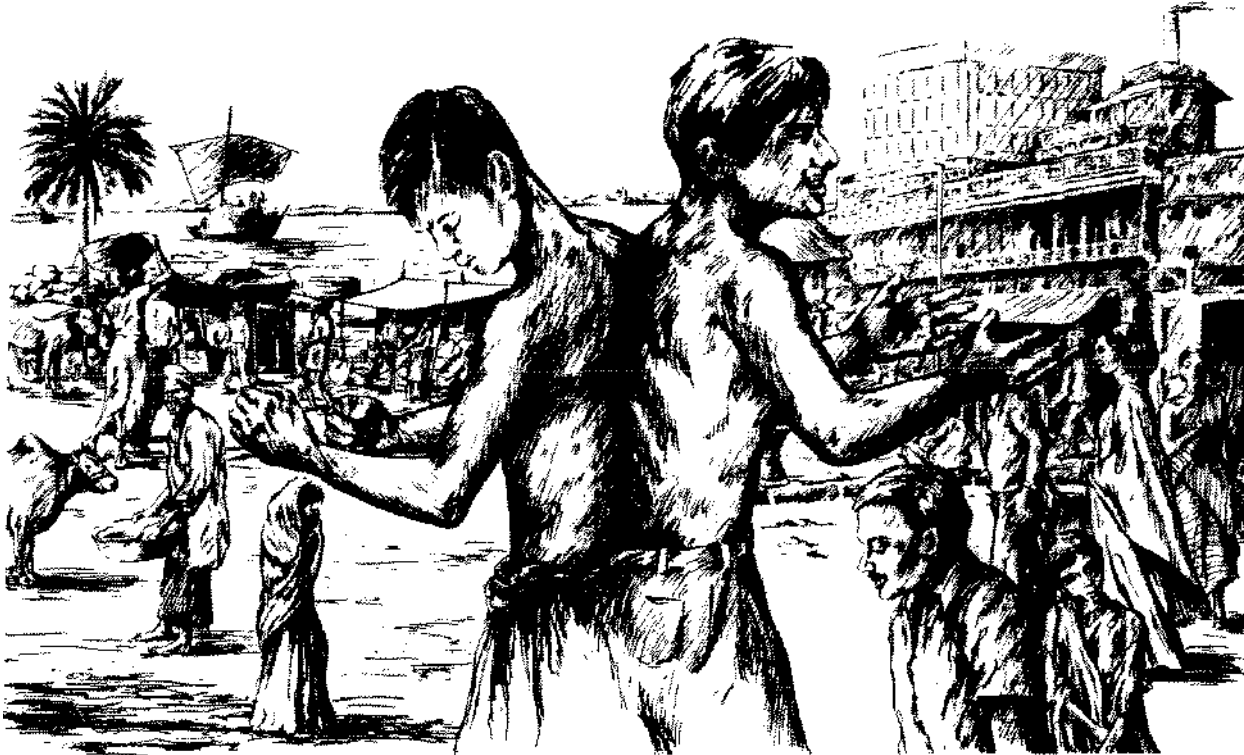


# India: Land Of Contrasts And Contradictions

by Donna Seidel



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**I**ndia is a land of contrasts and contradictions. It covers only a fortieth of the world's land surface, but holds one-sixth of its people.<sup>1</sup> In fact, India is the second largest country in the world, population-wise, with 780 million and no end to the population growth in sight. India calls itself one nation, but is made up of twenty-two states and nine republics, each with its own peoples, customs, culture, language and dress.

Along with the huge country and the great numbers of people can be found almost everything to greater or lesser degrees: there is rural India and there is urban India; there is poverty and there is wealth. There is also a strong history of tradition and there is progressiveness as the old structures of religion and caste shift slightly and somewhat uncomfortably to allow twentieth century ideas of human rights to be accommodated.

As outsiders, we cannot hope to fully understand the country, and we must also remember that surface impressions may be deceiving. But an attempt will be made to throw some light on a few of the many faces that make up the India of today.

