

## BUSINESSMAN'S MORAL FAILURE

**I**F Indian businessmen are right about the way that a great many of them now live, then all the wise men of the ages, all the prophets and the saints were wrong. If the saints were not wrong, the businessmen must be.

Too many businessmen never stop to ponder what they are doing; they reject the need for self-discipline; they are satisfied to be clever, when they need to be wise. They worry about their place on the economic ladder, but are not concerned enough to know whether the civilization in which they work is likely to collapse. They can beat a local competitor, but may well be defeated by the greatest competitor of us all, moral decay.

India would have failed at the outset without a philosophy developed by men more concerned with the betterment of the human spirit than the comforts of the body. These men were inspired by immoral philosophers and religious thinkers. Ask the Indian businessmen why he is successful today, and he may explain to you the advantages of capitalism, the profit motive and the like; he may, with almost mock modesty, point out the superiority of his own products and the methods of marketing them. But he will largely ignore the philosophic foundations of the free enterprise system. He seems to ignore the great ethical laws as they apply immediately to his work. The truth is that he is preoccupied chiefly with profit, coasting on the spiritual momentum of the past, divorced from our sources of inspiration. He is the leading citizen of a nation propelled today by meaningless drives towards materialistic and often meaningless goals.

Clearly no institution will survive if it is dedicated only to self-preservation. A business has an ideal beyond simple success. It is not a biological organism whose survival is a virtue in itself. Rather, it is a man-created institution, an integral part of our culture, and as such must make a contribution of service to society (as well as a profit

for itself) if it hopes to survive. It cannot do this by focussing on self-gain alone.

Why do I single out the Indian businessman for indictment, when he is probably no more materialistic than any other of another land? I do so because of the responsibility he bears, because his role in Indian society is so great. Virtually all of us in India have adopted in some degree the standards of our business society; and to that degree we have abandoned our ethical traditions.

The Indian businessman's tragedy is that he fails to see the signs of his decay. But the signs are apparent in the vulgar ostentation all around us and in the widespread defiance of law. The signs are apparent in our general toleration of wrong-doing, which is itself an evil and corrupting force. Human history is studded with the ruins of empires that came to a similar pass. Nations have been wrecked because they lacked an overriding moral goal to which individuals could dedicate themselves. History shows us that when we become success-dominated, we lose sight of our real motives for living.

In pre-independence days, India was ideal-dominated. Both individual citizens and the country as a whole had an inspiring ideal in life that was not limited to industrial or economic growth. The men who gathered in 1942 could muster all their intellectual energies to formulate a national plan, overcome differences of back-ground and interest—all because these men were labouring for a higher goal. An equally vital role is awaiting the Indian businessman today. In Indian history the businessman has often transcended his industrial role become the buttress of the public welfare. Today's crisis demands of him leadership in still another dimension—one where he has thus far conspicuously failed.

Innumerable businessmen rapidly moving up the financial ladder have unequivocally stated in private conversations that, "It is impossible to conduct business in India today without breaking the law." If the statement is exaggerated, it nevertheless retains its distressing validity. The most casual observer is aware of the transgression that go on daily in the Indian business community he hears of tax returns being outright perjury, he hears of purchasing agents who are taking bribes from suppliers, of businessmen offering bribes for false testimony or for police protection of some dubious enterprise; he reads of businessmen bestowing favours on government official

to win special privileges. I would not deny that competition is the basis of free enterprise and industrial success. Competition surely induces better efforts and great production. But to compete in ways that are designed to destroy someone else and one's own self in the long run, is very different from competing in terms of doing better than your rival. It seems to me that a management which is worthy of success is very different from a management which just wants success. One management conduct its affairs in a spirit of contribution, the other in a spirit of selfishness. Contributions to the general good have of course been made by men seeking only their own advantage, but selfishness cannot be made a principle of life and, in our time, might easily be fatal. Management worthy of success remembers that the true justification for profit is an incentive to serve the community. Success is a dividend paid to business by community for the services it renders. In this sense, profits must clearly be an earned increment.

#### THE PRACTICAL VALUE OF ETHICS

We understand the meaning and value to the individual of "a good reputation." Every businessman knows that his reputation for integrity is one of his major assets. Certainly, a man's progress in a business enterprise depends in a large measure on the reputation he earns through his daily behaviour. It is immensely difficult to falsify such a reputation over extended period of time. We are soon known by those around us, for who we are, rather than what we would like others to think about us. This is a man's "character" in the widest sense of the word. A major company's criteria for selecting employees run in this order; character, intelligence, experience. "A really bright executive picks up experience very quickly", I was told, "But the man we need and want most, in important places, is a man with character sufficient to resist many kinds of pressures when the going gets rough. We find, then, that character is the most important ingredient of all, particularly if the man is to be responsible for policy making. An executive can buy brains and can buy experience, but character is something he must supply himself."

