
UNIT 21 CULTURE I : MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

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21.0 OBJECTIVES

On going through this unit you should be able to understand:

- the concept of culture, as used in anthropology and sociology;
- that culture as a distinctively human phenomenon, rooted in human being's unique nature; and
- that culture is closely inter-related to biological process.

21.1 INTRODUCTION

If you have been to a zoo or a circus, and have observed the behaviour of monkeys and chimpanzees, you must have been struck by the similarities between their gestures and ours. Some of you might have wondered whether we are just like these animals, albeit a little more developed.

In recent years, a number of sciences have devoted attention to animal behaviour. As a result of extensive researches and investigations, we now know a good deal about what we share with other animals, as well as the ways in which we differ from

them. The concept of culture has greatly expanded our understanding of the nature and behaviour of human beings in all its richness and diversity, as well as in relation to the behaviour of animals. It has greatly helped us in understanding the diverse ways in which the basic biological needs of human beings are satisfied. It has brought to our awareness the differences among the various communities and groups of mankind, and the manner in which these differences are continued and passed on from one generation to another .

The concept of culture is immensely helpful in that it offers us a truly broad perspective on mankind, and thereby expands our intellectual horizons. It liberates us from the chains of prejudice and groups-centredness, and thus humanizes our consciousness.

21.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE

We sometimes describe an individual as “a highly cultured person”, meaning thereby that the person in question has certain features such as his or her speech, manners, taste for literature, music or painting, which distinguish him/her from others. Culture, in this sense, refers to certain personal characteristics of an individual. However, this is not the sense in which the word culture is used and understood in social sciences.

Sometimes, culture is used in popular discourse to refer to a celebration or an evening of entertainment, as when one speaks of a “cultural show”. In this sense, culture is identified with aesthetics or the fine arts, such as dance, music or drama. This also is different from the technical meaning of the word culture.

Culture is used in a special sense in anthropology and sociology. It refers to the sum total of human beings’ behaviour, feelings, beliefs, thoughts; it connotes everything that is acquired by them as social beings. One of the most comprehensive definition of the term culture was provided by the 19th century British anthropologist, Edward Tylor. He defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as member of society.”

21.2.1 Role of Culture

Culture has two distinctive, but inter-related aspects. On the one hand, it is an expression of human beings ingenuity; it cannot be adequately understood without reference to certain characteristics which are unique to human beings. These unique characteristics include rationality and imagination, capacity for self-awareness and self-reflection, and capacity for symbolic communication or language.

On the other hand, culture has played a crucial role in the fulfilment of capacities and potentialities. Their survival in the evolutionary process was made possible due to culture. Such factors as co-operations, the domestication of plants and animals, the discovery and use of fire, the making of tools and implements, and the invention and use of language greatly facilitated their adaptation to the natural environment. Modern biologists point out that, unlike animals, human beings played an active role in their own evolutionary career.

Co-operation among human beings provided security from wild animals and external threats. It facilitated the hunting of wild animals by making it a group activity. The domestication of plants and animals helped in the adaptation of human groups and communities to the environment. Obtaining food through gathering, fishing and hunting was made easier by the use of tools and implements. The discovery and use of fire provided security from wild animals. Language made possible the sharing,

accumulation and transmission of experience and skill. If not for culture, human beings would have probably perished in the long and arduous process of evolution.

21.2.2 Features of Culture

Culture is used in two senses, a general and a specific sense. Used in a general sense, it implied the sum total of those characteristics which are unique to mankind and which have no parallel in the animal kingdom. When used in a specific sense, it refers to the totality of the life ways and behaviour patterns of a community or a group. One may speak, for example, of Chinese culture, Eskimo culture, Hindu culture, etc.

