

Understanding cultural singularities of “Indianness” in an inter-cultural business setting

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Abstract:

Analysing data from the Indian Information Technology (IT) industry, this paper advances an understanding of cultural singularities of ‘Indianness’. The research context of an intercultural meeting place of IT and business process outsourcing (BPO) firms’ overseas subsidiaries, Belgium in this case, allows the authors to identify ten cultural singularities that typify ‘Indianness’. This ethnographic, reflexive study is further validated by employing Ghoshal’s ‘smell of the place’ metaphor through the authors collective experiences as consultants and researchers, and builds and extends upon the popular cultural dimension frameworks for understanding intercultural business and management. Existing cultural dimensions do not sufficiently describe the contemporary intercultural dynamics that typically take place in workplaces, especially so in offshore and outsourcing environments. A provisional set of parameters for understanding Indian culture, with its relevant impact on business life (customs and manners), business processes, and business deliverables are proposed in this study.

Keywords:

Indianness, Business Process Outsourcing, Indian organisations, Indian Culture, Ethnographic and Reflexive method,

Introduction

Utilising an ethnographic reflexive methodology, this paper is an attempt to enrich and broaden the existing understanding of cultural value dimensions by incorporating cultural and business singularities that typify Indianness. Although the literature on cultural value dimensions is extremely well developed (Hofstede, 1980, 1944; House et al. 2004; Mendenhall and Oddou 1985; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1993), there are numerous limitations identified in the literature in the application of such frameworks (see for example, Brewis and Jack 2009; Cala`s and Smircich 1987; McSweeney 2002). Most of the critiques highlight the positivist orientations adopted by the above frameworks for understanding a phenomenon that is highly complex, diverse, kaleidoscopic, holographic and context-specific. Such aspects of culture are especially true for a large, diverse, geographically diffused, and culturally rich and complex heritage nation such as India. There are several recent accounts that have highlighted the complexity of understanding Indian culture in general (Das 2010; Kakkar and Kakkar 2009; Malhotra, 2011) and more specifically, culture in an Indian organisational context (Pattanaik 2013; Rath 2014; Malik and Pereira 2015; Pereira and Malik 2015 a,b).

Our paper departs from the above stream of literature, in that we argue that there is a paucity of studies, which focuses on the existence or belongingness to a particular culture. We believe

for generating a universal understanding such as that espoused by the above cultural values dimensions, one must explore the singularities that allow for translatable universalisms.

In this research, we use the term ‘singularities’ in the context of Indian culture and draw and build upon the existing literature on this topic. Teschner (2008: p. 32) defines “Singularities” as “...what makes things unique. They are features of a particular that distinguish it from things in its kind. They are the differentia that separate species from other species in a genus. Singularities are what give something its identity, albeit an identity that is established by contrast and exclusion.” For example, Wood and Caldas (1998) investigated institutional and organisational singularities in Brazil to demonstrate the impact contextual singularities have on not only adoption of foreign ideas and concepts but also how it helps MNCs to understand and assimilate the host nation’s singularities. The authors identified five sets of institutional, cultural and organisational singularities for Brazil to collectively capture the singularities associated with the Brazilian business environment.

When it comes to the relationship between the concept of singularities and universalism Russo (2006: p. 676), explains and suggests that “...only singular can be universal and vice-versa. Translating universals is the equivalent of translating singularities – only singularities are translatable.” In a similar vein, Pudenko (2006), whilst exploring the relationship between universalities and particularities in cross-cultural management research found that singularities influence both the systems of universalities and particularities. Thus, in the context of our research it is argued that in order to get a closer understanding of a ‘cultural’ reality, it is wise to move away from an ‘either/or’ dichotomy of universalism versus particularism, and explore ways of integrating the two by incorporating the concept of cultural singularities.

Similarly, the concept of ‘Indianness’, we argue, is an attribute of being an ‘Indian’ or of Indian culture and is manifested through various cultural, linguistic and social behaviours. For example, Kachru (1976) highlighted the use of English language by the Indians in their social cultural context to be different from the American or the British expression and usage of English language. He argued that the use of English language by Indians was driven by pragmatism and the needs of the local conditions. Kachru (1976: p. 236) concludes that “The strength of the English language is in presenting the *Americanness* in its American variety, and the *Englishness* in its British variety. Let us, therefore, appreciate and encourage the Third World varieties of English too. The individuality of the Third World varieties, such as the *Indianness* of its Indian variety, is contributing to the linguistic mosaic which the speakers of the English language have created in the English speaking world.” We extend this argument in ‘understanding cultural singularities of “Indianness” in an inter-cultural business setting’.

“Indianness”, here, is thus a set of generic attributes in which Indians happen to score strongly. Such attributes are typically used by Indians when describing their uniqueness. In our paper we have focused on these attributes in accordance with “India”. As business academics and practitioners, we have found these attributes useful when introducing the fact that cultures represent a “flow” rather than a collection of “cultural islands”. Using these

parameters, people have been shown to understand each other better and hence enhance their cooperation. Through such an understanding one can get a deeper appreciation of the cultural values dimensions popularly noted in studies on cultures of nation states.

Business and organisational context

With the emergence of India's new-found marketplace identity as a global provider of information technology (IT) and business consultancy services in the areas of engineering, communication, software development, business process and information technologies outsourcing, there have never before been more Indians working overseas than now (Bach 2011). The significance of gaining a deeper understanding of Indian cultural singularities is timely and ever more pressing now than in the past. The contribution to the nation's gross domestic product (8%), employment (3.5 million), foreign exchange from the Indian IT industry is well acknowledged (NASSCOM 2012; 2014). Thus, the emergence of a cluster of economic activity in the areas of high-technology services sectors has been particularly noted in the case of the Indian IT industry (Gottipatti 2012). Further, it is estimated that India receives foreign exchange remittances of close to \$US70 billion from its expatriate population (Feedbacq 2014). If we add the number of Indians working in India for multinational (MNC) employers (Saraswati 2012), one can conclude that India is now well and truly a key player in the global business environment to such a degree, that the presence and traces of Indian cultural identity should be unmistakably present in the daily workings in these intercultural settings. This context forms the 'business setting' for our research. It is therefore challenging, for managers on both sides of the contractual arrangement i.e. the outsourcer and the service provider or the MNC and its subsidiary—to understand the cultural nuances for better integration and managing diversity at workplace (Cox 1994; Cox and Blake 1991; Malik Sinha and Blumenfeld, 2012).

