
UNIT 1 INDIAN CULTURE AND HERITAGE: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT I

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you shall be able to learn:

- the meaning of culture and heritage and the elements they consist of,
- the factors which contributed to the making of our culture,
- how the Indian culture evolved over centuries of history, and
- what are the landmarks of the development of our culture and what are their identifying features.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Indian culture is unique in several ways. It has an uninterrupted history of evolution dating back in the past to nearly five thousand years. During all this period it has enriched itself by assimilating diverse kinds of influences and impacts. This has given Indian culture a certain vibrance and has saved it from a monotonous uniformity. In fact the pulsating mosaic of this culture is most vividly displayed as you go across the length and width of India. You will simultaneously discern a spirit of unity that underlies this enormous diversity.

Thus when we talk of Indian culture we actually speak of a **rich plurality of cultural traditions and not a monolithic entity**. This plurality in some cases is the consequence of a common origin (as in the case of the majority of Indian languages); in other cases of shared heritage (such as our music, architecture, many popular religious cults etc.); and in still others due to a common struggle against the colonial rule. Equally important is the fact that we also perceive ourselves as part of a common culture cutting across national boundaries. This common cultural heritage is the legacy of a complex interaction of various cultures through centuries of shared existence.

We shall, in the following sections, take you on a historical journey through the evolution of Indian culture.

1.2 CULTURE AND HERITAGE: PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

Let us begin this journey by first arriving at a debate over what constitutes culture. The word is often used interchangeably with civilization, and both have a history in what they have meant at different points of time and in different societies. Both referred originally to a process, and in some sense this meaning is still inherent in the ways these two words are used.

The term civilization is now generally used to describe **an achieved state or condition of organized social life as well as the process whereby it has been arrived at**. Through comparative studies we today also come across terms such as western civilization, modern civilization, industrial civilization, etc. which are descriptive.

Culture as a concept is more complicated than civilization. The word is used in various ways **denoting values of general human development** which today are not easily questionable, for example, freedom, democracy, equality, secularism, etc. The particularities of different communities which constitute their **rights and expression** also are included within the meaning of culture. There are three broad levels, with a certain overlapping, at which the meaning of the term culture can be understood:

- i) The general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development.
- ii) A particular way of life, whether of a people, period, or a group.
- iii) The works of intellectual and artistic endeavour expressed through music, literature, art, film etc.

Heritage is a similarly broad concept. It often carries the meaning of culture too. **Whatever we inherit from our past can be called our heritage**. In terms of contents it includes our craft traditions, music, dance, painting, architecture and other art forms, traditions of production and technology, different systems of therapies, our environment with all its bio-diversity, our systems of philosophy etc.

Our cultural heritage has a strong secular – popular content and is pluralistic in character. But it also contains many elements which inhibit our development as a nation like caste system, superstitions, discriminations against women and dalits. We, therefore, have to be conscious about what aspects of our culture we should conserve and emulate and what elements we must discard.

1.3 CULTURE AND ITS DETERMINANTS

Culture is determined and shaped historically and socially. It, in its turn, influences the social, economic and political development of people or nation. This Section will deal in detail with this complex interaction of various factors which has influenced our culture over thousands of years.

1.3.1 Culture, Society and History

To begin with, **culture is the life and mind of a society at any given time in history. The culture of a particular society or age cannot be separated from its historical context**. The continuity, change or transformation in cultural traditions is influenced by the social, economic and political developments at any given time, and vice-versa.

To give a few examples, the growth and changes in agricultural production are inseparably linked with the emergence, development and changes within the Vedic civilization in India. The Vedic civilization which gave birth to the **varnashram** and the caste system has, in turn, exerted great influence on Indian culture. The caste system - an inescapable aspect of our society through history, has assumed changes, modifications, and flexibility to suit the changing needs of the various ruling groups in India. The early Dravidian civilization has been an important influence because of its cultural significance in a specific historical and social context. The flowering of art and literature as well as the Buddhist monuments of the Maurya and Gupta period would not have been possible without the prosperity and increase

in commerce during that period. The same can be said for the Chola temples or the Vijaynagar structures.

