Industrialization and Modernization: The Upheaval of Indian Society's Morality and Spirituality

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Abstract

Modernity is preceded by industrial revolution which signified and for all practical purposes, implied a change in the nature and thrust of economy: mercantile and agricultural to industrial economy and simultaneously the industrialization/commercialization of agriculture. The economy changed its thrust from need based to market based i.e., profit making. The whole process is resulting in making individual economically independent and leading to breaking up of joint family system. The economic independence of individual is bound to have brought up certain critical changes in their attitude towards family, community, society and particularly the value-system that had evolved during the course of history and had come to stay, at times, backed by the force of religion. The big issue before us is that how to resist/minimize/curtail the impact of the forces which we have adopted and have continuously been adopting? In essence, we wish to fight the consequences but promote and preserve the causes. Indian educational system has, at times, been sought to be geared to meet this challenge. We have to seek to partly spiritualize the content and/or thrust of education by adopting and incorporating thoughts of great spiritual leaders of the country. The question, however, remains: can we rear our generation by teaching them spirituality in an extremely materialized environment which does not strengthen the desired value system. The issue is wide, deep and of vast significance. The outcome of the problems has certainly psychological ramification but it has its roots outside the psychology. This may perhaps be resolved if at all it can be resolved, by inter-disciplinary collective synchronized efforts.

Keywords: Modernization, Individualization, Morality, Values,

The Western society passed through a state of transition during the 18th and 19th century, entered the phase of modernity during the 20th century. The present century has witnessed those societies getting fully modernized. But this era is marked by speedy value deterioration in the context of accentuated and well established materialism and advent of technological and economic advancement. As a result the social relations are becoming artificial, making the person individualistic and ego-centric. But when this mask is discarded by a single jostle and the vicissitudes characteristic of a rough world, the darkness and misery seem pervading everywhere -- at least, to many, if not for all. Such a state of affairs is aptly comparable to the treacherous sea-shore, which appears charming, but in actuality imperils the lives of sailors. The world's turmoil is hardly showing any sign of abating. Humanity is experiencing intense strains; it seems to be circling, peering around the rim of hell.

Contemporary modern life differs in many respects from the life of earlier times. Modern societies are urbanized, industrialized, rationalized, differentiated, professionalized, bureaucratized, globalized and so on, whereas previous societies were characterized as stratified, undifferentiated, rural, agrarian, and above all -- dominated by traditional institutions of family and religions. An important shift has occurred in the foundation and legitimization of the main values in society. In pre-modern agrarian societies, the basic value orientations were primarily rooted in tradition and in institutional religion, whereas, in modern and post-modern societies values are increasingly based on individual autonomy, self-interest and personal preferences. Individual freedom has gained importance, and the people's dependence on the traditional social and religious institutions is on decline. Instead of relying on these institutions and their prescriptions, individuals have become personally responsible for their acts and their preferred ways of living.

Modern society, therefore, is often described as individualistic, indicating a society consisting of individuals, 'whose goal is to fulfil private ends, largely through relationships seen as instrumental, and whose principal characteristic is the possession of individual rights that have priority over societal needs (Crittenden, 1992). The impact of collective authority has declined to the advantage of personal autonomy. The desire for community relationships has been overridden by a focus on the individual. Though no longer being bound by rigid societal standards is oft freeing for the sections of society who have been oppressed by these very standards, at the same time, the decline of community leads to a sense of societal isolation.

The process of individualization if often assumed as the real threat to morality. It is argued that the increased emphasis on the individual generates all kinds of negative side effects, such as consumerism, privatism, nihilism, atomism, narcissism, hedonism and egoism. The unbridled pursuit of selfish and personal goals undermines collective solidarity and citizenship, and may ultimately lead to social dissolution and isolation. Individual autonomy does not allow society to interfere with people's personal lives and their decisions, and since morality represents a voice of society (Poole, 1991), it has become less self-evident in modern individualized society to accept the prevailing collective moral principles.

In contemporary individualized society there can be no valid rational justification of objective moral standards and hence there are no such standards (MacIntyre, 1981). Modern individualized people are, to a large extent, independent of society, and therefore, their moral sources are quite diverse (Taylor, 1989). There does not prevail public order of standards and evaluations any more. In similar vein Bellah, et. Al. (1986) warned of individualism that has grown cancerous destroying social commitment and agreement on moral issues. Each individual becomes his own moral guide. Rigid moral standards are impossible in modern, individualized society, since they 'interfere with one's freedom and enjoyment in life'. The question, however, remains: whether morality and modernization are essentially incompatible. How true is the suggestion that modern individuals are mainly interested in pursuing their own interests, guided by personal happiness, success and achievement, and denying the public cause?

The presumed decline in morality is supposed to be closely related to increasing modernization in general and augmenting levels of individualization in particular. It is widely acknowledged, and even otherwise is a matter of common sense that not all the countries are equally modern and individualized. It is quite natural to expect prevalence of differences in degree of moral decline, as well as in morality. Further, 'although it can be argued that moral values share similar basic features across the societies, it is obvious that the manner in which they are applied may vary radically both between and within the different societies, and at different times. (Harding et. Al. 1986).

In particular, the variation in the degrees in which the religious institutions exercise influence on society, may speak of the differences, in the individualization, as also in the level moral orientation. In more traditional settings, religion and morality were connected closely, and the waning of the dominant position of religion in modernizing society fostered the establishment of a 'new morality' or 'permissive morality' (Wilson, 1982).

