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CULTURE QUESTION: WESTERN AND INDIAN CONTEXT



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ABSTRACT

The present paper intends to explore the notion of culture in western context in general and Indian context in particular. It also attempts to examine the role of culture as ideology, though masked, and is not obvious, but exercises and perpetuates its domination and obtains the tacit consent of the masses. Indian cultural construct has also been interpreted in the light of Jotirao Phule's theorization of Indian history, religion and mythology. The paper also attempts to build an argument regarding culture question in Indian social environment by referring the framework introduced by the discipline of cultural studies.

KEYWORDS

Culture, hegemony, ideology, superstructure, Brahmanism, Marx, Gramsci, Ambedkar, Phule, Raymond Williams

RESEARCH PAPER

Long before the establishment of Birmingham Center for Cultural Studies, the term culture, in the beginning, was used for 'tending of natural growth', as in animal husbandry or agriculture. Later it became 'a process of human development'. But in eighteenth century this term got refined and sophisticated connotation of 'high culture', and remained the same until the second half of the twentieth century. The founders of Birmingham center for cultural studies redefined the term in a very wider perspective which encompassed almost all the dimensions of human being. Raymond Williams, one of the important Marxist theorists, defined the concept of culture as-

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. The making of a mind is, first, the slow learning of shapes, purposes, and meanings, so that work, observation and communication are possible. Then, second, but equal in importance, is the testing of these in experience, the making of new observations, comparisons, and

meanings. A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are ordinary processes of human society and human minds, and we see through them the nature of culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses; to mean a whole way of life- the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning- the special process of discovery and creative effort some writers reserve the word for one or the other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind. (2011, pp.53-54)

Individual's learning of shapes, purposes and meanings leads towards the gradual understanding of culture, through which observation and communication become possible. The whole process is unconscious and gradual, a part of upbringing. Culture is 'meaningfulness' in mind, which becomes pervasive and engulfs the whole community. But it does not mean that cultural meanings are decided and determined by an individual, rather, it is a collective process. Williams's perception of cultural formation is concerned with the training of psyche in an unconscious way. Therefore it is ordinary. Ordinary in the sense, generalized, customized, and not deliberately instilled or stuffed. Williams's definition goes very close to Gramsci's interpretation of cultural hegemony which will be briefly discussed later in this paper. Of course this definition can not be considered as an ultimate definition of culture as Williams himself says that the very word 'culture' is one of the two or three very complicated words in English language. The discipline of cultural studies which emerged in 60s has become the seminal doctrine of present intellectual world. The origin of this discipline is certainly in leftist political school. The Marxist thinkers like Raymond Williams, T.W. Adorno, Gramsci, Jameson, Eagleton and others base their analysis of culture on the model of base-superstructure by Marx and Engels. In fact Marx and Engels did not write in detail about cultural phenomena, though they had concrete understanding of it. But, since, the culture was not their primary concern; we find some sporadic but crucial views on culture by them. The interpreters of base and superstructure model have discussed each and every possibility of this model in

cultural context, which has become a guiding force behind the school of cultural studies as an independent discipline. Superstructure, for Marx, consists ideology, religion, law, art etc. which are the inevitably associated domains with the economic structure of the society which consists modes of production. This influential base-superstructure model considers the economic system as the base, the foundation of society, and legal, political, and cultural forms of life are considered as superstructure which grows out of and serves to reproduce and strengthen the economic base. Though economic basis is the foundation on which superstructure is erected, this basis too is influenced by superstructure. K.N. Panikkar in this connection, pertinently argues:

In fact in Marx's scheme, the base and superstructure not only interdepend but interpenetrate as well. (April 1990, p.4)

The concept of culture has been mostly defined, analyzed and studied by Marxist and Neo-Marxist cultural thinkers. Evaluation of bourgeois economy though seems to be Marx's primary concern, the critique of German Ideology and his interpretation of art and letters have more attracted the believers and non-believers of Marxism. Louis Dupre pertinently puts –

No aspect of Marx's work has more profoundly affected the modern mind than his critique of ideology. Friends and foes alike have, often unwittingly, spoken Marx's language in interesting arts and letters and adopted his standards in judging the overall drift of our culture. (Sept. 1980, p- 91)

In this intellectual tradition, the most distinguishing and influential theorist is Antonio Gramsci, who, according to Stuart Hall, is not a Marxist in either a doctrinal, orthodox or religious sense. But still Gramsci tries to apply Marxian concept base and superstructure which serves as the background principle of his whole intellectual concern. Gramsci had his own unique way of defining culture and its attributes. He takes the concept of culture in terms of hegemonic ideological superstructure, which comprises –

1. The 'spontaneous' consent' given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental groups; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.

