



Tradition : The Dialectics of Continuity and Change

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ABSTRACT

Culture, Civilization and tradition are some of the significant categories and domains of phenomena that have captured the attention of almost all the thinkers intending to study collective human seekings and creations. Of these, culture and civilization refer to the realms of human creations, and tradition implies how these creations are transferred through the generations. The paper seeks to understand the nature of the tradition and to dispel the notion that tradition represents continuity sans change.

KEYWORDS

Tradition, Change, Continuity, Creativity

Culture and civilization represent complex concepts whose analysis reveals significant insights illuminating the nature and meaning of processes as well as attainments of collective human seekings and creativity. Rather than referring to natural entities existing out there in the world, they have a necessary reference not only to trans-biological aspects of being human, but also to trans-natural domains of human condition and reality in which present human generations find themselves. They have to be maintained, reproduced, modified and passed on to successive generations in order that fruits of collective human seekings and creativity are not lost into oblivion. Cultures and civilizations in order to continue as embodiments and expressions of human creativity, devise some techniques and ways for their maintenance and transmission. Like culture and civilization these techniques and ways themselves are results of human creativity, because culture and civilization not being biological or natural entity, cannot be transmitted through natural process found in living beings. As opposed to natural domain, trans-natural aspects cannot be transmitted genetically through the generations, rather mode of their transmission is social in nature. Tradition is considered to be the medium of this social transmission through which cultural and civilizational creations and attainments are transferred down the generations.

The Nature of Tradition

The term tradition has its roots in the Latin world traders which has the connotations of handing down, passing on and to deliver (1994:190). In this sense tradition refers to all the social inheritance of the group and collectivity. Present generations cannot undermine the past of society as present institutions or learning does not begin anew in the absolute sense. Present generations find themselves surrounded by the results and consequences of prior choices of previous generations. Educational and institutional processes keep alive the fruits of experiences and learnings of previous generations that have relevance not only for the present but, more often than not, for the future as well. There is no doubt about the fact that present generations re-interpret the social heritage handed down to them in the light of their vision of the future and modify it; but the rules of interpretation, though may themselves be modified by the present generations, nevertheless are transferred by the previous generations. Tradition in this sense is like collective memory of the group.

G.C. Pande has summed up the view that draws analogy between tradition and memory by insisting that "tradition plays the same role in social life as memory does in individual life" (1999, 103). The metaphor of memory contains important and significant insights not only about the role of tradition but

also about its nature.

Tradition like memory is not something that is prefabricated and stagnant, rather human acts weave the fabric of both memory as well as tradition. Memory creates a sense of identity in the individual, similarly tradition also serves the purpose of creating a sense of cultural identity. Just as a person without memory will lead an abnormal life -worse than a schizophrenic- similarly people without a tradition will have no sense of identity and purpose. They will lack a sense of direction, and hence no destiny or future. Memory is an integral part of the process of self-creation of a person, similarly tradition also is an integral part of processes of human self-creation that are related to the creation of culture. Constituents of the memory are particular choices that an individual makes, through which he or she creates himself or herself. On the same lines, tradition as collective memory is also constituted by the choices made by successive generations. These choices that have already been made play an important role in forming the self-image of a person as well as of a culture and a civilization. Thus tradition forms an integral part of the self-image of society, group and the community that helps provide direction to the various spheres of life in everyday situations.

Tradition lives through its enactments. It is constituted by a series of enactments that are not only regular in nature but are also passed on to the successive generations. The passing on is associated with the idea of respect for traditions and a sense of duty not only towards them, but also for passing them on to next generations. The elements of tradition that loose respect of some generations do not evoke the sense of duty for passing them on, and are thereby reduced to the memory of historians from the status of collective memory of the society.

Regularities in the domain of tradition and its enactments are to be distinguished from natural regularities based upon causation. As opposed to them, regularities in the realm of tradition are results of human interventions, and as such are based on deliberations. They are intentional and are not enforced through coercion or sanctions. Coercion or fear of sanctions may result in some form of forced social practices. But once the force is removed, the practice will wither away and vanish. Thus the respect and sense of duty that tradition commands is based not on some external power, but on the authority of the tradition which is internal to it.

