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Living in differences and tensions of the self

Remarks on overt and covert tensions in urban societies in India

topics

- *problems of urbanisation in India*
- *tension between poor and rich*
- *family relationships: the joint family*
- *urbanisation and identity-crisis*
- *migration*

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Introduction

“Difference” in this paper is narrowly restricted to describe people’s external and internal cognitive behaviour patterns, which is manifested in overt and covert ways. Overt in the sense of dress codes, life style and practise of rituals and religion. Covert in the sense of thought process. Both are rooted in history influenced by belief-systems, traditions and culture.

Any study of the difference in the people has to be understood in the socio-economic, political and religious context. When we talk about social context Indians are divided and fragmented by structural and systemic evils, such as fundamentalism, regionalism, casteism and communalism. Caste is the very fabric of the Indian society and the foundation of the socio-political structure. Caste determines one’s life and status. In villages low caste people, Dalit people, are not allowed to draw water from wells, eat in common eating places, or walk in the same paths and worship in temples. In cities this may not be so overt, but placement, job opportunities, promotions, housing and marriages are based on caste and people are discriminated.

In this paper I want to focus more on the covert patterns of people living in cities in India. The first section will give a brief description on cities, the second section is about joint family and the relationship in families and the urban and western influence, the third will attempt to construct the Indian Psyche if there is one, the fourth section will deal with the ways people cope with differences they experience in cities, and the last section will reflect on some newer movements which

are present in cities and I close with some suggestions for Pastoral Care and Counselling in urban differences.

Differences of Cities and in Cities

Cities in the Third World

The growth of the cities especially in the third world is phenomenal. It is estimated that between 1975 and 2000 the urban population of Latin America will be 216%, of China will be 224%, of the rest of Asia will be 269%, of the Middle East will be 302% and Africa will be 347%. In such statistics the number of people is not accounted. The 36% of the population gathered in Asia's cities will be greater than the entire combined urban population of the developed countries. In 1950, seven cities were identified as the giant cities consisting of 5,000,000 among them only two were located in Asia, Africa and Latin America. By 1985 22 of the 34 giant cities were in third world but by 2020 it is estimated that there will be 80 to 93 cities in the third world.

The composition, development and growth of cities varies. For example: Madras city is nothing but an extension of slums. Bangalore is known to be the fastest growing cosmopolitan city in Asia, it is known to be the Silicon Valley of India. Its pleasant climate and the cosmopolitan nature has attracted many multinational and national companies, now it is the concrete jungle causing environmental problems.

Theological understanding of the city: a place for justice, peace and equality

City for some is invention of God and to others it is an invention of human being. City is to be understood as ongoing process of human interactions and not as a state or condition. City is spoken in theological themes such as of protection, salvation or liberation, survival, evil and prosperity. Any discussion on nature of good or evil depends on the functioning of the systems and the subsystems that governs the city. The systems such as the economic, political and religious and the sub systems such as education, health care, culture, art and social service. These man made systems corrupt the city and affect the people. God intends liberation for all humans from evil and desires to establish peace, justice and equality. God hates sin and oppression, for example, Amos in 2:6 and 7 explains of the sins, the illtreatment of people, such as selling the needy for a pair of sandals, trampling on the heads of the poor and denying justice to the oppressed.

Economic and social differences: poor and rich

The majority of people in India and in the cities are living in poverty. The new economic policy of India encourages privatisation, offers free trade and grants license. The actual beneficiaries of this is International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Several corporations such as Transnational Corporation are cashing on the situation, since the market dictates everything and not people. I am not a student of economics, but what I gather is that India has incurred debts and is moving towards "balance of payment crisis". The deficit has risen to \$ 4.057 million due to a huge imports. The per capita GNP income in 1993 was \$ 290, but in Switzerland it was around \$ 36.410. This scenario only goes to prove that rich countries are becoming richer and poor countries are becoming poorer. Globalisation is defi-

nately another means of further domination and domestication, a new form of neo-colonisation. And all that becomes visible in the cities.

The non-economic factors that come along with globalisation is much more harmful and destructive. Let me give you an example: The media promotes artificial ethos, an utopian ideal devoid of pain and suffering through electronic gadgets, food, clothes, fashion and cosmetics. Though it advocates against drudgery, relieving of pain and suffering by introducing new products yet its values are destroying communitarian values by promoting individualistic values. Added to this is the corruption scandals, these scams seem to be on the increase and has developed into “Hawala culture” comprising of money, property and power. Politically the power is still in the hands of rich and powerful.

