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Tradition vis-a-vis Modernity in India: A Sociological Study of Mark Tully's India's Unending Journey

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Abstract: Beginning from a land of kings and magicians India has come to be known as the next super power of the world with its economy reaching unprecedented highs. If, on one side, it reminds the world of a land of floods, earthquakes, cobras, leopards, trapping fire flies in jars, munching on raw sugar cane, travelling by steam trains, riding in rickshaws, Maharajas and mahouts, which was old India, on the other side it reminds the world of a land of computer software, supersonic missiles, nuclear weapons, rockets, satellites and world class medical treatments, which is new India.

Everywhere the image of India is being painted in bright colours. But despite taking long leaps of economic progress in the modern age, India has not distanced itself from its centuries old traditions. It is a country where traditions have remained intact with every step of progress. Many travel writers who travel across the length and breadth of India opine in their travel writings that India is a country where tradition and modernity go hand in hand and where traditions prosper in the wake of modernity. India's Unending Journey by Mark Tully, a British travel writer, explores the same idea all through his book.

Key words: Tradition, modernity, religion, culture, festival, pluralist, materialism, industrialisation, dogmatic, fatalist, yoga, sensual, erotic, liberty, myth, tantra, balance

Travellers from all around the world view India as a perfect blend of Tradition and modernity. They notice that tradition and modernity go hand in hand, each one not affecting the other in almost all walks of life. It is a land where traditions are not lost in the dreary world of modern values and modern scientific advancement is not discouraged in the name of traditions. It is a land where mind-scrambling contrasts and inconsistencies present themselves at every turn. This aspect of India has been an area of interest for many travellers and travel writers as well. *No*

Full Stops in India (1992) and *India's Unending Journey* (2008) by Mark Tully, *The Penguin book of Indian* Journeys (2004) edited by Dom Moraes, *India* (2007) by Sanjeev Bhaskar, and *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (2009) by William Dalrymple are some such travel texts as throw light on the co-existence of tradition and modernity in India. The present research paper aims to explore the idea of co-existence of traditions and modernity through the analytical study of Mark Tully's travel book titled India's Unending Journey

Sir William Mark Tully is one of the world's leading writers and broadcasters on India. He is the former Bureau Chief of BBC, New Delhi. He was born at Tollygunge in Calcutta, British India and was educated in England. He worked for BBC for a period of 30 years. He has written many travel books on India. His No Full Stops in India (1998) is a collection of Journalistic essays. In 2002 came *India in Slow Motion* co-authored with Gillian Wright. Tully later wrote *India's Unending Journey* (2008) and *India: The Road Ahead* (2011), published in India under the title *Non-Stop India*. He was knighted in the New Year Honours 2002. He is a recipient of the Padma Shree (1992) and Padma Bhushan (2005). He is also a member of The Oriental Club. He now works as a journalist in New Delhi with his colleague and partner, Gillian Wright. He is the regular presenter of the weekly BBC Radio 4 programme Something Understood.

Mark Tully in his book *No Full Stops in India* seems to convey a message that traditions can get along with the modernity and it is possible for India to preserve its own genius and to build a nation according to its lights. His *India's Unending Journey* is an explanation that religion, culture and economics keep India occupied and how a perfect balance is maintained between the tradition and the modernity in all walks of Indian life. This book covers many subjects and reveals the profound changes happening in India today, and how they keep the country alive amid the continuum of its age old traditions. Through interviews and anecdotes, Tully records his journey from the skyscrapers of Gurgaon to the religious riots in Ayodhya, from the calm of a university campus to farmers deep in the countryside. He brings us all the colour, flavour and balance of this fascinating nation that is having such an impact on our world.

Tully begins his journey from Puri in Orissa, where he has come for a few days' holiday, and to wallow in nostalgia for his British Raj childhood which he writes about in Chapter 1

entitled "Puri: Exploring the Opposites" of this travel book. It is the Hindu festival of Kartik Purnima, which marks the full moon of the month of Kartik and Puri is all geared up for celebrations. Unaware of this, he is woken by loud explosions, sharp, ear-splitting cracks and the swoosh of rockets shooting up into the sky. Later Tully also joins the festivities and he observes that there is no one in charge to tell the devotees who to worship or how to worship them, and there is no one to turn him away for being a foreigner and a Christian and he is reminded that Hinduism is a pluralist religion. He writes, "While Kartik Purnima brought to mind my experience of Hinduism's admirable tolerance of different doctrines and different philosophical schools, including atheism, I was also reminded in Puri that Hinduism can be exclusive." (2008: 6) This bathing festival reminds him of his first Maha Kumbh Mela, which he attended in 1989.

