About Indian Managers And Organizations

Ashok Malhotra
Organisation Consultant and Author

A Summary of the Address by Mr Ashok Malhotra during the talk on ‘Indian Managers and Organizations’ held on 7th January 2019 at Chennai

The tension between Indianness and the ways of the corporate world has often been commented upon and studied by both practitioners and scholars. In my recent book “Indian Managers and Organisations: Boons and Burdens”, I have explored this tension both through empirical data and insights from several scholars. The focus has been on understanding how Indian managers feel, think and act, and how their Indianness impacts organisational processes such as decision making, conflict resolution, authority relations, peer dynamics, team work etc. The data used in the book has been gathered through the EUM framework (Existential Universe Mapper). This framework has been developed by me and has been deployed by me and many of my other colleagues, in more than 100 organizations covering more than 5000 people.

One of the key features of this framework is that it does not use categories of types and traits. Instead it tries to understand the “interplay” between multiple aspects and focusses on “pattern recognition”. Consequently, when the tension between Indianness and corporate imperatives, is seen through the EUM lens, we find that it is not just a “problem” but also has tremendous creative potential. This tension carries in it the seeds of new perspectives which are of great relevance not just for “Indian corporates” but for a much larger human context.

In the following paragraphs, I have tried to engage with some of the themes covered in the book, through the format of a dialogue i.e. a series of Questions and Responses.

1. What is Indianness?

   India is a large and diverse country. There are significant differences between people belonging to different communities of region, religion, language, socio-economic levels etc. It is therefore futile to look at anything like a monolithic “Indian character”- with uniform habits, practices, personality traits etc. Indianness is best understood as a perspective - a way of life and a set of beliefs and assumptions about human condition. It includes elements like primacy of the belonging system, context- sensitive thinking, preference for a holistic rather than reductionist approach, nature of individual agency, nature of power relations etc. This perspective is not exclusive to Indians. However, it can perhaps be discerned more easily amongst people of the subcontinent, because it is the basis of our civilizational identity.

2. Is the notion of civilizational identity relevant in a global village?

   While there is much in common between different civilizations, there are also significant differences- not just in terms of their customs and practices, but also in terms of their beliefs and assumptions about human existence. Every civilization has to deal with the same human imperatives, but their ways of engagement differ. Thus, the uniqueness of a civilization can not be understood in terms of absolutes of mutually exclusive categories. Instead, it has to be seen
as relative emphasis or tilt in dealing with dualities that may have a contrary pull. One civilization may place greater emphasis on “contentment” whereas another may emphasise “ambition”. Similarly, some civilizations may be more individual-centric, whereas others may be more community-centric. While talking of civilizational identity, it is important to remember that the idea is not to stereotype but only to acknowledge these nuances.

With globalisation many of these nuances get ignored and a certain homogeneity is assumed. In this homogeneous common universal culture, civilizations which are better placed in a political and economic sense, have a distinct advantage. Thus, their perspective tends to acquire an aura of universal desirability, and the civilizations which are relatively poorly placed are seen as regressive. It is not accidental that many of us use the terms “Modern” and “Western” almost interchangeably. The assumption is that progress equals westernisation. Thus, what we call universal culture is in fact not universal at all. It is merely a dominance of a single perspective (Anglo-Saxon) over a host of other perspectives including Indianness.

There are two main difficulties with this.

a) People of other civilizations are forced to adapt to ways which are alien to them and have to live with the resultant tension and dissonance. This also leaves them with huge amounts of guilt and shame, and,

b) The world at large is deprived of the wisdom inherent in these so called backward and regressive civilizations.

