8 Ideas of India 9 Civilization and Culture UNIT 1 CIVILIZATION AND CULTURE* Structure 1.0 Objectives 1.1 Introduction 1.2 Approaches to the Study of Indian Civilization 1.2.1 The Cataloguing of Traits 1.2.2 The Reading of Cultural Essence 1.2.3 The Study of Cultural Communication 1.2.4 Analysing Indian Civilization as a Type 1.3 Understanding the Geography of India 1.3.1 The Perennial/ Nuclear Zones 1.3.2 The Route Zones 1.3.3 The Zones of Relative Isolation 1.4 Viewing India from a Structural and Cultural Perspective 1.5 Discourses on India's Civilizational Unity 1.6 Let Us Sum Up 1.7 References 1.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress 1.0 OBJECTIVES After reading this unit, you should be able to: • elaborate on different approaches to the study of Indian Civilization; • give an account of India in terms of its cultural and historical geography and how these contribute to its diversity and plurality; • explain how despite the underlying plurality, India is an all encompassing civilization; and. • examine the various elements that have played a role in unifying Indian civilisation. 1.1 INTRODUCTION India is one of the oldest civilizations in the world and home to half a billion people. It's known for its cultural diversity and plurality. It is beyond the scope of one discipline to capture all the diversity as they are in every dimension of life, in the population, in the geography, environment, modes of livelihood and above all in its cultures. There are four broad approaches to study Indian civilization. The first section of the unit focuses on these approaches. Indian population represents a variety of historical migrations that has resulted in racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. The populations concentrated in different regions, speak diverse languages and have a distinct way of life that sets them apart from each other. The ecological and physiographic variations of different *Contributed by Kanika Kakkar, Delhi University 10 Ideas of India regions of India explain its richness and diversity. The Section 1.3 elaborates on the cultural and historical geography of India. In the Section 1.4 the social structure and cultural diversity of Indian civilization is examined. The religious and socio-political historical past are significant to understand the evolution of Indian society. It highlights the fact that no society can be properly understood without reference to its history. Section 1.5 reflects on the significant elements that contribute to the unity of Indian civilization. It highlights that regionalism was never a significant threat to Indian civilization's unified identity in spite of internal conflicts and almost continuous warfare. 1.2 APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF INDIAN CIVILIZATION The term civilisation comes from the Latin word civis, meaning "citizen" or "townsman." Thus a semblance of complexity is evident in the definition of civilisation. The term assumes some agricultural practices, trade, some evidence of planned dwellings, multiple cultures, art, religion and some administrative and political structures. Civilization is a complex of human grouping/ society with cultural-material and non-material/ideational traits and a defined polity. Thus the Indus Valley Civilization whose society is revealed to us through its artefacts and monuments is considered a civilisation. India is considered one of oldest continuing civilizations because its origin is traced back to the Harappan civilization. There have been innumerable scholarly accounts focusing on the Indian civilization devoted to understanding of the nature of Indian society and culture. In doing so, these accounts illuminate diversity and richness of India as a civilization and provide multiple conceptual tools/methodology used to study it. Cohn (1971) points out that four broad approaches/directions to understand Indian civilization can be derived from these accounts. They are: • Catalogue Approach • Cultural Essence Approach • Cultural Communication Approach • Approaching India as a Type The ensuing sub-sections provide their elaborate account. 1.2.1 The Cataloguing of Traits This approach entails recording of traits, institutions and qualities that are assumed to be essentially Indian. The variations and deviations that India may represent are examined in terms of statistical measures of mean or mode. India and its population reflect diversity which may be explicable in terms of geographical, ecological, regional, class or religious differences. However, the emphasis of the approach

