

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Three children around your age have drawn the figures above. Use the empty box to draw your human figure. Is your drawing similar to any of the others? The chances are that your drawing is quite different from the other three, which you can see are quite different from each other. This is because each one of us has a unique drawing style. We not only don't look exactly like each other but also differ in terms of the language we speak, our cultural backgrounds, the religious rituals we observe and, of course the way we draw!



Now ask your teacher to help you check, how many of you have similar answers. Is there anyone whose list matches yours exactly? Probably not. But many of you may have similar answers. How many like reading the same kind of books? How many different languages are spoken by the students in your class?

By now you must have recognised the many ways in which you are quite like some of your classmates and other ways in which you are different from them.



MAKING FRIENDS

Do you think it would be easy for you to make friends with someone who was very different from you? Read the following story and think about this.

I had meant it as a joke. A joke made up for a small ragged boy who sold newspapers at the Janpat crossing at the busy intersection. Every time I cycled past he would run after me, holding out the English paper and screaming out the evening's headlines in a mixture of Hindi and English words. This time, I stopped by the pavement and asked for the Hindi paper. His mouth fell open.

"You mean you know Hindi?" he asked.

"Of course," I said as I paid for the paper.

"Why? What did you think?"

He paused. "But you look so...so angrez," he said. "You mean you can even read Hindi?"

"Of course I can," I said, this time a little impatiently. "I can speak, read and write Hindi. Hindi is one of the subjects I study in school."

"Subjects?" he asked. How could I explain what a subject was to someone who had never been to school? "Well, it is something..." I began, but the lights changed, and the honking behind me grew a hundredfold and I let myself be pushed along with the rest of the traffic.

The next day he was there again, smiling at me and holding out a Hindi paper. "Bhaiyya," he said, "aap ka akhbaar. Ab Bathaaiye yeh subject kya cheez hai?" the English word sounded strange on his tongue. It sounded like its other meaning in English – to be ruled by someone else.



"Oh, it's just something to study," I said. And then because the red light had come on, I asked him, "Have you ever been to school?" "Never," he answered. And he added proudly, "I began working when I was so high." He measured himself against my cycle-seat. "First my mother used to come with me but I can do it all alone."

"Where is your mother now?" I asked, but then the lights changed and I was off. I heard him yell from somewhere behind me, "She's in Meerut with..." The rest was drowned out.

"My name is Samir," he said the next day. And very shyly he asked, "What's yours?" It was incredible. My bicycle wobbled. "My name is Samir too," I said. "What?" His eyes lit up. "Yes," I grinned at him. "It's another name for Hanuman's father, you know." "So now you are Samir Ek and I'm Samir Do," he said triumphantly. "Something like that," I answered and then I held out my hand. "Haath milao, Samir Do!" His hand nestled in mine like a little bird. I could still feel its warmth as I cycled away.

The next day, he did not have his usual smile for me. "There is trouble in Meerut," he said. "Many people are being killed there in the riots." I looked at the headlines. Communal Riots, it blazed. "But Samir..." I began. "I'm a Muslim Samir," he said in answer. "And all my people are in Meerut." His eyes filled with tears and when I touched his shoulder, he would not look up.

He was not at the crossing the day after. Neither the day after nor ever again. And no newspaper, in English or Hindi, can tell me where my Samir Do has gone.

While Samir Ek is more familiar with English, Samir Do speaks Hindi. Although they both are more at home in different languages they still communicated with each other. They made the effort to do so because this was what was important to them.

Samir Ek and Samir Do also come from different religious and cultural backgrounds. While Samir Ek is a Hindu, Samir Do is a Muslim. Different religious and cultural backgrounds such as these are an aspect of diversity.

In addition to their diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, there are other ways in which Samir Ek and Samir Do are different from each other. For example, while Samir Ek goes to school, Samir Do sells newspapers.

Samir Do did not have the opportunity to attend school. Perhaps you've noticed that there are several people in the area where you live who are poor and who don't have enough to eat or wear and sometimes not even a place to live. This difference is not the same as the one we have seen earlier. Here, we're talking not of difference but of inequality. Inequality comes about when a person does not have the resources and opportunities that are available to other persons.

The caste system is another example of inequality. According to this, society was divided into different groups depending upon the work that people did and they were supposed to remain in those groups. So if your parents were potters you could only become a potter, nothing else. This system was considered irreversible. And because you were not supposed to change your profession, it was not considered necessary for you to know anything more than what you needed in your profession. This created a situation of inequality. You will read more about this and other inequalities in the following chapters.

◆ What does diversity add to our lives?

Just like Samir Ek and Samir Do became friends, you might have friends who are very different from you. You have probably eaten different kinds of food in their homes, celebrated different festivals with them, tried out the clothes they wear, and learnt some of their languages as well.



You probably like reading and hearing stories and adventures about different animals, people and even ghosts. Perhaps you even enjoy making up stories yourself ! Many young people feel happy when they read a good story because it gives them lots of ideas to make up more stories. People who write stories get their ideas from all sorts of different places – from books, and real life and from their imagination. Some may have lived in forests close to animals and chosen to write of their fights and friendships. Others read real accounts of kings and queens and wrote stories about love and honour. Some dipped into their own childhood memories of school and friends and wrote stories of adventure.



Imagine if all the storytellers and writers that you have heard and read so far were forced to live in a place where all people wore the same two colours red and white, ate the same food (maybe potatoes!), took care of the same two animals, for example, the deer and the cat, and to entertain themselves played snakes and ladders. What kind of stories do you think they would write?

