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**ART &  
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*for* **Civil Servies Examination**

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## 1.

# INDIAN CULTURE (AN INTRODUCTION)

- The English word 'Culture' is derived from the Latin term 'cult or cultus' meaning tilling, or cultivating or refining and worship. In sum it means cultivating and refining a thing to such an extent that its end product evokes our admiration and respect.
- **Culture** is the characteristic and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Thus culture refers to a human-made environment which includes all the material and non-material products of group life that are transmitted from one generation to the next.
- **Culture** is also defined as shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization. Thus, it can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group and all the achievements of group life are collectively called culture.
- Thus, the essential core of culture lies in those finer ideas which are transmitted within a group-both historically derived as well as selected with their attached value.
- **Cultural heritage** is an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation. Cultural heritage includes:
  - ▶ Tangible culture (such as buildings, monuments, landscapes, books, works of art, and artifacts); and
  - ▶ Intangible culture (such as folklore, traditions, language, and knowledge), and natural heritage (including culturally significant landscapes, and biodiversity).
- Culture is determined and shaped historically and socially. It, in its turn, influences the social, economic and political development of people or nation.

## Culture, Society and History:

- The culture of a particular society or age cannot be separated from its historical context. The continuity, change or transformation in cultural traditions is influenced by the social, economic and political developments at any given time, and vice-versa.
- In context of India, the growth and changes in agricultural production are inseparably linked with the emergence, development and changes within the Vedic civilization in India.
- The Vedic civilization which gave birth to the varnashram and the caste system has, in turn, exerted great influence on Indian culture. The caste system - an inescapable aspect of our society through history, has assumed changes, modifications, and flexibility to suit the changing needs of the various ruling groups in India.
- The growth of art and literature as well as the Buddhist monuments of the Maurya and Gupta period would not have been possible without the prosperity and increase in commerce during that period.

- The Bhakti movement had as its basis the growth of trade and commerce, and the consequent growth of towns in the 14th and 15th centuries, which motivated a questioning of the caste restrictions in certain occupations in the name of religion.
- The preachings of Bhakti saints in the peoples' languages and their compilation made possible the growth of Braj, Awadhi, Rajasthani, Gujarati, Marathi, Panjabi, Kashmiri and other regional literatures.
- The enormous expenditure involved in the magnificent architecture of the Mughals was possible only because of the significantly increased state share in the surplus production during Mughal rule.
- Development of new musical forms and their popularisation in the courts, translation of important texts of the world, as well as growth of new techniques in production were immensely helped by the Court patronage generated by this increased surplus.
- The concepts of equality as part of anti-caste and peasant economic struggles, the movement for women's education and emancipation, a scientific temper, secularism, a democratic culture and the culture of democracy took shape in the context of modernity that came with the development of capitalism in India, as a result of the impact of British conquest.

### Impact of Political Structures on Culture:

- Political structures have also had an impact on our culture throughout its history. For example, the periods of political decentralization, as after the disintegration of the Gupta Empire and, later, the Mughal Empire, resulted in the growth of regional cultures.
- Similarly the periods of centralization, such as the Mughal and the modern periods, helped in the development of a composite culture and tradition.
- The religion professed by a ruler can also inspire the development of art forms bearing those religious expressions. Similarly a more liberal, democratic and secular rule may witness the growth of non-religious art forms as seen in modern and contemporary India. An oppressive rule can also stimulate cultural expressions of protest as seen during the colonial rule.

### Outside Influences on Culture:

- No society has existed in isolation, or remained uninfluenced by the other societies it came in contact with. Repeated new influences as a result of trade contacts, conquests followed by settlements and adoption or intermixing with the native population by different tribes and races through India's history have enriched India's culture.
- The Aryans brought with them forms of agricultural products, new gods and beliefs.
- With Turkish conquest came gunpowder, cavalry and new techniques. Stitched cloth, domes, arches, paper, glass-making techniques, and water-wheel are some of the elements of civilization which came from outside.
- Persian influences after the Mughal conquest brought into being new melodies, musical forms, musical instruments, dastan and ghazals as forms of literary expression, miniature painting, etc.
- The composite, syncretic culture, and flowering of different regional cultures came from the interaction that shared life gave to India. It is a culture of unity in diversity.

