

From Cyber Parks to Sadhus, Change and Tradition in Urban India: Colin Todhunter

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There exists a significant amount of literature and debate regarding modernity, urbanisation and social change in India. Critical inquiries persist, not least on the impact of change on the daily lives of individuals and the ways in which they navigate their identities amid the tensions between modernity and tradition in an increasingly dynamic urban environment.

At the heart of this urban landscape are the working poor, who play a crucial role in India's economy. Engaged in diverse occupations, such as construction, goods transport, waste recycling, domestic service and street vending, their contributions are vital for the functioning of the economy.

Informal workers constitute more than 90 per cent of the labour force (80 per cent in urban settings). However, the informal sector is characterised by challenging working conditions that include strenuous manual labour, low remuneration, extended hours and a lack of workplace benefits.

This stark reality of the informal sector stands in direct contrast to the expansive cyber parks and modern shopping malls that epitomise India's uneven 'development' — a concept that suggests modernisation often occurs in isolated sectors, leaving substantial portions of the population relatively untouched. This is particularly evident in the retail landscape, where traditional and modern forms of commerce coexist, often in uneasy tension.

On one hand, there is a concerning proliferation of organised retail and (monopolistic) online commerce platforms, representing one aspect of Indian consumerism. On the other hand, local street markets and vendors — integral components of the informal sector — remain a longstanding and vital feature of Indian urban life.

Despite the encroachment of modern retail, these traditional markets continue to thrive, facilitating a direct connection between rural producers and urban consumers, particularly concerning fresh produce. This farm-to-table model not only sustains millions of livelihoods within the informal sector, but it is also deeply embedded in Indian culinary culture, highlighting the ongoing relevance of these markets within urban neighbourhoods. The persistence of such traditional forms of commerce alongside modern retail outlets highlights the interplay between tradition and modernity in India's urban economic landscape.

Culturally, India presents a distinctive scenario. Unlike many Western contexts where religion is often compartmentalised, spiritual practices and symbols are intricately interwoven into public life. The integration of sacred and secular elements persists despite the influences of modernity, urbanisation and global consumerism.

While societal structures may evolve externally, fundamental cultural and spiritual values remain deeply entrenched. Indian urbanism allows for the coexistence of age-old practices with contemporary realities; tradition and modernity, spirituality and materialism exist together.

For instance, religious symbols serve as markers of cultural identity. The portrayal of Hindu deities on everyday items reinforces cultural connections even within modern contexts. Such representations often feature vibrant artistic styles that blend functionality with cultural significance.

Moreover, religious paraphernalia — such as leaves, limes or conch shells — are commonly used to adorn small businesses. Each leaf possesses distinct symbolic meanings; conch shells are associated with Vishnu and are frequently displayed outside stores. Limes, often paired with green chillies to ward off negative energies, symbolise prosperity and abundance, making them prevalent, hanging in front of shops. This practice illustrates how spiritual beliefs permeate daily life and underscores the enduring influence of tradition on contemporary commerce in India.

Deeply rooted beliefs associated with concepts like dharma persist despite social transformations. Many dharmic traditions emphasise the significance of seva (selfless service), with charitable giving — known as dana in Sanskrit — considered an essential aspect of one's dharma or religious duty. This practice is perceived not merely as a moral obligation but as a spiritual endeavour that fosters personal growth and good karma. This may, in part, help us to understand why 'duty' or 'service' is often invoked when people talk about their jobs.

Historical photographs depicting Britain in the 1950s and 1960s evoke memories of cohesive communities and industrial landscapes that were rapidly swept away under the guise of 'progress'. These images connect us to a past where individual identities were closely linked to their local and immediate social, economic and cultural environments.

The consequences of this 'progress' have been critically examined by writer Paul Kingsnorth in his book *Real England: The Battle Against the Bland*. He laments the loss of authentic pubs, rural hedgerows, affordable housing, individuality and character in towns due to corporate greed and an insatiable quest for profit — a phenomenon described by one insightful reviewer as a "Starbucked, Wetherspooned avalanche".

In India, custom, tradition and personal identity are intricately interwoven. The persistence of ancient beliefs amid modern pressures underscores the enduring power of cultural identity. However, even within this context, forces such as modernity or globalisation — more accurately framed as neocolonialism — are gradually reshaping urban landscapes and influencing the lives, fashions and preferences of its inhabitants.

In 2003, British journalist David Charters (1948-2020) remarked:

"Sadly, the world is being shrunk to a 'global village' by the forces of celebrity, mass media, instant communications, swift travel and the constant desire for standardisation. So, we should record the qualities that made us different while there is still time".

Take a journey through Chennai's streets to prompt reflection on the issues highlighted above by visiting the author's open-access, image-based ebook [here](#).

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Featured image: Elante Mall is the largest mall of Chandigarh (Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

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