

Chapter 3

Navigating Organizational Paradoxes in Indian Context: The Role of Cultural Metacognition



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Abstract Organizational paradoxes—interdependent contradictions—are becoming increasingly relevant in today’s complex world. In India, such paradoxes are evident in socio-cultural realities, such as wealth disparity, food shortage, and wastage, and are rooted in philosophical and spiritual epistemics. Yet extant research rarely integrates cultural psychology with paradox theory or explores its impact on the dynamics of Indian organizations. This chapter emphasizes cultural metacognition—the awareness of socio-cognitive processes shaped by culture—as key to understanding paradoxes. Drawing on cross-cultural studies in cognitive dissonance, self-construal, thinking styles, and attribution, it examines how certain cultural tendencies can both aid and hinder paradox management. By bridging paradox theory with cultural insights, this chapter, toward the end, offers culturally informed strategies for Indian leaders and managers.

Paradox: “a statement or situation that may be true but seems impossible or difficult to understand because it contains two opposite facts or characteristics”

—Cambridge University Press (n.d.)

“Two Indias”—a satirical monologue, highlighting the paradoxes in modern Indian society, was uploaded on YouTube by Indian actor and International Emmy Award-winning comedian, Vir Das, on November 15, 2021. He recorded it at the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in Washington D.C., with a predominantly Indian audience, apparently laughing and cheering at his one-liners. The satire referenced contradictions in various facets of Indian life; one of the most provocative ones being, “I come from an India where we worship women during the day and gangrape them at night.” As the video went viral, so did the public response to it. The myriad online and offline reactions to the 7-min video showcased their own paradoxical nature. These ranged from complementary, exceedingly supportive adulatory

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comments and approving affirmations, to crass, downright disapprovingly negative—trolls, profanities, and even reports of police complaints filed against the actor and him being labeled as a “terrorist.” National and international media (“Comedian Vir Das causes a stir”, “Two Indias’ monologue...sparks sharp debate, police complaints”, 2021) reaffirmed both narratives: opposing polarities and contradictions abound in Indian society, and calling them out elicits powerful and mixed public reactions.

Other statistical indices mirror the satirical examination of paradoxes in the country. Curiously, both hunger and food waste are high. In the Global Hunger Index, with a score of 27.5, India has a level of hunger that is “serious” (Global Hunger Index, n.d). However, approximately 69 million tonnes of household food is wasted per year (UNEP Food Waste Index Report, 2021). The rate of growth of wealth—and poverty—are also ironically in sync. According to the Hurun India Wealth Report 2021, the number of dollar-millionaire households (households with a net worth of at least INR 7 crore) in India has increased by 11% (4,58,000 households) compared to 2020. However, the number of people who are poor in India (with incomes of \$2 or less a day) is estimated to have increased by 75 million (Kochhar, 2021).

While such paradoxes are as ubiquitous as these are subtle in the country, people’s overt and covert reactions to them come in many forms. Paradoxes, when made salient, bewilder, bemuse, provoke, pinch, pain us, or even shock the audience. Occasionally, when these dualities are invoked rhetorically, empirically, or interrogatively, they trigger a variety of reactions. The curious part is, that more often than not, such paradoxical elements that defy common sense logic, seem to be hiding in plain sight. They exist, but are willfully or implicitly ignored because they may trigger discomfort and anxiety—both at individual and societal levels.

The prevalence of paradoxes within a nation’s social system and the diverse public responses to them are not far-removed from the theoretical scholarly literature on “paradox management” in organizational studies. Referred to as the “meta theory” (Lewis & Smith, 2014; Schad et al., 2016), the term is used to refer to many organizational tensions inherent in dualisms, dilemmas, and competing demands; paradoxes are formally defined as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382)... “such [contradictory] elements seem logical when considered in isolation but irrational, inconsistent, and absurd when juxtaposed” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 386). These may manifest in day-to-day work activities, such as the simultaneous demands to compete and cooperate with coworkers, to work speedily and meet deadlines while minimizing errors, to maintain flexibility while adhering to rules (see Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; see also Zhang et al., 2015). Paradoxes also appear at the strategic macro level, such as between financial profits and social responsibilities (Jay, 2013), control and collaboration in corporate governance (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003), short-term profitability and a long-term strategic vision (Slawinski & Bansal, 2015). Conceptually, paradoxes are theorized differently than related terms such as conflicts, trade-offs, dilemmas which can be split in either-or dichotomies than paradoxes which require *both-and* approach (Fairhurst et al., 2016).

In recent years, mainstream corporate discourse has increasingly emphasized the need for leaders to embrace paradox focus as an integral part of their thinking

and priorities. For instance, Ulrich and Brockbank (2019) talk of “Leaders as Paradox Navigators,” underscoring the importance of balancing competing demands to navigate organizational challenges effectively. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) introduced the framework of six leadership paradoxes to capture the dualities that contemporary leaders must integrate into their skillsets. These include being a Global-Minded Localist, High-Integrity Politician, Strategic Executor, Tech-Savvy Humanist, Humble Hero, and Traditional Innovator (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2019). Such frameworks reflect a growing recognition that successful leadership in today’s complex business environment must possess seemingly contradictory capabilities simultaneously.

