

# Pursuing an MBA Degree in India: An Analysis of Barriers and Motivations for Men and Women

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## Abstract

Across the globe, graduate management education is known for providing a competitive edge in a variety of industries for both men and women. India, in particular, is an area in which management education is becoming increasingly popular (Mahajan, 2006). However, Indian culture only recently began to promote the advancement of women, who were historically viewed as inferior to men in terms of career competence. The liberation underway, which includes increased academic and professional opportunities for women (Kosambi, 2000), coincides with the recent progression of Indian society and government (Santosh, 2005).

Given the recent transition, cultural influences might have an impact on decisions to pursue advanced education and career paths. This paper will identify the decision-making process of Indian women in comparison to Indian men as they pursue an MBA degree. In 2005, the Graduate Management Admission Council<sup>®</sup> (GMAC<sup>®</sup>) conducted the mba.com Registrants Survey. This study of the 1,297 Indian citizens who participated in that survey examines any potential differences in the barriers and motivations Indian participants associated with the pursuit of an MBA degree. The examination provides a better understanding of female applicants from India based on characteristics that impact their decision to pursue an MBA degree, such as the culture of the nation.

The increasingly progressive nature of modern India may explain the annual increases in prospective MBA students of Indian citizenship registering to take the GMAT<sup>®</sup> exam, as reported from the mba.com Registrants Survey (Schoenfeld, 2005a; 2005b). According to a recent study on geographic trends, India was the number one country in Asia to which GMAT<sup>®</sup> examinees sent their score reports in 2001 and 2005 (Peyton, 2005a). At the same time, business schools all over the world are engaging in recruiting efforts to attract these and other international applicants, as well as female applicants in general, as part of the fierce competition to bring gender diversity and cultural diversity to MBA programs (Schoenfeld, 2006).

Indian women are an exceptionally interesting part of the gender and cultural diversity equation. Gender roles in Indian society have been historically commonplace, and in some parts of the country they still survive (Santosh, 2005). From an educational perspective, Indian women have been provided with limited opportunities for education and advancement until recently (Kosambi,

2000). From a cultural perspective, the norm for a woman in some instances continues to encompass more of a focus on family and traditions rather than education. However, the more educated society becomes, the further people move away from gender roles, oppression, and poverty. As India strives for economic and social development, Indian society is likewise recognizing a place for women in the corporate world. Yet there remains some pressure to conform to traditional roles within families, which continues to create barriers.

Around the globe, women often face more barriers than men do in pursuit of an MBA degree, and the motivations of women commonly differ from those of men (Marks & Edgington, 2006). The impact of culture and sociological factors into the educational outlook in India is what makes India unique from other nations. Also noteworthy from a management education perspective is the abundance of B-schools available in India. There are currently over 950 B-schools approved by the All India Council for Technical Education (A.I.C.T.E.) in various

categories, including the Indian Institutes of Management (I.I.M.'s), university departments, and autonomous private institutes (Joshi, 2006). The proliferation of MBA programs in India is resulting in about 10,000 MBA graduates every year (Joshi, 2006).

This study focuses on the barriers and motivations for women and men from India in pursuit of an MBA degree for a comparative analysis. The mba.com Registrants Survey tracks the progression of students through the MBA pipeline and provides business schools all over the world with information that can be utilized for such purposes as marketing, academic program development, and developing an understanding of student goals and agendas. The survey reveals information on the decision-making process that those prospective students, including Indian women, face when deciding to pursue an MBA degree. Responses collected by the mba.com Registrants survey made by Indian citizens pertaining to the motives and the impediments associated with management education are compared by gender to elaborate on trends within India.

## **Background**

### **India**

Principles of management are not the same from nation to nation. In India, a hierarchical system is accepted with its obligations and duties (Lewis, 2006). Many businesses in India are family owned, and generations are predetermined to carry on the trade of the elder in the family. A good education and strong work ethic are encouraged, but nepotism is traditional. In addition, Hinduism governs social behavior in India, and women show great deference to men (Kosambi, 2000). These traditions, among others, historically provided men with superiority over women in the business arena. As India approaches status as the most populous nation, thinking big, and thinking globally is becoming a social norm. The economic and social needs for advancement encourage the inclusion of women in the corporate sector, and equality for women is quickly turning into a nationwide debate. Bangalore, advertised as the Silicon Valley of India, represents the career-minded and goal-oriented working class (Lewis, 2006). The significance of this small city becoming commercialized is important because it representative of the progression of the nation as a whole. Education and experience influence such factors, and management education in particular can

be linked to each of these aspects. Meanwhile, more women are becoming involved in business, technology, and the government of India. These women are motivated and interested in India's progression, and so for these women, pursuing an MBA may be an ideal option.

