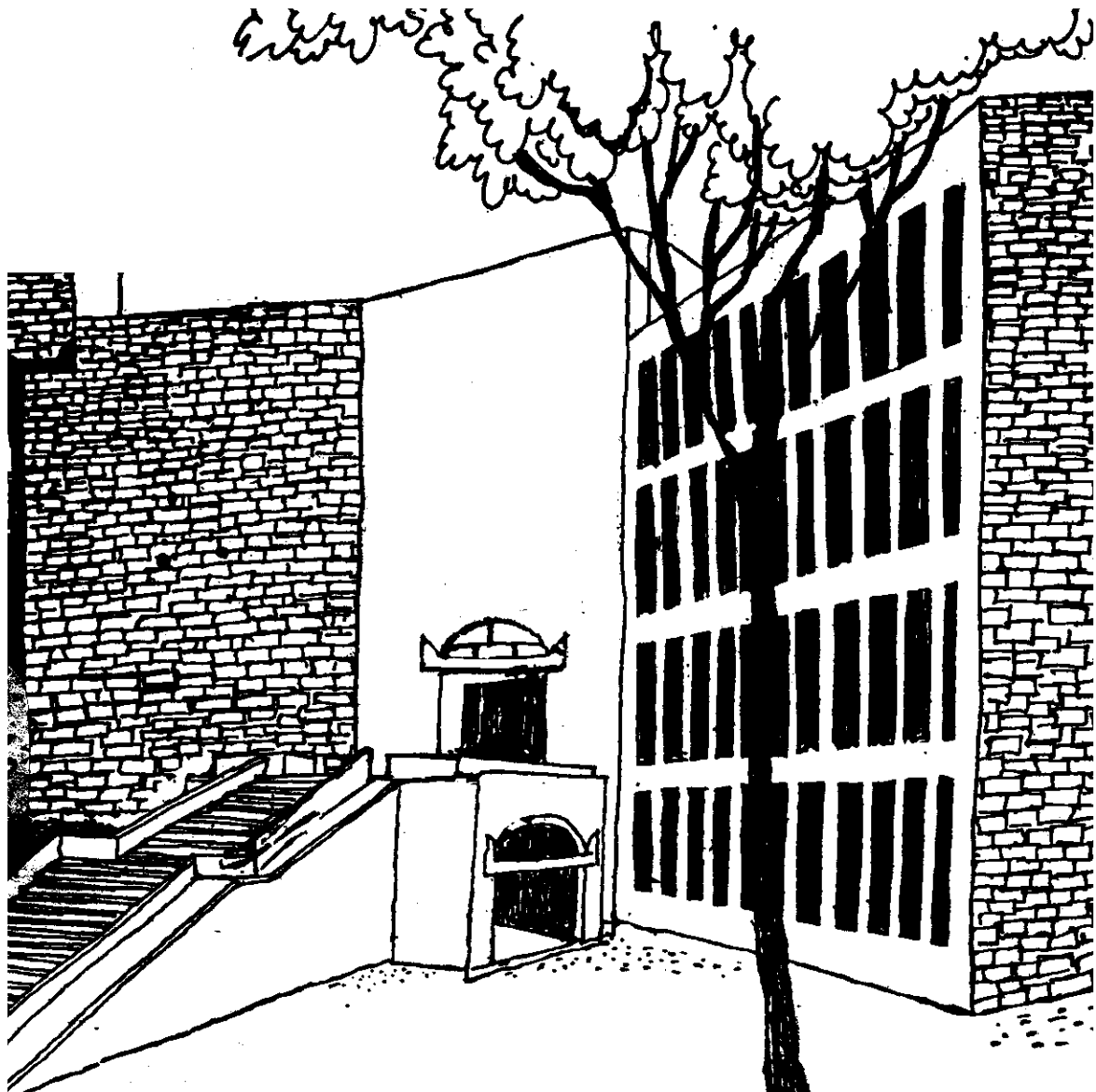




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# Working Paper



SOCIO-CULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF  
CONFLICTS IN ORGANIZATION

By

N.M. Agrawal

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## SOCIO-CULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF CONFLICTS

### IN ORGANIZATION

#### Abstract

The paper focuses on conflicts in organization. It discusses the need for understanding the process of 'conflict' particularly in the context of developing countries. It is argued that the exigencies of development create value differences between the older and the younger generation which lead to intra-personal and inter-personal conflict. Other major causes of conflicts are the prevalence of many cultures, languages, castes, and ethnic groups. The conflict resolution methods used by industrially developed countries are reviewed and possibilities of using them in Indian organizations are explored. Some of the indigenous approaches to conflict resolution and problems in using them in organization are also discussed.

## Introduction:

In developing countries, there is a need for rapid and balanced economic growth. In addition, there is need for building educational, health and other institutions which can help the masses to improve their quality of life. Since there is scarcity of resources, it is also necessary to ensure that productivity of these institutions is high. Thus, the exigencies of development demand that we seek new knowledge, technology and innovation. The younger generation is being exposed to new knowledge through the process of education. But the older generation, which has learned mainly through experience, finds it difficult to accept the knowledge acquired by the younger generation. As a consequence, a generation gap often exists in organizations, resulting in intra-personal and inter-personal conflict. In addition, Indian society consists of many cultures, languages, castes and ethnic groups. This heterogeneity is also often a cause of inter-group conflicts in organizations.