2. *The apparatus of state coercive power which “legally” enforces discipline on these groups who do not “consent” either actively or passively. This apparatus is however, constituted for the whole society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed. (2011, p. 191)*

Upper classes/ bourgeois, according to Gramsci, condition the masses in such a way that the hegemony is legitimized. This conditioning is so necessary and crucial because the masses/proletariats can never even think to oppose the domination. Domination by ideas and cultural forms bring about consent to the rule of fundamental dominant groups. The ‘state’ and ‘civil society’ play the role to establish the hegemony. Educational institutions, churches, media, and popular traditions and other cultural forms are the crucial elements of ‘civil society’, while, the institutions like market capitalism, fascism, police, and military, etc. are the elements of ‘state’.

Gramsci’s hegemony theory, though propounded in Italian context, suits to the need of anti-hegemonic discourse formulated by the subordinated groups all over the world.

Postmodernism and culture:

Academic area of cultural studies observes the postmodernism as an opportunity for the articulation of popular culture which demands ‘decentering’ and opens the possibilities of assertion to the marginal. Especially the neglected cultural voices get the space in the western cultural narratives. It is true that post modern condition has global capitalism that tries to control and dominate through technological power, but still, the voices from the culturally subordinated groups continue to assert using the same tools. Therefore, pluralism has become the key word in post modern cultural studies. But still the fact is, so loud the voices of masses or subordinated groups may be, they are unheard and unnoticed in a great hullabaloo of postmodern globalization. In this connection Douglas Kellner argues-

To be sure, the new world order of technology, culture, and politics in contemporary global capitalism is marked by more multiplicity, pluralism, and openness to difference and voices from the margins, but it is controlled and limited by transnational corporations which are becoming powerful new cultural arbitrators who threaten to constrict the range of cultural expression rather than to expand it. (p. 13)

Above discussion about the concept of culture, from its very emergence, focuses on the crucial facts that the new discipline of cultural studies concentrates on the issues of power politics and power relations. It also makes clear distinction between elite culture and non-elite culture. In fact the whole world is divided into these two categories. This division is visible at every moment, in every situation and every country. Even international wars, in spite of its political, economic and imperialist motives, had inevitable cultural dimensions.

Culture in Indian context-

Culture in India is not a uniform phenomenon but fragmented in several social and caste groups with their own characteristics. Though the dominant media projects Indian culture as a single and all pervasive concept, it is not so, because, basically India is divided in several religions, castes, and creeds with their own specific cultural identity. Therefore no single culture can represent the whole nation. But if one decides to classify Indian culture for the sake of understanding, he or she may have two different cultures which are in sharp contrast to each other. Precondition to understand Indian culture is to understand the caste structure and its implications. In fact no culture can be understood without socio-economic, political power relations, religious traditions, and most importantly literature. Indian cultural reality is based on the unnatural and discriminatory caste ideology which has been legitimized by religion. Indian post colonial thinkers are not enthusiastic to view the Indian culture in its true sense. Nevertheless there are resistance cultures and ideologies ceaselessly trying to liberate their suppressed cultural identity. Dominant narratives and ideologies, however, often inhibit and confuse the construction of the traditions and ideologies of resistance. Since social scientists are mostly associated with power elites, they work in the interest of upper caste dominant groups. They construct and interpret the events or evidence in ways that marginalize or neglect the role of lower caste. Post colonial thinkers, deliberately and conveniently turn their focus on the consequences of the colonialism. British rule is often held responsible for the poverty and wretched condition of the masses. This is the 'scholarly strategy' invented by Indian post colonial thinkers to divert the attention and distort and subvert the popular protest and, revolutionary movements and rebellion.

As Braj Ranjan Mani points out-

'... on the other hand, those intellectuals who are a part of the power elite play a major role in the scheme of domination. They try to conceal or at least minimize- the existence of social cleavages, and the concomitant conflicts of interests and values between masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, oppressors and oppressed in class, race, and gender. Class conflict, is a concept that upsets the elite since they do not see themselves as oppressive even though they can not outrightly deny the existence of huge social divides. Injustice and oppression, whatever its form and color, is a threat to peace and harmony. Not surprisingly, struggle, in multifarious forms throughout history, against the exploitative system are as old as oppression.'(15)

In Indian social history ideology has been treated as an instrument of domination and Brahmanism is an archetypical expression of it. Sacerdotal literature, social hierarchical structure and religio-political institutions have been created glorified, and established with the primary goal of keeping the masses ignorant, servile and disunited. (Dharmateerth1992). Brahmanism as an ideology of caste functions as a crucial vehicle to carry the vedic culture which dehumanizes, divides, and dominates the productive masses. Indian masses have been divided in thousands of castes and sub castes. This division is not based on equal footings but hierarchical. Every caste has been endowed with 'cultural ego' of its own, which instills the superiority complex and a feeling of hatred about the lower castes. Ambedkar calls it the 'graded inequality'. All the castes except some dominant ones, share the same 'humiliating status' by the ruling castes. But still they remain divided and quarrelsome. Dominant castes are always united. There may be some casual, temporary tensions among them on the issue of power sharing but ultimately they work in the interest of one another and never allow the lower castes to enter the power structure. As a matter of fact, caste system in India is based on social stratification where castes are hierarchised and 'occupationally identified'. Birth based segregation is again another feature of caste system which gets reinforced by endogamy. Casteism is a hegemonic ideology, sustained through a cleverly designed socio-religious structure, which works, to use Antony Gramsci's term, as a 'permanently organized force'. It functions at many levels in divergent forms- all of which empower the ruling dominant castes and disempower the rest. Inequality, injustice, discrimination,

