

**DEVDUTT PATTANAİK'S *BUSINESS SUTRA*: A DERIVATION OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT THEORY AND PRACTICE FROM INDIAN MYTHOLOGY AND LITERATURE**

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**Abstract**

*Devdutt Pattanaik is a world renowned mythologist with his commendable and inspiring work in the realm of Indian Mythological research and writings. Logical reasoning of every aspect with a multi-dimensional outlook makes him convincing in his discourse. Business Sutra: A very Indian Approach to Management is a fundamental approach to management, business and leadership in a progressively polarized world. Pattanaik has meticulously implied the ancient Indian thought, literature and mythology to construct a theory that can be easily understood by the 21<sup>st</sup> century people. He has incorporated the Mahabharata and the Ramayana into human resource management. He opines that no society can exist without myth as it creates notions of right and wrong, good and bad, heaven and hell, rights and duties. To him, mythology tells people how they should see the world. The book, attempts to answer the basic question, is there an Indian way of doing business? The central argument is that management practices today are a reflection of the western beliefs which are convergent, and uni-dimensional. The Indian ethos can be better understood through our stories, symbols and rituals. The book attempts to take different aspects of business and craft what would be an Indian approach to management. His work Business Sutra (A very Indian Approach to Management) is a derivation of business management theory and practice from the Indian mythology, myths and literature and by doing so he has rendered a great service to the knowledge system of India as well as the world.*

**Keywords:** Myth, Indian Mythology, Culture, Business and Management

Devdutt Pattanaik is a world renowned mythologist with his commendable and inspiring work in the realm of Indian Mythological research and writings. He offers intelligibly diverse types of retelling and interpretation of Indian myths and mythology. His clear view into the Indian mythologies giving insights about variations in the perception and analysis of Indian mythological stories and Indian culture has brought widespread awareness and curiosity regarding mythology among the readers and researcher. Logical reasoning of every aspect with a multi-dimensional outlook of makes him convincing in his discourse. He is also a speaker, illustrator and author, on Hindu sacred lore, legends, folklore, fables and parables. His work focuses largely on the areas of religion, mythology, and management. He

has written books on the relevance of sacred stories, symbols and rituals in modern times; his more popular books include *Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* and *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* and *My Gita*. Pattanaik has incorporated the Mahabharata and the Ramayana into human resource management. Pattanaik opines that no society can exist without myth as it creates notions of right and wrong, good and bad, heaven and hell, rights and duties. To him, mythology tells people how they should see the world. Different people will have their own mythology, reframing old ones or creating new ones. His desire is to get Saraswati out of the closet. Saraswati belongs everywhere, she has to flow everywhere and his body of work is aimed to make knowledge accessible.

The central theme of the *Business Sutra: An Indian Approach to Management*, is based on the conflicting situations in the corporate world. If there is a strife between individual beliefs and corporate beliefs, the resulting scenario is filled with problems caused due to disharmony. On the contrary, when institutional beliefs and individual beliefs are congruent, harmony is the resultant corporate climate. *Business Sutra* is a very inspiring endeavour by Devdutt Pattanaik which has power to change the notion that business has nothing to do with belief. His illustrations on the association of management with beliefs in Indian culture are exceptionally admirable. The book, *Business Sutra* attempts to answer the basic question, is there an Indian way of doing business? The central argument is that management practices today are a reflection of the western beliefs which are convergent, and uni-dimensional. The Indian ethos can be better understood through our stories, symbols and rituals. The book attempts to take different aspects of business and craft what would be an Indian approach to management. Management is regarded as one of the most important disciplines in social sciences. In India we are studying, researching and practicing this field of management with the help of paradigm of the theoretical framework provided to us by the West. But the situations in India are culturally and philosophically very different from the West. *Business Sutra* tries to develop an alternative theory and practice of management. Devdutt Pattanaik thinks that India needs to have its own theory and practices of management. The book is a beginning in this direction by looking at ancient Indian wisdom as the roots of our culture, thinking and practices lie in the ancient Indian wisdom spread over in Myth, stories, folk lore and mythology.

