

Impact of Personality (Gunas) and Belief Systems on Helping[†]

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The belief in the law of karma is an essential element of the Indian worldview and gunas constitute the Indian personality theory. The ideal of Indian philosophy is to achieve a sense of oneness with all creation. In this study, we investigate the effects of sattva guna (a dimension of Indian personality theory) and belief in the law of karma (an essential aspect of Indian culture) on oneness and helping behaviors in teams. We studied a group of 292 students over a period of 45 days while they worked on a live team project. We measured the students' beliefs and their personality (gunas) at the start of the study and their peers rated the students' helpfulness in a group activity after 45 days. We found that students who were high on sattva guna and who believed in the law of karma were more likely to experience a sense of oneness (relatedness) with others. In addition, these students were perceived by their team members to be more helpful.

Key Words: Gunas, Helping, Karma, Oneness, Spirituality

Social science theories while attempting to describe human behavior in precise “scientific” terms often contain powerful behavioral norms for students who are exposed to these theories. In this way instead of merely being a description of human behavior, they become self-fulfilling (Ghoshal, 2005). One such theory that is said to be self-fulfilling is the theory of the self-interested behavior of human beings in organizations (Ferraro, Pfeffer, and Sutton, 2005; Ghoshal and Moran, 1996; Ghoshal, 2005; and Miller, 1999). The fact that business education leads to behavior that is more self-interested was validated in a longitudinal study of business school students over a period of five years. It was found that students gave more importance to self-oriented values like “a comfortable life” and “pleasure” and less importance to others-oriented values like “being helpful” and “being polite” over a two-year program (Krishnan, 2008). To reverse the damage caused by these theories and to reinstitute

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ethical or moral concerns in the practice of management, Ghoshal (2005) called for teaching theories, which would help build moral/ethical organizations.

The Indian worldview, from which has emerged Indian psychology and ethics, has a distinct contribution due to its holistic understanding of a person consisting of the body, mind, and consciousness (Rao and Paranjpe, 2016, p. 5). Corresponding to these three levels of personhood are three corresponding ways of knowing—the body through the five senses observes the external world, the mind understands, and the consciousness is capable of realization (Rao and Paranjpe, 2016, p. 6).

In this paper, we investigate the practical usefulness of an ethical framework derived from the Indian worldview. Specifically, we investigate the impact of *sattva guna* and a belief in the law of *karma* in enhancing certain positive behaviors in groups such as helping others.

Helping behavior or prosocial behavior measured in terms of community involvement and civic responsibility is one of the most common behavioral outcomes used in validating measures of moral development (Rest, Thoma, Narvaez, and Bebeau, 1997). Hence, it is a useful measure to assess if the ethical framework derived from the Indian worldview can address some of the negative effects of contemporary business-school education. By studying a cohort consisting of 292 students over a period of 45 days, we show that *sattva guna* and a belief in the law of *karma* enhance a feeling of relatedness with others which in turn leads to more helping behaviors in a team.

THE INDIAN WELTANSCHAUUNG

The Indian worldview is characterized by three fundamental beliefs, which are common to all the six systems of Indian philosophy (Dasgupta, 1922/1991, p. 71; and Prabhavananda, 1960, p. 201). The first belief is in the existence of the subject that perceives the world of objects. In the Rg-Veda, the subject or self is denoted by the word *atma* (Ghanananda, 1958). The self, which is our true unknown nature, pure and untouched by the impurities of the world of objects, does not perish when the objects including the physical body perish. The self is the eternal subject, which is free from all impurities of the world of objects like death, hunger, old age, sin, and thirst. Being complete, the self is free from all forms of desires (Radhakrishnan, 1940). When the physical body dies, all beings take on another physical body, resulting in transmigration.

