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Read to Lead

## Food for Thought

SUHEL SETH : FRI JUL 06 2007, 17:23 HRS

Shombit sengupta is a Bengali who has adapted to his adopted country, France, much like a Bengali takes to fish. But it is the curiously titled *Jalebi Management* that unravels the tubular structure, as Sen (this is what they call him in Europe, he tells us) says, of life in the world of management. *Jalebi Management* is a fascinating book only because it is written by someone who has never run companies; in fact, Sengupta only advises them and his advice is largely in the design area.

Therefore what you get is a very basic overview of management honed by the years that Sengupta has spent between Calcutta, where he landed up as a refugee torn by religious separatism as he calls it, and Paris, where, Zidane-like, he came to terms with 15-franc jalebis and the whole midnight revelry which Algerians committed in a city not entirely theirs.

The essential premise of the book is pithy and true. The world of management is increasingly getting riddled with complexity and a discomfort with the status quo. It is something that should delight (and not scare) the CEO because from this discomfort arises the need to do something about it.

Status quo breeds complacency which is what we see missing in today's competitive environment, which is why he begins brilliantly with the million versus billion mindset, arguing that the million mindset (the Americas and Europe) can never understand the needs, the pressures and the aspirations of the billion-mindset people (China and India), almost presenting a case why we in India must be content with a *Shatabdi Express* rather than aspire to a *TGV* as in his native France.

In this journey to present life in the world of management as a jalebi, Sengupta covers a lot of ground. In fact, I believe, a little too much.

The reader travels from the travails of the 14th district of Paris to the epic film *The Dreamer* that Bernardo Bertolucci produced in 2003 to talk about an evolving society with greater permissiveness and here, Sengupta argues, lie the same analogies qua management. Various kinds of promoters and different sets of values drive companies — from the kind of promoter who is god to the kind of company that is Apple.

Where the book scores tremendously is the broad brushstrokes of social engineering coupled with Sengupta's own views on all that impacts us, which he is able to transmit succinctly. Thus the theories of management are no longer theories.

There is an obvious French bias in the book: almost all examples have their origins in France — be it the re-interpretation of the art of Egypt as reflected in I.M. Pei's glass pyramid outside the Louvre to the changes that have been witnessed in French culture to the visible architecture of Centre Pompidou. The brilliance of Sengupta's book lies in the fact that it is management made both easy and, if I may add, very edible.

Only a Bengali settled in Paris would extend his pining for jalebis to the title of a management book. Unlike most management books, the examples transcend the routine company case studies and are instead historical truths on the one hand and researched experiences on the other — which is why the book is as practical as perhaps eating a jalebi and is as complex as making one.

But then Sengupta has always been the maverick whom the general world of advertising and marketing has frowned upon for his avant-garde style. I like his comments on the need for renovation and his indictment of the Indian Establishment for being unwilling to look at scientific renovations of heritage.

The good thing is that this book tells us he hasn't changed. This is a must-read book. If nothing else, it is a perfect ode to the humble jalebi.