UNIT 3 TRADITION AND CREATIVITY

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3.0 OBJECTIVES
After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- define and understand the meaning of tradition;
- develop and understanding of different views on tradition;
- understand changes in tradition;
- define and understand creativity; and
- understand the symbiotic relationship between tradition and creativity.

3.1 INTRODUCTION
Tradition and creativity are often seen as opposing concepts. In this Unit, we will try to explore both and see how they derive strength and inspiration from each other. We will go into the different aspects that constitute these two notions and in so doing, will be in a position to judge for ourselves, whether they are truly opposed to each other or are in fact, complementary so that one cannot survive without the other. By the end of this Unit, you will be able to define both tradition and creativity and would have reached a position of understanding how they flow through our society, civilization and culture.

3.2 TRADITION
The word tradition comes from the Latin *traditionem*, which means ‘a giving up, delivering up, surrendering’. What do we mean when we talk about tradition? We could very simply define tradition as something that is handed down, passed on from the past to the present and, presumably, to the future. It is a body of
beliefs or customs taught by one generation to the next, often orally. When we talk of a set of customs and practices, we can think of examples like the way in which we celebrate certain festivals and talk of Holi or Diwali traditions etc.

Traditions are also linked to religious movements or religious bodies which have a collection of teachings or beliefs. For example, we can talk about the Vaisnavite tradition or the Sufi tradition and so on. But traditions can be made up of either secular or sacred beliefs.

The difference between the Western concept of tradition and the Indian concept is that the former primarily views tradition as but a relic of the past while the latter sees it as a continuous flow of folk culture. Hence, in India, folk culture is seen as a vibrant, living background that presents all major socio-cultural movements in context. In fact, many of these movements drew a large part of their sustenance from folk cultures and used them in a conscious way to create new traditions that drew broadly from common sources. So, some folk traditions took shape on their own or were self-activated while others were created intentionally - consciously activated - for a purpose (the traditions of the bhakti movement, the social reformist movement etc). A good example of this would be the celebration of the Ganeshotsav in Maharashtra. However, both types of traditions are an integral part of Indian tradition today.

### 3.2.1 Various views of tradition

Sociologists view tradition as a symbolic system and the most significant core of human action. A tradition is part of the collective consciousness of a particular community or group and is thus the group’s common property which supercedes all other possessions. The social traditions include folkways, mores and customs. It has a binding effect upon the members of that particular group and is often rigid and compulsory specially when viewed in the Indian context so that following the traditions is not a voluntary, individual action but a normative orientation of the group for whom there is no escape from tradition.

Tradition is an important concept in philosophy. The philosophy of the twentieth century and contemporary Western philosophy is split into two – one being what is called the ‘Analytic’ tradition that can be seen in the English-speaking and Scandinavian countries and the second being the ‘Continental’ tradition to be found in German and Romance-speaking Europe.

A call for a return to traditional ways of life and values and a rejection of materialistic, consumerist values is what ‘Radical Traditionalism’ stresses upon. It extols the virtues of old ideals like hard work, craftsmanship and local culture and an affinity with the culture of one’s own community. It derides the faceless anonymity and homogeneity of the age of technology and globalization. Radical tradition is a protest against the excesses of the modern world and the new traditions that have sprung up in the wake of industrialization.

In the field of archaeology, tradition denotes the movements that develop one from the other over time. It is formed under the influence of various cultures, creative thinkers and progress of technology.

As we have already said, tradition is the transmission of something from the past into the present. What is transmitted could be an object or a cultural concept. For
example, it may be a ritual, beliefs, images, practices and institutions. It could also include buildings, monuments, works of art like sculptures, paintings, books or tools and machines.

Whether we know who started it or the founder remains completely unknown, makes no difference to the forming of a tradition. Many of the most precious and revered of our traditions do not have the name of their creators ascribed to them. It also does not matter for how long the idea was reflected upon before being manifested into concrete practice. All that matters is that it exists. Some traditions may have been arrived at after intense reflection and thought while others were not preceded by much reasoning. Some traditions are believed to have been divinely revealed but some were formed through experience and logical deduction.

A tradition is brought into being through the ideas, imagination and actions of human beings and it is handed down over many generations. It is something that exists in a society at any particular point of time and which was already present before the present members of that society came into it. However, although it may be an element from the past, it is every bit as vivid as anything else of that time because it is both important and inexhaustible.

Traditions are a facet of the social structure of human civilization and involve the gaining of not only beliefs but also skills and knowledge of various things. So, at one basic level, we can also say that tradition is something that contains information and is a knowledge system through which knowledge is transferred from one generation to the next. Whatever is brought into the present from the past, in a particular context of society or culture, is actually information which, at many levels, is even more important for human beings than practices or rituals.

