Essay · Essay

Customary morality cannot be a guide to modern life

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MARKS	WORD LIMIT
125	~1200 words

Answer Hint

Meaning of customary morality; tradition and social norms; changing social values; reason and scientific temper; constitutional morality; individual liberty; gender equality; caste discrimination; human rights; ethical decision-making; reform movements; balance between tradition and modernity; role of education; evolving moral standards

Model Answer

Introduction

Every society develops moral principles, customs and traditions that guide human behaviour. These norms often emerge from historical experiences, religious beliefs, collective practices and the desire to maintain social order. They provide a sense of identity, continuity and belonging. However, societies are not static. Scientific discoveries, technological advancement, democratic movements and changing social relationships continually reshape human life.

Customary morality refers to the moral standards inherited from tradition and accepted by a community over time. While such morality can preserve valuable wisdom, it may also perpetuate practices that conflict with equality, liberty, dignity and justice. Therefore, the question is whether inherited customs should continue to determine what is right and wrong in a rapidly changing world.

Modern life requires ethical principles that are critically examined, sensitive to human dignity and capable of responding to new circumstances. Customary morality cannot be an unquestioned guide to modern life because tradition alone does not guarantee justice. Nevertheless, this does not mean that all traditions should be rejected. The real challenge is to preserve the ethical wisdom of the past while reforming customs that undermine human freedom and social progress.

Body

1. Understanding Customary Morality

Customary morality consists of norms and expectations that a community regards as appropriate because they have been practised and transmitted across generations.

It may include respect for elders, hospitality, honesty, community responsibility, care for family members and concern for social harmony. These values can strengthen trust and provide guidance in everyday life.

However, customary morality can also involve rigid social hierarchies, restrictions on individual choices, discriminatory practices and unquestioned obedience to authority.

Its central limitation is that a practice may be considered morally acceptable simply because it is old or widely followed. Yet longevity and popularity do not necessarily establish moral correctness.

For example, historical societies often accepted practices that denied equal rights to women or excluded certain communities from education and public life. Such practices demonstrate that social acceptance can coexist with injustice.

Therefore, customs should be evaluated according to their ethical consequences rather than accepted merely because they are inherited.

2. Why Customary Morality Is Insufficient for Modern Life

Changing social realities

Modern societies face circumstances that earlier generations could not have anticipated, including artificial intelligence, genetic technologies, digital privacy, climate change and complex global economic relationships. Traditional rules may not provide adequate answers to these emerging

ethical questions.

Conflict with individual liberty

Some customs place excessive emphasis on family or community authority and restrict individual choices regarding education, marriage, occupation, dress and personal beliefs. Modern democratic societies recognise that individual dignity and freedom deserve protection.

Perpetuation of discrimination

Customary practices may preserve inequalities based on caste, gender, disability, birth or social status. When tradition becomes a justification for exclusion, it can obstruct equality of opportunity.

Resistance to scientific reasoning

Beliefs based solely on inherited authority may discourage critical inquiry and evidence-based thinking. In areas such as healthcare, education and environmental protection, decisions must be informed by reliable evidence.

Moral inconsistency

Different communities may follow conflicting customs. If tradition alone determines morality, it becomes difficult to resolve disagreements about justice, rights and acceptable conduct.

Suppression of reform

Social reformers frequently challenge established practices that society has accepted for generations. If customary morality is treated as unquestionable, reform becomes difficult and injustice may continue indefinitely.

These limitations demonstrate that modern ethical life requires reasoned evaluation, openness to change and respect for universal human dignity.

3. Tradition Does Not Always Mean Justice

One of the strongest arguments against treating customary morality as an absolute guide is that many practices once considered normal are now recognised as unjust.

Caste-based exclusion: Historically entrenched caste practices denied dignity and opportunities to disadvantaged communities. Constitutional equality and social reform challenge such inherited discrimination.

Gender inequality: Customs restricting women's education, property rights, employment or participation in public life have often reinforced unequal power relations.

Child marriage: Although historically prevalent in some communities, child marriage undermines children's health, education, autonomy and future opportunities.