India is almost two nations: the first, mainly urban, comprises 20% of the nation's population, provides 80% of its GNP and absorbs 80% of its developmental inputs; the second, mainly rural, comprises 80% of the total population, and accounts for a fraction of its GNP and financial inputs.<sup>2</sup> Neither knows much nor cares about the other. Furthermore, of the 45 to 50% of the population that lives below the poverty line, 20% are in the urban areas and 80% are in the rural areas.<sup>3</sup>

Seven-tenths of the people of India depend on farming for a living. Their lives are a composite of

malnutrition, disease, hard labour and meagre returns. Many have never been more than a few miles from the village where they were born and may have only vaguely heard the name Indira Gandhi. The literacy rate is particularly low in rural India; only one woman in four can read and write and less than half the men.<sup>4</sup>

Many of these farmers eke out a bare subsistence in a feudal agricultural system marked by absentee landlords, extortionate sharecropping and bonded labour. Pitiful stories abound of farmers, their families and generations of descendants toiling all their lives hardly to make a dent in the interest on their debt. These farmers, caught in the squeeze between a rise in the price of agricultural commodities and the nonagricultural necessities of life, are demanding an increase in the price of their agricultural products. They have organized a civil disobedience campaign and are refusing to sell their produce. At isolated railroad junctions, hundreds of peasants are sitting on the tracks, blocking the movement of freight trains carrying food to the cities.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, there are the rich, many of whom can be found in the urban areas and all of whom have an interest in low food prices. In the cities of New Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta are India's consumer middle class as well as the ostentatiously wealthy. Accompanied by servants and drivers, the privileged women are easily visible in their silk and gold-brocaded saris while the men dress in impeccably-tailored Western business suits. Their children, combed and neat in smart school uniforms, are driven to the private school every morning by the family's rickshaw driver or chauffeur.

The large cities are also home to the civil service, the universities, the medical schools, the factories and the cinemas. Real estate in Bombay currently runs at about \$200,000 US for an unremarkable three-bedroom apartment.<sup>6</sup> Also available in the cities are Scotch whiskey, discotheques, fashionably-dressed women and career girls. Calcutta prides itself on being a center of Hindu culture with a cafe society rivalling the Left Bank in Paris. The city is alive and pulsating with the latest political, artistic, and literary trends along with a healthy dose of commerce and industry.

Just beneath the veneer of these thriving cosmopolitan centers, however, often in the gutters, are more of India's poor. It is estimated that everyday more than 1500 people or 300 families arrive in Bombay to live.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately,

there is no place to house them. Approximately 100,000 sleep on the pavement. Luckier migrants live in the chawls or slums built to accommodate industrial workers, while others have founded squatters' settlements made of cardboard, mud, tin, tile and old boards. The number of beggars in the streets is estimated at 70,000.<sup>7</sup>

The contrast between urban and rural life and the gulf between the rich and the poor continues to widen, however. Although there are now twelve cities with a population of a million or more, the villages remain the root. There are about 576,000 villages in India, less than one-half with electric light and many without road access.<sup>8</sup> The twentieth century is only visible in the cities with their colleges, mills, chemical plants, towers of commerce, science establishment and centers of research, while most of the villagers in the rural areas live life exactly as their ancestors did, yoked to the land.

Another of the paradoxes with which Indians have to cope is the continual pull and tug between tradition and progressiveness. On the one hand, India is old and India is traditional. Religion, caste and the extended family define the individual completely. More recently, however, the old structures which condoned the dowry system, child marriage and widow burning find themselves having to accommodate and adapt to twentieth century demands for more women's and children's rights.

Traditionalism and Hinduism are inextricably linked, and India is predominantly Hindu—at least 82% of the population declare themselves as such.<sup>9</sup> Hinduism is both a religious and a social system, embracing the natural and the supernatural. It is based on birth and behaviour in life, all elements being connected by the idea of dharma—the fulfilling of one's duty as dictated by conscience, social background, personality and custom. It is a complete code for living.

To religion must be added the framework of caste which has existed for more than 3000 years. Membership in a particular caste or sub-caste preordains occupation, political allegiance, choice of bride, dietary habits and social relationships with respect to other castes. It is closely bound up with karma—the idea that actions and behaviour in the present life effect future existence, the soul being eternal and going through a cycle of births, deaths and re-births.

Thus Indians, from birth, are used to the security of a group and the security of a minutely-regulated

life. As nothing is accidental, as the universe and all its living things have a fundamental order, the astrologers have an important role to play in determining the auspicious time for consummating a marriage, calling an election, embarking on a trip, starting a new job and sowing the crop.

