



# Facilitating workplace spirituality: lessons from Indian spiritual traditions

Facilitating  
workplace  
spirituality

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to seek to propose that spiritual traditions of India have enormous wisdom to provide a wholesome spiritual foundation to the modern day management. It can also play a significant role in facilitating the dimensions of workplace spirituality as conceptualized by the western counterparts. The paper does not intend to reinvent the wheel but to present an integrated framework for facilitating workplace spirituality that incorporates the western and the Indian views.

**Design/methodology/approach** – For this study, the authors maintained an open approach. The authors first reviewed the extant literature on workplace spirituality to explore its dimensions. Thereafter, the authors searched for Indian spiritual traditions that can be suggested to have some similarity with the dimensions of workplace spirituality and can further help in facilitating those dimensions at the workplace.

**Findings** – The paper presents an integrated framework that suggests that doctrine of Karma Yoga, tradition of Loksangrah, Guna theory, daivi sampat and Pancha Kosha model can help in facilitating the five dimensions of workplace spirituality specified in the study.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study proposes five dimensions of workplace spirituality which is not an exhaustive list. These dimensions may be facilitated by a variety of Indian spiritual traditions but this study includes only five specific Indian traditions.

**Originality/value** – The authors have creatively integrated the eastern and the western knowledge to come up with a framework that enriches the concept of workplace spirituality facilitation.

**Keywords** India, Workplace, Organizational behaviour, Spirituality

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

Spirituality has been described as “the science of the soul, a peculiarly Indian science” (Rolland, 1960, p. 91). India shares a deep connection with spirituality and “it is no surprise that many innovations in the field of spirituality originated in India” (Bhawuk, 2011, p. 25). A list of spiritual gurus over 2,500 years in India corroborated by Kroeber (1944) supports that India has emphasized and valued spirituality from time immemorial. India has witnessed the presence of some great sages and saints, spiritual masters and gurus such as Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Shree Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda, etc., who have advocated the path of positive living. The philosophical tradition of India is defined by righteousness that gives it the capacity to improve life which is the core test of any philosophical system (Radhakrishnan, 1914).

Swami Vivekananda, an Indian social and spiritual leader, made a statement that “India must start the wave which is going to spiritualize the material civilization of the world. It has the life giving water with which must be quenched the burning fire of materialism which is burning the core of the hearts of millions in other lands” (Swami Vivekananda, 1987, p. 105).

This statement seems to come true as many Indian spiritual traditions have become prominent in the west (McDermott, 1975). The spiritual traditions of India have



enormous practical wisdom to provide a wholesome spiritual foundation to the modern day management. Indian wisdom is well versed to deal with intricacies of self and offers wisdom beyond narrow focus of profitability and short term perspectives. Its traditions have stood the test of time (Bhawuk, 2011). Thus, we posit that Indian spiritual traditions can play a significant role in facilitating workplace spirituality. We acknowledge and appreciate the work done by the western counterparts on the topic of workplace spirituality. The paper therefore does not intend to reinvent the wheel but to present an integrated framework that incorporates western and Indian views on spirituality.

### **Approach**

Research in workplace spirituality is relatively new to the management and the research approaches to study the concept are still evolving (Bindlish *et al.*, 2012). Transpersonal approaches such as integral inquiry, intuitive inquiry, organic research, phenomenological inquiry, informed exceptional human experience inquiry, etc., have been recognized as some valid methods for research in spirituality (Braud and Anderson, 1998). For this study, we maintained an open approach. We first reviewed the extant literature on workplace spirituality to explore its dimensions. Thereafter, we searched for Indian spiritual traditions that can be suggested to have some similarity with the dimensions of workplace spirituality and can further help in facilitating those dimensions at the workplace.

The framework of this paper comprises four parts, starting with the definitions of spirituality and workplace spirituality. Then the dimensions of workplace spirituality are discussed. Next, an integrated framework for facilitating workplace spirituality through Indian spiritual traditions is presented. Subsequently, it outlines the limitations of the paper. Finally, implications for management education are discussed.

