
UNIT 16 SOCIAL DIVERSITY AND EDUCATION

Structure

- 16.1 Introduction
- 16.2 Objectives
- 16.3 Explaining Social Diversities
 - 16.3.1 Meaning and Nature of Social Diversity
 - 16.3.2 Types of Social Diversity
- 16.4 Influence of Social Diversity on Education
 - 16.4.1 Differential Access: Reaching the Unreached
 - 16.4.2 Uneven Participation and Completion
 - 16.4.3 Achievement: Equitable Quality in Education
- 16.5 Recent Challenges of Diversity for Education
 - 16.5.1 Achieving the Unfinished Task
 - 16.5.2 Cultural Nationalism and Nation Building
 - 16.5.3 Globalization and Education
- 16.6 Let's Sum Up
- 16.7 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 16.8 References and Suggested Readings

16.1 INTRODUCTION

India is one nation, but a plural society. Its plurality is in-built in its geographical, demographic, historical, political, economic and socio-cultural base. Its social diversity has been expressed in various forms such as languages, religions, tribes and castes. While the social diversity is a historical fact, a synthesis has also been consolidating alongside. It goes without saying that Indian society is characterized by 'unity in diversity'. Within the overall national Indian identity, various local and regional identities are surviving. An individual passes through the arena of national and regional identities in one's day-to-day life on regular basis. Too much emphasis on regional, linguistic or religious identities can damage the national fabric and lead them to the path of confrontation, while laying excessive stress on national identity may lead to the monolithic nation state and destroy the cultural heritage of the regional or subnational identities.

Education plays a central role in conserving, modifying and transforming identities. Keeping in mind the heterogeneous character of Indian society, the national policy on education envisages harmonious development of all groups i.e. promoting development and maintaining group identities in an integrated manner. The balancing act of education is well reflected in the constitutional provision. Education being classified under the Concurrent List of the Constitution has given scope for promotion of both national and subnational identities. On the one hand, while the Constitution of India talks of the fundamental duties to be ordained in all types of education in the country, on the other hand under Directive Principles of State Policy, it directs the state to protect and promote economic and educational interests of the weaker sections. It also promotes the education of religious and linguistic minority groups.

This unit addresses several questions such as: What do you mean by 'social diversity' in the Indian context? Which are these groups? What is the educational implication of this social diversity? What roles can education play in providing equal opportunity to these groups and harmonious development among them. The first section of this

unit explains the meaning, nature and types of social diversity existing in India. The second section deals with influence of the social diversity on education system in India. And the third section identifies some of the new challenges to the Indian education system which are on account of the social diversity.

16.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- appreciate the complex nature of social diversity in India;
- develop an understanding of the educational problems faced by different groups; and
- explain the role of education in providing equal opportunity for development and in establishing harmony among them;

Let us begin our discussion by trying to understand the very nature of social diversities prevailing in our society.

16.3 EXPLAINING SOCIAL DIVERSITIES

India has been considered as perhaps the largest and most plural society in the world. In India, people speak an array of languages and use a wide range of scripts. As a country, India has major religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism—living side by side. India is the world's most complex and comprehensively pluralistic society, home to a vast variety of castes, tribes, communities, religions, languages, customs and living styles. It was estimated by the Anthropological Survey of India that there are nearly 4,599 separate communities in India with as many as 325 languages and dialects in 12 distinct language families and some 24 scripts. The mosaic of identities that constitute the meaning of Indianness has been on display on Republic Day every year. Moreover the National Anthem emphasizes diversity in a similar manner with the first verse being a series of names of different geographic regions, ethnicities and cultures.

16.3.1 Meaning and Nature of Social Diversity

By 'social diversity', we mean co-existence of different social groups within a given geo-political setting or in simpler terms, differentiation of society into groups. Other terms such as, 'plurality', 'multiculturalism', 'social differentiation' etc. are also interchangeably used to explain this feature. The diversity may be both functional and dysfunctional for a society depending on its composition. The question that may arise at this stage is 'how much pluralist a society can become without losing its organic unity?' Despite divisions of groups, an underlying unity runs through the whole Indian social system. In order to understand the nature of social diversity in India, it is important to understand the nature of group identities that form the diversity.

