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By 2020, a multi-polar world is expected to emerge where US, China, India and Europe will be the four key pillars. Both India and China offer mega markets with billions of micro consumers

YIN & YANG

of a brewing partnership



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IT WAS IN 1997 THAT I FIRST STEPPED ON Chinese soil and experienced the country in a significant way. My aim then was to explore business opportunities in the country, especially in the area of education, on behalf of NIIT. Since China was a fast growing economy in those days — notching up a steady, and consistent, year-on-year GDP growth of over 7% — it seemed the perfect place to be in. From having its doors firmly shut for years, the great dragon was lowering its barriers and allowing countries to scale its Great Wall. It was an extremely opportune time and we wanted to be a part of this big moment.

It was in fact my interaction with the people of China, particularly those in the government and industry, that shaped my impressions about the country and created an identity for the country 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 conspicuous by its absence.

What one found in the mid '90s was a slightly cautious government, which seemed extremely wary of allowing 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 attempted to find a chink in the Chinese armour.

Our fortunes took an unexpected turn. This again changed my perspective about the country and in some ways 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 on account of the fact that by then India had built up its credentials in the software and services arena. Clearly, the Chinese government had begun to acknowledge India's global presence in the area of IT software and services and training and developed a quiet respect for what we had to offer.

The era of Deng Xiaoping and a modernising China eased matters for us. We were allowed to introduce IT training through our first centre in Shanghai, which captured the imagination of the young. I have always found the attitude of the Chinese very refreshing — their ability 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 ran-



domantly 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 locals. 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, taking a more guarded approach, especially while taking business decisions. For Indians, accustomed to more free interactions, the silence and non committal behaviour can be daunting. However, the fix here is to absorb, understand and try and pick the quiet signals. It is also important to abandon the India perspective when engaging with Chinese organisations and the people.

This can really help as overall the Chinese are quite friendly towards business practitioners, particularly from India. We have found that Indians are even more valued than Westerners. The Chinese believe that India has given the world a lot of thought leadership — through icons such as the Buddha and Gandhi — and that we offer a better social model with greater focus on human values. This viewpoint has proved extremely beneficial for us to spread our network throughout China.

Today NIIT is present in 189 locations across 66 cities in China. We have partnered with over 140 universities and colleges in the country and the road ahead seems brighter. Our success in China proves without doubt that despite the yin and the yang, pulls and pushes, positives and negatives, China is a wonderful destination to do business in.

When I look back at our engagement in China, I cannot help but add that I have found it to be an extremely pragmatic nation, unlikely to drag in

personal prejudices into business. Take the instance of China's rather fractious relationship with Japan. In ideology China may find itself on the opposite side of the fence with Japan, but it doesn't let this impact its business with them. Japan remains China's second largest trading partner. This in all likelihood is also the reason why China, despite its less than stable political relationship with India, continues to strengthen trade with its neighbour. While trade between the two countries stood at \$1 billion a decade ago, it is now \$50 billion. China is

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India's largest trade partner today, though this trade is slightly skewed to the Chinese side.

The Chinese have the ability to "compartmentalise" matters with ease, keeping the problem areas out from their pure "business dealings." It will be important to keep this in mind as we move forward, and as China becomes more and more important to our business outlook. It is our belief that

if any Indian company does not have a China strategy by now, it will not exist beyond 2020. By that year, we expect to see a multi-polar world where US, China, India and Europe would be the four key pillars contributing to the majority of global GDP. Both India and China offer mega markets with billions of micro consumers. Companies that do not address these colossal markets will not survive. As of now, 90 Indian companies have a presence here. China is coming to India. We are seeing much more collaboration than ever before.

And in this environment, it is not just the business aspect that one must focus on. Interestingly, when it comes to establishing a cultural connect with China, we as Indians are almost half way there. Whether it is a taxi driver or a shop keeper — most Chinese know and love Bollywood, and the stars of both the big and small screens.

It gives me a great sense of pleasure and comfort when I enter a pub, bar or disco in Shanghai and hear the familiar strains of an A R Rahman number. It's the same in a DVD shop. A recent performance by tiple maestro Zakir Hussain ended in a standing ovation, where nearly 80% of the audience was Chinese. Need one say more?

With so much of commonality and connect, it is not surprising that after years of solitude, both the nations are eyeing one another with renewed interest. However, it will take true commitment on both sides, for this interest to turn into a mutually beneficial partnership and for the two nations to build a relationship based on enduring, mutual respect and admiration.

(The writer was recently conferred the celebrity award by China's ministry of education for influencing the development of training industry in China)