

Peer Review Article

Conscious Systemic Leadership:

A Theoretical Construct Drawing from the Philosophy of *Shiva*

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Abstract

Conscious systemic leadership (CSL) is a theoretical construct that draws from Shiva consciousness. Through major parts of history, theories and narratives have taken an individualistic approach to leadership focusing on the person as a leader. However, systemic leadership (SL) is an emergent phenomenon that draws on synergies and concerted efforts of several people and institutions operating across several places and levels to create a more purposeful and meaningful existence for us. If SL is about shifting the focus from the self to the wider scheme of existence, a consciousness-based approach is necessary. A consciousness-based approach enables us to undergo a mind-shift from the individual to the collective, from short-term to long-term, from rigidity to fluidity, from holding-on to letting-go, and from results-focus to learning-orientation. The philosophy of Shiva is drawn on to understand that consciousness is the substratum of reality, an insight used to build the theoretical construct of CSL. In Shiva consciousness, reality is embodied in our experience of the world through a transcendental and eternal process of fusion and dance of energies between the opposing archetypes of the purusha and prakriti; pure consciousness and the creative force, respectively. Everywhere, in each minute attribute of

reality, a “self” is present, which is the universal consciousness of Shiva. CSL demands a set of new thinking and practices to bring this concept to life. With the integration of consciousness, CSL makes a new addition to the field of SL as the first attempt in the literature to draw on perspectives from Hindu philosophy, more specifically the Shiva philosophy.

Keywords

systemic leadership; Shiva; consciousness; Hindu philosophy

Introduction

In this paper, I will make an experimental attempt to connect an understanding of consciousness, drawn from the philosophy of the Hindu god, *Shiva*, to systemic leadership (SL) to present a new theoretical construct of, what I call, conscious systemic leadership (CSL). I call this attempt “experimental” because I am trying to bring together two very different disciplines in a way that has not been done before. This attempt also serves to address the call from Ivanov (2011) that systems practice needs to be developed at the interface of formal science, political ethics, analytical psychology, and religious thought.

I will begin by talking about my motivation behind this research. Next, I will introduce SL and build an argument for the importance of integrating it with insights from consciousness. This will be followed by an introduction of *Shiva* that will cover who/what *Shiva* is, the main representations of *Shiva*, and the philosophy of *Shiva*. I will, then, articulate the ontology and epistemology of CSL based on the understanding of *Shiva* consciousness. The theoretical construct of CSL will be presented, next. Finally, I will highlight the contribution of this research and share my thoughts on the potential future inquiry into this topic.

All Sanskrit words are italicized.

My Motivation Behind This Research

In 2018, I had the opportunity to attend a talk by Fritjof Capra, celebrated author of the *Tao of Physics*, in the UK and chatted with him over dinner. I was fascinated by how he drew inspiration from the ancient philosophy of *Shiva* to understand complex occurrences in nature and connected this understanding to quantum physics and social reality. In 2020, I met Capra again in Berkeley, US, for coffee and we talked more. His narratives gripped me and I started digging deeper into the symbolisms and philosophy of *Shiva*. I started reading interpretations of *Shiva* mythology and philosophy in the works of Alan Daniélou, Alan Watts, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Fritjof Capra, Raja Choudhury, and Stella Kramrisch, among many others. This led me to connect the profound *Shiva* philosophy to systems thinking in my first research paper (Chowdhury, 2022a) on this topic. The COVID-19 lockdown and the perils associated with it, also, led me to explore and practice certain *mantras* associated with *Shiva* that

offered me a platform for deeper introspection of my own place in the wider scheme of existence.

As I began to dig deeper into the subject, I was mesmerized by how consciousness can be understood in a different light through the lens of the *Shiva* philosophy. With my training and practitioner experience in systems thinking, I found myself motivated to draw from this understanding and craft a theoretical construct of CSL that, I believe, will benefit the discipline of systems thinking. In this paper, I will identify two key pillars for this inquiry: the ontology and epistemology of this research. The ontology will be based on the understanding that consciousness is fundamental to our existence. Insights from *Shiva* consciousness point towards the understanding that reality is embodied and it arises due to the pulsating dance between opposing energies. This will form my basis to arrive at the epistemology that life is an embodied experience of this pulsating dance of opposing energies manifested in the expansive states of existence in which we find ourselves.

Systemic Leadership (SL)

Through major parts of history, theories and narratives by various scholars (Bass, 1985; Carlyle, 1840; Gill, 2011; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; House, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Maxwell, 1993; Nicholas & Cottrell, 2014; Stogdill, 1950;) have taken an individualistic approach to leadership. Marking a stark departure from the individual-oriented approach, critical leadership studies focus on power relations and identity constructions that are inherent in social systems which play a direct role in legitimizing and reproducing divisive and exclusive societal roles (Banks, 2008; Collinson, 2011; Fairhurst, 2007; Gabriel, 1997; Kellerman, 2016; Lipmen-Blumen, 2005; Nye, 2008). Critical theory eschews orthodox designations of leader and follower as the starting point of its inquiry and focuses on leadership as an emergent phenomenon of groups (Chandler & Kirsch, 2018). Leadership is considered a social process occurring among all members in a social setting regardless of what position they hold. Formal and informal interactions, seen and unseen alliances, and differences and convergences align and mobilize the members in the social context towards a shared vision, making leadership an emergent phenomenon (Curren et al., 2016; Fransen et al., 2015; Ritchie et al., 2006; Spillane, 2006). The grand challenges facing our world—climate change, data colonization, threat of nuclear war, poverty, migration, hunger, and species extinction, among many others—are impossible to pin down if approached in isolation. To navigate such realities, what is needed is a new form of collective leadership capacity that is more conscious (Scharmer, 2019). Scharmer calls for a collective connection to the highest future possibilities and bringing it to the “now” through his theory of presencing. Presencing happens when our perception begins to occur from the source of our emerging future. Such a vision needs a different form of leadership from the traditional approaches, where the focus shifts from the individual to the collective and takes shape in the form of SL. For such a transformation,

practitioners need to go through a shift in their own position and boldly embrace viewpoints from other stakeholders, who may have contrarian perspectives, in a process where they may often have to de-center themselves in the path towards creating a shared future (Senge et al., 2015). To achieve such a future state, a consciousness-based approach is necessary.

