Carved in Stone: Discursive Pragmatism and the Dabbawala Discourse

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Abstract

The study examines the discourse that has been generated around the Dabbawalas' processes, their reception, assessment and applicability. The questions that this study raises are: Is the discourse generated around the dabbawala more outcome-based rather than process-based? How deep can we go with the analysis of metaphors, symbols and motifs in the Varkari tradition; to reconstruct this discourse and use this to visualize an efficiently functioning system in its broader context, and also view it as a directional and rejuvenating device for organizations? This critique is enabled by discursive pragmatism and semiotic enquiry. The study also situates these questions in the broader debate on anti-performativity in Critical Management Studies. It moves towards "critical performativity" through illustrative "micro-emancipations"(Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009) in business discourse.

Keywords: Dabbawala, Discursive Pragmatism, Semiotics, Performativity

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Reflexive practice in ontological and epistemological pronouncements have characterized critical approaches to organizational theory since the 1960s which saw the emergence of a highly inward, self-conscious focus on the constructed nature of social reality. The erosion of observable, objective versions of reality was celebrated by the rise of critical theory and practice: a text-intensive examination of the hitherto taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs and practices.

The field of Critical Management Studies (henceforth CMS) resonates with this impact of theoretical and epistemological inroads into mainstream management theory; notably the displacement of mainstream management certainties by structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction, critical discursive analysis, critical feminist theory, post-colonialism and critical sociology. CMS in its radical and moderate versions has evolved as a reflexive mode of enquiry into the undercurrents, tensions, oppositions, the grand narratives and the performative assumptions that characterize much of mainstream management theory and practice.

Our aim in this article is to examine the discourse generated around the Mumbai Dabbawalas — a highly acclaimed Mumbai-based tiffin carrier service — and to show how critical performativity can be achieved through a pragmatic "inside-out" application of the signifying processes in the *Varkari* tradition[1] that informs the Dabbawalas functions and modalities. To do this we first present an overview of Critical Management Studies and the performativity debate. We then argue our usage of Discursive Pragmatism which enables the present study by situating it within the broad field of Discursive Analytics and the role of Text as an analytical tool. Next, we contextualize the Dabbawala phenomenon within Indian

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[1] For a detailed study of the Varkari code, see Lele,1981; Mokashi, 1987.

Management thought and its applications by identifying an inside-out approach. The questions that we raise for our study are then addressed through the application of semiotic and discursive enquiry into the Dabbawalas' processes. Based on the findings, we argue in favour of a "critical performativity" (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009) which can enable and invigorate present day managerial and organizational practices.

The following section examines CMS' principles to situate this discursive study and endorses the call for a critical performativity.

Towards the Performativity Debate

The guiding principles for CMS identified in a number of disciplinary enquiries are denaturalization, anti-performativity and reflexivity (Fournier and Gray, 2000; Alvesson, Bridgman and Willmott, 2009). CMS takes on mainstream management theory and practice for its relentless pursuit of means-ends calculations, which translate into such seemingly neutral outcomes as productivity, efficiency and resultant profits for the organization. CMS engages with these, directing its critical devices on the hidden undercurrents in these postulations of neutralities and certainties reflected in the vast body of management theory and projected onto the mechanisms of organizational reality. As Alvesson et al. (2009) state: "In questioning the legitimacy and efficacy of established patterns of thought and action," CMS "offers an alternative to the mainstream in which knowledge of management becomes knowledge for management and alternative voices are absent or marginalized" and "acts as an intellectual counterforce to the ego administration of modern, advanced industrial society" which seeks a "best-fit, standardized, undifferentiated mass of individuality" (pp.4-6).

The concept of anti-performativity which challenges the means-ends focus or the sheer instrumentality of business performance is reworked by the concept of critical performativity (Spicer et al, 2009). According to them, "Performativity is not just about efficiency, but it also involves active intervention into discourse and practice" (p.544). Apart from being a pragmatic approach then, a critical performative view consists of affirmation, "to process from informant's practices and experiences and then expand horizons through selective and informed critical-constructive questioning" such as the affirmation of ambivalent practitioner metaphors (pp.547-48) and potentialities, "attempting to create a sense of what could be" (p.550). Denaturalization implies a rigourous questioning of seemingly naturalized organizational knowledge by deconstructing such established myths. Additionally, CMS is characterized by its reflexivity, a highly self-conscious, inward-looking focus at the implications of its own practices (Alvesson, Hardy & Harley, 2008).