The second belief is about the doctrine of freedom (*mukti*). Not inquiring into the subject or self but identifying with the physical body and other objects leads us through this endless cycle of birth and death. If we could be free of all such identification with objects, there would be no fuel (in the form of joys or sorrows to be experienced) to propel us into another birth and we would be free of this eternal cycle. Freedom from the cycle of birth and death (*moksha*) or self-realization is the supreme goal. It results when the bonds of ignorance have been broken and is a state, which is free from all imperfections and limitations (Prabhavananda, 1960).

The third is the belief in the theory of karma i.e., according to which an individual actor is ordained to experience either joy or sorrow in the future depending upon the degree of goodness or maleficence of his or her earlier actions. Sometimes, this cycle may necessitate a future birth in which the actor's body must fully experience either the suffering or joy that is due based on his or her past actions. Action is good or bad. Often, individuals may be required to take birth in another body to experience fully the joy or suffering that is due to them because of their past actions.

THE DOCTRINE OF KARMA

The doctrine of *karma* is perhaps the most widely known and misunderstood aspect of the Indian weltanschauung (Mahadevan, 1958) and is equivalent to the belief in a just world (Connors and Heaven, 1990; and Hafer and Begue, 2005) which states that individuals get what they deserve (Connors and Heaven, 1990). *Karma* extends the concept of justice to other worlds and other births, thereby implying that all good and bad deeds of all previous lives are accounted for cumulatively. Accordingly, in every life one reaps what one has sown in one's previous lives (Radhakrishnan, 1926).

Observation of an effect in the current day would be attributable to a cause of yesterday. This is a cyclical phenomenon in which today's actions become the cause for an effect observed tomorrow. Today's actions and thoughts serve as the cause for tomorrow's effects, and a cause would have its own separate effect or effects. Though this link is not visible to the naked eye, it nevertheless does exist.

Thus, *karma* theory coupled with transmigration is the most parsimonious explanation for the birth-based inequalities that are seen among people. This theory is instrumental in reaffirming one's faith in natural justice. A positive outcome results from good deeds, while tragic outcomes result from bad deeds done in one's past. This makes an individual responsible for his or her own suffering or well-being (Agrawal and Dalal, 1993; and Dalal and Pande, 1988).

One's belief in the theory of *karma* is correlated with one's beliefs in a just world and in an almighty god (Agrawal and Dalal, 1993). Belief in the theory of *karma* has also been found to enhance one's transformational leadership (Kejriwal and Krishnan, 2004). It has also been used to assist in psychological recovery of accident victims (Dalal and Pande, 1988).

A spiritual law (*satya*) and its mode of operating in the cosmos (*rita*) offers the metaphysical explanation of the law of *karma*. Violation of this law leads to punishment through a series of transmigrations, while conformity leads to spiritual and material progress. In case actions of an individual have a personal motive, one that may be incongruous with the cosmos' universal order and ends up creating disequilibrium, the consequences of the actions need to be suffered by the doer. This regulative force, in ethical, metaphysical and psychological terms is called *karma* (Krishnananda, 1994).

The law of *karma* is not a blind mechanical framework in which man is trapped for eternity. An individual can certainly work on his actions in the present for a better future, given that each outcome that one experiences is inevitably an outcome of preceding conditions. Freedom from the cycle of *karma* is possible and is the ultimate goal and destiny of every being (Mahadevan, 1958).

ONENESS

For an individual who believes in the basic tenets of Indian philosophy, there arises a sense of connectedness with all beings. This sense of connectedness is due to two reasons. First, the awareness of the inherent divinity of every being makes one rise above petty differences of appearance and social status and creates a sense of oneness or relatedness with others. The sum and substance of the Upanishads is that the *atman*, or the innermost essence of man is that which exists beyond the physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of an individual and this essence (i.e., the *atman*) is the same identity in all beings (Dasgupta, 1991). In other words, once we have put aside the physical differences, differences in thinking, and differences in feeling amongst all individuals, the only thing that remains is pure consciousness which is not conditioned by physical forms, thoughts, and feelings (Vivekananda, 1972).