Paradox management, while receiving significant attention in contemporary management literature, has deep philosophical and historical roots (for a review, see Schad et al., 2017). Eastern knowledge traditions considered the harmony and balance of paradoxical elements as completely natural and expected. For instance, Taoism’s yin-yang framework highlights the interdependence and balance of opposites, offering a lens to understand the coexistence of contradictions (Chen, 2002; Fang, 2012; Leslie, Li, & Zhao, 2015). Similarly, ancient Indian philosophy is rich with metaphors and symbols that underscore the unity within duality. The Hindu deity Shiva’s form as *Ardhanarishwar*—half man and half woman—symbolizes the seamless integration and fluidity of opposites. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, an American Indologist, observed (1969), “Paradox is the very heart of Śaiva mythology” (p. 300), emphasizing how duality is not merely oppositional but inherently interconnected. These epistemological traditions, some dating back over five millennia, provided a normative folk theory that shaped people’s thoughts and ideas.

Despite the phenomenon’s roots in indigenous knowledge systems, a culturally informed, formal understanding of organizational paradoxes—critical for contextualizing Western organizational literature and corporate discourse within Indian organizations and leadership—is notably lacking. For instance, when practitioners advocate for “Leaders as Paradox Navigators” (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2019) or when PricewaterhouseCoopers, a global consulting firm with a large presence in India, introduces paradoxical leadership frameworks as management tools, do Indian managers interpret and apply these concepts in the same way as their American counterparts? Or are these frameworks redundant in the Indian context? More broadly, how do different Indian organizations—governmental, non-governmental, corporate, or non-profit—deal with the complexities of paradoxical demands, such as tradition versus modernity, systemic innovation versus frugal *jugaad*, women empowerment versus harassment—to name a few?

This chapter seeks to address this gap in the practitioner’s repertoire by drawing on the concept of *cultural metacognition*, encouraging Indian leaders and managers to critically reflect on their own cultural frameworks when engaging with paradox discourse. Specifically, I argue that certain Indian psychological characteristics—detailed later in the chapter—may serve as a double-edged sword: while these characteristics are often assumed to facilitate paradox management, they may, under certain conditions, lead to dysfunctional outcomes. This position is counterintuitive to the prevailing narrative. For example, Indian social psychologist, JBP Sinha, says:

Indians are deeply anchored in their ancient thoughts and habits that are still resilient and helpful to understand, cope with and excel in the globalizing world. The most salient feature of the primordial mindset is a pluralistic worldview that allows adding new ideas and influences to the old ones...They have radar-like sensitivity to threats and opportunities and the agility to shuffle paradoxes and keep reorganizing their mindset to get the best in a particular situation (J.B.P. Sinha, 2014, p.V)

This chapter challenges some of these assumptions, particularly in contexts where the polarities, if not attended in an analytic rational manner, may widen the gulf and exacerbate paradoxical tensions.

This chapter also aims to contribute to the evolving field of paradox research by advancing theoretical frameworks that intersect with cultural psychology. Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of micro-foundations, focusing on the affective-cognitive processes that underlie the paradoxical mindset (e.g., Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). For cross-cultural researchers, the concept of the mutual constitution of culture and psyche is a basic tenet (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010; Shweder, 1991)—a proposition that aligns closely with the emerging scholarly discourse on the micro-foundations of paradox management. By bridging these domains, this chapter seeks to enrich the scholarly understanding of how culturally embedded psychological processes influence the way paradoxes are experienced, interpreted, and navigated within organizational contexts. Furthermore, as Putnam et al. (2016) argue, paradoxes are not merely objective organizational phenomena; rather, they are socially constructed through language, interaction, and meaning-making processes—an epistemological approach that is the mainstay of cultural psychology. Hence, a more nuanced, culturally grounded understanding of organizational paradoxes, particularly in non-Western contexts such as India, promises to enrich the organizational paradoxes literature.

But, first, what is cultural metacognition and how can practitioners benefit from it?

3.1 Cultural Metacognition

Cultural metacognition, defined as a conscious self-awareness of how cultural contexts influence an individual's thinking (Chua et al., 2012), has been predominantly studied within the framework of cultural intelligence (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008), particularly for understanding and bridging differences across diverse cultural contexts. It is often positioned as a key competency in cross-cultural training programs, helping individuals navigate global teams, international leadership roles, and multicultural environments. However, I argue that cultural metacognition is equally, if not more, critical in monocultural environments because it enables individuals to surface, question, and critically examine assumptions that are deeply embedded within their own cultural context.

This skill becomes particularly important when trying to understand and manage paradoxes in culturally complex societies like India. Paradoxes often thrive beneath

the surface of unquestioned cultural norms. Without the ability to reflect on how cultural encoding shapes dominant modes of thinking, these tensions may remain invisible, unarticulated, or dismissed as mere anomalies. Cultural metacognition fosters a deeper level of reflection, allowing individuals to recognize how their thought patterns, decision-making processes, and leadership behaviors are influenced by cultural socialization they might otherwise take for granted. This reflective process is critical for engaging with paradoxes in a meaningful way, particularly in contexts where cultural narratives about balance and harmony—as described subsequently—can obscure systemic contradictions.

