

A Vedic Critique of Marketing

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“Asuric men have no true knowledge of the way of action or the way of abstention, the fulfilling or the holding in of the nature. Truth is not in them, nor clean doing, nor faithful observance. They see naturally in the world nothing but a huge play of the satisfaction of self; theirs is a world with Desire for its cause and seed and governing force and law, a world of Chance, a world devoid of just relation and linked Karma, a world without God, not true, not founded in Truth. Whatever better intellectual or higher religious dogma they may possess, this alone is the true creed of their mind and will in action; they follow always the cult of Desire and Ego....The Asuric man becomes the centre or instrument of a fierce, Titanic, violent action, a power of destruction in the world, a fount of injury and evil. Arrogant, full of self esteem and the drunkenness of their pride, these misguided souls delude themselves, persist in false and obstinate aims and pursue the fixed impure resolution of their longings. They imagine that desire and enjoyment are all the aim of life and in their inordinate and insatiable pursuit of it they are the prey of a devouring, a measurelessly unceasing care and thought and endeavour and anxiety till the moment of their death.”

Sri Aurobindo in Essays on the Gita

Marketing of late has been under attack from various fronts. Serious academics question the theoretical foundations of Marketing and do not consider it as a serious academic discipline. The argument is that it is derived from other social sciences like economics, psychology, sociology and anthropology, hence it does not have a philosophical foundation of its own. Elegies have been written on the death of Marketing. Let us therefore give marketing the dignified burial it deserves. Let us inscribe upon its gravestone the optimistic hope that its soul has permeated the business world that the marketing function itself has left behind. And if we have a dark cast to our thought – let us imagine the possibility that marketing might someday rise from the dead to walk among us once again.(Holbrook & Hulbert, 2002) Specifically in Marketing Management as presented in text books and taught in Universities the two major weaknesses are that it lacks a general, theoretical foundation and therefore offers a poor context for conceptual understanding and development of contemporary phenomena and it is pedagogical and easy to grasp, sometimes driven by a desire to make the text attractive and therefore offering unfortunate simplifications, sometimes more aligned with the media hype than profoundly addressing core variables and their links. (Gummesson, 2002)

Also the very premisses on which the edifice of academic marketing management has been built are under severe scrutiny and criticism...Modern marketing thinking derives primarily from the Anglo Saxon model of capitalism...that model is relatively unsuccessful in a global context, and that the most successful marketers, namely the Germans and the Japanese have used neither business schools nor marketing textbooks to achieve their success (Thomas 1994)

Hundreds of marketing academics and so called marketing professionals demonstrate an unflinching allegiance to a concept which has failed to deliver a cogent, defensible general theory in over 40 years of development.(Robson and Rowe,1997)

Other criticisms more piercing and scathing have come from the post modernist school of thinking. The allegation is that the Marketing concept is essentially a modern concept which in these post modern times has become totally irrelevant. The criticism has not been well received among marketing academics because it undermines the very foundations of marketing theory.(Robson and Rowe 1997)Attempts have been made by scholars to incorporate these post modern concepts to arrive at a theory of post modern marketing. The modern marketing concept – in requiring that consumers’ needs and desires are and should be the reigning criterion – is a quintessential exemplar of such a clear, unambiguous, modern norm (Firat and Dholakia, 2006).

The second attack has come from the ecological, business ethics and consumer movements which state that marketing and advertising are responsible for the pathological consumption habits, excessive greed, environmental damage, loss of communal life, of genuine human bonds and fraternity, commercialization and commodification of relationships.(See Deb (2001), Schorr (2001), Korten(2001)). Marketing seems to have lost its credibility among general people and there is a general feeling that marketing today essentially stands for manipulation and the pathology of persuasion.