Believing strongly in the law of *karma* leads one to the realization that each individual suffers or benefits from his or her current circumstances as an outcome of some past obligation. Therefore, the relationships that one experiences during one's life time are not simple temporal forces but due to a systematic arrangement of natural forces based on one's past relationships. A cause-effect sequence is not possible if all beings exist in isolation and are totally disconnected from each other. Therefore, one suffers the consequences of good and evil deeds towards others because all people are integrally linked to each other. Because of this sense of connectedness, the individual who strongly believes in *karma* theory is likely to manifest attitudes and behaviors, which display this sense of oneness with his or her surroundings.

Hypothesis 1: *A belief in the law of karma is positively related to a feeling of connectedness or oneness with others.*

Individuals who believe in the law of *karma* believe that they are part of a team, department, or organization for a larger purpose, i.e., to fulfill their past obligations. The only way one can achieve liberation is through the conscientious discharge of those past obligations. Hence, they strive to fulfill all their obligations towards their organization and their coworkers. Individuals who have a strong belief in Indian philosophy showed high amounts of sportsmanship and courtesy in their organizations (Mulla and Krishnan, 2012). In a team context, it is more likely that an individual having a strong belief in the law of *karma* will think that he or she is placed in that particular situation only to discharge some past obligation. Hence, he or she will

consider it his or her duty to fully contribute to the team's output and hence will put in large amounts of efforts. Cause-effect sequence implies that one cannot escape the consequences of not discharging his or her role properly. If people believe that they will reap what they sow, they are likely to sow the best seeds.

Hypothesis 2: *A belief in the law of karma leads to helping behavior in a team.*

Individuals who strongly believe in the doctrine of *karma*, liberation, and the potential divinity of all beings experience a strong sense of relatedness with their work and their colleagues in the work environment. The feeling of oneness or connectedness is one in which an individual completely identifies with another and treats the other as he would treat himself or herself. Because of this, individuals are more likely to engage in altruistic behaviors and contribute towards team goals. Studies have shown that a feeling of oneness with group members leads to helping behavior (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, and Neuberg, 1997; and Swann, Jr., Gomez, Huici, Morales, and Hixon, 2010).

Hypothesis 3: *Oneness leads to helping behavior in a team.*

GUNAS: THE INDIAN PERSONALITY THEORY

According to the Sankhya school of Indian philosophy, nature is made up of three basic ingredients or *gunas* (see Note 1) and humans being a part of nature are likewise made of these three *gunas* (Dasgupta, 1991). In the *Bhagavad Gita* (BG), human personality is described as a combination of three *gunas* in varying quantities (BG chapter 14, verse 5). The three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* each symbolize different qualities and an individual may have each of these in different amounts such that one or the other is a predominant personality disposition. *Sattva* represents purity, calmness, and wisdom (BG chapter 14, verse 11), while *rajas* represents activity and restlessness (BG chapter 14, verse 12), and *tamas* represents ignorance and dullness (BG chapter 14, verse 13). The three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* can also be understood as illumination, passion, and dullness respectively (Bhal and Debnath, 2006). The predominant *guna* of an individual is expressed in various activities of the person such as choice of food, friends, manner of giving gifts, spending one's leisure activity, dealing with pleasure and pain, etc. in a way that almost every action can be performed in either a *sattvic*, *rajasic*, or a *tamasic* manner.

Of the three *gunas*, *sattva* has been considered as the most desirable *guna*, which leads to worldly peace and spiritual progress (BG chapter 14, verse 18). The three *gunas* can also be conceptualized as a progressive development from *tamas* to *rajas* to *sattva* and these have been compared with the id, ego, and super-ego respectively (Mohan and Sandhu, 1988). Moreover, there is an implicit hierarchy and a recommended developmental trajectory: individuals evolve by increasing *sattva*, while simultaneously reducing *tamas* and *rajas*.