is to list out traits or qualities that are distinctly Indian or contribute to Indianness) This, of course, is primarily based on assuming the notion of what it means to be Indian and these may vary from scholar to scholar) 11 Civilization and Culture Activity 1 Make a list of traits or institutions or qualities that are unique to India. Compare your list if possible with the others students at your study centre. 1.2.2 The Reading of Cultural Essence (This approach entails discovery of essential style and process — the cultural essenceas truly representative of Indian civilization since its inception, but not trait or content. The cultural essence reflects India in its true spirit, which it has imbibed over the years in the wake of historical and various other exigencies. It indicates India is not statistically measurable. Rather, its essence may be understood in terms of concepts like 'unity in diversity', tolerance and brotherhood, respect for the spiritual and divine. The concept of ethos is essentially abstract and deductive in nature. It again is highly subjective as a concept) 1.2.3 (The Study of Cultural Communication The cultural communication approach entails focusing on the ways and processes through which the content of the civilizational system are transmitted and communicated through different levels of society. It draws attention towards the structural integration of the Indian civilization. The works of social anthropologists, McKim Marriott (1955) and Robert Redfield (1956) provide a significant basis to understand the unity and interdependence of various parts of a civilizational entity. Marriott highlights cultural synthesis and interaction between 'Great Tradition' and 'Little Tradition' while focusing on festivals celebrated in a small north Indian village, Kishangarhi in Uttar Pradesh. Similarly, Redfield's analysis reflects constant interaction and communication between great tradition and little tradition in the form of folk–urban continuum, which stands for symbiotic and interdependent relationship between the two) You can read more about views of Marriott and Redfield regarding the unity of a civilizational entity, society and culture in Box 1 and 2 Box 1: Parochialization and Universalization McKim Marriott's work Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization (1955), proposes the twin concepts of Universalization and Parochialization for explaining the cultural exchange between great tradition and little tradition in India. Universalization is the process of carrying further the great tradition by encompassing the elements of little tradition. In other words it relates to the systematisation and standardisation of local rites, values and cultural ideals by universal sanskritic belief system. To explain his point he takes the example of the diwali — the Festival of Lights celebrated locally, in Kishangarhi village to propitiate goddess of wealth and prosperity Saurti. He elaborates that goddess Lakshmi may be a universalised form of Saurti of the little tradition as the former is also symbolic of wealth and prosperity. In contrast to the universalization process is parochialization. It stands for the downward spread of rites, beliefs and cultural ideals of universal appeal to suit the local environs. It reflects the creativity of little communities within India's indigenous civilization. Mariott explains this process by citing the example Naurtha festival in Kishangarhi, pointing it as a parochialized version of Navarathri in which nine different consecrates of the Sanskritic goddess Durga is propitiated for nine successive days. 12 Ideas of India Box 2: Little and Great Traditions Robert Redfield's work Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization (1956) is based on his experiences with Latin American peasants. However, like McKim Marriott he too discovered that the peasant-based societies were not isolated and bounded. Peasants' way of life is influenced by tribes, towns and cities people. He viewed peasant society as a system of social relations, with relationships extending outside it to wider communities. His emphasis was to highlight the interdependence of peasant community as bearers of little tradition on townsfolk and populace who represented great tradition. 1.2.4 Analysing Indian Civilization as a Type This approach is predominantly popular with comparative sociologists. According to this approach Indian civilization is seen as a distinct type in juxtaposition with other societies and culture. The emphasis is to view Indian society as a

traditional society, which is experiencing processes, such as modernisation that illustrate cultural, social and historical principles. The aim is however, not to read distinct values or aspects that are unique to India's structure, but typify it on the basis of what it has in common with other societies and culture and then to examine variations. For example, India may be seen as a type in being a village society or an agrarian society as this allows comparisons with other societies and cultures which may display a similarity in terms of presence of a rural life and community. However, to view India as a caste society will be a futile exercise as the concept/phenomenon of caste is unique to India. This rules out the possibility for making India's cross-cultural/societal comparisons. The unique is thus 'scientifically incomprehensible' in view of this approach (Cohn 1971:4). Check Your Progress 1 i) Complete the following Sentences a) The cultural communication approach involves .... b) ....and.........................are two eminent social anthropologists associated with the cultural communication approach to the Indian civilization. c) Classifying Indian civilization as a type implies focusing on making................. rather than examining aspects that are distinct and unique to India's social structure. ii) How is cataloguing of traits different from cultural essence approach to understand Indian civilization? Elaborate in three sentences.

