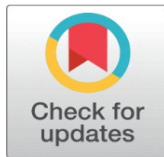


PRESERVING AND PROMOTING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS: A CASE STUDY OF THE CHINMAYA MISSION

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Received 25 February 2026
Accepted 27 April 2026
Published 18 May 2026

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DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i10s.2026.8188](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i10s.2026.8188)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

This case study narrates how the Chinmaya Mission, which was founded in 1953 by Swami Chinmayananda Saraswati, could be considered as a living case study of how Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) could be maintained, institutionalized and scaled with values-based leadership and strategic coherence. The study reveals the overlap of philosophy, pedagogy and social innovation in the ecosystem of the Chinmaya Mission through first-hand field experience with the Chinmaya Mission Sidhbari Ashram and the Chinmaya Organisation for Rural Development (CORD) villages, as well as secondary research.

It also explores the operationalization of the concepts of Advaita Vedanta by management practices such as leadership development, participatory governance, knowledge transfer, and sustainability.

The analysis reveals that the Chinmaya Mission has a replicable model that can be applied in the modern-day organizations with the aim of integrating purpose and performance by indigenizing ethics and awareness frameworks.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Values-Based Leadership, Strategic Management, Social Innovation, Vedanta, Education for Sustainable Development

1. INTRODUCTION

The curvy road led upwards to Sidhbari, Himachal Pradesh, through pine forests and prayer flags. Management professor Dr. Gauri Govind of the business school of North India came to the Chinmaya Mission Ashram just in time as the day was breaking to bathe the Dhauladhar mountains in gold. Then, as she looked at the beautiful scene before her she heard the indescribable sound of Om wafting through the still air and she felt like she had stepped into some quiet valley engulfed in timelessness.

Dr. Govind had not only come to Sidhbari as a scholar but also as a seeker. How a group of people, who were deeply rooted in spirituality, could have managed to maintain their relevance and strength over more than seven decades and

preserve the traditional wisdom of the Indians had always baffled her and she had decided to make the trip. She had studied the organizational design and models of leadership over the years and was intrigued with the scale of the ecosystem of the Chinmaya Mission: more than 300 centres all over the world, 100 schools, a modern university, and a vast network of rural development.

But it was the clarity of purpose of the Mission which made an impression on her as she stood wrapped in the serenity of the ashram courtyard, but the clarity of purpose of the Mission. The discipline, silence and service were almost recitations of a managerial philosophy which she so frequently discussed in the classrooms but so seldom found practised in the field.

Once the founder of the Mission, Swami Chinmayananda, had said: It is necessary to reform man before he can reform the world.

All the interactions Dr. Govind had experienced at Sidhbari, appeared to be founded upon that principle - self-mastery as a basis of leadership. She therefore decided to use this as an analytical prism through which she can be able to relate her observations to the management theory: how purpose, ethics, and reflective awareness can be used to support institutions in a much more effective way as compared to hierarchy or control.

This case tells the story of Dr. Govind, who has been on the journey of Sidhbari, where spiritual stillness prevails, to the flourishing villages where CORD (Chinmaya Organisation for Rural Development) has brought about change.

It addresses the ways in which the Chinmaya Mission can serve to illustrate values-based management, social innovation, and how to preserve the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in action.

2. METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

This research utilizes a qualitative interpretive research design, based on both primary field observations and secondary documentary analysis to understand the lived experience of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in organizational practice.

Dr. Gauri Govind gathered first hand information in her field immersion at the Chinmaya Mission Sidhbari Ashram and the CORD (Chinmaya Organisation for Rural Development) Centre. During her visit to Sidhbari, she witnessed young Brahmacharins going through the Vedanta training program, attending early morning discourse sessions, and participating in reflective conversations with resident Acharyas to clearly see how the Mission is translating the spiritual philosophy into leadership development. She visited two CORD-adopted villages on her visits, met with the leaders of Mahila Mandal, vocational trainers, the youth volunteers, and health workers and engaged them in detailed discussion. These assisted her to have first hand experience of how the traditional wisdom, collective decision making and utilization of local resources influenced the practices of grassroots development.

The institutional publications, annual reports of the Chinmaya International Foundation (CIF), Chinmaya Vishwa Vidyapeeth (CVV) and CORD, as well as scholarly research, government policy reports, and research articles on the IKS and sustainability, were the sources of secondary data. The analysis follows three thematic layers:

- 1) **Philosophy and Leadership**, which studies the application of Vedanta to management thinking;
- 2) **Institutional Design and Strategy**, which explores mission-driven organizational coherence; and
- 3) **Social Innovation and Community Development**, which assesses how IKS principles guide empowerment, livelihood creation, and sustainability in rural India.

In an attempt to give her findings additional depth in terms of the interpretive validity of her findings, Dr. Govind employed the approach of thematic analysis based on the principles of the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The aim was not to measure responses but find out the patterns of meaning inherent in lived experiences and in institutional narratives.

The systematic review of the area conducted through reading the field notes, reflective journals, and transcripts of interviews with Acharyas, village leaders, and CORD facilitators, helped to identify recurrent conceptual codes, such as self-leadership, participatory empowerment, knowledge preservation and ethical governance. They were then classified into higher order themes, which fit within the three layers of analysis: Philosophy and Leadership, Institutional Design and Strategy, and Social Innovation and Community Development.

