



Just a Tea Stall Girl: Lessons from India

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*I have crossed an ocean, I have lost my tongue;
from the root of the old one a new one has sprung.
(Vimochana: Forum for Women's Rights, Bangalore)*

An old institution of predominantly white privilege, the university sabbatical, favored me with a leave in 2004. I went to India, puzzling on the possibilities. Would I learn more than any white, mid-fifties, well-to-do female traveller? Would I journey as an informed foreigner or a hapless tourist? Would I connect with active social justice communities? Would Indian people talk to me about issues of substance?

After about a month in India, opportunities abounded. Social workers, academics, social justice activists, family lawyers and human rights defenders included me in their work. Community social workers introduced me to women's development initiatives in urban areas and rural villages; advocates and academics invited me to co-present workshops; executive directors of research agencies took me to policy and planning weekends with participants from across India; social justice experts exposed me to some of the diverse challenges that face India. I was accepted as a foreigner, not just a tourist; as an observer, and as a learner. Almost everyone I met took time to educate me about the splendor and suffering that is India.

Certainly my white privilege played a role in connecting me with these talented, fascinating and powerful people. They picked me up and took me along because I wanted to learn, and my life experience rendered me new and unusual. They wanted to hear about social justice issues in Canada, and they shared their learning and life experience in return. Most, like me, enjoy a level of autonomy and independence. Mullaly (2002) observes that social workers and other persons of privilege are socialized into the dominant culture. Mindful of this, I developed a broader reference group of less privileged Indian women and men, and eventually my ties to these less affluent communities permitted me to describe myself as 'just a tea-stall girl' learning in India.

The tea stalls

Tea-stalls, like coffee shops in rural North America, are gathering places where people talk politics and the state of their world over chai or coffee. India is still a rigidly paternalistic society; those who frequent the tea-stalls are almost exclusively men, some employed, others underemployed or unemployed. Many speak English, the language of government. Their first question, "What country coming from, madam?" was my license to ask questions in return.

One man told me that he relocated from his village in Kerala to work in the Chennai tea-stall where I sat. Kerala has a literacy rate of over ninety percent, and fewer than twenty percent of its

population lives in slum housing. But employment opportunities are limited, so this man must leave his home to find work. He opens the tea stall every morning at 4:00 AM; closes it after dusk. Elaborating on the problem of unemployment in Kerala, he mentioned the years 1991 and 1992 when the World Bank devalued the rupee. For this man it was the beginning of globalization, and it spelled the end of his lifestyle.

As he spun my second cup of coffee through the air, hot milk flowing from one cup to another, he talked about his two daughters, aged four and ten years, who live in Kerala with his wife. He would not consider moving them to Chennai, the large capital city of the state of Tamil Nadu. The family is separated by the Southern width of the sub-continent, a long commute. He travels home every six months; sends money monthly. Once he was an agricultural worker, but the river ran dry and the groundwater disappeared. What happened to the river? Was there a drought? No, he told me. The dry river was just one more gift of globalization.

Water and Globalization

Most of the people I talked with named water as India's greatest problem. Although Kerala is not in the throes of India's drought, much one-time agricultural land lies barren, decimated by transnational companies such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola. The unemployment in Kerala exemplifies how globalization promises prosperity to everyone, but delivers only to a select few. In spite of its promises, global capitalism is unable or unwilling to confront poverty; instead, it intensifies the inequality between the very rich and the achingly poor. In the case of India, it appears that globalization creates poverty. Soft-drink companies like Coke and Pepsi drain the bore wells, empty the rivers, siphon off all the groundwater, pollute the land with chemical waste, and then move with impunity to replicate the same havoc in a new location. Farmers, agricultural workers, small business owners and their families simply move on, dispossessed, displaced, and dislocated.

Tired of moving on, people in Kerala coordinated a protest movement against a Coca Cola plant early in 2004. After having depleted the water supply at the village of Plachimada, Coke applied to tap into another water source. Tribal people, agricultural workers and villagers banded together to stop this move; human rights defenders and social justice advocates from across India traveled to the village in support of the protesters. Eventually the case went to Kerala's High Court. Faced with charges in the High Court, wide-spread political controversy, and stop-work orders from the village council and the state government, Coke suspended operations at its bottling plant in Plachimada. This was a defeat that many hope will pave the way for the next defeat, and the next. The Times of India reported from Jaipur, on June 5, 2004:

Coca-Cola is now facing the ire of a parched Rajasthan village on the heels of its woes with mass stir and legal tangle in a wet Kerala. A depleting water table has brought the villagers of Kaladera, near here, together for a demonstration before the soft drink giant's factory on Saturday. The villagers of this state, with an annual average rainfall of only 50 centimetres, hold the factory, set up in 1999 as part of state's special drive to attract foreign investment, responsible for a sharp drop in the water table in and around the area. "The Coca-Cola plant is drawing too much of groundwater, which has forced the water table in the area to drop to an alarming level," Ladu Singh, villager, said on Friday.

