

Unit 21

Religion and Politics

Contents

- 21.1 Introduction
- 21.2 Understanding Religion and Politics
- 21.3 Approaches to the study of Religion
- 21.4 Religion and Politics in India : A Historical Overview
- 21.5 Religion and Politics in Contemporary India
- 21.6 Secularism
- 21.7 Fundamentalism
- 21.8 Conclusion
- 21.9 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- define the concept of religion and politics;
- describe some of the major approaches to the study of religion;
- explain the interrelationship between religion and politics in India historically; and
- outline the major aspects of religion and politics in contemporary India.

21.1 Introduction

In this paper the term religion is being used in the Weberian. It is emphasised that 'sacred' notions have always made their presence felt in the domain of the secular. Thus seen, religion is viewed as a form of orientation to the secular world in the sense that it is a source of knowledge, values and norms of a society. Religion thus viewed is an ideology, a system of thought, located in the domain of the sacred. Though pertaining to the 'other world' and often associated with the 'internal' and the 'spiritual domain' of the individual and the collectivity, it has to do with the individuals and collectivities existing in 'this world', in that it offers a way to negotiate life.

The definition of politics is not as complex as that of religion. It is generally accepted that politics is a set of activities deeply entrenched in 'this world,' the secular world. These activities are those which are geared towards the attainment, acquisition, maintenance and consolidation of power. Political activities also include those which use symbols and metaphors of the sacred domain to determine and gain ends that are not religious. These are directed towards creating distinct spaces for communities implicit in which is a definite striving to attain power. In this unit you will learn about the relation between religion and politics in societies. We begin by explaining the meaning of religion and politics before trying to understand their relationship.

21.2 Understanding Religion and Politics

Religion and politics are inseparable; they have always been intertwined in a complex way. According to Romila Thapar.

"...The relationship between religion and politics had complex dimensions in the past and cannot be explained away by a simple monocausal explanation that reduces everything to a minimalist religious motivation. Religion is a

private matter so long as it remains within the thoughts of a person. When these thoughts are expressed publicly and inspire public action such as building monuments for worship and organizing fellow believers into carrying out political and social functions, then religion ceases to be an exclusively personal matter. It is no longer a matter of faith since its formulation as an organization of believers has a bearing on the functioning of the society. Its religious identity incorporates these functions that are expressed through its institutions such as monasteries, *mathas*, temples, mosques, Khangahs churches, synagogues, *gurudwaras*. Their role has to be assessed not merely in terms of the religion with which they are associated, but also in the context of their functions as institutions of society..." (Thapar, 2004: 229-30).

How do we understand religion? Religion is understood in different ways by different people. Philosophers, theologians and sociologists have different perspectives to understand religion. However, sociologists have understood religion as primarily a social phenomenon. Every society has religious beliefs, rites and organization. Religion very often influences our understanding of everyday life. In many societies religion affects the way we relate to each other. Our religious beliefs often guide our social interaction. Religion can be a unifying factor in some societies. However, in some societies it can be a matter of conflict.

"Religion broadly refers to:

- a) experiences of human beings as a collectivity in all parts of the world.
- b) Relationships between human beings, probably in all walks of life, and
- c) To all facts of everyday human life, for example, education, politics, economy etc."

(Kennedy, M 1992 : pp. 9 in IGNOU, BDP elective Course, ESO-05 : Society and Religion, Block-1)

Therefore, it is very clear that religion is a social phenomena. It is related with politics, as mentioned earlier in an inextricable manner. Since, it is a social phenomena and part of the culture of society which we inherit, often we grow up being socialized into the religious beliefs, values and practices of our parents. It is another thing that after maturity we may reject this religion and take up another or simply not be part of any religion.

Religion as a phenomenon is very difficult to define, but central to the notion of religion is the idea of the 'sacred' as opposed to the 'secular' and the 'profane'. It is a "... particular class of phenomenon, a kind of knowledge, a varied form of activities in space and time and a typology of roles and persons..." (Madan, T.N. 1991:2).

We explore the relationship between religion and politics in four sections. The first section provides an overview of the various sociological and anthropological approaches to religion, and locates the perception of religion in this framework; the second section deals with the relationship between religion and politics in India historically; the third section describes the manifestations of this relationship in contemporary India in the form of communalism, rise of secularism and fundamentalism, religious nationalism, and the fourth section forms the conclusion.

21.3 Approaches to the study of religion

Study of religion as an important element of social life has been the focus of attention of several sociologists and social anthropologists. Here below is an overview of some of the major approaches to religion.

i) The Functional Approach

The basic assumptions of this approach is that parts of a society are linked to each other through its values and norms and that each part of the society fulfils a positive function for the maintenance of the total society. Religion furnishes the consensual and integrative framework for society. For Durkheim the 'sacred' was the most fundamental religious idea or phenomenon. According to him...

"A religion is an unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called church all those who adhere to them" (1965:62)

Important, from our perspective is (a) the aspect of 'things set apart' and (b) the idea of a moral community, which is an eminently collective thing (ibid: 63). What is 'set apart' is not just supernatural beings, but also persons with supernatural or magical powers, places (temples, mosques, churches), certain performances and events (such as births, deaths, marriages, eclipses etc). The term 'set apart' means that which is other than routine or ordinary.

The notion of the 'sacred' becomes sharper when contrasted with the 'profane' or the 'secular'. Durkheim emphasises that this is the very core of religious phenomena.

He says, ..."All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of things, real and ideal, of which men think into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words 'profane' and sacred (ibid: 52).

Durkheim was not interested in seeking the historical origins of religion but was concerned with the sociological causes for the existence of religion, which he found in the human need for social life. To him religion was a collective phenomenon, which arose from social interaction. He studied the Australian aborigines, agreeing with the prevailing scholarly opinion that aboriginal totemism was the simplest, 'the elementary' form of the religious life. He was of the opinion that if one succeeded in discovering the origin of totemic beliefs, it was possible to discover at the same time "...the causes leading to the rise of the religious sentiment in humanity..." (ibid: 195).

Presenting a detailed discussion of totemic gatherings among these aborigines, he located the roots of religious beliefs and practices in social interaction.

Durkheim concluded that 'the collective and anonymous force of the clan, the God of the clan, the totemic principle can therefore be nothing other than the clan itself (ibid: 236). Generalizing from the Australian case - the elementary form of the religious life - Durkheim came to consider society as the source and sustainer of religious sentiments and structures and, therefore, God, its members, creating among them 'the sensation of a perpetual dependence' (ibid: 237). Thus Durkheim's interpretation of religion derives religion from the very nature of social life.

Reflection and Action 21.01

You have just read about Durkheim's concept of religion and society. Talk to five members of your family/community about how they describe the essential elements of their religion and how it is practiced in everyday life.

Write a report of one page on "Perspective on Religion and Society in My Community." Compare your note with those of other students at your Study Center.

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown focused on the role of religion in the maintenance of social solidarity in his sociological analysis of ritual. He was influenced by W. Robertson Smith in his emphasis upon rituals rather than beliefs in the study of religion. He followed Durkheim closely, but narrowly. He along with others, such as Malinowski, of the British school of sociological functionalism was concerned with the question of how religion anywhere and at any time contributes to the maintenance of social solidarity According to him...

"An orderly social life amongst human beings depends upon the presence in the minds of the members of society of certain sentiments, which control the behaviour of the individual in relation to others. Rites can therefore be shown to have specific social functions, when...they have for their effect to regulate, maintain and transmit from one generation to another sentiments on which the constitution of society depends..."(1952:157).

E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1965) disagrees with Radcliffe Brown. His monograph on the Azande (1937) shows a shift in the explanation of supernatural phenomena from function to meaning. Witchcraft among the Azande was explained by him as a mode of causality for human misfortune. In his later work, 'Nuer Religion' (1956), the same shift from straightforward functionalism to the problem of meaning can be noticed, though he did not go into an explicit phenomenological analysis. He was close to Durkheim when he interpreted the Nuer religious thought and ritual in terms of social order. In the study of religious beliefs and practices in Gujarat (1973) David Pocock is concerned with the problem of subjective meaning and offers an alternative to narrowly functionalist approach.

Venugopal (1998) thinks religion can be functional at pragmatic level as well. Human beings face stressful situations in everyday life, such as, those of sickness, misfortune, death etc, which disrupt the normal tenor of a household. In such situations religion, ritual, magic provide a kind of solace which wealth and privilege can not give (1998: 91).

Merton (1968) and Parsons (1975) have referred to the functional roles of religion. Merton shows a definite relationship between Puritanic ethic and the rise of science in the seventeenth century England. Hard work and commitment to the improvement of this world, etc., which came from Puritan faith were effective in developing scientific temper. In other words, rationality of religion influenced the lives of scientists. Robert Boyle, John Ray, Newton and many others were not only noted scientists but were also devoted to new ethics. They contributed to the improvement of the material world through their scientific researches as a tribute to the glory of God (Venugopal, 1998: 91).

Talcott Parsons demonstrated that the normative order of society in the West rested on the religious premises of Christianity; it inspired voluntaristic kind of action, wherein individuals are committed to the welfare of others in society (ibid).

Functionalism focuses on the consensual rather than a dialectical pattern of growth. It looks at the role of religion mainly in terms of the present and does not address the problem of subjective meaning and the historical and cultural aspects of religion.

ii) Weber and the phenomenological approach

Ever since the publication of Evans-Pritchard's 'Nuer Religion' sociological and social anthropological studies of religion have increasingly moved in the direction of phenomenology, 'a trend anticipated in the work of Max Weber,' (Madan, 1991:6).

Box 21.1 : Phenomenology

If you recall back to what you had learnt about 'phenomenology' in your core course MSO-002 Research Methodologies And Methods, Book-1, page 81, you will know what phenomenology means. However, to again refresh your memory, we explain this concept and theoretical approach to understand social reality again.

Phenomenology as a term gained wide acceptance first in philosophy as a result of its use by Hegel in his work *Phenomenology of Mind* 1897. But the main source of the phenomenological tradition in modern times is to be found in the writings of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). "the dominant concerns of Husserl's phenomenology are expressed in the root of the word itself, derived from the conjunction of the noun form of 'phainama', to appear, and logos to reason. The origin of human reason is to be discovered in the structure of appearance in the basic ordering of human experience". (Mitchell, Dumcan C.(ed.) 81-141) Thus, phenomenology concerns itself with the source of knowledge and how human beings derive knowledge.

Weber's sociology of religion provides an alternative perspective to Durkheim's which emphasises the 'exteriority,' and 'coerciveness of 'social facts,' which are also collective representations. The essence of Weber's sociology of religion lies in his emphasis on an 'interpretive understanding' of social reality, leading to causal explanation. From this perspective an understanding of 'religious behaviour... can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, ideas and purposes of the individuals concerned - in short, from the viewpoint of the religious behaviour's 'meaning' (1964:1).

Weber studied preliterate as well as the so-called world religions (viz., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam) in order to examine, among other things, the relations between religious beliefs and practices on the one hand, and the secular domain of politics, economics, sexuality, etc on the other. He is unlike Durkheim who paid particular attention to the relation between it and the religious milieu and did not look at economy. In "Protestant Ethic and the sprit of capitalism", weber argued for a causal relationship between the Protestant ethics and the rise of rational capitalism in Western Europe.

Weber said that, "only in the modern Western world that rational capitalistic enterprises with fixed capital, free labour, the rational specialization and combination of functions, bound together in a market economy are to be found... and that economic grounds alone do not provide a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon" (Weber 1947: 279)

He looked at the Calvinist ethics of Protestantism and asserted that the crucial elements of this ethic were the ideas of predestination and 'calling,' i.e., the notion that one's fate and one's work are both predetermined by God. This idea of predestination generated anxiety amongst the Calvinists. In order to cope with this anxiety, he Calvinist put his faith in the hope that 'God helps those who help themselves. Thus he himself creates his own salvation, or...the conviction of it' (1930:115).

This led to worldly asceticism, i.e., exercise of restraint on immediate gratification, which had the unintended consequence of accumulation of capital and expanded investment, which nurtured capitalism. It was thus that the Christian ascetics 'strode in the market place of life' (ibid: 154).

Thus in Europe capitalism was an aspect of the process of rationalization, which was facilitated by the theological debates within Christianity. Weber went beyond Europe to examine the economic ethics associated with the other world religions. A basic conclusion he drew after examining the religions in India was that 'Indian religiosity is the cradle of those religious ethics which

have abrogated the world, theoretically, practically and to the greatest extent' (1958:323). However, other social scientists, like Milton Singer (1972) and others who studied religion in India found that this opinion did not hold true at the field level. Singer's study proved that Hindu businessmen had the capacity to compartmentalise their religious life from their business life. Jainism and Buddhism both have elements, which are closer to the ethics of profit and enterprise.

Weber distinguished between 'mysticism' or the attitude of abandoning worldly involvement, and 'rationally active asceticism,' which is this worldly and seeks to master the world. The central concerns of Weber's sociology of religion, therefore, included the related questions of the future of religion and the nature of human existence in modern society. To him the religious fate of mankind is constructed consciously by human beings 'themselves through the world images they fashion and the social institutions they construct. Weber had an enormous influence on contemporary works in the field.

Peter Berger looks upon religion as that special human activity through which comprehensive, meaningful, sacred cosmos is constructed. (Berger 1973). Clifford Geertz, a cultural anthropologist views religion as a cultural system - as a system of symbols implicit in which is a world view and a related code of conduct. Both these social scientists stress the importance of interpretive understanding. For Berger, religion is a way to find 'meaning' in life, to bestow legitimacy on social life and to help it to remove chaos. For Geertz, religion makes human life meaningful in the midst of moral perplexities and social conflicts.

iii) Structuralist Approach

A major contemporary theoretical development in the study of religion derives from the structuralist movement in anthropology initiated by Claude Levi - Strauss.

Levi-Strauss subsumes the study of the 'sacred' under forms of thought, modes of classification, mythologies etc. He disagrees with the identification of 'totemism' with religious forms. To him totems are rather modes of classification. (See Levi-Strauss 1963 & 1966). He asserts that the sacred objects owe their significance neither to the narrow considerations of utility, nor to their social nor moral character, but to their availability as concrete manifestations or embodiments of abstract ideas. The primitives do not '*think*' differently from the *civilized* but they *symbolize* differently. Religious systems, comprising myths and rites, are symbolic systems of signs, of communication, which establish through analogical reasoning continuities between nature and culture and between cosmic order and social life.

Louis Dumont has been one of the most distinguished exponents of the structuralist approach in Indianist studies. His 'Homo Hierarchicus' (1967) identifies religious values - notions of pure and impure - as the very foundation of the caste system.

In the works of both Levi-Strauss and Dumont, social phenomena or cultural facts, appear above 'the threshold of consciousness' as manifest expressions of fundamental 'latent' structures. The task of structural analysis is to explicate this relationship and to show that societies differ not in terms of fundamental constituent elements but in the way these elements are interrelated in various patterns.

Veena Das (1977), and JPS Uberoi (1996) are some of the other social scientists, who have made a structural analysis of religion in India. They present interpretation of ritual in terms of certain fundamental categories of thought

(such as time, space, purity, power and auspiciousness) and in relation to the structure of social relations.

Common to these approaches is the fact that in all of them religion is regarded as an important element of social life. The system of beliefs, rituals and practices in themselves are not significant; they are significant only in the way these are manifested and actualized in interactions between individuals and groups in a society. It is sociologically significant as a basis for social interactions in the process of which, through the use of symbols, metaphors, language and rhetoric strategies it demarcates boundaries, creates distinct often-conflicting identities.

Thus perceived religion has always been an important basis of identity and marker of boundaries. The substantive content cosmological, theological and metaphysical of religion *per-se* is not significant, it assumes significance when it is used by individuals and collectivities to gain political ends.

This paper, approaches religion not in terms of the substantive content of any particular religion or with its ritual aspect. It rather approaches it in terms of its relationship with the secular world. What is viewed as significant is the dynamic aspect of the relationship between the two realms. In other words the focus is on practical modes of being rather than on the abstract realms of value. In the words of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who breaks up the omnibus category of religion into *faith* and tradition - that is matters 'internal' and 'external' - *a religious tradition' is a part of this world, it is a product of human activity; it is diverse, it is fluid, it grows, it changes, it accumulates..'* (in Madan 1998). Religion is viewed in its aspect of a religious tradition, where it is presented as an ideology operating in particular historical setting, by interested groups such as political parties or by charismatic individuals to achieve vested interests.

Box 21.2: A Millenarian Movement : Birsa Munda (1874-1901)

One of the best known millenarian movements in tribal India was the Birsa Munda movement (1874-1901) in Chotanagpur, Bihar. The movement among the Munda tribals led by their leader Birsa was typical of the resistance and revitalisation movements in the latter half of the 19th Century. It represents the struggle and aspirations of his people and sowed the first stirrings of nationalism among them. It is characterised by a combination of a religious and political movement and by an urge to recreate the old world which had disappeared under the impact of colonial rule in India. (Singh, K.S. 1983. Birsa Munda and his movement 1874-1901, A Study of a millenarian movement in Chotanagpur. Oxford University Press: Calcutta)

Seen thus, religion in this sense is an important social force, which operates in society and contributes to its constitution.

Reflection and Action 21.2

Do you know of a socio-religious movement which has made a difference to the life of the people who follow it in a socio-cultural sense, for eg. Bhakti Movement in the past, Birsa Munda movement of the tribals in Chotanagpur, Bihar etc.

Write a report of one page about the social, political and cultural background of this religious movement and its present state. Discuss the report with your Academic Counsellor and peers at your Study Center.

