Inherited Objects, Invented Traditions.

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Thingamajigs' 'handed down' through 'cooked up' observances.

Every year around October, families belonging to a South Indian community get busy; on the days leading up to the annual festival of Navrathri, a collection of dolls is removed from storage, wiped clean and checked for damage. On the first day of the ten day festival, an assortment of brightly coloured dolls, some barely three inches high, are grouped into mini tableaus on a stepped platform. The setting up of these tableaus during the festival is called a bommagollu, and every year new bommas, or dolls, are purchased and added to this assortment. During the festival days, friends and family drop by to appreciate the latest themes and details of the newest acquisitions. The dolls are often handed down through generations in a family, each family having their own curious collections, themes, and small customs associated with the observance.

A Tradition Reimagined: Details from the 2018 boomagollu, or tableau of dolls by Rohini Sen and Eshwar Naidu (Picture Credit: Rohini Sen)

Though not from the community that traditionally observes this custom, R and E, a young married couple, enamoured by this ceremony, decided to adopt the tradition. They created their own version, and added customs unique to them, while following some of the practices of the original tradition. Every year, months in advance, they plan the displays, actively seeking out dolls from craftsmen across South India—often even commissioning special designs and collections. Over the years, their collection has grown and has become part of the storehouse of memories they have created—inheritances that participate in the tradition they have invented.

The objects we inherit most often act as triggers for our memories. However, they also have stories of their own—stories of creation and association, of community and place. As objects with agency, they have their own historicity and assist in forming pathways and connections to identities from which we may have long disassociated or distanced. These objects claim their lineage and value in convention, becoming integral and near indispensable in traditions we invent: in the rituals, ceremonies, and festivals that help in creating our identities. In most cases an inherited object is a bequeathed artefact of ancestral and historical value to a person or a community; this paper, however, focuses on inherited objects that participate in ritual traditions and those that migrate along with communities to take part in 'invented' traditions.

The term 'invented tradition', borrowed from Eric Hobsbawn's book, is used here to look at 'traditions' that are 'invented and formally instituted', [1] but also those that emerge almost organically, often in the more recent past, and yet, establish themselves firmly and definitively in the cultural imagination of communities. An invented tradition, then, is a set of repeated practices, governed by overt or tacit rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, that seeks to inculcate values and norms of behaviour by continuity with the past.

What meaning do inherited objects have in invented traditions? How do they participate when moving from the past to novel situations? This essay seeks to unravel the connection between inherited objects and invented traditions looking at these terms independently, as well as their intertwined meanings. What happens when some of these objects move from the past to the present, from the private to public spheres, from individual ownership and relationships to collective and shared belonging?

There are many dynamics at play in ceremonies conducted by nations, by communities, and by individuals. In the push and pull between the need for innovative transformation on the one hand, and the need for predictable and invariant structure on the other; the need to shake off the 'weight' of the past and yet maintain a continuity with it—inherited objects adapt to the roles they play in invented traditions.

Beating the Retreat: The Massed Bands of the Household Division perform in the fireworks finale at Beating the Retreat 2013. (Picture Credit: Press Information Bureau on behalf of Ministry of Defence, Government of India)

When confronted with novelty and change, how do objects and traditions carry forward aspects that are unchanging and constant? It is not always easy to adapt or incorporate new traditions, especially when met by strong resistance. Beating the Retreat is a ceremony conducted by the Indian state, performed on the 29th of January every year to commemorate the end of the Republic Day celebrations. The term Beating the Retreat comes from a tradition started in England in the 1700s to mark the end of the day's battle and to commemorate soldiers who died fighting; the tradition has been adopted by many Commonwealth countries in varying forms. In India, the ceremony is conducted at the Raisina Hills in New Delhi, near the President's House, and takes inspiration from a version held in Buckingham Palace in London every June. In India it was first conducted in 1952 post-Independence, and was conceived in its present form in 1961 to mark the visit of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip as guests at the Republic Day celebrations. The ceremony incorporates formal military music and drill performances in an extravaganza by bands from the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. Over the years, it was seen as an assured demonstration of nationalist pride and a nod to a borrowed military tradition,[2] while also evolving to incorporate a repertoire of Indian military compositions. The penultimate performance is a rendition of Mahatma Gandhi's favourite hymn, Abide With Me—a symbol of solace and prayer to military personnel across communities. Over the years, subtle changes to the ceremony, such as the introduction of certain instruments, have often been met with minor murmurs from various stakeholders. In 2016 and subsequent years, pressures from political groups to give it a more 'Indian' flavour prompted more changes to creep into the programme. For instance, there was discussion about removing the Christian hymn altogether. This caused widespread consternation and protests amongst military old-timers, and eventually the hymn was reinstated. A subsequent introduction of popular Bollywood film music prompted many from the military music fraternity to express their outrage at the move away from what they considered a solemn event; 'trivialising military bands by mixing incompatible instruments and popular music and dance'.[3] Notwithstanding the dynamics at play, the Beating the Retreat tradition gets reinvented with the introduction of new musical compositions, that may not have a physical form but nonetheless are 'object-things'.