To ensure the analytical consistency and the contextual consistency, Dr. Govind triangulated her observations with the secondary sources: annual reports, speeches, and policy frameworks like the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and IKS Handbook (2023).

This interpretive methodology enabled the study to go beyond the superficial descriptions to understand how the structures and practices of the Chinmaya Mission represent a phenomenological interpretation of how the structures and practices of the Chinmaya Mission embody the principles of Advaita Vedanta, in real-life management situations. The insertion of individual and group experience into larger contexts of management systems, and into larger contexts of values, helped the analysis bridge the subjective realm of values with the structural realm of management systems - a hallmark of IKS-inspired inquiry.

3. THE SIDHBARI EXPERIENCE: LEADERSHIP IN REFLECTION

There was a the feeling of contemplation everywhere at Sidhbari, where Dr Govind could feel the cloud of all-enveloping contemplation hovering around. The ashram is a beautiful quiet spot at the foot of the Dhauladhar mountains where the mist lies low and the wind rustles through the pine trees. The day starts much earlier than the sunrise. A conch is blowing, gentle, but firm. Now it was time to begin the morning sadhana. Young Brahmacharins, in saffron robes, sat cross-legged in the stone courtyard, notebooks and scriptures open before them.

Dr. Gauri Govind sat and observed the teacher as she started the session, not talking, but not saying. It taught her, first, that nothing was to be learned, but to be attentive. Then after a few minutes of silence the Acharya started to speak in slow, careful voice. It was no lecture, but a conversation that was going on, highly Socratic in character, in which the questions were more important than the answers.

Later, during an informal conversation, one Acharya told her,

“Vedanta is not an escape from the world – it is management of the self. Once you understand yourself, leading others becomes effortless.”

The words remained in her mind. She remembered numerous corporate leadership workshops when she had observed managers who failed to create teams or deal with conflicts because of inner confusion. Here, in this remote Himalayan ashram, she witnessed the basis of leadership education being laid - not through frameworks, and simulations but through introspection and disciplined living.

The daily routine of the ashram, namely the śravaṇa (listening), manana (reflection), and nididhyasana (internalization) are indicative of a cyclic learning process, with the first step being the reception of knowledge, then questioning, and finally absorbing the knowledge through practice. Everything, whether it is cleaning the prayer hall or making meals is perceived as a component of learning.

On management side, the Sidhbari pedagogy is transformational leadership in its purest form - Self-realization is the foundation of leadership and not positional power. The students are not trained simply to memorize the scriptures but they are taught to serve others, to be disciplined without being rigid and to be clear without being arrogant.

Dr. Govind observed that this is a reflection of the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) where motivations are self-directed with the sources of motivation being autonomy, mastery and purpose as opposed to external rewards. The approach to learning in the Ashram is participative and inquiry-based as is the case with the concept learning organization proposed by Peter Senge (1990), which survived on shared vision, personal mastery and systems thinking.

Every day at Sidhbari is a microcosm of organizational life - structured and flexible, hierarchical and humane. Decision-making is participatory, with the lead being taken by the senior Acharya, but through a consultative process. During the discussion concerning the mistakes, no blame or finger pointing is done. This promotes psychological safety and humility- values that are always aimed at achieving by modern management.

As Dr. Govind, looked at the silent discipline of the Ashram, she realized that Sidhbari was not merely a monastic retreat, it was much more; it was a leadership laboratory which operated on indigenous epistemology. Its education was more on leading, but not controlling, but creating awareness. In that silence that succeeded the chants, was it that the living essence of that which she had long taught in the classrooms, that which she had long taught, was true leadership begins with mastery of the self.

4. PHILOSOPHY INTO PRACTICE: THE CORD MODEL OF EMPOWERMENT

Amidst the scenic surroundings of Sindhbari, comes a short, winding road, to a place that is full of life - work is underway, quiet but determined work, at the Chinmaya Organisation for Rural Development (CORD).

When Sindhbari is the mind of reflection of the Chinmaya Mission, then CORD is its heartbeat. CORD, led by the paediatrician turned leader of development, Dr. Kshama Metre, has shown how Vedantic principles of self-awareness and service could be modelled to embody a model of participatory, sustainable development.

As Dr. Gauri Govind approached the center, she saw a signboard which said: "Empowerment through Participation." She was welcomed by the sound of sewing machines, the aroma of herbs drying in the sun, and laughter of a group of women who were busy talking under a neem tree. Everything was busy at the center, but she could feel an all-pervasive sense of calmness, the same sense of grounding that she had perceived at Sindhbari.

According to Dr. Metre, we are not here to provide solutions but to assist people to find their own. This is basically the approach of CORD - facilitation and not intervention. Each of the initiatives is modelled with the local wisdom, community dialogue, and self-governance - the principles that are deeply embedded in the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in India.

4.1. MAHILA MANDALS: DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE

Dr. Govind went to one of the adopted villages nearby, and attended a weekly meeting of the Mahila Mandal. She noticed a circle of approximately 25 women sitting in a circle. Their dialogues were broad based and included micro-savings records, local health concerns and school attendance. Interestingly, according to Dr. Govind, no one attempted to control the discussion; there was a shared leadership. Rukmini Devi, a woman, served as the secretary that month, keeping records in a handmade ledger.

