

# A Study of Indian Customs and Traditions During the Transition to the Modern Era

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**Abstract**—The year 1600 CE marks a critical juncture in Indian history. Situated at the zenith of the Mughal Empire under Akbar the Great and the dawn of European commercial interest via the chartering of the East India Company, this period witnessed a unique synthesis of indigenous traditions and external influences. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural fabric of India around 1600 CE, examining religious syncretism, caste dynamics, domestic customs, gender roles, and daily traditions. Through historical cross-examination, we explore how these practices formed a resilient yet adaptable societal framework.

**Index Terms**—Indian customs and traditions, modern era, cultural transition, Indian society, social change, modernization in India, urbanization, globalization, joint family system, nuclear family, marriage customs, women empowerment, religious practices, Indian festivals, education system, industrialization, cultural heritage, traditional values, western influence, Indian culture, social reforms, technology and society, cultural preservation, Indian lifestyle, tradition and modernity, social transformation, Indian history, family values, and cultural diversity.



## I. INTRODUCTION

By 1600 CE, the Indian subcontinent was characterized by staggering diversity and deep-rooted cultural institutions. It was neither static nor entirely

fragmented. The subcontinent functioned under a sophisticated network of regional kingdoms, agrarian economies, and sprawling urban trade centres. To study Indian customs at this specific historical marker is to observe a society navigating the peak of Indo-Islamic cultural fusion while maintaining ancient Vedic, Bhakti, and local folk traditions.

India is a land of rich cultural diversity, ancient customs, and deep-rooted traditions. Indian society has evolved continuously from ancient times through the medieval period into the modern era. The transition to the modern era, especially during the 19th and 20th centuries, brought significant social, political, economic, and cultural changes. Western education, industrialization, globalization, technological advancement, urbanization, and social reform movements greatly influenced traditional Indian customs and lifestyles.

Despite modernization, India has preserved many of its traditional practices while adapting them to contemporary needs. This research paper studies the transformation of Indian customs and traditions during the transition to the modern era and examines how traditional values coexist with modern lifestyles.

### 1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To study the origin and evolution of Indian culture.
2. To understand the important features of Indian culture.
3. To examine the impact of modernization on Indian traditions.
4. To analyze the role of globalization in cultural transformation.
5. To study the importance of preserving Indian cultural heritage.

## II. RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE AND SYNCRETISM

Religion in 1600 CE was the primary axis around which daily life, law, and traditions revolved. Rather than existing in isolated silos, different faiths profoundly influenced one another's customs.

### 2.1 The Bhakti and Sufi Movements

The intersection of the Hindu Bhakti movement and Islamic Sufism created a shared cultural space. By 1600, the teachings of saints like Kabir, Guru Nanak, Mirabai, and Tulsidas (who composed the Ramcharitmanas in the late 16th century) had thoroughly democratized religious practice.

Customs: Ritualistic rigidity was frequently bypassed in favor of congregational singing (bhajans and qawwalis).

Pilgrimage: Shared veneration of Sufi shrines (dargahs) by both Hindus and Muslims became a defining feature of North Indian communal life.

Imperial Policy: Din-i-Ilahi and Sulh-i-kul

At the imperial court in Agra, Emperor Akbar formulated Sulh-i-kul (universal peace) and Din-i-Ilahi (a syncretic spiritual program).

Court Traditions: The Mughal court adopted Persian festivals like Nowruz (New Year) alongside Hindu festivals like Dipavali (Diwali) and Rakshabandhan. Akbar's patronization of Sanskrit texts translated into Persian (Razmnama for the Mahabharata) established a precedent of elite intellectual exchange.

## III. SOCIAL HIERARCHY AND THE CASTE SYSTEM

The social structure of 1600 CE was heavily stratified, governed primarily by the Varna and Jati (caste) systems, alongside the evolving Muslim social stratification (Ashraf vs. Ajlaf).

Social Strata	Primary Roles & Attributes (c. 1600 CE)
Elite / Ruling Class	Mughal nobility (Mansabdars), Rajput chieftains, and Brahmin advisors. Controlled land and revenue.

Mercantile Class	Banias, Marwaris, and Chettiyars. Immensely wealthy, controlling inland and maritime trade.
Agrarian / Artisan Class	The backbone of the economy. Comprised peasants, weavers, and metalworkers organized into tight-knit guild-like jatis.
Marginalized Communities	Performed essential sanitation and labor duties; strictly segregated from village centers due to notions of ritual purity.