CMS traces its roots to Weberian sociology and Marxist enquiries into the division of labour, wealth and the capitalist ideology. As such, CMS in its radical avatar has followed the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Alvesson, 1985) and has welcomed diverse approaches to critical enquiry, prominent amongst which is the text-intensive approach to the social construction of reality which this present study draws heavily from and which we shall now address.

Discursive Analytics

Texts — written, spoken or identified as events — are discursive acts or practices which constitute the discourse generated around a phenomenon. Discursive analytics attempts to deconstruct the surface and deep structures in a text's functional mode. The field was opened up

through studies in Critical Linguistics and Discourse Analysis resulting in a radical version

Critical Discourse Analysis[2] seen in enquiries into the political and ideological undertones in all

forms of text across various media. As Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy (2004) define the field, it

is concerned with the systematic study of texts — their production, dissemination and

consumption — in order to explore the relationship between discourse and social reality (p.2).

We may differentiate between text and talk in organizational settings which constitutes an

organization's discourse — "inter-discursity" — where a text draws from diverse discourses

(Fairclough in Hardy, 2001, p.27) and "intertextuality", a link between texts which constitute a

wider discourse.

A majority of texts comprising the Dabbawala discourse have been produced within

academic/journal/press domains. While all three domains reflect a critical focus on issues of

adaptability in the Dabbawalas' case, the focus is still end-dominated. Outcomes are asserted and

where processes are described, they stop one step short of examining ontological issues. This

discursive act also constructs its mode of address and its addressee, the reader or the consumer of

the text. The search for seemingly objective, end-directed pronouncements which can work as

quick-fix understandings of complex phenomena in turn drives such discursive acts. Discursive

Pragmatism, as espoused by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000 b) recognizes the specific dynamics

of language use: "language as context-dependent, metaphorical, active, built upon repressed

meanings and capable of constituting "other" phenomena." Its user is characterized as "socially

situated, discursively constituted, sensitive, responsive to dominant cultural norms …. and is

oriented towards the effects of language use (p.19). Here, we conduct a micro-level study at the

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[2] For an introduction and literature review see Van Dijk, 1993.

level of language-in-use, its rhetorics and structure and connect it with this meso-level approach to the production and consumption of texts (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000a, p.9). At a macro-level, we can view this phenomenon as a part of the Indian Management Narrative, one that borrows heavily from Western modes of management and work practices to build the "India Shining story." There is an implicit dominant stance in the discursive acts revealed by the texts under study which seeks to emphasize and stabilize embedded outcome-centric discourse. Our readings seek to destabilize and interrogate this stance constructively by uncovering discursive alternatives in the Dabbawala discourse.

Discursive Pragmatism that the present study uses as an analytical tool derives from the text-based approach highlighted by Discursivism. Discursive Pragmatism as defined by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b) is concerned with uncovering not just the text but the vocabularies-settings relations signified in the text and the larger Discourse that it is a part of. The text reveals a layer of presences and absences (Derrida, 1988, p.121), the uncovering of which leads to significant insights on the discursive constitution of the text; as all language is seem as constitutive, and the focus on absences deconstructs a sense of the Other: an absent element or a marginalized position. Counter-posing discursive acts that make up a discourse thus reflects the emancipatory potential in the text. The application of these analytic principles to management theory and practice is on one level a reflexive approach to process and an emancipatory approach in application, what Alvesson and Kärreman (2000 b) stress should be a "discourse-near but not a discourse-exclusive approach" (p.1).

The present study identifies these features of discursive pragmatism for the study of individual texts such as case studies, blogs, articles, students' write-ups, PowerPoint slides; all of

which constitute the Dabbawala discourse. The study attempts to uncover the gaps and absences in these texts which reflect a vital link between the assessment of the Dabbawalas' highly successful business model and a movement towards critical performativity.

Two discursive acts that lead to the third approach that we explore in this paper are highlighted in the following section; the first is seen in the study and discovery of ancient Indian thought for business contexts and managerial practices, the second is the level of actual applications to business situations and workplace scenarios.

