

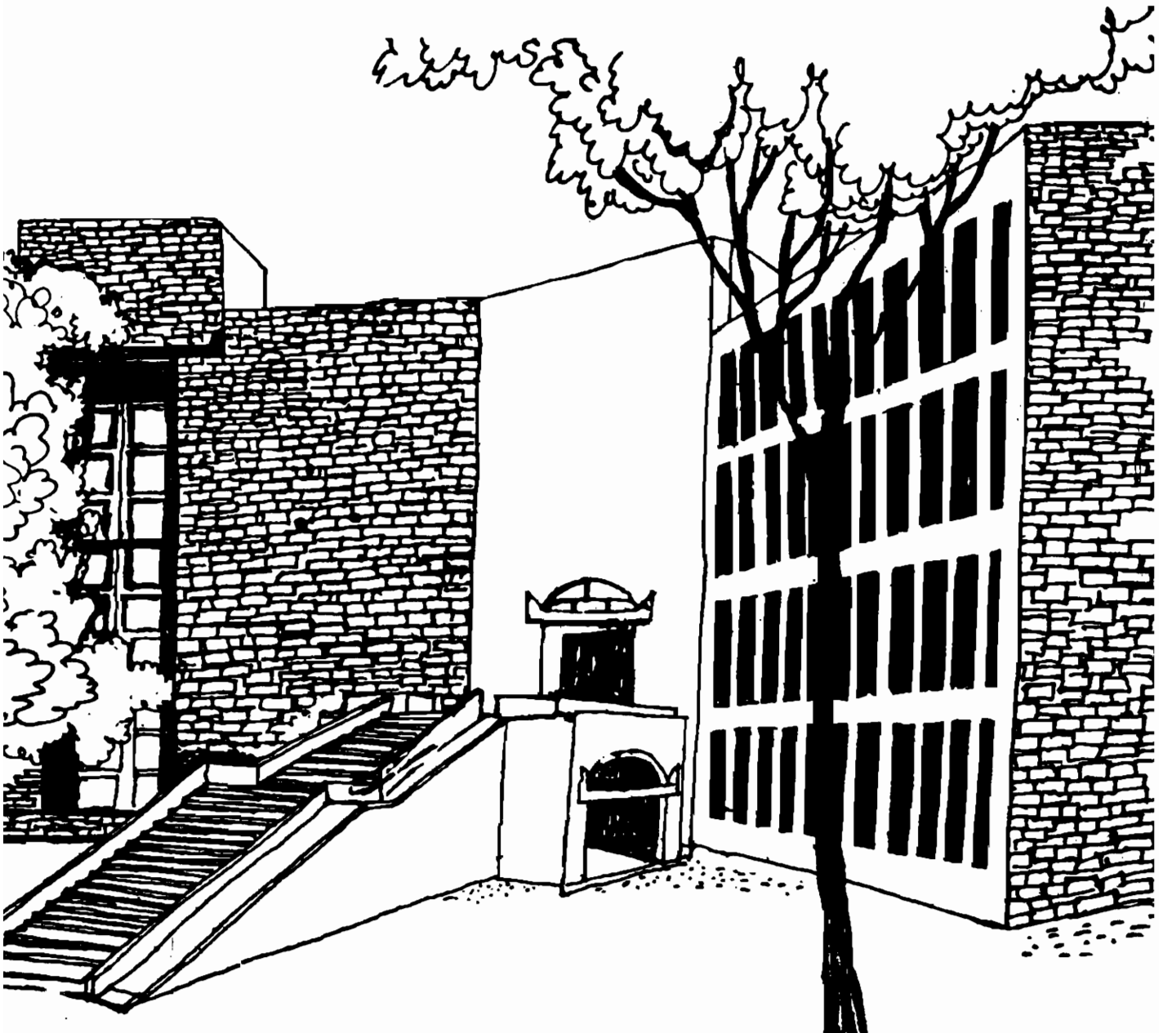


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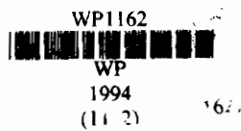


**CONNECTED CRITICISM AND
THE WOMB OF TRADITION**

By

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CONNECTED CRITICISM AND THE WOMB OF TRADITION*

Ananta Giri**

We are apt to be misled here by the ideological uses to which the concept of a tradition has been put by conservative political theorists. Characteristically such theorists have followed Burke in contrasting tradition with reason and the stability of tradition with conflict. Both contrasts obfuscate. For all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition; this is as true of modern physics as of medieval logic.