Despite the well-publicized victory in Plachimada and continuing protests in agricultural villages, few people I met on the streets in India seemed worried about the impact of

globalization. Indeed, many viewed transnationals as creators of employment, not exploiters of cheap labor. People shared a pessimistic outlook, a sense that globalization is not really the answer to poverty, but it is still the most viable alternative. In this country of one billion people, where 350 million go to bed hungry each night, there is a vague sense that the meager social safety net catches the very poor; a hope that government intervention offsets the losses confronting displaced persons. It is not difficult to appreciate the impotence conveyed by the man I met in that tea-stall conversation and that of countless others with similar stories. Displaced from their villages and underemployed in large cities, the cycle of many lives is to work, send their earnings home and save rupees by living in the city slums.

The Slums

Eighty percent of those who live below the Indian poverty line are homeless slum dwellers. Forcibly evicted when their land is ceded by governments to airport, mine or dam construction, to international agricultural ventures or massive bottling plants, displaced agricultural workers are among those who are forced to move to the city slums.

The slums also shelter homeless forest dwellers, displaced by national parks and sanctuaries, and people from Dalit communities. Dalit people are below the bottom in the Hindu four-fold caste system. They perform India's dirtiest work; sweeping the streets, scrubbing the toilets, picking up and through the garbage, and sometimes dying in more dangerous tasks such as emptying the septic tanks. After the 2004 tsunami it was the Dalit people in India who dug the corpses out of the sand. Dalits live at risk of murder and mutilation for such 'crimes' as wearing shoes in their village, drawing water from the village well or entering a Hindu temple. Yoginder Sikand writes, "Forming almost a fifth of the Indian population, the Scheduled Castes or the Dalits, a conglomeration of numerous caste groups considered as ritually 'polluting' and, therefore, 'untouchable', by caste Hindus, are victims of the most sternly hierarchical social order that human beings have ever devised" (Sikand 2004, p. 48). Some Dalits move to escape rural discrimination through the anonymity of city dwelling; others move because land, promised to them by governments when they were forcibly evicted, never materialized. Once local social networks and traditional support systems are destroyed, many development-displaced persons have no option but to migrate to the slums of major cities. Internal displacement is a chronicle of lost livelihoods, lost villages bulldozed for an airport or massive dam project, and lost relocation plans that, regardless of political promises, are almost always to an urban slum.

I observed vast differences in urban slums. Most impermanent is the ragged collection of canvas pup tents covered with blue tarps, located near construction projects, a first stop for many migrant families. More permanent thatch shacks line concrete fences along the railway lines. Beside every city improvement project stands a tent or thatch slum, housing women, men and children who dig fibre-optic cable into trenches; carry stones on their heads on construction sites; prepare land for highway expansions; repair railroad lines and perform other manual labour jobs. Poor work for poor money is endless.

The largest slum in Asia, situated in Mumbai, has an air of resigned permanence that appears less dependent on building projects. Constructed of canvas, thatch, tarp, used brick, corrugated metal, plastic and old wood, it houses thousands of displaced people who support themselves in part through manual scavenging. Ostensibly against the law in India, manual scavenging involves picking through the garbage of India to reclaim and reuse discarded material. It is ugly, degrading, filthy work, undertaken mostly by Dalit people, while governments turn a blind eye.

Manual scavenging lowers the refuse level in the landfills, which creates a benefit for municipal governments. They profit from the despair of manual scavengers.

Permanent, planned city slums are little more than rows and rows of tiny, concrete houses lining narrow streets, each self-contained unit attached to the houses on either side. Most have a floor space smaller than two double beds, and house an average of six people. The advantage of a permanent slum dwelling lies in its tiny kitchen, attached toilet, and small bathing area with a water tap.

Women work at home in the permanent slums. Along with tailoring, embroidery and other piecework, women of all ages prepare the base for incense sticks; girls as young as eight work alongside their mothers after school. As I watched, they pinched a piece of black gum-like material from a ball, rolled it on a thin wooden stick, set the stick aside, and reached for another in a quick tempo developed through countless repetitions. One thousand sticks earn ten rupees, about twenty cents in United States dollars. The palms of these women and girl children are stained flat black. In a culture where people eat with their hands that stain adds countless poisons to each meal.

