UNIT 1 MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand what is tradition;
- explain the difference between tradition and dogma; and
- understand how tradition changes from time to time.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we will have a detailed discussion on tradition and the various factors that lead to changes in traditions from time to time. Tradition does not only give us a strong sense of our collective identity but also provides us vital strength to withstand trying circumstances as a community. Therefore, tradition is a very significant component of any society. Any mutation in tradition, also thereby, generates a lot of apprehension, especially in a traditional society. But sometimes our fright of changing tradition assumes such a proportion that it gets degenerated into extreme conservatism. Such conservatism also holds the same danger of inflicting injury on our collective identity through the backdoor. In fact, the actions of the high priests of such conservatism perhaps pose greater threat to our collective identity than the singular incidence of a breach in tradition. All these warrant that the meaning and significance of the term ‘tradition’ is understood in the proper perspective.

1.2 DEFINITION OF TRADITION

Let us now focus on how one defines tradition. The English term ‘tradition’ has its origin in the Latin root ‘tradere’ that implies meanings like surrender, transfer, handing over, etc. According to Anthony Giddens, ‘tradere’ was originally used in the context of Roman Law, where it referred to the laws of inheritance. Property
Thus, tradition of a particular community is constituted by its cultural elements that are transferred from one generation to the other. American Anthropologist Robert Redfield says, “(T)he word ‘tradition’ connotes the act of handing down and what is handed down from generation to another. Thus tradition carries with it the sense of age, long continuity and stability” (1962). This is a widely accepted definition of tradition. According to this view, the concept of tradition has two aspects. The first is a process and the second is the product of this process. We may take the case of the Indian Classical dances, for instance, which is a glorious component of the Indian music and culture. For several hundred years the various forms of Indian Classical dance have been transferred from one generation to the other through a definite process of teaching and learning either in temples or in the gurukul. The existence of various gharanas that we know today also testifies to this.

Most of the classical dance forms had their origin in temples and they were thus confined to the religious domain. So, initially in the 19th and the 20th centuries, when efforts were on to bring them out to the secular domain there was some resistance. But despite that in course of time these dance forms came out of the confines of the religious domain to the non-sacred, secular domain (functions, television, etc). Simultaneously, the process of teaching and learning of classical dance forms also largely shifted to different and new domains, such as from dance training institutes to universities. This process has resulted not only in the conservation of these musical traditions but also their popularization.

The point emphasized here is that both, the process of learning classical dances, and the product of this process, the dance itself, are parts of the Indian tradition. The same is applied to all other traditional socio-cultural items.

1.3 TRADITION Vs. DOGMA

You have already seen above some of the definitions of tradition and the process of production of tradition. Now we will try to distinguish tradition from dogma. There is a tendency to associate tradition with negative attributes such as dogma and ignorance. Tracing the history of such a notion of tradition, British Sociologist Anthony Giddens writes, “(I)t was the 18th Century Enlightenment in Europe that gave tradition a bad name. Tradition comes to be looked as merely the shadow side of modernity, an implausible construct that can be easily brushed aside.” (1999) He continues, “The term ‘tradition’ as it is used today is actually a product of the last 200 years in Europe….in mediaeval times, there was no generic notion of tradition. There was no call for such a word, precisely because tradition and custom were everywhere.” The idea of tradition, then, is itself a creation of modernity.

In this context, the comment of T. S. Eliot, one of the most influential poets and intellectual of the 20th century, appears quite significant. Even though considered conservative by certain standard in his treatment of culture, Eliot, in his celebrated essay, ‘Tradition and Individual Talent’ comments, “(T)radition is not solely, or
even primarily the maintenance of certain dogmatic beliefs... We are always in danger, in clinging to an old tradition, or attempting to re-establish one, of confusing the vital and the unessential, the real and the sentimental. Our second danger is to associate tradition with the immovable." (1953: 20-21) He further says, "(T)radition... involves a historical sense... and the historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but also of its presence." (ibid: 23). What is implied in Eliot’s comment is that the way in which the presence is influenced by the past, the idea of the past may also be modified according to the present need. Thus, it is not correct to hold that tradition has only to do with the past. The truth is that tradition marches on incorporating new elements without divesting its linkage with the past.