The Indian Management Way

A large body of texts that constitute the Indian Management Discourse consists of inter-textual weavings based on ancient Indian thought. Over the last decade, there has been growing and sustained interest in such texts as the *Bhagwad Gita*, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, *Chanakyaniti*, the *Panchtantra*, teachings by the Buddha and various mythological narratives. Management gurus and practitioners alike have looked inward or eastward for a changing thought paradigm after other Western and Eastern models. The transition to this present and continuing phase has inadvertently been marked by initial skepticism and gradual acceptance. Two illustrative examples in this context are a news article from Business Week, 2006 and happenings at the Future Group marked by this mythological infusion in business practices. A range of texts that appear at various points in this movement from skepticism to acceptance and acceptability are the contextual discourse that our position on the Dabbawala discourse refers to and intersects.

Management by Inclusive Action and Mythology

A special report titled Karma Capitalism authored by Pete Engardio that appeared on 30 October 2006 in BusinessWeek is a classic example of the initial curiosity and tinge of skepticism that accompanies the foray of ancient Indian principles into modern business practices. Engardio looks at the departures from aggressive approaches such as Sun-Tzu's the *Art of War* to the action-oriented, introspective tone of the *Bhagwad Gita*. This is seen in the context of increased interest in culture and collective growth and an inclusive approach towards multiple stakeholders.

An example of process interventions based on ancient Indian thought is Edwina Pio's qualitative research (2005) for a labour-intensive organization in India, an organization marked by low morale, high turnover and absenteeism. Concepts such as *Bhakti*, the *Guru-Shishya* tradition, *Karma*, *Puja* and others are invoked as the backbone for corporate citizenship (pp.10-11). Processes and skills are interpreted using Eastern perspectives.

A very strong illustration of the application of Indian thought in the field of management practice is the position of Chief Belief Officer at Kishor Biyani's Future Group. This movement away from the wide-ranging albeit generic enquiries into ancient Indian wisdom and applications in management is mythologist Devdutt Patnaik's reflective and task-oriented application[3] of Indian mythological narratives to the understanding of business concepts, leadership, change management, ethics, team-effort and so on coupled with an introduction of symbolic 'rituals' in the workplace for increased collective functions. New concepts in the Indian retail scene are

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[3] Radjou, N. http://blogs.hbr.org/radjou/2009/09/future-groups-mythological-mar.html

Mahalingam T.V. The Atheist turns to Mythology. http://business.outlookindia.com/article_v3.aspx?artid=102030

elaborated by Pattnaik with illustrative tales from texts that have according to him an enduring power and appeal to logic, reason and the intuitive power that can best address our diverse society.

The Dabbawala Phenomenon

Universally lauded as the six-sigma achievers, these white kurta-dhoti clad, Gandhi topi bearers have been the discussion field of management thinkers and practitioners alike. Their error-free and highly committed daily transactions of lunch-box delivery and return across a highly demanding metroscape have prompted many deliberations on efficiency and output.

Stefan H. Thomke, a professor of business administration at Harvard Business School and author of a case study titled, "The Dabbawala System: On Time Delivery, Every Time," points out: "Most importantly, the dabbawala's performance can only be understood if we study the entire system — their culture, management, organization and processes — and how these factors interact with each other," Thomke notes. "You cannot copy one single factor ... and hope to replicate performance without regard to others" (as cited in "Improving Efficiency," para.9).

Discourse generated around the Dabbawala's highly successful business model reveals such gaps. The onus has been on outcomes and achievements with limited enquiry into the foundations or base of this organization. The study examines the discourse that has been generated around the dabbawalas processes, their reception, assessment and applicability. The textual analysis is based on a close reading of various kinds of text that contributes to this discourse: case studies, articles, short write-ups, news items, blogs, presentation slides. It is observed that the focus on Dabbawalas is seen in the following contexts: Business education — discussion of the Business Model and the Supply-Chain System, Time Management, Efficiency,

Six sigma certification. While Ethics is also touched upon as a significant area, the onus is heavily on the Dabbawalas' business model.

Our reading of the discourse practices in the Dabbawala discourse is aimed at uncovering a vital link represented by the energy and foundational force that runs through the Dabbawalas' culture and operations: the Dabbawalas' faith in Vitthal, the presiding deity at Pandharpur, Maharashtra; the Varkari tradition that emanates from this faith and the metaphors, symbols and beliefs that form a continuum between faith on the one hand and business practice on the other.

