

Management and Labour Studies
26 (4), October 2001, pp. 237-244.

Can the Indian Worldview Facilitate the Emergence of Transformational Leaders?

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Abstract

Several studies have highlighted the importance of transformational leadership in enhancing organizational performance and follower commitment. This paper outlines four basic components of the Indian worldview—an understanding of the real nature of this world (theory of Maya), preference for action over inaction, perceiving the potentially divine nature of oneself and others, and visualizing freedom as the supreme goal of human existence—and presents propositions relating those components to transformational leadership. An argument is made for teaching Indian philosophy in schools and colleges in India to facilitate the emergence of greater number of transformational leaders who could lift people to higher levels.

Some authors have claimed that the fundamental assumptions permeating the Indian culture are not conducive for the emergence of effective leaders. Therefore, attempts have been made to import Western models of motivation and leadership and simply force them to fit the Indian context, notwithstanding their irrelevance (Hofstede, 1980). Consistent with this hypothesis, schools and colleges in India have avoided the teaching of Indian philosophy, even though religion and philosophy comprise the innermost core of India and they permeate all aspects of Indian life. Consequently, the graduates coming out of the halls of education find themselves rootless, and go around practically as bodies without souls. This paper is an attempt to refute the claim that the Indian culture is not conducive for the emergence of effective leaders. An argument is made in this paper that the truly Indian worldview can only facilitate the emergence of superior leaders who transform others and make this earth a better place to live. If we did not see too many transformational leaders emerging in India of late, it is because we have ignorantly shied away from understanding and reinforcing the Indian worldview.

James MacGregor Burns (1978) defined leadership as inducing followers to pursue common or at least joint purposes that represent the values and motivations of both leaders and followers. The problem of addressing the values of both leaders and followers could be handled in two ways. Burns termed the first one as transactional leadership and the second as transforming or transformational leadership. Transactional leadership, which involves an exchange of valued things, is based on current values and motivations of both leaders and followers. Transformational leadership on the other hand, does not take the current values and motivations to be fixed, but rather seeks to change them. In an interview study of transformational leaders, Lehr (1987) found that what was most important and common to all the leaders studied was an underlying belief system that guided and directed their actions.

This paper outlines the four essential components of the Indian Weltanschauung and presents propositions relating those components to transformational leadership.

Transformational Leadership

According to Burns (1978), transformational leadership “occurs when one or more persons *engage* with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (page 20), and results in a transforming effect on both leaders and followers. The purposes of leaders and followers that might have started out as separate but related, as in the case of transactional leadership, become fused. The transformational leader looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower.

Transformational leaders broaden and change the interests of their followers, and generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group. They stir their followers to look beyond their self-interest for the good of the group. The transformational leader articulates a realistic vision of the future that can be shared, stimulates subordinates intellectually, and pays attention to the differences among the subordinates. Transformational leaders change the organizational culture. Superior performance or performance beyond normal expectations is possible only by transforming followers’ values, attitudes and motives from a lower to a higher plane of arousal and maturity (Bass, 1998). Studies have found significant and positive relationships between transformational leadership and the amount of effort followers are willing to exert, satisfaction with the leader, ratings of job performance, and perceived effectiveness (Bass, 1998). Transformational leadership contributes significantly to effective organizational performance. Transformational leadership assumes even greater importance considering that organizations face a rapidly changing environment today.

Elevating Power of Leadership

According to Burns (1978: 4), “the result of transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents.” Transformational leaders throw themselves into a dynamic relationship with followers who will feel elevated by it and become more active themselves, thereby creating new cadres of leaders. Transformational leadership alters and elevates the motives, values and goals of followers through the vital teaching role of leadership, enabling leaders and followers to be united in the pursuit of higher goals. Transformational leaders raise their followers up through levels of morality.

The issue of moral leadership concerned Burns (1978) the most. He considered moral leadership as emerging from, and always returning to, the fundamental wants, needs, aspirations, and values of the followers. Satisfaction of followers’ authentic needs is the primary objective of moral leadership. Burns held that transformational leadership “ultimately becomes *moral* in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both” (page 20).

