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- iii) Speaking to your spouse _____
- iv) Speaking to your spouse _____
- b) Identify the types of needs the following situations depict:
 - i) Your boss is unhappy with your performance _____
 - ii) Isolated from grapevine group _____
 - iii) Your boss invites you to share your inputs _____
 - iv) You are called upon to assist your fellow-worker _____

3.3 COMMUNICTING ACROSS CULTURES

Compared to the last two decades a very large number of young Indian executives and professionals now routinely communicate with people from other cultures, especially American and European. Here we shall take a look at some aspects in which cultural values that shape our lives are fundamentally different from the Western ones. Understanding the differences between our cultural values and those of the West will help us communicate better with the Westerners.

1. What is "Culture"?

Culture is our understanding of acceptable actions and beliefs. Each of us grows up in a culture that provides pattern of acceptable behaviour and belief. It is the background over against which all our actions and beliefs become meaningful. We are not aware of this background most of the times – like the glasses that we wear through which we see, but are not aware that we are seeing through the glasses. However, not until we come in contact with someone different from our culture that we become aware of our cultural background.

Culture can be seen as the way we live, the clothes we wear, and the thoughts we think. It is the collection of values that sustain and direct our lives. The influence of culture on communication is so strong that anthropologist Edward Hall says, "culture is communication

and communication is culture". Differences in cultural values and perceptions can be an invisible source of great misunderstanding between people of different regions.

Until a few years ago, before the globalisation of the Indian economy, and before information technology exploded on the Indian scene, it was just a small minority of middle and senior managers and senior bureaucrats who needed to communicate across cultures. Their age, experience, and exposure to the world in general perhaps protected them from serious communication problems stemming from inter-cultural differences. But today even young executives, fresh from colleges, have to interact with people from different cultures.

Not all of them may go abroad, but most of them would have to communicate with foreigners through e-mail or phone. Attempting to communicate across cultures without adequate preparation may lead them into serious problems.

2. The East versus the West :

Anyone who wants to deal with people from a particular country should prepare themselves by studying its culture and history, so that they can avoid at least the more serious problems of communication that result from cultural differences.

We shall consider some fundamental Indian values and compare them with the Western ones, primarily because we have to communicate with them whether we like it or not. They control the world trade; they control money matters; they control science and technology. They set the rules for the world and we have to play by their rules.

[There is another reason why we should take Western culture seriously. Western values and practices are being adopted all over the world. The rest of the world is exposed to them through electronic media that is totally dominated by the West, and through their multinational companies.

We should, however, remember that the West is not one whole culture with uniform values. There are many countries, cultures, languages, and peoples that makeup what we call as the West.

There are differences, yet there are similarities that bind them into together. For instance, America and Europe are Westerners yet they are different in many ways.

Hence, it is important that we make proper distinction and avoid over generalisations and simplifications.

a) Heart versus Mind

We Indians are driven more by our heart than our mind. Like everyone else, we have rules and regulations, but we tend to succumb to the demands of the present. Take the instance of traffic lights at a crossing. We will break the traffic rules if we have to in order to meet our appointment, or for that matter, we do not need a reason for violating any rules, if we can.

We have long-term plans, but those plans could easily change if we encounter any hurdle. The here and now is important for us, for which we are more than willing to change our plans or break the rules.

M.M. Monippally, in his book *Business Communication Strategies*, puts it aptly: "We sacrifice the future at the altar of the present". We are capable of taking decisions without much planning. This might sound ridiculous, but a cursory glance around us will indicate that we take so many decisions without planning.

For example, the manner in which our cities are built – no proper plans for housing, roads, utilities, etc. Our actions are without plans; they are based on ad-hoc decisions.

Westerners are fundamentally different in their approach to planning. They sacrifice the present for the sake of the future, which they create with thorough planning.

The future drives them says Monippally. They are less flexible towards the demands of the present situation. They invest heavily in planning the future and are confident that they will pull through the present situation, if any.

b) Particularists versus Universalists

Fons Trompenaars, in his book, *Riding the Waves of Culture*, calls the Westerners as "Universalists". Universalism believes that what is good and right can be defined and can be applied always everywhere. For example, rules and regulations must be obeyed. Westerners like to change rules rather than bend them to accommodate individual cases. We Indians are quite capable of bending rules to accommodate individuals who happen to be influential. The Westerners believe that what is good for all is applicable to everyone; if something is not good for one then change it and make it applicable for all. Indians believe that what is good for one need not be applicable for all.

