

Towards Understanding Contours of Culture

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Abstract—Culture is not a simple or amorphous concept. Various factors impact culture of people and the society they live in. Economic, political developments impinge on the traditions and social practices of people. Geographical locations have their own role to play in shaping culture of a community. Culture is not a single variable. Political, economic, religious reforms and wars transform cultural lives of a country inconceivably. Unabated violence and slaughter of mankind across the continents in the twentieth century culminated in diverse movements and trends in literature, arts and sports beyond imagination. Shattered habitations, battered lives, desire to lead dignified life offered impetus to migrations and new settlements. Culture may be viewed as an ideal, as a documentary as well as a way of life. Cultural transmission cannot be unidirectional or unilateral. Culture cannot be studied in isolation. Its relationship with humanities and social sciences is inalienable.

Keywords— Culture, Community, Migration, Reforms.

I. INTRODUCTION

There have been animated discussions on the relationship of culture on economic and political developments of a country or society. One may state that economic development changes culture. In India this aspect is manifest in myriad ways. Small eateries made way to Restaurants and it is not surprising to find youth walking into McDonalds, Subways and pubs. Their elders either willingly or unwillingly have to taste Pizzas, Burgers and hotdogs. Traditional food items made way to imported stuff. Fruits are no exception. Malls, high-rise buildings dot the horizon in any developing or metropolitan city in India today.

This may be compared with the impact of great depression and world wars on Great Britain in the twentieth century. Collapse of Wall street, share market created chaos and resulted in change of life style. While cricket remained the prerogative of the elite and well placed in English society, football became the game of workers, expatriates and migrant population. East London was the habitat of the not so rich and newly arrived populace. Going to movie theatres declined and visiting opera house and spending time before the Television set was on the rise. Still theatres drew people to witness dramas when presented on the stage.

Political and financial setbacks too transform culture of countries. World war II changed Germany and Japan from militarized countries to the most pacific nations in the world. Their work ethics were immensely influenced and a

perceptible change was on view.

Colonialism and imperialism have either altered or distorted the cultures of the colonies and social practices there. After gaining independence also they were branded under developed countries or undeveloped countries. This is the way the former rulers looked at their earlier colonies. Dependency theory or Maan-Baap theory was propagated to explain the reasons for backwardness of the subjects and the ennobling efforts made by the ruling class just like a parent to educate and nurture better cultural values in his/her ward.

Today in a changed world order racist discrimination is no longer viewed generously. The subaltern has learnt to speak. It is better to find a solution than probe for the cause of disquiet anywhere. The world has moved ahead positively and responds as one man whenever human life is threatened or public order is deliberately destabilised. Growing terrorist activities are condemned in one voice and relief operations are launched voluntarily. These developments auger well for the survival of humanity, liberal cultural values that view the world is a global village, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. Political and economic reforms are no longer a taboo anywhere in the world today.

Geographical location plays a vital role in a country and its culture in inviting attention and appreciation or disdain. The economic concerns are irrevocably intertwined with this parameter. It may be noticed that all advanced or well developed democracies are in temperate zones, while the poorer countries are in the tropical zones.

Culture is not an independent variable. Historical factors, political developments, geographical and climatic conditions along with economic policies followed do contribute to a larger extent in fixing the contours of a countries culture. Institutional modifications also sway the stability of national culture.

While capitalist, free market context flourish resorting to required financial reforms from time to time, those modeled on progressive policies of certain earlier regimes could not make much head way. Concept of welfare state made people a little complacent waiting for succour and doles from administration. It was also the time when well-meaning endeavours were made in throwing certain corridors open for foreign investment that enabled some contexts surge ahead triumphantly. In India too financial reforms initiated in the last decade of the twentieth century ushered in an era of growth, better living conditions for the people, thereby boosting opportunities in quality education, medical care, per capita income and general sense of wellbeing. In a vast country of India's dimensions and magnitude of current population, a lot more needs to be done to alleviate the condition of suffering

masses.

Actions launched to purge antagonist elements in progressive contexts changed the concept of culture and imposed the attitude and line of action of those in power.

Max Weber of Germany basically a historian, who later bloomed into a brilliant social scientist with his seminal work 'The Protestant Ethic and the spirit of Capitalism' [1904-1905], felt that Protestantism to be more specific Calvinist path, promoted the modern capitalist approach. His contention was that following of an ethical norm in everyday life paved the way for economic development. Emphasising the value of time and money, he advocated the adherence to ethical norms in daily transactions.

Encouraging literacy among girls and boys, reading the Bible every day by oneself was more edifying in more than one way, he firmly believed. Time was accorded top priority in daily activities. Consequently, clock makers in Catholic countries like France, Bavaria, and England were Protestants. These nations benefitted immensely. Awareness about time and use of clocks multiplied beyond imagination. Probably, it might be one reason for the uprightness and time sense in many of these countries. It soon became a part of their culture. In nations where industrial revolution ushered in rapid urbanization of rural areas, adherence to strict work ethics and punctuality became a distinguishing feature of their culture.