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UNDERSTANDING THE GEOGRAPHY OF INDIA Indian civilization has complex and deeply rooted historical traditions, with a wide variation in custom and behaviour regionally and with the social structure of a particular region (Cohn 1971:7). Much of the diversity and regional variations in India may be explained on the grounds of variations in her geography. Further, it is the basic physiography of India that has provided a broad framework for a persistent historical, cultural and political pattern. It therefore, becomes significant to take an account of its (historical) geography. Cohn lists out three zones into which India may be divided in a broad geographical way. These are: • The Perennial or Nuclear Zones • The Route Zones • The Zones of Relative Isolation A description of these zones is provided below: 1.3.1 The Perennial/Nuclear Zones The perennial zones are the fertile river basins, plains and delta. Historically, they have been centres/nucleus of human settlement, high population density, political activity and a stable state system. They have settled agriculture practices. They are known for being trade centres of agricultural and craft commodities. Various pre-modern and modern cities have emerged in nuclear zones. India is marked by such zones both in north and south India. Historically, the river basins and plains around Peshawar led to the emergence of first nuclear zone in northern India which is Gandhara, a town that is now in Pakistan. This region played a pivotal role in spreading the influences from western and central Asia to India. The Sutlej-Jamuna doab and the GangeseJamuna doab formed the major nuclear zones of north. These comprised of cities like Kurukshetra-Panchala, Kanauj, Panipat, Delhi, Agra, which have had a vibrant politico-historical past. Kosala, the present day Central Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and Saurahastra, the contemporary Gujarat are other examples of nuclear zones of north. Each of these zones have distinct linguistic traditions and owing to topographical and climatic variations have evolved a distinctive cropping pattern. There are five major nuclear zones in south India. These are –Andhra, Tamil Nadu , Kerala, Maharashtra and Mysore. Andhra is the home of Telugu speaking people. It is constituted by the rich agricultural delta areas of Godavari and Krishna river. Tamil Nadu is the site of the Chola and

