

ESADE

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ESADE

Management Gurus: An Indian Soundtrack on Leadership and Spirituality

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In a university context the world over, it is not unusual to find preferential treatment given to the study of certain subjects that stand out for their importance or for their public interest. In these cases, one of the preferred options is the establishment of a chair, understood to represent a unit of academic excellence.

The ESADE Chair in LeadershipS and Democratic Governance proposes developing a programme to explore the questions put forward on this subject. The Chair is intended to promote a permanent forum for dialogue between organisations (companies, administrations, NGOs) and actors (entrepreneurs, directors, political, social, civil and union representatives, etc.), currently committed to addressing the challenges of governing a world that is at once global and local. It also aims to deal with the challenge of studying and promoting innovative forms of leadership suitable for today's complex environments.

The Chair's promoters are:



Introduction



It is always a pleasure to come to ESADE; thank you for inviting me. Let me start by stating what my basic line of work is. I try to combine aspects of Indian spirituality, Indian sacredness –aspects intrinsic to Indian culture– with management practices that are largely Western. So what I am going to present to you is how I see a “management guru”. This contribution is also called “An Indian Soundtrack” because although I now live in New Zealand –I have been living there for the last five years– I am originally from India, and my fascination and my passion for Indian epistemologies remain.

When I say “Indian epistemologies”, I would like you to conjure up a few images of India in your mind; we will come back to that in a few moments. Very often, when one thinks of India, one thinks of poverty, one thinks of people who are struggling, and, more recently, of jobs in the West that are being moved to the East (outsourcing). But the question I want to take as a starting point is: what are the ways in which people understand things? How do they see knowledge? How do they translate their own understanding into action?

I should point out since the beginning that, whilst India has many different religions, I have chosen for these considerations the Hindu and Buddhist points of view. Thus, the Islamic viewpoint is not included, and neither is the Christian viewpoint, nor the Sufi, nor the Farsi, nor the Bahá’í viewpoint.

What we will try to see is whether a person who is in management can function as a guru, can function as a leader, can function as someone who is able to translate words into actions which are relevant to society, to the economy and to the historical legacy of a nation.

Who or what is a “management guru”? The etymology of the word guru is gu and ru: someone who illuminates the darkness. Therefore, if one is a leader or a guru, is one expected to illuminate the darkness? Is there darkness? What do you define as darkness? A thousand questions...

For a number of years now, I have been using the story format, the parable format, to teach and talk about different aspects. Therefore, I shall share a few parables with you, which are based on the consultancy work I have done in a number of organisations in India.

I had a consultancy company for ten years. The considerations I will be talking about are based on interactions with organisations which usually lasted for a period of three years. Because I am an educator, a teacher, in this work I also kept asking myself: how do we develop knowers and learners who, in grappling with knowledge and action, can move beyond Western templates and find resonance in Otherness? Which, of course, then leads us to ask: what is Otherness?

I wish to underline the fact that the parables that I shall be sharing with you are based on the experiences gained from the consultancy assignments. We would go into these organisations every month and spend time there, from between eighteen hours a month to forty-eight hours a month to two hundred hours a month, every month for thirty-six months. The goal was to set the organisation on the path towards economic viability. However, our modus operandi was that, in order to set something on this path and to ensure this economic viability will last, you have to be able to comprehend what individuals stand for.

The assignments were carried out in the labour-intensive textile sector, which employs



35 million people, primarily from the rural and semi-rural areas, where 65% of Indians reside. In the consultancy assignments our basic approach was to see development as freedom. Some of you are no doubt familiar with the work of Amartya Sen, who says that development is freedom because it enhances economic, social and political freedom. That is true development. The words spiritual and sacred do not come into this, so far.

My work involves interdisciplinary scholarship and I believe that, besides being a reflective practitioner –to use the words of Donald Schön –, I like to be pragmatic and use process

consultation from the work of Edgar Schein. If you have a thought, you have to ask what action results from that thought. As we say in the East, to know and not to use is not to know. Therefore, I hope that some of these thoughts or ideas can be implemented.

I devoted over 2.000 hours to consultancy in a dozen labour-intensive organisations ranging in size from 200 to 3,500 employees. In case any of you are working on gender issues, I would just like to add that most of the employees in these organisations –99.9%– were men. The only women there were cleaners, and may be a couple of secretaries.

**The Indian context,
the image of India**



Before going into the parables, we will start by considering the image you have of India. What are the images that come into your mind when you think of India?

- *Rabindranath Tagore.*

- *Mahatma Gandhi.*

Good, the word *mahatma* comes from the Sanskrit: *maha* means great, and *atman* means soul. Thus, he was the 'Great Soul'. Which were his key points? I would underline respect for nature, for traditions, for other people, and non-violence, or *ahimsa*, which was one of the things that he used in order to move the entire nation.

- *For me India is like an explosion of life, different religions, different people, different colours, everything living... It is different.*

Different and an explosion of life. I like that description. Many people who go to India for the first time tend to feel overwhelmed by the colours, by the noise, by the pollution, by the poverty, and also by the riches that are there, which you see when you go to the museums, or when you look at the jewellery that women tend to wear. Thank you for that. What else?

- *Maybe we should mention poverty here.*

Poverty is another aspect. In India, 45% of the population –if I have my figures right– live below the poverty line, on less than two dollars a day. Therefore, poverty is a major aspect. What else?

- *A lot of people.*

Yes, a lot of people, over 1.000 million. In 2030, India's population will surpass that of China. However, because the fertility rate is higher in India, you have many more young people, and therefore consumer-wise there will be many

more Indians who can work in comparison with China. The developmental model is also different from China's. That is probably one of the reasons why China has grown so fast in terms of the GDP and why it refuses to do anything about its foreign currency, irrespective of pressure from other countries.

- *A high rate of growth in the economy.*

Yes, a high rate of growth in the economy, which has also left a lot of people behind. I will come back to that aspect later, linking it to poverty.

