Application of critical management studies for organisational analysis

This report aims to use Critical Management Studies (CMS) concepts and ideas to explore specific aspects of organisational working and analyse the working of a specific business firm.

CMS provides a variety of alternatives to conventional management theory that offer radically diverse perspectives and aim to transform traditional management approaches. It is essentially rooted in strong scepticism on the moral defensibility and standing, as well as on the ecological and social sustainability, of prevalent types of organisational and management structures (Adler, 2006, p 1). CMS, it is important to understand, does not focus either on the inadequate or poor management practices of specific business firms or on the personal feelings of individual organisational executives and managers (Adler, 2006, p 1). It essentially deals with the widespread social injustice and the extreme environmental negativity of mainstream economic and social structures and systems that are served and replicated by traditional managers and conventional business organisations (Adler, 2006, p 1).

In the contemporary context, CMS deals with a broad range of management issues like strategy, accounting, marketing, international relations, information systems and international business (Lazonick & Sullivan, 2000, p 13). Whilst its approach is based in broad scepticism of existing management theories, practices and structures, it focuses on pivotal, rather than marginal issues. It aims to illustrate how conventional management beliefs and practices are not just nourished by, but also serve to support and sustain disruptive, troublesome, conflict ridden, and essentially destructive contemporary structures and patterns (Sim & Van Loon, 2005, p 9). It goes

on to provide alternative solutions and illustrates that the replication of such systems is not inevitable, necessary or unavoidable, but is actually dependent upon managerial thoughts and processes and therefore essentially changeable (Sim & Van Loon, 2005, p 9).

Influenced by the work of numerous thinkers like Weber, Hegel and Foucault, CMS has also been shaped by a number of contemporary developments that stretch beyond the realm of academic theory and philosophical or social thought (Adler, 2006, p 5) Many established critiques of the essential aspects of modern day capitalism have been marginalised by the fall and disintegration of the left from the 1970s (Hassard, et al, 2001, p 339). The growth and development of fresh social movements has provided different critical perspectives on the function of modern day business enterprise (Alvarez, et al, 1998, p 17). The growth of the European community and the astonishing rise of China and India, as well as other emerging economies, have helped in placing dominant Anglo-American business values and models in relative positions for purposes of comparison and assessment (Ibarra-Colado, 2006, p 463).

CMS is a very broad area of thought, theory and practice. The report takes up (a) the application of CMS to a Call Centre in India, (b) Weber's exposition of bureaucracy and (c) Transformational Leadership, with reference to Weber's work on leadership, for study and analysis.

2. 0. Application of CMS to Indian Call Centre

The phenomenon of workplace bullying has for long attracted significant attention in mainstream management literature and is looked upon with

concern by HR managers and organisational experts. This report deals with the application of CMS to the case study on Indian Call Centres, prepared by D'Cruz and Noronha in 2010. The two researchers conducted a phenomenological inquiry of working experiences of employees in international call centres in Bangalore and Mumbai in India and uncovered new ground in organisational etiological roles in workplace bullying. The case is considered as read and is thus not described in greater detail here.

The analysis of the working of the call centre and its adopted HRM policies reinforces the critical perspective of HRM policies followed by most business firms. The critical perspective espouses a significant gap between rhetoric and reality, with organisations claiming to follow soft HRM policies, even as they actually use hard HRM methods. Studies have found that whilst many organisations claim employees to be valuable assets and make numerous commitments for their development and welfare, employers in reality enforce hard HRM controls, wherein the interests of the organisation take priority over those of individual employees.

The call centre employees are in the first place not unionised. They are paid reasonably well for their qualifications and experience, compared to the larger labour market. They are moreover termed as professionals, provided with seemingly attractive designations to enhance their self esteem and self respect and made to feel important for organisational purposes. They are also inculcated with seemingly professional values, which call upon them to put their organisational interest before their own interest and work jointly for organisational success.

