

**A STUDY ON RISING STRESS AMONG CORPORATE PROFESSIONALS IN INDIA: IS
DEGRADATION OF VALUES A PROBABLE CAUSE?**

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Abstract:

Virtuous conduct and an enduring moral fibre are deemed to be the hallmark of a person of integrity. Every organisation desires such individuals within its folds. However, off late, there has been a perceptible degradation of ethics and values in the society, pervading all cross-sections in terms of age, gender and professions. A fiercely competitive employment market, as also mindless adherence to the dictum, “survival of the fittest” have apparently taken a toll upon the youth’s belief in value system. Corporate sector (public and private sectors combined) being the backbone of the economic power of India, the degenerating values in society and the consequent rise in stress levels, are having a debilitating effect on the mental, physical and moral health of our country.

Keywords: Values, Value System, Degenerating Values, Stress, Moral Health, Corporate Sector.

“Possessions, outward success, publicity, luxury - to me these have always been contemptible. I believe that a simple and unassuming manner of life is best for everyone, best for both the body and the mind.”

— *Albert Einstein.*¹

We are living in an extremely competitive world. The magic mantra for success today, not merely in business, but almost in every sphere of life hinges on ‘competitive advantage’. At least in the metropolitan centres of India, the quest begins even before the child is born, with waiting lists for admissions in reputed, if not elite schools, the unrelenting pressures of sterling academic performances starting from pre-school classes right till the class 12th boards and then nerve-wracking process of trying to conquer the battlefield of NEET, JEEs and prestigious university seats. The result of this mindless pursuit of academic excellence with little attention towards other aspects of holistic personality development has been the evolution of increasingly impatient population that is aspiring to succeed at all costs or rather any cost. While the upbringing of invariably every child includes a moral dimension – with “we should not lie, cheat or steal” being nearly as popular a phrase in India as the “Happy Birthday to You” song is, in the rest of the world – it is a stark reality that the moral fibre of the society is increasingly being withered because of excessive focus on competition and scant regard to the value-based conduct in daily life.

Corporate sector, especially in India, is rather infamous for high employee stress levels, given the competitive streak which Indian population inherits early in life, as discussed in the opening paragraph. A study was conducted by Oracle & Workplace Intelligence, an HR research firm, in the later half of 2021, to gauge the impact of COVID-19 pandemic upon the corporate workforce. Their results have shown that *corporate professionals across the world are in a state of emotional turmoil, with a sense that their lives and careers are out of their control. The most impacted are employees in India, along with Brazil and the UAE. The study covered more than 14,600 employees, managers, HR leaders and C-level executives across 13 countries, including 1,100 professionals from India. About 91% of the respondents to the survey from India said they were highly impacted in life, compared with the global average of 80%².*

With the pandemic discounted, the percentages may drop significantly but the proportion of stress among Indians, against the global or regional averages, are likely to be comparable. It is felt that a major part of the blame for such high levels of emotional turmoil and stress among the corporate professionals may be apportioned to the degradation of values in the society. An environment that

encounters rampant corruption, unethical trade practices, unusually high workplace politics, plethora of biases (religious, regional, caste, gender and so on) resulting in denial of deserved dues, inequity at workplace and cutthroat competition could be just a few of the factors, besides many more, that are bound to impact human psyche. It is believed that the progressive degradation of values and ethics in society at large has an immense role to play in the elevated stress levels among Indian corporate professionals. There is, therefore, an urgent need to examine the possible relationship between degradation of values and the increasing stress levels in a sector which employs nearly one-fourth, if not more, of the Indian workforce.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to examine the possibility of a dynamic interplay of values and ethics with the rising stress levels among the corporate professionals in India.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study is exploratory in nature, based, besides other inputs, also upon the *personal experiences of the author as a corporate trainee and professional* for nearly four years before switching over to teaching in higher-education sector (management), now spanning *17 years of academic experience*. The mixed professional experience, as well as continuous engagement with the industry even in present profile and the interaction with the environment have inspired the examination of this aspect. *While the initial intent was to carry out the study pertaining to the corporate environment of the Delhi NCR, the author felt it would be prudent to carry out a scan of the few major corporate centres of India, for a better perspective of the issue.*

The study is based on primary data, in view of the absence of any existing study and secondary data on this specific topic – relevance of values and ethics with professional stress. To study, telephonic and personal interviews were conducted with 125 professionals in the middle and senior management positions, in public sector as well as private sector. Details of the sample, summary of responses and the findings are discussed subsequently.

