

India, Culture and society

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India is so diverse, with so many different ethnic, religious and linguistic communities, that it is hardly possible to speak of its culture and society, better to speak of its multiplicity of cultures and societies. In the Fifties, Nehru² was portraying India as 400 million distinct men and women, all different one from the other, all living in a universe of personal thoughts and feelings. Those 400 million people are today over 1.13 billion³.

There may be, however, a unity. As Nehru also said: *“I was (...) fully aware of the diversities and divisions of Indian life, of classes, castes, religions, races, different degrees of cultural development. Yet I think that a country with a long cultural background and a common outlook of life develops a spirit that is peculiar to it and that is impressed on all its children, however much they may differ among themselves”*⁴.

Consequently this paper on Indian culture and society, in order to catch some of this diversity, consciously operates a selection in its object and orientation. That is a rational choice though Indian experience is almost always emotional, but hopefully this selection will offer some insight into what Nehru calls the “peculiar spirit” of India.

My main orientation will be, according to the theme of this conference, how present day India, with its social structures taking root over two thousand years, has been facing modernity. What social and cultural challenges has it been facing, what answers has it been offering? Nehru again said: *“Ancient India (...) was a world in*

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² Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1864) was a major political leader of the Congress Party, a pivotal figure in the Indian independence movement and the first Prime Minister of Independent India (1950-1964).

³ *Census of India* - estimate for March 10, 2008.

⁴ Nehru, J. *The Discovery of India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1946, 1997, p. 59.

*itself, a culture and a civilization which gave shape to all things. Foreign influences poured in and often influenced that culture and were absorbed*⁵. What about today?

Our hypothesis is that India has the very capacity which gives it unity, always to come back to itself: even today it still presents a unique type of social structure, the caste system, and culture to the world. Here stands its unique way of answering the issues of the modern world.

To start with a tale

Let us begin with a famous tale of the *Panchatantra*, a Sanskrit collection of animal fables in verse and prose, which is said to have been composed in the 2nd century BC, and that has inspired Aesop and La Fontaine. Quoting Hindu fables or legends is not just an erudite exercise for academics but rather it is faithful to Indian popular culture, a mixture of tradition, history, myth and legend inherited from the *Panchatantra*, the pan-indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and shared by every Indian, whoever she or he may be, illiterate, living in a remote village or educated in one of the thirty six Indian cities that account for more than five millions persons. This cultural background still exerts a powerful influence on his or her life, and constitutes a cultural hyphen between the rural (72% of Indian population, *Census 2001*) and urban India, two worlds divided in terms of development and cultural influence of the West. Still, the villager and the urban elite will both know about the fable of the Sage's daughter.

The Sage's daughter

Once upon a time there lived a sage on the banks of a river. He and his wife did not have any children. One day when the sage was praying in the middle of the river, an eagle happened to pass by and the eagle dropped a female mouse in the hands of the sage. The sage found the mouse in his hands on opening his eyes, and took it home to his wife.

On reaching home, he talked to his wife about the mouse and they decided to convert the mouse into a young baby girl. The sage and his wife began to take care of the girl child and brought her up as their daughter. The child grew day by day to a beautiful maiden by the age of sixteen. At this age, the sage decided to find a match for

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 62

the girl. He and his wife decided that the Sun God would be an ideal match for their girl.

So the sage prayed for the Sun God to appear, and once he appeared, asked him to marry his daughter but his daughter said, "Sorry! I cannot marry the Sun God because he is very intense and I will be reduced to ashes in his heat and light." The sage was displeased and asked the Sun God to suggest a possible groom. The Sun God suggested the name of the Lord of the Clouds, for the cloud can easily stop the rays of the sun.

The sage then prayed for the Lord of the Clouds and once he appeared he took him to his daughter. The daughter, once again, decided not to accept him as her groom. She said, "I do not want to marry a person as dark as him. Moreover, I am afraid of the thunder he produces". The sage was dejected once again and asked the Lord of the Clouds for a suitable groom. The Lord of the Clouds suggested, "Why don't you try the Lord of the Wind, for he can easily blow me away".

