

## 5

## LEARNING FROM THE WEST

- N R Narayana Murthy

### Let's get started

- What do we usually learn from the West?
- Do you have a good opinion of the values of the West?
- What are the values that India stands for?
- Let us see what we really have to learn from the West.

Read the essay to find out.....

Ladies & Gentlemen. It is a pleasure to be here at the Lal Bahadur Shastri Institute of Management. Lal Bahadur Shastri was a man of strong values and he epitomized simple living. He was a freedom fighter and innovative administrator who contributed to nation building in full measure. It is indeed a matter of pride for me to be chosen for the Lal Bahadur Shastri Award for Public Administration and Management Sciences. I thank the jury for this honour.

When I got the invitation to speak here, I decided to speak on an important topic on which I have pondered for years – the role of Western values in contemporary Indian society. Coming from a company that is built on strong values, the topic is close to my heart. Moreover, an organization is representative of society, and some of the lessons that I have learnt are applicable in the national context. In fact, values drive progress and define quality of life in society.

The word community joins two Latin words com (“together” or “with”) and unus (“one”). A community, then, is both one and many. It is a unified multitude and not a mere group of people. As it is said in the Vedas: Man can live individually, but can survive only collectively. Hence, the challenge is to form a progressive community by balancing the interests of the individual and that of the society. To meet this, we need to develop a value system where people accept modest sacrifices for the common good. What is a value system? It is the protocol for behaviour that enhances the trust, confidence and commitment of members of the community. It goes beyond the domain of legality – it is about decent and desirable behaviour. Further, it includes putting the community interests ahead of your own. Thus, our collective survival and progress is predicated on sound values. There are two pillars of the cultural value system – loyalty to family and loyalty to community. One should not be in isolation to the other, because, successful societies are those which combine both harmoniously. It is in this context that I will discuss the role of Western values in contemporary Indian society.

Some of you here might say that most of what I am going to discuss are actually Indian values in old ages, and not Western values. I live in the present, not in the bygone era. Therefore, I have seen these values practiced primarily in the West and not in India. Hence, the title of the topic.

I am happy as long as we practice these values – whether we call it Western or old Indian values. As an Indian, I am proud to be part of a culture, which has deep-rooted family values. We have tremendous loyalty to the family. For instance, parents make enormous sacrifices for their children. They support them until they can stand on their own feet. On the other side, children consider it their duty to take care of aged parents. We believe: *Mathru devo bhava* – mother is God, and *pithru devo bhava* – father is God. Further, brothers and sisters sacrifice for each other. In fact, the eldest brother or sister is respected by all the other siblings. As for marriage, it is held to be a sacred union – husband and wife are bonded, most often, for life. In joint families, the entire family works towards the welfare of the family. There is so much love and affection in our family life. This is the essence of Indian values and one of our key strengths. Our families act as a critical support mechanism for us. In fact, the credit to the success of Infosys goes, as much to the founders as to their families, for supporting them through the tough times. Unfortunately, our attitude towards family life is not reflected in our attitude towards community behaviour. From littering the streets to corruption to breaking of contractual obligations, we are apathetic to the common good. In the West – the US, Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand – individuals understand that they have to be responsible towards their community.

The primary difference between the West and us is that, there, people have a much better societal orientation. They care more for the society than we do. Further, they generally sacrifice more for the society than us. Quality of life is enhanced because of this. This is where we need to learn from the West.

I will talk about some of the lessons that we, Indians, can learn from the West. In the West, there is respect for the public good. For instance, parks free of litter, clean streets, public toilets free of graffiti – all these are instances of care for the public good. On the contrary, in India, we keep our houses clean and water our gardens everyday – but, when we go to a park, we do not think twice before littering the place.

Corruption, as we see in India, is another example of putting the interest of oneself, and at best that of one's family, above that of the society. Society is relatively corruption free in the West. For instance, it is very difficult to bribe a police officer into avoiding a speeding ticket.

This is because of the individual's responsible behaviour towards the community as a whole. On the contrary, in India, corruption, tax evasion, cheating and bribery have eaten into our vitals. For instance, contractors bribe officials, and construct low-quality roads and bridges. The result is that society loses in the form of substandard defence equipment and infrastructure, and low-quality recruitment, just to name a few impediments.

Apathy in solving community matters has held us back from making progress, which is otherwise within our reach. We see serious problems around us but do not try to solve them. We behave as if the problems do not exist or is somebody else's. On the other hand, in the West, people solve societal problems proactively. There are several examples of our apathetic attitude. For instance, all of us are aware of the problem of drought in India. More than 40 years ago, Dr K L Rao – an irrigation expert, suggested creation of a water grid connecting all the rivers in North and South India, to solve this problem. Unfortunately, nothing has been done about this. The story of power shortage in Bangalore is another instance. In 1983, it was decided to build a thermal power plant to meet Bangalore's power requirements. Unfortunately, we have still not started it. Further, the Milan subway in Bombay is in a deplorable state for the last 40 years, and no action has been taken.