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Writers on the organization suggest that culture as an independent variable influences the functioning of organizations (Triandis, 1972; Negandhi, et.al. 1971; Hofstede, 1978). It affects the values of the dominant coalition which defines organizational goals and objectives. Value issues, like choosing between social responsibility and economic success, are influenced by socio-cultural parameters. The various aspects of decision-making processes, the alternatives considered, and the actual choices, are affected by it (Hofstede, 1980). Culture also influences organization structure and its infrastructure (Negandhi et. al. 1971) which in turn affect conflicts and the process of conflict resolution in the organization. Another indirect influence of culture on the organization is through the values of non-members of the organization, like values of managements of competing organizations, government, customers, the press, and the public.

It is in this context that this paper attempts to explore the socio-cultural determinants of conflicts in Indian organizations. As Boulding (1964) says, conflict is not merely a phenomenon, but a system subject to its own dynamics. Conflict follows laws and principles that permit it to be explained and controlled to some extent. Pareek (1982) suggests that conflict can be functional and creative. It can create a sense of responsibility, a

sense of identity, and a desire for excellence amongst the parties. Conflict stimulates interest and curiosity and can provide opportunities for testing oneself and as such can be a very enjoyable experience (Deutsch, 1973). However, conflict can be dysfunctional as well. It can result in aggressive or even destructive behaviour. Hence, people who have to manage situations having potential for conflict should understand how conflicts get initiated, get escalated and how they can be managed. As suggested by Boulding (1964), conflict is not an evil to be abolished; the correct stance towards it is to manage it effectively. The further development of the paper is organized under the following sub headings :

- (a) The concept of conflict
- (b) Socio-cultural characteristics of Indian society
- (c) Generational conflict
- (d) Inter-group conflict
- (e) Approaches of conflict resolution
- (f) Suggestions for testing the propositions.

## 2.0 The Concept of Conflict:

In this section, the definitions of conflict are stated, the causes of conflict are identified, the variables to understand conflict are identified, and some interesting and useful typologies of conflict are reviewed.

A conflict exists whenever incompatible activities are pursued. Incompatible actions may originate in one person, group, or nation. Such conflicts are called intra-personal, intra-group or intra-national. Or, they may reflect incompatible actions of two or more persons, groups or nations; such conflicts are called inter-personal, inter-group or inter-national (Deutsch, 1973). Conflict may be because of the desire to have control over resources. Since the resources are usually limited, a lack of consensus on the basis of distribution of resources is likely to result in conflict. The other reasons for conflict may be the preferences of individuals, which may be incompatible. Conflict can be concerned with what "should be" i.e. values or beliefs, about "what is", that is, over facts, information, knowledge or belief about reality. Conflict can arise due to the nature of the relationship between two parties.

The distinction between competition and conflict is another source of ambiguity regarding conflict. Although competition produces conflict, not all instances of conflict reflect competition. For competitive conduct between any two parties, there has to be an inescapable or potential conflict of interest between suppliers or producers or buyers (Khandwala, 1981). But conflict can occur in

a collaborative context also. The members of the organization debating future corporate plans, may hold conflicting views, purely out of interest in the growth of their organization.

Variables of Conflict:

An understanding of conflict requires identifying the variables involved in the process of conflict. Deutsch (1973) suggests the following variables to be studied for understanding conflict:

- (a) The characteristics of the parties in a conflict - their values and motivations; their aspirations and objectives; their physical and intellectual and social resources for waging or resolving the conflict; their beliefs about conflict, including their conceptions of strategy and tactics.
- (b) Their prior relationship to one another - their attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about one another.
- (c) The nature of the issue giving rise to the conflict - its scope, motivational significance, formulation, periodicity etc.



- (d) The social environment within which the conflict occurs - the facilities and restraints, the nature of the social norms and institutional forms for regulating conflicts.
- (e) The interested audience to the conflict - their relationship to the parties in conflict and to one another, their interests in the conflict and its outcomes.
- (f) The strategies and tactics employed by the parties in the outcome.
- (g) The consequences of conflict for each of the participants and for other interested parties.

All the variables listed above are affected by the norms, values, and beliefs which constitute the socio-cultural environment of a society. Thus, the analysis of variables of conflict suggests the need to understand the influence of socio-cultural characteristics of a society on conflict.

#### Typologies of Conflict:

Interesting typologies of conflict exist (Rappoport, 1974; Deutsch, 1973; Mack and Snyder, 1973). We have used the typology provided by March and Simon (1958), because it provides a better understanding of the structure of

conflict and of conflict resolution mechanisms in the organizational context. According to March and Simon (1958 : 113), conflict is, "a breakdown in the standard mechanisms of decision making so that an individual or group experiences difficulty in selecting an action alternative". The breakdown in conflict may be at the individual decision-making level, resulting in individual conflict or intra-personal conflict; it may be amongst the parties involved in decision making resulting in organizational or inter-personal conflict; or it may involve many organizations or groups, resulting in inter-organizational or inter-group conflict.

Further elaborating on causal mechanisms of conflicts, March and Simon (1958) explain that individual conflict may arise due to a breakdown in decision-making, due to unacceptability, incomparability, and uncertainty of alternatives. Unacceptability refers to the situations in which probability distributions of outcomes associated with each alternative action are known, but not acceptable to the decision maker. Incomparability arises when the outcomes of various alternatives are known but they can not be compared; and uncertainty refers to the situations in which outcomes are not known. The reaction to conflict depends upon the cause of conflict. When the cause is

uncertainty, the attempt will be first to search for clarification of the consequences of alternatives already evoked. Experiencing failure in this attempt, the individual may switch over to search for new alternatives. As regards subjective uncertainty, it depends upon the past experience and complexity of the decision. The greater the past experience and the lower the complexity of the decision, the lower will be the subjective uncertainty. Similarly, the greater the disparity between the aspiration levels and achievement, the higher will be the subjective unacceptability and the higher will be the perceived conflict.

