

Kaveri goes to Poland: navigating a cross-cultural encounter between India and Poland

Geert Hofstede has defined “culture” as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, 2001). Culture defines the way in which each one of us thinks and behaves. Today’s workplace is culturally diverse. This means that people have to work with others from different cultural backgrounds. These cross-cultural encounters can be very difficult to navigate. Several times such encounters may result in cultural misunderstandings. This can mar a business relationship.

When interacting with people from different cultures, it is important for each of us to understand about the other’s culture, which includes their beliefs, values and attitudes. It is important that we respect their ways and understand what might offend them. It is imperative that organizations are proactive in this respect. This will help them to navigate a cross-cultural encounter with ease.

This case narrates a cross-cultural encounter between two people from two different cultural backgrounds, one from India and the other from Poland. It describes the various cultural gaffes that happen when they meet. This leaves the two people feeling offended that the other did not respect their culture. This jeopardizes the business relationship that they are meaning to start and casts a shadow over their partnership.



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The case writer(s) Neetu Ganapathy, Associate Professor - Systems, may be reached at neetug@sdmimd.ac.in Author(s) have prepared this case as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of the situation. This case is fictionalized and any resemblance to actual person or entities is coincidental. This publication may not be digitized, photocopied, or otherwise reproduced, posted, or transmitted, without the permission of SDMRCMS, SDMIMD, Mysore. For Teaching Notes please contact sdmrcms@sdmimd.ac.in.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Hofstede defined 6 cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001). They are:

Power distance

Power Distance is defined as *the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally* (Hofstede, 2001). In certain countries, the power distance is high while in others it is low.

As per research findings, India scores 77 on this dimension, while Poland scores 68. Both countries have a hierarchical society. Directions are given by the boss and followed by the subordinates. Subordinates look up to the boss for direction and the boss expects their loyalty. Communication is top down and generally feedback that is negative rarely travels to the boss. While this is more so in India, Poland is also not far behind. (Hofstede, n.d)

Individualism

Individualism is *the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members*. In certain societies, the individual is important and such societies are known as individualist societies. Here, the individual's achievements and success are given great importance. In other societies, the group is given importance and such a society is termed to be collectivist. Here, individuals are expected to act for the greater good of the group and not for themselves (Hofstede, 2001).

On this dimension, India has an intermediate score of 48 while Poland has a score of 60. Indian society is both collectivistic and individualistic. The collectivist side indicates that people like to belong to a group. Their family, colleagues, friends etc. influence the actions of individuals. The individualist aspect arises from the belief in religion. In Hindu philosophy, the cycle of birth and death and rebirth, is determined by how well an individual lived in his previous birth. Therefore, every individual is responsible for the way they live

their life. In contrast, Polish society is individualistic where the individual is responsible for their life and their decisions. (Hofstede, n.d)

Masculinity

Masculinity implies a society that lays great emphasis on achievement, success and competition. A feminine society emphasizes caring for others and having a good quality of life (Hofstede, 2001).

India scores 56 on this dimension while Poland scores 64. India is considered to be a Masculine society and a visual display of success and power are considered important here. But, India is also a spiritual country with many deities and various beliefs where humility is valued. Thus, it is not as Masculine as Poland where the focus is on success and achievements which are measured in terms of material gains (Hofstede, n.d).

Uncertainty avoidance

The dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance relates to the way that a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen? Different cultures deal with this in different ways. Some prefer to take things as they come and believe in destiny while others try to eliminate any uncertainty that exists (Hofstede, 2001).

India scores 40 on this dimension and Poland has a score of 93. In India, there is low preference for avoiding uncertainty. People are known to be tolerant and any change in plan is acceptable. People do not mind if someone comes late and believe that rules are meant to be circumvented. They also believe that most things are beyond their control as a supreme power controls everything. Poland has a very high preference for avoiding uncertainty. Thus, in Poland the rules are very strict and are followed. People there consider time to be money and are very punctual (Hofstede, n.d).

Long term orientation

This dimension describes how a society maintains its links with the past while preparing for the future. Some societies who have a low long term orientation score prefer to maintain their traditions and do not welcome change. Other societies who have a high score are more accepting of changes and give a lot of importance to education and consider it as a way to prepare for the future (Hofstede, 2001).

On this dimension, India scores a 51 and Poland scores a 38. India has an intermediate score which indicates that their tradition is dear to them but that they are also pragmatic. Indians have a great tolerance for religious beliefs from across the world. They are accepting of a lack of punctuality or change in a plan. Poland's low score indicates that they have a strong link with their traditions and do not like to deviate from them. They focus on achieving quick results (Hofstede, n.d).

