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Indian Culture: A Compact Profile

Abstract

Culture refers to the patterns of thought and behavior of people. It includes values, beliefs, rules of conduct, and patterns of social, political and economic organization. These are passed on from are generation to the next by formal as well as informal processes. Culture consists of the ways in which we think and act as members of a society. Indian Culture is an invaluable possession of our Society. Indian Culture is the oldest of all the culture of the world. In spite of facing many ups and downs, Indian Culture is shinning with all its glory and splendor. Culture is the soul of nation. On the basis of culture, we can experience the prosperity of its past and present. Culture is collection of values of human life, which establishes it specifically and ideally separate from groups. Culture thus refers to a human-made environment which includes all the material and non-material product of group life that are transmitted from one generation to the next. There is a general agreement among social scientists that culture consists of explicit and implicit patterns of behaviors acquired by human beings. These may be transmitted through symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment as artifacts. In this paper, emphasis will be on the concept and importance of Indian culture and to describe the distinctive features of Indian culture.

Introduction

Concept of Culture

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The English word 'Culture' is derived from the Latin term 'Cult' or 'Cultus' meaning tilling, or cultivating or refining and worship. In sum, it means cultivating and refining a thing to such an extent that its end product evokes our admiration and respect. The Hindi words Sanskriti is derived from Sanskrit root 'Kri' meaning 'to do' Culture may be defined as the way an individual and especially a group live, think, feel and organize themselves, celebrate and share life. Culture is a way of life. Culture is the embodiment of the way in which a man thinks and does things. It is also the things that we have inherited as members of society. Art, music, literature, architecture, sculpture, philosophy, religion and science can be seen as aspects of culture. However culture also includes the customs, traditions, festivals, ways of living and one's outlook on various issues of life.

The essential core of culture thus lie in those finer ideas which are transmitted with in a group-both historically derived as well as selected with their attached value. Culture is the expression of our nature in our modes of living and thinking. It may be seen in our literature, in religious practices, in recreation and enjoyment. Culture has two distinctive components: material and non-material, Material culture consists of objects that are related to the material aspect our life such as our dress, food and house hold goods, Non-material culture refers to ideas, ideals, thought and belief.

Meaning of Culture

Culture is the most essential component of mankind. American anthropologist Herskovits Observed that "whatever we see in the world is made up of two things – Nature and Culture. While Nature is God- made part of environment, Culture is the man-made part of environment".[1] According to Verma, "Culture is the source of the more-or–less spontaneous actions and reactions of a people and their mode of dealing with objective reality and subjective formations.[2] For Nehru, "Culture is the sum total of the people's endeavors". He asserts that " By culture …… I mean first of all what anthropologists mean, the way of life of a particular people living together is one place. The culture is visible in their arts, in their social systems, in their habits and customs, and in their religion . but things are simply the parts into which culture can be anatomised, as a human body can"…[3]

Culture: Some Definitions

Mathew Arnold defined culture in these words: "Culture is the acquainting by ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world." MacIver and Page, well known sociologists define culture as "the realm of styles, of values, of emotional attachments, of intellectual adventures …. (it is) the anti thesis of civilization. It is the expression of our nature in our modes of living and thinking, in our every day intercourse, in art, in literature, in religion, in recreation and enjoyment.[4] Taylor observes that "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts morals, laws custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.[5]". Shah defines ' Culture is that which is formed, shaped and moulded according to the inherent tendencies and mental outlooks, subject to time, place and circumstances factor which forms the basis of its entire political, social religious and economic activities.[6] According to Nehru, Culture is that which develops into a rich civilization flowing out in philosophy, drama, literature, art, science and mathematics, Truly culture is the sum total of the people's endeavors in different fields of life.[7] Deutsch observes that culture is derived from the latin word 'agri –culture' which means 'to till' or to cultivate. Thus, culture is something cultivated over a period of time.[8] These various approaches and definitions to the understanding of culture commonly emphasis two features: That culture is complex whole of values that embody thoughts and behavior, and that it is common way of life.

General Characteristics of Culture

Culture is learned

It is not hereditary. It is not created by any one person. It is learnt and cultivated over a period of time by individuals as members of a society. According to Kroebar, " Culture is both super-organic and super- individual."

Culture is Social and cumulative

Culture can thrive only in society. It cannot grow in isolation. It mirrors the social progress and development is any society. More and more knowledge is added in the particular culture as the time passes by. Each may work out solution to problems in life that passes from one generation to another.

Culture is dynamic

Culture, like time is always in motion and is transmitted through a claim of customs, traditions, values, ideas etc. It cannot be freezed in time. Claude Levi Strauss rightly stresses that one culture has no absolute criteria for judging the activities of another culture as 'low or noble. Cultural relativism in no way implies normlessness for oneself or for one's Society. Both what is 'rational' and what is 'ethical' depend on cultural value postions.[9]

Culture as mental Software

Culture is learned, not inherited. It is a complex system of values or one's preferences. Values are among the first things children learn not consciously, but implicity. It involves how an activity should be conducted, how an individual should act appropriately. It is a system that has several mutually interdependent parts. Although these parts are separate, they are interdependent with one another forming culture as whole.