Let us look at the Indian context. Some of the items are often viewed by people in the West as "the other", as something exotic. For example the saris, carpets, tapestries, etc. But there is also Bollywood, larger than Hollywood, and IT outsourcing. India is a good place for software, for computers, for doing all the back-office services for insurance and for medical transfers, etc.

At the same time, India has 25% of the world's undernourished inhabitants, in other words 216 million people –more than Sub-Saharan Africa–, and 400 million who cannot read or write, with an adult male literacy rate of 45% –for women it will be even higher – and an unemployment rate of 9.5%.

India annually churns out 1.3 million graduates, of varying quality, many of whom are very good. 40% of the scientists at NASA are Indian. A lot of the people in Silicon Valley are Indian.

Approximately 40% of Indian children leave school by the age of ten. That is another aspect. You have got a large population, you have got illiteracy, and you have got these children leaving school.

In India the GNI per capita is USD 720 (World Bank, 2006). Life expectancy for men is sixty-two and for women sixty-five. Whereas in a country like New

Zealand for example, the life expectancy is eighty-two and eighty-five respectively, with many people celebrating their hundredth birthday.

Major languages in India: Hindi, English and 17 other official languages. As regards the main religions in India, there is great diversity. There are six major religions: Hinduism being the main one practised by the majority of the country's inhabitants. Islam is the largest minority religion. I think about 2.3% are Christians. Of course you also have Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and several other religions.

Only 10% of the workforce are covered by formal pension schemes. I mention that because of some of the things we did in our consultancy work, which may seem simple and foolish from a Western point of view.

There has been a dramatic growth in the Indian economy (rates of 7%). There is a vast wealth gap: you have the world's richest people living side by side with the world's poorest. A question mark hangs over air and water quality; they are both very polluted.

India is the world's largest democracy. And some believe that India will form part of the troika of the future: America being first, followed by China and then India.

I believe we should also include scavenging (when you go to rubbish bins and you pull out the plastic and the tins, etc., which are then recycled) as a reference item for India. I deliberately use scavenging to start a debate on castes. Recently, I read something the BBC had written about India. They were talking about women who clean other women's bathrooms or homes. The woman cleaning the bathroom is from the lowest caste; her mother did it, her grandmother did it, and her daughter is probably going to end up doing the same thing. And because she cleans bathrooms she comes from a caste that is considered unclean, so people would tend not to touch her. So, how would you pay her for the work she does? Put it in a plastic bag and then throw it on the ground?

Now, some people have started organisations where these women from this lowest caste can



work and, for example, pack soaps that are supplied to hotels all over the world. They can pack whatever needs packaging, simple things. This gives these women more meaning to their life. It gives them self-esteem. Of course, these products are used by the higher castes who do not know that the items have been 'polluted' by the person who packed them. This is one example of the reality of India – is this leadership or spirituality?

I am presenting all these facts and figures because, if we are saying we can get things from the East in terms of management or in terms of spirituality, we must also consider the reality from which these thoughts and ideas emerge. And if we are saying that leadership has a link with spirituality, then we must consider what are the leaders doing over there.

Are Indians intrinsically spiritual?

For a number of Indians there is very little separation between the secular and the spiritual, between their working life and their home life. So, are Indians intrinsically spiritual?

I have read a lot of articles that tend to agree with this. However I have also had a number of Indians telling me that "if any Indians hear this, they will fly to Auckland to argue with you on the subject, because India is so diverse". Nevertheless, as I said, I believe that Indians are intrinsically spiritual. And this spirituality is accompanied by certain aspects such as respect, reverence for life, a sacredness of the environment, a belief in an afterlife, which you have got to strive for in this life.

For me, spirituality refers to the inner life energy of an individual seeking harmony with the universe. Thus it is something internal; it is an energy... One of the Sanskrit words for energy is prana, which means the life force. In Chinese, it is chi. In Sanskrit it is said that

spirit really means a flute, so you can play music through the flute. But in order to play this music you have got to be empty of yourself. Is that spirituality? Flutes have to be empty in order for the music to flow through it, and therefore you need to empty yourself.

Of course, if you read Indian philosophy, when you are talking about spirituality you will find that a lot of the gurus over there use the term *neti, neti, neti*, 'nothing, nothing, nothing', or 'not this, not this, not this'. So you could say that spirituality is an inner life energy, and you might add *neti, neti, neti*, it is not really that. Anyway, I believe in harmony with the universe. I also believe that spirituality is multifaceted. There are many dimensions to it. And I believe it is a journey; it is not static, it is dynamic.

I am not yet able to convince myself in terms of differences between spirituality and sacredness. Sometimes I like to think of it as a continuum with grey areas in between. Sometimes I do not like the idea of a continuum and I prefer to think of it as a moving spiral. So, you have the individual being spiritual, and the externalisation of that spirituality or the interpretation of that spirituality could be sacredness in terms of religious frameworks.

Therefore, what I am presenting as spirituality to you now is a comma, or a question mark in a dialectical enquiry. I mean it is not an end point. There has to be dialogue about it and therefore the definition or the vision of spirituality could change, depending upon different situations, depending upon the positions that you are going to take. Let us go back to Mahatma Gandhi: we assume that he was a spiritual leader, and a fabulous political leader, but today there are a lot of gender studies that say, "OK, that's wonderful. But, was he a good father? Was he a good husband?". Should a leader be that too? These aspects are also relevant here. This is why I am saying that the vision of spirituality is like a dialogue.

A dialogue on spirituality

What are your views on spirituality?

- I relate it to trying to understand the universe.

To try to understand the universe. Would you see that as being different from harmony?

- Understanding the universe may be more passive and harmony more active: if something is not right, it should be corrected.

- Spirituality is like a kind of anchor in your life: when everybody around you is in trouble, in chaos, there you are, a quiet point.