Typically, Hofstede's parameters, though vastly used, are above all descriptive. Helping somewhat to understand the 'other' (culture), and although a good 'starting point', they teach the intercultural practitioner little with regard to behaviour and intercultural skills. As noted earlier, there is a need to focus on the belongingness to a particular culture. More generally, although Hofstede's parameters are in themselves interesting descriptive features of a (company) culture, the big but widely accepted fluke is with Hofstede's uncompromising translation(s) of company cultures into "national cultures" (Brewis and Jack, 2009), whatever this might represent. With India, this fluke is most obvious. For example, does the Hofstede 'India framework' describe the purely *desi* (local/national-Indian) corporate culture, and if so, which one? Alternatively is it the non-resident Indian (NRI) culture, or some vague notion of an IIT-cum-IIM (Indian Institute of Technology and Indian Institute of Management) culture that is being portrayed? Not to mention the sheer geographical and anthropological incongruities of providing intercultural comparisons between countries, for instance "Belgium" and "India".

The business needs for intercultural rapprochement is evermore present now as global Indian IT firms have to, almost on a daily basis work and liaise with global software development teams. Even though Indian firms may deny the need for intercultural understanding in an

increasingly global business space, a number of their business practices and management models have been adapted through the knowledge spill overs from, (mainly) multinational corporations (Pereira and Malik, 2015). Serious efforts are thus being undertaken to instil the employees, both onsite and overseas, with the business practices and etiquettes required for their specific outsourcing contracts (e.g. Dusanj and Sidhu 2009; Giarrantana et al. 2004; Gorg and Strobl 2002, Pereira and Scot, 2015). The complexities of global operational issues increases even more and may mean that, for instance, an Indian software engineer working at his Indian employer's office in Hyderabad for a Danish account, would be invited (and expected) to plainly adapt to the Danish version of an Anglo-American approach to review meetings, and to stick to Danish business practices in day-to-day communication with the client. Further, would this software engineer be sent to Denmark for a limited or an extended period of time (typically, between 3-18 months)? Here would both the Danish client and the Indian employer expect her/him to adapt to such a degree that no (or scarce) traces of "Indianness" remain? Understanding and managing Indianness thus remains a key challenge for an increasing number of globally mobile workforces on both sides of the contracting parties.

In view of the above discussion, this ethnographic reflexive study analyses data from the Indian IT industry, and offers *three* distinctive contributions. *First*, we develop an understanding of cultural singularities of 'Indianness' in an organisational context. *Second*, by studying the phenomenon in a context where the incidence of intercultural differences is most likely to be found, we uncover key aspects of 'Indianness'. *Finally*, rather than employing a hypothetic-deductive approach of measuring the extent of Hofstede's or other similar cultural dimensions, the study builds on the extant literature focusing on India's indigenous cultural understanding in the Indian IT industry for understanding Indianness in an intercultural meeting place. Overall this study contributes by developing business singularities of *Indianness*. The rest of the paper is organised as follows. First, we offer a short review of alternate and indigenous understandings of 'Indianness'. Second, we provide a short account of why the research context offers fertile ground for studying this phenomenon. Third, we explain the research methodology. This is followed by our findings and discussion and then conclusions.

Understanding "Indianness": A brief review

Early attempts in understanding personal conduct

By far one of the most adored and earliest narrations of Indian approaches, which offers guidelines to leading a wise life was propagated through animal fables or stories of the *Panchtantra* (the five principles or techniques, originally in Sanskrit language). These stories have been in the form of verbal orations by the storyteller (oftentimes a *guru* – the teacher) to an audience (oftentimes the *shishyas* – the student or learner) from as early as the 3rd century BC (Ryder, 1925). Written by Vishnu Sharma, the *Panchtantra* is considered as a treatise on *nitishastra* (the science of polity). Another very influential work, *Kautaliya's Arthashastra* (also the science of polity), was written by Chanakya in the 321-296 BC period and is described as a "compendium of all the Arthashastras, which as a guidance to the King in

acquiring and maintaining the earth have been written by ancient teachers” (Chaturvedi, 2006: p.7). These schools of thought and other ancient epics and collections such as the *Mahabharata* have been part of the cultural upbringing of most Indians. The focus on ‘right action’ towards others and practicing *Karma-Yoga* (the art and science of intelligent actions as our actions will have an impact on our current and future life) has been a key message in the sacred Hindu scriptures of *The Bhagavad-Gita* (Vivekananda, 1972). Adaptations from the above discussion as well as the Buddhist philosophy have focused on concepts such as Nagarjuna’s *Catuskoti* and the *Madhyamaka* (on adopting the middle path) philosophy (Reugg 1981; Shantarakshita 2005; Westerhoff 2006). The consumption and usage of such knowledge by modern India is still alive and leaders and teachers often make direct references to the above philosophies. A vast majority of the Indian population still watches dramatised television serials of the above epics with extreme interest. Themes of coexistence, harmony, justice, ethics and *karma* are repeatedly communicated through the above treatises.

Pre-colonial discourses

Whilst this is not a comprehensive review of the literature, seen in terms of the concept of cultural narcissism, it should not come as a surprise that “Indianness” has been the subject of elaborate scrutiny and debate by numerous authors who have studied this phenomenon throughout the ages. Some of the earlier attempts to portray ‘Indianness’, was through the excessive *identity* row unleashed with the publication of Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* (1927), which was followed by an endless series of apologies by India’s self-appointed witnesses for the defence such as C.S. Ranga Iyer’s *Father India, a Reply to Mother India* (1927) and subsequently, Ernest Wood’s *An Englishman defends Mother India* (1929). The above works are suggestive of the difficulties, sensitivities and challenges in interpreting one’s rituals and customs by ‘the other’.

