"Leadership insights from the top: Exploring leadership through the narratives of CEOs in India"

Abstract

This paper highlights the corporate and non-corporate leadership practices in India, the effect of culture on such practices and how these drive management philosophies. Semi structured interviews were conducted with CEOs from India. The findings provide insights into organisational leadership in the context of India, more specifically the values, purpose and culture that guides leadership and management and the unique context in which leadership is practised. A key finding was that Indian leadership shares some aspects of global leadership traits, but cultural factors are significant influences on leadership style and philosophy. The long socio-economic and historical context of India cannot be ignored and has flavoured the leadership style of its business leaders. Many qualities of a good leader, as defined by Indian CEOs were derived from the Hindu mythology (Bhagvad Gita, Mahabharata, Ramayana, and the four Vedas). The findings are helpful to both practitioners and policy makers seeking to understand the leadership style of Indian CEOs. Our contribution rests on leadership insights which provide a more nuanced leadership style with elements of universalism as well as a particularism rooted in the rich socio-economic cultural history of India. Such a leadership has enabled pragmatism and a performance focus in the face of group and collective orientation.

Key words: leadership styles, India, culture, pragmatic jugaad

1. Introduction

The emergence of India as an economic power has made relevant the question of how leadership manifests itself in that part of the world; the role of leadership in transforming the Indian economic reality, the context in which this leadership is exercised, and the differences in leadership styles between the public sector and the private sector. It is important to understand the ramifications of the various social factors, particularly as many businesses are family-run; the corporate sector as well as the public sector has a decidedly moral purpose (Cappelli et al, 2015). Some would even argue that the private sector is imbued with a public sector ethos, with a fairly bureaucratic and paternalistic style of operations. Notwithstanding these issues, the interest in studying Indian businesses is growing (Cappelli et al 2010, 2015). However, there is still a dearth of research into leadership and management in the Indian context.

Accordingly this paper examines leadership and management in the Indian context from the perspective of Indian Chief Executives in a mixture of public and private organisations. It examines the underlying values and beliefs that they consider crucial in driving leadership behaviour and explores the influence of culture as a critical factor in the way organisations are run. The research question that this article seeks to explore is: what does their leadership and management practice look like? This could be further divided into: What are the key drivers of their leadership behaviour? What role do values, ethos and culture play in their leadership practise? The findings provide insights into organisational leadership in the context of India, more specifically the values, purpose and culture that guides leadership and management and the unique context in which leadership is practised. As part of the project, the research team interviewed CEOs located across India.

The paper examines leadership in the context of a changing environment within India and how personal values and leadership responses are guided by socio-economic, historical and cultural variables which impact on leadership within organisations. This is based on a review of the extant literature on India and its diversity, leadership and culture. However such a broad sweep of relevant literature will always be dogged with many omissions and here it would be wise to prompt the reader to focus on the purpose of the paper: to provide insights into understanding leadership in the Indian context and exploring the role of history and culture in influencing it. The research methodology is then outlined followed by the analysis of the main findings and conclusions.

2. *Review of the literature*

2.1.   *India: The historical, social-cultural, religious diversity*

Historically, India has been the seat of civilizations, empires and monarchies, notable mentions being the Harappan Civilisation which flowered in the north western parts as early as 2600 BC, Chandragupta Maurya whose rule epitomised imperial monarchy in c 321 BC and whose descendant Asoka (c268-231 BC) embraced Buddhism and is credited with the early dissemination of Buddhism in South and even South Eastern Asia (Thapar, 2002; Kossambi, 1965; Sharma, 2010; Singh & Lahiri, 2010; Wood, 2008). In these early times, the rise of monarchy was matched by a highly advanced system of education offered by the ancient universities of Takshila, Nalanda, Odantapuri, Vikramashila, Kanchipuram, Madurai and Shravan Belgola among others (Bhasham, 1967; Thapar, 2002).

Moving on to medieval times, the country continued to flourish with its rich diversity and cultural mosaic of eclectic influences, absorbing the traditions of Islam while developing regional identities and variations (Chandra, 2004; Chandra, 2006; Habib, 2011, 2013). The modern era continued to develop and grow: the social and cultural roots of India have constantly evolved since antiquity and despite the long periods of domination under the Mughals and the British, the numerous influences on its traditions, cultures, institutions and people are very evident (Chandra, 2004: Chandra, 2006; Kakar, 2006; Khilnani, 2003; Wood, 2008). India as it exists today is a composite of multiple linguistic regions, with great diversity in socio-cultural practices which manifest as various contending but also unifying influences on organisations. Truly organizations, and by implication leaders and leadership have been impacted by this state of evolution of more than 5000 years, such that it has even been averred that India is more than a geographical and administrative entity, it is an idea (Khilnani, 2003; Habib, 2013; Deb, 2011) that has been evolving and continues to do so. At any moment, only a miniscule microcosm of this diversity can be captured through research. This paper makes a contribution in understanding leadership in a country with a rich and varied history that had a 25% share of the world trade in the 18th Century (Maddison, 2006) Though change is a truism, paradoxically it takes shape within a great deal of continuity.

The coming together of various regions and principalities under one universal sway happened intermittently under the Mauryas (3rd to 1st Century BC), the Guptas (3rd to 6th Century AD) and then the Mughals (1526-1857). So the idea of one India, of one rule, of one people is a more recent phenomenon, complemented no doubt as a result of British colonial rule and its creation of the civil services. It is not surprising that leaders rooted in this chequered history would have different styles and agendas. Change in the context of multicultural continuity and diversity is a legacy of India's historical past.