Indian Marketing gurus and academics are yet to respond to the above challenges that have been thrown before Marketing. As such most of the theories and concepts of Management in general and Marketing in particular that are being taught in Indian business schools have been taken from US and Europe. Though attempts have been made by learned academicians to prove that Management and Marketing have been part and parcel of our civilisation and culture with different labels but the superfluity stands out. It speaks of the poverty of our minds that we try to analyse a five thousand year old civilisation by concepts and theories developed by a civilisation which is hardly five hundred years old.

The assumption that theories and concepts can be transplanted across cultures without the slightest modification needs to be reexamined since most of the concepts and theories taught in the discipline of Marketing in our business schools have their origins in environments which are very different from our own.

“Theories are culture specific - they are codes of a community's expectations from the art form / forms and therefore more adequately account for that community's response to the artifacts. Cultural specificity of theories can therefore be problematic if the theories of one culture are applied uncritically to the empirical reality of another culture. There are the Indian habits of mind and there are the western habits of mind nurtured over time by the specificity of the community's experience and these may differ crucially. It is these habits of mind that are imbricated deeply in the respective conceptual frameworks. The western linearity of time and thought with its in-built evolutionary imperative that is implicit in such structures as 'pre-X-post A' (pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial) contrasts sharply with the Indian schema of cyclic and simultaneity. Similarly, the western binarism and the search for certainty differs from the either-or/both schema and the uncertainty schema of the Indian mind. The list is long - the teleological anxiety, the apocalyptic vision, the wait for the millennium, the redeemer expectation, the anthropological centrism, the conception of man as a sinner, a vengeful God, an ethics contingent on a personal God - all these western constructs offer conceptual opposition to the Indian habits of mind, at least to the non-Hebraic habits of mind...The world-view / philosophy of a culture cannot be ignored in any discussion of an appropriate aesthetic. The Indian world-view therefore has to be taken into account. The critics of an Indian aesthetics rooted in Indian philosophy reduce Indian philosophy to simple 'idealism' and ignore the tremendous inner differentiation and range of Indian philosophical thinking (Malhotra 2007)

The problem is not with the concept *per se*. A concept is not as simple as it seems to be. A concept is born from a very defined and definite worldview of the scholar who formulates it. If some how we could peep in the mind of that scholar we shall see that the concept that he has given or created is a result of his upbringing, education, the specific environment in which he has developed his understanding of himself and the world around him. *It is a window through which we look at reality and draw conclusions from it.* It colours our understanding about people, situations and our environment.

An Understanding of Indian environment and situations demands that we develop some concepts which have their roots in our own culture and environment. Concepts and theories developed and perfected in alien lands put a thick lens on our eyes through which we try to understand our reality and this leads to a fundamental error of understanding ourselves.

Due to this fundamental error, even today majority of the theory and concepts that are understood and taught in our business schools about Marketing have no roots in our society and have evolved

in a society and environment that are radically different from our own. Hence the brilliant and creative minds of our country after their two years of business school training and education develop a thick lens of management theories through which they understand our country, society and people and themselves.

Marketing as it exists today both in theory and practice is a characteristic of the western civilisation that has its roots in the European Renaissance of the fifteenth century. The fundamental concepts of this civilisation are division between Man and Nature, the latter to be conquered and exploited for human benefits, the invisible hand of the market on which the economic edifice rests of most developed nations, survival of the fittest which gives man a license to define fitness as it suits himself.(Chakraborty 1999)

The fruits of this 'awakening' have been the Industrial Revolution and the rise of Technology, Colonialism of Asia, American and African nations first by physical means and now intellectually and economically, destruction of ecology and native cultures and people unheard of in human history. The above assumptions give a very violent nature to this civilisation. All streams of knowledge and practice be it Allopathy, Industrialism, Colonialism, perpetrated violence in their respective domains. Without violence to plants, animals and human beings we cannot conceive of the existence of the above three phenomena. One more fruit is the reign of quantity in our lives as Rene Guenon has so elaborately explained in his seminal work. This maddening race to measure and classify everything has led us to a situation where whatever cannot be measured is taken to be non-existent.