### 3.1 Caste Dynamics

Caste regulations dictated dietary habits, marriage alliances, and physical mobility. However, economic realities such as the booming textile trade allowed certain artisan castes to gain significant economic leverage, even if their ritual status remained unchanged.

## IV. DOMESTIC CUSTOMS AND LIFECYCLE RITUALS (SAMSKARAS)

For the vast majority of Hindus, life was structured by ancient Samskaras (lifecycle rituals), adapted to regional realities. Parallel life-cycle rituals (Akika, Nikah) dictated Muslim domestic life.

### 4.1 Birth and Childhood

The birth of a child, particularly a male heir, was celebrated with elaborate astrology (Janma Kundali). The Upanayana (sacred thread ceremony) remained a crucial rite of passage for upper-caste males, marking the transition into formal education.

### 4.2 Marriage Traditions

Marriage was viewed not as an individual choice but as a strategic alliance between families, strictly bound by endogamy (marrying within the caste) and exogamy (marrying outside the village or clan lineage).

Dowry and Bride-price: Depending on the region and caste, either dowry (Dahez) or bride-price was practiced.

Child Marriage: Pre-pubescent marriage was highly prevalent across both Hindu and Muslim communities, driven by a desire to secure alliances early and preserve perceived family honor.



Vijayanagara Empire  
(Then Mysuru state, Now Karnataka)

Main articles: Vijayanagara Empire and War of the League of the Indies



Map of the Sangama dynasty of the Vijayanagara Empire.

The Vijayanagara Empire was established in 1336 by Harihara I and his brother Bukka Raya I of Sangama Dynasty, which originated as a political heir of the Hoysala Empire, Kakatiya Empire, and the Pandyan Empire. The empire rose to prominence as a culmination of attempts by the south Indian powers to ward off Islamic invasions by the end of the 13th

century. It lasted until 1646, although its power declined after a major military defeat in 1565 by the combined armies of the Deccan sultanates. The empire is named after its capital city of Vijayanagara, whose ruins surround present day Hampi, now a World Heritage Site in Karnataka, India.

In the first two decades after the founding of the empire, Harihara I gained control over most of the area south of the Tungabhadra River and earned the title of Purvapaschima Samudradhishavara ("master of the eastern and western seas"). By 1374 Bukka Raya I, successor to Harihara I, had defeated the chiefdom of Arcot, the Reddys of Kondavidu, and the Sultan of Madurai and had gained control over Goa in the west and the Tungabhadra-Krishna doab in the north.

Harihara II, the second son of Bukka Raya I, further consolidated the kingdom beyond the Krishna River and brought the whole of South India under the Vijayanagara umbrella.<sup>[245]</sup> The next ruler, Deva Raya I, emerged successful against the Gajapatis of Odisha and undertook important works of fortification and irrigation. Italian traveller Niccolo de Conti wrote of him as the most powerful ruler of India. Deva Raya II succeeded to the throne in 1424 and was possibly the most capable of the Sangama Dynasty rulers.<sup>1</sup> He quelled rebelling feudal lords as well as the Zamorin of Calicut and Quilon in the south. He invaded the island of Sri Lanka and became overlord of the kings of Burma at Pegu and Tanasserim.

Mani ("protective jewel of Karnata Empire"). The kings patronised the saints of the dvaita order (philosophy of dualism) of Madhvacharya at Udupi.



Photograph of the ruins of the Vijayanagara Empire at Hampi, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1868



Gajashaala, or elephant's stable, was built by the Vijayanagar rulers for their war elephants.



Vijayanagara marketplace at Hampi, along with the sacred tank located on the side of Krishna temple.



Stone temple car in Vitthala Temple at Hampi

The empire's legacy includes many monuments spread over South India, the best known of which is the group at Hampi. The previous temple building traditions in South India came together in the Vijayanagara architecture style. The mingling of all faiths and vernaculars inspired architectural innovation of Hindu temple construction. South Indian mathematics flourished under the protection of the Vijayanagara Empire in Kerala. The south Indian mathematician Madhava of Sangamagrama founded the famous Kerala School of Astronomy and Mathematics in the 14th century which produced a lot of great south

Indian mathematicians like Parameshvara, Nilakantha Somayaji and Jyesthadeva. Efficient administration and vigorous overseas trade brought new technologies such as water management systems for irrigation. The empire's patronage enabled fine arts and literature to reach new heights in Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, and Sanskrit, while Carnatic music evolved into its current form.