At the Maha Kumbh Mela, Tully was deeply impressed by the millions of pilgrims who thronged to Allahbad. Their strong faith reconfirmed his belief that Hinduism still had deep roots in India. However, when he wrote about the festival to counteract any impression that Hinduism faced no challenge from modern materialism, he quoted a warning by R. C. Zaehner, the former Professor of Eastern religion and Ethics at Oxford which is as follows:

> "With the spread of Western education right down to the lowest strata of society and the progressive industrialization of the country the whole religious structure of Hinduism will be subjected to a severe strain; but such has been its genius for absorption and adaption that it would be foolhardy to prophesy how it will confront this new and unprecedented crisis." (8-9)

Industrialization has indeed spread rapidly in India since the 1980s and now almost all Indians want their children to have a Western education and to be taught in English. But in a tone of denial, Tully affirms the words of Zaehner and writes about the festival in Puri, "Yet the Maha Kumbh Mela and – on a smaller scale – Kartik Purnima in Puri demonstrates that Hinduism is continuing to stand up well in the face of crisis that Zaehner forecast, precisely because of its 'genius for absorption and adaptation'." (9) In charting the course of this book, Tully intends to warn both the West and India against the increasing materialism. He writes, "Nevertheless, I believe that these warnings are also relevant to India, which is in a danger of ignoring its own traditions and rushing headlong into the adoption of modern Western culture." (10) But at the

same time, Tully in a later chapter entitled "Delhi: An Indian Understanding" of this book reiterates the idea of 'genius for absorption and adaption' when he avers that Hinduism is an 'on going' process and in theory it can readily accept change.

The first aspect of Indian Tradition which Tully finds affected by the onslaught of modern Western culture is discussion. Tully writes, "Conversation is an integral part of the Indian tradition that has influenced me." (13) Every evening, with the cows safely home and a cloud of pungent smoke from cow-dung stoves lingering over the village, men would sit on their charpoys and talk over local and national issues. In small towns every tea shop has a copy of a newspaper and customers linger long after drinking the last drop of the milky sweet liquid in their cup to discuss the news. Tully admits, "Over the years I often joined in these discussions and was subjected to severe cross-questioning about the BBC reports they had heard on their transistors radios." (14) In the West the scene is altogether different. In modern Western tradition voices are all too often drowned out by the din of constant conflict – conflict that is frequently engineered by the media. Affirming this onslaught on the tradition of discussion in India, Tully writes, "In India, too, the media which takes its cue from the West, seems to think its role is to promote aggression not discussion, and conflict not conversation." (15) Now a day whenever there is a national religious dispute, the media put members of the extremist factions into the ring to fight over it, instead of giving viewers an opportunity to hear a reasoned debate. But Tully believes that the Indian tradition of argument and discussion provides a way forward between the rock of dogmatic modernism and the hard stone of post-modernism.

Tully believes that the Indians know the middle path very well and can create a balance between their traditions and modernism. He writes, "One of the most crucial balancing acts we have to perform is between fate and free will – between acknowledging that capabilities and opportunities are given to us and exercising our free will to make the best of them." (17) Fate is a part of Indian tradition and free will stands for the western values. The modern cult of individualism, and the belief that competition provides the driving force for progress – that without competition we would all sink into self-satisfied sloth – makes fate appear to be a dangerous word. Anyone who speaks of fate is almost bound to be called a fatalist. But Tully knows that Indians believe in fate but they are not fatalists and do not shirk from actions. This

fact is affirmed when he writes, "It is particularly dangerous to speak of fate in the context of Indian culture, which is so often accused of fatalism." (17)

