

Why are Indian managers so damn good?

By [R Gopalakrishnan](#) & [Ranjan Banerjee](#) November 20, 2018

What do Satya Nadella (Microsoft), Sundar Pichai (Google), Indra Nooyi (formerly PepsiCo), Shantanu Narayen (Adobe), Nitin Nohria (Harvard Business School)—to cite just a few well-known names—have in common? To begin with, they are successful leaders of globally renowned institutions that significantly impact the world we live in. Further, they are leaders who have had a significant component of their early upbringing, living experiences, and education in India. They are “made-in-India managers.”

A year back, R Gopalakrishnan and I began discussing this phenomenon. We spoke to many people whom we had studied with during our MBA and engineering days who were in leadership positions in global organisations across the world. “How,” we asked, “if at all, did being ‘made-in-India’ help you get where you are today?”

It is not unusual to find successful non-resident Indians being disparaging of India and some of the things that Indians are unable to get right (a criticism that is made sometimes with just cause). However, our experience from these conversations was quite different. The answers surprised us. To the man and woman, everybody we spoke to agreed that the experience of growing up in India had shaped them positively in fundamental ways.

It must be said at the outset that while the factors enumerated below play an important role, none of these factors in themselves are unique to Indian managers. Many of the factors are present in different measure in citizens of other developing countries. But we talk in the book (*The Made-in-India Manager*, Hachette India) of a concept called “emergence.” It is a concept from systems theory that in its essence states that the beauty of a flower cannot be understood by aggregating the beauty of the individual petals or the other parts of the flower—it comes from the way these components come together to create something of greater beauty, which is an emergent property of the flower.

Competitive intensity



The premier management institutes we are associated with (IIM Calcutta and SPJIMR) regularly host many students from premier business schools in Europe. SPJIMR annually welcomes exchange students from some of the best business schools in Europe. Recently, we conducted an informal focus group with ten such students to understand their perceptions of management education in India. One of the consistent themes that emerged through the interviews was their perception of Indian students as industrious and diligent. “They are much more focused,” they said. “It is very important for Indian students that they do well. We have become more hard-working by being around them. They are very competitive.”

The foreign students in question were themselves top students from the best business schools in their respective countries. Person for person, they felt that Indian students were more determined, more focused, and very hard-working. And so they must be, given the intense competition they have to overcome at every step. Statistics bear this out. Currently, 1.2 million students take the entrance examination to the IITs, which have fostered a number of luminaries. As per a newspaper report in the Hindustan Times in 2017, only 11,000 students were admitted to the IITs in 2017, an admit ratio of less than 1 in 100. India’s foremost business school, IIM Ahmedabad, admits one student for every 400 applications. The State Bank of India, India’s premier public sector bank, recently advertised for entry-level probationary officers. It received, on average, 550 applications for every position available (Times of India, May 2018). This demonstrates that intense competition is not only for elite academic institutions.

Competitive intensity implies that “made-in-India managers” have survived a high level of competition to get where they are, and this has taught them focus, self-analysis, the importance of practice, and the experience that difficult-looking odds can be overcome.

Diversity and inclusion

Diversity and inclusion are internalised early by many, and this stands us in good stead later, when adjusting to a different or a variety of cultural environments. Such exposure begins early in life. It is not unusual in school to share lunch with people from different states—a vast variety of cuisine is



shared, understood, and appreciated. Similarly, it is not unusual to sing Christian hymns at school and pray to a Hindu god at night.

Dealing with ambiguity

From the vagaries of the weather, to the unreliability of infrastructure—we learn to deal with a lot of things that are uncertain, and develop the ability to quickly assess situations and help ourselves without waiting for the system to help us. A friend argued that even in an everyday activity like commuting on extremely crowded local trains and getting to work on time, students and working executives develop resilience, the ability to adapt to systems that don't work, and the intensity to confront and overcome obstacles on a day-to-day basis.

Family values

The percentage of India-made leaders citing a family member as an influential role model is significantly higher than for their Western counterparts. The formative role of the family in shaping values through demonstration, stressing the value of education, and proving an “always there” support provides a strong value core that builds resilience.

Both Indra Nooyi, the former chairman and CEO of PepsiCo, and Satya Nadella, the CEO of Microsoft, talk about the strong influence that their mothers have had on their upbringing, aspirations, and values. The Indian middle class student has typically grown up in an extremely stable family environment, which has in turn encouraged high aspirations and deep self-confidence. Satya Nadella says of his mother, “My mother cared deeply about my being happy, confident and living in the moment without regret.” Indra Nooyi talks about the things her mother did to help her daughters believe that they could “become whoever they wanted to be.” In a specific instance, Nooyi talks about how her mother would ask both her daughters to make a presentation at the dinner table on what they would do if they were a particular world leader. She would then declare a winner. This kind of role-playing left a lasting impression on Nooyi.



Self-confidence is built by achievement in the face of obstacles. Often, a building block is early and unconditional caring in the immediate environment. Achievements in the student phase builds self-confidence in academic domains, and a relative lack of self-awareness in others.

The managerial workplace has a new set of rules—and early failures, coupled with a supportive culture, helps managers to understand themselves, understand failure and, through experience, realise that learning from yesterday's failure builds today's success. They then develop a deeper confidence. It is a quiet self-belief, a feeling that says, "If I am interested in something and want to make a difference, and I am willing to give it all my effort, there is very little that I cannot prima facie achieve." It does not need to be stated—it is a quiet determination and the ability to stay steadfast when short-term outcomes do not align with your expectations. It is not a common quality, and we do not think this is inborn. Our managers typically achieve this in a mid-career phase, and those who get there earlier are often early leaders.

And so we return to the concept of emergence. The strengths of the made-in-India manager emerge from the coming together of multiple, interlinked features with the ability to "think in English." We believe that as Indian sportsmen, companies and leaders make their mark on a global stage, tomorrow's made-in-India manager will grow up in a more inherently confident and assured India and consequently will themselves reflect these qualities. In that sense, it is likely that the soft power represented by "made-in-India managers" will grow further in the years to come.

R Gopalakrishnan and Ranjan Banerjee are co-authors of The Made-in-India Manager, published by Hachette India. We welcome your comments at ideas.india@gz.com.

