

MANAGING ONESELF IN ROLE IN THE *INDIAN CONTEXT*¹

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[*Journal of Indian Anthropological Society*, October, 2004]

ABSTRACT

The principal task of a manager is to provide and maintain boundaries, primarily of task, time and territories, and secondarily of many other resources, in such a way that those within the boundaries, including the managers themselves, can engage with the tasks of the system with least difficulty. Since every person manages some systemic tasks and relations, the concepts dealt with in this article are very real in most person's life. In order to manage systems and their boundaries, each person has to primarily manage oneself in one's various roles. This article focuses on some of the major socio-psychological processes present in India that each individual has to deal with in order to manage oneself in one's role.

Since this article is the revised version of a Convocation Address to postgraduate diploma holders in management, most of whom were going to take up the role of manager within a few days' or a few weeks' time, the subject chosen was managing oneself in one's role (Lawrence: 1979) in the *Indian context*. However, it is necessary to state, as succinctly as possible, my idea of what management is before dealing with the main focus of the article.

I have come to realise that basically the process of management consists of creating or providing, and maintaining, appropriate boundary conditions so that those within the boundary, including oneself, can engage with the primary task of the system. By primary task I mean that particular task which defines the meaning of the organisation, and unless that task is engaged with, the organisation will eventually cease to be.

A comparatively simple example would be the primary task of an airline. It could be stated as transforming would-be- customers into satisfied passengers as also conveying freight to its destination quickly and safely. The primary tasks of its sub-systems will have to be designed in such a way that all those contribute towards successful engagement with the primary task of the system as a whole.

The three most important boundary conditions are time, task and territory. These three are the most important resources for any kind of enterprise. Apart from these, there are a number of other obvious resources like personnel, technology, machinery, money, power etc. and not so obvious resources like skill and commitment to profession, values, attitudes and so on that people bring with them.

By maintaining boundary conditions I mean allowing only those transactions to take place across the boundary that are appropriate for engaging with the primary task as well as other ancillary tasks. For example, too much time allocated for a task takes that resource away from some other task and also creates a culture of laziness, while too little

time is likely to result in slipshod work; too little time also increases anxiety so that mistakes are likely to occur quite often. Providing and maintaining boundary conditions is a very challenging aspect of managerial function since the manager has to deal with pressures of all kinds of external forces that enter the system. Some of these pressures are overt and obvious, such as market conditions. However, some pressures that arise through assumptions that are either not clearly stated or that are not understood at all initially have to be surfaced by using diagnostic skill and only then dealt with.

Let us take the example of a hypothetical educational institution. I would articulate the primary task of an educational institution as engaging in activities that will create new knowledge, which in its turn can be transformed into wisdom by those engaged in the task. This would be a valid task for both students and teachers. If such a primary task is clearly held in the mind, one of the focus of the institution will be to make the students conscious of the fact that they are not raw material for transformation, like in a production line; they are in fact partners in participating in the task of the system. This could be a great motivator for the students to utilise all the resources for learning that the institution has on offer rather than develop a narrow focus for achieving good grades in the examinations. This would also make the teachers research and development oriented. The task of non-academic staff would be to support the academic system through their specialised interventions to facilitate engagement with the primary task.

However, let us imagine that a large number of students as well as many teachers in an academic institution have been brought up in families in which the value on education has been changed. Acquiring wisdom that one can utilise in all kinds of situations in one's life has lost its value for various reasons. What is valued in those families is getting good grades in class as some kind of a passport to enter jobs that will ensure survival in a turbulent world. The primary task of such an institution would then change, without anyone being aware of it, into a production centre for people with a huge amount of information. If that happened, the role of the students would then cease to be one of partner into one in which they would have to try to behave to the best of their ability as empty vessels in which information will be poured. The role of teachers in such a situation would be that of seeing to it that the students can get as much information as possible within the time available. Research would go down in priority to make time for accumulating more and more information produced by others. The educational institution then becomes a production centre for well-informed young people rather than a centre for development of knowledge and wisdom.