The process of industrialization/modernization started much later in India. As we know, India has been and still continues to be a traditional society having overwhelmingly strong beliefs in religious value system which, contemporarily, are hallmarks of traditionality and conservatism. In essence, tradition is taken to be consistent with religion.

Indian society is one that has undergone – and to some extent, still continues to undergo – industrialization. The dilemma it has faced, and still faces, is that the modernization that is a natural consequence to industrialization exists at odds with its spiritualism.

Modernism is believed to be inevitable consequence of industrialization. India wants to march ahead on the path of industrialization. On the other hand, spiritualism is well ingrained into the psyche of Indian society. It does not prefer to abandon traditionality. Indian society thus is confronted with a dilemma. This dilemma is applicable to all religions either Hindus or Muslims, and urbanized and the rural people.

Another dilemma is that appropriateness of the values on the whole is judged by the outgoing generation and India's present generation is determined to provide Western education to the incoming generation and put it on the path of progress which leads to the economic independence of the individual. This facilitates the trend of modernization to acquire roots and momentum. In a way, older generation has been having hopes which are not consistent, and that is why their aspiration about the younger generation are equally contradictory.

A similar dilemma is visible at the national level. India has adopted Westerns system of education plus economy which, essentially, are based on material culture and promote modernity. On the other hand, it intends, rather has a strong desire to promote Eastern-cum-Indian traditional value system which has its roots in the spirituality. But the two are treated as inconsistent with each other. However, India does not want to adopt/abandon one at the cost of the other.

As such, India is confronted with a big issue; ever increasing impact at the speeded-up process of modernization coupled with the direct impact of forces, the global forces that have been promoting and accelerating the process of modernization and which have been eroding the very base of the traditional value system. The big issue before us is that how to resist/minimize/curtail the impact of the forces which we have adopted and have continuously been adopting? In essence, we wish to fight the consequences but promote and preserve the causes. This dilemma or dichotomy is visible in Indian society where a gap has been existing and which continues to widen between the older and younger generations. How to bridge this gap?

The Indian educational system has, at times, been sought to be geared to meet this challenge. We have to seek to partly spiritualize the content and/or thrust of education by adopting and incorporating thoughts of great spiritual leaders of the country. At the same time, India, as a society, prizes secularism, most evident through our longstanding vision of being a metaphorical "salad bowl" society, or one which refuses to become a monolith through allowing every section that makes it up to maintain its separate identity.

To impart spiritual education in a society whose very foundations are built upon diversity is a task that needs to be carried out with great amount of caution. The values of one group cannot – and should not – dominate another's, lest the need for maintaining a distinctly Indian identity transform into an imposition

of the dominant group's ideal onto everyone other, non-dominant group. At the same time, this does not necessarily mean that any attempts to spiritualize the content of education is a futile one. Indian values are not cleaved from each other on grounds of community or religion; rather, these differences are individual notes, blending together to form a syncretic melody of "unity in diversity".

Regardless of the different elements that will inevitably have to be considered in the context of a society as teeming with differences as India is, the question, however, remains: can we rear our generation by teaching them spirituality in an extremely materialized environment which does not strengthen the desired value system? The issue is wide, deep and of vast significance. The outcomes of these problems have certainly psychological ramifications, but their roots exist outside psychology. This may perhaps be resolved (if it can at all be resolved), by inter-disciplinary, collective synchronized efforts.

Conclusions

The evolution of Western society from traditionalism to modernization has brought about profound changes in values, social structures, and individual autonomy – these changes have caused a sort of ripple-effect in societies that have only recently begun to experience this shift, including Indian society. As was the case in the West, though, this era of modernity has been characterized by a rapid deterioration of traditional values. Contemporary modern life differs significantly from earlier times, with societies now characterized by urbanization and industrialization. The shift from traditional, community-focused societies to modern, individual-centered ones has led to a prioritization of individual autonomy and self-interest over collective values and societal needs. While this newfound freedom from rigid societal standards can liberate heretofore oppressed sections of society, providing them with an opportunity to explore avenues that were previously inaccessible in a society controlled by the 'collective', it also contributes to a sense of societal isolation. The process of individualization poses a threat to collective morality, leading to negative side effects such as consumerism, nihilism, and egoism. With the decline of traditional social and religious institutions, individuals have become their own moral guides, further exacerbating societal fragmentation and moral relativism.

The impact of modernization and individualization varies across different societies, with differing degrees of moral decline and moral orientation. In traditional settings where religion and morality were closely intertwined, the waning influence of religious institutions has paved the way for the emergence of new moralities. In countries like India, the challenge of modernization is compounded by deeply ingrained spiritual traditions that coexist with the push for industrialization and Western education. This dilemma reflects broader tensions between traditional values and modern progress, both at the individual and national levels. Efforts to bridge this gap must involve incorporating spiritual education into the curriculum while respecting the diversity of values within society. By promoting secularism and embracing diversity, societies can strive towards a harmonious balance between tradition and progress. Ultimately, addressing the psychological ramifications of these challenges requires interdisciplinary, collective efforts aimed at fostering a holistic approach to modernization—one that values spirituality alongside material progress. Only through such synchronized efforts can societies navigate the complexities of modernity while preserving the richness of their cultural heritage.

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