

# Business and Values

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## Why not try to be good?

**I**t is true that whenever one speaks of business, the first thing that comes to mind is corrupt practices. Unfortunately most of the business news that we read in the morning newspapers everyday is negative and mostly about frauds and malpractices. But we should know that behind all such wrong things that are reported and widely circulated there are a lot of good things that are happening in this world. I can tell you that, considering the statistical reports of the last twenty years, these have been the most prosperous and the most peaceful two decades in human history. You will say that there is violence all around. China is making advancements, Russia has attacked Ukraine and so many different parts of the world are in trouble. But ever since the atom bombs were dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the world has realized that conquest is not a solution. We have to have bilateral discussions, negotiations for resolving disputes. It is true that skirmishes are there even on our borders. But if you look at human history, the world had been more violent in the past than during these last twenty years. If you take human life expectancy, it is higher than ever before. If you take human health it is better than ever before. Even if you take the sum total of the world's prosperity, though a country like ours is lagging behind, the world today is far more prosperous than it was fifty years ago. Now, all this good cannot happen without a lot of good being done by all of us. So it is true that just as in every part of life and society there are problems, in business too

there are wrong-doers. But a lot of good is happening in spite of them.

## Values

Values are ever evolving. There is no single proposition that remains static for all time. As times change we have to adjust. Yes, certain values such as integrity, truthfulness are everlasting. But when we look at the operative values in business or in other areas of life, they keep changing. For instance, in India, the opium trade, even just before independence, was legal. It is illegal today. As society evolves, certain things that were considered fine, have changed. Similarly, values in business also go through a changing process. I shall try and share with you just five or six thoughts about values in business and these are by no means prescriptive. They are possibly ideas that we can all turn over in our minds to evolve our own understanding of how we should look at business and values.

I would like to first of all state that almost twenty-five years ago, I had the great privilege of coming in touch with Prof. S. K. Chakraborty who is the founder of Centre for Human Values, IIM, Kolkata. I had many interactions with him and it was very interesting to go through a process of discussion as to how we should look at the different aspects of business and values. Let's begin with the basic concept.

Ours is a Vedic tradition. A large part of the world is in the Abrahamic tradition where we have Judaism, Christianity, Islam. In the Abrahamic tradition there is a concept of one life. It speaks of a Day of Judgement on which somebody judges you and,

depending on your conduct in this life, you are consigned either to hell or to heaven. The Indian concept in the Vedic tradition is that of many lives, many births. And that is how we come to the concept of karma. What you do in this life does not end here. You carry forward that to the next life. In a sense this whole Indian concept is based on cause and effect. As you sow so will you reap. Things are not much different in business. The only thing is that here sometimes you perform wrong things and you get short-term gains. But wrong things done will inevitably lead to wrong consequences. This has been proved time and again. Companies like the TATAs, that have put a premium on high values, have experienced that, even though they have suffered temporary losses or disadvantages, they have eventually come back winners because they have stuck to some good values all through the hundred and fifty odd years of their existence.

Now I will talk about another thought, and as I said, this talk is just a scrap book of five or six ideas, which, when put together, may give some idea of the sense of values in business that I am talking about.

### Emotion and Intellect

Albert Einstein once very beautifully said, 'And certainly we should take care not to make the intellect our God; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead, it can only serve; ...The intellect has a sharp eye for methods and tools, but is blind to ends and values.' Swami Vivekananda also corroborated: 'It is the heart which takes one to the highest plane, which intellect can never reach; it goes beyond intellect, and reaches to what is called inspiration.' The role of culture is to be a tool of inspiration, to inspire us to rise to a higher plane of consciousness and thus, live up to a higher sense of values. Mahatma Gandhi also said that knowledge of science, history, astronomy, chemistry etc. did not

help him control his senses. Therefore, neither elementary nor higher education is essential for man-making.

What do we learn from this? We need to use our intellect, but we also need to have an overriding quotient of compassion and emotion to be able to guide the intellect to a sense of higher values. This is true for all of us as human beings. It is true for all of us as leaders in a business organization.

