

Indians are what we are not – contrasting Swedish and Indian men in ICT industry

Connell's concept transnational business masculinity has been increasingly challenged. While the global industries require some degree of common culture for smooth cooperations, local and regional masculinities still are important in the cooperation between companies in, for example, Sweden and India.

When examining international research literature about Swedish masculinities, little can be found about masculinities in organizations. Swedish research on masculinities in organizations in its turn relies on theories from the English speaking world, and is less interested in whether the masculinities done in Swedish organizations are particularly local. In the context of the meeting of business masculinities from different parts of the world their local features can be accentuated and observed. This paper is one attempt to look at Swedish businessmen's self-understanding through their perceptions of the "other".

The paper is based on an interview study with 9 Swedish men engaged in the global industry of IT offshoring, and articles on ICT offshoring in the Swedish business newspaper Computer Sweden. The material describes "Indians", but those expressing their opinions are Swedish men, working in a male dominated area and therefore presumably expressing their ideas of Indian men, unless they state otherwise. In this particular paper, masculinities are understood as what is assumed about men's characteristics on basis of what can be observed of men's practices in (male dominated) organizations. In the context of the paper these practices are assumed to be shaped by the different cultural contexts in which the organizations are embedded – and which shape the practices of the employees.

When contrasting Indian men to themselves, the interviewees express what is different, what they themselves are not. In this way they express a certain kind of Swedish masculinity, which they also, to a large extent, describe as superior to Indian masculinity. The implicit descriptions of Swedish masculinity in the interviews give a notion of masculinity in a process of change, where such traditional masculine features as having an understanding of and positioning oneself in hierarchies or being free from domestic duties are regarded as negative, while others, such as devotion to work, are appreciated.

Hierarchies are seen as particularly undesirable by the Swedish interviewees, because they are perceived as making the work more ineffective. The underlying message is: we are effective, because we are part of a democratic working culture, and our work culture is democratic because we would not accept hierarchical power. Thus, being independent and able to assert oneself and one's ideas, instead of being a subordinate in a hierarchical system, is regarded as important for employees in Swedish companies. The other sign of the coin is being able to cooperate and having a general understanding for customers, seeing oneself as an equal and benevolent contributor, in contrast to Indians who are regarded as providing what they are told to provide, from their a subordinate position.

Earlier research distinguishes being self-sufficient as part of a Swedish masculinity.

It shows in how the Swedish interviewees talk about the “need” if their Indian colleagues to be acknowledged by their managers and in particular by their peers. In the interviews this is described as a cultural peculiarity, maybe a bit immature, but something which a Swedish manager should adapt to. The implicit message says that in Swedish companies this kind of public praise is not on the agenda, but that the employees should get their satisfaction from doing good work –often as part of a team - and being appreciated by their customers.

The fact that Indian men “do not know anything about housework” is mentioned as a curiosity by the Swedish interviewees. They signal that it is a natural part of being a Swedish man to be able to do the common household tasks. The Indian men are described as helpless in this respect and thus, also the discussion on housework, at least in part, relates to the independence ideal.

What is talked of with admiration is the devotion to work among the Indian men, which is both talked of as an advantage in business relations and as a positive personal characteristic. Climbing the career ladder, for example by frequently changing jobs, is also part of the Swedish business masculinity. The Swedish interviewees describe the Indian employees as possessing this characteristic to a higher degree than they do themselves, but on the negative side they highlight the problems which this causes to personnel managers in terms of personnel turnover.

The Indians’ competence is also admired – not in relation to the interviewees themselves, but in relation to the competence of Swedish men of the same age and educational background. In business masculinity, competence is a cherished characteristic where the Swedish men express that their peers are lacking.

Descriptions of masculinities in corporate cultures, outside the USA, UK and Australian sphere, are scarce. How business transactions can be affected by different constructions of masculinities between people from organizations outside this sphere is even less researched. This paper is a first step in mapping the important cultural differences, which shape transactions between businessmen from countries as culturally different as Sweden and India.