Indian Culture

Indian Culture is one of the most ancient cultures of the world. The ancient culture of Egypt, Greece, Rome etc were destroyed with time and only their remnants are left. But Indian culture is alive till today. Its fundamental principles are the same, as were in ancient times. One can see village panchayats, caste system and joint family system. The teachings of Buddha, Mahavira and Lord Krishna are alive till today also and are source of inspiration. The values of spirituality, praying nature, faith in karma and reincarnation, non- violence, truth, non-stealing, chastity, non- acquisitiveness, etc. inspire people of this nation today also.

Indian culture has evolved over a period about 6,000 years, Today it is a living factor in the lives of about one-fifth people of the globe, spread over a vast peninsula of two million square miles. Starting with the Upanishads of the great ascetics over eight centuries before Christ, the Indian culture has contributed immensely to the understanding of spiritual thoughts and material world, combining religion and science. Swami Ranganathanand, the Indian philosopher dwells on material and mental culture.[10] He argues that, " When a group achieves a measure of stability and security in the material base of its culture through settled agriculture and industry thus allowing for a certain amount of leisure, it tends to invest this surplus leisure in the higher plane of man's inner life, thus giving rise to the second aspect of its culture, namely mental culture.[11] During the Vedic period, the Indians were already exploring the life of mind, asking bold philosophical questions concerning nature of the universe, the meaning of human existence, and the difference between having and being, being and becoming. The great minds of the Vedic period in Indian history not only laid the foundations of Indian Society, but also created the fountain head of knowledge.

Sources of Indian Culture – A Historical Reconstruction

Chaman Nahal observed that Indian culture is, essentially hero. worship or here- centered. It has gathered its strength from the galaxy of role models like Buddha, Ashoka, Samudragupta, Vikramaditya, Akbar, Rani Laxmibai, Mahatma Gandhi and several others from our freedom struggle movement.[12] Radhemohan notes that India is the only country in the world which was invaded several times by people from different parts of the world. India has always been and in even today a great confluence of racial intermixing, cross fertilization of religious iedeas and secular thought, and co-existence of languages and dialects, indeed a veritable microcosm of the globe. All this made Indian Culture a unique composite culture. [13] Culture is built, shaped and moulded by individuals. For its proper growth and development it calls for sponsorship. In the past it was religion and royalty, later it was mainly government's and now in a global market economy is the transnational giants. M.N. Srinivas has rightly stressed that it may not be

an exaggeration to say that in India, Culture appears to have been defined, developed, and directed according to the elite class(es) of the society. Even if the non-elites participated in the promotion and propagation is largely at the behest of the religious gurus in the Vedic times. [14]

Religious Foundations

India has given birth to three religions: Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, Hinduism is founded on the premise of Sanatan Dharma. It stress Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (Universal brotherhood) and it allows maximum freedom in matters of faith, worship and tolerance. As de Bary point out that "Hinduism has always tended to assimilate rather than to exclude."[15]

One widely shared view is that a common religion may not be possible in India, but a common basis for all religions and the growth of a liberal, tolerant spirit in religious matters is possible and existed for centuries in India. India is a country where pluralism has been given aesthetic sanction and legitimacy to religious judgments. The language of hymns and songs, of scriptures and spiritual teaching exhibit a mind –boggling variety.

The System of four

A review of Indian literature and philosophy stress on the overarching nature of the "system of four"[16], be it Vedas, ages, varnas, ashramas, discipline policy, truths, dharmas, and dhams (Pilgrim centres), purushasthras etc. Vedas are regarded as the foundation of Indian culture. Rishi (Saints) are revered for their wisdom of the Vedas. They transmitted this perennial wisdom through their followers to guide the society in the right direction. As Sankaracharya asserts India is the accumulated treasure of spiritual truths discovered by the Rishis.