So it is your anchor to a calm place, it gives you meaning, it can function as a source that you keep going back to – to recover your equilibrium perhaps.

- The British philosopher, Austin, said that etymology is never completely alien to the meaning of a word. We can dispute that a little, but in the Western tradition I think spirituality probably comes from expiring, inspiring, respiration, etc., air, that was probably the most intangible thing the creators of the word could imagine. What is the origin of the equivalent word in Hindi or Sanskrit or Pali? Would it help us at least to see the origins of the idea of spirituality?

Thank you for that. I think it is prana, which means the breath of life, in other words breathing in and breathing out. When you look at yoga, when you look at meditation, a lot of the Indian forms pertain to your breath. Whether this be through the mouth or through the nose, and what you concentrate on in the cycles of inhalation and exhalation.



-I was wondering why you asked whether Indians are intrinsically spiritual. Why Indians and why intrinsically? If you are telling us that India is so diverse, that it is such a puzzle, why do you take it as a whole? And you compare Indians with who? Why not refer directly to human beings, which are also such a puzzle anyway? And why intrinsically? What do you mean by that?

That is a lovely question, and a contribution as well. The reason I said Indians is because I am talking about India. If you look at this from an anthropological point of view, and you believe that everybody is born with a divine spark, then yes, perhaps all humans are intrinsically spiritual, and you need an environment that helps the spirituality to flower.

Why have I said Indians are intrinsically spiritual? Because of different aspects that more or less pertain to all Indians. Despite the divergences, there is a tremendous convergence around them. Some of those will appear in the following list.

India's shared references

1) The **caste system** is omnipresent – I mentioned the scavengers. You have four castes in India: the highest caste, the *Brahmins*, who are the teachers, the priests; followed by the *Kshatriya*, the warriors – you do not have warriors today, but many of them are owners of businesses; followed by the *Vaishyas*, who are the traders, business people; followed by the *Sudras*, who are very low down in the caste system and who tend to do the menial work. This system is omnipresent. When people get married, you find that they would prefer to marry within their own sub-caste. Networks also tend to be caste-based, but that is changing now in the cities. This is important if you want to understand Indians and understand the way in which they themselves see how they fit into the overall system of the universe. If I am a *Brahmin*, perhaps I have a greater access to God or “the Other” than people lower down in the system. Do I?

2) **Corruption and bureaucracy** are rampant. If you look at the Corruption Perceptions Index, which covers 130 countries, can you guess the positions of New Zealand, Spain and India? Iceland scores one, New Zealand and Finland two. India? We are saying Indians are intrinsically spiritual, but we are also talking about a Corruption Perceptions Index, so how do you think India scores? The number given by the Corruption Perceptions Index is eighty-eight. Pretty low down. What about Spain? Twenty-three. So pretty good.

There is a great deal of corruption in India. However, a tremendous value is placed on knowledge, a desire for excellence and a capacity for hard work.

3) You also have Indians' very firm belief in **destiny**: “So perhaps I should not try so hard, it is my destiny.” *Karma*, the fruit of one's action, or what you sow: “as you sow, so shall you reap”. But they also have the concept of *purushartha*. *Purush* means man and *artha* means meaning. In other words, what meaning do I give to life through my actions?

4) You also have **devotion** or *bhakti*. Ritual worship is important, so I need to pray regularly, I need to hang garlands on the statues of the gods and the goddesses. And you have a thousand gods and a thousand goddesses...

5) You also have **duty**, which is righteous or dharma. If you have a certain position in society based on your caste, there are certain duties incumbent on that, and that is the meaning of dharma. Therefore, you try to carry out those duties the best you can.

6) **Hospitality** is very important, and the Sanskrit expression for this is *Atithi devo bhava*. It means that a guest is like God and should be treated like a deity. You would look after God very well, and should treat your guest in the same way. That is the exact translation. They say that is why the hospitality industry in India is very good.

7) The **infrastructure** is dismal; the airports do not work, nor do the trains... Trains can be two hours late; in fact, you are lucky if they are only two hours late! Lots of things are normal: floods, terrorism, etc. You have thousands dying in India out of these events. The World Trade Centre destruction? It was a terrible disaster, but larger numbers die in India on a regular basis out of catastrophes.

8) You also have *moksha/nirvana* or **eternal bliss** as life goals. I strive to do better, so that I am not reincarnated as a worm, for example. Or so that I am not reincarnated as a woman. Therefore I do certain things that are part of my *karma*. I try to live a good life so that I can be reborn in a better form than my present one.

9) Indian society is very strongly **patriarchal**. It is very difficult to move out of the boundaries of a patriarchal society. Thus, the man is omnipresent, the woman is born to serve him and look after him. In this very strong patriarchal society, the woman is not likely to move unless the man allows her to. Although this is changing.

10) **Reverence to the guru**. If you are a teacher, ideally you should be respected. If a leader teaches you something, your commitment to that person will increase. I have a published journal article called the “Guru-Shishya Process for Radiating Knowledge in Organisations”. I try to use this concept for encouraging spirituality and leadership.



11) **Ritual devotion** or *puja* which means prayers, temple visits, etc.

12) The **production and distribution of wealth** emanating from the king/owner, yet proudly democratic. If you are working in an organisation you say the organisation is your mother and father, they supposedly provide you with everything.

The guru

There are different definitions about what a *guru* is, besides “one who takes away the darkness”. A *guru* is someone who reconfigures the myths that are there currently in our society. The *gurus* act as leaders through the kinds of stories they tell. Ideally the stories should be created along with people in society, with people in the organisation, with people in education.

The *guru* is also a diffusion agent, spreading certain forms of thought, spirituality, altruism or philanthropy. And they also say that a guru should be –I keep coming back to actionable knowledge- a pragmatic purist. You know a lot about the research but you are pragmatic in how you implement it. So the guru is someone –again I have selectively picked up things– who moves out of academia, perhaps, and also sullies his hands by going into the workplace, by finding out what is happening in society and trying to make changes.

