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**TIME PAST, TIME PRESENT, TIME
FUTURE:
THE CASE OF INDIA POST**

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores competing views of the organisational future within India Post, and the potential of its employees to meet that future, drawing on an organisational case study. Two frameworks of time are used to illuminate the respective discussions: linear or non-linear time; and time orientation to the past, present or future. There were four principal findings. First, there was contradictory evidence about attitudes towards time indicated in the literature. Second, time was intimately involved with recruitment and promotion processes, interacting with ethnicity and gender. Third, time orientation was the most significant framework illuminating differing views about optimum future strategy. Fourth, different views demonstrated the plurivocality of the organisation.

INTRODUCTION¹

The aims of this study were: first, a general exploration of Indian attitudes towards time, using a case study of India Post; second the influence of time on work, career paths and the organisational future; and third, the use of metaphor to illuminate the significance of clusters of beliefs about the organisational future, linked to time orientations to the past, present or future. The paper starts by reviewing concepts of time, and then links these to cultural influences within the Indian workplace. Case study findings follow, divided into time and work, time and career, and time and change. Attitudes prevalent within the organisation are discussed in metaphorical terms before summarising and concluding.

CONCEPTS OF TIME

This section will first explore conceptions of time, and second relate them to cultural and societal contexts. Ancona et al (2001a) undertook a comprehensive review of the literature in relation to time. Of the many aspects they discuss, two will be of interest in this paper: first, linear time as opposed to non-linear time; and second, temporal orientation, that is, emphasis on the past, present or future (Ancona et al, 2001a).

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Time may be perceived as linear time or non-linear time, and the latter may be subdivided again into polychronic time, cyclical time, or timelessness. Sometimes these latter categories are conflated, but distinctions will be made here. People brought up within a developed economy often assume that time is a linear progression (Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 1997). Ideas of advancement of depend upon this assumption. Time may consequently be perceived as a commodity that must be used, wasted or saved, which gives rise to the oft repeated phrase 'time is money'. Linear time implies attachment to activity, results and outcomes (Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 1997) and opportunities within linear time may be seen as once and for all (Lewis, 1996).

The first non-linear conception of time may be described as multi-stranded, rather than single-stranded. This way of understanding time is the distinction between monochronic versus polychronic (or synchronic) time (Bluedorn et al., 1992, Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 1997). Put simply, monochronic time can be conceived as a single layered, whereas polychronic time is multi-layered. Monochronic individuals divide their time into segments, so that it is scheduled and compartmentalised, making it possible for the individual to concentrate on one thing at a time, whereas polychronic people happily undertake two to three tasks at once (Hall, 1983).

Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (1997) suggested that a synchronic approach is likely to be associated also with what they describe as communitarian and particularist cultures; these are respectively societies

where there is more emphasis on the group than on the individual, and where relationships and particular circumstances predominate over the universal application of abstract societal codes. They further suggest that promotion in synchronic cultures is more likely to depend on relationships with a superior than performance (Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 1997).

Another way of characterising time is cyclical (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961). A cyclical conception of time gives a sense of repetition and renewal, and opportunities are seen as probably arising again (Lewis, 1996). Instead of people being constrained by time, they adapt to it (Lewis, 1996).

Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (1997) suggest that people who conceive of time as cyclical put more emphasis on relationships. Mazzoleni (1987) asserts that cyclical models of time are associated with mythical time, whereas linear models of time relate to historical time, and therefore movement towards linear time may be seen as a process of modernisation. This emphasises the notion of time as a social construction, but also as a social constraint (Segre, 2000). It is suggested that cyclical time is generally found in Eastern/Southern societies (Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 1997)

The last conception of time proposed here is timelessness, which is not commented upon as such in the literature. This is different however to the other categorisations of non-linear time. Where timelessness prevails, the passage of time may simply be unremarked and undifferentiated. It can be

understood as living in the present, but without awareness or consciousness of this.

It is clear then that there is no simple binary opposite to linear time. Having delineated these conceptions of time, they should be seen as a tendency for some people at some time in particular circumstances, which may vary depending on what they are considering, and will be influenced by the cultural context. They are potential frameworks, rather than fixed mental categories. For instance individuals may conceptualise their lifetime as linear, but in an everyday sense perceive life as cyclical (Alheit,1994).

Some notion of the passage of time is necessary for the conceptualisation of time orientation, the tendency to give greater importance to the past, present or future (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961, Waller et al, 2001, Ancona et al, 2001a). Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) suggest that individuals with a past orientation are concerned to keep and nurture tradition. Time orientation is said to differ significantly between different societies and Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (1997) suggest that orientation towards the past is more likely to be found in Eastern/Southern countries. Waller et al (2001) suggest that those who focus on the present time see little connection between activities undertaken today and future goals. Therefore they are likely to be off-hand in relation to deadlines, negative about forward planning, lose track of time, but on the other hand are less risk averse and more impulsive (Waller et al, 2001). Individuals who focus on future time have the belief that current

activity will result in achieving goals in the future, and therefore they are goal orientated individuals, working with long planning horizons, and keeping time, for instance clock watching (Waller et al, 2001). Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (1997) submit that orientations towards the future are found in Western/Northern countries.

