INTRODUCTION

India is a kaleidoscope of diverse cultures and religions all of which have contributed to its numerous myths and legends. These in conjunction with its long history of colonial rule by the British for over 300 years, and the consequent introduction of Western systems of thought and education, have all gone into molding the unique sensibility of its people, and especially its elite classes, to which most corporate leaders in India belong. Increased multinational operations means increased multiculturalism within the organization and increased interaction between employees and managers of different cultures (Adler, 1983). Therefore, it is useful for foreign companies dealing with India to understand the customs, beliefs, and specific socio-cultural factors that drive the leadership, management techniques and decision making styles of their Indian partners.

It is a commonplace truism in academic discourse in social and cultural anthropology that myths and religions are closely related. In ‘Redefining myth and religion: introduction to a conversation’ Loyal de Rue (1994) defines myth as ‘story’ and religion as ‘ties that bind’. He argues that ‘myth and religion are closely associated because a shared myth is the most efficient and effective means for achieving social coherence’ (315). This understanding of the relationship between myth and religion becomes useful in illuminating the extraordinary cultural currency that Rama and Krishna, two of the most popular cultural icons in India, enjoy, not just as beloved religious deities, but also as role models in conducting oneself in everyday life, as well as offering specific lessons in leadership and conflict resolution to Indians across the country.

Further, as culture constantly evolves in response to changing socio-economic conditions, so too the perception and deployment of myths in light of changed circumstances in everyday life. Not only do changing customs influence the understanding of age-old myths but often these myths are manipulated in the service of specific political and cultural agendas, both progressive and obscurantist. For instance, Gandhi was able to mobilize the masses in
an anti-colonial freedom struggle against the British precisely because he understood the tremendous power of myths and cultural symbols in the daily life of the people. He motivated the peasantry by casting the independence struggle as a fight to achieve a new ‘Ram-Rajya’, a utopian moral and political ideal of post-independence India modeled on the legendary reign of Lord Rama, as a golden age. Gandhi himself, with his high-thinking ascetic lifestyle and inspirational leadership, was perceived as a modern day Rama by much of the peasantry (see Rao, 1938). More recently, the Bhartiya Janta Party, one of the key political parties in India, has sought to mobilize the masses by invoking the holy name of Lord Rama.

T. S. Eliot (1948), too, in his *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture* argues that one of the bases of cultural myths is religious beliefs. Besides religion, the culture and a history of the nation also influence prevailing myths and beliefs, and its subsequent emergent leadership styles. In comparative management studies, culture is considered to be a background factor that sets the context in the development and reinforcement of beliefs (Smircich, 1982; Cummings and Schmidt, 1972). In this chapter we view culture as a system of shared cognitions or a system of knowledge and beliefs (Rossi and O’Higgins, 1980). Culture is seen as a unique system for perceiving and organizing material phenomena, things, events and behavior.

This chapter is structured in three parts. First we present the factors — religion, culture and past history, that influence and shape the mythology that prevails in a country. Second, we look at the profiles of four very influential Indian leaders, Narayana Murthy, Ratan Tata, Verghese Kurian and Vikram Sarabhai, relative to the culture, mythology and historical background of India. Finally we showcase aspects of Indian leadership that are unique and different from the West and how they can help us to understand Indian leaders in their context.

**OVERVIEW OF INDIAN MYTHOLOGY**

The religion of the majority in India, Hinduism, the unique cultural context, and the historical past of India, have all been the drivers that have influenced the development and gradual evolution of Indian myths. These three drivers and the subsequent myths that have evolved give India its own ethos, which is then expressed in the belief systems, activities and language through which its people sustain themselves (Smircich, 1983a, b). Here, we examine each of the three drivers and their influence on Indian mythology and leadership.

**Religion and its Impact on Mythology and Leadership**

The predominant religion in India, Hinduism, is also one of the oldest religions
in the world and dates back over 3500 years. Many Indian myths have their origins in religious stories and embody key values that have been handed down through the central characters in these legends. The Hindu Trinity of gods consists of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer. According to myth, Vishnu the preserver, over the centuries, has taken on many incarnations and come to earth to uphold righteousness, rid the world of evil, and maintain the universal spiritual and moral order of things. Two of his incarnations, ‘Rama’ and ‘Krishna’ have been immortalized in the great Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

These epics, some of the oldest narrative poems in the world, are the source of many of the myths and legends in India. Dating back to a long enduring oral tradition, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana have continued to be revised and retold, each version ‘making a particular argument appropriate to its own time and place [and] have contributed to shaping the spheres of religion, politics, everyday morality to a degree unmatched by any other work in Indian history’ (Damrosch et al., 2008). The version of the Ramayana to which many retellings explicitly or implicitly respond is one in Sanskrit ascribed to Valmiki dating to 200 BC, while the Mahabharata is dated to 300 BC.