Broad fields

Of course, leadership and spirituality are very broad and diverse fields. But the context of a specific assignment and the geographic locale are relevant. I have written my cases on the basis of my consultancy assignments, therefore you were rewarded in accordance with the objectives met: if you met the targets, then you were rewarded; if not, tough luck!

Leadership and spirituality are embedded in a web of interdependence. We are interdependent

on people, we are interdependent on society, the economy, industry, etc.

And, since we are looking at the context of an organisation, can we make organisations a *shram mandir* or a temple of work? *Shram* is work, *mandir* is a holy place. So when you come to ESADE, for example, do you consider it a *shram mandir*? Do you feel that way? Who should make you feel that way?

And of course I believe that we are all fellow travellers in eternity.

Any questions, comments that you would like to make at this point in time?

- Does diversity tend to promote a sense of relativity in India?

I think one of the reasons Indians are successful in software is because they think of the same thing from many different angles. That is why they are so corrupt too. You can look at the same thing from many different perspectives. So the mind tends to work in those directions, and Indians are comfortable with many different ways of looking at the same thing.

- My feeling is that the variety, the richness, the complexity of life, is extraordinary in India. And I think that was rightly mentioned here at the beginning when you invited us to share our images. I think that is also true of the West. The difference may be that Indians can live through complexity without being in conflict; while we feel that we have to be committed to something. So variety automatically leads to a conflicting experience of not being able to come to terms with what life is about.

I agree. Indians tend to be comfortable with diversity and, therefore, with a number of

different ways of looking at the same thing, so they do not feel that they have to choose and take a single position or standpoint. Perhaps that is the reason people also say that they are passive. They do not take a stand and perhaps therefore they do not change, or they change less.

One more aspect. When we reflect we tend to understand knowledge better. Khalil Gibran says that the purpose of knowledge, of education, is to lead people to the threshold of their own minds. If you lead someone to the threshold of their mind, then you are assuming that they then have the capacity to make decisions that would be appropriate for being in harmony with the universe.

- I tend to imagine or think that Indians are better adapted to the world, whereas Western people are more concerned with controlling the world, or willing to control the world, through logic, science, development, etc.

I write about post-colonial viewpoints, so I would strongly tend to agree with what you have said. Quite often in the West you come forward, initially it is commercial and then it moves to political and that tends to be the way of conquering. Whereas, if you look at India, you have got Indians in many parts of the world but they have not colonised these places.

- You just made a connection between this capacity of digesting diversity and this tendency of not changing or not engaging in change, for instance in the case of the lowest castes. I would like to hear more about that.

One of the cases that I will run through now will show you how we believe that it is important to ignore the caste system. But you ignore the caste system through certain structures that are created in the organisation precisely by your leadership capacity. This concerns leading people to the threshold of their mind.

I strongly believe in a leader’s credibility. What makes the person credible to the audience or to the people they are working with? In terms of the organisations in which I worked as a consultant, we were management gurus or leaders. What made us credible?

I also believe in tapping into the teachings of religious faith, but I have also used the term “it is time for enlightened self-interest”. If I want to continue to breathe clean air, there may be things I need to do. If I come from a middle caste or a middle class, there might be something I need to do differently in order to change my mobility patterns.

I am going to talk about the consultancy assignment now and share a few parables with you.

The Indian Textile Sector

Textiles contribute 7% to India’s economic output. This sector employs 35 million people. It is a huge market. Why did we go into the textile sector? You have people in labour-intensive organisations over there, many of them from lower castes. They supply textiles, leather and jewellery to the fashion houses of Europe and America.

India has labour costs 15% lower than China, but electricity and water prices are much more expensive: in China they constitute 24% of the overall production costs, while in India it is 37%. So while India has the largest surface area devoted to cotton farming, I think it only produces one third of the cotton available internationally. Indians are not very productive in terms of the use of their land, and therefore in India the textile sector remains a cottage industry in many ways. You have got the owners who often belong to the higher castes, and you have got the workers. The owners are educated; the workers are usually uneducated. So this is a really exciting area for people to enter, particularly when many management consultants are entering India.

The consultancy assignment



THE CONSULTACY ASSIGNMENT

What was the consultancy assignment? We were as-



ked to put the organisation on a path towards economic viability. They said, “Do whatever you think is necessary to help the organisation earn higher profits.”

We entered as passionate and engaged agents of transformation, believing that changes had to be made in terms of money. Top management understands money: “Where is my dollar?” But you have to make changes through what you do with the people.

As I mentioned earlier, we made monthly visits, and the locations were in rural and semi-rural India. All of the companies had their headquarters in one of the major cities, such as Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata or Chennai.

We believed in consultant redundancy, so the plan was

that after three years we would leave. The idea was that, by that time, the organisation would be on the way towards having institutionalised the processes involved in change.

If there were overruns, they were treated as non-billable activities.

We operated in the organisation through the concept of the guru-shishya, the teacher and the pupil. We developed worker-trainers and management-facilitators, who functioned as agents of change within the organisation. In other words, we tried to transfer a number of our skills to these individuals. We tried to create an environment for them in which they could thrive in terms of their own potential.

We also looked at “Costs of Poor Quality”, meaning that we looked at where there were losses, either due to imperfections in the garments being produced, or due to different shades in the threads used to make the garments, and problems regarding who got which package of clothing, etc. This is what we focused on. We reduced all these problems, therefore we could tell the management: “Here is your money.”

And we did this through improvement projects. But, tell me, why should a worker who does not know you at all when you go in as a consultant, do anything for you? Why should they do it for you? And that is where we tapped into the spiritual aspects of the individuals.

We also provided training for top management, explaining the process that we intended to take the organisation through. We also offered technical training, in other words we taught people how to use machines. A lot of the workers were put on state-of-the-art machines without any training. If they made a mistake, if they had an accident then, too bad, they were not covered by pension or insurance. Therefore we carried out a great deal of welfare activities.