Waller et al (2001) point out that individuals with orientations respectively towards the present and future tend to come into conflict; future orientated individuals are seen as demanding and unreasonable, whereas present orientated individuals are perceived as lazy and unorganised, by their respective counterparts, which has an effect on teamwork. Curiously they do not comment on conflict between individuals with orientations towards the past, and other orientations. It is suggested that the present shapes interpretations of the past and future (Flaherty and Fine, 2001).

However, like linear or non-linear time, the relative emphasis on orientation towards the past, present and future may also vary between individuals in the same country. Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (1997) report on work by Cottle (1967) in which he asked respondents from different countries to draw the past, present and future as circles, arranged in any way they liked and altering the size as they wished. It was found that both relative size and the degree of overlap varied between and, more importantly for the purposes of this paper, within countries. Certainly Waller et al (2001) suggest that individual time orientation is influenced by cultural/societal factors as well as

more personalised experiences such as family background or work experience.

Making linkages between the first and second categorisations of time discussed here, Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (1997) suggest a causal chain is more likely to be perceived between past and present in sequentially organised cultures, that is, those with a linear view of time. They also suggest links between time orientation and the way businesses are run in different countries; where the past is important and overlaps the present, ascription is likely to be more important than achievement, thus bolstering traditional authority (Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 1997).

In discussing categorisations of time, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) were at pains to stress that all aspects of categorisations are present at all times in every society; however in each society or cultural subgroup there will be a tendency for certain values or attitudes to predominate.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN THE INDIAN WORKPLACE²

Approaches to work, employment and management in India are affected by various cultural influences. These will be discussed in turn, followed by suggested implications for attitudes towards time.

² Some of this section draws on Wilson E. M.: *Managing Diversity: Caste and Gender Issues in Organizations in India* (forthcoming) in Davidson M. and Fielden S.(eds) *Individual Psychology and Diversity in Organizations*, Wiley

Domestic systems are influential in relation to everyday life. Traditionally the joint or extended family has defined its members' roles, and is run by paternal authority, which has been criticised as inducing infantile behaviour in other adults (Sahay and Walsham, 1997). Thus respect is given to older people, and merit as a system for promotion within organisations is still questioned, with a preference for seniority rather than competence (Star of Mysore, 1998). The respect accorded to experience gained over time suggests a focus on linear time, which in turn becomes ascriptive. A tendency towards linear time may also be extrapolated from the national/political system, which adopted socialism and self-reliance after Independence (Sahay and Walsham, 1997), and embarked upon a series of 5 year plans. Self-sufficient economic policies were cast aside under liberalisation in 1992 and the consequent pressures of globalisation, replaced by modernist influences in relation to Western managerial practice, but still maintaining an expectation of (linear) progress.

Evidence from Indian religious traditions suggests that time is cyclical for Hindus, conceived as a wheel moving through enormous cycles of creation and destruction (Waterstone, 2002). However other religious influences suggest timelessness; for instance, Buddhists and Jains conceive that time has no beginning and no end (Waterstone, 2002). Sahay and Walsham (1997) suggest that the religious system leads to a rejection of time and chronology, and in every Indian spiritual tradition there is the aim of transcending time (Waterstone, 2002), which can be construed as timelessness. Similarly, Sahay

and Walsham (1997) suggest that in India time is not perceived in a linear fashion, pointing to the intellectual system, which entails a rejection of rationality and logic in the thinking of most Indians (Sahay and Walsham, 1997). Chapman and Saxena (1990) suggest that scientism and spiritualism can coexist. Singh (1990, cited by Sahay and Walsham, 1997) suggests that Indian managers can live with uncertainty, do not value time, and deal with every day as it comes. This suggests aspects of both timelessness and polychronic time.

Indians tend to have strong beliefs in essentialism, that people are born to their estate in life. Caste, tribal origin and gender may be perceived in this way (Srinivas, 1996, Nabar, 1995). Status is generally ascriptive (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997) within Indian society, with importance placed on social relationships and high status in society (Frazee, 1998). Thus there has been a tendency to value education and good jobs for their ascriptive and instrumental value, not merely for their intrinsic interest or worth.

Essentialist and ascriptive beliefs may be viewed as a further example of timelessness.

In relation to time orientation, previous research is contradictory. Using Cottle's (1967, cited in Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 1997) circular representations for present, past and future, Indian respondents indicated the present as slightly more important than the past. Both were more important than the future, with time periods adjacent but not overlapping as in some

other countries (Cottle, 1967, cited in Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 1997). This is countered by other assertions that there is a significant orientation towards the past (Sahay and Walsham, 1997).

