
UNIT 1 UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN INDIA*

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Concepts of Unity and Diversity
 - 1.2.1 Meaning of Diversity
 - 1.2.2 Meaning of Unity
- 1.3 Forms of Diversity in India
 - 1.3.1 Racial Diversity
 - 1.3.2 Linguistic Diversity
 - 1.3.3 Religious Diversity
 - 1.3.4 Caste Diversity
- 1.4 Bonds of Unity in India
 - 1.4.1 Geo-political Unity
 - 1.4.2 The Institution of Pilgrimage
 - 1.4.3 Tradition of Accommodation
 - 1.4.4 Tradition of Interdependence
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 References
- 1.7 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to :

- explain the concept of unity and diversity;
- describe the forms and bases of diversity in India;
- examine the bonds and mechanisms of unity in India; and
- provide an explanation to our option for a composite culture model rather than a uniformity model of unity.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with unity and diversity in India. You may have heard a lot about unity and diversity in India. But do you know what exactly it means? Here we will explain to you the meaning and content of this phrase. For this purpose the unit has been divided into three sections.

In the first section, we will specify the meaning of the two terms, diversity and unity.

In the second section, we will illustrate the forms of diversity in Indian society. For detailed treatment we will focus on the four forms of diversity, race, language, religion and caste.

*Adopted from IGNOU, BDP ESO-12, Unit 1 pp. 9-22 by Archana Singh

In the third section, we will bring out the bonds of unity in India. These are geopolitical, the culture of pilgrimage, tradition of accommodation, and tradition of interdependence.

Above all, we will note that the unity of India is born of a composite culture rather than a uniform culture.

1.2 CONCEPTS OF UNITY AND DIVERSITY

We begin by clarifying the meaning of the terms diversity and unity.

1.2.1 Meaning of Diversity

Ordinarily diversity means differences. For our purposes, however, it means something more than mere differences. It means collective differences, that is, differences which mark off one group of people from another. These differences may be of any sort: biological, religious, linguistic etc. On the basis of biological differences, for example, we have racial diversity. On the basis of religious differences, similarly, we have religious diversity. The point to note is that diversity refers to collective differences.

The term diversity is opposite of uniformity. Uniformity means similarity of some sort that characterises a people. 'Uni' refers to one; 'form' refers to the common ways. So when there is something common to all the people, we say they show uniformity. When students of a school, members of the police or the army wear the same type of dress, we say they are in 'uniform'. Like diversity, thus, uniformity is also a collective concept. When a group of people share a similar characteristic, be it language or religion or anything else, it shows uniformity in that respect. But when we have groups of people hailing from different races, religions and cultures, they represent diversity. D.N. Majumdar wrote a book with the title, Races and Cultures of India. Mark the words in the plural: Races (not Race); Cultures (not Culture).

Thus, diversity means variety. For all practical purposes it means variety of groups and cultures. We have such a variety in abundance in India. We have here a variety of races, of religions, of languages, of castes and of cultures. For the same reason India is known for its socio-cultural diversity.

1.2.2 Meaning of Unity

Unity means integration. It is a social psychological condition. It connotes a sense of one-ness, a sense of we-ness. It stands for the bonds, which hold the members of a society together.

There is a difference between unity and uniformity. Uniformity presupposes similarity, unity does not. Thus, unity may or may not be based on uniformity. Unity may be born out of uniformity. Durkheim calls this type of unity a mechanical solidarity. We find this type of unity in tribal societies and in traditional societies. However, unity may as well be based on differences. It is such unity, which is described by Durkheim as organic solidarity. This type of unity characterizes modern societies. Let us see it in a diagram.

