# Understanding cultural singularities of "Indianness" in an inter-cultural business setting

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## Abstract

*Analysing data from the Indian IT industry, this paper advances an understanding of cultural singularities of 'Indianness'. The research context of an intercultural meeting place of IT and business process outsourcing firms' overseas subsidiaries, Belgium in this case, allows the authors to identify ten cultural singularities that typify 'Indianness'. This study takes departure from the popular cultural dimension frameworks for understanding intercultural business and management as these do not sufficiently describe the contemporary intercultural dynamics that typically take place in workplaces, especially so in offshore and outsourcing environments. A provisional set of parameters for understanding Indian culture, with its relevant impact on business life (customs and manners), business processes, and business deliverables are proposed.*

## Introduction

With the emergence of India's new-found marketplace identity as a global provider of information technology (IT) and business consultancy services in the areas of engineering, communication, software development, business process and information technologies outsourcing, there have never before been more Indians working overseas than now (Bach 2011). The significance of their contribution to the nation's gross domestic product, employment, foreign exchange is well acknowledged (NASSCOM 2012; 2014) and the emergence of a cluster of economic activity in the areas of high-technology services sectors has been particularly noted the case in the Indian IT industry (Gottipatti 2012). Further, it is

estimated that India receives foreign exchange remittances of close to $US70 billion from its expatriate population (Feedbacq 2014). If we add the number of Indians working in India for multinational (MNC) employers (Saraswati 2012), one can conclude that India is now well and truly a key player in the global business environment to such a degree, that the presence of (traces of) Indian cultural identity should be unmistakably present in the daily workings in these intercultural settings.

It is therefore challenging, for managers on both sides of the contractual arrangement–the outsourcer and the service provider or the MNC and its subsidiary – to understand the cultural nuances for better integration and managing the diversity at workplace (Cox 1994; Cox and Blake 1991). Although there are numerous popular and perhaps useful academic and practitioner frameworks for understanding the cultural dimensions of nation states (Hofstede 1980, 1944; House et al. 2004; Mendenhall and Oddou 1985; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1993) there are numerous limitations identified in the literature in the application of such frameworks (see for example, Brewis and Jack 2009; Cala`s and Smircich 1987; McSweeney 2002). Most of the critiques highlight the positivist orientations adopted by the above frameworks for understanding a phenomenon that is highly complex, diverse, kaleidoscopic, holographic and context-specific. Such aspects of culture are especially true for a large, diverse, geographically diffused, and culturally rich and complex heritage nation such as India. There are several recent accounts that have highlighted the complexity of understanding Indian culture in general (Das 2010; Kakkar and Kakkar 2009; Malhotra, 2011) and more specifically, culture in an organisational context (Pattanaik 2013; Rath 2014).

Typically, Hofstede's parameters are above all descriptive. Helping somewhat to understand the 'other' (culture), they teach the intercultural practitioner little with regard to behaviour and intercultural skills. More general, although Hofstede's parameters are in themselves interesting descriptive features of a (company) culture, the big but widely accepted fluke is with Hofstede's uncompromising translation(s) of company cultures into "national cultures", whatever this might represent. With India, this fluke is most obvious: does the Hofstede India framework describe the purely *desi* (local/national-Indian) corporate culture (and if so: which one?), or the NRI culture, or some vague notion of an IIT-cum-IIM (Indian Institute of Technology and Indian Institute of Management) culture? – Not to mention the sheer geographical and anthropological absurdities of providing intercultural comparisons between for instance "Belgium" and "India".

The business needs for intercultural rapprochement is evermore present now as global Indian IT firms must, almost on a daily basis, work and /or liaise with global software development teams. Even though Indian firms may deny the need for intercultural understanding in an increasingly global business space, a number of their business practices and management models have been adapted through the knowledge spill-overs from, (mainly) MNCs (Dusanjh and Sidhu 2009; Giarrantana et al. 2004; Gorg and Strobl 2002) and serious efforts are being undertaken to instil the employees, both onsite and overseas, with the business practices and etiquettes required for their specific outsourcing contracts. This complicates the issues even more and may mean that, for instance, an Indian software engineer working at his Indian employer's office in Hyderabad for a Danish account, would be invited (and expected) to

plainly adapt to the Danish version of an Anglo-American approach to review meetings, and to stick to Danish business practices in day-to-day communication with the client. And even more: would this software engineer be sent to Denmark for a limited or an extended period (typically, between 3-18 months), than both the Danish client and the Indian employer would expect her/him to adapt to such a degree that no or very little traces of "Indianness" remain? Understanding and managing Indianness remains a key challenge for an increasing number of globally mobile workforces on both sides of the contracting parties.

In view of the above, analysing data from the Indian IT industry, this paper offers *three* distinctive contributions. *First*, we develop an understanding of cultural singularities of 'Indianness' in an organisational context. *Second*, by studying the phenomenon in a context where the incidence of intercultural differences is most likely to be found, we uncover the key aspects of 'Indianness'. *Finally*, rather than employing a hypothetical-deductive approach of measuring the extent of Hofstede's or similar dimensions, the study builds on the extant literature focusing on India's indigenous cultural understanding in the Indian IT industry for understanding Indianness in an intercultural meeting place. Overall this study contributes by developing business singularities of *Indianness*.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. First, we offer a short review of alternative and indigenous understandings of 'Indianness'. Second, we provide a short account of why the research context offers a fertile ground for studying this phenomenon. Third, we explain the research methodology. This is followed by our findings, discussion and conclusions.