The principal social, and hence workforce, difference that distinguishes India from other countries is the caste system. Caste is a hierarchical social system, determined by birth, and distinguished principally by marriage within one's one caste, and rules about physical and social contact with other castes (Dube, 1996). The categorisation of groups by themselves and others often differs (Unnithan, 1994), and Shah (1996) suggests that all one can state with certainty is that Brahmins are at the top of the system and Dalits, formerly known as untouchables are at the bottom. In the past, and more persistently in rural areas, caste determined occupation but increasing urbanisation has weakened this link considerably (Shah, 1996), as have government policies. The influence of caste is pervasive, and it has been suggested that it leads to attitudes of fatalism and determinism, with the locus of control perceived as located outside the individual (Frazee, 1998). It is helpful to understand the concept of karma, which among other meanings can be understood as 'the law of cause and effect'. It assumes every action by an individual has an inevitable outcome, for good or evil, and that the benefit of these accumulate and influence the current and later lives. Karma can be conceived of in three ways: the karma of the past that has influenced our current position, the karma we are creating in the moment, and the karma that will influence our future. Karma therefore has connotations of progress (between lives), but also

fatalism. Caste is regarded as the outcome of past karma. However the determinism implied is weakening; class used to be an outcome of caste, but has become increasingly differentiated from it as a response to education, industrialisation and urbanisation. As an essentialist and ascriptive belief, it was suggested above that caste may be linked to timelessness. However from another point of view it could be seen as supporting a linear view of time because of the belief that the past influences the present.

Indian culture has a deeply gendered nature, a gender gap remaining in relation to female education, employment, and per capita income (Hindu, 2001). Women are both idealised as devoted and self-effacing, whilst sometimes being viewed as rebels (Forbes, 1996). Essentialist thinking links current day norms and roles for women to legendary figures in Indian scriptures and literature to an extent that cannot be understood in Western cultures (Nabar, 1995). This can be seen as an outcome of both the religious and domestic joint family systems, and is another instance where the past heavily influences the present.

Finally, Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (1997) suggest that India has a short future time horizon relative to most other countries.

The evidence discussed above suggests a mixed picture in relation to categorisations of time. There is evidence of adherence to linear time, but this is countered by traditional notions of cyclical time and timelessness, with

some suggestions of polychronic time. The past and present are probably not as clearly delineated from each other as in some other cultures, with modernist ideas of future progress co-existing with determinist ideas of karma. It seems likely therefore that there may be variations in attitudes towards both linear and non-linear time, and time orientation, and that these may be found within and between individuals.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology (Wilson, 1997), replicates that used previously by the researcher in the UK and a case study in the Indian private sector, as follows:

1. Literature searches were undertaken in both the UK and India.
2. Individual interviews were undertaken with 10 employees, respectively selected to represent a cross section of male and female employees. The repertory grid method was used focusing on first, how employees advanced within the organisation, that is what underlies selection and promotion processes; and second, individuals' concept of a good manager. This promoted discussion of the organisation and how it is run.
3. A group workshop (Schein, 1992) was held with three women and three men. Although there is evidence that women in mixed groups contribute differently quantitatively (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1993), and qualitatively (Blanksby, 1988) two out of the three women present were very vocal.
4. Relevant organisational documents were perused (Schein, 1992, Forster, 1994).

5. Discussions were held with suitable informants to check perceptions and observations.
6. There was thematic and interpretative exploration of the empirical material supported by QSR NUD*IST. An interpretive approach was used for the analysis of empirical material, with thematic analysis drawing on both a priori and emergent categories (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Although the original focus of the research was to look at gender and difference in organisational India, the topics explored in this paper emerged during the interview process. Ancona et al (2001b) suggest that applying a temporal lens to research is a new way of understanding organisational phenomena, but that there may be difficulties incorporating it into research design implementation. They suggest experimenting by using new methods of data collection and analysis (Ancona et al, 2001b). Time orientation is usually referred to as individually based (Ancona et al, 2001a) or societal (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961), but in this case study it was examined at the organisational and subcultural level.
7. The metaphors used to frame discussion in this paper were originated by the author, and presented in a feedback session to interviewees and colleagues at the principal investigation site. Links were made between the metaphors and issues of time and time orientation, as discussed below, and these were accepted and elaborated by those present. The findings can therefore be taken as a credible (rather than a 'valid') interpretation (Janesick, 2000), dealing appropriately with the methodological problem of

assessing time orientation, which is both unobservable and subjective (Eberle, 1992).

Limitations of the methodology are as follows:

1. Given the size of India, and the size of India Post, it would have been extremely expensive in terms of time and money to have attempted to interview a stratified, or even reasonably representative, sample of employees. Most of the employees came from, and were working in, one South Indian city/region. This will have influenced not only opinions, but also their selection of material and presentation of themselves and the organisation, as there are said to be significant educational and cultural differences between South and North India. However, to counter this a few of the senior managers had served in other parts of India.
2. In addition, although I asked to interview a cross-section of employees, these were selected for me. One source of bias was the fact that a number of respondents had been closely associated with some of the innovations discussed in the findings section, and so may have been more predisposed to organisational change.
3. As a foreign researcher I may have missed some cultural nuances, and misread others. There are particular postcolonial resonances in a British researcher working in India. These are acknowledged here but not discussed in this paper.