An illustrative metaphor for the importance of cultural metacognition directed at one's own culture is found in a parable shared by David Foster Wallace (2009) in his commencement speech at Kenyon College. He recounts the story of two young fish swimming along when they encounter an older fish who says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" The younger fish swim on, puzzled, until one turns to the other and asks, "What the hell is water?" The parable highlights how the most pervasive and influential aspects of our environment are often the least visible to us—precisely because they are so deeply embedded in our daily lives. This metaphor captures the essence of cultural metacognition, the ability to recognize and reflect on the "water" we swim in, making the invisible forces of culture visible and open to critical examination.

The dangers of missing the cultural cues are not limited to individuals but are also evident in organizational decision-making. A business story from one of India's most renowned brands, the Tata Group, offers a striking example of this misjudgment. In November, 2013, business headlines such as "Ratan Tata Regrets Marketing Nano as the Cheapest Car," *The Hindu* (2013) captured the essence of this oversight. Marketed as the "world's cheapest car," the Nano was positioned to be an automotive innovation breakthrough and a cost-effective solution for middle-class families. The car's idea is traced to Ratan Tata's observation of a family of four precariously riding on a scooter during rainy conditions. He set his mind to offering this populace a cost-effective car as a safer mode of transport. While the innovation was a breakthrough in the automotive industry, the marketing was not adapted to the local culture. In a high-power distance society like India, where "status and privilege symbols" hold significant cultural value (Hofstede, 1980), the "cheap car" label proved to be a deterrent. Owning a car labeled as "cheap" was seen as a stigma and clashed with the aspirations and social identity of prospective buyers. Additionally, these potential customers, because of status differences, often felt uncomfortable entering car dealerships where the Nano was displayed (Kim et al., 2017). Ironically, while the innovation was inspired by an empathic leader's astute observation of the local realities and had gained global acclaim, its marketing strategy failed to account for a critical cultural nuance.

The water metaphor can also be appreciated with a common example from Indian history, illustrating how idiosyncratic cultural characteristics can remain unnoticed by those within a society, yet be starkly apparent to outsiders. India's colonization by the British is a compelling example of this phenomenon. During their expansion, the British displayed an astute psychological understanding of India's socio-cultural

dynamics, exploiting the nation's vulnerabilities through a strategy of "divide and rule" (Stewart, 1951). For instance, they organized the Indian army along religious and regional lines, deliberately preventing integration among soldiers from diverse backgrounds. Colonel Durand, a British officer in the Bengal Army, explicitly highlighted this strategy in his recommendations on the partition of the Bengal Presidency, noting, "That presidency may be divided ... there is a very considerable degree of that sort of jealousy and animosity which exists between coterminous peoples. It is advisable for us to take advantage of that sort of feeling" (p. 55, cited in Stewart, 1951). Much like the proverbial water, these cultural underpinnings often remain unnoticed by local members of the culture, yet profoundly influence their behavior and interactions.

3.1.1 *Cultural Metacognition and Organizational Paradoxes*

Cultural metacognition equips individuals to uncover and critically examine the assumptions embedded within their own cultural frameworks. This skill is particularly crucial for understanding and addressing paradoxes in the Indian context, where, as a subsequent review of empirical research will demonstrate, culturally grounded insights shape the experience and expression of paradox within organizational dynamics. Compared to constructs such as lay theories or folk theories—which represent commonly held cultural assumptions, cultural metacognition fosters a reflective awareness that enables individuals to recognize and navigate these implicit biases, thereby enhancing their capacity to manage paradoxical tensions effectively.

Another reason why cultural metacognition, rather than a cultural-awareness or a cross-cultural competency approach, is used is that most management theories on culture predominantly rely on culture-level variables derived from Geert Hofstede's (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010) framework. While these models offer comprehensive tools for understanding cultural dimensions, they serve more as *descriptions* rather than *explanations* of cultural differences (R. Tripathi, 2014). This distinction is critical because descriptive models often fall short of unpacking the underlying mechanisms that shape cultural phenomena. In contrast, the focus of the present chapter shifts toward knowledge drawn from explanatory models available in social psychological research.

To this end, a robust syllabus for fostering cultural metacognition could encompass modules on the foundational elements of cultural differences: cultural variations in self-construal, cognitive dissonance, thinking, and attribution styles.

3.2 Cognitive Dissonance and Self-Construal Across Cultures

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957; for a recent compendium see Haromon-Jones, 2019) remains a cornerstone of social psychology, explaining how humans strive for coherence between their attitudes (beliefs) and behaviors. Discrepancies between the two, termed “dissonance”—create psychological discomfort, motivating individuals to resolve the inconsistency by adjusting their attitudes, justifying their actions, or altering their behavior. This drive for consistency is deeply tied to maintaining a coherent self-concept (Aronson, 1968, 1999) and self-affirmation (Steele & Liu, 1983; Steele et al., 1993). Decades of research have validated this theory across multiple domains. However, cross-cultural research demonstrates that the experience and resolution of dissonance are shaped by cultural factors, challenging the theory’s universality (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005; Hoshino-Browne, 2012).

