

RETHINKING MYTHS ABOUT AMERICAN CULTURE

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Time to rethink cultural myths about US

By Swati Desai

Two decades ago, when I first went to the US as a student, I stayed with one old American woman who managed a home for old people. I was surprised to hear her talking to her daughter saying, "I am sorry I cannot babysit your son tonight. I must go to my church meeting, Sweetheart, you need to look for a babysitter." The Indian in me could not imagine a grandmother denying her daughter's request to look after her grandchild for one evening. Of course, I was very quick to sneer at the non-caring selfish American grandmother and feel superior about our culture that places such high value on family relationships.

During my first few months in the US, I found examples all around me reinforcing the stereotypical image I had fostered of selfish, loud, insensitive, materialistic, sex-crazed, violent Americans who could not care less about their children, marriage, virginity, simplicity, old parents, or any "higher" goal other than money. I felt very proud of my five thousand year old culture that valued knowledge over money, where the divorce rate was so low, the children grew up to respect and care for the old parents, the extended family was intact, parents would sacrifice their minimum comforts for their children, women were dignified in a Goddess like way, where I had never worried about crime statistics, music and dance had such rich tradition, and people were idealistic. I took every opportunity to inform my American friends of the Indian cultural superiority over them. They listened with curiosity.

As I lived more in the US while visiting India very often, my cultural myths about both the US and the Indian culture started falling apart. As I studied psychotherapy and focused on working with Indian immigrants in the US, I also realised how most of us deal with our cultural complex by either putting down the cultural trends in the US or by glorifying the sleek life style. Hardly ever we consider the multi-faceted reality or the issue of cultural sensitivity. In this process we miss out not only on huge learning opportunity but also hold restrictive fear and destructive aggravation due to distorted images.

In this series of articles, we will be rethinking the cultural myths about the US with the goals of learning lessons and tips for the visitors to the US.

Meanwhile, think if the following is indeed true:

The US divorce rate is as high as 50%. People do not know how to compromise in a marriage. Breaking a marriage is taken lightly.

Parents care about their lifestyle more than children's education. In fact, they kick their children out when they turn 18.

The plight of the old and lonely people is pathetic. They are just forced to live in old peoples' homes.

Sexual promiscuity is prevalent. Nobody cares. You get to know a person in a party

and then it is just "your place or mine".

People are not helpful. If you are being robbed, neighbours will simply ignore it.

People have a lot of money for luxuries such as new cars and vacations, but they will not help a family member in need.

Average American is not very smart. In India, even a subjiwaala can do quicker math. Average American is just a patriotic Rambo with a gun, unaware of finer cultural aspects. Or ___ Americans are all so creative and innovative. Their systems are impeccable and the functionality of their designs is flawless.

Next time we will examine the truth about such claims!

(The author, a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles and a mental health consultant to South Asian agencies, is on a visit to ISB, Hyderabad)