

CULTURES AS DYNAMIC REALITIES

Narsingh Jangra

Associate Prof. of English

Pt. C.L. S. Govt. College, Karnal

Abstract

Culture is a dynamic phenomenon. It may have endured for centuries in the olden times but it is not without change in the present world. In the wake of globalisation and advancement in the field of technology, especially communication and transportation, it has become a dynamic reality. Global business and better job and education opportunities combined with other factors have made it more prone to change at a faster speed. The speed and volume of migration of people now is unprecedented. This has led to the substitution of the traditional one (low and high cultures) by a couple of new cultures (mass cultures and technical or scientific ones). Because of the increasing role of communication technology, the passing over of gestures, attitudes or know-hows through visual imitation and oral communication have now become easier and faster. The low cultures of the past are being replaced by mass cultures are taking over the low cultures and the high cultures by scientific. Now people have easy access to new technologies, procedures and methodologies.

The new specialised and technical cultures are subservient to the society as a whole, and are not intended to rule over it. That is why the cultures present in a society are diverse but they are generally hierarchically structured. So, they will keep changing until they reach a stage where they become Global.

Key Words

Culture, globalization, customs, elite, mass culture, popular culture, cultural studies, dynamic, static, practice, attitude, values, belief, uniformization, standardization, hybridization

An introduction to the word 'Culture'

The word 'Culture' is derived from the Greek word 'Culture' which means 'to cultivate'. By the nineteenth century in Europe it meant the habits, customs and tastes of the upper class also known as the Elite. But in the present context of Cultural studies, it has come to acquire a different meaning. Now it is a 'mode of generating meanings and ideas' (Nayar, 2008). These meanings are governed by power relations which means that the Elite culture controls meanings because it controls the terms of the discourse and Non- elite views on life and art are rejected as 'tasteless', 'useless' or even stupid by the Elite. What this implies is that certain components of culture get more visibility and significance and some others are marginalised.

Cultural studies believe that the culture of a community includes various aspects: economic, spatial, ideological, erotic and political. Cultural studies, therefore, aim to include all these into its fold. It seeks to understand how particular objects acquire meaning and value in a society or community. Culture is not a natural thing- it is created, it is produced. It is produced as any other commodity is produced in a consumer based society. The production and consumption of culture forms the very basis of cultural studies.

The production and consumption of culture is linked to:

1. Who decides what is to be produced.
2. For whom it is to be produced.

And

3. How is the artefact marketed or presented.

The production and consumption of cultural artefacts defines one's identity. But the production and consumption of artefacts depends on the ability to do so and the ways in which these artefacts are marketed and sold. In short, culture is a product that is:

1. Made
2. Marketed.

And

3. Consumed.

It is interesting to note from the above that a culture is a processed thing and the processes (Making, Marketing, and Consumption) involved are themselves subject to change. This paper is based on this very assumption that a culture is always subject to a change. The paper aims to arrive at this conclusion by a deductive study of the cultural changes that our society has witnessed in the recent times.

The dynamic nature of cultures

Cultures are not static realities. They are dynamic ones (Claval, 1995). During the first half of the 20th century, anthropologists often conceived cultures as super-organic realities which were enforced on everybody in a society. Today cultures are generally considered as resulting from a complex process of handing on the practices and knowledge of older generations and taking advantage of personal experience: since everyone is exposed to a different set of models and has a different life trajectory, what he learns is not exactly equivalent to what has been internalized by other persons. In this perspective, cultures appear as complex sets of practices, attitudes, know-hows, knowledge, beliefs and values. They are plastic realities: every one reinterprets constantly what it has received or experienced in order to deal with evolving environments. The meanings given to the basic creeds change from one to the other and differ for each individual depending on his age and his past experience.

Culture establishes strong links between the individual and the collective past since much of it has been inherited. It is geared to the present through personal experience. It opens perspectives towards the future because of the values it includes and the horizons of expectation everyone is building as a result of his encounters and the models he chooses in his society or elsewhere. Because their culture is a heritage, the members of a community have generally similar attitudes, preferences and values. Since everyone is responsible for the construction of his horizons of expectation, an anarchic dimension is at the same time always present in the cultural field.

There are mechanisms which prevent the orientations chosen by the members of a group from too much diverging. Two are particularly important: 1- the values cultures incorporate induce a selective process: all the features which are proposed at a given time cannot be

accepted, since they are contrary to the moral, religious or philosophical principles incapsulated in what people have received and believe; 2- people are never isolated; they live in groups; their image for the others, and their perception of those who are members of the same group or outside it, constitute a key element in the idea they build of themselves. Identities play a decisive role in the dynamics of culture, since they limit some forms of evolution, and favour others.

Values and identities give some measure of permanency to cultures, when horizons of expectation undermines their stability, since they introduce diverging tendencies on the social scene.

