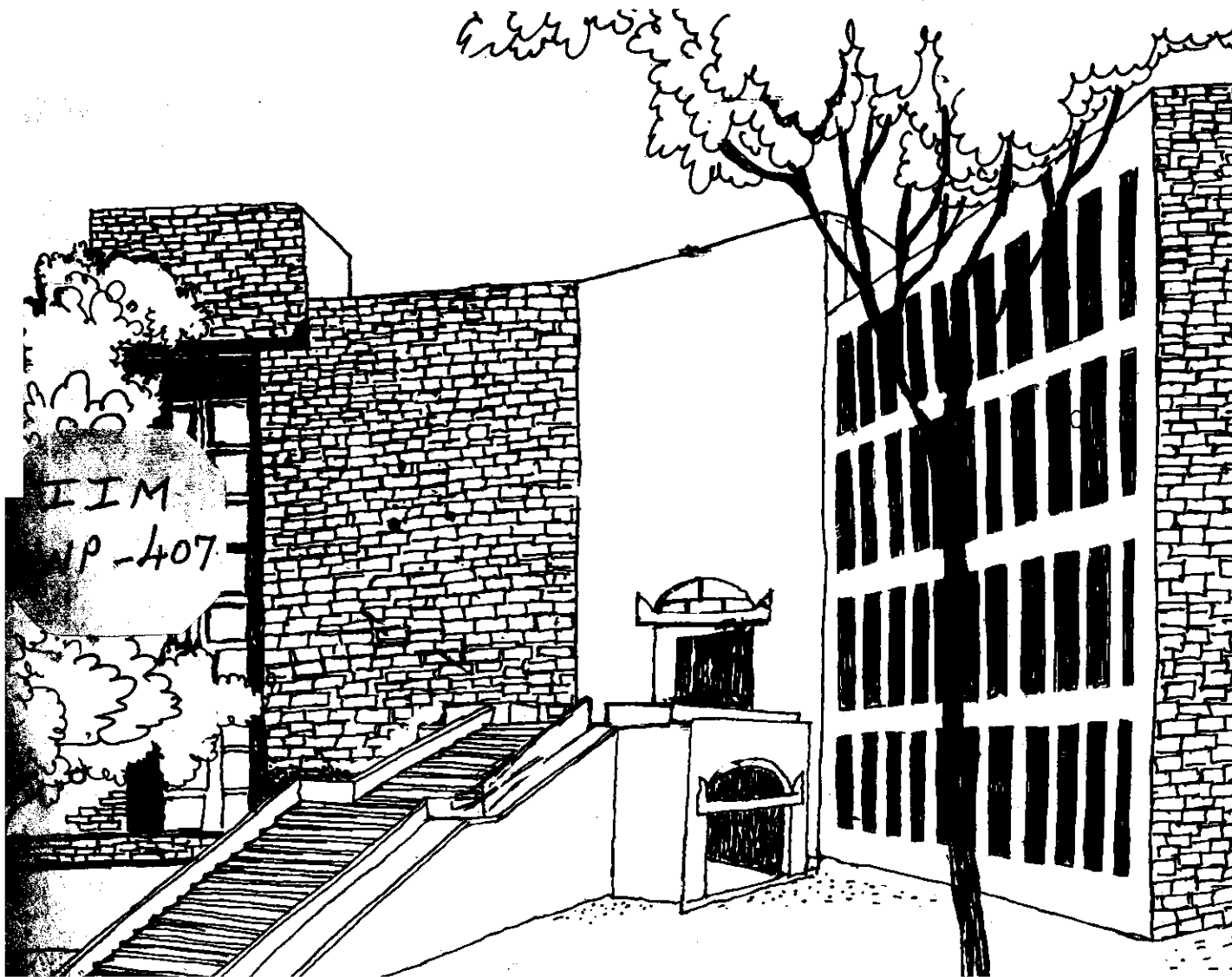




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Q&A IN INDIAN ORGANISATIONS:
AN IRREVERENT VIEW

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes the position that in Indian organisation, the most central and pivotal concern is the concept of work itself. Work is defined as activities that contribute to achieving organisational missions. Where work itself as a concept and a culture has not been internalized in Indian organisations, it is very difficult to talk about quality of work life (QWL). This paper takes the irreverent view that where work itself is not accepted as part of existence, it is meaningless to talk about quality of work life, in the sense that this term is used internationally. This view is elaborated in two parts. The first part looks at why work is not a central concept in Indian culture and economy and how this affects performance of organisations. The second part illustrates through the author's experience with a few organisations the importance of interventions to bring about a "work culture" before one even begins to think about QWL.

QWL IN INDIAN ORGANISATIONS - AN IRREVERENT VIEW

S.R. Ganesh

INTRODUCTION

This essay is a personal testament. Therefore, I think it would be useful to give relevant personal information pertaining to my work with and within organisations. My explicit concern of working with and within organisations has been slightly over a decade old in India. These experiences could be categorised under two broad heads:

1. those that pertain to my work within educational organisations engaged in research, teaching and consulting in the field of management - for about eight years at the Administrative Staff College of India and for the last couple of years at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad;
2. work with organisations as a researcher and a consultant primarily in the area of goal setting, organisation planning, manager development and, in recent years, more explicitly with strategic management issues. These experiences have been in respect of family businesses, private sector, predominantly professional organisations including associates of multi-nationals, public enterprises, governmental and quasi-governmental organisations as well as educational institutions.

My work has let me to believe that in Indian organisations, the most central and pivotal concern is the concept of work