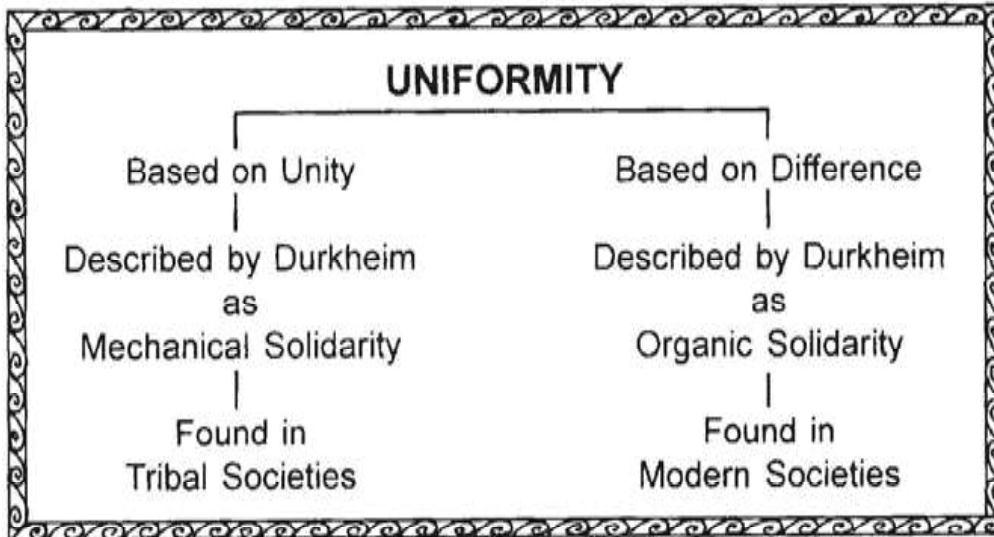


Figure 1.1: Two types of unity

The point to note is that unity does not have to be based on uniformity. Unity, as we noted earlier, implies integration. Integration does not mean absence of differences. Indeed, it stands for the ties that bind the diverse groups with one another.

Check Your Progress I

- i) Mark which of the following is the correct meaning of diversity?
 - a) Differences between two individuals
 - b) Similarities among the members of a group
 - c) Dissimilarities among groups.
- ii) Mark which of the following is the correct example of social diversity?
 - a) Temperamental differences between men and women
 - b) Property differences between the two neighbours
 - c) Differences of religious belongingness between two groups.
- iii) Indicate which of the following statements are true and which are false. Use T for True and F for False.
 - a) Unity means absence of differences.
 - b) Unity is opposite of diversity.
 - c) Uniformity is a necessary condition for unity.
 - d) Unity in diversity is a contradiction in terms.
 - e) Mechanical solidarity is based on uniformity.
 - f) Unity signifies integration.

1.3 FORMS OF DIVERSITY IN INDIA

As hinted earlier, we find in India diversity of various sorts. Some of its important forms are the following: racial, linguistic, religious and caste-based. Let us deal with each one of them in some detail.

1.3.1 Racial Diversity

You may have seen people of different races in India. A race is a group of people with a set of distinctive physical features such as skin colour, type of nose, form of hair, etc.

Herbert Risley had classified the people of India into seven racial types. These are (i) Turko-Iranian, (ii) Indo-Aryan, (iii) Scytho-Dravidian, (iv) Aryo-Dravidian, (v) Mongolo-Dravidian, (vi) Mongoloid, and (vii) Dravidian. These seven racial types can be reduced to three basic types—the Indo-Aryan, the Mongolian and the Dravidian. In his opinion the last two types would account for the racial composition of tribal India. He was the supervisor of the census operations held in India in 1891 and it was data from this census, which founded the basis of this classification. As, it was based mainly on language-types rather than physical characteristics; Risley's classification was criticised for its shortcomings.

Other administrative officers and anthropologists, like J.H. Hutton, D.N. Majumdar and B.S. Guha, have given the latest racial classification of the Indian people based on further researches in this field. Hutton's and Guha's classifications are based on 1931 census operations. B.S. Guha (1952) has identified six racial types (1) the Negrito, (2) the Proto Australoid, (3) the Mongoloid, (4) the Mediterranean, (5) the Western Brachycephals, and (6) the Nordic. Besides telling you what the various types denote, we shall not go into the details of this issue, because that will involve us in technical matters pertaining to physical anthropology. Here, we need only to be aware of the diversity of racial types in India.

Negritos are the people who belong to the black racial stock as found in Africa. They have black skin colour, frizzle hair, thick lips, etc. In India some of the tribes in South India, such as the Kadar, the Irula and the Paniyan have distinct Negrito strain.