And what is a man's character but his personal moral dimension, the ideals he sets up for himself, his sense of integrity and of responsibility, his relations with others? Unquestionably, ethics have an

immediate value inseparable from their ultimate one: the creation of better men and women. Rivalry for godness should, in the long run, make for pragmatic gain. But it is not enough for the individual or the enterprises merely to mean well. They must make an effort to understand what they are doing, and why they are doing it.

The first step therefore in life is self criticism. Ethics is a branch of thought starting with self-discipline. Discipline, whether among children or adults, whether self-imposed or otherwise is not popular in India today. "And a welter of codes—in industries, in combines of industries, in labour—do not meet the situation.

Before anyone can think creatively about the moral life, he must feel in his fibre a few principles that are part of any civilized ethics, without which civilization would be meaningless. We have to feel the significance of the life and its unique opportunity for achievement. Each of us has only one life on earth. When that life is used unwisely, loss is irreparable for oneself and for one's fellows.

The businessman who understands these truths will develop an almost automatic pattern of behaviour. Certain ancient rules apply with equal force to all men in all situations. These immutable laws are expressed in various ways. The Bible says: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself", and further; "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." Similar commandments are promulgated in the literature of all great tradition, of East and West.

: Yet these and other binding commandments are often violated in the Indian business community. A man fears he may be risking his business if he obeys them, forgetting, however, that if he violates them he risks his place in the world.

#### WHAT CAN WE DO ?

There are many businessmen who admit the indictment and ask; "what can we do?" To begin with, a businessman can develop an awareness that every decision of his life should involve moral considerations. He can help develop this sensitivity in employees and associates, through example, through discussing with them the moral implications of company actions, through constant reminders that he has values in life above profit or economic security.

The businessman must realize that the inculcation of moral sensitivity starts in early age and continues throughout life. He can, without "moralizing", transform his home into a school for moral responsibility. Avoiding precept, the businessman can make even his conversation at table serve the vital end of character education for himself, his wife, his children, and his guests.

The Indian businessman should literally place ethics on the agenda—for himself at home and in the office, for his company and trade association.

His calendar should include regular meetings of management to discuss the moral dimensions in his particular business.

He should put moral health on the same level as mental and physical health, indeed above them. This means that he should read literature dealing with ethics; devote time to the study of ethics alone and with colleagues and scholars, work for the establishment of research in ethics, as he has worked for the development of research in science and technology.

Whatever else may or may not be involved in the application of such principles, it will demand direction of effort—not merely doing what one happens to lie at a given moment and following the easy path of self-indulgence. *Wisdom begins with sacrifice of immediate pleasure for long-range purposes.* There is a widespread view that belief in God and personal immortality leads to this discipline. The fact, however, is that the discipline itself is also indispensable to real belief in God and human immortality. That is why the role of businessman in Indian economics is no less crucial than of the religious leader or scholar.

Today's crisis demands the businessman's leadership in the field of human behaviour. The kind of criticism with which enlightened businessmen could confront philosophers and theologians could be a challenge. Then superficiality in religion would cease to be fashion. Our best young minds would strive for genuine, rather than apparent achievement.

#### ONE MODEST STEP

Civilization needs men and women whose every act and decision will bear the stamp of responsibility. India cannot survive long,

at least in freedom, if decisions are made irresponsibly—that is without disciplined consideration of individual and general consequences. At the present moment this may seem almost impossible to achieve. Yet without many dedicated men and women exercising consideration of each of their actions, none of the great traditions could have survived.

Does all of this sound as though the Indian businessman has to take on new burdens., and rush even more permaturely to his grave? On the contrary, one of man's primary duties to himself, his family and the community is preservation of his life on earth, so that he can realize his potentialities for good. The businessman who will take time to contemplate and to ponder the ethical dimension of life will discover new realms in which he can develop his talent, freeing himself from the bondage of the private gains that menaces the maturing business executive. Clearly understanding the principles of a purposeful life, he will share them with his family and colleagues. He will accept philosophically the occasional defeats and frustrations of his business career. He will carry his burdens serenely and thus preserve his own life, as well as that of the community.

Before he decides that the moral discipline required to build a better society is too arduous for him and that he is too busy to master a new dialect of higher thought, before he flees from his responsibility, he might do well to ponder the conquences. To rise to his full stature the Indian businessman must shoulder the present unique burden of responsibility. The fate of India hangs on his decision, for above all, India needs ethical leadership from those it respects as supremely practical. If the Indian businessman can bring himself to choose the ethical life, he can save not the present but future generation.