The questions that this study raises are: Is the discourse generated around the Dabbawala more outcome-based rather than process-based? How deep can we go with the help of metaphors, artefacts and motifs in the Varkari tradition to reconstruct this discourse and use this to visualize an efficiently functioning system in its broader context and also view it as a directional and rejuvenating device for organizations?

The Culture Metaphor

Organizational studies have examined how cultural paradigms have influenced dominant work cultures in different time periods. Morgan (2006) reflects on how the successes of the Japanese style of management; highly influential after a period of rapid expansion based on overtly competitive business styles advocated by high performing capitalist economies, can be traced to its traditions of physical agricultural practice in the rice-fields and the image and symbolism of the Samurai (pp.118-122).This is, similarly, as we draw a parallel between the Vitthal-Varkari tradition underlying the Dabbawalas' work practices, the inside-out view of specific signifiers impacting an entire people.

What differs in our target phenomenon; however, is the apparent disconnect between third-person observers/actors in the surrounding discourse and a home-grown tradition. The emancipatory potential of the Dabbawala discourse thus lies in setting off these embedded aspects of tradition in the texts which would facilitate an inside-out approach and provide a viable alternative for ethical and efficient work practices.

Signifying Processes in the Dabbawalas' Cultural Frame

A semiotic enquiry into the symbolic acts, processes and the mega-discourse surrounding Vitthal, the presiding deity at Pandharpur in Maharashtra can be used to complement our discourse study. Most Dabbawalas belong to this Vitthal-Varkari tradition. This includes the pilgrimage on foot at specific times during the year to the shrine at Pandharpur. Hundreds of Varkaris converge here after a long and chant-filled pilgrimage. The pilgrimage is marked by *harinaam*, the chant, prostration before each other and steadfastness of purpose. A definitive marker of the *Saguna Bhakti* tradition in India, the Varkari tradition has strong roots in the Bhakti literature of the saint-poets of Maharashtra. We begin our semiotic analysis on three grounds: the symbolic significance of Vitthal, the all-accessible deity; the Varkari tradition; the Dabbawala as pilgrim.

Vithoba of Pandharpur

Vithoba or Vitthal, the Varkari's *saguna* deity denotes access and intimacy. Operating outside the mainstream Brahminical tradition of ritual-based worship, the shrine at Pandharpur is a democratic, all-inviting edifice. Also referred to as the mother, *Vithu mauli*, the site is thus marked by openness, accessibility and ease.

The posture of Vithoba standing on a brick with his hands akimbo on hip denotes equilibrium, poise and a determination of purpose also seen in Indian classical dance postures. This is the root, the source of energy, determination and purpose and is manifested at two levels in the discourse under study: the Varkari tradition and the Dabbawalas' identity and operational procedures.

The Varkari

The Varkari/ pilgrim connotes the pilgrimage in a relentless onward movement marked by focus, concentration, convergence, frugality. This is a system which recognizes co-operation and harmonious co-existence also marked by the identification of equality of role and purpose. This is seen in the prostration before others to mark the visualization of the divine in all. This derives from the significantly democratic philosophy propounded by the Bhakti saint-poets of the medieval period in Maharashtra such as Sant Dnyaneshwar, Sant Tukaram, Sant Namdev, Sant Chokhamela and Sant Eknath who strove to emancipate people from caste and class divisions and established this all-encompassing tradition at Pandharpur. Just as they came from different strata and occupational backgrounds, so too their *abhangs* and songs stressed equality, sincerity, openness and determination of purpose. This marked the Sagun Bhakti marg which is especially followed by the *Grihastha* or one who participates in all aspects of worldly life. The poets' rhetoric is marked by logic and an accessible argumentation for spiritual progress. This duty-based approach to life propagated by the Varkari tradition emphasizes frugality, self-restraint, equality, rejection of discrimination, sacrifice, simplicity, forgiveness, overcoming passions, peaceful co-existence, compassion, non-violence, love, respect and humility, courage of conviction, equilibrium, sustainability and collective growth.

