



## Indian Version of Modernity Presented in *Sat Pagla Sathe* (A Gujarati Novel)

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### Abstract

*Every society or culture gets itself renewed through some apparent or non-apparent mechanisms because of various reasons over a period of time. Modernity is a renewal mechanism. Every society or culture uses this concept of modernity in its own way and generates some newness in the established framework in order to survive. The Indian thought of modernity is quite different from the western Euro-centric idea of modernity. It does not outrightly discard or reject the old and tries to create something completely new as suggested by the promoters of the movement called 'Modernism'. Rather, the Indian psyche believes in the ancient values. Here, the new is built on the strong foundation of the old. A Gujarati novel *Sat Pagla Sathe* (Seven Steps Together), written by Meera Bhatt, exemplifies this in a unique way. Revolving around the conjugal relationship, the novel presents an alternative way of living – holding the fundamental Indian values and throwing away the worn-out traditions that hinder the growth of women. The patriarchal mind-set is challenged with some logical arguments. Gender-neutral healthy human relationship is valued. The concept of conscious parenting is introduced.*

*Key Words* –, alternative modernity, Indian, culture, society

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Bhagvad Geeta says 'Change is eternal'. With the passage of time, everything on the earth gets changed. The things which do not undergo *modernity* the process of change perish. The same applies to the culture and the society. The society or culture gets itself renewed through some apparent or non-apparent mechanisms because of various reasons over a period of time. This process of renewal operates at multiple levels and touches various aspects of life simultaneously. It is manifested in thoughts, behavioral patterns and literature of the society.

Literature is said to be a mirror of society. It reflects various social, cultural, political, philosophical and spiritual movements in its own way. It presents a variety of renewal mechanisms for every facet of life. The renewal mechanisms are related to newness. They have something new in themselves and they lead to something new. Every society or culture requires the spirit of modernity to get itself renewed. This modernity is a state of mind or attitude that helps devising techniques for renewal. It is a faculty of mind that

questions the old or established logic or patterns and finds out new logic or patterns to avail on.

The word 'modernity' is connected with modernization and modernism or post-modernism. Modernization is the process through which modernity comes in. Modernism and post-modernism are the movements in the history of the western art. The promoters of these movements believed in the destruction of everything that is old and the construction of something that is completely new. They took the path of disjunction of the old and the new. But modernity ... contains within it the seeds of its own continual destruction and reconstruction. Multiple modernity theorists thus argue that the multiplicity of political and societal forms today are merely a continuation of this process and occur within, rather than outside, modernity itself.<sup>1</sup> (Fourie, 56)

The essential attribute of modernization is rationality. Rationality transforms thought

processes at the level of the individual and, in the process, permeates the entire institutional framework of society. ...the rationalization of cultural and social life resulting from the spread of scientific knowledge and attitude would lead, among other things, to the progressive eradication of traditional superstitions, prejudices, and errors...<sup>2</sup> (Gaonkar, 7-8) A series of societal changes are implicit in the process of modernisation. The social systems determine a great deal of life experience for any one individual. The concomitant structural changes and value shifts bring about fundamental changes in the entire cultural ethos.

The western concept of modernity presents a bold contrast between what existed and what is existent. It replaces former ways of occupying space and experiencing time. Once belief is lost, there can be no restoration. But modernity is experienced in different ways and at different times by various parts of the world. It can be different from the dominant Euro-centric concept of modernity. And the modernity that is not Euro-centric in nature is called the alternative modernity. Modernity has assumed different form and content in different historical and cultural contexts, where it is assimilated or “translated” to the very conditions being transformed under its impact. It is also within the nature of modernity, with its commitment to constant change, to ceaselessly generate new modernities out of the past, present and future.<sup>3</sup> (Dirlik, 10-11)

Alternative modernity is an attitude that persuades us to accept other cultures/traditions without any hierarchy. The idea of alternative modernity implies that modernity is revealed differently within specific cultures or civilizations. Creative adaptation (of modernity) ... is the site where a people “make” themselves modern, as opposed to being “made” modern by alien and impersonal forces,

and where they give themselves an identity and a destiny.<sup>4</sup> (Gaonkar, 16)

Modernity is a kind of renewal mechanism through which the society survives and develops. Indian context/model of alternative modernity is an internally connected cultural and intellectual renewal mechanism. The Indian consciousness does not believe in complete separation of the old and the new. Rather, it believes in the new emerging from the old; the simultaneous existence of the both. This can be compared to an age-old banyan tree having new branches after every few years. It shows that the Indian psyche does not promote replacement or destruction but propagates reconstruction.

