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CULTURAL CHANGE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The twentieth century is often remembered through its landmark events such as the Bolshevik Revolution, the World Wars, Fascism and the liberation of Asian and African nations from colonial rule.



Fig. 28.1.1 Bolshevik Revolution storming of Fort



Fig. 28.1.2 African Liberation



Fig. 28.1.3 Attack on Pearl Harbour world War II



Fig. 28.1.4 Fascism in Italy



Fig. 28.1.5 Ethiopia Liberation Movement



Fig. 28.1.6 Trench in World War I

All these developments were undoubtedly crucial and left their deep imprint on the contemporary world. However, it is important to note that society is transformed not just by dramatic occurrences but also many **slow and long term changes** in economy and culture and demography. The twentieth century was also a period of numerous such changes some of which were imperceptible to people living through them but which, in the long run, played a major role in giving to the world its present form.

In the previous chapter you learnt about a number of such developments including demographic explosion, rapid urbanization and the phenomenal growth of the middle and the working classes over the past century.

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Akin to such changes in the social structure or relations between major social groups in different countries, **cultural transformation** i.e. changes in people's values, attitudes, artistic tastes etc. also came during the same period through a slow and long term transformation. In the following chapter we shall try to closely examine some of these cultural changes and also assess whether they are leading to the evolution of a widely shared global culture today or to more tensions and frictions between cultures.

**OBJECTIVES**

After studying this lesson, you will be able to:

- explain the various meanings of the term culture;
- highlight the peculiar features and problems of interpreting culture;
- enumerate the major changes which came about in science, art, religion, education, media, recreation and attitudes and values during the twentieth century and
- assess the balance between 'globalization' or creation of an integrated world economy and culture and continuing resistance to western dominance today.

28.1 CULTURE DEFINED

But before we begin our journey into cultural changes of the twentieth century, it would be useful to carefully examine the various **meanings given to the term culture** in different disciplines.

Indeed, culture is one of the most complex terms in social sciences. Not only because it refers to a wide range of attributes such as customs, habits and values etc. which are difficult to measure or quantify but also because the term has been used in a variety of ways by different scholars.

For example, in official announcements and news bulletins, the term culture is frequently used to refer to **artistic creations** and intellectual achievements primarily. Thus Indian culture is showcased through our classical and folk music, dance forms, literature etc. with this usage of the term.

In a sharp departure from this notion, anthropologists use the term culture to refer to **the whole way of life** of a community including its cuisine, dress, work and leisure routines as well as popular customs, festivals etc. In this usage the focus is not so much on the exclusive or classical achievements of great artists and thinkers but on everyday practices which have been traditionally shared or accepted in a community. Thus in the study of Indian culture the focus on our popular festivals, religious traditions and also the caste system would be important according to this definition.

In yet another interpretation of the term culture, it is the **implicit values, beliefs and attitudes** widely shared or understood in a community that are recognized as the core of any culture. Thus Indian culture is supposed to have traditionally valued family bonds and respect for elders much more than the western world where children mostly leave their parents after marriage and the marital bond has also become extremely fragile.

In contrast to this concern with mentalities or ideals and belief patterns, archaeologists prefer to focus on **material culture** or commonly used artifacts such as pottery, jewelry, buildings etc. of ancient communities whose remains they try to locate through excavations.



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If you were to carefully review the preceding definitions you would note that culture can be studied with **two different criteria** in mind: of artistic and intellectual refinement on one hand and of historically shared or popular traditions on the other. The latter can also be identified at different levels: in material objects, practices or in values and attitudes.

Following these multiple facets of culture, we shall now briefly go through some outstanding developments in related fields such as the sciences, arts, entertainment, values, religion and education which were witnessed in the twentieth century.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 28.1

1. Give two example each of revolutionary and slow modes of change witnessed in the twentieth century.

2. Compare and contrast various interpretations of the term culture. Can you locate some common features in these interpretations?

