UNIT 15   HINDU SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Structure

15.0   OBJECTIVES

When you have read this unit you should be able to

- describe the concepts of *dharma, karma, artha* and *moksha* and their relevance to Hindu social structure

- list and describe some aspects of Hindu marriage and family

- describe *varna, jati,* caste councils and associations and *jajmani* system among the Hindus

- explain and describe some Hindu festivals.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

In Blocks 2 and 3 of ESO-12 you learnt about social institutions of our society. In this Block, you will learn about social organisation of different religious groups in India. In this unit, we deal with the social organisation of the Hindus.

Generally speaking, the process of doing things in an orderly fashion is called organisation. When we speak of social organisation, we talk about the arrangement of actions which conform with the norms and values of society. Thus, to understand the social organisation of a particular society, in this case Hindu society, we need to study the systematic ordering of social relations, including changes that have taken place over time in them.

In any description of social organisation of a people we need to refer to the ideological basis of the way the people act. In this unit also, in section 15.2 we introduce you to some fundamental concepts of Hindu religion upon which Hindu social institutions and collective activities are based. The religious concepts of the Hindus give us the ideological basis of the ways they organise their socio-economic activities, their festivals and rituals. We have, therefore, discussed some of the major ideas of Hinduism. In section 15.3 we give a demographic profile of the Hindu community in India. In section 15.4 are discussed aspects of its basic social institutions, namely, of marriage and family.

In section 15.5, we describe the arrangements of Hindu social categories which operate within a well-ordered Hindu social system across regions. As examples of collective behaviour of the community, the festivals and pilgrimage among the Hindu are discussed in section 15.6. Thus, our description of social life around marriage, family, inheritance, caste and festivals gives us a comprehensive picture of Hindu social organisation.

15.2 RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS AND HINDU SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world. It is a religion followed by several racial and ethnic groups. The Hindu sacred texts deal with the ethical behaviour of an individual of a family and of society in general. They also discuss and prescribe rules of administration, politics, statesmanship, legal principles and statecraft. The rules of conduct apply to personal and social life. Here, we will discuss only some religious concepts, which provide an understanding of the ways in which Hindu society is organised.

15.2.1 Concepts of *Dharma, Artha, Kama* and *Moksha*

A life of righteousness for a Hindu is possible through the fourfold scheme of practical endeavour. It comprises the concepts of **dharma, artha,** kama and **moksha.**

i) *Dharma* is honest and upright conduct or righteous action.

ii) *Artha* means a righteous and honest pursuit of economic activities.

iii) *Kama* is the fulfillment of one's normal desires.

iv) *Moksha* is liberation, that is absorption of the self into eternal bliss.

Related to these four concepts are the concepts of *karma* and *samsara.* Depending upon one's deeds *(karma)* one is able to reach the stage of *moksha* or liberation. The stage of *moksha* or liberation is a term for describing the end of the cycle of birth and rebirth. The cycle of birth and rebirth is known as *samsara.* The Hindus believe that each human being has a soul and that this soul is immortal. It does not perish at the time of death. The process of birth and rebirth goes on until *moksha* is attained. This cycle of transmigration is also known as *samsara,* which is the arena where the cycle of birth and rebirth operates. One's birth and rebirth in a particular state of existence is believed by the Hindus to be dependent on the quality of one's deeds *(karma).* For a Hindu, the issue of liberation is of paramount significance (Prabhu 1979: 43-48). Let us discuss a little more about these two concepts, i.e., *Karma* and *Samsara.*

15.2.2 *Karma* and *Samsara*

The concepts of *dharma, artha, kama* and *moksha* are related to tenets of *karma* and *samsara. Karma* is a word used for all activity or work. *Samsara* is the term used for the arena where the cycle of birth and rebirth continues to operate until one attains liberation. This is also called the theory of reincarnation or *punarjanma.* Actions are divided into good or bad on the basis of their intrinsic worth. Good deeds bring fame, merit and are the path to heaven. Bad deeds bring notoriety and lead to punishment and life in hell. It is recognised that an individual's overall position in a future life depends on the way he or she lives the present one. This belief, which gave a positive or negative value to certain actions, developed into a general theory of actions and is called the *karma* theory. The concept of karma is fully developed and woven into the belief in re-birth, which in turn is related to the belief concerning heaven, hell, and *moksha.* An individual's fate after death is determined by the sum total of grades and attributes of his or her actions or deeds *(karma)* during his or her life. Better birth and status is obtained if there is a surplus of many good deeds in a person's life. Otherwise one's status falls in the next life. Another related belief-is that the world moves in a cyclical process (birth and death follow one another). By following one's *karma* prescribed within the fourfold scheme of *dharma, artha, kama, moksha* an individual strives to get out of this otherwise infinite cyclical process of birth and death. Depending on one's previous and present *karma,* one prospers or suffers in this world. Later after death he either gains heaven or is punished with life in hell. Thus a human being after death may become a denizen or inhabitant of heaven or hell, may be reborn as an animal, or even be reborn as a tree. All this depends on one's *karma.* An individual usually wanders through many births till he or she finds final release or *moksha.*

Activity 1

Make a list at least six of the Hindu sacred books, which mention the four concepts of *dharma, artha, karma* and *moksha.* Compare, if possible, your list with those prepared by other students in the Study Centre.

15.2.3 Relevance to Hindu Social Structure

The belief in *karma* and *dharma* has direct relevance to Hindu social organisation, which is based on an arrangement of castes into a graded order.

This hierarchy, in turn, is linked with the quality of one's *karma.* One can say that if one's actions are good, one will be born in a higher caste in the next birth. Hindu society is supposed to be governed by rather strict rules of caste behaviour. There are, on the other hand, some general rules governing the behaviour of all members irrespective of caste. Castes coexist with different norms of behaviour and a continuity with the past in terms of one's actions in the previous birth. Whatever position one may be born into, one must fulfil the functions, without attachment, without hatred and resentment. Whatever may be one's *dharma,* its performance through one's *karma* brings blessings.

Each person has a duty *(dharma)* appropriate to one's caste and one's station in life. As mentioned before, the term *dharma* refers to honest and upright conduct or righteous action. *Dharma* has two aspects; one normative and the other naturalistic. The normative aspect refers to duty or path to be followed. The naturalistic meaning implies the essential attributes or nature, for example, the dharma or nature of water is to flow. The Hindus believe that one must follow one's *dharma* to achieve ultimate liberation from the cycle of births and deaths in this world. An individual belongs to a family and a caste group and has to perform his or her *dharma* (in the sense of its naturalistic aspect) accordingly. The main aim of following one's *dharma* is to eventually achieve *moksha* or liberation. *Dharma* relates not only to the caste but also to the different stages in one's life. As part of following one's *dharma* a Hindu goes through the life cycle rituals which are carried out in the context of marriage, family and caste. Let us now look at the size and spread of the Hindu community in India.

Check Your Progress 1

i)   Describe briefly the concepts of *dharma, artha, kama,* and *moksha.* Use about five lines for your answer.

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ii) How is the belief in Karma relevent to Hindu social organisation? Use two lines for your answer.

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15.3   PROFILE OF HINDU COMMUNITY IN INDIA

Hinduism is one of the most ancient religions of the world. Its earliest literary productions were the four Vedas. These comprise hymns and ritual ceremonies of the early Aryan settlers, who were a pastoral and agricultural people. The

Vedic period covers about 2500 B.C. to 600 B.C. The Upanishadic teachings, also of this period, contain philosophical reflection of human life. The period of the Epics succeeded that of the Upanishads. In the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* philosophical doctrines were often presented in the form of stories and parables. Many other doctrines followed including the *Bhakti* movement of Ramanuja, Vaishnavism, Saktism, Brahmo and Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna, and Aurobindo. Thus, Hindu doctrine developed in several stages.

Demographically the Hindus are the largest percentage of the population of India comprising 82.64 percent in 1981 (G0l l984). Even though the absolute number of people who follow Hinduism increased from 549 million in 1981 to 672 million (82.4 percent) in 1991, there was a marginal decrease in terms of percentage points (Census of India 1991). We find that in some states of India the percentage of Hindus is somewhat higher or much lower than the national average. In 1981, those above it included Himachal Pradesh (95.4), Orissa (95.4) and Madhya Pradesh (92.9). In 1991, in ten States the percentage of Hindus was above the national average. Himachal Pradesh (95.8 percent) has the highest concentration of Hindus. In 1981 those below the national average included the States of West Bengal (76.9), Sikkim (67.2), Manipur (60.0), Kerala (58.1), Punjab (36.9), Jammu and Kashmir (32.2), Meghalaya (18.0) and Nagaland (14.4). In comparison, a total of four States had Hindu population less than 50 percent in 1991 with the lowest being in Meghalaya (5.04 percent). The low figures are due to other religious denominations being higher. The percentage increase for 1971-81 among Hindus was highest in Nagaland (88.4) followed by Sikkim (47.2). Total population rose by 24.69 per cent during 1971-81 and for Hindus the rise was 24.15 per cent. This was in keeping with high fertility and low mortality rates found in this community.

15.4 MARRIAGE AND FAMILY AMONG THE HINDUS

Before we discuss specific institutions of the Hindus in India, let us emphasise how widely spread this community is. Consequently, in the areas of marriage or family, there are regional variations. What you will read in these pages is a generalisation covering the common elements and mentioning in passing about the variations. By and large, to marry and raise a family is a sacramental activity for the Hindus. Let us first look at the institution of marriage and then at the family in the Hindu community.

15.4.1 Hindu Marriage

Marriage is a sacred duty for all Hindus. It is an obligatory sacrament because the birth of a son is considered by many Hindus as necessary for obtaining *moksha.* In order to perform important rituals towards gods and ancestors, the sacred texts decree that it is obligatory for a Hindu to be married and have male descendants. Today, a large number of Hindus may, however, not believe in and practice these traditional ideas and associated customs.

Marriage is considered to be one of the sacraments sanctifying the body, mind and soul of the groom and bride. Therefore at the proper age and time, every Hindu woman and man is expected to get married. A wife is considered to be instrumental in helping her husband fulfil the four kinds of *purushartha,*

namely, d*harma, artha, kama* and *moksha* (see Section 15.2). According to this view of marriage, a man is thought to be incomplete without wife and children. Figure 15.1 demonstrates the traditional Hindu marriage.

When we discuss Hindu marriage, we should also speak of the eight forms of marriage, which describe the ways marriages are traditionally consecrated among the Hindus.

15.4.2 Eight Forms of Hindu Marriage

Before enumerating these eight forms, let us make it clear that here we are not talking about the usual usage in sociology regarding the forms of marriage. In sociology we discuss monogamy, polygamy and group marriage etc. under the topic of forms of marriage. In that respect, it will suffice to note here that monogamy (i.e., a man is married to one woman at a time) is the usual form of marriage among the Hindus. But various forms of polygamy are also found in the Hindu community. A widow is allowed to remarry among lower castes.
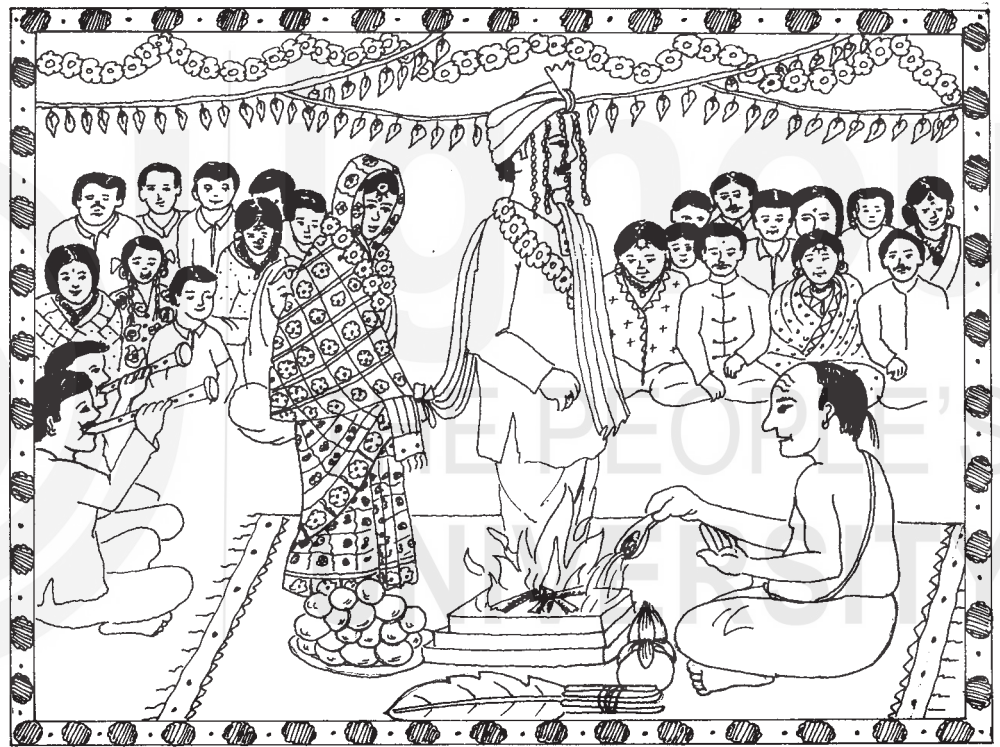

Fig. 15.1: A Hindu marriage

Higher castes usually prohibit widow marriage. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 permits divorce on the grounds of insanity, leprosy, adultery, etc. A detailed discussion on these points has already been given in unit 7 of Block 2 of this course. Coming back to the forms of marriage among the Hindus, only the first four of the following eight forms bring purification to ancestors on the sides of father and mother, the remaining four forms produce no such value (Pandey 1976: 159-169). The eight forms are given below.

i) **The *Brahma* form:** It comprises the gift or giving away of the daughter by the father to a man, who has learnt the Veda.

(ii) **The *Daiva* form:** It involves the giving away of the daughter by the father to a priest, who duly officiates at a sacrifice, during the course of its performance.

(iii) **The Arsha form:** It consists of the daughter being given away by the father to a man after receiving a cow and a bull from the bridegroom, not with an intention of selling the child, but in accordance with the requirement of the *dharma.*

(iv) **The Prajapatya form:** In this form of marriage, the father gives away his daughter to the bridegroom and addresses the couple to perform their *dharma* together.

(v) **The *Asura* form:** It involves a payment by the bridegroom to the bride's father for obtaining a wife.

(vi) **The *Gandharva* form:** Here the bride and the bridegroom agree to marry at their own consent. Such a decision to marry is consequently consecrated by going through the sacred rites of marriage.

(vii) **The Rakshasa form:** This is described as a marriage, through force.

(viii)**The Paishacha form:** In this form, a man first seduces a woman (who may be intoxicated or mentally retarded) and subsequently marries her.

Of these eight forms of marriage, the giving away the daughter by her father described in the first four is considered as the ideal form. The right to give a maiden in marriage is held by the father, the grandfather, the brothers, the kinspersons and the mother, in that order.

The Hindus lay stress on pre-marital chastity on the part of both the male and the female (Prabhu 1979: 153-154). The marital bond is also to be respected through mutual fidelity. There are also forms of endogamy (marriage within a certain group) and exogamy (marriage outside the group) for which rules are laid down. These rules are designed to regulate the Hindu marriage in the sense of specifying the choice of spouses within specific groups (see sections on Rules of Marriage in units 8 and 9 of Block2 of ESO-12).

15.4.3 Endogamy

The widest category of endogamy for a Hindu is his or her *varna*. Within each *varna* are several castes and sub-castes which are considered to be the categories for endogamy in the region. We do also come across some inter-caste/ inter-subcaste marriages in contemporary times. Yet, these are few and far between. The rule of caste/ subcaste endogamy is the prescribed mode followed by most of the Hindus all over India.

15.4.4 Exogamy

As regards the rule of exogamy, a Hindu is enjoined not to marry within his own gotra. The word *'gotra'* in this context denotes one's extended family or the clan. The *gotra* of a family is usually named after the ancestor who founded the family. People with a common ancestor are not allowed to marry each other. At present, the rule of exogamy is usually defined in terms of prohibition of marriage within five generations on the mother's side and seven generations on the father's side. However this rule can be circumvented by letting someone of a different *gotra* do the *kanyadaan,* that is the rite of giving the daughter away in marriage (Madan 1965). There is a clearly defined limit upto which persons are considered to be related in such a way that their marriage cannot be permitted.

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There are marked differences in north India and south India in this regard. In north India, a marriage between both the cross and parallel cousins is prohibited while in south India, cross-cousins are allowed to marry. Thus, the *gotra* rule, as understood in north India, does not apply to the Hindus of south India.

The most common form of marriage is that the bridegroom and his group goes to the bride's home. There the bride is given away by the father or her guardian with due rituals and ceremonies. Variations, of course, occur according to the region and caste. The salient features of the marriage rites and their significance are described in unit 7 of Block 2 of this course.

The continuity of the family is one of the objects of marriage. We will now examine the family in the context of the Hindu community.

15.4.5 The Hindu Family

For a Hindu, the event of marriage signifies the completion of the *brahmacharya ashrama* i.e., the stage of a celibate-life. Marriage heralds the beginning of the householder stage *(grihastha)*. Now, begins the process of the preservation and continuity of the *kula* or the family. A Hindu home symbolises the continuity of its living members, past members that are no more and future members that are yet to come. The living members are considered to be the trustees of the home. It is supposed to belong to the ancestors and includes the interests of the male descendants of the family. The individual as such does not belong to the home. One only performs one's *dharma*. The home is the place where *dharma* and *karm*a are practised by the people who are enjoined to remain detached yet conduct the affairs of the world (Prabhu 1979: 216-217). For a Hindu, his or her life in the stage of a householder is lived and regulated in terms of *dharma* and *karma*. In performing these two activities, one also performs one's *artha* and *kama*. This process leads one towards the final goal, *moksha*.

15.4.6 The Form of Hindu Family

The most striking feature of a Hindu family is its jointness. That is to say the unit of residence is often not confined to the parents and their children only. It usually includes three generations living under the same roof and sharing the family property in common. Concerning the joint family and the nuclear family among the Hindus, unit 6 of Block 2 of ESO-12 gives a fairly detailed description. What we need to emphasise again is that the joint family (in India in general, and among the Hindus in particular) is believed to be the ideal form of family. In practice, we find many combinations and permutations of family living among the Hindus.

Whether living in a nuclear or a joint family most Hindu families prefer that each member goes through some basic life-cycle rituals. These sacraments have been prescribed by the sacred texts and are meant for purifying body and mind. The sacraments are supposed to help make the human being into a social being. Some of them purify a human being in the present life and others help in the life-after-death. From birth to death, the sacraments (rituals) help in organising and disciplining the life of the Hindus, and enabling them to perform the *dharma* in accordance with their status. There is diversity in the observance

of the sacrament. Depending on the region and caste, different numbers of sacraments are observed. There are rituals from which women are excluded. Yet other rituals have special significance for them. Thus for a female the nuptial ceremony is regarded as being of equal significance to the sacrament of *upanayan* (the stage when a male child is initiated into the study of the Veda).

Activity 2

If you live in a nuclear family then stay for some days in the joint family of one of your close relatives.

If you live in a joint family then arrange to stay with relatives who live in a nuclear family for some days.

In either case make comparisons, in terms of the following points, between the two types of family life in your notebook: i) size, ii) range of kin relationships, iii) pattern of authority and iv) division of labour.

Write a note of 1000 words on comparisons observed by you.

15.4.7 Relations among Family Members

As the concepts of *dharma* and *karma* are so much a part of the Hindu way of life both at normative and behavioural levels, we find that each member in the family has his or her prescribed *sacred duty*. General principles of differentiation on the basis of age and sex regulate the relations within the Hindu family, in terms of precedence, obedience and subservience.

