

CUSTOMS: THE HUMAN METAMORPHOSIS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper primarily is attempting to enhance the understanding of how a custom begins, and the journey of that custom until it becomes useless. This paper is to understand how to determine if a custom is relevant in the modern times, and to know if it has not become toxic adherence to some law which no one knows how it started.

Most of us listen to our grandmothers say not to leave the house for some time after sneezing, or not to leave the house when a black cat crosses our path, these are often regarded as superstitions, but they do had a reasoning, like in ancient India, after preparing butter and curd, mothers often used to forget tying them in a certain height so that no cats or kids could steal the butter, so whenever a cat crossed the path while leaving the house it was wise to check if the butter and curd were tied above in a height. After knowing the reason, now we know that this custom has no relevance in contemporary world where large amounts of curd is not prepared in majority of households, and even if a small proportion of curd is made it is stored in the refrigerator this could be how this custom originated.

What did we just do to understand if something is a simple superstitious custom or if it had a contemporary relevance? We will analyze how we did it in this paper. As I have mentioned in my earlier papers also that to understand the origin of anything we must understand its origin, so primarily we will start with the investigation of how customs originate.

ORIGIN

How do customs originate? The common answer would be trough the culture of the land, but how does culture originate? We know that the whole world is geographically different, and

Darwin rightly says that evolution happens with respect to the environmental conditionsⁱ, hence every time there is a geographical distinction, people evolve differently. It is all a game of survival; people develop habits to sustain and survive in a particular condition and customs have exactly originated this way.

For example in India it is a custom to wash your hands and feet before entering into a house, and they do it with fresh water, there is enough water in India (at the time customs started in India the civilizations were based around water bodies) so it is wise to properly wash with a lot of water, same custom is seen in Islamic tradition, but if you observe the way they wash their hands and legs, you can see its water economic, and it is wise for them to wash themselves that way because Islam originated in harsh desert conditions and water economics played crucial role in sustenance.

Even if you observe the national customs like India never attacked any foreign nation on its own, and all its military was purely for self-defense, we can realize that India never had to attack any nation as it was self-sustained, but when you see Islamic nations occupying lands, you must comprehend that's the only way to sustain, as the desertic caliphates had to expand themselves to levied taxes and feed their people.

When you see nations like Rome, you may wonder why they conquered other nations when they had natural resources, but the very fact that they had natural resources establishes the fact that they needed human resource to extract or efficiently use those resources, that's the reason they had slavery and trade of slaves, they occupied lands to conquer human capital. Nations like England were invaded for farmlands as fertility was necessary, but all the point of this is to sustain, India was self-sustaining hence they did not have to attack other nations and invasion culture had to do with sustenance.

That is how customs originated, to prove this we can take a nation like our own as example, India has variety of cultures and traditions, why? Because India is geographically varied fanatically.

Now how do these customs become irrelevant when they had a very logical beginning? To answer this, I would rely on the Monkeys and Banana experimentⁱⁱ: 5 monkeys were placed in a cage, and a ladder was placed inside the cage, every time it was time for food, a banana would be placed on the ladder, and every time there was a banana placed on the ladder a monkey

would climb and bring it down. After few days when the first monkey climbed on the ladder, the scientist poured water on the other four monkeys, in the beginning the monkeys did not understand, but later on as this repeated a series of time the monkeys realized that if the monkey climbed on the ladder for the banana the water was being poured, so every time the monkey tried to climb the ladder, the other monkeys beat the first monkey and after sometime the monkey stopped trying to climb. Now the scientist replaced the first monkey with a new blue colored monkey, this monkey did not know about the ritual so when the banana was placed it tried to climb the ladder, the other 4 monkeys beat up the blue monkey. This continued for few days, and the blue monkey though it did not know why it is not allowed to climb the ladder it stopped trying. Now another blue monkey replaced one of the default monkeys. This monkey also initially tried to climb the ladder but the other 4 monkeys including a blue one beat up the new monkey. Like this all the default monkeys were substituted with new blue monkeys, and not a single monkey in this batch knew why they were not allowed to climb the ladder, but they hit each other if they tried to.

This is one way of explaining how customs originated, though there was a solid reason to beat the monkey to avoid water being poured on them initially, later on it became a ritual with no meaning.

