

Society and Culture: Plurality of Culture in India

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Introduction

Cultural man is considered to have existed on earth for about 1.5 million years. Evidence of humans leading a social and cultural life are available from this period. Thus, human beings were the first of species in the animal kingdom, capable of producing culture. Once this capacity for building culture was attained, its exercise led to a secure adaptation to their environment. This exercise generated a need and prompted man to live in the company of others. Man not only started experimenting with his environment, he also started sharing his experiences with fellow human beings, sometimes in their original form and at other times in an improvised and improved form. The beginning of human beings living in aggregates gave rise to the concept of society. Then man started organizing his experiences and behaviour in an ordered form which gave rise to a systematized form of life. This constituted his culture. Both the rise and formation of society and culture went hand in hand. Biological evolution in man a process of struggle for survival (accompanied cultural evolution).

In the initial stages human beings grouped and organised themselves in the form of small, simple and nomadic

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bands. This was the beginning of organised society, though it was quite different from today's advanced and complex society. The activities of human beings, their behaviour and living together, and moving in groups from one place to another in search of food and shelter helped them to develop a common way of life .

Some sociologists try to distinguish between 'social' and 'cultural' aspects of human life. They employ 'social' to refer to the relationships among the groups within in society. For them 'culture' consists of the ways of life of the members of the society.' The relationship of group to another is regarded as an aspect of culture. The family, e.g., is a social group, the way they act, interact and behave is their culture. A society is considered to be a group of people who share a common habitat and who are dependent upon one another for their survival and well-being. Large societies of today are made up of classes, castes, ethnic groups etc.

Concept of Society

Socrates said, man is a social animal and being social for man is both natural as well as necessary. There are other animals, who also have an organised life, but the social life of man is different from, them. Behaviour among animals is instinctive and dies with the animal but among men, behaviour is learned and, passed on from one generation to another. This aspect is distinctive of man and distinguishes him from other animals. This characteristic binds all men together to behave in a similar manner. They form an aggregate of people who lead a similar way of life and there is also a similarity in their behaviour and other activities. It is from this aspect that Herskovits has defined society: "Society is an organised, interacting aggregate of individuals who follow a given way of life." In simple words it can be

said that society is composed of people. Man studies himself as a member of this aggregate of people that we call society.

Comte characterizes society in terms of “social statics” and “social dynamics”. referring to social stability as well as social change. ‘Social statics’ deals with relatively stable and orderly aspects of social life, e.g., family life, marriage and kinship and social institutions. Similarly ‘social dynamics’ focuses on the changing aspects of social life, e.g., social changes, social processes etc. In the context of social dynamics and the changes that took place in society, Comte emphasized that evolution of society passed through three stages, i.e. savagery, barbarism and civilization; evolution of marriage and family has passed through promiscuity, group marriage, polygamy and finally monogamy. Likewise the evolution of religion has passed through the stages of animism, polytheism and monotheism.

The question may arise why is it necessary for a man to live in society or why is society necessary for man? The answer to these queries can briefly be given as under:

- 1) Man has his needs and he chooses to meet or fulfill these needs by himself; He can meet them while being a member of society or while living in society. The meeting of those needs is conditioned by the patterns of requirements and behaviour that we can call culture. There is a wide variety of variation in meeting human needs from one society to another. This variation makes one society different and unique from other societies.
- 2) From the very beginning, i.e., from birth itself, man needs the support of others. Initially he is dependent

upon others who provide who provide him help in social and physical unbringing. His overall growth and development is provided within and by the organised social life. This is where the society has its basic relevance. Though the society extends and plays this role throughout the life of man, in the initial phase of his life he needs it the most.

- 3) The society provides the understanding knowledge and exposure to a man about his milieu and environment. It is in society that man learns to behave, to act, to respond and to play his requisite role for his environment and for the society of which he is a member.

All these factors do not work independent of each other. They have a cumulative effect. However, each factor has its own significance. Further, there are some basic elements of social organisation and ideology. These elements contribute towards continuity and change and proper functioning of the society.

Concept of Culture

We can begin by saying that man is the only organism capable of building culture and transmitting it from one generation to another. Some other animals and insects too are considered to have their culture, but it dies with them but the culture created by man distinguishes man from other animals.