The occurrence of inter-personal conflict requires that each participant in decision-making process has an alternative and the alternatives chosen by different participants are different.

March and Simon identify three factors for inter-group conflict to occur, namely, the existence of a positive felt need for joint decision-making and of either a difference in goals or difference in perception of reality or both among the participants in the organization. The felt need for joint decision making depends on inter-dependence of schedules, organization level and mutual dependence on limited resources. The difference in perceptions of reality

depend upon the number of information sources and channelling of information processing; and difference in goals is a function of dependence on limited resources and operationality of organization goals.

In the subsequent sections we use the typology given above to understand generational conflict and inter-group conflict.

### 3.0 Socio-cultural Characteristics of Indian Society:

In the last section, we reviewed the concept of conflict. In this section, we define culture and summarize some of the important socio-cultural characteristics of our society, which influence the conflicts in organization.

Culture is the system of beliefs and values of a society. According to Hofstede (1980 : 24), "Culture is the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another". Moddie (1968) calls the culture prevailing in India at the time of independence as a mixture of the Brahmanical culture, a product of the Indo-British connection, and the culture emerging as an outcome of industrialization. According to him, the Brahmanic culture was traditional, caste dominated,

hierarchical, authoritarian, village, and land based. Some of the prominent characteristics of our mixed culture, relevant to our paper are listed below:

- (a) India traditionally has had a joint family system. According to Taimani (1975) many aspects of the traditional family system have got transferred to the industrial setting and consequently a combination of traditional culture and modern ethos is experienced and seen at the work place.
- (b) In the earlier days, knowledge was usually acquired by individuals by living in the ashrams of the Guru. The profession of an individual was also decided by the caste to which he belonged. Professional knowledge was acquired by young people by working with experienced people. Thus, experience and age may still be considered to be very important variables in the process of decision-making by the older generation. It is generally assumed that the older the person, the more knowledgeable he or she would be.
- (c) The older generation believes in the "authority of custom", while the younger generation likes to recognize the "authority of reason". For the older generation, the "authority of custom" had its origin

in religious beliefs which defined the duties and mode of conduct at different stages of the human life cycle. Kaker (1971), in a content analysis study of 31 stories of Indian origin, found that the chief source of authority was the traditional-moral, which occurred in 84% of the cases. However, the concept of religion itself has changed; while the younger generation considers religion as a matter of personal choice, the older generation believes in compulsory acceptance of it (Sinha et. al., 1971).

- (d) Due to a very strong authoritarian motive, parents have a tendency to control and take important decisions on behalf of their children. This tendency is carried over into the organizational environment and superior subordinate relationships are found to be authoritarian in nature (Kakar, 1970).
- (e) According to Chattopadhyay (1975), there is too much of dependency in Indian culture. He says "dependency refers to the extent to which one individual relies on another for his physical or emotional existence or both".

(f) India is a country of many cultures, languages, castes, and ethnic groups. The indirect evidence such as the insistence on marrying in one's own caste or religion, suggests that members of the older generation value association with their own caste and linguistic group much more than the younger generation. (Sinha, et. al. 1971).

#### 4.0 Generational Conflict in Organization:

As discussed in the last section, the generation-gap results in a difference in values between the older and the younger generations. These differences may cause intra-personal and inter-personal conflict experienced by both the generations.

The younger generation has been brought up in an independent country. It relishes autonomy and independence. But due to the prolonged duration of education, the dependence of an individual on the education system is prolonged till one crosses the age of twenty. This makes an individual impatient with one's dependence and the individual wants to be independent (Kakar and Chowdhary, 1970). But the experience in the organization may frustrate this desire for independence. According to Garg and Parikh (1976), each older generation displays

a strong emotional need to see its mode of life validated by the younger generation by continuation of behaviour. The need for such behaviour varies from culture to culture. In India, "a very strong need to see the historic continuity as a whole at the psychological level persists" (Garg and Parikh, 1976 : 27). This need becomes the cause of generational conflict.

To understand the generational conflict in its proper perspective, we review some of the cases from Indian organizations which depicts the process of conflict. Based on the analysis of the cases, we identify the conflict situations and their causes, and then generate certain propositions about generational conflict.

(a) Ajit Verma, The M.B.A.<sup>1</sup>

AK, a retired ICS Officer has built up a successful engineering organization, namely ABC Engineering. Some of the important positions in the organization such as that of General Manager, Stores Superintendent etc. are filled by people who had worked with AK earlier and who therefore enjoy his confidence. The DGM is a professional in his early forties, who was also recruited based on recommendations from his

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<sup>1</sup> Sources of all the cases are listed in the reference.



erstwhile colleagues in the government. Both the sons of AK, BK, a mechanical engineer, and CK, a post-graduate in commerce, are working in the organization as Technical Director and Administrative Director respectively.

The organization had a good growth record and had diversified in many areas. As a consequence of this growth, a need for improving the administrative system was felt. Ajit Verma, a young MBA is recruited by the organization to introduce costing systems and he reports to the Chief Accountant. In his first 2 months, with the organization, he was asked by the DGM to look into the working of stores. He noticed many discrepancies and made certain suggestions regarding the working of stores and other areas. None of his suggestions were accepted and as a result of it, he felt frustrated.

