

N. Jayapalan (2001:2) Indian Society and Social Institutions (Vol I) meher offer Press, Delhi

38.	Indian Political Parties	538
39.	Religion in Indian Politics	554 ✓
40.	Regionalism in Indian Politics	572 ✓
	Index	584

chp I

1

Characteristics of Indian Society

In his monumental work 'A Comparative Analysis of the Jajmani System' T.O. Beidelman has given a graphic account of the characteristics of Indian Society. Indian Society is bound together with the bond of fundamental unity in culture. Since the very origin of Indian Society this cultural unity has been clearly visible.

Cultural unity in India is reflected in the life of the people belonging to different races, religious groups, sects, communities but still hold Indian Culture as the stem of their diverse attachments.

Indian diversity as well as unity is seen in the following fields:

1. Geographical unity.
2. Cultural unity.
3. Religious unity.
4. Emotional unity.
5. Political unity.
6. Racial unity.

M.N. Srinivas in his 'Social Change in Modern India' and B. Kuppaswamy in his 'Social Change in India' have given a clear picture about the characteristics of Indian Society. Added to this Stuart Pigot in his 'Pre-historic India' has pointed out some of the features of Indian cultural unity.

1. Geographical Unity

India is a rich land having definite territory of its own, like any other nation in the world. The geographical unity of India is a matter of strange observation for the Europeans living in small regions having similar cultural identification.

AI QUAD CAMERA



India that is 'Bharatvarsha' reflects a historical significance and is the symbol of unity. From the early times till today every religious thinker, political philosopher and poet, has a deep admiration for this great country spreading from the Himalayas in the north to the 'Cape Camorin' in the south as a single expanse of Indian Culture and civilization.

One finds praises for this unified culture, reflected in various shades in the writings of the great saints and poets.

The kings, who tried to spread their empire from one end to another, have been praised by the poets as well as the great men of the contemporary times. There came no ruler from the early days who did not wish to rule the country as a whole by expanding his empire.

Today the whole country is called as Mother India with reverence by all the Indians and we feel proud of this amazing soil of ancient culture and civilization. In Mother India we find ourselves connected with one another and realise the inherent unity in our innerself.

2. Cultural Unity

In spite of many differences between customs and traditions, one finds a fundamental cultural unity in our country among the different communities and human groups. The mark of this unity can be found in the literature from the early ages. The approach to literature, traditions and customs and philosophy is fundamentally Indian in its sentiment. A clear cultural unity is found among the people though they practise different religious rites, and have different social intercourse. Cultural unity is a force behind all the group activities. There exists no group which does not accept the nature of family and sanctity of Sanskaras. Not only this, but many of the festivals are celebrated throughout the country in the same manner which reflects the bond of unity existing among the people belonging to different sects. Behind all the group expressions and sectional activities, there lies the bond of cultural unity.

The transition of the Indian society from Sanskritization to Secularisation has not affected the cultural unity. British rule brought with it a process of secularization of Indian social life and culture a tendency that gradually became stronger with the

CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIAN SOCIETY

development of communications, growth of towns and increased spatial mobility, and the speed of education.

The two World Wars, and Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience campaigns both of which socially and politically mobilized the masses, also contributed to increased secularization. And with independence there began a deepening as well as a broadening of the secularization process as witnessed in such measures as the declaration of India as a Secular State, the constitutional recognition of the equality of all citizens before the law, the introduction of universal adult suffrage, and undertaking of a programme of planned development. Thus, the cultural unity in India was unaffected during the period of transition.

3. Religious Unity

The Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsees, Buddhists and other religious communities live in this country. In spite of this diversity in religious belief, every Indian does not find his religious view apart from others. Each religion in our country exhibits one single feeling, each believes in the immortality of soul, temporary existence of this physical world, Nirvana, and contemplation and this is all the ideas falling within the lap of religions in our country. Though all the religions take different ways to accomplish their objectives which is same, for all and every religion embodies faith in invisible God, purity of thought, benevolence, and pity as the true characteristics of every individual. No religion teaches cruelty or selfishness.

Nearly every religion has its rituals and observance of certain norms. Such rituals and norms are nearly common in all the religions. Worshippers of one God or Goddess have erected the temples to offer their prayers for instance of Shiva and Vishnu, Krishna and Rama temples are found in nearly every corner of the country. No one comes into the conflict of the other. The great legendary epics, the *Geeta*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata* is read as well in Punjab as in the southern part of the country. People offer their prayers by singing legendary prayers of Rama and Krishna and people speaking all the languages repeat these songs with equal reverence.

Religious equality in our country is still safe, and the religious units established by the Aryans are still accepted in our society. Indian society has been unique in world history because of its continuity on the one hand and its vast diversity on the other.

The archeological investigations of Harappa and Mohanjodaro, popularly described as the Indian Valley Civilization, established that civilization had attained a high degree of maturity round about B.C. 3,000. So one can infer that the beginning of this civilization may even go back by about 500 years, in order to achieve that state of urban development and complexity which has been revealed by the archeological remains. Later archeological findings have shown that the remains of the civilization extend as far east, as the Sutlej Valley in Jaisalmer in Rajasthan and as far south as Lothal near Ahmedabad. Thus, this civilization was not confined to the Indus Valley but extended further east and south.