Males are more respected than females, and members senior in age command more respect than the younger members. For example, the father is respected more than the mother and has greater authority. The father's mother by virtue of her age, is respected by all members who are younger to her. It is considered ideal for a man and wife to live with all their married sons in a joint family. They are to be respected and cared for by the sons and their wives and children. It is expected that the sons and their wives will perform their duties to the satisfaction of the parents, and thereby earn their blessings and religious merit.

The sons have a right in their fathers' ancestral property. The age old rules of inheritance which are still customary gave ownership and inheritance rights to males, while they give only maintenance rights to females. These customary rules continue to prevail even today. The Hindu Succession Act and the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, however, introduced some changes. The Act makes the husband legally responsible for the maintenance of his wife and children. According to this Act (which is also applicable to Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs), the property of a Hindu comes down to his sons, daughters, widow and mother. Daughters legally have a share equal to that of sons in their father's property. In actual practice customs and tradition continue to be so powerful that very few women are able to take advantage of their rights. From being a member of the primary group, such as the family, one goes on to being a part of one's lineage and subcaste/caste. The largest category of this belongingness for a Hindu can be expressed in terms of the idea of *varna*. Let us now understand the *varna* system among the Hindus.

Check Your Progress 2

i)   Describe the rule of exogamy among the Hindus. Use about five lines for your answer.

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ii) Discuss family interaction among the Hindus. Use about six lines for your answer.

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15.5   THE *VARNA* SYSTEM

The broader aspects of activities in the sphere of economy and polity form a very important part of social life. For a Hindu, these activities take place within the context of a Hindu view of life. A Hindu is born into a *jati* (caste) and follows his *dharma* in this birth to improve the future birth. A discussion of the four stages, called *ashrama*, of a Hindu's life, and the divisions of the Hindu community into the *varna* categories and caste groups, would provide us a framework to look at the bases of the politico-economic activities of the Hindus.

15.5.1 The Four *Varna*

The Hindus are divided into four *varna* namely, Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. These four categories are ranked from higher to lower in the order mentioned here. This means that Brahman is ranked as the highest and the Sudra the lowest. The *varna* system of dividing the members of the Hindu society is an ideological construct which is mentioned in their religious texts. Each *varna* is also associated with particular occupations. A Brahman is supposed to be a priest by profession, a Kshatriya to be a warrior; a Vaishya to be a trader; and a Sudra to be a worker. All Hindus recognise this system and can place their identity in terms of one of the four *varna*. Most of the basic ideas on *varna* system and its links to the concepts of *karma* and *dharma* are generally present in the thinking of Hindus (Prabhu 1979: 321). Village studies carried out by Marriott (1959), Dube (1955), Srinivas (1977) and Carstairs (1957) also confirm this view. This division of society into four categories is however better visualised in terms of caste groups into which the

Hindu society is divided. Before we proceed to the discussion of caste groups, let us also briefly talk about the four stages of a man's life, which provide us an understanding of the Hindu view of the various socio-economic and political activities, to be performed at different stages.

15.5.2 The Four Stages of Life

The Life of a Hindu is considered to be divisible into four stages, namely

i) *brahmacharya ashram*

ii) *grihastha ashram*

iii) *vanaprastha ashram*

iv) *sanyasa ashram*

It is the *dharma* of a Hindu to pass through these stages in one's life. The male members of Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaishya *varna* pass through four different *ashram* (stages) in their life. The first *ashram* is called *brahmacharya ashram* (the educational stage) from which the fourth *varna,* viz., *Sudra* and women of the first three *varna* are barred *Brahmacharyashram* ends (after studentship) at marriage. Celibacy is prescribed till marriage.

The second stage of life is called the *grihasthashram*. During this a man rears a family, earns a living and performs his daily personal and social duties. Following this a man gradually enters the third stage of life called the *vanaprashthashram*. During this stage the householder relinquishes his duties in the household, and devotes his time to religious pursuits. His links with his family are weakened. During this *ashram* a man retires into the forest with or without his wife leaving behind the householder's cares and duties. The final phase of a Hindu's life begins with the stage known as the *sanyasashram*. In this stage one attempts to totally withdraw oneself from the world and its cares by going to the forest and spending the rest of life in pursuit of *moksha*. The four stages of a Hindu's life just described are together called the *varnashrama* system. There is an ideal scheme, which correlates the *vamashrama* phases to ages at which a particular *ashram* begins. However, it is the endeavour that is important and not the age at which this begins. Thus Hinduism permits young unmarried sanyasi, as well as those who never go beyond *grihasthashrama*. Thus there is nothing compulsory about living life in the *varnashram* scheme. It is, however, highly recommended (Prabhu 1979:73-100).

At present most Hindus do not systematically go through the *varnashrama*. They do, however, accept these stages to be the ideal ways in which a Hindu should spend his life. Like the four *varna*, the four stages of life are models. In real life, we find that occupations associated with each *varna* are not followed precisely in accordance with what is written in the sacred texts. Today a Brahman may be employed in a shoe company, selling shoes to all the customers irrespective of their *varna* or caste. As we said before, the Hindus are divided into castes or *jati* which are hereditary groups.

15.5.3 *Jati*

Jati or castes are hereditary groups in **hierarchical** relation to one another, similar to the hierarchy among *varna*. Brahman castes are the highest while

untouchable castes are the lowest. Those between these two extremes are placed according to regional hierarchies.

A caste group can be seen as an extended kin group because members of a caste marry among themselves. Caste endogamy is also explained by the term *beti vyavahar* as against *roti vyavahar*. *Beti vyavahar* refers to the practice of giving and taking of the daughters *(beti)* of different families within a caste. *Roti vyavahar* means only the giving and taking of food *(roti)* with certain categories of people. It is possible to have *roti vyavahar* with people of castes other than one's own. Lower castes accept cooked food and water from higher castes but the opposite is traditionally not permitted. There are certain rules and conditions which regulate the type of food which is accepted when offered to a person of higher caste. The caste groups claim their superior status by showing the evidence of their dietary practices in terms of acceptance/non-acceptance of food and water from particular castes. Besides food, there are also customary discriminatory practices related to different caste groups. For example, the untouchable castes were not permitted to enter certain parts of upper caste streets or houses and temples. This is a typical example of the idea of purity and pollution on which the ideology of caste is supposed to be based. When we consider a caste to be high or low on the basis of its purity or pollution level, we refer to it as a ritual hierarchy of castes. The level of purity/pollution is judged by the prevalent practices relating to acceptance/non-acceptance of food, entry to sacred places and widow-remarriage. In all these hierarchically arranged caste-groups, the scheme of *dharma, artha, kama* and *moksha* is followed without hatred or resentment towards the lower or the higher group. In other words, people born into a caste accept the sacred duty *(dharma)* of their caste and do not question the right to the higher caste-people to social privileges. Within their own caste they organise themselves for fulfilling several purposes. Let us say a few words about caste councils, which have specific functions in regulating the behaviour of their caste members.

15.5.4 Caste Councils and Caste Associations

Generally each caste has its council. The leaders in the council are usually the elderly members of the caste. Caste councils act as a judiciary for caste groups and help settle disputes related to marriage, separation, divorce or any other untoward behaviour of their caste members. The caste councils are localised covering many villages.

Caste associations are recent phenomena. They are engaged in various activities. For example, they run educational institutions, cooperatives, hospitals, old age homes and orphanages. From time to time they print and distribute among their members pamphlets containing information about new rules of behaviour regarding marriage ceremonies, gifts, widow remarriage, etc. They also publicise the nature of punishment to be meted out to defaulters. These associations are generally regional. They also act as political pressure groups. The caste councils and caste associations regulate the behaviour of caste members.

15.5.5 Interdependence among Castes

There is interdependence among caste groups. A member of a caste not only interacts within his own caste but also with other castes. Both aspects are very important for the socio-economic and political organisation of the Hindus. We shall now discuss a little about the inter-caste relationships.

For the Hindus, the caste system is a coherent and comprehensive system with rituals and occupational hierarchy. The occupational division of castes also helps to maintain equilibrium in the economic sphere. Being religiously oriented, members of different castes accept their rituals and occupational position. Within the framework of caste ideology, they perform their *dharma* and *karma* and endeavour to improve their present and future life. In both the ritual and economic spheres, members of different castes are dependent on one another. Members of different castes are vertically organised which is more manifest in the rural society. The context of Hindu social organisation is to be seen as a system of interdependence among the members of different caste groups. The *jajmani* system is an important aspect of this interdependence.

15.5.6 *Jajmani* System

In rural areas of India, it was found that a village generally comprises several Hindu castes, each living in different clusters. These castes have relationships of giving and taking of services among one another. Usually the peasant castes are numerically preponderant. Due to their numerical majority and also their economic power they have been called dominant castes by sociologists. The dominant caste needs services of the carpenters, blacksmith, potter, barber, washerman for various farming and ritual activities. The peasants pay in cash and kind for these services from other castes. The castes providing these services depend for their livelihood on the patronage of the dominant caste. In turn, the servicing castes also give support to their patrons in matters of political group formation. The relationship of patron and client among these interacting caste groups usually continue from generation to generation. Thus, the villagers are bound in a system of the exchange of services. Without this exchange the normal day-to-day life may not run smoothly. This is why this aspect is a very important part of Hindu social organisation.

The interdependence among caste groups is also evident in the ritual sphere apart from politico-economic activities. Pilgrimage, worship, recitation of holy texts, life cycle ritual ceremonies, fairs and festivals are rituals which bring together members of different castes. Without a whole series of interaction among them, these activities are just not possible. The instance of a Hindu wedding (one of the life cycle ritual ceremonies) is a case which illustrates this point. Here, a Brahman priest is needed to perform the sacred rites, the barber is required for the shaving and bathing, the drummer beats the drums, the washerman brings freshly laundered clothes, the untouchable takes the charge of sweeping the floor, the gardeners bring flowers and so on.

We can also look at the temple activities as an example of interdependence among castes. Members of different castes perform their respective sacred duties (*sva-dharma*) for the up-keep of the temple. The priestly castes perform the worship, the goldsmith caste provides ornaments for the idols, other castes provide services like cooking, tailoring, filling water, playing drums and so on. Among the Hindus, temples do not figure as prominently in terms of organised systems, as such institutions as the Mosque and Church of the Muslims and Christians respectively. People belonging to different castes organise and perform their duties to earn religious merit and improve their life after death. Each person considers his or her contribution to the temple as

one's duty and improves his or her *karma*. No task is less or more important when performed in the context of one's caste membership and one's *ashram* in life. This shows that the ritual aspect of social activities of caste groups forms an important part of social organisation. This aspect is most reflected in collective behaviour at festivals, fairs and pilgrimages. This is the reason why we are now going to discuss here the festivals, fairs and pilgrimages among the Hindus.

15.6   FESTIVALS AND PILGRIMAGES

Festivals, pilgrimages and other ceremonial occasions are usually linked with religion. As such they show how both personal identity of the individuals as well as collective identity of the groups are highlighted by the patterns of interaction during these events. Festivals manifest the social cohesion and solidarity of the community. We begin our discussion of this aspect of social organisation by describing festivals, fairs and pilgrimages among the Hindus.

15.6.1 Festivals

Most of the Hindu festivals are linked to the arrival of particular seasons. For example, the festival of *Diwali* marks the arrival of winter season while that of *Holi* signifies the beginning of summer season. Some festivals are associated with eclipses and movements of the heavenly bodies such as the moon and other planets. Many festivals are held in the honour of the deities like Krishna, Siva, Durga, Lakshmi and Rama, e.g., *Dussehra, Durgapuja, Janmashtami,* etc. Local festivals have their roots in the ecology of the region, celebrating myths associated with plants like coconuts, *tulsi (basil),* the sacred tree, or with animals, like elephants, snakes and monkeys. There are regional festivals connected with the agricultural cycle such as the occasion of first ploughing, sowing or harvest. Among the artisans, carpenter, blacksmith and brass-workers, people worship the deity called Vishwakarma.

We shall not go into the ritualistic aspect of these festivals. The emphasis here is on the role these festivals play in social life of the people. During festivals, people in a locality get together and their participation in a common activity enhances their feeling of belonging to a community. These occasions also provide the chance to people for buying and selling special commodities. By preparing special food and wearing special clothes, people bring about the feelings of freshness and change in their day-to-day life. This regenerates them for carrying the routine activities. Recurrence of festivals and associated rituals strengthens their faith in the stability and integrity of their social order.

Festivals like *Holi, Diwali* and *Dussehra* are celebrated on a scale, which includes participation of Hindus as well as non-Hindus. They provide occasions for a meeting across religions.

Associated with festivals are fairs, which are held at prescribed times on a holy spot. Sometimes, fairs assume independent significance and attract the participation of cross-section of society. Some famous fairs such as the fair of Sonepur or Pushkar draw people from all over the country. In these fairs, craftsmen bring their special artware, artists come to present their shows, agricultural surplus is brought for selling, brisk trading is carried on in cattle,

horses, elephants. Each fair is both a religious and a secular occasion and people participate in both with equal enthusiasm.

Activity 3

Describe in five pages at least two festivals of your area in terms of the following points.

i)   major social groups celebrating them,

ii)   main events taking place during their celebration,

iii)   time of the year for their celebration, andi

v)   special significance of these festivals.

Compare, if possible, your description with those of the other students of your Study Centre.

15.6.2 Pilgrimage

Not very different from a fair is a pilgrimage. The cultural unity of the Hindus is expressed in the institution of pilgrimage. When a pilgrim goes to the southern pilgrim centre at Rameshwaram, he or she also aspires to reach the northern end of the country, at Badrinath. Most pilgrims also aspire to go to Puri in the east and to Dwarikanath in the west.

In these places of pilgrimage, there is often a fair being held during the periods pilgrims arrive in large numbers. Generally, people go to these places in large groups. Such groups are mostly formed on the basis of kin relationships. They may also include neighbours, friends and business partners.

Different sects of Hinduism have acquired pilgrim centres around the whole country over time. Besides the four centres in the four directions, the Sakta sect has more than fifty centres of pilgrimage. There are seven places of pilgrimage, dedicated to the Sun god, Surya. One of them is in Multan, in West Pakistan. Despite linguistic, racial, and cultural differences, most Hindus undertake long and arduous journeys to the many varied pilgrim places. This adds an important dimension to their social life.

Check Your Progress 3

i)   Show the difference between a caste council and a caste association. Use about six lines for your answer.

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ii)   Name six pilgrim places associated with Hinduism. Use three lines for your answer.

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15.7   LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have studied the social organisation of the Hindus. We began with religious concepts like *dharma, artha, kama, moksha, karma* and *samsara* which are the basis of Hindu social organisation. We discussed marriage and family, among the Hindus including forms of marriage and family, endogamy, exogamy and family relations. We then examined caste groups among Hindus. We discussed the varna system, *jati* and the *jajmani* system. Finally we described festivals and pilgrimages among the Hindus.

15.8   KEYWORDS

Artha	Activities pertaining to the economic aspects of life. e.g., earning a livelihood.
Beti Vyavahar	The phrase refers to a relationship in which social groups can intermarry.
Brahmcharya Ashram	That stage in life, which is associated with studentship and celibacy.
Dharma	Good, upright, and righteous conduct.
Grihasta Ashram	The stage of the householder, earning a living and rearing a family.
Hierarchical	An order of ranking which goes from top to bottom, or vice versa. The caste system is an example of this kind of ranking.
Jati	Caste groups arranged in a hierarchical order. There are very many *jatis* in India, running into thousands.
Karma	The concept of *karma* refers to a belief in the efficacy of actions of a person, either good or bad.
Moksha	Liberation from birth and death and regaining of oneness with the Supreme Being.
Roti *Vyavahar*	The phrase refers to a relation of exchange of food between two social groups.
Sanyasa Ashrama	That stage in life when free from family life one devotes oneself solely to deeds leading to moksha.
Samsara	The process of birth and rebirth, which continues till the soul is finally free.
Vanaprastha Ashram	The life of a forest wanderer who lives a detached life free from all bondages. This is a stage before sanyasa.

15.9 FURTHER READING

Gould, H.A. 1987. *The Hindu Caste System.* Chanakya Publications: Delhi.

Patel, S. 1980. *Hinduism: Religion and a Way of Life.* Associated Publishing House: New Delhi

Prabhu, P.H. 1979. *Hindu Social Organisation: A Study in Socio-Psychological and Ideological Foundations.* Popular Prakashan Pvt. Ltd.: Bombay.

Radhakrishnan, S. 1979. *The Hindu View of Life.* Blackie and Son Pvt. Ltd.: Bombay.

Roy Burman, J.J. 2002. *Hindu Muslim Syncretic Shrines and Communities.* Mittal: New Delhi

15.10 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) A Hindu can live a righteous life by following the fourfold scheme of practical endeavour. Thus *dharma* is honest and upright conduct or righteous action. *Artha* means a righteous pursuit of economic activities. *Kama* is the fulfillment of normal desires or cravings. *Moksha* is the culmination of the self into eternal bliss.

ii) Hindu social organization is based on an arrangement of castes into a graded order. One's birth in a particular caste depends on that person's *karma* in post-life.

Check Your Progress 2

i) The rule of exogamy among the Hindus is mainly guided by the rule of *gotra* exogamy. This means that persons of similar *gotra* cannot marry each other. Secondly, in north India, relations of certain degree on both father's and mother's side cannot marry each other. In south India, parallel cousins cannot marry each other. Then, there are various rules of exogamy applied in particular regions.

ii) In the Hindu family, interaction is arranged along the lines of precedence, obedience and subservience. Males are usually more respected than females, and the old are given more respect than the young. A joint family life is considered an ideal form of family. Only sons have a right in ancestral property, while females have only maintenance rights. The Hindu Succession Act and Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956) have made women eligible for inheritance.

Check Your Progress 3

i) Traditionally, each caste has a caste council. Its jurisdiction covers several villages. It acts as a judiciary for settling disputes related to marriage, separation, divorce or any other untoward behaviour of a caste-fellow. A caste association is, on the other hand, a recent phenomenon, arising out

of the needs of many castes or sub-castes to merge in order to involve in multi-faced activities. Such association covers a much larger area in its jurisdiction. It also acts as a political pressure group.

ii) The four pilgrim centres of Hindus are in four directions, Badrinath in the north, Rameshwaram in the south, Dwaraka in the west and Puri in the east. The Kashi and Prayag are also considered as holy places, which devout Hindus like to visit at least once in their lifetime. In south India, Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh, Guruvayur in Kerala and Mantralaya in Karnataka are famous pilgrim places, which Hindus of all denominations visit.

UNIT 16 MUSLIM SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Structure

16.0 OBJECTIVES

On going through this unit you should be able to

● describe briefly the emergence of Islam and Muslim community in India

● list and describe the basic tenets of Islam with special reference to its views on social equality

● explain the social divisions among the Muslims

● describe the processes involved in the maintenance of social control in the Islamic community

● describe the main features of Muslim marriage, family and systems of inheritance

● list the main festivals celebrated by the Muslims

● indicate some of the external influences on Muslim social practices.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we examined the various facets of Hindu Social Organisation. In this unit we are going to look at some important aspects of Muslim social organisation. We begin our examination with an introductory note on the emergence of Islam and the Muslim community in India. We will proceed to describe the central tenets of Islam, elaborating the view of Islam on social equality, in a little more detail. This will be followed by a discussion

on certain aspects of Muslim social organisation. We shall focus on social divisions among the Muslims, the way the Muslim community tries to maintain social control, their institutions of marriage and family, their system of inheritance and festivals. We shall also look at some of the external influences on Muslim social practices.