In fact this assumption is so strong in India that in my experience many educational institutions have indeed become production centres for well informed people. India has a large number of academic institutions for higher education. Many of those are also for technical and professional education. Yet the number of referred research papers that come out in international journals has extremely low Indian presence. The University Grants Commission too unconsciously colludes in this process. Money is available for holding seminars and conferences for developing new knowledge. But funds are almost routinely sanctioned rather late in the financial year so that academics get invited to participate with notice ranging from three months to sometimes three weeks. No one can

produce a paper of value from which other knowledgeable people in the same field can learn something unless one has a long notice.

My experience abroad has been of seminars, conferences and symposia invitations with one to two years' notice. So it is of no wonder that many Indians get international recognition for their contribution to knowledge only after they settle down abroad where the academic institutions by and large manage to keep their focus on the primary task of increasing knowledge and wisdom, whereby the students and teachers can also manage themselves in their role with comparative ease. Of course, we Indians are great in creating the illusion for ourselves that those ethnic Indians who take up foreign citizenship and make a name, even if they are born of people who left India several generations ago, somehow continue to remain Indians. This illusion is a defence against feeling ashamed about our poor performance and *not doing something about it*. Thus, for example, the Indian media continues to make great noise about V.S.Naipaul, the West Indian Nobel Prize winner in literature, even though for several generations his family have given up Indian citizenship, and for V.S.Naipaul India is an "area of darkness"!

The question that can be raised now is why such a shift in the primary task of academic institutions takes place. There can be quite a few reasons that could be researched and established (Chattopadhyay: 1989 & 1989a). I will choose here only one as an example of how roles get mismanaged and consequently the tasks get changed or corrupted.

Most parents try to bring up their children according to the prevalent cultural norm of their generation. Though as a result the norms get somewhat changed in every generation, a good deal of outdated continuity also exist. One of the characteristics of culture is that it sets boundaries on one's behaviour. As a result we all grow up with both conscious and unconscious assumptions about what are prescribed and proscribed behaviours, assumptions about "appropriate" values, attitudes etc.

An important example of an unconscious assumption would be the picture of authority that we tend to carry with us to whichever work organisation we join. In every organisation, all over the world, with only one tribe in North America (Miller: 1955) that has remained an exception, the belief is that authority is delegated from top downwards. Yet the reality is that when someone joins an organisation, she or he delegates a whole lot of one's personal authority upward by agreeing to follow the rules and norms of the organisation. So, to begin with, one delegates upwards one's personal authority over time, dress, location and many other activities over which that person had far more authority before joining work. The authority delegated upwards includes even that of getting sacked!

I was a professor in Indian Institute of Management Calcutta for almost three decades. During that period I have often felt amused at watching how unconsciously the students anticipate this when they present themselves at the campus interviews. While it seems that during two years of study they use their personal authority to the best of their ability to present themselves as ragamuffins who are doing their utmost to arrive in classroom as and when it suits them, the same young people suddenly become almost unrecognisable

ladies and gentlemen bedecked in beautiful saris and smart suits purposefully striding along to be on time for their job interviews. They have already begun to learn to modify the use of their personal authority at the assumed demand of people with greater systemic authority.

This reality of delegating one's authority upwards (Chattopadhyay and Malhotra: 1999) is almost universally denied because our first experience of authority takes place at home where we never got any opportunity to delegate any authority upwards. Our experience at home is that some role holders automatically get high authority or even absolute and unquestionable authority and they are known as parents. In many Indian homes the number is reduced to one and the father is experienced as an autocratic authority figure who has the last word on almost every issue – from the sublime to the utterly mundane, such as at what interval one has to have a hair cut! This gets recorded strongly in our unconscious. We carry this picture of institution in our unconscious and project it on all other institutions that we join in later life. There, if our power position is low, we accept orders from authority figures that are illegitimate in the sense that the order took for granted such authority as we had not delegated upwards, or such authority as have nothing to do with the task we are engaged in for which our service has been hired. We accept the order without thinking that it is illegitimate. We do that because we get out of touch with the reality that we had been initially required to delegate upwards some amount of our personal authority, which were expected to be task relevant.

