

# 34

## CULTURAL PLURALISM

We have earlier discussed the meaning, concept and characteristics of culture. We are also acquainted with the ancient, medieval and modern aspects of Indian culture. In this lesson we will understand the meaning of cultural pluralism, cultural relativism and cultural lag as well as the changes responsible for cultural lag.

### OBJECTIVES

After reading this lesson, you will be able to:

- explain the meaning of Cultural pluralism;
- discuss cultural relativism; and
- explain culture lag and the changes responsible for culture lag.

### 34.1 MEANING OF CULTURE PLURALISM

While discussing cultural pluralism, we should first understand the term 'pluralism' which means many. Cultural pluralism originates when two or more culture groups occupy a single geographical area, and participate in some common activity/activities, borrow elements of culture from each other, but continue to maintain their respective cultural autonomy. It is the co-existence of many dissimilar things or patterns of activity. In other words we can say cultural pluralism is a system where different culture-groups co-exist and share a common cultural platform without losing their respective identity. Some aspects of cultural pluralism can be understood when



## Notes

we look at our country as a whole. Our country has been divided into 28 states and 7 union territories. It extends from Kashmir in the North to Kanya Kumari in the South and from Kutch in Gujrat in the West to Kamrup in Arunchala Pradesh in the East. We speak different languages. We dress differently. But, irrespective of these differences we subscribe to a common national ethos, subscribe to a common political ideology, pay our homage to the same gods and goddesses. We visit the same places of pilgrimage, respect a common body of heritage. Thus, we present a seemingly multicultural situation within the framework of a single integrated cultural whole; what Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his "Discovery of India" terms as "Unity in Diversity". In India, past traditions as well as present circumstances favour the growth of a novel type of nationhood which promotes a common national culture, but at the same time ensures various communities freedom to maintain and develop their own cultural and religious traditions, so long as they are not detrimental to the unity and general welfare of the nation. This is cultural pluralism.



## INTEXT QUESTIONS 34.1



Notes

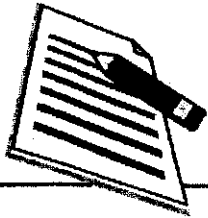
## Fill in the Blanks

- Pluralism means \_\_\_\_\_
- The best example of cultural pluralism is \_\_\_\_\_
- Cultural pluralism has been termed by Pandit Nehru in his "Discovery in India" as \_\_\_\_\_
- India has been divided into \_\_\_\_\_ states and \_\_\_\_\_ union territories.

## 34.2 CULTURE RELATIVISM

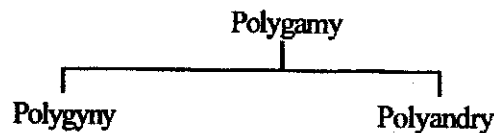
All people form judgements about ways of life different from their own. When systematic study is undertaken, comparison gives rise to classification, and many scholars have formulated different ways of classifying the ways of human life. But, evaluation of cultures may stand or fall with the acceptance of the premises from which they derive. Also, many criteria on which judgement is based may be in conflict. So the conclusions drawn from one definition of what is desirable will not agree with those based on another formulation. Whenever we study cultures or compare one culture with another culture, we have to evaluate cultures according to their functions of perpetuating the group and how they perform their essential tasks in their cultural context. Otherwise, societies wherein they exist would not survive. Before going to study cultural relativism, we have to understand the term "ethnocentrism."

Human beings live in groups. Each group has its own way of life that we broadly term as culture. Members of a group arrive at the way they conduct themselves through a continuous process of trial and error culminating in beliefs, values, mores and folkways. Thus, each culture functions in the context of its own experience and environment. Consequently an individual looks upon his/her own culture as better than any other, and tries to judge other cultures through the standards of his own culture. This tendency of judging other cultures through one's own scale is broadly termed as "*ethnocentrism*". Ethnocentrism is perpetuated directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously through a process which tends to put down other people's way of doing things as bizarre or inferior. For example, cultures in which *cross-cousin* marriage is a norm, tends to look down upon the cultural practice in which a cross cousin is equated with a sister and vice versa.



Notes

While studying different cultures and describing and comparing other cultures, we should and must remain neutral and should not make any judgement about the merits of one culture over another. Cultural relativism is an ethical position in which all cultures are taken as equal, each being a separate unit with its own integrity that should not be compared to our own culture in terms of how it measures upto our standards. The history of each culture is distinct. Became so (that way) as a result of its own development. And, it therefore, can not be ranked against another culture with a different history. Each culture has changed over time, some more, some less in certain areas and some in response to pressures that the other did not face. Because each culture has a history of its own, culture cannot be compared on a scale of excellence in which the ranks are set according to the standards of one particular group. Throughout our study of other cultures, we should attempt to overcome as much of our ethnocentrism as possible. We should try to become more objective about cultural differences, to be tolerant of other people. This attitude is known as cultural relativism.



It is based on the idea that all values are relative and that there are no absolute standards that are valid in all cultural settings. For example, Muslims approve *polygyny* which is a taboo among many Hindu groups. Khasi, communities in northeast India are matrilineal whereas the Naga are patrilineal. Many South Indian communities prefer marriage with a cross – cousin, whereas in eastern India a cross cousin is equated with a sister. Muslim prefer marriage even with a parallel cousin. These practices are acceptable in terms of values in the context of their occurrence. In other words, the east Indian practice of equating a cross cousin with the sister does not hold good to judge the South Indian practice. Thus, a specific practice is related to a specific culture. This is what we mean by *cultural relativism*.

