

The Significance of Culture in the understanding of Social Change in Contemporary India

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Culture is a unique human reality. It emanates from the unity of human kind in nature, but it situates itself as a meta-natural reality. It is manifested in the technological, mental, moral, social, aesthetic and spiritual achievements of humankind. Culture gives meaning to our relationship with the other, as it also forms our subjective identity. Culture, therefore, enters into the processes of social change in many forms and at various levels. It defines the quality of social change as its indicator. By selective adaptations to outside cultural forces, it has a large measure of resilience. With all its institutional pervasiveness, it has a core, which acts as a filter or a moderator to the outside forces of cultural contact and change. This also explains why in each mainstream culture one may find existence of sub-cultures and counter-cultures.

Paradigm Shifts

Sociologists have been studying culture since the beginning of sociology in India, which roughly corresponds, with the establishment of the British rule and the rise of the national movement. The trauma of the colonial experience inspired them to undertake critical appraisal of the indigenous cultural traditions, and it also made them conscious about the strong points of the western culture. The paradigm of cultural studies that evolved through this historically led them to debate how the Indian tradition in its essential form could be made to adapt with the western culture without a loss of its core values or cultural identity. A deeper analysis of the textual culture, the cross-cultural comparisons of dominant traits and themes of culture, and a critical evaluation of the western constructions of the Indian culture and its evolution, were the main pre-occupations of this period. This trend was re-oriented to empirical-ethnographic studies of cultures. One set of studies contributed richly to the understanding of the tribal cultures, their intrinsic attributes and their linkages with other cultures such as those of the peasants, castes and regions. Yet another set of studies, largely under the influence of the American social anthropologists, focussed upon the phenomenon of culture in the context of the Indian community and its folk-tradition. A distinctive feature of this approach, however, was its sensitivity to the analysis of the interactions between culture and civilisation (Unnithan, deva and Sing: 1965). The main indicator of the former as used, was the spoken language or the oral tradition, and of the latter, the written or the textual-elite tradition. Folk-elite dimension of culture was, however, not treated as a static continuum but as a historical reality embedded in the levels of circulation.

The studies using this paradigm yielded rich insights into the structure and organisation of the Indian cultural traditions. They also brought out in concrete terms the extent and direction of linkages that local cultures had with the cosmopolitan culture. The folk-elite and textual-contextual ties in cultural practices, beliefs and traditions were empirically mapped out. Community as a unit of cultural studies gave way to the concept of 'systems', which formed the basis of a new paradigm of cultural study through the notions of modernisation. The focus of such

studies shifted to studying the relationship that culture maintains with forces of technological, economic, political and institutional developments in a society. Largely a product of the Euro-American social sciences, modernisation paradigm of cultural studies was received in India with cautious criticism. Indian sociologists made their own conceptual and methodological innovations. A sharp distinction was drawn between westernisation and modernisation, locating this process in the cultural-historical individuality of each society and its initial historical conditions (Singh Y: 1973). The recognition of this factor was farsighted; the existence of plural traditions or patterns of modernisation are today widely acknowledged even by its skeptics of the past (see, Eisentadt: 1988). We encounter now several resurgent cultural responses to modernisation, such as the Confucian, Islamic, Judaic and Hinduistic, in addition to the traditional Euro-Christian origin of this process in the past. The caution of the Indian sociologists has been amply vindicated.