One Hundred Women Die

The brutal treatment of women, in many forms, appears entrenched in India. I was astonished to learn that, in the thoroughly modern city of Bangalore, an average of one hundred women die suspiciously every month. They die from 'suicide', 'kitchen fires', 'strange maladies' and other unspecified disasters. Five years ago Vimochana, a social justice agency in Bangalore, began to question these suspicious deaths. Did these women really die in accidents or by their own hands? Or did they die at the hands of their husbands, mothers-in-law, other in-law family members? Perhaps they died because they had not given birth to a boy child or because their husbands believed they were having an affair. Or did they die because they could bring no more dowry money into their new family? Dowry is the Indian practice in which a bride's parents transfer wealth in the form of money and gifts to her marital home; after the wedding some husbands and in-law families insist on continued dowry support from the bride's family. For these reasons and more, women are dying.

Did they hang themselves because they had a stomach ache, or were they strangled and then hung from a ceiling fan? Rope burns would effectively cover the marks of strangulation. Did they fall while hanging clothes on the roof, or drown when they fell in the well? Or, like most of Bangalore's dead brides, did they die in an accidental kitchen fire or was kerosene poured over their bodies and set alight? The beauty of burning is that it eradicates all evidence of earlier beatings and other violence. Vimochana and other non-government organizations who combat violence against women say the police investigating these suspicious deaths appear all too willing to accept the 'accident report' offered by the husband's family.

Most of the women die from burning. In India, food is cooked on a two-burner gas cooker, which has been known to explode in what is termed a 'stove-burst'. When Vimochana began to investigate these stove-burst deaths, their initial thought was to lobby for stove safety regulations. A closer look showed that only young wives appeared to be the victims of most stove fires, often late in the evening after the meal had been consumed. As the story goes, women in synthetic saris are cooking over a gas burner. The stove explodes, or they use their sari material as a potholder, and the sari catches on fire. And in the kitchen, with water and family close at hand, they suffer severe burns. Vimochana wondered how many fumble-fingered women there could possibly be in the kitchens of Bangalore.

Of course, these deaths happen all over India, not just in Bangalore, the high-priced, cosmopolitan, information technology capital of India. Still, if such deaths happen in the literate South, where people have more than a minimal education, where jobs are more plentiful, where money flows and many actualize their potential, I wondered what might happen in the illiterate, corruption-ridden, uneducated, poverty-stricken North.

I learned that such killings are by no means confined to the poor. Affluent and middle-class young women are also murdered by their in-law families. Underlying the violence are globalization and greed, commercialization, consumerism and commodification of women. A rampant consumer culture pervades India in the same way that it does the West. In India, dowry provides an additional source of revenue to meet those constantly growing consumer needs.

Dowry is an age-old practice in India; once it served to recognize the worth of a woman to her agrarian family. It evolved from the custom of *Streedham*, meaning 'wealth of the woman'. In early agrarian communities, *streedham* was a gift parents presented to their daughters at the time of her marriage. In tribal societies, the husband's family paid a bride price to the wife's family, as compensation for her loss to the parental home. Both practices, symbolically and in real terms, acknowledged the value and worth of women within the home and the community.

As elsewhere in the world, development established the private-public divide in India. Men took their place in the public sphere, represented by money, management and markets, while women cooked, cleaned and cared for children. Women's work in the private sphere was devalued, worth less than work outside the home. Young men moved to the cities, obtained higher educations and better jobs. The dowry system changed to recognize this new reality, and women, once an asset to the home and the community, were increasingly seen as a burden. Dowry replaced *streedham* and bride price as a compensation for the bride, to bolster the value of a commodity with little market value. In India today, parents of young women buy husbands for their daughters.

After the wedding, some in-law families persist in their attempts to raise wanted cash through the dowry system, sending the bride home again and again for added rupees. When this plan appears doomed to fail, some murder their sister or daughter-in-law, usually with no consequences. The United Nations Children's Fund Press Web Centre quotes executive director Carol Bellamy, "In India, it is estimated that more than 5,000 women are killed each year because their in-laws consider their dowries inadequate. A tiny percentage of their murderers are brought to justice" (United Nation Children's Fund 2000). Given that 1,200 women died in Bangalore alone in 2003, dowry-related deaths appear to be rising. These deaths, caused by drowning, kitchen fires, hanging, falls or other inventive measures, cross all socio-economic lines. Very occasionally a newspaper will report the death of a physician, stockbroker, lawyer or other upper class professional who hanged herself, allegedly depressed over dowry demands. Similar deaths of middle-class or poor women do not make the news.

