Approaching Decision-Making from a Dharmic Perspective

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Abstract

The world is witnessing unprecedented crises on many fronts of human endeavor like economic, political, environmental, social and personal. These crises are, in one sense, an effect of decisions made individually or collectively either in the recent past or bygone eras. These decisions arise from the decision-making models followed, which in turn are rooted in the perspective offered by the culture of the land.

Now researchers and thought leaders are revisiting the decision models with the aim of making them more holistic, i.e. as multidimensional as possible. We see how decision-making models have evolved from simplistic uni-objective models to multi-objective and multivariate models that include uncertainty as an underlying assumption.

Given this context, in our work we approach decision-making from a dharmic perspective. By dharmic we mean the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh traditions. We explore how the perspective adopted impacts decision making and the consequences of the decisions made. We have followed a multi-pronged approach. Initially, we critique the western models of decision making. In doing this we observe that the dharmic way of decision-making presupposes the features of multidimensionality and uncertainty. In other words, these features are endogenous to the dharmic way of decision-making whereas they are exogenous in the western way. In addition to this, the dharmic way recognizes how the qualities of the decision-maker impact the decisions and hence lays emphasis on the refinement of these qualities. For instance, the idea of citta-shuddhi (purification of consciousness) is considered important.

Based on the critique and comparison we propose a model of decision-making inspired by dharmic perspective, specifically, from Indian philosophy and psychology. We base this model on aspects like embodied knowing, collectivity, reflection and contemplation and application of tarka (debate) and vada (discussion).

The intended benefit of our work is to understand the gaps in the current decision-making processes that lead to crises. We achieve this by changing the perspective from western to dharmic. This leads to the refinement of the instruments of decision-making that will impact collective well-being.

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1. Introduction

Decision-Making is a complex problem-solving activity involving making choices based on facts, personal preferences, emotions, circumstances and values. The decision-making process starts with a set of objectives or issues. Several alternatives are considered and the consequence of each alternative is analyzed. The alternatives are also compared amongst themselves. The best of the alternatives is then chosen. When this process is looked at as a set of steps, then it seems to be very simple. But when we deeply look at decision-making, it is no more a simple process but rather a multi-dimensional process including a variety of factors like organizational factors, human factors, cultural factors and many more. In recent times, organizations are recognizing the importance of making the decision-making process as comprehensive as possible by including several factors into consideration. The focus has moved from the outcomes of the decision-making process to the process itself. In this paper we present our work on strengthening the decision-making process. Though we do not categorize the type of decisions as organizational or administrative or personal, we present a generic and preliminary decision-making model based on Indian psychology and philosophy that may be applicable to individuals, organizations and countries since in each of these contexts it is the people who make the decisions.

2. Understanding Modern Decision-Making models:

A number of decision-making theories have been proposed from different perspectives. Decision-making can be looked at from the organizational perspective or from an operations perspective or from a behavioral perspective. The popular theories view decision-making as a creative and complex process of making choices. Due to the consequences that the decisions may have, it is necessary to relook the processes of decision-making [1]. Irvin Janis mentions that "A poor-quality decision-making process (which characterizes simplistic strategies) is more likely than a high-quality process to lead to undesirable outcomes (including disastrous fiascoes)."[2]. He also mentions that while making crucial decisions, people do not use the procedures that they normally employ in daily decision-making. Rather it is more of an analytical process. Hence decision-making varies according to circumstances.

Organizations and researchers are moving from an objective process to a more subjective one. They are looking at models that include facts and data supplemented with intuition and values. Uncertainty is being made an inherent part of the process. Over the years they have come to realize that a mere framework of decision-making will not suffice and that the outcome, decision-making process and the decision maker are closely related and are not independent from one another.

