Identity, Contextualization, and Individualization: Three Psychological Processes in Social Change in India

Alan Roland
National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis and Columbia University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol8/iss8/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
IDENTITY, CONTEXTUALIZATION, AND INDIVIDUALIZATION: THREE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES IN SOCIAL CHANGE IN INDIA

Alan Roland

It has usually been the prerogative of the social scientist and historian to study the cascading effects of social change in Asian countries and cultures such as India, including the dynamic interactions of traditional, Westernizing and modernizing influences.* While this macrocosmic perspective of the underlying dynamics and effects of social change is essential to scanning the broader picture, our understanding may well need a complementary methodology of investigating in depth individuals caught in the swirling eddies of change. It is to this problem of evolving a psychoanalytic psychology of social change relevant to the Indian experience that I would like to address this paper. My endeavor is to chart the channels of distinct psychological processes related to the varied currents of change in India. By probing the individual through depth psychoanalytic work, I assume that his or her psychological make-up, resolutions and conflicts are not simply idiosyncratic, but in important ways reflect the prevailing and changing sociocultural patterns—thus shedding light on social change and how it is internalized in meaningful and workable new integrations or in ongoing conflicts and challenges within the psyche.

During the British colonial period, Indian society was exposed to and often dominated by forces of quite another civilizational cast. Radically new types of political, economic, social and educational institutions were introduced, as well as other new dimensions including secularization, contractual economic relationships with a market and monetary economy, modern science and higher-level technology—including radically new means of communication and transportation, philosophical and ideological systems and attitudes including rationalism and liberalism, militant Christianity, and not to be underestimated, very different life styles and psychological make-up. From a psychological standpoint, another salient dimension pervaded this process of change and acculturation that had enormous psychological impact on Indians, particularly those involved with the ruling raj. *British colonial, educational
and missionary attitudes all conveyed intense feelings of British superiority and Indian inferiority, especially after England consolidated its rule over India in the 19th century. The first psychological process, that of identity, relates centrally to these colonial attitudes.

To formulate a psychoanalytic psychology of social change in India necessitates a closer examination of Erikson’s multi-faceted, seminal concept of identity. Implicit in it is the assumed act of self-creation—central to contemporary Western and particularly American personality. Contemporary American culture has granted if not imposed on the individual an enormous degree of autonomy in the adolescent and young adult years to choose among a great variety of social options involving who will be a mate or love partner, what kind of educational or vocational training to get and then what kind of work to do, what social affiliations to make, where to live, and what kind of ideology or value system to develop and become committed to. It is the frequently enormously difficult intra-psychic task of the individual adolescent and young adult in American society to integrate these adult role commitments with the intra-psychic identifications and self-images developed within the family that is the crux of Erikson’s elaboration of identity. His work perceptively charts the stormy seas that are more often than not encountered in this prolonged act of self-creating—the identity conflicts, confusions, and crises, the frequent need for a moratorium, the occasional synthesis around negative identities, and eventually, the hopefully resolved positive identity synthesis. Even his elaboration of the childhood psychosocial stages of development is strongly oriented towards the adolescent and young adult struggle for a self-created identity synthesis; e.g. autonomy and initiative are emphasized as two crucial early childhood building blocks of identity. That this psychological description may not fully pertain to all segments of American society doesn’t detract from its being the dominant mode of psychological development in youth in contemporary America.

I would strongly submit that Erikson’s brilliant elaboration of identity is not the experience of childhood, youth, and young adulthood in traditional Indian society, nor is it that of most in middle and upper middle-class urban circles to any significant extent. Traditional and even contemporary urban Indian culture does not grant the kind of autonomy, nor the various social and cultural options to the person that American culture does. Rather, marriages are still arranged, educational and occupational choices are still chosen with predominating parental guidance, social affiliations or friends usually become absorbed by the extended family with no separation of age groups, a highly integrated Hindu
world view with certain variations and nuances is still pervasively present and operative. In essence, psychological development and functioning in Hindu India does not involve the self-creation of identity; but rather it essentially involves self-transformation from grosser to more subtle, illuminating qualities initially through the inner structures of the familial self within context-specific, reciprocally responsible, hierarchical intimacy relationships—eventuating in the possible Self-realization of the grounds of one’s being and consciousness. The fact that many Hindus may not actively participate in this last step does not negate their implicitly and explicitly accepting this existential psychological Reality.

