

INDIAN CULTURE AND ITS UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS

Dr. Shital A. Agrawal

Dept. of History

Shri & Smt. P. K. Kotawala Arts College, Patan

INTRODUCTION :

Culture refers to the patterns of thought and behaviour of people. It includes values, beliefs, rules of conduct, and patterns of social, political and economic organisation. These are passed on from one generation to the next by formal as well as informal processes. Culture consists of the ways in which we think and act as members of a society. Thus, all the achievements of group life are collectively called culture. In popular parlance, the material aspects of culture, such as scientific and technological achievements are seen as distinct from culture which is left with the non-material, higher achievements of group life (art, music, literature, philosophy, religion and science). Culture is the product of such an organization and expresses itself through language and art, philosophy and religion. It also expresses itself through social habits, customs, economic organisations and political institutions.

Culture has two types: (i) material, and (ii) non-material. The first includes technologies, instruments, material goods, consumer goods, household design and architecture, modes of production, trade, commerce, welfare and other social activities. The latter includes norms, values, beliefs, myths, legends, literature, ritual, art forms and other intellectual-literary activities. The material and non-material aspects of any culture are usually interdependent on each other. Sometimes, however, material culture may change quickly but the non-material may take longer time to change. According to Indologists, Indian culture stands not only for a traditional social code but also for a spiritual foundation of life.

Indian culture is an invaluable possession of our society. Indian culture is the oldest of all the cultures of the world. In spite of facing many ups and downs Indian culture is shining with all its glory and splendor. Culture is the soul of nation. On the basis of culture, we can experience the prosperity of its past and present. Culture is collection of values of human life, which establishes it specifically and ideally separate from other groups.

❖ CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIAN CULTURE:

Traditional Indian culture, in its overall thrust towards the spiritual, promotes moral values and the attitudes of generosity, simplicity and frugality. Some of the striking features

of Indian culture that pervade its numerous castes, tribes, ethnic groups and religious groups and sects are as follows

A) A Cosmic Vision:

The framework of Indian culture places human beings within a conception of the universe as a divine creation. It is not anthropo-centric (human-centric) only and considers all elements of creation, both living and non-living, as manifestations of the divine. Therefore, it respects God's design and promotes the ideal of co-existence. This vision thus, synthesizes human beings, nature and God into one integral whole. This is reflected in the idea of satyam-shivam-sundaram.

B) Sense of Harmony:

Indian philosophy and culture tries to achieve an innate harmony and order and this is extended to the entire cosmos. Indian culture assumes that natural cosmic order inherent in nature is the foundation of moral and social order. Inner harmony is supposed to be the foundation of outer harmony. External order and beauty will naturally follow from inner harmony. Indian culture balances and seeks to synthesize the material and the spiritual, as aptly illustrated by the concept of purushartha.

C) Tolerance:

An important characteristic of Indian culture is tolerance. In India, tolerance and liberalism is found for all religions, castes, communities, etc. Many foreign cultures invaded India and Indian society gave every culture the opportunity of prospering. Indian society accepted and respected Shaka, Huna, Shithiyan, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist cultures. The feeling of tolerance towards all religions is a wonderful characteristic of Indian society. Rigveda says —Truth is one, even then the Scholars describe it in various forms. In Gita, Lord Krishna says, —Those praying others are actually praying me. This thought is the extreme of tolerance. There is a peaceful coexistence of various religions in India and all have been effecting each other – although this tradition has been badly affected by activities of converting religion by some religious organisations. All the religions existing in India are respected equally. Indian culture accepts the manifoldness of reality and assimilates plurality of viewpoints, behaviours, customs and institutions. It does not try to suppress diversity in favour of uniformity. The motto of Indian culture is both unity in diversity as well as diversity in unity.

D) Continuity and Stability:

The principles of Indian culture are today also that much in practice, as they were initially. A special characteristic of Indian culture is – its continuous flow. Since, Indian culture is based on values, so it's development is continuous. Many centuries passed by, many changes occurred, many foreign invaders were faced, but the light of Indian culture today also is continuously glowing. No Scholar can end its history of like that of the cultures Egypt, Greece, Rome, Sumer, Babylon and Syria because it is yet in the phase of construction. Indian culture can be understood by looking at its present cultural standards. The light of ancient Indian culture life is yet glowing. Many invasions occurred, many rulers changed, many laws were passed but even today, the traditional institutions, religion, epics, literature, philosophy, traditions, etc. are alive. The situations and government could not remove them completely. The stability of Indian culture is unique within itself, even today. Indian culture has always favoured change within continuity. It is in favour of gradual change or reform. It does not favour abrupt or instant change. Therefore, most changes in thought have come in the form of commentaries and interpretation and not in the form of original systems of thought. In matters of behaviour also synthesis of old and new is preferred over replacement of old by the new.

