



Work sheet

Cross Cultural Conflict and Collective Identities, a case study written by Jasmin Mahadevan, Hochschule Pforzheim Germany (used by permission)

Read the case study and based on a culture reflexive analysis discuss solutions to solve the conflict.

The Company is based in Germany and has about 35.000 employees worldwide. It has a new site in India and knowledge needs to be transferred from Germany to India.

The cross-site work between Germany and India was regarded as not hindered by culture. “We do not have cross-cultural issues, we are all engineers” was a common saying. Indian culture, for example, was described as ‘rich’, ‘colourful’, ‘fascinating’, ‘contradicting’ and ‘intriguing’ by non-Indian engineers who had visited the Indian site. In general, fascination and willingness to learn more was expressed. Hinduism as the dominating Indian religion was described as ‘peaceful’, ‘an old religion’, ‘colourful’ and ‘fascinating’. Indian engineers were intrigued by German traditions such as Easter egg hunts and decorating a Christmas tree. During lunch and coffee-breaks, Hindu and Christian religious rituals and traditions were a common topic. When visiting the other site, engineers frequently visited temples, churches and monasteries, being guided by their local colleagues. Yet, descriptions of culture were always accompanied by the assertion that culture was a category outside engineering practice. German engineers often talked about the Indian colleagues saying: “When they are here, they are just engineers. It is India that is different.”

One aspect of ‘Indianness’, however, seemed to be perceived as a negative national culture-specific category inside work, hence contradicting the established discourses of

'we are all engineers'. It was called 'this vegetarianism at the Indian site'. It was almost as if vegetarianism seemed to encompass something profoundly alien, endangering, aggressive.

At the Indian site, employees were mainly Hindu. Among the Indian Hindu engineers, being vegetarian can be interpreted as following the Hindu ideal of purity (Explanation: in many schools of Hinduism, the act of consuming food itself is perceived to be impure as the (dirty) outer world now enters the (to be purified) inner body).

However Indian engineers would regard Indian culture as a concept beyond engineering. One Indian engineer coined this belief as follows: "We are all engineers. We are not limited by Indian tradition." The corresponding opinion of the German engineers was: "Tradition is a good thing – but do they [the Indians] have to limit themselves that much?!" To him, 'vegetarianism' is a limitation, a not exploring of all possibilities. From the experienced engineers' perspective, the learners' repetition of a counter-engineering practice might therefore signal resistance against becoming an engineer. The adherence to strict rules might also signal a spirit that is not free and does not explore all possibilities and therefore might not be able to perform as well as an engineer. This resulted in a lack of trust towards the Indian engineers.

Sources:

Jasmin Mahadevan 2011. Are engineers religious? An interpretative approach to cross-cultural conflict and collective identities. In: *International Journal of Cross Cultural management*. 12(1) pp. 133-149

Jasmin Mahadevan 2015. Caste, purity, and female dress in IT India: Embodied norm violation as reflexive ethnographic practice. In: *Culture and Organization*, Vol. 21 (5) pp. 366-385; DOI: [10.1080/14759551.2015.1062012](https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2015.1062012)

