Cultural diversity through Swami Vivekananda's eyes: 5C framework to cultural competence

Chandni Mehta

PhD Scholar, Faculty of Management Studies, Banasthali Vidyapeeth, New Delhi, India

*Corresponding Author:
Email: chandnimehta01@gmail.com

Abstract

Over past management research has positively identified benefits of cultural diversity and close integration on the organizational productivity. What we see lacking is emergence of contemporary Indian management ideas, framework and thought processes. Vivekananda was one of the first Indians with the ability to bridge Oriental and Western management philosophies, mold Vedanta within prevalent western beliefs. This trait of acknowledging innate diversity in the global world and yet finding common ground of brotherhood and humanity has been presented in a structured framework as part of this paper. We belief this framework has the potential to establish new paradigms of cultural acceptance and strengthen the increasingly globalized corporations.

Keywords: Cultural diversity, Contemporary Indian management, Universalism, Diversity, Integration.

Introduction

"The great lesson is, that unity is behind all. Call it God, Love, Spirit. Allah, Jehovah — it is the same unity that animates all life from the lowest animal to the noblest man." Swami Vivekananda (India's Mission, 1896).[1]

108 years before UNESCO recognized cultural diversity as "common heritage of humanity", a monk from India taught the world benefits of unity in diversity. His travels throughout India and across the world helped him see the common thread of humanity across all the cultures. When we go through his letters, speeches especially at World Parliament of Religions and articles we can see immense importance given to maintaining unity in diversity. A common recurrent theme in his talks cultural diversity in India and its management.

While in the modern management literature has been enriched by Hofstede's six dimensions of culture[2] which calculate distance between different cultures. By determining cultures as a collective conscience and a collective programming of mind Hofstede laid foundation for incorporating cultural diversity inside human resources management parlance. For example, using Hofstede's framework and calculating Power Distance Index we see that Latin countries (Guatemala: 95) have a higher score while European countries (Germany: 35) possess a lower score.[3] This points to more egalitarian society as a part of European countries. All these six dimensions enrich our ability to communicate across cultures.

However, we still lack a comprehensive framework or literature which incorporates very Indian point of view in understanding cultural diversity. We believe Vivekananda served an important position in Indian history where his call for spiritual excellence with scientific throughput enlightened masses and prepared us to look into dream of independent India.

His ideas were ahead of his time and remain relevant in post-independence society. We are still dealing with intra-religion differences, high rates of female feticide, growing intolerance in our society. And these issues sadly are also part of modern corporations which on a macro level resemble the society where they are based from. We now understand various dimensions of cultural diversity through Vivekananda's eyes using 5C framework (Fig. 1). Each element of this framework emphasizes important non-negotiable elements of cultural integration.
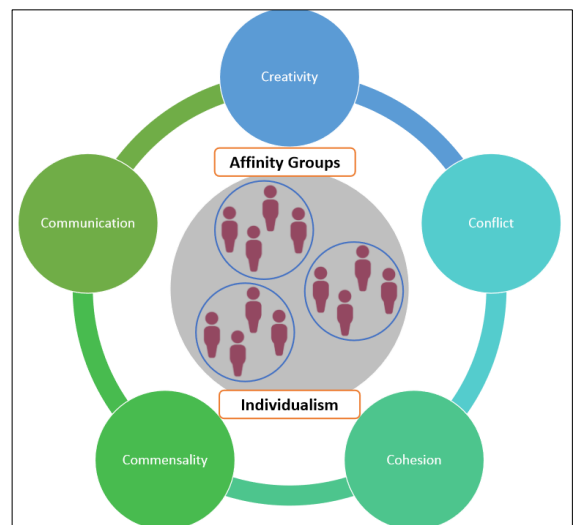
Fig. 1: 5C framework of cultural diversity

5C Framework of Cultural Diversity: We have meticulously gone through collections of his writings, letters, speeches and research papers to understand how Vivekananda embraces cultural diversity. Vivekananda

lived in a world where management as a theoretical practice and area of research had not started. But his ideas were way ahead of his time and are still relevant in the current corporate culture. In retrospective analysis we see five key areas of cultural integrity emerging from his thoughts.

Commensality

The Merriam Webster dictionary online (2017) defines commensality as the practice of eating together. In fact, this application of commensality is seen in the Sikhism in the practice of langars "the great open kitchen for all". However, in the management parlance we can define Commensality as the practice of blending all the resources in an Open environment. Today, presence of Open source IT platforms stands proof of commensality where engineers throughout the world lend their expertise to each other.

