A CULTURE OF ENOUGH

Let's begin this New Year with some retrospection. Is something heady brewing, some infection catching among smart young corporate professionals in this country?

Recently, Arghyam, a foundation I have set up to fund initiatives in water and sanitation, needed to hire for a senior position. We put out an ad on a mainstream jobs site, in addition to using development sector channels. To our great surprise, we were absolutely flooded with enquiries.

Professionals with the kind of resume that could easily be taken very seriously in any blue chip company were telling us that they were looking for meaningful change. They were saying that they did not want to work in the corporate sector any more. That they were willing to take home half of what they were currently earning. That they did not want to work in mainstream jobs, in addition to using development sector channels.

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Some shared some life-changing experiences. "My mother did not get an ambulance on time." "I visited a tribal village and saw first-hand for myself how people survive." Others said: "I have looked at my life—I have enough, enough education, enough job experience, enough asset building. I can live comfortably now, with my investments as a buffer. But the question that comes to me time and again is—if my child asks me, what difference have you made, what can I, sitting in my air-conditioned office, tell her?"

In this past decade or so, we all have heard of the trickling in of successful people, especially NRIs, into the not-for-profit sector in India. But that sort of thing remained a side show, something to admire, but not necessarily to emulate.

Yet, over the past couple of years, I have been sensing a seminal shift. This is not just a trickle of people opting out of cushy jobs. This is more like a leak. Will it become a flood?

Why are some of the brightest corporate minds turning their attention to social projects instead of the business of making money?

It cannot really be a mid-life crisis, because many of these people are in their 30s, at the threshold of doing bigger and better and better in their organizations. Nor is it, as the cynics would have it, only because of the financial crisis and the ensuing job security issues. This phenomenon precedes that. And in fact, those who have jobs right now are hunkering down to protect them.

Nor is this like the general dropout culture of the 1960s in the US. This wave of hopefuls in fact, while wanting world peace and all that good stuff, also wants to apply the very skills and approaches learnt in the corporate avatar to a new sphere. And I have met many graduates of prestigious business schools, who are starting as they mean to go on, with first jobs or enterprises that focus on the social sector. So the mystery deepens.

Some might think I am making too much of all this, and it could well be so. From my point of view in the social sector, this inflow of talent is a great thing. We do need more creativity, more capacity, more financial accountability and also people with different skills and experience to join the work of creating a more equitable society.

Yet, I also think this might be a wake-up call for the Indian corporate sector. Why is there a sense of dissatisfaction spreading? Maybe success has become its own failure in some sense—in that so many brilliant young people rose up the corporate ladder, quickly made their money through Esops or other means, and had many choices to opt out of the daily grind.

But a more troubling question is whether the agenda of the corporate sector is beginning to look too separate from that of India as a whole. Could this be a reaction to an insensitivity to ecosystems and also to some poor business practices that are far too prevalent in our society?

Whatever it might be, when real talent is so rare, Indian companies can hardly afford to let it slip away. For there are no walls high enough, no pay packets big enough, no HR team smart enough to keep employees once they have become disenchanted.

There is a deepening sense of unease over social divides, along with overarching evidence that this is a different kind of century. Terror, global warming, poverty and disease, ironically, are reminding us of our common destiny, perhaps as never before. There is bubbling angst about what kind of world we will leave for our children.

Wonderfully, this trickle-turned-leak suggests that the message is hitting home, where the heart is. People are asking the key question—what message is my own life giving? And that can only be good news.

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