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Culture, in Indian Context, is Indeed Ordinary

Ram Prakash Maurya

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Indira Gandhi University, Meerpur, Rewari.

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Abstract:

Raymond Williams, the well-known socialist writer and critique, in his famous essay “Culture is Ordinary” challenges the exclusionary notion of culture and lays emphasis on its inclusiveness and synchronization with the ordinary people. This paper aims at studying the findings of Raymond Williams’s essay in the context of Indian culture and in qualifying norms suggested by the essayist with respect to the Indian society. The pre-conceived stereotypes built around any culture are hereby challenged by sharing some interesting personal experiences to corroborate the arguments presented by Raymond Williams to ultimately stress upon the organic nature of culture. The existing system of education and skill development is being put under scanner in order to assess its effectiveness to cater the diversity in Indian culture. Finally, solutions are suggested in order to nurture the cultural models of various stratum of Indian society in order to achieve a state of culture that is expanding as well as ever progressing.

Keywords: Culture is Ordinary, Indian context, Raymond Williams, Indian society.

Introduction:

American sociologist Wendy Griswold defines culture as a “society’s way of life.”

It is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society.
(Griswold)

Culture is not restricted to a specialized group of a society. A democratic state like India is the biggest manifestation of “ordinary” culture wherein the masses shape the government of the nation. Every ordinary individual contributes in the structuring of its complex and dynamic culture. The culture of wisdom and knowledge has its roots in the ordinary background. It is evident that India has history of rich culture found across the humble streets, villages among

ordinary people. If somebody genuinely wants to explore the culture of any Indian city or village, then one must roam around ordinary streets and interact across ordinary people instead of getting acquainted through controlled medium like museums or libraries. Culture is not an absolute or rigid imagery but a more abstract and non-tangible phenomenon which can be experienced by coming in contact with ordinary ambience among ordinary people.

Culture on the humble streets of India:

Few weeks back, I came across a hawker selling kitchen utensils in exchange of old clothes (a traditional business commonly seen in the old towns of India). My wife, in spite of being a working woman who is almost always busy toggling between her corporate job and household chores, took out time to check on the utensils in a hope to get a fair deal (probably an instinctive habit being an Indian woman). Even I got involved in the process when I simply enquired about the quality of the steel used in those utensils (I deliberately raised doubts over the quality so that we could negotiate well). However, the reply which the hawker gave simply shocked me. He said that his steel is “18-8”. His response astonished me so much that I immediately asked if he is actually aware what this term “18-8” means. And he said, yes, he continued, that “18-8” means that the shine of steel will never fade off and the material is quite durable.

Now let me inform the readers the technical explanation of “18-8”. It means 18% chromium and 8% nickel which is the chemical composition of one of the finest forms of steel, that is, stainless steel. While the chromium binds oxygen to the surface of the product to protect the material from oxidation and subsequent corrosion or rust, nickel protects the mirror finish of the surface of stainless steel and thus responsible for its overall durability.

Now if readers try to correlate the above technical explanation with the hawker’s reply, I am sure they will be astonished by the accuracy of his reply (“shine will never fade off and the material is quite durable”). I was equally astonished to get such a technically accurate reply from someone who might have never attended any college, leave alone the professional education. Moreover, he was well aware how to market his product by highlighting a particular component from its chemical composition.

What my entire reason of putting forth this experience here is that it is a classic example in which the culture of demonstrating technical knowledge of metallurgy into practice that I witnessed not in any lecture hall of a renowned engineering college but in a rustic old city

street; it is also a classic example in which the culture of marketing the product in such a technically accurate manner was exhibited not in any famous Business School but on humble streets; that too, by an ordinary man, having virtually no formal education. It underlines the fact that “Culture is Ordinary”.

