

## **Cultural Differences between America and India** - A. N. 'Shen' Sengupta



Both America and India are like my parents, since both have nurtured me. My sojourn in USA started in 1958 and I visited Atlanta first time in 1959. But my real association with this country started as early as 1951 , i.e., 57 years ago, when I was an architectural freshman in India, since my Head of the Dept .came from USA, so did my Thesis Advisor and a Guest Professor and after I graduated, one of my colleagues. I shall never forget the wonderful gesture made by my Thesis Advisor and his wife, by way of bringing for me and my classmates trays full of goodies during our all-night drawing sessions. I reciprocated in kind when I taught in this country.

I wish to stick to the positive aspects of both USA and India because that is culturally right and also because I believe that stressing positive aspects develops a better understanding and sets up an ever-growing positive cycle as opposed to a vicious cycle based on highlighting the negative. I have become aware of the many misconceptions about the respective countries. Such misconceptions can not only act as formidable barriers against friendly relationships but also come in the way of promoting business, travel , medical tourism, cultural exchanges, exchange of potentially beneficial knowledge and experience , solving global socio-economic and environmental problems and potential co-operation in all other aspects. Co-operation , rather than confrontation can come only when we can understand each other and put ourselves in the other person's shoes. We conveniently forget that we are all children of a common mother, the legendary, Lucy. I do believe that unless and until we do understand the basic oneness of humanity, and the fact that we are all brothers and sisters sharing the one and only life-bearing blue planet, attempting to solve any global problem or even major national problems will prove to be futile. Thus the more we and specially our younger generations become knowledgeable about other cultures, the better prepared we become to solve problems and bring peace and prosperity to all. This is the basis of Cultural Streams International, a non-profit organization, which I have founded. Its motto is “ Networking Cultures Around The Globe’.

Even though my talk is based on differences, I shall often refer to certain cultural aspects of one country only, when the difference or similarity is obvious. First I like to tell you what impressed me most about this country. It is the generosity and openness of the people. It is the sense of boundlessness of the land, of the highways, of the national parks and forests, of physical and social mobility. It is its indomitable and adventurous spirit. It is the sense of tolerance of people from all different cultures and countries. It is the sense of humour, of courtesy, of civic sense, of caring for animals and trees, of people in distress. It is the sense that you, no matter who you are, can have any and all opportunities without having to go through endless red tape and worse. It is the bountifulness of all that one needs. This country welcomes you with open arms and makes you its own, right from the first moment. These we take for granted and yet they must be treasured.

Thanks to some of these that I, a lecturer at NC State, was received by the Dean and his wife at Raleigh's bus station and spent the very first nights in this country in the same room in which

slept Frank Lloyd Wright , the greatest architect of modern times. I shall never forget driving to a diner and listening to the blaring song by Frank Sinatra, Oh La Re, meaning: we will fly, we will sing and we will dance. Thanks to some of these that years rolled by without my seeing one single compatriot or missing them. Thanks to these that I walked in and out of jobs and schools freely without one bit of worry about what future held. I also picked up the American habit of cracking jokes at every turn and opening the doors for women. This landed me in trouble in India. When I told a colleague of mine, who had hurt his leg, if he was chasing some girls, he was indignant. When I opened the door for a junior woman colleague, she just stood there waiting for me enter first. The experience has been repeated over and over again. Incidentally, I had a colonoscopy here just a few days ago. As I was lying down in my curtained cubicle, I could overhear the following conversation in the adjacent cubicle: Nurse: Do you have any problems like diabetes, high blood pressure, or heart... Patient (interrupting her): I am heart-broken. What are you doing this evening?

Not so long ago, people here believed that India was a vast country, a land of maharajas, of fabulous wealth, and also of snake-charmers and utter poverty. Actually India is only 1/3 the size of USA with three times the latter's population, i.e. it is nine times as dense. Alas, there are no maharajas: they all have been made into governors of their respective states. Snake- charmers are rare. There is a lot of poverty, about which we talk later, but there is also a 300 million strong middle class. It also has one of the largest English –speaking population in the world albeit with a slightly British accent. Apart from English, there are fourteen major languages, with two of them ranking among the top five in the world.

India is the largest democracy in the world, with a voting-age population that equals the entire population of USA. It fiercely protects freedom of speech, press, legal rights, religious rights, minority rights and human rights. At present the three most important officials are all minorities: the President is a woman, the Prime Minister is a Sikh which represents 1.9% of the population, and the leader of the ruling party is an Italian-born Christian lady representing 2.3% of the population. Minorities have held these positions time and again throughout the 60 years of free India. I believe that no other country in the world can claim this distinction.

