Management Thoughts in Purāṇās

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Introduction

Spirituality and ethics are core values that have shaped human life from time immemorial. However, as societies and their institutions progress and go through ebbs and flows, so does the relevance of such core values. Currently business entities are going through challenging times facing multitude of problems. Post 2000, there has been a wave of scandals related to the information and communications technology (ICT) sector (the cases of Enron and WorldCom for example). In recent times ethical issues were raised in the banking sector (London Interbank Offered Rate (LIBOR) scandal for example). The Satyam episode in India also highlighted the consequences of fraudulent and unethical practices of business leaders. These have brought to limelight the inadequacy of current management practices primarily arising out of bad leadership, personal greed and unethical practices. The most frequently heard phrases include meltdown of the global economy, sub-prime crisis, perils of depression of not only of the economy but also of the people being sent out of companies. People talk about problems of supply crisis, price rise, salary cuts and layoffs.

This paper discusses the issue of management thoughts contained in our purāṇās. The paper begins by highlighting some of the issues that modern day management faces. Therefore, there is an interest to look for alternative perspectives and ideas pertaining to management. This is followed by arguing that it is not surprising to find that the purāṇās indeed contain rich perspectives on management. The paper further proceeds to propose a schema for organization of our traditional wisdom that consists of the śruti, smṛitis, purāṇās and other ancient texts and demonstrate its parallels to the modern day repository of knowledge that any society needs for management. Using this schema the role of purāṇās in the context of management is established. Finally, a few specific issues of relevance to management today are taken up for discussion. The paper shows how the ideas contained in the purāṇās either clarifies certain aspects in today's context or provides alternative perspectives to the problems that we currently go through in the domain of management.

Current Problems in Business Management

Among the many challenges in the business world, workers world-wide face increasing demands to work extended hours and consequently experience considerable work
This invariably leads to mental stress and job burnout among managers. A recent research reported that a growing number of dissatisfied employees complained that they felt deprived of meaning in their workplaces. The "Occupy Wall Street" and other anti-business movements clearly show the crisis of the materialistic management paradigm. Materialistic management is based on the belief that the sole motivation of doing business is money-making and success should be measured by the generated profit only.

The current state of the society points to an interesting state of duality. On one hand, there are indicators of progress such as more salary, greater buying power leading to many malls and hyper stores for shopping, better roads and higher educational standards. However, ironically on the other hand we also find that the stress levels are high and people are ageing faster. There are studies that suggest that India is the diabetic and hypertension capital of the world. Furthermore, several people increasingly complain of deteriorating quality of life. On an average we find that individuals feel more stressed today than perhaps 20 – 30 years ago. In today’s scheme of things, organizations and management philosophies will brush this idea into a personal agenda not worth getting into. The dominant thinking in management seems to be "you can keep aside all those individual issues and set your targets and make sure things work". It is hard to imagine that individual issues can be kept away and still there is something called Business Management.

Another major source of worry for modern business management and society is sustainability. The western world seems to be waking up to the issue of sustainability after running the consumption engine to its maximum capacity. A paper published in 1999 suggested that in the US it takes 12.2 acres to supply an average person's basic needs, eight acres in the Netherlands and less than an acre in India. Most strikingly, another estimate was that if the entire world lived like those in North America do, it would take three planet Earths to support the present population, leave alone the future generations.

The current approach to this problem assumes that perhaps we can create and/or tame nature. Unfortunately this could be nothing more than a wishful thinking. Another study showed how futile and fancy this idea could be. An experimental setup known as Biosphere II was created in Arizona. Despite $200 million worth of elaborate equipment, Biosphere II had failed to generate breathable air, drinkable water, and adequate food for just eight people. Business management practices today are simply incapable of addressing the larger issue of sustainability using market economy as the main vehicle.