Indulgence

This dimension is defined as *the extent to which people indulge their desires. If they give in to their desires with ease, it is called indulgence. If they control their desires, it is called restraint.* "Restraint". Cultures can, therefore, be described as Indulgent or Restrained (Hofstede, 2001).

India receives a low score of 26 on this dimension and Poland's score is 29. Thus, both cultures are that of restraint. In these societies, there is not much emphasis on leisure. They feel that indulgence is wrong and control their desires. Such societies have people who are highly pessimistic and cynical.

The opportunity

Kaveri Ponappa, the CEO of Kodagu Coffee and Spices, was in a pensive mood. As she looked out the window, she was wondering what to do. She had just received a mail from a Polish company, Mondelez Polska. The mail appreciated her efforts at building the company and for having

taken the company to great heights. Further, they sought her help to start a new line of business in Poland, that of coffee and spices.

In the mail, the Polish company had proposed that it was interested in buying coffee beans and spices from Kodagu Coffee and Spices. It also mentioned that Mondelez Polska was interested in setting up a coffee roasting plant in Poland and was looking for the expertise from Kaveri's company. It suggested a joint venture opportunity. In this context, she had been invited to Poland for further discussions.

About Kodagu Coffee and Spices

Kodagu Coffee and Spices was established in the year 2000 under the able leadership of Col. A. T. Ponappa, a retired Army Officer. Col. Ponappa belonged to Coorg, also known as Kodagu. Coorg is famous for its coffee and spices like pepper and cardamom. The company made a small beginning with just 8 people. They supplied coffee powder and whole spices to clients across Karnataka and were known for their quality. They were the only company, which sold coffee powder with an ISI¹ mark.

Since Col. Ponappa had his own estates, he sourced his coffee beans and spices from his own estates. With time, as demand grew, the company began sourcing the spices and the coffee from other estates in Coorg and Hassan. The best beans and spices were procured and processed at the plants in Coorg. German machines were brought in to process the coffee beans. The quality of the products was given top priority.

By the year 2010, the company had grown in size to 100 employees. Marketing offices were opened in many different cities in India with the head office in Bangalore. This was done to cater to the countrywide demand for coffee and spices. The company had begun exporting coffee to many foreign countries including Germany, Belgium and Spain.

In the same year, Col. Ponappa's daughter, Kaveri, who had completed

¹ ISI Mark: a certification for industrial products in India developed by the Bureau of Indian Standards.

her MBA and was working in an FMCG company for the last 5 years decided to join her Dad's business. She had a lot of plans to take their products to the world. She introduced many variants in coffee, which were popular in Europe. She had also taken the initiative to start exclusive cafes across India under the brand "Koorg Coffee". They had 9 cafes in India and all of them were running successfully.

Preparing for the meeting

When Kaveri had received the mail from Poland, she had been working on the launch of their 10th cafe in Bangalore. She had recently taken over as the CEO from her Dad. She decided to consult her father on the way forward and went to his office. Col. Ponappa was in the midst of a meeting with a customer and signaled her to wait.

At the end of the meeting, Kaveri briefed her father about the mail she had received. On hearing this Col. Ponappa was very happy. "Oh, that sounds like a great opportunity! We must make the most of it. Since you have to go next month, you better prepare for your meeting. Learn all you can about the company, the market for coffee and spices in Poland and about their culture." said Col. Ponappa.

Kaveri spent the next few weeks preparing for her trip to Poland. She learnt about the company and its market position. She found out details regarding the market for coffee and spices in Poland and its prices in the international market. She checked out how international transactions are carried out. She even considered how she would pitch the new variants of coffee that she had created.

She was going to meet the CEO of Mondelez Polska, Mr. Warclaw Skorupski. She learnt that he was in his 50s and was a shrewd businessperson. He had been with the company since 1989 and was at the helm of affairs since 2005. She prepared a presentation highlighting the achievements of Kodagu Coffee and Spices that she wished to share with the CEO of the Polish company. She also planned on the points she would use during the negotiations. With this, she was all set for the trip.

The meeting

Kaveri landed at the airport in Warsaw on a cold winter evening in December and checked into her hotel room. Her meeting with Mr. Skorupski was on the next day at 10:00 AM. She was very tired from the journey. After a quick dinner, she went to bed hoping to wake up early to prepare for the meeting.

