



315en29B

## CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL SITUATION

Suppose you woke up one morning to find yourself in an strange land, where people speak a language you do not understand, wear different clothes, eat food you are not used to. You would probably find it impossible to survive unless you learned their ways of behaviour. These ways of behaviour, along with many other things, go into the making of our culture.

As you will see, all of us are born into cultures. This may differ according to our region, religion and caste or class. As we grow, each one of us absorbs dozens of cultural practices almost automatically. Many of these practices have been handed down for generations, some of these for centuries, and some are even millennia old traditions. At the same time, cultural practices are subject to change. In this lesson, we will explore our relationship to culture.



### OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson, you will be able to:

- define culture;
- analyse how culture is shaped;
- explain cultural interaction and
- critically analyze phenomenon of globalisation.

### 29.1 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CULTURE

#### Forms of Cultural Expression

When we hear or see a cultural programme either on radio or TV or on stage, this usually includes music, songs and dance. Each of these is a form of cultural expression. Each such form communicates a message. A sculpture of the Buddha in meditation for instance, may be meant to encourage feelings of peace and tranquility (Fig.29.1). A folk/story may teach and entertain, whereas a towering monument like the Qutab Minar may tell us with awe (Fig.29.2). In other words, culture can be used to transmit a variety of ideas. We will see more examples of this in Lesson No.31.

**Notes***Fig 29.1 Buddha**Fig 29.2 Qutab Minar*

We have a wide range of cultural forms in India. These include sculpture, architecture literature, painting and music to name a few. There is an immense variety within each of these. For example, if we think of songs, we can immediately think of so many types: folk songs, film songs, bhajans, qawwalis. etc. Each type is usually sung on a special occasion, and has a special purpose. At the same time, you may have noticed that some film songs are in fact bhajans or set to folk tunes. In what ways do you think that a bhajan in a film is different from that sung by devotees in a temple?

## **29.2 POPULAR OR FOLK CULTURE**

Common people have developed rich cultural traditions which are often called popular, literally of the people. People have expressed themselves and communicated cultural values through song, dance and storytelling. All of these go into the making of folk culture.

Given their limited material resources, common people cannot build grand monuments, but they create and use countless smaller objects which are extremely beautiful. While some of these objects are used for routine activities, other are

*Fig 29.3 Kailashnath Temple*



## Notes

reserved for special occasions. Unfortunately, most of the material used is perishable, such as cane, cloth, wood, leaves or earthenware. As such, these objects do not last very long. So we know much less about the cultures of common people from ancient times (Fig 29.3).

### 29.3 CLASSICAL CULTURE

Dance forms such as Bharat Natyam are often referred to as classical. This means that it is one of the finest forms of artistic expression. Similarly Kalidasa is regarded as an example of a classical Sanskrit poet, The temples built by the Cholas are regarded as examples of classical temple architecture, as is the Taj Mahal of Mughal architecture (Fig.29.4)



Fig 29.4 Taj Mahal

We can justly be proud of these achievements. However, we need to remember that at the time when Kalidasa wrote (c 4th century AD) most people in north and central India spoke various forms of Prakrit (from which many modern Indian languages have developed). While they would have followed the Prakrit portions of Kalidasas plays, they would not have been able to understand his Sanskrit Verses. Similarly, common people would have found it difficult to enter the exquisite monuments we have just mentioned. Entry may have been restricted on grounds of caste or religion.

As such, classical culture tends to be highly developed but exclusive. It is only since the last two centuries or so that many Sanskrit works have been translated into regional languages, and monuments have been thrown open to a wider public.

Folk and classical cultures have co-existed and interacted for centuries. They have borrowed and adapted ideas from each other.

#### How Anthropologists Define Culture

Anthropology literally means the study of human beings. Cultural and social anthropologists study present-day societies, including rituals, beliefs, social customs, work patterns etc. So, When anthropologists write about culture they include some or all of these aspects.



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**The Archaeologist And Culture**

When often feel that we have something in common with those who eat and dress like us, whereas we tend to treat those who eat and dress differently as belonging to a different culture. This definition of culture is very similar to that used by the archaeologist. An archaeologist studies houses, tools, pots, statues, etc and tries to reconstruct how people lived in the past. Because all these objects can be seen and touched, and are more or less permanent they are regarded as part of our material culture. You will learn more about the production of some aspects of our material culture in next lesson (30).

