

COMMUNICATION, MEDIA GLOBALISATION AND CULTURE

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MEDIA & FUTURE OF SECULARISM - ACADEMIC SESSION III

- 1.1 A well-known anthropologist raised the question: Why Humans Have Culture. Then he went on to reply with a book of the same title and explained the origins, development and function of culture in society. But the question is a bit misleading, because it may give an impression that first the humans came and then they acquired a faculty called culture. Which came first, humans or culture? A question like which came first, hen or the egg! Actually humans are human because they have culture. The emergence and evolution of humans are coeval with the emergence and evolution of culture. Formation and acquisition of culture is precisely the point of departure between the humans and non-humans like living beings.
- 1.2 What is culture then. Though it is a very familiar term widely bandied about in everyday parlance as well as scholarly discourse, when it comes to definition we all fall into a mire of confusion.

“Culture” Raymond Williams said two decades ago, “ is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical – development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought” (Key Words 1976)

The modern connotations of this highly evocative word is not later than, say, Mathew Arnold’s Culture and Anarchy (1869) or Edward Tylor’s Primitive Culture (1871), though our century has enriched and distorted it almost beyond recognition., In India languages too the equivalents of “culture” acquired its current meanings only after the First World War (1818-1818). The first really authoritative modern dictionary of Malayalam, Sabdhatharavali published in 1922 did not recognize the present meaning of *Samskara* – it is only approved the ancient meaning of Sanskrit word, such as “shodasa sanskaraa” rites of passage etc. It is only in editions of the book revised in 1950s that the modern meaning too was added to the list. As late as 1918 Rabindra Nath Tagore lamented the absence of an equivalent Bengali term for the English word “culture”. It was then that the great linguist Sunithi Kumar Chatterjee came forward to save the situation by suggesting the adoption of “sanmskritic” for culture. The usage of this word in Hindi, Kannada, Marathi etc. also could be traced to the post First World War decade. Perhaps only Tamil can boast of purely local equivalent, *Panpad* and *Kalachara* Though these two words are not strictly equivalent they are often used as suffix. The former is pure Dravidian while the latter is a variation of Sanskrit usage. What ever it be, the

Tamils also began to use these words with present connotations only during the last three quarters of the century.

1.3 All these goes to prove not just the evolution fo the meaning of the word but the evolution, transformation and even metamorphosis of the concept itself – the concept of culture its nature and functions. Both the material culture of the anthropologists and the mental culture and cultural products of non-anthropologists were always recognized as very vital to human life and society, but relation of culture to power structure of society and its hegemonic patterns and their ideological underpinnings are new discoveries of ther recent one or two decades – generally termed as post modern era.

1.4 The facile idea of culture as a leisurely pursuit, or marginal activity and a soothing umbrella under which every class and every one could seek a shelter is now outdated. Even the idea of all-embracing “national” culture and its alleged hoary traditions are now under cloud of distrust. In a very significant work on the subject Glen Jordan and Chris Weedon say

“Everything in social and cultural life has fundamentally to do with power. Power is at the center of cultural politics. It is integral to culture. All signifying practices – that is, all practices that have meaning – involve relations of power. They Subject us in the sense that they offer us particular subject positions and modes of subjectivity. But these subject positions are not all the same. The power relations inherent in a particular signifying practice may be in a state of equilibrium, nut more often they involve relations off domination and subordination. We are either active subjects who take up positions from which we can exercise power within a particular social practice, or we are subjected to the definitions of others” (Cultural Politics, Oxford, 1995, Page 11)

From this understanding of the role of culture in political and power structure, they delineate the realm of Cultural politics.

“Whose culture shall be the official one and whose shall be suboprdated ? What culture shall be regarded as worthy of display and which shall be hidden ? Whose history shall be remembered and whose forgotten ? What images of social life shall be projected and which shall be marginalized ? What voices shall be heard and which be silenced ? Who is representing whom and on what basis ? (Ibid Page 4)

II. THE ROLE OF MEDIA

2.1 It is through communication that culture is inherited, exchanged and transformed. And communication needs media. Almost 250 centuries ago humans began communication through the media of lines, colours and shapes, paintings and artifacts. About the symbolic communication through abstract and arbitrary lines. The alphabet is a new-fangled fashion in human history with nomore than fifty centuries. For many centureis only microscopic minority of society had the skill and permission to handle this device, which may be termed the first technologisation of the word. Even in this century more than half the humanity is illiterate. India has the dubious deistinciton of claiming a majority of the world’s illiterates within its borders.

- 2.2 Now on the threshold of the 21st century, we have traveled a long way from the days when our forefathers in Phoenicia discovered this wonderful device of the alphabets – skins parchments, palm leaves, bricks, metal sheets, paper, printing – and back again to live sound and image communication of the dawn of civilization with our electronic gadgets. The growth and expansion of media technology at break-neck speed and hair breadth precision increased human expansion of media technology at break-neck spread and hair breadth precision increased human communication skills and effectiveness immensely. Accumulation and propagation of knowledge and ideas have become truly global reaching out to every nook and corner of earth and even to ethereal expanses. But along with such benefits dangerous and counter-productive hazards too.
- 2.3 Media needs technology and technology needs tools, machines and material payments and stylus, pens and paper printing machine ink, radio television and broad casting stations. Primitive tools and quills were within the capability of average men and women, but modern printing complexes and giant telecasting stations are worth crores, very much beyond the grasp of even well to do members of society. Only big monopoly combine