

Cultural differences between indian and western civilizations essay sample

[Countries](#), [India](#)



Introduction

In our Globalising world, the different cultures constantly come across each other. As a consequence, the ability to understand other cultures and to deal with cultural differences will probably be a major quality required in our future professional life. This year, thanks to the "Ichech housing project" we had the opportunity to gain experience on this subject. The topic of this essay is to explain the cultural differences that can exist between the Indian society and the Western society. In order to do that we will first make a theoretical analysis aiming to put in evidence the way those two societies are structured. We will also explain the differences that we can find between them. Then, we will analyze what was the result of the confrontation of these two cultures. In addition to that, I'll try to give my personal point of view on the evolution of India in the modern world in relation with my concrete experience. Finally, We will analyze what were our reactions to this cultural difference during our stay in India.

Indian civilization and western civilization.

Equality and individual against hierarchization and collectivity.

The Western society is based on two principles. Firstable, for us the essential human reality consists of the human being as an individual, which means independent and self-sufficient beings. The life values are based on the individual as an isolated being and the private person is the main agent of the institutions. Secondly, our society is egalitarian. That means that in principle, all individuals are considered equal. Therefore, the society is based

on the relations between individuals who are independent and equal to each other. Besides, the western civilization could be defined as a “rational” civilization because it’s founded on material values. Religion no longer rules all the aspects of our lives because we got used to consider society as independent of religion. The way we deal with problems is rather rational, scientific and technical. In our society everything is ruled by reason.

The Indian society is not founded on equality but on a hierarchized model. Moreover, the social reality is based on groups of people and not on individuals. These groups that structure the whole Indian society are obviously the castes. What is more, there is a very rigorous hierarchy among the castes. Every caste is characterized in agreement with its place in the hierarchy by a set of specific rules that entails a particular behavior in the society. Thus, the real human reality in the Indian society is founded, not on the particular beings but on the social orders to which they belong. Of course, the Indians, as everybody in the world, consider people as individuals and recognize the personality and the character of every human being. But if we study the Indian society, we can notice that private persons are not the real subject because they are always caught in a group relation that keeps them from standing out as independent individuals

It’s difficult for us to apprehend the way the Indian society structures itself. But we must try to understand from which logical way of thinking such an organization of the society is built.

To start with, we must point out that in contrast with our society which is considered as a “ rational civilization”, the Indian society is a “ traditional civilization” That means that in India, the society is ruled according to religion. Therefore, the predominant values are not material but spiritual.

Accordingly, the system of castes finds its origin in the Hindu religion through the notions of Karma and Dharma that are 2 key principles of this religion. These principles are closely bound to the doctrine of the reincarnation of the souls, which is the continuity of the individual through a set of different lives.

According to the Karma, who we are in any of these different lives is the result of our thoughts and acts during our previous lives. Therefore, the condition of a human being, his social rank and his fortune in his present life are determined by his attitude in his previous lives. The human being eternally carries the weight of his mistakes but he also benefits from his good actions forever. The soul improves from one reincarnation to the other. That’s why, the ones who live in accordance with the laws and that carry out the duties of their caste will progress and will reach in every reincarnation a higher rank in the hierarchy of the castes. The ultimate goal of all these rebirths is to reach the Moksha, which is the delivery of this cycle of reincarnations by which the soul dissolves itself in absolute.

The Dharma is the base of the universe; it gives it its cohesion and its harmony. According to the Dharma, there is a particular order in the world; there is a naturally organized hierarchy for everything. The notion of

unequality comes from this idea of hierachization : according to the order of the world, men are born unequal, with unequal abilities to carry out unequal tasks for their god. This inequality is justified by the Karma because one's present caste is the result of his actions in his previous life.

Moreover, the Dharma also expresses a notion a duty. Everyone has a special duty to fulfill which is defined by people's position in the hierarchy (the position in the hierarchy is of course the caste that one is born in). Every member of a caste has the same duty to fulfill. The castes are hierarchized according to the level of purity of their duty.

It's very important to appreciate the power of this ideology because in accordance with its principles, the social scale appears to be a scale of moral values. Indeed, the inequality of social positions actually represents justice because the position in which one is born is the result of his own actions. Therefore, social inequality is considered as morally right because it is due to the order of the world (Dharma).

