CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND ONLINE EDUCATION
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY

MASTER OF ARTS

SOCIOLOGY

BLOCK II

Vision

To grow to be a leading centre for human resource development through distance, open and universal learning system.

Mission

To provide quality higher education at door step through barrierless, flexible and open learning mode in conformity with national priority and societal need.

Objective

- To offer degree, diploma, certificate level programme of study through distance learning in various emerging subjects across the disciplines.

- To offer job oriented and vocational programmes in flexible terms in the line of the national and regional level demand of manpower.

- To offer various programmes under lifelong learning contributing to the local and regional level requirements and as per the need of the society at large.

- To undertake various research and academic activities for furtherance of distance education in the region.

- To contribute to conserve and promote cultural heritage, literature, traditional knowledge and environment conducting short programmes, workshops, seminars and research in interdisciplinary field.

MSO-401: SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Dr Rabin Deka	Head and Associate Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Tezpur University
Prof. Chandan Kumar Sharma	Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Tezpur University
Prof. Kedilezo Kikhi	Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Tezpur University
Dr Amiya Kumar Das	Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Tezpur University
Ms Ankita Bhattacharyya	Assistant Professor, Centre for Open and Distance Learning, Tezpur University

CONTRIBUTORS

Module III	Ms Mili Das	Research Scholar, Delhi School of Economics
	Ms Madhuri Deka	Research Scholar, Tezpur University
Module IV	Ms Madhuri Deka	Research Scholar, Tezpur University
	Ms Barnali Das	Assistant Professor, Dept of Sociology, Darrang College

EDITOR

Prof. Rabindra Kumar Mohanty	Professor and Head, Dept. of Sociology, Mizoram University

BLOCK II

TABLE OF CONTENT

****

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

This Block comprises of Modules **III** and **IV** of MSO 204: Sociology of Religion. **Module III** deals with religions in India and it consists of five units. **Unit 7** explores Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and Tribal Religion. On the other hand, **Unit 8** covers Christianity, Judaism and Islam. **Unit 9** is about religious cults and sects. **Unit 10** deals with the concept of God man and God woman. Certain aspects of religion in India like sacred knowledge, sacred space and sacred persona are discussed in **Unit 11.**

Module IV deals with the concept of religion in India in contemporary times. This module is divided into three units. **Unit 12** discusses secularism. **Unit 13** deals with proselytisation while **Unit 14** discusses communalism.

****

MODULE III: RELIGIONS IN INDIA

UNIT 7: RELIGIONS OF INDIA: BUDDHISM, HINDUISM, JAINISM, SIKHISM AND TRIBAL RELIGION

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The idea that deals with the origin of Indian religion and culture are purely a debatable topic. Shreds of evidence say Hindu nationalist claims that Sanatan dharma and Brahminic culture are deeply rooted in the past. On the other hand, many tribal and non-Brahminic communities argue that their religiosity and cultural roots pre-existed before Brahminic culture, therefore they are more ancient and superior to Aryans or Brahmins. However, Hinduism is a direct descended of Brahminism

around 3000 years ago. Hinduism is the oldest religion of India and has vast numbers of followers. In fact, many scholars argue that India was home for many tribal before arriving Aryans. This indicates us that India is the home of various religions and this country is hosting many religions since long back. Jainism and Buddhism took birth around the same time, 2,500 years ago, in north India. The starting phase of the Christian religion in India goes back to the sixth century. Islam appeared two centuries later. Within this period Zoroastrians and Jews also arrived in India. Sikhism is the youngest religion which took birth in India's soil in the sixteenth century. In the course of time, various religions have arisen and fallen in India (Madan, 1995). By referring Bankimchandra Chatterjee's opinion the unique feature of India is that Indian societies are highly influenced by its various religious ideologies. Let us move and discuss these major religions of India.

7.2 OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain religions of India;
- Describe different aspects of various religions of India;
- Discuss tribal religion;
- Analyse religion sociologically in Indian context.

7.3 HINDUISM

Hinduism is the oldest and perhaps the most complex religion among all the religions in the world. Hinduism is not merely a religion; it is more than a religion for the Hindu people of India. They consider Hinduism as a way of life and culture as a whole. 'The word "Hindu" is derived from the name of River Indus, which flows through the northern region of Indian sub-continent. In ancient times the river was called the 'Sindhu', but the Persians who migrated to India called the river 'Hindu', the land

'Hindustan' and its inhabitants 'Hindus'. Thus, the religion followed by the Hindus came to be known as Hinduism" (Bhalla 2005: 9).

The origin of Hinduism is a debatable topic. Various perspectives have given by various people. Some argue that it dates back to the pre-historic era. One school of thought opines that it is 50,000 years old. Indian Historian says that it is about 10,000 years old. According to some other historians, including German theologist like Max Mueller, Hinduism practised by the "Aryan settlers" of Indus Valley and the local communities date some 6000 years back. Archaeological evidence indicates that Indus Valley civilization at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa appears to date Hinduism to 6000-7000 years before Christ (Bhalla, 2005).

This section of the unit deals with an introductory description of Hinduism from the perspective of sociology. Hinduism has grown out of a long historical dynamic process of evolution. With the changes of time, this religion has produced stratified diverse ethnic groups, races and their languages, cultures and so on. Many scholars claim that Hinduism is seen contained in its hierarchical caste structure which is based on the Varna (racial) system. In this system, Brahmins stand at the top followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras at the bottom. The features of caste are: endogamy within caste, gotra and village exogamy, occupational differentiation, the notion of purity and pollution and ritual hierarchy, the position is fixed by birth. Srinivas (2003) argued that, although positions are fixed by birth still upward social mobility can happen and it is a very slow process. He analyses social mobility in caste hierarchy through Sanskritisation (Tribal and low caste people seek to upgrade their position thus they try to follow or imitate the rituals practices of upper castes or dominant castes). For Srinivas, this process of Sanskritization has happened throughout history and it will continue. This stratification system created cultural and racial clashes among Hindu people. Thus

D.N Majumdar (1944) says that Hinduism has grown out of the dynamics of the clash of cultures and contacts of races.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Do you think that the complex and stubborn caste system has any place for Sanskritization?

7.3.1 Hinduism and Its Various Elements

The authorities for the Hindu way of life are mentioned in the scriptures. The beliefs and attitudes fall into two main categories. These two are Shruti and Smriti.

- Shruti (to hear): It refers to the beliefs that ancient sages received philosophies directly from Gods. So, it includes the earliest Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas and the Upanishads.
- Smriti (what was remembered): It refers to those pieces of literature which is said to have remembered and handed down by the traditions. It includes all the scriptures other than the Vedas and the Upanishads.

The Vedas are written in the Sanskrit language which is considered as the language of God (*Deva Bhasha*). Vedas are based on older oral versions. Vedas are considered as eternal and divine by Hindus that can

be read only by the Brahmins. There are four Vedas, namely Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva. Upanishads teach the idea of Karma, Samsara and Moksha. Smriti scriptures include various groups of writings such as Puranas, Laws of Manu, Ramayana, Mahabharata, etc. (Bhalla, 2005). Hindu scriptures did not spread any positive equal interest in society. Brahmans not only belong to priestly groups but also own means of production (landowner Brahmins) and on the other hand lower-caste (landless Dalits) provides labour services to upper-caste for livelihood (Beteille, 1965).

Hinduism provides four chief aims of human life called Purusharthas they are:

1) Dharma: the first stage called Brahmacharya (studentship) is for acquiring moral knowledge, laws and duties.

2) Artha: is wealth which is needed to follow dharma such as to raise a family

3) Kama: refers one's sexual desires and it is viewed as lowest by Purusharthas.

4) Moksha: the last stage which refers to renunciation (resign) or giving up everything (Bhalla, 2005).

Without following Dharma, one cannot achieve moksha. Moksha means to merge one's soul with the eternal soul (*Paramatma)*. Hinduism is a theistic religion; it can be both monotheistic and polytheistic. It can also be regarded at some level as totemistic, animistic and pantheistic. In a simple language, we can call it syncretic religion.

Stop and Read

Monotheistic- belief in the existence of one god

Polytheistic- belief in the existence of multiple God.

Totemism- see stop and read Box 7.3

Animistic- belief that every natural thing in the universe has a soul.

Pantheistic- belief that God is all around us.

Syncretic- the mixer of different religious ideologies, cultures and so on.

7.4 BUDDHISM

Buddhism or Sadharma is the religion that was preached by Buddhas. A Buddha is one who attained 'Bodhi'. The meaning of this term bodhi is an ideal state of an ethical and intellectual perfection that can be attained by man. Thus the term Buddha deals with the idea of spiritual awakening or enlightened one. Siddhartha Gautam was the founder of Buddhism or Sadharma. He was born in Kapilavastu around 5th century BC. He belonged to an aristocratic family who spent his early life in luxury. Later he renounced his royal life to attain the spiritual truth. By doing so he achieved the state of enlightenment, which is known as 'nirvana'. Gradually many disciples got inspired by his teachings and he became sage of Sakya Tribe or Shakyamuni. Thus Gautama Shakyamuni is the best known in history; who has attained bodhi (Narasu, 2009).

7.4.1 Teaching of Gautama Buddha

Gautama Buddha preached his own teaching and spread the message of salvation.

To attain salvation, one has to practice austerities that is self-mortification. According to him suffering in life is due to desires and it can be treated by following the Four great truths and the Noble eightfold path. The Four Great Truths are:

1) The misery (*dukkham)* is associated with all stages of and conditions of conscious life;

2) That the cause of misery *(dukkha samudayam)* is the grasping desire *(trishna)* for selfish enjoyment;

3) That emancipation from misery *(dukkha nirodha)* is possible by renunciation of all selfish cravings (*upadanas)*;

4) That the means by which we can get rid of selfish cravings and attain freedom from misery is the Noble Eightfold Path *(arya astanga marga)* (Narasu, 2009).

According to Buddha one should avoid two extreme paths, one –A life addicted to pleasure and two- A life given to self-mortification for profitless. By avoiding these two extreme paths one has to take the middle path to attain salvation. And this middle path is the Noble Eightfold Path which leads to insight, to wisdom, to knowledge, to peace, to Nirvana. The Noble Eightfold Paths recommended by Buddha are:

1) The right viewpoint *(samyag drishti)*: realizing the four-noble truth

2) right desire (*samyag samkalpa)*: commitment to ethical growth in moderation

3) right speech *(samyag vak)*: one should speak in a truthful and non-hurtful way

4) right action *(samyag karma)*: avoiding action that would do harm

5) right living *(samyag ajiva)*: one's job should not harm in any way oneself or other directly or indirectly.

6) right effort *(samyag vyayama)*: one should make effort to improve oneself

7) right mindfulness *(samyag smriti)*: one should see things with clear consciousness

8) right tranquillity *(samyag Samadhi)*: the state of enlightenment, where ego disappears (Narasu, 2009).

Many scholars opine that Buddhism is a non-speculative (factual or real) religion and the teaching for salvation is provided just to secure one's effort and not through the grace of God. While most the religions preach autocracy, submissiveness and absolutism. Unlike other religions,

Buddhism preaches for creativeness and democratic co-operation. Thus the image of Buddha combines the wisdom of a philosopher and the triumph of a hero.

Stop and Read

Autocracy- when a person, institution or organization controls or governs; in our context the controlling or dominating religious organization, for instance- Vedic religion

Submissiveness- law-abiding

Absolutism- the holding of absolute principle or power of any concern matter. In our context, the matter is about absolute religious ideologies.

7.4.2 The Geographic Traditions

Buddhism spread throughout the Indian sub-continent in the 5th century. Slowly it started spreading into central, southeast and east Asia. Buddhism is divided into three types depending on the geographical areas but not in any hierarchical order.

- The Theravada ("teaching of elders"): Southeast Asia: Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam
- Mahayana (great vehicle): China, Nepal, Sikkim, Korea and Japan
- Tantrayana ("esoteric vehicle"): Mongolia, Tibet and parts of Siberia (Suda, 1978)

7.4.3 Features of Buddhism

Buddhism believes in equality. Thus the followers of this religion did not belong to high classes; in fact, it included the lower classes such as sweepers, barbers and so on. Many low caste Hindu people converted themselves into Buddhist to get rid of hierarchical caste structure. Gender equality is another important feature of Buddhism; it has a great

sociological significance that its doors are equally open for women as for men. The similar style of worshipping the images of deities provided by it gradually became a common feature for both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. Thus, many aspects of it were accepted by others and gradually the differences began to diminish. However, eventually, Hinduism grabbed Buddhism. Historical evidence says that the Mahayana form of Buddhism has gone under the influence of non-Aryan. This was the declining phase of Buddhism (Bapat 1999). Well, the liberal attitudes make Buddhism a religion of kindness, humanity and equality. Thus, while some religions allow animal sacrifices Buddhism stands apart and is against such sacrifices.

7.5 JAINISM

Jainism is also another offshoot of Hinduism like Buddhism. To some extent, both religions have similar principles but at the same time, they differ greatly too in some aspects. Both of them reject the idea of ritualism and the system of sacrifices. They also reject the authority of Vedas. Both of them believe in *nirvana* the ultimate goal of life that make a release from the cycle of birth and death. The way to achieve *nirvana* was directed by Buddha for Buddhism and by Mahavir to the Jains. Similarly, the term Buddha means 'the awakened one' and the word *Jina* means the man of perfect knowledge; which deals with 'self-conquest'.

By now you have seen that Buddhism and Jainism have several similarities. Now let us look at the differences between the two. According to Jainism, the entire universe is an interaction between the everlasting and co-existing divisions of *jiva* and *ajiva*; While Buddhism denies the existence of any permanent substance. The major difference is Buddhism became a world religion and spread to distant lands, while Jainism never became a missionary religion. It was confined to India where it took birth. One important point that you need to understand here

is, Jainism never became extinct in India like Buddhism. Buddhism lost its foothold and was grabbed by Hinduism in India. Although Jains are numerically less than other communities, they maintain their purity of life and stands far from other religions. Majority of Jains are Vaishyas by caste; they are traders and merchants (Suda, 1978).

Jains believe that Jainism is the oldest religion in the world it is far older than any other religion in the world. Jains believe that Mahavir (599BC-527BC) was the twenty-fourth and the last Tirthankara (a saviour and a spiritual teacher) who revived the philosophy of Jains. This philosophy was previously preached by Lord Parshva (950BC-850BC) in India. According to Jains presents scriptures are only reflections of his teachings. Mahavir was born into a royal family. After his conception, the wealth and prosperity increased in the family. Thus he got the name Vardhman, the increase of prosperity. He was born in the Indian region that shares borderline with Nepal within the same time frame of Buddha. Mahavir was 35 years older than Buddha (Bhalla, 2005).

7.5.1 Mahavir's Teaching

The religion made by Mahavir is natural, simple and free from all ritual complexities. He teaches the idea of spiritual happiness of living being and stressed the importance of the positive attitude of life. He taught people to follow the path of non-violence, truth, non-stealing, celibacy and non-possession. According to him, a living body is not only a body but a soul that has a perfect perception of knowledge, power and bliss. Mahavir rejects the idea of God as a creator, an operator and a destroyer; he said that worshipping gods and goddesses are nothing but seeking for material gains and personal benefits. He believed both man and woman are equal. Jainism provides five great vows, they are: pledging to abstain from injuring life, false speech, taking what is not given, unchastity and appropriation, not taking food and drink at night. Avoiding food at night with the aim of not to harm any insect unintentionally. Jainism believes

in Triratna that is three jewels of right knowledge, right faith, right conduct. These Triratna lead towards nirvana (Bhalla 2005). This great religion teaches the best principle which is a Dharma that one should follow which consists of self-help and self- reliance.

7.6 SIKHISM

Sikhism is an offshoot of Hinduism. Sikhism was originated on the soil of India by the teaching of its first saint Guru Nanak Dev. This religion has ten saints who made a significant contribution to establishing this new religion in India. It is very important to know how Baba Guru Nanak Dev devoted his entire life for the thoughts and ideas that he considered to promote. Secondly, by following his ideologies other Gurus carried Sikhism forward. During the period of promoting Sikhism Guru, Nanak Dev travelled many important places and met several people from various religions where he displayed his spiritual understanding of religion and god. At the later stage, many people started following his ideologies and eventually, they became Sikh. After the work of Guru Nanak Dev, the tradition of Sikhism was carried by nine other Gurus among whom Guru Gobind Singh is the last Guru (Bhalla 2005).

Guru Granth Sahib is the holy book of Sikhism. The first chapter of this Granth was composed by Guru Nanak. The main postulate is mentioned here the "Mool mantra" or "Gurbani". This chapter is designed for meditation that provides the philosophy of the path to salvation (Bhalla, 2005). The use of local language greatly helped to break away to Hinduism and to establish a new religion. The feature of Sikhism is that it believes in the universal brotherhood of man and woman, common fatherhood of God. The praiseworthy feature is that it believes that being a part of the society man should work for its upliftment. Sikh communities have achieved remarkable success, and they always contribute towards the progress not only in India but also in the other parts of the globe.

7.6.1 The Five 'K's

Sikh people can be easily identified because of five distinguishable symbols they carry which called "*panj kakke*" the five 'K's. These 'K's are introduced by Guru Gobind Singh on the occasion of birth Khalsa on the Baisakhi of 1699. Those five 'K's are:

1) Kesh: uncut hair and unshaved beard that symbolizes saintliness.

2) Kanga: a comb to maintain the hair

3) Kachcha: a knee-length pant which ensures quickness of movement at times of action

4) Kirpan: a sword that represents power and dignity to be used only in self-defence or to uphold justice

5) Kara: A steel bangle is worn on the right wrist which, symbolize strength and fearlessness (Bhalla, 2005).

Sikhism arose as a protest against the ritualism and ideology of Hinduism. Thus it stands near to Buddhism. All the Sikh gurus were householders and they considered Grihastha (or householder) is the supreme dharma. In this context, Sikhism is closer to Hinduism. Similarly, Manu says a person take renunciation (*sannyasa*) only after fulfilling the three stages Brahmacharya, Grihastha and Vanaprastha ashramas. J.P. Suda (1978) mentions Dr Barth's argument that many elements were taken from different religion by Guru Nanak during the formation of Sikhism. For instance, he took few elements from Islam i.e. strict monotheism and few from Hinduism like the concept of Brahman as '*sat-chit-anand' as a high moral idealism'* out of all these formed a new system of belief. In short, Nanak's conception of God is formless absolute.

Sikhism has become a missionary religion like Buddhism. Today worldwide more than 23 million people are following Sikhism. It is a religion that preaches truthful living, equity of mankind, rejects

superstitions and blind ritualism; it stands for humanity, harmony and love.

7.7 TRIBAL RELIGION

We already discussed major religions that originated in India but apart from these major religions, there are many religious minorities that exist in India. Few tribal communities are still following their own religion. They are still trying to resist themselves from the grip of Hinduism or conversion to Christianity and Buddhism. Ethnographical pieces of literature have a record of the existence of a wide variety of religious beliefs found in different geographical areas mainly from eastern, central and southern parts of the country including totemism, animism, Saktism and pantheism.

Stop and Read:

Totemism refers to mostly tribal religion. These people consider themselves as having descended from animate and inanimate objects such as plants, vegetables, animals and so on. Such an object is called Totem. The Totem is therefore considered sacred and is respected, worshipped, and is never harmed by the followers. Thus we have the example of the cow, snake, Tulsi plant etc. Totemism has been studied by many classical scholars, but Levi-Strauss's contribution is a remarkable one.

Saktism is a medieval religion which is directly descended of the primitive Mother Goddess.

