

---

# TOWARDS NEW METAPHORS FOR A GLOBALIZING INDIA: AN AGENDA FOR MANAGEMENT

---

Shelly Jose

*The time has come where the dominant metaphors are being recast either negatively or otherwise depending on the way the major influencers can actively shape them. Managing the macro-variables is a management function. Culture as a macro-variable is rarely thought of in terms of requiring management. Identifying, defining and shaping cultural variables have the potential to become a management agenda.*

## THE CROSSROADS

At this point in the history of our nation when we are firmly into the new millennium, it is fair to assume that liberalization, privatization and globalization are here to stay. Many of those reluctantly watching us have also satisfied themselves that, after India's pensive economic departures in the early 90s, successive governments are indeed committed to the cause of a new, definitive turn.

India suffered from a severe collective complex of being second rate in comparison with the rest of the world. This was evident in the appreciation of anything 'foreign' till recently. The term "Made in India" was almost equivalent to poor quality. Another indication of this complex was that the term MNC evoked an image of India as the host country rather than the home country, despite the fact that there are many Indian MNCs. Our collective mind still plays the second fiddle of imitation, duplicating rather than being the original of the entrepreneurial.

One way to eliminate our blindness to our own strength is to look at how others, especially from the West, perceive us. We would do well to remember Albert Einstein's comment that western civilization owes a lot to the Indians who taught them how to count, without

which no worthwhile scientific discovery could have been made. Similarly Mark Twain has commented that India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend and the great grandmother of tradition. He adds that the most valuable and most instructive materials in the history of man is treasured up in India alone. To quote Romain Roland, "if there is one place on earth where all the dreams of living men have found a home from very earliest days when man began the dream of existence, it is India".

The greatness of India was as obvious to these thinkers as we are blind to it. The colonial domination spanning nearly three generations may be to blame, but it is incumbent on the young managers of today to give this complex a definitive turnaround considering that they enjoy the privilege of being in, and shaping the pragmatic world.

The peculiarities of India are many. One of the very longstanding cultures with a continuity exceeded only by China, India has a sizeable richness, though balanced by the burden of longevity. The richness and diversity among the states of India is unmatched by any of the other large

---

*Shelly Jose is a Faculty Member at Rajagiri School of Management, Kochi, India.*

---

countries. Within India, the cultural dissimilarities among the states are often ignored in favor of some commonness on the broader level. Like all other nations we find ourselves at crossroads and this should compellingly propel us towards a new direction. The effort will be worthwhile at many different levels: the political, the economic and the cultural; but given the nature of the ubiquity and deep influence of organizations, young managers of the nation have a special duty to give the nation a definitive turn.

This paper attempts to form the rationale for such an initiative.

### **METAPHORS OF YORE AND THEIR IMPORT**

In the cultural literature of a country, its dominant values are abstracted as the national character, or the modal personality. A metaphor in this context is a way of representing the dominant personality orientations in the society using symbolic language. In this way the abstract concept is explicated by a more concrete concept.

Some of the traditional metaphors that defined India were all from an etic (outsider's) perspective. This included epithets such as 'the nation of snake charmers, the nation of elephants, the nation where cows, rickshaws and pedestrians jostle for space on narrow bylanes. In some discourses one encounters the more tongue-in-cheek expression 'the Hindu rate of growth'. The first timer to India from abroad was sometimes shocked to find that India was much more than this. Even within the country the person from one corner would find other places fascinating. Nevertheless, the emotions that were evoked by these word pictures were not exactly appealing to the potential investor in Indian markets.

Markedly absent is the ability to take destiny into one's own hands, perhaps influenced to some degree by the deep rooted belief in 'karma' or predestination. It is not difficult to see that this conflicts with the basic tenets of Management that 'things can be and need to be managed' with definite objectives and outputs to achieve. Less researched is the effect this belief has on the psyche. The typical Indian thinking underlies a broader inclusive perspective, a long term orientation sometimes extending beyond one's own life and lifetime. Also, it gives a certain amount of resilience at the individual level, against failure as this can be viewed in the larger perspective with loci of control and effect extending beyond oneself.

