

## **Culture, Tradition and Religion: a critical analysis of two generations, the young and the old in *Caminho das Índias***

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A display of Indian culture, customs and rituals by the Brazilian television serial *Caminho das Índias* made it the center of attraction and also provoked curiosity about this mysterious country. The soap opera, *Caminho das Índias*, presented two distinct societies, Indian and Brazilian, side by side. Being first media production, presenting Indian culture (if it can be called Indian culture), on the one hand it served as a source of information and on the other hand it raised a number of questions in Brazilian mind about Indian society and culture.

It is curious to note that when the media deals with the questions related to the country or society of its own origin very little attention is paid to what it says or how it presents it but when the presentation involves a different culture or country, the audience react in a different way. First of all they do not simply relax and enjoy the presentation and second, they either take everything it presents on its face value or they question its validity. The presentation of *O Clone* and *Caminho das Índias* by the Brazilian T. V. channel *Globo* can be cited as two examples where in general, people believed that it was real display of Moroccan and Indian culture. This happens basically due to the fact that very few people know much about these far away societies, their cultures, and their traditions. Hence, the media becomes a powerful medium to propagate or create an image which in reality might not even exist.

The soap opera tries to include a number of topics about Indian society; its arranged marriage system, joint family system, role of religion in day to day life, superstitions, forbidden love, outcasts or *dalits* etc. As a result some topics are well elaborated but others were presented in a loose way. Yet it cannot be denied that as one watched the T. V. presentation one became conscious about the major differences between Brazilian way of life and Indian way of life and the way India was exposed by the *Globo*.<sup>2</sup>

*Caminho das Índias* offered an opportunity for Gloria Perez to frame a story where she could present a number of relationships between two generations both in

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of the soap opera and the presence of dance, discussion of social outcasts, *dalit* or Shudras, inter-cast marriage/love relationship and other such topics see SWARNAKAR, Sudha, “*Caminho das Índias*: uma Realidade ou uma Ficção” IN: **Crônicas Ensaios e Contos** (Org.) Magno Nicolau. João Pessoa: Ideia, 2009, pp 47-65.

Brazil and in India.<sup>3</sup> The first set presents two generations as it knits around the relationships between the members of a family; father/ mother and son/ daughter, grand father / grandmother and grand children, mother in law/ father in law and daughter in law/ son in law. The second set presents the social relationship between a Brahmin / pundit and other casts.

The term generation, according to the social critics, can be interpreted in four different ways: the generation used in the context of family and genealogy; the generation used by pedagogy; the generation used by historians; and the generation used in the socio-political context. Generation for Emanuel LEVINAS (1989) is a "social construct" and as each society has different structures it cannot be defined in one singular way. The main themes of family research distinguish the life-span event: the relationship between the generations in regard to child-parent-grandparent relationships, and the principle of dependency between them. Following the social critics and to limit the discussion this paper will look at generation in familial, social context and will discuss the relationship between family members; parents and children (father/ mother/ grandmother and grand children) and will concentrate mainly on the role played by the father and the grand mother.

The relationship between two generations in the East and in the West presents a big gap, a wide distance between them. Western culture seems to be more individualistic in comparison to the Eastern culture which is more family or society oriented. What in East is seen as a form of respect and modesty in Western culture is normally interpreted as subordination or loss of individuality. Hence, fifteen years old, in Western world, is seen and treated as an individual whereas in Eastern world an individual is never seen or treated an individual in Western sense of the word and such liberty is unimaginable for one even as an adult. By discussing the relationship between the young and the old in Indian culture and analyzing how it was projected by the media presentation, present work offers a critical analysis of the way it is structured by Gloria Perez in *Caminho das Índias*. The discussion involves the role of culture, tradition and religion in setting the patterns of behavior and formation of identity for the young and the elderly people in Indian culture.

A discussion of Indian culture and religion cannot ignore to look at its literary heritage and the role of this literature in the formation of Indian society. Briefly speaking, the literature of the Indian subcontinent can be divided into three periods: the ancient period, dominated by Sanskrit language (lasting up to about A.D. 1000); the medieval period, the emergence of regional languages and literature and influence of Persian and Arabic languages (from about A.D. 1000 to the early 1800's); and the modern period, development of modern Indian languages and dominance of English language and literature. However, it is the Ancient literature that plays a significant role in establishing the norms and code of societal and familial conduct in Indian society till date.

