



Short Paper

External influences on indigenous cultures

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INTRODUCTION In the early days of psychiatry there used to be a tendency towards homogenization. People were thought to be same everywhere quite disregarding the effect of culture on their character. Culture never had a precise definition; lately it has become more diffuse. However as far as our generation understands culture - the way people in groups live and think, have particular mores, customs and values - constituted psychological make-up of people and gave him his identity (or character/personality). Such self-construction comes under the purview of 'self- psychology', a comparative new line of thought, which is being followed by the author¹.

Presently there is much rethinking on identity following the unprecedented movement of non-western people into the western world. Adaptation in the midst of clash of cultures and such produce immense stress on immigrants. The resulting mental health problems that are often unfamiliar to attending psychiatrists are easily misinterpreted. Over the years it is gradually understood that psychiatry as practiced in the west is biased and eurocentric.

The subject of culture and personality has been endlessly debated from Wallace (1960) to Garro (2003) that leave no doubt in anybody's mind that the personality concept is also euro-centric. However, it is seen that people all over the world are trying to "become like" westerners and adopt their language, dress, customs, manner and living style. This process used to be called 'westernization' and it was thought to be deep, inevitable and effect of a superior, rational and scientific culture. Presently much is being written about this subject under the rubric of 'modernity', which is an enormous subject covering a time period beginning from almost the middle of 18th century to this day. (I am leaving aside globalization, which is more concerned with economics).

I shall confine myself to a small period and location, namely the British period in India, that also only to the much neglected psychological aspects.

It is said imperialism or not, the British period was beneficial to India as it brought 'modernity' to that country (accordingly to Karl Marx). However, leaving aside technology and such, the psychological changes that the Indians (or perhaps, all non-western peoples) underwent following colonial conquests do not seem that beneficial. A subject that has not received the attention it deserves. In recent years oriental scholars, notably Edward Said (1978), has made significant contributions on this subject. Indian author, psychologist and social scientist Ashis Nandy's, (1983; 1995; 2005) works in this respect are also seminal.

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It is somehow assumed that modernity in the form of science, rational and liberal thought are all western products. Indian Nobel Laureate, Economist Amartya Sen, (2005) has strongly refuted that claim; he has provided evidence that there had been extensive interchange of ideas and practices in the ancient and medieval world, which extended to pre-colonial times. These interchanges make it impossible to distinguish origin of ideas with any precision regarding time and place. Interactions between Indian and Arabic scholars, between Arabs and medieval European scholars are well-known, but what is little known is the close interchange between Indians and Chinese and it was not only religion (Buddhism) but also on science, astronomy, mathematics and so forth. Sen, (2005) has also shown that Indian culture had always been characterized by 'diversity, heterogeneity and pluralism', which prevented intolerance and orthodoxy. These aspects he says were obscured by the tendency of historians to follow a false type of historiography and classification.

I proceed from here with the presumption that we construct ourselves as persons, with our conscious volitional efforts. The self that is presented to the world is mainly based on our ancestral culture. We strive to retain the basic ingredient of this culture but also try to 'improve' ourselves according to, what is prevalent or perceived as a more attractive model. The latter is chosen because that usually allows one to change or 'develop' in keeping with the surrounding changing world, which the traditional mores resist. Both traditional and the newer models are steeped in power games, where the dominant one is naturally the winner. Personality studies in the hands of academic psychologists had been rather sterile till the aforesaid authors and others started making an impact on the establishment and the subject came into the lay public domain.

A question that arose once before with the coming of the colonial powers in India is again in our midst, what is our 'true' character? In the present period of transition of post-post-colonial times do we have a choice to determine the sort of character we would like to have? What need to be changed? If any at all? The biggest flaw we have is said to be our lack of rational thought or critical faculty. Previously, eminent psychiatrists like Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, Erich Ericson and others have tried to answer some broad questions involved in social construction of personality, but in later years, these have become studies of 'identity' and gone more or less out of psychological domain. Indian author Sudhir Kakar, (1978) has written considerably on childhood development and personality formation of Indians; which are strongly culturally oriented. However, Kakar has been criticized for neglecting social aspects and being class oriented. Altogether, psychological aspects of the colonial question have been left almost untouched by mental health experts. It is my contention that the subject is extremely important because one's self concepts have profound effect on psychotherapy.