In contrast to the dystopian world of the Mahabharata where brothers and kinsmen are ranged in battle against each other, casting the principal actors, Arjuna of the Pandavas, and the Kaurava elders, in a paralyzing moral dilemma, the Ramayana transforms the enemy into the monstrous other, the demon Ravana. This narrative strategy effectively distances the forces of evil from self and kin and simplifies the moral action of the epic. Consequently, the Ramayana ‘offers positive paradigms for life, and no other work remotely approximates it for the didactic force it has exercised throughout India’s history’ (Damrosch et al., 2008: 612).

Rama, the eponymous hero of the Ramayana, and Krishna, Arjuna’s charioteer, and the orator of the Bhagvada Gita, exhorting a grief paralyzed Arjuna on the battlegrounds of Kurukshetra to do his duty, personify different qualities and consequently provide different role models for leadership. Rama and Krishna are both incarnations of Vishnu, and are considered visionary, semi-divine personages who affirm the value of righteous actions undertaken in the cause of duty. But while Rama embodies a selfless and humane idealism in which the warrior’s duty or dharma is deemed subservient to the higher law of hierarchical obedience – of son to father, and younger brother to elder brother, Krishna articulates a pragmatic idealism that is undergirded by the larger irony of cosmic justice that transcends the bonds of familial kinship.

Rama was compassionate and sensitive to people’s needs. He cared for every one of his citizens individually (Sekhar, 2001). Recent empirical work shows that this style is still prevalent in India, even though its extent is not firmly established. Sinha (1980) labels this as a ‘nurturant task’ leadership
style. In contrast to Rama, Krishna personifies more a pragmatic leadership style, one which is achieving in adverse conditions (Sekhar, 2001). This style of leadership is more relevant to the turbulent times that India is going through as some of the leadership qualities associated with Krishna have a practical, goal oriented overtone.

Rama was an efficient leader because he was courageous and upheld values of tradition, righteousness, and self-sacrifice while Krishna was an effective leader because he knew how to be diplomatic which helped him deal with different kinds of people. The leadership qualities associated with Rama include righteousness, humility, and being a kingmaker. Righteousness implies doing what you believe is morally right, even though there may be no immediate perceivable benefits to yourself. When asked by his father to spend 14 years in exile, he humbly accepted his fate, despite being the rightful heir to the throne. Finally, Rama had an amazing ability to create and nurture leaders. He did not seek to usurp power but share it with the deserving. Rama’s ability to nurture leaders and create collaborators is seen in his crowning of Sugriva, after he vanquished Valli his wicked brother. Sugriva then aids Rama in rescuing Sita from the powerful Ravana, the demon king who had abducted her. Similarly, he welcomed Vibhishana, Ravana’s brother, even though he belonged to the enemy camp, and eventually crowned him King of Lanka, after the defeat of Ravana. In both these instances, Rama’s actions were motivated by righteousness and compassion, but these also proved to be longsighted strategic choices since they eventually help his cause against Ravana. Krishna’s effectiveness, on the other hand, lay in that his ideas were farsighted and clever, somewhat cunning and pragmatic. Armed with such a ‘skill set’ Krishna offered key advice on leadership to his friend and devotee Arjuna, which has been passed down to us as the Bhagvada Gita which preaches the disinterested execution of one’s dharma or duty. In Dominance and Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India, Ranajit Guha (1997: 35) defines dharma as ‘the quintessence of virtue or moral duty, [which] implies a social duty conforming to one’s place in the caste hierarchy as well as the local power structure.’ He further argues that this is an ideal that has been consecrated by myth, as in the ideal of King Prthu in the Bhagvada Gita, the primordial provider and protector, but also that dharma implies ‘not only the prerogatives of coercion (danda)’ but also an obligation to protect, foster, support, and promote the subordinate.

