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## Chapter 7

### Tradition under Stress

India in the nineteenth century saw, as mentioned in the earlier chapters, extensive engagements with the problem of cultural inheritance and the tradition(s) which were handed down to those who lived then. I do not propose to survey this entire history. Instead in this chapter I look at the mode of interpretations which were used as a defence against this inherited tradition and as a way to reappropriate it for popular use and consumption. In this there was a pattern and a distinct logic which I shall try to unravel. In these interpretations of tradition, the structures and modes of argumentation employed in the (early) philosophical discourse of entrenched Modernity are replayed with great sophistication, though without conscious intent. Of particular interest is the sense of superiority of one's own thought *vis-à-vis* all others', and the manner in which the Other, in a philosophical as well as sociological sense is, as discussed in Chapter 1, reproduced and deployed to talk of people who live by different philosophical conceptions and religious beliefs about life and the hereafter.

This inquiry will be pursued through a number of questions: What becomes of the relations people have with tradition when tradition itself becomes a part of the politics of power? Does tradition remain the same when it is used as a weapon to mobilize people into contending camps as has happened since the late nineteenth century? It is presumed in the above questions that there is a disjuncture between tradition as a lived experience among the people, and tradition as a manipulated entity in the hands of the elite. What consideration is given to those holding vantage positions in society when they begin to monopolistically redefine tradition? Alternatively, what kind of access do ordinary people have to this

kind of reinterpreted tradition? and what becomes of it as a lived resource for these people, in handling their everyday problems?

I do not seek to answer these questions directly but rather build the argument such that clues to possible answers emerge. The argument begins with the existence of tradition in the pre-colonial period and the later phase of colonialism, and then goes on to examine how it has been reworked in India and reinterpreted in the last hundred years or so. My argument shows how tradition stands divided between its lived versions and its articulated forms. In other words, I shall try to show the bifurcation that has come about in the last hundred years or so between the public face of tradition, which fills the public sphere as politics or intellectual debate, and its private face amongst the people in its varied unreflective forms—unreflective given the absence of widespread literacy in Indian society at the time. Through all this I also want to see if a life of tolerance, in the sense in which Locke talks of it,<sup>1</sup> and mutual recognition, as required in modern pluralism,<sup>2</sup> can be built on the basis of tradition as it stands reinterpreted in India today.

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I do not think that one can possibly take tradition in India in the Burkean sense,<sup>3</sup> as some homogeneous, collective wisdom. It may have had such a character in England which happens to be just one nationality within the European continent. Moreover, when Burke reflected upon tradition, England and Europe had already been through the Renaissance period and there were lively debates on what became the English version of the Enlightenment, the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and the rapid expansion of capitalism. The concept of tradition in India is far more complex with much less social unification through popular reflective appropriation than in Europe. Tradition here provides many more internally differentiated pictures of the past. This is so between linguistic-cultural zones as well as within them between various communities and classes, and substrata within these.

The past transmitted as tradition is distinct from history. It carries a sense of living presence which is cherished. As such, tradition, though historically embedded, is socially present. It is transmitted but we do not 'inherit' it in the way we inherit property.

In whatever way we conceive of tradition as transmitted wisdom(s), it is not reducible to knowledge: it cannot be given out

in a propositional form as knowledge can be. One could say, further, it is beyond validation or invalidation. Thus, as a past it can be sensed and captured in stories but, unlike history, it cannot be told as *the* story. History as the Story can be deeply contested, whereas tradition is made up of many stories which can co-exist. This is what Weber may have meant when he said, in contrast to the rational/modern, that tradition is intellectually unanalysable.<sup>4</sup> Unlike beliefs about culture, those relating to nature are, in some rudimentary way at least, falsifiable. The mode of legitimation of tradition, in whatever form, is different. In primitive societies concepts of tradition have an unquestionable standing and are self-validating. For this discussion, I shall continue to look only at tradition in these societies.

In this sense, while occupying a distinct space, tradition has common features with religion or the sacred in general. But the social space occupied by tradition is, by definition wider than religion even when it is deeply influenced by religion. The space occupied by tradition can shrink or expand in its inevitable engagements both with the secular and the religious spheres. Ontologically, the ground of its being can only be felt, as with religion but unlike the secular, and felt more often as desirable. Not amenable to a propositional form, it is self-evident to one who is inside it. Tradition for an insider is like an unconditional binding force in whichever form it takes: as custom, ritual practices, social precepts, rules of conduct, beliefs about the self and others, and about social space.<sup>5</sup>

That is how tradition is directly accessible to people as a moral economy, a meaning system, a repository of resources—both social and personal—and as a psychological support mechanism. Tradition in India from early times has also undergone a constant process of re-interpretation, which has always been an internal component of the symbolic system in India, unlike in what Levi-Strauss calls the 'cold societies'.<sup>6</sup>

Tradition in India has thus been involved in an ongoing dialogue with itself, which, when conducted over a long period, alters its own conceptual terrain as well as those of its people. This is how tradition in India has been renegotiated and reworked.<sup>7</sup> But the *inner essence* of this dialogue within tradition has been different from a rational dialogue such as, let us say, Socrates had with the Sophists. Until the coming of the British, whoever we pick out, whether Chaitanya or the Bhakti saints, exhibits a mode of

questioning that is wholly internal to the presuppositions of the tradition. Many varied interpretations may have emerged but they all shared one thing: there was no external yardstick—explicit or implicit—to measure the relevance of the traditions. One indication of this was how experience was classified within these reworked versions of tradition. There were hardly any new epistemic categories to assimilate experience and little recourse to transcultural categories. All this changed drastically once the encounter with British colonialism took place.

