

INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture02

History and development of Popular Culture

We will be now discussing about the history and development of popular culture. Previously, we discussed the definitions of culture, popular culture and also the word popular, the current meaning of popular as stated by Raymond Williams. And we saw how various different scholars have come up with little bit of critique and also with the definitions of popular culture. And popular culture has been also addressed by Bennett, who has given similar kind of definitions as to how John's story has discussed.

And then we also saw that popular culture's definition has come to a point where the lines of distinctions have blurred between the high culture and the popular culture. Now we will be discussing the history and development of popular culture and then how it is seen in academia, which is very important. And we'll look into other strains of popular culture or rather the words that conceptually add to what we call as popular culture. Now, to begin with, in the 18th century, a three-part artistic tradition emerged and this was the traditional folk, the high art and the new popular.

So, all of the three in a way came in the 18th century. But there was not always a clear-cut discussion around it or, a demarcation, one can say, around these three, though all of the three emerged during the same time. And then this cultural evolution unfolded alongside significant technological, social and political changes. So all three, evolved around technology, social change and political change that was going on in the 18th century.

Then we come to the mid 19th century when the modern mass society emerged and most of the credit should be given to the mass media. So mass media was the reason or the only reason in the mid-19th century to create what is now called modern mass society. It facilitated, it was facilitated by the emergence of the modern mass media as the dominant form of communication that was the

dominant force. And at various stages of development, this happened not in one state, but in sequential stages, this development took place. Prior to the guardians of elite and to some extent folk culture have perceived the emergence of popular culture as a direct threat to the foundation of the civilization.

So they say that popular culture might lead to shaking the foundations of civilization. The culture that they have built with time. So this came around the mid-19th century when Again, folk were being situated with the elite. It has still not been equated with the popular.

Now, many scholars, satirists and critics from Jonathan Swift to Samuel Johnson and T.S. Eliot also debate that They have criticized popular culture and called it like mob culture or also it is perceived as lowbrow. The term lowbrow became famous and popular from Dewight So DeWitt was the one who used and helped it get popularized.

And then we also see that popular culture. is seen as a degradation. It degrades the high culture, high cultural standards and societal values. So in a way, again, it is being situated as an inferior culture. It is being shown in a dark light as to what possibly popular culture is doing to the high culture.

During the 19th and the early 20th century, we see that, these scholars hold a negative view of popular culture. And this negative attitude also leads to discouraging and even disparaging to an extent. And it is very evidently, shown in Defoe where he, Defoe and Dickens both, Dickens we have already taken as an example, where they both have struggled to make their work or their work to contribute in the high culture. So they both in a way have struggled like

Before it was deemed worthy of scholarly study. So it says about the attitude that was reflected in educational institutes and academic circles. So the educational institutes and academic circles, therefore, were not ready to study popular culture or even. think and write about it or even discuss it because they did not want their conditions to be like Defoe and Dickens, where they are struggling to make it or make it contribute to what is called like high literature. Only in the second half of the 20th century,

we see that a sufficiently large group of scholars, who already had this political power, this economy and requisites of social, were able to legitimize popular

culture study. So it took time. It took almost a whole century to come to the conclusion that popular cultural studies Culture can be a part of the academy and it can be studied. But again, it has come from scholars.

It has not come from a culture or an individual. But it is the effort of these scholars who, who held some political power, some status in the social structure. And therefore it was possible. Some British essayists, popular British essayists like Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin, have opposed this integration of popular culture and they have called it a mob. Arnold's work, especially in *Culture and Anarchy*, we see and more explicitly in Ruskin's *Stone of Venice*, they have vehemently criticized mass production consumption, a fundamental element of popular culture.

condemning them wholeheartedly. Their writings reflect a consciousness about popular culture even though they approach it from a perspective of disdain and hostility. So the hostility is quite evident in the way they term it as mob or how they have kind of addressed or approached it. There is some sort of disdain and hostility. And then there is Dewitt who

is the flag bearer or torch bearer of this elite banner. And then he has talked a lot about, disassociating popular culture with scholars or scholarly work in the post-World War II period. The first ever work around popular culture in academia or in as popular culture studies emerged in the 1960s in *Daedalus* magazine. This is a very famous magazine and it ran pieces of theory of mass culture by Oscar Handlin, Stuart Hughes and also Edgar Heyman.

Even Sontag wrote an essay on culture and the new sensibility. And of course, Abraham Kaplan's *On the Aesthetics of the Popular*. These were the ones that compiled a kind of writing or literature in the 1960s that came out in *Daedalus*. And it is very significant, almost like a, laying of stones. to build an academia in and around popular culture discourse.

And then there are other people also who contributed like Irving Goffman. Then we have Peter L. Berger, then Thomas L. Luckman, who drew upon the perspectives from anthropology and sociology. Now, this is very interesting to note that most of the popular culture has come from anthropology and sociology. Even Birmingham School did a lot of study from the aspects of sociology, the empirical studies that they have contributed largely to understand culture.

