

## **Interrogating Traditions : Towards A Conceptual Framework**

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In the existing histories of communities of North East India there has always been some writing or the other on the traditional institutions of the different communities. However there is space to doubt the historicity of some of the information and concepts included in many of these writings. The history of human civilisation would definitely bear testimony to the fact that there has been no community or society without a past. That past however becomes important in the light of how it is viewed by the present. It would be of great interest to examine why the past and its links with the present through 'tradition' becomes more important in some societies than in others. In the societies of the North Eastern States of India for instance, one finds a very interesting scenario. Communities which have a historically traceable past of various centuries with a variety of traditions and traditional institutions are talking less in terms of traditions than communities who have had a longer pre-literate past and whose recorded history is difficult to trace. Today's Assam for example has had a history which can be traced through various tools of historical evidence as far back as the early centuries A.D. There was a monarchy, the Ahom monarchy, which established a kingdom and ruled for well nigh six hundred years.<sup>1</sup> Yet in the early years of the 19th century when the Ahom monarchy began to weaken and decline to be finally overthrown by the British, there was a gradual adaptation to the new constitutional system introduced by the British colonisers and then, throughout the nineteenth and better part of the twentieth century, although there were various kinds of resistance to the colonisers from different sections of the society at different times, there was never a very strong attempt to revive earlier systems (read traditions) or to create a new system and call it traditional. In contrast in Meghalaya, at least since the last half century or so, there has been a strong tendency of referring to "traditions" and their "traditional Institutions" from a historical past which can be very hazy because of the extreme paucity of reliable historical evidence. In this context of certain communities/societies dwelling on traditions more than others one can also refer to certain African communi-

ties who sought to refer back to tradition to reiterate the fact that all that was progressive did not come with the colonisers. For instance Jomo Kenyatta believes that among his Kikuyu people, and by extension amongst all African traditional societies, there was the existence of democracy before the advent of colonialism.<sup>2</sup> He says that, "before the coming of the Europeans, the Kikuyu had a democratic regime."<sup>3</sup> This view of Kenyatta has however been challenged by Godfrey Muriuki, an authority on Kikuyu pre-colonial history, who holds that contrary to what Kenyatta says there is no historical evidence to show that there was ever a monarchy of the Kikuyu which they overthrew to establish a democracy.<sup>4</sup> In fact the democracy of the Kikuyu that Kenyatta describes is very akin to the constitutional system as existed in Britain. Interestingly the Khasi-Jayantia also speak about a traditional "Khasi Democracy" which is believed to have had a very ancient past. The historicity of traditions definitely needs inquiry here.

To understand the situations arising out of claims like the above requires not only a very clear picture of the history of the evolution of the social and political institutions of the societies sought to be studied but also a grasp of the entire concept of tradition. Tradition understood not merely in terms of modernity and change but in terms of the deeper historical experiences enshrined in that term. Do traditions always need to be very old and exist from "time immemorial" (albeit a very unhistorical idea)? How and why are traditions "invented"?<sup>5</sup> In whose interests do traditions function? These and many such queries need to be addressed before we can seek to understand why traditions assume more importance for some communities and not for others. Such an inquiry needs both a theoretical understanding of the concept of tradition and also a framework of analysis to test the historical dimensions of traditions.

It is "difficult to determine precisely how long something has to survive before it can be regarded as a tradition."<sup>6</sup> Does tradition necessarily have to mean lack of change? Andrew Heywood, maintains that "tradition stands for continuity or conservation: the absence of change."<sup>7</sup> This perception may have some 'ideological usefulness' in justifying certain political traditions but the fact that it is devoid of the idea of change makes it lose its vitality. Alasdair MacIntyre points out that a tradition which is living is always an embodiment of continuous conflicts. Tradition therefore needs to be seen in the light of certain virtues grasped which have possibilities for the future drawing upon the past. The question thus still remains what past, or how remote a past.

The specification of the past is an exercise which has not been taken up very seriously by social scientists in general. Some historians may be exceptions in this regard. Sociologists have, for instance, viewed traditions as ways of giving legitimacy to existing socio-political order and “generalised modes of perception of social and cultural reality and of coping with major social and political systems.”<sup>8</sup> There is a lot of acceptability in views such as these although there still exists a stress on the dimensions of continuity and looking at traditions as something static and given. A central concern of sociological theory has been the various contradictory concepts of tradition. What sociological theory termed as ‘Great Tradition’ referred to the ‘Dynamics of Tradition’ which emphasised creativity and activity as the fundamentals of tradition. The other variant of the theories stressed on customs, habits and the unchanging or static concept of tradition. Sociological theories have thus raised the issues that tradition can be both dynamic and static but what appears to be missing in these discussions is the problem raised by us above - in which past of the society can traditions be located. For how long does a custom or habit have to survive in order to have a tradition created? The answers to these questions have to be sought in the historical experiences of societies and communities and the search for the historical roots of tradition has led not only to a wealth of information on the subject but also to the development of very innovative ideas and theories on the subject.