The system's boundary in the theory of cultural modernisation was based upon the assumption of its inherent and universal rationality. Its edifice soon fell as the backwash effects of technological and industrial growth such as ecological decay, decline in family values. Sharpening edges of the disguised exploitations, feelings of alienation among individuals and the disintegration in the structure and values of community life took alarming forms. This disenchantment from modernisation probably added to the rise of the post-modernist debate, and its paradigms for the study of culture. Its precursor, the cultural analysis paradigm made innovations by studying culture in its symbolic depth; it focused upon exploration of its latent codes, structures of meanings and semiotic forms. It does not reject totally the notions of structure or system. It, however, recognises the variations and multiplicity of themes in the cultural space within a single community or a regional group (Singh Y: 1986). Post-modernism, on the other hand, rejects such assumptions in totality and seeks to explore culture by breaking the idea of system inside-out, and by the process of deconstruction of a culture's linguistic, spoken or written text. The post-modernist response to the study of culture rests in its method as well as in its critique of the aberrations of the contemporary post-industrial civilisation. Or, is it itself a symptom of this aberration? However, the Indian sociologists are just beginning to evaluate its significance to the understanding of the cultural processes and its implications to social change.

It is a measure of the resilience of the Indian scholars that they have maintained an acute critical consciousness in respect of the new emerging paradigms of cultural studies originating in the West. Their focus has been on historicity of the Indian culture and civilisation, towards indigenisation of methods and theories and upon constructive criticism of paradigms of the western origin. This approach is intrinsic to the evolution of methods and theories for culture studies, and it has proved viable as now the uses of singular paradigm are being increasingly replaced by 'paradigm mixes' both in sociology and culturology (see Erasov B& Singh Y: 1991).

Contemporary Cultural Changes

Many visible and significant cultural changes have taken place in India since Independence. Across the nation, the life style and leisure time activities of the people have changed. It includes modes of consumption, style of dress, uses of synthetic material or artifacts, modes of transport, and the weakening of the traditional interdictions about the consumption of meat, poultry etc. The consumption of fruits, vegetables and milk products now has much wider base. The 'green

revolution' that took place in the 1970s is now supplemented by a "white revolution". The evidence provided by the Peoples of India survey (POI) and the National Sample Surveys support the large extent of these changes. Where, on one hand, ethnic and regional self-consciousness or identity of castes, tribes and minorities or other regional groups is increasing, there is evidence also to support the prevalence of many integrative cultural processes within our society which contribute to the growth of a holistic consciousness. There is increased inter-regional migration which makes it possible for regional cultural traits, culinary products, cultural performances, ritual forms, styles of dress and ornamentation to flow to other parts and mix together. The POI has identified 91 cultural regions within India, almost each state having plural cultural regions with the possible exception of Goa "which forms a cultural zone" (see, Singh K.S.: 1992:53). The consumption profile of India which emerges from this survey, that of a total of 4635 communities (POI), belies the stereotyped image of India as being engrossed in "otherworldly asceticism". (see Singh K.S.: 1992). In matters of consumption the practice of non-vegetarianism is on the increase. Among some communities there is a parallel movement also towards vegetarianism. The use of alcohol is in vogue in some form or the other among about 50% of the total communities in India. Lately, a rise in its consumption has become a matter of worry in several of our states and regions.

The emerging consumption profile of our people, indicates on the one hand, the cultural resilience of the past and the present aspects of our tradition. On the other hand, it also suggests as to how susceptible is our consumption behaviour to temptations of gross and unmindful consumerism. Even though relatively small, a substantial section of the upward mobile population in our society may be a victim of temptations. A movement for balance and temperance is necessary. Notwithstanding this fact, the continuity of a high level of cultural resilience represented by a rising middle class, now more than 200 millions in number, ensures product and market diversification so necessary for rapid economic growth. Considering its sociological features in our agrarian, industrial and service-sectors of economy, this class may also discourage mindless consumerism having more proclivity towards savings and investments. The fragile balance between values and disvalues in life style forms an area of continued education, and cautious vigilance in the society.

