

Building bridges

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India is a land of contrasts. While one half of the country is trapped in tradition, the other half straddles tradition and modernity with élan. This divide cannot be bridged in a hurry. The 'work in progress' sign will be up for a long time, writes Shefali Tripathi Mehta.



A girl in a burka, the veil thrown back, riding a scooter with an old man on pillion in Ahmedabad city; sprightly women in sarees, heads covered, driving two wheelers in small-town Bikaner; an LCD TV in a 10x10 room of a Mumbai chawl; the raddiwala giving me his 'mobile' number at my Bangalore home, once enigmatic, these are now quintessential images of modern India.

A generation that head-bangs, also plays antakshari singing Kishore Kumar hits; gorges on pizza and fries but craves for home-cooked daal-chawal; wears jeans to college but slips effortlessly into traditional attire at religious and social functions; talks 'dude' language with friends and switches to the vernacular at home; men and women heading teams across the world ask their parents to 'arrange' their marriages — our complex social mindset and conduct straddle tradition and modernity with élan.

It is also true that this picture of amazing balance still goes askew. Those that study or work together, fall in love but cannot marry because of differences in caste, religion or social class; honour killings, female infanticide, dowry demands and deaths are still unchecked; the poor struggling to make two ends meet still borrow for elaborate marriage, birth or death ceremonies due to societal pressures; highly educated Indians still employ small children as domestic help and the instances of their abuse make us want to hang our heads in shame.

But the learning curve has been steep. We are a country today where those that lived without electricity in remote villages, walking miles to school, work in multinationals; from studying science in vernacular, we have gone on to teach in universities across the world; the house-help who mops our floors sends her kids to study in English medium, private schools. The divide cannot be bridged in a hurry. The 'work in progress' sign will be up for a long time.

Trapped in tradition

More and more youngsters from smaller towns and villages, from the middle and lower income groups, many of these first generation literates, on the strength of their hard work and the fire in their bellies, move to bigger cities to study and work; to travel and live abroad.

Though every generation of youngsters demands independence — the need to live on their own terms, away from the questioning control of parents — with increased exposure and familiarity with other cultures, interaction and exchange of ideas with foreigners, we aspire to be more like the rest of the world.

The economic liberalisation, the new jobs, the international stores, coupled with our increased purchasing power allows us to dress, eat and live like anyone else anywhere in the world.

Indian parents try to fulfil all the needs and wishes of their children well into their adulthood. A driver who rides a bicycle to work will work extra hours to buy his son a motorbike. Parents may not be able to save for their old age or illness but will provide for their kids' education, marriage and other needs. The West is a more individualistic society. Parents do not expect their children to live with them, care for them during old age or help them financially. Children are encouraged to work and earn for their needs.

Just as the Indian parent is culturally conditioned to support their kids well into adulthood, so are Indian children to provide for them during old age and illness. But when children feel duty-bound and confined, or when parents cannot make adjustments with the fast-paced changes modern life demands, conflicts arise.

Children who grew up perfectly happily in joint families prefer nuclear ones now, mainly because their parents or elders cannot accept the changes that they have adopted. Tradition is a guide, not a jailer, said Somerset Maugham. In these times, the tradition of 'respect for elders' cannot translate into undisputed acceptance of their word.

Youngsters still need advice and guidance from elders, but they also have more information and resources to do things independently. Nor does the 'do as told' dictate for women work. At the time of marriage, the groom's family which wants a qualified girl who works and earns as well as the boy does, cannot later expect her to return home on time, eat last, bear sons and not travel on work.

Respect and tolerance

In a country where neighbourhoods have been extended families and neighbours are still referred to as akka, didi, bhaiya, anna, bhabhiji, even strangers on the road are addressed as uncle and aunty, we slide effortlessly into the convention of calling people much older and senior to us by their names at work.

Oprah Winfrey's comment that "some Indian people eat with their hands still" outraged Indians for its lack of sensitivity towards our culture. At formal buffets or sit-down dinners, we use cutlery, but when the occasion demands, most of us do not hesitate to use

our fingers. This is a matter of reverence for our surroundings, people and the occasion. This is culture. Eating with a spoon is not.

Ours is a culture of respect and love for all; tolerance of every other culture. The feet touching, head bowing, namaskara, aarti, tilak application are acts of veneration and love, not to be confused with a servile or subservient outlook.

It is imperative for us to reflect on how some of our beautiful community festivals like Teej, Raksha Bandhan, Holi, Onam and Lohri have come to acquire such an indelible religious tarnish? The Holi Baraat is one of the oldest traditions of Lucknow in which Hindus and Muslims take out a procession to spread the message of peace and brotherhood. It is Ustad Bismillah Khan's shehnai that plays at Hindu weddings.

For generations, hundreds of Muslims in Vrindavan have been stitching clothes for the Hindu deities. In the royal kingdom of Bhopal, which had a majority Hindu population and Muslim rulers, it was the Hindus who prepared the Iftaar during Ramzan and the Muslim rulers who began the Diwali celebrations. Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia and Amir Khusrau loved and wrote about Holi. Bahadur Shah Zafar's Holi phags are sung even today.

What is modernity?

'Breaking the shackles of superstition, the grandchildren of an orthodox man, who never allowed his children to witness the solar eclipse, had their bit of freedom...Almost thirty years later, when his father is no more, Sarvesh with his wife and two children came to Lalbagh to see the celestial event with the dead man's X-ray film, which was cut into four pieces.' The newspapers reported. This attitude of the older generation was formed centuries ago when man feared the wrath of nature, when knowledge of celestial phenomenon was limited.

