

The EuroIndia Centre: An Example of Indo-European Co-operation

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THE VISION

Michel Sabatier¹ landed in a strange country, survived it and learned to love it. This strange country was India! One realises that it is a brilliant country once the first cultural and psychological shock is overcome. He absorbed all the richness and sanctity of the Indian culture like a sponge. After a point, he was saturated and couldn't absorb anymore.

He also felt frustration at the crass ignorance by most Europeans he would come across of not being able to convey his Indian knowledge and conviction.

It was this saturation and frustration that was the first precondition to the formation of the EuroIndia Centre. The sponge now wanted to share all that it had absorbed. He wanted to share his Indophilia with others and to disseminate the Euro-Indian ideal.

After coming back from India he realised that he was neither European nor Indian, he was a EuroIndian. In Europe, he met people who had a similar experience, but the other way round: Indians who had come to live in Europe and found themselves transformed into EuroIndians. They realised, that they were a breed apart. They were like war veterans who could understand each other but the others could only imagine the experience. One of these Indians was Ashok Kar, who is Michel Sabatier's founding buddy, who graduated from a European business school and stayed on to work and live. He is now the Principle Advisor of the EuroIndia Centre.

They together resolved that if they were to try to bring Europeans and Indians closer together again that would require the creation of a Euro-Indian institutional tool that to their dismay they found out did not exist, though Europe and India have always had very strong cultural and historic ties for centuries.

This surprising institutional absence showed that it was time indeed to renew and revitalise these ties that had suffered a great deal from India's isolationism and try and reverse the latest trends, which did not augur well of future Euro-Indian ties.

The enlarging Europe had been focusing on China when looking East for markets: in the 1990s, European investment in China being 7 times bigger than in India, the emerging India had been focusing on the US when looking west for opportunities: In 2000, India sold 5 times more IT services to the US than to Europe and 7 times more Indians chose the US than Europe for higher education. Europe was clearly losing the battle in the hearts and minds of the New Indians while India was losing the attention and support of the enlarged Europe.

A counter trend had to be developed to correct these unwanted trends. This urgent need was acknowledged by the official European and Indian sides, when they recently signed an EU-India Strategic Partnership Initiative agreement.

Whatever may be the amount of goodwill and means displayed on this auspicious occasion they may be hampered by the lack of Euro-Indian civil society institutions that can support official endeavours at the grassroots level.

Against this promising backdrop, the EuroIndia Centre was set-up, which would serve the cause of a rejuvenated Euro-Indian partnership. It would support the reversal of these trends and help in the mobilization of the European and Indian civil societies, of which it would be a part, by working out suitable strategies and implementing concrete initiatives on the ground.

The idea of the EuroIndia Centre was born and now it was time to conceptualise, institutionalise and most importantly to finance it.

THE CONCEPT

Although the idea developed from a personal and intimate experience, the EuroIndia Centre in the making needed rules, a constitution, a motto and a strong driving force.

The founder members decided that the motto of the EuroIndia Centre would be “Joining hands for a shared future in a multi-polar world”.

It was officially founded in 2001 as the first private institution entirely dedicated to the revival of the age-old Euro-Indian Partnership. The Centre aimed at being a:

1. Congenial crossroad for multi-dimensional exchange.
2. Dedicated source of expert information, analysis and skills.
3. Cross-cultural training centre.
4. Permanent observatory of the two communities.
5. Rallying point for the protagonists of the Euro-Indian Partnership.

A Euro-Indian Board runs the Centre. Its first co-presidents have been Raymond Barre, former French Prime Minister, and Dr. Manmohan Singh, the Prime Minister of India. The Board entrusts the day to day management to a Euro-Indian Secretariat, headed by Michel Sabatier based in La Rochelle and seconded by Rama Naidu from Delhi.

It was important to emphasise that we are not a European outfit looking at India, nor an Indian outfit looking at Europe. We are EuroIndians trying to rebuild bridges between two close friends who have shared millennia of close economic, political and cultural relations but got estranged for four decades only by an accident of history.

We wanted the beginning of a true Euro-Indian dialogue on new lines. It was decided that members would be chosen with care. A would-be EuroIndian has to specify his Euro-Indian motivations, his contribution to the Euro-Indian cause and his expectation from the Centre, before he is accepted in the club. Each application is scrutinised by the Board for its genuineness of purpose and its contribution to the cause and the Centre.

Now came the important question of financing the centre. It was contemplated that the local authorities of La Rochelle, the headquarters of the Centre, and its supporting region, would finance the Centre. This led to several talks with the local authorities of La Rochelle, the Poitou-Charentes Region then headed by Jean-Pierre Raffarin, who went on to become the French Prime Minister. But barring a token subsidy by the latter, this exercise proved vain as it was obviously too early to convince them that a Euro-Indian institution was worth supporting.

With no “easy” public finances, the Centre had to choose between being stillborn or forging ahead. We chose the latter. Out of necessity, we changed our strategy, which proved a blessing in disguise.

