UNIT 1  SANSKRITIZATION AND PALACE PARADIGM

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:
- explain what Palace Paradigm is;
- understand the differences between written and oral traditions;
- explain how culture is produced in society;
- explain the relation between the concept of Palace Paradigm and performing arts;
- understand what Sanskritization is;
- explain the strengths and weaknesses of the concept of Sanskritization; and
- know what the application is of the concept to understand Indian culture.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we will discuss some of the major theoretical debates that are generally associated with the concept of Palace Paradigm and Sanskritization. A paradigm, as we know, is a pattern of a highly structured phenomenon. It is always multi-dimensional and as such generates many more patterns to achieve completeness in its shape, size, dimensions, meaning and objectives.

Kings and their stories influence our cultural worldview to a significant extent. The traditional way of understanding and writing history is also premised largely on the narratives about kings and their activities. This has been obviously
perpetrated by the elites and powerful section of the society with a view to perpetuating the hegemony of the royalty. The hegemony of royalty-centric historical discourse obviously played the role of a civilizing instrument in the days of the kings and emperors. However, its disciplining function is not yet over despite the fact that we have no kings today. The reason for this may be attributed to the fact that it serves the interest of the ruling elites even today. A cursory observation makes it amply clear as to the preponderance of the relics and symbols of monarchy not only in the various spheres of popular cultures and customs but also in the very institutions of democracy. Eminent folklorist Jawaharlal Handoo, observing this overarching and all-encompassing nature of the royal-centric historical discourse describes it as 'palace paradigm'. He says, "(it) has not only misled generations the world over, but has also blurred the story - the real story - of humankind and helped the hegemony of power politics and domination"(2006: 24) despite the changes humankind has undergone over time. "Even in the modern political systems the status of this paradigm remains by and large unchanged because...people are still hungry for kings and the underlying forces of this paradigm and its civilizing discourse." (ibid: 24)

Next we will discuss what Sanskritization is. There are different approaches to the study of social change in India. 'Sanskritization' is one of the most significant of these approaches which explains the process of cultural mobility in the traditional Indian social structure. The term was first used by sociologist M. N. Srinivas in his book, Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India (1952) to explain the process of upward mobility with the caste system. According to Srinivas, "(T)he caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. Movement has always been possible, and especially so in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called 'Sanskritization'...in preference to 'Brahminization', as certain Vedic rites are confined to the Brahmins and the two other 'twice-born' castes" (1952: 32)

### 1.2 PALACE PARADIGM

#### 1.2.1 Hegemony of the written discourse

In this section, we will try to understand what written discourse is and the role that it plays in shaping culture in society. Closely related to the palace-oriented historical discourse is the preponderant role of the written document as the sole authentic source of historical facts. As the written discourse had been the exclusive preserve of the few literate elites even not in distant past, it is their worldview and interests that determined the tone of the historical discourse. These literate few, on the other hand, had mostly been under the patronage of either kings or other members of the ruling class. Naturally, they assumed the role of advocates of the ruling class. The voice of the vast majority of marginal, illiterate, powerless masses hardly found any space in the framework of their writing. Instead of being a poly-vocal system, history became a mouthpiece of the ruling elites. History-writing did not only distort the real story of mankind but also became a
powerful discourse casting human civilizations and their future in a particular mould. Thus, Handoo contends that history became a monolithic concept and a discourse of subversion with a strong philosophical foundation of its own. Civilizations came to be recognized by this concept of discourse and by this philosophy of monolithism. The discourse of Palace Paradigm became the discourse of civilizations. The strength of a culture and a civilization began to be judged only in terms of stone structures - palaces, forts, stone bridges, prisons - and discussion of all these in big books. This metaphor was also extended to wars, conquests, bloodshed, colonization and slavery.

In the Indian context, it is difficult to trace the exact time since when written discourse became the sole arbiter of 'knowledge' and began to be associated with power. However, according to Handoo, it seems that the pre-eminence of the written discourse and the knowledge, power and a strong patriarchal value system - all ran parallel to the emergence of feudalism in India. (2006: 24) The palace being the epicentre of the feudal system, it became the ideal of all social discourses and came to shape the collective consciousness of the people. The privileged section of the society including the educated elites, rich traders, and so on who could not have managed a comfortable lifestyle without coming under the sway of the heavy wings of the palace understandably became advocates of the palace paradigm. Handoo, however, says that it is also possible that this powerful section of the society might not have been conscious of the hazards of this paradigm and the discourse it generated because of its strong civilizing effect. The latter made the discourse of Palace Paradigm appear the most normal and obvious thing which was beyond any question. This civilizing effect was all the more effective because of its deliberate integration with religion. (ibid: 25)