While clothes and food are also part of our material culture, they decay very fast. As such, while archaeologists do often recover traces of food and clothes used in earlier times, these are generally fewer than those of things such as utensils, tools or weapons.

We can see then that culture can be defined in many ways:

- (a) as forms of cultural expression (e.g. song, dance, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, etc.)
- (b) in terms of the social group which produces or uses a cultural form (e.g. popular/folk, classical/elite)
- (c) broader definitions in terms of aspects of social, religious and material life.

Have you noticed how these definitions overlap? Look at the picture of this house (Fig.29.5). In terms of its form we would classify it as an example of architecture (as opposed to sculpture or music). It is also, at the same time, an example of folk or popular culture, as it is a part of the material culture of those who build and live in it.



*Fig 29.5 A House*

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Another example: a painting from Ajanta can be classified as a classical religious painting. In the next lesson you will learn about how cultural forms are produced.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 29.1**

I. Match the following:

- |                    |                             |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| (a) Dance          | Sanskrit poetry             |
| (b) Taj Mahal      | form of cultural expression |
| (c) Kalidasa       | Mughal architecture         |
| (d) anthropology   | material culture            |
| (e) archaeologists | Social customs              |

II. State whether true or false:

1. Film songs never borrow folk tunes.
2. Story telling is a part of folk tunes?
3. Rituals are not a part of our culture.
4. Houses, clothes and food are part of our material culture.
5. Folk and classical cultures have not influenced each other.

**29.4 HOW CULTURE IS SHAPED**

Some of our most spectacular forms of cultural expression are connected with religion. In architecture, the stupa at Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh), the temples of south



*Fig 29.6 Sanchi Stupa*



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India mentioned above, and those at Dilwara (Rajasthan), as well as the Jama Masjid, Delhi (illustrations) are outstanding examples of beautiful structures created for religious purposes.



Fig 29.7 Dilwara Temple

Religion has, through the ages, also inspired some of our best poetry and music. These include Vedic chants, the compositions of Buddhist monks and nuns, and perhaps most well-known, the compositions of Bhakti and Sufi saints.

Tamil Nadu has had a rich and continuous tradition of Vaishnava and Shaiva devotional literature, which includes the compositions of women like Andal. One of the earliest and best-known Kashmiri poets was Lai Ded, a woman saint of the fourteenth century.

Today, medieval saint-composers such as Mira Bai, Guru Nanak and Kabir are revered not only in their own regions but throughout India. Many saints belonged to low castes and used the language of common people. Their compositions, part of our popular culture, have been transmitted orally for centuries.

Our religious beliefs also influences our daily lives. Sometimes, marriage rituals, the food we eat, and the clothes we wear are governed by religious rules. But, more often, what we eat and wear, or our marriage customs, “vary according to regions rather than according to religion. To take a simple example. Hindu Muslim Christian and Sikh wornd in Punjab—generally wear salwar kameej, whereas Hindu, Muslim and Christian women in Tamil Nadu usually wear saris. So while our religious beliefs do shape our cultural practices, they are not the only influence.



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Fig 29.8 Jama Masjid

### 29.5 OUR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SITUATION

Many of our cultural practices are influenced by our social and economic situation. For example, our social situation may influence what we wear. You may have noticed that many women are required to dress differently, depending on whether they are unmarried, or widowed.

Sometimes, our cultural practices may be influenced by both our social and our economic situation. This includes such things as our tastes and preferences in music—whether we like folk songs, film songs, classical music or western pop music. While we can learn Hindi film songs quickly from the radio, for example, learning classical music is far more difficult and expensive. It also takes much longer, and many of us might find it difficult to spare time for it.

The cultural objects we produce and use are also often limited by our economic resources. None of us would have been able to build the Taj Mahal even if we had wanted to. This was only possible for Shah Jahan, the ruler of a large and prosperous empire.

Shah Jahan began the construction of the Taj Mahal in 1632, in memory of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal. It took about twenty two years to build the monument, with as many as twenty thousand labourers working daily during the earlier/stages. The cost of construction was forty million rupees, an enormous sum in those days.



