

# The Bridge on the River Narmada: Leadership Dilemmas in Infrastructure Building

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**Abstract.** This case examines the leadership of Sanjay Londhe, CEO of Ashoka Buildcon Limited, during the high-stakes Narmada Bridge project. Facing unprecedented challenges of very tight project timelines and severe crisis situations, Londhe navigated them to successfully complete the project on time without compromising quality. Central to the narrative are the ethical dilemmas inherent in balancing national infrastructure goals with stakeholder well-being and environmental sustainability. By analyzing Londhe's adaptive capacity and managerial judgment, the case explores whether his actions serve as a model for executive leadership and responsible leadership concepts or highlight systemic vulnerabilities in emerging economies. It helps participants examine how senior leaders build adaptive capacity, exercise managerial judgment, and maintain legitimacy as they navigate complex stakeholder environments. This case examines executive leadership in crisis, with particular emphasis on ethics, stakeholder tensions, and strategic execution.

**Keywords:** executive leadership, responsible leadership, ethical dilemmas, strategic execution, leadership in crisis.

Sanjay Londhe, Chief Executive Officer and the Executive Director of Ashoka Buildcon, a leading infrastructure and construction company from India, was tense on a cloudy morning in August 2020. He was addressing his engineers, who were involved in a complex infrastructure project to construct a bridge on the River Narmada as part of the Mumbai–Delhi Expressway. The Narmada experienced severe flooding after exceptionally heavy rainfall in August 2020, and the construction work of the bridge, casting yard, and other equipment used by the company suffered significant damage. It was a major setback as Sanjay stared at the timeline – March 2022, for the completion and handover of the bridge to the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), a nodal agency for various infrastructure development projects of national importance. There was a pin-drop silence, and the entire team looked very dejected. They had suffered multiple setbacks in this project before. There were floods before in 2019, the Coronavirus pandemic, and a fatal accident at the site. The team had lost precious time, but they had worked very hard to overcome these setbacks. But now, once again, the

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flood and the subsequent damage appeared to be the last straw. Sanjay had a clear mandate from the board that, regardless of delays and damage, the project, which was of national importance, had to be completed on schedule. This was extremely crucial, as delays would have created a negative reputation, impacted future business, and escalated costs, thereby placing a huge burden on the organisation's financial health. *“We will have to rise to this challenge. This project is of utmost importance to the survival and growth of our company as a leading construction organisation in India and internationally. The timeline of March 2022 is sacrosanct for the completion of this project. We have encountered huge challenges not only on this project but also in the past, and we have overcome them as a team. So, let's courageously face this challenge and collectively emerge victorious”*, Sanjay tried to inspire his team. Still, he had a question mark: whether he could lead the team to execute and deliver this project successfully by March 2022.

### ASHOKA BUILDCON

Ashoka Buildcon Limited is a Fortune India 500 (Fortune India, 2025) company listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange and the National Stock Exchange, and one of the leading highway developers in India. The company is an integrated engineering-procurement-construction (EPC), build-own-transfer (BOT), and hybrid annuity model (HAM) player. From humble beginnings in 1976, the organisation rose to its present stature through its commitment to upholding Quality, Safety, Consistency, and Environmental Consciousness in all its assignments. The organisation felt proud of its strength, reflected in its ability to think and perform beyond the ‘ordinary’ and to challenge perceived boundaries in the construction industry. As a result, Ashoka Buildcon Limited achieved a portfolio of extraordinary achievements that helped it build new-age infrastructure in India and overseas. Over the years, it had developed a strong talent pool and solid fundamentals. This enabled the organisation to execute projects of any scale.

The organisation played a major role in developing India’s infrastructure by executing signature projects, including highways, expressways, and bridges. They had completed more than 14,000 km (8,700 miles) of highways, 300 km (186 miles) of gas pipeline, 50,000 km (31,000 miles) of powerline network, and 300-plus power stations, among others (Zaveri H, 2025).

Sanjay completed his Bachelor of Engineering in civil engineering from Sadar Patel College of Engineering, one of the top engineering colleges in India. He had stints at Tata Projects and other construction companies before joining Ashoka in the early 1990s. Since then, he had contributed to the growth of Ashoka Buildcon and grown with the organisation. The Institute of Engineers, India, recognized him as a Fellow (FIE) in 1997.

### BHARATMALA PARIYOJANA