## Understanding "Indianness": A brief review

*Early attempts in understanding personal conduct*

By far one of the most adored and earliest narrations of Indian business & leadership approaches, which offers guidelines to leading a wise life, was propagated through animal fables or stories of the *Panchtantra* (the five principles or techniques, originally in Sanskrit language). These stories have been in the form of verbal orations by the storyteller (oftentimes a *guru* – the teacher) to an audience (oftentimes the *shishyas* – the student or learner) from as early as the 3rd century BC (Ryder, 1925). Written by Vishnu Sharma, the *Panchtantra* is considered as a treatise on *nitishastra* (the science of polity). Another very influential work, *Kautaliya's Arthashastra* (also the science of polity)*,* was written by Chanakya in the 321-296 BC period and is described as a "compendium of all the Arthashastras, which as a guidance to the King in acquiring and maintaining the earth have been written by ancient teachers" (Chaturvedi, 2006: p.7). These schools of thought and other ancient epics and collections such as the *Mahabharata* have been part of the cultural upbringing of most Indians. The focus on 'right action' towards others and practicing *Karma-Yoga* (the art and science of intelligent actions as our actions will have an impact on our current and future life) has been a key message in the scriptures of *The Bhagavad-Gita* (Vivekananda, 1972). Adaptations from the above as well as the Buddhist philosophy have focused on mathematical,philosophical and logical concepts such as Nagarjuna's *Catushkoti* and the *Madhyamaka* (on adopting the

middle path) philosophy (Reugg 1981; Shantarakshita 2005; Westerhoff 2006). The consumption and usage of such knowledge by modern India is still alive and leaders and teachers often make direct references to the above philosophies. A vast majority of the Indian population still watches dramatised television serials of the above epics with extreme interest. Themes of coexistence, harmony, justice, ethics and *karma* are repeatedly communicated through the above treatises.

### Pre-colonial discourses

Whilst this is not a comprehensive review of the literature, however, seen in terms of the concept of cultural narcissism, it should not come as a surprise that "Indianness" has been the subject of elaborate scrutiny and debate by numerous authors who have studied this phenomenon throughout the ages. In some of the earlier attempts to portray 'Indianness', we need only to be reminded of the excessive *identity row* unleashed with the publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927), which was followed by an endless series of apologies by India's self-appointed witnesses for the defence such as C.S. Ranga Iyer's *Father India, a Reply to Mother India* (1927) and subsequently, Ernest Wood's - *An Englishman defends Mother India* (1929). The above works points to a very bleak affair indeed, of intercultural misrepresentations and misunderstandings, suggestive of the difficulties in interpreting one's rituals and customs by 'the other'.

### Recent discourses

Following the above period, came more constructive and original accounts. More recently, intellectuals such as Chaudhuri (1965), Singh (1982), Kakkar and Kakkar (2009), Das (2010), Malhotra (2011), and many others, have provided their understandings and accounts on India. Notwithstanding all this, after an interval of ninety odd years, the *Mother India* debacle was more-or-less copied and pasted into the 21st century withthe recent (2014) row over Wendy Doniger's *Hinduism: An Alternative History* (2009).

Factual knowledge of "the other" being scarce and common frameworks of reference being few and far between, it is nevertheless essential for all partners in the outsourcing framework to establish a descriptive socio-anthropological model through which mutual understanding of each other's personal sphere drivers and motivational factors can be understood. Further, if each other's behavioural traits be correctly read, ways can be found to find mutual value in each other's being different.

In the context of the conventional approaches (e.g. Hofstede 1984; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1993) describing primarily cultural building blocks that seem to matter to non-Indians, there has been some solace in recent descriptive works by Kakar and Kakkar (2009), Malhotra (2011), Das (2010) and Mulla (2013). With some work attracting critical reviews (see for e.g. Gross 2013; Kearns 2013; Larson 2012), we believe that (with the possible exception of Das (2010) and Malhotra (2011)), most of the 20th century attempts at

codification of "Indianness" have been either historical, sociological, psychological and political, or all of these. Therefore, very little has been offered in terms of a descriptive understanding referring to "Indianness" as such, completely independent of the subject persons being Indian or not, thus avoiding the vagueness of the term and its sensitivities in the context of nationalism.

The application of earlier Indian philosophies and spiritual beliefs in modern day organisations and management is seeing a renewed interest amongst modern day academics and managers. For example, Mulla and Krishnan (2013), building on the concept of *Karma Yoga*, present an Indian model of moral development in business settings. Similarly, Muniapan and Shaikh (2007) advanced a case for corporate governance lessons to be learnt through Kautilya's Arthashastra. A new addition to the codification approaches of *"Indianness"* is evident in the work of Pattanaik (2013). Most prior attempts on capturing Indianness in business have been somewhat over-ambitious attempts to turn *Kautilya/Chanakya* (Arthashastra collection) approaches into a modern Indian version, offering management guidelines from the *Nitishartra* (politics) and *Arthashastras* (economics), with the doubtable claim of them being "updated". Pattanaik's work however, in a somewhat similar approach to the *Panchtantara,* has set out to use stories, symbols and rituals drawn from Hindu, Jain and Buddhist mythology in order to explain and understand day-to-day business situations from a perspective which could coincide with our proposed "Indianness". However, one could critique that it would have added value if it could be ethnically and religiously more neutral than purely *desi* (e.g. local fore lore).

