Chapter 2

CULTURAL HISTORY: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Men do not make history, they tend to follow what has already been existed. This gets transmitted in course of time. Culture and its forms, undoubtedly, emerge from history. Cultural history, as studied today, implies a broad spectrum in terms of both its subject matter and theoretical perspective. The contours of the subject vary. Over the years it has covered different fields and has generated diverse historiographies. Its approaches are unique and eclectic, not only confining itself to the study of the disciplines of history alone. It is interdisciplinary in the sense that it embraces other disciplines like anthropology, sociology, economics, cultural studies and very recently literary studies. Thus in this way cultural history has provided a meeting ground for a variety of interests and methodologies. Since the late 1970s and 1980s it has acquired an irreplaceable place in the historical arena as an important academic discipline. In recent years the theme of cultural history has gained much prominence giving it a whole new dimension. It is at the cutting edge of both historical and cultural studies. Looking at various definitions and debate thereof, it has been tried to draw a link between the past and present and also understand the modes of cultural history in the following lines for facilitation of the present study.

2.1. Cultural History: Meaning and Definition

Cultural history is no new term in the historical parameters of culture. The parameters of defining cultural history are manifold. Several scholars have viewed it from different standpoints and have aptly put forward theoretical dimensions ranging from the social and political dominance of culture to those associated with aesthetic and literary discourses. Every culture belonging to a
society has its own history. The society that adopts or follows a culture through inheritance too, has a history. Cultural history, a new development in history, meets the different nuances of culture. Peter Burke (1997, 1) argues on the definition of cultural history to be like defining culture on its own. It is difficult to reach an overarching interpretation as culture has so many meanings and definitions put forth by many. So also it is difficult to define cultural history. According to him, cultural history is something not in shape, it is constantly changing and this change has an insubstantial nature. The emergence of cultural history in the 1970s and 1980s and its subsequent dominance was in part a response to the perceived limitations of the social history perspective of the previous historiography. In describing the behavioral tendencies of social groups and emphasizing normative behavior, often in the abstractions of numbers and charts, social historians had moved beyond an elite-dominated political paradigm, but had ignored both the uniqueness of individual experience and the ways in which social life is created through politics and culture. And their attachment to group categories and social structural explanations had begun to deaden history as an exploration of contingent experience. Cultural historians sought to bring some life back into the exploration of the lives of ordinary people and to open them up to arenas of freedom and choice. “By the mid 1980s, cultural historians were drawing upon beliefs about the agency of ordinary people that social historians such as Herbert Gutman and Eugene Genovese had emphasized, but drew away from the way agency was attributed to participation in predefined group activities” (Fass 2003, 39). Cultural history in this context is a new term in understanding the concepts of culture in a broad perspective drawing an interrelationship between culture and history which has etched a space of its own.

The beginning of the era of seventies to the twenty-first century witnessed the study of the domain of cultural history gaining newer heights gradually changing the discourse of historiography. This transformation has interested historians to work on a wide range of diverse themes and sources. The history of
representation and practice offered important themes which cultural historians sought to investigate. There are many theoretical interpretations on the evolution of the terms in contemporary times. Culture as we understand is connected to a society's development. As Raymond Williams defines "culture to include the organization of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate" (Sardar and Loon 2010, 5).

Since culture is broadly defined to have embraced both high and low, elites and the ordinary, conditioning human endeavours, its history would redefine ways in which the human past relate to each other. Cultural history involves both representation and practices, as to why it is connected to the historical agencies. Peter Burke has undertaken a parallel reflection to the study of cultural history giving dent to more theoretical aspects. In one of his writings in *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (2009), Burke suggested,

> Cultural historians might usefully define themselves not in terms of a particular area or field such as art, literature and music, but rather of a distinctive concern for values and symbols, wherever these are to be found, in the everyday life of ordinary people as well as in special performances for the elite (18-19).

