

Preface

Indian Philosophical Issues - Relevance to Contemporary Management

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As long as humans have existed, they have needed to manage their affairs. However, it was not until the late nineteenth century in Western cultures that theories of management were developed to describe, measure, and guide the management of industrial capitalist production and bureaucratic processes. The quest for better and sustainable management paradigms has led to the huge formal research and education phenomenon of business schools such that an MBA is now almost *de rigeur* as a post-nominal when applying for management positions. Implicit in the management paradigms are assumptions about the nature of humankind, our needs, drives, traits, and motivations, and ultimately – though rarely – a concept of human telos. While a philosophy of humankind is implicit in these paradigms, it is rarely explicated. Management theories gained an apparent complexity appropriate for a discipline by applying economic, psychological, sociological, and mathematical theory, more recently co-opting, often inappropriately, complex scientific theories such as systems theory and complexity theory. However, rarely has philosophy been explicit in such theories.

It was perhaps the increasing complexity of management and organisational theory as well as the easy accumulation of data within industries that led to a belief that there had to be something more. Would access to terabytes of data gathered by increasingly intrusive data gathering techniques deliver better outcomes for the organisation and indeed society at large was the question posed by numerous theories in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Among the first to pose this question, using Ackoff's data–information–knowledge–wisdom (DIKW), was Bierly et al. (2000) who proposed the importance of wisdom as a foundation of our theorising. A special issue of *Social Epistemology* (McKenna et al. 2007) helped to propel

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the case for the importance of wisdom in organisation and management theory. Indeed this journal provided a special issue on wisdom in management in 2011 (McKenna et al. 2011).

As pleasing as this development is, a major concern has been the dominant Western orientation, mostly neo-Aristotelian, of wisdom in management. While there is a growing body of work using Chinese wisdom traditions in contemporary management theory and practice (see, for example, de Bettignies et al. 2011), there is very little from Indian culture. Perhaps this may be because of the diversity of philosophical traditions compared with the dominance of Confucianism in traditional Chinese philosophy. It is this lacuna that this special issue wishes to address. The question that this special issue raises is whether the philosophies of management based on Indian philosophies of wisdom have anything significant to offer to modern management practices.

‘Management has lost its way’ was the reply Professor Graham Ward, the Coaching Practice Director of INSEAD Business School who has coached the CEOs of some of the multinational giants, when asked the reason for his growing interest in understanding philosophy especially Indian philosophy. (Ward 2013). Such statements may have been ridiculed as absurd a decade ago. However, given that the 2008 global financial crisis has left latent cancerous cells throughout the world’s economy, not least in Europe and now, as a consequence, in the powerhouse Chinese economy, the orthodox tendency to ridicule such propositions is considerably muted. Apparently virtuous organisations revered for their “best practices” have come under the scanner in terms of their corporate governance, the degree of responsibility of the actions or decisions they take, and the extent of risk-exposure of the stakeholders to the decision of the corporations, etc.

There has been a change also in organisational discourse as organisations now talk of stakeholders collocated with words like “responsibility”, “accountability”, “sustainability”, “environmentally friendly”, and the like. Of gravest and most urgent concern is the very sustainability of the planet which hosts our human activity. Although the COP21 Climate Change declaration agreed in Paris in December 2015 at last offers a sliver of hope that Earth will not reach the 2 degree increase likely to produce more devastating climate changes than the ones we are experiencing now, the reality is that the world’s two largest nations, China and India, continue to build coal fired power stations to develop their economies. Furthermore, orthodox economics continues to operate on the assumption that economic growth should be based on producing greater numbers of consumer good. Without a wisdom orientation to environmental sustainability, that is, regarding human survival as our most urgent concern, then all other considerations are simply irrelevant.

Whether we will see an authentic, more socially conscious business paradigm emerging only time will tell. Considerable justified scepticism exists about corporations’ real commitment to stakeholder interests, particularly in developing countries (see, for example, Frynas 2008). Nonetheless, the altered discourse of business may give us hope that the longer term interests of a better future for all is still possible. The Aristotelian vision of “human flourishing” may still provide management practices that promote human, social, economic, and ecological sustainability.

The way towards evolving a more sustainable future is to create a philosophy of business which is more resilient to the demands of a turbulent global environment. This can happen by re-affirming our trust in the “wisdom” of our philosophers. Sometimes wisdom is ignored because either it is taken too lightly asserting that philosophy is for society and not for business whose only purpose is to earn profits or it is because there is scepticism towards traditions because they are thought to be out of context today.