The sage then prayed for the Lord of the Wind. On the appearance of the Wind God, he took him to his daughter. His daughter rejected the groom saying that she could not marry such a feeble person like the Wind God who is always on the move. Dejected once again the sage asked the Wind God for a suggestion. The Wind God suggested the Lord of the Mountain which was rock solid and stopped the wind easily. So the sage then went to the Mountain Lord and requested him to marry his daughter. But the daughter once again rejected the Mountain Lord saying that he was too cold-hearted for her to marry and requested the sage to find somebody softer. The Mountain God then suggested a mouse to him, because the mouse is soft and yet can easily make holes in the mountain.

This time the daughter was happy and agreed to marry a he-mouse. So the sage said, "Look at what the destiny had to offer you. You started as a mouse, and were destined to marry a mouse in the end. So be it". He then converted her back to a she-mouse and got her married to a he-mouse.

India, like this maiden, has taken many faces, has had many partners, loved or hated, but has always come back to itself, and in its face-to-face with history, it has always shown a unique way out, sometimes as clever as a mouse. The moral of this

fable is not so much that destiny cannot be changed, but more that, whatever its metamorphosis and appearances, the heroine keeps her integrity.

This paper will examine, both from the broader sociological view to a more restricted one, how specific Indian social structures have been able to adapt to the requirements of the present time.

Firstly we will question the Nation at large. As we have been saying, the population of India is so diverse that it has challenged the capacity of the Modern State to handle the cohabitation of the numerous different ethnic, religious and linguistic communities.

Secondly, we will examine the hierarchical social structure, so bewildering for Westerners, that is the caste system which, as a composite social structure, is unique to India, and we will try to understand how it has adapted in the modern Indian setting.

Finally, it is at the root of the social life that is in the family, traditionally joint and patriarchal, that we will find a third unique model of adaptability of India

Giving unity to diversity

India is a mosaic of linguistic communities with hundreds of spoken languages and dialects belonging to four linguistic families (Indo-European language, with its Sanskrit roots, which has shaped Hindi -the official language mostly spoken in Northern India, Dravidian languages, such as Tamil, which predominate in the southern States, as well as pockets of Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman languages). It is important to remind ourselves that the present administrative division of the 28 States of the Federation of India was initially determined in the Fifties, after a controversial debate, on linguistic criteria. India is also a religious mosaic, with Muslims, Christian, Sikhs, and a myriad of other minorities (Buddhist, Jain, Parse, Jew, etc.) coexisting with the Hindu majority (82% of the population). The Muslim minority which makes up 12,5 % of the national population, therefore over a 150 millions people, makes India the third Muslim country in the world, a fact often overlooked. The Christian community is far less important demographically (2,3%) but politically significant .

This diversity has been represented as a huge challenge for national cohesion and for democracy. Indeed, many linguistic and/or religious minorities have been, and still

are, fighting for recognition, and the spoken language or religion of a minority group is a powerful vector for claiming autonomy or separatism. The two major endemic conflicts in modern India illustrate this challenge: the Sikh demand for more autonomy in Punjab and the never-ending conflict of the Kashmir region, opposing Indian Muslims of India to the Indian Government since Independence (1947).

How has modern India been able to answer the intricate question of its national identity respecting all its minorities? How to define an Indian identity which would be all inclusive of its linguistic and religious mosaic? In other words, who is an Indian?

An answer, claiming to be based on the historical interpretation of the internal principle of India's identity, through the so-called Vedic age, Muslim period and the British rule, has been provided by V.D. Savarkar and the Hindutva pundits. In his famous pamphlet⁶, he defines "Hindutva" (Hinduness) as the belonging to an ethnical community, territorially based, and sharing common Hindu religion and values: this ethnical nationalism, as opposed to a universal nationalism, is based on the notion of the nation as a culture. In this sense, somehow dangerous interpretation for national unity, the Partition of India and Pakistan was written in the Indian cultural roots, and the communalist clashes between religious groups are nothing but expected.

As opposed to this interpretation, stands the model of a republican State able to respect and protect all the identities without imposing one cultural model. This idea has been well summarized by Nehru on the eve of formalising it in the Constitution, as for him, the "deep" definition of Indian unity is defined by "*the widest tolerance of belief and custom, (...) every variety acknowledged and even encouraged*"⁷. This notion of Indian proverbial tolerance has a long history: Ashoka, one of the great Indian emperor (304 BC – 232 BC) embraced Buddhism and in his numerous edicts asked for tolerance of all religion of his empire. This definition of "deep unity" was promoted in the Indian Constitution of the 26th January, 1950, and has been translate into practice in three main original ways that we will examine now.