3. Why is culture such a difficult term in social sciences?

28.2 SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Perhaps the most remarkable achievement of the twentieth century was the phenomenal growth of science and technology which affected and transformed every aspect of life from entertainment and education to transport and communication at a very rapid pace during the period. Cars and aeroplanes, radio and transistors, movies and television, calculators and computers, satellites and mobile phones and lasers and organ transplants are only some of the new products and services made available by modern technology during the preceding century.

Behind this spate of technological innovations lay very intricate developments in various scientific realms such as sub atomic physics, genetic and molecular biology and space research. Some of the famous scientists who made major discoveries in these fields were **Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Fyneman** and **Homi J. Bhabha**.



Fig. 28.2.1 Marie Curry, Discovery of Radioactivity



Fig. 28.2.2 Richard P Fyneman

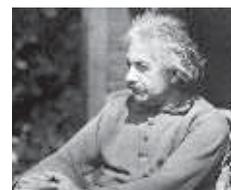


Fig. 28.2.3 Albert Einstin, Nuclear Scientist

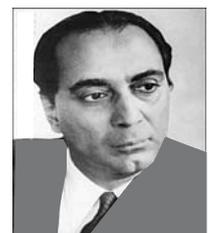


Fig. 28.2.4 Homi J. Bhabha, Nuclear Scientist

**Notes**

But by and large recent scientific advancements have not been a product of individual genius so much as of large teams of scientists drawn from various countries of the world and concentrated in heavily funded research centers in advanced countries, specially the USA.

It is also important to note that while contemporary science and technology have offered numerous benefits to people, at the same time, the apprehension and fear of science amongst people has also grown simultaneously. Partly this is due to the incomprehensibility of latest advances in modern science even to educated laymen. What makes modern science perhaps even more awesome is its power to manufacture evermore destructive weapons and to threaten the delicate ecological balance on the earth.

Obviously, social accountability and responsibility of scientists and governments promoting and guiding scientific research is high in the present epoch.

The Arts and Literature

Besides science, the twentieth century has also been a time of considerable growth of art forms such as painting, music and literature and of the emergence of some totally novel artistic media such as cinema and recorded music.

Some of the major art movements which shaped new creative work in this period across countries were modernism, socialist realism and postmodernism. In fact modernism evolved as ‘avant garde’ or leading art trend in Europe in the last quarter of nineteenth century and became a worldwide influence in the twentieth century.

Although modernism had diverse streams such as symbolism, impressionism and surrealism, one major tendency common to them all has been the urge to uncover the deeper world of subconscious feelings and thoughts instead of portraying the apparent world of objects and persons as they appear. Further, to give expression to this modernist concern with subjective and subconscious elements, conventional modes of artistic expression had also to be transcended and new and bold experiments tried repeatedly which often look extremely abstract and incomprehensible to an untrained viewer.

Some of the great modernists who evolved their own styles in this vein were the Spanish painter Pablo Picasso famous for introducing ‘cubism’ or multi dimensional view of figures in paintings and the famous Irish writer James Joyce who introduced the technique of ‘the stream of consciousness’ in his work called Ulysses.



Fig. 28.3 Picasso



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Ironically, while most modernists were extremely bold and experimental in evolving new modes of artistic expression, in their social and political outlook, many of them remained apathetic to political challenges of their time and deeply pessimistic about modern civilization or even the human condition as a whole.

In the same period, however, another branch of artists expressed a more forward looking and hopeful vision of social transformation in their works through the genre of socialist realism. Playwrights like Bertold Brecht in Germany and George Bernard Shaw of Britain and novelists like Maxim Gorki and poets like Alexander Blok in Russia can be counted as the leading lights of this trend. These poets and writers were inspired by the ideals of an egalitarian transformation of society.

The Bolshevik Revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union inspired many and socialist realism as an art trend continued to inspire considerable creative work in many non communist countries caught in the fierce trap of colonial, feudal and capitalist exploitation simultaneously. In India, for example, the Progressive Writers' Association was formed by master poets like Majaz and Josh in 1940s with explicit left sympathies, and other masters such as Premchand reflected deep social concerns in their realist accounts of rural life of their times. Similarly, in China, great realist writing with socialist leanings was penned by a genius like Lu Hsun while in Latin America the anti US resistance inspired the poetry of Pablo Neruda.