Many tribal religions were grabbed by the influencing Aryan ideologies and few tribal people from low status started giving up their own primitive customs and religion for seeking to influence high status. With

the passage of time, new society started transforming for many reasons like social conflicts, changes of political powers, stratification system, social interactions and so on. Due to various changes such as political, economic and natural calamities that create invasion, conquest and migration that have largely affected the local people, frequent changes were observed in the social pattern. "The change in the social pattern gave rise to change in their concepts of religion and beliefs. In respect of supernatural affairs, various castes and communities have re-oriented their concepts of religion and attitude towards the established formalities as well as associated ritualistic behaviours. The supernatural concepts, implanted to institutions and religion attracted the people in the hope of obtaining peace, happiness and secured life" (Bhowmick, 1976: 8). Festivals attracted individuals and social groups and people participated in those festivals and got mixed with one another. In this dynamic process typical folk festivals also accepted popular Hindu tradition with the ritual process through the process of socio-religious assimilation (to fully become part of another culture) (Bhowmick, 1976). Thus maximum tribal religions have disappeared with time. Although most of the parts of India were going under the rule of Aryans and Hindu religion few parts still remain the same and Aryanization failed to influence these communities. The new movement of revitalization has emerged among some tribal communities such as Khasi and Naga who are trying to preserve their tradition, custom and religion (Madan, 1995).

7.8 SUMMING UP

Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism all of them arose in India as reform movements against Hinduism. All the three founders of reform movements could see that Hinduism is steadily declining due to its hierarchical system. Buddhism is the only one religion that spread far beyond the borders of the country of origin. Though Hinduism a major religion did not cross the boundaries because of its ethnic character.

Glossary

- Hierarchical: arranged in order of rank
- Endogamy: marrying outside the clan or tribe
- Exogamy: marrying inside the caste, clan or group
- Mobility: able to be moved
- Preached: a speech about religion
- Disciples: follower
- self-mortification: self-torture
- offshoot: a branch
- celibacy: unmarried state
- pledging: serious promise
- abstain: to choose not to
- stratification: divided into social classes
- invasion: to enter forcefully
- conquest: domination
- revitalization: to make energetic again

7.9 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the basic principles of Hinduism.
2. What are the teachings and features of Buddhism?
3. Examine the relationship (similarities and differences) between Buddhism and Jainism.
4. Discuss the socio-religious background of the emergence of Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism in India.
5. Discuss the significance of Tribal religion in India.

7.10 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

Bapat, P.B. (1999). India and Buddhism. In *Buddhism and India,* by Sharma, J.B & Sharma, S.P, 22-28. Sublime Publication, Jaipur.

Beteille, A. (1965). *Caste, class and Power: Changing patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village.* University of California Press, London.

Bhalla, K.S. (2005). *Major Religions In India.* Star Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.

Bhowmick, P. K. (1976). *Socio-Cultural Profile of Frontier Bengal.* Punthi Pustak, Calcutta.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1963).*Totemis.* Penguin Books.

Madan, T.N. (1995). Introduction. In Madan, T.N., editor, *Religion in India.* Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Majumdar, D.N. (1944). *Races and Cultures of India.* Asian Publishing House, Delhi.

Mazumdar, H.T. (1986). *India's Religious Heritage*. Allied, New Delhi.

Narasu, P. L. (2009). What is Buddhism? In Aloysius, G., editor, *What is Buddhism?* Samyak Prakashan, New Delhi

Roberts, K.A. (1984). *Religion in Sociological Perspective*. Dorsey Press, New York.

Srinivas, M. N. (2003). *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India.* Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Suda, J.P. (1978). *Religions in India: A Study of their essential Unity*. Sterling Publisher Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.

****

UNIT 8: RELIGIONS OF INDIA: CHRISTIANITY, JUDAISM, ISLAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have studied Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism and Tribal religion of India. These major religions of India tell us about the basic socio-religious scenario of India. Now we will move further and understand two other major religions of India: Christianity and Islam. We will also discuss Judaism in India which is practised by a minimal population. This unit deals with various aspects of these three religions; for instance, religious features, historical factors, socio-religious interlinkage, socio-religious and socio-cultural assimilation,

changing the culture, social movements and so on. Let us move and try to understand these various aspects of these three religions of India.

8.2 OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe Christianity, Judaism and Islam;
- Describe various aspects of these three religions of India.

8.3 CHRISTIANITY

It is very hard to define accurate timeframe when the religion of Christianity emerged. It is a religion which is founded roughly about 2000 years ago and practised by more than 2000 million people worldwide. "It originated in Judea (present-day Israel) in the first century A.D. and is based on the life and teaching of Jesus Nazareth who became known as Jesus Christ (the anointed one), thus the root of the name Christian" (Bhalla, 2005: 71). Christianity came into existence from Judaism because Jesus was a Jew by birth; thus, it has emerged as a breakaway sect of Judaism and in the shadow of Roman rule. So, both the religions, Christianity and Judaism, shared the same historical root. Jewish life in Judea was marked by various social disturbance, for instance economic, political, religious and social oppression under the Roman government. To get rid of these oppressions a sense of self-help or self-rule has emerged. Thus, as a result, stories told by early Christian (were Jews) about Jesus are a creator, a messiah, and the restoration of God's kingdom. Jesus's idea of establishing a kingdom is very different from the Roman government. Christians consider Jesus to be divine, whereas other Christian argue that he was a human being who has a special relationship with God (Thangaraj & Peter Dass, 2018).

In the Indian context, Christianity has a unique perspective. In the Indian case, Christianity has appeared to be a peculiar one. Majority of Indian Christians are those Christians who have converted themselves from the

rigid Hindu caste system. It seems that newly converted Christians try to retain their old religious structure within their new socio-religious setup. Thus, many sociologists and anthropologists have agreed with this fact that Indian Christians are greatly influenced by the values and ideologies of Hinduism and that too particularly influenced by the structure of the caste system. Dumont argues that the adherence values of a monotheistic religion with egalitarian tendencies are weaker than the fundamental values on which the caste system rests (Dumont, 1970). The religion of Christianity is an egalitarian religion that does not speak for any inequality. Thus, many lower caste Hindu people converted themselves to Christian religion just to get rid of the rigid caste system and seeking equal status in the socio-religious frame. However, it is also interesting to note that the Hindu caste system is so deep-rooted that wherever Hindu people travelled or converted to other religion some elements of this caste system also got carried with them. A vast number of sociological studies state that the social life of Indian Christians is very much influenced by the Hindu caste structure. Thus, Fuller opines that the egalitarianism of Christianity had a marginal impact on the Hindu way of life (Fuller, 1976: 65).

8.3.1 Christianity and its Various Elements:

Christianity is a monotheistic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as presented in the New Testament. Jesus of Nazareth was a Palestinian Jew born in Bethlehem in Judea near about 10 kilometres from Jerusalem. Modern civilization marks his birth by dividing time BC (Before Christ) and A.D (After Death). A.D also stands for Latin Phrase 'Anno Domini' means 'in the year of our lord'. (Bhalla, 2005).

There are two main divisions of Christendom. The major bases of this split are mainly political intolerance, persecution and religious war.

These two groups are Catholic and Protestant. Let's discuss a few elements of Christianity.

The Cross:

The cross symbol, seen as a representation of the instrument of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, is the best-known earliest used religious symbol of Christianity. It is related to the crucifix (a cross that includes a usually three-dimensional representation of Jesus' body) and to the more general family of cross symbols. The cross-shaped sign, represented in its simplest form by a crossing of two lines at right angles, greatly antedates, in both East and West, the introduction of Christianity.

The Bible:

The sacred scriptures of the Bible and its collections are divided into the Old Testament (39 books) and the New Testament (27 books). The history of Christianity began with the prophesying with the Old Testament. These books are also records of the experience that the Israelite people had of Yahweh "the God of their father". The Old Testament of the Bible was written approximately between 900 B.C-160 B.C. Later, these books were translated from Hebrew to Greek. The New Testament was written approximately between 40 A.D and 140 A.D and was written wholly in Greek. The life of Jesus Christ is contained in the four Gospels of the New Testament, particularly those of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John evangelist, of which Matthew and John were Apostles. They differ in some but overall agree in all essentials. Most of the historical records of the start of Christian faith are recorded in the New Testament. The Gospels represent the resurrection of Jesus Christ; His teaching and the events of His life. The study of Jesus's life, background and death represent that He was perfectly the fulfilment of messianic prophecies (Bhalla, 2005).

Teachings of Jesus:

The essence of teachings Jesus's is called sermon on the mount. These emphasize the following doctrines:

- Love your enemies
- Do not judge others
- Trust God
- Don't be anxious about tomorrow
- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Bhalla, 2005).

Priesthood and God:

Protestant believes in the universal priesthood and Catholic have a specially ordained priesthood. All Christians believe in one God. They believe that God consists of three divine persons, i.e. the holy trinity: God the father, God the son and the holy spirit (Bhalla, 2005).

Sin and Salvation:

Christians believe that doing something displeasing to God is a sin. They believe that through Christ, God does for people which they cannot do for themselves. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches affirm that the believer receives this gift from God. On the other hand, Protestants believe that salvation is grace alone. They simply believe in God's grace (Bhalla, 2005).

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Have you met anyone converted to Christianity from Hinduism? How is her/his religious and cultural life? Observe, think and write down your views.

8.3.2 Christianity in India:

Christianity arrived in India with one of the apostles of Jesus Christ. He was Saint Thomas who spent some years in south India and died there. According to Clothey, many legends claim that Syrian Christian community was founded in India by Saint Thomas at around 4th century (Clothey, 2008). Some believe that Saint Bartholomew was the first missionary who arrived in India. Historically Christian missionary activities started with the advent of Saint Francis Xavier in 1544. Christianity flourished in India by Catholic and Protestant missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries. They made a remarkable contribution to the improvement of society and education for this country (Bhalla, 2005). Christians are not very evenly distributed in India. The vast majority of Indian Christians are from the states of Kerala, Tamil-Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and also few states of north-east India; like Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram. The population are smaller in central and western parts than the south and north-east part of India (Thangaraj & Peter Dass, 2018). Downs has studied the role of Christianity in the process of cultural change which has been taking place in the tribal areas of Northeast India. Although eight sisters of northeast belong to a particular zone of India, this area is the most diverse area of the country. A vast number of tribal communities live in this zone, each tribe has its own unique identity in terms of culture, language, religion, ethnicity and so on. No one can precisely say how many languages are spoken here. He opines that there are various factors which made a socio-cultural change in the hilly areas of Northeast India, and Christianity is one of the primary agencies in the formation of new cultural synthesis. The process of Cultural assimilation takes place when a new religion enter a new zone (Downs, 1994). Thus, Indian Christianity is diverse and peculiar because of its various regional cultures, ethnicity, languages and so on. These differences are manifested in liturgical practices, worship pattern, rites of passage, individual ritual, various family ceremonies, church architecture and many more. Thus, Christianity is practised in Northeast

India among the states are different from each other and also Christianity practised in South India is different from other zones of India (Thangaraj & Peter Dass, 2018).

Stop and Read:

- Testament: two main divisions of the Bible

- Hebrew: the language of modern Israel

- Gospel: the teaching of the Christian religion

- Messiah: a person who is expected to save people from a very bad situation

- Resurrection: the event told about in the Bible in which Jesus Christ returned to life after his death, rebirth

- Salvation: something that saves someone or something from danger or a difficult situation

- Persecution: to constantly annoy

8.4 JUDAISM

Judaism is a universal monotheistic religion. The fundamental orientation of Judaism is practical and this-worldly with no official body of dogma. But, this belief system also possesses an orthodox system of codification; based on their religious book Pentateuch and the books of the prophets and the hagiography (the writings) which are included in the law of Judaism tradition. This orthodox system resides on the written law and oral law the Talmud and its codifications; for example, the Kashrut law informs to elevate the Jews and to distinguish them from animals. It also defines their own religion and how it differs from other religions (Weil, 2018).

Judaic religion is organized around Jewish liturgy—the rituals, the festivals which reflects the lifecycle of its people. Judaism also incorporates more mystical traditions such as Hasidic and Kabbalistic. Both of these are not necessarily followed by the majority of the Judaic people (Weil, 2018).

Symbol of Judaism

The David Star

The six-pointed star of David, It is the best known religious symbol of the Jewish faith. The sign is based on the shape of David's shield or the symbol on his shield. The David's star is a relatively new symbol of Judaism, becoming popular only in the last 200 years. It is named after King David, whom legend tells us had a shield with this star on it.

Menorah

The menorah is the oldest religious symbol of the Jewish faith. It is a seven branched candle holder.

8.4.1 Judaism in India

Entire South Asia has never been a proper home for Judaic religion. A very minuscule number of Jews has been given shelter in the South Asian region. Judaism stands opposite almost in every aspect of its ideology from Hinduism. Hinduism is the main dominant religion in India which emphasizes in polytheism and icon centrism, whereas Judaism is a monotheistic and iconoclastic religion which has been in India as a minor religion. Only a few Jewish communities are found in India; such as The Bene Israel of Maharashtra, the Cochin Jews of Kerala and the Baghdadi Jewish of Calcutta and Bombay. These three communities flourished only in India. After independence, the number of Jewish communities was near about twenty-three thousand and they contributed a lot in Indian academic, literary and many more. A few groups from Northeast India like Manipur, Mizoram claim themselves as descendants of "Lost Israelites". Based on this claim, thousands of people migrated to Israel

(Weil, 2018). However, lager Indian Jewish diasporas flourished in abroad. In recent decades, new Jewish groups are also emerging in India especially in the state of Andhra Pradesh (Egorova and Perwez, 2013). Many European Jews arrived in India at different points in history. Jews and Portuguese arrived in India almost in the same span of time and established their own communities in Goa. Many Jews from Germany, Austria, Poland and other European countries found a temporary home in India after the Holocaust. All the three communities of Jews in India are monotheistic in nature but some of the sacred life of Jews are unique and they are heavily influenced by Hindu and Muslim rituals or practices. The Bene Israel of Maharashtra is specially integrated with the culture of India. Even the other two groups of Jews have also adopted some Indian customs such as burial and marriage that reflect the local customs of India (Weil, 2018).

8.4.2 Thirteen Principles of Judaism:

In the middle ages, Maimonides (1135-1204) formulated his thirteen principles. These thirteen principles are the essence of Jewish belief which are taken as a kind of creed for Judaism (Hunter, 2003). They are:

1. The existence of creator and providence
2. The unity of the creator
3. The non-physical nature of the creator
4. The eternal existence of the creator
5. The sole right of the creator to be worshipped
6. The words of the prophets
7. The character of Moses as the greatest of all prophets
8. The revelation of the law to Moses at the Mount Sinai.
9. The immutability of the revealed law
10. The omniscience of God
11. The reality of retribution in this world and in the hereafter
12. The coming of the Messiah
13. The resurrection of the dead

- Pentateuch: the first book of Jewish and Christian Scriptures

- Talmud: the authoritative body of Jewish tradition comprising the Mishnah and Gemara

- Minuscule: very small

- Icon centrism: a member of a centre

- Iconoclastic: criticizes or opposes beliefs and practices that are widely accepted

- Maimonides: a medieval Jewish philosopher.

- Holocaust: the killing of millions of Jews and other people by the Nazis during World War II

- Revelation: something that surprises

- Immutability: unable to be changed

- Omniscience: the state of knowing everything

- Retribution: Punishment for doing something wrong

- Creed: a statement of the basic beliefs of a religion

8.5 ISLAM

Today Islam is the second largest religion in the world. Islam was founded by Prophet Muhammad in Arabia in the early 7th century A.D. The meaning of the word Islam is 'submission'; specifically, the submission to the will of the one God, that is 'Allah' in the Arabic language. The word 'Islam' and 'Salaam' have come from the same root meaning of peace. On the other hand, the word ''Muslim'' means one who submits the self to the will of God regardless of ethnic background, race, nationality and so on. Therefore, the aim of being Muslim is to live

according to the Prophet's teaching through active obedience to god and by submitting oneself to the God's will, human beings gain peace in their lives in the world and also in the hereafter (Bhalla, 2005).

Islam's Symbol:

The star and crescent is the best-known symbol used to represent Islam. The symbol is not Muslim in origin, it was a polytheistic icon adopted during the spread of Islam, and its use today is sometimes controversial in the Muslim world. The crescent and star are often said to be Islamic symbols, but historians say that they were the insignia of the Ottoman Empire, not of Islam as a whole.

8.5.1 Allah:

Allah the creator, is the omnipotent. In the Islamic belief, Allah means God has no pattern, son or daughter or any competitor. He does not have any helper either. In short, he is all in all and unique (Bhalla 2005). Symbolically, the word "Allah" in Arabic script or characters can be regarded as visually representing Islam as a symbol.

8.5.2 Prophet Muhammad:

Prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca to a merchant family in Quaraishi Tribe in the 570 CE. His father died several weeks before his birth and his mother died when he was six years old. He was raised by his paternal grandfather and paternal uncle. Living and working in a city, Muhammad was unhappy. Thus, he started going to the hills to meditate in the solitude of the desert. During one month of meditation in the month of Ramadan, he received the first revelation from God. He returned with the divine majesty, he compiled a book name "Quran'' by revealing all the verses. The Quran is not the literal work of Prophet Muhammad, but it is a direct revelation of the lord. It contains God's final message to mankind that was revealed to Muhammad. The aim of the prophet was to restore the worship of one true God the creator and the sustainer of the universe (Bhalla 2005).

8.5.3 Five Acts of Worship:

The five acts of worships are the fundamental and essential five pillars of worships of Islam. Each Muslim is expected to fulfil these obligations. These are:

Al-Shahadah (Bearing witness to the one and only god)- In the Quran, the description of God is beyond human understanding. But in the Quran, it is referred to by ninety-nine attributes such as compassionate, merciful and the forgiving. "Together with the command to bear witness and acknowledge the singularity, centrality, unity and uniqueness of God the believer is enjoined to confess that Muhammad is God's messenger and prophet"(Bhalla, 2005: 47).

Al-Salah (prayer)- A Muslim should offer prayer 5 times a day. Prayers should be offered with the face towards Mecca. Five prayers are *Fajr* the morning prayer before the sunrise. *Zuhr* the noon prayer just after the midday to afternoon. *Asr* the afternoon prayer just late afternoon until before the sunset. *Maghrib* the sunset prayer, the prayer of sunset and darkness. *Isha* the night prayer before sleeping. All the five prayers should be congregational and should be offered in a group; But individual prayer also may be offered (Bhalla, 2005).

Al-Siyam (fasting during Ramadan)- the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar requires special attention. During this month, Muslims abstain from food, drink and sexual activity from sunrise to sunset and religious observation is emphasised (Bhalla, 2005).

Al-Zakat (Almsgiving Charity)- the term Zakat means purification. The literal meaning is to save a proportion of one's wealth and give it to the needy members. It is a religious duty (Bhalla, 2005).

Al-Hajj (Pilgrimage)- the pilgrimage to Mecca is required in one's lifespan. The activity of pilgrimage shows repentance and hopes for the

result of forgiveness by God. It represents the bond establishing in a stronger way with the self and God (Bhalla, 2005).

8.5.4 Sunnis and Shias:

After the prophet's death, Islam spread quickly from Spain in the west to India in the east within a century. Islam also succeeded in uniting an Arab world of separate tribes and castes, but disagreement concerning the succession of the prophet caused a division in Islam between two groups: Sunnis and Shi'ites.

At the beginning of the eighth and ninth centuries, Sufism as a form of mysticism was developed. This movement was developed which was very influential in Asia and Africa. However, Sunni form makes more than 80% of the world's Muslims. They are followers of Hanifa, Safi, Hanible and Malik school; they considered themselves to be the mainstreamed traditionalist. They believe that their faith belongs to secular societies. They have adapted the variety of national culture; they follow three sources of law: the Quran, the Hadith and consensus of Muslim. On the other hand, Shiite Muslims belong to the minority of the world's Muslims and they are the followers of Jafri School. They have separated themselves from Sunni Muslims over a dispute over the successor to Muhammad. The major distinction between the two traditions derives from different approaches to the government (Bhalla, 2005).