A key cultural variable influencing cognitive dissonance is the concept of *interdependent self-construal* (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), where individuals view themselves as fundamentally connected to others, embedded in interpersonal relationships, and guided by roles and social obligations. In such cultural contexts, like many Asian societies including India, cognitive inconsistencies are less likely to be perceived as threats to the self-concept, particularly when they occur in isolation from relational contexts (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Hoshino-Browne, 2012). For example, in one of the earliest studies exploring cultural variations in cognitive dissonance, Heine and Lehman (1997) employed the free-choice paradigm, where participants rated the attractiveness of certain items both before and after choosing the items for themselves. The typical pattern observed in Western participants is an increase in preference for the chosen item and a decrease in preference for the rejected one—an effect interpreted as evidence of dissonance reduction. Interestingly, Japanese participants showed significantly less of this effect compared to their Canadian counterparts, suggesting a reduced motivation to resolve dissonance when decisions are made in isolation from social contexts. Similarly, Indians relative to Americans, do not display a tight linkage between personal preferences and choice; instead, they were willing to modulate their choice for close others (Savani et al., 2008, 2010).

Kitayama et al. (2004) and Hoshino-Browne et al. (2005) further demonstrated that East Asian participants are more likely to experience and reduce cognitive dissonance when decisions involve close others, such as when making choices imagining close friends or in-group members. This suggests that dissonance is more salient in interpersonal contexts, where approval in the eyes of others is culturally prioritized. Similarly, in cultures like India, where relational dynamics often outweigh the need for internal consistency, cognitive dissonance is more likely to be triggered by interpersonal demands than by isolated, personal decisions.

Interestingly, the cultural nuances of cognitive dissonance were already evident in early empirical research conducted in India, which significantly influenced Festinger’s conceptualization of the theory. Indian psychologists Jamuna Prasad

(1935) and Durganand Sinha (1952) studied the spread of rumors following catastrophic natural events; Prasad examined the rumors in the wake of the devastating 1934 Bihar earthquake and Sinha, the landslide of Darjeeling in June 1950. Prasad observed that rumors were not mere fabrications but served as collective attempts to reconcile inconsistencies in shared experiences and beliefs. Rather than resolving dissonance individually, communities engaged in social processes to make sense of ambiguous events (for a review of Prasad's work, see Bordia & DiFonzo, 2002). In similar vein as Prasad, D. Sinha also inferred that people were using dramatization and exaggeration tactics to deal with anxiety and uncertainty in the absence of concrete information.

This work impacted Festinger's thinking, illustrating how individuals and groups seek psychological coherence when faced with uncertainty. While Festinger's theory emphasized individual discomfort with inconsistency, Prasad and D. Sinha's observations highlighted the collective resolution of dissonance in Indian culture, where contradictions are often managed through social dialogue and shared narratives rather than personal cognitive adjustments.

3.2.1 Decreased Dissonance: Implications for Paradox Management

The finding that cognitive dissonance—as defined by the need to maintain internal consistency in attitudes and behaviors—is not a universal psychological phenomenon experienced uniformly across cultures is consequential to the theoretical discussion of paradoxes. For example, in paradox research, Miron-Spektor et al. (2018) discuss the concept of a “paradox mindset,” which refers to an individual's capacity to embrace and navigate tensions and contradictions effectively. This mindset assumes that contradictions inherently cause discomfort, thereby motivating individuals to engage with paradoxes in search of resolution or integration. However, in cultural contexts like India, where cognitive dissonance is minimized or often resolved socially, this discomfort in the core self may not arise as strongly, or at all. The absence of dissonance may limit individuals' recognition of paradoxical tensions, potentially undermining their ability to engage with contradictions proactively.

A recent tragic news exemplifies this risk: a new employee at a global consulting firm with over 100,000 employees in India reportedly succumbed to excessive workload demands, paying with her life. This incident, widely reported in mainstream media (*Grieving Mom's Heart-Wrenching Letter Blames Toxic Culture for Daughter's Death*, 2024) underscores the vulnerability of a new employee at the hands of senior managers and team leaders. The employee allegedly kept trying to meet the expectations of her supervisors, who were excessively demanding.

Such a motivation to meet the expectations of others resonates with empirical research. R. Tripathi et al., (2018) demonstrated that an obligations-oriented motivational framework, rather than autonomy, serves as a stronger driver for individuals in

the Indian cultural context. While this orientation aligns with interdependence and social relatedness, functioning as a culturally adaptive mechanism for motivation in routine circumstances, it carries the risk of exploitation under abusive or authoritarian leadership. In such environments, obligation-oriented employees may succumb to dominance or a toxic work culture.

Viewed through the cultural lens of cognitive dissonance theory, leaders and managers may experience little to no moral conflict when prioritizing productivity and efficiency over employee well-being, especially when the workforce seeks to meet expectations. The absence of systemic safeguards—or “cognitive rail guards”—potentially allows the paradoxical tension between performance targets and employee health to remain unacknowledged. In such cultures, then, leaders may need to implement *dissonance-induction strategies*—creating situations that deliberately highlight contradictions to invoke moral or cognitive conflict. Introducing transparent workload caps could serve as an artificial dissonance-induction mechanism, compelling leaders and managers to confront this paradox more explicitly and prioritize employee well-being alongside company and team targets.