DIVERSITY IN INDIA

India is a country of many diversities. We speak different languages, have various types of food, celebrate different festivals, practise different religions. But actually, if you think about it, we do many things that are similar except that we do them in different ways.

◆ How do we explain Diversity?

A little more than two hundred years ago or long before the train, aeroplane, bus or car became a part of our lives, people travelled from one part of the world to another, in ships, on horses, on camels or on foot. Often, they went in search of new lands, or new places to settle in, or for people to trade with. And because it took so long to travel, once they got to a place, people stayed there, often for a long time. Many others left their homes because there were famines and drought and they could not get enough to eat. Some went in search of work while others left because there was a war.

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Sometimes, as they began to make their homes in new places, people began to change a little and at other times they managed to do things in the old ways. So their languages, food, music, religions became a mix of the old and the new, and out of this intermixing of cultures, came something new and different.

The history of many places shows us how many different cultural influences have helped to shape life and culture there. Thus regions became very diverse because of their unique histories.

Similarly diversity also comes about when people adapt their lives to the geographical area in which they live. For example living near the sea is quite different from living in a mountainous area.

Not only do people have different clothing and eating habits, but even the kinds of work they do are different. In cities it is often easy to forget how closely people's lives are tied to their physical surroundings. This is because in the city people seldom grow their own vegetables and grain. Instead they depend on the market to buy all the food and other goods that they need.

Let us try to understand what we mean when we say that historical and geographical factors influence the diversity of a region. We can do this by reading about life in two different parts of the country, Kerala and Ladakh.

While Kerala and Ladakh are quite different in terms of their geographical features, the history of both regions has seen similar cultural influences. Both regions were influenced by Chinese and Arab traders. It was the geography of Kerala which allowed for the cultivation of spices and the special geographical location of Ladakh and its wool that drew traders to these regions. Thus history and geography are often tied in the cultural life of a region.

The influence of diverse cultures is not merely a thing of the past. Our present lives are all about moving from place to place for work and with each move our cultural traditions and way of life slowly become part of the new place we are in. Similarly in our own neighbourhoods we live close to people from several communities. Our daily lives are about the ways in which we do things together and hear stories about each other's lives, customs and traditions.



The dry barren landscape of the mountainous desert of Ladakh.

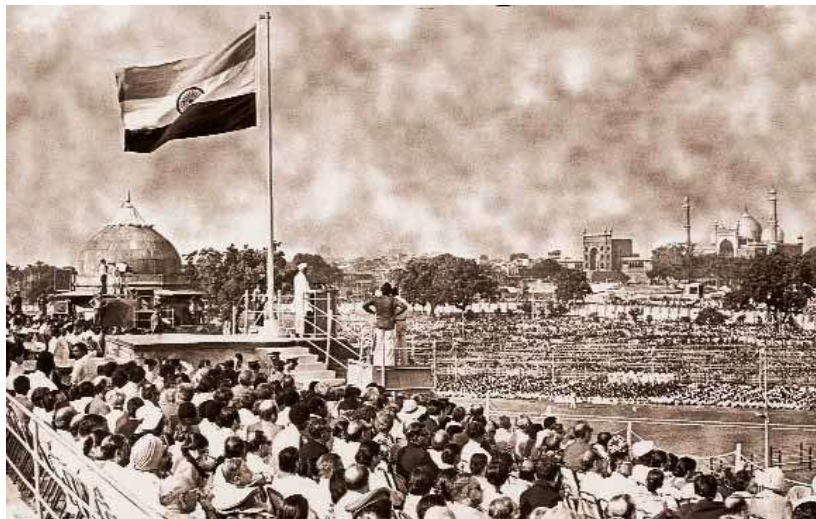
UNITY IN DIVERSITY

India's diversity has always been recognised as a source of its strength. When the British ruled India, women and men from different cultural, religious and regional backgrounds came together to oppose them. India's freedom movement had thousands of people of different backgrounds in it. They worked together to decide joint actions, they went to jail together, and they found different ways to oppose the British. Interestingly the British thought they could divide Indians because they were so different, and then continue to rule them. But the people showed how they could be different and yet be united in their battle against the British.

Don't forget the days of blood, O friend
In the midst of your happiness remember
to shed a tear for us
The hunter has torn away every single
flower
Do plant a flower in the desert garden
dear friend
Having fallen to bullets we slept in
Jallianwala Bagh
Do light a lamp on this lonely grave
O friend
The blood of Hindus and Muslims flows
together today
Do soak your robe in this river of blood
dear friend
Some rot in jails while others lie in their
graves
Do shed a few tears for them O friend.

Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA)

This song was sung after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar in which a British general opened fire on a large group of unarmed, peaceful people killing many and wounding even more. Men and women, Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, rich and poor had gathered to protest against the British. This song was composed and sung to honour the memory of those brave people.



Pt. Nehru delivering an Independence Day speech

Songs and symbols that emerged during the freedom struggle serve as a constant reminder of our country's rich tradition of respect for diversity. Do you know the story of the Indian flag? It was used as a symbol of protest against the British by people everywhere.

In his book *The Discovery of India* Jawaharlal Nehru says that Indian unity is not something imposed from the outside but rather, "It was something deeper and within its fold, the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practised and every variety acknowledged and even encouraged." It was Nehru, who coined the phrase, "unity in diversity" to describe the country.