

## The notion of change and changelessness<sup>1</sup>

*B Mahadevan<sup>2</sup>*

Changes happen in one's personal, professional and social lives all the time. Yet everyone avoids facing this reality and gets affected by it, sometimes badly. At a personal level, for a vast majority of us, change has a very adverse effect and we go through an unpleasant situation for a period of time. In some extreme cases, the effect is felt for a very long period. While this is a universal rule, what differs is only the degree to which the changes affect us. Consider several things that happen to us as individuals where changes can affect us often adversely. For example, losing a job or denial of a promotion is an event that brings changes in our life and affects us to an extent. The passing away of elders and parents brings unpleasant experiences to us on account of the changed reality. Youngsters sometimes deny newer opportunities for working because the place is very unfamiliar to them. They feel that it is a cultural shock and too much of change that they cannot bear. Marriage is a big change in every individual's life as it puts them into new ways of carrying out the day-to-day life.

While this is the situation at the individual level, the issues are far more serious and challenging in an organization. Changes introduced in the manner an activity is done is resisted with great might. If an organization introduced a computer based software and new forms and procedures the employees will resist it by striking work. While part of the reasons for such a resistance is to bargain better pay and working conditions, a vast majority oppose because of the fear of the unknown. Therefore, managers in organizations constantly worry about the adverse fallout of the changes that they want to introduce and plan for change management programs by experts and consultants. In a nutshell, change management is all about getting equipped with facing the changes as they unfold.

### The dynamics of change

There is one dynamics of change that we often tend to ignore and fail to notice. Notwithstanding whether we liked the change in the beginning or not, we get used to it and start to behave normally after sometime. A person living in Bangalore could talk about the impossibility of living in a city like Chennai on account of too much heat and sweat. However, if the same person reaches a situation of making a living by working in Chennai all the resistance to change will melt after sometime. A person grieving profusely the loss of his beloved spouse or mother does not end up spending his/her entire life grieving only. After sometime he/she returns back to near normalcy and continues with his/her daily chores. There is a subtle message in this behavioural pattern exhibited by individuals. The "self" has

---

<sup>1</sup> **Mahadevan, B.** (2012). "The notion of change and changelessness", *Sadguru's Blessings*, Vol. 9 (10), June, 2012, pp 17 – 18.

<sup>2</sup> *B Mahadevan is a Professor at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.*

a tendency to return to a natural state even after these disturbances. Therefore, all that a change management could do is to facilitate this process of returning to this natural state with less stress.

This raises some questions: Why is it that some people are unable to adjust to the changes while others could? What is this natural state and what happens if one understands this aspect of life? Another question that bothers us is whether change is such a terrible thing that it must uniformly bring a negative feeling out of many of us? Lord Krishna helps us understand these aspects by pointing to the notion of changelessness.

### **The notion of changelessness**

According to Lord Krishna, the problem stems from one's inability to develop a correct understanding of "the reality" behind things, events and outcomes. Change by its very definition is something that *is there* only for a temporary period of time and *is not there* (*asat*) afterwards. What *is there permanently* is called *sat*. Lord Krishna reminds Arjuna that those considered as *asat* cannot have any worthwhile attribute or level of existence (*bhāvaḥ*). Similarly, by a reverse logic those without any attributes of existence (*abhāvaḥ*) cannot be identified in any manner with *sat*. He proclaims that a person who has developed such an understanding has indeed mastered the art of knowing the reality (the truth behind events and outcomes) in life (*tatva darṣi*).

नासतो विद्यते भावः नाभावो विद्यते सतः ।

उभयोरपि दृष्टोऽन्तः त्वनयोस्तत्त्वदर्शिभिः ॥ 2.16

*nāsato vidyate bhāvaḥ nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ*  
*ubhayorapi dr̥ṣṭo'ntaḥ tvanayos-tatva-darśibhiḥ*

The important implication of this *śloka* is the need to understand the change and changeless aspects of everything that happens in our life. Our inability to understand the changelessness is the root cause of all the problems pertaining to changes that we face. Another important point to note is that our inner self always has a natural tendency to gravitate towards the changeless aspects of life (*sat*). Somewhere in the deepest part of our heart, we know that parents, siblings, spouse and well-wishers are not permanent aspects of our life. Therefore, after sometime the reality will sink in. A person who has been constantly sobering and profusely crying over the dead body of the beloved will be in absolute bliss when he/she becomes very tired and slip into deep sleep, by the side of the dead body. Therefore, to judge events in life and take appropriate positions in life we need to have an unambiguous reference frame of the changelessness. People who have achieved this skill according to Lord Krishna are *tatva darśis*.

## **Search for the changelessness in everything**

In simple terms, it suggests that change management boils down to identifying ourselves with changelessness in aspects of life in which we see changes happening. First of all, all physical aspects in life are of changing nature only. The human body changes all its cells in a matter of few hours, people outgrow and look different after several years and eventually drop the physical body one day. Therefore, giving undue importance to these changing (physical) aspects of life can be a source for grief when changes affect. With some more reflection on this idea, one can further arrive at a conclusion that a host of events that affect us (through a change process) are all temporary only. Denial of promotion, for example, is an event whose effect ought to be temporary. After a while the feeling will be pushed to the background. If this realization was there even at the time of occurrence of the event, we might have been in a better position to face the reality and get back to normalcy very fast. Therefore, whenever we face an unpleasant situation arising out of changes happening around us, it is worthwhile to ask what is the changeless aspect through which I perceive the change? Does that get affected anyway?

Nobody can shield themselves from the onslaught of changes, but can take steps to face it better as it unfolds. It is time we take control of our self when events unfold in life rather than leaving it to astrologers and gemologists. Contemplating on the notion of change and changelessness and developing a superior sense of discrimination between what is real and what is unreal is the divine prescription from Lord Krishna.