Other dissonance-induction strategies could include company-wide dialogic and discussion-based interventions that allow supervisors to maintain balance and shared accountability in work allocation and performance goals for newcomers. The *obligations-oriented* workforce often relies on supervisors to take responsible decisions for them, especially at the early stage of their careers. Reflective discussions among supervisors can create systemic safeguards against culturally conditioned minimization of dissonance, allowing them to acknowledge and navigate paradoxical concerns better. Under benevolent and nurturant leadership, the duty-bound and obligations-oriented workforce can be an organization’s biggest strength. This was exemplified by the extraordinary courage and resilience displayed by the management and service staff of the Taj Hotel during the 2008 Mumbai terror attack. Hailed as the “Ordinary Heroes of the Taj” (Deshpande & Raina, 2011), these employees put themselves in the line of fire to protect the guests of the hotel. This workforce ethos aligned with the Taj Hotel’s HR approach, which prioritizes recruiting fresh hires from small towns and semi-urban areas—regions where socialization instills a high degree of duty-orientation (Deshpande & Raina, 2011). The events at the Taj show obligations-oriented employees can rise to the occasion in an exemplary manner, under supportive leadership, reinforcing the idea that the type of leadership is an important piece in resolving the paradoxical tensions between employee well-being and productivity.

3.3 Thinking Styles in Cultural Context

3.3.1 *Analytical and Holistic Thinking*

Cross-cultural research highlights distinct thinking styles rooted in cultural traditions (e.g., Nisbett et al., 2001; Nisbett & Masuda, 2003): Western cultures, shaped by ancient Greek philosophy, tend to adopt an analytical thinking style that emphasizes formal logic and the separation of individual components of the world. This approach relies heavily on dialectical reasoning and formal logic, involving a process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, as exemplified by the works of Marx and Engels (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Analytical thinking emphasizes resolving contradictions through logical progression and synthesis.

In contrast, Eastern cultural traditions emphasize a holistic thinking style that focuses on context, relationships, and interconnectedness (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). This holistic reasoning style, referred to as “naïve dialecticism,” diverges from formal logic by embracing fluidity, multiplicity of meanings, and the coexistence of opposites. Naïve dialecticism operates on three key principles: (1) Change: Reality is in a constant state of flux, (2) Contradiction: Opposites coexist naturally, and (3) Holism: Everything is interconnected. Unlike Western dialectical reasoning, which follows a linear progression of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, naïve dialecticism accepts the coexistence of contradictions without requiring resolution. Both thinking styles have their significance and relevance for work and scientific domains and knowledge systems (De Oliveira & Nisbett, 2017).

3.3.2 *Context Sensitivity and Balance in Indian Thinking*

The Indian perspective, characterized by holistic thinking and context sensitivity (J.B.P. Sinha & Kanungo, 1997), has also been referred to as “pluralistic worldview” (J.B.P. Sinha, 2014), which emphasizes that absolute truth is fragmented and context-dependent. As Kakar and Kakar (2007) explain, the Hindu way of thinking reflects pronounced ethical relativism, where right and wrong are context-dependent, influenced by factors like place (*desa*), time (*kala*), life stage (ashrama), and inherent disposition (*guna*). “Every action can be right or wrong,” depending on its specific context (Kakar & Kakar, 2007, p. 201). This ethos encourages a pluralistic perspective, exemplified by the Hindu parable of the six blind men and the elephant where the reality is subjective and defined within the confines of the context (Kakar & Kakar, 2007). Kakar and Kakar (2007) also highlight the coexistence of seemingly incompatible practices in Indian life—such as a reputed scientist practicing astrology or corporate executives consulting spiritual advisors—reflecting a worldview that tolerates multiple, even conflicting, truths without cognitive dissonance.

J.B.P. Sinha (2002) in defining the “structure of the context” (p.159) comments, “Context sensitivity means being aware of the idealized and normative parts of the

context [higher order philosophical and spiritual traditions], and yet seeking out its lower pragmatic parts [*desh*(place), *kal*(time), and *patra*(person)] as guidelines for determining actual behaviour...Changes in the three contextual components change the rules of conduct” (p. 160).

This orientation behaviorally manifests in ways that allow people to hold and maintain seemingly opposite orientations in harmony. For example, D. Sinha and R.C. Tripathi (1994) empirically inferred a “co-existence of opposites proclivity where individualism (pursuit of personal goals) and collectivism (relational harmony and embeddedness) (I/C) function like “figure and ground” in Indian society: “Depending on the situation, one rises to form the figure while the other recedes into the background” (p. 324). This mixed orientation—a balance of individualism/collectivism orientation—was further supported by J.B.P. Sinha et al. (2001), who found that in various situations—such as marriage decisions, job interviews, and social obligations—Indian participants blended individualistic and collectivistic tendencies. For example, many prioritized attending a job interview (individualistic) while ensuring support for a sick friend through family networks (collectivistic). The individualistic intentions were juxtaposed with collectivistic behaviors and vice versa.