Therefore, we see Irving Goffman and then we have Berger who has contributed to the discipline of sociology and anthropology. Now, popular culture in the groups of academia. It was in 1969 that Bowling Green State University in Ohio opened a centre for popular culture. This was the first ever that was happening and that too in the year 1969. And then they had other materials to kind of support, which were the audio center and the popular cultural library.

The centre also supported graduate students. So they ran a BA program, especially for popular culture. And then the areas that were linked or associated were English. OK, English and students who were studying popular culture, American folklore, American studies and American literature. the same year in the second annual meeting of the American Study Association.

Now, this American Study Association is very important. It is important because one of the members of this association went on to come up with a journal, very famous and the first of its kind in 1976, the Journal of Popular Culture. Now, this association, the American Studies Association, the Popular Culture Association was founded on this particular meeting. This initiative was led by Ray Brown. Now, Ray Brown is the guy who started Journal of Popular Culture.

He was a journal's editor, the first ever. And there is Russell Nye, Marshall Fishwalk. and then George Coletti and around 200 other people, other scholars who were part of this sentiment, who shared the same sentiment. Now, there was a literature, a founding literature, which was getting initiated. But initially, it meant with skepticism and suspicion whether they will be successful or not.

But quickly other people, other enthusiastic readers also started at the same time. So, there was no gap, the starting and the following were consecutively, spontaneously happening. Even before, even because there was some sort of skepticism and suspicion, even then it was made possible. Now, this Bowling Green State House,

was the first, as I already discussed, and the second was Morgan State University. It brought in MA courses and then it started granting degrees in popular culture. These are the only two bodies where we see that they are giving degrees in the area of popular culture. One is Bowling Green State House in Ohio and then the other one is Morgan State University, Baltimore. Now, across

260 schools in the United States, approximately 1933 popular culture courses were offered and 2000 such courses were available nationwide by 1979. So by the time the Journal of Popular Culture was established, the course on popular culture got integrated in academia really well and it was widely taught in BA programs and MA programs. They typically focused on aspects of popular culture, including popular literature, films, mass media, ethnic studies, radio, television, culture or intellectual history and music covering a wide range. Then we have the Birmingham School and it is very important. The Birmingham Centre, the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, is one of the sites where Stuart Hall pioneered popular culture.

So he was the pioneer. We have read his works on coding and decoding. And then we have, so much of written material available on cultural studies by him. One such essay was, what is this black in black popular culture, where he tried to discuss the race and ethnicity aspect in the wide range of popular culture, within the wide range of popular culture.

For him, popular culture study was a site of negotiation, contest and resistance. How black artists have emerged through resistance. Rap, and jazz, are the forms of music that situate themselves in the realm of resistance by black artists. Now, coming to the difference between what is high culture and low culture and very important. This is one of the distinguishing factors which creates the distinction, which is high culture and low culture.

It is also known as highbrow culture and lowbrow culture is difficult. So something difficult is seen to be exclusivity. So if it is not difficult, it is not exclusive. The same goes for something which is real and is difficult to understand. Real is not easy.

Non-real is easy. So therefore, this distinction, these are kind of parameters which you need to cross in order to be instilled in what is called as high culture. Bourdieu, again, makes a point and says that this kind of superiority and inferiority supports class distinction. So there comes again social structure, the class, class society.

And then we have also the economic factor. So economic factor. also decides your class and of course, social factor also decides your class. So he says that in this definition of high and low basically situates itself in the Marxist reading of

popular culture supporting class distinction. Then we have high culture which is the outcome of individual creative efforts.

Now we know of an essay by Walter Benjamin Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, where he talks about the reproduction of an art piece that takes place. Again, bringing in the example of Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa was painted by, of course, Da Vinci. And we see the, printed versions of the Mona Lisa. We also see the printed version of Van Gogh

So what is the artist's contribution to this production? Is there any contribution in this production or there are no individual efforts? So if there are no individual creative efforts associated with the production, it leads to mass production, just like the printouts or labels or posters of Mona Lisa or Van Gogh's Starry Night. Then comes Dewight. Very important.

Now, Dewight criticizes mass culture on several levels. He says that it weakens the high culture by feeding on the high culture. And in return, it does not give anything. So the output is zero. Therefore, he terms it as a parasite.

So popular culture is like a parasite which is feeding on the high culture. Very important. Now, earlier we discussed how folk emerged organically. So, Dewight is of the idea that folk art emerged from organically from the people and it is spontaneous and native. And it is expressed by, them by the people expressed by the people and is largely independent of the high culture.

Now, when it is largely independent of the high culture, there is no involvement of an institution. But still, since it is organic and it is spontaneous and native, and, it is independent of high culture. It still formulates a sort of culture, which is separate, of course, not of the rule, not like the dominant culture, but still can be situated with the high art. And then Dewight also says, giving the example of Dante, that Dante is an example to demonstrate that despite he was, there was a phase in his life where he was continuously facing religious and political pressures, but he did not compromise with the integrity of the art or integrity of the work.

So in order to, make it called a high culture. or make it called low culture. He withstood with his idea that he would not cater to the average taste and Dante succeeded after a point. Now, the term that we are often referring to, while a pop

group that performs in public reflects low culture, What is it that happens in a concert hall that reflects like, high culture?