Cultural history attained popularity and emerged as a major variety of history only in the last three decades or so. It was more frequently practiced in the German speaking nations before gaining grounds all over the world. It was looked in part as a response to the broad spectrum of social history under the previous historiography. Now cultural history has become one of the important domains of history defining culture and its formations. Jacob Burckhardt and John Huizinga, two founding figures of the discipline emphasized on the fact that cultural history should include both the ordinary and the popular. It should include the lives and perceptions of the ordinary people. "It is in the sphere of culture that human contemplation can perceive that spiritual continuum which...gives meaning to all
history. The vision of both past and present is what distinguishes human beings from the animals” (Burckhardt 1998, 12). Burckhardt lays emphasis on intuition, perception and empathy and regards these as influential in historical representation.

Cultural history is important to understand the cultural edifice of a particular community, an institution and the region. It has invariably been related to cultural studies since it talks about cultural space and identity. For many anthropologists and historians cultural history has a fascinating task to accomplish in defining the cultural milieu of a particular community or locality. It is essentially a history of culture. To trace the importance of the new representation of cultural history we need to relate some of the influences made by some eminent theorists in this field. Mention can be made of the work accomplished by French cultural critic Michel Foucault, American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, contemporary historians Natalie Z. Davis and E.P. Thompson. The common concern with certain cultural phenomenon such as rituals, ceremonies, texts and discourse have now been deviated with modern concepts accumulated from cultural anthropology and literary criticism. “Cultural history presented an opportunity to plunge even deeper into the lives of ordinary people, offering the potential for a richer study of human experience in the past” (Crone, Gange and Jones 2007, 2). By this notion of culture we can ascribe it as a symbolic representation of important events and practices taking place and also to denote the objects codifying cultural values. Thus culture, in abstract has become one of the major components defining the social, political and economic life of an individual.

However the main direction of cultural history in the twentieth century is on the issues of representation as a way of expressing the spirit of a society, the meaning and values articulated through such social practices. As a result of this, by the end of 1980s a confluence took place between social and cultural history, where social historians started drawing insights from cultural history. Elaborated
broadly the field of cultural history has evolved from three distinct unifying strands. The first being a stress upon human subjectivity, second the holistic approach to culture seeking unifying patterns or structures and third, an interpretive, hermeneutic method of analysis.

The Sattras, as we understand them from the cultural history perspective, ponder on the issue of agency focusing primarily on the human subjectivity, through the cultural practices, which have laid an impact on the whole Assamese society, particularly the Vaisnavas. This has also an impact on the social norms and conditions upon which the society revolves. The individuals act as agents drawing upon the ideals and traditions of these institutions.

From the mid-nineteenth century emphasis upon the collective modes of thought was laid as one of the holistic approaches to culture. Émile Durkheim while establishing a science of society gave priority to the study of a social group or a community than the individuals concerned. He believed that human behavior rests on the moral, religious and social principles rather than concerning individual lives. According to him, ‘rituals and ceremonies that accompanies at the social level plays a vital role in creating social cohesion and stability’ (Green 2008, 56). This metaphor reveals the fact that society is not an individual entity and that all aspects of the society are interrelated. The influence of Durkheim can be contextualized with the present study since we generalize the Sattras as social institutions catering to the needs of the society than giving an individual outlook. This is more visible when we link collective memory as one of the concepts of cultural history in understanding the Sattras.

Natalie Zemon Davis and E. P. Thompson’s views on community and legitimacy where the integrated focus is laid on the community with an analysis of power borrowed from Foucault’s concept of power that ultimately brings about a reformation. Roger Chartier’s views on power have also been included in our present study where he points out that power is not bimodal but a spectrum. Based
on his ideas and concepts, the present researcher has analyzed the Sattras locating the dichotomy between the one who possesses power or the control and who does not but produces a spectrum of how the individuals related to it use the existing resources available to them to assert themselves in a variety of contexts.

