

Hinduism, Values and Management

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Global corporations and governments appreciate the importance of an ethical public appearance. Thus values and ethics for business and government have become important components of management training. The movement for management values originated in the United States, it quickly spread to Europe, and India can hardly be said to lag behind. Indian initiatives in this field receive financial support from enterprises such as the Tata Group, the ONGC (Natural Oil and Gas), and the BPCL (Bharat Petroleum).

By Victor A. van Bijlert

The upsurge of interest in management values can be traced back to political demands for a smaller state. Social scientists have observed that the old welfare state is giving way to the night-watchman state where social security, health insurance, and public utilities are privatized. Thus economic life is slipping away from parliamentary control and regulation. This freedom has some economic advantages, but it does not preclude irresponsibility and downright fraud.

The slipping away of public control mechanisms seems to encourage managerial misbehaviour. Promoters of business ethics in the United States and Europe have understood that the growing private sector requires clear formulations of ethically acceptable corporate behaviour. Thus 'values in business', 'values-based management', 'ethical entrepreneurship', and so forth, have entered the market of management teaching.

Hindu values and business

Concern for ethical corporate behaviour was first expressed in India in the early 1980s. The then Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, informally urged Swami Yuktananda, a monk and follower of the Shri Ramakrishna movement, to promote Indian values for the moral improvement of Indian management. Indian values, it was claimed, derived from the inclusivist (Hindu) Vedanta philosophy. Vedantic Hinduism (like Christianity in the Western world) in the 1980s came to be regarded as a cultural resource for Indian managers. It was thought that values awareness would prevent corruption. Less corruption in the end meant less financial loss.

The target groups for values training were managers of private and public sector enterprises, high-ranking state civil servants, and executives of the Indian Administrative Service. Promoting values in Indian government, however, inevitably has political implications.

In the 1990s, the Hindu conservative Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power at the national level. This boosted efforts to promote Hindu values in management. Professors working at institutes of management in Calcutta, Lucknow, and Ahmedabad began to lecture on Indian (read Hindu) ethics for management and developed special training courses for Indian managers. While the number of courses is steadily increasing, the serious scholarly literature on the subject remains small.

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One scholar with an international reputation has held undisputed sway over the field since the 1990s: S.K. Chakraborty (Management Centre for Human Values, Calcutta). Author of about twenty books, Chakraborty practically initiated the Hindu values movement in management literature. Other notable contributors to this literature are the genuinely concerned author R.C. Sekhar (T.A. Pai Management Institute, Manipal) and Arindam Choudhury, the author of a recent best-seller.

Serious authors like S.K. Chakraborty address financial and political corruption, entrepreneurial irresponsibility, 'creative' accounting, and fraudulent practices in the stock markets and commercial banking. These real problems require

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criticism and analysis from an ethical perspective. The values that inspire this criticism are based on modern Hindu thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore, and Mahatma Gandhi. These figures had a great impact on modern India, not least due to their involvement in early Hindu nationalism and the freedom struggle. Their actions provide instances of exemplary values and ethical behaviour and prove that 'typical Indian corruption' is neither typical nor Indian.

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The promotion of religion as the fundamental source of ethical behaviour is based on two sociological observations: (a) the great world religions of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism have large followings, and are more universal in aim and intent than political or social ideologies; (b) unlike ideologies, world religions address (or claim to address) issues of ultimate human concern such as life, death, good, evil, and the hereafter. Thus, Hinduism (the religion of about 85 per cent of Indians) provides fundamental Indian values. One may question the need to turn to world religions to seek ultimate values. But so long as religions provide values to millions around the world, academics have reason to study their impact on values discourse. Indian intellectuals who regard themselves as secular and (often) leftist balk at the use of religious texts as sources for values, especially the use of Hindu texts as sources for ethics in business and politics. Their apprehension is not groundless.