A typical decision-making process has the following steps:

- Problem Identification
- Gathering data about the problem
- Identifying the criteria to be satisfied
- Identify several alternatives
- Check how much each alternative satisfies the criteria
- Compare the alternatives
- Choose the best among them

These steps are performed in an iterative manner. It could be individual decisions regarding starting a business or an organizational decision of capturing new markets or global decisions of International policies, the same broad set of steps may be applied. As situations change, the decisions and the decision-making process may have to be revisited.

Literature on decision-making highlights that it is not a single objective that is being met but rather multiple objectives that are taken into account. Hence decision-making is necessarily a multi-objective/multi-criteria process.
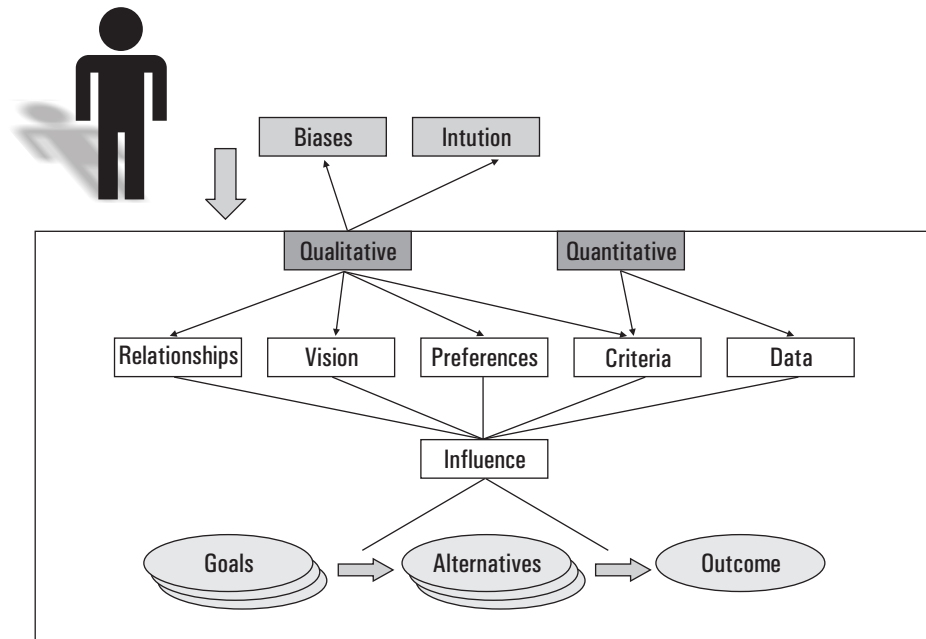

Figure 1 : Decision-Making model based on popular theories

Figure 1 gives a model based on various decision-making theories and models. Here the decision-maker starts with a set of goals, he identifies alternatives and one outcome is

chosen. Factors that affect decision-making are a) qualitative b) quantitative in nature. We have further classified them for specific factors like organizational vision, relationship with government, suppliers etc, criteria like quality, cost and time, constraints like resources and factors like data or information. This is not a comprehensive classification but this is just to give an overview of what may influence decision-making. These factors influence both the identification of alternatives and arriving at the outcome. Since in most popular models, the decision-maker and his biases and preferences seems external to the process, we have depicted it that way.

3. Gaps in the Current Model:

In this section we identify certain aspects of the decision-making models that may be relooked and improved upon. The understanding of these potential areas of improvement gives us interesting directions.

3.1 The Decision Blind Spot:

Often decision makers get so close to the problem, that there seems to be a blind spots that leads to disappearance of all other parameters influencing the decision. In the process of decision-making, the scope of each sub-objective is broken down so much, that the problem becomes too specific in nature. This not only prevents the decision-maker from remembering the overall objective but also may be disastrous to the individual/organization/nation.

3.2 The Forgotten Cause-Effect Relationship

If one looks at the broad sets of steps proposed by most decision-making theories, one may find the solution and criteria to be the highlight. Though the objective is met, the cause of the problem has been kept out of the model. Unless one deeply delves into the cause of the problem, it may be difficult to avoid future problems. When the cause-effect relationship is not clearly established, one may take any number of good decisions, but they will all seem to be just "quick fixes" and not permanent solutions.

