**Indian Society : Socio-Cultural Unity and Diversity**

**Historicity of Unity in Diversity:**

The Indian cultural tradition is unique. The notions of dharma (normative order), karma (personal moral commitment] and jati (caste) as the hierarchical principles of social stratification are basic to Indian culture. A certain level of configuration of these elements and consensus have brought about persistence and equilibrium in Indian society, and hence no major breakdown has taken place in its culture. It is said that the change is in the cultural system and not of the system. In other words, basic cultural and social values and norms still continue with some modifications.

The values of dharma, karma and jati continue to guide social and cultural activ­ities to a large extent. Hence, change is in the system and not of the system. However, the contemporary India has witnessed basic structural changes in economic and political fields. The traditional value system has lost its ground to a considerable extent as the jati has acquired a new form, and it is no more an effective mechanism of division of labour and status determination

The uniqueness of the Indian culture does not simply refer to its esoteric nature. It requires a thorough study in terms of its history. Absorption and assimilation characterised social and cultural change. Aryans and Dravidians lived together. Hindus and Muslims lived in close proximity – socially and culturally.

Later on, Christians joined them. Today, Hindus, Jains, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and people of other faiths participate together in the government, industry, commerce and other sectors of public life. Thus, there has been a continuous unity even in the situation of stark diversity.

Diversity is reflected in thousands of caste groups, each having its own rituals, rites, rules and customs. It can be seen in terms of linguistic, religious and other ethnic variations. The styles of life differ from region to region and vary even between different castes and religious groups within the same village. Some rulers made conscious efforts to ensure unity in diversity.

The emperor Ashoka worked for the unity of India by achieving cultural and religious harmony and administrative efficiency. Akbar, one of the most powerful Mughal emperors, projected the concept of a state religion called Din-e-Illahi, a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam.

The majority of Muslims in villages transformed their social life beyond recognition. They mingled with Hindus freely in almost all walks of life. The Hindu rajas and Muslim kings recognized literary and artistic abilities in individuals from both the communities. Kabir and Nanak were greatly influenced by the teachings of Islam.

Conversion to Islam, and later on to Christianity, and today to Buddhism, has resulted in a ‘mixed’ culture. The Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, worked throughout his life to achieve national unity and integrity through communal harmony, upliftment of the poor and downtrodden and propagation of a just social order.

The colonial India has two histories. One is of colonialism produced by the colonisers, and the other is of India’s culture and civilization perpetrated through its intellectual and philosophical fervour. India’s history, its architectural treasures, its literature, philosophy, music, drama, dance, and its other fine arts, all contributed to its social life, and could not be destroyed by alien rule. It is this history which remained neglected during British Raj.

Mahatma Gandhi desired radical changes. However, he wished to associate such changes with India’s tradition and cultural heritage. Jawaharlal Nehru, the architect of modern India, with a modern and secular outlook, upheld India’s past with reverence and a sense of pride. He (1956) writes: “Yet the past is ever with us and all that we are and that we have come from the past. We are its products and we live immersed in it. Not to understand it and feel it as something living within us is not to understand the present. To combine it with the present and extend it to the future, to break from it where it cannot be so united, to make all this the pulsating and vibrating material for thought and action – that is life.”

In another passage, Nehru highlights India’s cultural heritage. He (ibid) writes: “The rising middle classes … wanted some cultural roots to cling on to, something that gave them assurance of their own worth, something that would reduce the sense of frustration and humiliation that foreign conquest and rule had produced… The past of India, with all its cultural variety and greatness, was a common heritage of all the Indian people, Hindu, Moslem, Christian and others; and their ancestors had helped to build it.” But Nehru never wanted the deadwood of the past to dominate the present. He was, in fact, a man with a democratic spirit and modern outlook.

**Forces of Unity in Modern India:**

**M.N. Srinivas (1952), a noted sociologist, writes:**

“The concept of unity is inherent in Hinduism. There are sacred centres of Hindu pilgrimage in every corner of the land. Certain salient aspects of Sanskritic culture are to be found all over the country. India is the sacred land not only of the Hindus but also of the Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists. The Muslims and Christians, too, have several sacred centres of pilgrimage in India. The institution of caste cuts across diverse religious groups and gives them all a common social idiom.”

