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INDIAN CULTURE

Have you ever thought of the amazing progress we, as human beings, have made in various spheres of life, be it language, literature, art and architecture, science or religion? Have you ever wondered how all this has been possible? This happened because, we did not have to make a fresh beginning each time, but were able to make use of and build on the work of past generations. You have never had to bother about having to make your own script or creating a new language system for yourself. These are already given to you which you enjoy as a member of society. Then you build on it by making your contribution or addition which further becomes an asset for the coming generations. This is a continuous and never-ending process. It is a precious possession unique to human beings and is known as culture. Culture is a way of life. You, your family has a culture and so does your region and your country. You may be curious to know about the uniqueness of Indian culture and find out its distinct characteristics. In this unit we will understand how Indian culture is unique and what are its characteristics.



OBJECTIVES

After reading this lesson you will be able to:

- describe the distinctive features of Indian culture;
- identify the central points and uniqueness of Indian culture;
- discuss the importance of spirituality in Indian culture;
- explain the points of diversity and underlying unity in it; and
- trace the process of infusion into and integration of elements from other cultures in Indian culture.



Notes

2.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIAN CULTURE

Indian culture is as many sided as life. It includes intellectual and social aspects of any human being. It also takes account of the aesthetic instinct as well as the spiritual impulses of human being. It has also, in effect, an appeal to the subconscious as a force making for the formation of character.

Look at the map of India and you see India is a vast country with a lot of diversity in her physical and social environment. We see people around us speaking different languages, having different religions and practising different rituals. You can also see these diversities in their food habits and dress patterns. Besides, look at the myriad forms of dance and music in our country. But within all these diversities there is an underlying unity which acts as a cementing force. The intermingling of people has been steadily taking place in India over centuries. A number of people of different racial stock, ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs have settled down here. Let us not forget that the composite and dynamic character of Indian culture is a result of the rich contributions of all these diverse cultural groups over a long period of time. The distinctive features of Indian culture and its uniqueness are the precious possession of all Indians.

2.1.1 Continuity and Change

Many great cultures had developed in different countries and regions of the world. Many of them have perished or have been replaced by other cultures. However Indian culture has had an enduring character. Despite major changes and upheavals significant threads of continuity can be traced throughout the course of Indian history right upto the present day.

You may have read about the Harappan civilization which flourished in the Indian subcontinent over 4500 years ago. Archaeologists have found evidences to show that cultures existed here even before the matured phase of the Harappan civilization. This tells us that we have a very long history behind us. And yet what is amazing is that even today the pattern of a house in an Indian village is not very different from that of a Harappan house. Some aspects of Harappan culture are still practised, such as, the worshipping of Mother Goddess and Pashupati. Similarly, Vedic, Buddhist, Jain and many other traditions continue to be followed even today. At the same time one should not lose sight of the changes as are evident in the multistoried buildings in the metropolitan cities like Mumbai and Delhi, quite unlike the Harappan houses that had only one storey. The point to be noted here is that continuity and change in our civilization has gone hand in hand. In fact, a remarkable feature of Indian culture is that along with continuity it has kept on changing, whereas the basic spirit of our culture continued. It has kept on discarding what was becoming irrelevant in the modern age. In our long history, there have been periods of ups and downs. As a result, movements have grown and reforms brought about. The reform movements in the Vedic religion brought about by Jainism and Buddhism in sixth century BC and the religious and social awakening in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in



modern India are a few examples when revolutionary changes were brought about in Indian thought and practices. Yet the thread of basic philosophy of Indian culture continued and still persists. Thus a process of continuity and change has always been a feature of Indian culture. This shows the dynamic character of our culture.

2.1.2 Variety and Unity

Indian culture, over the last three millennia, has successfully, but quietly, observed the best assimilable parts from other religions and cultures, from time to time and integrated them into itself.

Indeed few cultures in the world have such variety as the Indian culture. You may perhaps wonder why the people of Kerala use coconut oil while the people of Uttar Pradesh use mustard oil for cooking. This is because Kerala is a coastal state and coconut grows here in plenty. While Uttar Pradesh is a plain area which is favourable for the growth of mustard. What is the similarity in the Bhangra dance of Punjab or the Pongal of Tamil Nadu or the Bihu dance of Assam? Both are celebrated after a rich harvest of crops. Have you noticed the different languages that we speak like Bengali, Tamil, Gujarati or Oriya? India is the home of many forms of dance and music which we normally use for festivals and social functions like marriages or the birth of a child.

A large number of languages and dialects are spoken in our country which has led to the growth of a great variety of literature. People belonging to eight great religions of the world co-exist here in a harmonious manner. Do you know that India is home to many religions of the world like Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism and of course Hinduism. Numerous styles of architecture, sculpture and painting have developed here. Different styles of music and dance, both folk and classical, exist in the country. So also are numerous festivals and customs. This wide variety has led to the making of Indian culture both composite one and rich and beautiful at the same time. Why is there so much variety in our culture? There are many reasons for this. The vastness of the country and variation in its physical and climatic features is an obvious reason for the variety.