Tully acknowledges the Indian tradition of living a balanced life and its merit. He writes, "And so, to me, the Indian tradition has come to imply that in everything in life we should seek to be balanced, and that the quest for the balance never ends." (17) He compares how nature is revered and nurtured in India whereas in the West it is facing exploitation at the hands of its people. Tully learns a lesson from Indian tradition which is opposed to the western ideals. This fact is quite evident when he writes about the relevance of Indian tradition in the following words:

> "What I have learnt in India seems to me relevant not only for our personal lives but also for humans as a species. If we had properly cared for balance in the first place, we would not have put nature as seriously out of balance as it is now. If we had been more humble, we would not have treated nature as inferior to us, as a resource for us to use. We would have realized sooner how dependent we are upon it. We must remember that we neither created the system that sustains us, nor do we sustain it." (19)

Another part of Indian tradition that has not died out and has been able to carve out a niche successfully in spite of relentless attacks of modernism is Yoga. In the west, India is known for two things and Yoga is one of these. Like other Indian Traditions, Yoga teaches us to maintain a balance in our life. It teaches that the mental and the physical have to be kept in balance. The modern life style has undoubtedly made our life much easier and comfortable, but it has also given us a number of maladies which were not associated with the traditional way of life. These maladies include hypertension, depression, diabetes, obesity, sciatica and a whole lot of other life style diseases which are beyond the control of modern system of medicine. Interestingly, Yoga has proved an effective remedy for all these maladies. About Yoga Tully writes, "In its many different forms Yoga is much more than a mere keep-fit technique or an alternative to the ubiquitous gyms which are one of the latest Western imports to India. Consequently, more and more numbers of westerners are turning to Yoga as an alternative way of life style. So much so it has become a craze among both the westerners and the elite Indians.

A lot of towns and cities have emerged as Yoga centres. Every year thousands of westerners come to places like Rishikesh to learn Yoga. In this connection Tully writes, "…it's impossible to live in India for long without taking an interest in Yoga…" (63)

In the next chapter entitled "Raipur: A God too Small", Tully visits Raipur, the capital of newly born state of Chattisgarh and the areas around it. He visits many churches and meets many Jesuits to learn how the Roman Catholic Church in India is accepting pluralism to shed its western identity and to become recognizably Indian. The Roman Catholics have traditionally claimed that there can be no salvation outside the church. He meets a Jesuit scholar Father Samuel Ryan about whom he writes, "The Jesuit scholar Father Samuel Ryan explained how his Church was now adapting itself to the Indian plural tradition. He also maintained that it was because of Indian theology that the Vatican no longer claimed there could be no salvation outside the church." (82)

To witness this transformation, Tully visits the ashram of Bede Griffiths, who is often called 'the patriarch of Western monasticism'. Bede lived the latter part of his life in India, where he attempted to marry the faith he had been taught with the insights that country had given him. His best known book is called *The Marriage of East and West*. He died in 1993 at this small ashram in south India. In the ashram, Tully is able to witness a shift from West to East at first sight. He meets Father Christadas, one of the disciples of Bede. Describing his appearance, Tully writes, "Father Christadas looked more like a Hindu holy man than a Christian monk; he was bare-chested, with a straggling beard and unkempt hair, and wore a plain saffron lungi wrapped around his waist and extending to his ankles, and beads around his neck." (85)

The ashram also shows visible signs of the shift from West to east. Describing this fusion Tully writes, "The ashram itself was a celebration of Bede's marriage of East and West. The chapel was known as the temple, and its bright technicoloured dome was surrounded by Hindu iconography, with Jesus in the centre, also clad like a Hindu holy man…In the garden there was a statue of Jesus meditating and enfolded by a lotus, a flower sacred to Hindus." (85) Bede Graffiths also used to meditate in front of that statue. He wanted to find a meeting point between the West's tradition of reason and the East's tradition of imagination.