Srinivas further notes that India, as a secular state, tolerates diversity. The Five-Year Plans, the spread of egalitarian ideals, a single government and a common body of civil and criminal laws are enough evidence of India’s plural character and oneness. However, one may not agree with Srinivas’ observation regarding Hinduism in general and about the caste system, in particular.

Orthodoxy of these two systems has, at times, endangered India’s unity. The two have often been misused for suppression and exploitation of weaker sections of society, including women. Recently, the Noble laureate Amartya Sen, pleaded for a common civil code for all the commu­nities, including Muslims.

The Constitution of independent India has established the ‘rule of law’ throughout the entire country. All citizens are equal and subject to the same authority. Birth-based privileges have been abolished. Religion, language, region, caste or community are no longer the basis of special powers and privileges.

The weaker sections of society, the Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs), and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) have been given special concessions to bridge the gap between them and the upper castes and classes. Today, no caste or social group suffers from any kind of social disability. Women enjoy equal rights with men, in all respects.

The policy of ‘divide and rule’, adopted by the British to rule this country, is no more in operation. Colonial exploi­tation has been replaced by processes of development and egalitarian ideology. However, despite constitutional and legal enactments, the weaker sections and women lag behind because of the deep-rooted entrenchment of the upper castes and patriarchy.

**Factors of Disunity:**

Despite a rich cultural heritage, egalitarian policies and programmes, and the ‘rule of law’, narrow loyalties, parochial ties and primordial interests have also increased in the post-independence India. We find divisive forces in many parts of the country. India is a land of sharp contrasts having very rich, upper caste and class people on the one hand, and extremely poor, lower caste and class people on the other.

There are minority groups based on a variety of considerations such as religion, language, region, customs and traditions. Even, the so-called majority group, namely, the Hindus, is divided into several sects, castes, clans and linguistic groups. These groups have certain aspirations for their members in regard to better education, employment and a high standard of living.

All members belonging to different castes and communities do not have equal chance or access, and hence they are denied ‘distributive justice’. Such a situation of unequal opportunities in life, which itself is rooted into socially structured inequalities, aggravates tensions, mutual distrust and frustration.

The consciousness of unity and a feeling of Indianness are seriously hampered due to situations of hierarchy and inequality. Today, India is faced with this problem due to a lack of synchroni­sation between the form and contents of its social structure. There is an urgent need to reduce the hiatus between the ideal and the actual. National integration can be achieved by bridging up this gap, which is, in fact, between the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, and between the upper caste and class and the lower caste and class people.

**Ethnicity**

**Defining Ethnicity:**

Literally speaking, the word ‘ethnos’ means nation, and the word ‘ethnicity’ is developed from it. However, ethnicity is not defined as nationhood. It is defined as a collectivity of people of a distinct nature in terms of race, descent and culture. Thus, an ethnic group is a social collectivity having certain shared historicity and common attributes, such as race, tribe, language, religion, dress, diet, etc. A combination of them in a group makes it an ethnic group, which is perceived as such by its members and by members of other groups.

One may call this self-perception ethnic consciousness for status and for recognition as a distinct social entity. Ethnicity is not a static or pre-ordained category; it is a manifestation of the common economic, political, social and cultural interests and their protection by certain members in a plural society. Thus, ethnicity, at times, is used as an instrument of mobilisation for realising social, economic and political goals.

Ethnicity is a cultural phenomenon, and as such no culture is superior or inferior. Culture belongs to a people, and they endear it like any other people. E.B. Tylor defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Culture is the man-made part of the environment.

Culture is social as it relates people in a variety of situations. Being a relational phenomenon, culture has instrumental significance. Therefore, all ethnic entities are cultural groupings, hence they enjoy the same position in terms of the normative orientations of different sets of people. The Constitution of India declares that India is a secular state in which distinctions and discriminations based on caste, creed, region, language, religion, etc., are not allowed. The people have been given ‘fundamental rights’, according to which, primordial or ascriptive considerations do not find any place in modern India.

**Ethnicity and Culture:**

An ethnic group may think that it is a living being of a unique kind. Its members generally think in terms of a real or fictitious common­ality based on common ancestory, cultural heritage, language, religion and even economic interests. Internally, all ethnic groups are stratified despite their claim of commonality in all respects. Ethnicity has also become a very sensitive aspect of India’s social fabric because of ethnic cleavage, conflict, violence and hatred.