Firstly, by defining itself not simply as laic but as secularist, the Indian State has set up a way of respecting and encouraging all minorities equally in the promoting of

⁶Savarkar, V.D., *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, S.S. Savarkar, Bombay, 1923, 1969.

⁷Nehru, J., *Ibid.*, p. 62.

their cultural practices. Two articles of the Fundamental Rights (Part 3 of the Constitution) express this creed. Article 29 states that “*Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same*”. Article 30 states that “*All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice*”. Following the violence of Partition, these articles were fundamental statements vowing to ensure harmony in a wounded country. In ensuring freedom of cult and equal respect of all religions of India, the “secular State” endorsed a protective role, and overtook the neutral role of a purely laic State, as it directly interfered in religious practices in order to encourage them. This protective interference can be illustrated by the *Satanic Verses* affair in 1988 which in fact started not in Iran but in India. Indeed the Indian Government condemned Rushdie’s novel for the alleged blasphemous representation of Islam, a few month before Ayatollah Khomeini’s *fatwa* on the author’s life.

The second important feature of India’s “deep unity” is found in the reference in the Indian Constitution to communities and not to individuals, thereby underlining a very specific aspect of Indian society. As a matter of fact, religious identities in India are far less a question of individual creed, incredibly diverse and espousing many syncretic forms (a Hindu may well be venerating Ganesh and Shiva and Jesus, or a Muslim Sant and Buddha) but more of collective practice⁸. The central place of the reference to the group belonging which structures Indian identity sharply differentiates it from Western society with emphasis on individualism.

Thirdly, the Indian justice system provides, besides the unified criminal and commercial laws, three Personal Laws: the Hindu Code Bill, the Muslim Personal Law and the Christian Law. In continuation with colonial rules, the Indian State has set up a very unique model of administering justice which respects different cultural practices. It has been a compromise as the Constitution of 1950 calls for a Unique Civil Code. These Personal Laws have also served as a political tool to redefine social categories. Indeed, the cleavage lies between the Hindus that are subjects of the Hindu Code, the Muslims, and the Christians. Paradoxically enough, religious minorities as such as the Buddhists,

⁸This thesis is developed by the Indian philosopher R. Bhargava, *What is secularism for?*, in Bhargava, R. (ed.), *Secularism and its Critics*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998.

Jains and Sikhs are joined in with the Hindus in their legal definition, regarding all the issues of marriage, divorce, adoption, and heritage.

The religious categorization in legal issues concerning family law, instead of reflecting tolerance, may have favoured communalism, and dangerous collective political mobilisation on a religious basis, which is stirred up by Hindu nationalists as part of their electoral strategy. This bias has subsequently led to great political controversy, as in the famous Shah Bano case⁹.

Finally, by its challenge to promote and respect diversity by a unified Nation, the Republic of India has been setting up an ambiguity, if not a contradiction: though every Indian citizen is recognised as equal and has equal rights, whatever his/her “*religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth*”(Constitution), he or she may benefit from different differential treatment and privilege according to his/her group belonging, that is, according to his/her caste.

Caste, Its twentieth Century Avatar¹⁰

Reference to group belonging, a strong vector of identity in India, is a direct reference to its most original and unique institution, caste. Let us try to define what is generally intended by “caste” in sociological literature: it refers to a socio-historical reality organising the life of Hindus, that of a set of endogenous groups, generally endorsing a traditional occupation, and integrated into local, hierarchical, ritualised, politico-economic systems of co-operation and interdependence.