On the next day, the day of the meeting, Mr. Skorupski reached the office at 8:45 AM and gave instructions to Ms. Maria, his secretary to prepare everything for the ensuing meeting with Ms. Ponappa from India. Ms. Maria made all arrangements and called Kaveri to let her know that a car was on its way to pick her up and would reach in 15 minutes. She informed her that it would take 25 minutes for her to travel from her hotel to their office.

It was 9:00 AM. The car would be here in 15 minutes. Kaveri was ready. But, she had not been prepared for the intense cold. Her jacket was not warm enough. She wanted to buy a new jacket before she left for the meeting. She stepped out of the hotel and went to the closest shopping mall to buy a jacket quickly. By the time she returned to the hotel, it was 10:30 AM and her pickup had been waiting for her. She left immediately.

At 9:45 AM Mr. Skorupski checked on the whereabouts of his guest and was informed that she was out shopping. When Kaveri arrived at the Mondelez office it was 11:00 AM. Ms. Maria received her and conducted her to the CEO's chamber. Kaveri walked in, introduced herself and extended her hand to Mr. Skorupski. He took her hand and kissed it. She felt awkward about it. She had not used her traditional greeting of 'Namaste' as she had believed that a handshake was universal. She apologized for being late. Mr. Skorupski says "It's ok."

Mr. Skorupski presents his card to Kaveri. Kaveri accepts it and puts it in her bag. She had forgotten to carry her visiting card and apologizes for not having carried her card. After a short conversation about her travel, Mr. Skorupski starts telling her about Poland and its history.

While he is very animated about it and talks passionately, she is unable to make sense of it and is unable to respond intelligently as she has very little knowledge on this subject.

Kaveri has carried a small crystal Ganesh as a gift for Mr. Skorupski. She tells him “Mr. Skorupski please accept a small gift. This is a crystal idol of Lord Ganesha, who we worship. This is a symbol of good luck.” Mr. Skorupski receives the gift and leaves it on the side table. Kaveri looks aghast. He gives Kaveri a gift, which is beautifully wrapped. She thanks him for it and places it in her bag.

Kaveri decides that now is the right time to talk about business. “I would like to tell you more about our company. I have prepared a small presentation that captures the essence of what we do. I want to present it to you.” she says. Mr. Skorupski suggests that they have lunch. “We’ve arranged for lunch in your honor. I would like you to meet the other members of our team.” he says. Kaveri is not very hungry and she is used to eating lunch at 1:30 PM and it is only 12:00 PM.

Mr. Skorupski takes Kaveri’s hand and leads her to a large dining room. Kaveri is not happy that he is holding her hand but she reluctantly follows him. In the room, 7 others join them. After a quick introduction, they sit down to an elaborate meal. Before the meal begins, wine is served. Kaveri doesn’t drink. Mr. Skorupski raises a toast to the relationship they are about to start. Everyone raises their glass. Kaveri doesn’t know what to do. She hesitantly takes a sip and smiles sheepishly at Mr. Skorupski.

The meal begins and Kaveri is served several dishes that she has never eaten before. One of the dishes looks strange. On asking, she learns that it is cold meat. “Cold cuts are part of our meal. Cold meat gives us heat.” says Mr. Skorupski. She finds it to be very bland. She is unable to eat it. She picks on her food while everyone else is enjoying his or her meal.

The next course also comprises of meat. Mr. Skorupski tells her that this dish is a favorite in Poland. “What is it made of?” she asks. “It is made of beef.” Says Mr. Skorupski. She is shocked and tells him that she doesn’t eat beef. Everyone looks surprised and cannot seem to understand what the fuss is about. Her plate is cleared and Mr. Skorupski apologizes.

The final course comprises of dessert that Kaveri relishes. “This is Sernik, a popular dessert made from cheese.” Says Mr. Skorupski. She takes a large helping and enjoys it. She notices all wine glasses being refilled. Mr. Skorupski notices that her glass has not been emptied. He can’t seem to understand why. He asks her if she would like to have some coffee. She refuses.

After lunch, Mr. Skorupski tells her that he has another engagement and excuses himself. Kaveri leaves for her hotel. During the meal, Kaveri had tried to talk about business several times. But each time she noticed that no one was interested. She is unable to make sense of this. She is also upset over the many aspects of her culture that her host had not understood. She wonders what she should do next. Should she stay and try to meet Mr. Skorupski again or should she return to India?

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