Through the ages India has welcomed people from all over the world and from all religions. Today there is a sizeable population of Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Jains and Muslims. Even after the partition in 1947, India remained a secular country by its constitution and with her 150 million Muslim citizens, possibly has the third largest Muslim population in the world. It is India's historic open-arm policy that attracted Columbus to undertake a voyage to India, except that he possibly made the single largest mistake in human history. It is interesting that some years ago, when I would say that I am from India, I would be asked 'from which tribe?' or would be confided that he or she was part- Indian.

Let me tell about some of the differences. India's is the longest continually surviving civilization in the world and it dates back to 3300 B.C. There have been older civilizations, like Egypt's and Mesopotamia's but they have been replaced. India's culture has been shaped gradually over millenniums by great thinkers, who transmitted their thoughts first through words and later through writings, like the Upanishads, Vedas and Bhagabat Gita. In Indian thinking there are no absolutes, in the sense that there is a cyclic order in everything and finite and infinite, dark and light, matter and energy, beginning and end , and so on, co-exist .There is an uncanny similarity between this way of thinking and the findings of modern science. I am no physicist but I like to mention just a few examples: We know that gravity or perhaps dark matter pulls together the entire universe and yet we also know that the universe is expanding at an accelerating speed

defying gravity. We know that an atom can be in several different places at the same time and yet several atoms can occupy the very same space at the same time too. We know that matter and energy dance together in the entire universe. This non-absoluteness is ingrained in the Indian psyche. Thus Indian thinking and call it a religion if you will, has no limits.

In all fairness, this is too much for even many Indians. So the society has made it simpler for people by giving many easy-to-understand norms, forms and rituals. Thus we find a whole retinue of gods and goddesses, sacred animals and trees, mountains and rivers, are worshipped, like in ancient Greece. People, of all levels of education and intellect, do understand the abstract concepts behind these, albeit in varying degrees. It is very important to note that it is this attitude that makes people of India accept and even absorb concepts from other societies readily. In a way this is like English language, which absorbs from other languages and become richer all the time. I like to mention, that even though Indians do not crack jokes as often as Americans do, they have no problem with making rather affectionate fun of gods and goddesses and freely drawing caricatures of them. Also, the bestowing of sanctity on natural objects like mountains and rivers and even animals and trees could go a long way to protect the environment and ecology. Alas, there are other forces, which tend to defeat this virtue.

Enough of the heavy stuff. I like to touch on a number of unique cultural traits.

First is the place of women in India. Women are looked up to as 'Shakti', meaning 'Power'. The majority of the most revered divine figures are indeed women. After all women can do what men cannot, bringing all of us to this world. Women are more than equal but they are not the same as men. Their role as mothers and the hearts of families have very ancient historic and prehistoric roots. Generally, women rule the family life whereas men rule the external domain. If women walk behind men, it is because men act as the human shields, in case of any possible violence. Not bad, is it? Married women wear a red dot on the forehead. On being asked what it is, I have explained that it is like a 'red light', meaning 'stop!' Marriages are mostly arranged by parents, who naturally know their children best and objectively, who side with the daughter or son-in-law as per social customs and act as the cushion so to say in marital disputes to prevent them from boiling up. Divorce is very rare indeed and a modern phenomenon at best and believe me there is lasting love based on a true commitment that marriages are made not for this life alone; they are made in Heaven and are eternal.

A very interesting and important cultural trait is the way people address each other. It is by actual and also assumed relationships. A daughter is addressed as Mother and a son as Father. This may sound strange but as people get old they become like children in many ways and children do take care of them. The roles are reversed universally. In fact in Singapore, it is a criminal offence not to take care of elderly parents. A father-in-law addresses his daughter-in-law also as Mother and she addresses him as Father. All people become uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, or elder brothers or sisters and so on. By the way an uncle or an aunt or a nephew or a niece is addressed one can tell whether he is maternal or paternal and so on. This kind of networking becomes real in the sense that the roles carry certain rights and responsibilities, which are expected. For example, an uncle or an elder brother always foots the bill. Calling by first names is customary only among friends or siblings of near equal age or to those who are younger. I remember my uneasiness in calling the Dean and his wife at N. C. State by their first names when I first came to this country. It goes without saying that in India calling anyone senior by his or her first name would be considered as utterly rude.

There are certain courtesies also which go with relationships as well as age. One is not supposed to remain seated when an elder enters, nor smoke or drink, let alone raise one's feet on the table, in front of an elder. When I first entered my class in N.C. State, many of my students' feet were on their desks. I felt uneasy and told them to put them down and they respectfully obliged. But when I went to the faculty meetings the feet were mostly up—but I could not tell them to put them down. But I didn't join. In fact, in India when a teacher or an elder enters a room, others do stand up. Traditionally, those who are senior are to be obeyed in all matters including marital disputes. Drinking is socially looked down upon as a most heinous vice. But I must confess that with increasing globalization things are changing slowly, especially among the affluent classes of people. Yet putting up one's feet on the table, not standing up when an elder person enters a room or drinking or smoking in front of an elder person would be frowned upon. Using expletives in front of anyone is considered as unacceptable. While in India I would occasionally say 'Damn it'. One day a group of my young helping hands, with tears in their eyes, told me 'sir, you are using bad words'. Well, I promised to never do it again and I kept my promise.

