

The Vulnerable Culture

By Saumil Gandhi

In the past and to this day, the Indian culture has been under the constant influence of the western world. This influence that was first welcomed is now slowly but surely becoming a threat to the survival of the Indian cultural beliefs. The magnitude of this influence encompasses from the entertainment industry to traditional family values. Some Indians call this influence an unwanted change and term it as a *cultural genocide*. They believe with the introduction of this genocide our rich ancient culture is at stake. Mary Louise Pratt, author of the article “Arts of the Contact Zone,” terms the process by which this unwanted change is introduced in a culture as a “contact zone.” She defines this term as [...] “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” [...] (Pratt 575). This social space created by the clash of two or more cultures tends to engulf the subordinate culture by the culture in authority and dominance, leaving the subordinate culture vulnerable to extinction. I fear the extinction of these subordinate cultures and believe that the contact zone in India enables the dominant Western culture to diminish and inhibit the growth of traditional Indian and other minority cultures.

The contact zone was created in India the minute the Indian sub-continent came under the British rule. In the beginning of the 17th century the British entered India and engaged in peaceful trading. Being motivated by Imperialism the British then began annexing states and transferred the Indian Economy to Colonial British Economy. After draining away tons of Indian Gold, wealth and resources, the British finally left India and declared it independent in 1947. But before leaving our country the

British left their imprints and invaded our rich culture by introducing this unwanted genocide. The unwanted genocide is still stained in our culture and is becoming a threat to our cultures survival. The results of this contact zone can be noticed in many regions of our culture especially in our music, language, films and family traditions.

Born and raised in India, a country known for its rich culture and heritage, I have witnessed and experienced the effect and influence the dominant western world has played on my culture and its members. This influence forces me to believe with a passionate, unshakeable conviction that in all circumstances and at all times, this world is designed for the ones in power, who knowingly or unknowingly shape the structure, culture and lifestyle of the ones in the subordinate. Since culture is defined by The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language as “the transmission of social behavior and patterns, for instance in art, music, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thought, from one generation to another,” we often notice the replication of the culture in dominance by the ones in the subordinate. This replication in this modern world with a country’s past historical influence and background takes place even faster. In India, I feel this change is occurring at a tremendous speed not only in the area of films, music and language but in our beliefs and traditions our culture tries to promote.

The Indian film industry, called ‘Bollywood,’ in spite of being the largest film industry in the world indicates a western character from its very name. The name suggests modelling after, the Western film industry, ‘Hollywood’ as it is only the alphabet ‘B’ that makes it non-western. The magnitude of western influence on this industry is unimaginable. Most of the Indian films are an absolute copy of Western movies and ideas. Western violence and action with the Indian touch is the basic theme for all of them. Our country’s rich culture and heritage is no longer portrayed through

our movies, making our culture vulnerable to being lost, and reflecting the strong influence of the contact zone.

Music, an area that we were initially proud of for our originality and diversity, is now attaining a Western character and is getting completely engulfed with the Western rhythm and style. Eminent music composers like Bally Sagoo have a strong reputation of converting old Indian songs to its Western Alternatives. On the other hand Singers like Devang Patel remix Western rap to its Indian alternative. This conversion is truly evident in his latest album 'Patel Scope,' where he's managed to sing songs like Macarena and Coco jambo in the Indian language (Hindi). In the past, there were talks of putting restrictions on foreign television channels beaming Western music with intentions of countering cultural invasion. To the relief of most, the majority decided against these resolutions. However, at present, our cultural music is in danger and is feared of becoming extinct. It is of no surprise that Naushad Ali, a distinguished Indian music composer; in a television interview said "A time will come when Indians will have to rush to San Francisco if they want to learn Indian music" (Dhadkan 40). There indeed might be a touch of exaggeration in this statement, but when a person of Naushad Ali's reputation gives vent to such fear, it certainly means that there is a need for introspection and consideration. A threat to the survival of our cultures celestial and divine music is felt and there is certainly fear for its extinction.

Furthermore, the diversity of our language is another region that is feared of becoming extinct. In India, eighteen languages are recognized by the constitution of India and there are over one thousand six hundred minor languages and dialects listed in the latest census (Travel India par 1). Each community and part of India has its own local language, which is endangered when it is not spoken by their children. These languages become even more difficult to preserve when the importance of the English Language is emphasized in this modern world. Since most schools in India

are not 'authorized' to teach local languages by institutions of school, business or governments. They don't give much importance to the teaching of these local languages and have their curriculum based on English or the national language Hindi. As a result, these local languages are struggling to survive.

Preservation of these languages plays an important role not only in the survival of ancient culture, but it teaches values, beliefs and understanding of a person's origin. Language represents a culture's wisdom and helps understand and interpret certain significant historical events. They have been created with a lot of effort by our ancestors and have survived to this era with great difficulty; its loss would create an intellectual calamity to ancient knowledge and would soon lead to the extinction of an entire culture. Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow in her article "World's Languages are fast disappearing" says:

Hundreds of languages have gone the way of the do-do bird, and thousands more are in the precarious position of the spotted owl. Many more cannot even be mourned, since, like countless species, they have evolved and vanished without leaving any record of their existence (par 1).

Intellectual property that has been created with great difficulty is getting lost in this modern world, without even getting noticed and leaving any trace of its very existence. This gives us humans all the more reasons to take concrete steps for the preservation of various languages that will enable us to understand and interpret our past.

But the area where this cultural conflict has affected us the most is in the cultivation of family values and the maintaining of strong family bonds. In India, most families are close-knit, and adult brothers, with their families, usually live together under one roof. The elders take great pains to instill good values and ethics in the younger generation, resulting in strong bonds and a sense of security. The blending of relationship between the families of

brothers can be compared to the addition of sugar to water. Though sugar loses its identity when added to water, it adds sweetness to water. This sweetness is more desirable and indicates the strong unity and affection between two families. But in recent years, with increased western influence, it has been noticed that families prefer to live separately and follow the western way of life. They find it difficult to follow the tradition of their ancestors and instead maintain their distance from each other. As a result, families are disintegrating reflecting another result of the contact zone, where the western culture is shaping the lives and lifestyles of the Indian people.

Like India other nations with their unique cultures also fear the extinction of their ancient cultures. His Holiness the Dalai Lama in an exclusive interview with Professor Robert A.

F. Thurman in "The Real Politik of Spirituality" said:

Today Tibet, with its unique cultural heritage, which incorporates Buddhist spirituality, is truly facing the threat of extinction. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, some kind of cultural genocide is taking place. Time is running out (par 1).

Not only is the Indian culture undergoing a transformation and facing the threat of extinction, but also other cultures are experiencing the same problem. I often wonder in this era, where dominance and authority is the key to preservation and survival, if our culture and all the other cultures in the minority will exist a couple of hundred years from now? Will the future generation truly understand our rich culture and the importance of it? Will the past glory of our ancestors be preserved?

This fear of extinction often leads me to question why people in the subordinate culture should go through this extreme loss of their ancient and beautiful culture; why should they live with this fear of their culture's extinction and termination? Just because they are a minority does not mean that they must forfeit something so special and close to them. They still do have the

fundamental right to live the way they want, speak the language they want and have their children and grandchildren follow the same tradition and beliefs they did. Each culture is associated with its own wisdom and uniqueness, and gives a person a unique identity. Preservation of these diverse cultures will not only help support the minority in upholding what's theirs but will also help preserve their sense of identity and ancient pride.

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