The above review, albeit an extremely brief account of the complex contextual influences on thinking culturally, about Indianness, points to the difficulties in detaching context from how Indians experience and demonstrate Indianness. To this end, the next section provides details of the methodological approach adopted in developing their subjective understanding of Indianness.

**Methodology**

Use of ethnographic methodological approaches is increasingly gaining prominence in studies of management and organisation (see for e.g. Van Maannen, 1988, 1998, 2006). This is especially relevant for 'reflexivity' as it helps to create new understandings of a socially embedded and contextually complex phenomenon such as culture (Alvesson, 2003; Greetz, 1973). In the above context, Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) promote what they identify as a 'reflexive approach' to research. This approach is concerned with the study and interpretation of human behaviour, structures of society, and how people function within these structures. The aspiration for this research was to achieve reflexivity, and true reflexivity will occur only when different research methodologies are played against and reflected in one another (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). Hence, according to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000:248), "reflection means interpreting one's own interpretations, looking at one's own authority, and turning a self-critical eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author". Further, Warin (2011:810) argues that: "researcher reflexivity is not synonymous with self-awareness, nor is

it synonymous with an empathic sensitivity to the socio-emotional states of our research participants. It is both of these things, in tandem: relational awareness". Relational awareness is thus a reciprocal awareness of how the researcher influences his or her research participants' perceptions and a similar awareness of how the respondents influence the researcher. Etherington (2007:611) further makes the point that reflexivity is connected to the ethical dimension of research through the researcher's willingness to "emerge from behind the secure barrier of anonymity and own up to their involvement". Hence, in this research both the researchers' influence on respondents as well as the respondents' influence on the researchers were considered.

Thus, for the first author of the present study, as a participant observer being in the field and as part and parcel of the outsourcing experience, such an approach allows for seeking deeper meanings and observations of what is essentially a complex phenomenon. Analysing the themes emanating from an intercultural meeting place, of delivering intercultural training to employees of three subsidiaries of Indian IT firms operating in Belgium, this study analyses the key business singularities that typify aspects of Indianness. These Indian IT firms are operating both *in situ* and offshore, delivering engineering solutions, software applications development, software services including IT support and project management services to Belgian manufacturing, financial (banking) and telecommunication industries. In each of these three cases, and in the course of 20 months (Sept 2012 - April 2014), in small groups of between 12-25 participants, a total of 1536 non-Indian staff and 350 Indian staff were provided intercultural training. The learning facilitator (first author) begins the intercultural facilitation with intakes of trainees from both the Belgian client firms and Indian service providers. At this point the facilitator is informed of best practices as well as difficulties encountered at the workplace and its social environment in the outsourcing arrangement. The intake/exercise is done separately for both the contracting parties in order to let frustrations come into the open unrestrictedly. For each group of trainees, the respondent's concepts and key words are gathered in sortable tables, thus enabling the creation of generic tendencies. This brings in enough material to construe a tailor-made intercultural induction and understanding programme. It is important to note here that the facilitator is neither of both cultures but has a deep, near-native understanding of both nevertheless. This permits one to see each situation from the other's point of view, to note what is significant when seen from the other side, and to be able to discuss, frame and contextualise issues in such a way that solution behaviour can be suggested without forcing either party out of its own cultural comfort zone.

In the first stages of an intercultural learning facilitation programme, the key is to defuse existing stereotypes of 'the other', and in order to provide a tool with which to do just this, one would typically gather information through group related association games. The process is thus to gather a learning group (typically 12 persons in a European context, with up to 25 or even more in an Indian context), give them as a starting word 'India', or, with Indian groups, 'Belgium', and then see what comes up next. Generally and typically, the stakeholders in a business outsourcing situation know little or nothing of each other's culture. Once the group

members respond to their understanding of the 'others', the following three training steps are enforced.

A *first* step covers the topic that *diversity matters* in general, and aims at generating both a willingness to know and understand the other, and an acceptance of the other as "other". In this, deference for difference is completely different from cultural adaptation, integration and inclusivity programmes: it works at a much deeper, socio-psychological level and it celebrates the added value of the differences in each other – thus supporting the famous diversity conjecture (Cox, 1994). The *second* step offers an exploration of the 'other' cultural habitat on the social (community) level. The facilitator identifies key aspects of the 'other' culture, which have an impact on how people operate in a professional context and/or its social aspect. A typical question at this level is: What drives my 'other' colleague in life? Key concepts are values, family life, social habitat, customs and manners. Lastly, the *third* step focuses on how this 'otherness' impacts work processes, work methodologies and business deliverables. Key words here are communication methods and strategies, applied logic, leadership models, work ethics and heuristics.

## Findings

The following section presents the analysis in the form of key preliminary themes, following which, aspects of business singularities are drawn, leading to our understanding of 'Indianness'. Beginning with a descriptive analysis of the intercultural meeting place (the first stage of the intercultural facilitation and analysis), the second and final stages outlined above delve into deeper understanding of the phenomenon.