Recent discourses

Following the above period, more constructive and original accounts came to the fore. Recently, scholars such as Chaudhuri (1965), Singh (1982), Naipaul (1990), Kakkar and Kakkar (2009), Das (2010), Malhotra (2011), and more recent studies (Pereira and Malik, 2015a, b; Malik and Pereira, 2015), have provided their understandings and accounts on India. Before which (and, after ninety odd years), the *Mother India* work was more-or-less replicated in the 21st century, the recent example being the 2014 row over Wendy Doniger’s *Hinduism: An Alternative History* (2009). In the context of our study, factual knowledge of “the other” being scarce and common frameworks of reference being few and far between, it is nevertheless essential for all partners in the outsourcing framework to establish a descriptive socio-anthropological model through which mutual understanding of each other’s personal sphere drivers and motivational factors can be understood. Further, if each other’s behavioural traits are correctly read, ways can be found to find mutual value in each other being different. In the context of the conventional approaches (e.g. Hofstede 1984; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1993) that describe primarily cultural building blocks that seem to matter to non-Indians, there has been some additional developments in recent descriptive works by Kakkar and Kakkar (2009), Malhotra (2011), Das (2010) and Mulla

(2013). With some work attracting critical reviews (see for e.g. Gross 2013; Kearns 2013; Larson 2012), we believe that (with the possible exception of Das (2010) and Malhotra (2011)), most of the 20th century attempts at theorisation of “Indianness” have been either historical, sociological, psychological and political, or a combination of these. From a business perspective Lakhsman (2015) in his book ‘Doing Business in India’ discusses the cultural and consumer profile of the people of India and how these fit into the macroeconomic context. Therefore very little has been offered in terms of a descriptive understanding referring to “Indianness” as such, completely independent of the subject/ persons being Indian or not, thus avoiding the vagueness of the term and its sensitivities in the context of nationalism.

The application of earlier Indian philosophies and spiritual beliefs in modern day organisations and management is seeing a renewed interest amongst modern day academics and managers. For example, Mulla and Krishnan (2013), build on the concept of *Karma Yoga* and present an Indian model of moral development in business settings. Similarly, Muniapan and Shaikh (2007) advance a case for corporate governance lessons to be learnt through Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, as did Pereira and Muniapan (2015) through their work in utilising *Vedanta* an ancient Indian spiritual and religious philosophy and its contributions and relevance to management in modern Indian organisations. Further, a new addition to the theorisation approaches of “Indianness” is evident in the work of Pattanaik (2013). Most prior attempts on capturing Indianness in business have been somewhat over-ambitious, attempts to turn *Kautilya/Chanakya* (Arthashastra collection) approaches into the Indian version, offering management guidelines from the *Nitishartra* (politics) and *Arthashastras* (economics), with the claim of them being “modern”. Pattanaik’s work however, in a somewhat similar approach to the *Panchtantara*, has set out to use stories, symbols and rituals drawn from Hindu, Jain and Buddhist mythology in order to explain and understand day-to-day business situations from a perspective which could coincide with our proposed “Indianness”. However, one could critique that Pattanaik’s work would have added greater value if it could ethnically and religiously be more neutral than purely *desi* (e.g. purely based on local fore lore and mythology). Even if one were to accept these as reliable accounts, more modern and recent evidence would be required to validate these prescriptions.

The above review, albeit an extremely brief account of the complex contextual influences on thinking culturally, about Indianness, points to the difficulties in detaching context from how Indians experience and demonstrate Indianness. To this end, the next section provides details of the methodological approach adopted in developing their subjective understanding of Indianness.

Methodology

Use of ethnographic methodological approaches is increasingly gaining prominence in studies of management and organisation (see for e.g. Van Maannen, 1988, 1998, 2006). This is especially relevant for ‘reflexivity’ as it helps to create new understandings of a socially embedded and contextually complex phenomenon such as culture (Alvesson, 2003; Greetz, 1973). In this context, Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) promote what they identify as a

‘reflexive approach’ to research. This approach is concerned with the study and interpretation of human behaviour, structures of society, and how people function within these structures. The aspiration for this research was to achieve reflexivity, and true reflexivity will occur only when different research methodologies are played against and reflected in one another (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). Hence, according to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000: p 248), “reflection means interpreting one’s own interpretations, looking at one’s own authority, and turning a self-critical eye onto one’s own authority as interpreter and author”. Further, Warin (2011: p 810) argues that: “researcher reflexivity is not synonymous with self-awareness, nor is it synonymous with an empathic sensitivity to the socio-emotional states of our research participants. It is both of these things, in tandem: relational awareness”. Relational awareness is thus a reciprocal awareness of how the researcher influences his or her research participants’ perceptions and a similar awareness of how the respondents influence the researcher. Etherington (2007: p 611) further makes the point that reflexivity is connected to the ethical dimension of research through the researcher’s willingness to “emerge from behind the secure barrier of anonymity and own up to their involvement”. Hence, in this research triangulation took place. First through the researchers’ influence on respondents and second, between the three authors as independent consultants and researchers, and third through the respondents’ influence on the researchers’ interpretations.

This ethnographic, reflexive study further borrows and employs Sumantra Ghoshal’s ‘smell of the place’ metaphorically (De Vita and Case, 2014) to gauge and understand the cultural singularities of “Indianness” in an inter-cultural business setting. Recently De Vita and Case (2014) utilize Ghoshal’s ‘springtime theory’ and ‘smell of the place’ metaphor to draw on in their critique of the managerialist culture in contemporary UK business schools. The theory and the metaphor were originally outlined by Ghoshal in a speech at the World Economic Forum. Ghoshal in his talk proposes his ‘springtime theory’, arguing that approaches to management strongly affect culture: ‘the smell of the place’. He uses the example of how his senses (e.g. ‘smell’) ignite through a comparison between his energy level when walking through a forest in Fontainebleau, near INSEAD, in France, (where he had previously worked), in spring time, and that when visiting his native home town of Calcutta, India, in the summer. He contrasted the differing qualities of life in a French springtime forest with the heat and different conditions of an Indian urban setting. Ghoshal thus uses the analogy in the context of observing the culture in an organisational set up, where if you walk through the door of any organisation, within 15 minutes you get a ‘smell of the place’, and you can tell straight away whether it is Calcutta or Fontainebleau. (Please refer to the talk downloadable from YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUddgE8rI0E). Thus, this study builds and extends the popular cultural dimension frameworks metaphorically through a ‘smell of the place’ for understanding intercultural business and management and capturing the contemporary intercultural dynamics that typically take place in workplaces in offshore and outsourcing environments.

Thus, as participant observers being in the field as part and parcel of the experience, such an approach allows for seeking deeper meanings and observations of what is essentially a

complex phenomenon. The authors were thus essentially gauging the cultural ‘smell of the place’ (De Vita and Case, 2014).

