

Tradition and Modernity : Middle Class Life in Bhopal

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THE SETTING

The modern city of Bhopal, located about 400 miles south of Delhi, has an area of 285 square kilometers and a population of 671,018, according to the 1981 census figures (Census of India Town Directory : 89). The city is important not only as the capital of India's largest state, Madhya Pradesh, but as a major industrial centre. Perhaps it is best known abroad as the site of the world's largest Industrial disaster, the Union Carbide gas explosion of December 2, 1984, in which some 3828 persons were killed outright, 19000 were permanently disabled, and upto 150,000 others injured or seriously affected in various ways. But this event tragic as it was, is not the subject of this paper.

Before independence, Bhopal was not only a city, but a small central Indian state governed by a succession of Muslim rulers beginning in the eighteenth century. Muslim rule was particularly noteworthy for its many female heads of state, known as *begums*. The city's early history is cloudy, but existing accounts assert that it was founded in the eleventh century, A.D. by Raja Bhoj (1010-1055), one of a line of Rajput kings who ruled the Malwa region of central India from about 800 to 1200 A.D. (Ali 1984 : 2). According to the old Bhopal State Gazetteer, prepared during the British period, the name Bhopal is "popularly derived from Bhojpal or Bhoja's dam, the great dam which now holds up the Bhopal city lakes, having been built, it is said, by a minister of Raja Bhoja....." (Bhopal State Gazetteer 1908 : 1). Bhopal's lakes, known as "upper" and "lower", respectively, provide a central focus around which the city is built. They are said to modify its climate, which indeed is relatively pleasant, even during the hot season, April through June. Bhopal is also known for its beautiful parks, the range of green hills which overlooks it, and its quaint "old city", which continues to be largely Muslim in population and character. The Muslim population of Bhopal is at least a quarter of a million, and the city's 466 mosques are said to represent the largest number of Muslim places of worship in proportion to population of any city in the world. Some of these, such as the Taj-ul-Masjid are edifices of truly majestic proportions. Other architectural monuments, such as palaces and public buildings are also noteworthy. In 1982 an elaborate structure called Bharat Bhavan (India Hall) was completed overlooking the largest of the two lakes. It was designed as a centre for the arts, housing both permanent and changing exhibits of traditional and modern Indian painting and sculpture and providing a venue for concerts, lectures and seminars.

Like any large city, Bhopal is divided into many neighborhoods with distinctive characteristics. The focus of the study reported on here is a small neighborhood or *mohalla* called Shaktinagar in the Bharat Heavy Electricals (BHEL) area on the southeastern outskirts of the city. The BHEL plant, which now employs some 18,500 workers, was established as a public sector enterprise in 1961 by the government of India with the goal of producing much-needed heavy electrical equipments such as hydroelectric dynamos, high voltage transformers, generators, electric engines for rail transit, and so forth. Because of the scale of the enterprise, a large tract of land was set aside for a planned community surrounding the plant. This community is nearly a small town of its own, with housing, schools, medical facilities, markets, places of worship, parks, a sport complex, and recreational centres. In 1981 the population of the BHEL area was about 86,000 (Ali 1987 : 5-6).

Shaktinagar consists of a 68-acre parcel of land with 476 house plots, 438 of which were occupied by dwellings in the 1989-90 period. Plans for *mohalla* were drawn up by the BHEL Employees Co-Op Housing Society in the 1960's. Originally the land occupied by the entire BHEL complex was donated to the project by Madhya Pradesh government. A proportion of this, in turn, was set aside by the BHEL administration for management and supervisory employee housing in Shaktinagar and Saketnagar. To construct their houses, future occupants first had to pay a "deposit" of Rs. 5,000-22,000, depending on the size of the plot. Later they were provided with low-interest loans of upto Rs. 80,000 to begin actual construction. The plots are of four sizes, 100' x 60', 80' x 50', 60' x 40' and 50' x 30'. The houses were built in various styles and sizes according to the status, and therefore the income, of the occupants. In some cases these are two-storey buildings, one storey occupied by the owner and another by tenants. Many of the houses are elaborate, and "modernistic", with large front porches or patios overlooking lawns and gardens. There is a great variety of architectural styles and building plans. Generally they have the living room in front and are not built in the traditional style of large Indian houses with courtyards in the middle. All have modern plumbing, bathrooms, and kitchens. Virtually all kitchens are equipped with gas stoves, refrigerators, blenders, toasters and other appliances. TV sets are universal and VCR's very common in these homes. Most houses have overhead fans and many have "coolers" of the water and fan variety. The homes of higher paid employees inevitably have an automobile parked in the driveway and sometimes one or more motor scooters as well. Lower-rank technical and engineering staff (and some renters who may or may not be BHEL employees) occupy the smaller houses and rarely own cars.

