

# **Indian and Finnish societies as I see them**

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28 November, 2007

Giddens in his book Sociology writes “Learning sociology means taking a step back from our own personal interpretations of the world, to look at the social influences which shape our lives. Sociology does not deny or diminish the reality of individual experiences. ... Learning sociology is in part a process of self-exploration.” I attempt to take the very first step towards the learning of sociology by exploration of my own experiences of two very distinct societies, Indian and Finnish, and my interpretations of them.

## **Visit to Finland – my broaden outlook towards India**

When I first got a chance to visit Finland as a post-doctoral research fellow, I came to know that it was a completely different far away country about which nobody seems to have heard of! I arrived in Helsinki on 29 September, 1996 after travelling through London Heathrow.

I arrived on a cold rainy autumn Sunday and a big question appeared in front of me “Why there were no people?” This was a big contrast to Indian cities where even at the time of big family festivals, you would always find people on the streets.

Back in 1996 it was not common to see Indians in Helsinki. Over the years Indian population migrating to Finland has increased and with that there is increase in the Asian markets and restaurants. Most Indians who were here then were in restaurant business and many people asked me whether I owned a restaurant. I was a proud academician which was rare!

Finland's strong coffee culture and non-vegetarian eating habit appear different from Indian culture but then India is a vast country with varying culture of eating and drinking. Smoking and alcohol consumptions are socially accepted in Finland but was not so in India. I had read about the alcohol drinking culture of Finland and this was a bigger problem for me than eating non-vegetarian food on the same table since I had not seen anyone close to me drunk before.

Before I go on to exploring my experiences, I would like to recall an incident. On one cold winter evening, my husband and I walked out for our regular evening walk engrossed in serious discussion leaving the apartment keys, mobile phones, and money in the apartment. We never had any interaction with our neighbours during our five years of stay in the same apartment but we still attempted to ring the door bells of several apartments because we needed to use the phone to request the housing company. Unfortunately, nobody responded but we did manage to enter the apartment after all but I never forgot this incident. News which took a permanent place in mind was about a man who was found dead in his apartment after several years. Do people in Finland have so little social interaction and lead loner life? Could such a thing happen in India? Thus began my thirst for comparing two societies.

## **Population and people**

India's population is younger than Finnish population. It is this young population which constitute sizeable part of Indian society. The present day movement shows that the Indian society is moving towards conservative-corporatist (Industrial based

model). Ever since I have come to know Finland, I have wished that Indian society follows the path which Finland took and accept the Nordic model (to begin with equality and redistribution!)

People of Finland are honest, non-violent, quiet, and prefer simplicity. They do not believe in wasting words like many other things and are very careful about what is being said. Your word can be a binding even if there is nothing formally written down. Wasn't Indian population like this several decades ago? In general Indians like to talk and are eager to get into conversation, like to say things in a very elaborate manner, in some situations still word can be a binding. Indians on the other hand also believe in grandeur of items (like cars, home) and its actual functionality does not receive the prime importance. Surprisingly uniform moral is observed in Finland while there is no such uniformity in India but then India has huge cultural and regional diversity.

In Finland there seems to be little social interaction. Staying alone makes one depressed and lonely a general thinking in India. In India, you have to be really strict if you prefer and wish to spend some quiet moments. With regard to the social visits, you must have a prior arrangement and the duration of visit if you wish to visit somebody here in Finland. While in India, you are free to drop-in any time and continue staying as long as you please.

In many places in India we still follow the system of word of mouth. This is a very old tradition in India used for passing of information from generation to generation. In Finland, everything is usually well-documented and hence, there is very little to ask.

I must mention meeting a Finnish mathematics teacher, who taught me Finnish, in the flight from London to Helsinki, my friendship with whom lasted forever. Meeting her made me think "Wouldn't people behave just the same in India too? Was I really in a completely different world, as I was told?" My learning about the Finnish society began mostly by comparing it with the Indian society - of course, from my own view point.

### **Concept of age or ageing**

Addressing everyone (younger, older) by the first name was rather difficult for me at first. In India, usually the last name is used for addressing while in Finland it is the first name which is used. When I entered into the society deeper, I realised that one communicates with children also at the equal level which was very impressive. In India, one is considered "wiser" and "respectable" as one grows older and a child's voice is only a noise and never to be heard. India has a lot to learn from Finnish ways here when it comes to talking to children but Finland has to learn from India when it comes to respecting elders.

Another thing which struck me was the idea of ageing or when one is considered to be old. In India, at the age of 40-45 everything seems to cease and one is expected to be on the peak in life with excellent permanent job, family with children, own house, own car and so on. Why there is such a big difference in looking at life in both the societies?

### **Education**

In India, school education, as I remember, focuses on subject matter and students can become expert in specific subject while in Finland, basic values, general awareness, responsibilities, practical knowledge of home management, extra activities like music are taught. In Finland, university education is usually taken leisurely and not much competitive spirit while in India, it is mostly taken with a lot of dedication, and especially if receiving some fellowship and also a need for completing it before reaching certain age due to high competition.

The academic environment in Finland and India is quite comparable. The interactions between different research groups seemed similar in both the countries. Usually the seminars and teaching sessions are non-interactive and rather few questions are asked in Finland. In India, there are usually many questions are asked. In many Indian universities, still the old style of teaching method is used with extensive use of writing board and explaining everything in great details. In Finland, students are taught to think by providing them with highlights (mostly) and then students are expected to furnish details and learn more on their own. The Indian doctoral students who study in Finnish universities sometime face the problem because they expect too much interaction with their supervisors and would want to discuss everything with the supervisors. The Finnish students do not dependent on their supervisors as much.