A good example for understanding the relation between task and upward authority delegation will be the difference in authority delegation between the armed services and all other institutions. In the former one delegates upwards the authority over one's life and limbs. Therefore one cannot sue the armed forces for exposing one to danger over one's life and at least in theory if a soldier starts running away from battle, the officer present there has the right to shoot him if necessary. But in most other forms of enterprise one can sue the organisation for exposing one to hazardous situation leading to injury because the initial upward delegation had nothing to do with authority over life and limbs.

In the Indian sub-continent two unconscious processes operate that create quite a bit of difficulty for us in dealing with our personal authority and managing ourselves in role. Both of these processes in many ways support one another. I have named one of the processes as "The Invader in the Mind in Indian Metaculture" (Chattopadhyay: 1991). By metaculture I mean those culture traits that are common to most Indian cultures based on region, religion, language and what have you.

In order to understand this concept of the invader in the mind one has to consider not only the history, but also the proto-history, i.e. the combination of facts and myths about the past beyond the era about which documented history exists.

Invasion of this sub-continent started from a period shrouded in the mist of lack of written history and goes back to several thousand years. Since there were quite a number of invasions, the erstwhile invaders later became the invaded as new sets of invaders

poured in. One of the consequences is our carrying in our unconscious pictures of both invading and being invaded. This is behaviourally acted out all the time. Many forms of contemporary behaviour pattern can be cited as evidence to support this hypothesis. Let me record here some of those.

Our country is wedded to the idea of democracy, which means that those who sit in state legislatures and the Parliament are the people's representatives. The laws and the policies that govern the country are made by them as well as by the ministers, who are also people's representatives. The bureaucratic machinery executes these.

However, our experience is that the people's representatives and the senior bureaucrats become VIPs. Use of this terminology establishes that as human beings they are far more important than those whom they represent and serve. As a result they invade the rights of the people in various ways. One common example is the custom of travelling in cars fitted with red light, at the sight of which the traffic police interfere with the normal movement of traffic to create passage for them. I have experienced such invasion another country where I spent a couple of years. In that country democracy as a notion is not yet fully understood. But in India, where there are enough educated people who understand the meaning of democracy, this type of invasion of one's rights is also taken for granted. Other forms of invasion would include having to shell out festival subscription, the amount of which is decided by the organisers without consulting the 'donor', the paradox of disrupting traffic flow with rallies and calling general strikes to serve political interests in the name of protest against invasion of rights (!) etc. The list stretches on and on.

At a more mundane level, if anyone wishes to visit a friend or a relative briefly or to stay on for some days when they come from a distant place, it is considered as very poor manners if the host to be finds it very difficult to agree to the visit for whatever reason. Divinity is projected on the role of guest and the hapless host has to put up with the invasion with good grace.

The role of host also has the licence to invade the guests' rights in two ways. One is by insisting that one has to fulfil the obligation of that role whether or not it suits one since the other party has issued an invitation. Another way of invasion is the assault on the digestive system of the guest by insisting that they have to eat whatever the host thinks fit to offer.

Thus the invasion game goes on in various ways, in various circumstances. The formula is that whoever is perceived as contextually more powerful invades the contextually less powerful. In the case of the VIPs invading the citizens' rights, the primary task changes from governing a country as people's representatives to ruling a country with unlimited power. This was demonstrated in the recent past when there was media report of the then Prime Minister advising the Chief Minister of Gujarat to "treat all his subjects as equal".

Thus, people's representatives were unconsciously transformed into royalty! In other situations also the primary tasks change, like during festivals joyful participation changes into coerced participation or worse, when joyful participation ends in humiliation and

physical assault since some powerful groups decided that such joyful participation amounts to acceptance of something known as ‘decadent culture’. So it is not a sign of barbarian behaviour or decadence when groups indulge in fascistic practices where one invades both the body and the mind of others if one has more contextual power!

This notion of the invader in the mind, existing in the unconscious of the people of the sub-continent, is buttressed by the caste system, which is underpinned by a second unconscious process of projection of a different order that brings in the notion of purity and pollution. This system is so all pervading that it has also penetrated Islam and Christianity in India, as has been documented in numerous anthropological studies published in Indian and in international journals.