The Bhagvada Gita also articulates the Indian ideology of bhakti. Bhakti is key to our discussion of leadership because it is a philosophy and way of life that is deeply imbued in the consciousness of the people in India. Guha calls bhakti ‘an ideology of subordination par excellence. Inferiority in any relationship of power structured as dominance and subordination within the Indian tradition can be derived from it’ (50). Within the Vaishnavite tradition (to
which worshipers of Rama and Krishna belong) the Krishna/devotee or leader-subordinate relationship can be classified in three essential dyads of the Palalka/Palya, Prabhu/Dasa, and Lalaka/Lalya. Broadly understood, the three dyads can be translated as protector/servant, master/subject, and superior relative/inferior relative (50). In analyzing the close ties of loyalty and benevolent paternalism that characterize relations between workers and leaders in Indian corporations, an understanding of the deeply held cultural idioms of bhakti that define the world view of most Indians is of critical importance.

Another key concept of leadership in the Gita is being aware of the importance of followers and their needs. To be successful as a leader, the leader needs to recognize the unique needs of every follower and address them accordingly. The recognition of the distinctiveness of the followers is more likely to motivate people being led to believing in the leader and being influenced by him or her.

Choudhary (2006) argues that the leadership styles mentioned and used in the Gita varied based on the maturity level of the followers. When followers display lack of capability, one needs leadership by direction, the more mature followers need to be given incentives (dand), so one leads by attraction or charm (daam), if their level of maturity is higher, then leadership by association (saam) where the followers are involved in the decision making. Finally, the most mature followers should be left alone and trusted completely, which is leadership by delegation (bhed). Many of these concepts of leadership have gained universal acceptance today. These differences in leadership styles are today expressed as authoritative, participative and delegating leadership styles. While leadership and decision making include morality as a central principle, the myths also allow for pragmatism, the inclusion of the led, as well as a sense of the context in decision making.

### Culture and its Impact on Leadership

The cultural values in India, while unique in many ways, are also a study in contradictions. There are many cultural traits that are unique to the Indian context and some of these have been emphasized by Hofstede’s (1980) comparison of cultures. Hofstede (1980) uses five dimensions to compare cultures across the world. They include power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long term orientation. The three dimensions on which India was significantly different from Western cultures (US and UK) were power distance, individualism/collectivism, and long term orientation (Figure 17.1).

India has power distance as the highest Hofstede dimension with a ranking of 77 compared to a world average of 56.5. Compared to Western nations like the United States and UK, India accepts a high degree of power inequality. In
India, the less powerful accept relations that are more autocratic and paternalistic (Hofstede, 1980). A sense of hierarchy and a respect for authority are deep rooted and have their origins in the caste system, among other factors already discussed in this paper. The caste system has created many vertical and horizontal divisions in Indian society and has influenced social practices. This system has accorded opportunities and privileges to some groups and denied the same opportunities to other groups (Srinivas, 1957). Members belonging to higher castes that had the experience of being leaders have learnt to use their power and authority while members of other groups or lower castes have developed a deep, unquestioning respect for authority. This has created a non-egalitarian value system which remains institutionalized in the Indian social system, but is being increasingly called into question. The high power distance lends itself to a leadership style that can be characterized as benevolent paternalism where the leader is autocratic but has the best interests of the led at heart. Indian leaders are used to respect from their subordinates. The position of authority they hold affords them legitimate authority to carry out their wishes.

Figure 17.1 Cultural dimensions of India
In the context of corporate governance, the high power distance has in some instances resulted in consolidation of top management power, particularly in large family owned firms, and this has resulted in marginalizing the power of the boards of directors and minority share holders (Verma, 1997). The concentration of power in the hands of some groups has inhibited the development of systems of checks and balances. Consequently, in some instances, fewer options may be evaluated in the decision making process, and sometimes innovative solutions may be swept aside or not considered if they do not benefit the parties or people in power.

