



Holistic Flexibility as an advancement in systems thinking

Inspired by the *Nataraja* (dancing *Shiva*)

Plenary

Annual Conference of the International Society
for the Systems Sciences – July, 2021

Rajneesh Chowdhury, Ph.D.

Management Consultant and Researcher
Visiting Fellow, Centre for Systems Studies,
University of Hull Business School (UK)

www.RajneeshChowdhury.com



Introduction

INSPIRATION

A personal journey

What I intend to achieve through this presentation

FLOW OF THE DISCUSSION

Introduction to the *Nataraja*

Systems Thinking and Holistic Flexibility

Nataraja and Holistic Flexibility

Advancement in systems thinking



Introduction to the *Nataraja*



The *Shiva*



Deeper meanings

ARDHANARESHWARA

Meaning half male and half female – archetypes

Purusha (Male) – pure consciousness

Prakriti (Female) – creative power

TRILOKA

The three worlds

Bhur – material world

Bhuva – mental world

Svaha – spiritual world



Universal symbols



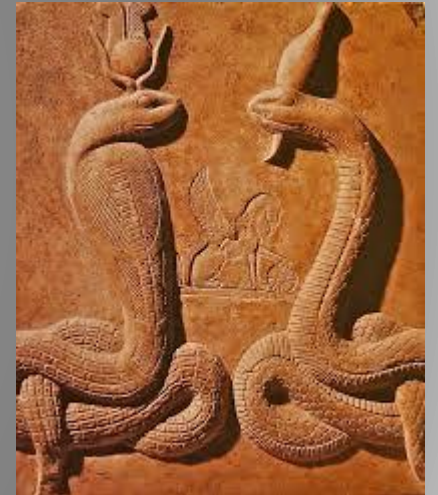
KUNDALINI
Hinduism
Buddhism



ROD OF ASCLEPIUS
Greek mythology
Symbol of Medicine



CADUCEUS
Greek mythology



**PIN OF
ANCIENT EGYPT**

Shiva Linga



Captured in Guwahati, India
(May, 2021)

Shiva represents stillness

The ultimate
thermodynamic system

The *Nataraja*

EVOLUTION

Traced to the confluence of Vedic Hinduism of 1500-to-500 BCE and the Indus Valley civilization from 2500-1500 BCE in various forms through the ages till the appearance of the dancing *Shiva* during the third-to-fifth century CE.

MAIN SYMBOLISM

Panchakritya – 5 most important functions

MAYA

Power of creation (NOT ILLUSION)



Admiration of the *Nataraja*

ALDOUS HUXLEY, 1961

“The whole thing is there, you see. The world of space and time, and matter and energy, the world of creation and destruction, the world of psychology... We (the West) don't have anything remotely approaching such a comprehensive symbol, which is both cosmic and psychological, and spiritual.”



*Chidambaram Temple (10th Century)
Tamil Nadu, India*

Admiration of the *Nataraja*

FRITJOF CAPRA IN THE *TAO OF PHYSICS*, 1975

“For the modern physicists... Shiva’s dance is the dance of subatomic matter. As in Hindu mythology, it is a continual dance of creation and destruction involving the whole cosmos; the basis of all existence and of all natural phenomena... [modern physics experiments] bear testimony to the continual rhythm of creation and destruction in the universe, are visual images of the dance of Shiva equaling those of the Indian artists in beauty and profound significance. The metaphor of the cosmic dance thus unifies ancient mythology, religious art, and modern physics. It is indeed, as Coomaraswamy has said, ‘poetry, but none the less science’.”



(*Nataraja* at the CERN, Switzerland)



Systems Thinking and Holistic Flexibility



Systems thinking

WAVES IN SYSTEMS THINKING

First wave | Hard systems thinking

Second wave | Soft systems thinking

Third wave | Critical systems thinking (CST)

CRITIQUE OF CST

Philosophical

Methodological

Practical



Holistic Flexibility

THE BOOK

Covers 15 years of research in applied systems thinking in the fields of:

