POPULAR CULTURE OF SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA
1998 ASIANetwork CONFERENCE PANEL

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India and Philippines were the foci of the panel, chaired by Teodora Amoloza. The observations about popular culture in South and Southeast Asia of United Board Visiting Scholars Manohar Samuel, Patricia Gabriel, and Carla Gay Romarate tied in with the first meetings of the 1998-1999 ASIANetwork Ford Faculty Development Seminars on South Asia and Southeast Asia that took place during the conference. The Visiting Scholars of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia annually attend the ASIANetwork conferences and contribute to the panels and the conversations. The Visiting Scholars spend one year on American college campuses completing research and participating actively in the life of the host institution.


SUMMARY: CONTEMPORARY INDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE
Manohar Samuel


World’s largest democracy

The images that Americans have of India are somewhat blurred and marred by dominant media presentations. The essence of India, much more than what the American media presents, displays unity in diversity, with an estimated 800 languages spoken all over India, different customs, and traditions, eating habits, and religions. Modern India has stark contrasts and its own share of contradictions. It is the largest democracy alive. With its liberalization and market reforms, it is emerging as one of the dynamic economies of the world. Yet, it is economically one of the poorest countries in the world, with a high illiteracy rate and a population expected to reach one billion by the year 2000.

Since the 1990s, when India adopted market-oriented economic policies, significant changes have occurred, not only in technology in which it is an increasingly world leader, but in culture, social institutions, and inter-personal relationships as well. Television shows, cinema, and popular music have evolved with the times. The market-oriented, media-driven Western influence has affected India in no small measure. With the advent of satellite connections, almost every home can now follow the international news, commercials, soap operas, and sporting events.

Traditions of tolerance

Consumerism has permeated and changed the fabric of contemporary Indian society. Buying the latest cars, television sets, electronic gadgets, trendy clothes, or visiting hair styling boutiques have become popular. Levi/Lee jeans, T-shirts, and ladies dresses and skirts from midis to maxis have almost replaced the traditional Indian sari/salwar kameez. Nearly every field is computerized in India to meet the global competition. The traditional and the modern co-mingle in food habits, clothes, and religious practices. By and large there is a spirit of tolerance, which has been practiced for a long time. The traditional Indian festivals continue to lend color to its great heritage. There are several similarities between America and India. If India has caste divisions, America has race divisions. Like America, India is seriously promoting a climate of rich cultural diversity and pluralism.

India today is changing with times and is fast emerging as a powerful nation, especially in South Asia. Like an elaborate tapestry, India continues to have a rich cultural mix tempered with modernist influences. Anyone who comes in touch with India is caught in its web of magic. The beauty of contemporary India lies in the eyes of the beholder, one who can appreciate its hoary tradition and its diversity.
SUMMARY: WOMEN IN INDIAN CULTURE
Patricia Gabriel


Women give social and cosmic mooring

Women, all over the world, have been waging a war on discrimination. Yet they remain victims of abuse and discrimination almost everywhere in the world. A 1993 United Nations Development Report found that there is no country in the world that treats its women as well as its men. The situation in India is no different. The Indian woman, the central figure in the Indian family, has for over three millennia nurtured a caring environment by providing the main mechanism for the continuation of the concept of family and traditions. Through her traditional behavior and duties, especially in her chastity and loyalty to her husband, her role as mother and wife, and her sacrifices for the welfare of her extended family, she has given the family its social and cosmic mooring.

To Mahatma Gandhi goes the credit for bringing Indian women not only into the nation's mainstream, but also into focus as an unwavering force in nation building. He insisted on the inviolability of the personal dignity and autonomy of women and urged them to assert themselves in the family and build a society based on rationality. While feminists gave the fillip to the emancipation of women in America, educated women activists in India led the crusade against female segregation and championed women's literacy, equality between sexes within and outside the family, and involvement of rural women in the nation's economic development. The movement gave a new meaning to sexuality, an expression of being human that went beyond simply work and survival needs to a deep need for self-expression and for the right of self-determination and fulfillment in relation to others. There was an urgent imperative to be recognized as useful members of society.

The State in India has been the prime mover in bringing about social change, and it is charged with the responsibility of ensuring the fundamental rights of equality of sexes and the absence of discrimination on the basis of sex. In India, the last decade has seen significant changes in the lives of women in the family, the work place, and society. Technological development has lead to innumerable opportunities for women in both organized and unorganized sectors. Nearly half the nation's work force is women who are found in almost all professions. Taken collectively, the implications for Indian women, society and the country are significant. The message is clear: Indian women seek freedom in body, mind and spirit. This is no longer a distant dream or fantasy. It is an inevitable truth.

SUMMARY: ABANGAN: IMAGES OF CONTEMPORARY FILIPINO FAMILIES AS PORTRAYED IN PHILIPPINE TELEVISION
Carla Gay Romarate

Carla Gay Romarate, Religion and Ethics, 1997-1998 Visiting Scholar at Hope College, Holland Michigan, conducted research on women and religion with cross-cultural perspectives and with focus on Asian and Filippino contexts. Romarate teaches "Christianity in a Changing World" and "Christian Ethics, and Biblical Hebrew" at Central Philippine University, Iloilo City, Philippines and is developing a course on "Women and Gender in Church and Society."

Television as a mirror

Contemporary images of Filippino families are portrayed in a popular Philippine satirical television situation comedy, Abangan ang Susunod na Kabanata (Watch for the Next Chapter). The traditional Filippino family is depicted as an institution increasingly challenged by contemporary realities arising from the Philippine, Asian, and Western contexts. Images of Filippino families include the ruling, upper class clan, the middle class nouveau riche family, and the urban poor extended family. Each episode deals with current socio-political issues that affect Philippine society and Filippino families, in particular.

Abangan's episodes depict several emerging images of the Filippino.

1. Single and/or absentee parents. Married men and women leave the country due to poverty, lack of employment, and underemployment to become overseas contract workers (OCWs), entertainers, and domestic helpers, thus creating the "Filipino Diaspora."

2. Extended families in the urban areas. Rich and middle-class families take care of poor and under-privileged relatives from the rural areas.

3. Non-traditional families. These include families or households headed by single persons (e.g. a landlady or a widow/widower) as in boarding houses; families headed by a homosexual (gay or bakla) and his heterosexual partner; and "second families" (querida/mistress) of a rich businessman or politician and their offspring.
4. More egalitarian family relationships. Couples with college education tend to be more egalitarian in their decision-making. Women's movements and feminist advocates are shown as influencing the heightened awareness of the need for gender equality in Filipino families.

Other issues addressed by Abangan related to Filipino families are sexual harassment in the workplace, nepotism, domestic violence, kinship and "kumpadre/kumadre" system, and gender issues.

Emerging images of Filipino families as portrayed in Abangan point out some new elements, variations, and innovations that have been infused into the traditional mold in order to respond to current realities that affect this Filipino institution. The challenges brought about by globalization, the collapse of some Asian economies, and domestic problems are going to shake the very foundations of the close family ties which Filipino families have zealously preserved for centuries. Abangan, with its flair for Filipino humor, has captured the creative and daring ways that many Filipino families have adapted to cope with the contemporary situation.

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