



Modern, Modernity and Modernization: A Theoretical Study Through the Lens of Political Modernization in India and Shekhawati

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Abstract

This paper explores the conceptual evolution of "modern," "modernity," and "modernization," utilizing the dual analytical lenses of India's national democratic paradigm and the specific regional context of Shekhawati. By examining how grand political theories function when applied to both the macro-level Indian state and the micro-level political dynamics of Shekhawati, this study seeks to unpack how traditional agrarian and feudal societies adapt to modern political norms. Ultimately, this paper investigates how the synthesis of traditional social structures and modern democratic processes in India and Shekhawati challenges Western-centric modernization theories, offering a more grounded, contextual understanding of political development in the post-colonial world.

Keywords: Modernity in India, Political modernization, Politics of Shekhawati, K-shaped modernization, Modernization of traditions

Introduction

The discourse on societal change in contemporary social science relies heavily on a triad of terms that are often used interchangeably, yet remain distinctly nuanced: "modern," "modernity," and "modernization." Etymologically they are derived from the Late Latin word *modernus*—itself stemming from *modo*, meaning "just now" or "presently"—the term "modern" originally served as a temporal break to separate the present era from the ancient past. However, in contemporary political and sociological literature, this temporal marker evolved into a profound conceptual framework representing a radical shift from traditional worldviews. In this conceptual matrix, "modern" denotes a temporal state or the quality of belonging to the contemporary epoch. "Modernity" represents the experiential, cultural, and philosophical condition characterized by rationalism, secularism, individualism, and a critical orientation toward the social environment—establishing, as C.E. Welch highlights, a societal culture that enables individuals to develop a critical view of their relation to nature and society while expanding personal, structural, and moral choices. "Modernization," meanwhile, is the process—the socio-economic, technological, and political movement—through which a traditional society undergoes structural transformations to achieve the condition of modernity.

In classical sociology, the concept of modernization emerged to explain the seismic shifts of European history, a period Karl Polanyi famously referred to as the age of the "Great Transformation," marked by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and market expansion. Early sociological thinkers theorized this shift as an inevitable transition from tradition to rationality, and from close-knit agrarian communities to complex industrial societies. By the mid-twentieth century, this inquiry pivoted sharply into political science as the dissolution of colonial empires ushered in a "Greater Transformation" across newly independent states in the post-colonial world. Political scientists faced an

urgent imperative to understand how developing polities would construct stable governance structures while navigating rapid socio-economic shifts. In political science, political modernization refers specifically to the structural transformation of political institutions, behavior, and culture. As conceptualized by thinkers like Karl Deutsch and Halpern, political modernization entails social mobilization—a process where old social, psychological, and political commitments are eroded, making citizens available for new patterns of socialization and political participation. It involves shifting away from absolutist or traditional authority toward representative, institutionalized, and responsive governance structures, marked by administrative capacity, structural differentiation, and mass democratic engagement.

A critical debate in comparative politics centers on whether political modernization is synonymous with Westernization. The classical, ethnocentric view—critiqued by scholars like S.N. Eisenstadt and V.R. Mehta—assumed a unilinear trajectory, postulating that developing societies must "catch up" with Western Europe and North America by adopting their exact institutional and cultural blueprints. Mehta specifically critiques this teleological view, arguing that modernization cannot simply be a fixed route or an imitation of Western standards. Modernization does not require the total eradication of the old to be replaced by the new; as C.H. Dodd notes, modernization is "the effect of the new on the old, not the eradication of the old and its substitution by the new". Consequently, contemporary scholarship recognizes "multiple modernities," acknowledging that non-Western societies can modernize their institutional structures without surrendering their distinct cultural identities or historical experiences.

