for example, believed in being a friend to his team members and had filled the gaps between master and the subordinates' relationship. Shivaji discouraged any preferential treatment for himself and he ate, fought and slept alongside his comrades. He worked for not only his personal growth but also stimulated the growth of his team members (Sardesai, 2002). Shivaji's leadership thus depicts the features of participative or democratic leadership style. Akbar, the great Mughal emperor is considered as a pragmatic leader for he had understood the complexities of Indian society and politics very well. He realized the sensitiveness of the masses in India towards their religion, customs and beliefs and had thus abolished all discriminations based on religion (Chhokar et al., 2008). Akbar however was a charismatic leader as well. His personal qualities and appearance has been vividly described by many in the literature. One such description was provided by his own son Salim, later known as Jahangir, when he says, "*In his actions and movements he was not like the people of the world, and the Glory of God manifested itself in him*" (Salim, n.d. cited in Richards, 2001).

Leadership in Indian history- the Mauryan and Maratha Empire

Sarvakar in his book '*Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*' stated that leadership in the Indian history can be described in six epochs and had mentioned the Mauryan and the Maratha empires among these six (Sarvarkar, 1971 cited in Padhy, 2011). Leadership in the Mauryan dynasty can be traced back to the times of Chandragupta Maurya who was the founder of the great Mauryan Empire. Chandragupta rose to the level of an emperor from being a simple soldier in the Magadha army (Weir, 2007). Although Chandragupta had no such background, he had a great understanding of the political situations (Padhy, 2011). He also had the ability to exploit the best resources which might not be available in proximity. Mookerji (1988) exemplifies the same by stating that Chandragupta did not confine his army to local recruits; he created a composite army including variety of people. Chandragupta has been widely appreciated in the history for uniting the then unorganized and isolated Indian states. Mookerji claims that Chandragupta had exactly understood the need for a strong leadership, organization of the multiple Indian provinces, pooling of resources and establishing unity of direction to fight in defense of a supreme military power, Alexander. However, the saga of effective leadership continued in the Mauryan Empire even after the death of Chandragupta under the rule of his son Bindusara and particularly grandson Ashoka. There is not much literature available about the leadership of Bindusara, however he ruled the empire for 32 years and extended it further to the Deccan Plains and Mysore in the south (Phillips and Gritzner, 2003). Ashoka who sat on the throne after the death of Bindusara has been renowned in the history for his compassion and humanity (Jeevandeep Prakashan, n.d.). He was a great warrior and a great administrator as well. The book by Marshall Cavendish Corporation (2008) provides that during the reign of Ashoka, written means were used for communication and for record keeping which helped the economy of the Mauryan Empire to flourish. This also proves Ashoka to be a great visionary as he had fair idea of the importance of written records. Testa (2001) on the other hand, asserts that Ashoka was an enthusiastic and diligent leader and he ably managed the vast empire by strengthening the internal governance, but also criticizes Ashoka for his sudden adoption and imposition of Buddhist laws which disrupted the entire system and led to the dissatisfaction and rage of people. The role of effective leadership can be assessed by the fact that after the death of Ashoka, the seven rulers that followed him could not hold the empire and the Mauryan Empire witnessed a downfall (Teachers' Curriculum Institute, n.d.).

Good leadership was also evident in the Maratha Empire. Maratha leaders had a different orientation than those of the Mauryans as they believed that mere defense from the enemy is not enough rather adopted an aggressive attitude against the enemy (Padhy, 2011). The great Maratha Empire was established by Shivaji, described as a great, charismatic and shrewd leader by Magill (n.d.). Magill further described Shivaji as a fierce warrior who had introduced the famous 'guerrilla warfare' which also exemplifies his innovative and risk-taking abilities. Shivaji was endowed with several leadership traits. Shivaji had an engaging appearance, and was sober, resourceful, focused, and fearless. Shivaji also had the ability to attract talent through his shrewd and unerring judgment (Sardesai, 2002). After Shivaji's death another great leadership was witnessed during the times of Balaji Rao Viswanath, a Peshwa and a man of unique foresight, wisdom and abilities. Balaji Rao was not a great general but he was a brilliant tactician, a crafty military strategist, a wise statesman, a genius financial organizer, and a determined and focused leader (Khan, 2000). Balaji successfully united the Marhattas and set an example that generalship alone cannot help build empires.

How empires were built during these dynasties using good leadership skills (an example of Rajput leaders)

No discussion on leadership can possibly complete without a mention of the Rajputs who comprise an integral part of the leadership history of India. Rajputs were basically great warriors and fighting was their duty. They are known for their valour. Two great Rajput leaders in the Indian history are Prithvi Raj Chauhan and Maharana Pratap who were ambitious and successful warriors. Prithvi Raj Chauhan was the most famous rulers from Rajasthan who

has been described as 'a less than divine king' (Snodgrass, 2006). His legendary actions include the seventeen wars with Muhammad of Ghori who tried to invade the Delhi fort, the habitat of Chauhan. Out of these seventeen invasions, in sixteen times Prithvi Raj emerged as a winner and protected his land from the enemies on account of his great warrior ship. Snodgrass further describes Prithvi Raj Chauhan as an extraordinary man with a tremendous appetite, an excellent archer, and also a great host. As Snodgrass provides, every time Ghori was forgiven and he was treated like an honored guest; fed, clothed and then released. This somehow proves the generosity and the royal attitude of Prithvi Raj Chauhan. Maharana Pratap, another Rajput leader was the son of Uday Singh of Mewar. His heroic deeds and fights against aggression and adversity are an inspiration till date. He is known for his self-respect and determination as he had refused Akbar to enter into matrimonial alliance or submit before him like other Rajput princes. Pratap was a true patriot and in spite of facing miseries and hurdles, he did not bow his head before Akbar (Chaurasia, 2002). However, the darker side of Rajputs cannot be overlooked. Overall the Rajput leaders lacked the statesmanship and diplomatic skills. There were internal rivalries and Rajputs were divided into petty provinces and they wasted much of their resources of men and materials in wars among them. Their military system was outdated and the armies suffered from lack of unity of command (Mehta, 2009).

Other such examples of good leadership in Indian history

Indian history is all flooded with examples of great leadership by the people of both sexes. The sagas of the great Marathas under the leaderships of Shivaji, Sambhaji, Baji Rao Peshwa; the Mughals under the leaderships of Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb; the Rajputs under Prithvi Raj Chauhan, and Maharana Pratap describe the richness of leadership in India. Not only the men, but also women have showed great heroism. Chand Bibi, Razia Sultana, Noor Jehan, Rani Durgawati are a few names in this regard. Chand Bibi, the princess of Deccan had defended the city from the invasions of Mughals, fought bravely and for a long time kept the enemy at bay (Chaurasia, 2002). She is said to be a leader of new breed who has risen from the shopfloor (Singh, 2008). Rani Durgawati, on the other hand was a Rajput princess who had preferred martyrdom to being converted as a Muslim. She too protected her people from the invasion of the Mughals and as soon as she felt, her kingdom was annexed to the Mughal Empire (Murkute, 1990).

Conclusion

The paper discussed the leadership sagas of a few great leaders in the Indian history who still serve as an inspiration to the world. Every leader had distinct personality and traits and depicted a unique leadership style. Some were great warriors, others were great statesman. Some were born leaders while others inculcated the quality of leadership over time. However, it can be said that the discussion of leadership in the Indian history under this paper is only a glimpse of the great leadership epochs.

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