-Alasdair Macintyre,
After Virtue, p. 206.

..an antithesis of tradition and modernity confuses different contexts and arises out of cultural vanity, historical mis-comprehension and utopianism masquerading as social science. It needs to be replaced by a synthesis where modernity would simply be a new phase of the seeking to grapple with the problem of securing utilities for the mass of mankind. The contrast which would then remain would be a contrast between the diversely expressed age-old tradition of man's deeper awareness of eternal verities, and a newer tradition absolutizing the technology of manipulating matter for the sake of ephemeral utilities.

- G.C. Panda,
*The Meaning and Process of Culture
as Philosophy of History*, p.105-106.

The Problem

At present many of us--concerned human beings, citizens, and scholars--are engaged in a critical evaluation of the agenda of modernity--its discourse as well as practice. This critical evaluation has been prompted by our experience of living in the -

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modern world and both the progress and disenchantment that it has brought about. This critical appreciation of the world of modernity has manifested itself in many forms from extremist fundamentalism of all kinds to varieties of postmodernism, including the cultural reconstructions of modernity in traditional societies. At present the critique of modernity has expressed itself primarily in the form of a cultural critique which has involved simultaneously critiques of existing modes of social organization and codes of collective representation. In this cultural critique participants are also bringing the perspective of tradition to bear upon our contemporary reflections, since culture can not be genuinely thought of without belonging to a tradition or locating one's cultural sensibility or aspirations in a tradition. For instance, certain forms of contemporary postmodernism such as post-modern architecture or postmodern spirituality are essentially critical interpreters and practitioners of the emancipatory perspectives within the womb of tradition (Griffin 1988; Harvey 1987). While the idea of vernacular architecture is central to varieties of post-modern conceptions of space and an ideal human habitat certain traditions of embodied religiosity are central to post modern striving in religion and spirituality.

Though tradition has not been altogether missing from our contemporary reflections it is nonetheless not central to the practice of cultural criticism. This is partly because of the fact that the actors and schools of thought which set the terms

of debate in our increasingly monological global discourse do not live out any animating tradition. The only way they can speak of tradition is by analyzing it as a piece of object or by inventing it. Thus it is no wonder that the current discussion is totally exhausted by the somehow incestuous quarrel and sibling rivalry between modernity and postmodernity and the dynamics of tradition has been conspicuous by its absence. But it is essential to invite the missing god of tradition in order to participate in the contemporary trigonometry of criticism and creativity with tradition, modernity and postmodernity as an engaging trinity.

The present paper aims at looking at critically the relevance of tradition in the contemporary context by a critical exploration of styles of criticism available within the womb of tradition and the prospect for widening the universe of discourse that these styles embody. The paper looks into the possibility of criticism within the womb of tradition, which is not perceived as an externalist rejection of its frames of culture. The paper focuses on a genre of criticism of tradition which is internal to it but at the same time work towards its desired transformation. This style of criticism of tradition is called "connected criticism" by Michael Walzer (1988) and "internal criticism" by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (1987). As the paper describes connected criticism as a mode of critical engagement with tradition, it also discusses the implication for cultural criticism when it takes tradition seriously and the relevance of tradition in the contemporary context which is characterized by a

global interpenetration among the cultural forms of tradition, modernity and postmodernity.