We, Indians, would do well to remember Thomas Hunter's words: "Idleness travels very slowly, and poverty soon overtakes it". What could be the reason for all this? We were ruled by foreigners for over thousand years. Thus, we have always believed that public issues belonged to some foreign ruler and that we have no role in solving them. Moreover, we have lost the will to proactively solve our own problems. Thus, we have got used to just executing someone else's orders. Borrowing Aristotle's words: "We are what we repeatedly do". Thus, having done this over the years, the decision-makers in our society are not trained for solving problems. Our decision-makers look to somebody else to take decisions. Unfortunately, there is nobody to look up to and this is the tragedy.

Another interesting attribute, which we Indians can learn from the West, is their accountability. Irrespective of your position, in the West, you are held accountable for what you do. However, in India, the more 'important' you are, the less answerable you are. For instance, a senior politician once declared that he 'forgot' to file his tax returns for 10 consecutive years – and he got away with it. To quote another instance, there are over 100 loss making public sector units (central) in India. Nevertheless, I have not seen action taken for bad performance against top managers in these organizations.

Dignity of labour is an integral part of the Western value system. In the West, each person is proud about his or her labour that raises honest sweat. On the other hand, in India, we tend to overlook the significance of those who are not in professional jobs. We have a mindset that reveres only supposedly intellectual work.

For instance, I have seen many engineers, fresh from college, who only want to do cutting-edge work and not work that is of relevance to business and the country. However, be it an organization or society, there are different people performing different roles. For success, all these people are required to discharge their duties. This includes everyone from the CEO to the person who serves tea – every role is important. Hence, we need a mindset that reveres everyone who puts in honest work.

Indians become intimate even without being friendly. They ask favours of strangers without any hesitation. For instance, the other day, while I was travelling from Bangalore to Mantralaya, I met a fellow traveller on the train. Hardly five minutes into the conversation, he requested me to speak to his MD about removing him from the bottom 10% list in his company, earmarked for disciplinary action. I was reminded of what Rudyard Kipling once said: A westerner can be friendly without being intimate while an easterner tends to be intimate without being friendly.

Yet another lesson to be learnt from the West is about their professionalism in dealings. The common good being more important than personal equations, people do not let personal relations interfere with their professional dealings. For instance, they don't hesitate to chastise a colleague, even if he is a personal friend, for incompetent work. In India, I have seen that we tend to view even work interactions from a personal perspective. Further, we are the most 'thin-skinned' society in the world – we see insults where none is meant. This may be because we were not free for most of the last thousand years. Further, we seem to extend this lack of professionalism to our sense of punctuality. We do not seem to respect the other person's time. The Indian Standard Time somehow seems to be always running late. Moreover, deadlines are typically not met. How many public projects are completed on time? The disheartening aspect is that we have accepted this as the norm rather than the exception.

In the West, they show professionalism by embracing meritocracy. Meritocracy by definition means that we cannot let personal prejudices affect our evaluation of an individual's performance. As we increasingly start to benchmark ourselves with global standards, we have to embrace meritocracy. In the West, right from a very young age, parents teach their children to be independent in thinking. Thus, they grow up to be strong, confident individuals. In India, we still suffer from feudal thinking. I have seen people, who are otherwise bright, refusing to show independence and preferring to be told what to do by their boss. We need to overcome this attitude if we have to succeed globally.

The Western value system teaches respect to contractual obligation. In the West, contractual obligations are seldom dishonoured. This is important – enforceability of legal rights and contracts is the most important factor in the enhancement of credibility of our people and nation. In India, we consider our marriage vows as sacred. We are willing to sacrifice in order to respect our marriage vows. However, we do not extend this to the public domain.

To quote another instance, I had given recommendations to several students for the national scholarship for higher studies in US universities. Most of them did not return to India even though contractually they were obliged to spend five years after their degree in India. In fact, according to a professor at a reputed US university, the maximum default rate for student loans is among Indians – all of these students pass out in flying colours and land lucrative jobs, yet they refuse to pay back their loans. Thus, their action has made it difficult for the students after them, from India, to obtain loans. We have to change this attitude.

Further, we Indians do not display intellectual honesty. For example, our political leaders use mobile phones to tell journalists on the other side that they do not believe in technology! If we want our youngsters to progress, such hypocrisy must be stopped. We are all aware of our rights as citizens. Nevertheless, we often fail to acknowledge the duty that accompanies every right. To borrow Dwight Eisenhower's words: "People that value its privileges above its principles soon lose both". Our duty is towards the community as a whole, as much as it is towards our families.