Doppler Effect on rail tracks:

Another instance which surprised me was the scene of a railway track where some local villagers were trying to cross the track instead of walking over the foot over bridge in order to save time and effort. I saw an old man bending down the rail track and putting his ear near the track and then crossing the road thereafter. Actually, he was trying to sense the sound wave of the upcoming train in order to ensure that it is farther enough to safely cross the track. Although, this action is in no circumstance be considered “safe” and must not be practiced, but what flabbergasted me was the fact that the man was actually applying the principle of “Doppler Effect” according to which there is a change in frequency of the sound wave whenever there is a relative motion between the observer (the old man) and the source (upcoming train). It was funny and surprising to observe the practical application of a theory of physics by an ordinary man in an ordinary environment.

Culture of “Common Sense” is Ordinary”:

I would like to share another personal incident which I experienced many years back during my school days in science class when I, for the first time, learnt about the concept of “Centre of Gravity”. It states that no matter how much we displace or tilt any object, it will not fall down until its original centre of gravity (an imaginary point where the entire weight of the body is assumed to be concentrated) goes out of its geometry, or in other words, when the line of gravity falls outside the base of support. After feeling quite enlightened after studying this concept, I tried to boast my knowledge in front of my mother when I reached home. So I asked my mother, that today I will “explain” her why we keep all these steel glasses (in tapered shape) in the kitchen in an inverted position and not the other way around (being in tapered shape, a lower centre of gravity will increase stability). And my mother calmly said she already knew. I was amazed (actually quite disappointed also as I could not put up a show of my newly earned knowledge) to know how my mother who had studied only up to 10th standard is already aware of concept of “Centre of Gravity”. So, I asked her to explain the reason. And she simply replied that we keep all these glasses in inverted position so that dust and dirt do not enter in them. And I felt so annoyed with myself on making this over complicated while my mother’s

explanation was much simpler and having greater reason in all senses. This entire experience taught me that the “common sense” is not necessarily gained through a well learned process in a controlled environment as in some University or college, but rather in an ordinary atmosphere of daily routine life. Hence, the culture of common sense is indeed “Ordinary”.

Importance of “Ordinary” in literature:

Bertolt Brecht, the renowned German playwright and a path breaking one in terms of the content and structure of the theatre he created, is known for his insistence on the importance of lives and struggles of an ordinary man. His poem “*Questions From a Worker Who Reads*” is a manifestation of glorifying the achievements of ordinary people in contrast to the otherwise set notion of highlighting kings and queens.

Who built the seven gates of Thebes?

The books are filled with names of kings.

Was it the kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?

And Babylon, so many times destroyed.

...So many particulars.

So many questions. (Brecht)

Bertolt Brecht always aimed at reaching to the ordinary working class in the society through his theatre, which was traditionally meant for Bourgeois people. His subjects of theatre were always deliberately aimed towards the plight and suffering of ordinary people.

American playwright, Arthur Miller, in his famous essay “Tragedy and the Common Man” lays emphasis on the importance of life of an ordinary man in these lines:

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were.

If rank or nobility of character was indispensable, then it would follow that the problems of those with rank were the particular problems of tragedy. But surely the right of one monarch to capture the domain from another no longer raises our passions, nor are our concepts of justice what they were to the mind of an Elizabethan king.
(Miller)

The idea of Miller in putting common or ordinary man at the centre of a tragedy further substantiates the focus on ordinary man and ordinary and routinely world in determining the culture of any society in the modern times.

William Wordsworth's, in his remarkable essay "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", lays emphasis on the ordinary life as the subject of the poetry and ordinary language as the language of the poetry. Wordsworth's essay was a response to the Neo-classical age of English Literature which was essentially meant for aristocratic class. Wordsworth deliberately chose low and rustic life as the subject for his poetry. Wordsworth remarked:

Passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable. (Wordsworth)

According to Wordsworth, a poet is a man speaking to men. The only difference between poet and common man is the promptness in his thoughts. Thus, Wordsworth urged to link the poet and poetry with an ordinary man.