We used a dual approach to our data collection. The first approach of the research was an ethnographic reflexive study, undertaken in Belgium, in the context of an Indian IT MNC. The choice of our research setting allows us the opportunity to explore aspects of Indianness of Indians in a foreign setting. Indianness in such a setting is likely to be more pronounced and easily identifiable through the interactions between the locals and Indian expatriates when the cultural singularities of locals and Indians collide, especially when singularities of each culture plays out very strongly in such interactions. The three authors went through an iterative process of trying to interpret both types of data (ethnographic smell of culture) and the responses from both respondent’s cultures (Belgian and Indian). Validity of our findings is claimed through an iterative process involving triangulated reflexive approach wherein the non-native Indian i.e. the first author’s views were discussed alongside the two native-Indian (now living overseas for more than a decade in an Anglo-Saxon culture) views. Further, all three authors have extensive experience in working, consulting and researching into the Indian IT/BPO industry (e.g. Malik and Rowley, 2015; Malik, 2015; Pereira and Malik, 2015c; Pereira and Budhwar, 2015; Pereira and Scott, 2015) and hence the ‘smell of the place’ metaphor to gauge ‘cultural singularities’ of ‘Indianness’ was helpful as documentary notes from those experiences and research were used, as further ‘validators’. This was our second approach. Thus, analysing the themes emanating from an intercultural meeting place, of delivering intercultural training to employees of three subsidiaries of Indian IT firms operating in Belgium, we analyse the key business singularities that typify aspects of Indianness. As explained above, we further utilise notes and documents from our collective experiences (past and present) as consultants and researchers in the Indian IT/BPO industry when examining emerging themes.

Singh (1991) and subsequently Dev (2003) are among the contributors to the notion of ‘singularities’ in an Indian context. Singh for example, accords literatures "cultural singularities" much rather than "linguistic" or "national" attributes, and his *singularities* are very much in the same line as what we are investigating here. These Indian IT firms are operating both *in situ* and offshore, delivering engineering solutions, software applications development, software services including IT support and project management services to Belgian manufacturing, financial (banking) and telecommunication industries. In each of these three cases, and in the course of 20 months (Sept 2012 - April 2014) in small groups of between 12-25 participants, a total of 1536 non-Indian staff and 350 Indian staff were provided intercultural training.

Conventionally, the learning facilitator (the first author) begins the intercultural facilitation with intakes of trainees from both the Belgian client firms and Indian service providers. At this point the facilitator is informed of best practices as well as difficulties encountered (cultural) at the workplace and its social environment in the outsourcing arrangement. The intake/exercise is undertaken separately for both the contracting parties in order to let ‘frustrations’ come to the fore unrestrictedly. More specifically, a questionnaire is distributed in groups as part of the cultural training and association games. The questionnaire lists certain

words, for example, the word “clean”. Next, the group members are asked what comes to their mind when they are thinking about this word. All the key words are listed on flipcharts, in real time, and discussed further with the respondents. The words are further refined following a discussion with the groups till the group members are happy with a final list for each such word in the questionnaire. In cases where certain other words are dominant they are noted with frequency distribution on a scorecard for all to see and review. Repeating these steps for various words, eventually leads to a framework of cultural and business singularities. It needs to be emphasised that such an approach is more engrained in business practice. Nevertheless, these steps were replicable and the words were generated and further validated based on ethnographic experiences and using the concept of ‘the smell of the place’ by the authors.

For each group of trainees, the respondent’s concepts and key words are collated and analysed in sortable tables, thus enabling the creation of generic tendencies of Indianness. This brings in enough material to construe a tailor-made intercultural induction and understanding programme. As pointed earlier, it is important to note here that the facilitator is neither of both cultures but has a deep, near-native understanding of both nevertheless. This permits one to see each situation ‘reflexively’ from the other’s point of view, to note what is significant when seen from the other side, and to be able to discuss, frame and contextualise issues in such a way that solution behaviour can be suggested without forcing either party out of its own cultural comfort zone.

In the initial stages of an intercultural learning facilitation programme, the key is to defuse existing stereotypes of ‘the other’, and in order to provide a tool with which to do this, the first author (the facilitator) typically gathers information through group related association games. The process is thus to gather a learning group (typically 12 persons in a European context, with up to 25 or even more in an Indian context), give them as a starting word ‘India’, or, with Indian groups, ‘Belgium’, and then see what views come up next. Generally and typically, the stakeholders in a business outsourcing situation know little or nothing of each other’s culture. Once the group members respond to their understanding of the ‘others’, the following three training steps are enforced.

A *first* step covers the topic that *diversity matters* in general, and aims at generating both a willingness to know and understand the other, and an acceptance of the other as “other”. In this, deference for difference is completely different from cultural adaptation, integration and inclusivity programmes. It works at a much deeper, socio-psychological level and it celebrates the added value of the differences in each other, thus supporting the famous diversity conjecture (Cox, 1994). The *second* step offers an exploration of the ‘other’ cultural habitat on the social (community) level. The facilitator identifies key aspects of the ‘other’ culture, which have an impact on how people operate in a professional context and/or its social aspect. A typical question at this level is: What drives my ‘other’ colleague in life? Key concepts are values, family life, social habitat, customs and manners. Lastly, the *third* step focuses on how this ‘otherness’ impacts work processes, work methodologies and business deliverables. Key words here are communication methods and strategies, applied logic, leadership models, work ethics and heuristics.

Findings and discussion

The following section presents the analysis in the form of key preliminary themes, following which, aspects of business singularities are drawn and discussed, leading to our understanding of ‘Indianness’. Beginning with a descriptive analysis of the intercultural meeting place (the first stage of the intercultural facilitation and analysis), the second and final stages outlined above delve into deeper understanding of the phenomenon, through our collective reflexive and ethnographic experiences and data from the three organisations. We also then draw upon the literature in earlier sections to further discuss our proposed cultural singularities of Indianness.

The intercultural meeting place

Intercultural incompetence

Ignorance and stereotypes. With regard to knowledge of India as ‘the other’, here is an overview of the top 15 ‘terms’ of gathered data categories. The categories were gathered per group of trainees (128 groups), first individually per attendant, and consecutively discussed in plenum. When a certain concept was vague or could be understood in different ways, the plenum discussion would provide more precise and disparate wording/terms. Sometimes, as for instance in the case of “gender inequality”, it was useful to bring certain ideas together into one category. Thus, with a maximum score of 128 (for those categories mentioned by every group), we took note of: holy cows (101), poverty (99), caste (98), over-populated (96), chaotic (87), wobbly heads (82), social inequality (82), dirty (82), Gandhi (76), incomprehensible English (72), Bollywood (58), Ganges (29), Hinduism (27), extreme gender inequality (including gang rapes) (27), never-tell-the-truth (22).

With data gathered through the precise and identical process as described above, but now with a maximum score of 14 (for 14 groups of trainees), what Indians know of their destination culture seems to be similar. As far as Belgium is concerned, *glass* pops up with score 10, *planning* with 9, *lack of family values* with 4, and, remarkably, *no government* gets a score of 3.