Religious differences and the need of tolerance

In pluralistic society like India one is used to the constant conflicts among various ethnic groups mostly in regard to religious practices. One almost accepts and lives with different religious symbols and worship patterns however disturbing it is. One witnesses philosophical battles or verbal or written attacks and in extreme cases worship places will be desecrated and burned and human beings destroyed. Tolerance is one way of coping with religious fundamentalism such as accepting construction of worship places in odd places, blockade of roads due to processions or meeting, etc. The level of tolerance either enhances to live in peace or destroys harmony.

Pluralistic society and family relationship

Joint family

Joint family inculcates many familial values. Joint family comprises of three generation of families living together consisting of both vertical and horizontal relationships. Vertical is father - son relationship and horizontal means brothers of father's and their families staying together. They are controlled by one male authority. They share a common roof, food and which may vary from family to family. The strength of the joint family is that it protects the weak, unemployed and underemployed and unhealthy. All are fed, clothed and educated no matter how much one earns. Babysitting is provided free, elderly are taken care and there is constantly some one at home, so children can come to a home with people and never to an empty house which is the case nowadays as both parents are working. Joint family had many advantages, it also has disadvantages though it encourages social relations between couples and wider family. It does not provide (1) a space for intimate relationship between couples or between parents and children (2) no privacy and (3) no power for women to decide. This type of family develops a strong symbolic relationship where self is seen in relational to others, ego boundaries are more open to others and there is little psychological space around oneself. Indians always refer to as 'we', 'ours' and 'us' and never I, 'mine' or 'me'. Belonging to collectivity is preferred to individualism, autonomy and initiative is undermined. Indians will identify in terms of 'role', group, caste, class and gender. All these values are now endangered by an emerging new family type, especially in the cities.

Nature of relationships

The interpersonal functioning and relationship in the Indian society is the hierarchical structure. Most relationships are cognitively arranged in the hierarchical order. The image of the superior is seen as 'nurturant' or assertive never impersonal or fraternal. Such type of understanding is promoted in the social educational system and also religion gives sanction to this understanding.

Indian behaviour is characterised by reciprocity, strong mutual caring where emotional connectedness is essential and any feelings disruptive of the relationship are contained and inhibited. This is the reason why Indians would compromise even if they are right.

Most social scientists, writers and historians have commented on peaceful co-existence of contrasting values and behaviour dispositions which is reflected in the various aspects of life and have spoken of the peaceful co-existence of logical opposites in the emotional sphere. One can describe this contrasting personality as a sense of solidarity with uncontrollable tendency towards disunity; collective megalomaniac with abject xenolatory; authoritarianism with an archaic individualism; violence with non-violence; militarism with fascism; possessiveness with carelessness about property owned; courage with cowardice; cleverness with stupidity.

Even educated Indians have the capacity to compartmentalise science and logic they study or even daily working with it. One can give a rationale justifying that Indians are torn by their internal psychological tussles and suggest that there is a creation of double consciousness each complete and coherent; but capable of shutting out the other, when one is dominant. Holding of contradicting values is seen in day to day life. For example:

There is a wide gap between what is professed and what is practised, this is revealed in the promises of the politicians. For example, promises are given and never kept and there is no feeling of remorse for not keeping it. An Indian finds it difficult to say 'no' even if he/she knows that he/she is unable to carry out what has been asked.

A research was done comparing Indians and Westerners attitude, five contrasting values were chosen such as embeddedness in one's group, harmony, tolerance and duty in contrast to hedonism, preference, personalised relationships and arranging persons, objects, ideas. and relationship hierarchically. Though there were similarities yet they were apparent differences. 1) Indians preferred embeddedness in groups 2) Preferred hierarchy particularly based on class and caste 3) Preferred maintenance of personalised relationship.

