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Traditional Values and Contemporary Dilemmas : India

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Dynamics of Selective Retention

Past is both an assest and a liability. To a large extent the success of a modernising nation depends on its ability to convert the assets in its tradition to present advantages and to reject the liabilities which are obstacles in its social transformation. Our position assumes that notwithstanding the interdependence of system components, the constituting elements have some degree of autonomy. In all social systems some aspects are relatively more autonomous while others have a greater amount of reciprocal involvement vis-a-vis other system components. This means that in changing a system we can pursue the path of selective retention and replacement of its traditional elements.

Why not destroy the past and create a New Social Order in tune with the aspirations of the people and the spirit of the contemporary era ? Our preference for a *selective retention* approach is dictated by pragmatic considerations and historical experiences rather than ideological pre-suppositions or national chauvinism. All systems are responsive to stimuli, although the degree and intensity of this response would vary depending upon the character of their antecedent institutional framework and historicity. To this extent their past is gradually but surely to be replaced. But at the same time all systems tend to preserve aspects of their past and even in those societies where revolutions have taken place, persistance of aspects of their past structures continues. If this is the reality, why not accept it and evolve one's strategy of change accordingly ? But there is a significant difference here. Instead of fatalistically accepting the 'natural tendencies' in the system, we opt for conscious planning and intervention in changing the system and hence the plea for selective retention and replacement.

In evaluating the assets and liabilities of Indian tradition we face

certain specific problems and the requisite clarifications are required. India's is an ancient civilization with a deep historicity. It is difficult to demarcate India's hoary past into clear-cut time boundaries. Besides the Indian diversity is so stupendous that to speak in singular about this nation is extremely hazardous. This is true not only in terms of the difference in folk and elite conceptions of Man and Society, but also in terms of the variations in her Little (micro) and Great (macro) Traditions. Yet one can conceive of a certain unity amidst this multiplicity and, when we speak of India's past tradition, we refer to this Unity. While India is an Old Society, it is also a New Nation ·

When did modernity have its beginnings in India ? Broadly speaking India's modernization started in the 18th century. Her contacts with the West, particularly with the British colonial rulers accelerated the process of modernization in certain dimensions. However, the Indian Nation as a political entity emerged only in 1947. The blue print of society towards which India strives today is embodied in her Constitution. Therefore, when we refer to modern India our frame of reference is independent India.

Here we propose to analyse the basic features of India's tradition and modernity. In undertaking this exercise we shall differentiate between the ideological and empirical components of the system. This is necessary because in all societies at all times there exists a gap between 'what ought to be' and 'what is', between the theory and practice. This gap is not always and necessarily indicative of human fads and foibles alone but of the imperfections of the goal itself or the impossibility of adequately translating ideologies into programmes. Thus we recognize not only a 'praxis-lag' but also a 'theory-gap' in our attempt at an objective evaluation of any situation.

Traditional Assets and Liabilities

The traditional society in India was organized on the principles of hierarchy, Pluralism, Holism, Renunciation, Tolerence etc., among others. The value-themes listed here are by no means exhaustive but only illustrative and we will deal with the first three of them as these appear to be the cardinal ones and encompass several others. Hierarchy implies the ordering of the units which constitute a system in relation to the whole in a superior-inferior gradation. Hierarchy manifested itself not only in the system of caste and sub-caste stratification based on the notions of ritual purity and pollution acquired by birth, but also in the Hindu concept of occupational life-cycles and age-grades (ashramas) and moral duties (dharma). Marrying within one's own caste (jati) was superior both to hypergamy and hypo-gamy, that is the practice of a male seeking his spouse from a lower caste and that of a female marrying into a lower caste. Of the triple objectives of marriage, religious duty (dharma) had precedence over securing progeny (praja) or sexual pleasure (rati). The one who renounced the world (sanyasin) was morally superior to one who still remained mundane.

The Brahman who emerged from the mouth of the creater occupied an admittedly exalted position as compared with the Shudra, who emerged from the feet of God. Thus the notion of hierarchy was omnipresent and all powerful in regulating human conduct in every minute aspect of life. While the ideology of hierarchy institutionalized inequality in every concievable aspect of human life, it allocated a secure and definite place to each individual and caste group, The valuation of individuals and groups and the distribution of societal resources was based on *status* and the status was ascriptive, even though birth into a group was believed to be based on moral merit, gathered during the previous birth, as implied in the theory of Karma and Reincarnation.