The suppressive character of the written discourse in the Indian context, Handoo argues, is most evident in case of Indian literature. He points out that India has a very ancient tradition of written literary works; yet there is no clear evidence that this mighty tradition of literary activity ever, even by mistake, addressed the problems of the common masses of the land. Except the literature emerging out of the Bhakti movement of the medieval period, Indian literature remained imprisoned in the confines of the Palace Paradigm till the beginning of the 20th century. (Handoo 2006: 25)

This discourse, Handoo alleges, did not allow the ordinary, collective and shared discourse to develop in its own terms. In fact, there was pressure on it to either go out of circulation completely or merge with the powerful high discourse by restructuring itself to suit the hegemonic designs of the dominant written discourse. On the other hand, Handoo contends that folklore, more particularly folk literature, in spite of these pressures seems to have become the centre of the ordinary discourse in India. It continued to represent the collective sharing and concern for ordinary human conditions while the palace-centric written discourse became an instrument of power and exploitation. The latter, in due course, developed such complex linguistic, stylistic and semantic markers that interpretation became inevitable, which in turn developed as a means of exerting power on the marginal people who could not understand, share or benefit from such markers.
1.2.2 The sway of the Palace Paradigm

In the previous section we had focussed on the role of written texts in shaping culture. In this section, we will highlight the relation between written texts/discourse and palace as the centre of production of culture. It is not that only the written discourse and the historical space come under the sway of the palace paradigm. Most of the social behaviour and cultural expressions of the feudal society in India yielded to the latter. For example, the Indian classical music, dance and drama, cuisine, costume, philosophical discourse, language, religion, and literary folklore which enjoyed a much wider social base were influenced by the discourse of Palace Paradigm to a considerable extent. It was only natural, Handoo argues, that the civilizing power of oral discourse such as fairy tales and animal tales which have significant influence on the people, especially the children, in shaping their social attitude and behaviour, was recognized and were therefore assimilated into the so-called 'high art' conforming to the ideology of the ruling elites and then frozen into an ideology of subversion. (2006: 26)

Handoo argues that the literary fairy tales, like many other genres was essentially designed for children both to divert as amusement and instruct ideologically as a means to mould the inner nature of young people. In fact, here amusement has to be seen as a direct creation of ideology. With the same end, literary animal tale was also redesigned and was used for generating religious discourse, ethics and politics of the palace paradigm. Handoo illustrates his contention with examples drawn from the tales of the Jataka and the Panchatantra. In these tales, the world of animals is consciously modeled on human society in which an imaginary world peopled with animal actors is constructed. This imaginary world of the animal tale is differentiated from the real world by a simple device of inverting the characteristics of its animal inhabitants in relation to their real-world counterparts. In the process, the "large animals such as the elephant, apparently powerful and wise, are portrayed as weak and foolish while small creatures that seem of little account are bestowed in these tales with wisdom and courage. It then becomes possible, by reversing the play of metaphor, to imagine a differently constructed human society." (Handoo 2006: 27)
Handoo points out that such literary animal tales were used for training children and young princes in the art of kingship and diplomacy in the palaces of India. The Buddhists and the Jains also used this genre of folktale for religious discourses. He contends that “through the medium of inversion…children and adults are taught to recognize certain basic truths of life and existence. And in this way perhaps the impossible was made possible, at least temporarily.” (2006: 27)

Handoo states that the above-mentioned metaphor is present everywhere. Even in the modern world, the symbolism of the animal tale is very popular among children and has been extended to suit new situations. He cites examples of the heroes of modern popular culture such as Donald Duck and Spiderman who appear to be the extensions of traditional symbolism. (ibid)

This affair of role play and symbolic inversion is witnessed in other genre too. Handoo examines this in a case Holi, a folk festival celebrated widely in various parts of India, especially in the north India. A festival of colours, Holi coincides the harvest time. The festival is celebrated with dance, music, feast, fasting, and other festivities. The structure and performance of this festival suggest that just like the animal tale, Holi makes an attempt at symbolic inversion of the rigid barriers of social structure, kinship roles, and powers of hierarchy, howsoever temporary. Colour as a marker of race, community, gender, status, etc often provides symbolic social sanction to the maintenance of different social hierarchies and kinship roles. Yet it is with the same colour that these hierarchies and roles are reversed symbolically. In Holi, everybody irrespective of age, caste, economic status, and gender are free to hug and apply colour on each other's face as way of greetings. This is simply not possible in regular, normal times. As coloured faces blur identity of the people, forbidden behaviours occur freely and a collective catharsis is reached in the form of doing funny things. Similarly, obscene and vulgar language becomes the normal language of discourse during the festival. Handoo contends that both the above-mentioned genres of folklore, the animal tale and the Holi and similar festivals, are using the discourse of reverse role play in a symbolic attempt to overcome the anxieties created by the hegemony of the palace paradigm.