The book consists of three chapters. The first chapter of the book is an Introduction: *Connecting Beliefs to Business* is written thoughtfully and has capability of attracting interest of the readers. It is an autobiographical account of the author as to how he conceived the idea of the book. For a long time, management and mythology were parallel rivers in his life, unconnected with each other. The things have changed when he perceived the problems in the corporate world. Knowledge of mythology, according to him, could help managers and leaders appreciate better the behavior of the investors and regulators, employers and

employees and competitors and customers. Mythology is after all, the map of the human mind. His research has brought the bare truth in front of him that the Belief as conventionally approached in modern times, is very different from the traditional Indian approach. Thus he rendered his efforts to find original ideas in Indian Mythology that had escaped academicians and scholars who were entrenched in Western thought. He emphasizes the significance of Belief in Indian life when he writes, 'Belief in India is not something you have; it is what makes you who you are'. According to him, 'Belief is the seed from which sprout every human enterprise, every culture, every act of human kindness and cruelty. Every belief is irrational and hence a myth. Therefore the study of stories, symbols and rituals to decode the beliefs they communicate is called mythology. There are secular mythologies in the world, such as stories, symbols and rituals of a nation state, or a corporation, as well as religious mythologies'. The author eruditely explains significance of the title of book in a very lucid manner, "As is belief, so is behaviour, so is business. It is called 3B framework. Sutra is a string that connects the dots; here the string connects belief with business. He shares his views regarding the title and why it is 'an Indian approach to management'. It has been explicitly affirmed by the author, "A very Indian approach to business reveals the gap in the fundamental assumptions that defines management science taught in B- schools today. It celebrates my truth and your truth and the human capability to expand the mind, thanks to imagination."(*Business Sutra:20*) It is quite a painstaking and erudite activity on the author's part to describe diverse philosophies and to associate them to Management. The argument becomes vivid and acceptable due to the scholarly illustrations which have added a glare to the book. The first sketch of the book is in form of a human brain divided in two segments each side listing out words assumed opposite to one another like belief-logic, cyclic linear, infinity- one, synthesis-analysis and the best one being myth- math. He is so crystal clear in his illustrations that, they easily convey his thought to the readers, who are ready to make believe.

Inspiration behind the astonishing association of management and mythology done by the author has been elaborated in the introduction where he affirms, "The more I explored mythology, the more I felt like Aladdin in a cave of undiscovered treasures". (*Ibid:12*) With this he beautifully illustrates through a 75 sketches that management is an expression of the mind and mythology is a map of the mind (root of plant has been portrayed as mind and flower of the plant as management). The modern management system came to India from the West and naturally carries deep rooted belief system of the West and according to the author; it is more focused on accomplishment of quantified objectives. "The book is a tour de force of Indian mythology and the relevance of various stories, rituals and contemporary managers. The author is critical of modern Western thought which dismisses mythology as irrational and unscientific". (*India Today*) In contrast to it, Indian mythology offers a more subjective and diversified way of doing business. The typical stories, symbols and rituals drawn from Hindu, Jain and Buddhist mythology forms the major content of the discourse prevailed in

the Business Sutra: A very Indian Approach to Management. It provides us with immense possibilities of getting acquainted with an extensive variety of business situations that range from running a successful tea stall to nurturing talent in a large multinational corporation.

