

INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture01

What is Culture, Definitions of Popular Culture

Hello everyone, today we'll be starting our NPTEL course on Introduction to Popular Culture and we'll be dealing with several topics that come under the domain of popular culture. But before venturing into the discourse of popular culture and how it has been situated in the Indian context, we will be first looking into the definition of what popular culture. Because the meanings are diverse and there are plenty of scholars who have given different meaning and definition to the term popular culture. Before venturing again in the definitional paradigm of popular culture, let us see what popular culture is. Now, Raymond Williams has defined it or rather he has made a comment saying that it is one of the two or three most difficult or complicated definitions in the English language.

Now, this brings us to the discussion that if culture, the word culture is so difficult, how the meanings have been before and in the modern day context, how the meaning of culture has changed. Now, looking at the other definitions of popular culture or culture in general, he says that a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development. He gives examples from Western Europe where people like, philosophers, the spiritual aesthetic factors and great artists and poets. So this is one of the definitions of the word culture where we input, take the input of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development. Now, moving on from this definition.

definition we have the second definition which is it says that a particular way of life whether of a people a period or a group includes religious beliefs, religious festivals, holidays, sports, literacy etc. Now What this definition means is how one perceives certain things in their day-to-day life, the social and the cultural moral values surrounding it. So this is the definition that is closer to the larger aspect of popular culture. And the third it says is the work and practice of intellectual and especially artistic activity.

It means the text. So these artistic activities are music. It could be films. It could be advertisements. And they act as a text.

These texts and practices whose principal function is to signify, to produce meaning or also at times it becomes the production of meaning altogether. So we see how in so many ways the word culture has been defined. John Storey in his book, *Cultural Theory and Pop Culture*, has talked about various definitions of popular culture and how it is situated in different theories. For example, in Marxism, in structuralism.

But we will not be dealing with the definitions, and how it has been perceived in various different theoretical paradigms. We'll try to locate what culture means, and what popular means, moving on to the definitions of popular culture altogether. Now, according to Story, the second definition, which is, a definition of Raymond Williams, it talks about the people, and their practices. This is what he is referring to here, where the meaning of popular culture most aligns.

the third meaning, which is about when it tells us about, the signifying the practices.

For example, again, soap operas, and pop music as they act as text. Now, William also says further in his *Forward to Culture and Society* that the idea of culture and the world itself in its general modern use came into English thinking. So the term culture, as it exists in the English dictionary, is a modern approach and it was seen, that its usage became common in the Industrial Revolution era. This also tells us about, the effect of a culture that it could be in a way a sort of, transformation or it also signifies some sort of resistance because what happened during the Industrial Revolution is quite evidently studied now the definition of popular we already saw what culture means where it is situated basically the practices of people such as religion and you know the aesthetics from western Europe the philosophers the high art that they wrote or drew the poetry that was coming from there of aesthetics. So we see how the meaning of culture has been. Now moving on to what is popular. The word popular again situates itself in different meanings. Again this is mentioned by Raymond Williams.

So he says the first current meaning is well-liked by many people. Now What is well-liked by many people also situates in mass culture. So from here, we begin

to explore the word popular and popular culture. It also says that it is an inferior kind of work.

So bringing in the idea of high culture and low culture or highbrow culture, lowbrow culture as Dwight made it very significantly popular. Then it also says works deliberately set out to win favour with the people. So what is popular or where the mass of many people is involved, it says that it works deliberately to set to win favour from more people. Lastly, culture actually made by the people for themselves. So what is popular?

That is something which is made by the people and for them. So we see what popular is the common definitions or common meanings or the current meanings that have been given to us by Raymond Williams. Now, coming to the actual definition of what is popular culture. And it is very interesting to note that John Storey in his book has given us six definitions of popular culture. There are many other scholars that he has included and who do agree with his definition.

Most of his definitions have a different strain of definition or meaning to the term popular culture. We will be dealing and discussing with them with those. So the first definition is simple. Just like the word popular, widely favored or liked by many people. Now, when we say something which is widely favored or well-liked by many people, it also means that we are talking about the aspect of, popularity, how popular something is.

Of course, the meaning of popular has also, changed with time, but it retains the essence of widely favored. Then we have a second way, which is said to be a residual or residual category, something that is leftover. So basically what is popular is from the high culture, whatever is left, that is called as popular culture. There to accommodate texts, practices that fail to meet the required standards to qualify as high culture. So suppose there is an art form and it is placed high.

in amongst the elite or the dominant class

we see that there is another form of art that cannot find its place in the elite or the dominant culture and therefore because it is not meeting the requirements of being called high culture it is situated in the or is said to fail the standards and therefore is situated within the context of popular culture. It is also called inferior culture. So the debate of high and low again resurfaces and it tells us what is

popular culture. Now further it says that there is something real and the real leads to be difficult.