The three *gunas* are said to work in a trinity (Narayanan and Krishnan, 2003). In other words, all individuals always possess all the three *gunas*; however, an individual's current state of *sattva*, *rajas*, or *tamas* can be explained due to dominance of one of the three *gunas* over the other two (Das, 1987). Hence, each *guna* exists by suppressing the other two (Radhakrishnan, 1971; p. 319). The dominance of a dimension is pervasive and is reflected in diverse aspects of an individual's life such as the type of food consumed, the type of recreations preferred, the type of companions, conduct, and ways of thinking and behaving (Mohan and Sandhu, 1986).

Since dominance of one *guna* implies the suppression of the other two *gunas*, it is enough to study just one of the *gunas*. Moreover, since *sattva* is the most desirable and morally relevant *guna*, we focus exclusively on it in this study.

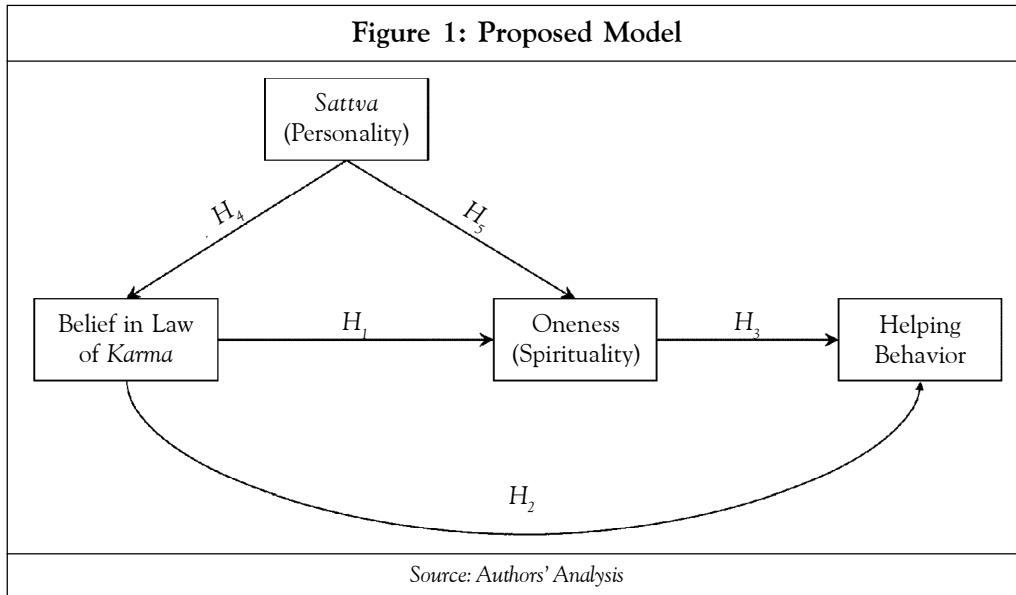
The ideal of *sattva* represents an enlightened state of "knowledge and peace, where the mind is purified from all its agitations and the intellect is cleansed of passions and criminal lust" (Bhal and Debnath, 2006, p. 171). Individuals who are *sattvic* (i.e., possess high amounts of *sattva*) are said to strive after happiness and knowledge (BG chapter 14, verse 6) and are indifferent to pleasure and pain (BG chapter 18, verse 10). As individuals strive for knowledge trying to make sense of the seemingly unfair world with its multiple contradictions, they are likely to start believing in some higher principle or order in the universe which drives the apparent chaos. They are likely to understand that nothing can happen without an appropriate cause. This higher principle is the law of *karma* which then in turn develops a sense of acceptance of the world the way it is and is visible in the form of equanimity of the *sattvic* person to pleasure and pain.

Hypothesis 4: *Sattva is positively related to belief in the law of karma.*

Individuals who are high on *sattva* are likely to be beyond petty likes and dislikes as well as beyond emotions such as anger, envy, and hate. This gives them a deeper understanding of others and makes them more spiritual. *Gunas* are related to ethical behavior and ethical decision-making (Sharma and Bhal, 2003). A study of 114 managers showed that presence of *sattva* was positively related to spirituality, idealism, and religiousness (Bhal and Debnath, 2006). Hence, it is likely that the predominance of *sattva* will lead to an ability to look beyond apparent differences in physical form and thinking of individuals at their innermost essence and thereby to realize the oneness with others.