In the case described above, we notice that Ajit Verma experiences an intra-personal conflict. This intra-personal conflict arises due to the unacceptability of certain existing modes of working which owe their origin to the inter-personal conflict with his immediate boss who is reluctant to bring changes which may not be liked by the senior officers close to AK, the Chairman. Thus, we observe a situation in which the younger generation experiences an intra-personal conflict due to the un-

acceptability of a situation because of the difference between its aspiration level and the existing situation. Similarly, we also observe an inter-personal conflict between the older and the younger generations due to a difference in the perception of reality and a difference in goals.

Based on the above analysis we hypothesize that:

Proposition-1:

In a family managed organization, the greater the rate of growth and diversification, the greater will be the need for professionalization, and the higher will be intra and inter personal conflicts in the organization.

The case also narrates that AK, the Chairman, is not very happy at the speed with which BK is expanding the company. He also does not like BK's overconcern for technical excellence and apparent indifference to the cost aspect. He feels uncomfortable due to the fact that he does not have any experience in new fields in which BK has plans to diversify. However, he is proud of his son because he works very hard on the shopfloor.

Thus, it looks as if one of the causes of generational conflict could be the over-reliance of the older generation on experience and the desire to move along

proven paths, and the over-emphasis on knowledge and innovations and experimentation by the younger generation. In traditional societies, experience is valued very much because that is the mode of learning for the older generation. However, due to the exigencies of development, there has been a tremendous increase in the needed technical and managerial knowledge, resulting in the younger generation being better equipped with conceptual and analytical tools. The above analysis also highlights how the generational conflict can hinder the development process.

(b) Munir:

Munir was 22 years old, lived in Bombay, and after completing his graduation went to Calcutta to join his family business. The business was looked after by his uncle who had a very cordial and affectionate relationship with Munir. During his stay for 6 months at Calcutta, Munir attempted to learn and make some improvements in the business field. He was told that if he did not learn the business the hard way, as his uncle had learned, he would be too bookish to make suggestions for improvements in the business, which was running based on

the thirty years of experience of his uncle. He felt frustrated and returned to Bombay. Reflecting on his relationship with his uncle and the conflicts he had with him, he said (Kakar, et. al., 1970 : 131), "When I question his policy, his decisions, I unknowingly assume the position of his equal, while to me, the change in position, the transition may seem natural, to uncle Salim it could be quite discomfoting, making his position rather vulnerable. By questioning his actions, I unwittingly assume the right to evaluate him. This puts him on the defensive and unequivocally stands behind his actions. As such the purpose of my questioning which is to learn is defeated - the result a deadlock . . . . There exists a chasm of one full generation between the two of us. Social values have changed, economic conditions have changed, human needs have changed, and what have you."

Here again, we find that uncle Salim, a representative of the older generation, values his experience while undermining the importance of education acquired by Munir, the representative of the younger generation, resulting in a generational conflict.

Based on the above, we hypothesize that:

Proposition-2:

The greater the difference in experience and technical knowledge between the older and younger generations, the greater will be the importance attached to experience by the older generation and to technical knowledge by the younger generation; and hence the greater will be the generational conflict in such organizations.

(c) Kanangi Mills:-

Mr. Alagappan, a shrewd businessman, started his first textile unit in 1930, and over time by acquiring sick mills at very low prices had expanded his business substantially. Though in his late seventies, he has good control over the group. The company had a good growth record upto 1964, but then started having problems due to the poor modernization plan of the company; recession in textile industry in 1965 and again in 1969-70; and in-fighting among the family members. In the early 70's two of the grand sons of Mr. Alagappan were associated with the business. Mr. Narayan, 28 years old, was an MBA with a doctorate in Organization Behaviour. Before joining the business he had a successful career as a consultant and trainer. He was incharge of Kanangi Mills in Madurai. Mr. Muthu, 22 years old, was a B.Tech. in textiles and was managing two units of the group in Madurai and Coimbatore. The case facts suggest

that Mr. Narayanan had been able to introduce major changes in the operations and working of Kanangi Mills and the changes were favourably accepted. Mr. Muthu also had certain plans for bringing improvements in the working of the units, but he felt that it would require the consent of the grandfather, and that the grandfather would not agree to the changes. Consequently, the changes did not get implemented.

In the above described case, Mr. Muthu had not worked outside the family business. As such, his dependence on the family business and on the older generation managing the business was high. As a consequence, he found it difficult to introduce the changes based on his knowledge because they would not have been approved by the grandfather based on his experience. Thus, Muthu, the representative of the younger generation experienced intra-personal conflict which owed its origin to the generation gap.

Based on the above we hypothesize that:

Proposition-3:

In a family owned organization, the greater the involvement and dominance of the older generation in family business, and the greater the dependence of the younger generation on family business, the greater will be the intra-personal conflict experienced by the younger generation.

We notice from Kanangi Mills and ABC Engineering (supplement to Ajit Verma, the MBA case) that the top management in family managed business consisted of representatives of the older and the younger generations. This happened due to very rapid growth of both the organizations, creating the need for placing the members of the younger generation in the top management. Any major change affecting the organization required the approval of the top management and thus at top level there was always a felt need for joint decision-making. But due to the difference in the technical knowledge and the experience of the older and the younger generation, their perceptions of reality and their aspirations for growth were likely to differ. This resulted in inter-personal conflict at the top level. In ABC Engineering the father and the son at the top level were in conflict, while in Kanangi Mills the grand-father and the grandsons faced inter-personal conflict.