### **Spirituality**

In the past, management and spirituality were considered poles apart. Factors such as downsizing, decreasing neighbourhood and increasing access to eastern philosophies (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000); individual and organizational benefits (Krishnakumar and Neck, 2002) and the wave of postmodernism (Kourie, 2007) has made it possible to discuss the two fields jointly.

There are numerous definitions of spirituality, but none of the definition explains the concept completely and has the consensus of all. This definitional conundrum exists because of the subjectivity of the concept (Gull and Doh, 2004), lack of empirical rigour (McCormick, 1994), overlap with the field of religion (Zinnbauer *et al.*, 1999) and personal (Freshman, 1999) and complex (Coyle, 2002) nature of the subject. Bauman (1998) has pointed out that these definitions do not reveal as much they conceal, and they complicate the concept while pretending to clarify and set it straight.

Three views on spirituality have been described by Krishnakumar and Neck (2002). Intrinsic view suggests spirituality as originating from inside the individual. (Moore and Casper, 2006, pp. 109-110) conceptualization of spirituality “internal substance, a value, belief, attitude, or emotion that affects people’s behaviour” falls within this perspective. Religious view regards spirituality as linked to one’s religious association such that religion and spirituality go hand-in-hand (Sheldrake, 2007). An existentialist view is concerned with finding meaning and purpose in work (Neck and Milliman, 1994, p. 9). Definition of spirituality “expressing our desires to find meaning and purpose in lives and is a process of living out one’s set of deeply held personal values” falls within this perspective.

### Workplace spirituality

Today, the employees spend most of their waking time at work with their co-workers (Mirvis, 1997). They seek meaning, purpose and fulfillment in their work (Mitroff and Denton, 1999) because they partly derive their social identity from work (Cartwright and Cooper, 1997). This shift in consciousness is giving impetus to workplace spirituality.

Workplace spirituality has been defined both from the organizational and individual perspective. The former defines it as a “framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employees’ experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy” (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003, p. 13). From an individual’s point of view workplace spirituality requires finding ultimate purpose in life, developing connection with others and having alignment with organizational values (Mitroff and Denton, 1999).

### Dimensions of workplace spirituality

The dimensions of the workplace spirituality reveal what employees seek from a spiritual workplace. Table I presents the dimensions of workplace spirituality identified by various research studies.

Absence of a single and agreed definition of workplace spirituality has led to subjective categorization of the concept. For the present study, we propose five dimensions of workplace spirituality: meaningful work, transcendence of self, interconnectedness, holistic growth and development and alignment with organizational values. All dimensions are interconnected such that none of the dimension exists in isolation. These dimensions were selected for two reasons. First, they seem to surface often in the literature. Second, both individual level factors and organizational features can play a role in facilitating these dimensions in turn integrating individual level and organizational level views on workplace spirituality.

### Facilitating workplace spirituality: lessons from Indian spiritual traditions

Some research studies have contributed to the facilitation of spirituality at the workplace from individual and organizational perspective (Pawar, 2008, 2009). This study contributes to the facilitation aspect by specifying an integrated framework that specifies facilitation of workplace spirituality through Indian spiritual traditions.

Research studies	Dimensions
Dehler and Welsh (2003)	Search for meaning; deeper self knowledge and transcendence of self
Ashmos and Duchon (2000)	Meaningful work, sense of community and inner life
Milliman <i>et al.</i> (2003)	Meaningful work, sense of community and alignment with organizational values
Kinjerski and Skrypnik (2004)	Engaging work, spiritual connection, sense of community and mystical experience
Neck and Milliman (1994)	Meaning and purpose in life, transcendent personal state and positive attitudes and relationships
Ashforth and Pratt (2003)	Transcendence of self, holism and harmony and growth
Sheep (2004)	Self-workplace integration, meaningful work, transcendence of self and personal growth and development
Moore (2008)	Self-work immersion, interconnectedness and self-actualization

**Table I.**  
Dimensions of  
workplace spirituality

This was done by establishing linkages between the dimensions of workplace spirituality and the related Indian spiritual traditions. The authors established these linkages by way of spending time with people with spiritual propensities, by their own experience and prior knowledge and reading ancient scriptures. Thereafter, the linkages were supported with the extant literature to describe how lessons from these traditions can help to facilitate spirituality at the workplace.