There are a number of definitions of culture:

One of the best, and most acceptable, early definitions of culture was given by E.B. Tylor (1871) in his book "Primitive culture", wherein he described culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society".

The definition indicates that culture is not simple and it is not constituted by one or two elements. Rather it is a complex one and is constituted by a large number of aspects of life which range, as shown in the definition, from knowledge to law to customs. This also includes habits acquired by man while living and interacting in society with other members. Though constituted by a large number of units, called traits, culture has to be understood in totality, the whole. All the traits are so well integrated that each one gets almost assimilated into the other. Culture, when seen holistically, is understood as a complex whole. The following are some of the characteristics of culture:

- 1) **Culture is a complex whole:** All the elements and traits of culture are to be understood in relationship to one another. All of them, in this respect, constitute, a whole, called culture, and is complex in nature.
- 2) **Culture is learned :** Culture of mankind is not instinctive, or innate, or transmitted biologically. It is composed of habits, i.e., learned tendencies to react, acquired by each individual through his own life experiences after birth.
- 3) **Culture is inculcated:** All animals are capable of learning but man alone seems to be capable, to a large extent, of passing on his acquired habits and behaviour to his off spring. A dog can be trained to learn many tricks, but it cannot pass them on to its puppies. However, man is capable of transmitting all his learning and habits to his offspring.
- 4) **Culture is social:** Habits of cultural order are not only inculcated and transmitted overtime; they are all social, i.e., shared by all human beings living together in the society. The habits shared together

by the members of the society constitute their culture.

- 5) **Culture is commercial:** The habits that constitute culture of a group form the ideal norms or patterns of behaviour.
- 6) **Culture is gratifying:** Culture always, and necessarily, satisfies biological needs and secondary needs derived from it. It also helps in gratifying human interaction with the external world of nature and fellowmen.
- 7) **Culture is adaptive:** Culture changes. The process of change appears to be an adaptive one, comparable to evolution in the organic realm but is of a different order. Over a period of time culture adjusts to the geographical environment and to the biological and socio-psychological demands of the human organism. It adjusts through borrowing and organisation.
- 8) **Culture is integrative:** In the process of adaptation, all the elements of culture tend to form a consistent and integrated whole. Some anthropologists consider that culture is actually an integrated system which has most of its elements in perfect equilibrium with one another.
- 9) **Language as a vehicle of culture:** All elements of culture are transmitted from one generation to another through language in verbal or written form. Without language man cannot transmit the culture from one period of time to another and from one place to another.
- 10) **Culture is cumulative:** Any knowledge, or skill or any other form of culture is acquired by one generation from the preceding one. The acquired

culture is added or modified and in a cumulative form transmitted to the next generation. This helps man in acquiring knowledge, skills and other aspects of culture from the remote past and hand them over to the future generations.

Out of a huge number of definitions, some which clearly and closely express human behaviour and environment, are given below:

“Culture is the man made part of the environment” (Herskovits, MJ. 1955).

“The sum total of the knowledge, attitudes and habitual behaviour patterns shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society” (Linton, 1940).

“(All the) historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and non-rational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behaviour of man” (Kluckhohn and Kelly, 1945).

The concept of culture also includes tools, techniques, ideas, values and all life (Kroeber, 1948). All such aspects, arts and artifacts and the patterns of human behavior acquired and transmitted, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952).

It becomes clear that culture is more than a biological phenomenon. In brief the notion of culture is inclusive of man's mature behaviour acquired from his group by conscious learning or by a conditioning process, techniques of various kinds, social and other institutions, beliefs, and patterned modes of conduct. Thus man becomes the only “culture building”- animal

As stated culture has two aspects :

- 1) Material culture

2) Non-material culture.

