

# WHAT VALUES FROM YOUR PARENTS' GENERATION WOULD YOU PRESERVE IN A CHANGING WORLD?

Mexican-American writers Sandra Cisneros and Erika L. Sanchez discuss their paths to finding beauty in a culture that often devalues women, while Sakena Yacobi, of Afghanistan, and Shahzoda Nazarova, of Uzbekistan, share how Persian poetry and traditions serve to inspire during times of upheaval. Writer Devdutt Pattanaik explores the adaptability of family values in his native India.

## MEXICO: "YOU NEVER FEEL ALONE"

SANDRA CISNEROS

*Adapted from recent conversations between Sandra Cisneros and Caroline Preston*

I live in a small town in Mexico, where many of the old values are still preserved. That's one of the reasons why I chose to move here, San Miguel de Allende, instead of a big city. There are so many things in Mexican culture I want to let go, particularly with regard to women and their place in society. But I appreciate the value placed on respect for elders that's so prominent in Mexico, especially in the smaller and more traditional communities.

It's something I found in my own family too. The young people took care of the elders and there is a value in age. Maybe it's a tradition from the indigenous inhabitants we have here in the Americas. Even in humble communities, you don't ship out the elderly to facilities. There is a sense of caring and respect.

I see it with myself now that I'm getting older. When I came to Mexico when I was younger, I always had to dress a certain way, to put on my conservative clothes and disguise myself, to be androgynous or asexual, because you didn't want to be called *mamacita* or *mamasota*. But that's changed.

Yesterday at the airport, a *maletero*, or porter, came up to me and said, "¿Madre, le puedo ayudar?" (Mother, may I help you?) I am of an

age that I am turned into a mother even though I've had no children. I thought, Oh my goodness, I've been elevated to the status of the goddesses, of Mother Mary, of *las diosas*. Even though Mexico is a macho culture, it's a matriarchal culture, and it respects women if they're mothers. I get a level of respect here in Mexico that I've never felt before.

San Miguel de Allende is a kind of bubble, a historical town integral to Mexican independence from Spain. It's in the state where my ancestors are from. I moved here in 2013 after visiting for a reading in 2011. I had heard a lot about this place, in a bad way. Usually you hear, "Oh, it's overrun with expats, skip that town," so I came with a negative attitude, and I was very surprised when I moved there. I still have complaints—no place is perfect—but I've found a town that contains two halves of myself, my English-speaking half and my Mexican half.

Last night I went to a *kermés*, a church festival. It was completely Mexican: families, grandparents, and children listening to music, buying food, and waiting for 10:30 when the fireworks were set off to celebrate the feast of the annunciation. The *castillos* were lit—fireworks built on reeds, these giant five-story structures. They spin around and send a lot of smoke; it's beautiful, and it's scary at the same time. They are burning right above you, with the cinders falling, and at any moment your hair could catch fire. I like these communal rituals, this fusion of

pre-conquest celebrations and church customs. I feel a connection with history. Here the past isn't the past, there's a sense of living alongside it. That's so different from what I experience in the United States. I value the traditions that link us to the seasons, to the community, and to one another. You never feel alone.

---

**SANDRA CISNEROS** is an author and activist whose work explores the lives of the working class. "The House on Mango Street," her classic novel about a Mexican-American girl coming of age in Chicago, has sold more than 6 million copies. Cisneros spoke with World Policy Journal editor Caroline Preston.

---

## MEXICO: SUPPORT AND ALTRUISM

ERIKA L. SANCHEZ

*Adapted from a conversation with Ritikaa Iyer*

Growing up, I resented much about traditional Mexican culture. I was often irate about the gender inequality and patriarchy I witnessed in the majority-Mexican town in Illinois where I was raised. The women cooked all day, and the men ate the food. Women were often mistreated and objectified by the men in our culture and society as a whole, and it was confusing to watch strong women endure this. It was hard for me to see beyond the inequity, and instead of rejecting these parts of my culture, I moved away from it.

Only when I was older did I begin to understand the beauty in my culture. My community was family-oriented, and there was always a support system if anyone needed help, emotionally or financially. Whenever I returned to Mexico, where my family is very poor, my relatives would always take the time to feed those even poorer. My family still found the means to help others, even if they had little themselves. My mother and aunts and other women in the U.S. comforted each other and relied on female relatives for child care. This has become rare,

and I hope future generations retain these values of support and altruism.