In the next chapter entitled "Khajuraho: The Sensual and the Sacred", Tully brings to fore

a face of India which the natives find shockingly un-Indian and which is a common phenomenon in West. Tully is in Khajuraho, a small town, little more than an overgrown village in central India, which is famous for its temples with their erotic carvings. In Indian tradition, sexual impulse is something to be repressed, whereas on the contrary in the West, which stands for modernity, it is something to be rejoiced in. But the temples in Khajuraho are a sharp contrast to the Indian tradition as the erotic carvings on their walls may clearly prompt any Indian to wonder how religion and sexuality go together and what could be the religious purpose of this erotica. Describing the place, Tully writes, "The portion of the temple walls between the approach to the sanctuary and the sanctuary itself is covered with carvings that show almost every position in which it is possible to have sex." (152)

Nobody to this day knows for sure why these erotic sculptures decorate the splendid temples of Khajuraho, but after seeing the temples and the erotic carvings Tully has come to a better understanding of the possible theology behind them which is of following the path of balance between the extremes, sexual restraint and sexual liberty in this case represented by traditional and modern values respectively. Expressing this understanding, Tully writes, "It's an understanding that has led me to believe that our response to our sexuality should be neither those of the repressive Christian tradition nor the modern licence, in which it seems that everything is acceptable, but a middle way between the two." (155) In India this balance is perfectly maintained.

But this equilibrium is not without threats which modernity or the modern Western culture is posing. The modern culture has given rise to new morality which is threatening our age old traditions. The consequences are visible in almost all walks of Indian life and to demonstrate, Tully picks up the example of advertising in India. He writes, "In India there is a stricter code on advertising than in the west and more rigorous film censorship, but nevertheless the television coverage of a recent international cricket series was interrupted after almost every over by an advertisement for a male hair gel called 'Set Wet', described by a husky female voice as, 'Sexy – very, very sexy'." (156) About kissing in Indian films, Tully reveals, " 'No kissing, please, we're Indians' was the view the censors took when I first came to India, and remained so for a long time." (169) But these days, the situation has moved on and the ban on kissing has been

relaxed. In other areas also the morals are changing fast due to the increasing materialism, which is a product of modernity.

Despite a sexual revolution at hand in India, Tully is of the view that a balance will be maintained and the traditions will not succumb to the modernity. He gives his explanation in the following words:

> "Westerners have always tended to be ruled by one form or other of moral orthodoxy, and so it is perhaps not surprising that the sexual revolution has imposed an orthodoxy that is just as pervasive as the Victorian morality once was. However, in India, with its long tradition of heterodoxy, different understandings of sexuality have long lived side by side. There has certainly been a repressive tradition, but India is also the country in which the *Kama Sutra* was written." (158)

Ancient Indians were concerned with the scientific study of human behaviour. They were particularly interested in how life should be lived to achieve four main aims. The first three goals of human life were held to be those of dharma (virtue and the following of the religious practices), artha (economic prosperity) and kama (desire, pleasure and love, including the erotic). These led to the final goal of moksha, liberation from suffering and from cycle of death and rebirth. So, in the traditional frame work of Indian life all these goals are equally important and, therefore, a balance is maintained at all times and in all circumstances.

Tully also mentions the myth of Shiva and Parvati to suggest that the sacred and the sensual can coexist. About the myth, he writes:

> "According to the myth, Shiva had withdrawn from the world in mourning for his wife Sati, a form of the great goddess. His absence had allowed a powerful demon to take control of the world and so the other gods went to the great goddess to appeal to her to manifest her again and woo Shiva back. The goddess was reborn as Parvati, daughter of the mountains. She grew into an intellectually brilliant and beautiful young woman. When she decided to serve Shiva in his meditation, the gods conspired to make him fall in love with her. They sent Kama, the god of desire who – like Eros in Greek mythology – was armed with a bow and arrow.

> He fired an arrow at Shiva, distracting the god from his meditation and making him aware of Parvati's attractions. In his rage at being thus disturbed, Shiva burnt up Kama with a glance from his third eye. After Kama's death Parvati felt she had lost all hope of marrying Shiva but was advised that she could still win him if she undertook penances. Her penances enabled her to cleanse herself of all false pride and egotism, and when Shiva felt the time was ripe to test her, she passed the trials he set with flying colours. The two married and their thousands of years of lovemaking started." (164-65)

Of course this myth contains many layers of meaning. The union of Shiva and Parvati, for example, restored balance to the universe. Deriving his own conclusion of the myth, Tully writes, "This myth is also one of many examples of how the Indian tradition is able to combine the sacred and the sensual, unlike either tradition or modernity in the West." (166) In spite of these traditions that combine the sacred and the sensual, there is a repressive sexuality that is widespread in India in this modern age as a result of age old traditions.