21.4 Religion and Politics in India: Historical Overview.

When we examine the history of India from the ancient times to the contemporary, we find that in India the patterns of interaction between religion and politics has varied from time to time and it has had varied social

consequences. (Sharma, T.R. 1988 : 41). Sharma argues that in India one element which is all pervasive throughout its history, though in varying degrees, is the use of religion for the fulfillment of political ends and aspirations. In India religion always served politics and politics has often served religion. Religion was never able to fully extricate itself from politics nor could politics ever rid itself fully of religion. Thus, one finds politicisation of religion in some manifest or latent form at all stages of our history. He says that in India historically we find this interaction between religion and politics in four phases. First phase extended from Indus valley civilisation to the advent of Islam, the second from the advent of Islam to the Indian muting of 1857, the third from 1857 to Indian Independence in 1947, and the fourth from 1947 onwards. While there was close interplay between religion and politics during all these phases, the nature, the intensity and the dynamics of this interaction was different during each of these phases.

The sacred and the secular perspectives have been inextricably interwoven in pre-colonial India. Indian society has witnessed continuous changes affecting the political systems, occupational structures, culture and religion. Religions in India have been the prime source of tension, innovation and even modernization (see Venugopal, 1998). The use of religious idioms has been important in initiating change in India, particularly in political movements and reform movements.

The beginning of the nineteenth century has been marked by a number of social reform movements. This section looks at some of these political and social reform movements.

Though the British rule brought about far-reaching changes in administration, transport, communication and economy, it also disrupted traditional social ties and fragmented culture. It was at this point of time that Ram Mohan Roy in Bengal, Dayanand Saraswati in the North, Jyotirao Phule in Maharashtra introduced reforms in education and socio-religious pursuits and also provided a perspective on national life. They drew upon Indian tradition as well as Western knowledge. They were inspired by the rationalist and the liberal doctrines, according to which the basic unit of society was an individual perceived as citizen and as a human being. They used the Western methods of organization in sponsoring schools and colleges for men and women. Their aim was to raise the national consciousness in terms of culture. These reform movements led to a mass awakening which paved the way for the political awakening in the twentieth century. The struggle for independence was in the initial stages a product of educated middle-classes in Bengal, Punjab and Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu to mention a few states. In addition to liberal education, a religious upsurge stimulated the youth to participate in the freedom struggle. (Venugopal, 1998).

In Maharashtra, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, revived on a large scale, the Ganapati puja which then served as venue for political meetings. In Bengal, Ras Behari Ghosh, Bipin Chandra Pal and their associates used religious symbols centred around the Durga Puja to develop a political consciousness. Apart from this, socio-religious plays in these and other provinces of India conveyed political messages to the public. During the national Independence Movement, Gandhiji used the Hindu notion of 'Ram Raya' to unify, integrate and mobilise a majority of the Indian population.

In post 1947 India the relationship between religion and politics are manifested in the growth of communalism, development of secularism and rise of fundamentalism, which is the focus in the next section.

21.5 Religion and Politics in Contemporary India

Today the debate in India is primarily focussed on communalism, secularism and fundamentalism/ religious nationalism: Religion and Politics in contemporary India can be *** as undergoing a different phase of *** where interests other than "regions" guide actions of indurd.

Communalism it must be asserted at the outset is not in the main about religion.

"...It can be defined..." as an ideology which envisages the religious community as a political group committed to the protection and promotion of its social and economic interests and cultural values. It is thus a substitute for nationalism. The territory occupied (or sought to be occupied) by the group is seen as 'holy land' or 'land of the pure' which is what the words '*Pakistan* and '*Khalistan*' mean. As pointed out by Louis Dumont, the religious element that enters into the composition of communalism seems to be but the shadow of religions, i.e. religion taken not as the essence and guide of life in all spheres, but only as a sign of the distinction of one human, at least virtually political group against others (Madan, 1991) In the context of India, the important question to be addressed is viz: - has the persistence of communalism in India and the persistence of communal riots, any thing to do with the substantive 'religious' contents of the conflicting religions? This section attempts to answer this question by examining the communal riots between Hindus and Muslims.

Historical analysis of Hindu-Muslim communal conflict, its causes and conditions has been highly contentious in character. According to one group of historians, (such as, Gyanendra Pandey (2000). Sandrio Freitag (1989), Ayesha Jalal (1985 etc.) Hindu-Muslim consciousness and conflict are largely modern constructions in which the British colonial rulers played a major role, either through deliberate 'divide and rule' policies or through ways in which they categorised, classified and typified the various people of India for example they categorised some tribes as criminal tribes. These constructions views of Hindu and/or Muslim communal consciousness or communalism as forms of ideology connect to class, group and elite political interests. Thus to them the growth of communal consciousness is an instrument of struggle, either against the British or between Hindus and Muslims for political advantage or supremacy. In the course of the struggle communal violence was often the result of conflicts framed within a communal discourse. They hold that communalism is a cover that hides a multiplicity of mainly political and economic causes.

The other group of historians (C.A. Bayly (1985), Gaborieau (1985) argue that there is more continuity between the past and the present, extending backward at least to the early 18th century and in some arguments to the earlier period of Moghul rule. To them inter-religious conflict and riots that resemble contemporary Hindu-Muslim conflict were present in pre-modern times. They lay greater stress on their religious significance and on the existence of strong communal identities that preceded them (Brass, 2003).

However, in modern India we still find the traces of 'divide and rule' policy of the colonial rulers of the past. The imprint that has led to a great divide' between the two largest communities of Hindus and Muslims in India keeps waxing and waning according to the political climate of the nation as well as its different religions. Brass says "Whatever the similarities, continuities and persisting idioms may be found before the 19th century, it would seem idle to over emphasise them. The consolidation of the heterogeneous Hindu and Muslim groupings in the subcontinent and the politicization of the differences between them are overwhelmingly a modern phenomenon, deeply connected

with the striving for control over the modern state apparatus, involving a claim to rightful inheritance on the part of Hindus and to self determination on the part of Muslim leaders. In the course of the struggles for power that developed during British rule, intensified in the late 19th century and culminated in the division of India in 1947, a discourse of Hindu-Muslim difference was created that has struck deep roots in both communities and acquired a partly self sustaining momentum that at the same time continues to be fed by political competition." (Brass, 2003).

Asserting that communal conflict has little to do with religion itself, but with its, use by the politicians for their vested interests, Ali Asghar Engineer, one of the most prolific writers on Hindu-Muslim riots in India, blames neither the Hindus nor Muslims as communities for the flaming of communal riots. To him it is the politicians on the one hand and the forms of economic competition between Hindus and Muslims on the other that are responsible for the eruption of communal riots. To him minor disputes are exploited by petty-minded politicians, who have no qualms in sacrificing human lives that follow upon their exploitation of such disputes for their political advantage. At times political movement themselves are the cause of violence, as in the '*Ramshila puja*' processions of militant Hindus carrying bricks to Ayodhya in the movement, to bring down the Babri Mosque there and replace it with a temple to the god Ram. These processions resulted in the eruption of riots all over the country. Thus, to Engineer, the primary cause of communal riots in India is the pursuit of political advantage at any cost. Its clear that despite all the condemnation of riots from all concerned members of the conflicting communities to the elite intellectuals to the state - the riots continue.

Brass uses Mertonian kind of functional analysis to explain this persistence. To him riots serve the interests of particular individual groups, organization and even society as a whole in concrete useful ways that are beneficial to them. Further using one of the more common uses of the term 'function' viz, that of 'use' or 'utility,' he speaks of the functional utility of the persistence of Hindu-Muslim riots in India for a wide variety of interests, groups, institutions and organizations including ultimately the state. Under these circumstances, it is not possible to produce a broad enough consensus in society to eliminate violent riots from Indian public life (ibid).

Thus, contrary to the prevailing notion that riots are spontaneous rather than planned, that they breakout either unexpectedly as a consequence of a build up of tensions that may or may not explode under fortuitous circumstances, they, to Brass, are....

"meticulously planned and coordinated from beginning to end. Rather they are dramatic productions, street theatre performances that are meant to appear spontaneous, but involve many people in a variety of roles and actions that include inciting the interest of the audience, the dramatization and enlargement of incidents into a fit subject for a performance and finally, the production of the event... [they] are dramatic productions, creations of specific persons, groups and parties, operating through institutionalized riot networks within a discursive framework of Hindu-Muslim communal opposition and antagonism, that in turn produces specific forms of political practice that make riots integral to the political process..." (ibid).

21.6 Secularism

The Partition in India with its communal holocaust and forced migration and its Independence gave rise to an intense debate about what the character of the new nation-state should be: Secular, i.e., multi-community with equal rights for all?, Socialist? or Hindu? (Pandey: 2001).

Pakistan emerged, as an overwhelming Muslim country, observing which sections of the Hindu nationalist press in India began to assert that India should be cleared of Muslims (ibid).

This was the rise of Hindu nationalism, alongside of which also arose, much more emphatically, another more inclusive nationalism, which emphasised the composite character of Indian society and refused to give the same sort of primacy to the Hindu element in India's history and self-consciousness. This was later termed as 'secular nationalism', which Nehru called as the 'real' or Indian 'Nationalism'. This was the nationalism of the Indian Constitution (ibid).

The Indian Constitution reflects a national consensus about the vision of a secular Indian polity which emerged during the national struggle. It is important to point out that secularism in the sense of the separation of the church and the state (as it means in the West) is not relevant in India. Here it implies an impartiality of the state in its dealings with citizens professing different faiths (*Sarva Dharma Sambhav*).

The emergence of a secular society in the West has been a consequence of the growth of modern industrial mode of production and advancement of scientific knowledge. While the growth of scientific knowledge leads to a decline of cognitive function of the religious and the scientific world, the rise of modern industrial societies have been accompanied with a process of differentiation whereby various parts of the society and their functions becoming increasingly specialized based on knowledge.

The notion of the secular in India is thus different from that of the West. The deviations from archetypal secularism were based on the plea made by Dr. Ambedkar that the influence of religion (Hindu), such as, caste system in this country were so vast that they covered every aspect of life, from birth to death. He said unless the state had the power, it would be impossible for our legislatures to enact any social measures, Gandhi also believed that the secular law in certain cases could be used to tackle social evils.

India's secularism bears the impact of non-dualist worldview of the Indian people as well as the impact of India's plural society and India's experience. Hence, it has been rightly described as a "canopy concept" - all-inclusive concept based on universal tolerance - in which the state has been assigned the role of a reformer of a society in which religion determines the social structure and social behaviour.

There is a growing skepticism among intellectuals about the use of secularism in India, whether secularism is good for India, particularly in the wake of social and political upheavals witnessed in the past few years.

"...The social and political turmoil in the country does not make the case for secularism weaker, it makes it stronger..." (Beteille, 2000).

The need for secularism is not because it will eliminate religious passion from human affairs, but that it may to some extent neutralize and soften its expression in public life. "...However ardently one may desire the separation of religion and politics, it is impossible in a democracy to prevent political leaders from exploiting religious sentiments or religious leaders from seeking political alliances..." (ibid).

India is both culturally and demographically different from Western countries such as Britain and France. India's religious minorities may comprise only a small proportion of the total population, but in absolute numbers they are very large. There is no question here of the differences of religious identity getting obliterated through either peaceful assimilation or forceful conversion in either the long or the short run. Thus secularism ensures that no religious

doctrine or community exercises unwarranted dominion over the other, and not only to nourish institutions that are by their nature indifferent to religious demands.

Secularism either in the sense of equal respect for all religions, or in the sense of indifference to religion in selected spheres of social life, is a philosophy of moderation, that makes it particularly compatible with democratic politics. It is undermined when political parties heighten or exploit religious differences for the mobilization of political support. (See Beteille, 2000).

21.7 Fundamentalism

Drawing upon the experience of American fundamentalists and that of Iranian revolution in 1979, Madan describes fundamentalism; as (i) affirmation of inspiration, final authority, inerrancy, and transparency of scripture as the source of belief, knowledge, morals, and manners; (ii) recognition of the reactive character of fundamentalism: it is not an original impulse as, for example, orthodoxy is, but a reaction to a perceived threat or crisis; (iii) intolerance of dissent, implying monopoly over truth...; (iv) cultural critique, that is, the idea that all is not well with social or community life as lived at a particular time; (v) appeal to tradition, but in a selective manner that establishes a meaningful relationship between the past and the present, redefining or even inventing tradition in the process; (vi) capture of political power and remodeling of the state for the achievement of the stated objectives; and (vii) charismatic leadership. (Madan, 1998: 27-28).

However, fundamentalism has been often equated with orthodoxy, revivalism, cultural nationalism, traditionalism and communalism, the latter two being particularly mixed up with fundamentalism, it would be pertinent to briefly distinguish between the three. Traditionalism as compared to fundamentalism is quietest and it is content with pursuing religion in the sacred sphere without it spilling over into other domains particularly, the political. The element of activism is common to communalism and fundamentalism, whereas the communalists have a particular 'other', for the fundamentalists it is rather a case of 'us' versus "the rest," because the 'rest' is a "general other." Moreover, fundamentalism reaches deep into its philosophical and religious roots to define its community of believers. It looks inwards and is self-producing. (Gupta 1996: 206).

It is common knowledge that long range tolerance and catholicity are an abiding general characteristic of the psyche of the people in India. In spite of the fact that it is multi-religious, multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi cultural nation, fundamentalism is alien to Indian people as a whole. By and large the Nationalist Movement at the grass roots or people's level was all-inclusive, also the Constitution of India reflects the values of National Movement.

Nevertheless, some of the seven features of fundamentalism enumerated above by Madan can be located or identified in Indian polity. There have always existed pockets or "enclaves" of fundamentalist forces among the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians in India in the past and in the contemporary times. As a matter of fact, Indian people have suffered from spasmodic onslaughts of one or the other variant of fundamentalism, specially communalism, religious nationalism and terrorism.

There are several reasons for this. But during the past five or six decades this phenomena is intimately related to the process of 'democratization' of Indian polity, leading, inter alia, to injection of doses of political 'power' and all that it means.

Further, Islamic fundamentalism has its roots in the concept of Pan-Islamism which expresses itself in the movement like *tabliqi* (conversion or proselytesation) and which in turn, fosters Hindu fundamentalism (say *shuddhi* movement).

There are also international ramifications of Pan-Islamism. For example, some Islamic states have been supporting Islamic fundamentalist forces in India. This phenomena was very prominent feature of political scene in the eighties (Meenakshi Puram conversion).

We would like to specially refer to a few instance of role of religion in contemporary Indian politics. First, a person not at all known for his, religiosity, M.A. Jinnah, the father of Pakistan argued that one did not have to be religious to appreciate the cultural differences between Islam and Hinduism. The cultural distinctiveness of Indian Islam, he stressed, constituted the rationale for a separate nation-state of Pakistan. To him Islam and Hinduism are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but are different and distinct social orders, belonging to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions....(ibid).

Now take, the rise of Sikh militancy in the eighties. "Sikh fundamentalism is a 'reactive' phenomenon. It is a defense mechanism, where aggressiveness "...is a cover for fear of the threatening other - namely, nonconformist Sikhs, secularists of all communities, and communal Hindus, and as certain process, notably heresy, modernization, cultural disintegration, and political domination..." (Madan, 1998). These are fears and anxieties which the fundamentalists would want every Sikh to have.

There is not enough space to go into the historical and political dynamics of the growth of this perceived threat to cultural identity. But briefly stated, this fear and anxiety not only found its culmination in the demand for a separate Sikh state "Khalistan," but also in the rise of fundamentalism among a cross section of Sikhs, Muslim and in the Hindu. This is also manifest in the ..."demand of some religious communities notably Sikhs, for the recognition of their 'right' to repudiate the separation of religion and politics in the conduct of their own community life..." (Madan, 1998).

21.8 Conclusion

Secular nationalism is India's acknowledged ideology, it has its roots in National movement. It implies that all religions are treated as equal in the sense that none will dominate the functioning of the state. But the term 'secular' does not mean separation of state from religion, but implies neutrality of state to all religions. Secularism, in India means religious equidistance, but not non-involvement. Here religion is not the determinant of Indians citizenship, it is their birthright.

Secular nationalism and religious nationalism have been two of the most important organizing devices for mass politics in India, which have generated passions in politics - sometime very violent. It has taken primarily two forms viz., Muslim and Hindu nationalism. Muslim nationalism emerged in the first half of the twentieth century. It led to the birth of Pakistan in 1947. Hindu nationalism could be viewed as the mirror image of Muslim nationalism. According to the Hindu nationalists, Hinduism is not only the religion of India's majority community but also what gives India its distinctive national identity; other religions must assimilate to the Hindu center. (Varshney, 2002). Hindu nationalists insist on having cultural and political primacy in shaping India's destiny and build Hindu unity politically.

In short, the Indian polity is sub-continental and complex. It has been characterised by pluralism. Since 1947 India has accepted the political culture

of democracy. In this ethos, the dynamics of the relationship between religion and politics has raised many problem regarding secularism, rise of communalism, religious nationalism and fundamentalism. Above all it has even raised the sensitive question of the nature of national identity of India -what is India? And who is an Indian?

21.9 Further Reading

Durkheim, Emile, 1965 (1915). *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Translated by J.W, Swain, Fdree Press, New York.

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



Unit 22

Religion and Culture

Contents

- 22.1 Introduction
- 22.2 Culture : Meaning and Definition
- 22.3 Religion : Meaning and Definition
- 22.4 Theoretical Explanation : Bond between Religion and Culture
- 22.5 Sociological Explanation : The three Approaches to the understanding of sacred and the Secular Order
- 22.6 Culture and Religion in India
- 22.7 Conclusion
- 22.8 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

After reading this unit, it is expected that you will be able to:

- provide the definition and meaning of the concept of culture and religion;
- discuss the theoretical explanation of the bond between culture and religion;
- describe the three classical sociological approaches towards the understanding of the sacred and the secular or profane order;
- outline some of the other approaches to understand culture and religion; and
- explain the relationship between culture and religion in India.