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It appears that our ideas of business management do not seem to work well. The unfolding business crises and scams have exposed the leadership crunch in organisations. The current practice of leadership seems unable to resolve the major issues facing businesses. Furthermore, this has once again brought to the forefront the role of spirituality and ethical and moral values in all domains of the society including the business. A number of scholars mention a paradigm shift in management theory, and practice in the last few years. These changes in management include a shift from an economic focus to quality of life, spirituality, and social responsibility, a shift from self-centeredness to interconnectedness, and a change from a materialistic to a spiritual orientation. Another researcher reports that Anita Roddick, the founder of the Body Shop, invested a quarter of the company’s net profits back to the community to “keep the soul of the company alive.” Such traits are exhibited by an individual when she/he is able to imbibe spirituality.

Role of Purāṇās in Management

The moot question is whether our purāṇās contain useful ideas for management. A cursory glance at some portions of our purāṇās will indeed suggest that there is a rich repository of management thoughts contained in it. The reasons are not farfetched. Management is all about dealing with a multitude of people, situations, and entities around. Since the purāṇās contain a number of situations dealing multiple entities and people it is inevitable that they indeed bring out management ideas to the fore. In order to understand this better we need to delve a little bit into the manner in which the ancient Indian knowledge tradition is organized.

The core and primordial source of our knowledge is the śṛti. The vedic text consisting of mantras, brahmanas, aranyakas and upaniṣads form the śṛti. Śṛti provides the overall defining framework for our living. Therefore there is a need to expand the tenets contained in this framework. It requires detailed explanations in terms of “how to” aspects of the ideas expressed in the śṛti. Therefore, we have another set of knowledge known as smṛtis, which provide detailed prescriptions in terms of do’s and don’ts of specific situations. These are in the form of dharma śastras, gruhya and śrāuta sutras etc. In other words the smṛtis are detailed commentaries that provide explanatory details of what is intended in the śṛti. Although smṛtis provide detailed instructions with respect to the application of the ideas enjoined in the vedas, several conflicting situations emerge and pose unique challenges in the applications of these principles. Therefore, knowledge of how different situations that can be subjective in nature, and need to be addressed based on the merits of the situation, have been handled is a very useful addition to the repository. This indeed will provide subtle dimensions and needed

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clarity to handle a myriad of situations that emerge in one’s life. The purāṇās serve this very purpose and provide this valuable knowledge for the benefit of the mankind.

It appears that in modern times we have adopted systems that are designed using a very similar approach to handle a variety of situations as they emerge from time to time. For instance consider the Income Tax Act 1961. This act will be cryptic and will merely enumerate the sections and sub-sections in the act. In order to understand its applications, typically a detailed publication known as “A guide to the Income Tax Act” is brought out. This will provide the explanatory notes detailing the intent behind the sections and sub-sections of the act. It will also unambiguously lay down the do’s and don’ts pertaining to various sections and provisions of the act. This is the equivalent of the smṛtis. However, what makes the application of the act more meaningful and easy is the compilation of “Case laws”. Case laws are detailed descriptions of how various complications arising out of situations from time to time have been handled. This is the exact equivalence of the purāṇās in our ancient knowledge tradition.

Viewed from this perspective, we will be able to appreciate the fact that purāṇās play a crucial role in helping us deal with the world of vyavahāra. Therefore, they indeed contain valuable knowledge relevant to management.

Some Management Thoughts from Purāṇās

In our knowledge tradition under the category of purāṇas there are two itihāsas (Rāmāyaṇam and Mahābhāratam) and 18 Mahāpurāṇas. There are several upa-purāṇas also. It is practically impossible even to take a single purāṇa and explore the management thoughts in them. Therefore, in this paper, we adopt a different approach. We take a few major themes discussed in the management literature today and explore the ideas pertaining to these discussed in the purāṇas. At the outset it may not be out of place to mention that in recent times there have been several attempts to cull out management thoughts from Srimad Bhagavad Gītā, which is part of Mahābhāratam.