16.3.2 Types of Social Diversity

The main sources of social diversity are ethnic origins, religions and languages. According to Sorokin, the social differentiation can be classified into two types: a) intra-group (i.e. differentiation within a group and b) inter-group differentiation (i.e. differentiation among the groups). Further groups may also be classified as: a) unibound (i.e. groups whose members are bound into a solidarity system by one main value or interest such as, race, sex and age; b) multibound (i.e. groups formed by the coalescence of two or more unibound values such as castes, tribes, classes etc.

Intra-group differentiation means a division of the group into subgroups that perform different functions and are not graded superior or inferior to each other. However when subgroups are ranked 'superior and inferior' or 'higher and lower', intergroup differentiation becomes intergroup stratification such as castes in the Indian Caste System.

Language

Language is one of the main markers of group solidarity in any society. The social categorization in terms of languages is much stronger than any other social markers such as religion, class, caste, tribe etc. Group identities are expressed in stronger terms when language identities are combined with other types. India is highly diversified in terms of languages. Despite language based reorganisation of states, India has not been able to solve many language related problems. Under the state reorganisation, only a few major languages have been given official recognition and resource support. The following issues need to be looked into:

Language nationalism operates at the regional level rather than at the national level;

Three-language formula devised for imparting education at different levels is still not fully implemented;

The states have not devised their policy for protecting the educational, cultural and economic interests of the language minority groups who inadvertently have fallen in particular state territory.

Educational implication of the language diversification has not been worked out and incorporated into the education system.

Unity at the national level should have national language component in the policy framework.

The Indian constitution lists 15 languages as major languages. All major languages have regional and dialectical variations. Besides these, 227 languages/dialects have also been recognized as mother tongues making the task of language planning and promotion more difficult. Furthermore, diversification of tribal groups in terms of languages make the situation that much more complicated.

Religion

Religion is an important binding force of social integration among individuals and groups. By religion, we generally mean belief in supernatural being or entities. Religion has been playing an important role in Indian society from the very evolution of human society. It has never been static. India is a multi-religious society. Changes have taken place in religions from time to time. Religious reform movements have been integral parts of India's sociocultural life.

The 1961 Census of India listed 7 religious categories, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, Shikhs and other religions and persuasions. However, there are other religious groups such as, Jews, Zorarastrians and tribals which find mention in the 1931 Census. Religion is a complex phenomenon in India. Conservative and progressive elements are found among different groups highlighting intra-religious differentiation.

Religious conversion has been a controversial issue through out the Indian history. It still draws attention even in the contemporary situation. In recent years, religious conversion of tribals has generated a considerable antipathy and conflict. Religion also brings out internal cohesion by cementing internal class, language and other

divisions. Even the introduced religions such as, Islam, Christianity, Zorastrian etc have developed Indian character. Hinduism, the main religion has allowed other religions to grow alongside. It not only affected other religions, but has also been affected by other religions. The Bhakti movement and the Sufi tradition are a testimony to this give-and-take situation.

The Constitution of India considering the country as secular has treated all religious groups on equal terms. It has made provision for freedom to all religious groups to hold and practise their beliefs and rituals. Secularism has been ingrained in the national policies and planning of education and development.

Caste

Caste is a system of social relations. It is an important feature of Indian society based on endogamy, hierarchy, occupational association, purity and pollution, and inscriptive status. Although caste seeks ideological roots in the varna scheme of Hinduism, it is an all pervasive and a very complex phenomenon which holds its sway till today. It has provided internal structure and social base to Indian Society sometimes cutting across religious barriers. The social system that emerged out of social division of labour has received perpetual religious sanction. The caste system has been responding to empirical realities and has been changing. The four fold *varnas* have given ways to several castes often addressed as *jatis*. The inscriptive status (i.e. caste ranking based on birth) has made the caste system a bit inflexible. However despite the inscriptive nature of caste ranking, the caste has never been static. The prevalence of thousands of subcastes, clans and subclans within a caste is a testimony of diversification, differentiation and change in the caste system.