Economists Friedrich Hayek and Thomas Sowell emphasize the economic efficiency of tradition as a means to both transfer and access information. For instance, in order not to waste a valuable resource like time, decisions can be taken on the basis of established tradition instead of making an independent survey of the available resources and then arriving at a decision. As such, traditions offer an abundant source of information at very little or no cost at all and are also validated nodes of knowledge that have been accepted and approved by a majority section of society. Michael Polanyi, chemist and philosopher posits that traditions are given importance because our knowledge is vaster than when we can express and that we are able to gather and transmit precious information through the traditions that surround us. We are, most often, not even aware of how these traditions developed, what factors influenced their creation and evolution etc.

Thus, we can define tradition as the performance of a particular practice or following a specific custom or even a story that has been learnt by heart and transmitted over several generations. On an average, a practice may be seen to have become a tradition if it has lasted for at least three generations. Many of these practices evolved before the invention of a written script and hence they are a part of the oral tradition in which the tools of poetry play a significant role as devices like alliteration, rhyme etc are aids to memory. Trends in fashion – in any field (clothes, literature, art etc) are, as we know, of a very transient nature and need followers in a quick span of time before the trend changes. However, there are some traditions which have evolved from fashions that were viewed as being more substantial and sustaining than the others and have stood the test of time.
When we think of tradition, the qualities one usually associates with it are: ancientness, unchangeability and importance in our day-to-day lives. Many of us think of tradition as something that evolved naturally but, as we have seen, there are some traditions that have deliberately been created for certain purposes, most often, in order to increase the importance of certain institutions or communities. For example, the colonial powers invented traditions in their colonies to serve their purpose of imperialism. They would cleverly make use of an existing tradition and bend it out of shape for their selfish interests. They would recognize some chief as ‘traditional’ if it suited them and reject others if they seemed to be in opposition to their interests. Do you remember the Rani of Jhansi and her major point of conflict with the British?

3.2.2 Changes in tradition

All traditions are dynamic. This means that they change over a period of time and adapt to the changing social milieu. Any tradition that remains too rigid and refuses to adapt to suit the needs of changed times will soon become obsolete. Over a period of time, the changes in the tradition also get accepted as part of the ancient tradition. A tradition may change because the people who follow it wish to make it better, more practical and more suitable to the times in which they live. In the same way, while a piece of art or literature remains the same over ages, the interpretation of it may change as society changes.

3.2.3 Rejection of tradition

In many ways, progress of any sort is seen to be opposed to tradition. Scientific knowledge specially, is usually placed in an antithetical position to traditional knowledge. With the horizons of knowledge expanding practically every minute, traditions are viewed as stick-in-the-mud obstacles to growth and to the application of scientific principles as well as logic and reason. Traditions are usually associated with backwardness, illiteracy and superstitious beliefs. According to the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, destruction is a part of nature. So, change is necessary. Only that world-view which can keep re-interpreting the universe can remain strong and valid. Seen from this perspective, it is essential to keep inventing and re-inventing traditions. It is only when one breaks away from tradition that one’s creativity gets the opportunity to blossom.
2) Do you think that in order to be established as a tradition, it has to remain unchanged over the years?

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3) What are the elements that give rise to traditions?

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4) How do traditions provide a sense of bonding?

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5) How do traditions divide people?

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3.3 CREATIVITY

For most people, creativity means any action that generates something new. Creativity can be defined as a process that gives rise to new ideas and theories or makes new connections between those concepts which already exist. Creativity
is both a mental and social process and whatever results from the creative process is considered original. Creativity is divergent in the sense that it departs from existing norms and models and forges its own paths.

Although creativity has been studied from various perspectives such as behavioural psychology, social psychology, psychometrics, cognitive science, artificial intelligence, philosophy, history, economics, design research, business, management and so on, no one has been able to come up with a single, definitive, generalized theory or definition of this phenomenon. Nor have psychologists been able to devise a standardized measurement technique as they have for other human cognitive processes.

3.3.1 Views regarding creativity

What is the fount of creativity? There are various views regarding this million-dollar question. Some say that it is divine inspiration, a gift from the gods or Muses while others say it is the result of a conscious mental process. It has also been attributed to one’s social and cultural environment, to certain qualities of personality and even to chance or accident (when the ‘Eureka’ moment ushers in a new thought). There is one view that creativity is a thing that some people are born with and no one can be taught how to be creative, and there is the opposing view that it can be learned by applying some simple methods.