Upon hindsight, it follows that these are closely related to, and sometimes solutions to the concerns that the profession of management grapples with today: that of finding room for ethics, that of sustainable development, that of handling frustration and conflict. Many a time unconsciously we refer to these peculiarities as antithetical to the market place when we mention that something is against 'Indian culture'.

### **ORGANIZATIONAL METAPHORS**

Among the metaphors applied at the organizational level, the most frequent for Indian organizations is 'the family'. The corresponding organizational metaphors for English organizations is the 'country fair', for France 'the pyramid' and for German ones, the 'well oiled machine' or the 'symphony orchestra', for Italy 'the opera', for the Japanese 'the garden' and for Israel 'kibbutz'.

Despite the values attached to the family, when it comes to a work culture, the family evokes connotations alien to the work setting. It invites a sense of the negative informal. The festival season and social functions are excuses for absence under the family metaphor. Also a general atmosphere of tolerance to these at the expense of the objectives is wont with the family metaphor. To speak of objectives, the family metaphor evokes objectives as more diffused than concrete.

At the same time, the community feeling that may have been a positive scorer seems to be missing, as this is retained and confined to the original family setting of the employee. At the organizational level, the metaphor implies a parochial inwardness rather than a professional pragmatic extroversion.

### **THE EMERGING METAPHORS - THE NEED FOR ACTIVE FORMULATION**

The success of the Information Technology industry and IT enabled industry in the last decade and the ongoing one has shown India in a new light. There are few examples in history where things fell into place so very well to the advantage of a country. Think of the IT success without a favourable time zone difference from the rest of the world. Think of a potentially IT savvy people with no liberalization in sight. Liberalization, IT revolution, a huge pool of English speaking people and India's favourable geography would have been impotent, one without the other.

The point of relevance in this instance is that the modernization and development in this era is one that is totally liberated from the strap of development envisaged by the first generation after independence. But even as we identify ourselves with this emerging metaphor of the 'liberated powerhouse' we need to be cautioned against other emerging metaphors such as the 'back office of the world'. Are our industries to be recast into a paradigm of a neo second rate while China is being spoken of as the 'workshop of the world'? India needs to forge ahead with value addition on many different fronts of the economy without which it is in danger of being branded with a new, equally derogatory metaphor.

Several dissenting voices about the dominant world order of today reveal a bifurcation of the world into core and periphery. The core represents the countries where the financial, technical and the productive power is concentrated- where power is controlled by elite. The periphery on the other hand contains the exploited regions that sell their resources and labour to the core without ever having access to the latter's wealth. The new movement is a variation of the colonial past where the enrichment of the core is structurally dependent on the impoverishment of the periphery. Strategy is all about seeing where we are going and determining where and how we want to reach our destination. As a nation, an active effort towards new metaphors is imperative.

### WORK RELATED VALUE DIMENSIONS

There are a number of ways in which people differ on culture which is the cornerstone on which the dominant metaphors are built. This includes the conceptions of values, symbols, heroes and rituals. Out of the above, values are the most important but difficult to capture as they are largely internal unlike the other three which are external. According to Hofstede, a leading authority on the subject, in terms of values, the people of the world differ on

- 1) the extent to which power is expected and accepted to be distributed unequally, in other words the degree of inequality among people, considered normal from relatively equal to extremely unequal
- 2) the degree to which people in a country have learned to act as individuals rather than as members of cohesive groups: from collectivist to individualist

- 3) the degree to which 'masculine' values like assertiveness, performance, success and competition prevail over "feminine values like the quality of life, maintaining warm personal relationships, service, caring, and solidarity: from tender to tough
- 4) the degree to which people in a country prefer structured over unstructured situations: from relatively flexible to extremely rigid and
- 5) the degree to which people consider time as something rigid and time as flexible. These four dimensions are respectively called the power distance (high or low), individualism (the opposite being collectivism), masculinity (the opposite being femininity), uncertainty avoidance (high or low) and time orientation (long term or short term).