The forms of devotional expression are also significant signifying devices: Bhajan, Keertan, the recital of *Haripaath* and *Japa* or the rhythmic chanting of the divine name or naam is a systematic, discipline-inducing, uniform and equilibrium-enhancing practice. Carrying *paalkhis* of the saints during pilgrimage or *vari* is the physical complement of these mental, cognitive acts.

Signification

Table 1 outlines the signification transfers from the Vitthal-Varkari tradition to the Dabbawalas' operations and thought. The study of this highly successful supply-chain activity, as the Dabbawalas' system has been aptly acknowledged to be; requires a holistic understanding of the root signifiers in the tradition that they belong to and how this is reflected in their behavior, modes of functioning and thought. For instance, the *vari*/ pilgrimage with its denotations of cyclical phases, goal-driven journey on foot by a collective mass with frugal means and minimum requirements and its connotations of rigour, patience and single-mindedness is the root signifier for the Dabbawalas' daily journey across an urban metroscape marked by congested infrastructure, simplicity of travel, dress and movements and a determination of purpose.

<center>**<Insert Table 1 here>**</center>

This initial semiotic enquiry uncovers the denotative and connotative elements of the Vitthal-Varkari tradition which informs the Dabbawalas' practices. These, as we shall see in the following section, are aspects often neglected or marginalized in the discourse generated around the Dabbawalas.

Naturalization and Dominant Readings

Knowledge creates and reproduces a discourse which can turn into the dominant discourse overlooking other strands of enquiry. This coercion can lead to the exclusion of other approaches towards the understanding of phenomena or entities. Calas and Smircich (1999) point out how the post-structuralist approach is a destabilizing practice and demonstrates how "what is said conceals its Other." The stabilizing of meaning is constituted within a system of inclusion and exclusion. The method of Deconstruction demonstrates how "particular words and phrases are privileged as central to the meaning" and therefore one needs to look for the concealed and the opposite (pp.654 -656). In our uncovering of these gaps and absences we now analyze representative texts in the Dabbawala discourse.

Methodology

We have used a coding framework for identification of gaps, illustrative of the following signifiers in the sample texts: Tradition/home/root signifiers, signifiers for management discourse expectations/ certainties, signifiers for management discourse gaps and Vitthal-Varkari signifiers which possess emancipatory potential. The discursive pragmatist approach involves a close-range deterministic reading of the texts (Alvesson and Karrman, 2000a, pp. 9-12) for the identification of these signifiers across texts.

Textual Markers in the Dabbawala Discourse

The following analysis uses 4 excerpts from texts generating the Dabbawala discourse; these are indicative of the wide range of texts that comprise this discourse such as lectures, blogs, case studies, commentaries, journal articles, newspaper articles, presentation slides and so on. Our approach to these sample texts is primarily exploratory.

Excerpt 1[4]

The Dabbawala community has about 5000 people working with them. These Dabbawalas

deliver lunch boxes for about 2 lakh people at their work places on time. The work doesn't end

here. They also carry the empty lunch boxes back to the homes of the customers. The

unbelievable part is they make only one mistake in sixteen million transactions and have been

consistently good at it for all the time of their operations. This credibility earned them a six

sigma designation by the Forbes magazine and ISO 9001 accreditation. The three main reasons

for their success are as follows.

1. Supply Chain Management

Surprisingly there is no use of Information systems or technology for their Supply chain side. A

rigorous level of practice over the years has led to the unwritten steps to follow for accurate

supply chain management and time precision. There are about 40000 transactions (delivery and

return) of lunch boxes taking place daily. The figure below shows their Supply chain model.

<p style="text-align: center;">**<Insert Table 2 here>**</p>

Excerpt 2[5]

Though this may appear to be a simple business idea, it is revolutionary for various reasons. For

one, the Dabbawalas do not work for salaries; they are all shareholders in the business that keeps

expanding when more Dabbawalas are added to their business structure. Currently there are a

total of 5000 Dabbawalas, who deliver approx. 200,000 lunches every day. It is worth

mentioning that these Dabbawalas are mostly illiterate and make use of zero technology in their

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[4] http://www.mbaskool.com/business-articles/operations/2891-dabbawalas-unique-supply-chain-model.html

[5] http://blogs.cornell.edu/info4220/2013/04/21/the-mumbai-dabbawala-network/

work even today. Yet, they have a delivery mechanism with a defect rate of only 1 in sixteen million deliveries which means they have achieved a 99.99 % success rate. According to an article in Forbes Magazine, they have been awarded with a six sigma rating. But, for the Dabbawalas even a single mistake is unpardonable. It is believed that such discipline and sincerity for their work is the secret of their unbelievable success.