So popular culture is not real and therefore it is easy for everyone this is how it is understood so superior culture high culture is real culture and therefore it is difficult for people to comprehend

it is also exclusive it's not inclusive it's exclusive and it is for a select audience who can appreciate it moving on to Bourdieu where he says that these cultural distinctions kind of bring in Class distinction. So again, coming back to Marx, this also talks about the taste. So this taste, whether it is in fashion, we'll be discussing, when subcultures and countercultures where the taste is, is it ideological or is it just in the context of whether it is good or bad?

So taste in this context is an ideological concept. That is what Bourdieu says. It also marks both social and economic class. It's not just it tells your social status, but it also tells about your economic class. So what kind of taste you prefer, depending on that, one can identify.

Now, this definition of popular culture is often supported by claims. What kind of claims? That popular culture is mass-produced commercial culture. So coming, we see money coming in where mass production is the commercial culture. So, for example, the painting of Mona Lisa by Da Vinci is one

piece which was created by da Vinci and it's a masterpiece. But we often see that in homes, especially people who love art, we see, a printout version of the Mona Lisa stuck on their walls. What does it tell about? It tells us about the mass of commercial culture, right?

So again, the debate comes in what you situate in high culture and what you situate in mass culture. Has it to do with the availability of the raw material? Because that is what it shows, the printed version of Mona Lisa. But the same goes with Van Gogh's The Starry Nights. Moving on, he gives the example of William Shakespeare.

Now, Shakespeare at some point was considered part of a popular theatre. But now he's the epitome of what we call as high culture. Same with Dicken's work. They did not first qualify or meet the standards of what is called high culture.

But later on, they were included in the high culture. So what does it signify? Is this a demarcation, a line or a standard that we are, following or are trying to look up to? Then, Similarly, film noir, which is also talks about the cynical, cynicism and crime thriller kind of films that used to be part of the famous Hollywood genre.

But later on, we see that it has become... Preserve the academic and film club moving from the popular to the domain of what is called as high culture. So how are we going to situate any piece of text or, practice into these two categories that the scholars have debated much debated about? Now One example, again, brings us closer to how to identify or if is there anything to identify. In July 1991, in Hyde Park, a concert was organized by Luciano.

Luciano was an Italian, tenor singer in a way. Tenor seems to be very difficult. So he is situated in that category of opera singers. Now, he organized a concert. in the Hyde Park of London.

Then we see that almost 250,000 people were supposed to attend, but because of rain, only a lack of people attended. The British tabloid wrote about the concert's significance for the masses. It talked about highlighting its inclusivity by framing Luciano's performance as accessible to ordinary people who couldn't typically attend opera events. Now, what does it say?

What does it tell us about popular culture? It tells that there is some blurring distinction between high and popular culture which has started or is taking place. Maybe it existed before, but since there were no discussions around it, these scholars were high on their argument that it is very degrading. Popular culture is very degrading and therefore might be that there were no discussions about this blurring of high culture and low culture.

Now, These tabloids, kind of acknowledge the role in redefining the event as culturally significant. Now, he is an acclaimed, artist performing free for people. What does it signify? Does it signify that his art is not high culture?

It is low culture or what does it signify? So that is the question now. addressing that we also can understand that when we ask it is good because it is popular what is good because it is popular it was a popular performance now this again brings back to the question that if something is good because it is popular then

this particular performance by Luciano was a popular performance, which means it was a good performance. A good performance, again, we equate with high culture.

Now, these are the questions that linger around the discussion of popular culture. Now, there are a few other definitions of popular culture, and these definitions also align with the definitions that we have just discussed on popular culture. So it says that there is something called hegemony theory and this is the claim that theorists of popular culture are really theorists about the constitution of the people. So basically if we look deeper into this question what does it say?

It says that there is a formulation of a theory is taking place to constitute what the people are or are. Right. So this theory of hegemony is quite important coming from Gramsci. Then we have Hall, Stuart Hall.

He says that popular culture is a contested site for the political construction of the people and the relations to the power block. So, it tells us about the relationship between the people which is the common masses with the dominant or authoritative bodies that exist and it is a site it is a space for negotiation how, these relationships are shown so it is not as simple of a definition that everyone says or everyone speaks about but it is a bit complicated or it is a bit complex and it also says that this is, of course, to make popular culture profoundly political concept.

Now, yeah. So this brings us to the fact that popular culture is not just a simple definition of high culture and low culture. It has to do something with the political concept. Since Stuart Hall has discussed this coming from Birmingham School, he has written extensively on cultural studies and also tells us about how ethnicity and race come into place.