Pluralism as a value implied tolerance of other styles of life while preserving one's own. Hinduism, the dominant religion of India, was essentially tolerant and instead of abruptly converting, it gradually assimilated other faiths. In fact conversion to Hinduism was almost impossible as the contingency of placing the convert in the hierarchical order could not be easily solved. Hindus believed in the existence of multiple paths leading to the same ultimate goal. Thus the faiths of the Muslim conquerors, Christian colonial rulers, Parsi merchants and traders, etc., not only survived but prospered for centuries in India. The differenecs at the level of doctrines and rituals notwithstanding, the followers of different religions lived in harmony in India till the "modern' democratic politics made it necessary for each group to compete and vie with one another to maximise the benefits made available through state patronage.

The caste system provided an institutional basis for reinforcing the pluralistic tradition of Hinduism. Each caste had its own occupation, customs, ritual, traditions, and government. While each caste was insulated on the one hand, it was interdependent on several others. Autonomy co-existed with dependence and this led to an appreciation and recognition of other's distinctiveness. Apart from this, given the linguistic diversities and cultural differences, castes operated essentially as regional entities. This resulied in a localistic orientation of castes ; castes with the same name differed sometime substantially in their customs and traditions between different localities. This means that pluralism had not only a vertical dimension but also a horizontal one. And, co-existence of culturally diverse groups became a norm. However, co-existence was not always peaceful, particularly in its political context. Some groups dominated over otheis and a superior-inferior relation was implied in so far as the inferior groups accepted the domination of superior groups without overt protest, which they often did due to the unequal distribution of resources. Thus the hierarchical principle was implicit here too.

Holism assumed a relationship between individual and group in which the latter had primacy over the former; the individual was expected to perform his duties and claim his rights always keeping in mind the wider interests of the community. The individual subservience to collectivity was manifested in a multiplicity of contexts, be it familial communism,

village democracy or caste council meetings. The families were often joint in that they consisted of a large number of kin, includiug dependents—the aged, widowed, physically handicapped etc, Although each contributed according to one's ability, one was expected to draw from the familial pool of wealth only according to one's need. Similarly the destitutes and dependents of village community were the responsibility of the rich: the latter often operated as trustees of community wealth rather than private profiteers. This called for self-restraint of one's wants in the interests of fellow beings, the community-at-large. However, in so far as the individual was subservient to the community it implied a hierarchical relationship. Thus, in the final analysis, the hierarchical principle was all-embracing; it encompassed the values of pluralism and holism.

Notwithstanding the ideological prescriptions, practical aberrations were not uncommon. Thus the hierarchy was clear and sharp only at the polar points of the caste system, the disputes over caste rank being almost always endemic in the middle region often facilitating mobility inspite of the rigid institutional framework, Further the indeterminacy over rank arose contextually, the king assuming superiority over the priest in secular matters and the priest claiming over-arching importance of the sacred over secular, thereby affirming his over-all superior status. Additionally, the problem of allocating status to the group-tribals, Musiims, Charistians, etc., either assimilated into the Hindu fold or obtaining outside of it was also problematic as each person or group has to be placed in relation to others in a caste society. Similarly, pluralism, while it implied tolerance. had not infrequently led to bigotry and domination, creating hostility between groups. Finally, holism, while it implied collectivistic orientation, did not always impart the requisite altruism to sustain it. Individuals often felt the weight of the heavy yoke to which they were tied by group control, inhibiting their initiative, often leading to considerable tension in interpersonal and individual-group relations. All this is indicative of the dissensus that existed between theory and practice, prescription and performance in the traditional system of India.

Modern Values

The fundamental values that the Indian Nation pursues today are embodied in the Constitution. These values are embedded in the basic goals of Socialism, Secularism and Democracy. It is wrong to assume that everybody holds these values equally dear : Some think that socialism should be the most important goal to be pursued with immidiacy, for, the realisation of other goals is contingent upon the establishment of socialism. Similarly, there are others who bestow primacy on the values embodied in democracy and argue that the pursuit of other goals in the manner endangering it is worthless. That is to say, notwithstanding the over-all consensus about the basic values, disagreements exist over their importance or the mode and sequence of their realisation. Perhaps such a situation

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is unavoidable in a country where a multi-party system exists under a parliamentary democracy. We ignore this dissensus while pursuing the present analysis. Yet another clarification ought to be made here. None of the goals are achieved as yet and may be they will not be achieved in the near future and performance in relation to each varies substantially.