Culture is characterised by the following features:

- i) It is shared in common by the members of a given society or community. Culture therefore, refers not to beliefs and activities of individuals, but to those of groups of people who are organised in communities. It is fundamentally a social, rather than personal or individual, phenomenon.
- ii) Culture is learnt and acquired by human beings in interaction with others. An individual acquires the characteristics of his parents and his group in two ways. On the one hand, she or he acquires the physical characteristics and features of her or his parents, such as skin colour, stature, texture of hair and colour of the eyes, through **genetic transmission**, over which he or she has no control. On the other hand, he or she learns and acquires the thoughts, attitudes, language and habits of his or her parents, and through them, of his or her group, by way of **cultural transmission**.

It follows from the above observation that differences among various groups and communities in regard to language, beliefs, customs and rituals are to be understood and explained not in terms of physical or racial differences, which are biologically inherited, but in terms of learnt and acquired cultural differences.

- iii) Culture is not only learnt and acquired by individuals in a social context, but it is also accumulated and transmitted from generation to generation, through the mechanism of symbolic communication or language. In other words, a society or a community accumulates, over long periods of time, experiences, knowledge and skill, which are shared in common by its members, and it passes from one generation to another.

Activity 1

Interview one member of your Grandparent's generation, one of your own generation and one of a child's generation in your family on what they think about the role of men, women and children in your family/community and society. Write a report on "Social and Cultural Changes in my Society" of about 2 pages. Compare your note with others students and discuss the topic with your counsellor at your study centre.

21.3 CULTURE AND HUMAN NATURE

You have learnt in the foregoing sections that culture is essentially an expression of certain characteristics which are unique to human beings. A comparison between animal nature. In recent years, several disciplines such as physiological psychology, neuro-physiology, ethology (which is concerned with the study of animal behaviour in the wild) and sociology (which studies animal and human behaviour in a comparative framework) have provided us with valuable information on animal behaviour.

Consequently, we are now in a better position to know what human beings share with other animals, and what is unique to them.

21.3.1 Human Beings and Other Animals

A few decades ago, it was commonly believed that animals can neither learn to make and use tools, nor can they plan ahead or count. Modern researches in animal behaviour have established that all these assumptions about animals are not correct.

The fact that animals are capable of learning has been known to animal trainers and zoo keepers for a long time. You too must have observed this fact if you have pets such as parrots or dogs or cats at home. Researches in ethology and ornithology (the systematic study of the behaviour of birds) indicate that a number of animal species are capable of learning patterns of behaviour. For example, the young one of a bird learns the song pattern of its species during the first spring of its life. A young chimpanzee learns from its mother how to identify poisonous fruits and berries in the forest.

Many species of birds have a remarkable sense of direction and planning. This is evident in their seasonal migration. When the freezing cold of the Arctic becomes too harsh, the Siberian cranes cross a distance of several thousand miles and fly over to places like Bombay, Mysore, where the weather is more pleasant for them. They go back to their native habitat soon after the cold subsides.

The higher primates, such as monkeys and apes, make and use crude tools. The chimpanzees in the wild feed on white ants, which breed in the hollow recesses of tree trunks, when the chimpanzee's hand cannot reach right inside, he plucks the branch of a tree, inserts it inside the trunk and waits. When the white ants cling to the branch, he takes it out and gobbles up the ants.

The emu is an Australian animal which lays big eggs. The Australian buzzard, who is very fond of the eggs, drives the emu from its eggs, and then flies aloft with a stone in its claws. It drops the stone on the eggs and when they break, it swoops down and swallows the contents.

There are striking similarities between human beings and the chimpanzees in the number and form of chromosomes, the proteins of the blood, and the structure of the genetic material DNA. Jane Goodall, an ethnologist, studies the behaviour of chimpanzees in their natural setting in Tanzania. She found interesting similarities between certain aspects of chimpanzee behaviour and human behaviour. She found that, much like human beings, the chimpanzees have a lengthy childhood; they form close family attachment; they make and use primitive tools, and hunt in a collective manner. She also found similarities in respect of communication, such as facial expressions and gestures.