16.2 EMERGENCE OF ISLAM AND MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN INDIA

The word 'Islam' means submission to the will of Allah. The followers of Islam called Muslims believe that Quran is the true word of Allah. They believe the Quran was revealed to mankind through the medium of his Prophet and messenger, Muhammed. Islam came into being in the early seventh century in west central Arabia but its systematic formulation and establishment took place only in 622 AD, when Muhammed emigrated from the city of Mecca to Medina. Thus Muslim calendar records events from the first lunar month of that year July 16th 622 AD.

Prior to the emergence of Islam in Western Central Arabia, there were only clusters of warring tribes. Prophet Muhammed brought in a number of social reforms and established a well ordered set of beliefs and practices. Islam, as a religion, became established in this region and began to spread as a political community or "ummah" with its own laws and socio-political institutions. Today Muslims form about one seventh of the world's population. They are highly concentrated in Asia and Africa. Their tiniest concentration is in Oceania (includes Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia).

With regard to the emergence of Islam in India, it was introduced into India by Arab traders, who gradually established settlements on the western and eastern coasts of south India. They obtained permission to practice their religion. Sind was conquered by the Arabs early in the eighth century and north west Punjab by the Turks in the eleventh century. The Delhi Sultanate was established by 1206 AD. It was about the sixteenth century that Mughals built up an extensive empire. The establishment of Muslim government at any place was usually followed by the construction of a mosque and other related socio-religious activities. As the Muslim rule strengthened in India, their numbers also increased. The large numbers of Muslims in India are mainly due to conversion (Gazetteer of India 1965: 466-467).

Today numerically the Muslims comprise the largest minority community in India. According to the 1981 census Muslims constituted around twelve percent of the total population in India. In 1991 also their strength remained same as in the previous decade, around twelve percent of the total population. In 1981 Jammu and Kashmir had the highest percentage of Muslims (64.19 percent). In 1991, the Muslim population was highest in Assam. In Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Orissa the Muslim population is low. In Kerala and in West Bengal Muslims formed nearly 21 percent of the total population of those states in 1981. Assam (28.43), Kerala (23.3), Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal were the States, which had Muslim population in 1991 above national average. Some States such as Sikkim and Meghalaya had Muslim population less than 1 percent.

16.3 TENETS OF ISLAM: VIEW ON SOCIAL EQUALITY

As mentioned earlier in section 16.2, Islam means submission to or acceptance of the will of God. Its perfect form is found in the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah (acts and sayings of Prophet Muhammed). Islam is a monotheistic religion, i.e. it believes in one God who is considered the Creator of the universe, of time and space whose law governs everything that exists. The Quran is the word of God, revealed to his messenger, Prophet Muhammed, in order to lead mankind on a righteous path. The Muslims believe that there will be a 'Last Day' when God will judge all mankind. The belief is that on the judgement day, those who have led a good life will be rewarded and those who have led a bad life will be punished.

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

Islam is claimed by its believers to be a religion of equality. There are a number of Quranic verses that instruct the Muslims that in evaluating an individual they should not accord much importance to such factors as race, nationality, or ancestry. What matters is the extent to which a Muslim practices the teachings of the Quran.
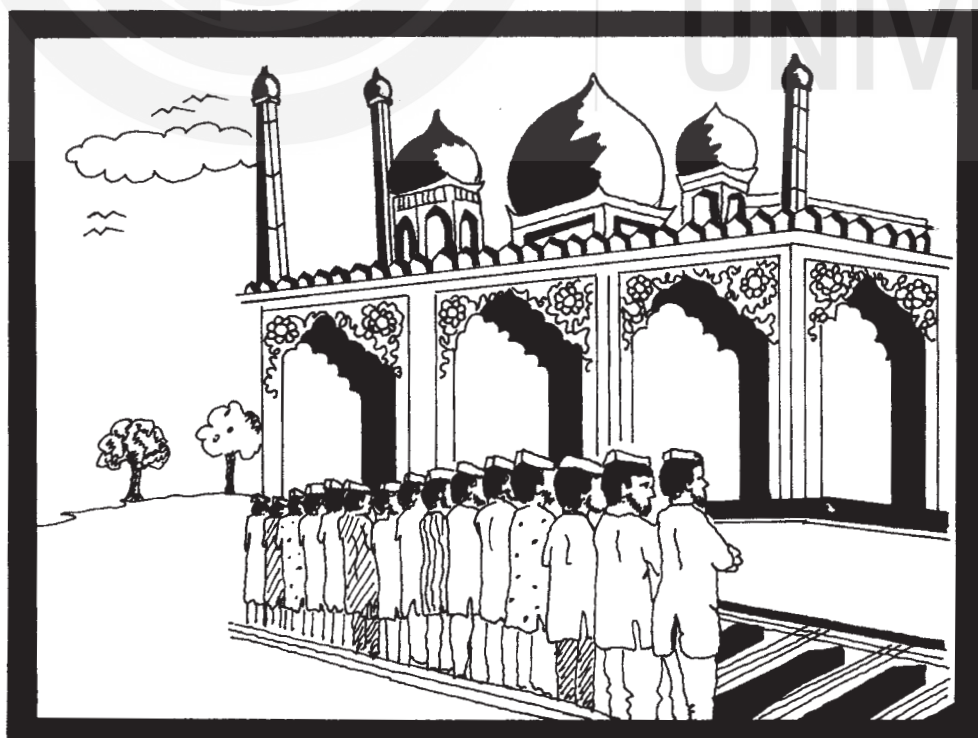

Fig. 16.1: Prayer at a mosque

Muslims insist that the principle of equality be upheld in day-to-day living. All Muslims irrespective of their group affiliation could say *namaz* together and that they need not observe restrictions on eating and drinking together whenever an occasion arises. It is also held that there are no formal restrictions on inter-group (caste) marriages, and that, in fact, Islam encourages it. The existence of an inter-group hierarchy is also denied. Figure 16.1 shows a prayer being held at a mosque.

Check Your Progress 1

i)   Briefly describe the emergence of Islam. Use five lines for your answer.

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ii)   What are the important commands of Islam? Use five lines for your answer.

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iii)   What is the Islamic view on social equality? Use twelve lines for your answer.

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16.4 ASPECTS OF SOCIAL ORGANISATION

In this section, we shall look at certain aspects of Muslim social organisation. We find that though Quran recommends the egalitarian principle and provides the ordering principles for social behaviour. In reality there are social divisions among Muslims. Then we discuss the Islamic sanctions relating to family, marriage and inheritance. The next section deals with some festivals celebrated by Muslims. But first let us look at the social divisions in Muslim society.

16.4.1 Social Divisions among Muslims

The most popularly known division among the Muslims, all over the world, is the division between Shias and Sunnis. They hold the divergent views of and interpretations over Islamic texts and tradition. In India, a vast majority of Muslims are Sunnis (Gazetteer of India 1965). Apart from these kind of divisions there are also other kinds of social groupings among Muslims in India, which reflect the influence of Hindu beliefs and practices specially those relating to caste system.

Muslims in India are divided into two major sections, (i) those who claim to be the descendants of early Muslim immigrants and (ii) those of indigenous origin whose ancestors were converted to Islam. The former section has often been called *Ashraf* or *Shurafa* (singular *sharif*, Arabic words, meaning honourable), while the latter section does not have a specific name. In Bengal, according to Risley (1908), it was designated as *Ajlaf* (for clean occupational castes) and *Arzal* (for unclean castes).

Here, we will first discuss the *Ashraf* category of Muslims and then Muslim converts of Indian origin.

i) *Ashraf* **category of Muslims**

In the Muslim social hierarchy, the descendants of immigrants from Persia, Afghanistan, Arabia and Turkistan are recognised as the highest category of Muslims in India. The Indian Muslim castes, known as Sayyed, Shaikh, Mughal and Pathan comprise this category.

Sayyed are considered to be descended from Fatima's line. She was the daughter of the Prophet Muhammed. As direct descendants of the Prophet, Sayyed are accorded highest social status among the Muslims. They are subdivided into two lineage sections, Hasani and Husaini. After the names of the descendants of Hasan and Husain. Further subdivisions of Sayyed are called Jafari from Jafar as Sadiq, Rizvi from Ali ibr Muras ar-Raza and so on. Some Sayyed subdivisions are named after the disciples of Sayyed saints such as Chishti, Jalali and Oadiriya (Blunt 1931).

In the second rank of social hierarchy of the Muslims come the Shaikh. They are considered to be the descendants of early Muslims migrants of Mecca and Medina. They trace their descent from either (i) The Ansar or Ansari (the helpers), meaning those who provided shelter to the Prophet and his followers, or (ii) the Muhajirum the immigrants, meaning those who were citizens of Mecca and migrated to Medina as the followers of the Prophet.

The Mughal and Pathan subdivisions of the *Ashraf* rank third in the social hierarchy of the Muslims. Both are almost equal in social status. Those who

came to India with the Mughal (concept form of the word Mongol) armies and subsequently settled here were known as the Mughal. Their main subdivisions, based on different ethnic and tribal origins, are Chagtai, Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmans and Qizilbarh.

The Pathan are descendants of those who migrated to India from Afghanistan or from the Pashto-speakers of the North Western Frontier Province of Pakistan. At present, regional subdivisions of Pathan Muslims are based on their prolonged residence in one or the other parts of India, e.g., Rohila Pathan are the inhabitants of Rohilkhand region. Mostly, the Pathan have four major sub-sections namely, Yusufzai, Lodhi, Ghani and Vakar. These sub-sections are further divided into sub-sub-sections, such as, Ghilzai, Mohammed, Mohammedzai, Tarin, Durrangi.

Among the *Ashraf* groups, are also included those pseudo-*Ashraf* who claim descent from one of the Ashraf caste. Ansari (1959-60: 37-38) has given several examples of attempts by some groups for raising their social status through their claims to Ashraf descent. Ansari has given a long list of certain castes, mentioned in the 1931 census report of Uttar Pradesh. These Muslim castes have tried to raise their social status by claiming new surnames and also corresponding high social status.

ii) Muslim Converts of Indian Origin

The Muslim converts of Indian origin are generally called by their caste names. In this group are placed three distinct groups, namely, converts from high caste of the Hindus, converts from clean occupational castes and converts from unclean occupational castes (Bhangi or sweeper, Chamar or tanner). We will briefly speak about each of the three groups.

Converts from High Castes

In the social hierarchy of the Muslims in India, converts from high castes of the Hindus are placed below the rank of *Ashraf*. Many of the Rajput branches of a family in north India have Muslim branches, e.g., the Bais, Bhatti, Bisen, Chandel, Bargujar, Chauhan, Pawar, Rathore, Tomar. At times some of these groups try to mix with higher-ranking groups of Muslims (see Ansari 1959-60: 40). By and large these converts still follow some of the Hindu practices, e.g., they do not marry first cousins, either cross or parallel. Islamic law allows the marriage of near-kin whereas among the Hindus in north India, prohibition regarding marriage extends to distant degrees of kinship relations on both father's and mother's sides.

Clean occupational Castes

Clean castes are those, which are permitted contact with higher castes under certain rules. These are opposed to unclean castes which are not permitted any contact with higher castes. The matter of cleanliness is considered in terms of the nature of one's traditional occupation. Some occupations involve necessary contact with the persons of higher castes. People who perform such occupations belong to clean castes. For example, a barber has to necessarily come in close contact with his client. A barber belongs to a clean caste.

The castes, belonging to clean occupations rank below the *Ashraf* and Muslim Raiputs, comprise the bulk of Muslim population in India. The descendants of the converts from Hindu clean castes belong to this category. The process of

conversion often involved either groups in different castes of the whole caste group. Many castes of this kind have both Hindu and Muslim sections. For example, it is common to find a carpenter, tailor, laundryman, potter, barber, and goldsmith in both the Hindu and Muslim communities.

These sections operate exclusively in matters of family, marriage and kinship while they also act as one in trade union activities. We can divide these castes in three groups, namely, (a) castes without a Hindu counterpart in existence at present, (b) castes with a larger Muslim section and a smaller Hindu section, (c) castes which are opposite of (b), i. e., with a smaller Muslim section and a larger Hindu section. Let us briefly discuss each of these groups.

Ansari (1959-60: 41-42) includes the following castes of Uttar Pradesh in this group.

a)   Atishbaz (firework maker), Bhand (jester), Bhatiyara (innkeeper), Bhishti (water carrier), Gaddi (grazier), Momin Julaha (Muslim weaver), Mirasi (Musician), Qassab (butcher), and Faqir (beggar). According to Ansari, all these castes have exclusive Muslim following. Only in some cases there are Hindu castes with similar occupations. But these groups are known by different caste-labels. For example, a Bhishti (water carrier) in Hindu community is known as Kahar.

b)   Castes with larger Muslim and smaller Hindu section in Uttar Pradesh, according to Ansari (1959-60: 46) are known by the following names.

Darji (tailor), Dhuniya (cotton carder), Kunjra or Kabariya (green grocer), Manihar (bangle maker), Saigalgar (metal sharpener), and Rangrez (cloth printer).

Ansari's account of these castes is based mainly on his study of the 1931 census reports. It is possible that this situation has now changed. In fact, we need fresh data on this aspect to say something with certainty.

c)   Castes with larger Hindu than Muslim sections have obviously provided few followers to Islam. Speaking about Uttar Pradesh, Ansari (1959-60: 47) includes Dhobi (Laundry man), Kumhar (potter), Nai or Hajjam (Barber) and Teli (oil presser) in this group.

Muslim sections of these castes are identified on account of their separate caste councils (Panchayat). These are endogamous castes, practising their own ceremonies and customs.

Unclean Castes

Lastly, we have the Muslim untouchables, occupying bottom place in the Muslim social hierarchy. These people do the menial tasks, including scavenging and sweeping. They are descendants of converts who retained their low social status along with their caste name, occupation and poverty. For example, a Bhangi (scavenger), either a Muslim or a non-Muslim, is not permitted to enter a mosque. In theory, it is possible for a Muslim Bhangi to pray in a mosque, but in practice his entry into a mosque is disapproved. On the other hand, an untouchable Muslim is permitted to learn Quran while an untouchable Hindu is not supposed to learn religious texts.

16.4.2 Caste and Kin Relationships

Having discussed social divisions among the Muslims, let us now see how

these divisions reflect the operation of caste and kin relationships in Muslim social organisation. Cultural characteristics constituting caste among the Hindus may in turn be used to evaluate the situation of Muslims in India. Such a discussion will help us to follow the interrelation between caste and kinship systems. We can see how caste relationships also act as kin groups. These cultural characteristics may be put as follows.

i)   caste is endogamous

ii) it involves occupational specialisation

iii) castes are hierarchically ordered

iv) there are restrictions on social intercourse and commensality.

i)   **Endogamy: Zat & Biradari**

Muslims use the term **zat** (equivalent of caste) to express the purity of descent. The *zat* is, therefore, primarily an endogamous unit of society. The households belonging to each *zat* in the village conceive of themselves as a collectivity and designate themselves as ***bhai-band or biradari*** (literally caste-brotherhood). This solidarity among the members is not merely a fictional notion, but rests on demonstrable kinship linkages. Since all the households belonging to each caste are descendants of one common ancestor, or a few related common ancestors, who had settled in the village at the time it was established or subsequently related by ties of common descent. On account of the custom of preferential cousin marriage prevalent among some *bhai-band* or *biradaris,* there always exists a tie of descent among them.

The *biradari* resembles caste in the features of its inner structure, e.g. membership is determined only by birth and the group boundaries are maintained through endogamy. However, violations of the rules of endogamy are not dealt with in an identical manner; they range from mere disapproval to outright excommunication. Among the *Ashraf,* the caste brotherhoods are subdivided again into *Biadharis* (marriage circles) to provide a restricted circle in which to choose a wife. Sometimes the endogamous circle becomes so narrow that it includes only the extended kinship group of the person's parents. Such a limited kinship group is generally termed a *kuf.* Whereas the Biradari generally functions for all ceremonial intercourse, the *biadhari* (marriage circles) within the *Biradari* is restricted to the choosing of wives. The Muslim Rajputs are very endogamous, but do not marry first cousins as the Ashrafs do.

Activity 1

Read carefully the section on the Muslim concept of 'Biradari'. In your own community what does 'Biradari' constitute? Write a small note of a page on "Composition of Biradari in my Community". Compare, if possible, what you have noted down with those written by others at the Study Centre.

Some of the occupational castes such as the Qasab (butcher), Manihar (bracelet maker) are almost strictly endogamous and they generally do not marry outside their castes. Certain other occupational castes, such as Julaha (weaver), Nai (barber), Kumhar (potter) may even practice isogamy (marrying equals). Finally

the Bhangi (scavanger) caste is confined to itself for marriage purposes. A clean caste person would not and does not like to establish marriage relations with Bhangis.

ii) Occupational Specialisation

The second attribute of caste or *Biradari,* which resembles the Hindu caste, is their association with a traditional occupation. An exception to this is the various *Ashraf* groups whose names are indicative of their origin or descent. But in the case of many others groups the various names are indicative of the respective traditional occupations.

Since the division of castes entails a degree of occupational specialisation amongst them, the relationship among the different castes tends toward economic interdependence. The different castes participate in this system in different capacities according to their place in the productive organisation revolving around land. The *Ashraf* groups, who are predominantly landowners and whose principal occupation in the village is cultivation, form the nucleus of the system of economic interdependence among the castes. They are referred to as the ***jajmans***. Muslim castes, whose names imply a traditional occupation, render specialised and traditional economic and ritual services for their *jajmans*. Some of the Muslim castes in this respect are Barhai (carpenter), Darzi (tailor), Dhobi (laundryman) Kumhar (potter), Lohar (blacksmith), Nai or Hajjam (barber), Sunar (goldsmith) Teli (oil presser) Bhishti (water carrier), Gaddi (grazier), Julaha (weaver), Qasab (butcher) etc. Each of these occupational castes, with both Hindu and Muslim section, is sometimes united for trade-union purposes. But for social and ceremonial purposes each section is generally limited to itself. In cases of marriages, ceremonial feasts, ritual observances, each communal section of every caste functions as a distinct and separate unit.

iii) Hierarchical Ordering

The third important attribute of caste is the hierarchical ordering of various Muslim groups. Every Muslim caste has its definite place within the total social organisation. Each caste is considered to be either high or low in relation to other castes. The *Ashraf* castes top the social ranking when compared to the other Muslim castes. Further, every Muslim belongs to a certain caste, his/her social status is, therefore, defined and often fixed according to the status of the caste to which he/she belongs. All the Muslim castes, like Hindu castes, are graded into a hierarchical scheme. The *Ashrafs,* almost by common consensus, are assigned the highest position in the ranking strata by virtue of their supposed descent from Prophet Mohammad. The Bhangis and Chamars are assigned the lowest rank. The Muslim Rajputs are ranked lower than *Ashraf* but are considered higher than the various clean occupational castes. The latter are superior to the Muslim untouchables but inferior to Muslim Rajputs.

iv) Restrictions on Social Intercourse and Commensality

Finally, one observes the presence of restrictions on social intercourse and commensalism (i.e. eating together) among the various Muslim castes. The various *Ashraf* groups observe no restriction in inter-group commensality among themselves. There are, however, several restrictions on commensal relations with the rest of the caste groupings who are considered inferior to the *Ashrafs*.

The various *Ashraf* groups assign low status to the non-Ashraf groups because it is maintained that the latter do not observe certain ritual cleanliness *(paki)*.