The genesis of this system seems to have taken place when those who brought the Vedic culture to this sub-continent sought to create an umbrella organisation to bring some kind of integration among the people of the sub-continent who practised different kinds of religious rituals, had different kinds of food and dress habits, rules of inheritance etc. So they created the fourfold *varna* system based on occupation. There is evidence to show that this was not an ascriptive by birth system to begin with. People accepted this umbrella organisation because the Vedic people also offered them in return the protection necessary to live in peace. But this also laid the base for the dependency syndrome in the sub-continent (Bose: 1976).

Communities in those days were comparatively isolated and occupational skills were passed from father to son. Even where there was the need to learn from a teacher, the choice of profession was limited because of comparative isolation. As a result families and communities tended to specialise in particular occupations or professions and this eventually led to a social transformation that gave rise to a system that was based on birth.

As mentioned above, a second process was also involved in creating the dehumanising aspect of the caste system. I am referring here to the purity-pollution basis of the system. This was, I have hypothesised in some of my publications (Chattopadhyay: 1991a), contributed also by the fact of the sub-continent being invaded many times.

Invasions mean killing many people in the process and looting their resources. Those who get killed more often than not include peaceful civilians of all age groups. Further, looting of resources of the invaded country also means denial of access to those resources to people who had developed those. If the invaders believe that they belong to a civilised society, they usually suffer from a sense of guilt for invading another nation through bloodshed and later staking their right on a large amount of resources that belong to the invaded natives. This sense of guilt is usually repressed and like most repressed experience, the guilt is projected on the invaded in various ways. For example, the European imperialists created three myths for themselves and believed in them to the extent that these were included in school textbooks. In fact, in my personal experience I have found that these myths continue to remain both in the conscious and unconscious of

those nations, and are acted out through their behaviour. Some example may be seen in some of my more recent publications (Chattopadhyay: 1999, 1999a & b).

These three myths are, first, that God had placed the duty of saving pagan souls by conquering and proselytising the natives of non-European countries. A second myth was developed to justify their riding roughshod over the native customs and laws and enforcing through the use of brutal means the Whiteman's laws. This myth was that God had further decreed that the whitemen had been chosen by Him to bring peace and justice to the apparently unruly and chaotic pagans. Finally, to justify at home the human toll of their own people in battles and through diseases against which the invaders had little or no immunity, a third myth was introduced. This was that actually the conquered territories were the "Whiteman's burden" and not colonies that they were sucking dry to increase the wealth of their respective countries.

Thus, guilt was handled by floating the belief in the inferior status of the conquered pagans. In fact they were dehumanised both in the mind and in practice by believing that their souls were impure and had to be saved. Defence against the guilt for large-scale slave trade was made through floating and believing in a more barbaric myth in North America in the early days. This was that African slaves were not quite human, so that when they fell ill, they were treated by veterinary doctors and the illegitimate children born to female slaves sired by a white father were considered to have some human blood.

Thus, the defence mechanism consisted of projecting the guilt resulting from harbouring and satisfying the evil desire to gain riches from other countries at any cost. The evil within one's society was projected on the conquered people in the shape of inferiority that made them impure in the eyes of the conquerors. Thus segregation was blatantly practised in South Africa and the southern states of USA and not so blatantly in other colonies.

The Vedic people, known as the Aryans to the Western scholars, who descended in several streams, were no exception. They also had resorted to bloodshed and in the early days did not hesitate to forcibly take brides since most of them had been men, the soldiers, who intended to settle down in this landscape that presented a soothing picture of plenitude. So by the time the Vedic culture matured, they also floated the myth of inferiority of the invaded people and added to it the dimension of pollution for good measure. In other words, they retained the sense of purity by projecting the evil in themselves as impurity on the conquered. That is how the caste system became what there is today, a hierarchic system based on purity and pollution that dehumanise the so-called lower orders. The caste system is so much entrenched in the Indian psyche that even democratic Islam and Christianity have not escaped creating caste-like hierarchies, as has been recorded in many anthropological research studies.