### **Meaningful work**

Employees today look beyond efficiency and effectiveness and seek meaning, purpose and fulfillment in their work (Mitroff and Denton, 1999). The quest for meaning is not new. People quitting their jobs in search for meaning or spiritually enriching life have become a common phenomenon these days (Burack, 1999). Meaningfulness is the value that a person assigns to the work goal or purpose as per one's own ideals or standards (May *et al.*, 2004). Milliman *et al.* (2003) considers having meaning and purpose in one's work as the primal aspect of workplace spirituality. Employee's use their own truths and desires in work that ultimately gives meaning to their life (Hawley, 1993). It is reported that lack of meaning or purpose of work can lead to alienation from oneself, reduce the productivity and can result in employee frustration (Naylor *et al.*, 1996). Moore (1992) observes work as vocation and calling that helps in creating greater meaning at workplace. Thus, meaning that one obtains from work is important for spiritual development at the workplace.

The meaning ascribed to work varies across different cultures (Nag *et al.*, 2012). According to the Indian worldview, the ultimate goal of human existence is to achieve salvation, and the best way this is done is through work, which is considered as a duty and a contribution. The doctrine of Karma Yoga, the fundamental belief of Indian worldview, forms the core of the Indian philosophy of work (Dasgupta, 1991). The word Karma means action and effects of actions. The Karma theory believes that "all actions that are done have the power to ordain for their doers joy or sorrow in future depending upon the action whether it is good or bad" (Mulla and Krishnan, 2006, p. 26).

We elaborate on the two dimensions of Karma Yoga (Mulla and Krishnan, 2009) to explain how it can help the employees to find meaning in work.

#### *Duty orientation*

It suggests that in order to seek meaning at work one should perform one's duty with outmost devotion. The *Bhagawad Gita* advocates that one should prefer action over inaction because it is only when one performs action one can get out of the state of ignorance and seek meaning (Krishnan, 2001). It teaches us to perform action with complete "knowledge of the work – the purpose, the processes and the results" (Singh, 1999, p. 28). This knowledge clears the ambiguity and provides deeper clarity and meaning of the work one does. The law of karma is relevant for people in the organization as work carried out in a righteous and meaningful way will give way to spiritual development (Chakraborty and Chakraborty, 2006).

#### *Indifference to rewards*

Karma Yoga advocates the path of Nishkam Karma which suggests that actions or deeds should not be performed with an attachment to the fruits thereof. It does not mean working without returns. Chakraborty and Chakraborty (2006) elaborates that Nishkam Karma means performing work on the agreed compensation and not engage in calculations and comparison with others for personal gains. Carrying out work

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without excessive attachment to results helps one attain evenness of mind and improves concentration. A constant desire for results may lead to a lot of stress and frustration which ultimately leads to misery. A mind that is not calm and stable will not be able to derive meaning in work. *Bhagavad Gita* enunciates: “*karmany evadhikaras te ma phalesu kadacana ma karma-phala-hetur bhur ma te’ sango stv akarmani*” (Chapter 2, Verse 47, *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*, p. 121) which suggests that a person has right only to its action and not to its fruits.

### **Interconnectedness**

“If a single word can best capture the meaning of spirituality and the vital role that it plays in people’s lives, that word is interconnectedness” (Mitroff and Denton, 1999, p. 83). Interconnectedness involves having a deep connection to, or relationship with, others (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000) that fosters positive feelings (Jurkiewicz and Giacalone, 2004). The relationship is developed with the inner selves of others and connection is experienced at a deeper level (Neal and Bennett, 2000). Work organizations have replaced the traditional social support institutions (Bell and Taylor, 2001) that makes interconnectedness all the more relevant.

