

Title of the paper: Defining *Tradition* in the Socio-Cultural Perspectives of Assam

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Abstract

In the present socio-cultural context, where people are over-apprehensive of losing their cherished *traditions* as a result of inroads of so called *modernity*, it is extremely important to understand the term *tradition* in its appropriate meaning. The present study endeavors to show how certain traditions move from one age to other absorbing the necessary spatiotemporal changes and thus, making themselves significant markers of continuity and change. This work primarily attempts to focus on two key aspects of *tradition*. First of all it makes an effort to define the term *tradition* from different perspectives. Along with, it also examines the validity of the popular notion where *traditions* are believed to be sacrosanct and unalterable. At the same time, it also advocates how certain obsolete *traditions*, which had once deep roots and larger social implications, can be reviewed and re-used for newer purposes.

Key words: *tradition, modernity*, socio-cultural context, Assam etc.

Defining *Tradition* in the Socio-Cultural Perspectives of Assam

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We are living in an age of extremes. In our country itself, one may see the mindless disapproval of one's age old cultural ethics, social ethos etc. in the name of so called modernity. On the other side of the coin what one sees is the irresistible and irresponsible immergence of a fascist tendency of moral policing in the name of "cherished *traditions*". This group of people are over-apprehensive of losing their longstanding *traditions* as a result of inroads of *modernity* (and hence moral policing e.g. you should not wear this, you cannot eat that etc.) So we are in between these extreme binaries. There are people who totally negate *tradition* because for them *tradition* is synonymous to superstition and backwardness; and there are some other people who are very much possessive about because for them *tradition* is like lifeline or like something which is there from 'time immemorial'. In this confusing situation how we would be able to choose what is right and what is wrong, what should we accept and what we should not. Now, how to bridge these two extreme notions? At this critical juncture, what I believe is that a clear and unbiased understanding of the term tradition can help us to realize the situation more appropriately and comprehensively.

This work primarily attempts to focus on a few key aspects of *tradition*. First of all it makes an effort to define the term *tradition* from different perspective. Along with, it also examines the validity of the popular notion where *traditions* are believed to be sacrosanct

and unalterable. The present study, endeavors to show how certain traditions move from one age to other absorbing the necessary spatio-temporal changes and thus, making themselves significant markers of continuity and change. At the same time it also advocates how certain obsolete *traditions*, which had once deep root and larger social implications, can be reviewed and re-used for newer purposes.

In recent times, *tradition* has become the subject of prolonged debate in different scholarly discipline. Unremitting attempts have been made to define and re-define its meaning. The term *tradition* has its origin from the Latin word '*traditio*' which usually denotes 'to hand down', 'to transfer', 'to handover' or 'to give for safekeeping'. Thus, in its most familiar use, *tradition* is basically the diffusion of accumulated knowledge (whose formal source cannot be verified) from one generation to the generation next. The method of such transformation is often by oral means. *Tradition* is thus, a living process that links the past with the present.

As a part of the human society, people are closely associated with certain *traditions* and are seen to be very sensitive and apprehensive about these *traditions*. Why *traditions* are so imperative to society? Because *traditions* are like passports to the members of the society to identify them with their respective roots. In order to establish a link with a definite history people use to look into the *traditions* which they believed to be with them from time immemorial and at times, they knowingly or unknowingly manipulate history to serve their cause. Here comes the responsibility of the historians to assess a *tradition* in its historical context. Romila Thapar, prominent historian remarks, "It becomes necessary

therefore for historians to pause from time to time, to take stock as it were by asking whether what has come to be accepted as *tradition* deserves to be so accepted.”¹ This is very interesting because, *traditions* which we presume to ‘have long pedigrees may on an historical analysis be found to be an invention of yesterday’. ² This leads us to another very fascinating facet of *tradition* i.e. ‘invented tradition’. What is an ‘invented tradition’? An invented tradition has every appearance of being an actual tradition. Thus ‘it repeats images and symbols drawn from the past (real or imagined), but is in fact both of a relatively recent origin and artificially created’.³ The mentor of the concept of ‘invented tradition’ is the renowned British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm.

