

November 18, 2010

'Dharma' and 'adharma'

In recent years, one of many new phrases that have been added to the political and business lexicon include “coalition *dharma*”. Self-righteous, extraordinarily thick-skinned spokespersons across all major national parties have used this phrase at different times in an attempt to justify inaction or gloss over some of the biggest scandals and scams that India has seen since its Independence.

Unfortunately, beyond the realm of politics, *dharma* is being given new interpretations there too. In the garb of protecting and maximising the shareholder’s return as the new interpretation of “corporate *dharma*”, sector after sector is seeing unfettered rise of malpractices, be it in health care, education, or business at large.

In the garb of following the “*dharma* of socialism”, public-private partnerships are being given a new definition: “public (assets) for private parties”.

The new definition of the “*dharma* of democracy” includes letting in criminals, unqualified or less qualified kith and kin, and wheeler-dealers as party candidates, citing “winnability” of such candidates as the prime criterion for selection.

Can *dharma* be redefined and reinterpreted as conveniently as is being done in recent years, or is it merely a cover for political and business expediency, avarice, weakness of leadership, and lack of concern for society at large? Can India afford to let multiple cancers that include corruption, nepotism and lack of enlightened political and business leadership gnaw away its very innards? *Dharma*, since time immemorial, has implied acknowledging one’s righteous duty and acting resolutely accordingly. The interpretation of right and wrong, across millennia, does not really change though actions may. Hence, even “law” per se cannot be interpreted as per political expedience since it has to be accepted both in spirit as in letter. Yet, political party after party has been using subterfuges in the garb of law by merely citing either “precedents” of moral and behavioural turpitude by previous governments or side-stepping issues claiming that they are subjudice. More recently, the “model code of conduct” as prescribed in the context of state or general elections, and “Parliament being in session” are also increasingly being used to justify inaction or turn a blind eye to tsunamis of *adharmic* activity.

Across the very rich and diverse religious and philosophical history of India through millennia, *dharma* has been interpreted more or less as an immutable way of life. Likewise, there is enough for political and business leaders to learn from ancient treatises, such as Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, that have as much relevance today as it would have been 2,000 years ago.

How the political landscape will evolve in the coming years is to be seen. However, it seems that the rampaging corruption and the rapidly increasing shock and anger of the *aam admi*, as new, bigger and more audacious scams get unearthed almost on a daily basis, now could catalyse a transformational change in the very near future.

The message for private business is not very different too. The time-honoured *dharma* for business is to be customer-driven, taking care of the customer and her needs and interests in the same spirit as *atithi devo bhavah*. Yet, in sector after sector, disturbing trends are emerging that are in total divergence with this *dharma*. There is already growing outrage against the increasing malpractice in the healthcare sector with blatant disregard of the Hippocratic Oath by some, if not many, professionals. Many have entered private education with the primary objective of taking advantage of the lack of quality primary, secondary and higher education capacity in the country and thereby raking in very large financial returns while sacrificing quality and indulging in misleading advertising with practically no regulatory checks. Food and food products are being sold with blatant (and most of the times, with very dangerous long-term effects on the health of the consumer) adulteration, with the exception of just a handful of organised, large

players, and the trend is on the rise. By actually following the “*dharma* of the businesses” in its true spirit, interests of shareholders and society can be served very well without any conflict, as many businesses and business houses in India have already demonstrated and continue to demonstrate.

Let us not try to redefine *dharma* to suit nefarious needs, and let our leaders, whether they sit in Parliament or state legislatures, or in the boardrooms and chambers of commerce, not misinterpret what their *dharma* is.

arvind.singhal@technopak.com