The Indian psyche

There is a need to understand a general behaviour pattern of Indians. This is not an easy journey. I will attempt to construct the behaviour pattern of Indians that effects the personality. These attributes have their roots in religio-philosophical, cultural and social values. An analysis of selected films and proverbs shows the typical personality as mild, passive, dependent, other worldly, non-materialistic, conditioned by basic values of Hindu religion. Hindu personality can be described as passive, innerdirected and narcissistic with low aspiration, passivity, and conformity as basic characteristics of Indians.

Passivity and conformity have been the basic feature of Indian psyche. Joint family and caste system are discussed as the causes for ingraining reluctance in per-

sons not to take decisions and evade responsibility. One can go further and say that out of the sacred womb of the Indian family only *yes-men* could emerge. The familial interactions develop an acute sense of dependence through extreme emphasis on parental authority and minimising opportunities for personal initiative. Personal initiative is replaced by obedience and conformity. Loyalty and conformity are expected rather than competence, efficiency and initiative.

Even after the son grows up a strong bond between son and father exists. The desire for approval and sanction of father is longed at every stage. The fatalistic submission of Indians surprises westerners. In spite of that is described about Indian psyche there is also the other side which affirms qualities such as body loving, non-dominating, non-competitive, and non-hierarchical; and virtues such as patience, tolerance, sacrifice, openness, synthesis, love, and relationship.

Identity crisis of the Self

Tension between the understanding "who are you" and "where are you from"

Westernisation process, urbanisation and education as well as the position one holds brings in tension in the understanding of self.

Indians are beginning to address the question “who are you” primarily giving importance to the individual. This conflicts with the traditional understanding which asks “where are you from”. David Augsburger notes that the Chinese are known by his/her unit and not “by individual name. The centre of gravity for Chinese is group, group values are more important”. Like Chinese, Indians also have a socio-centric personality, that means not only roots are important but branches and sub-branches are important. It is a network of relationships or connectedness with others which is important.

These relationships come in a package deal with responsibilities and obligations. For example: Eldest son has economic and moral obligations towards younger brothers and sisters. This involves giving and receiving of material and financial resources. These obligations at times calls for costly sacrifices in terms of giving up one’s studies, job, forgoing promotions or selling one’s property etc.

The present situation of the conflict of holding two opposite views without integration between the understanding “who are you” and “where do you come from” creates problems and this needs to be addressed.

Today the cities are creating a new group of young people who are children of parents working abroad. These youths live in hostels have lot of money, freedom, who consider themselves as foreigners, speak English fluently and are unable to read and write their mother tongue. They consider themselves as foreigners when they are not. This causes a false identity or no identity.

What is “mental health” for those, who live with contradicting values?

Westernisation, education and the work ethos of many firms are affecting the thinking and ‘values’ of Indians, especially in cities. One of the conflict is to adopt individualism. Individualism is more a western concept which is stressed as a norm for mature personhood. David Augsburger describes individualism has a commitment to self-reliance. The belief is that one can control one's destiny without any assistance of others, often resulting in competitiveness and surprisingly

conformity. Individuals who climb the “ladder” to belong to the “status giving group” are conforming to their custom and use them to move toward success. Many Indians live in a twilight zone caught in a conflicting zone of western and eastern values, especially in cities.

Some accept, affirm and practise individualism at the cost of facing the consequences from the family, who are unable to understand such values. For example: I am aware of a couple who are very individualistic and with good intention put their parents in a home. The friends and relatives criticised them as even disobeying Christ and almost struck them off Peter’s list.

Some affirm individualistic values in theoretical level but are unable to practise, for example: I am aware of a gentleman who used to be very understanding, supportive, encouraged progress, advocated freedom and emphasised individualistic values but recently came to know that he never allowed his wife to take any decision and controlled every one at home.

Some hold both the values and use it according to the situation for survival. For example: A doctor friend of mine criticised the astrologers, yet in crisis visited the astrologer. This is because Indians can compartmentalise two opposite views. The conflict is between the western and eastern values. This western concept of mental health measured by “self reliance”, “self sufficiency”, inner directed responsibility for oneself and internal sense of personal identity, such a concept Indians consider as undesirable, abrasive and disruptive of harmonious social relationship.

This scenario presents a problem for people living in difference. There are “conceptual problems” of holding “new” and “traditional” values. This raises a lot of questions such as: What is Mental Health? The Mental Health as defined by western world should be accepted? How to access the mental health and address the mental health of those who are caught in the struggle between two opposite and contradicting values.