They are however at the same time made to work difficult hours, experience difficult working conditions and have to deal with very demanding and often harsh clients. They are given difficult targets and are harshly dealt with during their period of work. Such harshness emanates, not just from their supervisors and managers, but also from their peers, because of the intense conditioning they go through in the course of their work. The authors term the phenomenon to be depersonalised bullying, wherein organisational policies, the working attitudes of supervisors and the behaviour of the agents combine to achieve a harsh and forceful environment towards work.

Critical theory states that rhetoric has outstripped reality in modern HRM practice. The dominance of rhetoric can be observed from the fact that whilst organisations constantly talk of employee benefits and welfare, organisational reality is influenced by impersonal economic rationalism. Progressive personnel practices are rarely implemented and most organisations are dominated by harsh personnel practices and by the subjugation and denial of unionism.

Such policies reveal HRM practitioners to be wolves in the clothing of sheep. Soft rhetoric is used to work on the esteem and identity of employees to disguise hard workplace reality, where power is not shared by the employee and remains with the employer. Guest (1990, p 377) suggests that such HRM practices provide a smokescreen for management to resist unionism and turn employees into willing slaves, who work against their own interests because of their conviction in the benevolence of their organisations.

Willmott (1993, p 515) states that organisational rhetoric masks pluralist employee needs and helps the introduction of HRM practices, wherein organisations benefit at employee expense. He suggests that the willingness of employees to subjugate themselves arise from corporate values that promise security, identity and self determination. Vaughan (1994, p 26) states that organisations use rhetoric to communicate an inherently attractive image of people who trust each other, share risks and rewards and are united by common feelings of identity but provide little indication of the remote economic rationalism that distinguishes management in the real world. Other experts believe that the apparent softness towards employees essentially works towards management of employee discontent and obtaining of employee consent to organisational control.

An analysis of the activities of the Indian Call Centres appears to reinforce such critical perspectives. It is however important at this stage to understand that critical perspectives often employ selective perception. Interviews conducted by the researchers with call centre employees, (who feel that their working conditions, whilst oppressive, are by and large necessary), appears to confirm this perception.

3. 0. Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy essentially represents a form of organisation where activity is carried out by specifically appointed officials with different degrees of power. The theory of bureaucracy is a fundamental element of organisational study and is related to the work of Max Weber (1864-1920), the well known German psychologist (Fineman, et al, 2005, p 32).

Whilst bureaucracy is by and large summarily dismissed by much of contemporary society for its association with inefficiency, slow working and red tape, Max Weber perceived it to be the height of administrative rationality (Fineman, et al, 2005, p 32). Weber formulated an ideal model of bureaucracy that was exclusively based on various assumptions and premises of rational and legal authority. Such sort of authority, Weber explained, was based on a rational and logical structure of rules and regulations that was essentially and absolutely impersonal (Fineman, et al, 2005, p 32). The ideal form of bureaucracy is represented as a hypothetical organisation that does not involve any other sort of relationship or authority. It does not have any friendships or enmities, collegiate bodies or committees, or informal groups, cliques or cabals (Morrison, 2006, p 57). It consists essentially of individuals who give and receive commands that are based on rational and logical systems of rules (Morrison, 2006, p 57).

Max Weber identified a number of fundamental features of ideal bureaucracies, the more important of which include (a) a clear and rigid hierarchical structure of different offices, wherein lower offices are controlled by superior ones, (b) the appointment of people to offices strictly on the basis of their individual expertise, duly certified by written qualifications, (c) the conduct of work and activity of each and every office solely on the basis of exact rules and regulations, (d) the clear separation of ownership and control, with the power to control juniors deriving specifically and only from the occupancy of a particular office, (e) free and fair contractual relationships between organisations and their officials, (f) the comprehensive divorce of official activity and work from the personal, private and emotional

life of officials, and (g) a system of career progression and promotion that is influenced by seniority, as well as by achievement in the workplace (Fineman, et al, 2005, p 34).

