INDIAN WORK ETHOS:

A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE
INTRODUCTION

This research study identifies the field of work as an adventure of consciousness and uses a new phrase to describe it -- WORKSHIP, work as worship. Based primarily, on the classical psycho-philosophy of India, laid down in Vedantic literature, this model of workship attempts a shift in paradigm from the Greek concept of work as "ponos" or pain to a liberating dimension of work the ultimate aims of which are ananda (bliss) and mukti (freedom).

Examining the various elements that constitute workship, the researcher comes up with the four-fold paths of workship: discipline, righteousness, sacrifice and transcendence and analyses them in detail. Finally, the paper argues that workship has the potential to unfold man's latent spirituality for a sustainable world order.

CONCEPT OF WORK IN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

If we can visualise the world we live in as a limitless field of action, which indeed it is, our notion of work would simply seem like an artificial boundary created by ourselves on a field which teems with boundless activities. As a matter of fact, whatever we understand by the expression "my work", is nothing but a manifestation of an idea. This idea could be shaped by the idea of a product as in the statement, "we make steel" or that of a certain type of activity like "I am an engineer". This idea could also manifest itself into a world
view --- for instance, when we say, "I am a capitalist or a conservationist." In industrialised societies, where our work or "profession" is one with our identity, the very idea of work, which is but a mental construct, assumes such an immense proportion that it overshadows our real identities. To explore the element of truth implicit in the statement: "I am an engineer", one may ask this question: Am I an engineer or have I an engineering qualification? Obviously, my identity as a human being in this world and society is much bigger than an engineering degree. One of the maladies of a highly specialised mind in the industrial society is that our narrow world view shapes our work and is in turn shaped by what we perceive as our work (or our "idea" of work).

When we begin to assess the contemporary climate of ideas about our work life we encounter the following trends:

(a) Our worklife is shaped by an aggressive individualism where the individual has become the focal point of insistent and ever increasing demands and a contrived hierarchy of needs.

(b) Such individuals become the progeny of an outlook which makes human development seem less important than acquisition of material rewards and creature comforts.

(c) Another feature of the contemporary worldview "is its obsession with efficiency, both physical and mental, based on scientific and admittedly very fertile technology"^1
(d) With increasing sophistication in technology, the individual is more and more being governed and remote controlled by the modern prophet --- the "expert".

(e) With thinking becoming more and more specialised and "object-driven" in the work-place, the individual mind has begun to snap its contact with the "subjective" of the worker --- the meaning that he derives from work and the relevance of his work in the context of universal human concerns.

(f) The worldview of the individual worker has shrunk so much so that he has begun to see himself as an impersonal mechanism of an economic engine:

Furthermore, those who discuss the economics of work seldom deal adequately with issues of meaning, and those who are concerned with the ways people seek to discover the meaning of life seldom appear competent to deal with the economics of work.  

(g) Having lost touch with overarching values and the very purpose of his human existence, the worker clings desperately to make-believe ideologies, which though fragile and subject to rapid changes, gives him a temporary sense of security.

(h) Thus, though an individual's work is but an "expression" or a manifestation of a universal field of action, the worker creates an artificial definition (to make finite) of work
through subscription to exclusive ideologies.

(i) And, from this crisis of vision, which is in essence a frog-in-the-well syndrome, arises three fundamental misconceptions about our work life.

THREE MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF WORK

(1) One great illusion that we love to hold on to is that our work is a nine-to-five affair. The truth is that our whole existence is nothing but work. The very fact of our being alive is an ample testimony that we are at work --- whether we are breathing in or breathing out; working our muscles or our minds; working for ourselves or inspite of ourselves!

(2) Work is a product which is external to ourselves and not an intrinsic process:

The second misconception is that our work is perceived, defined and measured in terms of an external product of our efforts. Yet, all significant work is really an intrinsic process of unfoldment of human consciousness. Even the most tangible product of our work is really a process. The men who toiled to invent the first ballon must have marvelled at their creation as Man’s final triumph over gravity! If only they had lived to see our most sophisticated rocket, they would have no problem visualising that the balloon was only a small and visible product in an unending and invisible process of man’s inner
quest for perfection. So it is with all our work --- we get caught in the product or in the "idea" of the product, so much so that the process remains obscure to our limited vision. The glib, oft-heard expression: "mind over matter" exposes the limitation of a vision that sees the conquest of external Nature by the mind as the only worthwhile work in this world. On the contrary, the classical wisdom of India enshrined in the Vedantic and Buddhist texts have emphatically stated the need to conquer internal human nature as a precondition for human development. This assumption is based on direct experiencing or "seeing" by the countless sages and seers of antiquity that mind itself was matter and it was necessary to conquer the mind and its frailties. When Edmund Hillary became the first man to have climbed Mount Everest, he spoke the same truth in a startling expression:

"It is not the mountain we conquer but ourselves.

