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Topic- Unity and Diversity

Unity and Diversity in Indian Society

Indian is a vast country and has a long history. Its society has evolved through the ages and has also been affected by foreign influences giving it extreme diversity and made unity amidst diversity a characteristic of the Indian society. However, to understand the process, we need to understand the meaning of diversity, unity and pluralism as well as their relevance to the Indian society

Diversity

‘Diversity’ means collective differences among people, that is, those differences which mark off one group of people from another. These differences may be of any sort: biological, religious, linguistic etc. On the basis of biological differences, for example, we have racial diversity. On the basis of religious differences, similarly, we have religious diversity. The point to note is that diversity refers to collective differences.

The term diversity is opposite of uniformity. So when there is something common to all the people, we say they show uniformity. When students of a school, members of the police or the army wear the same type of dress, we say they are in ‘uniform’. Like diversity, thus, uniformity is also a collective concept. When a group of people share a similar characteristic, be it language or religion or anything else, it shows uniformity in that respect. But when we have groups of people hailing from different races, religions and cultures, they represent diversity. Thus, diversity means variety.

However, diversity needs to be differentiated from fragmentation. Diversity means existence of differences in a whole. It does not mean separate parts. Fragmentation does not mean differences, it means different parts and in that situation each part would be a whole in itself. For all practical purposes it means variety of groups and cultures. We have such a variety in abundance in India. We have here a variety of races, of religions, of languages, of castes and of cultures. For the same reason India is known for its socio-cultural diversity.

India is a land of “Unity in diversity”. The high mountain ranges, vast seas, large river-irrigated lands, countless rivers and streams, dark forests, sandy deserts, all these have adorned India with an exceptional diversity.

Among the people there are numerous races, castes, creeds, religions and languages.

The term “Unity in diversity” refers to the state of togetherness or oneness in spite of presence of immense diversity. “Unity in diversity” is based on the concept where the individual or social differences in physical attributes, skin colour, castes, creed, cultural and religious practices, etc. are not looked upon as a conflict. Rather, these differences are looked upon as varieties that enrich the society and the nation as a whole.

Unity in diversity is a very important principle because we all live in a diverse world and it is crucial to respect each other and to support each other no matter what our culture, background, gender, orientation or other differences may be.

In India, there are a large number of ancient culture prevailing or still practicing today. Though there are several numbers of diverse cultures in India, still it has unity in diversity. The modern Indian civilization has been nourished and developed by multiracial contributions. From times immemorial, diverse races migrated into India by via land and sea routes and get themselves settled here. In course of time they are absolutely absorbed in India’s social life. The ancient ethno-linguistic groups, such as, the Aryans, the Austrics, the Negritos the Dravidians, the Alpines and the Mongoloids, had combined to constitute the modern Indian race.

In the historical period, diverse branches of the aforementioned unique ethnic groups – the Persians, the Pallavas, the Kushanas, the Greeks, the Sakas, the Huns, the Portuguese, the Arabs, the Turks, the English and the European races came to India, and enriched Indian ethnicity and culture by their contribution to the same.

The Indian people composed of several racial elements have a range of languages among them. Official accounts confirm that more than two hundred languages are present in this country. Each region has its own language. The local people speak in their own language. In spite of the fact that there are numerous languages among various races, there is a sense of national unity and oneness among all the Indians. It is this spirit of patriotism that binds us together as one nation.

Different Elements of Unity in Diversity

For academic purpose, we can divide the different elements of unity in diversity in Geographical elements, religious elements, cultural elements, political elements and linguistic elements. A brief idea about each of them is as follows:

Geographical Elements of Unity in Diversity

India has diverse geography. At broadest level, the country can be divided into several regions viz. Himalaya, northern plains, plateau of central India and Deccan, Western & Eastern Ghats, Thar Desert etc. Each of them has different climate, temperature, vegetation, fauna, people and so on. Despite of this diversity, India has been defined as a distinct geographical unit since ages. A sloka in *Vishnu Purana* defines *Bharata* as *the land which is south of snowy mountains and north of ocean*. The country was time and again unified by different imperialist forces taking into consideration its geographical distinctness. There was a time two kings were known as Uttarapathapathi {Harsha} and Dakshinapathpathi {Pulkeshi}, thus giving a notion of only two parts of this vast country. The medieval sultans and mughals tried to consolidate their empire from north to south, geographically. British also did the same.

- **Religious Elements of Unity in Diversity**

India has multitude of religions including majority Hinduism and minority Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Bahá'í Faith and so on. The religious diversity has been one of the main divisive force in the country leading to problem of communalism, yet this diversity has many a times kept the country united in difficult times. Religious unity is particularly visible when a war or a disaster happens. Time and again, India has stood united in crisis, and that is what religious unity in diversity of India is.

This apart, we see everyday examples of religious harmony such as use of *Ganapati Pandal* as a makeshift mosque for Muslims; and Hindus participating in Eid festivities [{reference}](#); Sikhs building mosques for Muslims; Muslims kids robed as Krishna for Janmasthan festivals and so on. There are some religious centres in the country {Ajmer Sharif, Bodhgaya, Golden Temple in Amritsar etc.} which have acquired a character that goes beyond one religion.

Cultural Elements of Unity in Diversity

The Cultural unity in diversity of India is generally denoted with the phrase “*Ganga-Jamuni Tahjeeb*” or India’s composite culture. Despite of diversity, there are numerous cultural elements and factors that have shaped India’s composite culture. Some of them are as follows:

Indian Music

The best example of India’s composite culture is our music, particularly the Hindustani Classical Music. It has ancient origins, yet emergence of a highly developed and enriched music of northern India could not have been possible without Muslim contributions and its patronage. Emergence of Khayal from Dhrupad, Tabla from Pakhawaj / Mridangam are some of the key examples. Indian Veena and Persian Tambura merged to emerge as Sitar. Similarly, Ghazals and Qawwalis have played a unifying factor between the people of Indian sub-continent.

