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## **Block 2**

# **Elements of Religion**



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## UNIT 5 SACRED, MYTH AND RITUAL: SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION\*

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### Structure

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### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this Unit, you will be able to

- explain concepts of sacred, myth and ritual;
- discuss the social significance of myths and rituals; and
- discuss the significance of religion in society.

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Religion often affects our understanding of the everyday life. The way in which we relate to each other is often influenced by our religious beliefs. Religion is also related to politics, and to economic activities like production, distribution and consumption. Religion can unite human beings, but also sow hatred among them. Religion may produce differing impacts in different places. At one end of the globe, it serve to justify oppression and unequal distribution of resources. The same religion, you may find, serves as a reason to resist and struggle against oppression, at the other end of the globe.

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\* Adapted from IGNOU Course Material: *Society and Religion* (ESO 15) Units 1 and 3 written by Michael Kennedy, Unit 5 written by Shobhita Jain, Unit 6 written by Eddie Rodrigues and *Society in India* (ESO 12) Unit 27 with modifications by Nita Mathur

## 5.2 NOTION OF THE 'SACRED'

Religious beliefs as studied by Durkheim presuppose the classification of all things into 'sacred' and 'profane'. There is an opposition between these two spheres which has to be carefully regulated through rites and ceremonies. The sacred is that which is set apart, considered holy and venerated or dreaded and avoided. The sacred is usually in a higher position, valued more than profane things, and its identity and power are protected by social rules. The profane, on the other hand, refers to the mundane, ordinary aspects of day-to-day existence. The sacred and profane are kept apart, says Durkheim, because they are heterogeneous (different), antagonistic (in conflict) and isolated (separated). Rites therefore exist to mediate between the two worlds. Let us take an example. Why are believers not allowed to wear their shoes inside a temple? Wearing shoes or *chappals* for walking is a routine, practical or profane act. The temple is considered a holy, pure place; it is sacred. The floor of the temple must therefore be protected from the polluting dirt of our shoes. The sacred and profane are kept apart.

### Box 5.1 Sacred and Profane

Durkheim (1961:52) wrote about the sacred and the profane that All known religious beliefs ... presuppose a classification of all things ... into two classes or opposed group, generally designated by two distinct terms .... profane and sacred .... by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits. a rock, tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred ..... The circle of sacred objects cannot be determined, then, once for all. Its extent varies infinitely, according to the different religions. That is how Buddhism is a religion: in default of gods, it admits the existence of sacred things, namely, the four noble truths and the practices derived from them .....

we must now show by what general characteristic they (sacred things) are to be distinguished from profane things ....

One might be tempted, first of all, to define them by the place they are generally assigned in the hierarchy of things. They are naturally considered superior in dignity power to profane things.....

The opposition of these two classes manifests itself outwardly with a visible sign by which we can easily recognise the very special classification, wherever it exists.

Beliefs and rites, says Durkheim, unite to form religion. Beliefs are the moral ideas, the rules, the teachings and myths. They are the collective representations which exist outside of the individual, yet integrate the individual into the religious system. Through beliefs, human beings understand the sacred and their relationship to it. They can lead their lives accordingly.

Evans-Pritchard (1981), however, maintained that sacred-profane dichotomy is not universal. Sacred and profane are not always antithetical.

### **Box 5.2 Evans-Pritchard's view on Sacred-Profane Dichotomy**

Concerning the distinction between sacred and profane, Pritchard observes that amongst the Azande, such clear cut distinctions simply do not exist. Categories of explanations that one would normally associate with the realm of the sacred are at the same time used in the very same way to denote a range of activities in the domain of the profane. Thus the Azande would use the term 'soul' when explaining what is happening during a magical rite, which is justified in that such an entity belongs to the domain of the sacred. But in the same manner they would use the term soul to explain the process by which a seed put in the ground germinates to become a plant. In fact, for Evans-Pritchard the rituals and the beliefs of the Azande clearly denote that for these tribes, the natural and the supernatural, the sacred and the profane, the ritual act and the non-ritual act are all inextricably interwoven in their everyday life.

As we look critically at Durkheim's work on religion, we need to also mention, though only in passing, the ideas of his contemporaries. More than contemporaries, they were his colleagues and students, the writers of the *Annee Sociologique* school. Durkheim founded and edited the journal, *L'Annee sociologique*. Those who contributed articles to this journal came to be known as belonging to the *Annees Sociologique* school.

One of the well-known writers of this school, was Marcel Mauss (1906) who wrote on the Eskimos. In this study he showed sacred and secular dimensions of time by describing patterns of Eskimo life during the summer and the winter. He said that during the summer when ice in the sea melted away, the Eskimos lived in smaller groups and pursued various activities. During the winter they could not pursue hunting and lived in long houses. They had to form larger groups and live in a new social arrangement. During this phase of annual calendar, the Eskimos performed the religious ceremonies. Mauss argued that this pattern showed that religion was an outcome of social concentration and it was reinforced during the winter celebrations. This is exactly what Durkheim's thesis of religion is all about. So we can say that Mauss produced a perfect confirmation of Durkheim's ideas. But do remember that one illustration does not make a law and therefore we can treat this case only as an example of Durkheim's theory and cannot cite it as its proof.

Another member of the *Annee Sociologique* School, Robert Hertz (1960), made use of Durkheim's ideas of the sacred and profane. He related them to the opposition between the right and the left hands. The opposition right and left has its parallels in equally established opposition between the male and the female, the powerful and the powerless, the lucky and the unlucky.

### Check Your Progress 1

1) What are the basic arguments of Durkheim on religion?

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2) Explain the significance of sacred-profane dichotomy.

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### 5.3 MYTH AND RITUAL

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Myth may be understood as a narrative held in common by a group of people. Among the tribes religious myth, belief, religious value and religious action are not treated as something apart from other kinds of belief and behaviour, as followed in social, economic and political contexts. Yet, the meaning of beliefs and behaviour of the tribals appears mysterious to the outsiders. This is precisely because theirs is a religion without explanation. However, tribal religion is no less complete than the highly developed form of complex religion to the extent that its implicit philosophy recognises the same universal truth.

Saraswati's (1986) exploration and analysis of the tribal myths of North-East India has led him to say that in the archaic vision, human, cosmos and the supernatural are not separate realities but are related and closely communicable to the extent that the Land of the Dead is the archetype of the Land of the Living. In support of his argument he quotes the Apa Tani's eschatological beliefs, as recorded by Furer-Haimendorf (1953): "The Apa Tani believe that the souls, Yalo, of all those who die a natural death go to Neli, the place of the dead, which looks like an Apa Tani village with long rows of houses. As an Apa Tani lived on this earth so will he live in Neli; a rich man will find the cattle he has sacrificed during his lifetime. Every woman returns to her first husband, but those who died unmarried may there marry and beget children. Life in Neli is similar to life on earth: people cultivate and work, and ultimately they die once more and go to another 'Land of the Dead'.

### Box 5.3 Lévi-Strauss's Understanding of Myth

Lévi-Strauss argues that mythic structures (symbolic structures) parallel social structure, not because myth mirrors society. But because, both myth and social structure share a common underlying structure of human mind. Put it differently, myths are more than the meaning they offer to an interpreter, and the functions they fulfill for the society which shapes them. Lévi-Strauss argues that there are relatively stable mental structures (structures in mind) which give rise to permutations and combinations in the form of culture. These mental structures are universal human nature. These structures are union and opposition between ideas, better put as 'binary opposition'. Like a grammar beneath languages lies the logic or code beneath culture (any symbolic form, myth, for that matter).

Lévi-Strauss studies myth as a system of signs. For him, a myth accounts for the basic conceptual categories of the human mind. These categories are made of contradictory series of such binary opposition as raw and cooked, nature and culture, left and right etc. Thus, a myth is a version of a theme which is represented in specific combination of categories.

In the ethnographic description of diverse cultures given by scholars like Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski, Émile Durkheim and many others, The term ritual is used to denote two separate sets of activities.

- i) The first is strictly in the sphere of religious practice and refers to a wide range of religious activities viz. prayer, ceremonial worship, chanting, a range of gestures and movements, activities with sacred object, etc. all done with the specific intention of spiritual communication with a Supreme Being. Thus, the various religious activities and practices engaged in by the Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, etc. in their respective temples, mosques, churches and gurdwaras, etc. may be referred to as rituals. Besides, in their respective homes, practitioners of a faith also conduct 'religious activities that are referred to as rituals. Thus the Hindu family performing 'pooja' on certain occasions, the Muslims family performing 'namaz', or the Christian family reciting the 'rosary' at the hour of prayers are all rituals performed by these believers in their respective homes.
- ii) A second set of human activities that are identified as rituals are those associated with individual life cycle as they move from one social setting to the next. In all societies, from birth to death an individual passes through several stages demarcating a transition from one stage of life to the next. Such transitions, are often marked by activity which is ritualistic in character.

Durkheim (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*) pointed out that all human societies are divided into the opposing domains of 'sacred' and 'profane'. These two domains were separate and exclusive. The domain of the sacred consisted of things set aside and forbidden. The domain of the profane consisted of things not so regarded and belonging to the ordinary level.

According to Durkheim, ritual was that human behaviour that takes place in the domain of the sacred. By specifying the particular location within which religious activities occur, Durkheim laid the grounds for an empirical examination of the religious sphere as well as the relationship that practices and beliefs within this domain had with the larger human society.

It is this empirical emphasis on the study of religion, that brought about a substantive increase in anthropological field studies of the domain of the sacred. Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard and others all studied religious beliefs and practices of various tribal societies with a view to further examining the interrelationship between society and religion.

Improving on the definition of rituals offered by Durkheim, and orienting the meaning of rituals within the theory of the Social System, Talcott Parsons observes that rituals are human practices within the realm of the sacred that are characterized by their essential non-rational or transcendental nature. What Parsons means by this is that unlike human rational behaviour that occurs within a means-end relationship, ritual behaviour exists outside the means-end relations. They are an end in themselves.

### **Evolutionary Theories of Ritual**

The earliest efforts at developing theories of ritual were those of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural evolutionists viz. Edward Tylor and James Frazer. In both Tylor's '*Primitive Culture*' (1871) 1958 and Frazer's '*The Golden Bough*' (1890) 1950, there is an effort to provide for an intellectual approach to the understanding of ritual behaviour. Neither Tylor nor Frazer used the term ritual when referring to the practices that we have identified and labelled as rituals. But Tylor observed that the world of human beliefs as passing through three stages-viz. Magic, Religion and Science and it was the practices the 'primitive' man engaged in the stage of magic that interested those scholars. It is now recognized that these early scholars of religion made an important contribution by bringing religion into sharp focus. All subsequent sociologists and anthropologists who wrote on religion after Frazer and Tylor had the task of refining the existing theories and providing further inputs into the area.

Such practices were identified by Tylor as being magico-religious practices and he attributed the reasons for these magico-religious practices to the fact that man's intellect needed some form of explanation to understand phenomena like sleep, death, fate, etc. Such a need led to the creation of what Tylor termed as animism.

Rituals within animism result from human beings tendency to attribute a spirit or indwelling personality to the world of animate and inanimate objects. It is the practice evolved out of such an intellectual exercise by people in simple societies that gives rise to the forms of ritual. It is important to note that Tylor emphasised magic and magical practices as the basis through which ritual worship evolved

because according to him there was a distinct difference between the stage of magic and that of religion. Magical practices according to Tylor formed the first cohesive institutional basis for the emergence of societies. In these magical practices or what Frazer called 'Pseudo Science', people were developing systems of explanations, through which both, individually and group-wise they could come to terms with the various unknown realities that they had to live with.

The institution of magical practices is thus very much located in the realm of the spiritual and in people's efforts to understand this spiritual. Tylor's and Frazer's observations of rituals as magico-religious practices or pseudo-science are essentially based on a conjecture to explain the origin of religion. Very little ethnographic evidence exists to prove or disprove such theoretical conjectures.

But it is important to note that by making distinctions between magic and religion, Tylor set the ground for a future enquiry on the scope and identity of religious practices.

### **Functionalist Theories of Ritual**

If the nineteenth century evolutionists who studied religion were criticised for an over emphasis on the origins of religion and ritual, scholars on religion who followed them were inclined to shift the emphasis on the study of religions and rituals to answering the questions-what do rituals do in human society or what they ought to do in human society. Such an enquiry which is also termed as functionalism in Sociological theory was an approach adopted by both Emile Durkheim and Malinowski. In his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1954) Durkheim observed that in all human societies there exists a dichotomy between the world of the sacred and the world of the profane. Using this dichotomy of sacred and profane, Durkheim put forward a theory of religion in which religious beliefs and practices are seen to have a social function for the community that follow them, Durkheim identified this social function as the integrative function of society.

To illustrate Durkheim focuses on the Arunta Tribesmen of Western Australia whose elaborate religious ceremonies of worship of their totem symbolized the community worshipping itself.

The ritual thus taken on the twin function of reinforcing collective values and reaffirming the community among individuals. In other words, Durkheim's emphasis on religion and rituals as an integrative force in society which must be seen as part of his idea of the 'collective consciousness of a society'. Religious beliefs and practices are the mechanism by which the collective consciousness of a society gets institutionalised and is reproduced from one generation to the next. Rituals in such a context must be seen as creating the ground for group solidarity amongst the individuals participating in them. The elaborate procedure in which individuals come to take upon themselves various roles performing various gestures and movements, engage in various forms of vocal recitations, chanting

and so on are all means through which rituals bring about a sense of group solidarity among its participants. Through rituals, Durkheim tried to emphasise that the participants acquire the knowledge of what is good, required, accepted and desired by the community and in this sense brought the individual closer to the collective identity of the group.

Further Durkheim observed that at the symbolic level, rituals represented the collective identity of the social group. Thus, the sacred object in ritual practices were sacred because they symbolized the collective identity of the group.

Likewise the stylized pattern of movements and gestures should be perceived as symbols forms whose meanings and values were known to the members of the social group. These meanings may not be known to every member of a society. Instead, there are usually priests whose specialization is in ritual, whose function it is to disseminate meanings. This emphasis on the importance of the social group in the understanding of ritual, is perhaps the most important aspect of Durkheim's explanation of rituals and their relationship to society. In doing so however, he argued that magic could not be in the domain of sacred as it was not obligatory on the part of the community.

Magic does not have a set of beliefs which a church has. In general however, Durkheim's theory of rituals sought to establish a universal character of rituals in all human cultures. The domain of the sacred and the profane existed in all cultures that claimed to have a religion. The problem however, was that Durkheim never sought to elaborate on what exactly were, the criteria on which the distinction between sacred and profane was to be made.

Were there a set of sacred objects and symbolic forms that could be sacred to all cultures? Or was this distinction embodied in the mind of the individual participant taking part in the ritual? Or was the distinction a mere label of convenience developed by the European mind unable to explain the complex phenomenon as it occurred in non- European societies? Durkheim himself recognised a number of these problems in his distinction of sacred and profane. It was the fieldwork studies of later day anthropologists that sought to resolve some of these queries concerning the distinction of sacred and profane. Yet we must remember that later scholars have pointed out that the difference between sacred and profane may not be absolutely distinct.

### **Malinowski's Understanding of Ritual**

Anthropological field studies of non-European cultures at the beginning of this century enriched the theory of rituals by actually investigating the domain of the sacred as it actually exists in the everyday life tribal society. Important amongst such studies are the explanations offered by Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard.

Malinowski's functionalist approach to the study of ritual is based on his field investigations of the Trobriand Islanders in the 'Argonauts of the Western Pacific

1922). Malinowski's functional theory of religion has already been discussed in a previous unit. Like Durkheim, the basic thrust of Malinowski's approach to rituals is that rituals have a social function for the community in which they take place.

He disagreed with Tylor's reasoning that rituals are the result of 'primitive' man's rationality at coming to terms with unknown and unexplainable forces in nature. The rituals of the Trobriand Islanders were neither the result of speculation nor the product of an underdeveloped intellect. In their everyday life, the Trobriand people were quite capable at distinguishing between those acts that they considered magical and those that belonged to the realm of common sense or technological activities. The magic practices of the Trobriand Islanders had also an accompanying set of beliefs which were very much a part of the community and even if they did not have anything like a church as perceived by the European mind, their magical beliefs did create a strong bond of solidarity within the community.

The social function of ritual according to Malinowski was to create and enhance emotional solidarity within the community. Every individual or group in their everyday life has to grapple with a range of anxieties, sufferings, fears, moral problems of good and bad, problems arising out of severe problems such as epidemics, death etc. In such moments of tensions and emotional strain, rituals helps reaffirm solidarity with the group by creating a sense of security and oneness with other members of the group. The experience of a ritual thus unites them through its systematized and symbolic actions, which create a new integrative state of mind for the members of the group.

Ritual in the above sense performed both explanatory and validatory functions. As an explanatory function Malinowski pointed out that rituals explained the larger 'why' questions of life and existence, or explanations about the uncontrollable forces of nature, or explanations of providence concerning the maintenance and welfare of the group, or explanations of the life cycle concerning birth and death. Such queries are to be found in all cultures, in simple societies. Rituals as symbolic expression offer explanations to such queries for members of the social group.

As a validating function, rituals support and affirm the continued existence of the structure of the social group. Thus, the social relations, the institutions, the values, the goals of the social group etc. are supported by ritual practices so that such aspects of the social group are seen as righteous and rituals uphold with the threat of sanctions what is considered as desirable in the conduct of individuals towards the social group.

Malinowski also emphasised the interrelated and interdependent nature of rituals in simple societies. In the Trobriand Islands, he observed that the rituals linked up to every facet of the social life of the community. In the political sphere there were ritual and ceremonies for the physical well-being and strength of the

leadership. In the economic sphere, rituals represented the continuity of certain forms of property relations, or rituals seeking divine intervention for a successful harvest or to avert some natural catastrophe etc. In short we can say that in the life of these simple societies, rituals play a prominent role at any point of time in the life of the individual or social group that is recognised as being crucial.

There does exist a great deal of similarity in the ideas of both Durkheim and Malinowski with regard to rituals. It must be remembered however, that Malinowski laid the real foundation for the scientific examination of ritual practices by actually studying these in the context of the Trobriand Islanders. In doing so he was able to not only prove Durkheim's views on magic as wrong, he was even able to empirically prove the distinct domains of sacred and profane amongst the community of the Trobriand people. Further, while Durkheim sought to emphasise integration as the basic social function of ritual practices, Malinowski emphasised emotional solidarity as the key social function of rituals within a social group.

### **Symbolic Dimension of Ritual**

One of the important aspect of rituals emphasised by Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, Malinowski as well as other scholars working on rituals was the symbolic dimensions of rituals. As symbolic expressions, what do rituals have to say? This is an area in which structural anthropology has also attempted to provide some explanations.

Unlike the functionalist approach to rituals which understands them primarily in terms of the social functions they fulfil in a society, the structuralist points out that rituals need not be reduced to their social functions but they can be studied in themselves as systems of symbolic expressions that are internally consistent and reflect the logic of the mind in its effort to explain the unknown. The structuralist appearance would point out that the division of the world into the domain of sacred and the domain of profane, is in keeping with the structural rule followed by the mind in naming and classifying the world. Thus, sacred and profane are binary opposites resulting from the structuring of reality by the unconscious. In other words, the underlying symbolic value of rituals must be understood in terms of their relationship with the sacred as opposed to the profane. Edmund Leach goes on to add that within the context of these oppositions, rituals are symbolic statements derived from the social and cultural dimensions of a community.

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## **5.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION IN SOCIETY**

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Malinowski had studied the Trobriand Islanders in the Western Pacific. The people here were mostly from fishing communities and had to constantly deal with hazardous expeditions for fishing and underwent experiences that could not be explained by them. Malinowski argued that the feelings of fear, anger,

sadness, etc. that arose in the mind of people in simple societies on such occasions were overcome by resorting to religious activities or the performance of certain rituals that would help get over such unsure feelings. Religion functioned here to essentially help one to regain one's stability of mind and readjust to situations of emotional stress that had arisen. In other words, religion functioned as a 'tool for adoption' to any given situation. For example, when the islanders would set out for a long journey, they would perform rituals and magic on the boat so that it would not give them trouble on the way. Such an exercise was carried out in all kinds of situations of mental and physical instability. Ritual and magic have a great influence on the activities of the society as a whole. The influence of rituals increases greatly in times of acute stress and especially in all events that people find hard to explain.

Asking similar questions which early evolutionists asked, Malinowski and his followers gave different answers. In this sense they understood religion in terms of its functions; their findings progressed beyond traditional answers to questions of origin and development of religion. They provided the functionalist alternative to evolutionist theories. Not content with simply observing and recording data about simple societies, Malinowski's successor, Radcliffe-Brown, tried to analyse ethnographic data by using sociological concepts. He was attracted to the Durkheimian sociology.

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown tried to make Durkheim's theory of totemism into a more comprehensive view of religion. In an article, 'The Sociological Theory of Totemism', Radcliffe-Brown (1929:295-309) showed totemism to be a particular form of universalistic law operating in human society. The universal law is that anything related to material or non-material well being of a society is an object of religious attitude. For example, those who depend on dairy products have ritual attitude to dairy animals. Radcliffe-Brown did not accept explanations of the origin of religion in terms of psychology.

Evans-Pritchard (1965:74) is, however, critical of this position. He points out that in practice, while describing the occasions of dancing among the Andaman Islanders, Radcliffe-Brown explains religious behaviour mainly in terms of the personality of the dancer and mixture of feelings and actions in his dance which produce solidarity in the community. Secondly, on the basis of this case, Radcliffe-Brown generalizes that a ritual attitude generates social cohesion and harmony. Evans-Pritchard (1965:74) objects to this tendency of generalising on the basis of one case. For example, the dances in Central Africa, he points out, often cause conflict and Thirdly, Radcliffe-Brown argues that religion functions to keep society together and its forms vary in accordance with types of society. For example, ancestor worship is commonly found in societies with lineage systems. But, then, Evans-Pritchard (1956:75) again, as if to prove Radcliffe-Brown wrong, points out that among some African groups, ancestor cult is found where no lineage system exists.

Evans-Pritchard criticizes Radcliffe-Brown's functionalist approach to religion on the following bases:

- i) Sociological explanations offered by Radcliffe-Brown did not take into account any negative evidence.
- ii) Radcliffe-Brown's generalised statements are vague in nature. They have very little scientific value because it is not possible to either prove or disprove them.

Evans-Pritchard criticised the functionalist approach to the study of religion. In addition he considered the possibilities for showing that certain religious systems are found in societies of a particular type. This was initially taken by Levy-Bruhl and later Evans-Pritchard also added new ideas to the sociological study of religion.

