

Indian culture and Western dynamism

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Culture, tradition and adherence to some of our time-tested values have to become an essential part of Indian life and economic behaviour. We should adopt some of the most desirable traits of Western culture and civilisation, but we must shun some of its more pernicious and undesirable characteristics, such as the obsession with consuming more and more.

What is of deep concern is the growing power of the large corporation on decision-making at every level on Governments all over the world, including those in this country, and their huge influence on human behaviour. Equally of concern is the power of advertising, which reaches our homes through television and radio and increasingly everywhere, now that we carry our telephones with us. Advertising was largely responsible for the increase in tobacco consumption during the 20th century. Hollywood in particular had a very important part to play in creating iconic images of stars who appeared in movies seldom without a cigarette or cigar between their lips.

The relevant question to answer today, or at least to be debated, is whether India should abandon its cultural roots and time-tested values while adopting the Western obsession with consumerism or we shun the appeal of “voluptuous consumption” (a term that former President of India, KR Narayanan used in his inaugural address at The Energy and Resources Institute’s silver jubilee conference in 2000). Those who reach upper middle class status or higher in India are driven by a fixation to consume at the same levels as their counterparts in the developed world.

However, the richest of the rich, particularly in the US, have established a remarkable record of private philanthropy, where so many billionaires have given away their entire riches for the benefit of society. Have any of our billionaires shown even a fraction of that benevolence by genuinely contributing towards good causes? Have they emulated the remarkable record of innovation and thinking out-of-the-box that has created unprecedented economic success in the developed countries?

If one looks at our record of patenting and innovation, we are light years apart from the capacity and achievement attained in the Western world. There are some islands of excellence such as our space programme which continue to demonstrate the inherent capabilities of Indian society, but this reality is sadly accompanied by innumerable examples of institutions which may have reached great heights through hard work and perseverance but destroyed overnight through bureaucratic controls and approaches.

It takes years of blood and sweat to build an institution of excellence, but an extremely short period of time to bring it to a level of ridiculous mediocrity through bureaucratic management. The result is that even our knowledge organisations widely follow cultures derived from bureaucratic systems. They gather large numbers of peons and clerks, distorting what is referred to as the teeth to tail ratio.

After 70 years of independence, India still exhibits a colonial mindset and a fascination for values and preferences prevalent in the developed world. But we have still not created a culture of innovation and efficiency which is the hallmark of Western society, and which if genuinely imbibed by us, would help the average person on the street and help alleviate widespread poverty. This is perhaps an appropriate moment for us to introspect on the totally alien lifestyles and values which we have adopted by emulating the West, while shutting our eyes to its strengths.

In the US, for instance, one seldom finds the destructive envy that is so common in India towards those who excel in society despite all odds. Typically, even when two persons in those societies dislike each other, one seldom finds hurdles and obstacles being placed in the path of achieving benefits to an organisation or society, and thus ensuring that if a job had to be done everyone facilitates it even if the person responsible is unpopular.

And, in the developed world there are often distinct differences which reflect differences in values, ethics and a concern for environmental protection. Why should we not emphasise the way of life in the Nordic countries rather than North America or other opulent societies which consume and waste on a large scale?

In this world of instant communication and particularly in populous countries like India, we underestimate the extent to which our actions could have an impact on the rest of the world. If India pursued a more culture and tradition based pattern of development, that would clearly provide a powerful model for the rest of the world to follow. In essence, in today's world, it is inevitable that there is a convergence between developed and developing economic systems. There is already a powerful section of thinkers and economists who are emphasising what is labelled as the philosophy of degrowth.

A more appropriate term, and certainly more appealing, would be to regard the transformation required as redevelopment. Essentially, the desired transformation that the world needs is really more about substitution than reduction. Fossil fuels would give way to renewable forms of energy; metals and minerals would be replaced by bio based materials; and even diets would move towards much lower amounts of animal protein, reversing the increasing trends which have been pushed in recent decades by advertising the 'virtues' of excessive consumption of meat.

At the pain of repetition, it would be necessary to remind ourselves of what Mahatma Gandhi said when he was asked whether he would not want India to reach the same level of prosperity as Britain. He responded by stating that Britain had reached its level of so-called prosperity by using half the resources of this planet, therefore, "how many planets would a country like India require?"

It is time that we created a truly sustainable pattern of growth, and a meritocracy which displaces the cancer of bureaucratic systems that are common through different levels of Government, the public sector and knowledge

organisations, including research institutions. Comparisons with China are often not valid, but I know intimately how Chinese institutions have evolved over the last four decades.

In the early 1980s, Chinese universities and centres of research were way behind ours, particularly since they had suffered the ravages of the cultural revolution. Today, China has some of the best institutions in the world, and their record of innovation and technology development is second to none, and that too in a communist society. But centralised systems are not allowed to suffocate the local autonomy of institutions that are agents of change. Our annual science congress emphasises Indian traditions in science, we have failed to create a scientific culture to suit today's challenges, without which our claims of greatness would remain hollow.

(This is the second and final part of a two-part series on over-consumerism)

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