The above characteristics gave rise to the modern day capitalism of which the chief expression is the multinational corporation. The rise of the modern corporation was an intensification of the above qualities. The corporation which emerged as a dominant institution in the twentieth century and is overshadowing the nation state in twenty first so much so that some historians see the market state as replacing the nation state.(Bobbit, 2003) The instruments which modern day corporations use to further their interests are marketing and its twin sisters of advertising and public relations. Peter Drucker the foremost guru of management and a fierce advocate of marketing and the customer, in his concept of the corporation had predicted that the corporation will in future become a dominant institution of our society and it will satisfy most of our social needs. But he too was disillusioned with twentieth century capitalism with its willingness to reward greed rather than performance and with the growing gap between management and workers, before his death in California on 11th November 2005. "This is morally and socially unforgivable...Although I believe in free markets, I have serious doubts about capitalism" (Thomas, 2006)

Marketing being a very important element of market economy plays a pivotal role along with advertisement in the selling of goods and services in the form of fashion, lifestyles and entertainment. We can see that how in the garb of satisfying human needs and so called demand management marketing starts manufacturing 'wants'. If we agree to the often quoted defense that needs preexist, it influences and manipulates our needs to become wants for corporate brands and not the product or service per se. All our vulnerable emotions like fear, insecurity and greed are whipped up and used for commercialising every aspect of our life. The successful marketing companies today are those who are able to commercialise every human need, emotion and aspect of our daily life. The attempt is to commercialise every human transaction and see in it a means for making money. We can see the early commodification and later brandification of our every need and want right from daily essentials for living and sustaining our life to our relationships and culture being packaged and sold for a profit. The essential sacred element which is a part of every human being has been shown the door and consumers are just objects to be manipulated for further consumption by our giant Asuras in the form of Transnational Corporations.

"This new economy is structured around flows of information, power, and wealth in global financial networks that rely decisively on advanced information and communication technologies. It is shaped in a very fundamental way by machines, and the resulting economic, social and

cultural environment is not life enhancing but life degrading. It has triggered a great deal of resistance, which may well coalesce into a worldwide movement to change the current economic system by organizing its financial flows according to a different set of values and beliefs. The systematic understanding of life makes it clear that in the coming years such a change will be imperative not only for the well being of human organisations, but also for the survival and sustainability of humanity as a whole.(Capra 2002)

Some Core Vedic Concepts

Here the word vedic is used in a comprehensive sense that it incorporates the concepts of Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagwad Geeta and Saints and Yogis who have lived and realized these concepts in their lives.

Rta : Rta is order that comprehends order: serial order, causal order, regulative order, hierarchical order, order of sequence and order of coexistence. As Rta is not what is created or made, Rta is what is, what has been, what exists in itself or what subsists. As unrta is what is untrue or false, rta is truth or what is true; therefore rta is same as satya; and rta that is moral order manifests itself in man and society as dharma, moral law and social order.; therefore rta is natural order and moral order, both rooted in divine order; Rta is a conception which unifies Science, Philosophy and Religion Dharma : Dharma is like a centripetal force in nature which keeps things to the centre; dharma is a centripetal force in man, society, and the universe. Dharma is derived from the root dhr, which means, to uphold, to support, to nourish.

Truth and Non Injury : Non injury has three dimensions, non injury in thought, word and deed; injury in thought and word is a ‘cold war’ in human relations, while injury in thought is not merely injury to others but injury to oneself... There is an organic relation between Truth and Non Injury... It was a basic idea in Gandhi; non violence is a Means, the only Means to Truth. (Nikam, 1973)

The concept of Brahman which is the unchanging, undying reality that pervades the entire cosmos. The Vedic seers saw that everything in the universe changed and they called the creation samsara, that which always moves. The unchanging, substratum which is supreme, all pervasive is the Brahman This Brahman finds its expression in the living world as Atman. This immortal spark within man the rishis called as Atman. In essence the Brahman and Atman are one. Tat Tvam Asi – Thou art That is a famous quote from the Upanishads.