In the introduction to the book called *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm defines *invented tradition* as follows:

Invented Tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past... However, in so far as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of ‘invented’ traditions is that the continuity with it is largely fictitious. In short they are response to novel situations

¹. Thapar Romila, (2004) *Cultural Transaction and Early India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p1

². *ibid*, p 8

³. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100009526> retrieved on 04/06/2018

which take the form of reference to old situations or which establish their own past by quasi- obligatory repetition. It is contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some part of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the ‘invention of tradition’ so interesting for the historians of the past two centuries.³

[Habsbawm and Ranger: 1992: ii]

Hobsbawm argues that all *invented traditions* use reference to the past for different purposes; be it for the creation of national identity promoting national unity or for legitimization of certain institutions or cultural practices.

Here I would like to cite an interesting example of *invented traditions* in the context of Assam. . Assamese people have a long dietary list which includes different types of vegetable, fish and meat etc. But a few dishes are very common in every household like *amitar khar* (a preparation of papaya seasoned with alkali), *alu pitika* (smashed potato), *bilahir tenga* (a cuisine made of tomato) which are considered as the most popular food items of Assam. However historical enquiry gives us amazing information in this regard. None of these vegetables (potato, tomato or papaya) are indigenous products of Assam. On the other hand they had their original homeland in South America. It is interesting to mention that all these vegetables entered Assam along with the colonial rulers only in the

⁴Hobsbawm, Eric. and Ranger Terence (ed.), 1992. *The Invention Of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, p 2

early part of nineteenth century. This discussion thus enlightens us that all *traditions* may not have long historical background as we generally believe.

Let us now move into another important aspect of *tradition*. There exists a divergence of opinion between the scholarly and public discourse on the nature of *tradition*. While the scholars tended to express *tradition* as progressive, multi-layered, dynamic and creative; the common men conceptualize *tradition* as a part of ‘*traditional values*’ associated with a past oriented, unified and inherently stable society.⁴ *Tradition* is, however, not a blind or timid ‘adherence’ to the past; neither is it the maintenance of certain dogmatic beliefs.⁵ It is a matter of much wider significance. In real sense *tradition* is a dynamic concept constantly evolving over time. We should not assume that a *tradition* is handed down in an unchanging fashion. The very act of transition from one age to the other introduces change.⁶ While diffusing from time to time, a *tradition* cannot move of its own. It is the sharing people who through their participation operate as a bearer of a particular *tradition* from one generation to the next. In this process, they endorse it according to the need of the time and space. *Tradition*, thus, is a continuous process which incorporates newer aspects in its forwarding march without losing its link with the immediate past.

To explain the process of continuity and change in *tradition*, I would like to cite an example here. We all are aware of the fact that Assam is the birth place of tea cultivation

⁴. Bronner Simon J., (2000) *The American Concept of Tradition : Folklore in the Discourse of Tradition al Value in Western Folklore*, Vol. 59 Spring. Pp 143-170

⁵. Eliot T.S., (1920) *Tradition and Individual Talent* in The Sacred Wood, Dover Publications, New York, 1997 (First Published in 1920) p 23.

⁶. Thapar Romila, *ibid* p 8.

in India and we always offer this credit to our British colonial masters. If oral traditions are to be believed, the *Singphos*, a hill tribe of Assam had the tradition of tea cultivation even before the coming of the British to Assam. It is stated that Robert Bruce, who introduced tea plantation in India in the model of China, was very upset with the repeated futile attempts to cultivate tea in Assam. Then one fine morning in 1823, he met Bessa Gam, a *Singpho* chieftain who told him that “Sahab, this is not the way you can cultivate tea in this land. We have been cultivating tea from the days of our eternal grandfathers. Tea plants are very tender. They demand the care like a *pat-madoi* i.e. a queen.”⁷ Then he divulged the traditional knowledge of tea plantation to Robert Bruce and the rest is history. Previously, the *Singphos* used tea mostly for medicinal purposes. ‘They produce their tea by plucking the tender leaves and drying them in the sun and exposing to the night dew for three days and nights. The leaves are then placed in ‘*bahar sunga*’ (hollow tube of a bamboo) and these cylinders are kept exposed to the smoke of the fire. In this way, their tea can be kept for years without losing its flavour’.⁸ But the most interesting point is that the practice of using tea as a refreshing drink has changed a lot since the meeting of Robert Bruce with the *Singpho Gam*. Now a days, tea is used not only as a medicinal drink, rather it has become part of life of the half of the people of the world and the most fascinating thing is that in regards to tea you have number of options to try your tastes. You can have a sip in your cup of tea with or without sugar, milk, molasses, ginger, lemon, ice, honey and what not! The only thing that matters is your taste. Thus

