

The Residential Environment and the East
Indian Community

By Satish Dhar

It goes without saying that there is a considerable difference between the residential environment of Canadian and Indian cities or villages. This difference is an obvious source of stress for fresh immigrants. The familiar ambience of their native village or town, the predictable configuration of buildings and open spaces that constituted "home" is no longer offered to them in the Canadian setting. The resulting loss of identity and rootlessness that they feel cannot be exaggerated.

The object is to give an idea of the feeling of alienation that the Canadian neighbourhood engenders in an Indian immigrant..

Here we will look at the social and physical framework of an Indian neighbourhood and how it accommodates the environmental preferences and activity patterns of Indians. Comparison will be made to a typical Canadian neighbourhood and the ingredients that this neighbourhood lacks, in terms of an Indian's needs, will be pointed out. The object is to give some idea of the feeling of deprivation, the sense of alienation that the unfamiliar surroundings of a Canadian neighbourhood engenders in a new immigrant. This, in turn, may help to explain the causes of some of the problems that the Indian community faces in integrating with Canadian society.

The Small Town

Indian towns have few urban characteristics

Let us begin with a commonly held notion. India is a land of villages: 80% of the people live in villages. But even this figure does not convey the rural character of India society. Of the 20% urban population, 12% live in towns of less than 20,000. Towns of this size can only with considerable amount of imagination be called towns. Certainly they have few of the characteristics of towns or cities in Canada. In these cities there is hardly any industry to speak of, few metalled roads, no sanitation or sewerage facilities, seldom any running water and electricity is a luxury few of the residents can afford. Most of the houses have thatched or impermanent roofs or mud walls, few of the streets are suitable for motorised traffic, both because they are narrow (sometimes only a few feet wide) or because abutting houses are not aligned to form uninterrupted passage.

There is no zoning and few by-laws govern the development of these towns. People build as they like, to standards they can afford. There is no building inspection to speak of since there are no building standards or codes. As such the town is a conglomerate

The towns are a conglomerate of individual decisions.....

tion of individual decisions. In a sense, therefore, the city comprises a physical framework expressing, within economic constraints, the way of life of the people. The environment and city form is not mediated by institutionally prescribed codes, standards, practices and by-laws. These cities are literally built by the people for themselves.

Canadian cities and towns are expressions of formal institutions.....

In contrast a Canadian city is an expression of the institutional framework: the municipal by-laws, the city grid, the standards and codes, the constraints imposed by service facilities: roads, sewer lines, etc. In other words, the non-human demands have primacy over strictly human needs in a Canadian city. The ability of the people to participate in the fashioning of their immediate environment is limited to the interior of the house. Obviously, lacking this control, civilised, modern society has paid a high cultural and psychic price for its modern service facilities and physical order. Similarly, Indian small town society pays a high price for the integrity of its environment: poor amenities, disease, safety hazards (like fire, unsafe construction) and general physical squalor.

In India there is no open housing market as such. The house is not just another commodity

It was suggested earlier that the Indian city dweller builds his house without reference to any formal institution be it the municipality or other levels of government or private commercial institutions. To make the picture of this autonomy complete it is worthwhile to add that the financial institutions also do not intervene in the process of house building. Few people in small towns borrow money to build a house, mortgage institutions serve a very small percentage of the population and government subsidy has no significant impact on housing of the masses. Thus most houses are built on the basis of the resources of the builder. The usual method is to build part by part: one room at a time by a process of aggregation - as the need arises and resources permit. A little extra earning, a new member in the family - through marriage in the joint family - results in a new room. The point to understand is, there is no mass open housing market in India. People build by themselves either with hired labour or self-help. Increase in need for accommodation does not result in people shifting to another larger house since houses cannot be bought or sold so easily. The ancestral home grows and changes (sometimes parts are allowed to decay if family size reduces) according to the needs of the family.

The ancestral home
is part of the
cultural heritage
of a family

The Ancestral Home Concept

The ancestral home must be understood if an Indian's attachments and strong bonds with the neighbourhood of his birth are to be appreciated. This home constitutes the spatial framework within which the experiences of an individual take place. It links his experiences with those of his forefathers, giving him a place in the history of his lineage and a historical identity. His memories and the events in his life become a part of the lore of the family. As such the family itself does not consist merely of the living members at a particular time, discrete and autonomous, but part of a stream that flows from the past and goes on to the future. The ancestral home contributes to this sense of continuity and historical identity.

This sense of commitment to the ancestral home is traditional in India. Even the increasing mobility of society and nominal social change has not changed this attachment. It is usual for people to maintain a house in the ancestral village or town, even if it performs no economic function and demands considerable financial sacrifice. Doing otherwise would be for an Indian, like dis-inheriting his past, denying his roots, admitting the mortality of his family history.