3.3.3 *Contextual Mindset as a Double-Edged Sword*

While it is often assumed that context-sensitive thinking may lead to more effective paradox navigation, this relationship is more nuanced. On the one hand, it promotes a holistic understanding of connected and contextualized elements, on the other, it can become counterproductive when it leads to overgeneralization or an excessive focus on synthesis, overshadowing the need to address specific polarities independently and effectively. Cultural attitudes like “*chalta hai*” (it’s okay, it works) (J.B.P. Sinha, 1990, 2008) and “*adjust madi*” (please adjust) reflect the potential downsides of this cognitive style. These attitudes, rooted in a deeply contextual and accommodating worldview, often manifest as dysfunctional responses to paradoxical or challenging situations.

The “*chalta hai*” mindset, for instance, reflects a tolerance for imperfections and an acceptance of improvised solutions, which can lead to an ad-hoc approach, a lack of accountability, and an inability to push for quality controls and standards. Similarly, the “*adjust madi*” mindset promotes compromise and flexibility, but may also discourage structural reforms. These attitudes, while being beneficial for short-term adaptability, can hinder long-term effectiveness in paradox management and decision-making.

Another counterproductive outcome could be the excessive focus on one pole at the expense of the other pole of the opposing elements. This occurs when organizations and leaders try to blend conflicting demands with superficial resolutions without meaningful engagement. This obscures or dilutes the focus that each pole deserves. For example, HR functions in most organizations rely on employee pulse surveys

that measure employee satisfaction and engagement levels holistically. While these surveys provide a broad overview, they often lack the granularity to capture specific concerns, such as perceptions of fairness, supervisor-supervisee relations, etc. There is often a reluctance to have a more nuanced approach, potentially for the fear of surfacing uncomfortable tensions or for fear of enhancing employee expectations. However, this paradox between willful ignorance and a deeper understanding of organizational realities can be addressed by constructive dialogue.

R. Tripathi et al. (2021), for example, found one such anomaly when they examined the performance management practices in Indian IT multinational, in light of the major revamping that had occurred with the “abandonment of annual, bell-curve based, and manager centric appraisal system...” (Ten IT giants who changed their appraisal system, 2016). One of the findings from the quantitative survey revealed a significant discrepancy between managers’ and employees’ perceptions of performance management, both in terms of what it currently assesses and what employees believe it should assess. Specifically, there was at least one-scale point difference in ratings on the “Perceived Purposes of the Performance Appraisal System,” when employees evaluated performance appraisal factors across the “was,” “is,” and “should be” dimensions.

This misalignment highlights a dilution of focus on employee perspectives as multinationals introduced systemic changes to Performance Management Systems (PMS), operating under the assumption that HR and middle managers had a comprehensive understanding of the process. Although the revamped PMS was purportedly introduced as a more employee-friendly initiative, HR largely overlooked the perceptions of what PMS *should be*, failing to integrate this nuance while implementing strategic reforms. From the leadership and organizational standpoint, the acknowledgment of the employee perspective while recognizing that some expectations were more aspirational and not entirely practical could have addressed these challenges. A more analytic approach, rather than a purely holistic one, was required in this context.

3.3.4 Attribution Style: Another Dimension of Context Sensitivity and Its Potential Pitfalls

Attribution theory, which examines how individuals infer the causes of behavior, plays a crucial role in understanding paradox navigation in the Indian organizational and cultural context. Originally proposed by Heider (1958) and elaborated by Kelley (1967), attribution theory highlights how individuals weigh internal (dispositional) versus external (situational) factors to explain others’ actions. Western research has consistently demonstrated a bias toward dispositional attributions—a phenomenon termed the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE) (Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, 1977). Even when contextual influences are made explicit, individuals

in Western cultures tend to ascribe behavior to stable personal traits, often ignoring the situational constraints.

However, cross-cultural research has revealed significant East–West differences in attribution styles. Studies suggest that individuals in Eastern cultures, including India, are more attuned to situational influences and less prone to the FAE (Choi et al., 1999; Miller, 1984; Shweder & Bourne, 1982). For instance, Indian participants in Miller's (1984) study were more likely than Americans to attribute behavior to contextual factors, reflecting the interdependent self-construal prevalent in collectivist cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In Shweder and Bourne (1982), Indians used situation-centric descriptions (e.g., “she brings cake to my family on festival days”) versus Americans were more likely to say, “she is friendly”. Reflecting on such cross-cultural findings on causal attribution, Aronson et al. (1994) remarked, “people in Western cultures appear to be like personality psychologists ... whereas people in Eastern cultures seem to be more like social psychologists” (p. 185).