Evaluating Tradition:

From Internal Criticism to Connected Criticism

By connected criticism Walzer refers to those styles of criticism where the critics criticize a prevalent way of life as meaningful interpreters of tradition, and not simply as their outright iconoclasts. Tradition has an eternal dimension and the contingent dimension. Tradition is an embodiment of the seeking for value and good life within a particular social group but because of the work of power the seeking for eternal values within a tradition gets fossilized into a few customs and institutions which instead of pointing the individuals to the Divine even chains the Divine in the prison of the caste system. This tension between value and power creates the perennial need for criticism of tradition even if as a cultural form it might be a representation of perennial philosophy so that the distortion of power is corrected and tradition becomes a base for the realization of an ideal society again (Giri 1993).

But criticism of tradition is a difficult task, "nearly always full of peril--especially when they involve... going against some groups deeply held beliefs. It is frequently felt that any modification of tradition, especially through scientific and/or urban rational criticism, must be an unacceptable external imposition upon traditional culture" (Nussbaum and Sen 1987: 15).

But this simultaneous need for criticism on the one hand and respect for the cultural integrity of tradition--embodied in the critic's immersion in tradition's essential props--challenges us to practise a style of criticism which is internal and immersed--internal because it uses "resources within the culture itself in order to criticize certain aspects of culture"; and immersed rather than detached because its norm of evaluation is based upon "the point of view of experienced immersion in the way of life of a culture" (ibid: 15). In such a style of criticism the critic earns his authority to criticize a tradition and create a space for moral reflection on taken-for-granted norms within a people "by arguing with his fellows" (Walzer 1988: 33) in their own idioms. Practitioners of connected criticism thus are not "marginal men and women" and have overcome both the difficulties of detachment from and ambiguous connection with tradition through their love and action. As criticism is an inquiry into "whether the suggested mode of togetherness genuinely hangs together" (Neville 1974: 189) in a tradition its criterion of judgement cannot be detachment since "detachment, in any area, yields not objectivity but incoherence" (Nussbaum & Sen 1987: 22).

But connected criticism as it is deeply immersed within a tradition is also not bound by it either in its source or in its scope. Its immersion is accompanied not only by a "transcendence from within" (Mohanty 1989: 146) but also by exposure to views from afar. Its inspiration for criticising a tradition many

times occurs out of a cross-cultural encounter; yet the style of criticism is still internal because the view from afar that it brings comes not through an astronomer but through a prophet. As Nussbaum and Sen argue: "An external critique cannot ignore internal facts, but does not preclude response to other societies and to an extended plurality of cultures" (ibid: 32). In fact, values of one part of the plurality of cultures can "enter in an integral way in an internal critique of another parts..." (ibid).

In its task of objective evaluation of tradition connected criticism does not stop at the taken-for-granted assumptions of a culture in the name of functionalism or structuralism or even descriptive pragmatism but proceed to "conduct a reflective dialectical examination" of people's views within a tradition (ibid). Thus connected criticism is also a normative criticism of tradition which performs a redemptive and transformative function and under whose moralizing gaze familiar institutions of society are perceived as "instances of problematic justice" by the actors (Habermas 1990: 108). Internal criticism has a thrust towards problematization of the "unquestioningly accepted ideas of the good life" within a tradition where the relevance of the experiential context of people tends to pale" (ibid: 105). Connected criticism, as it is based upon immersion within tradition, also involves taking a hypothetical attitude to culture, where the "philosophy of as if" becomes a guide to transformative action. But because such criticism is practised by those who live the very tradition and have even rivalled the

faithful in their authentic living of it their hypothetical attitude to culture is able to engage the mind and heart of the actors. And even if such connected critics get crucified for the charges of heresy and blasphemy by the powers that be they don't suffer from the problem of incomprehension and lack of communication with the actors of tradition.

Internal Criticism as a Rational Deliberation

There can be two kinds of connected criticism -- philosophical/rational and prophetic. In the philosophical mode of connected criticism it is the philosopher who conducts critical inquiry. While in the later it is the prophet who is the archetypal critic. In Nussbaum and Sen's agenda of internal criticism it is the rational philosopher-- whose guide is Aristotle--is the critic while in Walzer's it is the prophet. These two different agendas involve different assumptions and have different implications for the appreciation of traditional vision of good life in the contemporary world.