22.1 Introduction

Both philosophy and sociology, prominently among social sciences, continue to explore why all cultures have religious beliefs and practices, and why they feel strongly about them. All societies - traditional, modern and postmodern - practice some form of religion and religion is held as an important component of society everywhere. Even in some 'socialist' states, where religion is expected to play only a marginal role if any, religion has shown a remarkable tenacity. It has been observed that notwithstanding ban on practicing religion in public life in such nation states, people practice some or the other type of religion here as well. Recent political and cultural developments in the leftist 'socialist' world have demonstrated the importance of religion as a significant social institution in no uncertain terms. For example in Poland during the 1990's a Catholic Political leader Les Walescha was instrumental in bringing down the communist regime.

In a society as diverse and heterogeneous as India, the multiplicity of religions, cults, sects and divine belief systems. Indian culture has always placed high premium on its systems of faith and religious observance. Therefore, a systematic sociological discussion on the nature of relationship between culture and religion assumes significance in our context. Such a discussion, however, should take into consideration the wide-ranging and scholarly approaches and conceptual viewpoints on the nature of such relationships. This kind of a discussion becomes sociologically fruitful when it is placed within the global framework of sociology of religion from where lessons can be drawn to understand the Indian situation.

It is, of course, equally true that there is a notable number of non-believers in all societies including those where religion finds the political and economic support of the ruling elite. The moot question often raised by sociologists is *why some individuals and groups believe in and practice a religion devoutly, while others in the same society or culture are skeptical about religion*. This also raises the issue of the complex relationship between the two vital concepts in sociology, namely, religion and culture. Since a pretty long period of time it has been proved without reservation that religion is a complex phenomenon especially when considered in the total societal - rather than individual - context and hence this topic deserves a close and in-depth attention of social scientists. This unit intends to discuss the moot issues related to the multifaceted issue of the relationship between culture and religion at the conceptual level and then to understand the Indian scenario in the light of this belief.

The discussion on the topic 'religion and culture' has been an important debate simply because religion is understood to be a critical dimension of all societies today *as it always has been*. In spite of the processes of urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation in the post-industrial context, religion and its practices touch almost all aspects of contemporary human life. The sociology of religion seeks to understand religion in its varied manifestations as a social institution, as a cultural practice, and as a pattern of beliefs and activities that are shaped by prevalent societal conditions and which, in turn, shape these conditions. Although recent developments such as secularisation and globalisation have challenged several aspects of religious practices all over the world, *religiosity* is still a dominant characteristic of contemporary society. In recent decades, it is not uncommon to realise that countries at times are divided into distinct blocks (such as Christian or Islamic nations) on the basis of religions they support and maintain. What is more, such a distinction also breeds inward animosity and acrimony, if not outwardly hatred, towards those who *do not belong*.

The sociological discussion on the relationship between culture and religion becomes important also for its historical worth. Many prominent intellectuals of the modern social science era opposed organised and institutionalised religion. In a sense, the basic identity of the modern intellectual advances in Europe was formed in the movement for liberation of society and culture from the dogmas of the church that had ruled medieval Europe. This movement was characterised then as the confrontation of scientific temper with doctrinaire character of religion and religious establishment. The progressive intellectuals of the period when sociology was born were solidly in revolt against dogmatic pursuit of religious belief system. They were ready to build a cultural system bereft of religious deliberations.

All these direct to the need for a concentrated debate on the relationship between culture and religion. Such a discourse should take place in the context of individual's functioning as a member of society. Such an attempt will be made in the next few pages with the help of vast sociological literature available on this topic.

The famous argument on the Indian 'sacred cow' by the cultural ecology school of anthropology is worth remembering in this context. The Hindu prohibition on cow slaughter much against the problem of severe malnutrition in India is the case in point. Marvin Harris (1975) demonstrated that live cattle play a very vital role in the Indian ecological system. Close association between religious practices on the one hand and cultural and ecological factor on the other are the issues that are presented here. This kind of sociological insight into the relationship between culture and religion in India needs to be augmented to understand this society more specifically. The exceedingly complex relationship between human behaviour and the nature can be understood

better if one attempts to understand the relationship between religion and culture. Essentially, both the cultural and the religious systems as subsystems of Indian society function within the broad social framework.

22.2 Culture : Meaning and Definition

The concept of culture has rightly received prime attention in sociological research owing to its centrality in understanding the nature and performance of the social arrangement called 'society'. Culture is probably one of the most discussed and debated topics in sociological literature because of its central location in the study of individual in society. This concept has attracted the attention of sociologists, cultural anthropologists, literature scholars and social psychologists among others in understanding human social behaviour. With its multifaceted and multidimensional features, the study of culture has gained increasing importance over the last few decades.

In ordinary speech the word culture is often used to refer to sophisticated tastes in art, literature, music, and so on. The sociological use of this term is much wider, for it includes the entire way of life of a society. Hence the relationship between culture and religion is very close. Culture sometimes is explained in terms of material and non-material. While artifacts such as books, pens, schools, factories, wheels, etc. represent material culture, more abstract creations such as language, ideas, religious belief, customs, myths and so on constitute the non-material culture.

Like the explanations, the definition of the term culture also is wide-ranging. Culture has been defined in broad terms as 'a design for living' (Kluckhohn, 1949) or 'a set of mechanisms - plans, recipes, rules, roles, constructions or what may be described in the computer terminology as 'programming for social behaviour' (Geertz, 1978). Both the definitions point out to the vitality and significance of culture in society. Culture points out to the human way of adapting to the environment, a design for living acquired through learning.

Culture is achieved or acquired and not innate or ascribed. It is obtained through human socialisation - the continuous and ongoing process of interaction and learning through which we acquire a personal identity and social skills to adjust and develop. The content of this process of acquisition carried forward from one human collectivity to the next. In other words, culture is transmitted from one generation to another. It should be noted that what kind of individual we become is strongly influenced by enculturation - the immersion in a culture to the point where that particular design for living seems 'only natural' and given inevitably. Most of us do not question our cultural practices and do not view them critically because they are naturally ours and are not external to us.

Every individual is accidentally born into a family and he/she acquires a culture as the member of that particular collectivity. Because the cultural traits are specific to and identifiable within a given community, there cannot be a generalised and universal judgement on the desirability or undesirability of any cultural element or practice. In other words, cultural system is available only to its members and outside agents cannot judge the appropriateness of a culture by standards external to that culture. Justification for or critique of a culture and its practice can meaningfully emerge only from within.

Reflection and Action 22.1

List 10 items of material culture and 5 items of non-material culture which are related to your religion and are found in your society/community. Write an essay on "My Culture and My Beliefs" of about a page. Compare your list and essay with those of other students at your Study Center.

Culture is generally typified as material and non-material culture although that distinction has some notional overlapping. The many different sections that make up a group's design for living - from sophisticated science and technology to toys and children's games; from great works of art and music to kitchen utensils; from sacred ceremonies and worshipping acts to customs like shaking hands or saying 'namaste'; from beliefs about what does and does not taste good; even sex - all are shaped by learning all through life. Learning is of central importance in cultural acquisition as noted earlier. The degree of this learning determines the rate and extent of understanding culture and related course of action within the group. Thus, culture defines the way of life of the individual. Of all the learning applications, acquiring religion has a very special place in individual's life. This provides a position to the individual in his/her social functioning within the group. Therefore, a sociological discussion on religion invariably leads to an elaborate discussion on culture and the reciprocal relationship between these two important elements of society.

Culture consists of all the shared products of human society, both the objects and subjective elements. Culture influences all aspects of individual's living in society. In fact, as Parsons pointed out, the social system and cultural system cannot exist independent of one another and any such distinction is made only for the sake of abstraction and analysis. Culture forms the platform for all other social institutions including, family, kinship, science, economy, polity, and religion.

Religion and culture are closely linked and cannot be separated within the complex social phenomenon called society. As Clifford Geertz observes, 'non-culture human beings do not, in fact, exist, never have existed, and most important, could not in the nature of the case exist.' The unprecedented success of our species depends on the existence of human culture. We create culture, and culture in turn creates us. Our shared culture is what makes our social life possible. Without a culture transmitted from the past, each new generation would have to solve the most elementary problems of human existence over again. Without culture, we probably would have to invent fire every morning!

Cultures around the world vary widely and each culture is unique in its form and content. Cultural variations can be explained in terms of the functions that particular elements serve in maintaining the social system and in terms of their ecological significance as an adaptation to the total environment around us. It is true that human migration and mobility have led to cultural exchange and sometimes interaction of people of different cultures for trade and commerce or pilgrimages and so on might also have resulted from diffusion from one culture to another.

In essence, all cultures consist of five basic elements: belief (ideas about how the world operates); values (ideas about the meaning of life); norms and sanctions (guidelines for behaviour) expressive symbols (material representations of ideas and values); and language.

22.3 Religion : Meaning and Definition

Indian culture in its traditional form has accorded great importance to religion. The concept of *dharma* (loosely translated as duty borrowing from its Sanskrit meaning) has been a guiding light to culture of the Hindus in India for thousands of years. Although the term *dharma* is considerably vast and expansive in its territory compared to the term religion, religious dictums have played vital role in shaping up all forms of cultural practices. Often it is pointed out that *vritti dharma* (occupational duty), *raja dharma* (ruler's duty), *manava dharma* (duty as a human being), *samanya dharma* (general obligations) and the like are not strictly part of the ritualistic function of religion as described earlier.

In the Indian context, *dharma* describes the order of the world and not necessarily to some act referring to supernatural power. For instance, when Upanishads say: '*satyam vada dharmanchara*' (speak truth, follow your duty) the individual is advised to act according to the high values of the cultural system rather than being directed to perform some religious act. In other words, *dharma* is talked about in fulfilling the daily chores and is not always associated with religious acts and performances. Before we go further into this aspect of religion, let us be clear on the sociological concept of religion in its general sense.

India is the homeland for all major world religions. Hinduism is the major religion of the country, but practitioners of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Judaism, and a host of other religions of the world also dwell here. However, with the advent of secularism, especially as an integral part of Indian economy, polity, science and culture, major changes have taken place on the Indian religious scenario. In fact, the very connotation of religion has changed in India after we adopted a secular form of governance. The relationship between religion and other institutions of society has radically altered the place of religion in the life of the modern Indian. From a standpoint where it was taken that each member in the society has his/her own dharma, now India conceives of religion as any other social institution that requires some or the other form of social control.

By now we know that religion exists in all societies and cultures. The earlier Western idea that 'only the West was religious and other people have "fallen from grace"' has been proved off beam quite a while ago. Ancient cultures like India, Egypt and China had highly complex and elaborate religious systems thousands of years ago. While theologians spoke of the existence of religions only in some parts of the world, sociologists and anthropologists have always assumed universality of religion as indicated in the classical writings of Comte, Spencer and later on Durkheim and Weber. However, settling the issue of globality of religion has given rise to the difficult problem of why all cultures should have some or the other form of religion and why should it play such a prominent role in individual's life.

There have been some plausible explanations on this topic. An early revelation of God to all peoples has been a conceivable theological explanation that gained prominence during the middle ages. But such an explanation is one outside the arena of scientific investigation, untenable in terms of validity, and thus cannot be accepted by the spirit of rational inquiry. As a scientific alternative to this uncertainty, sociologists have approached this question in a more rational and objective way, often borrowing insights and propositions from other sister disciplines like cultural anthropology, psychology and literature.

Box 22.1: Religion and Psychology

Psychological explanation of the pre-eminence of religion in culture heavily rests on the fact that religion acts as a reliever of stress, anxiety and frustration. All humans undergo stress, and it is argued that in many such instances religion can act as a consoler to reduce the tension of the sufferer. However, we know that in life it is not always the case. As commonly witnessed, in some cases, religion itself may become the source of tension and anxiety, far from acting as a consoler.

Religion is ubiquitous and universal in its presence. Sociologists and anthropologists have provided us with strong evidences to this effect. Prehistoric evidences clearly indicate religious practices dating back to very early time of human collectivity. More and more intense studies increasingly demonstrate that people, originally reported as having no religions, did possess religious beliefs and practices; many early reports in this direction are now

proved wrong, often because of observer's bias or due to superficial contacts with the community under investigation. Even conflict sociology does not discard the ever-present character of religion as a social institution. While Marxian conceptual premise dismisses religion as a mechanism of people with power to control people without power, there is no denial of the existence of different forms of religions in society as such.

Like many terms, the term religion also has changed its earlier plain denotation. The word religion is derived from the Latin word religion meaning 'good faith'. The word also indicates some form of 'ritual' in its original meaning. In general terms, the word religion is understood as a set of institutionalised beliefs and practices that deal with the ultimate meaning of life. Religion, like the essence of culture, provides a blue print for the behaviour of the individual member of society on the basis of principles sustained by divine, supernatural or transcendent order of morality. Religion is something that human beings follow as members of social groups and therefore the study of religion invariably leads to the study of people and culture.

As we have noted already, religion is one such central social institution that is found in all forms of society since the beginning of recorded human history although its form and content have been changing from time to time and from region to region. The great variety of its outward appearance makes it extremely difficult for sociologists to provide a satisfactory definition of the concept. Study of religion looks at the question of how different societies and cultures have different religious beliefs and practices, how cultural and religious differences across the globe can be understood meaningfully and put into their proper context.

In this sense, the study of religion is comparative, since comparisons are made between different religions and different types of religious practices within divergent cultural contexts. In fact, in modern sociological literature, religious studies are frequently labelled 'comparative religion'. There is a trend in contemporary social sciences now to go beyond the general understanding of religion as a universal social institution. Instead, now the attempt is also to understand it from two distinct but reciprocally related approaches: religion as an explanation of religious traditions, and religion as a universal social institution found in all human societies.

22.4 Theoretical Explanation : Bond between Religion and Culture

As social beings, individuals need one another and share the pleasures and pains of life as they occur in the routine course of existence. Some of them can be explained in terms of logic, common-sense and the scientific logic available to him or her from his or her social position, but all of them cannot be logically deduced to his or her satisfaction. Individual, therefore, needs enlightenment for events, happenings and issues that cannot be explained by sheer common-sense or materialistic objectives accessible to her/him. Religion acquires importance in providing explanation to such unsolved enigmas and queries. That is why human beings create supernatural powers and start believing that these powers have created them. He or she also searches answers to inexplicable questions within the realm of the spiritual-mystical and receives moral order from such maxim. Putting it succinctly, individual in society, in a large number of cases, functions at two discrete levels of explanatory orders – the natural and the supernatural: the SACRED and the SECULAR or ordinary.

22.5 Sociological Explanation : The Three Approaches to the understanding of the Sacred and the Secular Order

The sacred and the secular are two important concepts that need to be seriously studied in the course of discussion on religion and culture in their sociological context. People everywhere divide their world into the realms of sacred and profane or secular. In this context three approaches to the sociological explanation of the relationship between religion and society may be discussed here for the benefit of the reader. Three great scholars provide these three explanations: namely (1) Karl Marx, (2) Emile Durkheim, and (3) Max Weber. We shall briefly look into these three theoretical viewpoints to understand the relationship between religion and culture in classical sociology.

- i) **Karl Marx**, the German scholar, has provided a conflict perspective of religion. Marx saw religion as a reflection of society (not as an expression of "primitive" or psychological needs as other theorists of his time presented). Unlike theorists like Durkheim who emphasised the positive functions of religion, Marx stressed the negative side or the dysfunction's of religion as a social institution. Whereas Durkheim saw religion as benefiting all segments of society by promoting social commitment (we shall look into this theoretical position in the next section of this unit), Marx saw religion as serving the interests of the ruling class at the expense of the powerless masses. "Religion," he wrote, "is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (1848/1964, p.42).

Marx argued that just as a painkiller masks the symptoms of disease, silencing the sick person into the illusory belief that he or she is hale and hearty, so religion masks the exploitation of workers, lulling them into the false belief that existing social arrangements are just - or if not just, inescapable. Thus Marx argued that religion as a social institution teaches that the individual's position on earth will be rewarded in heaven. In so doing, it obscures the exploitative tendencies hidden within the class structure and the elite's vested interest in the status quo. In this way, religion becomes a tool in the hands of the 'haves' to exploit and oppress the 'have-nots'.

Marx perceived religion as the personification of alienation: the self-estrangement people experience when they feel they have lost control over social institutions. The term 'alienation' was used by him to describe the modern worker's experience of being nothing more than a 'cog in a machine.' He also employed this concept to describe what he saw as the dehumanising effect of religion. 'The more the worker expends himself in work the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in the face of himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life, the less he belongs to himself. It is just the same as in religion. The more of himself man attributes to God the less he has left in himself' wrote Marx in one of his famous articles (1844/1963), p.122).

As the above quoted citations indicate Marx's denunciation and rejection of religion in society was total. He argued that only when people give up the illusory happiness of religion will they begin to demand real happiness. In furthering his attack on religion as an exploitative social institution in the clutches of the bourgeois class, he wrote: 'The criticism of religion disillusion man so that he will think, act and fashion his reality as a man who has ... regained his reason' (1844/1963, p.44). He predicted that in a classless society with communistic form of economic order, religion would become irrelevant and unnecessary. Like the capitalist class itself, religion would die its natural death.

Thus, Karl Marx considered religion as an uncalled for and manipulative institution forming an integral part of the exploitative superstructure. Both the religious and cultural institutions transform with the transformation of the economic foundation or the base. Religion and culture are the result of the existing power structure of society and religion would wither away once the class society revolutionises itself into a classless society.

Reflection and Action 22.2

Keeping the ideas of Karl Marx on religion in mind, think carefully about your own religious beliefs and values. Write an essay of two pages on "The Relevance of Religion in my Life."

Compare your essay with the essay of other students at your Study Center.

