

Let us move forward

Development should be rejected, but not because it is western or foreign. It is time to look for a new ethic to tackle the crisis of modern life. And the answer may not always lie in traditional cultures.

Kathyayini Chamaraj, freelance journalist

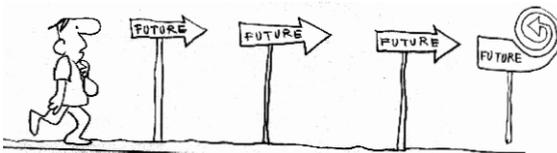
Kathyayini brings out the futility of looking for Structural Transformation merely in an over-romanticized past, much in the same way as religious fundamentalists imagine past glories and the purity of life in times gone by.

It is not only the bigots and fundamentalists who hark back to the past.

Just as modern scientists and technologists have thrown out the baby – the wisdom of the ancients (and not so ancients) - with the bath water, so too do the counter-modernists. We then throw ourselves open to charges of being anti-development, anti-progress, anti-modern. In short, of being Luddite.

Structural Transformation calls for a critical understanding of both modernity and tradition. It calls for a synthesis of the real gains of the dominant modernization paradigm with the counter paradigm of egalitarian, dignified, sustainable well-being of every human being.

What we need is a new ethic and a new culture, she says, not of the GATT, IMF, World Bank variety, but the one of solidarity and mutual help.



Back to the Future

by Kathyayini Chamaraj

A section of the women's movement in the developing world rejects what it terms the "universal vision" based on the ideas of scientific rationality, secularism and the nation state emanating from nineteenth century Europe as the "ultimate desirable vision for every other culture and society outside the western world" (Asian Women's Human Rights Council).

It claims that these notions and the institutions derived from them, such as those of the free market, have resulted in other "universalisms" outside the west being delegitimised and termed underdeveloped and even uncivilised.

This section also criticised the universal covenants of human rights such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as also being Eurocentric and relating exclusively to the relationship between the individual citizen and the nation state, ignoring notions of collective rights of communities, for instance to commons.

Its search is hence for an "authentic universalism born from an experience of cultures rooted in diversity." It holds that in the secular world of the west, all that is sacred is illegitimate in the light of the cultures, knowledges (sic) and wisdoms (sic) of the people on the peripheries, that one must seek other visions of governance, notions of justice and modes of being itself."

Romanticisation of indigenous/traditional cultures

While one has every reason to question the Western models of development being adopted even by developing countries, one also recognises in this cultural approach a certain romanticisation of indigenous/traditional cultures and the blind equation of whatever is indigenous and traditional with the intrinsically good and desirable.

Within this cultural approach, at one end is the view that preserving diversities of cultural identities per se is an inherent good; and hence globalisation and homogenisation trends which tend to destroy cultural identities need to be opposed.

At the other end is the view that traditional cultures need to be preserved because they have sustainable lifestyles built into their systems.

The tyranny and drudgery of traditional societies

But contrary to these views, studies reflect that traditional / indigenous cultures have not always been sustainable (Sara Sarkar, EPW, 22.7.95) and that many ancient civilisations met their end due to their environmentally destructive practices.

The impression that traditional cultures are sustainable may have gained ground because these cultures were not yet aware of the use of many technologies or fossil fuels and the pressure of their populations on the environment had not reached destructive proportions.

One more difficulty that arises in accepting these new "cultural" visions is that equity, a necessary element of any development, has never been a component of traditional cultures. Oppression, discrimination, exploitation and superstition have characterised most of them.

This is especially true for the treatment of women within traditional cultures. Says Sarkar, "... in almost all cultures of the world, hierarchy, class or caste system, and patriarchy have condemned large parts of the population to a permanently humiliated existence for no other reason than that they were born in the wrong family or as women." Thus in India, much of the violence against women and their status relative to men, has cultural sanction.

The history of the last century is replete with reformatory movements that were directed against oppressive cultural mores and customs, which were coming in the way of women's emancipation. The abolition of sati and widow remarriage, for instance, have been hard-won victories on behalf of women. Can one envisage a return of the older practices in the name of preserving cultural identity?

Cultural Identities are Divisive and Oppressive

Emphasis on cultural identities tends to highlight differences between people rather than their commonalities and creates walls instead of uniting people often leading to communal and ethnic riots. Those who speak on behalf of letting cultural identities assert themselves are often not very articulate about the shape and content of the "unity in diversity" that they expect will emerge out of such cultural freedom.

Especially where Indian women are concerned, our cultures provide little space for their self-fulfillment and for the expression of their individuality. Patriarchal structures are framed to keep women within the four walls of the house as far as possible. It is a moot point whether the satisfaction of the basic needs of the vast majority of the poor, most of them women, is possible without a certain amount of development of the Western kind. Heretical as it may sound, it is doubtful if the housewife, the domestic helper or the traditional washer-woman can be liberated without the aid of mixer-grinders and washing machines.

Sarkar also makes the pertinent point that the Western model of development has not been so much imposed on the people of developing countries as much as that people have themselves opted for this model - they preferred to wear trousers and move around in cars rather than wear dhotis and ride in bullock carts.

Whether this is good or bad is a different question altogether. Hence, while a thatched hut may satisfy the yearning for the romantic and the picturesque of a jaded urban spirit seeking solace by going "back to nature", a permanent dweller of a thatched hut would in all probability prefer the security of a pucca roof over his head. It is also debatable whether our dismal infant and maternal mortality rates can be lowered without replacing these romanticised structures with better housing which will enable the maintenance of better standards of hygiene.

The question then reduces itself to one of determining how much industrialisation one can adopt, keeping in view the limitations imposed by the demands of equity and environmental sustainability. Traditional cultures per se do not guarantee either of these.

A new ethic and culture

As Sarkar puts it, "Development should be rejected, but not because it is western or foreign. It should be rejected, because it is ecologically, economically, politically and socially impossible and/or harmful, ..."

What is needed then is not a "return to tradition" but a new ethic and culture both in the North and the South, capable of tackling the crisis of modern civilisation.

The new ethic and culture should accept the imperatives of equality and the limits to growth – both economic and that of population, says Sarkar. All cultures undergo evolution and there is hence no need to weep over the evaporation of traditional cultural value. If it helps in meeting the new goals, it should be preserved and further developed. There is also no need to be frightened of the slogan "one world", says Sarkar, because it need not necessarily mean the "one world" of the GATT, IMF, World Bank, but the one of solidarity and mutual help because humankind is one. ▶

About the author: **Kathyayini Chamaraj** is a Bangalore-based freelance journalist.

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