Based on the above, we hypothesize that:

Proposition-4:

In family owned organizations, the greater the growth rate of the company, the greater will be the need to induct members of the younger generation into the top management, and therefore, the greater are the chances of inter-personal conflict at the top level.

Another cause of generational conflict is the difference in relative importance given by the representatives of the two generations to the affiliative system as against the work system. According to Parikh (1978), the present day manager's life space is fragmented into socio-psychological role space and socio-temporal role space. Socio-psychological role space is defined as the "matrix of social relationships, social tasks, and affiliative system" and socio-temporal role space highlights the nature of task, quality of work and functional interdependence (Parikh, 1978 : 3). The older generation, because of its traditional beliefs and values, likes to emphasize socio-psychological role and demands loyalty from the younger generation. But members of the younger generation, being more professional, may prefer to identify themselves with their professions. Thus, the reluctance to bend ethics by the younger generation to suit the situation, may be one of the causes of inter-personal conflict between two generations. As Khandwalla (1980 : 175) observes, "In most non-professionally managed organizations, there seems to be a strong results orientation, and willingness to bend ethics to suit the situation".

In the last decade, many organizations, being aware of the importance of education, have been systematically



trying to induct management trainees at junior and middle management levels. There are instances of non-acceptance of management trainees by old fashioned senior managers. Virmani (1979) reports that organizations secured a compromise between the old generation managers and the management trainees by assuring the members of the older generation that their promotional opportunities would not be affected and they would be encouraged to get training. By exposing the older managers to new knowledge in the field of management, through continuous education, the knowledge gap between the older and the younger generation can be reduced, reducing the possibilities of conflict.

Based on the above, we hypothesize that :

Proposition-5:

The greater the investment by the organization in upgrading the knowledge base of the older generation, and the lesser the insecurity experienced by the older generation with reference to its career development because of the induction of members of the younger generation, the lesser will be the generational conflict in the organization.

5.0 Inter-Group Conflict:

In this section, we argue that the presence of many cultures, languages, castes, and ethnic groups

is one of the major causes of inter-group conflict in Indian organizations.

Weiner (1978), commenting on the process of modernization, suggests that it has two consequences : (a) it provides incentives and opportunities for mobility and creates the conditions for increasing migration; (b) it nurtures the growth of ethnic identification and ethnic cohesion. These processes are antagonistic; while the former encourages the movement of individuals across cultural, linguistic, and ethnic regions, the latter generates antimigrant sentiments among 'local' people. "Economic and demographic tendencies thus conflict with social, cultural, and political tendencies" (Weiner, 1978 : 3).

Studies in schools, (Hofstede, 1978), and in business organizations (Singer, 1971) suggests that members of a dominant coalition have a tendency to rate people with similar value systems higher in competence. In the Indian context Rice (1958 : 245) observes that "different departments tend to be staffed by different castes or sub-castes and by different ethnic groups . . . . . any difficulties, rivalries, or jealousies between different ethnic groups have been reflected in productivity". While these may reduce intra-group conflict, they increase the

possibilities and intensities of inter-group conflict. Sheth (1981) observes that such work practices result in distorted perceptions and create tension and conflict in the work situation. Some of the comments by Gujarati workers about the departments in which Maharashtrians were in a dominant majority in a factory described by Sheth (1981 : 81) are reproduced below :

"A Marathi worker who joined after my joining here on a similar job now gets Rs.2.25 per day, while I get only Rs.2.00 per day".

"The Marathi workers and the foreman do not train a newly appointed apprentice properly if he is a Gujarati. They fear the Gujarati will master the job and compete with Marathi workers".

"In this workshop a Gujarati worker is told plainly that he has few chances of survival in here. This is the workshop of the Marathi people".

In the struggle for access to resources, ethnic groups create their own resources, the most important being the ethnic infrastructure. In an industrial township, known to the author, Bengalis formed their association and started Durga Pooja. It resulted in the formation

of associations by Keralites, Maharashtrians, and the people from the North, and the celebration of Onam, Ganesh Pooja, and Janmashtami. Though everybody used to participate in the functions, the initiative for organizing the function was usually taken by the respective ethnic groups and there used to be competition amongst the groups to organise better functions than the others.

At the cost of gross simplification and possible bias, we suggest that the interactions in such activities have two consequences : (1) It improves the affiliative bonds within a given ethnic group and also affects the work environment by improved cooperation within a given ethnic group (2) The perception of the staff that such ethnic group affiliation results in favouritism.

Thus, people in Indian organizations attempt to build groups based on caste, creed, language, or religion and these groups become a source of informal power for members of the group. The informal leaders of the groups like to strengthen their position by favouring their group members while distributing rewards. A subjective reward system facilitates favouritism by the boss.

Based on the above discussion, we hypothesize that:

Proposition-6:

Given socio-cultural heterogeneity of the staff working in an Indian organization, the more subjective the reward system, the greater will be perceived socio-cultural favouritism in the distribution of rewards, and the greater will be inter-group conflict in the organization.

A subjective reward system is more likely in an organization whose management is not professionalised. A professional by training is likely to give greater importance to his work-identity rather than to societal-identity. Due to his professional competence, he depends less on his social affiliative system for power. Thus, his decisions about distributing rewards will be affected by performance considerations rather than by considerations of caste, language, or ethnicity.

