
UNIT 1 MEANINGS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF HERITAGE AND CULTURE

Issues

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- explain the multifaceted implications of the term heritage;
- explain the phenomenon of heritage both as process and product; and
- know the functions or uses of heritage in human society.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we will discuss what we understand by the term 'heritage'. The term 'heritage', till the beginning of 20th century, had something to do with the act of inheritance. It was usually used to mean the parental resources inherited by an individual or a family. However, towards the end of the 20th century, the term went through striking expansions in its usages, defying a singular and definitional meaning and making 'heritage' almost synonymous to what is meant by 'culture'. Today, heritage means a wide range of things, from material objects to non-material resources, which are linked with the identity of a group, society or nation. This linking process, which is the process of heritage construction and is discussed later in this unit, is seen to be motivated by varied social political and economic goals. Besides this increasing exploitation of the term, the meaning of heritage is made complex in contemporary times also by the fact that the entities like "community", "nationality" and "identity", on which the notion of heritage is essentially dependent, are dynamic and unstable in nature. Thus, the symbols of heritage keep changing with the change of these notions along time and space. There is another point to be noted in this regard. In the modern period, culture has also emerged as one of the markers of identity. Therefore, the meaning of heritage could also include the relationships that exist between politics of identity, culture and community. What constitutes heritage is also related to the question of awareness. For example, awareness of new kinds of geography, of

endangered living species, or flora paves way for their recognition as specimens of heritage in different countries. We may well remember that given the environmental degradation that the globe is slipping into, there may soon come a time when the Antarctic glaciers will be declared as universal heritage.

1.2 WHAT IS HERITAGE - I

Defining heritage in straightforward terms is not so easy. Although the standard dictionaries provide the meaning of heritage as what is inherited and nation's historic buildings and countryside, the current practices of heritage at different contexts have made the idea of heritage far from such simplistic notions. Some perspectives of heritage are discussed in the following paragraphs which would be later analyzed to reach at some working definitions of heritage.

1.2.1 National heritage

To begin with, heritage refers to certain resources of the past which are valued, preserved and exhibited by a community as symbols of their collective glory. This romantic nationalist notion of heritage saw heightened manifestations in the 20th century's global political scenario which was marked with emergence of several new nation-states across the world. These new nation-states which had to fight for their political independence from the colonial empires drew heavily on the forceful projections of their respective national heritage - a banner under which material artifacts and cultural performances which are representatives of the glorious past were showcased to the other world. The local governments of such newly liberated nations were seen to be engaged in preserving and disseminating their heritage resources with due emphasis. The museum institutions were increasingly established to display and preserve the items of national treasure, and historical monuments and buildings were protected under exclusive legal acts. Expressive cultural traditions, such as music, dance, drama and other aspects of folklife were began to be promoted through government and non-governmental establishments in nationalistic spirits. Many of these countries were former colonies of European powers. It is important to note that the concept of museum underwent a change between the colonial and post colonial period. For example, in India, whereas the British began the culture of museum as means of preserving the past of the colonies, in the post independence period, the setting up of museums was guided by the interest in showcasing the past glory of civilizations that emerged in the subcontinent, such as Harrapan and Vedic. Whereas the British were guided by the desire to document and preserve the material artifacts of a different culture than theirs (and which the local people cared little to reserve as was argued in the case of Ajanta and Ellora caves), the Indian government was guided by the interest of preserving its own past and showcase glory.



Examples of Indian national heritage

1.2.2 World heritage

Parallel to the above mentioned political developments, the unprecedented progress in the fields of science and technology and the growth of a market economy were the two other significant phenomena of the 20th century. Both these two factors were seen to be primarily responsible in bringing out a dominance of the western culture and values over the non-western world. Rapid expansion of western technology and market led to the massive embracing of western material culture and western values in the non-western countries, at the cost of their local culture and local values - a process which is labeled as westernization. Such consequences resulted in growing intellectual and public concerns against the rapid loss of many local traditional expressive forms, such as, language, religion, various genres of visual and performing arts, and distinctive local landscapes besides the local social values. This speedy diminishing of cultural diversity gave a new global perspective to the issue of heritage protection. Several international organizations like, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Council of Museums, (ICOM), International Centre for the Study of Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) and many other national and regional bodies, became actively engaged in providing legal, technical and financial support for the protection of heritage treasures in various forms at various places. The industrial expansion and exploitation had reportedly caused alarming decrease of the natural resources for which preservation and sustenance of natural resources also became the agenda of equal priority. This created the category of natural heritage which are protected in the forms of reserve forests, sanctuaries and natural parks. Mention can be made about the World Heritage Site designation given by the UNESCO, which is accorded primarily to two kinds of sites: sites of natural resources and the sites of cultural resources - both having outstanding universal value.