Sanskrit epics, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata*, after the Vedas, play dominant part role as model for Indian culture and tradition. Similar to epics in Western literature like *The Odyssey* both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are the

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<sup>3</sup> Looking from a comparative perspective I feel *Caminho das Índias* gives ample opportunity for a comparative analysis of a number of issues presenting two distinct societies, cultures, and families.

major epic poems of Indian literature and have been translated not only in almost all Indian languages but also in major foreign languages. The difference between Homer's *Odyssey* and these epics, however, is that long back they seized to be considered as mere literary texts and have transformed into the major religious texts in Indian sense of word religion that means "dharma" duty or prescribed code of conduct.<sup>4</sup>

Two scenes from the *Ramayana* are crucial for present study. One is when Rama breaks the bow in the "Sita Swayambar". Another is "Bharat Milap" when Rama meets his brother Bharat in Chitrakoot. These episodes in the epic are the clear mark of Indian culture and its emphasis on the respect for the elderly people, as we see in Rama's polite request for pardon to the sage Vishwamitra and the affectionate relationship between brothers. Unlike Western culture, where the difference between the children of different mothers and same father is marked, in *Ramayana* the five children of king Dasharatha (born from three wives) show no such distinction.

Commenting on culture and society Raymond Williams (1981, p.13) observes that, "The concept of 'culture', when it is seen in the broad context of historical developments, exerts a strong pressure against the limited terms of all the other concepts." About the word "culture" and its use he comments further, "Until the eighteenth century it was still a noun of process: the culture of something —crops, animals, minds." Raymond Williams' observation in its limited context can be acceptable but on a wider scale it creates some doubt. An Indian scholar might be surprised to know that the use of key word like "culture", in modern criticism, is quite recent because the synonym of "culture" in Sanskrit language "sanskriti" has been in use for at least five thousand years as the evidences from the Vedic literature show. This leads one to think and reflect on the close relationship between "culture" or "sanskriti" and literature, and "sanskriti" and religion when one talks of India. Similar to the *Bible*, the canonical literature of Western tradition, which keeps a strong hold on questions of ethic and morals for Western public, in Indian tradition the Sanskrit epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* set the social and familial norms till today.

These literary texts are an example of the powerful role of a literary work, as I mention above, they are not seen as mere poetic works but are used as the major source of Indian culture and tradition. Moreover, for most Hindus both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, very high quality literary works, are also the major sources of religious and cultural teachings and are read throughout India with respect and rigor in the houses as well as in the temples as the sacred books of learning. Both these epics can be sited as an example of how the rhetoric of dramatization and recitation were used to preserve the literary/ religious texts and stories and were successfully handed down orally from one generation to another. Hence, despite of having a large number of people who were unable to read or write, the cultural message was transmitted by these epics with success.

The *Bhagavad Geeta* (The Song of the Lord), embedded within the epic *Mahabharata*, is the most influential text of Hindu philosophy. Here Lord Krishna explains to the Pandava prince, Arjuna, the meaning of dharma (religious duty). Apart from the main message that everyone must follow the course of duty without thinking

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<sup>4</sup> See APTE, Vaman Shivram. *Sanskrit English Dictionary*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas Publishers, 1970, p. 268.

about its results the *Bhagwad Geeta* also presents a well constructed philosophical discourse on the death and reincarnation and till today is one of the most respected works on philosophy of death. In almost whole India the *Bhagwad Geeta* serves as religious scripture one desires to listen before ones' final partition from this world.

The relationship between two generations in Indian culture follows the teachings of these literary/ religious books and the respect for the elderly comes as a natural form of behavior. Obeying the adults (often not restricted only to the family member) is seen as "dharma" and not as submission or loss of individuality. Rama the epic hero of *Ramayana* who gives up the life of comfort and lives like a nomad in forests for fourteen years to fulfill his father's promise becomes the symbol of an ideal son. The great grand father Bhishma in *Mahabharata* becomes the icon of determination, truthfulness and principle who commands respect.<sup>5</sup>

*Caminho das Índias* presents five Indian households but the main theme is structured around the Ananda family. A family from Punjab settled, in the city of Jaipur, in Rajasthan. The family consists of grand mother "Dadi"/ Lakshmi, "Chacha" (uncle) Opash the only son of Lakshmi, his three sons; Amitabha, Raj, Ravi and a daughter Shanti, grand daughter, Anusha and grand son, the baby boy, son of Maya and Raj. Apart from these there are three daughters in law; Surya, Maya and Camila.