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All 'modern' exercises of negotiating tradition begin with the realization of a rupture within the tradition, whether articulated as such or not, which in turn implies a notion of crisis. Such crisis can be seen in that tradition no longer appears to be self-validating. What Islam could not do, colonialism did. It induced a rupture within the ontological basis of tradition. Received beliefs were no longer adequate. In unravelling the inner logic of tradition, the question of whether the change has been for the better or worse need not be asked at all. Whatever the mode of implantation, Modernity has flourished on Indian soil. The outlook entailed by Modernity, its categories for understanding social reality, and the knowledge acquired about it, forced a dialogue on tradition which is not internally related to its presuppositions in the way the dialogue of the Bhakti seers was. Now the interpretations that arise from this dialogue within tradition do not have a primordial affinity to one another as was the case before contact with Modernity. Modernity in India came as a package with colonialism. Things may have been hypothetically different if it were simply an internal struggle between secularism and religion, or modernity and tradition. But the dialogue took place, in many an instance though not necessarily, caught between defeat, domination and humiliation of being under foreign rule on the one hand, and on the other, as shown in Chapter 3, the flattening of differences juristically and the consequent sense of pain at being made to look inferior. One result of this was to create a neat distinction between the 'modern' and the traditional or the 'secular' and religious. How the inherent tensions are handled will be examined later.

These interpretations became competing, reworked versions, some of which now stand face to face in stark opposition to one another, lacking the capacity to co-exist as in earlier times. As

instances of such pairs, each contending for allegiance, one might pose Ram Mohun Roy against Bankim Chatterjee, Vidyasagar against Vivekananda, or Gandhi against Savarkar. These can easily be seen, analytically speaking, as opposed versions of insertion into, and articulation of, tradition—as much for oneself as for the benefit of others. This opposition is also revealed in the criterial properties employed to sponsor the different versions of tradition valid for the changed times. One important property of these interpretations was the systematic, even if sometimes implicit, employment of criteria external to tradition and the efforts made to validate its claims in terms of these criteria.

Two changes, that go to the very roots of what defines a tradition, are worth noting at this point. When validation is sought not just in a rational mode of argument but in terms of criteria external to tradition, tradition itself ceases to be lived presence: no more like stories we tell each other but instead the Story—that is, an account informed by historiography. Secondly, and more specifically in the case of India, the distinction between *acara* and *dharma* is undermined.<sup>7</sup> Whereas earlier these two distinct conceptions were in a dialogue of 'creative tension' *acara* now loses its local and conceptual autonomy.

That such intellectual moves were provoked by challenges from outside the domain of tradition also becomes evident from the types of language used. In recent times, many writers have taken to using terms such as construction of or 'inventing' tradition, or 'imagining' nation-community. When talking of the *Bhakti* movement or of other mystics engaged in the reworking of tradition, the same writers would not use such terms. Why employ such terms only when talking of engagements with tradition which came about *after* the colonial encounter? The seductive nature of this vocabulary does not explain why it does not extend to other periods, and seems to be confined to the times during and after colonial subjugation. This use is symptomatic of a forced or simulated necessity. A tradition is nothing if it is not rooted among the people. How and when does an invention or a construction become a tradition or when does it become one?<sup>8</sup> An intellectual exercise carried on a body of existing traditions, as the *Bhakti* movements did, is no doubt potentially capable of becoming a tradition itself but that exercise by itself does not constitute a tradition. A tradition always has a language of its own which both builds and sustains it. The notion of createdness—an artefact—has its intellectual lineage

in the empiricist way of looking at (social) reality; you make a contract to make a State *à la* Hobbes, or a basis for just society *à la* Rawls, but a tradition is not like a State—primarily a set of institutions—and therefore such a procedure of conceiving creation even as an analytical device to differentiate it from an antecedent condition is, it seems to me, impermissible.

