Unit 30
Tradition and Modernity

Contents

Learning Objectives

After reading this unit you will be able to

- describe the concept of tradition
- define modernity
- outline the "juggernaut" of modernity
- discuss modernity and rationality

30.1   Introduction

In this unit we will take up the topics of tradition and modernity. At the very outset it is pointed out that tradition and modernity are not contradictory or competing concepts. Rather they represent different faces of meaning and are in fact symbiotically related to each other. As such tradition (s) is the ground from which all manner of modernity arises. Further we may point out that as it stands tradition has to be qualified, which it is to say it could be a local tradition or an all-society tradition. Thus these are many different strands to the thinking on tradition and there are very many differing interpretations. Thus tradition is a live and vital factor in many cultures and could be:

- Tradition of food and edibles
- Tradition of music and dance
- Scriptural tradition
- Artistic tradition
- Martial arts tradition
- Sociological tradition
- Tradition and attire

Thus the terms 'tradition' and 'modernity' do not exist in isolation of each other but are in fact related to each other. While these terms concepts and processes exist, they exist and function dialogically. Thus modernity is an economic force while tradition is fundamentally cultural and social.

What is the role of tradition is a pertinent point here. Tradition is basically a series of attitudes, languages, music, art, scholarship and so on which have

been developing since ages past. Over the passage of time tradition becomes more or less entrenched in the body politic and we have even traditional law and scriptures in any case are an aspect of tradition. Now why is tradition so important to the individual and society? This is because it provides a continuity to social process and garners the creative and improvisational and transmits these traditions to the forthcoming generations of the members of a given society and thereby assuring survival of the society itself. Tradition is, therefore, a repository of survival mechanisms without which a society would fail to cohere. It would set fragmented and break up, the result of which would be anomic. Let us consider the music tradition in India. In this particular tradition of classical music there are "*gharanas*" or groupings, and each of these has a lineage comprising the singers who had commenced or inaugurated the *gharana* and all those who have passed their talent down the line producing maestros who would take over charge once the older musicians went on into retirement.

Now, once there is an example to work upon we can see that tradition also implies a life-style, a way of living. As such the training in music, art, drama is very rigid and within the confines of tradition which often passes by vote and repetition of movement, notes, or other exercise which any particular training may require. Usually with the teaching of traditional music and dance are an endless series of do's and don'ts which is what tradition is all about. Thus tradition refers *to a body of knowledge that has a structured inventory of actions and ideology* that comprise its legitimate domain. Thereafter it is a question of pinpointing what area of tradition is it that we are referring to. Thus on examination we find that tradition itself has a reasonably long duration for which it has established itself; further there are many different strands or what we may call "varieties of tradition." Then to continue with the example of music *gharanas* in India we find that there is a basic division between north Indian classical music and South Indian classical music. Each of these two basic divisions has numerous subdivisions and so on. It is, therefore, a misnomer to treat the concept of tradition as a term which covers everything in society and culture. Thus if it is held that the tradition of music is very strong in India, it may also be asked "what type of music tradition is it that is being referred to? ''

Clearly then tradition also represents a rubric under which all little traditions can be assimilated. If it is considered in depth tradition can be seen to involve various different types of activities within it which would need some brief elaboration. Tradition thus encompasses and embodies:

- a particular process or legacy
- sub traditions which from the field from which required contributions can be made
- a historical aspect, either oral or scripted
- a certain concept of the supernatural
- economic structures of sustanance
- aspects of indigenous art
- facts of architecture
- scholarship in all areas of social concern
- literature both scriptural and others
- technological structures
- military for self defense or offence

Thus tradition is clearly a type of structure and ideology that has a past and charges over time to absorb developments in that field so that tradition remains itself, but at the same time recreates and expands itself.

30.2 Tradition, Society and Culture

Tradition then is "accreted" over time and its boundaries become increasingly well defined. This means that tradition expands or contracts depending upon the social and cultural situation. Further it would be wrong to assume that traditions constantly expand and that progress is always linear. It is quite possible that there is non linear retrogression as well. A third situation arises when tradition develops an entropic tendency and stagnates for some time before once again addressing progression (linear forward movement) or retrogression.