The Indian has
great reverence
for age and the
past

Supporting the loyalty to the ancestral home is an Indian's great reverence for age, for time past. Youth is not worshipped in India, nor envied. Old people are considered receptacles of the accumulated heritage of the family, which form the basis of many family practices and beliefs. Reverence for old age is a part of reverence for the past. The past to an Indian was purer, more pristine. In the past, man it is believed lived his life as part of a moral and spiritual idyll. The future is not viewed with hopeful anticipation. It is viewed instead with scepticism, suspicion and resignation. As seen by an Indian the future is bound to be so much worse than the present because it is so much farther from the past.

We have spoken so far about the physical, institutional and cultural framework in which the living environment "happens" in India. We can now investigate the quality of an Indian neighbourhood: the spatial context within which the community fulfills itself.

The House

We will start from inside and work our way outwards from the house to the neighbourhood and finally

Most domestic
activity takes
place in the
outdoors.....
there is little
personal privacy
inside the house...

to the city as a whole. Basically, the house consists of a walled, unroofed enclosure. Rooms are built along the enclosing walls leaving the centre open to the sky. These rooms belong to different nuclear families which comprise the extended family. The rooms are used for storage of belongings, for moments of privacy or for sleeping during cold nights. Otherwise most living is done in the courtyard: cooking and other domestic work; pounding rice, washing clothes and dishes. All the women members of the joint family share in this. There is usually a men's room and women's room where the women and men of both the extended family or the community can meet. Apart from this broad categorisation rooms do not perform any specific functions: there is no such thing as a bedroom, hall or kitchen. On cold or rainy nights or days any suitable room may be used for any activity.

As is obvious there is very little privacy with the extended family. The sense of community, social interaction is at a high level. Things are done together. That does not mean that an extended family home is a sanctuary of cooperative harmony. Tensions, conflicts, petty jealousies are part of living in a joint family. Family conflicts constitute plots and subplots in the drama of joint family living. But it is an intensely human drama in which all problems are converted to human terms.

The Neighbourhood

The neighbourhoods
are close-knit
communities

A high level of social interaction continues at the neighbourhood level as well. This is because the neighbourhoods are made up of closely knit communities bound together by caste, caste grouping or occupation. There is a high degree of community consciousness and personal identification with these neighbourhoods by the inhabitants whose families may have lived in them for generations.

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Neighbourhoods have their own shops, the shopkeepers being well-known to the community on a personal basis. There is no such thing as a large impersonal supermarket run by employees for an unknown owner. The relationship between the shopkeeper and the shoppers is a social one.

The streets in these neighbourhoods are not merely narrow passages but social spaces into which activities from the abutting houses spill over. Houses may have platforms adjoining the street where extra-family socialisation may take place. These streets are familiar, known and sheltered

Streets are not merely for passage but are social spaces

The neighbourhood streets have a protective sanctuary like quality even the women can venture into them

The city is a collection of such close-knit communities

places used almost entirely by the community each of whose members is intimately known to the others. Known not only personally, but in terms of his family history, his role in the family and his position in the community. This is what gives the neighbourhood streets a protective and sanctuary like quality, into which women, children and even the old can venture. This must be stressed because women lead an extremely sheltered life. They do not generally speaking mix with the men folk outside the family but keep to domestic life. But the neighbourhood streets have such a secure, unhazardous quality about them and the shopkeepers are personally known, that women do manage to function effectively as housewives. However, in those areas of large cities, where this sort of neighbourhood solidarity, as well as street pattern does not exist, the men often have to do the shopping - even for groceries. The women folk are not accustomed to venturing out into the world outside their social environment.

The City

The cities are made up of an aggregation of such communities each comprising of anything between less than a hundred to a few thousand members. Each community is very self-sufficient and people may seldom venture out of these communities except for work, and in many cases even this is within the immediate neighbourhood. In other words, a city dweller, particularly women folk and children spend almost their entire life within their own community and have seldom to confront people they do not know socially and personally. There is seldom any reason for public agencies outside the community to venture into these social citadels except during elections or censuses. Any intervention by outside agencies in this environment would not be understood by the people. Perhaps this gives some idea of the problems facing community development workers in India who wish to change the habits of the people. The people are unable to identify themselves with respect to these outsiders; they do not know how to respond and behave with people whose family background or caste affiliation, ancestry or position with respect to themselves they do not know. Free floating, autonomous individuals unconnected to a broader social picture are an anomaly in this type of community.