How people deal with differences and tensions in cities in India

“hit and run”

These people’s intention is to stay for short time and hence they are not interested in “integrating” or “reacting” to the life in the city. Some are opportunists, use the resources and then leave the city. For example:

A research was done on migrant student’s attitude toward the city. 29 out of 174 rural students made use of every opportunity to return to their villages frequently and 50% were feeling “home-sick”. 56 out of 174 rural migrants, that is 32% or one out of every 3 students, wanted to get back to his/her village, as their main purpose was to pursue studies in city in order to have better status or position in their villages.

Muslim community is second largest group in India. Among the Diaspora Muslims, the majority live in India. Some of them have a strong feeling that this is an alien land and one day they will reach the promised land. Though they have adopted to the local culture, speak local language, but they retain their religious practise and yet they live in eschatological hope.

There are other problems which people face for example: One such is of the problem of the youths. Children of the migrants go through inner conflicts as they are

unable to adjust to the peer pressure and city life. City youths are raised in urban environment who think differently and act independently. The frustration and influence of city life influence them to be independent, raise questions at home which causes tensions at home. Their conflicts and the parents controlling patterns affect the children sometimes resulting in severe malady.

There are several young people who drop into the cities of becoming “movie stars” as the largest entertainment world in India’s movies. These people’s ambition is to be a “star” and nothing more.

“came and conquered”

This group of people came and saw city as the land of milk and honey and settled in the city. Their philosophy is “survival” and development of themselves. They avoid rocking the boat, but maintain peace with neighbours, learn the local language and a bit of culture and avoid interfering with other religions, but make contributions, patronise festivals and exercise tolerance at all costs. For example: Certain positions in the offices and institutions are held by non-local people in cities of Madras and Bangalore. Eventually they conquer positions, places and practise nepotism and become exclusivists. Both in Madras and Bangalore cities, Reddies from Andhra Pradesh, Keralites from Kerala have almost taken over certain organisations and firms and some have exclusive clubs for themselves.

This leads to domination of the powerful over the weaker sections. Caste and regionalism come into play. For example: A research conducted to study the intake of students revealed that there was a significant gap between admission and enrolment of rural migrants. The fall in enrolment was attested to lack of information about social amenities in Bangalore city; problems of discrimination due to their rural origins and caste.

Conquered feeling yet have lost social security. Another set of people who came to city hoped to live in harmony with others are unable to cope with pressures of city life or mainly differences.

“fight and lose”

Struggle with “familistic” versus “individualistic” values: These to whom family was the beginning and end of social organisation are used to familistic values which permeates the society from bottom to top. Behaviour in rural area is traditional, spontaneous and uncritical what one person does is similar to what another person does and patterns of conduct are clear. These people come from the close, familiar, well knit environment of a village. They are reared in the families which extends to the whole of the village community, such people get lost in the city. Where people from the cities coming from different ethnic communities live together and more and more emphasis is upon individualism, materialism, indirect contacts, impersonal ways and indifference. Unlike the city people, they feel cut off and isolate themselves or join people like them. The worst effected are those who have come alone without families. The social pressure which helped them in the past is now lacking. One's freedom to do what one pleases becomes a hindrance and a disadvantage.

Struggle with unemployment: Those who came seeking for green pastures or those who came to earn money to repay loans end up in frustration as many do not get the jobs as they anticipated. This is coupled with competition and the attitude of employer, today along with educational qualification, technical skills. Firms are looking for city cultured people or people with working knowledge of English or

state language. This tendency to prefer local people over a migrant creates in the migrant a feeling of low self esteem, believing in the given stereotype image and this result in return to village or moving away from the dominant class to the outskirts, choosing a residential area according to their class.

False identity or blocked growth: There are some people who think they have better status since they are able to make both ends meet and may speak good English language. But in reality they actually are treated as low castes, with no privileges which they are unable to understand. This false identity paralyzes them to accept discrimination. They live in a constant state of denial that every one is good to them.

How to help people living in urban settings

Governmental Programmes

The cultural and development programmes initiated by the government and private sectors to encourage integration is only benefited by a few affluent and select groups. These programmes are set within the framework of caste, class and status.

Church

The Church with all its programmes caters mostly to Christians and very peripherally to the non-Christians. The tragedy is that it also has caste churches, politics and very few leaders from the low caste, which defeats the very purpose of integration.