- ii) **Emile Durkheim**, the French scholar, is considered as having done pioneering work on sociology of religion. His classic book "Elementary Forms of Religious Life" as well as many other writings stand testimony to his great insights in the field of sociology of religion. Durkheim's reading of historical and ethnographic literature of his time convinced him that all societies make a clear distinction between the sacred and profane as mentioned above and such a distinction at the societal level is significant in understanding why people in groups and societies behave as they do. His theoretical distinction between the concepts of sacred and the profane stands as a classic contribution to sociology even today.

Durkheim proposed that sacred is anything that inspires awe, reverence or deep respect among the members. It has extraordinary, supernatural and sometimes even dangerous qualities and can usually be approached only through some form of ritual. Such a ritual may be in the form of simple prayer, incantation, hymns, ceremonial cleansing or offering of prey. Any thing can be sacred depending on social acceptance: an idol, rock, tree, book, the sun, the moon, the king or even an engine. The profane, on the other hand, is anything that is regarded as part of the ordinary rather than the supernatural world. Profane is something irreligious, ungodly and unspiritual. All objects in live situations, except those, which are considered by the community as sacred, are profane or sacrilegious objects. Individual's social behaviour is influenced by his relationship to the sacred and the profane during the course of his everyday life.

Durkheim, like his illustrious predecessors, recognised the universality of religion throughout human history. If religion is universal, he reasoned, it must perform some vital function in human society. Otherwise, this social institution could not have survived for thousands of years. Rejecting psychological explanation on universality of religion as consoler to the frustrated hearts (as mentioned earlier), Durkheim sought to find out the significant causes of religion. He observed that there are certain key social forces that maintain religion in all societies. He proposed that because religion performs some vital social functions, members accept this institution as an important element of social structure.

In the true spirit of objective scientific inquiry, Durkheim began his search of these key social forces in the descriptions of totemism in Australian aboriginal groups (which he believed represented the simplest and earliest form of human society). A totem is a sacred emblem that members of a group or clan treat with reverence and awe. The things chosen as totems (a lizard, a caterpillar, a fish, a tree) are not, in themselves, awe inspiring. But members of a clan see the object as their link to the supernatural. They call themselves by its name, observe taboos in approaching it, and

consider its appearance or behaviour as especially significant having sacred importance.

A totem is both a symbol of god and a symbol of the clan. This has clearly connected the cultural and the religious realms of the society. Durkheim saw this association between the sacred and the clan as a clue to the function of religion. In worshipping its totem, members of the clan were worshipping society. 'The god of the clan, the totemic principle, can be nothing less than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem' wrote Durkheim (1912/1947, p.206).

Durkheimian logic in this instance has been simple and straightforward. . Many of the sentiments and experiences that people categorise as 'religious' are responses to unseen but powerful social forces. Because they cannot be explained by the ordinary rationalisation, the community provides a supernatural explanation to a natural social force. For example, the religious belief that human beings are the product of divine creation reflects the social fact that we are creatures of our culture and time. The religious sensation of perpetuity reflects the social fact that society existed before we were born and will continue after we die.

In supporting this position, Durkheim remarked: 'We speak a language that we did not invent; we invoke rights that we did not found; a treasury of knowledge is transmitted to each generation that it did not gather itself' (1912/1947, p.212). Going still further, 'is it any wonder', Durkheim asked, 'that we feel as if our lives are designed and controlled by outside forces? That we treat these forces with awe, as if our lives depended upon them? Durkheim strongly held, then, that religious beliefs arise from our experience of social forces. Religion helps us to give this experience a concrete form and expression in a socially acceptable form.

Elaborating on this basic insight, Durkheim argued that the primary function of religion in a society is to create and maintain a 'moral community.' Religious beliefs reinforce group norms and values by adding a sacred dimension to everyday social pressure. In this sense religion acts as a confirmer of cultural system. Religious rituals reinforce social solidarity by bringing people together to reaffirm their common bonds and recall their social heritage. Religion brings people together and unites them as a single community. Participation in rituals heightens the feeling of being part of something larger than oneself. This, in turn, helps individuals to adjust to loss and pain. Durkheim believed that if science were to undermine belief in the sacred, some functional equivalent would arise to replace traditional religion.

Durkheim's arguments regarding the relationship between religion, society and culture have undergone some changes. The Durkheimian conception of the division between the 'sacred' and 'profane' is sharper in the modern societies as compared to the traditional social set-up of the nineteenth century Europe. For example, in the modern Western societies citizens take pride in separating the religious beliefs and practices from their public life. As a result, the governments do not support any one religion against the other in their governance. Religious function, structures and roles segregated from the secular ones as far as possible. In contrast, traditional social set-up does not make any sharp segregation between the sacred and the secular. Hence, in such a system a sharp distinction between the two may look not only unfeasible but also undesirable. Yet, everywhere people do recognise that some occasions, places, persons or times are more sacred than others. The evidences for such recognition are seen in people's collective actions.

- iii) **Max Weber**, the German scholar and sociologist par excellence, has provided an in-depth insight into the nature, functions and consequences of religion as a social institution. Max Weber's interest in religion was inspired to some degree by the arguments of Karl Marx. Like Marx, Weber also devoted much of his intellectual life to investigating the history of capitalism but his concentration was more on the social categories rather than the economic categories although he credited Marx with highlighting the role of economic arrangements in history. But whereas Marx believed that all history could be explained in terms of struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor classes, Weber viewed economy as only one of many influences on the course of human history.

In certain respects, Weber's sociology of religion has been a pathfinder. Contrary to the Marxian notion that religion is an obstacle to social change and progress, Weber argued that religion itself can become a powerful agent of social transformation. Weber's classic work, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1904/1958) has been described as a 'dialogue with the ghost of Karl Marx' (Coser, 1977, p.228). This model sociological classic still remains as a thesis in the comprehensive understanding of religion, a powerful social institution meeting not only supernatural needs but also performing pecuniary functions of society i.e. being closely related with the economic aspect of society.

Weber began this work by observing that in countries with both Protestant and Catholic populations, the business leaders, the bankers, even the highly skilled workers were 'overwhelmingly Protestant'. Weber tried to find out the sociological reasons for this unusual phenomenon. He asked questions regarding specifics such as what is there about Protestant beliefs and practices that fosters economic enterprise in comparison to other communities? Weber found an answer in the Calvinist phase of the Protestant Reformation. His explanation focused on two elements of Protestant belief: the redemptive value of work and worldly asceticism.

Weber found that the doctrine of predestination was central to Calvinist thinking. The Catholic Church taught that the route to salvation led through the church; that one earned a place in heaven through participation in the sacraments (mass, confession, penance, and so on). The Calvinist belief that god decided whether an individual would be 'elected to the saints' or 'damned to hell' much before the person was born, and that nothing he or she did on earth could alter that predetermination of God's will. This has helped Protestants to act freely and unchained individuals from the bonds of the church. But this belief also created intense anxiety in people's minds. How could a person know whether he or she was one of God's chosen few to be 'elected' to the heaven? The Calvinist answer was simple. This is clearly indicated in one's own lifetime through his/her worldly achievements. Good works might not earn one salvation (as Catholics believed), but they did ease the fear of damnation. As the Bible states, "Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings" (Proverbs xxii, 29).

The Calvinist conviction in the redemptive value of hard work was combined with what Weber called 'worldly asceticism.' Calvinists condemned self-indulgence, the pursuit of luxury and lavishness, and the pleasures of the flesh. But they also rejected the belief that one could earn salvation by giving away one's possessions and living in poverty (something they associated with Catholic monks). What, then, was the successful entrepreneur to do with his wealth? Calvinism's answer here again was straightforward: engage in savings and put those profits to work. Calvin 'did not wish to impose mortification on the man of wealth, but the use of his means for necessary and practical things' wrote Weber (1904/1958, p.171). And so the Protestant ethic, with its peculiar combination of hard work and self-denial, was born. For centuries,

the Catholic Church had condemned the pursuit of profits, especially through money lending and trade. Calvinism elevated saving, investing, rational calculation, and profit making to a moral duty. Indirectly, then, Calvinism gave capitalism moral sanction and created a pool of dedicated entrepreneurs. In this way a religious ethos have given rise to a type of new economic system and a new way of looking at life. Religion, economy and culture - three major social institutions - have come together, mutually influencing each other in the process of creating a new way of living and thinking.

Weber did not maintain that these beliefs alone could explain why capitalism emerged in Protestant Europe rather than, say, china or India. Rather he saw Protestant beliefs as one of many factors that contributed to the rise of capitalism. Although he disagreed with Marx's economic determinism, he did not set out to disprove the role of economics in history. He stated: 'It is not ... my aim to substitute for one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and history' (1904/1958, p.183) Rather his aim was to show that history could not be reduced to one-factor explanations and that religion could be an agent of social and cultural change.

In the conclusion to his book, Weber described the spirit of capitalism and the near-worship of rational instrumentalism in modern times as an 'iron cage' in which 'the technical and economic conditions of machine production... determine the lives of all individuals.' He continued, 'In the field of (capitalism's) highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.' The religious spirit that had inspired the growth of capitalism has fled the cage, leaving behind 'specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart.' For Weber, a society in which human activities and relationships are governed by rational calculation and 'economic compulsions' is devoid of meaning. In this sense, a moral order, a system of ethos, which transcends the sheer pleasure principle of wealth and comforts, is something Weber aspired for the modern society. In so doing, Weber endeavoured to combine an elevated arrangement of culture with moral principles, linking religion and culture at a higher level of synthesis.

Some Other Sociological Approaches to the Understanding of Culture and Religion

Beside Marx, Durkheim and Weber, there have been other sociological perspectives explaining the nature of religion within the cultural framework. Most of these explanatory schemes examining the relationship between society, culture and religion suffer from the inadequacies of ignoring either the intellectual or the emotional content. The early evolutionists were generally misled by assuming that religion was solely a product of human mind and thinking. In this sense, they considered religion and spiritual order as purely personal and private affair. For example, psychoanalytic theory has considered religion purely as a product of human experience based on trauma or emotional pressure. We have noticed in earlier paragraphs how Durkheim rejected this explanation in his elucidation. The functional theory if you recall the previous unit 21, on the other hand, understood religion as having a relationship with virtually every human activity. This explication is so broad and extensive that specificity in analysis is lost. Owing to this difficulty of diffuseness, functional exposition with an eclectic viewpoint has failed to produce concrete development proposals in terms of a comprehensive social theory of religion. Structuralism (please refer back to unit-21) seems to have suffered by its heavy and superfluous stress on intellectualism although it has attempted to offer an alternative account to functionalist explanation of religion as meeting functional needs of the society.

Clifford Geertz, the American social anthropologist, has tried to resolve the problem of extremity in terms of emotion versus intellectual bias in the

explanation of religion. Geertz presented a scheme that requires focus on both the rational and the emotional content of religion. The term *ethos* is used to denote the feelings or the personality aspects that are a part of religion. The concept of worldview is employed to account for human reason. According to him the '*ethos*' is made intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life implied by the actual state of affairs, at least as perceived by a particular '*worldview*'. In turn, one's worldview must be made emotionally acceptable by being presented as an image of actual state of affairs. In this way, Geertz proposes, harmony between the emotional and intellectual aspects of religion can be conceived.

Looking at the development of religion as a social phenomenon historically, in a number of large and heterogeneous societies, a great change took place during a few hundred years before the Christian era. This was especially true with large societies like India, China, Egypt or Babylonia. This was the time when great religions namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism (and later its offshoots Christianity and Islam) emerged in the world. This has resulted in the change in the nature of human relationship to the physical and social worlds.

Such a change consisted of separating the idea of natural world from the idea of spiritual world. Instead of gods and supernatural powers intervening in the world around us routinely, they found place in an entirely different realm: heaven and hell, another sphere of reality, a world of ideal principles. This supernatural world stood as an ideal to the norms and values prevalent in culture, thus establishing a firm affiliation between the two. Needless to point out that the consequences of this change were far reaching for both the members and social institutions.

Settling the issue of the universality of religion as mentioned above raised the difficult question of why religion should be a part of all cultures. The explanation provided by Durkheim in his distinction between the sacred and the profane (discussed in earlier paragraphs) has not been accepted in social sciences fully. Anthropologists attempted to explore issues and concepts such as (1) sacred and secular (2) *mana* and taboo (3) priests and shamans and the like in this regard. Practices in health care and education have been closely linked to religion in many societies and these issues were also closely looked into. Traditional medicine men, witches and sorcerers have also been cultural part of society in a number of instances. Their ability to offer gratification to their group members was conceived as a possible explanation of the issue.

A number of societies have attempted not to use common sense and rational logic in interpreting religion as a part of culture. Supernatural powers of religion was used as an extraordinary elements in such an analysis. In those societies both magical and religious beliefs are frequently regarded as rational. They are treated as either relics for the past or the product of people with a pre-logical/illogical mindset. A common question in cultural studies has been: Why do people continue such practices even when desired goals are unfulfilled? Is it not irrational when people continue to pour water on '*lingam*' or perform the practice of getting '*mules married*' even when such acts fail to bring rain? The question demands not a logical explanation bereft of societal context. It demands a culturally acceptable answer instead.

While rationalisation within cultural framework is characteristics of religion, parts of it are also rational explanations of events. Mythology is particularly noteworthy as explanation for questions about why, when, and where. Mythological explanations some times provide clues to repressed feelings due to cultural inhibitions. In this sense certain mythological practices may be considered as collective dream of a given culture in which people express feelings they cannot otherwise show. For the people involved religion allows

them to play with otherwise unexplained feelings kept at the unconscious level.

Sir James Frazer argued that religion is an integrated substructure of the culture. His argument that religion evolved from magic with a projected evolution of religion to science is not accepted by other social scientists. His arguments have been persuasive for a wide audience though of lesser concern in sociology and anthropology. Another evolutionist Herbert Spencer approached the problem of determining the origin of religion through examination of Australian aborigines who were considered the most primitive of living cultures. Since these natives paid much attention to their ancestors, Spencer reasoned that heroic ancestors were remembered and glorified by descendents. Over time, such grand parents assumed godlike qualities. In short long-dead ancestors became the realm of the sacred. These spirits began to govern the weather, health, education, family life and other vital areas of culture. Putting it succinctly, Spencer proposed that human beings intellectually created their religion, and that they progressed through rational, evolutionary stages. Incidentally, Spencer also noted a religious and political connection. He contented that while the fear of other living people was basic for political organisation, a fear of the dead was foundation of religious control.

Other theories on the origin and function of religion are also far from being adequate in their explanation. The historical method, psychological theories, functional theories of religion (especially of Malinowski and Radcliff-Brown) and structural theories have also been only partial in explaining the origin, the functions and the structure of religion as a social institution within the cultural milieu. It may be pointed out that most theories of religion are inadequate and suffer by ignoring either the intellectual or the emotional content. Of all the theoretical explanations, Clifford Geertz's explanation seems to be comprehensive. Although Geertz has not provided a thoroughly satisfying account of the mutual relation between ethos and world view, his presentation forces attention to both affect and thought in any analysis of religious phenomenon.

22.6 Culture and Religion in India

Indian sociologists have developed concepts such as Sanskritisation, parochialisation, little tradition, great tradition, and a number of concepts to explain how religious ideas and ideals have been guiding Indian society in depth.

India is a diverse and heterogeneous society in terms of culture as well as religious beliefs. The religious beliefs, forms of worship, objects of reverence, rituals, ceremonies of the people, places of pilgrimage and sacred books are all varied and numerous. But all of them are profound in their influence over the development of individual's personality as well as the feeling of community. The secondary institutions within religion in India include rites and rituals, forms and objects of worship, and organised groups for the propagation of religion. Each one of these factors influences the culture of the common people considerably. In this sense religious mores form firm foundation to the preservation of certain basic elements in the culture.

Religious groups in India, especially those adhering to major religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism, have lived in partial harmony, together forming an Indian culture over the last several hundreds of years. As Mahatma Gandhi once said about Hinduism, 'it is more than a religion; it is a way of life.' The Indian culture enjoys the fact that Hinduism, its most ancient and powerful religious group, pervades every aspect of individual's life making this culture a highly complex one.

Box 22.2: Culture and Religion

In the Indian context, the distinction between culture and religion cannot be constructed sharp unlike in the Western, Judeo-Christian cultural context. In India, the member of this society is simultaneously both religious and non-religious. It is often said that Hinduism is more than a religion. It is a way of life based on justice and harmony. Culture constantly strives to maintain social solidarity and harmony between its members. Indian religious ethos also constantly aims at this goal. As the famous saying in Sanskrit reads, 'for those who are noble in character, the entire world is the home' (*udara charithanamthu vasudhaiva kutumbakam*).

Indians, mainly Hindus, over the years have developed two streams of public life: *asthika* or the 'believer' and *nastika* or the 'non-believer.' The complex Hindu theology is woven around the abstract spiritual concepts such as Brahma, atman, paramatma, punarjanma, karma, papa, and the like and they have lent an influencing hand to the nature, structure and functioning of pan-Indian culture.

Religion and culture work towards the same goal of four cardinal principles of humankind. These principles are:

- 1) Survival of the species
- 2) Security in the life span of individuals
- 3) Material prosperity for ensuring survival and security, and
- 4) Continuous expansion of the scope of wholesome living, and mental progress for unfolding the potential of every individual.

22.7 Conclusion

Religion, all over the world, is basically a matter of faith and emotion. Although there are religious leaders who argue otherwise, it is for certain that religion is not an issue to be dealt with in terms of information, reason and logical judgement. Culture, on the other hand, works within as well as outside the realm of faith and emotion. As Merton pointed out, there are 'cultural universals' and many elements of culture are found in almost all societies. The very fact, that religion is based on trust in some supernatural power, and that there are 'believers' and 'nonbelievers' within this construction proves its highly emotive nature of operation. In spite of these basic structural differences, religion and culture have many important goals in common.