Here, we will discuss a case study, made by an Indian scholar, M.N. Srinivas. Srinivas was a student and colleague of Radcliffe-Brown and as such in his study of religion he used Durkheim's ideas via Radcliffe-Brown's theory of ritual.

#### **Box 5.4 Radcliffe-Brown's theory of Ritual**

Beattie (1964:210) writes about Radcliffe-Brown's theory of ritual. Since people's behaviour is largely determined by what they think to be important, the performance of ritual may have important social consequences. This was the central theme of Radcliffe-Brown's theory of ritual, which he derived from Durkheim. In *The Andaman Islanders* and elsewhere he argued that ritual's main social function is to express certain important social sentiments (or as we should now a days call them values), such as the need for mutual support and solidarity between the members of a community. Unless enough people held and acted on these values the society could not survive, and through the performance of ritual they are constantly in the minds of the performers, and so the maintenance of the social system is secured.

#### **5.4.1 The Case of Coorg Religion**

Religion is seen as strengthening solidarity in society. You also came to know that according to Durkheim, religion itself is a product of the collective sentiment, aroused by the collective performance of rituals. This view was criticised by many scholars as being unsatisfactory in its explanation of the origin of religion. But Durkheimian understanding of religion via Radcliffe-Brown left a deep impact on M.N. Srinivas's study of religion among the 'Coorg. The Coorg are the inhabitants of the mountainous district of Coorg, in Karnataka. M.N. Srinivas, a pioneer Indian sociologist, conducted this study in the early 1940s.

Srinivas closely observed the social life of the Coorg, particularly their religious beliefs and practices. He argued that religious rituals and beliefs strengthen unity

in the Coorg society at various levels. For a Coorg Hindu, there are three important social institutions. They are the *okka*, the village and the caste. Almost all Coorg are members of one or the other *okka*. *Okka* is a patrilineal group. The village is a cluster of several *okka* and within the village-there are a number of hierarchically arranged caste groups.

Religion performs specific functions for these three social institutions. Most important function of all is the solidarity fiction. Each *okka* has a special set of rituals which are performed during festival and other ceremonial occasion. In the same way, village celebrates the festival of their patron deity and performs certain rituals.

The village festival mark the differences between castes but also bring them together. At the same time, they bring together several Coorg villages. Now let us elaborate on these functions of religion separately for the three social institutions listed above.

### **Solidarity of the *Okka***

As mentioned earlier: *Okka* is a patrilineal grouping. Srinivas (1978:159) writes "A group of agnatically related males who descended from a common ancestor and their wives and children" constitute an *okka*. Only by birth one can become a member of the *okka*. In the society at large, individuals are generally identified by their *okka*.

Each *okka* has ancestral immovable property which is normally not divided. A person is prohibited from marrying within the *okka*. In other words, marriage is generally a bonding of two unrelated *okka*. The ancestral house of the *okka* is fairly large and has, many rooms. Members of the *okka* live and grow together.

They perform many rituals in unison, especially the rituals to propitiate the ancestors of the *okka*. There are several occasions when, according to Srinivas (1978: 125) "the unity and solidarity of an *okka* find expression in ritual". Let me elaborate one such occasion i.e. marriage. A Coorg marriage involves two important rites. They are *murtha* and *sammanda* rites. *Murtha* is nothing but an auspicious occasion (time). The *murtha* is also indicated by rites performed by all relatives to the subject, groom or bride as the case may be.

A Coorg marriage has the *murtha*, performed on the most auspicious time of the auspicious day. At the centre of *murtha* rite lies the offering of milk by the relatives to the bride or groom in a *kindi* (a special type of vessel). If the mother of the groom or bride is not widowed, she is the first to offer milk. After the elaborate *murtha* rite is performed thrice, comes the *sammanda* ritual. The first two *Murtha* rites bring at one place the groom/bride and his/her kindred. The third *murtha* rite brings the groom and bride's kindred together for participation in marriage rituals.

The *sammanda* ritual marks the transfer of an individual from one *okka* to another. A person can be a member of only a single *okka* at a time. After marriage, the bride leaves her native *okka* and acquires the membership of the conjugal *okka*. If she becomes a widow, again a *sammanda* ritual may be performed and her membership transferred back to the native *okka*. The *sammanda* ritual comprises an elaborate system of rites. In a nutshell, it is a pledge undertaken publicly by two *okka*, involved in marriage, under the eyewitness of two friendly *okka*.

Apart from marriage, there are several festivals, feasts of village-deities, and occasions when ancestors of the *okka* are propitiated. During these celebrations, a complex set of rituals are performed, which express and strengthen the solidarity of the *okka*.

### **Village and Caste Solidarity**

The social differences in the village community are expressed during village festivals, when members of different castes serve different functions. At the same time, the unity between *okka*, castes and villages also finds expression through religious customs and rituals.

During the harvest festival, every *okka* in the village sends all the adult males to participate in the collective dances. At the end of the festivals of the village deities, there is a collective bunt, to which all the *okka* send their adult males. The collective dance and hand canalise the inter-*okka* rivalry present in the village, thereby preventing the destruction of social order, observed Srinivas.

The festival of village deity commences when the villagers take a vow collectively to observe certain restrictions till the end of festival. The restrictions include prohibition of today drinking and slaughter of animals within the village boundary. The prescriptions include keeping the houses clean, lighting the sacred wall-lamp of the house, and joining the singing and dancing. At the end of the village festival, there is a dinner for the entire village. This village dinner is called *urorme* or village harmony. These facts of solidarity of the Coorgi *okka* is found reflected in other village studies in India. In fact village solidarity requires the frequent meeting of members of a village society and also dealing with occasions of stress, tension, and trauma. On such occasion it is religious explanations and ritual which have to be involved and practiced.

Caste finds an expression in the village festival. Srinivas point out the instance of Ketrappa festival in Bengur. During the festival the high caste members bring fowls and pigs as offering to the deity. The fowls are beheaded by a Coorg and the pigs by a Panika. But the animals offered by the lower castes like Meda and Poleya, are not decapitated by either a Coorg or a Panika. Only a Meda can decapitate the offerings presented by the lower castes. There are several such instances where caste hierarchy is expressed and Srinivas mentions several of them in his study.

Calendar festivals like the harvest festival require the cooperation from several *nad*. *Nad* is a cluster of villages. Rites, necessary to prevent epidemics are performed at both the *nad* and village level. To rouse the wrath of a *nad* or a village, it is enough to attack its temple. To take another example, when festivals of certain deities are celebrated, it is customary for certain temples located in other villages to send gifts. Thus religious festivals and rituals unite caste, *okka* and village of the Coorg society.

### Check Your Progress 2

1) Explain briefly the significance of *murtha* and *sammanda* rituals.

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2) How does the festival of village-deity strengthen the solidarity of the Coorg village?

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## 5.5 LET US SUM UP

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Religion performs many social functions. It transforms the society into a moral community. Further, Durkheim's understanding of religion was critically evaluated. It was argued that his sacred-profane dichotomy does not seem to be universal. We discussed the ideas of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown.

The concluding section described the functions of religious rituals and festivals among the Coorg. Among the Coorg, the domestic cult of '*okka*' in general, and marriage rites in particular, strengthen the solidarity of the *okka*. The village festivals ' and festivals of village-deities were shown to strengthen inter-*okka*, inter-caste, inter-village solidarity in the Coorg society. This was given here as an example of a functional study of religion.

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## 5.6 REFERENCES

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## 5.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Basic arguments of Durkheim are as follows:
  - a) Sacred-profane dichotomy is at the centre of religion, particularly totemism. From profane's attitude towards the sacred emerged the fundamental categories of thought like time, member and class.
  - b) Religion helps human being to understand the world and to adapt to the crises of life.
  - c) Religion and God are creations of society. When society worships God, it worships itself and in the process becomes a single moral community.
- 2) The sacred-profane dichotomy gives rise to fundamental categories of thought. Moreover, due to the rules and regulations to be followed before the profane can approach the sacred, society becomes a moral community.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) *Murtha* is a ritual performed in a marriage at the most auspicious time. At the centre of *murtha* ritual lies the offering of milk in a *kindi* to the subject of the celebration. Three *murtha* are performed. The first unites the bride and her relatives, the second the groom and his relatives. The last *murtha* unites the bride and the groom's kindred. In a similar way, the *sammanda* ritual strengthens the solidarity between the two *okka* (the bride and the groom) and their friendly *okka*.
- 2) During the village-deity's festivals, there are several customs which bring different *okka*, castes together. For example, to the collective-hunt at the end of the festival, all *okka* have to send their adult males. At the festival, each *okka* and castes (low or high) have a definite role to play. At the end of the festival, there is a 'harmony dinner held for the whole village.

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## UNIT 6 BODY: LIFE-CYCLE RITUALS\*

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### Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Major Aspects of Ritual
- 6.3 Functions of Ritual
- 6.4 Life-cycle Rituals in Different Communities
  - 6.4.1 Hindu Community
  - 6.4.2 Syrian Christian Community
  - 6.4.3 Sikh Community
  - 6.4.4 Muslim Community
  - 6.4.5 Korku Community
- 6.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.6 References
- 6.7 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 6.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this Unit you will be able to:

- describe a typology of religion;
- discuss a classification of ritual;
- explain religion in tribal societies; and
- describe rites of birth, marriage and death in select communities.

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### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

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When we turn to life-cycle rituals we find, that they are the core of religion. Again, life-cycle rituals refer more to the cycle of life: birth, marriage and death. Nevertheless the ritual itself may not follow such a linear path. That is to say that between birth and death a man or woman may have one or more divorces and marriages. This is an almost universal fact. Moreover, another facet of our problems is that a study of a life-cycle ritual often begins at conception, goes on through various rituals during the period of pregnancy until child-birth. In this Unit we begin with an introduction to ritual. We then discuss Saraswati's

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\*Adopted from IGNOU Course Material: Units 28 and 29 of *Society and Religion* (ESO15) written by Tribhuvan Kapur and Unit 16 of *Society in India* (ESO 12) with modifications by Nita Mathur

functions of ritual (Saraswati: 1984). Having done this we describe and analyse birth and related rites among Hindus, Syrian Christians, Sikhs and the Korku tribe. We also describe and analyse marriage rites among the same groups.

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## 6.2 MAJOR ASPECTS OF RITUAL

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The 'word 'ritual' can only be understood in terms of a background of who is using it. For a clergyman all ritual takes place within a church in keeping with various relations. For a doctor however it may refer to some habits of a patient(s). For Durkheim rites are the modes of behaviour which delineate how a man should conduct himself in the presence of sacred objects (Durkheim: 1915). A recent publication edited by Daniel de Coppet (1992) states that ritual is a special kind of performance which is both an act and a statement. Rituals create and maintain - or transform - a society's cultural identity and social relations. Thus ritual while putting on a performance also communicates. That is to say human beings actions in the ritual context communicate. In attempting to understand ritual we are trying to discover the rules of grammar and syntax of an unknown language.

Finally life-crisis rituals have an effect on society of rejuvenating its 'sentiments' as Radcliffe-Brown (1966) puts it and make it cohere. Van Gennep found (1966) that these ceremonies which he called rites of passage, were to be found in all societies. He felt that three types of major phases could be distinguished:

- i) separation
- ii) transition
- iii) incorporation

These phases can be found in birth, marriage and death. With respect to our topic we find that the ideas of separation transition and incorporation are all indicating the tension or liminality which accompanies these rituals. Thus rituals of life-cycle whether birth and marriage or death have to have within them an in-built mechanism of tension management. The same ideas have been expressed in terms of the facts of pre-liminality, liminality and post-liminality, 'Lumen' means threshold, and each life crisis or life-cycle ritual goes through this feeling of tension or liminality while crossing the threshold. We will mention these categories in the examples we give later on.

Tension arises at childbirth, marriage, and death because these events call for very careful handling. In death specially there is a fear imminent. So also in the others. However, an important observation, made by Van Gannep, is that the three major phases of separation, transition and incorporation are not developed to the same extent by all societies or in every set of ceremonies. Thus rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies. Rites of incorporation are prominent in marriage ceremonies. Transition rites play an important part in pregnancy, and initiation rites.

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## 6.3 FUNCTIONS OF RITUAL

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We now turn to functions of rituals since these functions form an important part of any life-cycle ritual. These functions are present usually in a combined way in these life-cycle rituals which we will now discuss. Saraswati (1984 : 98-104) has stated that ritual is the core component of all religions. The rules of ritual are transmitted either orally or through the written text. And as Saraswati points out through "ritual action flows the well being not only of the performer but also of the performing society" (ibid). He points out that ritual is by definition "an obligatory social behaviour prescribed for occasions that have reference to belief system". Ritual also holds the ritual participants together both as a community in belief and action. It provides a system of meaning to both the social and the cosmic world. The sharing of ritual experience creates a deeper bond. Religious behaviour and ritual, is different from secular ritual. However the former maintains social order from one point of view, and the latter from another.

Saraswati has provided the societal functions of ritual. These societal functions of ritual which Saraswati provides indicate to us as we have noted earlier that ritual has a specific role of play. This role includes as Radcliffe-Brown (ibid) has said, to make the society cohere and to rejuvenate all the values and ideals society is comprised of. It involves a socializing aspect too. Ritual is thus a teaching device and as Saraswati notes its performance includes apart from socialization, social control, as merit and status, rites of identification and so on. We discuss these below and suggest the student try to identify these in the rituals, we describe later.

- i) **Ritual as Socialization:** In all societies there are life-cycle rituals. These rituals are of two types i.e. the rites from concern W cremation, and the other deals with daily and seasonal sacrifices.
- ii) **Ritual as Social Control:** Ritual has integrative values and puts the social order together. It is linked with other worldly rewards and retributions. It is an integral part of the normative system. Thus the maintenance or ritual order also brings about social order and the spiritual order
- iii) **Ritual as merit and status:** Ritual leads to religious merit and it is itself performed for merit and status. The performer gets social prestige and spiritual merit.
- iv) **Ritual as identification:** The imitation rite is essential for every member without which membership cannot be gained. Ritual mutilation, circumcision, perforation of ear lobe are all rites of identification.
- v) **Ritual as Spiritual Advancement:** Prayer, pilgrimage workship and esoteric rites all aim at spiritual advancement.

- vi) Ritual as Nonverbal Communication: Ritual has a variety of esoteric and exoteric communication. The use of words and space is such that it often follows archetypal patterns. Esoteric communication has a hidden and specialized meaning available only to experts, such as priests. Exoteric communication is available to all concerned.
  
- vii) Ritual and Cultivation of Excellence: People's sense of enjoying beauty and sense of aesthetics are reflected very well in ritual objects and motifs. Ritual leads to excellence here. It may be dance, painting or handicraft which achieves this. As Saraswati (ibid) notes 'No Brahmanic ritual is devoid of aesthetic value.
  
- viii) Ritual as Therapy: Rituals of witchcraft and sorcery are such that they are used in many societies to heal affliction. This is as true of simple religions as that of complex and mixed forms.
  
- ix) Ritual as Occupation: Ritual specialists exist in all societies and enjoy extra privileges and economic benefits. In Hindu places of pilgrimage such ritual occupation can be very lucrative.
  
- x) Ritual as Way of Life: A religious being lives within the ambit of ritual. There are rituals for daily observance, annual ceremonies and some festivals.

Thus we may say that the above scheme covers the broad scope of ritual or of functions of ritual as viewed by Saraswati.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) List Van Gennep's three types of rites of passage.  
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- 2) List four types of rituals from among those which are presented by Saraswati.  
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## 6.4 LIFE-CYCLE RITUALS IN DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES

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We will now focus attention on life-cycle rituals practiced in different communities. Each community is unique and practice different kinds of rituals. It is not possible to bring out these differences here. We discuss an overview of life-cycle rituals in different communities.

### 6.4.1 Hindu Community

In his book, *Hindu Sanskaras* (1976) Raj Bali Pandey has pointed out the following scheme:

- i) pre-natal rituals
- ii) rituals of childhood
- iii) educational rituals
- iv) marriage rituals
- v) funeral rituals

Main objectives of pre-natal rites are: to avoid abortion, keep evil forces and demons away, and to keep the pregnant woman happy. We now turn to the 'Jatkarma' or the birth ceremonies. These are the rituals of childhood. The Jatkarma ceremony was performed before cutting the naval cord.

These are the liminal rites and there is a quick and obvious reduction in tension and these rituals manage the tension levels right up to the Medha-Janana and Ayusa which are now described

The ceremony of "Medha-janana" is done first with the fore finger of the right hand. The father holding an instrument of gold gives to the child, honey and ghee or ghee alone. The substances that the father gives to the child are considered to be good for mental growth. They also produced beauty, good digestion and talent. Next we have the "Ayusya" or rite for ensuring a long life. The father whispers appropriate mantras into the child's ear. Five Brahmans are asked to blow their breath on the child. The breath, it is believed, produces a long life. This, ceremony, therefore, is believed to strengthen the breath of the child and provide a long life for the new born. The next rite is supposed to harness 'strength'. The father recites appropriate verses for the same.

The navel-cord is cut, the child thoroughly washed and put to the mother's breast. The next ritual is that of 'Namkarana' or name-giving.

We now turn to the marriage rites and their symbolism. You will note as we describe the rituals that Van Gennep's classification of separation, transition and incorporation is found to be present. In marriage of the Hindus often there is a

shifting of the residence also and this adds to the liminality or transition element of the ritual. Saraswati notes that there are two kinds of rituals in Bhramanic marriage, that is, Sastrachar and Lokacharya. The Sastrachar are performed according to the textual canons, of the shastras. The orally transmitted rituals are Lokachar or Striachar. Even in forms of marriage such as Gandharva or Paisacha where consummation precedes the wedding, Sastric rites are used to legalize the marriage. However the Lokacharya rites have also to be performed by the women, and the villagers. Saraswati (ibid) points out that there are various customs in different regions and villages, which are observed at the wedding.

The main points of the sastrachar are that there is use of written text, scriptural authority and that the male priest pontificates. Mantras are essential and clarified butter is used. Again, there are mainly purificatory benedictory rites. Auspicious time is very important for rites. Then the applicability of rules is wider than of Lokacharya. The textual tradition is upheld and followed both at the groom's and bride's places. These rites are also essential for legitimizing marriage and consequently children therein.

Now what of the Lokacharya? Here oral knowledge is used. Women exercise the authority and lead the ceremonies. There are songs and incantations but no sacrifices. Again the rites leave a magical element. Further the rites are performed in the sequence. The women desire rules as based in memory and mainly localized. The oral tradition of Lokacharya is different for the groom and for the bride. Oral rites are not compulsory or essential but have a profound meaning and emotion.

In a paddhati quoted by Pandey (1976) the Kanyadaan means the "gift of the virgin". Only the father is properly entitled to make this gift or someone in his place when the father is not there. Thus the grandfather, brother, and others including the mother are entitled to give away the girl. A Samkalpa is uttered and then the bride is given away formally. Satpadi are given greater prominence in the Pnaddhati quoted by Pandey than the one quoted by Saraswati (1977). This is the rite of seven steps and without it the marriage is incomplete. The husband and wife step in a northerly direction in seven steps. However it is also a Lokachar custom that the bride and groom go round the sacred fire seven times. Puffed rice is sprinkled by the bride who follows the groom her sari being tied to his turban. This ritual practice is supposed to legally bind the couple in matrimony. While saptapadi is common to the Grihyasutras Kanyadaan is not. We should now briefly point out the symbolism of the marriage rites as noted by Saraswati (ibid). The shastras treat marriage as a sacrament and religious rites are prescribed for it. The blessings of Superhuman beings are sought. When the groom makes the bride stand on a milestone it is to make the marriage firm and strong. Similarly, all the rituals of marriage and the mantras are used to seek blessings and make a strong creative union. The mantras too fulfil this purpose. There are biological symbols as well as such as when the bride

is sprinkled with sura. This makes her desirable. This is so for fertility rites. Magical rites are used to make the post-consummation period safe for the woman.

We now turn attention to last rites. After death the body is bathed and laid out on view for all those who want darshan of the departed soul. A picture or some article belonging to the dead person is garlanded and joss sticks lit around it, if this is possible.

In some cases mantras are repeated at the side of the dead body. In Some cases tulsi (basil) water is dropped into the dying persons mouth.

A structure is made of bamboo which looks like a six feet ladder upon which the corpse is laid. The big toes of the corpse are tied together. The corpse is already covered with a white or red sheet depending upon the status of the dead. It is a married women then a red shroud is used. There are several other rituals for a married woman. White shrouds are used for everybody else. The dead body needs to have been washed and cleanly clothed. These are preliminal rites which take place before the funeral itself. In a sense they are rituals which have the function- of maintaining ritual order and securing the corpse to the bier.

### **Box 6.1 Last Rites in Hindu Community**

Cremation is the most recognised form of disposal of a corpse among the Hindu from the Vedas upto the present day. This custom is believed to be the most refined by the Hindus. Some causes could have led to this belief.

- i) Communities which were nomadic found it convenient to cremate and carry only some bones of the ancestor.
- ii) Desire to be free of the ghost is also a powerful motive. When the body was gone the ghost could not stay.
- iii) Fire which consumes entire forests at times probably suggested its utility in burning away the dead as well.
- iv) These reasons were strong in the early phases but later on its was the prestige and honour given to 'Agn;' (fire) that made it the method par excellence to exhume a corpse.

Once it is put on the bier and secured firmly onto it with rope, the near male relatives shoulder the bier and carry it towards the cremation ground. Shoulders are changed several times on the way to the cremation grounds. In urban areas however a hearse-van is usually requisitioned and the body is driven to the cremation ground. It is led by the eldest male, a son preferably.

The procession then goes to the cremation ground by foot. Here the body is put near the cremation shed and wood is piled up into the pyre for the corpse. Meanwhile the priest performs certain ceremonies on the corpse for its betterment in the next world.

Thereafter the corpse is laid on the pyre without the bier and covered up with wood. The pyre is always lit by the eldest living son. Except in the absence of the same, a male relative lights the pyre. The main mourners go around the funeral fire keeping their right shoulder, towards the pyre. This is not always so. Among the Coorgs and the Kumaonis some groups go in an anticlockwise manner keeping the left shoulder to the pyre. This varies from group to group. The fire is then left to burn and the cranium is staved in by the eldest son. This is to free the trapped soul. This is a liminal stage in which the body transits from flesh and blood to bone and ashes.