Thus tradition begins when a particular action or activity is seen to be of significance to the society. However, as we have pointed out that there are many types of tradition (music, art, architecture) and many strands within each one of them. As such it is possible to study some of these strands but to study them in totality would imply many years of research and might still be lacking sufficient data to be able to come to a holistic and synoptic point of view (Rojas, 1966). Thus what we are talking about is the fact that there is no such thing as a total vision of any society which is pluralistic, since members from different races and ethnicities will have different traditions. Thus the tradition that peoples and societies inherit from their forefathers is available to them in various forms. Any process over several generations becomes by itself a particular tradition or a sub tradition.

Box 30.1: The Accretion of Tradition

Thus tradition:

- accumulates over decades/centuries. Consider for e.g. the scriptural tradition of India which is itself a plurality. Thus in the shift from oral tradition to the scripting tradition there is a formalisation of knowledge and as this process goes on the society that is subjected to it develops not just one but pluralist traditions.
- the field of art and architecture is replete with the traditions that have emerged from it. Thus in India there are several traditions in art and architecture including. The (i) Classical (ii) medieval and, (iii) traditional.

In each of these areas artists and architects have been responsible for development of classical medieval and traditional art and architecture. These traditions developed in India over centuries of accretion. Further the economic structures are such that they begin from centuries earlier and tend to be well fixed until Industrialisation begins in the 1800's. In the Indian tradition the exchange of goods and services commenced and worked in terms of physical exchanges of services which could be provided to the landlords by the hoi polloi. This was a traditional system and exploited the landless labourers by underpaying and making them work for long hours. For doing this the sharecroppers as they were known, were given at the end of the agricultural season a certain amount of grains to help them to subsist. Such examples can be found globally and feudalism was yet another iniquitous system. The point is that it is rather difficult to say with any degree of certainty that tradition(s) are 'good' or 'bad.' On examination, however, it is clear that though Indian tradition has sanctity yet sati and dowry is part of this very same tradition. Thus it is a weeding of tradition which alone can

make it work efficiently and not flow over into negative directives. Over a span of time (usually centuries) any specific tradition begins to coagulate into a specific conglomeration of beliefs and rities. These beliefs and rities are specific to any tradition and apply equally to sub traditions within and subordinate within it.

Traditions then cover the entire ideological gamut and are also applicable to the material culture. What then is tradition? Tradition is a particular approach to social reality which it influences and provides a direction to individual and social reality. Thus it would be better to talk in terms of the plural traditions than to mention some overarching condition which would be a false construct as reality is not entirely apprehended under it.

Traditional technology is another area which has been extensively used and improved upon. Thus in agriculture the use of the tractor or combine harvester has brought matters to a confrontation. Thus while the situation (harvesting) has changed, the attitudes are still traditional, both in the family and at work. Thus at a particular time in the flow of tradition non-traditional, modern machines, are used. This means now that there is a contradiction between the technology and the attitudes of the workers and their beneficiaries. Age old customs and tradition's often get non functional and sometimes changes have to be introduced to make the two compatible. Tradition then is what holds a society together. However, there are factors within a tradition which may go out of circulation. Thus in some metros in India the scriptural and popular level of celebrating festivals, like Holi, Diwali, and so on is such that tradition battles with culture and many changes have occurred in these festivals in cities including plastic lighting on the house and a few burning candles to observe traditional candle lighting in Diwali.

30.3 Tradition and Modernity

In such and other activities tradition comes head on with the whole concept of modernity. The question of course is in which way modernity relates to tradition. Is modernity a different type of tradition? Do tradition and modernity have anything in common and how are they related to each other?

Tradition has a tendency to become entropic and inward looking. This is true of many local level traditions and sub traditions are stamped out and disappear without leaving much of a trace. The pertinent question here is why does tradition disappear, change, ameliorate or attempt to coexist with modernity? The fact of the matter is that the vectors or chief characteristics of a tradition are themselves set to develop, change, or become stagnant. Thus tradition has many sub traditions and it is these that often linger on, indefinitely, in various geophysical territories within a specific culture area.

Reflection and Action 30.1

Discuss the concept of tradition ? Does tradition change or does it remain static?