2.2. The Concept of Culture

Culture is a term that carries multiple meanings and is understood in very many ways. For some it is considered to be social behavior but it is not. It abstracts behavior from its connotation. Culture, as we all understand, is at the threshold of every developing society. The idea of culture goes back at least as far as the eighteenth century and was spurred in the nineteenth century by the nationalist impetus. Culture may be defined best in the words of Edward Said (1983, 89), “culture is used to designate not merely something to which one belongs but something that one possesses, and along with that proprietary process, culture also designates a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture comes into forceful play.”

The notion of culture is absorbed within cultural history. Understanding culture as the quintessential part of cultural history, we try to establish its various parameters through theorizing some concepts and ideas. When communities regularly interact with each other to create a cultural network, they tend to share similar ‘clusters of common concepts, emotions and practices.’ Culture is the basic premise on which the study of cultural history revolves. The term ‘culture’ has been defined from various perspectives by different scholars. The notion of culture is not always the same and it changes with variations of how we foresee culture. Since it has been used in several distinctive ways, the concept itself fascinates and often confuses the individuals. This was cited by Chaney (1994, 2) in one of his writings on culture. In another sense, “culture may also be defined as
the socially and historically situated process of production of meanings” (Barrett et al. 1979, 10). This definition connotes culture as a productive enterprise through the notion of representation. Raymond Williams has pointed out that modern meaning of culture essentially appeared only in the 18th and 19th centuries and not before that. Earlier it simply meant as its original Latin root word cultura meant cultivation of the soil.

The concept of ‘culture’ became a noun of inner process, specialized to its presumed agencies in ‘intellectual life’ and the ‘arts’. It became also a noun of general process, specialized to its presumed configurations in ‘whole ways of life’. It played a crucial role in definitions of ‘the arts’ and ‘the humanities’, from the first sense. It played an equally crucial role in definitions of the ‘human sciences’ and the ‘social sciences’, in the second sense (Williams 2009, 17).

The concept of culture as an institutional sphere devoted to the making of meaning is based on an assumption that the social formations are based on certain clusters of institutions devoted to specialized actions delivering a meaning. These institutional spheres cater to different conventional spheres like politics, economy, society and culture, of which culture specifies production, circulation and use of meanings. The locus of cultural sphere may further be subdivided into sub themes of literature, music, education, religion etc. The study of culture, “if culture is defined in this way, is the study of the activities that take place within these institutionally defined spheres and of the meanings produced in them” (Bonnell and Hunt 1999, 41).

By the late twentieth century culture came to have a different connotation. Its meaning grounded on three important points, “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development; a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general [and] ....the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (Green 2008, 2).
Because culture, as broadly defined, embraces both high and low, conditions all human activities, its history offers a way of understanding how different spheres of human pasts relate to each other. Hence, culture may well be defined to lie at the heart of historical agency, since cultural history involves both representation and practice. A coherent culture is based on the notion that it produces a system of meanings. “Culture consists of learned and shared systems of meaning and understanding, communicated primarily by means of natural language. These meanings and understandings are not just representations about what is in the world; they are also directive, evocative, and reality constructing in character” (Roy 1990, 65). These systems of meanings are understood as schema, referred to as knowledge structures specifying how certain elements like objects, situations, events and actions relate to each other under varied circumstances.

2.2.1. Representation and Practice

The idea of representation is central to cultural history today. The concept of representation has come a long way to determine the values, practices and assets of culture. Roger Chartier has redefined “cultural history to be concerned primarily with two aspects, representation and practices” (Bennett and Frow 2008, 111). It is connected with the basics of the implicit rules that an individual undergoes while performing the role assigned to him in appropriation of cultural forms. The study of representation became quite popular amongst the cultural historians since the idea of representation started reflecting not only the reality but also constructed it. Historical evidence, as well as “the historian’s own account of the past, should be understood as representations, rather than reconstructions of reality” (Green 2008, 9). As an important form of representation, both memory and lived experiences share an intimate relation with a capacity to transform the present and the future.
When members of a particular community interact and share thoughts, representations are then used for message construction and comprehension. Communication helps to consolidate conventional beliefs and ideas related to a culture. When individuals communicate they represent their respective cultures. In the words of Sperber (1996, 88), “those representations which are repeatedly communicated and minimally transformed in the process will end up belonging to the culture.” The fundamental and common knowledge can be understood as an embodiment of certain activities in a structured environment, which procures interaction with individuals or members of a group. Likewise, considering the Sattras in this context we can understand that the practices of rites and rituals, routine or occasion specific, are forms of a practical understanding and knowledge.

