



Towards mentoring the Indian organizational woman: Propositions, considerations, and first steps

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ABSTRACT

The globalized Indian economy creates employment opportunity for educated Indian women and increases gender diversity in Indian Enterprises (IEs). Increased gender diversity presents myriad challenges for integrating women into the managerial ranks of IEs. We highlight these challenges, offer propositions on the Indian culture, the status of women within IEs, and formal mentoring as a human resource development initiative. Further, we use social identity theory as a lens for understanding these challenges, and integrate knowledge from the Western literature on mentoring women. We conclude by suggesting first steps for developing formal mentoring programs aimed at the Indian organizational woman.

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1. Introduction

Globalization and its resultant economic reform in the early 1990s have spawned macro and micro level changes in the Indian economy. A hallmark characteristic of these changes is that the Indian business environment is more competitive and more diverse. This competitive environment has created a need for a highly qualified workforce that includes the participation of educated urban women in greater numbers (Budhwar & Boyne, 2004). This paper addresses the issue of educated urban women's participation in the Indian workforce by focusing on their human resource development (HRD) needs. HRD consists of organizationally sponsored educational and developmental activities aimed at improving employee performance and personal growth. Our specific focus is on formal mentoring, an HRD initiative proven to be helpful in facilitating the personal and professional socialization of women and minorities in the Western organizations; particularly in the United States. Indian women by virtue of their demographic characteristic represent diversity and minority status in Indian enterprises (IEs). This gender diversification of IEs presents an HRD opportunity for IEs to achieve vertical integration of their human resources. By vertical integration of human resources, we mean incorporating and combining the talents of both men and women for the sole purpose of producing outputs in

the most effective and efficient manner. A hallmark characteristic of vertical integration in this instance is that women may come to hold positions in every structural level of IEs. Vertical integration can only occur if these new women entrants are socialized to IEs. Socialization is the process where an employee learns to appreciate the values; social knowledge, expected behaviors and abilities for participating as an organizational member and functioning in organizational roles (Louis, 1980). The diversification and subsequent vertical integration of women into the professional workforce associated with IEs can be viewed as a positive development because IEs are transforming from an essentially male-dominated manifestation to a post globalization state where educated urban women are now a source of diversity. We define the professional workforce in IEs as comprised of individuals with a minimum of a baccalaureate degree and additional professional degrees such as Master of Business Administration (MBA).

For purposes of this paper, we delimit our discussion of diversity to the observable characteristic of gender within IEs. Further, we contextualize our discussion of gender by focusing on formal mentoring as an HRD process for socializing and vertically integrating Indian women into IEs. We use research and scholarly literature on mentoring as a repository of knowledge and guidance for how formal mentoring could be used to achieve vertical integration. We acknowledge that organizational mentoring in all its manifestations is largely a phenomenon practiced and studied in the West and/or western-styled organizations located in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. However, this acknowledgement underscores the reality that not enough is known about mentoring in IEs and virtually little to nothing is known about mentoring the Indian organizational woman. Given this reality, and acting in the spirit of

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boundaryless organizational learning, we make the following propositions: (1) Indian culture as reflected within organizations and their sub-cultures invariably impacts women and cross-gender relationships in IEs; (2) the Indian woman's role has progressed from that of a daughter, mother, and wife to now include that of a professional; however, the patriarchic culture in IEs may hinder a woman's progression through the leadership/managerial ranks; (3) Formal mentoring programs can help the Indian organizational woman to become a mentor and a protégé and progress through the leadership/managerial ranks in IEs; and (4) Social Identity theory and the constructs of diversity and inclusion can aid the vertical integration of women into IEs. These propositions are anchored in the domain of organizational development (OD). Bennis (1969) describes OD as a response to change using a complex strategy for changing organizational values, beliefs, attitudes and structures so that they can adapt to change.

We begin our discussion at a macro level by focusing on the Indian culture. We then refine our focus to a discussion of the culture within IEs. This discussion concludes with a statement characterizing the status of the Indian organizational woman. Next, we address organizational mentoring using gender as a lens to conduct a focused review of the mentoring literature. We then use social identity theory; the constructs of diversity and inclusion as an explanatory base for understanding gender differences within the mentoring literature and extend this understanding to IEs. We conclude the paper by proposing first steps for OD/HRD interventions aimed at maximizing the effectiveness of formal mentoring programs directed at the Indian organizational woman.

