

Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India: Unity in Diversity:

The most often noticed feature of Indian society is “Unity in Diversity”. This phrase celebrates how India has been stronger by welcoming various cultural, social and ethnic elements. It also transcends the notion accommodation without assimilation has been the key feature of Indian civilization. India has accommodated different elements of society without letting them lose their separate identity. We have got enough freedom to practice our own way of life.

We note that Unity in Diversity is not something unique to India only. This concept is a popular motto in most nations and it has also provided backbone to several political and social movements around the world. Its core idea is “unity without uniformity” and “diversity without fragmentation”. It is based on the notion that diversity enriches human interaction.

“Unity in diversity” is a popular motto within and among nation states, and also in political and social movements.

Different Elements of Unity in Diversity:

Geographical Elements of Unity in Diversity

Religious Elements of Unity in Diversity

Cultural Elements of Unity in Diversity

Political Elements of Unity in Diversity

Linguistic Elements of Unity in Diversity

Institution of Pilgrimage as element of Unity in Diversity

Accommodation within Hinduism as element of unity in diversity

Tradition of Interdependence as element of unity in diversity

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 Uttarapathpathi {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 placed. 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 interdependence, 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.