itself. I define work as activities that contribute to achieving organisational missions. Where work itself as a concept and a culture has not been internalised in Indian organisations, it is very difficult to talk about quality of work life (QWL). Therefore, I find that over the years, most of my interventions with and within organisations have been in the direction of creating a work culture and creating concern for work performance in Indian organisations. The irreverent view I take, in this essay, is to posit that where work itself is not accepted as part of existence, it is meaningless to talk about quality of work life, in the sense that this term is used internationally. I will attempt to do this in two parts. In the first part I will look at why work is not a central concept in Indian culture and economy and how this affects performance of organisations. In the second part, I will illustrate through my experience with a few organisations the importance of interventions to bring about a "work culture" before one even begins to think about QWL.

- I -

ORGANISATIONS PERFORMANCE AND WORK

Organisations as a concept is an outcome of the industrial revolution and the concomitant industrialisation in the West and elsewhere. Basically, organisations have come to connote places where "productive work" is done¹. Essentially, this has displaced the pre-industrialisation concept of productive work as being performed in primary-group and community settings. Following this displacement of productive work for meeting societal needs from the primary-group settings, our world has become populated with more and more complex organisations which have come to stay with us as part of our everyday existence. Whereas in the West, this displacement has been facilitated by both social and religious values including the protestant Christian work-ethic, no such over-arching value system has provided an umbrella for functioning of organisations in the Indian context. Therefore, Indian organisations are basically importation of the western ideas of productive work being done in places other than primary group and community settings. I am not too sure, given the predominantly agrarian society that we are, how valid is this displacement of productive work from primary group and community settings. However, the reality is that we live in a matrix of organisations of all kinds which affect our life, day in and day out, whether one is in a remote village or whether one lives in a urban metropolis. If this thesis is accepted, then, I would argue that there are several conditions other

than our agrarian base which makes it difficult for us to accept organisations as "work places".

