



Connections with the Past: A Must for Modern Societies

Purushotam Dass

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Deshbandhu College

University of Delhi

Abstract:

Modern society is a progression from the past, and in this progression, our civilization has changed a lot. There is a need to re-establish connections with the past to understand the ways in which we have progressed and the mistakes we have committed as a community. The need of the hour is to find ways in which awareness of the past is manifest in our modern consciousness to pave the path for our progress. The paper “Connections with the Past: A Must for Modern societies” critically explores the historical past and manifests its significance in our lives.

Keywords:

Christian Missionaries, Connections, Dr Ambedkar, History, Humanitarian Values, Modern Society.

History is a continuous progression of events and filled with ruptures that change the course of the historical progression. A student of history reads this progression of events, but

at the same time, what seems significant for them is that he reads the historical past from the modern perspective as s/he is situated in the contemporary context. So, their gaze at history / historical facts/ chronology is always already mediated through a lens that makes them constantly compare with the societal structure in which s/he lives. This mediation makes them find history an enigma and a structured reality that manifests itself according to the ideological positioning of the student /historian, and consequently, the connectedness that is established between the past and the present makes the reading of history a current event. Modern societies are a manifestation of the progression from the historical past. Our understanding of contemporary life and society will always remain half-baked until we cannot establish the connections with the past and realize how history has progressed to render us the reality in which we live today. The short paper explores the connections between past and modern societies by examining the how and why of the matter to figure out how a better and more precise understanding of the past and the present can only be gauged by building connections.

History has always been a secret vault recording the relationships and animosities between people. It has always been a source of disputes and amicability. Many modern-day hostilities are based on historical sources, whether the animosities between the Jews and the Christians that led to the holocaust or the recent Western people's distrust and grudges against the Muslims. Even in *Ibn Muslama's Pact and The Pact of Umar*, one notices the relationship between the Muslim conquerors and their non-Muslim subjects from the point of view of the Quran as it states, "The Quran reminds Muslims of the heritage that they share with People of the Book — namely, Jews, Christians, and Sabeans. Yet the Quran also threatens eternal hellfire for all who perversely refuse to become Muslims, including Jews and Christians who remain obstinate in their rejection of the Prophet's revelations." (Keralaverma, 2011). The relationship between these communities had always been a sense of

betrayal. The role of historians is often to look for the ordinary moments of these animosities, which has still pervaded modern-day life and have been one of the prime reasons for violence in the present circumstances. Today, many people and institutions are trying to talk about inter-faith beliefs and conglomerations to bring together people of different religious communities to create a world where humanitarian values are more significant than sectarian beliefs.

Again, when we talk of humanitarian values, they are not something that can merely be found in the present-day world. Even in ancient China, humanitarian values were much prevalent. One can take the example of Confucius, who “took age-old Chinese values, such as filial piety and proper performance of ancient rituals, and turned them into moral principles. His genius was that he insisted human beings are moral creatures with social obligations and are, by that fact, obliged to comport themselves humanely and with integrity.” The integrity of humankind and the social obligation has created great civilizations and not just wars and victories. History makes us learn that society is built on the values of the people and these values are to be learnt from history. The connections with the past make us get back our renewed faith in those essential humanitarian values and transcends us from the path of impropriety, violence, cruelties and inhuman injustices to a way of looking forward to establishing connections with people and forming relationships that can truly revolutionize the modern society and make a world habitable for all.