The ability to combine the sacred and the sensual has often been mistaken in the West for a licence to practice free sex. But in India it is not so. Had it been so, there would have been free sex in India also. Sex is still a taboo in most of the parts of India. It is not a matter to be discussed openly and freely. But there are certain religious practices in India that have the element of the sensual as their integral part but without any implications for a free sex and the sensual often serves as an aid to the whole practice. Such practices may not join the main stream of the Indian tradition and may be labelled untraditional and a sacrilege but they continue to be observed in the Modern age.

Tantra is one of these practices and to learn more about tantra, Tully visits the Tantric centre at Tarapeeth in West Bengal. He meets some Tantrics there. One Tantric is seated on a throne of skulls in front of the fire-pit on the floor of his hut, where he performs his rituals. When asked by Tully why he has chosen to spend his life meditating in a place where he was permanently reminded of death, he replies, "In Tantra you learn to overcome fear of anything. So we meditate here to overcome our fear of death, and I sit on a throne of skulls, which many would consider to be a sacrilege." (167) About these Tantrics, Tully further writes, "Tantrics

believe they must overcome the fear that lies behind many taboos, including the fear of impurity and pollution. Therefore they can offer hair, blood, fish and meat in their sacrificial rites, as well as other things usually regarded as impure, which means that many of their practices would seem scandalous to other Hindus." (167)

Sex is another aspect of Tantra that makes it scandalous and untraditional. When Tully approaches the subject of sex, the Tantric explains, "For us, sex is not to be feared because it is a way to expand consciousness. But then there are special rites for this, and sex has to be refined; rules and discipline have to be followed." (168) The Tantric explains to him how sex is one way of arousing what he called the cosmic energy in all of us and of becoming sources ourselves of that energy. He says, "In our tradition it is described as the purest form of consciousness, like a flash of lightening, tender as lotus fibre, the fine golden thread that binds all believers, the sap of creation." (168)

During his visit to Ayodhya, Tully finds another such tradition. He is talking about the Rasik tradition. There he finds many different approaches to Rama and they do not necessarily involve revering him as an ascetic which many Indians may find untraditional. About this tradition, he writes, "The followers of the Rasik tradition concentrate on Rama and Sita as a young married couple. Some of these devotees try, at a spiritual level, to experience Rama as Sita would have done. This form of spirituality is very similar to the intensely feminine spirituality, with sexual overtones…" (170-71) Little wonder, tradition and modernity go hand in hand in India.

Tully carries on with his theme of the fusion of the East and the West in the Indian life in the last chapter entitled "Varanasi: The Unity of Opposites" also. For many Hindus, Varanasi is the archetypal sacred place, yet almost one-third of its population is Muslim. It is Shiva's city, yet many gods are worshipped here and different religions practiced. It is also the city where the Budha said he would not concern himself with matters of ultimate reality, such as whether God exists or not. For Tully, Varanasi is a city of balance. Justifying this claim, he writes, "For all its sanctity, Varanasi symbolizes a balanced life in which worship, work and pleasure all play a role and earning money is an obligation but not an obsession." (249) As a city of Shiva, it acknowledges the pleasures offered by Kama, the god of love, and also the danger of his arrows.

Varanasi has learnt to preserve tradition and accommodate change that modernity has brought about. It is one of the oldest living cities in the world – as old as Jerusalem, Athens or Beijing. But there is a difference between Varanasi and those ancient sites, which the American scholar Diana Eck, who has studied the city's traditions, religion, and culture carefully, has observed. Tully quotes her from her book, *Banaras, City of light*, where about the city she says, "Today Peking, Athens, and Jerusalem are moved by a very different ethos from that which moved them in ancient times, but Kashi is not. " (249) This clearly proves that traditions in India can sustain themselves despite the advent of modern culture.

