

CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT & THE STATE

DURING the last four decades, several efforts have been made by the government for the promotion of culture in general and the Fine Arts in particular. The first was the establishment of national academies followed by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. A little later the National Book Trust and the Film Development Corporation were set up. Zonal Cultural Centers were also established.

A recent exercise in this direction is the National Policy on Culture (NPC) which needs the approval of parliament. Prepared by the Human Resources Development Ministry, the policy has brought into focus several issues like- what is culture? Is there a national culture? Is there is a need for such a policy? Will the policy being visualized serve the cause of culture and finally, what is the role of the state in culture?

The word culture is so frequently used that it has lost its value, its force and truth of meaning. Even now attempts are made to describe what culture is, but with little success. The word culture needs to be closely studied and its true meaning known.

The most acceptable definition of cultures is given by Edward Taylor who says: "Culture is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, laws, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by men as members of society."

Culture covers every important aspect of life and every key factor determining how people live. So it is obvious that any document on culture will have to cover almost every aspect of life that is religious, social, economic and artistic. But efforts in the past have focused only on one aspect of culture-artistic. Mere dance, drama, music, theatre etc., do not make culture complete. Even the NPC assumes Fine arts as culture or Bharatiya Sanskriti and pays no or little attention to other aspects of life.

Though the policy wants to "outline conditions conducive to more satisfactory self-expression and participation in cultural life by the Indian people at large" it does not specify how it will ensure such conditions. Unless a cultural policy takes into account the social and economic conditions , it cannot be successful. Because, there can be no culture without leisure and leisure is the product of freedom from hunger, poverty and want. Except Ananda Coomaraswamy, every scholar has emphasized leisure as a pre-requisite for culture.

No explanation is needed to point out that the present social and economic conditions is neither conducive to culture nor for leisure. Prof. V.K. Gokak says "the rich man who does not care for culture, the middle class man who is satisfied with his narrow successes and thinks, in his self-importance, that there is nothing else worth acquiring and the populace which is struggling all the time for mere subsistence, having hardly any time for the finer things on life, if these are the persons that constitute society, how can there be any scope for culture?"

It is here the nexus between culture and development that needs to be analysed. Taking its cue from the UNESCO's report by the Inter Governmental Committee of the World Decade for Cultural Development, the policy on culture tends to use culture expression as a means to create a favourable bedrock for the absorption of the fruits of development. One wonders how exactly development experts will go about assessing the cultural personality of the people in the country.

Unfortunately in India, development has never been a component of culture. In this land of spiritual greatness, culture is the other name for religion, rituals and all that goes with it. At best it has included the Fine arts. At no time science and technology is seen as a part of a cultural process.

One need not read a cultural anthropologist like Max Weber or an intellectual like Nirad Chaudhari to know how religion, particularly Hinduism has adversely effected economic development. Several studies have been carried out by scholars like William Kapp, who have found out that certain aspects of Indian culture like theory of Karma and rebirth has acted as a major impediment to economic betterment.

Thus a culture policy must begin at the other end that is people and their religious and social values. These values are to be re-defined so that the speed of development is increased. There cannot be a policy on culture in isolation to other policies like industry or environment. As one writer puts it "any culture policy should not only redefine development but also evolve an action plan for that. The economic activities of the society that is production, technology, distribution of resources have a great deal to do with sustaining and transmuting culture. There cannot be one kind of cultural policy and one kind of economic policy. Both have to go hand in hand."

Another important issue which the NPC has brought to focus relates to national identity of India. In its introductory part the policy says that "culture is a central instrument of discovering, integrating and asserting the national identity of India." It wants to integrate the holistic vision of culture in such a way that no segment, area or community feels excluded. Though the objective is laudable, it is doubtful whether culture unity can ever be achieved because partition and communal clashes have exposed the myth of national culture. Our messiahs of culture replaced national culture with composite culture, which again is open to question. For there is no culture that is independent.

A close study of Indian history would reveal that the so-called culture unity was and is the unity of the elites.

For the masses who are generally illiterate, economically backward, cultural unity is merely an idea. The reasons are not far to seek. For centuries language was the basis of cultural unity, though it is believed that religion was the uniting factor.

After the British took over India, English became the unifying force. Even to this day, cultural unity means the unity of the English- knowing elites.

It is an irony that while an alien language has brought about some cultural unity, Indian languages have failed to do so. Instead they have created more hurdles in the way of unity. Since language is a basic component of culture, a national language policy is a prerequisite for cultural unity. It is a tragedy that even after three decades we have not been able to evolve an acceptable language policy.

Take another example. The seven sacred rivers are said to be a basis for cultural unity. But today, river disputes have made people fanatical resorting to violence. It is time we stop deceiving ourselves in the name of cultural unity and try to accept reality as it is.

An important question is whether a policy on culture is essential and to what extent should the government have a role in it. Is it not true that many cultural forms like to exist without a policy or state patronage? Most creative arts have sustained themselves not due to governmental support but due to committed individuals and groups.

But the government thinks that a stage has arrived when the importance of culture has to be clearly and candidly defined, the area of public intervention in culture identified, the role of state in culture assessed and readjusted, importance of societal and voluntary efforts in this area recognized and further encouraged. For this, the policy envisages setting up of a statutory body, called the Bharatiya Sanskriti Parishad, which will be accountable to parliament. This apex body will supervise, co-ordinate and fund cultural institution. The paper assures elimination of various forms of intervention such as bureaucratic and political "as far as possible."

The proposal to establish such a body has not found any takers with the states or the culture personalities. Since there are already many institutions to promote culture, another body would be superfluous. Secondly, what the government talks now as 'arms length intervention,' would not remain so. The promise of "as far as possible" would turn out to be "as much as possible" in the long run. Finally, the autonomy enjoyed by the existing cultural institutions is there for all to see. Girish karnad says: "How can the ideal of decentralization be brought about by one single body like the Bharatiya Sanskriti Parishad? What is the guarantee that this proposed body too will not be reduced to the status of a rubber stamp?"

The Dr.Homi J. Bhaba Committee, the G.D. Khosla committee and the recent Haskar Committee have all made critical remarks about the functioning of the academies. The NPC envisages the setting up of a network of rural libraries linked up with district library system and a National Commission for Library and Information system. But will it work?

What is required is action to eradicate corruption, inefficient working of the existing cultural institutions and ensure that they function better.