In a diverse and socially stratified country like India where regional, religious, and caste-based in-group orientations remain deeply etched in the psyche, the context-sensitive “naïve social psychologist” attributional approach can sometime backfire. While situational attribution promotes a comprehensive approach to understanding human actions compared to dispositional, this type of attribution style may be susceptible to implicit biases, leading to stereotyping, prejudices, and exclusion, particularly those framed as “in-group” versus “out-group.” The “Ultimate Attribution Error” (UAE), according to Pettigrew (1979), captures this phenomenon, wherein in-group members attribute out-group failures to dispositional causes and successes to external factors. The bias has been empirically studied in the Indian context. Taylor and Jaggi (1974) found that Hindu participants were more likely to attribute negative behaviors of Muslims to internal traits, while explaining away their positive actions as situational or exceptional. While more recent studies (e.g., Khan & Liu, 2008; Khandelwal et al., 2014) found mixed results regarding UAE—showing a significant in-group positive bias but a non-significant negative bias toward out-group, even subtle forms of attributional biases can undermine paradox management. Diversity in India is a key social issue (Pandey et al., 2019) with deep ramifications in organizational microcosms.

The group-based attributional biases, for example, may undermine the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts of organizations. DEI is mostly seen from the representation perspective, in that a particular percentage of the workforce needs to be from the minority. However, leaders often ignore the other pole, which is integration. While organizations may hire from marginalized groups with good intentions, they often fail to adequately support assimilation, inadvertently reinforcing exclusionary dynamics. When leaders do not actively engage in culturally sensitive integration efforts, employees from underrepresented backgrounds may struggle to find a sense of belonging—an issue paradoxically worsened by superficial inclusion efforts. Ignoring one pole of the paradox (integration) while focusing solely on diversity representation can inadvertently exacerbate intergroup biases, making the workplace less inclusive despite DEI efforts.

Such attributional biases that lead to ignoring the paradoxical tensions between representation and integration, can be overcome with systemic interventions such as bias-awareness training, structured mentorship programs, and organizational policies that signal transparency and fairness in performance evaluations and promotions.

While I have discussed the module-level empirical and theoretical research pieces, and the abstractions of those for paradox management, broadly, how might one mitigate the pernicious effects of certain cultural characteristics that hinder paradox navigation? Two key nuances of the cultural metacognition approach: (a) acknowledgment of the cultural legacy and (b) making the invisible visible, are discussed to transform it from an abstract principle to an actionable insight.

3.4 The Practitioner's Guide to Cultural Metacognition

3.4.1 *Acknowledgment of the Cultural Legacy*

As discussed earlier, the first step in the cultural metacognition approach is an active awareness of cultural encoding discussed above—those deeply ingrained cognitive patterns that shape thought and behavior, that come in the way of navigating paradoxes effectively. The previous section on insights drawn from cross-cultural research emphasized the “what” of this pursuit. However, cultural metacognition is not just about awareness and knowing the “what” of the content; it is an iterative process of critically examining cultural legacies to determine where they serve as enablers and where they act as barriers to recognition of paradoxes critical to achieving professional and organizational goals. A compelling illustration comes from the research on crew resource management and its cultural underpinnings by Robert L. Helmreich and colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin (see Helmreich et al., 2001). Their study of cockpit conversations in airline crashes, such as those involving Korean Air, uncovered the cultural dimensions of dysfunctional communication scripts in the cockpit.

Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* famously described Helmreich et al.'s research as “Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes” (Gladwell, 2008). The turning point for Korean Air came when David Greenberg of Delta Airlines took over, recognizing that the high-context communication style characterized by “sharply defined gradients of Korean hierarchy” (Gladwell, p.219) was unsuitable for aviation safety. Instead of demanding immediate adoption of English, Greenberg acknowledged the power and persistence of cultural legacies while encouraging the pilots to confront and adapt aspects of their heritage that were incompatible with the demands of the aviation industry.

He knew that cultural legacies matter—that they are powerful and pervasive and that they persist, long after their original usefulness has passed. But he didn't assume that legacies are an indelible part of who we are. Koreans were honest about where they came from and were willing to confront those aspects of their heritage that did not suit the aviation world; they

could change. He offered his pilots what everyone from hockey players to software tycoons has been offered on the way to success, an opportunity to transform their relationship to the workplace.

(Gladwell, 2008, p. 219).

This transformation underscores the critical role of acknowledgment and cultural introspection in addressing systemic challenges within organizations. It illustrates how cultural metacognition—the ability to reflect on how cultural norms and values shape thinking and behavior—can help leaders recognize and confront deeply ingrained cultural patterns that come in the way of desired outcomes. Through this reflective process, leaders can facilitate a broader cultural shift within the organization, enabling employees to understand how certain cultural characteristics, while adaptive in some contexts, may need to be critically examined and, at times, overcome to achieve an objective, unbiased understanding of complex issues.

This transformative exercise has broad parallels with the Lewinian paradigm of change management, which conceptualizes change as a process involving three key stages: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing (Lewin, 1947). In the context of Korean Air, the unfreezing stage involved recognizing the need for change through cultural introspection, acknowledging that traditional communication norms were contributing to systemic risks. The changing phase was marked by the introduction of new practices, such as Crew Resource Management (CRM) training, English adoption, that challenged existing hierarchical norms and encouraged more egalitarian, safety-focused communication. Finally, the refreezing stage involved institutionalizing these changes, embedding new cultural norms and practices into the organizational fabric to ensure sustained improvements in safety and performance.