Earlier we were waiting till somebody will tell you what to do, and Rukmini said. We make our own plans now we make our plans, plans to live in our own houses, plans to work in our own fields, plans to educate our own daughters.

In it Dr. Govind thought, lay the essence of participatory governance. Power was no longer the outside to the inside, the charity to the capacity. Every Mahila Mandal is a micro-organization - democratic, transparent and accountable. Members deliberate, make decisions and take actions as a group reflecting the ideas of distributed leadership that is frequently referred to in contemporary organizational theory.

Management wise, these groups have the characteristics of self-managed teams. Rotational leadership system creates a sense of ownership and flexibility. Decision-making is consensus-based, similar to models of shared leadership and participatory management applied in flat organizational structures.

Additionally, the model of CORD is in line with the Theory Y that is based on the premise that people are naturally responsible and able to self-direct when trusted. That type of trust that has enabled the Mahila Mandals to flourish - turning the idea of empowerment into a practical reality.

It is not only economical growth, but mental change. Dr. Govind noted that the women exuded confidence through agency- a vital aspect of leadership development which is hardly evident in the corporate environment.

4.2. LIVELIHOODS AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING: SOCIAL INNOVATION IN ACTION

At the CORD center, Dr. Govind paid a visit to the vocational training units. She observed women busy weaving Himachali shawls; and some making herbal skincare products, and others busy processing locally grown grains. The walls were also adorned with posters related to product branding, price charts, and production schedules. They were all created by the participants themselves.

All the initiatives incorporated native talents along with contemporary enterprise frameworks. The wool weaving unit, say, revived the traditional Himachali patterns, yet maintained the quality and relevance in the market. The herbal unit involved the local medicinal plants - Tulsi, Brahmi and Amla - with the ancient Ayurvedic knowledge coupled with the modern packaging and quality control.

In a management perspective, Dr. Govind realized this is social innovation through IKS, where the local wisdom would be exploited to develop economically feasible, socially inclusive business models. CORD, through its vocational

programs, is a model of inclusive entrepreneurship, which is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, especially SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

These female-owned businesses demonstrate the principles of shared value creation (Porter and Kramer, 2011): economic activity that, at the same time, benefited society and preserved culture. The profits were cyclically reinvested in the expansion of training programs or to support the education of children, demonstrating a cyclical, sustainable business model based upon community ethics.

Dr. Govind thought it must be a real-life implementation of the Michael Porters social value concept - only much more natural. It is not driven by corporate CSR strategy but by cultural identity and self-reliance - what Indian traditions call *swabhiman* (self-respect).

4.3. HEALTH AND WELL-BEING: SYSTEMS THINKING AT THE GRASSROOTS

Community health is another pillar of the work of CORD. A local clinic is a combination of Ayurveda, yoga, and allopathic medicine, the focus of which is prevention and lifestyle management. In one of his community health workshops, Dr. Govind was able to observe *Swasthya Sakhis*, or village women who had been trained to be health volunteers, performing yoga poses and explaining why the local herbs they used were beneficial.

The Digital health records are stored on tablets and this demonstrates how indigenous and modern knowledge systems can collaborate together. This integrated model is systems thinking in action - the combination of various disciplines to make up the entire well-being.

In management language, we can say that this is a hybrid innovation model - in which tacit (traditional) and explicit (modern) knowledge converge to solve complex, interdependent problems. This kind of integrative design resembles the model of knowledge spiral by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) in that knowledge flows between individuals, teams, and institutions in a dynamic manner.

4.4. YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION: BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Dr. Govind attended one of the sessions of *Balavihar* a program of story-telling-based teaching of children. The children were keenly listening as the facilitator read them the local folktales with some lessons on how to cooperate and respect nature. In another room the older students were engaged in a debate on water conservation and waste management and were learning how to combine both of these aspects of the traditional agricultural wisdom of the area with the modern sustainability practices.

CORD through these programs aims at offering experiential learning on a community level. The youth clubs and *Balavihars* impart all the young players know about civic responsibility, empathy, and ecological awareness - qualities that the responsible leadership requires. They also help in the formation of social capital -network of trust, cooperation and shared values that can be sustained in the long term development of a community.

Here, in the terms of management education, Dr. Govind perceived the IKS counterpart of character education - a pedagogy which turns students into moral, emotionally intelligent individuals and not just skilled workers.

4.5. LEADERSHIP THROUGH SEVA: ETHICS IN ACTION

Dr. Govind was intrigued to find out the seamless integration of leadership, service, and spirituality in the daily life of the people. As a principle in management, *seva* -selfless service- was embodied in Dr. Metre and her colleagues. The chain of command was almost not seen; decisions were made by everyone and credit was distributed in many ways.

When questioned how she inspired her employees, Dr. Metre smiled and said,

We do not handle people, we just remind people of the reason they serve.

The philosophy is similar to the servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977) - according to which the leaders live to help the others thrive. It is also an indication of the Vedantic management principle of *Nishkama Karma* -action without attachment to reward.