Two additional features of the physical environment of Shaktinagar are notable : first, the Housing Society's plans for the *mohalla* include a shopping centre, two primary and one secondary school with attached playgrounds, a community hall and three large public gardens. As of May, 1990, work was in progress on the shopping centre, but the school and gardens were still in the planning stage. Secondly, a broad, 180' wide

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road along the southern edge of the society has never been paved although the roadbed has been laid out and cleared. Ironically, this broad roadbed currently is occupied by squatters who have come to the area seeking employment. The make-shift dwellings which they occupy constitute a kind of shanty town contrasting sharply with the affluent housing which it faces directly. During the period of the research a group of homeowners began a petition drive to evict or at least restrict these squatter colonies (locally called *jhugees*) to certain limited portions of the road area. The situation is made even more ironic by the fact that most of the squatters provide menial labor to the homeowners in the form of housekeeping, washing and ironing, gardening and construction.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Originally my goal was to study an urban immigrant population in the city of Raipur as a continuation of my long-range research in village, town and urban communities of Chhattisgarh, a cultural region in southern Madhya Pradesh, some 80 miles southeast of Bhopal. However, when access to that region was denied by the government of India, I revised my plans and decided to study traditional and modern norms and behavior patterns among middle class families in Bhopal, which is not viewed as a "sensitive" area by the government. Accordingly, supported by a Senior Research Fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies, I conducted fieldwork from August, 1989 through May, 1990 in Shaktinagar. The able assistance of three graduate students from the Department of Sociology, Barkatullah University, Bhopal, was Obtained and together we formulated a "basic data" interview schedule with 23 questions. I also designed a "follow-up" in-depth interview schedule with 7 major categories and a number of questions within each category. A total of 325 basic data household interviews were conducted, almost all by the students, and I completed 66 follow-up household interviews on my own with some assistance from the students. In addition, I resided in the household of a senior manager's family in Shaktinagar, obtained a guest membership in the "Senior Officers' club," and used participant-observation techniques to complement and enhance the interview data.

The basic data interviews revealed an extremely diverse, well educated community. There are 273 Hindu, 16 Jain, 15 Muslim, 14 Sikh and 7 Christian households in the sample. Among Hindus, the castes (*jatis*) are numerous and diverse; when grouped together under their *varnas* (four-fold division of Hindu society), there are 109 Brahman households, 72 Kshatriya, 66 Vaishya, 7 Shudra (20 of unknown or uncertain *varna* due to omissions in the data collection). Moreover, the inhabitants are also ethnically diverse, coming from virtually every region in northern India and several in the south. The total number of persons is 1506 or an average of 4.6 per households. The inhabitants of 234 of the households, or about 72% live in nuclear families; the other 91 households, or 28% consist of extended or enhanced families. The space limitations of this short paper do not permit me to present much of the household data, but the following statistics are worthy of note: an average of 3 out of the 4.6 household

members either hold an advanced degree (above matriculation) or are studying for one. In other words, it appears that about 3 out of 4 adults hold or are working for a higher degree. The most noteworthy exception to this is wives of some of the lower-level employees in a workman or supervisory rather than a managerial position. BHEL has its own elementary and high schools, but some residents send their children to private schools outside the BHEL area. Of significance is the fact that of 906 offsprings produced in the 325 households in the sample, 687 or 76% go or went to English medium schools, while only 63 or 9.7% of the parents of these offspring attended English-medium schools. This is an interesting example of educational improvement and upward mobility among these middle class families.

Most of the BHEL employees in the sample are engineers, though some are physicians, technicians, accountants, and administrators. All employees are grouped into three basic salary grades by employment position: workmen, supervisors and executives. These in turn are divided into a total of 28 ranks, with salaries ranging from Rs.800 per month all the way upto Rs. 5,000 per month.(During the 1989 - 90 period there were about 18 rupees to the dollar). In Shaktinagar, nearly all the heads of households in the houses occupying the 37 largest plots were in the executive ranks, although a few were physicians, who have a different but also very lucrative salary scale. In addition to the basic salary, employees receive a "dearness allowance" linked to the cost of living index as revised quarterly. This may be anywhere from Rs.200 to 1107, depending on the basic salary. there are additional perks, such as paid leaves with a transport allowance, low-cost loans, medical benefits, etc. Although complete agreement on the definition of social class has not been achieved among social scientists, it would seem that both by income and life style my informants in this community clearly may be perceived as "middle class".