Consciousness-Based Approach to SL

A consciousness-based approach to SL can enable the understanding that each one of us is part of the wider scheme of existence. This understanding can help us to de-center ourselves from the singular self to the collective self and create the necessary conditions for the realization of SL. Daniélou (2006, p. 97) notes:

An element of consciousness acts as a kind of inactive witness in every atom or conglomerate of atoms, in every cell, as well as at the center of the ‘inner organ’, the principal engine of every living being... However, this consciousness does not really ‘belong’ to the inner organ, since it is inseparable from Universal Consciousness...

Gurdjieff touches on the interconnectedness of the universe where everything is alive and self-feeding, working towards the realization of higher levels of being (Cusack, 2011). Gurdjieff’s works extend the limits of human inquiry into the domain of cosmology that, through universal laws, connects individual existence to the context of cosmic existence. Gurdjieff advocates that the purpose of life must be a development of the soul, rescuing it from the fragmented interests dominated by trivial likes and dislikes. Through his laws, Gurdjieff developed a body of emanative cosmology that covers the different manifestations and concentrations of energy that flow from the absolute.

A consciousness-based approach allows us to appreciate social purpose, personal commitment, and meaningful entrepreneurial creativity. Taking a conscious approach is one of the most authentic skills needed for accountable and responsible leadership (Hayden, 2017; Jonesa & Brazdaub, 2015; Laszlo, 2020; Marinčič & Marič, 2018;). Conscious leadership is:

“a theory grounded in the sociocultural knowledge of reciprocity, which allows leaders to perceive patterns in the environment, see the interconnectivity of multiple problems, and subscribe to a participatory leadership style, which incorporates the idea of shared responsibility and problem solving” (Jones, 2012, p. 41).

A consciousness-based approach to SL can lead to the realization of the importance of self-awareness, humility, and mindfulness (Cooper & Croswell, 2011). Conscious leadership is about being truly responsible for one’s actions and communication (Klopčič, 2009; Ward & Haase, 2016). Several other works talk about the relevance of consciousness and spiritual traditions in systemic management and meaningful leadership (Coll, 2021; Gu & Zhu, 2000; Maheshwari, 2021; Rajagopalan, 2020; Sharma, 2014; Shen & Midgley, 2007 a, b, c, 2015; Zhu, 2000). A wide range of research has shown that a consciousness-

based discourse can lead to leadership behaviors that are more compassionate and rewarding, and practices that are more responsible and sustainable (Fairholm & Fairholm, 2012; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010; Khalsa, 2010; Nandram & Borden, 2010; Sheep, 2006; Tackney et al., 2017; Tzouramani & Karakas, 2016). A consciousness-based approach to leadership needs to be considered as a “holistic spiritual approach” (Nandram, 2016, p. 65) that requires an ability to connect the awareness of the individual existence to the wider cosmic existence. However, extending the importance of understanding consciousness to develop a new understanding of SL is currently a gap in existing literature.

A consciousness-based approach has the potential to enable practitioners to undergo a mind-shift from the individual to the collective, from short-term to long-term, from rigidity to fluidity, from holding-on to letting-go, and from results-focus to learning-orientation. It can help in striking a balance between the pursuits of actions and an evocation of humility and release of the ego. In light of the polycrises gripping the world, and in the context of the arguments that I have presented above, there is a need to link SL with consciousness.

The following discussion will attempt to understand the *Shiva* philosophy and an exploration will be made to draw from this understanding to develop a theoretical construct for CSL.

Understanding *Shiva*

Who or What is *Shiva*?

Shiva is one of the most important gods in Hindu mythology along with *Brahma* and *Vishnu*, who together form the holy trinity in Hindu philosophy. Based on extensive religious and historical research, Kramrisch (1981) discusses *Shiva* as the primordial energy of the universe, before which he was the seed of uncreation, holding the total potentiality of existence beyond existence and any transcendence. Reference to *Shiva* goes back to the Vedic literature from the mid-first millennium BCE (Flood, 2005). However, references to the origin of *Shiva* date back to much earlier in time with historical evidence of the presence of what many believe to be a proto-*Shiva* (Kramrisch, 1981; Pullanoor, 2019). Ancient scriptures of *Shiva* present extensive myths and allegories that attempt to convey highly sophisticated philosophical and psychological concepts and meanings.

Representations of *Shiva*

There are four most prominent representations of *Shiva*: the *linga*, the dancing *Shiva*, the *Yogi*, and the family man.

The Linga

Linga means phallus carrying the inherent symbolism of the cosmic union of opposing forces and an unmanifest reality. The *linga* is commonly seen placed on top of the *yoni* (vagina). As Rao (1914) explains, the union of the masculine and feminine is the most important generative principle and this iconography has attracted adoration and adulation from generations of people across many religions over millennia. I would like to note that the masculine and feminine are not meant to be interpreted as sexes per -se, but these are archetypes representing the two fundamental opposing cosmic forces. They are also called *purusha* (masculine principle as pure consciousness) and *prakriti* (feminine principle as creative power), respectively. Drawing from *Samkhya*, the oldest school of Hindu philosophy, and Kashmir Shaivism, *prakriti* has three *gunas* (universal attributes) that are in a state of dormant equilibrium: *tamas* (darkness and chaos), *rajas* (activity and passion), and *sattva* (beingness and harmony). On one hand, *Prakriti* must come in union with *purusha* and this union is responsible for the manifestation of the universe. On the other hand, *Purusha* is meaningless without its self-realization through the manifestation process. *Purusha* and *prakriti*, therefore, are non-dual as they cannot be separated. *Shiva* can only be perceived through his creation. See figure 1 for a depiction of the *linga*.



Figure 1. Linga ruins from the Markanda temple (8th century CE) in Maharashtra (India); (Source: Wiki Media Commons).