Vijayanagara went into decline after the defeat in the Battle of Talikota (1565). After the death of Aliya Rama Raya in the Battle of Talikota, Tirumala Deva Raya started the Aravidu dynasty, moved and founded a new capital of Penukonda to replace the destroyed Hampi, and attempted to reconstitute the remains of Vijayanagara Empire. Tirumala abdicated in 1572, dividing the remains of his kingdom to his three sons, and pursued a religious life until his death in 1578.

The Aravidu dynasty successors ruled the region but the empire collapsed in 1614, and the final remains ended in 1646, from continued wars with the Bijapur sultanate and others. During this period, more kingdoms in South India became independent and separate from Vijayanagara. These include the Mysore Kingdom, Keladi Nayaka, Nayaks of Madurai, Nayaks of Tanjore, Nayakas of Chitradurga and Nayak Kingdom of Gingee – all of which declared independence and went on to have a significant impact on the history of South India in the coming centuries.

#### V. GENDER ROLES AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

The status of women around 1600 CE was highly restrictive, though nuances existed based on class and geography.

**Purdah and Seclusion:** The custom of purdah (veiling and segregation of women) was strictly observed among upper-class Muslim and Hindu (particularly Rajput) families. It was seen as a marker of high social status and modesty.

**Sati and Jauhar:** The practice of Sati (widow burning) was practiced among certain elite Hindu castes, particularly the Rajputs, despite repeated, active attempts by Akbar to discourage or ban forced immolation. Jauhar (mass self-immolation) was practiced by royal women during military defeats to avoid capture.

**Property Rights:** Women generally lacked independent property rights, though Islamic jurisprudence granted

Muslim women a theoretical right to a share of inheritance and mahr (dower), which was practiced with varying degrees of strictness depending on local customary laws.

The Matriarchal Exception: In contrast to the deeply patriarchal North, parts of Southern India specifically the Nayar community of Kerala maintained resilient matrilineal traditions (Marumakkathayam), where property and family lineage passed through the female line.



## VI. DAILY LIFE, DRESS, AND MATERIAL CULTURE

### Attire

Clothing in 1600 CE reflected both climate and social standing.

Common Folk: Men typically wore a dhoti or lungi, while women wore early variations of the unstitched sari or ghagra.

Elite Fashion: The Mughal court popularized stitched garments. The Jama (a long-sleeved tunic), Pajama, and elaborate turbans (Pagri) became standard elite wear, heavily influencing Rajput and Deccani royal attire. Silk, brocade, and fine muslin (Malmal) were highly prized.

### Dietary Traditions

Diets were largely regional and seasonal.

Vegetarianism: Firmly entrenched in Vaishnavite, Jain, and Brahmin communities across Gujarat, Rajasthan, and South India.

Culinary Fusion: The imperial kitchens of Delhi and Agra were perfecting what we now know as Mughlai cuisine marrying Persian cooking techniques (use of nuts, saffron, and slow-cooking) with Indian spices. The period also marks the very beginning of the introduction of New World crops (like chili peppers and tobacco) by the Portuguese, which would permanently alter Indian agriculture and diet in the coming centuries.

### Religious Customs and Traditions

Religion occupied a central place in ancient Indian life. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism were major religions that shaped customs and moral values.

### Vedic Rituals

The Vedic people performed yajnas or fire sacrifices to please gods and seek blessings for prosperity, rain, and victory. Priests recited hymns from the Vedas during these ceremonies.

Research on Vedic traditions identifies yajna as a major social and spiritual institution in ancient India.

### Worship Practices

People worshipped natural forces such as:

- Sun (Surya)
- Fire (Agni)
- Wind (Vayu)
- Rain (Indra)

Temples later became important centers of worship, education, and cultural activities.

### Buddhism and Jainism

Buddhism and Jainism promoted:

- Non-violence (Ahimsa)
- Truthfulness
- Simplicity
- Meditation
- Compassion

These religions influenced Indian traditions by encouraging ethical living and equality.

### Marriage Customs in Ancient India

Marriage was considered a sacred institution in ancient India. It was viewed as a religious duty and an important stage of life.