One of the important evidences for my argument comes from the non-performance as well as poor performance of many of our organisations, whatever the ownership. I think the reason is that Indian economy operates under protected market conditions and the protection is skewed toward perpetuation of vested interests. Such protection prevents market forces from coming into play and generating pressures for performance on organisations through normal market mechanisms of exit and voice and there is a forced choice situation as far as consumers are concerned.² Protection as well as concentration of material and economic power prevents creation of groups which would mobilise consumers of all kinds and bring about some pressure on organisations. Therefore, the voice mechanisms are non-existent and exit as a mechanism is foreclosed for consumers in the country due to absence of alternatives and prevalence of state as well as private monopolies and near-monopolies. Thus, the consumer has no choice but to use the state transport system and to toe the line in so far as basic necessities of everyday existence are concerned. If one exits from the state system, one merely walks into the hands of a private monopolist with high prices. Therefore, the choice is really between Scylla and Charibides and organisations do not find themselves under any pressure of performance from the market. This creates conditions in organisations which affect work in the following ways:

1. There is very little concern for quality of product or service.
2. There is very little concern for timeliness.
3. There is very little concern for 'costs'.
4. There is very little concern for people who work because they also have very few choices available to them.
5. There is very little concern for future.
6. There is very little concern for "organisational processes", especially, those which add the quality dimension to work.

The other important evidence for my argument comes from the observation that organisations in this country have "fuzzy" boundaries. Essentially, organisations have come to represent settings in which societal forces interact. Thus, our organisations have provided settings for interaction of familial forces, interest groups, caste conflicts, regional and linguistic groups, class conflicts and political and religious forces, among others.³

Irrespective of the ownership, these societal forces appear to predominate in Indian organisations much more than in the West. Therefore, organisations do not concern themselves with work which is essential for carrying out their missions, but, seem to concern themselves more with those activities which maintain an "equilibrium" of the societal forces. This "equilibrium" is generally in directions which perpetuate, again, vested interests and do not

upset power balances. In many ways, ours can be considered a political economy which is essentially in the nature of a 'spoils regime'.⁴ In such a stage of development the political and other leaders play the game chiefly for the sake of sharing of the spoils. Performance is of limited consequence to them because of the unequal and skewed power distribution. The masses, be they in the society or be they employees in the organisations are unable to influence the quality of management. In contrast, organisations in the West may be considered to be in a societal matrix which could be depicted as a political economy of the 'mature order'. Concern for performance is an important characteristic of a mature society. In this context work becomes a central concern and so does QWL. Thus, societal conditions make it extremely difficult for organisations to be concerned about performance and, therefore, about work, in the first place. This may also explain why many organisations perform poorly or do not perform at all. "Performance", itself, is an alien concept in this context. Hence, one wonders what success would QWL interventions have in organisations given such hostile conditions. Experiments of the 'industrial democracy' kind are not feasible and my point is that QWL experiments will tend to remain as isolated instances and may evaporate over time unless great care is taken to insulate such experiments. This may also explain why many voluntary agencies which are involved in some interesting work in bringing about social change do not want to spread out nor link up with other agencies. Perhaps, limited and insulated experiments spread all over are

of a greater value than concerted efforts of the 'industrial democracy' kind.

Thus, my point of view is that we have to work with power centres to create concern for performance and, therefore, concern for work. Since power centres in any organisation are not under any external pressure for performance such pressure would have to be generated internally, i.e., they have to begin to feel a need for performance and, therefore, for work itself. They also have to begin to understand that concern for performance and concern for work would necessitate their changing their own behaviours and creating cultures which are congruent with such concerns. Most QWL efforts fail on this account. In family businesses and private-sector 'professionally managed organisations with continuity of leadership, this is more possible. Along with higher education as well as influence of the West, many people who occupy key positions in such organisations are more amenable to generating internal pressures. However, governmental organisations and public enterprises which do not have stability of leadership tend to succumb to the prevailing ethos.