The Dancing Shiva

Innumerable accounts (Choudhury, 2016; Coomaraswamy, 1918; Danielou, 2006; Jansen, 1993; Kramrisch, 1981; Nanda & Michell, 2004; Pullanoor, 2019; Sharada, 2004; Sivaramamurti, 1974; Smith, 2003) serve to understand *Shiva* to be in a state of constant trance. Various forms of *Shiva's* dance exist, all of which can be interpreted to convey the central message of the manifestation of the primal rhythmic energy.

Out of all dance forms of *Shiva*, the *Nataraja* is perhaps the most well-recognized. The *Nataraja* transcends the gender divide and portrays *Shiva* as the *Ardhanarishvara* (hermaphrodite). *Shiva* wears a male earring on the right ear and a female earring on the left ear representing masculinity and femininity respectively. *Shiva* is depicted as having four arms and engaged in a blissful dance with his locks of hair whirling towards the eternal cosmic circle. In the first right arm, *Shiva* holds the *damru*, a form of hand-held mini drum, in its beating mode, its vibration representing *srishti* or the creation of the universe and time. The first left arm is raised holding a flame of fire that atrophies matter to a formless state (Pullanoor, 2019). The fire represents *samhara* or transformation. *Srishti* and *samhara* represent the constant cycle of creation and transformation that defines the cosmic cycle. The second right arm with an open palm offers reassurance of stability and “becoming” while humanity is braced with this force of continual transformation. This is representative of *sthiti*. The second left arm with the palm pointing downwards depicts *tirobhava*, which can be interpreted to mean ignorance in which humans fall. This serves to understand concealment of knowledge and preoccupation with the creative illusion of our lived-in experience, known as *maya*. The raised left leg represents *anugraha*, or liberation, and is indicative of humankind’s possibilities to attain liberation from ignorance and from being a mere witness of *maya*, caught in the intense cyclical metamorphosis of birth, life, and death. *Srishti*, *samhara*, *sthiti*, *tirobhava*, and *anugraha* are recognized as the five most important functions of the *Nataraja* and are referred to as the *panchakritya*. *Shiva's* long locks are seen expanding into this unending cosmos in a representative union of the lord and the cosmos itself—the microcosm and the macrocosm, respectively (Chowdhury, 2022a). Capra (1975) talks about the dancing *Shiva* as a sophisticated symbol of the dance of particles and the emergence of the physical world, as studied in modern physics. See figure 2 for a depiction of the dancing *Shiva*.



Figure 2. Nataraja ruins from the Elephanta Caves (5th – 6th century CE) in Maharashtra (India); (Source: Wiki Media Commons).

The Yogi

Shiva is often called the supreme *yogi* (meditator) who has control over mind, body, and soul through the practice of the ultimate yoga. He is seen as the ascetic or mystic. In the words of Kramrisch (1981), “As the Lord of *Yoga* he [*Shiva*] causes the transformation of the vitally creative power into mental creativity and the interiorized objectivity of detachment that leads to release” (p. 437). As the supreme *Yogi*, *Shiva* stands still in the vertical position, which is deemed to be sacred as it symbolizes ascent towards a higher-order consciousness (Kramrisch, 1981). The yogic transcendence balances the opposing masculine and feminine energies in cosmic unity. The straight and static masculine side and the flexed and flowing feminine side assimilate in *Shiva*, the energy that is actually nothingness or complete stillness of the consciousness. See figure 3 for a depiction of *Shiva* as the *Yogi*.



Figure 3. Meditating Shiva ruins from the Elephanta Caves (5th – 6th century CE) in Maharashtra (India); (Source: Wiki Media Commons).

The Family Man

Shiva is also portrayed as a family man, away from his image as an ascetic and mystic. *Shiva's* vehement meditation was interrupted by severe penance from *Parvati*, who was in love with him. The Elephanta caves, constructed about the mid-fifth to sixth centuries CE, in the Western Indian state of Maharashtra, carry elaborate carvings of *Shiva* with his wife, *Parvati* (read as equivalent to *Prakriti*) and two sons, *Kartikeya* and *Ganesha*. According to the *Skanda Purana*, the ancient scriptures dedicated to *Skanda* (another name for *Kartikeya*), dating back to the eighth century CE (Bakker, 2014; Mann, 2011), *Kartikeya* had six heads: the first five heads represent the five existential elements—earth, water, fire, air, ether—and the sixth head represents pure consciousness. *Ganesha* was the second son of *Shiva*, who was born in *Shiva's* absence. *Ganesha* was created by *Parvati* out of her own body to serve as a gatekeeper when she was taking a bath. When *Ganesha* displayed ego trying to stop his own father's entry when his mother was bathing, *Shiva* beheaded *Ganesha* without knowing that *Ganesha* was his son. Later, *Ganesha's* head was restored with the head of an elephant and since then, *Ganesha* is regarded as the god of goodwill. Family portraits of *Shiva*, often depict certain symbolisms: the powerful presence of *vasuki*, the serpent representing the preservation of secret knowledge. The locks of *Shiva's* hair can be interpreted as channeling the course of the holy Ganges as it descends from the symbolic Milky Way galaxy to the Earth. The *thrishul*, or the trident, with its three prongs represent the three worlds in Hindu mythology—*bhur* (material world), *bhuvaha* (mental world), and *svaha* (spiritual world). The bull is a symbol of *dharma* (righteousness)

reminding us of the infinite consciousness within each one of us. *Shiva's* representation as a family man is symbolic of our social existence, the reality that we, as humans, have found ourselves in. Various virtues for everyday life can be drawn from *Shiva's* representation as a family man but discussing this aspect is beyond the scope of this paper. See figure 4 for a representative portrait of *Shiva* and his family.



Figure 4. *Shiva and his family* (18th century); Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Museum, Mumbai; (Source: Wiki Media Commons).

Next, a discussion will be presented on how we can draw from the various myths and allegories of *Shiva* to understand consciousness.