Are ethnic groups classes? Are they the same groupings as of caste groups? A plural or multi-ethnic society like India would have an overlapping of ethnic, caste and class groupings. Contextuality of these groupings is important to distinguish among ethnicity, caste and class as three bases of social ranking and identification.

A given country consists of various communities; and facts about their origin and migration help understand the history of its civilization. The present population of India is over 1,000 million. More than 100 years ago, Sir Herbert Risley noted that there were 2,378 main castes among the Hindus in India. Certainly, this number must have reached over 3,000 by this time due to the processes of fission and social mobility.

Marriage takes place in accordance with the rules of caste endogamy, clan exogamy and avoidance of relations on father’s and mother’s sides. Besides these caste groups, there are other communities, such as, Muslims, Chris­tians, Sikhs, Parsis, Jains and many tribal groups, who limit marriage and social interaction to their own groups. However, inter-caste marriages are taking place, particularly among the educated urban middle and upper-middle class families. Resistance to such marriages is negligible due to weakening of the caste system.

**Nature of Ethnic Conflict:**

At times, ethnic groups tend to operate as diametrically opposed groups due to clash of their real or supposed interests. Such a clash of interests may also take the form of communalism. Some groups may take undue advantage of their large numbers or of superior social origins to corner a major share of the national resources.

The other communities with smaller populations may feel deprived of what they feel are their ‘legitimate claims’. Situations of mutual distrust, disaffection and distance may arise between various ethnic groups. One perspective is that ‘relative deprivation’ is the root cause of all ethnic strife. The lack of distributive justice, differential accessibility to resources and cultural differences have been considered the main reasons of ethnic problems.

Sometimes ethnic conflict is due to the distinction made between ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’. ‘We’ (insiders) against ‘they’ (outsiders] is an attitude found in all societies. Immigrants are treated as ‘foreigners’. Such a problem arises when people speaking Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Oriya, Hindi, Kashmiri, Punjabi, Urdu, Marathi and Sindhi consider each other different in the national context.

As such ethnic groups may be referred as ‘primordial collectivities’. Members belonging to one state often consider members from other states as outsiders. They would not like them to seek employment in their state. Sub-regions, cities, towns and even villages are often used for drawing a line between the insiders and the outsiders. The question is: can we call it ethnicity? The answer is a clear no. India is a poly-ethnic society having distinctions based on race, caste, language, religion and territory.

**Religion:**

**Defining Religion:**

**There are two types of values:**

(1) categorical or absolute values, and

(2) instrumental values.

The first refers to beliefs and practices relating to the supernatural powers. The second refers to norms and practices related to work, efficiency, productivity, etc. Religion falls in the first category of the value system.

Religion may be defined as “beliefs and practices related to supernatural entities, spirits and powers, which are considered as ultimate in shaping human relations”.

**Surjit Sinha refers to three components of the sociology of religion:**

(1) beliefs in supernatural entities,

(2) specialists who create such beliefs, and

(3) laity who receive these beliefs in various forms.

Religion has played an important part in Indian society from the earliest times. It has assumed numerous forms and nomencla­tures in relation to different groups of people associated with it. India has been a poly-religious society.

Transformations and changes in different religions have occurred from time to time vis-a-vis changes in intellectual climate and social structure. Religion in India has never been static. Today, it has made inroads into the arenas of politics and economic life. At times, affinity to religion is made an issue in elections; and in economic and business transactions.

Religious movements have been a perpetual feature of India’s socio-cultural life. Pre-Vedic and Vedic religions, unorthodox religious currents led by Buddha and Mahavira, and theistic religions, including the element of Bhakti, characterize dynamics of religion in Indian society. Religious sects like Vaishnavism, Saivism and Saktism emerged as the components of orthodox Brahmanism. In addition to these ramifications of religion, several folk cults and religious practices were evolved by people in various parts of India.

**Religious Communities and Diversity in India:**

According to the 1931 census, there were ten religious groups in India. These included: Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jews, and other tribal and non-tribal religious groups. The census of 1961 listed only seven religious categories, namely, Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians, Sikhs and other religions and persuasions.