For centuries, Delhi has been in the thick of affairs affecting the whole of India (Dalrymple, 1994; Guha, 2007; Tully, 1994; Rushdie, 1981; Sengupta, 2007). Apart from being the capital city it has emerged as a political, cultural and commercial centre (Sengupta, 2007; Dasgupta, 2014). It houses the seat of the Indian political system - the legislative arm represented by bi- cameral houses of Indian Parliament, the Lok Sabha and the Raja Sabha, the judicial arm represented by the Supreme Court of India and the executive arm represented by the bureaucracy, government departments, defence headquarters and headquarters of other public sector undertakings. Even if a company has headquarters elsewhere, the doyens of industry congregate in

Delhi very often. Along with Mumbai, most of the strategy, planning and mergers and acquisitions are brokered in these two metropolises.

During the British Raj bureaucrats from the Indian Civil Service influenced and implemented government policies and decisions. After India's Independence, the Civil Service was renamed the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) and India retains one of the most complex bureaucracies in the world, facing a wide range of societal and policy problems. The liberal socialism that emerged as a result of the independence struggle seemed to include wide diversity, in line with a pluralistic and many-hued society and politics (Wood, 2008; Basu, 2010 Deb, 2011). Such an evolution resulted in the first freely elected communist government being established not in the erstwhile USSR or China but in the Indian state of Kerala (1959).

India's population of over a billion and its young demographics presents both opportunities as well as challenges. Not surprisingly, Indian leaders must continuously develop new solutions to old problems by more effective and efficient use of resources to meet ever growing needs (Mulgan and Albury, 2003). Being the largest democracy in the world, liberalising and opening up and developing its economy rapidly is a complex challenge (Basu, 2010), and calls for varying leadership styles, in both public and private sectors.

India is a complex collectivity with strong intra-group differences. The group can have different primacy, with ethnicity, religion, language, caste, regions all vying for supremacy within individual identities. This diversity of languages, cultures, religions and people of different social origins and ethnicities have been captured in recent writings (Sen, 2005; Budhwar et al, 2010; wood, 2008). Indian leaders tend to be imbued by a high power distance mentality and complex hierarchies (Kanungo and Mendonca, 1994), arguably an accretion rooted in its history of powerful rulers and grand ambitions.

Most government run organisations, industries and departments are run by bureaucrats, non-elected officials. The prevalence of bureaucratic structures and practices could also be explained as a consequence of the socialist policy that India adopted as it transitioned from colonial rule after independence. This policy led to the expansion of government stake in infrastructure, service and basic industries and the development of public sector undertakings in areas as diverse as telecom and telephones, iron and steel, space exploration to bridges and highways and public utilities. This changed in the late 1980s and the 1990s which saw the opening of the economy, liberalisation of trade, disinvestment of government holding in enterprises and entry of foreign joint ventures in several core sectors like banking (Basu, 2010). This could offer some explanation to common paternalistic and autocratic leadership styles

within bureaucratic organisations. It also fuses the distinctions between the public and private sectors as many erstwhile public sector undertakings have government stakes (in varying proportions) and the movement of people across the sectors has led to the private sector being infused with public sector type values, ethos and leadership. So many of the corporate leaders are very much like public sector leaders favouring bureaucratic systems and processes and risk aversion espousing shared responsibility, embracing corporate social responsibility with a rich stake in developmental and social matters and paternalistic altruism along with the drive for profits and expansion (Basu, 2010; Budhwar and Verma, 2010; Cappelli et al 2010, 2015).

The understanding of public leadership is influenced by, as opined by Brookes and Grint's (2010) a focus on collective leadership combining both distributed (vertical-functional) leadership and shared (horizontal-geographic/cross sector) leadership; transforming relationships for an integration of services across public services; focus on collective whole system approaches; creating a learning organisation [1](Senge, 2006); seeking public value (Moore, 1995); problem solving (Rittell and Webber, 1973), and adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Tripathi and Dixon, 2008). India is a mixture of many cultures with the urban majority influenced to varying degrees by Western culture. However, it is the legacy of Victorian and Mughal (Islamic) cultures that have left the deepest impressions on the Indian society in terms of acceptable norms.

Modern day India has some major challenges to overcome in social structures and cultural practices, some of which are quite archaic and arguably quite Victorian, like gender and caste/class issues; representation of nationhood and regional affiliations; the strong social-cultural-religious identities, and the place of values in individual and communal lives (Chowdhury, 2010; Deb, 2011). Besides there are other aspects which need development and modernisation, not least, aspects such as poor infrastructure across parts of the country and geo-political disputes with neighbouring countries, as well as those parameters on which India has been seen as slipping rather than making progress, like corruption and slow moving regulatory labyrinths. Such conditions partly explain the findings of Cappelli et

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[1] All of these are seminal in Brookes and Grint's (2010) book on public leadership.

al, (2010, 2015) that Indian business leadership is guided by broad mission and purpose. However, in both the public and private sectors, there is a growing demand for quick decision-making driven by the expectations of a growing and educated middle class ambitiously asserting its rise and place in the world of business. This is manifested in the meteoric rise of Infosys and Biocon amongst other organisations.

