

Learning from the West: N R Narayan Murthy

Q. What should we learn from the West according to Narayan Murthy? Why?

The speech 'Learning from the West' was delivered by Narayan Murthy when he received the Lal Bahadur Shastri Award for Excellence in Public Administration and Management Sciences, 2001 from the Lal Bahadur Shastri Institute of Management. In his speech as the most successful businessman in India, he argues that Indians need to incorporate certain Western maxims into their values system. Here, the author has spoken decisively about the role of Western values in contemporary Indian society. Some of the lessons he has learnt from the West regarding values are applicable to Indian society also. Here, the writer dwells on some of them. These are - respect for the public good, accountability, intellectual independence, responsibility to the community, dignity of labour, acknowledging the accomplishments of others, professionalism and respect for contractual obligations.

The speech entitled 'Learning from the West' by N R Narayan Murthy was delivered by him to perceive the importance/relevance of Western values in contemporary Indian society. Initially, he defines a community as a unified multitude and then goes on to say that the Vedas say that man can live individually, but can survive only collectively. So, a balance of interests is essential for communal harmony. It is important to develop a value system where people will sacrifice personal good for the common good. According to Murthy, a value system is the protocol for behaviour which enhances trust, confidence and commitment. He firmly believes that loyalty to family and loyalty to community are the pillars of a social value system. In a family, the members of a family work for the welfare of the entire family. However, the writer regrets that this familial attitude is not reflected in the attitude towards the community. But in the West, people are aware of their responsibility towards their community/society. Further, the writer underlines the fundamental difference between the Westerners and Indians. According to him, people in the West have better attitudes and beliefs as compared to Indians and as a consequence, they care for the welfare of their society. However, Indians do not have a caring attitude towards society and thus the quality of public life suffers. It is necessary for Indians to care for the public good. The society in the West is corruption-free. Unfortunately, in India, bribery and apathy in solving the problems of the community have kept the society backwards.

According to the writer, the reason for the deplorable condition of India is that Indians believe that public issues belong to some foreign ruler and that they will solve the problems. Thus, Indians have lost the will to solve their problems. Another attribute of a progressive society is respect for others who have more, to learn from them. However, the Indian leaders misguide the society into believing that other societies have nothing to offer us. The Indian leaders must remember that the greatest fault is not to acknowledge the goodness and qualities of others. So if Indians want to progress they have to change their attitude and pay heed to people who are better than them. Further, the writer stresses on another attribute which the Indians can learn from the Western people that is their sense of accountability. There, one is held responsible for

what one does irrespective of his position. However, in India, the 'important' people are not answerable to anyone.

Besides, the dignity of labour is the central value of the Western system. In India, for instance, the writer has seen many engineers, fresh from college, who only do cutting-edge work and do not make any effort that is of relevance to the business and the country. Therefore, Indians need to change their mindset and respect everyone who puts in honest work.

According to the writer, Indians must learn professionalism. In the West, people do not let their personal relations come in conflict with their professional dealings. Western parents from the time their children are very young; teach them to think for themselves. Therefore, these children grow up as strong and confident adults. However, in India, Indians suffer from feudal thinking. Even the bright people prefer to carry out the orders of their Bosses/seniors. Indians need to overcome this attitude if they want to succeed globally. The writer stresses that the Western value system teaches respect for contractual obligations. However, the writer's experience in India, in this regard, is miserable. The writer had given recommendations to many students for US Universities, but most of them did not return to India even though they are contractually obliged to spend 5 years in India after obtaining their degrees. In the end the writer underscores the importance of obligations and duties.