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**Adult Education, Cultural Development and Social Movements**

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**The Contemporary Challenge**

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## Context

We are now living in a rapidly changed world. Certain characteristics of the world are specially relevant for our discussion on adult education and cultural development. First characteristic of this is the unipolar nature of the contemporary world scenario. This unipolar nature is not merely in geographical, political or military sense, but it is unipolar in economic and socio-cultural sense as well. It is now being increasingly assumed that capitalist form of economic organisation as demonstrated in the countries of the North is the only appropriate form of economic organisation in all countries of the world. As a result, there are increasing pressures on local communities (which have tried to organise their economic and socio-cultural reality through centuries of tradition and experience) to adapt to this singular form of economic organisation.

The second aspect of the current world scenario is the global dimension of local living. The process of globalisation of all our regions, countries and communities has reached a great deal of maturity and fullness at this juncture. Not only this globalisation has occurred through the economic linkages across the boundaries of nation-states but it has also been sustained and extended through a global communication network, in particular the global media. As a result, the local communities and even nation-states are not able to preserve their boundaries which have become extremely porous and overtaken through this process of globalisation. The global electronic media (Soap operas, STAR, BBC and the CNN) have entered all our bedrooms,

irrespective of location, religion, politics, culture, class, caste.

### Consequences

What then are some of the consequences of this current world scenario. While most debate continues to focus on the evolution and consolidation of a "new" world economic order, very little attention is being paid to the question of the "new world cultural order." The processes described above have resulted in strong pressure towards "homogenisation" of culture throughout the world. Historically, human civilisation and community evolved appropriate cultural forms to their ecological, socio-economic and physical context. Hence, we witnessed a situation of wide diversity of human culture not only from one region to another, but from one part of the country to another. From the country where I come from this diversity is at times frightening when we travel a distance of less than 500 miles within the country.

In its concrete manifestation this strong pressure towards homogenisation of culture is implying singular form of cultural artifacts and elements. Firstly, homogenisation of knowledge and knowledge systems itself has been going on over the last 50 years but now seems to have reached a level of supremacy and hegemony hitherto not experienced by human civilisation. The modern electronic communication technology and systems have aided in the virtual and complete hegemony of the dominant positivistic science and its attendant system of knowledge based on false assumptions of objectivity and neutrality. Indigenous an

ass, popular systems of knowledge production evolved and in use for centuries have not only been systematically destroyed but also completely de-legitimised and decimated as a consequence of this process.

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Another aspect of this homogenisation of culture is the destruction of indigenous values and norms which govern the functioning of human interaction across individuals, families and communities in diverse locations of human civilisation. Each set of values and norms were evolved in the appropriate historical and ecological context of each living community. These are no longer the reference for guiding human behaviour since universal values (as a consequence of homogenisation process) was displaced local values and norms.

Another aspect of this impact can be seen in language. Language is not merely a form of expression but also the basis of deriving meaning in one's life. Language and its associated constructs provide the basis for human civilisation to make sense of their immediate reality as well as to express that sense to others, both in oral and written forms. Therefore, each human community and civilisation evolved its own appropriate language, format, concepts, words, alphabets and the very basis of using that language appropriate to that community. The consequence of homogenisation of culture is the destruction of indigenous languages and dialects and the imposition of the dominant "lingua franca" particularly English, French and Spanish. The new generations depend on the use of English language in our country are not only using alien language, but also thinking in an alien framework and deriving meaning in an alien context.

And when we look at forms of dress, food habits and other related dimensions of human culture, we find the overwhelming impact of blue-jeans, hamburgers and Coco-Cola. Not only that this has resulted in a disrespect for indigenous forms of dress, food and life-style in the eyes of the new generation, but it has also de-legitimised the very appropriateness and relevance of these forms as they evolved historically in those communities. It is in this sense that we have to recognise the growing alienation of individuals, families and communities in the contemporary world.

### Identity

This alienation was most stark in the societies of the North (North America and Western Europe) over the last two decades but is increasingly a phenomenon in the countries of the South as well. In this context of homogenisation of culture with destruction of indigenous values, norms, language, knowledge system, dress, food and other aspects, it is not surprising that individuals, families and communities are craving for their roots, their identity, the very meaning of survival and life at this juncture in their ecological and socio-cultural context. It is precisely because of this that we are witnessing a phenomena of world wide conflicts around the question of "cultural and ethnic identity." The need for defining "Who am I?" in an individual and social sense and ensuring the continuity of that definition with my historical roots has become so profound at this juncture that wherever we look at this globe we find a reassertion of the narrow, more secure, yet identifiable ethnic and cultural identity. It is precisely because of this that