A bit of local history will be relevant here. With the coming of colonial powers, Western science and ideas were accepted wholeheartedly by Indian intelligentsia. Science was seen as "metaphor of universal reason [...]". (It) became "cultural authority for Indian modernity" (Prakash, 2000). However, the most appreciable aspect of science, its self-critical approach, and constant renewal do not seem to have impacted our scholars that much!

The colonialists imparted a deep sense of inferiority in Indians by denigrating all things Indian and disparaging Indian character traits. The late Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, (eminent scholar and philosopher, ex- President of India) says, "the British or pro-British writers tried their best to persuade Indians that its philosophy is absurd, its art puerile, its poetry uninspired, its religion grotesque, and its ethics barbarous" (1977).

Reacting to such onslaughts, the Indians, given their defeated, victim status, imitated the British, at times rather crudely, however they also adopted another strategy. They constructed an individualized western self, which is to say they 'became British' for all purposes, but their inner

identity, the ‘Indian self’ (the *secret self* of A. Nandy, 1995) remained compartmentalized, or intact. Whatever polemics, arguments, and ethical debates that went on among the intellectuals of the time, ‘psychological aspects of being’ was not one of them. ‘Theirs’ and ‘ours’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ character traits were discussed; ‘theirs’ were seen as superior and accepted. But this acceptance was not in any radical sense; it was not through psychoanalysis, a newly emerging ‘science’ that was establishing itself at the time (Hartnack, 2001), application of which supposedly changed personality. It is said that psychoanalysis was accepted as Indians found a theory of social criticism in it, which was also anti-imperialist (Nandy, 2005). Such political overlay of psychoanalysis soon disappeared and we were left with gross prejudices in its name. The model of a person in Freudian psychoanalysis was a white western male, and the family was father dominated, nuclear family. This model was not questioned anywhere, the western man became the prototype of human being. The nuclear family caused some problem, but there were only mild references that we have large joint families where father wasn’t that important a figure. Freudian ideas became sacrosanct despite the fact that the founder of psychoanalytical society in India, Dr. Girindrasekhar Bose (1886-1953), with his deep insight, had found that son’s identification with mother was the accepted and dominant feature in Indian psyche. It was many years later psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar (1997) also found the same. There was very little debate on Dr. Bose’s theories when he tried to forge an Indian version of personality. It would appear that under strong intellectual dominance, capacity of first hand experience suffers, Indian psychiatrists refused to ‘see’ or experience what was right in front of their eyes, meaning their self-doubts prompt them to accept only text-book dictum. Some well-known facts may be repeated to highlight east-west differences in personality. The western credo is individualism. The western person constructs his self as a separate, complete person, bound in his body, whereas, we remain essentially bound in a fundamental way with others, family, kin, community, even cosmos! Individualism is a western product (Karim & Littlewood, 1992), a socially and psychologically coveted quality that arose out of philosophy, history and social changes in the west. It has become an essential need for a modern person.

To be an Individual a person primarily has to shed his ‘dependency needs’. From psychoanalytic point of view, which makes “dependence vs. independence as the nuclear conflict in the development of human personality” (Neki, 1976). A label of dependent or over-dependent person draws derogatory evaluation in the western world.

A westerner is an individual first; he may or may not acknowledge his duties and obligation towards his family. Whatever he does, is done as free choices, voluntarily. An Indian on the other hand is under compulsion over his duties and obligations, brought up as he is in the symbiotic womb of the joint family. Ideally the family protects him from anxiety and supports him in vicissitudes of life, but leaves him hopelessly unprepared for taking difficult individual decisions. He is forever dependent on others. In modern times when the supports are hard to come by he has to face life unaided. Again, to meet with challenges he develops various strategies, mainly by constructing an outer social self. He ‘becomes a westerner’ for all practical purposes, a large gap is left within himself, and his inner identity becomes uncertain. It may leave him unsure and anxiety prone, but he can function perfectly well all the same. There is no consistent inner struggle within to justify himself and his actions to be a consistent person in all times and places. Some Indian authors writing in English, notably Jhumpa Lahiri (2002), portrays such persons very well.

‘Becoming another’ has several levels; it can never be totally authentic. And here comes the crux of the matter. A westerner’s ego ideal is individuality, no matter how difficult it is to exist with this internal unconnected-ness; he would rather choose loneliness, than messy proximity. An Indian’s assumed individuality is like a cloak or at best a vest it seldom becomes the skin. But does that mean he is incapable of becoming an individual? Or exercise rational thought, independent

views; however unpleasant and uncompromising if need be? It would be ridiculous to assume that. Philosophy, logic or mathematics could not have achieved the height they did in India without the power of rational thinking (Sen, 2005).