The Indian caste system has also been analyzed from the class point of view by several social scientists. The caste and class debate has arisen to analyze social differentiation within the caste system. According to some sociologists, caste and class are two different forms of social stratification; and changes are taking place from caste (ranking of groups) to class (ranking of individuals). The following need to be taken into account:

Despite transformation and changes, the caste system has persisted as an ideology, social structure and practices;

The caste system inherits problems related to economic, political and social domination and privileges, subjugation and deprivation etc;

The Constitution of India has made special provisions for protection of the deprived castes mainly the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Other Backward Castes (OBC).

Tribe

Tribal people are other important sociocultural groups in India, constituting over 8 per cent of the Indian population (2001 Census). However, given the current classification of tribal groups in India, it is difficult to define the term 'tribe'. In the Imperial Gazetteer, the word 'tribe' has been defined as 'a collection of families which have a common name and a common dialect and which occupy or profess to occupy a common territory and which have been endogamous'.

In fact, with regard to tribal groups, the task has often been to identify the tribal groups, rather than to define them. The academic considerations have not been given due attention in identifying these groups (Betteille, 1986). According to Singh (1994), 'tribe' is an administrative and political concept in India. The categorization of tribal groups has been done state-wise and has not been uniform. There are cases of the groups that have been classified, as scheduled tribes in one state, have not been

categorized as the tribes in other states. The tribal groups are much behind their non-tribal counterparts in terms of their educational attainment. With regard to tribals, the following issues need to be looked at:

The tribal groups differ from other disadvantaged groups in terms of their cultural specificities.

The tribal people in themselves are highly diversified groups. The degree of tribalism varies from the extremely primitive isolated tribal groups located in the Andaman Islands to the modern developed tribal groups such as the Meena in Rajasthan.

The tribal groups are further differentiated in terms of size, territorial locality, racial features, marriage and kinship patterns, languages/dialects, economy, religious beliefs and practices, development and educational attainment etc.

The tribes being a local community perceive their identity largely at the regional and local levels than at the national level. The problems faced by the tribal groups vary from region to region, state to state, and from one tribal group to another.

Gender

Gender is a form of socio-biological difference between man and woman. The sexual difference is socially constructed contrasting characteristics labelled as masculine and feminine. Conceptually the term 'gender' differs from 'sex', as the latter refers mainly to bimodal distribution of biological/demographic characteristics between male and female. In the case of gender differences, it is the socio-biological differences that have been historically conditioned and are accepted as part of the social institutions. The elements of power and control are embedded in the gender difference. Although both sex and gender differences are universal, the nature and degree of difference varies from one social group to another.

The educational development in India is characterized by widening gender gap in education. The picture is dismal, as the female literacy is 54.16 per cent as against 75.85 per cent for males (2001 Census). The gender disparities exist at all levels of education. For example, the gender gap at the primary enrolment level was 22 per cent (Haq and Haq, 1998).

The gender gap in education needs to be understood in terms of disadvantaged position of women in Indian society. Although the Indian women suffer from biases in almost all spheres of their social life, the nature and intensity of this biasness may however vary across different social groups. The problem is intensified further, when gender disadvantage is combined with class, caste, religious and other disadvantages. For instance, the dropout rate at the elementary schooling stage is the highest among rural ST female children (NSS, 50th Round, 1993-94)

Thus, social diversity resulting from social differentiation is characterized by the problems of disparities and disadvantages. Very often, these group disparities get reflected in regional imbalances, if there is concentration of disadvantaged groups in certain pockets or regions. So 'region' although not a social category, shows a certain pattern indicating a particular socioeconomic status, because of certain categories of social groups inhabiting the region. For instance, the northern and eastern regions are backward in terms of educational and economic development, as the regions have higher proportions of the disadvantaged groups. Disparities within and among different groups need to be studied from different angles. The following section deals with the impact of social diversity on education.

