Sociology: Debate on Tradition and Modernity in India

Paper 2: Perspectives on study of Indian Society; Modernization of Indian tradition.

Introduction

In the study of modernization in India, tradition has always been an obsession. During the 1950s, there was a hot debate in India on tradition and modernity. In the west also, when modernization began after enlightenment, there was a serious debate on religion, science, state and fundamentalism.

In India, modernity needs to be analysed in the context of liberalism, democracy and capitalism. The Britishers had colonial power to exploit the Indian masses, but in their effort they also wanted not to interfere in the traditional structure of Indian society. The princely rulers were highly antagonistic to modernity. Their survival depended on the continuity and strengthening of tradition. And, therefore, in Indian situation also, it is quite meaningful to discuss modernity in terms of India’s traditions and hence the obsession.

Mukherjee was a Marxist scientist who thought that there was dialectical link between India’s tradition and modernity; colonialism and nationalism; & individualism and collectivity.

Majumdar was a functionalist who agreed to synthesis between modernity and tradition. His idea of tradition came from the study of tribal and his content was ‘culture’.

For Ghurye, tradition was heuristic method for sociological analysis. For him, any tradition was Hindu traditions and to understand Indian society, one must know those traditions.

Srinivas thinks that the only meaningful changes taking place is among the weaker sections who are imitating the twice-born & he explains it through sanskritization & westernisation.

For Desai, tradition is a secular phenomenon. Its nature is having link with economic relations and when the latter changes, then the tradition also eventually changes.

Examining ‘Modernity’ in terms of India’s ‘traditions’

1. Analysis by D. P Mukherjee
   He argued that there is dialectical relation between India’s tradition and modernity, British colonialism and nationalism and individualism and collectivity, i.e., sangha. His concept of dialectics was anchored in liberal humanism. The encounter of
tradition with modernization created certain cultural contradictions, adaptations and in some cases situations of conflict also. The major influences in their shaping have been Buddhism, Islam, and western commerce and culture. It was through the assimilation and conflict of such varying forces that Indian culture became what it is today, neither Hindu nor Islamic, neither a replica of the western mode of living and thought nor a purely Asiatic product.

2. **Analysis by D. N Majumdar**
   The past must be understood in the context of the present, and the present will stabilize the future if it can find its fulfilment in the moorings of the past. There was no golden age; there can be none in the future. Life is a process of adjustment and in its unfolding, it has thrown out individuals who are misfit and the latter have both helped and hindered cultural progress; the misfits are misfits in the context of a dynamic setting, and if only, the misfits could be fitted into the structure of life, the process that is life will continue to unfold itself, adjust and march as to man’s destiny through an integration and synthesis that constitute the core of the dynamics of culture change and culture crises.

3. **Analysis by G S Ghurye**
   Traditions, he insists, are essentially Hindu traditions. Whatever group we may discuss in India, it has its origin in Hindu civilization. In his work, Social Tensions in India (1968), he argues that Hindus and Muslims are two separate and cultural distinct groups that can hardly have any chances of integration. During his creative period of writing Indian sociology was engaged in the debate on tradition and modernity. But Ghurye did not enter into this controversy. Nor he took up the issue of the role of traditions in Indian society. As an orientalist, however, he stressed the importance of Indian traditions, especially the Hindu ethnography.

4. **Analysis by M N Srinivas**
   Srinivas has extensively talked about the social evils of caste society; he pleads for change in caste system and discusses westernization and modernization as viable paradigms of changes. Srinivas in a straightforward way rejects secularism and stands in favour of Hindu traditions. In his critique of Indian secularism which appeared in a short article in the Times of India in 1993, he finds secularism wanting
because he believes that India needs a new philosophy to solve the cultural and spiritual crisis facing the country and that philosophy cannot be secular humanism.

5. **Analysis by A R Desai**

He rejects any interpretation of tradition with reference to religion, rituals and festivities. It is essentially a secular phenomenon. Its nature is economic and it originates and develops in economics. He finds it in family, village and other social institutions. He also does not find the origin of tradition in western culture. Quite like other Marxists, he employs production relations for the explanation of traditional social background of Indian nationalism is his classical work.

**Questions**

1. What is wrong with A.R. Desai is that he is very profound when he applies principles of Marxism in analysing Indian situations, but fails at the level of empirical support. Substantiate.

2. D P Mukherjee mainly focuses upon the encounter of the tradition with that of the west which, on the one hand, unleashed many forces of cultural contradiction and, on the other, gave rise to a new middle class. Analyse how nationalism became a dialectic of colonialism.