Our work is a means of acquisition (bondage) and not a source of liberation:

The third and grandest illusion about our worklife is that we tend to believe that our work is exclusively our own. Thus, work becomes a personalised matter prompting us to lay claim to all the fruits of our labour for ourselves. This would seem like a travesty of truth if we realized
that the circumstances we work under are certainly not our own making. The Bhagavad Gita enumerates five sets of causal factors which determine the results of our actions:

1. **Adhisthana** : the body-mind frame on which the soul dwells.
2. **Karta** : the ego of the doer
3. **Karanam** : the various senses which aids in performance of action.
4. **Vividh Chesta** : various efforts of the psychophysiological structure e.g. vital breath.
5. **Daiva** : Super personal cosmic power which guides the destiny of all our action.

(Gita, Chapter 18)

Therefore, we clearly see that Karta or the ego of the doer is only one of the many causes for determining the course of our action. The Gita creates an irrefutable raison d'être for liberating our ego from undesirable attachment to the fruits of our action in a telling phrase --- **nishkam karma** or desirless action. Sri Aurobindo crystallizes the essence of nishkam karma thus:

"The Gita's solution is to rise above our natural being and normal mind, above our intellectual and ethical perplexities into

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another consciousness with another law of being and therefore another standpoint for our action; where personal desire and personal emotions no longer govern it; where the dualities fall away; where the action is no longer our own and where therefore the sense of personal virtue and personal sin is exceeded, where the universal, the impersonal, the divine spirit works out through us its purpose in the world"4

Aurobindo does not merely speculate or philosophise about action in a liberated state but clearly states that this is a realizable ideal:

"Action without desire is possible, action without attachment is possible, action without ego is possible"5

THE MISSING LINK OF "SPIRIT" IN ACTION

Our industrial civilization has superimposed its own limitations on the cosmic field of action. It has narrowed down our views of work to an economically driven, production-focused activity which apparently has no link with the nature and spirit of our being. Any mental or physical activity which is not rooted in the spirit of action alienates the worker from his work. Such work, whatever its magnitude, is like a skyscraper
without a foundation that is laid low by the first high wind. Much of the current academic output on work and its nature surprisingly by passes this spiritual dimension of work and its role in setting right the existential vacuum which afflicts most modern workers. Yet in contemporary managerial parlance the notion of spirit creeps in almost unnoticed. We may examine the etymological roots of the following expressions from the vocabulary of industrial organizations in support of our contention:

(a) **Professional** Management: The word "profession" is synonymous with the German word "beruf" which means religious vocation or calling. "It was with Martin Luther that the German word meaning 'profession' took on a religious colour which it was never to lose and which from Germany passed into all analogous words of Protestant countries."*

(b) **Charismatic** Leadership: the Oxford English Dictionary defines the word 'charisma' as 1. Spiritual grace 2. Capacity to inspire devotion and enthusiasm.

(c) **Espirit de corps**: This expression literally means the spirit of loyalty and devotion which unites members of a group.

(d) Team **spirit**: The world 'spirit' in team spirit is perhaps too obvious and conspicuous to challenge us to explore the spiritual dimension of successful teamwork in
organizations.

Our search for the apparently obscure dimension of the spirit of our action leads us to coin a new word, WORKSHIP --- work as worship.

Workshop is performance of action for unfoldment of the spirit of our being towards greater perfection and progressively higher states of consciousness. And this perfection is not outside ourselves but is an implicit precondition/state of our being

Thus, workshop implies the following:

1. The worker is essentially a spiritual being involved in a human experience. He is not a human resource looking for a spiritual experience. This is a reflection of a Vedantic model of human being as poorna or an autonomous, self-existent wholeness.

2. The ultimate goal of work is to unfold this essentially spiritual dimension of man. And thus the value of work is understood in terms of human development (de envelope) and not just through material output.

3. The spirit of a man’s action springs from the nature of his being and its inner foundation in a man’s consciousness.

4. The focus of action thus changes from becoming which is a
function of time to being which is a function of consciousness.