In order to create concern for performance, interventions have to be addressed toward creating an awareness of the social cost of non-performance and poor performance among the key stake holders, who can be politicians, senior bureaucrats, trade unionists, among others. In a "spoils regime" this is an extremely difficult task, if not an impossible one. In the next part, I will illustrate my argument through a few examples where the primary thrust has

been to influence the power centres to be concerned about performance and, therefore, about work. Over the years, I believe that such organisations which are influenced this way are likely to move in the direction of QWL experiments of the kind encountered abroad. One may also examine whether QWL interventions in our context are to be of the kind internationally attempted. I suspect that QWL interventions will have to link the individuals in organisations in a mature way both internally as well as externally, such that performance is seen as a social contribution and non-performance and poor performance is seen as a social cost and a burden.⁵ I further suspect that most failures can be traced to the difficulties of creating, strengthening and servicing such links internally and externally because of fuzzy boundaries. Therefore, creating a 'counter-culture' should be the predominant, explicit concern of interventions preceding QWL experiments in our context. In the next part, I illustrate such efforts from my limited experience, primarily, from my work with organisations.

- II -

CREATING A COUNTER CULTURE

I think strategic interventions hold the key to creating a "counter culture" which promotes concern for performance and hence for work. Elsewhere, I have defined strategic interventions as planned activities undertaken by the key actors in a social system which bring about significant changes in the posture and perception of the social system towards its primary task and its environment.⁶ I had identified three categories of interventions as being relevant in the context of inter-organisational effectiveness. Given the reality of 'fuzzy' boundaries, Indian organisations may also be conceived of as arenas where multiple organisations interact. Therefore, the three categories of interventions are equally germane to organisational effectiveness. These are:

1. Purpose creating interventions involving development of super-ordinate goals for the various groups interacting in the organisational arena; conscious mapping of future states and development of specific action plans for movement towards these future states
2. Boundary changing interventions to include development of groups and roles to handle problems of dissolution and as well as creation of new individual/group boundaries; conscious identification of the stake holders and their salience from time to time; conscious operationalisation of inter-group dependencies and ways of handling these

dependencies and development of mechanisms for inter-group linkages from time to time

3. Culture changing interventions to include

activities to develop trust among the interacting people from various groups at different levels at different points of time; conscious creation and nurturing of teams across groups for the performance of different tasks at different points of time; conscious creation of mechanisms for on-line real-time information sharing to bring about effective monitoring and control without undue reliance on sophisticated and expensive technologies.

I will illustrate these interventions respectively, with one example each: one of a medium sized private sector, public limited company predominantly controlled by one family; another of a family of business group with several companies both closely held and ^{of} public limited type; and finally, of a state level industrial infrastructure corporation considered a leader in the country. Incidentally, all these organisations are acknowledged leaders in their fields of activity. Again, while I will illustrate one category of intervention with one organisation, each one has attempted and is attempting other categories of interventions. I have merely identified the thrust behind attempts of each organisation to create a "counter-culture".

Thus, organisation "A" has attempted to use purpose creating interventions to bring in concern for performance. Although a leader in its industry, for more than a decade and a half, this organisation was under no pressure because of monopolistic conditions. However, it enjoyed good relationship between the owners and the workers. There was no middle line of management to speak of. One shift ran without supervisors. Tomorrow was very much like yesterday and growth was slow. Export opportunities were not tapped nor diversification. The chief executive (one of three family members in a corporate group of six) felt the need to reinvest the profits in creating new divisions to provide opportunities for growth of people in the organisation. For the first time, the six members of the corporate group sat down and began to look at the organisation systematically and its future. Even to day, after several years of debating, the corporate group is not fully convinced about a business-mix for the future which would rely less and less on the existing business. The mission was debated on several occasions and clarity on areas which were not considered desirable was reached. . . With the corporate group developing clarity on the future of the organisation, a demand was placed on the middle management to shoulder operational responsibilities. Thus, as two inter-locking groups are under evolution, with the corporate group more concerned with issues beyond three years and the operating group more concerned with issues within a time span of two years, Super-ordinate result areas were identified, especially, in the operating group which brought together the marketing and the