The picture I have painted seems to fit in with the traditional image of village life rather than that of a city. That is indeed the point that I wish to make. Most Indian cities are more like a

Even the metropolitan cities have large areas with village like character

collection of loosely connected villages than they are cities in the real sense of the word. Apart from the 7 or 8 metropolitan cities like Calcutta, Madras Bombay and Delhi etc., most cities in India follow the description given above. Even the large metropolitan cities have large areas within them, as much as 30% - 40% of their areas, which have village like characteristics. As such, therefore, most Indians, even if they are city dwellers, are really villagers at heart. When migrants, for instance, come from villages to large cities they do not have to change their way of life to adapt to city living. Instead they gravitate to squatter communities in the cities established by earlier migrants from their village. Thus they get together and create their village inside the big cities. Indian urban areas are full of such villages.

Similar settlement patterns have been noticed in France where because of a grave housing shortage Algerian and Portuguese workers have had to set up squatter colonies. In these colonies they continue their own closely knit community structures. They do not have to go through the strain of adapting to a new life style - which would have been necessary had they been able to occupy conventional French housing facilities.

The Canadian Environment

The case in Canada is different. The Indian people have not been left to their own devices to form their own communities according to their own rules. Without exception immigrants have had to fit themselves into residential environments that express the Canadian way of life. Building codes, city by-laws, zoning regulations have prescribed the type of residential environment in which the Indians live like other Canadians. They do not build their houses by a slow additive process that they are accustomed to, but move into completed houses built by developers or contractors. Like other Canadians they have very little physical control over the way the house is built, since the institutional controls are so great.

What does this environment mean to Indians? What he sees is independent self-contained cells dotting the landscape interspersed with roads and transmission lines. There is no provision for people, for friendly get togethers in the open air. The moment you are outside your house you are thrust into a wide anonymous world with neither the social nor the physical enclosure of the neighbourhood to

The Canadian environment is made up of individual houses dotting the land the outdoors are anonymous areas where little social interaction can take place

give you some protection, some feeling of security. To people who are accustomed to the immediate neighbourhood being a part of the house, where social interaction can take place, this sort of environment creates alienation. Under such conditions they cannot feel part of the neighbourhood, since the neighbourhood does not fulfill their conception of a community.

The houses themselves are neutral shells, structures incapable of sheltering life's experiences in the same way that their original homes could. Besides a house is just like any other commodity that can be bought or sold in the market place. No non-economic commitment to the house is either required or needed. By an Indian's conception of time the house is merely a temporary shelter even if one lives in it for more than a decade.

Inside the home rooms are divided according to specific functions which are fixed. Appliances and electric connections make it impossible to establish control over the house. In fact the house controls activities within it rather than the other way around. Then there is a clear separation between exterior and interior. All domestic activity, like cooking, washing, etc. have to be done inside the house, inside a cocoon of privacy. To a people who do not put a stress on privacy this results in a feeling of being trapped.

The Need for Understanding

It is very difficult for an uneducated Indian to adapt to the Canadian environment ... he needs all the help he can get

It is possible to continue endlessly in this vein pointing out the conflicts that arise in an Indian immigrant's life as he is confronted by the Canadian way of life. Here I have tried to hint at the stresses that are generated by the components of life that are taken for granted and accepted unquestioningly by most immigrants to Canada. And yet even these basic items, like housing environments, are a source of stress to an Indian immigrant. I can offer no magic solution to this problem. There is none. I am merely trying to explain some of the reasons why the Indian community has found it difficult to integrate into Canadian society. I have tried to suggest that lack of participation in community activity and unwillingness to use community facilities and services is not a result of lack of sociability or gregariousness on the part of Indians. It is just that the social framework within which life's activities are conducted in Canada is so unfamiliar

as to lead the people to equate participation in the world outside with a hazardous and unpredictable undertaking. This is particularly so for the women who are not accustomed to and have seldom had to mix with people other than their immediate kin.

Community workers must try to establish personal relationships with the family

In the end I would like to stress that an uneducated Indian has to perform prodigies if he wishes to adapt to Canadian society. It is a painful process and he needs all the help he can get. Coupled with that his children going to school bring back strange ideas which he cannot assimilate. Community workers must attempt to establish personal relationships with the family because that is the only relationship between people that they understand. They cannot trust anyone who shows an interest in them only in his capacity as a social worker, a nurse or a teacher. On the other hand brow-beating parents for their children's lack of progress in school, expressing irritation over the parent's own apparent lack of interest in their children's academic performance is likely to be unproductive since it will increase the parents' feeling of insecurity, and the parents will take it out on the child. One thing must be made very clear: an Indian parent is as much a part of his child's life as is a Canadian parent. Lack of participation in say, parent-teacher meetings is not the result of indifference but of fear of participation in this cultural milieu.