Creativity is also often described as a process that breaks previous assumptions. It is only when one is prepared to take the risk of discarding certain assumptions that one has taken for granted, there is the readiness to think ‘out of the box’ and try out a new technique which might seem to others to be strange or ridiculous, that creativity truly takes shape.

We usually think of creativity in the context of the fine arts but it is one of the fundamental building blocks for inventions and discoveries that have changed the world. As such, creativity is an essential part of such diverse fields as engineering, architecture, economics, science, business and industrial design. In these fields, it is not enough merely to be original for what is required is that the created product should also be appropriate to the times and situation.

How does one differentiate between creativity and innovation? We could say that creativity is the process through which new ideas are generated while innovation implies not only creation but also the application of those new ideas in particular situations. However, there is not much difference between the two as products of creativity, in order to be tenable, should be both original and appropriate. At the most, one may say that creativity is a term used for artistic endeavour while the term ‘innovation’ would be applicable in business contexts.

There is a difference in the manner in which Western and Eastern thinkers viewed the notion of creativity. For the former, creativity in the Christian period the word ‘creatio’ as taken to mean the act of God creating from nothing while for the latter, this theory had no place in their philosophy and they regarded creation as discovery or imitation. The western world, by the nineteenth century had come to see creativity as purely the domain of art and it was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that it was used in the context of the sciences.
3.4 CREATIVITY MERGING WITH TRADITION

How is creativity linked to tradition? The evolution of any institution or discipline hinges upon following certain established rules (tradition) and making changes in them (creativity) over a period of time. However, some theorists argue that when we encourage creative thinking, we are actually encouraging people to break from tradition, to break away from existing norms and be radically non-conformist.

Very often if we are over appreciative of the thoughts and ideas expressed by past thinkers, and by traditions, it can take us away from formulating our own, original thoughts. Being dazzled by the brilliance of the past, we are no longer able to see our way clearly enough to forge new paths and explore for ourselves and thus come to a discovery of individual truths. The American writer and philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson offers the example of the English poets who had been “Shakespearized” for over two hundred years in the sense that they imitated Shakespeare rather than evolve their own thoughts and style. He exhorted the American writers to move away from the shadow of the European tradition and develop their own style and tradition.

T.S. Eliot, another great poet-critic of the modern world, expressed his views regarding tradition and creativity by claiming that, far from assuming that a writer’s greatness lies in how much he departs from the tradition, from his predecessors, he must, in reality, embody “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer,” while, at the same time, also convey whatever is happening in his contemporary world. Eliot says that “the most individual parts of his (the poet) work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.” So, according to Eliot, it is important for a poet to have this “historical sense,” which means not just a superficial similarity but also awareness and understanding of the manner in which the past is related to the present. Tradition, for Eliot, is a concept that is special and complex because to him it signifies a “simultaneous order,” a timelessness in which past and present are merged in a historical timelessness but which, at the same time, also retains the sense of the contemporaneous present.

However, in following tradition, one does not have to give up one’s originality and subscribe to blind imitation. It is possible to be original only when one has a tradition to draw upon. The creative act does not, cannot occur in a vacuum. When a new piece of creation comes into being, it changes the dynamics of the old system and causes it to rearrange itself in order to be accommodated within that framework. When this happens, there is a simultaneous change in the way in which the old is perceived and interpreted. In Eliot’s own words: “What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it.” Eliot refers to this organic tradition, this developing canon, as the “mind of Europe” in which the private mind is subsumed by this more massive one. A living, dynamic tradition is one which can rearrange its contours to allow new works to enter and flow with it. Although the tradition was complete before the addition of the new, there must be, if order is to be maintained, some conformity between the old and the new.

For a poet to be creative and original, he must first surrender himself to the vast universe of tradition that precedes his actions. For Eliot, talent is the ability to
connect with Tradition and create something which has the merit to become a part of it. In that sense, both the present and the past are modified by each other and the creative artist must be aware of this for him to act with responsibility towards his art and its traditions. Let me illustrate this by giving you an example: the languages that we speak today are constantly undergoing change, addition of new words, some words becoming obsolete etc. Every new speaker re-shapes the language, every new writer plays with the words, often giving new connotations to familiar words. Yet, the changes take place within the existing framework - we talk of the traditions of that particular language even though it may be vastly different today than it was a century ago. Here is a good example of how change and order co-exist and are still part of a system, a tradition.

A great many of the twentieth century artists professed to be against tradition but it was most probably a protest against mindless repetition and blind imitation that had become lifeless and were no longer nourished by artistic sources. There are those who have imbibed the traditions of the past, have learnt from them and then go further than that in their quest to find a new way of expressing themselves. On the other hand are those artists who do not learn from the past and so either produce poor imitations or works which is of no lasting quality and can only be viewed as works of protest.