Max Weber argued that his ideal type of bureaucracy was a strong administrative tool with important facilitating attributes that included swiftness, exactness, clarity, discretion, senior-junior relationships and subordination, absence of friction, cost economy, unity and continuity (Parker, 2002, p 41). Weber was clear in deploring the " iron cage" impact of bureaucracy on humanity but felt that organisations will, in search of greater efficiency, unfailingly progress towards the ideal type of bureaucracy (Parker, 2002, p 41). Comparing the inevitable dominance of bureaucratic mechanisms to the way in which machines prevail over other non-mechanical methods of production, he argued that the inherent technical superiority of bureaucracy over other organisational forms would result in its progressive advancement and its inevitable dominance of organisational structure (Parker, 2002, p 41).

Weber's description of the ideal type of bureaucracy has been criticised for a range of reasons, but continues to remain a foundation of contemporary organisational theory (Fineman, et al, 2005, p 35). He has often been criticised for his obvious dismissal of the human element in organisational and working life, but has disregarded such criticism stating that such criticism did not appreciate the elemental strength of bureaucratic impersonality and exaggerated the significance of the human factor (Fineman, et al, 2005, p 35).

Sewell and Barker (2006, p 69) state that discipline in Weber's bureaucracy comes from " prompt and automatic obedience in a predictable form from a given group of persons … (and) includes the practiced nature of uncritical and mass obedience". They demonstrate Weber's depiction of bureaucracy as a potential iron cage at a business firm, ISE, where efforts to engage in team work resulted ultimately in a concertive environment that was constraining and liberating, even as it was coercive and protective at the same time. The authors reveal how teamwork, even when managements use it for the purposes of organisational democracy along with achievement of business goals, can lead to the oppressive internalisation of management goals and business values by team members; who thereafter start to exploit their own selves and discipline co-team members for the sake of being responsible team members and for business performance (Sewell & Barker, 2006, p 72).

The resulting conformism often leads to suppression of democratic interaction about the appropriateness of fundamental goals and values. The authors show how various mechanisms combine to make teamwork attractive despite its many negative effects and promote the vision of the team as a unified entity and a big happy family (Sewell & Barker, 2006, p 72). It is also clear from the analysis of the call centre how both supervisors and juniors accept the extreme difficulties of their circumstances and the development of the iron cage. They lose their right to protest or to rectify inequities because of their tacit acceptance of the inevitability of depersonalised bullying in the face of mandatory SLA conditions and the potentially devastating impact of their breach.

The use of CMS illustrates, through these examples of teamwork, the differences between traditional management and CMS perceptions. Mainstream management research very often presents teamwork as an important management tool for effective mobilisation of employees in order to achieve improvements in business performance (Adler, et al, 2006, p 2). Whilst teamwork is routinely praised as an important management aid, some amount of doubt has on its benefits has arisen in recent years because of the repeated failure of strongly supported and well staffed teams to deliver on management objectives in different types of workplace situations.

CMS clearly shows that teamwork in the modern context has many adverse consequences and can actually lead to significant covert and overt exploitation and oppression of team members for the sake of business performance (Adler, et al, 2006, p 2).

4. 0. Transformational Leadership

Max Weber in his work on leadership described charismatic leaders as heroes who transform and changed their environments, until they were removed or were succeeded by traditional or bureaucratic authority. Bass (1990, p 19), subsequently built upon the theories forwarded by Weber and later by Burns to identify four important components to transformational leadership, which were thereafter creatively figured to commence with the letter " I", which made it easier to refer to it as the four I model. Bass's four I model of transformational leadership consists of (a) idealised influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualised consideration (Bass, 1990, p 19).

Idealised influence represents the leadership component which states that transformational leaders behave and act like role models for followers who seek to replicate and emulate their behaviour (House, 1977, p 190). Whilst such a component leads to people being considered to be truly extraordinary, the three important attributes associated with such a leadership element are the willingness to engage in risks, consistent and not arbitrary behaviour, and high levels of ethics and integrity (House, 1977, p 190). Bass states that idealised influence is built on genuine trust between leaders and followers, which in turn is constructed on a strong ethical and moral foundation (Bass, 1990, p 20).