3. What is the significance of the lens developed in this study?

The preponderance of the Anglo-Saxon perspectives is also reflected in the lenses (conceptual frameworks) which we deploy in understanding individual behaviour and collective processes. When we deploy an alien framework to understand ourselves, we are likely to get a very distorted picture. This is so, because the framework is based upon very different set of beliefs and assumptions. The situation is somewhat akin to the proverbial ugly duckling, who though born out of the egg of a turkey, keeps comparing itself to ducks, because that is the only reference point that it has. For example, context-sensitivity when seen through a context-free lens looks like hypocrisy or expediency. Similarly, relationship orientation, when seen through the lens of individualistic orientation looks like lack of agency, low ego strength and immature dependency. It is therefore not surprising that expressions like “you know how Indians are” often have a derogatory tonality. Inability to look at ourselves through our own eyes was poignantly expressed by the great Rabindranath Tagore in his statement “we have bought our spectacles at the expense of our eyesight.”

In this process, we not merely indignify ourselves but also get alienated from ourselves, particularly in our professional spheres. Thus, one often comes across people who become very Indian in their personal and social lives but are unable to integrate their Indianness in their professional lives. In the professional space, Indianness is either regarded as irrelevant or a liability. If one wishes to gain a more accurate and empathetic understanding of the Indian situation, we need to have a framework which can pick up the nuances of our civilizational predispositions.

4. What is EUM and how is it different?

The EUM framework attempts to understand the Individual, the organization, and the relationship between the two. It has been inspired by Claire Graves’ theory of levels of existence, which in
turn has strong resonance with Shri Aurobindo’s theory of chakras. It is based on the premise that human nature is not a set thing but is ever evolving/emerging. Further, it looks at human psychology in a holistic manner, which includes individual’s needs, motivations, beliefs, values and conditions of existence, together and in relationship to each other. EUM also has strong resonance with Anekantavada (Pluralism) – the fundamental doctrine of Jainism, which rests on the notion that “reality is perceived differently from diverse points of view, and that no single point of view is the complete truth”. Other significant features of the framework are emphasis on contextuality, Interplay and pattern recognition.

The framework posits six Universes which reside within an Individual/Organization which are in constant interaction with each other as also the environment. It is the pattern of this interplay which the EUM instruments try to decipher - both at the individual level as also at the organizational level.

Most (by no means, all) western frameworks are linear and deploy mutually exclusive and discrete categories (e.g. strengths/weaknesses, true/false, introverted/extroverted, submissive/dominating etc.) The psychometric instruments based on such frameworks tend to focus on either “personality types” or “personality traits/competencies etc.” They are akin to putting an object (in this case a person) under the microscope and studying its properties. In sharp contrast to this, in EUM, the “Self” is more akin to a verb rather than a noun - it is held as a flowing river or a dynamic configuration of multiple elements, somewhat like a kaleidoscope. Thus, in EUM, the individual or the organization are not categorised as “This” or “that”. Instead they are seen as endless potentialities. The attempt is to understand the forces (both internal and external) which will help or hinder the actualisation of these potentialities. For example, the same person may become highly expressive or outgoing in some situations, and extremely withdrawn and reserved in other situations. Labelling him/her as extroverted or introverted or a mix of the two, is not as meaningful as to understand the multiple forces which are at play and the pattern of the individual's engagements with them.

5. What are some of the significant findings from this study?

The most significant finding of this work is that there are two competing perspectives which reside within most Indian managers. The first perspective (which has been named P1) is based on the corporate imperatives, which are largely based on the prevalent notions about management and leadership. The second perspective (P2) is based on their civilizational predisposition i.e. Indianness.

Many Indian managers are able to integrate the two perspectives and achieve phenomenal results. However, many others are unable to do so and hence a large part of their energy is expended in managing the tension generated by the competing pulls. While this may not impair their managerial efficacy, it seriously damages their creativity and leadership potential. It becomes difficult for them to act with conviction and legitimize/authorise themselves to act on behalf of the System. Thus, we find that the same manager who can act firmly and decisively in respect of his/her own area of responsibility, becomes extremely tentative when invited to influence and impact the larger context.

The key to unlocking the potential of the Indian manager lies in the ability to co-hold the two perspectives. This co-holding is not just applicable to Indian managers but has a much larger
applicability. While humanity has progressed and benefited considerably from P1 (particularly post industrialization) its limitations and downside are becoming far too obvious in the postmodern era.