The success of CORD is anchored on this ethical infrastructure where all the initiatives are informed by values of honesty, accountability, and respect to human dignity. According to Dr. Govind, the organization operated as a values-based organization with governance flowing not through control but through culture.

4.6. MANAGERIAL INSIGHTS

From her CORD experience, Dr. Govind distilled several management insights:

- 1) **Empowerment as Capacity-Building:** True empowerment arises from capability and confidence, not external aid.
- 2) **Participatory Governance:** Collective decision-making ensures accountability and inclusivity.
- 3) **IKS as Innovation Resource:** Indigenous wisdom offers practical frameworks for sustainable business.
- 4) **Ethics as Efficiency:** Moral clarity enhances efficiency by reducing the need for external monitoring.
- 5) **Leadership as Service:** Leaders who serve create enduring organizations.

Dr. Govind regarded CORD as a social project, but as living case study on how philosophy could lead to sustainable management. She knew that operational knowledge of what modern organizations often find difficult to execute, purpose alignment, decentralized leadership, and real community involvement was in each village meeting, training program, and youth discussion.

It was evening when she got out of the centre that evening and the sun had already gone down behind the mountains and she could hear a low chorus of evening bhajans being sung somewhere in the nearby Ashram. It was the feeling that she had at that moment that the boundary between spiritual endeavour and managerial prowess had been crossed. It was the genius of the Chinmaya Mission to see that the teaching of Vedanta as theory is not the work of the Chinmaya Mission but of the genius of organizations and managers to apply this theory in practice.

5. THE CHINMAYA ECOSYSTEM: STRATEGIC COHERENCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

Dr. Gauri Govind bid adieu to the villages, and made her way back to the peace of the Sidhbari Ashram. She started to realize that the Chinmaya Mission was not a set of independent programs but an ecosystem, where all the parts are mutually dependent. The CIF, CVV, CORD and the Chinmaya Vidyalyas were not necessarily distinct entities, they were in fact interconnected limbs of the same body. They all shared the same thing; a single consciousness; the founding vision of the Mission to transform people so that they could transform society.

She came to learn that this ecosystem was one of those that strategy scholars refer to as strategic coherence - the alignment of various activities in the interests of a common cause. Corporations have achieved this coherence either by branding or common processes but the Mission succeeded in achieving it with values and vision. The principle which united was that knowledge, action, and devotion are not dissimilar pursuits, but are combination avenues which lead to realization.

5.1. CHINMAYA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION (CIF): KNOWLEDGE AS STRATEGY

The intellectual engine of the Mission is the Chinmaya International Foundation, at Adi Shankara Nilayam in Kerala. The given emphasis on Sanskrit study, philosophy and preservation of the texts shows the profound knowledge of what knowledge management is as a strategic capability. CIF digitalizes palm-leaf manuscripts, translates classical commentaries and provides online courses in Vedanta and linguistics to foreign audiences.

Dr. Govind saw in this a form of institutional ambidexterity – with a balance being achieved between preservation (exploitation of existing knowledge) and innovation (exploration through digital education). It also reflects the SECI model by Nonaka (1995) in which tacit knowledge embedded in scriptures is externalized and combined with modern pedagogy and re-internalized by learners across the globe. In short, the mission of CIF transforms IKS into a living renewable intellectual resource.

5.2. CHINMAYA VISHWA VIDYAPEETH (CVV): INTEGRATING IKS WITH MODERN HIGHER EDUCATION

When she came to the university in Kochi, Chinmaya Vishwa Vidyapeeth, Dr. Govind discovered that there was one more layer of this plan - the institutionalization of the native wisdom in the formal school. At CVV, both modern and traditional disciplines were combined, such as economics, psychology, and data science as modern ones, and Sanskrit, Yoga, and Indian philosophy as classical.

The Centre of IKS-CKS Integration is a university based centre that collaborates with global institutions and practices design thinking and transdisciplinary research to address the problems of the day through the Indian epistemology. This strategic amalgamation reflects what was outlined by Mintzberg (1994) as emergent strategy; an adaptive, learning-based process that arises out of experience and is not pre-planned.

In the case of Dr. Govind, CVV has shown that a mission-based organization can be adjusted to the demands of the modern governance, i.e., accreditation, curriculum design, performance measures, etc., without losing its spirit. It was an archetype of hybrid organizational character, in which tradition and innovation were in peaceful coexistence.

5.3. CHINMAYA ORGANISATION FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT (CORD): STRATEGY AT THE GRASSROOTS

In contrast to this, CORD is the working arm of the translation of philosophy into social action. It converts ideals of Vedantic philosophy to inclusive business concepts and community leadership initiatives. CIF and CVV are concerned with intellectual capital whereas CORD concentrates on social and human capital. They are collectively known as a triple-levelled system - thought, education and application - thereby making sure that there is a continuity between theory and practice. From a management viewpoint, this triad resembles Porter's value chain adapted to a social mission:

- CIF generates intellectual resources (knowledge inputs).
- CVV refines them into educational offerings (process).
- CORD delivers community transformation (impact outputs).

Each vertical reinforces the others, creating a feedback loop where ideas inspire action and action refines ideas – a hallmark of learning organizations.