### The intercultural meeting place

### Intercultural incompetence

*Ignorance and stereotypes.* With regard to knowledge of India as 'the other', here is an overview of the top 15 'terms' of gathered data categories. The categories were gathered per group of trainees (128 groups), first individually per attendant, and consecutively discussed in plenum. When a certain concept was vague or could be understood in different ways, the plenum discussion would provide more precise and disparate wording/terms. Sometimes, as for instance in the case of "gender inequality", it was useful to bring certain ideas together into one category. Thus, with a maximum score of 128 (for those categories mentioned by every group), we took note of: holy cows (101), poverty (99), caste (98), over-populated (96), chaotic (87), wobbly heads (82), social inequality (82), dirty (82), Gandhi (76), incomprehensible English (72), Bollywood (58), Ganges (29), Hinduism (27), extreme gender inequality (including gang rapes) (27), never-tell-the-truth (22).

With data gathered through the precise and identical process as described above, but now with a maximum score of 14 (for 14 groups of trainees), what Indians know of their destination culture seems to be not much better. As far as Belgium is concerned, *glass* pops up with score

10, *planning* with 9, *lack of family values* with 4, and, remarkably, *no government* gets a score of 3.

As we have seen, what non-Indians know of India does often go no further than the holy cow, chaos, crowds and (recently) gang rape set list. With regard to known personalities, it will probably come as a shock to Indians to realize that the name of none of the Bollywood celebrities rings a bell with non-Indians – and it is also a given fact that none of the current day business celebrities (with the possible exception of UK-based Laxmi Mittal) and/or politicians has managed to get her/himself a place in the frames of reference of the non-Indians. Even when it came to well-known corporate personalities such as Narayan Murthy (Infosys), Nandan Nilekani (Infosys), Subramaniam Ramadorai (Tata Consultancy Services), Chanda Kochhar (ICICI), Indra Nooyi (Pepsico), or even Satya Nadella (Microsoft) - a zero score was found. And although the name of Gandhi figures on the list, not only is the Bapu (Gandhi was affectionately known by this name) perceived to have had a daughter called Indira (who was actually Nehru's daughter), also he appears to be quite lonely up there. There is no mention of Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore or any of the visionary thinkers of yore. In the political sphere, there is no mention of Jawaharlal Nehru, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh, Mayawati, Jayalalitha, or Abdul Kalam, and, remarkably in the current state of affairs, no Narendra Modi.

*Cultural narcissisms.* With so little knowledge of each other, one might be tempted to conclude that the global village mantra which most of us so much like to hear resonating in all aspects of our lives, is not much more than an easily unmasked myth. The facts seem to show that, even in a global context, we tend to restrict our knowledge of 'the other' to those aspects in which we find for ourselves a commonly understood frame of reference, and when this lacks, we opt for no factual knowledge at all. Interestingly, this process exists in both ways. For instance, much rather than showing an interest in Belgian cinema or Belgian celebrities, Indians show keenness to know who of their own (Bollywood) celebrities has managed to gain the attention, if not the appreciation, of her/his Belgian colleagues. And vice versa: much rather than wondering what the Indian stand on living with a high degree of cultural diversity and multilingualism is, the Belgians express keenness to learn how to explain to their Indian business counterparts their own typically Belgian and extremely intricate linguistic, cultural-political matters, such as the indomitable and all-pervasive BHV issue (aka Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde), an insolvable political puzzle of attributing single linguistic rights to a series of small villages in the Brussels suburbia, which has become a national obsession since the 1970s. Truly, with regard to cultural narcissism, both parties seem to outcompete each other. Part of this is due to a persistent (unconscious) denial with both the parties to admit their sense of ignorance.

**Denial**

If, at all, an intercultural trainer or coach, or mediator of any sort, would be brought into play through the invitation of the Indian counterpart in the outsourcing process – then she/he would typically be a senior Indian employee with expatriation experience, who is also deemed to be knowledgeable in intercultural matters. However, the intercultural training component

would be limited to linguistic variances such as learning key aspects of behavioural etiquettes and putting out a series of intercultural warning signs with regard to the commonly known and used intercultural dimensions proposed in frameworks such the one developed by Geert Hofstede et alia. Mostly, however,  the Indian management would try to restrict intercultural interventions as much as it can, on the pretext that "cultural differences are something of the past" – very much like "caste", which, however much intrinsically present in all aspects of Indian day-to-day life, is generically referred to as "something that mattered in the old days, but not today", especially so in high-technology and egalitarian industries  such as India's information technology industry, which employs a large proportion of knowledge workers .