Let us take another idea. Swamiji mentioned that the purpose of life is a quest for knowledge. If you really put that in the context of business, somebody will ask, what does the quest for knowledge have to do with business? Well, certainly business is a summation of work done by many of us together to give something of value to other people.

*Nishkāma Karma* or doing one's duty without seeking fruits of action has to be the corner-stone on which the philosophy of business is to rest. The next question will be, isn't business profit-oriented? If profit is a fruit, you need to make business service-oriented, product-oriented, and, God-willing, if the service is good and the product is good, the fruit in the form of profit will follow. Very often in business, we try to put the profit first, and then start cutting corners, because by 'fruit' we mean the desirable object and not the desire to attain excellence in product and service.

In the *Manusmṛiti* there are ten foundations on which *dharma* rests. You might ask, what do these have to do with business? Well, as I said, the principles of personal *dharma* and business *dharma* are not different. It is only that in personal life you have a lot more control because it is your own individual self. But in a business you have to influence a very large number of people. But having said that, principles remain the same. What are the ten foundations? One is *dhṛiti* which is patience, *kṣamā*, forgiveness, *dama*, self-control, *asteya*, non-stealing, *svacchatā*, purity or

cleanliness, *indriya-nigraha* which means restraint of the senses, *dhi*, intuitive intelligence, *vidya*, learning, *satya*, truth and *akrodha* which is angerlessness. These are the fundamental principles of the *Manusmriti* for *dharma*, and I think these principles apply to business as well.

### The spirit of service

In business there is always an ethical dilemma—a dilemma about whether I should do this or do that. In the *Prapanna Gita*, Duryodhan, in one of his introspective moments, says to Krishna, *Jānami dharmam na cha me pravrittih, jānāmyadharmam na cha me nivrittih*. In other words, I know what is ethical but I don't have the will to do it. He also says, I know what is unethical but I cannot desist from doing it. This is the quintessential to-do-or-not-to-do situation in business. We sometimes feel that something that we want to do is probably not a good idea on a higher ethical plane but somewhere it is going to translate into good profits. Or sometimes you feel that this is what I must do because everyone seems to be doing it. That is a dilemma. And we have to always fight this dilemma and hope that we are able to rise to our higher self.

The next point that I would like to mention is that we are all born with five debts—the *deva rin*, the *pitri rin*, the *rishi rin*, the *nri rin*, the *bhuta rin*—our debts to nature and God, to our teachers, sages and seers, to our ancestors and our parents, to humanity, and to the sub-human species and animals. Why is it a debt? Because, we are alive owing to the contributions of all these different forces, or presences in our lives.<sup>1</sup>

If you look at your life as consisting of

so many debts, which you are supposed to repay, your attitude should be one of giving, not grabbing. Because you are saying to yourself, can I do what I can do? Let me try to do what I can do. And something will happen. It is very similar to the concept of *yajna*. In *yajna* you make an offering to the Lord in the hope that the Lord will bless you in the form of rain or bounty, or whatever. But you don't make a transaction by saying, please, tell me if it is going to rain, then I am going to do *yajna*. This is not how it works. You do the *yajna* with belief and faith. If it is done with pioussness and humility, the blessings will follow.

Finally, I want to leave you with a reference to a very interesting poem by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore which in a sense sums up some of the thoughts that I have shared with you. The poem entitled *The Miser* speaks of a person to whom God has come. He thinks, now that God has come, he may ask for anything. But, to his surprise, God asks: 'What do you have for me?' And the person says, Oh my God! I came here thinking I'll get something and now He is asking me to give. What do I have to give? So he takes out one small grain from his pouch and gives it to God. When he comes back home he opens the pouch and finds that there is one grain of gold. Then he wonders, if he had given the whole bag then he might have got a bag full of gold!

This is business. We often become miserly and think that we should do this and not that. But if we do something wholeheartedly, we may hope to receive His grace and blessings and He shall bestow unto us more than what we deserve. ■

### NOTE

1 For another discussion of the idea of *Rin* or debt, see *Bulletin*, Nov., 2021, pp. 12-17. (Associate Editor)

\* This is the gist of the Foundation day oration delivered at the Institute on 29 Jan 2022 by Sri Harshavardhan Neotia, Padmashri, Chairman of Ambuja Neotia Group.