Margaret Elizabeth Noble, an Irish aristocrat who we fondly know as Sister Nivedita was a living example of practice of Commensality. In his own word Vivekananda said, "There is but one basis of wellbeing, social, political or spiritual to know that I and my brother are one. This is true for all countries and all people".[4]

Vivekananda's ideas of Universalism, brotherhood and common thread across all human beings resonate deeply for today's successful corporations. Despite the large differences that exists across employee's organizations can benefit by adopting commensality as a necessary practice. Developing commensality is based on common approach of mutual respect.

This points out to a strong need for human resource professionals to organize events that promote Commensality. Feeling of oneness and common cultural heritage can build one organization with distinct ethos. Different functions, departments and teams need to come together to create a medley of strong idea; idea of their own organization. This is especially relevant in a country like India where we have employees from diverse cultural backgrounds, regions, religions and languages. With more and more global organizations adopting India as their base for Global Delivery Centers (GDC's) specially for IT, Finance and other specialized knowledge work it is imperative that we consider Commensality. Own up Commensality as a KPI for HR and organizational growth measurement by tying it up to various events, small and big developing oneness among all employees.

Communication

Being a prolific orator and effective communicator Vivekananda could permeate his ideas and thoughts across worlds. American poet Harriet Munroe recognizes Vivekananda's eloquent expressing style at Parliament of Religions in her book, A Poet's Life:

"But the handsome monk in the orange robe gave us in perfect English a masterpiece. His personality, dominant, magnetic; his voice, rich as a bronze bell; the controlled fervor of his feeling; the beauty of his message to the Western world he was facing for the first time- these combined to give us a rare and perfect moment of supreme emotion. It was human eloquence at its highest pitch." (Chaudhari, 2011)[5]

But Oratory and public speeches are one of the important facets of Vivekananda's lucid conversation style. His written communication skills and ability to add emotions to the words through his letters to his disciples and known associates tremendously contributed in his success to spread Vedanta philosophy. Here, it is crucial to mention that he was completed devoted in his belief in Vedanta philosophy and its relevance in modern, contemporary India. It is this belief this gave rise to conviction so necessary for anyone to champion the cause they stand for.

Vivekananda's ability to organize people and provide them with clear directions is a much-needed quality in any leader. In a letter to Alasinga dated 31 August 1894 he writes, "Now organize a little society. You will have to take charge of the whole movement, not as a leader, but as a servant. Do you know, the least show of leading destroys everything by rousing jealousy? (LSV, Vol1).[6]

If a leader can himself influence strong communicators and figures like Mahatama Gandhi, Jamsethji Tata among others there must be presence of special ability. However, this ability only well-tempered with championing of cause leads to most brilliant communicators. It is imperative that organization identifies best communicators across small zones in its premises. They need not necessarily be the team leaders or managers but can be any employee who like Vivekananda can champion the organizational cause. While, communication in majority Indian organizations have followed a Top-Down approach but now time is ripe to experiment with Bottoms-Up and Hybrid communication styles. Bring forth excellent communicators, groom them to take mantle of leadership and take their organizations forward with them.

Creativity

Woodman (1993) (cited in Taha V et al, p.9) defines organizational creativity as "the creation of a valuable, useful new product, service, idea, procedure, or process by individuals working together in a complex social system".[7] New paradigms emerge only when we open ourselves to new ideas, new way of working and strike off old ways. Swami Vivekananda was one of the few leaders who dreamt of new idea with philosophical bent of mind tinkered with modern scientific notions of western world.

With reference to ideal environment, he shared with his devotees:

"Let us now go to work, mix the nations up together and let the new nation come.

Aryan civilization has been of three types: the Roman, the Greek, and the Hindu. The roman type is the type of organization, conquest, steadiness- but lacking in emotional nature, appreciation of beauty and the higher emotions. Its defect is cruelty. The Greek is essentially enthusiastic for the beautiful, but frivolous and has a tendency to become immoral. The Hindu type is essentially metaphysical and religious, but lacking in all the elements of organization and work.

Each type has its advantage in this new land of promise. They have the Roman organization, the power of the Greek's wonderful love for the beautiful and the Hindu's backbone of religion and love of God. Mix these up together and bring in the new civilization." (CW, Vol 9)[8]

Put simply Vivekananda was exhorting his disciples in taking best of each civilization that we have encountered. Then, synthesize a new Indian civilization from it. From an organizational perspective this is very relevant teaching.