I find it ironic, however, that in a community where family responsibility and generosity are held in high regard, there is a line where that support ends. Sex, for example, was not something we spoke about. Young women who became pregnant were castigated as 'dirty' for engaging in sexual acts; there was a stigma, and I think it's important to provide information, to help and not judge. I had my own education through *Loveline*, a radio show I listened to late at night, and that's not an ideal way to learn about sex. But even on this subject, my older brother tried to assist me. When he was in college in central Illinois and I was in high school, he would share with me the feminist texts he was reading, by writers such as Adrienne Rich. That was valuable.

My parents' views on social issues have shifted over the years, and today my family would not care if I wanted to educate my children on sex. When we speak about retaining traditional family values, it's important to remember that the world changes and our ideals evolve. Family values like generosity and aiding others will adapt with each generation, for better and for worse.

---

**ERIKA L. SANCHEZ** is a poet, essayist, and novelist and the daughter of Mexican immigrant parents. Her debut poetry collection, "Lessons on Expulsion," was published in July. Sanchez spoke with World Policy Journal editorial assistant Ritikaa Iyer.

---

## AFGHANISTAN: VALUING CHARACTER

SAKENA YACOobi

I was born in Herat, Afghanistan, in 1950. The country was a very different place than it is today. Largely rural, and lacking in modern conveniences, my nation was poor in terms of material wealth.

But there were no beggars. People worked hard and were self-sufficient. Nothing was more important than being seen as honorable by relatives and neighbors. In my family, as in others, this meant following religious teachings to respect all people. All were created by God and equal in God's eyes.

Our parents were our models and our teachers. We were taught to pray daily, and to be honest and considerate of others. We were not to steal, cheat, or abuse our bodies with drugs or violence—those activities were considered *haram*. Until a few years ago, I had never heard of self-immolation and heroin addiction was virtually non-existent. We were taught to work and study hard; help our parents, siblings, and strangers; and waste no time on frivolous pursuits.

My parents were strict with me and my four siblings but we always knew we were loved. We were taught to value ourselves for our good character, not our material possessions. We have a saying that a tree with little fruit may grow straight and tall but offers no shade, while the branches of a tree that bears much fruit fall to the ground but give shade to all who sit beneath it—humility is better than arrogance.

These values were a pillar in our life, and they were also reflected in the writing of our great poets, such as Khwāja Shams-ud-Dīn Muhammad Hāfez-e Shīrāzī, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, and Khajjah Abdullah Ansari. “When you stop admiring yourself and let the eyes of the heart open your vision to vast other worlds,” writes Rumi, “then all you do will become admirable.”

Unfortunately, nearly four decades of war have thoroughly devastated Afghanistan. Families and communities have been torn apart; poverty and joblessness are everywhere. Core family values have been forgotten. Parents may teach them but do not model them. People have lost their way.

We at the Afghan Institute of Learning, a nonprofit organization I founded in 1995 to sup-

port health, education, and development in Afghanistan, are trying to reintroduce these values through our great poets. Students in our learning centers and schools read and discuss poems, we've held poetry conferences, and my radio station, Radio Meraj, broadcasts poetry and holds conversations on its meaning. As Afghans listen to their poetry, their souls are touched and tears roll down their faces. One father visited our office to report that his rebellious, teenage daughter had been changed by one of our “Love and Forgiveness” workshops. She cooked for family and showed her parents respect.

In August, there were devastating terrorist bombings in the Herat area. We were heartened to see people put aside their ethnic and religious differences and call upon the deep spiritual faith of Islam, as reflected in its poets, to move forward. People mourned the dead and spoke of confronting violence with love and compassion—behaving as Rumi, and Islam, had taught us.

---

**DR. SAKENA YACOOBI** is the founder and CEO of the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL). AIL works in education and health, and provides training in human rights, leadership, and peace, particularly for women and children. Founded in 1995, its programs have been replicated throughout Afghanistan.

## UZBEKISTAN: LEAVING OUR DOORS OPEN

SHAHZODA NAZAROVA

I am Tajik, born in the Samarkand region of eastern Uzbekistan. Carved up by the Soviets, Central Asia is a place of multiethnic communities and arbitrary borders. With the exception of our mother tongues, Central Asians share virtually everything the region offers—agricultural and pastoral lifestyles, rituals, and traditions. Sometimes it is hard to tell who is Tajik and who is Uzbek, Krygyz, Kazak, or Turkmen.

