

What India has taught me – Indian and Finnish societies as I see them

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The first impression of India when I arrived there in the middle of the hot season in 1989 was that of amazement. Everything appeared as inscrutable. The coordinates utilized when negotiating one's everyday life in Finland were practically useless in India. My first encounter in the Indian soil was far from a positive one. I took an auto riksha from the airport to New Delhi, and the driver would not agree about the fee. Finally he stopped the auto riksha in the middle of the desert, turned off the engine and, turned towards me and said that he would not move an inch unless I promised to pay as much as he demanded. Being a young lone female in an alien country, that was not a very promising start to my engagement with India.

This first incident brought it to me that in India I am in a society where all my taken-for-granted rules and regulations are put aside. Here, what counted was dexterity and wit, not following of rules and regulations. Everyone has to fight for their own interests in the public sphere, otherwise others are going to run over. The first impression was that of a jungle's law. Later on, this was naturally qualified and I realized that there were moral codes but that they were somewhat different from the ones I was used to.

Indian society is a collection of paradoxes, and that is probably why it attracts me as well as so many others. We see there a way of life that challenges the most profound taken-for-granted ideas of being in the world that a person brought up as a Finn has. The principal reason why India has attracted me despite many nasty experiences along the way is that *India forces you to think*. All certainties are qualified, all taken-for grantedness gives way to doubt and pondering, also amazement.

Among the features that puzzled me in India were

- 1) the non-existence of an individual as an end in itself;
- 2) notion that religion is not a field of life that can be considered apart;
- 3) the profound changes in life along Indians' life cycle, particularly the value given to ageing;
- 4) the need to control bad luck, and that everything has its 'prime time', auspicious moment;

- 5) gender as the most important feature of a person, in all respects;
- 6) that people could be so casual vis-à-vis suffering.

After acquainting myself with India, I have never been the same again and never seen Finland in the same way. I have learned to value some things much more than before, and find some things less bearable.

How do I see India?

I see India as a society driven by controversies. Carrying along the legacy of a tumultuous history, Indians have managed to create an atmosphere of dynamism and a forward-looking attitude. It is amazing to see the strength of will to go forward even among people who suffer from poverty and inequality in their everyday life. People are not disillusioned or passive, even though the stereotypical image of the 'karmic Indian' has been widely spread in earlier times among Westerners. India's ability to rejuvenate and transform is remarkable.

It is a society full of injustice. You can see it everywhere. Maybe that is why the goodness you can see there, too, appears so striking – it is so unexpected and virtuous that it blinds the on-looker.

A Finnish yellow-paper journalist who went to Mumbai the other week titled her column 'Horrible Mumbai' – there is so much poverty around that Finns who are unaccustomed to see deprivation react very strongly to it. To those people, India would be a welcome to reality in which the majority of the world's people live, unlike in the haven of the Nordic countries.

India has taught me to see in people who live in poverty also other things than their poverty; that poverty does not destroy people's personality. Absolute poverty and hunger is a crime against humanity but still, we should not forget that the poor are also people, despite the malformed relationship that comes in between due to the material asymmetry. Also the poor need their dignity.

Being a woman

In India, my taken-for-granted value as a human being at par with others in the public sphere was constantly counteracted. It was a revelation that there are places where the world outside the domestic sphere is basically the world of men, where a woman has to constantly guard and protect

herself. It was necessary to start thinking of protecting myself against various kinds of male intrusions, from excessive curiosity to insulting touch, a need which I had never before really had to consciously contemplate. And some of my nasty experiences as a woman in India I would gladly have by-passed, as they were so degrading.

Initially, this possibility of public degradation was a shock difficult to overcome. Only as time passed I realized the other side of the coin – the valuation of femininity and mothering that has no equal in my Finnish background. A woman's ability to give birth to new life was cherished as the most valuable bounty and a fundamental mystery.

What I came to see differently in Finnish society

One of the things realized was that in comparison to Finland, ageing of a woman was regarded in a favourable light in India. I came to realize that in Finland ageing women are considered in a very different way. Particularly for women, ageing is seen more as degradation, not elevation like in India. This was brought home to me during my PhD field work in Andhra, when women who had their menopause commonly spoke about it as a favourable change in the feminine body. They regarded it as a relief to get rid of the menstrual cycle, not a loss of something as I realize at least many women I know in Finland tend to see it. These are only impressions, though, not based on research.

Generally speaking, the low prestige we give to the old people in Finland became very evident after acquainting with India. This is most evident in the way old people appear to feel offended in the public here. Moving around in the public transportation and in other public terrains and observing the aged here, you cannot but be sad about the common expression of helplessness they convey. When I was having small babies and moving around with the baby pram, it was astonishing to realize how aggressive many elderly people were towards baby prams and mothers. When thinking about it, I came to the conclusion that old people feel so sidelined in society that they have to have some scapegoat who is even below them -- and that is the young mothers.

One feature which became even more visible in comparison with the Indian way of life is the use of alcohol in Finland. This is of course a common-place, but I never forget how it was to return from my fieldwork in rural India to Kallio, a district in Helsinki, in the middle of the summer. Seeing a

drunkard in every other corner of the street was simply horrifying. Why does it have to be like this, so many people destroying their and their dear ones' lives?

The strongest influence of India vis-à-vis my image of Finland comes in the way I see the Finnish family. After being accustomed to the abiding family sociality, it was a disillusionment to be back to the extremely nucleated way of life in Finland. Naturally I had come to see the weak side of the Indian family system, too, when it at times does not provide the kind of protection it is supposed to the needy ones, and the internal quarrels and even cruelty, especially towards women, that is ingrained in the system. But at the same time, the nucleated and individualized family thinking we can see here appeared anaemic and lifeless, as if people have denied themselves caring. The constant struggle between individual wants and desires versus one's sacrifices for the family are heavily leaning to the side of selfishness. Many people in India consider so-called western way of life as selfish, and in a way it may be seen as such. People seem to easily give up their relationships, for example, if they feel that it does not have anything to offer for themselves any more. They say, why should I stand this if I don't get any rewards. Why should I toil for the benefit of the family, if they don't give me immediate returns? Sometimes you hear ageing women who have stayed home taking care of their children for many years speaking in a very bitter manner, considering themselves as having made a bad bargain – having got nothing in return for their sacrifice.

In this little essay I have given a voice to very personal and even unanalytical thoughts. The views raised could be debated and challenged; despite it, I hope that these experiences make the reader think, just like India has made me to think and question, endlessly.