The supreme goal of life lies in spiritual realization whereby the individual becomes aware of the deathless Atman within him. It has also been called an enlightenment in modern terms. To realize the essential divinity within is the first and foremost goal of a human being in this world. This form is given as an opportunity to realize that goal. All else, wealth, health, happiness is just a means to achieve this goal. If we do not advance on this eternal journey of ours in our lifetime such a life may be said to be a wasted opportunity.

This spiritual realization **gives us the eternal knowledge**, the real knowledge of things and phenomenon. We can see things in light of eternity and their actual relations with one another. Only a rishi or a realized being can know and understand the true nature of all things, the right path for self realization, and answer to eternal questions of life.

The concept of Karma delineates the importance of Action in life. It includes action, causality and destiny. Action being inevitable, the human individual is bound by the results of his actions, pleasant fruits flowing from good deeds and unpleasant consequences from evil ones.

The concept of Nishkama Karma tells us to do our work without being attached to the fruits of our actions, since the result is not dependent on our actions alone but lot of other factors play a role in the formation of the result. Hence doing our duty with sincerity and dedication is what is in our hands, not the fruits or consequences of our actions.

The concept of time is not linear. Humanity does not proceed from barbarism to civilisation. Time is cyclic. There are four Yugas, namely the Satya or Krita, Treta, Dwapara and Kaliyug. Truth and Virtue are ascendant in the first yuga, they diminish gradually in the successive Yugas

and in Kaliyuga after tremendous destruction there is again beginning of a new Satyuga. Hence progress as understood by us in modern terms is meaningless.

The four goals of life are Dharma Artha, Kama and Moksha. The first task is to find our Swadharma, our inherent nature and duty in this world. Doing it with sincerity and devotion we shall earn Artha or Money. With this money we shall enjoy Kama or our desires. After achieving these three aims we should try for the ultimate aim of Moksha, which means Self realization.

All beings, because of a shared spirituality are members of **one large family**, beautifully put as Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam. We are the children of Immortality. To attain it in this life itself is the real adventure.

All spiritual paths essentially lead us to the same truth. Ekam Sat, Viprah Bahudha Vadanti. As all rivers join the ocean, so all the faiths reach the same Truth as their final destination.

Linking the human existence to the cosmic existence is the **concept of Rina**. There are five rinas or debts to be paid by every human being. Deva Rina, the debt to the cosmic powers for making our existence possible and safe in this world, Rishi Rina, the debt to our Sages and Saints who have sacrificed their life for the pursuit of Truth, and who brought this knowledge of Immortality for us. Pitru Rina is the debt owed to our ancestors because of whom we are brought up and educated and made able to function in the world. Nri Rina is the debt owed to our fellow men who form an integral part of our existence. The last Rina Bhoot Rina is the debt owed to the plants, animals and all life around us who make our existence possible.

A classic prayer of Upanishad says it all. Lead me from Untruth to Truth, from Darkness to Light and from Death to Immortality.

Anand Coomaraswamy says that the greatest contribution of India to the world is that it has formulated a sociology which made it possible to live these concepts in practical life. An effort was made by the rishis and vedic sociologists to give a framework which made it possible to practice these concepts and live and realize them in ones life. One cannot help but conclude that the culture and civilisation born of these concepts was a non violent civilisation, which had its medical system as Ayurveda and not Allopathy.

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Analysing the current dominant civilisation of global capitalism on the above concepts leads us to the conclusion that we have taken an opposite path. The Vedic rishi says that the reality which our senses give to us is not final and real. We have to, through sadhana and tapas purify our senses and our instrument to know the real nature of things and to know ourself. The path that was suggested was of Yoga or the path of Unity with the Divine. The current direction in which we are running is the exact opposite of the above path. Taking our sensory impressions and appearances as the final reality we have created more illusions and deceptions to cheat us.