The bones are collected a day later when the pyre has cooled off and put in earthen pots. These pots are taken to a river and immersed there. Holy men's bones and ashes are made into a memorial called a Samadhi. On the fourth day from death a prayer is organised for the peace of the departed soul. Finally a prayer is held annually for the departed soul. We must remember however that this is a variation not found all over India. It is also to be remembered that a funeral is a polluting event and the mourners either go home and bathe or bathe in the cremation ground itself if the inclination and facilities are there. There may also be a funeral feast later on. Collection of bones and their immersion into a holy river are all postliminal customs. They indicate an incorporation into the world of ancestors. This post-liminal phase include rituals like Chautha; Pagade and Shraddha among the Punjabis which comprise the postliminal phase. Chautha is held on the fourth day after the death and towards its termination Pagade is given to the eldest remaining survivor. It vests him with the authority of the head of the household. Shraddha is kept annually in memory of the deceased and the welfare of his or her soul.

#### **6.4.2 Syrian Christian Community**

These birth rites are also mainly those of incorporation into society and to earn spiritual merit and status. The first child of a couple is born usually in the mother's house. The daughter goes to her parents a few months before delivery.

In earlier times it was customary to bring the pregnant woman to her mother's place with the help of seven ladies including the mother. The rituals and customs before the bride comes to her mother's house right up to the moment of childbirth are rites of separation/preliminality. The child is born with the help of married women of the household and the aid of a midwife. The birth of a boy gives great joy and a loud whistling sound is made. As soon as the child is born the exact time is noted so that the horoscope can be accurately cast. This practice is taken from the Hindus, and much faith is put on the forecasts. Initially the horoscopes are cast on dried palmyra palm leaf parchment. This is

made into strips joined together with strings" Initially the horoscopes are cast on dried palmyra palm leaf parchment. This is made into strips joined together with strings. Initially the horoscopes are cast on dried palmyra palm leaf parchment. This is made into strips joined together with strings. The strings are kept fixed by wooden blocks to act as the cover of a book. The writing on the parchment is done by a steel stylus in beautiful letters; Sometimes this is accompanied by floral designs. Next the child is bathed and a priest or an elder relative whispers in the child's ear "Moron Yesu Masiha" or "Jesus Christ is Lord". As soon as the child is 90m a horoscope is cast. From this point on the rituals pass the 'threshold' (the liminal point) and enter into incorporation/post-liminality.

The child is also given a few drops of honey to drink in which gold is mixed. This is done by the grandmother or a presiding lady by rubbing a gold ornament on a stone on which some honey has been smeared. This custom shared by the Nambudris is to ensure prosperity.

After seven days, the husband's family visit the baby, Care is taken that the party consists of an odd number of people. This is because of the belief that even numbers of people on such occasions bring bad luck. On seeing the child the husband's mother places some gold in the hands of the child.

The baptism can now take place along with the service in the chapel. After an interval of two months or more from the date of birth of the child, the wife returns to her husband's house with gifts of jewellery, clothes and household equipment. These are customs which are associated with postliminality. Their function is socialisation of the society, its rejuvenation and bringing it closer together by virtue of having faced the life crisis together.

The formal education of the child begins at 3 or 4 after a "thread" ceremony somewhat like that of the Hindus. The priest sits next to the child with a brass tray in which 'paddy' is heaped. Taking the child's forefinger the priest traces - Yesu' in the heap of paddy. A short prayer is offered followed by a feast. It is considered that the child has been initiated into learning and can begin his schooling. For girls in their 7th or 8th year the ears are pierced so that they can wear ornaments, it is clear from the previous descriptions that the rites of incorporation as signified by birth are elaborate. When daughter goes to her mother's place three months before giving birth it is a ritual act. But it is not accompanied by ritual activities per se. Earlier seven ladies brought the pregnant women to the house. These and other rituals indicate that Syrian Christianity is ritually quite different from Hinduism. Some rituals are similar at times especially when gold and honey are given to the child to ensure prosperity. But they display every bit the desire to placate supernatural forces.

In the past, child marriage was widely practised in Kerala, The consummation however took place only on reaching maturity. Nowadays marriages take place

after maturity. It is also desirable that the groom be employed and the bride be in her early twenties. The initiative in negotiating a marriage usually rests on the bride's family. When the appropriate choice has been made, according to the girl's side, a representative of the boy's family is sent to settle the marriage. In the past a bride and groom met for the first time in the church at the time of their marriage.

Today, while wooing and courtship are out, the two partners exchange photographs and may meet under supervised conditions to talk for a brief while. This supervision is done usually by the girl's mother or her married sister. The betrothal ceremony among the Syrian Christians takes place on the day the banns or formal proclamation of the intended marriage, are announced by the priest in the church immediately after the Qurbana or Eucharist, or the Sacramental service commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus Christ. As usual all the ceremonies preceding the marriage ceremony are the rites of separation/preliminality. The banns are called in both the parishes, that of the boy and the girl. This is to ensure that anyone who has any objection to the marriage should place his point of view.

A betrothal feast is held in the bride's house which begins with sweets and is followed by a formal meal. This is the time when the dowry is handed over. It was regarded as a gift from the father to the daughter and approximated the value of the property the younger sons would receive on the death of their father. It was ruinous in many cases.

The marriage service consists of two parts the first is the 'betrothal and the second is the solemnization of the marriage. The betrothal and the solemnization of marriage are both aspects of liminality. They presage, the moment of transition from one status (unmarried) to another (married). When the bridal couple arrive at the church, two gold chains and a cloth serve as a veil for the bride. The minnus or tali are placed on a table in front of the sanctuary. The couple stand in front of this table, the bride on the right of the bridegroom. This is in contrast with Western Churches where the bride always stands on the left.

The service commences with prayers and blessing of the two rings. The priest first places the ring on the right hand fourth or "ring finger" and blesses it. He then places the ring on the corresponding finger of the bride's hand. It is believed that the ring finger has a vein which is directly linked with the heart. The Syrian Christian ceremony differs from the western church in that the rings are put on by the priest and not exchanged between the couple.

Next we have the blessing on the crowns. Gold chains with crosses are used for this. After the gold chains are blessed the priest raises the chain from the groom three times like a crown and places it on his cheek. He does the same with the chain of the bride. These chains are usually heirlooms and preserved carefully for such occasions.

The priest now comes to the actual ceremony of marriage. The priest places the tali around the bride's neck and the husband ties the thread of the minu in a knot. After this the priest puts a cloth, which is a gift from the groom to the bride on her head and the marriage ceremony closes. The custom of tying a minu or tali is copied from the Bhramins e.g. the Nambudiris, The veil was formerly preserved as a shroud to cover the bride at the time of her death.

After the church wedding the bridal couple come in procession to the bride's house where a pandal or shamiana is erected. The rites after the marriage is solemnized and the procession to the brides house are rites of incorporation or postliminality. They are met at the gate by young women carrying lights. The best man leads them in. The crowd shouts 'nada nada', 'walk walk' and blows shrill whistles. The bride must take the right foot over the threshold, as this is both a mark of respect as well as an omen of good luck. The couple sit on a dais amidst floral patterns made of rice and flowers. Rose water is sprinkled on the guests and pan supari are distributed. Marriage songs are sung and the wedding feast begins. Betel leaves (Paan) betel nut (supari) and tobacco are served before the guests depart. Thus Syrian Christians have a large number of customs for their marriages. The church features prominently and is the venue of all weddings. Akin to the western Christian wedding, rings are exchanged. However the ring is given to the bride and groom by the priest not by groom and the bride respectively. These rituals of the Syrian Church reflect social control and identification, occupation and a way of life. We need to add that these rituals rejuvenate the societies values and norms, its "sentiments" so to speak. Let us now turn attention to death rituals.

The death ceremonies of the Syrians reflect reverence and solemnity. In the Syrian Christian church there is no such ritual as the extreme unction or last rites. But there are certain rituals at the time of illness. The priest is usually at the bedside and as the end approaches, prayers are chanted. The priest whispers the basic doctrinal beliefs in the dying person's ear. When death occurs women commence weeping &ldbeating their breasts. It becomes obvious to the neighbourhood that death has taken place. Kitchen fires are extinguished and no cooking is done until after the funeral has taken place. The body is washed and dressed and placed in a room facing East with a cross at the head and candles to either side. Incense is burned. Prayers and hymns are chanted throughout the time the body is in the house. Clearly these are preliminal rites whthe priest is at the bedside of the dying person. However death does not occur gradually all the time. There may be. an accident. In such a case the rest of the rites are observed a\$ given above. They are rites of separation. The group is attempting to separate themselves from the deceased' and preparing themselves for transitional/liminal rites.

The dead body is anointed with oil by the priest. The sign of the cross is made on the face, breast, and knees with oil. The funeral procession then leaves for the Church to lay the body to rest. Graveyards in Kerala are usually in the church compound. The body is placed in a coffin and carried to the graveyard. Women of the household do not accompany the procession. The elaborate funeral service comprise prayers and hymns. When the coffin is lowered into the grave the priest throws mud into it in the sign of a cross. Each mourner also throws in mud while the prayers are said. Syrian Christians bury the corpse with head to the west so that it faces the east. This follows from the firm belief that the messiah will come from near Jerusalem. The ceremony right from anointing of the corpse with oil and the priest making signs of cross, till when it is laid into the ground, head to the west are all rites of transition. The body is in the grave and mud is thrown in. It will gradually disappear and will no longer inhabit the social world. These rites indicate this liminal phase. The ritual communicates this disappearance non-verbally.

After the funeral, mourners return home. Here they are served a simple meal of rice. A purification ceremony known as pullakuli was held thereafter. This custom was borrowed from the Nambudiris. Except daily wage earners in olden times mourners were considered to be under pollution till the eighth or teourners do not keep engagements till the fortieth day. On this day a special ceremony is held at the end of which the priest blesses everybody by letting them kiss the back of his hand. A non-vegetarian meal is provided and this brings to end the period of official mourning. On each death anniversary a ceremony is performed. A requiem mass is held in the church. A candle is also lit on the grave and some charity is distributed to the needy. It is clear the rites of post liminality are somewhat extended among the Syrian Christians who do not keep social engagements till the fortieth day. The priest then blesses and declares this phase closed after several ceremonies described above.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) What are the main points of the Syrian Christian funeral.

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2) Discuss the significance of the collection of bones among Hindu death rituals.

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### 6.4.3 Sikh Community

The rites of Sikhs too like those of the Hindus and Syrian Christians reflect a similar aspect of the rites of passage. That is preliminal rites or rites of separation before birth; liminal or transitional rites at or just around birth when the tension is at the highest; and finally the naming rites which are rites of incorporation or postliminality.

The birth of a child whether boy or girl is equally welcome. When the mother has recovered, there is a visit to the gurdwara for giving thanks. A certain amount of cash is given to buy '*Karah Prasad*'. In villages women prepare the '*Karah Prasad*' themselves and take it to the gurdwara. A '*romalla*' or piece of silk or brocade about one square meter is given to the Guru Granth Sahib. At the gurdwara thanks giving sabads (hymns) are read. Devout families ask that the child be given '*amrit*' or nectar which is made by dissolving patashas (sugar crystals).

The granthi (priest) stirs the water with a khanda (short, two-edged sword) and describes the first five verse of the Japji. The amrit is put in the kirpan and touched on the child's tongue with it. The mother drinks the rest. The Guru Granth Sahib is now opened at random and the first word of the left hand page will be read out to the parents. The name is decided by using the initial of the word and announced. The granthi says '*Jo bhole so nihal*' and the congregation approves by saying '*Sat sri akal*'. Prayers follow.

#### Box 6.2 Daily Rituals

A Sikh must take an early morning bath in fresh water. Next he must recite the Japji, the Jap of Guru Gobind Singh and his Swayyas, before or after breakfast. Before beginning the daily work he must sing the gurbani in the gurdwara. The thought of God should not leave his mind as he works. He should then recite the Rahiras (the Holy Path) at dusk and the Sohilla before sleeping.

There are social customs as well. In a joint family the baby is born in the husband's home. The wife's parents visit her bringing gifts for her and the mother-in-law and a turban for the husband and father-in-law. Sometimes a langar or free feast could be arranged for the poor and gifts given to widows as charity. The Sikh birth rites too are rites of incorporation. Besides going to the gurdwara and visiting the bride's mother and father, they are also rites of social interaction. They also show ritual as occupation in the form of the granthi. Spiritual merit and spiritual advancement is also seen. Socialization behaviours are also clearly present. However Sikhism is essentially an open and modern religion. The martial aspect of the religion surfaces forcefully in the amrit ceremony where patashas are dissolved in water by a short two edged sword.

The amrit is then given to the child on his lips and tongue with that Khanda. Also the way of naming is very random but based again on the Guru Granth Sahib.

There are certain norms and considerations, usually the eldest daughter marries before her younger sister. Again, if a young person is undergoing higher education his marriage will be deferred until this is over. Further if there is death in the family e.g. a father dies then the elder son's marriage is postponed till the younger children have completed their education. The family and its friends assist in finding a partner (Cole and Sambhi : 1978). What is looked for, is suitability in the form of virtuous qualities, temperament, and age. Social status and economic status are also looked into. Finally, the caste is also taken into account. Thus a Jat is likely to marry a Jat and a Ramgarhia a Ramgarhia. There are, however, exceptions. A Sikh must marry a Sikh. The gurus teaching the best carried out in a householders state. Usually mixed marriages are not successful and conflict and tension creep in through rural-urban, rich-poor, the moral laxity versus piety. Sikhs should not marry close to their family or "whose caste name is the same at the distance of the four grandparent (Cole and Sambhi *ibid*). The couple meets informally before the final decision is made. This is done in the presence of some of the family elders. This helps them both to familiarise themselves with, and assess the prospects of the matrimonial alliance.

A betrothal ceremony may take place before the marriage but it is not compulsory. The wedding is both a social and a religious occasion. It can take place on any day. Sikhs do not believe in auspicious/inauspicious days. There are no doubt practical considerations. For example monsoon months are inconvenient as rains interfere in arrangements. The wedding takes place in the bride's village, on a flat roof top of a country house or garden or gurudwara. It is important that the Guru Granth Sahib should be there. We now turn to the preliminal, liminal and postliminal rites. By this time you must be familiar with them. Try to locate them as the unit continues.

The groom's party usually arrives at the evening earlier and the formal meeting of the two families take place. When the covering hymn *Asa di Var* is sung the groom takes his place at the foot of the *Adi Granth*. The bride sits to the left of the groom along with a friend. A short hymn containing general advice is sung. One of the officiants then explains that a Sikh marriage is meant to be a fusion of two souls in one and not a social contract. It is like the union of man and God which is the aim of Sikhism. Hymns are sung giving advice on marriage. A wife should be faithful, humble, and do her husband's bidding.

The bride and groom assent marriage by bowing to the *Guru Granth Sahib*. They sit down and the bride's father garlands the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Then the bride's dupatta is tied to the muslim scarf which hangs from the groom's shoulders. The *Lavan* of *Guru Ram Das* is turned to. The verse is sung as the couple walk around the *Guru Granth Sahib* in a clockwise direction the groom in front.

They return to their place and the second verse is read. The circling is now repeated. This happens four times. As the last encirclement is completed, flower petals are thrown. The service ends with the singing of the first five and the last stanzas of the Anand followed by the Ardas prayer. The Guru's Counsel is now taken by opening the scripture at random. The congregation is served Karah prasad. The marriage party leaves for the grooms village in the afternoon. The entire ceremony is the liminal or transition aspect of the ceremony. The marriage party leaving for the grooms village/town/city/residence marks the period of incorporation or post liminality,

A word on the symbolism of the ritualism is useful here. The first circling is for adherence to the householders' duties. The second is for faith in God. In the third for living detachedly in the world with eyes fixed towards God. The fourth circling and verse describe the return of the soul to-God. Thus Sikhism is symbolic but maintains a simplicity and beauty 'of ritual. The symbolism involved in the Sikh marriage is directly connected with the GURU Granth Sahib. This ceremony is very beautiful and simple in the sense that it involves four circling of the holy Grantha, each of which have a specific significance gleaned from the scripture itself.' Even the assert of both groom and bride is given to the Guru Granth Sabhi rather than any individual. Ritual of socialization, non-verbal communication, spiritual advancement; occupation and cultivation of excellence is all there is these Sikh rituals of marriage.

Sikhs are of the view that in a hot climate the funeral should take place quickly, preferably a day after the death has occurred. They practice cremation. Burial at sea is permitted and not considered wrong, but cremation has been the tradition of five hundred years. The ashes can be buried and this has happened in the case of samadhis and shrines of saints. However, usually the ashes are immersed into a nearby river. Funeral moments are not considered desirable and the Gurus forbade any such thing in their case, but we find that gurdwaras sprang up in such locations. Thus the preliminal customs are done quickly and with efficiency and cremation is the favoured method.

Cremation is attended by the entire family, unlike the Hindus where the women stay behind. The body is washed and it is ensured that the five Symbols of Sikhism adorn it that is the Kirpan, Kaccha, Kanga, Kara and Kesh. It is taken on a bier to the cremation ground in a procession. The mourners sing hymns. The funeral pyre is lit by a close male relative and the evening hymn is sung during the cremation. Prayers are also offered, including the Ardas.

When the mourners get home again it is customary to wash one's hands and face and many of them bathe as well. A complete reading of the Guru Granth Sahib begins and goes on for the next ten days intermittently in stretches of about an hour of reading followed by intervals, till the include reading is completed. The preliminal customs do include getting the body ready and dressed. However when the fire is lit we are with the transitional/liminal rites. The post-liminal rites then

begin and go on until the mourners get home, bathe and the complete reading of the Guru Granth Sahib is done in the next ten days as described. These rituals indicate aspects of ritual as an occupation by those who chant (Guru Granth Sahib) and ritual as a way of life in that death will always be where life is.

An important social custom which has deep cultural significance in Sikh rites is the distribution of Karah Prasad. The mourners are given Karah Prasad. The sharing of the food has deep meaning and signifies the continuity of social life at a time when it is ruptured due to death. This method of affirming life contrasts with such practices as going into isolation, fasting, and manifestations of ritual grief. Karah Prasad is also a post liminal rite and indicates that the transitional phase has ended. It is also a ritual which rejuvenates society as it is given to all present in the ritual.

It is believed that good' Karma leads to birth as a Sikh. It gives one a chance to come into contact with gurbani and to seek liberation. Dying persons are read gurbani to, the message of which is that the holy name is the most precious possession and those who do not chant it will repent their ways.

#### **6.4.4 Muslim Community**

Muslims insist that the principle of equality be upheld in day-to-day living. All Muslims irrespective of their group affiliation could say namaz together and that they need not observe restrictions on eating and drinking together whenever an occasion arises. It is also held that there are no formal restrictions on inter- group (caste) marriages, and that, in fact, Islam encourages it.

Islam means submission to or acceptance of the will of God. It's perfect form is found in the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah (acts and sayings of Prophet Muhammed). Islam is a monotheistic religion, i.e. it believes in one God who is considered the Creator of the universe, of time and space whose law governs everything that exists. The Quran is the word of God, revealed to his messenger, Prophet Muhammed, in order to lead mankind on a righteous path. The Muslims believe that there will be a 'Last Day' when God will judge all mankind. The belief is that on the judgement day, those who have led a good life will be rewarded and those who have led a bad life will be punished.

The important commands of Islam are prayer, fasting, pilgrimage to Mecca, performance of all that is enjoined and abstinence from what is forbidden and Jihad or striving in the way set by God with all the resources at one's disposal. The social rules of behaviour include among other things the observation of the principles of equality and brotherhood among Muslims and of earning one's livelihood through personal labour. The totality of beliefs and practices is called the Shariah (path) of Islam (Gazetteer of India 1965: 468-469).

Life cycle rituals and festivals constitute important elements of every religious community. They serve, apart from other things, the purpose of reaffirming one's

faith in one's religion. Some of the (important Muslim ceremonies include life-cycle rituals around birth, marriage and death. A few important ones are (i) the naming of the child (ii) circumcision which is done by a barber or in a hospital (iii) the Bismillah ceremony, which initiates a child into reading Quran. Feasts and celebrations associated with these ceremonies and festivals not only make for social solidarity among the believers but also allow people from different socio-religious backgrounds to meet and know each other.

Let us examine here the essential features of Muslim marriage in the context of Islamic religion, which has provided the ideological foundation for social behaviour.

Marriage among Muslims is known by the Arabic word 'Nikah'. It takes place in the form of contract and is not considered as sacrosanct (exceedingly sacred). It is obligatory in character. Muslim law maintains that the main objective of 'Nikah' is procreation and legalisation of children. The essential elements of Muslim marriage are: a) marriage proposal is made by or on behalf of the concerned parties; b) acceptance of the proposal in the presence of one or two male and two female witnesses; c) settlement of Dower or Mehr.

The arrangement of marriage is largely the responsibility of the parents, particularly that of the father. In the past, bride or bridegroom had no say in the selection of his or her partner. This disadvantage was even more glaring in the case of female. With the passage of time male members of Muslim community have acquired some freedom in the choice of their spouse. In case of woman the situation has not much changed.

Islamic law does not specify any particular age limit for marriage. The only condition is that a minor girl cannot join the husband after marriage. Although young girls may be married but the girl should join the husband only after attaining maturity. This interpretation is not related to age but to attainment of puberty. According to the latest amendment of 'Child Marriage Restraint Act' of 1929 the minimum marriageable age of male and female is 21 years and 18 years respectively. Nevertheless early marriage is still widely prevalent in the Muslim community.

The ceremony of Muslim marriage, i.e. 'Nikah' is conducted by 'kazi'. It is customary to recite verses from Quran so as to seek Allah's blessings for the couple. Consent is sought from both the individuals. In order to complete the marriage ceremony, a formal document 'Nikahnama' is prepared. Notwithstanding other aspects, 'Nikahnama' specifies the nature of Dower or Mehr. Mehr is a particular sum of money or property, which the bride is entitled to receive from bridegroom in consideration of marriage. It's a sort of guarantee for the security of the woman. Mehr is an indispensable custom without which no Muslim marriage can acquire social or legal legitimacy. Mehr is not a fixed amount of money or property. It varies according to the social and economic

status of the concerned families. The mode of payment is also flexible. It can be paid either immediately after the marriage or postponed till some mutually agreeable future date.

Islamic Law never mentioned about dowry. But in reality it has become a common practice. Broadly speaking, the amount of Mehr has been reduced to a mere symbolic value. Usually it is several times smaller than the dowry, which the parents of many girls pay at the time of marriage. Thus the ritualisation of Mehr and the increasing practice of dowry have adversely affected the status of Muslim women and their marriage prospects.