< Insert Table 3 here>

Excerpt 3[6]

The "warriors of the road," as the dabbawalas liked to call themselves, had no written records of customers' home addresses. They attributed their speed and accuracy to the efforts of Medge's grandfather, who had institutionalized "time management tactics," a code of ethics, a sense of discipline, and crucially, a simple yet comprehensive system of identification codes based on colors, well-known symbols, and characters that were universally identifiable. The use of these basic visual cues, it was estimated, fundamentally contributed to their 2008 "error rate," which was an impressive one in six million deliveries. It also allowed for a hub and spoke distribution system, where railway stations served as central sorting and distribution points ("hubs") and each station had different delivery routes ("spokes"). Similar models had been pioneered by airlines in the 1950s and adopted by FedEx for overnight delivery in the 1970s. The Dabbawala system had relied on such a distribution model since its inception nearly a century earlier.

< Insert Table 4 here>

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[6] http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=38410

Excerpt 4[7]

Among the throngs arriving at the central railway station are the familiar white caps of the city's

dabbawalas; a few at first, then in growing numbers as the minutes pass and more trains arrive.

Balanced precariously in crates on their heads, or slung over shoulders in insulated bags, the

dabbawalas take a midday meal to up to 200,000 workers daily, lovingly prepared by wives that

morning and taken from home to desk, still piping hot.

Identical scenes take place at all Mumbai's central railway stations. Using a complex but highly

effective system of codes, the tiffin boxes – stacks of metal containers typically containing daal,

vegetables, chapatis and rice – are taken from the suburbs to the city by an army of mostly semi-

literate workers.

It is a delivery system without equal anywhere in the world. Most remarkable of all, the

dabbawalas almost never fail.

Virtually unchanged since the system was first conceived under the British Raj over 120 years

ago, the dabbawalas are these days held up as a textbook example of efficiency and organisation

by admirers including the Harvard Business School, The Economist magazine and Prince

Charles.

<div align="center">**< Insert Table 5 here>**</div>

Findings

The texts denote a majority of signifiers that make claims to an objective view of reality.

Typical amongst these are business jargon and certainty signifiers. They also include signifiers

which focus on business outcomes. These are reflected in column 3 in each table. For instance,

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[7] http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/business-secrets-of-mumbais-dabbawalas-revealed-in-dubai#full

signifiers marking certainties acknowledged and underscored by mainstream management

discourse which turn into dominant markers such as " consistently", "rigorous", "accurate"

(Table 2); or, "six sigma", "success" (Table 3); similarly, "speed", "distribution system",

"overnight delivery" (Table 4). The study demonstrates the cognition and attitudes underlying

the texts. These are uncovered as the textual Other, the absence or the gap. The gaps are reflected

in column 4 in each table. For instance, mainstream management discourse reveals its

uncertainties through such signifiers as "no use of information technology", "unwritten steps"

(Table 2); "do not work for salaries" (Table 3); "no written records (Table 4); and "precariously"

(Table 5). The absence in turn points to the presence of a unifying meta-presence that all the

texts are unable to signify overtly but reveal this missing link through language use. Since the

dominant position taken by each text claims to attain a textual certainty; the Other slips through

the language used in context. This is the emancipatory potential in the Vitthal-Varkari frame

which is revealed through language use marked by column 5 in each table; such as,

"unbelievable", "over the years" (Table 2); "revolutionary", "secret" (Table 3); "universally

identifiable", "fundamentally", "nearly a century earlier" (Table 4) or "without equal",

"remarkable", "never fail" (Table 5). A close-range reading shows how all the texts reveal

similar patterns.