Modernity is not the rejection of culture and traditions, but a rational interpretation and forward-looking attitude. Any tradition that regresses should be dismissed, but to reject something due to ignorance or imitation is foolhardy.

As a society, we're already divided on the basis of caste, culture, religion, socio-economic status and standing. Now the divide, spurred by rapid technological developments, threatens us.

When a woman climbing an escalator going down in a mall is laughed at and youngsters stand around making videos of her to share on social networking sites — such deceptive modernity shames our gracious culture. If we can take by the hand the bewildered, old man in his village clothes afraid to cross the busy city road, across, we are truly progressive and cultured.

An incident that exposes our general lack of sensitivity in dealing with those that are not with-it yet, as also our fallacious notion of modernity involves a middle-aged woman who entered the washroom at the Bengaluru International Airport wearing a traditional

ghagra-choli, her head covered with an odhni. “Sit on the seat,” the attendant hollered from the other end, above heads crowding the limited space. The woman said she only needed to pee. “SIT on the seat!” the attendant was firm.

In her anxiety, the woman left the door ajar. She first faced the seat, then turned her back to the seat, finally, unable to figure out how to use the western-style commode, left without relieving herself. Are the Eastern-style squat toilets that the whole country used not so long ago suddenly so passé that they cannot be installed in a couple of cubicles at public conveniences?

Is it better to allow a major part of the population such humiliation, distress and watch them take a dump on the roadsides? So, even though many a with-it women think it is a crap idea, many city malls have graphical illustrations inside their facilities showing how a Western-style commode should be used by women.

Reinvent, revive

The idea was a little alien at first — celebrating festivals on weekends, but in this fast-paced urban life, it has emerged as a great alternative for keeping our wonderful traditions alive. Housing societies and apartment complexes these days see people across different regions and faiths come together to celebrate all festivals in their traditional glory — with a taste of authentic food and a glimpse of traditional dress and customs.

We do not become modern by rejecting traditions, but by moulding regressive attitudes, reinventing traditions, finding new meanings to old beliefs. Can we not look afresh at the worship of animals, rivers and celestial objects and regard it as gratitude and respect for nature and natural resources so that we may stop abusing the planet we call Mother Earth? Of what use is the worshipping of kanyas during Ashtami puja if girls are not allowed the freedom to make their own life choices?

In 1905, when the British decided to divide Bengal on the basis of caste and religion, Rabindranath Tagore reinvented the festival of Raksha Bandhan, using it to promote the idea of love and brotherhood among Hindus and Muslims of Bengal and to bolster the spirit of nationalism. People censure the traditions of Karva Chauth and Raksha Bandhan as regressive.

No woman who observes Karva Chauth today does so with the blind belief that fasting will make her husband live longer. It is more a celebration of the wonderful bond between a couple and it is also not uncommon to see husbands join the fast with their wives. Similarly, the physical ‘protection’ of a sister by her brother is not the idea behind Raksha Bandhan anymore. With siblings spread across the world, it is a day for renewing the beautiful bonds of childhood.

It is heartening to see girls increasingly taking care of parents in sickness and old age, providing financial and emotional support. Girls are not just excelling in traditionally male-dominated spheres, but taking over seamlessly whatever was once expected of boys. This is modernity. Modernity is the lifting of the stigma against divorce or remarriage of

girls, allowing them economic independence. Kanya daan is a regressive term that Nandita Das, actor-filmmaker, challenged some years ago. To 'give away' a daughter is considered the greatest of daans, but it also 'commodifies' a girl. Attitudes attached to such fallacious beliefs drive many girls to kill themselves rather than walk out of difficult marriages or return to their parents.

Assimilate change

Tradition is not all superstition. Superstitious beliefs are based on fear, not on facts or reason. These irrational fears originated at a time when people did not know better and have continued because of our insecurities. But our modern outlook must enable us to glean what is good from our age-old customs, for, as Henry James said, "It takes an endless amount of history to make even a little tradition."

Westerners are drawn towards the simple Indian way of life, spirituality, yoga and traditional medicine. When they approve, we take pride in these practices. We talk of cardio workouts and pilates in swank gyms while the westerners are drawn towards our total mind-body-spiritually uplifting traditional exercise of Suryanamaskar; the centuries-old dands and bethaks are back in vogue as Hindu squats and push-ups. The West with its propensity for research tells us the benefits of food like garlic, ginger, turmeric, flaxseed, onions and basil that has been a part of our diets for centuries.

Change is inevitable, we have to embrace change, those that resist it will be left behind. Those that disregard their roots will lose themselves in an illusion of modernity. Traditions are our roots, modernity our wings.

An incident that I will always regret for my lack of courage to question a traditional belief, is also my beacon. It was Holi and the world was drenched in colour and merriment. All of us were playing with colours outside, but one of our neighbours, a young widow, stood alone in her balcony watching. I was hesitant in asking her to join, afraid it might hurt or offend her sentiments or some social convention. Twenty years later, I wonder if that one step by me, someone else, or all of us collectively, would have been the one strong-arm she needed to come out of her forlorn existence, her imposed confinement.

Such social, emotional dilemmas will confront us on this path we tread balancing tradition and modernity. Some bridges will need to be crossed, others to be burned. The choice we make will determine where we go.