Religion is really a complex phenomenon in India. For example, elements of Sanskritic and tribal religion are found in a mixed form at various levels. So is the interaction between the ‘great’ and the ‘little’ traditions. Integration of Sanskritic Hindu religion and tribal religion is also found. The Santhals, for example, observe several high caste festivals. This is also the case with the lower and ‘untouchable’ castes. Some tribals worship Shiva.

**M.N. Srinivas (1952) writes:**

“Different tribes are Sanskritized in different degrees, and different sections of the same tribe may not be uniformly Sanskritized.” Conversion to Christianity and Islam has been a controversial issue over the past couple of decades.

It is said that the members of the depressed classes and tribals have converted to Christianity, Islam and Sikhism in various parts of the country, particularly in the 1920s and also after independence. A good number of tribals have accepted Hindu rituals and religious practices in Bihar, Bengal, Assam and other areas. Thousands of Harijans have converted to Buddhism in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra.

Induced or forced conversion is certainly against the spirit of the Constitution of India and the law of the land. There may be several factors responsible for change of religion. In recent years intense debate has occurred on religious conversions.

One view is that the lower castes and communities are converting to Islam and Christianity because of the oppressive nature of Hinduism. Contrary to this is the view that conversions are being induced by the proponents of Islam and Christianity.

It has been reported that minority religions show a greater percentage of literacy than the majority religions. Parsis, Jains, Jews and Christians have shown this pattern. With the exception of Christians, these communities are also engaged in trade and business more than Hindus and Muslims. A study reveals that the Parsis, Jews and Jains are ‘advanced’ in business, though their activ­ities are not diversified. Hindus and Muslims have a diversified occupational pattern because of their large numbers and spread all over the country.

The minority groups are found in specific regions, sub-regions and cities, and therefore, they find themselves in an advantageous position. Syrian Christians, Moplas, Parsis and some other groups have been benefited because of their strategic locations in Kerala and Maharashtra.

**Role of Religion in Social Integration:**

M.N. Srinivas (1952) examines the role of religion in social integration as a binding force amongst individuals and groups. However, it is more important to see how religion does this; how it functions. Karl Marx’s dictum, “religion is the opiate of the masses”, can be found true if religion becomes a tool of exploitation in the hands of a selected few who claim themselves its custodians and protectors. Srinivas, however, considers religious behaviour, as a part of social life.

**He refers to three points:**

(1) the relations between different castes and religious groups at the village and other local levels;

(2) the role of religion in the economic devel­opment of the country; and

(3) religion and socio-economic privileges.

Religious ethic may be conducive to the development of capitalism as observed by Max Weber. Religion may be used as a solid so unifying force by white people in situations of crisis as explained by Emile Durkheim.

Multi-religious villages are not as conspicuous a phenomenon as multi-caste villages in India. However, in Uttar Pradesh, one can find Hindu tenants and Muslim landlords and vice versa. In a village in Karnataka, a few big Hindu landowners had Muslim tenants and servants, while Muslim landowners had Hindu servants.

The Muslims were engaged in a variety of economic activities, as they did not own much land. The Hindus owned mango orchards, but the Muslims carried on the trade. Hindus and Muslims interacted on several occasions, including festivals and weddings. When a particular religious community has specialized in any economic field, its clientele belongs to various other religions.

In cities, Hindus and Muslims have been greeting each other on their festive occasions. In situations of riots and crises, they have come to each other’s rescue. In the riots of November 1984 in Delhi and other places, a large number of Sikhs were given shelter and protection by Hindus. Similarly, in recent Gujarat riots, many Muslim families took refuge in houses owned by Hindus. Hindus and Muslims have lived in amity in the country for centuries. Inter-community marriages in Punjab are a well-established practice.

There is also association between religious communities and the specific economic functions they perform. For example, Parsis are in the liquor trade. Moplah traders are found in Kerala, Mysore, Chennai and Mumbai. Jain traders are found in Mumbai, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Bengal.

Such an association is found even at the village level. From amongst the Hindus, Gujarati Banias, Telugu Komatis, Tamil Chettiars and Rajasthani Banias have played an important role in economic activities. However, from time to time, several new caste groups have entered into commerce and trade. Caste barriers have weakened, and spatial mobility is today far greater. The spread of various communities all over the country and diversification of their economic activities have strengthened the process of social integration.

