



I first stepped on Chinese soil in 1997. My aim at that time was to explore business opportunities in the country, especially in the area of education, on behalf of NIIT, the company I was a part of. Since China was a fast-growing economy in those days—notching up a steady and consistent YoY GDP growth of over seven percent—it seemed to be the perfect place to be in. From having its doors firmly shut on the outside world for years, the great dragon was lowering its barriers and allowing countries to scale its Great Wall. It was an extremely opportune time in the phase of its history, and we wanted to be part of this big moment. In fact, it was my interactions with the people of China, particularly those in the government and industry, that shaped my impressions about the country and created an identity for it in my mind.

In those days, China was automating rapidly, even though very few youngsters were opting for IT training. The result was that the demand-supply gap in the area of skilled technology professionals was slowly getting wider—such talent, in fact, was quite conspicuous by its absence.

What one found in the mid-1990s then was a slightly cautious government, which seemed extremely wary of allowing the private sector into major realms, especially education. Let's just say the overall environment was not very welcoming or easy to deal with.

Tight government control was the order of the day and we found the going tough when we initially attempted to try and find a chink in the Chinese armor.

Our fortunes, however, took an unexpected turn which once again changed my perspective about the country and, in some way, also altered the way the Chinese viewed Indian companies. We somehow managed to make a breakthrough when the Shanghai Education Bureau took the surprising decision of experimenting with our model of learning. The change in mindset was probably because by then India had built up its credentials in the software and services arena and shown the direction to the world in technology domain. Clearly, the Chinese government had begun to acknowledge India's global pre-eminence in the area of IT software and services and

training and developed a quiet respect for what we had to offer. That positive mindset continues to this very day.

The era of Deng Xiaoping and a China ready for modernization also eased matters for us. We were allowed to introduce IT training through our very first center in Shanghai, which simply captured the imagination of the young people and became a runaway success. We were pleasantly surprised by the response

“UNLIKE INDIA, CHINA HAS A HUGE LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BARRIER.”

of the youngsters. The students thronged our facility, embracing it with ready arms. I have always found this attitude very refreshing—the ability of the Chinese to acknowledge individuals and companies they feel can do things better than them.

They are always ready to learn from others, especially India, which now ranks high on their list of “esteemed countries.”

During the last decade in China, I also learnt the myriad dimensions of its complex and culturally diverse market. Like India, China is a tough terrain.

Unlike India, however, where English is quite rampantly used, China has a huge language and cultural barrier.

With a primary means of communication gone, China is indeed difficult to penetrate. It takes time, therefore, to study the market, understand its finer nuances and develop products that are suited to the needs of the local populace. This can be an uphill task as it is in complete variance to the scenario in India. Interestingly, what we found was that the Chinese do not say “yes” or “no” to one's face; they take a more guarded approach, especially when taking business decisions.

For Indians, accustomed to more free interactions, the silence and non-committal behavior can be daunting, to say the least. However, the fix here is to absorb, understand, and try and pick up the quiet signals. It is also important to abandon the India perspective and completely remove that context when engaging with Chinese organizations and the country's people.