The grand mother Lakshmi is presented as a family matriarch who receives respect from her son and grand children but ironically not from her daughter in law who always calls her "naga". The soap opera presents her in number of roles; as mother, grand mother, mother-in-law and also as someone with tinted past. As a mother she shows her affection by offering blessings to her son and other family members. Yet her portrayal lacks the authoritative intimacy normally enjoyed by woman at this age in her role. Instead of serving as a guide or adviser she is kept at distance even at very crucial moments in family. Such as in the episode when Opash comes to know about Raj's extramarital relationship and of his having a child out of this relationship. It definitely shows a lack of confidence in this mother figure which is not much in accordance with Indian way of family life. Mother in Indian culture enjoys a very higher status than the wife and one sees that most goddesses are worshiped as mothers; Parvathi, Lakshmi etc. As Susan Wadely (1988:33) observes, "The wifely role is one of subordination, of devotion in any circumstances, of dutifulness. It is the mother who gives, who must be obeyed, who loves [...]".

Shirley Chew (1996) observes that in traditional myth the representation of woman as Mother Goddess plays an important role in Hindu culture. According to [Wadley \(1988:33-34\)](#):

Women as non specialists are 'invisible' religious practitioners, since most of their observances are performed non-publicly (in the home or 'domestic' sphere) and their role is not textually sanctioned [...] Women's participation in life-cycle rites is definitely part of the 'little tradition' [...] During actual ceremonial time,

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<sup>5</sup> Despite being written almost 3000 years ago both epics hold a strong control on Indian mind. In late twentieth century both epics were transformed in successful T. V. serials. The complexity of *Mahabharata* was very well dealt in the media production which had 64 episodes and for more than a year it was displayed for one hour on every Sunday yet had hundred percent audience. The popularity of the serial is a simple example of the place these epics occupy in Indian mind.

women's practices clearly dominate: taking a marriage or a birth ceremony as a whole [...].

Lakshmi, though represents the mother figure, hardly dominates any social or religious activity. Though, occasionally, she tells some mythological stories in a broken way to Anusha they sound hollow as most of the time she is portrayed as a doll, a decorative piece in the drawing room from where she hardly moves. She shows no supremacy in religious matters and her son and grand sons bow to her but rarely the female folks show any respect or feelings. This seems strange in Indian context as in day to day life it is the female members of the family who are in constant contact with mother and mother in-law. Moreover, what she commands seems to be the tea sessions. Her role as an Indian grand mother presents a number of problems:

First, throughout the soap opera she is presented as a well dressed elderly woman, in a hair style quite uncommon for her class and age. What astonishes more is that no where she covers her head. Covering head is a common custom in both regions, Rajasthan and Punjab, specially elderly ladies follow this custom rigorously. In the scene where the family mourns for Raj's death the grand mother though covers her head but continues with her pose. It seems Gloria Perez used the Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi as her role model. In doing so she forgot that Mrs. Gandhi did not represent the image of an old Indian lady. She was the icon of *Shakti* (the powerful goddess) and "priyadarshini" in Indian image that never gets old.

Secondly, simplicity and religious activities such as reading of *Ramayana* or "Bhagwad Geeta", going to temple receiving and gossiping with the ladies of her age and chanting the *Bhajans* (religious songs) are the major activities of elderly ladies. The "Dadi" in the soap opera does not involve in any of these activities.

Thirdly, in Indian culture cooking is the main female activity which is given too much importance by both male and female members. The role of old ladies normally is to guide and supervise the younger generation (daughter in laws, grand daughters) and to trend them in cooking according to the individual test of family members. In whole soap opera the food is cooked but never served (even the marriage ceremony has no famous Indian banquet). What is served and demanded in whole soap opera is the "cha" tea and this demand is made by Lakshmi and *Chacha*. This seems funny to those accustomed with Indian house hold.

Fourthly, the elderly people, both male and female are seen as mentor, guide and teacher. The teaching and learning process, one of the major concerns of Indians finds no space in Gloria Perez's story. Shankar is the only character who comes close to the image of elderly people as teacher and guide. Lakshmi despite living in a joint family plays no such role. Telling stories (family stories, Puranic stories) are the main traits of old ladies which the soap opera almost omits. The only thing "Dadi" teaches to her grand daughters is to dance or how to use it to attract her husband. This takes her far from the real grandmother in Indian context.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, in Raj's death episode her posture, reaction and detachment is totally contradictory to what one normally sees during such occasions in India. Birth, marriage and death are three major events in all societies and all three have strong

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<sup>6</sup> see SWARNAKAR, Sudha, "Caminho das Índias: uma Realidade ou uma Ficção"

cultural marks. She is not presented as a real mourner even at the death of her young grand son with wife and small kid. Also according to Indian custom she and Maya's family (which is totally excluded from mourning!) have the specific role to offer support to young widow. The widow is never left alone specifically when she lives in a joint family. This part of the novel where ties between the young and old should have been strengthened seems to be most dilapidated in Indian context of religious and social rituals that follow such occasions.