Loksangrah, the social message of *Bhagavad Gita*, can help in facilitating the dimension of interconnectedness. Loksangrah “stands for the unity of the world and the interconnectedness of society” (Radhakrishnan, 1970, p. 139). It is composed of two words; *lok* which means the world and *sangrah* that means holding together. A society depends on interdependence of its constituents including individuals to function properly.

Indian scholars have considered the idea of Loksangrah a crucial lesson for modern corporate (Chakraborty, 1995). It implies that all the actions that individual and organizations take should be determined towards promoting welfare of the society and all the stakeholders. It is a break from the Darwinian philosophy of “Survival of the fittest” to “survival of all”. Moreover, in today’s business era there is a dire need to address the concerns of sustainability, justice, positive relations for which both employees and organizations must endeavour to apply the wisdom of spiritual tradition of loksangrah (Chattopadhyay and Agrawal, 1977). This can be done by promoting the idea of selfless service and concern for welfare of all among the employees (*Sarva-bhuta-hite ratah*), (Chapter 12, Verse 4, *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, p. 544); by encouraging employees to maintain the same attitude towards all the fellow employees (*Samah sarveshu bhuteshu*), (Chapter 18, Verse 54, *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, p. 738). It can further encourage the development of virtues like compassion, forgiveness, freedom from pride, aversion to fault finding (Nair, 2012).

### **Transcendence of self**

Transcendence of self suggests connection to something greater than the self (McCormick, 1994). To achieve transcendence at workplace employees should perceive their work and workplace as greater than the self. In light of this perception, work is carried out as a divine offering to supreme (Rozuel and Kakabadse, 2010) and the workplace is considered as a communal centre (Mirvis, 1997). Transcendence of self is often discussed in terms of self-actualization of the Maslow’s needs hierarchy. Burack (1999) defines self-actualization in the realm of spirituality as the meshing together of the mind via work.

The *Bhagavad Gita* speaks about three qualities of the mind: Sattva guna, Rajo guna and Tamo guna. These gunas serve as the fundamental operating principles

of nature. Sattva is associated with goodness and preservation; Rajas with passion and creation and Tamas with destruction and ignorance (Swami Prabhupada, 1986). *Bhagavad Gita* advocates achieving transcendence of self by moving beyond the forces that make up the nature. “*Sattvam rajasa tama iti gunah prakrti-sambhava nibadhnanti maha-baho dehe dehinam awayayam*” (Chapter 14, Verse 5, *Bhagavad Gita As It is*, p. 607) which suggests that it is possible to go beyond the gunas, to transcend their characteristics “moving towards the origin or source from where the individual came” (Nandagopal and Sankar, 2011, p. 191). According to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, to be without the three gunas is the technique for immediate realization (Miller, 2006). *Bhagavad Gita* suggests that engaging in full devotional service, unflinching in all circumstances as the path for transcendence of self. One who practices to walk beyond the material nature can bring his or her mind to a state where all differences dissolve and leave the individual in the state of fulfillment.

### **Alignment with organizational values**

This dimension of spirituality in the workplace is said to exist when personal values of the employees are in sync with the organizational values. It encompasses the interaction of employees with larger organizational purpose (Mitroff and Denton, 1999). Employees will feel aligned to the organization when they “believe that managers and employees in their organization have appropriate values, have a strong conscience, and are concerned about the welfare of its employees and community” (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000). This dimension requires organizations to provide a workplace environment that fosters ethical decision making, moral behaviours and workplace spirituality.

The ideology of Hindu ethics describes two tendencies of mankind – good and bad. *Bhagavad Gita* elaborates on such tendencies as daivi sampat (characteristics of the gods) and asuri sampat (characteristics of gienthood) and it is urged that one should try to grow the godlike qualities (Dalal and Misra, 2010). Daivi (divine) work involves “fearlessness, purity, self-control, sacrifice, calmness, absence of fault finding, absence of greed, modesty, absence of envy” (Desai, 2009, p. 166). Asuri (demonic) work is marked by “egoism, delusion, personal desires, improper performance, work not oriented towards service” (Desai, 2009, p. 167).