16.4.3 Social Control

Having described how Muslim social organisation is internally differentiated and hierarchically ranked, we shall now turn to other organisational aspects of Muslim society, specially those which restrict and control individuals and groups within the prescribed normative framework. Such an organisation takes two forms: direct control through a governing body, such as a council, and indirect control through public opinion. The Hindu social organisation operates and maintains itself through an operation of both these forms. Let us look at both of them in a little more detail. When particular acts of individuals are not approved by their caste fellows they become the victim of severe criticism. If a violation is serious, the criticism takes the form of action and the offender faces a social boycott the extent of which varies according to the nature of the offence. The other mode of control, through an authoritative body, is generally paractised among the occupational castes where such a body is known as the panchayat. membership in the caste panchayat generally includes all the adult males of the caste; the caste headman, known as *Sarpanch* is usually elected. In a situation of emergency, generally when a member of the caste has committed an offence, the whole panchayat is summoned to hear the case. The caste panchayat then gives its judgement. The most frequent punishment among them is a strict social boycott which is termed as *hugga pani band* (i.e. such a person is not welcomed or entertained by fellow caste members) or *zat biradari bahar* (expulsion from the caste brotherhood).

Among *Ashraf* and some of the higher occupational castes like higher Hindu castes, no authoritative caste council functions. Instead, the general caste opinion of approval and disapproval passes through the communicative network among caste members. Among the *Ashrafs*, joint family functions as the basic unit which controls its members in almost all social and personal matters; in the case of most occupationally related castes which have well organised caste Panchayats, the joint family remains comparatively less significant in social affairs. Among Muslims, Bhangi (Scavenger), Dhobi (washerman), Teli (oil presser), Julaha (weaver) etc. have well organised panchayats which function both as trade unions and as social organisations.

After looking at the pattern of social control among the Muslims, we will discuss in the next section the patterns of family, marrige and inhertance among them. Before proceeding to the next section, let us complete Check Your Progress 2.

Check Your Progress 2

(i)   What are the three distinct groups representing caste like subdivisions among Muslim converts? Use five lines for your answer.

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(ii) What is zat among the Muslim? Use six lines for your answer.

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(iii) What are the means by which the Muslim community in India exercises social control? Use five lines for your answer.

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16.4.4 Family, Marriage and Inheritance

The regulation of the Shariah along with the traditions of the Prophet provides us with a framework for identifying practices relating to Muslim marriage, family and inheritance. The Shariah consists of regulations pertaining to marriage, family and inheritance. The traditions of the Prophet include records of the Prophet's own manner of living and pronouncements on various matters of daily life. These traditions have become a source of normative guidance for Muslim social life. Let us discuss these traditions relating to family, marriage and inheritance in Muslim society in greater detail.

i) **Family**

Muslims, like other communities in India, live in small and large households. Both types of families, i.e., joint family and nuclear family, are found among the Muslims. The size of the family varies from four to eight members or as large as twenty five in number. Vast majority of the joint families are located in the rural areas and more nuclear families are located in urban areas.

Patrilineal and Matrilineal Family: Muslim family is usually patrilocal and patrilineal. After marriage the couple establishes the family at the place of the husband. Exceptions to patrilineal family are rare but not altogether absent. For instance, with the absence of a male heir, the head of the family may invite his daughter and her conjugal family to establish residence in his house. In such a situation, son of the daughter is adopted and becomes the legal heir to property. Another example of departure from the normative type of patrilocal and patrilineal family is the matrilineal families found in Lakshadweep Islands, Malabar district (Kerala) and Ratnagiri districts (Maharashtra) in India (Saiyed, A.R. and Saiyed, V.V. 1982: 117).

Family Break-up: In Islam, celibacy is discouraged and Muslims are enjoined to marry and multiply. Although divorce is a common phenomenon among

Muslims, Islam does not permit divorce to be taken lightly. This is indicated in the Prophet's words, "of all things Allah has made lawful for his servants, the most hateful to him is divorce," (Saiyed, A.R. & Saiyed, V.V., 1982:115). Thus Islam wanted to provide both for family stability as well as divorce in situations where marital maladjustments render healthy family life impossible.

Husband and Wife: Among Muslims, it is the duty of the husband or head of the family to provide for the maintenance of the family. In Islam, the wife has a legal right to be maintained by the husband. The social life of the majority of the Muslim women is confined within the family. She spends a major portion of her time in taking care of household matters and in the upbringing of children. Her social and emotional needs are fulfilled by her family. In fact her role and function in the family determines her social position in the family.

Sons and Daughters: Within the Muslim family sons and daughters generally do not enjoy equal social position (Menon 1981: 84). In the past even the birth of a girl was considered as an unfortunate and unpleasant event in the Muslim family (Menon 1981: 17). However, these days children are given equal treatment in routine general matters. But in important matters such as education, choice of career, choice of partner in marriage, the daughters are sometimes discriminated and sons are favoured.

Segregation of Women: Another notable practice among the Muslim families is *'purdah'* or seclusion of women. Majority of Muslims still live in joint families, where women reside in separate part of the house called *'Zanana'* (Menon 1981:21). The seclusion of women from participation in certain spheres of life is enforced through the custom of *'purdah'*. In the past, this custom was considered as a symbol of higher social position of the family. Social change and education has made some dent in this custom. Yet even today this custom remains an important aspect of the Muslim family.

ii) Marriage

In Block 2, unit 7 on Marriage and its Changing Patterns, we described some aspects of a Muslim marriage. Let us examine here the essential features of Muslim marriage in the context of Islamic religion, which has provided the ideological foundation for social behaviour.

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

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

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

Marriage Ceremony: The ceremony of Muslim marriage, i.e. *'Nikah'* is conducted by 'kazi'. It is customary to recite verses from Quran so as to seek Allah's blessings for the couple. Consent is sought from both the individuals. In order to complete the marriage ceremony, a formal document *'Nikahnama'* is prepared. Notwithstanding other aspects, *'Nikahnama'* specifies the nature of Dower or *Mehr. Mehr* is a particular sum of money or property, which the bride is entitled to receive from bridegroom in consideration of marriage. It's a sort of guarantee for the security of the woman. *Mehr* is an indispensable custom without which no Muslim marriage can acquire social or legal legitimacy. *Mehr* is not a fixed amount of money or property. It varies according to the social and economic status of the concerned families. The mode of payment is also flexible. It can be paid either immediately after the marriage or postponed till some mutually agreeable future date.

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

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

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

Divorce and Remarriage: Under Muslim Personal Law, husband enjoys unlimited freedom in matters of divorce. He is permitted to divorce his wife according to his own pleasure or without assigning any reason or cause. On the other hand, a woman does not enjoy such a freedom. This custom has resulted in man's domination arid power over the woman. Although the Prophet gave to the women, the right of obtaining separation on reasonable grounds but in practice this is not so. In general there are two types of divorce, i.e.

'talaq' and 'khol'. *Talaq* is exjudicial divorce and it becomes effective when the husband unilaterally pronounces the word *'Talaq'* thrice. In *'Khol'*, divorce takes place by mutual consent.

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

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

Inheritance: Though Islamic society is patrilineal, women in Islam enjoy the right to inherit property. Islamic jurisprudence defines not only the scope of the property a woman may own-by inheritance, by gift and by the fruits of her own labour but also recognises the absolute ownership of it. Both daughters and widows inherit property, including land and houses, from their parents and husbands. Islamic law grants women, even if childless, remarried or divorced complete rights over their inherited property. However, women inherit smaller shares of wealth than men do, a son's share is twice that of a daughter.

16.4.5 Life Cycle Rituals and Festivals

Life cycle rituals and festivals constitute important elements of every religious community. They serve, apart from other things, the purpose of reaffirming one's faith in one's religion. Some of the (important Muslim ceremonies include life-cycle rituals around birth, marriage and death. A few important ones are (i) the naming of the child (ii) circumcision which is done by a barber or in a hospital (iii) the *Bismillah* ceremony, which initiates a child into reading Quran. Feasts and celebrations associated with these ceremonies and festivals not only make for social solidarity among the believers but also allow people from different socio-religious backgrounds to meet and know each other. Let us now look at some important festivals among Muslims. They have two main festivals, namely, *Id-ul-Fitr and Id-ul-Azha.*

On the last day of *Ramzan* and on the sighting of the moon, we have *Id-ul-Fitr*. A prayer service is held. Muslims exchange embraces and greetings after prayers and participate in feasting and merriment. As is clear, these major religious activities and festivals make for social solidarity among Muslims and strengthen their social organisation

Ramzan occurs in the ninth month of the calendar. It is the month of self-purification, and commiseration with the poor. Quran is recited regularly.

Another important festival is *Id-Ul-Adha* or *Bakr-Id.* It is celebrated on the tenth day of the month *Dhul Hijja*. This involves a sacrifice made by pilgrims and performed as part of the ceremonies of *Hajj* in Arabia. The ceremony is observed simultaneously by all Muslims the world over. The Muslims offer food among household members, friends and relatives and the poor. The celebration of the Prophet's birthday, *Idi-Milad* and death anniversaries of

famous saints have also been added to the list of Muslim festivals. Besides these festivals, many Muslims celebrate several Hindu festivals. For example, the Moghul converts gave official status to celebration of *Diwali* and *Holi.*

Mubartam, is the first month of the Muslim calendar, commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Husain. Ta'zia processions of the Imams grave are carried out on this day. *Muharram* is not a festival in the usual sense of the term but a commemoration and a period of mourning. On the appearance of the new moon the *fatiha* (opening chapter of the Quran) is recited in the *imam bara* and some refreshment *(sherbet)* taken. The observance lasts ten to twelve days.

16.5 EXTERNAL INFLUENCE ON MUSLIM SOCIAL PRACTICES

Let us in this section mention some studies which indicate the nature of outside influences on Muslim social practices. Ahmed (1974: 326) in his study of' Muslim family in Bihar, found that the importance of *'mehr'* has decreased in the families he studied. Muslims there had incorporated the practice of dowry. Saiyed (1976) has observed that the Muslim Kokni women of Ratnagiri do not inherit landed property though Islamic law provides for it. D'Souza (1976: 167) in his study of Moplah Muslims of Kerala points put that Moplah marriage is considered incomplete without the Hindu function *"Kalyanam"*. There is ample evidence to show that British rule and the national movement for independence had made a dent on the Muslim *purdah* system. Educated Muslim women discarded their *purdah* and began to emerge prominently in spheres that were hitherto inaccessible to them. Quarratulain Hyder (1979) has pointed out that literature and journalism became the domain of Muslim women in India. However, it has to be mentioned here that the process of emancipation was mainly confined to the urban middle class women (Saiyed A.R. and Saiyed V.V. 1982:123).

Activity 2

Give examples which show the influence of Muslim social organisation in the following fields.

1) Music

2) Food

3) Dance

4) Literature

5) Architecture

6) Painting

To help you out, here is an example that the *sherwani* and *churidar* are dresses, which reflect the influence of Muslim style of dressing up. Compare your list, if possible, with those written by other students at the Study Centre.

These outside influences, however, have not led to a notable decrease in concern with religious socialisation and the promotion of religiosity among the Muslims. Muslim parents, irrespective of their group status or socio-economic status insist on providing religious education to their children. Emphasis on daily prayers, fasting, group recitation of Quran by women are some features of this concern for religious training. In a pluralistic society like India, Muslims as a minority group seem to feel that it is their duty to cultivate an Islamic religious cultural identity in their children (Saiyed and Saiyed V.V. 1982:132).

In fact today there is a process of **Islamisation** going on wherein various Muslim groups and sub-groups are giving up their practices and customs which resemble those that are present in Hindu communities. In practice this has meant greater observance of their religious traditions and marked turning toward Islamic practices and symbols under the influences of Islamisation. Muslims are rigidly adhering to the law of the *Shariat*. The process of Islamisation has provided a stronger internal unity to Muslims and made them effective politically, as are other organised groups.

Check Your Progress 3

i)   Tick the right answe of the following question.

     What is the Islamic view of marriage?

     a)   Islam does not consider marriage as obligatory.

     b)   Islam looks upon marriage as essential and obligatory.

     c)   Islam encourages celibacy.

ii)   State whether the following statements are true or false. Mark T or F against each statement.

     a)   Divorce is permitted in Islam.

     b)   In India, all Muslim families have been found to be patrilineal and patrilocal.

     c)   In Islam, women do not have the right to inherit property.

     d)   The Hindu influences on Islamic social practices can be seen in many areas like marriage, family and inheritance.

     e)   *Ramzan* is a Muslim festival celebrated in the first month of the Muslim Calendar.

iii) What is meant by Islamisation? Use seven lines for your answer.

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....   **Muslim Social Organisation**

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16.6   LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have described some important aspects of Muslim social organisation. We began by a brief description of the emergence of Islam in general and growth of the Muslim community in India. We talked of the important tenets of Islam with a special focus on its view of social equality. We noted that the word Islam means submission to or acceptance of the will of God. Islam is a monotheistic religion and Quran is the most sacred and holy book of Muslims. In our examination of the aspects of social organisation we looked at the social divisions among Muslims as well as the means they employ to exercise social control. We examined the caste like divisions among Muslims and the role of the Panchayat on exercising social control. Marriage, family, and inheritance are described under the heading 'Aspects of Social Organisation'. We focussed on rules regarding marriage, divorce and inheritance. Regarding family we observed that the Muslim family is by and large patrilineal and patrilocal. We concluded our examination with a note on the external influences on Muslim social practices.

16.7   KEYWORDS

Ashraf or Shurafa	Both are plural forms of the Arabic word *Sharif*, meaning honourable. The groups belonging to this category claim to be the descendants of early Muslim immigrants.
Ajlaf	A convert Muslim, especially from a lower Hindu caste.
Bhai-band or biradari	A related group consisting of a member of a caste, literally, brotherhood or an association of kinsmen.
Islamisation	Cultural process whereby groups and individuals distinguish themselves from non-Muslims by purifying themselves of the so called un-Islamic customs and practices.
Jajman	Patron, the recipient of ritual and economic services under the *jajmani* system.
Namaz	Prayer, the Islamic form of worship supposed to be performed five times daily.
Paki	Ritual purity required before prayers and other religious observances.
Zat	Urdu equivalent of the word, *'Jati'* meaning the effective endogamous unit of the caste system.

16.8 FURTHER READING

Ahmed, Imtiaz (ed.) 1983. *Modernisation and Social Change Among Muslims in India*. Manohar: New Delhi, Chapters 1 and 16.

Ansari, Ghaus. 1959-60. Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh. A Study of culture contact. The Eastern Anthropologist, 13 (2); 1-83.

Jackson, Paul S.J. (ed.) 1988. *The Muslims of India: Beliefs and Practices.* Theological Publications: Bangalore, Chapter I, II & III.

Saiyyed, V.V. and Mohammad, Talib 1995. *Religion and Ethnicity among Muslim.* Rawat: Jaipur

16.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i)   Islam means act of submission to Allah. Its holy book is the Quran, and this was revealed to man through Muhammad the Prophet. It came into existence in the early seventh century in West Central Arabia. Its systematic formulation took place in 622 A.D. when Muhammad went form Mecca to Medina.

ii) The important commands of Islam are prayer, fasting, pilgrimage to Mecca, performance of all that is demanded of a Muslim. Abstinence from what is forbidden and striving for what is set as the right path by Allah are also a part of the commands.

iii) According to the teachings of Quran all men are equal and no one should be evaluated on the basis of such factors like race, ancestry or nationality. The principle of equality is to be upheld in day-to-day life. Islam expects every Muslim irrespective of his group affiliations or status, to say *'namaz'* together and not to observe any kind of restrictions on social interaction relating to marriage and commensality.

Check Your Progress 2

i)   The three distinct groups are

   a)   converts from Hindu high castes

   b)   converts from clean occupational castes

   c)   converts from unclean occupational castes

ii) Muslims use the term *zat* to express the purity of descent. *Zat* is thus an endogamous unit of society. *Zat* also involves occupational specialisation. They are hierarchically ordered and tend to have an ideological and religious basis.

iii) The Muslims exercise social control with the help of direct means through a governing body like a council or panchayat and indirect means through public opinion such as social boycott by the community of which the violator is a member.

Check Your Progress 3

i)   b

ii) (a) T

     (b) F

     (c) F

     (d) T

     (e) F

iii) Islamisation is a process of social change wherein various groups of Muslims give up their practices and customs, which resemble those that are present in Hindu communities. It has also meant strict adherence to Islamic practices and symbols.

UNIT 17 CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Structure

17.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit describes the social organisation of Christians in India. A study of this unit will enable you to

● explain the origin of Christianity in India

● list and describe the common features of Christian faith

● describe the Christian social organisation in terms of family, the role of the priest, church and Christmas among Syrian Christians of Kerala

● identify and explain the areas of relationship between Christian and Hindu social life in Kerala.

17.1   INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we have looked at Muslim social organisation. In this unit we are going to familiarise you with the social organisation of another community, namely, the Christian community. Since the community of Christians has different bases of social organisation depending upon the region of a particular group, we have chosen one specific community as an example. It is called the Syrian Christian community of Kerala. Its social organisation is discussed here with reference to family and church.

The spatial and demographic dimensions of the Christianity in India are examined in section 17.2 Then we have a brief discussion on the origin of Christianity in India, with special reference to Kerala and Goa, and the eastern and north eastern parts of the country. Next, we describe the basic tenets of the Christianity. Then we begin with our case study of the Syrian Christian community of Kerala also known as the Christians of St. Thomas. Here, we discuss the case of Syrian Christian family in India. Here, we examine the role and status of the husband's mother, husband's father, the grandparents and the mother's brother in the family. Besides these we also discuss the aspects of patrilocal residence, patrilineage and inheritance in the Christian family. Next, we describe the role of priest, church and Christmas in Syrian Christian social organisation. Lastly, we analyse how the Hindu rituals and the elements of castes are in practice among the Christians of Kerala.

17.2   ORIGIN OF CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

In this section, we shall first discuss the spatial and demographic dimensions of the Christian community in India and then state briefly how Christianity first spread in Kerala and Goa and later in the eastern and north-eastern states.

17.2.1 Christian Community: The Spatial and Demographic Dimensions

In India there is no one homogeneous Christian community, but there are many different ones, organised around regional, language and sectarian bases. There are Kerala, Goan Tamil, Anglo-Indians in North India, Naga and North East Indian Christians, who are different in their language, socio-cultural practices and economic status. It is difficult to speak about a general Christian way of life in India for these very reasons. There are many churches, many denominations or groups, many sects or brotherhoods among them.

According to the 1981 Census there were 18 million Christians in India and the percentage of Christians in India's population accounted to 2.43 per cent. The total Christian population had almost kept up with the national increase of 24.69 per cent over 1971-81. In 1991 their population was 2.32 percent of the total population. However, the distribution of Christian population has been very uneven in India. There are dense settlements of Christians in some parts of the country while in other regions there are small and scattered Christian communities. In Andhra Pradesh, in the year 1981, the Christians represented 2.68 percent of the total population. In Kerala the percentage of Christians was 20.6. So also Manipur had a 29.7 per cent Christian population.

In fact, Meghalaya with 52.6 percent and Nagaland with 80.2 percent registered the highest concentration of Christian populations. Tamil Nadu had 5.78 percent Christian which was over twice the national average. Very low percentages of the Christian population had been recorded in some central and northern states of the community. For example, Jammu and Kashmir 0.14 percent, Madhya Pradesh 0.7 percent, Rajasthan 0.12 percent and Uttar Pradesh 0.15 percent. In 1991, the highest concentration of Christians was found in Nagaland (87.46 percent) and Meghalaya (85.73 percent). In some States such as Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana etc. the Christian population was very low.