The parables



Now I would like to share a few parables with you deriving from our consultancy experiences. A parable is a short story which can have many layers of meaning and which has an ethical dimension to it.

The first one I have called “**The Open-eyed Mahatma**”. The initial problem was “lack of skilled workers”. They did have workers, but they were absent, they would not come into the organisation or they would come late, and they were unskilled.

The trap, in terms of being a consultant, was: “Bowling down to the Director or the CEO, following what they wanted.”

What was the lesson learned? “Develop and maintain faith in workers and encourage the use of respected leaders and tradition and history –Gandhi– for emulation.”

Is this leadership? Is this spirituality? You will have to decide.

Here is the parable:

“The Director of the organisation strolled into the room. Politely, but in no uncertain terms, he said ‘It is impossible to have workers training other workers’ –remember they were uneducated workers. ‘You do not know my people or this region. If there is an accident during the training, due to the fact that we have sophisticated machinery, I will be responsible. Kindly note this has never been done.’ The consultant replied: ‘Well, I have met your people and studied this region and I believe that we will be extremely successful. You will see the results for yourself in a few months. If you like, you do not have to pay me until then.’ Reluctantly, the Director agreed and stalked out.”

“The selected young men –the workers– were eager to learn; they spent hours on the shop floor

and in the canteen, which was converted into a classroom. They were from the lower caste; they were not given a classroom. The teachers were their supervisors, managers and occasionally their CEO. The consultant suggested the use of local mythology could be combined with the theory and practice of spinning because these textile units were spinning units.”

“There was a lot of scepticism among the teachers, but they ploughed on – the teachers were the managers. The workers were thrilled and it was when their managers saw the workers spending hours on end, after the formal sessions, sharing their understanding with each other that they slowly started to believe us.” Remember we were mixing people from higher castes with people from lower castes, managers with workers.

“But this enthusiasm among the workers would probably be short-lived,” said the Director. As a director and as a leader you are trained to be sceptical. The consultant smiled, requesting at the same time a room for the worker-trainers, which would be used for training the workers.

Grudgingly, a room without furniture and with unpainted walls was allocated, for the belief was that the workers would not be able to look after it. “If I only clean other people’s bathrooms, how could I keep a room in the factory clean?”

“Now the consultant called the worker-trainers and showed them their training room and said, ‘Well, it is up to you to make it beautiful for those you will be teaching. You will be their *gurus*. No-one will enter this room until you have it ready. You have ten days.’”

“On the eighth day the worker-trainers opened the doors to the management. The walls were covered with posters, each one made by teams of worker-trainers, displaying various Indian values, like



dharmā or duty; *gunvantha* or good qualities, *agni* or fire for change. But in the centre there was a huge poster of India’s famous father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi or the Great Soul, who was born not far from where this organisation was located. The particular pose chosen was from a photograph that always portrays the Mahatma with his eyes closed, but in the picture the workers had drawn the eyes were open. Surprised, the CEO questioned the worker-trainers about this: ‘We decided to keep his eyes open because we wanted him to see what we are doing and feel proud of us,’ said the worker-trainers.”

This actually happened. It is a true story. Any questions? Would you like to make any comments? Any response to that?

- *What you described shocked me. The*

solution is really very creative, it is a good solution. I think that most of us will probably need some time to digest what you have just described.

- I know you should never ask this when you hear a parable, but can you tell us what happened next?

The CEO gave them furniture. That was one aspect; they got furniture for the room, so they could sit there more comfortably. It raised their self-esteem and they trained other people within the organisation. This company started exporting to foreign markets. The error rate was dramatically lowered, absenteeism was reduced. And these worker-trainers were young fellows, aged between twenty and twenty-five, educated up

to the fourth year of standard formal education. However, the format we used encouraged them to blossom, which I think was really important. Usually you would never have a situation where the entire management would leave the factory and go off on a holiday or a retreat. But the worker-trainers told them, “You can leave, we will run the factory,” which they did. And the number of accidents dropped dramatically. When I arrived, it was normal to hear of people getting their arms or fingers cut off, because, when you are working with the threads, that is what tends to happen. So that is part of the end of the story.

And these workers were like the champions of the place. The local villagers invited them to be their *gurus*. That is how I saw the movement, from the organisation towards the community, because they said, “You can be successful in the organisation, so maybe you have got some special talent and therefore can be successful in the community too.” What we also did was to give the worker-trainers uniforms. There was no extra money given to them, but the uniform was a symbolic way of saying, “Hey, you are an important guy. If you are important, you’d better get to work on time, because you are identifiable.”

And so we used small things perhaps, but we gave them the space to fulfil their potential, and I think that was really the issue. This can be seen if you look at the posters that they drew and the ideas they picked up, in addition to the open-eyed Mahatma. Hence the title.

So, is that leadership? Is that spirituality? Or would you want to call it something else?

- In some ways you were dealing with the question: “Who am I?”, you were dealing with identity.

- You were reinforcing the person’s identity. And in that way they could better answer the

question “Who am I?”. They could say “I am a...”.

Yes. We boosted their self-esteem, definitely, yes. “So I am not just someone from a lower caste. That is not my identity. I am more than that.” If, for example, I believe that all individuals have this divinity spark, spirituality, within them, then all of us can move on.

Quite often it is the leaders who need to be taught more than the workers. They are there because of the success they have had in the past. It does not mean the past is going to define what is going to happen in the future. Therefore, unless they are open to learning this issue will arise frequently. I thought we would lose the assignment because quite often we had conflict with the top management, with them saying, “No, this can’t be done.”

- Isn’t there a paradox in the fact that you invited the workers to express in a kind of a fantasy form, or a kind of a symbol, the Hindu myths or the Hindu religion, and yet through this you seem to be undoing the entire foundations of the caste system? So how did you manage that?

