

*Dr. Ashutosh P. Bhupatkar holds a Ph.D. from the University of Pune. He brings a blend of ten years of industry experience followed by over sixteen years as teacher/Director/Researcher in Management Institutions, using it all for designing courses - based on systems thinking, process consultation, organisation studies, etc. He has also been a consultant to a number of blue chip organisations, designing and delivering training initiatives and is serving on the board of a number of companies. . He is currently adviser, Pearl School of Business, Gurgaon. He can be reached at bhupatkar@yahoo.com*



It has been a favourite pastime of amateur management gurus to talk about the relevance of their particular guru, scripture or sect to modern management. I have seen 'The Will to Yoga Way', heard Swamiji's discourse on excellence in management and come across several titles that link particular meditation and breathing techniques to self management. I find it very entertaining to look at this cross-fertilization of ideas. But entertainment is big business, the mind industry is big business too and so it is time to take a closer look at them. Before I proceed to do this, let me state a claimer. I have read some of the scriptures, learnt Yoga, practiced meditation and perform breathing exercises regularly. I am not a sceptic of the spiritual side of things. I was a practicing manager for 10 years and head of an educational institution for 16 years. I have a formal degree in management and claim to know a little about the practice of management.

If you want to meet God in India go to any roadside shop in any city, town or village. You will find the proprietor's favourite deity or religious symbol sitting pretty in a photo frame on the wall behind the counter. But God that I refer to is not in

the frame on the wall, but in the mortal frame that faces you in the persona of the owner or worker. This person at the start of the day makes an offering to the deity and then gets on with his job. He earns his living by working for it day in and day out. He takes responsibility for his family and adapts to his milieu, by conforming to the social mores. The conformity measures may include paying instalments to local leaders, police and officials. He attributes his fortune to the complex environment, terming it as destiny. But he does not fall into inaction. The reason I refer to such millions of owners and workers as God is that they take responsibility but not credit. As a consequence they do not vitiate public life but contribute to its continued functioning, however flawed. They keep life going in and around them. They don't lecture from the podium about the relevance of scriptures to management.

Years ago, I had met an octogenarian Sikh gentleman at his son's house. I was told that the old man was still working in neighbourhood shops as a locum. When the shopkeepers wanted to go out of town on business or social obligations, the old man would be called to sit at the counter

and run the shop. Obviously, he was in possession of his mental faculties and paid for his services. I asked him the reason for doing so. The old man said it was Sewa - service to fellow human beings. He was practicing his own form of Karsewa that you experience in gurudwaras. It kept him active. I asked him if the work created any stress in him. He got charged and said he felt like slapping any one who complained of stress. Why? Just leave everything to Wahe guru (the Supreme Teacher = the Almighty) and there is no stress. When it is so simple, why carry your stress around? I asked him, how come you are getting angry? He said he never allowed anger to stay in the system and it came from his utter concern for the youth. I was struck by his simple logic and tremendous energy. I could see something typical about the Sikhs in him. Is there any wonder you find Sikhs in all corners of the globe doing hard work with gleam and gaiety? You won't find many lecturing about management wisdom, though.

But you will find two categories in India promising transport of esoteric principles from the ethereal realm to the board room. These are the vedantins and the yogis. The first will teach you the Gita and the meditation. The second category will tell you first to contort your body and then to exhort your mind. It is fine for managers and executives whose minds are troubled by non-achievement, under-achievement and pseudo-achievement. These things help take your mind away for some time from your worries. The same experience I have when I meet up friends and chatter for some time on anything and everything under the sun. Anything to calm you down should be good. The roadside business person and the 80-plus Sikh belong to the third category of the Bhakti followers. They bear God in their heart and not wear on their sleeve. They go about doing their work with faith and devotion and see their work as

God's work.

