INSIDE THE INDIAN BUSINESS MIND

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A Tactical Guide for Managers

**Katherine C. Zubko and
Raj R. Sahay**

PRAEGER

To our parents

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Preface

Every book has a starting point. For the one that you are holding in your hands right now that point of conception was in the foreign language section of the Boston Public Library in Copley Square. One crisp fall day in 2005, two people had followed the arrows matching the appropriate call number to meet in an aisle of tall metal bookshelves lined with dictionaries and grammars from Arabic to Swahili. Up on a ladder, Raj was pulling out the title *Teach Yourself Hindi* just as Kate rounded the corner of the aisle.

When the pair realized they had been seeking the same book, a conversation began. Raj was in the process of helping a client who would be traveling to India on business. The client's company had expectations about what the tasks and outcomes should be, but had not provided much training on how to achieve those goals within a completely different cultural setting. While Raj was giving one-on-one advice on how to negotiate cultural issues, he also was in search of resources to help his client acquire some language skills before her departure.

Kate was a Ph.D. student in the process of writing her dissertation on South Asian religion and culture. After returning from conducting research in Chennai, she would often get calls from the partners or friends of colleagues who were working in the private sector or for nonprofit organizations. These people were being sent to India as part of their work, but they felt that their places of employment were not preparing them for the cultural issues they could encounter in trying to meet the goals of their business interactions. In the midst of the daily writing routine, she began to meet people for coffee or talk by phone to answer questions and give advice. This had led her to the library that day to assess new sources she could offer to these people.

The amount of misperceptions about India and stereotypes that both of us witnessed in our work and travel experiences was a major

topic of our conversations. One day we began to list several of these, many of which had come from some of our personal narratives as an Indian man working in the United States and abroad, and as an American woman working in India, as well as hearing the stories of our colleagues and friends.

Raj's Story

Arriving in the United States in the early 1990s to enter an MBA program, I encountered my share of cultural shock on campus as well as in corporate settings that left me shocked, surprised, and on some occasions totally bewildered.

Coming from a social background that was very hierarchical and a culture that inculcated a great deal of respect for elders and teachers, I was astonished to see students addressing their professors by their first names. Once I went to see a finance professor, Charles Finnerty, who suggested that I should call him Chuck when I addressed him as "sir," which probably made him uncomfortable. On another occasion I felt aghast when my classmates refused an accounting professor's request to cancel a class to attend a personal emergency since they were not interested in a makeup class over the weekend. I was at my wit's end to see my classmates consuming food and drinks during lectures and sometimes sitting with their legs raised up on chairs, pointing their feet in the direction of the teacher.

Later at work, although I admired the straightforward talk and love for punctuality of my colleagues, I was intrigued by their approach to relationships, personal as well as professional. To me, it seemed transactional and had a rather short-term orientation. I interpreted love for fierce individuality and total freedom as a bit immoral since it ignored family and larger social values. At the same time, when I went back to work in India for a few years, I confronted some of the deeply ingrained local cultural habits at work that should not have affected me but they did. They made me uneasy and a misfit amidst my own people, such as a casual attitude toward timeliness and hierarchical work environments bordering on reverence for the boss to name a few. I could very well visualize the plight of American or European managers working with their counterparts and teams in India.

My experiences and cultural encounters in corporate environments both in the United States and India had often provoked me to imagine a situation and the outcome when the two cultures would collide. I could clearly see the confrontation and confusion ruling the

roost unless there is an honest and concerted effort *sans* prejudice to understand one another as people and human beings. I was both a student and a victim of the chasm separating the two sides but the idea to embark on a journey to bridge this gap, though germinating in my head for quite a while, didn't reach its fruition until I ran into Kate that afternoon in 2005 at the Boston Public Library.

Kate's Story

I landed in the middle of the night in India for the first time during the academic year that would witness the turning of the millennium. In fall 1999, I had earned a one-year travel grant to expand upon the two years of graduate studies in South Asian religion and culture I had just completed at Harvard University. On this first trip, as well as another subsequent 10-month trip for research for my Ph.D., I encountered several issues regarding logistics that my academic studies had no way of preparing me to handle.

The first few months of research involved setting up interviews with several local people involved in the support of arts and culture—not just performers, but also program organizers, grant agencies, auditorium board members, arts magazine editors, and corporate and individual donors. Without a liaison, I attempted to call different institutional bodies to clarify information and arrange meetings. Inevitably, I would be passed along until I reached a person who would agree to meet with me to answer my questions.

I would show up at the designated time, with my digital recorder and notebook, and I would be asked to have a seat. It did not matter if I was in someone's home or at an office, often tea was brought while I waited. Many times the person whom I had an appointment with was not available at all or not even present and I was asked to come back another time. "When?" I would ask, with the reply being some vague time frame—this afternoon, tomorrow morning, and so on. An exact time was not usually given.