The sociologist Max Weber was the first to mention a Hindu ethic consisting of the principles of samsara (belief in the transmi­gration of souls) and karma (doctrine of compensation). These two principles together formed the basis of the caste system.

Conse­quent upon this, according to Weber, caste system did not have a this-worldly rational ethic. Weber based his analysis on extrapo­lation of textual notions of Hinduism. He perhaps looked at the traditionalism and irrationality of Hinduism from the point of view of the Protestant ethic and its relationship with the growth of capitalism in his own society. However, no necessary antithetical relationship has been seen by many scholars between religion and economic development.

Milton Singer (1972) has found religious/ideological bases of the vama-jati order, sects and tribalism and their relationship as functional with the processes of modernisation, nationalism, indus­trialisation and bureaucracy. However, it would be quite absurd to draw the conclusion that the Hindu ethic and caste system have essentially contributed to economic development in a positive way, and therefore, there is no need to change these systems. This view simply explains the resilient character of Hinduism and the caste system vis-a-vis changes in India’s economy and polity.

**Social Organisation of Hindu Religion:**

Hinduism is not a static religion. It has changed considerably due to the spread of scientific knowledge, technological advancement, improved means of communication and the process of secularism. Despite these changes, Hinduism remains a complex phenomenon. At the pan-Indian level, education, mass media, press and migration have promoted secular values. However, at the local level, religious practices remain unaffected to a large extent. We can see basic structural change in the countryside along-with adherence to tradition and religious beliefs.

India has been characterised as a ‘primary’ or ‘orthogenetic’ civilisation, because it has its continuity; an uninterrupted history despite foreign invasions and wars between rulers within the country. The main source of strength of the Indian civilisation is the interaction between different parts of its traditions.

The traditions, which are written, find a place in Hindu or Islamic literature, religious texts and scripts. These are called ‘great traditions’. The traditions, which are unwritten and transmitted orally from one generation to another, are called ‘little traditions’. These two are constantly interacting with each other. When the elements of a great tradition filter down to the people, the process of such a spread is known as parochialisation.

When the elements of a little tradition become a part of a great (Sanskritic) tradition, the process is described as universalisation. To call a tradition great or little, in fact, amounts to designating people as great and little, because it is the people who are literate or unlettered. Traditions refer to norms of behaviour and interpersonal relations.

They are symbiotic in nature, but their hierarchy refers to a hierarchy of human beings. To call illiterate folks little and the literate as great, even by impli­cation, would involve a value judgement. Thus, religion is a very complex phenomenon. It is necessary to simplify it by clarifying those canons which put all the believers on the same wave-length without any discrimination whatsoever, based on caste, region, cultural heritage, economic position, educational status, etc.

**Use of Religion in Fulfilling Narrow Ends:**

Though religion is an integrative mechanism, it has been used to fulfill narrow social and political ends. A number of associations and groups have been formed with religious names with a view to evoke religious consciousness for getting support or favour from members belonging to a particular religious group. The Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League are glaring examples of this practice. Even educa­tional institutions have Hindu, Jain, Muslim, Christian and Sikh names.

**Language:**

**Defining Language:**

“A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which members of a social group cooperate and interact” [Gazetteer of India, Vol. I). Language as a system consists of a series of symbols, the meanings of which must be learned by all those who use that language. Language is an aspect of culture…. “by means of which the learning process is effectuated and a given way of life achieves both continuity and change” (ibid).

The building-up of knowledge is not possible without language. As such language is not simply a construction comprising of words, phrases and sentences based on certain rules (grammar), it is a means of communication, and a mode of social relationship. Language is not monolithic, it is differ­entiated and hierarchical vis-a-vis ramifications of people in society.

Thus, language is also a social phenomenon in terms of its differential association with different social strata. Some people have command over both written and oral aspects of a given language; while others, being simple folks, have access only to the oral aspect. Sanskritic language or any other language may become a resource for some people, whereas a lack of knowledge of the same may prove an obstacle in social and cultural mobility. A linguistic group or collectivity becomes, at times, a strong primordial entity, and may turn into a sort of ethnic or communal group in opposition to some such other group.