2.2.   *Leadership*

Leadership has been the subject of much interest by scholars, exemplified through the writings of Plato in the West, Confucius in the East (Turner and Müller, 2005) to more modern ones like Barnard (1968) and Stogdill (1974). Despite this fascination, there is no universal definition or theory of leadership; the literature is balkanized into a diverse ranges of approaches and theories. However, most scholars/writers will agree with Bryman's (1996) oft-noted three commonalities in the leadership literature: influence, group and goal. There is also some unanimity that leadership is the process of influencing the activities of an individual or group in efforts toward achievement of a goal in a given situation. Drucker (1996) sums up leadership by suggesting that the only definition of a leader is someone who has followers.

The leadership process incorporates understanding the relational aspects of interacting in a dynamic context and using adept ways of behaving to influence a group of people towards achieving a goal (Ladkin and Spiller, 2013; Brookes and Grint, 2010; Carroll et al., 2015). The leadership process is hence focused on the leader who initiates, commands and influences the leadership processes (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999) Traditionally, research in this area explored the hard skills, traits and styles associated with leadership, though more recently research has moved beyond these narrow moorings to more contested understandings with a focus on more relational, contextual, performative and discursive elements (Ladkin, 2013; Carroll, et al., 2015). This has fed more critical perspectives including viewing 'good' leadership as a social construct, an emergent property of groups and teams, which is subject to change, reinforcing both leadership and followership as mutual though unequal interactions (Grint, 2005; Kelley, 1988; Ladkin, 2015) and with '*interdependent relationships and intersubjective meanings*' (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 655). Modern leadership theory recognizes the importance of the soft skills relating to personal and emotional factors (Goleman; 2000; Ladkin, 2015).

Den Hartog et al. (1999) focused on exceptional leadership and found that, although culturally-contingent leadership characteristics exist, there are certain characteristics related to charismatic/transformational leadership that

are generally agreed worldwide as factors of exceptional leadership. Holmberg & Åkerblom's (2006) study was concentrated on exceptional leadership for middle managers in Sweden. They came to similar conclusions as Den Hartog et al (1999), that both culturally-contingent and globally endorsed leadership characteristics existed in Sweden. However, they further posited that culturally-contingent characteristics change slowly and, therefore, do not believe that a global convergence of leadership styles is taking place. Interestingly, Dickson, et al., (2003) make a strong case against the existence of universal leadership principles. During their review of cross-cultural leadership, they noted the existence of many different leadership styles, practices and preferences. The Globe Studies of 62 countries concluded that leaders universally across national boundaries manifested dynamic, decisive, honest and trustworthy personas with an ability to motivate and network and emphase performance and achievements. In some countries but not in others, culturally contingent leadership characteristics include enthusiasm, self-effacement and status-consciousness.

This article offers a different approach to the importance of a hitherto neglected area of leadership in Indian organizations in both the public and private sector: the focus is on public leadership rather than solely on leadership in a corporate context.

2.3. *Leadership and culture*

The role of culture in adoption of a leadership style cannot be ignored. The works of Hofstede (1980, 1991) and Trompenaars (1993) on cultural dimensions of leadership are very popular. Hofstede (1980) developed a model that identifies four primary dimensions to differentiate cultures: power distance, individualism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. He also identified two additional dimensions long-term orientation and Indulgence. Trompenaars (1993) provided a set of five dimensions to describe cultural values of universalism versus particularism, individualism versus collectivism, neutral versus affective relationships, specific versus diffuse relationships, and achievement versus ascription.

Hofstede (1980) treats culture as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. He further posits that in studying "values" we compare individuals; in studying "culture" we compare societies. According to Adler (2002) to understand the differences between domestic and global management, it is necessary to understand the primary ways in which cultures around the world vary.

Cultural differences are often a source of confusion but if well understood they can transform into a source of strength. An understanding of culture is a soft skill and is crucial to success in modern day project-based organisations which operate in multicultural settings and environments. Indian society and culture is an accretion of diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic, caste and regional differences. Budhwar, Verma and Sengupta (2010: 49) label it as a "*panorama which has absorbed different languages, cultures, religions and people of different social origins at different points of time*". These have resulted in innumerable patterns of life, styles of living and leading, rules and regulations, systems and processes and occupations and working arrangements. Change is also visible, as when two of the authors were growing up in India, the most desired professions were civil services, medical and engineering and now it is more commonplace to hear graduates wanting to set up their own enterprise, acquire an MBA etc. Myrdal famously referred to India as a soft state which was confirmed as soft work culture by Sinha (1990).

Using Hofstede's (1991) 4 dimensions of national culture, Kanungo and Mendonca (1994) claimed fundamental differences between Indian and Western cultures. High uncertainty avoidance and power distance goes hand in hand with low individualism and masculinity. The unwillingness to take risks reinforces traditional and bureaucratic systems and processes making it more difficult to change. Soft work culture also manifests itself as dependence and siloed routines where guidance of seniors or elders is almost obligatory (Sinha, 1990).

This section would be incomplete without a mention of caste, which has ubiquitously been associated with Indian society. Caste is also known as jati or an ascribed form of stratification within the society, which has sustained over time despite its transformations and is a persisting reality of the society. However, within the business context of the top organisations, its presence was not specifically mentioned or alluded to. This is of course not to deny its significance, but just to reiterate that caste is subtly present but not in a strident and obvious way.