Does this mean that identity in youth and adulthood has no meaning in contemporary urban India? Not at all. Here, I would like to draw upon the work of the Japanese psychoanalyst, Masahisa Nishizono, who perceptively points out that contemporary Japanese have, as it were, a two-layered personality: a deeper core personality associated with traditional Japanese culture, and an upper layer associated with acculturation to American and Western influences in Japan. I would strongly suggest an Indian analogy to this, although there are significant differences. What I have termed the Indian familial and Transcendent Selves are still very much the core self of Indians I have worked with psychoanalytically; but there is no question that the enormous social and cultural changes brought about by some 200 years of British colonial rule and some 30 plus years of post-Independence accelerated contacts with the West have resulted in highly significant acculturation, particularly in the urban areas. When identity conflicts and ensuing resolutions do take place in urban Indians, they usually involve reactions of the Indian Self to exposure to highly different, frequently conflicting value systems and world views, to significantly different ways of social relatedness and life styles, to equally different modes of psychological functioning, and of course to two centuries of Western denigration. Thus, the need for an identity integration is not within the core Indian Self, but rather between the core Self and various aspects of acculturation, represented by British culture in particular and Western in general.

Since British rule lasted far longer than the American occupation of Japan, there has been a much more prolonged exposure and opportunity for the absorption or rejection of foreign elements. Thus, the acculturation of the urban Indian core Self and its integration with foreign elements through Western education and working for the raj has undoubt edly progressed much further than in the Japanese, and has been seriously complicated by pervasively castigating and denigrating British
attitudes towards Indians. In part such attitudes are the familiar ones of the ruler who vaunts his superiority. I believe, however, that more profound issues have been at stake. The British asserted a civilizational superiority that not only was deeply rooted in their beliefs of a superior culture, religion, social institutions and such; but was also grounded in their asserted superiority in ways of social relatedness, psychological functioning, and personality make-up or character—in other words a Western-style individualized self. The denigration of the Indian conscience is a case in point, deriving from the difference between a Western-style superego functioning on universalistic principles relatively independent of context, in contrast to a highly socially contextual ego-ideal rooted in a mythic orientation. Thus, a Westerner would tend to see someone telling different things to different people as being two-faced or unprincipled; while an Indian might view this as showing appropriate sensitivity to the context of each relationship.

The point I am trying to stress is that whatever identity strivings to integrate an Indian Self with aspects of a Western one were present in certain urban Indian men, who were involved in varying degrees of acculturation, these strivings were greatly complicated by their core Indian Selves being so completely denigrated. In the first generations, these men were apparently more caught between traditional desires for advancing themselves and their families through the powers of the British Raj, and fending off what were often strong reactions from orthodox families that opposed acculturation. More complex have been the identity conflicts of second and third generation men whose fathers were themselves Westernized, but whose mothers were not. Here the conflicts are somewhat closer to the core Indian Self, where the inner core developed initially through the maternal figures is still highly Indian; but within it in terms of a still traditional relationship with the father are the internalizations of certain values that call for the child and youth to be different, with often a strong denigration of the culture fostered through the maternal matrix. That psychic paralysis sometimes resulted is not surprising.

The painfulness of this kind of identity conflict in Indian men has resulted in three identifiable and understandable directions of identity resolution. In more extreme form, they are the well-known identification with the aggressor where there is an almost total identification with a British or Western way of life—with a corresponding denigration of an Indian life-style, even though the core self still remains very much Indian; the opposite reaction of total rejection and criticism of everything Western and the idealization of all things Indian, usually countering
Indian spiritual culture against Western materialism; and a third resolution of reasserting an Indian identity over against a Western one through efforts at reinterpreting and reforming various aspects of Indian culture and society to counter British rule, often incorporating Western innovations into a new synthesis. In actuality, these three ideal types occur more in various admixtures than in pure form. So powerful have been these kinds of identity struggles generated by British rule that they still continue even 30 plus years after Independence. Apropos is the telling remark of Sudhir Kakar that beneath the guise of many overtly held value positions and orientations, deep down, urban Indian men must still make a decisive choice even to this day between being Indian in identity or Western. There still cannot be any easy resolution between the core Indian Self and Western acculturation.

