



## WHAT EUROPE CAN LEARN FROM INDIA

PUNDITS OFTEN POINT TO THE US AS A MODEL FOR EUROPE. THEY SHOULD BE LOOKING EAST INSTEAD.

By IMD Professor Amit S. Mukherjee

**IMD**  
Chemin de Bellerive 23  
PO Box 915,  
CH-1001 Lausanne  
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11  
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07  
info@imd.org  
www.imd.org

The EU is wrestling with seemingly insoluble human and financial crises. Pundits routinely draw unfavorable parallels to the US to illustrate needed changes. They say Europe needs a stronger central bank and greater political integration. Pointing to Puerto Rico's \$72 billion debt crisis, they note that financial markets have assumed that unlike Greece, this US Territory will make a soft landing.

This technocratic prescription, though valid, doesn't address a key fact: Europe's diverse population will impede the creation of the "US of Europe". India, which has comparable diversity, can teach much. But will Europeans be willing to learn from an emerging economy where corruption is rife? They should. Indians have got a lot wrong, but they got this right.

## Parallels

- The EU must unify very diverse peoples. In a few years starting in 1947, India integrated 600 independent and semi-independent kingdoms and the erstwhile British India, and consolidated them into language-based states. There are 29 today.
- Both the EU and India have 24 official languages. The peoples in India who speak these languages live in a country which is three-fourths the size of the EU's. Many languages are as different as English and Greek. Because half of India can't even recognize the other half's alphabets, educated Indians of different linguistic backgrounds talk to each other in English, an official language.
- India has greater religious diversity than Europe. It has more Christians than all but five EU countries, and more Muslims than all but two countries worldwide. The Hindus, too, are diverse; rituals can differ considerably across states.
- Like Europeans, Indians swear by their states' cultures and foods. More Westerners eat "chicken tikka masala" daily than Indians do.

## Managing diversity

The EU's efforts at managing diversity have been woeful. Its politicians haven't made a cogent case why diverse peoples should come together. Politicians – like Jean-Claude Juncker – who ardently champion the EU, offer technocratic rationales, not ones that ordinary people can feel in their guts. The absence of an emotion-laden rationale for unity has produced today's "What's in it for me?" ruptures along national and linguistic lines, as well as the alienation of European Muslims.

EU politicians don't seem to understand a basic truth taught in Leadership and Change Management courses: when people rally around a shared vision, driving change becomes easier. Why does the EU exist? Surely not to prevent a German initiated World War III? That rationale became irrelevant decades ago.

In contrast, India's efforts at forging a common identity – "India" did not exist for millennia – have been a substantial success. It adopted a national anthem that lauded, by name, every part of the country, and a flag with colors associated with the three major religions. Politicians made decisions that made no logical or economic sense, but helped manage diversity. Every child learned the message of "Unity in Diversity" from primary school onward.

And despite its periodic, ugly, politics-driven religious killings, India championed religious diversity. Four of its twelve presidents were Muslims, as were four of forty-two Chief Justices, many senior ministers and bureaucrats, and many top leaders of its armed forces. *Forbes* lists Indian Muslim billionaires, and India worships the many Muslims in its movies and the arts, and its beloved national cricket team. Europeans should ponder why so many British Muslims have joined ISIS while few Indians have, even though Britain's Muslim population is 1.6% of India's.

## The language example

The EU policy requiring children to study two non-native languages was a solid step towards instilling appreciation of diversity. However, countries support it irregularly. The UK lacks a country-wide time commitment, while Spain devotes only 5% time at primary levels and 10% in secondary levels. So, as a London resident, I heard British children speak only English, and during a two-week visit, I could get only one young Spaniard to admit to knowing English.

People can drive change themselves, but they must want to – and it takes much longer. In 1970s India, my fellow students and I ridiculed the efforts of an Académie Française-like language institute that coined longwinded Hindi equivalents of simple English: “railway signal” became “lahu-puth-gameni-awat-jawat-soochak-danda”.

Though today’s BJP government is pursuing similar silly ideas, DJs and program hosts on Indian TV and radio speak smooth amalgamations of native Indian languages with English. For example, “Hinglish”, which combines Hindi and English, teaches even illiterate Hindi-speakers English words. Unity in diversity, writ small.

