**Contemporary Israeli Parenting in the World of Trekking:**

**An Ethnography of Family Backpacking in India**

**Chen Yaari**

**Abstract**

In recent decades, the Israeli tradition of backpacking in India, which at the outset involved young singles, has spread to other segments of the middle-class population (Cohen, 2004; Noy, 2006, Ma’oz, 2005). Currently, young families with children may be found amongst the Israeli trekkers in India.

The objective of this study is to examine this as a new family phenomenon and, through this to elicit an understanding of the cultural approaches toward child rearing taken by young Israeli middle-class parents. In India, these parents assume full child rearing responsibility in a setting where they are not obligated to the authorities in terms of their children’s education and are likewise exempt from a range of commitments and duties that, in Israel, impinge on parental functioning. This study views these unique circumstances, which provide young mothers and fathers backpacking through India with broad parental autonomy and a chance to fashion the nuclear family as they please, as a window through which we may learn about their cultural worldview on issues of parenting and family life.

Thus, the research questions that guided this study focus on how and why Israeli parents choose to raise their children in the setting of trekking through India. What cultural assumptions and goals shape their parenting, and how does India serve them in attaining those goals?

The research method chosen is an ethnography of the classical type, in which the researcher lives with the subjects of his/her research (Shlesky & Alpert, 2007; Bar-Shalom, 2011). The research was carried out during two fieldwork periods in India, in 2010-2011 and in 2013, 9.5 months in total. The research included participatory observations (during some periods, the researcher functioned as part of a trekking family) and interviews with Israeli backpacking parents (n=49). Additional interviews (n=27) were held with non-Israeli backpacking parents to help clarify parenting patterns unique to Israeli travelers. Another tool used between 2010 and 2017, both in fieldwork and beyond, was tracking online texts about family treks to India and texts offering advice on family travel there. All the materials gathered in the fieldwork were analyzed using the grounded theory (Givton, 2001; Shimoni, 2010).

The research findings present a picture in which young, middle-class Israeli parents incorporate conservative cultural ideas with new ones and combine conformity with critique in their parenting model. They presented conformist attitudes in terms of Israeli/Western notions about what constitutes an environment fit for children; this was expressed in subordinating the family trek through India to various tourist practices. Such subordination is evidence that these definitions are axiomatic in young Israeli parents’ set of values – unassailable cultural codes, even in the act of contemporary parenting. Conformist views in the Israeli family ethos, including the “new father” model, were also found among the parents of traveling families. These views were manifested in the traveling patterns they adopted, which were affected by the family ethos; furthermore, they were manifested by this ethos being a motivating factor for the trek itself, stemming from the view that Israel, as a state entity, undermines their ethos. The family trek to India thus paradoxically serves as a means for these Israeli parents to live the Israeli family ethos while expressing their protest against the dissonance between Israel’s socioeconomic policies and values.

The backpacking world in India revealed that young, middle-class Israeli parents also take a critical view of the common contemporary childhood experience. In their opinion, it is tainted with the ills of ultra-modern Western society and damages children’s happiness and wellbeing. This view signals a romantic longing for the old-fashioned version of childhood, which has been lost or forgotten in Western society and which they rediscovered in the backpacking world in India, with an emphasis on pre-modern features. This critical stance was also manifested in the parenting and family entertainment model applied during the trek with its desire for unmediated, unstructured, and anti-consumerist parental investment, aided by the backpacking experience in India. But the backpacker-parents attributed to this model, and its application in the childhood experience of backpacking, not only significance as opposition to an achievement-oriented, capitalistic child-rearing culture, but also attributed as a way to nurture an elite by raising their children’s cultural capital and maintaining their cultural advantage. In their opinion, these dual meanings allowed them to play a kind of double game: they oppose the modern, Western childhood culture, while also ensuring their children a spot at its top.

The tension between subversive and conformist cultural and educational views among young, middle-class Israeli parents was apparent also when it came to studies during the trek. The unique freedom that parents have when raising and teaching their children in the backpacking world revealed that these parents’ definition of appropriate learning does not correspond with the pattern of learning taking place in the Israeli educational system. Nonetheless, these parents expressed their willingness to place their children in Israeli schools after their return home, expressing their belief that the alternative learning of their trek is an educational utopia that cannot be replicated in the Israeli setting.

The conclusion that emerged from this study’s findings is that the most subversive act that is, de facto, embedded in the phenomenon of family treks to India is the parents’ audacity to participate in an act identified with the hedonistic youth culture. Their participation in the backpacking tradition undermines the Western cultural definition of youth by parameters of family status and age (Mintz, 2004); it shatters the boundaries of Israeli parenthood’s culturally sanctioned norms. Another conclusion relates to the complex nature of the task of parenting for young, middle-class Israeli parents. The case of family treks to India demonstrates that these parents are coping not only with the ambitiousness that has become an inseparable part of the ethos of committed parenthood at this time, but are also with the gap between Israel’s sociopolitical structures and their own cultural views on family and education. These challenges reveal contemporary, middle-class Israeli parenthood as onerous and long way away from the Israeli promise of joy (Lavee-Katz, 2003).