The interviews were structured and keeping in view the nature of inquiry, as also to cater for inhibitions of the respondents, deep probing was avoided. The responses have been provided based on a pledge of anonymity of individuals as well as the identity of their organisations not being declassified. It is the responses which are of value, not the identity of organisations. The interviews have been carried out primarily from middle level management, with only a few inputs from the senior level management, as it is believed that middle level management is the main driving force in the organisations, sandwiched between the functional and the top levels, thereby subjected to larger work stresses.

DATA COLLECTION AND RESULTS

A. The details of the geographical distribution of the sample, from whom data has been collected, are tabulated below: -

<u>Type of Corporate Entity</u>	<u>Delhi NCR</u>	<u>Bengalur</u>	<u>Hyderabad</u>	<u>Pune</u>	<u>Total</u>
Private Sector Industrial	09	05	05	05	24
Public Sector Industrial	03	01	02	01	07
Private Sector Bank	10	02	03	02	17
Public Sector Bank	05	-	-	-	05
Private Sector IT	15	06	08	07	26
Private Sector NBFC	08	02	02	02	14
Private Sector MNC Corporate Office	14	06	08	04	32

TOTAL	64	22	18	21	125
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B. The sample comprised 42.4 percent (53 in number) female respondents and 57.6 per cent (72 in number) male respondents.

C. Questions of Interview. After introduction and customary exchanges about the purpose of the study, specific questions were asked about the topic. The questions that were asked are as follows:-

1. How many years of service have you put in?
2. Do you experience any kind of stress specifically related to work?
3. If yes to 2 above, is the stress due to workload or due to work environment?
4. If due to workload, does it have to do with your aspirations or due to inadequate working hands?
5. If due to working environment in 3, is it because of hard taskmasters or inefficient subordinates?
6. Does the environment also have to do with certain wrong work practices – like partial behaviour of people, denial of promotions to you, favouritism, etc?
7. Have you ever encountered a situation where you have had to do something against your wishes?
8. If yes to 8 above, did it involve any unprincipled conduct / unethical behaviour?
9. Have you ever witnessed any unethical behaviours in your work environment – involving you or your peers / superiors or subordinates?
10. Have you ever – willingly or unwillingly done something which was not ethical?
11. Will you ever do something against your wishes and ethics to save your job or gain promotions?
12. Have you ever been compelled to practice unethical work practices to achieve your periodical targets?
13. Do you feel stressed when you see others indulging in unethical work practices?
14. Do you feel stressed because of general decay in values and ethics in society, even if such an action by someone doesn't directly affect you?
15. Is the decay of values and ethics at workplace the biggest cause of stress for you?

D. An astoundingly high proportion of respondents replied in affirmative to most of the questions. The responses to the questions requiring replies in YES or NO to the stress or values related queries are summarised in the following table:-

Q No	No of YES Responses Received				
	Delhi NCR (64)	Bengaluru (22)	Hyderabad (18)	Pune (21)	Total (125)
2	64	19	15	18	116
3*	59	17	15	17	108
6	57	14	13	15	99
7	60	17	16	19	112
8	57	14	13	15	99
9	57	14	13	15	99
10	64	22	18	21	125
11	57	14	13	15	99
12	62	20	16	18	116
13	57	14	13	15	99
14	64	22	18	21	125

15	57	14	13	15	99
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* **Environment as answer is taken as YES for data collation in case of Question 3.**

E. The female respondents were also asked about sexual misdemeanour encountered at workplace against them. Only approximately 17 percent indicated any direct attempts which were also not repetitive in nature, barring an odd exception. However, they affirmed that the issue has not caused any prolonged stress for them, although for a few days and in few instances for a few weeks, that they would have felt stressed because of that incident.

F. Overall summary of the data reveals the following: -

<u>Attribute</u>	<u>Percentage of Overall Sample</u>				
	<u>Delhi NCR</u>	<u>Bengaluru</u>	<u>Hyderabad</u>	<u>Pune</u>	<u>Overall</u>
Stress at Workplace	100%	86.4%	83.3%	85.7%	92.8%
Stress due to Work Environment	92.2%	77.3%	83.3%	80.9%	86.4%
Affected by stress in society in general	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Stress as biggest contributor to stress at work place	89.1%	63.6%	72.2%	71.4%	79.2%

G. It is not surprising that an astounding 100 per cent of the sample feels stressed, to whatever extent, by the decaying values in the society. However, when the situation translates to the work environment, there is a reduced percentage, 79.2 per cent, which feels stressed by the unethical work culture. Probably, it is because of readiness of certain sections to mould into the environment, for the sake of acceptability amongst a peer group, for job security and lack of other avenues of employment or possibly even for furthering own career prospects.

