

The HR/IR Theory-Reality “Lag” – An Exploration

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The sociological construct of “culture lag” which suggest that human response always lags behind technological advance can also be extended to the reality-theory and reality-practice context of the world of work. Human resource management and industrial relations theory and practice, discipline and function whose role is to help in understanding and dealing with the reality of work and the reality for workers seem to be in a different world altogether disconnected from today’s reality. This study seeks to examine this lag between today’s reality and yesterday’s theory-practice constructions in the context of the workers and their working conditions in the national garment industry supplier units linked to the global supply chain of international brands.

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Introduction

The Human Resource Management function in contemporary organizations has marginalized the industrial relations function and in the same vein human resource management “theories” have overrun industrial relations theorizing. Meanwhile, while the tussle between the two streams of theory and practice has been going on, today’s “reality” is at variance with prevailing HRM and IR constructions which are purportedly “representing” reality and with HRM and IR practices which are proffered as best suited to “managing” reality.

The problem is not one of disconnect *between* theory and practice nor of disconnect of theory *from* practice, but the alienation of reality itself from both theory as well as practice as disseminated through management education and executive development processes. Theories are meant to help in interpreting and explaining practices while observations of practices are expected to provide a laboratory for grounded theorizing. The discourse is unfortunately between theory and

practice when it should be with ongoing reality. But when reality is disconnected from theory, it is time to take a critical look at the theory-reality lag.

The practice of HRM, packaging variations apart (the latest being “talent” management), revolves around themes like recruitment and selection, learning and development, performance assessment, compensation and benefits, recognition, employee “engagement” and career development. Central to HRM practice is the performance management function with which every other HRM sub function is configured and by which the entire HRM function is wired to strategic corporate objectives read as results and returns. The HRM function is then projected as a “business” partner and the view which is promulgated is that HR has nothing to do with “people” and has everything to do with “aligning” with strategic “business” imperatives.

The practice of industrial relations traditionally was expected to focus on labor law compliance, negotiating with unions (if any), collective bargaining, statutory benefits compliance, discipline management, grievance redressal and statutory or non-statutory employee consultative mechanisms, and litigation management. The minimum expectation from the industrial relations function and practice in a “free market” democracy is a commitment to “professional” independence in dealing with industrial relations problems, “impartial” deployment of industrial relations mechanisms and processes in addressing issues and an aspiration for nurturing “mutually beneficial”

relationships among industrial relations stakeholders even in situations of contested volatility. The industrial relations role is not that of a closely aligned “business partner” but as a “mediator-negotiator” balancing congruent as well as divergent interests of stakeholders in engagement with each other with a certain relational ethos underlying these practices, around which there may be adherents as well as critics.

Broadly HRM theories can be categorized into behavioral and functional constructions. *Behavioral* approaches focus on “humanist” theories and their normative standards as frames for designing HRM practice. Maslow’s Theory of Hierarchical Needs (Maslow, 1943:370-96), Herzberg’s Motivation-Hygiene Theory (Herzberg et al, 1959), McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y (McGregor, 1960) and Likert’s Four Systems Theory (Likert, 1967), and McClelland’s Achievement Theory (McClelland, 1961), Vroom’s (1964) Expectancy Theory and Adams (1963) Equity Theory with the alternate world views of the task oriented Taylor (1911) and the human relations slanted Mayo (1946;1949) hovering in the background constitute the behavioral underpinnings of the crafting of HRM policies and practices, systems and processes as depicted in teaching-training-learning engagements. The question however is to what extent do such theories of human needs relate to the direct producer of goods and services in a world which in the past three decades has been driven by globalization and a context in which garments production, for instance, is dispersed across the

globe in the hands of "low cost" national suppliers while the outcomes and gains are garnered by international brands which "own" the products and services? Who do these theories resonate with – the direct producers (workers of suppliers) scattered across the world or the appropriators of gains (the brands) in what is euphemistically referred to as the "global supply chain"?