6. What are the main difference between P1 and P2?

There are three strands through which P1 and P2 can be distinguished from each other. These are:

a) Homo economics versus Home reciprocans

The homo economicus approach rests on the belief that human beings are essentially rational and self-centred creatures, who plays the role of a discerning consumer (who maximizes utility) and ambitious producer (who maximizes profits). In contrast, for homo reciprocans, profit is not as important as fair distribution of goods in a community. Consequently, in reciprocal societies, exchange is impacted and governed by social relationships and kinship.

b) Regional Ingenieur versus Bricoleur

Rational Ingenieur refers to someone who uses or drives the engine. The Industrial revolution has seeded this paradigm which has driven globalization and designed the engines of its growth and scalability. Within this paradigm, logic, rationality, blueprints, standard operating procedures and goal driven purposive behaviour are celebrated. In contrast to this, Levi Strauss articulated an alternative paradigm of Bricolage, which he defined as “the process of evolution not as a product of design or an unfolding of a predetermined plan or template – but rather as the makeshift adaptation of existing structures and functions to new ends”.

c) Agonic versus Hedonic

Ethologist Michael Chance has described two basic modes in which a community is organised - Agonic and Hedonic. The Agonic mode is based upon the collective’s perception and experience of threat, power and anxiety, and the group is essentially a source of defence against external threat. Consequently, the group is organized around that individual who has the maximum fighting capability and the intra-group relations are marked by mutual defensiveness. On the other hand, Hedonic mode is based upon playful catching up and mutual support. Such groups are organized around the individual who has maximum prestige which is derived either through altruistic acts or demonstration of superior skills. Consequently, the focus shifts from negative attention (being potentially harmful) to positive attention (being competent and potentially helpful).

These three strands do not operate in isolation but are intimately connected to each other. Homo economicus, Rational Ingenieur and Agonic, resonate and reinforce each other. Together they are being called P1. On the other hand, Homo reciprocans, Bricoleur and Hedonic constitute P2.

Various organizational processes acquire very different meanings in these two perspectives. For example, contribution in P1 is likely to be associated with success and achievement, whereas in P2, it will become a function of dedication to duty and commitment to the System. P1 will rely more on structural provisions whereas P2 will rely more on social processes. P1 will emphasise transparency and consistent application of rules, whereas P2 will emphasise caring and compassion.

Neither is superior or inferior to the other. They just focus on two different aspects, which both conflict and complement each other.
7. How do these difference show up in real life?

In the book, the difference between P1 and P2 has been exemplified through two characters- Hema and Ravi. Hema is a high ranker from an Ivy league business school. After eight years with a reputed consulting organization, she has recently taken over as a business head in a global pharmaceutical firm. She is assertive, dynamic, extremely good with numbers, and has great understanding of business strategy and marketing. She has set ambitious goals for the business both in terms of performance and transformation. She likes to engage with her team in a “professional” manner, without getting caught with social niceties and sentimentality.

Ravi is the plant manager in the same company. He has spent nearly 30 years with the firm and was instrumental in setting up the plant. He has the reputation of being sincere, committed, and a man who understands technology, operational rules, safety norms and cost control. He prides himself that not merely has the plant been able to deliver on its production/cost targets, but that the team running it, is just like a family- loyal and friendly. He likes to keep a close eye on what is going on in the plant, as also between people and ensures that they are protected from all unwarranted external influences and interferences.

Hema and Ravi are not just two different people. Often, they reside within the same person and get caught in an adversarial relationship. To Ravi, Hema appears as pushy, aggressive, selfish, over-ambitious and non-caring. Similarly, to Hema, Ravi appears as old-school, close-minded, clannish fossil who has outlived his utility.