Mobilized and shaped by gifted leadership, sharpened and strengthened by conflict, values can be the source of vital change. At the highest stage of moral development persons are guided by near-universal ethical principles of justice such as equality of human rights and respect for individual dignity. This stage sets the opportunity for rare and creative leadership. Such leadership is transformational and it reaches into the need and value structures of followers, mobilizing and directing support for such values as justice and empathy. Such leadership has two characteristics. First, it is the kind of leadership that operates at need and value levels higher than those of the potential follower (but not so much higher as to lose contact). In its most effective form it appeals to the higher, more general and comprehensive values that express followers' more fundamental and enduring needs. Second, it is the kind of

leadership that can exploit conflict and tension within persons' value structures.

Contradictions can be expected among competing substantive values, such as liberty and equality, or between those values and moral values like honesty, or between terminal values and instrumental values (Burns, 1978).

Components of Transformational Leadership

The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) was developed to measure the factors in transactional and transformational leadership (Bass, 1985). Bass began with Burns's (1978) definition of a transformational leader as an individual who raises the followers' level of consciousness about the importance and value of designated outcomes and ways of reaching them; gets the followers to transcend their own self-interests for the sake of the team, organization, or larger polity; and raises their level of need from lower-level concerns for safety and security to higher-level needs for achievement and self-actualization.

Bass (1985) administered the MLQ to subordinates who were asked to rate their military or industrial supervisors. The items describing transformational leadership behaviors emerged as four factors—charismatic leadership, inspirational leadership, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Bass found charisma to be the most important component in the larger concept of transformational leadership. Followers described their charismatic leaders as those who made everyone enthusiastic about assignments, who commanded respect from everyone, who had a special gift of seeing what was important, and who had a sense of mission that they transmitted to their followers. Inspirational leadership, the second of the four factors, involves the arousal and heightening of motivation among followers. Envisioning a desired future state, making followers see that vision, and showing followers how to get to that state are part of the inspirational process. Intellectual stimulation, the third factor, arouses in followers the awareness of problems and how they may be solved,

and stirs the imagination and generates thoughts and insights. Transformational leaders enable followers to think about old problems in new ways, and provide followers with new ways of looking at things that used to puzzle followers before. The last factor, namely individualized consideration, involves giving personal attention to followers who seem neglected, treating each follower individually, and helping each follower get what he or she wants (Bass, 1985).

Characteristics of Transformational Leaders

Certain characteristics can be seen in those who take the initiative to establish a leadership relationship or in other words to enlist the support of followers. Zaleznik (1977) considered leaders who bring about change to belong to a distinct category of human beings. Several studies have shown that transformational leaders possess certain distinguishing characteristics. House, Spangler, and Woycke (1991) used archival data on U.S. presidents to demonstrate that charisma was positively related to need for power and activity inhibition, and negatively related to need for achievement. Charisma was also positively related to performance even after controlling for the effects of motives. Ross and Offermann (1997) found that transformational leadership was positively related to levels of pragmatism, nurturance, and feminine attributes, and negatively related to criticalness and aggression. Banerji and Krishnan (2000), in a study of transformational leaders' ethical preferences, found that inspirational leadership was negatively related to leader's preference for bribery and favoritism, and intellectual stimulation was negatively related to preference for bribery. Transformational leaders rate themselves high on purpose-in-life, personal efficacy, interpersonal control, and social self-confidence, while subordinates rate transformational leaders high on interpersonal control (Sosik & Megerian, 1999). Burns (1978) held that different sets of values determine the purposes of leaders who are transformational and of

those who are not. Transformational leaders have an underlying belief system that guides and directs their actions (Lehr, 1987). It would be worth investigating if the Indian worldview would provide such an underlying system for transformational leadership.

Indian Weltanschauung

Indian way of life or worldview has in the course of a long history, preserved at its core, certain fundamental values. The basis of those values is a belief in the existence of a god or a reality underlying all phenomena. The reality can be realized, and in fact, religion is supposed to start only when attempts are made to realize the reality. Religion is thus not a question of mere faith, but a hypothesis to be empirically verified. Indian thought also considers the realization of god to be the supreme goal of human existence. The goal however should not be confused with the means. God can be realized in many different ways and this diversity concerning means is considered the most distinguishing feature of the Indian Weltanschauung (Prabhavananda, 1960).