CUSTOMS THAT ARE USELESS

We have seen through the monkey experiment how customs are valid but have lost their original source, now we will see another illustration when customs become useless. It is a Telegu YouTube video of Crisna Chaitanya Reddy, the story starts like this: there was a priest who performs his pooja every morning to his god. One day when he was performing pooja a cat came and interrupted the pooja and made it difficult for him to complete the pooja. The next day before sitting for the pooja he caught the cat and tied it to a pillar and after he completed his pooja he released it. This continued for quite a few days and his young son took notes of it. Later on, after his father had passed away, though the cat was not in his house the son searched for the cat and caught it and tied to the pillar and performed his pooja. Now his son took notes of this, he interpreted that it was necessary for the cat to be present in a pooja ceremony. After his father died the cat also died very soon. Now his son bought a cat to tie it

to the pillar and later completed the pooja. Now do you see a shift from origination of a custom from need to uselessness? Yes, often we see customs like this which we will discuss further.

CUSTOMS THAT ARE NARROWED AND UNQUESTIONED

So there is another illustration of Mackerel and Barracudaⁱⁱⁱ. Scientists put a barracuda and a mackerel in the same aquarium but placed a transparent barrier in between, the barracuda saw the mackerel and tried to go for killing it, but bumped into the barrier and retreated, after bumping into the barrier for several times the barracuda stopped attacking the mackerel, after some days the barrier was removed, but yet in the fear of bumping the barrier the mackerel was never attacked.

A similar experiment is performed on mosquitoes where a batch of mosquitoes were placed in a jar and the lid was closed, after few weeks the mosquitoes did not fly above the height of the lid despite opening the lid. After few weeks the mosquitoes were poured on the ground, but still, they did not fly above the lid level. These are how few superstitions are developed.

TEMPORARILY VALID CUSTOMS

There are some customs that are valid only for the first few times and later becomes a waste to resources, to substantiate this statement I would use a story that my father told me when he was in air force. There was an important inspection and my father along with fellow comrades worked hard to make the place look tidy, but at the last moment one of my dad's friends spilled out the paint on the floor by mistake. My dad's superior who was a junior officer came in and controlled the damage by converting the spilled paint into an art. Few years passed and the junior officer became senior officer and was assigned to inspect the same place along with my dad, he arrived a day before the inspection was scheduled and saw my dad's juniors painting the same place, my dad and his senior laughed and asked why they were doing so, the juniors replied saying "we don't know it's just a custom to paint the place before inspection". See how painting the floor to control the damage of the spill was reasonable but only temporarily valid? After some time, it was just wasting of the paint of the government.

It is important for us to identify these sorts of customs and eliminate them with priority, they are utter waste to the society and are like leaches to the national resources.

Important take aways from the illustrations:

- All customs originate with a very valid reasoning and later few of them lose their relevance due to misinterpretations.
- Its is crucial to identify customs that have lost their relevance and not their continuity
- Customs should be examined before attaching sanctions to them
- Customs are sometimes just useless and waste to national resources

THE SATI RITUAL IN INDIA

There was this ritual of Sati sagamanam practiced in India, prominent revolutionaries like Dayananda Saraswathi, Damodar Roy fought to abolish this system. Mythologically Sati devi jumped in fire when her father Daksha insulted lord Shiva her spouse Infront of everyone in a family ceremony^{iv}, this is the mythological origin of the Sati system and women voluntarily used to jump in fire after their husbands died, the political and controversial origin of the sati system is that when Islamic invasions happened in India, and the king died in war, all the women in the kingdom jumped into fire to avoid becoming sex slaves under Muslim kings^v.

NEVERTHELESS, of how this system actually originated both the theories seem fairly fine until this was done voluntarily (supporters of government as a parent theory may argue that no human has right to take life away be it theirs or other's without government sanction, but that is a debate for another paper, for now let us agree on the notion that right to life is right to end our life too) but later on it was forced upon women that they had to jump into the fire after their husbands died even if it's against their free will.

It was brave of the imperial government to abolish such a prominent ritual, it could have attracted serious revolt against the Brits. But that statement would not be valid as it could have been politically gainful to the British government as there was a lot of dissent towards sati system by then, I don't think I am eligible enough to comment on the political bravery of the British government then but however it was morally a perfect thing to do so by analyzing the Sati custom, we can be sure it was temporarily valid but later useless.