I do not mean to suggest that construction, invention and imagining are one and the same thing. 'Construction', in one sense, has its pedigree in the Aristotelian usage. It can be a creative invention, like a form in art or literature. In that sense, a form can be constructed. But then nation or society or tradition are not, and cannot be, akin to *forms* and as such, it is important to be conscious of the connotations of the terms we employ. Even anticipatory projections about the nation—a perfectly legitimate exercise—or a desire for the continuity of anything socially existing, cannot be amenable to construction and thus invention is still harder to conceive as a strategy for social rebuilding. Therefore, to make a distinction between intellectually 'making' a tradition and people 'being in the making' of it is philosophically vital in understanding the changing modes of perception both of the 'social' sphere and of the social activity in which people are engaged. This distinction is of vital importance to the way traditions change their inner content. It is also necessary for an understanding of changing popular receptivity, and of how mobilized energies are socially deployed.

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Let me now raise the central issue of this argument. Unlike in earlier times, all attempts to negotiate tradition once the encounter with Modernity had commenced, are by way of outside interventions and made by those who are also trained in western learning. They address the people from a vantage point: in other words, people are now talked down to, since they lacked this double learning—knowledge of English and the West, on one hand, and that of traditional learning on the other. The ordinary people have not 'learnt' tradition in the way those who talk to them have, nor have they consciously appropriated it for tradition is something pre-reflectively available to them, like their mother's affection. Those who are reworking tradition have, because of their double learning, yardsticks from outside these traditions for appropriating, recasting or shedding those things that do not seem aligned with their reading

of tradition or with their notions of self and good.

When the common people are addressed, one purpose is to mobilize them, win them over to one's side, because there are others who are doing the same. These interventions thus become competitive, and it would therefore not be wrong to characterize them as interventions from above. I have on another occasion called these as 'elite interventions', without, in any way, attaching any pejorative sense to the term 'elite'.<sup>9</sup> It is in the character of these interventions from above, that they always contain a dimension of power, for how can power be far away when there is competitive mobilization involved? Those involved in this interpretative exercise calling for popular mobilizations were asking that power be for the nation representing the entire people, or equated with certain communities, or, as in the case of early Muslim assertion, simply power for certain communities as communities. At the same time as these interventions were becoming commonplace, communities were being coded and this coding also seemed to be telling them how weak or strong they happened to be at that particular moment, and thus how best to position themselves *vis-à-vis* one another, the 'nation' and the colonial presence.

We now start having monolithically coded Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and so on, whose articulated interests attach only to them. With this development, together with interventions from above into the silent world of traditions, the emerging sense of Indianness starts becoming more and more confused as well as its notion increasingly disputable. In these political disputes, the defence of the self-defined notion of nation becomes important in the restrictive appropriation of tradition, and with this its subsequent communalization as discussed in Chapter 5. Given all this what seems to be breaking down is the sense of society as a common entity. It is when the sense of society becomes fragmented that we have the ground on which sectarian contentions arise.

The intellectually most sophisticated and elaborate instances of restrictive appropriation came about in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, all over the country but more so in Bengal. Let me very briefly touch upon an aspect of these here, as I have dealt with them in detail in Chapter 5. With Bankim Chatterjee and then Vivekananda, we have within the developing discourse about Hinduness, India and its 'tradition', a double text. One text is about what the authors really wanted to deal with in their writings, but there is another parallel text which is all about the

Other, those who are seen as an alien presence in India, and whose earlier power and politics is now seen as a hostile intrusion. Such references are to be found earlier, but the consistency of the intellectual labour that goes into the making of the Other—the alien, the hostile intruder who is the Muslim—is something new. If one were to replace the Muslim with non-western civilization, as in the arguments of Enlightenment thinkers, one can see a clear replay of the mode of argumentation in entrenched Modernity about civilization and people of non-European societies. It is no doubt true that such assertions are made within a much larger cultural reassertion provoked by the feeling of inferiority induced by the colonial presence. Self-consciousness due to this was inevitable. But, as this cultural reassertion crystallized, the British were replaced by the 'Musalman'. It is also through these writings that figures from history are converted into historical cult figures imbued with the heroic features of an anticipated, desired Hindu personality. History is now treated as a direct constituent factor in the making of identity. Such a trend is more pronounced in the writings of Vivekananda where extraneous passages about the Muslims as 'slaughterers' and butchers bear no relation with the subject being talked about.<sup>10</sup>

With this shift in the essence of tradition, the earlier mode of legitimation will no longer do. Some other basic is required but it cannot be an alternative revelation by divine sanction, nor the sanctity of immemorialness; such foundational and canonical prescriptions are inadequate. It seems to me that the possible legitimatory principles can be selected from such notions as harmonizing change, giving stability to the conceived community, achieving solidarity among the people, a desired future for the nation, visions of superiority of one's tradition, and so on. The newly emergent elite who were combating colonial domination somehow clutched on to a combination of desired future and notions of the superiority of Indian culture and tradition. Indian tradition thus came to exclude anything that may have come from outside India, no matter how far back. Indigenism of sorts became a dominant trend, and continues to be an important trend in different guises even today. This development was the obverse of the creation of the Other in Indian society noted earlier.

