

OPINION

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THA CURSE OF TRADITION

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WATCHING on a small black and white television screen in a remote mountain hamlet in the south of France, the WEDDING OF THE CENTURY, together with 750 million other people, I was suddenly struck by the realisation that tradition can be a curse. The British sickness is, as much as anything the pandits like to diagnose, the result of traditions. Watching the pageantry unroll without a hitch, watching all the horses trot in unison beside the antediluvian carriages, obviously inspired by the story of Cinderella, whose author was a contemporary of Louis XIV, I suddenly understood why Britain is unable to make a car which holds together, on a mass produced scale, why her steel mills are overmanned, her uneconomic collieries are kept open, her apprenticeship system absurd, her trade unions staffed with dinosaurs, why her place in the league table of great powers has been frittered away. It is all because of tradition.

There is something immensely reassuring and comforting in sticking to tradition. And the British are the world's last stickers—as any display of pageantry shows. From the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace to Trooping the Colour, State Funerals, Royal Weddings and Jubilees there is nobody who can beat the British. They do it all superbly; so superbly that the rest of the world comes to admire or watches on television.

Unfortunately, admirable though tradition is, tradition comes from the past and is, by definition, rigid. It, therefore, makes change difficult and what is more serious may make it appear unnecessary. Therefore, tradition often stands in the way of progress. I remember when I visited the city of Wai in Maharashtra, being told with great pride of the daily performance of a holy Brahmin—each morning, before sunrise that worthy man performed 1,500, one thousand five hundred, I repeat, Surya Namaskars. Admirable, no doubt but I bet he was left with little energy for anything else! His family would probably have fared better had he engaged upon some more economically productive occupation. Nor does one have to look to Indian Brahmins to see how harmful sticking

to tradition at all costs can become. I know an English member of the landed gentry who, was so short of cash that there was a time when his family slept in beds without sheets and could not afford either decent food or domestic help, yet he found enough money to keep a game keeper for the peasants for his shoots.

Nor was he unique in sticking to so peculiar a set of priorities that it requires tradition to make sense of them. I was at school in France with a descendant of one of France's oldest aristocratic families. My schoolmate, who was also my friend, was impoverished — as so often happens the money had gone to the bastard branch. Because of her mistaken belief that she could only marry a man as blue-blooded as herself — and such a one would only consider a bride with a large dowery — she remained single. Attractive and clever she had an affair with a man of sufficient quality for him to be introduced to me. A handsome meritocrat who had gone far in the French Civil Service he was keen on marrying my friend. When I asked, on a subsequent trip to France what had happened to him she explained that tired of waiting he had married someone else "he wanted children" she said, "But so do you!" I exclaimed remembering how fond she was of children. "An affair yes, but children, my dear, out of the question. After all you forget that he is a commoner!" My friend is now a lonely old spinster and I sometimes wonder whether she still thinks she was right to have rejected her commoner, because of the lure of tradition.

The great genius of the Japanese is to combine tradition with change. Not long ago I saw a television documentary on life today, in a small and remote Japanese island where agriculture and handicrafts are the main sources of income and where tradition is combined with modernity. Marriages are still arranged, children continue to respect and obey their elders but every opportunity has been taken to benefit from progress. The trousseau of the bride contained equipment and gadgets which would not have been out of place in the United States in an urban setting: freezer, dish-washer, T.V., micro-oven, motor car etc. But what was extraordinary to watch on the television screen was the wedding itself. There was a traditional ceremony with traditional meal and prayers and the participants all wearing Kimonos; the bride (whose hair was cropped and permed) wore a wig as well as traditional make up. Then, immediately after, there was a second wedding reception with the young couple dressed like their western counterparts. The bride in white with a straw hat high heeled shoes and white gloves; the groom in pin-stripe and the meal, a western meal, eaten off a table high enough for people to have to sit on chairs. There was even a wedding cake and jaz or rock music, I forget which.

The Japanese alone seem to be able to reconcile tradition with progress perhaps because after all their own tradition is one of imitation rather than innovation.

The puzzle, in Britain's case is that, despite its great tradition of industrial pioneering it has let so much of its industry fall behind,

OLD AGE

"There was a time when, though my path was rough,
 This joy within me dallied with distress,
 And all misfortunes were but as the stuff
 Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:
 For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
 And fruits and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.
 But now afflictions bow me down to earth,
 Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth."

* * *

It is to spend long days
 And not once feel that we were ever young;
 It is to add, immured
 In the hot prison of the present, month
 To month with weary pain.

It is to suffer this
 And feel but half, and feebly, what we feel.
 Deep in our hidden heart
 Festers the dull remembrance of a change,
 But no emotion-none.

~~It is last stage of all—~~
 When we are frozen up within, and quite
 The phantom of ourselves,
 To hear the world applaud the hollow ghost
 Which blamed the living man."

* * *

"Age is in some ways almost more appalling than death. For, in the words of Epicurus, 'when we exist there is no death, and when there is death we no more exist': whereas, when we are old, we still exist. Death cannot be experienced: old age can— 'old age, abhorred, decrepit, unsociable, and unfriended'."

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