
UNIT 3 CULTURAL PLURALISM IN INDIAN SOCIETY

Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Objectives
- 3.3 Civilization and Culture
- 3.4 Plurality of Identities
- 3.5 The Cultural Diversity and the Richness of India
- 3.6 Cultural Pluralism in India
- 3.7 Cultural Pluralism and the Indian Constitution
- 3.8 Values Underlying Cultural Pluralism
- 3.9 The Challenges of Living in a Culturally Pluralistic Society
- 3.10 Activities for Children
- 3.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.12 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 3.13 References

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The units you have read so far in this block are on Indian culture and its philosophy as sources of values. In this unit we shall discuss values in the context of pluralism in the Indian culture. Imagine how boring it would be if all of us would wear the same clothes, speak the same language, and eat the same type of food! Fortunately, for those who live in India, there is a rich variety of food, clothes, customs languages, literature, festivals, music, art and dance. This variety is a result of the different historical, political and cultural influences, which have occurred in India in the last 5000 years. Schools need to ensure that children not only tolerate but also respect differences, appreciate the diversity while have a feeling of unity. Therefore, activities need to be integrated into the curriculum so that children can develop such values. We shall focus on these aspects in this unit.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you are expected to:

- discuss culture and civilization;
- appreciate plurality of identities;
- explain cultural pluralism in India;
- explain the role of the Indian constitution in preserving cultural pluralism;
- identify the values underlying cultural pluralism;
- discuss different ways of promoting cultural pluralism;
- discuss the impact of globalization on cultural pluralism;
- analyze the challenges of living in a culturally pluralistic society

3.3 CIVILIZATION AND CULTURE

The culture of India is one of the oldest cultures in the world. Right from the medieval period, there prevails diverse cultural diversities in form of dances, languages, religions, people, their customs and festivals. Every state of India has its own distinct culture and has carved out its own cultural niche. In spite of so much of cultural diversities, Indians are closely bound and that makes it a great country. Dating back to over 5000 years old civilization, India's culture has been adorned by migrating population, which over a period got absorbed into the Indian way of life. This great Indian culture comprises of Indian music, Indian Dance, Indian cuisine, costumes and Indian Festivals.

Several cultures form a part of one civilization claims Bonnemaision (2000, p. 86). The Indian civilization includes the cultures of the Harappans, Vedic Aryans, Buddhists, Jains, the influence of the cultures of the invaders, **Kushans**, Sakas, Greeks, Turko-Afghans, the **Delhi** Sultanate the Moguls and the British. It is also influenced by Bhaktism, Sufism. The Kushanas under **Kanishka**, introduced the **Gandhara** school of art which used Greek art to depict Buddhism. Although Islam was introduced in India by the Arabs in the 8th century A.D. it became the major religion (Tammita-Dalgoda, 2003) in India. Hindi, the Indian national language, in the Devnagari script, is the product of Sanskrit, a foreign language introduced by the Aryans 3500 years' ago. The Persian language introduced in India by the Mughals in the 12th century A.D. led to the development of the Indian language of Urdu. (Tammita-Dalgoda, 2003), Apart from these, Christian missionaries also had a profound influence on our educational system.

3.4 PLURALITY OF IDENTITIES

Children need to realize that India is a dynamic entity with a lot of diversity. A person need not be characterized by just language, religion, food but has a plurality of identities. By this, we mean a person can belong to many different groups at the same time, each of which is important in the given context. Common to all identities are the basic human values such as honesty, kindness, unselfishness etc. As Amartya Sen says "...history and background are not the only way of seeing ourselves and the groups to which we belong. There are a great variety of categories to which we simultaneously belong. I can be, at the same time, an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy, an author, a Sanskritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man with a non-religious lifestyle, from a Hindu background..."

In Indian culture, a mother is very significant. She may be a Malayalee Christian married to a Hindu, living in Bengal. Yet her identity is based on Indian traditions. She will bring up her children according to the values of her family, culture and tradition. She will want them to be honest like Yudhisthir as in the Mahabharata; she will encourage her children to respect elders, she will ask them to recognize God within all, as she teaches them to say '*namaskar*'. She will teach them cleanliness and hygiene, especially in preparation for prayers.