This had two very deep ramifications on the shape of tradition in India and how it defined its relations across the boundary. As far as the shape was concerned it completely altered the conception

of 'tolerance', a feature that has been seen by many people of both the sectarian variety as well as those struggling for inter-communal harmony, as the inner essence of tradition in India. In addition, common grounds of existence between different religious communities acquired over centuries of interaction and often referred to as the 'composite culture' or 'syncretic traditions', were deeply undermined. Let us first look at the claimed significance of 'tolerance' since it has a central place in the anti-modernist argument, and therefore a direct connection with what happens to the composite culture.

It is true that, historically, Hinduism had displayed an amazing capacity to accommodate and live in peace with diverse forms of competing world-views and philosophies. While the record is not totally unblemished, it had generally not persecuted the adherents of other religious orders nor taken a hostile stand against other religions. Till the coming of Islam, it had also succeeded more often than not in assimilating other faiths without recourse to coercion, unlike, for example Christianity and Islam. Although this is generally true, protagonists of this viewpoint have not bothered to examine the basis or limits of this tolerance. No religion is ever totally tolerant, but each lays down its ground rules towards tolerance, and Hinduism is no different. In Hinduism, there has been no notion of heresy—words have a freedom unlike any other religion—but it laid great emphasis on correct ritual behaviour differentially defined in terms of caste norms.

It was also highly tolerant towards those who were outside its fold, such as the non-Indian religions from the Semitic world. In pre-modern times Muslims or Christians in India may have had few complaints about their treatment by Hindus, but contact between these religions was sporadic and minimal, as was Hindu knowledge about them.

It is also true that it was and remains to some extent extremely intolerant of those within its fold who deviated from customary-ritual norms or behaviour patterns. Retribution was swift and often severe. We know of 'outcaste' people being killed for wearing gold or being punished with molten lead poured in the ears for overhearing the Vedas (scriptures) or even within the caste order, people being excommunicated for transgressing ordinary day-to-day ritual norms. The important question therefore seems to be: why does this inversion in the sphere of tolerance exist, and how did it later break down?

There are, I would speculate, two reasons. Firstly, the Hindu religion is a non-proselytizing religion. It could, therefore, afford not to bother about those outside its fold. One aspect of tolerance is a direct extension of this feature; only it would not like others to commit violence on the Hindus. Even if there was violence, little could be done if others held State power as was the case with Muslim rulers. Proselytizing itself has its own inner logic, whose success is measured by its spread. This immunity of Hinduism has become its oratorical strength today, for example amongst the Hindutva brigade, who preach the most intolerant version of Hinduism ever produced, yet wax eloquent about the tolerance of the Hindu tradition and therefore why Hinduism has to be more secular than the 'pseudo-secularism' of the Indian State. Secondly, the absence of a sacred Book and a fixed dogma, in the manner of Semitic religions, gives a different logic to Hinduism. It had, *ipso facto*, to be tolerant of all views as there was nothing that could be considered as heretical to the nucleus of its faith. The question is: can this be construed as a case of reflective tolerance, in the Lockean sense, as is expected in modern societies? My personal inclination is to remain sceptical of such claims. To retain their identity in some form or other, all religions have to maintain themselves, and to do so have to have a superior claim to some notion of truth and mode of earthly existence. Not having a fixed dogma to defend, the Hindu religion evolved a different mechanism of self-sustenance. It developed a highly elaborate and rigid pattern of living which was viewed as specifically Hindu. The lack of tolerance in Hinduism of such conceptions and practices is as palpable as that of any other religion about those features central to their self-sustenance as distinct bodies of faith. This feature of Hinduism can be categorized as *other-directed tolerance* and *self-directed intolerance*.

I would argue that this self-directed intolerance spills out and gradually becomes a generalized feature of Hinduism. The most graphic recent example was the campaign mounted to capture Babri Masjid (which was demolished on 6 December 1992) and convert it into a Ram Temple. This process of conversion of self-directed intolerance into other-directed intolerance began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century with what I have called the creation of the Other in Indian society—the presence of an alien, hostile intruder with bestial characteristics. Since then, each successive reworking of the Indian tradition, with the exception of Gandhi, has left less and less space for the accommodation of the Other.

Today it would take an amazing feat of intellectual acrobatics for anyone to argue that traditional notions of Indian tolerance can provide a solid foundation for inter-communal harmony—although some have tried, none has succeeded.

I now briefly look at that other tradition, referred to in India as 'composite culture', which, in many imperceptible ways, provided a basis for ordinary people to come together and live in relative harmony with one another.

There is a considerable body of literature on 'composite culture' and its place in the Indian social ethos.<sup>11</sup> Rather than going into a detailed discussion about composite culture, I shall simply indicate what ought to be excluded from consideration in deciding about its place and relevance. If composite culture can be viewed as the fusion of mentalities and an intermingling of cultures and thus a basis for day-to-day cordiality, then I suggest its manifestations in the fields of art, architecture, music, and philosophy should be discounted since these are not easily detectable by the lay public and tend to survive even when intercommunal relations have broken down and earlier social synthesis is being consciously given up.