Gita’s Karmayoga is a distillation of workship:

"Change your being, be reborn into the spirit and by that new birth proceed with the action to which the spirit within has appointed you..."

**WORKSHIP IS AN ADVENTURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

The essence of workship lies in transformation of the consciousness of the worker which gives him a new standpoint for action. It is a liberating principle which leads the worker to the twin goals of mukti (freedom) and ananda (bliss) enshrined in the upanishads as the ultimate goals of human existence. Mundane work becomes workship when action is linked to a transcendental consciousness that sees human existence as much more than a body-mind-senses complex to what it actually is:

"...Know therefore thy body to be a Knot in matter and thy mind to be whirl in universal Mind and thy life to be an eddy of life that is forever..."

Taittiriya Upanishad clearly delineates the five koshas or sheaths of the self which the human being can progressively experience:
"He who knows thus, attains, after desisting from this world, this self made of food. After attaining this self made of food, then attaining this self made of vital force, then attaining this self made of mind, then attaining this self made of intelligence."\[^{10}\]

In **workship** transformation of consciousness takes place progressively as a worker passes through the following sheaths or **koshas** in the course of his action:

1. **Annamoy Kosha** : the sheath made of food
2. **Pranomoy Kosha** : the sheath made of vital force
3. **Monomoy Kosha** : the sheath made of mind
4. **Vigyanmoy Kosha** : the sheath made of intelligence
5. **Anandamoy Kosha** : the sheath made of bliss

Given below is a schematic model of **workship** based on this progression of self. Here, progression implies 'ascension' and 'unfoldment' of self to SELF; from the physical-vital-mental to the supramental. In **workship** the worker and his work are not related instrumentally but integrally so much so that one is inseparable from the other.
Supramental (self transcendence)

self =SELF work as a boundary
less activity for
welfare of all)

Mental self (intellectual &
aesthetic activity,
high skill work)

Vital self (group affiliation,
belongingness)

Physical self (hunger, shelter &
physical needs)

PROGRESSION OF SELF THROUGH WORKSHIP

We will highlight from the above model of workship the
following salient features:

(a) The diagram resembles an inverted open ended pyramid
showing the progressive expansion and unfoldment of self
towards all-encompassing, transcendental poorna SELF.

(b) The motion described by the straight lines is not linear
but circular and three-dimensional like the two hands of a
compass describing a sphere.

(c) The physical self, the vital self, the mental self and the
supramental self do not exist in mutually exclusive
compartments but overlap in a continuum which form the
mosaic of a man’s consciousness.

(d) (i) The physical self corresponds to the annamoy
kosha of the upanishad and concerns itself with
basic physical needs like hunger and shelter.
This provides an obvious rationale for work in most human beings.

(ii) The vital self corresponds to the pranomoy kosha and a worker in this level of consciousness desires to bring about an extension of the field of physical activity by group affiliation and a sense of belongingness to a larger identity like a family or an organization. The vital consciousness is "not satisfied with the physical and objective only, but seeks too a subjective, an imaginative, a purely emotive satisfaction and pleasure. If there was not this factor, the physical mind of man left to itself would live like the animal, accepting his first actual life and its limits as his whole possibility, moving in material Nature's established order and asking for nothing beyond it." (Sri Aurobindo, The Life Divine).

(iii) The mental self corresponds to the monomaya kosha and concerns itself with intellectual and aesthetically satisfying activity like highly skilled work or artistic pursuits. The mental self is our thinking and understanding part. It is, as Sri Aurobindo says, in The Synthesis of Yoga, "not the end or the beginning; it is a
half-light thrown from the Infinite.""\(^\text{12}\) The mental life is ethical, idealistic and is constantly in pursuit of perfection. "A dream of perfect beauty, perfect conduct, Truth, whether seeking new forms of the Eternal or revitalising the old, is the very soul of pure mentality.""\(^\text{13}\)

(iv) The supramental self corresponds to the vigyanamaya kosha and encompasses the psychic and spiritual domain of human consciousness. Established in his supramental self, the worker perceives his work as a boundary-less activity, not for his own sake, but for the world at large and for lokasamgraha - selfless work for the welfare of all. This ushers in a state of nishkama karma (detached involvement) wherein the self begins to glimpse the SELF. The worker now begins to comprehend the unbounded field of action on which his work is but an expression of an Infinite intelligence. He sees himself not in isolation to that cosmic intelligence but as an integral part of it. His newly awakened consciousness liberates the worker from his limited notion of himself as a physical-vital-mental frame and transports him to a realm of ananda. And while in the field of action the
worker realises, as the mystic does, that:

"He is both the Play and the Player"

THE FOUR-FOLD PATHS OF WORKSHIP:

We shall now delineate the four-fold paths of workship which are:

1. Discipline
2. Righteousness
3. Sacrifice
4. Transcendence

1. **Discipline**: In the context of work, discipline has become synonymous with rules and legalities and manual-bound procedures. We have in most organizations a large paraphernalia of control systems like Confidential Reports and Performance Appraisal Reports which presumably serve as checks and balances for maintaining disciplined output by the employees. Yet, at their best these procedures are rules of propriety and at their worst they become ineffective mental constructs which push under the carpet the crucial issue of loss of faith in human virtue, which has to be preserved and protected, as it were, by legislation. It is almost like recruiting more policemen and hoping that the moral character of citizens will improve!

The classical Indian response to the problem of discipline has not been to treat the symptom but the root
of the disease itself --- the unruly mind which is the ultimate source of all indisciplined action. The Sanskrit word - *chittasuddhi* encompasses a whole range of mind purification processes like introspection, internalisation and meditation.

To improve the quality of discipline in our work life it is necessary to probe deep into the original sin --- loss of virtue and integrity of the inner self. Shinto ethics emphasizes, *makoto*, literally "roundedness" which connotes inner harmony. Taoist sages seek identification with the great pattern of Nature, the impersonal *Tao* and thereby gain *te* which means 'virtue' or 'power'. In Taoism, there are a few cryptic lines which adequately describe the modern organizational syndrome of managing discipline through rules and laws:

When virtue is lost, only then does the doctrine of humanity arise. When humanity is lost, only then does the doctrine of righteousness arise. When righteousness is lost, only then arise rules of propriety. Now propriety is a superficial expression of loyalty and faithlessness, and the beginning of disorder.¹⁵

*(Tao Te Ching 38)*
2. **Righteousness**: Righteousness means morally or ethically right action. Righteous action implies that the means employed for performance of action is as important as achieving the end results. Thus, doing the right thing should be of as much concern to the worker as doing the thing right. It is righteousness therefore that distinguishes work ethic from ethics-in-work.\(^\text{16}\) That which is ethically right constitutes ethics-in-work --- this is the corner stone of workship. An action has no value in itself, it takes its value from the force it represents and as Vivekananda wrote:

"Work is inevitable, it must be so. But we should work to the highest purpose."\(^\text{17}\)

And Mahatma Gandhi prescribed an authentic test for a righteous action:

"Thus, when we all care only for what our conscience says; then alone can we be regarded to have stepped onto the moral road."\(^\text{18}\)

The Sanskrit work dharma is a comprehensive word which has several interpretations, all of which may help us to clarify what righteousness is all about. One meaning of dharma is intrinsic nature of all animate or inanimate matter which obeys Nature's laws. Yet another meaning of
**Dharma** is 'religion'. **Dharma** also means right conduct. The classical Indian advice: "Act according to your dharma" conveys the multiplicity of meanings of righteous action.

3. **Sacrifice** : Sacrifice is the central and fundamental core of **workship**. The classical psycho-philosophy of India (Rigveda) tells us how the **Purusha** sacrifices himself for the creation of the universe. The sacrifice that the Bhagavad Gita talks about is not in terms of diminishing of self but an extension of ourselves by giving up the lower for the cause of the higher:

"There is the psychological sacrifice of self control and self discipline which leads to the higher self possession and self knowledge." 19

All great religions of the world have conceived work as sacrifice. In the Bible, John says:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit." 20

The concept of sacrifice entered the textbooks of all religions probably through Nature's manuscript where we see the enactment of work as sacrifice as a ceaseless law of
existence. A seed merges with the soil and sprouts into a plant which sacrifices its vitality so that a flower can be born. The flower in turn sacrifices its fragrance which melts into the air --- but not in vain. Bees, haunted by this fragrance pollinate the flower and new seeds are born. So is it with human life --- our work today is a sacrifice for the survival and sustenance of our posterity. It is in this sense that sacrifice leads to **workship**. The Qur'an (108. 1-2) relates sacrifice to abundance which connotes a larger-than-life quest of **workship**.

