

Unity in Diversity, or 'Many in the One'

CHAPTER

8

Oh, grant me my prayer, that I may never lose the bliss of the touch of the one in the play of the many.

— Rabindranath Tagore

... The principle of unity in diversity which has always been normal to [India] and its fulfilment the fundamental course of her being and its very nature, the Many in the One, would place her on the sure foundation of her Swabhava and Swadharma.

— Sri Aurobindo



The Big Questions ?

1. What is meant by 'unity in diversity' in the Indian scenario?
2. What aspects of India's diversity are the most striking?
3. How do we make out the unity underlying the diversity?



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A Rich Diversity

If you travel through India by train, you will notice not only changing landscapes but also many different types of dresses and food; you will hear different languages, familiar and unfamiliar, and see different scripts on the way. Even within your own region, you will often come across people from other parts of India with different customs and traditions. This is India's rich diversity, and it is usually the first thing that strikes visitors to our country.

With over 1.4 billion inhabitants (about 18 percent of the world's population), such diversity is not surprising! In the late 20th century, the Anthropological Survey of India, a national organisation, conducted a massive survey called 'People of India project' of 4,635 communities across all States of the country. It counted 325 languages using 25 scripts; it also observed that many Indians may be called migrants, in the sense of people not living near their birthplace or with their original community.



LET'S EXPLORE

As a class activity, make lists of (1) the birthplaces of at least 5 classmates and the birthplaces of their parents; (2) the students' mother tongues and other languages known to them. Discuss the results in terms of diversity.

While diversity is indeed beautiful, making sense of it is not so easy. Over a century ago, the British historian Vincent Smith wondered,



“How, in the face of such bewildering diversity, can a history of India be written? ... The answer to the query is found in the fact that India offers **unity in diversity**.”

What is meant by 'unity in diversity'? How shall we perceive and express this unity, or the 'Many in the One'? To answer this question, we will explore a few dimensions of Indian life.

Food for All

Some of you will have eaten food from different regions of India. The number of different dishes and preparations you can taste in India must be in their thousands, if not lakhs! Yet certain food grains are common to almost every part of the country — cereals such as rice, barley and wheat; millets such as pearl millet (bajra), sorghum (jowar), finger millet (ragi); and pulses such as various kinds of dals and