Each one of these four standards is expected to lead the humankind to a healthier more secure and better future. Both religion and culture strive to achieve such a future to their members. **The survival of their members** to both these social institutions essentially means their own survival. That culture is considered supreme which leads to the welfare of all; in the same way, that religion is an eternal religion which hopes and prays for the well being of all species (The Hindu religious saying which is also reflected in the traditional Indian culture is '*sarve janah sukino bavanthu sarve bhadrani pashyanthu.....*'). In the same way, **life security and longer life span of the members** is the desired goal of both the cultural and the religious systems. Immediately next is the principle of **material prosperity of the members**. Ultimately a cultural system or a system of religion survives only when and if its members are 'healthy, wealthy and wise'. The individual members of a religion, as in culture, pray for and look forward to be blessed with corporeal and material wealth along with mental peace. Finally, members of both culture and religion look forward for a happy, peaceful and contented life and opportunity to unfold the human potential to its fullest extent. Functioning towards the fulfillment of these fundamental tenets of human life is the basic objective of both religion and culture. There is no scope for the nonbeliever

to assess and criticise religion unless he/she is an integral, internal member of that given culture or religion. Culture comprises of both the sacred and the secular. In that sense, culture covers a larger canvas on which religion finds a small but critical role.

As we have entered the twenty-first century, our problems and priorities have become divergent and individualistic. Today, human society in general comes upon three predispositions operating concurrently. They point at certain problems and possible solutions.

The first tendency is the homogenisation of culture in the global scale, along with the globalisation of economy and polity. Second one is the assertion of the homogenised culture in different configurations of human society, usually in respective nation-states. Thirdly and very significantly, the demand of ethnic groups, at discerning level of their power potential within a nation state for the recognition of their 'minority' status cultures.

In a document on culture, the International Centre for Development (1979) has abridged the essential elements of the institution of culture at the generic level. This precise statement would help us to sum up our understanding of the relationship between culture and religion succinctly. The precise statement is that "Culture is an aggregate of values and traditions which is deeply linked to the everyday life of the people, and in that sense, it is a matrix of perception which allows one to apprehend the world." This statement aptly summarises Indian position on the relationship between culture and religion.

In India, religion, as an integral part of culture in general, provides a foundation for mores of society even today. Hence, we find that since time immemorial, religious sanctions are sought for doing certain desirable patterns of behaviour by the individual in society. Hence, they become a part of both the cultural and the religious systems in India in the form of mores. In so doing, violation of the pattern of behaviour then becomes violation of the order of God-the Almighty. It also receives reprimand from the society. Thus many taboos in our culture have religious sanctions, for instance, the taboo against eating beef among the Hindus has precise and definite religious sanction. Hinduism treats the killing of holy cow as an unpardonable sin. In the same vein, in an agrarian society, killing cows leads to both economic as well as social disaster, and hence, Indian culture does not accept.

To conclude, religious system and cultural system in India have a lot of overlapping in their intent and consequences. Needless to point out that Indian religion promises 'ideals' to its believer whereas Indian culture concentrates more on the 'actual'. The uneven and stratified system of the Indian religious order seemingly contrasts with the relatively flat and less uneven cultural system of modern India.

22.8 Further Reading

Bellah, R.N. (Ed.) 1965 : Religion and Progress in Modern Asia, Free Press: New York.

Bainbridge, 1985 : The Future of Religion, University of California Press : Berkeley.

Unit 23

Cohesive and Divisive Dimensions of Religion

Contents

- 23.1 Introduction
- 23.2 Religion and its Various Dimensions
- 23.3 Rivalry, Schism and Integration
- 23.4 Religions in India : A Unity in Diversity
- 23.5 Social Ramifications of Divisiveness in Indian Religion
- 23.6 Multiple interpretations in Indian Religions
- 23.7 Conclusion
- 23.8 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- describe the various dimensions of religion;
- discuss the different aspects like rivalry, schism and integration of religions;
- explain how and why religions in India provide a unity in diversity; and
- outline, in brief, the multiple interpretations found in religions in India.

23.1 Introduction

In this paper, an attempt will be made to examine religion with reference to its capacity to unite people and also divide them. The references will be mainly drawn from Indian society, although occasional comparisons with other societies will find a place in this paper. Broadly speaking, religion stands for social solidarity, harmony or unity of mankind. No religion upholds hate, violence or imposition of doctrine on unwilling people. Yet religions in all parts of the world have witnessed hatred or acts of violence in which both individuals and groups have taken part. The reasons for religious strife are various; some of which will be mentioned in this unit.

23.2 Religion and its Various Dimensions

The transit from one historical epoch to another changes in patterns of living and types of production, priestly manipulations, and political or social compulsions have had a bearing on religion. As religions are social phenomena, they not only impinge on society but are in turn susceptible to social pressures. But the modalities of conflict have varied. The pantheistic religions, which believe in a variety of gods, goddesses or sacred forces, have generally remained tolerant of differences in belief and practice¹. Shintoism, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism are pantheistic. In Japan, Buddhism has flourished along with Shintoism. In China, Taoism and Buddhism have existed side by side for long periods. India has always been noted for its tolerance. Since in pantheism there is the recognition of validity of different approaches to religious truth, there is very little to fight for or against a particular creed.

In the monotheistic religions of West Asia, such as, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there is no room for an alternative set of gods or sacred beliefs. Hence, the non-believers were treated as outsiders. Even here there was accommodation of religious diversities: for ex. Jerusalem in West Asia has

been a common holy place for all the three groups. The Caliphs who ruled from 7th to 13th century A.D. were tolerant of non-Islamic groups such as Jews and Christians. These minorities were granted special rights to follow their religious systems. However, monotheism lays an exclusive claim to truth. The outsiders may be tolerated but they are believed to be pursuing false doctrines or false gods. It is this attitude which often led to the bitter persecution of the non-believers. All over Europe, Christians never forgave Jews because they had crucified Jesus in connivance with Roman rulers. The Muslims have generally regarded Christians as infidels or idol worshippers (as Catholics and Orthodox Christians worship images or icons). The crusades (11th to 13th Century A.D. and the Spanish Inquisition 13th Century A.D) were large-scale events in which religious intolerance played a central part.

Although the pantheistic faiths do not persecute others on grounds of doctrine, yet violence can break out due to other reasons. Nationalistic or political considerations can make rulers ruthless. The Great Wall of China was started to be built in 3rd Century BC. One of the Chinese rulers who continued this work sent thousands of Buddhist monks to do forced labour; many of them died due to hard work, hunger or lack of nutrition. A Hindu ruler of Bengal Shashanka (circa 6th Century AD) destroyed a number of Buddhist monasteries in eastern India and drove out the monks. Although Buddhism stands for peace the rulers in Buddhist countries (Sri Lanka, Thailand etc) have often waged violent wars to quell rebellion or suppress political dissidents. Sri. Aurobindo² was critical of Buddhism in India for a different reason. The adoption of pacifism, by the Kshatriya groups in India under the aegis of Buddhism, led to the decline of martial spirit. However, outside India Buddhism has supported vigorous martial traditions. The Samurai in Japan are an example. At the same time, both in China and Japan monks extensively developed martial arts (Kung fu, Karate, etc), to defend themselves against warlords.

At this juncture it is to be remembered that religion per se does not support violence. The holy texts such as Torah, Bible and Koran stand for tolerance and goodwill. But non-religious factors have often incited violence against believers. The Nazis who ruled Germany (1933 – 1945) put to death six million Jews in different parts of Europe, ostensibly because the latter were anti-patriotic or anti-German. The real reason was that the Nazi rule in Germany drew upon the popular support to anti-Semitism. Similarly, the rulers of Communist China occupied Tibet in the late nineteen fifties. In the subsequent periods they destroyed 3,000 Buddhist monasteries, killed thousands of unarmed monks, and destroyed its artistic heritage³. The ostensible reason was that the Tibetans were rebels against the Chinese State. The real reason was their misguided hatred against Buddhism. If we look at these non-religious factors, it becomes clear that secular violence (war or battle to gain control of territory) is much more severe than religious violence.

A common view is that religions in different parts of the world have been legitimizers of tyranny or misrule by kings. But the evidence suggests that religion per se is not conservative or radical, oppressive or liberalising. In the 5th Century AD, Bodhidharma (the monk from South India) reached China and spread Buddhism. He stayed in the Emperor's court for a few years but left it and settled down in countryside. He rallied around him the oppressed peasants of China against the Chinese warlords. Early Christianity mobilised the workers, artisans and slaves to withstand Roman oppression. Many Christians were killed by the Roman rulers for their suspected disloyalty to Roman Empire. But in 16th Century Europe the Catholic Church connived with the brutal oppression of Mexicans by the Spanish colonial settlers. The Christian churches also condoned the European slave trade in the 18th and 19th Centuries, when millions of Africans were uprooted and sent to far-off colonies in North America and other places to work on plantations. By contrast, the more modern radical movements among the working classes in the West and in Latin America, have

been led by religious reformers. In 19th Century England, Protestants supported working class struggles⁴. In Latin America, the Catholic pastors have joined the struggle of workers against oppression. The Communist rule in Poland was brought down in 1990 by the protests of trade unions led by a Catholic political leader.

In Indian society, religions have divided as well as united people. Although religious persecution - as it is known elsewhere - is absent in India, its sects - Shaiva, Vaishnava and Shakta - have often been hostile to each other. In the more recent times the "communal" conflict has also come to the fore. There are also various differences in dietary habits, patterns of living, linguistic or cultural usages, which have led to a gulf between one religious group and the other. For example, the Vaishnavites wore the head tilak to symbolise lord Vishnu in horizontal lines, while the Shaivites apply vertical lines on their foreheads to symbolise lord Siva. Both these sects had a long history of struggle in India. In the South Shaivites were once persecuted by the Jains in antiquity; in turn Shaivities persecuted the Vaishnavas. In these instances, the reason for violence was greed (i.e., control of a holy place for gain) or the clamour for securing power and privilege in the royal court. In spite of this there has been a trend towards bridging cultural differences among the people. In this regard, noted reformers like Shankara, collectively built monuments like temples or other places of worship and the cultural unification through pilgrimages have made way for a national unity. There is no doubt that Indian religions have shown much resilience to adapt themselves to new exigencies and have emerged stronger at present than in the past. It is, therefore, a fact that the cohesive force of Indian religions is stronger than their divisive susceptibilities.

Reflection and Action 23.1

You have just read in the above paragraph that - "There is no doubt that Indian religions stronger than their divisive susceptibilities". Do you sub-scribe to the same view as the author or do you believe otherwise. If so, why? Write down your own opinion about why you agree or disagree with the author in about two pages.

Discuss your writing with other students at your Study Center. If possible, you may request the Academic Counsellor to organise a debate on this topic.

Before concluding this section, a few words may be said about the sectarian developments within religion. The sects in the West have arisen mainly because of the desire on the part of a breakaway group to secure religious freedom. The Catholic church's long-standing hegemony in religious, political and social spheres was effectively challenged by the Protestants in 16th Century Europe under the leadership of Martin Luther. The church had become corrupt. Its pastors frequently lapsed from the vow of celibacy. The Popes used to grant "Bulls" (certificates) which relieved the donors to the church of their sins. Instead of becoming a centre of spiritualism the church had become worldly or materialistic. While in public the Catholic Church upheld "otherworldliness", it had come under the seize of feudal families of Europe, which sent Bishops to the church to gain control over its vast estates and other properties.

As Protestant movement flourished in the post 16th Century Europe, the Catholic Church lost its hold on people in Europe; but it gained converts in Asia, Latin America and Africa in the subsequent centuries. The rivalries between the two groups were very intense; as a rule, the Catholics used the power of state to persecute Protestants and Vice Versa. In England, Germany, Netherlands and Nordic centuries, the Protestants have gained upper hand, while in Italy, Spain and Portugal, the Catholics have continued to remain dominant. To this day, Northern Europe has remained the centre of Protestantism, while Southern Europe is Catholic.

Box 23.1: Buddhism and Jainism

It is a sociologically significant phenomena that both Buddhism and Jainism were led by religious leaders who were of Kshatriya origin. They both led a protest movement against orthodox Hindu religion and religious practices, such as the rigidities of the caste system of social stratification. Both these religious sects are founded on profound religious philosophy and moral code. They do not have the concept of God as central to their belief. Both Gautam Buddha and Mahavira, religious leaders of Buddhism and Jainism, respectively, were considered to be 'avataars' of God rather than Gods themselves. Both the sects have later divided and subdivided, based on their own internal differences.

In India, Buddhism and Jainism were some of the major sects which gained public recognition. They rejected some aspects of Vedic culture (animal sacrifice etc.) but broadly concurred with Vedantic_(Upanishadic) culture. As such there was no radical separation between these sects and the earlier religion. Louis Renou⁵ has stated that the sects have provided dynamism to Indian culture by catering to its ethnic diversity. While religious doctrine can be abstract to ordinary people, the sects are the tangible reality. Most believers identify themselves with one sect or the other; their hopes and aspirations are shaped by the charismatic religious leaders who found the sects. Anyone who has visited Gujarat can notice the prestige of Vallabhacharya and Swami Narayan sects in that area. Likewise, there are followers of Shankaradeva in Assam or Chaitanya in Bengal, Kabir or Raidas in North India. Renou writes: "In contrast with popular Hinduism, which became a little stagnant and stale, the sect has become an instrument of progress. Reforms are of two kinds, sometimes strictness in the performance of religious practices is recommended; sometimes protest is registered against social scales and prohibitions in order that every man may have access to the religious life"⁶.

To sum up, Indian society offers fascinating or disturbing aspects of religions to the observer. There is bigotry or "touch-meattitude", which borders on the irrational element. But there are also the throngs of pilgrims who traverse the land to bathe at a holy river or visit a temple, utterly unmindful of the fact that they are with strangers speaking different languages. A confusion must be clarified here. For a long time in popular literature sects and castes have been treated as same. Both Vivekananda and Aurobindo have noted that castes were social frameworks designed to shelter productive processes (agriculture, industry and artisanship). By contrast, sects are fellowships of faith; the members of the sect are guided by their guru or acharya and not by rules of purity and pollution. In a satsang all caste prohibitions are laid at rest; the participants share the same shelter, eat the same food and address each other on equal terms. The Varkari sect of Maharashtra is a good example of this. Every year during the summer, thousands of people from different parts of the state or outside the state move in bands of pilgrims to Pandharpur (where Vishnu is worshipped). All the Bhaktas are treated alike, irrespective of their previous background, during the Yatra. Usually caste factor is significant for the members of the sect with reference to property inheritance or marriage; but free interaction with others is expected from a sect member. To reiterate, in spite of some common features caste is based on a hierarchy, while the sect is based on a fellowship of equals⁷.

23.3 Rivalry, Schism and Integration

In all religions of the worlds, schisms have arisen from time to time to fulfill some needs. If the followers of particular religious group feel deprived mentally or spiritually, they tend to break away from the rest and form a separate group. Charismatic leaders initiate mobilisation of these discontented people into new religious channels. Disputes over doctrines, pressure from nationalistic or ethnic needs and also the march of time, are other factors, which have favoured the formation of new sects. In Europe the sectarian strife has

adversely affected religious unity. To this day the Northern Ireland has faced disunity because of hostility between Catholics and Protestants. In Netherlands and Germany even trade unions in industries are affiliated to the above two groups. In Islam, the Sunnis and Shias are the major sects, while there are many smaller ones. Nationalistic rivalries and doctrinal differences have led to a separatist tendency. While Egypt and Saudi Arabia are the leaders of Sunnis, Iran is the leading Shia center.

Box 23.2: What is a sect?

Sect is a religious group that represents the people who dissent from the interpretation of the doctrine from an established church and as a communion of religious brotherhood which has a well defined creed. For eg. the Protestants from the Catholic religion. Its ideal type is a contrast to that of the Church even though it may share some traits with the latter. Unlike the Church, the membership of the sect is not compulsory. It is a voluntary, relatively exclusive and often qualified ritually.

The sect does not stand for unqualified universal conversion. God's grace is not for all, nor is it bestowed automatically. It is won by the individual's personal faith and ethical behaviour. Therefore, the sect has a disdain for 'the refined verbal spinning of ecclesiastical theologians' (Johnson 1968 : Chap. 16) Quoted in ESO-05 : Society and Religion, Block 3 Religion And Related Aspects, pp. 9, BDP, IGNOU).

In India too, there have often been hostile encounters among the Shaivite, Vaishnavite and Shakta components among the Hindus. The Kumbha Mela festival is held periodically in four places, namely, Prayag, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik. Previously, there used to be fights between the Nagas (Shaivites) and Bairagis (Vaishnavites) belonging to different monastic affiliations (akhadas)⁸. Although now the Mela is peaceful, there are underlying tensions between the different sects. These armed groups, namely Nagas (shaivites) and Bairagis (Vaishnavites) were created in order to safeguard Hinduism against the encroachments from Islam or Christianity. But they were often misguided by the zealots who provoked them to fight against one another, although they belonged to the same religious stream in Indian society.