2.4.   *Leadership in the Indian context*

Despite being one of the fastest growing economies in the 21st century, there is a scarcity of literature regarding trends in Human Resource Management for Indian organisations (Budhwar and Verma, 2010) which also extends to leadership (Palrecha, Spangler and Yammarino, 2012; Cappelli et al 2010, 2015). More recently there have been calls for culturally specific and local constructs for studying and analysing leadership in various parts of the

world (Meyer, 2006; Lau, 2002). Following on Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009) support the use of qualitative research using multiple sources and mixed-method approaches. Working within this tradition, Sinha (1980, 1995) developed a culturally contingent leadership model for the Indian context which he names the nurturant–task (NT) leadership model which was based on more than 40 empirical studies. A few studies have used this model (Palrecha, 2009; Sayeed, 2010) although the jury is not all unanimous in its applicability (Palrecha *et al*, 2012). Sinha (1995) focuses on three characteristics of leadership, namely:

a) Excessive dependency even when it is not required. This makes the overt seeking of support, guidance, and encouragement essential.

b) Preference for hierarchy, emanating from the stranglehold of a hierarchically stratified society where castes and sub-castes are extremely important. This intrinsic preference for hierarchy demonstrates a visible status consciousness where respect for, and obedience of elders and superiors is unsurmountable.

c) Preference for personalized relationships which is based on an enhanced perception of own-personal and others-impersonal divide (Kumar and Singh, 1976). This often results in favouritism and nepotism.

The above characteristics of NT leadership are displayed in the leader–follower relationships in organisations and manifests through a range of leadership styles in various combinations: authoritarian, bureaucratic, participative, nurturing, task-oriented, and nurturant-task oriented styles. The nurturant–task leadership style is nurturing and relational but subject to high effort, sincerity and deference by the follower-subordinates. The nurturance is a privilege, granted for the subordinates explicit quality and quantity of hard work and perseverance: it is not universally imparted, but subject to criteria that the followers must meet (Sinha, 1980). However, the model requires empirical substantiation and suffers from fissures and cracks (Sinha, 1995) and more research would help to map the '*uncharted territory*' of Asian Leadership models (See Arvey, et al, 2015 Special Issue).

Indian leadership shares some aspects of global leadership traits (Prabhakar, Saran, & Liddle, 2013; Cappelli et al 2015), but there are other distinctive aspects of leadership in the Indian context within what Cappelli, et al (2010) label as the 'India Way' which has pushed companies like Infosys, Tata and HCL to the top of the global corporate scene. The India Way of doing business encompasses four key principled practices, holistic engagement with employees, improvisation and adaptability, creative value

proposition, and broad mission and purpose. Each of these require some leadership behaviours and characteristics.

Palrecha et al (2012) in their recent study using a multi-theory, multi-methods approach found strong support for an organisational specific leadership model, some support for a nurturant–task leadership model, and minimal support for universal, transformational leadership theory. This indicates gaps in theory and empirical evidence; the current article's focus on leadership in the Indian context is timely as well as being relevant as though India's growth slowed in the early 2010s, it has re-asserted itself as a global player by beating China as the favoured destination for FDIs in 2015 (HT, 2015).

3. *Research Design & Methodology*

The data collection for this paper consists of interviews with 32 CEOs in Indian public and private organisations. The data collection instrument focused on the opinion of CEOs regarding their leadership behaviours, organisational practices and effectiveness, comparative organisational performance and strategic intent in organisational change. It also included questions about the business environment of the organisation and challenges facing the leaders and their organisations. The interview guide developed by Professor Robert House for the Cross-cultural CEO study was used to gather leadership perspectives for this paper. The interview questions are is in the English language which remains a preferred way of communication among Indian business leaders, therefore no translation was involved. There were a set of a dozen questions which were adapted for each interview (see Appendix A).

It is important to understand the style of leadership practiced in India and the underlying philosophy[2] of management. For this study, the title CEO and leader have been used interchangeably. The title CEO has been used as a generalization for a host of designations acting at the highest level including Director General and Chief Corporate representative. The 32 CEOs hailed from diverse sectors including public sector, government departments &

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[2] The philosophy of management is used in terms of a way of leading with guiding values, beliefs and attitudes that generally underlines leadership behaviours in Indian businesses, akin to Reinhard Bendix's '*ideologies of management*'(2001). The way of life in ingrained in India psyche for instance being an Hindu is more than practising the religion of Hinduism it is a way of life, arguably filtering down from the ancient languages, Sanskrit's Dharma and Pali's Dhamma.

institutions, private companies, family business, civil services (IAS), and universities. The industries these CEOs belong to are shown in the Table 1. 16 of these CEOs belonged to the private and 16 to the public sector[3]. Of the 32 interviews, 28 were with Indian business leaders and 4 with foreign nationals working in India (from Italy, Japan, Finland and France respectively). As clarified earlier, the stamp of earlier bureaucratic and procedure-driven structures are indelible not only in the public sector, but also in the corporate or for-profit sector (Budhwar and Verma, 2010; Basu, 2010). It is with this reason that the present journal is considered for discussing the outcomes of this exploration on leadership in the public and private domain in the Indian context. All the respondents interviewed happened to be males, such a demographic selection was totally unintentional.

Data collection was primarily done through semi-structured interviews in and around Delhi which houses not only the Headquarters of organisations in the public sector but also the regional head offices of quite a few private sector companies. It is a metropolis with diversity and multiplicity ingrained in every aspect of its life (Dasgupta, 2014). Hence, it seems to be a microcosm of the whole of India and has served as its capital more often than not since the medieval times.

