

‘Expatriates in India’ by Steffan Braasch

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This book is a doctoral dissertation by a Swiss student who spent much of 1998 in a survey of 85 expatriates executives working in India, most of them German and American, plus 272 Indians mainly employed by foreign companies. The result is a thorough work that has two components, an empirical survey grounded in strong data, plus an analysis of the emotional makeup of Indians, and their differentiation from Western counterparts that blends sociology with psychology, and sometimes appears to be retro-fitted to the empirical conclusions. But the observations of Indian behavior traits are very accurate.

The author’s style is heavy and sometimes staid, but this is a minor objection to a work that breaks fresh ground in giving a portrayal of how foreigners working in India view their work environment. It is of value at a time when globalization increases the interactions between Indian and foreign businessmen. Its principal conclusions should concern not just those who come to work in India from abroad and the Indian executives in foreign subsidiaries and joint ventures, but all those engaged in the encounters across cultures.

Indians are portrayed as intensely emotional, which the author ascribes to the exceptional bonding between mothers and their offspring, much stronger than in Western society. Another characteristic is a fixed core of values and a flexible surface, which leads to a “chameleon syndrome” of an outward desire to conform. There is a strong hierarchical and vertical orientation as well, plus intense power consciousness. The differentiation between “*apna*” and “*paraya*” leads to in-group collectivism, and an urge to benefit at the cost of other groups. Other traits: low demand for perfection, passivity, low responsibility and strong upward delegation, and reduced planning ability.

The second half of the book analyses the way expatriates tend to behave and the ideal manner in which they could be prepared for assignments in India. The profile of expatriates has changed around the world – in place of the earlier “colonial expatriates” those sent out today are career-oriented who come for specific tasks for shorter periods. This leads to quicker turnover

and even greater need for preparation. The three characteristics the expatriate needs are authoritativeness, emotionality/empathy, and leadership. In dealing with Indians he needs to understand the personality makeup and accept that their flexibility factor makes them relatively easily “improvable” provided the effective motivation is applied. This brings the author to his formula “dddP”: the expatriate has to adapt to Indian *paternalism*, through *deliberate* effort, in a manner that is *demanding*, and is *differentiated* for each employee. The book is at its best in offering intensely practical advice to foreign companies working in India and bringing expatriates. It should be required reading for newcomers and for the HR departments of such companies.

Much of the advice is relevant for expatriates who come to work in middle or even junior capacities, but the broad assumption is that the expatriate is the boss of the unit. This reflects the inherent continental European bias that they make the best CEOs, and working in junior capacities under a “native” chief executive is a rarity. It ignores the empirical fact that experience in North America and UK shows that Indian management skill is a global resource that so many major enterprises are using to advantage. Europe misses out on this at its own cost.

The study that is waiting to be addressed is the cultural and personality factors give the top percentile of Indian managers the ability to rise so well to the very pinnacle. It may well be that the same flexibility that Braasch notes is part of the strength. No less relevant is surely the innate cross-cultural ability that all Indians learn from nursery and primary school and in their neighborhoods – adaptation to other people’s customs and ways of living and of thought. Braasch seems to overlook this element.