The question of caste undoubtedly brings us back to the protean relationship between the caste system and Hinduism. The *jati*, term referring to endogamous descent-groups ranked by religious status and occupation, is an empirical social category: each Hindu belongs to one of the thousands of local *jati* of India. These *jati*

⁹ This case of a Muslim woman divorced by the Muslim *talaq* practice, because she had no means to support herself and her children, approached the courts for securing maintenance from her husband. The Supreme Court of India (SC) invoked the Code of Criminal Procedure, which applies to everyone regardless of caste, creed or religion. It ruled that Shah Bano be given maintenance money. The reaction of protest of orthodox Muslims who perceived in the SC judgment an encroachment of the Muslim Personal Law caused the Rajiv Gandhi government to pass the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986 which diluted the secular judgment of the Supreme Court. This generated tremendous heat in India as it proved that fundamentalist minorities can exert pressure on government and judicial decisions.

appear to be the expression of a symbolical order as expressed in ancient brahmanical texts. The *varna* system organises hierarchically each member of Hindu society into four *varna* according to its purity, prescribing its *dharma* (duty) and its *karma* (action). This ancient system of *varna* excludes all strangers, tribals or impures (called latter intouchables) from the Hindu society¹¹.

The three characteristics of *jati*, the numerous endogamous groups ranked in the larger symbolical *varna* scale, are religious status, occupation and endogamy, which structure an organicist society or “holistic” according to L. Dumont, which means that the whole (the caste group or the society) is greater than the sum of its parts (being the individuals or the different caste groups). The overarching principle organizing this holistic society is, always following Dumont, the religious principle of ritual purity¹².

There has been a huge debate between social scientists about the faith of the caste system in modern India. The assumption that it would dissolve and be replaced by a class system and an individualistic ethos has been abandoned as obviously caste belonging remains a pertinent feature of identification and social structure. It raised a new question as to how to analyze the changes that are nonetheless occurring within the caste system, but also its capacity to adapt itself to a changing socio-economic and political context. Here again, one has to strongly differentiate between urban India, where the religious ranking has lost its meaning in everyday social transactions, from rural India where the inter-castes relations are still observed and informed by the religious ranking and the purity and impurity principle. Furthermore, caste occupation has lost ground, especially in urban India, where social mobility gained through education and professional career is more significant than in rural India. Indeed, if castes are viewed as functionally interrelated in a system contributing to the vertical integration in a hierarchical society, then many aspects of castes have already disappeared, as mobility is no longer related to religious status (sanskritisation) but to

¹⁰ This title is a reference to the book of the great Indian sociologist, Srinivas, M.N. (ed.), *Caste, Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, Delhi, Penguin Book India, 1996.

¹¹ The *varna* society, as enunciated in the canonical sacred texts of Hinduism as the *Rigveda* or in the *Manusmriti*, categorises the Hindus into four categories, popularly referred to as the “caste system”. Broadly speaking, the four *varna* (colours, orders, classes) include, from the highest status to the lowest status, Brahmins (Vedic poets, priests, scholars, teachers, landowners), Khshatriya (nobility, warriors, landowners), Vaisya (‘the people’: traders, agriculturists, pastoralists), and Sudra (artisans, workers, servants and household slaves).

¹² Dumont, L., *Homo Hierarchicus*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966.

education and profession (westernisation¹³) theoretically opened to every Indian. But if one can dismiss one's caste in every day life in urban India, by discarding the conventional markers of caste origin (as specific dress, names, attitudes, etc.), the caste as the locus of collective identity strongly reemerges during important occasions in life, such as marriage, based on endogamy and requiring the kinsfolk participation. In this regard, caste is still an important identity marker for a Hindu, regulates marriages and kinship, and facilitates reference group behavior, at least in private life.

The enduring importance of caste, as an endogamous group, is well illustrated in the marriage website for Indians living abroad www.shaadi.com (that is “marriage dot com”) in which the caste origin of the brides and grooms to be figure in their personal description.

In answering the question about the future of Indian caste, N. Jayaram states that *“its religious basis may wane, its systemic rigor may weaken, but its social (kinship) basis will persist, and its group connotation will gain strength”*¹⁴. To the enduring social basis of caste belonging we have to add its political instrumentalization built up over the last century, which has reinforced caste as a major social structure in Indian contemporary society. Indeed, the policy of positive discrimination in favor of the backward groups has played an important role in reinforcing caste consciousness and communitarism in India. This policy has its roots in the British colonial administration which reserved political safeguards for the so-called Depressed Castes, that is the Untouchables, which they considered socially backward due to the ostracism they endured because of ritually polluted status. The quotas strengthened their access to the sector of education, public occupation and political representation. At Independence, the principle of positive discrimination on the basis of caste was pursued: any member of a *jati* classified as Scheduled Caste (SC) - that is the previous Depressed Caste - can benefit from one of the 15% reserved seats in educational public structure and public service. If the necessity of such a policy has not been really challenged by the civil society, its more recent opening to the “Other Backward Castes” (OBC) in 1990, which represent nearly half of the Indian population, has lead to a heated and sometimes