This way of thinking is totally opposed to our western egalitarian ideology and it seems unstandable to us. But this represents exactly the problem of cultural exchange: we can't resist to the temptation of translating our way of thinking in a different cultural system. But for the Indian mentality the notion of equality in human and social relations is totally none-existent. In his society, the Hindu doesn't feel like he is exploited, forced or alienated but rather integrated. This ideology unfortunately leads to passivity and resignation facing this order that seems unavoidable.

Good versus evil

The Indian ideology is different from our culture in many ways but among them I would like to analyze in particular its notion of good and evil. I think that the Indian way to consider good and evil is very interesting.

The notion of good and evil is not the same in India as in our Western culture. Christianity is founded on dualism: Good or Evil, God or Satan are opposed to each other. Between good and evil, one has to make a choice, compromise is not possible. This has great influence on the way we think in the West : when confronted to a problem, the western thought judges the choice between two opposite necessary.

On the contrary, Hinduism teaches that in the natural order of the world (Dharma), all things are hierarchized according to their degree of purity. But nothing is entirely pure (good) or impure (evil). Everything consists of a certain amount of good and evil. That's the reason why according to Hinduism, we cannot give such a rigorous definition of what is good or what is evil. There is actually no necessity to make a choice between two opposite. Therefore, Indians have an extremely tolerant mentality because they are convinced that nothing that exists doesn't contain any good at all.

That's why, the spirit of conciliation is very developed : Indians think that all dissensions can and should be leveled by mutual agreements. In the same way of thinking, a Indian is persuaded that two parties that are opposed can be adopted simultaneously. For example, if he has to choose between free enterprise and social state, an Indian will prefer to apply the two systems

while attempting to make them work together. As a result, because of his large tolerance the Hindu tends to accept what is new, strange or different very easily. This notion highly concerns us because it defines how Indians react when they are in contact with a different culture. Of course this is precisely, the concrete situation that we lived.

Confrontation of tradition and modernity.

Since the colonization of the Indian Sub Continent by the British, these two ways of thinking, Indian and Western, have been confronted. Ever since, the influence of the Western World on the Indian society kept on growing. This influence has grown so big that modernism, which is a non-religious, rational, scientific and technical way to deal with problems, nowadays imposes itself as a new way of thinking to the Indians in everyday life. Therefore, we can consider that, nowadays, India is a world in transition where the present and the past constantly defy each other. The Indian's daily life is made of an unceasing coming and going between modernity and tradition. On one side, India lives in a traditional world turned towards religion with a system of castes to which the centuries gave an uncompromising rigidity. But simultaneously, another part of India lives in a new world, in constant evolution, turned toward western rationalism and open to individual dynamism and to social progress. Unfortunately, we can notice a great difference between the rural community and the cities. Indeed, this evolution of mentalities is not so easily accepted in the countryside.

The constitution of 1950 is a meaningful sign of this evolution. It is based on the fundamental rights of citizenship, which is a Western notion. Its main clause declares equality for everybody and denounces all discrimination based on religion, race or caste.

My personal impression is that India is succeeding in finding a good compromise between keeping its identity and adopt the progressive ideas that will allow it to ensure its development and its integration in our globalizing world. The impression I had during my short stay there is that India is definitely turned towards the future. I also feel like India is the master of its destiny and an ambitious Nation.

I witnessed that all the children were going to school. As a matter of fact, the Indian education system is in full expansion and the government's efforts strive towards education for all.

I also witnessed that there was enough food to feed everybody. (que les gens mangeaient à leur faim) Effectively, as incredible as it can appear with its billion residents, India is self-sufficient concerning food supplies. Very few developing countries achieved the same performance which is even more impressing for India because it's an overcrowded country.

It's also good to appreciate that, of all countries that reached independence after World War II, India is the only one that hasn't had to suffer from a revolution or a military dictatorship. Besides, ever since its independence, India has been a democracy, which actually makes it the biggest democracy of the world.

Off course, misery is still a reality in India but I believe that this country must go through these difficult times on the path of its development. Moreover, my opinion is that the hardest times are over and that the country is slowly but surely making its way toward prosperity. A middle class of 200 to 300 millions people is already appearing in India. This represents a population as big as the amount of citizens of the USA.

In conclusion, I think, and those who think the same way are numerous, that India is on the right path. I am extremely optimistic about for its future.