Teachers can assist the children in recognizing and developing an awareness of the different groups to which the students may belong. At the same time teachers

should help them recognize that underlying all the different groups is a basic unity of human values that represent one great nation. The students should be made aware of their duties and responsibilities as student member of a school/college/university, as a member of a family/community/religion/linguistic group/geographical region with its own music, art; dance, literature. Each aspect could be celebrated and appreciated through **different** activities such as concerts, dramas, debates, discussions, poster preparation and presentation. There can be an informal musical concert or a program of **different** dances. Students can have an exhibition of different crafts and costumes. An informal concert of songs could be organized. Therefore it is not easy to answer the question "Who am I?" for all these identities together create an individual along with one's personality traits, likes, dislikes, values and beliefs.

3.5 THE CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND THE RICHNESS OF INDIA

The culture of India is one of the oldest cultures in the world. Right from the medieval period there has been prevailing diverse cultural diversities in form of dances, languages, religions, people, customs and festivals.

Our manners, way of communicating with one another, etc are one of the important components of culture. Even though we have accepted modern means of living, improved our lifestyle, our values and beliefs still remain unchanged. There is amazing cultural diversity throughout the country. And there is hardly any culture in the world that is as varied and unique as India. India is a vast country, having variety of geographical features and climatic conditions and is home to some of the most ancient civilizations, including four major world religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Indian culture is a composite mixture of varying styles and influences. Festivals in India are characterized by color, gaiety, enthusiasm, prayers and rituals and in the realm of music, there are varieties of folk, popular, pop, and classical music. The Indian culture has persisted through the ages precisely for the reasons of **antiquity, unity, continuity** and universality of its nature. Thus within the ambience of Indian culture one can identify 'Indian Music', 'Indian Dance', 'Indian Cinema', 'Indian Literature', Indian Cuisine' 'Indian Fairs and Festivals' and so on. Indian culture tells us about the importance of co-operation and better living amongst ourselves and subsequently sends the message of making this world a better place to live in.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How can a teacher teach the aspects of cultural pluralism to students?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) Define cultural pluralism in the Indian context?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

3) Describe briefly about Indian cultural diversity?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

3.6 CULTURAL PLURALISM IN INDIA

When many cultures co-exist in a given geographical area, without one dominating the other, it is known as "cultural pluralism". There is a common national culture in India, but at the same time the various communities have the freedom to maintain and develop their own cultural and religious traditions, so long as they are not detrimental to the unity and general welfare of the nation. This is **cultural pluralism** in the Indian context. **Nehru** (1946) described the "unity in diversity" within India when he said, "it is fascinating to find how the Bengalis, the Marathas, the Gujuratis, the Tamils, the Andhras, the Oriyas, the **Assamese**, the Canarese, the Malayalis, the **Sindhis**, the Punjabis, the Pathans, the **Kashmiris**, the Rajputs and the great central block of the Hindusthani speaking people, have retained their peculiar characteristics for hundreds of years... have remained distinctively Indian." Indian Culture is grand and unique and has fostered other cultures. We can call Gandhi the embodiment of Indian cultural heritage. He was the one who highlighted India's culture and spoke of its characteristics of magnanimity, flexibility and above all of its synthesis. The history of the country's culture goes back to the ancient past or we can certainly line it up at least with the Dravidian era. Later on, many other cultures came in contact with the Indian Culture and easily merged themselves into it according to the circumstances and conditions that prevailed in India. In the same context, Gandhiji regarded the homogeneity of the Indian environment as the basis of this synthesis.

a) Religion

India is one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world, with some of the most deeply religious societies and cultures. Religion still plays a central and definitive role in the life of many of its people. The religion of 80% of the people is Hinduism. Islam is practiced by around 13% of all Indians. It is the birthplace of Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and they are accepted within its rich cultural tapestry. The religions of Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism are celebrated in their unique ways India is a secular country, where there is no State Religion. India has no official or established state religion. Most other

states in its neighborhood affirm a religious identity: Pakistan and Bangladesh are Islamic states; **Sri Lanka** gives a special status to Buddhism; and Nepal is a Hindu state. India, however, has no established religion and this is the first sign of its commitment to treat all communities as equal. This is supplemented by the constitutional provisions that protect religious liberty. While most societies grant individuals the right to religious belief, in India communities enjoy the right to continue with their distinct religious practices. Perhaps the most significant part of this is that in all matters of family, individuals are governed by their community personal laws. Religious communities have **the right** to set up their own religious and charitable institutions; they can establish their own educational institutions, and, above all, these institutions can receive financial support from the state. Thus public recognition has been granted to different religious communities and space made for them to continue with their way of life.