Therefore, he says that it is a site of contestation where we often see resistance as well. The third definition of popular culture is mass culture. We will be dealing with the definition of mass culture and the theory around it. So it says that whatever is about the people can be construed as mass culture. And those who refer to popular culture as mass culture, basically they are talking about commercial culture.

So they equate mass culture with commercial culture. Mass production for mass consumption. So consumption again comes into play where we see that mass production leads to mass consumption and its audience does not discriminate. Unlike the high culture, this mass culture does not discriminate against its audience at all. It's very inviting.

Moving on to the fourth definition. So this fourth definition arises from the people themselves rather than being imposed from above. So we see that this definition is not being it's not imposed from above. It is coming from the people who are these people, the masses. It is not an authoritative figure sitting somewhere up and trying to dominate.

No, this is not the case with the fourth definition of popular culture. It says that the definition emphasizes that popular culture should be seen as an authentic expression of the people's culture. So as they say something the high culture is authentic. Similarly, this popular culture is of the masses and it is as real and as authentic as anything else and it also aligns popular culture with folk culture.

Now the discourse here is a bit twisted because of folk culture and Dwight has also talked about saying that it is a kind of high culture because it it's a very it's very organic in nature but here we are seeing that They are saying that it aligns with what is called popular culture. So folk is getting aligned with popular culture. Now, if you go into the terminology of folk, folk actually in one of the meanings of folk, it means people. So.

Is it correct or is it incorrect to associate it with popular culture? But coming from Dwight, it seems as if folk culture is a different strain of high culture, but of course not of low culture. Then further, it says that it emerged from America, especially New York. The originating city is New York and Americanization is, is the term that has been used suggesting that modern popular culture was largely invented and shaped in America, particularly in urban centers.

Now, there is a debate or a discussion By other scholars who say that who are not, who are from America saying that it has not come from America. It's not an Americanization or American culture, which they equate with popular culture. But rather, it is more of, blames it on the Soviet Union's use of technology, ultra use of technology.

It is also associated with a romanticized view of working-class culture. Now, they say that the romanticization that is happening in the working culture is in a way, a source of symbolic protest within modern capitalism. So what capitalism or modern capitalism does or says is that they do not like the romanticization of the working class, which means they are happy being, the working class. This is what they understand and therefore they suggest that it is a form of resistance. Romanticizing working class itself shows a form of opposition and resistance towards the capitalist, the dominant or the high class. This perspective suggests that popular culture, particularly emanating from the working class, is coming, being produced from the working class and is used as a significant form of resistance or rebellion. It also later moves on to say who qualifies for inclusion. Now, who is going to determine what should be included and what should be left?

Now, of course, we know that popular culture does not discriminate, but this high culture does. So there are a few problems with this, the study of popular culture altogether. One of these is this question who qualifies for inclusion? And it is said that it evades the commercial nature of many of the resources. Now, there is a nature attached to the commercialization and it says that it removes it.

It evades the commercial nature of many of the resources from which popular culture is made. This is again coming back to commercial and capitalist and the kind of raw material that is used again coming to mass culture because it is associated with mass consumption. Now, he further says. John Storey further says that people do not spontaneously produce so it is not an ongoing process that they are just producing and producing and producing from the raw materials of their own making so whatever raw material is that they are producing it is not like they are producing spontaneously some form of culture from them and which is of course popular culture but he says that What is certain is that it's raw materials are those which are commercially produced.

So it is the raw material. It is not the person who is spontaneously creating. It is a raw material. In fact, is what is producing or commercializing things or making mass consumption possible. So again, the shift is not the people, but the raw material we see happening with the fourth definition.

Now we have the fifth definition and interestingly it talks about the struggle between the subordinate group and the dominant group. So it is a constant struggle between the dominant group and the subordinate group. We also see there is incorporation serving the interest of the dominant group. Now, when there is a process of incorporation happening, it always serves the dominant group. It also sees that this is a space of interaction and negotiation.

So it is in a way discussing what earlier Stuart Hall talked about. He sees this as a site of contestation. So this popular culture is a ground. It's a battlefield, in fact, where this negotiation interaction is happening between both the forces, which are the dominant and the popular. They are both marked by both resistance and incorporation so both of the things are happening at the same time the popular are resisting and also they are incorporating things now what this fifth definition further says is that they are talking about a kind of shift labels and meanings over time. So the definition of popular culture is not constant. It's not in a latent form. It is always shifting.

So the meaning of the word popular or the popular culture itself will change in time. Now we have already seen that the lines between what is called as high and inferior or popular have already changed. been blurred. So we don't know, the further formulations of the term could be very different from what it is today. So the meanings or the labels are, it's keep on shifting.