Poor women in the Bangalore area who survive the initial attack are taken to the burn unit at Victoria Hospital, a government-run institution. Social workers on the burn unit are particularly important in helping to bring their murderers to justice. When first admitted to the burn ward, most women are terrified and in terrible pain. They are also conscious. Tutored by their in-law family on the way to the hospital, they repeat the story that their burns happened in an accidental kitchen fire. The extent of their burns and the smell of kerosene in their hair tell a different story. A day or two later, they may admit to the social worker that they were set on fire by a family member. Like all women who are the victims of violence, they are frightened and ashamed. But they are also courageous, and many agree to make a Dying Declaration to the police.

Nearly three out of four women admitted to this ward die, burns covering seventy to ninety-five percent of their bodies. In 2003 a total of five hundred and seventy-eight women died in Victoria Hospital. Another two hundred and forty-three were discharged awaiting reconstructive surgery. Four hundred and eighty-eight of these women lived in Bangalore; the other three hundred and thirty-three were from rural areas. These statistics reflect admissions to one government hospital; more affluent women are admitted to burn units in private hospitals.

I met a rural homemaker on Victoria Hospital's burn unit. She was 18 years old and 4 months pregnant, and burns covered 90% of her young body. She lay naked on a bed, under a tented sheet. When admitted two nights before, she told the staff her husband often talked tenderly to a divorced woman in her village. She was depressed and jealous when he came home late that evening, so she poured kerosene on her body and lit a match.

The next day I visited the ward again, and heard this dying woman talk to the unit social worker. Sitting in a far corner of the ward, I did not need a translator to appreciate the depth of her grief. I later learned that her husband, a farmer, had indeed come home late; he was out drinking. On the day he burned her, he had sent her to her family for more dowry money. This time it was 2000 rupees to buy potato seeds. Dutifully she went, and dutifully they paid. When he came home that night, late and reeking of alcohol, she asked him if he intended to sow potatoes or just drink her 2000 rupees away. Enraged that she would question him, he poured kerosene over her and set her on fire.

With support from her sister and the social worker, this young woman made a Dying Declaration to the police. Ten days later she died. The social worker will follow up, ensure that charges are filed, stand by the dead woman's family in the High Court, and once again expose the medical-legal aspects of dowry violence and burning brides. If he is convicted, it will be more difficult for the dead woman's husband to portray himself as a poor widower in search of another bride. But who will speak to the commodification of women that fuels so many of these deaths.

Female Foeticide

The commodification of women begins before birth. Girl children are viewed as an expensive commodity, often best avoided. In the telling 0-6 year age range, India's 2001 census reported an average of only 899 girl children for every 1000 boys. The rate of female foeticide is increasing in part because girls are considered an economic burden destined only for marriage, while boys work and carry on the family name. An Indian girl's upbringing is specifically geared to her traditional roles of wife and mother, be she a teacher or a businesswoman, a tailor or an agricultural worker. Mothers begin to save for dowry and wedding costs the moment a girl child is born. At the receptions I attended, held in expensive wedding halls rented for the event, over one thousand people sat down to a multi-course meal, in shifts, accompanied by the music of a live band. It is not uncommon for the parents of the bride to cash in their pensions, re-mortgage their homes, and still pay wedding debts for years.

The Indian family's preference for boy children could be aptly described as 'gender apartheid', but it is not a great conceptual leap to understand why boys are best. The United Nations Development Fund for Women writes:

Gender relations in India are based upon the belief that men are superior to women, and thus entitled to privileges in the public and domestic spheres. Son preference is strong and women are socialized to assume subordinate roles. . . in the last decade there has been a sharp decline in the sex ratio in the age group of 0-6 years. . . in some of the more developed states of the country . .

the sex ratio has fallen by over 50 points. According to Amaryta Sen, India is witnessing a shift from morality inequality to natality inequality where parents prefer infant sons over daughters (United Nations Development Fund for Women 2003, pp. 170 – 171).

Statistics show female foeticide is a largely an act of the affluent, the middle class, the educated, and the well-employed. The largest discrepancies in the 0-6 year male-female ratios are in the affluent states of northern India: Punjab, Haryana, and Gujarat. This decline in child sex ratios began twenty to thirty years ago in different parts of India. Between 1991 and 2002 one in four girls went missing, although the Indian population increased.