The third identity resolution gave rise to formidable 19th and 20th century indigenous reform movements. Highly charismatic, venerated leaders led these movements, reinterpreting traditional Hindu culture and reasserting its legitimacy while simultaneously trying to reform the more glaring social injustices and to modernize various aspects of the society within the syncretistic tradition of Hinduism. Since Bengal was the 19th and early 20th century hub of the British colonial empire in India, important reform movements originated there such as the Brahma Samaj led by Ram Mohan Roy in the mid-19th century, and the Ramakrishna Mission created by Swami Vivekananda in the very beginning of the 20th century, Vivekananda being among the first to strongly reassert the values of Hinduism while making active efforts at reform. Other charismatic Bengali leaders were the political-religious leader, Aurobindo, who initially gave a strong ideological, religious basis to Indian nationalism, while later in his more spiritual phase synthesized Western civilizational influences with a reinterpretation and reassertion of Hinduism; the internationally noted poet, Rabindranath Tagore, who played a major role in the revival of Indian arts through founding a college of the arts, Santiniketan; and the activist political figure, Subhas Bose. Simultaneously, the Punjab experienced a renaissance of Vedic Hinduism and reform through the Arya Samaj founded by Swami Dayananda; while in the Madras area the Theosophical Movement created in the latter part of the 19th century also strongly reaffirmed the legitimacy of Hinduism—this being one of the only movements to reassert Hindu religion in which Westerners such as Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant and Colonel Olcott played major roles—Besant becoming an active political figure in the Indian national movement and Congress. All of these movements eventually became overshadowed by the Gandhian
national movement, which was the first to draw in large numbers of the rural and urban masses.

Another example of the third kind of identity resolution occurred when the British introduced a scientific world view and the ideology of rationalism in the 19th century, not only as modes of thought but ultimate ideals for challenging and criticizing the Hindu world view as irrational and superstitious. Major religious and philosophical leaders such as Vivekananda and Aurobindo among others asserted that the scientific approach and rationalism could easily be incorporated within the religio-philosophic orientation of Hinduism, particularly of the Upanishads; while highly creative scientists such as the physicist, Jagadis Chandra Bose, and the mathematician, Srinivasa Ramanujan, actively used basic Hindu philosophical postulates around the pervasiveness of Shakti and emanations from the Godhead or Brahman in their scientific work—the assertion of Hindu principles in science becoming part of a larger identity struggle for Bose. Certainly, the research of Edward Shils on Indian intellectuals and a current project conducted by Professor Sinari at an Indian Institute of Technology both indicate no basic ideological conflict in Indian intellectuals and scientists between the Hindu and scientific world views—the latter simply being seen as a legitimate type of investigation into one of the multi-layered realities of the cosmos. Contemporary India has thus been able to train legions of scientists and technologists with almost no intellectual conflict over differing world views.

As we move from the churning rapids of the Indian encounter with Western values and life-styles into the quick-flowing but calmer waters of the modernization process, different psychological processes and dynamics predominate over the identity struggles described above. These psychological processes revolve around the fundamental issues as to what extent the configurations of the traditional Indian Self are amenable and adaptive to innovations and modernizing changes; and to what extent, the Indian Self can psychologically incorporate a greater degree of individualization and individuation congruent with these changes. It may well happen that identity dynamics and these other processes frequently coincide; nevertheless, important distinctions must be made between the psychological encounter with civilizationally different values and ways of life, and the assimilation of foreign innovations, whether technological or institutional. That the line may sometimes blur still does not negate this differential analysis. That conflicts are potentially inherent in all three of these processes also goes without saying; but this doesn’t negate the adaptive function of these processes in the evolution of the Indian Self.
I am viewing the modernization process in the light of Singer’s and the Rudolphs’ work where traditional elements are frequently highly adaptive in incorporating many innovations. Particularly relevant is Singer’s stressing the Indian cultural mode of traditionalizing various foreign innovations through a series of adaptive strategies, including the essential psychological element of compartmentalization. From the perspective of a Western conscience, compartmentalization would have to take place because of too great cognitive dissonance between behavior and attitudes expected in the work and familial milieus since the Western superego is so oriented towards universalistic principles of behavior. This cognitive compartmentalization would seem to be related to another observation that an Indian may frequently say one thing to one person and something completely different on the same topic to another. It is not that these dissonances are completely absent in Western relationships, but they go against the grain of the Western ego-ideal. From the perspective of the Indian conscience, a more accurate term than compartmentalization would be “contextualization.” Specific contextualization of relationships and situations is essential to the functioning of the Indian conscience. All of the adaptive strategies Singer has cited are oriented towards contextualizing a new situation, thus making it livable and workable within the mode of the Indian familial self.