India scored very low on the individualism dimension compared to countries like the US and UK. This implies that Indians were well integrated into strong cohesive in-groups, often extended families, which protect them for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede 1980). The strong sense of ‘collectivism’ influences their priorities in managing and leading groups. Until recently, the average Indian displayed loyalty to the companies that he or she worked with and tended to stay with one organization for a considerable length of time. The leaders considered their organization and its followers as their ‘kutumb’ or family in managing them (Sinha, 2004). Many leaders displayed nurturing qualities towards their subordinates and many companies display a sense of responsibility to the communities in which they operate. This trait in the Indian culture dates back to the myth of Rama and his nurturing qualities and this core cultural value has endured over generations. For example, Tata Steel led by Ratan Tata, Chairman of Tata Sons, and Muthuraman, CEO of Tata Steel in 2006 and 2007 spent millions of dollars on education, health, and agricultural development projects, in 800 villages near Jamshedpur the headquarters of Tata Steel. The company had a paternalistic attitude and for many years did not lay off employees even though their profitability was seriously threatened. Like the employees, the company culture valued the notion of the ‘employee family’ (Engardio and McGregor, 2006).

Masculinity versus Femininity refers to the values placed on traditional male versus female values. Masculine cultures value competitiveness, assertiveness, ambition and accumulation of wealth and material possessions, whereas feminine cultures place more value on relationships and quality of life (Hofstede, 1980). India, the US and UK seem to be similar and tend to value competitiveness, assertiveness and ambition more. This common affirmation of masculine values in the three countries speaks also of the cross-cultural prevalence of patriarchal values. In Indian culture, the ideal of the Ardhnarieshawara, that blends masculinity and femininity in equal measure, is true only in its absence in everyday life. Relationships or collectivism being valorized more is not really a contradiction of this index. Perhaps it is this valuing of competitiveness, assertion and ambition, that accounts for the similarity in uncertainty avoidance discussed below.
The scores of India on uncertainty avoidance are somewhat similar to the US and UK and the scores on uncertainty avoidance are the lowest compared to other dimensions. This can be interpreted that as a people, Indians are more open to risk and uncertainty. A tolerance for ambiguity that has added to the richness and variety of Indian life and has allowed the seamless assimilation of many customs, beliefs, and traditions, perhaps accounts for this lack of risk aversion. Synthesis and pluralism have made Indians more acceptable of diversity in the workplace and in everyday life. This sense of synthesis is reflected in racial harmony, primary institutions of family, modes of worship, and faith in democratic institutions. India is largely ethnically homogeneous, and people are generally accepting of religious and gender diversity in the workplace. The ability to cope with uncertainty also comes from a sense of security arising from faith in fate, or belief in karma, while at the same time doing one’s duty or dharma as specific to a particular social position or role. The contradiction also arises from the many meanings of karma – a key Hindu philosophy or principle of action, a belief that your present actions will determine your future life rather than the obverse that your present life is determined by your past actions. It’s quite an extraordinary contradiction from a generally conservative people who seem to believe in the status quo. The tolerance for uncertainty can be linked to the Hindu belief that the spirit of Brahma or the divine pervades everything, both animate and inanimate.

India scored significantly higher on long term orientation compared to the USA and UK. This dimension describes a society’s ‘time horizon’ and the importance attached to the future versus the past and present. This expansive ‘time horizon’ is perhaps most powerfully demonstrated in a cyclical notion of time. The word ‘Kal’, for instance, translates both as tomorrow and yesterday in Hindi. This value can also be attributed to the belief in karma that actions in the past and present affect the future. There are other ways long term orientation manifests itself in everyday behavior. First, age and experience have greater value in India when compared to the West and actions are evaluated from their impact in the present and future point of view. A person’s seniority can impact the extent of influence a person can have as a leader. Second, managers tend to stay with one job for a longer period of time and are willing to wait for the rewards of experience to come to them. However, both of these values are changing in recent times.

**Political History of India and its Impact on Leadership**

The final factor that impacts the psyche, the myths and the values of a nation’s people is the political history of a country. Each country’s history is unique and leaves its distinct influence on the people and their values.
Two aspects are notable when we consider the political history of India. The first is the 300 years of British colonial rule and its impact on the language and thinking of the average Indian, and the second is the diversity in terms of language, culture and practices and its impact on myths in the past and present, and leadership practice.

British colonialism in India is remarkable for catalyzing a number of processes of change, but most of all for bringing about an intellectual revolution. Britain brought to India a European definition of history, philosophy, science, and language and introduced an educational system that was inspired by Western philosophy and ideals. Leadership is a product of history and educational system in a country (Nachtigal, 2006). The interpretation of myths is also influenced by the education and intellectual evolution of a people.