Check Your Progress 1

- Notes: a) Write your answer in the space given below.
b) Compare your answer with those given at the end of unit.

1) What is the meaning of the term "Social Diversity"

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2) Identify any three types of social diversity

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16.4 INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL DIVERSITY ON EDUCATION

In the above sections, we have discussed meaning, nature and types of social diversity. The question remains, 'What are the major implications of social diversity for education in India?' or 'What roles education can play in a highly diverse society?' This in turn means examining relationship between education and social diversity. In this section, we have analyzed the influence of social diversity on education in terms of access, participation and achievement.

16.4.1 Differential Access: Reaching the Unreached

Following constitutional commitment of providing education to all, there has been considerable expansion of educational facilities since Independence. A major bottleneck in this respect has been the persistence of group and regional disparities. There are still a large number of accessless habitations most of which belong to the disadvantaged groups. A large number of children are out of school. Besides there is the problem of social access to school, as even in the habitations with school the children belonging to SC/ST and minority groups either do not get enrolled or are not attending the school. The problem of inadequate access, therefore, needs to be studied in terms of groups.

The children from different social and economic groups attend different types of school. While the children from higher socio-economic groups attend good quality schools (i.e. schools well equipped with infrastructure and competent teachers), the children from disadvantaged groups end up in the poor quality schools (i.e. single teacher, multigrade situations, poorly trained teachers). The need, therefore, is to intensify the efforts to make educational facilities accessible to such deprived groups in the deprived regions. This, in turn, means making special provisions to the disadvantaged children such as girls, SC/ST and minority groups. Furthermore this also calls for going beyond the rigid education system and making provisions of non-formal or alternative education for children who either drop out or do not enroll at all. In order to cover the remote and inaccessible areas and groups, the government has adopted two strategies: a) reducing the norms (population and distance) for opening schools in smaller habitations and b) opening various alternative education centers to suit the needs of particular groups.

16.4.2 Uneven Participation and Completion

The children's access to school does not ensure their participation in schooling. The children should stay in the school to complete full cycle of elementary or secondary schooling. By participation, we mean children's enrolment, attendance and completion of the schooling. The problem of differential access is compounded by differential participation. Despite improvement in enrolment rates, the dropouts continue to remain high, and higher among girls, SCs and STs (GOI, 2003). The group disparities are also reflected in regional disparities. One of the immediate tasks for the government is to bridge all gender and social gaps in enrolment and retention within a specified time frame. This also emerges from our constitutional concern as has been expressed in Article-46 of the Constitution of India,

'The State shall promote with special care the *educational* and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and shall protect them from social justice and all forms of exploitation' (italics added).

Fulfilling constitutional commitment requires targeting of educational interventions to the needy groups. A number of programmes have been launched for improving the children's participation in school such as midday meal and other incentives (attendance allowance, free textbooks and uniforms), early childhood care and education, ashram schools etc.

16.4.3 Achievement: Equitable Quality in Education

The school education system in India has expanded manifold. This obviously poses a major challenge not only for efficient management but also for mobilizing resources and maintaining a reasonable level of quality. It is recognized that quality improvement in education cannot be carried on a turnkey basis. One of the major challenges of the education system in a diverse country like India is to provide a quality education to all the groups who are at different stages of development.

On theoretical plane, there is an inherent conflict between quality and equality in education. *Quality breeds inequality, while equality hampers quality.* The term 'quality' means excellence. Excessive emphasis on excellence in education may become discriminatory, as the children from various disadvantaged groups who have not been exposed to modern education so far, find it difficult to cope with demands of the education system. The higher dropout rate among the disadvantaged children is also related with learning difficulties due to excessive curriculum load. Treating all the groups at par would, therefore, not be a suitable strategy in this case. On the other hand, if educational standard is set at the minimum for all children by keeping in mind the disadvantaged children, it would go against the children belonging to well educated family. The cycle of deprivation is likely to continue for the disadvantaged children in both the cases.