plant groups. Specific action plans were evolved. This has enabled the organisation to bring in its fold the middle managers who felt left out earlier. Today the inter-meshing between the corporate group the operating group and the workers is complete with the workers accepting the operating group members as "managers" as opposed to negating their existence as "non-owners" and a "non-productive layer". Increasing pressures are also on the family members of the corporate group to act in consonance with the mission and not use the organisation as a setting for satisfying family needs. The corporate group has matured into a group of "entrepreneur-managers". Thus, when this organisation was confronted with crises resulting from high raw material costs, spiralling labour costs and technological obsolescence, it responded well to the challenges due to the internal strengths built on processes of participation at all levels. Even on the industrial relations front, the organisation has moved away from a benevolent stance to a mature work centred relationship which is both human and humane. This has been possible as a result of conscious planning. It could be said that in this organisation there is concern for performance and, hence, work related to an organisational mission that has managerial consensus with workers' understanding. Purpose creating interventions have paved the way for QWL experiments.

In organisation B, primary thrust has been toward creation of a Group identity and developing appropriate mechanisms for handling inter-group problems within the Business Group. This organisation has been in existence for over three decades and consists of a

Marketing organisation and multiple manufacturing organisations floated by the Group. It also has several manufacturing principals who are not formal members of the Group. Run primarily as a one-man show, the Chairman had been feeling a need to diversify out of existing traditional industry and more into newer, sophisticated industries. Coming in of the young son-in-law of one of his close associates (a friend) in the Group, provided him this opportunity. Although initially he visualised the problem as training of his marketing staff, he began to see the value of bringing about a Group identity around a strategic planning process. Interactions were set in motion which resulted in the creation of a formal management Board at the Group level followed by a reorganisation of the Marketing Organisation into a Product-Region set-up. Product Managers and Regional Managers were sharply identified and a triangular interaction was set in motion with the Management Board linked to the Product-Region set-up through Technical Directors. Planned periodic interactions of Product Managers of the Marketing Organisation with manufacturing heads and the Executive Director/was also initiated. A quarterly coming together of Product Managers and Regional Managers along with a six monthly coming together with the manufacturing heads and the Management Board have created a sense of identity and belongingness to the Group. In this process old boundaries have been dissolved and new boundaries have emerged. New systems sharply identifying accountability and performance have emerged. Concern for Regions as profit centres and concern for a healthy "business portfolio" have been expressed. Hidden costs have surfaced and

strategic criteria have evolved. Hence, the strategic planning process which focussed on boundary changing interventions has created conditions in this Group whereby QWL experiments can flourish. Again, this has been possible because the power holders have felt an internal urge to do so.

In the case of Organisation C, it is a successful state-level industrial infrastructure corporation. It is an informal organisation but, "status conscious". Since it had been under no great pressure, neither future thinking nor systems were developed in the past. In recent years, this organisation has attempted to adopt MBO as a way of managing.⁸ As a result of this it has had to rely on formalisation of planning, review and monitoring processes as well as its information system.⁹ This has brought in its wake 12 key groups in the organisation starting with a corporate group, 5 departmental groups, 5 regional groups and one apex monitoring group. Historically, the organisation is split between commercial and engineering functions. The creation of these twelve groups has brought in its wake the realisation that "formalisation" and "systematization" with growth requires a culture built on trust at different levels to make groups function effectively. This has thrown in sharp relief issues as to the composition of these groups, the role of regions vis a vis head office departments, the need for creating business centres around regions and, hence, the role of regional managers vis a vis the engineering personnel. All these necessitate a major structural and cultural change. Having begun to move in this direction has created internal pressures on an organisation which is really under no external pressure.

A gradual attempt to look out into the future and develop internal control information including a computerized M.I.S. is beginning to put pressure on effective functioning of groups. The organisation has now consented to have a "process consultant" to help the groups become effective. For a governmental organisation this is a major cultural departure indeed. In addition, this organisation has set in motion 'training and development' efforts which cover all the employees except the class IV staff. In these efforts the officers act as "trainers" for the next level and a process of feedback has also started. At the present stage, the educational efforts are primarily technical and cognitive, but then, this is just a beginning. In many ways, this effort has helped to break the ice at different levels and to build trust. More sophisticated efforts at involvement may come about if these developments get institutionalised. Thus, O.D. interventions are paving the way for creation of "counter-culture" and opening up the possibilities of QWL experiments.