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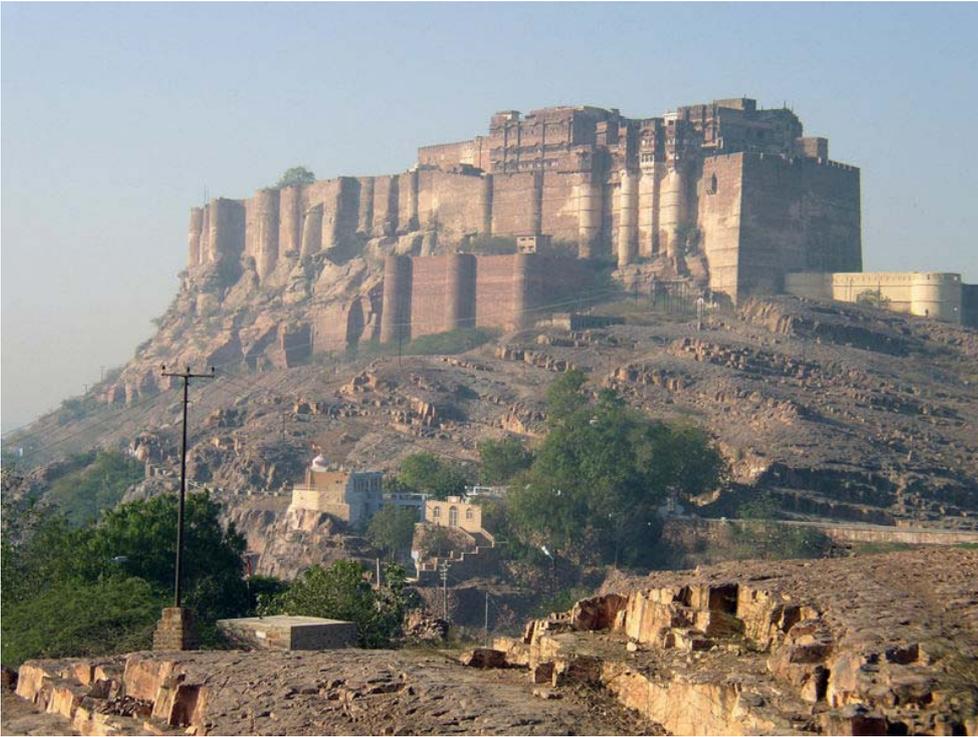


Fig 29.9 Jodhpur Fort



Fig 29.10 Jaipur Fort



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In fact, most of the splendid forts, palaces, and religious monuments we see (illustration, Jodhpur/Jaipur) were built by rulers. Apart from serving as royal residences or places of worship, they were also meant to proclaim the power and glory of those when got them built. However, although material resources are important, they are not always decisive. Mira Bai left the wealth and splendour of the palace of Chittor to embrace a life of homelessness and freedom to pursue her spiritual goals. Today we remember her songs and *not* her husband.



## INTEXT QUESTIONS 29.2

1. Fill in the blanks:

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ at Sanchi is an example of religious architecture.
2. Vedic chants are a form of \_\_\_\_\_ Music.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ was a famous woman saint of Tamil Nadu.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ is one of the best-known Kashmiri poets.
5. Bhakti and Sufi saints composed poems in the language of the \_\_\_\_\_.
6. These poems were transmitted \_\_\_\_\_.
7. The clothes we wear vary according to rather than \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Forts and palaces were built by \_\_\_\_\_.

## 29.6 CULTURAL INTERACTION

Our culture is often shaped through a process of interaction. This happens when people with different cultural traditions come into contact with one another. Such contact can take place through the expeditions and voyages of merchants or traders, or when conquerors invade a country. It also occurs when pilgrims or travellers visit distant lands, and when craftsmen and labouring women and men travel from place to place in search of employment.

Those involved in such interactions learn about the practice of different peoples, and carry their own ideas and customs to new lands. In the process, the cultural practices of all those who participate in such interaction tends to change.

Let us take the example of food. Did you know that vegetables like the potato and tomato were introduced to India about five hundred years ago by Portuguese traders and soldiers who brought them from central America, and that tea has come from China? Other food items, such as rice and the dals we use, oilseeds like mustard and sesame, have been cultivated in India for over five thousand years.

If you look at what we eat today, you will notice that it is a mixture of foods which have been traditionally available, as well as more recent additions. At the same time, people in other parts of the world, such as the USA and Great Britain, have developed taste for Indian cuisine, especially curries and kababs. You will come across more examples of cultural interaction and its effects in the lessons which follow.