The **Proto-Australoid** races consist of an ethnic group, which includes the Australian aborigines and other peoples of southern Asia and Pacific Islands. Representatives of this group are the Ainu of Japan, the Vedda of Sri Lanka, and the Sakai of Malaysia. In India the tribes of Middle India belong to this strain. Some of these tribes are the Ho of Singhbhum, Bihar, and the Bhil of the Vindhya ranges.

The **Mongoloids** are a major racial stock native to Asia, including the peoples of northern and eastern Asia. For example, Chinese, Japanese, Burmese, Eskimos, and often American Indians also belong to this race. In India, the North Eastern regions have tribes of brachycephalic Mongoloid strain. A slightly different kind of Mongoloid racial stock is found in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Mikir-Bodo group of tribes and the Angami Nagas represent the best examples of Mongoloid racial composition in India.

The **Mediterranean** races relate to the caucasian physical type, i.e., the white race. It is characterised by medium or short stature, slender build, long head with **cephalic index** (the ratio multiplied by 100 of the maximum breadth of the head to its maximum length) of less than 75 and dark (continental) complexion.

The **Western Brachycephals** are divided into the following three sub-groups: (1) The **Alpenoid** are characterised by broad head, medium stature and light skin, found amongst Bania castes of Gujarat, the Kayasthas of Bengal, etc. (ii) The **Dinaric** – They are characterised by broad head, long nose, tall stature and dark skin colour, found amongst the Brahmin of Bengal, the non-Brahmin of Karnataka, (iii) The **Armenoid**– They are characterised by features similar to Dinaric. The Armenoid have a more marked shape of the back of head, a prominent and narrow nose. The Parsi of Bombay show the typical characteristics of the Armenoid race (Das 1988: 223).

Finally, the **Nordic** races belong to the physical type characterised by tall stature, long head, light skin and hair, and blue eyes. They are found in Scandinavian countries, Europe. In India, they are found in different parts of north of the country, especially in Punjab and Rajputana. The Kho of Chitral, the Red Kaffirs, the Khatash are some of the representatives of this type. Research suggests that the Nordics came from the north, probably from south east Russia and south west Siberia, through central Asia to India. (Das 1988: 223).

1.3.2 Linguistic Diversity

Do you know how many languages are there in India? While the famous linguist Grierson noted 179 languages and 544 dialects, the 1971 census on the other hand, reported 1652 languages in India which are spoken as mother tongue. Not all these languages are, however, equally widespread. Many of them are tribal speeches and these are spoken by less than one percent of the total population. Here you can see that in India there is a good deal of linguistic diversity.

Only 18 languages are listed in Schedule VIII of the Indian Constitution. These are Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. Out of these 18 languages, Hindi is spoken by 39.85 per cent of the total population; Bengali, Telugu and Marathi by around 8 per cent each; Tamil and Urdu by 6.26 and 5.22 per cent, respectively; and the rest by less than 5 per cent each as per 1991 census report (India 2003).

The above constitutionally recognised languages belong to two linguistic families: Indo-Aryan and Dravidian. Malayalam, Kannada, Tamil and Telugu are the four major Dravidian languages. The languages of Indo-Aryan family are spoken by 75 per cent of India's total population while the languages of Dravidian family are spoken by 20 per cent.

This linguistic diversity notwithstanding, we have always had a sort of link language, though it has varied from age to age. In ancient times it was Sanskrit, in medieval age it was Arabic or Persian and in modern times we have Hindi and English as official languages.

1.3.3 Religious Diversity

India is a land of multiple religions. We find here followers of various faiths, particularly of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, among others. You know it that Hinduism is the dominant religion of India. According to the census of 1981 it is professed by 82.64 per cent of the total population. Next comes Islam, which is practised by 11.35 per cent. This is

followed by Christianity having a following of 2.43 per cent, Sikhism reported by 1.96 per cent, Buddhism by 0.71 per cent and Jainism by 0.48 per cent. The religions with lesser following are Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Bahaism.

While Hinduism saw a slight reduction in the percentage of their followers by the year 1991, most of the other religions increased their strength though by very narrow margin. According to the 1991 census the Hinduism has 82.41 per cent followers to the total population. 11.67 per cent followed Islam and 2.32 per cent followed Christianity. Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism followed by 1.99, 0.77 and 0.41 per cent, respectively. And 0.43 reported to follow other religions. (Census of India 1995, Series 1, Paper 1 on Religion).