The Bhakti movement had as its basis the growth of trade and commerce, and the consequent growth of towns in the 14th and 15th centuries, which motivated a questioning of the caste restrictions in certain occupations in the name of religion. The preachings of Bhakti saints in the peoples' languages and their compilation made possible the growth of Braj, Awadhi, Rajasthani, Gujarati, Marathi, Panjabi, Kashmiri and other regional literatures.

The enormous expenditure involved in the magnificent architecture of the Mughals was possible only because of the significantly increased state share in the surplus production during Mughal rule. Development of new musical forms and their popularisation in the courts, translation of important texts of the world, as well as growth of new techniques in production were immensely helped by the Court patronage generated by this increased surplus.

The concepts of equality as part of anti-caste and peasant economic struggles, the movement for women's education and emancipation, a scientific temper, secularism, a democratic culture and the culture of democracy took shape in the context of modernity that came with the development of capitalism in India, as a result of the impact of British conquest.

1.3.2 Political Structures and Their Impact on Culture

Political structures have also had an impact on our culture throughout its history. For example, the periods of political decentralization, as after the disintegration of the Gupta Empire and, later, the Mughal Empire, resulted in the growth of regional cultures. Similarly the periods of centralization, such as the Mughal and the modern periods, helped in the development of a composite, syncretic tradition that has the semblance of a national culture. The religion professed by a ruler can inspire the development of art forms bearing those religious expressions. It does not, however, mean that other forms were suppressed. Similarly a more liberal, democratic and secular rule may witness the growth of non-religious art forms as seen in modern and contemporary India. An oppressive rule can also stimulate cultural expressions of protest as seen during the colonial rule.

1.3.3 Outside Influences and Culture

No society has existed in isolation, or remained uninfluenced by the other societies it came in contact with. This is as true of our country as any other, and we have had contact with the outside world since the earliest times. We have taken much from it, and given much to it. Our entire scientific and technological heritage is a shared heritage.

Repeated new influences as a result of trade contacts, conquests followed by settlements and adoption or intermixing with the native population by different tribes and races through India's history have enriched India's culture. The Aryans brought with them forms of agricultural products, new gods and beliefs. With Turkish conquest came gunpowder, cavalry and new techniques. Stitched cloth, domes, arches, paper, glass-making techniques, and water-wheel are some of the elements of civilization which came from outside. Persian influences after the Mughal conquest brought into being new melodies, musical forms, musical instruments, dastan and ghazals as forms of literary expression, miniature painting, etc. The composite, syncretic culture, and flowering of different regional cultures came from the interaction that shared life gave to India. It is a culture of unity in diversity.

1.3.4 Cultural Awareness and History

Even cultural awareness has a connection with history. For example, a scientific temper is possible only in the context of modernity, as are secularism and an attitude of pluralism. We cannot search for an awareness and consciousness of these values in our ancient past. The past may contain many things of great importance. At the same time, however, there are many things like slavery, caste system, discrimination against dalits and women, religious intolerance etc which must be seen as inimical to our development today. The past and present both must be critically examined and then the positive things be assimilated and the negative things be discarded. In this connection, the lines of a great Sanskrit poet are particularly apt:

All that is old need not be good
All that is new need not be bad
Wise men decide after a tough test
The fools tread the beaten path.

Check Your Progress-1

1) What are the components of our culture? Write in 50 words.

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2) What are the main factors which influence culture?

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1.4 HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

In this Section we will discuss how our culture has evolved historically in various stages. Starting with the Harappan Civilization from the ancient period we go into the medieval period in search of our cultural heritage and then come to the modern and contemporary period. We have dealt with in this Unit upto the early medieval period. The later medieval, modern and the contemporary periods have been dealt with in the next Unit. This is not to say that the people of the stone ages or Neolithic period had no culture. Many cave paintings depict such art forms that demonstrate the culture of those periods.

1.4.1 The Harappan Period

The chance discovery of the Harappan civilization was made during the late 19th century. The fact that it was the ancient most civilization of India and contemporary to Mesopotamian (ancient Iraq) and Egyptian civilization, however, was determined only in the early 20th century. It was a five thousand year old civilization and represented an advanced level of cultural development during an epoch when iron was still not discovered and bronze was used for making tools, implements and arms.