What I am stressing of course is that the ability of these men to function with minimal conflict in both traditional and modern life styles in the family and work spheres respectively—assuming there is no denigration of one by the other—is profoundly related to their having a similar internal emotional structure and conscience in both of these situations. They carry with them into both groups an internalized ego-ideal that is radar-oriented towards identifying with the group’s norms, customs, and attitudes, with a strong deference and respect for hierarchical authority. No conflict is experienced because their ego-ideal functions on the basis of having harmonious group relationships where consideration for others and the group norms are profoundly respected, and the reciprocal responsibilities and the deferences of hierarchical relationships are observed so as to minimize conflict and hurtful feelings. Even in most modern life-style institutions, this mode of hierarchical relationship strongly predominates. In a sense, no real psychologically dynamic compartmentalization takes place because as long as a given situation is properly contextualized with its own acceptable norms, these men, and increasingly urban women too, would be acting perfectly appropriately according to their inner conscience. The problem comes in certain urban spheres where it becomes difficult for Indians to contextualize situations within reasonably traditional values—in part
because the values and behavior expected are too different, in part because change has occurred too rapidly for the situation to be contextualized.

It is evident then that contextualization as a major aspect of the Indian familial self—particularly of the conscience and ego functioning or cognition—is a major psychological process in Indian encounters with social change. It is further evident that this process has not been sufficiently appreciated or elaborated upon in psychological studies of the modernization process, where attitudinal change, achievement motivation, and acculturation stress have mainly been emphasized. From a cognitive standpoint, A. K. Ramanujan has perceptively and comprehensively indicated how contextualization pervades the Hindu mind and culture. He views the modernization process as a constant tension between the polarities of assimilating Western innovations that are context-free (such as constitutional political institutions, universal education, modern science, and business and technology) and of the Indian pull towards contextualizing everything.

It is also apparent that the Hindu mythic orientation and other traditional images play a major psychological role in contextualization in the modernization process. Since every relationship and encounter is preconsciously referred back to mythic images, folklore, and traditional conceptions, encounters with the West and with modern innovations are no exception. These may range from Gandhi’s exhortation to Indian women to resist the British as Sita resisted Ravanna, Gandhi literally labelling the British colonial power a Ravanna-raj; to Indians viewing the British raj as a kind of Kshatriyas, albeit a particularly difficult variety to cope with. The enormous assimilative tendencies that Indian culture is usually credited with—one man labelling it a boa constrictor that can swallow almost anything—is to a great extent based on the power of this contextualizing process. By drawing upon past images and mythology, the current and the new can continuously be invested with familiar meaning, thus ensuring continuity within change. Problems mainly arise when change occurs too fast, when innovations are too outside prevailing images and categories, or when there is a high degree of deculturation through a highly Westernized, secular education.