At some point in the development or spread of a tradition tends to become less influential and is capable of dealing only with local traditions. At the some time tradition sees the necessity of dynamism and various religious traditions themselves find it difficult to sustain themselves. Thus when a tradition becomes entropic it becomes clear that the tradition is now stagnant

and in being so is quite capable of calcifying and becomes superficially related to rities, rituals, ceremonies while the essential communication remains obfuscated and confused.

Thus tradition is dynamic and records accretive changes. We must also keep in mind that social changes are part of the process of society. However, it is equally clear that beyond a point tradition is not able to deal with a new set of situations and the new institutions, At this point if the society is not to become anarchic, it will require that traditions ameliorate and try to change. Yet a tradition can only follow its ontology and find itself as inadequate in the face of modernity. Thus the forces of modernity tend to choke tradition or at least make it relatively insignificant and even innocuous. However, tradition though it becomes quiescent it is not really banished by modernity because modernity is evidenced only in the advanced countries of the West and in the metropolitans of the East. This is made clear when we compare architecture of the North and the South. Thus a luxury hotel in metropolitan of a developing country is virtually no different than that of an advanced country. Thus tradition is never really banished but is pushed back as the forces of modernity take root.

Box 30.2: Aspects of Modernity

Some aspects of modernity include:
- emergence of nation-state and nationhood
- industrialisation and capitalism
- democracy
- increasing influence of science and technology
- the phenomena of urbanisation
- expansion of mass media

There are, however, other defining characteristics of modernity which include
- disenchantment with the world
- secularisation
- rationalisation
- commodification
- mass society

Modernity, however, means different things in the North and the South. Thus modernity indicates a type of society that is more developed relative to other societies. So, a society characterised by modernity is described as a modern society.

We can compare modern society with societies that are pre-modern or those that are post-modern. However neither of these approaches is fully satisfactory. The social structure of modernity is such that it defines the transition from isolated communities to mass scale society. Referred to in this manner modernity is found, therefore, not just in the West. This process can be seen as working all over the world rather than just in the advanced nations.

Thus mass society implies:
- large scale movement of goods, people, and information among separate areas
- standardisation of many aspects of society which are helpful for mobility

- increased specialisation and interdependence of different parts of the society

Thus modernity can be apparently contradictory, but these features listed above are different parts of the overall ontology of this process. When the elements or products of modernity "invade" another culture through popular processes such as various cultural aspects such as folktales and cinema there is a widespread 'overhaul' of cultural and social ontology and these tend to change a society and prepare it for further changes. This results in a homogenisation of culture and creates widespread diversification at the local level. There are other features, such as democratic government and the hierarchical structures within it. So also does the private sector grow greatly in influence (Genard Delanty, 2000). This sometimes creates a friction and modernity can be perceived as being totalitarian. However, the individual in modernity belongs to those subsystems, and is part of the competition, liberty, and individualism. This is all the more true for comparisons of modernity with societies that are traditional.

Modernity brought with it many blessings to the people including much better health and economic prospects. However, there are also some problems which have emerged with modern society e.g. the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during world war II; and the arms race thereafter. Other problems include environmental degradation e.g. air and water pollution. Modernity also creates great stress on people and alienation or being without specific interest in anything (malaise). At the present point the debate is still on whether modernity is socially positive or not, whether it has proved beneficial or not to world society.

30.4   Modernity as a Juggernaut

Giddens position conflicts with the contention that society has entered into a post modern world. Thus modernity witnesses tremendous increases in the scope, pace and depth of change relative to systems that preceded it. Further the path or trajectory of change is not linear, going forward step by step. For Giddens modernity implies

- capitalism
- industrialism
- surveillance programs and activities
- military power

Giddens theory of structuration and its basic components adequately describe modernity. These elements are:

- distanciation, or separation in of time and space
- disembedding
- reflexivity

While in pre-modern societies time and space were totally interconnected. However, with the onset of modernity time and space were no longer closely linked, and this interconnection became very weak. Now, this fact is important so far as modernity is concerned.

Distanciation helps in the establishment of organisations and bureaucracy, and makes possible the nation-state which is international. That is it is

possible to connect local and global arenas. Again the modern society is within the matrix of history and it takes from that to influence the present. Finally such distanciation makes possible the second of Giddens factors of modernity that is disembedding. Disembedding itself is the process of transcending the local context and it's reorganising itself along indefinite stretches of time and space. According to Giddens there are two varieties of disembedding factors. These are:

- symbolic tokens e.g. money. This allows for time-space distantiation and allows money transactions with those who are widely separated in time and space.