In fact, the flowering of art and literature in Asian, African and Latin American countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is one of the most significant developments of recent times. Artists in such countries gave expression to the nationalist aspirations on one hand and also dealt with the problem of feudal and emerging capitalist exploitation within their societies, as also the peculiar challenge of synthesizing their traditions with a rapid surge of modernization on the other. From the creative genius of Rabindranath Tagore a hundred years ago to the post colonial musings of Gabriel Garcia Marquez in Latin America and Chinua Achebe of Africa, this engagement has produced some of the finest literature of recent times.

Philosophy and the Human Sciences

In terms of students, faculty positions in universities and publications, the Human Sciences (Social Sciences and Psychology) have seen a phenomenal expansion in the twentieth century and specially after the Second World War in most countries of the world.

However, along with expansion and the growing race for publications and promotions amongst social scientists has come a growing tendency for specialization and jargon which characterizes lots of academic writing today.

In fact, the birth of specialized disciplines from a comprehensive and unspecialized approach to social and philosophical enquiry can be traced back to early nineteenth century in Europe when economics, political science, sociology, anthropology and psychology gradually emerged as distinct disciplines with their own specific methods and delimited concerns.

Meanwhile, philosophy under the influence of thinkers like A.J. Ayer and Wittgenstein itself shifted focus increasingly from probing broader questions about ethics and politics to a narrower and rigorous concern with clarifying the nature of language and symbols through which issues are posed.



Great Thinkers



Fig. 28.4.1 E. P. Thompson



Fig. 28.4.2 Amartya Sen

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This does not imply that broader questions about causation, human nature and change are not being posed today. Great thinkers like Bertrand Russell, Noam Chomsky and Louis Althusser continued to write on a broad range of concerns.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 28.2.1

1. Name four outstanding scientists of the twentieth century along with the discoveries.

2. Name the major art movements which influenced artists and writers across nations in the twentieth century.

3. Name a few thinkers who continued to write innovatively on ethical and political issues at a time when excessive specialization and jargon came to dominate the majority of scholarly writing in the preceding century.

28.3 CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND SYMBOLS

While changing concerns and achievements of scientists, philosophers and artists are important aspects of cultural history, changes in cultural institutions such as religions, folklore, language, education systems and the mass media are also extremely significant to note in any study of cultural change. Anthropologists refer to these as cultural institutions or symbol systems which represent coherent patterns of values and worldview to the participants. Such cultural symbols are of historical significance not only because they address basic human needs for information, entertainment and faith or ‘meaning’ in life but also because they have a major role in shaping popular values, beliefs, emotions and behavior patterns commonly observed in different social groups.

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But it is important to note here that in most societies, the regulation and control of cultural institutions such as education and the mass media is mostly in the hands of the dominant elites who control property as well as centres of power. You are familiar with the Brahmanical influence on Hindu beliefs regarding caste system, sati etc. which enabled the upper castes especially in ancient India to monopolise the fruits of labor performed by the Sudras. Similarly, in modern times, the capitalist class exercises vast influence on the mass media and seeks to mould popular beliefs and attitudes in such a way as to facilitate its dominance over the exploited masses with or without the use of force.

Within this general model of the operation of cultural institutions, numerous variations can be seen in their characteristics or 'meaning'. The past century was indeed a time of rapid transformation when fundamental changes occurred not only in the message and content of education, religion and folklore etc. but also in the balance between these major cultural institutions across countries.

LANGUAGES

One of the principal ingredients of any culture is its language. The twentieth century witnessed a dramatic transformation of the linguistic map of the world as local dialects spoken by the masses as well as classical languages like Sanskrit and Latin, which had been the privileged media of learning amongst scholars for centuries, gave way to select national languages adopted by regions to express their emerging national identities.