But the times also witnessed superficiality of religious chief and utter failure of the Church in coming to the succor of the suffering people, especially children as reflected in the poems of William Blake's work 'Songs of Experience.' He castigates the British aristocracy and the church for ignoring the deprivation of less fortunate ones in contemporary society. Poems like 'London', 'Holy Thursday', 'The Human Abstract' among others mirror his righteous indignation. 'Tiger' is one of his best poems, where he demonstrates that God is capable of creating a meek and innocent animal like the Lamb and also the most ferocious and formidable force on earth, the Tiger. This reflects the social and cultural situation prevailing in the contemporary society. Accordingly cultural norms are framed.

History narrates and affirms that solutions exist within a society to fight against poverty and overcome scarcity. External support or aid may be helpful for a while only. Self-empowerment is the best form of empowerment one can think of. Hard work, thrift, honesty, patience pay in the long run. These virtues are inculcated in children through fables, folktales and short stories narrated by grandmothers in the Asian context. Universally these are meant to create positive vibrations and regard for noble traits in a person, and by implication in a society or community.

An estimate of how some countries changed their destinies deserves mention here. Protestant reformation culminated in economic development of Europe. Those that desire to forge ahead in life and succeed do not hesitate to change their values, goals and means. Puerto Rico is an example. At the other end of the spectrum are the countries in the Middle East who decline to see the writing on the wall. Festering wounds caused by acts of terrorism devastate families, communities

and countries. Mankind is brutalised. Bruises may remain invisible, scars stay unseen, but the grief caused and loss sustained can never be compensated. This is an example to show how wrong cultural values vandalise and dehumanise our world.

Japan learnt the lesson of its life during World War II and was almost decimated. Instead of ruing over the loss of power and prestige, the Japanese focused on industry and commerce and rose like the proverbial phoenix from ashes. South Korea and Taiwan, both former colonies of Japan followed suit and are prospering. Rigidity to reform is a major stumbling block to success and progress. China is no exception. Thoroughly revamping priorities, the Chinese are the largest earners of foreign exchange for their country.

Cultural transmission takes place in diverse ways. It is not unidirectional and unilateral. Through the participation of large number of people it occurs through dialogue, discussion and conversation. In many countries culture models are passed on from one generation to another through recitation. Time tested verses and sayings which highlight benefits of virtues and value based life are communicated orally first and absorbed in absolute humility and obedience. The learners memorise the cultural expressions without understanding meaning or social significance of what is communicated to them. Naturally this practice results in hierarchical patterns and hegemony of vested elements. This is how norms of 'high' and 'low' are formed and followed. Social scientists like Max Weber advocate use of imagination to shape human experience, generate different forms and shapes to data that pose complex problems.

Social scientists air their views and theories on people purely from academic point of view. They seldom think about pragmatic follow up of their views. Hierarchical structures operate with their own set of value systems. Favouring what is advantageous and shunning what is not is a general norm adopted anywhere in the world. The same pattern is perceptible in literary studies also. 'High' represents the exalted, powerful and the elite sections in society. 'Low' refers to the lowly placed in social strata, the uninitiated and illiterate masses. Eating, reading and writing traditions are accordingly framed and perpetuated. This extends to life style as well as preferences of attire too.

Intellectuals pronounce judgment as regards what is good or bad for the society they live in. F.R. Leavis noticed debilitating impact of certain Hollywood movies on the minds of youth in England during inter-war period in twentieth century. People in authority declare what is sacred and what is profane purely based their own proclivities. They do not hesitate to categorise what is ennobling and what is debasing; what is desirable and what is not. This way, hegemony operates and extends from generation to generation. Consequently class conflicts ensue on account of discontent reaching saturation point.

Popular art films, cultural practices, literary work never find favour with prudes and are not allowed into the precincts of hallowed academic institutions. Chetan Bhagat is a very popular novelist in India. His novels sell like proverbial hot

cakes. It is a debatable point whether his work will ever be prescribed for serious study in colleges and universities. The same may be applicable to immensely popular Harry Potter series. In this chaotic scenario, the preferences or desires of the middle class are never cared for nor talked about, leaving them in no man's land or veritable 'Trishanku's position. They can never identify with the 'low' nor can attain equality with the 'high', which they clamour for. Upward mobility is always advantageous and much sought after goal of many in any society.

"Ethnocentrism refers to the superiority feeling of the members of a certain culture. Generally, ethnocentric persons have the tendency to interpret the other culture, based on their own cultural values. An American manager considers English as the "best" and will not learn another language. The manager may consider another language as inferior or illogical. And if she/he considers his/her nonverbal system as the most civilized, he/she will have the tendency to reject other systems as primitive. In this way the ethnocentrism can become an obstacle for an efficient empathy and lead not only to the total destruction of communication, but to antagonism and even hostility." [Y.Suneetha & G.M. Sundaravalli, *Global Perspectives, Local Initiatives*, 1911p126].