Traditionally, the law must serve dharma or the fulfilling of one's duty, yet dharma is filled with injustice and cruelty and can accommodate and even institutionalize atrocities against large numbers of citizens. One of the largest legislated groups of second-class citizens is women. Tradition has relegated them to play an unfair role in the established social system,

Marriage for millions of Indian women and their families is a dreaded financial burden. Under the dowry system, it is the custom for the bride's parents to present gold, jewelry, household items and cash to the bride's husband and his family at the wedding and on social and religious occasions. Very often the groom's family continues to demand more, taunting or physically torturing the new daughter-in-law until either their demands are met or the young bride commits suicide or, as is often officially reported, encounters "accidental death while cooking". In New Delhi, at least two young brides die of burns every day.<sup>10</sup> To protest the loopholes in the 1961 Dowry Act that allows this persecution of women to continue, women in New Delhi marched in August, 1982, calling for a ceiling on dowries and demanding that women police officers investigate suspicious deaths.

Child marriage is another example of injustice to women and children. Although a law forbids girls to marry before the age of eighteen to prevent them from being exploited, burdened and damaged by too early pregnancy, it is largely ignored because it cannot be enforced. In 1971, 5.4 million children between the ages of ten and fourteen were married and more than a third of people between fifteen and nineteen were married.<sup>11</sup>

As a consequence of the child marriage system, a large number of child-widows exist who are not allowed to remarry according to Hindu laws. The practice of *sutee* or widow-burning whereby the widow threw herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre was outlawed by the British in 1829, but still continues unofficially in many rural areas. Throughout India, however, the stigma attached to widowhood remains. Custom makes them feel outcasts—unwelcome burdens on their husband's families with whom they must continue to live.

Their presence is regarded as inauspicious at religious and social functions, so that often the young widow ends up taking her own life to escape from her bleak future.

On a more positive note, however, strides are being made in the area of women's issues. In 1947, the Women's Welfare Department was established and set itself the task of "helping women discover themselves". Since then, the number of working women has increased as has the literacy rate for women, although it is still half that of males. Women are becoming more active in writing, movies, dance and music, and women's magazines are beginning to stimulate discussion on women's issues. Encouraged by Indira Gandhi, more women are also entering the political arena.

Nevertheless, the traditional image of the chaste woman and devoted mother remains. The penalty for going against the stream is social degradation, ostracism and neglect. Often a working woman becomes merely a dowry-earning individual. The annual birth rate in India continues to keep women in bondage. In 1980, it was 35 births per thousand population compared to 21 per thousand in China and 15 per thousand in the United States. In addition, for every 1000 males, there are only 935 females, attesting to the continuing practice of female infanticide.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile the gulf between the rural and urban woman remains a chasm. If India is to cope with the new pressures and release itself from some of the old ones, the law must develop some independence from tradition and its controls.

India, land of contrasts and contradictions, occupies several centuries at once. It ranks as tenth among the world's industrial nations and it is third in the number of scientists and engineers. Yet anyone who has ever tried to use a telephone in India knows that the jungle of crossed and unresponsive lines must be a factor in the national blood pressure reading. India spends millions of dollars on space satellite programs and atomic reactors; yet in 1981, bullock carts were used to transport M21 fighters to the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi. Another paradox is the National Party or Jan Sangh which combines a party platform of nuclear armory with a program for protecting the holy cow—free fodder for cows and homes for old cows.<sup>14</sup>

Yet despite these apparent contradictions, India continues to function as one nation. As the country's strength increases by one million a month in the largest democracy in the world,

numbers alone ensure that the Indian will never be isolated from his fellow man. Extended family, religion and caste will continue to bind the individual to tradition, while new ideas and fearless individuals and groups will persist in leading the country's poor and oppressed in more progressive directions.

There is still much about India that a Westerner cannot know and cannot see. He may get a distorted view in brief visits in which he is charmed by the color, variety and drama, and by the generous and hospitable people. But he cannot have any idea of the dimensions of the problems and no way of measuring the distance she has come.

## Notes

1. Trevor Fishlock, *India File* (New Delhi: Rupa Publishers, 1983), p. 2.
2. David Davidar, "The Other India", *Gentlemen*, February, 1984, p. 84.
3. Davidar, p. 87.
4. Fishlock, p. 11.
5. Kai Bird, "Rural India in Revolt Against the Cities", *The Nation*, 232, (March 14,1981), p. 302.
6. Fishlock, p. 146.
7. V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 57.
8. Fishlock, p. 167.
9. Fishlock, p. 12.
10. S. Sondhi, "Dowry Deaths in India", *Ms*, (January, 1983), p. 22.
11. Fishlock, p. 31.
12. C. S. Lakshimi, "Tamil Women at the Crossroads", *Vnesco Courier* 37, (March 1,1984), p. 38.
13. "Talk of the Town", *New Yorker*, 59, (Sept. 28,1983), p. 40.
14. Naipaul, p. 114.

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