Indian socialism is different in theory and practice as compared with socialism elsewhere. Whiie recognizing the concentration of economic resources, Indian socialism does not attempt collectivisation of private property but only seeks to limit it ; the legitimacy of private property as an institution is not yet fundamentally questioned, only its cautious restriction is aimed at. Viewed against the background of the prevailing radical ideologies in contemporary world this perspective is certainly less than radical but it is certalnly progressive when it is matched against the backdrop of the pre-existing system of property relations. *The Indian social system with its all-pervasive institutionalized inequality, allcated resourses and distributed rewards on the basis of status which in turn was based on birth.* The recognition of the need for providing an opportunity structure which facilitated men to acquire material resources and move up in the social ladder ignoring their past background was radical only if viewed in terms of the antecedent social structure of India. Thus Indian socialism is based on the principle of allocation of resource and roles, based on merit, In so far as the erstwhile social system was characterized by extreme inequalities and in so far as a sudden break from the past did not take place, considerable continuity is in evidence. In effeet then, those who have "merit" today are also the one's who had a capita-the past. The net result has been the gradual development of status in listic system which recognizes merit as the basis of distribution of resouce and allocation of roles as against socialism which insists on *need* as the basis of distributive justice. While the shift from a feudal hierarchical system based on status to a capitalistic system hinged on merit is not yet complete, the birth pangs of socialism are constantly felt and the process seems to be long-drawn and difficult one,

Secularism in the Indian context meant in practice tolerance of otner communities—particularly religious communities. The import of inducing secularism as a primary value in the Indian Constitution should be seen against the backdrop of the circumstances which led to the split of the Indian sub-continent. India is a multi-religious nation in terms of its ideology and existential realities, but its birth was co-terminus with that of a muslim nation—Pakistan, occasioned by animosity between Hindus and Muslims. India remains even to-day one of the biggest Muslim nations in the world with a population of 60 million Muslims. Such a

situation called for the explicit recognition of the distinctiveness of other religious groups and hence the importance of secularism as a value.   Secularism meant not only non-interference in the affairs of other communities but also developing a positive appreciation for their distinct style of life. After independence, the need for recognizing cultural autonomy in the regional-linguistic context became compelling,   The official recognition of the cultural autonomy of regional linguistic entities became explicit in the late fifties when the Indian states were re-organized on the basis of language (culture).   This may be interpreted as another aspect of Indian secularism, if tolerance of diversity were the basic value in secularism,   Notwithstanding the fact that secularism is fundamental to Independent India its institutionalization is far from achieved, communal riots and linguistic squabbles are not in frequent.

While Indian democracy shares its form with other democratic societies and emphasises equality of opportunity, its substance is certainly different.   Democracy assumes the existence of autonomous and independent individuals capable of participation in the decision-making process. In the traditional social system of India the individual as an autonomous entity making decisions for himself was non-existent.   The Indian. tradition did not in fact admit of the concept of *individual* and the Indian individual emerged only when he renounced the world by assuming the role of Sanyasin or family ascetic.   This all pervasive holism was not conducive to the operation of democracy which pre-supposed the existence of autonomous individuals.   This is the reason why Indian democracy is anchored in primordial loyalty structures such as religion, caste, linguistic groups etc., wherein ideological polarisation is nebulous and often incomplete and frequently mediated by traditional values and rigid institutional structures. The democratic man in so far as he wants to combine the values of socialism and secularism should develop a collectivistic orientation. At the same time the collectivistic orientation saould be qualitatively different from existing primordial linkages, it should be based on universalistic values and should have a trans-local orientation. One of the basic dilemmas in bringing the traditional and modern values closely lies precisely here.

Congruence and Conflict

Having discussed the fundamental value-themes of traditional and modern India. we now propose to examine the possibilities of their being fused or synthesised.   For purposes of brevity and clarity the three fundamental value-pairs are stated below.   We will examine two aspects of the problem presently.   First. the possibility of reconciling these value-a pa irsnd second, unfolding their internal consistency so as to understand the possibility of effecting a consensus not only between tradition and modernity but also within each of the value-packages.