Today's corporations need to be relevant to future generations and this can only happen if they are open to new ways of working, new communications styles and emerging products and ideas. In other words, be Creative.

To promote a creativity oriented culture there are two important components:

A. **Intrinsic Component:** These include working at a micro level to ensure freedom and complete respect to individuals. Incorporate democratic exchange of ideas within an organization and open new fronts for the talented individuals

B. **Extrinsic Component:** Set-up workshops, programs, design thinking weeks & high-tea sessions to promote flow of ideas across the organization.

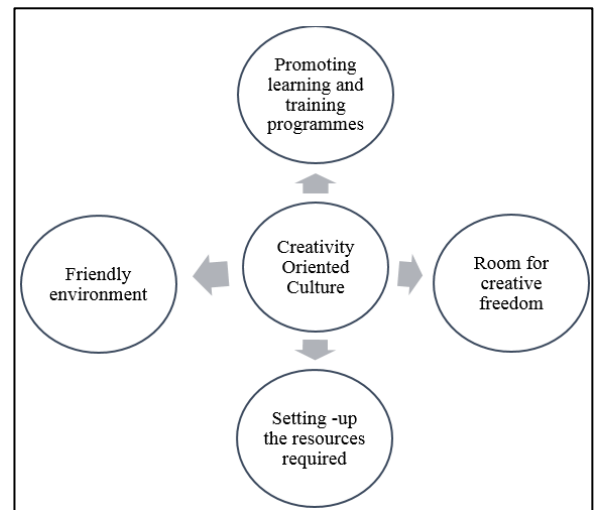We map out a highly Creativity oriented culture (Fig. 2)

Fig. 2: Creativity oriented culture

Conflict Management

Thomas (2005) (cited in Omisore & Abidoun 2014) defines conflict as a "disagreement in opinions between people or groups, due to differences in attitudes, beliefs, values or needs. In the business world, differences in such characteristics as work experience, personality, peer group, environment and situation, all lead to difference in personal attitudes, beliefs, values or needs."[9]

Conflict arises whenever an Individual faces differences of opinion within immediate surrounding environment. These differences of opinions can exist at two levels;
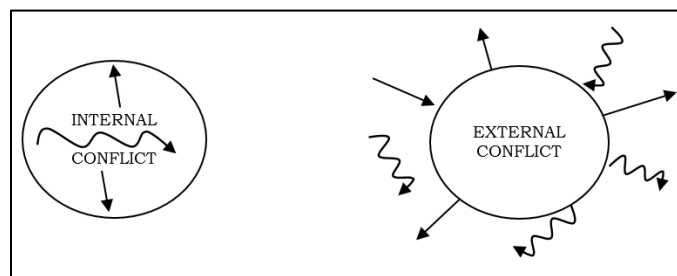
A. **Internal Conflict:** Often arises due to contrasting views or opinions co-existing and clarity of thought evades in a situation. The area of clarity of thought and mind through self-control infact serves as one of the central themes in Indian philosophy as seen in Bhagwad Gita. Swami Vivekananda was very mindful towards internal conflict, when one sees differences between Karma and Dharma. Drawing his intellect from such erudite sources Vivekananda stressed on purity of mind. He was instrumental in setting up Raja Yoga classes in New York to practice Yama, to purify the mind of his disciples.

B. **External Conflict:** External conflicts derived out of differences of opinion, practices, religion, caste, creed and numerous factors todays are the biggest source of threat to any societies future. While addressing the audience in a Raja Yoga class he shared, "Different races take to different processes of controlling nature. Just as in the same society some individuals want to control the external nature, and others the internal, so, among races,

some want to control the external nature, and others the internal. Some say that by controlling internal nature we control everything. Others that by controlling external nature we control everything. Carried to the extreme both are right, because in nature there is no such division as internal or external. These are fictitious limitations that never existed. The externalists and the internalists are destined to meet at the same point, when both reach the extreme of their knowledge. Just as a physicist, when he pushes his knowledge to its limits, finds it melting away into metaphysics, so a metaphysician will find that what he calls mind and matter are but apparent distinctions, the reality being One." (CW: Vol 1)[10] Organizations need to aware about situations where conflict can arise and deal with them effectively. Devise steps, procedures, policies and processes to tackle and avoid any external conflicts.