Pandyan kingdom, and inhabits Tamil speaking people. It comprises of fertile plains of Pennar river and Kaveri delta and is densely populated. Maharashtra is the Marathi speaking area. It bears similarity with Mysore, the home of Kannada speaking population in agricultural practices. Both the zones are known for dry agriculture with millet, maize and gram being prominent crops. Also, unlike Tamil Nadu the two zones display a dispersed settlement pattern. Kerala/Malabar forms the south western part of India. It stands distinct from other zones in the south owing to its height due to the Niligiri ranges and the rain it receives. The Western Ghats isolate it from 14 Ideas of India other zones in south and render it a distinct culture and social structure, visible in the practice of matriliny by the Nayar community. However, similar to Andhra and Tamil Nadu, Kerala displays agriculture based on wet rice cultivation. 1.3.2 The Route Zones Malwa provides a typical example of a route zone. It connects north India with the western coast and Deccan. It acts as a passage for invaders and traders to reach nuclear zones of attraction. It is a distinct cultural region, lying towards south of Aravali ranges. It is a semi-arid region. The route zones have no unified and persistent political tradition. Socially and culturally, they are mosaics rather than having distinctive culture and social structure (Cohn 1971: 26). They are areas of settlement of migrant population. 1.3.3 The Zones of Relative Isolation The zones of relative isolation are relatively inaccessible and geographically lesser conducive areas for human settlement. Ladakh for instance is not only icy cold but relatively cut off due to high mountains ranges. And therefore has sparse settlements. A village in the Ladakh region is relatively isolated due to high mountain ranges (Photo credit : Kiranmayi Bhushi) The northern part of the country is hilly and mountainous and represents several zones of relative isolation like: a) The area in the northern arc. This is constituted by the regions adjoining the borders of Baluchistan and Afghanistan. It is inhabited by loosely organised tribes who have been Islamised. b) The areas around Gilgit and Jammu and Kashmir having a unique cultural tradition, assimilating Hindus from the plains. c) The areas along the Himalayas in the plains extending through Nepal border, Bhutan and Sikkim and place where the Brahmaputra River enters Assam 15 plains. These represent dual cultural influence that of Tibetan-Buddhism Civilization and Culture and Hindu beliefs transmitted from the plains. d) In the hilly and forested tracts of north east, the area between Burma and India. The area is home to various tribes reflecting south-eastern influence. e) The Rajputana/ Marwar is a region of relative isolation in the north west India. Since, the 10th century it is inhabited by the Rajputs and other refugees from Muslim invaders who established their culture over the scattered tribes of the region. In addition, there are two significant zones of isolation in central India. These are: a) This is the area running through Vindhya mountains, eastern Gujarat, Narmada River, eastern Banaras from where Kaimur hills are visible. b) The mountainous terrain south of Vindhya range, northern Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, north western Orissa and south eastern Bihar. Activity 2 What do you think are the sources that contribute to diversity of the three geographical zones discussed above? Note down your thoughts in a notebook. Check Your Progress 2 i) Complete the following sentences a) ....are inaccessible and geographically lesser conducive areas for human settlement. b) The perennial /nuclear zones include .... c) Malwa provides a typical example of a .... d) Socially and culturally route zones are a .... 1.4 VIEWING INDIA FROM A STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE The social structure and culture of Indian civilization is deeply influenced by its past. The history of Indian civilization reveals that religion, economy and politics played a significant role in shaping its social structure and culture. It is the mythicreligious past and direct political past (strongly dependent on the economy) , which provide a basis to understand mutual alliances and tensions between the various regional political entities that existed in pre-colonial India. The mythic and religious are intertwined with the political and myths, such as those of sacred kingship are often

invoked to justify present political hierarchies and relationships. Numerous invasions, migrations and a porous and accepting religion has added diversity to the Indian population and given it an essentially pluralistic content. 16 Ideas of India However, this does not imply India may not be perceived as a singular entity/ unit, a nation. Structurally and culturally Indian civilization is highly segmented and stratified. The previous section illustrated India as regionally segmented. Hinduism is not a doctrinal religion and more of a way of life. The sub-continent has allowed the flourishing of religions such as Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism and accepted outside religions like Islam and Christianity. Thus the religious past of India manifests a high level of differentiation and absorption of diverse elements. The great tradition of India in terms of the hierarchy of varna-order and the prolific jati system is an all-encompassing system of social order that has so permeated the Indian sub-continent that incoming religions such as Islam and Christianity have also accepted this social order in practice if not in ideology. The present day social and political order draws significantly from the past in letting the caste system of varna and local jatis play significant role in the arena of power dynamics and formation of social networks and groups. Even in contemporary India a person's identity is linked to his/her jati and varna identity and legitimized by reference to some imagined and mythical past. Activity 3 In addition, to Hinduism what are the other major religions practised in India? List them out in your notebook. The connections with religious past also provide a crucial means for identification with a distinct kinship group and particular ancestry. Thus, Hindus visit Gaya and Haridwar to perform rituals for their dead, where priests maintain books tracing the genealogical history of their clients. The varna and jati systems rule the social world by its superimposition on the kinship system by the rule of jati endogamy. There is also the concept of generational or blood feuding that is a derivative of kinship and practiced in societies where kinship still plays a key role. Thus, we could come across households and clans whose members may not enter into marital alliances or inter-dine with each other as their ancestors in the previous generations had disputes or quarrels. The influence of kinship and the jati system as an extended kin group restricts the social mobility and confines people to groups identified by the past more than the present. Nonetheless, this perception of past has been changing over the years, particularly since the end of 19th century when our nationalist leaders started to portray India as a nation and its population as a unit. India is no longer perceived simply as a segment or fragment, divided into several regions/states with its population representing different religious/ social identities. In 1947 following its independence from the British, India was declared as a secular state. The overtly Hindu symbols were avoided and a mix of religions were represented in the formation of the national symbols, to reiterate its secular character. Secularism in India refers to a respect for all religions and not its western counterpart of no religion. Thus, the flag of the country has a Buddhist wheel of law. The national emblem is made of lions, taken from the seal of the Buddhist king, Asoka. Further, jana, gana, mana was adopted as the national anthem spelling out peoples and regions of India, clearly reinforcing its unified identity, despite the underlying diversities. In short, the concern of the nationalist leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru had been to portray India as essentially representative of the principle of 'unity Civilization and Culture in diversity'. The principle of unity and diversity reflects India's ability 'to absorb and reshape what is foreign' (Cohn 1971:57). India's civilization represents assimilation and absorption of elements from long period of several waves of immigrant rule. This has indeed contributed to its socio-cultural richness and pluralism. However, the following section focusing on Embree's account on unity of India's civilizational past, raises questions regarding appropriateness of viewing Indian society and culture in view of 'unity in diversity'. Check Your Progress 3 i) Complete the following sentences by filling in the blank spaces a) The mythic/ritual past for Hindus relates to .... b) In addition to the religious past,