Some of the Indian historians assert that many of the main features of Indian culture have been derived from this civilization. They note that some forms of dress, utensils and pottery which are to be found in contemporary India may be traced to the Mohanjodaro days. It is also suggested that some of the current religious beliefs like the cult of the mother goddess, the worship of Shiva and the reverence for the Cow, could be traced back to that civilization. It is also asserted that the pacifist temper of the Indian people could be traced to the civilization. Thus, it would be said that the Indian civilization could claim a continuity of about 5,500 years which is unique in the history of man.

The religious texts impart much satisfaction and solace to the people in our country. The places of worship scattered all over the country signify the religious unity throughout the country. Pilgrimages of Hindus at Badrinarayan, Prayag, Varanasi throws spells of religious unity among the people belonging to the Hindu community. Likewise, Ajmer symbolises the feeling of unity among Muslims living in India and enjoins them with other people belong to other religious sects. This inculcates the feeling of unity and patriotism among the Indian people.

Rivers in India like the Ganges, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada all symbolises the ancient culture and their names often

appear in the prayer. This again binds the people living in different parts and following distinct religious faiths.

In short religion binds the people living in the country of ours and has helped in strengthening the forces bringing integrity and unity in the Indian social system. What Ruth Benedict wrote is true of Indian religion :

"Religion is not to be identified with the pursuit of ideal ends. Spirituality and the virtues are two social values which were discovered in the process of social life. They may well constitute the value of religion in man's history just as the pearl constitutes the value of the oyster. Nevertheless the making of the pearl is a byproduct in the life of oyster, and it does not give a clue to the evolution of the oyster."

4. Emotional Unity

Next comes emotional unity. Multiplicity of language hamper the national unity and it becomes more irksome when there are a large number of races in a country. But quite peculiarly, both these factors are present in India yet the integrity of the social system has remained unchallenged because Sanskrit had been prevalent on the 'base' or 'link' language throughout the country. Sanskrit was accepted by the people of north as well as the south. Sanskrit became the explanatory of the Hindu Culture and all the classics were written in Sanskrit.

Later on Prakrit language spread in the country (nearly 300 to 400 B.C.). Now Sanskrit became the language of scholars and common men started using Prakrit. Kalidasa and Asvaghosha, the two pillars of ancient literature wrote dramas in the language comprising a mixture of Sanskrit and Prakrit. Sanskrit continued to weave the fragmented culture into one and kept in infusing the sense of unity among the people. The books of Kalidasa and other accelerated the temper of growth of this emotional unity.

All the religious groups in the country adopted Sanskrit as the basis of the expression in spite of the literatures available in Pali and Prakrit languages. Nearly all the Indian languages of the modern times found their origin in the Sanskrit languages and Sanskrit is the one language in which the whole literature of ancient times and philosophy of the gone off days is available.

From this viewpoint, it is to be accepted that Sanskrit has played a predominant role in building the emotional unity and promoting the cultural unity in India.

5. Political Unity

Then comes political unity. Political unity in the country is an outcome of the religious and cultural unity that has been prevalent since the time immemorial. History has facts in its store to prove that in early days many princes and kings rebelled against the central authority, but every rebel realised the importance of the universal over lordship (i.e. Chakravarti), and such incidents are authoritically proved by the Vedic literatures in which kings had tried to become universal overlords (Chakravarti) by conquering more and more territory.

Notable among these kings are Prabhū Dilip, Aj, Dashrath, Sagar, Mandhata, and Pandav King Yudhishtira. Many instances are present in the ancient literatures to prove that kings tried to annex more territory to acquire the title of 'Universal overlord.' The desire behind such attempts of annexation were not motivated by the acquisition of wealth or psychological arrogance but to unite the whole of India into one unit of rule. There is no instance which could prove that any Indian king ever tried to annex the territory of any foreign ruler, but all the facts prove that kings wanted to expand their kingdoms as far as possible in their bid to bring more and more Indian territory under a single control.

Ashvamedha Yaga was performed by Chandra Gupta, Ashoka and Samudra Gupta to their entity as the 'Universal Lord.' The idea of universal lordship is an actual happening since many synonymous words are found in the Vedic literature as well as there is reference of Ashvamedha Yaga, too, which clearly indicates the aspiration of great kings to unite the country as far as they could in their bid to bring political unity though a few got success.

6. Racial Unity

Many different races have invaded India from the very early days and noteworthy among these are Aryans, Shaka, Huns, etc., but Indian soil absorbed all their racial dissimilarity and they all became Indians and now if any one attempts to sort out these invading races, he will find nothing but frustrations and utter

failure. Indian social system provided them a big place of cover and solace and as the time passed these different tribes and races established a concrete physical identification with the local culture and civilization after the fall of Mauryan Empire, so many races, came to India but, when Muslims arrived they faced only one race, i.e., the Hindus and it proves that the early races of Negros, Dravidians, Aryans, the Mongols, the Greeks, the Yuchi, Shaka, Aabhir, the Turks, the Huns have lost their individual identity and have been absolutely assimilated into the four varnas of the Indian social system.

Indian culture is an amalgamation of various foreign social cultures that came in the country from time to time. Aryans are hailed for bringing unity in the Indian culture. Even the Muslims were influenced by Indian culture and they differ from the Muslims of Arabian and Persian countries.

Hindu saints from time to time have infused the feeling of oneness among the people having different social cultures and the primary trait in Hindu Culture has influenced every Hindu and has helped in maintaining unity among the diversity. Even the Muslims have shown great interest in the Hindu religion, culture, philosophy and it shows the pervasiveness of the Indian cultural unity.