

The powerful nudge

Should We Call The Nudge Theory A Dynamic Sway Or Classic Conditioning?

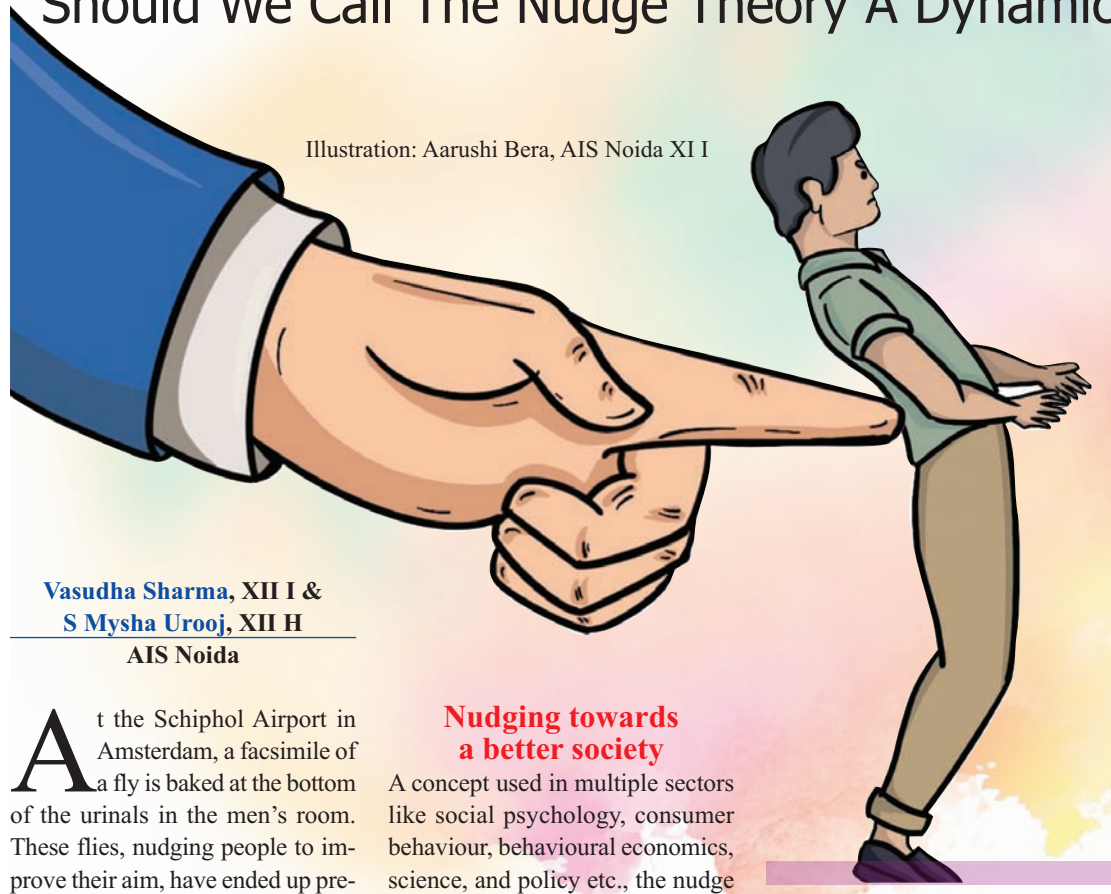


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At the Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, a facsimile of a fly is baked at the bottom of the urinals in the men's room. These flies, nudging people to improve their aim, have ended up preventing spillage by 80%, saving more than 8% of the cleaning budget. This nudge, however, is not accidental. In fact, it is psychologically engineered to "attract people's attention and alter their behaviour in a positive way without actually requiring anyone to do anything at all", as per Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, the two American scholars who popularised the concept of this nudge theory.

Nudging towards a better society

A concept used in multiple sectors like social psychology, consumer behaviour, behavioural economics, science, and policy etc., the nudge stands to be the perfect example of libertarian paternalism. It allows people the freedom to choose, simply nudging them towards the rational choice. When presented with apple slices vs small pieces of cake, people unconsciously turned towards healthier choices, as concluded from an experiment by iNudgeYou; the average intake of apple increased 60.8% and the intake of cake decreased by 34%

within two days. Presented as a 'free choice', the effects of nudge theory were seen in effect during the COVID-19 pandemic. One whiff of the virus and the entire world had started paying immediate attention to proper handwashing – with soap, scrubbing every finger, and for at least 20 seconds. A survey published in Plos One showcased that more than 95% Eu-

ropeans started washing their hands properly after the pandemic than they did before. Even the white lines drawn at the S shaped curves at Lake Shore Drive in Chicago have nudged the accident rate to fall by 36%, creating a safer and better world for everyone without compromising on essentials.

Nudging towards a better governance

The subtle impact of the theory has been so monumental that governments all around the world are not only using them to bring a change in their subjects, but also themselves. Former UK PM David Cameron and US president Barack Obama recognised its power and sought to employ nudge theory to advance their domestic policy goals in their countries. In fact, Obama employed one of the original innovators of the theory, Cass Sunstein, as the administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs to ensure maximum results. The UK, too, created a British Behavioural Insights Team aka Nudge Unit in 2010 with the help of David Halpern with the aim of generating and applying behavioural insights following the principals of nudge theory. The country also depended on it for 'herd immunity', and even Australia has created an official Nudge

Unity in 2012 and Behavioural Economics Team of Australia in 2016 for applying insights to public policy.

Nudging towards criticism

Though it all sounds great in theory and seems a revolutionary step to take, its remarks are not all sunshine and rainbows. Being deemed as 'limited' in its effectiveness, even big names like The King's Fund have asked the society to rather work on sure solutions than just nudging, if the plan is to bring change. With charges that claim that nudging diminished autonomy, threatens dignity, violate liberties, and reduces welfare, ethicists claim for it to be manipulative, even bordering classic conditioning. Besides, a research by David Tannenbaum found that governments using nudging only believe it to be ethical and functional when it aligns with their own political leanings.

Some researches claim it to be the ultimate step of waving in change, yet some claim that the ethicality of nudges are susceptible to partisan bias. In the midst of it all, the theory stands, and the world with it, deciding to what extent should it be employed and when it should be rejected. What do you think? **GT**

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Waka Waka	42%
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