- systems of professional expertise. These are very useful because they help create the environment. Some such experts include doctors and lawyers. Other experts affect everyday commodities and even property. Thus expert systems provide reassurance across time and space. Again in abstract systems, trust is fundamental not only to modern societies also because the symbolic tokens and expert systems serve to dissembed the society in the modern world.

Thus an economy based on monetary transactions and the legal system work because the members have trust in them.

Again another basic characteristic of modernity is the phenomena of reflexivity. Thus all social and psychological aspects, processes, events, can be reflected upon, understood better and working as an activity which influences the further development of a phenomenon. The fact of disembedment indicates

- the need for trust

- the need for expert systems

Trust according to Giddens is socialised into children and then reinforced by behaviour that conforms to this expectation of mutually reliable behaviours. However, this is also accompanied by destabilising factors, risk factors that threaten trust and create ongoing lack of security in people. Thus the risk of nuclear wars are neither fought nor won. The risk factor in global or local war is such that several danger points have arisen and disarmament of military of nuclear warheads could easily be one of the international projects to increase the sense of security for the subjects.

Giddens points out that the risk factor extends into the material environment and what can be done to prevent its degradation (forests, rivers, rural and urban habitats). Again global investments existing in institutional settings are also risky. The subjects take notice of risks while taking action. Religion receded and only those facts are believed in which the subjects can realise and turn into reality. The awareness of the different risk factors is increasing in the modern world and is one of the facts of modernity. Again the subjects and the 'public' are aware that even experts cannot handle certain risks and risk-situations.

30.5   Ontological Insecurity and Modernity

According to Giddens ontological insecurity has been created within modernity itself and suggests that

- *design faults* in the construction of the modern world

- *operator failure* of those who run the modern world

- *unintended consequences*
- *reflexivity of the modern society*

Thus according to Giddens in modern society 'control' becomes an important issue because new knowledge is continuously cropping up and superceding the old, and giving it a different direction altogether. As an answer to this Giddens suggests *utopian realism*.

That is utopian ideals and social reality should be taken together as a single unit rather than aim for just the one or the other. Giddens is critical of the postmodern theories and feels that were systematic knowledge impossible the intellectual activity/academics would come to a standstill. He feels that postmodernism would involve a world in which

- there are post scarcity systems
- multilayered democracy
- demilitarisation
- humanisation of technology

However, it is clear that post modernity cannot be predicted in such simple parameters which need not appear at all.

Giddens notes that the reflexive modern world pushes the self into becoming a "reflexive project." Thus the self becomes an area to be reflected upon with a view to ameliorating it and bringing it into tune with itself and society. Thus he points out that the subject is a result of inner search and also the body must be controlled and socially projected in a specific manner in the relevant physical spaces. There are formulas how which define we interact. In fact reflexivity has led to a body-obsession and a social neurosis. Modernity and modern society are also characterised by setting apart some areas of deviance from the normal day to day living. This has been termed the "Sequestration of experience" by Giddens. Thus phenomena like madness, sickness, death and sexuality are sequestered and delineated as areas that should be hidden from the attention. The reason that the phenomena of sequestration comes about is because abstract systems have controlled large segments of society. Though sequestration brings with it a sense of penacling security it is quite clear that there is an avoidance of basic truths, such as the processes of death, sickness, madness etc.

Thus modernity has brought with both positive and negative consequences. One of the negative consequences is that there tends to be a sort of malaise or what Giddens terms "personal meaninglessness." This is because important areas of daily life have been sequestered, and repressed. The light at the end of the tunnel is reflexivity of modern life which as it increases will ensure that such sequestration does not take place and processes that have been swept under the carpet will one day be the most significant and important. While Giddens is concerned with modernity we find that Beck is interested in the new modernity. Thus Beck and Giddens feel that we are living in a modern world rather than a post modern one. What is the risk that accompanies the new modernity? Beck labels the new modernity as "reflexive modernity." Beck feels that relationships in such a society are increasingly reflexive and individuals are forced to make wide range of individual decisions so far as relationships are concerned, and how they can be begun and maintained.