The Harappan script has not yet been deciphered. So our knowledge about this civilization is based mainly on archaeological findings. These studies show that this civilization was mainly urban and was spread far and wide in what today are India and Pakistan. Mahenjodaro, Harappa, Kalibangan, Lothal etc. were some of the major cities of the period. There was a certain unity of conception among the various cities. A Harappan city was divided into two parts - the one settled on a raised platform and meant for the rulers and the lower city meant for the common people. The houses were built, in some cases, of baked bricks

and in other cases of mud bricks. These bricks were of standard size which showed that the brick - making was organized on a large scale.

Similar to the town-planning, the potteries made by the Harappans were found in large areas and showed a uniform pattern. In fact, their tradition of pottery - making can, with many changes, be found even today.

Art works in terracotta and sculptures in bronze and stone are other important remains from the Harappan period. The Harappan potteries and seals contain figures of bull, ram, pipal tree, fish scales etc. The Harappans also seemed to worship pipal tree and the phallus (an image of Shiva) which remain important religious symbols in today's India.

About this civilization you will learn more in Unit 18 in Block 6 of this course.

1.4.2 The Vedic Civilization

The Vedic Civilization, associated with the coming of the Aryans to India, is said to have begun about 1500 B.C. and lasted about 600 B.C. Unlike the Harappan Civilization which was city-based, it was an agricultural civilization. It was during this period that many features which we associate with what has come to be called as Hinduism originated and took shape. It has left its imprint on our culture today in the form of settled agriculture, cattle breeding, centrality of cow (and bullocks) in our economy and religious beliefs, the horse, the chariot, the use of iron, domestication of animals such as elephants, kinship and patriarchy as basis of social organization, the development of kingdom and large empires out of chieftainships. We still have with us the Vedic hymns composed almost 3500 years ago which even today are used in many Hindu rituals, the sacredness of fire as intermediary between god and man, the worship of gods associated with natural phenomena, the doctrine of transmigrating, animal sacrifice etc. In terms of literature and philosophical thought it has given us the Vedas, the Upanishads, Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit languages and literature, etc.

1.4.3 The Buddhist Epoch

During the 6th century B.C., the opposition to the domination of the society by Brahmins grew. New religious ideas, which were heterodox in nature, arose. The reasons for their emergence were the following:

- i) The Vedic rituals had become most elaborate and cumbersome for most social groups. There were meaningless ceremonies and sacrifices leading to enormous expenses.
- ii) Since the Brahmins were the executors of these rituals, their domination over the other groups was becoming established. They also devised a hierarchical four-tier system called **varnashram** and claimed the highest position for themselves. This led to resentment among many groups such as the **Kshatriyas** and **Vaishyas** who were otherwise powerful and wealthy but lacked in social importance.
- iii) The social status became linked to birth. The caste system which was earlier devised as occupational categories became atrophied and the social mobility became rare. It was this discontent generated by the Brahminical domination and the rising political and economic power of the **Kshatriyas** and the **Vaishyas** that gave rise to and supported the new religious ideas.

Mahavir and Gautam Buddha were the two great religious leaders of this period. By the strength of their ideas they can be said to be among the greatest in the world. The Jain and Buddha religions emerged as a result of teachings of Mahavir and Gautam Buddha respectively. While the followers of the Jain religion were mostly among the **Vaishyas**, Buddhism had its followers among all communities. Buddhism spread far and wide and, at one point of time, almost the whole of Asia, which represented the pinnacle of civilization, became influenced by Buddhism. In India also, Buddhism held sway for almost one thousand years and greatly influenced Indian culture and society. Many concepts and values of this period are among our most cherished cultural heritage today. We are listing below the most important contributions of these religious ideas to our cultural tradition:

- i) Jainism and Buddhism represented a revolt against the concept of social inequality and the hierarchical **Varnashram** system preached by the Brahmins. These religions opened

their gates to members of all castes and groups in the society. They also gave an equal status to women.