A notable practice associated with Muslim marriage is polygamy or plurality of wives. In Islam, a Muslim male may have four wives at a time. However, he must be able to treat them on equal and just bases. In India, this practice of plurality of wives became popular during the Muslim Rule. These days it is becoming less prevalent. It has considerably decreased among the urban and educated sections of Muslim population.

Islam permits marriage between both parallel and cross cousins. A notable preferential choice is whereby a male marries his father's brother's daughter. Mohammedan Law also provides for certain restrictions in marriage so far as other communities are concerned. A Muslim woman cannot marry a 'Kithabian' or non-Muslim. But a male can marry a 'Kithabia'. Let us make it clear that 'Kithabia'(n) is an individual who believes in a religion revealed through a book {other than Quran} but does not engages in the practice of 'idol' or 'fire' worship, etc.

Under Muslim Personal Law, husband enjoys unlimited freedom in matters of divorce. He is permitted to divorce his wife according to his own pleasure or without assigning any reason or cause. On the other hand, a woman does not enjoy such a freedom. This custom has resulted in man's domination and power over the woman. The Prophet gave to the women, the right of obtaining separation on reasonable grounds.

After divorce a woman is not free to remarry immediately. She is supposed to wait for a specified period before seeking remarriage is considered the most detestable custom in Islam. In India, with the 'Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act', 1939, Muslim woman got the right to divorce her husband on certain specified grounds but men still enjoy much greater freedom as compared to women in matters of divorce.

The Quran and Islamic tradition favour widow marriage. The responsibility for marrying a widow lies with her parents. Although the provision for widow marriage is clearly stated yet until recent times such marriages were presented because of socio-cultural considerations.

### 6.4.5 Korku Community

Korkus are a tribe which live in the Vindhala hills. They are spread out in many parts of these hills and number many different groupings of the same tribe. Let us now turn to their rituals of birth.

The birth takes place in a corner of the verandah far removed from the entrance or kitchen. This is because a birth is ritually impure and pollutes the food. It must be far from the entrance to keep out people with an evil eye. The woman sits or lies on the ground and the midwife massages her from the hips downwards. In case of a difficult childbirth a thread is unravelled before the woman's eyes or a magician is called in. He makes a potion with water which the woman is to drink. If even this fails, the magician goes into a trance. His patron deity tells him the course of things. Offerings are prescribed sometimes those of a goat. A 'magic' string is tied on her, The offerings are made after the birth.

After the birth, the midwife ties the umbilical cord with a cloth and cuts it with a knife or bamboo splint. Turmeric is applied on the wound. The placenta is buried in a corner of the verandah, the mother and child are put up behind sheets in a corner of the house. This is to avoid the evil eye. The mother doesn't eat solid food for about five days. She is served a thin gruel. The newborn child is suckled only on the third day. During the first two days, the lips of the new-born baby are touched with butter milk. Mother and child are ritually impure for about 12 days. A bath is taken to purify her. It is clear here again that the rituals are those of incorporation. They socialize the child. In this brief description of childbirth among the Korkus we can clearly see the influence of Hinduism over their ritual. The concept of pollution as the child is born and then the purification are both clearly a Hindu concept. However, the originality of the tribal view remains. This is brought out by the twisted thread being unravelled in front of a woman having a difficult delivery. Moreover, the menstrual period is one of a Noidance of women. These rituals are rituals of incorporation. They have all the elements of ritual as non-verbal communication and therapy and a way of life.

Stephen Fuchs tells us (Fuchs; 1988: 237-281) that Korkus 'exercise clan and village exogamy and also kinship exogamy. This extends to all known kin. Marriage between cousins and cross cousins is forbidden. Most of the marriages are arranged marriages although love marriages are not ruled out in arranging the marriage similar economic background and similar social levels are also necessary.

The Korkus live in joint households and this means that the match should not disrupt this institution. During the first year of marriage the women spends time mainly with her mother-in-law and sister-in-law.

The initiative for contracting a marital arrangement is taken by the youth's parents. When an appropriate girl is found 'keeping all the restriction in mind, her parents are approached. The boy and girl are usually not consulted. All the malchbes and open declaration of attachment are considered shameful. Such behaviour leads to a large reduction in bride price. The elders of house take only a marginal interest in the proceedings. Thus the choice of marriage partners is left mainly to the parents. But today a boy rarely marries against his wish. All the Korkus do not have the same rites, just as in the case of the Todas and Andaman Islanders. There are differences among Korkus of the Nimars, and Korkus of the Melghat, and Central India. Among the Nimar Korkus engagement is celebrated on a Friday. The boy's father and a villager take the bride price. All these may be considered to be pre-liminal customs.

The price of a bullock or calf is also given. The bullock donated to the girl's father must be returned if the groom dies. The gift of the bullock has symbolic significance; it seals the friendship between the two families. The wedding ceremonies are spread over several days.

The wedding shed is erected in the groom's village in a Monday. It is erected on a Tuesday in the bride's village. The young men cut 12 sala; trees. They are received by the bride or mother of the groom. She holds a tray with unboiled rice, kuku and oil. She moves the plate around and puts the mixture on the foreheads of the young men in a vertical line. Then the wedding shed is erected. This is clearly a preliminal custom signifying the separation stage. These rites as we will see are very elaborate among the Korkus discussed.

### **Box 6.3 Korku Tribe**

The Korkus are found in the Satpura mountains in Central India especially in the region surrounding Mahadev Hill. The hills are about 2,000 ft. high and spread out into plateaus. The Korkus occupy the central portions of the Satpura mountains, the Mahadev hill and eastern sections. They are agriculturists. This area was ruled by different political powers and led to a Hinduization of the Korkus. Hinduization here refers to a process by which the religious practices and rituals of caste Hindus are emulated by the Korkus.

In the evening after the wedding shed is erected, the groom is bathed and offerings are given to the ancestors. The offerings consist of various food grains and a chicken. These offerings are given at the "middle post" of the ancestors a pole in the centre of the village. The bridegroom simply watches. Women sing wedding songs sitting in a circle following which the women amount the groom with turmeric.

The night is spent in dancing and feasting. The village shaman offers a chicken and prayers to god for the young couple. The wedding party is then ready to go to the bride's village. The party consists of the bridegroom and his nearest relatives of both sexes. His mother however must remain behind in the Village. The party arrives at about 5 pm in the bride's village.

Ceremonies of the Bride's village: The bridegroom is in nuptials-dhotti, shirt, and a new turban. He wears a dagger with a lemon struck on its point. This dagger symbolises protection against evil spirits. The procession then starts with jingling bells. Shortly before departure a blanket is spread in the yard. The groom embraces his elder brother's wife seven times. This is possibly a survival symbolizing the fraternal polyandry of the past.

The wedding pavillion is patched over smoothly by cloth. In front of the entrance to the house two magic squares (chaul) are drawn on one of these the groom sites. This brings us to the transitional aspect of the ritual.

Now the bride dressed in finery is carried into the wedding place, by her-maternal uncle who carries her on his hips like a child. The bridegroom is similarly carried by his maternal uncle. The two are thus carried around the courtyard thrice. During this time both groom and bride throw rice and millet grains at each other. They also throw turmeric. The two are seated on the square in front of the mandap. They are covered with a sheet and-water is poured over them. The groom ties a bead necklace around the girl's neck. The end of the bride's layenda is knotted to the groom's loincloth or sheet which he carries on his shoulder.

Now both get up and walk to the image of Mutua Deo, where the priest performs an offering. The bride holds the little finger of the bridegroom with the little finger of her right hand. They both walk around the squares and the central post five times. They are now officially married. Now the couple is separated and made to sit side by side on the two squares. Once again the loin cloth of the groom is tied to the bride's layenda. From now on the rituals will be post liminal as the 'limen' or threshold has been crossed. As we see the customs and rituals among the Korkus are inclusive of rites of socialization, non-verbal communication and therapy. In fact there is a great deal of feasting and drama involved in it. However, unlike the formal atmosphere of the Hindu marriage, the grandeur of the Syrian Christian marriage, the beauty and elegance of the Sikh marriage, the Korku marriage is a riot of feasting, colour, and music. This however does not undermine its solemn nature.

Let us now turn to death rituals.

When a man is close to death among the Korkus, the dying person is served rice water or plain water to drink. If he is unable to swallow it he is considered to be close to death. He is then laid on the ground. If a Korku dies on a bed, then that bed is discarded forever. No one would sleep on such a bed for fear that the dead persons spirit would come and bother him.

Korkus lament every death in the Clan. The women strike themselves on their head and chest. They cry words of sorrow. These words express a longing to go with the dead person. A bier is made by the men with bamboo poles and seven cross bars. The corpse is denuded of all clothes and jewellery. The dead body of males is wrapped in a white sheet. The corpse of married women is wrapped in a red cloth and that of widows in a white sheet.

When a woman becomes a widow she laments and takes off all her jewellery. On the other hand a widower does not do anything like that. He sits mourning near the corpse of the wife. A Korku widow is allowed to put on her jewellery after ten days. These are all preliminary aspects of a funeral and the Korkus are similar to Syrian Christians in the beating of the chest in sorrow. Among the Hindus too a widow removes her jewellery, just as a widow does among the Korkus.

When all funeral arrangements are ready the procession begins. The eldest son carries with him an earthen pot containing rice water. If the eldest son is not there, a younger brother or a close relative takes over. At half distance to the graveyard the group stops. The bier is put on the ground and carriers change place from left to right. Women do not accompany the procession as their wailing and crying disturb the spirit world.

The Korku villages have their own graveyards where graves are dug somewhat haphazardly and mounds are seen covered with stones and thorns.

In the burial ground a hole 3-4 feet in depth is dug. A north-south direction is kept, the face being kept looking north. The Southern bottom where the head is kept is coated with cow dung and leaves. Before putting the body into the grave a few copper coins are thrown in. Flour and turmeric are sprinkled and turmeric is sprinkled around the grave. The body is placed on its back with head to the south facing north. A coin is sometimes put into the mouth of the deceased, so that he or she may use it in the next world. The grave is half-filled with mud and lined with thorns. It is then filled with earth. The earth is loose and 'not pounded since this may hurt the dead person. When he or she will be reborn, they believe, the signs of such pounding will be on his body. The 'packing' of thorns and boulders into the grave is to keep wild animals from gnawing at the body. Occasionally a coin; flute or other articles are buried with the body. The pot with rice water is broken at the head of the grave. This is for the deceased to eat if he is unable at once to find something to eat in the other world.

We can see so far that these rituals are those of separation from the social World and incorporation into the other. These are rites of passage.

All these rites are also an expression of affections at the separation of the dead person. They feel obliged to send off the dead person in the best possible way. The liminal customs are such that they make it clear to everyone who is participating that the man or woman has passed over to the world of the dead. They are rituals of socialization and spiritual merit. They also have an aspect of therapy in them. Once the man or woman is buried the liminal aspect gradually closes with the pot of rice being broken at the head of the grave.

When the funeral is over the mourners (men) bathe in a close by river or bathing area. They wear a turban which is washed later. The bonds with the deceased are broken at about the half way point under a tree. Here they each pluck a leaf and pick up a stone. They wave them overhead and throw them away. This is rite of purification and segregation. It expresses the breaking of all bonds with

the diseased. A brass pitcher full of water is carried back and a little water is poured in each person's hand. He waves it over his head and drops it on his left foot. This foot is held over the fire at the door. This is a purificatory ritual that accompanies every funeral.

The post liminal rites continue. In the evening at the house of mourning a flour silhouette of the man is drawn. It is usually 10 cm long. A top of this a basket is kept upside down. After an hour the basket is removed and the silhouette is examined. From any changes in the pattern made by insects, the people try to find out why the man died and how his spirit would be. If changes are found near the stomach, for instance, it is said he died of stomach disorder. Disturbances during these rites 'are also taken as signs of witchcraft. The divination especially the aspect concerning the spirit can be viewed as a rite of incorporation in the other world. The post liminal rites here among the Korkus are very specific and include bathing, throwing leaves overhead and pouring water from a brass pitcher into the hands of each mourner. These rituals are communicating that there is a distinction between the dead and those who are alive. These actions also have a therapeutic value giving the mourners something to do. The flour silhouette, 10 cm long also serves to convince the bereaved group of people that there was specific reason for the death.

After divination is over a chicken is killed and roasted. It is eaten with rice. After this meal, often a woman goes into a trance and the belief is that it is the dead person who possesses her. She advises the mourners often about the future.

Then a dinner is proposed in the house of the mourners. No food is cooked while the body is there. Dirges are sung each morning in this house. They become shorter and shorter as the separation becomes complete.

The memorial banquet is held about two weeks later. All the guests contribute to it. At the start a goat and some chickens are sacrificed. These are an offering to the dead and helps the spirit to find peace. Once this sacrifice is over the spirit comes to the "middle post" of the house here a prayer is offered for forty-five days after the banquet. As mentioned earlier these post liminal rites through which the dead person will become incorporated into the 'other' world are more elaborate among the Korkus including the forty-five days prayer offered at the "middle post" of the house.

After death people become spirits if they are old, and if they die young they are devoured by an evil soul. Naturistic beliefs are there and spirits are believed to exist in whirlwind and other natural phenomena. Belief in rebirth does exist among the Korkus. They also believe that dead people are usually indifferent to those who are alive. They place memorial stones in a pile under some shady tree just outside the village. These are basic beliefs of retribution and reward according to the deeds that have been performed in heaven by the individuals concerned.

Good deeds mean good rewards in heaven and bad deeds punishment in hell. The post-liminal rites described above are not complete and after one year a memorial feast is given. It is only after the sidoli feast that the spirit is finally laid to rest that incorporation into the other world is considered to be complete. All this while liminal aspects remain and the spirit exists but only in transition,

The feast is served, organized and arranged by the family. All kinsmen and affine are invited to the feast. The feast sets the spirit at rest. All their remains are taken to the riverside. A memorial post called 'munda' is erected out there. It is made of teak' wood. It is usually two feet below the ground and three feet above it; and is square in shape. If a man dies at a foreign location the munda must be reached at his original home. However not all clans of the Koroku erect mundas.

Further a mando hut facing a north-south direction is also erected. Inside it are seven cone shaped stones got from the river. Each stone represents a deity. Such a hut is meant only for shamans and village priests.

Several other feasts follow and they are indicative of an attempt by the living to remove the dead person, body and soul, from them. It is also an attempt to help the dead person to be incorporated into the other world. In between, it may be said, lies a type of liminal phase for the dead person's spirit. One interesting rite of solidarity is the carrying of the basket with a light (diya) in it to every neighbours' house since the last sidoli. Then hymns are sung. The chief organizers of the feast dress like groom and bride. Their garments are knotted together. A boy or girl may substitute for them with no obligation to marry subsequently. After midnight the two are separated and go to opposite sides of the room and shout at and abuse each other. The other guests soon follow suit. This is an old ritual and the abuse may even seem grossly absent to outsiders. It is quite obvious that their concerns are now with this world and with each other rather than any spirits. On the third day of the feast the munda is carried to the place of the Kharkia where holi is celebrated.

A male goat is killed here. On the fourth day of the feast the munda is erected near a river. Several other rituals occur. However, they all express incorporation for the dead persons spirit from the world of the living, and life in the world of the dead.

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## 6.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit we have described and explained the rites of birth and marriage in various communities. These include the Hindus, Syrian Christians, Sikhs and the Koroku tribe. We have therefore dealt with the subject adequately.

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## 6.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) Rites of Incorporation  
b) Rites of Transition  
c) Rites of Separation
- 2) a) Ritual as Socialization  
b) Ritual as identification  
c) Ritual as merit and status  
d) Ritual as non-verbal communication

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The main points of the Syrian Christian funeral are that it is a burial presided by a priest and mourners. The graveyard is in the compound of a church when the coffin has been lowered into the grave each mourner throws in some mud. The face is put facing towards, east that is Jerusalem from where the Messiah is expected to come.
- 2) Among Hindus the bones are collected the day after cremation when the pyre has cooled off. These bones are usually immersed into the nearest river. Holy men's bones and ashes are made into a memorial mound called a Samadhi.

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## UNIT 7 PRAYER: PILGRIMAGES AND FESTIVALS\*

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### Structure

- 7.0 Objectives
- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 What are Pilgrimages
  - 7.2.1 Turner's Typology of Pilgrimage?
  - 7.2.2 Social Significance of Pilgrimages
- 7.3 Religious Festivals
  - 7.3.1 What is a Religious Festival?
  - 7.3.2 Social Significance of Religious Festivals
- 7.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 7.5 References
- 7.6 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 7.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit you will be able to:

- understand the meaning and nature of pilgrimage as an expression of the religious- sentiment -as both an individual's behaviour and a socio-cultural institution;
- appreciate the social significance of pilgrimages, i.e. the effect of pilgrimage on the socio-economic life of a people and on. social solidarity and unity among the people;
- have a comprehensive idea of how pilgrimage has evolved through history in response to change in the social, economic and cultural spheres, specially in India;
- comprehend sociologically the phenomenon of religious festivals; and
- enrich your overall understanding of the relation between society and religion.

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\* Adapted from IGNOU Course Material: Unit 30 written by S K Bhattacharya and Unit 31 written by J S Bhat in Society and Religion (ESO 15) with modifications by Nita Mathur

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## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

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There are many ways by which prayer is offered. Many people pray in their houses every day. A large number of people render special prayer when they go on pilgrimages and on the occasion of religious festivals. In this unit we begin with the question: what is a pilgrimage? We then go on to examine pilgrimages in various contexts and features. Next we discuss the institutional aspect of a pilgrimage and the sacredness associated with it. Following this we examine pilgrimage centre and their liminality and the nature of auspiciousness in pilgrimage.

We will also discuss what a religious festival is and its social significance. We will analyse the social significance of pilgrimages and religious festivals.

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## 7.2 WHAT ARE PILGRIMAGES?

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Most religions of the world have laid great emphasis on 'the sacredness of certain localities and have either enjoined or recommended with great insistence, pilgrimages to them. These places are famous for miracles and the 'inspiration for religious life of the faithful or the revivification of faith. A religious believer in any culture may feel the call of such a place which may lie at a distance and resolve to journey there, i.e., to undertake a pilgrimage to the sacred site.

### Definition of Pilgrimage and Pilgrim

Most people understand pilgrimage as a journey to a holy place or shrine, either in the pilgrim's native land or abroad, the object of pilgrimage is to obtain some benefit-material, symbolic, moral or spiritual - which the sanctity of the-chosen spot is believed to confer. A pilgrimage may be undertaken because such a journey 'is considered meritorious. The idea of the acquisition of divine favour either directly or through a saint, is generally associated with such a journey. The benefits expected out of the labour or travail involved in the journey or expedition to the destination of pilgrimage, i.e., holy place, may range from the satisfaction of mundane interests to the 'highest spiritual attainment. But the journey has a root in the religious beliefs of the person( s) undertaking it the journey to the sacred spot is always associated with some religious motive or motives which are, in one way , or another, religious ideas and beliefs.

From the above definitions it is absolutely clear that two significant features which do recur in pilgrimages are:

- i) sacred places and
- ii) the act of travelling or journeying itself

"Pilgrimages are sacred journeys extraordinary" (Saraswati, 1985: 103). True, pilgrimage as practised in India and elsewhere is guided by the highly diversified motives of the pilgrims.

Pilgrimages are not mindless movements or migrations either. They are voluntary and individual, unlike the mindless collective migrations familiar in ancient and medieval times. Each is a personal act, following a personal decision, and resulting in a wide range of significant personal experience. Pilgrimage is thus a journey in quest of some ultimate value or some spiritual experience.

**Box 7.1 Is Every Visit to a nearby Holy Place a Pilgrimage?**

Is a visit made daily or occasionally by a devotee to the local or next-door shrine a pilgrimage? No, it is just a 'journey' to a sacred spot. Pilgrimage ' or pilgrim's journey 'usually covers long distances and extends over a considerable duration of time. Indeed pilgrimage implies a movement away from home and the severing, though temporarily, of the enduring bonds which bind the individual there. The pilgrim's journey begins amid the entanglements of the domestic social setting. The pilgrim then moves out and away from across distance, to a place that is set apart from the complex problems of everyday mundane life. The journey to the pilgrimage centre provides the opportunity for preparation of the devotee's mind for the proper attitudes needed in the pilgrimage centre.

**Individualistic Aspect of Pilgrimage**

Notwithstanding the collective aspect, associated with organisation of pilgrimages, various studies of pilgrimages in Hindu, Buddhist or Christian cultures have revealed the individualistic aspect of pilgrimages. Hindu pilgrimage, more specifically, Kashi pilgrimage, is essentially a personal quest for salvation both in space and in time. All rituals are aimed at earning the merits which are -not collectively shared. The merit of a pilgrimage is earned individually; and moksa, the ultimate aim of pilgrimage is salvation of the individual soul. Pilgrimage is an affair of the individual. There are, of course, cases where motives for going on pilgrimage originate in a general atmosphere of piety, devotion and communal and social loyalty. But very often a pilgrimage is "the result of a vow.

Something is wrong, or some danger threatening, or some good things highly desired' are missing", hence the journey is undertaken (ibid, 255). The pilgrim goes to the holy place in pursuit of some personally desired end. Buddhist pilgrims rituals of circumambulation (pradakshina) of the sacred shrines of the relics of Buddha is symbolic of a journey representing personal spiritual ascent.

There are specific motives concerned with mundane existence. They usually involve a commitment or vow to the deity whose blessing is sought for the solution of a problem which is of great concern to the pilgrim, e.g., the desire for the birth of. a male offspring. The second category of motives consists of

earning religious merit. It is hard to define such motives. It may be interpreted as the desire to purify the soul rather than to pray for wealth or success in business. Each pilgrimage has a related sacred complex. Turner (1974: 189) views pilgrimages as processes or flows of activities and observes that "pilgrimages will constitute objectively a connected network of processes each involving a journey to and from a particular site. Such sites (are) places where, according to believers, some manifestation of divine or supernatural power had occurred, what Mircea Eliade would call a 'theophany' (Turner 1974 : 189).