We have to remember that fundamental social problems grow out of a lack of commitment to the common good. To quote Henry Beecher: "Culture is that which helps us to work for the betterment of all". Hence, friends, I do believe that we can make our society even better by assimilating these Western values into our own culture – we will be stronger for it. Most of our behaviour comes from greed, lack of self-confidence, lack of confidence in the nation, and lack of respect for the society. To borrow Gandhi's words: "There is enough in this world for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed". Let us work towards a society where we would do unto others what we would have others do unto us. Let us all be responsible citizens who make our country a great place to live. In the words of Churchill: "Responsibility is the price of greatness". We have to extend our family values beyond the boundaries of our home.

Finally, let us work towards maximum welfare of the maximum people – *Samastajanaanaam sukhino bhavantu*. Thus, let us - people of this generation, conduct ourselves as great citizens rather than just good people so that we can serve as good examples for our younger generation.

## GLOSSARY

- epitomize (v) /ɪˈpɪtəmaɪz/ : (M) to be a perfect example  
 (U) The fighting qualities of the team are epitomized by the captain.
- predicate (v) /ˈpredɪkət/ : (M) to base something on a particular belief, idea or principle  
 : (U) Democracy is predicated upon the rule of law.
- bygone (adj) /ˈbaɪɡən/ : (M) happening or existing a long time ago  
 (U) The horse cart belongs to a bygone era.
- obligation (n) /ˌɒblɪˈɡeɪʃn/ : (M) the state of being forced to do something because it is your duty or because of law etc.  
 : (U) You are under no obligation to buy anything.
- orientation (n) /ˌɔːriənˈteɪʃn/ : (M) the type of aims or interests that a person or an organization has; the act of directing your aims towards a particular thing.  
 (U) The course is essentially theoretical in orientation.

- graffiti (n) /grə'fi:ti/ : (M) drawing or writing on a wall  
(U) The subway was covered in graffiti.
- evasion (n) /ɪ'veɪʒn/ : (M) the act of avoiding somebody or of avoiding something that you are supposed to do  
(U) He has been charged with tax evasion.
- impediment (n) /ɪm'pedɪmənt/: (M) something that stops or delays the progress of something, obstacle  
(U) The level of inflation is a serious impediment to economic recovery.
- apathetic (adj) /,æpə'tetɪk/ : (M) showing no interest or enthusiasm  
(U) We need to reach those children who are apathetic about school.
- proactive (adj) /,prəʊ'æktɪv/ : (M) (of a person or policy) controlling a situation by making things happen rather than waiting for things to happen and then reacting  
(U) Managers must be proactive in identifying and preventing potential problems.
- gloat (v) /gləʊt/ : (M) [intransitive] (gloat about/at/over something) to show that you are happy about your own success or somebody else's failure, in a pleasant way  
(U) She was still gloating over her rival's disappointment.
- earmark (v) /'ɪəmə:k/ : (M) to state that something will happen to somebody/something in future  
: (U) This factory has been earmarked for future expansion.
- meritocracy (n) /,merɪ'tɒkrəsi/ : (M) a country or social system where people get power or money on the basis of their ability  
(U) The school honour's club was a meritocracy where leaders were chosen because of their academic achievements.
- benchmark (n) /'bentʃmɑ:k/ : (M) something that can be measured or used as a standard that other things can be compared with  
(U) A man's ability to keep his word even though there is no legal document, is a benchmark of his good character.
- lucrative (adj) /'lu:krətɪv/ : (M) producing a large amount of money, making a large profit  
(U) Indigo and opium are the most lucrative crops.

## About the author

One of the brilliant minds behind the Indian multinational corporation INFOSYS Ltd. is N R Narayana Murthy, an industrialist counted amongst the greatest Indian industrialists of our time. Nagavara Ramarao Narayana Murthy, popularly known as Infosys Narayana Murthy, was born on 20<sup>th</sup> August, 1946 in an educated, middle class family in Shidlaghatta, Chikkaballapura district, Karnataka. From childhood days, Narayana Murthy was academically brilliant. He was passionate about mathematics and physics. He always had the thirst and the desire to gain more knowledge in these fields.



After completing his school education, he went to the National Institute of Engineering and graduated in 1967 with a degree in electrical engineering. In 1969 he received his master's degree from Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur. Before venturing to become an entrepreneur he had worked with Patni Computer Systems in Pune. He had always dreamed of becoming an entrepreneur and hoped to form a big company which would create job opportunities for the country's youngsters. Blessed with a brilliant mind and astute business sense, he formed Infosys in 1981 with six other software professionals with an initial capital of just Rs. 10,000. Over the years the company grew manifold to become one of the top IT services companies based in India.

