

Book Review

Book : Business Sutra - A very Indian approach to Management

Author : Devdutt Pattanaik

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Business Sutra: A very Indian Approach to Management. Devdutt Pattanaik. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2013. 435pp

The new found confidence among authors of propagating all things Indian in the recent past can be attributed to existential crisis among thinkers and management gurus of the western world. The theories proposed by them have not been the proverbial panacea and have failed the economies world over.

Management has been around for more than millennia and we have had eastern thinkers like Confucius, Sun Tzu (The Art of War), Chanakya (Arthasashtra) espouse how a business or an organization ought to be conducted. But, for reasons historical or otherwise, we have depended heavily on the models and theories (or the supposed scientism) proposed by western thinkers from Adam Smith through Peter Drucker. But, as mentioned earlier, this approach has not been without pitfalls....what with the economies at the brinks of financial cliffs, leadership crises, ethical bankruptcies and such. It is in this backdrop that management theorists and practitioners sit up and notice a work that claims to presents a radically different and nuanced approach to management, business and leadership.

In this book, Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik shows how despite its posturing of objectivity, western (read modern) management is rooted in occidental (Greek, biblical) beliefs and is fixated with accomplishing rigid objectives and increasing shareholder value. Dr.Pattanaik, juxtaposes this with the Indian approach (as apparent in her myths and folklore) of accommodating subjectivity and diversity, offering an inclusive and empathetic way to success. He uses stories, symbols and rituals from Hindu, Jain and Buddhist mythology to understand a

wide range of business and managerial issues of the modern world. The kernel of Dr Pattanaik's work is this idea- the work place becomes a *rana-bhoomi* (battle ground for various stakeholders) if wealth is chased, as against, a *ranga-bhoomi* (a theatrical stage or playground) when wealth is attracted.

For those familiar with Dr Devdutt Pattanaik works, that include over twenty five books, four hundred articles on Indian mythology, his column in the Economic Times, the very popular talk he gave at the TED India Conference in 2009 and the successful show Business Sutra on CNBC-TV18 in 2010, this tome seems to be distillation of many ideas and concepts presented in earlier works .Here they are presented in a unique and innovative framework that the author calls the 3B (Belief, Behavior and Business) frame work that attempts at being an alternative Indian approach to management.

Dr Devdutt Pattanaik who is trained to be a medico and has spent fifteen years in health care and pharmaceutical industries has been a self taught mythologist and has now turned his passion into a vocation by being a part of the think tank of the Future Group as its Chief Belief Officer.

The entire book is presented in three sections- 'Introduction' -which connects Belief to Business; 'From Goal to Gaze' -which decodes Western, Chinese and Indian Beliefs and 'Business Sutra' (Sutra are a set of rules or aphorisms in Sanskrit on a technical subject).There are innumerable illustrations and line drawings (which are typical Devdutt style!) throughout the book which help understand the ideas and concepts. Another important facet of the narrative style is the presence of case capsules that relate the esoteric concepts in myths and folklore to typical incidents that occur on a day to day basis in business organizations big and small across India.



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The introduction section proposes the 3B framework as the premise of the book and goes on to justify as to why this is a very Indian approach by revealing an alternative perspective that multiple truths can be celebrated and that human mind can be expanded thanks to imagination. This is startlingly different the frameworks that we have been indoctrinated where objectivity is championed. A fresh framework of Business sutra which is primarily subjective is proposed. Every idea is thought of as a dot which could be a part of infinite number of beautiful patterns, each self sufficient pattern being a part of a bigger one!!

In the second section 'Goal to Gaze', Western, Chinese and Indian beliefs are decoded. The author, in this section, elucidates how everything depends on each of our beliefs. While the 'objective' western beliefs premise that there is only one life and one goal and hence are concerned with 'what?' of business and the 'pragmatic' Chinese beliefs seek order and keeping out chaos and hence concerned with 'how?' of business, the Indian beliefs seek 'peace' as the mind is very aware of subjective goals of different people .It is thus concerned with the 'why?' of business.

In the western belief system one's belief that authority will exploit you or the belief that leaders care for you will make you behave in a defiant way or loyal way thus making the goal of one's life or business individual actualization or collective good respectively. In the Chinese system, one's belief that social hierarchy should reflect celestial organization and that natural forces should be trusted implicitly will make you indulge in rituals as if they were virtues and strive for balance in opposing forces of nature thus making order and harmony the goals of one's life and business.

In contrast to these, the author opines, in India ,one's beliefs about the world view (darshan/gaze), personality, mindset and feelings will make you invest (*svaha*) in your life/business as if it were a 'yagna' with the goal being the '*tathastu*' of the devata being invoked. The '*tathastu*' itself is again very subjective based the '*yajaman*' who conducts this yagna. As is your world view so is your personality; as is your personality so is your mindset; as is your mindset so are your feelings; as

are your feelings so is your behavior (the *svaha* of the yagna); as is your *svaha* so is your *tathastu*!!!

The third section comprises of around 150 Business sutra presented in five different chapters. The first chapter 'Kama's Vision Statement' explores through ten aphorisms how imagination transforms every human into Brahma, the creator of the *yagna*. The next three chapters explore the concepts on *Drishti*, *Divya Drishti* and *Darshan*, which determine the quality of the *yagna*. Each of these chapters is further subdivided into segments- each segment elucidating an idea. The final chapter 'Yama's balance sheet explores the impact of the *yagna* on the *yajaman*.

The author seems to have been mindful of the fact that he has used many non English (read Sanskrit) words to explain the indigenous concepts. Many words are non translatable and many ideas cannot be succinctly explained in English as with Sanskrit words. That explains the section on Business Sutra Vocabulary. There is also an Index of all the Business Sutra.

As you read the book, you invariably start cross checking each sutra with the comparable HBR influenced western management principles and models. In fact, you might even start enjoying this intellectually invigorating game of mapping the ideas and concepts in this book to the ones we are indoctrinated with. Also, the illustrations are highly impressive and are super successful in driving home the ideas. The best thing about this book is that it does not demand a linear reading-you could open any page and start reading.

Although the author has forcefully argued and articulated his view point, non Indian readers might find it challenging to grasp it in one reading as it heavily uses non English words. Also from academic stand point, the disclaimer from the author withstanding, it remains to be seen how implementable the frame work is. Also the framework lacks testability, rigor and is far from being parsimonious.

All in all; this is a highly recommended book that might serve you as good starting point to understand yourself, your team, organization and society!