1.2.3 Heritage industry

In addition to the social, political and environmental interests in the resources of the past, as mentioned above, the expansion of heritage also took place in the line of economic consumption, particularly towards the later decades of the 20th century. Technological advancement in the field of transport and communication, and the increase of the disposable incomes of people had facilitated the rapid growth of leisure and tourism services sector. The existing heritage sites of natural and cultural importance were not only increasingly made tourist-destinations, but heritage resources were began to be commodified. Visits to heritage sites, museums and parks, and live participatory cultural experiences are packaged for tourist consumption against payments. For example, in India, we can think of places or historical sites such as the Taj Mahal, the Red Fort and such sites. Tourism markets begin to be flooded with various items of local food, drink, costumes, and artistic performances as heritage products. An obvious consequence of such commodification process is the inclusion of new objects and spaces everyday under the fold of heritage - a process which is referred by some scholars as heritagization (e.g. Walsh 1992: 138). Such heritagization processes, as they are primarily aimed at monetary benefit for which almost anything and everything is blended as heritage, raised the issue of authenticity of heritage. However, this economic potential of heritage resources has also been increasingly subjected for the development of host communities and their places.

Check your progress 1

- Note:** 1) Your answers should be about 100 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

1) What is heritage industry?

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1.3 WHAT IS HERITAGE - II

From the above discussion, it is evident that heritage is a multidimensional practice in contemporary times which is far more complicated than the erstwhile understanding of heritage as a set of plainly inherited resources. The phenomenon of heritage bears close relationships with what is understood as the past and the history. However, herein, the past and the history here are not to be understood as something with objective reality or something that actually happened in the bygone times. Rather, doing heritage involves a process of subjective selection, and if necessary adequate re-creation, of the past and the history for contemporary socio-political or economic objectives. For example, if an Indian needs to talk about his or her national heritage, he or she would probably point towards the architectural wonder of the Taj Mahal, or the performance-traditions like the Bharat-Natyam or Odissi, or the great art works of the Ajanta and Ellora. These resources would be specifically chosen as Indian heritage from the shared Indian past because they can portray a sense of pride of being an Indian to the outside world. Thus heritage is the contemporary use of the past and the history for an imagined future. It is a kind of inter-generational exchange.

1.4 HERITAGE AND CULTURE

'Culture' has been defined and explained in many ways, from different academic and intellectual perspectives at different times. The understanding of the relationship between heritage and culture would depend on the perspectives in which both the terms are looked upon. In any case, the vital issue that comes as a common element in 'heritage' and 'culture' is the shared human values which determine whether something is to be called as heritage or not and these values are essentially culturally loaded, or they can be called cultural values.

All heritage resources can also be looked as cultural resources. Our earlier examples of Indian heritage, such as, Bharat-Natyam or Odissi dances are very much the traits of Indian culture. What about the Taj Mahal? And the Ajanta and Ellora arts? One may call them as the specimens of dead culture as those types of architecture and religious art are no longer practiced in current times. Yet, culture is like an ever-changing stream, and modern understanding of culture is based upon how the meanings of objects are shared by a group or nationality. The significance of the Taj Mahal and the artistic specimens of the two caves are based on such specifically

shared meanings and values of the Indians, which would definitely permit to call them as items of Indian culture - in the broader understanding of the term culture. Even an item of natural heritage such as a natural park or a reserve forest may appear to be outside the purview of culture if looked from the binary oppositional view of nature-culture. However, the significance assigned to such natural resources, their demarcation as distinctive assets are essentially embedded in shared human values, and thus can be regarded as cultural products. Thus, all heritages of a community are simultaneously the assets of the culture of that community. But, all goods of culture are not necessarily heritage goods. Only those items of culture which are specifically projected for contemporary purposes by the members of the culture-group can be called as heritage. We can say that heritage is always a part of culture but culture is not necessarily heritage always.

Check your progress 2

Note:1) Your answers should be less than 200 words each;

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

2) Are 'heritage' and 'culture' synonymous to one another? Discuss

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1.5 HERITAGE AS CULTURAL CONSTRUCT

The idea of heritage as cultural construct is to underline the fact that heritage is created by cultural values as necessitated in the contexts of specific time and space. Heritage items are significant more due to these culturally assigned values rather than any intrinsic value of their own. Their designation as heritage is in fact a dynamic process of cultural construction. It is dynamic because the construction of heritage depends upon the notions of community, nationality and identity - which are not fixed and static entities. They do keep changing with the changing political, social and economic contexts. If we turn back to our working examples of the Indian heritages, we will see that items like the Taj Mahal, the Ajanta and Ellora caves and the Bharata-Natyam and Odissi are projected to bear the sense of Indian nationality. This feeling of nationality shared by all the Indian citizens of current times was non-existent few centuries back. Prior to the 19th century, people of Arunachal Pradesh would not have felt associated with the Bharat-Natyam and the people of Kerala would not have felt that the Taj Mahal somehow belonged to them. The current notion of Indian nationality is a creation of the late 19th century consciousness for independence which triggered a sense of belonging to a shared geography and history that is now called as the Indian. Thus, the above mentioned items make sense of Indian heritage only when the notion of Indian nationality is at work.

