

“Tradition” in Hindu Thought

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There is no direct word used in Sanskrit to denote the concept of tradition but this concept is implied in various definitions of Dharma. It can be said in general that in the Hindu way of thinking, “tradition” plays an important role and the Sanskrit texts of Dharma have recognised the importance of tradition.

In Gautama Dharmasootra (1.1.2) we read *vedo dharmamoolaam tadvidaam ca smritisheelee*. This means that Veda are the highest authority in connection with religious matters but the memory and the behavior of those who know the Veda are also decisive factors in religious controversies. So it can be said that the concept of tradition is indirectly implied by the words ‘memory and behavior’ of the Vedic savants. In other texts also similar thoughts are found. Thus for example Vasishtha says that the Dharma is preached by Vedas and Smritis. In the absence of these, one has to take a decision on the basis of the practice of the learned elite (*shishtaacaara*). The learned elite however is expected to be free from any personal desire (1.4-6). Yaajnavalkya (1.7) also includes the behavior of good people (*sadaacaara*) while enumerating the sources of Dharma. The word ‘*sadaacaara*’ is sometimes interpreted as ‘*Sampradaaya*’ [Sat-Siddhaanta-Maartaanda 1.5 page 49 (Nirnaya Sagar)]. The word *Sampradaaya*’ roughly corresponds to the word tradition in English. The view that the practice of the learned people is authoritative in religious matters is mentioned also by Manu (1.6 - *vedo'khilo dharmamoolam smritisheelee ca tadvidaam/aacaarashcaiva saadhoonaam aatmanastushtir eva ca*). All these views regarding the authoritativeness of the behavior of the learned elite has a support in the Vedic text namely Taittireeya Upanishad (1.11). It is said there that in case of doubt regarding the proper way of behavior one should imitate the way of behavior of the brahmins who have the power of discretion and love for religion.

It should be however noted that the Indian texts on Dharma consider the Vedic texts as the real authoritative texts and other authorities are accepted as authorities only on the assumption that they have a known or an unknown basis in the Vedas. Thus the Smriti (memory) texts are considered to be valid because they are supposed to be based on the Shrutis. A problem however arises when we do not find a Shruti-text supporting the Smriti-text. In such cases some people assume that the concerned Shruti might have been lost. But this view is not acceptable to Tantra-Vaarttika. It is argued there that in case we accept that some Vedic texts are lost, then the Smritis of Buddha etc. will also have to be accepted as authoritative because they may also be based on some lost Shrutis and then anybody may claim that his views are based on some lost Shruti. Therefore the Tantra-Vaarttika concludes that only those Smritis which have some basis in the Shrutis which are existing, are authoritative (page 163-164).

In connection with the traditional customs of different people, Tantra-Vaarttika makes a lengthy discussion. Thus for example the Brahmin women of Ahicchatra (Ramnagar) and Mathura consume alcoholic drinks. Northern Brahmins give, accept or sell horses, mules, camels, etc. and eat from the same plate of their wives, children and friends. Southern Brahmins marry the maternal uncle’s daughter. Both the northern as well as the southern Brahmins chew betel leaves touched by persons of all castes

(page 209). It should be noted that these customs although prevalent are not accepted by the thinkers on the Dharma-Shastra as Sadaacaara or Shishtaacaara. Only those customs are considered to be valid or known as ancient ones, that are not opposed to any expressed Vedic or Smriti-text, and regarded as obligatory by the learned elites, being followed by them. (shrutismritiviruddhaanaam shishtair dharmabuddhyaanushttheyamaanaamaacaaraanaam) (Meemaamsaakaustubha, page 43).