**Role of Language in Social Integration:**

Language is a living force; it is not a static phenomenon. It has changed with changes in social formations, ruling clans and with demands of specific historical situations. Pali and Prakrit languages were prominent in ancient India. Sanskrit enjoyed the status of carrying Hindu Sanskritic culture throughout the country.

These were followed by modern Indo-Aryan languages like Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kashmiri, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sindhi and Urdu. The languages in peninsular India are of Dravidian stock (with the exception of Marathi). These include Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada. Each of these languages, of both the stocks, has several dialects spoken by people living in different linguistic regions.

The rulers of medieval India brought new forms of religion, language, manners and customs compared to those of the orthogenetic culture and civilization. The institutional basis of social order and economic organisation remained unchanged to a large extent. The caste system and village economy continued to function considerably undisturbed during the medieval period. However, Indian culture and political power underwent transformation, influ­encing language, culture and religion. A ‘Hindustani’ way of life emerged in northern India.

The writings and accounts of foreign travellers from Islamic countries promoted Arabic and Persian languages. Though the Hindu culture, caste system and village economy remained largely unaffected despite foreign rule, the Indo-Aryan languages rapidly developed into literary languages.

With the emergence of these languages, cultural changes occurred, including diminishing upper caste domination, the decline of Sanskrit language, and waves of religious and social reforms, using popular idioms and the language of laity. The confrontation of Hindu and Muslim cultures led to interesting results and a mixed culture, particularly in North India.

**Linguistic Structure of India:**

According to Grierson, India have 179 languages and 544 dialects. However, this estimate cannot be accepted as authentic since the dialects were counted under the head of ‘languages’. The Consti­tution of India, in its Eighth Schedule, recognises two official and 22 national languages.

The two official languages are English and Hindi (Devanagri script), whereas national languages include Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Konkani, Manipuri, Nepali, Bodo, Maithali, Dogri and Santhali. In undivided India, over 73 per cent of the people spoke the Indo-Aryan languages, 20 per cent the Dravidian languages, 1.3 per cent the Austric languages and only 0.85 per cent spoke the Sino-Tibetan languages.

**Language as the Basis of States Reorganisation:**

The present formation of India into states represents the language map of India. The States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) carved out states based on linguistic uniformity and continuity. There is an anomaly, however, in the ten Hindi-speaking states, namely, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttranchal, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab.

The spoken languages within these states have been clubbed under the broad head of Hindi. The rest of the states, namely, Assam, Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala have a majority of people who speak Assamese, Bengali, Oriya, Telugu, Gujarati, Marathi, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam, respectively.

Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan were large states. A demand for smaller states came up from time to time from the people of these states. The Adivasis of Chotanagpur, the Santhal Parganas of Bihar and the tribals of the adjoining areas of Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh demanded formation of a separate state of Jharkhand on the basis of not only their distinct language, culture, administrative viability and geographical conti­guity but also their exploitation by the Dikkus (non-Adivasi zamindars, moneylenders and other exploiters). Consequently, three new states were carved out, namely, Jharkhand from Bihar, Uttranchal from Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh from Madhya Pradesh.

**The Language Problem:**

It seems that the root cause of the present language problem in India is the imposition of English by the British Raj in the country. Lord Macaulay said: “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” He continued: “To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.” This policy of imparting education in English proved fruitful for the Raj but not for the Indian masses. Universities and colleges were established for the express purpose of training individuals for subordinate ranks.

Nationalist leaders viewed this policy as a device of the British to produce a ‘baboo (clerks) class’. Jawaharlal Nehru (1956) writes: “The British had created a new caste or class in India; the English-educated class, which lived in a world of its own, cut off from the mass of the population, and looked always, even when protesting, towards its rulers.” The indig­enous elite were thus transformed into a class of clerks by Macaulay’s policy of English education in India in the first half of the last century.

However, there is also a counter-view that India could join the world community only through its English education. The promotion of vernaculars would have been a threat to India’s unity. The study of science and technology was made possible by the knowledge of English. We have already stated some limitations of the view which undermines the role of indigenous languages in ’emotional integration’ and ‘national consolidation’. Rabindranath Tagore writes: “A language is not like an umbrella or an overcoat, that can be borrowed by unconscious or deliberate mistake; it is like the living skin itself.”