## Crisis to crisis

Instead of celebrating Europe’s cultural richness and unifying people, European leaders are perversely pushing them apart. Wolfgang Schäuble mused that indolent Greece should temporarily leave the Euro zone. David Cameron promised a referendum on EU membership unless the EU acceded to British demands. Greece is flirting with Russia. Viktor Orban wants the EU refugee/migrant policy to ensure that Europe remains Christian. This depressing list is unending. Disunity in diversity, writ large.

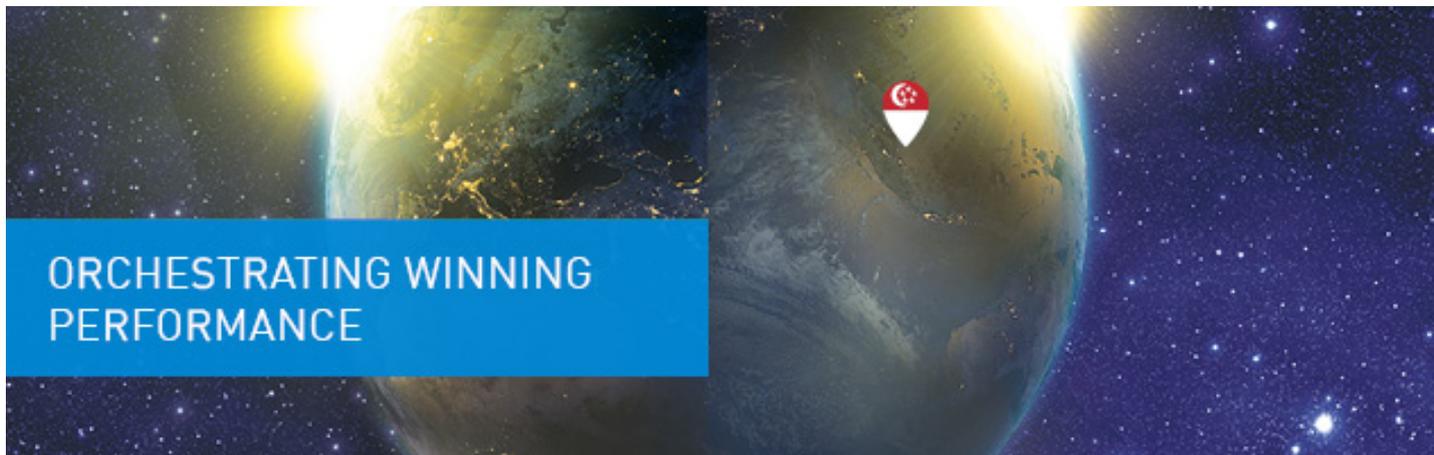
And so, the very rich EU cannot deal effectively deal with the present refugee crisis. In contrast, during the 1971 bloodbath that birthed Bangladesh, dirt-poor India, plagued with regular famines, hosted roughly 10 million Muslim refugees.

The EU will stop lurching from crisis to crisis only if its leaders ensure it stands for something that makes Europeans proud. Its leaders must set an extraordinary, but human, vision that no country can fulfill on its own. They must learn to give something up first, in order to get something in return. They have to champion policies and ideas that their compatriots oppose, if these are essential for the EU’s long-term success. David Cameron, Angela Merkel, and Françoise Holland have not shown they are up to such challenges.

However, I am convinced the EU can embrace diversity and overcome these challenges. After all, ordinary Europeans created Médecins Sans Frontières, and instead of staying in the comfort of their rich homelands, at great risk to themselves, regularly take light and hope to the darkest corners of the world.

[Amit Mukherjee](#) is Professor of Leadership and Strategy at IMD. He will be based at IMD’s Executive Learning Center in Singapore.

## Related Programs



### **ORCHESTRATING WINNING PERFORMANCE - <http://www.imd.org/owp>**

#### **The global business program for individuals and teams**

Program Directors Michael Wade and Dominique Turpin

- Get exposed to the latest management thinking and to practical and innovative solutions for your business
- Anticipate global business trends
- Boost your performance, broaden your perspectives and expand your global network
- Design the program that suits you and your team
- Become a complete executive through activities that develop your mental, physical, and emotional health



### **TRANSITION TO BUSINESS LEADERSHIP - <http://www.imd.org/tbl>**

#### **Turning functional managers into business leaders**

Program Directors Michael Watkins and J. Stewart Black

- Understand your strengths and areas of development relative to leading a business
- Formulate and implement a business strategy
- Design and structure business units to deliver results
- Build and lead cross-functional teams
- Part of IMD's Program for Executive Development (PED)