One may point out here that similar role reversal is experienced in the carnivals of the western societies. The entire feudal order is turned upside down in the carnivals. Eminent Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin develops his concept of ‘carnivalesque’ from the carnivals. In the carnivals, the existing social hierarchies, the customs and etiquettes associated with these hierarchies, the taken-for-granted truths - all are profaned and overturned by the suppressed voices of day to day life. In the process, fools become wise, kings become beggars, and so on. Besides, there occurs a wholesale intermingling of opposites like fact and fantasy, heaven and hell, and so on. Bakhtin coined the term ‘carnivalesque’ to refer to that literary mode which subverts the ideologies and the institutions of the dominant order through shocking wit and absurdity. [Bakhtin 1929(1984); 1965(1984)]

1.2.3 The Palace Paradigm and the epic discourse

We will now focus on the Indian epics in our attempt to understand what Palace Paradigm is. It has been recognized that both ballads and epics as strong genres develop mainly among politically marginal people. However, Handoo holds that the Indian literary epic, just like the fairy tale, was assimilated into the discourse
of the Palace Paradigm and used as a civilizing instrument for the royals and the elites besides glorifying the kings and their kingships. An epic always has a long and powerful narrative recited with music. It also is studded with elements from myth, history and religion. With all these attributes an epic becomes a fine source of amusement irrespective of time and space. Handoo says, "(M)ore than any other literary genre, epics present the story of the kings without any symbolic disguise. The question is not that these epics offer the historical discourse of the feudal society and … the past of humankind; the real issue is that these epic metaphors have penetrated into the subconscious structures of the Indian society … in such a forceful manner that these have, it would seem, the same medieval effect in modern times." (2006: 29)

For example, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the famous Indian epic duo, recount the stories of the Kshatriyas, the traditional warrior and royal caste. Yet even folk epics which abound throughout regions and communities having nothing to do with either the Kshatriyas or kingship, were highly influenced by the famous pan-Indian epic structures. Thus, "these great stories of bloodshed, palace feuds, wars and conquests, abduction of women, concubines, treasure hunts and sibling rivalries seem to have set standards and ideals of a feudal society that resulted in setting role models for men and women that are thriving even now and directing the behaviour of the Indian society." To illustrate this, Handoo points out the fact that "most of the literary epics are raised on male bias. Epic poets are men singing the glory of other men, armed men, to be precise. …(O)ut of the thirty eight basic themes upon which most epic narratives of the world are based, only nine are associated with women. The ideals of the epic world obviously do not have much to share with women, nor do the women enjoy the heroic values. There is little they can do there other than getting abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or the other." (2006: 29)

Handoo further points out to the fact that the practice of burning alive of the widows (sati) of the dead warriors is basically a palace practice, perhaps the outcome of a historical need of the royalty and the feudal elites which was glorified in the epic discourse so much so that it became a civilizing force for the womenfolk of the Indian society. According to Handoo, the Indian women have a special relationship with fire throughout their lives as house keeper, food maker and food-provider. Besides fire also acts as an instrument of survival, power and purification and also of ultimate self-destruction (agni pariksha, sati, and dowry death = bride burning) for them even today seems to reinforce the relationship of this epic metaphor with the Palace Paradigm and its relevance in modern Indian society.

Further, Handoo claims that the models of violence in the Indian, particularly male, collective subconscious are rooted in epic metaphors. All epics, which as mentioned earlier are epitome of the palace discourse, are constructed around themes of violence and war. In this regard, Handoo contents the thesis that Indo-Aryan epics such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata or the Illiad are raised on violence while many non-Aryan epics such as the Cilapparikaram (a South Indian epic) is highly representative of non-violence. On the contrary, he argues that if the Indo-Aryan epics are "full of war, bloodshed, sibling rivalry, abduction of women, disputes over land and property, etc, and that such things establish these epics as epics of violence, then the Cillapatrikaram too is full of extramarital
relations, prostitution, theft, disputes, murder, death, suicides, fire and destruction. This non-Aryan epic also by and large seems to share the basic characteristics of the Indo-European epic repertoire…The point here is to define violence in the context of an epic and also realize its relationship with the culture and its paradigms that created the epic in the first place. Murder/death in war and murder/death in the palace are definition violent acts and share the semantics of violence equally." (2006: 30).

Handoo makes an interesting observation while he states that "unlike in other cultures such as Christianity or Islam, most of the hero-gods in the Indian epics are essentially rooted in royalty or feudal order…These hero-gods, more often than not, indulge purposefully in defining or redefining the philosophical dimensions of kingship, sometimes ideal kingship and the discourse of religion that they practice through the epic metaphors. Handoo points out that the impact of these epic metaphors and the palace discourse extend to the political ideology of modern India, too. Thus, padayatra, Ramarajya, and other loaded epic metaphors that fill the political vocabulary of modern India’s social and political ideology explain the historical connections between the epics and the contemporary political discourse.