## Sacredness of Pilgrimage

The sacred is a category of things and actions set apart as holy and entitled to reverence. Such a category is often held to represent symbolically the key values of a society. The sacred is understood in contrast with profane. What is profane is ordinary, not sacred. Durkheim declares that all religions divide the universe into two opposed realms: sacred and profane and establish rules distinguishing former from the latter. Dichotomy of the sacred and profane in absolutist terms has been subjected to wide-ranging empirical and conceptual criticism. For instance, the idea of polar opposition between the sacred and profane be applied to the Indian context with caution because Indian religious thought is hierarchical (in the sense of encompassing of the contrary) rather than simply dualistic (recognizing the binary opposition). That is the profane, though the opposite of the sacred, is included in the latter and thus subordinated to it (Madan 1991: 3). Even in a place of pilgrimage like Kashi which is renowned for its sacredness, "it is difficult to make clear-cut distinction between the sacred and the secular in its organization of space, in the performance of its rituals and in the profession of ritual specialists".

The quality of sacredness characterizes various aspects of the journey to and activities in pilgrimage centres. Liminality of pilgrimage centres becomes clear when it is likened to a ford. A ford is a shallow stream where it is possible to cross safely on foot, in a vehicle, etc., and without using a boat. Indeed, the Sanskrit equivalent for a centre of pilgrimage is *tirtha*. The Sanskrit word, *tirtha*, is translated as a passage, way road, ford, stairs for landing or descent into a river, bathing place, place of pilgrimage. *Tirtha* has other connotations and usages as well. But the plurality of the uses of *tirtha* shares a symbolic value of holiness prescribed to certain exalted categories of place, state or person. The significance of symbolism lies in the notion of "crossing over" (transition or passage). The notion of fording or crossing over, implies a crossing place — a liminal, media location between two realms (of the sacred and the profane). A *tirtha* is such a place, and in symbolic terms, so is every place of pilgrimage. Similarly, a learned purified, initiated or devout individual rises above mundane society to stand between himself/herself and God, and so is able to act as a point of intersection and, therefore, fording.

The sacredness of the site accounts for the great concern with purity among pilgrims. The pilgrims must remove the taints of impurity from their body and mind. In case of Hindu pilgrims, for instance, the journey is itself a purification by austerities. For the quality of sacredness attached to pilgrimage and pilgrim centres.

### **Auspiciousness in Pilgrimage**

Auspiciousness is an important element in pilgrimage. Auspiciousness/inauspiciousness is distinct from purity/impurity. The former refers primarily to events and ultimately to life itself as an event-structure. Purity-impurity is basically an attribute of objects.

A tirtha- sthana or place of pilgrimage of the Hindus, located on the bank of a river or body of water, is graded as holy and a pilgrimage (yatra) to it is considered auspicious. The holiness of the place and the auspiciousness of the visit are greatly enhanced, if two or more rivers merge there (Madan 1987 : 52).

Auspiciousness implies benediction and well-being. An auspicious or subha time, or event or conduct is considered conducive to well-being.

Pilgrims attach great importance to objects or persons supposed to bring about subha or auspiciousness even if such objects or persons may suffer from impurity. Thus the pilgrims to the temple of Jagannath at Puri are told 'that viewing the circumambulating of devadasis is auspicious, i.e., these actions result into well-being. Some worshippers in the temple pick the dust from the feet of the dancing devadasis, or roll on the ground where they have danced, in the hope of attaining well-being, of winning divine grace (Marglin 1985: 109). For, they are told that the devadasis are the living embodiments of Jagannatha's consort, Lakshmi, indeed, the devadasis have the exclusive right to sing and dance in the outer sanctum of the temple at various times of the day and the year. They are associated with many other auspicious rites and events in the temple complex. They are, therefore, venerated by the pilgrims.

But the devadasis are denied entry into the inner sanctum of Jagannatha's temple. This prohibition is linked with the devadasis' status as courtesans. Their body is thus impure. But the sight or worship of the devadasis is auspicious for the pilgrims (Marglin 1985 : 35).

#### **7.2.1 Turners' Typology of Pilgrimages**

Victor and Edith Turner have attempted a typology of pilgrimages depending mainly on European history and history of Christian pilgrimages (Turner and Turner, 1978).

- i) **Archaic Pilgrimage:** Archaic pilgrimage traditions have come down from very ancient times, and little or nothing is known of their foundation. Archaic pilgrimages are those pilgrimages which bear quite evident traces of syncretism with older religious beliefs and symbols'. Turner and Turner cite Glastonbury, Chalma in Mexico, Croagh Patrick in Ireland and Pandharpur in India. Pandharpur is included in this category because "its equivocal deity Vithova Bhave may well have Dravidian, pre-Indo European associations" (Turner and Turner, 1978 : 18).
- ii) **Prototypical Pilgrimages:** Pilgrimages established by the founder of a religion by his or her first disciples or important evangelists of his faith may be called prototypical. Examples are: Jerusalem and Rome (Christianity), Mecca (Islam), Banaras and Mount Kailas (Hinduism), Bodh Gaya and Saranath (Buddhism).
- iii) **High-period Pilgrimage:** In the hey-day of a pilgrimage tradition an elaborate shrine, crowded with symbols is created. In the middle ages when the growth of Muslim power in the Mediterranean hampered Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the loss was compensated by the creation of shrines all over Europe. Chartres, Canterbury, Walsingham, Compostela, Loreto, Assisi, Czestochowa, etc., are important examples. Eventually at many European centres routinization and decline set in and meaning was lost in the jungle of symbolic objects and rites. Hence during the era of Reformation and the era of Puritanism many of them like Walsingham became targets of iconoclasts and were suppressed.
- iv) **Modern Pilgrimages:** All over the world in the last two/centuries a new type of pilgrimage characterized by "a highly devotional tone and the fervent personal piety of their adherents" has developed. This modern pilgrimage is "deeply involved with mass technological and scientific culture". Pilgrims travel by automobile and airplane. Pilgrimage centres publish newspapers and pamphlets. The catchment areas of modern pilgrimages are great and flourishing urban industrial cities. However, the message is "still traditional, at variance with the values of today". Both apparitional and saint-centred pilgrimage abounds in Europe as well as in other parts of the modern world, e.g. Japan or Israel.

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Enumerate the types of pilgrimage that have been described by Turner.  
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- 2) Write a brief note on pilgrimages in India.  
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### 7.2.3 The Social Significance of Pilgrimages

For a comprehensive understanding of the social significance of pilgrimages we shall first examine Turner's thesis on pilgrimage as a social process, where he emphasizes the communitas in pilgrimages and their liminal (see Key words) character. We shall then see how pilgrimage is related to different aspects of social life, namely, social and cultural integration, educational, economic, political and other kinds of activities.

#### Turner's Thesis

Victor W. Turner begins his thesis on pilgrimages as social processes with the idea that pilgrimage has the classic three-stage form of a rite of passage (as described by Van Gennep)

- i) separation,
- ii) the liminal stage (the journey itself, the sojourn at the shrine, and the contact with the sacred, and .
- iii) "reaggregation (the home-coming)-.

In this context Turner asks us to consider two modalities of social experience

- i) of structure and
- ii) of communities.

In structure people are differentiated by social role and position and linked in an often hierarchical political system. By contrast, *communitas* presents itself in an undifferentiated community of equals who may recognize each other in an immediate and total way. *Communitas* "is almost everywhere held to be sacred or 'holy', possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency". Turner (1974 : 203) remarks that *communitas* emerges where social structure is not and reaffirms the bonds of essential unity upon which the social order ultimately rests.

Pilgrimages seem to be regarded by self-conscious pilgrims both (i) as occasions on which *communitas* is experienced; and (ii) journeys towards a sacred source of - *communitas*, which is also seen as a source of healing and renewal. The intervening period and flow of activities between departure from home for the pilgrimage centre and return there from to the familiar world is marked out by "liminality, the optimal setting of *communitas* relations, and *communitas*, a Spontaneously generated-relationship between levelled and equal, total and individuated human beings" (Turner, 1974a : 202).

Liminality and community as together constitute anti-structure. Anti-structure is not the total reversal of structure but rather the source and origin of the all structures and their critique. It suggests new possibilities. In the pilgrimage situation the ethos of *communitas* becomes manifest in the social bond which develops among pilgrims and which welds them into a group. Relations among members of the group of pilgrims cut across the social divisions which are typical of social order in the home sphere. Pilgrims are relieved for a time from the nets of social structure wherefrom they journey to the pilgrimage centre. Since it allows temporary release, pilgrimage is designated as a form of anti-structure compared to the highly ordered and structured sedentary life of the place of residence. Pilgrimage involves the establishment of a temporary bond of camaraderie/comradeship and quasi-fraternity among those en route:

### **Pilgrimage and Socio-cultural Integration**

The contribution of pilgrimages to social and cultural integration of a people is observed at three levels.

- i) First, pilgrimage promotes national or regional integration cutting across group boundaries.
- ii) Pilgrimage has a great impact on the group of participants themselves in maintaining and strengthening the values and, ideals held by the group;
- iii) Pilgrimage serves in many cases to reinforce the existing patterns of social relations within the area from which the pilgrimage draws pilgrims.

India is well-known for diversities of race, region, language, sect, caste etc, Here too pilgrimages have been a very important vehicle of the idea of essential Unity of the the Indian people. Noting this M.N. Srinivas (1962: 105) writes, "The concept of unity of India is essentially a religious one". Famous centres of pilgrimage lie in every part of the country. Even in pre-British times when the means of communication and transport were very poor, pilgrims occasionally walked hundreds of miles across territories infested with fierce animals and dacoits and braved disease and privation to reach the sacred places for earning religious merit. The grand pilgrimage was *pradakshina* or clockwise circumambulation of the territory of India.

In a sacred centre like Banaras many kinds of people and many local and regional elements of culture are juxtaposed and ordered in a small place. A Maharashtrian priest intending to study the Vedas in Banaras will look for and get a Maharashtrian scholar in the city where he will also meet Bengalis and Tamils and rituals bearing the colour of their specific regional cultures. For example, the deity Murukan enshrined in several pilgrimage centres throughout the State of Tamil Nadu, stands as a symbol for Tamil Nadu and its people. Pilgrimage practices are a feature of Tamil regional identity. *Pilgrimage forges a social bond within the local area.* Sectarianism and

factionalism are widespread in the regions from which the pilgrims come. But the pilgrimage is non-sectarian and is joined by all segments of the population to perform non-sectarian agricultural rites which concern the entire population of the area.

Some pilgrimages transcend national boundaries and therefore function to bring together communities larger than the nation-state. The Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca links all the separate communities of Muslims into one community of the Faithful centred on Mecca.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) What are Turner's views on structure and communities?

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2) Write briefly on the socio-cultural aspect of pilgrimage.

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**Pilgrimage and Education**

Pilgrimage has been one of the important sources of education, information and cultural awareness for the pilgrims. The Hindu pilgrimage affords, for instance, an opportunity to countless people living in distant villages to know India as a whole and also her varying manners, life styles and customs. Karve (1962: 13-29) noted that three characteristics of education were present in the pilgrimage

- i) The preservation of traditional knowledge,
- ii) its cultivation,
- iii) and its transmission to the next generation.

This education was also many-sided. Besides religion and philosophy, the three arts of music, dancing, and drama were included in it. It also encompassed the living together for some time of the whole array of communities, castes and classes within Indian society.

## Pilgrimage and the Arts

Dance and music, architecture, sculpture, and painting receive ample encouragement and transmission through pilgrimage. Many of the temples in Hindu and Jain tirthas are commendable for their artistic beauty and admirable design and conception which set examples for other such constructions. Temples in India may rightly be said to represent both poetry and philosophy in brick and stone, and temple worship was in a way responsible for the great development and subsequent refinement of sculpture and painting, and music and dancing to extraordinary levels of excellence. It is difficult to find temples of great antiquity in North and West India as these parts of the country were vulnerable to repeated invasions and destruction by the foreigners. In north India's tirtha tradition a tirtha is created through the deification of the land or territory. Temples are less significant than the sacred territory on which they stand. By contrast, the creation of a tirtha by building temples and housing the deity is largely a south Indian tradition. Hence, the large temple complex and the walled sacred territory are the characteristic features of the South.

## Pilgrimages, Material Culture and Economy

Pilgrimages have a role in the spread of material culture through the exchange of ideas and goods among the pilgrims along the routes of pilgrimage. The route-pattern of ancient pilgrimages suggests at least two favourable zones or corridors (if contact between the North and the South. These corridors seem to have been favoured for the southward expansion of plow agriculture. The areas less suited for plow agriculture remained outside the zones and hence the pale of Hinduism and partly inhabited by tribal peoples. The Purohits (popularly known as Pandas) at Hardwar also maintain an elaborate system of record keeping on long leaders called bahis which contain genealogies of their clients Yajman. The bahis have been kept for generations and are handed down from father to son or even sold to other purohits, given in dowry to a son-in-law, or otherwise exchanged as property. This is so because of their association with the means of livelihood of Pandas who depend for their living on the custom provided by pilgrims visiting pilgrimages. Constant coming and going of pilgrims in a pilgrimage place gives impetus to growth of business activities in the area, small and big needs of pilgrims have to be catered and as a result appear a variety of marketing arrangements.

Apart from deity requirements of temporary shelter, food, articles for worship, several forms of entertainment; recreation also appear as a side-business activity. For example, the Pushkar *tirtha* in Rajasthan is famous for both its sacred character and its fair, where brisk business in animal trade is transacted between buyers and sellers from a wide area.

### Socio-Political Aspect of Pilgrimage

The close association in a common purpose, namely, the purpose of pilgrimage, of large number of people from different tribes, communities and localities affords the basis for the development of political unity and stability of political authority. Pilgrimages played as vital a role in' pan-Hebraism (Hebrew system of religion) as in modern pan-Islamism. Pilgrimages provided in the past the ideological legitimation for empires. Christian pilgrimages can be traced back, to the glorification of the Palestinian and Syrian 'Holy Land' perpetrated by the Emperor Constantine and his ecclesiastical retinue. The crusading spirit of the Christian intending to visit Jerusalem was generated when the hardship in the way increased because of the seeming intolerance of the aracen rulers. No doubt, notice of political conquest-and worldly ambition entered into the Crusades in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries as well as in the practice of pilgrimage. Similarly, the Buddhist and Islamic holy places were generated out of the respective efforts of King Asoka and Muhammed, and their priestly functionaries to establish Buddhism and Islam as state religions, respectively.

#### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) How is pilgrimage a source of education, information and cultural awareness?  
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- 2) What is the link between pilgrimage places and advancement in performative arts?  
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- 3) Why do markets develop around pilgrim places?  
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## 7.3 RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

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In this section, you deal with two questions: What is a religious festival? What do we mean by its social significance and how can we comprehend it sociologically?

### 7.3.1 What is a Religious Festival?

Derived from the adjective festive (meaning festal, mirthful), festival means joyful celebration, feast (Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary). It also means day or season for public celebrations or merry-making (Oxford Progressive English Dictionary). Sociologically, too, a joyful public celebration or merry-making on or within a fixed day or season is the essential ingredient of a festival. Usually, such a celebration also includes feasting.

When because of its association with the Supernatural, a festival also acquires the rites and ceremonies of prayer/propitiation as a means of salvation from evil, it becomes religious. In India, festivals mostly fall on the continuum of religion and magic, some carrying the overtones of religion and some of magic. Mostly, they tend to combine both.

Because of its association with the Supernatural, a religious festival is viewed as sacred. It is a tradition which has routinized rituals and ceremonies. Highly routinized and sophisticated rituals and ceremonies may be conducted by the priest/magician but others may be informally performed at the group level.

By its very nature, the religious festival gets set in the patterned network of social relationships. This patterning may take place at the level of a society and/or also at the levels of groups. That is, as in our society, at the levels of family, caste, village, city, region and religious groupings of various kinds.

The religious festival is a social expression of what sociologists/anthropologists conceive as 'religious experience'. Durkheim pointed out that questions about all sorts of things which surpass the limits of knowledge are the oasis of the human social experience we call religion.

In order to be social, significance is to be interpreted in the context of meaning which practitioners of a festival assign to it. Its importance is to be interpreted in relation to the patterned network of social relationships in which the festival in question is set. Both meaning and importance are to be seen in the context of the individual's society and culture and their interrelatedness and structuring at the level, we may have in mind. As a student of sociology, you may be already familiar with the concept of function which, largely, includes both meaning and importance. To be precise, in sociology, function is conceived as observable consequences of a cultural trait, an institution, a patterned social activity and a role or a set of roles in relation

to the operation of .the patterned 'social network' it belongs to or of which it is a part. Consequences can be positive or negative or partly positive and partly negative.

### **7.3.2 Social Significance of Religious Festivals**

We now turn to examine the social significance of the festivals described. It is quite clear that society has given an importance place to religious festivals and that they, are of integrative value. They also have significance for socialization purposes.

#### **Adjustment between Man, Nature and Society**

O'Dea (1966: p. 115) points out that in the annual social cycle of life, there occurs 'the patterned alternation of sacred and profane periods, of periods of celebration and periods of work'. If we keep in mind our festivals of Basant Panchami, Shivaratri and Holi on the one hand, and Sanjhi, Karwa Chauth, Deepawali and Govardhan Puja on the other, we notice that our religious festivals mostly fall in the periods of transition alternating between well-set seasons-Rains, Winter and Summer.

The months of Agahan and Paush do not have any festivals. As against this, in the polyandrous tracts of Garhwal (Jaunsar Bawar, Jaunpur and Rawain), the last days of the month of Paush are characterized by a series of festivals falling one after the other. They are characterized by a festive gay abandon expressed through singing, dancing, eating, drinking and merry-making. By tradition, young married girls return to their father's house to join the winter festivities. These festivals are partly religious but mostly this worldly, given mainly to recreation and merry-making. It is to be noted that because of intense cold and snow, agricultural activity remains at a standstill, in some places.

#### **Emotional Social Security of the Individual**

Certain festivals like Karwa Chauth are intended to provide emotional social security to the individual. Karwa Chauth may be said to have a loose group-character in so far as it is observed only by married women or by the women of a family or neighbourhood. It is intended to provide salvation against the evil of the social curse of widowhood. Festivals seeking to attain emotional-social security tend to acquire a magical undertone. They may or may not have group-character.

Festivals relating to fertility cult, agricultural and otherwise prosperity, longevity of husband brother and son, and annual collective propitiation of gods or goddesses to ward off the evils of misfortunes and diseases (small-pox and cholera) fall in this category.

## Identity, Solidarity, Differentiation and Conflict

Socially, religious festivals are also related to group identity and solidarity and to intra-and-inter-group differentiation and conflict. It tends to lend identity and solidarity to different types of groups, namely, a panth (religious brotherhood), a caste, a spatial group (village/region/nation) and an ethnic group (as for example, the Parsis).

To illustrate: Moharram lends identity to the Muslim, the gadi Panchami to the followers of Shivanaraini Panth Karwa Chauth and Sanjhi are not all-India but regional festivals. Likewise, Dala Chhatha is essentially a festival of the Bhojpuri region. It is characterized by rituals ensuring fecundity of a woman, fulfilment of longing for a male offspring and longevity of the son's life.

Celebration of Ravidas Jayanti has not united endogamous groups of its followers into a socially solid group. At Dehradun, the Raidasi and Jatiya Chamars join the procession but hold other celebrations in their respective Mohallas (Bhatt, 1961). Even the Raidasis now hold their celebration at two places though they live in the same ward and in a more or less contiguous settlement. Now there are separate organizations to manage the celebration of Ravidas Jayanthi.

## Social Stratification

In the Indian situation, there is a close linkage between the celebration, of a religious festival and social stratification. Social stratification on India consists largely of hierarchically arranged castes. Each caste has a traditionally ordained occupational role. Traditionally, caste-based occupational roles have been subservient to agricultural economy and to the social-economic position of the agriculturist.

Because of the growing impact of urban-industrialism, the traditional synchronization between caste and occupation is fast changing. Still, in the rural situation, it continues though in a fragile form. However, largely speaking, in the celebration of a religious festival, the Brahmin performs a priestly role, members of artisan castes meet the requirements relating to the craft of their respective castes and members of low castes play the role of the menial. In the celebration of Ram Lila, in many places, the effigy of Ravan is made by Muslim artisans.

## Ritual Art

Ritual art relates to the expressive aspect of religion in society. As the previous descriptions of Sanjhi and Karwa Chauth indicate, art finds a crucial place in the celebration of a religious festival. It may be found associated with various forms of art, drawing, painting, modeling, sculpturing (out of stone and/or wood) and decoration, floral and otherwise.

Artists may be specialists as well as non-specialists. Where rituals are directed by a specialist and celebration of the festival is set in the stratificational structure, creation of relevant art-objects may become a job of one or more specialists, In a village, in the polyandrous tract of Garhwal, the wooden idols of Hanuman, bear and sheep, are carved by the village carpenter (the Bad,). Otherwise, as in the case of Sanjhi and Karwa, it may be done by non-specialists.

### Check Your Progress 4

1) Write about identity solidarity differentiation and conflict and religious festivals.

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2) What is ritual art? Can you gave some examples of it?

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### Unity in Diversity

In a pluralistic society like ours, emotional realization of unity in diversity is our socio-cultural ethos and philosophical worldview. Our religious festivals are also seen in the corresponding socio-cultural matrix.

Like cultural traits, religious festivals, too, have the tendency to diffuse. Diffusion is both vertical and horizontal. Shakti cult, for example, has diffused both vertically and horizontally. In the horizontal diffusion, in which the process of spread, assimilation, integration and consequent modification come into operation. Consequently, there develop regional forms of a religious festival.

To illustrate, the concept of Goddess emanates from the philosophically conceived all-pervading supernatural female power. But, that manifests itself in various forms- Vashno Devi, Shakumbari, Kamakhya, Durga, Kali, Shitala etc. Each of them is regionally located. But, all are viewed as manifestations of the same power.

Unity in diversity of Shaki cult manifests at another level-at the level of region and habitat. In Malwa, in M.P., San}hi is celebrated during pitripaksha, in the Western Uttar Pradesh after pitripaksha and at Mathura in the month of Shravan. In Malwa, San}hi symbolizes a divine unmarried girl who, year by year, leaves for her sasural (father-in-law's house). In Western Uttar Pradesh, it symbolizes the Goddess and, in Brij Radha and Krishna.

In Bundel Khand (U.P.) it is a form of Mamulia and, in Maharashtra, a form of Gulabi. In Eastern U.P. and Bihar, it is Jhinhia and in Bengal, the powerful Durga cult. In Tamil Nadu, it becomes a festivals of dolls. In Gujarat, it takes the form of vigorous and glamorous Garba festival. And, in all these regional forms of Shakti cult, young unmarried girls play a crucial role.

