

CULTURE : CONCEPT AND CHARACTERISTICS

We all use the term culture quite freely to mean different things at different times. At times, we mean by culture the life style of the people of upper stratum. At times, we refer some people as un-cultured meaning 'rude' or 'uncouth'. The term 'un-cultured' is not acceptable to sociology; because all human beings have one or the other type of culture- a way of living. Culture binds individuals together and keeps them in a group and also sets them apart from 'other people'. Our culture makes us Indian and distinguishes us from the American or the German. Thus, culture is the distinguishing element of a society or group. A culture is expressed also through certain material products. It is also expressed through language, religion, economy and political system, etc. Culture is a way of life that is common to a group of people. It includes a collection of beliefs and attitudes, shared understandings and patterns of behaviour. They enable us to understand each other. In this lesson, you will read more about culture, its concept and characteristics.



OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson you will be able to:

- define culture;
- understand the concept of culture; and
- recognise the characteristics of culture.



Notes

32.1 DEFINITION OF CULTURE

Culture is an integral part of our existence. Yet, it is different from people to people. We can understand culture better with the following example: whenever we meet a relation of ours or a friend, we greet him with folded hands (*namaskar*). We offer respect to our elders by touching their feet. This is typical of Indian culture. Shaking hands, hugging and kissing are different ways of greeting friends and relatives in the western world.

Now let us define culture. A widely accepted and easily understood definition is:

“Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”

From this definition we may conclude that culture has both learning and teaching capabilities. In other words, everyone in the group teaches and learns capabilities. The details of the processes of learning and teaching vary from culture to culture, group to group, or from place to place.

However, these processes may be centered on certain universal aspects of human behavior and activities such as house building, food production, and preparation, clothing language, etc. The methods of food production and preparation, the structure of buildings, the way people clothe, the way people speak and communicate varies from culture to culture.

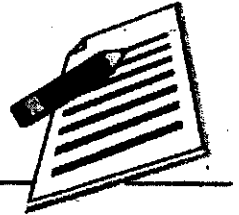
Capability is the ability to cope with the environment, natural as well as man made

$\text{Man} \times \text{environment} = \text{culture}$

32.1.1 Concept of Culture

Culture- As said earlier, culture is the way of life that is common to a group of people. Now let us look at culture in its time-space jacket.

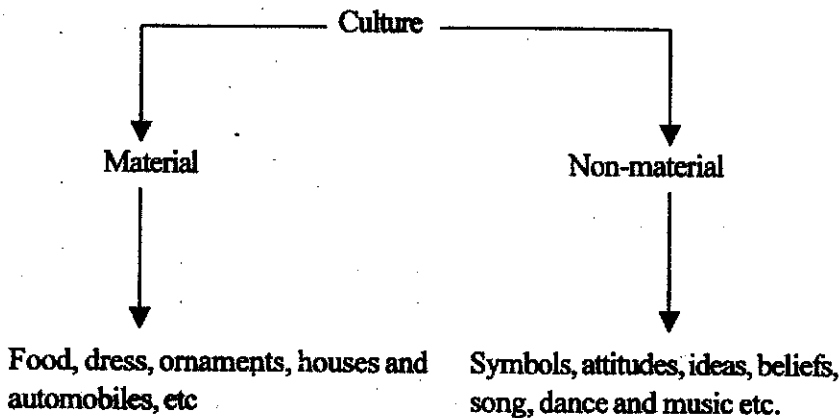
Time bound: Wearing of warm clothes in winter and carrying an umbrella in rainy season are examples of behavioural change over a short period of time i.e. approximately a year. Over long periods of time, patterns of behaviour change due to factors entering as contents of culture. For example, about 200 years back, there were no railway facilities a hundred years ago there were no aeroplanes. Twenty-five years back people were not exposed to computers as they are today. All these innovations have influenced the way of life to such an extent that life without them is almost unthinkable. That is how time is a determining factor in the cultural makeup of a people.



Graphics of a person greeting another person with raised fists.

Space bound: We all greet our friends when we meet them after a lapse of time. However, the way in which we greet varies from culture to culture and place to place. The Indians greet with folded hands, the Englishmen greet by shaking hands, and the inhabitants of Tikopia, a small Polynesian island, greet by approaching each other with raised fists, which to an outsider appears as a prelude to fight. This is how the human behaviour varies from place to place.