***Shiva* Consciousness as the Substratum of Reality**

I will draw from the representations and allegories of *Shiva* to understand consciousness as the substratum of reality. It is important to note that stories of ancient scriptures and cultures carry their own meaning and have the potential to offer cues to address human challenges that are not restricted to time and place (Peterson, 2013). Daniélou (2006) offers commentaries to argue that that

the description of *Shiva* consciousness in Hindu philosophy is informative to our understanding of consciousness as the substratum of reality. The basis of everything that we witness as distinct, separate, or individual existences all map back to one non-distinct, non-separate, and non-individualized force. Kashmir Shaivism, attributed majorly to the works of Somananda (c. 875–925 CE), Utpaladeva (c. 925-975 C.E.), and Abhinavagupta (c. 975-1025 C.E.), provides extensive commentaries on the *Shiva* philosophy as the principle of cosmic pulsation, or *spanda*, resulting in the manifestation of our worldly experience. At the very foundation is the pulsation of *prakasha*, the self-shining light of awareness, and *vimarsha*, the self-reflective power of awareness. These basic energies of pulsations are also interpreted to exist between *linga* and *yonis*, or *purusha* and *prakriti*, or *Shiva* and *Parvati/Shakti*, respectively. While *Shiva* is pure awareness, *Shakti* is the power of self-reflection that arises within us as the desire to see beneath the surface of life. The two are one.

Interestingly, scientific advancements in neuroscience and psychiatry have led to the definition of human consciousness as:

The presence of a wakeful arousal state and the awareness and motivation to respond to self and/or environmental events. In the intact brain, arousal is the overall level of responsiveness to environmental stimuli... While arousal is the global state of responsiveness, awareness is the brain's ability to perceive specific environmental stimuli in different domains, including visual, somatosensory, auditory, and interoceptive (e.g., visceral and body position). (Goldfine & Schiff, 2011, p.724)

Jeremy (2021, para. 1) notes: “Through this cosmic dance, universes are created, sustained, then dissolved back into the vast nothingness from which they arose”. The parallels between *prakasha* and *vimarsha* and arousal and awareness, respectively, seem more than a mere coincidence, and can help us to understand how consciousness can be the key to unlock awareness and awareness-based systems change.

The *Pratyabhijna* school within Kashmir Shaivism articulates that “Shiva necessarily manifests himself, and that he has no consciousness of his manifestation” (Tantray et al., 2018, p. 16). It also espouses the theory of causation called *Satkaryavada*, according to which an effect pre-exists within its cause. As a consequence of this theory, *Pratyabhijna* views the universe as the effect that pre-exists in *Shiva* himself (Berger et al., 2018). The *Spanda Karika*, one of the essential scriptures of Kashmir Shaivism, composed between the eighth and ninth century CE, attributes the origin of the cosmos to the pulsating energies between *gunas* (universal attributes) in the void between the perceiver and the perceived that give rise to the reality that we experience (Wallis, 2019). To revisit the *gunas*:

Rajas is the law of motion, velocity, and acceleration, *tamas* is the law of inertia, the guiding principle of when an object must come to rest, and *sattva* is the intelligence guiding the laws of motion and rest. Western physics does not

have an equivalent to Sattva, matter is considered inert with no intelligence of its own. Ancient Hindus attributed intelligence and consciousness to all matter since everything visible to the eye comes from the mingling of Purusha, the primordial consciousness, and Prakriti, the visible Universe. (Ayurmagaya, 2023, para. 10–14)

Similar was the view of Gurdjieff in his Three Laws according to which every phenomenon consists of three separate forces: active, passive, and reconciling or neutral. This law applies to everything in the universe (de Salzman, 2011, p. 296). Embodied reality is the manifestation of these pulsating opposing forces.

Parrish-Sprowl et al. (2020) discuss how quantum thinking offers a similar set of assumptions that lead us to understand that everything is systemically interconnected. The mystery of the quantum world proves that even beyond the tiniest particles of matter—electrons, neutrons, and protons—and their antiparticles—antielectrons, positrons, and antiprotons, respectively—there are still smaller building blocks called quarks that are nothing but pulsating loops of energies (Carithers & Grannis, 1995). The building blocks of reality are entangled nodes of energies emerging out of “nothing”, and yet “nothing” cannot exist as empty space is itself a quantum playground. In the words of particle physicist, Jim Al-Khalili:

An average point in an empty space borrows energy from the future only to give back—a particle and an antiparticle that annihilate each other. Self-destruction back into energy. In space there is constant creation and destruction—physicists call it the quantum foam. (Reel Truth Science Documentaries, 2018, 00:00)

Parallel to this theory is the ancient *Shiva* consciousness, where reality is realized through a transcendental and eternal process of fusion and dance of energies between the archetypes of *prakasha* and *vimarsha*. Everywhere, in each minute attribute of reality, a “self” is present, which is the universal consciousness of *Shiva*. This argument resonates with Wendt (2015) and Kak (2021), who talk about consciousness as inherent to the material world and reaching all the way down to the subatomic level.

Drawing from this understanding, I have identified two key pillars—the ontology and epistemology of this research—as the scaffolds for working towards the theoretical construct of CSL.

Ontology and Epistemology of This Research

The ontology of CSL is that consciousness is fundamental to our existence. I draw from *Shiva* consciousness to argue that reality arises due to the pulsating dance between archetypal contrarian imperatives—*prakasha* and *vimarsha*, *linga* and *yoni*, *Shiva* and *Parvati*, *Shiva* and *Shakti*, *purusha* and *prakriti*—that inform the fundamental philosophy of existence. I take “contrarian” to mean opposing and “imperative” to mean something that has a commanding importance. Hence, I use the term “contrarian imperative” to refer to selected

dichotomies, inherent in *Shiva* consciousness as the building blocks of existence. The term *Dvandva* is fundamental in Sanskrit grammar and refers to compound pairs of opposite words that bring our embodied experience to life through language and expression, thus giving a linguistic turn to this argument.