Based on the above, we hypothesize that:

Proposition-7:

The greater the professionalization of the organization's managers, the less subjective will be the reward system, the lesser the likelihood of favouritism, and the lesser will be inter-group conflict.

In the next section, we review various approaches to conflict resolution and their relevance to the conflicts discussed in the paper.

## 6.0 Approaches to conflict resolution:

In this section, we briefly review some of the prevailing approaches to conflict resolution in industrially developed countries. We look at the possibilities of using these approaches to resolve conflicts in Indian organizations. Some indigenous approaches to conflict resolution and the problems in using them in organizations are also discussed. Finally, we comment on the need for, and means of, integrating these approaches to resolve conflicts in Indian organizations.

According to March and Simon (1958), the organization responds to conflict through four processes: (1) problem-solving, (2) persuasion, (3) bargaining, and (4) politics. In problem-solving, it is assumed that objectives are shared and hence the attempt is to find a solution which can satisfy the shared criteria. In persuasion, though goals may differ they are not taken as fixed. In bargaining, disagreement over goals is taken as fixed, and the attempt is to evolve a solution based on shared values of "fairness". The use of politics in conflict resolution implies that the arena of bargaining is not fixed by the participants. The first two processes are categorized by March and Simon (1958)

as analytical processes, and the last two as bargaining. Commenting on the use of bargaining in the organization, they state: "Bargaining almost necessarily places strains on the status and power systems in the organization. If those who are formally more powerful prevail, this results in a more forceful perception of status and power differences in the organization. If they do not prevail, their position is weakened" (March and Simon, 1958 : 131). In resolving generational conflicts in Indian organization, it is unlikely that the older generation, being status conscious, will prefer bargaining.

The older generation may not prefer analytical approaches. Their exposure to the problem solving approach, which is techniques and data based, is often minimal. Because of their absolute belief in their own experience they prefer to dictate decisions rather than to persuade the younger generation.

In developed countries, OD is extensively used to resolve conflicts (Bennis, 1969; Argyris 1971, 1972; Beckhard, 1969, McGregor, 1967; Schein, 1969; Blake et. al., 1964; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1969; etc.). As identified by French (1969), some of the objectives of OD programs are:

- (a) To increase the incidence of confrontation of organic problems both within groups and between groups.
- (b) To create an environment in which the authority of assigned role is augmented by authority based on knowledge and skill.
- (c) To increase the openness of communication, laterally, vertically and diagonally.

The use of the confrontation meeting, one of the popular techniques of OD, involves the psychological mechanisms of public recognition of interdependence and common fate, expression of hostile feelings towards another group, and exchange of information (Khandwalla, 1977 : 547). In Indian society, **open** confrontation with elders is considered an insult to them and, as such, OD interventions may not be preferred by the older generation.

Thus, we find that conflict resolution mechanisms prevailing in industrially developed societies may be preferred by the younger generation because of their exposure to these methods, and the congruence between their values and the values represented by these approaches. However, it is precisely because of these reasons that the older generation may not prefer these approaches. Thus, the decision about the approach to conflict resolution itself can be a cause of generational conflict in India.



Indigenous Approaches to Conflict - resolution:

- (a) Dharma: Dharma has been one of the major mechanisms of conflict resolution in India society. As defined in Vedic culture, Satya, Yajna, and Tapas are different aspects of Dharma (Munshi, 1961). Satya, or "the truth", stands for the elimination of the discord between thought, word, and deed which splits human personality. The pursuit of Satya can eliminate all intra-personal conflict. Yajna, or sacrifice, stands for eliminating the ego. The Bhagaved Gita (Sri Aurbindo, 1966) says that action without Yajna is bondage. Yajna can minimise or eliminate intra-personal conflicts based on personality clashes and conflict of self-interest. Tapas stands for self-mastery and encompasses truth and non-violence and surrender to higher powers. Tapas, too, reduces both intra-personal and inter-personal conflict by making one self-sufficient and selfless.

Chakaraborty (1983) argues that in the sphere of man-management decision making, effectiveness is primarily a function of the level of mental purity of the decision maker. He suggests a spiritual approach to managing the organization and advocates recourse to Indian sources like the Manusmriti, the Panchatantra,

and the Upanishads to get some valid concepts to manage the organization. Chakraborty (1963 : 20) commenting on Kapp's sociological writing (1968), says that his writing is "extremely potent in destroying all vestiges of self-respect and self-confidence in an Indian reader's mind - especially in that of a budding young Indian who has no prior authentic acquaintance with the pillars of his culture". We argue that unfamiliarity with traditional culture and religion is the reason why Dharma may not be practised by the younger generation for conflict-resolution. In our adaptation to the industrial culture, we may have rejected some of the positive aspects of our traditional culture. However, Satyagraha, as practiced by Gandhiji, in its truest form can be considered nearer to Dharma and hence we review the use of Satyagraha as a mechanism of conflict resolution.

(b) Satyagraha:

Gandhiji showed to the world, first in South Africa and then in India, that non-violence can be effectively used for conflict-resolution. For Gandhiji (1951), Satyagraha was a positive doctrine of resistance. It was active but purified resistance.

It meant 'holding on to truth' or 'insistence on truth'. The soul of the movement was active resistance which finds an outlet in the active force of love, faith, and sacrifice.

