

Chapter I



Samarth Ramdas : Leadership in Thought and Action

“Management means, in the last analysis, the substitution of thought for brawn and muscle, of knowledge for folklore and superstition, and of cooperation for force.”

*Peter F Drucker,
Management Thinker and Author*

Management, simply put, is the act of bringing people together to accomplish desired goals. Various individuals, bound by common rules and regulations, working towards time bound achievement of their common goal is, indeed, the management process. The mainstream management knowledge is vast and continuously evolving. But the one, which is outside the purview of the mainstream discipline, should not be ignored.

Useful concepts which are hidden in historical manuscripts are valuable for modern management thought and need to be thoroughly examined. The ideas that provide solutions to modern management problems must be inducted in the mainstream discipline, even though they originate from dated scriptures. Present day business schools are engaged in the conceptualization and dissemination of modern management knowledge. But there are some scriptural sources which could add immense value to the overall management thought.

As Horace, the Roman poet, satirist, and critic said two thousand years ago:

“Instead of forming new words, I recommend to you any kind of artful management by which you may be able to give cost to old ones.”

The impact of these wise words will be lost on us, unless we care for true knowledge. No modern body of information can stand isolated by cutting off its links to the past.

Also, the complex processes of management could be understood easily, should someone explain them in the language of common people. Such an approach will be helpful to spread management ideas to those who are outside the purview of business schools. Any discipline - including the management thought - will be close to people's hearts if they can relate their day-to-day lives with its tenets. Many scriptures from medieval India are written in a language commonly understood by people. This precisely is the secret of their popularity through ages.

There are certain historical manuscripts that could be considered as organized efforts to chronicle management-like thoughts in their times. Lao Tsu's *The Art of War* or Kautilya's *Arthshastra* or Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* are some of the pioneering efforts in the broader discipline of management. But there are some other treatises in regional languages which are either not well researched or are ignored by the mainstream scholars. Such works make an interesting reading from the viewpoint of management and possess immense potential for popularizing management thought beyond the B-schools.

Dasbodh the magnum opus by Swami Ramdas (1608-1681), is one such early effort in which ideas on management abound. Popularly known as Samarth Ramdas in western India, his works are part of daily reading for many Indians. The original form of the book is a narration by Guru Ramdas to his chief disciples. The scripture addresses the issue of development of a balanced life, with the twin objectives of material progress and spiritual wellbeing. This treatise is one of the leading spiritual scriptures from the western Indian state of Maharashtra. Except for the early work by a few noteworthy scholars, no attention has been paid to its content from the management point of view.

Ramdas envisioned his society to be progressive equally on the material as well as the spiritual front.¹ Ramdas was not only a saintly figure of his times but also a resourceful organizer. He initiated a movement and built an entire organization of missionaries to propagate the tenets of Hinduism across the country. His organization was spread in the north as well as the south of India. His influence over the day-to-day living of Maharashtrians is evident even in this day and age. Several of his works like *Manobodh* or *Manache Shlok* (rhymed verses explaining ways to develop the mind) are widely referred to even

1. Prabhakar Poojari, Samarthayogi Ramdas

today. I take interest in his literature, especially *Dasbodh*, and in studying it from the management perspective.

There are several concepts in Ramdas' literature that are akin to the modern concepts of planning, development of communication skills, human resource management, marketing, leadership development, organizational development and strategic thinking. In this book, I present Ramdas' thoughts on each of these topics by unearthing their managerial potential. Also, I see contemporary examples that facilitate a clear understanding of his vision and principles. I believe that his literature – especially *Dasbodh* and *Manobodh* – is very relevant in shaping the character and capabilities of today's professional managers.

