Full Text:

Akshaya (ak-SHAH-yah), 14, and her sister, Aishvarya (aysh-WAR-yah), 11, live in a cheerful, four-bedroom house with a tiny but lush garden in front. Their bustling middle-class neighborhood sits on the outskirts of the rapidly expanding city of Bangalore, in southern India (see map, p. 17). Along its streets, a procession of comfortable homes, high-rise apartment buildings, and fancy malls are symbols of the dynamic economy of the new India.

But the old India is never far away. Akshaya and Aishvarya, whose last name is Radhakrishna (rah-dah-KREESH-nah), tell JS about the young daughter of construction workers living in a shantytown near their neighborhood. They learned that the girl had been sent home from school because she wore tattered clothes. "We bought her new uniforms," Aishvarya says.

"Some have so much and others so little," adds Akshaya. "I don't believe in the Indian philosophy of karma. Nobody deserves less. It is not their fault."

"Poor Nation" No More?

A vast country on the continent of Asia, India is home to 1.1 billion people. Its trillion-dollar economy is the world's second-fastest-growing after that of neighboring China. Today, India is trying to shrug off a "poor nation" label from its past and, like China, aims to be a global economic superpower.

The Radhakrishnas are typical of the rising middle class in the new India--ambitious and hard-working. The girls' father is a manager for Intel, a multinational technology company headquartered in Santa Clara, California.

Many multinationals are drawn to India for its skilled workers and low wages. That combination is helping to make Bangalore, a city of 7 million people, a global technology hub.

In the new economy, double-income families are becoming more common. The girls' mother, Uma, is a math teacher. Just a generation ago, most women stayed at home.

Despite this newfound prosperity for families like the Radhakrishnas, poverty remains a serious problem. Half the population in India survives on less than a dollar a day.

Bangalore's construction boom has drawn thousands of poor families from the countryside, where the chief livelihood is farming. Even in the city, most migrants remain

poor. Besides construction work, they typically find menial jobs, often as servants for the well-to-do. It is common to see migrants' shantytowns sitting side by side with middle-class developments.

Conflict and Partition

As Akshaya points out, many Indians believe that karma helps determine the quality of one's life. Karma is one of the basic beliefs of Hinduism, the faith of about 80 percent of India's population. One of the world's oldest religions, Hinduism is based on a belief in many gods and in reincarnation.

For about 200 years, beginning in the mid-18th century, much of the Indian subcontinent was part of the British Empire. Hinduism dominated, but waves of conquest and immigration over the centuries also caused many people to embrace Islam.

Then, in 1947, Britain granted the area independence. A predominantly Muslim country called Pakistan was partitioned (separated) from India. Conflicts over religion and land led to violence. Millions of Muslims were forced out of India, while Hindus were evicted from Pakistan and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). About half a million people were killed in Hindu-Muslim riots during partition.

Faith and Family

The Radhakrishna family is Hindu. Each morning, Akshaya and Aishvarya worship their ancestral deity Venkataramana (the god of wealth), as well as Hanuman (the monkey god), Ganesha (the elephant-headed god of good beginnings), and Saraswati (the goddess of learning).

After prayers, they eat a freshly cooked breakfast of upma (spiced cream of wheat), idli (steamed patties of rice and lentil), or dosa (rice-and-lentil pancakes).

The family embraces their sacred traditions and modern conveniences. Akshaya and Aishvarya usually wear jeans and T-shirts. But they are as comfortable in the traditional salwar kameez, a loose-fitting tunic and baggy pants, which is their mother's work attire. Urea also favors the sari, a six-yard-long women's garment that is wrapped around the waist and then draped across the shoulder. She always wears a bindi, the dot on a woman's forehead that traditionally signifies her marital status.

The gifts' paternal grandmother lives with the family for most of the year. But extended families are becoming rare in cities like Bangalore. Some Indians say that industrialization is contributing to the breakdown of the family system.

Learning From Elders

Recently, the sisters have been busy with back-to-school preparations. Akshaya is entering the 10th grade and Aishvarya the 6th. Indian schools have a rigorous curriculum

based on the British system. "There is pressure from the parents and the teachers to study," says Akshaya.

The sisters balance academics with swimming and lessons in Hindustani music. They also take part in school activities, including literary festivals and basketball games.

What distinguishes middle-class Indian teens from other kids in the Western world? Uma tells JS that it is their deep respect for their elders and for learning.

"Parents and teachers play a huge role in molding kids," she says. For instance, kids stand up while addressing their teacher, but never by name, only as "ma'am" or "sir." Both girls observe the daily limits set by their parents on Internet chats and watching television shows, such as Hannah Montana.

Tradition holds sway in the teens' social lives too. Neither sister is interested in dating, which is taboo in most Indian families. In some cities, moral-policing groups have banned young people from celebrating Valentine's Day or showing affection in public.

Akshaya and Aishvarya's parents had a traditional arranged marriage. There was no courtship--the match was made by family elders. The girls are amused that the first time their parents met was at their own engagement.

The arranged-marriage tradition is still strong in India, but for how long? Younger Indians are choosing their own partners--often to the dismay of family elders.

Akshaya says that one of her friends at school is in love. "You can fall in love when you are financially independent," her father chimes in.

Akshaya isn't ready yet anyway. "It is not very smart to get all emotional and depressed at 15," she tells JS. But when her time comes, she says, "I'm not for an arranged marriage. I want to get to know the person."

Her mother quickly adds, "We hope she chooses a boy who is compatible to the family."

Words to Know

* civic: of or related to community affairs.

* karma: fate; an inescapable destiny that rewards or punishes a person for good or evil done in a past life.

* migrant: a person who moves from one area to another to find work.

* reincarnation: the rebirth of a human soul in a new body.

* shantytown: a poor, usually crowded, community where people live in rough-built huts or shelters.

Think About It

1. How might India's tech boom affect the country over the next decade?

2. Describe some of the traditions that your family observes.

The young sisters on this issue's cover are members of a generation growing up in an India that is experiencing rapid change. Long stuck with a "poor nation" label, India has a dynamically expanding economy made possible by an educated, technologically savvy work force that is willing to take lower wages than those in the U.S. and other developed countries. As in China, India's economic boom is bringing about societal changes. What does this shift mean to teens in today's India?

INDIA IN BRIEF

India's film industry is now one of the largest in the world. Its Bollywood films have become popular in the U.S. The name Bollywood is a combination of two city names: Bombay (now called Mumbai) and Hollywood.

* Hindus consider monkeys and cows to be sacred animals. In New Delhi, India's capital, monkeys are allowed to roam free--which sometimes creates problems for office workers and residents.

* The longest station name in the Indian Railways system is Venkatanarasim-harajuvariapeta. The word is sometimes written with the prefix Sri (a title of respect), making it even longer.

* India is the world's leading producer of mangoes, accounting for nearly 50 percent of global output.

* Each gear, millions of Hindus travel to the holy city of Varanasi, India, to wash away their sins in the Ganges River.

by Saritha Rai in Bangalore

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