Hofstede (1980) writes that social systems can only exist because human behavior is not random, but to some extent predictable. Culture and religion are highly regarded in India, and family traditions are, thus, heavily regarded and embedded into Indian society. However, progression is a long-term endeavor, especially for a sizable nation like India. The taboos of women becoming independent and self-sufficient in the business world still remain to some extent (Santosh, 2005).

Indian women interested in pursuing an MBA outside of India face added resistance, as relocation presents added scrutiny from some due to the cultural tradition of women leaving home only for marriage. Yet, recent survey results from the 2006 Global MBA® Graduate survey support evidence of this progressive practice, with women increasingly travelling abroad for management education. Some of these Indian citizens ultimately seek permanent residency outside their home country while others gain professional experience abroad after their MBA program and return to India. The allocation of female Indian citizens who seek permanent residency outside of India is 36% in comparison to those who return after working for a year, which is 26% of the 293 Indian citizens who responded to the Global MBA® Graduate survey in 2006. These percentages indicate substantial qualitative and quantitative differences. Because culture is so eminent in India, working for the good of the public and for the good of the nation is seen as more respectable than venturing out into a different nation and becoming a foreigner in that social system.

The Indian government liberalized the business education market over the 1990s, resulting in a rapid growth of business schools offering programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels (Gupta, 2003). One might argue that these changes to the education market were an effort to keep educated Indian citizens within India to help with the country's economic development and were influenced by the importance of culture and following the rhetoric that culture has set within Indian society.

Meanwhile, the interest Indian citizens hold in pursuing an MBA degree continues to grow. The percentage of GMAT® score reports being sent to schools in India from Indian citizens has more than tripled from 2001 to 2005, while interest in the United States from this group declined 14.37% (Peyton, 2005a). In 2005, India was the nation with the largest percentage increase in test-taker volume, with an 18% increase in GMAT® tests taken from residents of India. Peyton also found that though Indian citizens still prefer to study in the U.S., there is increased interest from Indian citizens in studying close to home, as well as abroad in Europe and Canada (Peyton, 2005a). GMAT® candidate data for the 2004-05 testing year reveals that India and China were the top two countries in terms of GMAT® test-taker volume outside of the U.S. Although these countries may be in close geographic proximity, interest in graduate business school from women in these countries is quite different. The percentage of female test takers from China is 56%, versus 23% for India.

Regardless of whether they reside in India while attempting to attain higher education or choose to hurdle the opposition and study outside of India, there are undoubtedly barriers for women in the education arena. However, emergence of new business schools enables significant shifts in preferences of international test takers around the globe, and literacy campaigns and political movements, in particular, may be generating opportunity for social mobilization in India. In fact, the Indian government is funding financial support to colleges and universities in India to provide on-campus housing for women to achieve gender equity in access to higher education, according to the 2005-2006 Annual Report published by the Department of Secondary and Higher Education in the Government of India. As a result of such initiatives, the women of India today are much more empowered and motivated than they were thirty years ago.

## **Barriers**

Reservations associated with continuing education are commonplace across cultures. Concerns related to adequacy, finances, and the demands of being a student are worthy of serious consideration to potential applicants (Marks and Edgington, 2006). In India, barriers that relate to adequacy are further related to the responsibilities and norms society traditionally placed on women. The dependent role women have endured or may in some areas still endure in India does not promote financial independence in most cases, and the time and dedication necessary for successful MBA student life could present a struggle for Indian women who still face the demands of their traditions and culture to marry and procreate. The barriers derived from the 2005 mba.com Registrants Survey are reflective of the major concerns that deal with competence, funding, and the demands of being an MBA student.

## **Motivations**

Motivation associated with seeking a higher level of education can be based on a variety of factors. Aside from a general sense of accomplishment, the motivation associated with pursuing an MBA degree is targeted towards augmenting or modifying an occupational area. Professional credentials attained by gaining management education provide a competitive edge to remain marketable in the corporate sector. Management education can also prompt a change in profession due to gained expertise in a specialized arena of the business industry. The confidence gained by an MBA education further empowers MBA graduates to pursue advancement or to revolutionize their career path. In India, motivations for men and women align with such generalized aspects as the nation develops.

