

The Leadership of Hindu Gurus: Its Meaning and Implications for Practice

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Never before in the history of civilization has there been a need for true leadership as at present. The timeliness of this conference on “the meeting of the minds between those who study leadership and those who practice it,” seems a prophetic occasion for the solution of this conundrum; not only in the attempt to bring theory and practice together but in the consolidation of Eastern and Western views on leadership.

Burns (1978), Rost (1991) and many other writers have presented comprehensive descriptions and explanations of leadership. Yet information on the type of leadership in which theory and practice are reciprocally related and used for the purpose of unselfish service to humanity, has only been referred to. Since ancient times, Hindu gurus, as teachers and leaders, have continued a tradition of transforming learners. By applying knowledge in a unique educational system that harmonized theory and practice, the leadership of Hindu gurus has guided learners toward inner change before serving or leading others. Before a discussion on the leadership of Hindu gurus and how they integrated theory and practice, it is fundamental to clarify the Western position of “those who study leadership and those who practice it.”

Those who study leadership emerge from two perspectives. The first perspective is an intellectual framework that evolved from Newton’s mechanistic-objectivistic-reductionistic methodology. By the eighteenth century, Auguste Comte attempted to regenerate education with his positivistic ideology. In correlation with Descartes’s dualism, Comte posited that human knowledge could only be justified by scientific methods of inquiry. When the scientific ideology became institutionalized, it gave birth to the field of psychology in 1879 (Zimbardo, 1988). By the 1900s, psychology became the foundation for education, with its objectivist and positivist conception of the human being as “an individualist and problem-solver with dominion over

nature” (Goswami, 1994). Today, those who study leadership continue to do so from the old Newtonian epistemology of science and a dualist-based, materialistic ontology.

The second perspective of those who study leadership for practical application in the postmodern era was defined by Rost (1991). He conceptualized leadership as “an influence relationship among leaders and followers (collaborators) who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (p. 102). Rost refuted industrial-materialistic leadership with his postmodern leadership theory. He recognized leadership as a transformational and shared process in which leaders and collaborators would act in an ethical and moral way. Rost theorized that transformation in leadership incorporated eleven different types – physical, intellectual, social, civic, ecological, aesthetic, psychological, transcendental, moral, spiritual, and holistic. He suggested that for his leadership to occur in any type of group situation, transformation was necessary. However, he did not elucidate on how self-transformation was possible.

Currently, those who practice leadership continue to do so from both the industrial paradigm of management and the old epistemology of science. In the industrial paradigm, leadership is related to the leader having followers who achieve specific goals through a hierarchical system. Leadership is viewed as having power, authority and control over others. Burns (1978) identified various types of leadership: transactional, political, intellectual, reform, revolutionary and executive, for achieving different goals. Most of these types of leadership are dominated by the old dualistic science and characterized by a materialistic world view. As a result, old dogmas and practices continue to be perpetuated.

However, human beings are not just physical beings. In essence, they are also spiritual. It is at this inner level of spirit that transformation is first possible, then outward into the world. The study on the lives of Hindu gurus demonstrated that their leadership abilities emerge from self-transformation. While Western epistemology is based on “a world of external, objective reality” (Harman & De Quincey, 1994, p. 2), Hindu gurus believe in a sole reality of nondual, nonrelational Pure Consciousness that is God and in the identity of the individual self and the Supreme Self which is God (Satprakashananda, 1965). The levels of the human self are illustrated

in the following diagram. This was not only theory. Hindu gurus spent many years in spiritual discipline and directly experienced God. They were not content to simply meditate and enjoy the bliss of God.

As exemplars of leadership, the gurus felt it their duty to help genuine learners to also achieve similar transformation for the good of society. As teachers and leaders, they communicated a lived experience in a powerful way (Cenkner, 1977). Epistemologically, they outlined new ways of understanding and experiencing consciousness, and ontologically, a new way of life and a new existence.

From their philosophy and spiritual experience, Hindu gurus conceptualized the universe as a manifestation of God. Human beings were also regarded as manifestations of God, in the aspect of the inner self. Correspondingly, Hindu gurus believed that to serve people was to serve God. They brought theory and practice together in their leadership. While their leadership styles reflect an ancient religious tradition, their practice was defined by a nondual science and an ontology of consciousness that have relevance to Western quantum physics and psychology. Pragmatically, they unified the Western matter-based ontology and the Eastern spiritual-based ontology. In addition, by recognizing and experiencing the inner self or spirit as God at the human level, and leading others to this awareness, Hindu gurus reconciled the five psychological disciplines: psychophysiology, psychodynamics, behaviorism, cognition and humanism.

There is a Hindu saying: To know Brahman (God) is to become Brahman. Transformation does not occur intellectually, although intellectual knowledge leads to transformation. Transformation must occur experientially. Leadership for the new millennium requires the ability to influence others, to create harmony through mutual consideration, and to intend transformational changes through mutual purposes. If leadership in the future requires the ability to act ethically, and to use such ability for ethical changes, this could only be possible by inner transformation.

In the industrial paradigm, theory and practice of leadership had no practical connections, except by philosophy. If postindustrial leadership, as defined by Rost, is to lead away from

competition, utilitarianism, elitism and other characteristics of the industrial paradigm, then leaders and scholars of the leadership process must be guided by a higher sense of being. Those who study leadership and practice it from the industrial perspective do so within a limited materialistic ideology. In this paradigm, there is no acknowledgment of integrity and personal evolution that explores the highest human potential of self-awareness. Rost's postmodern leadership offers a retrospective orientation in which leadership, previously known as management, progresses into recognition of a higher stage of maturity. This stage invites a new perspective of wholeness and moral and ethical sense upon which postmodern leadership can really take place. The lives of Hindu gurus have demonstrated that we have the ability to become what we already are – conscious beings. Rooted in the wisdom of our newfound science of nonduality, psychology of the self, and historical understanding, each one of us can now use it to better our understanding of leading and serving others.

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Sources Consulted

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