

## 10<sup>th</sup> - Democracy and Diversity



Apart from language and region, people have distinct identity in the form of physical appearance, class, religion, gender, caste, tribe, etc. In this chapter, we are going to understand how democracy responds to social differences, divisions and inequalities.

**A story from Mexico Olympics:** During the medal ceremony of the 200 metres race in the 1968 Olympics held at Mexico City, the two US athletes stood with clenched fists upraised and heads bowed, while the American national anthem was played. They were Tommie Smith and Carlos. They were African-American athletes. They had won the gold and bronze medals respectively. They received their medals wearing black socks and no shoes to represent Black Poverty. With this act, they tried to draw international attention to racial discrimination in the United States. The black-gloved and raised clenched fists were meant to symbolise Black Power. The third athlete (silver medallist) standing with them was a white Australian athlete, Peter Norman. He wore a human rights badge on his shirt during the ceremony to show his support to the two Americans.

The International Olympic Association held Carlos and Smith guilty of violating the Olympic spirit by making a political statement. Their medals were taken back. They were subjected to a lot of criticism in their home country. Norman also suffered for his action and was not included in the Australian team for the next Olympic. But their action succeeded in gaining international attention for the Civil Rights Movement in the US. Later on, the San Jose ('Saan Hoze') State University of which they were former students, honoured them and installed their statue in the University campus.

**Differences, similarities, divisions:** The athletes in the given example, were responding to social divisions and social inequalities. However, this happens even in societies which do not have racial divisions like in Belgium and Sri Lanka. In the case of Belgium, people who live in different regions, speak different languages. In Sri Lanka, linguistic as well as religious differences are there. Thus, social diversity can take different forms in different societies.

**Origins of Social Differences:** Social diversity takes different forms in different societies. We belong to a community because we were born into it. We all experience social differences based in our daily lives, but all kinds of social differences are not based on birth only. Some of them are based on our choices. Every social difference does not lead to social division. Social differences divide similar people from one another, but they also unite very different people. People belonging to different social groups share differences and similarities cutting across the boundaries of their groups. In the example of Mexican Olympic, two players were African-American and one was white, but they were all athletes who stood against racial discrimination. It is often seen that people belonging to same religion feel that they do not belong to the same community because their caste or sect is different. It is possible for people from different religions to have the same caste and feel close to each other. Rich and poor persons from the same family often do not keep close relations to each other.

**Overlapping and Cross-Cutting Differences:** Social division takes place when some social difference overlaps with other differences. The difference between the Blacks and whites becomes a social division in the US because the Blacks tend to

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be poor, homeless and discriminated against. In India, Dalits tend to be poor and landless. They often face discrimination and injustice. This creates social divisions, when one kind of social difference becomes more important than the other and people start feeling that they belong to different communities. If social differences cross cut one another, it is difficult to pit one group of people against the other. It means that groups that share a common interest on one issue are likely to be in different sides on a different issue.

**Case of Northern Ireland and the Netherlands:** In the case of Northern Ireland and the Netherlands, people are predominantly Christian, but divided between Catholics and Protestants. In Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants have conflicts, while they do not have conflicts in the Netherlands. It is because in Northern Ireland, Catholics are poor due to historical discrimination. While in the Netherlands, Catholics and Protestants are about equally likely to be poor or rich.

**Social Divisions due to Overlapping Social Differences:** Overlapping social differences create possibilities of deep social divisions and tensions. Cross-cutting social differences are easier to accommodate. Social divisions of one kind or another exist in most countries. E.g. they exist in big country like India or small country like Belgium. Even they exist in Homogeneous society. Germany and Sweden were once highly homogeneous societies, but now they are undergoing rapid change with influx of people or Migrants from other parts of the world. Migrants bring with them their own culture and tend to form a different social community. Thus, most countries of the world became multi-cultural.

