

THE POVERTY OF AFFLUENCE

Jacinta Goveas: Special to The Star. **Toronto Star** 14 Feb 1993: B1.

BEFORE I immigrated to Canada from Pakistan, I had often been warned about "culture shock."

I had already experienced culture shock when I spent three years working as a community development worker in a village in India, more than 2,400 kilometres away from my middle-class home.

Most of the people were landless farmers whose whole families, including the children, worked on land owned by absentee feudal landlords. They were paid with a share of the crop, selling most in the neighboring towns and keeping the rest for themselves.

They were very poor and had very little of what we consider the necessities of life - a choice of food products, clothes, entertainment. Even the real necessities - drinking water, staple foods, medical assistance, education - were hard to come by and people often died as a result. The injustices they suffered as a result of the system of landless farming made it impossible for them to escape their way of life.

Since coming to this world, my mind has often been transported back to that village. For people such as myself who come from very restrictive cultures, North America offers the possibility of realizing so many of our hopes and ambitions.

Couples being able to demonstrate their affection on the streets, people being allowed to express different opinions and freely criticize the government, a choice of sexual preferences, the right to pursue whatever career path you want regardless of sex or class - this is what I thought made the difference between a free society and a restricted one.

I was not at all bothered by these differences.

What was a real shock to me was the abundance of material goods here, from food to clothes to gadgets that we are seemingly unable to live without.

Advertising campaigns make sure that we really need these things. We end up feeling apologetic because we don't have as much as our neighbors.

The sense of not being acceptable was strong - and confusing. Many of us had never before experienced ourselves as different because of our accent or the color our skin.

We may not recognize racism in our everyday lives, but we do know that what we are, who we are, is not enough. Our qualifications, our culture, our language, our food - we sense that all of this is not acceptable to the dominant community.

And so we resort to compensating for the things we feel we are not by accumulating material possessions. We need to feel accepted into the new society, so we get what they have. We decorate our houses like theirs; we use the same cosmetics, clothes, cars - whatever it takes. Rather than share the values we bring with us we bow to the obvious material values.

And in the end, we promote the myth that immigrants all come to this country for economic prosperity.

It is sad to listen to newcomers, particularly refugees, who have risked a lot to come here to join a friend, relative or even acquaintance from their home community. It is hard for the people here to find time for the newcomer. They are busy with their jobs - sometimes two jobs - paying off mortgages and loans, saving for the new car or for next year's vacation or to start a family.

I realize that all this is important, but are we losing sight of our priorities? Are we playing into the hands of the corporations by accepting their ideas of what we need? Are we agreeing to live our lives as others think we should?

My first job here was in an office. I was one of the hundreds of nine-to-fivers, but with a difference - I was the new kid. My colleagues were kind, and so decided to take my education in hand. It was interesting to listen to the things they felt I simply had to know: The kinds of clothes I should wear, the need to develop an image, an interest in makeup, all the places I simply had to go to, and how important it was to have a man in my life.

What struck me most was that they seemed to have no sense of who they were as people. All of the talk was of shopping and credit card limits. People who had worked together for years had developed very superficial relationships with one another.

There was little awareness of Canada, never mind the rest of the world.

Poverty was not an alien experience to many of this group, but it was poverty within a local, narrow frame of reference: It meant not being able to afford a particular dress, feeling intimidated by the prices of electrical gadgets, having to wear the same coat for a third winter in a row. Christmas was the saddest time of all because there was so much that they wanted to get for their children and friends but could not afford.

Before I came to Canada, I used to envy Western women for their political awareness and freedom to fight for a different way of life. I took it for granted that they were all as aware as I of the possibilities available to use if we were free enough to explore them. This was one of the main reasons I wanted to make this country my home. We were socialized to think that almost every woman in the West is a disciple of women's liberation.

Imagine the disillusionment when I found that women here were "liberated" only to the extent of having accepted a different set of rules, instead of having the freedom to question what was being offered.

VERY FEW, for example, questioned the way management was using women's liberation slogans to encourage women to accept exploitation. Few had questioned the codes that made women feel they had to struggle to be more decorative rather than rise within the company by pursuing professional development that would help them to get ahead. Women, like immigrants, had accepted and integrated the values of the dominant culture.

A friend of mine, a new arrival, was talking to me about how appreciative he was of his new country. He was especially grateful to the advertising on television. "At least we know what to buy," he said.

Nobody ever said a truer word. The advertising not only tells us what to buy, it gives new meaning to old words, like "freedom for a dollar." The Lotto 6/49 advertisement proudly proclaims "freedom for a dollar" and flashes images of dreams fulfilled - fancy cars, boats, vacations to exotic places. Freedom becomes synonymous with the acquisition of possessions.

Where I came from, material possessions were few. But what we did have, and were rich in, was a deep sense of what was right and what was important. We always had time for our families and for our children. There was no need for Hallmark cards to tell our children how much we cared, because we expressed it to them every day in so many ways.

Relationships there were real. People invited you into their hearts and into their families very quickly.

There was no pressure to rush around trying to meet mortgage payments or beat credit card debts, and so there was time to be present for people in a very deep way.

No need to worry about counselling bills, because there were people right there to talk to, people who would be ready to walk many miles with you in your struggles.

I often think of the obvious poverty of the people in that faraway village, and of their wealth, and of the obvious wealth of people in this society. Here, there is not much you could wish for that is not obtainable - if you have the money. So we spend a lot of time and energy getting the money that is going to make getting that particular thing possible.

But are we not losing sight of something very basic in this rush for collecting material wealth? What about our relationships with one another?

I am continually struck by the loneliness and pain in this society. We feel the need to legitimize our friendships, so we have programs like Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Special committees are appointed to welcome new people into the neighborhood.

What does it say about us that we need others to organize us to do things that should come naturally to us - and have come naturally to us before?

When I made the transition from my home to this country, I came looking for personal freedom. I appreciate this above all else in this society.

But faced with consumerism and the need to fill in the empty spaces with things, I think we are all called upon to choose alternative lifestyles and make choices that will enable us to leave something other than our possessions to the ones who come after us.

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