8.5.5 Islam in India

Islam arrived in Indian subcontinent within a few years of its birth. Muslim Arab Merchants were trading on the west coast of India before the advent of Islam. Some of them settled in southern and western coasts of India and married with local Indians. Thus, pockets of Islamic culture started forming in India who used to live a peaceful life with their neighbours. This settlement was entirely calm and peaceful and interactive without conflict with neighbours even into the recent past. The constant interactions were with Muslim Traders and craftsmen from

Turkey and central Asia to the northern and eastern zone of India like Punjab, Kashmir, East Bengal from the eighth century onwards. A huge number of these foreign artisans and traders who were Muslims settled in India from the beginning of the twentieth century (Clothey, 2008). So, in India, Muslims have been residing with Hindus representing their own traditional worldview as Islam does not promote any margin for social inequalities. The prime concept of Islamic faith is that all human beings are equal in front of Allah. However, in the Indian context, a vast number of sociological and anthropological studies show the existence of caste structure among Indian Muslims. So, the Indian case appears as a peculiar one as the Indian Muslims have accepted the structure of caste within their social setup (Ansari, 1960; Ahmed, 1978; Abbasi, 1988; Chauhan, 1992; Dumont, 1970; Mandelbaum, 1972). According to Dumont (1970), the presence of caste structure among Indian Muslims is nothing but a result of cultural assimilation. However, many other scholars argued that the element of Hindu caste structure has transferred through conversion during the Muslim rule in India.

8.6 SUMMING UP

Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism they all have elements in common in the matter of orthopraxis which has developed the critical system of law, purity system, strict endogamy and so on. Therefore, these restrictions make these religions close to their own ethnic boundaries. But, cultural accommodation and adaptation have always been happening throughout history and will continue to happen. So, Jews have adopted some customs of Hinduism and on the other hand, Indian Christianity and Islamism are highly influenced by the Hindu caste structure.

Glossary:

- Adherence: the act of doing what is required by a rule or belief

- Egalitarian: aiming for equal status

- Marginal: not included in the main part of the society or of a group

- Apostles: someone who believes in or supports an idea, cause etc.

- Messianic: relating to or having the qualities of a messiah

- Sermon: a speech about a moral or religious subject that is usually given by a religious leader

- Advent: the arrival of a notable person

- Flourish: to do very well

- Prophecies: the power to know what will happen in the future

- Synthesis: something that is made by combining different things

- Liturgy: a fixed set of ceremonies, words, etc that are used during public worship in a religion

- Rites of passage: a ceremony that makes an important stage in someone's life, especially birth, the transitions from childhood to adulthood, marriage and death

- Orientation: a person's feelings, interest and beliefs

- Dogma: a belief or set of beliefs that are taught by a religious organization

- Codification: to put in an orderly form

- Emerging: newly created

- Essence: the quality

- Mysticism: a religious practice based on the belief that knowledge of spiritual truth can be gained by praying deeply
- congregational: relating to religious service

8.7 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the various elements of Christianity.
2. Discuss Judaism in India.
3. Discuss the features of Islamism and Islam in India.
4. Examine how the Indian scenario of Christianity, Judaism and Islam are different from other countries?

8.8 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

Abbasi, P.A. (1988). Muslimo Men Jati: Ex Samiksha, *Manav,* No. 2&3: 107-118.

Ahmad, I. (1978). *Caste and Social Stratification Among Muslims in India.* Manohar, Delhi.

Ansari, G. (1960). *Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh, Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society.* Lucknow.

Bhalla, K.S. (2005). *Major Religions In India.* Star Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.

Chauhan, B.R. (1992). *Muslims in Meerut: Rural-Urban Dimensions,* ICSSR Project MS.

Clothey, W.F. (2008). *Religion in India: A Historical Introduction.* Routledge, London and New York.

Downs, S.F. (1994). *Essays on Christianity in North-East India.* Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi.

Dumont, L. (1970). *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications.* Vikas Publications House, Delhi.

Egorova, Y. and Perwez, S. (2013). *The Jews of Andhra Pradesh: Contesting Caste and Religion in South India.* Oxford University Press, New York.

Fuller, C.J. (1976). *The Nayars Today*. Cambridge, New Delhi.

Hunter, Alastair. (2003). Judaism. In Ridgeon, L., editor, *Major World Religions: From Their Origins to the Presents,* pages 116-177. Routledge Curzon, London and New York.

Mandelbaum, D.G. (1972). *Society in India.* Popular, Bombay.

Singh, Y. (1973). *Modernization of Indian Tradition: A Systematic Study of Social Change.* Tomson Press Ltd, Delhi.

Thangaraj, M. T. and Dass, R.P. (2018). Indian Christian Tradition. In Mittal, S. and Thursby, G., editors, *Religions of India: An Introduction,* pages 207-231. Routledge, New York and London.

Weil, S. (2018). Indian Judaic Traditions. In Mittal, S. and Thursby, G., editors, *Religions of India: An Introduction,* pages 187-206. Routledge, New York and London.

****

UNIT 9: RELIGIOUS CULTS AND SECTS

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 Introduction

9.2 Objectives

9.3 Religious Cults

9.4 Religious Sects

9.5 Difference Between Cults and Sects

9.6 Description of Primitive Cult by Emile Durkheim

9.7 Cults of Ancient India

    9.7.1 Sahajiya Buddhism

    9.7.2 Sakti Cult

    9.7.3 Saiva Cult

9.8 Religious Sects of Ancient India

    9.8.1 Vaishnavism and its followers

    9.8.2 Radha Krishna

    9.8.3 Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism

9.9 Summing up

9.10 Questions

9.11 Recommended Readings and References

9.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will throw light on the meaning of religious cult and sect, and then we will try to understand how classical theorists analyse these concepts and give a sociological frame. By discussing these ideas, this unit will move further to analyse few religious cults and sects of ancient India.

9.2 OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain religious cults;
- Explain religious sects;
- Explain the relationship between positive and negative cults;
- Analyse religion in a broader perspective.

9.3 RELIGIOUS CULTS

The word "cult" has derived from the French word "culte" which has come from Latin noun "*cultus.*" The latter is related to the Latin verb "*colere*" that means "*to worship or give reverence to a deity.*" Thus, we can say the original meaning, of the term "*cult*", can be applied to any group of religious believers: Southern Baptists, Roman Catholics, Hindus or Muslims[1]. In simpler words, a cult can be defined as "a religious group, often living together, whose beliefs are considered extreme or strange by many people"[2]. According to Sociological Dictionary cult is "in both developed and less developed societies, the most informal and often most transient type of religious organisation or movement, usually distinguished from other forms of religious organisation by its deviation from the dominant orthodoxies within the communities in which it operates. In preindustrial or transitional societies, cults often coexist with more formally organised religions and perform specialised functions, including magical rites. Within both underdeveloped and developed societies, it is characteristic of cults that they recruit individuals who make a positive choice to become involved"[3]. If we analyse this, we will find that the recruitment of members is normally based on by birth or by family ties. But the membership of cult is unlike mainstream process.

---

[1] http://www.religioustolerance.org/cults.htm
[2] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cult
[3] David Jary &Julia Jary, 2000. *''cult''* in *Dictionary*: Sociology. Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers

In other words, we can say that a cult is created by a religious group that is often lead by a single charismatic person and viewed as a spiritually innovative group. A cult is simply a new religious movement in its own way for the benefit of its own group. Any religious group which is an off-shoot of other religion can be considered a cult, for instance, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Cult is nothing but a new religious movement or an alternative religious group. For a better understanding of the term, we will discuss various ancient cults of India.

Stop and Read:

- Reverence: a deep respect for someone or something.

- Transient: not lasting for a long time.

- Deviation: an action, behaviour, or condition that is different from what is usual or expected

- Transitional: changing from one state to another

- Mainstream: the ideas, attitudes, or activities that are shared by most people and regarded as normal or conventional.

- Charismatic: exercising a compelling charm which inspires devotion in others.

9.4 RELIGIOUS SECTS

The word "sect" comes from the Latin word "secta'' which means "manner, mode," or "school of thought." It came into the English language through the Old French "secte'' which is used to refer to a distinctive system of beliefs[4].

---

[4] http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/religion-miscellaneous/difference-between-sect-and-cult/

A sect is "a religious group with beliefs that make it different from a larger or more established religion it has separated from and a sect is also a small group of people who share a particular set of political beliefs[5]. The word sect is significant in both political sociology and the study of social movements. We can consider that the idea of sect deals with social movements from the perspective of religiosity and religious organisations. "A sect is a small religious group that is an offshoot of an established religion. It holds most beliefs in common with its religion of origin but has a number of novel concepts which differentiate them from that religion"[6]. Now we will try to understand what sociological dictionary defines about sect: "a religious, or sometimes a secular, social movement characterized by its opposition to and rejection of orthodox religious and/or secular institutions, doctrines and practices"[7]. Let us analyse the above-mentioned sentence with an example. Churches were characterised as conservative, most orthodox, hierarchic tradition- which have the highest degree of organisation. On the contrary, sects are a perfectionist, radical, egalitarian, manifesting a low degree of organisation and institutionalisation. Many sectarian movements show some degree of conflict with both the religious and secular social world. Sect seems to find a middle path between the orthodox religiosity and secular world. Thus, many sects have its basis in national or political identity as well as in religion.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is religious cult?

---

[5] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sect
[6] http://www.religioustolerance.org/cults.htm
[7] David Jary &Julia Jary, 2000. ''*sect*'' in *Dictionary*: Sociology. Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers

----

----

2. Define a sect.

Stop and Read:

- Orthodox: following or conforming to the traditional or generally accepted rules or beliefs of a religion, philosophy or practice.

- Doctrines: a belief or set of beliefs held and taught by a church, political party or another group.

- Hierarchic: arranged in order of rank

- Radical: very new and different from what is traditional or ordinary. Or having extreme political or social views that are not shared by most people.

- Egalitarian: aiming for equal status. Or believing in or on the principle that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities.

- Quasi: being partly or almost

9.5 DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CULTS AND SECTS

Let us discuss a few points of difference between cults and sects:

1. "A sect is a small group that separated from a larger group to follow a different doctrine while a cult is a small, quasi-religious group with very unorthodox ideologies, rituals, and practices.

2. A sect is a branch of a certain religious organization while a cult is a totally different organization.

3. Members of a sect live in mainstream society while members of a cult usually live in isolation away from their families who are non-believers.

4. Cult members are usually completely obedient and dependent upon their leader while members of a sect are not.

5. Some sects have been widely accepted and recognized by other religious groups and most governments while most cults are not"[8]

Let us move and discuss how Emile Durkheim defines primitive cult sociologically. After analysing primitive cult, you will be able to understand the concept of cult more clearly.

9.6 DESCRIPTION OF PRIMITIVE CULT BY EMILE DURKHEIM

The classical book *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) is a great work done by prominent sociologist Emile Durkheim, where he explained and described the most original religion from which modern religions have taken their shape. The form of primitive religion is simpler than others. Durkheim has analysed systematically the belief of primitive religion, where he found that primitive people are born in religion and they are the product of religious thought. The main argument of this book is that religion is something eminently social. Religious representation is the collective representation which is a collective reality. Rituals are the manner of acting through which a group of people show and maintain their collective mental states. Rituals are performed in a way that is divided into days, week, months, years etc.

---

[8] http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/religion-miscellaneous/difference-between-sect-and-cult/

He described the characteristic attitudes of a primitive cult which is classifying the general forms of rites or ritual. Every cult has two aspects, one is negative and other is positive. Both are closely associated; there is a strong connection between them and it is very necessary to distinguish them. Sacred things are always separated from profane things and religiously considered as superior in dignity to the profane things. So a group of totemic rites have the object of realization of this essential state of separation. All these rites merely prohibit certain actions or impose certain abstentions; they consist entirely of interdictions or "taboos". Therefore, Durkheim described this system as "negative cult" as it confines itself to forbidding certain ways. For example, certain foods (animals and vegetables) are sacred which are forbidden to profane persons, certain objects cannot be touched or even looked at; certain words or sounds cannot be uttered, and certain activities cannot be done. All these are prohibited when religious ceremonies are being practised. Consumption of forbidden food is believed to cause sickness or death. That is why Durkheim argued that religious life and profane life cannot exist at the same time or same place.

Negative cult not only confines itself to protecting sacred beings from contact but also it plays a role for the worshipper to modify his/her condition positively. Nobody can enter in a religious ceremony without first him/her submitting himself/herself to a sort of initiation which will lead the worshipper gradually into the sacred world. So the negative rites give the religious permission to achieve the positive ones. In an initiation ceremony, a worshipper submits himself/herself into various negative rites to create or develop his/her moral and religious ideologies through his sufferings (self-abnegation), the ultimate motive is to acquire sacred world. So, negative cults cannot develop without suffering. It is believed that suffering creates exceptional strength and it is the sign of breaking profane environment and attaching with the sacred world. Through these cults, we can understand what real asceticism is. So in order to have actual asceticism, it is essential to practise negative cult. Asceticism not

only represents religious norms but it is also a symbol of social and moral interest of human culture. Durkheim argued that religious asceticism is the source of all religions. Thus, religious forces are actually moral forces of a human being and rites are the external expression of religious belief. For him, religion is an expression of our collective consciousness. It is not only for Aborigines but also for all society, There is no society that does not have religion. Thus, he argued that religion is not imaginary, it is a very real expression of society itself.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Write two differences between cult and sect.

----

2. Distinguish between negative and positive cult as given by Durkheim.

--

9.7 CULTS OF ANCIENT INDIA

Historical evidence informs us that there were many cults which took birth from major religions of Ancient India and evolved in their own way. Few cults emerged as a result of the merger of two major religions, i.e. the mixer of tribal religion and developed Hindu religion or Hinduism and Buddhism. Maximum ancient cults of India strive to achieve the main aim, that is the ultimate reality, which is free from all the boundaries. And this aim leads to the path of suffering which we already

discussed in the theory given by Durkheim about the positive cult and negative cult. Let us move and study a few ancient cults of India, namely Sahajiya Buddhism, Sakti cult, Saiva cult.

9.7.1 Sahajiya Buddhism

Sahajiya Buddhism is an off-shoot of popular Buddhism. It is widely known as Tantric Buddhism. Evidence says that during the reign of Pala Dynasty in West-Bengal, Buddhism in tantric form was gaining popularity. Tantric texts were written in the different Buddhist monasteries which were established in Bengal. The authors of Sahajiya Buddhistic songs and commentaries were mostly inhabitants of Bengal or adjoining areas. This Buddhist Sahajiya Cult reflected not only the Buddhistic tone and culture but it was essentially the esoteric yogic cult. Maximum esoteric cults which were developing in ancient India within Hinduism or Buddhism. Thus, all kinds of esoteric *Sadhana* of India have a common background. The main aim of all esoteric school is to achieve the ultimate truth or reality. Again, to achieve the ultimate goal the process has two main aspects. These two aspects are suffering and bondage. The secret of all esoteric *sadhana* is to destroy all the negativity which can be done by suffering and to attain the non-duality. The ultimate state of non-duality is called in the various esoteric system as the state of *advaya, maithuna, Sahaja Samadhi.* Thus, the name of this cult is Sahajiya Buddhism (Das Gupta 1962).

9.7.2 Sakti Cult

"Saktism is essentially a medieval religion, but it is a direct off-shoot of the primitive Mother Goddess cult. N.N. Bhattacharya explained from the period of food gathering to food producing, the female principle was the predominant cult with the mysterious force of birth and generation. Thus, Mother Goddess was the symbol of generation, the actual producer of life, also the mother of the human race (Bhattacharya, 1999). In primitive society, women are considered more powerful than men

because a woman can produce life out of her body and the male had no significance at all because they were not recognized as fathers. Thus, primitive people expressed their love for mothers through worshipping mother goddesses and in these matriarchal societies males were not recognized as fathers. But in the course of time when the contribution of the male in the process of generation became recognized, the male principle was eventually recognized as the counterpart of the female goddess. Thus, we have evidence of pre-Vedic Samkhya philosophy, according to this the production or creation results from the union of male (*Purusha)* and female (*Prakriti).* In this philosophy, the male principle has a place that is highly anomalous, inactive, subordinate and nothing but a passive counterpart. It may be because of the matriarchal society where is a father is an insignificant creator (Bhattacharya, 1974)**.** Later the concept of ardhanareshwar also developed.

"The cult of goddess was originally the Non-*Aryan* cult which was mingled with the *Aryan* beliefs in the later times" (Kumar, 1974: 29). So, later due to the influence of advance Hinduism or Vedanta the conception of *Purusha* or male principle was introduced in a dominating way. According to Aryan ideology, these goddesses started appearing as ideal daughters, wives (Sri Laxmi, Sita), sisters, and many more. In this period Goddesses got a predominant position. For instance, in the *Ramayana*, Sita is an ideal sacrificing wife of her husband Ram.

However, it may be noted that the Goddesses are depicted not only as creators (Shakti, Prakriti), but also destructor, "Durga the formidable, slayer of the Buffalo Demon (Mahisasura)" and "she is worshipped separately in each high caste house" (Nicholas, 1982). Many scholars agreed that almost all the local goddesses appear as the mother in various roles like creator, nurturer, protector, saviour, destructor and many more. Thus Preston (1980) said that Indian mother goddess is a beacon of hope and a source of renewal for her people.

9.7.3 Saiva Cult

"The God Siva has been worshipped in India not only for children but also for the fertility of soil" (Maity, 1989: 37). The origin of Saivism is a debatable topic; the roots of Saivism may be traced back to the pre-Vedic period in India. The main feature of Saivism is to worship the phallic symbol i.e. the *linga* which is symbolized in the form of cylindrical stones. "it is generally believed by scholars that from the earliest times Siva and his phallic symbol i.e. *linga* have been closely associated with the fertility cult and rituals in India" (Maity, 1989: 37). "In Bengal childless especially the barren women lie down on many temples of Siva for offspring" (Maity 1989: 38).

In Gupta age, there was a greater influence of Saktism on the Saiva religion as well as Vaishnavism. Many liturgical pieces of evidence and many discoveries of images of Ardhanarisvara and Hara-Parvati clearly indicate that the cult of Saktism and Saivism merged with each other and this process produced a new concept of Purusa and Prakriti. Thus, during Gupta and post-Gupta period in Mahabharata, the goddess started appearing indifferently as the wife of Vishnu and Siva. In Saivism, the marriage of Siva and Parvati, the peaceful householder's life, their children, and in Vaishnavism the conception of Sri-Lakshmi wife of Vishnu started becoming a popular theme of this period (Bhattacharya,1974).

The rituals of worshipping of these ancient cults are mostly self-sacrificing rituals. By doing self-sacrificing rituals devotees try to satisfy their female supreme deity or male supreme deity to fulfil their ultimate motive. We have many examples from various cults of keeping vratas (fasting), jumping on knife, hook-swinging practice and so on.

9.8 RELIGIOUS SECTS OF ANCIENT INDIA

India was home to various tribes and castes before the advent of the Aryans. These early tribes and castes were actual and original ancient inhabitants of India so they are real ancestors of Indian people. These tribes were defined as 'Astro-Asiatic' by anthropologists and including India, entire south Asia is the main homeland of these people. Socio-cultural or socio-religious affairs like marriage customs, ritual process, folk stories, folk festivals, can be seen among these tribes from ancient times. (Majumdar, 1352 BS). On the other hand, the ideologies of Aryans were growing side by side. Thus, the Aryans always tried to conquest further as they were advanced from those of the local inhabitants. The main motive of Aryan was to conquest those regions which were occupied by the indigenous tribes and castes; to spread their religious ideologies (Pai, 1981). The religiosity of indigenous tribes was very close to nature, they were nature worshippers, animal worshippers, they used to worship snakes, demons, they were barbaric and could consume any fleshes of dead animals.