Key factors in the shaping of cultures

Cultures are built through the passing over of attitudes, practices, know-hows, knowledge, beliefs and values from an individual to the other, from one generation to the next. They depend upon the channels and means of communication used by the groups under scrutiny (Claval, 1995; Goody, 1986; 1993). The transmission and permanent reappraisal of cultures may result from direct visual observation and verbal interaction. They may be at least partially passed over through the written word. In the contemporary world, information technology is playing a growing role. Direct face to face communication is perfectly efficient for the handing over of gestures, practices or know-hows. The spatial range of this process is however short: a few meters, ten or twenty at best. People keep moving, but as long as societies rely only on orality, know-hows, attitudes and values remain contained within small local areas. Since messages are not transformed into material memories, oral cultures can hardly accumulate abstract knowledge. The written word has a longer range. It is perfectly adequate for conveying knowledge, believes or values, but suffers severe limitation for transmitting gestures or practices. Because of its material form, it gives an accumulative dimension to the cultural processes. Modern telecommunications combine the long range of the written word and the advantages of orality and direct imitation.

Globalization and the standardization of daily life culture

Because of globalization, the diffusion of innovations, consumption patterns and new daily life patterns which were active from mid 19th century gained a new momentum during

the last fifty years. Mortality experienced a sharp decline everywhere after the end of World War II, inducing progressively new attitudes towards procreation and life: the reduction of fertility rates appeared as a necessity, which generally meant a sharp break with previous religious attitudes.

In many respects, a process of standardization is at work in the cultural field. It results from the impact of mass cultures and the diffusion of new consumption patterns at the World scale. Production technologies have ceased to be included in the sphere of low cultures or their contemporary counterparts, mass cultures. They are increasingly incorporated into the new forms of high cultures, i. e. the technological or scientific ones. Since they rest on scientific knowledge and technologies, they are conducive to the uniformization of tools, machine tools and products.

The material content of culture is more uniform than in the past. It means that many attitudes, know-hows, practices are becoming the same everywhere: we all shake hands now, we all get same kind of education, online education is now available to all, even in villages we find people preparing and eating Chinese food, every product of almost every brand is available in malls and big stores, people have live-in relationships, gay culture is open now in India, nudity and sex education are no longer a taboo now and are not frowned upon, in order to cook their food, people increasingly use similar gas or electric cookers, steel pans and saucepans There is so much uniformity in relations now. We do not have Chachas, Taus, Buas, Phoofies and Mausies, We have only Uncles and Aunties now. So much so the relations have also been materialised and made uniform. No woman says now Ke me uski patni hoo. They all say ye mera pati hai as if the husband is not a relation or a human being and has been reduced to the status of a property. Hats off to Ekta Kapoor who is making similar kinds of serial where a woman says with authority to another ke Mihir mera pati hai and authority keeps on shifting. Similarly, the girls and the boys express their authority over their possessions which are supposedly their boyfriends or girlfriend respectively. Because of higher mobility, cultural confrontations are more numerous than in the past, but they occur between cultures which are closer than fifty years ago. When we move around, we find that the rapid advance of modernization is striking: the scene of daily life is in many ways similar to that we find in the West.

Globalization and the threat over traditional identities

The standardization of cultures is one of most striking features of today World. This process undermines, however, the bases of most identities. Cultures differed traditionally from place to place, technologies varied from a town to the next one and crafts were so long to acquire that people stick to the same job for all their life. As a result, the building of identities was easy: material realities were used as markers. People had the feeling to belong to the same group because they lived in the same type of house, ate the same food, drank the same beverages, wore the same dress, and looked at landscapes which mirrored the agricultural technologies they used and their past history.

Standardization has rubbed out a good part of the traditional identity markers. At a time of mass cultures, young people are wearing the same jeans and dancing according to the same rhythms all over the World. As a result, globalization triggered strong reactions. People refuse to look like their neighbours. They protect the landscapes of the countries they live in, preserve their monuments and try to avoid a complete standardization of the food and beverage locally produced. This has given rise to a whole range of products. Now we have not only cars of Maruty but also Hyundai, Toyota, Volkswagen, Skoda, GM, MG, Audi, Mercedes and many more. Now we have not only Nokia mobile phones, but also mobile phones from Sony, Samsung, LG, Motorola, Micromax, Vivo, Apple and so many other Chinese brands. So much so the chargers of these mobiles phones are also different. Now we do not send our children to traditional schools. They attend schools where they use interactive boards. Earlier identities were not based only on material markers. They were also- and generally mainly- anchored in the values shared by individuals and communities. In the pursuit of development, some of the values imported with the Western ideology of Progress proved contradictory with the central beliefs of the local non-Western religions. The new facilities of transport and communication allowed for a rapid transformation of the horizons of expectation of ordinary people all over the World: everyone wishes to have a motorbike or a car, to benefit from better health systems and to send their children to better schools. Because of these expectations, traditional religious values often appear less meaningful. The result being that there is a hybridization of culture.