It has been estimated that nearly 6500 languages are still spoken in the world today. Nearly half of these are spoken by tiny communities and are in the process of becoming extinct already. Ten major languages are mother tongues of more than half of world's population already. (Source: Foundation for Endangered Languages website)

Another interesting feature of the changing language pattern of the globe in recent times has been the growth of bilingualism or familiarity with at least two languages amongst a growing number of educated people across the globe. The English language has particularly emerged as the second adopted language with the growth of globalization and the emergence of the internet. While the Chinese remain the biggest linguistic group in the world still, the number of people knowing English (about 10% of global population) is second and the number knowing English as second language is the highest.

Another major development amongst languages in the twentieth century under the impact of growing education and mass media has been the growing mixture between them. While English itself has adopted a number of new words from other languages including French and Hindi, the evolution of Hinglish or the spoken mixture of Hindi, Urdu and English amongst educated Indians is also noteworthy in this context.

FOLK TRADITIONS

The twentieth century also saw a major transformation in the position of folklore in popular culture across societies. Dozens of traditional arts and modes of entertainment such as puppet shows, story telling, mythological drama, folk dances etc have quietly but surely got marginalized within the past century over most of the developing world. Age old songs, tales and fables which had been used by communities to both transmit ideas and values to succeeding generations rapidly lost ground to professionally produced entertainment and news programs broadcast through the modern mass media.

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Yet some effort is being made by states as well as civic agencies, as in India, to preserve them through financial and institutional support now.

MASS MEDIA

On the other hand radio, cinema, gramophone records, television, cassettes and CDs and computers and mobile phones arrived in quick succession and revolutionized the way we receive information, entertain ourselves, relate to each other or even think and respond to social and political issues.

Though some of the new media like cinema and television have been used for producing highly artistic and educational programs also by great artists of the century such as Charlie Chaplin, Satyajit Ray and Steven Spielberg yet, the logic of advertising and the competition for a mass audience which is the driving force behind these media has encouraged more and more sensationalism, sex and violence in their programs.

The attention commanded by these new channels of mass communication and entertainment has been historic. Thus it was found during a survey that in the USA a majority of families already had two TV sets in 1980 and that an average child there spent twice as much time before television as in study or sports.

RELIGION

Besides traditional art forms and folklore, another major cultural institution whose role in most societies has got delimited over the past century is religion. In both the developed and the developing world, predominantly secular outlooks and loyalties such as humanism, nationalism and democracy have inspired vast movements and commitment amongst people over the past century. This is not to say that nationalists (who profess a strong loyalty to a nation state) or the humanists (who value human life more than the after life) can't be religious at the same time. Indeed, in almost all the countries, most people (specially women) continue to count themselves amongst believers to this day. In a 1981 survey of religious beliefs in the USA, for example, only about 10% of people described themselves as atheists. Moreover, pilgrimages and the production of devotional literature and songs etc has actually grown phenomenally over the past century.

Yet, the shrinking influence of religion in everyday life is also evident in the fact that religion does not permeate daily practices ranging from greetings, meals, celebrations, public ceremonies etc specially in the cities in the manner it did only a hundred years back. Secondly, religious values and outlook do not entirely encompass other major social institutions such as the state, arts etc. as they did earlier and a vast number of our practices today are actually carried on in a manner quite contradictory to common religious beliefs. Thus, only a century ago, most marriages even in the west were solemnized in the church and baptism for every new born was almost mandatory. By 1990, it was discovered in France that only 30% of couples got married in church. Divorce and abortion which were prohibited by the church have become not only legalized in most countries in the west but also increasingly accepted and destigmatised. Similar trends are visible in many Asian and African countries too.

EDUCATION

While religion has ceased to define, in recent times, the rules and ideals operative in a growing number of social realms, modern education based on secular and scientific knowledge has grown phenomenally over the same period. The requirements of modern educated citizens proficient in reading, writing and calculations and proud of their

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national history and heritage was strongly felt not only for manning the modern posts in the state and industrial and service sectors of the economy but also for creating a homogeneous body of citizens intrinsically loyal to their nation states.