On the other hand, the Aryans considered their religious ideologies civilised and advanced from tribal religions. So, the Aryans always tried to control local indigenous people. Interestingly, the tribal people also started compromising with the culture and religious belief of advanced Aryans. This process created a new alternative form of religion. The ritual and superstitions of the older form are absorbed with the advanced form (Pai, 1981). Thus, "World history says, whenever strong or civilised group assimilate with the weak or underdeveloped group; it is the fact

that later one gets blended with the former one. Old language, religion, customs are never vanished in fact all these express in a new way" (Majumdar, 1352 BS: 15). However, the culture of non-Aryans did not vanish completely during the strong influencing era of Aryanisation. Their languages, customs, cultures still have an important role in today's life of indigenous people of India (Mitra, 2001). It is worth saying that culture dies hard which many scholars demonstrated through their research works. Thus, the process of socio-religious assimilation creates new forms of religious sects. Many scholars argued that Hindu society is a mixture of ancient Austric people and Aryan people who have various religious sects and cults.

9.8.1 Vaishnavism and its Followers
Vaishnavism is a new reform or developed sect which is an off-shoot of old Hinduism. The followers of this new sect worship Vishnu and considered him as the supreme god. According to this religion, Bhakti played an important part which is identified with Bhagavata (Pai, 1981).

9.8.2 The Sect of Radha Krishna
This Radha Krishna sect is another off-shoot of Vaishnavism. This devotion represents one of most intimate relation which shows the intense love as a symbol of the relationship between man and god. The story of Radha's love towards Krishna which depicts in a poetic way in Bhagavata is nothing but the depiction of man to god relationship (Pai, 1981).

9.8.3 Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism
We have already discussed these three religions of India in Unit 7. These three religions are also religious sects which were created from Hinduism by their founders as a newly developed and reform religious movements against Hinduism (Pai, 1981).

So, we have understood how society transforms or evolves with time from the religious perspective. We have studied how the process of socio-religious assimilation creates new reform religions which are nothing but religious sects.

9.9 SUMMING UP

To sum up, religious cults and sects are nothing but various divisions of major religions. The major difference of cult and sect is that sect represents a more radical break with the rejection of teaching and beliefs of a major religion. In contrast, cults are more like off-shoots of an established major faith of religion. Cult aims to meet the need of sacred experience to achieve spiritual freedom. However, cults and sects are a mixture of beliefs, traditions, ideas, ritual practices from several religions.

Glossary:

Abstentions: the act of choosing not to do.

Taboos: something that is not acceptable

Initiation: a ceremony or a series of actions that makes a person a member of a group or organisation.

Asceticism: relating to or having a strict and simple way of living that avoids physical pleasure

Esoteric: only taught to or understood by members of a special group

Sadhana: disciplined and dedicated practice or learning, especially in religion

indigenous: existing naturally in a particular region or environment

---

Assimilation: to adopt the ways of another culture or to fully become part of a different society.

9.10 QUESTIONS

1. What is religious cult? Explain with examples.
2. What is religious Sect? Explain with examples.
3. Examine how religious cults are different from religious sects.
4. Analyse how religious cults and sects take birth from established religion and evolve?

9.11 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

Bhattacharyya, N. (1974). *History of Sakta Religion.* Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.

Bhattacharyya, N. (1999). *The Indian Mother Goddess.* Manohar Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi.

Dasgupta, S. (1962). *Obscure Religious Cults.* Inland Printing works, Calcutta.

Durkheim, E. (2001). *The Elementary forms of Religious Life.* Oxford University Press, Oxford

Kumar, P. (1974). *Sakti Cult in Ancient India: With Special Reference to the Puranic Literature.* Bharatiya Publishing House, Varanasi.

Maity, P.K. (1989). *Human Fertility Cults and Rituals of Bengal: A Comparative Study.* Abhinav Publications, New Delhi.

Majumdar, R.C. (1352 BS). *Bangla Desher Itihas.* Calcutta University, Calcutta.

Mitra, A. (2001). *Rarher Sanskriti O Dharma Thakur.* Gupta Press, Calcutta.

Nagar, S.L. (1995). *Surya and Sun Cult (In Indian Art, Culture, literature And thought).* Aryan Books International, New Delhi.

Nicholas, R.W. (1982). The Village Mother in Bengal. In Preston, J.J., editor, *Mother Worship: Theme and Variations,* pages 192-209. The University of North Carolina Press, USA.

Oman, J.C. (1991). *Cults, Customs and Superstitions of India.* Indian Bibliographies Bureau, Delhi.

Pai, D.A. (1981). *Religious Sects in Ancient India.* Eastern Books Linkers, New Delhi.

Preston, J.J. (1980). *Cult Of The Goddess: Social and Religious Change in a Hindu Temple.* Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., Delhi.

.

****

UNIT 10: GODMAN AND GODWOMAN

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.1 Introduction

10.2 Objectives

10.3 Godman and Godwoman

    10.3.1 Who are Godman and Godwoman?

    10.3.2 Some Infamous Godman and Godwoman of India

10.4 Persisting Trend of Godman and Godwoman in 21st Century India

    10.4.1 Religious Sanction

    10.4.2 Vote Bank Politics

10.5 Obsession with Godman and Godwoman

    10.5.1 Reasons for the Obsession

    10.5.2 Need to End the Obsession

10.6 Summing Up

10.7 Questions

10.8 Recommended Readings and References

10.1 INTRODUCTION

India is well known for many different things such as wide varieties of food, co-existence of different communities, yoga etc. Along with these, India is also famous for spiritualism and the Guru-Shishya (Teacher-Disciple) relationship. Historically, India has been a land of spiritual saints and Gurus[9] who helped in bringing about social changes in the society. Gautama Buddha, Guru Nanak and Sai Baba are some of the spiritual Gurus who advocated the notions of equality, humanity, service, goodness, fraternal love, harmony etc. Through such notions, they tried to break the myths of the society and helped in building a unified nation with its cultural and religious plurality.

---

[9] Here the term Gurus refers to both men and women.

All these Gurus did not have any greed for worldly and material things and led a simple life. They preached about forgiveness, love, selfless service, contentment, social justice, inner peace devotion, etc and also practised it by incorporating such virtues in their lifestyle and behaviour. Therefore, they were revered by the people. Whenever people faced any difficulty, they used to rush to the Gurus to seek help. They acted as the guide in seeking Enlightenment and knowledge about the Supreme Authority.

However, in modern India, the path towards spirituality and the personality of the Gurus have changed. There has been the rise of the trend of Godman and Godwoman who are misleading people for generations, for their selfish gains. In this unit, we will learn about such Godman and Godwoman of India.

10.2 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- Identify the Godman and Godwoman in society;
- Discuss some infamous Godman and Godwoman of India;
- Analyse the factors towards the persisting trend of Godman and Godwoman in 21st century India;
- Discuss and analyse the reasons for the obsession with Godman and Godwoman;
- Analyse the need to end the obsession.

10.3 GODMAN AND GODWOMAN

At some point in life, we all have met someone who has told us about their positive experience with a '*Baba*' (Godman) or '*Mataji*' (Godwoman). There are innumerable instances where people have thanked these Godmen and Godwomen for changing their lives for the better. However, it is interesting to see that most people seek the help of a Godman and Godwoman not for spiritual purposes but to gain material

and worldly things such as success in businesses or getting promoted, winning in elections, curing of an ailment, etc.

Moreover, the personalities of these Gurus are totally different from the Gurus of earlier times. Considering the Gurus of earlier times, it is believed and expected that these Godmen and Godwomen are concerned with the best interest of all people and that they would never manipulate the truth for their selfish interests and gains. But this is not so. These Godmen and Godwomen are in no way similar to the Gurus of earlier times, neither in their preaching and deeds nor in their lifestyle.

Stop and Read:

Guru Nanak founded Sikhism in the 15th century and stressed upon the faith on one creator, the unity of all humankind, selfless service and social justice and Gautama Buddha preached that a man full of desires can never get rid of sorrow (RANA, 2017)

Therefore, the question that comes to our mind is that who are these people that are called as Godmen and Godwomen and what makes them different from the Gurus of earlier times? This will be discussed in the next section.

10.3.1 Who are Godman and Godwoman?

Self-proclaimed and self-styled Gurus are termed as the Godmen and Godwomen. They proclaim to be having the status of Godman (*avatar* of God) and possess the mystic knowledge of spirituality which can solve any problem of devotees instantly if the devotee follows the Godman with true heart (Rana, 2017). They consider themselves to be the agents of God through which God makes contact with the common people and

being endowed with very special and magical powers. Therefore, they portray themselves as someone who cannot be questioned and challenged by common people or their devotees and thus possessing absolute authority.

They appeal to people of their power of providing instant relief from their sufferings and in case they fail to do so, it is not because of their inability but because of the devotee's bad Karma. Seeing them with suspicion or doubting them is seen as the devotee's lack of faith, doubting God and way too much dependency on intellect.

Hence, these Godman and Godwoman make people believe that the way towards spirituality and getting respite from their sufferings is their openness and acceptance of Guru's teachings, preaching and his/her behaviour even if it is illogical, cruel and immoral.

10.3.2 Some Infamous Godmen and Godwomen of India

In this section, we will discuss some Godmen and Godwomen of India who gained widespread popularity but for all the wrong reasons. It is very ironic that these Godmen and Godwomen who claims to save people from their distress, actually could not save themselves from the judiciary.

- **Asaram Bapu**- He is a Hindu self-styled Godman and is being worshipped by many as a deity for his magical healing powers. He gathered media attention in 2008 when two boys went missing from his residential school in Motera. Two days later, their mutilated bodies were recovered from the Sabarmati river near the Asaram Bapu's ashram and he, along with his son, and disciples were accused of killing the boys as a part of a black magic ritual. Later, Asaram Bapu and his son were accused of rape and molestation by several women. Both of them have been convicted by the judiciary and are now serving their sentence.
- **Sant Rampal**- He is another self-styled Hindu Godman who claimed to be a spiritual successor and a reincarnation of Kabir (the Hindu Saint).
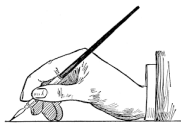
He is the founder of the Satlok Ashram in Haryana. He was charged with murder after a clash with Arya Samaj, that resulted in the death of an Arya Samaj follower. He was released on bail in 2008 and in 2014, the court ordered his arrest due to his repeated failure to appear in the court. However, approximately fifteen thousand of his followers gathered around the Satlok Ashram to prevent his arrest. After violent clashes between his followers and paramilitary forces for several days, he was finally arrested and put behind bars.

- **Radhe Maa**- She is a self-proclaimed Godwoman and it is believed by her followers that she acquired spirituality at a very young age. Few of her followers criticised her when a picture of her wearing mini-skirt and a video of her dancing to a Bollywood track was circulated. She was accused by a woman for encouraging her in-laws to demand dowry and forcefully making her work in the ashram where she was physically abused. The woman filed a case against Radhe Maa.

- **Nirmal Baba**- He is another self-styled Godman who offers an instant solution to the suffering of people. He has a show titled 'Nirmal Darbar' where he publicly meets his followers and addresses their problems. He was accused of fraud.

- **Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh**- He is self-styled Godman who is also seen acting, directing and producing films. He is the founder of the organisation called Dera Sacha Sauda. He was accused of rape by many women who were his followers once and in 2017, he was convicted by the CBI court. His conviction made many other women speak up about their ordeal. His conviction also led to widespread violence by his DSS members that resulted in the death of many.

These are few of the infamous Godmen and Godwoman of India. The list is long. The similarities between the above self-proclaim Godmen and Godwoman are that all of them are criminals in the eyes of the law and they possess amass wealth. However, in spite of the allegations and their conviction by the court, their followers find it very difficult to accept it as true and most of

them still worship them. Therefore, there is a persisting trend of the Godman and Godwoman even in 21st century India.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who can be called as a Godman and Godwoman?

----

2. Name some infamous Godman and Godwoman of India.

----

3. Fill up the blank:

Seeing the Godman and Godwoman with suspicion or doubting them is seen as _____

10.4 PERSISTING TREND OF GODMAN AND GODWOMAN IN 21ST CENTURY INDIA

As we have seen in the previous discussion that the Godmen and Godwomen are accepted completely and unquestionably without any suspicion by the different sections of the society. We have also discussed that despite the conviction of the Godmen and Godwomen on criminal charges, their followers and devotees still persistently worship them. The devotees and followers of these Godmen and Godwomen live in denial and in most of the cases, those who make allegations are advised to keep silent or are threatened. The same was the case with many women who accused Gurmeet Ram Rahim with allegations of rape.

Moreover, there has been a rise in this trend of Godman and Godwoman even in 21st century India. It is interesting because, in an era where India is achieving great heights in terms of science and technology and leading a path towards modernization, a majority of the section of society have blind faith on these self-styled Godman and Godwoman. Hence, they also have a firm hold on the lives of the people. Thus, we will discuss the factors that help in the persisting trend of Godman and Godwoman.

10.4.1 Religious Sanction

Religion holds a very important place in the lives of Indian people. Since the time of childhood, an individual is taught about the teachings, values and norms of their religion due to which almost every action of an individual is taken keeping in mind that it aligns with their religious values and norms. Moreover, considering the history of religious Gurus such as Jesus, Muhammad, and Vivekananda etc. who gave strength and assistance to the people in times of great hardship and worked for the welfare of the people at the cost of their personal lives, makes people to accept the self-styled Godman and Godwoman without a hint of doubt. Added to this, since these Godmen and Godwomen thrive in the name of God, people believe that challenging or questioning their authority would mean challenging their religion and angering God. Furthermore, the Godmen and Godwomen get the backing for their claims and authority from the religious texts. For instance, the Vedas talk about how God must be pleased with tributes and sacrifices in order to meet their aspirations and desires; and since these Godmen and Godwomen are representatives of God, they must also be pleased by different means. Mostly, it is these Godmen and Godwomen who dictates what must be done to please them. Mary Garden (2003) has talked about her experience of travelling to India for spiritual enlightenment with Indian Godman. She mentioned that how she was made the consort and later the chief consort of a certain Swamiji within weeks of her visiting to the ashram and that how she did not feel the need to question him as the Swamiji told her that it wasn't

sex but a ritual to raise her 'kundalini'. She was convinced as she has learnt about a tradition in Hinduism where there is a special place for coupling by spiritual partners to form a mystic union.

<div style="border:1px solid black; padding:10px;">

Stop and Read:

In July 2018, the news that sent shivers down the spine to the entire nation was the death of 11 members of a family in Burari, Delhi. The members included the youngest kids to the aged elderly. The investigation team doubts the involvement of a 'Baba' or Godman on the basis of a diary that was recovered from the crime scene. The steps and the rituals for committing the mass suicide were written down in the diary and the motive behind it was to attain salvation.

</div>

Therefore, these Godmen and Godwomen prey on the follower's beliefs and faith in religion and God. They are aware that even if someone tries to challenge their authority, there are a million others who would discard their claims and the trust on the Godman and Godwoman would remain intact. This is from where these self-styled Godmen and Godwomen draw their power and control over the masses.

10.4.2 Vote bank Politics

Vote bank politics refers to the phenomenon where a loyal group of voters from a single community/caste/village/religion/group supports a certain candidate or political formation in democratic elections.

Coupled with the religious sanction, this vote bank politics by the political leaders contribute to the persisting trend of Godman and Godwoman in India. In order to increase their supporters, many

influential political leaders associate themselves with Godman and Godwoman.

Nita Mathur (2015) mentions that the ashrams of these Godmen and Godwomen are well equipped with technology, gadgets and personnel with the motive of increasing their followers and devotees while maintaining the existing ones. Moreover, they organise rituals or 'havan' which they claim is for the benefit and welfare of all people in the society. Therefore, through such strategies, these Godmen, Godwomen and their team is able to attract huge fan following and devotees. And this makes the political leaders join hands with them so that their devotees and followers could be turned into a vote bank. Moreover, when the actor-turned-politicians with massive fan following and popularity, seek the blessings of such self-styled Godman and Godwoman, the masses are automatically drawn towards these 'Baba' and 'Mataji'. Political parties and leaders that are responsible for the growth and development of a country get involved in promoting blind faith and faith in these self-styled Godmen and Godwomen, the future of a country seems to be dark; and scientific, rational thinking takes a backseat.

> **Stop and Read:**
>
> In 1951, Jawaharlal Nehru refused to be a part of the inauguration ceremony of the Somnath Temple and opposed President Rajendra Prasad's decision to inaugurate it. His objection was criticised by many and as Gupta says (2014) it would be misleading to interpret his actions to be of an atheist. It was indeed a warning not to involve the State too intimately with religion. However, his daughter, Indira Gandhi, mostly started an election campaign by first visiting a temple.

The support of the political leaders and parties makes the self-styled Godman and Godwoman powerful. If they would have refrained from associating themselves with Godman and Godwoman; the power, control and influence of these Godmen and Godwomen over the common people would have been minimal. Moreover, the knowledge that even the State is reluctant and petrified to interfere in religious affairs, boosts the confidence of these self-styled Godmen and Godwomen.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS
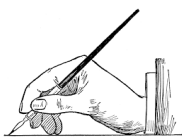
1. What are the two factors that help in the persisting trend of Godman and Godwoman in India?

----

2. What is vote bank politics?

10.5 OBSESSION WITH GODMAN AND GODWOMAN

In the previous section, we have discussed how the trend of self-styled Godman and Godwoman still persists in the 21st century. Another point to ponder is that while India is achieving huge success in terms of science and technology, on the other hand, it is grappling with its self-styled Godmen and Godwomen. Interestingly, the people are not even conscious that they are grappling with it; they think they are lucky enough to experience such divine people in close proximity who are endowed with special magical powers to provide instant relief to their

hardships. Moreover, as we have earlier discussed how the followers blindly trust these Godmen and Godwomen even if they are convicted of crimes. Such is the extent of the obsession of people with the Godman and Godwoman. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the reason(s) behind the obsession.

10.5.1 Reasons for the Obsession

It is well known that people of India bows down and surrenders before their religion and God. The self-styled Godman and Godwoman take advantage of this and finds it very convenient to convince people of their divine personality. Moreover, these Godman and Godwoman claim to be possessing special magical powers that can solve any problem of life and instantly. Once the people are convinced, they resort to the Godman and Godwoman whenever they face any hardships in their life or intend to prosper and achieve success. Thus, and as Nita Mathur (2015) argues, the people are drawn to the Godman and Godwoman since they offer them an opportunity to escape from their mundane activities and relief from the stress they are frequently subjected to.

Furthermore, the modernity brought about by globalisation and other significant changes in social life, also brought with it the problems of this modernity such as competition, job insecurity, loneliness, exposure to different cultures and life situations creating confusion in the choice of path to be taken in dealing with them, poverty, unemployment, corruption, etc. People find it very difficult to cope with such problems and as a result, they seek solace in the fascinating maxims of the Godman and Godwoman. People love to know about their future and want assurance of a bright and successful future, and they are assured of this by the Godman and Godwoman provided the people follow them unquestionably and do as they are directed. Therefore, the fear of the uncertain and unknown makes people seek recourse in Godman and Godwoman.

Yet another reason for the obsession is the loosening grip of social institutions such as the family in developing a sense of belongingness and integration and providing the necessary support and guidance to an individual. This is also an outcome of modernity that leads to the erosion of traditional values and social institutions which are being replaced by aspirations and competition for materialistic things which creates identity crisis and mental stress. In the absence of proper guidance and affection in crucial times, the individuals are vulnerable to the influence of the Godman and Godwoman who offers to provide them with necessary assistance.

Another factor that makes people obsess with Godman and Godwoman is their portrayal in the media. A range of TV soaps, serials and movies are centred on the magical and mystical powers of Godman and Godwoman and how they make miracles happen. This leaves a huge impact on the lives of common people who are already struggling with hardships.