Hypothesis 5: *Sattva is positively related to feeling of oneness with others.*

Hence, we propose a comprehensive model in which *sattva* *guna* and belief in the law of *karma* leads to a feeling of oneness, which in turn leads to helping behavior. Our proposed model is shown in Figure 1.



METHODOLOGY USED

We investigated the relationship between beliefs in law of karma, spirituality (oneness) and three team behaviors, viz., devoted effort, helping, and sincerity. Data were collected from 292 students who were completing a seven-week leadership experiential project as part of a one-year full-time residential postgraduate program in business management in south India. The sample consisted of 207 males and 85 females. The minimum, median, and maximum age of the respondents was 22 years, 25 years, and 38 years respectively. The minimum, median, and maximum work experience of the respondents was 18 months, 42 months, and 156 months respectively.

MEASURES

Belief in the law of *karma* was measured using a total of 10 items—three items of Mulla and Krishnan (2007) and seven items of Kejriwal and Krishnan (2004). Oneness or spirituality was measured using a modified version of the scale used by Krishnan (2007). The scale had seven items. *Gun*as were measured using a 15-item scale, which was a modified and expanded version of a scale initially developed by Das (1987) and later standardized by Das (1991). The respondents' belief in the law of *karma*, *gun*as, and spirituality were measured by a self-report scale administered to the respondents online, four weeks after the start of the seven-week project.

The helping behaviors were measured by peer reports at the end of the seven-week project. All the respondents in this study were members of 20 project teams, each consisting of around 15 members working on rural service initiatives. All the members of the teams reported on the team helping behaviors of all other members and their responses were averaged to get the team behavior scores of each member.

RESULTS

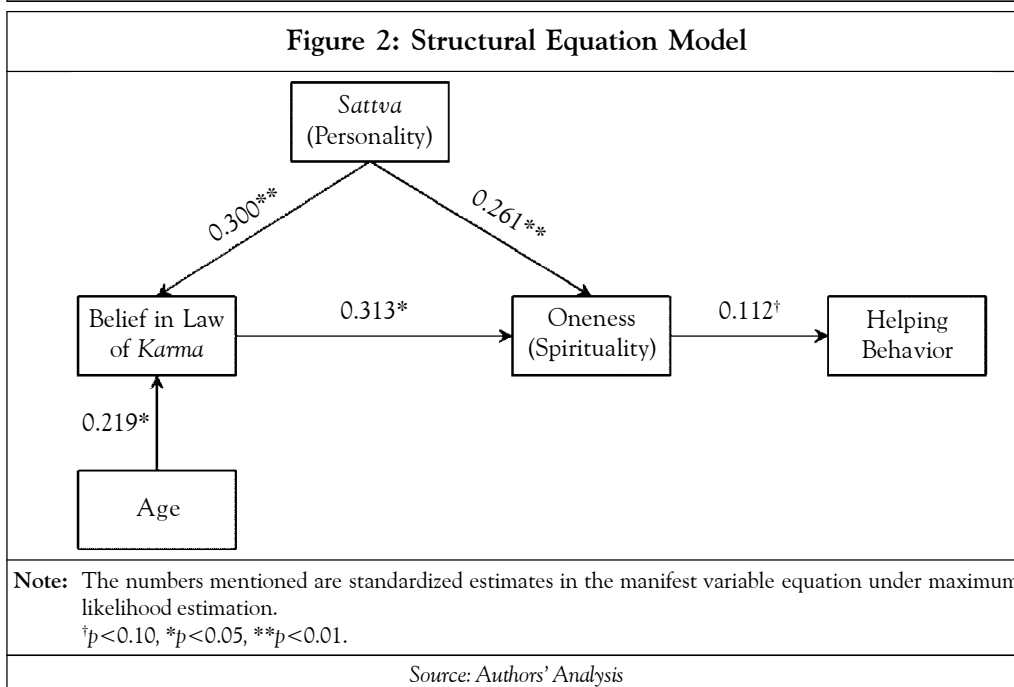
The factor structure of all the variables was tested using IBM SPSS Amos 20.0.0 software. For *sattva*, after dropping seven items, we found a three-factor solution with good fit indices ($\chi^2/DF = 1.532, p = 0.074, GFI = 0.979, NFI = 0.914, TLI = 0.946, RMSEA = 0.043, SRMR = 0.0381, AVE = 0.97, \text{ and } CR = 0.99$). All the three factors of *sattva* were used together for further analysis. For belief in law of *karma*, after dropping six items, we found a single factor solution with good fit indices ($\chi^2/DF = 1.757, p = 0.137, GFI = 0.994, NFI = 0.991, TLI = 0.988, RMSEA = 0.051, SRMR =$