Social Impact

Organization Development

Corporate Reputation

RESEARCH THEMES

Flexibility | Responsibility | State of mind

Flexible Systems Management

Rajneesh Chowdhury

Systems Thinking for Management Consultants

Introducing Holistic Flexibility

*Foreword by
Professor Michael C. Jackson OBE*

 Springer

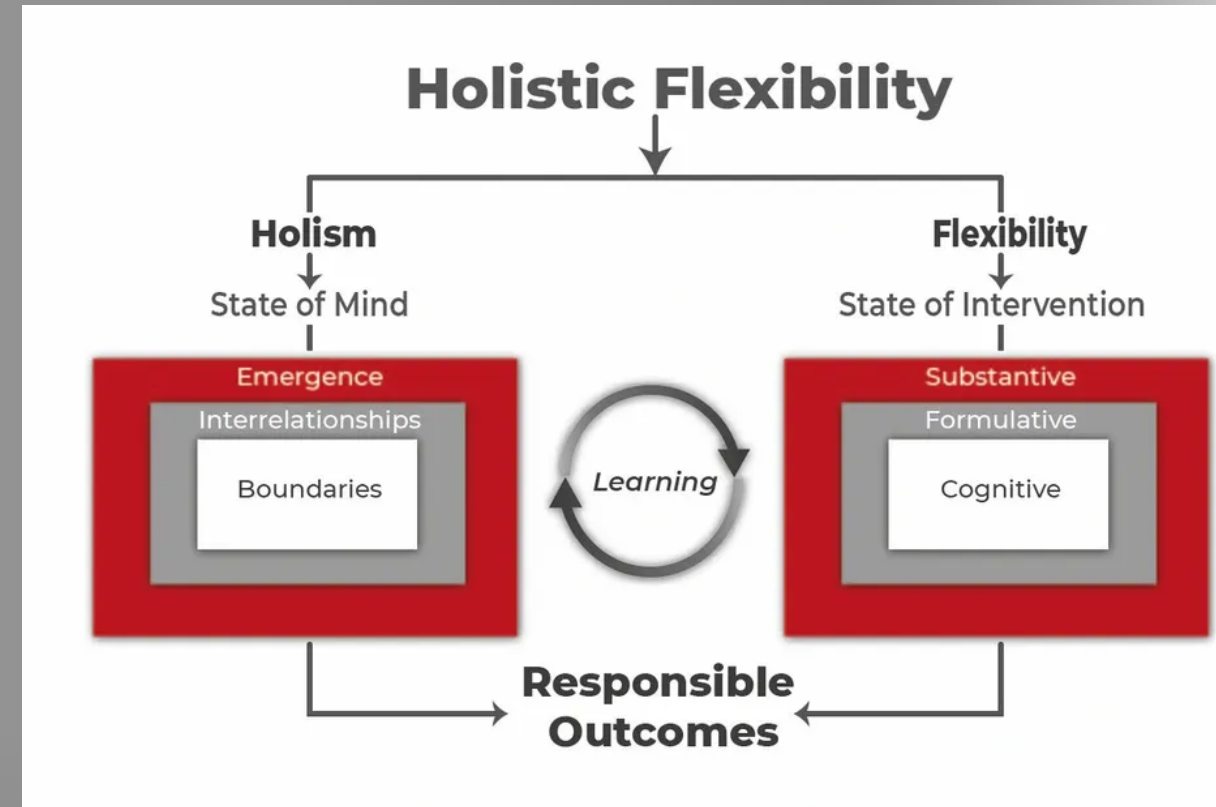
Holistic Flexibility

THE CONCEPTUAL LENS

Dynamic interplay between a state of mind that has the ability to absorb systemic complexity and a state of intervention that has the ability to embrace flexibility both in intent and form.

Holistic Flexibility is neither a framework, nor a methodology; rather, it is a conceptual lens for managers that can offer them intellectual, emotional, and tactical elasticity in management practice.

Serve as an inspiration for managers to thread disparate strands with analysis and logic, and yet transcend the same in the passage through lateral thinking and connected rationality.





Nataraja and Holistic Flexibility



Religion and management research

Religious philosophy and symbolism can offer an alternative perspective to that that separates mind-&-matter, cause-&-effect and profit-&-responsibility with a dualist standpoint.

Offers a framework for a “purpose-oriented approach” in business and management.

Ivanov (2011) says that systems practice needs to be developed at the interface of formal science, political ethics, analytic psychology, and religious thought.

This is the first scholarly attempt to explore the philosophy of the *Nataraja* in the context of systems thinking.