A good many people in India are vegetarians. They eat no meat, fish or egg, but they do consume milk. This is partly because of the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. A great majority of people consider a cow as sacred, because they feel that a cow, which provides nourishment like a mother, is somewhat like a mother too. One can understand the sentiments some if one thinks of the very idea of eating a dog, a man's best friend. It is equally unthinkable. Utterances such as 'Holy Cow' would be rather offensive. In fact, today an increasing number of doctors in USA are advocating eating fruits and vegetables and cutting down on animal protein. Incidentally, the Indian practice of meditation as a way to calm one's mind and reduce blood pressure and the practice of Yoga, a holistic mind-body enlivening system, have become main-street in this country.

There is a marked difference between the two countries when it comes to the sense of privacy. Partly because of the strong joint-family system and in more recent times because of scarcity of space in apartments and also since tropical climate requires keeping doors and windows open, people in India do not guard privacy the way it is done here, except in very special moments. Thanks to having few telephones until very recently, people would drop in at any time without giving any notice whatsoever and would be welcomed and served sweets or a meal and even an invitation to stay overnight in some instances. There is no privacy in terms of one's income, health conditions, and the like. Parents or elder relatives can speak for their adult children in these matters without having to obtain the latter's consent. The best part is that no one minds. Privacy, which is abundant in America, has its rewards. But then, lack of it has its rewards too: one is never lonely or alone in times of need: neighbours are aware and takes care like family members. Such closeness between neighbours is partly a result of low socio-economic and most importantly, physical mobility. With space at a premium density is high: people are used to rubbing shoulders. One bonus accrued from the lessened need for privacy and density, is a very low level of violent crime. However, people do have a tendency to dish out punishment by themselves, if they witness a crime, such as molesting a woman. Incidentally, very few in India are allowed to carry guns.

There are also considerable differences when it comes to personal hygiene. Using toilet paper or handkerchiefs or paper tissues is not customary. For all such occasions one has to use water and of course in privacy. This aspect of privacy is true even in public toilets or showers. One must not wear shoes inside houses or temple precincts. However, when it comes to community hygiene it is another story altogether. People have no qualms about sweeping one's own rubbish and dumping it on the street or sometimes right next to the neighbour's house.

In contrast with the American sense of order in virtually everything including music, weddings, funerals and even prayers, the Indian way tends to be rather improvised within some broadly defined boundaries and positively not rehearsed. Also, whereas in America there is a sombre note in the way people dress for concerts, weddings, funerals and prayers, Indians by and large exhibit a gay abandon of sound and colours. Even though the Christian population in India is small, you would not know it during Christmas: there is widespread use of colourful lanterns and decorations in most cities. And many Hindus flock to the churches to attend the masses. I have done so myself many times in this country and find the candle-light masses to be of exceptional beauty. Interestingly, sombreness disappears when Americans are informal: virtually anything but anything goes. Indians are seldom informal to the point that certain behavioral codes, including the way a person dresses, can be *laissez faire*.

People in India almost intuitively live within their means. Even the very poor tend to save for hard times. Saving is very much encouraged by also the government through an excellent network of banks and post-offices. Women's best friend however tends to be gold jewellery, which in hard times acts like a cash reserve. Women in India appear to have the biggest horde of gold in the world! Borrowing, and worse still, lending and collecting interest were socially looked down upon. However helping one's relatives and even friends is a common practice. Consuming minimally is the norm: this is true for everything, be it food, clothing, transportation, housing, energy-use and entertainment. Also, vegetables are much cheaper than meat. Dressing in a tropical country is cheaper. People walk, bike or ride a bus or a train, India incidentally having world's largest train system. Houses almost never use heating or air-conditioning and are made bricks or earth. Movies come closest to providing night-life. People also help each other by bartering services. The notion that if a person earns \$ 2 a day is miserable is not quite true. His or her purchasing power for life's essentials or simple needs are like \$ 80, since a \$ is the equivalent of Rs. 40. So, the vast majority of people in India pursue life, liberty and happiness matter-of-factly and hence rather successfully. Thus in a unique way, they are no different from the vast majority of people of this country. Finally, with this understanding we may like to ask ourselves if the one-billion plus people are not doing it right pursuing a life-style which is environment-and-eco-friendly and if it would not be a better world if we would network cultures around the world.