Mail and telephonic contacts were established with these respondents (Table 1) so as to get a good understanding of corporate and public sector leadership in India. These semi-structured interviews were video-recorded with the permission of interviewees and lasted around one hour. Interviews were fully transcribed. A content analysis was done manually and minutely and the main themes were captured and scrutinized in form of a database file. The file was read over again to capture the dominating, underlying themes.

Table 1 here.

4. *Results: Attributes of Indian Leaders*

The interviewees have described their own philosophy of management[4]. It's not what they would like to see in others as 'ideal' or 'desired'. It's what they think they practice as their preferred style of leadership. Indian leaders/

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[3] By public, we mean government departments and also PSUs. Pease see table 1 in appendix for more clarity.

CEOs tend to be very philosophical with respect to the way of expression of their ways of management and leadership and are guided by altruistic and socio-economic ambitions of 'doing good', benefitting their employees, communities, regions and the nation.

Available literature has conceptualized and developed measures of nine cultural dimensions: performance orientation, assertiveness, future orientation, humane orientation, institutional collectivism, in-group collectivism, gender egalitarianism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Javidan *et al.*, 2006; Kanungo and Mendonca, 1994).

These dimensions are recorded in the work of numerous researchers and authors (e.g Deresky, 2006; Javidan and House, 2002; Hofstede, 1991; House *et al.*, 1997, 2002 and 2004). Based on our analysis of interview data, below are the cultural and leadership dimensions of Indian CEOs.

4.1. *People orientation:*

Indian leaders display a high-level of patience and respect the sentiments of their co-workers. They place emphasis on creating an environment to enable the best from their staff. An emphasis on creating positive values, sharing and ensuring commitment to those values and aligning people with organizational goals was highlighted in the leadership narratives. The leader had to identify the requirements of the job at hand, ensure that these were clarified and the organization has the capability to execute and achieve the quality standards. Further they felt it necessary to be transparent which future-proofed the organization to failure and enabled a healthier attitude to risks. They underscored the need for learning from mistakes and being flexible in the face of changing circumstances which was seen as necessary for success. According to the Editor of the Pioneer newspaper:

'A leader must be oriented towards the people: JUST ONE THING - treat everyone with dignity'

There was a broad acceptance amongst the interviewees that a leader would have to be a high achiever with an ability to motivate and enthuse their staff, peers and even other stakeholders. There were elements of *the chief knows best* but within an overall paternalistic and moral outlook. This did not however prevent them from being performance driven and focusing on the achievement of goals. Apart from an ability to motivate, leaders would also need to exhibit high levels of energy to passionately commit and jealously pursue the mission that they have conveyed to the organization to achieve.

. Executive Director of Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) opines*:*

'People orientation is a means, not the task accomplished. We have to feel committed to task. I have been telling from the beginning. Task has got to be accomplished. But when you set a task, the method that you choose to achieve the task should be such that it gives a win-win situation for one and all'.

Executive Director, India Habitat Centre states:

'You need to be seen and believed that you'll be all the time fair and straight, and no matter what the pressures, you'll not compromise on fairness. It's okay to do compromises where it's essential, but you'll certainly not dilute the degree of equity to people who are affected by your decisions'.

The Chairman of Indian Railway Board adds:

'I would say taking your team along, taking initiative, hard work, having some special projects achievements'.

CEOs perceive people orientation as their personal strength and also as the strength of their organisation. They believe in providing an environment that fosters creativity, innovation and better performance. On being asked about his personal strength a Director of Haldiram's comments that:

'I feel proud that I have been able to inculcate a culture of teamwork and cooperation and that's the strength of the organisation. My strength is, understanding the people I am working with, what the customers wants. What are their taste preferences and what are the strengths of my company and where I have to take my company to, which position that I know and my confidence in developing and implementing the systems'.

The Chief of Fiat in India states:

'First of all, understand people; invest in people and being able to motivate people. At the end of the day, companies are made of people. Everybody must have told you, but again & again I understand that this is the real part of it – people!'

From the above quotes and analysis of interviews one can conclude that Indian leaders would like to be seen to be people oriented; the people orientation emphasises the need to be open and fair and respecting others views. Teams were important for enhancing performance and ensuring positive attitudes and motivations and keeping up the morale and team spirit.

4.2.   *Institutional and In-Group Collectivism*

Leadership can be referred to as a group outcome and as group process of influence towards the achievement of shared goals. So groups rather than

the individual were the focus of attention and the relationships between these. Family and social ties were influential in defining group values, motivation and commitment. Collectivism did not extend to democratic or participative decision making but rather the presence of a small elite in-group at the apex that contributed to decision making. Collectivism also did not embed as collective decision-making throughout the organization. So rather than one person deciding all issues, the dominant group was responsible for it. The leaders were also imbued with societal and cultural values and ethos. They actively sought to manage societal issues which they considered as retrograde or damaging to societies and communities. The CEO of Indo-Asian opines:

'My tag line, which I write on all my e-mails, is: together we can make it happen, very simple'.

Chairman of IFCI (Industrial Finance Corporation of India) adds:

'I believe that the people are important in management and if we are able to manage people, if we are able to ignite some aspirations and get commitments from them, they can do wonders'.