“From Goal to Gaze: *Decoding Western, Chinese and Indian beliefs*”, is the II chapter of the book in which the author delineates the variety of human thought process with an example from Indian mythology, the race between Lord Ganesh and his brother Kartikeya. Both decided to race three times around the world. Kartikeya, being more athletic, jumped on his peacock and flew around the oceans, the continents and the stars. The elephant-headed Ganesha simply went around his parents, twirling around himself, and declared himself the winner. When asked for an explanation, Ganesha said, “I went around my world. You went around the world. What matters more?” (*Business Sutra:25*) The author compares the subjective and objective truth, and tries to convey that different people have different worlds of imagination. According to the author, ‘Everything depends on our belief; the lens of subjective truth that helps us makes sense of the world.’ (*Ibid:25*) In this chapter author takes us on a journey to have ‘gaze’ upon these belief and wants us to appreciate the diversity of human thought. Only by doing this we should have a gaze-based approach to management. The comparison of Western, Indian and Chinese beliefs and how they affect the behaviour and hence the business has been highlighted. He recites the story of Alexander and an Indian gymnosophist: a naked thinker to prove his point that the westerners have goals and they believe in one life with linear achievement while Indian way is cyclical believing in rebirth distinguishing it from both the Western and the Chinese way. While explaining the implications of faith in rebirth author tells us, ‘Belief in multiple lives establishes a worldview that is comfortable with the absence of binary logic, where there are no fixed goals, continuously changing plans, dependence on relationships, celebration of trust and loyalty, uneasiness with rules, actions dependent on crisis, preference for short-term results over long term vision, and reliance on resourcefulness that gives rise to contextual, non-replicable improvisations: the *jugaad*. This is the Indian way’. The author gives the valid reasons for the Indian universities not touching the mythological references in the curriculum. He thinks that the founding fathers of our democracy who were educated in Europe kept the religious and mythological issues sideline due to partition and other sensitive issues. “The pursuit of secular, scientific and vocational goals meant that all things sanatan were sidelined.” (*Ibid:56*) “In other words, Indianness today is understood within the Western template, with the Western lens and Western gaze..... Words such as ‘gaze’, ‘construct’, ‘code’ and ‘design’ that are more suited to explaining the Indian way entered the English language only after the 1970s with the rise of postmodern studies and the works of Foucault, Derrida, Barthes and Berger. These were not available to early writers who sought to express Indian thoughts in Indian terms.....Only in recent times have a few Indian scholars started taking up the challenge to re-evaluate ancient Indian ideas on Indian terms.” (*Ibid:57-58*) At the end of chapter the author has shown a simple comparison with the help of candid

sketches, of two very different contexts of India and USA. When USA comprises of 4% of the world's population and has more than 17% of the world's annual wealth generation, India comprising of 4 % of world's population and has less than 5 % of world's annual wealth generation, still they are expected to have the same goals. Various short cases have been used to explain different business situations and relevance of mythology in those situations.

Business Sutra: *A Very Indian approach to Management*, the final chapter which forms the crux of the book. The beginning line states that Business is yagna, the ritual described in the oldest and most revered of Hindu scriptures, the Rig Veda. There are four components of this yagna, the yajman- person who performs ritual, swaha- the offerings in yagna or investment, to please deity or devata or consumer, and tathastu- so it shall be or fulfillment of desire or the return on investment. Yagna is considered successful only if its outcomes are wealth and prosperity signifying arrival of Lakshmi. In management science, business is about generating Lakshmi, ethically and efficiently, what yagna signifies. The author has meticulously joined the dots like guna, varna, bhaav, saguna nirguna, darshan meaning philosophy or worldview from ancient Indian knowledge system to create a meaningful rangoli of Business Sutra. According to him, "Economic growth does not lead to intellectual and emotion growth; if anything it can amplify fear. The rishis saw economic growth without personal growth as a recipe for disaster for then Lakshmi would come along with her sister; alakshmi could slip away from the grasp of the yajaman who was unworthy of her. They were convinced that economic growth has to be an outcome of intellectual and emotional growth. For the workplace to be a happy playground (ranga-bhoomi) rather than fierce battleground (rana-bhoomi), Lakshmi had to be an indicator and darshan, the lever. As is darshan, so is guna; as is guna so is varna, so is bhaav; as is bhaav so is swaha, so is tathastu. In other words, as is belief, so is behavior, so is business. This is Business Sutra, a very Indian approach to management."(Ibid:76-77)

A business management theory and practice based on mythology and ancient Indian knowledge and literature is elucidated through various short stories with a unique perspective. It has many ideas and stories and illustrations with sketches and examples of contemporary situations in the corporate world. It has been subdivided into 5 sections namely *Kama's Vision Statement*, *Drishti, observing objective reality*, *Divya-dristi, observing subjective reality*, *Darshan, observing the subject*, and *Yama's Balance Sheet*.

The first section *Kama's Vision Statement* explores how 'Human hunger is unique' 'Imagination expands human hunger' 'Only humans can exchange', 'Every devata seeks high returns on investment', 'Conflict is inherent in exchange', 'Imagination can help humans outgrow hunger', 'Human hunger for the intangible is often overlooked', 'There are three types of food that can be exchanged during yagna', 'We have to make room for others', 'Yagna can be a tool for personal growth, if we allow it to be'. Imagination transforms every human into Brahma, the creator of the yagna.

