



Tradition vs Modernity: Finding the Balance

“The modernity of yesterday is the tradition of today, and the modernity of today will be the tradition tomorrow”, said Jose Andres Puerta. The term ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ are expressions of values regarding social and cultural transformation in societies as they pass from the ‘primitive’ to ‘pre-industrial’ to ‘industrial’ and ‘post-industrial’ phases of social development. Tradition is a time-honoured practice, which is an inherited, established or customary pattern of thought, action or behaviour passed down from generation to generation.

Traditions are usually rooted in the past and represent the actual identity of a particular society. Modernity refers to the contemporary behaviour or way of doing things. It connotes a certain type of culture whose quality is determined by rationality, the liberal spirit, plurality of opinion and centres of decision making, autonomy in the various fields of experience, secular ethics and respect for the private world of an individual.

Tradition is the collective wisdom and modes of behaviour of the ancestor’s cherished rituals and behavioural patterns as observed by the present generation. Tradition is often belittled when it is seen to be sanctioning or promoting unscientific and superstitious conduct and beliefs. Modernity as opposed to tradition refers to an outlook that is generally future-oriented and forward-looking. Modernity rests on a rational interpretation of religious, social and economic institutions and phenomena.

Traditions exercise a very strong and sometimes almost an imperceptible hold over us. Such influence is seen at its most pervasive in rituals relating to birth, death and marriage. It is seen that even the most modern-minded Hindus would not like to tinker with traditional rituals associated with the ceremonies of birth, marriage and death. Even very poor persons beg and borrow money to discharge their traditional obligations as relating thereto. That is why we are often witness to a contradiction in human behaviour when a highly educated person inaugurates a modern factory with sophisticated machineries by breaking a coconut or lighting of the ceremonial lamp. So, modernity may be notably visible in the occupational

and professional spheres, in matters pertaining family and social life, tradition still looms large. Indian tradition is ancient, long and haloed. As a matter of fact, modernity in India has not replaced tradition largely or decisively.

“Tradition” and “modernity” are widely used as polar opposites in a linear theory of social change. While it is true that any society clinging onto traditions alone by being closed to change tends to become fossilised, it is, however, incorrect to view traditional societies as static or structurally homogeneous. A society is constantly evolving and putting forth challenges to traditional customs and ideas. What is needed is to remove what is unwanted and retain what is good in it. The relations between the traditional and the modern do not necessarily involve displacement, conflict, or exclusiveness. Modernity does not necessarily weaken tradition. Both tradition and modernity form the bases of ideologies and movements in which the polar opposites are converted into aspirations, but traditional forms may supply support for, as well as against, change.

Modern society cannot completely break itself free from the old traditions, nor is it necessary. The past is remarkably rich and varied, capable of providing a starting point for modernity. Modernity offers numerous instances of the spirit of free and critical inquiry of the highest intellectual order, determination to pursue truth regardless of where it leads a positive and secular approach to life. Here, a tradition of abstract thinking is necessary for the growth of modern knowledge.

The establishment of the democratic Indian republic cherishing the values of secularism, socialism and democracy challenged the traditional values of caste inequalities. The key to this process is the exposure of Indian society and its elite to the liberal culture of science, technology and democracy in the West. The new institutions of education, law and justice, industry and commerce, health and medicine, transport and communication et al were introduced as a result thereof. The same ushered new processes of socio-cultural changes in our society.

India’s traditional wisdom and values slowly came into contact with Western values of rationalism, science and technology which the British colonial administration introduced in India mainly for the consolidation of their rule. However, the same led to new and unexpected outcomes in the rise of cultural renaissance in India and the national freedom movement. Feudalism was challenged by rationality, capitalism and science. In India, modernity needs to be analysed in the context of liberalism, democracy and capitalism. Science and technology play an important role in the process, which revolutionises the outlook of people and also fundamentally alters its production system and economy. Education and more exposure to newer wisdom and world views facilitate this change.

Some of the harmful traditions have already given way to newer, modernised expressions of behaviour. Today, some abhorrent customs and practices such as Sati is prohibited, Indian widows are remarrying, child marriages have significantly declined, caste system in India has weakened as a result of losing its grip on societal behaviour, dowry system is declining, and women are increasingly coming out to acquire modern education or to take up a profession. But the supreme values of old Indian tradition are still relevant in modern Indian society, such as simplicity, values and ethics which need to be upheld.

The rich tradition and culture of India provide a bridge for the masses between the present and the future. India needs to modernise herself, but she does not have to seek inspiration solely from a culture which is not a part of her own tradition. She can partly get it from her own rich past and establish continuity with it. In this era of globalisation and liberalisation, modernisation should not be a blatant imitation of the West. We should be judicious in our selection of the requisite values in keeping with the demands of our times. Then alone will we be able to preserve and revive our old virtues that made India great and famous all over the world in the past.

We must adapt ourselves with the changing times, else we shall deprive ourselves of the opportunity to make any progress or development in consonance with the changing times. Indian Society continues to live in two worlds, the traditional and the modern, at the same time. What seems to have happened with most of us is that we have accepted modernity in our professional work, but we continue to be traditional in personal life by retaining our values and attitudes.

It must be said that tradition and modernity are not always contrarian values. None can be termed as fully black or white and the best in both needs to be inculcated. Violation of human rights by vested interests is often done in the garb of protecting tradition or embracing modernism which needs to be condemned. The misplaced encounter between tradition and modernity, therefore, repeatedly ends up in undesirable conflicts and crusades, something never advisable for a progressive society.

We don't really need modernity in order to exist totally and fully. A healthy blend of both, imbibing the best of each, is the right path for a progressive syncretic society. Neither a feudalistic, archaic mindset nor a mere cloning of any new idea can sustain any society in the long run. In a pluralistic society, mutual respect for both, constructive criticism of both, and adaptation of the good in both would be ideal for its progress. A rational balance between tradition and modernity is desirable rather than being pathologically attached to one or the other side.

Salient Points

- Traditions are rooted in the past while modernity refers to the contemporary behavioural patterns.
- In India, modernity may be visible in professional spheres, in matters pertaining family and social life, tradition still looms large.
- It is incorrect to view traditional societies as static.
- Modernity does not necessarily weaken tradition.
- Modern society cannot completely break itself free from the old traditions, nor is it necessary.
- Some of the harmful traditions have given way to modernised behaviour.
- India, to modernise herself, does not have to seek inspiration solely from a culture which is not a part of her own tradition.
- We should be judicious in our selection of requisite values in keeping with the demands of our times.

Glossary

Primitive: relating to early stage of historical development

Connote: imply

Fossilised: very old

Homogenous: alike

Renaissance: revival of something

Contrarian: opposing

Archaic: old fashioned