### Cultural Awareness and History:

- Even cultural awareness has a connection with history. For example, a scientific temper is possible only in the context of modernity, as are secularism and an attitude of pluralism. The past may contain many things of great importance, however, there are many things like slavery, caste system, discrimination against SCs and women, religious intolerance etc which must be seen as inimical to our development today.

### Indian Culture:

- Indian culture is an uninterrupted history of evolution dating back in the past to nearly five thousand years and the pulsating mosaic of this culture is most vividly displayed across the length and width of India. The

Indian culture is a rich plurality of cultural traditions and not a monolithic entity. This plurality in some cases is the consequence of a common origin (as in the case of the majority of Indian languages); in other cases of shared heritage (such as our music, architecture, religious cults etc.).

- Indian cultural heritage has a strong secular content and is pluralistic in character, but it also contains many elements which are hurdle in the development of the nation like caste system, superstitions, discriminations against women and SCs, etc.

### Reasons for so much variety in Indian culture:

- The size of the country and the variations in its physical and climatic features are the main reasons for the variety in Indian culture.
- Secondly, different ethnic groups like Iranians, Greeks, Kushanas, Shakas, Hunas, Arabs, Turks, Mughals and Europeans came to India. They settled here and mingled with the local population. They brought their cultural habits, thoughts and ideas to India. India has always shown a remarkable capacity for the assimilation of ideas.
- Despite this diversity, there is an intrinsic unity in our cultural heritage. It is reflected throughout the nation in our music, dance forms, drama, art and literature.

### Significance of Geography:

- The ancient civilization in India grew up in a sharply demarcated sub-continent bounded on the north by the world's largest mountain range- the chain of the Himalayas, which, with its extensions to east and west, divides India from the rest of Asia and the world. The barrier, however, was at no time an insuperable one, and at all periods both settlers and traders have found their way over the high and desolate passes into India., while Indians have carried their commerce and culture beyond her frontiers by the same route. India's isolation has never been complete, and the effect of the mountain wall in developing her unique culture has often been over rated.
- The importance of the mountains to India is not much in the isolation which they give her, as in the fact that they are the source of her two great rivers. The cloud drifting northwards and the westwards in the rainy seasons discharge the last of their moisture on the high peaks, whence, fed by ever-melting snow, innumerable streams flow southwards, to meet in the great river systems of the Indus and the Ganga. On their way they pass through small and fertile plateau, such as the valleys of the Kashmir and Nepal, to debouch on the great plain.
- Of the two river systems, that of the Indus, now mainly in Pakistan, had the earliest civilization. And gave its name to India, as the Indian knew this river as Sindhu, and the Persians, who found difficulty in pronouncing as initials, called it Hindu. From the Persia the word passed to Greece, where the whole of India became known by the name of the western river. The ancient Indians knew their subcontinent as Jambuidvipa or Bharatavarsa. With the Muslim invasion the Persian name returned in the form of Hindustan, and those of its inhabitants who followed the old religion became known as Hindu. Not only this, more than two thousand years before Christ the fertile plain of Punjab, watered by the five great tributaries of the Indus - Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Satlaj - had a high culture, which spread as far as the sea and along the western seaboard at least as far as Gujarat. The lower Indus, in the region of Pakistan known as Sind, passes through barren desert, though this was once a well watered and fertile land.
- The western half of the Ganga plain, from the region around Delhi to Patna, and including the Doab, or the land between the Ganga and its great tributary river Yamuna, has always been the heart of India. Here, in the region once known as Aryavrata, the land of the Aryans, here classical culture was formed. This is one among the most productive lands in the world, and it has supported a very large population ever since it was brought under the plough. As its mouth in Bengal the Ganga forms a large delta, and here the Ganga joins the Brahmaputra, which flows from Tibet by way of the valley of Assam, the easternmost outpost of Hindu culture. South of the great plain is a highland zone, rising to the chain of the Vindhyan mountains.
- These are by no means as impressive as the Himalayas, but have tended to form a barrier between the North and the South. The south as called as Deccan, is a dry and hilly plateau, bordered on either side by long range of hills, the western and Eastern Ghats. Of these two ranges of hills, the western is the higher, and therefore most of the rivers of the Deccan, such as the Mahanadi, the Godavari, the Krishna and the Kaveri, flow

eastwards. Two large rivers only, the Narmada and the Tapti, flow westwards; near their mouths the Deccan rivers pass through plains which are smaller than that of the Ganga but almost as populous. The south-eastern part of the Peninsula forms a larger plain, the Tamil country, the culture of which was once independent, and is not yet completely unified with that of the North. The Dravidian peoples of Southern India still speak languages in no way akin to those of the North, and are of a different ethnic character. Though there has been much intermixing between Northern and Southern types. Geographically Ceylon is a continuation of India, the plain of the North resembling that of South India, and the mountains in the centre of the Island the Western Ghats.