A major goal of the research was to determine the extent to which these middle class families adhered to "traditional" lifestyles and to what extent their lifestyles had been "modernized". Without getting involved in an elaborate discussion of what constitutes "tradition" vs. "modernity" in the contemporary Indian context, for the purpose of this paper let it suffice to think of traditional norms and behavior in terms of those patterns prescribed in religious scriptures, those revealed in the ethnographic literature of the last 40 years, particularly for rural areas, and those understood from my own observations in previous research in village and town, beginning in 1967 - 68. Admittedly, this approach is subjective, but I think most Indians as well as students of Indian society and culture would agree with the general picture if not all the details. The term "modern" is widely used in India to refer to a set of values which is more permissive, liberal and democratic than that which is rooted in traditional Indian life. A typical example would be tolerance for inter-caste marriage. Another might be acceptance of "love" marriage rather than arranged marriage. Attitudes towards religion, caste customs, women's roles, kinship relations and many other aspects of Indian life appear to be changing, i.e., modernizing. Although difficult to quantify, it appears that modernization is progressing more rapidly among urban, middle class Indian than among other segments

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of the population. Let us see what my data show.

In the 66 in-depth follow-up interviews which were conducted, I probed for information on leisure activities, persistence and importance of kinship ties, family organization and division of labor, attitudes toward health, medicine, industrialization and science, adherence to traditional religious beliefs and participation in religious activities. These interviews were as open-ended as possible, but I always tried to focus on subjects which would provide information on the above topics. Most Interviews lasted about an hour and most were conducted with male head of household, though often with other family members present.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Kinship and Marriage

It is obvious that most families have liberalized their attitudes and practices relative to marriage. Although parents remain responsible for finding potential spouses for their children and for making the wedding arrangements, young people enjoy more freedom in expressing their approval or disapproval of life partners. No longer do potential mates wait until the wedding to see each other. At the very least they meet each other before marriage, and this practice now is so common that it is regarded customary. Most male informants said they would not object to their children choosing their own mates, but often qualified this by adding that they would want to check on the background and families of the bride or groom to be. Older women in these families are less tolerant of so-called love marriages. Although nearly all male informants maintain that marriage into the same "community" is preferred and upper caste informants rigidly draw the line on marriage to low caste or untouchable people. But generally speaking most people are more concerned about social class considerations, such as occupation, wealth and education than about traditional caste and kinship criteria.

I have already noted that about 28% of the households in the total sample of 375 consist of extended or enhanced families. Most commonly one finds a household head's elderly parent or parents living in the home, but siblings living elsewhere. However, there are cases of two or three brothers and their wives, children and elderly parents occupying a household in a traditional joint family manner. But whether or not there is residential unity, virtually everyone maintains close ties with lineal and various types of collateral relatives, wherever they may be. Many BHEL families come from rural and small town communities elsewhere in India where they have an ancestral home. If their parents or relatives continue to live there, frequent visits are made and many people plan to retire there. During a daughter or daughter-in-law's pregnancy and childbirth, the woman's mother or mother-in-law frequently comes to help with the housework, and sometimes remains for several months thereafter. Many additional examples could be cited to demonstrate the continued importance of traditional kinship ties.

2. Household Routines and the Division of Labor

Most of the households remain traditional in the sense that the male head goes off to work and his spouse stays at home to do house work, prepare food and raise children. However, there are also many households in which a son and his wife both work and the grand-parents take care of the children. Virtually all of the well to do households, and many with quite modest income hire housekeepers and gardeners. Women from the *juggis* are hired to clean house, do dishes and help with the laundry, as a minimum. They also accompany the women of the house on shopping trips to help carry groceries or other purchases. In nearby markets frequently one also sees spouses shopping together, particularly if major purchases have to be made. The family car is often used for such shopping excursions.

3. Caste Behavior

Among these middle class families, traditional restrictions on interdining are largely ignored. Social gatherings at public functions such as wedding or parties at the "club" include people from many castes and all religions. A private homes as well, the guest list is likely to be very diverse, organized in terms of one's workmates, neighbors, acquaintances, etc. In strictly vegetarian households where meat is never prepared, only vegetarian dishes are offered to guests but this is no deterrent to participation by non-vegetarians. And vegetarians seem to have no compunctions about eating vegetarian dishes in non-vegetarian homes, even though they know that meat has been cooked in those kitchens. There are even households in which women cook meat for their husbands and children, though they remain steadfastly vegetarian themselves.

Caste identity comes into play in relation to marriage, as mentioned above and also in relation to certain social and political observances. In the BHEL community there are a number of regional and /or caste organisations, or samaj, which bring together people of the same community in an attempt to maintain selected aspects of their culture, such as performances of folk music, folk dramas, mythological recitations and the like. In some instances apparently such organizations also serve as mutual help groups and try to advance the interests of the group with reference to social and political issues. The traditional complex caste hierarchy and its structured integration so characteristics of village life is absent in this urban setting, but all vestiges of caste identity have not been eliminated.