b) Language

There are 22 official languages and each has its distinctive script (Guha 2010). The Indian one rupee currency shows seventeen languages and seventeen scripts. Besides, there are 63 non-Indian languages spoken in the country and a total of more than 1652 languages and dialects. Among the great Indian thinkers who moulded independent India are Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath **Tagore**, and Mahatma Gandhi. Like Nehru, **Tagore** also consistently stressed on "unity in diversity". It is by celebrating the diversity of cultures that true unity could be achieved. He was one of the greatest champions of Indian pluralism. He believed in "liberal pluralism" which encouraged both the autonomy of individuals and also acknowledged that this autonomy was only possible in the context of multiple cultural traditions. **Tagore's** concept of autonomy was based on the ability "to think critically about oneself and one's traditions, the ability to courageously put them to the test posed by the example of others and their ways of life" (Nussbaum, 2007).

Mahatma Gandhi aptly described the plurality of religions when he was asked whether he was a Hindu and he replied, "Yes I am. I am also a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist and a **Jew**." (Nussbaum 2007) Republic Day Parade of India is a Symbol of Cultural Pluralism. Have you watched the Republic Day celebrations at Delhi on January **26th**? It's a marvelous display of the cultural pluralism of our country. 26th January, 1950 was the day when the Indian Republic and its Constitution came into force and therefore this day is celebrated as Republic Day. A grand parade is held in the capital, New **Delhi**, "from Raisina Hill near the Rashtrapati Bhavan (President's House), along the Rajpath, past India Gate and on to the historic Red Fort."

The Prime Minister of India lays a wreath at the Amar **Jawan** Jyoti at India Gate, commemorating all the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the country. There is a magnificent military parade. This is followed by a colorful cultural parade. India's rich cultural heritage is depicted in the form of tableaux from various states. Each state depicts its unique festivals, historical locations, art; etc School children from all over the country also participate in the parade presenting folk dances, drills and singing to the tunes of patriotic songs. Celebrations are also held in all state capitals, at district headquarters, sub divisions, taluks, and panchayats."

(india.gov.in/myindia/republicday.php)

3.7 CULTURAL PLURALISM AND THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION

Cultural pluralism is reflected in the "secular democratic framework" of the Indian Constitution. The Indian Constitution can be said to be a multicultural document in the (*International Journal on Multicultural Societies* (WMS), Vol. 5, No.2, 2003: 148 -161 Bhattacharya 2001). Through its political and institutional policy, the constitution recognizes and accommodates the diversity of India.

Article 350 A of the constitution directs every state to provide adequate facilities for instruction in mother-tongue at the primary stage of education of children belonging to linguistic minority groups and empowers the President to issue proper direction to any state (Basu 1997, 380). Article 29 (2) forbids any discrimination against any citizen on the basis of religion, race, caste or language in the matter of admission into educational institutions maintained or aided by the state. Articles 29 (1) and 30 (1) stipulate that minorities can establish and administer educational institutions of their own choice, and the state cannot compel them to attend institutions not to their liking. The linguistic diversity of India is evident in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution which officially recognizes 22 languages. Hindi is the official language and English is the associate official language.

In India, 'Multiculturalism'⁷ is a special kind of relationship adopted by the state towards different cultural communities that fall within its sovereignty (Bhargava 2004). In the Indian model, multiple religions are part of its foundation and not an afterthought. Even if the state is not identified with a particular religion, there is official and public recognition granted to religious communities. It respects liberty, equality, encourages peace and tolerance. It also tries to ensure equal dignity and status to members of all religions. There is a strong effort to encourage all to enter Hindu temples irrespective of their caste. The state also shows respect for religious communities by giving public support. India's constitutional secularism allows decisions on individual or community values by allowing flexibility between the public and private within a democratic process based on non-violence, protection of basic human rights, including the right not to be disenfranchised (Bhargava, 2004).

The government promotes cultural pluralism in many ways by policies that recognize and celebrate public holidays of minority religions; encourages the celebration of festivals, holidays of all cultures; encourages the music and arts of all cultures and encourages the representation of cultures in different areas of life. The government also provides funds or subsidizes important religious customs such as the Haj pilgrimage.

