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# UNIT 1 MEANING AND TYPES OF CULTURE

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- gain an understanding of the concept of culture;
- understand the importance of culture and its effect on our lives;
- be acquainted with different perspectives on culture; and
- categorize different types of culture

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this Unit we will try to look at the concept of culture in all its aspects as it relates to human society and civilization. We shall see how culture impinges on our lives at various levels and how important it is as a means of carrying forward traditions and values. By the end of this Unit, you will have a fair idea of the notion of culture and be able to see how culture can be defined and also how it can be categorized into different types.

Before we begin to talk about the different types of culture, perhaps it would be appropriate to see what exactly we mean by 'culture'. We suggest that you carry out Activity 1 as listed in section 1.5 of this unit.

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## 1.2 MEANING OF CULTURE

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The dictionary defines culture as 'customs and civilization of a particular time or people' and 'intellectual and artistic achievement or expression'. Through time, various thinkers and philosophers have defined and explored the meaning of culture in their own ways. In the 1950s, A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn collected over a hundred definitions of culture.

Culture is spoken of as *sanskriti* in Vedic terms, the word originating from *sanskara* which is imbued with the sense of a process of enhancement and cleansing. *Sanskriti* could then be taken to mean a collection of techniques or a system that purifies and elevates Man's existence by showing him how to coexist in harmony with others and teaches him the courtesies of living in human society and the practice philanthropy. It also gathers into its ambit, those values and modes of conduct which bring about refinement and instills those *sanskara* which will take them on the road to enlightenment and will refine their talents.

In his book, *Knowledge, Culture and Man*, Pritibhushan Chatterji says that culture "means something cultivated or ripened... 'Culture' also refers to some kind of refinement which is born of education and enlightenment." This seems to be very close to culture as envisioned in our ancient Vedic view.

Perhaps one of the very first comprehensive statements about culture in the Western world was offered by an anthropologist, Prof. Edward Burnett Tylor who said that culture was a multifaceted set of "knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Another anthropologist, William A. Haviland, offered this modern view of culture: "Culture is a set of rules or standards that, when acted upon by the members of a society, produce behaviour that falls within a range of variance the members consider proper and acceptable."

Describing culture as both the result and foundation of instruction, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru declared that it was fundamental for the creation and growth of both physical and mental attributes. Cultural historian Raymond Williams views culture as a whole way of life, or a structure of feeling.

In her book *Culture and Modernity*, Roop Rekha Verma defines culture as "a system of the patterns and the modes of expectations, expressions, values, institutionalization and enjoyment habits of people in general."

Sri Rajgopalacharya, a great Indian philosopher and the first Governor General of independent India, said that culture was the collective expression of the thoughts, speeches and deeds of the learned, talented or creative members of a society or a nation.

Thus we can see that the various definitions of culture do not lay stress on the outward behaviour that can be observed but on the ethics and ideas from which attitudes and behaviour originate.

With so many different perspectives on culture, it is difficult to give one, universal, blanket definition that would cover all aspects because both the meaning and aim of culture is so vast. In culture can be found, the origin and evolution of all the thoughts, customs, objectives and ethics of a particular country or society. It can rightly be said that culture is traditional yet dynamic as it keeps expanding and developing. It is the foundation of the lifestyle of a nation and continuously supports the progress of the members of that society towards a civilized, liberal and enlightened way of life. It is a collection of abstract concepts that have gradually evolved from time immemorial which have contributed to the growth of human society. For any nation, its cultural values form the basis of its progress and its power which can thus, without exaggeration, be called the real wealth of a nation.

### Check your progress 1

**Note:** 1) Your answer should be 500 words;

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit or in the section concerned.

1) How do the various definitions of culture embrace all aspects of human society?

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### 1.2.1 The characteristics of culture

According to William Haviland, there are four basic characteristics of culture. The first thing we can say about culture is that it is common to a group of people who make up a particular society. It can be said that culture is like an ensemble of signs that every person puts up for the others so that he can be identified in a distinct manner. It marks out and shows how we are different.

It is not hereditary but something that is learned after birth during the period of socialization. Culture is the different ways we have of knowing not only others but also ourselves. The culture of urban spaces - the indifference that is so much a part of urbanization - allows an intermingling of various cultures. When two people of different cultures meet and interact in an urban social situation, that space is, in a sense, a sort of no-man's-land and belongs to neither in particular. So, as sociologist George Simmel says, modern, urban culture is as much about indifference as it is about difference.