FINDINGS

The Postal Service within India was set up during the time of the British Raj, and is the largest postal service in the world. Since Independence in 1947 it has been one of the recognised All India Services, part of the civil service run by the government of India rather than by individual states. It is therefore subject to central government rules and regulations, and still significantly administered from New Delhi. It is now branded as India Post.

Time and work

As the largest postal service in the world, unsurprisingly India Post was a bureaucracy, with cumbersome operational procedures seemingly inherited from colonial times. There were comments from managers that much of the work was mind-numbingly boring. The departmental manual referred to training learners in handwriting, although calculators and latterly computers were starting to be provided. Although inspectors did sample checking on audit inspections, on an everyday basis everything was double-checked. On querying the necessity, it was stated:

'Too much checking prescribed - I'm very sorry but it is the British system'. (female manager)

This may be seen as an attachment to the past. Chapman and Saxena (1990) suggest that the Indian public sector is process rather than goal orientated.

On the other hand old-fashioned working methods may be the outcome of the lack of resources rather than attachment to unnecessary bureaucracy.

Time was intrinsically connected with the work of India Post. Delivering an individual letter was a linear activity, but cumulatively every 24 hours there was a cycle of collections, deliveries and opening hours, which had to be scheduled and rostered. This affected the employment conditions, particularly of some part time, ancillary staff in rural areas, as their hours of employment were dependent on when deliveries arrived for sorting and distribution. Some branches opened at 7 a.m. and some branches opened late, as it depended on the movement of mail. Split shifts and unsocial hours could be demanded of full time officers, for which lieu time was said to be difficult to arrange. Another cyclical event was the monsoon, for which special arrangements were detailed in the departmental manual.

Gender was interwoven with time, because of the demands of the work. One officer told me that it was difficult to be a married woman in the Post Office, because of early opening, late finishing, and split shifts. Protective legislation meant that where female employees undertook evening or night duties, a ladies toilet and a separate dining-room had to be available. This view was put more robustly by a middle manager:

'by sex itself they got constraints'.

He said both that women could not stay late, because their husbands would not permit it, and also that they would not want to do it anyway. It appeared that up to the time of the case study, rosters had taken account of these sensibilities. This intrusion of family into work expectations indicates division of time into acceptable and not acceptable. It could also be seen as an orientation towards the past (women's overarching duty towards the family) versus an orientation towards the present (women in the workforce). This is similar to, and perhaps an outcome of, Sahay and Watson's (1997) observation that male managers have different value systems at home and work.

Time and career

Discussions about the appointment and promotion systems within the organisation (Table 1) revealed a complicated, hierarchical organisational structure. There were basically three major groupings of employees.

Table 1: Entry points and promotion paths in India Post

Secretary/Director General/ Chairman of Postal Board	Promotion by seniority and CR (confidential report) No reservation <i>men and women</i>
Directorate, Delhi - members of Postal Board	Ditto
Senior Postmaster General, Head of postal services for a state (senior admin grade)	Ditto
Director (junior admin grade)	Ditto
Senior superintendent of post offices A (senior time scale)	Ditto

UPSC (Union Public Service Commission) selection (general exam, interview and specialist exam), age limit 28, reservation applies. Can be directed to serve anywhere in India.	
Senior superintendent of post offices A	Gazetted
Superintendent of post offices B	Gazetted. After this may be directed to serve in anywhere in India. Promotion by seniority, but 25% of vacancies filled by exam (assistant superintendents and senior clerks can take)
Assistant superintendent of post offices C	Promotion by seniority. Posted within own state.
Inspector C	<i>Men and women, mostly men</i>
Inspectors exam - unreserved and reserved quota, merit list applies. Age limit 40 and 5 years service. Starting in 2001 33% of positions will be reserved for direct graduate entry by exam.	
Senior clerk = postmaster C	
Office assistants C	Office based
Postal assistants C	Office based
Sorting assistants C	Office based
Clerk selection - test and interview for outside applicants with minimum PUC (graduates also apply) Existing staff (group D plus postmen) take separate test, no educational qualification requirement Small % reserved for extra departmental agents with PUC at level of lowest mark of outside applicants <i>men and women, women starting to exceed men in some southern states</i>	
Postmen - between groups C and D	<i>Men and women, mostly men</i>
Postman exam - English and local language. Group D employees and extra departmental agents have access to internal promotion route.	
Extra departmental postmasters, postmen, and packers <i>men and women</i>	Do group D job part time. No pension or benefits
Extra departmental agents	Standard 8 required. If senior enough can become Group D Work 3-5 hours per day
Gardeners D <i>men</i>	Appointments via the employment exchanges. Applicants register their name and are sent for job according to seniority of registration, providing they meet the eligibility criteria. From these candidates the PO selects. Rs 4-5000 per month, plus pension and benefits.
Peons/attendants D <i>men and women</i>	
Chowdikar (gatekeeper/security) D <i>men</i>	
Cleaners, scavengers D <i>men and women</i>	Same application procedure, pay and benefits as above, but only the lowest castes apply for these posts

First there were those who had passed the all India Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) assessment process, which selected an elite group of administrators for all the All India Services, only a few hundred per year. After joint training at the civil service training college at Mussorie, they were posted directly into senior management grades (group A), from where they could progress to the top of the service. The second broad grouping were those who entered as clerks (group C), a small number of whom took and passed the selection process for inspector; they were unable to rise above senior superintendent (group B). The third group was less well-educated, and performed routine white-collar and blue-collar jobs (group D). Postmen and women were situated between groups C and D. As indicated in Table 1, despite various internal promotion routes there were some insurmountable barriers between grades.

