**Culture in India**

Indian culture is multi-cultural and multi-lingual. Some definitions of culture are given below:

*The sum total of knowledge, attitudes and habitual behaviour patterns shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society Ralph Linton (1940).*

*The pattern of life within a community, the regularly recurring activities and material and social arrangements characteristic of a particular group Ward Goodenough (1957).*

*Culture is the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their feelings and make their judgements” (Geertz 1957 American Anthropologist 59:32-54).*

Indian culture includes intellectual and social aspects of any human being. It also takes account of the aesthetic instinct as well as the spiritual impulses of human being. It has also, in effect, an appeal to the subconscious as a force making for the formation of character. Look at the map of India and you see India is a vast country with a lot of diversity in her physical and social environment. We see people around us speaking different languages, having different religions and practising different rituals. You can also see these diversities in their food habits and dress patterns. Besides, look at the myriad forms of dance and music in our country. But within all these diversities there is an underlying unity which acts as a cementing force. The intermingling of people has been steadily taking place in India over centuries. A number of people of different racial stock, ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs have settled down here. Let us not forget that the composite and dynamic character of Indian culture is a result of the rich contributions of all these diverse cultural groups over a long period of time. The distinctive features of Indian culture and its uniqueness are the precious possession of all Indians.

Continuity and Change

Many great cultures had developed in different countries and regions of the world. Many of them have perished or have been replaced by other cultures. However Indian culture has had an enduring character. Despite major changes and upheavals significant threads of continuity can be traced throughout the course of Indian history right upto the present day. You may have read about the Harappan civilization which flourished in the Indian subcontinent over 4500 years ago. Archaeologists have found evidences to show that cultures existed here even before the matured phase of the Harappan civilization. This tells us that we have a very long history behind us. And yet what is amazing is that even today the pattern of a house in an Indian village is not very different from that of a Harappan house. Some aspects of Harappan culture are still practised, such as, the worshipping of Mother Goddess and Pashupati. Similarly, Vedic, Buddhist, Jain and many other traditions continue to be followed even today. The point to be noted here is that continuity and change in our civilization has gone hand in hand. In fact, a remarkable feature of Indian culture is that along with continuity it has kept on changing, whereas the basic spirit of our culture continued. It has kept on discarding what was becoming irrelevant in the modern age. In our long history, there have been periods of ups and downs. As a result, movements have grown and reforms brought about. The reform movements in the Vedic religion brought about by Jainism and Buddhism in sixth century BC and the religious and social awakening in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in modern India are a few examples when revolutionary changes were brought about in Indian thought and practices. Yet the thread of basic philosophy of Indian culture continued and still persists. Thus a process of continuity and change has always been a feature of Indian culture. This shows the dynamic character of our culture. 2.1.2 Variety and Unity Indian culture, over the last three mellenia, has successfully, but quietly, observed the best assimilable parts from other religions and cultures, from time to time and integated them into itself. Indeed few cultures in the world have such variety as the Indian culture. You may perhaps wonder why the people of Kerala use coconut oil while the people of Uttar Pradesh use mustard oil for cooking. This is because Kerala is a coastal state and coconut grows here in plenty. While Uttar Pradesh is a plain area which is favourable for the growth of mustard. What is the similarity in the Bhangra dance of Punjab or the Pongal of Tamil Nadu or the Bihu dance of Assam? Both are celebrated after a rich harvest of crops. Have you noticed the different languages that we speak like Bengali, Tamil, Gujarati or Oriya? India is the home of many forms of dance and music which we normally use for festivals and social functions like marriages or the birth of a child. A large number of languages and dialects are spoken in our country which has led to the growth of a great variety of literature. People belonging to eight great religions of the world co-exist here in a harmonious manner. Do you know that India is home to many religions of the world like Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism and of course Hinduism. Numerous styles of architecture, sculpture and painting have developed here. Different styles of music and dance, both folk and classical, exist in the country. So also are numerous festivals and customs. This wide variety has led to the making of Indian culture both composite one and rich and beautiful at the same time. Why is there so much variety in our culture? There are many reasons for this. The vastness of the country and variation in its physical and climatic features is an obvious reason for the variety. The second important reason for the variety in our culture is the intermingling among various ethnic groups. Since time immemorial, people from far and near have been coming and settling here. We find people belonging to different racial stocks like the Proto-Australoids, the Negroids and the Mongoloids living in India. Various ethnic groups like Iranians, Greeks, Kushanas, Shakas, Hunas, Arabs, Turks, Mughals and Europeans also came to India, settled here and intermixed with the local population. The people belonging to other cultures brought their cultural habits, thoughts and ideas, which got amalgamated into the existing culture. India through the ages has shown a remarkable capacity for assimilation of ideas. This has contributed to the variety and richness of our culture. Along with contacts with outside cultures, cultural exchange between different regions of India has also continued. In spite of physical barriers, Indians used to travel from one part of the country to another for trade or pilgrimage. Some regions were joined together through conquests or by alliance. As a result, people transmitted cultural habits and thoughts from one part of the country to the other. Military campaigns too took people from one place to another. This helped in exchanging ideas. Such contacts have led to the development of commonness in Indian culture, which has been maintained throughout our history. Another unifying factor is climate. Despite geographical diversity and climatic variations India experiences an inherent unity. The system of monsoons is the most important component of the Indian climatic pattern and this gives unity to the whole country. The coming of the monsoon has ensured that agriculture remains the main occupation of the people of India. On the other hand, the differences in physical features have affected the food habits, dress, houses and economic activities of people leading to the formation of social, economic and political institutions. These factors in turn influenced the thinking and philosophy of the people. The variety in physical features and climate of India has thus led to the development of a variety of cultures in different regions. The typical features of different regions have given some identity to these cultures. The composite nature of our culture is reflected in our music, dance forms, drama and art forms like paintings, sculpture and architecture as well. Our literature in different languages also reflects this composite nature. Unity in diversity is reflected in our political forms as well. During the early Vedic period, society was pastoral, that is, people used to move from place to place in search of pastures. But as these people started practising agriculture, they settled down. This settled life led to community development and growth of towns which needed rules and regulations. Thus emerged a political organisation. This included the sabhas and samitis which were political bodies through which people participated in governance. In course of time, the concept of rashtra emerged and possession of territory became the new measure of power. In some places, republics came up. The period from sixth to fourth century BC is known as the age of Mahajana padas in India. In these kingdoms kings had more powers. Subsequently large empires were also established with emperors exercising absolute powers. You may be aware of ancient rulers such as Ashoka, Samudragupta and Harshavardhana. The Mughals also established a vast empire in India. The British established themselves in India and in l858, India became a part of the British Empire. However, in 1947, we were able to gain our freedom after a long struggle. Today we are a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic and a uniform system of government prevails over the length and breadth of the country.

(Source: Indian Culture Notes Indian Culture and Heritage Secondary Course)