Groups and NGO's

There are pockets of people's groups such as ecumenical women's groups, NGOs belonging to multi-religious faith, religious groups, tribal awakening groups, dalits and minorities addressing various differences and injustices. Some activists use Marxist ideology to address injustice though the ideological framework for the liberation of exploited sections. This may address the class issue but the caste and religious ideologies will remain.

Media

Some of the movies very graphically and vividly expose the evils in both systems and sub-systems. But there is no statistical data on its influence on the thinking of the people, yet there is a lot of substantial and categorical statements made on the negative influence of media on youths.

Women movements

Women's Liberation Movement, which came on the scene in 1960 focused on patriarchy as the form of social exploitation. Sexuality was seen as a potential power for women's liberation. Violence has been a central theme in organising against rape and wife beating.

Cultural Feminist: Many Indians followed and raised the same concerns of their counterpart in the west. They moved towards a spirituality viewing science, and technology as dominating, militaristic and patriarchal. They accepted the difference between men and women as irrevocable and men as naturally prone to violence and women as non-violent, yet seeing women as superior. Though there is

strength in their analysis, their preoccupation with differences and accepting men being violent and their exclusiveness prevented providing a holistic framework to address violence and sacrifice.

Autonomous eclectic feminist groups comprised of both, rural women (peasants and poor) and the urban educated women. They all have their own particular emphasis but the similarity is the asserting of their rights not in isolation or with feminist groups or with women's wings of political groups but with social movements. The context is given prime focus in their reflection.

Eco-feminists bring together all the themes such as production, violence and sexuality. They take an interdisciplinary approach in discussing issues. They give naturalistic explanations of violence where men are rapists of earth and women have productive relationship with nature.

There has been a paradigm shift from addressing issues in relation to men and women. This is indicated in the resolution of a women's conference of Nasi Mukti Sangharsh Sammedan which met in Patna. They pointed to the state as the major support of violence against women such as rape and other forms of sexual abuse, female foeticide, witch-killing, sati, dowry murders, wife-beating. Such violence and the continued sense of insecurity that is instilled in women as result keeps them bound to the home. This group raised several questions: What is the effect and incidence of violence on different classes' castes, communities of women and what is their relationship between specific Indian traditions of *sri shakti* or *prakriti* to violence against women; in particular how is this violence related to caste structures and traditions?

Suggestions for pastoral care and counselling in urban differences

Openness and being sensitive to others would be a way to live with differences. The method for this interaction is listening. A few suggestions:

Openness is cultivating an ability to understand the mystery of things, events and people. People are not shallow creations but having depth and hidden meanings. Their relationship with God and human beings have meanings. Things and persons are symbols and sacraments. This is a Asian reality, which consist of sacramental representation and symbolic celebrations as well as poetry and art. This poetic symbolic approach to reality is integral to the human heart. Today the consumerism and commodity culture kills all symbolic and poetic nature.

Openness is not going with preconceived ideas but the readiness to study and learn which enables one to see from the depths and different perspectives. This includes discernment and evaluation meaning raising questions. This also means not taking a position of knowing rather than an "unknowing position" with no value judgements. A willingness to learn about reality calls for courage to unlearn what one knows and to relearn.

Openness means tolerance. Indians are known for tolerance, permissive and assimilative nature. Overemphasis on tolerance or experience does not mean to negate truth or to have no concern for truth. Truth of religion should be like relationships: every experience is lived experience. Truth here is not to be understood in absolute sense. The Indian understanding of tolerance springs from the conviction that God and the truth of God is an inexhaustible mystery which cannot be un-

derstood timely and not completely at any given stage and no one can claim that they know the truth not even any revealed religion claiming historical heritage.

Openness means not being dogmatic and authoritative. Authority in India is esteemed high and seen as office, position and power, but in matters of religion it is not seen as the ability to promote growth and freedom. This is based on their understanding of religious structure. The Indian religious structure offers a model, where the structure is not built on judiciary system with power to execute decisions. Authority is not

grounded in any external appointment but in the inner attainment of quality and knowledge of scriptures. In the realm of the religion there is freedom and no organisation binding people.

All these suggestions can be challenges in the approaches to counselling.