*Possible causes of Indian neglect*. In most cases, and in our business practices accounting for almost 75 % of our business revenue, the need for intercultural guidance is expressed by the non-Indian party. This seems to point at either a deeply rooted Indian ignorance of the importance of cultural vestiges in all aspects of life, or a deliberate negation of the willingness to keep whatever degree of "Indianness" in matters global and/or matters business. Seen in the light of India's  emergent nation building, nationalism, heritage discovery, cultural renaissance  and general *jan-gan-man bhava* (a term used to describe conscious attempts to portray national integration sentiment), all of which have become prevalent post-independence, in coincidence with the first steps of the disclosure of the erstwhile license Raj into the global market – it seems difficult to maintain that Indian businesspeople dealing with a global marketplace would be ignorant of India's unique cultural identity. If so, we can only conclude that to keep "Indianness" away from the non-Indian customer is, or has been, a deliberate choice, born out of pragmatism, but in the context of a lingering perception that "Indianness" would be hard to sell, and that "less Indianness" would thus be a market bonus – while all the time "being proudly Indian" has remained a favourite, under cover pastime for millions of non-resident (overseas) Indians and Indian workforce catering for the global market.

*Failure of attempted cultural schizophrenia.* As Indian companies globalise and employ a growing number of non-Indian staff, clearly with the aim of 'under-covering their Indian identities even more and even stronger, one would guess that this approach so far has been all but an undivided success. And indeed it has not. The non-Indian part of the outsourcing deal, i.e. the outsourcer, has always been invited into the outsourcing scheme with the price as a bait, and if India would have remained non-expensive and would have been 'overall non-Indian in language, customs and manners', then India's position would have remained strong as ever. But with the service delivery costs gradually increasing, as India's economy and marketplace are emerging, and notwithstanding the often-stated unique advantage of 'not having the language barrier', the outsourcer is ever more focusing on the bother of 'Indianness', and India is now rapidly losing valuable market share of low-complexity outsourcing services to newer, and cheaper outsourcing destinations such as Vietnam and the Philippines – with more to come (Forbes, 2007). This turn of events seems to prove that, indeed, price matters above all, and the "absence of Indianness" as a sales argument has always been a fantasy, existing only in the minds of a handful of over-zealous NRI

businesspeople and/or cognoscenti of the Indian origin but European or American university alumni kind.

In other words: however much it has been denied or kept hidden at the Indian side of the deal, "Indianness" has been an issue all along – and this is why, in fast growing numbers, the non-Indian clients of Indian outsourcing parties are keen to follow training tracks in which they dream of learning how to manage their Indians, on site or offshore, and how to make their non-Indian employees cope with the presence, physical or virtual, of Indians on the workplace. In this, the core driver is always the fact that it is perceived that Indians are indeed "different", do indeed behave "differently", or do indeed need to be managed "differently". To this end, a growing number of companies, dealing with outsourcing ventures with India as a destination, thus feel the emergent need for intercultural learning modules focusing on understanding 'Indianness' and 'otherness' in order to help make their offshore ventures successful, or: help keep a healthy balance between the prospected profit of working with Indians and the costs involved in intercultural misunderstandings and mismanagement.

**Typical intercultural learning process**

This being so, at first instance, it happens to be the non-Indian side which approaches the intercultural training provider – whereas the Indian side restricts itself to introducing petty customs-and-manners issues, and/or launches itself in language brush-ups. When, occasionally, it has been the Indian side to do the "first step" – this has always been happening at the impetus of the client requiring after it. With growing awareness of the importance of intercultural matters, businesspeople and managers worldwide would, at a first level, be familiar with the Hofstede mechanics (1980, 1984), and try to get away with this. Typically, only when toying around with the Hofstede culture parameters proves to be unsatisfactory (which proves to be the case early on in the process) would a more deep-digging intercultural learning facilitator be approached.

**Becoming interculturally competent**

Following a deeper exploration of the 'other's' cultural habitat and social communities and how it impacts 'other' people in a social setting, we find it useful to develop a description of 'Indianness', and to describe this aspect in the perspective of its supposed absence in non-Indian environments, along the following five cultural values that may shape behaviour at workplaces:

**Five values**

**(1) The jan-gan-man bhava (Nation-state Identity Structures)**: Identification with the national anthem and related national integration campaigns such as those covered by political

parties, large corporates, leaders, anti-corruption movements, Bollywood movies and televised social issue documentaries such as *Satyamev Jayate* (Truth alone triumphs) are critical aspects of individual sentiments towards their association with a single, unified nation state, in an extremely diverse social and secular fabric.

**(2) The importance of Rishta (Relationship)**: The focus on family values and relationship labelling and identification across the borders of biological and genetic kinship is another critical value Indians identify with very strongly. As much as a matter of personal pride associated with *rishtey* (plural of relationship), social interactions and access is greatly enhanced through relationships.

**(3) Bhojan (Food)**: The immense diversity in Indian cuisine creates a strong cultural food identity. This cultural aspect has inherent qualities of social bonding through consumption and discourses about Indian indigenous cuisine. There are numerous examples of not mere 'tolerance' of multiple and local geographical cuisines but across the length and breadth of the nation and socially, individuals and families respect and embrace 'other' cuisines to great extents. In extreme cases, cuisine forms a very strong aspect of social discourse.

**(4) Jati-Gotra-Varna (Caste and Caste-related Identity and Community Constructs)**: Jati-Gotra-Varna engenders a sense of community and belongingness, with inherent levels of commensality, social conversation and social control based on individual capabilities and societal contributions (HHR, 2014). The above differs from the typical Marxist polemic discourses that often focus on class-interpreted caste-based classifications.