For Aristotle, all evaluations of tradition must be internal, proceeding with the values that people held dear. While "for Plato, the opinions of finite and imperfect people, as embodied in their traditions, are hardly a sufficient basis for an account of what is really good, even good for those very same people" (Nussbaum & Sen 1987: 17) Aristotle urges us critics to "seek conviction through arguments using the traditional beliefs as our witnesses and standards" (ibid: 23). But at the same time

evaluation of tradition in the Aristotelian agenda also involves a movement "beyond the superficial desires of participants to a deeper and more objective level" (ibid: 22). "Aristotle insists that these two goals--individual clarification and communal attunement--can be achieved together, by a cooperative critical discourse that insists upon the philosophical virtues of orderliness, deliberateness, and precision" (ibid). This is a deliberative process which "confronts the reflecting participant with all of the alternative views on a topic, leads him or her through a thorough imaginative exploration of each," leading to modification of their many "unconsidered positions" (ibid: 24). Yet, as Nussbaum and Sen make clear: "this modification, if it takes place, will take place not as imposition from without, but as a discovery about which, among that person's own values, are the deepest and the most central. This is self-discovery and discovery of one's own traditions" (ibid: 24).

In Nussbaum and Sen's agenda of the Aristotelian criticism of tradition there is a commitment to a "tradition of rational argumentation" (ibid: 29) and a "rational criticism of culture that proceeds by utilizing material internal to the culture itself" (ibid: 30). But they leave untouched the question of the cultural construction of rationality itself. In applying their scheme of criticism to evaluate Indian tradition they argue that the representation of Indian tradition as mystical has ignored the internal criticism of it in the work of the rationalist critics. But the opposition between the mystical and the

rational that Nussbaum and Sen take for granted is itself a universalization of a particular cultural agenda, viz. the agenda of modernity. Therefore one is not clear as to why an internal criticism of a tradition has to be a rational one, when rationality means anti-mysticism. For instance, Sri Aurobindo's work suggests that there is no opposition between the spiritual and the rational though they belong to different levels in an encompassing hierarchy (Sri Aurobindo 1950). In fact looking at Indian tradition through the Aristotelian gaze makes Nussbaum and Sen look for dualisms where in fact exists a transcendental unity.

Nussbaum and Sen's presentation of "truth in ethics" lying in moves beyond the superficial desires of participants immediately reminds one of Habermas' critical theory and his agenda of "discourse ethics" (Habermas 1990). But Habermas himself tells us that such processes of rational argumentation are inadequate in themselves in transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions of the participants in discourse, since "the discursive justification of norms is no guarantor of moral insights" (ibid: 209). But though Habermas himself is in search of hermeneutic supplements to overcome the limits of rational deliberation the farthest he can go is towards neighbourhood solidarity and "internalization of authority" (ibid: 179). This supplementary hermeneutic effort is not very different from the discovery of the self as a "relational" agent in Nussbaum and Sen's agenda of internal criticism (ibid: 25). Nussbaum and Sen

argue that the deliberative process "is viewed not in any simple way as the transcending or sacrificing of self; it is a further part of the discovery of self, since the self is understood in its very nature to be a relational entity, and its own ends are understood as shared ends" (ibid: 24-25).

But are these two processes--transcending or sacrificing self and discovering self--opposed to each other as Nussbaum and Sen seem to be assuming and suggesting? Is such an assumption about the ontology of man traditional or modern? Without essentializing the traditional mode one can still argue that in all traditional orders the emphasis upon ritual sacrifice suggests that one cannot really discover oneself without sacrificing oneself and transcending oneself (Nagendra 1971). If, as G.C. Pande argues, "the whole process of self-realization is the process of realizing that the non-self is the self" (Pande 1989: 40) then self-sacrifice and self-discovery are part of the same process of interrogation of the self in search of transcendence. From a very different background Roberto Unger makes a similar argument when he writes that the citizen in empowered democracy renounces not only because of the constitutional guarantee offered to him but because of "higher spiritual significance," which consists in "the assertion of transcendence as a diurnal context smashing" (Unger 1987: 579).