3.8 VALUES UNDERLYING CULTURAL PLURALISM

Compassion, equality, tolerance, acceptance, appreciation, adjustment are some of the underlying values necessary for safeguarding the culturally pluralistic society of India. Indians are very aesthetic and eager to know of the dance, music, songs, food, clothes, and crafts of other states. Formal or informal gatherings are

usually incomplete without a cultural program. Weddings in urban or rural areas are a celebration of all these cultural aspects.

Students can organize a festival on "Dances of India" or a "getting to know each other's culture" program or arrange a "Food of India" exhibition. They can have discussions, role plays, debates, puppet shows on the various aspects of Indian culture. Students are to be encouraged to discuss differences and similarities, what features of their culture to preserve and why. It is through such activities that students shall imbibe the values underlying cultural pluralism. In these activities it is advisable that the teacher remains a facilitator and guides the students to express their own ideas and feelings.

3.9 THE CHALLENGES OF LIVING IN A CULTURALLY PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

According to Nussbaum in "The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future", (2007) conflict between cultures are in reality a "clash between people who are prepared to live with others who are different and those who seek the protection of homogeneity." Culture groups may differ but they have to be given their due recognition in society. Guha insists that the "forces that have kept India together are many", and individuals, institutions have helped "transcend the divisiveness of class and culture and have nullified the predictions that India would not stay united and not stay democratic" (Guha, 2007).

Another challenge before India is that of globalization. There is a lot more interaction with different cultures as a consequence of globalization. Will India be able to retain its cultural pluralism against this onslaught of globalization? The richness of Indian cuisine, music, dance, fabrics, and crafts are appreciated across the globe. It is the more subtle aspects of Indian customs and traditions that are being challenged. Traditions are being questioned which is good for it encourages students to explore and understand the deeper meaning of customs and traditions like why should we respect our elders? Should older people be respected just because they are old? Of course, it is always advisable to allow the student to ask such questions and then guide the student to arrive at his/her own decision based on what he/she values. Therefore, in lesson plans time for such exploratory activities should be organized.

Fashion, dress, food, films, music are having a global impact across the world. Just as Hollywood films have an impact on our lives; Bollywood films too are a source of entertainment abroad. Fast food is a favorite and in cities even vendors are seen enjoying a burger and an ice-cream cone! Consequently, we retain our cultural plurality and at the same time do follow certain global patterns of consumption and in balancing these lies the challenge as we retain our cultural identity despite the impact of globalization.

Once again the law of love overcomes all differences. Only if we are willing to appreciate the differences, acknowledge the richness of each other's culture can we progress. In a culturally pluralistic society, we have to be careful, not to judge whether other cultures are right or wrong nor should we be judgmental about the customs of other cultures or try to promote one culture against the other. All cultures need to be given equal respect, within the larger framework of the laws, customs and in accordance with the Indian Constitution.

3.10 ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

- 1) Observe the Republic day celebrations on Doordarshan and identify 5 features that you liked most. Pay careful attention to the costumes, songs and tableaux. (30-50 words)
- 2) Plan an event by which you will encourage the students to appreciate their cultural heritage. What cultural **feature/s** will the students focus on? What are the materials that you will need? How much will it cost? (Make a small budget and maintain it). How much preparation time will you give the students? When will they present it? How will they be assessed? How can you involve the parents also? (Maybe the parents can help in making props; teach the children **songs/dances**).
- 3) Conduct the following activity. Students are to identify one Indian custom/tradition that they consider (a) important and (b) unimportant. They are to explain their choice. They are also to interview at least 8-10 persons and find out what **custom/tradition** they consider important and unimportant **and find** out the reasons for their choice. They list the results of their survey and analyze it to discover which **custom/tradition** is the most (a) important and (b) unimportant. They are to suggest two ways of preserving at least five **most** important **customs/traditions**. In addition to the above the following activities can be done along with the students to explain the diversity of cultures and to teach the **students** to respect each other's culture.
 - **Ask** students **to** create and share visual depictions of their individual cultural compositions.
 - In small groups, one member **is selected** to tell his or her life story. **After** the speaker has finished talking, have **the** listeners create a visual depiction of the cultural influences in the speaker's life.

