

# INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

## Lecture03

### Mass Culture

We will now look into the definition of mass culture. It is a very important and integral aspect of what we call as popular culture. Therefore, we need to understand how mass culture has performed in the larger domain of popular culture. Now, in simple terms, mass culture could mean that it is a culture of the masses. And by masses, I mean a group or a community of people.

They might associate themselves with any culture that has just emerged or any religious practices or beliefs which their whole community or ethnicity adheres to. So with this simple definition of mass culture, we move on to how it has been discussed in academia or scholarship. So mass culture is basically called a commercial culture because of its reasons related to economy and consumption. mass production happens because of mass consumption.

And whenever there is consumption, there is demand and supply, again, through which we can correlate to the discipline of economics, which comes into play. And then we see that there is mass production for widespread consumption happening, And this widespread consumption is non-discriminatory in nature. So that is one of the key factors of mass production, that it does not discriminate. It is non-discriminatory to its audience.

And then there is a certain formula and it is manipulative, of course. So to consume or to be part of that consumerist culture, someone needs to do the production and that production is, is very formulaic in nature so there is a formula, for how to make things popular it first one could be cheap so the price is less and therefore many people can consume it there is also a sense of passive consumption attached to it which again brings in that what is in trend so there are a lot of things which are in trend and since it is in trend other people also become passive consumers of that mass production. And then it is also seen to be manipulative.

It generates a kind of desire. It generates a kind of opportunity for you to consume the goods which you don't require. So there comes the idea of formulaic and manipulation. Catering to the political agendas If at all it is existent.

Now it is viewed as promoting passive consumption and it says that it dulls the consumer's mind and the culture itself. So two things are happening with mass consumption. One is that it is making the consumer a passive consumer. It tells the consumer or makes them believe that they need the product. act in reality they do not actually need it, they have no use for the product that is one and the second is that it does the thought process of the consumer at large. it does not give the opportunity to the consumer to comprehend things and therefore it does the same to the culture also. It makes the culture also dull. It is not interesting anymore. Since there are people who are passive consumers, there is nothing to be excited about. Simon Frith has contradicted this idea.

He says that there are artists, like single artists who release their album or even one song. And these singles fall miserably. In terms of consumption, in terms of monetary, in terms of finances. It says that consumption is an automatic and passive activity, as earlier told by the critics of mass culture. But he disagrees and says that consumption is not automatic.

It is not even passive. Had it been passive and automatic, the albums of these artists would not fail. And as we know, when we talk about high culture or high brow culture, the artists or the individuals who create, okay, is one. It is an individual creator. It is not a mass creator.

therefore, how does this signify what can be construed as mass culture or what cannot be the allegations against mass culture that it is passive and also automatic is kind of dethroned by Simon Frith. Now, scholars often say that there was a golden age when culture was flourishing, but that golden age has passed and it is not coming anytime soon. So in a way, it's like losing the idealized past it is romanticizing in a way. They're romanticizing the past, which was once golden. It is characterized by a sense of either a lost organic community or a vanished folk culture. So they are equating it with two things.

One is the lost organic community, which is no longer there, which means maybe now what is flourishing is the inorganic community and the vanished folk culture. So folk cultures have vanished. There could be other several reasons for the

Vanishing of four cultures, maybe the practitioners are no longer there, but it kind of blames the mass culture for the reason for the vanishing of four cultures. Now, John Fiske again argues that in capitalist societies, there is there is no true authentic culture.

So according to Fiske, there is no authentic or non-authentic thing available. And that can be used as a standard to measure the supposed inauthentic. What do you call authentic or what do you call inauthentic? According to John Fiske therefore he puts in this question, this idea of thought. Therefore, lamenting, crying over things.

The loss of high culture is just futile because, you see, it is deeply rooted in romantic nostalgia. No longer now we see that there is a difference or distinction between the high and the low. So these scholars of the yesteryears are still talking about or crying over the rooted nostalgia of the yesteryears, romanticizing the loss. Further, the benign version of the mass culture perspective, the realm of it is called it is included in the realm of collective fantasy and public imagination, which is suggested by Maltby. And Maltby suggests that popular culture offers a form of escapism.

Whatever is serious, as it has already been told that, too much of seriousness leads to some sort of pessimism after a point of time and then you want to escape. So this escape is through mass culture and mass culture. has a collective of fantasy and imagination and lets people explore their own utopian selves. So once they are coming out of what is this dichotomy of high and low, they indulge themselves in popular culture, which kind of gives them a sort of relief. It acts as a medicine, according to Maltby.