¹³ These two principles of mobility have been theorised by M.N. Srinivas in the Fifties. Sanskritisation, the traditional model of mobility as opposed to westernisation, is the process by which a Hindu caste of low status modifies its social practices, rituals, ideology, and endorses the ones of a superior caste by status in order to imitate her.

¹⁴ Jayaram, N., Caste and Hinduism, in Srinivas, M.N. (ed.), *Op. Cit.*

violent debate. As a matter of fact, the “Other Backward Castes” is not a social category but a collection of heterogeneous *jati*, more or less corresponding to the Sudra (see note 11) and mostly related to agricultural work. These OBCs are benefiting of up to 27% of seat reservation in public service. This preferential policy to uplift backward categories is then defined on caste and not on economical class backwardness. There have been attempts to better target the needing population by defining a “creamy lawyer” (which are the actual terms employed) in 1993 which has had tremendous political and social consequences. The policy of positive discrimination appears to be the framework and the lever of collective mobilization among the low Indian castes¹⁵. Conversely, the quotas in the political field (seats specifically reserved for SC) paradoxically solidified the casteism by reinforcing the local interests.

The debate on caste and casteisation of Indian society has been at the core of the Indian debate and media for over two decades. Recently, the Congress government has been proposing in its agenda to extend quotas for OBC in Central Higher Educational Institutions (including the worldwide famous Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management), and in private firms. The latter have been strongly opposing the last proposal. But in April 2008, The Supreme Court upheld the law enacted by the Central Government in 2006 providing a quota of 27 % for candidates belonging to the OBC in Central Higher Educational Institutions. With this very controversial measure, the debate on affirmative action reached its peak. This debate revolves around four principal issues: the legitimacy of the universalistic policies (equal treatment for all) vs. differential actions, meritocracy vs. the risk of “mediocrities”, the definition of the basis of exclusion, and finally the delimitation of the target populations. This debate is not so far from the one instigated after Brazil implemented its new quota policy on the basis of race in 2004 in the educational sector.

Caste today can be seen as endogamous groups, who share a common identity and act as interest groups in the political arena. The ethnicisation and politisation of caste system is a feature of contemporary India, revealing once again the plasticity of Indian social structures and its capacity to adapt and resist to changes, literally as an “avatar”.

The Hindu family, the home of the world

¹⁵ Jaffrelot, C., *Inde : La Démocratie par la Caste*, Paris, Fayard, 2005.

Even more than caste, the Indian family is considered the first constituent unit of the larger institutions such as castes and other inclusive ones. “*The homes of the individuals are in their families*”¹⁶ and these families are deeply anchored in the villages. The affective relationship every Indian entertains with its original village is doubling its relationship with its family that the women have left young to join their husbands’ families and villages. Whatever hardships were faced in the village, whether it is hunger or violence of archaic social relations, the urban migrant keeps a strong emotional relationship with the native village. He tries to return whenever he can to his native village and community, the *beradari*¹⁷.

Academics have described in length the traditional model of the Hindu Joint Family or undivided family, as an extended family arrangement, consisting of many generations living under the same roof. All the male members are blood relatives and all the women are either mothers, wives, unmarried daughters or widowed relatives, all bound by the common “*sapinda*” relationship, that is, the common lineal ascendant inclusive of the third generation in the line of ascent through the father.

This family, generally patrilinear, traditionally fulfils three functions: sociological, as it is a residential unit of consumption (commensality), economic (as the family is a productive enterprise, and generally owns cultivable land in the village) and religious¹⁸. This last function legitimates the traditional model of the joint family, ideologically conceived to respect the brahminical orthodoxy of serving the divine order: as one of the traditional brahmin duties is to take care of the ancestors of the lineage, a Brahmin needs a son who will perform the cult to ancestors (*sraddha*) and by this tradition he will link the living world to the dead one. The Brahmin also needs a daughter to continue to expand relations between villages, as the marriage should be between a woman and a man belonging to the same *jati* but to different villages.

