



**COLUMN > CAREERS**  
**RAVI**  
**MACHIRAJU**

# The new conquistadors

Taking a leaf from their country's pacifist history, Indian business leaders show that the way to respond to corporate brutality is by giving back, not striking back.

**S**hobhaa De was in town recently and this magazine's inexhaustible editor organised a literary salon, reading from her latest book and a tete-a-tete with Singapore's venerable thought-guru Kishore Mahbubani of *Can Asians Think?* fame.

As is her wont, La De held sway and easily handled most questions with her inimitable style of brazen political incorrectness and acute insight into hard-

core reality regarding India and Indians. To kick-start the discussion, Kishore posed a brilliant question – why is it that India with so many hundreds of millions of people meekly accepted colonial slavery for centuries while Iraq with only 10 million people, traumatised by Saddam and his genocidal wars, is putting up such an interminable fight against the greatest army the world has ever seen?

That one question though deftly deflected by De, has a fascinating premise. For one thing, there was never such thing as “One India” with one army and a unified chain of command and populace until Sardar Patel and 1947, and some will argue that it is still a tenuous bond.

India was always a few hundred independent kingdoms and feudal land banks dominated in some measure by some great empire of the time. Hence every invasion meant the aggressor was always “fighting some other kingdom”, mostly a rival or an enemy king, ruling out a unified uprising against this “foreigner”.

In fact our history is full of Jaisinghs and Mir Jafars who could not only think but be excellent counter-agents and fifth columnists with vile machinations and stratagems that brought down perfectly strong kingdoms and handed them on a platter to the enemy.

What's all this got to do with business today? It looks like Indians are learning a few new mind games and some daring and dynamic businessmen are taking on huge western establishments and winning!

Take for example, the Arcelor-Mittal battle, detailed in the book *Cold Steel* as a bruising battle between the “old world” Frenchman Guy Dolle – with his whole prejudiced apparatus of support including the governments of

two powerful European countries, the business establishment, and the financial community – and Lakshmi Narayan Mittal, a man who came apparently from nowhere but who could certainly out-think and change the way the West viewed Indian business families.

Mittal, of course, is a high-profile industrialist but he is not the only one known for “thinking out of the box”. Infosys founder Narayana Murthy's story and philosophy is well-known. His company's customer base averages a 100-per-cent rise every year, he sits on a prime ministerial task force on developing technology which he believes is key to eradicating poverty, and he is a philanthropist, specially in the area of education. Many middle-class Indians, who migrated to the United States seeking quality education in pursuit of their dreams of affluence, are also now extremely aware of their social debt to India and network extensively within their community to find ways of “giving back”.

As Murthy says, “In India, history equals hurdle; and where you have two hundred years of “mindsets” to contend with, changing it is more than wishing it away or blasting it with PR.”

This is where “thinking differently and acting on it” comes into the picture and Indian entrepreneurs like Murthy are showing the way to corporate social responsibility. These are the change-agents of our time for whom “giving back” – not “striking back” – is the new mantra. And this is why India reacted the way it did to its oppressors. **is**

> Ravi Machiraju, who is based in Singapore, is the founder and CEO of Maxima Global Executive Search.



Shobhaa De at  
“India Se-India Club  
Literary Salon”.

PHOTO: SAM KUMAR

Created with

**nitroPDF<sup>®</sup>** professional

download the free trial online at [nitropdf.com/professional](http://nitropdf.com/professional)