1.6 USES OF HERITAGE

As discussed earlier that heritages are specifically chosen cultural assets. They are chosen as heritage to achieve a variety of social, political and economic objectives. The uses or functions of heritage are discussed below.

1.6.1 Social and political use of heritage and identity

Identity may be understood as the set of elements which is essential to distinguish the specific existence of a group or individual. Collective identity of people, which may be constructed on the basis of class, gender, ethnicity or nationalism, is the key factor in the process of construction of heritage. In fact, it can be said that the identity is the imagined concept shared by a group and the heritages are the visible representation of that imagined concept. Like languages are used to convey human thoughts, heritages are used to represent and communicate the desired identities of people. By embracing heritage, people convey their belongingness to a particular group.

In order to exhibit the distinctive existence of a group of people, which is the basic idea behind the notion of the group-identity, it is a general human tendency to provide evidences of the continuous existence of the group since the past. Because of this fact, there is always a sense of past-orientedness in the notion of heritage. Once again, let us discuss the example of Indian heritage in this perspective. The Indian nationality was formed during pre-Independence times to ensure the political and territorial unity of the diverse linguistic, racial and ethnic communities. The emotional unity amongst these diverse groups of people was indispensable to foster this new composite identity of Indianness. Thus, in post-independence times, central initiatives were taken by the Indian government to promote the various regional cultural resources as the items of Indian heritage.

Besides nationality, heritage construction also takes place to represent the identities of class, ethnicity and gender. The symbols and metaphors used in the actions of class struggle and movements of ethnic assertions provide ample examples of this fact.

1.6.2 Economic use

Heritage as commodity: Use of heritage as an economic resource is relatively new in comparison to its socio-political uses. As discussed earlier in this unit, the economic potentials of heritage were begun to be exploited with the rise of the tourism industry in late 20th century. It was because of tourism that heritage centres, such as, museums, galleries, emporiums, parks, monuments and sites became destinations of increasing number of visitors, paving the way for a booming heritage industry. In contrast to the political use of heritage where heritage resources are attributed with emotional and sacred values, the commercial exploitation of heritage is featured with the consumerist attitude of owning and experiencing heritage products and sites against monetary expenses. Heritage becomes commodity - to be packaged, sold and purchased.

The economic function of heritage, however, is a secondary and subsequent function to its socio-political values. This means, any arbitrary goods can not be branded as heritage for consumption unless such goods are directly or indirectly related to the socio-politically assigned heritage-value. For example, the traditions of Indian classical dances like Bharat-Natyam or Odissi have their own recognized

status as Indian classical heritage. However, this value attributed to such great traditions may be exploited for branding of various other items, such as costumes and jewelry associated with the tradition, audio-visual productions of such performances, etc.

The impact of the economic use of heritage may be both beneficial and harmful. The term commodification is often used in the negative sense to mean the dilution and undesired distortion of heritage because of its commercial exploitation. It is often argued that heritage resources lose the sanctity and authenticity in the process of commodification. In contrast to such harmful consequences, however, the economic potentials of heritage may also bring out good and positive results. In certain contexts, the commercial use of heritage may provide with the vital ground for continuity and sustainability of otherwise endangered traditional arts and crafts. The use of heritage for the sake of the economic benefits of local communities and the development of their places is another positive potential of the functions of heritage as economic capitals.

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) Sum up the economic functions of heritage.

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have discussed in detail some of the major issues connected to culture and heritage. We have discussed the conditions in which culture gets defined in terms of heritage. In this regard, we discussed the role of museums and archives, their origin in India and the changes that took place in the perspective of the post colonial government. One of the important issues that we have discussed in this Unit is how heritage is conceptualized in terms of its political, social and economic significance and how these significances can change over time. In other words, what constitutes heritage can change under different historical conditions.

1.8 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

Walsh, Kevin. The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the post-modern world. Routledge: London and New York. 1992.

Graham, Brian. Ashworth, G. J. and Turnbridge, J.E. A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture & Economy. Arnold: London. 2000.

1.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

- 1) The expansion of heritage also took place in the line of economic consumption, particularly towards the later decades of the 20th century. Technological advancement in the field of transport and communication, and the increase of the disposable incomes of people had facilitated the rapid growth of leisure and tourism services sector. The existing heritage sites of natural and cultural importance were not only increasingly made tourist-destinations, but heritage resources were began to be commodified. Visits to heritage sites, museums and parks, and live participatory cultural experiences are packaged for tourist consumption against payments. For example, in India, we can think of places or historical sites such as the Taj Mahal, the Red Fort and such sites. Tourism markets begin to be flooded with various items of local food, drink, costumes, and artistic performances as heritage products. An obvious consequence of such commodification process is the inclusion of new objects and spaces everyday under the fold of heritage - a process which is referred by some scholars as heritagization (e.g. Walsh 1992: 138). Such heritagization processes, as they are primarily aimed at monetary benefit for which almost anything and everything is blended as heritage, raised the issue of authenticity of heritage. However, this economic potential of heritage resources has also been increasingly subjected for the development of host communities and their places.
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