The second important reason for the variety in our culture is the intermingling among various ethnic groups. Since time immemorial, people from far and near have been coming and settling here. We find people belonging to different racial stocks like the Proto-Australoids, the Negroids and the Mongoloids living in India. Various ethnic groups like Iranians, Greeks, Kushanas, Shakas, Hunas, Arabs, Turks, Mughals and Europeans also came to India, settled here and intermixed with the local population. The people belonging to other cultures brought their cultural habits, thoughts and ideas, which got amalgamated into the existing culture. You will be surprised to know that it was only around second century BC that stitched clothes such as salwars, kurtas, topees, etc. were brought to India, by the Kushanas, Shakas and Parthians. Prior to that Indians wore clothes which were unstitched. The latest is the introduction of shirts, trousers, skirts, etc. which were brought by the Europeans in



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the eighteenth century. India through the ages has shown a remarkable capacity for assimilation of ideas. This has contributed to the variety and richness of our culture.

Along with contacts with outside cultures, cultural exchange between different regions of India has also continued. The Chikan work of Lucknow, Phulkari embroidery of Punjab, Kantha embroidery of Bengal, Patola of Orissa show a distinct regional flavour. Although the centres in the South, North, East and West of India have their characteristic cultures, yet these did not develop in absolute isolation. In spite of physical barriers, Indians used to travel from one part of the country to another for trade or pilgrimage. Some regions were joined together through conquests or by alliance. As a result, people transmitted cultural habits and thoughts from one part of the country to the other. Military campaigns too took people from one place to another. This helped in exchanging ideas. Such contacts have led to the development of commonness in Indian culture, which has been maintained throughout our history. Another unifying factor is climate. Despite geographical diversity and climatic variations India experiences an inherent unity. The system of monsoons is the most important component of the Indian climatic pattern and this gives unity to the whole country. The coming of the monsoon has ensured that agriculture remains the main occupation of the people of India. On the other hand the differences in physical features have affected the food habits, dress, houses and economic activities of people leading to the formation of social, economic and political institutions. These factors in turn influenced the thinking and philosophy of the people. The variety in physical features and climate of India has thus led to the development of a variety of cultures in different regions. The typical features of different regions have given some identity to these cultures.

The composite nature of our culture is reflected in our music, dance forms, drama and art forms like paintings, sculpture and architecture as well. Our literature in different languages also reflects this composite nature.

Unity in diversity is reflected in our political forms as well. During the early Vedic period, society was pastoral, that is, people used to move from place to place in search of pastures. But as these people started practising agriculture, they settled down. This settled life led to community development and growth of towns which needed rules and regulations. Thus emerged a political organisation. This included the *sabhas* and *samitis* which were political bodies through which people participated in governance. In course of time, the concept of *rashtra* emerged and possession of territory became the new measure of power. In some places, republics came up. The period from sixth to fourth century BC is known as the age of *mahajanapadas* in India. In these kingdoms kings had more powers. Subsequently large empires were also established with emperors exercising absolute powers. You may be aware of ancient rulers such as Ashoka, Samudragupta and Harshavardhana. The Mughals also established a vast empire in India. The British established themselves in India and in 1858, India became a part of the British Empire. However in 1947, we were able to gain our freedom after a long struggle. Today we are a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic and a uniform system of government prevails over the length and breadth of the country.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 2.1**

1. Name the state where Bhangra is a popular dance form.
2. What is the dance form of Assam known as?
3. Who brought salwars, kurtas, topees etc. to India around second century BC?
4. Which region is famous for Patola?

2.1.3 Secular Outlook

The secular character of Indian culture is a result of the intermingling of people belonging to diverse cultural groups over a long period of time. There have been instances of occasional conflicts here and there, but by and large, people have lived together peacefully for centuries. The popular cultural traditions of India are the best examples of such cultural synthesis in which a large number of people belonging to different religious groups come together.

You are aware that there is a great variety of thoughts and habits in our country. Among such a variety, dominance of one particular thought is not possible. You will recall that Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees and Jews live in India. The constitution declares India to be a secular country. Everyone is free to profess, practise and propagate any religion of his/her own choice. The state has no religion of its own and all religions are treated equally by the state. No one is to be discriminated on the basis of religion. The people have, to a large extent, developed a broad outlook and they believe in the concept of live and let others live.

Right to freedom of religion ensures secular nature of our polity. In the Western context development of secularism meant complete separation of the church and the state. In India secularism is taken as a more positive concept to cope with the complex social structure in the country with a view to protecting the interests of all, particularly the minorities.

2.1.4 Universalism

The concept of coexistence has not been confined to the geographical and political boundaries of the country only. India has a universal outlook and it has been promoting the message of peace and harmony to the entire world. India has been raising a strong voice against racialism and colonialism. It has protested against the formation of power blocks in the world. In fact India became one of the founder members of the non-aligned movement. India is committed to the development of other underdeveloped nations. In this manner, India has been discharging her responsibilities as a part of the world fraternity and has been contributing to the progress of the world.