- 1) **Material Culture:** It includes all those artifacts or things that have been created by man himself for his use, e.g., houses, furniture, clothes, tools, etc. It is that aspect that can be seen, touched and observed. The elements of material culture can be created, built, destroyed and rebuilt, and improved upon deliberately according to the needs and desires of man. Some creations are to protect man from the environment, and help man in the process of survival and to fight the inclement weather and hostile climate. Certain aspects, like medicines, are invented, discovered and put to use to fight diseases, improve health and quality of life. Some aspects of material culture are created and built to fulfill the desires and needs arising out of changes in non-material culture, i.e., ideational aspects of culture. Variations in material culture are wider and more wide spread as compared to non-material culture.
- 2) **Non-material Culture:** It includes all non-material and spiritual aspects of culture. Ellenwood defined culture in terms of the whole of man's material civilization like tools, weapons, clothing, shelter, machines, and even systems of industry', and on the other hand as man's non-material or spiritual civilization, such as, language, literature, art, religion, ritual, morality, law and government. The definition clearly identifies the areas that fall under material and nonmaterial culture.

Relationship of Culture and Society

In simple terms this relationship can be understood when we say that culture refers to the ideas, values and norms in the minds of the people whereas society

refers to the people themselves. Therefore, ideas constitute culture and people constitute society.

Herskovits has made this clear when he observed that "a culture is the way of life of the people; while a society is an organised and interacting aggregate of individuals who follow a given way of life". Further "a society is composed of people the way they behave is their culture".

To begin with we may study man's ideas, institutions, and material objects. In reality we study man himself. Thus, it is difficult to separate man as a social being from man as a creature who has culture. The two aspects are so well integrated that one can't be understood and explained in the absence of the other. It can be said that both society and culture are not mutually exclusive. One needs to comprehend social realities with society and culture.

In society, comprising of individuals, the individual members may die and be replaced by others. Therefore, society has a structural aspect. Its structure and continuation is based on the birth, death and replacement by other members. Culture, on the other hand, is independent of individual members. Birth, death or replacement of individual members is not of much consequence to the culture. Society falls in the realm of social structure and social organisation whereas culture falls in the realm of normative order:

On the social level there is a continuous process of interactive behaviour, whose persistent form of social relationship refers to what we call social structure; whereas on the cultural level there are beliefs, values, norms etc. in terms of which individuals define their world, expressing their feelings and judgments. Therefore, culture is the fabric in which human beings

interpret their experience; social structure is the form that action takes. Thus culture and social structure are different aspects of the same phenomenon.

S.F. Nadel (1951) has made a distinction between society and culture in this way:

“Society means the totality of social facts projected on to the dimensions of relationships and groupings; cultures, the same totality in the dimensions of action”. In this respect, some scholars have even raised the question “are not people -’ society - the reality rather than their way of life”. Some consider ways of life as the intangibles and as the inferences drawn from the behavior of people. Therefore, to study society is important for us because it essentially allows us to understand’ how the . life lived by man in aggregates affects his behaviour.

Relations between individuals, in all societies, change with age, with strength, with obligations assumed, and with status achieved. Among all societies, social life of an individual begins by identification with a group. It is the cultural training by the group that makes an individual fit to live according to the expectations of the group, or society. It is through the learning experience that a man achieves competence in his culture.

The necessity of society for human beings has been explained by many scholars. This necessity is explained partly in terms of physical and mental make up of man and partly in terms of his cultural conditioning.

Why should man live in society? Some of the reasons are explain :

Primarily a man needs to fulfill and satisfy his biological and other needs in society. But he adopts cultural

means to satisfy them and thus culture becomes a means to the end. As a member of society, man can express his choices to satisfy his needs and the process of this satisfaction takes the form of cultural expressions. To meet his requirements of shelter and food, man uses his cultural capabilities.

It is a fact that at the time of birth the child is most helpless physically and mentally, to face the environment around him to meet his needs. It takes a lot of time for him to gain maturity and self-reliance. He needs the sustained support of others in the process of his upbringing. The whole process of his growth and development takes place under the care of other members of society or members of his group. This is carried on in the organised life of the group. It is during this process that a child inculcates values and norms to develop his personality. He develops skills and capabilities and equips himself to face the world around him.

It is for the above reasons to be self-reliant and competent to respond to the expectations others have of him that he must live in society, and live as a member of it in continuous interaction with other members.