E) Adaptability:

Adaptability has a great contribution in making Indian culture immortal. Adaptability is the process of changing according to time, place and period. It's an essential element of longevity of any culture. Indian culture has a unique property of adjustment, as a result of which, it is maintained till today. Indian family, caste, religion and institutions have changed themselves with time. Due to adaptability and co-ordination of Indian culture, it's continuity, utility and activity is still present. Dr. Radha Krishnan, in his book, *Indian culture: Some Thoughts*, while describing the adaptability of Indian culture has said all people whether black or white, Hindus or Muslims, Christians or Jews are brothers and our country is the entire universe. We should have devotion for those things, which are beyond the limits of knowledge and regarding which, it's difficult to say anything. Our hope towards mankind was based on that respect and devotion, which people had towards other's views. There should be no efforts on imposing our thoughts on others.

F) Receptivity:

Receptivity is an important characteristic of Indian culture. Indian culture has always accepted the good of the invading cultures. Indian culture is like an ocean, in which many

rivers come and meet. In the same way all castes succumbed to the Indian culture and very rapidly they dissolved in the Hindutva. Indian culture has always adjusted with other cultures it's ability to maintain unity amongst the diversities of all is the best. The reliability, which developed in this culture due to this receptivity, is a boon for this world and is appreciated by all. We have always adopted the properties of various cultures. Vasudaiva Kutumbakam is the soul of Indian culture. Indian culture has always answered and activated itself by receiving and adjusting with the elements of foreign cultures. Indian culture has received the elements of Muslim cultures and has never hesitated in accepting the useful things of foreign culture. Therefore, it's continuity, utility and activity are still there today. The adaptability and receptivity of this culture has given it the power to remain alive in all the conditions. Due to this property, Indian culture was never destroyed even after facing the foreign attacks. Actually, Indian society and culture had facilitated foreign attackers by getting them close and becoming intimate with them and not only gave but also received many things.

G) Spirituality:

Spirituality is the soul of Indian culture. Here the existence of soul is accepted. Therefore, the ultimate aim of man is not physical comforts but is self-realisation. Radha Kumud Mukerjee, in his book, Hindu Civilization, has analysed that Indian culture, which kept it's personal specialities, bound the entire nation in unity in such a way that nation and culture were considered inseparable and became unanimous. Nation became culture and culture became nation. Country took the form of Spiritual World, beyond the physical world. When Indian culture originated in the times of Rigveda, then it spread with time to Saptasindhu, Bramhavarta, Aryavarta, Jumbudweepa, Bharata Varsha or India. Because of its strength, it reached abroad beyond the borders of India and established there also.

H) Religious Dominance:

Religion has a central place in Indian culture. Vedas, Upanishads, Purana, Mahabharata, Gita, Agama, Tripitak, Quran and Bible affect the people of Indian culture. These books have developed optimism, theism, sacrifice, penance, restraints, good conduct, truthfulness, compassion, authenticity, friendliness, forgiveness, etc. Monier Williams has rightly said, —Although in India, there are 500 and above dialects but religious language is only one and religious literature is also one, which all the followers of Hindu religion, varying in caste, language, social status and opinion, believe and pray with devotion. That language is Sanskrit and that literature is Sanskrit literature. It is the only dictionary of Veda

or other knowledge. It is the only source of Hindu Religion and Philosophy, the only mirror, which correctly reflects the Hindu views, thoughts, customs and traditions. It is the source for the development of regional languages and is also the source for getting material for the publication of important religious and scientific thoughts.

I) Thoughts about Karma and Reincarnation:

The concept of Karma (action) and Reincarnation have special importance in Indian culture. It is believed that one gains virtue during good action and takes birth in higher order in his next birth and spends a comfortable life. The one doing bad action takes birth in lower order in his next birth and suffers pain and leads a miserable life. Upanishads say that the Principle of fruits of action is correct.

A man gets the fruits as per the action he does. Therefore, man needs to modify his actions, so as to improve the next birth also. Continuously performing good actions in all his birth, he will get salvation, i.e. will be liberated from the cycle of birth and death. This concept is not only of the Upanishads but is also the basis of the Jainism, Buddhism, etc. In this way, the concept of reincarnation is associated with the principle of action. The actual cause of reincarnation is the actions done in the previous birth.

J) Emphasis on Duty:

As against rights, Indian culture emphasises dharma or moral duty. It is believed that performance of one's duty is more important than asserting one's right. It also emphasises the complementariness between one's own duty and other's rights. Thus, through the emphasis on community or family obligations, Indian culture promotes interdependence rather than Independence and autonomy of the individual.

K) The Ideal of Joint Family:

At the level of marriage, there is a lot of plurality in India. At the level of family, however, there is striking similarity. For example, the ideal or norm of joint family is upheld by almost every Indian. Every person may not live in a joint household but the ideal of joint family is still favoured. The family is the defining feature of Indian culture. Although Indians differentiate between individual identity and family identity, the Western type of individualism is rare in Indian culture.