Then there are sects within each religion. Hinduism, for example, has many sects including Shaiva, Shakta and Vaishnava. Add to them the sects born or religious reform movements such as Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Ram Krishna Mission. More recently, some new cults have come up such as Radhaswami, Saibaba, etc. Similarly, Islam is divided into Shiya and Sunni; Sikhism into Namdhari and Nirankari; Jainism into Digambar and Shvetambar; and Buddhism into Hinayan and Mahayan.

While Hindu and Muslim are found in almost all parts of India, the remaining minority religions have their pockets of concentration. Christians have their strongholds in the three southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and in the north-eastern states like Nagaland and Meghalaya. Sikhs are concentrated largely in Punjab, Buddhists in Maharashtra, and Jains are mainly spread over Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Gujarat, but also found in most urban centres throughout the country.

Check Your Progress II

i) List, in one line, some of the major forms of diversity found in India?

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

ii) According to Grierson, how many dialects and languages are spoken in India?

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

iii) What are the various religions found in India? Use two lines for your answer.

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

1.3.4 Caste Diversity

India, as you know, is a country of castes. The term caste is generally used in two senses: sometimes in the sense of Varna and sometimes in the sense of Jati. (i) Varna refers to a segment of the four-fold division of Hindu society based on functional criterion. The four Varna are Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra with their specialised functions as learning, defence, trade and manual service. The Varna hierarchy is accepted all over India. (ii) Jati refers to a hereditary endogamous status group practising a specific traditional occupation. You may be surprised to know that there are more than 3,000 jati in India. These are hierarchically graded in different ways in different regions.

It may also be noted that the practice of caste system is not confined to Hindus alone. We find castes among the Muslim, Christian, Sikh as well as other communities. You may have heard of the hierarchy of Shaikh, Saiyed, Mughal, Pathan among the Muslim. Furthermore, there are castes like teli (oil pressure), dhobi (washerman), darjee (tailor), etc. among the Muslim. Similarly, caste consciousness among the Christian in India is not unknown. Since a vast majority of Christians in India are converted from Hindu fold, the converts have carried the caste system into Christianity. Among the Sikh again you have so many castes including Jat Sikh and Majahabi Sikh (lower castes). In view of this you can well imagine the extent of caste diversity in India.

In addition to the above described major forms of diversity, we have diversity of many other sorts like settlement patterns – tribal, rural, urban; marriage and kinship patterns along religious and regional lines; cultural patterns reflecting regional variations, and so on. These forms of diversity will become clear to you as you proceed along this course. You will also learn about these aspects more elaborately in the next few Blocks.

Activity 1

What language do you speak and to which stock of languages does it belong? Find out what language/s/is/are spoken in the ten families living on the left side of your own family. Divide them according to the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian stock of languages. Write down all this information on a separate sheet. Compare your findings with those of other students at your study centre.

1.4 BONDS OF UNITY IN INDIA

In the preceding section we have illustrated the diversity of India. But that is not the whole story. There are bonds of unity underlying all this diversity. These bonds of unity may be located in a certain underlying uniformity of life as well as in certain mechanisms of integration. Census Commissioner in 1911, Herbert Risley (1969), was right when he observed: “Beneath the manifold diversity of physical and social type, language, custom and religion which strikes the observer in India there can still be discerned a certain underlying uniformity of life from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin”. We will describe the bonds of unity of India in this section. These are geo-political unity, the institution of pilgrimage, tradition of accommodation, and tradition of interdependence. We will now describe each of them in that order.

1.4.1 Geo-political Unity

The first bond of unity of India is found in its geo-political integration. India is known for its geographical unity marked by the Himalayas in the north end and the oceans on the other sides. Politically India is now a sovereign state. The same constitution and same parliament govern every part of it. We share the same political culture marked by the norms of democracy, secularism and socialism.

Although it has not been recognised till recently, the geo-political unity of India was always visualized by our seers and rulers. The expressions of this consciousness of the geo-political unity of India are found in Rig-Veda, in Sanskrit literature, in the edicts of Asoka, in Buddhist monuments and in various other sources. The ideal of geo-political unity of India is also reflected in the concepts of Bharatvarsha (the old indigenous classic name for India), Chakravarti (emperor), and Ekchhatradhipatya (under one rule).

