



The Individual & The Community

by Shekhar Deshpande

People ask: what is one thing that distinguishes Indian culture from the Western? It's a difficult question. One could be flippant and give some answer that would befit the tourist amidst us. A serious answer would inaugurate a discourse. And yet, it is possible to give an answer that would be simple and complex at the same time.

Perhaps the single most crucial difference between cultures is the relationship of the individual to the community. In India, it is embodied and imbricated and in the West, it is calculated, negotiated and then established. In non-Western cultures in general, the individual is accountable as responsible to the community and in the West, the individual is accountable as a will-full member of the community.

One of the most valuable contributions that the Indian immigrant community has made over the past few years is to listen to these distinctions. We have mediated these distinctions through our voices: literatures, poetry and other art forms. Mostly, it is a story of a generation that has negotiated the newer forms of thought in their lives coming from their Indian heritage. Western education and Western lifestyles have assured that this

generation is assimilated into the relationship between the individual and the community.

These thoughts are on our minds as we navigate through new forms of media — the Internet dialogs on India and by Indians.

Someone went to India and the smell, the dirt, the attitude of the customs and the police got to his head and he swore never to return and never to return willfully until such conditions disappeared. There has erupted a war of words about a "sense of responsibility of Indians," "one's preparedness to India," and "one's responsibility toward India."

All of this should be easy to understand, if we see that there are two groups of Indian Americans here whose world views are clashing in the continuing struggle between the Western and the non-Western perspectives over the centuries.

The first group, trained in the Western rationalist and atomistic worldview, sees itself as belonging to India by choice. Mostly younger, they are second generation Indians or relatively new arrivals. It is not that they are dazzled by the visual and the tactile wealth of the West. Their own place in the world, in the Indian world, seems to be caught between the schism of thinking of themselves as parts of the community of India and their easy,

superficial practical imperatives informed by the West. Thus, they don't like the filth, the dust, the slow lifestyle. And yet they are concerned about it, troubled about it and perhaps feel involved with it. They believe that the attitude that the "natives" have are deplorable and could be easily denounced. They are bothered by it enough to do something about it.

The second group that does not live this schism, and yet experiences or witnesses it, is the older generation of Indians. They are here because the collectivity of family and community that forms their most fundamental bonds is here as well. Their children are the nearest connection to that collectivity. They are enjoying the physical luxury of the material culture. They return to India often and they notice the same conditions that the other generation does. But here there is a sense of collective accountability. That filth is part of the same world that gave them security, peace, beauty and loyalty. If the forces that gave them one thing survive, the rest will and should survive.

We did not want to repeat the particulars of the dialog between these groups. As a first attempt, we are trying to conceptualize the debate. We invite the two groups to continue the dialog on the pages of *Little India*.