Culture has two broad components: One is material and the other is non-material. The material part includes everything that is made, fashioned or transformed by human beings in society i.e. it is **tangible**, like ploughs, sickles, digging sticks



musical instruments, etc. If we look closely, we find that even people who have agriculture as their main occupation do not use similar agricultural implements. In hilly areas, hoes are used instead of ploughs. Here we see that the environment plays a vital role in conditioning the culture of a society. Thus, it may be said that the material expression of man's interaction with environment is cultural. Environment



Notes

is not the same every where. It varies from place to place. Hence, culture from place to place can also change along with the change of environment.

Let us now move to the non-material aspects of culture. Non-material culture includes symbols, ideas that shape the lives of human beings in relation to one another. The most important of these are attitudes, beliefs, values and norms. For example, the beliefs affect the rituals. Muslims observe fasting for one month (known as *Ramzan month*). During this period, they take food once a day, that is only after seeing moon in the evening. On the last day of Ramzan, fasting breaks with a particular type of sweet dish along with other sweets which are also distributed among near and dear ones. Similarly, food-related beliefs and taboos (restrictions) govern our food habits and food consumption at different phases and occasions of life. For example, among the Oriyas, there is restriction on taking non-vegetarian food during the month of 'Kartik'. It is believed that avoiding non-vegetarian food during this month prevents different diseases and helps leading a normal healthy life. A restriction on food during *navaratri* among north Indians is another example of non-material culture.

Not entering the kitchen with slippers on observing forty days rest after childbirth, are other examples of non-material aspects of culture. Some of these practices have been found to have scientific basis also. For example, use of turmeric in almost every ritual and food preparation is said to be associated with its antiseptic quality. This is common nearly among all communities in India.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 32.1

Match Column 'A' and 'B'

- | A | B |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 1. Culture refers to | 1. Both material and non-material aspects |
| 2. House, a plough, a cycle, etc.,
are examples of | 2. a way of life |
| 3. Knowledge, beliefs, arts,
moral law and custom, etc.,
are examples of | 3. material culture |
| 4. Every culture has | 4. non-material of culture |

32.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE

Let us now discuss the most common and important characteristics of culture. They are:



Notes

1. Culture is universal.
2. Culture is stable, yet it is also dynamic
3. Culture is a learned behavior.

(A) Culture is universal

An Oriya family was residing in Bangalore. Once, when they were having their dinner consisting of *chapati* and *dalma*, their neighbour, a Telegu speaking woman entered. she was rather surprised to see the Oriyas eating *chapati* and not rice, which in fact was essential to her own dinner. Thinking that perhaps the Oriyas had run out of rice, she offered to provide them the required amount. To her request, the Oriyas said that it was not the case of running out of rice, but they were accustomed to eating *chapati* at night. This example shows that while food is universal, what people eat, how they prepare and serve it, varies from one community to another. Culture is both universal and particular.

The concept of man as the only culture-building animal makes culture universal and makes it an attribute of all human beings. All humans have technology to manipulate their natural environment to sustain their life. They have some way of producing food and distribute it among themselves. All have institutions such as family and other kin groups. All people have some kind of system of political control and adjudication of law and justice. All have songs, dances and tales in different forms of arts. All have languages to convey their ideas.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 32.2

Put a tick (✓) for the right one and (X) for the wrong one.

1. Culture is not universal
2. Culture is space bound.
3. Each culture is similar to others.
4. Universality of culture is an integral part of human existence

(B) Culture is stable yet it is also dynamic

A culture is also time bound. It changes over time. In other words, it is in a continuous state of flux. Culture can be compared to a flowing river. As the river flows down, the water at a given spot along the river gets replaced by the second incoming flow. However, the river remains as ever so. So is culture. The contents change, are modified, get replaced, but the river of culture flows. It is a process of



Notes

continuous change and continuity makes culture dynamic. Change in the culture comes so steadily and stealthily that we never suspect it until we project the present on the past. Let us take the example of our own photograph. A present photograph of this year and another photograph taken few years back will definitely give an idea of change in culture either in hair style or in dress pattern. We can mark here how styles of clothing and hair have changed over years. In our daily life we can see many such changes. Years back, in our society, girls' education was not encouraged while early marriage was mostly encouraged. Girls were staying at home, learning household activities till they were engaged and got married. Over years, we see girls have come out of the four walls of the house not only for formal education, but also for higher education. Now a days quite a number of young boys and girls are free to select their own life partners. Thus, we see every time something new is added to our culture while a bit fades away. In this way, culture is an ever-changing process.