Her identity as an old woman takes on what becomes in the soap opera an unfamiliar shape as it does not combine with the model role for a grandmother. Instead of offering guidance or assuming the role of a mature and experienced old lady Lakshmi lingers in her own tinted past unable to find an edge from which to create meaning, or to act as an Indian grandmother. Her criticism of new generation (specifically of her daughter in law Indira) appears ridiculous in the light of her own tinted identity. Such inscription transforms Lakshmi's personal situation into an ambiguous social and historical statement.

A significant preoccupation in the soap opera consists in how Lakshmi is to make sense out of her own sexual experience. Eventually she achieves it through a series of conflicting realizations in which the role of mother is paramount as she opens up her secret, not only to her son Opash but also to whole family. Lakshmi's past and its revelation both seem quite distant from the normal relations in two generation in Indian context where such a secret should have been guarded till death. However, it serves the purpose of projecting the higher goal she achieves as she is able to avoid the catastrophic situation where son would have committed a sin by physically assaulting his own father.

The eldest male member "Chacha" or uncle is radicalized and muted in a number of scenes where Opash assumes the role of patriarch. His relationship with his mother, sons and other members of the family and also his position in society as a well known merchant is well presented. In a joint family, in India, a child grows more in the company of the grand mother and other elderly family members than with his parents and feeding, playing, narrating stories are part of this free environment in which a child grows up. However, in *Caminho das Índias* majority of the time, Raj's son, the small baby is cared by his mother. The grand mother Lakshmi and grand father "Chacha" never ever hold the boy. Similarly Anusha the only young girl, considered like a sister in Indian joint family and Gopal's daughter never play or show any interest in the baby which seems quite strange as at this age young girls adore to play with younger ones. In Western world younger children's role in taking care of baby or younger children is interpreted as "child labor" but in Indian context it is seen as an important part of family life and during this early age by the involvement of family in caring and bringing up the child the family bond is normally tied up.

The relationship between the young and the old generation can be interpreted as culture specific yet it cannot be denied that apart from the culture and tradition, the religion also plays a major part in many cultures. Religious interference becomes transparent as we look at an individual and the way he/she behaves, dresses, and addresses the elderly people. Opash seems to be the only family member who shows affection, plays with the baby and uses the typical Indian phrase "Meu pequeno Krishna" (my young Krishna). The association between "Bal-Krishna" (child Krishna)

and a small child is very common in India and this religious context is used in a quite normal way by Opash in exploring the relationship between two generations. The writer tries to build up a society where the younger ones bow to the elderly member of the family and touch their feet. This Indian way of greeting the adults is well maintained as one observes frequent use of "Namaste" and bowing and touching feet of people who are older and receiving their blessings "Jeete raho beti" (though makes one laugh due to the gender confusion as for male members it should be "Jeete raho bete"). The distance between the child and elderly people presented in the soap opera seems more close to the Western family pattern where parents (father/ mother) are the sole responsible for bringing up children and the grand parents keep themselves at a distance as mere observer. In Western context the closeness might be interpreted as "unwanted interference".

Different from the Indian traditions, in the *Caminho das Índias*, the youngest son Ravi does not follow his elder brother Raj's example and marries to a non Indian girl against his family wish. The daughter Shanti takes much bolder step by, renouncing the family bonds, running away from her home and home country to realize her individual dream. These episodes distance the soap opera from the social and cultural context where the relationship between brothers is symbolized by Ram-Laxhman or Ram-Bharata pair from Ramayana. It presents fights between brothers and also between the daughters in law. These scenes appear more inappropriate in a traditional family. There is no formation of generation apart from historical turnovers or new cultural appearances. Zygmunt Bauman, the sociologist, describes these challenging, excessive and even order-violating manifestations as the guidelines to the modernizing mind of any society. Hence, the representations of family values in talk and in action so distant from the role models serve to show how identities are shaped by the intersections of modern circumstances in *Caminho das Índias*.

Concluding one can say that by disrupting the possibility of a homogeneous familial identity and the idea of home, the *Caminho das Índias* creates a destabilized space from which the younger generation begins to reconstruct their own history and identity, distant from the old generation, also distant from its religious traditions as one might expect in Indian context.

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