Thus the *varna* and the *jati* systems, together known as the caste system, continue to be based on an unconscious process of projecting that which is unacceptable within one's group on the next lower order. The nexus of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas created a terror campaign that led to the internalisation of the projected "badness" or "evil" of the

dwija groups by the lower orders. The Brahmins' weapon of terror was psychological, which in many ways is more powerful than the sword of the Kshatryias.

This psychological terror was and still is one of capitalising on the basic fear of death, playing on the anxiety about the unknowability about what death really is. And as each successive lower order introject the projected badness, they in their turn project downwards their feelings of badness so that at the bottom come the so-called untouchables who were and still are considered as so impure that one is supposed to get polluted by their touch. In the initial phase this system could be introduced because of the dependent state in which the invaded people remained by accepting the umbrella organisation of the *varna* system.

I have introduced at length the notion of the Invader in the Mind in Indian psyche and the dehumanising aspect of the caste system with its psychological process in order to draw attention to the difficulties that one faces in managing oneself in role in organisations based on hierarchic order in India.

It starts at home. A son or daughter role is expected to remain same in terms of the role relationship with the parents over the years. But that is an absurd thought. Children grow up and develop minds of their own. They can then think very differently from their parents, judge the world in terms of what it is while they are growing up as also what it is becoming in their lifetime and not get stuck to the picture of what it was while their parents were growing up or during their parents' adult life. However, the entrenched idea of hierarchy is not one of skill, knowledge or psychological maturity based difference. It is based on the notion of superiority over the lower echelons of hierarchy because in some way the latter are considered as inferior (and even impure, as in the caste system). This is also acted out in many ways.

The most blatant example of acting out this phenomenon is the custom of touching the feet of the elders and other 'superiors' to express respect. One has to remember that in our metaculture feet are considered as inferior to hands. In fact the portion of the body waist downward is known as the inferior part of the body (*adhamanga*) and trunk upwards as the superior part of the body (*uttamanga*). Therefore to show respect one has to demean oneself by indicating that one's superiormost part of the body, i.e. the head, is inferior to the inferiormost part, i.e. the feet, of the elder, or others considered as 'superior', when a person touches someone's feet and then brings the hand to one's head to act out the drama of bringing dust from another's foot to one's head.

In work organisations this sense of inherent superiority of the superordinate role holder is expressed in many ways. The commonest way is by standing up when a superordinate role holder enters the room. The superordinate role holder also expects to see evidence of "inferiority" in their subordinates in some ways.

One of the ways of expressing this superior-inferior relationship is not smoking in front of a "superior". This "superior" could be a relative older in age or belong to an older generation even if such a person is not older in age, or a superordinate role holder in

many work organisations. I remember feeling amused rather than angry when as a university research scholar in the mid-nineteen fifties I had visited a Programme Evaluation Project of Government of India to assess its effectiveness. The Assistant Project Officer was as young as I was. He refused to accompany me to the office club in the evening because the subordinate staff did not hide their cigarettes in his presence, although some of them were much older than him in age!

Another way of expressing this superior-inferior relationship is addressing him or her as “Sir” or “Madam”. In government offices, I have often heard a superordinate officer being referred to as ‘superior’ as though one gains qualitative superiority as a person by getting promoted to a superordinate role! In Anglophone Europe, America and Australia the only people who address others as “Sir” or “Madam” are shop assistants and trades people who serve customers and in many schools the male teachers are addressed as “Sir”!

In India the British taught us to address male teachers as “Sir” since they represented a modified version of the British education system that the British Government sought to spread in India. Towards the close of the 20th century a British social scientist (Bazalgette: 1991) researched the British education system and showed in a well documented paper that their education system is focused on producing good subjects of the Queen or the King rather than in helping young people to develop themselves primarily as good citizens. In India we seem to have internalised this aspect of education of the erstwhile invaders.