17.2.2 Christianity in Kerala and Goa

Christianity came to Kerala through the work of St. Thomas, a disciple of Jesus in the first century and in the fourth century through the influence of traders from Syria. Accounts show that St. Thomas, a follower of Jesus, converted several Nambuthiri Brahmans to Christianity. Thomas is said to have landed in the ancient port of Muziris in 52 A.D.

The Christians of St. Thomas were very prosperous, and historians write that the local kings were very pleased with them and gave them several privileges.

In 345 A.D. a Christian, Thomas of Cana set out with permission from the Bishop of his land, and came to Kerala with a number of Christians from Jerusalem, Baghdad and Nineveh.

The Indian Church of St. Thomas came into a close relationship with the Persian Church from the time of the arrival of this immigrant group. However, in the sixteenth century, Persia lost control over the Indian church for the St. Thomas Christians came under the ritual domination of the Portuguese who had arrived in India for purposes of trade. When the Portuguese arrived in India they found a well established Christian Church, where the believers spoke of themselves as being "the Christians of St. Thomas". They are also called the Syrian Christians.

This period began with the 'discovery' of a sea route to India by Vasco de Gama in 1498. Trade was not their only concern. The priests who followed the first Portuguese travellers and discoverers began the establishment of Portuguese rituals in the Churches of Kerala. The Christians of St. Thomas loved their ancient ceremonies, and they did not want to transfer their loyalty from the Patriarch of the East (who was like their Pope) to the Pope of Rome.

It was only in 1653 that the St. Thomas Christians were able to free themselves from Portuguese domination. At this time a division was created in the community of St. Thomas Christians, between those who followed the Pope, and those who followed the Patriarch of the Eastern churches. Historical events, such as the coming of the English divided the community into several more groups. Some of these are called the Anglican (now a part of the church of South India) Mar Thoma, Evangelical and the **Yakoba.** The Yakoba are themselves divided into two parties because of a church quarrel. Yet, all these groups or denominations share a similar culture. The church practices of each of the group is somewhat different.

In 1509 Alfonso de Albuquerque saw that if the Portuguese were to consolidate their commercial interests they must have a permanent residential interest in India. Goa became central in this interest, and along with administrators the ships of the Portuguese also carried priests. Evangelical work among the native people of Goa began with the work of Franciscan friar Antony de Loueo in 1517. In 1542, Francis Xavier arrived in Goa, and soon after he began his work amongst the Paravas, the fisher-folk in the Coromandel Coast.

The Dutch followed the Portuguese in the colonisation of India and consequently, its commercial exploitation. However, they were not zealous in spreading the Christian faith, and they did not arouse the deep hostility that the Portuguese did. The English followed the Dutch, and they spread the Gospel through missionaries (Menachery 1973).

17.2.3 Christianity in the East and North East

In 1793, Carey and Thomas of the Baptist Missionary society arrived in Kolkata, where they proceeded to translate and print the Bible in the vernacular. In 1806, Rev. Caludius Buchanan was already writing about the importance of the dissemination of the Bible in Malabar, and he was aided in his plans by the British Resident in Travancore. Benjamin Bailey spent decades in the translation of the Bible in Kottayam, Kerala.

In the North East hills of India the first attempt to preach Christianity was made by William Carey, the founder of Serampore College near Calcutta. He sent one of his early converts named Krishna Chandra Pal to the Khasi hills in 1813.

Christian Missions were from a very early period interested in education. Western ideas were introduced through the schools and colleges set up by Christian missionaries, and in turn had its impact in the growth of the National movement. We know how close Mahatma Gandhi was to C.F. Andrews and how the gentleness of Jesus' life made a profound impact on the ideas on non-violence that Gandhi evolved, for liberating the country from its colonial fetters (Neil 1984). Since it is not possible to present an account of the social organisation of all Christian communities in India, we are here selecting only one section of Indian Christians for this purpose. In the following sections you will learn about the Syrian Christian social organisation.

17.3   TENETS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

However, in spite of regional variations as described above there are certain tenets, which unite Christian life and experience all over the country. The first of these is that all Christians believe that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is their saviour. They believe that Jesus was born to Mary, a virgin, and that God, the Father, sent him to redeem people of their sins. The concept of virgin birth, is accepted alike by Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians in India. Christianity asserts that Jesus was the Son of God. However, Jesus' father on earth was Joseph. He was a carpenter who protected Mary and took her away to Bethlehem where the baby Jesus was born in a stable. The story of the poverty surrounding Jesus' birth is a very important one for Christians. It establishes the background of much of what Jesus taught, and the manner in which his teachings celebrated poverty, meekness and humility.

17.3.1 The Life of Jesus

The life of Jesus is the central principle around which Christians in India organise their ritual life. The two most important religious festivals of the Christians are Christmas and Easter. Christmas marks the anniversary of Jesus' birth, and is celebrated by attending the Church, eating festival food, wearing new clothes and greeting friends and neighbours. In India, there would be differences among Christians in the kind of festive food that is served, or the kind of clothes that are worn. These are, however, regional differences of custom. The belief that Jesus' birth must be celebrated and this celebration unites Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, Goan, Malayali, Konkan or Naga Christians. Similarly, all Christians mourn the crucifixion of Jesus on Good Friday, and celebrate his Resurrection, or victory over death on Easter Sunday. All Christians believe that Jesus was killed by his enemies who hated what he taught; but on the third day, he arose from the tomb and convinced his followers of his divinity, for soon after he ascended to heaven. The Christian church then came into existence with the belief in the Resurrection of Jesus. The Eucharist service, which is the central part of Christian rituals, enacts the life of Jesus. It is like a sacred drama, which is performed so that the Christians may continually remember the life of Jesus, hear again his teachings, and try to live their lives in the way that he taught his disciples. Let us now briefly discuss the various elements of Christian faith.

17.3.2 Various Elements of Christian Faith

Christianity is a historical religion, and all Indian Christians accept that their Master, born in the Middle East, was Jesus of Nazareth. The Bible is the sacred book of the Christians. It provides the basis for Christian beliefs and the norms for Christian behaviour. The Four Gospels (a part of the Bible) of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to be found in the Bible are often read by all Christians in the country. These are memories of Jesus' life; they affirm that Jesus is authentically human, as well as Lord, Messiah (Christos, the Son of God).

For all Christians in India as elsewhere, the reality of God is affirmed in Jesus' life on earth. All Christians accept the propriety of speaking of God in a three-fold manner, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is a problem of great theological complexity, and among Christians there can be differences in the interpretation of the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Let us, for our purposes merely say that all Christians believe in the Trinity. They believe also that the Universe has been divinely created, that people are sinful, and that Jesus was sent to earth so that people and God could become reconciled. The Christian Church was founded by Jesus and his spirit is constantly present and sustains all the Church and all believers. Finally, all Christians believe that all human life (human history) must one day close, and then will follow the day of judgement when people will either be rewarded or punished according to the kinds of life they have led.

Activity 1

Read the section on the Tenets of Christian Faith carefully. Now describe briefly the tenets of your own religion, or, any other religion. Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

Check Your Progress 1

i) How did Christianity come to Kerala? Use three lines for your answer.

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    ....

ii) Which colonial powers were interested in evangelisation (teaching and
    spreading the ideas of the Gospels)? Use three lines for your answer.

    ....

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    ....

iii) Briefly state the teachings of Christianity. Use eight lines for your answer.

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17.4 THE CHRISTIANS OF ST. THOMAS: AN EXAMPLE OF CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Christianity, like any other religion, is a way of life. Differences in the social
organisation of Christianity will arise from the historical, cultural, political
and geographical environment in which the community is founded. Thus the
social organisation of Christians in Goa, Delhi, Punjab, Nagaland or Tamil
Nadu will differ from one another depending upon the region and its culture
and/or sectarian differences. The social organisation of Christians of St.
Thomas, called the Syrian Christians, has been described in order to show
you the specific nature of organisation of a particular Christian community
in India. It is only one example of Christian life in our country, but it may
help you to understand what Christianity is about. The following sections
describe Christian social organisation in terms of family, the role of Priest,
Church and Christmas among Syrian Christians of Kerala. The interaction
between and some common rituals of the Christians and Hindus have also
been referred. In the earlier sections, the origins of Christians in India and
some of their basic beliefs have been given. All this should give you some
ideas regarding the social life and organisation of the Christians in India.

17.4.1 The Christian Family

The Syrian Christian family is a very close knit one. Let us look at Christian family relationships, and see what they say about this particular Indian Christian community.

The Husband's Mother

When a Christian bride enters her husband's home, her husband's mother would have a very important role to play in her new life. Close relations between a Syrian Christian husband and wife, specially in the early years, are thought to be unseemly. When they move into an independent household with the birth of children, that husband and wife complement each other, but a certain reserve always marks their relationship.

The closeness of family bonds, which characterises the Syrian Christian family, is a tribute in fact to the relationship between a woman and her son's wives. It is not merely cooking and the organisation of the household that a bride learns from her husband's mother. She learns the Christian virtues of charity and piety as well. However, there are often tensions between the two women, since the relationship is an unequal one.

The Husband's Father

The relation of a Syrian Christian woman to her husband's father is one of respect. He is the head of the household till the time of his death. However, by the time he is about sixty years of age, he may retire from active social life. While actual control of property may be in the hands of the sons, the father is treated with great respect, and his advice is always sought. It is he who leads the family at prayer when after dinner the family kneels together on the carefully laid out reed mats. Further, it is the father who gives formal permission, necessary economic assistance and the blessings when a couple want to set up house separately. The relationship between sons and fathers is one marked by devotion, affection, obedience and respect on the one side, and by patronage and authoritarianism on the other. This relation, full of tensions, is also reflected in the relation of the bride to her husband's father.

For many Christians, while they live in **nuclear households** (consisting of parents and their unmarried children) the ideal family that they generally desire are **three generations,** in which all the sons bring their brides into the paternal households, and live all together with their children. However, in practice, amongst the Syrian Christians, the sons set up separate households with the birth of children.

The Grandparents

For these Christians, grandparents play a very important role because they live close by. The paternal grandmother is an important person in the life of the child, particularly as the child grows up. A teasing relationship is often evident. Even before they go to formal school, they accompany their grandmother every day to the parish church. It is to her that they recount the events of the day. She teaches them stories from the bible and songs about Jesus.

On the other hand, with the grandfather the relationship is one of great formality. This is the consequence of authoritarianism and patrilineality. The grandfather in the Christian household is the *griha nayakan* (head of the house) and this idea of domestic authority is pervasive, he leads in family prayers, gets priority in being served the best at meal times, makes all important decisions regarding property, money and the arrangement of marriages.

The Mother's Brother

The mother's brother is of great importance to the children. Gifts from the mother's brother are received on occasions of marriage and birth. The mother's brother always brings abundant quantities of fruit and sweet foods called *palaharam* when he comes to visit. Many Christmas vacations are spent at the mother's brother's house with the maternal grandparents. Here the children are honoured and beloved guests.

As they grow up, however, their father's house becomes more important. It now becomes the centre of their life, particularly when they are sons. It is to this house and property that they will be **heirs**. This is "their own house" as opposed to their "mother's brother's house".

17.4.2 The Patrilocal Residence

Patrilocal residence (staying in the same locality as the father) is of great importance to these Christians. Brothers always live in neighbouring houses, food and garden products are often shared. They visit each other, celebrate rituals and ceremonies in each other's houses, share sorrows and difficulties. The link between them is that they are of the same blood and the same name.

17.4.3 The Patrilineage

For the Syrian Christian, the patrilineage is important, and the significance of house names must be understood in this respect. A man is better known as Vazhapallil Paul or Pallivadikal Thomas, for the house name carries the ideas of property, privileges and lineage. It expresses the idea of patrilineal **descent** or of membership in a lineage organised around the male descendants of an ancestor.

In contrast to descent is filiation, which relates an individual to both parents, not merely to the father and his male relatives. The relation of children to their mother is in striking contrast to their relation with their father. It is to the mother that the young child turns to for every need, and she mediates between the child and the father, the latter being a distant figure. In fact, among these Christians all women should be like Mary, the mother of Jesus. They must be gentle, soft and humble like the *matav* (mother).

Women are never formally included in the affairs of the outside world, those relating to the domain of property and income for instance. Even in the question of marriage it is the fathers who meet, discuss financial and practical matters and fix the alliance. Women cook, clean, take care of children and are devoted to the religious life, spending much time in prayer and attending devotions at the Church.

17.4.4 Inheritance

Till 1986, women were given *stridhanam* by their fathers, which was seen to be their share in father's wealth. It was controlled not by women, but by the husband's father. After a Supreme Court ruling in 1986, a woman may inherit equally with her brothers should her father die without writing a will. Written wills, however, ensure even today that it is sons who inherit property, while daughters are given away in marriage with *stridhanam,* which is never really hers to use, since her husband's father or her husband will control it.

Inheritance customs express the dominant place of the father in the Syrian Christian household. Traditionally the concept of equal share was never of importance to the Syrians. Property was divided according to the whim of the father, or according to the need of his children. The question of manipulation and favouritism arose frequently. The writing of wills has always been very popular amongst these Christians, and the father has absolute control over his sons.

What does this brief discussion of the Christian family show? It describes patriarchal authority which is in fact the basis of Christian social organisation. The next section will discuss the church in the context of Christian social organisation.

Activity 2

Read Sub-section 17.4.1 once again. By now you would be aware of the role of the husband's father in a Syrian Christian family. Now, note down in about fifteen lines the role of husband's father in the family of your own community. Compare, if possible your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

17.5   THE CHURCH

Here we will look at the priest, the church and the celebration of a Christian festival, i.e. Christians, in order to understand more aspects of Christian social organisation.

17.5.1 The Priest in Christianity

The Christian priest is greatly respected by his parishioners. When he conducts prayers and offers the sacrifice (as the central rite of Christianity is called) he stands in place of Jesus Christ. He has the power to reveal the sacred world to those who believe. The Christian priest is a man of God. Amongst the Yakobas, the priest is expected to grow a long beard, and wear a round black cap, loose trousers and a flowing black or white gown. These are the signs by which a priest is known. He must be always calm and disciplined. When he goes to the Church he must not talk to anyone, all of his being must be directed to God. When people are in trouble, ill, suffering or dying he must be with them. At times of joy, feasting, marriages, births, entering a new house, he must be present to bless the occasion. No one will start a celebratory meal without the priest. If the village is having an exhibition of fire-crackers on a feast day or a function, the priest must be present. He is given the best place to sit in, the best food, and the greatest respect.

The prelates or Bishops of the Church are treated with even greater respect. It is only on festivals and other important occasions that the people meet them. At other times they live in the monastery in meditation and prayer. The Bishops are the leaders of the community. Every Christian knows them by sight and by name. To be related to a Bishop in anyway is of great value. As soon as the Christians see a Bishop, all conversation stops, every one stands at attention. Even if the Bishop is younger than many of his parishioners, they express great respect, almost awe. Those who come to him must bow their heads and receive a blessing with his handcross. To have a Bishop officiate at a baptism or marriage or funeral is considered to be a very great honour.

Fig. 17.1: The Christian church

17.5.2 The Christian Church

In this section, we will describe the architecture and interior of the church. The construction of the traditional Syrian church in Kerala (see figure 17.1) follows the principles laid down by the Hindu *Shastras* on architecture. It is surrounded by a courtyard on all sides. The walls are similar to Hindu temple walls in height, width and design. Inside, the Church is whitewashed; sometimes there are religious paintings on the wall or ceilings. These pictures tell the story of Jesus, and often have pictures of St. Thomas, who is said to have brought Christianity to Kerala. The altar is placed on a higher platform, and no one may climb the steps upto this sanctuary. It's a holy place. Only the priests and his assistants are allowed access to the altar, the holy vessels, the cross and candles that are kept there. There are no chairs or pews in the traditional Syrian Church. The floor is covered with reed mats, and on these the people kneel and pray. The men stand on the left side facing the altar; the women stand on the right side. There is an aisle between them, down which

the priest's assistants will walk swinging the container of burning incense, which purifies the air. Many churches have silver or bronze oil lamps that have wicks burning in them. The devotees come and pour oil into these lamps and each will light a wick in honour of Jesus. In each of these churches there will usually be a large stone cross in the outer courtyard, which can be seen from very far away.

The church is the heart of Christian social life. People in the villages visit the church every evening for *Sandhya Namaskaram* and in the morning for *Vishudha Qurbana*, the Holy Sacrifice. The Holy Sacrifice is a symbol of the life of Jesus. The priest, through the rituals of the church, acts out of the great mystery of the life of Jesus. The mystery of religious belief lies in that moment and practical reality is kept away, while the sacred world is for that moment brought closer.

Everyday, the people participate in the great mystery of the Sacrifice, and specially on Sundays the churches are full. The two greatest festivals are Christmas and Easter, which are celebrated with great joy. In fact, for many traditional Christians, the perception of time is not according to the Western calendar year, but centres around the life of Jesus. It begins with the birth of Christ.

We will now discuss Christmas celebrations amongst these Christians as an example of their religious life.

17.5.3 Christmas

Twenty five days before Christmas are days of Lent or abstinence, to mark the coming of great Joy.

The days before Christmas are days of hectic activity. The house is cleaned and made ready for guests. On Christmas Eve all the churches are open, decorated with green leaves and plants. The houses on the roadside look bright with lights. The streets are full of children. Each Christian house is marked by a big star, because when Jesus was born, a bright star was seen in the sky. There is usually among these Christians of Kerala, no practice of decorating a tree, buying new clothes or sending greeting cards. What is given great importance is going to Church, eating an elaborately cooked meal and spending the day together with relations and friends. Those who are wealthy have their houses white-washed, while others clean, polish and wash their houses for a week.

The first part of the Christmas service begins on the twenty-four evening. The main service takes place in the early hours (3 a.m.) of the twenty-fifth of December. In the evening prayers, the priest tells the people about the birth of Christ to Virgin Mary. He tells them of the wise men who came from the East and gave Jesus gifts, and how shepherds came to see the child who was born in Bethlehem. The priest tells the people again how poor Jesus was born in a manger, wrapped in rags amongst animals. After these hymns and prayers of the evening, the people go home.

At 3 a.m. on Christmas morning all the Christians will be walking to their church. They bring with them oil, candles and incense as gifts for the church.

In the Church, the priest wears very beautiful golden and green robes, the candles are all lit, and the Church is filled with the fragrance of incense. In the Christmas songs and prayers that follow an important place is given to Mary. She is *deva mata* (mother of God) *rajmakal,* a princess and David *putri* (a daughter of King David).

After the celebration of Qurbana (Holy Sacrifice) the people kiss the Cross and leave their gifts of incense and oil. They are like the shepherds and the wise men who came to Jesus at his birth and left offerings for him.

Dawn breaks as people leave the Church. The narrow roads and bylanes are full of early morning worshippers each greeting the other. No one is dressed in his or her newest or best, all come to Church in simple ordinary clothes, usually white cotton. It is enough that they have woken up at 2.30 a.m. to express their devotion and belief in the birth of Jesus.

Having described one of their rituals, we shall now try to show in the next section, how Christianity in India is to be understood in relation to its regional cultural dimensions. Here we have described the relation of Christianity to Hinduism in Kerala.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Describe the family organisation of the Christians in Kerala. Use about seven lines for your answer.

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ii) Outline the importance of the priests in a Christian society. Give your answer in about three lines.

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iii) How do the Syrian Christians celebrate Christmas? Give your answer in about three lines.

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17.6 THE RELATION OF CHRISTIANITY TO HINDUISM IN KERALA

The Christians of Kerala are in a specific cultural relationship to their Hindu neighbours. We will take some examples here in order to understand how the Christian and the Hindu share many aspects of their social life together. Let us first look at calendar and time.