This dilemma has the implication for a pedagogic strategy sensitive to the prevailing social diversity. Education for social diversity therefore amounts to a carefully programmed induction into the complexity of the society and achieving equitable quality in education. Achieving excellence is the prime objective of education, but the system should create suitable environment for all the members of society. One may argue that in curricular terms, social diversity means diversified approach to knowledge or acquisition of knowledge.

Furthermore, the quality of education in government schools has been deteriorating over the years. The deteriorating condition of government schools has implication for disadvantaged children, as they are the ones who end up with these schools. Evidence shows that it is the poor people who access government schools. The children from

higher income groups usually study in private schools. The dysfunctional schools continue to be an area of concern in the more underdeveloped regions of the country. Recent reports have indicated gender bias in school choice by parents. That is, the villagers send girls to government schools and boys to private schools for two reasons a) they still consider girls as liability and b) girls are entitled to various types of incentives.

On the whole, social groups are at different stages of educational development. This is reflected in their differential responses in the schooling system in terms of access, participation and achievement. The delay in achieving the Universal Elementary Education is related with differential educational development of the groups.

Check Your Progress 2

Notes: a) Write your answer in the space given below.

b) Compare your answer with those given at the end of unit.

3) How does social diversity manifest itself in Indian education system today?

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16.5 RECENT CHALLENGES OF DIVERSITY FOR EDUCATION

The concept of social diversities cannot be understood adequately, unless one is able to explain the underlying disparities prevailing within and among the diverse groups. The social groups are at different levels of educational and economic development. We will now look at some of the major challenges currently being faced by the education system:

16.5.1 Achieving the Unfinished Task

The task of providing basic education to all the citizens remains unfulfilled till today. The Article-45 of the Constitution of India set the deadline for achieving the goal of Universal Elementary Education (UEE) in 1951:

‘—The State shall endeavor to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years’

In response to the constitutional commitment, several programmes have been launched for educational development. The constitutional goal of achieving the UEE remains elusive even after over 50 years of planned educational development and even now it is the most important challenge for the Indian education system. One of the main reasons of the delay in achievement of UEE is that the disadvantaged groups such as the SC/ ST, minority groups have not been able to take advantage of educational facilities supplied to them. One can visualize this in differential educational development of the social groups in India. That is, educational development is still pursued in supply form. In recent years, various centrally sponsored educational programmes and schemes have been launched for improving the educational conditions of the people. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, a centrally sponsored scheme has been launched in all the states to achieve the goal of universal elementary education. Much would depend how effectively the programme is implemented.

16.5.2 Cultural Nationalism and Nation Building

As discussed above, India is highly diversified in terms of ethnic composition, religions and languages. The diversity has both assimilative and fissiparous tendencies. The question that comes up is: 'Is social diversity likely to contribute to the harmonious evolution of society or is it a potential threat to social stability?' Recently, the country has been experiencing social tension and conflict, posing threat to its unity. One of the major challenges for the state is to maintain an integral balance among the diverse groups. Education being an instrument of social stability and change has a vital role to play.

The UNESCO Charter in its opening statement remarked, 'since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be created'. Education, therefore, can play a vital role in creating conditions of peaceful co-existence among the competing groups. This has implication for pedagogy, teacher training and classroom transaction. One needs to take into account questions such as: How should teachers assist their students to realize their full potential in a highly diversified society like India, or enable them to resolve conflicts arising out of group differences? What guidance can be given to the teachers, parents and others interested in education that will help them to cope sensitively with the educational needs of individuals from different social backgrounds?

Besides teacher training and classroom transaction, curriculum and school textbooks need to be sensitive to the implication of prevailing diversities in the society. By factoring diversity into our curriculum and textbooks, we mean knowing about others and transcending the rigid cultural barriers. The prevailing social and cultural practices and ethos should be reflected in the textbooks. Recent controversies regarding history curriculum and textbooks have brought the agenda of cohesion, peace and harmony to the forefront. Multicultural approach should be adopted while imparting education in a socially and culturally diverse society. This entails upon incorporation of experiences of the diverse groups and promotion of intercultural understanding.