Integrative changes in our culture are also taking place in several other directions. Analysis of cultural values and practices of Indian communities in terms of culture traits indicates significant commonalties particularly within "macro-regions". Interestingly, these culture traits are shared irrespective of differences in religion, caste and tribe. "There is very high correlation of traits between the SC and ST, between ST and Hindus, between the Hindu and Sikh (and) the Hindu and Muslims (which is very high indeed)" reports POI survey. Many traits are shared by a large number of communities in India. In terms of language behaviour, there is phenomenal growth in bi-lingualism in India during the past two decades, the 1961 Census estimated bi-lingualism to be 9.7 per cent; it grew to 13.4 per cent in 1971. The POI survey estimates the extent of bi-lingualism at about 64.2 per cent. It signifies expansive growth in cultural interactions among people of different linguistic regions through migration, trade, communication exposures and cultural and social mobility of people.

Ethnicity, Cultural Identity and Change

Major occupational and techno-cultural changes have taken place in our society due to the political, social and economic developments. These changes have promoted linkages and interactions among castes, tribes, religious groups and cultural regions. We notice significant magnitude of the spread effect of these cultural changes across regions and ethnic boundaries. These developments have, however, also reinforced people's self-consciousness and narrow cultural identities organised on principles of ethnicity, religion, caste, language and region. The process of cultural integration on a national scale has grown but with simultaneous increase in search for cultural autonomy. We notice it among the tribes, not only as manifested in their political demands, but also in their movements, such as "return to tribal religion" despite their religion of conversion. Among the Dalits there is a powerful movement for cultural autonomy. It reflects their long-standing disenchantment from Brahmanical caste-Hinduism (see, Singh K.S.: 1994:11; Gail Omvedt: 1993; Gore M.S.: 1993; Singh Y: 1993). The intensity of media exposure, political participation and the competitive outlook towards social mobility have added strength to these processes. Politicisation of religion is reflected in conscious distortions of meaning and uses of religious symbols, artifacts and rituals. The traits common among various religions of India are suppressed and those articulating distinction and separation are highlighted. There is increased tendency towards parochialisation of culture or its symbolic forms.

In the context of overall social change, it is essential to examine the nature of relationships that demands for cultural autonomy or ethnicity have with the processes of cultural integration in the Indian society as a whole. Sociological studies suggest the existence of a viable linkage between these two otherwise contradictory process. Cultural integration of diverse entities in the pan-Indian society has had a long history in India. Its matrix was that of a civilisation. This civilisation was not subsumed in, but out-acrossed religious, ethnic, linguistic and regional boundaries. It subsisted upon interdependence among diverse plural social entities established through technology, production processes, trade, market and circulation of products and of personnel engaged in pursuits of crafts, art, aesthetics, knowledge and learning. It was coincidental that Hinduism, the mainstream religion, contributed to the reinforcement of this civilisation.

As Louis Renou says: "Hinduism is a way of life, a mode of thought, that becomes second nature. It is not so much its practices that are important, for they can be dispensed with; not is it the Church, since it has no priesthood, or at least no sacerdotal hierarchy. The important thing is to accept certain fundamental conceptions, to acknowledge a certain 'spirituality', a term much abused in current parlance" (cf. Renou L: 1953:56). It was possible for this religion-cultural mainstream to sustain or even thrive upon pluralities of religious faiths, practices and social groupings such as tribe, caste or minority faiths. Thus, diverse forms of cultural and social identities flourished under the diffuse umbrella of the Indian civilisation. One identity or faith did not threaten the existence of the other.

The dispensation of cultural coexistence was founded upon a typical equilibrium established by a pre-industrial technology, mode of production and its social and political institutions. The two revolutions, one industrial and the other republican, have totally altered this traditional equilibrium. Industrial revolution generates demand for nation building; it is followed by a search for a world community or global civilisation. In the process of evolution through these two phases, the local and regional cultural identities feel threatened. The political process of nation-building and its economic-industrial correlates sharpen inequalities, at least in the initial phase; there is