Four fundamental beliefs that characterize the Indian worldview—Maya, preference for action, potential divinity, and goal of freedom—are now presented and propositions are drawn relating them to transformational leadership. (a) Theory of Maya is used by Indian philosophy to explain the existence of the world as being neither real nor unreal. The world that we see is a bundle of contradictions, and understanding this leads to disenchantment with status quo, which is the starting point for transformational leadership. (b) The only way to get out of this bundle of contradictions is to discharge one's duties incessantly, and not remain inactive. (c) Belief in one's own essentially divine nature, which follows from accepting the reality that underlies all phenomena, enhances leader's self-confidence. Self-confidence is a prerequisite for changing the status quo. The leader with the Indian worldview also sees divinity in every being, resulting in greater respect for followers. (d) Defining realization of

god or freedom as the ultimate goal provides the framework for transcendent values, and this helps elevate followers to higher levels of morality.

Theory of Maya

The oldest idea of Maya that is found in the Indian literature is the sense of delusion. The word was used in the sense of magic also. Once the idea developed slightly, Maya was considered to be a kind of mist that has come between us and the truth. Nature was considered to be Maya and the Ruler of this Maya was the Lord Himself. Maya finally came to mean merely a simple statement of facts—what we are and what we see around us. Maya is not a theory for the explanation of the world; it is simply a statement of facts as they exist, that the very basis of our being is contradiction, that wherever there is good, there must also be evil. The least amount of material prosperity that we enjoy is causing the same amount of misery elsewhere. As we increase our power to be happy, we also increase our power to suffer. It is therefore fallacious to claim that it is one of the features of evolution that it eliminates evil. Good and bad are not two separate existences. The very same phenomenon that is appearing to be good now may appear to be bad tomorrow. Maya is a statement of the fact of this universe, of how it is going on (Vivekananda, 1972, Volume 2).

Mind and matter, finite objects and their relations are a misreading of reality and nothing more. Misreading or illusion could be of two types—private illusions of the individual like dreams, and universal or world illusion. Maya as a universal principle is different from ignorance that is individual. These two kinds of illusions are also different from those ideas that are altogether unreal and imaginary (like the son of a barren woman). The world is and is not. It is neither real nor unreal. This paradox simply recognizes the existence of Maya (Prabhavananda, 1960).

According to the Indian worldview, our whole life is a contradiction. Every impulse of our heart asks us to be selfish. At the same time, there is some power beyond us, which says that it is unselfishness alone that is good. Thus we are oscillating between optimism and pessimism. Every attempt to solve the laws of causation, time, and space would be futile, because the very attempt would have to be made by taking for granted the existence of these three. The world is a mixture of existence and non-existence. The whole world is going towards death, and yet the tremendous clinging to life exists. Hope is dominant in the heart of childhood. We think we are free, and the very same moment we are shown that we are not. This bundle of contradictions that is characteristic of human existence is Maya (Vivekananda, 1972, Volume 2).

Awareness and acceptance of contradictions at every step of human existence gives rise to a certain amount of disillusionment with the present state of affairs. Being satisfied with what exists is possible only by clinging on to the optimism end of the paradox. A full understanding of the statement of facts or Maya is bound to create lack of contentment with the status quo, which is the starting point for any transformation. Hence:

Proposition 1. Understanding that human existence is characterized by contradictions (Maya) would facilitate the emergence of transformational leadership.

Importance of Action

According to the Indian worldview, there are two reasons why we should do something about this state of contradictions. The answer is in the first place, that we must work for lessening misery, for that is the only way to make ourselves happy. We should work to do good with more zest than ever, and what this knowledge will do for us is to break down our fanaticism. In the second place, we must do our part, because that is the only way of getting out of this life of contradiction (Vivekananda, 1972, Volume 2).

These could be countered by proposing an alternative method: "It may be very true, but do not think of it. Make hay while the sun shines. Do not look at the dark side of the picture, but always towards the hopeful, the positive side." This alternative method is what is called practical wisdom. However, we cannot hide carrion with roses; it is impossible. Those that are satisfied with patchwork will never evolve into something higher. There is this strongly conservative tendency in human nature: we do not like to move one step forward. Most of mankind behaves just like persons who become frozen in snow. Human evolution begins with a tremendous dissatisfaction with the present state of things. There comes a time when the mind awakes from this long and dreary dream—the child gives up its play and wants to go back to its mother. All religions are more or less attempts to get beyond nature. In one word, they are all struggling towards freedom. The way is not with Maya, but against it. The whole history of humanity is a continuous fight against the so-called laws of nature. Beyond this Maya can be found something that is not bound by Maya; and if we can get there, we shall not be bound by Maya.