Nowhere is this distinction between Westernization and true political modernization more visible than in India. As Myron Weiner observes, modernization in the Indian context manifested not as a blind urge to be Westernized, but through targeted national imperatives: industrialization,

social reform through democratic restructuring, and the consolidation of a unified national state. In India, modernization has operated through a unique synthesis of traditional structures and democratic processes. Rather than destroying traditional identities like caste, community, and regional affiliations, Indian democracy has mobilized them, transforming traditional social groups into political pressure groups and voting blocs—a process widely understood as the "modernization of tradition." As Wilfred C. Smith noted, modernization in India is a process through which the country becomes conscious of itself and its processes, constructing technical means for executing choices based on its own internal aspirations. V.R. Mehta reinforces this by defining Indian modernization as an internally driven process rooted in first knowing one's own society through its historical experience, and second, acting to realize its potential in light of contemporary goals.

While the macro-narrative of Indian political modernization provides a overarching framework of constitutionalism, electoral participation, and state-building, its true complexity lies in its regional manifestations. To fully grasp how these theoretical abstraction translate into lived political realities, one must examine localized micro-histories where traditional power matrices directly collide with modern democratic imperatives. The region of Shekhawati in Rajasthan presents a compelling case study of this dynamic. Historically defined by feudal lordship, land tenure systems, and deep-seated socio-cultural hierarchies, Shekhawati underwent a distinct trajectory of political modernization. Following Indian independence, the abolition of the jagirdari system, the introduction of universal adult franchise, the rise of peasant agrarian movements, and the expansion of Panchayati Raj institutions gradually restructured the power dynamics of the region. Rather than completely erasing feudal legacies, political modernization in Shekhawati has accommodated, recontextualized, and negotiated with these traditional social structures, creating a nuanced political landscape where traditional authority and modern electoral democracy continuously interlock.

This paper explores the conceptual evolution of "modern," "modernity," and "modernization," utilizing the dual analytical lenses of India's national democratic paradigm and the specific regional context of Shekhawati. By examining how grand political theories function when applied to both the macro-level Indian state and the micro-level political dynamics of Shekhawati, this study seeks to unpack how traditional agrarian and feudal societies adapt to modern political norms. Ultimately, this paper investigates how the synthesis of traditional social structures and modern democratic processes in India and Shekhawati challenges Western-centric modernization theories, offering a more grounded, contextual understanding of political development in the post-colonial world.

Hegemonic Modernity

The classical discourse on modernization was neither politically neutral nor epistemologically objective; rather, it operated as a form of "hegemonic modernity." Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's formulation of hegemony, Western modernization theory established a consensus that framed Western historical experience as the universal, normative trajectory for human progress, relegating non-Western

societies to a perpetual state of political and social deficiency. This epistemological dominance was deepened through what Edward Said conceptualized as Orientalism—a discourse through which colonial power constructs the "Orient" as irrational, stagnant, and traditional, thereby justifying colonial subjugation as a benevolent, civilizing mission to bring "modernity" to the colonized.

In the Indian context, this colonial framework enforced a reductive binary that equated "modern" with Westernization and "traditional" with backwardness. Critiquing this Eurocentric teleology, postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty calls for a project to "provincialize Europe." Chakrabarty argues that Third World political histories cannot be understood merely as a narrative of "lack" or incomplete transition toward Western-style liberal institutions. Instead, European history must be recognized as a local, regional experience rather than a universal template. Building upon this, Partha Chatterjee demonstrates how anti-colonial nationalism in India rejected the totalizing claims of Western modernity. Rather than passively absorbing Western frameworks, Indian society demarcated a domain of sovereignty—preserving its inner, spiritual, and cultural identity while selectively adopting the outer, material instruments of modern statecraft and technology.

Hegemonic modernity, therefore, attempted to universalize a singular historical path. However, postcolonial critique exposes how this framework ignored the capacity of non-Western polities to re-articulate, subvert, and domesticate modern political forms. By dismantling the myth of a singular, Western-centric modernization, these scholars pave the way for examining how political modernization in India—and at its micro-level regional sites like Shekhawati—functions not as an imitation of Euro-American models, but as a site of active negotiation, resistance, and indigenous transformation.

Multiple Modernities and Indian Encounter with Modernity and Political Modernization

To dismantle the totalizing impulses of Eurocentric development theory, contemporary political sociology turns to the paradigm of "Multiple Modernities." Formulated by S.N. Eisenstadt, this perspective posits that modernity is not a single, unilinear trajectory originating in Western Europe to be cloned globally. Instead, Eisenstadt argues that the expansion of modernity creates continuous re-interpretations and institutional reformulations. Modernity brings a general set of structural, cultural, and political characteristics—such as social differentiation, mass mobilization, and public accountability—but these are continually re-imagined through the distinct historical, religious, and institutional matrices of non-Western civilizational spaces.