- ii) They opposed the rituals and sacrifices prevalent in the society. Instead they put emphasis on **Karma** as deciding the fate of the individuals in the next world. Non-violence, humanism and stress on moral life were the hallmarks of these new religious orders.
- iii) One of the tools of the Brahminical domination was the stress on the language of the Vedas, that is, Sanskrit. The new religions put more emphasis on the popular languages like Prakrit, Pali and Ardha Magadhi. Buddhist and Jain texts were written in these languages and nobody was debarred from reading or interpreting them. This paved the way for the development of the vernacular literature.

This period also witnessed the rise of architecture and sculpture to new heights. The temples at Jhandial (Taxila), Nagari (Rajasthan), Besnagar (Madhya Pradesh) and Nagarjunakonda (Andhra Pradesh) are some of the structures found in excavations.

The Buddhist **Stupas**, in which the mortal remains of important personalities are to be found, are distributed in Bodh Gaya (Bihar), Sanchi and Bharhut (Madhya Pradesh), Amaravati and Nagarjunkonda (Andhra Pradesh) and Taxila (in Pakistan).

Cave architecture and cave paintings reached new heights and the Mathura, Gandhara and Amaravathi schools of art produced figures of great beauty during this period. All these places, monuments and figures are of great touristic interests even today and every year thousands of pilgrims or tourists visit these sites.

It was during this period that South India witnessed the rise of Satavahanas, one of the greatest Indian rulers, in the 1st century B.C. They were also called the Andhra dynasty. They held sway in most of the Deccan and on their collapse, other powers like the Cholas, Pandyas, Keralaputras etc arose.

The celebrated **sangam** poetry in Tamil was collected and classified by an academy of scholars. This provides us with one of our greatest literary traditions.

1.4.4 The Gupta Period

After the collapse of the Mauryan empire in the 2nd century B.C., there was no large political structure in India. The Kushanas ruled the North India and the Satavahanas in the South. Many small kingdoms ruled over large parts of India. With the emergence of the Guptas in the 4th Century A.D., there was again an attempt to build an all India empire.

Established by Chandra Gupta I in 319-20 A.D., the Gupta power reached its peak during the reign of Samudra Gupta and Chandra Gupta II. The process of decline started during the reign of Skanda Gupta and by the middle of the 6th Century A.D. it seems to have collapsed. In the beginning of the 7th century A.D. Harsha tried to revive the imperial tradition but after his death by the mid-7th century his empire declined.

Gupta period is often described as representing the highest forms of Indian culture. So far as the literary and philosophical achievements are concerned, there is truth in this statement. The Sanskrit epics, **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata**, though composed in earlier times, are said to be collected during this period. This period also saw the resurgence of Hinduism and the initiation of the great debate between Buddhism and the Brahminical religion (Hinduism in current parlance). The codification of the Hindu social and family laws was done by Manu, Yajnavalkya, Narada, Brihaspati and Katyayana. The caste-system, the joint family system and the subordinate position of the women in the family and society were formalised during this period. The Brahmins reacquired their dominant and privileged position in society.

In Hinduism the emphasis shifted from sacrifices to idol worship. The trinity of godheads (**Brahma - Vishnu - Mahesh**) became established. Devotional worship (**Bhakti**) was encouraged. A division between **Vaishnavism** and **Shaivism** occurred. The Hindu thinkers developed a cyclic theory of time according to which the **Kalpa** was divided into 4 ages (**Satyug, Tretayug, Dwaparyug and Kaliyug**) and at the end of which the Universe is recreated.

This period also witnessed the composition of six great systems of Hindu philosophy - Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Sankhya, Yoga, Mimansa and Vedanta.

The Puranas (the Hindu religious texts and historical sources) were also composed in this period.

Great developments took place in the fields of Indian astronomy, astrology and mathematics. Aryabhata and Varahamihira were some of the great astronomers of the period.

Kalidas, the greatest of the Indian literary figures, composed his poetic and dramatic works during this period. His epic poems, Kumarsambhava and Raghuvamsha, the lyrical poem Meghaduta and the great drama Shakuntala are considered among the greatest of the world literature. Later on Shudrak (Mrichchha Katika) and Banabhatta (Harsha Charita) contributed to this great literary tradition. The fables of Panchatantra were collected and scripted. Vatsyayan's Kamasutra, the world - famous text on sexual enjoyment was also written during this period.