Imperialistic trends and colonial enterprise of the European nations, since the scientific developments starting from the sixteenth century, which became more ferocious in the post-industrial developments, have been led to many kinds of subjugations and atrocities. Whereas Columbus’s journey is being celebrated in the United States as a heroic ordeal, some people, especially the indigenous people of America, believe him to be a villain.(Schuman, 2005).The European civilizational pursuits in the colonies had often been

criticized as the ‘white man’s burden’ under the garb of which the colonizers carried on their cruelty and victimization of the natives of different parts of the world, whether it is Latin America or Africa or Asian countries or the aboriginals of Australia. In this milieu, the example of Bernardino de Sahagun, one of the earliest Christian missionaries from Spain who arrived in Mexico in 1529 and worked to develop the Mexican natives is worth mentioning. He learnt their Nahuatl language and started collecting the knowledge of the Mexican natives to write his book *General History of the Things in New Spain* (1545), which documented the Mexican culture of that time. The colonizing minds opposed the text. It was confiscated and archived only to be discovered in the nineteenth century. An account of Bernardino de Sahagun and his writings clarifies that it is not the whole of Europe who was the colonizers. In the heart of Europe also runs the humanitarian values. They also thought of doing good to the world when they went to different parts of the world for missionary purposes. Colonialism is a venture of the European elite minds who thought of expanding their horizon of victimization and colonizing the planet. However, people like Bernardino de Sahagun still existed and made efforts to build a world known for its humanitarian values. Captain Cook or Columbus may have undertaken the journey to establish new sea routes. However, they paved the path for colonial enterprises. Science has been a means of atrocious victimization and violence, starting from ancient days to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings during World War II. However, another aspect of science has also benefited humankind and made human lives more accessible, comfortable, disease-free, and purposeful. By connecting to the historical past, we can learn these and further progress modern society.

Building connections with the past is also necessary for modern societies. From the past, we can learn where all we have gone wrong with the ways of the world, where we have missed the mark, and how we perpetrated injustices. Having detailed knowledge about the past often makes us aware of our awkward sensibilities that often mar our lives, whether

racial prejudices, gender stereotyping and related violence and oppression, religious fanaticism, or caste-based injustices. When one looks at ancient Indian history, one sees that despite its glorious achievements in specific fields of knowledge and art, it has made women and lower caste people victims of the caste-based norms which Manu coded down in what is known as *Manusmriti*. According to Manu's sayings, women and lower caste people could not own property, educate themselves, or even own arms and ammunition. (Laws of Manu). So, all ways of questioning and critiquing the Brahminical hierarchy and supposed *dharma* was kept away from women and lower caste people (especially the untouchables), leading to their victimization and oppression. Even Buddha's teachings and King Ashoka's efforts to spread Buddha's ideas could not affect the Hindu caste and gender beliefs. Dr Ambedkar, the architect of the independent Indian Constitution, tried to do away with these caste-based atrocities and gendered violence by making constitutional provisions (Kuber, 1987). Dr Ambedkar and other social reformers (such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who fought and abolished the *sati* system in the nineteenth century) studied the History of India as well as from other parts of the world and came up with egalitarian ideas and views to correct and reform those aspects of Indian culture which has abominable for centuries. Learning from mistakes from history can make modern societies find a more significant emphasis on social justice.

To conclude, it needs to be emphasized that the connections established between past and present are not a matter of just finding bridges. However, they are also meant to explore how the past lives in modern lives and how everyday life reconstructs history according to its own viewpoints and ideological positioning. Moreover, from the past, we learn what and how we as human beings have misguided and misjudged ourselves and how that has led to many a problem for human civilization across the globe. All our environmental issues, gendered violence, caste atrocities, class struggle, global terrorism, wars and battles have been because

of how we, as human beings, failed to live up to the humanitarian values. Connecting to the past will make us relive those inglorious moments, those shameful aspects of human beings and will help us in moving in the right direction and at the same time, it will make us revisit the glorious past and be proud of our human endeavours which truly built the human civilization and its culture.

Works Cited

- Keralaverma, B. *Cross Currents: The Evolution of Literary Movements*, Current Books, Thrissur, 2011.
- Kuber, W. N. *Dr. Ambedkar: A Critical Study*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973.
- Kuber, W.N..*B.R Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Publications Divisions, 1987.
- Schuman, Howard. Barry Schwartz and Hannah D'Arcy. "Elite Revisionists and Popular Beliefs: Christopher Columbus, Hero or Villain?" *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 69.1 Spring, 2005: 2-29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3521601>.