However, Westerners, driven by universalism, go to the extent that what is good for them is also good for the rest of the world. They try to impose their logic, their values

and their system on the rest of the world. They write down in detail the standard operating procedure for manufacturing a product or rendering a service. Then they insist that the procedure be followed in all respects. So whosoever manufactures the product or renders the service in whatever country or under whatever conditions, the quality is the same. Our approach is more informal. We do not follow the procedures as long as the work is accomplished. This has adverse affect on the quality of workmanship.

Westerners are also known for their meticulous nature in gathering data and using statistics extensively to draw universal principles, and this enables them to lead the rest of the world. They do not depend upon the intuition of the people, but rely on the sciences and the power of statistics to draw their inferences and conclusions. Monippally has put it very aptly: "Their predictions are based on analysis of the well documented past and the well-studied present".

These fundamental differences in perspectives can cause serious problems when we communicate with the Westerners. Here are some tips Fons Trompenaars gives particularists on how to deal with the universalists.

- i) Be prepared for 'rational', professional arguments.
- ii) Do not take 'get down to business' attitude as rude.
- iii) Carefully prepare legal ground with a lawyer if in doubt.
- iv) Strive for consistency and uniform procedures.
- v) Institute formal and public ways of changing the way business is conducted.
- vi) Seek fairness by treating all like cases in the same way.

c) **Specific versus Diffused Relationship**

Another noticeable feature of the Western culture is the compartmentalisation of relationships between people. A colleague is a colleague, nothing more and nothing less. Someone does not become the member of one's circle of friends just because they work together. Similarly, a neighbour is only a neighbour, even if two people live side by side for a long time. Such relations are kept separate. Work and personal lives are distinctly separated. Privacy is tightly guarded and highly prized.

In contrast, our relationship with people tends to be diffused. For instance, in a work situation a colleague can make demands on us that are not work-related. We may be expected to do things for our boss that is not related to the work in the office. Refusing

to do such favours could have had repercussions. We do not separate our relations tightly. Moreover, when requests are turned down we tend to take it seriously, which affects our relations.

Making requests for us is not easy, because the person we request might say 'yes' when he really means 'no'. We are not straightforward in our approach to requests. Westerners will not hesitate to say 'no', if they do not want to comply with your request. Here is an anecdote that Monippally narrates from *Trainload of Jokes and Anecdotes*, edited by K. R. Vaidyanathan.

In a train, a personable young man asked the prosperous middle-aged man sitting opposite him: "Excuse me, sir, can you tell me the time please?"

"No!" barked the other man.

"B-but..."

"No buts! I've got my reasons. You're a nice young fellow. If I tell you the time, we'll start up a conversation. Then we'll get off at the same station; you'll offer me a drink. I'll invite you to my place for dinner and you'll meet my daughter."

She's a charming girl," continued the middle-aged man, "and you'll be pleasant to her. Next thing you know, you'll be asking my permission to marry her. You don't expect me to consent to my daughter marrying a man who doesn't even have a watch, do you?"

d) Nepotism versus Meritocracy

In the West nepotism is remarkably low compared to India. Here even the private sector, leave alone the government and public sector, is not entirely free from employing the relations of top managers. The merit for employment is kinship, not competence. And kinship can encompass not only blood relations, but also people from the same village. The Western way of separating work from life helps companies hire people who, in their judgement, will perform the tasks best. Without such compartmentalise relationships between and life, meritocracy would not have taken such strong roots in the US.

e) Hire-and-Fire Policy

In the West hire-and-fire policy is widely practiced. This practice is also derived from their ability to compartmentalise relationships. A person is hired on the basis of how much he/she can allow the system to extract the work out of them. Just as an

object is selected to perform a function in a machine, so also a person is selected, not only on the basis of ability, but also on the basis of the willingness to be used by the system so that the system can function. When the person cannot be functional within a system, then the person is discarded from the system.

In contrast the Indian approach to employment is different. Many employees are kept in their job not because the employer needs them but because they need the job for their livelihood. The best example is the government and public sector, where the objectives are not economic in nature but social. In India everyone perceives as harsh and heartless firing a person when his services are no longer needed or when the person is unable to perform. In fact, the public sector undertaking goes so far as to offer a job to a dependent in case of the demise of the earning member.

This is done on the grounds of compassion and not the basis of merit. An Indian employer does not hire just certain technical or professional skills relevant to the firm's requirement, but the whole person. This makes it difficult for the employer to assess the performance of the employee without considering the person as a whole. For instance, if a person is not efficient in his/her work but has a good nature that appeals to his/her boss then the person is retained at work.

f) Individualism

This is another characteristic of the Western society, particularly the American, in which everyone is for one's self. Everyone in the US is expected to take care of himself/herself. A person's self-interest is dominant as long as one takes care of one's self.

Here is an interesting way in which Jacob Braude answers the question "What is Americanism?" in his book *Braude's Treasury of Wit and Humour*.

