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Cultural globalisation: How different are we?

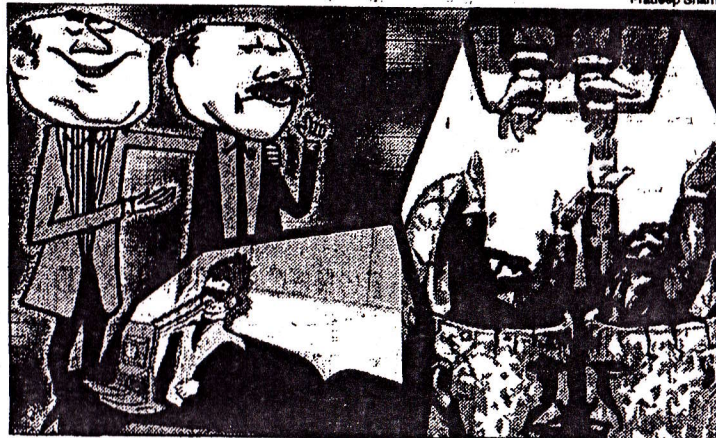
By Swati Desai

When John from the US was visiting India, he was frustrated to discover that the nodding for "Yes" was different in India. He also discovered that when the service people promised a service with their Yes nod, it did not mean "now" but anywhere from now and one week. He also noticed that people preferred agreeing on the face rather than facing direct confrontation.

In Kavita's initial few months of being in the US as a student, she felt hurt by the "bluntness" of a fellow American student who could not help her at a time suitable for her - she had asked him for help in understanding a portion she had missed in the class. It took her some time to understand the concept of respecting other person's time commitments and that a polite "no" did not mean breaking a friendship.

After the initial disturbing discoveries of the differences, if one chooses to explore further, one finds out that many emotions are, in fact, the same across the two cultures. The social twists around feeling hurt about a subtle rejection, pleasure in gossiping about others, comfort in sticking to your type of people, and joy in achieving social recognition for one's efforts are some examples of these universal emotions.

Are we more similar or more different? In what ways are we dif-



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ferent? Do the people in the US really belong to a different planet as one Indian friend liked to put?

Cultural Psychologists believe that culture does influence behaviour and emotions. On the other hand, some other researchers dating back to Darwin focus on the biologically common roots of human behaviour. Vedanta philosophy beautifully presents the universality of human existence in proposing the oneness of Atman and Brahman, and so does Dalai Lama who believes that human predicaments are universal and our shared biological roots make us brothers and sisters.

These differing views can be reconciled in the following way. As social scientists put it, a person can be viewed as having three levels, first the biological (universal)

level, then the middle level from the cultural and environmental influences (malleable), and the third level of individual (idiosyncratic) differences.

One way to understand another human being would be to pay close attention to all three levels. The level that we want to focus on in this series of articles is the middle level of understanding the differences that arise due to the collective environment or culture, with references to the universal level as well.

The recent phenomenon of Cultural Globalisation makes it interesting to understand the differences and similarities. The two cultures, Indian and US, are not only getting more exposed to each other but also are getting influenced by each other. The globali-

sation of the business world, the lifting of protectionism, the amusing and relatively new ease of travelling back and forth, outsourcing, and the explosion of cross-cultural television viewing have undoubtedly begun the process of cultural globalisation. For our purposes, Cultural Globalisation is defined as the cross-cultural transfer of culture specific beliefs, ideas, behaviours, and ultimately the world view. The more profound manifestations of such globalisation are the changing values on how self-confidence should be projected and the definition of happiness. Popular popular manifestations are pictures of Madonna with her Henna Tattoos and Zakir Hussain enchanting all American audience with his percussion concerts.

The new mantra is to be bi-cultural, to be at home in both cultures, in terms of comfort of residing and working in both cultures. For that purpose, the differences need to be understood and not feared. Similarities need to be noticed and not discarded. In the following series of articles, we will explore and understand the cultural influences, examine Cultural Globalisation and suggest some future directions.

(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)

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