ROLE OF CUSTOMS

So essentially, we have understood that customs were formulated for survival purpose, but one may ask that if customs are just methods of surviving environmental challenges, then why are customary offerings made to God and why rituals are often attached to God.

The simple answer to that would be my assumption that probably there is no god which is another huge topic, but God was indeed made to be believed by the elders of communities to mandate customs^{vi}. It is often very difficult for scientific minds to explain a lay man the theory of science, hence I strongly believe that the concept of God was developed to mandate certain habits essential for survival.

For example take the custom of applying turmeric to the threshold of the main door of a house is hard to explain to a lay man, turmeric is anti-bacterial in nature so the custom of applying turmeric to doors helped contain diseases^{vii}, but explaining this to huge mass is difficult so the custom is associated with goddess Lakshmi, it is easy to convince that there exists a goddess called Lakshmi and she will be pleased if one applies turmeric to doors and threshold of a house. Take the example of tying mango leaves to new houses, it is often said that gods get pleased by decoration of houses with mango leaves, but the logical source to this custom could be that almost all houses in India are white washed when they are constructed, and relatives arrive as guests to review the house, calcium carbonate when reacted with carbon dioxide becomes a powder of CaCO_3 , when relatives sit in the new house the carbon dioxide levels increase and causing the limestone to become powder, so to avoid this mango leaves are tied in the house to neutralize the oxygen percentage with carbon dioxide percentage in the room. Now this can naturally not be explained to a lay man so the customary belief is that it pleases gods.

CUSTOMS AS METAMORPHOSIS OF HUMANS

Darwin in his Origin of species talked about Evolution by Natural selection, to summarize it, the idea of natural selection is that if a particular species faces difficulty in survival in respect to a certain condition, then the offspring of that species will be born with the evolved trait to survive the harsh condition. Natural selection is time taking, it takes generations of a species

to develop a perfect trait in respect to a problem. But there is another way species tend to adopt to natural challenges which is not caused by natural selection (metamorphosis is a product of natural selection, species through natural selection have developed the skill to metamorphose, there is no denial, the statement intends to say metamorphic change caused to a species in itself is not a reflection to natural selection as it does not contain reproduction) but happens instantly in the same life, it is metamorphosis. A caterpillar forms a cocoon and inside it, it develops wings. Same way humans form a cocoon called customs to develop the resistance towards harsh conditions. For example, get back to the black cat example, cat being the trouble to the curd in household, humans developed the cocoon of rechecking if the curd is tied at a height to avoid the trouble of the curd being eaten by the cat. Clearly as humans cannot metamorphose like the caterpillars it is safe to assume that humans developed their own cocoon called customs.

CONCLUSION

All customs must be questioned and must be passed through the filter of rationality, if a custom is very old and contains sanctions it must immediately be evaluated on basis of public policy. It is natural that all customs originated with perfect logics but few ended up being irrelevant and few being superstitions and a very few being still relevant.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Darwin, C. & Keble, L. (1859) On the origin of species by means of natural selection, or, The preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life

ⁱⁱ Pandey, B. K. (n.d.). "What is your Banana?" - *The 5 Monkeys Experiment*.

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-your-banana-5-monkeys-experiment-bhupesh-kumar-pandey/>

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Story of the Mackerel and the Barracuda*. (2019, January 15). SWZ Insurance.

<https://www.swzinsurance.com/the-story-of-the-mackerel-and-the-barracuda/>

^{iv} Mukhopadhyay, Anway (2018-04-20). *The Goddess in Hindu-Tantric Traditions: Devi as Corpse*. Routledge. ISBN 978-1-351-06352-4.

^v Levi, Scott C. (November 2002). "Hindus Beyond the Hindu Kush: Indians in the Central Asian Slave Trade". *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. **12** (3): 277–

288. doi:10.1017/S1356186302000329. JSTOR 25188289. S2CID 155047611.

^{vi} Singh, B. (2019). *Why I am an Atheist*. Sristhi Publishers & Distributors.

^{vii} Sopher, D. E. (1964). Indigenous uses of turmeric (*Curcuma domestica*) in Asia and Oceania. *Anthropos*, (H. 1./2), 93-127.