In all the three organisations the efforts have been to create a counter-culture through influencing the power centres, generating and nurturing internal pressures since external pressures are not strong enough. My experience of working with and within educational institutions also supports this point of view. A diagnosis that was done of a premier technological institution is not even taken cognizance of by the internal elite although efforts have been made repeatedly to bring an internal group together to look at issues together.¹⁰ In the case of educational institutions I have been part of, institutional fragmentation is a common phenomenon. The

institutions have become "mere addresses" for various members and not "habitats" to be cared for. Other institutions engaged in research and education around the country have experienced the phenomena of "tail wagging the dog" and "displacement of missions".¹¹ The former has happened due to () the core professionals not investing themselves sufficiently in the development of the institution and (b) increasing alienation followed by coming together of the other members of the institution making demands on the system which negate the mission. The latter has happened because of gradual erosion of "political will" in the institutional leaders who begin to view their roles from limited personal or professional perspectives." Therefore, it becomes all the more important to initiate strategic interventions of the kind described earlier. All three are appropriate and one may start with one or the other depending where the initial thrust would be most effective. Creating a "counter-culture" is the need of the day - a culture that places work at its core and concern for performance as its prime-mover. Therefore, unless one moves in this direction, I have to restate my irreverent view that it is meaningless to talk about QWL in the Indian context.

NOTES

1. DANIEL YANKELOVICH (1981) Self Centredness Meets the Hard Realities, Learning to think realistically and Toward an Ethic of Commitment, Industry Week, May 18, June 1 and June 15, respectively, highlight the problems in the context of developed countries.
2. HIRSCHMAN, A.O (1970) Exit, Voice and Loyalty, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, provides an elegant treatment of these three mechanisms.
3. LARS ENGWALL (1981/82) Organisation Theory: Where are You? Omega; Celia Davies (1981) Organisation Theory: What use are you? Paper on the topic "Present state of organisation theory" presented by invitation at the Fifth Conference arranged by the Autonomous Work Group on Health Organisation within EGOS April 6-9, 1981, Linköping, Sweden; and

Mary Zey-Ferrel (1981) Criticisms of the Dominant Perspective on Organisations, The Sociological Quarterly 22(2), echo similar feelings elsewhere.
4. SAMUEL PAUL (1981) The Strategic Management of Development Programmes: Evidence from an international study, Working Paper No.390, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, introduces the link between political performance and developmental performance at different stages of political development.
5. GORDON LAWRENCE (1979) Citizenship and the Work Place: A Current Case Study, paper presented at the Conference on Theorien und Methoden der Organisationsentwicklung - in Vergleich USA/ Europe at University of Bielefeld, 13-15 December, 1979, discusses issues such as the ones raised here in the context of industrialised societies. I have also immensely benefitted from reading Gouranga Chattopadhyay's "Addendum" to Gordon Lawrence's paper.
6. BENEH, S.R. (1981) Vanishing Boundaries Working Paper No.380 Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, deals with inter-organisational effectiveness at a conceptual level.
7. BARRY HEDLEY (1977) Strategy and the "Business Portfolio", Long Range Planning, 10 (February) provides a useful treatment of the concept of business mix

8. MAHESHWARI B.L. (1980) Management by Objectives, New Delhi: Tata-McGraw Hill, discusses the concept and practice of MBO in the Indian context.
9. JOSHIPURA, M.R. (1981) Changing Management Processes: An Inside view of MBO implementation, paper prepared specially for the Seminar on Management by Objectives November 2-7, 1981 at Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad graphically depicts the difficulties of creating a "counter-culture"
10. GANESH, S.R. (1981) Training Patterns, February, Seminar summarises the main points of diagnosis of the higher education institution in the field of technology
11. GANESH, S.R. (1978) Processes of institution building: A comparative study of Indian management education institutions, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, London: University of London, provides insights into development of leading management education institutions in the country and their performance till 1977.