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**INTEXT QUESTIONS 29.3**

State whether true or false:

1. Cultural interaction can take place when merchants visit new lands.
2. Invasions do not lead to cultural interaction.
3. Tea was grown in central America.
4. Mustard and sesame were brought to India by the Portuguese.
5. Curries are popular in Great Britain.

**29.7 GLOBALISATION**

The process whereby the entire world is being brought under a single economic and cultural network is often referred to as globalisation, (from the word globe)

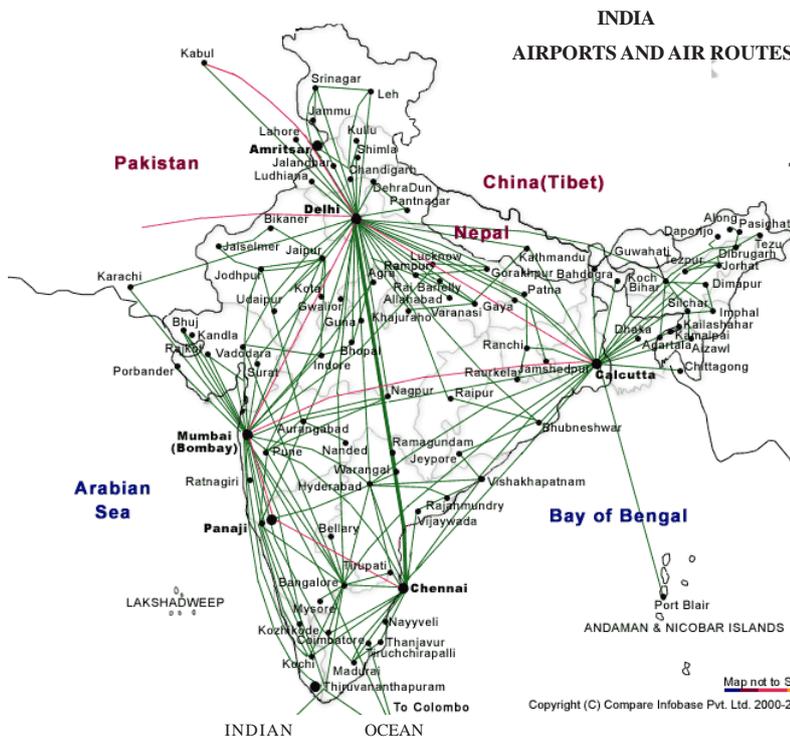


Fig 29.11 Airline network

**29.8 WHAT IS A GLOBAL VILLAGE**

You may have heard the expression global village. At first sight it may appear to be contradictory. How can something which is global or worldwide be a village at the same time?

The phrase global village was used for the first time by a scholar named Mc-Luhan. He felt that with the increased use of television, communication would change



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dramatically This meant that people would be able to send messages across thousands of miles almost instantly. As a result, physical distance would no longer appear as a barrier, preventing or slowing down communication.

Over the last few decades, and especially in the last ten years, the vast TV networks which have emerged through the use of satellites and other powerful technological devices might make us believe that McLuhan's prediction has come true. Sitting in India, we can watch Nelson Mandela taking over as president of South Africa, or a cricket match in Sharjah. But then we may ask are the differences amongst people only those of physical distance?

While most people who live together in a village are farmers, there are obvious differences amongst rich landlords, small farmers, tenant cultivators, craftsmen, and landless agricultural labourers. In other words, people can be close to one another in physical terms, but be separated by social and economic distance. As the landlord are more powerful they tend to dominate social, economic and cultural interaction in the village. So although communication may be direct, and face-to-face, it is at the same time influenced by the fact that those who participate in it are not equal in status.

This problem is aggravated even more in the global village. Here communication is dominated by people in cities. You may have noticed that on the average, city-dwellers are richer and more influential than those who live in villages. We can go a step further and distinguish between cities in developing countries like India, and those in developed countries like the USA. People living in the latter are generally richer than those living in Indian cities, and it is usually powerful people in these cities of the developed countries who produce and beam out TV programmes, which we then receive.

What happens in the global village is that although distances are overcome, communication becomes a one-day process. We can see and hear what is presented by the TV producers, but there is no genuine dialogue. So unlike face-to-face conversation in a small village, where we can discuss, interrupt, quarrel and make up, we simply receive the messages which flow to us from TV and often follow them. It is much more difficult to question or challenge what we are told.