He gives, extends this example of, the idea of fantasy and imagination, saying that the Christmas holidays, I mean, the Christmas and seaside holidays were once, were just a dream, a far-fetched dream for the common people. And, collective desires, in a way and then later on we see that popular culture what it did is commercialized and markets our dreams and who does not want to live their dream right? So it enriches our experience by presenting diverse and varied dreams that you might not encounter otherwise so in a way commercial culture or commercial or popular culture is kind of giving the individuals the opportunity to

the masses, the opportunity to live their dream, to have a seaside holiday. Now, we have these packages.

These travel companies give us a package, a very curated itinerary and then it becomes easy for people to even think that okay they can afford this and they can go and have a seaside holiday. So this is what commercial culture is doing in a way after escapism through escapism. So this is a dream that is being fulfilled. Now Arnold again who was inspired by Coleridge says that the mass culture is somewhat raw and uncultivated and he has used this again and again. Once he says it is raw and uncultivated, the next time he says the raw and unkindled masses, our masses quite as raw and uncultivated as the French, those vast, miserable, unmanageable masses of sunken people. Calling them raw, calling them uncultivated, calling them unkindled, and also calling them uncultivated as the French. No comparison is with the French.

They are a bunch of unmanageable people, sunken people. So this is the idea that Arnold has. And he comes from the epitome of elitism, this is what he refers to, to the mass or the mass culture in general. Now, there is a lot of critique that has emerged.

Most of it is a critique of what we study in the larger domain of mass culture. Again, Arnold making a comeback. And he says that history shows that, mass culture is in a way, a moral failure of the unsound majority. So it destroys what is high culture.

Okay. That is what he intends to. In his support, there is F.R. Lewis, uh, who has extended this idea to cultural politics, how in cultural politics, the moral failure of the unsound majority has been addressed or how it has been perceived, That is very important to note.

Again, in America, just after World War, the situation was that there were Temporary cultural and political agreements happening. Some concessions taking place post-World War. The situation could be very pessimistic after the war. Therefore, there was a need to have some sort of concessions regarding cultural and political notions.

Now, they tried to have something... curated along the lines of liberalism, pluralism and the idea of classlessness. This consensus was supported by the

cultural authority of American intellectuals. So all the American intellectuals in a way gathered together and had this consensus that, OK, let's decide on some points regarding liberalism, pluralism and classlessness. But immediately we see, however, that this consciousness began to unravel.

It began to shift or it began to disorient itself. Due to the agitation of black civil rights, so just after post-World War, the turmoil of a state that is trying to stabilize again gets destabilized with some movements such as the black civil rights, the emergence of the counterculture, opposition to the Vietnam War, the Women Liberation Movement and the Campaign for Gay and Lesbian Rights. So post-World War, we see that a lot of movements or maybe social movements got attached with the American culture or with the American authority at large.

So these discussions around the agitation around black civil rights and then the counterculture emergence with different cults coming into place. Then we have the protest the Vietnam War and the women's liberation movement, as it was seen as, again, a counterculture movement that got integrated into the mainstream after some time. This was the reason that the mass culture in ways of protest emerged, these movements challenged and eventually undermined the previously established consensus. So, in a way, the consensus that was formed earlier, just after the World War, is now getting de-established.

It is also being challenged by different movements that are coming into place. Now, There is something called the mass culture, which is like a forum of or means of social control. The radical socialist or the, the radical or the socialist positions were viewed as mass culture, as a form of means to social control. In many ways, if we associate it with the previous point, it becomes very obvious and interesting to understand how mass culture as a form of or means to control the society at large, how it had got that kind of power or how it saw mass culture to hold to that power to control the society.

Now, Rosenberg, another critic of mass culture, said that America is not the reason for mass culture. Instead, it is widespread in the Soviet Union. Its creator is not capitalism, but technology. Therefore, American cannot be held responsible for the emergence or for its persistence. So,

What Rosenberg is doing is shifting the entire blame of the propagation of mass culture to the Soviet Union and that not to capitalization, but to technology,

because, of course, Russia was once a Marxist state, a communist state. Now. Rosenberg says that what high culture can get from mass culture and it is kind of mass culture is trying to learn the high culture. He gives two concepts or two reasons or two summaries in fact, where he says that these two reasons are the greatest of all reasons why high culture can be integrated into mass culture. One is financial work.

Now it is seen that people often who practice high art or aesthetic art might not be always rich. So there is an aspect of financial gain and this financial gain which can be quite tempting for creators and producers of high culture who might be struggling financially. So finance can be one reason why the high culture can bend or lean towards what is called as mass culture. The second is a large audience.