A careful assessment of Ramdas' thinking may leave you amazed: Many of his thoughts have a striking similarity to the thoughts of modern management gurus. Take, for example, this gem:

‘येके ठाई बैसोन राहिला । तरी मग व्यापचि बुडाला ।
सावधपर्णे ज्याला त्याला । भेटि द्यावी ।’

*‘Be seated at a place / and (you will) lose control of all
enterprise / (instead) cautiously meet several people /
(and see your enterprise flourishing) !!’*²

Dasbodh prescribes socially responsible leadership, which is people oriented. Ramdas expects a good leader to reach out to people instead of staying put at one place (like the office cabin). He'd like a leader to meet as many people as possible, listen to them carefully and comprehend ground realities. This is strikingly similar to what Tom Peters suggests in his *Management by Walking Around*. Peters was the first management thinker who suggested that a manager should come out of his cabin and take a walk around the office/plant

2. L.R. Pangarkar, श्री समर्थ रामदास विरचित सार्थ दासबोध

and frequently interact with his subordinates. Such convergence in the thoughts of thinkers is evident throughout the history of ideas. Indeed, great thinkers are not limited by the boundaries of language, nation or time.

Human empowerment, his raison d'être:

To help us appreciate better Ramdas' work, let us think of the times in which he lived. This was 17th century Maharashtra. In those times, several autocratic and unjust rulers ruled medieval India. The local political elite knottowed with the invaders, who came lured by the wealth and vast tracts of our fertile land. As these invaders usurped power, the elite became their local partners or subsidiaries. Also, in the absence of any state support, droughts and floods caused tremendous strain on the population. People were burdened under heavy discriminatory taxes like jizya³, and had to fork out huge sums to pay to the callous administration. Thus they were economically exploited and little was left for them to support their own lives.

Commoners were also subject to the loot and plunder at the hands of the rulers' mercenary forces and the members of the administration. Women were abducted and raped, and there was no state recourse available. There was widespread dissatisfaction and disillusionment about the rulers, but in the absence of organized resistance, people had no choice but to suffer these excesses.

Moreover, people had lost confidence in themselves and preferred to remain sufferers. In utter desperation, ignoring ...wisdom, they leaned toward religious rituals, ignoring the core spiritual wisdom. The social elite had no time to pursue higher knowledge. Such ignorance would have crippled any society.

3. A per capita tax levied on a section of an Islamic state's non-Muslim citizens. From the point of view of Muslim rulers, jizya was a material proof of the non-muslim's acceptance of subjection to the state and its laws

Shankar Abhyankar, in his book on Ramdas, maintains that all saints of Maharashtra tried to improve the moral standards of the society which was devastated by external raids. But, only Ramdas, while fully deciphering the raiders' nefarious designs, had taken them head on.⁴

Human development comes to a standstill if there is no political freedom and social justice. Able leadership is an essential ingredient for any desirable social change. When most of the social actors are depressed and disorganized, a leader has to show the path. An anarchy-like situation warrants the leadership to first change the mindset of people, followed by change in the political arena. Throughout world history it's evident that in society physical change follows an ideological one. Political change has to be supported by change in thinking from those who govern the political system. Samarth Ramdas, along with Sant Tukaram, Sant Eknath, Sant Namdeo and Sant Dnyaneshwar, collectively contributed to the change in the minds of Maharashtrians. The social awakening caused by the thoughts of these saint-poets supported Chatrpati Shivaji, who brought in political freedom to the medieval Maharashtra.

Ramdas ideated new themes and initiated newer ways of thinking. No society can suddenly embrace a new set of ideas overnight by completely abandoning the old ones. Wisely, Ramdas didn't attempt to do it either. Instead, he reformulated the existing ideas, in order to meet the practical demands of the situation. What we find in Ramdas is the gradual shift to new ideas and a fresh approach to the prevalent ones. He bridged the gap between the available and the required knowledge for effecting social development. This is a critical role a leader has to play. And Ramdas' leadership in the realm of knowledge as well as in the realm of organizational methods was successful in meeting the challenges of the times.