The religious schisms have also inspired movements to integrate the belief systems. In the West it is known as the Ecumenical Movement: it seeks to bring together on a common forum the three major segments namely Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox Christians. It is also a response to the challenge of secularism. This movement not only focuses on the common spiritual elements in these different religious affiliations, but also seeks to provide a bulwark against growing atheism in the West. In Islam Sufism has brought together, Muslims and non-Muslims (Christians, Hindus etc.) who are inclined to believe in the oneness of mankind. In the North African states (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia), the official Islam and Sufism are often at loggerheads, but each in a way has integrated the believers. The official Islam has organised the literates, urban merchants and administrators, while Sufism has a hold on the folk-tribal groups of the rural hinterland.⁹

In India, Shankara (8th Century A.D.) took a decisive step in bringing together the sects under a common programme for rebuilding the Hindu society. He enjoined upon the Hindus to follow Panchayatana system (worship of five deities chosen freely by the individuals). He unified in his smarta tradition the six sects, namely Saura, Skanda, Ganapatya, Shakta, Shaiva and Vaishnava sects. He felt that such unifications were necessary to control the centrifugal forces. To this day smarta groups are found all over India from Kashmir to Rameshwaram. Ramanujia (11th century A.D.) preached Vaishnava Bhakti and drew followers from both Brahmins and non - Brahmins in Tamilnadu. The great Bhaktas of the North, Nanak, Tulsidas, Kabir, Dadu and Raidas, are well known for building up a spiritual fellowship. The highly charismatic Vaishnava saint

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (16th century) had a massive following in eastern India (Bengal and Orissa) which included Hindus, tribals and Muslims. Swami Narayan (1781-1830) in Gujarat¹⁰ has stated that he drew inspiration from the teachings of Ramanuja; he preached a Vaishnava doctrine which was noted for its puritanism. He carried forward the mission of Ramanuja by drawing into his fold a variety of castes, including the then backward castes of Bhatiya, Lohana and Patel and the tribals.¹¹ He conferred a high spiritual status on his followers by calling them " Brahminised Saints". (Vivekananda once remarked that all the followers of Nanak were Brahmins. The implication of this is that unlike the caste in a sect status is conferred on the basis of merit).

The message of sectarian philosophy is simple and clear. Indians need not destroy customs (such as idol-worship and caste). At the same time attempts should be made to transcend our social barriers without renouncing them. In fact, the three noted Indian thinkers, namely, Vivekananda, Aurobindo and Coomaraswamy have stated that the caste system which was based on mutual interdependence gave stability to Indian society. The Indians need not discard the past but they have to redefine it in terms of the present. Further, it is to be noted that while Vedas (which were orally transmitted) were accessible only to a few, the Upanishads (Gita included), Epics and Puranas were freely accessible to most people. Common people in villages and towns across the country came to know about them, through the itinerant religious preachers who gave an exposition to them in public.

Box 23.3: Hindu Orthodoxy and Caste Structure

However, one must not forget that orthox Hindusim had its regidities which were expressed in the caste structure which, from the modern day point of view was based on exploitation and torture of a large majority of the dalits or sudras by a small population of upper castes. If caste mobility was possible, it was possible only as a social group to a limited degree. Otherwise, we have the example of Eklavya, whose thumb was cut off so that he may not learn the art of archery and compete with the Kshatriya Princes.

It is not a surprise that several religious sects arose as a protest to remove the evils of caste system and religious orthodoxy. From Jainism, Buddhism, Bhakti movement to Sikhism all the sects have arisen to correct the wrongs of the earlier social structure.

More than anything else, the Indians- Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Muslims - have been engaged in a tangible religious experience called pilgrimage¹³. All through the year the ordinary men, women and children travel across the country to visit a holy shrine or bathe in a sacred river. The sacred rivers and places of worship (temples, dargahs and gurudwaras) are open to all, irrespective of caste or rank.

Box 23.4 Some Aberrations

However, some temples like Lord Jagganath temple in Puri prohibits the entry of foreigners. Mosques generally do not allow the entry of women to conduct prayers except perhaps in Kashmir. Even the Ayyappa Temple does not allow women to enter their premises. In remote areas of Regasthan there have been cases reported of erstu *****

During pilgrimage the caste norms are entirely suspended. For example, when numerous people take bath in Ganga at Prayag or Haridwar or throng the places of worship (Hindu, Muslim or Sikh) it is just not possible to identify them on the basis of their rank or privilege. They are totally unaware of differences in skin colour, gender or age group. They are in a state of euphoria in which all participants appear to be equal. The temples at Tirupati, Vaishnodevi, Dwaraka, Rameshwaram, etc are entirely free for anybody to

enter. The public places of worship in India (Hindu, Sufi or Sikh) have placed no restrictions on anyone. Victor Turner has used the term "anti-structure" to describe pilgrimage which suspends all structural barriers (caste, class and ethnicity). His view is that every society has antistructures, which absorb the stresses produced by the structures. ¹⁴

To sum up the integrative enterprise, both in terms of the past and present three levels can be identified" (a) the intellectual orientation provided by the rationalistic Buddhism and Jainism; b) the emotional orientation of the Bhakti groups; and (c) the participatory orientation of pilgrimage, India is not only characterised by extreme ethnic diversity but also gives rise to countless groups or sub-groups, which are ready to break away from each other for even a trivial reason. But the above-mentioned factors of integration have imparted a unique stability to India, especially in cultural terms. Breaking away is good to the extent that it gives rise to creative expressions in religion, but integration is also good because it reinforces the underlying unity of the Indian nation. Even the hotly debated communalism has no real roots in the Indian culture; it has been clearly an offshoot of colonial policies which divided people through deliberative ideology or the ideology of divide and rule, and administrative fiat. Indian religions have only a tenuous connection with the Indian political projections, which appear to be Western inspired. To give an instance, R.S.S. which claims to be a cultural body has no genetic connection with the religious akhadas which have survived from the past. It trains its volunteers through a Western type of drill. By contrast the modern training centers in Kung Fu (China) and Karate (Japan) have shown a remarkable continuity of the ancient tradition. The Shaolin temple in China (which was founded by the monk Bodhidharma in 5th Century A.D.) has remained the centre of Kung Fu up to the present, although this country has been under communist rule for decades. Careful analysis will uncover the motives which have inspired disinformation about modern India.

23.4 Religion in India : A Unity in Diversity

The prehistoric cave paintings discovered in different parts of India, and the ancient burial chambers known as dolmen and tumuli, have revealed that the folks and tribes which in the past inhabited the subcontinent were inspired by religion. The Vedic culture which flourished in India in the three millennia before Christ no doubt absorbed many of the tribal beliefs and practices. Religions in India do not reject the legacy of the past but absorb it or modify it. The Vedic settlements, which were located on the banks of Saraswati (now extinct) in the northwestern India, pursued a sacrificial cult in which the celestial figures like Indra, Varuna, Surya and Agni were worshipped. The observation of Max Muller that Hindus worship these personifications of nature because they are in awe of their might is not correct. There was a reciprocal relationship between man and god. In fact, it was in the West Asian religions that people were in awe of the transcendental god (Jehovah or Allah). In the post-Vedic development known as Bhaktism, instead of fear the man and god are bound in an affectionate relationship (for ex. Krishna is the beloved of Radha or kin of Arjuna). (Islam's stand was modified in Sufism where god is the beloved of the faquir).

The Vedic culture was centered around a Potlatch type of a system in which valuables like honey, silk, cereals were burnt. Animals also were sacrificed in order to appease the gods. In turn the gods were expected to bestow on the sacrificer healthy progeny, ensure good rains and crops and success in warfare. The implication of this was that the available surplus was distributed to the kith and kin and the invitees in the form of gifts. Karl Polyani has stated that in a reciprocal economy surplus is not accumulated. Hence, there was no class formation in it. The Vedic society (in spite of Varna framework) was a folk society i.e., without structural inequality. In the post-Vedic Society of India,

there were numerous republican states (Buddha and Mahavira were born in a republican setting) where the norm of equality was high. The ruler was a first person among equals (*primus inter pares*). The Buddhist Jataka tales (composed in Sanskrit) give much evidence about the early states. But when the Empires rose in North India these small states were superseded. In fact, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* recommends an aggressive strategy to take over the small states, so that the Mauryan Empire would not face political competition. In the south, however, the Chola, Pallava and Pandya rulers pursued a decentralized polity¹⁵; the village panchayats (like the early republics of north) maintained genuine autonomy. The kings were mainly engaged in defending the territory against invaders and maintaining administrative cohesion within the state.

The central aspect of the Vedic society was the maintenance of an interdependence between cosmos and the earth. Hence, the rulers led by Brahmin priests regularly conducted the fire sacrifices. It was clearly a two way process. The gods protected society through the provision of good rains, surplus crops and ensured health to people and livestock. At the same time by receiving the offerings of the people during fire sacrifice the gods retained their heavenly positions. Therefore, a dutiful ruler by performing sacrifice contributed to the good of both cosmos and earth. If men depended on gods, the latter also required support from the former. In the legends Indra is upset when Vishwamitra undertakes Tapasya. Likewise, Indra is upset when the people of Vraja stop worshipping him following the advice from the child god Krishna. These acts disrupted the old order based on reciprocal ties. As mentioned above, the Indian approach to religion is not based on fear. In the West Asian religions god is transcendental and hence he does not depend on the acts of people. Instead, the people are at the mercy of the mighty god. This is the underlying reason for the extraordinary importance attached to the kingship in India¹⁶. Any ordinary mortal can become a king, but once he assumes kingship his good rule ensures peace on both cosmos and earth.

As mentioned in the introduction, the sects and cults which have arisen in India from time to time have responded to the ethnic diversities of Indian people, by throwing up alternative paths to the attainment of the final goal described as Moksha or Nirvana. As Vivekananda and Aurobindo noted in their works, Vedic wisdom (especially the Upanishadic truth) has guided all subsequent sacred documents such as epics, puranas, etc. These later products are not outside the Vedic framework. A few words would be necessary to clarify the relationship between Vedas and Upanishads (Vedanta). The Upanishads like Buddhism and Jainism de-emphasized animal slaughter and materialistic goals of Vedic culture. Instead, they urged people to pursue the spiritual path by giving new meanings to the action. For eg: sacrifice means the giving up of ego (called *ahamkara* or *asmita*). Likewise, Vedic rites have strong symbolic meanings. For eg: The desire for sons has an esoteric meaning, the sons are a metaphor for ideas. The fire sacrifice refers to the inner life of man; it enables him to remove the ego and acquire new ideas (i.e., intuition) to guide him forward on the spiritual path. Thus, the sacred texts in India, whether Hindu, Buddhist or Jain, retain the same basic tenets, although numerous alternative explanations are put forth by them. In sum, all important religious developments in Hinduism up to the present can only be placed under the rubric *Sanatana Dharma*¹⁷. From the time of Vedic rishis till the present, basic ethical and spiritual ideas have continued. To that extent, Buddha, Mahavira, Kabir, Nanak, Shankara, Ramanuja and Swami Narayana did not reject the *Sanatana* tradition; they only modified some parts of it and made it more dynamic.

As mentioned earlier, the communal phase started during British rule, especially the later part. The early rulers of the British East India Company did not interfere in religious affairs. But the later rulers followed a divisive policy. For instance, under the aegis of the "superiority of Aryan races" they brought

about rifts between different sections of people through systematic disinformation. The Hindus and Sikhs were encouraged to believe that they belonged to separate 'races'. The Hindus and Muslims came to distrust each other to the extent that it would not be possible for them to live side by side. The Aryan and Dravidian languages were declared as coming from separate origins. The martial 'races' were quite distinct from non-martial 'races'. To facilitate such unsubstantiated views, books were written and articles published in journals of Indology.

Reflection and Action 23.2

Do you think your religion has played a positive role in your life? Give your perspective in an essay of one page on "The Social Significant of My Religion".

Compare your essay with those of other's at your Study Center.

Besides, the administrative measures taken up during the British rule created a sense of separation. The colonial era was marked by the existence of about 600 princely states which had entered into treaty with the foreign rule. Under the treaty the same cultural or linguistic area was parcelled into small states, which had their own army, currency and railway networks. (It was during 1947-1950 that under the leadership of Sardar Patel these states were merged into the Indian Union). In the first part of 20th Century, the Partition of Bengal in 1911 and the Partition of the country in 1947-1948 were large scale events. These were the culminations of increasing communal tension in the Indian subcontinent. The various Census operations which lasted till 1931 had heightened the caste consciousness of the people. In the nineteen thirties and forties, the rise of Dravidian movement in south and the anti-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra added a new divisive dimension to national consciousness.

23.5 Social Ramifications of Divisiveness in Indian Religions

It is foreign to the culture of India that anybody should be persecuted for their beliefs. Vivekananda noted that both Buddha and Jesus were the prophets who sought to give a new direction to the seekers of salvation. But the response they received from the people around them was quite different. Buddha preached against the Brahminical rituals in his journeys across the vast plains of North India. He was not halted anywhere by the Brahmins¹⁸. He lived upto a ripe old age; till his death he continued his mission. By contrast, Jesus was persecuted by the orthodox Jews because he criticized their materialism (he said "drive out the money changers from the temples") and also their obsession with nationalism. His universal message of love and indifference to power and privilege incensed the Jews. Vivekananda further stated that materialists (Lokayata and charvaka) freely propagated their atheism without hindrance. The statement that Brahmins destroyed their atheistic texts and buried them in sand is a canard. The fact is that both Buddhism and Jainism are atheistic, although they believe in spirituality. Their texts were not destroyed by the Brahmins. The real reason for the decline and disappearance of materialists, such as, the Cgarvaha's was that they had no ethical goals. They preached a hedonism based on sensual pleasures. The decline of Tantra in India was also due to the inversion of ethics. In fact, all those religions in India which have survived today are committed to an ethical code. In India atheism is not non-belief in god but denial of divinity (spirituality) within man.¹⁹ Buddha and Mahavira did not subscribe to belief in god, but they upheld an ethical conduct which they said was necessary for the spiritual advancement of mankind.

A distinguishing aspect of India according to Coomaraswamy is that there is freedom of worship regarding the personal deity (Ishta Devata)²⁰. Any deity or spiritual guide can be chosen by a man or woman without causing disruption of social ties. A Hindu can freely adopt Nanak as his guru; a Sikh can go on an annual pilgrimage to Vaishnadevi or Dwaraka. Such freedom is not available in West Asian religions. This is because only a select few (Moses, Christ or Mohammed) are recognised as spiritual guides. In India just as sects are many, gurus are also many; these gurus cut across the caste, gender or social status. All paths are equally valid and it is up to the individual to choose anyone. The only constraint is on the strict observance of norms which are prescribed to the castes and sects. An interesting legend from Gujarat refers to Swami Narayan's yogic power; he appeared at once as Shiva, Narayana and Durga on the mental screens of his devotees. He transported two hundred devotees to Brindavan in a trance state to witness the Ras lila of Krishna. These devotees included some non-Hindus like Jains and Muslims.²¹

As mentioned earlier, in spite of the remarkable freedom on the level of beliefs, the sects have often undermined each other. The sectarian literature often has a partisan viewpoint. The gurus of one sect may be glorified as superior to their counterparts in other sects. During the past centuries, some violent acts have indeed disturbed the tolerant spirit. A Maratha general in the end of 18th Century laid siege to the monastery in southwestern Karnataka which had been established by Shankaracharya in Sringeri. When the pontiff appealed to Tipu Sultan of Mysore he sent a contingent of Muslim soldiers to guard the monastery. This force threw out the invaders. Later, the Peshwa (ruler of Marathas) apologised to the pontiff for the misconduct of his general.

There is a widespread view that many temples were destroyed by the Muslim invaders in North and Western India. Indeed, Somnath temple was looted by Mohammed of Gazni; Malik Kafur, a Muslim general, destroyed some Hindu temples in South India. But it is not possible to conclude that all temples or other places of worship were destroyed by the Muslims. In fact, there is evidence to show that the sectarian rivalries have taken advantage of turmoil created by war or invasion. For example, in the 17th century the Vijayanagar kingdom of the South was destroyed by the Muslim rulers of the neighbouring provinces. However, in the aftermath it was found that some of the Vaishnavite temples had been extensively damaged, although the Shaivite temples were mostly left intact. As the Muslim conquerors would not take side with one sect or the other, it was quite likely that one sect settled old scores with another sect, taking advantage of the disturbed conditions.

If the Muslims converted a few Hindu or Jain shrines into Islamic monuments (for ex. Kutab Minar in Delhi or Jama Masjid in Ahmedabad), the Hindus also converted Buddhist or Jain shrines into Hindu ones (for ex. Puri Jagannath temple in Orissa or Lakshmi temple at Kolhapur, Maharashtra were previously non-Hindu monuments). But change from one faith to another has not obliterated the old features. The converted structures retain the old features: this can be seen in Kutab Minar in Delhi or Jama Masjid in Ahmedabad. When a Hindu or Jain shrine was converted into an Islamic monument, the snake image was turned into a lotus flower. Islam forbids human or animal images but allows geometrical or floral designs. However, Coomaraswamy noted that the human or animal images found in Indian shrines are not drawn from real life but are only symbolic: they stand for ideas. Hence he found no difference between Hindu and Muslim iconography.²²

23.6 Multiple interpretations in Indian Religions

The basic sacred texts of Hindus which are composed in Sanskrit are the four Vedas, commentaries by the acharyas on the Vedic rituals and formulae, one hundred and eight Upanishads, Ramayana and Mahabharata, the twenty one

Purnas, and the hagiographies of Bhakti saints who lived and preached in different parts of India. Bhagavad Gita (which is actually a Upanishad) has referred to the three paths to salvation: the Jnana marga (path of spiritual knowledge) karma marga (the path of action) and the Bhakti marga (the path of devotion).²³ Over the centuries, hundreds of commentaries have been written on the Gita; the output is continuing upto the present. The commentaries have appeared in Indian languages and also English and German. Each commentary professes to offer a new interpretation of Krishna's message to Arjuna. Whatever be the Hindu sect the guru attains a high status if he or she writes or preaches on Gita. Similarly, other texts have undergone diverse interpretations. There is no doubt that the endless diversity of Indian people in language, region and inherited culture has had a bearing on these varied interpretations and religious practices. The endless debates between different sects also emanate from the same source; multiple interpretations and practices have stimulated high literary activity but have also often caused frictions.

Box 23.5: Sects Amongst Buddhism, Jainism and Other Religions

The Buddhist sects such as Hinayana and Mahayana also gave rise to a large volume of literature which interpreted Buddha's message in different ways. The Hinayana is a monk-centred religion; the members of laity cannot attain nirvana in this life but have to wait for a better birth. The monks are free from the delusions of earthly life; they are assured of liberation in this very birth. By contrast, Mahayana opens the gate to a wide range of people (even householders). Also, Mahayana subscribes to the doctrine of interdependent origination of all phenomena (pratitya samutpada).²⁴ What it means is that human beings can realize nirvana only when they shed their individualized identity (ego) and merge themselves in the interdependence with others. Hence, for them nirvana is not a state of void (shunyata) but the end of hiatus between individual and collectivity. There are also a variety of smaller sects which interpret Buddhism in different ways.