Translating this theoretical shift into the Indian context, political theorist Sudipta Kaviraj demonstrates that Indian modernity is neither a flawed derivative of the West nor a mere continuation of traditional structures. Kaviraj conceptualizes Indian modernity as a process of "revision and adaptation," wherein modern democratic concepts (such as rights, equality, and sovereignty) undergo a profound transformation upon contact with Indian society. Rather than replacing traditional structures, modern political forms alter the internal logic of those structures. For instance, while modern institutions like universal suffrage and legal equality were introduced from above, they were rapidly internalized from below, causing what Kaviraj calls a

"thickening" of democratic consciousness among previously marginalized groups.

This theoretical evolution fundamentally rescues the concept of political modernization from its original, Cold War-era origins. In the 1950s and 1960s, American behavioral political science—led by scholars associated with the SSRC Committee on Comparative Politics (such as Gabriel Almond, James Coleman, and Samuel Huntington)—framed political modernization largely as a counter-insurgency, anti-communist intellectual project. In that classical formulation, political modernization was narrowly equated with institutional decay control, order, institutional capacity, and Western-style administrative rationalization.

However, political modernization today extends far beyond formal state institutions, administrative apparatuses, or electoral procedures. It operates as an all-pervasive process of social re-articulation that invades and re-signifies the most intimate, mundane spheres of human existence—including life-course events such as birth, marriage, and death, as well as core social identities like caste, class, and gender.

The Political Modernization of the Everyday and Identity

- **Birth, Marriage, and Death as Politicized Sites:** In a pre-modern or traditional setting, vital events like birth, marriage, and death functioned primarily within local, religious, or kinship domains. Under political modernization, these elementary life processes are thoroughly brought under state legibility and legal rationality—what Michel Foucault terms biopolitics. State registration of births, statutory minimum marriage ages, legal codifications of inheritance and divorce, and official death certification convert personal life-cycles into sites of political regulation and citizen-rights claims.
- **Caste as a Modern Political Entity:** Far from being eradicated by modernity, caste in India has undergone what Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph famously termed the "Modernization of Tradition." As caste groups formed caste associations, mobilized as voting blocs, and leveraged state-mandated affirmative action policies (reservations), caste transformed from a closed, ritualistic hierarchical order into an organized, horizontal political interest group fighting for state resources and political representation.
- **Class and Gender Transformations:** Class identities, intertwined with agrarian land reforms and post-independence development programs, shifted from hereditary feudal obligations to legal contract, wage bargaining, and socio-economic mobilization. Simultaneously, gender relations—historically confined to the private, patriarchal sphere—have been forcefully pulled into the political arena. Feminist scholarship (such as work by Nivedita Menon and Flavia Agnes) highlights how legal reforms surrounding domestic violence, property rights, and reproductive health have politically modernized gender, transforming women from passive subjects of social protection into active legal and political claimants.

Institutional Sites—Education, Health, and Local Governance: This deep-seated political modernization finds its operational reality in everyday public institutions and participatory governance frameworks.

- **Education as an Engine of Rights Consciousness:** Public education does not merely impart literacy; it acts as a primary vehicle for political socialization. As Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen contend, education provides marginalized groups with the critical tools and legal literacy required to question traditional authority, navigate bureaucratic structures, and demand accountability from the state.
- **Public Health as State-Citizen Contract:** Health services function as a critical juncture where the state's duty to care intersects with citizen expectations. The transformation of healthcare from a matter of charity or local folk tradition into a public entitlement reflects a modernized political consciousness where health outcomes are recognized as structural rights rather than individual fate.
- **Panchayati Raj and Decentralized Representation:** The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments fundamentally altered the landscape of political representation in India. By institutionalizing Gram Sabhas and mandating reservations for women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes in local governance, Panchayati Raj institutions decentralized democratic power. Scholars like Sudha Pai have noted how local self-governance has disrupted traditional rural power structures, allowing subaltern groups to directly contest local hegemony, allocate development funds, and re-shape local political realities.

While Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph (*The Modernization of Tradition*) and Myron Weiner (*Politics of Scarcity, State Politics in India*) laid foundational groundwork by demonstrating how Indian democracy successfully adapted traditional social structures rather than destroying them, their framework contains notable limitations.

Writing primarily from mid-century structural-functionalist and behavioral perspectives, both the Rudolphs and Weiner tended to view the "modernization of tradition" through an overly harmonious, consensus-driven lens. They frequently framed the political mobilization of caste associations and traditional networks as a functional mechanism for democratic stability and peaceful system integration. In doing so, their analyses often obscured the severe material violence, structural inequalities, and power asymmetries inherent in Indian society. Modern scholars critique their approach for treating social categories like caste, religion, and regional identities as largely static, functional variables within electoral arithmetic, rather than dynamic sites of deep-seated conflict, domination, and subaltern resistance. In contrast, the broader, more critical understanding of political modernization outlined earlier moves beyond this functionalist paradigm. It recognizes that political modernization is not merely about how traditional structures comfortably adapt to formal democratic processes, but how political power radically penetrates every layer of social life—redefining personal identities, life-course events, gender relations, and state-citizen interactions through

continuous contestation, negotiation, and structural transformation.

Ultimately, political modernization in contemporary India is not a top-down, technocratic exercise in institution-building. It is a dynamic, contested process that re-defines how individuals perceive their bodies, their social identities, their rights, and their relationship with the state—setting the ideal theoretical backdrop for examining regional political shifts in sites like Shekhawati.

Political Modernization: Shekhawati's Experience

To grasp the true complexity of political modernization in non-Western contexts, macro-level national frameworks must be evaluated against localized micro-histories. The Shekhawati region of Rajasthan—encompassing the three contiguous districts of Sikar, Jhunjhunu, and Churu—offers an extraordinary case study of political development. Historically, Shekhawati was never a single administrative unit; Churu was integrated into the princely state of Bikaner, while Sikar and Jhunjhunu operated under the suzerainty of the Jaipur State as prominent thikanas (feudal estates). Despite these historical administrative divisions, the region is bound by a shared socio-cultural fabric, linguistic idiom, and collective memory.

Studying political modernization in Shekhawati challenges standard textbook paradigms. On the surface, the vernacular discourse of the masses may appear rooted in traditional orthodoxy; yet, the region's socio-political trajectories have consistently been ahead of their time. Historically, Shekhawati served as an epicenter of resistance against colonial interference and feudal exploitation. The anti-feudal peasant struggles of the early twentieth century—directed against oppressive jagirdari taxes (lag-bags) and forced labor (beggar)—dismantled early feudal structures and laid the foundation for modern civic consciousness.

Historically anchored in an agrarian ethos, the region's political vocabulary was initially shaped around the land, crops, and farmer identity. However, this vocabulary expanded through unique regional catalysts. Jhunjhunu, with its high density of military households and enlistment in the Indian Armed Forces, imported a distinct ethos of state-civic engagement, national consciousness, and defense-led welfare demands. Concurrently, Sikar evolved into a national coaching and educational hub, transforming the regional economy and instilling a modern, aspiration-driven youth culture.

Contrary to conventional assumptions that modernization erases tradition, political modernization in Shekhawati is interwoven into its traditions, transitional practices, and governance dynamics.

In recent decades, the modern administrative state has increasingly intervened in domains that were historically governed by local custom—a dynamic closely aligned with Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics. Life-course events such as birth, which historically occurred within the domestic and traditional sphere, have been systematically institutionalized through state-sponsored public health initiatives and hospital births.

Interestingly, this institutional transition has recontextualized rather than eradicated traditional rituals. Rituals like Kua Pujan (well-worship by the new mother), Chhathi (sixth-day birth celebration), and Dash than (tenth-day family celebration) are increasingly performing

symbolic or formalistic functions within a modernized, institutional framework.