5.4. CHINMAYA VIDYALAYAS: VALUES AT SCALE

This philosophy is introduced to young learners through the Chinmaya Vidyalayas, which are distributed all over India and in other countries. The emphasis lies on integrating educational with ethical education and mindfulness under their Chinmaya Vision Programme (CVP). Incorporating reflection and dialogue in subjects such as mathematics to history is a training of teachers.

Through this system, Dr. Govind found it to be a strategic diffusion mechanism, that instilled IKS-inspired pedagogy throughout the age groups and regions. The Vidyalayas are therefore franchise units of values, maintaining brand integrity through cultural uniformity, instead of rigid standardization as Collins and Porras (1994) term it a visionary organization, guided by an enduring core ideology.

5.5. GOVERNANCE THROUGH VALUES: THE FEDERATED MODEL

Dr. Govind was impressed by the governance system of the Mission. She found that there was a tremendous amount of autonomy with which each unit was functioning - as ashram, school, or research center. However, they were all in accord with general codes of ethics and religious guidance of the central trust.

This will be a federation system and management is decentralized. Outward and inward respectively, power of decision-making and philosophical and cultural alignment respectively. It is related to the professional bureaucracy model of Mintzberg where the action is not coordinated by control systems but by expertise and values.

Another interesting point connected with the accountability mechanisms of the Mission is that the emphasis is placed on ethical self-control rather than on the heavy bureaucratic control. There is openness in reporting, auditing and assessments but compliance is more of a moral conviction than a moral command. It is governance by trust which is one of the alternative models, which increasingly gain relevance in the modern discourses on ESG and responsible management.

5.6. STRATEGIC LEARNING AND ADAPTABILITY

Dr. Govind knew that there was a pattern that was common to all these layers - strategic learning. Whether it was CIF adapting to digital scholarship, CVV making ancient wisdom meet the standards of education around the world, or CORD being innovative with social enterprises, the adaptability of the Mission was due to its philosophical underpinning, namely, the Vedanta principle of balance and awareness.

This in the terms of organizational theory denotes dynamic capability (Teece, 2007) - the capacity to reorganize the competencies in response to the changing environments without losing the main identity of the organization.

The ecosystem of Chinmaya Mission is therefore a case of strategic alignment, which is mission-driven. Its institutions, which are many in both purpose and place, are not bound together by dictum but by belief. This consistency enables it to expand without disintegrating and be innovative without losing its essence, a problem many organizations today are struggling to overcome.

The reflection which Dr. Govind made in her field notes was as follows:

The Chinmaya Mission demonstrates that when the centre holds - when vision and values are in tune - diversity does not constitute a weakness but rather a source of strength.

6. VEDANTA AS A FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZATIONAL ETHICS

It was evening when Dr Gauri Govind got back to the Sidhbari Ashram and the evening arti was going on. A kind of peace was resting on her as the warm radiance of lamps and hymns pervaded the air. Dr. Govind recalled her experiences of the past week - of the quiet classes of Brahmacharins and the lively classes of Mahila Mandals. She realized that contexts may vary, but nonetheless there is still a thread that runs through them and that is that there is consciousness in every decision, every interaction, every process.

Here she started to regard Vedanta not as philosophy but as an ethical system - as a living code of conduct of leadership and organization.

6.1. THE ETHICAL FOUNDATION OF ONENESS

The main teaching of Advaita Vedanta, the teaching of the non-duality of existence, all creatures are manifestations of one underlying consciousness is the primary teaching of Advaita Vedanta. This management worldview is translated into the interconnectedness, inclusivity, and responsibility.

Dr. Govind observed that this unity sense was the moral compass of governing the Mission. It substituted the outward conformity with the inward discipline which is what the modern theorists refer to as ethical self-regulation. Ethical behaviour was to leaders in the Chinmaya ecosystem, whether as a part of the education system, a research institution, or a rural development agency, a logical extension of awareness, rather than a standard that can be imposed.

She had witnessed this at CORD: transparency in the financial books kept by village committees; healthful involvement in profit-sharing; free accountability sessions in community rooms. No one appointment existed as an ethics officer, since ethics was the duty of all.

This is what is known by Treviño, Weaver and Reynolds (2006) as the moral infrastructure, informal rules and shared values that help to sustain ethical conduct more efficiently than codes of conduct.

6.2. NISHKAMA KARMA: ETHICS OF INTENTION AND DETACHMENT

The concept of Nishkama Karma - one doing his duty in a selfless manner, without being bound to the consequences of his actions. This principle in organizations promotes purpose-based action, rather than action because of reward.

At Sidhbari, Dr. Govind found this philosophy in the workings of the ashram. Assigning tasks was done but never micromanagement. Everybody, including the senior Acharyas, kitchen volunteers, all others, quietly and well-mannered fulfilled their roles. It was not recognition, but rather right action.

In the study of leadership, this is in line with servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977) as well as stewardship theory where trust, altruism and moral responsibility are emphasized over authority and control. Leaders of the Mission demonstrated this by their behaviour, not by their rank, but by personal uprightness and integrity. In her notes, Dr. Govind wrote:

“Whereas most organizations manage performance, the Chinmaya Mission manages consciousness. Ethical action flows naturally when intention is pure.”