Principle I (inspired by *Srishti*)

SRISHTI

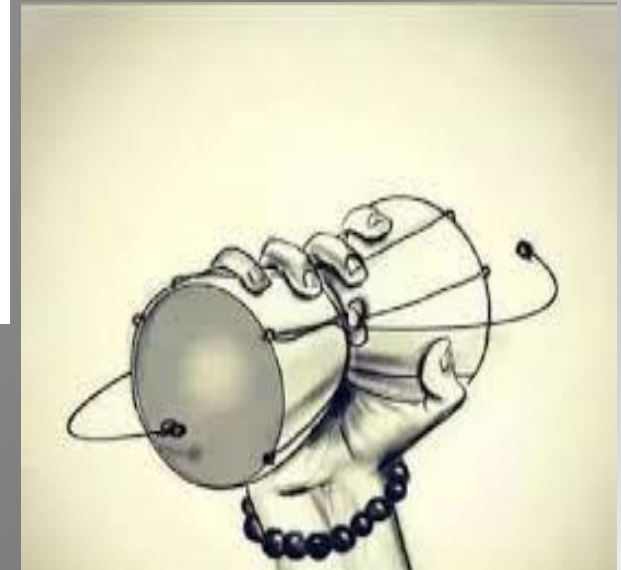
The perennial beat of the mini-drum symbolic of dynamism, unconcealment, and constant change.

SYSTEM AS BECOMING

A system is constantly being unconcealed.

Address a problem as a time-shot in the entire journey of time-lapse.

Understanding of boundaries, interrelationships, and emergence.



Principle II (inspired by *Samhara*)

SAMHARA

Power of transformation and regeneration.

TRANSFORMATIVE FLEXIBILITY



Types of flexibility	Aspect addressed	Dependency	Related discipline
Cognitive flexibility	Thinking	Nature-Nurture	Psychology, Psychiatry
Formulative flexibility	Planning	Frameworks and Models	Management, Administration
Substantive flexibility	Action	Resource Availability	Material Sciences, Finances, Human Resource, Supply Chain



Principle III (inspired by *Tirobhava*)

TIROBHAVA

Dwarf the ego, self-centricity, and jealousy that traps humans into the tunnel of darkness.

RESPONSIBLE PRACTICE

Addresses economic, environmental, and social parameters.

Building systemic capability.

Ejecting ignorance, self-centricity, and myopic thinking.

Samkhya philosophy – the self be realized in other selves and in the inanimate as an extension of the same cosmic force.



Principle IV (inspired by *Anugraha*)

ANUGRAHA

Indicative of salvation and graceful co-evolution rather than of managers acting as mere witnesses of the cyclical metamorphosis of the self and the world resulting in what the *Samkhya* calls *maya*.

SPIRAL OF LEARNING

Multipronged and multidimensional learning will lead towards what the *Samkhya* calls *vidya* or knowledge.

Single-loop learning | Efficiency

Double-loop learning | Effectiveness

Triple-loop learning | Value-centricity



Principle V (inspired by *Sthithi*)

Abhaya mudra



STHITHI

Reassurance that life will continue with order amidst disorder; hidden patterns will emerge out of chaos.

PRAGMATIC ARTISTRY

This balancing act requires a ‘dance’ of competencies and skills, dependent on both nature and nurture.

“Pragmatic” indicates the importance of contextuality over standardization and seamless customization over method-adherence.

“Artistry” indicates that such behavior requires understanding, elegance, and poise in part of the manager and that it does not come by chance.

Shakti goddess



Ganesha



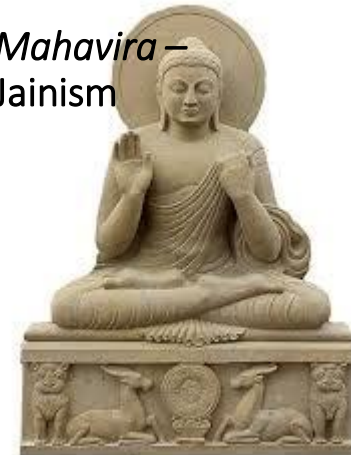
Sitting Shiva



Buddha –
Buddhism



Mahavira –
Jainism





Holistic Flexibility | 5 Principles

SYSTEM AS BECOMING

Negotiation of boundaries, appreciation of interrelationships, and cognizance of emergence.

TRANSFORMATIVE FLEXIBILITY

Brings about transformation in situations propelled by flexibility in cognition, formulation, and substantiation.

RESPONSIBLE PRACTICE

Addresses problems holistically, meaningfully, and sustainably touching human and non-human dimensions.