- From Kashmir in the North to Cape Comorin in the South the Sub-continent is about 2,000 miles long, and therefore its climate varies considerably. The Himalayan region has cold winters, with occasional frost and snow. In the northern plains the winter is cool, with wide variation of days and night temperature, whereas the hot seasons are almost intolerable. The temperature of the Deccan varies less with the season, though in the higher parts of the plateau nights are cool in winter. The Tamil Plains is continuously hot, but its temperature never rises to that of the northern plains in summer.
- The most important features of the Indian climate is the monsoon, or the rains. It has often been said that the scales of natural phenomena in India, and her total dependence on the monsoon, have helped to form the character of her peoples. Even today major disasters, such as floods, famine and plague, are hard to check, and in old days their control was almost impossible.
- Thus, although India was isolated largely by the geographical features and different climatic zone, yet her vast dimensions, variety of racial elements, wide differences of climate, great diversities of soils and different physical characteristics not only prevented her from being a stagnant pool but gave it a continental character. It enabled her to generate the forces of action and reaction which led to the development of rich civilization and culture.

## Elements of Unity in India in Different Period of her History

Due to cultural and economic interaction and geographical mobility there has emerged an all-India style, a series of inter-linkages and much commonality between different regions of India. The following few paragraphs will elaborate the elements which act as binding factors in spite of numerous diversity in India.

- India is characterized by numerous local level traditions or folk traditions as well as what could be deemed as the greater classical tradition. The latter would be more widely spread over the country but also confined to certain dominant sections of society.
- Common to each linguistic region are specific agriculture related castes which form the core of rural communities, along with their complementary artisan and service castes. These were involved in a jajmani-service provider relationship. In the urban areas there were predominantly, castes of banias (traders), crafts persons and castes such as brahmins and kayasthas.
- Pilgrimage centres have also led to a type of unity at the all India level. Barriers of caste, class and other social taboos were almost absent at pilgrimage centres during several cultural occasions. People from different regions were able to interact at the pilgrim centres with each other leading to the establishment of cultural bonds. Trans-sectarian pilgrim sites include Kashi, Haridwar, Rameshwaram, Dwarka, Badrinath, Gaya, similarly Amritsar and Ajmer Sharif also become pilgrimage centre during medieval period.
- Traditional personal laws and social customs of the Hindus were applicable in different regions. The Dayabhaga system of inheritance was popular in Bengal whereas the Mitakshara prevailed over the rest of the country, except in Kerala and Bengal. Most Indians believe in the ideas of heaven and hell and cherish the idea of moksha (salvation) or nirvana (liberation) from the cycle of life and death. This concept of moksha or nirvana is linked with the perception of the one ultimate Brahma.
- In the middle ages when the world witnessed the most intensely fought religious wars in Europe and the Middle East, India stood out as a country where many religions co-existed in relative social harmony. The role of the ruler like Akbar was also very important in this context.
- Islam seems to have strengthened the de-ritualising and egalitarian trends in Medieval Hinduism, while Hindu philosophy seems to have strengthened the mystical spiritual strain in Muslim religious thought. For example, the Bhakti movement initiated by the Nayanar Saints of South India found strength in the context of Islam

and Muslim dominance in North India. In the same way, the mystic and devotional aspect of Islam was strengthened in the philosophical milieu of Hinduism. Ramanand, Kabir, Nanak and Dara Shikoh played a significant role in the spread of mutual understanding among the Hindu and the Muslim masses.