Inherited objects are tightly woven into traditions. Often, due to the nature and relevance of the material object, they wield power through their adhesiveness and resilience in cultural processes.

Processions in ancient India were part of religious or political rituals; a deity or king (often on a caparisoned elephant) would circumambulate the regions under their 'command' as a display of power. In modern India, yatras, or processions, that take ownership of the road are common; with the lines between the sacred and the political blurring—so much so that it is difficult to differentiate one type of procession from another. Processions are often opportunities for pent up tensions to spill onto the streets as caste and communal politics overtake what may have started off as a religious event. Almost all processions, use objects whether inherited, borrowed or migrated, participating deliberately or incidentally in inventing traditions.

Folk rituals and processions associated with temple festivals of North Malabar in Kerala are performed at village centres by the mannan community, a Dalit[4] sub-caste. A relatively recent phenomenon found in many parts of India are the processions, dances and celebrations performed in street squares that mark the birthday of a Dalit political and social icon, B.R. Ambedkar. These two examples performed by Dalit communities in different geographies and cultural landscapes, demonstrate the ways in which visual and material symbologies have been utilized, transferred and empowered. These traditions, one belonging to a more ancient past and the other relatively new, share certain commonalities in the way in which they are conducted and in the material objects associated with them.

The more recent, 'invented' tradition has emerged only of late as a popular culture phenomenon and is the setting for political performances and rituals. While both examples 'belong' to marginalized communities, the first that we look at is derived from a tradition of the 'past' and could fall into the category of heritage as accepted by 'authorised heritage discourse'[5] because of the aesthetic, sometimes monumental, quality of its visual manifestations. The second example has no 'sophisticated' aesthetic or 'object-thing' that can be attributed to it. It uses objects that are in some way inherited from the first and uses traditions that can be considered to have been 'invented' more recently.

The Village Festival Processions

Processions at the village temple festival: An assemblage of dance, performance, elephants, floats, drumming and dance, caparisoned elephants at the temple festival watch over the revelry on the paddy fields. (Photo Credit: Sarita Sundar March 2015)

The performances are set against the backdrop of the spectacle of the village festival which is also in transition, and has its own agendas; village panchayats, or committees, wanting to better the organization of previous ones, or each community wanting to lay claim to the physical and virtual space of the festival. As a region with not just mixed castes but mixed religions, each community in the North Malabar region of Kerala vies to stake claim to the space. The temple ground then becomes a space for various power struggles with each entity having its own social, economic and political value that can be exchanged and bartered. In the effort to keep authority over the space, visual assertions are made evident. The cattle models are made bigger and more 'modern', there are more dancers and drummers; while in earlier times there may have been one or two elephants—of late there are at least twenty. The laundered white cloth that was once ceremoniously washed to create the horse and bullock models has been replaced by tinsel and plastic molded forms, the floats that were once carried like a palanquin by men have become motorized with wheels. While the core symbols remain in place—the ceremonial flag hoisting, the coconut leaf decorations, the elephants, and the bullock and horse models—the outer surfaces have changed, as well as the agency that they command.

The Ambedkar Jayanti or Birthday Processions on Street Squares in Bangalore

A drumroll, reminiscent of the kellikottu, or the heralding drums, in the village festival, resonates through a loudspeaker announcing the start of the celebration. Children are admonished to stand with folded hands in front of the portrait of Ambedkar while an audio recording relays a musical rendering of his life. A small make-shift altar under a flag post has a photograph of Ambedkar (in a western style blue suit), an incense stick stand, an oil wick lamp, fruits, sweets and flowers. A kolam, a drawing made of rice paste, on the road in front of the altar indicates that the area was recently cleansed to mark the sanctity of the area. As the crowds gather around, a man breaks a coconut into two and adds these to the altar as offering. The secretary of the 'Ambedkar Association' circles an incense stick around Ambedkar's photograph and the spectators. The flag is raised, similar to the kodiyettam, or flag hoisting, in temple festivals, flowers are scattered on the altar, and sweets are distributed to the 'devotees'