In 1979 the first sex selection clinic opened in Amritsar, site of the Golden Temple in Punjab. It offered pre-natal sex determination and selective female fetus abortion, using amniocentesis. Soon clinics sprang up in Delhi, Mumbai, and in the state of Gujarat. Advertisements appeared on the Mumbai local trains and in the railway stations. The late 1980's brought the wonders of ultrasound; non-invasive, simple, quick. By the early 1990's ultrasound had gone mobile; pre-natal sex determination delivered right to mom's door by her ever so helpful physician. The technology spread rapidly across India, but the highest sex selection rates remained in the more affluent states at the centre of the country.

The 2001 Indian Census Commission published *Missing: Mapping the Adverse Child Sex Ratio in India*. The census identified that Gujarat has an overall ratio of 879 girls for every 1000 boys, with a low of 798 girls in the district of Mahesana. For every 1000 boy children 0-6 years playing in the South West district of Delhi, there are only 865 girl children.

In Punjab 10 of the 17 districts record a drastic reduction in the child sex ratio to less than 800 girls for every 1000 boys. Fatehgarh Sahib has the lowest child sex ratio with merely 754 girls to 1000 boys. What was observed as a trend in 1991 has become a disturbing reality in 2001 (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner 2003, p. 5).

What will this mean in the next twenty years? The simple answer is that men will not have an equal number of women available for marriage. The complexity emerges in the consequential increase in crimes against women: abduction and rape, sexual harassment, polyandry, the sale of young girls as future wives, forced prostitution, and the severe restriction of women's freedom and mobility. The sex ratio imbalance in India has reached an unprecedented scale; without rapid intervention young women may one day require bodyguards simply to maintain school attendance.

What reasons underlie this imbalance? There are the societal reasons: a strong preference for sons in a country with a small family norm and the balanced family concept. This balanced family concept applauds two parents, two children. Families who choose to have more children may find their social status jeopardized. Some policy analysts in India believe the balanced family concept is strongly linked to female foeticide, but this is not a popular stance in a country of over one billion souls. I listened as one female academic addressed her peers at a foeticide symposium, and observed their discomfort when she identified the balanced family concept as a tragedy for unborn girl children.

There are economic concerns regarding a female child, the dowry and marriage costs. India's profit-based society, fast-growing with globalization, gives rise to consumer-based economic selfishness, met in part through endless dowry harassment. Boys are not just a gift from God: they cost less. Too, they are seen as more productive, able to do men's work.

The platitudes from physicians who perform female foeticide include protests that they are 'assisting with population control', 'honoring a woman's personal choice' or more simplistically, 'just helping the woman'. Their protests ignore the intolerable coercion faced by many Indian women, wrought by husbands and in-law families. Such individual female domination takes place behind the family curtain, where the decision is made that the woman must kill her girl child. The blame for sex selection and female foeticide rests not on the woman, but squarely on the medical profession, who attempt to turn it back to their powerless pregnant patients.

It is a common response to believe this practice is one of the uneducated, the ill, the poor, the ignorant. Faced with many statistical reviews, I abandoned my belief. The issue is one of wealthy and middle-class families. The drop in sex ratios is not from the infanticide of the poor, but from the technology of the rich. The problem is complex; rooted in societal values that deny girls the opportunity to survive. The main actors are the machine and the doctor who operates it; to take away the service is to take away the demand.

The Role of the Green Revolution

The Green Revolution is also implicated in the devaluation of women in India. In her book "The Violence of the Green Revolution", Vandana Shiva writes:

The Green Revolution strategy integrated Third World farmers into the global markets of fertilizers, pesticides and seeds, and disintegrated their organic links with their soils and communities. The progressive farmer of Punjab became the farmer who could most rapidly forget the ways of the soil and learn the ways of the market. One outcome of this was violence to the soil ... Another outcome was violence in the community, especially to women and children. Commercialization linked with cultural disintegration created new forms of addictions and new forms of abuse and aggression (Shiva 2001, 191).

This revolution imposed the commercialization and mechanization of agriculture on India's agrarian community. It marginalized and devalued the work of women, wresting away their control of agricultural production. It increased materialism as it changed the face and focus of rural areas; from small, adequate production to the 'need' for bigger machines, larger fields, more animals. Punjab, Gujarat and Haryana, the Green Revolution states, are also the states with the highest rates of female foeticide in India.