The epistemology of CSL is realized in the reality of our expansive dimensional domains. Let me explain what I mean by “dimensional domain”. SL is about appreciating our embodied nature, starting with the self, as emergent consciousness. Several other works talk about emergent reality as a hierarchical, progressive notion (Boulding, 1956; Dreier et al., 2019; Spann & Ritchie-Dunham, 2017; Stacey & Griffin, 2005). However, my notion of the dimensional domains is different: to practice SL, one must undertake the journey of transcending the self through a continual conscious engagement with the boundaries of the emergent system. Boundaries are not pre-decided, but we take an active part in deciding systemic boundaries based on our value judgments (Churchman, 1979; Midgley, 2000). Therefore, boundaries can be contracting or expanding based on our values. We draw them for the convenience of determining our intentional actions to achieve results. Dimensional domains do not indicate a hierarchy or progression. Rather, they indicate the various dimensions of our states of embodied experiences. SL is an engagement within the dimensional domains of intended boundaries within which increasing complexities emerge between the decision maker (who draws the boundaries), resources (that are required to deliver on intended actions), and responsibility (that and those affected by our actions).

See figure 5 for the ontology and epistemology of CSL.

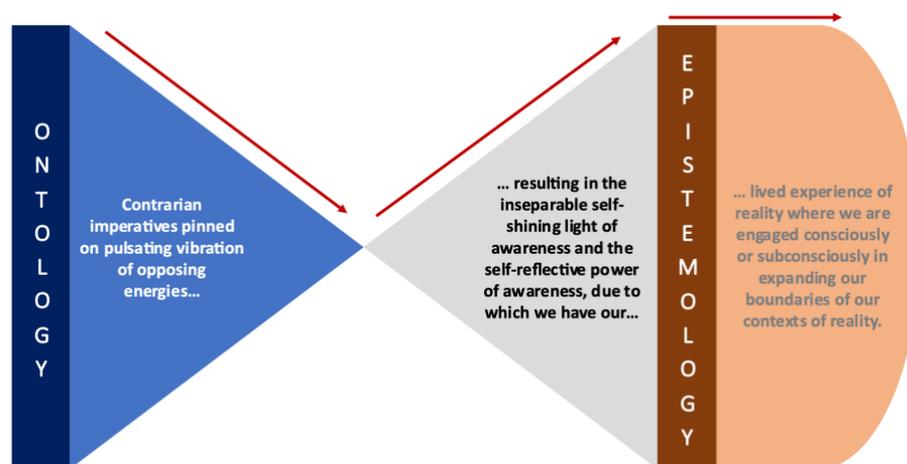


Figure 5. Ontology and epistemology of CSL.

In working towards the theoretical construct of CSL, I have considered the contrarian imperatives and dimensional domains as its two key scaffolds.

Towards a Consciousness-Based Approach to SL

In this section, I will work towards building a theoretical construct for conscious systemic leadership (CSL). Drawing from *Shiva* consciousness, the contrarian imperatives and dimensional domains provide the scaffolding for CSL.

Contrarian Imperatives

Three contrarian imperatives are articulated (this is not meant to be exhaustive):

1. **Involution Vs. Evolution:** *Shiva* represents involution. This characteristic stems from references to *Shiva* as the nothingness, out of which everything emerges. In mathematics, an involution is a function that is its own inverse, which can be represented with the formula “ $f(f(x)) = x$ ” for all x in the domain of f (“Involution,” 2023). In ring theory, involution is customarily taken to mean an antihomomorphism that is its own inverse function. The *linga* is a sophisticated symbol of this concept that represents the formless most potent seed of energies that has the power to manifest the reality that we embody. In the *linga*, involution is depicted by the sign of the *linga* itself, evolution is symbolized in its union with the creative force of the *yonis* at the base. This is the seat of *Brahma*, the Hindu god of creation, out of which preservation is generated with *Vishnu*, the Hindu god of preservation.
2. **Convergence Vs. Divergence:** *Shiva* is the force that subsumes all energies into an eternal trance, which is also equally depictive of the divergent forces that define existence. This is represented most creatively in the *Nataraja*, where at one level, the *panchakritya* carries significant life lessons of existence as *Shiva* dances across the vast expanse of the cosmos, and at another level, there is the full convergence of the energies in the dark void within the dance of the energies of *Shiva* and *Shakti*. The dance starts deep within nothingness with *Shiva* and *Shakti* representing the convergence of all cosmic energies yet expanding and diverging outwards in a fashion that is eternal and never-ending.
3. **Microcosm Vs. Macrocosm:** *Shiva* is the microcosm, as seen in the form of a *Yogi*, who is in eternal meditation, where the human psyche is fused with the primordial consciousness. But he is also the *Yogi* whose vehement meditative oneness is disturbed by *Parvati* to transform him into a family man. Out of the eternal conjugal union between *Shiva* and *Parvati* comes their sons *Kartikeya* and *Ganesha*. This family unit, the macrocosm, is depicted in several art forms as a complete happy family that makes earth their abode. The primordial consciousness is now the universal consciousness of the world that is present in every life that exists.

See figure 6 for a depiction of the contrarian imperatives.

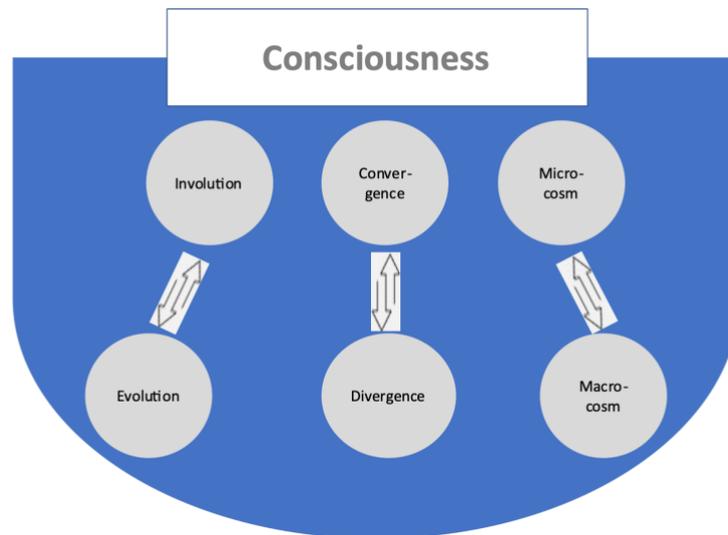


Figure 6. Contrarian imperatives.