It has to be remembered that the subcontinent of India has been one cultural unit throughout the ages, cutting across political boundaries.

2.1.5 Materialistic and Spiritualistic

Culture is spiritual development of a race or nation in the field of mind, interests, conduct, thought, art, skills and civilization.

India is popularly known to be a land of spirituality particularly to the West. However, Indian history from ancient times to present day shows that the developments of materialistic and non-materialistic culture have been going on alongside. You will recall that the Harappan civilization was an urban one. It had a systematic town planning where roads cut each other at right angles. They had a profound knowledge of mathematics, weights and measures. They had built their towns in a scientific manner and had an elaborate drainage system. The Harappans had external trade and travelled across the seas to trade with the Sumerians.

Excellent books on medicines, planets, stars, and plants were written. Discoveries of theories-like “earth rotates around the sun” or “earth is round” were made by Indians long before Europe accepted them. Similarly in the area of mathematics and in the field of medicine and other sciences India’s achievements in ancient times have been remarkable. There was no opposition or resistance by religious or other thoughts in pursuing such knowledge.

In philosophical thought even atheistic thinking developed and grew in India. You may be aware that Jainism and Buddhism are silent about the existence of God. What does all this tell us? Indeed, that Indian culture has been both materialistic and non-materialistic or spiritualistic.

The culture of India is the living expression of the simplicity and profundity of her people.

2.2 CULTURAL IDENTITY, RELIGION, REGION AND ETHNICITY

Our cultural identities are based on various factors such as religion and region. As a result each Indian possesses multiple identities. Which of these identities asserts itself at a certain point of time and prevails over the others, depends on the political, social or economic context in which the person finds himself/herself. Thus each person may have some things in common with another, but may be vastly different in some other aspects. For example, except belief, forms of worship and rituals, there may be little that is common among those who follow a particular faith from the point of view of the whole country. Even in the forms of worship and rituals there are sectorian and regional differences.



Thus culturally, Hindus are not all similar, nor are all the Muslims. Brahmins in Tamil Nadu are quite different from their counterparts in Kashmir. Similarly, Muslims in Kerala and Uttar Pradesh are dissimilar in several aspects of their culture. Regional identities are more real. People of different religions and *jatis* may have common regional cultural traits like language, food, dress, values and also the worldview. In Bengal, both Hindus and Muslims take pride in being Bengalis. Elsewhere one finds Hindus, Christians and Muslims sharing several elements of regional culture.

In principle, different religious groups owe their allegiance to different religious doctrines. For instance the Vedas and Shastras may be sources of inspiration for Hindus, Koran and Hadees for Muslims, and the Bible for Christians. However, at the level of rituals and life styles there is a lot of intermingling among followers of different religions.

Ethnic culture is strong among the tribal groups. For example, in the small state of Nagaland, there are more than a dozen tribes and they differ from each other in their dress, speech and beliefs. Bastar district of Chhattisgarh has several groups claiming different ethnic origins.

2.3 CULTURAL INFLUENCES

In the modern context, there are at least three significant influences on our culture. They are westernisation, emergent national cultural styles and popular culture.

Before independence some Western modes were adopted by the aristocracy and members of the civil services. The influence, over the years, has spread to the middle classes and to a small extent, to the villages as well. The growing demand for English medium schools in the villages is a proof of this statement.

During the struggle for freedom a new style emerged. This became a national style. For example the Gandhi cap and khadi may now be only ceremonial and a symbol, but it contributed to the unity of the country and provided commonness to culture.

Popular culture which is the product of mass media is another unifying factor. The impact of films has been tremendous. Radio and television also reshape images and attitudes. Their hold on us is undeniable. Modern media has promoted issues that are of both traditional and public interest.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 2.2

1. Give two examples of people who came to India from outside and settled here.
2. Which component of climate gives unity to India?
3. Name the civilization with which the Harappans were known to have had trade relations across the seas.

**Notes****WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT**

- The meaning of culture is very wide and comprehensive. It has been defined as a sum total of integrated learned behaviour. It connotes a way of life of the people living in a society.
- Culture constitutes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by humans as members of society.
- Due to its adaptability and comprehensiveness, Indian culture has survived through the ages.
- Unity in diversity is one of the major characteristics of Indian culture which makes it unique.
- A synthesis of various cultures came about through the ages to give shape to what is recognised as Indian culture today.
- Spirituality and value based life style is the core of Indian culture but it has a scientific temperament too.

**TERMINAL EXERCISE**

1. What are the different components of culture?
2. Give the meaning of material and non-material culture.
3. Define the secular character of Indian culture.
4. Describe the distinctive features of Indian culture.
5. Write short notes on the following:
 - a. Cultural synthesis in India
 - b. Spirituality
 - c. Adaptability as a characteristic of Indian culture
6. Explain in detail unity in diversity in the context of Indian culture.

**ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS****2.1**

1. Punjab

2. Bihu
3. Kushans, Shakas and Parthians
4. Orissa

2.2

1. Kushans and Mughals
2. Monsoons
3. Sumerian