The interpretative stress and the narrowing of the space within the Indian tradition discussed above had its parallel, though of a different kind, among the Muslims as well. The traditions within the Muslim religious community were also subjected to interventions and reworkings by both neo-orthodox and 'modernist' interpretations, both trying to draw the community away from the national developments for altogether different reasons. Whatever their intentions, they succeeded in drawing the Muslim community apart.<sup>12</sup>

These developments, among Hindus as well as Muslims, bring to light the internal infirmity of those traditions which make up the composite culture. They survived as long as they were left alone, as long as there was no intervention from above. Once the intervention began—either by spokesmen of dominant version of the orthodoxy, by the elite, or by the State—their common features began to either dissolve into the existing or parallel neo-orthodoxies propounded by these spokesmen, or were reassimilated into prevailing modes of life sanctioned by them. The frail nature of composite cultures was precisely in their inability to withstand the interventions from above.

The problem has been that at the folk levels what came about has been of a pre-reflective kind, that is, it was not thought out

and consciously appropriated by the people belonging to different religious traditions or by the bearers of culture within them. Or, even at the pre-reflective levels the compositeness that has been there was not aligned with contending orthodoxies in a way as to be taken as necessarily acceptable when consciously thought about. Once the orthodoxy reacted to such danger by intervening from above, it more or less succeeded in pushing back or defeating most of these tendencies in social life.

The interventions among the Muslims, starting roughly from the first half of the nineteenth century, were not of a uniform character. From the angle of the Muslims in India, some of these represented a retreat into rather primitive varieties of fundamentalist Islam. Shah Waliullah or Sayyed Ahmad of Bareilly and their lesser known followers, like Haji Shariatullah of Faraizis in Bengal, Maulvi of Faizabad, or Maulvi Karamat Ali of Jaunpur, all were influenced in the first half of the nineteenth century by the Wahabi movement. They concentrated their attention on the 'un-Islamic' practices prevalent among the Muslims of the time, such as the folk practices of joining each other's festivals, mode of salutations and greetings, common customs and etiquette influenced by the surrounding Hindu ethos, and, above all, worship of saints as *shirk* (associating other powers with Allah). They wanted to wean Muslims, and especially the new converts, away from residual Hindu practices and create instead a purified form of Islam unadulterated by 'foreign influences'. Another form of intervention which occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century, is best represented by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan whose vision was of a Muslim community, staying away from the emerging struggle against British colonialism, and achieving rapid modernization with a conception of Islam consonant with reason, science and the demands of the modern era.

Whatever the differences of historical time, internal thrust, or intentions and motivations, there are certain common features and consequences of all these interventions. The more salient features are: first, a thought-out and planned move to address the people directly instead of relying on the court or the aristocracy to defend Islam, as, for example, the orthodoxy did in the conflict between Aurangzeb and Dara Shikoh. Some set out to build bridges between the Muslim gentry and the lower ranks to provide enduring channels of communication within the community. Secondly, these interventions sought to shift the emphasis away from theological arguments addressed to the learned towards political appeals and

some form of mobilization of the people on broad themes. Thirdly, there was a consistent effort to reconstruct a 'healthier' version of Islam on which the newly sought identity of Muslims could stand. It may not be wrong to see the two trends which came about due to these interventions as 'Traditionalist' and 'Modernist'. Interestingly, they took diametrically opposite stands towards the nationalist movement even while looking at Muslims as a distinct cultural community.

The contradictory result of these developments was that while they were slowly drawing the Muslim community away from the rest of society, they were also slowly bringing them into the public arena as active participants, insistent on being heard. The people were becoming the subjects of history. This was a development, democratic in essence, but with far-reaching disastrous consequences. When seen in conjunction with the developments in the rest of Indian society, especially the Hindus, we can more clearly see the manner in which political contentions were taking shape. The nature of Hindu response to the conditions imposed by colonialism we have already seen.

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We now have a different view of what it means to be a Hindu. Earlier all those who belonged to the various sanatan traditions which emerged in India were Hindus. This I consider to be a pacifist view of being a Hindu. From the late nineteenth century, with the developments noted above, the Muslims are picked out, and to be a Hindu meant to combat Muslims, if not physically, then at least ideologically. It is at this time that we have the development of views which can be categorized as a combative version of Hindu religion.<sup>13</sup> This ideological combat, after travelling a complex course moves on to a terrain, roughly since 1925,<sup>14</sup> where the new right-wing, militant face of Hinduism arises and attempts to marginalize those people who do not belong to one or the other core cultures of Hinduism. Politically it tried to disfranchise these Others, and render them voiceless. The RSS, the VHP, L.K. Advani and his Rath Yatra represent the fascist face of Indian politics which may be called 'communalized Hinduism'.

One feature of the rise of fascist Hinduism is the change in the direction of its ideological message. The earlier messages, say of Bankim Chatterjee or Vivekananda, were directed to the society with a view to rejuvenate the Indian culture and the individual

Hindu personality. Today, however, people and society are of marginal importance and any attempt to address society is done only with the purpose of capturing the State. Why this discourse has developed a widespread appeal is a question that I shall not go into here. Instead I reflect here upon the role of the State and its power in influencing the way traditions in India are now being reworked and curtailing the possibility of people being agents in society.

