1.   Details of Module and its structure

Module Detail	
Subject Name	Sociology
Course Name	Sociology 01 (Class XI, Semester - 1)
Module Name/Title	Culture: definition and dimensions – Part 1
Module Id	kesy_10401
Pre-requisites	Sociology, basic concepts, society and social structure
Objectives	After going through this lesson, the learners will be able to understand the following: 1. Basic concepts 2. Culture 3. Aspects and dimensions of culture 4. Cultural change
Keywords	Culture, Dimensions of culture, Normative and cognitive aspects, Material and non-material aspects of culture

2.   Development Team

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Introduction

Sociology is academic study of society and human interactions. The subject matter of sociology is diverse, ranging from crime to religion, from the family to the political institutions, stratification to individual choices, economic organization to state, from ethnic relations to the shared beliefs of a common culture. Attempting to understand diverse types of institutions, their interrelationship, the main task of student of sociology is to understand that how human action shapes social and cultural structures and how it gets shaped by social and cultural surroundings. The sum total of all forms of actions, structure and functions of institutions is shaped by culture and influences culture. What is culture?'Culture', like 'society', is a term we use frequently and come across in many ways in our daily lives.

In this chapter we will learn about culture, define culture more precisely and to appreciate its different aspects. The most common definition of culture is that culture is a set of "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; *also* : the characteristic features of everyday existence (as diversions or a way of life} shared by people in a place or time". Culture is the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization.

The dictionary of Sociology defines Culture as "The attitudes, behavior, beliefs, customs, habits, language, and values that are characteristic of a group, society, or organization in a particular place and time, the accumulated knowledge of which is passed to the next generation through socialization". In everyday conversation, culture is confined to the arts, or alludes to the way of life of certain classes or even countries. Sociologists and anthropologists study the social contexts within which culture exists. They take culture apart to try and understand the relations between its various aspects.

Just like you need a map to navigate over unknown space or territory, you need culture to conduct or behave your self in society. No society can exists with out culture. Culture is the defining characteristic of society. Culture is the common understanding, which is learnt and developed through social interaction with others in society. A common understanding within a group demarcates it from others and gives

it an identity. Cultures are never a finished products. Culture is dynamic, it is always changing and evolving. Elements and dimension are constantly being added, deleted, expanded, modified, shrunk or rearranged in cultural systems. This makes cultures as a dynamic functioning unit.

Culture is shared. The capacity of individuals to develop a common understanding with others and to draw the same meanings from signs and symbols is what distinguishes humans from other animals. Creating meaning is a social virtue as we learn it in the company of others in families, groups and communities. We learn the use of tools and techniques as well as the non- material signs and symbols through interaction with family members, friends and colleagues in different social settings. Much of this knowledge is systematically described and conveyed either orally or through books. This learning prepares us for carrying out our roles and responsibilities in society. You have already dealt with status and roles. What we learn in the family is primary socialisation, while that which happens in school and other institutions are secondary socialisation.

Activity 1

How do you greet another person in your 'culture'? Do you greet different kinds of persons (friends, older relatives, the other gender, people from other groups) differently? Discuss any awkward experience you may have had when you did not know how you should greet a person. Is that because you did not share a common 'culture'? But next time round you will know what to do. Your cultural knowledge thereby expands and rearranges itself.

For example, notice the interaction below. Notice how words and facial expressions convey meaning in a conversation.

Commuter asks autodriver: "Indiranagar?" The verb that conveys the question — "Bartheera?" or "Will you come?" — is implied in the arch of the eyebrow. Driver jerks his head in the direction of the back seat if the answer is "Yes". If it is "No" (which is more likely the case as every true blue Bangalorean knows) he might just drive away or grimace as if he has heard a bad word or shake his head with a smile that seems to suggest a "Sorry", all depending on the mood of the moment.

Diversity of Cultures

Human civilizations have flourished in different regions and diverse kinds of geographical settings. Human beings live in a variety of natural settings like in the mountains and plains, in forests and clear lands, in deserts and river valleys, in islands and main lands. The societies are organized in different patterns, from simple to complex. There are different social set up like villages, towns and cities. In different environments, and geographical regions, people adopt different mechanisms and strategies to cope with the natural and social conditions. This leads to the emergence of diverse ways of life or cultures.

Disparities in coping mechanisms were evident during the devastating tsunami of 26 December 2004, which affected some parts of the Tamil Nadu and Kerala coast as well as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India. People on the mainland and islands are integrated into a relatively modern way of life. The fisherfolk and the service personnel in the islands were caught unaware and suffered large scale devastation and much loss of life. On the other hand, the 'primitive' tribal communities in the islands like the Onges, Jarawas, Great Andamanese or Shompens who had no access to modern science and technology, foresaw the calamity based on their experiential knowledge and saved themselves by moving on to higher ground. This shows that having access to modern science and technology does not make modern cultures superior to the tribal cultures of the islands. Hence, cultures cannot be ranked but can be judged adequate or inadequate in terms of their ability to cope with the strains imposed by nature.