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Amongst all Variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Belief in karma	3.94	0.80	(0.80)					
2. Oneness	4.16	0.67	0.41**	(0.76)				
3. Sattva	6.06	1.44	0.23**	0.27**	(0.68)			
4. Helping behavior	76.26	8.20	0.18	0.07	0.14*	–		
5. Gender (Male=0, Female=1)	0.29	0.45	0.11*	0.02	–0.03	0.05	–	
6. Age (in years)	25.92	1.78	0.16**	0.05	0.01	–0.17**	–0.09	–
7. Work Experience (in months)	42.43	13.89	0.09 [†]	0.05	–0.02	–0.15**	–0.10	0.75**

Note: *N* varies from 289 to 292. [†] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.
 Figures in brackets along the diagonal are Cronbach alphas.

Source: Authors' Calculations



0.016, AVE = 0.97, and CR = 0.99). For spirituality, after dropping three items, we found a single factor solution with good fit indices ($\chi^2/DF = 0.863$, $p = 0.422$, GFI = 0.997, NFI = 0.996, TLI = 1.002, RMSEA = 0, SRMR = 0.015). The Intra-class Correlation Coefficient (ICC) for the average scores on helping behavior in the team was 0.675.

The means, standard deviations, and correlations amongst all the variables are shown in Table 1.

We used structural equation modeling to test the goodness of fit of the following model: *sattva* affects belief in the law of *karma* and oneness; belief in the law of *karma* affects oneness; and oneness affects helping behavior. The model with path coefficients is given in Figure 2. Covariance structure analysis using maximum likelihood estimation yielded Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) of 0.926, GFI Adjusted for Degrees of Freedom (AGFI) of 0.901, and Root Mean Square Residual (RMR) of 0.217 (SRMR = 0.058, Chi-square = 233.769, DF = 156, $\chi^2/DF = 1.499$).

As can be seen in Figure 2, H_1 is supported. Individuals having a strong belief in the law of *karma* are likely to score higher on feeling of oneness with others. Similarly, H_3 suggesting that oneness leads to devoted effort towards team goals is also supported. H_4 and H_5 , which suggest that *sattva* leads to belief in law of *karma* and a feeling of oneness with others are also supported by the final model. We did not find adequate support for H_2 , i.e., that belief in the law of *karma* leads to helping behavior.

DISCUSSION

The impact of belief in the law of *karma* and of *sattva* on an individual's spirituality and helping behaviors was explored in this study. We found that individuals who believed in the law of *karma* were more likely to perceive a sense of oneness with others. That is, they were able to look beyond the apparent differences in physical form, thought process, and feelings at the essential core of a human being which is the same for all. It was this feeling of oneness which then enabled them to contribute their fullest when they were part of a team. Moreover, the personality dimension of *sattva* was positively related to belief in the law of *karma* as well a feeling of oneness with others.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Our primary contribution lies in using variables derived from Indian philosophy such as belief in law of *karma* and *sattva* to predict helping behavior in teams. There are broadly two different approaches to understanding aspects of Indian culture—one of them is purely conceptual and the other empirical. Scholars in the conceptual school take up concepts of Indian culture and emphasize their relevance to contemporary business. However, they believe that these constructs cannot (or should not) be measured using conventional psychometric tools. On the other hand, scholars in the empirical school have used contemporary psychometric theory to conceptualize