3.3 The Decision Myopia:

Just as decision-makers tend to forget the overall goal while getting too close to the problem, they may also be making decisions that are time bound. In their paper on Myopic Risk-Seeking of lottery ticket buyers [3], the authors say that "…people buy more tickets when they view the decision to purchase tickets myopically, making one decision at a time, rather than broadly bracketing the decision—i.e., considering the aggregate consequences of purchasing multiple tickets". This has resulted in people

spending less on food and daily supplies compared to their spending on lotteries. Myopic decision-making results in corrective measures rather than preventive measures.

3.4 The Exogenous Decision maker:

In most popular decision-making models, the decision-maker is considered to be external to the system. It is believed that decision-making is a strictly rational process and given a framework, any person could arrive at the best possible decisions. Such a standpoint is taken to avoid personal preferences, biases, intuitions, conflicts etc. This often seems to be an ideal case and may not be true in all circumstances.

3.5 The Decision Distancing Factor:

Thomas Princen in his book Confronting Consumption [4] defines distancing as the "…the separation between primary resource extraction decisions and ultimate consumption decisions occurs along four dimensions—geography, culture, bargaining power, and agency". He says that when the geographic distance between the producer and consumer is short, we have more information on how, where, when and why things are produced. This helps us make better purchase decisions. This also leads to better consumer-aware production decisions. When translated to organizational level, the greater the distance between ground-reality and the management, the less inclusive decisions would be. This also happens when companies try to setup shop in other countries. The companies may only think in the lines of offering jobs and profits but the culture, philosophy and preferences of the natives are often abstracted. Many such decisions made from far-off have led to inculturation and degradation of local environments.

3.6 The Decisions Short Term Memory:

G.A Miller says that "…span of absolute judgment and the span of immediate memory impose severe limitations on the amount of information that we are able to receive, process, and remember [5]. When applied to the decision-making domain, when there are limited set of objectives, we would remember and take into account each one of them. But when there are numerous objectives and alternatives, we may fail to take into consideration many of them. On one side we need to make multi-objective decisions and on the other hand we need to remember all the objectives. In practicality this may be very difficult to achieve.

3.7 The Value of Values:

The deeper we analyse the basic decision-making framework, the better insights we gain.

In most models, there is no specific mention of ethics or values. Most models talk of "ethical decision-making" or "value based decision-making". They are looked at as classification of decisions and not the foundations on which the decisions are made. None of the models address the foundations which hold the decisions. The models address the criteria based on which decisions have to be made but the criteria are more in terms of cost, quality, time, resources and data.

3.8 Ordering the Chaos

It is only recently that decision-makers are getting comfortable with chaos. Most models tend to avoid chaos and uncertainty in the models fearing the impact they may have the outcome. Minor adjustments are made to the model whenever uncertainties are encountered with minimum disturbances. Uncertainties are often broken down as risks and are handled as independent problems. This is problematic because, risks here are handled from the organizational perspective more in terms of risk due to high demand, currency rates, regulations etc. This does not address the impact the decisions may have on the environment and people.

3.9 Global vs Local Decisions

Often decisions made in a specific context may not be optimal in another context i.e. decisions may be locally optimal but globally suboptimal. This is not addressed in many models. When decision-makers make decisions only based on local parameters, their decisions may be good but when the global picture is taken into account, the decisions may actually be detrimental. Most models take care of this only statistically by attaching numbers and weightages but when it comes to the reality of decision-making, not everything can be translated into numbers. The much debated Foreign Direct Investment in Indian retail sector is a good example. When one makes local decisions by looking at the finance, economics and operational aspects of the decision, it seems very favorable. But when looks at the global picture as to how this decision may affect the entire value chain from farming to the retailer, the infrastructural investments etc one may have to revisit the decisions, include more factors and then make a choice.