So it says a philharmonic orchestra that performs for the privilege. A philharmonic orchestra that performs for the privilege in a concert hall reflects high culture, while a pop group that performs in a public park reflects low culture. But what about people like Luciano who belong to the high culture? They are great artists, but they are, in fact, performing for everyone and that too for free for the masses. And, a lack of people are coming to watch his performance, coming to watch his concert regularly.

Even though there is rainfall. So what does it signify? What does it tell? Again, this brings us back to the discourse of what is high and what is low. Now, there is some sort of opposition that is taking place.

In between those oppositions, the opposition between the low and the high grew wider with the former being increasingly sacralized. So, the high culture is somewhat very sacrosanct and on the contrary, the popular culture is considered to be easy and Easy entertainment. So something which is very sacrosanct and not available for everyone is termed to be high and which is easy entertainment often is taken to be popular.

The term highbrow originated from phrenology and then it is associated with intellectual or aesthetic refinement. And then we have the lowbrow, which came a couple of decades later, which says that it lacks intellectual or aesthetic sophistication. And Levine has talked about this and discussed it. There is F.R. Lewis who has also, who is also of the same opinion that there should be a distinction between what is high, and what is low.

Everything should not be included in the category of high. And high is always serious. Now, high is always serious, which again makes it distinct from the low. Now, the low culture, as many scholars have referred it to low culture or low low brow culture or popular culture is not serious. That is their take on the distinct distinction between the high and the low.

Now, the social structuring and taste come into question and it is very important. So Hankwit says that the high aesthetics and popular aesthetics, there is a difference in taste. Now, again, this taste revolves around some sort of ideology,

some sort of politics is associated with it. Social structuring of taste also includes an aesthetic theory. So what is your taste in fashion?

OK, if it is what is considered as very aesthetic, it will be situated under high. But if it has a lot of colours, especially with minimalism, nowadays we see that. Minimalism is associated with a sort of. Capitalism. less is more.

So there is a big room and there could be just one artwork and it can be construed as less is more and it is classy, which again brings us to the idea of taste. Whereas there is a same room which is decorated with different art pieces in different colours. So basically, a lot of colours, again, in the study of minimalism, especially in architecture and decor, it is associated with Bohemian, which is again a bit associated with the hippie culture, bringing in the idea of subcultures and again associating it with pop culture. Then there is high aesthetics emphasizing the importance of form over content.

So in high aesthetics, form is more important than the content. It advocates for a sense of distance and detachment when engaging with autonomous artwork. So if someone is, engaging with an artwork, what a high culture expects is you shouldn't attach yourself. You should be autonomous.

The artwork should be autonomous. There shouldn't be any connection between the two and that is how you bring in more form and less content in what you situate in popular culture or high culture. Then in contrast to popular and high, We also see that there are representing themes or subjects that are relatable and relevant to people's everyday life. So whatever is associated with low culture is about people's everyday lives.

It is not exclusive. It is very inclusive, relatable, very relevant. This distinction highlights different approaches to artistic appreciation and cultural expression. So Hanquinet again comes back and says that popular is about everyday people and their everyday lives.

And then the differing approaches to artistic appreciation and cultural expression. So the approach that high culture uses in order to, appreciate a piece of art And the cultural expressions around it is differently placed when it is a popular art or popular medium. Now, there are recent researches where scholars have, questioned the traditional high and low distinction and declared a complete

collapse of it. So we see, again, bringing it back to the sixth definition of popular culture. So, this has come from scholars who are now part and parcel of the larger body of popular cultural studies stating that the question between what is traditional high and low, the distinction has been completely collapsed. This inquiry promotes a re-evaluation. So, now there is a re-evaluation is required as to where you are going to situate what is called popular and what is called high.

How individual taste preferences are organized. So in times to come or even it might be happening as of now how individuals' tastes and preferences are organized needs to be categorized. So we often see that there are concerts which are being attended by people of the high class society. Many celebrities also go and attend these concerts with their family, with their kids.

Now, what does it situate? Where does it situate itself? And what does it say about an individual's taste preferences? On the contrary, if it is an event like the Met Gala you cannot wear anything and go it has a theme and of course, it is it might be unsaid that you need to have a very good label you need to wear a very good brand or luxury brand to that Met Gala event. So how the tastes and preferences and choices are changing. The same celebrity who visits the Met Gala wearing expensive clothes, which are specially designed, which are exclusive, attends a concert the next day. So, what are these dominant groups?

Are they really the dominant groups or are they changing, or they are re-evaluating themselves or redesigning their preferences and tastes? High culture may encompass classical as well as new or emerging cultures. References suggest more fluid. So instead of being something where they have to choose between things it is better for them to be more fluid this is about the high culture so this high culture may encompass classical as well as new or emerging cultures

Referring suggests a more fluid understanding of cultural hierarchies. Instead of saying that whatever is of good taste belongs to the high culture, whatever is of ordinary taste belongs to the low culture. More than that, they should just think of integrating or categorizing or maybe reorganizing, re-evaluating the discourse around it and come to a point where Fluidity is promoted.