Linear time was a crucial determinant of career paths. Every four years employees were normally posted to another working unit. After placement within a particular grade, promotion was according to seniority, with a special terminology: 'time bound promotion'. Clerks, for instance, could expect promotion after 16 and 26 years. The (slow) passage of time was thus equated with (useful) experience.

'Senior to me is experience. What you lack in merit you make up in experience' (female senior manager)

The advantage of seniority is that no one could do anything against you ... the element of subjectivity is not there (male clerk)

Time bound promotion was however amended for those in reserved categories. One of the major legacies of the British was the reservation system operational throughout the public sector, a form of affirmative action rigidly enforced by quotas. Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are legally defined, and deemed to constitute 22.5% of the population (Monappa, 1997) with an additional category of Other Backward Classes, increasing the proportion of reserved places to 49.5% (Upadhyaya, 1998). Reservation also applies to people with disabilities, ex-servicemen, and meritorious sportsmen and sportswomen. There have been serious criticisms: first, of the methods used to identify castes (Radhakrishnan, 1996, Shah, 1996a); second, of the use of caste and tribe as markers (Hindu, 1999a); and third, of the hijacking of the system by more economically advanced segments of scheduled categories, known as 'creamy layers', families and groups who have already benefited substantially (Sivaramayya, 1996, Hindu, 1999b). Concerns have also been expressed about the effect on efficiency (Shah 1996b). However, perhaps one of the worst outcomes of the system is that it satisfies no-one.

As a consequence of reservation, at each entry or boundary point between grades, there were two streams under consideration: first the general 'merit' (competitively successful) stream; and second those in reserved categories, who effectively formed a separate merit stream. As well as quota allocations for reserved groups, they could also benefit from relaxed age limits, and amended entry and promotion requirements (Muthuswamy, 2002). Thus speed of progress up the organisation was partly contingent on ethnicity. There were very mixed accounts of the success of reservation, which echoed those in the literature (e.g. Srinivas, 1996); some respondents viewed it as a moral necessity, and others a disregard of competence. There were additional critical comments about the 'creamy layers' (senior manager), and continuing social stigma (manager in a reserved category).

Gender also had an insidious effect on career paths. Women were freely joining at the clerical grade, and numbers were increasing among the elite top managers.

'Women employees have opportunities - it's not like in olden days'
(female clerk).

In terms of proportional representation women formed an 'M' shaped curve, clustered at clerk level and increasingly at the top. However both men and women stated that women were less likely to take the inspectors exam, because postings out of their home area could not be reconciled with their

domestic responsibilities. Although some women might make this choice, it was suggested to me that some husbands would not allow it. This is despite the fact that married women were often sympathetically dealt with in postings (which some men were starting to question). Women's marital and domestic responsibilities were described as follows:

'Many ladies make many sacrifices to stay in a marriage' (female inspector)

'Bringing up children and cooking is even now done by ladies' (male officer)

However, there were some exceptions. One female manager said that her husband gives their children their evening meal and takes them to their Hindi class, and a middle manager told me that as his wife was employed, he therefore helped with the housework. In general it was suggested that there was a clash of expectation between the demands of the job (linear time) and customary expectations (time orientation towards the past) or between productive and reproductive time.

For the UPSC cadre there was a departmental promotion committee. For a short period in 2000-1 this allowed people with merit to supersede colleagues. Only one woman, but many men, were selected for accelerated promotion. A senior manager commented that selection had been 'purely subjective',

influenced by contact with politicians, and bribery, the response to which has been a return to promotion by seniority.

In relation to progression within the organisation, there were elements that derived from India Post's place in the public sector that were no longer seen in the UK, for instance, uniformity of grading systems between services, and the use of the quasi-military term 'gazetted' for senior officers. The civil service was said to be invariant to the extent that personnel rules applied to all services, and it was a commercial proposition to publish a book, *Swamy's Guide* (Muthuswamy, 2002) summarising these. There was an expectation that India Post would continue to provide employment for large numbers of lower rank employees whom the government would not make redundant because of fear of union backlash. This appeared to be partly a legacy of the many years of socialism, and also a paternalistic example of welfarism.

When discussing employees' progression within India Post the importance of the past became evident as a significant factor in career trajectories. In analysing the constructs about career success, the majority of interviewees considered past life experiences hugely influential in determining not only the initial entry point to the organisation, but also possibilities for promotion:

'The son of a labourer will be brought up as a labourer and he will die as a labourer' (middle manager).