10.5.2 Need to End the Obsession

The constant need of the people of assuring them of relief from their anxiety, problems and fear of the uncertain creates an opportunity for the self-styled Godman and Godwoman to take maximum advantage of their situations. The devotees are constantly reminded that they are lucky to

be under the spiritual guidance of the Godman and Godwoman. It is their good 'karma' because of which they could come in contact with the Godman and Godwoman. Eventually, the people become way too much dependent on these Godmen and Godwomen's advice for their physical, financial and emotional wellbeing. As rightly pointed out by Nita Mathur (2015), those who are rich and can afford, these Godman and Godwoman are made to stay at their residences so that they are accessible or sponsors their public meetings and patronise them through various means; while others go to them and offer whatever is within their budget.

Thus, the Godmen and Godwomen amass cash in the name of religion, God and the personal fears of the gullible people. Therefore, it is high time that this obsession with Godman and Godwoman is ended. Education alone will not be helpful and enough in ending the obsession as even the well-educated and rational people comprises the devotees of such self-styled Godman and Godwoman. There have to be significant changes in the social consciousness of people. And this will result when the political leaders will refrain from associating with and patronising these Godman and Godwoman for their selfish interests. Added to this, the media has to be responsible and avoid promoting and reinforcing irrationality and superstitions. Most importantly, the people have to realise that life has ups and downs and believe in themselves to battle out life's struggles rather than waiting for a miracle to occur.

Nita Mathur (2015) puts rightly Dipankar Gupta (2014) in his words, to stop the rise of Godman and Godwoman, the society must graduate to a society which is characterised by "Dignity of the individual; adherence to universalistic norms; elevation of individual achievement over privileges or deprivileges of birth; accountability in public life."

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS
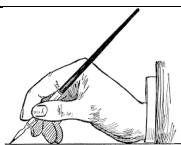
1. Why it is important to understand the reasons behind the people's obsession with Godman and Godwoman?

----

2. Is education enough to end this obsession?

10.6 SUMMING UP

- The history of spiritual and charismatic Gurus makes people blindly follow the self-styled Godman and Godwoman.

- The self-styled and self-proclaimed Godman and Godwoman promise instant remedy for people's problems.

- This trend of Godman and Godwoman still persists in 21st century India as they thrive in the name of God and religion.

- Vote bank politics and patronage by political leaders and parties make the Godman and Godwoman powerful.

- The assurance of quick-fix solutions by the Godman and Godwoman for people's hardship makes people obsessed with them.

- The obsession makes people lose their rational thinking capacity and dependent on the Godman and Godwoman and therefore it is important to end the obsession.

10.7 QUESTIONS

Short Questions

1. Define Godman and Godwoman.
2. What is vote bank politics?
3. What makes the Godman and Godwoman powerful?
4. Why do people follow the Godman and Godwoman unquestionably and blindly?

Essay type

1. Discuss a few infamous Godman and Godwoman of India and the charges levelled against them
2. Explain the factors responsible for the persisting trend of Godman and Godwoman in 21st Century India.
3. Discuss the reasons for people's obsession with Godman and Godwoman.
4. Do you think there is a need to end the people's obsession with Godman and Godwoman? If yes, how it can be done?

10.8 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

Gupta, D. (2014). India's Godman Syndrome. *Hindu*, 26 November.

Garden, M. (2003). The Trouble with Gurus, *Australian Financial Review*.

Mathur, N. (2015). Gods, God-men and the Gullible, *Economic and Political Weekly*.

Rana, M. (2017). Trend of Spiritual Godman in India: Implications for the modern Indian society, *International Journal of Academic Research and Development*, Vol 2.

www.thehindu.com/opinion/brokering-deals-with-god/article

****

UNIT 11: ASPECTS OF RELIGION IN INDIA: SACRED KNOWLEDGE, SACRED SPACE AND SACRED PERSONA

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 INTRODUCTION

The concepts of sacred and profane are central to Emile Durkheim's theory of religion. The 'sacred' was identified by Durkheim as the most fundamental religious idea or phenomena (Madan, 1991). According to him, religion is constituted of two fundamental categories- beliefs and rites. Classification of all things, whether real or spiritual, into a dichotomy of sacred and profane is a common feature of all belief systems. Durkheim says that the sacred is ideal and it transcends everyday existence. It is extraordinary, fear-inducing, something that is seen with awe; and which can be potentially dangerous. Something that is considered sacred is kept separate from the things that are considered profane. Profane constitutes those ideas, practices, persons and things

which are mundane and considered ordinary. It is believed that the sacred or the holy must be kept separated from the profane or unholy to avoid subordination and contamination of the sacred. Therefore, there are several prohibitions and taboos to ascertain this separation. For instance, in his study among the Australian aborigines, Durkheim mentioned that there is a prohibition of physical contact with the sacred totem. It included the prohibition on eating and watching the totem; and talking about it in daily, profane circumstances.

All religions have the notion of sacred inherent in them. There are different dimensions of sacred, such as sacred knowledge, sacred space and sacred persona, in all religions. However, it is not feasible here to talk about these dimensions of all religions of India. Therefore, to understand the concepts of sacred knowledge, sacred space and sacred persona; we will deal with two religions at a time for each concept.

11.2 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the concept of sacred and profane in religion;
- Discuss and analyse sacred knowledge of Hinduism and Islam;
- Discuss and understand the concept of sacred space in relation to Judaism and Hinduism;
- Discuss and analyse the concept of sacred persona in relation to Islam and Hindu temple priests.

11.3 UNDERSTANDING SACRED KNOWLEDGE OF RELIGIONS

According to T.N. Madan (1991), sacred knowledge means knowledge that may be considered sacred in itself by virtue of its source, form and content. It is essentially and unquestionably sacred for the believers of a religion. It is the, Madan argues, 'word of God' which is said to be

brought to the mankind by chosen messengers to convey God's divine commandments for human obedience so that the social order and moral justice prevails. For instance, the Quran and the Vedas constitute the body of sacred knowledge for Muslims and Hindus.

It is the sacred knowledge that guides people in their way of life. The beliefs, practices, morals, values, rituals and norms of society; all stem from the sacred knowledge of religions. It is inculcated into us from the time we are born, through the process of socialisation. People adhere to it and revere it as it is considered to be God's commandment to lead a life. Therefore, people are very particular about their observance of values, norms, rituals etc.

Although not every member belonging to a religion knows about the entire sacred knowledge; they seem to have at least some idea of it. This is because and as mentioned earlier; it is transmitted to generations after generations through socialisation.

Stop and Read:

Based on his study among the Australian aborigines, Durkheim argued that totemism is the elementary form of religion. The 'totem' is originally an animal or plant, that later assumes symbolic significance for a group. It is a sacred object which is regarded with veneration and around which various ritual activities revolve.

In this section, we will discuss the concept of sacred knowledge in relation to Hinduism and Islam

11.3.1 Hinduism

Hinduism began in India thousands of years ago and is considered to be one of the oldest religion in the world. It is a heterogeneous religion as

there are variations in the rituals, practices and the worship of deities, across different regions and communities. However, there are central tenets that unify it as one religion. These tenets or concepts are widely believed and are considered as sacred knowledge by the community of believers. The sources of the knowledge are Vedas, Upanishads, Epics, Samhita, Smritis, the Puranas etc. Let us discuss the three most important tenets and concepts of Hinduism in detail as suggested by K.S. Mathur (1964).

- **The theory of transmigration of souls (*punarjanama or avagamana*)-** It is believed that a Hindu person's life has a meaning only when it is understood in terms of a chain of births extending from the past into the future. Thus, there is a belief in the immortality of the soul. It is eternal and cannot be cut by weapons or burnt by fire nor drenched by water and therefore it does not experience any pain or pleasure (K.S. Mathur, 1964). Each soul takes a number of incarnations.

- **The doctrine of deserts (The Law of *Karma*)-** It is the law of the universe that controls the births and deaths. It is through this law that the births of souls in the form of animals, birds, insects or human beings are explained. The basis of this doctrine is the belief that all action has its reactions and the kind of reaction is determined by the kind of action. The theory of transmigration of souls is governed by the law of karma. Both the concepts taken together implies to the notion that whatever an individual experiences in her/his life, whether it is pain, misery, pleasure, wealth, capacities etc., are the result of the individual's deeds in earlier existences, good or bad. Thus, it is popularly believed that good karma leads to spiritual merit or *punya*, while the outcomes of bad karma are the accumulation of sin or *paap*.

- **Hindu scheme of values (*Dharma*)-** As suggested by K.S. Mathur (1964), *dharma* is a synonym for 'righteousness, goodness, virtue' and is an attribute of 'all that is true, all that is

austere and pure, and all that has divine beauty and virtue'(*satyam, shivam, sundaram*). The *karma* theory explains that the way towards spiritual merit and its worldly rewards of prosperity and well-being is governed by dharma. These rewards include good thoughts, knowledge, conduct and behaviour. There are **three broad categories** of the **principles of dharma**.

➢ The first category consists of the moral principles that an individual must follow in order to have a healthy life in the community. It serves as a platform for the individual to attain spiritual merit or punya. For example- the Hindu way of greeting elders.

➢ The second category consists of the rules of behaviour and rites. The observance of such rules leads to the moral advancement of the individual. It involves the phenomena of alms-giving to Brahmins, mendicants, temples and the needy, construction of temples, cowsheds etc.

➢ The third category of rules is considered to be essentially important for a person to follow. These are concerned with the prohibitions or what a person must not do. These prohibitions are based on the ideas of purity and pollution that have a ritual sanction. It involves rules regarding, for instance, marriage, food sharing and social interaction between different caste groups. Violation of these rules is considered to be polluting the individual and might result in the individual's expulsion from the caste group.

11.3.2 Islam

The Muslims derive their sacred knowledge from the holy text, Quran. It is the pure Divine Word that proceeded through the Prophet's heart. The meaning of the word 'Quran' is 'recitation' (Rahman, 1979) and is considered to be the Word of God (*Kalam Allah*) by the Muslim community. Primarily, it focuses on the religious and moral principles.

Its major emphasis is on monotheism and social justice. The moral principles are believed to be God's command and man must submit to it and also implement it in their life, and this implementation is considered the service to God *(ibada)*.

The Quran's aim is the man and his betterment and therefore it seeks to stress heavily on the moral tensions that would bring out the creativity in the actions of human beings. The Quran also conspicuously establishes the absolute supremacy of God by focussing on the notion that man cannot make or unmake moral laws as per their wish and that the laws are already made for them. Moreover, the Quran condemns the loss of faith and hope in the mercy of God.

Rahman (2009) argues that The Quran tries to instill a belief in man by drawing his attention to certain obvious facts and turning these facts into "reminders" of God. Hence the Quran is also called as "The Reminder."

Therefore, Rahman (2009) argues that the main points in this tremendous thrust for reminding man are-

- that everything except God is contingent upon God, including the entirety of nature
- that God, with all His might and glory, is essentially the all-merciful God and
- that both these aspects necessarily entail a proper relationship between God and Man, a relationship of the served and the servant and consequently also a proper relationship between man and man

The Quran lays special significance on prayer as it prevents a man from evil and assists in overpowering difficulties and hardships. Added to this, the believers are required to observe one month's fast during the month of Ramadan. It involves complete abstention from eating and drinking

from dawn till sunset. One of the reasons for the practice is the belief that The Quran first revealed in the month of Ramadan.

Moreover, it is obligatory for the Muslims to go for pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their life. But this is applicable for people who can afford to go to Mecca and at the same time can provide for their families in their absence. The institution of pilgrimage, Rahman (1979) argues, is an important mechanism for fostering brotherhood among Muslims of diverse races and cultures.

The Quran emphasises on the value of *jihad*, which means the act of surrendering of people and their wealth in the path of God. The purpose of the value is to establish prayer, command good and forbid evil. There is a ban on consumption of alcohol and gambling as these are considered to be the work of the devil. In terms of marriage, unlimited polygamy is strictly regulated and the number of women that a man can marry was limited to four. However, this comes with a condition that if the husband feels that he would not be capable to do justice to several wives, he must marry only one woman.

Thus from the above discussion on sacred knowledge, it is evident that this acts as a guide of leading a life, for the community of believers. Moreover, the believers unquestionably follow it because the sources of such sacred knowledge are the sacred texts of religion.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What are sources of sacred knowledge of Hinduism and Islam?

----

2. Mention the three principles of dharma.

----

3. Fill up the blank:

The Quran emphasises on the value of *jihad*, which means_____

11.4 UNDERSTANDING SACRED SPACE OF RELIGIONS

Sacred Space is the philosophical extension of Durkheim's ideas on Sacred and Profane. Mircea Eliade a Romanian theorist and historian of religion, father of modern religious studies through his work "The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion" (1956) developed the idea of Sacred Space and Sacred Time.

Time and Space are ordinary (profane) until they are made special (sacred) by those who want or need to enter them. Rituals help religious people construct sacred space/time. Myths are the stories that explain why these times and spaces are important to create and inhabit for a particular religious group. Religion sets boundaries and orders human life; sacred space and time are among the most powerful ordering mechanisms that religion offers to human beings.

The most important function of sacred space is its ability to orient religious communities; to give them a meaningful space in which to dwell. Mircea Eliade, who made these categories famous, wrote, "they are of concern both to the philosopher and to anyone seeking to discover the possible dimensions of human existence."

Space becomes sacred once people start practising religious rituals in that space or directs the rituals towards it. Thereafter, that defined space is distinguished from other spaces. Sacred space encompasses a wide variety of places, ranging from places where religious rituals are practised such as a small space marked for worship at home; to places that are specifically constructed for religious purposes such as temples, churches; to places that are religiously interpreted such as mountains or rivers.

Moreover, few places are perceived to be sacred due to the belief that God communicated to humans from there and thus it was preserved as sacred by the human agency, while there are some places that are considered as sacred due to the occurrence of significant religious events. For instance, Jerusalem has been a holy place for Muslims and established its sanctity due to the journey of the Prophet Muhammad.

A sacred space is a place where the camouflage between humans and the transcendent, i.e. the God, is thin and it facilitates communication between heaven and earth. Thus, they are places of purity because without purity people will not be able to come in contact with God. Moreover, it is believed that being present in a sacred space reduces the imperfections, shortcomings and the messiness of life. Let us understand the concept in relation to a few religions.

11.4.1 Jewish Concept of Sacred Space

According to Cohn (1981), Jews identified themselves as being the mountain people. They have a concept known as 'vertical sacredness', which means viewing the world as holier the more an individual was closer to the mountains. Thus they have the concept of sacred mountains such as Mts. Zion and Sinai. It is believed that the sites touched by God and especially the mountains, indicated the Divineness of nature. Mt. Zion is the home of the eternal God and is itself eternal (Cohn, 1981).

Cohn (1981) argues that **Mt. Sinai is sacred for three reasons.** They are-

➢ It was seen as the *Axis Mundi* within the Pentateuch (the Books of Moses)—a link between Heaven and Earth;

➢ It was seen as the peripheral pivot (the furthest point to which Jews travel);

➢ It was seen as symbolizing primal time, or the beginning of Israel.

Interestingly, the mountains were also used as a metaphor for female fertility and female body, as there are references made on the Bible regarding the illegitimate fertility rites on the top of hills.

However, all the above constituted the sacred space of the Jews before the building of the temple. The corresponding effect of the building of the temples was that it replaced the mountains as the holy place for the Jews. Therefore, the centre of Judaism was in the temple and no longer dwelt in the mountains. Simmins (2008) argues that the Bible states about the temple in Jerusalem being the holiest space in Israel due to the dwelling of God's presence. Thus, the nation of Israel will be holy if Israel and its priests and people follow the teachings of God. There were certain conditions for the priesthood that are mentioned in the Leviticus[10]. Since the priests were the ones who made the offerings, they needed to be holy. Thus, there are directions in the Leviticus to keep the priests holy because only then the temple would remain holy.

Again, after the destruction of the temple, the concept of sacred space for the Jews shifted to the Torah and towards the practice of faith in individual homes of the Jews. The Torah can be understood as the first five books of the Jewish Bible that deal with the law of God. Thus,

---

[10] The Book of Leviticus is the third book of the Torah and of the Old Testament. Most of its chapters consist of God's speeches to Moses, in which he is commanded to repeat to the Israelites.

wherever the principles of Torah are upheld, so is the concept of sacred. However, Jerusalem remained the ambiguous centre (Cohn, 1981).

Therefore it can be argued that Jews had three quite distinct concepts of sacredness- Mountains, the Temple and the Torah.

Stop and Read:

On December 1992, a huge group of Kar Sevaks demolished the Babri Mosque in the city of Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh. Ayodhya is considered to be the birthplace of the Hindu God, Ram; thus a sacred space for the Hindus. However, in the 16th century, Mir Baqi, a Mughal General, built a mosque there known as the Babri Masjid; and thus a sacred space for the Muslims. The forceful demolition of the mosque by the Hindu Kar Sevaks led to the violent riots between the Hindus and the Muslims. This incident can be seen as a contradiction between the sacred spaces of different religions.

11.4.2 Hinduism's Concept of Sacred Space

The Hindus believe some specific places to be having the element of sacredness than others. For instance, they revere the mountains such as the Himalayas. The reverence of the mountains by the Hindu's stems from the belief of Gods being residing there. The veneration of the Hindu's for the mountains is also visible in the architectural arrangements of Hindu temples, most of which are on the mountains such as the Amarnath temple and Vaishno Devi temple in Jammu and Kashmir. Moreover, visiting these two temples is considered to be the attainment of *Punya* or spiritual merit.

Apart from the mountains, the Hindus worship the rivers and the Ganga is considered to be the holiest of all. It is religiously believed that ritual bathing in the Ganga cleanses people of all their sins that they might have committed in their life. The Ganga plays a vital role in ceremonies and worship, in rituals of birth and initiation, of purification and religious merit, of marriage and death. The Ganga is known as Mother Ganga (*Ganga Mai*) bringing life in the form of sacred water (Singh, 1994). Added to this, the Ganga is considered a sacred fluid which forms an essential element in all the Hindu rites and rituals.

Stop and Read:

There are many sacred sites and centres of pilgrimage along the Ganga river such as Gomukha, Gangotri, Devaprayaga, Rishikesha, Haridvara, Kankhala, Soron, Bithura, Prayaga/Allahabad, Vindhyachala, Chundra, Varanasi, Patna, Sultanganj and Gangasagara. However, Varanasi is considered to be the most sacred place of all the holy places in India.
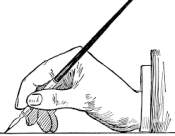
The Hindus believe in the concept of *tirtha*, that is, the pilgrimage. It is said that the pilgrimage helps in the cleansing of an individual of their sins and it is popularly believed that the more strenuous the journey is, the more effective it will be in cleansing the sins. The *tirtha* revolves around the idea that an ideal *tirtha* will be the one that involves encompassing the four divine *dhammas* (abodes). These are-

- Badrinath in Himalayans (north);
- Jagannatha Puri in the east (Bay of Bengal);
- Rameswaram in the south (Indian ocean); and
- Dwarka in the west (Arabian Sea)

Furthermore, the temples and shrines at home and elsewhere constitute the sacred space for Hindus, where different religious rituals are performed.

However, there are a section of the Hindus who believe that a place can be considered as sacred if one feels sanctified by being there.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Define vertical sacredness.

----

2. What are the four divine *dhammas* in Hinduism?

-- ---

11.5 UNDERSTANDING SACRED PERSONA OF RELIGIONS

The element of sacredness is manifested in certain officials and people. This is common for all religions. These officials are then considered holy by the rest of the community of believers and they are accorded a higher position in the society. The reason for this is that these officials are believed to be much closer to Gods than any other member of the religion, which we have understood while studying about the priests of the Jewish temple in the previous section.

The Brahmins in Hinduism, the Shamans among the indigenous people, and the Father in Christianity etc. are all considered as sacred personas. The sacred personas of each religion are revered because of their ability to interpret the holy texts that no other person can do and performing rites and rituals of various kinds. Moreover, the sacredness of the personas is considered to be validated by God in the sacred texts of religions. Thus, they possess legitimate authority.

