



THE SUNDAY TIMES

4G
An extra hour to play with...
clocks went back this morning

Students of karma capitalism

US business schools are lining up for courses that will help tomorrow's executives find their inner peace.

Dean Nelson reports from New Delhi

THE young executives — among America's brightest and best — cast off their shoes and sat cross-legged at the feet of a tall 80-year-old man dressed in flowing white robes.

Like disciples in the presence of a prophet, they hung on his every word. And they stared with concentration as their teacher wrote on a white flip-board the bywords to business success: concentration, consistency, co-operation.

For the members of the Young Presidents' Association, meeting in New Jersey, this was no ordinary leadership seminar. They were being imbued with the values of the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta, by its most venerable proponent, Swami Parthasarathy.

It was only one example of how America's business schools and corporations are turning to the teachings of Hindu gurus and the wisdom of Lord Krishna for guidance for their budding hedge-fund managers, investment bankers and venture capitalists.

Greed may have been good in the 1980s but karma capitalism is now being seen as illuminating the way to long-term business success. Companies are turning to gurus and swamis to transform stressed-out, one-dimensional executives into well-balanced bosses whose inner peace will keep them focused, productive and profitable.

On the syllabus at Harvard, Kellogg, Wharton and Ross business and management schools is the Bhagavad Gita, one of Hinduism's most sacred texts. Also known as the Song of the Divine One, the work relates a conversation between the supreme deity Krishna and Arjuna, a warrior prince.



Enlightened approach: the teachings of Hindu philosophy and the wisdom of Lord Krishna are becoming popular at some leading American business schools

Its sentiments are being used to bring out the best in the next generation of business leaders. About one in 10 professors at these institutions are of Indian origin, and although opinion among them varies widely, some of their common themes are gaining a wider audience. The most influential is that business leaders should aim for a higher purpose rather than simply amassing a fortune.

Why is not clear, but political goals like social justice and corporate social responsibility seem to have become business aspirations for many companies and schools. And for many, the methodology of achieving them includes developing more rounded executives with a strong spiritual sense of who they are.

A number of leading Indian academics such as Ram Charan, CK Prahalad and Vijay Govindarajan have emerged as gurus who can bring about this change, while more populist teachers like Deepak Chopra have created global business brands advising top executives on how to change their lives.

Parthasarathy, who runs his own school of Vedanta Hindu philosophy in Mumbai and still bats regularly for his college cricket team, is the guru of gurus. Parthasarathy was the heir to his family's shipping business, but turned his back on the family firm after studying at London University.

Every time you read it you understand more and get more depth. There is no problem in the world to which you do not find a solution there!

He began studying the Bhagavad Gita, and has spent the past 50 years building a multimillion pound empire through explaining its practical benefits to wealthy corporations and executives.

He has recently returned to India from America where — in addition to the Young Presidents' Organisation — he lectured students at Wharton Business School and executives at Lehman Brothers in Manhattan. His tours are booked well beyond next year, and will include Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia.

While traditional business teaching has

used the language of war and conquest, Parthasarathy uses the Bhagavad Gita to urge his students to turn inwards, to develop what he calls the intellect, by which he means their own personal understanding of themselves and the world, and to develop their "concentration, consistency and co-operation".

Parthasarathy, or Swamiji as he is known to many of his followers, uses the Bhagavad Gita and its "Vedic laws" to inspire his students to raise their aim from earning a crust to focusing on higher spiritual or business goals.

The Gita, as it is known, is the Hindu text in which Lord Krishna reveals himself as Supreme Being to Arjuna as he toils in moral confusion on the battlefield. In the script, Krishna explains to Arjuna that his soul will endure beyond his life, and that enlightenment comes through shedding the ego, and focusing on the "immortal self". He explains the importance of devotion, action, meditation and knowledge and teaches that real leaders cast aside emotions that interfere with sound judgment, and put their duty ahead of their personal fortunes.

Parthasarathy's long-term friend Gopichand Hinduja, who with his brothers owns Gulf Oil and Ashok Leyland Trucks and is listed as the seventh-richest man in Britain, said he is one of several gurus who have increased his knowledge of the Gita and in turn helped their family business.

"The Bhagavad Gita can make people better decision-makers. If you just close your eyes and be silent, that gives you the inner strength to focus. It's nothing to do with religion but inner confidence. This has transpired from Vedic law and scripture," he said.

"We know him [Parthasarathy] very well. He uses meditation, yoga and relaxation to ease stress. The world is becoming faster, and people have hypertension. There's no swami or guru we haven't met or tried to understand. In general, each one has some benefit. Vedic law has helped us as businessmen. There are many examples. All of us follow the Bhagavad Gita. Every time you read it you understand more and get more depth.

There is no problem in the world to which you do not find a solution there."

Parthasarathy, however, is sceptical about his new role as guru-in-chief to America Inc. "The business community has appreciated my line of approach. But nobody knows what I'm talking about, just bits and pieces. I'm saying they need to develop their intellect, not simply their intelligence, which is just knowledge from external sources, to help earn a living.

"Your intellect is your capacity to deal with the world, which is dormant in you. I ask people to think. People are doing business, but they don't know why," he said.

"You've got to set targets for yourself. They could be material or spiritual. I'm not interested in business. I'm interested in teaching people what life is about. We have to add self-realisation as a target, to know yourself. We have a spiritual target and all these business jokers have a material target."

He is sceptical of the prospects of many of his business students benefiting from his teaching. "Not a single soul has understood. At Kellogg, nobody understood. They said it was inspiring. They think I will help them make more money. It's hype," he said.

Gopichand Hinduja said his students could learn as much from their guru's business practices as their spiritual teaching. "Some of these swamis are now richer than many of the businessmen," he noted.

WISDOM OF KRISHNA

GREED IS BAD

"You should never engage in action only for the desire of rewards," Krishna says. Acting on worldly desires leads to failure. Do well, and good things will come.

BE FAIR

Enlightened leaders are compassionate and selfless and they "treat everyone as their equals". Followers will rally round them and follow their example.

ACT RATHER THAN REACT

Leaders accomplish "excellence by taking action", Krishna says. A leader's actions today can become the "karma" that influences his status tomorrow.

SEEK HIGHER CONSCIOUSNESS

Leaders should view problems within their larger contexts. In other words, show sensitivity to shareholders, employees, partners and neighbours.