In another context, political theorist Mark Warren (1992) has argued that a theory of discourse is not a theory of self-transformation, and without self-transformation how can criticism

of tradition as a transformative movement be possible? The problem with Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen's Aristotelian internal criticism is that they fail to realize that "reflective dialectical examination" also requires "reflexive self" (Giddens 1991) and "transcendental sacred" (Unger 1987) as frames of criticism without which critical exercise is incapable of performing the task of transformation. Here to talk of transcendental sacred is not necessarily to evade reality by being mystical. It refers to a frame of criticism and a "dimension of ground" (Laclau 1992) from which we can judge whether the society which we have treated as god is really fair to human beings or not. For Unger even though the transcendental sacred is "elusive and disposable and requires, to be recognised, the power of vision, which is the ability to see the invisible" without this there is in fact no choice left to people especially as the kings and the priests of the social worlds present them as "graced with the authority of an ultimate reality" (ibid: 576). In such a case the decisiveness of the social world "arises precisely from its lack of any place within a hierarchy of contexts" (ibid: 577). And it is interesting that Unger, a political theorist--not a "mystic"--, argues that when the social sacred loses its touch with the transcendent sacred "there is no larger defining reality to which it can serve as the vehicle or from whose standpoint it can be criticized" (ibid).

Towards Prophetic Criticism

Thus not only the internal criticism of a tradition can be both rational and spiritual there is a perennial need for making the rational internal criticism a part of the encompassing engagement of spiritual criticism. Such an agenda would carry much conviction in the traditional societies where social criticism has manifested itself in varieties of Bhakti movements. Not only in traditional societies but also in varieties of contemporary societies criticisms of modern institutions-- colonialism, slavery, etc.--have been the work of the prophets-- be it Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. who, it must not be forgotten, have used the name of God to build their movements against forces of oppression. Even in modern critical social movements we are "back to the beginning," to use the words of Michael Walzer, where social critic is a prophet.

As in the case of philosophical internal criticism prophetic criticism of tradition is not an external one, it also uses the idioms of tradition to criticize it. As Walzer argues: "Although there is conflict between the prophets and the established priesthood, prophecy does not in any sense constitute underground or...a sectarian movement. In the dispute between Amos and the priest Amaziah, it is the prophet who appeals to religious tradition, the priest only to reason of state...Prophecy aims to arouse remembrance, recognition, indignation, repentance" (Walzer 1988: 63).

When we are confronted with the challenge of the criticism of tradition the prophetic mode of criticism is more internal

compared to the philosophical mode as it uses the idiom of religion, which is at the heart of the traditional order (Bellah et al. 1991, Sacks 1991). Its touch with the transcendent and its encompassment of the rational mode of argumentation as an essential evolutionary step has a special need today when existing forms of critical theory have degenerated either into narcissism or to a detached critique of the political order where one is more busy in fighting against the negativity of the Other rather than to transform oneself and thus, lay the invincible blocks for the criticism of culture (see Apter 1992; Laclau; and Pantham 1989).

The Contemporary Relevance of Tradition

The experience of modernity in the last three centuries has taught us the virtues of "hermeneutics of suspicion" in putting all received traditions into question--examining their relevance and coherence. But modernity, and now postmodernity in several guises of deconstruction, has taken the hermeneutics of suspicion to an extreme. It has to be now supplemented by a "hermeneutics of recovery", and this supplementing has to be a process of synthesis. In Sri Aurobindo's words, the challenge here now is no less than for a "synthesis of yoga." And in this yoga of synthesis tradition can provide us spiritual insights, which has a special need now as the world is now dominated by money and power as the ultimate measures of good life. It is an immersion

within tradition which can teach us that "the essence of man is 'faith,' not 'reason,' much less 'labour'" (Pande 1989: 54) and faith is nothing but **shradha** (Pande 1991).

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