It is such contrarian imperatives that result in the manifestation process out of the universal consciousness. With reference to *Kashmir Shaivism*, Tantray et al., (2018, p. 2) say: “Manifestation process is a mechanism of appearance (effect) from ultimate reality (cause) which is the seed or embryo of the causation.” Therefore, *Kashmir Shaivism* can be regarded as non-relational consciousness where the distinction between cause and effect, subject and object, and the self and the other is nullified. Similarly, Coomaraswamy (1918) talks about the determination of the eternal rhythmic character of the world process as the great antithesis of all dualities: “The interplay of these opposites constitutes the whole of sensational and [registered] existence, the Eternal Becoming...” (p. 10).

Dimensional Domains

Five dimensional domains are identified. Based on the ontology of the contrarian imperatives, the dimensional domains are a set of non-hierarchical representations of our states of embodied experience. Practicing SL is about our engagement within the dimensional domains with an awareness of the boundaries we continually demarcate considering us as the decision maker, our resources, and our responsibility. I have drawn the boundary at the ecosystem level without engaging at the cosmological level, because I am conscious of the implications of this research that I would like to be relatable and translatable into practice.

Each of the dimensional domains exists relationally and dynamically:

Individual: This begins at the level of the self. It was probably the power of self-awareness, propelled by self-reflection, that was one of the essential drivers of a remarkably rapid appearance of human civilization 40,000 to 60,000 years ago (Leary & Buttermore, 2003). Self-awareness can also be looked upon as self-

consciousness (Fenigstein et al., 1975). Inner work, introspection, and reflection are practices that are widely proposed for greater self-awareness and development at the individual level (Boyatzis, 2014; Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Goleman et al., 2002; Sullivan, 2017). It is at the individual level that we must draw from the understanding that everything we perceive exists as a vibration of *prakasha* and *vimarsha* that emanates from the undercurrent of consciousness that gives us the innate power within ourselves to know ourselves... to become self-aware. Self-awareness not only influences individual behavior (de Silva, 2004), it also enables us to appreciate the impact of our behavior on others (Palmer, 2014). Church (1997) views self-awareness as a cognitive schema, whereby self-awareness is seen to be the foundation for contexts and relationships. Therefore, although, initially, it may seem that at the individual level, responsibility rests with the self, it is not so. Individual reality is created in the dynamic interaction between the self and the context, which can be seen at the level of an aggregation of individuals for a common purpose, which I refer to as the team.

Team: We must allow our experience with the team to be a relational emergence of our self into a system of individuals working towards a common purpose. Every individual is a leader. The leadership model “changes the focus from a powerful individual, usually placed on an unrealistic pedestal, to a team of leaders who constitute a leadership system” (Kantor, 2019, p. 36). Drawing from Shiva consciousness, it is about understanding and working with networks and relationships with other individuals who are an extension of the self. To achieve the higher purpose, Scharmer (2019) argues that for every individual, three types of presence must collapse into each other: the presence of the past (current field), the presence of the future (the emerging field of the future), and the presence of one’s authentic self. The merging of the three types of presence leads to the resonance of a profound shift in the way we experience our contexts and realities that prepares us for the change that is necessary. This can also be regarded as “full spectrum consciousness” (Hollingshead, 2018). Conscious teams are more capable of acting with integrity and focusing on results that are more impactful and ethical (Hollingshead, 2018). SL, at this level, means that individuals must be sensitive to others within and across teams, give constructive feedback, shun bigotry and politics, and take full responsibility for the outcomes of collaborative actions (Hollingshead, 2018; Kan, 2019).

Organization: Several teams and networks of teams come together to form an organization. SL is about extending the sense of awareness and meaning from the individual, to the team, to the organization. Individuals and teams extend their consciousness-based values and beliefs to the organization through an active process of self and organizational alignment. Similar sentiments are also surfaced by Pandey and Gupta (2008), who talk about spiritually conscious organizations. At this dimensional domain, SL decision-making arises from shared agency between the individuals and the organization with teams acting as synapses between the two. Focus must be retained on developing relationships through careful listening to, understanding, empathizing with, and supporting people internal and external to the organization. Such an approach contributes towards the enablement of compassionate and inclusive leadership (West, 2021). Several organizations are already exploring how organizational performance can be measured based on a consciousness approach (Nandram & Borden, 2010). In order to operationalize such thinking, leadership system must display “collective intelligence”, covering rational, emotional, moral, social, and structural intelligence, which can help an organization face almost every conceivable organizational eventuality (Kantor, 2019).

Platform: I use the term “platform” to denote the lateral existence of several organizations working in a similar or related socio-economic, political, and technological environment to pursue common, related, or interdependent purposes. At the level of organizations, SL is largely confined to the viability of the organization. But where do the boundaries of an organization start and end? This question can only be addressed by ascertaining to what extent one wants to see the effects of one’s decisions and actions (Chowdhury, 2019a, b). SL involves being able to sketch boundaries that are dynamic and constantly evolving across various institutions—social, regulatory, technological, and economic—realizing that organizations influence and are influenced by factors and forces that lie beyond themselves or their sector. SL involves convening stakeholders, enabling negotiations, neutralizing unequal demands, and facilitating agreements. This is an important step at a time when there is an increasing call for a well-being economy in the world, bringing together organizations, alliances, movements, and individuals working towards a common purpose to deliver human and ecological well-being (Coscieme et al., 2019; Fioramonti et al., 2022; Roy, 2021; Zeidler, 2022).

