

Dear SIETAR Members and Supporters,

The theme for this month is ambiguity. A conversation with one of our board members, Lakshmi Kumar, inspired the theme of this month. A pioneer in the field of education in India, Lakshmi has studied sociology and social work and mentors Swedish students doing social work in India. Crossing cultures requires an enormous ability to deal with ambiguity as much on the part of those living and working in other cultures as on the part of those who guide them, as illustrated by the cases Lakshmi has generously offered to share with us in the editorial. In line with the theme of ambiguity, the resource section has a review of the film "Lunchbox" by Sunita Nichani. Enjoy!

UPDATES

Tanja Schulze, 2013 – 2014 President of Young SIETAR has requested the help of interculturalists across the globe in completing a survey on the nature of the intercultural profession. To participate please click on the link: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ICProfessionSurvey2013>

EDITORIAL - Caution them, but don't alarm them By Lakshmi Kumar

These were the words my son uttered after he went out with a few Swedish students out for a drink. He mentioned that the students are very worried about meeting young people in India, after what they have heard about Delhi rape, daily rape and the recent blog from an American student. He advised that the pre departure course should adequately caution them – to understand the layers of nonverbal signals they receive from the environment, yet not to frighten them so much that they suspect every well-meaning host member to be a potential offender.

This dilemma is not new for me or for that matter anyone who works with people from other cultures. I receive students of social work from Sweden every semester for a one term field practice in India. It stems from an episode my student faced some years ago. She had gone for an evening smoke and she was standing outside her building compound. While she was enjoying her puff, the security guard of the building approached her, said hello, shook hands (everyone seems to know when to kiss, bow, or shake hands?) and joined for small talk. The polite Swede offered a cigarette which in itself is misread by the guard. So, they stood there, smoked and talked in broken Swenglish - about life in general. When she was leaving, she thanked him for the company and shook hands to greet. The guard followed her to the staircase, and as she waved good night, he grabbed her and began to grope her. She didn't expect this sudden turn of behaviour. She ran up the stairs and slammed the door on him.

Next day, during the seminar break, she came up to me and shared this incident. Her biggest worry was if she was "rude" to him in any ways with her flight and if she has mis-understood the cultural behaviour in any way. My response was that this was not cultural from any angle but total violation of her dignity, disrespect and in its worst form, perversion. This behaviour has no cultural code but is a universal expression of abuse. I did take the matter to the police so he would never take a friendly gesture from a girl for granted. I don't know if he has learnt any life lessons after the police took "charge" of him.

This has thrown a deep confusion and concern for me as an inter-cultural trainer. I struggle with the question of how to bring a fine balance of how much to warn my students – about them being friendly with people from another social, economic back ground. Swedes come from a culture with a strong preference for equality, low power distance where these layers of socio-economic strata are fuzzy. Whereas, an Indian (middle class) girl will almost always know whom to have a friendly conversation with and where the boundaries are drawn. How do I explain this to my students in such a way that they understand the essence of this stratification? Am I giving any unintended messages such as don't be very friendly with "working class" even if this is the subtly loaded? Will I be able to explain the thin line between being friendly and being polite? How do I warn them of the dangers that they should watch for when they venture out with "new friends" from the host culture? Without giving them a feeling that every man they meet in India is a potential danger for them?

I have travelled with them in India and what I have seen (through their experiences) would hang my head down in shame. I know the stories of men shouting abuses when they walk by and the constant chase for a photo with them wherever they go, more so, when they are in their bathing suits. I also know the stories of a stranger dropping them back to my place because they got lost, the fellow travellers who took them home in Varansi as the train reaches the station in wee hours (and it is not safe). How do I present both (or many) Indias to my students?

EDITORIAL - Movie Review by Sunita Nichani

The Lunchbox by Ritesh Batra, screened at the International Critic's week at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival

A film set in Mumbai, around the service of the iconic dabbawallahs who ferry thousands of lunchboxes to office-goers in the crowded city without the slightest glitch. The film however revolves around one such lunchbox delivered to the wrong person, leading to an epistolary romance between the unintended recipient and the lonely housewife who prepares the gastronomic treats hoping to win her indifferent husband's heart through his stomach. What personally fascinated me was the contrast between the almost antiquated means of communication showcased in the movie – a basket hanging on a rope to exchange tidbits with the upstairs neighbor, paper notes in the lunchbox instead of the ubiquitous text messages of today – and the modernity of the characters who each broke their cultural shackles to choose freedom and second chances. Unlike typical Bollywood cinema, the film ends on an ambiguous note, letting the viewer connect the dots as he/she wishes. A wonderful visual resource for exploring some of the facets of contemporary evolving Indian society.



Sunita Nichani

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