English education was voluntarily chosen by the Indian intelligentsia as strategic means of upward mobility and this choice empowered them in a multitude of ways. The Europeanization of the imagination provided a valuable resource for the elite that enabled Indians to relate to Western language and culture. The elite were able to merge their English learning with a learning of Indian languages and world views. Kumar (2007) argues that the educated Indian was comfortable with plural intellectual worlds and he/she was able to speak multiple languages, have access to varying notions of truth, and to share cultural meanings between the so-called ‘east’ and the ‘west’. It was normal for the Indian to be comfortable with the values of their grandmothers as well as that of the formal curriculum of their schools that were imitated from the British institutions.

The second aspect of India is it is a conglomeration of multiple languages and cultures that are distinct. Consequently, one cannot focus on an overall pattern of values among the people within the country. The recognition of diversity and its assimilation into their behavior and thinking have made Indians unique. In a sense India is a study in contradictions. On the one hand, Indians have recognized that their success in political or economic ventures, and the legitimacy of their ventures, depended on their ability to attract the support of a variety of ethnic and social groups. This forced those in leadership positions to be more tolerant, and co-opt the opinions of others in less powerful positions. On the other hand, the notion of democracy or a voice for every individual which evolved gradually and naturally in the Western world, is a concept that is still struggling to take hold in the Indian system. The less powerful do not assert their rights and are more likely to buy into the ideas of those in power. This has resulted in the nurturing, more paternalistic leadership style that is a default mode of leading.
OVERVIEW OF INDIAN LEADERS

In this section, we present profiles of four very influential Indian leaders from very diverse backgrounds, both current and past. These leaders are corporate chieftains, who have created management systems, and are considered thought and action leaders who have broadly impacted their respective organizations in significant ways. We examine them in the context of religion, culture, history, and the myths prevalent in India.

The four leaders we examine here are Narayana Murthy, the founder and head of Infosys, Ratan Tata, the current Chairman of Tata industries, Verghese Kurian, the first Chairman of Gujarat Co-operative Milk Marketing Federation, who provided a model of rural development not only for India, but for the world community, and finally, Vikram Sarabhai, the father of the Indian space program.

Narayana Murthy is one of the co-founders and the first CEO and Chairman of the Indian IT outsourcing company Infosys. Founded in 1981, Infosys was the first Indian company to be listed on the US stock exchange (Nasdaq) in 1999. In 2007, Infosys had over 50,000 employees and over $2 billion in revenues. The company has been voted ‘the best employer in India’ two years in a row in a survey conducted by Hewitt Associates. In 2006 Narayana Murthy was voted as the most admired CEO in India for the fifth year in a row. Several factors make Infosys stand out, but the most significant one has been its founder CEO and Chairman, Narayana Murthy. His ethics, values and leadership style have shaped the company’s reputation, growth and performance. Narayana Murthy asserts that ‘I have always believed that leadership does not exist in a vacuum, you need lots of good people to lead ... you need people who have the same or higher level of passion, energy and aspiration.’ He is one of the first Indian leaders who willingly shared the wealth he created with his employees, and at least 400 Infosys employees are dollar millionaires today. His leadership style embodies the nurturing style of Rama. He also believes in being extremely tolerant toward diversity: ‘I want Infosys to be a place where people of different genders, nationalities, races, and religious beliefs work together in an environment of intense competition but utmost harmony, courtesy, and dignity to add more and more value to our customers day after day.’ Despite all the accolades and the praise he has received, Narayana Murthy remains a simple, humble and caring father figure for the employees of Infosys (Wikipedia, 2007).

Ratan Tata, the Chairman of Tata industries is the second Indian leader we showcase here. When Ratan Tata took over as the Chairman in 1991, the Tata conglomerate resembled an opaque jungle of companies. He rebuilt, tore down, expanded, and forged a powerful holding company that has interests...
now in seven areas including – steel, automobile production, information technology, telecommunications, and energy. He re-hauled the calcified bureaucratic culture of the Tata companies, and raised the conglomerate’s ownership stake in all the Tata companies to 26 percent. He took tough decisions when he got Tata Steel to shed half its 78 000 employees between 1994 and 2005 and changed the firm’s relationship with its employees from paternalistic to practical. Some of his leadership decisions embody the pragmatism that Krishna displayed.

