

Guiding Principles

Realising that Indian cultural tradition is rich in leadership values, corporations are beginning to analyse and absorb the wisdom of the scriptures

KURUKSHETRA. Arjuna pauses, then declines to fight. Is there glory in a victory that kills fathers, sons, teachers and students? One of the most able warriors in the land is paralysed by emotion. Lord Krishna reminds him of the consequences to the state and society.

Modern day managers face the same situation every day—a conflict between tough decisions and the larger good. "Corporate playing fields are much like Kurukshetra," says Delhi-based management consultant M.B. Ahireya. "They can be viewed as *Dharm Kshetra*, where the role of leadership is to re-establish *dharma* and resolve the conflicts that arise between customers and suppliers, pollution and the environment, manipulative politics in the organisation and unfair practices towards workers."

Concepts like *Uthstha* (stand up and be counted), *Vishkudha* (doubt), *Swadharma* (duty) and *Nishkama Karma* (work without attachment to results) have always existed in the *shastras*. Now, driven by the understanding that the Indian cultural tradition is rich in these leadership values, managements are beginning to examine the wisdom embodied in the scriptures. Many across the country who have tried to inculcate the values prescribed in the *Gita* are starting to show positive results. Says Dr. Subir Chowdhury, director Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Calcutta: "It's back to basics. If traditional values are transplanted to modern times, a new management style can develop as opposed to the Japanese and the American style."

Companies like Crompton Greaves, Larsen & Toubro, Excel Industries and the Marital Group are beginning to reinterpret business in the context of Indian heritage. Asca Brown Boveri Limited's (ABB) unit in Vadodra is one such place which has been experimenting with the Vedanta style as part of its total quality management programme for the past four years. Consultant Varun Jha was called to hold workshops for workers. The results are visible and can be quantified.

At ABB, one group of worker reduced the time to make a circuit breaker from 120 days to 68 days, while customer delivery has improved 100 per cent. "The foundation of the change programme lies in getting away from the hand-body syndrome and engaging the minds of people in a creative manner towards an overall vision," says ABB Vice-President K.K. Kamra.

The *shastras* have been used in more sophisticated management missions than improving shop floor objectives.

Ahireya, who earned his doctorate at Harvard and leads the new interest in the *shastras* today, has used his knowledge of the *Gita* to reorganise Indian family businesses like those of the Harshankar Singham, transform the political culture of the M. Thapar group to that of a business culture and has helped workers at Shaw Wallace come to terms with the fight between brothers Manu and Kishore Chhabra.

At the Rs. 240-crore Excel Industries, says Managing Director K.C. Shroff, who bases his management methods on the *Upanishads*, the company hasn't wasted an hour on industrial disputes in its 53-year history. Shroff quotes the *Upanishads*: "Together we will work, together we will do great things. But never envy each other."

The rediscovery of ancient wisdom is quickly being recognized as *turbo vidya*. "The Bhagavad Gita works because it recognizes *atma* (soul) management," says Alok Chopra, an *archarya* at the Vedant Academy, a non profit organisation which holds courses on vedic principles. "We tell people, if all you want is more money and power, go to a financial institution. If you want to know the right place of both, the *Gita* will help."

According to Bangalore based economist S.L.N. Sinha, author of *Management with Dharm All the Way* and books on the Ramayan and the Mahabharat, values are critical to the performance of individuals and also to the outcome of corporate efforts. "The principles of management tell you how to acquire skills. But people don't have to courage or character to use those skills correctly," says Sinha who was the founder-director of the Institute of Financial Management and Research, Madras, and currently lectures on the subject. Many are convinced that western management has outlived

its relevance in the context of Indian psyche.

Excessive emphasis on competition and not enough on integrative cooperation has begun to expose its imperfections. "In line with the integrative mode, companies like Thermax and Sundaram Fasteners have been trying to evolve 'shared vision' and 'core corporate values,' says Jha. "Once that is done, it has a powerful emotive appeal within the organisation."

Jha says that he is amazed at the resonance with which Indian workers take to concepts like Karma Yoga. His studies have shown that even three years after the training in *shastras*, the new set of values survive erosion. He thinks that when a management educator uses the *shastras*, he literally taps into what Carl Jung calls the "collective unconscious" or the *sanskara*. Better work ethics, cooperation between departments and improved management-union relationships begin to emerge naturally.

Results appear to match the theory. And companies like Logic Control Private Limited, which manufactures voltage stabilisers, are beginning to experience them. "Most workers lack a purpose in life," says S.K. Bahl, managing director of the Rs. 1.96-crore Logic Control. "Their lives are full of misgivings, doubts and complexes. Within two months of lectures on the *Vedas*, the transformation at Logic Control became evident. Workers became aware of the contribution they make and

The shastras are being used to meet management needs and shop floor objectives.



Illustration by JANANTO

began to appreciate their significance. "Things move so smoothly now that I'm sitting idle most of the time," says Bahl.

The changes caught the attention of a transporter who ships products between Logic Control and his company called Controls and Switchgear. It seldom took the transporter more than 10 minutes to get material off-loaded at Logic Control premises. But back at his own office, it took him hours. When the transporter decided to speak to the Logic Control people, he discovered that there was no bureaucracy or hierarchy. He was told that this was a result of the weekly Vedanta sittings. Soon, Controls and Switchgear's 2,000 employees, including the top management, were looking at the *Vedas* for corporate guidance. Says Controls and Switchgear Managing Director Ravindra Nath Khanna: "I took wanted to be in the same boat."

WHAT Khanna discovered are key solutions which every management aims for. "The *Vedas* combine the dynamism of the West with the peace and serenity of the East," says Khanna. "Secondly, they tell you to be true to what you are doing. 'Khanna gives the example of standing for a *yagna*, throwing *ahuti* in the fire in the hope that the fire god will shower his blessings. A factory is like a *havan kund*—your efforts are like *ahuti*—if they are pure and sincere, you will be rewarded. 'We encourage workers to deliberate on their actions,' says Khanna. 'I've seen it transforming my people psychologically.'"

The transformation is inevitable, suggests Dr. Y. Jayadev, director of Bombay's 75-year-old Yoga Institute. His experience has shown that the *Vedas* as well as yoga help cultivate an other-worldly attitude. With industry and business showing and increasing interest in the value of the *shastras*, IIT Delhi is conducting an efficiency study at Logic Star to quantify the gains. Whatever its findings, the need for a specifically Indian movement has become imperative to balance the western dynamics of progress. "A sobering effect to the mindless rat race is the need of the hour," says Chowdhury of IIM, Calcutta where Professor S.K. Chakraborty is setting up a Centre for Management of Human Values. Recognised as one of the first to use the *shastras* in management, Chakraborty has been holding workshops and lectures for managers for more than six years now.

Unfortunately, many consultants who use the *shastras* are sometimes viewed as cranks or even religious fundamentalists. But they continue to look towards the great Indian epics for inspiration, helping resolve the conflicts between individual, corporate and social objectives. The attitude is in keeping with what Sinha observes in his book: "Public interest must always take precedence over private interest. That is the path of *Dharma*." A path that could help bring in improved work ethics and enhance productivity—a mission statement that any management would be proud of.

—ARUN RUBEN BANERJEE