The notion of Sustainability

Over the recent past there has been a growing concern on the impact of business on environment. These arise on account of depletion of natural resources, waste generated from industrial activity, manufacturing and mass and service systems and at the end-of-life of products. Increasingly, firms are under pressure to take responsibility for restoring, sustaining and enriching the planet’s ecosystem instead of merely exploiting them. In our contemporary approach to business growth and profitability, we seem oblivious to the fact that resources required for sustaining the current levels of consumption may be fast depleting. Further, today’s management discourse on sustainability is dominantly one of economic sustainability. The other two dimensions; environmental sustainability and social sustainability are not well articulated and addressed today.

Ideas in purāṇas on the other hand provide an overarching and more comprehensive framework for sustainability. The notion of Dharma as the key puruṣārtha emphasizes
the notion of sustainability in a wider sense. In the Karna Parva of Mahābhāratam there is a basic definition available for dharma:

धारणाम् मित्याहुधर्मम् धारयते प्रजा।
यदृश्यात् धारणसंयुक्तं स धर्मं इति निष्ठवः।

72.58

dhāraṇād-dharmam iti āhuḥ dharmo dhārayate prajāḥ
yat syāt dhāraṇasanyuktam sa dharma iti niṣcayah

According to these prescriptions, the very purpose of dharma is to ensure sustainability of the living beings and all those that are fundamentally contributing to the cause of sustainability is indeed classified to be dhārmic. Furthermore, the overall framework of dharma is primarily intended for nourishment and development of the living beings. A deeper understanding of the various tenets of dharma can help today’s society restore the balance from a perspective of sustainability. For instance, the notion of yajña as portrayed in our purāṇas (see for example chapter 3 of Gītā, ślokas 9 – 20) provide a larger meaning to sustainability. Similarly the concept of panca mahā yajñas envisaged in our purāṇas also presents a larger and a robust framework for sustainability.

The architects of our tradition clearly had a very unequivocal understanding of sustainability in letter and spirit. On account of the importance of sustainability, our purāṇas emphasized the need for protecting dharma as it in turn will protect the one who follows dharma, as is evident from the parting advice Kausalyā gives to Śri Rāma when he left for the forest (Ayodhyā Kāndam):

यं पालयिसि धर्मम् तवं धृत्या च नियमेन च।
स वै राघवशादूर्ल धर्मस्त्वामभिरक्षत॥ २५.३
yam pālayasi dharmaṃ tvam dhyāya ca niyamena ca
sa vai rāghavaśārdulā dharmaḥ tvāmabhikṛṣat

"O Raghava! the Dharma which you uphold with steadfastness and discipline may protect you from all sides".

The manu smṛti presented the same idea as:

13 All ślokās are rendered in Roman scripts as per the IAST schema for transliteration.
Modern management theories have spent disproportionately more time on the issue of satisfaction and motivation. On the other hand, if we look at the *paurānic* literature, the emphasis seems to be more on inspiration. One of the issues that Shri Krishna emphasizes to Arjuna through the teachings laid out in *Srimad Bhagavad Gītā* is the issue of leadership. In several chapters in the *Gītā* there are interesting discussions pertaining to the quality of leadership. According to the *Gītā*, leadership is at its best only when it becomes inspirational. Inspirational leaders have several attributes. These include:

- Outgrowing one’s own vision from the narrow perspective of “what is in it for me?” (*Gītā*: 3.9) to an opportunity to make a difference to the people and the place that they associate with
- Unwavering commitment to lead by example (*Gītā*: 3.21)
- Developing a high degree of equanimity (*Gītā*: 2.14). No great leadership is possible without developing a sense of equanimity. Lord Krishna drives this point home in the *Gītā* in several places (Chapters 2 to 14).
- Understanding and practising the principle of mutual dependence (*Gītā* 3.11)
- Not being afraid of anyone and not generating any sense of fear in others (*Gītā*: 12.15)
- An ability to dramatically transform people and entities in a sustained fashion that they come into contact with. It is therefore not surprising that many entities and people in this country and elsewhere have been significantly influenced by a person like Mahatma Gandhi till date. This phenomenon is tightly bound to our continuing tradition.
- Leaving behind an impact that guides a large number of people and organisations for a long time to come. Collins echoes these attributes through his definition of Level 5 leadership, one that transcends self-interest through a paradoxical mix of humility and professional will.