Inspirational motivation refers to the behaviour of transformational leaders, which supposively inspires followers and provides relevance, meaning and element of challenge and bravery to their work (Bass, 1990, p 20). Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their followers through the development of an appealing and preferred future vision, the communication of clear expectations and the demonstration of a clear assurance and commitment to the joint objectives and vision of the team. The leaders appeal to do what is right and should be done inspires everybody to move forward (Bass, 1990, p 20).

Intellectual stimulation refers to the ways and means in which transformational leaders incorporate the opinions of followers in the confronting and addressing of organisational issues and challenges and stimulate, excite, support and sustain them in being both innovative and creative in identification of solutions (House, 1977, p 192). Transformational leaders are able to intellectually stimulate their followers by challenging

assumptions and conjectures reframing problems and challenges and approaching existing problems in fresh ways. No idea is considered to be stupid in intellectual stimulation. The vision of the leader provides relevant frameworks for followers to visualise the ways in which they connect with the leader, the organisation, the goal and each other (House, 1977, p 192).

Individualised consideration refers to the readiness of transformational leaders to give individualised attention to every follower for his or her professional development through appropriate advice and even mentorship. It follows from this that the key feature of this component is the designing of bespoke learning opportunities for every follower based on his unique desires and needs (Judge, 2004, p 756). Such an approach not only trains and educates succeeding generations of leaders but also satisfies the need of individuals for self fulfilment, self actualisation and self worth. By doing so it also encourages followers to grow and assume more important organisational roles (Judge, 2004, p 756).

Weber in his theory on leadership wrote of three types of leaders, namely bureaucratic, charismatic and traditional. Weber recognised that leadership was essentially situational and that genuine leaders required moving efficiently from one style of leadership to another to continue to be successful (Judge, 2004, p 756). Weber believed in two essential leadership paradigms transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Charismatic leaders, in Weber's model were practically divine in nature and comparable to heroes. Weber was the first to elaborate and discuss the various implications of charismatic leadership for organisations (Judge, 2004, p 757). When Weber wrote on charisma, akin to the idealised influence

element forwarded by Bass, his views were considered to be controversial because of the conversion of the concept of charisma from religious use to legitimate authority that could be made applicable to political, administrative and economy contexts (Bass, 1990, p 19). Weber's writings led to a shift of the conceptualisation of charisma from religion to larger society. Transformational leadership, history proves, has been used for wrong purposes (Judge, 2004, p 757). Hitler's powerful and charismatic personality fits the profile of a transformational leader very well. His aim ultimately however led to his own fulfilment rather than the betterment of his followers. Such leadership is also perceived to be immoral because it can motivate followers to sacrifice their own lives for organisational needs. Being double edged in nature it requires to be suffused by high moral values and ethics to be socially beneficial (House, 1977, p 190).

5. 0. Conclusion

Critical Management Studies provides a range of alternatives to traditional management theory that offer very different perspectives and aim to change such conventional practice.

The report takes up the case study prepared by D'Cruz and Noronha of IIM Ahmadabad on depersonalised bullying at Indian call centres in Mumbai and Bangalore. It thereafter uses two of Max Weber's theories on bureaucracy and transformational leadership in order to analyse the working practices and environment at the call centre. The analysis of Weber's theories help in understanding the ways and means in which contemporary organisational and management structures impose oppressive and restrictive limitations on

employees in modern day organisations, even as modern day HR practices ostensibly strive more equal and dignified working environments.

CMS is based in robust scepticism on the moral defensibility and ecological and social sustainability of dominant organisational and management structures. It is an antidote and a completely sceptical but objective route for analysis of the rules of conduct on which contemporary societies and leadership are constituted. It aims at positioning itself to counter positivism and create an oppositional discourse to empirical and inflexible social science. Whilst it aims to liberate individuals from environments of limited autonomy, it must also remain self critical and avoid taking the position of a total alternative discourse.