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The identification between State power and nation-nationalism, and a restrictive view of Hinduism by orchestrated campaigns and mass mobilizations, raises the question as to what remains of tradition as a pre-reflective, lived experience of the people. The question of whether these have been completely appropriated by those speaking monopolistically for tradition has to be answered both as yes and no.

The reworked tradition, in both its forms—militant and communalized—has succeeded in filling up the public sphere, the space occupied by politics, intellectual contentions, and such other activities. It has forced the lived experiences of people into the corners of private, domestic life. Even within that domain, it has managed to induce confusion and uncertainty. Not that people have ceased to think contrary to the monopolistic definitions being imposed on them in the name of religion, tradition and nationalism. Within their day-to-day lives they no longer find avenues to contest or contradict these monopolistic definitions. Their voice has been enfeebled. Moreover, whatever little resistance or questioning takes place at the local level is dissipated due to the absence of any tradition-based all-India focus, such as that provided by Gandhi before Independence. The kind of traditions people live with have been, in a way, losing their autonomy; they are no longer available to them in the larger social sphere where social interactions and political contestations take place.

Let me clarify that, although I am not a Gandhian, I wish to make use of Gandhi's valiant attempt to rescue tradition from being taken over by divisive, sectarian forces to highlight the point being made. An additional reason for bringing in Gandhi here is to highlight the difficulties in using tradition as a popular resource; a name invariably invoked by anti-modernists to show how tradition can be an alternative to the secular. Gandhi not only gave to

tradition a very high value but also closely associated it with religion. Tradition in India, for Gandhi, was such that the social being of its people could be best understood through their religion-based consciousness. Gandhi would have liked to see India as a happy co-existence of religious communities in which Hinduism provided a benign and nourishing presence—the Indian 'nation' being a reflective coalition of the living and vibrant faiths of the different people living in India. By freeing faith from religiosity, Gandhi tried to give tradition back to people as a weapon to combat domination.

This detour into Gandhian thinking brings to the fore the anti-democratic features of communalized tradition espoused by the forces active today. This has placed the burden of individual faith on to the Hindu 'community' in the belief that only a unified community can be a reservoir of constant corrective action in favour of the nation. It is here, in such a conception, that we find the source of fascist trends. This conception involves the direct identity of Hindus counterposed to the negative similarity of minorities.

It alleges that in the past, the minorities, for all their other differences, have never stood for the independence of the 'nation'—on the contrary, they have distorted its history and inflicted violence on its culture. In this lies their similarity—only some are worse than others. As such they can neither own India's past nor defend its unity today.

Implicit in all this is a pathological conception of the past in relation to the conceived community. It sponsors the view that the past and its intellectual ordering is possible only via the communities. The past looked in this way becomes *ours* whereas 'history' can be written by anybody. As such one can own the past without owning any ordered version of it as History.

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In a society such as India, still living, according to popular beliefs with cyclical notions of time, history as a narrative of events in serial time becomes somewhat unintelligible and therefore loses some significance as such. History as a logically ordered process of summing up epochal trends would not make much sense. In India before the coming of the Muslims, there were almost no accounts of empires nor of economic or technological transformations. We had no chronological or authorial history in the Hellenic or Roman sense. By this I do not mean to say that India did not have any



sense of history—on the contrary. Every society has its collective memory—its sense of history and it varies a great deal how this memory is organized. India is no exception, but here there are different criterial properties by which social memory has been organized. The question is: what type of past was thought to be, for whatever reasons, worthwhile remembering? We know that the lives of the Buddha and Sankara were recorded, as were customs and regulations about land and produce. The Smritis, Puranas and Darshanas have been recorded in considerable detail, as have traditions, beliefs and ideas, and the changes that came in them.

All these are accessible in written form, but not necessarily in the *chronological* or *authorial* form existing in the Judaeo-Hellenic traditions. It is the essence that is self-evident and it needs no date or authorial stamp for its social approval. The 'community' and its collective memory is the guarantor of this self-evident essence, and this has a direct link with the way tradition has been described at the beginning of this chapter.

Thus if we look, with this perspective, at the Ram Janma Bhoomi versus Babri Masjid argument, for example, between the secular historians (with whom I am in strong sympathy) on the one hand and rival claims of Hindutva on the other, we see a clash of two different and incompatible notions of history; the European notion, with dates, documents and authorial backings, and the inherited (though not necessarily articulated) notions of history with its sensitivity, often unauthentic these days, to tradition and immediacy of living collective memory. The two arguments are incommensurable precisely because the Indian popular consciousness does not have the conceptual equipment to handle history as ordered events within a linear flow of time. What therefore looks like self-evident truth to one looks like factually unsubstantiated rubbish to the other.