4. Occupation, education and the position of women

As we have seen, most of the male occupations involve engineering and technical fields of various kinds. Accordingly, most of the senior males in the sample have university or other higher education degrees, such as engineering certificates from technical institutes. Most have a good command of English as well as one or more Indian languages, since

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English is required for most of the supervisory and managerial positions at BHEL . Virtually all offspring of college age are indeed attending a college or university ,including the females. One finding that suprised me is that many of the young women are going into engineering fields. I learned that one reason for this is the BHEL policy of hiring automatically , in positions for which they are qualified ,the male and female children of BHEL employees . Other fields popular with the younger generation are medicine and law. Clearly, as the next generation matures fewer women will remain housewives exclusively. It is likely that ,just as in Europe and the U.S. , both spouses will work and increasingly ,given the abundance of available cheap labour, household help will be hired to deal with the menial chores at home.

5. Religion

Religion appears to remain the most traditional sphere of activity for these middle class people. Although purity-pollution considerations relative to caste interaction are greatly relaxed ,in other ways religious beliefs and practices remain strong and traditional .Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians continue to perform their respective household rituals (or prayers) and life-cycle rites, observe religious holidays, visit places of worship, go on pilgrimage and generally participate fully in religious activities. Moreover, though a few informants expressed some mild skepticism about metaphysical concepts, most seemed to accept the core of beliefs associated with their religion. During my stay a very popular production of the Ramayana was serialized, presented on television for an hour every Sunday at 9 A.M. Although watched for its entertainment value by people of all religions, Hindus were a particularly devout, consistent audience. Only the medium , not the message, seems to have been modernized.

6. Recreation and entertainment

Because BHEL is such a self contained community, most of the people of Shaktinagar are able to stay within the area for most kinds of recreation and entertainment. Those who qualify may go to the Senior Officers' Club where they attend various functions such as a big musical cum drama production (complete with a lotto" game, refreshments, etc.) in the club's ampitheatre at Divali time ,weekly movies, and various occasional events .During the hot season the Club's swimming pool is open with certain hours reserved for ladies, others for men, and still others for children. In the fall the tennis season begins ,and a relatively small but devoted group of male tennis players participates in double on the club's three clay courts every evening after work and on Sunday mornings from 6 to 9 A.M. The club also offers billiards, cards and a reading room. Other classes of workers at the plant have their own clubs, but they are smaller and less pretentious.

There is a sports arena in the BHEL area where young people participate in all kinds of activities, including soccer, field hockey, track and field events, etc.

Some of the wives of senior managers in Shaktinagar participate in a "kitty club". This group meets once a month and contributes a sum of money to the "Kitty." A drawing is held and the winner takes the money in the Kitty but is also obligated to host the next meeting. This means providing the place and tea or coffee and refreshments. The main activities are card playing, discussions on issues of the day and of course gossiping. The refreshments typically are an interesting combination of Indian foods (Such as *samosas* and *pakorras*) and western food such as sandwiches and pastries. In my host's residence the woman of the house prided herself on her chocolate cake. Some of these women also meet weekly in one another's homes for cards and chatting. In a more traditional vein, some women also meet every Thursday for the singing of *bhajans*.

One interesting and somewhat surprising observation about recreation and entertainment is that very few people from Shaktinagar go into Bhopal proper for movies, concerts, or cultural events at Bharat Bhavan. A few families do go in for dinner at several restaurants where Indian, Western or Chinese food is served. Aside from this the only reason to go downtown or into the old city is shopping. Certain Bhopal markets are noted for one type of merchandise or other, so shopping trips often take people outside of the BHEL complex in ways which no other activities do.

Finally the most universal form of entertainment in the colony these days seems to be television. Though limited to just three channels at the time of the study, TV carried a variety of programming with wide appeal. And many people have VCR's, so that renting movies has become a major alternative to going out to the cinema.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Patterns of sociocultural change in contemporary Indian society may be observed at two levels : those on the surface, such as the relaxation of rules regarding arranged marriages, and those deeper ,infrastructural features, such as industrialization and the modernization of production. These deeper aspects of change have resulted in a shift from rural sources of wealth, i.e. landlordism, to urban sources of wealth, i.e. professional and technical pursuits as well as business and commerce. At the same time, certain persistent features of traditional life, such as advantages accorded higher castes, influence access to the new urban roles and lifestyles. The most substantial changes seem to be in areas such as consumer technology (TV, automobiles, refrigerators) and entertainment /recreation. These contrast with religious belief and behaviour and the general importance of kinship, which seem to have changed only superficially if at all.

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On the other hand, among the middle class families of this study at least, women are attaining access to education and therefore non-traditional occupations, including the professions, in a way which was unthinkable a generation ago. We have also observed that there is a great relaxation of rules governing intercaste behaviour, and indeed caste in the traditional sense has lost much of its meaning here. Still, there is a persistent objection to intercaste marriage. Such a combination of modern and traditional attitudes with regard to the same institution appears to be the predominant feature of middle class values that I have observed.

NOTES

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