It is clear from chart I that there is no basic contradiction between the traditional value of pluralism and the modern value of secularism since

Traditional Values	Modern Values	Pre-requisites for realisation
I (a) Pluralism	(b) Secularism	Tolerance and respect for others' style of life
II (a) Hierarchy	(b) Socialism	Status based allocation of roles and resources for II(a) and Need based allocation for II (b).
III (a) Holism	(b) Individualism (Democracy)	Renunciation of self-interest for III(a) and assertion of self-interests for III (b).

tolerance of others' style of life is basic to both. However, pluralism of the past is associated with distinct and deep traditions for each of the groups which often provided legitimacy for special privileges and prerogatives. This in turn rendered those with a disproportionate share of privileges a dominating elite. But secularism as it is understood to-day in India calls upon the advantaged groups to orientate consciously their behaviour in such a way so as not to handicap the less privileged groups.

As pointed out earlier hierarchy was the over-arching value of the Traditional Order. The significant point in this context is the principle of allocation of resources and distribution rewards based on birth. This is in direct contravention to the principle of need-based distribution implied in socialism. Perhaps one can discover a linkage here ; in the traditional system status defined the need and in the modern system need is sought to be defined on the basis of contribution made by individuals and groups for the maintenance of the system and its change in a desirable direction. If those who occupied higher status are also taken to be the ones who contributed most to the system, the contradiction between the two principles of allocation can be resolved. But this cannot be done. The basis of status in the traditional society was birth and the definition of need in modern society is based on individuals potentials to contribute to the system and hence the irreconcilability of the principles of hierarchy and socialism.

The traditional principle of holism required that the individuals should renounce their self-interests at the alter of collective goals, To the extent that no autonomy was bestowed on the individual and he remained encompassed in the current of collective life, there was no basic problem. However, with the introduction of democracy which impells individuals to be autonomous entities asserting their independence from group, the inevit-

able development of self-interests, often at the cost of collective orienta-
tion, is in evidence. This is complicated because of the extreme distri-
butional imbalances in terms of wealth, power and prestige which is a
legacy of the antecedent social system. Thus we find the principles of
holism and individualism (democracy) are mutually inimical. The upshot
of our analysis, then, is that the possibilities of bringing about a reconci-
liation between India's traditional and her modern values is limited ex-
cept in the case of pluralism and secularism. •

Broadly speaking the modern values enshrined in Indian Constitu-
tion are not fully translated into practice. Even aş we recognize this
praxis-lag, we should take into account the transmutations in the transi-
tional stage during which a synthesis of the traditional and modern values
is being evolved. Perhaps a couple of illustrations will clarify the situa-
tions. Traditionally castes were status bestowing entities and they empha-
sized the ritual dimension (purity-pollution) of the status. In modern India
the castes are increasingly getting secularised in that they perform instru-
mental functions for their members. Thus, caste associations open educa-
tional institutions, establish financial agencies—banks, co-operatives etc.,
institute funds for housing, travel abroad and the like, field candidate in
elections through political parties. And all these for the material welfare
of their own members which help improve their secular status. This secula-
risation of castes in terms of functions, particularly in urban India, change
their substance while retaining the traditional forms. The traditional caste
pluralism which jealously guarded ritual purity is no more universally
functional but the modern caste secularism which insists on the material
improvement of the caste members is even expanding. The recruitment
to caste associations is based on membership in primordial groups and
hence ascriptive but the goals these associations pursue are instrumental
and achievement oriented.

Although the induction of democratic political framework assumes
individual autonomy and freedom, the actual operation of the democratic
process in India is infused with a high amount of traditional collectivism.
For instance, decisions in the political context are rarely arrived at by
individuals as independent entities ; the prevalence of 'group-voting' by
kingroups, castes or territorial groups (villages) is not uncommon. The
insistence on consensus in decisional process, avoiding the animosities as-
sociated with intense competition is quite frequent in political parties.
Finally, given the present state of Indian economy social welfare measures
to assist the unemployed, the aged, the invalid etc., are rarely instituted
by the State and the burden of supporting the dispossessed and disadvan-
taged is often accepted by the kin, caste and religious groups. In fact, most
Indians who occupy well-off positions as compared with other members of
their village, caste or kin would consider it to be their moral obligation to
help their less fortunate bretheren through educating them or finding a job
or raising capital for them. Thus, while the context in which the modern
Indian operates has undergone a partial change, the fulfilment of traditional

obligations which calls for a collectivistic orientation persists. In the final analysis, what we witness in India to-day is neither the continuation of traditional norms nor the institutionalization of the newly introduced values but an intermediate situation indicative of an ongoing transitional anomie.