¹⁶ The expression is from Stern, R.W, *Changing India*, Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 1993

¹⁷ *Biradari* can be translated by fraternity or groups of pairs. It is the belonging group at the local level (see Dumont, L., *Op. Cit.*).

About the relationships between the urban migrant and its original village, see Racine, J.-L. (ed.), *Les Attaches de l’Homme, Enracinement paysan et logiques paysannes en Inde du Sud*, Paris, Ed. de la MSH, 1994.

¹⁸ See Lardiniois, L., L’ordre du monde et l’institution familiale en Inde, in *L’Histoire de la Famille*, Burguière, A. & ali., Paris, Armand Colin, 1986.

Leaving aside the traditional role of the woman in the traditional Indian family, let us just note here her overarching function as wife and mother, and her submission to masculine power in a generally patriarchal structure.

One can easily understand why such an institution has been at the core of the upheavals which have been shaking Indian society during the 19th century and so forth, when the traditional model has been confronted by the western model of the colonial authorities. The small Bengali, educated intelligentsia, the *bhadralok*, had tried to overcome the contradiction between the two models, and the status of woman has been at the center of the debate, as women appear to be the main actors of demographical, sociological, and economical changes. The heated debate around the family code, from child marriage to the ritual of burning widows (*sati*), infanticide, right to property etc., has been opposing reformists to traditionalists.

Though this model and its many different variants¹⁹ have been prevailing in the representation of traditional India, it is in fact not quite representative of the social reality. Indeed, the joint family has always been secondary to the empirical prevalence of the nuclear family, today accounting for more than 80% of the families.

The economic and social transformations have modified the functions of the family, depending on social, economic or religious constraints, but sometimes it is the traditional model that is reinforced. For example, the agricultural tenure being parcelised (the medium size of rural exploitation is less than 1, 5 ha), it may favor the permanence of extended family as one owning unit even if this one have been gaining autonomy. In the same way, the departure from the family of a newly-wed young couple is delayed due to economic constraints.

Women status has considerably changed especially in urban area, where they are generally more educated, work in different sectors and therefore emancipate themselves somewhat from patriarchal model. The confrontation of traditional familial norms to the western consumerism tends to create or awake pathological social production such as the spread of the practice of dowry, which is today affecting every caste. Money being today an important component of status marriage now appears as a financial transaction. Since the mid eighties, the number of deaths by dowry has multiplied from a few

¹⁹ Many variants may be found, as associated family when two brothers and their family live together without the parents, or generation family when the son and his family live with the parents, and so on.

hundreds to thousands, despite the fact that this financial transaction has been outlawed since 1961 and that domestic violence constitutes a criminal offence²⁰. The urban educated woman is consequently in a contradictory position, both on the edge of emancipation but also still strongly bound to her family and its traditional values.

What is this Indian family then? Though the statistics show that it is largely a nuclear family, in many ways it functions as an extended family. The marriage, generally intra caste (endogamous) is still regulated by the family and kin group and as the psychoanalyst S. Kakar states, most of Indians grow up in a family environment closer to the joint family than to the nuclear model²¹. This is noticeable in the organization of its hybrid contemporary forms. For example, the houses or apartments of related nuclear families can often be spatially very close so as to recreate the extended family for numerous occasions –very often gathering for meal, feasts or celebrations. In the nuclear family itself, the principles of age and gender may still organize the relations of authority: the oldest member has the greatest authority, the authority of the woman will depend on the rank of her husband . To be convinced, one just needs to see the moral underpinning of Bollywood family fresco²², such as *Kabhi-Khushie-Kabhie-Gham*, which have a tremendous success and project an absolute reverence to family values.

The family, as with the caste, appears to be another example of a social structure which has adapted itself to the requirements of modern times.