21.3.2 Uniqueness of Human Beings

In certain respects, human beings are part of the animal kingdom, in that certain biological and physiological processes are commonly shared between them and animals. Yet, they differ from the other species of animals in several crucial aspects, which set them apart from the rest of the animal world.

- 1) In animals, the satisfaction of basic biological urges, such as hunger, thirst and sex, is determined by instincts. In human beings, instincts have almost disappeared. Consequently, the satisfaction of biological needs in them takes place through culture. Animal responses to the environment are fixed and

stereotyped, whereas human beings responds to his or her environment in a flexible manner and in a variety of ways.

- 2) Though some species of animals make and use tools of a primitive nature, human beings' tool making ability is of a qualitatively superior kind. In animals, tools are made and used only for the present; as soon as their purpose is served, they are thrown away. Human beings on the other hand, make tools not only for the present, but also in anticipation of their future use.

Furthermore, culture makes it possible for men and women to accumulate their experience and skill in regard to tool making and pass it on from generation to generation. Thus, over several thousand years there has been a continuous improvement in their tools making ability.

- 3) Human being is the only species in which the female is sexually receptive throughout the year. This has important consequences for marital and social behaviour.
- 4) The human child is dependent, physically and emotionally on the mother for a much longer period, as compared to other species of animals. This has a significant bearing on woman's roles, on the mother-child relationship, as well as on the network of kinship in human society.
- 5) There are certain characteristics of human beings, which are described as 'species-specific'. The human brain has developed certain devices such as control of hand and speech, foresight and planning. The main organisation of the brain is located in the frontal and the pre-frontal lobes, which enable people to think of actions in the future.
- 6) Human being is essentially a symbolic animal. She/He is the only animal capable of self consciousness, of self-reflection. The rational and imaginative faculties enable them to create concepts, meanings and values which have universal significance. Their symbolic nature enables them to transcend the immediate environment of which they are a part.
- 7) Human beings capacity for symbolic communication or language is unique to them. The development of the vocal cords in human beings and the close location of the speech and hearing centres in the brain made possible the emergence of language.

Check Your Progress 1

Note : a) Use the space below for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1) Discuss the main characteristics of culture. Use about five lines.

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2) Give some examples of the uniqueness of human beings. Use about four lines

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21.4 CULTURE AND BIOLOGY

Human being shares with animals certain basic biological urges, such as hunger, thirst and sex, which press for satisfaction. However, there is a significant difference in the manner in which the satisfaction of basic biological needs takes place in them and in animals. Among the animals, the basic needs are satisfied through the mechanism of instincts, whereas in human beings they are fulfilled and regulated through culture.

21.4.1 Culture and the Satisfaction of Hunger

There are tremendous variations in the manner in which the biological urge of hunger is satisfied among human groups and communities in different parts of the world. The Bushmen, who live in the hot, sandy Kalahari desert in Southern Africa, survive on wild plants, insects, locusts, scorpions, bustards and ostriches. The Eskimos,, who live in the freezing cold of the Arctic, survive on the meat and fat of the walrus. The Lapps of Scandinavia survive on the milk and meat of the reindeer. The Andaman Islanders in the Bay of Bengal live by means of fruits and roots gathering, fishing, and hunting. The Semang hunters of Malaysia, who survive on yams, berries, roots and nuts, supplement their diet with squirrels, monkeys and lizards. The Australian aborigines hunt the kangaroo and relish its meat.

21.4.2 Food Taboos and Rituals

Culture defines what types of food are worthy of consumption by a given people or a community, and what food items are to be avoided. Consequently, a given food item, which is relished by one people may be abhorred by another. The aphorism a short sentence packed with meaning, “one man’s food is another man’s poison” is very true in a cultural sense. Pork, which is forbidden to Jews and Muslims is eaten with relish by the Christians. Milk and milk products are regarded as luxury food by the Baganda of East Africa, and the people of West Africa and the Chinese consider them as inedible and nauseating. The Navahos and the Apaches of New Guinea and Arizona consider fish nauseating and unfit for human consumption. Dog meat, which will be nauseating to most modern people, is eaten with relish by the Mexican Indians and some Naga tribals in India. The American Indians, until recently, considered tomatoes poisonous and refused to eat them. Certain types of fish are considered a delicacy and eaten raw in Japan. Eating raw meat is widely prevalent in several parts of Africa.