Even a cursory observation of some more such terms would illustrate this. The terminologies such as rajkiya (literally means royal, but is used to mean official matters at present), raj marg (lit. royal street, but is used to mean high ways in the present parlance), raj bhavan (lit. royal abode, now used for the residence of state governors) conspicuously testify to the existing sway of the palace paradigm. Handoo mentions an interesting point when he states how a god, a king, and a Kshatriya is implied by the same term thakur (literally, it means both god and the kshatriya caste) in Hindi. Here, god seems to be realized through the metaphor of maharaj (literally a king of kings) or thakur and vice-versa. Expressions such as 'kripa karo maharaj' (have mercy, o’ king of kings/god) and 'thakur ke gun gaun' (praising the god/a king/ a landlord) are used interchangeably to pay tribute to both god and kings and powerful landlords. (2006: 34)

Check your progress 2
Note: 1) Your answers should be about 300 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the unit.
2) What is the role of Palace Paradigm in Indian culture formation?
1.2.4 Palace Paradigm and the discourse of performing arts

In this section, we will try to explain the relation between Palace Paradigm and performing art with regard to India. According to Handoo, the genre of Indian performing arts reflects the worldview of the palace and the patriarchal bias associated with it in a clearer symbolic manner. Yet, this genre, including both folk and classical, has been by and large neglected by scholars. He argues that though the classical dances of India such as Bharat Natyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, etc. have been discussed by scholars in terms of their structures, designs, music and postures, the underlying male bias of the Palace Paradigm embedded in these dance forms have missed the attention of the above scholars. Handoo asserts that each "classical dance, more particularly its postures, movements, the design of the stage and costumes, the music and musical instruments associated with it, if viewed holistically, present a strong male view" inherent in the palace paradigm. (2006: 30) The same applies to many other Indian folk dance forms as well.

According to Handoo, the classical dances, for instance, emphasize not only on the attributes such as female beauty, dress, erotic gestures and colour, but many gestures inherent in these dances seem to be there more to suit the male ego rather than to cater to the necessity of the dance or the dancer. In that context, he argues for a serious interpretation of the movements of dancing, for example, in fast rotation and in circles, various gestures like throwing of arms repeatedly in the nothingness of space and moving hands in various directions and so on. After all, all human gestures have a context and if that were not true then the language of gestures would not be able to communicate. The communication of the above-mentioned performing arts is also essentially based on a language of gestures. The repetition of gestures in case of dances occurs to ensure that no misunderstanding or distortion of meaning of these gestures takes place.

With this understanding, Handoo goes on to investigate the semantic foundations of gestures of such performances. He points out that in Hindi and other languages of India, for example, nachana ('to make one dance'), ungliyun par nachana ('to make one dance on finger tips'), etc. seem to be reflexive of male ego and power. An analysis of such expressions, which abound also in other Indian languages, might lead to far deeper understanding of the phenomenon of performing arts in India.

It is interesting, as Handoo notes, that most of the great teachers of these arts have been males. On the other hand, most of those who learn and perform these arts have been females. He further mentions that often the percussion instruments accompanying these performances such as the tabla, mridangam, and so on seem to be a symbolic male object. The tabla incidentally is a masculine noun in Hindi. In fact, the tabla might be a phallic symbol as suggested by the slang usage of the term. Tabla bajana ('to beat the tabla') denotes sexual activity in a given context. Thus, no wonder that tabla as a musical instrument is culturally associated more with male than female.

Further, it is customary that females perform the dances inside an arena with fixed boundaries. In Kuchipudi, the female dancer dances on the sharp edge of a metal dish, just like an acrobat. This symbolic dimension of boundaries, limitations, and the male designated domains are visible in what is popularly known as the 'bamboo dances' among several tribal groups such as the Mizos, Tiwas, Nagas, etc. of northeastern India. Bamboo is generally recognized as a
male phallic symbol. In these 'bamboo dances' females dancers keep hopping from one rectangular bamboo frame to another created by men with the help of bamboo poles. Every time the female dancer(s) try to escape a male-made frame, they are trapped in another. Handoo proposes that through these symbolic representations, a model of confinement, limitation, dependence, and of helplessness, etc. is created and perpetuated in these dance forms, which are not only designed by men in the courts and palaces, but are also excellent reflections of the male dominance. As such, these performing arts, folk or classical, should be subject to serious study as a civilizing device and as an extension of the palace paradigm.