One of the more interesting compromises may lie between “the home and the world” –to quote the famous title of the Bengali poet R. Tagore: in the professional world, the urban Indian will be attached to modern values and behave in a cosmopolitan way, far from the consideration about being vegetarian or having to practice his morning *puja* (homage to deities), he will surely appreciate a Brazilian picanha. At home, however, the same person will respect tradition, as his identity lies in the kind of

²⁰ In 1995, the National Crime Bureau of the Government of India reported about 6,000 dowry deaths every year, a figure which has continued to grow. The unofficial estimates put the number of deaths at 25,000.

²¹ Kakar, S. & K., *The Indians, Portrait of a People*, Penguin Books India, Delhi, 2006.

²² Bollywood (Bombay-Hollywood conflating) is the name given to the Mumbai-based Hindi language film industry. They are generally musicals, with songs and dancing, and love interest. The plots are often melodramatic, separates lovers, villains, evil step-mothers, dramatic reversals of fortune, etc. Most of the

worship he performs, of the food he eats, of the clothes he wears, of the kin group he meets. It is interesting to note that in *Babyji*, the romance of Abha Dawesar (2003) which shows the emancipation of a college girl in Delhi during the Nineties, the young heroine is forbidden to wear jeans at home, and that in the very controversial film of D. Mehta, *Fire* (2000), attacking one of India's many gender-related taboos, lesbianism, and the privileges of patriarchy, one of the greatest offences and transgressions of the daughter-in-law is her daring to wear a pair of jeans at home.

A question remains, which relates to the Indian elite. Internationalised, trained in the United States and returning to the new modern towns flourishing in India, it is this elite which is applauding *Fire* and reading *Babyji*. If you go and walk down the streets of Pune, the booming city of Maharashtra, where one of the latest erected buildings has been called Fortaleza, or the streets of Magarpatta city, its new suburb erected in a few years around a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) for Electronic Hardware and Software, which boasts a security system, a first class college, sport grounds, etc.²³, and if you sit down on a bench with a couple and their boy who have just come back from the United States after their studies and decided to settle back here, they will tell you that they do not see much of a difference between their modern city and the one they were living in New Jersey, and that they are happy here as they regain their “roots”. At night, they will tell stories of *Panchatantra* to their kid. On Monday, when the young executive will come back to his American-like consulting office with his hair shaved, all his colleagues will understand that his father has died and that he had performed the funeral rites, without need to question.

To end with a tale

To conclude this paper on India culture and society, it is worth emphasizing that India is answering present changes through its modernity which is not to be confused with westernisation²⁴. Two long-term tendencies are surely going to define the future of India: the first one is the market economy and its impact on society. Indian preoccupation may be more concentrated on the level of life and more characterised by

Bollywood films are 'social movies' -meaning basically clean fare intended for family viewing.

²³ See <http://www.magarpattacity.com>.

²⁴ On this misleading confusion, see Das, G., *India Unbound*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.

a middle-class, globalised culture. By contrast, the second tendency is the escalating religious consciousness, dangerously leading to strengthen particularisms and religious conflicts. As long as religiosity remains in India as a private affair, the evil of communalism may be avoided.

Hopefully India and Indians have winning cards to face the threats included in the tendencies towards uniformisation and particularism. Let us return to our fable of the polymorphic maiden. It recalls the argument of Amartya Sen destroying the fallacy about the belief that an individual possesses one and only one identity²⁵. All individuals possess multiple identities. It is perfectly possible to be, at the same time, the patriarch of a joint family at home, an executive at work, an amateur of bossa nova, a Bohra in the mosque, a Muslim in society and an Indian abroad. Another person can be a Hindu Brahmin and similar to the former in other respects. The question is which of the above classifications constitute a person's identity and which not? If religion, nationality and language are greater aspects of identity, multiple identities and identity shifts form a powerful counter argument to religious fundamentalists claiming the supremacy of a "super-identity", which overrides all others. There, A. Sen develops a second argument against the belief that identity is merely inherited. Identity may be partly constrained by "*economic poverty, social deprivation, political tyranny or cultural authoritarianism*", but there exists considerable leeway in the choice of many other identities, as the individual is not bundled into one single group (caste, religion, nation, etc.). This gives space for a dynamic of development. Maybe the clever she-mouse should try the mountain avatar, and be the Giant India it looks like abroad.

25 Sen, A., *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, Norton & Company, New York, 2006.