L) Caste System:

Another characteristic of Indian culture is social stratification. In every region of India, there are about 200 castes. The social structure is made of thousands of those castes

and sub-castes, which decide the social status of a person on the basis of birth. According to E.A.H.Blunt, —Caste is a collection of intermarried or intra-married groups, which have a general name, whose membership is heredity and put some bans and rules on its members residing socially together. Its members, either do traditional business or claim their uniform community. Thus, Indian culture has a special system of stratification.

M) Unity in Diversity:

An important characteristic of Indian culture is Unity in Diversity. There is much diversity in Indian culture like in geography, in caste, in creed, in language, in religion, in politics, etc. Dr. R.K.Mukerjee writes, —India is a museum of different types, communities, customs, traditions, religions, cultures, beliefs, languages, castes and social system. But even after having so much of external diversity, none can deny the internal unity of Indian culture. Thus, in Indian culture there is Unity in Diversity. According to Pandit Nehru, — “Those who see India, are deeply moved by its Unity in Diversity. No one can break this unity. This fundamental unity of India is its great fundament element.”

According to Sir Herbert Rizle, —“Even after the linguistic, social and geographical diversity, a special uniformity is seen from Kanyakumari to the Himalayas.” Indian culture is a huge tree, the roots of which have Aryan culture. Like a new layer is formed all around the tree every year, similarly layers of many historical eras surround the tree of Indian culture, protecting it and getting life sap from it. We all live in the cooling shade of that tree.

N) Four Duties:

By fulfilling duties, a person can follow his religion while living in physical comforts and thus can gain salvation. Fulfilling duties is a characteristic of Indian culture. In this, in a person’s life, four basis are considered-Dharma (religion), Arth (money), Kama (lust), Moksha (salvation). Religion is related to the fulfillment of moral duties. Money is related to the fulfillment of all needs. Lust is associated with pleasures in life. Salvation is the last goal. All these inspire an individual to fulfill his duties and to live in a disciplined way in society. Two contradictory thoughts are seen in the history of the world—first the world and life is momentary and destructible and second is that the success of life depends on the enjoyment.

Its best example is Western school of thought. But one can see the co-ordination between the two in Indian culture. Both should be mingled to the real nature, importance and goal of human life. The expression of this coordination is the Principle of Efforts.

It is believed that the nation, which has forgotten its culture, is not an alive nation. He used to tell the importance of Indian cultural values. People who believe in material development can be intolerant. Those who believe in development of weapons can be unrelative. Those who consider harm done to others for their own welfare as forgivable can be liberal but the exceptional of Indian culture is that though it considers material as an essential thing but has not made it the centre of faith. Though it has used the power of weapons but has considered its welfare in it. It has considered harm done to others for its own welfare as unforgivable. The ultimate goal of life here is not luxury and desires but is sacrifice-penance and self-realisation.

❖ **SUMMARY:**

- 1) Culture has been derived from Latin term 'Cult' or 'Cultus' meaning tilling or refining
- 2) Sanskriti is derived from Sanskrit root 'Kri' meaning to do. Culture may be defined as the way an individual and especially a group live, think, feel and organize themselves, celebrate and share life.
- 3) Culture has different characteristics. It can be acquired, lost or shared. It is cumulative. It is dynamic, diverse and gives us a range of permissible behaviour-pattern. It can change. Culture includes both material and non-material components.
- 4) In deeper sense it is culture that produces the kind of literature, music, dance, sculpture, architecture and various other art forms as well as the many organizations and structures that make the functioning of the society smooth and well-ordered.
- 5) Culture provides us with ideas, ideals and values to lead a decent life.
- 6) Self restraints in conduct, consideration for the feelings of others and for the rights of others, are the highest marks of culture.
- 7) A cultural heritage means all the aspects or values of culture transmitted to human beings by their ancestors to the next generation.
- 8) Architectural creations, monuments, material artifacts, the intellectual achievements, philosophy, pleasure of knowledge, scientific inventions and discoveries are parts of heritage.
- 9) Indian culture is characterised with the famous notion of unity in diversity and show continuity and adaptability with times.

- 10) The geographical location and the physiographic division of India created an isolated condition for the country. The various physical features of the country and the strategic location immensely help the Indian culture.

REFERENCES:

1. Gore, M. S., Unity in Diversity: The Indian Experience in Nation-Building, Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 2002.
2. Kabir, Humayun, Our Heritage, National Information and Publications Ltd., Mumbai, 1946.
3. Malik, S. C., Understanding Indian Civilisation : A Framework of Enquiry, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, 1975.
4. Mukerji, D. P., Sociology of Indian Culture, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 1948/1979.
5. Pandey, Govind Chandra, Foundations of Indian Culture, Books and Books, New Delhi, 1984.