In terms of architectural or sculptural developments also the Gupta period was significant. In Block-5 of this Course these features have been discussed in detail.

1.4.5 The Early Medieval Period

If we take the period from the decline of the empires of Guptas and Harsha to the early 16th century, we find the following developments in the cultural spheres.

- i) The period saw the decline of Buddhism and rise of Hinduism led by the great South Indian religious figure, Shankara (788-820 A.D.). He was born in Kerala and developed the philosophy of Advaita (Monism) which, many scholars say, assimilated many features of Buddhism. He travelled extensively in the country, engaged the Buddhist scholars in debates, founded a religious order and established four seats or mathas in Badrinath in the north, Shringeri in the South, Puri in the East and Dwarka in the West to uphold his teachings.
- ii) While Shankara upheld the orthodoxy in Hinduism, there were many streams emerging which preached a child like devotion to God. This came to be called as Bhakti movement and had its origins in South India. The Nayanars and Alvars, considered to be the first Bhakti saints, were already spreading their movement in the 8th and 9th centuries at the same time when Shankara was evolving his monistic philosophy. These saints rejected monism, Brahmin dominance, caste system and the ritual worship. Among them were many from the non-Brahmin castes, mostly peasants and traders, some even from among washermen, potters, fishermen, hunters, toddy tappers etc. Right from its beginnings the Bhakti movement was popular in its origins and conception. Hymns were composed in the honour of Vishnu, Shiva and later Krishna.

In Maharashtra, the Bhakti movement started with Jnanesvara and Namdev (1270 - 1350). Eknath (1533-99), Tukaram (1598 - 1650) and Ramdas (1608 - 81) carried forward this tradition and built a strong popular base for the Bhakti tradition.

In Bengal the Bhakti movement was inspired by the Vaishnavites. Jayadev, Chandidas and Chaitanya were some of the influential figures of this region. From the Chaitanya tradition developed the baul movement with following both among the Hindus and Muslims of the region. In North India, particularly in the Hindi land, the Bhakti tradition was inspired by Ramanand. He was probably born and brought up in South India and was among the followers of Ramanuja's sect. Later he travelled all over India spreading his teachings. Kabir and Raidas were famous among his disciples.

Kabir Das, considered to be one of the greatest reformers and poets in the Hindi area, was born in a Muslim family of Banaras. He interacted with many saints and Sufis of his time. He was very harsh in his criticism of both the orthodox Hindu and Muslim religious practices. He believed in Nirguna Brahma and equated Ram with Rahim, Krishna with Karim and Hari with Hazrat. With him the Bhakti movement not only transcended its caste boundaries but also the religious boundaries. His verses collected in Adi Granth, Kabir Granthawali and Bijak are among the priceless jewels of our anti-orthodox and syncretic traditions.

Raidas, Nanak and Dadu were part of the tradition which Kabir represented. After them, however, it was channelised into **Saguna** and non-critical streams of Mirabai, Nand Das and Surdas and culminated with Tulsidas (1532 - 1623) whose **Ramcharitmanas** became the most popular text of the Hindus in north India. He tried to synthesize the existing trends of the "Bhakti movement and poetry. But he represented a more orthodox tradition which was different from the anti-caste, homogenising tradition of Kabir, Nanak and Dadu.

The Bhakti movement also gave rise to important regional literary development. Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, Bengali, Oriya, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Braj were some of the Indian languages in which Bhakti literature was composed and written. These regional languages made the Bhakti movement even more popular and provided a vehicle to the saints to reach the masses. It is through them, therefore, that this great movement became ingrained in the popular memory.

- iii) It was during this period that India came in touch with Arabs and, through them, with Islam. Trade relations had existed since ancient times between Arabia and India. From the 7th -8th century, Arabs had established their principality in Sindh. Since then a vital interaction existed between the two cultures. The urban population knew both Arabic and Sanskrit. The Quran was translated into Sindhi, while the Sanskrit works on astronomy, medicine, ethics and administration were translated into Arabic.