Each culture can therefore be classified according to the combination of the above dimensions. A detailed discussion on the combinations is beyond the scope of this paper but it would suffice to mention that India is high on power distance, high on collectivism (low on individualism), moderate on masculinity-femininity and moderate on uncertainty avoidance. While the following discussion advocates the desirable changes that are required, we would do well to remember that cultural dimensions as they are, are difficult to change and changes are, by nature, very slow. One could at best hope to throw light on this facet among the whole gamut of variables that determine organizational dynamics.

In terms of the dimensions of work-related cultural values, the challenges to India are many. The high power distance of India is a concomitant of the long reign of the influence of caste. If India is to compete, she needs to move away from a paradigm of high power distance to a lower one to accommodate the large pool of people which is her real strength. Power distance has an excluding denotation largely in India's case on reasons of tradition and caste. An atmosphere of achievement appreciation rather than ascription of inherited station is a prerequisite for encouraging greater efforts to advance one's lot where one need not rely on one's ancestry.

Among the many reasons for prevalence of individualism is the greater economic independence that characterizes growing economies. While India tends towards collectivism, a movement towards greater individualism is predicted in the light of economic growth. However, India needs to develop and assert collectivism's non- alienating

---

elements as a counterbalance to the impersonality of modernization if it is to gain the best of tradition and the fruits of modernization.

The oriental inclination towards segregation of the sexes is still largely a feature of India that conflicts with the demands and norms of a job and workplace that is becoming increasingly gender neutral. Additionally the feminine qualities of care, concern and nurturance are now professed to be more desirable and finds place in Organizational Behaviour literature. To do so we need to be more inclusive and inviting of both the genders in a world where the strengths of both masculine and feminine complement and reinforce.

India is notorious for its lack of systems and its scant respect for those that exist. Consider the disregard for systems such as traffic signals. A system if bypassed can have severe consequences at the larger level and is detrimental to the development of a society. A system is antithetical to power as violation of system can be rectified by use of power. This explains the strong disregard for system in a large power-distance country. Among the many interpretations of uncertainty avoidance, the installation of systems is considered as a reliable way of reducing uncertainty. However, the belief in predestination discussed earlier and the disrespect for formal systems go together.

Similarly, an examination of the present pattern of development of the IT industry in India reveals that the development has taken place in centres where there is a youth culture. Where there is a marked absence of youth culture the industry moves on hesitantly. It needs to be recognized that low youth culture is a result of the combination of high power distance, low individualism, low femininity and higher uncertainty avoidance. This is

only to highlight the relevance of a cultural fit even within the country as far as specific industries are concerned.

## CONCLUSION

Management is critically positioned to influence the destiny of a nation. It has influence over people and can shape the sub-units of the nation at the organizational level. It has the wherewithal and the motivation to do so. The time has come where the dominant metaphors are being recast either negatively or otherwise depending on the way the major influencers can actively shape them. Managing the macro-variables is a management function. Culture as a macro-variable is rarely thought of in terms of requiring management. Identifying, defining and shaping cultural variables have the potential to become a management agenda. This can be one of the emic (insider) exercises by the enabled, for a changing society. In this way the eventual metaphoric outcome can be a competitive strength for the nation as a whole.

## REFERENCES

1. *Motivation, Leadership and organization: do American theories apply abroad?*. G. Hofstede, European Institute for advanced studies in Management, Brussels; Report of research carried out from 1973-1978
2. *Can Hindus be ambitious?*; John Elliot, Outlook, Dec. 21, 1998
3. *The Twilight of American culture*; Borris Berman; W W. Norton and company
4. *Profits over people: (Neoliberalism and Global order)* Noam Chomsky; Madhyam books 1998.
5. *Branding the nation: Challenge for the masses and policy makers*; Joshy Joseph; Advertising Express; January 2004
6. *Cultures and organizations*; G. Hofstede; Harper Collins Business.