2. The Indian culture

Researchers and practitioners should recognize and account for the important role culture plays at both the macro and the micro levels of Indian society. The patriarchic culture and gender stereotypes in IEs can be explained by the social role theory. Social role theory suggests that individuals are expected to behave in accordance with culturally defined gender roles (Eagly, 1978). Cultural perceptions about gender differences define how Indian men and women are expected to behave in organizations. Further, these differences create inequalities between men and women in terms of power and prestige.

Women in India have always been subjected to a paradoxical status. Women are regarded with high respect in Indian mythological scriptures. Most of the deities worshipped in India are goddesses. However, Indian women have always been subjugated by men and relegated to subordinate roles in the society (Nath, 2000). Indian societal norms have restricted women's role to that of daughter, wife, and mother. Women working outside home have been considered unfavorably by a majority in the society. According to Bandyopadhyay (2000), women are groomed to be submissive in Indian society and such patriarchal attitudes towards women still prevail in contemporary Indian families.

Historically, Indian society regards men as assertive, physically stronger and thus, well suited for the task of the bread earner in the family. In contrast, women are perceived to be humble, docile and best suited for care giving roles and household chores in the family (Budhwar & Sparrow, 2002). These cultural stereotypes about gender roles have characterized the organizational culture in IEs for many decades. Gendered organizational cultures have encouraged social biases against women and prohibited women's career progression keeping the employment of women in managerial positions at lower levels in IEs (Budhwar, Saini, & Bhatnagar, 2005). As a result, women have been restricted to administrative jobs at junior/lower levels and to IEs belonging to the 'soft' industries such

as fashion, teaching and nursing (Budhwar et al., 2005; Gulhati, 1990). As noted by Gulhati (1990), the Indian woman's presence is much less felt in non-traditional professions such as law, medicine, engineering and corporate management.

A study by Gupta, Koshal, and Koshal (1998) further found that Indian men feel comfortable supervising women instead of being subordinates to them. Indian male traditional beliefs permeate the boundaries between their personal and their professional lives. They fail to accept women in leadership roles at work as they have never seen their mothers, wives and daughters play dominating roles in their families. These cultural beliefs predispose Indian men to underestimate women's business skills. They perceive women's sensitivity to human relations as a weakness instead of strength when it comes to making objective business decisions. They believe that women need to forego their feminine traits and act assertively in order to be successful in leadership positions in IEs (Gupta et al., 1998). These findings confirm the results of the study by Gulhati (1990) which found that men saw women as less qualified to hold managerial positions in organizations. It is quite evident that the patriarchic culture in Indian society has a strong influence on how the role of an ideal manager is defined in IEs. An ideal manager in an IE is perceived to be a firm, ambitious, and aggressive man and women are expected to take up subservient roles to him (Gulhati, 1990).

3. The Indian organizational woman

Parikh and Mahrukh (1999) has aptly traced the transformation of the Indian organizational woman from an enigmatic figure, covered in meters of fabric, to the contemporary educated, and accomplished professional who wears business suits and works alongside men in corporate offices. They present a panoramic view of the Indian woman in management from the 1950s to the new millennium and discuss five phases in the evolution of Indian organizational women.

3.1. The Indian organizational woman: 1950s

The first phase began in the 1950s when Indian women joined the workforce primarily to financially support their families due to the loss of a male family member. They shouldered dual responsibilities of caring for their families and being a professional. Their organizational roles however, were restricted to secretarial and administrative positions. Women, in order to get tasks accomplished often, resorted to using feminine social skills such as pleading, and cajoling. This confirmed and perpetuated traditional gender-stereotypes of women in submissive and marginal roles and inhibited women from being assertive about their career progression in IEs. In their personal lives, these women completed their familial duties of child rearing without any help from their husbands and their family members. They understood that working outside the home was a privilege granted to them by their families and this privilege could be taken away if they failed to complete their traditional duties of a mother and a wife. In summary, the primary duty of the Indian women in the 1950s was being a mother and a wife rather than that of a professional working woman.

3.2. The Indian organizational woman: 1960s–1970s

Unlike the previous decade, Indian women in the mid 1960s and 1970s had aspirations for a career in organizations and explored new roles that included leadership responsibilities. Naturally, these women worked longer hours and sought influence with management. However, they lacked female role models in organizations. They emulated successful men who prided them-

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