

# Contending Notions on Culture: A Philosophical Reflection

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**Abstract**—The paper focuses on the concept of culture in the context of its operative terms i.e. affinity and diversity. Culture represents different systems of meaning and visions of life. The values, attitudes, practices etc associated with different cultures are relative. An individual can choose to be in a particular culture or have the liberty and right to question it. Even though the values or the behavior underlying certain actions or practices may seem awkward, gaining deeper knowledge regarding such aspects may bring out the sentiments that the people of that culture holds for such aspects. It is mere respect, acceptance and recognition that every culture demands. Any failure to show such respect leads to violence. Moreover, instead of scrutinizing others' culture, it is better to first learn various aspects of one's own culture and provide with suggestions if needed. Central to this paper are the debates and contestations associated with the concept of culture.

In this context, I will take up the works of Ruth Benedict and Sri Aurobindo. Benedict claims that a culture has immense effect over one's personality as culture is the one people inherit. It's the culture that gives an overall shape to the individual. Benedict's primary aim behind this book was to make known the fundamental attitudes of the three cultures (Zuni, Dobu and Kwakiutl); in other words she wanted to picture the immense respect they had for their cultural practices which were performed in order to show their solidarity towards their culture. On the other hand, Sri Aurobindo provides a detail about the elements that comprise Indian culture. For Aurobindo, Indian culture is made up of its art, literature, religion, policy etc. each having spirituality at its back drop. The interesting aspect lies in the comparison that he draws between the Indian and the western culture and there by mentioning their development over the time. With the comparison, I wish to develop cross cultural view points.

**Keywords:** culture, affinity, diversity, respect, recognition, personality, spirituality.

## 1. INTROCUCTION

Culture is a system that represents various systems of meanings and visions. It can be understood through two of its operative terms: affinity and diversity. Through language, history, art, architecture etc. culture creates affinity and by the virtue of identity, culture creates diversity with other cultures. It is something inherited by people that is uncritically accepted or revised (in rare case) by people. The culture that is discussed by Ruth Benedict in *Patterns of Culture* is kind of

societal rather than biological. She provides a comparative study of three primitive cultures, i.e. Zuni, Dobu and Kwakiutl, and shows how different emotions and feelings are placed in different cultures. No one culture is superior to another; the difference only lies in difference in beliefs and temperament. Moreover, Benedict hoped for a world where diversity is recognized and acknowledged.<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand a particular culture, we need to make an effort to recognize the underlying behavior of that culture. Rather than criticizing and scrutinizing, it is better to comprehend the history and the emotions associated with that culture. Regarding this Benedict writes:

“...not every culture is characterized by a dominant culture, but it seems probable that the more intimate our knowledge of the cultural drives that actuate the behavior of the individual, the more we shall find that certain controls of emotion, certain ideals of conduct, prevail that account for what seem to us as abnormal attitudes when viewed from the standpoint of our civilization.”<sup>2</sup>

The three cultures i.e. Zuni, Dobu and Kwakiutl follow certain rituals and customary practices regarding warfare, art, adolescence etc. having unique particularities in them. The men engaging in heroic acts, showing off their masculinity, women getting involved in practices of enhancing their beauty, practices that leads to their seclusion, beliefs regarding the institution of marriage etc. are the important aspects that have been exhaustively discussed by Benedict in her work. The stress being put on either men or women regarding certain practices is relative to different places. No one trait is treated similar in another culture. Even though it may seem disturbing at first, but making an effort to realize the undercurrent behind such practices will lead us to accept it to a certain extent. These practices are followed by the members in the name of solidarity which in turn will lead their culture to move in a positive direction. For example: The culture of the Inuits

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict, Ruth, (1934), *Patterns of Culture*, The American Library, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

enables them to kill their babies. It may seem horrific but doing so is important for the existence of their culture.<sup>3</sup>

There can also be witnessed certain cross cultural similarities. For instance: in the Zuni culture when a girl attains adolescence she is secluded and leaves her to live in the wilderness. She is considered a threat or a danger to those who captures a glimpse of her. Her arms and legs are loaded with bands to protect her from evil spirits.<sup>4</sup> Similarly certain practices can also be found in India. I have basically taken certain instances of Tamil Nadu; however, the glimpse of these practices can also be found in other parts of the country. A girl, in Tamil Nadu, when attains a new status, it becomes a matter of celebration. Initially she has to go through a strenuous process like not entering the house, not using utensils, not entering into temples, sleeping on the floor etc. After five seven days a holy ceremony named Sadangu is performed where she becomes the centre of attraction. She is dressed like a bride and the entire village is invited to be a part of this ceremony.<sup>5</sup>