As we have seen, what non-Indians know of India does often go no further than the holy cow, chaos, crowds and (recently) gang rape set list. With regard to known personalities, it was surprising that the name of none of the Bollywood celebrities rings a bell with non-Indians. It is also surprising that none of the current day business celebrities (with the possible exception of UK-based Laxmi Mittal) and/or politicians has managed to get her/himself a place in the frames of reference of the non-Indians. Even when it came to well-known corporate personalities such as Narayan Murthy (Infosys), Nandan Nilekani (Infosys), Subramaniam Ramadorai (Tata Consultancy Services), Chanda Kochhar (ICICI), Indra Nooyi (Pepsico), or even Satya Nadella (Microsoft), a zero score was found. And although the name of Gandhi figures on the list, the Bapu (refers to Gandhi affectionately as ‘Father of the Nation’) is perceived to have had a daughter called Indira Gandhi (who was actually Jawaharlal Nehru’s

daughter). Gandhi also appears to be quite lonely up there. There is no mention of Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore or any of the visionary thinkers of yore. In the political sphere there is no mention of Jawaharlal Nehru, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh, Mayawati, Jayalalitha, or Abdul Kalam, and, given the current state of affairs, no Narendra Modi.

Cultural narcissisms. With so little knowledge of each other, one might be tempted to conclude that the global village mantra which most of us hear resonating in all aspects of our lives, is not much more than an easily unmasked myth. The facts seem to show that, even in a global context, we tend to restrict our knowledge of ‘the other’ to those aspects in which we find for ourselves a commonly understood frame of reference, and when this lacks, we opt for no factual knowledge at all. Interestingly, this process exists both ways. For instance, much rather than showing an interest in Belgian cinema or Belgian celebrities, Indians show keenness to know who of their own (Bollywood) celebrities has managed to gain the attention, if not the appreciation, of her/his Belgian colleagues. And vice versa, much rather than wondering what the Indian stand on living with a high degree of cultural diversity and multilingualism is, the Belgians express keenness to learn how to explain to their Indian business counterparts their own typically Belgian and extremely intricate linguistic, cultural-political matters, such as the indomitable and all-pervasive BHV issue (aka Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde), an insolvable political puzzle of attributing single linguistic rights to a series of small villages in the Brussels suburbia, which has become a national obsession since the 1970s. Truly, with regard to cultural narcissism, both parties seem to outcompete each other. Part of this is due to a constant denial on part of both the parties to admit their sense of ignorance.

Denial

Evidence from our collective experiences and data suggests that if, at all, an intercultural trainer, coach, or mediator of any sort, would be brought into play through the invitation of the Indian counterpart in the outsourcing process, she/he would typically be a senior Indian employee with expatriation experience. This person would also be deemed to be knowledgeable in intercultural matters. Here however, the intercultural training component would be limited to linguistic variances such as learning key aspects of behavioural etiquettes and putting out a series of intercultural warning signs with regard to the commonly known and used intercultural dimensions proposed in frameworks such as those developed by Hofstede. In most cases however, the Indian management would try to restrict intercultural interventions as much as it can, on the pretext that “cultural differences are something of the past”, very much like ‘caste’, which, however is still intrinsically present in aspects of Indian day-to-day life. This is generically referred to as “something that mattered in the old days, but not today”, especially so in high-technology and egalitarian industries, such as India’s IT industry, which employs a large proportion of knowledge workers.

Possible causes of Indian neglect. In most cases, and in the business practices accounting for almost 75 % of the business revenue (for the authors as consultants and researchers), the need for intercultural guidance is expressed by the non-Indian party. This seems to point at either a

deeply rooted Indian ignorance of the importance of cultural vestiges in all aspects of life, or a deliberate negation of the willingness to keep whatever degree of “Indianness” in matters global and/or matters business. Seen in the light of India’s emergent nation building, nationalism, heritage discovery, cultural renaissance and general *jan-gan-man bhava* (a term used to describe conscious attempts to portray national integration sentiment), all of which have become prevalent post-independence. Further, in coincidence with the first steps of the disclosure of the erstwhile license Raj into the global market, it seems difficult to maintain that Indian business people dealing with a global marketplace would be ignorant of India’s unique cultural identity. If so, we can only conclude that to keep “Indianness” away from the non-Indian customer is, or has been, a deliberate choice, born out of pragmatism, but in the context of a lingering perception that “Indianness” would be hard to sell, and that “less Indianness” would thus be a market bonus, while all the time “being proudly Indian” has remained a favourite, under cover pastime for millions of NRI (Non Resident Indians, such as authors two and three) and Indian workforce catering for the global market.

Failure of attempted cultural schizophrenia. As Indian companies globalise and employ a growing number of non-Indian staff, clearly with the aim of ‘under-covering’ their Indian identities even more and even stronger, our evidence suggests that this approach so far has been all but an undivided success. In terms of the non-Indian part of the outsourcing deal, i.e. the outsourcer, has always been lured into the outsourcing scheme with the price as an attractive proposition, and if India can remain competitive and can be ‘overall non-Indian in language, customs and manners’, then India’s position can remain strong. But with the service delivery costs gradually increasing, as India’s economy and marketplace are emerging, and notwithstanding the often stated unique advantage of ‘not having the language barrier’, the outsourcer is ever more focusing on the challenge of ‘Indianness’. India is now rapidly losing valuable market share of low-complexity outsourcing services to newer, and cheaper outsourcing destinations such as Vietnam and the Philippines, with more predicted to come (Forbes, 2007, Pereira, Munjal and Nandakumar, 2016). This turn of events seems to prove that, price matters above all, and the “absence of Indianness” as a sales argument has always been a challenge, existing only in the minds of a handful of over-zealous NRI business people and/or cognoscenti of the Indian origin but European or American university alumni.

In other words, however much it has been denied or kept hidden at the Indian side of the deal, “Indianness” has been a challenge all along. This is why, in fast growing numbers, the non-Indian clients of Indian outsourcing parties are keen to follow training tracks in which they get an opportunity of learning how to manage their Indian counter parts, on site or offshore, and how to make their non-Indian employees cope with the presence, both- physical or virtual, of Indians at the workplace. In this, the core driver is always the fact that it is perceived that Indians are different, do behave differently, or do need to be managed differently. To this end, a growing number of companies, dealing with outsourcing ventures with India as a destination, feel the emergent need for intercultural learning modules focusing on understanding ‘Indianness’ and ‘otherness’ in order to help make their offshore ventures successful. Further, our experiences and data suggest that it would help keep a healthy

balance between the prospected profit of working with Indians and the costs involved in intercultural misunderstandings and mismanagement.

