

Culture and Society: India

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Abstract

The term 'culture' was originally associated with 'the tending of natural growth' and human education. However, in the 19th century, its meaning evolved to represent culture as an independent entity, signifying 'a general state or habit of mind' linked to human excellence. In time, it evolved to signify 'the collective tapestry of intellectual growth within a society,' weaving in 'the rich tapestry of the arts.' Eventually, it blossomed to embrace 'an entire way of life, intertwining material, intellectual, and spiritual threads.'

INTRODUCTION

During the eighteenth century, European observers noted that Indian society and political development matched those of European society. Portuguese adventurers, administrators, merchants and priests were the first modern observers of the Indian caste system, gaining direct experience with Indian society on the Malabar coast. The missionary perspective emerged later than the orientalist view. By the eighteenth century's end, three major traditions for studying Indian society had developed: orientalist, administrative, and missionary (Cohn, 1968). In "Culture and Society," Williams (1959), an English cultural critic, argues that the notion of 'culture' experienced a significant transformation in meaning during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Initially, 'culture' was primarily associated with 'the tending of natural growth' and human education. However, in the 19th century, the term evolved to represent culture as an autonomous entity, signifying 'a general state or habit of mind' linked to human excellence. Subsequently, it came to describe 'the general state of intellectual development within a society' and included 'the general body of the arts.' Ultimately, it expanded to encompass 'a whole way of life, including material, intellectual, and spiritual aspects' (Oswell, 2006).

Society originally comprised segments of the population with leisure time and associated wealth. In contrast, mass society denotes a period where the masses have been liberated from "physically exhausting labour." Historically and conceptually, society preceded mass society, and neither term is generic; each can be historically pinpointed and described (Arendt, 1960). In contemporary discourse, it is widely recognised that engaging with mass culture and mass society is essential. It is important to identify certain "positive" elements within these phenomena, primarily due to the intrinsic link between mass culture and mass society (Arendt, 1992). In the late 1970s, the "sociology of culture" emerged, utilising traditional sociological methods to investigate the creation and distribution of cultural artifacts such as music, art, drama, and literature. By the late 1980s, cultural sociologists had broadened their focus beyond the institutions responsible for cultural production, directing their attention to the significance of meaning in social life. Culture represents a theoretically defined aspect of social existence that must be distinguished from the complex reality of human life (Sewell, 2004).

Indian Society

The Eurocentric perspective and labour market framework are insufficient for addressing social exclusion

in India. Historically marginalised groups include Dalits/Untouchables/Scheduled Castes, Adivasis/Scheduled Tribes and, in certain regions, women and religious minorities. However, the discourse on exclusion in Indian society is most effectively understood through the lens of the caste system. Social exclusion in India is deeply rooted in the Hindu caste system, which has persisted for over three millennia. Caste functions as the traditional mechanism of social organization and control in India, representing one of the most intricate forms of social stratification and one of the most comprehensive and objectionable exclusionary systems (Modi, 2015). In post-independence India, civil society primarily traces its origins to the late colonial period, shaped by resistance to colonial rule. Various associations flourished in a diverse social landscape. Gandhian organizations promoted volunteerism, emphasizing basic education for Dalits ('untouchables') and village development. Western liberal thinkers and philanthropists, including Christian missionaries, played a significant role in building health and education infrastructure and advocating for social reform (Basile, 2017).

Throughout history, cultures within different societies have undergone both gradual and significant changes. These transformations have been facilitated by successive generations, who not only absorbed and integrated the cognitive and practical skills of their predecessors but also critically evaluated, assessed, and incrementally expanded upon them. This process was driven by the need to address previously unresolved issues and to confront new challenges as they arose (Gautam, 1994). India is renowned for its diverse languages and religions, creating a demand for measures to protect minority cultures. While the state plays a crucial role in providing these protections, it should also actively contribute to the cultural development of communities. The need for state cooperation in fostering social and cultural progress is particularly pronounced in India (Char, 1946). The initiation of nationwide census operations in 1872 significantly advanced the ethnographic mapping of India, with these censuses being conducted every ten years starting from 1881. Many scholars have highlighted the crucial impact of the census in both understanding India and aiding its social and political evolution (Béteille, 1992).

India, with its ancient roots, has faced contradictions and socio-political upheavals from within and due to foreign invasions. Consequently, it has undergone various social and structural changes over time, reflected in its socio-cultural fabric. These hierarchies and social structures have appeared in different forms, influencing and reshaping the nature of Indian society and its diverse institutions, including marriage, family, jāti, caste, community, kinship, religious practices, and rural, urban, and tribal communities (Modi, 2012). The globalisation and liberalisation policies of the 1990s appear to have significantly expanded India's middle class, which now comprises nearly 30 percent of the population and continues to grow. However, an important question remains: has globalisation facilitated inter-generational occupational mobility? Even today, there is a scarcity of comprehensive studies on this aspect of occupational mobility across generations in India (Modi, 2014).

Indian Culture

Culture significantly influences the process of knowledge acquisition, particularly within educational settings such as schools and colleges. It impacts language learning, including elements such as pronunciation, sentence structure, and dialogue. Moreover, culture shapes the tone of voice used during personal interactions, even in group contexts like discussions around a table. Additionally, culture determines whether learning is pursued individually or collaboratively (Mohanty, 2011). Indian culture is characterised by complexity, with traditions traceable back at least five millennia. Processes of immigration, invasion, colonial rule, and modernization have introduced external influences, some of

which have been assimilated into foundational Indian worldviews, while others coexist within the overarching Indian cultural framework (Sinha & Kumar, 2004). Cultural development is a historical process characterized by the transmission of knowledge and practices from one generation to the next, facilitating the perpetuation of culture across generations. The culture inherited from predecessors constitutes cultural heritage (Satpathy, 2015).

Indian culture embodies the lifestyle embraced by the civilised populace of India, particularly Hindus, since approximately 400 or 500 B.C. This cultural manifestation is documented in literature from that period onward, primarily in Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit languages, and subsequently in other languages, including certain Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages, notably Tamil and Telugu (Aos et al., 2006). Indian culture does not prioritize the Western notion of exploiting and controlling the environment; gaining power and dominance over nature is not valued. In the Indian perspective, humans are an integral part of the world and are created from it (Bigart, 1972). It may be advantageous to perceive Gandhi and Nehru's leadership in India as establishing a novel set of values for social reform. While these leaders drew upon elements of the Indian ethical tradition, this influence may be less significant compared to the new values introduced. The divergence of modern Indian leadership from the past is best understood by acknowledging the assertion that the Indian perspective on life is "spiritual," in contrast to the West's "materialistic" viewpoint. Against this backdrop of "spiritual" values, the reform movement's values are new and essential. The contemporary leadership of social reform has addressed the profound dualism inherent in Indian thought, central to Buddhism and Hinduism, the two most widespread forms of Asian religion and ethical philosophy (Goheen et al., 1958). Culture intertwines with economic political, and social processes, making it challenging to understand development without cultural factors. The intersection of culture and development emerged as an approach in the 1990s during a period of crisis in development theory (Schech, 2024).

Conclusion

India exemplifies the significant transformations instigated by both internal dynamics and external influences, which have reshaped its social structures, including marriage, family, caste and community. It plays a crucial role in language acquisition, affecting pronunciation and sentence construction. Furthermore, culture dictates communication styles and preferences for individual or group learning, rendering it an essential component of the educational experience. Indian culture, characterised by its intricate complexity, has been shaped by successive waves of immigration, invasion, colonial rule and modernisation. Embracing the richness of India's cultural evolution is imperative, as it is a powerful force that shapes the nation's identity and future.

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