All the various manifestations of religion have this one common central basis: It is the preaching of freedom, the way out of this world. They never came to reconcile the world and religion. Every moment nature is proving us to be slaves. Yet, some inner voice tells us that we are free. We are all following that voice, whether we know it or not. We are ethical when we follow that voice. Then, the scene begins to shift. As soon as we know the voice and understand what it is, the whole scene changes.

The simplest way out of this contradictory state of affairs is to just start doing whatever is expected of us. Discharging the obligations of the roles that we are occupying as diligently as possible is the best way out. Remaining inactive does not help. On the other hand, doing whatever is expected of us will gradually take us out of this state. Whenever there is a choice between being inactive and doing something, doing something is always to

be preferred. It is only by doing action that we can hope to get out of the state of ignorance (Nikhilananda, 1972). Such a strong bias toward action is a prerequisite for a leader who wishes to take others to a higher state. Therefore:

Proposition 2. Preference for action over inaction would be positively related to transformational leadership.

Potential Divinity of Every Being

According to the Indian worldview, all the powers in the universe are already ours. It is we who have put our hands before our eyes and cry that it is dark. Thus the ideal is not only practical, but it has been so all the time. The greatest error is to say that we are weak, that we are sinners. All wisdom and all purity are in the soul already, dimly expressed or better expressed—that is all the difference. Not only can this be realized in the depths of forests or caves, but by human beings in all possible conditions of life. Understanding that we are potentially divine, and that it is only a matter of time before the potential divinity becomes manifest increases our faith in our capabilities to do great things (Vivekananda, 1972, Volume 2).

The ideal of faith in ourselves is of the greatest help to us. It means faith in all. The same potential divinity that exists in us also exists in all other human beings. The divinity in others may be lying dormant and might need to be woken up. The fundamental process of leadership is, in large part, to make conscious what lies unconscious among followers. Seeing the potentially divine nature of others not only makes us have faith in others, it also makes us respect others. Respect for others and their needs is the major characteristic of transformational leadership. The most powerful influences consist of deeply human relationships in which two or more persons *engage* with one another (Burns, 1978). Hence:

Proposition 3. Understanding the potentially divine nature of oneself and others would enhance transformational leadership.

Freedom or Self-Realization as Supreme Goal

The goal of human life is to realize the potential divinity of oneself and others. In the innermost core of the human soul is the center of the whole universe. That is the common ground, and standing there alone can we find a common solution. The differentiation between religion and the life of the world is fictitious. The ideals of religion must cover the whole field of life. Whatever is done in this world is aimed at realizing one's divine nature. This may be done knowingly or unknowingly. The goal is the same towards which all of us are striving. Means adopted could be diverse. A man may see a great deal of difference between grass and a little tree, but if one mounts very high, the grass and the biggest tree will appear much the same. So, from the standpoint of the highest ideal, the lowest animal and the highest man are the same. From the standpoint of the supreme goal of freedom, the various means adopted are hardly significant (Vivekananda, 1972, Volume 2).

Understanding that all of us are going towards the same goal prevents us from looking down with contempt on others. Criticism and condemnation is a vain way of spending our energies, for in the long run we come to learn that all are seeing the same thing, are more or less approaching the same ideal, and that most of our differences are merely differences of expression. Striving towards the common goal of freedom provides the transcendental basis on which all human beings can converge. Leadership is nothing if not linked to collective purpose. Leadership is a process of morality to the degree that leaders engage with followers on the basis of shared motives and values and goals—on the basis, that is, of the followers' "true" needs as well as those of leaders (Burns, 1978).

Proposition 4. Understanding and making others understand that freedom is the supreme goal of human existence would be positively related to transformational leadership.

Conclusion

The multiple changes occurring in society and the business world have created a greater need for transformational leadership. Emergence of transformational leadership could only be facilitated by the truly Indian worldview. It is time that we started teaching Indian philosophy in schools and colleges in India to facilitate the emergence of greater number of transformational leaders who could lift people to higher levels. There is also a total lack of empirical studies on the impact of Indian worldview on various organizational variables. It is therefore necessary that more attention be given to studying the Indian worldview, instead of shying away or simply importing Western models.

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