Practices are fundamental to human lives. “Practice will always in some measure elude representation, because it is so multiple in its meanings” (Dewald 1998, 234). Even though they escape from each other, yet both are at the heart of cultural history. The study advocates a view on culture as a complex phenomenon with a socially produced and socially set values cherished by individuals or a group of individuals which undertake a form of ‘community practices’. The cultural artefacts as we consider here act as mediating devices where joint activity is co-ordinated. Practice implies a system and this system is embedded in culture. Through the repetition of practices through the medium of ritual, economy, heritage, the Sattras foster their own cultural identity. And acquiring a common cultural background, these institutions share a common and collective memory and identity which is understood through its various socio-cultural forms in practice. The reading of the sacred texts on every singular occasion is also a kind of practice undertaken here and such practices provide meaning to the reader as well as the listener. It also develops a sense of harmony and concordance in all such practices.
2.2.2. Knowledge and Power

The concept of power forms an important part in understanding the interdisciplinary aspects of cultural studies. The inter-relationship between power and culture needs no insisting. And it is due to the influences of power that culture changes. Culture is generally constituted through meanings and representations which are significant mechanisms to invoke human practices. "The construction of representation is necessarily a matter of power since any representation involves the selection and organization of signs and meanings" (Barker 2004, 161). Whether political or cultural, people attain the capacity to resist the forces of power. The discourse theories as proposed by Michel Foucault treat culture to have an equal significance for all. The present study not only focuses on the Sattras as the primary subject matter but it puts emphasis upon the representations of Sattriya culture and the ways in which these representations go through the institutional arrangement of the Sattras. These discourses on power and knowledge hold sway in the society. They provide scope for communication by relaying messages with meanings and also indicate the relationship that develops between individuals. Thus to understand the relations of power, it is important to explicate the relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault's conception on power is determined as, "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.....there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations" (Foucault 1978, 93).

In our present study we approach the concept of power through knowledge which is transmitted through practices and human endeavour. It does not necessarily deal with the concept of ideology, which generally refers to the organizing and justifying ideas held by individuals about themselves. Power, in this context is understood as a concept which enhances knowledge rather than associating the ideals of subordination and a terrain of conflict and struggle where
individuals crave for authority. Michel Foucault in an article *The Subject and Power* (1982, 789) defines power relationships as, “a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future.” He also stressed on power as a productive force which circulates through all levels in the society. The power which is circulated further helps in the growth of the institution since knowledge implicated with power develops into a relationship which cannot be dissociated. Émile Durkheim mentions in his *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915) a sociological view of knowledge in which categories are socially constructed and the rules are socially sustained and interpreted. According to him, interactions take place when individuals gather experiences and these experiences are sustained and reinforced through continued interactions. Knowledge and competence, as we understand in the present context, are carried by a distinct group of individuals who expertises in relevant fields based on experiences.

The Sattras, in our present study also undertake the question of power regime. But it has been observed that most of these institutions are not coercive in terms of authority of power. The culture of these institutions functions in an organized and participatory way shaping the social life and concentrating on the conduct of the individuals involved with it. We may say, “culture is not just a matter of representations and consciousness but of institutional practices, administrative routines and spatial arrangements that are manifestations of power” (Barker 2004, 162). Moreover these institutions follow a disciplinary order of their own in terms of organization and selection of administrative heads. The practices and discourses related to them are also interpreted by a disciplinary character through which a rationality of efficiency and productivity is expected.

The discourses of power can never reach the static domination to which they tend, because they are repeatedly upset by the practical resistance of ordinary
people. Nor can practical resistance ever triumph fully, for new norms of dominance always emerge (Dewald 1998, 225).