untouchability, human rights abuse, mass illiteracy, and oppression are the results of caste system. Indian culture, as projected and glorified by the orientalist, is the false portrayal, pseudo-image which is far away from the reality. Here the question of representation comes on the surface – who is representing India? And who are the true representatives of India? Since the entire media and all the modes of expression have been monopolized by the ruling castes, the true picture of Indian cultural facts is impossible. Power elites/ruling castes have been projecting India as the holy land or the land of spirituality, which is utterly false depiction.

Though power politics is at the heart of Casteism/Brahmanism, it has been contested and challenged by resistance ideologies and cultures from the time of its very emergence. Jotirao Phule is the first potential opponent of cultural hegemony in modern India. In fact the age of reason in modern India begins from Phule. Interrogating and challenging the brahmanic cultural hegemony are the indispensable character of Phule's works. His ideological journey from *slavery* to *Universal Religion of Truth Book* is a perennial struggle against the ruling culture. In *Slavery* he brings out a critique of hegemonic culture and categorically insists on the necessity to destruct it. He does not stop here but introduces a very seminal system of ideas which focuses on the alternative culture.

In many ways, dharma and caste are the center of Phule's thought. His opposition to Brahmanism did not relate only to the Verna system. It also related to almost everything within the Hindu system. Phule rarely uses the term Hindu or Hinduism as we know it originates in the shrutis(the Vedas) and the smritis. He was convinced that these books were a part of the brahmanical attempt at creating texts which would rationalize and perpetuate their dominance. (Deshpande,5)

Chaturvarnya system is the most seminal feature of brahmanic culture. This is the division of people along the lines of four vernas. Since the chaturvarnya system, as the brahmanic position claimed, is God given and eternal, and therefore unassailable. (Deshpande,5).

Phule was the first thinker who could challenge this brahmanical position and rejected the pseudo-religion based on discrimination.

Phule was not interested in tinkering with this or that aspect of the brahmanical structure to make it a little humane. He argued for its complete rejection and

destruction. In its place, he sought to create dichotomous conception of the Hindu social structure. (ibid)

Some scholars have declared Phule 'system builder', which is absolutely true because, rejection of brahmanic system is not the only concern of Phule but to create and establish the alternative system is equally crucial for him. Therefore Phule's writings contain both, harsh criticism and categorical rejection of hegemonic system along with the necessity to build the original system this land. While attaching the brahmanic supremacy, which has been legitimized by the sacerdotal literature, Phule demythifies the myths such as the Avatarkalpana (notion of incarnation), Karmavipak thesis, etc., because he knows the roots of brahmanic supremacy are there in these myths, and masses have been befooled by making them to believe in them. Mythology has been the fundamental tool used by brahmanic position to perpetuate hegemonic ideology. Phule, by demythifying the myths, proves the hollowness of the brahmanic ideology and thus debrahmanises the culture.

An ideologue- activist unlike any other in India of his time, Phule grappled with almost all important questions facing society- religion, caste, politics, education, language, literature, history, mythology, the gender question, mass pverty, the state of agriculture, and the lot of cultivators. (Mani, 253)

Phule's *Slavery* is a very strong polemics against hegemonic ideology and culture. This book can be called as the inevitable theoretical statement. Published in 1873, *Slavery* is a hard hitting book, which is a virtual declaration of war on hegemonic culture. It is truly a manifesto of revolt against the caste society. Written in dialogic form, the book traces the history of upper caste hegemony and goes on to examine the motives and inhuman laws framed by the priestly class. Phule's emphasis on the subversion of the brahmanic culture and religion is not the end in itself. It is the beginning of 'alternative reconstruction.' This could not be done without replacing the discriminating culture and religion with universal and egalitarian religion. He is of the view that man and society need religion therefore he declares the new religion in his seminal book- *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak* (Universal Religion of Truth Book). This book is like his final testament, containing the gist of his thoughts on religion and culture. Here he attempts to articulate his vision of rational, compassionate, and egalitarian religion.

To conclude, if the dominating cultural construct finds its expression in the religious practices, which have been sanctioned by the scriptures, and perpetuates exploitation and oppression through irrational and unscientific or pseudo-scientific means, then, it becomes very much necessary to formulate an alternative discourse and grand narrative, to subvert the dominant narratives and discourses, through rational, scientific religious constructs, which Phule and Ambedkar do.

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