

Feeding culture vultures

By Suchita Malik

IN a country as vast as ours, there are bound to be numerous cultural currents that never seem to meet. Take, for instance, the gulf between North and South India and the question of language that has been a bone of contention for a long time. The North Indians casually dismiss all South Indians as 'Madrasis' without realising that many other people and cultures thrive in the land south of the Vindhayas. It may never strike them that they speak different languages and can come from places other than Madras, or Chennai as it is called now. Similarly, people from South India do not feel at home with the bubbly, happy-go-lucky sort of Punjabis.

Let alone the North-South, or the East-West 'bloc', cultural differences can be shockingly sharp within the same territory as well. Take, for instance, Delhi, Haryana and Punjab. Haryana may be touching Delhi's boundaries from three sides, yet there is a sea of difference as far as the cultural life is concerned. While Haryana may boast of its agri-culture, Delhi is an amalgamation of various "nationalities", languages and cultures which live together quite amicably.

A bride from the metropolis in a Haryana household, would generally be treated as an 'alien' and also as one who has come to "snatch away" their son from them. When confronted with the same situation in the case of their own daughter, nevertheless, they would all be ready to redeem the situation by constantly referring to the right of a woman to live away from the in-laws.

Comparing Delhi's culture with that of Haryana may be odious. Things, however, would virtually be at loggerheads when it comes to Haryana and Punjab, the latter being the parent state. Punjab, in 1966, was bifurcated into two separate entities. This led to the forming of two separate identities. Let alone the politicians' gimmicks of sharing water or conceding one territory for another, or deciding the issue of the Capital once for all, the cultural divide goes deeper into the psyche of the

people. It is hard for a Haryanvi to admit that Punjab would always remain the mother-culture and that it has branched out or manifested itself in various undertones in many parts of Haryana.

These differences in culture would be even sharper when it comes to the status of women. The woman in Haryana generally has a lower social status as compared to her counterpart in Punjab. It would be a great shock for a woman from Punjab if she were to venture into a Haryana household. Things may not be made as intolerable for a bride who has come from the South or, say, Bengal since she comes from a different culture altogether and gets the benefit of doubt automatically. But not so for a *bahu* from the region.

Culturally speaking, Haryana can be divided into three main areas, each under a distinctive influence. The influence of Punjab and its culture is more than evident in towns like Karnal, Kurukshetra and Ambala; whereas districts like Rewari, Narnaul, Bhiwani and Gurgaon have more in common with Rajasthani culture. Thirdly, and most importantly, is the Jat heartland consisting of Rohtak, Jind, Panipat and Sonapat districts. Their cultural roots, it is said, lie in agri-culture. One notices while driving through the state that women in Rohtak carry water on their heads and work in the fields while the women in the northern parts are generally not 'field-labourers'.

It is primarily for this reason that when it comes to marrying their daughter, the people of Rohtak will prefer to go towards Karnal and Ambala. But when it comes to get a *bahu*, they would like a tough and hardy girl from the areas bordering Rajasthan.

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That leaves us wondering — what is this culture? The disparity between any two cultures be so stark that it can result in a shock for the new entrant? the psyche of the person concerned and what connotations? As it is, one who is an alien term connotations? As it is, one who is an alien co-operation, sympathy and affection to adjust to set-up and environment. As such, a negative attitude of the other community can prove to be very in establishing a rapport. Rather, it can result in tensions for a lifetime.

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societal transformation in the long run. Broadly speaking, let us look at the parameters, define and specify a change in cultures. Different linguistic tones and accents, the very way of life itself, culture differences apparent. Very often, honest take a backseat and misunderstandings may occur harsh tone or the manner of speech of the other person meaning Haryanvi, while saving the life of the other may blur out angrily, *Marega ke?* (do you want to die) may send wrong signals to the other person. The go may be totally lost due to the harshness of the language. Haryanvi sister-in-law, while actually in an affection with her *bhabhi* may tell her, "*Tu mere gaon ke na, tu na*" etc. thus appearing to be a heartless woman who doesn't understand the nuances of the language or

vultures at home

That leaves us wondering — what is this culture shock? Can the disparity between any two cultures be so strong and wide that it can result in a shock for the new entrant? Does it affect the psyche of the person concerned and what can be its long-term connotations? As it is, one who is an alien needs all the co-operation, sympathy and affection to adjust to a rather new set-up and environment. As such, a negative and nagging attitude of the other community can prove to be very detrimental in establishing a rapport. Rather, it can result in strained relations for a lifetime.

Diversity, in any form, is the other name for change that sows the seeds for improvement. A hostile and negative approach based on caste considerations, can, however, stifle the natural process of effecting positive changes that can contribute to the societal transformation in the long run.

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Broadly speaking, let us look at the parameters, which may define and specify a change in cultures. Different languages, linguistic tones and accents, the very way of life itself make the culture differences apparent. Very often, honest intentions take a backseat and misunderstandings may occur due to the harsh tone or the manner of speech of the other person. A well-meaning Haryanvi, while saving the life of the other person, may blurt out angrily, *Marega ke?* (do you want to die?), which may send wrong signals to the other person. The good gesture may be totally lost due to the harshness of the language. A Haryanvi sister-in-law, while actually in an affectionate mood with her *bhabhi* may tell her, "*Tu mere gaon ke na, tu mere got ki na*" etc. thus appearing to be a heartless woman to one who doesn't understand the nuances of the language or culture. A

woman from Punjab may take this well-meaning remark otherwise.

Similarly, the difference in the dress code is the most striking factor that may go against a woman. A trouser-wearing English-speaking woman will immediately become a target of ridicule in an orthodox set-up. Once targeted thus, all her good actions, qualities or honest intentions may fall on deaf ears.

The same applies to food habits as well. Differing tastes and cuisine are not looked at favourably; rather they become a source of thrusting insults at the other party. Haryanvi jats have been traditionally been eating 'chane ki dal' but the moment it becomes 'cholle' or even 'rajmah', it becomes 'Punjabi' food, and, therefore, a source of ridicule.

Same is the case as far as their living styles are concerned. Spending money on any kind of personal comfort or clothes is strictly a taboo in a typical rural Haryana household. As long as the dress of a Haryanvi woman is a 'ghagra choli' or a yellow shirt with blue 'salwar' and a green 'dupatta', everything is fine but the moment it becomes a matching stylish 'salwar-kameez' with an ethnic 'dupatta', it becomes a serious threat to their age-old customs. If their old women smoke a 'bidi' or 'hookah' or take the addictive 'snuff', it is all in order but all hell will break loose if a young woman from another culture is seen having a puff or two.

Each caste or community has its own traits and characteristics and likes to preserve them. There is nothing wrong with this provided it does not result in looking down on others. But the Indian land is perhaps unique in this respect. There are a number of tribes among the Nagas but Tangkhul Nagas consider themselves superior in the same manner as the Deswalis do among the Jats and the Rathors among the Rajputs. Thus, inter-caste conflict flourish unabated. It is true that in a diverse society as ours, some contradictions are natural and, perhaps, they are an indication of the health of the social order, yet things should not go so awry that it becomes insulting for an individual to survive in a different culture.