4. Shankar Abhyankar, Samarth Ramdas,

Inducting proactive thinking :

Ramdas believed that all human beings possess the ability to change their own destiny. He was one of the rare saint-poets who supported persistence in all endeavours, spiritual or otherwise. This is extremely significant because then existent knowledge accorded prominence to destiny than hardwork. Ramdas' work emphasized his belief in human effort; according to him, instead of asking the astrologer to make sense of one's destiny, one can change the lines on one's palm by consistent effort, He says:

रेखा तितुकी पुसोन जाते । प्रत्यक्ष प्रत्यया येते ।
डोळे झांकणी करावे ते । काय निमित्त्य ॥
घालून अकलेचा पवाड । व्हावे ब्रह्मांडाहून जाड ।
येथे कैचे आणले द्वाड । करंटेपण ॥'

*'A line on the palm may get blurred / which is a common experience / Why should one ignore this (fact) / without any reason? // By using the supreme human wit / one can even transgress this universe / (So) is there any scope / for the erroneous inactivity in life? //'*⁵

For Ramdas, the spiritual domain was no different from the material world. This was in stark contrast to the prevalent thinking that man cannot change his destiny without God's intervention. He declares in one of his works:

प्रेत्न आहे थोर पाहावा विचार । येणें पैलपार पाविजेतो ॥
पाविजेतो पार प्रारब्धेकरूनी । येत्न केल्या जर्नी होत नाही ॥
होत नाहीं प्रेत्नें ऐसें काय आहे । विचारूनी पाहे आलया रे ॥१-३ ॥'

Consider that the effort is great / with the help of which (one can) progress in the spiritual realm (as well); (Even) to set aside the effect of past karma / there is no solace

5. (L.R. Pangarkar, श्री समर्थ ग्रंथ भांडार)

but to strive hard (now); Is there anything impossible to achieve through effort? I Ask yourself about this opinion (of mine)' 6

In those times, the economy of Maharashtra was completely crippled due to frequent famines and invasions. Resigned to this fate, people were inclined to justify their inability to change their fortunes rather than do something about it. Added to this, the Hindu scriptures were misinterpreted by the local pundits. Result: Complete social inaction. Ramdas identified this intellectual slumber as the most important enemy of the society and vowed to bring about all-round proactiveness. He urged action, enforcing society to take a stand against its problems.

But, one may ask, in today's world of hyperaction, if there is a need to teach proactiveness? The answer lies in the fact that human nature hasn't changed in thousand years. Fundamental traits like apathy, ignorance, laziness and the tendency to react rather than be proactive, are still causes of retrogression. Even in management, Theory X assumes that the basic nature of human beings is to be lazy; hence continuous motivation is required to get the work done from people. This led to the development of a separate stream of study on motivational methods.⁷ Management guru Stephen Covey describes what is called 'Proactive attitude' in his famous book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*:

The word proactivity "means more than merely taking initiative. It means that as human beings, we are responsible for our own lives. Our behaviour is a function of our decisions, not our conditions. We can subordinate feelings to values. We have to take the initiative and the responsibility to make things happen."⁸

6. (L. R. Pangarkar, श्री समर्थ ग्रंथ भांडार)

7. Dr. Sudhir Nirgudkar, *The Royal Path to Success*

8. Stephen Covey, 'The Seven Habbits of Highly Effective People'

Ramdas describes at length the characteristics of a proactive person in his work 'Study of Wisdom' or 'शहाणपणाचा अभ्यास'

The next chapter will deal with the text in greater detail.

In the following chapters we will see how Ramdas advice on management of materials, role of a leader, essence of leadership, principles of management bear similarities with the contemporary techniques of management.

The holistic approach of Ramdas:

Systems approach is a hallmark of the modern scientific and management thought. It explains how different sub systems (or parts) are linked to one another so as to form a whole, which is greater than the sum of its parts. All the sub systems of human life like political, social, organizational, economic, healthcare, governmental, science, art, education, spirituality and religion are interlinked in some way or the other. All subsystems contribute to a meaningful existence of human life.