Functional Theories

There are a few dominant *functional* HR theories which find a place in teaching-learning processes in course and program offerings in management schools. Beer et al (1984) came up with a conceptual framework in which HRM is a function of stakeholder interests, situational factors, HR policies, outcomes and long-term benefits. About the same time, Fombrun et al (1984) conceptualized strategic HRM as a function of selection, performance, appraisal, rewards and development. Walton (1985) proffered the "control versus commitment" practice choices for crafting the human resource management function. Pfeiffer (1994) proposed the "sixteen specific practices" profile of "high performance" HRM - employment security, selectivity in recruiting, high wages, incentive pay, employee ownership, information sharing, participation and empowerment, teams and job-re-design, training and skills development, cross-utilization and cross-training, symbolic egalitarianism, wage compression, promotion from within, long-term perspective, measurement of practices, overarching philosophy. Huselid (1995) empirically established the link between high perfor-

mance HR practices and both intermediate employee related outcomes and corporate financial performance.

Again, the question arises as to where do we locate the relevance of these theories and their applications to national suppliers of HRM practice in the global supply chain? What is their relevance in the lived experiences of direct producers in national supplier organizations? Or is it implied that the dominant behavioral and functional theories of HRM are relevant for the organizations of "brands" who own the output and the gains accruing from the products and services? Then in that case, is the implication to be drawn that HRM theories are of relevance for the more "sophisticated" organizations of product owning brands whereas for the direct producers in "less" sophisticated supplier organizations IR theories would suffice and would be more relevant?

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Turning then to industrial relations, there are a few "theories" which find a place in whatever is "leftover" in terms of space in teaching-training-learning processes in management education after HRM has had its say. Dunlop (1958) has his place with his view that IR is about rules and rule-making. Flanders

(1970) has put forward the view that IR revolves around stakeholder institutions. Fox (1966) wrote about the unitary as well as the pluralist approaches in the management of IR. Fox (1974) added a third “radical” perspective later in which he challenged the basic premise as the mere recognition of plural centers of power that brings about a balance of power. Braverman (1974) in his seminal work stated that the main mechanisms of control of IR by management were realized through job fragmentation and job specialization. Friedman (1977) wrote of two perspectives - direct control and responsible autonomy approaches. Hyman (1977) on the other hand has taken the position that IR is about the processes of control over work relations where collective organizations of workers play a significant role. Edwards (1979) described two types of control - technological control and bureaucratic control. The ethnographic account of how consent is organized at the point of production by Burawoy (1979) yielded three types of control - despotic control, hegemonic control as well as hegemonic despotism. Gospel (1983) identified the putting out system, job contracting and the wage-earning foremen mechanisms as practices through which management exercises control over IR. Kochan and Katz (1988) tried to build a comprehensive theoretical framework linking industrial relations management at the functional and workplace levels to firm level strategic choice.

The assumption of these theories is that the industrial relations stakeholders would have a certain modicum of respect

for laws and rights and fair play. But when laws are infringed and rights are denied and when these infringements are resorted to by the agencies of the state aligned with employers, then the situation becomes a matter of grave concern. And when the trend begins to move in the direction of amending or repealing laws towards reinforcement of the dominance of the state-employer coalition, in the name of “reforms”, the situation deteriorates. Reality for the direct producers changes and disconnect between theories and practices and the emerging reality widens.

Hayter (2015:2), for instance, enumerates some of these changes in the past two decades impinging on industrial relations processes which widens the gap between existing theories and the emerging reality and calls into question the sustainability of some of the dominant theories enumerated above. Flexible work arrangements, zero hour contracts, spread of the informal sector without formal contracts and social security protection, market oriented retrenchment policies, the progressive erosion of regulatory institutions and the decline in union influence and bargaining leverages constitute a new reality. Studies have also shown that there has been a rising legislative trend privileging individual rights over collective rights (Stewart, 2009:197-201; Sheldon, 2008:235-248; Ewing, 2008:3-50).

These trends call into question the applicability of some of the dominant theories enumerated above because the morphology and modalities of industrial relations based on assumptions of fair play, engagement standards, respect for

due process and democratic methods of dealing with differences seem like a thing of a distant past. A glimpse into the resulting reality in the garment industry worker's life-world is in order not only in examining the lag between yesterday's theory and today's reality but also to see if there is something more than just a lag.

