
Down the Memory Lane: *Vikalpa* Over 25 Years

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I was elated when Professor Dixit reminded me that *Vikalpa* has entered the silver jubilee year. As the first Managing Editor of *Vikalpa*, I fondly remember the early successes and failures that have left impressions on my memory.

I was put in charge of *Vikalpa* (of course that was not the only assignment I had at that time) as a stop-gap arrangement. Professor K R S Murthy was selected, when he was still at Harvard completing his DBA, to look after *Vikalpa*. I was eagerly looking forward to his joining the Institute. However, when he came, he was drafted to teach in the Business Policy (BP) area courses. Our faculty strength in the BP area had depleted to only two, he and me, at one time. He indicated that he could not look after both teaching and *Vikalpa*. I had, therefore, no choice but to settle down for a long inning with *Vikalpa*.

Before launching *Vikalpa*, the faculty meetings were consumed by endless debates on what its content and audience should be. Should it aim at practitioners and be somewhat akin to *Harvard Business Review*? Should it focus on research, tools, techniques, and models?

The debate was never settled one way or the other. When we started, we realized the ground reality. Who the Editor was and the articles received decided the focus issue after issue. We did not get sufficient number of quality articles so that we could create a focus. Moreover, the Editors could mobilize articles only from professionals who were known in their subject. Each Editor brought his own focus to the fore, irrespective of the debate or the decision.

In this din of controversy, I had my doubts. I had seen many journals starting with a fanfare and closing down with a whimper. Some business schools were having trouble with their journals. During those days, we were struggling with our *Alumnus*.

Every institute starts a journal as a matter of prestige. Often, the journal ends up as an outlet for reject articles. Would *Vikalpa* repeat the history? That was my suspicion. However, at the same time, there was some confidence that this would not be so. Being young at that time, there was unwarranted confidence that we could do better than others.

There was another problem. How do we handle the politics of the internal authors? Some were very cooperative when the reviewers or I suggested any Editorial changes. Some were "touch me not" flowers. With some, heavens would fall if an article had to be drastically edited or turned down; all the politics of the place would come into play. Unfortunately for me, the timing of such incidents, though they were few, was perfect. Professor Udai Pareek, the first Editor, would be away on some external assignment, and I would be left handling the hot potato. A couple of times, I went to Professor Ravi Matthai, who was on the first Editorial Board. However, his inimitable and enigmatic smile told me, "You better learn to handle this if you want to grow up."

Another problem area was advertising. Ravi came up with an outlandish idea. He was good at conjuring up such ideas; at the same time, he grasped the ground realities soon. I admired and respected him for that. He suggested that we should, instead of soliciting regular product advertisements, ask organizations to sponsor advertisements that we would design through NID. These advertisements should be thought-provoking, philosophical, and conceptual about management, social values, and national culture and ethos. Simply put, I did not understand the idea. I did not have a clue what those advertisements would look like. Both Ravi and Udai tried to get some sponsors. I chipped in with my two-penny effort. Soon I found that there were no takers to sponsor such advertisements. Then I talked to Ravi and was able to convince him that the idea was very difficult to carry out, at least for the first few issues. He readily agreed with me. We then decided to go in for corporate advertisements rather than product advertisements. Mind you, in the 1970s, even the concept of corporate advertisements was not much heard of.

Then I went through the classic routine of mailing to all and sundry for subscriptions. The result was not very encouraging. We got near-about 500 subscriptions. Well, anyway, I felt that was the beginning, and I hoped I would do better with some more effort.

We went through the usual rigmarole and discussions, doing and redoing the design of the journal. NID helped us with the design. My eyes were set on the quality of American journals. However, given the

quality of paper and printing facilities available in Ahmedabad, I was apprehensive of the outcome. I spent days and nights editing and proof-reading the first issue to make sure that no glaring errors occurred.

When the first issue came and was distributed to the faculty, I kept my fingers crossed and dreaded all kinds of criticism. But then I was also philosophical, "well, I've done my best, given the infrastructure available." The next morning I had a big surprise. Professor C K Prahalad, my neighbour in Wing 1, came into my room. He very boisterously congratulated me for the first issue and said that the printing, design, and everything was of a very high order and was similar to that of any international journal. He said he had read the journal from cover to cover the night before and he could not find anything wrong. That made the day for me. Then doubts crept into my mind. Can I do it issue after issue?