It was explained that this was because a poor and illiterate labourer had inadequate means to develop his children. As a result, personal background such as an urban upbringing, or good schooling, were thought to be influential, but the most important determinants were considered to be whether one were a graduate, and in particular whether one had passed the UPSC selection process, or the inspectors' exam. For instance it was said by a middle manager of someone who had passed the UPSC:

'(People like this) can directly jump to the highest level because they have a very good backup from the family.'

Chapman and Saxena (1990) suggest that there is over-reliance on education rather than competence in the public sector. Whilst the promotion system was transparent, it was strongly expressed by some that competence, not seniority, should be the principal criterion.

Hard work gets you nowhere (female manager)

The less said much the better ... promotion avenues (are) very pathetic ...not commensurate with work and responsibility (male manager)

all people are treated alike - efficient and inefficient - and promotion is only on timescale (male clerk)

The selection and promotion system appeared to engender a rather deterministic mindset. For instance, near the bottom of the organisation there was the large group of group D employees. They had completed standard 10, the secondary school leaving certificate stage, and were employed generally in simple clerical jobs, such as selling stamps. One female manager stated that it was:

'always useful to have someone to do things'

and therefore she did not think that they would be phased out. Some interviewees appeared to consider that group D employees could never be developed, despite the fact that there were internal career routes open to them. One senior manager said that when the educated India has no more answers, then he or she falls back on karma. The suggestion that attitudes to group D employees could be linked to cultural ideas about karma was accepted at a feedback presentation. The attitudes to group Ds were the counterpart of the view that favourable past circumstances determined an advantageous career path.

Despite this, there were some indications of a more meritocratic approach to promotion and appointment. In relation to skills, there was one area that many India Post employees were quite certain would make a difference in the future: IT skills, both hardware and software. A female clerk told me that one

of the successful applicants for an IT R&D centre had already completed some relevant qualifications privately and had previously developed a customer care programme in an operational posting. It appeared that commercial necessity might force premium pay for IT staff, as a few had gone to better jobs in the public and private sectors. Only in this area, and in selection for training centres, were the normal 'posting' rules breached. These were however somewhat marginal. A more mainstream innovation due to come on stream was the selection of 33% of inspectors via an external competitive exam, to increase the pool of talent. Within the Indian public sector context, this may be judged an orientation towards the future.

In relation to human resource management and development, India Post appeared to have no specialised strategy or function, most procedures being dealt with under general administration. Chapman and Saxena (1990) state that personnel policies, inherited from colonial rule, make no link between recruitment, training and promotion. For instance the workshop participants indicated that the Annual Confidential Review (appraisal) system was used negatively rather than positively in relation to postings. In addition it was said that when deciding future postings managers did not have the time to go into the merits of each person, as the task was too massive. Postings were seen as an administrative necessity rather than a developmental opportunity. It was also pointed out that there was no systematic HRD within IP. Apart from specialist training centres, there were no personnel and training

specialists, and these serve one or two postings before returning to operational posts.

In summary, despite the strong linear influence on careers, the considerable time orientation towards the past significantly influenced attitudes towards employee capabilities and possible development.

Time and change

Like public services in other countries, India Post found itself in an increasingly turbulent and complex environment. According to respondents, three major forces could be identified. First, there was the onslaught of information and communication technologies. Businesses were finding that it was quicker, cheaper, and allegedly more reliable to use e-mail and fax rather than the postal service. Second, despite a legal monopoly on the right to deliver mail, courier services were cherry picking bulk deliveries between major towns and cities, as they claimed to be delivering documents rather than letters. Third, like all Government of India services, India Post was subject to government policy. It was thus required to contract the number of employees, year-on-year. Some respondents gave the impression of India Post being at the mercy of dynamic and uncontrollable forces. Thus, India Post seemed to be at a turning point in its history, with confusion about which business or industry it was in: mail delivery, the communications industry, and also secondary banking services.

On the one hand there was evidence of some attitudes that envisaged little change. One respondent stated that in relation to recent concerns that had been expressed about the competitive environment, the director-general of India Post had said reassuringly that India Post had always been there, and always would be, and that reports of its imminent demise had always been erroneous. More negatively, another interviewee claimed that people at the top did not want change. Some respondents described colleagues as rule bound:

They will never see men behind ... rules are for man, man is not for rules. (male clerk)

There was however contrary evidence in relation to attitudes. Among a number of employees, not only managers, there was evidence of what has been termed New Public Management (McCourt and Minogue, 2001). Senior managers talked positively in terms of the future and change, and were well acquainted with Western managerial discourses and espoused values of customer service, which were exemplified by the prominently displayed statement in the entrance hall of one building:

The mission of the Post is to provide high quality mail, parcel and related services in India and throughout the world; to be recognised as an efficient and excellent organisation exceeding the expectations of the customers, employees and the society...