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## 7.4 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have seen what pilgrimages are: This includes the definitions of pilgrimages, temple going, merit producing aspects and so on. Also covered were-the institutional aspects of pilgrimage and its sacredness. Pilgrimage centres and liminality and auspiciousness in pilgrimage were also examined. We then examined Turner's typology of pilgrimages, the interpretations of Hajj and pilgrimages in India. Finally we turned attention to the social significance of pilgrimages. This included Turner's thesis, cultural integration, the arts and education. It covered economy and the socio-political aspect of pilgrimage.

We examined what a religious festival is and analysed the scope of its social significance. We discussed the social significance of religious' festivals. This included adjustment between culture, nature and society. Next we looked at the emotional and social security of the individual. Following a discussion of identity, solidarity differentiation and conflict the issue of stratification was examined. Ritual art and unity in diversity in relation to observation of religious festivals were also discussed.

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## 7.6 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The types of pilgrimage enumerated by Turner are: a) archaic pilgrimage b) proto typical pilgrimages c) high-period pilgrimage d) modern pilgrimage
- 2) India's pilgrimages are both ancient and continuous the tirthas were glorified by the sacred literature. As the offerings made at the sacred places are a source of livelihood for the priests. They extol the sanctity of the tirtha they serve Tirthas are repositories of tradition and propagators of reinterpreted values and beliefs. The government of India is providing all facilities and accommodations possible at these sites. It is also using these places for its programme of family planning or exhibition of agricultural and industrial products.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) In a structure-situation we find that people are differentiated by status and position. This is often manifested in a hierarchical manner. On the other hand 'communitas' dissolves structure and erects bonds of essential unity.
- 2) Pilgrimage causes socio-cultural integration. In Banaras, for example all regions are represented, including Tamils, Maharashtrians, Bengalis and Punjabis. Many social bonds are formed, indeed some of the transcending national boundaries.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) While on a pilgrimage, people get the chance to interact with persons from different regions, with different socio-economic backgrounds. This interaction gives them a chance to learn about people of other regions, their life styles and customs.
- 2) In most pilgrim places, there are often side-shows which give ample scope for proliferation, of performative arts of drama, dance, singing and playing of instruments. Many temples are famous for their devadasis and their performances. Besides, many temples are unique examples of architectural designs and they have beautiful paintings and sculptures.
- 3) Basically, markets appear in pilgrim places to cater for the needs of pilgrims. Pilgrimages involve fulfilment of the daily needs of pilgrims on

their way. Apart from daily needs, supply goods related to worship and other sacred duties is also another reason for setting up shops. In addition, for recreation and entertainments, different types of arrangement are made in and around the pilgrim centres.

### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Religious festivals are related to group identity and solidarity and to group differentiation and conflict e.g. Moharram lends identity to the Muslims the gadi of Basant Panchami to the followers of Shivanaraini faith. Again celebration of Moharram is linked to the differentiation between Shia and Sunni.
- 2) Ritual art is that which is done within a context of religion and society. An example of this is the clay modelling of Goddess San}hi, the Tazias at Moharram, and the making of the karwa in Karwa Chauth.



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## UNIT 8 RELIGION, SECTS AND CULTS\*

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### Structure

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Understanding Religious Groups
- 8.3 The Genesis of Religious Groups
  - 8.3.1 Social Factors
  - 8.3.2 Development Process
  - 8.3.3 Universal Features
- 8.4 The Church-Sect Typology
  - 8.4.1 Ecclesia (The Church)
  - 8.4.2 Sect
  - 8.4.3 Denomination
  - 8.4.4 Cult
- 8.5 The Religious Groups in India
  - 8.5.1 Dynamics of Math, Marg and Sampradaya
  - 8.5.2 Sangh
  - 8.5.3 Math
  - 8.5.4 Panth
- 8.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.7 References
- 8.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 8.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit you will be able to:

- familiarise yourself with various religious organisations both in the Indian context and the western context;
- understand the origins of the religious organisations, their development and their social functions;
- compare the religious organisations in India with that of the Western religious organisations; and
- analyse whether the typologies offered by western sociologists are adequate to understand the Indian religious organisations.

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\* Adopted from IGNOU Course Material: Unit 12 of *Society and Religion* written by G S Bhat with modifications by Nita Mathur

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## 8.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this Unit we will discuss religious organisations as an important element of religion. This we hope will enable you to evolve a comparative perspective. This Unit also seeks to explain the genesis of religious formations, their development, functions and the dynamics. We hope this discussion will help you understand the dynamic-interaction between ideal and real.

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## 8.2 UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS GROUPS

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Religion is not only a body of belief but it is practised. Almost all major religions of the world are found in organised forms.

A religious organisation grows out of and after the religious experience of a charismatic personality (as for example, Christ, Mohammad, Buddha). This religious experience of a charismatic personality gets organised and institutionalised. Its' developmental process operates at three levels: (i) formation of the pattern of worship, i.e., the cult; (ii) formation of the pattern of ideas and definitions, i.e., development of myths and theology; and (iii) formation of association and organisation. The problem of interpreting the original religious experience can also be added to this.

Sociologists generally speak of four types of religious groups-the ecclesia (The Church), the sect, the denomination and the cult. Known as the Church-Sect Typology, this differentiation of religious groups is based mainly on the pioneering work of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch and on the basis of development of Christianity in the West.

Does it help to explain religio-social groupings of all types and of all religions other than Christianity? The prevalent sociological stand on this question is somewhat ethnocentric, ambiguous and even contradictory. To some, with certain changes, this typology is universally applicable (Mobergh, 1961), while to others, it is not (Bhatt, 1969). To Johnson it can be conveniently adopted for 'the purpose of exposition' though he also finds it somewhat 'awkward to discuss oriental religions'. In India, we identify religious groups as Mat, Marg, Sampradaya, Sangh, Panth, Sama], Ashram and Akhara. Here, we face a problem, that is, can we explain religious groups in India by the Church-Sect Typology?

To find an answer to the question, we have to look at religious groups from the social-historical perspective. Also, we have to analyse the genesis of religious groupings.

Without emphasizing too much on the uniqueness of India, we have to keep in mind the distinction between two traditions of religious experience-the Semitic, out of which grew Christianity and Islam and the tradition of netiwad-

anekantwad (the tradition of religious pluralism) out of which grew religious groups in India. Let us elaborate them a little more. As you can already discern the crossover of religious concepts from the Christian tradition as discussed above, are really distinct from each other so far as organisations are concerned.

In the Semitic tradition, religious experience is viewed as revealed and a commandment from God sent through a divinely chosen mediatory between man and God therefore the Semitic tradition tends to be monolithic. This helps in the organisation and spread of this type of religion. But, it sometimes comes in conflict with the political authority and other religions.

In the other tradition, no religious experience is final. There are and can be many paths to reach God. In India, we have both these traditions, growing parallel and cutting across each other. Islam tends to be monolithic though sufism is pluralistic. While there are socio-historical differences between monolithic and pluralistic religions, according to sociologists, there are certain characteristic features of religious organisations. These can be made the basis of comparison.

Johnson (1868: 419-20) suggests a seven-point criteria of variables to compare religious groups. They are summarily given below for your reference as they have been made use of in describing religious groups for you:

- i) Group Membership: Compulsory or voluntary
  - ii) If voluntary: exclusive or relatively open to new members
  - iii) Group's attitude towards other religious groups
  - iv) Whether the group proselytises or not
  - v) Internal Organisation: autocratic or democratic
  - vi) Clergy: Whether clergy regarded as necessary for the salvation of lay members
  - vii) Attitude of the group towards the secular affairs of the society as a whole.
- Such criteria can be used for comparative study of religious groups.

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### **8.3 THE GENESIS OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS**

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In very general terms we can define religion as a system of belief and practices. It is shared among people and also it sustains over time. As a shared and stable practice of faith religion organises itself into a consistent systematic form. In the sub-sections to follow, we will try and understand the way in which religious groups originate and sustain, over a period of time.

### 8.3.1 Social Factors

The genesis of religious organisation lies in social groupings which are a part of the society. It also lies in the routinisation and institutionalisation of charisma and in the structural differentiation of society. The solid foundations of a religious organisation are often laid down by the disciples and not by the founder. His religious experience provides a breakthrough.

Death of the originator of the religion or preceptor creates the crisis of continuity and succession. The way they are met has a significant bearing on the subsequent religious organisation. The cultural background of the group in which the preceptor functioned, its kinship and political structure and the material and ideal interests of the followers, particularly the leaders among them, along with the teachings of the preceptor, affect the formation of the religious group.

The crisis of continuity is generally met by collecting, recording and communicating the sayings, precepts, sermons and deeds of the founder. But, socially, of more crucial importance is the emergence of a system of worship, a cultic philosophy which binds and inspires the ensuing religious brotherhood: The cult is the nucleus of every religious organisation.

The crisis of succession can be met in many ways - by the prevalent rule of inheritance (usually primogeniture) or by nominating the successor disciple; or by consensus among the disciples; or by appointment; or through a struggle for power among the disciples/colleagues or among the members of the group itself. Much depends on the gravity of the situation. It may be pointed out that succession in a religious group is not usually smooth and easy. It may involve much infighting within the group before anything about succession is finalised or decided upon by the factions attempting to garner leadership and power.

### 8.3.2 Development Process

Formation of cult is one level of this process, the other being the formation of myths and theology. The formation of the group is the third level. These three levels operate simultaneously and inter-relatedly,

Myth is a dramatic story in which the Supernatural interacts with humans in the human forms), the myth reinforces belief in the cultic pattern. Theology rationalises the belief system. Both constitute 'the intellectual level of rationalisation of religion'. Development of theology goes along with the 'development of professional priestly class - the religious specialist'. With theology develops a moral code (O Dea: 1969: 41-46).

Theology has a strong propensity to develop into a body of dogma. Consequently, it often comes into conflict with the dynamics of class changes and power-structure. It tends to generate protest and a variety of interpretations. It thus precipitates schism and splits which are often linked with the interests of the common people of the laity and literati.

When a cult develops and standardises norms of ritual worship, initiation and membership, of resolving the problems of continuity and succession and doctrinal matters and of managing its expansion, it may be said to have taken the form of a religious organisation (group). The system of worship and rationalisation of its belief-system defines its boundary.

A religious group originates as a primary group, dividing the humanity between believers and non-believers. But, it also grows and multiplies because of inner differentiation of the total society and the group itself and growing enrichment of religious experience. With the emergence of religious specialists such as priests and soon there appears the organisation distinction between laity and clergy. The clergy owes its existence to the hierarchy or ordained offices, having the elements of bureaucracy. The office and not its occupant has the touch of the Supernatural.

### 8.3.3 Universal Features

Symbolised by its rituals, beliefs and organisation, a religious group displays a new spirit of coherence and unity. Nevertheless, it adjusts with the differences based on position and function and often tolerates the order system of statuses which it desires.

Acquiring a revolutionary character, a religious group may recognise and accept the established society. Or, it may reject the established society only in spirit to promote the attitude of equality within the group, as was the case in Buddhism. It opposed the conservative society and took equality as an ideal. The internal structure of religious group is a dynamic process. It operates at two levels. On one hand it creates internal differentiation and on the other hand it organises and institutionalises itself.

#### Activity 1

Analyse the characters and contents of a myth associated with a cult in your family/neighbourhood. You can compare your notes with others at your Study Centre.

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## 8.4 THE CHURCH-SECT TYPOLOGY

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When a religious grouping establishes its beliefs, norms and practices into an organised form it takes an established religious organisational form. In a very loose sense a Church can be described as this. At the same time an organised religion has multiple strands because of internal differentiation. In this section we will try and understand the dynamics of church, sect and cult.

### 8.4.1 Ecclesia (The Church)

The Ecclesia was founded on the religious experience of Christ as described in the Bible. Christ being the divine mediator between man and God, in the ecclesia, his experience is viewed as revealed and, hence, infallible. Since this revelation is for man's salvation, man must adopt it. It must be followed by many and people who oppose it (heretics) must be punished or converted.

This doctrinal and rigid approach has tended to make the Ecclesia a highly proselytising religion, so much so that Raja Ram Mohan Roy distinguished between the precepts and practices of Jesus and Christianity preached by the missionaries (Sarkar, B.K. 1937: 619-624; Bhatt, G.S. 1968: 34). Since it could be organised and people who did not belong to it could be converted (proselytise), it grew to be international with national, regional and local variations.

Having the organisational distinction of the laity and clergy, the Ecclesia is an apostolical order. The clergy consists of the ministers of Christian religion. They are trained, selected and appointed. They are knitted into a hierarchy of allotted offices, their functioning is bureaucratized. Clergy-hood is a career. A member of the clergy derives his religious qualities from the office which he holds by virtue of appointment and ordination. It is quite obvious that the entire situation is hierarchical and bureaucratic in its functioning.

The priest and his office are pivotal to the Ecclesia, Being viewed as spiritual-religious guardian of the members of his parish, the priest can take confessions and grant pardon from sins. He solemnises marriages and counsels even in the secular needs of the members of his church. His main function is to preach and to convert.

Historically, the Ecclesia is characterised by a conflict and consequent adjustment between monasticism and protestantism. Monasticism is said to have grown out of a view that God cannot be experienced by human knowledge and also they believed in the 'original sin'. Because of the concept of original sin which created a deep anxiety and even fear of sex, self-denial in the service of God became primary, The monastery, however, was open to both men and women.

Protestantism separated the world and God. The world was accepted as treat an area for man's activity and worldly achievement. Charitable social work and management of large charitable institutions was added to the Church's activity and has since remained its trait. In this process of adjustment 'monks became assimilated into clerics and clerics to monks'. Together, they made up the Church- rather its two classes, men of religion (the clergy) and the men who lived in the world (the laity).

Combining the elective and appointed offices, the Ecclesia has tended to grow and expand as a self-contained unitary-federal structure. Its head, the Pope is elected by a small college of appointed officials. The rest of the hierarchy officials is appointed. Among these, only the office of the priest may be said to be religious in the true sense of the term while all others are managerial.

The Ecclesia trains and recruits its personnel through its theological educational institutions. For a dynamic definition of its creed, it also organises research institutions study centres, seminars and workshops. It publishes journals and maintains printing, presses and publishing houses. It also establishes and controls schools and colleges' for secular education where imparting of secular education is combined with preaching as its primary aim is to spread 'the World of God'.

Along with the pursuit of spirituality, the Church also develops vested interests in wealth and temporal power. It also develops vested interest in the established social order which legitimises its power, possessions, privileges and interests. This involvement in secular matters brings it into conflict with the secular-political structure. Sometimes leading to schism as in the case of the development of Church of England.

Secular interests of the Church also tend to make the clergy conservative. That may also lead to conflict. But, conflict with the secular world is not a dominant feature of the Church. Many times the Church does come to terms with the secular-political world and accommodate itself to secular life.

#### **8.4.2 Sect**

As a religious group, the Sects stands for those who dissent from the interpretation of the doctrine from an established church and (the united works) as a communion of religious brotherhood with a well-defined creed. Its ideal type is a contrast to that of the Church though it may share some traits with the latter. Unlike the Church, the membership of the sect is compulsory. It is voluntary, relative exclusive and often qualified ritually. The fact is that the sect arises from people's dissent with the Church over many differences of dogma and perception of the social situation. These make the sect have a clear dogma and values of its own.

The Sect does not stand for unqualified universal conversion. God's grace is not for all, nor is it bestowed automatically. It is won by the individual's personal faith and ethical behaviour. Therefore, the Sect has a disdain for 'the refined verbal spinings of ecclesiastical theologians' (Johnson: *ibid*: 427).

The sect is often intolerant toward other religious groups. It may or may not proselytise. Obliteration of distinction between the clergy and the laity is its chief characteristic. In its organisation, the Sect is usually democratic. It may be this worldly as well as other worldly.

The Sect takes birth in protest and rebellion. Its relation with the political authority mayor may not be smooth. If rebellious, the Sect may be prosecuted.

Sectarianism has been quite pronounced in Christianity. Its cause is said to be partly in the Christian tradition itself. Christianity grew in protest, so does the Sect. The Christian Sects arose mostly to uphold 'the value of radical individualism, the ideal of love and brotherhood and a conscious concern for the poor'.

Protest against the Church' view that 'religious authority inheres in the office and set of ritual ordination and not 'in the individual soul' has been another cause of sectarianism in Christianity. A third cause is resentment against the social institutions- the Church supports. The sect is an expression of social justice. The question relating to the neglect of the poor and purity of the Gospel often precipitated a sense of injustice, discontent and dissatisfaction.'

A sect encompasses not the whole but a part of a society. Attaining identity easily, it tends to provide a sense of greater self-esteem to its members and, thus, it derives its relevance. The greater the rebellion, the greater the criticism, the more is the sect's self-esteem and inner unity. Persecution of a rebellious sect all the more enhances its self-esteem and inner unity.

### 8.4.3 Denomination

The Denomination grows out of the Sect as the latter grows out of the Ecclesia. As Johnson observes, "The line between ecclesia and denomination is not always clear-cut nor is the line between sect and cult ... denomination is what usually results when a sect becomes 'respectable' in the eyes of middle class society and relaxes its religious vigour." (ibid. pp. 433-35). It is also observed that a conservative type of sect is more prone to change into a denomination.

A denomination, thus, grows out of a sect and shares many similarities with the Ecclesia. Socially, it is a middle class phenomenon, bound essentially by middle class-status-identity and respectability. Its membership is voluntary and relatively open but is largely defined by the class-status-consciousness; the denomination is thus the result of the Sect becoming larger in terms of members and is in fact much closer to the Church than the Sect ever was. It also means a change of the various dogmas ethics and codes of the denomination.

The binding chord of 'fellowship of love and religious service' which is a distinguishing trait of the cult, becomes weak, almost nonexistent, in the denomination. For the member of a denomination religion is one of his interests, almost one of his recreations. Church-going is just a duty, which he imposes upon himself, his wife and children.

The employment of clergy, too, becomes a status-symbol. Members of the clergy are sometimes trained in psychology and/or in theology. Working as ministers and counsellors, they are not supposed to possess any supernatural powers and are not regarded necessary for one's salvation.

The dilemma of the church becomes more acute in the denomination. It is the dilemma of religiosity vs. secularism, the rich vs. poor and spirituality vs. mundanity.

### 8.4.4 Cult

The social reality of the Cult is essentially rooted in the 'cultic act' (ibid: 39-44). This act is a system of worship - a complex of feelings and attitudes, symbols (gestures, words, rites and rituals) and primarily a relationship with sacred object and the world beyond. It involves co-activity and a social boundary. In it the relationship between the laity and clergy is not negligible but secondary.

#### Box 1 Cultic Act

O'Dea (ibid. p. 41) Observes:

" ... The cultic act is social congregational act in which the group re- enacts its relationship to the sacred objects and, through them, to the beyond, and in so - doing reinforces its own solidarity and reaffirms its own values, in it, relationship of fellowship, and of leader and followers, are acted out, reasserted and strengthened. For the individual, it incorporates him into the group which provides him with the emotional support, and by its re-enactment of the religious experience relates him to the source of strength and comfort".

The Cult is a voluntary organisation, open to all who wish to join or participate" in it. But, where secretive, it tends to be highly exclusive. Says Johnson (ibid: 438). "In general cults are not strict except in financial matters". Yet, it tends to regulate its members as per its doctrine and system of rituals which are well-defined. A cult emphasizes one doctrine (above all others) or it focuses upon a God or Goddess with certain definite characteristics.

Cults seem to flourish in metropolitan centres where culturally heterogeneous populations are thrown together and they widely feel the impact of most rapid and impinging social change. It creates situations of contingency and powerlessness and, thus, the problems of adjustment. The cults help to meet that situation (for details and illustrations see Johnson: ibid: p. 438).

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Write a note on Ecclesia.

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2) Name a sect which has acquired the distinction of a denomination.

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3) Give two reasons for the rise of sectarian tradition in Christianity.

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## 8.5 THE RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN INDIA

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We have studied the genesis of religious groups and various factors which contribute to the establishment of perpetuation of religious grouping in general. In this section we will try to understand the religious grouping in particular - in the Indian context. We will be studying:

- Math, Marg and Sampradaya
- Sangh
- Math
- Panth

### 8.5.1 Math, Marg and Sampradaya

In the Indian perspective, a religious group primarily originates in a math. In the given context, it would mean opinion/viewpoint of a charismatic person (the Original Preceptor) and/or of a group about the existence/non-existence of God and meaning of man's social existence. In this perspective even the atheistic Buddhism in a math, the Buddha math.

A marg (i.e. path) is essentially defined by the rituals, of worship relation to its math. The marg also defines the relationship between the preceptor and his successor and followers in relation to God/Dharma and in relation to themselves. It defines the social circle of the math.

When the complex of a math-marg grows into a tradition of dogmatic knowledge, handed down both in time and space through an organised body of believers and expounders, it takes the form of a sampradaya. Reaction against dogma and/or its interpretation precipitates a new math. Hinayan,. Mahayan and Virayan are referred to as Sampradayas and as Buddha Math. As a hypothesis, it may be propounded that religious groups arise out of the dynamics of matha, marg-and sampradaya. Out of this dynamics, in different periods of India's social history, have arisen religious groups, the main ideal types of which are the Sangh, the Mat, and the Panth and the samaj.

### 8.5.2 Sangh

Founded by the Buddha the Sangh has grown to be international with significant national variations. It has assimilated from local traditions and also from the Ecclesia. However, it is not an ecclesia. The term Sangh means 'any close contact or any number of people living together for a certain purpose'. It also means 'society-and association'. As a religious organisation it has two well-defined objectives: (1) To provide best possible conditions for individual development: (2) To teach dhamma (dharma Sanskrit) to mankind. (Humphreys, Christian:1951). In 'Members of the Sangh do not own property individually but the Sangh does own property as a corporate body. It has a sect of hierarchy of appointive and elective offices. It is secular, empirical and rational. It can easily be compared to an association.

It is structured on the concept of tri-ratna (three jewels), i.e., the teacher, the teaching and those who followed it. As Buddha decreed, after him, the tri-ratna came to be guided by Dhamma and Vinaya. To Buddha, Dhamma symbolised not religion in the usual sense of the term but a set of empirically-rationally derived rules of conduct and duty which lead the individual to the 'Right Path' and safeguard against suffering and pain. In due course, the Sangh has grown into" ... the order of yellow-robed monks requiring two hundred and twenty seven rules of observance and fortnightly confessions of infraction". (Bahm, 1958: p.131).

