

The Search For Knowledge

INDIA?? You ask me which synonyms I relate spontaneously to India?? Let me tell you: Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Theresa and "Holy Cows" and yes, lately, also Nuclear Tests!

Thus didn't speak Nietzsche's Zarathustra, but one German gentleman – senior project manager of a multinational company – on the verge of doing business with Indian companies.

To be quite frank: the gentleman in question has excellent company! Before chancellor Schröder started the Green Card discussion at Cebit 2000, a vast majority of managers from the German business community would have answered roughly the same. Some may have added: tea; spices; Indira Gandhi; Taj Mahal; Maharajas; Hinduism; bathing in the river Ganges; women wearing Sari's; burning of widows; masses of poor people living in slums; British East-Indian Company; colonisation; Himalaya; Kashmir; Miss World; Software; maybe even the famous diamond "Kohinoor" or the novel "The Far Pavilions".

However: This example shows very much, which package of individual perception and prejudices we carry on our business way to India, and how little we actually know about India and it's people, not to talk about their business people!

Once there, you dive into a new world: You are stepping out of Bombay – sorry: Mumbai – Airport, it is hot. It is humid. There are masses of people all closely pressed together. There is a lot of noise. There is even more pollution. There are droves of beggars of all ages. Especially the children touch your heart – and also your purse. You have lots of people offering money exchange, taxis, hotels, you don't even care anymore, what else they offer. You see salvation in reaching your room at an international 5-Star Hotel. You don't want to think about tomorrow and your meetings with completely unknown Indians, which are supposed to be your future business partners, customers, suppliers – or even worse – employees. You don't want to ponder, that your career, a new job challenge or sheer necessity needs you to move to India for a number of days, weeks, month or years and you wonder how you will survive in such an environment. Your worst nightmares seem to come true – or are they?

You remember some information from your "Intercultural Training India", which you attended at Siemens before your departure. At the time, you didn't really believe what they were talking about: that your first impression – opposite to German believe – will not be the lasting one. That your Indian counterparts can't they "NO", but are likely to be honest. That during meetings or briefs, they will stand or sit in front of you, wagging their heads. That the many problems, German managers see waiting at every corner, can potentially be solved in some Indian way (at least many of them). That Indians are a proud and sensible people (yeah, you thought, Winnetou was also proud and sensible, but unfortunately he was a red-Indian, not the real thing!). That the first and foremost thing you need in India is patience and time! At the training, they even claimed, that with all the differences between

India/Indians and Germany/Germans there are not so many differences really. That you can do business with Indians just as you would do business with Germans! That was the most unbelievable statement in the whole 2 Training days!

You don't care to remember, that India (or what is considered India today) has a couple of thousands years more history than Germany. It's almost like when we were just out of our caves, the Indians were already writing in Sanskrit. If you see the chaos today, you can't believe anything could be achieved in India at all. At the training they were positive that you could overcome the few difference there are. The role-plays during the training where a surprise: you learnt how inventive/creative Indians could be in business life. How sensitive situations could be "de-fused". How you groom your business partners to send clear messages to you. Your trainers took special care, to work on these "few" but important differences. They pointed out, where the sensitive spots are in an Indian/German business relation. They trained you in yet further role-plays, how to handle these situations and how not to loose your face or make your business partner loose their face. They even tried to train you not to loose your patience!

One focus of the training was clearly, to compare the similarities and the sometimes diametrically opposite strategies in Indo-German business-relations. Further, some few rules what to do and what not to do in business, private or public. However, they couldn't even make out a simple list of do's and don'ts! That would make live so much easier – wouldn't it?

A few days or month into your stay in India, you realise that the Intercultural Training wasn't a waste of time after all. There was some merit in the role-plays and specific situation you play-acted during the training. You've encountered for sure most of the difficult situations mentioned during the training – and even if you didn't understand at the time, now you see the positive effect: While you hardly can't avoid such strange encounters, at least you've got a good idea, how to handle the individual situations. And one more thing came also true: Your first impression at Mumbai Airport wasn't the lasting one. As targeted during your training, you'd not only learnt, how to achieve your business goals in difficult environment or how to live a good life in India. You'd actually learnt to respect and appreciate your Indian counterparts – and isn't that, what Intercultural Training is all about?

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