Take a factory, for example. It never makes profits unless workers put in efforts, owners support it financially, customers buy its products and favourable economic conditions help the trade in general. All these factors become a part of the system. This approach is also referred to as holistic or integrated or 'systems approach'.

Modern management institutions lay maximum emphasis on producing talent that can think holistically. Even managerial education comprises of different sub parts like human resource management, financial management, production/operations management, systems management etc. This is primarily done to train managers to think holistically with the help of these interlinked disciplines.

Ramdas laid great emphasis on the holistic approach. His entire literature consists of a variety of topics. According to Shankar Abhyankar, the editor of *Sant Vagmay Kosh*

(Encyclopedia of Saint Literature), Ramdas' entire literature consists of 26,500 couplets.⁹ In all his literary work, he deals with socially relevant topics, which include:

- Building of factories
- Constructing of temples
- Increasing savings
- Limiting the size of the family.
- Organizing public functions
- Building social organizations
- Developing Leaders
- Evolving methods of continuous learning and training
- Providing tips for Operating the state machinery
- Evolving effective political leadership
- Introducing the nature of a king's ministerial council and ministers' duties
- Emphasizing the role of communication.

He emphasizes thoughtful action over reckless behaviour, wisdom over rote memory, duty over benefits, action over inaction, efficiency over ineptness, proactive action over reaction and spirituality over ritualistic religion. The difference with Ramdas is that he preached only that which he had gained through his own experience and wisdom. His holistic approach is borne out of his own conviction about the interdependence of knowledge.

For instance, the verse ...

“ज्ञानेची ज्ञान शोधार्थे । ज्ञाने अज्ञान त्यागणे ।
ज्ञानेची प्रत्ययो येतो । ज्ञाने संदेह तुटती ।
ज्ञानेची सर्वही सिद्धी । ज्ञानेची सकळै कळा ।
ज्ञानेची तीक्ष्ण बुद्धी । नित्यानित्य विवेकु हा ॥”

9. Shankar Abhyankar, Samarth Ramdas

*'Decipher knowledge through wisdom / knowledge brushes away ignorance / True knowledge can take you to realization / it can also clear the confusion / Knowledge culminates in achievements / it imparts the skills / It sharpens your intellect / by instilling judgment (in you) !!'*¹⁰

This is a further indication that Ramadas' treatment of knowledge was way ahead of his times.

Ramdas practised what he preached:

"If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem," says motivational expert Shiv Khera. Usually, an unmotivated human being adopts the path of least resistance and does not fight the problem. But modern thought suggests that successful individuals take charge of life and try to proactively come out of their problems. Fittingly, modern management practices lay emphasis on the problem solving ability of managers.

Ramdas had to fight the prevalent medieval society's mindset which had become fatalistic and due to which people had taken refuge in destiny. Like any modern day social thinker, he had to counter the existing regressive thoughts. He didn't use his energy to attack ignorance, backward-looking notions and irrational behavior. Instead, he initiated constructive action on progressive lines. His methodology was, uniquely, both preventive and prescriptive.

Throughout his life Ramdas lived as an ascetic and devoted his life to the realization of God within (Atmaaram). His mission in life was to propagate true spiritual knowledge and to uplift people to a higher spiritual plane. All his writing focused on these twin objectives. He was a rare saint who never ignored the material progress of people. Armed with rare organizational skills

10. L. R. Pangarkar, श्री समर्थ ग्रंथ भांडार

for his times, he set up over 1,100 nerve centers called Mutts and engaged people in a socially constructive way. Ramadas' Mutts were not only present in Maharashtra but were also in what is today's Uttar Pradesh, Uttranchal, Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh.¹¹ They had a defined territorial limit and responsibility; they were headed by Mahants (leaders) trained on Ramdas' tenets; were connected to the central Mutt via a well-defined reporting lines.