The Ambedkar Jayanti celebration with processions of floats, dances and drummers. Indexical symbols, some local, some borrowed from Hindu traditions are used in the Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations. Fibreglass models of elephants with flower garlands during the Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations. (Photo Credit: Ramu Aravindan. April, 2015)

There is a concentrated regard with which the celebration of Ambedkar's birthday takes place, all appearances pointing to a religious ceremony—with worshipping devotees in front of a god-like figure in a photograph. Ambedkar famously rejected Hinduism, and was in all probability a rationalist. While the dichotomy in the ritual is ostensibly duplicitous, and it is tempting to dismiss these events as an 'irrational deification of Ambedkar',[6] it is equally difficult to remain unmoved by this mediated experience. The ceremony involves objects and visuals that Hindus use as spiritual receptacles to communicate with gods. To deify an individual using systems from the very religion that he rejected seems inappropriate, surely. However for the Dalit community these visual demonstrations—the flag staff, the drum rolls, the flowers, the lamps, incense sticks, sweet offerings and the breaking of the coconut—are all necessary to anchor emotions, they are the essential material objects that give the intangible some 'substance'—to honour their idol. Using the indexical symbols of Hinduism in the worshiping of a non-believer, is possibly a deception, but one in which the participants are willing perpetrators. As surrogates of religious rituals in traditional societies, new gods, new altars and new priests have replaced old ones—in order to connect to things at a spiritual or philosophical level.

What was purely a religious village festival tradition in the past, and is ostensibly so today as well, now carries political and commercial overtones. In a possibly reverse situation, the Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations reveal how commemorative festivities in honour of a political leader display religious and sacred overtones in their visual expression.

What is significant when looking at these three sets of examples is the re-use of objects and rituals from the past in order to construct novel and invented traditions. R and E reimagined an existing tradition by introducing unique objects and new narratives. The Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations dip into 'materials that are inherited from the past'—part of community 'storehouses' of symbolic practice and language. There are concerns that the core nature of the Beating the Retreat tradition was being compromised with the grafting of new musical compositions into the reinvented ceremony. Implicit in the use of the term 'invention' is a lack of authenticity—with the implication that anything new is inherently not genuine, a falsification or a manipulation.[7]

The reimagined bommagollu ritual, the new avatar of the Beating the Retreat ceremony and the invented Ambedkar Jayanti tradition can certainly be called out to question for their use of novel, or even, not-quite-authentic objects. And yet, tradition is something that is always changing—adapting to the newest and latest order. The battle between innovation and change—and permanence and continuance—is inherent in all cultural processes. In order for certain traditions to be preserved and kept alive, cultural practices will always require invention and reconstruction—that sometimes involve an eclectic assemblage, sometimes an impertinent augmentation, and sometimes an innovative reimagination.

Notes

[1] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[2] Robin James Fitch-McCullough,'Imperial Influence On The Postcolonial Indian Army, 1945-1973' (2017), Graduate College Dissertations and Theses. 763. https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/graddis/763

[3] Revathi Krishnan, 'Indian popular tunes that are pushing out colonial martial music at Beating the Retreat', The Print, 30th January, 2020 https://theprint.in/defence/how-beating-the-retreat-is-getting-more-indian-year-by-year/356781/

[4] 'Dalit' comes from the Sanskrit root dal- and means "broken, ground-down, downtrodden, or oppressed." The term refers to a caste previously known as untouchables or harijans. They were considered untouchable because of the impurity connected with their traditional occupations as cleaners or washer people. While there have been attempts to integrate the community, Tartakov, states how it is surprising that many exclusion practices do continue till present day. Gary Michael Tartakov, Dalit Art and Visual Imagery (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[5] Laurajane Smith, Uses of Heritage (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006).

[6] Sharmila Rege. 2008. 'Interrogating the Thesis of Irrational Deification', Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 43, no. 7, 16-20. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40277605 Accessed: 31-03-2015

[7] Paul Post. 1996. 'Rituals and the Function of the Past: Rereading Eric Hobsbawm', Journal of Ritual Studies, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 85–107. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/44398699. Accessed 12 Apr. 2021.