Methodological Exploration

This study is an attempt primarily to examine the reality-theory lag in the context of radical changes in the way work is organized and managed in garment factories of national suppliers servicing the global supply chain of international brands. The data has been collected from reliable, credible, *reported* secondary sources, since primary data collection as planned could not be carried out due to the COVID-19 lockdown. Data for this study has been generated from news reports in the form of narrative extracts as narrated by women garment industry workers in and around the South Indian city of Bengaluru. Data reliability was ensured by corroborative support from multiple, credible, published secondary sources (PUCL Karnataka, December 24, 2018) while adhering to established copyright protocols and publishing practices. Since the main purpose of the study is to theorize rather than merely to chronicle or describe or reproduce, reported secondary data only becomes a means to theorizing.

High Intensity Task-Target Management

The HR function as conceptualized by Fombrun et al (1984) has five ele-

ments - selection, performance, appraisal, rewards and development. Data related to the garment workers' context shows that there is only one - "the high intensity task-target management" function.

This is borne out in the case of a woman garment worker for whom the 18-hour day begins (Rohini Mohan, 2017a) with preparing breakfast and lunch followed by a harried one hour commute. Once she logs in at the garments factory, she goes through the grind of eight to nine hours of intense, repetitive, relentless, closely supervised work stitching 60-100 pockets per hour on garments. There are just two five-minutes rushed washroom breaks and a hurried 20-minutes lunch break. *"If I so much as take my hand off the machine to crack my knuckles, I'll be abused for lazing around, and they will pile more work at my station as punishment"* (Rohini Mohan, 2017a). The focus is on the task and target of "60-100 pockets per hour" failing which there is abuse and additional "pile" of workload as "punishment". Abusive behavior as an intimidatory tactic to produce compliance as an HR "approach" is contraindicated with Maslow's "esteem" needs in his theory of hierarchy of needs. There is nothing that does more damage to the respect due to the person and also to the dignity of the worker than constant intimidatory abuse. It is in this "high intensity" atmosphere that assessment is done on an hourly basis and sanctions are meted out on an ongoing basis by abusive supervisors. After this kind of a life at work, it is another tired commute for the worker at

the end of the working day by bus or walk to her home for another round of household chores and cooking. There is no luxury of “work-life balance” as the same relentless cycle repeats again and again and again. Functional and behavioral theories and practice get fused into hourly high intensity task-target extraction as dictated by the strategic imperatives of the international brands and the global supply chain.

Unquestioning Submissive Behavior Management

The tightly controlled and regimented work organization in the garment industry calls for a pliant, compliant, submissive workforce capable of unquestioning willingness to submit to the “high intensity task-target management” regimes. Towards this end, over the years the sourcing of women workers has shifted from the urban margins to the rural displace and then to migrant tribal women workers from poverty ridden environments. As reported in one of the news stories, one of the workers “*belongs to the Oraon tribe, is the youngest in a family of six in Sarudah village, Singhbhum district, Jharkhand*” (Rohini Mohan, 2017b). A class 11 dropout, she learnt tailoring in Ranchi and somehow managed to get permission from her family to take up a job in Bengaluru and has been working now for 4 years. “We really needed the money” (Rohini Mohan, 2017b). As the reporter puts it, “*they share a rural, poverty-ridden past and an unflinching hope for prosperity through hard work*”. This extract from the news story clearly pro-

vides evidence of the narrative behind the sourcing policies of the garment industry – apart from sourcing from historically marginalized castes and financially disadvantaged classes, the preference is for workers from cultures with socialization processes which produce individuals who have a deferential orientation to feudal hierarchies – a background which potentially can be converted into submission to regimented work routines. Migrant workers are even preferred over workers of the soil in which the industry is located (Rohini Mohan, 2017b). Higher satisfaction pegged to lower wage expectations combined with the culturally constructed propensity towards submissiveness make for conducive grounds for high intensity task-target management. An approach that lays the foundation to deny “physiological” needs which is the most basic need in Maslow’s theory.