1.2.5 The critique of the concept

In the previous sections, we have introduced you to the concept of Palace Paradigm and the various perspectives that see culture as centred on the significance of palace, i.e. elites, in society. In this section, we shall highlight some of the major critiques or drawbacks of the concept of palace paradigm. There is no doubt that the 'palace paradigm' approach delineates a number of interesting facts about the nature of our cultural artifacts and the ideologies inherent therein. However, many of the concerns raised by it have been addressed by other interpretations of Indian culture too. It is true that the kings and powerful feudal lords set the standards of socio-cultural behaviour of the Indian masses. Yet there are many customs and cultural artifacts which cannot be said to have emerged from the discourse surrounding the palace. The tribal art forms of the northeast that Handoo mentions, for example, did not have a palace origin. Similarly, there are many folk forms (which ranges from folktales and folksongs, etc. to riddles and witchcraft) which often demonstrated anti-palace orientation. Not only that, anti-palace ideology has been evident in many written literature as well. It is a different matter that many such written documents questioning the dominant discourse have been destroyed by the ruling classes. Thus, it is clear that the palace was not the only centre for cultural production and dissemination.

Further, the 'palace paradigm' speaks only of the manifestations of a feudal order which is projected as a rather static, monolithic concept. It does not delve into the dynamics of the feudal socio-economic structure and the conflicts within it, a study of which perhaps would have provided better understanding of its influence on the cultural domain of the Indian society.

The claims of the approach often appear overarching. The approach offers a partial explanation of the process of cultural production and their dissemination in India.

Check your progress 3

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 300 words each;
      2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.
      3) What is the main critique of the concept of palace paradigm?

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1.3 SANSKRITIZATION

1.3.1 Brahminization vs. Sanskritization

We have discussed what Palace Paradigm is and what are the strengths and weaknesses of the concept. Now we will discuss what Sanskritization is. Sanskritization is found to be identified with imitation of the Brahminical customs and manners by the lower castes. Srinivas presumed that the Brahmins to be the sole model of emulation for the sanskritizing groups. However, he abandoned the term for 'Sanskritization' on account of a number of reasons and defined Sanskritization as a process that refers to "the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, 'twice-born' caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community." (Srinivas 1966/77: 6)

The reasons which persuaded Srinivas to redefine the above process of caste mobility may be briefly discussed as below:

Firstly, Srinivas found that "Brahminization is subsumed under the wider process of Sanskritization." (1962/1989: 42) However, he also points out that the two may be at variance with each other at times. For example, though Sanskritization necessitates renunciation of certain habits and customs on the part of the sanskritizing groups such as drinking liquor, eating beef and pork, etc, the Brahmins in the Vedic period drank soma, an alcoholic drink, ate beef, and offered blood sacrifices which were given up in post-Vedic times. Though the Brahmins today, by and large, are vegetarians, there are non-vegetarian Brahmins too. The Assamese, Bengali, Kashmiri, Maithili, Oriya and Saraswat Brahmins eat non-vegetarian food. The Brahmins are characterized by many other regional variations suggesting that they can not be treated as a homogeneous group with respect to their habits and customs. Therefore, if the term Brahminization was used it would have been necessary to specify which particular Brahmin group was meant. Moreover, as the Brahmins are also undergoing various changes over time in the cultural domain it would have been further necessary to specify at which particular period of its history a particular Brahmin group is referred to as a model for Sanskritization.

Secondly, the agents of Sanskritization are not always the Brahmins. In fact, there was prohibition on the non-twice-born castes from following the customs and rites of the Brahmins, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that the Brahmins were responsible for this. On the other hand, there were non-Brahmin agents of Sanskritization. The Lingayats of South India, for example, have been a powerful force for Sanskritization of several low castes of Karnataka. Though founded by a Brahmin named Basava in the 12th century, the Lingayat movement was anti-Brahminical in tone and spirit drawing a large number of followers from the lower castes. In fact, the Lingayats of Mysore claim equality with Brahmins, and the more orthodox of them do not accept food cooked or handled by Brahmins. (Srinivas 1962/89: 43)

There are many such examples. What comes out clearly from the above is that Sanskritization as a process of social mobility cannot be explained only with the
help of the Brahminical model. There can be other models (Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra) as well depending on the context. In fact, Srinivas also highlights the fact that the Brahmin claim to supremacy was contested by the Kshatriyas on various occasions. (1966/77: 23-4)

Srinivas also cites anthropologists D. F. Pocock and Milton Singer to justify his contention. Pocock pointed out to the existence of a Kshatriya model of Sanskritization. Singer states that there exist not one or two models of Sanskritization but three if not four. (Srinivas 1966/77: 8). Srinivas quotes Singer:

"The local version (of Sanskritik Hinduism) may use the four varna labels--Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra--but the defining content of these labels varies with locality and needs to be empirically determined for any particular locality. It has also been discovered that the relative prestige and rank of these different varnas tend to vary with locality, time and group. In many areas, e.g., the kingly or martial, life-style has a rank equal with or sometimes higher than that of the Brahmin. Groups in these areas who wish to improve their status do so by adopting some of the stigmata of the Rajput life-style, i.e., by "Rajputizing" their way of life (Sinha). Even the life-styles of the merchant and peasant have been taken as models in localities where these groups are dominant." (Srinivas: Ibid)