In the course of the history of Hinduism we notice that many popular customs and traditions were given sanction by the authorities in the field of religion. In the Aashvalaayana-Grihyasootra (1.7.1) it is said that at the time of marriage the customs in a particular region or in a village should be accepted (*atha khalooccaavaca janapadadharma graamadharmaashca taan vivaahate prateeyaata*). As regards the ancestral ritual also we find that in addition to the standard prescribed ritual many popular rites and customs were sanctioned by Baudhaayana-Dharmasootra (11.5.13) (*sheshakriyaayaam loko'nuro nuroddhavayaha. Gautama (11.20-22) also says that the regional or family traditions peculiar to a particular community like those of agriculturists, merchants, money-lenders, herdsmen and artisans are accepted as valid as far as they do not go against the sacred texts (deshakuladharmashca aamnaayair aviruddhaaha hdjcaanam karshakavanikpashupaalakuseedikaaravaha sve sve varge tebhyashca yathaadhikaaram arthaan pratyavahritya dharmavayavasthaa)*). Brihaspati says that if the regional traditions are not followed the people will get angry. They will hate the king and the king will be at a loss. Therefore he has to allow people to follow the traditions even though they are at times very strange. Thus he mentions among others that the people in the central part of the country eat beef, people in the eastern eat fish, women in the northern part consume alcoholic drinks and the men in the northern part do not consider women to be untouchable at the time of their monthly course (Brihaspati quoted in Smriticandrika 1.10).

A problem therefore arises whether the traditions which are apparently not acceptable but still are prevalent in some parts should be considered as acceptable or not. And it seems that although the texts which refer to such traditions do not support them, these traditions have prevailed in the course of time and ultimately have been accepted at least indirectly by some texts. But really speaking, a more serious problem arises when some traditions or doctrines which are supported by the vedic texts are supported by the heretic schools also. Thus for example, the precepts like Ahimsaa, Satya, restraint of the senses are preached by the vedas as well as the Buddhist Cannons. Kumaarila on Poorva-Meemamsaa-Sootra (1.3.55-7) mentions these problems and says that these high principles although they are not against the vedas and the ideas of the elite they should not be accepted on the basis of Buddhist texts, as for example, milk if it is kept in a bag made of skin of a dog is not to be accepted because it is impure. These precepts are also impure when they are preached by the Buddha. Elsewhere however we find that a more catholic view is put forth. According to that view, even the traditions of the other societies are to be honoured and respected. In Maanasollaasa (115) we read *anyeshaam api devaanaam nindaam dvesham ca varjayet. Devam devakulam drishtvaa namaskuryaat na langhayet..* This verse indicates that one has to pay homage to the Gods of even other religions. In the course of the history of Hinduism we notice that this concept of tolerance is very widespread and although at times quarrels between two sects or two religions are not completely unknown, the Hindus did honour the other religious texts and religious places.

A very noteworthy point in the discussion on traditions is connected with the so-called Kalivarjyas, that is traditions to be avoided in Kali era. There are numerous things which are referred to as Kalivarjyas but the most important ones are enumerated in the following oft-quoted verse - *agnihotram gavaalambham samnyaasam palapaitrikam. Devaarcca sutotpattim kalu panca vivarjayet..* (Smritimuktaavali

(Varnaashrama) page 176). Here Agnihotra, cow-sacrifice, renunciation, use of meat at the time of ancestral ritual and levirate are banned in Kali era. It should be noted that all these traditions were acceptable in the vedic age but still changed times did not allow them. Many other traditions such as performance of sacrifices like Raajasooya, Ashvamedha, Gosava are also said to be *kalivarjyas*. So it seems that the authors of the religious texts have taken a note of changes in the circumstances and banned many vedic traditions. It should be however added that in spite of this ban a few Shrauta-rites like Agnihotra etc. did continue to exist and with some minor modifications are still being performed by a very small number of Hindus.

In modern days Privy Council declared that under the Hindu system of law clear proof of usage would outweigh the written law text (12MIA397 PG436). In this context we may add the famous rule *shaashtraad roodhiha baleeyasee* which means that tradition is stronger than the scriptures.

While concluding the treatment of 'tradition' some general observations can be made as follows. The Hindu thinkers appear to be always facing the dilemma of how to preserve the authority of the ancient texts on the one hand and how to accommodate and sanction the new traditions which may often go against the ancient scriptures. Numerous divergent views and differences of opinion are mentioned by them, but they have ultimately to sanction the traditions which have deep roots in society at large. They have accepted the fact that to give a fair judgement in the case of each and every religious matter is not an easy task. The nature of Dharma is protean. Thus we read *tarko'pratishtaha shrutayo vibhinnaaha naiko munir yasya vacaha pramaanam. Dharmasya tattvam nihitam guhaayaam mahaajano yena gataha sa panthaaha..* Here it is indicated that whatever is followed by the majority of the people, that is the correct path. So the tradition which is accepted by the majority of the people alone is considered to be valid from the point of view of religion.