Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management

(Devdutt Pattanaik)

It took an American Psychiatrist, Dr. Burt Weiss, to bring the concept of past life experiences to center-stage in spite of the fact that we, as Indians, have grown up with the underlying assumption of rebirth and past karma. It took William G. Ouchi, an American Professor (albeit of Japanese descent) to propound Theory Z, that points outs that Western approaches to motivating employees cannot be applied per se to the eastern world as there are distinct cultural differences which must be therefore addressed within the specific cultural context. So, when an Indian creates an effective connect between Indian 'Beliefs' and 'Business' principles, it is certainly time to celebrate. Dr. Devdutt Patnaik in his book Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management, harvests the wisdom found in Indian folklore, mythological tales and metaphors to derive a rich source of strategy for effective 'people management'. Business sutra is a reminder that hidden within the many mysterious layers of Indian mythology and metaphors is a storehouse of knowledge that can be useful for the manager. In fact Devdutt Patnaik has not only uncovered the link between mythological tales and everyday life but also succinctly identified the management lessons drawn from it. Every metaphor, every mythological tale or/and folk lore is a management theory in itself and Devdutt shows how- simply, beautifully and in an easy to understand manner.

Globalisation has change the entire business scenario and as the world shrinks into a global village the imperative to keep abreast stock of the dynamically changing political, social, economic and technological environment cannot be over emphasized. Knowledge itself is ever expanding and knowledge management is recognised as the most useful skill of present day business leaders. The Indian civilisation is among the worlds oldest. India has a long and chequered history of the rule and misrule of kings and emperors. Ancient India is also known to be a leader in trade and commerce. Its past is rich with legends, folk lore and mythological tales. All of which help Devdutt to create a fresh framework of management, especially in the area of human resource management. Devdutt states that while modern management aspires towards objectivity, yet its focus on accomplishing rigid objectives and

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targets and increasing shareholder value, reveals what may be identified as a bias towards western concepts. The Indian way of doing business is apparent in Indian mythology but unfortunately no longer seen in practice. Devdutt draws on stories, symbols, and rituals to understand a wide variety of business situations and bring this lost knowledge to the forefront.

The book itself consists of three main parts, and each part is distinct in that it focuses on explaining one aspect to the reader.

The first part is the ‘Introduction’ which establishes the connection between the principles of management and Hindu mythology. This part is twenty five pages long and emphasizes the need for such a book while outlining the author's perception of management chronologically. Devdutt speaks of the design of the book and how he has tried to connect management to mythology and how it may work for some and may not work for others. Devdutt brings out a strong connect between the wisdom so deftly interspersed within mythological stories and legends, and management principles, by uncovering the inherent pragmatic solutions to management issues that can be learnt by reading, understanding and assimilating the knowledge.

The second part titled ‘Business Sutra’ forms the chunk of the book. The word ‘sutra’ means aphorism or a terse statement. This part is divided into 12 sections that enumerate 145 sutras. A relevant episode drawn from Hindu mythology is used to explain every sutra following which the author mentions the principle of management that it correlates to. A case study that further reinforces the principle of management found in the sutra is encased in a highlighted box. Readers can use these case studies to assimilate the information or return to them for a quick recap or reference.

Illustrations or diagrams abound in the book. In fact they appear relentlessly on almost every alternate page and help to establish the sutra and its underlying principles visually for the reader. The sketches/diagrams bear the indelible stamp of Devdutt, as witnessed in all his previous books, and bear testimony to his bold lines and unique artistic merit.

The book creates a series of frameworks, each intricately woven into the other, leading the reader towards reflective thought. The theme that runs central to the book is not very different from Elton Mayo's Human Relations School of Management that states that human beings are not cogs in a machine that can be moved to action by merely oiling, with money or incentive. They are valuable resources whose worth must be recognised. Human beings long for recognition and want to be treated with respect and a humane approach. The book also emphasizes that most of the problems that surface in an organisation can be attributed to the incongruence between individual beliefs and goals and organisational beliefs and goals. In order to establish a harmonious corporate environment, it is imperative to strike a balance between the two. Devdutt uses stories of flawed kings, silently suffering queens, demons enticing the Gods into lawless jungles, and other mythological tales to show
that if one believes that wealth needs to be chased, the workplace becomes a ‘Rana Bhoomi’ or battlefield for investors, employers, management, workers, employees, vendors, competitors and customers; therefore it is imperative to recognise that wealth can be attracted and need not be chased so that the workplace becomes a ‘Ranga Bhoomi’ or a playground, where everyone is happy.

The last part of the book is a collection of 14 opinions, each a single sentence within quotation marks. This for the reader is an enigma, for the page bears the caption ‘How to reject his book’. It appears that the author is battling within himself to answer any doubts or questions that may challenge his framework. Unfortunately, Devdutt does not explain the logic behind such self depreciation, and leaves the reader puzzled.

While Dr. Devdutt Patnaik's view is well-articulated, and easy to comprehend for the Indian reader, the use of Hindu mythology and non-English words may be a deterrent to the reader not familiar with the two. In any case, for the reader well versed with the rich treasure of Indian heritage, Devdutt draws excellent allegories between the themes of Indian mythology with the common dilemmas that managers face in everyday business scenarios. This book is meant for a diligent reader, one who possesses a keen interest and infinite energy to accompany the author in a unique exploration of the subject that attempts to explain the how, what and why of human behaviour.