Apart from helping people grow spiritually, Ramdas nurtured the right political leadership. He not only patronized Shivaji but also moulded popular opinion to support domestic leadership over the Mughals. This was one of the ways by which this positive and proactive socio-spiritual leader played a key role in the social transformation of his society.

Belief in 'change from within':

Change in human attitude is a most difficult thing to achieve. It requires personal initiative and commitment from the individual. Superficial changes in personality, based on outward alterations, cannot bring about a sustainable transformation. It only leads to an addition of superficial traits based on external changes. Allurements like money or promotions, or even punishments never produce lasting change in human nature. Like other saints of his times, Ramdas believed that a total re-orientation of the human mind is essential to transform any society. He worked tirelessly on the human mind through all his work and played as effective a role as that of Lord Sri Krishna in Mahabharata. The way Sri Krishna inspired Arjuna to retrace his steps and fight his enemies, Ramdas inspired the society to develop self-confidence and fight the perpetrators of injustice. He prodded people to strive for excellence in whatever they did.

11. S. M. Mate, Sri Ramadas Svaminche Prapanch Vijnyan

Through his philosophy, Ramadas heralded a social re-engineering in the medieval Indian society. His methodology resulted in a chain reaction of sorts; Ramdas-trained-leadership spun off other potential leaders, which further expanded to deliver a positive transformation in the society. This is in line with contemporary thinking on management. To quote a modern thinker:

“The conventional definition of management is getting work done through people, but real management is developing people through work.”

Ramdas’ approach was that of character building instead of mere superficial transformation. Not surprisingly, the lives of many individuals who came into contact with him were transformed. He himself trained many Mahants at his central Mutt. The chain reaction that he set off continued for generations and produced excellent results. It vindicated his philosophy that social change first and foremost warranted individual transformation.

Management guru Stephen Covey calls this as an ‘inside-out approach’ of change:

“The inside-out approach says that private victories precede public victories, that making and keeping promises to ourselves precedes making and keeping promises to others. It says it’s futile to put personality ahead of character, to try to improve relationships with others before improving with ourselves.”¹²

Ramdas preached complete unanimity in thought & action and deplored any dichotomy between the two. One of his couplets is vehemently against such hypocrisy:

“बाहेर सात बिक ध्यान काये | आंतमध्ये पान काये ||
बाहेर सिरो मुंड काये | आंत हे आभंड काये ||
डोई जटाभार काये | आंत संसार काये ||

12. Stephen Covey, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

बाहेर लंगोट बंद काये । आंत माकड छंद काये ॥
रामदास म्हणे जी । हें काय तें काय ॥”

‘Why do you maintain a serene meditative posture externally while allow greed to control you from within? Why do you shave your head (symbol of renunciation) at the same time maintain corrupt intentions within? Why do you maintain long hair (a must for many Sanyasis), and continue to get engrossed in worldly functions? Why do you maintain outward celibacy, but encourage lust within?’¹³

If any individual behaves in such duplicitous manner, it’s a sure recipe for his character loss. Ramdas suggests that individuals should conduct a self-assessment of their own behavior and try to replace bad habits with good ones. In his seminal work *Manache Shlok* or *Manobodh*, he prescribes a method to change such behaviour:

“विवेके क्रिया आपुली पालटावी ।
अती आदरे शुद्ध क्रिया धरावी ।
जनीं बोलण्यासारिखे चाल बापा ।”

‘(An) individual should alter his (faulty) habits with the help of his judgment / One should adopt right habits / practice what one preaches ॥’¹⁴

Holding a mirror to oneself and taking corrective steps to reform oneself are essential qualities an individual must take in order to establish his credentials. A leader with strong credentials has no dirt of followers.



13. L. R. Pangarkar, समग्र समर्थ वाङ्मय / Shankar Abhyankar, समर्थ रामदास

14. samarth Ramdas, श्री मनाचे श्लोक