Here, a statement of the noted British folklorist Edwin Sidney Hartland is worth noting. He writes, "(T)radition is always being created anew, and new traditions of modern origin are as much within our province as the ancient ones." (1978: 23) Thus, the idea of tradition is not connotative of something static; it is rather a dynamic concept. Some examples should drive home the point more clearly.

In their celebrated book, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger show that much of what we think of as traditional and steeped in the mist of time, is actually a product at most of the last couple of centuries, and is often much more recent than that. They illustrate this with the help of various examples.

As for example, the Scots, though a part of the United Kingdom, are quite particular about celebrating their national identity. Whenever occasion arises they would flaunt their tradition in elaborating fashion. Men wear the kilt, with each clan having its own tartan - and their ceremonials are accompanied by the wail of the bagpipes. By means of these symbols, they show their loyalty to ancient rituals - rituals whose origins go far back into antiquity. However, Hobsbawm and Ranger show that along with most of other symbols of Scottishness, all these are of quite recent origin. The short kilt seems to have been invented by an English industrialist from Lancashire, Thomas Rawlinson, in the early 18th Century. He set out to alter the existing dress of highlanders to make it convenient for workmen. Kilts were a product of the industrial revolution. The aim was not to preserve time-honoured customs, but the opposite - to bring the highlanders out of the heather and into the factory. The kilt didn’t start life as the national dress of Scotland. The lowlanders, who made up the large majority of Scots, saw highland dress as a barbaric form of clothing, which most looked on with some contempt. Similarly, many of the clan tartans worn now were devised during the Victorian period, by enterprising tailors who correctly saw a market in them.

Hobsbawm and Ranger then go on to give examples of invented traditions from different societies, including colonial India. Before 1860, for example, Indian soldiers and the British both wore Western-style uniforms. But in the eyes of the British, Indians had to look like Indians. The dress uniforms were modified to include turbans, sashes and tunics which were regarded as ‘authentic’. Some of the traditions they invented, or half invented, continue on in the country today, although of course others were later rejected.
1.4 TRADITION: ‘INVENTED’ Vs. ‘GENUINE’

In this section, we will try to understand what the basic issues in the debate are over ‘invented’ and ‘genuine’ aspects of tradition in a society. Hobsbawm in his ‘Introduction’ to The Invention of Tradition gives an outline of his understanding of invented traditions. According to him, “invented tradition” is “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1983: 1). He distinguishes ‘invented’ from ‘genuine’ traditions by claiming that in the former case continuity with the “historic past” is “largely factitious” (ibid: 2). Hobsbawm further argues that the invention of tradition is universal, but occurs most frequently during periods of “rapid” social change (ibid: 4), when the “functions” of invented traditions are to legitimize “relations of authority” and to establish or symbolize “social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities” (ibid: 9). For Hobsbawm, these functions made invented traditions particularly useful at a time when the emergence of mass politics posed problems of social control to the authorities of large, centralized political entities. However, Hobsbawm and Ranger go on to contend that invented traditions and customs are not genuine ones. They are manufactured often with certain objective which has mostly to do with acquiring power.