3.10 The missing synthesis in the analysis:

From Kant's definition of Analytic and Synthetic, analytic statements conform to logical rules and synthetic statements that connect to intuition. When we look at the modern decision-making models, we find that the entire problem is broken down into logical parts and solved. The parts may add up to the whole but distort the concept of "wholeness" and may not represent a higher unity. We could take the case of an

organization with several divisions. Each division may have its own goals to meet. Together they may constitute the organization but whether they meet the organizational goals by meeting these sub-goals is a question. This often results in intra-organizational competition.

4. Looking at the gaps from a dharmic lens:

Our *shastras* clearly indicate knowledge forms that include the logical but are not limited to just logical. For e.g. the *Nyaya shastras* describe knowledge forms of *pratyaksha* (intuition based), *anumana* (inference based), *upamana* (comparison based) and *sabda* (verbal testimony). Though *Nyaya* is analytical this is closer to reality than the western scientific methodology's almost absolute reliance on logic alone. Factual knowledge is always limited by the instruments of perception used to observe the fact. When logic relies heavily upon factual knowledge then it is bound to discard many truths to be baseless superstitions. For e.g. we know that in the west till a certain point in time people believed that the earth is flat since the instrument used for perception were the eyes. The higher truth of the earth being spherical was discarded as it did not match with observed facts. Likewise when we adopt valid forms of knowledge from our *shastras* we see that it validates higher grades of truth that seem illogical from the western scientific viewpoint. Sage Gaudapada has said that if the dream states do not fit into the context of the general experience of our fellow men or of our own normal experience, it must be understood that it is not because they fall short of absolute reality, but because they do not conform to our conventional standards. They constitute a separate class of experiences and, within their order, they are coherent. This recognition helps in addressing the blind spots that exist in decision-making leading us to a more comprehensive understanding where conflicts (based on logic alone) can be resolved.

Discarding traditional knowledge because it does not fit into the narrow definitions of current scientific standards leads to a situation where there is lack of clarity with respect to temporal, spatial and cultural dimensions. The cause and effect relationship of certain decisions become clear only with passage of time and that gets embedded in the cultural memory. Looking at these with the myopic lens of logic alone makes them seem like superstition or mythical with no practical value. For e.g. the destruction of native seed stock, that have acquired the gene pool through centuries for pest-resilience, drought adaptation etc., in the name of new genetically engineered "better" variety of seeds is a case in point. When *aitihya* is recognized as a valid form of authoritative knowledge we overcome our limitations in the form of myopic decisions imposed by time. As a person ages certain best practices are developed that help in decision-making and overall well being. Likewise as a civilization ages, best practices in the form of tradition and culture become the bulwark of strong and robust decision-making processes in all areas of human endeavor including (but not limited to) economy, politics, ecology, law.

When decision-making processes underplay or do not recognize the role of the individual decision maker there crop up serious limitations. The *adhikari-bheda* is an important Indian concept that helps us here. *Adhikari-bheda* is not just in terms of qualifications and training that the decision-maker has received but deeper than that. The Indian concept of *Chitta-Shuddhi* indicates the important qualification necessary for any decision-maker which goes beyond mere qualification or training in objective knowledge forms. This also makes ethics, human values and such higher value concepts integral to the *dharmic* perspective that is lacking in the western paradigm. The decision-maker without having purified his *chitta* of undesirable propensities of say jealousy, unhealthy competition, violence etc. is bound to err in the decision-making process. Furthermore, errors in right understanding including *dosha* (defects – *raga-attraction*, *dwesha-repulsion*, *moha-delusion*) and *samskara* (entrenched habits that limit the person) that *Nyaya shastras* talk about, limit the ability to achieve *chitta shuddhi* and hence limit the ability of the decision-maker in arriving at globally optimal decisions. Dr.S.Radhakrishnan has stated in interpreting Adi Sankara's theory on erroneous perception that when we mistake a rope for a snake and judge "This is a snake" we have two elements: the "this" or what is present to the senses, and the "snake" which we attribute to the "this"; the latter describes the mode of form in which we happen to cognize the presented datum. The error of the judgement is due to the element of interpretation or what our thoughts superimposes on the ground. [6] This clearly shows the importance of *chitta shuddhi*.