- A unified culture in language, music and the arts was developed during the medieval period. Hindi and Urdu are the product of this unified Hindustani culture of medieval India. Both languages have common roots, common vocabulary but these are written in different scripts — Devanagari and Persian respectively.
- In music and arts, the Hindus and the Muslims had come together. North Indian (Hindustani) music was nurtured at the king's courts and in the Hindu temples. Hindus sang at the Muslim courts and Muslims have sung bhajans at Hindu temples. Krishna, Radha and the gopis have provided the staple theme for many of the compositions sung by Hindu and Muslim masters alike.
- In architecture the process of blending Hindu and Muslim elements was perfected during the medieval period. During the rule of Akbar, a synthesis of the Turko-Persian conceptions with Indian style was attempted. In Jahangir's time the Hindu influence seems to have had increased. The tomb of Akbar at Sikandra shows, in spite of its Muslim arches and domes, the general pattern of Buddhist viharas or of the rathas of Mahablipuram. Jain influence is found on the mosque of Fathehpur Sikri and Mount Abu. The Mughal architecture acquired new qualities which neither the Persian nor the old Indian styles had ever possessed.
- Painting also developed a new style during this period through the blending of the Turko-Iranian with the old Indian style. Akbar founded an academy of painting at his court where Indian and Persian artists worked together. Jahangir was not only a patron of art but was himself an artist, and during his time Mughal painting reached its zenith.
- During the colonial rule different factors led to significant changes in the structure of Indian society. The traditional framework of unity in Indian civilization came under tremendous stress. Modern education introduced by the colonial rulers initiated a process of cultural westernisation.
- The freedom movement (1857-1947) created new sources of unity in Indian society. Now, nationalism replaced religion and culture as the cementing force within Indian society. Despite the partition in 1947, the experience of freedom movement is still the foundation of Indian unity in modern India.
- After the independence the nation and its different organs have become the pillars of unity in India. The constitution built on the pre-existing unity of India has strengthened it still further by emphasizing the values of equality, fraternity, secularism and justice.
- Modern means of communication, the network of railways, surface transport, civil aviation, post offices, telegraph, telephones, print media, radio and television have played important roles in maintaining and strengthening the national ethos and creating a we feeling among Indians.
- Industrialisation, urbanization and other economic factors have led to the creation of the capitalist and the middle classes and have also created mobility of labour and services throughout the country.
- Thus, the above account on the aspect of unity in diversity speaks that Indian has a traditional culture with cosmopolitan outlook. Since time immemorial inspite of having scores of differences the country is still united in spirit, in politics, in the mind of the inhabitants and will remain in such condition perpetually.

## Major Features of the Indian Culture:

### ■ Continuity and Change

- ▶ Indian cultural heritage is as old as the Indus Valley Civilization. It still flourishes maintaining its original features together with changes. There were many great cultures in different parts of the world, however, most of them have disappeared or have been replaced by other cultures. A culture perishes when it fails to absorb changes.
- ▶ Several changes were brought about in Indian thought and practices by various movements. The major example include the reform movements by Jainism and Buddhism in 6th century BC and the religious and social awakening in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Indian culture has maintained an unbroken continuity from the Vedic times to the present day, in spite of countless wars and two centuries of the British rule. Thus a process of continuity and change has always been a feature of the Indian culture. It shows the dynamic character of our culture.

### ■ Religious Pluralism

- ▶ India has been a cradle of religions. It considered religion as a way of life and not just as rituals or dogmas. India has a tradition of giving equal respect for all religions. Due to this, other major world religions flourished in India. India has always preached and practiced tolerance and understanding.
- ▶ The secular character of Indian culture is a result of the intermingling of people from diverse cultural groups. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees and Jews live together in India and every citizen is free to profess, practise and propagate any religion of his/her own choice. There is no state religion and the state gives equal respect for all religions.

### ■ Universalism

- ▶ The values of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and Loka Samastha Sukhino Bhavanthu are the key aspects of Indian tradition. Our scriptures advocate that Iswar or the Divine Spirit is in all living beings. So, the Indian culture believes in the oneness of all living beings.
- ▶ The concept of co-existence is not limited to the geographical and political boundaries of the country alone. India has a universal outlook. It has been promoting the message of peace and harmony in the entire world.

## Spiritual and Material

- India is popularly known to be a land of spiritualism. However, Indian history from ancient times shows the development of materialistic culture as well. In the areas of astronomy, medicine and other sciences India's achievements in ancient times were significant and there was no resistance from religions in pursuing such knowledge.

## Humanity and Tolerance

- The gentleness of Indians has always been there, despite the aggressiveness of the Muslim conquerors and the reformative attitude of the British, the Portuguese and the Dutch. The Indians are noted for their benevolent and calm nature, without any harshness in their principles and ideals.

## Closely connected Social System

- The Indian culture has family-bound traditions and customs. The families are closely connected with grandparents, parents, children and grandchildren. They share the same spirit, values, tradition and property. Indians regard family as an institution or a link, which continues for the rest of their lives.

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