Various shades of vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism exist side by side in the Indian society. Thus, you find some strict vegetarians in South India (Vira Saiva) and Gujarat (Jain), who consider meat, eggs and fish as taboo. There are strict Jains who do not eat tubers. Many traditional families forbid elderly ladies and widows of all ages from eating onions and garlic.

Many cultures prescribe that certain types of food are not to be combined with others. Orthodox Jews, for example, do not combine meat and milk products in the same meal. Orthodox Muslims avoid eating dairy products immediately after eating fish. The Eskimo keep the sea foods separate from foods obtained from land animals.

Rituals are invariably associated with the consumption of food. In India for example, one is supposed to have a ritual bath before taking one's meal, which is followed by wearing ritually clean clothes. Thereafter, the person is to sit in a ritually clean place, and then eat the food. The Brahmins of Nepal can take their food only while wearing unsewn garments.

Activity 2

List at least two items of food which are considered to be auspicious in your culture/religion/society and why? Write a note of one page on "Food and its Social Nature". Discuss your note with your peers and Academic Counsellor at your study centre.



Food Culture

The rules of ritual purity and pollution in India are particularly observed in regard to food. Some foods such as milk are regarded as having inherent purity; other foods are made pure with frying. Food that has been fried in oil or ghee is less likely to be polluted. Such fried food called **pukka** food, in contrast with **kaccha** food cooked in water, can be exchanged between different communities in North India. In North India, cooking or eating in an earthen vessel is considered ritually clean. However, in South India, a Brahmin will never eat from an earthen vessel, as it is considered polluting.

Many cultures prescribe fasting and abstinence from food. Devout Jews fast every Thursday and Monday in addition they fast for 24 hours on Yom Kippur. The early Christians observed Lent which lasted for forty days. The Muslims fast for a whole month during Ramzan (the 9th month of the Muhammadan Year) Hinduism considers fasting a meritorious act, to be observed on auspicious occasions. It is important to note that the act of fasting represents a symbolic transcendence of the biological urge of hunger and thirst.

21.4.3 Patterns of Sexual Gratification

There are infinite variations among groups of mankind in regard to the fulfilment of the sexual impulse. In almost all cultures, sexual mating is institutionalised in marriage. Furthermore, every culture has rules of incest, which prohibit marital relations among close relatives. The incest taboo is a universal cultural invention which is aimed at regulating sexual behaviour. There are great diversities in respect of incest regulations from one culture to another, and even within a single society. In North India, for example, cross-cousin marriages are not allowed, whereas they are preferred in south India. In some south Indian castes, an elder sister is expected to ask her younger brother to marry her own daughter. This would be considered incestuous in North India.

Furthermore, there are rules of endogamy in many cultures, which prescribe that one should marry within one's own kin group lineage. Rules of exogamy, on the other hand require an individual to marry outside the group of gotra. In many parts of North India, the system of village exogamy exists, which requires that an individual may marry a girl only from another village.

Great diversities exist among groups of mankind in respect of partners in marriage. Polygyny (the union of one man and more than one woman) is a favoured form of marriage in Africa, the Near East, China, Melanesia, Polynesia and among the tribal communities in North and South America. King Mtessa of Uganda is said to have had 7000 wives. Among the Trobriand Islanders, who are generally monogamous, a chief may have as many as 60 wives. Polyandry (the union of one woman and several men) is prevalent among the Marquesans of Polynesia, the Todas in India, the Kandyans of Sri Lanka, the Da-la of Indo-China and the Paviotso Indians of North America. Among the Khasas of Jaunsar-Bawar in Himachal Pradesh, there exists a system of fraternal polyandry, in which a woman is married to two or more brothers at the same time.