Thus, the Korean Air example not only highlights the practical application of cultural metacognition in driving organizational change but also demonstrates how deeply rooted cultural norms can be reshaped through deliberate, reflective processes starting at the individual level.

3.4.2 Making the Invisible Visible Through Dialogic Interventions

Cultural metacognition helps leaders to critically examine and reflect on implicit assumptions, biases, and socially grounded characteristics. By considering how cultural encoding influences the recognition and salience of paradoxes, this reflective process not only brings hidden tensions to the surface but also provides the foundational language and pathways for open discussions on paradoxical issues. To broaden the scope and application, cultural metacognition can be incorporated as an organizational and team-level exercise, allowing leaders and employees to discuss the reflections in structured rituals and dialogic interventions, such as interactive storytelling and meaning-making. For example, Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017) offer an interesting insight on how even the research idea of inductively studying the

construction and response of paradoxes in micro-interactions involving humor was borne out of the following observation in a telecommunications organization:

[One] particular day... Tensions were running high as they discussed a *piece robot* technology that might get around the problem without co-locating their engineers. Suddenly, laughing, one of them suggested that what they really needed was a *peace robot* to help settle the tensions between them in trying to do their jobs in this paradoxical structural context. The others in the meeting quickly joined the joke, laughing and making peace signs in the air, insisting the peace robot should be included in the resulting action plans. Laughing, the team leader agreed and the meeting progressed with a better will to work with the paradoxical conditions to implement the joined-up technology. (p. 433)

Open dialogues and free-flowing discussion about potential paradoxes are particularly valuable in the Indian context, where the oral traditions of dialogue, storytelling, and collective meaning-making are part of the cultural milieu. These traditions not only facilitate confronting the blind spots in organizational thinking, but also help in arriving at creative and novel solutions to the problems at hand.

R. Tripathi and Kumar (2020) discuss an example of such an approach when Tata Steel faced the difficult decision to lay off a large number of employees. The then Managing Director did not limit communication to formal announcements. Instead, he held meetings, not only with the affected employees, but also with their spouses and family members to explain the rationale behind the decision and offer support. This approach reflects an acute awareness of India's collectivist ethos, where family plays a central role in individuals' professional lives and of the strength of dialogues and conversations during challenging times. By engaging with both employees and their families, Tata Steel demonstrated cultural sensitivity while navigating a highly paradoxical situation—balancing the need for business efficiency with the organization's commitment to employee well-being.

Another example, as noted in R. Tripathi and Karumathil (2024), is Tata Group's paradoxical pursuit of profitability and sustainability. As pioneers of employee welfare schemes and responsible business practices, in the wake of COVID-19, the company announced that the surviving family members of deceased employees would continue to receive the employee's last drawn salary, along with medical and housing benefits, until the employee's retirement age. Sceptics might have found this as a sub-optimal financial decision. From the paradox lens, this can be seen as tension between economic rationality and emotional commitment to employee welfare. However, for the Tata Group, the paradox—and its resolution—resides in the organization's enduring narrative of community-centric values and long-term social responsibility. Rather than perceiving this as a tension to be managed, the company frames it as an integral expression of its values and identity, where economic and ethical commitments are not contradictory, but mutually reinforcing.

3.5 Implications and Concluding Remarks

The proposal to include cultural metacognition in the leadership repertoire is a step in addressing the complexities of paradox management. This approach holds relevance not only for Indian organizational settings but also for multicultural, global work environments in general as it encourages leaders to navigate tensions in culturally grounded ways. By combining reflective self-awareness efforts with dialogical engagement, its applications extend beyond individual leadership to influence organizational culture, team dynamics, and broader strategic and social goals.

The role of cultural metacognition in paradox management also opens avenues for further empirical research. Empirical studies could investigate the specific mechanisms by which cultural metacognition influences the recognition and resolution of paradoxical tensions in different cultures. Theoretically, integrating cultural metacognition with paradox management frameworks enriches the understanding of how individuals and organizations engage with contradictions. Current models, such as the paradox mindset (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), often assume a universal approach to tensions and contradictions. However, cross-cultural research on cognitive dissonance, thinking, and attribution styles challenges this assumption, suggesting that the experience of paradox could be deeply shaped by cultural context. By embedding cross-cultural research into paradox theory, scholars can account for the diverse ways in which paradoxes are perceived, experienced, and resolved across cultures. This integration would advance a more inclusive, context-sensitive approach to paradox management, offering actionable insights for leaders operating in increasingly globalized and multicultural environments.

Finally, in the Indian social context, whether it's Vir Das' satirical take on "Two Indias," or Shashi Tharoor's political analysis in "The Paradoxical Prime Minister" (2018), or Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's essay, "Contrary India" (2005), paradoxes remain a recurring theme—piquing curiosity, inviting inquiry, and challenging conventional perspectives. This chapter is an attempt to extend that conversation into the realm of organizational paradoxes, urging us to move beyond dismissive refrains like, "Oh, it's just a paradox." Instead, it invites leaders, scholars, and practitioners to recognize the interaction of paradoxes in cultural contexts for socially responsible and community-oriented growth and progress, within organizations—and without.

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