11.5.1 Sacred Persona in Islam

Prophet Muhammad was the first and foremost sacred persona of Islam as he was considered the Messenger of God. However, after his death and since he did not lay down any rules for succession, there was ambiguity regarding the person who would lead the community and their duties. Moreover, the 'hadith' and 'sunna' had to be repeatedly re-created and reproduced in social life. Therefore, there was a need for sacred personas. Gilsenan (1982) argues that the Men of Learning, who in some cases were sheriffs, studied, organised and interpreted the Book and became a category of figures of authority. While others who were associated with the Sufi mystical tradition were said to have claimed descent of Muhammad by blessing. This means a chain of grace that linked certain holy men to the family of the Prophet or their ability to perform miraculous acts through mystical powers and which, in turn, apply as evidence of their special religious favour in the opinion of God. Thus, a part of the dynamic aspect of Islam stems from such tensions and contradictions in the ranks of different holy men.

The ulema has been primarily the interpreters and guardians of the sacred texts. They were the ones who organised the body of law and practice that were derived from the Quran. Moreover, they administered and elaborated the law that later was manifested into four schools such as the Hanbali, Hanafi, Shafei and Maliki. These made the people accord them the position as the learned doctors of scriptures. Therefore, the ulema occupied and still holds an influential position in defining an official version of Islamic belief and practice (Gilsenan, 1982).

The ulema, argues Gilsenan (1982), are different from the clergy. They do not have the authority to promise or refuse salvation and whether a person would go to heaven or hell is not in their capacity. They consider themselves to be the proper guardians of 'the Word' or the Quran. Since

the sacred text cannot be interpreted and understood by everyone along with the fact that the 'meaning' cannot be imparted to the rest of the community by everyone, it got restricted to the body of specialists. Thus, the sacred text was made to seem incomprehensible and complex that could only be understood by few scholars. The sacred text was made an instrument for commanding authority and a way of regulating its access by others.

The ulema acquires learning through training and not by personal sanctity. They have to go through a process of study and examination in religious schools and universities. Based on this, the ulema gathers authority and legitimacy of a Men of Learning and knowledge who guards the Law and also ensures that its purity is maintained.

Stop and read:

A Sannyasi is a person who is also considered to be a sacred persona in Hinduism along with priests. A Sannyasi is a person who passes through the first three statuses of Brahminical Hinduism and then renounces the world. Thereafter he is supposed to be taken care of by others. All the Sannyasis are graded according to four degrees of increasing sanctity- Kavichar, Bahodak, Hans, Paramhans (Uberoi, 1967)

11.5.2 Hindu Temple Priests

The priests are the principal servants of God and they are sole persons who perform various services to God in the close proximity of their image. Temples and shrines are recognized by devotees as places where special attitudes and restrictions prevail because they are the abode of the sacred. Added to this, they are the interpreters of the sacred texts. Therefore they are considered to be much closer to God than any other

member in the temples. Moreover, in a hierarchy where the deities are the supreme, the priests occupy the immediate first rank after them. All these vest the element of sacred in the priests of Hindu temples; thus considered as a sacred persona. These temple priests also act as domestic priests in the homes of Hindus where they perform various rituals at festivals or rites of passage etc.

Majority of the priests are vegetarians and wear the sacred thread. The sacred thread is given to them at their initiation ceremony that they undergo in early adulthood. Moreover, the priests belong to the Brahmin caste and are therefore the purest category of caste. They occupied higher positions and status during the rule of the Kings as Gurus to the Kings. All the above reasons guarantee them the authority, respect and the holy status in the society.

Since they are associated with the Holy, it is mandatory for priests to observe certain rules in order to maintain the purity and sanctity of the temple. The priests are required to purify themselves by bathing and praying early in the morning before they open the doors of the sacred temple for daily worship. While working in the temple, the priests are required to wear a white cotton cloth in the traditional Brahmin style. Over this, they must wrap a piece of silk coloured cloth as it is believed that silk does not transmit pollution. This silk coloured cloth is supposed to protect the priests from getting polluted when they come in contact with the devotees in the temple. Added to this, the priests carry a small bag that contains white ash (*vibhuti*). Very few of them wear footwear and they shave their heads with just a string of hair being tied into a knot.

Impurity involves death, birth and menstruation. During the menstrual days of the priest's wife and daughter(s), he is forbidden from having contact with the idol or worshipping the idol and can neither perform temple rituals. The same is applicable during the birth or death in the priest's family.
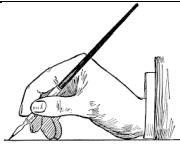
1. Why the sacred personas of religions revered?

----

2. Who are the ulema?

11.6 SUMMING UP

- The concept of sacred and profane was central to Durkheim's work.

- The dimensions of sacred are sacred knowledge, sacred space and sacred persona.

- Sacred knowledge acts as a guidebook of life for the believers.

- The sacred space is a place of communication between God and humans.

- The Jewish had three different concepts of sacred space- Mountains, the Temple and the Torah.

- The sacred personas derive their authority from their ability to interpret and understand the sacred texts.

11.7 QUESTIONS

Short Questions

1. Define sacred knowledge, sacred space and sacred persona.
2. Explain the three categories of principles of *dharma*.
3. Explain the reasons for the sacredness of Mt. Sinai?
4. What are sacred and profane?
5. Define vertical sacredness.

Essay type

1. Discuss the most important tenets of Hinduism.
2. Discuss the teachings of Quran.
3. "Jews had three quite distinct concepts of sacredness- Mountains, the Temple and the Torah." Explain.
4. Elaborate on Hinduism's concept of sacred space.
5. Explain the role of ulema in Islam.
6. Why are the Hindu temple priests considered as a sacred persona? Explain.

11.8 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

Cohn, R. (1981). *The Shape of Sacred Space: Four Biblical Studies,* Scholars Press.

Fuller, C.J. (1984). *Hindu Temple Priests* in *Religion in India*, 1991, Oxford University Press.

Gilsenan, M. (1982). *Recognizing Islam: An Anthropologist's Introduction*, Biddles Ltd.

https://www.google.com/amp/s/dictionary.cambridge.org/amp/english/torah

Madan, T.N. (1991). *Religion in India*, Oxford University Press.

Mathur, K.S. (1964). *Hindu Values of Life* in *Caste and Ritual in a Malwa Village*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay.

Rahman, F. (1979). *Islam*, 2nd edn, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Rahman, F. (2009). *Major Themes of the Qur'ān,* 2nd edn, University of Chicago Press.

Simmins, G. (2008). *Sacred Spaces and Sacred Places*, VDM Publishing.

Singh, R.P.B. (1994). *Water symbolism and sacred landscape in Hinduism: A study of Benares (Varanasi)*, Erdkunde, Germany.

****

MODULE IV: RELIGION IN INDIA: CONTEMPORARY TIMES

UNIT 12: SECULARISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 INTRODUCTION

Religion is an important identity marker of the people. People are highly sensitive and emotional when it comes to their religious identity. There are chances that people might turn violent in defence of their religion and religious practices. The chances are even higher in countries which are religiously diverse. Added to this, if in some way the actions of the state involuntarily imply that it is favouring a particular religion over others, conflicts and clashes might occur. As a result, it might affect the law and order situation of the country. Thus, several countries consider it safe to adopt the ideal of secularism.

The concept of secularism can be understood as the process by which the influence of religion is eliminated from public life. The concept is said to have originated in the West. However, it is argued that the term is used

and understood in a different sense in India. Thus, secularism can be said to have two different understandings: Western and Indian. The following sections will throw light on these two different understandings of secularism.

12.2 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the different meanings of secularism;
- Analyse the constitutional provisions of secularism in India;
- Discuss the sociological debate on secularisation;
- Assess the contemporary challenge to secularism in India and the ways to deal with it.

12.3 MEANING OF SECULARISM

Secularism is an important topic of discussion and analysis in social science research. Scholars from different disciplines have worked on secularism ranging from sociology, political science, anthropology, religious studies and so on. Thus, it can be inferred that it is indeed an important area of analysis.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines secularism as "non-spiritual, having no concern with the religious or spiritual matter". It further adds "As the word implies, secularism is based solely on consideration of practical morality with a view to the physical, social and moral improvement of society" (cited in Amrutkar, 2011). Amrutkar (2011) then quotes Chambers Dictionary definition of secularism, which is "the belief that the state, morals, education, etc. should be independent of religion." Then he cites that according to Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences "secularism in the philosophical sphere may be interpreted as a revolt against theological and universals. In the political sphere, it came

to mean that a temporal ruler was entitled to exercise power in his own right".

Based on the above definitions, Amrutkar (2011) devised three principles for a secular state. These are- (i) freedom of religion (ii) absence of discrimination on the ground of religion and (iii) separation of state from religion.

However, the practical implementation of the above principles is not even and uniform across the world. This is due to the different socio-political conditions of different countries. This, therefore, explains the different understanding and application of the concept of secularism in the Western and Indian context. The same will be discussed in the following section.

Stop and Read:

Emile Durkheim anticipated that in industrial societies, the social significance of religion would decline. He argued that it would lose some of its importance as a factor of integrating society.

12.3.1 Western and Indian Meanings

As we have discussed in the previous sections, the term secularism has different meanings in the Western and Indian context.

The emergence of secularism can be traced to 17th and 18th century Europe. The social and political conditions of this period in Europe led to its emergence. The term was coined by Holyoake in 1851. The context of its emergence was the conflict between the Church and the State. As a result of this conflict, the boundaries between the spheres of temporal and spiritual authorities were demarcated. This further led to the evolution of different principles of secularism such as freedom of

religion and conscience; tolerance; a democratic conception of citizenship, etc.

Moreover, the advent of the Enlightenment replaced the mythical and religious view of the world with the scientific, technological-industrial approach. As a consequence, it led to the differentiation or separation of the political sphere from the religious sphere. This understanding formed the basis of the Western idea of secularism. Thus, in the Western meaning of secularism, there is complete separation of the state and the religion. Therefore, the state does not give any grant to the Church nor the Church requests or demands any support from the state in its religious activities.

Secularism has a very different meaning in India. The concept means that all religions in the country are treated equally without favouring any religion. Moreover, it means that no Indian can be discriminated on the grounds of one's religion. It also aims to guarantee freedom of religious belief and provide fundamental human rights regardless of religious belief.

Therefore, in the Western context, secularism refers to the separation of the state from religion or indifference toward religion. Thus, the antonym of secular, as rightly observed by Pantham (1997), in the West is religious. While in India, communal is considered to be the opposite of secular. The Western concept of secularism cannot be applied to India because of its religious plurality and the fact that it is a highly religious society.

Therefore, instead of blindly copying and implementing Western secularism, the framers of the Indian Constitution made few modifications in its meaning. This was done by keeping in mind the specificity of India's socio-political scenario.

12.3.2 Constitutional Provisions of Secularism in India

The Preamble to the Indian Constitution initially aimed to constitute India a Sovereign, Socialist, Democratic Republic. However, the terms Socialist and Secular were added to it by the 42nd amendment. According to Pantham (1997), the main articles of the Constitution that provide for a secular state can be summarized as follows-

- ➢ All persons have equal freedom of conscience and religion;
- ➢ No discrimination by the state against any citizen on grounds of religion;
- ➢ No communal electorates;
- ➢ The state has the power to regulate through law any economic, financial or any other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice;
- ➢ Untouchability is abolished by Article 17;
- ➢ Every religious denomination has the right to establish and operate institutions for religious and charitable purposes, subject to public order, morality and health;
- ➢ All religious minorities have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice and they cannot be discriminated against by the state in its granting of aid to educational institutions;
- ➢ No citizen can be discriminated on the ground of religion for employment or office under the state as well as for admission into educational institutions maintained or aided by state funds;
- ➢ Public revenues are not to be used to promote any religion.

Therefore, Pantham (1997) argues that the above constitutional framework is based on the liberal-secular ideal of freedom, equality and fraternity of all citizens. It is through such perspective, argues Pantham (1997), that the Constitution of India provides the state to intervene in certain religiously sanctioned social evils such as child marriage,

untouchability, Sati, polygamy and so on. Thus, it can be argued that the State has to curb the situations that might result in religious indifference and try to maintain a balance in religious diversities.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Write any one definition of secularism.

----

2. What are the three principles for a secular state devised by Amrutkar?

----

3. Fill up the blank:

The terms Socialist and Secular were added to the Constitution by the_____

12.4 THE SOCIOLOGICAL DEBATE ON SECULARISATION

It has been widely agreed by a few sociological thinkers that any kind of change in society will eventually lead to changes in the religion too. Few thinkers have argued that social changes would lead to the declining importance and influence of religion in the lives of people. Marx, Weber and Durkheim argued that the advent of the process of modernisation and the explanation and control of the social world through science and technology would lead to the development of the process of secularisation. "Secularisation describes the process whereby religion

loses its influence over the various spheres of social life" (Sutton, 2009, p. 695).

Weber foresaw that there would be a reduction in the importance of religion and that people would act more in terms of the rational fulfilment of goals rather than in terms of emotions and traditions.

However, there is no consensus over the secularisation thesis. Therefore, there is a debate over the advent of the process of secularisation in modern, industrial societies. This debate is one of the complicated areas in the sociology of religion and led to the development of two groups in the debate. These were the supporters and the opponents of the secularisation thesis. Their arguments will be discussed in the following sections.

12.4.1 Arguments of the Proponents and the Opponents

There has been disagreement among the supporters and the opponents of the secularisation thesis. The proponents of the thesis are in alignment with the arguments of the founding fathers of sociology, namely Marx, Weber and Durkheim, that the power, influence and importance of religion will diminish in modern industrial societies. The proponents also argue that the dependence on science and technology to explain and understand the social world and eventually controlling it would act as the contributing force towards the emergence of secularisation.

On the other hand, the opponents of the secularisation thesis argue that religion holds a significant place in the lives of the people in modern industrial societies. They say that although the form in which religion remains significant is different from the earlier times, it still exists in new and unfamiliar forms. They substantiate their arguments with the example of the sustained popularity of the new religious movements in the modern world. They further argue that although the traditional

religions tend to lose their hold, religion as a whole is not at all disappearing from the modern world; instead they are being mediated and developed in new directions.

However, the proponents argue that religious movements are not central to society as a whole and have an impact only on the lives of the individual followers. This is because, according to them, the new religious movements are scattered, unorganized and lacks sustained efforts. Moreover, the participants do not see it as a serious religious commitment. It is more of a lifestyle choice or a hobby, argues the proponents, for the participants.

Stop and Read:

Late Smt. Indira Gandhi said, "Secularism is neither a religion nor indifference to religion but equal respect for all religions, not mere tolerance but positive respect- without it, there is no future for the nation" (cited in Rizvi, 2005).

Moreover, different theorists have different views on the intensity of the process of secularization. Some believe that it will eventually be a global process due to westernisation and modernisation, while, other theorists consider it to be restricted to Western societies.

12.4.2 Evaluation of the Process of Secularization

As we have discussed earlier, the concept of secularization is a complicated one. This is because there is very little agreement on the mechanisms of measuring the process. Moreover, different sociologists define religion differently.

According to Sutton (2009), secularization can be evaluated on the basis of a number of dimensions. These are explained below.

> ➢ The **first dimension** is objective in nature. It is the level of membership of religious organisations. With the help of statistics

and official data, the number of people belonging to a religious body can be calculated. It can also show the number of people who are active in attending the services and ceremonies of the religious body. Sutton (2009) argues that according to this index, it can be inferred that most of the industrialised countries have experienced considerable secularisation.

- ➢ The **second dimension** involves the degree to which the religious organisations are maintaining their social influence, wealth and prestige. In earlier times, religious organisations had substantial influence over governments and other social agencies and were highly respected. However, in modern times, there has been a considerable decline in the social and political influence of religious organisations worldwide. With few exceptions, most of the long-standing religious organisations are financially insecure.

- ➢ The **third dimension** can be termed, according to Sutton (2009), as religiosity. It involves beliefs and values. The regularity in the attendance of people in religious bodies does not necessarily imply the holding of strong religious views. This is because they may attend out of the expectations from the family and/or community or due to habit. However, as compared to the earlier times, the hold of the religious ideas in modern times is lessening. Most of the tensions in the world today such as those in the Middle East, Sudan, etc. are partially due to religious differences. But, the majority of the wars and conflicts in modern times are considerably secular in nature i.e., it is a consequence of differing political ideologies and material interests.

Stop and Read:

If a state is secular, it does not imply that it is irreligious. It simply denotes the fact that it will remain neutral in the matters of

religion. For example, the state would not promote any religion. The concept of secularism can be understood as a policy to curb discrimination on the basis of religion and ensuring equal liberty for all citizens, believers or non-believers.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS
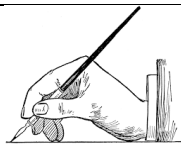
1. Define secularisation.

----

2. What are the dimensions for evaluating the process of secularisation?

-- -----

12.5 CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE TO SECULARISM IN INDIA

Secularism was incorporated in the Indian Constitution through a range of debates and discussion among the framers of the Constitution. Jawaharlal Nehru, a stalwart of the freedom struggle, insisted on the inclusion of the ideal of secularism into the Constitution. It was a result of his modern outlook of the world on the grounds of rationality.

The framers of the Constitution and Nehru had the vision of India as a nation that would have peaceful co-existence of different religions and all religions would be treated with equal respect.

However, there are instances which point to the fact that people of India have failed to align with the vision of the framers of the Constitution and Nehru. Although secularism was incorporated, it has not yet become the part and parcel of the lives of the people of India. This is evident in the various communal riots that have occurred in the country. Communalism is still very strong in India and can be seen as a danger to secularism.

12.5.1 Communalism

The peculiar form and characteristic of secularism in India can be said to be responsible for many practices in Indian politics that prove poisonous for the country and its harmony. Religion has permeated to all spheres of life- social, economic, political, by using religious tolerance as the mechanism. The centrality of religion in the lives of Indian people has led to the emergence of the phenomenon called communalism. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines communalism as the loyalty to a particular socio-political grouping based on religious or ethnic affiliation. Therefore, communalism is the most important contemporary challenge faced by secularism in India.

There are instances where public functions and ceremonies are influenced by religion. Moreover, a nexus can be seen between the political leaders and the religious leaders from different religions. Prior to an election, the political leaders are seen seeking the blessings of different religious leaders in order to appease the people from that religion. Since the credibility of the political leaders is seen with suspicion by the people, this seems to be the perfect way of gaining the trust of the people. By joining hands with religious leaders, the political leaders try to create a vote bank for their party. Religion is used as a channel by the different political parties and leaders in India to strengthen and expand their political base. Moreover, the government is continuously pressurised by the numerous religious groups and

organisations to concede to their demands and the government finally ends up accommodating their demands. Accommodation of demands of a particular religious group gives confidence to other religious groupings to assert their demands to the government.

Amrutkar (2011) cited the following two instances of government giving in to the communal pressures of religious organisations-

1. The Rajiv Gandhi government's decision to overturn the impact of the judgement of the Supreme Court in the Shah Bano case
2. The withdrawal of Presidential ordinance (1990) that acquired the disputed land at Ayodhya due to the pressure from the Babri Masjid Action Committee

The above two are a few of the many instances of the combination of politics and religion. Such a combination leads to the growth of communalism. Moreover, it affects, according to Amrutkar (2011), the secular polity of India in two ways-

1. The politicisation of religious identity
2. Legitimising the communal organisations as the authentic representatives of the interests of the different religious groups.

Therefore, the end result of all the above practices is, argues Amrutkar (2011), not the secularisation of the socio-economic and political processes but the communalisation of these practices.

Thus, communalisation can be considered as a threat to secularism in India.