Untouchability: Socially established practices of untouchability violate human dignity and equality. Article 17 of the Indian Constitution abolishes untouchability and forbids its practice.

Restrictions on personal choice: Practices that deny consenting adults the freedom to choose their partners or pursue their own lives may conflict with individual liberty and constitutional protections.

These examples illustrate that a custom must be judged by whether it promotes justice and human welfare, not simply by how long it has existed.

A society progresses when it gains the courage to question inherited practices and the wisdom to distinguish valuable traditions from harmful ones.

4. Constitutional Morality as a Guide to Modern Life

In a constitutional democracy, morality must be compatible with the fundamental principles that protect the dignity and rights of all citizens.

Constitutional morality refers to respect for constitutional values, institutions, procedures and limitations on power. It requires citizens and public authorities to uphold equality, liberty, justice and fraternity even when prevailing social attitudes conflict with these principles.

Equality before the law: Article 14 establishes equality before the law and equal protection of the laws.

Prohibition of discrimination: Article 15 prohibits specified forms of discrimination by the state and provides a constitutional foundation for challenging exclusion.

Freedom and dignity: Article 21 protects life and personal liberty, interpreted by the Supreme Court to encompass important dimensions of human dignity and autonomy.

Freedom of conscience and religion: Article 25 protects freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practise and propagate religion,

subject to constitutional limitations.

Abolition of untouchability: Article 17 rejects a historically entrenched practice that violated equality and dignity.

Constitutional morality does not require the rejection of religion, culture or tradition. Instead, it provides a common framework through which diverse communities can coexist while respecting the rights of every individual.

When a customary practice conflicts with fundamental rights, democratic society must critically examine the practice rather than automatically subordinate individual dignity to tradition.

5. The Importance of Reason and Scientific Temper

Modern life requires decisions based on evidence, rational analysis and an understanding of consequences.

Healthcare: Medical treatment should be guided by scientific evidence rather than harmful superstitions or unverified claims.

Environmental protection: Traditional practices may offer valuable ecological knowledge, but contemporary environmental challenges also require scientific monitoring, climate modelling and sustainable technologies.

Digital ethics: Issues such as artificial intelligence, surveillance, data protection and online misinformation require new ethical frameworks that combine established principles with technical understanding.

Public policy: Government decisions should be informed by reliable data, transparent evaluation and the needs of affected communities.

Personal relationships: Ethical decisions should consider consent, equality, mutual respect and the well-being of those involved rather than rely exclusively on social expectations.

Scientific temper does not mean that science can answer every moral question. Evidence can help establish what is likely to happen, but ethical reasoning is necessary to decide what ought to happen.

A balanced moral framework therefore combines reason, empathy, evidence and respect for human rights.

6. The Continuing Relevance of Tradition

Although customary morality cannot be an unquestioned guide, tradition continues to have considerable value.

Social identity: Languages, festivals, rituals, art and cultural practices provide communities with a sense of continuity and belonging.

Intergenerational wisdom: Traditional knowledge may contain useful lessons about conservation, community cooperation, agriculture, food and local healthcare practices, subject to scientific evaluation where necessary.

Family and social responsibility: Values such as respect, compassion, hospitality, honesty and care for older persons can strengthen relationships and social solidarity.

Community support: Local traditions of mutual assistance can help communities respond to illness, disasters and economic hardship.

Cultural diversity: Respect for diverse traditions enriches society and encourages mutual understanding.

The problem is not tradition itself, but the unquestioning acceptance of every inherited practice. Traditions that promote compassion, cooperation and dignity can remain relevant, while those that perpetuate exploitation or discrimination should be reformed.

7. Reform Movements and the Evolution of Morality in India

Indian history demonstrates that moral progress has often emerged through the critical examination of customary practices.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy challenged social practices such as sati and contributed to the reform movement that culminated in its abolition under colonial rule.

Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule worked to expand education and challenge caste and gender-based exclusion.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar opposed caste discrimination and untouchability and emphasised equality, liberty and fraternity as essential foundations of a democratic society.

Mahatma Gandhi challenged untouchability and mobilised people against social injustice, while drawing upon ethical and spiritual traditions.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated widow remarriage and supported women's education, helping challenge restrictive social conventions.