Hindutva and management

The influence of Hindu communalism on Indian public life grew during the BJP's rise to power. Today Hindu communalism is euphemistically rebaptized 'Hindu nationalism'. Even some Western scholars have adopted this term. The protagonists of this 'nationalism' often call it Hindutva, which translates as 'Hinduness' or 'Hindudom'. It regards only Hindus as true Indians; Islam and Christianity are foreign to what it calls the 'Indian ethos'. Therefore Hindu 'nationalists' demand a Hindu *rashtra*, a purely 'Hindu India' and brand all those who criticize or oppose this programme – communists, socialists, members of the Congress party, liberals, secular intellectuals and anybody who has independence of mind – 'pseudo-secular' or 'un-Indian'. They criticize previous Congress governments for pandering to 'minorities' to gain or keep votes. As Hindu communalists promote themselves as the sole interpreters and inheritors of Hinduism, it is unavoidable to be drawn into sharp political confrontations when dealing with contemporary Hindu ethics.

What is at stake? The main issue for Indian/Hindu values in management is how one defines the concept of managerial leadership, in other words, how an executive should give direction to an organization. Broadly speaking, there are two positions among writers on Hindu values and management: some prefer a hierarchical approach to leadership, others a more egalitarian one. This dividing line has socio-political implications. The advocates of hierarchy in management prefer authoritarianism in politics; the egalitarians on the whole support democracy.

The most famous and influential representative of the first approach is S.K. Chakraborty. In his courses on values for managers he presents a leadership model that builds upon hierarchy, strict obedience to a boss or leader, rituals, and punishment for those who disobey this leader. In some of

his courses and articles Chakraborty has argued for abolishing the present secular constitution and parliamentary democracy, and replacing them with a Hindu constitution and rule by a few wise gentlemen.

R.C. Sekhar, in contrast, stresses the coaching model of management and a 'flat', i.e. non-hierarchical, form of organization. Non-hierarchical managerial behaviour is also advocated by Peter Pruzan of the Copenhagen Business School in his many lectures in India. Pruzan's source of inspiration is Shri Sathya Sai Baba. Arindam Choudhury in his best-selling book *Count Your Chickens Before They Hatch* wants Indian managers to act with self-confidence and a sense of initiative. One of Choudhury's Hindu role models is Swami Vivekananda. However, the vocal supporters of egalitarianism and democracy are outnumbered by those who tacitly support hierarchy and authoritarianism.

Challenges for the future

The scholarly debate in India on values in management is not isolated from the wider socio-political context. Announcements for courses on Indian values in institutes of management invariably mention government executives along with private sector managers as participants. The Management Centre for Human Values, Calcutta (founded by S.K. Chakraborty) has taught courses on Indian values for top executives of the Indian Administrative Service where values in management are treated as a derivative of Indian / Hindu social values. S.K. Chakraborty argues that a manager is 'man' first and manager second. The debate raises issues with serious implications for the future of India.

According to some Western observers, India (following China) will emerge as an economic superpower. Abdul Kalam, President of India, has outlined a dream to 'ignite' the minds of youth through widespread education with the aim to build a technologically advanced nation. In order to realize this dream, government institutions and businesses must work in a socially and economically progressive environment. This requires universal basic education fostering independence of mind, rationality, problem solving, and initiative. In short, a democratic egalitarian temperament is essential to growth in every respect.

It is estimated that over 90 per cent of India's work force is barely educated and works in the informal sector. The greatest challenge for the future will be the full mobilization of this work force on a socially just and economically responsible basis. Serious debate on values is indispensable. Indian executives in government and business must reflect on the ultimate ideals that ought to guide the future of India: will the country be transformed into a more democratic and economically equitable society that enables all of its citizens – irrespective of gender, status or religious background – to fully develop their talents and creativity? Rational and democratically minded authors on Hindu values can contribute to the dissemination and public internalization of these ideals. The literature on Hindu ethics and values requires input from a more varied range of authors, and should seriously reflect on issues such as democracy and the civil rights embodied in the Indian constitution, for these form the basis for a better future. ◀

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