Though the business carries his name, he only draws a salary from Tata Sons. Ratan Tata takes personal modesty very seriously and what really excites him is his ability to combine the philanthropic heritage of the Tata group with modern business sense. He has clearly developed a global footprint for the Tata companies by the aggressive acquisitions of Tetley Tea (UK), Daewoo Commercial vehicles (Korean company) and Corus Steel (UK) (Media Reports, Tata Sons, 2007). Through his development of a now much hyped low cost people’s car, ‘Nano’ Ratan Tata reinforces his legacy of commitment to the common man while at the same time recognizing the explosive profit potential in the growing segment of the upwardly mobile in India. Ratan Tata is a leader who has tried to be competitive in the new era of globalization while continuing to maintain the hallowed legacy of benevolent paternalism of its founder Jamshetji Tata.

Vergehese Kurien is often called the ‘father of the white revolution’ in India. He revolutionized the way dairy products were produced and marketed through Anand Milk Producers Union Limited. He attended university in the US, returned to India and dedicated his professional life to empowering the Indian farmer through cooperatives where dairy farmers could own and manage profitable agri-business enterprises with their produce, however small it may be. As a man he is considered self-centered and authoritarian, but thoroughly professional (Singhi, 2007). He is a great strategist who had the unique ability to communicate with multiple stakeholders – farmers, the scientific world, consumers and the international community to transform the power of the farmers. Kurien used his Western education by transferring the Western concept of organization, and provided a model of rural development for India and the world community. He got the farmers to buy into his philosophy of marketing their products and helped create powerful brands to sell their products. Kurien was able to recruit the farmers by inspiring them through the vision of a cooperative that helps the farmers to help themselves. It is largely credit to Kurien’s work that India is the largest producer of milk in the world today.

The final leader that we examine in this section is Vikram Sarabhai who many consider as the father of the Indian space program. Sarabhai was much more than a highly talented scientist. He was a dreamer, creator and innova-
He was a scion of a wealthy business family but was also a great believer in equality. He believed that: ‘we have to be constantly alert to see that our long-inherited feudal reflexes do not seep back into our veins’ (Parthasarathy, 2007). He motivated people with his positive attitude, created scientific institutions and programs because of his vision and foresight.

Sarabhai set up the first rocket launching station at Thumba and India launched its first space rocket under his leadership. He launched the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment which was the result of a negotiation between Sarabhai and NASA of USA (Parthasarathy, 2003). He also initiated the space project which is now a reality with the launching of many satellites. Sarabhai’s vision still drives India’s ambitious space program and continues to inspire Indians in the fields of science and technology. If leadership is a ‘process of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement’ (Stogdill, 1950) then Kurien and Sarabhai are examples of leaders who exemplify the ability to accomplish ambitious goals with their respective groups.

When analyzing these leaders, we can ask the question: are there unique personality characteristics that set these people apart and distinguish them as leaders or was it the situation and the circumstances that surrounded them that caused them to emerge as leaders? This is the ongoing debate between the trait theories of leadership (Boyatzis, 1982; Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991) and situational theories of leadership (Fiedler, 1967; House and Mitchell, 1974).

The research evidence shows that traits do matter. Six traits on which leaders differ from non-leaders include drive or ambition, the desire to lead, honesty and integrity, self-confidence, cognitive ability and knowledge of the field or business (Stogdill, 1950; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991). Many of the traits discussed here are evident in the four leaders discussed above. Drive or ambition is particularly evident in Narayana Murthy and Verghese Kurian both of whom founded their respective organizations. Ratan Tata and Vikram Sarabhai, because of the family background and inherited position, displayed tremendous self-confidence. All four leaders displayed honesty and integrity and had a commanding knowledge of the fields they worked in.

To a large extent, the success of these men can be attributed to the specific circumstance of the organizations that they led. The unique situation of the organization and its external environment raised unique issues that needed to be managed. Consequently, the evaluation of success in a leadership situation is also a function of the situation. For example, Ratan Tata took over the reins of Tata Sons when Indian policy toward industry was being liberalized and the management had greater decision making power in the context of
their companies. The CEO of Infosys founded the company when the power of the internet was beginning to be unleashed and the notion of outsourcing was rapidly gaining popularity. Verghese Kurien came upon the scene when the farmers were ready to be organized and there was social awareness in the country about the relevance and importance of cooperatives. In the case of Vikram Sarabhai, India had political leaders who were interested in science and technological progress, and he focused the resources and talent at his disposal to achieve greatness.