INTERPRETATION

From the results of the small survey presented above, the presence of exceedingly high levels of stress among Indian corporate professionals are corroborated. According to a December 2020 report of The Hindu Business Line, 70% of the Indian professionals are stressed, against an Asia-Pacific average of 60%.³ In fact, an earlier study of 2018, by Shaheed Bhagat Singh College of Delhi University found work related stress to be affecting approximately 80% of its sample⁴.

It is, therefore, apparent that while the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the lives and may have altered the nature of stress among workers due to the online / work-from-home regimes, it has not had much effect on the proportion of people impacted. *The hitherto fore less researched aspect of impact of values and ethical conduct on workplace stress has been the focal point of this study and the data clearly establishes its profound contribution to the stress.* In this light, it is felt necessary to examine the importance of values and morally upright conduct in our lives.

“Values aren't buses... They're not supposed to get you anywhere. They're supposed to define who you are.”

— Jennifer Crusie⁵

MORALS, VALUES AND ETHICS IN INDIAN CORPORATE SECTOR – A REALITY CHECK

Morals, Values and Ethics. Character is the most important asset for a man. Nothing describes the importance of character better than the above quote by famous author Jennifer Crusie (real name Jennifer Smith), who has authored more than 20 novels. Before we analyse the importance of these virtues for corporate professionals, it would be prudent to understand what morals, values and ethics actually mean. These words are often used as synonyms for each other. Probably, the dictionary meanings of each of these will amplify the difference and significance of these words. The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines these words as follows (bolds / italics have been added by the author for emphasis on key aspects):-

- 1) **Moral**⁶. Relating to the standards of good or bad behaviour, fairness, honesty, etc, *which each person believes in*, rather than to laws. Behaving in ways *considered by most people* to be correct and honest. *Standards for good or bad character and behaviour.*
- 2) **Values**⁷. The *beliefs* people have, *about what is right or wrong* and what is most *important* in life, that *control their behaviour.*
- 3) **Ethic**⁸. A *system of accepted beliefs*, which *controls behaviour*, especially such a system based on morals. The study of what is morally right and what is not.

It is evident from the aforesaid dictionary meanings, that while morals and values are largely personal traits of an individual, ethics are more related to group, society or organisational aspects. Ethics enable an action to be considered in a perspective, within the framework of an organisation or a society, and then arrive at a conclusion of that action being good or bad. For instance, in certain societies polygamy is a taboo while in another society it is an accepted norm. This is based on the ethics of those respective societies.

Corporate sector is largely concerned with delivery of value through its offerings (products or services) and is totally based on human elements. The importance of values and ethical conducts is, therefore, paramount. Moreover, a substantial proportion of our working population is being continuously absorbed into the corporate sector in various roles. As per the data with the World Bank, 25.12% of Indian workforce is employed in the industrial sector⁹ while 32.28% is employed with the services sector¹⁰, as of the year 2019. The statistics for current employment patterns are likely to be comparable.

To quote from the Economic Survey of India 2020-21, "*Industry-wise estimates on workforce shows that the largest, about 21.5 crore persons are employed in 'Agriculture', which is still the largest employer with 42.5 per cent of workforce. Next important industry is 'other services' where about 6.4 crore persons (13.8 per cent) were engaged. 'Manufacturing' and 'Trade, hotel & restaurants' each employed about 5.9 crore persons with the share of nearly 12.1 per cent and 12.6 per cent respectively, while 'Construction' sector employed about 5.7 crore persons in 2018-19 with share of 12.1 per cent*"¹¹. Given these employment statistics, it would not be incorrect to assume that at least 25% of the workforce of India would be employed in the organised corporate sector, comprising industrial as well as the services sector (private as well as public sector).

Scenario in the Corporate Sector. More and more of the day's generation aspires to populate the corporate sector with hopes of a dream future and excellent monetary remuneration, accompanied with additional perks. A thriving private education industry provides further boost to these high hopes of the youth, with innumerable engineering, medical and management institutes dotting the national landscape. A student once entering these institutes surrenders himself to these institutes with the belief that he / she will be launched into a galactic journey from these portals. The reality, however is rather distinct from their dreams.

Over the recent few years, especially the last three decades, there have been numerous reasons cited for the rapid decline in moral standards and ethics in the Indian society as a whole. Different observers have analysed the causes for this decline in diverse manners.

While some have attributed it to being a fall-out of westernization of Indian culture, others have pinned the blame on immoral conduct of political leadership while some others have done so upon the rampant corruption among government servants and service providing agencies, particularly to the over-ambitious and overtly career conscious leadership in public and private sector enterprises. All of these may, however, not be the most comprehensive and fair assessments of the problem.