pressure for conformity and standardisation in institutional relationships, such as economy, power structure, education, recreation, information and a whole range of the services. The more there is pressure for giving legitimacy to these macro-institutions, the more there is a sense of unease, often resentment, among localised cultural identities based on tribal, caste or religious groupings. Ironically, the fear of the over-arching national or global institutions has not subsided despite growth in economy and polity. The passage from industrial to post-industrial phase of social, economic and cultural development is not reassuring in several vital areas of human concerns, such as, the well being of the basic institutions such as family and community, the protection of the identity of cultural minorities, the practice of voluntaristic consensus methods in place of the uses of power or domination in cultural negotiations or decision-making and preservation of natural habitat of humankind and its quality. India holds a unique position in the process of this transition. Here, we witness a conjuncture of cultural institutions and values belonging to the pre-industrial agrarian society with those, which coincide with the cultural values of industrial capitalism. In a narrow, as yet a nascent form, we may also witness presence of symptoms of a post-industrial phase of cultural development in India. This makes the task of sociologists studying culture most exciting, as also most challenging. Happily, the social structure and institutions in our country have traditionally favoured preservation of cultural identities of the minority groups; the rich interaction between the folk and elite cultures ensured its success, and preserved cultural autonomy of plural identities in a loosely structured notion of a civilisation. The cultural policies implemented after Independence, have in large measure been sensitive to the need for preservation of such identities. But as we try to establish the national framework of an industrial society with potential to achieve the post-industrial phase of development, many pressures are generated, which may come to clash with the local cultural identities. It may generate anxiety or a threat perception at various levels of cultural organisations in our society.

Communication, Culture and Economic Change

An important dimension of such perceptions is located in the contemporary processes of culture change in relation to the national paradigm of social and economic development. The past orientalist pronouncement, that Indian culture being other-worldly and fractured by segmentary divisions into caste, tribe etc. would not help or rather hinder the growth of a modern economy and a democratic polity, has been proved erroneous. Castes, tribes, family institutions and religions as illustrated by sociological studies, have richly contributed to the growth in agricultural and industrial entrepreneurship, and modern systems of profession, education technology and science. The core values of the oral cultural tradition, which encouraged creative interaction with the written culture, proved helpful in indigenisation of democratic values and integration of diversities. The absence of such cultural processes in the core values of a society may render the passage to democracy rather difficult to achieve (see, Chu Leonard L: 1988: 2-13). The oral tradition of the folk culture also reinforces the roots of cultural pluralism and preservation of local cultural identities. The core cultural values and institutions in India enshrined in the folk culture have served to strengthen the foundations of the Indian society, as they have interacted deeply with its literary or textual cultural traditions. This process integrates the micro-level of cultural institutions with those at the macro-level of institutionalisation. There also exists a “dialectical relationship between the literary tradition of the folk, Dalit and insurgents and the mainstream literary tradition” (see, Singh Y: 1988: 45) in contemporary India.

As we slowly enter into the industrial phase of capitalist development, several new cultural challenges are bound to be encountered and most of these merit formulation of far-sighted policies. The massive entry of the mass-media, the universalisation of communication through radio and television, the proliferation in the number of English and vernacular language newspapers, journals, magazines, the technological availability of global information system through satellites etc. are bringing about hitherto unknown degree of information-entertainment revolution. Mounted as this 'revolution' is on the chariot of market-capitalism with propensity for endless profit making, it may tend increasingly to convert culture into commodity. The emphasis may shift from content to packaging of culture. Not assimilation or integration of culture, but its marketing is an orientation which may usher culture into an unfamiliar domain, that of cut-throat competition with a market ethos. The revolution in information and communication technology, together with increase in the rapid means of transport, extended networking of markets of culture industries, such as tourism, inter-cultural meets and exchanges, institutionalised exchange of cultural objects etc., contribute to a globalisation of culture. The process is bound to increase and exert ever new pressures as we march from industrial to post-industrial phase of development.