The Sangh grew into a democratic-oligarchic-secular organisation (Bapat, 1956,4-6, Panikarak, 1954: 20). It grew along with the growth of monasticism of Chaitya and Vihara "the dwelling places of mendicants, in this case, Buddha Bhikkhus/monks. The monasteries were organized as disciples grew, grooves and properties gifted and audiences flocked to listen to the teachings of Buddha. The Sangh originated as an assembly of monks to elect and appoint office-bearers to supervise new constructions, to look after property, the distribution of clothing, the allotment of dwelling places and acceptance of property as a gift to the Sangh. Besides its rules of procedure, the Sangh mainly rested on Bhikkhuhood, i.e., the Order of Bhikkhus are organised in a hierarchical order. At the bottom of that hierarchy stands the Sammera (the novice). When given a new name and robes, he rises to the status of new Bhikkhu, The Jhera (The Elder) belongs to the next stratum and the Mahathera to the highest stratum. The head of the monastery is the Nayak.

One enters the Sangh as a Bhikkhu through a prescribed initiation ceremony, As in Buddhist doctrine one's status in society is determined by one's Karma and not by one's birth, admission to Bhikkhuhood is open to all free men above twenty and healthy. The Bhikkhu is expected to lead the life of celibacy and mendicancy, to seek self-enlightenment through study and meditation and to teach Dhamma to the' people.

The Bhikkhu is also expected to practice a simple, austere and inquisitive living, taking only as much he needs. His belongings consist of three robes, a waist-cloth, begging bowl, a razor, a water-container and a needle. He may also add to this an umbrella, a pair of sandals and a few books.

A Bhikkhu, particularly the Novice (The Samnera) is obliged to go out for begging in the morning and return by noon to take food. He spends the rest of the day in study, meditation and teaching. Excepting the rainy season, the Bhikkhu is expected to travel and teach all the year around. In rainy seasons, he returns to communal life to study and revise the rules of Dhamma. To carry the gift of Dhamma to the people is Bhikkhu's main duty. To progress on the path of Dhamma is the individual's business and not of his. He is not a priest/missionary in the Christian sense of the term. He does not belong to an 'apostolic order'. He is just a preacher of Dhamma (Humphreys: *ibid*: p.138).

1. Organisation: Every Buddhist monk could be a member of the Sangh of a particular area. The members were supposed to come from all the four directions (*chaturdisa*). The quorum often members is a norm but, today, it is not universally uniform. Deliberation and decisions of an assembly without complete quorum were invalid. They could not be validated by taking the assent of absentee members.

The Sangh had pre-ordained rules for the seating arrangement. The questions to be decided at the Sangh had to be formally presented. Every member had a right to express his opinion and to vote, for, decisions were taken by a majority vote. Complicated questions were referred to the select committee and its recommendations were placed before the Sangh for rectification. To decide the questions of fundamental principles a religious council was convened. However, novices and women were not entitled to vote or to constitute the quorum.

Buddha, though reluctantly, also created the fraternity of ordained female monks (Bhikkhunis or nuns). Always subservient to men in rank and observance, the order of Bhikkhunis declined in India by Ashoka's time. Today, even in countries which have the rawad tradition there is no woman member of the order.

2. The Sangh and Society: In Buddha math, the Sangh is supreme, the final arbiter almost in all the matters of social life, "I submit to Buddha, to Dhamma and to the Sangh", so runs the prayer of a Buddha. It may be derived to imply willing submission to Dhamma and, ultimately, to the Sangh by following the path shown by the Buddha.

Since Buddha preached to take things as they are, it may be said that the Sangh philosophically takes a neutral view of the political powers that be. By and large, political power was friendly to it but not in all situations. As has been evident recently in Burma and Ceylon, it has tended to dabble in worldly politics (Humphreys: *ibid*: p. 139).

Today, the Sangh largely remains the same though in the process of diffusion and acculturation, it has undergone some modifications as well. The Bhikkhu has lost the role of village-teacher because of growing secular control over education as a part of the process of modernisation. In Japan, a Bhikkhu is just a communicator and-not an exponent. If he likes, he can lead a married life. The Sangh has now lost its earlier vigour.

### 8.5.3 Math

The Math was founded in the eighth century A.D. by Adi Shankaracharya, popularly known as Shankara. He is also the founder of adwaita philosophy which combines both *Jyana* (knowledge) and *Bhakti* (devotion) and seeks to unite divergent beliefs at a higher level of thought. The word Math means the dwelling place of sanyasins (medicants) who preach the doctrine of adwait based on *Nirguna* (formless)/ *Saguna* (having a human form) math.

The Math is also the place where students reside seeking the highest meaning of life and knowledge for the goodness of others. By this the Math becomes a theologically oriented educational institution, devoted to the cultivation and preaching of the theistic doctrine of its founder. Shri Chaitanya Math preaches Krishna Bahkti of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Ramakrishna Math teaches the unidirectionality of all religious experiences, mainly of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

The Math is said to have its ancestry in the Sangh. Organisationally, it shares much with the Sangh though, doctrinally, it differs. The Sangh is atheistic. Rooted in Vedanta, the Math is theistic. The Math and adwaita and their organisational inter-relatedness grew out of protest against Buddhism and the Mimansaka. Shankara established four Maths at the four comers of India (Badrinath, Puri, Dwarka and Sringeri) to "emphasise the growing consciousness about the geographical unity of India" (Nehru, 1960 : 182). The Math is also viewed as a product of Hindu reformation in the eighth century (Pannikar, K.M. 99-101). The Math was founded to organise and train selfless spiritual preachers to preach adwaita mat oneness of belief.

This trait of Math-tradition reverberates with greater vigour and emphasis in the teachings of Vivekanand, the founder of Ramkrishna Math. Shri Chaitanya Gaudiya. Math aims 'to build national character' and 'to help people to visualise the underlying thread of unity amongst people in spite of diversity'. Combining the sacred with secular (*parlaukik and iblaukik*), the tradition with modernity and theism with charitable social work, the Math is today a medieval-modern tradition of a philosophical worldview and its propagation. Socially, it is an upper-cast, middle-class phenomenon. Its lay members are mostly drawn from amongst the professionals and businessmen, from the new rich. With the growth of middle classes, it has tended to multiply and diffuse.

The Math is rather like a pendulum, moving between exclusiveness and inclusiveness. Its theistic doctrine, its ritual structure, its clergy and laity and their social background tend to give it the aura of exclusiveness though, theoretically, it welcomes all. As is clear the Math is an organisation of members who may themselves differ on crucial issues, often leading to one or more schisms over time. This is the usual path taken by a Math when differences of opinion or dogma-interpretation is done with mutually differing stands on almost every issue: This leads to schisms in mat over time.

The Math has three objectives. (1) Its primary objective is theistic--to define, maintain and preach the theism it upholds. For that it creates institutional means to train and appoint preachers of its theism. (2) It strives for inculcation of ethical-moral values, the main aim being to rehabilitate the individual in family, polity and society. (3) Organisation of charitable social work is the third objective. It includes running of dispensaries and hospitals, educational institutions and Sanskrit pathshalas (schools). In pursuance of its theistic aim, the Math often maintains a printing press to publish books and journals. It may also maintain a library for education and research.

These days, the Math mostly functions as a registered society organized under a constitutionally regulated Trust. The tendency to convert the Math (and also Ashram) into a Trust has been on the increase and for that many reasons are advanced. It is the best available institutional safeguard for the property of the Math. The customary rule of inheritance by a nominated/initiated disciple creates conflict and cannot, in all circumstances, save the Math property from being squandered and misused. It also facilitates raising of funds as a certain percentage of one's income is exempted from income tax if given as a donation to a registered charitable institution.

### **Box 2 The Organisational Structure of Chaitanya Math**

The Math has a seat and head Office which are not located at one place. It has two-tier membership ordinary and special. Election and nomination is confined to special members who are selected by the Governing Body but that selection is subject to the ratification of President-Acharya. Those paying a donation of, for example, Rs. 1000/- or more are its patrons but they do not play any role in its governance.

At the apex, the Governing Body is presided over by the Founder President Acharya and by his deputy. The Executive President is Acharya. There are three categories of secretaries - the Secretary, the Joint-Secretaries and the Assistant Secretaries. By rule, the latter are required to be on a constant tour of India to preach and supervise the branches of the Math.

The local Math - a branch - is headed by the Math Rakshak, appointed by the

Governing Body and the President Acharya. Below-him are the Mat Sewaks who undertake cooking, cleaning and other menial jobs of the Math. For them, it is sewa (service of the God). The local Math consists of Bramacharis (the student-sewaks), Vanaprasthis and Sanyasins. After serving the Math as a Bramhachari, one has freedom to return to grihasth ashram (the life of the householder). After fulfilling the duties of the householder, one may return to join the Math as a Vanasprasthi and, finally, to get initiated into Sanyas, the service of the Math and humanity.

The saffron-robed functionaries of the Math are Prabhus/Maharajas. They are knitted into a hierarchy which is based on seniority, recognition of one's spiritual attainment, learning in the religious lore of the math and meritorious services rendered towards the cause of the Mission. The title of Vishupad is indicative of the highest position and that of Prabhupad of the next position in the hierarchy. One devoted to the service of the mission by body (kaya), mind (mana) and speech (vak) is Tridandi Swami. The Acharya has the right to initiate one into the order of the Math, particularly into that of the Sanyasins. This power can be delegated.

#### **8.5.4 Panth**

As a religious organisation, the Panth (meaning path) is a distinct type though it draws much from the traditions of the Sangh and the Math. The Panth grew out of the protest and religio-social reform and reorganisation which was generated in India under the politico-religious domination of Islam. The Panth-tradition continues since then.

It is also a product of Nirgun School of Bhakti (devotion to the Formless), also called the Nirgun Baath, Though monistic, it denies the concept of eternal moksha. It is more this-worldly than the adwait of Shankar. Socially, it hinges on the Bhagat (the initiated) and the Guru (the initiator). The Bhagat is attached to a guru and his path. He discards ritual formalism and is expected to be a staunch vegetarian and teetotaler. He is also expected to lead a simple and austere life. Devoted to his guru, his theistic doctrine and school (the panth), to family and to his caste-based economic pursuit in life, the Bhagat is the Grihastha Sadhu (one who combines renunciation with family life).

The Panth protests against vamashrama, the birth-based inequality of caste, ritual formalism and rigidity of both Hinduism and Islam. It emphasises the piousness of means and Karma-based mobility and equality of all before the God. In real life, the Panth could not avoid ritualism of its cult which is simple and not elaborate. The Panth cuts across Hinduism and Islam but it also grows in and along each of them. It denounces and cuts across caste but it also grows along caste. It could not completely avoid the grip of caste.

The Panth is a religious brotherhood bound by the panth shown by the Adiguru (the original preceptor) after whom it is often clubbed (Kabir Panth, Dadu Panth etc.). The successor in line may symbolize the charisma of the Adiguru. The poetic compositions of the original Guru or his successor(s) constitute the religious lore of the Panth and explain its theistic doctrine. Besides Guru, the common theistic precept, the cultic rituals and ritual marks and insignia of identity, usually adopted as personal paraphernalia of the followers, bind the panthic brotherhood and endow it with a touch of exclusiveness.

The Panthic political structure is oligarchic. The charismatic gurudom of Adiguru passes either through inheritance or nomination. Under the Adiguru or his successor, there is a hierarchy of gurus and mahant(s). The Panth, too, is associated with a seat (the Gaddi) where it was originally founded. The original gaddi may divide into gaddis, i.e., branches located in different centres. A branch is managed by the local mahants and functionaries who are appointed by consensus by the local brotherhood.

### Activity 2

Identify a religious group of the religion' you follow and outline its group characteristics.' Repeat the same exercise with a religious group other than yours.

Because of the importance of the Guru, in the panthic organisation, gurudwara attains a significant social-communal importance. With gurudwara, the jhanda (flag) cult occupies a crucial place in the total cultic structure of the panth. However, Gurudwara is the place of daily, occasional and festive congregations. It strengthens brotherhood. It is a medium of religious-social communication. Panths such as those who have allegiance to a saint or master also experience Schisms when the preceptor dies and different groups emerge in the Panth.

The Panthic grouping is also subject to protest, schism and fission. The fission is not as much caused by doctrinal issues as by internal differentiation and intra-group competition for power, both sacred and secular. The brotherhood is dichotomized between the sant (saint) and the commoner (the laity). The sant is the theologian of the Panth. He expounds its doctrine and is its preacher, a touring missionary. He may have renounced the world or he may be a householder-saint. He may be dressed in the saffron robe or his robes may be of a prescribed style of colour. He may be ordinarily dressed if he were a householder-saint (gribastha sadbu). But he must carry the insignia of the Panth.

Having its distinct initiation ceremony, the Panth is an exclusive-sectarian brotherhood. To be initiated into the Panth means owing allegiance to the Guru or to his ordained successor. In a Panth the Guru and the Mahant may be combined while in another they may be different. Mahant, in fact, is not a guru; he is head of a Math or of a group of saints. A highly exclusive panth may have secret rituals and a code language. Till recently, the Shivanarainis did not admit

the uninitiated into their gurudwara and they have a code language which is now dying out. They also did not allow women to enter the gurudwara. A Shivanaraini is expected to carry with him his identity card (the parwana) issued by the presiding Mahant of the gurudwara he belongs to.

Through the doctrine of bhakti and organizational instrument of the Panth, the high elite took the Sanskritic way of life. The doctrine of bhakti emerged in the South and its early preceptors were Brahmins though as a thought its ancestry is deeper. In the North, it was introduced by Ramanand, but the founders of the Panth mostly came from the castes of the middle and lower levels. Nanak was a Khatri and so was the founder of Radhasoami panth. The Shivanaraini panth was founded by a Rajput (Shivanarain). Ravidasa was a chamar by caste and Kabir came from the Muslim weaver caste (the Julaba).

Significantly, the followers of the Panth have been and are mostly drawn from lower levels of caste-structure and only occasionally from the middle level. Opposing varnasbrama, the Panth stimulated a strong popular version of sanskritisation. Not being complex ritually, it tended to stimulate doctrinal and ritual-social mobility of caste HIOUghit could not go very far.

By protesting against varnasbrama, it tended to protest against the power-structure entitled therein. In some cases it received political patronage from the political power and in some it came into conflict with it. The conflict is often caused by the secular interests of its leaders. However, the sharper the conflict, the more aggressive is the Panth.

Today, like the Math, a panth may be constitutionally regulated and functioning as a Trust. It tends towards fundamentalism and political throwback. At certain levels, as among the Chamar, there has been a shift in panthic allegiance. In the Ravidas panth, in Bijnore, they moved towards Sikhism. At Dehradun, the Chamar migrants from Bijnore moved towards Arya Samaj. Now, neo-Buddhism seems to make a greater religio-reformist appeal. Many times inner differentiation of the caste. also tends to generate schism and fission (Bhatt, G.S. 1961:229-241).

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Write how the Sangh is different from the Ecclesia.  
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.....
- 2) Who is the founder of Advaita Philosophy?  
.....  
.....
- 3) Name the four Mats established by Adi Shankaracharya.  
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.....

- 4) Write five lines on the Panth as a religious organisation. In what way it is similar to a sect?

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## 8.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit we have discussed and observed the following.

Complex religious organisations grow essentially out of and after the religious experience of a charismatic personality (e.g.,: Christ, Mohammad). It then develops into a pattern of ideas and practices or rituals.

The Semitic religions like Christianity and Islam are monotheistic which enables them to organise on a more systematic way. The Church or the Ecclesia is thus far more organised than its 'equivalents' that we may find in India. This raises the question whether we can use the Church-Sect typology, offered by Western sociologists to understand the Indian religious organisation. Though we find no exact equivalents to the Church-sect typology, it enables us to have a comparative perspective.

This unit also discusses the dynamic process of a religious organisation, the origins and development. For any religious group to be an established organisation and a creed it evolves a system of worship, a philosophy which binds and inspires ensuing religious brotherhood.'

The sect and the cults are results of internal schisms and dynamics, which soon institutionalise themes for the survival of the religious organisation. This aspect has also been discussed in this unit.

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## 8.7 REFERENCES

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## 8.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

1) The literal meaning of Ecclesia is a popular assembly. However Ecclesia as a Church has a religious connotation. The Ecclesia was founded on the religious experience of Christ as compiled in the Bible. Christ being the mediator between God and man his experience is viewed as revealed and infallible, This revelation' must be preserved and carried on to serve as a guide to man's salvation.

The Ecclesia or the church functions like a bureaucracy with hierarchy of offices. The member of the church-clergy derives his/her religious status qualities from the office he holds the virtue of appointment and ordination. Its head the Pope is elected by a small group of officials. The rest of the hierarchy of officials is appointed.

The Ecclesia trains and recruits its personnel through its theological educational institutions. It organizes research institution, study centres, seminars and workshops, It also establishes schools, colleges for secular education where imparting secular education is combined with preaching on God.

2) Calvinism arose as sect of Protestantism to become a denomination.

3) Sectarianism is quite pronounced in Christianity, the cause for it lying only partly in Christianity. One of the chief reasons for the rise of sects is the value for individualism. Another important reason has been a resentment against the social institutions the church supports. And by opposing, it hopes to bring social justice.

### Check Your Progress 2

1) The Sangh is different from Ecclesia by the fact that it is secular, empirical, rational. The Dhamma that it teaches is not, religion in the usual sense of the term but a set of empirically rationally derived rules of conduct, a duty which guides the individual in his life. The Dhamma that is preached is not a revelation of God and thus is not infallible.

2) Adi Shankaracharya or Shankara as he is popularly known is the founder of advaita philosophy.

3) The four Mats established by adi Shankaracharya are at Badrinath, Puri, Dwarka and Srinegeri.

4) The Panth grew out of the Bhakti movement. It is basically a protest and social reform movement.

The Panth protests against the birth based inequality of caste, ritual formalism and rigidity of Hinduism and Islam. The followers have their own rituals, insignia and identity which gives it a touch of exclusiveness. The followers are expected to lead an austere and simple life of devotion to a formless Govt.

The panth is similar to the sect for like the sect the Panth originates as a protest to some percepts of the dominant religion and like the sect the Panth stresses on individual salvation and devotion.



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## UNIT 9 CRAFT: RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS\*

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### Structure

- 9.0 Objectives
- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Religious Specialists and the Sociology of Religion
  - 9.2.1 Weber on Religion
- 9.3 The Priest
  - 9.3.1 Weber's Understanding of the Priest
  - 9.3.2 Priests and Priesthood: An Overview
  - 9.3.3 Priests and Royalty
  - 9.3.4 Priestly Qualifications
- 9.4 The Shaman
  - 9.4.1 Weber on the Magician
  - 9.4.2 The Shaman: A General Overview
  - 9.4.3 The Functions and Role of a Shaman
  - 9.4.4 Organisation
  - 9.4.5 An Example: The Oraon Shaman
- 9.5 The Prophet
  - 9.5.1 Weber on the Prophet
  - 9.5.2 The Prophet: An Overview
  - 9.5.3 Sathya Sai Baba: An Example
- 9.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 9.7 References
- 9.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 9.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

- the nature and functions of specialists;
- how these developed over time and how their position today may not be as socially significant as it once was;
- the role they play in mediating between the human and the divine world; and
- the changes that have taken place in the nature of these specialists.

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\* Adopted from IGNOU Course Material: *Society and Religion* (ESO 15) with modifications by Nita Mathur

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## 9.1 INTRODUCTION

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This Unit is concerned with the nature of religious specialists. It deals with the nature of religious specialists, focussing attention on three particular types: the shaman, the priest and the prophet. It is important for us to briefly understand who they are. As such, they are persons who because of certain charismatic qualities they possess, are accorded the status of being intermediaries of mediators between the world of the human and that of the divine or magical. This act of mediation may either be performed by a single individual or a group of individuals, where each performs a separate task. Such performances: may occur on special ritual occasions, as a matter of daily routine, or during illness.

There are different kinds of specialists who derive their power from the functions they perform, the doctrine they adhere to and by the nature of their following. To name a few, we have priest found in temples, prophets such as Muhammad, cultic leaders such as Sathya Sai Baba, shamans such as those found in Nepal and Tibet, sectarian leaders like the late Swami Prabhupadji of the ISKCON, and so on.

The significance and role of these specialists varies from society to society, and it is related to an extent to the nature of the religious system in the particular society. The functions of the specialists are usually meant for achieving positive ends and benevolence, but often they may even be aimed at inflicting harm. We often find men seeking the services of the specialists even when they are not required. Even the assistance of the exorciser, medicine man and magician are sought as a normal routine. This unit will therefore deal with the development of three particular categories of specialists, the priest, the shaman and the prophet, and their functions and social significance. We will support our description wherever we can with examples.

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## 9.2 RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS AND SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

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Before we proceed into a detailed discussion of the nature of the three specialists, it is imperative that as students of sociology, we look at what the sociology of Religion has to say about them. "A religious specialist is one who devotes himself to a ... religious system" (Turner in *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, p. 437). In societies where such power is considered as impersonal anthropologists have described it as magic and the specialist who manipulates the power as a magician; and where power is personalised, as deities, gods, spirits or demons and the life, anthropologists talk of religion. In reality, no clear demarcation can be drawn between religion and magic. Religious systems contain religious beliefs, practices and magical elements. The role of religious beliefs, practices and magical elements, the role of religious specialists, is thus overlapping.

Early anthropologists such as Frazer, Durkheim, Malinowski did not specifically identify religious specialist as a distinct phenomenon for theoretical discussion. They considered the specialist a part of the religious system which according to them is a distinct 'social' phenomenon.

Max Weber provided the necessary breakthrough. His comparative study of world religions, which focused on theory of religious ideas, brought focus directly on religious specialist as agent of social transformation or as conservation of tradition. Weber wrote extensively on religions, its social consequences and the nature of religious functionaries. Before we go on to detailed discussion on what Weber has to say, we will have a look at how anthropologists have distinguished different religious specialists.

Max Weber, though aware of the numerous instances of overlap distinguishes between a priest and a prophet. A priest, he writes is always associated with the functioning of regularly organised and permanent enterprise concerned with influencing the gods. In Weber's view the prophet is distinguished from the priest by personal call. The authority of the prophet is founded on revelation and personal charisma.

Anthropologists who, unlike Weber, are less concerned with the genesis of religion as a force of social change or reinforcement have looked at shamans as part of the working of religious systems in simpler societies. The editors A. Lessa and B.Z. Hogs devote a whole section to this aspect in their *Reader in Comparative Religion* (1958). They find that shamans tend to predominate in food-gathering societies. Where the shaman offers personalised service to one or two individuals or a group whereas the priest, according to them, is characteristic of more structurally elaborate food-producing, or agricultural societies, where there are common ceremonials or rites for the benefit of the whole community.