**(5) Dharma (Purpose of Life)**: A key concept emanating from Indian philosophy, Dharma means of what is 'established' and thus takes a 'rule-like' form with degrees of contextualizing for governing day-to-day behaviour, choices and decisions within the framework of dharmic deontologies.

When groups of people, whether Indian or non-Indian, would be compared against the above five descriptive values, those individuals scoring high on all five would definitely appear to have a high degree of 'Indianness', irrespective of the person of Indian origin's current citizenship status. Moreover, any person, with a sense of belonging to any group or community wherever in the world, would recognize our descriptive value-based cultural building blocks as having an understandable meaning and a clearly measurable impact on social dealings and day-to-day behaviour. Once the levels of 'Indianness' are thus defined, it will become clear that degrees of this 'Indianness' have impact on both a set of horizontal, call it superficial dimensions, and on dimensions operating in depth. Indeed, 'Indianness' might easily be forgotten on the surface, for example in an expatriation context, seemingly taking over non-Indian habits and lifestyle, adopting non-Indian dress codes, nuclear family living modes, and so on. In its vertical dimensions, however, 'Indianness' remains untainted, quite unaffected by its being uprooted from its natural habitat. Sometimes, with a diaspora-related distance settling in, 'Indianness', along the lines of the above building blocks, would indeed become stronger rather than weaker in its qualitative and quantitative measures.

Cultural competence, then, would be the faculty of being able to understand the self as well as the other against a set of descriptive cultural building blocks such as the above, and discovering the added value in one's outlook on life, by coming into touch with and being presented a mirror image by the other. The 'Indianness' values have a pervasive impact on the individual behaviours at the workplace. These are presented in the following section.

**Business singularities of 'Indianness'**

Having instigated awareness of intercultural matters and cultural competences through relevant descriptive cultural building blocks or key concepts, the intercultural learning facilitator should then shift focus to the workplace itself. Indeed, besides matters of social relevance, in which for instance non-Indians 'complain' about Indian tiffin-box habits, most of the worries are those that directly impact work methodologies, processes, matters of project management, heuristics and output or deliverables. Based on our day-to-day business practices, and with the same reasoning behind our preference to find building blocks that describe 'Indianness' rather than measuring Indian scores against Hofstedian national culture parameters, we have identified five essentials (singularities) of business culture, which have a major impact on Indian vs non-Indian collaboration and cooperation in teams, be it insourced, outsourced, or multi-sourced.

These business singularities are described below:

**(1) Vyavahaar** or expectations with regard to communicative outspokenness and rigidity is one of the key features of 'Indianness' identified and recognized even at first contact by non-Indians, constitutes of a perceived particular way of dealing with communication. Contrary to the typical office environment *talking-in-bullet-point* style, which is generally by far the preferred way to communicate in a professional environment, not excepting India, and which has been sustained by the *powerpointisation* of business communication all the way since the early nineties – Indians are perceived by some to communicate in dotted or *rangoli*-like patterns, that may be deemed to be 'difficult to interpret', let alone be managed by non-Indians. When analysed in dialogue with non-Indian observers, the communication style in question turns out to be clearly not the 'circular talk' as identified by the typical dilettante anthropologist. *Vyavahaar*, in our view, involves deviations of the communication arrow to 'other' aspects of the truth before arriving at the aimed destination, as well as implications of peer-support and group-related dynamics. We adhere to *Vyavahaar* as a denominator, loving the fact that its translation involves aspects of *behaviour*, *demeanour*, *character*, *usage*, *treatment*, *relation*, *usability*, *operability*, *feasibility*, and, interestingly, *tact* (Monier-Williams 1899; Böhtlingk 1879-1889; Varmma 1966). *Vyavahaar*, thus, means that communication is not straightforward, hesitant, lacks the typical western preference for assertiveness, is manifold, multiple, and checked for peer support. It is represented by, among many other non-verbal expressions, the so-called wobbly-head and is so often wrongly conceived as "does not speak the truth" (also see the stereotypes listed above) – whereas the style is by definition aimed at postponing ill-advised judgment and not speaking out before *truth* is thoroughly asserted. This singularity is influenced by aspects of *Dharma, Rishta* and the need for truth espoused in *Jan-Gan-Man* and *Satyamev Jayate*.