The new cultural challenges that these phenomena give rise to are many. It may augment the real as well as perceived threats to local and smaller cultural identities due to massification and marketisation of culture. It may lead to non-institutionalised modes of inter-cultural contacts, such as through tourism, marketing of culture object, leisure-enterprises such as hotels, tourist resorts etc. that may be an imposition upon local or regional communities. In the process the de-contextualisation and displacement of meanings and values of cultural objects may increase. Its impact upon values, cultural practices, ecology and mental and physical health and quality of life of the people may be disastrous. The consequent erosion of values and structures of folk culture, and decay in its creative relationship with the mainstream cultural tradition may be directly related to the growth in new leisure and culture markets. If in the meantime the traditional family system and the community or neighbourhood bonds weaken as it has happened in many developed societies, the new cultural changes portend major crisis in the social and cultural system of our society.

As of now our traditional social institutions such as family, caste, tribe, community and neighbourhood, etc are able to throw up resilience. The Indian people have also shown cultural resilience in decodification of cultural meaning of symbols projected by mass media of communication. They have largely behaved like, what is called an "active audience" or as "producers of meanings" (see, Schiller Herbert E: 1988) from the messages in communication. The long exposure of the Indian middle classes to Euro-American culture through the uses of the English language, adds additional resilience to our exposure to the Western cultural institutions. In the words of the Japanese social anthropologist Nakane Chie, "If there is a meeting place of East and West, it is in India, not Japan" (See, Nakane Chie: 1988: 62). It may be a generous remark, but it has a basis in our history. However, despite our cultural resilience the quality and institutional organisation of the mass-based, market and commodity oriented new cultural forces are most likely to cause dislocations. They may give rise to subcultures directly in conflict with the general cultural values or practices. Moreover, mass culture is backed by a faceless, striking power of technology and the massive organisation of market capitalism (see, Dissanayake Wimal: 1988: 26-40).

The relevance of a cultural policy assumes significance in this context. Indeed, it is valid that the core and the creative domains of the culture of a people is the product of the spontaneous and innovative responses both individual and collective, and it cannot be planned or orchestrated by a cultural policy. Nevertheless, in the context of cultural challenges that are most likely to be generated by the market-capitalism, information-technology and pressures of globalisation of culture, a policy framework to meet the challenges becomes inevitable. In our country, such a cultural policy will have to be organically linked with the policies of our social and economic development. Probably, the urgent needs at one level, say cultural, would of necessity have to be reflected at the other, for example in the policy of economic globalisation or liberalisation. Broadly, such a policy framework must take into account the need to enrich and protect local and regional cultural values, practices and identities in the process of the cultural exposure to mega-institutions of mass communication and marketisation.

No doubt, there is evidence to suggest that the expansion of electronic technologies such as the computers and telecommunication cultural systems, with right level of economic growth and emphasis upon distributive processes for social mobility, resolves the problems of cultural identity, creates a sense of confidence or pride in people's heart in respect of their situation and, correspondingly, the fear of cultural dependency comes down or withers away. "Japanese experience indicates that a strong economy and superior technology tend to resolve rather than cause cultural identity problem". Moreover, "the cultural identity problem is considered to occur when cultural change is so drastic as to destroy the sense of continuity." Again the "lesson drawn from Japanese experience is that the cultural identity problem is more strongly influenced by the present than the past, its origin or its history" (see, Youchi Ito: 1988: 196-201). The temporariness of creating new cultural identities by myth-making is also self-evident in India, but the Japanese experience suggests the need for a strong link among cultural policy, economic policy and the technology policy.

In the process of creating this linkage, the involvement of people, decentralisation of decision-making process, uses of multi-media approach to communications of culture and value-sensitisation of the market oriented mega-cultural institutions and organisations would be necessary. Emphasis on plurality, identity and continuity is essential not only for a healthy direction and quality of cultural development in India, but also for its most effective role in brining about social change in our society. A sudden discontinuity in culture can be politically de-stabilising just as the lack of creative response to adapt and change can be stultifying and socially degenerative. A creative balance between continuity and change in cultural policy is, therefore, essential for us to achieve our future goal.

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