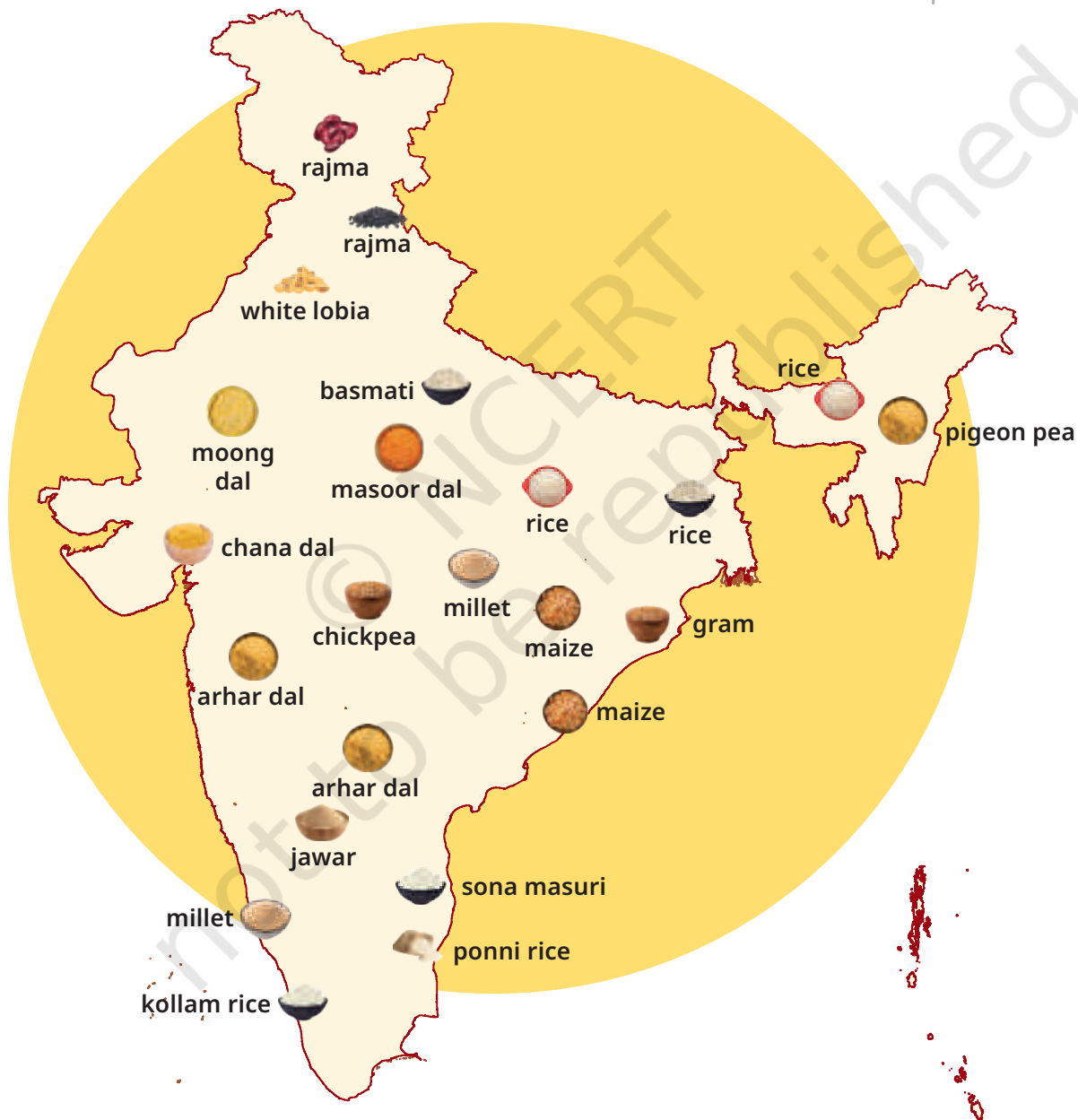


Fig. 8.1. A few examples of cereals and pulses from different regions of India

grams. All these are called ‘staple grains’ because they are the basic food for most Indians (Fig. 8.1 on page 127). Similarly, some common spices such as turmeric, cumin, cardamom and ginger, are also used throughout the country. We could continue this list with some common vegetables, common oils etc.

So we see how the same ingredients (*unity*) can be used in a number of combinations (*diversity*) to prepare an endless variety of dishes!

LET'S EXPLORE



- As a class activity, make a list of ingredients (grains, spices, etc.) that are used in your home.
- Take any one vegetable and think of the number of different dishes you can prepare with it.

Textiles and Clothing



Fig. 8.2. Stone relief of a woman in a sari from Vaiśhali (today in Bihar)

Every region and community in India has developed its own styles of clothing and dresses. Yet, we notice a commonality in some traditional Indian dresses, irrespective of the material used. An obvious example is the plain length of cloth called the sari, a type of clothing worn in most parts of India and made from different fabrics — mostly cotton or silk, but nowadays synthetic fabrics too. Banarasi, Kanjivaram, Paithani, Patan Patola, Muga or Mysore are some of the famous types of silk saris. There are many more kinds of cotton saris. Altogether, this unstitched piece of cloth comes in hundreds of varieties. They are

produced by different methods of weaving (Fig. 8.3 on the right) and designing. Some designs are part of the cloth, while others are printed after the cloth is woven. Finally, there are endless variations in the colours, which are produced from many kinds of pigments.

The sari has a long history. This stone **relief** (Fig. 8.2 on page 128) from Vaiśhali (today in Bihar) goes back a few centuries BCE.

LET'S EXPLORE

Explain how the example of the sari reflects both unity and diversity (in 100-150 words).



Fig. 8.3. A few specimens of colourful traditional Indian textiles.



DON'T MISS OUT

For a very long time, India produced the finest cotton in the world and Indian textiles were exported as far away as Europe. One beautiful type of printed cotton called 'chintz' became so popular in 17th-century Europe that the sale of some European dresses dropped sharply. Eventually, to protect their own products, England and France decided to ban the import of chintz from India!

There are many ways of wearing the sari, as they vary from one region to another or from one community to another. In fact, new ways of draping it are still being invented. But in the end, it is a single dress — the sari. In past centuries,

Relief:

A design that stands out from the surface of a panel (which may be of stone, wood, ceramic or another material).



Fig. 8.4. Women often put the sari to many uses beyond that of a dress (pictures from south India).



several travellers to India marvelled at its simplicity, economy, and the diverse ways in which it is worn. In addition, women often put the sari to many uses beyond that of a dress; the six pictures in Fig. 8.4 above illustrate a few such creative uses.



LET'S EXPLORE

- In the above pictures, can you recognise what a sari has been used for?
- Are you aware of, or can you imagine, more uses for the sari?



→ Following the example of the sari, make a list of different styles you have seen for the dhoti — both as regards the fabric and the uses the dhoti can be put to. What conclusion can you draw?

Festivals Galore

There is an immense variety of festivals in India. You may have noticed that a few common ones are celebrated across India almost at the same time, though they have different names. We will take just one example — Makara Sankranti, which marks the beginning of the harvest season in many

parts of India on or around January 14. The map shows the different names of similar festivals across India about the same date.



Fig. 8.5. Different names of similar festivals across India about the same date

LET'S EXPLORE

→ What is your favourite festival and how is it celebrated in your region? Do you know whether it is celebrated in any other part of India, maybe under a different name?