Most western countries had made school education compulsory and affordable or free in the nineteenth century itself. In the previous century, the newly liberated nations in Asia and Africa also made efforts in the same direction though with less success due to limited resources and the heavy burden of the colonial and alien pattern in their education systems. In our country, more than half of the population remained non literate as late as 1980 and only in the preceding two decades has the proportion of non literates come down to 25% approximately.

Meanwhile university education expanded rapidly from the middle of the twentieth century. Thus, in 1939, in advanced countries like Britain and France, less than 0.1% of the population were enrolled in colleges. By late 1990s, however, nearly 2% of the population in most of these nations could be receiving college education (a twenty fold increase). Indeed, between 1960 and 1980, higher education expanded phenomenally in the developing world too and similar proportion of students in these poorer countries got enrolled in universities soon even though their vocational and primary education still remained undeveloped. Further, due to a much smaller organized sector in their economies the problem of educated unemployed was also stupendous in these countries.

University students have been active in social and cultural protests. The large scale and simultaneous student protests which spread like wild fire from New York and San Francisco to Paris and Prague in 1968 are still remembered for their radicalism since they sought to not only oppose repressive state policies and educational elitism within these countries, but also spawned robust internationalism and anti war anti imperialist sentiments by challenging US intervention in Vietnam. In the more recent decades, however, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union and the proliferation of escapist entertainment channels, student protests seem to be in a state of lull worldwide.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS**

1. What is meant by the term cultural institutions in the given text? Name some major institutions of culture.

2. In what ways did the linguistic pattern of the globe change in the twentieth century?

3. Name the various new channels of mass communication which revolutionized the ways in which we receive news, information, entertainment and talk today.

28.4 GLOBALIZATION

The rise of modern education, mass media and secular political ideologies have contributed to another significant development of the twentieth century, namely,

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globalization. The process of globalization may be defined as the emergence of a more and more integrated world with growing networks of multi-national trade, manufacturing and finance as well as political and welfare agencies such as the United Nations and professional bodies such as the World Social Forum uniting an overwhelming number of people in ties of interdependence though on unequal terms favoring the rich.

The growth of multi national corporations, the availability of goods and services from across the globe in city malls and over the internet, cheap and instant communication of ideas, news and information across the globe, the emergence of global trends and markets in fashion, food and entertainment are all indications of the extent of globalization apparent today.

Here it is important to understand that globalization did not suddenly emerge in the twentieth century. Global trading networks and flow of medical and technical knowledge can be traced back to earlier periods too. The process of colonization of non European countries by European powers from the beginning of the sixteenth century stepped up the unequal integration of the world in a phenomenal way. But the growth of powerful and far reaching transnational corporations and associations and global media networks are more specific to the preceding century only.

While these new channels enable global flows of goods, services and information and may be expected to bring greater choice and possibly prosperity to some regions, the reality is that not only have they suddenly disrupted age old cultural patterns and social customs but are also moulding the entire world in western habits and values generally, besides further sharpening inequalities between the rich and the poor across the globe.

Unfortunately, within this advance of western ideas and habits across the globe again, the migration of the great ideals of liberty, equality and democracy into the non western world have been much more difficult than the contagion of western individualism, materialism, break up of the joint family and community ties, loneliness, neurosis etc. On top of this, in many developing countries, the problems of rampant poverty, corruption, criminalization, lawlessness or dictatorships still complicate the situation ominously.

In this scenario, great responsibility falls on the shoulders of the young to make the right choices between enticing options and steer their countries through the whirlwind of cultural and social change expected to accelerate in the new century.

**WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT**

While leaders, battles and revolutions have a major influence on the world at times, slow and imperceptible changes in demography, social classes and widely shared beliefs, values and attitudes also transform it cumulatively.