Typical intercultural learning process

As discussed above, at first instance, it happens to be the non-Indian side which approaches the intercultural training provider, whereas the Indian side restricts itself to introducing inconsequential customs-and-manners issues, and/or launches itself in language issues (Pereira and Anderson, 2012; Pereira and Scott, 2015). When, occasionally, it has been the Indian side to take the “first step”, there was evidence that there was impetus of the client requiring it. With growing awareness of the importance of intercultural matters, business people and managers worldwide would, at a first level, be familiar with the Hofstede mechanics (1980, 1984), and try to get away with this. Our experiences and data further suggest that only when toying around with the simplistic Hofstede culture parameters proves to be unsatisfactory would a more in-depth and critical intercultural learning facilitator be approached.

Becoming inter-culturally competent

Following a deeper exploration and analysis through our collective experiences and data of the ‘other’s’ cultural habitat and social communities and how it impacts ‘other’ people in a social setting, we develop a description of ‘Indianness’. This aspect is described in the perspective of its supposed absence in non-Indian environments, along the following five cultural values that may shape behaviour at workplaces.

Five values

(1) The jan-gan-man bhava (Emotions towards Indian National Anthem): Identification with the national anthem and related national integration campaigns such as those covered by political parties, large corporates, leaders, anti-corruption movements, Bollywood movies and televised social issue documentaries such as *Satyamev Jayate* (Truth alone triumphs) are critical aspects of individual sentiments towards their association with a single, unified nation state, in an extremely diverse social and secular fabric.

(2) The importance of Rishta (Relationship): The focus on family values and relationship labelling and identification across the borders of biological and genetic kinship is another critical value Indians identify with very strongly. As much as a matter of personal pride associated with *rishtey* (plural of relationship), social interactions and access is greatly enhanced through relationships.

(3) Bhojan (Food): The immense diversity in Indian cuisine creates a strong cultural food identity. This cultural aspect has inherent qualities of social bonding through consumption and discourses about Indian indigenous cuisine. Our collective experiences and data suggest numerous examples of not mere ‘tolerance’ of multiple and local geographical cuisines but across the length and breadth of the nation and socially, individuals and families respect and embrace ‘other’ cuisines to great extents. In extreme cases, cuisine forms a very strong aspect of social discourse.

(4) Jati-Gotra-Varna (An approximate translation: of tribal origin-closest ancestor-classification based on abilities): Jati-Gotra-Varna engenders a sense of community and belongingness, with inherent levels of commensality, social *peerness* and social control based on individual capabilities and societal contributions (HHR, 2014). The above differs from the typical Marxist polemic discourses that often focus on caste-based classifications.

(5) Dharma (to hold, maintain, and keep): A key concept emanating from Indian philosophy, ‘Dharma’ means of what is ‘established’ and thus takes a ‘rule-like’ form with degrees of contextualising for governing day-to-day behaviour, choices and decisions within the framework of dharmic deontologies.

In our study we found that when groups of people, whether Indian or non-Indian, are compared against the above five descriptive values, those individuals scoring high on all five definitely appear to have a high degree of ‘Indianness’, irrespective of the person of Indian origin’s current citizenship status. Moreover, our collective experiences and data suggest that, any person, with a sense of belonging to any group or community wherever in the world, would recognise our descriptive value-based cultural building blocks as having an understandable meaning and a clearly measurable impact on social dealings and day-to-day behaviour. We envisage that once the levels of ‘Indianness’ are thus defined, it will become clear that degrees of this ‘Indianness’ have impact on both a set of horizontal, traditional dimensions, and on dimensions operating in depth. Further, ‘Indianness’ might easily be forgotten on the surface, for example in an expatriation context, seemingly taking over non-Indian habits and lifestyle, adopting non-Indian dress codes, nuclear family living modes, and so on. In its vertical dimensions, however, we find that, ‘Indianness’ remains untainted, quite unaffected by its being uprooted from its natural habitat. We further envisage that, with a diaspora-related distance settling in, ‘Indianness’, along the lines of the above building blocks, would become stronger rather than weaker in its qualitative and quantitative measures.

We argue that cultural competence, then, would be the faculty of being able to understand the self as well as the other against a set of descriptive cultural building blocks such as the above, and discovering the added value in one’s outlook on life, by coming into touch with and being presented a mirror image by the other. The ‘Indianness’ values have a pervasive impact on the individual behaviours at the workplace. These are presented in the following section.

Business singularities of ‘Indianness’

Having instigated awareness of intercultural matters and cultural competences through relevant descriptive cultural building blocks (or key concepts), the intercultural learning facilitator traditionally (as in our case) now shifts focus to the workplace itself. Evidence from our study suggest that, besides matters of social relevance, in which for instance non-Indians ‘complain’ about Indian tiffin-box habits, most of the worries are those that directly impact work methodologies, processes, matters of project management, and output or deliverables. Based on the evidence of our day-to-day business practices, and with the same reasoning behind our preference to find building blocks that describe ‘Indianness’ rather than measuring Indian scores against Hofstedian national culture parameters, we have identified five

essentials (singularities) of business culture, which have a major impact on Indian vs non-Indian collaboration and cooperation in teams, be it insourced, outsourced, or multi-sourced.

These business singularities are described below:

(1) **Vyavahaar**, or expectations with regard to communicative outspokenness and rigidity is one of the key features of ‘Indianness’ identified and recognised even at first contact by non-Indians. This constitutes a perceived particular way of dealing with communication. Contrary to the typical office environment, ‘*talking-in-bullet-point*’ style is generally and by far the preferred way to communicate in a professional environment by Indians. This has been sustained by the ‘*powerpointisation*’ of business communication all the way since the early nineties, as Indians are perceived by some to communicate in dotted or *rangoli* (traditional Indian floor designs) like patterns, that may be deemed to be ‘difficult to interpret’, let alone understood by non-Indians. When analysed in dialogue with non-Indian observers, the communication style in question turns out to be clearly not the ‘circular talk’ as identified by the typical dilettante anthropologist. *Vyavahaar*, in our view, involves deviations of the communication arrow to ‘other’ aspects of the truth before arriving at the aimed destination, as well as implications of peer-support and group-related dynamics. We adhere to *Vyavahaar* as a denominator, adhering to the fact that its translation involves aspects of *behaviour*, *demeanour*, *character*, *usage*, *treatment*, *relation*, *usability*, *operability*, *feasibility*, and, interestingly, *tact* (Monier-Williams 1899; Graz 1959; Varmma 1966). *Vyavahaar*, thus, means that communication is not straightforward, is hesitant, lacks the typical western preference for assertiveness, is manifold, multiple, and checked for peer support. It is represented by, among many other non-verbal expressions, the so-called wobbly-head and is so often conceived as “does not speak the truth” (refer to the stereotypes listed above), whereas the style is by definition aimed at postponing ill-advised judgment and not speaking out before *truth* is thoroughly asserted. This singularity is influenced by aspects of *Dharma*, *Rishta* and the need for truth espoused in, for example, *Jan-Gan-Man* and *Satyamev Jayate*.