(2) **Nyaaya,** a generic term covering 'reasoning, 'logic' and 'method', builds on the above singularity and relies on India's long-standing tradition with regard to argumentative reasoning, mathematics and logic (Sen 2005). The expectations with regard to bipolar logic versus *chatushkoti* thinking and the use of tetralemmic logical operators (Westerhoff 2006), surprises non-Indians about their Indian colleagues' seemingly innate "incapacity" to get along with the traditional Aristotelian bipolar syllogisms. Rather than reasoning in terms of *yes* or *no*, or *true* and *not true*, 'Indianness' seems to indicate a natural preference for logical arguments known as *chatushkoti*, or the suite of four functions – an indivisible quaternity or tetralemma, as was developed by Nagarjuna (Reugg, 1981; Westerhoff, 2006) and contemporary Buddhist logicians, mainly at the unibversities of Taxila and Nalanda - and has played a major role in the *Buddha Dharma* logico-epistemological and other dharmic traditions such as the *Madhyamika* (Reugg, 1981; Shantarakshita 2005). Indeed, the *tetralemma* or *chatushkoti* approach is perceived by non-Indians as a predominant function of 'Indianness', pervading not only communication issues and sheer logical exchanges, but also work methodology, project management, and even social dealings at the workplace. We need mention that there is an obvious connection between the *rangoli*-like patterns of *vyavahaar* and application of tetralemmic logic: indeed, the roots of *nyaaya* are so deep and well-established that even the most dilettante person with a high degree of 'Indianness', who might never have heard of any of the above logical terminology, is essentially affected by it. In its aspect of 'method', *nyaaya* is extremely visible in Indian, or so-called vedic (scientific) mathematics where calculus and arithmetic are treated in ways completely alien to the non-Indian traditions, even if the latter are using essentially the same mathematical framework, which was merely 'translated' into 'non-Indianness' by al-Khwarizmi and others (Rosen 1831; Rashed 1994). From counting and multiplication to India's specific vedic numbering system, in which numbers higher than 9,999 are conceptualised in two-digit groups, or a mix of two- and three-digit groups (*lakh, karor, arab, kharab, neel*, etc.), rather than the three-digit format used in the entire 'Indianness'-less world – differences are so all-pervasive that individuals with a high degree of 'Indianness' do not even consider how severely affected they are by difference in this matter.

(3) **Gurutva**, literally "heaviness" or "office of the guru", deals with the expectations with regard to coping with authority and hierarchy, and means to acquire the necessary "gurutva" to execute efficient leadership. As covered earlier, the reliance on the authority of a guru goes back to the *guru-shishya-parampara* or the '*guru-shishya-tradition* of teaching and learning. One can wonder where the *guru* (the word means both "teacher" and "heavy") gets the *gurutva* ("heaviness", "authority") from, which credits her/him with the inherent right to teach, share, coach, mentor, tutor, and finally, evaluate and judge – all key responsibilities (KRA's) belonging to today's exemplary people managers and leaders, operating in standardized review meeting templates and evaluation cycles.

In this, 'Indianness' shows a clear tendency towards not the *leadership through competence* model so dearly favoured by 'Indianness-less' environments, but towards the *leadership through loyalty and benevolence* model, a.k.a. *paternal leadership* - as exemplified by the

*Kautilya's Arthashastras* and *Nitisutras* and other affiliated Indian sources. Illustrative of this leadership and people management contradiction is the sheer incapacity of the non-Indian to comprehend, or even fathom the intricacies of loyalty mechanisms such as the ones of Dronacharya and Ekalavya – a story in which the non-Indian consequently identifies with the latter, thereby obliterating from the record even the most basic loyalty standards and dilemmas of the *acharya*. In brief, 'Indianness' seems to favour an absolutely 'different' kind of people management and people leadership, in which family values are predominant, and in which the method of book-keeping loyalties and tabulating them into *loyalty debits* and *loyalty credits* is easily mistaken by non-Indians as opening the gates to 'business on the sly' and 'corruption'.

An aspect of learning in 'Indianness' is the outcome of how the logical, mathematical, and grammatical, but also the ritualistic and literary frameworks of competence, are instilled into education (*shiksha*). Major strings of knowledge are offered, by way of what basically comes down to rote learning. This means that the student is wired into deconstructing problems into chunks of readily digestible sub-sets, to which the solutions seem to be naturally and inherently present in the thinking patterns of the practitioner – a mechanism which is perceived to be detrimental to documentability, originality and creativity by the 'Indianness-less' onlooker, but which, on the contrary, can effectively provide a great deal of additional mental freedom to the natural freeloader. Add to this all the seemingly inherent dislike for writing (hence the long-standing tradition of oral transmission of knowledge – for example, the *Panchtantra*), exemplified in the reluctance for projects in which (software) documentation is key, and 'Indianness' gets an altogether broader and deeper meaning than could be fathomed.

(4) **Karma Yoga** – focuses on the techniques of intelligent actions. Indian culture sustains the thought that karma (actions) effects our lives in the present and in the future (Mulla and Krishnan 2013). Mulla and Krishnan (2013) offer a three-lobed cluster of developing an Indian code of moral conduct in which the assembled relative weight of the *ethics of autonomy*, the *ethics of community* and the *ethics of metaphysics* is, in the case of "Indianness", almost exclusively distributed among the latter two. Thus, Karma Yoga focuses on disciplined action and has expectations with regard to one's stand in relation to their work and life. While the purview of *dharmayoga* is more in the social and personal spheres, we treat *karmayoga* more in the work arena– mainly because of how it is seen from the perspective of the 'other', the non-Indian. This may seem all the more extravagant, since *karmayoga* in effect represents a near to zero boundary between 'work' and 'life'. Indeed, as perceived by non-Indian eyes, the modern discussion of 'finding the balance' is abundantly non-Indian in nature: Indians, so the adagio says, are always 'at work', if not anything else, than by the naked fact of their seemingly unlimited availability. Not alone do dictums on serviceability and ad hoc availability prevail in common Indian parlance (Das 2010), but the tradition of equating one's identity with what she or he does in life germinates with the emergence of caste as the foundation stone of India's organizational dynamics of society. Further, he argues that such thinking may have blossomed ever since and remains to be a

driver in Indian corporate life and relevant business expectations.

