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What We must Learn from the West

Pre-reading

Form groups of four or five members and discuss the answers to the following questions.

- Are there any typically Indian practices or attitudes that you dislike?
- What kind of practices and attitudes do you think Indians need to learn from other cultures?

Reading

The following article presents the point of view of a successful and respected Indian of our time.

What We must Learn from the West

Narayana Murthy

The role of Western values in contemporary Indian society is a subject on which I have pondered for years. I come from a company that is built on strong values. Moreover, various stakeholders of our company – employees, investors, customers and vendor-partners – come from across the globe, and in dealing with them over the years, I have come to appreciate several aspects of the West's value system. An organization is representative of society, and some of the lessons that I have learnt from the West regarding values are, I think, applicable to us as a nation. Here are some of them:

Respect for the Public Good

Indian culture has deep-rooted family values – parents make enormous sacrifices for their children; children consider it their duty to take care of aged parents; and marriage is held to be a sacred union with husband and wife bonded for life. Unfortunately, our attitude towards the community is very different from our attitude towards the family.

Although we keep our homes spotlessly clean, when we go out we do not think twice before littering. On the other hand, parks in the West are generally free of litter and their streets are clean.

We are also apathetic about community matters. We see serious problems around us but behave as if they are someone else's responsibility. For instance, all of us are aware of the problem of drought in India.

More than thirty years ago, irrigation expert Dr. K. L. Rao suggested solving this problem by creating a water grid interlinking the Ganga and Cauvery and several other Indian rivers. Unfortunately, nothing was done about this¹.

The story of power shortage in Bangalore is another example. In 1983, it was decided to build a thermal power plant to meet Bangalore's power requirements. Unfortunately, we have still not started it. Five years ago, because of the constant foreign travel required in the software industry, I had suggested a 240-page passport. This would eliminate frequent visits to the passport office. However, I am yet to hear from the Ministry of External Affairs on this.

Could the reason for all this be that we were ruled by foreigners for over a thousand years and thus came to believe that solving public problems was the responsibility of a foreign ruler, not ours? Even our decision-makers look to somebody else to take decisions.

In the West, individuals understand that they have to be responsible to their community. They care for their society and make sacrifices for it. They solve societal problems proactively. This is where we need to learn from the West. Successful societies are those that harmoniously combine loyalty to family and loyalty to community.

Acknowledging the Accomplishments of Others

In my extensive travels, I have not come across another society as contemptuous as we are of countries that have done better. This attitude, incidentally, is nothing new. Even Al-Biruni, the noted eleventh century logician and traveller, who spent about twenty years in India, referred to this trait of Indians.

If we want to progress, we must listen to and learn from people who have performed better than us.

Accountability

Another attribute we must learn from the West is accountability. There, you are held responsible for what you do, irrespective of your position. In India, the more 'important' you are, the less answerable you become. For instance, a senior politician once declared that he 'forgot' to file his tax returns for ten consecutive years – and got away with it. And although there are over a hundred loss-making public sector

¹ Late last year the central government finally appointed a task force to study such a project. – Eds.

units belonging to the central government, I have not seen action taken against top managers for bad performance in any of these organizations.

Dignity of Labour

Whereas this is an integral part of the West's value system, in India we revere only supposedly intellectual work. For instance, I have seen many engineers, fresh from college, who only want to do cutting-edge work, and not work that is of relevance to business and the nation. For anything to be run successfully, everyone – from the CEO to the person who serves tea – must discharge his or her duties in a responsible manner. We, therefore, need a mindset that reveres everyone who puts in honest work, no matter what work it is.

Professionalism

In the West, people do not let personal relations interfere with their professional dealings. They do not hesitate to chastise a colleague for incompetence, even if he is a friend. In India, we tend to view even work interactions from a personal perspective. We are also the most thin-skinned society in the world – we see insults where none is meant.

We extend this lack of professionalism to our sense of punctuality. We do not respect the other person's time. Indian Standard Time always runs late, and deadlines are typically not met.

Intellectual Independence


From the time their children are very young, Western parents teach them to think for themselves. So, these children grow up to be strong, confident adults. But in India, we suffer from feudal thinking. I have seen bright people who prefer to be told what to do by their bosses. We need to overcome this attitude if we are to succeed globally.

Honouring Contracts

The Western value system teaches respect for contractual obligation. In India, we consider it crucial to fulfill personal vows – as with family or friends. However, we do not extend this to the public domain. For instance, I had recommended several students for national scholarships for higher studies in American universities. Most of them did not come back to India even though contractually they were obliged to spend five years here after getting their degree. We have to change this attitude.

We are all aware of our rights as citizens. But we often fail to acknowledge the duty that accompanies every right. We should keep in mind what former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower said: "A people that values its privileges above its principles soon loses both." So, let us work towards a society where "we would do unto others as we would have them do unto us" and make our country great.

Comprehension

 Complete the following statements by choosing the most appropriate option given below.

- a. Indian attitudes to cleanliness are
 - i. confused.
 - ii. contradictory.
 - iii. sacred.
- b. India's colonial past
 - i. could have created the tendency to shirk responsibility.
 - ii. could be the cause for the habit of postponing action.
 - iii. could have led to the indifference to public welfare.
 - iv. could have made Indians lose their problem-solving ability.
- c. According to the writer, Indians
 - i. have to become active in the public sphere.
 - ii. have to realize the need for social welfare.
 - iii. have to extend their responsibilities beyond the family.
 - iv. have to make sacrifices for public welfare.
- d. Taking responsibility for one's action
 - i. is not a part of Indian work culture.
 - ii. is not valued in India.
 - iii. will make India's politicians better.
 - iv. is essential for ensuring good performance in the sector.
- e. Young people in India
 - i. need to be allowed to think for themselves.
 - ii. have to be taught to listen to elders.
 - iii. lack the ability to take decisions.
 - iv. take instructions only from their bosses.
- f. The writer quotes American President Eisenhower
 - i. to tell Indians that they have to accept contractual obligations.
 - ii. to make Indians aware of their rights as citizens.
 - iii. to remind Indians that rights come with responsibilities.
 - iv. to urge Indians to fulfill their duties.
- g. The tone of the writer is generally
 - i. deprecatory.
 - ii. condescending.
 - iii. hopeful.
 - iv. balanced.

Speaking

Discuss in groups of four or five the following topics and then share your views with the entire class.

- Your opinions on the views expressed in the article 'What We must Learn from the West'.
- What do you think are the problematic aspects of the Indian mindset? What do you think needs to be done to weed out certain characteristics that work against the good of society?
- What do you think India can teach the rest of the world? Or what can India learn from the rest of the world?

Writing

For each of the people mentioned in the first column work out the institution they would be associated with, what they would be accountable for and to whom, and possible penalties in case of non-fulfillment of their responsibilities.

People	Institution	Accountable for/to	Penalty for non-fulfillment
e.g., Wife	Household	Kitchen maintenance/husband	scolding/husband substituting for wife/ignoring the lapse
Child	School		
Lawyer			
Engineer			
		Payment of telephone bill	
	Parliament		
			Traffic fine of Rs 100/-
Doctor/Surgeon/Father			