The concept of Dharma is one of the major contributions of the Vedas. Dharma means, in general, "that which is right. " It refers first and foremost to a person's duties than his rights, These duties devolve neither from divine decree nor from a person's own resolve, but from the position in life and society into which he is born. There is neither punishment nor reward in Dharma, but the wisdom of this concept is that it helps people to accept their condition we have to act in harmony with our state, since rebellion against dharma is like is also a God, who appears where men are being tested for their righteousness, strength of character, sense of honour, generosity and readiness for self-sacrifice Knap pert observes that the Mahabharata is based entirely on the hero's acceptance of Dharma's immutable rules of behaviors. It remained indefinable and is the highest form of law that is not legislated. [17] As Joshi argues, there are certain universal truth which once discovered become guidelines for actions. The great Smritis of Manu and Yajnavalkya tried to codify Dharma. As Lord Krishna says in his Bhagvad Gita that "action without desire is action with Dharma. In contrast, the western motivation theories stress that desire drives action. [18]

Waterstone argues that in India science and religion are not opposed fundamentally, as they often seems to be in the west, they are seen as part of the same great search for truth and enlightenment that inspired the sages of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The dominant belief is that past deeds influence present live. Radhakrishnan, the great Indian philosopher and former President of the country once observed that, "The ideal man of India is not the magnanimous man of Greece or the brave knight of medieval Europe, but the free man of spirit, who has attained insight into the universal sources by rigid discipline and practice of disinterested virtues, who has freed himself from the prejudices of his time and place. It is India's pride that she cling fast to this ideal. [19]

True Hinduism is accommodative. It is for this reason that Indians proudly carry a part of it wherever they go. As Swami Vivekananda notes, " I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and Universal acceptance. We believe not only in Universal tolerance but we accept all religions as true." This accommodative nature of Hinduism makes it appear different from other religions. "Ekam sat vipra Bahuda Vadanti ie. that which exists is one" Sages call it by various names".[20] This ideology is reflected in many of the Hindu mythologies.

Today the Country is undergoing a cultural revolution. There is a growing section of the Indian society, which is fast loosing their faith in the traditional forms of religion and along in the traditional values in religion. While religion is flying out of the window of the educated modern Hindu, other cults and Superstitions including belief in astrology, palmistry, and the like are taking their place. As Swami Ranganathananda avers, the educated Hindu's loss of faith in his traditional religion is not even being compensated by the substitution of a robust atheism having its roots in humanitarianism and compassion. [21]

Socio-Philosophical Roots of Indian Culture

The socio-philosophical foundations of Indian culture are rooted in several concepts which are in brief as follows-

Truthfulness

Hindu religions, Indian philosophers and statesmen have always held, " Satyameva Jayate". Ghandhian philosophy is fully based on a quest for truth, belief in trusteeship and faith in non-violence. The practice of truth means integration of practice with precept and thoughts with deeds, letting no gap between what is said and what is done.

Tolerance

Tolerance towards all religions and persons is a trait which Indian culture strongly stands for. In India, tolerance and liberalism is found for all religions, castes, communities etc. Many foreign cultures invaded India and India Society gave every culture the opportunity of prospering. Indian Society accepted and respected all the feeling of tolerance towards all religions is a wonderful characteristic of Indian society. Indian culture accepts the manifoldness of reality and assimilates plurality of viewpoints, behaviors, customs and institutions. It does not try to suppress diversity in favour of uniformity.

Non-Violence

Indian Culture emphasizes non- violence. Ahinsa (non-violence) is the fundamental ethical corpus of Indian culture. It derives its basis impetus from Jainism, Gandhiji preached and followed the truth and non-violence in his deeds .

The Ideal of Joint family

India has a long tradition of joint family are common values agreed and followed and often esteem as ideal. Any accent on individual value leads to a strain and tends to break the joint structure. The joint family centered, characterized by intimacy, mutuality of interests, strong primary group controls, and mutual assistance in time of need. Family traditions and pride are strong in large joint families and individual members are dominated by the opinions of the larger group, mainly the elders.[22] Norm of joint family is upheld by almost every Indian. Every person may not live in a joint house hold but the ideal of joint family is still favored. The family is the defining feature of Indian Culture The western type of individualism is rare in Indian culture. In a joint family, elders had moderating effects in the upbringing of children in a family. They had the time, interest and inclination to pass on moral values and stores to make them worldly wise even as they stress on moral values and moral conduct.[23]

Education for life and life as Education

The relationship between education and life was realized in ancient India even though bulk of its population was illiterate. The main objectives of the ancient system of education are summarized by Kireet Joshi in the following words- "Lead me from falsehood to truth lead me from darkness to light and lead me from death to immortality.[24] He also sums up that, " the ancient Indian education developed as part of the general system of Indian Culture. Swadhyaya (self-study) as the corner stone of the pupil's discipline and method of learning. The pupil was expected to develop extraordinary powers of memory, imagination and thought. The predominance of oral tradition necessitated the cultivation of the power of memory, the high content of philosophical and spiritual knowledge necessitated the cultivation of subtlety and complexity of thought. [25]

Emphasis on moral conduct

R.T. Nanda observed that, " The present day education lays a great deal of emphasis on material gains, Mere material gains can not the objective for a human being. This materialistic approach to life has made man corrupt, fame- hungry and devoid of austerity, humanism and service motivation. [26] To combat this tendency education in religious and moral values is a must. Teachers alone cannot accomplish this great task, the active cooperation of the enlightened elders and leaders of the community, parents and guardians and the government is very necessary.