Collect a variety of magazines and newspapers that are representative of several cultures. Divide students into groups, with each group receiving several issues of the same publication. Direct students to peruse the periodicals and determine which beliefs and values are conveyed. In the ensuing whole-class discussion, ask students to identify **values that vary from journal to journal. Such a discussion facilitates students' consideration of differences and similarities among cultures.**

- **Arrange** desks in a circle and ask students to introduce themselves and highlight any situations in their lives when they were in the numerical minority, as if they were a giraffe among hippos. The instructor should **provide an example by first introducing himself or herself in such a manner. This activity, for which ample time should be provided, contains several benefits:**
 - In articulating situations in which they have felt different, students will think about what makes their own backgrounds distinctive and what in their backgrounds is similar to the backgrounds of classmates.
 - Even though the class may appear to be monocultural, students will see the class as a whole being characterized by diversity.

- In reflecting on their own and classmates' experiences of being in the minority, students will begin to have empathy for those who are members of minority groups within society.

(Retrieved from www. ncrel.org, dated 2.5.11; info@ncrel.org

Copyright © North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. All rights reserved).

Check Your Progress 2

1) What are the challenges of living in a multicultural society in India?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) What are the values necessary for safeguarding cultural pluralism?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3.11 LET US SUM UP

Thus Indian culture is rich and diverse and as a result unique in its very own way. Even though we have accepted modern means of living, improved our lifestyle, our values and beliefs still remain unchanged. Togetherness is the essential character of our way of life. It is this spirit of togetherness that welcomes and blends diverse elements that seem disparate outside of that framework. This mytho-spiritual character of the Indian ethos has never failed to mystify western observers. "Is India a mystery or a muddle?" was the question that stalked E. M. Foster right through and beyond his tryst with India. India is neither; she is, instead, a spiritual-cultural unity-in-diversity that can host the different and the contrary. It was Gandhiji, essentially an Indian who could blend Indian spirituality with western rationality, Swami Vivekananda, who embodied the spirit of India, advocated a synthesis of the east and the west: The same spirit runs through Vivekananda concept of the integrated Indian identity synthesizing Vedantic soul with Islamic body. Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru were all champions of cultural pluralism. Important values practiced in such a culturally pluralistic society are acceptance, compassion, equality, tolerance, appreciation and adjustment. Globalization is leading to homogenization of culture, which is inevitable but at the same time we also have to retain our culture and the diversity integral to it.

3.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) In the classroom the teacher can celebrate each aspect through different activities such as concerts, dramas, debates, discussions, poster preparation and presentations.
- 2) Cultural pluralism in the Indian context is the common national culture in India, in which the various communities have the freedom to maintain and develop their own cultural and religious traditions, so long as they are not detrimental to the unity and general welfare of the nation.
- 3) There is hardly any culture in the world that is as varied and unique as India. India is home to some of the most ancient civilizations, including four major world religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Indian culture is a composite mixture of varying styles and influences. Festivals in India are characterized by color, gaiety, enthusiasm, prayers and rituals and in the realm of music; there are varieties of folk, popular, pop, and classical music.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) a) Conflict between cultures b) and globalization.
- 2) Compassion, equality, tolerance, acceptance, appreciation and adjustment are some of the underlying values necessary for safeguarding the pluralistic society of India.

3.13 REFERENCES

- Bagger, M. (2007) Journal of International Affairs: Review of the book «The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence and India's Future,» by Martha C. Nussbaum
- Basham, A.L. (2004) *The wonder that was India* Picador, India.
- Basu, D. D. (1997) *Introduction to the Constitution of India*. New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India.
- Bhargava, R., Bagchi, A. and Sudarshan, R.eds. (1999) *Multiculturalism, Liberalism and Democracy*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Bhattacharya, H. (2001) "Federalism, decentralization and state-building in India: aspects of centre-state relations". In: R. Bird and T. Stauffer, eds., *Intergovernmental Fiscal Relations in Fragmented Societies*, Basle: Helbing and Lichtenhahn.
- Bonnemaïson, J. (2000) *La géographie culturelle, Paris, Editions du CTHS*
- Das N.K. (2003). *Culture Religion and Philosophy*, Rawat Publications
- Guha, R. (2010) *Makers of Modern India* Penguin, India
- Henderson, C.E. (2002) *Culture and customs of India* Greenwood Press, London Picador

- Nehru, J.** (1990) *Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, India
- Sen, A.** (2006) *Identity and violence: the illusion of destiny*: Penguin; New York
- Tammita-Delgoda, S.** (2003) *A Traveller's History of India*, Interlink Books, New York

Online sources:

india.gov.in/myindia/republicday.php

http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-multiculturalism/article_2204.jsp

http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-multiculturalism/article_2204.jsp