There were also a number of examples of innovation described. The most important of these was the development of integrated software, a proprietary programme known as Meghdoot, for the delivery of a wide range of post and related services, which was being exported to other countries, for instance Bhutan, Uzbekistan, and Mauritius (India Post website, 2002). Interestingly, the work was originally contracted to private companies, but they kept failing, allegedly because they did not understand the business. One enterprising manager volunteered to take it on, and the internal facility he developed had become recognised as the premier R&D centre for software. It was anticipated however that this development would lead to a drastic reduction of personnel, and some staff and union resistance had already emerged at the implementation stage. Nevertheless there had been a proposal to convert all post offices into Internet cafes, and a pilot introducing e-mail to rural areas commenced shortly after the case study (Tripathi, 2001). This IT enabled reform is similar to the positive integration approach identified by Heeks (2000).

Because of threats to their core business, there were continuing efforts to diversify the business of India Post, and it was undertaking monetary transactions, accepting deposits on behalf of government agencies and financial institutions, including transferring money from abroad through the Western Union. A series of reports in *The Times of India* (e.g. 2001, 2002)

indicated a number of these initiatives around and after the time of the case study.

A third area of innovation described was a response to the limited organisational training capacity. A senior manager said that staff could be trained approximately once in 30 years, given existing capacity. A training centre had therefore made a new comprehensive proposal for distance learning to the Directorate (in Delhi), the vision for which was said to come jointly from the director and staff. The intention was to prepare standardised packages for each programme (Postal Training Centre, 2002).

Rules were set out for the delegation of decisions, but this was an area where one manager was described by two of his staff as pushing the limits. A deputy to the manager described how they had a division of responsibility but often acted in the other's place. He deputised totally in the absence of his superior and had autonomy to take action for the good of the institution. An employee at a more junior level expressed his job satisfaction with his delegated responsibilities thus:

'Here I am given independent charge. No one will question me. For buying these routine things no one will give permission ... He makes me feel he is totally depending on me ... I feel responsible to complete the task'.

In the same facility a clerk commented on the flexibility that had developed:

the division of labour is not strictly followed here.

The manager who had encouraged these developments considered that a healthy work culture had evolved in his unit, stating that:

(Employees have) tasted the advantage in working with better understanding ... I believe in institution building, not in some kind of individual development.

His view of teamwork was that employees at all levels can make a contribution:

'Never the top man who makes a difference in society'.

Nevertheless there were elements of traditional hierarchical expectations within this facility, for instance in the deployment of 'peons'. Officially called 'attendants' and part of the Group D ranks, peons ran errands all day long. It was quite common in the middle of an interview for a peon to enter, place documents for perusal in front of the person being interviewed, await a signature, and depart. Vestiges of hierarchy were also evident in separate toilet provision for senior managers and others. These observations show the influence of attitudes from the past.

To summarise, this section has indicated conflicts between orientations towards the past, present and future.

METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

As mentioned above, India Post seemed to be at a turning point in its history. Interviewees' attitudes varied from complacent to proactive, and views of the organisation could be couched in terms of New Public Management, or refer to an immovable bureaucracy, as indicated above. Having undertaken to report back to the organisation, the problem was how to encapsulate and conveyed these contradictory understandings. To characterise different views that could be identified about the future of India Post, use was made of the metaphors of elephant, hyena, and bird of prey, with respective foci on time orientation towards the past, present and future. Of course, like all metaphors they can conceal as well as elucidate (Morgan, 1997) and although presented as three separate scenarios were more intertwined in reality. These metaphors can be seen in tabular form in Table 2.

Table 2: Metaphors of organisational futures

	Elephant	Hyena	Bird of prey
Time orientation	Past predominantly	Present and near future	Future, anchored in present
Business	Mail delivery, secondary banking	Some mail delivery	Communications, 'one-stop shop'
Culture	Role culture, bureaucracy	Person culture?	Task culture, targeted

Speed	Slow	Variable, erratic	Fast and sure
Attitude (to change)	Complacent, inactive	Concerned, reactive, <i>does not make first move</i>	Aggressive/proactive
Geographical focus	Geographical coverage	Geographical pickings	Geographical selection/variation?
Employment policy	Job for life	Flexible hours	Slimline organisation (not all will survive)
Knowledge management	Hidden wisdom	Fragmented wisdom	Technological superiority
Operational focus	Process	[shifting?]	Results
Vision	Reflection of past	Sequential focus on different topics	'Helicopter' vision
Use of resources	Consuming lots of resources	Wasteful use of resources	Selective use of resources
	<i>White elephant</i>		

Notes used for the feedback presentation to India Post staff at South Indian City, on 17.11.01, and amended in the light of discussion. Italics indicate comments made at presentation

The first metaphor was the elephant, where the focus of the business appeared to be on mail delivery and secondary banking. Its speed would be slow and ponderous. Time orientation, although ostensibly within the present, would be significantly influenced by the past, and bureaucratic attitudes and rules and regulations would be important, with the acceptance of a hierarchical role culture, and an operational focus on process. The attitude towards change could therefore be described as complacent and inactive. The director-general's attitude towards India Post mentioned above is indicative of this viewpoint. It would be assumed that India Post would continue to provide universal geographical coverage for mail services, and in addition a job for life for staff. If like the elephant it would never forget, then some of this wisdom could be hidden, or perhaps just out of date. There

would be no particular vision, just a reflection of the past. It was suggested by attendees at the feedback session that in addition it could be seen as a white elephant, and that it would consume lots of resources. The elephant could be seen as reassuring, strong and positive for those who adhered to this viewpoint. However its detractors saw it as oversized, cumbersome and out of date.