First of all, we told the workers to do what they wanted with the room. They chose the religious aspect and others. That is the first point I would like to make.

The second point is that, because I am originally Indian, I am happy with the number of different ways of looking at things. Therefore I could use structures to de-structure a particular situation. But in this case I was looking at values that are intrinsically Indian; for example the Mahatma is known all over India as a revered leader. And therefore you pick up something like that, which they chose to pick up. So I am probably assuming that the environment we created for them, and the rapport we created for them helped them to come up with this, and because of the form of



parables or stories often told in India and in many developing countries... And it is an easy way of reaching people and a very powerful way at that. That is probably the reason why they went back to what they knew. And you have the good and the bad in the traditions as well. So, hopefully from this we took the good, and therefore were able to break the caste system to some extent.

I would just like to add one more point. The workers did not have any place to keep their food when they came in the morning, because only those of the higher caste were allowed to hang their food bags on the walls. It was a major change to convince them to have a canteen, where everyone could sit and eat.

- The parable reminds me that workers increase their output when they are treated with some kind of attention.

That is true. You are giving workers respect.

- I also think on the different aspects of a leader

like Gandhi. He had self-esteem, but also a lot of love. The fact that made him respectable at that time is that he started

Yes, that is true. So you identify with the local people. One of the things that the top management in this organisation felt was that, “If we do not give them a classroom, they will not be able to operate as consultants.” What we did was to take the workers out onto the lawn and we sat on the grass and told them this. So, for the workers the message was “You are identifying with us, you are sitting next to us, things are fine.” For the management the message was “It is a stance that we are taking, you know, we are here to do a job and we will do it. We do not really need your money, we will still move forward”. So, is that leadership?

The second parable I have called the “**Cotton Cows**”. It is very simple. This was an organisation where cotton was disappearing. The more cotton that disappears before it is made into thread,

THE PARABLES

the less raw material you have, right? So wasted raw material was the issue there. And everyone said the workers were robbing the cotton. We believed that the workers were not robbing the cotton and that they were honest people. What we did find was that cows were coming in and eating the cotton.

This might seem strange, but the owner of the organisation lived on the same property as the mill, and he had a farm with cows. So the cows, being sacred in India, were allowed to roam around, and when the supervisor had earlier asked to the CEO to put up a fence, he had refused. Therefore, we had to find a way of getting the CEO to come there, because the cows had their regular feeding time off the cotton bales. You might wonder how they entered the factory. When the prices are good, they buy in bulk and the cotton bales are left out in the garden. Thus, it was easy for the cows to gain access to them.

Therefore, keeping in mind the fact that cows are sacred, what do you do? The point I am trying to make here is you are still tapping into the local ethos, into the society, but you are bringing more harmony into what you are doing.

The next parable is about women: “**Statistics and Saraswati**”. *Saraswati* is the goddess of learning, and we had a few workers here who were women, mostly unmarried mothers or women whose husbands had left them. These women were working in this plant, and we helped them, we chose them as worker-trainers. They did really well, and one of the results of this was to have framed pictures of *Saraswati*, the goddess of learning, around the plant.

Is that leadership? Is that spirituality? It was a big thing for these people, bearing in mind that India is a patriarchal society. You might have a goddess who is a goddess of learning, but that doesn't mean that women are respected. So this was a major way of changing some of the aspects within that society.

The fourth parable is entitled “**The Bicycle and the Clock.**” The problem was “high levels of absenteeism”. The answer was to offer rewards that could be used by the employee, like bicycles, and that involved their families, like clocks.

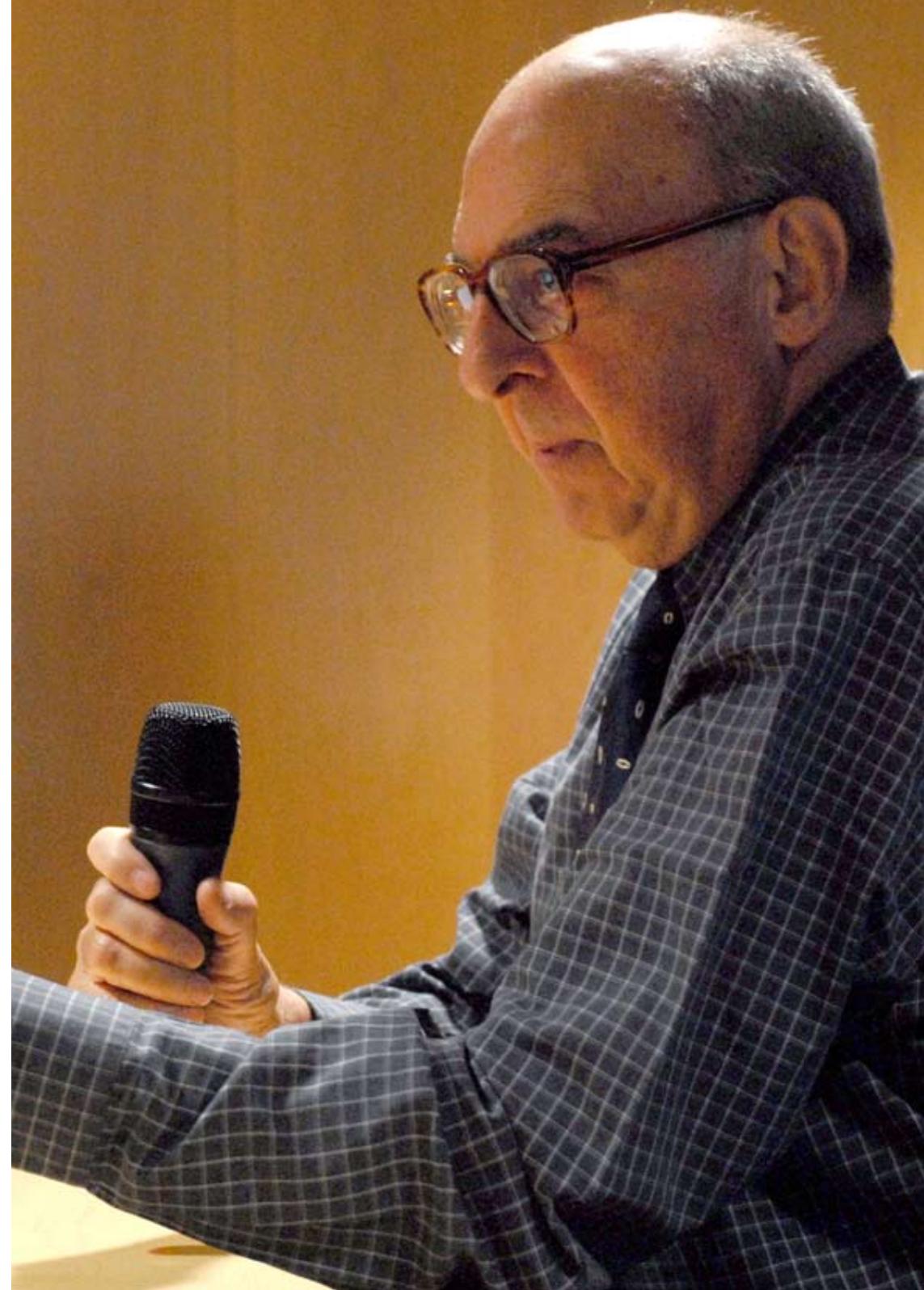
“The worker's families flocked to visit the mill. Every week thirty families came along. The women in these families came dressed in their best finery, with their head covered, carrying babies on their hips, walking for miles in many instances, cultured but uneducated. One wife said in surprise: ‘So much machinery to make thread, which I use to stitch my sari blouse.’”