Ecosystem: This is regarded as the macro-level manifestation of all forms and orders of life (known to us): human and non-human, living and nonliving, the human as the creator and the human as the created, and the constituents of the world we are aware of, and those we are unaware of. I include the global commons—high seas, airspace, outer space, and cyberspace—as part of this dimensional domain, as they influence our actions that, in turn, affect them. SL provides the cognitive foundation to appreciate that this infinite and unending revelation of reality—starting from the individual self, to teams, to organizations, to platforms—culminates in the interconnected and emergent ecosystem. With consciousness at the core of the dimensional domains, the ecosystem is not something external but very much a part of the quantum reality that is also inherent in the individual self. SL, at the ecosystem level, calls for the realization that global capitalism in its present form is unsustainable—socially, ecologically, and even financially—and what is needed is an integral regenerative approach. This mesmerizing manifestation of the ecosystem is the evolutionary expansive macrocosm of the universal consciousness. Reaching the inflection point where one can dissipate between the macrocosm and the microcosm comes with immense and arduous work on the self. Reflecting a similar sentiment, Scharmer (2016) talks about presencing in Theory U as a process of “letting go, in order to let come”—the capacity to give up our most prized beliefs and surrender to whatever it is that might want to emerge.

See figure 7 for the dimensional domains.

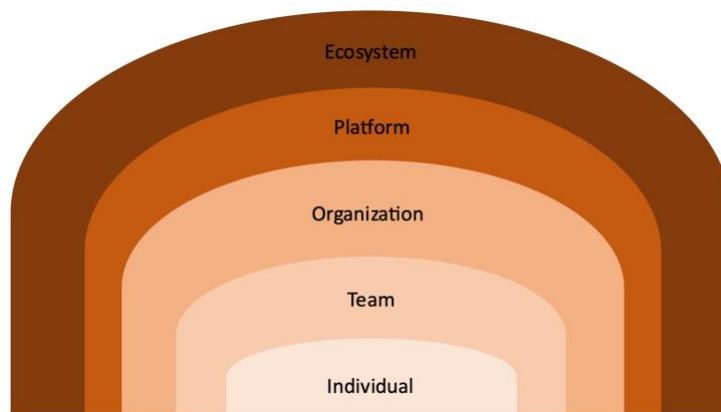


Figure 7. Dimensional domains.

The dimensional domains are naturally subsumed within each other as centripetal and centrifugal forces and, very much, reflect the character of the contrarian imperatives. The dimensional domains are an open system where boundaries are permeable and non-distinct but they operate with the core

systems principle of equifinality, where the final state of an open system can be reached by the same or different initial conditions within the homeostatic cosmic system (Chowdhury, 2019a).

Having articulated the contrarian imperatives and the dimensional domains, the next section will present a theoretical construct for CSL.

A Theoretical Construct for Conscious Systemic Leadership

A theoretical construct for CSL is presented in figure 8. It is proposed to pique radical transformation for human engagement, and to create lasting meaning for our actions and their consequences.

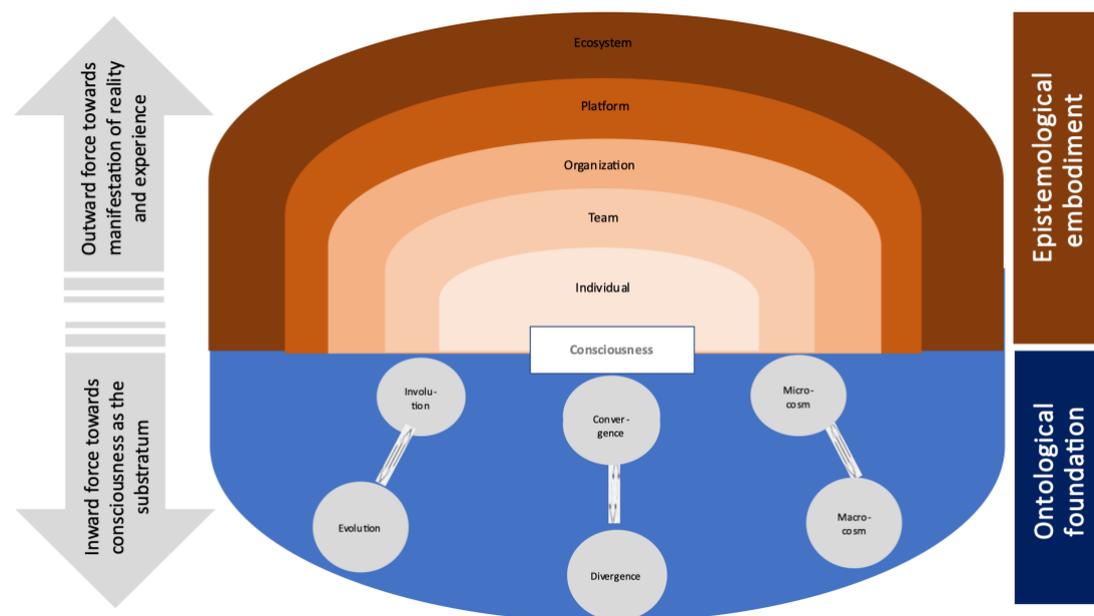


Figure 8. Framework for conscious systemic leadership.

I propose CSL, essentially, as a meaning-making process. Capra and Luisi (2014) explore meaning as a shorthand notation for the inner world of reflective consciousness. They further argue that understanding of social phenomena must involve the integration of four perspectives—form, matter, process, and meaning. The inward and the outwards forces represent the primordial rhythmic oscillation that creates reality as we experience it. At the same time, CSL reminds us that consciousness is multidimensional and that “our relationship to the outer, observable self (body, mind, and emotions) is the manifestation of our relationship with our essence and our relationship to the world around us (society and nature)”, a thought that is also prevalent in Sri Aurobindo’s integral philosophy (Borden, 2009, p. 166).

CSL will demand the demonstration of a new set of practices at the level of each dimensional domain. Crafting these practices in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I am highlighting the following indicative practices as a thought starter:

Individual

- Self-reflection, guided attention, and perception practices.
- Charitable work beyond giving donations.
- Interaction with people from different cultures, interests, and worldviews with an accommodative mindset, without being intimidated by uncertainty.
- Introspection and acting on how you want to bring change with your individual leadership capacity.