Culture is associated with various symbols such as an image, an object of worship, rituals, texts and artefacts to continue its flow and it is dependent on people following the codes of conventions associated with a specific culture. It is something that is learnt and internalized by that particular community. However, none of these symbols should be confused with the culture itself. They may be the conduit into the processes of a culture but they have meaning, only insofar as, a network of people make use of them in particular ways. In this way, a colour, a stone, a gesture may become a sign. We cannot say that we can understand a culture merely by looking at its signs. We have to see what part they play in the lives of the people, how they are used - and abused - in their daily lives.

It is an amalgamation of social, economic and political features. Cultural historian Raymond Williams refers to culture as a whole way of life, or a structure of feeling. This definition underlies the idea of culture being something that one

imbibes, often unconsciously and which influences and shapes all things in your life, your attitudes, how you perceive something, how you react to it etc.

Since culture is a collection of rules or signs that regulate our actions and reactions, they can also determine whether or not we are tolerant of differences and how we get along with those of other cultures or with rule-breakers. Some cultures deal strictly with those who break their rules while others, which are more secure about themselves, take such things in their stride. Thus culture, depending on the conventions, place, time etc, can be either closed or open to differences. Quite often, the openness or otherwise of a particular culture is determined by ethical or political factors both towards those on the inside of that culture and towards those on the outside of it. This gives rise to cultural politics and cultural relativism.

Culture provides a sense of identity to its members, thus helping them cope with difficulties during times of stress and lends meaning and continuity. Where the forces of capitalism and the marketplace have eroded the sense of continuity due to rapid political and economic changes and, as Karl Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profaned', culture is the one process that affirms one's sense of self and identity in this increasingly divided and fragmented world of consumerism.

Sometimes, there is a conflict between the forces that drive the economy of a nation and the passions that fuel a culture and which view economy as being a supplement to culture and not the other way around.

Culture can never be the result of any one single person's initiative or endeavour nor can it be said to be the consequence of any particular incident at any particular time. It is a slow and gradual evolution over epochs and history. Culture is the collected legacy of innumerable ventures, trials and experiences over time as societies and civilizations evolve over time. It is not something that is established or altered within the span of one generation or period but is what slowly develops over a period of centuries. Within the infinite ramifications of culture is encompassed the history of all aspects of all human societies. It registers the movement and waves of thoughts and deeds; the ascent and descent of empires and civilizations; the barriers that came in the way of human progress; the cycles of ruin and regeneration of societies at the social, national and global levels. All and any advancements made - whether in psychology, art, science, politics, economy or dealing with the spiritual realm - are recorded in culture.

So we can say that the backbone of any society is its culture. Whether it is the art, traditions, festivals, ceremonies, even dress and food, it is the culture of the community which is a deciding factor. If, for any reason there is any block or interference in the growth and transmission of cultural values, the entire structure of that particular society would change. Civilization can be said to be the external appearance of culture and the two are inextricably connected. Civilization is the expression of culture while culture is the origin and strength of a civilization. If culture cannot exist without people, people also cannot survive without culture. Perhaps it would not be wrong to state that the social function culture performs in a society is its true meaning as it primarily plays the role of expressing, informing and socializing. However, like the products of culture which mirror a social actuality, so also, we can say that the meaning of culture mirrors a reality that goes beyond factual, prosaic and scientific explanations. For some people, culture is the reflection of a spiritual force that precedes all thought and interaction.

Everyone's life is influenced by the culture that surrounds them. If we were to distance ourselves from our culture, our lives would cease to have a direction and flow and it is therefore essential for us to maintain vibrant contact with our cultural heritage.

Culture differs according to place, time, community and race and this is natural. However, when a particular culture is founded upon values of universal significance, it expands and lasts even after the society that gave rise to it is wiped out. On the other hand, if a culture has its source in greed or fanatically rigid ideology, it will not stand the test of time and will soon die away.

Any culture that is too rigid, does not adapt, or is not dynamic, would be lost. In its truest sense, culture is like a stream or river that flows around obstacles, changing course when needed without stopping its flow. None of the cultures that established their realm over a period of centuries and over different geographical spaces remained static. The secret behind their influence and longevity was their readiness to accept new inputs and to assimilate them all into a harmonious whole.

**Check your progress 2**

**Note:** 1) Your answer should be 500 words;

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit or in the section concerned.

2) What role does culture play in the evolution of human civilization? Give examples.

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3) Culture and civilization cannot be separated from one another. Discuss.

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4) What are the characteristics of culture?

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5) What do you think are the dimensions that affect culture?  
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**1.3 TYPES OF CULTURE**

We have 'corporate culture' that refers to the wheeling-dealing world of the corporate sector; there is the 'competitive culture' in educational institutions that encourages the students to give their best; there is 'consumerist culture' which highlights status and spending power and is related to greater material satisfaction; there is 'emerging culture' that is an index of attitudes and behaviour patterns of a specific group. By such free use of this word, it almost appears as though the basic meaning of culture has been lost!