Certain religious traditions, such as ancient and medieval asceticism and Roman Catholicism encourage celibacy. Thus, cultural factors regulate the satisfaction, or wilful negation of the sexual impulse among human beings to a remarkable extent.

21.4.4 Culture in Relation to Health and Sickness

Cultural factors significantly influence health and sickness in society. Certain types of ailments are significantly correlated with such factors as class, occupation, ethnicity and food habits. Hypertension, diabetes and ulcers may be regarded as urban diseases, generally connected with sedentary occupations. Environmental pollution, brought about by technological advancement, is now identified as one of the major causes for the growing incidence of cancer.

Food habits, particularly the consumption of fatty foods and high salt intake, are significantly correlated with cardiovascular diseases. Several tribal communities in the South Pacific islands, the Kirghiz of Turkey, certain African tribes, the Australian aborigines, and the Eskimos use no salt in their diet. Consequently, diseases such as high blood pressure are unknown among them. On the other hand, one-fourth of the diet of Eastern Finlanders consists of animal fat; consequently, they are most prone to heart attacks.

A culture generally defines what diseases are to be considered as illness, and therefore requiring treatment. Intestinal worms are regarded as necessary for digestion among the Thonga of Africa and the Yap Islanders. In most primitive societies, diagnosis and treatment of diseases are invariably associated with magical beliefs and rites and

shamanistic practices. In some cultures, diseases are associated with the violation of taboos. Among the Ojibwa Indians, a person who is guilty of violating food taboos, invites sickness on himself and his family members.

21.4.5 Culture and Sex Roles

Men and women differ not only in anatomical and physical features, but also in respect of behaviour, role and attitudes. It is generally held that men and women behave differently because nature has prescribed different roles and behaviour patterns for them. This is a mistaken view.

The differences between the roles and behaviour patterns of men and women, though related to certain anatomical and physical processes, are not entirely determined by them. Sex roles and traits, in other words, are not biologically given, they are conditioned by culture.

In India and in many other cultures, men are supposed to be dominant, aggressive and rational, while women are supposed to be submissive, impulsive emotional and delicate. Margaret Mead, a distinguished American anthropologist, made a comparative study of the respective roles of men and women in three primitive societies in New Guinea. She found that in each of these cultures, the sex roles were radically different from those of Western culture. For example, in the Tehambuli tribe, women are masculine and men feminine, in terms of Western cultural standards. Women are dominant, responsible and are engaged in gardening and fishing activities. Men, on the other hand, are concerned with aesthetic matters, and with being charming. Among the Arapesh, both men and women show feminine traits; they do not indulge in aggressive behaviour. Among the Mundugumor, both men and women exhibit masculine traits. Their behaviour reflects violence and aggressiveness. Mead, therefore, concluded that sex roles are culturally conditioned.

21.4.6 Culture and Race

Differences in physical characteristics and features among people belonging to different countries or groups are often confused with differences in culture and behaviour. One hears, for example, of Jewish race, Negro race, Aryan race, etc. When the term race is used in this manner, it combines a set of unrelated features, such as physical characteristics, language, religion, cultural traditions and behaviour patterns, which differentiate a given people from others. Furthermore, there is invariably an implicit value-judgement in this sense of the term race. Some races are regarded as being naturally and inherently superior to the others.

This is a wholly fallacious view. There is no necessary connection between race, language, culture and nationality. Racial features are largely determined by genetic and biological factors, whereas culture and language are learnt, acquired and transmitted through training and education.

Race prejudice is based on false and irrational premises. In fact, racism has proved to be one of the most dangerous myths of modern times. Hitler's belief in the superiority of the Nordic race led to the most inhuman massacre of six million Jews in Nazi Germany. Race prejudice has been responsible for the persecution and harassment of thousands of Negroes in the United States. The obnoxious phenomenon of apartheid in South Africa, whereby a small white minority had ruthlessly ruled over a vast black population, is an expression of the ideology of racism.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space below for your answers.