Co-ordinated actions produce a commonly shared knowledge. Through rituals and commemorations knowledge can, to a great extent build up a history just as history creates common knowledge. Such actions and performances are common in the Sattras involved in our study where knowledge gets reposed and disseminated through the above actions. Knowledge depends on how people choose to communicate. The Sattras can thus be grouped as centres for disseminating knowledge which gets percolated down to the community. Through the initiation process, use of sacred texts in manuscripts, each and every session of ritual performances, an act of knowledge-gathering and knowledge dissemination takes place among the Vaisnava followers. The Sattras also function as non-formal institutions of learning. Through their multilinear tasks they share knowledge with the people belonging to the Vaisnava community and it gets transmitted from one generation to another. In such conditions, we refrain from using the Gramscian hegemonic structure of power. The variety of knowledge-spreading devices is intimately connected with the lives of every individual.

2.3. Engaging Cultural History and Cultural Studies

Since the methodology applied in the present research is interdisciplinary, we try to identify certain problems from the perspective of both cultural history and cultural studies. Particular established disciplines have various methods and approaches that bring them closer to the interdisciplinary domain of cultural studies. Apart from the major disciplines of sociology and anthropology, other generative frameworks for providing an agenda for data analysis lie in the disciplines of cultural history, while the sociology of culture, cultural geography and the new historicism in literary studies. An engagement with history is like
gaining experiences from the sacred, secular and the mundane or popular. It is popular in the sense that it is spread widely. The development of popular interests vests on how history is represented. It involves activities which redeems the past. The continual process of diverse interactions between now and then is vital to cultural studies as history provides a broad set of resources to construct the past and represent the present. Engaging with history within cultural studies has two major strands: “doing cultural history in a way that is informed by general theoretical and hermeneutical issues, including those informing cultural studies; and developing critical analysis of contemporary uses and manifestations of the past in contemporary culture, including media presentations of the past and versions of the past in vernacular traditions and conventions of everyday life” (Pickering 2008, 194). To deal with this idea, in the present work the researcher has moved between social and cultural history with both contemporary and historical forms of analysis. The notions of cultural history and cultural studies supplement each other. So combining cultural history and contemporary cultural studies, develops an understanding of the past in the light of the present. Hence, our study of the institutions coils them together into a closer intellectual relationship which develops into an understanding of a long term cultural process. By way of doing this, we also perceive a notion of the dynamics of cultural traditions evolved out of this, patterns of continuity emerging as a result of the social changes that has taken place over the years. The speculation of engaging cultural studies with history is to historicize the popular experiences and negotiations of the past.

The perspectives which the researcher has drawn while studying the cultural history of the institution, recognize that there are always diverse beliefs, practices and actions represented in understanding a community. Since these institutions also cater to religious beliefs and practices, the individuals are morally responsible too. As such moral discourses intensify unity and identity which are equally and essentially important to a community.
2.4. The Trajectories of Memory in Cultural History

The social framework of memory took shape under the French anthropologist and sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s. According to him, memories are constructed by social groups and it is these social groups which determine what to remember and how it is to be remembered. “There is too often a facile mode of doing cultural history, whereby one picks a historical event or a vehicle of memory, analyzes its representation or how people perceived it over time, and draws conclusions about memory (or collective memory)” (Confino 1997, 1388). Memory can be assigned as articulating the cultural, the social and the political connections. It draws a link between social practices and representations. The individuals of a rational group identify the events and relate those to their group. It can be assigned as a collective effort to remember the past. Memory consigns to that faculty which connects individuals mentally and by way of which the individuals preserve and also recover their pasts and subsequent events. “Memory is central to understanding cultural life, not because it is the past, but because it is the modality of our relation to it” (Terdiman 1993, 7). The notion of memory has occupied an important place in the study of cultural history. It denotes the representations of the past with a shared cultural knowledge that passes on from generations to generations.