Let us now examine the theory-gap in the two value packages-traditional and modern—so as to understand whether they are internally consistent.   In the context of tradition, pluralism which is based on tolerance and holism founded on collectivistic orientation are not mutually in-consistent, because tolerance implies a collectivity orientation.   However, hierarchy which is based on the principle of status led to a segmentatalisation of society leading to multiple group formation each of which was imprisoned in its narrow grooves.   Additionally, pluralism fostered local or group pride overlooking wider interests thereby reinforcing hierarchy. Under such a situation holism in effect meant the collectivity orientation of insulated communities. This was not conducive to the growth of modern nationalistic values.   But since the over-arching values of hierarchy enveloped other values, and an all-pervasive and dominating elite acted as the custodian of societal values, the requisite unity was forged and the traditional society was rendered an on-going concern.

The basic inconsistency that we witness in the value package of modern India is that between socialism, as we have defined it, and individualism. If the basic tenet of socialism is a pattern of need-based allocation of resources and distribution of rewards to role incumbents, this calls for a high amount of collectivistic orientation and altruism.   One cannot insist on one's share, in such a system, based on ones status or merit.   One should be willing to contribute to the system as much as one can, that is based on one's ability, but should be prepared to accept the principle of need-based allocation.   The spirit of individualism, implied in democracy, rebels against this as it ceaselessly emphasizes the importance of individual merit and it bestows undue importance to welfare of individuals.   It may be argued that maximisation of interests by all individuals will automatically lead to collective welfare and therefore common interests will not be endangered.   But there are two problems here.   First, such a system inevitably fosters accute competition between individuals for achieving their self-defined goals.   Secondly, no system by definition can facilitate the maximisation of interests by all individuals who come to compose it, at any rate viewed from the subjective perceptions of the system participants. And, subjective evaluations are relevant in the context of heightening or lessening psychological deprivations.   The options here are two : Voluntary restraint by individuals keeping in mind the community interests or imposition of controls by an agency external to the individual, usually the state. While the latter will inescapably degenerate into totalitarianism, the former will inevitably require individuals who have internalized a high degree of altruism. If one is utopian, the other is dehumanising.

Conclusion

Our analysis unfolds that both the traditional and modern values of India have assets and liabilities embedded in them. And, we should consciously opt for a judicious combination of assets both in the traditional and modern values in a consistent fashion to secure the most appropriate mix. Once again, we are at a new set of problems. What is the most appropriate mix ? I can only assert that there is no mix which is universally appropriate ; appropiateness will have to be defined contextually. The context is provided by the historicity of a system, and its present existential conditions.

We have seen that while the traditional value of holism fostered primordial collectivism with the introduction of democracy individualistic values are gaining ground leading to the emergence of civil or instrumental collectivism, often degenerating into economism. What we need to inject into the system is ideological collectivism wherein men are motivated to plunge into collective mobilization with an altruistic orientation for systemic welfare rather than narrow individual and group interests. While retaining the collectivistic orientation found in our tradition, the content of collectivism should be transformed. We must recognize that a democracy innate to India can admit individual autonomy only sparingly. Traditional principles of allocation of roles and distribution of resources was based on hierarchy (status). Today it is based on merit (capitalism) which inevitably ensures the persistence of institutionalized inequality. What we should pursue is a system of need based allocation (Socialism). The traditional value of pluralism insulated individuals and groups into their narrow socio-cultural grooves, incapable of developing wider perspectives and fostering hostilities towards others. Secularism of modern India only fosters a conscious indifference to 'other cultures'. It is necessary to harness the pluralistic orientation of traditional India to utilise it in order to transform the erstwhile but continuing hostility and the contemporary indifference to 'other cultures' into a conscious sensitization and appreciation of them. But in pursuing these objectives the current existential realities cannot be ignored.

Indian economy is predominantly rural and is characterized by substantial disparities in income and wealth. Indian industrial capital is concentrated in a few hands. Indian nation is vast and consists of hetrogeneous population with considerable cultural diversity. Indian polity is manned by an elite drawn from a relatively narrow base. Given these realities what we need in India is a co-operative socialist economy in which the primary producers directly own means of production more or less equitably and not state capitalism, a decentralised and not a delegated polity, which gives maximum opportunity to the men at the grass-root to shape their destiny and a secular pluralistic society which permits the optimum elasticity to maintain the diversities in culture. Under the prevalent Indian conditions to opt for state capitalism, delegate political power and pursue 'secularism', as it is today, is to create unwittingly another elitist regime. □