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) Bring out the relationship between culture and biology. Use about eight lines.

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2) Distinguish between race and culture. Use about six lines.

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21.5 LET US SUM UP

- i) Culture, which differentiates human beings from other animals, refers to the sum total of their activities, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and all that is characteristic of them as social beings.
- ii) Culture is shared by the members of a group or community. It is learnt and acquired by individuals through language. It is transmitted from one generation to another through training and education.
- iii) Culture is an expression of human beings' unique capabilities and potentialities. On the other hand, it plays an active role in the fulfilment of these potentialities. Culture has been instrumental in the evolutionary survival of human race.
- iv) Culture is significantly related to biological processes. It regulates the manner in which basic biological urges, such as hunger, thirst and sex, are satisfied. Consequently, there are tremendous variations in respect of satisfactions of these urges.
- v) Cultural processes have a significant bearing on health and sickness in society. Factors such as class, occupation, urbanisation and food habits are significantly correlated with certain types of diseases, such as hypertension, diabetes and ulcer.

- vi) The respective roles of men and women are not determined by biological processes, but are defined and influenced by cultural conditions. In other words, a culture defines what roles and activities are appropriate for men and women.

21.6 KEY WORDS

- Cultural Transmission** : The process whereby elements of culture, such as language, attitudes and beliefs, are passed on from one generation to another through training and education.
- Endogamy** : The system of marrying within one's own group or caste.
- Exogamy** : The system of marriage which requires that a person may marry only in another group or village.
- Fraternal Polyandry** : A system of marriage in which a woman is married to two or more brothers in the same household.
- Genetic Transmission** : The mechanism whereby the parents pass on their hereditary physical characteristics to their offspring.
- Gotra** : A Hindu clan which traces descent from a common ancestor.
- Lineage** : A group of people who are related by blood ties, and who trace their descent from a common ancestor.
- Polyandry** : A system of marriage in which a woman is married to two or more men at the same time.
- Polygyny** : A system of marriage in which a man is allowed to have more than one wife.
- Race** : A human population whose members share some hereditary biological characteristics which separate them from other groups.
- Rules of Incest** : Universally prevalent rules in human society which prohibit marital or sex relations among close relatives, such as between father and daughter, mother and son, brother and sister.
- Shamanism** : The widely prevalent belief among primitive people in the power of medicine men and sorcerers, who act on behalf of spiritual forces and heal the sick.
- Species Specific** : Those characteristics and features, mainly of a biological and physiological nature, which are unique to human beings or any other organisation.
- Symdolic Communication** : Communication through language which is unique to human beings.

21.7 FURTHER READINGS

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21.8 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Culture has three major features. It is commonly shared among the members of a group or community. It is the attribute of a group, rather than an individual and therefore a social phenomena. It is learnt and acquired by individual human beings in the course of growing up in a social milieu largely through language. It is transmitted, through education, from one generation to another.
- 2) Human being is a unique animal in the animal kingdom because unlike other animals they do not behave by instinct but according to the cultural pattern of their society. They use tools of increasing complexity and functionality than any animal, Culture is unique to the human species.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Culture and biological processes are closely related. Culture regulates the satisfaction of basic biological urges, such as hunger, thirst and sex. Consequently, these urges are satisfied in scores of ways by various groups of mankind.

There is a significant correlation between certain types of diseases (such as hypertension, diabetes and ulcer) and certain cultural factors, such as food habits, urbanisation, occupation and class. Roles of men and women are not determined by biological factors. These are conditioned by cultural processes.

- 2) Race constitutes the differences in physical features and characteristics which are transmitted generically from one people to another. The racial features have nothing to do with cultural or linguistic features, although culture is often confused with them. Culture, as a contrast, is the sum total of human beings life ways, their behaviour, feelings and thoughts. It constitutes everything that is acquired by them as social beings.