The second metaphor is the hyena, and this is the most negative metaphor, as India Post would be seen as dependent on the decisions of others. Its speed would be variable, even erratic. Time orientation would be primarily in the present or the near future, but relatively unfocused and unanchored. The business would be conceived as mail delivery, after cherry picking had been undertaken by commercial predators and alternative communication systems. The culture would be primarily reactive; comments at the feedback presentation suggested that the hyena did not make the first move. Geographical focus would therefore be relegated to the leftovers from others. In a decimated organisation, those left might work flexible, unpredictable hours, and organisational wisdom would be fragmented. There would be no specific operational focus because of sequential attention given to different activities, and therefore probably a wasteful use of resources. This was a point of view that could be inferred rather than heard, representing the fears of those who were aware of difficulties ahead but could not see how they could be countered.

The third metaphor was the bird of prey, chosen because of its ability to rise above current concerns and take in a broader picture, commonly known as helicopter vision. It would fly fast and sure. Here the business would be conceived primarily as communications, utilising new technology, particularly proprietary programmes, to create a series of 'one-stop shops'. This was an aggressive, proactive response to change, envisaging geographical selection and possibly variation, with selective use of resources. Knowledge management would be enabled by technological superiority in a results-focused task culture. Whilst anchored in the present, its adherents were firmly focused on the future. This would demand a slimline organisation. This was the view of the modernisers, but rejected as a fantasy by others.

These metaphors were discussed and accepted as conflicting views current in the organisation at the feedback presentation. Those present also accepted that when talking about the organisation and talking about its employees there was a disjuncture between time orientations focusing respectively on the future and the past. On the one hand when talking about the role and business of the organisation respondents were anchored in the present and looking towards the future (bird of prey). On the other hand, when talking about employees and career paths, there was a deterministic attitude that relied heavily on the past (elephant). This has implications for the future of India Post, which were acknowledged by those present.

CONCLUSION

There are four main conclusions that can be drawn from this paper.

First, some of the cultural tendencies associated with attitudes to time presaged in the literature were apparent in the case study. There was evidence of linear time in the delivery of mail and consequent attachments to activity and results. It could also be seen in forward planning that took place on both an operational and strategic level. The importance of relationships within cultures tending to polychronic use of time was implicitly acknowledged in the rigid rules about career postings, time bound promotion, and the rules against out of turn promotion. However although cyclical time was evident, it did not appear significantly more important than linear time, and time and work was not really noteworthy in this study. It is important to notice that different elements were co-existent in the case study, and that therefore no uniform culturalist explanation can be applied. In discussing time and India, one should therefore avoid what has been described elsewhere as 'sophisticated stereotyping' (Osland and Bird, 2000).

Second, time was intimately involved with recruitment and promotion processes to a degree perhaps not seen in other countries. The passage of time determined both entry and cut-off points for competitive exams for entry into particular grades, and also predetermined promotions after prescribed

time periods. There were interactions between time and ethnicity, and time and gender in relation to promotional paths.

Third, time orientation was the most significant framework in understanding cross-cutting views within the organisation about its optimum future strategy, as illustrated in the metaphors discussed above. The importance of the past could be seen in the respondents' emphasis on past life events determining career possibilities, and the importance of seniority. The ossification of class distinctions through reservation, and the preservation of hierarchy, could also be seen as elements tending to an orientation towards the past. An orientation towards the present could be seen in the relative complacency conveyed by some respondents about the increasingly competitive organisational environment. It may however be a misunderstanding to attribute comments about the lack of incentive to work hard as evidence of this orientation, as it could equally be a response to the rigid promotion rules. An orientation towards the future could be seen in all those managers and employees who talked positively about future developments, and how India Post could engage proactively with the challenges it faces. Long planning horizons and innovation were evidence of this.

Fourth, these were not however three discreet views. Not only were aspects found in the same organisation and same facility, they could also be found in the same person. Boje (1995) writes about story plurivocality, and this was evident in India Post. The attempts by the director-general to impose a

universal, hegemonic account of India Post was clearly disrupted within the organisation as other voices emerged; stories of the past were being displaced by stories of disaster and innovation. The use of animal metaphors to some extent meets criticisms that mechanistic and organic metaphors are unhelpful (Boje, 1995), as animals are sentient beings, but the choice could be criticised as anthropomorphic. They were chosen intuitively for an Indian audience by the author, and appeared helpful in conveying the plurivocality of India Post to some of its employees. In terms of discourse, the elephant metaphor can be understood as representing a post-colonial discourse, using the term in a temporal as well as critical sense. The hyena represents the dark side of liberalisation of economic policy in India, whereas the bird of prey is an optimistic, modernist response to globalisation and the development of information and communication technologies.

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