If I continue with education and sex discrimination then I must say that there has been movement towards education for all in Finland while in India, this movement got diverted to promoting education of girls and then more towards discrimination based on social class by introduction of law to have several percentages of seats reserved for lower social class. Similar discrimination exists at work places.

### **A woman of Indian origin in Finnish society**

In India, I was always advised not to go out in the evenings and to certain places alone. In Finland, there was no such advice but friends were quite protective (may be because I am an Indian woman). In India, people would immediately advice and also help to dress in the local style but in Finland nobody seemed to mind (at least nobody ever commented on anything; comments on one's person is unacceptable, perhaps). Adjusting at work place with all male colleagues was not difficult because it was the same in Pune, India where I did my doctoral studies.

In Finland, the work and personal lives are kept separate. One generally does not make friends from the work place. In India, there is a very thin line between the two and hence, to keep the two lives separate, one has to be prepared to be treated differently. Also, in big cities (just like here) it is hard to meet anyone outside the work place and hence, the social life can diminish.

When I came to Finland, my first impression was that this country unlike India is really controlled and run by women. In government offices, banks, schools, mostly women are employed. But then looking deeper, some discrimination could be seen with regard to profession and possibly salary but I dare not to draw more inferences since there are no data available to support the hypotheses.

Having a paid maternity leave of one year which can be extendable to three years was something which I had never heard in India. Like new mother, the father is also entitled to paternal leave. Such parental leave system is now being introduced in India

too. But child-bearing and child-rearing are fully the mother's responsibility. I found it quite amazing to see child-rearing among new father.

## **Family life**

India has a joint family system while Finland has nuclear family system. There are strengths and limitations of both the systems as I come to see it after staying in both the systems. A question which comes to my mind is: why the proportion of people feeling lonely and depressed is higher in Finland compared to India? Aren't people in India lonely in the midst of house full of people? Is it the life integrated with spiritual practices help people overcome loneliness?

I list them below but they are just from my view-point and are easily debatable.

### **Strength and limitations of Indian family structure**

- Having family support in upbringing of children
- Security: financial as well as emotional
- Support in difficult times
- Decision making requires approval from the family
- At times high expectations from each other in the family
- Clear demarcation of the gender related work

### **Strength and limitations of Finnish family structure**

- Support in upbringing of children from the state
- No clearly described security from family
- Support in difficult times but need to be asked for
- Apparently selfish approach since no approval from the family is needed
- No expectations from each other in the family and hence, freedom of choice
- Work is mostly shared by men and women in the family

## **Social class**

Flying from India to Finland brought me to a civilisation where social classes did not exist and everyone was equal. I got integrated into this civilisation easily because it was my imagined society. In India, one has to be born in a certain social class and one is attached to it till death. Nothing you can do to change it! In Finland, one is free choose what one wants to be, of course to some extent this is true in India too but may not be as easy as in Finland.

The social status and basic dignity are accorded to everyone irrespective of the profession or way of life while in India, everything is integrated to define the social status. Unfortunately, education has not necessarily brought changes in the thinking and hierarchical social class behaviour continues.

In India, work and habits are somehow always related to dignity. If you are at a higher position and if you are seen walking to work then it is considered below dignity or not acceptable behaviour.

## **Summary**

Simplicity, truth and non-violence are the basic principles followed by people in Finnish society. Faith, Vegetarianism and kinship are the basic principles followed by people in Indian society. Self-sufficiency comes from the basic education at school

about general awareness, practical knowledge of home management, extra activities like music. This is lacking in India due to class-system in the society and large population making cheap labour available. It becomes a question of survival and in the process the dignity is lost (or not preserved).

Even though the principle of kinship looks a strong point of India, there are several disadvantages of it. I have admired the interest and willingness of old people in living alone. When you are old and staying with younger generation, you have to follow their rules and regulations (in most cases) and that could make life rather miserable. In my opinion, this is also a question of maintaining dignity and it can be done by having independence.

India has to learn from Finland to care for historic monuments and other cultural heritage. I must mention an article from NewScientist (5 May 2007, pages 58-61) which is about Scandinavian biopharma design for Nordic living but it has touched many social aspects of Scandinavia with which I fully agree. It says that the Scandinavian is a better place for children and it also encourages people to work sane hours. We must teach our youngsters the Finnish motto Education for all and everything else for all. Everyone is equal.

India is a diverse country full of contrasts and contradictions - from highly qualified people to illiterates, from cities booming with IT businesses and high rise buildings to slums, from a woman president to a woman caged in her own house - she is still lively and colourful. I must admit that in spite of all the comforts and social security structure of Finland, at times I have strongly felt that *something substantial is missing in lives* (could be because life is so predictable here and hence, monotonous) and have longed for hustle and bustle of India!

When I am concluding this self-exploration India is celebrating her sixty years of independence. Finland got her independence in 1917 and will celebrate her ninety years of independence in December, 2007. The changes in Finland started to take place around late 70 that is about sixty years after the independence. This is the right time for such a comparative study so as to learn from each others experiences and choose the path which will lead to change for the betterment of the society.

*Freedom of choice is what everyone should have independent of the place!*