Based on the principles of Satyagraha, Gandhiji himself organized a strike in an Ahmedabad textile mill in 1918. The strike was considered to be successful. However, he was aware of the possible losses occurring due to strikes, to both the parties and to society. In an article in the issue of 'Young India' dated 5th October, 1920, the Mahatma said<sup>2</sup> "I know that strikes are an inherent right of the workman for the purpose of securing justice but it must be considered a crime immediately the capitalists accepted the principles of arbitration".

While reviewing industrial conflicts in India, it is difficult to conclude whether strikes have been able to resolve conflicts, but the data definitely suggest that over time the number of disputes, the number of workers involved, and the man days lost have increased substantially in industrial conflicts (Verma, 1981 : 504).

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Subramaniam (1972), see reference.

(c) Mediation:

The traditional Indian system of conflict resolution relies more on third party mediation than on direct confrontation between the two parties (Thaigrajan, 1972). If two brothers, or a father and son, are in conflict, there is always an uncle or an elderly relative on hand to mediate between the two. In the social context also, mediators have been very popular and effective. In villages, Panchas, elderly people working as mediators, are known as Pancha Parmeshwara i.e. mediators are equivalent to God. Indian mythology is also full of evidence about the faith in mediators. In the Mahabharata (Subramaniam, 1965), when the Pandavas reached home with Draupadi, Kunti, their mother decided that all brothers share Draupadi equally. All the Pandavas abided by the decision of the mother, the mediator, without raising any questions. In 'Pancha-Parameshara' a story by Premchand, a famous Hindi story writer, he shows how mediators always rise above their own selfish needs and resolve conflicts as truthfully as possible. All this evidence reflects the attitude of our traditional society towards a mediator.

Voluntary arbitration, as a mechanism of mediation to resolve industrial conflicts came into prominence with the advocacy by Gandhiji, as discussed earlier. But Verma (1981 : 32), observes that inspite of influential advocacy of it in different policy making forums, voluntary arbitration has not taken root as a mechanism for conflict resolution.

In villages the parties in dispute and the mediator belong to the same culture. In addition, they are dependant on each other for their routine life and, as a consequence, build up trust in the mediator. As against this, in the industrial environment, the workers themselves come from different cultures. In addition, the parties in a dispute do not have much faith in a mediator for several reasons. First of all, there are not enough competent mediators who are known or acceptable to both the parties. Secondly, since very often the employer pays the fees of the arbitrator, the employees consider the mediator to be biased (Das, 1982). In addition, the law permits the parties to go for adjudication if they are not happy with the decision of a voluntary arbitrator. There are cases when arbitration awards were taken to courts in writ

proceedings, even at the interlocutory stage (Meher, 1974). In villages, by contrast, there is social pressure to abide by the decisions of the mediator.

Based on the above, we hypothesize that:

Proposition-8:

In a society, the greater the difference between traditional culture and industrial culture, the more difficult it will be to adopt indigenous approaches to resolve conflict in the organization of that society.

(d) Suppression:

Suppression is another way of settling conflicts. Suppression or negation of conflict may owe its origin to child rearing habits and the prevailing norms in a society. In the traditional joint family system, children, particularly, sons, are very well looked after. Parents believe that their sons will become the source of economic support in later life, and through their participation in the rituals of death and mourning, they will guarantee the parents religious merit and righteous passage into the next life (Nandy and Kakkar, 1980). As a consequence, parents go to great lengths to bring up male children. In turn, the children feel indebted to their parents and

elders. In a situation of conflict, members of the younger generation may find it difficult to confront their elders and may feel a sense of guilt if the elders get hurt due to a confrontation. Children are also taught to respect elders and abide by their decisions. It is considered disrespectful to discuss or disagree with one's elders, resulting in a suppression of feelings and emotions. Thus the possibilities of any open ventilation of feelings by the younger generation get diminished, and hence they suppress or negate the conflict.

Based on the above, we hypothesize that:

Proposition-9:

The greater the belief of the younger generation in traditional norms like obedience to elders, the greater will be the use of suppression by the younger generation as a mechanism of conflict resolution and the greater will be the intra-personal conflict experienced by the younger generation.

In summary, Western approaches to conflict resolution as practised in industrially developed countries may not be acceptable to the older generation, and the indigenous approaches to conflict resolution may not be approved by the younger generation. However, simultaneous

existence of the older generation and the younger generation in a large number of Indian organizations is a reality with which we have to live with for a long time to come. Below we discuss some tentative approaches to bridge the gap between the two generations.

Bridging the generation gap:

There is enough evidence to suggest that the older generation realizes the importance of new knowledge. In family owned business houses, the best possible educational facilities are provided to the younger members of the family. The induction of young graduates as management trainees in private and public enterprises is a common phenomenon. Obviously, it must be with the consent of the people in power, quite a few of who may be belonging to the older generation. But beyond that, the older generation finds it difficult to change. The experience gathered over life time becomes part of their identity and to reject it at such a late stage of life can be quite painful, particularly since they may realize that even if they want to, it is difficult for them to acquire new knowledge comparable to that of the younger generation. Under the circumstances, the onus of the initiative to bridge the gap lies with the younger generation.



The younger generation should take the initiative to understand the values and beliefs held by the older generation. It can facilitate their communication with the older generation and the introduction of changes in the organization. One internal change agent was having difficulty in communicating some organizational changes to his director. He was aware of his director's devotion to J. Krishnamurthy. He found a striking similarity between the organization changes planned by him and an article of J. Krishnamurthy. He passed on a copy of the article to his director to convey his ideas of organizational changes and was successful in getting his proposal accepted by the Director (Anonymous, 1980).