.............................provides a basis to understand Indian social structure. c) The...................................... reinforce India's unified identity, despite the prevalence of diversities. 1.5 DISCOURSES ON INDIA'S CIVILIZATIONAL UNITY The unified identity of Indian civilization is a matter of discussion and debate. Embree (1989) presents three different views. On one hand there are those who deny the unity of the Indian civilization. The second view contrarily, sees India as an all- encompassing civilization and unified entity. The third view is a synthesis of the first, two positions. According to this view India is a land of composite culture, reflective of 'unity and diversity'. The advocates of the first view are those who fall in line with the geographer Spate's thought that historically India is constituted of 'perennial/nuclear regions', which have played a crucial role in shaping and structuring its regional geography and socio-cultural and political history. The perennial/nuclear regions are areas of high population density and activity and stand in distinction from not only each other but also zones which are relatively isolated. As we have seen in Section 1.2, according to this view Indian civilization is witness to variations in regional geography, which in turn explains the variations in its socio-cultural traditions and levels of political development. This view purports the concept of regionalism. That regionalism is a force which challenges the idea of an all-Indian civilisation emerges clearly in the colonial works, Hobson-Jobson and that of Strachey. These works view unity of India as artificially created by the colonial conquest of the country that would last until the exercise of imperial power. According to these India is a land of numerous regions and hence it would be wrong to perceive people residing here as 'Indians'. Contrary, to such colonial conceptualisation we find many Indians and nationalist leaders asserting physical, political, social and religious unity of India as a civilizational legacy. The 1885 meeting of Indian National Congress provides a testimony of such claims. The proponents of the second view feel that despite the continued significance of nuclear regions of historical geography there exists reality of an all Indian civilization. They view colonial emphasis on regionalism as a misreading of Indian history. 18 Ideas of India The third view that pronounces Indian civilization as displaying 'unity in diversity' finds one of the earliest expression in the historian, Vincent Smith's Oxford History of India, 1919. This is taken as the most appropriate basis to understand Indian civilization's uniqueness and distinctiveness from other world cultures. However, Embree rejects the characterisation of India's civilizational history in terms of 'unity in diversity'. Reaffirming the second view, Embree attributes unity of India to the Brahmanical ideology and tradition, which is a pervasive force with the Hindus who form the majority of its population. He contrasts it with Hinduism, which he relates to religious and social practices with innumerable regional and local variants and manifestations that developed in the subcontinent over its long history since the 3rd century BCE. On the other hand, according to him, the Brahmanical ideology represents a uniform and coherent set of statements in the classical texts and inheritance from historical experiences pertaining to philosophy of life and worldview. It provides meaning to the lives of majority of Indian population and hence,may be regarded as the significant force contributing to the unity of Indian civilization.The notions like karma and reincarnation, concept of dharma, and a sense of a hierarchical social order with respect for Brahmans and rituals are significant contents of the Brahmanic ideology. These ideological canons articulated with political experiences underlying "imperial institutions brought a variety of regions under a central authority"(Embree 1989: 12). While the unifying role that the Brahmanical ideology played during the Mauryan empire is doubtful, after the latter's disintegration, it emerged as "an articulated theory of society, with its religious and social sanctions, for political power" (ibid: 17). The deference paid to Brahmanical culture by the rulers regarding the nature of governance and kingship was noteworthy even when India came under Islamic rule. Activity 4 Collect some information on the Mauryan Empire. Write a note of about two-three pages covering: a) its major rulers, b) its expanse

