



POSTCARDS FROM THE FUTURE



INDIVIDUALISM IN THE FUTURE: AMERICAN STYLE OR INDIAN ISHTYLE?

Today it is not shocking that a five-year-old Delhi child asks her mom to “give me my space” and city teenagers routinely ask their parents to “take the chill pill”. Young and middle-aged executives follow the dictates of their career to places far off from their home towns where their parents live. Driving ambition seems the hallmark of the times and elderly parents with NRI children populate every big city in large numbers looking after themselves in very many ways that would have been unthinkable even in the sixties.



With increasing globalization and the march of American style consumerism in India, it seems inevitable that individualism as a value will grow even stronger. This is an alarm signal to many, as it seems to signal the beginning of the breakdown of the family.

And yet, various media surveys of ‘modern’ teenagers and ‘individualistic’ youth show them up as having as much confidence in their parents’ ability to guide them through their life choices whether in careers or marriage partners as previous generations did. And if anything, claim greater closeness to their dads and mothers compared to previous generations. In many of their attitudes, they display a remarkable degree of conservatism and respect for tradition.



So will Indians grow more and more individualistic in the next decade? And what form will this individualism take? Will we become more Americanized in our ways?

The answer seems to be both Yes and No. Yes, we will become more individualistic in our orientation and No, it will not be American style individualism.

Today, the importance of the person – the individual, not just the role is well established in the family. The needs and preferences of the individual and individual happiness as notions are being balanced against family and filial roles, duties and obligations. This is as true for women and children as it is for men. But is this the same as American style individualism?

Cross cultural psychologists who have studied the psyche of Indians and Americans postulate that there are fundamental and deep-rooted differences in the orientation of Indians and Americans. These differences originate from child rearing practices and thus the developmental psychology of Indians and Americans. Such cultural imprinting changes slowly and marginally over hundreds of years, if at all.



The American psyche and world-view is constructed around certain premises. There is clear separation of the self vs. other with strong ego boundaries. (I vs. You) This is reflected in very infancy wherein babies sleep in their own room and even toddlers are encouraged towards independent play. Autonomy and independence to make one's own individual identity are prized in the culture – the rituals and rites of passage in the teenage years are geared towards individuals breaking away and separating from parents to make their own choices and decisions.



Thus, the American adult is raised towards self-driven choices in various situations. The pervasive belief system is “I am responsible for myself, I owe it to myself” ... and personal choices rule life. The culture pushes people towards self-help and a D-I-Y (Do-it-yourself) orientation to life. Relationships are essentially between equals and governed by rules and legalities.



On the other hand, the Indian psyche and world view is built from a very different set of premises. There is little separation of the self vs. others in the family with weak ego boundaries (I and my family members are one). The individual is deeply embedded – is really a node – in a hierarchical network of family and others.



Family and relationships are central to life and identity is fashioned around these. Give and take ... mutuality and reciprocal obligations govern life. The pervasive belief system is “I am responsible to my family, I owe it to my family” ... negotiated choice rules life. The culture pushes people towards mutual help and an O-D-Y (Others do it for you) orientation.

Autonomy and achievement are for family esteem more than for individual realization of potential



The emergence of individual preferences and fulfilment of the same within the family umbrella in urban India represents a negotiated individuality rather than any movement towards American style autonomy and independence. Will this change in the forthcoming decade or will we see further development of negotiated individuality in various ways; that is the relevant question to consider?

The forces of change working towards fostering greater individualism in the next decade include

- a) Consumerism as a philosophy that constantly reinforces ideas of individual choice, preference and desire and provides legitimacy for fulfilling the same.
- b) Media dominance coupled with rapid expansion of the fashion & glamour industry working in tandem to promote identity exploration and image projection.
- c) Media driven activism blurring the boundaries between private and public and forcing the State to intervene in the private lives of citizens e.g., the child runner Budhia case.
- d) Growing affluence, 24x7x365 working lives and paucity of time coupled with greater work mobility forcing a focus on and prioritization of individual commitments.

How will these forces play out, through their interaction with the bedrock of the Indian psyche as well as institutional power structures in the system? What are the possibilities?



The continuing need to stand out and not be anonymous, be seen as ‘someone special’ will fuel the desire for self-expression, especially amongst youth. Fashion will become a powerful tool for this, expect spiky hair, strange haircuts, body piercing, tattooing, more bizarre clothes et al. Whether in ten years, Indian teenagers will adopt the extreme ways of Japanese teenagers is a moot point. The countervailing force to the full blown development of self expression will be the education establishment – college principals, teachers and other authority figures who may continue to perceive these explorations as lack of respect and a careless attitude to study, hence clamp down on them. In which case, since the desire is strong, the behaviour will go underground.



Self-expression i.e, the desire to showcase one’s innate talent, special abilities and skills will be visible in all life stages and in all ways. Talent contests will find infinite forms and formats, in offices, in neighbourhoods, on TV, radio, in every media. Home décor as much as personal fashion and style will benefit from this trend. The next decade will see everyone engaged in an ongoing quest to make “my personal statement”, through everything they own, use and wear.



By the middle or end of the decade, with huge growth of high speed broad band connectivity, 3G cell phones et al, and a tech savvy young generation, we can expect young people to explore alternative identities through personal avatars in sites such as Second Life.

There will be greater and greater demarcation and boundaries between “my space”, “my things” and “your space” and “your things” even amongst family members.



With high time pressure, people will seek their own “personal and private” time for themselves, to do the things that they want to do. Women, housewives in particular (even middle class housewives) will take time out of attending to others to make time for themselves and their personal indulgences. In fact, they will expect it as a matter of right rather than treat it as a matter for negotiation.



New technologies and gadgets will enable each family member to escape into their own world. The stereotype of the ‘new age family’ will be one where each family member is around in the drawing room but each absorbed in his/her own gadget – grandma into the TV, son into his gameboy, dad into his laptop and email and mom into her cell phone.

This direction of individualism is inherently isolating, hence runs in opposition to the Indian cultural imprint, which is relationship oriented. Thus, there will be a corrective counter force that will compel people to seek a balance. People will use technology and also find other ways to maintain deep family ties and inter-connectedness. Three possibilities present themselves.



The search for and membership of ‘like-minded’ groups and activities undertaken together will grow hugely and become mainstream resulting in explosive growth of clubs of all kinds. The internet will be a powerful enabler in the search and identification of special interest groups to become members of. Membership of an interest group is the best way to feel and say, “WE are different and special”.

Friends are the new family, especially for young singles who are working away from their hometowns.



Families will live in separate spaces but have deeply shared lives. E-mail, webcam, skype, cell phones et al make it possible for people to live far away yet know every detail of each other’s lives and consult each other on a daily basis. Those who hanker for the ‘old’ days of joint families will reverse the approach, living in shared spaces but leading somewhat separate lives.

So, what’s the future? American style Individualism or fundamental change? NO.
Indian Ishtyle Individualism or change with continuity? YES.