According to the western belief of modernity, nothing new can take place unless and until the old dies. It believes in binary system. It leads to the rejection of tradition in order to nurture individualism and self-development. According to the eastern belief of modernity, nothing new can take place without the old. It believes in continuum. ...cultural traditions continue to exert powerful influences in the modernizing process...primordial ties rooted in concrete living communities have helped to shape different configurations of the modern experience.<sup>5</sup> (Weiming, 111) Here, the new and the old exist together and complement each other. This leads to the establishment of interconnectedness, multiplicity and interdependence.

As suggested by Raymond Williams, every society, at a given point of time, has a specific cultural pattern in which some residual, dominant and emergent features simultaneously exist. This plurality or multiplicity of cultural elements cannot be destroyed. This coexistence of various cultural traits is readily accepted in Indian cultures.

The Gujarati novel *Sat Pagla Sathe* (1989), written by Meera Bhatt, is selected

to exemplify the Indian version of modernity. *Sat Pagla Sathe*, literally meaning *seven steps together*, refers to marriage in the Indian context. The reason for selecting this text is the newness of ideas depicted in it. The Gujarati author presents the so-called Euro-centric concept of modernity in the indigenous setting. She not only rejects the prevalent social system, traditions and rituals but also suggests an alternative for the same. Thus, she creates a new version of modernity which is called an alternative modernity. ...cultural and historical backgrounds lead different civilizations to have sufficiently different interpretations of these core features so as to result in various distinctive 'modernities'.<sup>6</sup> (Fourie, 57)

The author focuses on the conjugal relationship. She criticises the typical Indian mind-set of patriarchy. In our male-dominated society, women get less or limited chances to develop her personality in her own way. She is not considered to be an individual and not granted any liberty to decide or act. The author shuns this practice and puts forward a fresh point of view advocating equal rights for women in the society. She gives a viable alternative which can be followed instead of the existent one.

The protagonist Purna is a representative of the modernist attitude prevalent in the present-day Indian society. She holds the strings of the past, lives fully in the present and looks forward to a future of her dreams. She consciously avails on the conventional values to build her present state of liberated mind and constructs a positive viable future. She does not reject the conventions outrightly. Rather, she accepts some values from the age-old traditions and creates an alternative framework for her present and future. She, in a way, offers a renewal mechanism by proposing new point of view to look at the Indian marriage system in particular and the Indian family institution in general.

She gives importance to self-control (સંયમ) in life. She thinks that not observing self-control is not freedom. Modernity has nothing to do with being wayward or unruly. She believes that observing restraint and discipline leads to natural growth. સંયમને હું જીવનવિકાસનું પ્રાણતત્વ સમજું છું. મારી દ્રષ્ટિએ સંયમિત જીવન એટલે મૂરઝાઈ-કરમાઈ ગયેલું ફૂલ નહીં, પણ પૂર્ણ પ્રકુલ્લિત ફૂલ! એની પાંદડી-પાંદડી પરની ઊજળી ઝાંચ, એની વહેતી સુગંધ, બધું માટીના કણકણમાં નિયમબદ્ધ રહીને, કુદરતના કાનૂન સાથે તાલબદ્ધતા જાળવીને પ્રાપ્ત થયેલી સંપદા છે...બીનમાંથી સૂર જગાવવા તારને બાંધવા તો પડે જ! (12-13) This is a unique feature of the Indian concept of modernity. Nature follows some unwritten rules to blossom and so requires a human being!

Purna is a modern woman having radical notions about marriage and family systems. Her ideas are presented through her diary and her conversations with Asim, her husband. She questions the old framework of the society. સહજીવનમાં આવા કેટલાય સંસ્કારોને તપાસતાં રહેવું પડે, એનું પુનઃમૂલ્યાંકન કરી રાખવા જેવા સંસ્કારોને ખાતર-પાણી આપી ફળ-ફૂલ આપતાં કરવા પડશે અને જે સંસ્કારો હવે કોઈ ખપના નથી રહ્યા તેને સન્માનપૂર્વક અગ્નિસંસ્કાર આપવો પડશે. (14-15) She firmly believes that one should keep on evaluating the existing values (સંસ્કારો) and discard the same respectfully if they are no more useful.