As a child, my Tajik classmates and I shared a school with our Uzbek neighbors. For much of the year, the Uzbeks, who lived farther from school, studied in the morning and we Tajiks, who lived closer, studied in the evening. But during winter months, when the days were shorter, we switched and took the morning shift. At first, we resented our Uzbek neighbors for causing us to awaken early and for lacking a school of their own. But elders of both sides counseled us to treat each other respectfully, as guests from God.

From our elders we learned to welcome each other into our homes and our lives. Many of my childhood memories revolve around sharing food. Every house had two gates: One opened to the street and the second opened to our neighbors, who would bring dishes to be eaten together and exchanged. This is the Central Asian culture I knew.

But with the rise of cities, this culture is going extinct. Neighbors are being sealed off from one another, higher walls are being built, and sharing is going out of fashion. Families are also fracturing. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, daughters and wives travel to Russia, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States to earn money for their families.

I want to believe that one day they will return to their land and once again embrace the family for whom they've been toiling. I hope we as a society can end the need for mass migration by creating jobs for our brothers and sisters at home. As we Persians say, a tree roots better in one place.

There is a Persian story about a sacred tree of Asurig and a goat. The goat calls the tree boring because it cannot move, while he, the goat, can walk and see new places. Unfortunately, younger generations are more like the goat than the sacred tree. Ideally, we would all be endowed with elements of both the tree and the goat. We would travel and explore new places and ideas, but we would always come

home to our family. And we would leave our doors open to the experiences of old and new generations alike.

.....  
**SHAHZODA NAZAROVA** is a Tajik writer and journalist who began a memoir-writing campaign for Tajik mothers. Also known by her pen name Shahzoda Samarqandi, she is the author of three novels, "Stockholm Syndrome" (2009), "Motherland" (2013), and "Registan" (2017). She lives in the Netherlands.

## INDIA: FAMILY STRUCTURES ARE MUTABLE

DEV DUTT PATTANAIK

Talk of "protecting family values," so common in the American media, conveys a sense of threat, of barbarians at the gate seeking to destroy something precious. Such thinking is typical of cultures informed by Western and Abrahamic mythologies, where a static world is heroically defended against the meddlesome gods of Greek myth, or a determined prophet fights to uphold God's commandments, as in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic texts.

These traditions inform India via its Christian and Muslim communities. They also influence Indian thought through its Constitution, which in structuring the relationship between the state and the citizenry acts as a secular surrogate for God's commandments. But the fact is, India's Constitution has been amended more than 80 times in the last 70 years. My country is comfortable, even obsessed, with dynamism. Our ancient, homegrown worldviews of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism encourage this way of thinking. In these mythologies, the world is infinite, eternal, and never static. Instead of clinging to a prescribed set of family values, we constantly adapt to changing times.

Sadly, many Indians sometimes doubt this approach to life because the global discourse privileges Western worldviews, which consider

“traditional” values to be under assault. As a result, we have started to convince ourselves that a normative family structure once existed across our country’s vast history and geography.

But family structures in India are mutable, adapting in response to both opportunities and threats. Today, most families, at least those who live in cities, are nuclear. Many middle-class couples choose to have only one child. A few generations ago, however, most families lived under one roof with cousins, uncles, and aunts who raised children collectively. Monogamy was not legally enforced until the 19th century.

Hindu temples display images of deities with many wives. Hindu epics tell narratives of unmarried nymphs, single mothers and fathers, a commune of goddesses, and female-to-male transgender characters.

Family values in a Mumbai gated community are different from those in a Mumbai slum. During the day, the slums empty of single mothers who work as maids in opulent

homes. Children are raised by other children and kindly neighbors, who offer support less by choice than obligation. For those living in poverty, helping others is a valuable currency, a kind of social debt. This informal, communal child-care system is entrenched in rural India, and child psychologists have begun to celebrate it, pointing to shortcomings of raising children in isolation, with their own private bedrooms, as is the norm in developed economies.

Yes, the world is dynamic. But the global village is not homogenous. And as our relationships with phone screens compete with human relationships, Indians need to adapt to newly emerging, diverse contexts, without feeling overwhelmed by Western notions of normality. Whether they will be the influenced, or also the influencers, remains to be seen.

---

**DEV DUTT PATTANAİK** is a writer and speaker whose work focuses on the relevance of mythology in modern times.

---

Compiled by Ritikaa Iyer, Divya Ramesh, and Maya Singhal