

## **Strategizing as Embodied and Materialized: Investigations into Shifts in Steel Distribution Practices in Post Liberalization India**

### **Abstract**

As a field of academic research, Strategic Management (SM) is a young field which has established itself as the 'master discourse' of the corporate world in a relatively short time. Its key pillars have been the 'content' and 'process' studies which concern themselves with the fate of organizations, aiding general managers in their pursuit for superior performance. Indeed, 'performance' is the most frequently used keyword in this field and is seen as the definition of strategy itself.

With SM focusing on performance of organizations as wholes, the actual activities and labour of actors who are involved in strategy related work gets marginalized. Strategy as Practice (SAP) is a recent sub-stream of strategic management which is more interested in the practical performance of actors who engage with the organizations, as also in the practice of the profession of strategy itself and its effects on the larger society. It does so by investigating the micro of actor's daily doings in relation to strategizing and how their labour impacts strategic outcomes. Not only does SAP go beyond the top management / middle management focus of traditional SM studies, it also recognizes those outside the confines of the organizational boundary, countering the relative dehumanization that traditional studies have spawned by ignoring the range of actors and their daily activities. This interest in daily performances is but a part of the larger 'practice turn' in social sciences which spans various interests tied in their common endeavour to overcome the dualism between 'societism' and 'individualism', with practice theorists paying equal attention to the workings of the individual as to the force of the social.

The context of the thesis is the vast changes that took place on account of the liberalization of the Indian economy. I investigate the particular case of shifts in distribution practices in the steel industry, and find that far from being obvious or following an objective techno-economic rationality, the shifts and their strategic implications can be understood only through the practices of individuals who use micro resources and practical wisdom to go about their lives in face of larger forces, of which they themselves are an inherent constituting part.

A key line of enquiry in practice studies is regarding the origin of practices themselves. A large core sees daily activities arising not from conscious and deliberate planning but from embodied dispositions that are inscribed and internalized forms of external social reality. Beyond this core of practices emanating from embodied dispositions lies the significant minority of 'post-humanists' of science and technology studies who see activities also arising from non-humans like machines and artefacts. In the thesis, I investigate two particular strands of managerial work, one related to embodied dispositions and the other to external material resources, and thereby participate in the discourse which conceives practices as 'embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding'.

In one strand of investigation delved into the varying dispositions, capital endowments and practices of two classes of managers in a steel manufacturing organization and their equally contrasting classes of distribution allies outside the organization. I explore the differences of the various classes of agents through their embodied dispositions derived from their families, schools and largely early age experiences and influences. These embodied and natural differences dispose the actors towards particular and distinct ways of working and acting. Transported into the field of steel distribution, these varied dispositions clash for prominence and primacy. I show how the liberalization of the Indian economy provided the opportunity of one set of actors and their allies (synonymous with a particular disposition) to overcome another set of previously dominant actors (synonymous with a vastly different disposition), in the process affecting 'strategic renewal' for the organization. This investigation revealed the micro structure of a renewal process and showed it to be having a 'personal' and 'bodily' character, derived from deeply held dispositions and related laborious work of actors. I show that strategy-making happened not only at the 'corporate level' and 'business level' but also at the 'body level' of individual actors. Furthermore, I show how various external actors, like strategy consultants and business allies, had significant role in determining the direction and content of strategic renewal of the organization under study, thus arguing for higher sensitivity towards actors beyond organizational boundaries.

In contrast to the deeply personal nature of embodied dispositions that explain strategic renewal in the first strand of investigation, another strand of investigation looks at the influence of 'strategy

tools', introduced in the discourse and practice of SM through consultants and curriculum of business schools. I follow a 2\*2 matrix in its birth and subsequent evolution in a steel distribution network and find that its presence and usage by various actors has performative effects, creating a particular kind of steel retailer called the 'exclusive' steel retailer. Again, I show how these performative effects of the tool impinge upon the existing equations in the field of steel distribution, and account for advantages that accrue to certain individuals and organizations. Through this study I show that strategy tools and theories have strong societal effects and thus seek greater space for tools and frameworks in making sense of the strategy profession.

My thesis shows the shift in distribution practices to be a strategic act, with actors involved in a series of contests, conflicts and collaborations leading to consequences for the individual as well as the associated organizations and larger society. By showing the doing of strategy as having embodied and materialized dimensions, my thesis shows that the practices of daily coping of various actors, revealed in human activity and shaped by the situations they find themselves in, constitute the immanent strategy that comes to bear in organizations.