Educational and training institutions can play a vital role in developing greater understanding amongst the two generation. The case studies and role-plays relevant to the problems of generational conflict can be included in the course material for management courses and management development programmes. This will provide an opportunity to expose each generation to the view point of the other generation. Educational Institutions and organizations should arrange talks by learned people about Indian culture and its values.

The acceptance of some of the values of our culture like dedication and concern for the system to which one belongs, by the younger generation will help to reduce intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict experienced by them.

According to Professor Pulin Garg,<sup>3</sup> manifested conflict between the two generations is based upon the differences in their approaches to life and work. Members of the older generation identify themselves with their work and organization and hence even enjoy doing very routine work. The members of the younger generation derive their identity from the knowledge they have acquired, and hence they keep changing their organization in pursuit of being able to use their knowledge. A laboratory setting can provide an opportunity to members of the two generations to know their own identity and the identity of the other generation. The evidence from Indian organization suggests that a stranger laboratory is more effective to bring overall changes in participants as compared to family laboratory (Sinha, et. al., 1975).

As discussed earlier, it is the lack of communication between the two generations which results in the non-resolution of conflict. It is suggested that it should be

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<sup>3</sup> It is based on the discussion, the author had with Professor Pulin Garg, IIM, Ahmedabad.

attempted to institutionalize a forum within the organization where the younger and older generations can exchange their grievances. The younger generation may welcome the move, but it will not be easily acceptable to the older generation. Hence, it is suggested that a change-agent, either external or internal, having the confidence of the older generation and aware of the problem of generational conflict in the organization, should attempt to institutionalize the change forum.

A selection system can also be effectively utilised to reduce generational conflict. Members of the younger generation who have worked successfully with members of the older generation in the organization prone to generational conflict need to be identified. By using in-depth interviews, the skills, beliefs and values held by the members of the younger generation in the above organizations should be found out. The organizations which are likely to experience generational conflict should include the above identified skills, values, and beliefs in their screening test for young entrants. This will ensure harmony in relations between the older and the younger generations.

All the above mentioned suggestions to bridge the gap between two generations presupposes the awareness of

conflict and a desire to solve it by the organization. It is in this context, that the need to validate the propositions suggested in the paper becomes pressing. In the last section of the paper, we suggest some approaches to test the propositions developed in the paper.

#### 7.0 Suggestions for testing the propositions:

In Indian organizations, the study of conflict, particularly generational conflict and intergroup conflict caused by socio-cultural heterogeneity, is at a very elementary stage. The studies of generational conflict in the organization have been exploratory in nature and are reported as case studies (Garg et. al., 1976; Kakkar et. al., 1970).

This study has suggested some hypotheses about conflict in organizations which need to be tested. According to Selltiz, et. al. (1976 : 91), "studies testing hypotheses require procedures that will not only reduce bias and increase reliability but will permit inferences about causality. Experiments are specially suited to meeting this latter requirement". However, they themselves admit that many studies concerned with testing hypotheses about causal

relationships cannot be cast in the form of experiments. In the present study also, it is difficult to design the experiments to test the hypotheses. Participation in an experiment necessitates a more permissive attitude towards new knowledge. Representatives of the older generation who are willing to participate in the experiment, may not be true representatives of the older generation. Hence, it is suggested that a field study should be used to test the hypotheses.

An entry strategy for field research implies answering the questions of suitability, feasibility, and suitable tactics (Schatzman et. al., 1973). We are interested in studying generational conflict and inter-group conflict caused by heterogeneity of the staff. Hence, the suitability of the site for hypotheses one to five and hypothesis nine will require that in the organization under study at various levels, particularly at senior levels, representatives of both the generation should be working. Similarly, for testing hypotheses six and seven, there should be heterogeneity in the staff working in the organizations. The criterion of feasibility implies that the researcher should be able to match his resources, in terms of time, mobility, skills, etc. to properties of the organization like size, population, complexity etc.

In the present study, the researcher will have to spend considerable time getting familiar with the organization for data collection, and hence it may be desirable if the organizations chosen could meet both the above mentioned criteria of suitability. This will reduce the number of organization under study and facilitate data collection. The suitable tactics for data collection will be a combination of indepth interviews, systematic observation and questionnaires. Since people may not be consciously aware of generational conflict, it is suggested that by talking to people in the organization and going through the records of the organization, important decisions take by the organization in various functional areas may be identified. The representatives of both generations may be asked to narrate the process of decision-making and their involvement in the decisions. Subsequently, by analysing the interviews, the level of conflict can be interpreted. In addition, Pareek (1982) has suggested a few scales to measure conflict in organization. They can be modified appropriately to meet the requirement. For measuring inter-group conflict, subjectivity of reward system, and sense of insecurity experienced by the older generation with reference to their career development in organization due to induction of younger generation, we have to depend extensively on

indepth interviews. Variables like culture of the organization are to be assessed by researcher based on his systematic observation and understanding of the organization.

As regards classification of the members of the organization into the older and the younger generations staff aged 50 and above can be considered representatives of the older generation as their early socialization would be in pre-independence India. The staff members below 30 years of age can be considered representatives of the younger generation as they are expected to be exposed to the latest technical knowledge.

A correlation test between level of conflict and other variables identified in a given proposition can be carried out to test the propositions.

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