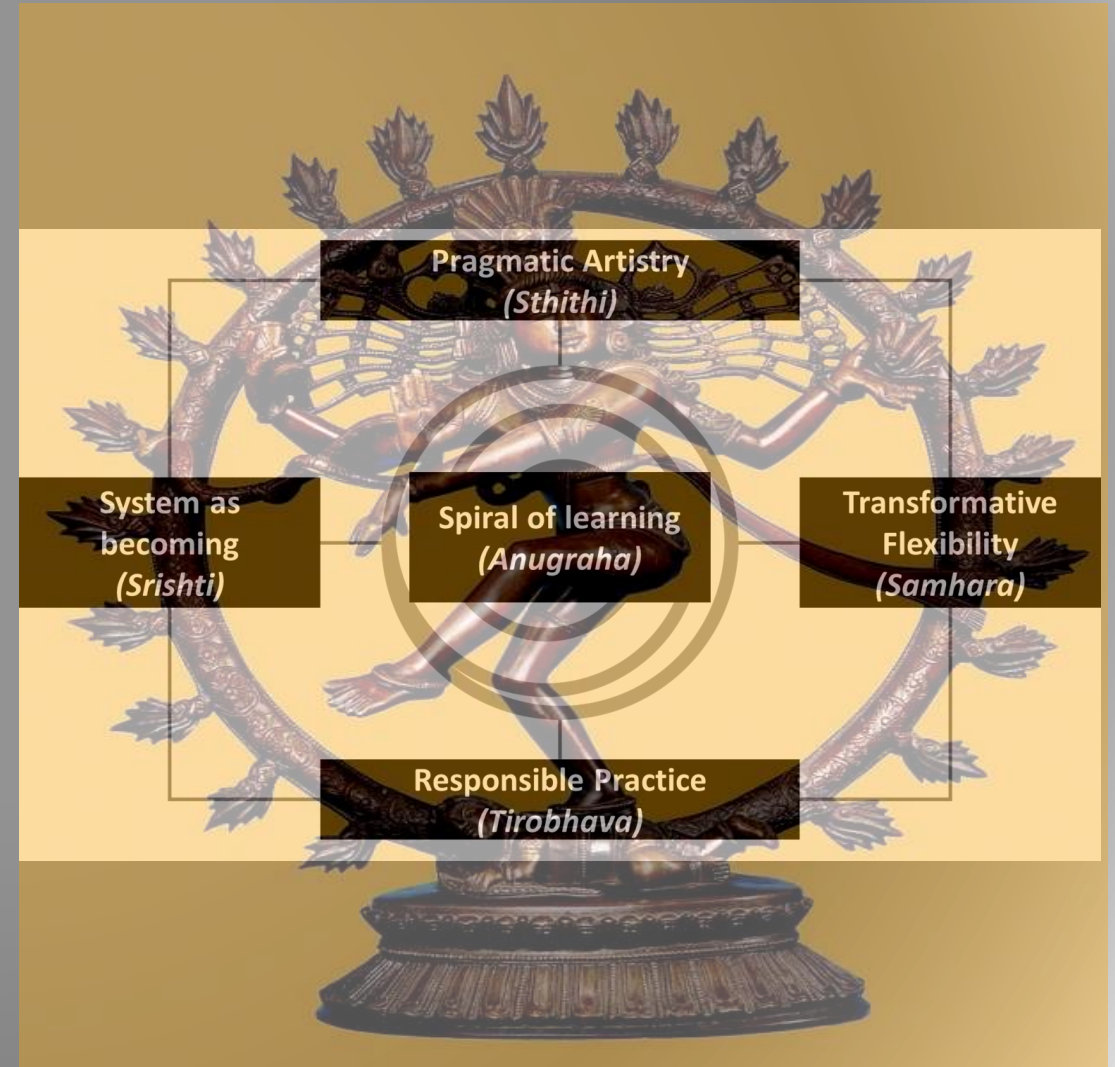
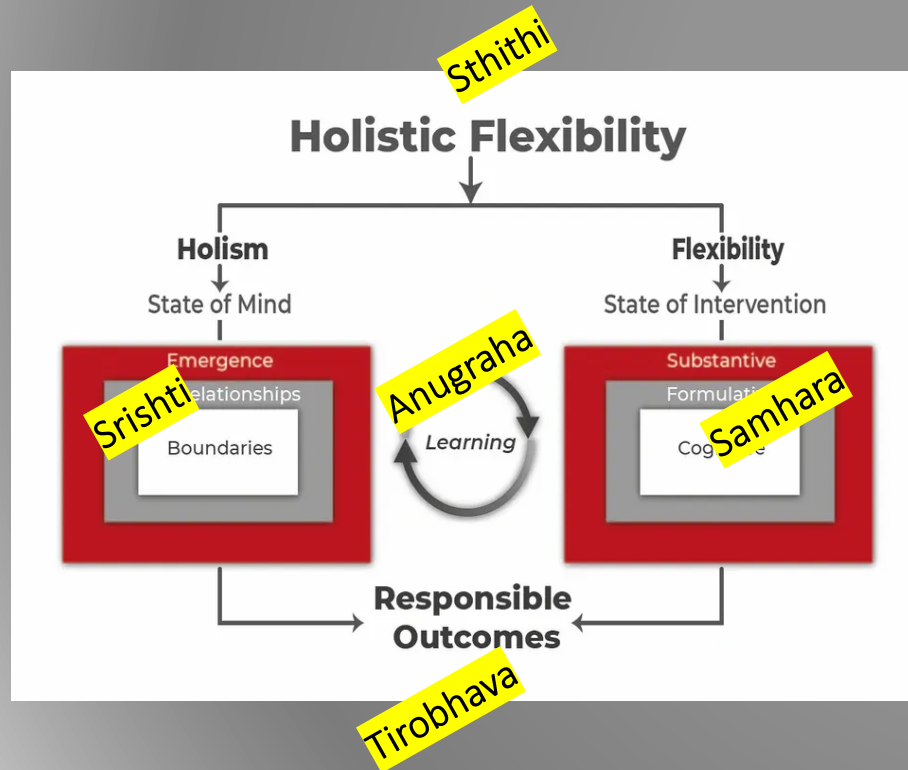
SPIRAL OF LEARNING