“Each family was told about the importance of their man's contribution to the mill and each was given a wall clock as a gift. During the next few months one worker was overheard saying: ‘She keeps looking at the clock and has called the neighbours to see it as well. Now she wakes me up in time, so my boss does not have to shout at me for coming in late.’”

“Also, a competition was run, with prizes for the workers with the best attendance. These prizes were ten bicycles. Smiling, the consultant asked the CEO to calculate the total cost for the clocks and bicycles and then the savings made over the months as a result of improved attendance.”

You can call it a reward mechanism or motivation. They were not riding bicycles to reduce pollution, but they had to walk a few miles to the mill. So, if they got a bicycle it helped them tremendously. As for the clocks, they used to come late because they could not tell the time, with the changes of seasons. Therefore, we involved the families in this issue.

Once again a simple method, but we had to fight for every penny from top management.



Reflective questions for management gurus



I have tried to present you with a mosaic of different images, different ideas, different ways of looking at the East. Well, a lot of what you might think about the East is paradoxical. Many people like to think of the East as a paradox, as a riddle.

1) So, the first question is: If you are a leader, should you display rational compassion?

- You have to have compassion when something happens and you just can't change it. For example, a problem arises and you can't solve it, so you have compassion. You just let it be and carry on towards the future. That is what I call the ability to flow.

The concept of flow is of course very important in the East. A lot has been written about it in the West too. If you are compassionate, quite often people say that it is the right part of your brain that has been activated, and if you are rational it is the left part. How do you transcend both? One of the terms used in India is the bodhicitta, a mind that is enlightened. A leader, ideally –I am being very prescriptive– should have an enlightened mind, or a bodhicitta or rational compassion. So, you are in a state of flow and you can handle dualities without being unnerved by them; you can handle ambiguity and yet flow with what needs to get done.

2) The second question is whether you should appreciate and incorporate local traditions in all the processes implemented in the organization. Any reactions to that? Any examples from your own experiences?

- Benchmarking.

- If you consider that there is one way of doing things properly, isn't it against what you said that there are a lot of points for seeing and understanding things?

- When you talked about local traditions, I was thinking about appreciating and incorporating forms of communication which are understandable for all sides, not only local traditions. I don't have that much experience in organisations, but I do have some experience in developing programmes, and one of the problems that we found is that communication does not work if you don't use the right metaphors or you don't use the right words. Words have different meanings. Thus we have children dying in Nigeria, for instance, because they did not pick up the right word for diarrhoea. Therefore, when you say local traditions I would say communication, local forms of communication, including traditions, but also anything that can help. We should overcome the idea that workers are not skilled and therefore won't understand: let's talk to them in the way they talk and then they will understand everything.

I fully agree. The communication delivery mechanism is very important.

- Do you feel that the West is losing the notion of local tradition - even the notion?

Sometimes to move forward and make progress you might need to move away from local traditions. But at the same time, many of them deserve to be kept. What I sometimes see happening in the West is that where you do have pockets of tradition they are more like museums or festival days, but it is not part and parcel of the peoples' lives and of the spirit that animates them and what they are doing.

- When you talk about East and West, where is New Zealand?

Good question. New Zealand is considered to be a Western country; even though it is in the Asia-Pacific region, in the Pacific Rim, but they consider themselves to be a Western country with a very strong colonial heritage. The mother country is the UK; they

still have a governor-general. However, the first Asian governor-general was inaugurated on the 23rd August this year. So perhaps they will be a bit more Eastern in the future. But you also have immigrants: around 15% of the population are immigrants from non-traditional source countries. So that creates its own set of issues. But they like to think of themselves as Western, and I think the rest of the world agrees with them.

3) The third question refers to the possibility of incorporating spirituality through visible symbols. Can you do this?

- That is one of the most sensitive issues. In our local context, secularisation has led to the impression that there is no room for visible religious symbols. In order to respect people without a belief, you have to avoid these kind of symbols. The workplace being a public place, it is considered those symbols should be kept to the private world.