The threat over identities resulting from hybridization and globalization has fuelled many

types of ideological or religious movements during the last thirty years: ecologisms, regionalisms, nationalisms or fundamentalisms.

The crisis of the idea of Progress and its consequences on the Western World

In Western countries there always were people skeptical with the idea of Progress. They knew that the improvement of the material conditions of life would not necessarily be conducive to the control of passions and a better moral life. They were conscious of the waste produced by modern industries and the harm it caused to the environment. Their voice was, however, covered by all those who were confident in a better future.

The situation began to change after World War I because of the use of chemical weapons and the growing damage caused to civilian populations in total war. World War II had a deeper effect because of the millions of dead and wounded it left. People discovered that technical progress could be conducive either to a better situation for humanity or to its destruction. Within a few years, other factors concurred to the rise of this new form of pessimism. The use of pesticides, DDT more precisely, appeared so harmful to the environment that the only solution was to ban it. People discovered that a threat on the global environment was emerging.

Western civilization lost in its way its main foundation: the idea of Progress. It put more emphasis on the material gain than on the social dimension of progress. The consequences of this transformation are paramount. At the global scale, other civilizations ceased to consider the Western one as the only model: hence the new dynamism of Islam, Hinduism, or, in the political field, the success of Asianism. Everyone is eager to borrow Western societies their techniques, but nobody wishes to accept their central values. The idea of a superiority of the Western civilization is forgotten.

Globalization and the rise of multicultural situations

Because of the increasing mobility of persons and the easier transfer of information, the contacts between cultures are closer than in the past. Migration from the South countries to the rich ones of the North appears to many individuals as the only way to escape local poverty and instability and to materialize their horizons of expectation. People do not move because Western civilization appears a superior one to them. Their personal situations differ

from those prevailing in the past. Because of the generalization of primary and secondary education, a growing proportion of migrants is familiar with the traditional high cultures of their home country. Because of the modernization of local consumption patterns and modes of life, the gap between the material cultures of the home and host countries has been reduced. Now people from abroad come to our country for better education and medical facilities.

Emigrants have ceased to be motivated by the search of a higher and better civilization. They move because they wish to get a job, earn higher salaries and enjoy better social security systems. Because of more rapid and cheaper transport, and new telecommunication technologies, the cultural links with the home country are not as completely severed as in the past. Diasporas subsisted only when they were supported by a strong religious faith. Today, they can last for a long period even if their religious basis is weak.

In many ways, a process of assimilation and integration develops, as in the past. It does not lead, however, to the easy fusion of the migrants in the host countries. They stick to their cultures because they wish to preserve their identities.

The crisis of the idea of Progress deprives in this way Western societies of a good part of their former power of integration and assimilation. Since the members of Western societies have ceased to believe that their own values had a universal dimension and ought to be shared by everyone, they have no reason to impose their own cultures to the newcomers. The great cities of the Western World are increasingly made of a mosaic of cultures. Their reality is multicultural.

Conclusion

Cultures are complex and dynamic realities. They evolve constantly. They are highly dependent on the technologies of communication upon which rests the passing over of inheritance from individual to individual and generation to generation. The forms of modernization characteristic of the 20th century were responsible for a rapid standardization of many aspects of material cultures all over the World, and the substitution of a new couple of cultures (mass cultures and technical or scientific ones) for the traditional one (low and high cultures). Because of the increasing role of communication technology, the passing over

of gestures, attitudes or know-hows through visual imitation and oral communication is now not restricted to small areas. The low cultures of the past are replaced by mass cultures. Their content is different: they are more centered on consumption than production, entertainment than work.

At the same time, high cultures are transformed. They incorporate a larger share of scientific knowledge and techniques than before and give less room to rhetorics, philosophy and religion. It is now possible for people to get instantly informed of new technologies, procedures and methodologies.

The new specialised and technical cultures do not play the same role as the traditional cultures in the field of ethics and social regulation. They appear as subservient to the society as a whole, and are not intended to rule over it. That is why the cultures present in a society are diverse. They are generally hierarchically structured but they will keep changing until they reach a stage where together they all will be called as Global.

References:

- Claval, Paul, 1995, *La Géographie culturelle*, Paris, Nathan.
- Goody, Jack, 1986, *La Logique de l'écriture. Aux origines des sociétés humaines*, Paris, A. Colin.
- Goody, Jack, 1993, *The Interface between the Oral and the Written*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Pramod K. Nayar, 2008, *An Introduction to Cultural Studies*, New Delhi, Viva Books Pvt. Ltd.