

The Parallel Lives Project

For a little while now, I have been working on what I call the Parallel Lives Project: From Maine to New Delhi, as part of which I have been interviewing people in different walks of life here in Maine, and then in winter, (no one will talk to me in the scorching, blistering summer of New Delhi) I hope to go to New Delhi and collect the life stories, thoughts and viewpoints of people there. To me it is a very important project for many reasons:

First, it spans the two worlds that I inhabit not just physically, but cognitively. In today's global world, with the bits and bytes flying in fractions of a second from Maine to New Delhi and back, and the economic interdependence of our two worlds becoming more and more entwined with help desks and in-sourcing and outsourcing of services and people, it seems imperative that one know and understand the other side.

Secondly, what are these two sides in themselves, and, how different or similar are they to each other? How far in distance and mind and lifestyles and viewpoints and culture and social and economic frameworks are they really?

With me and many like me from different parts of the world traveling to and living here in America, and many from here and other places in the world, now living and traveling to India, how different do we find these new worlds? How much do we understand them? How much do we assimilate? And do we know enough to find common ground? Can we penetrate further than the color and the dress codes and the hellos and the *namastays* to really meet each other?

What are our present lives and how they have evolved? What are our thoughts and social and cultural conditions that have brought us to our stations in life? How we view our world and its frameworks, and how we view the rest of the world. What are our expectations and what we aspire to, for ourselves, for our children? What do we think about growing old and how do we manage it? What are our important issues and those of our society and how do we deal with them?

What do we think about religion and spirituality? How different is the religion of a million different deities from the one with one on a cross? Does it give different things to its followers or the same? And what does one mean by these terms anyway?

What is freedom to people? And what is today's generation thinking and doing?

How do we view politics and our politicians? And how do our politicians, making laws and decisions for the two biggest democracies in the world view themselves and the rest of the world? And how different is our politics really, and what impact it has for our two interlinked societies.

And, what about community- for us, and for our children? Is it disappearing? How much and when is it important to us? Does it mean similar things or different, to people in two different parts of the world?

And did I talk about parallel lives? Well, then, what does it mean to be a plumber in America vs. one in India? To be an engineer, a doctor, a street person, a postman, a shoe repairman, a butcher, a young woman, a housewife, teacher, principal, elderly person, child, business-woman, politician, or, a lesbian or gay and how would I find one in India, anyway! Yes, looking for some parallels may well be impossible, and what does that say about the two different societies in itself?

And here, where would I find that smiling tandoor-waali of my neighborhood who sat atop an earthen mound in the middle of which was built a hot tandoor, and slapped flattened balls of dough with her bare hands into the insides of the furnace? Or her daughter, who has now taken over her place seamlessly on the mound as her mother passed away recently, and remembers the time I lived there and shares the present of that neighborhood with me, its lingering past.

Yes, some parallels may not exist at all, and talk volumes about their individual societies by their absence, but many more do, and the recognition of their existence, and the frameworks of society, culture and thought within which they exist should be able to provide initiative and depth to an informed community dialogue, because the very future of our society and children depends on it.