When CEOs make management decisions, whether they relate to the direction the organisation should take or whether they relate to individuals, the perception of fairness and transparency was vital. The attention was not so much on what is being done as whether it fairly applied to everybody equitably. Equitable nature of decision making helped in building up trust, fostering meaningful communication and a sense of fair play. Thus trust building, communication and a sense of fair play becomes pivotal. According to the Managing Director of Ebony Retail Holdings Limited:

'I think it's more to do with belongingness. Trust and belongingness (are important) and that is not a one-way street. I can pay best salaries, I can create opportunities and yet, that might not be enough, there has to be openness'.

As Maddock (2008a) suggests that innovation is driven by creative people and culture. In employing the right people, leaders can create the conditions for innovation. Leaders nurture staff, create the conditions for innovation by being open, inclusive and collaborative, creating harmony and synergy and joining the dots (Maddock, 2008b).

The CEO of Indo-Asian says:

One is the commitment of our people who work in the organisation, which is very high, immediately reciprocated by our people. The kind of team we

have, the people their commitment to the organisation and the bond that we all share with the organisation is tremendous.

Indian CEOs tend to understand the importance of participative management, as Vice Chancellor of BITS-Pilani observes:

My philosophy of management is something in which you should be able to make everybody participate in the development.

From the above quotes it is evident that Indian leaders are group-oriented, as this helps in face-saving and parcels responsibility in case of failure. Transparent and fair decision making was considered significant.

4.3. *Power distance and Gender egalitarianism*

All the CEOs interviewed for this study happen to be males; this demographic selection was unintentional. Despite recent increase in female participation in the Indian job market, there are still few females at the top echelons of organizations. There are many Indian women who have reached top level in other countries, notably in the USA.

The Indian organisational system generally tends to be highly hierarchical with a relatively high power distance. Indian public sector organisations are often state run and have to adhere to strict hierarchy and red-tape that is well entrenched in organizational culture . A head of a major public sector organization sums up in the following words:

..as a government company, we have certain rules and regulations, which sometimes do not allow us to take commercial decisions. I hope, as we go along, more autonomy would be given to us, which is not there today

A Vice Chancellor of a public university echoes similar sentiments:

… we are used to a bureaucratic style of functioning where things take more time than they should normally take. As Vice-Chancellor, one cannot be totally independent on some fronts. One has to go by the government procedures. As an academician sometimes you feel that something that has taken two years would have perhaps taken six months elsewhere. These are the sort of things which slow down the progress in some areas.

Overall, the leaders normatively emphasized the group in their discourses but the organisations were hierarchical with high power distance. The emphasis on group orientation obfuscated and increased time spent of decision making. This is evidenced further in the following section.

4.4. *Philosophy of management*

The findings from India indicate that both public and private sector leaders aim to be people-centred and value the contributions of their staff. They also seek to balance competing demands, as shown in the following section.

The Director of Dalmia group state that:

My philosophy of management is Plan A: Survive, Plan B: Prosper and balance the two.

The Chairman of Indian Railway Board says:

My philosophy of life is balance. Balance also tallies with the nature, the stars and the suns. The nature has a balance. So, balance is my philosophy of life and thereafter. Balance brings the best resource, motivation, genuineness and your optimism.

Two other interviewees comment that:

Leadership, it is a job to be done. Do, it fairly, properly, squarely and balancing all the different situations which would be there and that's roughly what it will be.

The balance between tending, asking and trusting from the essence how management can be run and it's true at the junior management level, it's true at the senior management level and it's true at the board.

The Director General of CSIR (Council of Scientific & Industrial Research) says that,

I always talk about three things that a CEO must have: innovation, compassion and passion. The most difficult part in a multinational is the way people interact. Many times most of the problems and most of the delays arise because there is not a well-coordinated line of action and interaction becomes important. Most of the times, it's easier to interact with the outside world rather than inside world. One of the strengths of a CEO is to know very well his people and the group as a whole.

The Ambassador of Finland to India opines:

I would say, dialogue, cooperation, pays attention to the welfare of your personnel and then try at the same time to introduce some sort of efficiency in what you are doing.

The CEOs are not necessarily the only means of ascertaining where the industry/sector is going. Very often, there are other people in the organisation who may sense where it is going and take you closer to it. The Vice-Chancellor of GGSIPU University says:

'Philosophy of management, I think today is very participative because you cannot really decide on your own'.

Overall, the respondents generally underscored that their way of leading and managing as being group orientated, with the goal and mission being developmental and 'making a difference' to organisations, and staff.

4.5. *The effect of culture*

Culture and religion are important aspects of public and private sector leadership in an Indian context as shown by the following quotations. The Director of Dalmia group states:

There are lots of cultural issues. Same stuff, which every company faces and we are facing exactly that.

The Chief corporate representative of Fiat International in India puts his opinions in this way:

Indians have many things in common, the importance of family, and of family-run businesses. Emotionally speaking, I found many similarities with Italians. We fight and then we are the best of friends. Indians, on the other side, have a different structure in the way their industry is developing. There is no homogeneity. There are small and medium scale family businesses, and there are big conglomerates, may be some of which started as a family-run business like Fiat and Benetton'.

In line with the effect of religion on Indian administrative philosophy one can easily see the effect of scriptures in the following statement, a *shloka* (hymn) of *Bhagwad Geeta* (a Hindu religious scripture) by the Chief of Engineers India Limited:

'Karmanyevadhikaraste Ma phaleshu kadachana

Ma karnaphalahetur bhurma Te Sangostvakarmani

Translated from Sanskrit, this couplet from the Bhagvad Gita reads: You have a right to work (karma) but never its fruits. Let not the fruits of action be your motive, not let your focus (attachment) be on inaction. Never consider results or consequences as your right, it is through your effort and duty that you acquire fulfilment.