This approach reframes the Western notion of compliance-based ethics into an awareness-based ethics – a distinctly Indian contribution to organizational theory.

6.3. DHARMA AS ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

An implicit decision making framework of the Mission is the concept of Dharma doing what is right according to one role, context and conscience. In contrast to established codes of ethics, Dharma advocates situational reasoning based on discernment (*viveka*).

Dr. Govind was at a meeting on the Giving of Grants when Dr. Govind visited the Mission. She observed that the discussion was highly thoughtful and not procedural. To reach a decision, senior members considered needs of a community and long-term sustainability and alignment to the purpose of the Mission.

This in management terminology would have been ethical decision-making by integrating the stakeholders in the process similar to the Triple Bottom Line approach but with the added moral aspect to the process. They were not only evaluated in terms of efficiency but also in terms of rightness - whether they were in line with compassion, justice and long-term welfare.

This situational ethics and value-based model of governance is closer to this adaptive model of Dharma, which acknowledges that ethical decisions must be based on balancing duties, consequences, and virtues, all at the same time.

6.4. GOVERNANCE THROUGH CONSCIOUS AWARENESS

The governance structure of the Mission has a reflection of mindful administration. Frequent review meetings start and end with a brief prayer or some moments of silence - a symbolic yet powerful reminder that leadership is service.

Such rituals were not a formality as Dr. Govind found that rituals were a conscious act of letting people take a break and shifting their focus not on ego but purpose. This reflective governance practice is similar to what Harvard scholar Ronald Heifetz refers to as adaptive leadership- leading with humility and awareness in complex value-laden environments.

In addition, the individual trusts have transparency mechanisms that are used to enhance ethical accountability. All projects have public accounts of money and results and villagers, teachers or volunteers are free to challenge any decision. This participatory governance reflected in this culture of openness is based on mutual respect, self-discipline, which underlies participatory governance, the ideals of Swaraj (self-rule through self-discipline).

6.5. VEDANTA AND CONTEMPORARY MANAGEMENT ETHICS

When Dr. Govind was synthesizing her field notes she saw that the ethical framework presented in Vedanta has a great deal to offer to the global theory of management in an effective way. Whereas the Western model of ethics tends to understand morality in terms of compliance and external controls, the model of ethics as expounded by Vedantics focuses on inner transformation whereby awareness will form the controller of behavior.

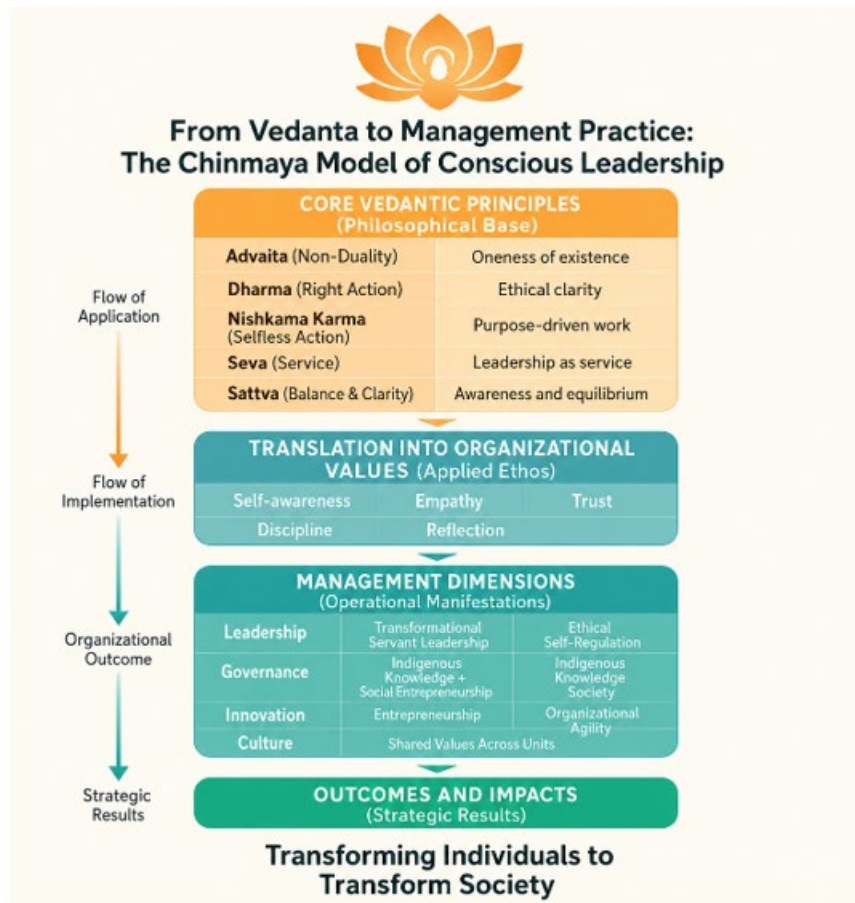
The 7-decade history of successful expansion of the Chinmaya Mission, is testimony to the fact that it is possible to build organizations that operate on ethical consciousness, and that can achieve their objectives in the most sustainable way. Its leaders do what Collins (2001) describes as Level 5 leadership - a combination of humility and willpower - based on spiritual intelligence.