The role of subject in a monarchic country, even if the queen or the king has little constitutional authority, is very different from the role of citizen in a democracy. In the former the demand is of unquestioned loyalty to the unreachable superior being called the King or the Queen who assumes office supposedly by God’s Grace that cannot be questioned. In the latter the expectation is of responsibility towards the nation in return for the rights of a citizen. In India most people fail to manage themselves in the citizen role since the picture in the mind is one of subject who is at the mercy of the rulers. The other side of the coin is also true, as was demonstrated, for example, by the then Prime Minister when he advised the Chief Minister of Gujarat after the communal riot, to treat as equal *all his subjects*. I could cite a second example from our experience of offering workshops during three consecutive years at the Lall Bahadur Shastri Academy in Mussourie where the probationers of the top echelon of bureaucracy, the Indian Administrative Service, get trained. During the workshops quite often we heard the probationers say, “When we become rulers” instead of saying “When we become administrators”!

I have given these examples to highlight the third element in our metaculture that creates enormous problem in managing oneself in role in a country that is trying to develop itself economically, mainly through capitalistic means. This is the entrenched feudal value system that is also not openly examined. Feudal values also strongly support hierarchy where the superordinate role holders remain unquestionable and therefore decisions become centralised and information is guarded at the top. As a result, the lower echelons

of hierarchy quite often perceive the decisions coming down to them as based on the whims of the superordinate role holders and are therefore arbitrary, irrespective of the reality.

Incidentally, ingrained feudal values are one of the reasons why corruption is so rampant in this country. In the feudal system, the officials serving a feudal lord were expected to hand over to the treasury a certain amount of money. The means used for raising the sum was by and large their business and so long as they satisfied their feudal lord, it did not matter how much money they retained for themselves. Secondly, there was also the *nazrana* or *bhet* giving culture. If one had to see the feudal lord, one had to grease the palms of the officials. This was also a legitimate means of earning money for the officials. The feudal lord would intervene only if they extracted so much money from the subjects that the estate became endangered by the prospect of rebellion.

When young management graduates join hierarchic organisations of different kinds, more often than not they experience themselves as being placed at the receiving end of both conscious and unconscious pressure to break their role boundary and consequently break the organisations' task and objective boundaries. In the past this was a contributing factor to the country's sluggish economic growth and great disparity between the rich and the poor that must always drag down the economy. Now this process of unconsciously breaking role, task and objective boundaries has assumed far greater threat to the economy because through Globalisation international players in large numbers have entered the Indian business scenario. They have already started taking advantage of the poor performance of quite a few Indian industrial units by making take over bids. The entry of every new player from abroad increases the risk of more of the country's resource being mopped up and sent abroad. The foreign exchange situation of India appears so good today that the term "India Shining" has been coined to establish the idea that the current foreign reserve is a great asset for the country.

However, analysis of foreign exchange earning by India (Venkitaramanan: 2004) and the nature of foreign exchange reserve sends out a message of imminent danger rather than one of great hope. This is because rise in foreign exchange reserve is mainly due to significant contribution in capital resources. This dependence on capital accounts means that India's liabilities rather than resources have increased. That is to say, the rise in foreign exchange reserves is primarily reflected by increase in liabilities rather than through current earnings. To put it even more simply, those who have deposited these foreign currencies in Indian banks also have the right to withdraw those and despatch the lot to their home countries. If that happens in large scale, the Indian economy will perhaps face a depression that it has not tasted for a long time.

Hence I have dwelt at length in this article on the long-term processes that have created conditions for individuals to more easily mismanage themselves in their role than successfully manage themselves in role. And one cannot be an effective manager unless one first learns to manage oneself in role.

While concluding I can only record my hope that the young management postgraduate diploma holders will go out there in the turbulent and uncertain world from the somewhat protected life at home and in academic institutions and remember to manage themselves in whatever role they take up so that they can break out of the dependency syndrome. It is only then that they will be able to withstand others' effort to invade their personal authority. Nor will they have the urge to waste energy by invading others' boundaries. Instead they will be able to collaborate and cooperate in organisation and nation building tasks. By managing themselves in their various roles they will then create history in their own way.

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1. Revised version of the Convocation Address at the graduation of MBA students of the Management Development & Research Institute (Pune) delivered on 15.02.04.

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