Thanks to my friends in the media, the first issue was widely reviewed in the press. I started getting calls from advertising agencies for reprints of Professor A K Jain's article on media planning. Suddenly I discovered that I had hit a gold mine. I seized the opportunity. I asked whoever wanted a reprint of that article to give me one year's subscription. Soon I could pile up some more subscriptions. I then started dreaming of getting at least one such article in every issue. If that happened, I was sure that we would be on the road to success. However, the dream remained a dream.

To increase the subscription and visibility, Udai suggested we start an exchange programme with other educational institutions. We did this with moderate success. The benefit went to the library; they could stop subscriptions to some journals and save money. *Vikalpa* got a few more numbers to show in subscription but had to bear the printing and mailing costs.

Boosting the circulation was really a tough task. I tried, of course, without much success, to persuade some distributors to take up the task.

The economics of publishing *Vikalpa* was not sound. Printing costs were totally subsidized. Other costs were accounted in some other activities, like publications or the course of written analysis and communication (WAC). As the issues started coming out, the number of articles and contributors started flattening out.

Subscription, economics, and getting quality articles continued to be my worries, though I am grateful that nobody held me up for that.

Then an idea struck me. In those days, I was

equally involved in the Management Development Programmes (MDPs) of the institute. I could convince the MDP committee to make every programme participant a subscriber to *Vikalpa* for one year, charge the amount in the programme fee, and pass that amount to *Vikalpa*. My suggestion was accepted. Suddenly our subscription number became respectable and my economics became comfortable to the extent that we could pay most of the printing charges, if not all. Some thought it was a brilliant stroke of mine. However, I wondered then and I still wonder whether it was a great idea. At best, it was a temporary measure. The real subscription and repeat orders — the real indicators of the worth of *Vikalpa* — continued to be low.

By this stage, I slowly withdrew from *Vikalpa*. More of my time was taken up in teaching.

Later, at one stage, it was suggested that we should entrust the printing and distribution of *Vikalpa* to a publisher. The idea was more or less accepted. Still I was asked to comment on the publisher's proposal. I was uncomfortable with the proposal. All that the publisher offered to do was to print the journal on our behalf and distribute it to whatever subscribers we found. In return, he would bill us for the total printing cost through whatever copies we would take for our distribution to the MDPs and public relations purpose. Canvassing for articles, editing, and promotion was to be done by the institute. That is what I broadly remember now of the proposal; I do not now remember the details and nuances of the proposal. Moreover, the overall economics did not sound right to me. The publisher would benefit to the extent of adding to his list of publications and reputation and the institute would be assured of quality printing. Further, it appeared that we were going to subcontract one of our main businesses — dissemination of knowledge. In the end, whether it was because of my note or something else, the idea was dropped, and the Institute continued to treat it as an institutional activity.

At some stage, Professor Murthy was asked to take up the Editorship of *Vikalpa*. By then the BP area had gained sufficient number of faculty, and Professor Murthy could spend his time exclusively on *Vikalpa*. He spent considerable time on creating a focus for the content and polishing the articles. He took pains to maintain the regularity in periodicity. He collected Editorial staff and provided a distinct identity to the *Vikalpa* office. He raised some donations and sponsorships to start a fund, to buy some equipment, and hire a couple of Editorial staff. I admire his tenacity and persistence. At that time, he had one and

only one objective — to build the *Vikalpa* office. In one way or another, he made me part with some of my colleagues to work in the *Vikalpa* office. I think these efforts of building an Editorial team and a fund for *Vikalpa* were the most important steps to give continuity and stability to the journal.

Now, in the silver jubilee year of *Vikalpa*, I feel happy and somewhat proud that I was a part of a great beginning, however miniscule role I had. I wish *Vikalpa* and the people behind it many happy challenging years. I hope, in future, *Vikalpa*, in addition to its quality of get-up and regularity in publication, will:

- Gain a distinct identity through focused content and audience and get away from being all things to all.
- Achieve much greater regular subscription (now it is about 1,500) to be known in influential circles.
- Be read, referred, and quoted both in academic and practising world.

In conclusion, my dream and wish would be that some day, teachers, researchers, and managers — national and international — would readily subscribe to *Vikalpa* as a matter of professional need and prestige.