16.5.3 Globalization and Education

Modern formal education is the medium through which globalization is being spread throughout the world. The process is intensified with remarkable progress in the field of information technology. Globalization has strong linkage with education, because the task of transferring ever increasing knowledge and skills is entrusted with the education system. India is not isolated from this impact. The history of educational development in the country shows that education is both the cause and consequence of globalization. In India, the modern formal education was started by the British to serve its global interests. Even today, to a great extent, the ethos and thrust of education remain the same. Both the school education and higher education promote the cause of globalization, as they prepare the learners for outside world by delinking them from their cultural roots.

The process of privatization in all sectors heightens globalization drive. Education is not untouched in this respect. A large number of private schools are being opened in various parts of the country. The phenomenon is also affecting the rural areas. The spurt in the number of private schools is an outcome of unfulfilled educational demand of the affluent sections of society and their dissatisfaction with low quality of education in the government schools. It is most likely that the increasing privatization in education sector will accentuate disparities between the disadvantaged and the advantaged and reduce commitment for quality improvement in government schools.

Globalization promotes individualism, by breaking down the cultural and social boundaries. It makes the task of solving problems arising out of social diversification.

Globalization supports survival of the fittest policy for individuals and intensifies further concentration of prevailing disadvantages in particular groups. One of the impending dangers of globalization is that it would put the disadvantaged groups at the mercy of individual whims and break local indigenous survival networks without providing a viable alternative. This process of alienation is embedded in the education system. Mahatma Gandhi pointed out this danger in his remark that the greatest evil of the present educational system was that it had broken up the continuity of our existence.

Check Your Progress 3

Notes: a) Write your answer in the space given below.

b) Compare your answer with those given at the end of unit.

4) Mention the recent challenges to education in the area of social diversity.

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16.6 LET'S SUM UP

India is a land of diversities. Its diversity is expressed in terms of language, religion, caste, tribes and gender. The diversity is a result of both internal differentiation and external influence. The processes of differentiation and unification have been going on simultaneously. The groups that have been differentiated on one social marker may be seen united on others. For instance, the groups which are divided on religious lines such as the Hindu, the Muslims etc. are united in terms of languages, gender etc. Thus 'unity amidst diversity' prevails in the Indian society. However the balance between diversity and unity is delicate and fraught with several problems. One needs to analyze the power relations between diverse groups.

The major implication of the social diversity for the education system is bringing the diverse groups at par, as the groups are at different levels of educational and economic development. One basic objective of the education system is to accommodate the diversities that exist in the population. However assessment of the educational development indicates that although substantial progress has been made in the field of education during the last five decades, gaps continue to exist between regions, states in terms of gender and social groupings. Despite the constitutional promise of equality in Independent India, the hierarchies in terms of educational access, participation and achievement are getting reinforced between the advantaged and the disadvantaged groups. The tribes, dalits (Scheduled Castes), minorities and girls continue to be deprived and further marginalized.

The education system is facing the major challenges of achieving UEE, bringing the disadvantaged into the national mainstream, and preparing them against the dangers of globalization. One of the major challenges for the education system in India has been to achieve universal elementary education (UEE). The main reason for the delay in achievement of UEE is that the education system has not been able to bring the most disadvantaged, that is, the SC, the ST and girls within its fold fully. These groups are suffering from multiple disadvantages. The education system needs to treat the disadvantaged groups as special focus groups and reform its pedagogy in such a way that the most disadvantaged gets the maximum benefits and support.

16.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Social diversity may be taken to mean the co-existence of different social groups within a given geo-political setting.
- 2) These may include Language, Religion, Caste, Tribe, Gender.
- 3) – In terms of differential access amongst various diverse social groups,
– Uneven Participation and Completion amongst various diverse social groups,
– Achievement also varies due to inequitable Quality in Education amongst various diverse social groups
- 4) – Achieving the Unfinished Task of education for all
– Cultural Nationalism
– Nation Building
– Impact of Globalization on Education.

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