Increased materialism brought an increase in violence against women, increased dowry harassment, increased alcoholism afflicting fathers, brothers and husbands. All this contributed to the devaluing of women. Yet women still do 90% of the work in rural India; they rear children, clean, cook, sew, work in the fields, attend community meetings to strategize on approaches to government for needed services, and they walk, sometimes for kilometers, to collect firewood and water. And India is still a rural economy. Anyone who doubts that fact need only look at the recent rout of the city-focused Bharatiya Janata Party that governed India for most of the last eight years. People hope the new Congress coalition will remember the forest, tribal, and rural people of India.

Politics and Communalism

An election for the Centre government and many Indian states was called while I was in India. It absorbed India's people and I was in my element. I read the daily newspapers, and bought

informative, weekly news magazines. I watched brief television newscasts in English and longer ones in Hindi, catching what I could from the pictures.

On the day the ballots were counted, early results showed surprising strength for the secular Congress party, and unexpected losses for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and their right-wing coalition. Commentators wrangled over the efficacy of the Bharatiya Janata Party's campaign slogan, 'India Shining'.

India was not shining in the rural areas, and voter dissatisfaction was immediately evident. The urban economic focus of the Bharatiya Janata Party appeared to be their undoing. Pundits postulated about the anti-incumbency factor. A few wondered about the Gujarat carnage in 2002, and the communal complicity of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leadership at the central and state government levels. This was a valid question in light of the BJP's continued allegiance to Hindutva, the political ideology whose goal is the 'Hinduization' of India, and whose militant wing promotes such Hinduization.

In his book "The Gujarat Carnage", editor Ashgar Ali Engineer authenticates the role of Hindutva militants in the 2002 Gujarat bloodshed. He identifies that "Communalism is not, as often thought by some, a product of religion, but, rather, of the politics of the elite of a religious community" (Engineer 2003, p. 19). He describes how the Bharatiya Janata Party provided the leadership that led to the deaths in Gujarat, where an estimated twenty-five hundred Muslims were massacred, their homes and businesses burned, their women and girl-children raped, and then slaughtered:

The complicity of the government . . . was unprecedented. There was an involvement of the entire government from the top political leaders to the lower level police constables (whose) involvement in the carnage took the following three forms: first when they remained passive spectators, second, when they instigated mob violence and third, when they actively participated in the carnage. . . The ruling political party, the BJP . . . openly justified the violence, stating that there would be a reaction of Hindus against the Godhra incident all over Gujarat (Engineer 2003, pp. 362 – 363).

The "Godhra incident" refers to the railway car that was set on fire near the town of Godhra on February 28, 2002. Fifty-nine Hindu people died inside the railway car. The fire was attributed to Muslims standing outside the car, throwing petrol-soaked and burning rags into the car. Forensic tests later determined such action did not cause the fire; instead it was started inside the coach. This information came to late to stop the massive reprisals coordinated against the Muslims in Gujarat.

Very rough estimates place the number of Muslims who became refugees in their own state at somewhere between 100,000 and 250,000 (Engineer 2003, p. 378). The communal complicity of the Bharatiya Janata Party continues to be exposed in books and journal articles, news reports and editorials. Thus, on Election Day, some commentators speculated that secular Hindus, Christians and Muslims used their votes to defeat the BJP and narrowly elect the Congress Party. Certainly Sonia Gandhi, Congress party leader, ran the Congress campaign on an anti-communal, secular platform.

Electoral Outcomes

On election night I hit the streets in search of newspapers and editorial opinions. All newspapers were sold out, of course, but a young man heard my request, walked me to his home and emerged

with a freshly creased Times of India, the paper of India's right. I expressed gratitude and went to leave, but he was eager to show me a message on his cellular telephone. The text decried the Congress win and ended, "Now we will be ruled by another foreigner". It took me a moment to put it together; the message referred to the British Raj, and Sonia Gandhi's Italian ancestry. The young man justified his fears about the Congress win, explaining that the Congress party "likes the Muslims". I took in the caste mark on his forehead and suggested there was little for India's Hindus to worry about; Hindus make up 75% of India's population, while Muslims account for only 12%. His eyes registered that this was new information, probably untrue. Walking home, I reflected on the immense power of Hindutva. Militant Hinduism. 'Cultural nationalism', as it was softly peddled by the Bharatiya Janata Party in the dying days of the election.