The people of Kashi also believe in maintaining an equilibrium between tradition and modernity. Tully meets one Muslim from Kashi named Khaliquzzaman, who is a businessman and who tells what Western culture is and why there should be a balance between East and West. Tully quotes the reply of Khaliquzzaman in the following words:

> "Materialism and worldliness are the main characteristics of Western culture, as we understand it. There is lack of spirituality and no fear of God. We are afraid of it coming to India and becoming so strong that it turns us into consumers, full of greed and with no generosity in us towards others. Then the moral restrictions of our religion will be set aside and there will be an excess of lust, desire, and killing for gain. Instead there should be an equilibrium in society with everyone practicing their own religion and maintaining their values." (253)

The Mahant, or Head Priest of the Sankat Mochan temple, Veer Bhadra Mishra is himself a symbol of the balance between tradition and modernity. In addition to being the Mahant of the temple, Veer Bhadra is a former professor of civil engineering, specializing in hydraulics, at Banaras Hindu University., one of India's largest universities in India. Now retired, he sees no conflict between his science and his faith. Quoting the explanation of the Mahant for maintaining a balance, Tully writes, "The interface between them is the key to a happy life. Science and faith are like two banks of a river. If one crumbles there is a flood and disaster." (256) The Mahant, with his views on the importance of science and religion, and the combination in him of a priest and a scientist, represents the need for non-rational as well as rational understanding of reality.

Tully is amazed at the number of festivals in Varanasi as there is a festival every day and

some even say that there are seven days in a week in the sacred city but eight festivals. He finds that over the years there has been no change in the tradition of observance of these festivals in India though modernity has entered almost every walk of Indian life. But in comparison, the festivals are losing their spirit in the West and have reduced to mere formalities due to modernistic tendencies. To support his point of view, he cites an example from his own country and writes, "In Britain, we still have Sundays but they have become shopping sprees…We still have festivals, but deprived of their religious significance they also seem to have lost their seasonal flavour." (259)

Varanasi also reminds Tully of a strange tradition which is unusual elsewhere in India and which has come to acquire significance in the West. In Varanasi, the dead bodies are cremated in the open near the banks of the Ganga which is contrary to the tradition of Hindus in India. Explaining more about this unusualness of this practice, Tully writes, "Traditionally, cremation grounds in India were sited outside towns and cities because Hindus regarded them as polluted places, but in Varanasi they are in the heart of the city. When I floated in a boat down the Ganga after dark and saw the flames of funeral pyres still burning on the two cremation ghats, I was reminded that Varanasi is probably the only city in the world where cremation grounds are tourist attractions." (265) As elsewhere, Varanasi demonstrates that a marriage of East and West is possible in India.

India is a place where there is a balance between the material and the spiritual, between reason and passion, between tradition and change, and between individuals and society. There are factors which contribute to this balance. Hinduism being a highly absorbing and adoptive religion does not face any challenge from modernity. The practice of conversation and discussion aids to the balance between the traditional and modern values. Though Indians believe in fate, they are not fatalists. Amid growing development they still respect nature and its resources. They do not discard the old for the new. Old cites like Varanasi are still maintaining their ethos. Also the passion of the Indians and foreigners as well is increasing for Yoga and Ayurveda, which are our traditional practices. The tradition of pluralism in religion and belief of Indians in maintaining a balance between sexual restraint and liberty clearly affirm the balance between tradition and modernity. In terms of dress code and on media the impact of modernity cannot be

denied.

Despite tradition taking modernity head on, the latter in some cases does have an edge over the former and the effect is quite noticeable. In some walks of life modernity has either modified or done away with the traditions. But there is a good scope for traditions to survive and go hand in hand with the modernity in India owing to its highly absorbing nature. That India is a land of paradoxes where tradition and modernity co-exist is best described by the remarks of Shashi Tharoor, when in his book, *The Elephant, the Tiger & the Cellphone*, he writes:

> "One of my favourite photographs is from the last Kumbh Mela. It showed a Hindu sadhu right out of central casting – naked body, matted hair and beard, ash-smeared forehead, rudraksh mala around his neck, the works – chatting away on a mobile phone. The contrast says so much about the land of paradoxes that is today's India – a country that, as I wrote many years ago, manages to live in several centuries at the same time." (2012: 14)

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