

\* Anjani Jain \*

What makes Indians so good at research and strategy?

# THE GREAT Indian MANAGEMENT Thinker

THINKSTOCK



In my discussions with students and the media about Indian managers and management thinkers, I've come across a variety of perspectives. First, it seems conspicuous to Western observers that the faculties of prominent business schools and the ranks of influential management consultants and authors in the US are replete with Indians. I am sometimes asked what explains this preponderance and whether Indian culture is especially conducive to the contemplation of leadership in business.

Second, much has been written recently by both management thinkers and other observers about the uniquely Indian characteristics of successful business leaders op-

erating in India. These characteristics include, it is claimed, a commitment to inclusive growth, a long-term perspective on business objectives, and the much vaunted proclivity for *jugaad*-the improvisational ability to find workable solutions around seemingly intractable problems. But *jugaad* is also seen to have a darker side-the readiness to compromise principle in favour of expediency and a lax attitude toward the law. Indeed, stories of corruption and fraud in India receive greater attention in the Western media, just as books lauding the triumphs of Indian business proliferate in domestic airport bookstalls.

The fact that there are so many India-born professors at top US business schools should not be too surprising. Indians constitute one-sixth of the world's population. India's educated elite is fluent in English (the facility in language alone explains why you don't see nearly as many Indian professionals in Germany, Japan, or Brazil), and the prestigious institutions of higher learning in India, especially in engineering (including computer science), business, and medicine-the IITs, IIMs, AIIMS-have been greatly influenced by American higher education in the last 50 years.

Bright kids in India have been disproportionately drawn (more likely pushed by their parents) to these professional fields (as opposed to pure sciences or the humanities), both because of the high quality of the educational institutions in these fields and the attractive career prospects associated with them. Indian students in these fields have found it relatively easy to enter the US in pursuit of PhDs or other advanced degrees, often supported by scholarships or research grants.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the preponderance reflects something I find truly remarkable about the Indian educational system. In a society rife with endemic corruption and graft, India has managed to create a tradition of meritocracy and world-class excellence at her best educational institutions. It is astounding to me that these institutions have been impervious to both political pressure and financial influence and have maintained a pure meritocracy in the selection of students. This has also created a tremendously potent democratising influence on the Indian society at large and has allowed talented students from even the most underprivi-

leged backgrounds to break through centuries-old barriers of caste, class and economic deprivation. I believe that the large presence of India-born faculty at top universities in the English-speaking world owes a great deal to this tradition of educational meritocracy.

Who are the most influential Indian business and management professors in the US? What makes Indians good at research and strategic thinking? The people I admire most as original thinkers and educators are not likely to be among a top-10 list of well-known business gurus. I should disclose here that I harbour considerable skepticism about the lasting value of the neatly packaged bromides found in much of the "business wisdom" literature.

Scholars of Indian origin have indeed made important and pathbreaking contributions in many fields that are foundational to business knowledge: economics, statistics, psychology, ethics, applied mathematics, computer science and philosophy. To me, research has much more to do with independent, unorthodox and creative thinking than with strategic thinking. Serious, thoughtful scholars of business have often influenced business practice in the US and scholars of Indian origin have earned their place among them. Many of these Indian scholars have spanned the two different

realms of India and the US with a deep understanding of each culture and a heartfelt sense of gratitude for the opportunities afforded them by each society. Perhaps this has lent their scholarship a different vantage point or a different sensibility than their non-Indian colleagues but to proffer these generalizations is superficial punditry on my part. The only comment I'll make is the subject of a wonderful book by Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: The ancient and vibrant Indian tradition of heterodoxy, dissent, pluralism and reasoned discourse* has allowed Indian civilization through the ages to produce many independent and wise thinkers. To Sen's thesis, I might add the footnote that the creative freedom and vibrant intellectualism of the

American university has allowed many Indian scholars in the last four decades to realize the fruits of their intellectual labour, which would have been harder to achieve in the country of their birth.

Is Indian thinking about management, leadership, or global strategy shaped by classical Indian literature such as the Bhagavad Gita?

The Bhagavad Gita is a wise and wonderful poem, with much thoughtful commentary about both the conduct and the examination of life. The philosophical ideas it encapsulates have had a pervasive influence on Indian culture through the centuries and it is astonishing that a work of literature composed two-and-a-half millennia ago should have such resonance today. While most Indians can recite a few shlokas from the Gita, and even aspire to some of its wisdom, the custom of attributing one's inspiration for ideas

to the Gita seems to me to cheapen the influence, if for no other reason than the fact that most of these ideas are unlikely to match either the grandeur or the longevity of the Gita!

The issues that confront managers seem mostly prosaic and practical; yet their enterprises have wider and sometimes profound social consequences. India's culture has venerated knowledge and produced elaborate philosophical theories of knowledge for two millennia. It em-

phasizes that we must understand the world the way it is before we have any hope of changing it for the better. This is as true for managers and management thinkers as it is for politicians, sociologists and philosophers. Whether the cultural tradition makes Indian managers more attuned to the consequences of their choices, I have no evidence to say; but as an educator, it does seem to me vitally important that managers possess great sensitivity, knowledge and wisdom about how their enterprises shape and are shaped by the societies in which they operate.



Anjani Jain



The author is Senior Associate Dean of the full-time MBA Program at Yale School of Management