Lovable cultural values inculcated at home and school make an individual stand out in a crowd. Jumping queues, breaking traffic rules, staring at strangers are generally deemed uncouth and uncivilised practices. Just as dress reveals a person's class, speech too helps in understanding a person's upbringing and education. Concealed patterns and norms of behaviour do not offer much ground to locate culture of a community. But intercultural exchanges between societies or countries do enable erase misconceptions and underlying fears about the 'others'. It is possible only when awareness is created through conscious efforts by teachers in schools and parents at homes. Tolerance, patience, ability to understand rather than judge, living in one's own space without transgressing into the arena of others do foster feelings of fraternity and friendship.

Culture is associated with ethical norms, notions of good and bad, right and wrong as well as beauty and intelligence. Concepts are not nor universal just like practices. While functioning according to time frame accorded is the norm in many countries, in some cultures performing a task slowly and steadily is appreciated. They believe that 'haste makes waste. In Telugu there is a proverb: 'Parigethi paalu thaagekanna, nilabadi neellu thaagadam melu.'

[Instead of drinking milk while running, better to drink water standing at a place]. This is analogical with English proverb 'Patience pays in the long run.' These proverbs or statements of wisdom are specific to a culture, though similar ideas are conveyed or shared universally at times.

Individuals are deemed to be representatives of their cultures. But they do represent layers of culture or sub-cultures. India is a multilingual country with many sub-cultures. A person from India basically represents Indian culture. Close examination reveals he mirrors his linguistic and regional sub-cultures. Further scrutiny amplifies he imitates and integrates cultures of his parents, relations and

those closer to his family. He vivifies his family culture. It is a moot point whether culture emerges from individuals or persons shape themselves as per their community's culture. Responses of people to their own culture may not be the uniform or identical.

Culture comforts and terrorise too. A person in his own cultural group is quite comfortable. In a different cultural group his confidence levels or comfort zone may not be assuring. But, one who is exposed to multiculturalism is quite at home, wherever he goes. Hence the need for teaching cultural values and exposing to different cultures from childhood. In India, essentially a spiritual land, people go on pilgrimages regularly. Visiting places, tasting diverse cuisine, listening to different languages, trying observe and understand different modes of expressions enlarge one's awareness. While it is common in the west and well appreciated in India now, going on a holiday is the most enjoyable and enriching experience for individuals or families to relax, refresh and recharge one's batteries. Mobility is the motivating factor in understanding cultures.

Geert Hofstede in 'Culture and Organisations' defines culture as the software of the mind. He elucidates how immensely one is impacted by culture in one's day today life. F.Trompenaars employs the image of onion to delineate culture. He believes that the core convictions of any society remain at the centre, while outer skin is viewed as the culture of the group, several layers remain hidden in the form of education, language, architecture, food habits, rituals, practices, attire among others. Their work is misconstrued as leading to stereotypes and differences that exist culminating in stances of 'us' and 'them'. In spite of apparent diversity in cultures and viewpoints about them, their scholarly contribution has infused fresh breath and inspiration for study of cultures.

Cultural component when introduced in language teaching appropriately, leads to inter-cultural understanding and cultural transmission becomes possible. The term 'cultural capital' encompasses knowledge, skills and education. While native children inherit from their parents and family, a good number of immigrant children acquire it in schools. They may experience a little discomfort if the acquired is not compatible with what is inherited. It all depends on how one interprets and relates to form a meaning leading to realisation of cultures.

Ferdinand de Saussure, considered the father of 'semiotics', calls all the modes of interpretation as 'signs'. Words do not carry any meaning. It is people who extend meaning to a word from their own experiences, amassed information and context in which the word occurs. A sign consists of two parts: signifier and signified. While the first term takes form a sign takes, the latter refers to the idea or meaning one arrives at. Different people may interpret a term in diverse ways, depending on their own background, inclinations and stance taken politically.

It is pertinent to realise that one's thinking is conditioned by the language he is exposed to and uses. If the same person knows more languages, his perception will be enriched with

manifold interpretations and meanings are accordingly assigned to words. This argument extends to the manner in which positive and negative values and perceptions are inculcated among students in a language class.

A teacher of languages today has the onus of inculcating cultural values, apart from making a student linguistically proficient, endowed with communicative skills to negotiate day to day transactions by shaping him into full-fledged human being capable of inter-cultural communication through adequate cultural competence.

“The common outlook of human mentality makes it possible the inter-language and inter-cultural communication. There are common, universal values of all nations – life, bread, home, and family that have practical meaning of the intercultural dialogue. Finding balance, establishing equilibrium in this system is related to producing national cultural commentaries, certain minimum, related to the language and cultural information of the texts. [A. Koleva, 2005, p29].

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