indigenous constructs. Within this empirical school too, there have been two subdivisions, the first seeks to look at operant social values, or aspects of Indian culture in terms of their existing manifestations such as poverty syndrome, nurturant-task leadership, and *aram* culture (Sinha, 1997 and 2014). The second set of scholars (e.g., Agrawal and Dalal, 1993; Bhal and Debnath, 2006; and Dalal and Pande, 1988) have focused their attention on psycho-spiritual values that have a normative influence on behavior. By showing how constructs derived from Indian culture can have real-world implications in today's context, we contribute to this school of thought and hope that this study will inspire further research into the real-world outcomes of variables such as belief in law of *karma* and *gunas*.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research must improve and extend the findings of this study. First, though we collected data over a period and from multiple sources, use of longitudinal studies could provide rich insights into the behavioral outcomes at individual and group level of variables such as belief in the law of *karma* and *gunas*. Second, our measure of helping behavior was based on peer reports. Future studies may look at more substantial outcomes such as on-the-job performance and long-term career outcomes of the belief in law of *karma*. Finally, one could use experimental methods to manipulate or prime an individual's belief in the law of *karma* and then see its impact on outcomes of interest such as helping or ethical behavior.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

These findings are especially interesting and practical because the data for the independent and the dependent variable came from different sources and were temporally separated. Individuals' self-reports of their personality and belief systems could predict their peer-rated helping behaviors measured three weeks later while working on a live project. Since all organizations are interested in enhancing their members' citizenship behaviors any insight into how these behaviors can be enhanced is relevant.

The core elements of Indian philosophy include a belief in the law of *karma*, freedom from the cycle of birth and death as the supreme goal of existence, and divinity of all beings. These beliefs deeply pervade the consciousness of Indians and affect their attitudes towards others and their behavior in the workplace.

Organizations have started realizing the importance of developing a community feeling or a feeling of oneness among its employees, if they wish to enhance helping behaviors. This study provides evidence for strengthening such an inclination. Enhancing feelings of oneness with others will help in enhancing desirable behaviors like devoted effort, helping and sincerity. These behaviors will not only increase organizational performance, but will also make the work environment more enjoyable for everyone.

This study also provides important pointers on how to go about creating a community feeling or a feeling of oneness among employees. This study demonstrates that strengthening one's belief in the law of *karma* or the cause-effect sequence will help enhance oneness. Modifying a belief is best done by providing convincing evidence supporting the cause-effect sequence. Bringing greater transparency in the reward system could help demonstrate that the due effects always follow the appropriate causes. Changing the various organizational processes so that the linkage between cause and effect becomes clearer would be a good step in this regard.

Sattvic foods are wholesome and conducive to strength and vitality (BG chapter 17 verse 8). It is not at all difficult for any organization to serve such *sattvic* food in its canteens. Besides food, organizations can also focus on other aspects like encouraging appropriate hobbies and interests among their employees, to develop a *sattvic* personality. Developing a *sattvic* personality may have several other benefits to organizations, since *sattva* facilitates a balanced perspective towards all issues.

CONCLUSION

Organizations have realized that the key to success is to harness the discretionary efforts of individuals and induce them to work whole heartedly towards the team's goals. Age old concepts such as belief in the law of *karma* and the Indian personality framework of *gunas* are integral parts of the Indian psyche. In our quest for performance, we have often ignored these fundamental drives of behavior in the Indian context. Unless we investigate the unique elements of the Indian mindset and explore their linkages to outcomes of contemporary interest, we will never be able to harness the full potential of our people.

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NOTES:

1. According to Narain (1961), even though the Sanskrit word *guna* is often translated as "qualities" a more correct translation of the word would be "attributes."

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