Raymond Firth regards the shaman as a specialist who exercises developed techniques of control over spirits. The emphasis, here, is on control exercised over spirits. Thus he "serves as a means of communication between other human beings and the spirit world" (Firth, 1964: p. 689).

Although, we sometimes find the functions of these specialists overlapping, the priests, prophets and shamans clearly constitute a subtype of a single type of religious functionary. Let us briefly consider what Weber had to say about religion, before we proceed to consider in general the role of religious specialists in everyday life.

### **9.2.1 Weber on Religion**

Weber believes that the behaviour of individuals in a society is motivated by religious and magical factors. He discusses in his work the plurality of gods and their potential. He also traces out the development of monotheistic religions such as Islam and Judaism, and, polytheistic

religions such as Hinduism. In an attempt to classify religious experiences and specialists, he points out how men relate to supernatural forces through prayer, sacrifice and worship. They are helped along here by mediators such as priests. Often charms and spells are used when prayer does not work. In such cases they turn to the magician. One can say that religious specialists relate to the divine through rituals and religious activity while they relate to the evil or malevolent, through magical activity. There are some societies where both functions are performed by the same religious specialist, for example the Leopard Skin chief among the Nuer tribe of Sudan, Africa.

Other than the above mentioned functionaries, Weber also recognises the presence in society of the religious leader or the prophet. The prophet could be the founder of a world's religion such as Islam or a cultic figure such as Sathya Sai Baba in India.

Let us examine each specialist independently.

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## 9.3 THE PRIEST

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We have here first a description of the priest as Weber understood the category and then undertake a general explanation.

### 9.3.1 Weber's Understanding of the Priest

According to Weber, the priest is a functionary who performs regular, permanent and organised functions that are related to the divine. He does this usually through the act of worship either on behalf of an individual or for society as a whole.

The priest belongs to a social organisation and occupies a hereditary office. He is expected to have some specialised knowledge of texts and doctrines. According to Weber, the priest would have attained significant social and religious status through both rigorous training and by virtue of being born into a particular social group.

The priesthood is based on a code of behaviour and ethics. They dedicate their life to the task of communicating with the gods and are associated with either a place of worship, a social group or a following of disciples. The development of a 'doctrine' which involves the rise of a rational system of religious concepts and ethics is also associated with them.

### 9.3.2 Priests and Priesthood: An Overview

Priests and associated organisations are found in both simple and modern societies. The rise of priests is associated with the need felt by primitive man to come to terms with the supernatural world.

In simpler societies we find that not just priests but also magicians are associated with the ability to communicate with the divine world. It is believed as such that priesthood is as old as religion itself.

In both simple and advanced societies priests and magicians are functionaries who through their specialised knowledge and powers, are associated with and overcome malevolent and benevolent forces. The need for such duality was considered necessary so that the unknown supernatural powers would not be harmful to the human; instead, they would bring prosperity and goodwill. These early religious and magical practitioners, who offered guidance in such matters, have been regarded as the pioneers of an organised priesthood. We find that in the early periods of religious evolution there is no priesthood and men perform rituals or invoke the Gods themselves. There are some people such as tribals of Melanesia and Australia who even today do the religious and magical rites themselves without the help of intermediaries or specialists. Often in the early ages we find that in a collective group, one person would attain a certain significance in terms of his ability to deal with the supernatural or predict certain events or even acquire an expertise in performing certain ritual acts. Such a person would soon enough be regarded as an intermediary and gain priestly functions. As an example, we find that in certain Dravidian tribes, the head of the household would be the officiating priest at any type of family event. Before a regular priesthood arose, we thus find that men, other than priests, performed specialised functions. Into this category of specialists were also included those:

- i) who underwent ecstatic experiences by going into trances and then would make predictions such as a darvesh;
- ii) those who looked after places that have for some reason acquired a sacred significance and thus considered holy;
- iii) those persons or 'holy men' who exercise some kind of religious authority by performing miracles or curing illnesses.

Other than the above mentioned functionaries, magician too had a role to play in the lives of the people, for both their well-being and for inflicting harm. Those individuals who were able to exercise greater authority were the ones who over time gained significant status and were able to gain respect. They gradually came to form a category of specialists who officiated for individuals and groups and were both respected and feared.

### **9.3.3 Priests and Royalty**

We find that in most societies an interesting relationship also arose between priestly authority and the royalty. There are many examples in history of kings who were priests also, such as, among the tribes of Polynesia and Melanesia or

even in India where ancestor worship made it necessary for the king or family head to perform priestly functions. We also have examples of kinds who were raised to the status of divinity and were believed to imbibe in their beings, the essence or life of the tribe or nation. Thus if a kind weakened or became ill, it signified misfortune for the whole social group. Thus we find in many Societies, the leader would be put to death prematurely and a successor chosen immediately to prevent society from breaking up.

We also find examples from history of a close relationship between priesthood and kingship such that each was dependent on the other. We refer here to the sacerdotal role of the priest, found in many societies, of bestowing upon the king his rights as a ruler. This could be seen in the coronation of the king as found in Europe, where the Church played an important role, or in the form of the raja abhisheka of Indian kings that was performed by the Brahman priest. Further, it was the duty of the king in the former case to protect the religion of the State and in India, the priests were protected by the king.

### 9.3.4 Priestly Qualifications

Certain qualifications are laid down as being basic to priesthood. We mention here some of them without going into details.

- i) The priest's primary task is to mediate between the human and divine.
- ii) Priesthood is usually a hereditary institution.
- iii) The priests communicate with the divine through prayer, worship, rituals and so, on.
- iv) Priests have to undergo initiation into the profession. A certain self-training is considered necessary.
- v) The priests are expected to uphold their status through knowledge of natural phenomena and the elements and may have an eccentric appearance. They are also expected to be able to perform miracles.
- vi) A certain aura of mystery surrounds them.
- vii) They are expected to maintain certain restrictions in their personal life particularly in relation to the sexual realm, food and language.

It may finally be noted, that both religious and magical practitioners are included into the category of priests, While the magician uses magic spells and tries to coerce the known world of the supernatural, the religious functionary or priest brings about the desired results by propitiating the unknown through religious rituals and observances.

When examining the nature of priesthood in the Indian context we cannot ignore the role of the priest in the tribal context. Here he is seen as a medicine man, a healer and a person who not only has divine powers but also powers of magic and sorcery. We have examples of temples being built by tribals, served the Brahman priests such as among the Tiyans of Malabar. Because of their association with magic and healing, they are considered more as magicians than priests and are called shamans. We consider them in detail in the next section.

### Check Your Progress 1

1) Briefly discuss who religious specialists are.

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2) State in a few words what Weber's understanding of the priest is?

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## 9.4 THE SHAMAN

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Having examined in detail the nature and role of priests and priesthood, let us now proceed to look at the shaman as a specialist. In the previous sections we have been constantly referring to the need very often felt by a society to turn towards magical aid when religious rituals fail. We have also discussed how often the same

As far as the shaman as a specialist is concerned (section 13.4.6), we have narrowed down his role to the tribal context as that is where he is largely seen to operate. In this section we will try and describe the shaman and his social role, individual would combine both priestly and magical functions.

### 9.4.1 Weber on the Magician

If we examine Weber's work on religious specialists we do not find any mention of the shaman. He does however talk about the magician. We briefly examine what he has to say about the magician as; it is in magical acts that the shaman has his antecedents.

Weber believes that the relationship between the human and the supernatural could be expressed not just through religious worship assisted by a priest, but also through magical chants or sorcery. Weber also points out that, it is in magic that prayer and sacrifice have their origin. Sacrifice is seen as a major method of

coercing the gods into submission to a supplicant's needs. It was also seen as a method of directing the anger of the gods towards another object. It is believed that the sacrificial rituals of the Brahmans were magical in their intent and implication.

However not all sacrifices have magic or sorcery. The magician is understood by Weber as dealing with evil spirits on an individual level. His efforts may have both positive and negative consequences. The magician is usually self-employed though he may be the member of a hereditary caste or an organised guild. Rather than using a specialised doctrine of knowledge, the magician may derive his influence by virtue of personal gifts and knowledge of the supernatural world. The magician can have considerable power among his community and may be respected more out of fear than faith. He does not necessarily have a following as the priests do.

### Activity 1

Locate a travelling magician and enquire from him what he feels about his work. Note down the important points of the conversation and share this information with other students in your Study Centre

#### 9.4.2 The Shaman: A General Overview

Earlier we have outlined some of the broader features of the magician as a specialist. As far as the shaman is concerned, he represents all of the above features and more. He is found to use his magical abilities for purposes of well-being as well as for harming, usually in the context of pre-literate society. (They or their counterparts may even be found in modern societies). For instance a shaman may engage in an act of magic or sorcery to cure an illness, exorcise a possession, inflict injury or illness on someone or influence the forces of nature to bring rains. In other words his is a multi-functional role which gives him his status and respect. The shaman is found to occupy an important position in most tribal societies. In fact shamanism is a native and tribal religion.

Once greatly feared and misunderstood, today we find him using his abilities in social and political spheres in simple societies. For long time in early anthropological literature, he had a negative image of being a deviant. In later years, however his significance as playing a psychological role, was recognised. In fact it has been pointed out by the French structuralist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, that the shaman provides for the sick, a language that helps them to express their condition which they normally would not be able to do.

#### 9.4.3 The Functions and Role of a Shaman

As mentioned above, shamanism is a native religion. The word shaman is of North- East Asian origin and comes from the Tungusic word saman which means one who is "excited, moved or raised". We find that the shaman is

usually seen as a medicine-man who employs exorcism and sorcery as his tools. He derives his powers from association with the supernatural and it is believed that he is assisted by a medium or a spirit to attain his ends. Very often, the shamans ability to achieve results demands that his state of mind is altered and he either enters into a trance or an uncontrolled condition of excitement following which he communicates with the supernatural.

Shamans belonging to different tribes would use different means to achieve their ends. Certain factors are however found in common. They are as follows:

- a) either the office is hereditary or one's personality allows one to be chosen to the office;
- b) the shaman may have a peculiar mental state or even a physical shortcoming so that he may be considered neurotic or epileptic;
- c) the above abnormal qualities are central to his role;
- d) he may undergo training and austerities under the tutorship of an older shaman and may develop a peculiar disposition; the shaman may go into a trance or enter into an excited condition to make his predictions, or to cure the illness or get rid of a spam.

#### **Box 9.1 Buriats: Public Initiation Ceremonies of Siberian Shaman**

Among the Public initiation ceremonies of Siberian Shaman, those of Buriats are among the most interesting. The principal rite includes a climb over the birch tree. A strong birch tree is set up in the Shaman's tent, its roots in the heaven and its crown coming out of the smoke hole. The birch tree is called Udesi burkhan - the guardian of the door, for it opens the door to Heaven to the shaman. The birch tree always remains in his tent - serving as a distinguishing mark of shaman's residence. On the day of this sacred ceremony, the candidates climb to the top of the birch, carrying a sword in one hand. Emerging through the smoke hole he shouts for the aid of the god. After this the master shaman, the apprentice and the entire audience go in a procession which halts by a particular path, a goat is sacrificed, and the candidate stripped to the waist, has his head, eyes and ears anointed with blood, while the other shamans play their drums. The candidate then climbs it, followed by other Shamans. As they climb they all fall - or pretend to fall in ecstasy.

There the birch or pole is compared to the tree or pillar that stands at the centre of the world and that connects the three cosmic zones - Earth, Heaven and Hell.

As far as the functions performed by a shaman are concerned, it is believed that he combines the functions of priest, prophet and magician, all in one. He is known to perform priestly functions and uses sacrifice as a central act in the process of healing and divination. He also performs rituals of sacrifice and appeasement to the gods or spirits once they have been forced to submit to the shaman's needs.

Finally, because of fear of the shaman and his powers, he acquires a charismatic personality and qualities of leadership similar to a prophet. He may wear unusual jewellery and clothing, wear his hair long and matted, paint his body with colour or ash and carry either musical instruments or bones. His eccentric appearance and qualities have often earned him the name of a neurotic and a trickster.

#### 9.4.4 Organisation

As far as the hierarchic organisation of the shamans is concerned it is not as clearly identified as that of the priests. Within the community however, on the basis of the power and control a shaman has over spirits, he has a particular rank. They are also classified in terms of whether they perform positive magic (or white magic) in the well-being of a person or negative magic or black magic to make someone ill. Accordingly, they are either revered or feared and have higher or lower status. A shaman does not undergo indoctrination in an institution as a priest does not have to master tests except those that are special to his functions.

Unlike priesthood, we do find women included among the shamanistic category. Female shamans are usually associated with witchcraft and with sorcery. They are called shaman in.

The shaman is regarded important enough to be buried in a special way. Often where a shaman is buried a sacred site is created, entry into which is restricted.

A dead shaman's body may even become the object of a cult. The shaman is found to play a significant role amongst the people of Tibet, Nepal, the Red Indians in America and in some south Asia communities. In the Indian context we find they are found to play an important role in some tribal communities, In our next section we take an example to illustrate this point.

#### 9.4.5 An Example: The Oraon Shaman

As we have already mentioned, the shaman is closely associated with tribal life and medicine. We take here the example of a tribe among whom the shaman has great significance. We refer here to the Dravidian tribe of Oraons found in east India in the Chota Nagpur plateau. The shamans here and the tribe in general, were first studied by the Indian social anthropologist S.C. Roy, in the 1929s. The Oraons live in a hilly and forested region. They practise agriculture and both men and women share in farming. Their life is coloured by festivals and they have sacred groves for their village deity. Important in the life of the Oraon is the bagat or the shaman. His residence is identifiable by coloured flags

on bamboo poles that stand outside it. These flags represent the gods and goddesses, that are worshipped by the bhagat. It also includes the flag of the special deity that enters the bhagat during his trances, and helps him to heal and cure. The position of the bhagat is hereditary and usually only one son or daughter is handed down the knowledge in a family. An Oraon can become a shaman, only if he has special qualities that are recognised by the person to whom he is apprenticed. The life of the bhagat is simple and strict in matters of food and drink and is governed by the prescribed conduct and rules of shamanic training.

The Oraon bhagat need not become a shaman by inheritance only. He may be chosen by divine interventions, through a dream or a possession by a god who informs the chosen person of how to go about learning the knowledge to be a 'shaman.

The bhagat usually deals with illnesses that come from demonic possession; or illness or madness that comes from psychological stress. The treatment can be in the form of a healing ritual or an exorcism, better known as jhar phook. These rituals are of various kinds and extent, depending on the depth of a person's illness. Thus the bhagat is seen to perform both rituals associated with good spirits and the bad. They are seen not only to perform both rituals associated with good spirits and the bad. They are seen not only to cure and provide remedies for illness but much of their success comes from faith healing and divination. The bhagat is also known to go into trances and an ecstatic condition to reach the root of his patient's malady. It may be pointed out here that the range of a shaman and his personal power vary greatly from one societal context to another.

If we look at the above example, even though discussed here briefly, we find that the bhagat or shaman among the Oraon is very similar in his personality and life to the shaman described in general. Having considered the nature of the shaman and his role in social life specific to simpler societies, let us now proceed to examine the nature of the prophet and prophecy as the final form of religious specialisation.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1) Briefly discuss Weber's understanding of the magician is.

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2) Who is a shaman?

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## 9.5 THE PROPHET

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Having discussed the nature of the priest and shaman as religious specialists who have different and significant functions to perform' particularly in relationship to the world of the supernatural, let us now turn, to the prophet. The prophet is also a religious specialist but not of the kind that the priest and magician (shaman) are. He is more recognizable as a leader of a religious movement rather than as a functionary fulfilling a role within a movement. Prophets have also been the source of new world religions such as Islam or Zoroastrianism, or leaders (If sectarian religions. Let us first consider what Weber had to say about the prophet.

### 9.5.1 Weber on the Prophet

In his book on religion, Weber has devoted a whole chapter to the understanding (If what a prophet is. He defines the prophet as an individual who is capable of proclaiming a religious doctrine or a divine commandment because of his charismatic qualities. The major difference between the priest and prophet is that the prophet regards his mission as a "personal call" and derives his authority from personal revelation and charisma or an exceptional quality. The core of the prophet's mission is to carry forward the commandment or doctrine he has received as revelation. Often the prophet may use magic to establish his authority. The prophet is .usually successful and respected till his ability to convince and prove his uniqueness of purpose is intact:

Prophets also engage in healing and counselling. Weber points out that the prophet usually does not belong to an organisation and neither does he receive economic rewards for his ideas. He is not a professional and has a following of disciples or a laity because they believe in his or have faith in him. The prophet makes prophecies which become often the guiding principles of a religious sect or cult or even an entire religious movement. The prophet besides making prophecies, is a teacher of religious and philosophical wisdom.

To put it simply, the prophet may be seen as an individual who is an instrument for carrying forward the will of god and he is obeyed because of the ethical nature of his mission. He may also be a person who individually sets an example of attaining salvation as did Buddha. This latter form of exemplary prophetism has been found particularly in India.

### **9.5.2 The Prophet: An Overview**

The prophet has been found to rise in the context of almost all world religions in some form' or the other. In this section we briefly consider some features of a prophet and an example as we have already outlined in general with the help of Weber's work. We have already noted that the prophet does not belong to an institution as such and may be on a purely personal mission; we therefore do not examine the nature of organisation here. As such prophets have varied in nature from religion to religion and society to society, depending upon the nature of their mission. This has also determined the nature of the prophecies they have made. It may be noted however that the category of the prophet is absent in India's indigenous religious traditions. We mean by this that the, idea of the prophet such as Moses, Jesus or Muhammad, who bring to mankind a message or a commandment from God, are absent in India. In fact we do not even find them in the Indian tribal context as we find the shaman.

We do however have another category of prophet -in India who by virtue of his ability to foresee, to predict and to use clairvoyance, transcends time and space and makes prophecies about the future. He often is seen to use magic or miracle-making to convince the followers about the truthfulness of his prophecy. We consider here the example of such a prophet to illustrate the above.

### **9.5.3 Sathya Sai Baba: An Example**

Sathya Sai Baba is regarded as modern India's most famous miracle maker and deity saint. He is easily recognisable by his appearance and clothes. The, major part of his devotees come from the high caste middle and upper-middle classes in India. He can be regarded as a deity as he receives the homage of his devotees he returns these with blessings and grants boons. But above all he is known for his ability to make miracles and predictions come true. It is believed that only the real followers and believers of Sathya Sai Baba are really able to recognise him. His devotees have been seen to regard him as an avatar or manifestation of God -on earth.

Sai Baba receives this special status. not because or any mission that he heads of religion that he leads but as a consequence of the fact of his unusual capabilities and charismatic personality, His birth in 1926 in a village in Andhra Pradesh is seen as .divine because of the mysterious occurrences that took place then, such as a cobra suddenly appearing under his bed. At the age of thirteen he is believed to have suffered a seizure and then began performing miracles and later claimed to be 'Sai Baba', the saviour of his people, and a reincarnation of the

earlier saint, Sai Baba of Shirdi.

In 1940 he broke away from his family and set out on a career as a holyman and accepted devotees. He by now had begun performing the act of producing ash or vibhuti and other items. Although he became famous for his miracles, he also came to be known for his ability to cure and heal. In 1950, an ashram was constructed in the village of his birth and he had come to be recognised all over India as a god man, with a large following.

The important thing to note here is that his followers were there not because of what he professed but because of their faith in him as a divine person. He is known to go into trances and seizures to cure the illness of a devotee, by taking the illness upon himself.

He has predicted that there will be one more incarnation of Sai Baba, after him, and also tells of the place he will be born in Karnataka next. He claims himself to be an incarnation of Shiva and Shakti and much of the cult symbolism revolves around Shiva, though the cult and its membership themselves are very ambiguous. He remains the central charismatic authority of this cult and a modern day prophet and guru who does not preach a doctrine. Those who believe in him are his devotees, and those who do not are not his devotees.

**Check Your Progress 3**

1) Who is Prophet?

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2) Differentiate between a 'priest and a prophet.

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**9.6 LET US SUM UP**

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In this Unit you have studied three different types of religious specialists. We have begun by examining who a religious specialist is and what kinds of functions he performs for a society.

We have then proceeded to examine the major contribution made by Max Weber to the sociology of religion as well as his specific ideas on the priest, magician and prophet.

This Unit has also tried to deal with each specialist: priest shaman and prophet, separately, outlining the features and functions of each. We have tried to show how- each of the specialists have significance within a given context and how each associates with the layman differently. The purpose of examining these three different kinds of roles is to show how mankind relates to the world of the divine and supernatural, differently. Finally, wherever we have been able to, we have tried to support our presentation with examples from the Indian context. Our presentation has however been limited because the field is too diverse to be incorporated into a few pages.

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## 9.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Religious specialists are people who because of certain special qualities they possess are able to mediate between the human world and the supernatural world. The priest, the magician, the shaman are all examples of religious specialists.
- 2) According to Weber the priest is one who performs mediatory functions directed towards the world of the supernatural and divine. The priest belongs to an organisation or is related to an institution. He may even be attached to a family. He undergoes indoctrination and organisational learning. He has to abide by certain defined codes of behaviour. He is also expected to perform periodic rituals and sacrifice for the propitiation of the divine or the Gods and Goddesses

## Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Weber understands the magician as a specialist who uses his knowledge of the supernatural, sorcery, miracle making and exorcism to carry out rituals and acts that are both beneficial and harmful. He deals with evil spirits and tries to overcome illness through his magical powers.
- 2) The shaman is a tribal magician and leader. He is known for his powers of sorcery and exorcism and similar to those of the magician he performs both positive rituals of well-being, and negative rituals of ill-being.

## Check Your Progress 3

- 1) The prophet is a person who by virtue of his charismatic personality and qualities is capable of being a leader and gaining a following. The prophet leads a mission not for economic reasons but as he sees it as his personal calling or as a divine mission. The prophet may either lead a mission or he may be the founder of a world religion; to put it simply, the prophet is seen as a messenger or instrument of God's will.
- 2) The difference between the priest and prophet is that while the priest is a religious specialist who is attached to an organisation and performs rituals on behalf of others, the prophet is an independent person. He performs no rituals on behalf of people as such and is not a member of an organisation where there are others like him although, he may lead one. Secondly while the priest inherits his authority by birth in a family or through indoctrination and specialised knowledge, the prophet's authority comes from his personal charisma.

