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K. Ravindran, retired police commissioner for Tamil Nadu, has taken on a new mission in life, the creation of a system of business management based on the ancient wisdom of India. He's concluded that neither the traditional western management style, nor the newly touted Japanese approach are relevant to India. Instead, Ravindran says, Hindus should look to the ancient ideals, such as the four goals of life - artha (wealth), kama (pleasure), dharma (duty) and moksha (liberation) - for developing a truly Indian system of management. He's bringing his ideas into reality through the newly-formed Patanjali Management Association. A Madras meeting with Professor Spellman of Windsor University (Canada) led to an invitation to come to the West. In late 1988, Ravindran traveled through Canada, America and Australia lecturing to large and small groups of interested persons.

Ravindran began his study of management techniques during the later part of his 37 years with the Indian Police Service. As part of a program whereby senior officers are tapped to serve in other government departments, particularly industry and commerce, he was assigned to several top-level corporate positions which provided him considerable management experience. His last posting was as Chairman of Tamil Nadu's government-owned Transport Corporation.

The Kerala-born Ravindran is suited by birth to both of his life's professions - law enforcement officer and management philosopher. His family is of the nayar caste, the ancient kshatriyas (warrior class) of Kerala and are devotees of Lord Krishna at Guruvayoor temple. His father, the late Dr. C. Kunhan Raja, was professor of Sanskrit at the University of Madras for over 25 years. Ravindran maintains close contact with 95-year-old Paramacharya Chandrashekara of Kanchi Peetam in Tamil Nadu for spiritual guidance.

Using the Ancient Wisdom

Why should a modern manager turn to an ancient philosophy for guidance? "Because," answers Ravindran, "ancient philosophy in India was not a set of dry theoretical treatises evolved in caves in mountain tops or deep in forests, but was the result of a close study of mankind in his natural environment." The result, he points out, is that Hindu philosophy is just as prepared - if not more so - to deal with management problems as is any modern behavioral science.

In an interview during a visit to HINDUISM TODAY'S Hawaii editorial offices, Ravindran outlined four conclusions of his approach. The first was, "Unless you know yourself and learn how to manage yourself, you have no right, no authority and no capacity to manage others." Second, he said, one must cultivate the principle of nishkama karma, work for work's sake. "Once you start working for a reward and the reward is not forthcoming, you'll land yourself in a stress situation straight away. Desire for reward all the time should not be the main motivation." Third is, "Treat everyone as you would like to be treated;" and fourth, "Do not ask anyone to do anything that you are not willing to do yourself because you know it is not right to do."

Ravindran is particularly critical of the so-called "need-based" psychological models from which western management theories are derived. He says, "In a developing nation such as India, the problem of the need-based model is that the 'need' becomes more important than the 'end product,' and every action is motivated by the thought, 'What is there in it for me?'"

Instead, Ravindran starts from the traditional philosophical premise that the entire universe is a holistic entity in which the jiva (individual), the jagat (environment) and Iswara (controlling force) are the all-embracing factors in human existence - not mere personal desire. He equates the office or factory with the environment in which the individual works and the boss with the controlling force. "Indian philosophy suggests that the basic requirement is harmony among these three factors, since disharmony at one or more levels will lead to frustration, indiscipline, friction, interpersonal problems and a host of other problems that could well affect productivity and the attainment of excellence in any field." He mentioned the example of a large pharmaceutical firm in Andhra Pradesh where everyone meditates for 30 minutes each morning. The company has had no interpersonal relations problems for the last five years.

Facing the Real World

But there is a lot to do, Ravindran readily admits, and he is aware of some serious limitations. "During my tour of North America, I've heard so many complaints about Indian businessmen and their bad ethics. I don't think there is any point in trying to convert them at this point in time. But I think if we go for the younger generation, perhaps a few years from now, we'll have much better ethics. Of course, I may be just a small storm, but I hope the message will spread."

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