It is quite natural for a sense of artistic tension to exist between a creative artist and the traditions as the artist would like to produce something new, which has never been attempted before and so on. But there is also the desire to learn from the genius of the past. There is an Arabic proverb which says that one fig tree fertilizes another. In other words, one great mind can inspire another and that is how artists learn their craft and carry on glorious traditions of art and craftsmanship. While some artists can, quite easily maintain this fine balance, others do not wish to let past influences take away the tag of originality from their work and so keep trying to repress such influences.

Creativity lives in the tense, fertile, conjunction of individual expression and the inherited tradition and the best approach to such work lies in the apprenticeship model of learning where the student or disciple trains under the master or guru. Although many see the self and its expression as opposed to culture and tradition, they are in fact, actually complementary because they both need each other. Neither a purely self-expressionistic work divorced from a breathing tradition nor a completely traditional piece separated from individual feeling and experience would be noticeably substantial. In an attempt to eschew tradition altogether, the creative output would be rendered incoherent and without the inclusion of the self, there is nothing to be told.

Have you seen children when they start talking, painting or dancing? Do they draw upon the existing traditions to do so? No, they don’t. They give expression that can be seen as common across cultural and geographic spaces by tapping into the resources of their own developing brains. They are being self-creative in the truest sense of the word. However, if, as they grow, they are not brought into contact with the traditions of that particular field, this creativity stops. Have you not seen how little children who dance spontaneously to music, stop dancing as they grow older unless they are taught how to do so? But, once they do start learning, their creativity may again be threatened to be overwhelmed by the weight of the tradition that is imparted to them. It is essential therefore, to maintain a
balance between tradition – the residue of past talent - and creativity – the essence of present talent - and not let either one predominate over the other.

### Check Your Progress 2

**Notes:**
1) Your answers should be about 300-500 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit or in the section concerned.

1) How do traditions affect creativity?

2) Is it necessary for creative artists to reject traditions completely?

3) How does creativity affect tradition?

4) Giving concrete examples, give your views on the educational system of our country in this context. Do they only reinforce traditions in an academic way or do they offer scope for creativity?

5) What are the qualities necessary for a creative work to stand the test of time?
3.5 LET US SUM UP

Traditions are certain customs and practices or works of art that are handed down over generations. Earlier, they were committed to memory and transmitted orally, thus constituting a large body of oral traditions in different cultures. To remain meaningful, traditions must change and adapt in accordance with the changing times and must not be too rigid or suffocating for then they will die away. Traditions give people of a particular community or culture, a framework according to which they can shape their lives and also bonds them together in various ways. On the other hand, people from a different community may feel alienated when faced with traditions that are different from their own.

Although creativity is often viewed as being antithetical in nature to tradition, they are, in fact, complementary concepts. One can deviate from tradition only when one is fully grounded in it and understands it completely. Deviation for the sake of deviation or novelty is not true creativity. A creative person has to tap into the traditions of his chosen area for inspiration and sustenance and then try to go beyond what is traditional. Creativity affects both the past and the present and is a fusion of originality with tradition.

3.6 ACTIVITY

Here are a few activities which you can carry out to enhance your understanding of tradition and creativity and the symbiotic relationship between them.

1) At the beginning of the module put down your ideas of what you think tradition means. Some questions you could pose to yourself and which would prove helpful in crystallizing vague impressions could be: What are the factors that are involved in the creation and evolution of a tradition? What is the need for tradition? What difference does it make to human society?

2) Make a survey of the social/folk traditions prevalent in the area where you live and see if they are ‘self-activated’ or ‘consciously-activated’. If the latter, can you think of reasons why they were brought into being? What purpose were they meant to serve?

3) Think of some traditions that we follow, most often unthinkingly, and see if any of them were invented to benefit a particular community or class of people in society.

4) Pick any tradition associated with a festival or social functions like marriage and see how it has changed over the years. Talk to older people in your family or community and draw upon their memories of how that tradition was followed when they were young.

5) What do you think is the source of creativity? Discuss with your friends or with someone who is a writer or artist and try to see how creativity is triggered off in the human mind.

6) Try to define creativity for yourself, using the above material as the basic framework. Try to put down the most essential elements that the concept holds.
7) Put down your own views regarding the interconnection of tradition and creativity. Look at a piece of art or writing and see how it is both original as well as traditional.

3.7 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


3.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

Read sections 4.2, 4.2.1, 4.2.2 and 4.2.3.

Check Your Progress 2

Read sections 4.3, 4.3.1 and 4.4