Cohesion

McCracken (1998) conceptualized social cohesion as characteristics of a society dealing with the connections and relations between individuals, groups, and territorial units. Participation of all and inclusiveness among all citizens are the hallmarks of a highly cohesive society.[11] This inclusion is driven through financial inclusion such as access to banking network, social inclusion with positive affirmation and societal inclusion through adoption of one law and one constitution for all.

Swami Vivekananda directed his disciple Swami Sadanand to open a relief centre where poor and distressed people will be served and nursed irrespective of their colour and creed (Talks with Swami Vivekananda, 2009).[12] One of such institution that we see serving the cause of humanity is Belur Math under Ramakrishna Mission. His idea and the one for any egalitarian society should be based on creating a common platform for all which reaches even the most neglected and downtrodden.

Cohesion when built and sustained in any society has most far reaching beneficial effects as it uplifts the powerless and minimizes the distortion in its structures. It is this cohesion, strong bond which is also part of any strong organization. Any country on the path of development must distribute the fruits of development to all similarly organizations have the responsibility to take all its employees ahead.

When asked about the goal of Ramakrishna Mission, Vivekananda replied to one of his disciples, "Well, of course. But then this Math that we are building will harmonize all creeds, all standpoints. Just as Sri Ramakrishna held highly liberal views, this Math, too, will be a center for propagating similar ideas. The blazing lights of universal harmony that will emanate from here will flood the whole world".[13]

This example tells us how much Vivekananda gave due respect to Cohesion and its impact in developing society. Human resources professional specially need to be aware about the impact of cohesion on their teams. Develop constant touch based programs to facilitate cohesion. Team off sites and activities are one of the source to draw cohesion out but efforts should be consistent and regular.

Conclusion

Two important frameworks exist today in Management theory to understand cultural diversity among nations and people. But, these two frameworks are based on Western philosophical understanding and basis of classifying people. We lack a robust framework for assessing and acting towards incorporating cultural diversity in Indian corporations based on our own unique bent of mind and philosophical richness. It is here that Swami Vivekananda fills the gap with his thoughts, ideas and actions. We have merely interpreted, analyzed his ideas and actions in a structural manner through literature research and paper reviews. All the dense analysis has given rise to this 5C Framework of cultural diversity with Vivekananda's thinking process woven in and elaborated with suitable examples. Hopefully, it will add to native Indian management approaches suitable for our emerging global organizations to incorporate among themselves and take benefit from cultural diversity.

References

1. Swami Vivekananda, The Complete Works. Vol. V, Page 192.
2. Hofstede, G. (n.d). The 6-D model of national culture. Available at: <https://geerthofstede.com/> [Accessed on 18th July 2018]
3. Hofstede. G (n.d) The Six dimensions of national culture Available at: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/> [Accessed on 6th July 2018]
4. Prasad, Bhaiya. S. (1999). The Socio-Political Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda. Universal Publishing.com pp. 132.
5. Chaudhari, Asim. (2011). *Vivekananda A Born Leader*. Kolkata: Adavita Asrama. pp. 120-121.
6. *Talks with Swami Vivekananda*. (2009). Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama. Fifteenth Impression. pp. 90, 128-129, 130.
7. Taha V, Ali., M. Sirková & M. Ferencová. Impact of organizational culture on creativity and innovation. *Polish Journal of Management Studies.* 2016;14 (1):7-17.
8. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. (2009). Mayavati Memorial Edition. Volume Nine: 7th ed. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama. pp. 206.
9. Omisore, B.O & Abiodun, AR 'Organizational Conflicts: Causes, Effects and Remedies' International Journal of Academic Research in Economics and Management Sciences, Nov 2014, Vol.3, No.6, Available at: <http://hrmars.com/hrmars_papers/Organizational_Conflicts_Causes,_Effects_and_Remedies.pdf>
10. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Mayavati Memorial Edition. Volume One: 27th ed. (2009). pp 133
11. McCracken M 'Social Cohesion and Macroeconomic Performance' CSLS Conference on the State of Living

Standards and the Quality of Life in Canada, Ottawa,
Canada, Session 5' [Accessed on 2nd July 2018],
Available at: http://www.csls.ca/events/oct98/mccr.pdf

12. *Talks with Swami Vivekananda.* (2009). Kolkata: Advaita
Ashrama. Fifteenth Impression. pp. 90, 128-129, 130.

13. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Mayavati
Memorial Edition. Volume Seven: 12th ed. (2008).
pp.113.