The twentieth century was a unique time of major changes of the latter type too. Thus science and technology grew on a phenomenal pace in this period while the arts, philosophy and literature experienced worldwide movements such as Modernism, Socialist Realism and Postmodernism, and universal cultural institutions such as language, religion, education and mass media saw mammoth quantitative and qualitative changes in their working.

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As a result of these all round and speedy transformations, the world is also becoming more and more globalised now. This involves increasing integration of most countries of the world not only in terms of production and consumption of goods and services but also through exchange of news, information, ideas and entertainment.

While these growing cultural changes offer new opportunities for learning and mobility to today's youth, they also pose challenges such as increasing global competition, rising egoism, consumerism and hedonism and resultant alienation from family, country and collective efforts for building a just, prosperous and free society.

**TERMINAL QUESTIONS**

1. Unprecedented growth of science and technology in the twentieth century has not been an unmixed boon. Comment
2. Despite the fact that most people in the world still describe themselves as religious, the role of religion in public life has declined in recent times. Explain.
3. Describe the role of education and students in cultural transformation during the twentieth century.
4. Describe the relationship between globalization and westernization and also reflect on the challenges as well opportunities they bring to cultures of countries such as India.

**ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS****28.1**

1. Examples of Revolutionary Changes of the twentieth century include the birth of the Soviet Union in 1917 and the independence of colonized nations of Asia and Africa, led by India from 1947. Illustrations of slow but major cultural changes of the same period include the spread of literacy and ideas through expansion of educational institutions as well as mass media and the increasing globalization of entertainment, news and knowledge production.
2. The term culture has been used in two different ways by social scientists: to refer to creative work in the arts, literature, philosophy etc and to denote common values, beliefs and behavior patterns of a community deriving from its shared history, physical environment and traditions of language, folklore etc. While the former notion of culture is often exclusive to highly talented minds the latter pertains to social groups as a whole. Both, however, speak of mental phenomena mainly.
3. The term culture is as difficult as it is important in social sciences because its usage varies across thinkers and also because it refers to phenomena which are neither concrete nor measurable.

28.2

1. Among the outstanding scientists of the twentieth century were: Marie Curie (who laid down her life while working on the process of radiation); Albert Einstein

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(credited with the development of the theory of relativity); Fyneman (responsible for the development of the wave theory of sub atomic particles) and Charles Babbage (who did pioneering work in the creation of computers).

2. Modernism, Socialist realism, Postmodernism.
3. Bertrand Russell, Noam Chomsky, E.P. Thompson, Amartya Sen.

28.3

1. Cultural institutions here refer to symbol systems which are designed to shape attitudes, beliefs and values in a community. Some of the major cultural institutions found in all societies are religion, education, language, folklore and customs and the means of mass communication.
2. The twentieth century saw the further consolidation of national languages or major regional languages over local dialects and classical tongues in Asian and several African countries too. At the same time, English has emerged as a major link language of a globalising world.
3. Telephones, radio, cinema, television, tape recorders, compact discs, computers, communication satellites and mobile phones.

HINTS TO TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Refer 28.2
2. Refer 28.3
3. Refer 28.3.6
4. Refer 28.4

Project Work

Cultural change is often slow and imperceptible. But the twentieth century has witnessed a relatively rapid transformation of culture too. Ask your elders and try to cite some examples to illustrate cultural transformation witnessed within their lifetime.

Cite some elements of unity underlying the diversity in Indian culture in the realm of values, arts, institutions and customs today.

GLOSSARY

Culture	:	Shared values, beliefs and customs of a community on one hand and creative works in the arts, literature, philosophy or science on the other.
Globalisation	:	The growing integration of the world through increasing cross country networks of communication, entertainment, business and politics.
Jargon	:	Excessive use of technical and unfamiliar terms instead of everyday words in a display of scholarship.
Bilingualism	:	Ability to use and comprehend two languages with equal competence.
Modernism	:	A major twentieth century aesthetic trend which sought to express inner pains and problems of modern society.
Secularisation	:	The declining role of religion in public life without necessarily involving the rise of atheism.