According to Beck, within modernity itself there is a change from industrial society to the risk society which is different from industrial society but not totally. Thus the classical modernity was centred on producing wealth and equal distribution of the same. On the other hand the advanced modern societies the main issue is the reduction and canalisation of risk. Thus the main concern in classical modernity believed in equality, the concern of advanced modernity is a safety. These risks come from wealth produced in industry. This includes the nuclear industry and bombs whose effects and side effects can be devastating.

> ### Box 30.4: The Risk Factor
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> Even industrial pollutants are themselves a source of risk and have most dangerous effects on health. This kind of risk, including nuclear annihilation, is not simply localized but global. Again risk and class intermesh to some extent. Thus in industrial society it is clear that the wealthy classes can avoid risk or reduce it simply because they have the wealth to purchase safety. And this helps to strengthen the class society. On the other hand poverty is full of risks. Beck extends his analysis and states that the truth about social classes applies to the nation-states as well.

Thus the rich nations are able to minimize risks, the poor or poorer nations find that risk is centred in and around them. Again richer nations make further wealth and profit by catering to the poorer nations in order to build technology that will help to control the risks in poor nations and try to ameliorate them to some extent. It is pointed out, however, that no nation is completely safe from risks, nor are individuals. However, the nations that profit from the risk factor in poor nations find that there is a 'boomerang effect' and factors associated with risk tend to become proactive and try to eliminate or control the areas where risk reduction technologies are being made in the wealthy nations. However, though advanced modernity creates risks we find that accompanying these risks is reflexivity and makes those that produce risks themselves begin to think about the situation and how to alter it. But this is also in the case of those nations that are poor and face these risks. According to Beck it is science and the scientists that are responsible and a protector of global "contamination" of nature and culture, and accuses science and scientists for being illogical.

> ### Reflection and Action 30.2
>
> Discuss the aspects of risk taking in modern society. Is there some way in which this can be reduced or removed?

Again in classical industrial society we find that nature and culture were separate entities in the case of advanced modernity they go hand in hand are deeply interlinked and interrelated to each other. This linkage means that changes in either nature or culture feedback onto each other. Thus Beck points out that nature and society are related to each other almost symbiotically. This has led to the facts of nature being made political and so scientists, including social scientists are now in the domain of and being effected by politicisation. According to Beck the governments are losing their powerful control because of sub political bodies like research institutes. Subgroups of people are more responsive relative to the government. We can say advanced modernity has generated both hormones risks and also ways to deal with it. Ritzer evaluates modern society using the concepts of hyperrationality, Mcdonaldization and Americanization. Let us begin with

hyperrationality. Ritzer points out that the concept of hyperrationality draws heavily on rationality as conceptualised by Weber. For Weber we live in an increasingly rational world. Formal rationality is seen to be used for system-usage than Weber's other types of rationality: Substantive, theoretical and practical. Thus we see that formal rationality implies the increasingly felt need and importance of institutions which force members to adhere to a strict code of behaviour and conduct.

30.6 Modernity Rationality and Norms

On the other hand, substantive rationality implies dominance of norms and values in making of rational choice. Thus theoretical rationality deals with intellectual apprehension. On the other hand practical rationality defines the context/situation so far as daily decisions are concerned.

Now, we can say that hyperrationality goes beyond formal rationality. Thus a hyperrational system combines Webber's forms of rationality which include,

- formal rationality
- substantive
- intellectual
- practical

The reason such a system is called hyperrational because it uses and combines all four of Weber's forms of rationality.

Formal rationality has four aspects which are:

- efficiency
- predictability
- quantity rather than quality
- Substitution of non human for human technologies

Box 30.4: The Irrationality of Rationality

Thus this form of rationality is also accompanied by the "irrationality of rationality." In this schema we find that efficiency is always with a view to an end. And how we can use the best means to a goal. In fact food restaurants the delivery system is made so convenient and automatic that there are drive in facilities to help accelerate the process of food distribution and consumption. Now, the next factor in formal rationality is that there is a standardisation of processes and events and there are "no surprises", and the branches of fast food restaurants are very similar even across nations. They all proceed along the assembly line, mechanised approach to food. Further fast food restaurants pay greater attention to quantity rather than quality. Such a formally rational system has intrinsic to it the generation of "irrationalities", such as making the "dining experience" most bizarre, demystifying and dehumanising.