Now we can say that culture is stable but it is always changing. Another example will make it clear. The institution of marriage is found every where. But the pattern of marriage and practices associated with the marriage system are gradually changing. The marriage pattern among the 'Gujratis at the present and few generations' back will definitely give us the changes that take place. Hence, it is now clear that culture is stable yet it is also dynamic.

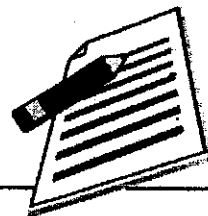
INTEXT QUESTIONS 32.3

Choose the right word and fill in the blanks with appropriate words:

- a) Culture is.....
- b) Culture is space and.....
- c) Changes in culture come
- d) Culture is ever

(C) Culture is a learned behaviour

When you greet others you fold your hands. But, have you seen a new born baby folding its hands to greet others? In other words, we can say that we have learnt to greet with *namaskar* because we have seen others doing in the same manner or we have been told by our elders to do so. But does any body tell a crow to build its own nest? Even tailorbirds weave their own nests. These birds have not learnt the technique of nest-building from other birds. They have inherited the quality from their parents. Human beings do not inherit any socio-cultural parental quality. They have to learn it from their family members, members of the group and the



society they live in. Thus culture is a learned behaviour and not genetically inherited nor is it an instinctive behaviour. It is acquired by human beings from the society in which they are brought up. Consequently, culture is unique to the human species. Learning of one generation is passed down to the succeeding generation through a process called "enculturation".

Enculturation is a process of education without a formal school. It is learning about one's own culture in order to become a member of one's society. It is a process that differs from one society to another. Enculturation is a continuous process of teaching and learning of all aspects of culture. It is not limited to physical activities such as food or dress, nor does it limit to the language we speak. It includes values, norms, attitudes, morality and everything both mental and physical. Learning the culture begins from birth and continues throughout life. Children born to Indian parents in India learn an alien culture if they are encultured in alien environment from their childhood. Here, we should note that culture is a group phenomenon and not an individual one. It pertains to society or to the people who share a way of life through a process of learning.

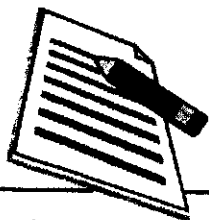
INTEXT QUESTIONS 32.4

1. Write 'T' for true and correct the false one.
 - i) Culture is genetically inherited.
 - ii) Culture is a learned behaviour.
 - iii) Learning of one's culture to become a member of the society is called enculturation.
 - iv) Culture is unique to all human species.



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- Culture is the total way of life shared by a group of people. It unites people of a group and sets apart one group from the other.
- We have also learnt that culture is universal and is not culture time and space bound.
- Time and space dimensions make culture dynamic and that culture is man made
- It is also learnt culture is a learned behaviour as human beings learn from their own culture. Thus we can say that culture establishes a pattern of life without which it is difficult to live. This example will make your understanding more clearly. We often feel very uncomfortable when we travel to another country and take to another way of life. Coming from a different cultural background,



Notes

leaving it far behind and adapting to a new cultural set up seems to be very difficult. This is because all cultures are not the same. They vary from place to place.

- Each society has a different culture or we may say culture differs from society to society.
- Another important aspect to be noted is that language plays a vital role in every culture. Finally, our culture reveals our total life, thinking and behaviour.



TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. What do you mean by
 - (a) Enculturation
 - (b) Culture
2. Define culture and discuss two important characteristics of culture.
3. Write a brief note on the concept of culture.
4. Culture is a learned behaviour and justify it with a suitable example.

GLOSSARY

- Culture** : A way of life common to a group of people. It includes both material and non-material aspects.
- Dynamic** : Which is not static. In relation to culture it is ever changing and these changes are both time and space bound.
- Enculturation** : It is a process of learning one's own culture, to be a member of the society.
- Taboo** : Restrictions or prohibitions which are not permitted by the society.
- Flux** : Flowing or constant succession of changes.
- Universal** : It is present in every human society.
- Acquired** : Not inherited but gained through effort or over time or both.



ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

32.1

A	B
1	1
2	3
3	4
4	2