Top of the news the next morning was the suicide of a 26-year-old man, whose note repeated that cellular phone message, "Now we will be ruled by another foreigner". The voices of the right pointed to this act as living proof of the Congress horror. Bharatiya Janata Party members were out in force, flogging Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin issue. Uma Bharati, Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, handed in her resignation and energetically planned to lead a nation-wide 'agitation' against Italian-born Sonia, whose impending role as Prime Minister was 'an insult to the country and a threat to national security'. A senior party leader, Sushma Swaraj, threatened to tonsure her head, sleep on the ground, eat only roasted lentils and wear white saris. The last refers to the once traditional Hindu practice of sati, where a widow would don a white sari before immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

And in the midst of the furor and the frenzy Sonia graciously, gracefully declined, but not before the President invited her to don the mantle of India's Prime Minister. You can't renounce what you don't have. She resigned with tact, and dignity, and clarity of purpose. She spoke only of her 'inner voice', made no allusion to the opposition forces arrayed against her. She did not renounce power, just the power that rests in the Prime Minister's position.

It was enough to inflame her adherents. Congress party activists staged a demonstration; women donned white saris and lay in the street in front of her home, rowdy young party workers protested at her office. The police were out in force, but only to maintain order. Elected members of parliament threatened to commit suicide, along with a few ambitious young men. The Bharatiya Janata Party called her 'fickle-minded' for not taking the Prime Minister's post. Some party adherents had the grace to laugh. The national television news station ran three full hours, live, of Congress members of parliament responding to Sonia's decision, some weeping, all pleading with her to reconsider. Indian politics provide great theatre on occasion, and this was certainly an occasion.

The smoke settled and Sonia Gandhi chose Dr. Manmohan Singh, an enormously respected politician, brilliant economist, quiet pragmatist, experienced cabinet minister and highly principled man, to be the Prime Minister of India. The country and parts of the world hailed her political acumen. There was not much for the Bharatiya Janata Party to complain about, so they remained quiet. Western papers, reaching for copy, trumpeted that a Muslim President swore in the first-ever Sikh Prime Minister; who was chosen by an Italian immigrant. They mindlessly heralded a new era of communal harmony.

This was complete nonsense, of course. Communal harmony will move slowly through India with hard work at the community level, honest dialogue, massive education, and the political will to create change. It will not be the result of a series of coincidences. At the same time, it may be that the phenomenon of Hindutva lost a minute measure of its power. A review of state-by-state

election results identified districts across India where pockets of Muslims and Christians did join with secular Hindus to unseat the party of Hindutva.

The United Progressive Alliance, coalition of the Congress and other secular parties, will rule India for the next five years or until the coalition collapses. Together they developed a Common Minimum Program that identified three major problems in rural areas: under and unemployment, poor irrigation to cope with the drought, and chronic malnutrition. The coalition recognized the importance of rebuilding the agricultural sector through interest relief on current debts, low-cost loans and irrigation. They promised to tackle malnutrition with food-for-work schemes and food security strategies. They said every adult in India will have at least 100 working days each year, at a wage better than the bottom. They promised economic reforms to help small-scale industries, and a stop to the sell-off of public service units such as power projects. In education, they set in motion a national program to provide primary and secondary students with noon-day meals, as well as promises to reverse the communalism currently present in school curriculums, bring more children into school, and make an effort to retrieve school drop-outs.

There were evident post-election ripples. I noticed significant changes in the content of the news. A report publicized the fact that 40,000 women in India died in 2003 from maternity-related deaths. Journalists filed stories telling their readers that health care for pregnant women was abysmal in India. Rural news reports told urban India how, in the last twenty-four months, 3,000 farmers in drought-stricken Andhra Pradesh chose pesticide as their method of suicide. Television newscasts described other suicides of farmers in other states, burdened by debts they would never repay, facing another drought, another loan, and another year of empty political promises to fund irrigation projects. India learned about current suicides by farmers affected by the latest drought; three to five every day; on one day twenty-seven deaths. Reports flowed in, chronicling rural despair. In early June the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh was at the top of the television news, begging farmers to stop their suicides and seek out relief programs recently put in place. It seemed too little, too late, even from a newly elected government.

The absence of women in government appeared on the front pages. I thought of parallels with Canada and read on. Women won only 44 of the total 538 seats in India's parliament, the Lok Sabha. Stories lamented that the Women's Reservation Bill, lurching for years from session to session, never quite made it to the top of the order paper. This Bill would enact a Constitutional guarantee that each party would reserve 33% of its seats for female candidates during an election. Male politicians believe women lack the 'winnability' factor, although when they run, an average of 33% of women candidates win. Most contest as Independents, denied a party ticket. A friend observed that the majority of India's female candidates enter politics through widowhood, the route of Sonia Gandhi. Party leaders are happy to capitalize on the fact that women who walk in their dead husband's footsteps garner a 'sympathy' vote. In a bid to reduce the electoral barriers to women's participation, the new government promised to make the Reservation Bill a reality early into their mandate.