<u>**Activity 2**</u>
<u>Collect some pictures and visuals showing how cultures differ from each other. Also look for differences in food habit, dress patterns, and languages, and identify how natural environment affects these forms.</u>

Defining Culture

Often the term 'culture' is used to refer to the acquiring of refined taste in classical music, dance forms, painting. But this notion of developing refined taste is biased.

Because, this refined taste was thought to distinguish people from the 'uncultured' masses. This can be seen in everyday behaviour, preferences of individuals like the preference for coffee over tea is considered to be evolved and refined.

Activity 3

Identify equivalents in Indian languages for the word culture. What associations do these carry?

By contrast, the sociologist looks at culture not as something that distinguishes individuals, but as a way of life in which all members of society participate. Every social organisation develops a culture of its own. One early anthropological definition of culture comes from the British scholar Edward Tylor: "Culture or civilisation taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1871).

Two generations later, the founder of the "functional school" of anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski of Poland (1884-1942) wrote: "Culture comprises inherited artifacts, goods, technical process, ideas, habits and values" (Malinowski 1931:621-46).

Clifford Geertz suggested that we look at human actions in the same way as we look at words in a book, and see them as conveying a message. "... Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs...".The search is not for a causal explanation, but for an interpretative one, that is in search for meaning (Geertz 1973:5). Likewise Leslie White had placed a comparable emphasis on culture as a means of adding meaning to objective reality, using the example of people regarding water from a particular source as holy.

Do you notice anything in Malinowski's definition that is missing in Tylor's?
Apart from his mention of art, all the things listed by Tylor are non-material. This is not because Tylor himself never looked at material culture. He was in fact a museum curator, and most of his anthropological writing was based on the examination of artifacts and tools from societies across the world, which he had never visited. We can

now see his definition of culture as an attempt to take into account its intangible and abstract dimensions, so as to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the societies he was studying. Malinowski happened to be stranded on an island in the Western Pacific during the First World War, and discovered thereby the value of remaining for an extended period with the society one was studying. This led to the establishment of the tradition of "field work".

The multiple definitions of culture in anthropological studies led Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (anthropologists from the United States) to publish a comprehensive survey entitled Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions in 1952. A sample of the various definitions is presented below.
 Try comparing these definitions to see which of these or which combination of these you find most satisfactory. You may first find yourself noticing words which recur–'way', 'learn' and 'behaviour'. However, if you then look at how each is used, you may be struck by the shifts in emphasis. The first phrase refers to mental ways but the second to the total way of life. Definitions (d), (e) and (f) lay stress on culture as what is shared and passed on among a group and down the generations. The last two phrases are the first to refer to culture as a means of directing behaviour.

Culture is...
   a) A way of thinking, feeling, believing.
   b) The total way of life of a people.
   c) An abstraction from behaviour.
   d) Learned behaviour.
   e) A storehouse of pooled learning.
   f) The social legacy the individual acquires from his group.
   g) A set of standardised orientations to recurrent problems.
   h) A mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour.

Make a list of phrases you have heard containing the word 'culture'. Ask your friends and family what they mean by culture? What criteria do they use to distinguish among cultures?

<u>Compare these definitions to see which of these (or combination of these) you find most satisfactory. You could do this by listing familiar uses of the word 'culture' (the culture of eighteenth century Lucknow, the culture of hospitality or the much used term 'Western culture'...). Which of the definitions best captures the impressions conveyed by each?</u>

Dimensions of Culture

Three dimensions of culture have been distinguished :

i. **Cognitive:** This refers to how we learn to process what we hear or see, so as to give it meaning (identifying the ring of a cell-phone as ours, recognising the cartoon of a politician).

ii. **Normative:** This refers to rules of conduct (not opening other people's letters, performing rituals at death).

iii. **Material:** This includes any activity made possible by means of materials. Materials also include tools or machines. Examples include internet 'chatting', using rice-flour paste to design kolam on floors.

It may have occurred to you that our understanding of material culture, especially art, is incomplete without knowledge acquired from the cognitive and normative areas. It is true that our developing understanding of social process would draw upon all these areas. But we might find that in a community where few have acquired the cognitive skill of literacy, it in fact becomes the norm for private letters to be read out by a third party. But as we see below, to focus on each of these areas separately provides many important insights.

Cognitive Aspects of Culture

The cognitive aspects of one's own culture are harder to recognise than its material aspects (which are tangible or visible or audible) and its normative aspects (which are explicitly stated). Cognition refers to understanding, how we make sense of all the information coming to us from our environment. In literate societies ideas are transcribed in books and documents and preserved in libraries, instititutions or archives. But in non-literate societies legend or lore is committed to memory and

transmitted orally. There are specialist practitioners of oral tradition who are trained to remember and narrate during ritual or festive occasions.