But everyday life situations are not so crystal clear. For example, rather long use of force and pressure may mould the will of people and they may internalize the practice. Such prac-

tices are sometimes considered to be a part of tradition. But they are not results of free human choices. It is this type of cases that give rise to ambiguities in understanding the role of tradition. These ambiguities are reflected particularly in the consideration of the role of tradition in bringing about change i.e. whether it cramps and binds human creativity; or if the energy of tradition can be used for change.

Tradition, Change and Continuity

Being human is almost co-terminus with meaning, significance and value. Human beings are not only value creating, choosing and seeking beings, rather they associate value with being human as well as with circumstances and surroundings in and through which they perform their everyday life-activities. They evaluate the present situation and circumstances, and it is seldom that they find them to be satisfactory. The dissatisfaction with the present has more often than not found expression in apprehending values the realization of which points towards a better future. But sometimes it so happens that this dissatisfaction with the present has sought refuge in the perceived golden past. Such views consider problems of the present to be a result of the society moving away from the tradition.

Thus some thinkers have been concerned more about the elements of change and future while others have laid more stress on the elements of continuity with tradition. People have strong attitudes towards role of tradition vis-a-vis change in the society. Radicals are more inclined towards taking tradition to be something that hinders energies the free flow of which could result in a better future. Conservatives on the other hand take tradition to be something that is natural and as such worthy of continuation as it helps maintain social order and stability.

Such criticisms as well as defences of tradition are based on a misunderstanding of the nature of tradition. The stress on either change divorced from continuity, or continuity sans change stems from an incorrect understanding of not only the processes of human history but also of the role of tradition in society. Tradition contains elements of both continuity as well as change in the realm of culture and civilization. Rather it needs to be stressed that tradition represents the dialectics of continuity and change. It does not refer to some rigid and unchanging reality as traditions do not continue despite human choices but only through such choices. The most fundamental error that forms backdrop of misconceptions regarding tradition from both radical as well as conservative perspective is to consider it as preformed, given and unchanging. Traditions do not remain untouched or unaffected by various processes pertaining to human reality and society. Various traditions are in constant dialogue with one another. There is an exchange of ideas, values, beliefs, etc. that takes place between them. This facilitates the cultures to evaluate their traditions and mould them accordingly. Changing contexts also help reinterpret the traditions. Traditions keep evaluating themselves in order to keep pace with times. It is rather difficult to understand tradition without understanding its internal dynamics. As has been seen, traditions are part of the collective memory of the society, but society itself chooses its traditions keeping in mind the immediate needs of the present in conjunction with the projected vision of the future. In certain special circumstances even collective but selective amnesia may become the need of the hour and selectively some traditions are erased from the collective memory of the society. The need to bring changes in traditions also stems from the fact that traditions are for human beings and not vice-versa. They should be seen as means of transferring experiences and achievements of previous generations rather than becoming ends-in-themselves.

Seen in this perspective there seems no inherent contradiction between tradition and change. Tradition and change should not be viewed as opposite poles of cultural realm. Change is an integral part of the nature of tradition. Traditions do change and grow. They have a role to play in continuity as well as change in the cultural realm. Changing and modifying a tradition is itself an important element of most of the traditions. Thus tradition of change is itself an important tradition. In this sense energy of tradition can be harnessed for the purpose of growth and renewal of a culture through its inner logic.

If there is any conflict, it is not between tradition and change, but between tradition and changing the tradition in the sense of replacing one tradition by another tradition. This implies that if some values or ideas are found worthwhile in certain other culture or tradition, it should be adapted by moulding it in accordance with the inner nature of one's own tradition so as to make it an integral part of the tradition. Meaning thereby that if it is imitation then it should not be blind imitation, rather aspects of other cultures and traditions should be imitated creatively.

In any case passing on of tradition from one generation to another involves imitation. But this imitation is, and should be creative imitation as the present generations make necessary changes in accordance with their enriching life experiences. And it is handed down to the next generations along with the changes. The next generations again, imitate it creatively.

Thus it becomes clear that tradition like culture and civilization is a product of human creativity. At the same time tradition harnesses the energies of human creativity to provide a direction to human destiny. Tradition and change are involved in a dialectical relationship as traditions on the one hand effect the processes of growth and decline of cultures, and on the other they themselves are effected by such processes.

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