Culture may be broadly divided into the following types:

- 1) High culture
- 2) Low culture.
- 3) Popular culture.
- 4) Folk culture.

**1.3.1 High culture**

The term 'high culture' was introduced in English by the Victorian poet-critic, Matthew Arnold through his work Culture and Anarchy (1869). For him, 'high culture' was a force that encouraged moral and political good. He said that this meant to "know the best that has been said and thought in the world" and he defined 'high culture' as the "study of perfection". The poet T. S. Eliot, in his Notes towards the definition of Culture (1948) felt that both high culture and popular culture were essential for there to be a complete culture.

Much of 'high culture' pertains to the appreciation of 'high art', a term that includes Literature, Performing Arts, Music and the Visual Arts. What was regarded as being a part of this 'high culture' was that which had mostly been created during a time when the artist had the patronage of wealthy, sophisticated and aesthetically inclined people and was thus able to produce works of art in an atmosphere that was free of financial or other tensions. Hence, the Western concept of 'high art' flows from the Graeco-Roman period and through the Renaissance. Of course, it existed in other societies as well, notably the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, Byzantium, Persia and China etc.

'High Culture' refers to paintings or cinema by the acknowledged masters, classical music or dance and writing that has been established as canons. Although it has

been criticized as being elitist and catering only to the educated, urban, affluent class, efforts have frequently been made to involve the general public in exhibitions or concerts that featured 'high culture'. Governments of various countries also promote it by funding museums and libraries and subsidizing theatre or music groups.

As access to books and education gradually opened up, academicians took up the study of all aspects of high culture and courses that focus on liberal arts promote this concept although they do not nowadays, use this specific term.

In the fields of Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Critical Theory, Sociology, Marxist thought and Postmodernism, the issue of high culture vis-a-vis popular or mass culture has been focused on in a variety of ways. It has also been an important concern in the field of political theory on Nationalism. For instance, Ernest Gellner viewed it as an essential feature in the formation of a composite national identity and he defined high culture as "...a literate codified culture which permits context-free communication". He distinguishes between various cultures rather than on the differences within a particular culture and contrasts 'high culture' with less complicated, agriculture-based 'low cultures'.

Yet another Sociology related, broader, class based concept of 'high culture' defines it as, "taste", under which can be found etiquette, appreciation of fine food and wine etc. It also refers to certain social rules that are meant for the upper class and which are not accessible to the lower classes.

### **1.3.2 Low culture**

This is a disparaging term, used for some varieties of popular culture and is viewed as the opposite of 'high culture'. Some culture theorists opine that both 'high' and 'low' cultures are subcultures. In the post-Modern era, it often appears that the line of distinction between both has almost been erased. Examples of 'low culture' are kitsch, slapstick, escapist or pulp fiction or cinema and popular music and dance (as opposed to classical music and dance).

The Romantic Movement was among the first to take another look at the supposed 'low culture' and re-value it at a time when medieval romances that had earlier been disparaged began to influence literature. 'Low culture' is also another term for popular culture ie, that which has mass appeal. This could include things in society as diverse as gossip magazines or talk shows, sports like football or cricket, film music and books that are currently best sellers or even take-away food.

### **1.3.3 Popular culture**

In the fifteenth century, the word 'popular' when used in law and politics, denoted 'low', 'base', 'vulgar' and 'of the common people'. It was not until the latter part of the eighteenth century that the word gained the positive connotation of what it is taken to mean today 'widespread' and 'well-liked'.

This type of culture, also known as pop culture, as the term suggests, is related to all those activities (along with their associated symbols) that are popular or common. The question which arises is how is this determined? It is determined most often by the mass media which defines and even determines what is popular in the social context - i.e. all that is accepted by the majority of the members of

a society. Popular culture is also taken to mean all those cultural factors that are widely prevalent in a particular society and which are transmitted through the local language.

Popular culture features constant change and is limited by both space and time. It flows, forms alternative streams and whirlpools which together create values and attitudes that are inter-dependent and influential in various ways. Elements of pop culture may actually diversify or evolve into a separate sub-culture as well. Whatever constitutes popular culture appeals to an extensive section of the public.

Popular culture is also often defined as Mass Culture, which is commercially driven, mass-produced and is meant for mass consumption. It can also be termed as the 'authentic' culture because it most reflects the tastes and fashions of the majority of that period. It is often seen as being almost antithetical to the exclusive, elitist 'high culture' and a sign of resistance by the masses. Popular culture has been seen to have emerged from the shift to urbanization after the Industrial Revolution.