Romila Thapar, throws some light on the historical origin of traditions in her work on the legend of Sakuntala, which she termed an interface between literature and history. While explaining as to why she was looking at the same legend at different points of time she wrote :

**“The present selects items from the past which are used to invent or refashion what comes to be called ‘tradition’. These are generally items which the present finds attractive and which legitimise its various codes of behaviour and belief. The making of tradition becomes another dialogue with the past. It is often a perceived past which contributes to the construction of history, although in effect it may well derive from the perspectives of the present.”<sup>9</sup>**

The idea reflected in the extract above, that the ideological concerns of the present very often colour the views of the past is discussed by Thapar in details in other writings.<sup>10</sup> The concept of the perceived past which leads to the invention of traditions is perhaps best reflected in the

writings of Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger and a number of historians of Scotland, Wales, or even historians of many African countries and communities.<sup>11</sup> The question we raised earlier about how remote a past has to be for the emergence of a tradition seems to have been answered very succinctly by Hobsbawm who argued that traditions can actually be invented and constructed and that what sometimes have been sought to be passed off as very ancient traditions are in fact of quite recent origin if the history of the tradition is traced.<sup>12</sup> Hobsbawm also laments that historians have not very seriously studied the process of the creation of rituals, customs and traditions. In fact, he argues that societies seem to have invented or created traditions at different points of time and we can perhaps “expect it to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which the ‘old’ traditions had been designed producing new ones to which they were not applicable... Adaptation took place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes.”<sup>13</sup> So it becomes clear that the reference to traditions in many given situation need not necessarily mean that it is a reference to something from a very remote past. Traditions can be invented at any historical time according to exigencies of the situation, and therefore not only do traditions need to be located but the process of their evolution also needs examination because such an exercise would serve two purposes. First, as Hobsbawm holds, devoting attention to traditions would enable the historian to recognise certain developments the symptoms of which are manifested in traditions. Secondly, for all traditions which are invented, history remains a legitimator.<sup>14</sup>

In fact if we make a comparison between different countries like Britain, (more specifically Scotland), many of the erstwhile African colonies and also India we find that there are some common points of reference for tradition. From works of historians of these countries we find that many of the traditions in these countries have either been of pretty recent creation or they have been created for the colonised by the colonial masters and which became so much a part of their traditions that scholars found it very difficult to unravel the complexities. For example in Africa, as also in India the newly emerging educated class tried to make use of the traditions invented by the British to make a place for themselves in the new “progressive” universe.

What we see in the all India level can also be seen in regional variations in different parts of the country. In the North Eastern part of the country one can perhaps view some of these facets of Imperial

hegemony. For instance the story of traditions in Khasi Jaintia society can present a very interesting picture. These societies being largely preliterate for a considerable period of their histories, there is a paucity of reliable tools of evidence which create problems in the reconstruction of a viable picture of the societies in the pre-colonial period. But for a social scientist, studying traditions is important because they provide a kind of evidence which conventional data and sources do not provide.<sup>15</sup>

In order to understand the historicity of what has emerged in the writings of scholars of Meghalaya in the twentieth century as tradition and traditional institutions and to try and estimate the age of these traditions it is necessary to begin with the historical understanding that all traditions are not "age old" or need to be so. Sometimes even quite recent traditions have served the interests of a society very well. In this context if we interrogate traditions in Meghalaya through the writings of historians and other scholars from the first decades of the last century we find a narrative taking shape in the works of P.R.T. Gurdon followed by a very widely quoted work by a Khasi scholar Homiwell Lyngdoh and then followed up later in the writings of Khasi scholars like Hamlet Bareh, Helen Giri, Barrister Pakem and L.S. Gassah. These scholars, as also others seem to have repeated either P.R.T. Gurdon's or Homiwell Lyngdoh's works or each other's writings without much criticism. Lyngdoh's book, although referred to as an authority by most, has problems for acceptance for academic analysis because of the methodological weaknesses. Bareh's work also has similar methodological problems because he often makes a number of statements without much evidence. However through uncritical repetition, a picture of tradition has emerged which needs to be critiqued very historically. Such an exercise even reveals that the tradition of not allowing women to take part in decision making may not have been a very old tradition because a critical examination of some sources shows that in 1850s for instance, there is no direct evidence to show that women were not allowed to take part in decision making. In fact the Queen mother in Jaintia kingdom seems to have been an important part of decision making. When then did the very patriarchal tradition of only adult males being allowed in public affairs begin to be invented? A very obvious conjecture would be that when the Christian Missionaries came they brought along with them their own ideas and value preferences. Depending upon their social realities in their home countries they introduced various ideas in the countries to which they went. For instance the Basel missionaries, the product of Wurttemberg pietism, carried with them to