Like the immediate situation, the country (India), its myths, its culture, its politics and history create a larger context for leaders and what contributes to leadership effectiveness. Of the four leaders mentioned here, three of them came from relatively affluent backgrounds, were schooled in American Universities and came back to India to assume positions of leadership in their respective organizations. Like the mythical gods of yore, Rama and Krishna, all four of these leaders displayed nurturing qualities and pragmatism in their leadership styles. Narayana Murthy, the CEO of Infosys was exemplified for his humility; Ratan Tata of Tata Sons and Verghese Kurien for their strong sense of ethics and commitment to the welfare of the underprivileged, and Vikram Sarabhai for his visionary qualities and dynamism.

GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

What kind of manager or leader have the myths, cultural context and political history of India helped to create? What values have evolved and become institutionalized because of the unique context of the country? How are these leadership qualities different from values in the West? We would argue that there are four distinct values that can be showcased.

The Ability to Adapt and Assimilate

Its troubled history, being an economically underdeveloped nation for most of the last century, has created among Indians a strong need to go out and seek opportunities and adapt to new and diverse conditions. Thomas Friedman (2005) points out that the educated Indian cannot only compete, but out-compete in the world of technology because of his or her ability to quickly understand and adapt to the current needs of new markets – see Commentary box.
COMMENTARY BOX

President of a Large Indian Engineering Company

In home grown companies such as ours the leadership styles are moving from paternalistic to participative especially with higher levels of international travel, and exposure to the company ‘owners’, and increased level and quality of education to the second generations in their family.

CEO of a Consulting Company

In India, a very high premium is placed on knowledge and therefore education. Knowledge itself is considered power and the symbol of status. Brahmins enjoyed the highest status in Indian society and their profession was to acquire and impart the knowledge. The emphasis on gaining knowledge creates a very strong achievement orientation with a competitive spirit. On hindsight, I feel this is what is responsible for putting India in such an admirable position on the world map despite the serious problems of corruption and a humongous population.

The educated elite in India have been products of a formal British educational system and have also imbibed the traditional languages, myths, narratives, values and ethics. In a sense, they are optimally suited to benefit from globalization in that they can relate to the global aspect of business and are yet uniquely local and Indian. A familiarity with the English language and exposure to Western systems make it easier for the Indian manager to adapt to Western systems, than it is for the Western manager to adapt to India. Globalization has necessitated that Indian and Western organizations adapt to the other country’s value systems. Current dependencies in the power structure demand greater adaptability on the part of Indian managers as they look for business and additional resources from the West. But in the course of time, the nature of dependency of this relationship is likely to shift and Western managers will recognize the importance of seeing the world from a more polycentric frame.

Benevolent Paternalism as the Overriding Leadership Value

Many studies (Singh and Bhandarkar, 1990; Virmani and Guptan, 1991) have
confirmed benevolent paternalism passed down from myth as a predominant leadership value. The role of karta as a father figure who is nurturing, caring, dependable, sacrificing, and yet demanding and authoritative, seems to be expected of Indian leaders. The leader evokes feelings of security, trust, and dependability in creating a familial culture (Sinha, 1980) and ‘collectivism’ which is strong in the Indian psyche.

Subordinates in India seem to push leaders further towards paternalism. They seem to expect it, relish it, and are motivated by a leader who behaves as a benevolent father figure. The genesis of this relationship probably goes back to the early socialization process which makes even adults in India strive for the father’s approval (Ramanujan, 1989). The father as the family head is respected and obeyed; he helps, reprimands and encourages self-sacrificing behavior.

As we know, as families grow, the father grows differentially fond of different family members. A similar phenomenon is also evidenced in organizations (Pandey, 1989). There is a feeling that employees who are close to the ‘men who matter’ rise faster in organizations (Sinha, 2004). The leader often encourages certain subordinates to get close to him. The smart subordinates place themselves in positions where the leader might turn to them. Once they get to the leader, the leaders extend favors to them. This can be traced back to the Bhagvada Gita where subordinates are treated differentially based on their skills and abilities. The leaders start believing in their protégé and the protégé reciprocates by loyalty.