However, it may be pointed out here that though 'introspection' underlies meditation (an Indian contribution to the world), it operates in another plane, seldom devoid of 'cosmic reality' (Kakar, 1997). Introspection may be taken as experimental ground for rational problem solving.

It seems to me that individualism based on rationality need not be taken as anti-thesis of mutual dependence. Indian authors have pointed out its importance sometime ago, (Surya & Jayaram, 1964; Neki, 1976).

CONCLUSIONS To return to my question of individualism, it is concluded that Indian attitude to it is ambiguous and it is adopted with much subterfuge. I am not analyzing individualism as such, but only what it entails psychologically, at least at one particular time and place.

Colonialists and anthropologists (for a time) had been telling the world from the early days, (e.g. Freud's *primal horde*) that the Indian ego is not individual but group-ego, it remains merged with the group or community, and the individual self is 'bonded'. According to such viewpoints Indians usually cannot act independently, like children whose ego is 'infantile and immature'. It has parallel in the animal kingdom where the 'herd instinct' guide action for the whole group. It is to be remembered Western thinking during the last century was strongly binary, everything was either/ or, it was also strongly laden with values. Nurture or culture (read 'civilization' which was supposed to prevail only in the west) was prioritized over nature. Such outdated thinking do not require elaboration in these postmodern days, but an embarrassment or inferiority in possessing any animal traits persists.

Bonding is very important to human beings who seem to require a "circle of intimacy around one where one can let the hair down and demand to be nurtured without the onus of charity [...] Absence of this ambience impoverishes one, no amount of substitutes, like search for God or Self, or making money, ceaseless activity, artifacts like motor cars, or stamp collection can help an inner emptiness. Human relationships are the most fulfilling element in life" (Hsu, 1989).

Indians so far have managed to live in "intimacy circles", but perhaps, not any longer. It is true the large joint families are breaking up, but perhaps a new pattern is emerging, where bonds remain. New grouping with smaller units are forming, or else members living far from each other consider themselves same family and make all efforts to gather together on religious festivals, marriages, anniversaries and so forth.

Affluence helps in keeping the ties, so cousins may be closer than own brothers. A mental health field survey in Calcutta, (Chakraborty, 1990) some years ago revealed that economic disparity among members, (which also determined power hierarchy), was the most potent cause for discord and dissension in families. One important new feature, women's independence and awareness that played a strong role in family 'break-ups' were also showing new kinds of awareness. Newly married 'choto-bou' (bride of the youngest brother with traditional role), invariably wants to live her own life, but she is also reasonable and accommodative and so is mother-in-law who is less tyrannical these days.

Except for a rare individual most people understand the need and usefulness of family.

'Given' relationships are more comforting, one does not have to go out and search for it and remain forever anxious about losing it; words said in anger can be retracted, forgiven and forgotten, which is not so with friends.

In conclusion it may be said that it is essential that traditional persons must change to survive and develop in the modern world. Being a self-sufficient individual has great compensations. There are no particular reasons why individualism should be opposed to family life, once the binding factor is understood and internalized. However, bringing a balance between freedom and bonding and bring up children accordingly require considerable conscious understanding by the parents.

NOTE

¹ The terms character, personality, person, and self have been used here rather loosely, and interchangeably. Here are some explanations. Personality is a technical term for psychologists; to them it means the unique difference between two persons. It may also mean aggregation of inborn (and universal) traits, which can be measured and profiles constructed. Character is a lay term denoting lay evaluation of personality that may carry value judgment. Identity has in the history of various disciplines concerned with it acquired various shades of meaning and variety of interpretations (Mol, 1978). Most authors divide identity as internal and external. Inner identity is what I think myself to be, or the image I have of myself, which is usually hidden from others. The external or social identity is what I construct for my self to be for other people or the society. Both are partly conscious and partly unconscious. Identity as elaborated here is entirely personal and private, which is a different concept from group identity, or national, regional or linguistic ones that one may also possess. Identity, as national character, seen from the '3rd person perspective', may influence a person quite deeply, but it can also be kept separated from self. At personal level 'self' is a much preferable term.

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