Yogendra Singh theorizes this situation when he states that there are two levels of meanings which are implicit in the concept of Sanskritization. These two levels may be described as 'historical specific' and 'contextual specific' connotations of Sanskritization. He says, "(I)n historical specific sense, Sanskritization refers to those processes in Indian history which led to changes in the status of various castes, its leadership or its cultural patterns in different periods of history. It is indicative of an endogenous source of social change in the broad historical spectrum of India. In contextual specific sense, however, Sanskritization denotes contemporaneous processes of cultural imitation of upper castes by lower castes or subcastes, in different parts of India. The nature of Sanskritization of this type is by no means uniform as the content of cultural norms or customs being imitated may vary from Sanskritic or Hindu traditional forms to the tribal and even Islamic patterns." (1996: 6-7)

The contextual process of Sanskritization is illustrated by various studies undertaken in different contexts throughout India. These studies show that at many places the lower castes imitate the customs of other non-Brahmin castes as mentioned above. In some exceptional cases, even the higher castes have been found imitating the tribal ways which may be described as the process of 'tribalization'. In some other contexts, even Muslim cultural model is found to be emulated by both the upper as well as lower castes.

1.3.2 Locally dominant caste

Let us now try to understand what locally dominant caste is. Closely associated with Srinivas' concept of Sanskritization is the concept locally dominant caste. It is the locally dominant caste, which by dint of its landed property, numerical strength, and high position in the local hierarchy wield significant influence in a particular area. (1966/77: 10). Such locally dominant caste (sometimes there may be more than one such caste in a locality) becomes the reference group for
the marginal groups in the region. Srinivas, however, mentions that occasionally we find castes which enjoyed political and economic power but were not rated high in ritual ranking. However, even in such cases, Sanskritization occurred sooner or later as without it the claim to a higher position was not effective. Thus, the three axes of power in the caste system are the ritual, the economic, and the political ones, and the possession of power in any one sphere usually leads to the acquisition of power in the other two. This does not mean, however, that inconsistencies do not occur - when a wealthy caste is seen in low ritual position and contrarily, a caste with high ritual position is poor. (1962/1989: 45)

However, it is not that there had been no obstacles in the way of the lower castes emulating the life styles of the higher castes. The locally dominant caste or the king of a region was often hostile to the process of the lower caste's taking over of the customs and rites of the higher castes. Yet, Brahminical customs and way of life managed to spread not only among all Hindus but also among some outlying tribes. (Srinivas 1962/89: 44) Srinivas says that this happened because in the hierarchically stratified Hindu society each group tries to pass for a higher group. And the best way of staking a claim to a higher position is to adopt the customs and way of life of a higher caste. (ibid)

Srinivas also made it clear that Sanskritization does not automatically result in the achievement of a higher status for the group. The latter must lay a claim to belong to a particular Varna. Besides, the concerned group must alter their customs, diet, and the way of life suitably, and if there are any inconsistencies in its claim, they must explain these inconsistencies by inventing an appropriate myth. Further, the group must be content to wait an indefinite period, and during this period it must maintain a continuous pressure regarding its claims. Before a claim is accepted by other castes, usually a generation or two must pass. (1962/89: 57)

Such practice of inventing myth to justify the aspired higher status of a group is present most conspicuously in case of the tribal chieftains seeking the Kshatriya status. The Brahmin priests under the tutelage of such chieftains played the role of the facilitator in such cases. They generated many myths and stories linking the origin of the neo-kshatriya rulers to Hindu mythological characters in order to legitimise this new status. Examples of such myths abound all over India. Srinivas quotes historian K. M. Panikkar who maintains that there have been no 'true' Kshatriyas in India since the Nandas of the Magadhan Empire. Since then, every royal family has come from a non-Kshatriya caste, including the famous Rajput dynasties of medieval India. Panikkar also holds that the Shudras seems to have produced a usually large number of royal families even in the more recent times. (Srinivas 1966/77: 9)