So one example that they talk about is the seaside holiday. So earlier the seaside holiday was associated with aristocratic culture. So aristocratic culture kind of advertised and thought that it was only meant for the aristocratic class, that they should go for a seaside holiday once in a while. But popular culture has made it, it was like a dream

for other people and the popular culture has made it made the dream happen okay so it materialized the dream and now we see that it has transformed into part of a popular culture within a century it has happened So now we see the common populace also going for a seaside holiday. It's not that difficult to afford for them as they mentioned. Or it is not only now limited or exclusive for the aristocratic class. So this is one prime example of the compromise equilibrium that Gramsci has talked about.

This theory of, compromise of equilibrium and shifting from aristocratic to the popular. It is deeply rooted in hegemony theory and it interprets popular culture as a battleground of ideological struggle between the dominant and the subordinate classes. and also cultures at the same time. So it is it one might say the high culture people might say or the elite or the dominant class might say that this is a culture that is prevalent with the

dominant class or with the high class but how it becomes a culture of the common populace of the popular that is the ideological struggle that has been discussed here that is what needs to be addressed the ideological struggle between the dominant and the subordinate class not only in the level of like social or economic but also on the level of culture. Now, Bennet adds to this fourth definition of popular culture. Bennet says that it is shaped by Hegemony and Opposition. So both of them, which are Hegemony and Opposition, shape popular culture. So we see how it is the idea of compromising the equilibrium situated in popular culture by the dominant class in order to push the subordinate class and the opposition by the subordinate class is always there. So, the feel of popular culture is influenced by the ruling class's pursuit of hegemony and by various forms of opposition that resist this hegemonic control. So, the subordinate class is opposing and resisting this hegemonic control. Then comes not solely imposed mass culture. So popular culture cannot be only said that it is mass culture.

So there are many other factors as well, which bring in together and formulate what is popular culture. Therefore, it is not solely imposed mass culture that the definition says. It is not a uniform top-down phenomenon. So it's not coming from the top of the dominant culture and saying that popular culture equals mass culture. No, that is not happening.

Bennett also says that it is not solely spontaneously oppositional. So there is something Other than that also happening. It is not just oppositional. So not solely composed of spontaneously oppositional cultures.

There are other dynamics as well involved with this. Then. It is a space of negotiation. So this idea is aligned with other scholars' idea of popular culture, which is negotiation. It's a space for negotiating, negotiating ideologies and also cultures at the same time.

Then Bennet further says that it is an interaction across different types. So it could be the interactions and blend of both, which is dominant and subordinate and oppositional values. So in a way, we see that what we discussed earlier or the examples that we saw is crossing boundaries. So this crossing of boundaries in a way also defines what popular culture could be. So this definition of being stringent, that high culture and low culture or only mass culture is not suiting.

the definition or it cannot be one idea that constitutes the definition of popular culture. Further, It is a mix of a complex mixture of permutations and combinations. Now, when we are talking about this complex mixture, it is deep down in politics. It is deep down in economy and class, as well as social structure. There is a combination and permutations of cultural elements and values which reflects the ongoing negotiation between different cultural forces. So it could be art, it could be music, it could be soap operas, it could be photography, it could be anything. Those are the cultural forces, which actually help in formulating what is a complex mixture and permutations. And now we come to the sixth definition, the last definition of popular culture. So according to this definition, it says that

there is no longer any kind of difference that exists between what is called popular culture and high culture. So the distinction has dissolved in a way. And it has something to do with the post-modernism or post-modernist debate, the claim about post-modern culture. So in post-modern culture or in post-modernism, we know that there is a pastiche, there is a parody, there is chaos, pastiche is an example of what this definition says that it has blurred and they are kind of bringing in various different ideas, various definitions to say that it is no longer a distinction.

It has become in a way like a melting pot. The example and it's a very classic example. Now, when artists achieve hit records due to their songs being featured in television commercials. Now, an artist is asked to lend their songs. Of course, there is money involved to feature in an ad.

Now, in an ad, they're promoting a product. That product could be anything. It could be, a soft drink. It could be a clothing brand. It could be anything.

Now, the question is, is the song itself being sold or it is the product being promoted? That is the question. So when one says that, it is an artist's song, it's

a work of art, which again equates to Something high culture. we say that it is being promoted now through a song.

It is played in a commercial. And when we look at the video, and the song playing along with it, what are we looking at? Are we looking at the artist's song? Are we looking at the product? So which is more important?

Which becomes more important? Is it still the song or is it the product that is now more important? So these questions are in a way blurring the boundaries. And it is a key aspect of postmodern culture, which is the blurring of the, there is no distinction. And where traditional distinctions between cultural categories are challenged and redefined.

So we see It acts as a challenge now and it is getting redefined. So in coming times, we might see a different definition of popular culture or a different theoretical aspect of popular culture popping in, which is most likely to happen because with the kind of definitions that we have looked into, it becomes very important and also very obvious.