In order to achieve such a level of leadership, a strong current of spirituality must run in an individual. Spirituality will broaden the vision of an individual, melt his/her heart through empathy, embolden him/her to take steps without fear of failure and

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significantly increase his/her leadership competence. This seems to be the underlying message in the Gītā on matters pertaining to leadership.

_Sense of Equanimity_

A leader faces a variety of situations in his professional life. While some of them may be conducive, in several cases it can be hostile to his thoughts and actions. All great decisions are not taken in haste and excitement but with a mental framework of calmness and mental equipoise. Developing a mental equipoise is all about developing a superior frame of mind that enables one to face the world of ups and downs with evenness. Only with such a capability one can face the pushes and pulls of life. Unfortunately, modern management practices have not dealt this issue in great detail. The emphasis in most cases is to address situational factors rather than personal/individual trials and tribulations.

On the other hand, one of the major issues discussed in the _purāṇas_ in several places and in great measure is the issue of equanimity (_titikṣā_). We have already seen how this issue has been discussed in great detail in the Gītā. Ayodhyā _Kāṇḍam_ of Rāmāyaṇam provides a wonderful illustration of the importance of this. In the 16th _sarga_, Vālmiki begins to describe the jubilant mood of Rāma (of becoming the king) when he was summoned by _Daśaratha_. In the 19th _sarga_ he goes on to describe the mental pressures Rāma has gone through.

हन्त शीघ्रसितो गत्वा द्रख्यामि च महीपतिम् ।
सह त्यं परिवारेण सुखमास्व रमस्वच ॥ 16.20

_hanta śīghramito gatvā draksyāmi ca mahipatim_
saha tvaṃ parivāreṇa sukhamāsva ramasva ca

Here Rāma is portrayed to be in a happy state of mind and he instructs _Sitā_ to revel in enjoyment with her friends so that he can meet his father and come back quickly. When he returned after the conversation with _Kaikeyi_ and _Daśaratha_, he was full of grief and was making all the efforts to conceal his emotions and feelings.

धारयन्मनसा दुःखिमिन्द्रयाणि निगृह्य च ।
प्रविवेशात्मवानु वेशम मातुरप्रिययसिववान् ॥ 19.35

dhārayan manasā duḥkhām-indriyāṇi nigṛhya ca
praviveśātmavān veṣma māturapriyaśaṃśivān

However, it was not possible to conceal his feelings, which is evident when we look at the following observation of _Sitā_. _Rāma_'s face changed, and he looked sad and on seeing this, _Sitā_ was worried and inquired him of the matter:

अथ सीता समुत्पत्य वेषमान च तं पतिम् ।
अपशयच्छोकसन्ताः चिन्ताव्यकुलितेन्द्रियम् ॥ 26.6
atha sītā samutpatya vepamāna ca taṁ patim
apaśyat-śokasantaptaṁ cintā-vyākulita-indriyam

The trace of events seems to have momentarily shaken Rāma’s belief in the superiority of dharma as a pursatthra. In this śloka He says, “By seeing the behaviour of the king, it appears that kāma is superior to artha and dharma”.

Further, Śri Rāma’s mind wanders into issues such as the luck that has befallen on Bharata to rule the kingdom and the wickedness of Kaikeyī. The following ślokas bear testimony to this:

sa hi sarvasya rājyaśya sukhamekāṃ bhaviṣyati
tāte ca vayasātīte mayi cāranyamāsthite

With the aged father around and my being in the forest, it is clear that Bharata will determine fortune and happiness of the people of Ayodhyā.