Besides the royal families, the process of elevation of a tribe or a lower caste into a higher caste is also an all-India phenomenon. In fact, this prompts many Indian sociologists to argue for a framework of tribe-caste continuum in the context of the Indian society. This continuity is found historically, for example, in a most conscious manner in the Assamese society. Situated in an overwhelmingly tribal dominated region and espoused by a liberal section of Assamese upper caste leaders of the Assamese neo-vaishnavite movement (both Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, its two original propagators hailed from upper caste) since the 16th century facilitated the entry of many tribal people into the caste framework
Conservation and Preservation: Some Ethical and Legal Issues

through a very simple procedure that entailed the renunciation of certain erstwhile tribal customs and food habits and acceptance of some new ones. The tribal neophytes were known as the saranias (one who takes sharana - religious refuge) or saru (little) Koch (an already Sanskritized group). A large number of people belonging to the Bodo-Kachari, Tiwa, Rabha and Karbi tribes, for example, became saranias and are still addressed as such who had over the years been assimilated into the Assamese society. In fact, in between the tribal and the saru Koch stage there was yet another stage called the Modahi in which the tribal neophytes were still allowed to take liquor. However, the upward mobility of the tribal neophytes did not stop here. By undergoing a process of 'renunciation' (of certain erstwhile tribal customs) and 'enunciation' (of certain Hindu customs), the tribal neophytes could move to higher stages. A saru Koch could become a Koch by abandoning the habit of eating pork and drinking liquor and observing the religious customs prescribed by the guru. If this life style is followed for three generations a Koch could acquire the status of a bor (bigger) Koch. By undergoing a similar process, a bor Koch could become a saru Keot (a Shudra caste), a saru Keot a bor Keot and a bor Keot a Kalita (though it is a Shudra caste, it enjoys a higher status in the traditional Assamese caste framework). In the process, in a matter of a few generations it even became possible for many tribal neophytes to enter into the coveted fold of caste system. In this connection, it is relevant to recount what the British social anthropologist Audrey Cantlie has to record on such transformation of social status within the Assamese social structure. She states that not merely the common Assamese populace but even many of the present day satradhikars (the neo-vaishnavite abbots or gurus) also had either tribal or lower caste origin. It is to be noted that these satradhikars (many of them are Brahmans as well) and their descendents use ‘Goswami’ (a Brahmin surname) as their surname and claim Kayastha (similar to the Kalitas, it is also a Shudra caste but enjoys a status next only to the Brahmans in Assam). Cantlie, however, contends that a number of satradhikars hailed from despised castes (fisherman and Chandala castes) and tribes. (Cantlie 1984: 176-7)

Check your progress 4

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 300 words each;

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

4) List few examples of upward mobility among social groups in Indian society.

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1.3.3 Sanskritization and Westernization

In this section, we will focus on the comparison between Sanskritization and Westernization. Like Sanskritization, Westernization is another concept propounded by Srinivas. Westernization refers to changes brought about as a consequence of the contact with western culture, particularly the British. Though there have been other western groups such as the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the French to India and have influenced Indian society and culture, none had the same scale of influence as the British, precisely because of the fact that the latter had ruled almost all over India for a period of two hundred years. Their rule produced radical and lasting changes in Indian society and culture. They brought with them new technology, institutions, knowledge, beliefs, and values which often went against the traditional Indian institutions, values and practices. For example, the British judicial system based on the principle of equality went directly against the traditional system of law based on status and hierarchy.

Thus, apparently the process of Westernization appears to be diametrically opposite to that of Sanskritization. However, a closer look gives a totally different picture. As Srinivas says, "(T)he spread of Sanskrit theological ideas increased under British rule. The development of communications carried Sanskritization to areas previously inaccessible, and the spread of literacy carried it to groups very low in the caste hierarchy. Western technology - railways, the internal combustion engine, press, radio, and plane - has aided the spread of Sanskritization." (1962/89: 48-9) He cites the example of the tradition of harikatha (a religious discourse where a priest reads and explains a religious story to his audience. Harikathas may be held at any time, but important Hindu festivals are considered especially suitable for the purpose). The reach of the harikathas have spread much wider with the introduction of microphone for the narrator. Indian films have been also playing a very crucial role in the popularization of the stories from the epics and the puranas. In the more modern context, the television has played an extraordinary role in the spread of the Sanskritic stories to the nook and corner of the country.

Besides, it is seen that the castes which took the lead in undergoing Westernization was mostly from the upper echelons, particularly the Brahmins, of the traditional hierarchy. Even a cursory observation at the composition of the Indian officers, social reformers, educationists, lawyers, army men, traders, etc. right from the early colonial period testify to the fact as to how the upper castes, that is, the more Sanskritized castes, were frontrunners in seizing the opportunities offered by the colonial administration. It is also true, however, that in certain cases it appeared that the Brahmins were handicapped by some customs in the race for Westernization. For example, the Brahminic customs such as vegetarianism and teetotalism were in sharp contradiction with the English habits of eating beef and pork, drinking whisky and so on. Nevertheless, that the Brahmins were the most westernized caste group in India is beyond doubt and thus have been able to perpetuate their traditional hegemony.