Now, who does not want a good, large fan base or an audience? Especially, in today's context where we have the influencer culture, when we have the celebrity culture, we see that we need a large audience. Mass culture has the potential to reach to the masses. So that is what the high culture can get. It is an opportunity for broader exposure and an impact beyond traditional elite circles to go beyond these traditional elite circles impact.

Again, it can be exchanged in currency later on. Again, coming back to the financial rewards. So these are the two very key factors which can affect what is now called as high culture. Now, Another important person is Van den Haag.

Van den Haag has criticized mass culture. So according to Haag, not necessarily that mass culture taste. It has to do with the mass culture taste. It does not say that the taste has declined. Rather, it says that the taste has now become increasingly significant for culture producers in Western societies.

So what mass culture is now doing is that it has made its taste significant. So that it can be produced, it can be made to consume as compared to the taste, the superiority of the taste that was exercised by the elite or the dominant class. Further, Haag observes how low and, how high and the folk are assimilated into mass culture, resulting in consumption as a part of mass culture. He expresses concerns that many people now consume classics incorrectly, which he sees as a new phenomenon. So what is now happening is

this new phenomenon where classics are consumed in a non-authentic way as they have mentioned, quote-unquote, incorrectly. Now, for example, recently in the emergence of blogs have emerged and people with blog pages, what they are doing, especially those who are interested in reading, are coming up with short stories or there's a particular term that is emerging for these short stories where they read the classics and give one-liner summary for the classics. That, in a way, can be assimilated with what example Haag is giving or what Haag means, by mistakenly consuming the classics. That is a modern explanation of what he says or suggests, how the modern, the popular and the high are getting assimilated.

He ultimately asserts that mass culture acts like a drug that reduces people's ability to engage with life. He has termed mass culture now as drugs and it is in a way affecting the lives of the people, of individuals or of society. And it is kind of reducing the people's ability to even think the way, mass culture dulls people's brains. This is what mass culture is doing and further he suggests that consuming it represents a form of repression.

People consume the empty texts and practices of mass culture to fill their inner void. Now, with the advancement of technology, we see that people are often on their phones and this is somewhat making them feel void inside. There is some sort of void inside because they are not communicating. They are always on virtual mode. They're living a virtual life.

They're not communicating with family, friends, relatives. So this is in a way leading to some sort of people start consuming empty texts and practices, practices which do not mean anything, which are not culturally rich. That is what it is talking about. But paradoxically, this emptiness grows deeper.

The more they engage with mass culture content. So according to Haag, the more you consume the content, popular or mass production the more you in a way grow deeper into that emptiness into that void and it will be more difficult further to fill that void. Now there are counter critiques also to this mass culture and Schiltz is one that kind of rejects certain ideas attached to mass culture. So, Haag and Arnold and even Dwight, to an extent, have said that it is a very intellectually deteriorating thing, which is mass culture.

It is also a legit deterioration of a product of a mass culture. Now, this intellectual deterioration is seen by Shills as he says that it is now less damaging than it was before. So one should be happy about mass culture not being as damaging as it was before. So less damaging to a lower class than the dismissal or dismal and harsh existence of earlier centuries had ever seen.

So this is one time where you see the damage being or there is damage control as compared to a previous time. The problem is not mass culture, but responses of intellectuals to mass culture. So basically, mass culture is not the problem, but how the intellectuals or scholars have responded to the study of mass culture, to the consumption and production of mass culture. They need to kind of comprehend and rethink and re-evaluate the way they have, evaluated mass culture.

Mass society has changed the cultural map so the map of culture that we studied beginning from Raymond to John Story to Bennett in a way it has changed that landscape that maps itself of what we call as culture and reducing the significance of superior or refined culture so earlier we used to see that the scholars are giving too much emphasis to what is superior and what is inferior and what is refined. So the significance has been lowered and that is a good sign. In fact, there is an increase in the importance of what was mediocre and brutal. So it's not just that the significance of the superior or the refined has been lowered, but there is a significant increase in what was called mediocre or brutal. Lastly, we have the Frankfurt School, which is also known for cultural studies. The scholars have given a very significant different, differentiation of what is construed as culture and what is construed as mass culture.

In a very simplified way, we'll now look at the differences between these two categories. So they say that culture is real, according to Frankfurt School Scholars, and mass culture is false. This is the distinction culture is more of a European thing. Mass culture is more of an American thing.

Americanization, as we discussed, culture is multidimensional, and mass culture is one-dimensional. Culture is an individual creation. Mass culture is mass production. Culture is active consumption, whereas mass culture is passive consumption. Then we have the imagination, which comes with culture.



But there is a distraction, which comes with mass culture. Lastly, culture is a point of negation or it can be seen as negation, whereas mass culture is basically social cement. It cements, it kind of blocks. So with this, we conclude mass culture.