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These reformers did not all adopt identical approaches, but their work demonstrates that society can respect its cultural inheritance while questioning practices that cause suffering.

Their efforts also reveal that ethical progress often requires courage, public reasoning, institutional reform and sustained collective action.

8. Customary Morality in a Globalised and Technological World

Globalisation and technological development have made ethical questions more complex.

Artificial intelligence: Traditional moral ideas concerning honesty, responsibility and fairness remain relevant, but new rules are needed for algorithmic bias, automated decision-making and accountability.

Privacy and digital conduct: Social norms developed in face-to-face communities may not adequately address digital surveillance, data ownership and online harassment.

Workplace ethics: Modern organisations must address discrimination, workplace safety, professional confidentiality and equal opportunity across diverse workforces.

Environmental responsibility: Contemporary consumption patterns affect people across geographical boundaries and generations. Ethical decisions must account for climate change, biodiversity loss and resource depletion.

Global human rights: International mobility and communication bring societies into closer contact with different cultural practices. Respect for cultural diversity must coexist with concern for universal human dignity.

These challenges require moral frameworks that can evolve without abandoning fundamental ethical principles.

9. Challenges in Moving Beyond Customary Morality

Rejecting unquestioned tradition is easier in theory than in practice.

Social resistance: People may perceive reform as an attack on their identity, faith or cultural heritage.

Political mobilisation: Political actors may invoke tradition to strengthen social divisions or oppose changes that protect vulnerable groups.

Generational conflict: Younger people may favour greater autonomy, while older generations may place stronger emphasis on inherited expectations.

Cultural relativism: Excessive emphasis on cultural difference can make societies reluctant to challenge harmful practices.

Loss of social cohesion: If traditions are rejected without constructive alternatives, communities may lose valuable sources of belonging and mutual support.

Selective modernity: Societies may adopt technological and economic changes while retaining discriminatory attitudes in family life or social institutions.

These challenges show why ethical reform must involve dialogue, education, legal safeguards and community participation rather than indiscriminate rejection of tradition.

10. The Way Forward: A Balanced Ethical Framework

Modern society needs an approach that combines the wisdom of tradition with the demands of justice and contemporary life.

First, education should promote critical thinking, constitutional values, scientific temper and respect for diversity. Students should learn to evaluate customs rather than accept or reject them automatically.

Second, public institutions must protect fundamental rights and ensure that cultural practices do not become instruments of coercion or discrimination.

Third, social reform should involve community leaders, educators, civil society and affected individuals. Dialogue can help distinguish meaningful traditions from practices that undermine dignity.

Fourth, traditional knowledge should be documented and preserved where valuable, while claims concerning health, environment and public safety should be evaluated using reliable evidence.

Fifth, individuals should develop moral autonomy: the ability to think independently, recognise the consequences of their choices and accept responsibility for their actions.

Finally, societies should remain open to reform. Ethical principles must be applied consistently, whether the issue concerns family relationships, religious practices, public administration or emerging technologies.

The objective is neither blind traditionalism nor uncritical modernisation. It is a society capable of learning from its past while building a more just future.

Conclusion

Customary morality has shaped human societies by preserving shared values, social relationships and cultural identity. Yet no tradition is beyond ethical examination. Practices inherited from the past may contain wisdom, but they may also reflect the inequalities and limitations of the circumstances in which they emerged.

Modern life requires moral guidance rooted in human dignity, reason, justice, scientific temper and constitutional values. These principles enable societies to respond to changing circumstances while protecting individual freedom and social welfare.

India's experience demonstrates that reform and cultural continuity need not be enemies. The country can preserve its rich diversity while rejecting practices that violate equality and dignity.

Ultimately, a mature society does not measure the worth of a practice merely by its age or popularity. It asks whether the practice promotes compassion, justice, freedom and the well-being of all. Tradition deserves respect when it enriches human life, but it must yield when it perpetuates injustice. **The true guide to modern life is not the unquestioning authority of custom, but the thoughtful integration of inherited wisdom with ethical reasoning and constitutional morality.**

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