## Methodology

### Sample

The mba.com Registrants survey was first launched in 2003 by GMAC®. This survey invites participants registering on mba.com to respond to various questions designed to track the progression of prospective students through the MBA pipeline from initial consideration to enrollment. The primary objective of the survey is to develop a profile of these prospective applicants. Of the 1,297 Indian citizen respondents to the 2005 mba.com Registrants Survey, 1,078 were male and 219 were female. Responses to specific survey questions concerning the

decision-making process, including motivations and barriers, were collected and analyzed.

### Variables

In the 2005 mba.com Registrant’s Survey conducted by GMAC®, the question relating to motivations in the mba.com Registrants Survey is worded, “My reason for pursuing graduate management education is because it will...” With this question, the survey questionnaire provides 14 statements that relate to what motivates these prospective students. These motivations, listed in Table I, were to be ranked by the respondent on a 7-point scale from “very true to me” to “not at all true”.

Table I. Motivations
Provide me with an opportunity for more challenging/interesting work
Give me a sense of personal satisfaction and achievement
Be a part of my planned career development
Allow me to obtain the professional credentials I need for advancement
Help me get the respect I deserve at work
Help me to develop the confidence I need to succeed
Allow me to transition from my current career path to a new one
Allow me to change occupational areas
Allow me to expand my international employment opportunities
Provide me the right connections to get a good job in the future
Help me achieve my goal of starting my own business
Help me develop the skills necessary to do my job
Allow me to remain marketable
Improve my long-term income and financial stability

The 2005 mba.com Registrants Survey conducted by GMAC® also asked participants to indicate how 15 types of potential reservations impacted their decision to pursue an MBA degree. Respondents rated whether the barriers were true on the same 7-point scale used for the motivations. The fact that the majority of barriers deemed

to be untrue to women also align with the progressive liberalization of the nation previously reviewed is notable. The reservations included in the survey are listed in Table 2. The analysis of these given motivations and barriers will explain any statistical differences specific to Indian citizens between genders.

Table 2. Barriers
The demands of graduate business school on my time and energy may be too great
It may require me to postpone marriage, having a child or other personal plans
It would severely limit the time I have for people who are important to me
It may require more money than I have available
The economy/job prospects are too uncertain
It may require me to take on large financial debt
I may not receive the same benefits others will
It may require me to delay accepting attractive job opportunities
It is too intimidating
My undergraduate academic record may be a barrier for me
My employment history may be a barrier for me
My scores on admissions tests may be a barrier for me
The recommendations I need to get may be a barrier for me
The essays I have to write may be a barrier for me
The interviews I may have to have may be a barrier for me

**Analysis**

The purpose of this paper is to compare the proportions of males and females that deemed the given motivations and barriers to be true. Significance testing of differences in proportions was conducted to determine whether the barriers and motivations associated with pursuing an MBA degree, as indicated on the 2005 mba.com Registrants Survey, were similar for the population of male and female prospective MBA students in India. Differences of 20% or less were considered, a priori, to be equivalent.

Equivalence was demonstrated by rejecting the null hypothesis that the proportions of male and female Indian MBA students indicating that a particular barrier or motivation differed by more than the criterion of 20%. The 95% confidence intervals around the observed difference in proportions is:

$$(\hat{p}_1 - \hat{p}_2) \pm 1.96 \sqrt{\frac{\hat{p}_1(1 - \hat{p}_1)}{n_1} + \frac{\hat{p}_2(1 - \hat{p}_2)}{n_2}}$$

where  $p_1$  and  $p_2$  refer to the male and female observed proportions, and  $n_1$  and  $n_2$  refer to the number of males and females responding to the question.

If the upper or lower bound of the confidence interval did not exceed 20%, the null hypothesis that there is a difference between the barriers and motivations to an MBA degree for Indian women and men was rejected. The proportions analyzed in this study were the proportions of male and female respondents indicating that the motivation or barrier was “very true to me.” The other points of the scales represent less than full agreement.

**Results**

Table 3 provides information on each of the barriers included in the survey and the percentage of males and females for whom these barriers were very true plus the differences between these percentages and the 95% confidence intervals. The lower and upper bounds of the 95% confidence interval do not exceed  $\pm 20\%$ . As a result, the null hypothesis of a difference greater than 20% is rejected for all of the assessed barriers. The most essential barrier Indian men and women face is the unavailability of adequate funding.