She logically puts forward her disagreement with the conventional norms of the society pertaining to conjugal relationship, childcare, parenting, individual identity of a wife, moral values and social contribution of an individual. She rejects many taboos but not just for the sake of defying the existent. She is very clear in her thoughts. She does not agree with the existing standards as they hinder her growth as an individual. She challenges the status of an Indian wife being a secondary citizen in the society.

The most important aspect of the novel is the construction of a new alternative framework for the society presented by Purna. Her protest does not go in vain. She channelizes her negative approach towards the worn-out traditional mindset and creates a new pattern of thinking. She moulds herself and her family with a lot of positive energy. She proves her strength of character by making the people around her value her efforts.

She presents a comprehensive picture of a modern Indian family in a systematic manner during the course of the novel. The typical Indian mentality expects complete submission of a wife to her husband and his family. અત્યાર સુધીની પરંપરા એમ જોતી આવેલી કે વહુ ઘરમાં આવી એટલે એક 'સાધન' ઘરમાં ઉમેરાયું. જેમ સ્ટીલનું કબાટ આવ્યું, રેડિયો, ટીવી, ફીઝ વસાવ્યાં તેથી ઘરની સગવડ-શોભા વધ્યાં, એમ જ વહુ ઘરમાં આવી તો સગવડ-શોભા-પ્રતિષ્ઠા વધારવાનું એક સૌથી સુંદર સાધન ઉમેરાયું. એ વહુ એક જીવતીજાગતી વ્યક્તિ છે. એને પણ એની પોતાની સ્વતંત્ર જરૂરિયાતો, અરમાનો હોય, એનું પણ પોતાનું એક નિરાળું વિશ્વ હોય એવું કોઈના ચિંતનમાં સ્થાન જ નહીં. (29)

There can be no space or time of her own. She cannot have her own wish or choice or voice. She cannot do anything on her own. She just has to follow. She is expected to forget or abolish her own identity. No decision-making power lies with her. She should be meek, timid and vulnerable. Her male counterpart, be it a father, husband or son, always overpower her.

But Purna, being a radical educated modern woman, denies to follow such standards and demands for an equal status of a wife in the conjugal relationship. સ્ત્રી એ કોઈ ચીજ નથી, સાધન નથી કે એનો કોઈ ધણી હોય, માલિક હોય, સ્વામી હોય, જે એને ફાવે તેમ વાપરી શકે, ઉપયોગ કરી શકે. સ્ત્રી એક વ્યક્તિ છે, ચેતન તત્વ છે, એક સ્વતંત્ર હસ્તી છે. એની પોતાની પણ એક આગવી દુનિયા છે, એની પોતાની ઈચ્છાઓ છે, માગણીઓ છે, એષણાઓ છે, હેતુ છે. પોતાના જીવનનો કોઈ ઉદ્દેશ લઈને જીવન સિદ્ધ કરવા એ જન્મી છે. (13)

She disagrees with the idea of surrender or submission. She believes that, in marriage, both the soul-mates have equal importance. Liberty of thought and action lies with both of them. None should be meek and timid. The wife should have an equal opportunity to flourish. She should be allowed all her individual rights to desire and select. None should dominate her. There should be some space for her in her family as well as in the society.

Again, Purna opposes gender discrimination at the early stage of life. She and Asim try to be as neutral as they can in the rearing of their twins Alok and Vishwa. ...આપણે નક્કી કર્યું છે કે બાળકોના ઉછેરમાં એક એક પગલું સમજી-બૂઝીને

ભરવું. આ ઉંમરે વિશુમાં – ‘હું છોકરી છું અને છોકરા કરતાં કાંઈક જુદી છું’ આવી સમાનતા કેળવવાની મને જરૂર નથી લગતી. (51)

She clarifies at one point of time that she respects the instinctive gender needs but does not agree with social norms of gender discrimination. The concept of conscious parenting is introduced.

She also believes that freedom is a matter of privilege. It cannot be sought or given. She discards the peculiarly Indian metaphor used for a married couple where the husband is a tree and the wife is a creeper. Instead, she considers them both two different trees being and growing with each other, enjoying the company of each other, but having separate identities from each other. અમારી સહ્યાત્રા, સહવાસ, સહયોગ આ બધું જ હશે, તેમ છતાંય અમે બંને પોતપોતાની ભૂમિ પર ઊગેલાં, ઊભેલાં બે સ્વતંત્ર વૃક્ષ હઈશું... વૃક્ષ-વેલીનો સંબંધ નહીં, પણ સ્વતંત્ર વૃક્ષ!... મારી ઝંખના એવી સીમિત નથી કે હું કેવળ મને વિકસાવીને જ સંતોષ પામું! કોઈ અન્યનું જીવન વિકસે તો તેમાં હું પણ વિકસું છું... (11) She feels that both of them should have liberty to develop their hobbies different from each other. There is nothing wrong in Asim going to an astronomers’ meet and Purna going to a concert.