Organizational values to some extent define the work culture of an organization which serves as a bonding mechanism for employees (Williams, 2002). Even employees want to work for organizations “whose goal is to not just be a good corporate citizen, but an organization that seeks to have a high sense of ethics or integrity and make a larger contribution than the typical company to the welfare of employees, customers, and society” (Milliman *et al.*, 2003, p. 430).

Facilitating spirituality at the workplace would require organizations to build an effective work culture in pursuit of its goals and objectives. This paper suggest that organizations should shed narrow selfish interests and profit only motives and try to build divine (daivi) work cultures marked by respect for individuals, concern for shareholders, responsibility towards the nation and society and value-based principles of (Suresh and Janaki, 2012). Organizations characterized by such values are known to indulge in good practices like CSR, corporate governance and ethical business operations and thereby promote spirituality at the workplace. Organizations that build demonic (asuri) work cultures may benefit in the short run and make quick money but they will move equally quick fast towards the list of hit scandals and scams (Suresh and Janaki, 2012).

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### Holistic growth and development

Holism is bringing together the various aspects into coherence. Growth is concerned with development of self. Holistic growth therefore refers to complete growth. This dimension gives spirituality a dynamic flavour. The whole process of holistic growth and development is all about “reaching one’s full potential and to have positive attitudes and relationships with the world” (Neck and Milliman, 1994, p. 10). It bridges the distance between what the person is to what a person must become. Organizations should thus “provide opportunities for employees to experience [...] greater personal growth and development” (p. 10).

Indian spiritual tradition recognizes multilayered existence, i.e. Pancha Koshas of human being, which has the potential to evolve and move towards higher levels of existence (Dalal and Misra, 2010). The model of Pancha Kosha is stated in the Taitriya Upanishad (Sri Aurobindo, 1981) which describes human self is a combination of five sheaths and the human behaviour is the function of these modalities. At the lowest level is the Annamaya Kosha that is the physical body. Next is the Pranamya Kosha, which is vital sheath. Next is Manomaya Kosha which deals with the emotions and sentiments. Next is the sheath of intellect and rationality known as the Vigyanamaya Kosha. The last is the Anandamaya Kosha, which is the sheath of eternal bliss or the state of spiritual consciousness (Mukherjee, 2011; Mishra and Chatterjee, 2010). It also explains the “process of evolution of consciousness and thus the consequent growth and development of individual self” (Kiran, 2010, p. 73).

The field of psychology also acknowledges the emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of our being which together results in subjective experience of being alive (Belling, 2009). Mahatma Gandhi’s idea of fivefold development leave (*Panchmukhi Vikas*) is also rooted in the theory of Pancha Kosha which implies “an integration of the physical, practical, aesthetic, moral and intellectual dimensions of learning for development of individuals, society and nations” (Sharma, 2000). Sri Aurobindo’s educational thoughts are also rooted in Pancha Kosha theory (Kiran, 2010). In the teachings of Sri Aurobindo the “soul” has been considered as the core of the “self” which is wrapped by various subtleties like physical, vital and mental consciousness. Awakening and balancing of these layers is the path towards development of an integrated self and sound personality (Sri Aurobindo and Mother on Education, 1996).

Integral education, by Sri Aurobindo, advocates developing of self by awakening the five sheaths or layers. Integral education means establishing “a positive relation, rhythm and synchronization amongst different aspects of human personality in order to achieve perfection and excellence in different life situation” (Kiran, 2010, p. 74). Therefore, it signals for peace and harmony and eventually rapid growth and development (Table II).

### Conclusion

Workplace spirituality is an important area for management scholarship because of the organizational (Fry, 2003) and individual benefits it accrue (Sheep, 2006). Quatro (2002) found a high correlation between organizational spirituality and business performance. Collins (2006) supported this by arguing that companies who practice spirituality makes long-term profits and gains. Research in workplace spirituality is developing in various directions such as concept development, psychometric instruments for measurement, antecedents and consequences (Pawar, 2009). In this study we examined the aspect of facilitating workplace spirituality through wisdom from Indian spiritual traditions. The paper suggests that the Indian doctrine of Karma

Yoga, Loksangrah, Guna theory, Daivi sampat and Pancha Kosha can help in facilitating the five dimensions of workplace spirituality. This study is, therefore, a step towards filling the gap between eastern (Indian) and western views on spirituality. It also integrates the individual and organizational views on workplace spirituality facilitation and presents a comprehensive view of the facilitating workplace spirituality phenomenon.