Let me now begin a serious examination of the several tenets attributed to the Gita, as an example. In a recent article it was stated:

One key message (in Bhagavad-Gita) is that enlightened leaders should master any impulses or emotions that cloud sound judgment. Good leaders are selfless, take initiative and focus on their duty rather than obsessing over outcomes or financial gain.

At the same time, business leaders exhort young managers to work with passion. Is passion not emotion in a raw form? How do you *master* emotions that cloud *sound* judgment? Obviously through meditation, comes the answer. If you do that, you may find your world turn upside down. For instance, you may stop selling certain products that go against your sound judgment. Or, you may stop most of your advertising that makes ludicrous claims like 'this shirt will give confidence, that hair cream will attract the lovelies and the motorbike will get your girl back.' If your sound judgment succeeds in driving out irrationality from your mind, where will you end up? Out on the street selling organic fruit to early morning joggers? Not a bad idea, if you ask me. The fact however is that the world of business revolves around the irrationality of the consumer and the investor. If everyone started using sound judgment keeping dark emotions out, business would be back to Charkha days.

Sound judgment never made a new product. Look at the failure rates of new product ideas, concepts and the products themselves, despite using numerous tools and techniques. So all talk of creativity and innovation, risk and venture should now be rephrased so as to curtail the cloudy emotions from gaining an upper hand. We talk of intuition and educated guesses in the context of innovations, but not of sound

judgement. Look at the next lesson drawn from the Divine Song and try to become selfless. You become selfless and your corporation also becomes selfless. Achieve financial gain but don't focus on that. Soon you may want to delist your stock from the stock market, because the latter institution operates on financial gain solely. But the real world wants you to achieve financial gain, be concerned over outcome *and* also focus on duty. It does not set up either or choices. All you can do is juggle the different goals not letting any one go out of hand. You have to take responsibility for the outcome and just can't shirk away from it.

By now, you must have got an inkling that there is a gap between the Gita and its several interpretations. The Gita *is open* to interpretation. There is one Gita, but there is no single interpretation. Even during our freedom struggle, leaders like Tilak and Gandhi turned to it for strength. But each one drew what he wanted most. Likewise, management thinkers are prone to draw support for their particular propositions from the scriptures. Let them do so while respecting others' right to a different interpretation. So let us focus on these thinkers and keep the scriptures away for the time being.

Management theory accepted the contingency approach nearly four decades ago. What this meant was a humble recognition that the theoretical propositions were inadequate for the purpose of application to practice. In managing, there is teeming specificity in a given situation that needs to be considered seriously. It is futile to try and work out conceptual frameworks for such specific situational factors. The contingency approach says that the first task in managing is to look at the specific factors of a situation and gauge the objectives to be met in that situation. Once the action-objective space is marked, one may use the conceptual frameworks to

evolve an appropriate response to it. So the space for theory and concepts was very carefully delineated in the field of management, recognizing the tremendous variety in managerial situations across time and space. Mind you, theory *is* useful in carefully thinking out options and their likely consequences.

The trouble with the contingency approach is that many practitioners view it as a license to do what they please *and justify it*. The justifications range from "consumers want it" to "competition is doing it". This is where management thinkers come in and try to rein in the practitioners from going over the edge. Because the issues are essentially moral, they find it convenient to invoke scriptural authority. What they do however is to select that nationality which is currently in focus internationally.

When Japanese corporations were rushing ahead, books on Zen and Tao started filling management shelves. Now that India Inc. is beginning to beep on world map, attention turns to Indian scriptures. In doing so, the management thinkers forget the lessons of the contingency approach. They never bring out the specificity of the current situation facing a corporate manager. Nor do they focus on the space for individual choice that exists in the world of today. Instead, they try to project the timeless or time-tested wisdom of the scriptures. But we must not forget that the scriptures were also products of their times. In their great need to draw moral strength for a mundane profession, the management gurus quickly turn to venerated scriptures, which are open to multiple interpretations.