17.6.1 Calendar and Time

The Malayalam era follows the Christian era by 825 years. It is still used in everyday speech when referring to the past, for marking the dates of the establishment of churches, houses and gravestones. If you wish to know which year 2005 is in the Malayalam era, you only have to subtract 825 years.

The months have names different from the Western calendar months. Each month has a certain attribute or character. Thus *Karkadam* (July-August) is considered to be the worst, a time of rain and hunger. *Kanni* (September-October) is thought to be a bad and inauspicious month, and during this period house construction will not begin, nor will marriages take place. *Dhanu* is the best season, and it is the time of Christmas, which the Christians celebrate with great joy.

The calculation of time according to moments is still done by the *nazhika*. The day is divided into 60 *nazhikas,* and each *nazhika* is 60 vinazhikas (24 seconds). This precise way of calculating time is used by people in making traditional (Ayurvedic) medicines, which follow given rules, held by both Hindus and Christians to be life laws of nature.

Days have special significance in terms of auspicious and inauspicious. Wednesdays are considered so dangerous that there is a saying that even a leopard cub will not emerge from its mother's womb. Fridays and Tuesdays were considered auspicious by both Hindus and Christians for oil baths and washing the head in the most elaborate fashion. On these days men would avoid travel, as this would cause extra work on a day which belonged to the women. Let us look at another example, that of house building, now.

17.6.2 Building of Houses

The Hindu *asari* (craftsman) who builds for the Christian, follows the customs and rules that he would for a Hindu client. The Christian places wholehearted trust in the *thachan* or carpenter who follows the rules laid down by the *Thatchu Shastra.* These are rules of measurement, location and construction. The Christian house is in architectural style essentially like any Hindu house of similar status, A traditional house-builder said, "In this matter the Christians have full faith in the Hindu *Shastras*. They know that if we do not do as the books say then some misfortune will befall the house or the occupants."

17.6.3 Elements of Caste in Christianity

The Syrian Christians of Kerala believe that their ancestors were Brahmans who were converted to Christianity by St. Thomas, a follower and friend of Jesus who came to Kerala in 52 A. D.

The Christians believe that when they converted from Hinduism to Christianity, they were forced to break away from their original caste group. However, their caste status is maintained by them because they are careful to behave in certain ways, which are in keeping with caste defined behaviour. They maintain the traditional boundaries and distances between high and low castes, even though this is against the moral laws of Christian life. It was the only way in which they could survive, and survive they did for almost two thousand years. Adaptation and compromise were the two laws by which this Christian community lived for many centuries. Even today, in spite of the many changes brought about by modernisation, they sustain their daily life, many of the traditional customs of the past. Let us look at some of these.

Like the Hindus, they have faith in horoscopes; like their Hindu neighbours they too tie the *tali* or marriage locket; they observe death pollution often to fifteen days, and the rituals of bathing to remove death pollution called *pula kuli*. Like the Hindus, they celebrate *onam* and *vishu* (harvest and new year festivals). They also celebrate *annaprasanam* (first feeding of a child with rice).

Check Your Progress 3

Select the correct answers of the following questions.

i) How many years separete the Malayalam era from Christian era?

   a)   825 years

   b)   625 years

   c)   925 years

   d)   725 years

ii) Whose rules and customs are followed by the craftsman while building the house for a Christian client in Kerala?

   a)   Hindu client strictly

   b)   Both Hindu and Muslim clients

   c)   Muslim client only

   d)   None of the above

17.7   LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have first given a general picture of Christian community in India and then described common features of Christian faith. For discussing Christian social organisation, we selected the example of Syrian Christian community and examined family, role of priest, church and Christmas among the Christians of St. Thomas. Thus, through a case study of Syrian Christians of Kerala, this unit has given you an understanding of Christian social organisation.

17.8   KEYWORDS

Descent	A principle, which symbolises the importance of birth in allocating group membership and individual identity.
Heirs	Descendants who will inherit a name, status and property.
Nuclear household	This would consist of father, mother and their unmarried sons and daughters.
Stridhanam	Women's wealth. A women's share in her father's property given to her at marriage.
Three generations	This would consist of a man, his son, and his son's son, along with their dependents, in a patrilineal society.
Yakoba	A term used to refer to a particular Christian sect amongst the Kerala Christians.

17.9   FURTHER READING

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17.10   SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i)   Christianity is believed to have come to Kerala in 52 A. D. through the teachings of St. Thomas, a disciple of Jesus.

ii)   The colonial powers interested in evangelising India were the Portuguese, to some extent the Dutch and the British.

iii)   Christianity teaches belief in the Trinity-the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost Spirit. Jesus came to earth to redeem men of their sins. All Christians believe that one day there will come the day of the Judgement, when good will be rewarded and evil punished. It teaches its people to abide by the moral code outlined by the Bible, their holy book.

Check Your Progress 2

i) The family organisation of the Christians in Kerala is patiilineal. The father is the head of the household. He wields immense power over the other members of the family. Sons have a relationship of filial devotion obedience and respect, towards their father. Daughters are sent away by marriage and are given *stridhanam*, but their bonds with the natal family remain strong.

ii) The priests are the leaders of society. They are given much importance and respect.

iii) The Syrian Christians celebrate Christmas by going to Church, by greeting each other and by eating festive food.

Check Your Progress 3

i) a

ii) b

UNIT 18 SIKH SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Structure

18.0 OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this unit you should be able to

● describe the spatial and demographic aspects of the Sikh community

● state some of the basic tenets of Sikhism

● explain the significance of Sikh scriptures for the Sikh community, religious life and activities

● describe Sikh institutions like Gurudwara and Sadh Sangat

● explain the economic orientation of the Sikhs.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

Following the description of social organisation of Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities, we now give you an account of Sikh Social Organisation. First, the unit tells you about the Sikh community and then gives the ideological basis of Sikhism. Since the sacred scriptures of the Sikhs play an important part in their social life, we also discuss them in detail. Taking up of arms for

self-defence by the Sikhs is discussed in section 18.4. Next, the unit describes some of the Sikh institutions, which are significant for discussing the Sikh social organisation. Lastly, the unit looks at Sikh worldview and economic orientation. Thus this unit introduces you to those institutions of Sikh social life which the Sikhs do not share with their Hindu and Muslim brethren.

18.2 WHO ARE THE SIKHS?

The Sikhs are those who follow the teachings of ten leaders, whom they call **Guru**. All these Gurus lived between 1469 A.D. and 1708 A.D. in Punjab. This State is the Northern part of India.

Over the centuries, guided by the Gurus, the Sikh religion expanded and increased its strength in India. However, in 1947 Punjab was divided between India and Pakistan. Many Sikhs who had lived in what became Pakistan were made homeless. They had to migrate to different countries. Sikhs have settled in many parts of the world including the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States of America, Germany and Kenya. There are not more than 12 million Sikhs in the world. Most of these are settled in Punjab. They comprised a little less than 2 per cent of India's 800 million population in 1981. In 1991 their strength was 1.99 percent of the total population. The Sikhs are spread all over India. They are also in many professions including business, academics, civil service, medicine and defence of India.

As per the 1981 census (Government of India 1984) we find that the Sikh population by head of household was 1.96 per cent of the total population of India. However, there were differences in state-wise percentages. Thus in Haryana they constituted 6.21 percent, while in Punjab they constituted 60.75 percent of the population of the two states respectively. These were the two states where Sikh percentage was higher than the national average. However, there were states where this average was much lower. These states included Andhra Pradesh (0.03), Bihar (0.11), Gujarat (0.07), Rajasthan(1.44) and so on. In terms of percentage increase over 1971-81 this had been most in Sikkim (242.5) which had 0.10 percentage of Sikhs. In Orissa (39.85) and in M. P. (44.5) the percentage increase in Sikh population over 1971-81 had been 26.15. In 1991, Punjab (63 percent) and Haryana (5.81 percent) were the only two states, which had Sikh population higher than the national average. There were only a handful of people who follow Sikkism in States such as Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura etc.

Over 80 percentage of the Sikhs are farmers. Next to this profession, army career is the next most popular vocation. They form ten per cent of the armed forces. The Sikh farmers played the leading role in the Green Revolution in the Sixties raising the wheat yield per acre by three hundred per cent! Again three of the nine Indians who climbed Mount Everest were Sikhs. They are eminent in many areas of life in India.

18.3 IDEOLOGICAL BASIS OF SIKHISM

The Sikh religion clearly represents a case of fission and fusion in the religious ideology of Indian society. Around five hundred years ago, it had its origins in

the wider religious revolt, called *bhakti* movement which was primarily directed against the bigotry and caste-based narrowism in which the then Hindu religion in a specific region was steeped. In this variant of Hinduism, the caste system which was founded upon the notion of ritual purity and pollution and accorded top position to the Brahmin and lowest to the Shudra was particularly isolated for its inhuman bias. The same *Bhakti* movement also tended to define the relationship between man and the God in simple terms of 'devotion', 'supplication' and purity of conduct.

The movement thus tended to build a fraternity of the devoted ones, bound together in their common love of God. It came down with a heavy hand upon the iniquitous caste system, which imposed upon the lowly 'untouchables' a variety of indignities and restrictions. These included those concerning **commensality**, interdining, marriage and even of physical contact. It is worth mentioning here that the untouchables under the caste system were denied any social status or identity. The status they were accorded was that which accrues to a slave and one, which reduces a human being to the level of a 'commodity'.

Sikhism strongly denounced this caste-sanctioned inequity and declared a fraternity of God's beings. In this there were neither any barriers nor any caste-based system of inequality. Thus a spirited affirmation of the principle of religious egalitarianism and a contemptuous rejection of the purity-pollution barrier by Sikhism became a point of fission which tore away this newly-born religion from the then practised brand of Hinduism.

Simultaneously, Sikhism also declared an open revolt against an endless array of 'inhuman' practices carried on in the name of religion, most of which were simply repugnant to human sensibility and sensitivity (Sher 1982: 4-5). But, sanctioned as they were by the Brahmans themselves, who were the ritual leaders of the Hindu society, they were hardly challenged with any degree of effectiveness. Thus, the cycle of mental and moral domination by Brahmans continued, oppressing all the castes - but most of all, the lowly untouchables. Sikhism emerged and evolved as a revolt against all this religious bigotry and irrationality.

We shall now first look at the religious ideology which outlines the emergence and growth of Sikhism and describe how this religion was founded.

18.3.1 How Nanak Founded Sikhism

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak who was born in the year 1469 in a place called Talwandi-Nankana Sahib, now in Pakistan. His father, a high caste Hindu called Kalyan Chand (also fondly addressed as 'Kalu') of the Bedi Kshatriya clan, was a village accountant in the service of the local Muslim landlord. Nanak received an education in traditional Hindu lore and the rudiments of Islam. Early in life he began associating with holy men. For a time he worked as the accountant of the Afghan chieftain at Sultanpur. There, a Muslim family servant, Mardana who was also a musician, joined him. Nanak began to compose hymns. Mardana put them to music and together they organised community hymn singing. From the offerings made, they organised a free canteen. Even now, no payment is required to be made for eating in such a place which is maintained from voluntary donations by 'devotees' and is fondly called *guru-ka-langar*, or the free kitchen of the spiritual master.

Here Muslims, as well as Hindus of all castes eat together. It is not just the question of different castes having the facility of eating together; rather they had to eat together in order to show conformity to Sikhism, since denial of caste-barriers was the basic characteristic of Sikhism.

At Sultanpur, Nanak had his first vision of God, in which he was ordered to preach to mankind. One day he disappeared into the water while bathing in a stream. Reappearing from it on the third day, he proclaimed: "There is no Hindu, there is no *Mussalman*".

Many miracles and marvels are associated with the life of Guru Nanak. It is important to remember that many incidents of his life as passed down historically sharply highlight some fundamental features of Sikhism. In other words, principles of religious morality in Sikhism are not taught or preached as abstractions. Rather, they are illustrated and affirmed in the way the Sikh gurus lived their lives. This character of the Sikh norms and morals adds a touch of immediate familiarity to the religion and its fundamental precepts. It removes from them the mystique, which often shrouds principles of religious morality.

For example, Guru Nanak, in one of his spiritual sojourns to Haridwar, demonstrated the futility of propitiating the far-off and unknown gods. Nanak saw some high caste pilgrims throw water in the direction of the sun by way of propitiating their ancestors. On seeing this he began to throw water in the opposite direction. When asked to account for this 'odd' behaviour of his, he explained that he was trying to water his fields. He said that these were only a few hundred miles away while the sun and the ancestors were in any case located much further.

In another incident, Nanak demonstrated the sanctity of honestly earned bread, another central canon of Sikh faith. While stopping over in a town during one of his spiritual wanderings, he deliberately chose to dine at the house of a poor carpenter, rejecting an invitation from a rich money-lender. There he demonstrated that he was correct. He squeezed the bread of the money-lender. Drops of blood came out of it. He then squeezed the bread of the carpenter. Drops of milk came out of it. He said that the money-lender earned his livelihood by exploiting the poor while the carpenter earned his livelihood through honest means. Hence he preferred to dine with the carpenter.

The purpose here is not to lend unqualified credulity to this 'folk' version of the incident. Instead the idea is to emphasise the popular perception held of both the Gurus and Sikhism. These incidents also illustrate popular beliefs in the pragmatic and livable character of Sikh faith.

Another central canon of Sikh faith has a direct relevance on the connection between religious precept and the practical day-to-day morality. This is a positive injunction by the Gurus for a virtuous engagement in the duties of a householder rather than withdrawal from the world as idealised in Hinduism or in Buddhism. The withdrawal from the affairs of this illusion-ridden world is idealised in Hinduism. It prescribes the eventual superiority of *sanyasa*, total withdrawal from the world, as something that everyone should try to approximate in the last stage of life. In Buddhism it is idealized via the formal injunction of Buddha that eventually, one should totally cut oneself off from both the urge to act and the fruits of one's actions (*karma*).

This message is brought home by the founder of Sikhism in the way he lived his life. He interspersed his spiritual sojourns or wanderings with the life of a peasant-householder Consequently, asceticism, penance, celibacy and so on have hardly any place in Sikhism (Singh 1987: 316).

18.3.2 Nanak's Concept of God

Theologically, Nanak's concept of God is proximate to the concept of *shudha-advaita* (pure or unqualified monism) which is an important school of Hindu *vedantic* philosophy. Accordingly, Nanak holds that the only entity, which exists in the world, is that of God and what everything else, in one way or the other, partakes of that entity. So much so that even *maya* or 'illusion', which mystifies this supreme reality, is created by God.

God, according to Nanak, is a 'formless', timeless, all powerful master-creator who is not influenced by feelings of jealousy and discrimination. As such he fears none and favours none. Nanak also addresses God by some 'personal' names such as Rab, Rahim, Govinda, Murari and Hari (Singh 1987: 317). As it can be easily seen, these invocations of God are derived both from Muslim as well as Hindu pantheons. But, perhaps the most important reason for choosing these invocations lies in the creed that Nanak was evolving. He wanted to emphasise the centrality of one-and-the-same-God apart from his diverse manifestations, as visualised by different religions. As such, he chose them from amongst the most popular usages then current among both Hindus and Muslims.

Nanak chose **Wahi-guru** as the specific way of addressing God by the members of Sikh faith. The term literally means 'hail O Guru'. Thus, an invocative or exclamatory expression has, by way of usage, turned into a proper noun.

18.3.3 Sacred Scripture

Every religion or religious system centres around a sacred text or set of texts having a governing or a regulating effect upon its followers and their life. Varying from religion to religion, the sacred text or texts contain, among other things, a set of instructions to be obeyed by the followers. These instructions regulate a certain range of their temporal activities.

For example, certain religions like Islam give detailed instructions to be followed. These cover virtually all the major situations that one may encounter in one's life. These may range from the minute method of worship and prayer to the death rites. They also provide rules for distributing the property of deceased parents between the heirs. On the other hand, there are religions like Hinduism which do not go into all those details about the way temporal life should be led. Hinduism stresses all the same many do's and dont's which should be strictly pursued. These include rules regarding purity and pollution or rules regarding choice of the marriage mate. Sikh scripture represents almost an extreme case of emphasising only the central canons or ethical morals which should be followed by the Sikhs in their day-to-day life.

The sacred scripture of Sikhs-The *Adi-Granth* or as reverentially called, the *Granthsahib*, was compiled by the 5th Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan Dev. It is in the script known as **Gurumukhi**, currently recognised as Punjabi (Singh T982: 693). However, the hymns included in the Granth are in several languages, such as Persian, old Punjabi, medieval Prakrit, Hindi, Marathi, Multani and

several local dialects, with an abundant treasure of Sanskrit and Arabic vocabulary. The Granth is the life-blood of Sikhs and is worshipped by them as respectfully as they would respect and worship their living guru. That is why, the *Granth* is normally addressed by Sikhs as Guru *Granth Sahib*, as if it is a living guide, master or a guru.

The *Granth* is handled by the devotees more like a person than a book. It is placed on a comfortable seat, flanked by colourful silken cloth sheets, which are regularly changed. It is impossible to find these clothings unclean or unkempt. The *Granth* is opened with a fine and graceful mannerism to the chanting of specific hymns in the small hours of the day. It is put to rest once again with a punctilious religious routine. After the *Granth* is closed for the night it is draped in fine colourful sheets and placed in a secluded 'room' specifically made for the purpose. All such rituals are maintained at all religious functions or at such functions as marriage or death where the presence of the *Granth* is considered necessary. The *Granth* is placed in all places of Sikh worship-called Gurudwara (the guru's bode). Figure 18.1 shows that the *Granth* is kept with great reverence in a **Gurudwara.**
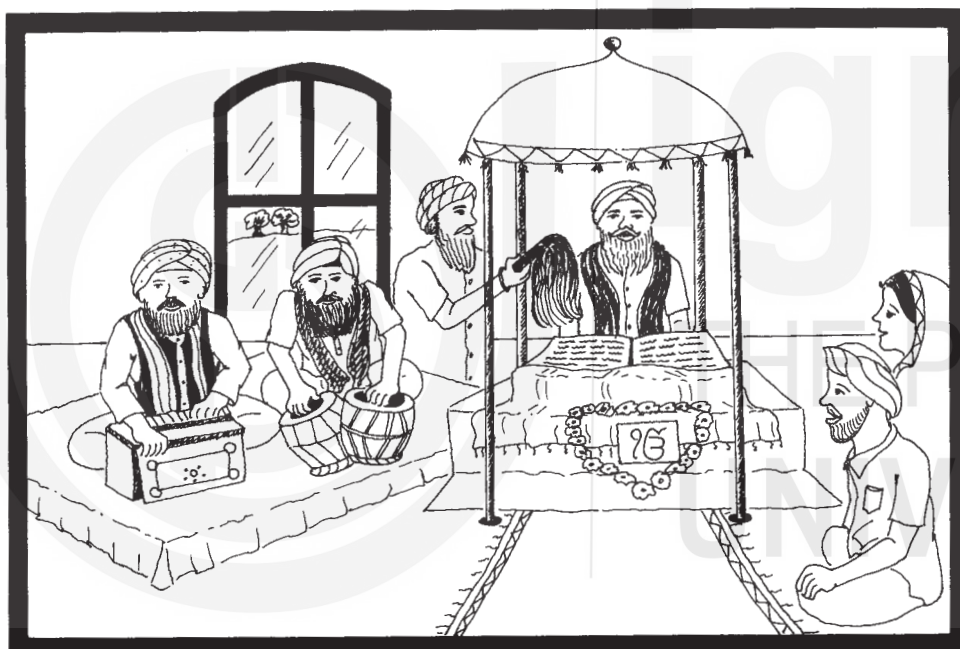

Fig. 18.1: The Gurudwara

Some Sikh devotees also place it in their homes and look to its upkeep with all the prescribed rituals and religious solemnity. This characteristic sanctity accorded by the Sikhs to their religious scripture, the *Granth*, is incomparable with any other known religion. To understand this peculiarity one must look at the following aspects of the Sikh history, given in sub-sections 18.3.4 and 18.3.5.