If we look at the logic of any business, it can be seen as the manifestation of the aspirations of the individual or group involved in founding and running the business. Aspirations are driven by the values by which they live every day. An enterprise can create a sustainable future for itself by paying attention not only towards attaining its ongoing economic objectives but also its underlying values: do these values fulfil its responsibility towards creating a sustainable future for society and the environment at large. Now that is possible only if the vision of those running the business balances individualistic and materialistic interests with a holistic and mindful orientation. This clearly provides the logical foundation for discussion about a school of philosophy that promotes the idea of business not just as a discrete individualistic entity but more as a conscious entity that is mindful of its interconnectedness with the overall cosmos or environment and how all the cosmic elements, which includes business, society, and environment, can co-create that is successful, sustainable, and perpetual. That indeed is one of the basic assumptions of Indian Philosophy. As the Great Aranyaka Upanishad proclaims “Aham Brahmasmi” or “I am the Universe”, similarly every business should also begin by acknowledging this reality that they are part of a larger reality and they co-create their destiny of a sustainable future by being more aligned to the eternal laws of the Universe.

In spite of a lot of interesting work and research done on Indian philosophy so far, primarily by prominent western scholars, there is still a lack of understanding or sometimes a general misunderstanding about the various schools of thought. This is partly due to the fact that in India, philosophy or wisdom is closely intertwined with mysticism or the mystics who interpreted the philosophy in their own unique ways. In India, the sages are seen as “Guru” or teachers of a larger Universal order who have a better vision of the cosmic reality than many. However, this is viewed with a bit of scepticism by the West because preachers are often seen with an eye of caution.

We also have various prominent business leaders, who are thoroughly driven by spiritual values; values that are interpretations of Indian philosophy by some revered saint or sage or spiritual leader. And they openly preach it in their own words too. We see many iconic business leaders attending Wisdom workshops or “Satsangs” of different spiritual leaders in India in search of a deeper wisdom for life and living. Whether it is Steve Jobs coming to meet the mystic Neem Karoli Baba in the Himachal Pradesh of India, Mark Zuckerberg openly admitting his fascinating experience of Indian culture in a temple which opened his “eyes” to a larger interconnected cosmic reality, or it is Kumar Mangalam Birla, the Chairman of one of the largest and oldest Indian multinationals, the Aditya Birla Group, they all acknowledge the way that Indian philosophy has affected the way they live and respect values. Mindfulness-based stress reduction programs, which are the most sought after stress management programs in corporate America run regularly by many Fortune 500 companies for their employees, are deeply rooted to Eastern traditions especially the Buddhist meditative practices and the Indian yogic practices. Many successful leaders such as Janice Marturano of General Mills and Bill George of Medtronic Inc. also have started consulting companies that use mindfulness as a tool for transformative leadership and creativity. Some big names that regularly conduct such programs include Apple, P&G, and General Mills. While these indicate a growing awareness and acceptance of Indian philosophy in management, such applications are useless and hypocritical unless they are deeply rooted in the holistic philosophy from which it comes.

In spite of this growing interest in Indic contemplative practices among global corporations, and in understanding Indian Philosophy as a foundation in ethics or leadership, there is still a lot of scope for research to establish frameworks that show how to integrate and implement the important values of Indian philosophy in contemporary management practices at a strategic

and tactical level. This is the gap that we begin to address in this Special Issue. In this special issue we not only present contemporary management themes like leadership, sustainability, capitalism, and management education with an Indian philosophical lens, but also discuss how Indian philosophy has been used by some companies.

The issue begins with Thomas Köllen's paper that provides an Indian view of capitalism and profit orientation based on the doctrine of *Karma*, which is the central theme of most wisdom traditions that originate in India viz., Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. This is followed by Parminder Sahota's paper of a view on sustainability frameworks based on the learnings from the Sikh "Gurus" or Masters. The third paper, by Sandeep Singh, identifies several dimensions of wise leadership to subsequently arrive at a wise leadership development model for contemporary times based on the philosophy of Kautilya. Kautilya, who is popularly known as Chanakya, was instrumental in grooming and nurturing Chandra Gupta, who later became the king of Magadha, the largest empire in ancient Indian history. There is a need for more dialogue at the intersection of liberal arts, humanities and management; the paper by Sanjoy Mukherjee and Summauli Pyne on the Nobel Laureate poet and writer Rabindranath Tagore and his views on values and education for establishing Universal awareness and inclusiveness in a culturally diverse nation intends to do that. Indian philosophy remains incomplete without a discussion on its spiritual roots and mystical elements. Sharda Nandram's paper, provide an understanding of the interplay of spirituality, intuition, and entrepreneurship. The issue concludes with the paper by Arundhati Virmani with François Lépineux which traces the spiritual roots of transformative entrepreneurship by discussing the case of Aravind Eye Care System, one of the largest providers of eye surgeries in the world.

We hope that this special issue will open new perspectives for re-establishing the much needed harmony in business where the spirit of enterprise and human flourishing remain intact.

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