Among a few of the important questions that need answering are, firstly, “*Have the morals and values undergone a degradation in the Indian corporate sector?*” Secondly, “*If yes, who or what is responsible?*”

The **answer to the first question** is an obvious and resounding “**Yes**”. The morals, values and ethics have indeed taken a beating in the last few decades. The concept of ‘Service Before Self’ and ‘Self-regulated Honour Code’, which used to be the hallmark of a traditional society have been reduced to mere words of insignificance. How else could one explain the several accounts reported over the years, of reputed corporate houses indulging in immoral actions of financial misappropriations of gargantuan proportions, indulgence in misconduct of every possible nature, political patronages, toxic work culture, sexual misconducts of employees and several other misdeeds. Therefore, the **answer to second question** is that **everyone who commits as well as those who ignore / overlook / condone such actions** being carried out, is responsible for it. While some are directly guilty of such behaviour, the balance of us is guilty of condoning the same.

Possible Causes for Degradation of Values. While nothing in this world can justify immoral and unethical behaviour, there seem to be some factors which may have a bearing upon such behaviour. An observing mind, over the past twenty years, has noted the major ones enumerated as follows:-

- 1) **Lack of Emphasis on Morals and Ethics in Training and Early Stages of Life.** There is a definite lack of training in ethical behaviour in the formative stages in the country. Training in values and ethics is generally limited to some non-graded value education books. Unless these values and ethics are ingrained into the system right from the beginning, their importance will never be fully realised and generations after generations will see rapid decline in values-based living.
- 2) **Result Oriented Approach.** Today’s corporate sector has got overtly influenced by the target or result oriented approach. The focus is primarily on achieving ‘*desired targets of profitability*’ at all costs, with values-based conduct relegated to obscurity. This ‘results oriented approach’ is severely detrimental to the development of morality based ethical actions and a ‘humane’ approach disregarding the fact that the end does not always justify the means.
- 3) **Inadequate Avenues for Personal Aspirations.** Every man dreams and aspires to be an achiever. With stiff competition in corporate jobs, this results in discontentment and resentment, prompting most of the professionals to resort to unethical practices, in pursuance of their aspirations right from the early days, by creating and promoting affiliations on regional or religious grounds, or even resorting to immoral and unethical measures for career progression through manipulation, enticements, coercion, networking in inappropriate ways, etc.
- 4) **Financial Insecurity.** With lack of job security and non-pensionable profiles, some individuals tend to grapple for every possible opportunity to secure any additional flow of money and may resort to unethical means in a bid to achieve competing lifestyles with their friends / counterparts.
- 5) **Personal Inadequacies.** There are certain individuals who have flaws and weaknesses in their character. It is possible that despite the stringent selection process, they have been able to make it through and are now a part of the system. To propel their careers forward, despite the lack of capabilities, they will resort to any possible ways, irrespective of their moral or ethical aspects.
- 6) **Inadequate Disposal of Identified Cases of Unethical Conduct.** Not all cases of immoral or unethical behaviour in the corporate system have been satisfactorily disposed. Usually, cases go unreported or are eventually covered up with no visible closure. Unless the environment realizes that any violations of the moral code, irrespective of the magnitude of such violations, will attract the maximum punitive action, it is unlikely that people with such inclinations will be deterred from indulging into such behaviour.
- 7) **Societal Influence.** While this reason may initially appear to be as firing the cannon from someone else’s shoulder, the influence of the overall societal environment cannot be ignored. With the details of rampant corruption in the country, there are many people in the corporate ladder who feel they are being deprived of this share. At times they feel furious because it is from the taxes,

that they have paid that some cronies are enjoying a lavish life. This resentment and the feeling of deprivation also may lead some people down a path of unethical lifestyle in a seemingly vengeful approach, often glorified by our tinsel town, in the form of the angry-young anti-heroes.

CONCLUSION

The study has been able to find significant evidence of corporate professionals in India facing work-related stress due to a perceptible decay in the values and ethics at workplace. This dimension has till now been less explored and the focus of majority of studies has been towards stress arising from the life-style and work-load in corporate sector. An increasingly materialistic approach to life, coupled with fierce competition in almost every sphere of life and human tendency towards 'success at every or any cost' is taking its toll on the human capital of this country.

Till now it has been proclaimed by most of the behavioural scientists that human resource is the only resource which appreciates with time, while every other resource depreciates. If the degradation of values in our society is left unaddressed, it is certain that the strong edifice will be irretrievably weakened. Therefore, there is a strong case for further and deeper research to explore this dimension of relationship between human values and stress among the various cross-sections of the society.

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