Given the uncritical identification of a community with an entire past, communalism finds it easier to appropriate tradition because it inserts its message into existing, unspoken biases or prejudices, stereotypical images of self and others, and unsubstantiated assumptions of a society. It mobilizes itself through a frenzied appeal to the imagination of society. That was why Gandhi, who wanted to move tradition into a terrain of emancipatory articulations, had to wage a gigantic struggle. Yet even he ended a tragic hero, despite his enormous success in mobilizing the masses for political Independence. If this was the fate of an emancipatory

project built on the heritage of tradition, which was highly organized, in possession of a national-level platform and led by a charismatic figure, one can well imagine the fate of tradition when left to its own dissipated and scattered resources.

It is precisely that the protagonists of tradition and of the communities or the social forces who are its carriers are on a weak ground. Their argument is flawed at the very point of its inception. The underlying purpose of their propositions is to posit tradition as a viable alternative to the ideal and practice of secularism.<sup>15</sup> They all seem to suggest that the tradition in India is such that the social order can easily draw upon its resources to do for Indian society what the ascendance of secularism did for the western world. In rejecting the idea of the secular as a practicable ideal for Indian society, they grill the notion of secularism, yet accept the relevance of tradition without putting it to the test. This procedure of analysis sponsors an acritical attitude to whatever goes by the name of tradition in India and bolsters its claims; all on the basis of overriding *prima facie* reasons.

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In the political context of tradition as it stands today, it seems most unlikely that it can provide an alternative basis for a politics based on social harmony. Each successive phase of renegotiating tradition since 1880, with the sole exception of Gandhi, has worked to narrow the space for people to use tradition as a resource to fight their battles. It has now been hijacked by the communal forces to build a politics of confrontation, and no one seems able to rescue it in favour of the people. This indeed is the dilemma. There is, therefore, a danger of a closure—illiberal and conservative in kind—in making an uncritical use of tradition in building a politics which can be an alternative to the modern and secular. The resurrection of tradition is not, to use a term from Jasper, in 'loving combat' with the emancipatory projects they stand for, as per Gandhi. It is by now more like a mortal duel. Social liberation can be universal only in its criterial essence, but this does not mean that every society uses the same themes or has recourse to the same forms of struggle. Every society is, in many ways, bound to its history and the consciousness entailed in it, and aspects of this will be discussed in the next chapter. But then traditions, to be of use in emancipatory struggles, have to be chaperoned by some kind of universalizable power and, as discussed in Chapter

2, this need not be drawn from the Enlightenment tradition nor even from the West; it is enough if the potential in the claim is justifiable in terms of reason.

It seems to me that the eulogies for tradition are, at their best like the appreciation of classical music, and at their worst like the nostalgia of a secure exile, a half audible cry from the far off which is not worth the strain of listening to.

### Notes and References

1. John Locke, 'A Letter Concerning Toleration Concerning Civil Government', in *Great Books of Western World: Locke, Berkeley, Hume* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1952).
2. See among others, Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. with introduction by Amy Gutman (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994); the book actually grew out of responses to Charles Taylor's article originally written in 1992.
3. Burke's main emphasis in talking about tradition is quite different from the one assumed when tradition is talked about in India. In India, the domains of culture (including one that informs politics) and social life are stressed whereas in Burke the main focus is on the realm of politics, whether it is his reasoned outburst against the French Revolution or the defence of English constitution. See, for instance, Edmund Burke, 'On a Motion Made in the House of Commons ... for a committee to Enquire into the State of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament', where he writes:  
Our constitution is a prescriptive constitution; it is a constitution whose sole authority is that it has existed time out of mind... Your king, your lords, your judges, grand and little, all are prescriptive; and what proves it is the dispute not yet concluded, and never near becoming so, when any of them first originated.  
*Works*, Vol. IV, p. 146. Cited in J.G.A. Pocock, 'Time, Institutions and Action: An Essay on Traditions and their Understanding', in Pocock ed., *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (London, Methuen & Co., 1971).
4. For Max Weber's use of the 'traditional' see the chapter devoted to political sociology in *Economy and Society*.
5. Pocock, 'Time, Institutions, and Action ...', elaborates the sense of tradition as follows:

'A tradition, in its simplest form, may be thought of as an indefinite series of repetitions of an action, which on each occasion performed on the assumption that it has been performed before; its performance is authorised—by the knowledge, or the assumption, of previous performance. In the pure state, as it were, such a tradition

is without a conceivable beginning; each performance presupposes a previous performance, in infinite regress. Furthermore, it may well be that it is the assumption, rather than the factual information, of the previous performance that is operative; each action provides the ground for assuming that it had a predecessor. Traditions of this kind, then, are immemorial, and they are prescriptive and presumptive; ... (p. 212. emphasis added).

It is, to use the language of Weber, an 'ideal-typical' rendering of what tradition means. Pocock himself is quite aware of it as a little later he indicates the kind of changes tradition can undergo.

6. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology Vol. 2* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1978), pp. 28–30.
7. I use in the context of India the notion of *acara* to stand for the tradition as a lived presence among the people. In that sense it may vary a great deal from one area to another or in terms of the social group one belongs to; for example, if one is an outcaste then the custom is that he cannot wear gold on his body or ride a horse or carry a sword and so on; it may well be the case that there is no scriptural sanction for such a custom. The same customs do not apply if one were a warrior or Kshatriya. The dialogue often involved a reinterpretation of these, among other purposes, to quietly alter these. The *Bhakti* movements, for instance, can be cited here as examples of these reinterpretations. I am thankful to Jayanti Alam for making me aware of the range of meanings and distinctions in the use of this term.
8. See the contribution in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983); ten years later Terence Ranger reviewed the debate and examined whether the use of the term 'invention' was at all appropriate. See his 'Invention of Tradition Revisited', in Preben Kaarsholm, Occasional Paper No., International Development Studies, Roskilde University.
9. The elite may emerge from among the most disadvantaged. It both happens that they may get assimilated to the dominant interests or remain independent and wage struggles for revolution or radical democracy.
10. See Chapter 5. for details.
11. The first major work on this problem was written, to the best of my knowledge, by Tara Chand in 1920 but was published in 1963 after the debate on this problem was revived in the 1960s, see his *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture* (Allahabad, The Indian Press, 1963). Before Independence, Jawaharlal Nehru dealt with this issue quite extensively in *Discovery of India* (Calcutta, Signet Press, 1946). Humayun Kabir also wrote about the same time in *The Indian Heritage* (Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 3rd rev. edn. 1955). In the case of both Nehru and Kabir the stringency of the demand for Pakistan with its constant reiterations that Muslims and Hindus are different in every conceivable way provides the immediate background.

The debate was revived in the 1960s, as a part of the struggle against the communal uses of history from both the Muslim and Hindu

viewpoints. Between 1957 and 1961, the Pakistan Historical Society came out with a four-volume work entitled: *A History of the Freedom Movement (Being the Story of the Muslim Struggle for Freedom of Hind-Pakistan, 1707-1947)*. I.H. Qureshi in his 'Introduction' (Vol. 1, pp. 1-57) tried to show the distinct and parallel paths of development among the two communities; he described the efforts of certain kings, especially Akbar, as detrimental to Muslims; and castigated the Moghuls before Aurangzeb for the crime of lulling the Muslim community.

Around the same time, the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan under the editorship of K.M. Munshi published the *History and Culture of Indian People* in 1960 from a distinctly Hindu point of view. R.C. Majumdar explicitly argued that Hindus and Muslims could 'never come together', that there was 'no sign that the twain shall ever meet'; (vol. 4, pp. 17 and 636). C.H. Phillips (ed.), *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon* (London, Oxford University Press, 1961) wrote that 'the newly acquired ideal of a 'secular state' is opposed to all known facts of Indian history'. Peter Hardy in Theodore de Bray et al, *Sources of Indian Tradition* (London, Oxford University Press, 1958) endorses the sort of positions taken by Qureshi and Majumdar (p. 369ff).

The renewed interest in finding the common grounds and synthesizing processes in history was both a result of and an effort at combating this kind of prejudged and communal use of history. An important attempt at this was the, 'Symposium', 'The Contribution of Indian Historians to the Process of National Integration' at the History Congress, see *The Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* (1961) where the issue of composite culture was discussed as a positive outcome of Indian history. Interestingly in the 1960s as in the 1940s the shadow of Pakistan looms in the background. For Bengal, see A. Roy, *Islamic Syncretic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983) and for India as a whole see Rasheeduddin Khan (ed.), *Composite Culture of India and National Integration* (Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study 1988.)

For citations of certain internal processes in the breakdown of the composite culture see Javeed Alam, 'The Composite Culture and its Historiography', *South Asia* (forthcoming).

12. Details in Chapter 4.
13. See Gyan Pandey (ed.), *Hindus and Other: The Question of Identity in India Today* (New Delhi, Viking, 1993).
14. For developments since 1925 see Sumit Sarkar, et al, *Khaki Pants and Saffron Flags* (Hyderabad, Orient Longman Paperback, 1992).
15. There are many writers in India who have taken the position that secularism is an alien ideology and cannot acquire roots in Indian society or that it is positively injurious for the social being in India. The most prominent among them are T.N. Madan, 'Secularism in its Place', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 46(4), 1987; and Ashis Nandy, 'An Anti-Secularist Manifesto', *Seminar*, 314, October 1985, or more recently 'Secularism', *Seminar*, no. 394, June 1992. See also his 'Homing in on History', *The*

*Statesman* (Sunday Magazine), 21 June 1992, and 'The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance', in Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1990); and Partha Chatterjee, 'Secularism and Toleration', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 9 July 1994. The direction and purpose of arguments vary a great deal, yet the rejection of the secular as alien for or a forced universal on India is what puts these scholars in the same class.