India has always been a multilingual civilisation with special elite languages and a constant interaction between local, regional and all-India languages. Unity and assimilation at various interactional levels have been specific features of the Indian sub-continent. Amidst vast diversities, the doctrine of a single language, essential for national identity, cohesiveness and unity, has been challenged from time to time.

Since European countries are characterised by one dominant language, the problem of unity and cohesion is therefore different in Europe than in India. We have one nation-state, but many cultures, languages and religions. India’s oneness lies in the community of the essence of all cultures and languages formed in different parts and regions.

About 90 per cent of the people claim national languages as their mother tongues. However, official (national) languages are Hindi and English according to the Eighth Schedule of India’s Constitution. The fact is that even national languages are regional in scope. Even today, English is considered a necessary licence to get lucrative and prestigious jobs. English has thus created a hiatus between the elite and the masses.

Regional and local leaders have, at times, demanded ‘linguistic autonomy’, with a view to replace English by Hindi or some other ‘national’ (regional) language. The carving out of states on the basis of language has certainly promoted regional linguistic autonomy.

The ‘three-language formula’ was devised to counter the demand for ‘Hindi only’, and also to promote the use of a ‘national’ (regional) language in a given state in place of Hindi and English. These three languages were Hindi, English and the regional language, such as Telugu or Tamil.

Advocating Hindi as the official language for the entire country has evoked sharp protests in non-Hindi-speaking areas such as Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Bengal and Assam. On the other hand, the indigenous languages have received the attention required for their preservation and enrichment. One view is that the extended use of indigenous languages can bring about emotional integration and national consolidation, as this would be a direct attack on the small upper class, entrenched in administration, law-enforcement agencies, business and industry (as these use English as the basic instrument of communication).

If English language is the medium of debate in Parliament or a State Assembly, the elected members cannot be considered true repre­sentatives of their people. Thus, it is argued that indigenous language should be used in administration and planning. Appar­ently, this seems to be a plausible way out, but it may block proper communication between the people speaking different national languages. Inter-language rivalries might also arise.

It is clear that the language situation in India is quite compli­cated and hazardous for national consolidation and development. The structure of linguistic states came into existence in India after a great deal of acrimony and bad feeling. Language riots in undivided Bombay state and anti-Hindi riots in Tamil Nadu are still fresh in our memory.

The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, once suggested that the people in the north should learn one of the South Indian languages, and the people of the south should learn Hindi voluntarily. This has not happened. On the contrary, linguistic insulation is admired and used for political gains and cultural domination and identity.

Even in the heartland of Hindi (northern India), after six decades of India’s independence, the English-knowing candidates are preferred for white-collar jobs. Demotion of English language logically amounts to the promotion of indigenous languages. However, the fact is that English continues to have its pride place, and at the same time, the regional languages are enjoying cultural and political significance.

In the absence of an all-India language as a unifying force, the formation of linguistic states has taken the country towards narrow sectionalism, provincialism and parochialism, endangering national integration. Caste, region and language tend to coincide in India to a great extent. Caste structure is broadly regional and goes along with the language boundaries. For example, a given number of sub-castes are found in Andhra Pradesh.

They do not intermarry with the equivalent castes from outside Andhra Pradesh. The languages spoken by them are also different. Thus, caste, region and language coexist and have a certain degree of homogeneity. The absence of a single script for India has also accentuated the linguistic turmoil from time to time.

Language is a very sensitive aspect of people’s lives. When, in accordance with the Official Languages Act of 1963, Hindi was declared the official language of India, serious riots broke out on 26 January 1965 in Tamil Nadu and spread to other non-Hindi- speaking states. Consequently, English was retained as an associate language for the non-Hindi speaking people as long as they wanted it. The three-language formula was introduced at this juncture.

We may sum up by stating that language, like ethnicity and region, is a primordial basis of collectivity, and therefore, it plays the same kind of role in various sectors of social life, including social ranking, economic development, education and politics. Language, being a cultural phenomenon, becomes a very sensitive issue on many occasions. Language disputes and riots have at times threatened national unity and solidarity.

The three-language formula was introduced as a device to minimise such problems, and to strengthen the forces of national unity and integrity. Language, as a means of communication and accretion of knowledge, should not be allowed to become an instrument of power in a few hands. It should be accessible to all those who wish to learn as a skill and as a means for social development.