In days that followed the Congress election the Sensex, India's stock market, fell through the floor. The Times of India ran a graph over their front-page banner; a bleeding red trail that dipped well into the text above the fold. Very graphic. Global markets fluttered, economic columnists wrote dire predictions, and socialists responded that the Sensex affects very few of the more than 1 billion souls in India. All looked to Prime Minister Singh; his experience as an

economist and former finance minister of India. Many also pondered global interference into domestic affairs.

The Politics of India and Pakistan

Simultaneously, India's newspapers covered two important news stories: India would meet Pakistan on the cricket fields of Lahore, and the political leadership of the two countries would reopen peace talks. People talked about the match and the talks, expressed high hopes for both, especially displaced merchants from Jammu and Kashmir, working far away from their families and homes. The violence that drove the tourists away from Kashmir drove them to sell their crafts in more moneyed places. They would love a peaceful Kashmir with a strong commercial base to support their jewelry, carvings and other handicrafts.

Waiting for coffee in a small town tea stall in northern India, my eyes slid over the Hindi newspaper, catching the pictures. In that moment I was illiterate, unable to read. My eyes stopped at a picture of Colin Powell, standing beside a brown man in a white outfit. I asked the owner of the tea stall for the story line. He glanced with little interest, said it was about the cricket match. "Colin Powell is here for a cricket match?" I smiled my surprise. He smiled too, and brought me an English newspaper.

Colin Powell was in Islamabad, meeting with Prime Minister Musharrah of Pakistan, to grant that country Major Non-NATO Ally status. I reacted with disbelief. It turned out the man working the tea stall shared my sentiments, but had earlier ducked my question. One wonders why anti-white sentiment is not more prevalent in India.

There is a delicate balance between India and Pakistan. Why would the United States elevate one country over the other on the eve of peace talks? Was there a political advantage beyond the endless war on terrorism? In Delhi the next week, Powell casually and carelessly offered the same Non-NATO Ally status to India. His offer was rejected, of course, then angrily hashed over in national news editorials and local letters to the editor.

Indian people appear to be fed up with endless political interference and global maneuverings, but that does not seem to hinder the U.S. On April 11, 2005 the Times of India reported from Kolkata that the "F-16 sale to Pak (was an) economic decision":

A senior US official on Monday said his country's decision to sell F-16 jets to Pakistan was purely a business consideration and not aimed at triggering an arms race in the region. "Any arms race between India and Pakistan and the issue of strategic balance are matters to be decided by the two neighbours," said Stephen Blake, director in the South Asia Bureau Office of the US State Department. ... "The decision to supply F-16s was taken because of our relations with Pakistan and because of its assistance in the war on terror," Blake added. (Times of India April 11, 2005)

This came amidst a flurry of editorial comment articulating the need for peace in Kashmir, irritation and anger at the talk of a sale, and poignant hopes for Prime Minister Musharrah's one day visit to Delhi. The political gamesmanship in the war against terrorism seems an intrusion into serious attempts at peace.

Conclusion

Some politicians and global entrepreneurs in North America make the mistake of believing that 'developing' means 'open to control'. Others suppose that, if nations are poor, they must also be

stupid. Still more forget that 'developing' countries like India favour internally-directed development over international expansion. Vandana Shiva writes, "We can draw some lessons from history about how technological change initiated by a special interest brings development to that group while creating underdevelopment for others" (Shiva 2001, 235). In a historical overview she recalls that:

Gandhi's critique of the industrialization of India on the western model was based on his perception of the poverty, dispossession and destruction of livelihoods which resulted from it. 'Why must India become industrial in the Western sense?', Gandhi has asked, 'what is good for one nation situated in one condition is not necessarily good for another differently situated. One man's food is often another man's poison....Mechanization is good when hands are too few for the work intended to be accomplished. It is an evil where there are more hands than required for the work as is the case in India' (Shiva 2001, 328).

Today there are even more hands that require work in India. All too often they are static hands, unemployed through Western greed. Nevertheless, the people that I chanced to meet, regardless of their personal struggles, treated me with grace and infinite courtesy. They offered humorous anecdotes and poignant narratives to illustrate their cultural, social and political commentary. Often I found myself struggling to ascend a very steep learning curve. My reflections were complicated by the great privilege I enjoyed as a Western traveller in an Eastern land, but my learning helped me to narrow the gap between the academy and the tea stall.

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