### Features of Ancient Indian Marriage

- Arranged marriages were common.
- Religious rituals and sacred fire ceremonies were important.
- Marriage united not only individuals but also families.
- Loyalty and commitment were highly valued.

Different forms of marriage existed according to ancient texts. Social customs also emphasized duties between husband and wife.

### Education System

The education system in ancient India was highly respected. The Gurukul system was widely practiced where students lived with their teachers (gurus) and received education.

### Characteristics of Gurukul Education

- Focus on discipline and moral values
- Oral learning and memorization
- Study of Vedas, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine
- Emphasis on character development

Education aimed at the complete development of the individual. Ancient Indian educational traditions are often described as holistic and value-oriented.

### Food Habits and Lifestyle

Ancient Indians followed simple and healthy lifestyles.

### Common Food Practices

- Consumption of grains, fruits, vegetables, and milk products
- Use of herbs and spices for health benefits
- Fasting during religious occasions
- Respect for food as sacred

Ayurveda, the traditional Indian system of medicine, influenced food habits and healthcare practices. Traditional healing systems evolved over thousands of years in the Indian subcontinent.

### Festivals and Celebrations

Festivals were important cultural traditions in ancient India. They promoted unity, spirituality, and social harmony.

### Major Celebrations

- Harvest festivals
- Seasonal celebrations
- Religious ceremonies
- Community gatherings

Music, dance, storytelling, and drama were often part of festivals and social functions.

### Position of Women in Ancient India

The position of women varied across different periods of ancient Indian history.

### Positive Aspects

- Women participated in religious rituals.
- Some women became scholars and poets.

- Education for women existed during the early Vedic age.

### Limitations

- Patriarchal society restricted freedom over time.
- Child marriage and limited property rights developed later.

Historical studies indicate that women's status changed significantly between the early and later Vedic periods.

### Art, Literature, and Cultural Traditions

Ancient India made remarkable contributions to literature, architecture, sculpture, music, and dance.

### Literature

Important literary works include:

- Vedas
- Upanishads
- Ramayana
- Mahabharata
- Arthashastra

### Art and Architecture

Temples, stupas, caves, and sculptures reflected religious devotion and artistic excellence.

### Music and Dance

Music and dance were associated with worship and entertainment. Classical traditions later evolved from these ancient practices.

### Philosophical Traditions

Ancient Indian traditions were strongly connected with philosophy and spirituality.

### Major Philosophical Concepts

- Dharma (duty)
- Karma (action and consequence)
- Moksha (liberation)
- Ahimsa (non-violence)

Indian philosophical schools encouraged self-discipline, ethical conduct, and pursuit of knowledge.

### Scientific and Intellectual Traditions

Ancient India contributed greatly to science and knowledge.

### Important Contributions

- Mathematics and the concept of zero

- Astronomy and calendar systems
- Medicine and surgery
- Metallurgy and engineering

Indian intellectual traditions integrated science with philosophy and religion.

#### Influence on Modern Indian Society

Many ancient customs and traditions continue to influence modern India.

#### Continuing Traditions

- Respect for elders
- Religious festivals
- Yoga and meditation
- Traditional marriage ceremonies
- Joint family values

Although modernization has changed lifestyles, ancient traditions still remain an important part of Indian identity.

### VII. CONCLUSION

In 1600 CE, Indian customs and traditions presented a complex tapestry of continuity and change. While systemic inequalities like the caste system and patriarchal restrictions remained firmly entrenched, the era was simultaneously defined by a remarkable capacity for cultural synthesis. The thriving Bhakti and Sufi movements, the syncretic court culture of the Mughals, and a bustling global trade network created a vibrant environment. Understanding this pivotal era provides vital context for how traditional India adapted to, resisted, and ultimately integrated into the early modern global landscape. The transition of India into the modern era brought remarkable changes in customs and traditions. Education, industrialization, globalization, technology, and social reforms transformed Indian society in many ways. Practices that once restricted social progress gradually declined, while values such as equality, individual freedom, and scientific thinking gained importance.

However, Indian culture has shown great resilience. Traditions continue to survive by adapting to modern lifestyles. Festivals, family values, spirituality, traditional arts, and cultural heritage remain integral parts of Indian identity. The coexistence of tradition and modernity reflects the uniqueness of Indian civilization. India's cultural transition demonstrates

that modernization does not necessarily mean abandoning tradition; instead, it involves adapting traditional values to contemporary realities while preserving cultural roots.

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