We decided to look for corporate financing. Michel Sabatier was crowned with success when he approached his Indian corporate friends. He managed to get 15 000 Euros each from 6 leading Indian groups: Godrej, HDFC, IDFC, Mahindra, Oberoi, Tata. He was less successful with European companies with only Lafarge contributing, as it was either too soon for them or they already had a presence in India and they felt that they did not require therefore the services of a EuroIndia Centre, or they didn't trust the feasibility of such a novel concept. On this occasion, we realised that the Indians see the Europeans with globalised eyes but the latter still have a long way to go before they see the former with a global perspective.

After this initial struggle, with a lot of sweat, tears and toil, further funding was obtained mostly through entry and membership fees. Thereafter, corporate sponsorship came in the wake of specific initiatives such as the EuroIndia Forum in Goa.

THE IMPLEMENTATION

Now that the Centre was up and running, specific steps had to be taken to make it thrive.

THE FIRST STEP: GETTING MEMBERS

With our limited finances and unlimited will to foster a new Euro-Indian partnership, we moved on. Our first priority was to look for quality members in sufficient numbers from both sides to get our novel institutional concept vindicated against all doubters.

We started concentrating on getting new members with a genuine Euro-Indian commitment and the will and skills to promote and organize new initiatives in certain strategic domains such as manufacturing, engineering, biotech and pharmaceuticals, health, information and communication technologies, business process outsourcing, media etc. In the process we also got the funding of our basic needs.

These new members in turn would suggest the co-option of other members. A recruitment momentum was thus created, while sticking to our selective policy.

THE SECOND STEP: LEVERAGING OUR MEMBERSHIP

We realised that we needed stronger communication tools to increase the visibility of the Centre, to rally new members and to foster a more fruitful dialogue among our members: a website, a newsletter and a journal.

These tools would provide a working and congenial bridge between those prime moving forces on both sides interested in a co-operative Euro-Indian dialogue and help them bring about new sustainable Euro-Indian initiatives.

THE THIRD STEP: PROVIDING SERVICES TO MEMBERS *BY* MEMBERS

The City Chapter Networking Scheme

The scheme was put into place in 9 European cities (Brussels, Copenhagen, Fontainebleau, Geneva, Hamburg, Hanover, La Rochelle, Paris, Zürich), 4 Indian cities (Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai) and one Asian city (Singapore).

In each of these cities, one member volunteered to act as a local contact point for fellow-members. Whenever a member travels to any of the above cities, she/he is invited to contact the designated member. With sufficient advance notice, she/he will endeavour to convene a get-together with local members, so that they get a chance to make acquaintance and interact with each other for mutual benefit.

By capitalizing on our members' network, skills and Euro-Indian commitment, the scheme is expected to give value to our members and enhance their sense of community belonging and solidarity, which is crucial to the success of our collective Euro-Indian endeavours.

Such a scheme that addresses the need for occasional face-to-face interaction will be supplemented soon by a Member Community Management System that will address the need for one-to-one interaction on a continuous basis on-line through the Centre's Website.

Cross-Cultural Training Services

The Centre currently provides cross-cultural training services to executives of European companies anxious to explore business opportunities in India and to succeed in their Indian venture. The same is proposed to Indian executives with the help of European training institutions who provide European networking and knowledge.

It is to be noted that the core of the cultural bridging expertise is provided by our own EuroIndian members. We tend to give first preference to requests by our members for the service, so as to give a concrete shape to our motto: "Serving members by members"

THE FOURTH AND CURRENT STEP: LAUNCHING SPECIFIC STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

In 2005, the Centre went into an introspective brainstorming to take stock of the situation and define a strategy for the next 3 years, called Vision 2008.

It helped us define two strategic missions that we want to accomplish, where we believe there is a timely and unfulfilled need for Euro-Indian co-operation in areas that we consider as strategic for Euro-Indian ties and in a format that we see as of mutual interest for Indians and Europeans. After a great deal of interaction between our European and Indian members, we outlined the two following missions:

1: "Urban India 2020: Creating partnerships for growth" in India (Goa), 8-11 Feb., 2007, with the following mission statement:

The Indian government has recently set up a National Urban Renewal Mission, which prioritises investment in urban development. Indian cities have indeed pressing needs to modernize their infrastructure and managerial practises to be able to cope with rapid economic growth and social demands for better living.

European cities have had to undergo the same drastic modernization to adjust to the post-war economic boom and did so quite successfully. Most run a dynamic international city-to-city cooperation programme that facilitates the transfer of proven expertise to which they are keen to add Indian cities, which are awaking to the reality and potential of such field level international cooperation.

As most Indian metro-cities were built along European patterns, European cities are for all these reasons ideally suited to help fellow Indian cities to modernize, provided a congenial exchange platform can be set up that allows the latter to imbibe the best from the former. This is the very purpose of the EuroIndia Forum that will address the key question: How can Indian cities leverage European cities expertise to modernize to mutual benefit? Answer: With practical solutions through co-operation.