In essence, with Vedantic ethics governance goes from being a system of control to a culture of care. It makes leadership more human, takes the morality of strategy and makes the logic of operationality within the institution correspond to its philosophical foundations.

As she reflected on her case study, Dr. Govind summed up the insight that would come to be the conceptual core of her case study:

This is not a collection of doctrines, but a way of being, where self-awareness, responsibility, and compassion blend to conscious action, is what makes the Chinmaya Mission prove that when ethics is lived, rather than legislated, sustainability becomes easy.

Figure 1



7. ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND ADAPTABILITY

It was the third morning of her stay at Sidhbaari and Dr. Gauri Govind determined to join a small group of Brahmacharins who were discussing a course in Sanskrit on the Internet offered by the Chinmaya International Foundation (CIF). The students carried with them laptops. The introduction of laptops in a monastic environment was not so much of a surprise to Dr. Govind as much as it was a matter of natural progression of the tradition and technology to coexist together.

One of the students described how the e-Vedanta program of CIF enables learners (students) around the world to access ancient texts via virtual classrooms. Another one shared that scholars are making use of digitized manuscripts to carry out comparative linguistic studies.

This was one bright example of organizational learning and flexibility to Dr. Govind; an institution which always managed to renew itself without losing its essence. The fact that the Mission has switched to the digital dissemination was not a concession to the modernity, but a natural progression of its mission: to make knowledge accessible and alive.

In a management perspective, this portrayed a dynamic capability theory of Teece (2007) - the capacity to combine, develop and recompose competencies to suit the changing environment. The Mission revealed this by being ever innovate in its pedagogy, delivery and outreach.

She observed that such malleability did not just apply to technology. Design thinking was implemented in the curriculum in the ethics and sustainability courses at Chinmaya Vishwa Vidyapeeth (CVV). Self-help groups at CORD have been able to adjust to new market realities by embracing the e-commerce platforms to market their handmade products.

These are just some of the attributes that Peter Senge (1990) describes as a learning organization- an organization that fosters inquiry, reflection and shared vision. In contrast to traditional institutions which compartmentalize learning, the Chinmaya mission takes a holistic approach to learning, an ecosystemic process, which is continuous, relational and value-driven.

Dr. Govind had noticed that this flexibility was due to the philosophical basis of the Mission in Advaita Vedanta. Adaptability in Vedanta is not taken to mean instability but as a manifestation of awareness - the ability to be able to align with truth as the circumstances change. Organizationally, this is translated to resilient flexibility- the ability to be rooted and at the same time grow.

The Chinmaya Mission demonstrates that focus of purpose creates a force of adaptive strength when many educational and social organizations are struggling with disruption. The reason is that although its why will always remain the same, its how may always change with no end.

8. CULTURE AS STRATEGY: THE CHINMAYA BRAND

As Dr. Govind commuted between the Sidhbari Ashram, CORD center and the nearby Chinmaya Vidyalaya, she was able to see a pattern; it was as though there was a quiet, underlying, almost invisible thread of cultural consistency. No matter to whom she was talking--be it a monk, or a teacher, or even a village woman--ss the same words came up again and again: seva, awareness, integrity, and learning.

This, she understood, was culture as strategy the most sustainable competitive strength of the Mission.

Contrary to the corporate brand that is founded on the visual identity, Chinmaya brand is based on behavioural identity. This spirit is echoed in all stakeholders, whether they are principals of Chinmaya schools, or village coordinators in CORD. It is this correspondence of behaviour to values that Edgar Schein (2010) refers to as the deepest level of organizational culture - shared assumptions that automatically guide behaviour.

It is due to such cultural coherence, Dr. Govind noted, that the Mission is capable of going up into the global scale and yet not to lose its authenticity. The influential aspect on the brand is the emotional appeal, rather than the marketing. By sending a child to a Chinmaya Vidyalaya or by a parent (who is a donor) supporting a CORD initiative, he is making an investment in trust capital, the belief that the institution will be acting with integrity.

This would be cultural branding - in which values constitute long term distinction (Holt, 2004). The credibility generated by the authenticity of the Mission is carried over into long-term support of the community and institutional resilience.

She also knew that such culture served as a social glue with federated system. This is because in an organization where operations are decentralized, tight control mechanisms may not be in place; however, the culture tends to compensate this. The spiritual-philosophical orientation of the Chinmaya Mission is an implicit rule - one that influences the decisions, that gives an ethical consistency and quality to the decisions, and one that provides an ethical consistency and quality across the geographically dispersed units.

In her reflections, Dr. Govind wrote:

“Culture, when rooted in truth and lived through people, becomes the most strategic resource an organization can possess.”

This observation aligns with Barney’s (1991) resource-based view, which identifies culture as a rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable asset – the ultimate source of sustained competitive advantage.

For the Chinmaya Mission, culture is not a by-product of success; it is the cause of it.

9. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: THE CHINMAYA MODEL OF VALUES-BASED MANAGEMENT

The bottom of her field immersion Dr. Govind had filled two notebooks: one with her observations recorded, the other with theoretical mappings. When she synthesized them, an obvious model developed: the Chinmaya Values-Based Management Framework - a system in which leadership, structure, and strategy are organically developed out of philosophy.