Team

- Appreciating the purpose of coming together as a team and loving your team members.
- Valuing the differences that members in the team bring and recognizing the power of respecting and accommodating such differences, treating consensus as an emergent phenomenon.
- Welcoming and accommodating individual introspection practices and engaging in group attention practices; integrating nature immersion practices for the team.
- Critically appreciating if the leadership capacity of your team is palpable and what it means for you.

Organization

- Aligning the organization's physical, financial, intellectual, and human capital to create meaning internally and externally for stakeholders who are involved and affected by the organization's actions.
- Developing relationships through careful listening to, understanding, empathizing with, and supporting people internal and external to the organization.
- Inviting and involving people with creative capabilities, such as performing arts, and introspection expertise, such as traditional healers, to take part in the organization's strategic initiatives.
- Leveraging the organizational leadership capacity to affect the desired change internally and externally.

Platform

- Reminding ourselves that the social, regulatory, technological, and economic institutions that we create serve our purpose, but

if they do not serve the purpose of social well-being and the ecological, our purpose will soon be defeated.

- Creating institutions and structures that convene stakeholders, enable negotiations, neutralize unequal demands, and facilitate agreements.
- Promoting Bohmian dialogue between stakeholders to experience everyone's point of view fully, equally, and nonjudgmentally.
- Reflecting on the missing gaps in the platform and mobilizing yourself, teams, and organization to leverage the collective leadership agency to fill those gaps.

Ecosystem

- Respecting the sacred nature of our global commons—high seas, airspace, outer space, and cyberspace.
- Adopting a regeneration mindset in our social, ecological, and even financial approaches.
- Developing capacities to give up our most prized beliefs and surrender to the system as it emerges through our conscious efforts.
- Imagining the direct connection between yourself and the ecosystem, and driving your leadership capacity to prevent any harm to the ecosystem as a result of your actions.

The above practices are not meant to be exhaustive and distinct for the dimensional domains, but they must run through all the states of our embodied experience. The distinctions are made to emphasize on certain aspects of the respective dimensional domains.

Implications of This Research

Contribution

CSL introduces a new characteristic for systemic leadership by connecting it to consciousness, which is central to the realization of the full potential of systems thinking. Although the concept of SL has been much talked about in intellectual circles and adopted by several large organizations in the public, private, and third sectors, it has, until now, failed to make an impact on addressing the world's big challenges. Climate change is a classic example. We are all aware that the consequences of our lifestyles can lead towards direct harm to the environment. Political leaders are aware of the disastrous impact of their policies on the climate. Large industries are aware of how their actions cause direct catastrophic results for the climate. But we fail to make any significant progress

in the way we act and behave. Although in theory we are aware of the tools and frameworks that are needed to approach such complexities, the challenges we encounter are often a result of our inability to realize that we are all part of the larger system acting as its agents; that there is no “other” in this equation. The effect of the individual actions of each one of us is felt by each one of us.

With the integration of consciousness, CSL makes a new addition to the field of SL as the first attempt in the literature to draw on perspectives from Hindu philosophy, more specifically the *Shiva* consciousness, to enrich the SL framework. It also advances my previous work on connecting the *Shiva* philosophy to systems thinking (Chowdhury, 2022a), which was also the first in the literature.

Deploying CSL in practice will require taking into consideration a wide range of challenges. CSL must be introduced and engrained in educational curricula, through all stages, so that learners are able to appreciate its value. The private sector will need to adopt and promote it. Nay-sayers will surface, who will always want to look at narrow political and selfish economic agendas against the tenets of systems thinking. To make a real impact, a conscious change in mindset needs to penetrate into every level of society. This thought complements what Scharmer (2019) says about “vertical literacy,” which is the capacity to shift one’s consciousness from one level to another, from ego- to eco-system awareness.

Future Research

To bring CSL to life, there will be a need for further inquiry. Systems theory and systems methodologies can offer the appropriate tools and frameworks for how to convene stakeholders, navigate conflict, agree on boundaries, negotiate on issues, and create shared visions through collaborative and inclusive approaches. Elsewhere, I have discussed in more detail how systems methodologies can be used creatively and flexibly to achieve outcomes that are more meaningful and responsible (Chowdhury, 2022b, 2023). Recent years have also seen the development of systems methodologies that are influenced by Eastern mysticism (Coll, 2021; Kim, n.d.; Rajagopalan, 2020; Shen & Midgley, 2007a,b,c, 2015). Future research needs to explore how such methodologies in systems thinking can be incorporated creatively and flexibly in CSL to realize this theoretical framework in practice. Further, it needs to be investigated if the researcher needs to be formally trained in systems thinking and methodologies, or if application of systems methodologies is a skill that can be picked up without formal training. Focus needs to be directed to understanding the challenges for the practices to enable CSL and how they can be overcome. Developing this research in the said direction will serve as the link between consciousness and awareness-based systems change in practice. Finally, insights from this new spectrum of research must be used to articulate and refine the capabilities and practices for CSL that I have, earlier, touched upon.

Conclusion

In this paper, I worked towards developing a theoretical construct of what I called conscious systemic leadership (CSL) drawing from the *Shiva* philosophy. A consciousness-based approach enables us to undergo a mind-shift from the individual to the collective, from short-term to long-term, from rigidity to fluidity, from holding-on to letting-go, and from results-focus to learning-orientation. I began by discussing my motivation behind this research. Then, I introduced systemic leadership (SL) and built an argument for the importance of integrating it with an understanding of consciousness. This was followed by introducing *Shiva*, covering who/what *Shiva* is, the main representations of *Shiva*, and the philosophy of *Shiva* consciousness. The ontology and epistemology of CSL, based on this understanding of *Shiva* consciousness, was articulated next. The ontology laid the foundation for the articulation of the contrarian imperatives and the epistemology laid the foundation for the articulation of the dimensional domains. The contrarian imperatives and the dimensional domains provided the scaffolding to work towards the theoretical construct of CSL that was presented. I highlighted indicative practices that can help bring CSL to life. Finally, I summarized the contribution of this research and shared my thoughts on the future inquiry into the topic.

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