  In the sample texts under study, the authorial identity intersects with the domain of

discourse as in the case of academics/journal or press. The private/public binary is developed

through this authorial identity in the pronouncements and projections of a stable centre that is the

authorial point of view or condition of address. It is in the gaps that we find neutralizing effects

exposing the marginalized position which interestingly, can come about only with the

employment of discourse analytic destabilizing practices. By decentering "true knowledge" then analyses can help us accept the possibility of other knowledges which otherwise may be ignored or deemed …. marginal (Calas and Smircich, 1999, p.658). Chiapello and Fairclough (2002) point out how all the different elements in a discourse which include activities, subjects, objects, forms of consciousness, values etc. are different but never "fully discrete…. There is a sense in which each internalizes the other" (p.194). It is this inter-weaving and inclusivity that needs to be uncovered through identification of the dominant/marginalized binary.

The Dabbawala as Varkari: An Example for Critical Performativity

A comparative view of three discourse acts; namely, identification of textual resonance with business requirements — seen in the study and discovery of ancient Indian thought suited to address contemporary business concerns, the application of narrative wisdom in actual workplace settings — seen in the Future Group's endorsement and employment of such applications and the underlying possibilities as yet undiscovered in pragmatic applications — seen in the textual Other of the Dabbawala discourse demonstrated here, reflects different modes of signification. Discourse in the first instance works on a seemingly, albeit mediated horizontal plane; the second instance moves the signifying processes outside-in whereas the recognition of specific signifiers in the Vitthal Varkari tradition works inside-out. It is this signifying process which makes the application workable, pragmatic and task-intensive.

These are the semiotic transitions between an understanding of ontology and epistemology in the Dabbawalas' functional modes that are revealed by a discourse analysis of texts on the Dabbawalas. The source of energy in the Dabbawalas' business model lies in the Bhakti tradition that they are a part of. A comprehensive view of the Vitthal-Varkari tradition

shows how every physical and symbolic element is reflected in the dabbawalas' everyday existence, specific movements, beliefs and organizational effort.

These are indicated by the absences in the Dabbawala discourse. The texts' absences are reflected in the words unconsciously used to signify a textual gap. Any analysis of the Dabbawalas' business model therefore, would be incomplete, without complementary enquiry into modes of being and method that they follow. As Alvesson and Willmott (1992) point out: " …. Critical theory strives to open up representations in a way that may have emancipatory consequences" (p.15). Drawing from Habermas'[8] thought, Forester differentiates between attention-shaping/communicative action and means to a particular end/instrumental action (as cited in Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, p.16). Our approach here responds to the CMS call for emancipatory communicative action endorsed by Alvesson and Kärreman: "…to encourage unashamedly utopian thinking in management through offering concepts and ideas that challenge current management practice …. A denaturalization and unfreezing of the way phenomena are understood is a crucial aspect in emancipation" (1992, p.16) and also in the concept of "micro-emancipations" (Spicer et al, 2009, p.554). Similarly, as Chiapello and Fairclough (2002) point out: Discourses include imaginaries — representations of how things might or could or should be…. These imaginaries may be enacted as actual networks of practices…. Such enactments …. may also come to be inculcated as new ways of being, new identities" (p.196).

The narrow focus on means-ends is a recurring feature in mainstream management theory. The performative stance based on a means-ends emphasis can thus be viewed critically

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[8] Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action (1984) envisages an "ideal speech situation" for free and equal communication. This serves as an important reference point for CMS writing on hegemonic practices.

from the discursive-semiotic angle that this article demonstrates. The present study also goes to show how the discourse generated around a source phenomenon can be read against itself to uncover a larger text that encourages critical performativity. The application and transfer of this understanding would lead to reassessing systems, procedures and behaviours in target organizations by interrogating these against the standards (as in the present case) laid down by the Dabbawalas' functional modes. As a counter to the embedding of dominant and naturalized elements, a critical performative approach here leads us to probe whether it becomes necessary to reclaim and embed marginalized discursive acts into mainstream practices to effect a desired change in organizational functions and managerial practices which become "micro-emancipations." According to Spicer et al, "Micro-emancipations …. gradually reduce the constraints that people in organizations face and also gives them more latitude for initiative and self-determination …. often occurs through the micro-transformations of aspects of everyday life" (p.554).

The texts under study try to fix the dabbawalas' identity in specific frames, this act of "fixing signification" (Calas and Smircich, 1999, p. 654), however, pushes the Other to the surface. The signifiers denoting astonishment and uniqueness also need to be viewed in the context that this discourse is a part of. The existence of an enterprise that functions in a state of equilibrium amidst chaotic conditions posed by fluctuations and disparity in the Indian economy can be traced back to these signifiers in the discourse acts. So the text moves between a welfare context and a capitalist, profit-oriented growth model and sets off a dialectical tension.