(2) **Nyaaya** or justice, builds on the above singularity and relies on India’s long-standing tradition with regard to argumentative reasoning, mathematics and logic (Sen 2005). The expectations with regard to bipolar logic versus *chatushkoti* thinking and the use of tetralemmic logical operators (Westerhoff 2006), surprises non-Indians about their Indian colleagues’ seemingly innate incapacity to get along with the traditional Aristotelian bipolar syllogisms. *Chatushkoti* is a Buddhist tradition of Indian logic with logical argument(s) of a ‘suite of four discrete functions’ including being, non-being, both being and non-being, neither being nor non-being. Rather than reasoning in terms of *yes* or *no*, or *true* and *not true*, ‘Indianness’ seems to indicate a natural preference for logical arguments known as *chatushkoti*, or the suite of four functions – an indivisible quaternity or tetralemma, as was developed by Nagarjuna (Reugg, 1981; Westerhoff, 2006) and others and has played a major role in the *Buddha Dharma* logic-epistemological and other dharmic traditions such as the *Madhyamika* (Reugg, 1981; Shantarakshita 2005). The *tetralemma* or *chatuskoti* approach is perceived by non-Indians as a predominant function of ‘Indianness’, pervading not only communication issues and sheer logical exchanges, but also work methodology, project management, and even social dealings at the workplace. We suggest that there is an obvious

connection between the *rangoli*-like patterns of *vyavahaar* and application of tetralemmic logic. Through our experiences and data we argue that, the roots of *nyaaya* are so deep and well-established that even the most dilettante person with a high degree of ‘Indianness’, who might never have heard of any of the above logical terminology, is essentially affected by it. We further argue that in its aspect of ‘method’, *nyaaya* is extremely visible in Indian, or so-called vedic (scientific) mathematics where calculus and arithmetic are treated in ways completely alien to the non-Indian traditions, even if the latter are using essentially the same mathematical framework, which was merely ‘translated’ into ‘non-Indianness by al-Khwarizmi and others (Rosen 1831; Rashed 1994). From counting and multiplication to India’s specific vedic numbering system, in which numbers higher than 9,999 are conceptualised in two-digit groups, or a mix of two- and three-digit groups (lakh, karor, arab, kharab, neel, etc.), rather than the three-digit format used in the entire ‘Indianness’-less world, differences are so all-pervasive that individuals with a high degree of ‘Indianness’ do not even consider how severely affected they are by difference in this matter.

(3) **Gurutva** means heaviness, office of the guru, and concerns with the expectations with regard to coping with authority and hierarchy, and means to acquire the necessary “gurutva” to execute efficient leadership. As covered earlier, the reliance on the authority of a guru goes back to the *guru-shishya-parampara* (teacher-learner-tradition) of teaching and learning (Chatwani, 2015). Traditionally the *guru* (the word means both “teacher” and “heavy”) gets the *gurutva* (“heaviness”, “authority”), which credits her/him with the inherent right to teach, share, coach, mentor, tutor, and finally, evaluate and judge – all key responsible areas (KRA’s) belonging to today’s exemplary people managers and leaders, operating in standardised review meeting templates and evaluation cycles.

Our experiences and data suggest that, ‘Indianness’ shows a clear tendency towards not the *leadership through competence* model so dearly favoured by ‘Indianness-less’ environments, but towards the *leadership through loyalty and benevolence* model as exemplified by the *Kautilya’s Arthashastras* and *Nitisutras* and other affiliated Indian sources. Illustrative of this leadership and people management contradiction is the sheer incapacity of the non-Indian to comprehend, or even fathom the intricacies of loyalty mechanisms such as the ones of Dronacharya and Ekalavya – a story in which the non-Indian consequently identifies with the latter, thereby obliterating from the record even the most basic loyalty standards and dilemmas of the *Acharya* (an influential mentor or leader). In brief, ‘Indianness’ seems to favour an absolutely ‘different’ kind of people management and people leadership, in which family values are predominant, and in which the method of book-keeping loyalties and tabulating them into *loyalty debits* and *loyalty credits* is easily mistaken by non-Indians as opening the gates to ‘business on the sly’ and ‘corruption’. Perhaps this ‘singularity’ aspect of Indianness is confusing and incomprehensible to non-Indians just as the Chinese cultural aspect of Guanxi was/is (Chen and Chen, 2004).

Our experiences and data further suggest that an aspect of learning in ‘Indianness’ is the outcome of how the logical, mathematical, and grammatical, but also the ritualistic and literary frameworks of competence, are instilled into education (*shiksha*). Major strings of knowledge are offered, by way of what basically comes down to rote learning. This means

that the student is wired into deconstructing problems into chunks of readily digestible subsets, to which the solutions seem to be naturally and inherently present in the thinking patterns of the practitioner. This mechanism is perceived to be detrimental to documentability, originality and creativity by the ‘Indianness-less’ onlooker, but which, on the contrary, can effectively provide a great deal of additional mental freedom to the natural freeloader. Add to this all the seemingly inherent dislike for writing (hence the long-standing tradition of oral transmission of knowledge – for example, the *Panchatantra*), exemplified in the reluctance for projects in which (software) documentation is key, and ‘Indianness’ gets an altogether broader and deeper meaning than could be fathomed.