*Limitations*

The study proposes five dimensions of workplace spirituality. It is quite possible that other dimensions exist that have not been accounted in the present study. It opens up research direction for all those who wish to take up research on conceptualization of workplace spirituality. We also acknowledge that there are several spiritual traditions in India that may facilitate these dimensions. However, because of the vast literature on Indian spiritual traditions it was impossible to do an exhaustive study of literature. Therefore, we opted for five specific spiritual traditions from India that bear some connection or linkage with the dimensions of workplace spirituality. Future research frameworks on facilitating workplace spirituality can include more or different spiritual traditions to make the framework more comprehensive. The linkages established in the present study can be taken up for further exploration.

**Implications for management development and education**

This paper is a step towards development and reform of contemporary management education in an era where corporate scandals, frauds, abusive leadership, dysfunctional behaviours have become a common phenomenon. In line with practical wisdom from Indian spiritual traditions, this study can help to add some insights and thus build upon the already existing courses on human behaviour and organizational development; human resource management and Training and Development.

*Human resource management*

Job design is one of the most critical functions of HRM literature. The topic has been researched frequently in order to improve productivity and performance of the employees and organizations. Certain characteristics of job, like experienced meaningfulness of work have psychological significance for employees (Parker and Wall, 1998).

The discussion on the dimension of “Meaningful Work” provides a new insight to the academicians and practitioners to design jobs in a manner that not just enhance motivation and satisfaction of employees but also fulfil their need to seek meaning and

**Table II.**  
Framework integrating workplace spirituality dimensions with Indian spiritual traditions

Dimension	Indian spiritual tradition	Facilitates through
Meaningful work	Karma Yoga, core of Indian philosophy of work	Duty orientation; indifference to rewards
Interconnectedness	Loksangrah, the social message of <i>Bhagavad Gita</i>	Selfless service; engaging in welfare for all
Transcendence of self	Gunās, modes of material nature	Moving beyond the three Gunas by devotional service
Alignment with organizational values	Daivi Sampat, divine work culture	Building a positive organizational culture
Holistic growth and development	Pancha Koshas, multilayered existence of human being	Cognizance of holistic nature of human being



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purpose in their work. Doctrine of Karma Yoga suggests incorporating the spirit of duty orientation and indifference to rewards in the employees.

### *Training and development*

The component of interconnectedness highlights the need and benefits of genuine relationships among the employees. Courses on interpersonal and group training may make use of the tradition of Loksangrah to promote unity, oneness and fellowship among the employees.

The major focus of development programmes have been on developing technical and analytical skills and competencies in the employees. However, that's a too narrow focus. Panch Kosha model makes the management scholars cognizant of multilayered existence of human beings that requires holistic nourishment and development. The development programmes urgently need to include spiritual aspects into their curriculum.

### *Human behaviour and organizational development*

The focus areas of organizational development include increasing organizational effectiveness, developing human potential and designing change (Pawar, 2008). This study on workplace spirituality highlights all the three elements. The study focuses on organizational effectiveness by building a "daivi sampat" that is a divine work culture that is marked by fearlessness, ethical practices, justice and support. The study also focuses on development of human potential by focusing on transcendence of self. Workplaces that exhibit higher levels of spirituality foster increased flexibility towards organizational change in employees (Salzmann, 1997). As a result the employees are less resistant to change and new ideas (Wagner, 1996). This promotes effective management and design of change in the organizational settings.

Spiritual interventions may be designed by the academicians, scholars and practitioners of organizational behaviour to include the dimension of spirituality and especially the Indian wisdom into the OB literature. As rightly put by "the challenge confronting management education lies in addressing the needs of the inner space" (Narayanswamy, 2008).

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