Collective memory is much more important when we talk of the shared memories. Perhaps collective memory has been so useful to think about how people construct pasts because of its open-endedness, because it is applicable to historical situations and human conditions in diverse societies and periods (Confino 1997, 1387). The temporalised experiences are individually or collective stored in as memory and this concerned with our representation of the past and social experiences. It acts as the central modality of all human experiences and draws a link of the past with the present. The approach of collective memory is to determine the notion of shared identity within a distinct social group whose
members have different interests and choices. More consequential to our present study is the approach of cultural history through representation of memory in the form of rituals and cultural artefacts, thereby analyzing the values, ideas and practices embedded in them.

The complex form of cultural history has concentrated on the materiality of memory, on the preservation, restoration and interpretation of the heritage sites. Memory is thus central in constituting both individual and collective identities. As a matter of fact, material objects and places play a mnemonic role in perpetuating and establishing collective identities. And as we proceed with a discussion on heritage resources of the Sattras, we try to draw a causal link between heritages and memory as a distinct form of collective as well as individual identity. Their heritage acts as a form of objectivised culture conforming to texts, rites, buildings, majestic art forms preserved for long by the particular community asserting collective uniqueness in the society.

Identities and memories are highly selective, inscriptive rather than descriptive, serving particular interests and ideological positions. Just as memory and identity support one another, they also sustain certain subjective positions, social boundaries, and, of course, power (Green 2008, 107).

Actions transmit memories as they transmit skills, from master to apprentice for example (Burke 1997, 48). This can be appropriated with our discussion on rituals where rituals are assigned as re-enactments of the past which involve both individual and collective memories to perform. They also interpret the past, shape memory and construct a social identity. The rituals as performed in the Sattras are thus collective representations. The events that take place in such institutions involve individuals, their shared notion of individual as well as collective experiences. On the basis of these knowledge and experiences, memory acts as the vital tool in understanding the modules of change and development in
these institutions. The lacuna between history and memory has helped in shaping
.the perceptions of the past and as an important component of cultural history,
memory attends to the social relations between individuals and all public forms
that involve memory. These may include the heritage sites, ritual practices and
popular festivals as discussed in the present work. This recognizes memory in all
cultural form and practices that take place in such institution.

"Memory is considered in a holistic sense, not just an individual faculty
but as socially and culturally constructed and communicated" (Pickering 2008,
192). Thus the relationship that exists between the individual and the collective in
terms of memory reflects the past to be mutually interdependent and reciprocal in
thoughts and actions. In summary, memory is a reflection of our past
understanding, be it a social, economic or cultural phenomenon in relating with
the present. Thus the relationship between cultural memory studies and other
forms of cultural enquiry especially cultural history is such that both memory and
history cannot be separated and they are intimately connected to each other.

The present study focuses its concern with an investigation of memory in
cultural sphere as it is enacted by the individuals in both individual and collective
manner. It sums up the variations involved in their ways of actions and
performances, the social commitments etc. Underlying this research is to explore
the idea that memory, on both individual and collective levels, is one of the key
ways in understanding the day to day human experiences and make sense of the
experiences they gather. Memory can be studied with an empirical approach
putting emphasis on the lived experiences of memory as modes of temporal
consciousness and action. The sites of memory, as in our discussion in relation to
the heritage sites not only conform to the inherent textual historical potentialities
but also includes the manner these potentialities engage individuals every day.
Thus, in the words of Emily Keightley (2008, 185), "the investigation of cultural
memory as an object of study rests on the shared assumption that memory is a key site through which the lived experience of time can be examined.”

Thus, the distinction between culture as a theoretical category and culture as a determinate body of beliefs and practices is “crucial for rethinking the place that ‘culture’ as a category of social life and determinant of history has held since the rise of cultural history and its displacement of social history as the focus of historical analysis” (Sewell 2005, 76). Apart from understanding culture as a system of symbols and meanings, it can also be approached as a sphere of practical activity. Culture is grounded in the lived experiences of the individuals and practices. Culture is understood as a realm of meanings often been produced and reproduced by individuals who are juxtaposed as historical agents.
REFERENCES