Thus, Srinivas contends, "the assumption of a simple and direct opposition between the two (Sanskritization and Westernization) and of the ultimate triumph of Westernization, I find too simple a hypothesis...considering the great complexity of the processes involved." (1962/89: 61) While in some cases, they were in conflict with each other in others they complemented each other.
However, as to whether Sanskritization of a lower caste or tribe is an essential preliminary to Westernization, Srinivas says that though he finds empirical evidence of this being true, he is quick to add that such empirical evidence is limited to some non-Brahmin castes of Mysore and does not refer to any logical necessity for Sanskritization occurring prior to Westernization.

It is possible that Westernization may occur without the intermediate process of Sanskritization. (1962/89: 60) Indeed, rapid industrialization has made it possible a process which has been conspicuous in the post-independence period. Social movements among the backward castes have been anti-Brahmin in their overtones right from the very beginning. After independence, the constitutional provisions along with various affirmative actions initiated by the government in various spheres (social, economic and political) have also created conditions and opportunities for the lower castes and tribes to bypass the process of Sanskritization.

Check your progress 5

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 300 words each;

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

5. Do you find any difference between Sanskritization and Westernization?

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1.3.4 Critical assessment

Let us now critically examine the concept of Sanskritization. Sanskritization has been a very dominant perspective in explaining social changes in the Indian society. However, the changes that it addresses are confined to the domain of culture to the exclusion of other much more significant political and economic processes. Thus, Sanskritization offers only a partial explanation to the social changes in Indian society. However, Srinivas himself is apt to point this out when he states, "(T)o describe the social changes occurring in modern India in terms of Sanskritization and Westernization is to describe it primarily in cultural and not structural terms."(1962/89: 55)

Besides, Sanskritization is concerned mainly with social mobility within the Hindu society while the Indian society is a heterogeneous complex of many sects and religions. The emergence of some of these sects and religions were directly related to the objective of freedom from the oppression of the traditional caste system. In recent times, the social movements among the backward castes and tribes have sought social mobility, as mentioned above, outside the framework of the caste society. They are no longer keen to go through the process of Sanskritization. Even if they come under the influence of it, it is not acknowledged by them and they also do not look for the recognition from others for higher status. In fact, the recent times have witnessed a strong tendency among many
castes to demand lower caste status to get the benefits of the policy of affirmative action (popularly known as 'reservation') reserved for the lower castes and tribes in the spheres of education, employment and electoral politics. With this same end, some castes which previously enjoyed relatively higher status in the caste hierarchy are now demanding tribal status. In such a situation, there is hardly any case for the tribal groups to change their existing status to caste.

It is clear that the significance of a higher ritual status that Sanskritization facilitated in the erstwhile feudal society does not seem to hold good in the politico-economic order of post-independence India. The symbolic status which caste mobility promised in the feudal society has lost much of its meaning today as the new Indian constitution facilitates social mobility among the backward groups by their educational, economic, and political empowerment through access to various opportunities and resources of the state.

Further, it is true that Sanskritization has resulted in changes in the status of castes but it has not led to changes of the caste system. That is, whatever change in mobility of a caste has occurred, it has occurred within the framework of the caste system. Sanskritization has not led to any change in the system. As Srinivas himself says, "the mobility characteristic of caste in the traditional period resulted only in positional changes for particular castes or sections of castes, and did not led to a structural change. That is while individual castes moved up or down, the structure remained the same."

Nevertheless, the concept of Sanskritization has been very influential in the explanation of social change in India. Despite various limitations it has provided a lot of insight into the complexities of the traditional Indian society and as against the widely prevalent stereotypical view of the Indian caste system being a static system offered a fresh perspective by highlighting the dynamism within it.

**Check your progress 6**

**Note:**
1) Your answers should be about 300 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.
6) Critically examine the concept of Sanskritization.

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1.4 **LET US SUM UP**

In this Unit, we have tried to focus on the concept of Palace Paradigm that has been developed by Jawaharlal Handoo to explain Indian culture. We have seen that the Handoo uses this concept to explain, what he thinks, is the fundamental characteristic of culture formation in India, viz. that it is a top down process.
Focusing especially on written culture, he argues that such cultures take shape and are standardized among the elites of the society and those at the bottom only receive that which has already been produced at the top by the elites. In that sense, such cultures are undemocratic in nature. Handoo, however, notes that this is precisely the reason why one should study folk culture to understand the popular life of the country. Since folk cultures are not shaped and standardized by the elites, they retain the elements of popular practices, beliefs and ways of life. In this Unit, we have also discussed in detail the concept of Sanskritization. To conclude in the words of Srinivas, "(S)anskritization has been a major process of cultural change in Indian history, and it has occurred in every part of the Indian subcontinent. It may have been more active at some periods than others, and some parts of India are more Sanskritized than others; but there is no doubt that the process has been universal." (1962/89: 23)

1.5 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES


1.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

1) Check section 2.2.1
2) Check section 2.2.2
3) Check section 2.2.5
4) Check section 2.3.2
5) Check section 2.3.3
6) Check section 2.3.4