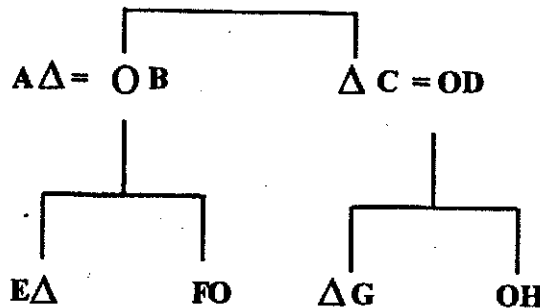


Chart of cross cousins



Notes

A is B, ' husband

C is D, ' husband

B is C's sister

E and F are A and B' children

G and H are C and D's children

E and F are cross cousins of G and H

One of the most fruitful discussions of cultural relativism is in the area of values and morals. We tend to be much more defensive about our moral behaviour than about other aspects of our culture because it is so strongly ingrained in us from early childhood. Our morals and values are also based on the cultural and physical environment in which we grow up and cannot be separated from it. In the context of cultural relativism: "Judgements are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation. This holds true for all phases of culture. Evaluations are relative to the cultural background out of which they arise".

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 34.2**

Write answer in one sentence:

What do you mean by

a. Ethnocentrism

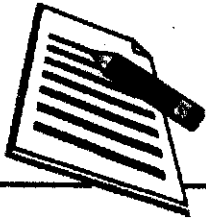
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

b. Monogamy

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

c. Cross-cousin marriage.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



Notes

### 34.3 CULTURAL LAG

The term culture lag refers to a situation when ideas, values, and norms and beliefs used to regulate social life do not keep pace with changes in the technology of society. For example, development of nuclear weapons by a number of nations without an acceptable international system of norms and values to regulate, control and use. In this case, a change in technology is yet to develop norms for its use. This is to say a change in values lags behind a change in the technological field.

At this moment of time, a large scale debate is going on the ethics of human cloning - to produce a human individual outside the natural process of reproductive mechanism. A human individual is linked to every other individual of his/her group in a network of relationships defined by the culture of which he/she is a part. How a cloned human being would fit into this culturally defined network or social relationship is yet to develop. This is, a clear case of *cultural lag* where developments in medical technology have outstripped the social field.

### INTEXT QUESTIONS 34.3

Write T for true and F for false

- a. When values regulating social life do not keep pace with changes in areas like technology, it is called cultural lag.
- b. There are accepted international norms to regulate the use of nuclear weapons.



### WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- As regards cultural pluralism we understand that it is a system where different culture groups co-exist and interact without losing their respective autonomy and identity as long as they are not detrimental to the national unity and general welfare of the nation.
- We also understood the meaning of ethnocentrism, which tends to put down other people's way of doing things as bizarre or inferior.
- Cultural relativism is an ethical position in which all cultures are taken as equal, each being a separate unit within its own integrity, that should not be compared to other cultures in terms of how it measures upto their standards.
- In this lesson we also learnt how culture lag arises due to differential changes in the society.



Notes

- Thus, we can say - India, which presents a clear picture of "Unity in Diversity" is a case of pluralist society.
- There are many culture lags in our society (in every society) .Because of the changes that take place and we should not compare one culture with another culture as inferior or superior because the development of each culture is unique and each culture has a history of its own.
- In other words, culture is dynamic and holds many possibilities of choice within its, framework.

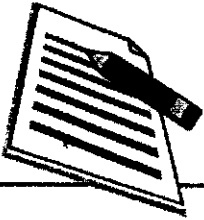


## TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. What do you understand by cultural pluralism? Give a suitable example.
2. What is ethnocentrism and how does it differ from cultural relativism? Discuss with examples.
3. Explain cultural relativism in your own words
4. Explain culture lag with an example.

## GLOSSARY

- Cross Cousin* - Cross Cousins are the children whose parents are related as brother and sister
- Parallel Cousin* - Parallel Cousins are children whose parents are related either as brothers or as sisters.
- Monogamy* - Mono means single, Gamous means marriage. Thus monogamy is a form of marriage when one man marries one women at a time.
- Polygamy* - Poly means more. When marriage takes place between one man and more than one woman it is polygyny. When one woman marries more than one man it is polyandry. Together the practice is known as polygamy.
- Patrilineal* - Patri means father. When the family line of descent is traced through the father to the son, again from son to grandson and so on this is known as patriliney( the noun form of patrilineal)



Notes

**Matrilineal**

- Matri means mother. When the line of descent is traced through the mothers line, i.e. from mother to daughter again from daughter to granddaughter and like wise, this is known as matrilineal.

**Cloning**

- To create a genetic duplicate of an individual or an organism through a sexual reproduction,

**ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS**

1.
  - a. many
  - b. India
  - c. 'Unity in Diversity'
  - d. 28 states and 7 union territories.
2.
  - a. Ethnocentrism is the tendency of judging other cultures through one's own scale.
  - b. Cultural relativism is an ethical position in which all cultures are taken as equal, each being a separate unit within its own integrity
  - c. The example of cross cousin and parallel cousin can be given
3.
  - a. T
  - b. F
  - c. T
  - d. T