The Jains have two major divisions: Digambara and Shwetambara. In the former category the senior monks are stark naked; they are the realised souls who have shed all worldly snares. They admit only males to monkhood, although women can earn merit through deeds like prolonged fasting etc., The Shwetambara sect consists of both male and female ascetics who are clad in white and follow a strenuous routine. Jain monks of any sect are very puritanical and follow the path of non-violence. Nevertheless, there are long standing rivalries between them over the validity of some sacred texts. In some parts of India, there have been clashes between the followers of the two sects. There are several disputes both in and outside the law courts over the control of temples. The Muslim and Sikh groups also have dissidence; within the Islam the Sunnis and the Shias have come into violent clashes in parts of North India. The Sikhism has a dissident section called 'Nirankaris', which has gained widespread support among the populace in North India.

An outstanding problem in Indian religions is what is called "reification". It means that ideas, meanings or symbols are turned into things. For eg: from the time of Manu the Hindu males were enjoined upon to offer Shraddha (libation) periodically to deceased ancestors. This practice later became a mere ritual, without any symbolic significance; the priests elaborated the ceremony which became an economic burden. Similarly, events such as birth, marriage, funerals, etc, were ritualized and elaborated; performing these rites drove more and more people into debt or economic deprivation. In most cases, the symbolic significance has been lost in the observance of Hindus. For ex: during Ekadashi (fasting on the 11th day of the month) the pious Hindus abstain from food and water. The central meaning of Ekadashi is not gaining merit through fasting alone. The term refers to the inner control exercised by man over the following: his five senses, his five motor functions (speaking, working, moving, eating and drinking) plus his own mind. Through this control the individual comes to dwell near god (upa-vasa). But most common people interpret the term upavasa as merely fasting. Abstaining from food without

the self-control or mental focus has detracted the people from the basic purpose.

Similarly, the other communities have also become a prey to reification. In Islam "Jihad" means the self-control which an individual gains under the guidance from Allah. Under the nationalistic urges, at present the term has come to mean a disposition towards violent activity against unarmed people or taking over territory. Islam does not sanction these interpretations. Jihad allows violence only in self-defense, i.e., if there is an attack on the faith by the outsiders, then it calls for armed resistance to it by the faithful. Among Christians the 6th commandment of Moses: "Thou shall not kill" was interpreted to include only human beings. Hence, animals came to be killed for food. There was an institutional practice of vegetarianism in most parts of Europe, perhaps as a compensation for this violation of the Mosaic Code. For forty days during Lent, the Christians stayed away from meat-eating. But it has nearly disappeared at present.

The gurus, munis and the Buddhist monks have not only tried to correct reification but also interpreted the scriptures in a different light. The guru's authority has exceeded the canonical constraints. On a number of occasions, gurus have interpreted sacred texts differently to settle some personal problems of their followers. The guru's satsang is not only a venue for prayers or meditation, but it is also a place for the devotees who throng to it, to gain clarity of mind or find solution to a personal problem. Some gurus in India have remained even silent (mauni) but on a non-verbal level have made the anguished men and women gain repose.²⁵ Ramana Maharshi of south India remained silent most of the time; but the ordinary men and women who came to see him felt relief by just sitting in his presence. Likewise, the followers of Nanak saw a halo around his head, which was a sign of his spirituality. These personalised experiences have phenomenological implications which means that the normal division between subject and object is no longer relevant. The social scientists have to go beyond the confines of positivism to gain insights into the religious life in India. In sum, the guru-shishya relationship transcends the duality of existence. There is an unmediated, direct interaction between the seekers and the guide. The satsang which is well known in North India is a kind of hermeneutical circle in which there are often inexplicable occurrences (for eg. a sudden change in attitude or healing of sickness which can take place instantly). Those who are outside these circles have no experience of this sort. However, this inner reality is compelling even if the outsiders find it difficult to believe.

A few words may be necessary to make the religious scene more explicit. All Indian religions have emphasised that direct experience (for eg. intuition) is more important than learning. In fact, many gurus in India (like Nanak, Ramakrishna) were not learned; yet people flocked to them to seek solace or advice. The guru exercises a moral authority in giving advice to a follower; some of his actions may not find sanction in the sacred texts, but no one questions the guru's words. The acharya who is learned in Sanskrit has a high prestige but he does not exercise personal influence to the same extent as the guru. It is a matter of common observance that attendance at religious gatherings in India is not based on publicity. There is an inner drive which makes the folk participate in religious events.

In the recent years the satsang in North India has come to occupy a central place among the religious populace. The destruction of many temples or other places of worship during the previous centuries had created a void in the north. Hence, the satsang practice started with stalwarts like Tulsidas, Kabir and Nanak but has vibrantly continued down to the present. Both male and female gurus have attracted large audiences consisting of men, women and children. The relative absence of ritualism or temple culture in north India has

not diminished the popularity of religion. The increasing use of electronic media (like T.V. video and audio cassettes) has further strengthened the culture of satsang.

23.7 Conclusion

Religions all over the world have attempted to provide some answers to the mysteries of life, by gaining access to the unknown factors which are operating beneath the visible phenomena. Everywhere religions especially at the folk level celebrate life rather than mourn it. The religious fairs and festivals in India or elsewhere are joyous scenes where families, their kith and kin, networks of villagers gather clad in fresh clothes, and exchange greetings. As noted earlier, these religious fairs for eg. the Pushbar mela her^{*****} are important markets for the trade in the hinterland: cereals, livestock, urban manufactured good etc, are exchanged on a large scale. These fairs are held in temple towns which are now made accessible through modern transport. Lafcadio Hearn (writer on Japanese culture) makes a remark on Japanese temples (Buddhist or Shinto) as follows:

“Religion brings no gloom into this sunshine: before the Buddhas and the gods folk smile as they pray; the temple courts are playgrounds for the children; and within the enclosure of the great public shrines - which are places of festivity rather than solemnity - dancing platforms are erected. For no inconsiderable time one may live in the midst of appearances like these, and perceive nothing to spoil the pleasure of the experience”.²⁶

Hearn's remarks would be applicable to any place of worship. The view of Max Weber that religion in India was driven by “otherworldliness” is not correct, if seen from a totality. It is true that ascetics and monks may stay away from the ordinary pleasures of life and lead thereby a life of deprivation. But for most people it is the celebratory aspect which motivates them to work hard, save money and use the available surplus to participate in a jatra or mela in a temple town. In any case, it is not poverty or despair, which makes individuals men and women to renounce the world. It is the higher perception which holds all human pleasures and pains are illusory that makes a person ascetic. It is a fact that men and women from a well off background have renounced the ties with the world on a voluntary basis. In medieval Europe or India through the ages, this has been the practice. The guru, the satsang, the temple and the pilgrimage are the abiding “anti-structures” that seem to absorb the fissiparous trends in the Indian society. It is these agencies which underline the oneness of Indian society in the midst of diversities. The sociologists can constructively interpret the divisions in order to gain an understanding of its cohesiveness.

In the West there has been in recent decades much debate on the separation between state and church. Although the constitutions of Western countries have separated the two, on less formal levels the separation is not complete. As mentioned earlier, the Nordic Europe is broadly Protestant, while the Southern Europe is broadly catholic. The main reason for the bitterness regarding this is that the European kings used to take a partisan view to in enforcing the public policies. The ruler happened to be a Catholic or Protestant or Orthodox Christian. During his rule the other religious groups in his realm had a feeling that they were discriminated against. The Indian experience was quite different. What guided them was their commitment to the dhamma which was non-sectarian. Emperors like Ashoka propagated dhamma which included the welfare of different religious sects. The term stands for justice in broad terms and goes far beyond ritualism, sectarianism or bigotry. Even at present, if there is a proper understanding of this term, there is no need for opposition between religion and state. Both can be complementary to each other and together they have the potentiality of ushering in a new India.

23.8 Further Reading

G.S. Ghurye, 1964 : Indian Sadhus, popular Prakashan : pp: 98-113, Bombay.

Ernest Gellner, 1983 : Muslim Society, University of Cambridge.

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Unit 24

Secularisation

Contents

- 24.1 Introduction
- 24.2 Secularism and Secularisation : A Definition
- 24.3 Secularism in India
- 24.4 Secularism and the Indian National Movement
- 24.5 The Constitution and Secularism
- 24.6 Conclusion
- 24.7 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- define the concept of secularism;
- explain what is meant by the process of secularisation;
- discuss the concept of secularism in the Indian context;
- describe the reasons why secularism became an important feature of the Indian National Movement and finally;
- discuss the important and significant nature of this concept in the Indian Constitution.

24.1 Introduction

Secularism, it is said, stands for a tendency that is broad and basic, primordial and significant, in the evolution of human thought and experience. Secularism is not a mere protest or discontent with excesses of religious zeal. Secularism is defined in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as a branch of utilitarian ethics, designed for the physical, social and moral improvement of mankind, which neither affirms nor denies the theistic premises of religion. It would be generally correct to say that in the contemporary modern world any man/woman considers his or her religion as a private and personal affair, governing his/her relationship with some unseen power God, or whatever one may call it. This relationship should help and not hinder the efficient performance of duties of the individual in other spheres of life. The process of secularisation of life and thought consists in the withdrawal and separation of 'religion' from other spheres of 'life and thought'.

Its essential principle has been to seek for human improvement by material means alone. The main thrust of secularism is towards the secular, social issues and reforms, which demanded the concerted efforts of all persons, regardless of their theological affiliations. The important thing was that those secular issues were to be tackled without any recourse to religious dogmas. Thus, secularism was largely a movement which aimed to improve the lot of people here on earth and emancipate them from all tyranny, whether of the church, or of a capitalist socio-economic order.¹

Etymologically, the word secular originates from the Latin *seculum* which implied "great span of time" or the "spirit of the age". Subsequently, it acquired different meaning - that of belonging to 'This World'. Thus, two worlds are conceptualized i.e. the secular and the religious or the temporal and the spiritual. In the Christian discourse, the spiritual order is regarded as decisive in terms of ultimate truth. The term secularisation was the subsequent

outcome. It was coined in 1648 after the Peace of Westphalia which originally referred to the transfer of ecclesiastical lands to civic control.²

Secularism is a "process whereby religious thinking practice and institutions loose their social significance".³ To speak of secularism is to speak of the triumph of science over religion and reason over faith. Secularism is a celebration of man's reason, ability to emancipate him/her from the influences of religious customs, beliefs, practices. Therefore, Secularism means the inevitable "desacrilisation" of the World. The World loses its sacred character as man and nature become the object of rational-casual explanation in which the supernatural plays no part.

24.2 Secularism and Secularisation : A Definition

'Secularism' is a value-loaded concept, its values derive from, and must be contextualised in our understanding of the underlying social process we call 'secularisation'. 'Secularisation is a social process and 'secularism' is a socio-political ideal or ideology. In actuality 'secularism' can become a reality in our social institutions only in so far as these are affected by 'secularisation'. Therefore, secularism is a product of, and, in turn, strengthen the process of secularisation. For the truism that there can be no secularism without process of secularisation is now widely accepted, but the challenge of actualising it through concrete social, political, economic and educational measures is an enormous task .⁴

Secularism is, above all, a product of the *weltanshauung* of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. It was the expression of Western man's urge to live his own life independently of the domination by the church which was the prevalent feature of medieval Western society. Secularism also affirmed the reality and worth of life in this world and the authority of reason and science in all secular matters.⁵

The word "secularism" was coined by Gorge Jacob Holyoake in 1851 to describe the socio-political movement started by himself, Charles Bradlaugh and others. G.J Holyoake used the term secularism to define an ideology, wherein social and industrial morality hitherto determined by reference to the transcending principles of religion, were now to be determined by reason, and firmly anchored to the good of man in this life. Secularism was subsequently projected as a rationalist movement, agnostic or indifferent to Religion.⁶

The secularism of Holyoake was a simple philosophy, which affirmed concern for life in this world, as articulated by the humanists and positivists alike. Secularism affirms the worth of this worldly existence, the independence of scientific knowledge, and human happiness as the only legitimate aims of social institutions. Holyoake described secularism as a "way of thinking", and as being concerned with "issues that can be tested in this life".⁷

According to Eris S, Water house, the relation of secularism to religion was understood as "mutually exclusive, rather than hostile." Secularism's only concern is that this world be known by experience and reason. It is not concerned about the "other world", or life after death; and neither offers, nor forbids, any opinion about these matters, it is willing to leave such questions to theology and is equally indifferent to both theism and atheism. Before adopting the term "secularism", Holyoake had considered the term "nethesim" and "limitationism" as alternatives. Holyoake was apparently more interested in countering the irrationalism of Christian theology, than in the negation of religion *per se*. His second aim was the affirmation of the worth and dignity of person and the autonomy of secular life .⁸

To begin then with secularisation in the West was hailed as “the liberation of modern man from religious tutelage” by some, while others bewailed it “as Christiamisation, paganisation and the like...”⁹ But historically the process of secularisation for the social scientist is intimately linked with the rise of modernity in the West and some would consider it as “perhaps the most significant development of the last several hundred years”¹⁰. It was the apparent decline in traditional church-oriented religion in recent times that heightened the process of secularisation and brought it to its present culmination. Yet it is a process whose roots can be traced to the very founding of the major religions and in fact it stands in an ambiguous and dialectical relation to the very phenomena it supposedly undermines. In this perspective, secularism is a Western concept to the extent that secularisation is a process that is located in Western society.

The term ‘secularisation’ is defined by Bryan Wilson as the process in which different social institutions ‘become recognised as distinctive concerns operating with considerable autonomy.’¹¹ It is also a process of “decline in religious activities, beliefs, ways of thinking and institutions.”¹² This decline in religious consciousness is the result of the universal acceptance of pragmatic or scientific approach to secular issues. In a secularised society people turn to science for explanation of natural phenomena and for remedial measures for their mundane problems. They no more take recourse to the “supernatural” for either cognitive understanding of the world, or even for emotional support.¹³ As a result, “Religion in the West has generally become a department of the social order rather than the pervasive or even determinant influence it once was.”¹⁴

In another work, Wilson mentions three features of a secular or secularised society, i.e.

- a) The prevalence of instrumental values,
- b) Rational procedures,
- © Technological methods.

He also defines a secular society as one in which “the sense of the sacred, the sense of the sanctity of life and deep religiosity are most conspicuously absent.”¹⁵ Let us see how the concept of secularism is understood in the context of Indian Society.

24.3 Secularism in India

Right from the beginning, Indian secularism drew its strength from pluralism. Secularism in the Indian tradition, was not the opposition of religion but was related to communalism, while Europe, being mono-religious, secularism was not the opposite of communalism as there was no struggle for domination between various religious communities. This is the crucial difference between the Western and Indian concepts of secularism. In Europe there was a struggle between the Christians and the church, while in India the struggle was between one religious community and the other. In India the saner leaders of both the communities emphasised justice in power sharing without questioning the religious authority of either community at any stage. ⁶²

Indians came across the concept of secularism in nineteenth century under the influence of the British rulers. It had never been the part of Indian scene before. Unlike Europe, India did not undergo any renaissance movement. It was only in late nineteenth century when the mutiny failed and the British consolidated their rule that the Indians opened their minds to the Western influences. But the Western ideas became popular only among a small section of Indians in urban areas. The British rule was essentially secular, as they began to impose secular laws replacing many of the religious laws. They also

imposed common criminal code, though they did not touch personal laws. It was a new experience for the Indians. They had always followed religious laws and traditions so far. There did not exist any concept of secular law until then. Any deviation from these laws and traditions was strongly condemned. It even attracted punishment like social boycott and excommunication. In the case of Hindus, caste rules were followed very rigidly indeed.

The word 'secular' in political sense was used after formation of Indian National Congress in 1885. The word secular in Indian political terminology came to be used in a pluralist setting and not in a Western sense that it indicated indifference to religion. As we know in the West the concept of secularism emerged as a result of a struggle between the Church and the political rulers. The Church was dominating the political scene and denied independence to the ruling monarchies in various parts of Europe. Thus, as a result of this struggle, the concept of secular polity emerged in Europe. It should also be noted that the European society was, for all practical purposes, a mono-religious society. Thus secularism had a very different connotation in the Western context. It is essentially signified a political authority totally independent of Church. The concept of secularism in India emerged in the context of religious pluralism, as against religious authoritarianism in the West. Secularism was emphasised by the Indian National Congress to allay the apprehension of religious minorities, particularly the Muslims, that it was not a Hindu political formation. It was a religious community, rather than religious authority, which mattered in Indian context.⁶³

Reflection and Action 24.1

Interview five people in your community belonging to different caste, class, occupation and religion. Ask them about their views on whether India is a 'secular' society or not?

Write a report of about two pages on the outcome of this interview, comparing the opinion of the interviewees and your own opinion. Compare your report with those of other students at your Study Center.

Secularism, in the Indian context, had very different connotation right from the very beginning. It related more to community and its secular interests rather than religion and its authority. Throughout our independence struggle, we were faced with secular/communal dichotomy. But none of our political leaders thought of challenging any religious authority, Hindu or Muslim. On the contrary, these leaders held out repeated assurances that both Hindus and Muslims would be free to profess and practice their respective religions both in an individual and a collective sense. Not only this, the political leadership used existing religious institutions to draw Hindu and Muslim masses in to political processes. Thus, Tilak used Shivaji and Ganesh festivals to create political consciousness among the Hindu masses. Gandhiji, too, used the concept of "Ram Rajya" on the one hand, to draw Hindu masses, and the Khilafat movement on the other, to attract the Muslim masses. Religion and religious institutions had to be used repeatedly to inspire people towards political action. Thus, Indian secularism never collided either with religion or religious authority. On the contrary, it drew upon it and its institutions to reinforce political processes.