Let us think about how writing may affect the production and consumption of art. In his influential book, Orality and Literacy Walter Ong cites a study of 1971 that states that only 78 of the approximately 3,000 existing languages possess a literature. Ong suggests that material that is not written down has certain specific characteristics. There is a lot of repetition of words, to make it simpler to remember. The audience of an oral performance is likely to be more receptive and involved than would be readers of a written text from an unfamiliar culture. Texts become more elaborate when they are written.

In societies like ours historically literacy has been made available only to the more privileged. Sociological studies are often concerned with investigating how literacy can be made relevant to the lives of people whose families have never gone to school. This can lead to unexpected responses, like a vegetable-seller who asked why he needed to know the alphabet when he could mentally calculate what his customers owed him?

The contemporary world allows us to rely far more on written, audio and visual records. Yet students of Indian classical music are still discouraged from writing down what they learn rather than carrying it in their memory. We still do not know enough about the impact of the electronic media, of multiple channels, of instant accessing and surfing. Do you think these new forms impact our attention span and cognitive culture?

Normative Aspects of Culture

The normative dimension consists of folkways, mores, customs, conven- tions and laws. These are values or rules that guide social behaviour in different contexts. We most often follow social norms because we are used to doing it, as a result of socialisation. All social norms are accompanied by sanctions that promote conformity.

While norms are implicit rules, laws are explicit rules. Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist has reminded us that when we try to understand another culture's norms,

we must remember that there are certain implicit understandings. For example, if a person wants to show gratitude for something s/he has been given, s/he should not offer a return- gift too quickly, or it seems like an attempt to get rid of a debt, not a friendly gesture.

A law is a formal sanction defined by government as a rule or principle that its citizens must follow. Laws are explicit. They are applicable to the whole society. And a violation of the law attracts penalties and punishment. If in your home children are not allowed to stay outdoors after sun down, that is a norm. It is specific to your family and may not be applicable to all families. However, if you are caught stealing a gold necklace from someone else's home, you have violated the universally accepted law of private property and can be sent to jail after trial as punishment.

Laws, which derive from the authority of the State are the most formal definitions of acceptable behaviour. While different schools may establish different norms for students, laws would apply to all those accepting the authority of the State. Unlike laws, norms can vary according to status. Dominant sections of society apply dominant norms. Often these norms are discriminating. For example norms that did not allow dalits from drinking water from the same vessel or even source. Or women from moving freely in the public sphere.

Material Aspects of Culture

The material aspect refers to tools, technologies, machines, buildings and modes of transportation, as well as instruments of production and communication. In urban areas the widespread use of mobile phones, music systems, cars and buses, ATMs (automated teller machines), refrigerators and computers in everyday life indicates the dependence on technology. Even in rural areas the use of transistor radios or electric motor pumps for lifting water from below the surface for irrigation demonstrates the adoption of technological devices for increasing production.

In sum there are two principal dimensions of culture: material and non-material. While the cognitive and normative aspects are non-material, the material dimension is crucial to increase production and enhance the quality of life. For integrated functioning of a culture the material and non-material dimensions must work together.

But when the material or technological dimensions change rapidly, the non-material aspects can lag behind in terms of values and norms. This can give rise to a situation of culture lag when the non-material dimensions are unable to match the advances of technology.

Culture and Identity

Identities are not inherited but fashioned both by the individual and the group through their relationship with others. For the individual the social roles that s/he plays imparts identity. Every person in modern society plays multiple roles. For instance within the family s/he may be a parent or a child but for each of the specific roles there are particular responsibilities and powers.

It is not sufficient to enact roles. They also have to be recognised and acknowledged. This can often be done through the recognition of the particular language that is used among role players. Students in schools have their own way of referring to their teachers, other students, class performances. By creating this language which also serves as a code, they create their own world of meanings and significances. Similarly, women are also known to create their own language and through it their own private space beyond the control of men especially when they congregate at the pond to bathe in rural areas or across washing lines on rooftops in urban areas.

In a culture there can be many sub-cultures, like that of the elite and working class youth. Sub-cultures are marked by style, taste and association. Particular sub-cultures are identifiable by their speech, dress codes, preference for particular kind of music or the manner in which they interact with their group members.

Sub-cultural groups can also function as cohesive units which impart an identity to all group members. Within such groups there can be leaders and followers but group members are bound by the purpose of the group and work together to achieve their objectives. For instance young members of a neighbourhood can form a club to engage themselves in sports and other constructive activities. Such activities create a positive image of the members in the locality and this gives the members not only a positive self- image but also inspires them to perform better in their activities. The orientation of their identity as a group undergoes a transformation. The group is able

to differentiate itself from other groups and thereby create its own identity through the acceptance and recognition of the neighbourhood.

Activity 5

Are you aware of any sub-cultural group in your locality? How are you able to identify them?