Adaptability

Adaptability has a great contribution in making Indian culture immortal Adaptability is the process of changing according to time, place and period. Its an essential element of longevity of any culture. Indian culture has a unique property of adjustment, as a result, it is maintained till today. Due to adaptability and co-ordination of Indian culture, it's continuity, utility and activity is still present Our hope towards mankind was based on that respect and devotion, which people had towards other's views. There should be no effects on imposing our thoughts on others.

Receptivity

Receptivity is an important characteristic of Indian culture. Indian culture has always accepted the good of invading cultures. Indian culture is like an ocean, in which many rivers come and meet. In the same way all castes succumbed to the Indian culture and very rapidly they dissolved in the Hindutva. Indian culture has always adjusted with other cultures. Its ability to maintain unity amongst the diversities of all is the best. The reliability, which developed in this culture due to this receptivity, is a boon for this world and is appreciated by all.

Thoughts aout karma and Reincarnation

The concept of Karma and Reincarnation have special importance in Indian culture. It is believed that one gains virtue during good action and takes birth in higher order in his next birth and spends a comfortable life. The one doing bad actions takes birth in lower order in his next birth and suffers pain and leads a miserable life. Upanishads says that the Principle of fruits of action is correct. A man gets the fruits as per the actions he does. Continuously performing good actions in all his birth, he will get salvation i.e. will be liberated from the cycle of birth and death. In this way the concept of reincarnation is associated with the principle of action. The actual cause of reincarnation is the actions done in the previous birth.

Unity in Diversity

One feature that is most often noticed about India is its unity in diversity. This overworked cliché has become a part of Indian's self-identity . There are very few countries which have such an enormous cultural diversity that India has to offer. Beneath the bewildering diversity of religion, language and customs of this vast country, the underlying unity is remarkable. Indian unity is the product of certain historical factors that are present in various fields of Indian social life, in appears as if the inhabitants from the Himalayas in the north to Kanyakumari in the South, and Kutch in the west to Arunachal in the east are woven together into a beautiful tapestry. In the process of its evolution, India society has acquired a culture characterized by stable patterns of pluralism. However, the acceptance of cultural pluralism does not detract us from the idea of promoting economic, political and social integration.

Accommodation without assimilation has been the characteristic of Indian civilization; Accommodation is a social process by which different elements of a society are integrated without loosing their separate identity. Assimilation on the other hand, is a type of integration where the earlier identity of the elements is dissolved. In Indian history and culture, additions of new components have not meant the discarding of old ones. The accommodation of

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diversity has been the underlying ideology and numerous, social and cultural factors have contributed to the enduring nature of Indian unity. Order and stability was maintained not primarily by the state but through social, cultural, moral and technological values and institutions of Indian civilization, Indian civilization gave enough freedom for the practice of any way of life.

Thus the above account on the aspect of unity in diversity speaks us that Indians has a traditional culture with cosmopolitan outlook. Since time immemorial in spite of having scores of differences, the country is still united in spirit, in politics, in the mind of the inhabitants and will remain in such condition perpetually.

It is naïve to consider any culture as fully perfect or eternally stable. Indian culture too has its dark spots. The caste system ordered a particular social order and social relations which limited education as per the needs of the social roles, perpetuated in equality and discrimination and endured, if not encouraged, suppression and oppression of the disadvantaged groups in the society Sri Aurobindo was concerned that, " if the Indian spirit was obliged to stereotype caste as the symbol of its social order. It never quite forgot, as the caste spirit is apt to forget, the human soul and the human mind are beyond caste."[27]

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to highlight the various features of Indian culture. In this paper emphasis will be on the concept and importance of cultural traits of India i.e. co - existence of religions, languages , dresses etc. How geographical, social and spiritual norms help through varios says to establish a compact nature of Indian Culture will be described in detail.

Conclusion

The challenges of modernity of traditional culture are multidimensional, As G.C. Pande notes, " if Science and Humanism determine the basic values of modernity. Religion has generally stood for divinely revealed tradition. For the modern mind, culture is a purely human enterprises which moves into the future is a tentative, experimental manner.[28] For religion however, human being must seek to follow what God has revealed in the past. The two nations thus appear contradictory. Some scholars attribute this contradiction to western influence. However, this modernity is nothing but a restoration of tradition to its original purity.

Eminent sociologist Yogendra Singh asserts that the cultural changes in India mirror both forces of resilience and transformation and that modernization has contributed not only to India's development, but also to its under development. He further observes that the quest for economic and social modernization has activated cultural forces which legitimize values like acquisitiveness, opportunistic utilitarianism. [29] Pande however argues that even if the evolution of modern materialist culture is parallel with the decline of the influence of religion, the underlying moral values did not disappear altogether. Certain values like love, pity, and truth are as much modern as ancient. [30]

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