> **Stop and read:**
>
> According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, a total of 3365 communal incidents occurred in the country from 2011 to October 2015. This is an average of 58 incidents a month. Eight states- Bihar, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra,

Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh account for 85% of all the incidents. These states were ruled by various parties at different points in time in these 5 years. (retrieved from Factly.in)

12.5.2 Dealing with Communalism

One of the major reason that the government gives in to the communal pressure is due to its divided political base. This means that a political party has its support base in specific areas. Therefore, in order to expand their support base, the political parties mix religion with politics. For instance, promising to bring in policies that would favour a particular religious group when voted to power. Thus, it leads to communal politics. Moreover, it leads to the growth of a tendency among all political parties to use religion as a tool to increase their support base without thinking about its consequences for national unity.

In order to deal with communalism and to protect the secular nature of Indian democracy, firstly, it is important to avoid the intermixing of politics and religion. Communalism has a firm hold over the lives of people and no effort has been made to address this and loosen the hold. Substantial efforts must be taken by the state and the civil society to eliminate the hold of the communalist forces over the lives of the people. Moreover, people from different religion must have respect for each other's religion and sentiments. Rizvi (2005) argues that all grounds that would foster discrimination and oppression of the minority and pamper fundamentalism must be removed. Added to this, the State should refrain from designing policies that would favour a particular religious group extensively. Such policies pose a serious threat to secularism. The media should also act responsibly in reporting instances of communalism. In recent years, it has been observed that the media tend to fan the flames of communalism. This should be reduced and the media should be extra cautious and responsible while reporting such instances. Lastly, an inculcation of loyalty to the nation irrespective of individual and group

differences would prove fruitful in strengthening the spirit of secularism (Rizvi, 2005).

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Define communalism.

----

2. Why does the government give in to the communal pressure?

12.6 SUMMING UP

- Secularism is an important area of analysis in social science research
- There are two meanings of secularism-Indian and Western
- The debate over secularisation is a complex one in sociology
- Sutton (2009) mentions the dimensions for evaluating the process of secularization
- One of the major threat to secularism in India is communalism
- In order to protect the secular nature of Indian democracy, it is imperative to deal with communalism

12.7 QUESTIONS

Short Questions

1. Define secularism.

2. What are the three principles devised by Amrutkar for a secular state?
3. Define secularisation.
4. Elaborate on the process of communalism.
5. Mention a few examples of the Indian government giving in to the demands of the religious groupings.

Essay type

1. Discuss the Western and Indian meaning of secularism.
2. Discuss the constitutional provisions of secularism in India
3. What is the sociological debate on secularisation? Explain the arguments of the proponents and the opponents of the debate.
4. Explain the dimensions for evaluating the process of secularisation.
5. Is communalism a threat to secularism in India? If yes, why?
6. Discuss the ways to deal with communalism in India.

12.8 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

Amrutkar, P. (2011). Indian Secularism: Is it a Way Out to Communalism? *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 72 (1): 173-178.

http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/77961/11/11_chapter%2006.pdf

http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/77961/7/07_chapter%2002.pdf.

Pantham, T. (1997). Indian Secularism and Its Critics: Some Reflections. *The Review of Politics*, 59 (3): 523-540, Cambridge University Press.

Rizvi, Md. M. A. (2005). Secularism in India: Retrospect and Prospects. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 66 (4): 901-914.

Singh, R. and Singh, K. (2008). Secularism In India : Challenges And Its Future. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 16 (3): 597-607.

Sutton, P.W. (2009). *Anthony Giddens Sociology*, 6th edition, Polity Press.

****

UNIT 13: PROSELYTISATION

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Introduction

13.2 Objectives

13.3 Understanding Proselytisation

      13.3.1 Proselytisation is Problematic

      13.3.2 Fundamental Right and Proselytisation

13.4 Anti-Conversion Laws in India

      13.4.1 Pre-Independent India

      13.4.2 Post-Independent India

13.5 Few Instances of Proselytisation in India

      13.5.1 Conversion of Dalits

      13.5.2 Conversion of the Tribal Communities

13.6 Summing Up

13.7 Questions

13.8 Recommended Readings and References

13.1 INTRODUCTION

Religion is considered to be an important aspect of people's lives. It shapes the perception of the people about the world and shapes the meaning that people attribute to the world. Religion also acts as a medium that provides hope and comfort to people in times of despair. Moreover, it involves a set of beliefs and practices that are generally held as a uniform for a community.

Religion is seen to be of the utmost importance to the people of India. Since the country is multi-religious, each group of people practising different religions tries to preserve their own religious faith and any attempt that seems to attack the religious sentiments of people are not tolerated. Proselytisation is considered to be one such attempt.

According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, proselytisation means to try to persuade someone to change their religious or political beliefs or way of living to one's own. Here, for the discussion, we will focus on the aspect of persuading someone to change their religious beliefs into one's own. In short, proselytisation refers to religious conversion. It can also be understood as religious propagation.

13.2 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the concept of Proselytisation and why it is problematic;
- Analyse the Fundamental Right related to the freedom of religion and its implications with respect to proselytisation;
- Analyse the anti-conversion laws in pre and post-independent India;
- Discuss a few instances of Proselytisation in India.

13.3 UNDERSTANDING PROSELYTISATION

The process of religious proselytisation can be termed as the process of encouraging or inducing people to join a religious movement, political party or other cause or organization. Here, in this unit, we are basically dealing with the meaning of proselytisation in the context of religion. It is also important to note here that proselytisation and religious conversion are two different terms with different meanings. However, in the context of religion, since proselytisation usually leads to conversion from one religious belief to another, you will observe in this unit that the term conversion is simultaneously used with proselytisation. The conversion that proselytisation may lead to, bring about an important change for the converts, that has effects on their family and society. A person or a group may convert to another religion due to several reasons ranging from personal, social, economic or political. Moreover, the conversion may be voluntary on the part of the individual or the group, or it may be done forcibly by the religious groups.

Religious proselytisation is not a new phenomenon in India. It has been present in the Indian society ever since India was conquered and ruled by various foreign rulers. For instance, the invasion of India by the Mughals and the Britishers had significant changes in the Indian social structure that also involved religious conversions.

Religious proselytisation has always remained a sensitive and controversial issue. It is evident in the debates that have been surfacing regarding religious proselytisation in India. However, its intensity has increased in contemporary times. For example, early 20th century debates on conversion began when Mahatma Gandhi's opinion on the role that would be played by the foreign missionaries in independent India, surfaced in an interview by *The Hindu* in 1931. He said that he would ask the missionaries to disengage if they would proselytise by providing medical aid and education (Claerhout and Roover, 2005). Gandhi argued: "Every nation's religion is as good as any other. Certainly, India's religions are adequate for her people. We need no converting spiritually" (*Collected Works*, Vol XLV: 320, cited in Claerhout and Roover, 2005). But later Gandhi said that he was misquoted by the reporter and that his true words were: "Every nation considers its own faith to be as good as that of any other. Certainly, the great faiths held by the people of India are adequate for her people. India stands in no need of conversions from one faith to another" (*Young India*, April 23, 1931). However, as can be seen from the discussion that the modifications that Gandhi made in his words did not make much difference to the overall picture. In return, there were different responses to Gandhi's comment and it generated a debate.

Thus, it can be argued that religious proselytisation is a very sensitive and controversial topic. Therefore, in the next section, we will discuss why proselytisation is considered to be problematic in society.

13.3.1 Proselytisation is Problematic

As we have discussed in the earlier section that proselytisation is considered to be problematic in society, especially in a multi-religious society such as India. It can be argued that, firstly, it is problematic because the term proselytisation is itself problematic. The term is described mostly with negative connotations. It has come to imply as an attempt to persuade someone to change her/his religion by using force, bribe or taking advantage of vulnerabilities of individuals or groups in order to increase the adherents of a religion. Therefore, it is perceived to have negative consequences.

The opponents of the process of proselytisation argue that it is a form of incivility as in a secular society, it is highly inappropriate to attempt to convert someone into another religion. Moreover, they also argue that it tends to threaten the identity of religious minorities. This argument stems from the historical experiences where the proselytisation activities of the British and Mughal Empire led to the damage of the indigenous religious beliefs and traditions. Since India is home to many religious minorities, it is believed that proselytisation would lead them to lose their identity, which in turn would generate chaos and conflicts in society.

Moreover, proselytisation is seen as a means, as argued by Bickley (2015), through which religious organisations take advantage of the vulnerabilities of people and groups and convert them to their own religion. Therefore, it is a crime and also the violation of an individual's freedom to follow one's religion. It is also argued that conversions tend to provoke social conflicts and violence among the people of a country that ultimately disturbs the solidarity among people and peace.

The opponents of conversion who are seeking a ban on it are mostly the Hindus in India. The resistance of the Hindus, argues Claerhout and

Roover (2015), toward the proselytising activities of Christianity and Islam is evident in various Hindu groups such as the Sangh Parivar and the moderate Gandhians. On the other hand, the proponents of conversion are mostly Christians and secularists (Claerhout and Roover, 2005). They argue that conversion is a fundamental human right and it must be protected in any democracy. The argument of the Christians and secularists that conversion is a fundamental right and its implications will be discussed in the next section.

13.3.2 Fundamental Right and Proselytisation

The Constitution of India in its Part III endorses the freedom of religion in India. The article 25 of the Constitution states that "Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this Part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely to profess, practice and propagate religion" (Chauhan, 2017: 127). In order to understand its inclusion in the Constitution of India, it is imperative to understand the history of its incorporation into the Constitution of India. On 6th December 1948, the Constituent Assembly debated the aspect of "Right to Propagate" in terms of religion as a Fundamental Right. Lokanath Misra argued in the Assembly that all citizens must have the right to profess and practice their religion but not let them give the opportunity to increase their number by using the State as a means to dictate over others. Thus, he was against incorporating "right to propagate" as a Fundamental Right. However, Pandit Lakshmi Kanta Maitra disagreed and argued that propagation does not necessarily mean the conversion by use of force in terms of arms, swords or coercion. Instead, he stated, the Fundamental Right to propagate one's religion would be helpful in removing the misconceptions that people might have about other co-existing religions in this multi-religious country.

Thus, the Constitution of India guarantees the Fundamental Right to every citizen to propagate one's religious faith. But, the Fundamental

Right to propagate one's own religion does not imply that a person has the right to convert another person to one's own religion. Instead, it implies that a person can spread one's religion by the propagation of its tenets. This distinction is often re-asserted by the Supreme Court in their judgements of different cases. For instance, in the case of *Digyadarsan Rajendra Ramdassji* vs. *State of Andhra Pradesh*, the apex court passed the judgement that "the right to propagate one's religion means the right to communicate a person's beliefs to another person or to expose the tenets of that faith, but would not include the right to 'convert' another person to the former's faith" (1970 AIR 181).
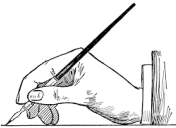
Orissa was among the first states in India to enact the Freedom of Religion Act in 1967. The Act describes its purpose as "an act to provide for the prohibition of conversion from one religion to another by use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means and for matters incidental thereto" (The Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, 1967). As outlined in the Act, the punishment for converting someone through the objectionable means would involve the sentence of one-year imprisonment and a fine of Rs 5000 or both. However, if the convert involves a minor, woman or a member of the Scheduled Castes or Tribes, the punishment would involve a sentence of 2 years imprisonment and a fine of Rs 10,000 or both (The Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, 1967).

Therefore, it is judicially established time and again that although propagation enjoys constitutional protection under the Right to Freedom of Religion, conversion does not. However, there are criticisms against this distinction made by the Supreme Court. The critics argue that the successful propagation of a religion would eventually lead to the adoption of that religion.

But it can be argued that the legal position of the Supreme Court is compatible with the policy of toleration and encouragement of all

religions and this is, to a certain extent, beneficial for a plural society such as India.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is Proselytisation?

----

2. What did Gandhi say regarding Proselytisation?

----

3. Fill up the blank:

_____ was among the first states in India to enact the Freedom of Religion Act in 1967.

13.4 ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS IN INDIA

There have been many laws that were passed in India for curbing religious conversion. These laws were prevalent in pre-independent India and continued after independence. Since India is a multi-religious country it was deemed necessary to pass anti-conversion laws in order to protect the people's religious faith from getting abandoned. Moreover, the states passed anti-conversion laws in pre-independent India as well as in post-independent India. But, the number has increased after the independence considering the historical context of partition in which India gained independence and its subsequent consequences that led to communal riots and conflicts. Therefore, the state governments acted extra cautiously while dealing with matters related to religion. In the next two sections, we will discuss the anti-conversion laws in pre-independent and post-independent India.

13.4.1 Pre-Independent India

It is argued that the Portuguese Catholics after conquering Goa were the first ones to attempt to convert people of Indian sub-continent into Christianity. Therefore, in order to understand the laws related to conversion in India, we must understand the history of anti-conversion laws that were passed and implemented by various princely states in pre-independent India.

The Colonial government never introduced any laws that would restrict the people from propagating their religion and converting others to their own religion. This was partly because they did not want to disturb their missionary activities. On the contrary, they encouraged the Evangelists and conversion to Christianity through the introduction of measures in the private law in order to do away with the obstacles in conversion. Moreover, they proposed attractive legal benefits to the converts to Christianity.

However, outside the domain of British India, a number of princely states enacted anti-conversion laws in order to prevent conversion to Islam or Christianity. Some of them were-

- ➢ **Raigarh State Conversion Act, 1936**- It was the first anti-conversion law that was passed. It was a means of warning and threatening from the government officials and Maharajas of Rajgarh to the oppressed classes within Hinduism not to adopt other religions, and to the Missionaries not to attempt to convert people. The Act banned preaching in the former kingdoms of Rajgarh, Jashpur, Surgua, etc. of the Chhotanagpur area (Mustafa and Sharma, 2003).
- ➢ **The Sarguja State Hindu Apostasy Act, 1945**- It was the second anti-conversion law to be enacted (Mustafa and Sharma, 2003). According to this Act, the power to allow or disallow

conversion to another religion was vested in the Durbar of the Rajas. It was argued that this was done to maintain law and order in the state and establish peace.

➢ **Udaipur State Anti-Conversion Act, 1946**- Under this Act, it was made mandatory to officially register the conversions from Hindu to other religions.

In addition to the above laws, there were other laws such as the Patna Freedom of Religion Act, 1942 and similar other laws were implemented in Bikaner, Jodhpur, Kalahandi and Kota.

Stop and Read:

Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1999) argued that religious conversion tends to destroy centuries-old communities and incites communal violence. According to him, it is violence and it breeds violence.

Thus, it is evident and as discussed earlier that religious conversion was always a sensitive and controversial issue for the people residing in India.

13.4.2 Post-Independent India

Similar to pre-independent India, in the post-independent India too, different anti-conversion laws were passed. Some of them are-

➢ **Indian Converts Regulation Bill, 1954**- It was moved to the Parliament by the then ruling party in India. The Bill advocated for mandatory licensing of Missionaries and for registering cases of conversion with the government bodies. However, the Bill was dropped on the directive of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

- **Backward Communities (Religious Protection) Bill, 1960**- This Bill was introduced in the Parliament with the aim of keeping a check on the conversion of Hindus to non-Indian religions, which according to the Bill involved Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Zoroastrianism. It was rejected by the Parliament on the grounds that it was offensive to certain specific religions.

Let us discuss the anti-conversion laws of a few states of India. The provisions of the Orissa's Freedom of Religion Act, 1967 has already been discussed in the earlier section.

Madhya Pradesh

- **Madhya Pradesh's Freedom of Religion Act, 1968** requires an individual to seek permission from the government to convert. If any individual does so without seeking the government's permission will be punished.
- The act states that no person shall convert or attempt to convert any person's religion by the use of force, allurement or fraudulent means.
- In 2006, there were efforts made by the state to amend the legislation by making it necessary for the priest conducting the

conversion ceremony to serve a notice to the DM. It was to be done a month prior to the ceremony. Violation of this requirement would involve a year of imprisonment and a fine of Rs 5000.

- The provisions of the proposed amendment also sought to make compulsory for the individual converting to present himself/herself before the DM and declare his/her intent. If any individual fails to comply with this provision, it would attract a fine of Rs 1000. The DM was also to serve a notice to the Police Superintendent to investigate the matter.

- However, the proposed amendment was rejected by the Governor of MP on the grounds that it would violate Freedom of Religion, guaranteed by Article 25 of the Indian Constitution.

Gujarat

- **Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act, 2003** was enacted to prohibit conversions from one religion to another by use of force, allurement, or fraudulent means.

- If a person forcibly converts another's religion, the person would be punished with an imprisonment term of 3 years and a monetary fine of Rs 50,000.

- In 2006, an amendment bill was sought to be passed by the BJP state-level government. The bill's aim was to change the definition of convert so as to allow inter-denomination conversion of the same religion. For this purpose, Jains and Buddhists were taken as denominations of the Hindu religion, Shia and Sunni were taken as denominations of Islam and Catholic and Protestant were taken as denominations of Christianity.

- However, the Jain and Buddhist communities raised objections for being considered as a denomination for the

Hindu religion. The amendment was thus considered to be objectionable and was not passed.

A law similar to the anti-conversion laws of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh was passed in **Arunachal Pradesh**. The provisions were more or less similar to provisions of the anti-conversion laws of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How many states in India have enacted anti-conversion laws?

----

2. Mention few anti-conversion laws of pre-independent India.

-- ---

13.5 FEW INSTANCES OF RELIGIOUS PROSELYTISATION IN INDIA

Now let us discuss a few instances of proselytisation in India. These instances of proselytisation in some cases occurred voluntarily on the part of the convert; while in other cases, it was out of coercion. This coercion may not only be in terms of physical violence but more at the level of consciousness such as attracting people to convert to one's own religion by offering privileges and benefits. Moreover, few minority groups converted due to the fear of attack and violence from the

dominant community. A few converted because they found the ideology of a particular religion relatable with the ideology held by them; while a few groups converted so that they could ensure their existence and are not excluded from the wider society. Thus, although the Constitution seeks to protect the religious faith of different communities and the states have implemented anti-conversion laws, these were not successful to curb the proselytisation of groups, voluntary or involuntary.

13.5.1 Proselytisation of Dalits

Chauhan (2017) argues that one of the major factors that motivate individuals to convert to other religion is 'relative deprivation', as identified by Baer (1978). Different studies conducted during the 1960s and 1970s recognized that economic, social, moral, spiritual and psychological deprivation were the key stimuli behind a person's decision to change their religious identities (Glock, 1964). The same was the case with the Dalits in India. Since they were assigned a lower caste status in the caste system, they were exploited, discriminated and subjugated by the upper caste members. They were also deprived of basic amenities and were excluded from the wider mainstream society. The upper caste Hindus even practised untouchability with the lower caste members. There were different roads for the upper caste and lower caste members for transportation. Moreover, even the shadow of a Dalit was considered to be impure and thus, they were excluded from the wider society. All of these made it difficult for the Dalits to assert themselves in the political and economic domain. It also had a considerable impact on their psychology.

Thus, in order to achieve social, economic and political equality and escape social victimization, the Dalits converted to other religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, etc. But they preferred converting mostly to Buddhism as it was favoured by the charismatic and influential Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar. He advocated that the fundamental

principle of Buddhism was the equality of all human beings. Moreover, he posited that Buddhism was the only religion that did not have any divisions based on caste. Thus, he appealed to the people to convert themselves into Buddhism from Hinduism.

A method of proselytisation in Hinduism is the practice of Sanskritization. The term was coined by M.N. Srinivas (1952). This is a process through which the lower castes or tribes adopt the practices and lifestyles of the upper caste Hindus, giving up their own, in order to achieve a higher position in the caste hierarchy. In some cases, Sanskritisation is voluntarily done by people while in other cases, it may be done by the dominant Hindu group to bring people of other groups/tribes into their fold through the means or allurements of education, improved health care, social service, reform movements, etc. Even in the process of Sanskritisation, lower caste people or tribes Sanskritise themselves in the craze for an upper caste status in the caste hierarchy.

However, attraction towards other religions may also be the effects of brainwashing, persuasion or coercion (Chauhan, 2017).