Activity 1

For a Sikh, the *Granth Sahib* acts as a living guide or master. Give an example from your religion or any other religion you know of a sacred text, which may be compared to the *Granth Sahib*. Write one page on how this scripture guides the followers of the religion.

18.3.4 Uniqueness of Sikh Scripture

A unique feature of Sikh scripture, which is not shared by any other religious scripture, lies in that it includes religious hymns not merely of the Sikh gurus, but also of several Hindu as well as Muslim saints who were contemporaries of the Sikh gurus. Most of these Hindu saints whose hymns have been included were drawn from the lowly castes, such as cobbler, butcher, barber, etc. who normally occupy bottom rungs of the Hindu caste ladder. The daily readings and recitations from the *Granth* make no distinction whatsoever between hymns of the Sikh guru and those of other. This aspect of the Sikh scripture, even though normally viewed as a 'good' and humanistic feature, still remains a puzzle. This is because no religion makes it a part of its daily worship to recite instructions or hymns not belonging to their own founders.

This can be understood only when we appreciate the central emphasis underlying the Sikh theology, philosophy and ethics. Sikhism emerged, as emphasised above, as a critique and refinement of the then existing ideas of religion and religious morality. As such, it tended to emphasise the relevance of some of the universal human values such as brotherhood and equality. It also emphasises the irrelevance of status whether economic or caste, in one's quest for God. It explains why 'saints' and devotees from across the religious and caste boundaries found their honoured place in the *Adi Granth*. They upheld these values.

What is the spiritual status of 'gurus' vis-a-vis God? It is important to re-affirm that Sikhism is a strongly monistic religion. That is why the ten Sikh gurus, even though held in utmost reverence, are not equated with God. There is only one God or **Akalpurush** (or the 'timeless being') who alone 'deserves' to be worshipped. The injunction of the much-honoured tenth guru of Sikhs, Guru Gobindsingh to his followers is noteworthy: Anyone, who calls me "God", shall perish in the fire of hell. This, however, does not imply that in terms of their religious sentiment, the Sikhs always find it possible to keep to a clear distinction between the two. Despite this, it needs to be stated that the *Granth* emphasises the 'inevitable' and instrumental role of the 'guru' in realising God. Let us also mention how the sacred book *Granth* came to be equated with a guru.

18.3.5 The *Granthsahib* and the Guru

The line of Sikh gurus, starting from their founder-Guru Nanak, went as far as the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. He enjoined upon Sikhs to regard the sacred *Granth* as their 'Guru' and turn to it for all advice and instruction for seeking direction of life. We find that today it is worshipped and read with regard and reverence.

Another historical circumstance, which nurtured this attitude of Sikhs for their sacred scripture, is the long period of persecution and suffering undergone by them at the hands of the Muslim rulers, starting from the time of their fifth guru, Guru Arjan Dev (1581-1606), to much after the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1709), in fact, till the execution of Banda Singh Bahadur (in 1716) who took over the military leadership of the Sikh community after assassination of the tenth guru. Of the ten Sikh gurus, fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev ('guru' between 1581-1606) and the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur ('guru' between 1664-1675) were executed by the Muslim rulers, whereas the

last and the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh ('guru' between 1675-1708), was assassinated by British hired assassins. Banda Bahadur took over the military command of the Sikh community after the tenth guru and for eight years defied the Mughals and devastated large tracts of eastern central Punjab. He was eventually captured along with seven hundred of his followers, and was executed in Delhi in the summer of 1716. During all these long years of struggle when they were hunted for their creed and at times even pushed into the remote forests, the *Granth* continued to be the centre of their day-to-day existence and chief source of inspiration.

Check Your Progress 1

i)   Write three lines on Guru Nanak's concept of God.

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ii) Write four lines on the uniqueness of the Sikh scripture.

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18.4   RESTRUCTURING OF RELIGIOUS ETHOS AMONG THE SIKHS: THE INSTITUTION OF *KHALSA* AND FIVE EMBLEMS

The pacifist religion of Guru Nanak took to arms by the time of Guru Hargobind. Less than hundred years after Guru Nanak's passing away in 1539, Sikhism accepted use of arms for self-defence. The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev, the father of Guru Hargobind, had earlier been executed by the Muslim rulers. Fifty years later, in l699, taking to arms was formally incorporated into the main corpus of Sikhisim by Guru Gobind Singh via the institution of *Khalsa*. This had taken place as a result of severe repression and persecution let loose by the Muslim rulers against the Sikhs. Let us discuss the institution of *Khalsa*, which restructured the religious ethos among the Sikhs.

Khalsa literally means "the pure" (from the Persian *Khales*, also meaning 'pure'). On April 13,1699, Guru Gobind Singh baptised the first batch of five Sikhs and gave them the common surname, Singh (lion). Kaur 'lioness' is the corresponding surname given to all Sikh women (Uberoi. 1969: 123-38).

The Sikhs were baptised by Guru Gobind Singh in the famous five emblems. All start with a 'k'. All believers are to maintain these in order to keep the status of a 'sikh'.

First of the Ks is *Kesa* (hair). A *Khalsa* must keep the hair unshorn. A *Khalsa* who cuts off his hair is a renegade (*patit*). The holiness of unshorn hair is

older than Guru Gobind Singh, the founder of Khalsa. Many of the earlier Gurus followed the tradition of letting the hair and beards grow. The other four are *Kangha* (comb); *Kacch* (drawers) worn by the soliders; *Kirpan* (sabre); and *Kara* (bracelet) of steel, commonly worn on the right wrist.

The baptism of Sikhs into the material qualities of valour and fearlessness meant a departure from the earlier pacifist tradition. Yet it inherited an essential continuity with the past tradition in more than one way. The first of the baptised Sikhs were drawn from five different caste groups. This underscored the essential equality between men of all castes and creeds as emphasised by the founding Guru Nanak. Yet another continuity with the past lay in the concept of *Sant Sipahi* (saint-solider). This implied that a Sikh would not wield a sword for the sake of doing so. Instead, it was to be done for a right cause and for the defence of one's just rights. In addition, a Sikh was supposed to lead a noble, virtuous and pure life.

As already mentioned above, Sikhs made a strong impact upon the Mughal rulers via Banda Bahadur but did not have a strong political organisation to displace them by their own rule. The subsequent course of the evolution of *Khalsa* political power was simple. For some years the *Khalsa* vanished into the hills. However, when Mughal power waned due to the invasion in 1738-1739 of the Persian Nader Shah, they re-emerged into the plains.

The Sikhs formed into *misls* (from Persian *mesals*, meaning both "example" and "equal"). They began to demand protection money from towns and villages. The series of invasions by Ahmad Shah Durrani, 1747-1769, completely destroyed Mughal administration. In the battle of Panipat in 1761 the Afghans crushed the rising Maratha power in the north. In the gap thus created, the Sikhs moved in as rulers of the Punjab (Singh 1987: 744).

This situation of political instability in Punjab eventually culminated in Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) establishing the first and the last kingdom of Sikhs in Punjab, stretching right upto the Khyber pass in the north. Ranjit Singh was an enlightened and secular king and ruled till 1839 (Singh 1963).

He respected all religions and gave liberal benefices to sacred places of all religions (Math 1981 and Honigberger 1981). This was followed by ten years of internecine warfare and palace stratagems plus clever political machinations by the British which ended finally in the annexation of Punjab by them in 1849. The annexation was followed by a period of an inexplicable intimacy between the Sikhs and the British. The Sikhs strongly sided with the British administration in quelling the mutiny of 1857 and also enlisted in large numbers in the British army at the time of First World War.

Some writers, for example, Khushwant Singh (1987: 745), maintain that this expression of loyalty on the part of Sikhs reflected a longing for peace and order after long years of bloodshed and disorder in Punjab.

The unprovoked massacre of four hundred innocent people by the British at the Jalianwala Bagh, Amritsar, on April 13, 1919, set the Sikh against the British. Secondly, despite the popular Sikh protest the British sided with the *mahants*, the hereditary priests controlling the *gurudwaras*. Thus Sikhs turned completely against them. These factors as well as the rising temper of the independence movement pushed the Sikhs into the national movement, now

led by Mahatma Gandhi. Independence in 1947 was accompanied by partition of the country and the Sikh community suffered enormously through pillage and manslaughter. At present, there are problems of compatibility between the perceived interests and political aspirations of the Sikhs on the one hand and the national policy on the other (Gandhi 1981: 52-66). From this description of political history of the Sikhs, we now turn to their social institutions.

18.5   SIKH INSTITUTIONS

Sikh institutions seem to emanate from the centrality of ethos, philosophy and theology of Sikhism. Quite a few of the institutions like marriage, kinship, property are, on the other hand, common between the Hindus and Sikhs. Almost all the important festivals of Hindus are celebrated by Sikhs as well.

Social ties between the Hindus and Sikhs including the marital ties continue to thrive. Many sub-caste groupings among the Punjabis underlying the main caste categories like Aroras, Khatris continue to be common between them. Even though Sikhism came up primarily as a revolt against the Hindu legacy of caste, it continues to use caste titles as a principle of social location and departure. These are, however, shorn of the purity-pollution barrier. We discuss here those institutions, which are peculiar to the Sikh community. Around these institutions can be observed much of the collective behaviour of the community.

18.5.1 The *Gurudwara*

Literally meaning the guru's abode this is the Sikh name or nomenclature for a place of worship. This is the seat of the holy *Granth* and of regular recitations from it, interspersed by singing of religious hymns. There are some *gurudwaras* associated with important happenings in the lives of the gurus. *Gurudwara* Sisganj in the Chandni Chowk of Delhi is associated with the martyrdom of the ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur. *Gurudwara Bangla Sahib* is associated with the 8th Guru Harkishan. There are over 200 historical *gurudwaras* associated with the Gurus. These are controlled by the *Shiromani Gurudwara Prabhandak* Committee (S.G.P.C.) set up by the Sikh *Gurudwara* Act of 1925-offerings are made at *gurudwara* and are used for their upkeep as well as the Khalsa schools and colleges. Golden Temple of Harmandar *Sahib gurudwara* at Amritsar is the most sacred *gurudwara* of Sikhs. It has the same sanctity for Sikhs as Kashi for Hindus, Mecca for the Muslims, Vatican for the Catholics or Jerusalem for the Jews.

It was built by the fifth guru of the Sikhs, Guru Arjan Dev (1563-1606 AD). The foundation of the temple was laid down by Sayyid Main Mir—a Muslim saint of Lahore. This fact in itself highlights religious catholicity of Sikhism. There are certain other features of this temple, which dramatise, symbolically, certain essential features of Sikhism and its philosophy.

First of all, the temple was made at the ground level lower than the rest of the city—a fact which, according to some underscores the humility of the founding gurus. Second, the temple has four main gates, which open in four different directions, which is taken to mean that the temple was thrown open equally to all the four castes. Some others, however, interpret this feature thus: the Golden

Temple has four doors in the four natural directions in order to instruct people of other religions who believe the abode of God to be in a certain direction or at a certain place. However, God is not confined to a certain direction. So, according to them, *Harmandar* means *'mandar' or temple for 'har'. This means it is for every one. In this phrase, the word 'mandar'* is a Sanskritik expression, whereas *'har'* is a Persian expression.

There is yet another feature of Golden Temple, which takes us right to the centre of the Sikh religious ethos. The complex of the Golden Temple is made up of two parts. First is the main part, called *harmandar*. It is set in the centre of a tank. The tank itself is located by a wide corridor for the pilgrims to go around as an act of religious supplication. *Gurbani* or the religious hymns from the *Granth* are sung or recited in this part of the temple for most part of day and night.

The second part of the sacred complex, which lies outside and ahead of the main gate of the *Harmandar*, is called *Akaltakht* or God's court. Since the very inception of the *Harmandar* the *Akaltakht* has been the seat of temporal authority of the Sikh gurus. They sat there, as if on the 'throne' vis-a-vis their followers and considered issues of temporal import including political issues. These two seats of 'spiritual' and 'temporal' authority were and are regarded as integral parts of the basic ethos of the Sikh community. Thus, the idea of separating 'religion' from 'polities' does not appeal to the Sikhs.

18.5.2 *Sadh Sangat*

No act of Sikh worship is complete without the holy gathering or *Sadh Sangat* which is virtually equated with God's presence. Such a gathering or *'sangat'* is supreme. It can take any decision, whether of religious or temporal import, which is binding upon the rest of the community. It can even censure reprimand, or punish a person for any impropriety committed by him. Maharaja Ranjit Singh is on record having received punishment in the form of cuts of cane upon his skin from a religious gathering at Golden Temple, Amritsar, for an act of moral impropriety committed by him. Gurus, particularly Guru Gobind Singh, have in several hymns recognised the superiority of *Sadh Sangat* over their own commands.

18.5.3 Guru ka Langar

As it has been highlighted in the opening section of this unit, the secular and equalitarian character of Sikhism was manifested through the institution of *langar* community kitchen. Here everyone, without any discrimination of caste and creed, sat together and ate in company. This is also sometimes called the principle of *pangat* or the queue. This again indicates the equal status of everyone in the presence of the Guru.

Even though initiated by the founding Guru Nanak, the institution of *langar* was formalised by the Guru Angad at a place called Goindwal. This was approximately 20 miles away from the city of Amritsar. Every *gurudwara*, big oil small, has a *langar* attached to it and is maintained from offerings made at that gurudwara.

As indicated above, there has been an inflow of a certain caste bias from Hinduism into the social life of Sikhs. This is reflected especially in the area

of marital selection. But the said caste bias stayed far short of its traditional rigour and severity with which it is encountered in the Hindu social life. This has been made possible by repeatedly de-emphasising the caste inequality through the institutions of *sangat* and *langar* in the day-to-day life of the Sikhs.

These institutions, therefore, prove functional for maintaining equality, so essential for the very survival of Sikh religious ethos.

Activity 2

Write a note on your religious institutions, which are similar to *Gurudwara, Sadh Sangat* and *Guru ka Langar.* Compare your note, if possible, with the notes prepared by other students at your Study Centre.

18.6 SIKH WORLDVIEW AND ECONOMIC ORIENTATION

The basic orientation to engage in economic activity flows, at least partly, from one's religious norms and values. This is what has been a major idea in Max Weber's (1976) analysis of the origin and development of the spirit of capitalism in contemporary Europe. The argument presupposes that the individuals in question are religious enough to let religious values hold away over them.

Thus, it has often been argued that a majority of the Sikh families, even after they were completely uprooted at the time of the partition of the country in 1947, built themselves to both 'fame' and 'prosperity'. Sikhs have been proverbially projected as compulsive do-gooders even in the teeth of most adverse circumstances. Their long-standing history of sufferings and persecution imparted the kind of fortitude that lies tacit under a highly resilient attitude. Second, a highly 'secular' and equalitarian attitude, which is reinforced by their institutions of *langar* and *sangat*. A part of their daily religious routine also seems to import the kind of pragmatism and realism which is required in the pursuit of business.

Still another mental attribute, which is conducive towards the same and is that of demystifying reality. This is apparently encouraged by the simple way some of the basic canons of their religion have been stated and repeated. The high 'achievement' orientation of their personality is evidenced by the fact that Sikhs today are found in virtually all the western countries, specifically in large numbers in Canada, the United States of America and United Kingdom where economic opportunities are relatively greater.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Write five lines on *Sadh Sangat* in Sikhism.

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ii)   Discuss the Sikh's economic orientation in five lines.

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18.7   LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have studied the social organisation of Sikhism. We then studied the sacred scripture and religious sentiment in Sikhism. We then provided information on Sikh historicity. We also indicated that which is unique in Sikh scriptures. *Khalsa* and political history were discussed including the expansion of Sikh power. Sikh institutions and their worldview were also considered. We have therefore, given an adequate overview of the Sikh community and institutions.

18.8   KEYWORDS

Akalpurush	Timeless Being
Commensality	Ritual seating and eating together of a particular group
Guru	Religious teacher
Gurudwara	Guru's abode-a place of worship
Gurumukhi	Punjabi script
Guru ka Langar	Community kitchen
Kacch	Under-drawers
Kangha	Comb
Kara	Bracelet of metal
Kesh	Hair
Kirpan	Sword or Sabre
Wahi-**Guru**	Hail O' Master

18.9 FURTHER READING

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18.10 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) Nanak's concept of God is that of pure monism. Nanak holds that only one entity exists, and that is God. Everything else partakes in the nature of God.

ii) Sikh scriptures are unique in that they include hymns of both Hindu and Muslim saints. Many of these Hindu saints were from low castes like butcher and cobbler. These are recited without distinction of hierarchy at prayers.

Check Your Progress 2

i) *Sadh Sangat* is the holy gathering, which is virtually equated with God's presence. Such a Sangat has decision-making power, which is binding on the community. For example, Maharaja Ranjit Singh received cuts by a cane at Golden Temple, Amritsar, for moral impropriety.

ii) Economic orientation flows from the religious orientation. They have been compulsive 'do gooders' in the face of adverse circumstances. The economic success, however, does not denigrate the religious side of life.

UNIT 19 ZOROASTRIAN SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Structure

19.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to

● outline the origin of Zoroastrianism in India

● state the population strength and spread of Parsis in India

● describe the role of Parsis in the socio-economic life of India

● list and describe the basic tenets of the Zoroastrian faith

● describe the basic Zoroastrian rites relating to initiation and Zoroastrian death

● describe the Zoroastrian customs relating to marriage, family, inheritance and succession

● outline the role of the Parsi Panchayat.

19.1 INTRODUCTION

In Block 4 you have so far read about the basic features of social organisation of the Hindu, Muslim, Christian and the Sikh communities. In this unit, we describe social organisation of another community, which has made its presence significant in India. We introduce you to some of the basic features of the

Zoroastrian social organisation. Zoroastrian popularly known in India as Parsis are following of Zoroaster. They are adherents of the religious system taught by him. Following this we have discussed location and population strength of Parsis in India. We discuss their role in the socio-economic life of Indian society. Then we describe the basic tenets of the Zoroastrian faith and rites relating to initiation and death, customs relating to marriage, inheritance and succession. Next are described the role of the Parsi Panchayat in the Zoroastrian community and the important festivals celebrated by Parsis.

19.2 PROFILE OF THE ZOROASTRIAN COMMUNITY IN INDIA

Before we trace their origin and location in India, let us briefly state the origin of Zoroastrianism.

19.2.1 Origin and Location in India

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions of the world. It takes its name from "Zarasthustra" (Zoroaster) who probably lived around the beginning of the first millennium B.C. His life period is dated diversely by historians as being anywhere between the fourth to ninth century B.C. Another name for Zoroastrianism is **"Mazdaism"** and is derived from the name of the religion's supreme God "Mazda" (meaning wise) or *Ahura Mazda* (meaning wise Lord). Fire is worshipped as a symbol of *'Ahura Mazda'* since it has the characteristics of purity and brightness.