Table 3. Barriers Reported for Indian Citizens, by Gender

Barriers	% of Indian Population for Whom the Barrier Holds True		(P <sub>1</sub> -P <sub>2</sub> )	95% Confidence Interval	
	Male N = 1078	Female N = 219		Lower bound	Upper bound
The demands of graduate business school on my time and energy may be too great	8.6%	10.5%	-1.90%	-6.29%	2.49%
It may require me to postpone marriage, having a child or other personal plans	13.1%	10.5%	2.60%	-1.93%	7.13%
It would severely limit the time I have for people who are important to me	7.1%	5.5%	1.60%	-1.79%	4.99%
It may require more money than I have available	34.0%	29.7%	4.30%	-2.38%	10.98%
The economy/job prospects are too uncertain	5.0%	6.8%	-1.80%	-5.38%	1.78%
It may require me to take on large financial debt	29.8%	26.9%	2.90%	-3.58%	9.38%
I may not receive the same benefits others will	3.7%	4.1%	-0.40%	-3.26%	2.46%
It may require me to delay accepting attractive job opportunities	6.9%	4.1%	2.80%	-0.23%	5.83%
It is too intimidating	2.2%	3.2%	-1.00%	-3.49%	1.49%
My undergraduate academic record may be a barrier for me	10.4%	8.2%	2.20%	-1.87%	6.27%
My employment history may be a barrier for me	4.8%	6.8%	-2.00%	-5.57%	1.57%
My scores on admissions tests may be a barrier for me	7.1%	12.3%	-5.20%	-9.81%	0.59%
The recommendations I need to get may be a barrier for me	5.8%	5.0%	0.80%	-2.41%	4.01%
The essays I have to write may be a barrier for me	4.1%	5.9%	-1.80%	-5.14%	1.54%
The interviews I may have to have may be a barrier for me	3.9%	2.7%	1.20%	-1.24%	3.64%

Table 4 provides the percentages of men and women from India who deemed the given motivations to be true for them along with the observed difference. There was no significant difference between Indian males and females on motivational factors when deciding to pursue an MBA degree, and all motivational factors seem to be represented

by the majority of both genders. It seems that Indian women and men are most motivated by the opportunity for more challenging and interesting work. Yet, interestingly, there is enormous variation amongst the barriers that hold true for the given sample.

Table 4. Motivations Reported for Indian Citizens, by Gender

Motivations	% of Indian Population for Whom the Motivation Holds True		(P <sub>1</sub> -P <sub>2</sub> )	95% Confidence Interval	
	Male N = 1078	Female N = 219		Lower bound	Upper bound
Provide me with an opportunity for more challenging/interesting work	66.3%	70.8%	-4.50%	-11.15%	2.15%
Give me a sense of personal satisfaction and achievement	61.8%	72.6%	10.80%	-17.38%	-4.22%
Be a part of my planned career development	61.8%	66.2%	-4.40%	-11.30%	2.50%
Allow me to obtain the professional credentials I need for advancement	59.0%	68.5%	-9.50%	-16.32%	-2.68%
Help me get the respect I deserve at work	31.9%	34.2%	-2.30%	-9.17%	4.57%
Help me to develop the confidence I need to succeed	42.1%	53.0%	10.90%	-18.14%	-3.66%
Allow me to transition from my current career path to a new one	47.5%	47.5%	0.00%	-7.25%	7.25%
Allow me to change occupational areas	33.2%	35.6%	-2.40%	-9.34%	4.54%
Allow me to expand my international employment opportunities	57.0%	64.8%	-7.80%	-14.78%	-0.82%
Provide me the right connections to get a good job in the future	43.2%	53.4%	10.20%	-17.44%	-2.96%
Help me achieve my goal of starting my own business	38.8%	33.3%	5.50%	-1.39%	12.39%
Help me develop the skills necessary to do my job	43.9%	53.0%	-9.10%	-16.34%	-1.86%
Allow me to remain marketable	52.7%	58.9%	-6.20%	-13.37%	0.97%
Improve my long-term income and financial stability	55.8%	63.0%	-7.20%	-14.25%	-0.15%

## Discussion

Considering the characteristics of the culture eminent in India, it is interesting to see that 33% of the women in the population are motivated by the goal to “start their own business” and 34% of women are motivated by getting the respect they deserve at work. The motivation to “start my own business,” in particular, resulted in the broadest range of confidence intervals with the upper bound, reaching 12.39%. Entrepreneurship, interestingly, is a typically common motivation amongst minorities, as respect and recognition is more attainable in a self-made business as

opposed to a large corporation (Edgington & Marshall, 2005). The reality of a glass ceiling and subsequent discriminating factors associated with promotions to executive positions is all too real for minorities and women across the globe. The 5% difference between Indian men and women motivated by the desire to start their own business is important because the difference is representative of this reality. Women in India are engaging in business management; however, in other parts of the world their minority status and gender may work against them. As a result, the acknowledgment and

accomplishment that comes with starting a business may seem more desirable. Female entrepreneurs have made huge strides in business during the past decade (Thorp, 2004). Keeping Indian culture in mind, it is possible that entrepreneurship is an increasingly popular motivation for women because it enables a more controlled balance between home and work life. Plus, there has been an enormous effort put into female entrepreneurship by the public and private sectors, and women are beginning to realize they can do it (Bloomfeld, 2004).