As we go the advanced society way and bring in similar changes to our patterns and modes of thought and existence, the Indian economy has to confront questions posed by the

India Shining story. The rise of CMS in modern, advanced societies coincides with their economic and financial upheavals and simmering undercurrents, tensions between abundance and marginalization. As we project our story to the rest of the world, we bear testimony to rampant corruption, inequality and lack of will and implementation. Our story then prompts us to look inwards and base our understanding of our unique situation on indigenous models that can co-exist with the pace set by globalization.

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Tables

Table 1

Signification transfers from the Vitthal-Varkari tradition to the Dabbawalas' operations and thought

Data specimen	Root signifiers in the Vitthal-Varkari tradition	Pragmatic applications of signifieds in the Dabbawalas' operations
1.	Non-brahminical emphasis Open to all Democratic sphere of activity	Emphasis on Equality, Collective Growth
2.	Posture of the deity Visual Signifier Hands firm on hips, standing on a brick	Equilibrium, poise Determination, stability of purpose Strong source of energy
3.	Tradition of saint-poets from different strata Varkari's prostrating before each other visualizing the saint in all Visual signifier	Democratization Equality Respect, Humility Recognition of the Individual as the Collective
4.	Japa/ chanting of the divine name Repetition Uninhibited, cyclical, rigorous Marked by concentration/focus and subsequent uniformity and ease Saguna Access to divinity	Uniformity and Consistency of Movements Focused action Repetition for perfection Simplicity of activity for goal attainment: procedures, codes, methods
5.	The Vari/Pilgrimage Visual Signifier Rigorous, winding, demanding On foot Journey Collective Mass of pilgrims Purposeful activity Collective experience for Collective gains	Journey across an urban metroscape Demands on time and energy Congested Infrastructure Frugality, simplicity of dress and movements Simplicity of travel: cycle, foot, train Determination of purpose Satisfaction at start and end points and the journey itself

Table 2

Discourse Analysis for Excerpt 1

		SIGNIFIERS		
Data unit	**Tradition/Roots/Home**	**Management Discourse: Certainties**	**Management Discourse: Gaps**	**Emancipatory potential Vitthal-Varkari frame**
1	Community	Supply-chain management	No use of information technology	Unbelievable
2		Consistently	Unwritten steps	Surprisingly
3		Credibility		Rigorous
		Rigorous		Practice
4		Accurate		Over the years
5		Time-precision		40,000 transactions

Table 3

Discourse Analysis for Excerpt 2

		SIGNIFIERS		
Data unit	**Tradition/Roots/Home**	**Management Discourse: Certainties**	**Management Discourse: Gaps**	**Emancipatory potential Vitthal-Varkari frame**
1	Simple	Six-sigma	Do not work for salaries	Revolutionary
2	All shareholders	Discipline	Mostly illiterate	Keeps expanding
3		Success	Zero technology	Unpardonable
4				Discipline
5				Sincerity
6				Secret
7				Unbelievable
8				Success

Table 4

Discourse Analysis for Excerpt 3

		SIGNIFIERS		
Data unit	Tradition/Roots/Home	Management Discourse: Certainties	Management Discourse: Gaps	Emancipatory potential Vitthal-Varkari frame
1	Warriors	Speed	No written records	Attributed
2	Simple	Accuracy		Efforts
3		Time management tactics		Code of ethics
4		Impressive		Discipline
		Discipline		Comprehensive
		Distribution system		Identification codes
		Overnight delivery		Universally identifiable
		Hub and spoke		Basic visual cues
				Fundamentally
				Hub and spoke
				Nearly a century earlier

Table 5

Discourse Analysis for Excerpt 4

		SIGNIFIERS		
Data unit	Tradition/Roots/Home	Management Discourse: Certainties	Management Discourse: Gaps	Emancipatory potential Vitthal-Varkari frame
1	Lovingly prepared	Complex	Precariously	Throngs
2	Wives	Highly effective	Semi-literate	White caps
3	Piping hot	Textbook example		Army
4	Typical – dal, vegetables, rice	Efficiency		Without equal
		Organization		Remarkable
				Never fail
				Virtually unchanged