"Lo ! we have given you abundance; so pray to your Lord, and sacrifice."\(^{21}\)

4. **Transcendence** : Transcendence is the final step in **workship**. India's mystic poet, Rabindranath Tagore describes this state as realization in action. It is through work as worship that individual consciousness transcends its own limitations and attains the supreme consciousness. The state of transcendence is realization of the ideal in work. It heralds the cessation of all dualities between pleasure and pain, success and failure, between the worker and his work. A quiet, still wisdom dawns, the Bhagavad Geeta describes this as **nirdwanda**, **sthitaprajna** (transcendent equilibrium).
In Shintoism, the *Oracle of Sumiyoshi* describes this transcendence in delightful poetry:

I have no corporeal existence
But universal benevolence is my divine body
I have no physical power
But uprightness is my strength
I have no religious clairvoyance beyond
What is bestowed by wisdom
I have no power of miracle other than
the Attainment of quiet happiness
I have no tact except
The exercise of gentleness.

**IS WORKSHIP WORKABLE?**

Workship is not just a philosophical construct but is based on the experiential learning and the collective wisdom of many men and women of the world. A Gandhi or a Mother Teresa are not quirks of history. They represent a glorious continuum of human beings who have time and again proved to us the efficacy of workship as a viable alternative to need and greed based contemporary models of work.

As a country, Japan has demonstrated a national model of workship. Much of modern scholarship tend to explain the Japanese economic miracle in terms of such stereotypes as Japan’s work culture, pan-nationalism, total quality management and so on. However, contemporary historians and sociologists are coming out with increasing evidence of a spiritual basis of the Japanese economic resurgence. Ronald Robertson in his book *Globalization: Social Theory and global Culture* (1992) states:
"I suggest that there are two relatively unique features of Japanese religion which have a great bearing upon these puzzles and which, at the same time, make it necessary to speak of Japanese religion as being a cohesive, relatively autonomous whole inspite of its superficial heterogeneity. I refer first, to the particular nature of Japanese syncretism and second to the resilience of what I call the infrastructural significance of religion itself. I also invoke the significance of pollution/purification rituals throughout Japan’s history, rituals which are central to the ‘native’ Shinto tradition, marking the boundaries between the inside and the outside of numerous relationships and circumstances."

Another western analyst Wolferen (1989) argues that the ideology of ‘Japaneseness’ consists in the overall religious attributes of the Japanese system and that religion in Japan is closely interwoven with the enigma of Japanese power.

Thus, it is now apparent that the superstructure of the Japanese worklife is being gradually linked with Japan’s spiritual and religious-cultural infrastructure. Japan is not
an isolated example. Workshop was indeed the basis of Indian renaissance during the golden Age of Maurya and Gupta period in Indian medieval history. During those times, work in India was invariably linked to one’s dharma or calling in life. In our opinion, workshop will also be the clue to India’s resurrection as an economic power in the post-liberalisation era.

In the global context we find that a consumption-based model of work has posed a threat to the viability of the earth system. The natural resources of the world are fast being depleted and man is poised against Nature which to him is but a ‘resource’ to be exploited. Man’s alienation from Nature is only a consequence of his alienation from his own existential identity. To be truly human is to be related through work to this vast and varied richness of Nature’s playground. The ancient Indian expression: vasudaivya kutumbakam crystallises the wisdom of a civilization which looked upon the whole world as one entity bound in a network of relationships. Workshop, attempts this yoga or linkage between man and his cosmic identity which has been ruptured largely in the course of three centuries of industrialisation. This model of work has great significance for sustainable world development.

Workshop is also a radical shift in paradigm from the Greek concept of work as ponos (pain) or ‘labour’ to one of ananda (bliss) and mukti (freedom) of the Vedantic tradition. This shift in consciousness lifts the anchors of work from a mundane,
meaningless routine and gives it an exalted status. We therefore have a debt to our destiny to unfold that dimension of our human potential which makes work a liberating experience.

Workshop, as we have stated earlier, is an adventure of consciousness. Like all adventures, the path leading to its destination is beset with surprises at every turn — pleasures and pitfalls, failures and successes — which make all journeys really memorable. All adventures have their uniqueness just as all human beings are unique although they have a common ancestry and a similar destiny in birth and death. Yet, imagine our surprise when we discover, after years of travelling that our destination was never apart from us but always was a part of us — resting deep within ourselves — only waiting to be arrived at by the magic wings of our awareness!
Reference


5. Ibid. p.32.


8. All India Magazine, op. cit., p.4.

9. Ibid., p.35.


12. Ibid., p.69.

13. Ibid., p.76.


21. Ibid., p. 620.

22. Ibid.