(5) **Jugaad** is a specific Indian term for heuristics or the mechanics of problem solving – and is often seen as "the art of coming up with innovative workarounds". As a singularity in our context, it focuses on managing expectations with regard to procedural rigidity vs. degrees of 'jugaadism'. One of the strongest arguments for this could indeed be the (near untranslatable) concept of *jugaad*. Often referred to as *frugal innovation* (Radjou, Prabhu and Ahuja 2012), and in our discourse as *heuristics* or 'the art of problem solving', *jugaad* is really much more than just this. Having spent entire workshops discussing the concept, based on multimedia examples of what is suspected to be examples of it, we have come to understand *jugaad* in terms of the following descriptors: (a) the use of unconventional means in order to achieve a commonly known purpose or goal, (b) tinkering with (un)conventional means in order to maximize quantity and quality of output, (c) frugality, (d) outside-the-boxness, (e) involving trust as an inherent part of its value proposition and (f) the impossibility of "impossible". In other words, *jugaad* permits the practitioner to always come up with a way, or to never say *no*, and to do this at basically the lowest possible expense. On the other hand, *jugaadi* solutions are (g) nearly always impermanent or non-durable, and (h) inherently non-scalable. But *solutions* they are indeed, and they are a trademark of teams in which high incidence of 'Indianness' prevails, whether this be through the presence of Indians, or not.

Incidently, when organised constructively, "jugaad" has proved to be an excellent business partner in "agile" process environments.

**The extravagance of heuristics**. More often than not, all the above leaves the non-Indian perplexed with regard to coping with 'Indianness' as such - and this goes as much in the case of working with the so-called 'occidentalized' Indian expatriate, as when dealing with offshore colleagues in a multi-sourced working model. Most of all, 'Indianness' is perceived as alien, wanton of the originality and creativity which is necessary to be entrusted with anything other than purely executive and maintenance work. This could be one of the reasons why 'Indianness' has not come to the fore till date. Exceptions, such as Pattanaik (2013), so far have not portrayed 'Indianness' as a blend of unique features and qualities, thus unleashing a new potential in all aspects of business practice and business life.

## Discussion and conclusion

### Towards new forms of 'Indianness'

As we have hinted at above, most clearly the conventional, call them "Hofstedian", models to describe business culture are not equipped to deal with the new kind of 'Indianness' which emerges from modern Indian business participation in ventures with non-Indians. There is no such thing as a 'national' version of 'Indianness'. Rather, a new 'Indian culture' is gradually taking shape – within, and outside of, the Indian geographical cradle, and by and with individuals and communities which are not necessarily or essentially *desi* in nature. Using the above 5 values and 5 business singularities, of 'Indianness', we are dealing with an

intrinsically dynamic framework of reference, which permits the user to understand 'Indianness' as a qualitative and quantitative feature of individuals, existing in relationship with peer communities and operating in teams, working on common projects and accomplishing commonly committed targets and goals. The above singularities are informed by the rich verbal and established traditions central in the upbringing and social interactions on Indians.

**The USP's of 'Indianness'**

We have seen that often 'Indianness' is being either disregarded or bluntly denied by Indian businesspeople, who deem it to be a stumbling block on the road to success, and who sell the self-perceived absence of it as a bonus to their clients. We have also seen that this negationist approach generally fails, since traces of deep and vertically rooted 'Indianness' have a tendency to take their possessors in their unawares. For this reason, 'Indianness' being apparent in all aspects of working with Indians, it is a major reason of fear for India's non-Indian business partners, and for non-Indian members of staff in their dealings with Indian colleagues. Hence, we have proposed a framework in which to describe this 'Indianness', in order to make sense of these qualifiable and quantifiable aspects–and, most of all, manageable. We have also proposed that 'Indianness' be a generic competence, which can be possessed, developed and expressed in degrees, by anyone who undertakes to excel in it, ethnic, genetic or geographical attributions notwithstanding. With all this, we have before us a well-documented competence, with the help of which companies and business partners can contribute substantially to the global business culture.

In summary this paper sets out to analyse data from the Indian IT industry, wherein we advance our understanding of cultural singularities of 'Indianness'. In most outsourcing situations, neither of the two parties typically possesses any knowledge of 'the other' beyond a very rudimentary set of stereotypes, biases and prejudices. The research context of an intercultural meeting place of IT and business process outsourcing firms' overseas subsidiaries, Belgium in this case, allow the authors to identify cultural singularities that typify 'Indianness'. Finally, our contribution here in this study is a departure from the normal Hofstedian categories, which are mostly descriptive and it is uncertain which culture they describe, since neither the disparate social or geographical stratagems of culture are clearly, or sensibly, defined. 'Indianness', when defined along a set of proposed parameters, becomes more than merely a descriptive method of social, private, and professional behavioural traits (of Indians). Rather, it constitutes a professional competency, valorising qualities which may or may not be present in global teams. We envisage that when played out as an asset, 'Indianness' should be acquirable by anybody, at any time, and it should and could be a key aspect of successfully positioning those who are endowed with strong degrees of it, whether they be "Indians" or not. Thus from a managerial and practical perspective too, 'Indianness' volunteers to be a USP to Indian companies venturing on the outsourcing market, a value proposition which has the possibility to outlive others, such as advantages in pricing/cost.

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