⁷ Nayak, B. M., *Voices of the Hills*, Scholars Publishing House, New Delhi 2012, p24

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jingpo_people#Singpho_people retrieved on06/06/2018

the voyage of tea from a historic past to modern times can be a better example of the process of continuity and change imbibed in a tradition.

It is, however, a natural fact that no particular *tradition* can continue for good. After a specific time frame it starts to lose its ground and then fall apart. Here arises the question as to whether it is feasible to breathe fresh life into a ‘dying *tradition*’ or whether there exists any practical utility of reviving it at all? This work answers both these questions in the affirmative.

An extinct *tradition* can, of course, be revived when its ancient elements are adopted and reused in a newer contemporary context. Hobsbawm, also advocates the adaptations and new uses of old *tradition* for new purposes. In the terminology of folklore this is called the *second existence*.

Such *second existence* can be best exemplified through the *tradition* of *bihu* dance form of Assam. The *bihu* dance form, which was started in an agrarian background under open sky, lost its previous significance as time rolled by. The art form regained its vigour once more when it was brought on the stage in the mid-fifties of the last century and thenceforth it retained its existence as the most prolific performing art form of Assam. In its original form, *bihu* was a spontaneous youthful expression of spring-time which evidently reflected the pastoral lifestyle of the Assamese society. The modern *bihu*, however is more commercial and less pastoral in essence. Still, in its newer avatar the *bihu*, not only attracts the rural mass alone; the urban populace has also been mesmerized

in the same degree. If the culture of *bihu* can be revived with such success, the same may be the case with some other decaying and old *traditions* too.

Another appropriate example in this regard is cricket. Cricket has a long *tradition* of playing for hundreds of years. Over these years this sport has adapted itself to the need and demand of its sharing people and changing times. The conversion of its format from the ‘five- day long test cricket’ to the limited over of ‘one- dayers’ and of course to the more modern ‘twenty-twenty’ form has not only prolonged the continuity of this sport but also made it one of the most prosperous sport throughout the globe.

There are certain things, which need clarifications regarding these examples. In case of both *bihu* and cricket, as we see, it was the commercialization that played a determining role in their continuation till date. This study, however, does not suggest a similar type of remedy in regard to all the *traditions* of Assam. Both the above examples are cited only to validate the point that extinct and old *traditions* can be revitalized keeping in mind the changing times and the requirements of the people.

Further, the suggestion of revival of a dying *tradition* does not necessarily mean the revival of each and every *tradition* we have since the inception of our culture. Those *traditions* which had been serving the society so long and still have immense potential to do so should get a chance for their second innings. It may help the society from another angle too. In the context of present dilemma of choosing between *tradition* and

modernity, such concept (i.e. re-use of old *tradition* in modern context) may immensely provide balance to the society and would give the idea of progress its fuller meaning.

From the foregoing discussion it becomes clear that *tradition* is a holistic idea with multi-layered meanings. Thus, *tradition* may be defined as an evolving concept of inherited knowledge which has a definite link with the immediate past and which tends to accommodate itself with newer aspects to cope with the changing situations. But while accommodating itself with newer innovations, the particular *tradition* must not de-link itself with its immediate past nor it should cross a certain parameter. There should be a balance between such change and demand of time; otherwise the *tradition* will lose its roots, and will be left out as a ‘dead *tradition*’ with no historical significance.

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