Before the nation of India was liberalized by its government, the idea of women in the corporate world was unfathomable. Perhaps as a result, Indian women are most motivated by the greater opportunity for more interesting and challenging work. Meanwhile, as the nation of India has progressed and women have been encouraged to become educated and independent, it appears that the motivations of these women have not differed from those of the men. Perhaps the inclusion of women into the corporate arena itself is a motivating factor for everyone in India to better the nation and its people by way of education and business savvy.

Interestingly, the perceived barriers of Indian women and men are equivalent as well. The demonstration of equivalence in this analysis shows that no particular barrier or motivation was representative of a minimum of 20% of the population, indicating no statistical significance. As such, literature that notes the liberalization of India and government efforts to alleviate the oppression of women in India is further supported by the findings of this study.

In fact, for all barriers, the lower and upper bound confidence intervals did not represent more than 20% of the female or male population indicating equivalence in the barriers faced by men and women of India. The results show that, contrary to India's cultural rhetoric before liberalization, women do not perceive many barriers for them when deciding to pursue an MBA degree. Interestingly, the importance placed on marriage in Indian culture did not emerge as very relevant to these prospective MBA students. Traditional Indian culture commonly treats marriage and bearing children as a necessary practice, which inevitably places pressure on women from their family. The observed rate of only 10% of women who find this to be a true barrier for them contradicts such tradition, perhaps as a reflection that the women being analyzed for this study are no longer

oppressed. Even more interesting is that more men (13%) find this to be a true barrier for them. When demonstrating equivalence in a significance test, this reservation was only represented by a maximum of 7% of the total population of Indian citizens.

Given that the upper bound confidence interval for all of the potential barriers does not exceed 20%, equivalence between male and female Indian citizens is demonstrated. The barriers that yielded the highest difference between males and females focused on the financial considerations of pursuing an MBA degree. With regard to available funds and large debt, 34% of the male and 30% of the female Indian respondents indicated that this was a true barrier in pursuing their management education. However, confidence intervals for these observed calculations only reached to about 11%. The barrier with the least impact on both genders of Indian citizens is the perception that management education may be too intimidating for them. This data collected is reflective of the literature cited previously, which states that education is becoming more significant in India and that women are becoming less oppressed as the nation engages in social mobilization. The high percentage of true motivations for both genders is also promising, and business schools can remain hopeful that more applicants with a diverse background from India will continue to inundate their programs. Perhaps India can find relief as MBA degrees play catalyst for the economic development the nation will continue to endure.

## **Conclusion**

The null hypothesis that there is a difference in the barriers and motivations of prospective MBA students who are Indian women and men was rejected and equivalence was demonstrated. The women of India are just as motivated as the men are to obtain an MBA degree, and the barriers faced by both genders do not result in differentiation. This information is important because it is reflective of the progressive nature of India today and the progress women are making around the world, as literature that references women in the corporate world has historically provided a level of discrepancy between men and women. Considering that obtaining more female applicants to business schools is also often a strategic imperative for business schools worldwide, it is relevant to understand that the motivations and barriers they endure may not result in differentiation from men. These



similarities may in fact be indicative of a possible increase in women attending business schools globally in the near future. Though there are fewer women than men who pursue an MBA degree in India, it is noteworthy that the number of women who enter the MBA pipeline is increasing.

Differences by gender in any nation may be impacted by factors not analyzed in this study, such as age, income, and work experience. Directions for future research, to develop a better understanding of the business school applicant pool in India, could analyze these factors to obtain further validation in either demonstrating equivalence or the lack thereof. Because the education industry in India is rapidly developing, as is the nation itself, it would be interesting to analyze other factors associated with pursuing an MBA degree in addition to motivations and barriers. The economic and social future of India will undoubtedly be

greatly impacted by the education of its people. Today there may be fewer women than men who are trying to enter the business world, but if they are equally motivated, women may be leading India to economic and social reform at a higher level tomorrow.

### Contact Information

For questions or comments regarding study findings, methodology or data, please contact the GMAC Research and Development department at [research@gmac.com](mailto:research@gmac.com).

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