

Unit 23

Cohesive and Divisive Dimensions of Religion

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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-cribe 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 Dharma¹⁷. 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 Buddha hood 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

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