It was, however, after the victory of Mohammed of Ghur on Prithviraj in 1192 and later conquests by his generals that the Turkish rule was established in India. With headquarter in Delhi, the Turkish chieftains spread in various parts of India and by the beginning of the 13th century managed to establish a strong central kingdom called Delhi sultanate under the suzerainty of Qutbuddin Aibak and later Iltutmish (1210-36). Slowly by the 14th century the Turks reached most parts of India and forced the local rulers to accept their suzerainty. They had settled in India and considered themselves as Indians. They coopted many local Hindu chieftains in the ruling hierarchy and recruited Hindus in their armies. Theirs was as much an Indian rule as any which preceded or succeeded them.

One of the great religious movements within Islam, Sufism, came to India during this period. Even before the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate some Sufi saints had come to India. There were three chief orders (**silsila**) of Sufis in India: a) **Chisti** which was more popular in and around Delhi and western U.P.; b) **Suhrawardi**, which was popular in Sindh and c) **Firdausi**, with followers in Bihar.

Sufism, like the Bhakti movement, was the popular side of religion. The Sufis opposed the Islamic orthodoxy and kept themselves aloof from the seats of power. They respected the original Islamic doctrine of equality of all followers and criticised the **ulema** for not being loyal to Islam. They remained non-conformist both in relation to the state and organized religion and were sometimes persecuted for heterodoxy and heresy.

Sufism and the Bhakti movement influenced each other. Both believed in spiritual guide (**guru**) and in mystical union with god. The **chisti Sufis** and the **Nathpanthi Yogis** were intermixing during the sultanate period. In fact both Sufism and the Bhakti movement represent the popular face of religions in India. The shrines of the Sufi saints like Muinuddin Chishti in Ajmer, Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi are revered by people of all religions.

- iv) It was during this period, particularly between 10th and 13th centuries that the tradition of Hindu architecture and sculpture as witnessed in temple-building reached its climax. The Kandariya Mahadev Temple at Khajuraho (around 1002 A.D.), the Rajarajeshwara Temple at Tanjore (around 1012 A.D.), the Udayeshwara Temple at Udaipur, Lingaraj temple at Bhubaneshwara (around 1060 A.D.), Jagannath Temple at Puri (1135 a.D.) and the Sun Temple at Konark (1250 A.D.) represent the best that any civilization can have.
- v) This period also witnessed the synthesis in art forms that the sultanate period brought about. The style of architecture that evolved is termed as **Indo-Islamic** and is shown in Alai Darwaza (built in 1325) at the Qutub complex and the Jamat Khana Masjid (built in 1325) at Nizamuddin.

Similarly in music, the popular **qawwali** was introduced for the first time; **khayal** was developed; **ragas** like **zilaph**, **sazgiri**, **sarparda** etc. were created; and a new musical

instrument **sitar** was developed by combining the old Indian **Veena** and the Iranian **tambura**.

Other important monuments from this period are Qutub Minar, Quwwatul Mosque, Iltutmish Tomb, Balban's Tomb, Khirki Masjid etc in Delhi.

This period was, therefore, extremely important for the development of composite cultural forms, achievement in architecture and sculpture, evolution of popular religious movements and growth of regional literatures.

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Buddhism is considered to have originated as a religion of protest against Hinduism. Critically Examine this statement.

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- 2) List the contributions made by the Gupta period to our cultural tradition.

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- 3) Write short notes on the Bhakti movement and Sufism.

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1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have discussed the various factors which had influenced our culture through thousands of years. The cultural heritage has also been examined by tracing its development through history. In this Unit we have limited ourselves from the Harappan period to the early medieval period and shown that the Indian cultural tradition has advanced by internal and external dialogues and by incorporating features from diverse religious, ethnic and regional traditions. In the next Unit we will discuss its historical evolution from the Mughal period to the present day.

1.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) For answer see Sec. 1.2
- 2) For answer see Sec. 1.3

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See the Sub-sec. 1.4.3
- 2) See the Sub-sec. 1.4.4
- 3) See the Sub-sec. 1.4.5