The second section *Drishti, observing objective reality* begins with a statement that 'the ability to see the human quest for wealth is drishti.' 'He who takes a call is a karta', 'Every one is a potential karta' 'A karta who allows and enable others to take a call is a yajman', 'A yajman has the power to take and give life', 'the size of the contribution does not matter', 'All calls are subjective', 'All decisions are contextual', 'Not everyone can handle the burden of uncertainty', 'Every decision has a consequence', 'Decisions are good or bad only in hindsight', 'Decisions are often rationalized in hindsight', 'If the decision is bad, the yajman alone is responsible', 'If the decision is good, the yajaman is the beneficiary', 'Business is violent Remaining three sections tell the readers about, what determines the quality of yagna , the last segment states the impact of yagna on yajaman. Each of these segments has some unique short stories. The beauty of these stories is that they are not very lengthy to read and hence reader doesn't lose interest in it.

A lot of Sanskrit words have been used like tathastu, svaha, maya and it was necessary to keep the spirit of this book intact. In this regard author says that English words are insufficient to convey all Indian ideas. The way meanings of such non-English words have been described is commendable. The author states that ultimately business and management is all about making decisions. Decisions are taken when alternatives exist and surely every decision has a consequence. This has been highlighted through an excerpt from Ramayana. Dashrath shoots an arrow in the direction of a sound that he believes to be a sound of deer drinking water. It turns out to be the sound of water being collected in a pot. The arrow fatally injures the young man who was fetching water. The young man is Shravan. His old and blind parents do not see this event as an accident. They see it as a murder. They curse Dashrath to, like them, die of heartbreak following separation from his son. Through this illustration author states that an arrow released from a bow is a metaphor for a decision that cannot be withdrawn. Thus in a very logical manner Pattanik offers us number of such examples from Indian mythology and literature.

Devdutt Pattanaik has meticulously implied the ancient Indian thought, literature and mythology to construct a theory and practice that can be easily understood by the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Ancient Indian knowledge system had not yet evolved to the level of the modern categorizations and specializations like they are in the various branches of knowledge today. The Vedic knowledge came from within and was considered spiritual therefore its dissemination as well assumed spiritual form. It was all inclusive without the separation of categories or faculties. The first section of the book is asking the very obvious question, what is belief got to do with business, somewhere around the line belief is associated with spirituality and it seems nothing to do with the material world. Second point, Devdutt Pattanaik makes that the notion that management science which is taught today is not rational and logical. According to him it is completely rooted in western mythology specifically Greek mythology and Biblical mythology and only a mythologist can see it. Hardly anybody else can perceive it in a vivid manner such as Pattanik does. The second chapter of the book

draws attention to this fact that how management science is structured on the Western belief and so it cannot work in a global village. There are other ways of looking at business too. And Pattanaik sees China as an exciting example of this. He decides to compare Chinese, Western and Indian beliefs the way he saw them. Third chapter is really the main body of the book, which is a presumption, what he considers a very Indian approach to management. At a technical level he had read a lot of books where there is a desperate attempt to force fit Indian thought into the Western template. So corporate social responsibility becomes 'Daan', and 'Dharma' becomes ethics and that was not the right language according to Pattanaik. He wanted to question the very fundamental assumption that the western thought is default and we have to somehow intellectually submit to it, and that is the benchmark, we have to align with that. He found that funny because that is also human thought and that is the reason he is questioning the very assumption of Western thought. The very Indian approach goes to the root of the matter of the fundamental assumption. *It is an endeavour to understand the relationship between belief and business and presenting an Indian way of Business and Management that is different from western management theories and practices.* Since the oblivion of the Vedic period and various hurdling factors in the history of the country such as anti discourse or invasions by other religion rulers, must have hindered the further study and research in the Vedic knowledge. After India came under the British rule we have accepted the Western thought and Knowledge System. The Western models and Paradigm of thinking have perpetuated in our knowledge system and thus in business life as well. Therefore our ancient Indian thought and knowledge system had been neglected to a great extent and scarcely any efforts had been taken to derive and develop the theories and practices in the modern context based on our ancient treasure of knowledge such as Indian mythology and literature. But Devdutt Pattanaik's work *Business Sutra (A very Indian Approach to Management)* is a derivation of business management theory and practice from the Indian mythology, myths and literature and by doing so he has rendered a great service to the knowledge system of India as well as the world.

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