The Indian tradition has always been able to accept uncertainity and working along to create principles of working that help the individual produce effective action without losing a sense of harmony and balance. This is a key factor that is missing or is not concretely acknowledged in the western approach. This leads to the situation where in the face of multidimensional decision making where the dimensions keep increasing or changing, the individual decision maker is put under undue stress leading to all sorts of complications. In the name of objective decision making the role of uncertain or dynamic conditions cannot be ignored nor would it be advisable to ignore. That is where if the underlying perspective acknowledges uncertainty in the face of growing multidimensionality that would help the individual decision maker significantly.

5. Applying Dharmic Principles to Decision-Making

5.1 Including *Pratyaksha* and *Sabda*:

Expansion of the quantitative aspect of decision-making by including the *pramanas* (means of right knowledge) stated in *Nyaya Shastras* viz. *Pratyaksha*, *anumana*, *upamana* and *sabda*. This way the analytical domain is expanded to include intuition and verbal testimony

(in the form of *shastras*). These are generally left out as being unscientific and non-secular. We argue that the entire body of non-secular knowledge is much vaster and deeper (acquired over millennia) than currently accepted scientific knowledge. And it would be in the best interests of humanity to include these in regular processes of decision-making and not shy away from these in the name of secularism and hence lose the tremendous worth of collective experiences of the Indian tradition (and other traditions as well).

5.2 The *Chitta Shuddhi* of the Decision-Maker

The importance of *chitta shuddhi* of the decision-maker is absent or underplayed in current models. Decision-making models that exclude the decision-maker's purity (in terms of higher value systems and ethics) for the sake of objectivity and replicability do so at the cost of decision-making processes that could lead to decisions that are objective but are not so conducive for well being (human and otherwise). This means as part of the training of the decision-maker, practices that lead to *chitta shuddhi* would need to be incorporated. In the *Nyaya Shastras* it is stated that *Raga*, *Dvesha* and *Moha* lead to erroneous knowledge and judgement. For ages Indian practices like *seva, japa, bhajan, kirtan, yogasanas, pranayama, dhyana* etc. have been used for the purpose of *chitta shuddhi* that leads to right perception of reality. Specifically the broader principles of *karma yoga, bhakthi yoga and jnana yoga* would need to be integrated. *Karma yoga* is the expansion of action from the limited context of selfish interest to the expansive context of *loka sangraha* (world welfare). *Bhakthi yoga* is the expansion of emotion from the limited context of selfish attachment to the expansive context of universal love. *Jnana yoga* is the expansion of knowledge from the limited context of purely utilitarian knowledge to the expansive context of knowledge of ultimate reality (Sat). This integration ensures that the decision-maker and hence the decisions get continually refined leading to globally optimal decisions that do not lead to the crises (like the ones facing us today). This training would create the right samskaras in the decision-maker – the samskaras that lead to right action, love and knowledge.

5.3 Collective Decision Making

The employment of the sixteen-fold technique of *Nyaya* for further refinement of the decision-making process. In Swami Sivananda's words – "One can remove misapprehension or false knowledge and attain supreme felicity by the true knowledge of the sixteen categories. The sixteen categories or *padarthas* are: means of right knowledge (*Pramana*), object of right knowledge (*Prameya*), doubt (*Samsaya*), purpose (*Prayojana*), familiar instance (*Drishtanta*), established tenet (*Siddhanta*), members (*Avayaya*), argumentation (*Tarka*), ascertainment (*Nirnaya*), discussion (*Vada*), wrangling (*Jalpa*), cavil (*Vitanda*), fallacy (*Hetvabhasa*), quibble (*Chala*), futility (*Jati*), and occasion for rebuke (*Nigraha-sthana*). [7]