Maximum Work-Minimal Wage Management

The only factor that keeps women at work in the garment factories in spite of the abuses as well as the exhausting work routine is the wage they receive at the end of every cycle. “*The reason these women work in garment factories in spite of the abuses and exacting targets is the promise of a dependable salary,*” (Rohini Mohan, 2017a) even though “*in the garment sector minimum wage is the maximum wage*” (Rohini Mohan, 2017c). Given that this sector depends largely on women between 18 and 40 years, what they receive by way of wages barely keeps up with inflation or with increasing experi-

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ence and skill levels. This HR compensation practice again barely meets the worker’s physiological needs and instead is based on “extract the maximum work and give minimum wages in return” principle which clearly is the antithesis of Maslow’s humanistic need “fulfilment” orientation to HR practice.

High Insecurity-uncertainty Management

And yet, the only source of a sense of security for a woman garment worker is the wage in a context in which the job itself is subject to acute insecurity in this sector (Rohini Mohan, 2017c). High insecurity is central to the employment management strategies of garment supplier organizations linked to international brands through the global supply chain. Sudden terminations without notice and without payment of wage arrears was recounted by a garment worker (Rohini Mohan, 2017a) when several workers were terminated abruptly because they protested against the decision of management in which a production manager was forcibly made to resign. As the worker herself tells the reporter, most of the time they just do not have the power to protest against terminations and non-payment of wages. “I thought garment factories were about international

brands, so it would be respectable,” she said. “But I’m done with them, their work pressure, and their reluctance to pay a decent wage to women.” (Rohini Mohan, 2017c). Her hopes were shattered by her experience of a combination of irrational work pressure, unfair wage policies and a compromised disputes resolution system.

The practice of creating an atmosphere of acute insecurity as a means to achieve high intensity task-target achievement is contraindicated with Maslow’s safety/security needs and belonging needs. Every worker has an expectation of reasonable stability related to job tenures but when, on the contrary, job insecurity is used as a conscious strategy, it not only induces a state of anxiety but it also does not evoke a sense of “belonging” to the organization or to the task or to the target. When theory encounters reality there is the realization that need denial rather than need satisfaction is central to HR practices; instead of providing stability and instead of arousing a sense of belonging, insecurity and alienation is central to the “need denial” HR strategy.

Anti-collective Action Management

Workers are barred from joining trade unions which is a Constitutional and legal right in the Indian IR context. “We are not members of any union – they are banned in every factory I have worked in for 15 years. But we got in touch when we had no other option,” (Rohini Mohan, 2017a). As is evident joining a union was again near impossible because

workers were discouraged from going anywhere near a union failing which there could be dire consequences. Rarely workers turn for help to unions and then only for filing complaints with the State Labor Commissioner's office through the unions. Workers can neither collectivize to redress grievances nor do they have any expectations from the conciliation machinery considering their experiences related to how employers and the agencies of the state work in tandem in delaying redressal of garment workers grievances (Rohini Mohan, 2017a; Rohini Mohan, 2017c).

There is nothing resembling industrial relations theory or practice as far as the garment industry context is concerned.

Traditionally, the industrial relations functional practices revolve around labor law compliance, trade union relations and collective bargaining. From a theoretical perspective we have seen that industrial relations concerns rules and laws (Dunlop), institutions and institutional processes (Flanders) and processes of control over work relations (Hyman) wherein collective organizations of workers play a role. However, the data in this study indicate there is nothing resembling industrial relations theory or practice as far as the garment industry context is concerned. Both laws related to wages and social security are flouted without any compunction, institutions like the conciliation and adjudication systems are compromised, workers are not allowed to form or participate in unions. If at all

there is something like industrial relations, it has become more of a worker "redressal and resistance" function as they try to defend their rights rather than a managerial function as has been in vogue in yester years in the garment industry circles. The theory-reality lag is clearly in evidence on the industrial relations theory and practice fronts.

Social Vulnerability Management

The difficulties encountered by women garment employees do not stop with insecurities associated with jobs and incomes. Even statutory social security benefits are compromised by employers. One reported case of woman garment worker is a poignant example of what transpires in these organizations (Rohini Mohan, 2017c). Describing her plight to the reporter, she narrated her story in which having contracted a serious illness she had to take medical leave and draw on insurance under the Employee State Insurance Act, being eligible for Rs 60,000/- To her utter dismay she was terminated by her employers during her leave due to illness and she had to go for treatment to a private hospital at exorbitant rates. Not only was she denied medical insurance benefits but she also had to face the consequences of an unfair termination when she was ill. "That was the moment I realized the significance of good pay and worker benefits." (Special Correspondent, 2016).