Raymond Williams, in his essay "Culture is Ordinary" further stresses upon the need of acknowledging that education is ordinary. Williams has put it in below lines:

I cannot accept that education is a training for jobs or for making useful citizens (that is, fitting into this system). It is a society's confirmation of its common meanings, and of the human skills for their amendment. We are moving into an economy where we shall need many more highly trained specialists. For this precise reason, I ask for a common education that will give our society its cohesion, and prevent it disintegrating into a series of specialist departments, the nation becomes a firm. (Williams)

Thus, Williams has clearly advocated for Liberal form of education which practically brings all people on a common platform and then further into manifolds of specialization.

India's National Education Policy 2020 is clearly in harmony to the above-mentioned proposition of Raymond Williams, that is, focus on liberal form of Arts.

India has a long tradition of holistic and multidisciplinary learning in the 'liberal arts', from universities, such as Takshashila and Nalanda to the extensive literatures of India combining subjects across fields. The very idea that all branches of creative human endeavour - including mathematics, science, vocational subjects, professional subjects, and soft skills - should be considered 'arts' indeed has distinctly Indian origins. This notion of 'knowledge of many arts' - what in modern times is called the 'liberal arts' (i.e., a liberal notion of the arts) - must be brought back to Indian education, as it is exactly the kind of education that will be required for the 21st century. (Ministry of Human Resource Development)

To understand the need for an all-inclusive liberal form of education, consider the example of an automobile mechanical worker working at a small workshop in a small town or village. One may find many workers who are extremely skilled owing to their vast and varied work experience. However, this class of workers cannot compete on a global platform primarily due to language barrier; as it is quite likely that they may not be able to put up their practical skills acquired through rigorous practical experience into theory or in any documented format owing to their language barrier or lack of formal education. The education system must be structured in such a manner that these skilled people get adequate atmosphere to harness their skills. This is the only way that the culture of our country may be preserved.

Role of National Education Policy (NEP 2020):

National Education Policy 2020 is the first educational policy of 21st century and certainly promises to prove instrumental in bringing much awaited educational reforms for Indian society. One of the most interesting incorporation in this policy is “Multilingualism” to acknowledge the diversity of the nation and ensure the all-inclusiveness of education beyond social and cultural barriers. NEP 2020 states the following:

Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother-tongue/local language. Students whose medium of instruction is the local/home language will begin to learn science and mathematics, bilingually in Grade 6 so that by the end of Grade 9 they can speak about science and other subjects both in their home language and English. (Ministry of Human Resource Development)

While there is no denying the fact that the above amendments in the NEP 2020 is indeed well intentioned and are actually in line with the preservation and nurturing of varied culture of the nation. However, it can have two practical pitfalls; firstly, since the use of local language in imparting education is not a mandatory requirement, it is a most likely scenario that most private schools will shy away from using local language as a prime mode of communication. As a result, the gulf between English speaking and local language speaking students may eventually widen further, which may pose a bigger problem for those opting for local language in competing with the rest of the lot. Secondly, these students will always be slightly behind the starting line of the race in the professional world which is typically characterized by globalization and multi-national culture.

Thus, it is paradoxical situation that on one hand; there is a pressing need to promote the domesticated ways (local language in this case), while at the same time one has to forgo these in a trade off with global or international advancement. This can be achieved by promoting local language on a global platform at not only academic but also professional and working level. Thus, the Educational and professional institutions should work in tandem for the effectiveness of each other. Though it is a task easier said than done, and definitely cannot be achieved overnight. But the specialist groups from both domains should work out together in this direction.

Conclusion:

The well-known German scholar, Max Mueller in his book “India: What it Can Teach Us” sum up his opinions about Indian culture in following words:

If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions, I should point to India. (Mueller)

The culture of India is ordinary for the lessons of ethics and morals brilliantly disguised in the age-old stories of grandmothers. The culture of India is ordinary for the evolution of most innovative ideals of start ups in ordinary tea gossip sessions among youngsters. The culture of India is ordinary for the priests some of whom are hardly formally educated but have immense knowledge of Vedas and the religious texts. Hence, it is the responsibility of each and every citizen of the nation to strive towards preserving and nurturing its ordinary culture and maintain its crudity.

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