or spread in the Indian subcontinent, c) its role in spreading of religions like Jainism and Buddhism. Yet, another factor according to Embree that provides unifying linkages to Indian civilization relates to the poltico-historical experience that was shaped owing to the intrusion of external powers – the Islamic, and the European. This is contrary to colonial and nationalist imagination of unity of India's civilization. The nationalists viewed Indian history in terms of great empires created by the Maurya and the Gupta rulers. This was primarily a reaction to the colonial construction that India's political unity was artificial, and created by imperial power. In Embree's opinion both the Brahmanical ideology and the two external intrusions have been significant in restricting the emergence of nation-states and countering the growth of regionalism in India. This is unique from the European experience. In Europe there are around 25 nation-states. Unlike the European Church, the Brahmanical tradition placed the ruler or the king at the centre of universal order, without stressing on the criteria of territorial sovereignty. Further, the intrusion of Islamic and European civilizations had an all encompassing effect 19 on India, destroying the scope and possibility for different regions to political Civilization and Culture independence. According to Embree regionalism has not been a counterforce to unity of India as it has been made to appear in many writings. This however, according to him does not imply India may be characterised in terms of 'unity and diversity'. The unification of India may be attributed to the two external invasions and the pervasive Brahmanical ideology. The forces that prevented attempts at political unification of India in the historical past should be seen not as instances of regionalism but internal political rivals to imperial institutions. Check Your Progress 4 i) What are the major forces that unify Indian civilization?

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Brahmanical ideology? (Explain briefly) .... ii) What do you understand by

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counterforce to the unity of Indian civilization. Elaborate in four sentences. .... iii) Regionalism has not been a

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.... 1.6 LET US SUM UP In this unit, we saw the composite culture and pluralistic content of the Indian civilization. We first focused on various approaches to the study of Indian culture and civilisation. Next, we elaborated on the cultural and historical geography of India and how this reflects richness and diversity of the Indian culture and civilization. Further, we examined how the structural and cultural past of the Indians have a significant bearing on their present. We saw how the ritual and socio-political past of Indians link them with specific religious and kinship groups. 20 Ideas of India We saw a reworking of the bounded identity of Indians in the efforts of nationalists, particularly following India's independence, as they wanted to represent the country as an unified political entity, reflecting the principle of 'unity in diversity'. In the last section we

examined Embree's understanding regarding the unity of Indian civilization. We observed India as representing two realities: that of various regions and unifying ideology of Brahmanical tradition and external intrusions. Embree's work focuses on the aspect that civilization is not a fixed heritage, handed down from the past, but rather an adaptive mechanisms that permit it to be both a historically determined and continuously renewed in a creative way. 1.7 REFERENCES Embree, A. Thomas. (1989). Imagining India. Oxford University Press. Chapter 1 Brahaminical Ideology and Regional Identities. Pp.9-27. Cohn, Bernard. (1971). India: The Social Anthropology of a Civilization. Oxford University Press. Chapters 1,3, 5 & 8 (1-7, 24-31, 51-59,79-97) Dube, S. C. (1990). Indian Society. New Delhi: National Book Trust. Chapters 1 and 2 (1-46)