Some of these qualities are distinct to Asian cultures, while some of the leadership qualities are common to many cultures. The acceptance of authority and the style of ‘benevolent paternalism’ is effective in cultures like India which accept a high power distance. In Western cultures, the assertion of individualism, the ability to push one’s ideas in a rational, logical fashion, are valued more and rewarded appropriately. However, the importance of personal relationships in career success is perhaps common across cultures. As leaders manage people, personal relationships that the leader and subordinates build play a large role in the success of the leaders and the subordinates.

The Emphasis on Spirituality versus Materialism and Economic Rationality

The underlying spiritual context in India and Western nations (USA) is different. Here, we use the USA as our point of comparison. Religion and myths in India emphasize the notion of ‘nishakamakarma’ which is a perspective that emphasizes action without attachment to the fruits thereof (Chakraborty, 1991). A leader who behaves in accordance with this perspective is generally grounded in wisdom and a state of equanimity. This perspective is in stark
contrast to the current Western ‘results orientation’ which emphasizes materialism, growth and competition (Pruzan, 2004). Closely related to the concept of ‘nishakarma’ are the concepts of ‘selflessness’ and ‘non-attachment’.

A useful synonym which illuminates the paradoxical nature of the Indian perspective in this context is ‘detached involvement’. The underlying idea is that instead of plying our egos and appraising activities by the resultant payoffs, and being elated when desires are fulfilled and disappointed when they are not, there is an alternate way to perform action. Leaders can act without being attached to fruits of their efforts. This also results in Indian leaders perhaps being a little more fatalistic in their action where they believe that they cannot control their destinies.

But both the Indian perspective and the Western perspective are changing because of their respective positions in the economic cycle of development. As Indian businesses grow, because of globalization, and technology developments, Indian managers and leaders are being influenced by Western business practices and are beginning to deify materialism, and becoming more competitive. As Western economies mature, their leaders are becoming more conscious of the larger responsibilities of business to their multiple stakeholders. In a sense globalization is providing an opportunity to assimilate different values and gradually realize a more balanced view of competition and the organization’s role in a larger context for both India and the West.

The Emphasis on Duty in India versus Rights in the West

The Indian approach to leadership and all action is grounded in the concept of ‘relationship to others’. This complements the notion of ‘servant leadership’ (Greenleaf, 1977). The notion of servant leadership, although popularized in the West, is grounded in the Indian idea of duty and leadership. The Western focus is on freedom and the right to do what an individual can do. In the Indian context, the leader typically searches for his or her duty in relation to one’s position in life and tries to behave in accordance with that duty, which is his/her dharma. In keeping with ‘benevolent paternalism’ the duty may be toward one’s subordinates or toward doing what the leader believes is right for the organization.

In the Western context, individuals are conscious of their rights as individuals and employees. Consequently, leaders within organizations respect the employees for their ideas, contribution and what they bring to the organization. Yet, this ingrained need to protect one’s right also creates a certain distance between the employee and the organization and the employee and the leader. The difference in orientation results in differences in perspective toward loyalty and also creates differences in the tenure of employees in organizations.
Blind Spots of Indian Leaders

Indian leaders have been criticized for certain traits and qualities that they do not possess. It has often been said that they lack the aggressive, killer instinct. This is perhaps a corollary to the philosophy of ‘detached involvement’. The lack of drive and results orientation tend to move the locus of control outside the individual, and more leaders in the Indian context tend to leave situations and problems to sort themselves out.

The concepts of individualism, creativity, innovation and speedy implementation are relatively new to the Indian psyche. The Indian economy has been protected and the government followed a licensing model where many of the key decisions were externally imposed on organizations. With the recent liberalization of government policy, and the globalization of commerce, Indian businesses are recognizing the importance of speedy decision making, innovation and results orientation and how they relate to survival, growth and organizational performance.

Finally, a culture that was until now more focused on the collective, and one that stressed family values, seniority and loyalty, is assimilating the Western values of individualism and respect for individual rights. Employees are becoming more aware of their skills and the demand for labor is creating greater mobility and a pressure on wages. Organizations across different countries are gradually assimilating values that are different from their own but relevant because of globalization. The eclectic organization with changing leadership values is gradually evolving to take its place in a world that is smaller and increasingly more inter-connected.

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