The striking fact about Purna’s rebellion is her faith in the intrinsic Indian values. She is full of love and hope. She does not believe in stretching the issues of family life so much as to get them torn. She is humble enough to let things go. She surrenders out of love. She accepts her husband's or mother-in-law's wish just for the sake of love and respect. She forgives Asim for his adultery just because she profoundly loves him. દુનિયાનું કોઈ બંધન

મને બાંધી શકે તેમ નથી, સિવાય પ્રેમનું બંધન. (64)

She realizes that a married couple should not take each other for granted as is observed very commonly in the Indian society. They should try their love and recharge their relationship during the course of time. સંબંધને પણ વચ્ચે વચ્ચે ટકોરા મારી લેવાની જરૂર હોય છે... કશું ક્યાંક તરડાઈ જતું નથી ને? થોડો બોદો અવાજ કેમ સંભળાય છે? જમીન નિત્ય માવજત માંગે છે, તેમ સંબંધને પણ નિત નવી માવજત જોઈએ, નવું ખાતર, નવું પાણી, નવો પ્રકાશ! ... ક્યાંક આપણે ચૂક્યાં. આપણું દાંપત્યજીવન ચાળીસી વટાવી ગયું, અન્યોન્ય માટે અનિવાર્ય ન રહ્યાં અને વાસીપણું દાખલ થઈ ગયું... (64)

In marriage, the growth of one is the responsibility of the other. Submission is not devotion. It subjugates one of them. Devotion should be mutual, leading to enrichment of both. They should not harm their individual identities. જીવનમાં મૈત્રી અને સંબંધ સમાનતાની ભૂમિકા પર જ સ્થાપાઈ શકે. એકપક્ષીય શરણતાને આધારે કદી સંબંધ સ્થાપાઈ ના શકે. અમારા દાંપત્યજીવનનો આદર્શ સમર્પણ નથી, સંબંધ છે, મૈત્રી છે, જેમાં બેઉનો પરિપૂર્ણ સ્વાતંત્ર્ય, પરિપૂર્ણ સમર્પણ અને બેઉનો પરિપૂર્ણ વિકાસ ગૃહિત છે. (35)

She believes that independence should be absolute. It cannot be found in fragments. Either it is complete or it does not exist at all. It cannot be partial. સ્વાતંત્ર્ય એ એક એવી ચીજ છે, જે કાં તો છે, કાં નથી. ટુકડા-

ટુકડામાં, અંશ-અંશમાં મળતું સ્વાતંત્ર્ય તે સ્વાતંત્ર્ય જ નથી. સ્વાતંત્ર્ય એક એવો છોડ છે, જે પૂર્ણતા, સમગ્રતાની ભૂમિ પર જ ખીલી શકે... સ્વાતંત્ર્ય આપવા લેવાની ચીજ નથી!...વાત તો છે સ્વાતંત્ર્યના સ્વીકારની.

(14)

She is a good host for the people from village who came for a relative's surgery. She does so out of her love for humanity. She also talks about sharing responsibilities of the family and home. She thinks that all the members of the family should share them equally instead of throwing them on to women.

She rejects the traditional post-death rituals of a Hindu society. Emphasizing the inherent Indian values, she introduces the concept of making death an occasion of giving something back to the society. She thinks that some memorable contribution should be made in the name of the departing soul. This can make the soul truly rest in peace.

Purna is named 'Samaj Lakshmi' (the Goddess of society). A married woman is called Gruha Lakshmi (the Goddess of home) and a girl is called Lakshmi (Goddess) in India. But here the protagonist becomes Samaj Lakshmi by bringing change in the society for its betterment.

An Indian mind does not believe in replacement or disjunction. It believes in reconstruction with a change of orientation. Having faith in this belief, the protagonist suggests a new way of thinking which is based on the strong foundation of the old Indian values. She does not violently rebel against the set standards but resist them with great conviction. She does not defy the social norms for the sake of doing so. Instead, she gives convincing arguments and sustainable alternatives.

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