1.4.2 The Institution of Pilgrimage

Another source of unity of India lies in what is known as temple culture, which is reflected in the network of shrines and sacred places. From Badrinath and Kedarnath in the north to Rameshwaram in the south, Jagannath Puri in the east to Dwaraka in the west the religious shrines and holy rivers are spread throughout the length and breadth of the country. Closely related to them is the age-old culture of pilgrimage, which has always moved people to various parts of the country and fostered in them a sense of geo-cultural unity.

As well as being an expression of religious sentiment, pilgrimage is also an expression of love for the motherland, a sort of mode of worship of the country. It has played a significant part in promoting interaction and cultural affinity among the people living in different parts of India. Pilgrimage can, therefore, rightly be viewed as a mechanism of geo-cultural unity.

1.4.3 Tradition of Accommodation

Have you heard of the syncretic quality of Indian culture, its remarkable quality of accommodation and tolerance? There is ample evidence of it. The first evidence of it lies in the elastic character of Hinduism, the majority religion of India. It is common knowledge that Hinduism is not a homogeneous religion, a religion having one God, one Book and one Temple. Indeed, it can be best described as a federation of faiths. Polytheistic (having multiple deities) in character, it goes to the extent of accommodating village level deities and tribal faiths.

For the same reason, sociologists have distinguished two broad forms of Hinduism: sanskritic and popular. Sanskrit is that which is found in the texts (religious books like Vedas, etc.) and popular is that which is found in the actual life situation of the vast masses. Robert Redfield has called these two forms as great tradition of Ramayana and Mahabharata and the little tradition of worship of the village deity. And everything passes for Hinduism.

What it shows is that Hinduism has been an open religion, a receptive and absorbing religion, an encompassing religion. It is known for its quality of openness and accommodation.

Another evidence of it lies in its apathy to conversion. Hinduism is not a proselytising religion. That is, it does not seek converts. Nor has it ordinarily resisted other religions to seek converts from within its fold. This quality of accommodation and tolerance has saved the way to the coexistence of several faiths in India. Mechanisms of coexistence of people of different faiths have been in existence here for long. Take for example, the case of Hindu-Muslim amity. Hindus and Muslims have always taken part in each other's functions, festivities and feasts. How did they do it? They did it by evolving the mechanism of providing for a separate hearth and a set of vessels for each other so as to respect each other's religious sensibility. This always facilitated mutual visiting and sharing in each other's joy and grief. They have also done so by showing regards for each other's saints and holy men. Thus, both Hindus and Muslims have shown reverence to the saints and Pirs of each other. And this holds as well for the coexistence of other religious groups like Sikh, Jain, Christian and so on.

Activity 2

Write the answers of the following questions on a separate sheet of paper and discuss them with other students at your study centre.

- i) Give, at least one example, in each of the following areas, to show the blending of Hindu and Muslim cultures in India.
 - a) architecture
 - b) literature
 - c) music
 - d) religion
- ii) Have you recently attended a wedding in a community other than your own? What has struck you as a markedly different feature, which is, absent during a wedding in your community?

1.4.4 Tradition of Interdependence

We have had a remarkable tradition of interdependence, which has held us together throughout centuries. One manifestation of it is found in the form of Jajmani system, i.e., a system of functional interdependence of castes. The term "jajman" refers generally to the patron or recipient of specialised services. The relations were traditionally between a food producing family and the families that supported them with goods and services. These came to be called the jajmani relations. Jajmani relations were conspicuous in village life, as they entailed ritual matters, social support as well as economic exchange. The whole of a local social order was involved (the people and their values) in such jajmani links. A patron had jajmani relations with members of a high caste (like a Brahmin priest whose services he needed for rituals). He also required the services of specialists from the lower jati to perform those necessary tasks like washing of dirty clothes, cutting of hair, cleaning the rooms and toilets, delivery of the child etc. Those associated in these interdependent relations were expected to be and were broadly supportive of each other with qualities of ready help that generally close kinsmen were expected to show.

The jajmani relations usually involved multiple kinds of payment and obligations as well as multiple functions.

Here it will suffice to note that no caste was self-sufficient. If anything, it depended for many things on other castes. In a sense, each caste was a functional group in that it rendered a specified service to other caste groups. Jajmani system is that mechanism which has formalised and regulated this functional interdependence.