Ritzer indicates that this is the trend all over the modern world where the emphasis is on quick turnover for business. Examining credit cards Ritzer feels that each of the factors applied to Mcdonaldization are true for the credit card industry. Loans are processed quickly. Again the credit card makes consumption predictable. Credit cards come with different credit limits and the transactions are relatively dehumanizing. Thus both the credit card and

the fast food restaurant can be seen to be an intrinsic aspect of the modern world.

Ritzer also argues for the "Americanization" of modern society which was evident in our discussion of fast food restaurants and credit card usage. Thus America is perceived as practicing/living in a modern world and engaged in the construction of the American way of life. Thus credit card usage is part of Americanization. The major credit cards companies are based in America. The Visa, MasterCard, and American Express are major cards relative to those based in Britain (Barclay Card) and Japan (JCB). The credit card companies are making a concerted effort to 'globalize' the credit cards. It is noted, however, that credit cards are and can be used for indigenous purchases. This both the credit cards and fast food restaurants have become part of the modern world and is in part a reflection of a specific world era. Let us now turn to some of the main ideas in the social theory of Jurgen Habermas, concerning modernity. Habermas feels that modernity has yet to play itself out and that there are many modern areas that can be developed further, before thinking of a postmodern world. According to Habermas modernity does have a number of paradoxes. Thus rationality that is a part of the overall social system is contradictory and conflictual with the rationality of the life-world as a whole. On the one hand social systems have multiplied their complexity and use instrumental reason. Again the life-world has also multiplied its diversity in terms of secularisation and the processes of reflexivity.

Thus a rational society according to Habermas is one where the system and the life-world exist together living an intermeshed but parallel existence. This conjoining and interaction leads to a stage in society of abundance economically, and environmental control due to rational systems being present and employed to their optimum. The problem of the modern world is that now the system begins to exercise power or to 'colonize' the life-world. This leads to a situation where the rational system denies the freedom to the life-world, a freedom that is necessary to allow the life world to grow to further maturity. Thus for Habermas the 'colonization' of the life world in modernity is its basic marker, and is, therefore, that he regards modernity as an 'unfinished project.' To Habermas the fully rational society where the rational system and the Life world(s) can exist and express themselves satisfactorily. At the moment such a situation does not exist and the life-world is greatly subdued and impoverished. This is the obstacle that has to be crossed over. It does not mean a violent destruction of systems economic or administrative, since they help life worlds to rationalize their existence and ontology. How is this to be done? This requires that we examine the relationship between system and life-world.

According to Habermas

- "restraining barriers" should be erected to reduce colonisation of life world
- "sensors" should be used to make a greater impact of life world on the system

In this manner the two areas that is life world and system benefit each other greatly. Habermas feels that until the above facts assert themselves modernity's project will take long to complete. Thus Habermas is squarely of the view that modernity has much to offer and that we are not in a postmodern society as yet.

30.7 Conclusion

Finally to put the last word in Habermas has criticized postmodernism on several grounds. Since our next unit is on post structuralism/postmodernism this unit would serve also as a precursor of our discussion on the same. Thus for Habermas:

- It is very difficult to objectively evaluate the postmodernists because one is not sure whether what one is reading is social theory or literature. In the former case the problems arises in postmodernists erecting a formidable fascade of jargon which is not in the mainstream of sociological knowledge. Hence, one doesn't know where to classify such theory.

- Normative sentiments are concealed from the reader, but nevertheless they offer normative critiques of contemporary society. However, these are not exactly grounded and, therefore, not effective.

- It has a totalising tendency despite the fact that postmodernists themselves are against this phenomena.

- Post modernists ignore the facts of daily life.

In short postmodernists are shut off from the very sphere (life-world) of activity from which they deprive themselves. As such the source of social data and the area of expression, that is everyday life is, cut off from them.

Thus in this unit we have examined and presented several theoretical positions on tradition and modernity. We have covered the approach of Giddens to modernity as also that of Beck and Ritzer. Finally, we considered the ideas of Habermas. All this has set the stage for our next unit. To fully understand and appreciate the units on post structuralism and postmodernism the background provided in this unit will be of great use.

30.8 Further Reading

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