Narayana Murthy has been listed among the twelve greatest entrepreneurs of our time by *Fortune* Magazine. He has been described as the "Father of the Indian IT sector" by *Time* Magazine due to his contribution to outsourcing in India. He has also been honoured with the Padma Vibhushan and Padma Shri awards.

## About the lesson

This present lesson is a speech delivered by Mr N R Narayana Murthy when he received the Lal Bahadur Sastry National Award for excellence in Public Administration and Management Sciences for the year 2001 from Lal Bahadur Sastry Institute of Management in New Delhi. A collection of speeches he had given in different occasions is published as a book *A Better India: A Better World*.

In his speech, Mr Murthy propounds the idea of community behaviour in the West. He contrasts and compares the phenomena in Europe with the life that he has been observing in India since his childhood. In doing so, he uses inspirational quotes to explain the matter in a better sense. As a thinker and visionary he instils a proverbial gravity and epigrammatic intensity in his speech.

Indians always put self and family interest before that of the community. Our wonderfully caring attitude towards our families is not reflected in our attitude towards our community behaviour. We have an apathy in addressing community matters. Indians suffer due to intellectual arrogance. It has not helped our society in any way. Narayana Murthy says that no other society

gloats so much about the past as we do and with little current accomplishment. If we have to progress, we have to change this attitude and learn from the people who are better than us. There is lack of accountability at every level of Indian bureaucracy and political system. In India the more 'important' you are, the 'less' answerable you become.

We look down on people doing menial jobs. There is no dignity of labour in India. We have a mind-set that respects only supposedly intellectual work. Indians ask favours from strangers without any hesitation. We become intimate without becoming friendly. Relations are given higher priority than merit in our country. We let our personal relations interfere with professional dealings. We are the most thin skinned society in the world. We see insults where none are meant. This may be because we were not free for most of the last thousand years. 'Indian Standard Time' is a sarcastic phrase famous world-wide as Indians do not follow it at all and which shows that we are time insensitive. Punctuality is not considered a virtue in India. Our lack of professionalism extends into our lack of sense of punctuality. In India, we are not supposed to think differently from our elders and bosses. This is by and large true. Though things are changing slowly, independent thinking is normally not encouraged in India. The last point Narayana Murthy mentions is that contractual agreements are not honoured. He closes his speech with a hope that we would stand as good examples of good people and great citizens for the next generation.

## CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**Answer the following questions in a line or two**

1. What is community?
2. Are the values discussed by Narayana Murthy new to India?
3. What is 'being apathetic to common good' ?
4. What is the primary difference between the West and us, according to the author?
5. What is the solution suggested by Dr K L Rao to solve the problem of drought in India?
6. Explain the terms 'professionalism' and 'meritocracy' in your own words.
7. What is intellectual honesty?
8. Fundamental social problems grow out of\_\_\_\_\_.
9. What do you understand by the term 'Indian Standard Time'?
10. What is culture, according to Henry Beecher?

**Answer the following in 10-15 lines each.**

1. Give a list of the lessons that Narayana Murthy feels we should learn from the West.
2. 'Our attitude towards family life is not reflected in our attitude towards community behaviour.' Explain this statement keeping in view the points made by Narayana Murthy in the essay 'Learning from the West'.



3. 'Indians become intimate even without being friendly.' Illustrate this statement with an example from Narayana Murthy's speech.
4. What is the point that Narayana Murthy wants to drive home when he quotes Henry Beecher? How did he conclude his speech?

## Annotations

Annotate the following in 10-15 lines each. A model annotation is given below

1. It is the protocol for behaviour that enhances the trust, confidence and commitment of members of the community. It goes beyond the domain of legality – it is about decent and desirable behaviour.

**Context :** The above line is taken from 'Learning from the West,' a speech delivered by NR Narayana Murthy when he received the Lal Bahadur Sastry National Award for excellence in Public Administration and Management Sciences for the year 2001 from Lal Bahadur Sastry Institute of Management in New Delhi.

**Explanation :** Mr Murthy explains that a community should have a set of values to progress. He says that people should accept modest sacrifices for the common good of the community. The community has to develop a value system in which the behaviour of the people should be in such a way that it intensifies and strengthens the trust, confidence and commitment of the members of the community. It cannot be implemented by rule of law. But such behaviour is desired by everyone in the community.

**General Relevance :** Narayana Murthy feels that every citizen of India should develop self-confidence, faith in his/her own ideas and hard working nature to make glorious India.

2. Unfortunately, our attitude towards family life is not reflected in our attitude towards community behaviour.
3. Meritocracy by definition means that we cannot let personal prejudices affect our evaluation of an individual's performance.
4. People that value its privileges above its principles soon lose both.

## SPEAKING SKILLS

### Inviting, accepting and refusing an invitation

In our daily life, we need to invite people to a party, a reception, a function, a wedding or a birthday. You need to know how to say that you will or will not be able to accept an invitation when someone invites you.