



Wonder that is INDIA

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IN HIS early years in India, General Motors India chief executive officer Karl Slym, once saw an Asiatic elephant walking down the street where he lived. He was understandably blown out of his wits. Today, he can remember it fondly. "Animals and people sharing the same infrastructure in such a casual way was something unusual to us, early on," says Slym.

In the pre-liberalisation days, most western visitors to India, expatriates or tourists, could be seen holding a copy of EM Forster's *A Passage To India* at airport lounges, mistaking the book for a 1924 edition of Lonely Planet guide to the mystic land. In many aspects, they would find the work prophetic—particularly the endnote where protagonist Dr Aziz unwittingly quotes Rudyard Kipling, "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." Globalisation has proved Kipling wrong and Aphra Behn right—Money speaks sense in a language all nations understand—and no one knows it better than the sunrise economies of China and India.

Yet, as the East and West are being melded, cross-cultural issues continue to crop up. Ask Alexander Moore, chief executive officer, LJ Hooker India, the local subsidiary of the Australian real estate player, who at his first interaction with his team in Bangalore was unsure of whether his colleagues understood what he was saying. Or Nigel Harwood, president and chief executive officer for InterGlobe General Aviation, who was baffled with "so many cultures" within one country. He indulges in plainspeak when he says that the pace of life is different in India and it took him sometime to adjust. "Aviation as an industry moves very fast and in the UK we were used to having lunch on the run. It was a shock to me that here, in India, everyone goes out for lunch, which range from 45 minutes to sometimes upto two hours." Harwood now feels much relaxed with the leisurely pace.

Harwood, Moore and Slym have been privileged expats who had the backing of professional relocation experts to minimise their cultural shock, but as Indian companies increasingly hire top and middle-level managers from the West, in a post-recession

scenario, to give their setups a global image, several expats find inadequate HR support to deal with issues like different work ethics, traffic, civic laws, housing food, mannerism, gender-issues, et al, in their initial days.

So why do westerners take up assignments to India in the first place? "India is regarded as a stepping stone, a stint in India is a formidable flight in corporate circles, large consumer base and multi-cultural demographics," says Aman Bandvi, chief executive officer, Credence Relocity, a corporate relocations firm which assists expatriates in cross-cultural issues. "Anyone who navigates Indian market, with any level of success, is sure to get a better say in Asia Pacific and growing markets. Those who survive India are considered alchemists elsewhere."

With the trend of workforce outsourcing crossing the borders, and over 50,000 expatriates currently employed in Indian firms, companies like Credence Relocity have emerged on the scene with services like legal consulting, immigration consulting and cross-cultural adjustment assistance. These companies are scientific in their approach, employ professionals, who work as cultural shock absorbers.

In a country where its own citizens might speak a host of different languages, and practise diametrically different cultures, it is not uncommon for a person from Lucknow to completely misunderstand someone from Chennai. For expats, this is all the more difficult as they come from cultures where there is much more personal space. "People ask personal questions, something I took some time to come to terms with," says Andrea Phillips, market researcher with Nielsen, who works with Tata Consultancy Services on a project and has been here for over a year. She manages a team, and found that her subordinates did not ask questions even when they had doubts. "There was a certain reluctance to ask, as if that was not something good," says Phillips. So she did something. "I started to ask a lot of direct questions."



Larger playing fields attract expatriates

FOR A company like Wipro, which employs people from 70 different nationalities in various countries, cross-cultural training is accorded top importance, says Sunita Rebecca Cherian, general manager, talent engagement and development, Wipro Tech, which has the maximum number of nationalities within various departments of Wipro. “We do not impose our culture on them—the training is for both Indians and for people of other nationalities—the idea is to get along productively,” says Cherian. What also matters is the brand that you build. “If you build a brand that respects other cultures, then talented people join you irrespective of the fact that you are an Indian firm,” says Cherian.

Global executive search firm Amrop, which has done a research study on expatriates in Indian companies, found that an India experience is the biggest attraction for foreigners moving to jobs in local firms. The larger playing field and challenging role content that employment in the country offers are other key allures, it said in its study titled *To be or not to be: Expatriates in Indian Companies*.

Another thing to get used to is longer work hours compared to European countries. “Work days here are much longer and I miss sailing, which I could do back in the UK,” says Julian Groom, who works with a Mumbai-based realty company. The Amrop study also found the same—that long hours and lower productivity are often complaints cited by expats. Groom also has to work six days a week. For some others, the lack of timing is more of a worry. “I expected people to come in at 9. But they would do that at 9.30, and some even after that,” says John Lee Fagence, programme manager at Cisco, who has been here 18 months now. “All of them used to stay late to compensate—but I could not schedule any morning meeting,” he says. The nature of work is more informal, including dress codes that a Brit cannot notice immediately. “I got my team, all Indians, to dress more formally, and I do think that has brought in a more professional behaviour in work,” he says.

There are other challenges too. Like a lack of respect

for privacy and personal space, according to the Amrop report. “I was often surprised by the personal questions I was asked,” says Phillips, who now has gotten used to it. Preety Kumar, managing partner, Amrop, who was involved in the study, says despite these challenges, more expats are coming to India as Indian companies globalise through acquisitions and become MNCs, like the Tata Group, Wipro, or Aditya Birla Group. “They are more willing to come here, than China. People we talked to had a greater sense of transparency, and could related to Indian culture better,” says Kumar. She added that while the interviews did not include specific questions comparing India to its larger neighbour, it came up while discussing other topics. Cherian says in due course Wipro acquired a reputation for respecting others’ cultures without compromising on the ‘spirit of Wipro.’ Now, the company is ready with a new training programme on diversity which includes real-life cases within the company to educate the participants. With almost a tenth of the total workforce being non-Indians, enrolling and passing the programme is compulsory.

Some challenges were not talked about but rather felt. When Phillips wanted to take the lift, she saw a whole mass of people waiting to rush in, jostling and shoving as they went. “I am more aggressive now, I thrust myself at the front,” she says. For Fagence, one thing is quite clear—that I have to adjust more, and should not expect my Indian colleagues to adjust that much—when in India, do as Indians do.”

A similar advice comes from GM India’s Slym, “Be aware of the differences, listen and learn what is the real scenario before jumping to conclusions and taking knee-jerk reactions. Once you get to know the environment and culture well enough you can make the right decisions and make them quickly.” Slym also believes HR departments need to have policies and guidelines in place to help in-bound expats. “It should start pre-assignment with an assessment to clarify if the potential expats and their family are a good fit for the country. A settled family is the first key to allow an Expatriate to perform.”