But the contention that invented traditions are not genuine is challenged by many other scholars. Eminent British sociologist Anthony Giddens, for example, argues, “all traditions are invented traditions. No traditional societies were wholly traditional, and traditions and customs have been invented for a diversity of reasons. We shouldn’t suppose that the conscious construction of tradition is found only in the modern period. Moreover, tradition always incorporates power, whether they are constructed in a deliberate way or not. Kings, emperors, priests and others have long invented traditions to suit themselves and to legitimise their rule. It is a myth to think of traditions as impervious to change. Traditions evolve over time, but also can be quite suddenly altered or transformed…they are invented and reinvented.” (1999)
It is true that some traditions are there which have lasted for hundreds of years. But it is simply wrong to suppose that for a given set of symbols or practices to be traditional, they must have existed for centuries. As Giddens says, “(E)ndurance over time is not the key defining feature of tradition, or of its more diffuse cousin, custom. The distinguishing characteristics of tradition are ritual and repetition. Traditions are always properties of groups, communities or collectivities. Individuals may follow traditions and customs, but traditions are not a quality of individual behaviour in the way habits are.”(1999)

The above account puts in perspective the debate between ‘invented’ and ‘genuine’ traditions. However, some illustrations should make it more comprehensible.

The two most important dishes in the traditional Assamese cuisine, for example, are Khar (a preparation seasoned with alkali) and tenga (a preparation that tastes sour). Khar prepared with amita (papaya) and tenga with bilahi (tomato) are the best. However, these two vegetables were not found in Assam prior to the advent of the British. The latter first brought these ‘traditional Assamese’ food items to Europe from Latin America, their place of origin. We were the recipients of these food items (and also, the ubiquitous potato) through the intervention of colonialism. Thus, papaya, tomato, potato, etc. are but relatively new addition to the Assamese traditional cuisine.

In the same token, these items were also new to the Indian cuisine as well. The immigrant character of papaya and tomato, for example, is still evident from their names in Hindi, viz., papita and tomattor respectively. Such examples can be multiplied.

Similarly, the same thing applies to the sphere of festivals too. The Rongali or the Bohag Bihu, for example, is the most important festival of the Assamese. Many present generation Assamese would be astonished to know that till around a century back, Bihu dance and songs were viewed with disdain by the Assamese elites. The latter described the Bihu performances as something barbaric performed by the wild, uncivilized section of the Assamese community. They sincerely craved for the banishment of this ‘embarrassing’ custom.

But the same Rongali Bihu not only survived but also became the Assamese national festival in the 1950s. It was accepted as one of the most important manifestation of the Assamese nationalism. Bihu took a leap directly from the village folk to the life of the urban elite. Stages came to be set-up in the towns and cities during the bihu season where demonstrations of bihu performances were held. As a result, from an element of folk culture bihu came to don the mantle of popular culture. And thanks to the role of various mass media agencies like radio, television, audio cassettes, cinema, etc., bihu songs and dances have now almost assumed the character of a mass culture.

Similarly, the celebration of famous festivals like the Durga Puja in Bengal, the Ganesh Chaturthi in Maharashtra, etc. which appear to have been there since long past, in fact, can be traced to much recent origin. It is true that these festivals had existed as rituals even before, but the degree and intensity of their celebrations were limited. In fact, the mass celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi since the 1920s is directly related to the renowned freedom fighter Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s project
Market and Cultural Property

of arousing nationalist consciousness among his countrymen in Maharashtra. The celebration of the festival thus became a collective expression of a people with a proud history and an instrument of independentist assertions.

Another very interesting example is the celebration of the Biswakarma Puja in various parts of north India, especially its eastern side. Biswakarma is the Hindu deity associated with smithereens of different kinds. However, like many other deities in the Hindu pantheon, his annual worshipping was not scheduled in the Hindu calendar. No mention is also there in the Hindu scriptures about his worship. How did the annual ritual of Biswakarma worship that we witness today then begin? In fact, though sounds strange it was the initiative of the British industrialists in India that was behind this phenomenon. These industrialists owning factories in and around Calcutta in the early colonial period having realized the strong influence of religion on the workers of these factories found a novel way in for annual cleaning up of the factories and the machineries therein. Thus a day was fixed, viz, 17th September for the purpose. One would notice that unlike all other annual worshipping of Hindu deities that is determined by Hindu almanac, Biswakarma Puja every year takes place on a fixed date according to the Gregorian calendar.