### 29.9 ADVERTISING AND CONSUMERISM

Consider the programmes we listen to on radio, or watch on TV-news, films, talk shows. programmes on science, music, history, sports-the variety seems infinite. However, no matter what we might choose to watch, we also see dozens if not hundreds of advertisements. Why is this so? This is because advertisers or sponsors pay for the programmes we see. They are usually carefully to choose programmes which are popular, so that they can reach out to a wide audience. They can then advertise their products to millions of people.

What the advertisers hope is that while watching our favourite TV shows we will notice their products and be tempted to try out. In other words, they get an

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opportunity to persuade us to buy their brands or products, no matter what soaps, creams, cars, household appliances the list is endless. This tendency to buy things beyond our immediate and basic requirements and occasionally beyond our means is known as consumerism.

Thus, while distances have indeed been bridged dramatically, the new technology is used to the advantage of big manufacturers including multinational companies. They create a large population of consumers who are persuaded to spend what they earn, or even borrow to buy various “objects of desire”.

As it works at present, globalisation usually serves the interests of rich industrialists more than anything else. For globalisation to be truly beneficial it will have to develop into an interaction based on respect for cultural diversity and a sharing of the world’s resources rather than their concentration in the hands of a few.

We also need to remember that the potential benefits of globalisation cannot be ignored. Even as we are persuaded to buy foreign products through TV programmes, we also learn about other cultures. We have to decide what is worth accepting and what can be rejected. Globalisation is something we now live with. We must understand that we can do so on our own terms.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 29.4**

Fill in the blanks:

1. Globalisation is taking place in the spheres of the \_\_\_\_\_ and cultural communication.
2. The \_\_\_\_\_ phrase was coined by McLuhan.
3. Advertisers \_\_\_\_\_ TV programmers.
4. Global communications are dominated by the \_\_\_\_\_ countries.

**WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT**

Culture is an integral part of human existence. There are many forms of cultural expression. Forms which are produced by or for common people are known as popular, whereas more exclusive forms are known as classical culture includes our social customs as well as objects such as clothes or food which we use in our daily lives. Our cultural practices are often influenced by our religious beliefs and our social and economic condition. They are also shaped through interaction amongst people. In the present-day situation, globalisation represents one specific form of interaction. This is a mixed blessing. It often leads to consumerism. This is encouraged by manufactures who advertise their products. At the same time, globalization is a beneficial force as it helps us communicate across great distances. And facilitates the exchange of all kinds of ideas and information.

**Notes****TERMINAL QUESTIONS**

1. Make a list of all the forms of cultural expression mentioned in the lesson. Tick the ones you have seen and heard yourself, and mention when and where you saw or heard the one you liked the most (e.g., your favourite painting, song, etc.)
2. Describe some of the ways in which our social and economic situation influences our cultural practices. Do you think that these are all important? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Think of a place you visited. Is it in your (a) district (b) state (c) country? Describe the ways in which the culture of the people of the place is similar to/different from yours.
4. Describe the nature of communication in a global village. In what ways is it similar to or different from that in an ordinary village?
5. Cut and paste five advertisements from either a daily newspaper or a magazine. Describe the products being advertised, where they are manufactured, where they are available, and what is the price. Describe how the advertiser tries to persuade you to buy the product.

**ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS****29.1**

- (a) form of cultural expression
- (b) Mughal architecture
- (c) sanskrit poetry
- (d) social customs
- (e) material culture

**II**

1. F
2. T
3. F
4. T
5. F

**29.2**

1. T
2. F
3. F
4. F
5. T

**Notes****29.3**

1. economy
2. global village
3. sponsor
4. developed

**GLOSSARY**

Anthropology	–	literally means the science of man. It includes a study of human beings in totality emphasizing both the physical and social aspects.
Archaeologist	–	is a scholar who analyses material remains of past societies and helps us understand them.
Classical	–	refers to anything which is considered to have perfect proportions. It is also used to describe what is usually thought to be excellent.
Consumerism	–	refers to the tendency to want more goods and services than are actually necessary, sometimes even if these cannot be afforded.
Material culture	–	includes things we use in our daily life. These are tangible, i.e. we can see and touch them, unlike ideas, which form part of our culture, but are intangible.
Popular	–	refers to something of the people, which is carried on by them. It also means something which is within the means of the people, as well as that which is approved or liked by the people.
Vedic Chants	–	The Vedas are four in number; Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva. These consist of mantras, many of which were meant to be chanted or sung during sacrifices and other rituals.