Relationship of Culture, Society and Individual

The social and cultural aspects of life are interrelated. The behaviour of members of a society is altogether a matter of social relationships. Membership to this relationship is constituted by individuals who are units of a society. At least two individuals constitute a social relationship. The significance of an individual in society lies in the promotion of his culture. All the three aspects, culture, society and individuals are related in

a network called the social fabric. Individuals also interact with their environment, construct ideas, and build their culture - both material and non-material. To build adequate and positive relationships, individuals must adjust to other individuals.

The constructive interplay between social, cultural factors and individuals makes society a civilised place to live in. All these factors jointly work and reinforce each other. The absence of any one could mean the non-existence of others. It is also in the face-to-face interaction that the individual's that their behaviour is influenced by others.

The behaviour of a single individual can be called his personality, the behaviour of a group of individuals is also called culture. Culture can also be termed as the total behaviour of individuals.

In society individuals learn the forms of conduct or behaviour which is acceptable to group. This process of learning acceptable behaviour is called acculturation. Thus, this process works as a bridge between culture as it exists and culture as presented by the individuals in their behaviour. It is during this process of acculturation that individuals are moulded into persons as desired by society.

While individuals have a small life span, culture persists from one generation to another. It is more than any individual who lives in it. Similarly, no society is made up of the same people for a long time. Births and deaths constantly change its members. When a whole generation of individuals in society has passed away, it is the pattern of behaviour (culture) that links the members to the past. This pattern of behaviour is passed to the individuals in society who comprise it now. This also helps us to understand how culture helps individuals to integrate to his society.

Plurality of Culture

It is observed that in any country we find people having different religions, castes, creeds, races, and above all, following different ways of life, having their own cultures and ethnic identities. Such a country is culturally plural. Cultural pluralism is a pattern or a system in which people of different faiths, religions, castes, creeds can all work and live together, retaining proudly their own faith and identity and sharing the common bond of being, either by birth or choice. Plural culture means the co-existence of several sub-cultures within a given society on equal terms. In such a pluralistic culture, the validity of various sub-cultures is recognized.

The people living in different sub-cultures follow different ways of life, live differently and think according to cultural patterns adopted by them. Thus cultural pluralism also gives rise to the concept of cultural diversity. Cultural differences set apart one group of people with one culture from another. Each group may be characterized by their own language, history or ancestry, religion, style of dress or adornment. The cultural characteristics of plural groups are socially inherited (socially transmitted) from one generation to another rather than being learnt in one generation alone.

Structurally, plural groups presenting one culture may be small or large in size, but all of them display a sense of solidarity among themselves. Generally, the membership to such plural groups is closed, i.e., it can be acquired through birth and only its members can use its resources but all the groups live on equal terms and none are considered to be supreme in a moral sense. Also no group can force anyone to follow or adopt its way of life.

Each group falling under a plural sub-culture has a collective opinion and shares a responsibility which is distinct and separate from the desires and intentions of other groups. Members of each group have common beliefs, common rights and common duties towards the group and they make efforts to maintain and integrate it.

Rural and urban areas of India present a plurality of cultures. It has tribal, rural and urban populations. It presents a diversity of culture and people in terms of language, religion, caste, food, dress and way of life. They all constitute sub-cultures of a larger society, that is Indian society. This diversity is carried to urban areas as well, but it is not as clearly defined and demarcated and apparent as it is in tribal and rural areas. Urban areas present a complex and variety of sub-cultures.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have attempted to learn what is culture and what is society. Culture is the way of life we live and society is the interacting aggregate of people. Culture has been defined in a number of ways. The definition by E.B. Tylor is the most acceptable. However other definitions present different aspects of culture and society. All of them lead us to think about ourselves as social being as well as cultural being, i.e., what kind of social life we had and how we can define it and what are the different types of cultures and how different cultures interact with each others.

In this unit we have also tried to establish a relationship between society, culture and the individual. We find that how they are inter-related and inter-twined. One has no meaning in the absence of the other. Culture has been classified into material and non-material

culture. Both social and cultural factors guide and determine social growth and development of an individual and help him to integrate into his group according to its (group) desires and expectations. The individual in turn enriches culture by extending the inter-personal relationships.

The concept of cultural pluralism has been shown to present different sub-cultures living together on equal terms and maintaining their identities.

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