

Impact Of Vartan Bhanji (VB) On Promotion Practices In Pakistan: Exploring The Lived Experiences

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the role of Vartan Bhanji on the promotion process of employees in the context of Pakistan. Based on qualitative study, our analysis shows that Vartan Bhanji being the ingrained value of Pakistani society influences the behaviour, priorities and decision process of employees in the contemporary organizations. This study reduces the knowledge-gap for Pakistan by presenting an emic perspective, a country underrepresented in the international HRM discourse; and illustrates the role of traditional social networks in modern organizations.

Keywords: ‘Vartan Bhanji’, ‘Pakki Vartan’ (strong relation) and ‘Kachi Vartan’ (weak relation), selection process, contextualizing.

Introduction

Vartan Bhanji is a framework of social organization and an institutionalized custom of gift/service exchange (Cialdini, 2001). This tradition of exchange is primarily maintained among relatives (familial network, ‘Bradri’), but it also applies to non-relatives in order to socially integrate them into the familial network. VB shapes the meaning and management of social networks in Pakistan, relying on ‘Neotta’ or ‘Neondra’ (a material or immaterial favor to relatives and friends), reciprocity, and ‘Mang’ (a request for help which must be satisfied). The people maintaining VB consisted of two relations; close/core relation called ‘Pakki Vartan’ and weak/peripheral relation ‘Kachi Vartan’. The members of various layers of VB

are differently treated and supported (Eglar, 1960).

The members of ‘Pakki Vartan’ are supported without considering rules and regulation whereas rules are observed in case of ‘Kachi Vartan’ (Alavi, 1978). Khilji (2003) rightly points out, ‘This family/social allegiance is binding and generally takes precedence over rules ... [M]embers of a group feel obliged to look after each other’ (pp. 115-116). This in a way influences the process of promotion of an individual in an organization. ‘Say, for example, there are two employees exactly at par. But one of them has either a better relationship with the manager or knows someone in the top management. Then we know who will be promoted, don’t we!’ This shows that in spite of

the strong influence of industrialization and urbanization, Vartan Bhanji is still important in the work world. Two incidents reported in the mainstream media illustrate this importance: Mr. Tauqir Sadiq was appointed as Chairman OGRA (Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority) despite his unsuitability (to work on such a sensitive position) as he maintained close relationship with the former PPP government (The Nation, 2013; Khan, 2012); Azim-ul-Haq Minhas promoted from grade 18 to 21 within a record period time of 3 years and then his appoint as executive director at World Bank (Dawn, 2013); and Mr. Rao Shakeel Ahmed's appointment as Director General Hajj in Jeddah while leaving the two other candidates Nayyar Mehmood and Sajjad Haider especially when NAB Lahore requested the establishment division to omit Shakeel's name as various references had been filed against him (Gishkori, 2011). These incidents show a great relevance of close reciprocal relationships based on the ingrained wisdom of VB. It is interesting to share that the characteristics and functions (it used to have in rural context) have changed due to the strong influence of industrialization, migration and urbanization (Chaudhry 1999). For example, friends and colleagues have taken the place of relatives and members from the same Braderi (Brotherhood).

Despite the influential role of VB there is no substantial research focusing on its impact on the process of promotion (intra-organizational) in Pakistan. Our paper addresses this gap. Based on in-depth interviews conducted from employees from Pakistani corporations, we analyze the role of Vartan Bhanji in the organizations in Pakistan. This context includes first Pakistani employees socialized under VB assumptions, in particular ('Pakki Vartan') close relation, (Katch Vartan) weak, in-group loyalty, reciprocity, and Mang; and second the local

firms themselves which have integrated VB into their organizational culture.

Research Methods

Qualitative research methodology was employed and field data was collected from two organizations. The in-depth interviews and case study methods were used to gather lived experiences of the employees. Ten in-depth interviews and five (5) case studies, personal as well as situational, were conducted to gather a more in-depth in sight of the issue at hand. Situational case studies (in which a situation was studied as a case) helped to understand an issue with the help of changing situational contexts (Pan and Tan, 2011).

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data in accordance with the method proposed by Leedy and Ormrod (2001) and Mayring (2007). At the first level, the data was synthesized by forming matrices to develop themes from the document analysis and in-depth interviews as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Later they were content analyzed in a consistent manner. On the basis of this process, the data was interpreted and results were compiled. For the validity of the results, every researcher individually themes which was later compared and discussed to develop a consensus.

Field Data and Analysis

It has been found that employees in the organization create informal relationships with each and are aware of the cultural notion of VB. They openly talk about it and share their created relationships with each other and with the seniors and juniors (on the basis of similarities due to caste, area, neighborhood, family relations etc) in the organization and maintain the status of an in-group member (through extending services, loyalty and indebtedness).

The respondents shared that developing and maintaining relations is a demanding phenomenon (giving extra time, energies, performance etc.) but it is essential for survival in the organization. The respondents also talk about the levels of relationship like close and weak; and share their insight about the type of support and favour reciprocally exchanged in line with the nature of relations. One of the respondents shared that a person from close relations (with Pakki Vartan) got the highest support as compared to the employee from Katchi Vartan. Consistently, the employees support each other in order to strengthen their relation and group to in turn get reciprocal support from it. Actually, 'the powerful figures within the organization consciously guard their own position by strengthening the position of their followers' (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014, p.1896).

The following case can help to have an in-depth understanding of the process through which an employee maintaining strong relations (Pakki Vartan) managed to get fast track promotion.

