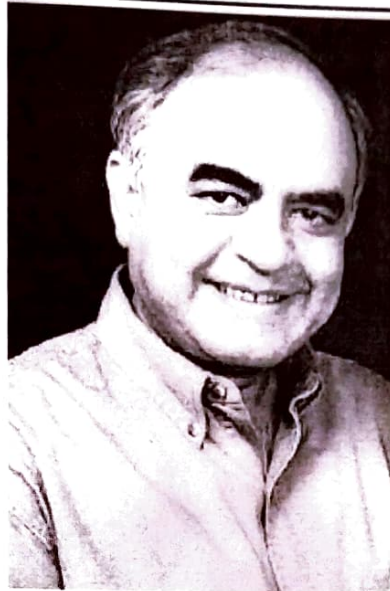


Managers need to hone their curiosity'

Vinay Kamath

Author of the bestseller 'India Unbound' on the corporate world and management education in India ... and his next book.

Our managerial schools are doing an adequate job. But there is lopsidedness in favour of engineering, which has led to tunnel vision. We need old liberal education which is being fast lost.



GURCHARAN DAS, former CEO, P&G; best-selling writer

Gurcharan Das wouldn't strike you as the archetypal corporate head honcho. And, he isn't. Mr Das, former CEO, Procter & Gamble India, and later Managing Director (Strategic Planning), P&G Worldwide, easily swapped his high-profile job as the India head of one of the top FMCG companies in the world to become best-selling writer.

Author of the bestseller, India Unbound, which has been published in many countries and languages and filmed by the BBC, he also wrote the novel, A Fine Family, which is being made into a film by Shyam Benegal.

His other literary works include a book of essays, The Elephant Paradigm, and an anthology, Three English Plays (Oxford), consisting of Larins Sahib, a prize-winning play about the British in India, which has been presented at the Edinburgh Festival; Mira, which was produced off-Broadway to critical acclaim from New York critics; and 9 Jakhoo Hill which has been performed with great success in major Indian cities.

In keeping with his eclectic and varied interests, Mr Das graduated with honours from Harvard University, where he studied moral philosophy and Sanskrit.

He later attended Harvard Business School (AMP), where he is featured in three case studies.

He took early retirement to pursue writing full time but still consults with a number of companies on global corporate strategy.

The New Manager caught up with him at his home in Alibagh where he intended to stay for a fortnight to catch up on writing for his next book to be published next year. Excerpts from an interview:

What is the key debate in corporate boardrooms today? Is it about going global? Or about managing people or resources?

The classic questions are always the same. Companies always need good people and good companies always make sure they have plenty of them and the way to make sure you have plenty is to recruit people from campuses and promote people from within.

And, always allow for attrition; in other words, always recruit extra people and make an assumption that a certain percentage will always leave you and you're not left in the lurch.

And, of course, in this whole game, you have to make sure you retain your best people. There is no point retaining the deadwood; you want to keep the most talented and find a way to remove the deadwood on a periodic basis.

A smart company will ask the bottom 5 per cent to leave.

Are companies coming back to the view that people are the best resources? At one time the emphasis was on other factors of production ...

In a competitive market, this is not something that you come to believe; it's something you do every day.

What I am saying is there are perennial questions which relate to how to recruit the best, how to retain, how to create an environment where you have innovation, people performing at their best and also how to keep customers locked in; you don't want them to leave you. You also have to retain customers.

What I am saying is the more business changes the more it remains the same. The same things are always important. So, in that sense nothing's changed.

Do you see that an Indian global manager has emerged? They are securing plum assignments worldwide.

I would say so. Certainly many Indian managers working for MNCs are travelling around the world. I was such a global manager in the 1980s long before it became fashionable. I was looking after Thailand and Indonesia apart from India and then went to a global position at the HQ. Take

an institution like Citibank. Today it is impressive to see that the key positions in the Citibank global sphere are occupied by Indians.

What characteristics do you think make them succeed?

I was asked the same questions by the global board of E&Y. I tried to find an answer in the education system and I came to the conclusion that it is the students and not the teachers who are responsible for the success of Indian education.

And, more than that, it is parents and their middle-class insecurities, which bring a certain diligence to their work; you will never see the mother of a teenage child out for dinner during exams. We can relate to that. It is those institutions that stand them in good stead; we credit IITs and IIMs, but this aspect is ignored.

Overall, Indian education is very mediocre. It is students and their tremendous aspirations which are responsible for their success. So, it is despite the system that they are successful.

I have another explanation. As the historian Toynbee said, education is only half the answer, the other half is history. Toynbee said that the "Western thought has entered deep into India's soul," and he said this 50 years ago. What he was trying to say was that India's experience of the West was more intimate, more profound and more painful than China, Russia, Japan or Ottoman Turkey.

His interpretation of British colonial history was one of the leisurely intermingling of two great civilisations which has eased India's passage to modernity. The idea being that modern institutions have found a comfortable home in India and more significantly, liberal thinking has become part of the Indian psyche, unlike, say, West Asia, which also experienced colonial rule. This may explain why Indians move about comfortably in today's global economy.

The other thing is the colonial exam system; the British needed educated Indians to collect taxes. The price of that was to learn English and take exams. And, that's entered the psyche of the modern middle class.

So while we normally revile Macaulay for turning us into Brown Sahibs, cutting us off from our culture, we don't give him enough credit for creating a meritocratic middle class. Our political slavery is gone but our obsession with English and tackling exams has continued. It's in our blood now — exams — and over 100 years this has been going on.

But are our management schools doing enough to groom these global managers?

Our managerial schools are doing an adequate job. But, the one thing I think management schools should provide ... you see, there is lopsidedness in favour of engineering, which has made people get tunnel vision. What we need is this old liberal education which is lost or being fast lost. When we were growing up, we read lots of literature, this is essential, it gave a solid

grounding in a classical, liberal sort of way, that will make for a much well-rounded global manager than just learning more about marketing

You think today's managers aren't reading enough, things beyond the typical management pale?

It is a big gap, when you compare them to the previous generation. The generation of our parents had a more well-balanced education than today's

So managers are not getting a balanced worldview?

I think Indian managers today don't have sufficient grounding in the humanities and for that reason they are less effective as global managers. They have the skills, but you need more than skills, you need a deep interest in the world, you need to hone your curiosity.

Do you see a paradigm shift in the way Indian business groups operate, in the way they are changing?

The best thing that has happened is that competition has become intense. And that's the best school of learning and improvement. We have seen how some of the big groups have become marginalised and new ones are making a success. <167, 1p, 1>The paradigm shift is competition and that's a good thing. Nobody can take anything for granted. In the old days with the Licence Raj you could protect your turf but now you have to work hard. That has been going on since 1991

You are writing your next book, what is it about?

In *India Unbound* I had concluded that the economy was on auto-pilot and prosperity was on its way and my worry was governance.

I am approaching governance in a very unique way. I have gone back to the *Mahabharata* — my subject at University was philosophy — and I have been reading about the moral dilemmas in the *Mahabharata* and throwing light on the problems of contemporary governance.

I am not interested in the corruption that hits the headlines every day but in the day-to-day issues of the state, such as the fact that one out of four school teachers does not turn up or two out of five doctors in a primary health centre or nurses don't show up.

These are civil servants of the government and they are not doing their job and it hurts the poor.

I am going back to the notion of *dharma* to see if one can throw some light. Obviously, you need to improve your institutions but there is also a moral dimension in the failure which needs to be emphasised.