Some women may consider it to be normal but for some it is no less than a matter of loneliness and embarrassment. The lack of knowledge about certain facts elevates the taboos to a great height be it the heroic acts of men or submissive acts of women. The government, policy makers, activists must make an effort to create awareness not only in men but also in women. It must be realized that a society cannot move forward by oppressing or suppressing its members which in turn prevents them to contribute positively towards the society. Moreover, a value, if it is not leading to any positive result, needs to be revised and replaced by a new value. The new value must have the same richness and same importance that the old one held for its members.

The spiritual side of a culture can be witnessed in Sri Aurobindo's work *The Foundations of Indian Culture*. His work provides details about the elements that comprise Indian culture. For Aurobindo, Indian culture is made up of its art, literature, religion, polity etc. each having spirituality at its backdrop. The interesting aspect lies in the comparison that he draws between the Indian and the western culture and thereby mentioning their development over the time.

Culture, for Aurobindo, is a way of life, with *Vidyā, Sāadhanā and Kalā*, consisting of first, thought, ideals and aspirations; second, practical outward formulation; third, creative self-expression, imagination and aesthetics. The Indian culture is rich in its spirituality that makes possible a man to be one with the absolute. A man is born ignorant as he initially remains confused about his nature, his supreme end and how the universe is created. A person has the capability to be united with the supreme reality in this very life. This unity never demands the person to leave his body. He can attain the

absolute and can again come to this world. This becomes the supreme end of a person. These are the aspects that comprises of Indian culture that gives identity to its people.<sup>6</sup>

Aurobindo wrote the book *The Foundations of Indian Culture* as a response or defense towards the allegations put on Indian culture by William Archer in *India and the Future*. Archer claimed that India is barbarous in terms of lack of a language. Aurobindo refuted his claim and stated that India has Vedas, Upanishads, and Shastras etc. written in Sanskrit language (one of the oldest languages).<sup>7</sup> Next, Archer considered Indian culture to be pessimist. Aurobindo defends Indian culture by maintaining that pessimism is not peculiar to Indian mind. Pessimism means when life is considered as full of suffering and not worth living. But in Indian culture, for example: in the school of Buddhism, though life is considered to be full of pain and suffering, it provided a way out of it i.e. nirvana.<sup>8</sup> These are few of the charges that were put on Indian culture by William Archer.

This overview helps us to understand Archer's role in introducing a hierarchy between Indian and Western culture. Aurobindo's defenses against Archer's charges were helpful enough to know not only new facts about Indian but also lead one to move deep into Indian tradition.

## 2. CONCLUSION

Benedict considered tolerance towards diversity as one of the ways to tackle complexities. There should also be certain skeptical attitude towards any beliefs, customs, practices etc before accepting. It is hard to come out of the values that were so inherent in us that we consider them to be eternal. But, since change is an inescapable truth, we need to accept the newness in our lives and breakthrough the actions that may obstruct our progress. All a society needs is respect, acceptance and recognition.

Archer's book was basically written from the Western Rationalism which doubted India of having any sort of culture. But it is important to realize that he work came at a time when India was still under the British rule. No thinker wrote anything about the Indian tradition so that those who put allegations would get acquainted with the Indian culture. And those who wrote about it, their works were not based on primary evidence.

For Aurobindo, only that culture needs to be valued and preserved that maintains a harmony between mind, spirit and the body. The essence of spirituality was embedded in each and every aspect of Indian culture. He felt that colonization did affect the Indian culture and its people but the essence of spirit was always embedded in them. It only becomes a matter of realization then.

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<sup>3</sup> Rachels, James, (2011), *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, McGraw- Hill Higher Education, p.2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>5</sup> <http://cirhep.linghag.se/>.

<sup>6</sup> Sri Aurobindo, (1953), *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, New York: Sri Aurobindo Library Inc, p. 112

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126- 131.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

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