Thus, new traditions have been witnessed in the spheres of traditional Indian music, dress, language, cuisine, festival, and so on. In some cases the forces of change are clearly exogenous (say, West European) and in some cases they are endogenous. However, even within the pan-Indian cultural spectrum, the cultural domain of one people is affecting the cultural domain of another. For example, the emergence of the churidar kamij (of Punjab and Haryana) as pan-Indian dress for women is a case in point. In the age of globalization this process of changes in tradition has become all the more rapid and widespread.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: 1) Your answer should be about 300 words;

2) You may check your answer with the possible answer given at the end of the Unit.

2) Can we call Biswakarma festival an ‘invented’ tradition?

1.5 TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Tradition is not only re-invented, existing traditions might also require some innovation from time to time for their sheer survival in a changing context. For example, various genres of the traditional Indian classical music like songs, dances, and instruments have undergone various innovations in order to suit the
Impact of Technology in Transforming Folk Art to Commodity

1.6 TRADITION AND MODERNISATION

Let us now focus on the modernization of tradition. Tradition even might need to be consciously modernized from time to time on the same ground that has been mentioned above. Such steps are warranted for adding efficiency, sustainability or finesse to the traditional artifacts. For example, one cannot afford to be resistant to introducing new technology in agriculture just for the sake of maintaining the tradition of plough cultivation. However, such straightforward examples may not always serve to illustrate the issue clearly. Modernizing traditional material culture (say, the shift from plough to mechanized form of agriculture) is relatively easy. But the kind and degree of change that it might bring to the non-material culture (say, the customs, beliefs, etc. associated with the plough cultivation) is the main cause of concern. The latter is more resistant to any change as it is deeply ingrained in the worldview of the people. Even a sudden change (indeed imposed from the above) in the realm of material culture is also not without problem. For example, an abrupt shift from the plough to mechanized cultivation may prove quite disjunctive in the peasant way of life in the sense that it may result in the loss of traditional occupations of a variety of people deeply intertwined with a peasant economy characterized by a preponderance of the use of plough. Therefore, any conscious attempt at modernizing a tradition should be such that the targeted people can absorb the impact of change with relative ease.

1.7 LEGITIMACY OF NEW TRADITIONS

However, it should be made clear at this point that while the changeability of tradition is an accepted fact, this change, however, gets legitimacy only within a definite framework with respect to time, space, and the degree of change. In other words, a new tradition, in order to get some popular legitimacy must have some functional, physical or emotional, relevance for the society. Moreover, some relation with the past traditions also helps new traditions acquire popular legitimacy. It is seen that many new traditions arrive riding on the back of the old traditions. The key issue accounting for the legitimacy of the new tradition is its anchorage in the life experiences of the people in a given socio-cultural milieu.

In this context, a debate among folklorists regarding ‘genuine’ and ‘spurious’ folklore is also worth noting. While there has been a tendency among a section
of folklorists to denounce invented or improvised forms of folklore as ‘fakelore’ (Dorson 1950), others disagree. The latter argue that such a notion which refuses to acknowledge any evolution or transformation of folklore would only lead to a fossilized view of folklore or traditional cultural artifacts and practices. In the context of the manner in which industrialization has facilitated the mechanical production of what previously had been the unique artifacts of a specific cultural milieu, it makes more sense to recognize the changing faces and functions of these traditional artifacts rather than confining them to an imagined ‘cultural enclave’ (Bendix 1989: 339) untouched by modernity.

However, this does not obviously give a free rein to all kinds of changes in tradition. Giddens maintains that tradition that is drained of its content, and commercialised, becomes either heritage or kitsch. As developed by the burgeoning heritage industry, heritage is tradition repackaged as spectacle. The refurbished buildings at tourist sites may look splendid, and the refurbishment may even be authentic down to the last detail. But the heritage that is thereby protected is severed from the lifeblood of tradition, which is its connection with the experience of everyday life.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: 1) Your answer should be about 300 words;

2) You may check your answer with the possible answer given at the end of the Unit.

3) What do you understand by modernisation of tradition?