- Maybe the problem at present in Western countries in incorporating spirituality is that it is linked to religion, or to a specific religion. Can we build up a constructive concept of spirituality, which is common to humanity?

You have made a very important observation. Are there universal symbols? Perhaps. Would they have the same kind of meaning for everybody? Would they elicit the same kind of response when contrasted with a religious symbol, which has tended to symbolise spirituality?

In India you do have certain symbols, for example footprints, which tend to symbolise something greater than yourself. You do not depict a god, in the same way that you do not depict Mohammed in a visual form. Thus you have symbols: a lotus or an elephant. But let's say I'm from the Christian tradition: if I go to a place of worship and I see an elephant, would it have the same effect on me as a cross, for example? So, it is a very big issue, and maybe the reason for what is

happening in many countries around the world is that they are losing a layer of "who we are". It is a very difficult issue, because how do you pick it up?

These are major issues. I do not know whether we have or will have leaders who are strong enough to take stances that are not considered fundamentalist, because that is the other aspect.

- Thinking back on the definition you gave of being Indian, with the eclecticism that disturbs me so much, perhaps we need Indian leaders, so that we do not hide visible symbols of spirituality trying to be polite. If we use them all, so that you can have them next to each other; no-one will feel offended, because they can all put up their symbols, and you learn to understand each other's symbols. That would be the ideal way. Of course it would be nice to construct the universal symbolism of spirituality, but we already have our symbols, and the problem is that we are not mature enough or educated so that we can use them without feeling offended because you have an elephant instead of a cross.

- My experience is that, in societies where people are very divided in relation to religions, there are some moments in which symbols are not helping. But on the other hand, the best symbol of spirituality is when you find someone who is spiritual and he or she explains to you the sources of this spirituality. So, in the end it is easier to try to have a society where people who are spiritual are proud of it, and at the same time explain to others why this makes them happy, and why it is important to them. On the other hand, a symbol for me, for example, is prayer. When traveling around the world (I used to work in an organisation working for developing countries), for instance when I was travelling in Africa and we had to stop our car because the Muslim people had to pray, for me that was a symbol. But for others it was something very annoying. However, when we began to discuss why that was very important for



them, and they began to explain their spirituality, that was the real symbol.

Very beautifully put; very difficult to implement. As I said, I believe in actionable knowledge, I believe in the real experiences.

Should there be collective involvement when you look at leadership and spirituality and when you look at management gurus? I believe there should be; that is my point of view. I think it is important, because through collective involvement you gain greater understanding, you gain greater change, and hopefully more harmony as a result. You have to create teams for sustained change.

If you are a leader, how much of your time are you prepared to invest without it being a *quid pro quo status*? “I give you five, but I will try and see if you will give me six. I give you five, you give me five.” You have to be prepared to spend non-billable time with workers to gain their commitment.

And I suppose this is what we have been trying to do: to have reflective conversations with oneself and peers to reaffirm and realign processes with an East-West sensitivity. Because there was dialogue, you will have been going through your own introspection on some of these ideas, and this allows you to reaffirm and reshape processes with a simultaneous East-West sensitivity. I think both are important.

One thing is to have reflective conversations with peers, another one is to have reflective conversations with other people who are different from you, precisely so you can learn and they can learn. So if for example you mention the different symbols in the same place, you can identify with your own symbols and with the local symbols. Seek to develop different solutions, as well as to construct alternative parables from a Western template, as a contrast to the East or Indian epistemologies. If you take the same situation, what are the different responses you can have to it?

And again I found constructing this through parables a very non-threatening way of reaching people. Why should you bare your innermost soul when spirituality is a very individual thing and could be a very individual thing to a stranger? If you do it through parables, it becomes more acceptable and easier to articulate.

Is there anything that is in your mind right now that you would like to dwell on, think about or perhaps don't agree with and want to kind of challenge yourself about right now?

- I might have one reaction to this. I am from an institution that is currently undergoing great changes. Change processes require a lot of communication and being the leader of an organisation you have to communicate a lot, but especially in this situation. You think you will never communicate enough in order to get the messages through to everyone and to receive their messages. I should probably think of some anecdotes and stories to tell my staff, we should all tell each other stories, not just in one direction. And the stories become independent and they are taught and you do not always have to do it yourself. That is what I found very attractive in the solutions you presented. We tend to dwell on forms, information, prepare reports and stuff like that, and that will never be as independent as these stories that just travel around. Therefore, I thought it might be a good strategy for reducing communication efforts and making them more effective.

- This could even be a message for missionaries, couldn't it? It is significant that you used the word “lead”, at least in your English translation. I understand that there is a leadership function but that it should totally respect other people's intimacy. Thank you.

I found parables to be a powerful way of communicating, and that is why I wanted to share them with you. The current Finance Minister said about India: “We want India to shine, but it must shine for all Indians.” He was talking about poverty levels, literacy levels, etc. And the Bhagavad-Gita, one of the books sacred to Indians, says: “The only constant in this world is change.” Perhaps that is our collective destiny, our karma, for being spiritual leaders!

Here are my acknowledgements. I would like to thank my University for sponsoring me. I am also very grateful to my son, professor Jaume Filella and professor Raimon Ribera— thank you very much for having me here.

- We should be thanking you, Dr. Pio. Your presentation was not only interesting but pleasant. I also want to thank the participants in the session, because yours was a different model of presentation. We are used to the model whereby the speaker makes the presentation and then opens the debate. You asked us to have a constant dialogue throughout the presentation, which is not that easy for us; so I have to thank both sides of the table. I also want to thank Joat Henrich for his coordination of all the technical infrastructure, etc.

Finally, I would like to underline the symbolic aspect of this session. My feeling is that the way we have combined the management language and the religious-spiritual language today is rather unusual in our context. Going often from one to the other, using them both without fear, is not frequent. We tend to see these two worlds as separate worlds. So I think it was a stimulating presentation that opened doors for us. Thank you very much.

