

Women Leadership in the Indian Corporate Sector - A Vedic insight

The regulatory authorities should be like Manu: trying to create (as part of dharma) via corrective policies and regulation, an environment where the gender minority population increases, thrives, and is not 'bullied' (the adharna) by the majority through activities such as repression, discrimination, exploitation, and sexual harassment (#MeToo).

By Ranjan Pal, Bodhibrata Nag

The Credit Suisse Gender Diversity report, published recently, highlights the sorry state of women's representation in the Indian corporate sector. Women representation in Indian boards was 17% compared to 35% in the UK and 29% in US/Canada. Women held top management positions in only 6% of Indian corporates surveyed, compared to 13% in the UK and 13% in the US/Canada

There is growing research around the globe proving that business settings with diverse leadership are more creative, progressive, inclusive, stable, and economically profitable. The studies also showcase that increased gender equality results in better employees, reduced costs for staff turnover and increased corporate social responsibility

Moreover, a lack of diversity reduces the number of female role models who can further inspire an increased representation of the latter, thereby marginalizing the gender minority. Credit Suisse's research has consistently demonstrated that the business model of companies with more gender-diverse leadership has displayed higher returns on capital, higher margins, and lower volatility through the cycle. The valuation and share price performance of such companies has also demonstrated a premium versus their less-diverse counterparts. In May 2018, stock market regulator SEBI mandated that the top 1,000 listed companies by market capitalization must have a woman board Advt member who is also an independent director. This mandate has helped to improve women's numbers at the board level from 11% in 2015 to 17% in 2021.

Unfortunately, for a growing economic powerhouse such as India, the pace of change on the gender diversity front should have been much faster. However, due to the country's historical and patriarchal structure, women struggle to gain equal opportunities for success in most spheres. Surprisingly, or otherwise, the current non-diversity in the Indian corporate sector and its significant betterment can be rationalized through the lens of Vedic and ancient Indian philosophy. The Vishnu Purana begins with the story of Matsya avatar of (Lord) Vishnu and his repeated interactions with Vaivasvata Manu - the first leader of humanity, to teach us wisdom of governance. In this tale, Vishnu takes the form of a small fish (analogous to a minority gender representation in corporates) and begs Manu to save him from the bigger fishes (the gender majority in corporates) in the river

Manu takes the small fish out of the river and places it in a small pot. However, the fish miraculously grows in size over time and needs to be first moved to a pitcher, then a pond, then to a lake, from the lake to a river, and finally to the sea that eventually floods to make room for a giant fish. In all these interactions, Manu acts with pure compassion and defies 'matsa-nyaya' (akin to the familiar 'law of the jungle' where the fittest survive) to save the small fish (while it was small) from the bigger fishes. The regulatory authorities should be like Manu: trying to create (as part of dharma) via corrective policies and regulation, an environment where the gender minority population increases,

thrives, and is not 'bullied' (the adharma) by the majority through activities such as repression, discrimination, exploitation, and sexual harassment (#MeToo).

Europe, for example, has been giving the regulatory push for higher women representation in boards, with Norway mandating 40% women representation in board in 2003, Spain with the requirement of 40% representation in 2007, Britain with the requirement of 30% representation in 2010, France with the requirement of 40% representation in 2011 and Germany with the requirement of 40% representation in 2017, according to an Economic Times article published in February last year.

Appropriate governance of diversity representations is not the sole problem in the Indian corporate sector. The ingrained historical issue of professional non-diversity within a gender population has plagued the feminine gender in India (and to some extent globally) for ages. Over decades, if not a century, this has unfairly led to an under-representation of women in the various sectors of (medical) science, technology, and mathematics.

To explain further, within each of these sectors, there are 'man-made' tiers/hierarchies of intellectual superiority and subject confidence that have been thumped on people since 'academic birth', eventually possibly leading to a statistically skewed under-representation of females in the philosophical and abstract subjects like certain engineering, mathematical, and physical sciences, and a contrasting opposite in the social, behavioural, and the life sciences.

However, it is tough to prove that men are aptly suited for some subjects biologically, and women aptly suited for some others. Women are usually hired for human resources or finance functions and not for core functions, thus making them ineligible or unqualified for leadership and board positions.

The best parallel (and probably a historical cause of the discriminatory mindset above) to rationalize this trend is the hallmark chatur-varna or the four-fold system of Vedic society once widely prevalent in 'ancient' India and also in many parts of India today. Here, (a) the Brahmins - who chanted Vedic lore and educated society (mainly Kshatriyas) on philosophical subjects, and (b) the mighty Kshatriyas who fought wars and controlled the land, i.e., the feudal class, were considered socially and intellectually superior to Vaishyas - the merchant class, and Shudras - the service class.

Thus, irrespective of the degree of latent aptitude one possessed for Brahmanic or Kshatriyas-like activities being born in Vaishya or Shudra families, one was never given the confidence to take such activities up for education or profession - in the worst case, often socially derided. The Brahmins primarily turned the concept of diversity, originally mentioned in the Vedas, into a hierarchical caste-based concept using Dharmashastras. However, this is never originally mentioned in the Vedas or Upanishads, that only talk about the atma or soul valuing diversity.

Thankfully, India does not suffer much from the caste-profession matching problem today. One hopes likewise that the unfair 'profession gender match' thinking in the current Indian corporates will drift away in due time.

Finally, we must not forget the role of karma - a central concept in the Vedas, in ensuing justice/fairness (over time) concerning promoting gender diversity as a governance act. Rationalizing using Vedic karma theory, it is not difficult to see that the current slow rise in increased gender diversity (and their say in related workplace matters like #MeToo) in the Indian corporate sector might be attributed to the sanchita karma of the minority over bearing decades of unfair bias against them by the non-minority.

This sanchita karma is increasingly going to balance things out in favour of the feminine gender (in all spheres of personal and professional life) in the decades to come - men beware and be willing to accept the outcomes, no matter how unfair it may seem!

On the other hand, the agami karma is in the own hands of both the governance authorities, and the minority. Getting back to the fishanalogy in the Vishnu Purana, at some point in time, the fish will not be small enough anymore, i.e., the day is imminent when women in the corporate sector will garner enough experience and power to be equal to men in quality and numbers. Any governance authority then cannot show foolhardy compassion to women affecting workplace fairness.

On the other hand, women should handle their agami karma well and not at any time exploit policies in their favour against men (e.g., #MeToo) - thereby affecting their sanchita karma. As for men, the normative strategy is to not react adversely to ongoing increasing acts of gender fairness by governing authorities and incur more negative karma.



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