Case I

Mr ABC, 35, assistant professor, working as a special assistant to dean of Humanities and Art in a public sector university of Pakistan. He establishes a close relationship with the dean based on the phenomenon of patronage. He joined the university as an MPhil student. He was from a small town of Punjab. During his MPhil studies he won the trust of one of his teachers and developed a close relationship with him. He helped the teachers in all the areas of class management and in this way got acknowledged in the department. After the completion of his degree, he secured the position of TRA in the department. Besides, he got admission in a PhD programme. Now he went the extra mile to take care of the assignments of the chair of his department and developed a

close relationship with him. The chair was working closely with the dean of faculty on various research projects and in this way he (ABC) indirectly became the part of that high profile social circle where he further facilitated his patrons with extraordinary services in the shape of a resource person of the department who provided information about all the events and people in the department -a proxy of the chair and the dean in the department.

Mr. ABC secured the position of assistant director of the campus when his chair/boss became the director. This position was created for him as the director felt unable to work without him, so on his request the position was created and he was placed on that seat...no competition, no interview and promoted to a sensitive position despite the availability of seasoned professionals. Interestingly, he (Mr. ABC) was a Teaching Research Assistant but as an assistant director dealt with professors and other senior officials. Consistently, he got inner view and information regarding the future openings and decisions; he was considered indispensable by his seniors. When positions of assistant professors were announced in the university, he was the strongest candidate who became assistant professor despite the fact that his PhD was still in progress but his mentors satisfied the members of the selection board and ensured completion of all the official requirements during the probation period.

When his mentor was promoted as professor and assigned the responsibility of the dean's office, he supported the new dean informally in his assignment and provided him with all the required help to run that office effectively. The dean, in the meanwhile, had successfully created a position of assistant dean and Mr. ABC was transferred from the department to the dean office. He sat in the dean's office and performed all the activities of the dean office. In fact, he

was a practicing dean and his boss was a symbolic dean.

This story reveals how an employee with a modest background goes the extra mile to serve and exhibit loyalty in order to win the confidence of a powerful figure for developing (Pakki Vartan) patron-client relationships and got the fast track promotion while many capable employees who couldn't maintain close relationship remain static on their positions.

However, in the case of a normal relationship with the work team, immediate boss and seniors performance-based criteria play an important role, too. They constitute a prerequisite for being eligible for promotion. To be sure, promotion practices in the company do differ from organizations working in line with traditional culture models where promotion is based solely on personal affiliation (Hofstede 2003).

Case 2

Mr DEF, 38 years, recently joined the department as a director. Mr. DEF did his master's degree in International Relations at a reputed university of Islamabad. He started his career with the organization in 2010 and was working as assistant director in the sales department. In 2013, he was promoted to deputy director and transferred to the marketing department. Although the departments deal with completely different aspects of management and there was little overlap between the two jobs, Mr DEF asked for a promotion to senior management through his mentors in the senior management team due to the higher rank of the job in the purchase department. Based on his appraisals, Mr DEF was viewed as a good worker and enthusiastic student who continued to improve his qualifications after graduation. In accordance with the rules and regulations of the HR policy, he received good evaluations when his case was presented to the promotion

committee after three years. Mr DEF went to his mentor, the senior manager at the audit department (a very strong member of the promotion committee) and asked him for help since his case met all the prerequisites for promotion. His mentor had worked closely with Mr DEF when Mr DEF was the deputy of his ex-boss XYZ who supported Mr DEF's case in the promotion committee. Finally, based on his good performance, improved qualifications and personal penetration, Mr DEF secured promotion to a higher post in the audit department.

Conclusion and Implication

Analysis of the case revealed sensitivity of promotion practices, the organizations formulate clear rules and regulations based on the principles of equality and transparency as laid down in the HR policies. However, most of the interview respondents point out that social relationships with the senior still strongly influence promotion practices. Those who have reciprocal relations due to regional, ethnic and caste links receive preferential treatment in the promotion procedures.

The analysis of field data has also pointed out the prevalence of two levels of relationship like close and weak and highlighted different levels of support in the promotion process. Like in case 1 as the person was from close relations (with Pakki Vartan) so rules are interpreted and adjusted to accommodate the employee by all means whereas in case 2 where the employee did have relationships but the level of mutual obligation was not very strong (Katchi Vartan). Consistently support is provided while adhering to the basic parameters of policy and support to employees is extended when he fulfills the new position requirements.

Finally, the field data has also revealed the value of positive relationships with the immediate supervisor and other seniors in management to secure privileges in the various processes directly and indirectly related to promotion and compensation. This is particularly true for individuals who are able to connect to the members of the promotion committee. However, performance-based criteria play an important role in case the relations are not very strong/ Katchi Vartan, so they constitute a prerequisite for being eligible for promotion. To be sure, promotion practices in the company do differ for employees having different relations (Saher & Mayrhofer) as organizations are working in line with traditional culture models where promotion is based solely on personal affiliation (Hofstede 2003). Hence, the ingrained wisdom of developing personnel based on VB and its various levels still play a role in contemporary organizations. Therefore, we see an interplay of criteria based on performance and on the VB social networks, which further connects the employees strategically with the management and with one another. Again, this leads to a 'blended situation' and is an example for the continuing importance of local norms and traditions even in the light of standard processes which contribute to organizational success in transitional economies (Davila and Elvira 2005; Jackson, Amaeshi and Yavuz 2008; Saini and Budhwar 2008, 2004).

Despite the knowledge contribution, this research has limitations. We could not extend our study to foreign organizations; however, it was beyond the framework of this research. Nonetheless, contemporary research results have revealed that practices of foreign companies extend more similarities with local organizations rather than organizations of home countries (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014; Khilji, 2003). Further research can explore if and how these two types of Vartans/ relations exist and

influence the promotion practices in multinational companies working in Pakistan. Finally, this paper can be helpful in extending rare insight to national as well as international managers to comprehend secrets (tacit knowledge) regarding promotion practices in Pakistan.

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