Africa their concept of an ideal rural society which they had developed through their attempts to defend the pre-industrial German peasant life.<sup>16</sup> Similarly the Welsh Presbyterian missionaries brought along with them to the Khasi hills the ideas that good life must begin with education. So they introduced patterns of education as developed in England and Wales with the values of liberalism and individualism, in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. With the new ideas came also the ideas of patriarchy which was the dominant social system from where the missionaries came. The new social forces created by education and British rule definitely had more progressive ideas than their uneducated kinsmen and therefore it would not be surprising if they in many ways strengthened some of the perceptions which the British rule in India was trying to foster. Here we see a similarity of patterns of evolution between colonial Africa and these parts. In Africa the colonial masters first tried to suppress any existing authority that was there in the societies. But soon they realised that it would be convenient for them to rule if the traditional authority was vested with powers under colonial supervision and where such powers were not present the colonial rulers created them, like the many African kingdoms created by the British for their own convenience. One can perhaps use these analogies for understanding developments in Khasi society also. What happened in Tanganyika may perhaps have happened here also when the western educated Khasis imbued with new ideas joined hands with the chiefs in what John Iliffe describes as "Progressive Chiefs and mission educated (Africans) combining in a programme of 'progressive traditionalism'".<sup>17</sup> Terence Ranger's quote from Leroy Vail may be pertinent for understanding the situation here also: "For the well-educated elite to accept traditional values and a hierarchical arrangement of society under chiefs is not to be wondered at, given the nature of the Victorian education they had received in the (mission) schools."<sup>18</sup> Thus, traditions came to be invented and strengthened but with the interpolation of a lot of new ideas and practices.

### *Notes and References*

1. There are a number of well documented works, both in English and the Vernacular on the history of Assam from the early centuries till the end of colonial rule. The Ahom kings maintained very well preserved official chronicles called *Buranji* which provide authentic narratives of the reign of each king. The archaeological finds of the recent years, known popularly as the Ambari finds, help trace the history of Assam to as far back as A.D.7th Century. The existing

- remains for royal monuments, temples and other structures provide a lot of important historical, insight. Works like K.L. Baruah, *Early History of Kamarupa*, Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Guwahati 1992, H.K. Barpujari, (ed.), *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vols. I-VI, (Guwahati, 1990-1992), and S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo Assamese Relations*, (Gauhati, 1974), besides the numerous *Buranjis* available would provide one with a fairly good knowledge of the history of Assam.
2. This issue can be seen discussed at great length in O. Oyugi Walker (ed.), *Democratic Theory and Practices in Africa*, (Kenya, 1988).
  3. *Ibid.* p. 50.
  4. See *Ibid.*
  5. This idea of invented traditions is being borrowed from Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger (ed.), *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge, 1983 (1st ed) 1995 (rep.)).
  6. *Ibid.* p. 150.
  7. *Loc. Cit.*
  8. Edward Shils, "Traditions", in *Comprehensive studies in society and History*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (April, 1971), as cited in Eisenstadt, *op. cit.*
  9. Romila Thapar, *Sakuntala : Texts, Readings, Histories*, (New Delhi, 2000 (rep. 1), p. 4.
  10. See, for instance, Romila Thapar, *Interpreting Early India*, (Delhi, 1983), pp. 1-22.
  11. The works referred to here can be found, among others, in Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger (ed.), *op. cit.*, V.G. Simiyu, "The Democratic Myth in the African Traditional Societies", in Walter O. Oyugi *et. al.* (ed.)
  12. E. Hobsbawm, "Introduction : Inventing traditions", in Hobsbawm & Ranger (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 1.
  13. *Ibid.* pp. 4-5.
  14. *Ibid.* p. 12.
  15. Eric Hobsbawm, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
  16. Terence Ranger, *op. cit.* P. 213.
  17. John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, cited in Terence Ranger *op. cit.*, p. 253.
  18. Terence Ranger, *op. cit.*, p. 242.