→ During October–November, many major festivals take place in India. Make a list of the few main ones and their various names in different parts of the country.

An Epic Spread

Literature offers us another fine illustration of unity in diversity. Indian literatures are extremely diverse (and among the most abundant in the world). Over centuries, despite differences in language, technique, etc., they have shared important themes and concerns. Who has not heard of the *Pañchatantra*, for example? This collection of delightful stories, with animals as the main characters, teaches us important life skills. The original Sanskrit text is at least 2,200 years old, but its stories have been adapted in almost every Indian language. In fact, they have travelled well beyond India, all the way to Southeast Asia, the Arab world and Europe, inspiring new collections of stories on the way — it is estimated that about 200 adaptations of the *Pañchatantra* exist in more than 50 languages! This illustrates how ‘one’ collection of stories has become ‘many’.

The most striking case, however, is that of India’s two **epics** — the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata.

These two long Sanskrit poems, which together might fill some 7,000 pages in their original versions, narrate the stories of heroes who fight to re-establish dharma. In the Mahābhārata, the Pāṇḍavas, with Kṛiṣṇa’s help, fight their own cousins, the Kauravas, to recover their kingdom. In the Rāmāyaṇa, Rāma, with the help of his brother Lakṣhmaṇa and of Hanuman, defeats the demon Rāvaṇa, who had kidnapped his wife Sītā. These stories contain many shorter ones that focus on values, and constantly ask questions about what is right and what is wrong.

Epic:
A long poem generally narrating the adventures of heroes and other great figures of the past.



Fig. 8.6. A painting depicting a major episode from the Rāmāyaṇa (18th century, Himachal Pradesh)

LET'S EXPLORE

In a class discussion, try to identify the episode depicted in the painting shown in Fig. 8.6 above and important details associated with it.

For more than two millennia, these two epics have been translated or adapted into regional literatures in India and beyond. In addition, there are countless folk versions of them. A few years ago, a scholar conducted a survey in Tamil Nadu alone and counted “about a hundred versions [of the Mahābhārata] that have come down to us in folklore forms.” Imagine what the number might be for the whole of India!

In fact, many communities have their own versions of the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. They have also preserved legends connecting their own history with these epics. This is especially true of tribal communities in many parts of

India, such as the Bhils, the Gonds, the Mundas and many more. Most tribes of India's northeast and Himalayan regions, including Kashmir, have had their own version of one or the other of the two epics, or both. These tribal adaptations are transmitted orally, along with legends on how the heroes of the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata (generally any or all of the five Pāṇḍavas, their wife Draupadī, but also sometimes their cousin and adversary Duryodhana) visited the tribes' respective regions.

The anthropologist K.S. Singh directed the 'People of India' project we referred to earlier (see page 126). In the case of the Mahābhārata, he observed, "There is hardly a place in the country which the epic heroes such as the Pandavas, did not visit according to folklores." And the same may be said of the Rāmāyaṇa. Over the centuries, perhaps more than any other texts, these two epics created a dense web of cultural interactions across India and many parts of Asia. Another example of unity in diversity.

To further illustrate the theme of this chapter, we could have continued our journey and turned to more facets of Indian culture. For instance, in India's classical arts, including classical architecture, both diversity and unity are easily noticeable. (You will study these fields through the Art Curricular Area.)

In the end, we should remember that Indian culture celebrates diversity as an enrichment, but never loses sight of the underlying unity which nourishes that diversity.



Fig. 8.7. 'Pañcha Pāṇḍavar', a carved stone in a forest of the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, depicting the five Pāṇḍava brothers. The shrine containing this stone is maintained by Irula tribals to commemorate the Pāṇḍavas' passing through the area.



Before we move on ...

- India offers immense diversity in its landscapes, people, languages, dresses, foods, festivals and customs.
- Diversity is easy to perceive in many fields, but there is also an underlying unity.
- India's unity celebrates diversity because diversity does not divide — it enriches.

Questions, activities and projects

1. Conduct a class discussion on the two quotations at the start of the chapter.
2. Select a few stories from the *Pañchatantra* and discuss how their message is still valid today. Do you know of any similar stories from your region?
3. Collect a few folk tales from your region and discuss their message.
4. Is there any ancient story that you have seen being depicted through a form of art? It could be a sculpture, a painting, a dance performance, a movie ... Discuss with your classmates.
5. Discuss in class the following quotation by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, when he travelled to many parts of India before Independence:

“Everywhere I found a cultural background which had exerted a powerful influence on their lives. ... The old epics of India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and other books, in popular translations and paraphrases, were widely known among the masses, and every incident and story and moral in them was engraved on the popular mind and gave a richness and content to it. Illiterate villagers would know hundreds of verses by heart and their conversation would be full of references to them or to some story with a moral, enshrined in some old classic.”