Women garment workers face a situation where jobs, wages, medical insurance are mired in uncertainties leaving them in a state of perpetual anxiety even

as they unflinchingly go through their daily grind in the factories. As if this was not enough, workers report how employers play around with the only statutory saving made possible through a centrally legislated Employee Provident Scheme 1952 which acts as a buffer during periods of dislocation due to loss of employment. Four workers who had quit from a company to move elsewhere discovered that their Provident Fund saving which had accumulated over the 2 year period of service with the company at the rate of 12% of their monthly wages deducted by the employers from their wages had not been deposited into the Fund. As one of the workers put it, *"this was the last straw"*. For the first time around 100 employees went on strike for three days and nights at the factory gates in protest – again to no avail. Some of the workers just gave up after a while and moved to other companies while some again for the first time approached the Karnataka Garment Workers Union to file a complaint with the State Labor Department.

It is not at all surprising given the "ongoing conduct" of employment relations that even during early days of the outbreak of the deadly COVID 19 before the Central Government ordered nation-wide lockdown, factories were running without social distancing safety requirements endangering the lives of the workers. *"Who will provide for rent and food if I take leave? Also, what happens if I lose the job. So, we are working despite the fear," said a worker in a garment factory in Peenya. "She said her family migrated to the city to meet their basic*

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needs. The virus is threatening our very livelihood," (DHNS, 2020 :22). It is a difficult choice - between threat to livelihood and threat to life – and the workers continued working in spite of acute fears and anxieties with little or no protection from the risk of infection. Again Maslow's safety and security needs are observed more in the breach in a "need denial" rather than a "need fulfilment" mode of functioning. This is again evidence of the lag between theory and reality not only on the social security front but also clear evidence of the manner in which industrial relations theories and practices, as disseminated, have an uncertain place in the garment workers' reality.

Conclusion

The new reality is a grim one especially for the direct producers of goods and services in the frontline of the global supply chain of international brands. The reality is grim because the underlying logic of "Neo-HR" strategic orientation that the direct producer is a "commodity" and an "input cost" to be minimized has led to the rise of informal labor bereft of contractual legality (no written employment contract) and enfeebling "vulnerability" (erosion of three social security benefits – pension, health insurance, and unemployment benefit)

(Lee, 2016: 319). Need denial and not need fulfilment is the underlying strategy.

Denial of rights is the other side of the management strategy. The direct producers experience work, bereft of Constitutional and industrial relations rights - right to life, right to associate, right to be recognized, right to represent, right to collective bargaining, right to raise disputes, right to withhold labor in the quest for the right to a living wage and livelihood security.

Reality, bereft of labor rights and basic need fulfilment, deteriorates dramatically. The reality of the world of work has changed for the worker “direct producer” in the past three decades in the direction of progressive and regressive dehumanization and debasement where employment is unfortunately experienced as enslavement. Behavioral and functional theories claiming to represent reality seem to be out of sync with the new reality wherein beneath the “proletariat” now stands the “precariat,” for whom ironically exploitation seems like a privilege compared to constant exclusion from the labor market (Lee, 2016 :317).

HR/IR theories and practices as disseminated have been replaced by the “Neo-HR” framework of high intensity task-target management, unquestioning submissive behavior management, high insecurity-uncertainty management, anti-collective action management and social vulnerability management. Deploying these five “Neo-HR” management strategies, garment workers are exploited to extract surplus value for the brand-supplier global supply chain.

Theory lags behind reality – a reality in which regimes are based on denial of basic needs and denial of worker rights rather than on the lofty frameworks which characterize behavioral and functional theories disseminated through learning and development processes. Theories have failed to factor in the deterioration of work and working conditions wherein regimes of insecurity and injustice perpetrated in the name of regimes of extraction of the global supply chains of international brands have wreaked havoc with the lives of the working classes.

Perhaps heeding Amartya Sen’s advice, to offset the theory-reality “lag”, theoretical efforts should be oriented to “how to reduce injustice and advance justice, rather than aiming only at the characterization of perfectly just societies – an exercise that is such a dominant feature of many theories of justice in political philosophy today” (Sen: 2009). Reality deserves better – from theory and practice.

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