In the beginning, I had tried to line up several appointments on a single day, which did not work very well. If people showed up late, I had to decide whether to cut short the interview to go on to the next meeting, or call and reschedule. If I went to the next meeting on time, often that person would not be available. When I did meet with people, within 10 minutes I found out that this was not the person who had the information I needed, and asked to speak to someone who could answer my questions. "Oh, yes" or "we'll see"

were common responses, even when sometimes the answer was really a "no."

These early experiences were frustrating, and I resisted drawing negative conclusions that would not have resolved the roadblocks I was facing. My American cultural background brought expectations about time and appointments, access to information, and even types of direct communication. I could choose to hold tight to these expectations, or even feed into stereotypes of punctuality and what might be perceived as dishonest—if something can't be done, a "no" would be the more direct or "honest" answer. I could remain frustrated, or reevaluate these expectations and see if there were clues I was missing that would help me complete my work. If I could understand why and then learn how to negotiate within the system, I would be able to create more successful interactions.

Moving Past Stereotypes

Our monthly conversations led to the realization that the types of resources available on the market for people going to India on business were not sufficient to help people navigate past the stereotypes. We had scanned the shelves and bestseller lists, finding many books describing the overall big picture in the interlinked globalized economies of the world—India and China were both in the spotlight as economists, journalists, and political theorists marked seismic shifts and trends, and digested them to the general readership market. As we continued our hunt and scoured the Internet, many etiquette books and articles were also available—lists of do's and don'ts that people should memorize. Some books on international negotiation also provided, in bullet point format, some tips on communication styles and gestures that should be engaged or avoided in different countries. Third, there were also books available on "Doing Business in India"—a promising title or subtitle that caught our attention. Each of these genres is helpful on a certain level, but we found that many of them hardly discussed culture beyond the stereotypes or to the degree of depth necessary to really prepare people.

While the United States dominates the attention of Indian executives through business school case studies, cable TV, media channels, magazines, and the Internet, giving them a broad familiarity with the popular culture, U.S. executives and Americans at large are quite uninformed about India, its history, and culture. They know about India and Indians primarily through Hollywood movies, their local Indian

food restaurant, the consumer explosion of Indian goods in style and design magazines and clothing, and to some extent on the basis of limited interactions with the immigrant Indian American community. Most Americans know India for the beautiful Taj Mahal. Religious seekers are drawn by the promise of its spiritual centers in Varanasi, Haridwar, Rishikesh, and the Himalayas, and some even write up their experiences that become *New York Times* bestsellers. But for most Americans, India is still the land of snake charmers, spiritual gurus, yoga, holy cows, and karma.

Raj and I knew firsthand that the lack of solid cultural information about India, along with stereotypes and misperceptions, creates major roadblocks in the interactions of businesspeople between our two cultures. We could fill a whole book demonstrating the problems these misperceptions cause just in the business environment alone. We realized that in order to recognize and move past these obstacles, it would be more effective to start by highlighting some of the outstanding features of Indian culture. We would then translate these cultural features in such a way as to not only break past those stereotypes, but provide templates that avoid the problems and misperceptions to begin with and identifies and corrects those already in place.

While adequate cultural information does prevent problems, and can be used to troubleshoot and resolve many snags, having a high level of cultural awareness is only a starting point. Any cross-cultural endeavor is bound to run into some unexpected issues. Even the writing of this book as authors from different cultures led to differences that we had no way of knowing about until we started collaborating on a project together. For example, once we had our cultural templates chosen, we were brainstorming different case examples that would best illustrate the translation of these ideas into business contexts. We found out we had very different approaches: Raj often chose to highlight tried and true case studies from large corporate models, and touched upon general public knowledge drawn from movies, news items, and history he absorbed without reference to specific sources. Kate, on the other hand, sought cases based on individual experiences that, with a personal voice, either Raj or his colleagues had experienced or could provide the seed for a narrative. In both of these approaches, the aim was to reach our main audience—the American manager traveling to India on business. Which approach would work best? How would each of these approaches serve to translate the models into practical tools?

In this process, we discovered that each of our approaches was based on a culture-specific preference for different types of knowledge to

serve as the highest form of authority. In American culture, individual experience is valued for its insight and unique perspective. In Indian culture, the highest compliment is absorption and acknowledgement of those who have gone before as having more value than one's own narrative.

Neither of these approaches is wrong. They just place the emphasis in different places in terms of cultural ideas of what holds more weight. We were frustrated at first, in that we felt each of us were unable to communicate well. Once we discovered it was a difference in cultural approaches, we were able to begin the process of mixing the two styles to come up with what we hope are not only the best illustrations of each cultural template, but an accurate representation of different cultural approaches. You will see a bit of both here, from Raj's ahistorical overview of the culture of India in chapter one, to Kate's structural features that include for each ingredient a bullet point summary and inclusion of very specific individual voices. Cultural translation requires a willingness to collaborate from both sides to be able to find common ground.

Overall, the cultural models suggested in this book are the best tools we have to offer in order for you to gain an important versatility with which to adapt to any business situation within which you find yourself. This book identifies and translates tools that are valued and recognizable within Indian culture as strategies that will improve your interactions and transactions with your Indian business associates. Happy and successful travels!

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