As the base of the freedom movement widened in the 1920s with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi and as he proceeded to fine tune the techniques of mass resistance that he had developed in South Africa, previously marginal groups were brought in to the freedom struggle and Indian society became united under the influence of the overarching call for freedom. But, paradoxically, the same period was to see the advent of fundamentalist and rabid groups, both Hindu and Muslim, who began to politicise religion and thereby divide Indian

society. And, as we have seen all over the world today, religious identification is often the product of a political movement and not necessarily the precondition for such a movement. In sum, we were to see parallel movements in India, one, that united people on the lines of the anti-colonial struggle and the other that divided people in the name of religion.

24.4 Secularism and the Indian National Movement

The leadership of the freedom struggle, therefore, had to devise a principle that would be capable of holding together people who subscribed to different faiths. This holding mechanism was provided by secularism. Nationalist movement, on the other hand, fought the colonial government for the goal of a united, free India. It sought to enlist the support of all religious groups in its nationalist struggle.⁶⁴This was, note, not a secularism that commands the separation of religion and politics but a secularism that ensures the equality of all faiths- *sarva dharma sambhava*. ⁶⁵

Communalism had a devastating effect on India's national life, finally resulting in the partition of the country and wide scale communal riots. It, therefore, came to be regarded as the greatest challenge to, or even negation of, both nationalism and secularism. The nationalist leaders very soon realised that they had to fight two enemies simultaneously - one, the British imperialist power and second, communalism within India. They saw in secularism an ideology that could serve both their purposes, that is fight or controvert communalism and provide a basis for a united Indian nation, which, in turn, would strengthen the nationalist movement for India's independence.

A nation can survive only when all sections of the populace share a sense of common nationality and to that extent transcend their limited, regional, ethnic, linguistic, or religious identities. In the words of Nehru, "Possibly, the most essential characteristics of national consciousness is a sense of belonging together and together facing the rest of mankind."⁶⁶ Since communal loyalties are the greatest hurdle in the emergence of a national consciousness, the latter can be founded only on a secularist ideology.

Nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw an overwhelming rise in Indian nationalism. The Congress led nationalist movement included persons with varying shades of opinion. It was, therefore, not entirely free from communalist elements, but its main thrust was towards a nationalist, secularist, and democratic ideology.

Unlike the social reformers and revivalist ideologues of that period, the leaders of Indian National Congress were secular in their approach to national problems. For the founders of Congress, national identity and the interests of the nation as a whole were all-inclusive and transcended the differences of religion, caste, language etc. the report of the second session of the Congress (1886) made its secular and nationalist character clear:

"The Congress is a community of temporal interests, and not of spiritual convictions, that qualify men to represent each other in the discussion of political questions. We hold their general interests in this country being identical, Hindus, Christians, Muslims and Parsis may as members of their respective communities represent each other in the discussion of public secular affairs". ⁶⁷

During the first decades of its existence, Congress was dominated by leaders like Dadabhai Nauroji, Surendernath Banerjee and GopalKrishna Gokhle. They were known as moderates who believed in rationalism, secularism, constitutionalism and liberalism. They were gradually replaced by more extremist leaders like Bipinchandra Pal, B.G. Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai. These leaders were strong nationalists, but there was a religious tinge to their speeches and

actions, such as the idealisation of Shivaji and Rana Pratap and popularisation of the religious festivals associated with Durga and Ganesh. Bipan Chandra has argued that both the shift in the Muslim leaders' stand from a nationalist one to a communalist one, and the religious tinge in the speeches and actions of the "extremist" leaders (as compared to the rational, liberal stand of the "moderates") were due to the compulsions of the mass politics. All of them knew that religious idioms, symbols and the talk of religion being in danger would have much greater appeal for the masses than any secular ideology.⁶⁸

In spite of this religious tinge, the nationalism of Congress leaders was very different from that of Hindu chauvinists and other communalists. Their concept of the nation was territorial, that is, included all the inhabitants of India, irrespective of their religious creed, or any other differences. They emphasised equality - of status for all the inhabitants of India, whatever their religion. Gandhi repeatedly affirmed "India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in a dreamland. The Hindus, the Mohammedans, the Parsis and Christians who have made India their country are fellow countrymen. In no part of the world are one nationality and religion synonymous terms, nor has it ever been so in India."⁶⁹

Another basic difference between Indian nationalism and the so-called "Hindu and Muslim nationalisms" lies in their respective attitudes towards religion. While the latter made religion the basis of both the individual's and community's identity and all their secular interests, Indian nationalism firmly asserted the irrelevance of religion for India's nationhood. Though all the nationalist leaders, with the exception of two Nehrus, were men of religion who accepted it as a worthy dimension of human life, they, at the same time, affirmed the need to separate religion from secular national concerns. They believed the national integration, or the sense of national identity could be achieved only if Indians set aside their religious identities and joined hand in the freedom struggle. Mahatma's efforts to integrate the "lower" caste Hindus in to the larger Hindu society, as well as his efforts to bring the Muslim and other religious minorities in to the national mainstream, were expressions of nationalist leaders to a large extent. This approach implied a total rejection of communalism, but frankly accepted the desirability and importance of religion in a person's life.

Further, religion was not the *bete noire* of Indian ideologues and nationalist leaders as it was in the post-Reformation West. In India, religion never tried to question scientific discoveries, or the use of scientific technology in everyday life. More importantly, religion was never perceived by Indian nationalist leaders and scholars of the crucial decades before Independence as the cause or source of the miserable condition of Indian masses. Instead, the colonial rule was perceived as the chief or only source of the misery and backwardness of the people. The solution to India's problems was again visualised as the attainment of Independence (*swaraja*), rather than the negation of religion.

The emphasis in most nationalist leaders, from Gandhi to Patel and Azad, was on the acceptance of the fact of existence of separate religious communities, while at the same time seeking to neutralise this fact by a greater emphasis on the need and value of their peaceful existence in one nation-society.⁷⁰ On the other hand, religious identity was not important for Nehru who emphasised a secular national identity rather than peaceful coexistence of different religious communities. Thus, Indian nationalism was based on the perception that a nation is constituted by a people who share common everyday problems, and endeavour together to achieve common goals of freedom, democratic rights and a just social order.⁷¹

Indian nationalism was further intimately allied to a secular standpoint. From the beginning, communalism, or the alliance between religion and politics,

was seen as the greatest danger to both nationalist movement and national integration. The entire concept of Indian secularism was developed in the process of attempting to weld together a rather heterogeneous populace, divided on communal lines, into a modern nation. This required a total rejection of communalism and the affirmation of the need to separate politics and other secular institutions from religion. "The alliance of religion and politics in the shape of communalism", said Nehru, is the most dangerous and yields the most abnormal kind of illegitimate brood."⁷²

Secularism was understood as the negation of communalism and implied the separation of religion and politics. D.E. Smith observes: "The main current of Indian nationalism assured the separation of religion and politics; there was no conflict between India's religious pluralism and the goal of independence with political unity."⁷³

The need for secularism arose in India and secularism was conceived accordingly in two related contexts - first, to counter the challenge of communalism to national integrity and second, to provide a basis for nationalism or nationalist movement which should be shared by all Indians.

Satish Chandra has pointed out that the two major concerns of leaders of national movement were "the nature of India's nationhood and the basis on which its unity could be preserved."⁷⁴ "The concept of secularism", according to him "arose in this context. It sought to mediate between the interests of various communities, and postulated a united Indian state where the followers of any religion would neither be favoured nor discriminated against. Thus, unlike Europe, secularism in India arose not as a process of conflict with organised religion, but an attempt to unify the followers of different religious faiths in India in their struggle against the foreign rulers by making secularism the premise of a united free India.

The emphasis, therefore, was not an opposition to religion at all, but on its accommodation in secular life by all religious groups. The idea of religious national life by all religious groups. The idea of religious toleration in terms of *sarva dharma sambhava*, or equal regard for all religions, became pivotal to Indian conception of secularism, as it made possible the harmonious existence of several religious communities in one nation-state. It was expected that communalism or exclusive loyalty to one's religious community could be countered by a positive ideal of equal regard for all religions.

Reflection and Action 24.2

Go to a library near your home or the Study Center library and look for history text books on the Indian National Movement and India's freedom struggle.

Write an essay of about two pages on "India's Struggle for Freedom and the use of Religious symbols."

Compare your essay with those of other students at your Study Center.

The Indian leadership continued to hold fast to this normative principle despite the fact that the country was partitioned ostensibly in the name of religion. Given the deep polarisation of Indian society and given the massive massacres and the brutality that marked the partition of the country, the leadership could easily have swung in the direction of majoritarianism. But it refused to be swayed and remained true to its commitment that all religions in post-independent India would be treated equally by the state.

Secularism, therefore, was the norm that inspired the forging of a mass coalition that fought for the independence of the country; it informed the debates in the constituent Assembly and underlay the spirit of the Constitution. And it was this meaning of secularism that was given a concrete shape in the Constitution.

Consider that the first principle of secularism that was codified in the Constitution carried the assurance that everyone had the freedom to practice their religion via Article 25 of the fundamental rights chapter. It follows that religion itself was not sought to be discouraged. 'We call our State a secular one. The word "secular" perhaps is not a very happy one. And yet, for want of a better, we have used it. What exactly does it mean? It does not obviously mean a state where religion as such is discouraged. It means freedom of religion and conscience, including freedom for those who may have no religion,'¹⁴stated Nehru.

Now, strictly speaking, we do not need to proclaim secularism in order to have religious freedom. This freedom can emerge from, and form part of the fundamental rights that are assured to every citizen. But a secular state cannot stop at granting the right to religion. The principle of secularism goes further and establishes equality between all religious groups. The concept of equality or sameness of all religions was inspired by the doctrine of *sarva dharma sambhava* that had permeated Gandhiji's understanding of religious toleration.

Box 24.1: Dr. Radhakrishnan's Views on Secularism

Dr. Radhakrishnan was to phrase his understanding of secularism as:

"We hold that no one religion should be given preferential status, or unique distinction, that no one religion should be accorded special privileges in national life, or international relations for that would be a violation of the basic principles of democracy and contrary to the best interest of religion and government....No group of citizens shall arrogate to itself rights and privileges which it denies to others. No person shall suffer any form of disability or discrimination because of his religion but all alike should be free to share to the fullest degree in the common life."⁷⁶

Now just as religious freedom does not necessarily need secularism to support it, the equality of religions can be established via the fundamental right of equality vide Article 14. but if we were to stop at this, secularism would be rendered redundant. For secularism extends beyond equality and freedom to declare that the state is not aligned to any particular religion. **It is this particular commitment that establishes the credentials of a secular state. Or secularism.** We can say, outstripping provisions for freedom and equality stipulates that the state will maintain an attitude of principled distance from all religious groups. It also contracts that the state would neither align itself with any particular religion, especially the majority religion, nor pursue any religious tasks of its own.

Jawaharlal Nehru was to state as much on one occasion. 'It is perhaps not very easy even to find a good word in Hindi for "secular". Some people think that it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. What it means is that it is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities; that, as a state, it does not allow itself to be attached to one faith or religion, which then becomes the state religion.'⁷⁷ The second and the third component of secularism, that is, equality of all religions and the distancing of the state from all religious groups, was specifically meant to assure the minorities that they had a legitimate place in the country and that they would not be discriminated against. Correspondingly, secularism established that the majority would not be privileged in any manner. The creed, therefore, discouraged any pretension that the religion of the majority had any right to stamp the body politic with its ethos.

24.5 The Constitution and Secularism

Indian Constitution is a creative blend between state secularism and religiosity of the civil society. The Indian Constitution treats all citizens equal, irrespective

of caste, creed, race, sex or religion. Article 14 guarantees equality before law. It says, "The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India." Article 15 says, 1) "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. 2) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment; or b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing, roads and places of public resort maintained, wholly or partly out of state funds or dedicated to the use of the general public."⁷⁸

Thus, the article does away with caste discriminations and Article 16 guaranteed equality of opportunity in matters of employment. Article 25-to 30-guarantee freedom of religion, of culture and language. Article 30 also guarantees to minorities the right to establish their own educational institutions. These Articles from 25 to 30 are extremely significant as far as minority rights are concerned, the minorities could be religious or linguistic.

Though our constitution is secular, originally the word secularism did not occur in it. It was during emergency in mid-seventies that the words "secular and socialist" were added and India was described as "secular and socialist republic". But the words secularism or secular were not defined. According to H.M. Seervai's *Constitutional Law of India*, "Realizing that the words 'secular' and 'socialist' required to be defined, the 45th amendment bill (which became the 44th amendment) proposed an amendment of article 366 by inserting definitions of the words 'secular' and 'socialist'. However, this amendment was not accepted by the Council of States. Consequently the words 'secular' and 'socialist' have remained undefined. But a footnote to this gives the proposed amendment defines secularism thus:

Article 366 of the Constitution shall be renumbered as clause (2) of that article and before clause (2) as so numbered, the following clause shall be inserted, namely, (1) in the preamble to the Constitution the expression 'secular' means a republic in which there is equal respect for all religions.⁷⁹

Thus, we see the words secular and secularism remain undefined in the Indian Constitution. 'Secularism' in the Indian Constitution connotes that:

- 1) the state, by itself, shall not espouse or establish or practice any religion,
- 2) public revenues will not be used to promote any religion,
- 3) the state shall have the power to regulate any "economic, financial or other secular activity" associated with religious practice (Article 25(2) (a) of the constitution);
- 4) the state shall have the power through the law to provide for "social welfare and reform or the throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of public character to all classes and sections of Hindus" (Article 25 (2) (b) of the constitution);
- 5) the practice of untouchability (in-so-far as it may be justified by Hindu religion) is constitutionally outlawed by Article 17);
- 6) every individual person will have, in that order, an equal right to freedom of conscience and religion;
- 7) these rights are, however, subject to the power of the state through law to impose restrictions on the ground of "public order, morality and health";
- 8) these rights are furthermore subject to other fundamental rights in Part III; and
- 9) the courts, auspiciously the Supreme Court, shall have the 'say' on adjudging state action as valid or otherwise under the above principles.

By this time, the nine features of secularism had marshaled behind them a quarter century of national constitutional consensus. To these nine features has been now added, since 1976, a fundamental duty of all citizens (under Articles 51-A (f) to “preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture”. This duty is addressed to all citizens (including leaders of political parties, and all holders of state power) and it is declared their fundamental obligation. Neither political practices, nor practices of power (including judicial power) will be legitimate if they contradict this duty.

The Constitution has undoubtedly erected a ‘wall of separation’ between the State and religion. While there are no doors opening from the side of religion in to the State, there are, however, several doors opening from side of the State in to religion. If the interests of public order, morality and health so demand, the right to profess, practice and propagate religion may be breached; so also the right of a religious denomination to manage its own affairs in matters pertaining to religion. The right to profess, practice and propagate religion may also be breached if the enforcement of other fundamental rights require it or if the demands of the social welfare and reform require it.

Thus the constitution contemplates and compels the supremacy of secular authority and secular interest over religious authority and religious interest.

We see, therefore, that secularism under the Constitution is an attitude, and a way of life, partly commanded and partly commended by the Constitution, embodying a system of values in which the relation between fellow human beings and between the State and citizen are freed from the bondage of the prejudices and loyalties of religion, race, caste, language and region and are ruled by a mutual concern for a life with dignity and culture for a society where everyone is free and equal and in which science and reason triumph over superstitious and blind belief and love of humanity over love of any particular section thereof.

24.6 Conclusion

In sum, the concept of secularism that emerged in India possessed three substantial components:

- The state would not attach itself to any one religion, which would thereby establish as the state religion.
- All citizens had the freedom of religious belief.
- The state would ensure equality among religious groups by ensuring that one group was not favoured at the expense of another. Correspondingly, the minorities were reassured that they would not be discriminated against in any way.

Therefore, in the first instance, secularism was designed to regulate debilitating religious strife, to assure the minorities of their safety and to set at rest any apprehension that the state would align itself with the dominant religion. In retrospect, it is not surprising that secularism proved to be attractive to Indian leadership. For one, secularism had historically emerged in the West as a formula to put an end to the religious wars that has devastated Europe in the sixteenth century. It was on the principle of secularism that communities that had gone to war over religion and societies that had tortured non-believers throughout the period of the Inquisition, could learn to live together. India faced similar problems. The anti-colonial struggle had provoked separate and potentially divisive communities to define themselves not only in opposition to colonialism but also in opposition to each other. This posed a distinct threat to the coherence of the new nation. The articulation of the principle of secularism, a principle that was strictly outside the ideological formulation of these identities, was designed to allow people to live together in civility. This is what contemporary critiques of secularism seem to forget.

In sum, for the country the attraction of secularism lay in the fact that it was the only prudent option for constructing a nation out of the fragmented and polarised identities that had emerged and consolidated themselves during the colonial and the anti-colonial phase. In India, where two new nations had materialised out of a blood drenched partition, i.e. India and Pakistan, the need was to forget that people who shared the same historical consciousness, the same language and the same folklore for centuries had split over religion. The need was to integrate these divided people on new ideologies, new perspectives, new issues. This issue could only be secularism that gave due recognition to religious identities and yet attempted to transcend them as far as the public sphere was concerned. *The state could not refuse to recognise the religious identities of its people.* That would have been bad politics and bad historical understanding. *What it could do was to stipulate that all religions were in principle equal.*

24.7 Further Reading

Jhingran, Saral. 1995. Secularism in India. P.53.

"Secularization" in the Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. Mircea Eliade, Vol. 13. p. 159.

Neera Chandoke. Representing the Secular Agenda for India in Mushirul Hasan (ed.)