"If you want your father to take care of you, that is paternalism. If you want your mother to take care of you, that is maternalism. If you want Uncle Sam to take care of you, that is Socialism. But if you want to take care of yourself, that is Americanism".

[Quoted by M. M. Monippally in *Business Communication Strategies*]

An average Westerner is more self-reliant and capable of taking independent decision than most Indian counterpart. Independence is a very strong value that is inculcated in Westerners from their childhood. Most young men and women leave their homes when they turn eighteen and earn their own livelihood. They make their own decisions for every facet of their life.

In contrast, we are brought up in a group/family that comprises, not only of father, mother, brothers, and sisters, but also of aunts and uncles, cousins, and elders, in the family or outside the family. We are not encouraged to be independent, but rely most of the times upon the elders to make decisions for us. To compensate this limitation on independence the family, or the extended family offers the individual a wide safety zone. An individual can always return to this zone of safety for support in case of misfortune.

This has its bearing on work-situation. The importance given in the West to individualism and assumption of responsibility for one's actions, there is generally less consultation and quicker decision-making. Consensus on a decision is not very important. If there is no consensus then the majority decision is accepted by all.

In India, when there is a difference of opinion, then serious and sustained efforts are made to arrive at a consensus. When there is no consensus there is a possibility to defer decision taken. People in authority try to get the support of others concerned for decision-making. At times meetings are convened merely to make it appear that decision-making is collective.

g) **Notion of Time**

Time is yet another fundamental aspect of life, in which different cultures have different perceptions. Punctuality is a fundamental value for most Westerners. The importance of time in industrial society has its roots in the affects of Industrial Revolution of the 19th century.

Alvin Toffler points out in his book *The Third Wave*, that with the advent of industrialisation many social institutions came into existence. One such institution that came into prominence was educational institution. In it there were two types of curricula – one that was overt and other the covert.

The overt curriculum had subject such as history, geography, mathematics, etc. While the covert curriculum, which was geared to preparing people from rural areas for factory jobs, consisted of obedience and punctuality.

In the West time is treated as being linear – i.e. it flows only in forward direction. For the Westerners time is money, and hence one must make the most of the time available. They allocate time for each activity and stick to their schedule. Their diaries run their lives. They do not like to alter their plans once they are made.

In the US you just cannot decide to go and visit your friend or son or daughter without planning them and finding if it is convenient to visit them.

For us, in India, time is not a linear, but cyclic in nature. Hence, it is not a limited resource. Manuqually agrees: "Perhaps the idea of the cycle of rebirth, lodged deeply in our collective psyche, takes urgency out of our concept of time".

Westerners have just this life to achieve whatever they want to, therefore, they must work hard and fast.

The Indians have many lives, hence, they have no need to be in hurry.

We do not take schedule or appointments too seriously. People with more important issues are also accommodated in a schedule without appointment. Or we may readily cancel earlier appointments if more important issues or people come up.

Perhaps nothing illustrates our casual attitude to time and to planning than committee meetings. Often meetings are called without notice, without giving the attendees the agenda. Even when the attendees get the agenda with the starting time clearly mentioned, meetings rarely start on time.

When dealing with Westerners we have to take schedules and appointments seriously. They generally mean what they say. Arriving late causes resentment; arriving early causes embarrassment.

It is unwise to assume that the Westerners take time the way we do.

h) Social Ladder

Our values differ from those of the West in the way we put people on the social ladder. In India one's status depends, to a large extent, on the caste and the family one has been born into, the position one holds currently or has held, the educational qualification one has acquired, the connection one has, and of course age.

Hierarchy is very important in our families and organisations. Money power is recognized, accepted, and feared but not admired.

Unless a family has been traditionally wealthy, there is a general belief that the present prosperity might be ill gotten. Society may envy the new rich but show little respect to them.

The West also has hierarchies. There is a special respect to people belonging to illustrious families. It recognizes educational achievements, the position one holds, and of course, the connection one has. It, however, gives greater importance to what an individual has achieved in the recent past, which is true of the American society.

However, the French society values class more than cash.

Within organisations the hierarchy is somewhat flat in most of the Western countries.

American companies tend to have the flattest hierarchies, while Indian companies the hierarchies are very steep. Employees, in India, at the lower end may not have access to the top management, which is especially true of government and semi-government organisations.

The cultural differences between the West and the East are many, and it is very easy for people who interact cross-culturally to fall into traps that would result in misunderstandings. Deliberate effort should be made to acquaint us with cultures of different countries that would enable communicating across cultures effectively.

Activity B :

Locate someone, preferably a businessperson, who has spent some time in another country, and interview him or her about the experience.

a) What preparation did the person have before going to the country?

b) In what ways was the preparation adequate or inadequate?