Impressions in relation with the concrete experience

Personal impressions

In a general point of view, I'm extremely satisfied with what this trip brought me. I have always loved to travel abroad and get to know other cultures. I try to participate to this kind of adventure as often as possible. Therefore, this wasn't my first experience of this type. I already had the occasion to take part to the same type of project in Venezuela : construction and direct contact with the population.

Besides, I lived one year in the USA as an exchange student, which also was a very strong experience of complete immersion in a different culture.

I'd like to insist on the fact that for me this type experience is the best way to discover an other culture. Indeed, by staying in the same place during a certain amount of time and having permanent contacts with the people with whom we collaborate for the project gives us the opportunity to have a real

good overview of what life is like in this other country. It allows us to be close to the population and to learn to know their way of living rather than to be simple, on the run, tourists.

For all these reasons, I was able to achieve my objectives, which were to get in contact with the Indian people and to discover their culture and their everyday life. I think that I'm pretty used to be confronted to another culture, that's why I was able to adapt myself and to always react positively to problems.

I feel that it is important for me to mention that I've been impressed because the Indian people are so open-minded and tolerant. I was touched when I saw, in Bangalore, a Hindu temple right next to a mosque and a Catholic church a hundred meters further away on the corner of the street. According to me this represents all the tolerance and the diversity of India. I also think that, the Indians themselves are the true richness of India and learn to know them is the most interesting experience than we can have in India. To give a good description, I would say that the Indians are serene, gentle, pleasant, sensitive, tolerant and courageous individuals, extremely welcoming with strangers and that show an extraordinary faculty to take advantage of the best side of what life can offer.

My opinion is that discovering other cultures is essential because it gives the opportunity to realize that some people live differently than us. It brings us a "puff of reality" that can help us to put our lives in Belgium in perspective. We can realize that the way we live and we think in our little Belgium

actually only represents such a tiny reality compared to the huge diversity of the different people that live in this world. It helps to reconsider our place in the world, to earn a little humility and to realize how lucky we are. For example, how can anyone neglect his studies while in India parents starve themselves to provide an education to their children. It could seem quite stupid but I believe that lots of people don't have the occasion or do not have the will realize such a fact.

The group.

First of all, living together in an unfamiliar environment helps building very strong relations between the members of the group. Indeed, living together and sharing the same goals and the same experiences during 3 weeks helps to really learn to know each other. We could even realize that even though we had been acquainted for several years, we didn't really know each other. Thanks to this experience we could eventually become real friends. I think that this aspect represents one of the major impacts of this project on our lives.

Furthermore, this experience allowed me to learn a lot concerning life in group. I believe that what I learned about teamwork during these three weeks will be really useful in my future professional life.

In general, the project was a success for our group but everything cannot be perfect and if we had to do it again I think that some aspects could be improved. I realized that, in a group, it is difficult to deal with everybody's character, motivation and objectives. Everyone reacts differently to

problems. For example, the girls in the group had a hard time accepting the fact that Indians cannot consider women as serious persons to deal with. On one side, it's true that it's irritating to have to suffer from such reducing prejudice. But on the other side, it is necessary to be able to understand that this is the way Indian culture is. And that how unjustified this custom is, it's necessary to make some efforts to accept it because we are in their country and we are their guests. Or at least to have the patience to explain to our Indian friends that in this matter, there are major cultural differences and that everybody should be able to make some efforts to get over this kind of difficulty.

I also realized that it's a hard task to maintain the cohesion of a team and to succeed in accomplishing great things together. I believe that in order to do that, it's necessary to communicate as much as possible.

In this matter, I had put a lot of hope in the group reunion that we had planned to do every evening to talk together and make a review of our day. This way we could have shared our elements of satisfaction, we would also have been able to point out what could be improved and to define common objectives.

Unfortunately, we didn't do such thing and I believe it was a mistake because doing so we would have been able to make our stay even better.

Conclusion

As we noticed, on one side, religion structures the whole Indian society through the system of castes. This fact brings situations of inequality that are very difficult to accept for us westerners. On the other side, we can also notice that influenced by the western mentality, India has started some progress. Indeed, It is changing very quickly. In a few years, new economic objectives and new social realities have raised allowing millions of Indians to hope for a better future. My opinion is that India is successful in finding a good compromise between tradition and modernity. However, the Indian mentality will always be very different from ours. That's the reason why traveling in India will always demand from us an effort of adaptation and of understanding as we could realize through our experience this summer.