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1.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have tried to understand what tradition is and also what we mean by change of tradition. We have seen that in many instances, what is considered traditional could be of rather recent origin, for example the Scottish tradition of wearing kilts. The same can also be said of the Indian festival of the deity Biswakarma. Therefore, we have come to see that whatever be the case for changing tradition, slow and gradual or rapid and radical, there is no doubt that tradition is an active and changing concept. But our failure to appreciate this crucial issue has been responsible for generating unwarranted conflict situations on many occasions. A tradition may be required to change or innovate itself, albeit within certain parameters, if time so demands. It does not imply any weakness on its part. Rather, a tradition that refuses to be adaptive to the demands of change ceases to continue as an asset to a society; it becomes a burden.

Traditions are needed, and will always persist, as Giddens maintains, because
they give continuity and form to social life. He points out that the Enlightenment in Europe set out to destroy the authority of tradition. Taking cue from the European history, modernists and rationalists elsewhere also launched their own anti-tradition movements. But, traditions remained strong for a long while in most of modern Europe and even more firmly entrenched across most of the rest of the world. Many traditions were reinvented and others were newly instituted. Thus, we see that the end of tradition does not mean that tradition disappears, as the Enlightenment thinkers wanted. On the contrary, in different versions, it continues to flourish everywhere.

1.9 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


Hartland, E. Sidney 1978

1.10 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

1) In their celebrated book, The Invention of Tradition (1983), historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger show that much of what we think of as traditional, and steeped in the mist of time, is actually a product at most of the last couple of centuries, and is often much more recent than that. They illustrate this with the help of various examples.

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have been invented by an English industrialist from Lancashire, Thomas Rawlinson, in the early 18th Century. He set out to alter the existing dress of highlanders to make it convenient for workmen. Kilts were a product of the industrial revolution. The aim was not to preserve time-honoured customs, but the opposite - to bring the highlanders out of the heather and into the factory. The kilt didn’t start life as the national dress of Scotland. The lowlanders, who made up the large majority of Scots, saw highland dress as a barbaric form of clothing, which most looked on with some contempt. Similarly, many of the clan tartans worn now were devised during the Victorian period, by enterprising tailors who correctly saw a market in them.

2) The celebration of the Biswakarma Puja in various parts of north India, especially its eastern side, can be considered an example of ‘invented’ tradition. Biswakarma is the Hindu deity associated with smithereens of different kinds. However, like many other deities in the Hindu pantheon, his annual worshipping was not scheduled in the Hindu calendar. No mention is also there in the Hindu scriptures about his worship. How did the annual ritual of Biswakarma worship that we witness today then begin? In fact, though sounds strange it was the initiative of the British industrialists in India that was behind this phenomenon. These industrialists owning factories in and around Calcutta in the early colonial period having realized the strong influence of religion on the workers of these factories found a novel way in for annual cleaning up of the factories and the machineries therein. Thus a day was fixed, viz, 17th September for the purpose. One would notice that unlike all other annual worshipping of Hindu deities that is determined by Hindu almanac, Biswakarma Puja every year takes place on a fixed date according to the Gregorian calendar.

3) Modernization of tradition may apply on both material and non-material culture. Modernizing traditional material culture (say, the shift from plough to mechanized form of agriculture) is relatively easy. But the kind and degree of change that it might bring to the non-material culture (say, the customs, beliefs, etc. associated with the plough cultivation) is the main cause of concern. The latter is more resistant to any change as it is deeply ingrained in the worldview of the people. Even a sudden change (indeed imposed from the above) in the realm of material culture is also not without problem. For example, an abrupt shift from the plough to mechanized cultivation may prove quite disjunctive in the peasant way of life in the sense that it may result in the loss of traditional occupations of a variety of people deeply intertwined with a peasant economy characterized by a preponderance of the use of plough. Therefore, any conscious attempt at modernizing a tradition should be such that the targeted people can absorb the impact of change with relative ease.