**Politics of social divisions:** Democracy involves competition among different political parties. Their competition tends to divide society. If they start competing in terms of some existing social division, it can make social divisions into political divisions. This leads to conflict, violence or even disintegration of a country. This has happened in many countries.

**Political Division Northern Ireland:** For many years, Northern Ireland has been the site of a violent and bitter ethno-political conflict. Its population is divided into two major sects of Christianity. Here, 53 per cent are Protestants and 44 per cent are Roman Catholics. The Protestants were represented by Unionists who wanted to remain with the UK, which is predominantly Protestant. On the other hand, the Catholics were represented by the Nationalist parties who demanded that Northern Ireland be unified with a predominantly Catholic country, i.e. the Republic of Ireland. Hundreds of civilians, militants and security forces were killed in the fight between Unionists and Nationalists and between the security forces of UK and the Nationalists. In 1998, the UK Government and the Nationalists reached a peace treaty.

**Political Division in Yugoslavia:** In Yugoslavia, political competition along religious ending ethnic lines led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia into six independent countries. Such examples conclude that politics and social division must not be allowed to mix. It would be best if there are no social divisions in any country. If social divisions do exist in country, they must never be expressed in politics.

But it is not necessary that every expression of social divisions leads to disasters. In most countries of the world, social division exists. Whenever they exist, they are reflected in politics. Political parties talk about these divisions, make different promises to different communities and make policies to redress the grievances of



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the disadvantaged communities. Social divisions affect voting in most countries. In many countries, there are parties that focus only on one community, yet all this does not lead to disintegration of the country.

**Three Determinants:** Three factors are crucial in deciding the outcome of politics of social divisions.

**People's Perception about their Identities:** In the first place, the outcome depends on how people perceive their identities. If people see their identities in singular and exclusive terms, it becomes very difficult to accommodate them. But if they think that their identities are multiple and complementary with the national identity, the situation becomes much easier and better. For example, most of the people of India and Belgium think themselves as Indian and Belgian as well as belonging to a state or a language group.

**Role of Political Leaders:** It depends on how political leaders raise the demands of any community. It is easier to accommodate demands which are within the constitutional framework and are not at the cost of another community. The majoritarian measure adopted by the Sri Lankan Government for the Sinhala supremacy was at the cost of the interest and identity of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka. In Yugoslavia, demand of leaders of different ethnic communities could not be accommodated within a single country.

**Attitude of the Government:** Lastly, it depends on how the government reacts to the demands of different groups. If the rulers of the majority community are willing to share power and accommodate the reasonable demands of the minority community, social divisions become less threatening for the country. But, if in the name of national unity, attempts are made to suppress those demands, the result is the opposite.

**Conclusion on Political and Social Division:** In a democracy, political expression of social division is very normal and can be healthy. This allows various disadvantaged and marginal social groups to express their grievances and the government to resolve them. Sometimes, social differences lead to unacceptable level of social inequality and injustice. The struggle against such inequality often leads to take the path of violence and disobey of state authority. However, history shows that democracy is the best way to fight for recognition and also to accommodate diversity.

### Notes:

**African-American:** Afro-American, Black American or Black is the terms used to refer mainly to the descendants of Africans who were brought into America as slaves between the 17th century 19th century.

**Black Power:** It was the movement started by Black people in 1966 in the USA against racism and the practice of apartheid and lasted till 1975. It was a militant movement advocating even violence if necessary to end racism in the US.

**Civil Rights Movement:** In the USA (1954-1968), this refers to a set of events and reform movements aimed at abolishing legal racial discrimination against African-Americans and restoring voting rights to them.

**Social Differences:** These are the situations where people are discriminated against on the basis of social, economic and racial inequality. It gives way to social diversity, which is different from society to society.

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**Social Division:** Division of the society on the basis of language, region, caste, colour, race or sex. It signifies linguistic and regional diversity.

**Cross-cutting Social Differences:** If social differences cross-cut one another, it is known as cross-cutting differences.