2: "Europe 2020: Enhancing growth by leveraging Indian talents", in Europe hopefully in 2008, with the following mission statement:

Europe craves for higher economic growth that would make necessary reforms to adjust to globalisation and make it socially

and politically more acceptable. India's young intellectual talents can help Europe to regain global competitiveness, in spite of her ageing population. How can Europe leverage Indian intellectual talents effectively?

The planned event may touch upon areas such as pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, I.T. and I.T.-enabled services, Business Process Outsourcing etc., where India has emerged as a leading international player.

We think that more of these state-of-the art Indian skills ought to be tapped by Europe on a larger scale than today, if Europe is to succeed in enhancing in overall productivity and creativity in a cost-competitive way.

The EuroIndia Forum in Goa

To a large extent the eventual success of the Centre will hinge on the success of the first of the above two missions, the EuroIndia Forum of Goa, as it would prove its unique relevance in the eyes of all goodwill EuroIndians and encourage them to rally around the Centre for further initiatives, thus creating a snowballing effect that the rapid emergence of India on the international scene will keep fuelling.

It is therefore relevant to go into the fine print of the event. It took us over one year of interaction between our Indian and European members to define a format that various parties from both sides—belonging to various categories—would find appealing, a format that would foster a balanced level playing dialogue between all of them in spite of India being clearly in need of state-of-the-art European urban technical and managerial expertise.

Among the above referred categories, our primary target are Cities, European cities which have a long-standing and fruitful practice of international co-operation with fellow-cities around the world and want to extend it to Indian cities, and Indian cities which have not so far taken advantage of this proven format of international co-operation for tapping the international state-of-the-art urban expertise they need.

We invited 5 large cities on each side to be partners to the Forum, mobilize their prime moving forces to take part in the Forum and lead by example other cities, which may be tempted to follow suit.

Among their prime moving forces, it is hoped that they will bring to the Forum entities that would not have thought of attending on their own for lack of exposure or resources, such as small and medium enterprises, academic institutions, NGO's, individual experts and consultants specialised in urban matters.

It is hoped that participating cities will end up signing co-operation agreements with one or several of their participating counterparts, thanks to a person to person understanding and affinity at a decision-making level that the Forum would have made possible.

Our secondary target are large companies having a business stake in urban renewal and in providing services to cities, be they Indian or European. In the process of their participation, we hope that they will get the best of exposure to potential clients and partners and that actual contracts will follow.

Our third target are academic institutions that specialise in training human resources in the fine art of managing and planning a city, be it an architecture school, a planning or a management institute, etc. It is hoped that such institutions from India, which are keen to upgrade and internationalise their curriculum and faculty, will find a keen match among European participants so that a co-operation tie-up can ensue.

Our fourth target are N.G.O.'s having a stake in the better management of cities and the improved welfare of their denizens. Operating at grassroots level, they have accumulated a wealth of practical experience of urban ills and often know their cure that they sometimes find it difficult to communicate to city officials or corporate civic service providers. They could use the Forum as a stage to share their views with all the above mentioned city stake-holders.

By bringing together the European and Indian spheres around essential issues, Urban India 2020 will provide each participating individual, firm and institution with:

- A greater visibility of their strategy in India, in the public and institutional eye
- A network of high-level corporate and institutional contacts throughout India and Europe
- Better awareness of emerging opportunities

If you have a stake in the betterment of cities, if you have the interest and skills to help Indian cities modernize, then the EuroIndia Forum is a unique occasion not to be missed: the first such event where fellow Indian and European urban stakeholders meet and exchange on their best practices in order to find mutually beneficial co-operative avenues which over a period of time will hopefully have a meaningful and positive impact on the fate of Indian cities and of Euro-India cooperation overall and in the urban field in particular.

You'll freely interact with a cross section of the top 200 urban stakeholders, decision makers and opinion leaders from Europe and India, be they ministers, mayors, civic officials and experts, C.E.O.'s, academics, N.G.O. managers...

You'll acquire quick yet in-depth domain update and influence on domain policies with a prime opportunity to further your own agenda through hands-on discussions with key domain players through dissemination and lobbying.

You'll be able to network informally with other high level participants in the congenial location of Goa with enhanced mutual cultural understanding brought about by prior cross-cultural training, cultural entertainment and interfacing provided by the EuroIndian members of the Centre. Welcome to Goa!

NOTES

¹ Michel Sabatier, graduated from the Ecole de Hautes Etudes Commerciales in 1974, and worked as Commercial Attaché at the French Embassy in New Delhi and the General Consulate in Bombay. Out of the last 31 years, about half have been spent in India as a resident, notably from 1983 to 1997 when he set up and ran the South Asia representative office of a European bank from Mumbai. Sabatier is currently the founding Secretary General of The EuroIndia Centre. He is married to an Indian national and conversant with Hindi.