Stop and read:

There has been a recent trend of the attempt of Hinduism to convert Christians, Muslims, tribal communities and others, both in India and abroad with immense aggressiveness and urgency. Different terms are used in order to avoid making it look like an attempt of proselytisation. It includes *shuddhi* meaning purification, *ghar vapasi* meaning homecoming, etc. "The philosophy behind these activities is that a Hindu converted to another religion is not only a

friend lost but also an enemy and a traitor created" (*Organiser*, 8 June 2003: 13)

13.5.2 Proselytisation of Tribal Communities

Xaxa (1999) argues that a dominant understanding of the transformation of tribes has been in terms of the tribe getting absorbed into a society that represents civilisation. He states that numerous works that were undertaken post-independence have focussed on the aspect of tribes getting assimilated into the Hindu society or tribes becoming castes. It is argued that the tribes have accepted the essence of the caste structure and have absorbed themselves within it. Xaxa (1999) cites certain examples of tribes in this regard-Bhils, Bhumijs, Majhis, Khasas and Raj-Gonds. Therefore, it is evident that the proselytisation of tribes in India has taken place.

The proselytisation of the tribes in Northeast India offers the appropriate example for the above discussion. Historically, it has been argued that the Ahoms of Assam converted to Hinduism during the rule of Rudra Singha (1696-1714). This was possible through the proselytising activities of Brahmins from West Bengal. It is stated that "The religious leaders responsible for the import of the Hindu rites and rituals (to Kamarupa) were the Brahmins". (K Barpujari (ed.), The Comprehensive History of Assam, vol.1: 305-306). But "Rudra Singh was the first to announce publicly his intention to become a disciple of a Hindu Brahmin" (Imperial Gazetteer of India Provincial Series Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1989: 34). Moreover, the conversion of certain tribes of Northeast India into Christianity because of the proselytising efforts of the Christian Missionaries serves as another remarkable example of proselytisation India.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS
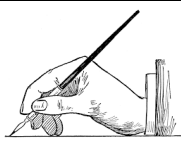
1. Define Sanskritisation.

----

2. Mention examples of tribes that have undergone proselytisation as argued by Xaxa.

13.6 SUMMING UP

- The process of religious proselytisation can be termed as the process of encouraging or inducing people to join a religious movement, political party or other cause or organization

- Religious proselytisation has always remained a sensitive and controversial issue.

- It is considered to be problematic in society, especially in a multi-religious society such as India.

- There were and are anti-conversion laws in pre-independent and post-independent India

- Religious proselytisation has led to religious conversion of Dalits and tribal communities in India

- There are different methods of proselytisation

13.7 QUESTIONS

Short Questions

1. Define proselytisation.
2. Explain the Constituent Assembly debates on the aspect of 'Right to Propagate' in terms of religion as a Fundamental Right.
3. Define Sanskritisation.
4. Write a note on Proselytisation of tribes.
5. What does Article 25 of the Constitution state?

Essay type

1. Why is proselytisation problematic?
2. Discuss anti-conversion laws in pre-independent and post-independent India
3. "Religious conversion has always remained a sensitive and controversial issue". Substantiate.
4. Discuss the proselytisation of Dalits.
5. "Fundamental Right to propagate one's own religion does not imply that a person has the right to convert another person to one's own religion". Explain.
6. What are some of the anti-conversion laws enacted by the states in India?

13.8 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

Baer, H.A.(1978). A field perspective of religious conversion: The Levites of Utah, *Review of Religious Research.*

Bickley, P. (2015). *The Problem of Proselytism.* Theos, London.

Chauhan, N. (2017). Religious Conversion And Freedom Of Religion In India: Debates And Dilemmas, Vol I, *Summer Issue, Ili Review*.

Claerhout, S. and Roover, J.D. (2005). The Question of Conversion in India, *Economic and Political Weekly*: 3048-3055

Glock, C.Y. (1964). The role of deprivation in the origin and evolution of religious groups. In Lee, R. and Marty, M.E., editors, *Religion and social conflict: Based Upon Lectures Given at the Institute of Ethics and Society at San Francisco Theological Seminary,* pages 24-36. Oxford University Press, New York.

http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/43250/10/10_chapter%202.pdf

https://blog.ipleaders.in/anti-conversion-laws

https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/proselytize

https://www.thehindu.com/sunday-anchor/propagation-without-proselytisation-what-the-law-says/article6711440.ece

Xaxa, V. (1999). Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34 (24): 1519-1524.

****

UNIT 14: COMMUNALISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 INTRODUCTION

A religious community gives rise to a sense of belongingness amongst its members which can be called "identity" in contemporary times. Incorporating all aspects of lives, some religious communities hold own religion as a way of life. Along with binding its followers together, religion also imparts them with a system of beliefs, rituals, traditions, institutions and a sense of sacred. Different religions of the society have their own social, economic and political interests which vary from religion to religion. In contemporary times, many religious communities

use to take religion as a pretext for competing with the threat of their socio-economic interest. Thus, religion becomes a cause of conflict and debate. In this unit, we will study about communalism especially in the Indian context which has become a major social problem in India. To know the present involvement of religion in a society like diversified India, a study about communalism is most important.

14.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain the concept of communalism;
- Analyse the growth and development of communalism in India;
- Explain the causes of growing communalism in India;
- Discuss the concept of communal violence.

14.3 CONCEPT OF COMMUNALISM

Let us begin with the meaning of the term communalism. The term "communalism" is derived from the word "communal" which is a combination of the words 'commune' and 'community'. Meaning of the word 'communal' is something, 'of or pertaining to a (or the) community'. In this way, communalism means all that pertains to the community. Communalism can be termed as the hostility practised by members of one community against the people of other community. Thus, it is a shared belief within a particular culture to promote religious and secular isolation from another group. It leads to hatred among the followers of a particular religious community against the followers of other religious communities. In simple meaning, it is opposed to secularism.

The term "communalism" as a political philosophy was first coined by the Murray Bookchin. When we talk about the origin of the term

"communalism" as a political philosophy, it should be mentioned that it has its roots in the ethnic and cultural diversity of Africa.

Stop and Read

Community: Community is a body of persons living together (though not necessarily at one place) and practicing more or less community of goods or having a common objective and interest.

Various scholars have defined communalism variously. Some of these are as follows:

- **Bipan Chandra** defines communalism as "the belief that because a group of people following a particular religion, they have common social, political and economic interest".
- **Ram Ahuja** states "The antagonism praised by the members of one community against the people of other community and religion can be termed as communalism".
- **Louis Dumont** refers, "Communalism is an affirmation and assertion of the religious community as a political group.
- **W.C. Smith (1979)** refers "Communalism is that ideology which has emphasized as the social, political and economic unit the group of adherents of each religion, and has emphasized the distinction, even antagonism, between such groups."

When a person practices politics using religion, he/she is called a communal person or communalist. They are the supporters of a particular community. Most of the time communalists try to divide the society on the basis of religion. They believe in a political identity based on religion.

Sociologist T. K. Oomen (1989) has suggested the following six dimensions of Communalism:

1) **Assimilationist (or) Communist Communalism:**

   When small religious groups are assimilated into a big religious group; it is known as Assimilationist Communalism.

2) **Welfarist Communalism:**

   This type of communalism emphasizes on the welfare of the particular community. For example- providing education, scholarship in higher studies etc.

3) **Retreatist Communalism:**

   Some religious Communities keep themselves away from political activities. This type of communalism is known as Retreatist Communalism.

4) **Retaliatory Communalism:**

   When members belonging to one religious community attempt to harm, hurt and injure the members of other religious communities that are called Retaliatory Communalism.

5) **Separatist Communalism:**

   Here, a particular community decides to maintain its cultural specificity and demands separate territorial Statehood within the Country. For example, the demand for separate Bodoland by Bodos of Assam.

6) **Secessionist Communalism:**

> In this type, a religious community demands a separate political identity and strive for a separate State.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS
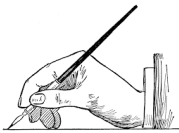
1. What do you mean by Religious Community?

----

2. Explain the nature of Communalism.

From the above explanation, we can understand the meaning of Communalism in general. Let us now discuss Communalism in the Indian context and its characteristics, causes and impact on Indian Society.

14.4 COMMUNALISM IN INDIA

Communalism is a significant socio-economic and political issue in the contemporary Indian States. Let us trace the concept of communalism in the case of the Indian States. In the Indian context, the word "communalism" is associated with clashes and tension between different religious communities of India. Along with various religious groups such as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhist, Jains and so on – the pluralist society of India is composed of various sub-groups of these religions. As a multi-religious society, it is seen that the common secular

interests of one religion are dissimilar and divergent from the interests of the followers of another religion. These dissimilarities help in the emergence of communalism which introduces various communal conflicts in the country from time to time.

14.4.1 Growth and Development

Prior to studying nature, causes and impact of Indian communalism, there is a need for knowing the roots of communalism in India. According to the ancient history of India, as there are no such communal feelings during that time, people of India lived in harmony. In those days, Indian people had a common economic and political interest. The colonial government introduced the "Divide and Rule" policy for their authoritative ruling which gave birth to communal feelings among the various religious communities of India. The Partition of Bengal (1905) and features of the separate electorate under the Government of India Act, 1919 led to modern politics in India. Thus, the root of communal consciousness emerged in India as a result of the transformation of Indian society and the growing modern politics under the impact of colonialism. For example- partition of India in 1947 in the name of two religious communities, Hindus and Muslims. In contemporary India, we have seen that religious and communal identities become exploited for electoral purposes and are used as a tool of "vote bank policy" of the political parties. In the words of Gopal Krishan, Communalism is a destructive Indian expression of religion in politics, which emphasizes the religious identity of social groups and requires political society to be organized, as a confederation of religious communities.

14.4.2 Characteristics

Let us look at some of the characteristics of Indian Communalism.

1) It is based on orthodox principles which confirm specific rules and beliefs.

2) It is an ideology which includes social, economic and political aspects for its reflection.

3) It is a result of the promotion of the specific interest of the community in maintaining its separate identity.

4) It considers own religious community as superior to other religious communities.

5) It leads to mutual distrust and disharmony among the communities as it fosters the interests of a section of the people against society as a whole.

6) It affects the root of democracy, secularism and national integration.

7) It combines religion with politics as it tries to achieve separate political identity.

8) In a positive manner, it helps in the protection and promotion of the interests of a particular community.

9) Sometimes it uses extremist strategies such as the use of violence against the other religious communities.

10) It is also seen that extreme form of communalism claims nationhood for the particular community and raise the status of a sovereign State. For example- demand of the Muslim League for Pakistan as a separate nation.

Stop and Read

Factors that encouraged the growth of Communalism in India by **A. P. Avasthi**:

1) Communal political parties and organizations

2) Minority appeasement policy by political parties

3) Communal appeal to the voters in elections

4) Media, literature and textbooks having a communal slant

---

5) Separation and isolationism among Muslims

6) Economic and educational backwardness among a big minority group that is Muslims

7) Aggressive Hindu chauvinism

8) Political opportunism among Political parties

9) "Divide and Rule" policy of the British

14.4.3 Causes

Communalism of India is a result of various causes rising in Indian society from time to time. Now we will discuss the causes of growing communalism in India-

1) **Divide and Rule Policy:**

   The "Divide and Rule" policy of British created distinction among the people of India. Indian people became against each other- Hindu against Muslim, upper caste against lower caste etc.

2) **Orthodoxy:**

   The orthodox members of each community always strive to create feelings among other members of the community that their community have a distinct identity with own cultural patterns, laws and thought. This kind of feelings has created a hindrance to accepting the concept of secularism.

3) **The Tragedy of India's partition:**

   Partition of India in 1947 was based on two religion- Hindus and Muslims. Although Pakistan was created for Muslims, a large number of Muslims still stays in secular India. This has created a large division between the Hindus and the Muslims.

4) **Linking religion with politics:**

   The politicisation of religion becomes one of the major tools of "vote bank policy" in the Indian States; which has affected the secular notion of the Country.

5) **Communal Political Parties:**

Religion becomes the ideology of a number of political parties in the Indian States. For example- Akali Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Hindu Mahasabha and so on. For the communal composition of the constituency, candidates are selected by different political parties on behalf of own community interest.

6) **Social Cause:**

The two major communities of India- the Hindus and the Muslims become suspicious towards each other as the social institutions, customs and practices of these two communities are so divergent.

7) **Psychological Causes:**

The psychology of some Hindus and Muslims become a hindrance to establishing secularism in India. Some of the Hindus feel that Muslims are fundamentalist and unpatriotic. On the other hand, most Muslims feel that they are treated inferior to Hindus in India.

8) **Conversion:**

Large scale conversion activities have been taken by Muslims and Christians which affect adversely leading to growing communalism among Indians.

9) **Mass Media effect:**

The news relating to communal tension in any part of India is immediately spread in the whole country through mass media. Many times they fail to update the actual news.

Thus, communalism spreads in the land of diversity (lingual, ethnic, cultural and racial diversity) as a threat to the Country's unique **"Unity in Diversity"** model.

14.4.4 Impact

The impact of Communalism is dependent on the nature of the communal problem. Every communal problem has different reasons behind it.

Indian communalism has divided secular and unified India on the basis of religion, language, caste, race, territory and ethnic origin. It has led to communal riots and violence among the communities of India. Communalism has been resulting in an unhealthy social, economic and political development in the Indian society. The communal conflict of India becomes the issue of unfavourable reaction and criticism in the countries of West Asia and Africa; which adversely affect the diplomatic relation of our country with them. According to M.K. Gandhi, Communalism is not only anti-national but also anti-Hinduism in the case of Hindu Communalism and anti-Islam in the case of Muslim Communalism.

Stop and Read

Bipan Chandra had identified three types of Communalism:

1) **Liberal Communalism-** Those who have common secular interests, they are under Liberal Communalism. Communalism is strong among them.

2) **Communal Communalism-** When different religions have different secular interests they are divergent from the others; this is called Communal Communalism.

3) **Extreme Communalism-** Different communities have different interests and hostile to others; this is known as Extreme Communalism.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How is religion politicised in India?

----

2. Outline communalism with reference to your locality.

14.5 COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

As a diversified Country, each community of India tries to preserve and promote its own interest. When the interests of two communities clash; communal violence takes place. In this way, the growing communalism in India has directly resulted in communal conflict and violence in the various parts of the country, creating bitterness and a sense of insecurity among the masses.

14.5.1 What is Communal Violence?

Let us discuss the concept of communal violence. communal violence is a form of violence which includes hatred, conflict, enmity, riots, revenge and other forms of tensions between communities of different religious faith and ethnic origin. It involves mobilization between two different communities against each other and taking the feelings of hostility, emotional fury, exploitation, social discrimination and social neglect. Ram Ahuja added that while Communalism is an Ideology, "communal violence is a demonstration of this ideology".

After studying the meaning of Communal Violence, we can say that it is the direct result of communalism. It is mostly found in the states of Africa, Asia, America, Europe and Australia. It is known by different name in the different parts of the world such as ethnic violence, non-state conflict, violent civil or minorities unrest, mass racial violence, social or inter-communal violence, ethno-religious violence and so on.

14.5.2 Major Communal Violence in India

communal violence is one among the most unfortunate mark of India's history. We will identify below some major communal violence of India:

1) **Partition of India, 1947-**

   After the partition of India on the basis of religion, people from both religions were forced to move from both sides of the Border. Hatred was seen everywhere in the country between Hindus and Muslims. Problems of refugees and their rehabilitation became the biggest challenge for independent India.

2) **Ethnic Cleansing of Kashmiri Hindu Pundits, 1989-**

   Kashmir is well known for the reflection of love, peace and harmony through brotherhood and unity among Hindus, Muslims and other communities living there. The Extremist Islamic Terrorism led mass killing and the large scale departure of Kashmiri Pundits from the Valley in 1989. This incident had created serious unrest among the people of Kashmir.

3) **Babri Masjid Demolition in Ayodhya, 1992-**

   Hindu mythology states Ayodhya as the birthplace of Lord Rama and that's why it is a sacred place for Hindus. But, Mughal General Mir Baqi had built a Mosque in Ayodhya in the name of Mughal ruler Babur. Since then there is a big controversy among Hindus and Muslims regarding the place of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. In 1992, due to some political mobilization, an atmosphere was raised among Hindu religious group from

various parts of India in support of demolishing Babri Masjid and building Ram Temple there.

4) **Communal Violence in Assam, 2012-**

   In 2012, ethnic cleansing took place in Assam which is home of distinguished tribal population and ethnic diversity. Ethnic clashes between Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims developed into a riot in Kokrajhar district of Assam in July 2012.

5) **Muzaffarnagar Violence, 2013-**

   There is an ethnic clash between the Jat and Muslim community of Muzaffarnagar because of some suspicious post on social media platform Facebook in 2013.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS
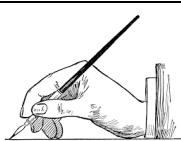
1. When do you call violence as communal?

----

2. Outline an example of communal violence from outside India.

14.6 SUMMING UP

It is difficult to make a concluding remark on communalism as its nature and causes differ from place to place. In the Indian context, communalism has a significant role to play in the social and political aspects of the country. While on the one hand, Indian constitutional

secular democracy promises equality and justice to all its citizens, irrespective of caste, class, creed, religion or race, on the other hand, communalism still continues to be a belief system and ideology among most of the Indians. Communalism in India, therefore, deserves very particular attention.

14.7 QUESTIONS

1. What is Communalism? Explain the causes of Communalism in India.
2. How Communalism has affected the 'Unity in Diversity' model of India?
3. Outline two major Communal Violence of India.
4. What kind of measures can be taken for eradicating Communalism in the Indian States?

14.8 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

Ahmed, I. (1969). Secularism and Communalism. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4 (28/30): 1137-1158.

Ahuja, R. (2014). *Social Problems in India*. Rawat Publication, New Delhi.

Avasthi, A. P. (2017). *Indian Government and Politics*. Lakshmi Narain Agarwal.

Bhambari, C.P. (1990). State and Communalism in India. *Social Scientist*, 18 (8/9):22-26.

Chandra, B. (1984). *Communalism in Modern India*. Vikash Publishing House, New Delhi.

Chandra, B. (1990). Communalism and the State: Some issues in India. *Social Scientist*, 18 (8/9):38-47.

DeVotta, N. (2002). Demography and Communalism in India. *Journal of International Affairs Editorial Board*, 56 (1):53-70.

Dixit, P. (1974). *Communalism: A struggle for power*. Orient Longman, New Delhi.

Ghosh, S. K. (1987). *Communal Riots in India*. Ashish Publication, New Delhi.

Hasnain, N. (2010). *Indian Society and Culture: Continuity and Change*. New Royal Book Company.

IGNOU, M.A. in Sociology materials.

Jayaram, N. & Saberwa, S. (2011). *Social Conflict*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Kothari, R. (1970). *Politics in India*. Orient Longman, New Delhi.

NCERT. Class X. Civics Textbook.

Seth, S. C. (2002). *Communalism: A socio-political study (1947)*. Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi.

Shankarao, C.N. (2004). *Sociology of Indian Society*. S. Chand & Company PVT.LTD., New Delhi.

Vanaik, A. (1997). *Communalism Contested: Religion, Modernity and Secularization*. Vistaar Publication, New Delhi.

https://egyankosh.ac.in
https://www.jstor.org
https://study.com
https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in

****

The Centre for Distance and Online Education was established in 2011 with the aim of disseminating knowledge and imparting quality education through open and distance learning mode. The Centre offers various post-graduate, undergraduate, diploma and certificate programmes in emerging areas of science and technology, social sciences, management and humanities with flexible system to cater to the needs of the learners who otherwise cannot avail the regular mode of education. The basic focus of the centre is to prepare human resources of the region and the country by making them skilled and employable.

CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND ONLINE EDUCATION
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY
(A Central University)
Tezpur, Assam - 784028
INDIA

Visit us at: www.tezu.ernet.in/tu_codl