Daily Life

Each religion has influenced other in its customs, manners, rituals, etiquettes, dress, consumes, cooking, fairs, festivals, games, sports and so on. For example, *Nisbat, Mehendi, Haldi, Tel, Mandwa, Jalwa, Barat, Kangan* etc. are the Muslim adaptation of Hindu ceremonies. Similarly, when lower Hindu caste people converted to Islam during Sultanate and Mughal era, they kept their livelihood / vocational practices attached to the caste, thus we have Muslim castes as well including Julahas, Ansaris and so on.

Religion – Bhakti & Sufi Movement

Bhakti Movement dissolved the separate religious identities to a great extent and provides a great contribution to India’s composite culture. It gave a rude shock to Brahmanical influence over Hinduism as well as religious bigotry in Islam. It brought to fore the universal brotherhood, equality and oneness of God while rejected castes, rituals, idol worship etc.

Essence of both Bhakti and Sufi movements was that they are not purists. Purism brings bigotry. Both of them brought Hindus and Muslim closer and thus contributing in composite culture of the country. The early Sufi saints laid great emphasis on love and had a pantheistic approach that was inherently in conflict with orthodoxy. Some practices of Sufi saints such as penance, fasting and holding the breath are sometimes traced to the Buddhist and Hindu yogic influences. Also, other evidence suggests that Hindu and Buddhist rituals have been absorbed and assimilated by the Sufis. The similarities between Hinduism, Buddhism and Sufism provided a basis for mutual toleration and understanding. The Chishti and

Suharwardi orders both helped create a climate of opinion where people belonging to different sects and religions could live in harmony.

For its part, the Bhakti movement preached against the caste system using the local languages so that the message reached the masses. The values preached by the Bhakti saints coincided with the Islamic ideas of equality and brotherhood preached by Sufi saints. Together, these saints called for unity between Hindus and Muslims. The goal of saints like Kabir and Nanak was to unite all castes and creeds. They denounced untouchability and emphasized the fundamental unity of man.

Literature

Different regions of India contributed to the promotion of literature and higher learning to the composite culture of India. For example, Vedas were developed in North-West {Sapta-Sindhu region}, Yajurveda and Brahmana in Kuru-Panchal region; Rajatarangini in Kashmir; Upanishads in Magadha; Gita Govinda in Bengal, Charyapadas in Odisha, West Bengal and Assam; Mahakavyas and dramas of Kalidasa in Ujjaini; Bhavbhut's works in Vidarbha; Dasakumarcharita of Dandin in Deccan; Sangam Literature in South and so on. Similarly, Taxila, Nalanda, Varanasi, Vallabhi, Vanvasi, Amaravati, Nagarjunkonda, Kanchi, Madurai and Odantapuri are shining examples of seats of higher learning in India

Political Elements of Unity in Diversity

Though it is believed that India's continuity as a civilization was social and cultural rather than political; yet idea of bringing entire country under one central authority has been dream of great kings, sultans, emperors and rulers. This idea was put into practice by Chandragupta; Asoka; Harsha; Akbar and British rulers. Despite this, India was never a well organized political unit. Even during British India, there were 600 princely states which were internally autonomous. Then, our current form of democracy and government draws its existence from different political parties, political ideologies and so on.

Linguistic Elements of Unity in Diversity

While three fourth of India speaks Indo-Aryan Languages, Dravidian languages are spoken by one fourth of Indians. India has 122 major languages and 1599 dialects, thus making it one of the most linguistically diverse nations around the world. The languages have been a divisive as well as adhesive force in the country. English emerged as lingua franca of the country and serves as medium of communication between two people who have different mother tongue. Similarly, Hindi has also, to a

great extent, served to keep the country united. Despite major issues such as demand of linguistic states, status of minority, anti-Hindi movements etc. have posed major challenges to governments from time to time.

Institution of Pilgrimage as element of Unity in Diversity

One of the important source of unity in India is its pilgrimage culture, reflected in network of religious shrines and sacred places. For example, Badrinath, Kedarnath in North, Dwarka / Somnath in West, Rameshwaram in South, Puri in East and holy rivers across the length and breadth of the nation have fostered the sense of India as one unit.

Accommodation within Hinduism as element of unity in diversity

Hinduism is not a homogenous religion with one God, one book, one temple and so on. It is a federation of faiths with multiple deities, multiple Holy Scriptures and multiple of faiths and philosophies including atheism. Its elastic character of Hinduism that has accommodated and adjusted with various faiths, religions etc. and has allowed coexistence of several faiths in India.

Tradition of Interdependence as element of unity in diversity

Despite the fact that ours is a caste ridden society, India has a remarkable tradition of inter-dependence, which has kept it united for centuries. One example is the Jajmani System or functional interdependence of various castes. *Jajman* or *Yajman* is the recipient of certain services. This system initially developed in the villages between the food producing families and the families which supported them with other goods and services. The entire gamut of social order developed with Jajmani links with multiple types of payments and obligations. None of the caste was self sufficient and it depended for many things on other castes. Thus, each caste worked as a functional group and was linked with other caste via the mechanisms of Jajmani system.

Though Jajmani system represented the inter-linking of Hindu caste yet, in practice this system crossed the boundary of religion and provided linkages between different religions also. For example, Hindu's dependence on Muslim weaver or washerman or Muslim's dependence on Hindu trader / tailor / Goldsmith etc. is a manifestation of that mechanism only, though not called so.