Table 1

Management Dimension	Chinmaya Practice / Example	Theoretical Anchor
Leadership	Self-awareness, servant leadership (<i>Seva</i> as motivation)	Transformational & Servant Leadership (Bass; Greenleaf)
Strategy	Mission-driven diversification (CIF, CVV, CORD)	Strategic Coherence & Balanced Scorecard Alignment
Governance	Ethical self-regulation, trust-based accountability	Moral Infrastructure (Treviño et al., 2006)
HR & Motivation	Purpose-driven engagement, community belonging	Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000)
Learning	Reflective dialogue, continuous adaptation	Learning Organization (Senge, 1990)
Innovation	Indigenous knowledge + market solutions	Social Innovation (Murray et al., 2010)
Culture	Shared philosophy across units	Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991)
Sustainability	Service-driven social impact	Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1997)

This model explains that the success of the Chinmaya Mission is not by chance, but it is based on the organizational design that is founded on consciousness.

Whereas the conventional organizations develop systems to manage behaviour, the Mission develops awareness to manage behaviour. It unites what is widely divided by the management literature - spiritual intelligence and institutional efficiency.

Theoretically the Mission is an example of spiritual pragmatism - a balance between moral ideals and managerial precision. It is goal-oriented and performance-focused and demonstrates that ethical organizations are scalable, efficient, and innovative.

10. REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD: THE HUMAN FACE OF TRANSFORMATION

It was the week of her departure out of Himachal and Dr. Govind decided that she would go back to a CORD village where she had previously attended a Mahila Mandal meeting. She was admiring the terraced fields that were shining in the afternoon sun when she spotted a group of women working on a water channel. She approached them to enquire who was the organizer of the activity. One lady smiling, said,

“We did. If we wait for others, we will keep waiting.”

That sentence encapsulated what Dr. Govind had been trying to articulate in her academic work – that empowerment is not a policy, but a mindset.

At another site, a youth volunteer guided her through a small organic farm established by a local self-help group. “This was once wasteland,” he said proudly. “Now we sell our produce in the town market.”

These interactions showed Dr. Govind clearly that the Mission’s leadership philosophy translated into social entrepreneurship. What had begun as a spiritual movement had become a network of changemakers – ordinary people managing extraordinary transformation.

Her reflection journal from that day reads:

“At Sidhbari, I saw leadership being cultivated through silence and study. I witnessed the same leadership in the villages, a dialogue and action leadership. Both are aspects of the same energy – awareness in motion.”

These experiences were a rediscovery to her that when management is dipped into cultural and moral intelligence it turns out not to be only a science of management but also an art of human flourishing.

11. LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Table 2

Area	Lessons and implications
Leadership Development	Leadership training should emphasize self-awareness before skill acquisition. As the Mission's model shows, self-mastery leads to authentic influence.
	Servant leadership and ethical intelligence create long-term organizational trust – crucial in volatile environments.
	Reflection-based learning can cultivate resilience and empathy in emerging leaders.
Strategy and Governance	Mission alignment is a powerful unifying mechanism. Shared purpose allows decentralization without losing direction.
	Governance systems anchored in values outperform those built solely on regulation.
	Transparency, when rooted in trust, fosters accountability without bureaucracy.
HR and Organizational Culture	Seva (selfless service) can be a transformative framework for employee engagement – connecting individual purpose to organizational mission.
	Organizations that nurture intrinsic motivation reduce turnover and improve well-being.
	Ethical culture acts as social capital that compounds over time.
Innovation and Sustainability	Indigenous knowledge can serve as a source of frugal, context-sensitive innovation.
	The Mission's integration of IKS, education, and enterprise illustrates how sustainability can emerge from tradition.
	Linking spiritual principles with global sustainability frameworks (SDGs, ESG) can yield models that are both inclusive and future-ready.
Policy and Education	Educational institutions can adopt the Chinmaya approach to integrate IKS with modern management pedagogy.
	Policymakers should engage with value-based organizations as partners in implementing community development programs.

The case represented an eye opener to Dr. Govind: the new frontier of management might not be technological, but philosophical - the rediscovery of wisdom traditions that have quietly given human and institutional integrity over the centuries.

12. CONCLUSION

Just as Dr. Gauri Govind was about to take her departure out of Sidhbari, she bowed down in a last farewell, before the huge figure of Hanuman, the symbol of power and service, which looks down on Sidhbari. It was made of highly polished bronze since it could be seen reflecting the low evening sunlight and faint echo of the chants could be heard in the Ashram.

She recalled weeks of her life in which she had trod through worlds - through school-rooms and school-yards, and through the dark, pious silence of the Dharma, and through the bright and vibrant talk of the Dharma, in the rural meetings. The venture had been what it was more than a study; a study in a new direction of management as conscious custodianship.

She realized that the Chinmaya Mission is not only a practice of preservation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems - it is a way of life. The philosophy is turned into leadership, reflection into strategy, and service into sustainability by its ecosystem.

The best combinations to be made as illustrated by the Mission are purpose together with process, values together with vision as well as ethics together with execution.

In her final field note, she wrote:

“The Chinmaya Mission teaches us that management, at its highest level, is not the management of systems or resources, but the management of consciousness. When institutions act with awareness, they not only endure – they enlighten.”

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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