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religion, caste, region, colour of skin, location of original inhabitants etc. have become significant variables around which the reassertion of narrow, and at times parochial, ethnic and cultural identities has started so intensely in the last few years. It is in this context of multiple reassertions of ethnic and cultural identity that we witness significant social and political conflicts, many a times associated with acts of violence and destruction. It is only in this sense that we can understand the reassertion of a Muslim identity or a Hindu identity, it is in this sense that we can understand the assertion of an indigenous tribal identity;, it is in this sense that we have to understand the reassertion of the the clannish and sub-caste identities in different regions and parts of the world. What has perhaps surprised us is the intensity with which this assertion for cultural and ethnic identity has occurred, many a times, associated with harsh violence and destruction on such a large and widespread basis throughout the globe. It is merely an indication of the deep and wide-spread consequences of the homogenisation of culture that has inflicted human civilisation towards the end of 20th century.

### Movements

What has even more surprised those of us engaged in our pursuits of social transformation in our societies is the relative inattention that we paid over the last 20 years to the question of culture, cultural development and cultural identity. Many of us as well as most social movements since Second World War, primarily focused on of economic and political issues of the masses and social transformation. This obsession with the

economic and political issues within social movements since Second World War led to a situation where cultural issues (values, norms, language, dress, food, knowledge systems etc.) were neglected in the very analysis of the underlying causes of oppression and marginalisation, on the one hand, and in our strategy of working towards social transformation, on the other.

This gap or vacuum has only begun to be made up with the rise of new social movements in the last decade. The women's movement began to articulate the issues of language, systems of knowledge from the feminist perspective in the past decade. It began to distinguish between economic and political dimensions of marginalisation and oppression and the cultural dimensions of undermining women's status in different communities and societies.

Similarly, in the past few years, the ecological movement has begun to raise the question of regeneration and sustenance of ecology as an immediate and interlinked aspect of cultural development and identity. Studies from diverse regions of the world have begun to show how various dimensions of culture developed by different local communities and civilisations were appropriate and relevant to the ecological requirements of the region. Values, symbols rituals, practices, knowledge systems, language etc. were all evolved in the appropriate local ecological context in order to ensure the survival and sustenance of that ecological balance. And many of these examples have begun to demonstrate that the breakdown of those cultural elements, (the breakdown of those values, norms, rituals)

those communities as a consequence of the processes described above and pressures for homogenisation of culture have been directly responsible for ecological destruction in the local habitats. It is in this sense the ecological movement has begun to talk about the significance and relevance of indigenous knowledge, local culture, language, norms etc. The ecological movement has thus raised the need for examining closely the linkage between biological diversity and socio-cultural diversity.

In recent years, movements of the indigenous people have once again brought the issue of culture and cultural identity at the centre of their social movement. Indigenous populations throughout the world are not merely talking about the economic and political rights but also the right to have a distinctive cultural identity.

It is in this sense that the new social movements in recent times are beginning to both respond to and reflect the reassertion of cultural and ethnic identity taking place throughout the world.

### Challenge

Viewed in this sense, then we begin to realise the vastness and the complexity of the challenge that this scenario poses for educators, in general, and adult educators, in particular. The task of building, re-building and sustaining appropriate cultural identities is essentially an educational task. It is through a process of face to face interaction, through a process of learning and socialisation, that human civilization has nurtured and strengthened culture. The impact of the trends described earlier, in particular, those resulting in the homogenisation of

culture, can only be counted through a process of local educational intervention. The challenge is to develop this role of education in promoting learning and socialisation of the current and future generation to the task of building, rebuilding and sustaining an ecologically and historically appropriate cultural identity has to be addressed at this juncture.

In the contemporary context, this educational role needs to be played both in the sense of face-to-face dialogue and interaction as well as in the form of the use of media, particularly its electronic potential. It is clear that global electronic media is significantly "educating" the new generation into a homogenised cultural identity. If we have to assist the current and future generations in discovering appropriate elements for their identity at this and future historical junctures, then we have to use education, both in its face-to-face and its remote media format. It is this challenge that we adult educators face; it is this challenge that deliberations in this seminar are addressing; and it is our collective responsibility to bring the issue of culture centrally into the process of development discourse, on the one hand, and in the practice of grassroots educators and mobilisers, on the other. Otherwise we remain silent spectators to the widespread reassertion of narrow and parochial, at times conflicting, cultural identities resulting in violence and mutual destruction. It is our historical and moral responsibility as adult educators to address this issue urgently.