Popular culture embraces a range of fields from mass media and entertainment to cooking, literature, clothing, sports, fashion, music, etc. and is expressed through circulation in large numbers. It has had great influence on art, notably that which was produced from the fifties onwards in the UK and the USA. It is frequently viewed as superficial, driven by consumerist motives, corrupted (and capable of corrupting), sensationalist in nature and catering to the lowest common denominator and therefore criticized, especially by religious organizations. There is the view that it is debased and inconsequential and one which not only skirts the deep realities of life but also, at the same time, ignores the simple, artless joys of existence. Some works appear to blur the fine line that demarcates 'high' and 'popular' culture and seem to belong to both categories for one or the other reason.

**Check your progress 3**

- Note:** 1) Your answer should be 500 words;  
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit or in the section concerned.  
5) How would you distinguish between High and Popular Culture?

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6) According to you, is popular culture an essential part of our society? Give reasons for your answer.

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7) Popular culture is only another name for vulgarity. Do you think this statement is true? Give reasons for your answer.

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8) In what ways does culture unite and in what ways does it divide people?

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**1.3.4 Folk culture**

This is the tradition and customs of a particular community or society that is reflected in the local lifestyle. Folk culture is usually transmitted from generation to generation through the oral tradition and is imbued with a strong feeling of community. It also shows up the differences between what used to be done and the new ways of doing it. In earlier times during the pre-industrial eras, folk culture was equivalent to mass culture and hence could also be called the popular culture of that time.

Folklore was and is a part of popular culture that is usually spread through word of mouth and in these modern times, through the Internet and SMS, evolving over time and usage.

Folk culture is firmly rooted to a sense of place. Even when some elements of it are shifted to a new locale, as in the case of migration, the displaced elements still carry strong connotations of the place of their origin. What distinguishes folk culture from popular culture is that the former places emphasis on looking inward without reference to the outside, unlike the latter. However, it must not

be forgotten that folk culture has always influenced both 'popular' and 'high' culture and many features of folk culture have gone on to become an indistinguishable and inextricable part of both these cultures.

**Check your progress 4**

- Note:** 1) Your answer should be 300 words;  
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit or in the section concerned.
- 9) Folk culture is what holds a community together. Do you agree? Give reasons and examples.

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**1.4 LET US SUM UP**

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There are many different definitions of culture as offered by sociologists, philosophers, cultural historians, anthropologists etc. They all try to encapsulate the different aspects of culture and how it impinges on our lives. Culture is something that is not transmitted through our genes but through symbols that are learned in the process of socialization. All culture is learned, but not everything learned is culture. Different communities or societies have different sets of values. Sometimes, these differences may lead to conflicts. The symbols of culture in themselves do not mean anything unless they are invested with significance by human beings. It is also possible for a sub-culture to exist within a community when certain groups within the larger community evolve their sub set of rules and symbols. Politics, economics, ethics, religion etc are all factors that influence and are in turn, influenced by culture.

Culture has been categorized into various categories like high, low, popular and folk. The categorization is based on the type, origin and nature of artistic or literary work and its appeal to various sections of society.

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**1.5 ACTIVITY**

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- 1) Put down your own thoughts about what you think culture means before you start reading this Unit. Try to illustrate your ideas with specific examples that you think may be appropriate and then compare what you have written with section 1.2 which discusses the meaning of Culture.
- 2) In the present day, the word 'culture' is used in many contexts. Hold

discussions with your friends or family and try to determine the types of culture that can be distinguished. Read what has been written on this subject in section 1.3 of this Unit and see how many of your ideas match what has been discussed.

- 3) Try to gather some examples of what is referred to as 'high culture' and note down what exactly is required in order to be able to appreciate and enjoy them.
- 4) Make a list of some works of 'high culture' that can also be enjoyed by the common man.
- 5) Look at all the items of popular culture that surround you in everyday life and select a particular area. Write down its characteristics and how it is different from High Culture.
- 6) Watch a film and review it from the viewpoint of culture. Which category would you place it in?
- 7) Go around the area where you live and try to collect some examples of folk culture in the form of their music, dance, handicrafts, stories etc. How many of these have entered the realm of popular or high culture? How have they been changed?
- 8) Take a look at traditional stories about a particular festival that have been handed down over generations in your own family and compare it with those told in other families or other communities. See what the differences in narration are and how they reflect that particular community's ideas.

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## 1.6 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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## 1.7 GLOSSARY

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sanskriti

amalgamation

consumerist culture

emerging culture

Post-modernism

pulp fiction

Kitsch

sub-culture

cultural politics

cultural relativism

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## 1.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

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### Check Your Progress 1

Answer 1. Read Section 1.2

### Check Your Progress 2

Answers 2 to 5. Read section 1.2.1

### Check Your Progress 3

Answers 6 to 8. Read section 1.3.1, 1.3.2 and 1.3.3

### Check Your Progress 4

Answer 9. Read section 1.3.4 and 1.2