(4) **Karma Yoga** focuses on the techniques of intelligent actions as our karma (actions) that effects our lives (Mulla and Krishnan 2013). Mulla and Krishnan (2013) offer a three-lobed cluster of developing an Indian code of moral conduct in which the assembled relative weight of the *ethics of autonomy*, the *ethics of community* and the *ethics of metaphysics* is, in the case of “Indianness”, almost exclusively distributed among the latter two. Thus, Karma Yoga focuses on disciplined action and has expectations with regard to one’s stand in relation to their work and life. Whilst the purview of *dharma yoga* is more in the social and personal spheres, we treat *karma yoga* more in the work arena– mainly because of how it is seen from the perspective of the ‘other’, the non-Indian. This may seem all the more extravagant, since *karma yoga* in effect represents a near zero boundary between ‘work’ and ‘life’. We argue that non-Indians would perceive that, the modern discussion of ‘finding the balance’ is abundantly non-Indian in nature. Indians, so the adagio says, are always ‘at work’, if not anything else, than by the fact of their seemingly unlimited availability. Not alone do dictums on serviceability and ad hoc availability prevail in common Indian parlance (as argued by Das 2010), but the tradition of equating one’s identity with what she or he does in life germinates with the emergence of caste as the foundation stone of India’s organisational dynamics of society. Further, Das (2010) argues that such thinking may have blossomed ever since and remains to be a driver in Indian corporate life and relevant business expectations.

(5) **Jugaad** or finding an innovative way around, focuses on managing expectations with regard to procedural rigidity versus degrees of ‘jugaadism’. One of the strongest arguments for this could be the (near untranslatable) concept of *jugaad*. Often referred to as *frugal innovation* (Radjou, Prabhu and Ahuja 2012), and in our discourse as *heuristics* or ‘the art of problem solving’, *jugaad* is really much more than just this. Having spent entire workshops discussing the concept, based on multimedia examples of what is suspected to be examples of it, we have come to understand *jugaad* in terms of the following descriptors: (a) the use of unconventional means in order to achieve a commonly known purpose or goal (Pereira and Scott, 2015), (b) tinkering with (un)conventional means in order to maximise quantity and quality of output, (c) frugality, (d) out-of-the-boxness, (e) involving trust as an inherent part of its value proposition, (f) the impossibility of impossible. In other words, *jugaad* permits the practitioner to always come up with a way, or to never say *no*, and to do this at basically the lowest possible expense. On the other hand, *jugaadi* solutions are (g) nearly always impermanent or non-durable, and (h) inherently non-scalable. But our experiences and data

suggest that these are ‘at all costs’ *solutions*, and are a trademark of teams in which high incidence of ‘Indianness’ prevails, whether this be through the presence of Indians, or not.

Conclusion

The extravagance of heuristics

More often than not, all the above leaves the non-Indian perplexed with regard to coping with ‘Indianness’ as such and this goes as much in the case of working with the so-called ‘occidentalised’ Indian expatriate, as when dealing with offshore colleagues in a multi-sourced working model. Most of all, ‘Indianness’ is perceived as alien, wanton of the originality and creativity which is necessary to be entrusted with anything other than mindless repetitive work. This could be one of the reasons why ‘Indianness’ has not come to the fore till date. Exceptions, such as Pattanaik (2013), so far have not portrayed ‘Indianness’ as a blend of unique features and qualities thus unleashing a new potential in all aspects of business practice and business life.

Towards new forms of ‘Indianness’

As we have hinted at above, most clearly the conventional (call them “Hofstedian”) models to describe business culture are not equipped to deal with the new kind of ‘Indianness’ which emerges from modern Indian business participation in ventures with non-Indians. There is no such thing as a ‘national’ version of ‘Indianness’. Rather, a new ‘Indian culture’ is gradually taking shape, both within, and outside of, the Indian geographical cradle, involving individuals and communities which are not necessarily or essentially *desi* in nature. Using the above five values and five business singularities, of ‘Indianness’, we are dealing with an intrinsically dynamic framework of reference, which permits the user to understand ‘Indianness’ as a qualitative and quantitative feature of individuals, existing in relationship with peer communities and operating in teams, working on common projects and accomplishing commonly committed targets and goals. The above singularities are informed by the rich verbal and established traditions central in the upbringing and social interactions on Indians. From a business perspective there are certain unique selling points (USPs) when it comes to Indianness. These are discussed below.

The USPs of ‘Indianness’

As discussed in detail above, our evidence suggests that often ‘Indianness’ is being either disregarded or bluntly denied by Indian business people, who deem it to be a stumbling block on the road to success, and who sell the self-perceived absence of it as a bonus to their clients. We have also seen that this negative approach generally fails, since traces of deep and vertically rooted ‘Indianness’ have a tendency to catch their possessors unaware. For this reason, ‘Indianness’ being apparent in all aspects of working with Indians, is a major reason of fear for India’s non-Indian business partners, and for non-Indian members of staff in their dealings with Indian colleagues. Hence, through the paper we have proposed a framework in which to describe this ‘Indianness’, in order to make sense of these qualified and quantifiable aspects, which are most of all, manageable. We have also proposed that ‘Indianness’ be a

generic competence, which can be possessed, developed and expressed in degrees, by anyone who undertakes to excel in it, ethnic, genetic or geographical attributions notwithstanding. We thus propose a well-documented competence, with the help of which companies and business partners can contribute substantially to the global business culture.

In summary this paper sets out to analyse data from the Indian IT industry, wherein we advance our understanding of cultural singularities of ‘Indianness’. In most outsourcing situations, neither of the two parties typically possesses any knowledge of ‘the other’ beyond a very rudimentary set of stereotypes, biases and prejudices. The research context of an intercultural meeting place of IT and business process outsourcing firms’ overseas subsidiaries, Belgium in this case, allow the authors to identify cultural singularities that typify ‘Indianness’. We further utilise our collective experiences as consultants and researchers in the Indian IT/BPO industry to ethnographically and reflexively ‘smell’ and validate these cultural singularities of Indianness. Finally, our contribution here in this study is a departure from the normal Hofstedian categories, which are mostly descriptive and it is uncertain which culture they describe, since neither the disparate social or geographical stratagems of culture are clearly, or sensibly, defined. ‘Indianness’, when defined along a set of proposed parameters, becomes more than merely a descriptive method of social, private, and professional behavioural traits (of Indians). Rather, it constitutes a professional competency, valorising qualities which may or may not be present in global teams. We envisage that when played out as an asset, knowledge of ‘Indianness’ should be acquirable by anybody, at any time, and it should and could be a key aspect of successfully positioning those who are endowed with strong degrees of it, whether they be “Indians” or not. Thus from a managerial and practical perspective too, ‘Indianness’ volunteers to be a USP to Indian companies venturing on the outsourcing market, a value proposition which has the possibility to outlive others, such as advantages in pricing/cost.

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