Our data suggests that for many Indian managers, Hema has emerged as a strong role model which they wish to emulate. They aspire to be Hema-like, but do not find it very easy to become like her, particularly because of their unease with personal ambition, conflict and aggression. On the other hand, they find it easy to identify with Ravi but hold him with some disdain. They fear that becoming like Ravi, will prevent them from keeping pace with the fast-changing environment. Simultaneously, they believe that most other people are Hema-like (particularly in its negative side). Thus, becoming more like Hema is not just a desire, but also a compulsion. The assumption is that if one has to survive in this “dog-eat-dog” world, then one has no choice but to become like Hema. Ravi may be held with some degree of nostalgia for the good old days but can only be treated as a relic of the past, who has little to offer for the present and the future.

When Hema and Ravi are in sync with each other, understand each other and see each other as a resource, they produce magical results. On the other hand, when they get caught in an adversarial relationship, what ensues is tremendous waste and dysfunctional conflicts. Thus, a healthy integration between Hema (P1) and Ravi (P2) is absolutely critical.

8. How can this integration be achieved?

There are no easy simple answers to this. Broadly speaking, we need a two-pronged approach:-

a) To facilitate the Indian manager to get over his/her squeamishness and difficulty in embracing P1. This will entail:

- Learning to exercise Agency in a responsible manner.

  This does not come very easily to many Indians. We either disown all volition and become mute spectators OR act arbitrarily/express recklessly with no concern for impact on others. In order to exercise Agency in a responsible manner, we need to learn to manage (as against suppressing or indiscriminately discharging) our aggressive impulses, own up our needs and desires without shame and guilt, and most importantly learn to exercise lateral and upward authority.
• Learning to harness creative potential of differences
The primary strategy deployed by many Indians in dealing with differences is that of “live and let live”. While this is good for peaceful co-existence, it also leads to sub-optimum performance, “chalta hai” attitude and restricting our sphere of responsibility and influence to a narrowly defined group - which directly concerns us. In order to harness the creative potential of differences, we have to learn to engage with conflict more directly, overcome our apprehension of potential accusation, become comfortable with non-affiliative relationships in task situations and engage with larger systemic issues in a pro-active manner.

b) To incorporate the wisdom of P2 in our notions of Management and Organizational process.
The prevalent notions about Management are largely based on P1 perspective – many of these will need to be reconfigured for a meaningful integration of P1 and P2. Some of the obvious shifts that we need to make, are as follows-
  o Emphasis on process and institutional processes rather than only tangible results.
  o Greater focus on wholesomeness rather than only relentless growth.
  o Emphasis on mutual respect and dignity in relationships and not just transactional efficacy.
  o Engaging with employees as responsible members rather than as customers or children
  o More space to open-ended and symbolic expressions and not just fact based close ended communication
  o Redefining competencies in ways that acknowledge support roles and infrastructure contribution.
  o Spaces for sharing feelings and promoting “dialogue” and not just formal presentations and “debate”

Needless to say, this is only an indicative list. The basic issue is that we need some fundamental departures in the way we look at the world of management and work organisations.

9. What benefits can be expected from this integration?
It is not just a question of benefits - it is a necessity. We can not escape the imperatives of modern-day living. Nor can we deny our civilizational predispositions. These are not a piece of clothing which can be discarded at will. Whether we like it or not, our dispositions will show up, no matter how much we try to suppress them. Simultaneously, they are not frozen moulds of captivity – they offer sufficient elbow room and degrees of freedom to reinterpret and recalibrate to suit the context of present times.

However, this will be possible only if we are also willing to review our notions about management and nature of work organizations. In fact, this review is necessary in any case. The downside of excessive reliance on P1 is already becoming evident and it is being increasingly recognized that we need perspectives which also provide space for P2 type of thinking.

In this respect, Indian managers are in a great position to become torch bearers of this integration. Their primary socialization (family, culture, mythology etc.) teaches them the imperatives of P2, whereas their secondary socialization (schooling, professional training, work experience etc.) equips them to deal with the imperatives of P1. For this to happen it is important that we understand, accept and dignify our civilizational heritage without glorifying or condemning it.