Furthermore, castes cut across the boundaries of religious communities. We have earlier mentioned that notions of caste are found in all the religious communities in India. In its actual practice, thus, the institution of jajmani provides for inter linkages between people of different religious groups. Thus a Hindu may be dependent for the washing of his clothes on a Muslim washerman. Similarly, a Muslim may be dependent for the stitching of his clothes on a Hindu tailor, and vice-versa.

Efforts have been made from time to time by sensitive and sensible leaders of both the communities to synthesise Hindu and Muslim traditions so as to bring the two major communities closer to each other. Akbar, for example, founded a new religion, Din-e-Ilahi, combining best of both the religions. The contributions made by Kabir, Eknath, Guru Nanak, and more recently Mahatma Gandhi, are well known in this regard.

Similarly, in the field of art and architecture we find such a happy blending of Hindu and Muslim styles. What else is this if not a proof of mutual appreciation for each other's culture?

Quite in line with these traditional bonds of unity, the Indian state in post Independence era has rightly opted for a composite culture model of national unity rather than a uniform culture model. The composite culture model provides for the preservation and growth of plurality of cultures within the framework of an integrated nation. Hence the significance of our choice of the norm of secularism, implying equal regard for all religions, as our policy of national integration.

The above account of the unity of India should not be taken to mean that we have always had a smooth sailing in matters of national unity, with no incidents of caste, communal or linguistic riots. Nor should it be taken to mean that the divisive and secessionist tendencies have been altogether absent. There have been occasional riots, at times serious riots. For example, who can forget the communal riots of partition days, the linguistic riots in Tamil Nadu in protest against the imposition of Hindi, the riots in Gujarat during 1980s between scheduled and non-scheduled castes and communal riots of 2002? The redeeming feature, however, is that the bonds of unity have always emerged stronger than the forces of disintegration.

Check Your Progress III

- i) List the bonds of unity in India, in the space given below.

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

- ii) Indicate the mechanism of the following set of terms, in the space provided against each.
- a) geo-political unity
 - b) geo-cultural unity
 - c) religious accommodation
 - d) social interdependence

iii) Distinguish between great tradition and little tradition, in the space given below.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

iv) Distinguish between composite culture and uniform culture models of national integration, in the space provided below.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have studied that diversity refers to: i) patterned differences between groups, ii) socio-cultural variety, and iii) lack of uniformity. Unity means integration that may or may not be based on uniformity, a sense of oneness arising from the bonds that hold the members together or that bind the diverse groups with one another.

You have also studied that there are major forms of diversity in India: race, language, religion and caste.

Underlying all the diversities there is a remarkable measure of unity. We have noted four bonds of unity in India: geo-political, geo-cultural, religious accommodation and functional interdependence. Closely related to these bonds are four mechanisms of integration: constitution, pilgrimage, provision of a separate hearth, cook and kitchenware for members of other religious community, and jajmani.

Finally, we have noted that India has opted for a composite culture model of unity rather than uniform cultural model.

1.6 REFERENCES

Betteille, A. 2000. *The Chronicles of Our Time*. Penguin Books India: New Delhi

Deshpandae, Satish 2003. *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*. Viking: New Delhi

Mukerjee, Radha Kumud 1954. *The Fundamental Unity of India*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan: Bombay, pp. 17-22

Risley, H.H. 1969, *The People of India* (first print in 1915). Orient Books: Delhi

Srinivas, M.N. 1969. *Social Structure*. Publications Division, Government of India: New Delhi

1.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- i) C
- ii) C
- iii) Statements a, b, c and d are false. Statements e and f are true.

Check Your Progress II

- i) Racial, linguistic, religious and caste-based.
- ii) 179 languages and 544 dialects.
- iii) Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Bahaism.

Check Your Progress III

- i) Geo-political, geo-cultural, tradition of accommodation, interdependence.
- ii) a) constitution
b) pilgrimage
c) separate cook and kitchenware
d) jajmani
- iii) Great tradition is sanskritic, based on sacred texts and scriptures, and elitist. Little tradition, on the other hand, is oral, village-based and popular.
- iv) Composite culture model provides for cultural pluralism while uniform culture model implies dominance of one culture.