Importance and faith on the philosophy of *Karma* is reflected in the following quote:

Karma Yoga is the essence of the management as far as I am concerned. Karma Yoga means that you must do your 'Karma' according to your knowledge, according to your sincerity. This is what I personally feel management is.

Generally the socio-historical and religious factors had a bearing on 'way we do things here' within the organization. This was reflected in the rhetoric of the leaders.

4.6. *Future Orientation*

Indian public and private sector leaders tend to be reasonably future-oriented as compared to other south Asian clusters (see Gupta et.al. 2002). The following quote by the CEO of an Indian company encapsulates this:

A leader makes decisions by making staff believe in them, and to "transform an organisation" a "very long-term basis" is essential.

The Ambassador of France to India combines the concept of consensus building to discuss the future in the following statement:

I would always like to be consensual to bring people on my position, to try to anticipate, to organize the time so that people have time, so that they know what they are doing. They are not afraid of what they are going to do in the future.

Largely the respondents in their discourse exhibited a future orientation and the long term which was important as well as in the direction and the goals that the organization aspired to.

5. *Discussion and Conclusion*

Our intention in this paper is to reveal some of the finer nuances of leadership as it exists in a range of business and public sector organisations. This was reflected in the wide variety of responses which can be attributed to India's many historical and current factors like culture, religion, region etc. The long socio-economic and historical context of India cannot be ignored and has flavoured the leadership style of its business leaders. Many qualities of a good leader, as defined by Indian CEOs, are derived from the Hindu mythology and its major epics (The Mahabharata and the Ramayana), as demonstrated in the previous sections.

Gupta *et al.*, (2002) provide a quantitative analysis on the southern Asian cluster, whereas this paper is solely focused on leadership styles in the India context and provides a more nuanced narrative and qualitative analysis, with the latter two methods complementing each other. Deeper more multi-method and multi-model research is warranted to understand leadership in business organizations in India. Also, the need to compare the NT leadership with elements of paternalistic leadership in other Asian cultures (Arvey et al, 2015; Zhang et al, 2015) is also apparent.

The interview data reveals that leaders in both the public and private sectors in India share an understanding of their roles and responsibility which are rooted in people orientations that complements task orientation, collective yet strategic leadership, hierarchical structures and in-groups. The emphasis on balance manifested through adoption of the middle path is undoubtedly shaped in large part by the cultural and socio religious realities of India. Despite a traditional affinity for group or collectivity and people orientation, the leaders were quite directive where it came to the overall mission and direction. This was tempered by pragmatism as well as a duty towards growth and development of the community, region and even the nation as a whole.

Without exception leadership narratives acknowledged the imperative of employing talented staff as crucial to success and agreed on the need to be appreciative of diversity in culture, religion etc. They espoused flexibility and adaptability in the ways of doing business which scaffolded the balancing of many competing demands which were perceived as prerequisite for create the necessary conditions to drive innovation. This adaptability through iterative processes of trial, making do, and being creative 'somehow' has been labelled as *jugaad* (Cappelli, et al, 2010, 2015). To achieve the synergy necessary to bring about transformational change, leaders saw the need to nurture staff with an inclusive and collaborative leadership style. This research hence supports both Cappelli et al's (2010) emphasis on people power being the source of competitive advantage as well as the NT model which found some favour with the Palrecha et al study of 2012.

Indian leaders view people orientation as a necessary means to getting tasks accomplished. They did not view people orientation and task orientation as mutually exclusive but the former more of an enabler to create an environment which made things possible, underpinning jugaad. So people orientation was backed by a pragmatic and realistic commitment not surprising in a highly competitive global environment.

Group and collective emphasis fostered a web of protocols and layered bureaucratic controls that ultimately reduced efficiency. When combined with high power distance it led to strategic control and ultimately lack of transparency at the top rather than any egalitarian group consensus and decision making. High power distance and hierarchical systems manifested as gender disparity.

Participation of employees in decision-making and an emphasis on continuous improvement were seen as not only allowing the development of new solutions to old problems, but also having the added bonus of utilizing resources more effectively and efficiently. It was seen as essential that

leaders communicate effectively with employees for innovation and transformation to take place. Valuing staff was deemed a critical factor in organisational performance and innovative practices. The people orientation emphasises the culture and societal pressures that necessitate the leaders to behave in a certain way. The prevailing social and economic systems in the Indian context foster the need for leaders to be people oriented. This Indian leader analysis has demonstrated that harmonizing culture and religion, and balancing the needs of employees against the needs of the organisation can add value and create immense benefits. Balance is seen as a critical factor in leadership in India. This element of balance as a leadership trait can be traced to the middle-path espoused by Gautam Buddha which in its simplest implies a balanced approach to life reflecting Aristotle's idea of virtue as the mean between two extreme states. The metaphysical aspects of Indian culture (Chatterjee, 2009).have had a deep impact values, beliefs and attitudes in how organisations are run and managed. The goal of bringing about change, even deep societal and cultural change and introducing new ways of doing things was the personal mantra of the CEOs.

Indian public and private sector leaders initiate, command and influence their followers by being philosophical in their approach and they seem to draw upon religious and cultural learning to manage teams. High power distance in this particularly bureaucratic and hierarchical context is the basis to achieve such a high degree of control and influence.