Embraces single-, double- and triple-loop learning to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, and value-centricity.

PRAGMATIC ARTISTRY

Pragmatism is necessary in dynamic situations. Artistry requires understanding, elegance, and poise.

Holistic Flexibility and *Panchakritya*





Holistic Flexibility | Behaviors

1. Ability to challenge taken-for-granted beliefs and expand the contours of one's own mental models.
2. Being open to change and being cognizant of emergent behaviors of the system – both intended and unintended.
3. Ability to think laterally and shift perspectives based on sound judgement.
4. Working across paradigms and embracing a wide range of methodologies from different frames of references within and outside those associated with traditional systems thinking.
5. Ability to connect the dots between various factors and modes of representation, even those that may seem distant from the problem itself.
6. Being creative in one's approach and leveraging different ways of knowing and engaging including art, theatre, experience, memory, and informal interaction.
7. Displaying a learning attitude and challenging oneself and other stakeholders by incorporating insights in their work, thereby enhancing efficiency, effectiveness, and humanistic values.
8. Involving and empowering stakeholders by creating conditions for the involved and the affected to realize their full potential.
9. Focusing on delivering outcomes that benefit social, economic, and environmental factors and thereby ensuring the wellbeing of current and future generations.
10. Connect one's existence with the larger human consciousness, and thereby the ability to shed one's ego and display humility, self-control, and emotional resilience.

Holistic Flexibility | Examples

Chowdhury, R. 2019. Sustainable Urbanization and Community Engagement. In Chowdhury, R. *Systems Thinking for Management Consultants: Introducing Holistic Flexibility*. Springer, 305-331.



Chowdhury, R. 2019. From Restructuring to Optimization: Enabling a Sales and Marketing Function. In Chowdhury, R. *Systems Thinking for Management Consultants: Introducing Holistic Flexibility*. Springer, 241-267.





Advancement in Systems Thinking





Advancement in systems thinking

WHERE WE ARE TODAY

Existing works in the first three waves in systems thinking remain within the rational-analytic domain of problem-solving (Midgley and Rajagopalan 2021).

Holistic Flexibility represents a break-away for the rational-analytic domain and has taken systems approaches beyond the use of methodologies and has lent it a more cognitive character.

Holistic Flexibility and its principles take the momentum of new developments in systems thinking (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2020; Midgley and Rajagopalan, 2021) as a state of mind.

FUTURE AVENUES OF RESEARCH FOR SYSTEMS THINKING

- (i) Inspirations from spirituality and religion to shape this new stance of systems thinking.
- (ii) Integration of consciousness studies with Holistic Flexibility for systems thinking.
- (iii) Does Holistic Flexibility signal to the fourth wave in systems thinking?



Holistic Flexibility as an advancement in systems thinking

Inspired by the *Nataraja* (dancing *Shiva*)

Plenary

Annual Conference of the International Society
for the Systems Sciences – July, 2021

Rajneesh Chowdhury, Ph.D.

Management Consultant and Researcher
Visiting Fellow, Centre for Systems Studies,
University of Hull Business School (UK)

www.RajneeshChowdhury.com