Turning now to the burgeoning individualization and individuation occurring with modernization, this is happening especially in urban areas but apparently to varying degrees in rural ones as well, and is essentially developing within the framework of the familial self and hierarchical relationships. As with any development, conflict is always potentially present. The middle and upper middle-class, urban Indian
extended family is gradually changing within the boundaries of its basic structure. Hierarchical relationships stretch to allow for somewhat more individualized choices in marital, educational, and occupational choices; for greater development of various ego skills through education; for somewhat greater recognition of individual family members’ identities in their role relationships and for somewhat more open expression of their views; for somewhat increased opportunities for decision-making and for the individual carrying of responsibilities; and for a somewhat closer husband-wife relationship. In child rearing, somewhat greater freedom is accorded the child, more consistent discipline tends to be instituted in early childhood for inner controls, and somewhat greater and more open involvement and participation of the father with his children is present. All of these familial changes tend towards individualizing psychological development to a significantly greater extent than before, though usually still within the traditional hierarchical structure.

To assess these psychological changes, a rather crucial question must be posed at this point: is the familial self easily open to individualizing changes, or is it a profoundly unchanging organization of the psyche? The answer is both “yes” and “no,” or more accurately, “both”; and upon the elaboration of this answer depends a large part of our understanding of the psychological correlates of social change in post-Independence, urban India. My strong impression is that with changes in urban extended family functioning, the core Indian familial self is open to certain individualizing changes while retaining continuity of the familial self. Thus, profound inner emotional structures of the familial self remain, while simultaneously there is a certain elasticity in developing more individualized modes of social relatedness and psychological functioning. However, the familial aspects of the self in my observations still remain strongly dominant over any individualized tendencies and development of ego skills, even when the latter are highly developed.

By individualization in India, I mean the contemporary tendencies towards increasing consideration of the child’s, and particularly the adolescent’s specific wishes, abilities, and inclinations in the social and work sphere, with a greater recognition of the individual functioning in a somewhat more independent way. In Indian social contexts, this would usually mean according to persons lower in hierarchical status, whether in the extended family or other institutions, a greater recognition of what is important to them, and what they have to say and contribute. With individualization, the individual identities of various fami-
ily members become much more responded to than in the past where the person was predominantly viewed in his or her kinship statuses and roles. 18

This increased individualization is now going hand-in-hand with a much greater individuation in urban educated Indians. Increasing ego skills with stress on education is being fostered from early childhood, as the urban middle and upper middle-classes exert tremendous efforts to get training in modern science, technology, the professions, and management and other business skills. I would like to reiterate that both the increasing individualization and individuation in urban Indians still occur overwhelmingly within the context of the familial self and within hierarchical relationships in the extended family and work situations—rather than leading to a more Westernized development involving increased separation, autonomy, and the self-creation of identity involved in individualism, and what I have come to term, the individualized self. What I have observed is that the basic familial self remains intact while allowing for a certain degree of individualization and increasing individuation. Stated from another standpoint, individualization as I have described it above and individuation are not intrinsically interrelated with the separation process with its gradual development of autonomy and an eventual, self-created identity synthesis—as is strongly posited in contemporary psychoanalysis and as is presently characteristic of the Western individualized self—although they are essential components of it.

NOTES

*This paper has been presented to the Indian Self Seminar of the Southern Asian Institute, Columbia University, March 19, 1981; to the Seminar of the South Asian Studies Program, University of Chicago, February 24, 1981; and the Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, Bloomington, Indiana, May 30, 1981.


10. Sudhir Kakar, Chapter VI, "Conclusion: Childhood and Social Change," *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 182–188. This same point was made in a personal communication by B. K. Ramanujam, formerly Clinical Director of the B.M. Institute of Mental Health in Ahmedabad.
12. A. K. Ramanujan, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" (Presented at the first Workshop on the Person in South Asia, Chicago, September, 1980.)
13. Personal communication from Ashis Nandy, Fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi.
14. Ashis Nandy in a brilliant analysis of traditional Indian attitudes towards biography and history in *Alternative Sciences*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1980, evaluates them as being profoundly oriented towards transforming each social reality into a psychologically and culturally significant myth, thus ensuring cultural continuity.
15. Kakar, Chapter VI, *The Inner World*.
16. Personal communication from B. K. Ramanujam.
17. Drs. Illana Cariapa and Shamasunder, psychoanalytically-oriented psychiatrists at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences in Bangalore, both of whom have worked extensively with rural patients with Shamasunder originally coming from a village, report significant changes in individualization in rural families.
18. Personal communication from B. K. Ramanujam.