Results from the interviews shed light on important aspects of Indian culture, particularly the economic and political legacy of colonialism, and its bureaucracy and hierarchy within the Indian commercial and business culture. This also has manifested through a concern with social issues and a commitment to social goals fuelled by enlightened self-interest (Palrecha *et al.,* 2012; Cappelli *et al.,* 2010). This obviously has been an historical legacy for example The Tata's set up Jamshedpur with hospital, educational, residential facilities and welfare schemes which are amongst the earliest in the world for steel factory workers (Tata, 2015).

Indian leaders in public and private sectors display a collective attitude towards problem solving; this also ensures that the blame for inefficiency in certain cases could be shared with others with limited negative consequences to an individual. The cultural shared and consultative attitude could be a positive mantra resulting in an empowered workforce or it could enable people to hide behind others when faced with tardy and slow decision-making (Budhwar and Verma, 2010). When aligned with following rules, it could lead to a strangle hold by bureaucratic red-tape: on this index India still has to make decisive progress. But participative leaders tended to facilitate

interaction, emphasise goals, and tone down differences. Such behaviour was also more integrative which seems to suit the religious and social diversity and syncretism. The newer breed of corporate organisations like Infosys and Biocon have also seen a much flatter structure with more consensus and participative decision making driven undoubtedly by globalisation. But how deep is this transformation and how much support it has at all levels of the organisations is not very clear. Clearly when competing on the global scale, both pragmatism and *jugaad* are important sources of advantage.

Indian public and private sector leaders have to be aware about the complex interactions between their social and organisational environments. The caste system, social status, religion, regionalism, ethnicity, political and social connections of the ones being led could affect a leader's ability to lead.

Internal culture in the organisation could vary drastically between a government department and a private corporation because government departments need to catch-up in many regards with the adoption of modern systems and ways of doing things more efficiently and effectively. The Indian leadership context is particularly different since religion and former colonial systems continue to influence the Indian mind set. The colonial era has left behind a complex mix of pseudo-Victorian value systems, high power distance and heavy handedness in approaches to leading.

It is the external context and internal cultural aspects of the environment that are the most significant to the leadership practices in India. *'Let it be'* or the *chalega* attitude is arguably to blame for slow progress and increased corruption in India. Anna Hazare, a reformist has tried to run a movement against corruption in India. Some individuals tend to attribute this failure to a preordained destiny. Though in a way this is in contrast to the dictates of scriptures in which *Karma* is emphasized.

A key limitation of the study is that it uses a set of self-reporting scales, and what each CEO claimed to be their leadership style may not necessarily have been the one they used in practice. Secondly, the size of the samples and the organisations covered would arguably not cover the diversity and scope of the totality of executive leadership in India; its generalisability to India context is also suspect. Certainly, there is a need for multi-methods and more in-depth and numerous studies to explore both the unique aspects of organisational leadership in India as well as the delineation of the universal. India's growing clout cannot be ignored; more longitudinal as well as bottom-up research is also called for.

This study was motivated by a deep-seated desire to explore the leadership and management styles of public and private sector senior executives in India and the influence of values, purpose and cultural factors in

the exercise of leadership. Despite the limitations, this article adds to the sparse information available on leadership in the Indian context. This paper could serve as the building blocks for further research, ultimately providing a more nuanced understanding of executive leadership in India. Our contribution rests on leadership insights which provide a more nuanced leadership style with elements of universalism as well as a particularism rooted in the rich socio-economic cultural history of India. Leadership research in India would benefit both from comparisons with other Asian leadership models but also from a deeper understanding of the existing socio-economic and cultural patterns, structures and values which are a legacy of its rich history. Such a leadership has enabled pragmatism and a performance focus in the face of group and collective orientation.

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Table 1: Sector and industry-based distribution of CEOs

Sectors	Number of interviews	Public Sector (including Government)	Private Sector
Government of India	6	6	
I.T.	3		3
Education/University Vice-Chancellor	2	2	
Engineering	5	3	2
Finance	2	1	1
Petroleum, Oil & Gas	2	2	
Chemicals	2		2
Publishing House	2		2
Foreigners	4	2 (France, Finland)	2 (Japan, Italy)
Misc. (e.g. retail, food, health and lifestyle, energy research)	4		4
Total	**32**	**8 + 8=16**	**16**

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Would you briefly, taking about five to eight minutes, describe your career to date, beginning with your education and then when you first entered a management position?

2. How did you happen to found your business? That is, what were the events or circumstances that led up to the founding of your business?

3. When you started your business, what goals did you expect or desire to achieve?

4. Did you have a vision of the kind of organization, products to be produced, and kind of market to be served by your organization when you founded your business or did the organization, product line(s) and markets evolve incrementally?

5. What were the major problems or barriers to achieving your vision/objectives that had to overcome?

6. What were the factors that helped you accomplish your objectives(s)?

7. What are your major strengths with respect to your functioning as a CEO of your organization?

8. What are your major weaknesses?

9. Please describe the most important organizational change that you plan to implement in the near future.

10. How do you plan to go about it? (Probe for how he or she will introduce the change and the strategy for its implementation.)

11. Please describe your philosophy of management (this is usually already implicitly described in the answers to the above questions). If time permits request the CEO to describe the second most important change he/she wants to introduce, and repeat question 9 with respect to this change.

12. Are there any other considerations we need to know about in order to understand your role in your current position?