Kaikeyī is wicked in nature, and out of her bad feelings she may even choose to poison my mother and your mother.
With a stream of wandering thoughts like this and being alone in the forest Rāma’s eyes were filled with tears and he could not sleep and was silently sitting in the night:

एतदन्यां करुण विलय विजने वने || 53.27
etadanyaccakaruṇām vilapya vijane vane
aśrupūrṇamukho rāmo niṣti tūṣnīmupāviśat

These thoughts and descriptions show how difficult is it for one to face disappointments and failures in life. However, towards the end of Ayodhyā Kāndam we are able to see a different characterization of Rāma when Bharata meets the brother and pleads him to return to Ayodhyā. The conversation between Rāma and Bharata and Rāma’s handling of the persuasions by Vasiṣṭha and other elders (sargas 98 – 116 in Ayodhyā Kāndam) provide a wonderful reading and valuable lessons on the issue of equanimity.

The lofty ideas that Rāma imparts to Bharata in the 105th sarga shows the level of maturity Rāma has exhibited and the strength of his character. After a long conversation Rāma advises Bharata to return to Ayodhyā and get himself anointed as the King in order to fulfill the wishes of the father. He further told him that he is doing the same act of fulfilling the wishes of his father by staying in the forest:

भवानिपतित तथेत्येव पितरं सत्यवादिनम् ।
कर्तुमहत्तिराजेन्द्रक्षिप्रमेवाभिषेचनात् ॥ 107.9
bhavānapitā tathetyevapatāṃ satyavādinam
kartumarhatirājendra kṣiprāmevābhīṣecanat

ऋणान्मोचय राजानं मक्खते भरत प्रभुम् ।
पितरं चापि धर्म्मज्ञ मातरं चाभिनन्दय ॥ 107.10
ṛṇānmocayarājānāṃ māktetebharata prabhum
pitāramcapidharmajñām mātaram căbhīnandaya

It is indeed hard to imagine how one can let go an opportunity to get back the kingdom. Managing one’s temptations is the hallmark of leadership. The entire set of events and narrations in Ayodhyā Kāndam provides a rich repository of knowledge as to how one can develop a strong character and clarified inner self. In today’s scheme of things, our ability to exhibit superior leadership skills critically depends on these aspects. A deeper contemplation of the events in Ayodhyā Kāndam will indeed give us valuable lessons.

Other Management ideas

There are a number of interesting ideas that one can draw from the purāṇas that may provide a concise yet an interesting perspective to several aspects of management. It may be worthwhile to mention one or two such examples here.
In the first *sarga* of *Sundara Kāndam* as soon as Hanuman crosses the sea and reaches the shores of Lanka, Valmiki points to the four factors that are important for executional excellence. Steadfastness and fortitude in the task at hand, a certain vision, good presence of mind supported by the knowledge of the problems and solutions and good executional skills are important aspects of accomplishing any task at hand.

Another valuable dimension in the *purāṇas* is the elaborate treatment of moral and ethical dilemmas that one’s is likely to face in decision making. These issues have been dealt with in such a manner that it provides some more clarity on the application of dharma in myriad situations. The issue of dharma sūkṣma described elaborately in our *purāṇas* provides one with thoughts pertaining to handling multiple situations which are in the domain of management. The following ślokas from the *Karna Parva* of *Mahābhāratam* provides an idea of this:

Conclusions

This paper merely provides a sample of what one can indeed look for in the *purāṇas*. A vast repository of knowledge contained in the *purāṇas* can provide valuable insights to several of the problems that we face today in our society. The choice is ours to make use of this. In our anxiety to cull out management thoughts from the *purāṇas* we must not lose sight of the fact that these texts are meant for a much larger purpose of shaping the thinking of the society on multiple aspects such as spirituality, religious practices, inculcating high thinking and setting aspirations for lofty goals of mokṣa. With such an overall understanding, we will gain more even when we cull out some useful perspectives in the domain of management.