It asks us to develop a symbiotic relationship with our surrounding life. We can only benefit if our host, Mother nature also benefits. We help nature to conserve itself and in turn we also are taken care of by Mother nature. Our present paradigm leads to a parasitic relationship where we are living off our host and in the end we destroy the host and we too are destroyed in the process.

Uncontrolled desire leads to greed, which is the root of all evil. True Happiness is not to be found in objects but within. Growth and Development are defined in terms of raising our consciousness from human to Divine. It is an effort to apply spiritual principles in society and day to day life. Any activity which disturbs our equilibrium, our sense of right and wrong, should be shunned. Human beings should move from Untruth, Death and Ignorance to Truth, Immortality and Light.

Analysing the phenomenon of Marketing from this point of view leads us to startling conclusions. Marketing turns out to be a science of Manipulation. All the tools and techniques of Brand Building and Consumer Behaviour turn out to be instruments of Manipulation. The consumer is seen as an entity which can consume infinite amount of goods and services, whose every aspect of life has to be commodified and brandified for the benefit of the corporation. In this process what happens to his well being, his happiness, his own personal growth is of no concern to the

Marketers. The Vedic view would see the current consumer culture based on Marketing and Advertising as an artificial culture based on appearances, in which the true feelings of the heart have no place at all. It would see modern consumer culture as not the product of inner integration but of inner fragmentation.

Reading the sixteenth chapter of Bhagwad Geeta, one finds that all the Asuric(Demonic) qualities listed are typical of a Marketing culture. We see them in practice in all the major corporations of the world.

It is the 'deficit driven', 'unripe', 'lower self' in us that constitutes the target of provocation and exploitation by marketing and advertising. The ever hungry, exteriorized aspect of us is in perpetual quest of self extension and self enlargement. In the outer domain this is possible only be more and evermore grabbing and possessing. It is this psychological weakness in the human being that is artfully turned into a basic strength and opportunity for marketing... On the other hand depth psychology, in all sacred traditions draws our attention to the Higher, the Ripe SELF within. The kingdom of heaven is within you, so declared the Bible. Vedanta, Gita never tire of asserting that our inner foundation of Atman is poorna, - whole, full and complete by, and in itself. Our essence, our core, instead of being deficit driven, is surplus inspired. It has no need of grabbing; 'giving' is its natural law (Chakraborty, 2003)

Taking a Vedic Concept of Asura, it turns out that the modern transnational corporation with marketing and advertising as its chief weapons is the Asura of our times. The quote from Sri Aurobindo in the beginning explains the chief characteristics of the Asura. All the qualities and characteristics typical of Asura belong to the present day Transnational Corporation. Marketing here becomes the chief weapon through which they wage and win their wars. The global destruction of life forms, endless violence some physical, major emotional, rapacious greed and hunger for more profits, staking every thing including life and human beings at the altar of itself, looking only at the material benefits and pleasures are some of the chief characteristics of this Asura of our age.

There has been a growing resistance to this phenomenon but it is scattered and has not yet attained a critical mass. The works of David Korten, John Madley are good introductions to the real nature of the Transnational Corporation of today. More research is needed in terms of ecological, social, psychological impacts of the activities of these Asuras of the twenty first Century. Marketing cannot be blamed in isolation for this phenomenon. Marketing exists as a chief weapon used by them for perpetrating their rule. The devastating effects of this greed speed phenomenon are the areas where lot of research can be done and questions can be raised about the validity and relevance of this institution for the betterment of Humankind. The central question that we need to ask ourselves of this speed and greed marketing culture is, " Are its objectives and techniques helping human beings to be closer to their central poornatva, inner wholeness, or dragging them away more and more towards peripheral and contrived deficits, causing inner fracture and fragmentation?"(Chakraborty, 2003)