Simultaneously, the nature of mortality in the region has undergone a shift. A noticeable increase in fatal road accidents and lifestyle diseases like heart attacks among young people has altered local demographic trends. This shift in causes of death carries significant political and administrative implications, triggering modern governance demands for better traffic enforcement, infrastructural safety, emergency medical response systems, and insurance networks. Lifestyle health issues legitimise presence of the state to dining table.

This institutionalization is equally prominent in the education and public health sectors, where usage patterns reflect structural socio-economic divides. Across Shekhawati, a clear divergence emerges along caste, class, and gender lines regarding institutional reliance.

Empirical observations and field studies indicate that marginalized castes, economically weaker households, and women disproportionately rely on state-run primary schools and government primary health centers (PHCs). While affluent sections increasingly opt for private alternatives, the consistent usage of state institutions by subaltern groups highlights a meaningful form of political modernization: the state is recognized as a primary provider of fundamental rights and social welfare.

On the front of political participation and local governance, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments provided legal pathways for historically marginalized groups to enter local power structures. However, true political modernization encounters structural hurdles, such as political proxy representations and the Sarpanch-Pati syndrome (where male relatives exercise real authority on behalf of elected women representatives).

In many rural localities, the formal institution of the Panchayat experiences a form of traditionalization—reduced by privileged elites to periodic five-year electoral contests, local factionalism, or a bureaucratic site for obtaining official signatures.

Yet, for marginalized communities, local governance structures remain critical sites for socio-economic survival and state negotiation. Programs like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY-R), Social Security Pensions, and the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) bind marginalized citizens to the local Panchayat. These welfare schemes turn local democratic institutions into vital mechanisms for accessing state resources and claiming rights.

The region is experiencing what we call 'K-shaped' political modernization

The Upper Arm (Marginalized Sections) demonstrate an upward trajectory of political modernization. Driven by material needs and democratic rights, they actively engage with public welfare programs, state schools, public health infrastructure, and local electoral spaces to challenge traditional social hierarchies.

The Lower Arm (Privileged/Dominant Sections) are economically or socially privileged groups, insulated by private capital and traditional authority, often engage with public institutions only casually or transactionally, maintaining a lower profile in state-led modernization processes.

Ultimately, political modernization in Shekhawati cannot be adequately evaluated through Western-centric models of unilinear development. The classical triad of political modernization—secularization, institutionalization, and mass participation—does not move uniformly across the region. Instead, it follows a distinct, indigenous trajectory where traditional social practices, localized socio-economic dynamics, and state-led democratic welfare continuously negotiate and reshape each other.

Conclusion

The epistemic confusion between political modernization and westernization is a deliberate construct. Experience of India and Shekhawati both shows that, referring western mode of political development as the only route to modernize the polity and society is a myth. The western way can be one way of modernization but is not the only one for sure. Each region and its people are rooted in different aspects of modernity, and by going with the actual understanding of the word 'modern' itself, neither can be termed as inferior. The challenges post-colonial societies like India facing in coping with the imported modernization is not because they are inherently backward or inexperienced but largely because of what Hamza Alavi aptly calls "overdeveloped state".

The institutional modernization precedes the modernization in thinking and doing, as a result of which modernization is not addressing actual social realities. The question of order and decay comes only when a new form of modernization is well accepted and then fails to take desired shape, but on the contrary, diverse Indian society is grappling with problems created by misplaced solutions. Political modernization as a state sponsored project has been an early thought of Nehruvian state building, where society has been left behind.

Post-colonial societies like India have regions like Shekhawati having their own strong sense of modernity. Definitely they are ready to accept state sponsored health services, but not ready to shed their rituals, the elites are eager to head the grassroot institutions but rooted in their elitism, still not interested in modernizing institutions at pace, people do look towards state as provider of basic amenities yet chose not to surrender their rights completely to these institutions.

The structural-functional approach of early political scientists like Rudolph and Rudolph calling Indian journey as "modernization of traditions" is also turned upside down by the evolution of politics and society in Shekhawati region. It is not that only traditions are getting modernized, in fact, modernity itself is getting traditionalized.

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