The scriptures were written at a time the respective society was getting organized around the principle of private property as against the previous communal form of ownership. Hence all of them pass injunctions against stealing, theft and

covetousness and uphold selflessness as a virtue. They helped evolve a value consensus for stable and sustained social functioning. As societies evolved and became industrial societies, individuals experienced greater space and freedom for pursuit of self interest. Need to regulate this pursuit was felt when the powerful sections exploited the weaker ones. Societies that matured evolved secular concepts of justice and the mechanisms to secure it. Such societies have experienced sustained progress.

In India, the process of industrialization inaugurated the era of open pursuit of self interest. We are culturally still grappling with the reality of such pursuits. Corruption in public and private spheres is a testimony to this cultural struggle of accepting the reality of self interest and thereby also accepting the need to regulate it. Corruption affords a veil to such pursuit, since the culture still does not accept the open pursuit of self interest. All holders of power form a league to protect each other and in the process subvert the mechanisms that are meant to ensure justice and protect the weak.

Indian management thinkers have a big challenge in explaining why in the land of the Bhagavad-Gita there is rampant corruption. How is it that only a handful of the business leaders turn to scriptures while the majority turns to western management gurus to pick up the nuggets of wisdom to do well in the world of today?

The answer lies in the fact that the organizing principles have changed from scriptural times to the modern times. Caste and communities were organized around bestowal of resources by the rulers and their devolution by further bestowal. The modern society and its institutions are based on exchange and bargaining of knowledge and skills. Transitional societies like India are grappling with replacement of feudal

bestowal by market bargaining. Globalization has expanded the space for bargaining of knowledge and skills beyond national boundaries. Try telling the IIM graduates that they should become enlightened leaders who do not allow emotional impulses to cloud their sound judgment, that they should be selfless and think of duty first and financial gain later.

The other important issue facing Indian society is that our notion of collectivity has still not moved over to integrate the notion of the social system beyond caste and community. As the pursuit of self interest and its regulation gather momentum, the notion that we can do so *within* the regulation of a system should also get currency. The collective self functioned in a collectivity. The individual self functions in a system. This notion of an *organization* or a *system* distinct from its holders is yet to take root in our psyche. Our notions in their feudal hangover continue to look at the personalized forms. Hence we talk of business *houses* and business *families*. So we have opportunities for self interest, weak regulatory systems and sticky caste and community norms, all existing side by side. No wonder we experience indiscipline, lawlessness and corruption in public life. In my language there is a saying which roughly translated means the monkeys have just come out of the pub.

Interestingly the concept of work enunciated in the Bhagavad-Gita is one of assigned work. That is, work is assigned to you by your place in the social hierarchy. Your place is the place accorded to your caste or community. The industrialization process has changed this notion of work fundamentally. Increasingly the young have a choice of work and hence a choice of education. Hopefully this freedom of choice would become available to greater and greater numbers. In making an informed choice the young one can hear the first

intimations of his or her identity. The working mother who brought up her son - he rose to become director general of our scientific establishment - worked with a clear goal. She did not accept the 'assigned' place for her son.

When such fundamental changes have taken place in the social organization, the role of thinkers is to integrate the notion of a social system in the cultural psyche of the society. Without such integration it is difficult to bring about an orderly and sustainable way of regulating economic activities. Instead, they seem interested in giving their interpretation of notions based on scriptures in order to bring some semblance of moral authority. What we need to incorporate is the concept of an overriding system within which we function. It is social, political and legal in character. We are not only building our businesses but also raising the strength of the overriding system. The concept of freedom is inextricably linked to it. My freedom is not absolute; it is underwritten by affording the same freedom to others. Justice follows very closely on the heels of these notions. Managers in India need to understand these concepts and their implications for practice. In their individual life, they are in any case free to turn to any spiritual practice.

I would say thousands of common people in India are already alive to their moral responsibility and are imparting some security and protection against a lawless machine that grabs at anything in sight. They would make as good gurus as the management ones.