There is, first, the state of *Samsaya* or doubt about the point to be discussed. Next comes the *Prayojana* or motive for discussing it. Next follows a *Drishtanta* or example which leads to the *Siddhanta* or established conclusion. Then comes the objector with his *Avayava* or argument, split up into five members. Next follows the *Tarka* or refutation, and the *Nirnaya* or ascertainment of the true state of the case. A further *Vada* or controversy takes place, which leads to *Jalpa* or mere wrangling. This is followed by *Vitanda* or caviling. *Hetvabhasa* or fallacious reasoning, and *Nigraha-Sthana*, the putting an end to all discussion by a demonstration of the objector's incapacity for argument."

When this process is done in an objective manner it can lead to excellent communication and relationship among the group of decision-makers. This would also lead to further refinement of decisions.

We have represented the above discussed concepts in Figure 2. In Figure 2 we have kept Dharma as the foundation at all levels. Also, the purity of the decision-maker has been given very high importance with the idea that the more mature and clear the decision-maker is the better would be the decisions that spring forth.
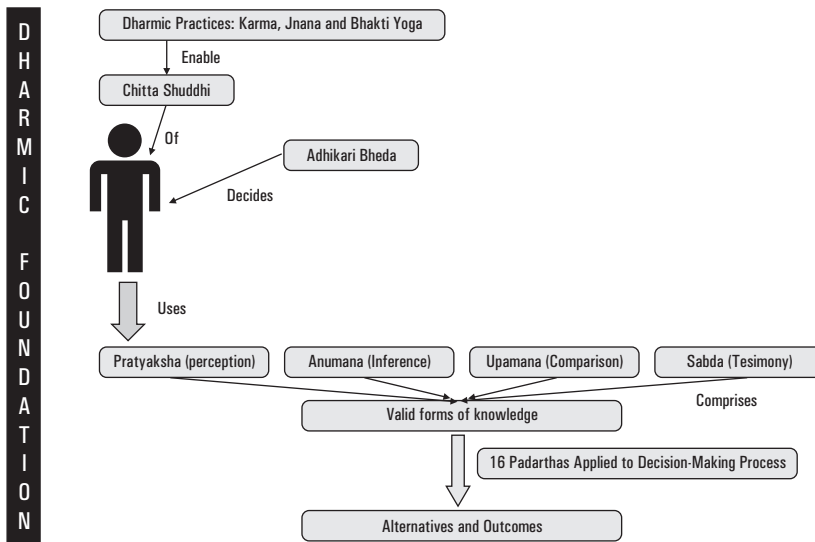

Figure 2 : Decision-making With Dharmic Perspective As The Foundation

Conclusion

Decision making has become more complex than ever. It has become multi-objective with many underlying uncertainties introduced by varying factors. Decisions are not taken in the vacuum of a momentary present but in the background of a collective past. If the future effects of the decisions (contained in the decisions themselves) are to lead to greater

harmony and good and not to conflict and crises it is important to recognize the role of the past tradition and culture. In this paper we have discussed the case for insights from the Indian tradition to be included in the decision making process viz., expanding the quantitative data by including *pratyaksha* and *sabda* along with *anumana* (which is currently scientifically accepted), *chitta shuddhi* of the decision maker and collective decision making along the lines indicated in *Nyaya* shastras. We believe that creating the right *samskaras* leads to right actions (decisions). Towards this integrating Indian practices along the principles of Karma Yoga, *Bhakthi Yoga and Jnana Yoga* into the training of decision makers would lead to the inculcation of right samskaras. *Dharma Sapeksh*a instead of *dharma nirpeksha* decision making would, we believe, be the way forward to create a harmonious (in the most expansive sense) world. As future work, we envision research that establishes as scientific the principles discussed above and other principles enunciated in the Indian *shastras*.

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