The roots of Zoroastrianism can be located in an Iranian tribal and basically pastoral society. Research suggests that historically this religion originated in the eastern and south central regions of the Iranian world. It began between the great mountain ranges of the Hindukush and Seistan, an area that today is divided between Iran and Afganisthan. By 500 B.C. Zoroastrianism had become the leading faith in Persia and Medea (now modern Iran). The Iranian-Zoroaster influence faced a serious challenge with the conquest of Iran by the Islamic Arabians in the seventh century A.D. The exodus or mass migration of Zoroastrians into other regions of the world can be seen to be a direct result of the forced Islamisation of Iran. [Kulke 1978: (4)].

The Zoroastrian religion was introduced in India about eighth century A.D. It is said that the first batch of Zoroastrians or Parsis reached Diu about 766 A.D. However, they abandoned it and set out for another place of residence. They took refuge in Gujarat. During their voyage to Gujarat from Diu their ship was overtaken by a storm. The voyaging Parsis took a vow that if they reached the shore in Gujarat safely they would establish the most sacred fire temple (called Atash Behram) there. The vow was duly fulfilled and a fire temple was consecrated in Sanjan (in Gujarat) where the Parsis landed safely. They took to agriculture and horticulture in and around Sanjan. As their numbers increased they spread to other parts of Gujarat. When the Muslims conquered Sanjan in the fifteenth century, the sacred fire was moved frequently and finally established at Udvada. The fire temple in Udvada is looked upon as the most sacred temple of the Parsis. Zoroastrian immigrants to India are said to have come from Pars. This is why they are known as Parsee. (Parsi

also sometimes spelt as Parsee). The Parsi community has adopted Gujarati as their official language. Let us now look at their numbers.

19.2.2 Population Strength

The Zoroastrian population around the world is estimated to be roughly 1,30,000 of which 82,000 are believed to be in India. Of this 82,000, more than 78.5 percent are reported to be living in Bombay. The strength of the Parsi population in India has varied between 80,000 and 82,000 as is evident from the recorded population censuses between 1881-1981. Their strength decreased to 76,382 by the year 1991. The Parsi community in India is found mainly in Maharashtra and specially in Bombay, Gujarat and Deccan. In 1991 a majority of 79.2 percent of Zorastrians lived in Maharashtra, followed by Gujarat (16.92 percent).

19.2.3 Role in Socio-Economic Life

Migrating to India over 1300 years ago, the Parsis have been an important part of the economic, political, educational and social life of India. Prior to and during the Muslim rule they lent their support to Hindu princes whenever it was needed. They played an important role in the Mughal administration. Following the arrival of the British they were among the first people to adopt to the western style of life and to English education. The Parsis began in India as a small mercantile community. They excelled themselves in trade and commerce. Two of the leading areas of economic activity in the nineteenth century, shipbuilding and the textile industry, owe their rapid growth mainly to the investment and trading initiative of the Parsis. Thus, early growth of the modern shipping industry in India is associated with the name of a Parsi family the Wadias. They were commissioned by the British for the management of the biggest shipyard in Bombay continuously for 150 years from 1735-1885. Another Parsi, D.R. Bannaji owned a personal fleet of thirty trading vessels (i.e. ships). Between 1915 and 1925, nearly 20 percent to 30 percent of the cotton mills in Bombay were owned by Parsis (Gauba 1979: 115-127).

Parsis have also been contributing greatly to the steel, chemical, cement, and other heavy industries. This has been so both during the British India and post Independent India. We have all heard about the Tata family. They were pioneers of the steel industry in India. Today they also run a host of other industries such as jute, chemical, tea, textile, printing, insurance, and so on. The Tata family is not only associated with industry but also with education and social work.

Parsis eminent in the political, economic, educational and social work in India during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included B.M. Malabari, S.S. Bengali, N. Fardoonji, P.M. Mazban, Sir P. Mehta, Sir D. Wacha, Maneckji, D. Petit, J. Tata, C.J. Readyymony and so many others.

The Parsis began in India as a small mercantile community. Gradually, a number of their families became successful industrial entrepreneurs, merchants, educationalists, social reformers, lawyers and pioneers in many other fields.

Proof of their open attitude with regard to occupational selection lies in that many of the Parsis derive their family names from the occupations their ancestors pursued in India. Many of their descendents still do so. Interesting family titles

thus include: Unwala (wool dealer), Kapadia (cloth dealer), Jhaveri (jeweller), Motiwala (pearl dealer), Biscuitwala (biscuit dealer), Batliwala (bottle dealer), Ginwala (wine dealer), Sodawaterwala (Soda dealer), Mondalwala (wine dealer), etc.

Activity 1

Take the map of India and mark the following items.

a)   The states where the Parsis are predominantly concentrated

b)   The location of their first fire temple

c)   The location of the plant of Tata Iron and Steel Company

Cross check your answer, if possible, with those given by other students at your Study Centre.

In general, Parsis are represented in different jobs. There is evidence to indicate that they have held many types of posts (Gauba 1979: 115). Supportive data for this is available as early as the middle of the nineteenth century.

Currently more and more Parsis are establishing themselves in the scientific and other professions. Homi J. Bhabha was the pioneer of nuclear research in India and General S.H.F.J. Manekshaw is the first Field Marshall of the Indian Army. Modern education is widely shared by all the various communities in India and the entrepreneurial skills of communities like Sindhis, Punjabis and Marwaris have come to the fore in modern India. However, Parsis continue to do well in most fields of endeavour (Kulke 1978: 51-55). Socio-economic life of this community is influenced by the tenets of Zoroastrianism. We shall now describe the main features of this religion.

19.3   TENETS OF ZOROASTRIANISM

Zoroaster, the founder of Zoroastrianism preached monotheism (belief in one supreme God and a deep moral life. He was against idol worship and over emphasis of ritual sacrifice. The basic tenets of Zoroastrianism are outlined mainly in two texts. The first of these is the *Avesta* or the *Zend Avesta*—it is a collection of texts gathered in writing roughly between the fourth and sixth century A.D. The second is the *Gatha* which comprises texts which are attributed to Zarathustra. These belonged initially to the oral tradition. The *Gathas* are five in number. The first four are ethical and philosophical. They describe and emphasise the omnipotence of or all pervading nature of *"Ahura Mazda"*. They also deal with the problem of evil due to the activities of the evil spirit. The fifth *Gatha*, is a hymn on the occasion of Zoroaster's daughter's marriage. The *Gathas* are written in *Avesta* which closely resembles Vedic Sanskrit. *Ahura Mazda* is considered to be the supreme God. He is the creator of heaven and earth, day and night, light and darkness. Life is seen as a struggle between the forces of good and evil.

The evil spirit is *"Angra Mainyu"*. One has to choose between good and evil. The ethical dualism (dualism indicated in the existence of good spirits and evil

spirits) that Zoroaster preached, emphasised that there are differences between human actions motivated by goodness and those that are motivated by evil.

Purity in thoughts, words and deeds implies the will to do good. Anything that is not guided by this motive is apt to turn into evil. Therefore the primary task of man is to live a righteous life. He must fight against the evil spirits along with his creator *Ahura Mazda*. They will be helped by a host of good spirits. One who lives a righteous life attains paradise. This is described as a state of immortal holiness in thought, word and deed. If one leads an impious life that person is condemned to an eternal hell of evil thoughts, deeds, and physical torment. The Parsis believe that the soul lives on after death. It meets its fate on the day of judgement, under the supervision of *Ahura Mazda*.

An important feature of Zoroastrianism is that it does not preach celibacy, asceticism, renunciation or self denial in life. It demands strict purity in thought, word and deed. This consists of abstinence from acts like adultery, rape, and the like (Cornoy 1961: 865).

Purity is essentially associated with fire. For the Parsis fire is worshipped as a symbol of purity, energy, force, light and radiance. And fire is a symbol of *Ahura Mazda*. Zoroastrian temples take the form of fire temples and are of three grades—*Atash Behrams*, *Agiaris* and *Dadgahs*, in that order of sacredness. Once the sacred fire is installed in a fire temple it must always be kept alive (always kept burning). The interior of a Fire temple is shown in the figure 19.1.
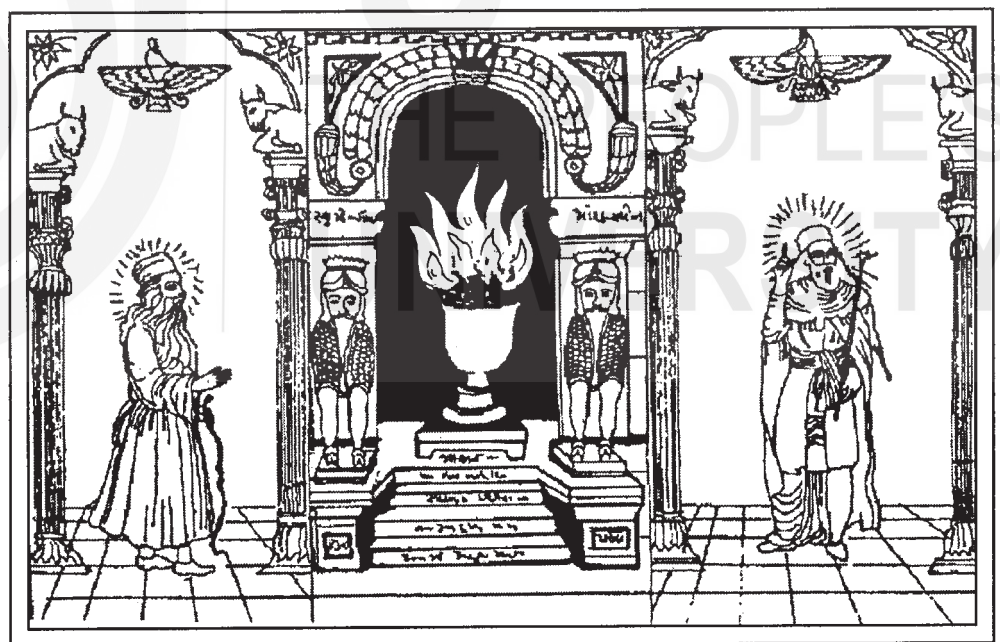

Fig. 19.1: The Fire temple

Many fire temples are places of pilgrimage for the Parsis. The oldest fire is known as the ''Iranshah'' which is supposed to have been burning for more than 1300 years. This is in Udvada. All Parsis have sacred flames burning in their houses also. These flames are kept burning constantly. In the fire temple the priest reads portions of the sacred scripture—the *Avesta*, five times a day. In each household, a Parsi is also expected to say prayers five times each day.

The translation of the sacred texts, including the Avesta was completed in 1820, from Pahalvi (ancient language) to Gujarati. The average Parsi is thus able to have access to the sacred texts for daily use in prayers. Zoroastrianism does not advocate fasting for religious merit.

The *Gathas* of Zoroaster is another source of information about Zoroastrian belief. They present the picture of a society in which agriculture and herds of domestic animals had come to be looked upon with affection. In the sacred prayer "Behram Yesht" the reverence that is shown to the cow is evident. This aspect of Zoroastrian faith (respect to the cow) reflects the interaction with Hinduism as Hindus also look upon the cow as a sacred animal. We will now discuss some of the rites, rituals and customs observed by the Parsis relating to birth, initiation, death, marriage and family. These reflect the belief systems discussed above. They also indicate the adaptations the Parsis have made as a result of the interaction with local dominant population and their rulers at different points in time.

Zoroastrian beliefs are closely linked with the way day-to-day life is carried on by the members of Parsi community. In the next section, we will see how basic rites and religious ceremonies form an important part of Parsi social life.

Check Your Progress 1

i)   Who was the founder of Zoroastrianism?

       ....

ii)   What is the other name for Zorastrianism?

       ....

iii)   What is worshipped among the Parsis as a symbol of the supreme God?

       ....

iv)   Where are the Parsis found in India?

       ....

v)   What are the two important sources of information about Zoroastrianism?

       ....

19.4   ASPECTS OF SOCIAL ORGANISATION

In this section we describe important life cycle rituals relating to birth and death. The social institutions of marriage and family are also discussed here. The Parsi system of inheritance and succession, the Panchayat and Festivals also figure in our discussion of the social organisation.

19.4.1 Rites of Initiation and Death

Even though Zoroastianism does not emphasise ritualism especially rituals sacrifices, there are some basic rites and religious ceremonies which form an integral part of the organisation of Parsi social life.

i) Rites of Initiation

Initiation rites mark the birth of a child into the Parsi family. On this occasion the child's lips are steeped in *haoma* (the sacred liquor). Full membership into the community is granted only when the child (both to a boy and a girl) attains the age between seven and fifteen. He or she then receives the girdle or cord called the *Kushti* or *Kusti*. This ceremony usually takes place before a child attains puberty. This initiation rite is called **Navjot** or *Naojote* (meaning new birth) and marks the admission of a Parsi boy or a girl into Zoroastrian faith. In addition, there is a host of other purificatory rites, which are often performed by many Parsis. They include the *padyab* (meaning ablution) *nahn* (meaning bath) or washing of one's body. The *bareshnum* is a complicated ritual performed at special places with the participation of a dog. The left ear of the dog is touched by the person concerned. The gaze of this animal is believed to put the evil spirit to flight. The purification rites for the initiation of priests and corpse-bearers, involve, apart from other things *gomez* (consecrated urine), originally cow's urine following Indo-Iranian practices and ideas (Cornoy 1961: 579-581).

ii) Death Rites

The Parsi custom of disposing the dead is indeed unique. Death rites are probably the most elaborate of the Parsi rites. These reflect, among other things, their attitude to life and life after death. Parsis do not burn or bury their dead lest this should pollute fire or earth and make them liable to a strict punishment. They carry the dead body, amidst elaborate rituals, to a place built high up for this purpose. This is called a **dokhma** or 'Tower of Silence'. The body is left there to be eaten up by vultures.

The removal of the dead body (for its final disposal) must only be done during the daytime. As for the Tower of Silence, its interior consists of three concentric circles, one each for men, women and children. The corpses are exposed without any dress. The vultures do not take long (an hour or two at the most) to remove the flesh off the bones. The bones are dried by the sun, and later swept into a central well. Formerly, the bones were kept in an ossuary, (the place where bones of the dead are deposited) or what they called *astodan,* to preserve them from rain and animals. The morning of the fourth day is marked as the most solemn observance in the death ritual. It is believed that the departed soul reaches the next world and appears before the deities who are to pass judgement over it. The souls, they believe would be judged in the presence of *Ahura Mazda* and his helping spirits.

19.4.2 Marriage and Family

Marriage is solemnised and sanctified by a religious ceremony but it is a contract. The prayers are recited from the Avesta. As a result of Hindu influence, prayers are recited in Sanskrit too (CSWI 1974: 48). Marriage is, by and large monogamous. Consent of both the boy and girl is essential for finalising marriage. Zoroastrianism prescribes strict monogamy. Religious tradition does not approve of child marriage. Dissolution of marriage (divorce or separation) is allowed under certain conditions. In fact in 1936, The Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act outlined clearly conditions under which divorce can be allowed. It also stated that both parties in marriage (husband and wife) could initiate

divorce proceedings. This law has been based on the liberal principles of Zoroastrianism, which grants rights to both men and women.

A Zoroastrian woman is considered as an equal partner in marriage and family. Both men and women are entitled to religious and secular education. Parents of the bride and the groom contribute to the expenses involved in setting up of their new household. A woman enjoys inheritance rights both in her capacity as a daughter and as a wife. Remarriage is allowed and a widow does not have to forego inheritance rights over her husband's property if she remarries (CSWI 1974: 4).

Thus Zoroastrianism has sanctioned liberal attitudes and practices regarding marriage and family. However, some of the less liberal attitudes and customs of the local population with which the Parsis came into contact have also made their impact on the institutions of marriage. Research has pointed out that by the seventeenth century A.D. Parsis settled in Gujarat had begun to pattern their social relationships after the Hindu society. Thus child marriage became common, some males practised bigamy or polygyny and widow remarriage was not easy. The evil practice of dowry also became prevalent. Horoscopes (birth charts) came to be prepared for Parsi children by Hindu priests (Bulsara 1968: 17-18).

These customs, especially dowry, bigamy, polygyny, child marriages, ban on widow remarriage, and divorce, came to be challenged by the enlightened sections of the Hindu and Parsi community including the members of Parsi Panchayat. Many members of Parsi community pointed out that these customs were not sanctioned by Zoroaster and therefore had to be stopped. Their concerted efforts indeed led to the removal of many of these practices. For instance, as a result of the vigorous campaigning by the social reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the 1929 Sarda Act was passed. This act penalised marriages of girls below 14 years of age and boys below 18 years. However, by this time (1929) there were hardly any child marriages among the Parsis. In fact, since then, the age of marriage has been rising, and since the 1960's the average age at marriage for Parsi men have been between 25-28 years. For Parsi women this is between 23-25 years (Bulsara 1968 : 26).

One important aspect regarding marriage and family, in which women suffer a disability even today, has been the aspect of inter-religious marriage. The child of a Parsi father and non-Parsi mother, whether in wedlock or out of it, can be initiated into the Zoroastrian faith by the Navjote or Naojote ceremony. However, neither by religion nor by law can a child of a Parsi mother and a non-Parsi father be admitted into Zoroastrianism. The steady decline in the size of the Parsi population can be traced, (to some extent) to the increasing number of marriages between Parsi women and non-Parsi men. Children born of such marriages are not recognised as Zoroastrians. Hence the decline in the number of members enumerated as Parsis. The Parsi community has not been able to stop such inter-religious marriages since Parsi girls enjoy the right to choose their spouses. Conservative members have their reservations and resentment against marriage between a Parsi and a non-Parsi. A Parsi boy's marriage with a non-Parsi girl is accepted with greater grace than the marriage of a Parsi girl with a non-Parsi boy. Since Zoroastrianism is not a proselytising

religion (it does not preach or practise conversion) it does not easily accept non-Parsi members into its fold.

Parsi girls marrying a non-Parsi boy by the 1954 Special Marriage Act have made a claim to the Parsi Panchayat that they must be given the right to visit the fire temple and remain a Parsi. It must be pointed out that these girls (those marrying non-Parsis) do not lose their rights of inheritance or intestate succession (CSWI 1974: 49).

19.4.3 Inheritance and Succession

A feature of the rules governing the Parsi intestate (without making a will) is that the share of male heir is double that of a female heir of' the same degree. For example, if a male Parsi dies leaving a widow and children, the property will be divided so that the share of each son and widow will be double the share of each daughter. Further if a male Parsi dies leaving one or both parents in addition to his wife and children, the property will be divided so that the father will receive a share equal to half the share of a son. The mother will receive a share equal to half the share of the daughter. On the other hand if a female Parsi dies intestate her husband and her children, will receive an equal share of her property.

Among Parsis adoption is not recognised by custom or law for purposes of inheritance and succession. A Parsi widow without any children, can adopt a son on the 4th day of her husband's death. This is for the temporary purpose of performing certain religious rites for the dead man. This adoption is for a limited purpose and does not grant any property rights on the adopted *"palak"*.

What is clear, from these Parsi rules of inheritance and succession, is that while they recognise the woman's right to inheritance and succession, the Parsi daughter's share of her father's property remains half of that of a son. It must be pointed out that most of these provisions were enacted in 1939. At that time these rules conferred more rights to women than the then existing Hindu and Muslim laws.

Activity 2

See the movie *Pestonjee* or any other film made on the Parsis. If you cannot see a movie on Parsis, read a book or magazine or journal, which has any articles, related to the Parsis. Note down what you have learnt from this activity about the Parsi marriage and family. Discuss the same with other students in the Study Centre.

19.4.4 Parsi Panchayat

Earlier we had mentioned that the Parsi Panchayat (also called *Anjuman*) played a role in reforming certain practices which reflected the infiltration of non-Zoroastrian elements into Parsi institutions (eg. child marriage, ban of remarriage, polygyny etc). In this section we will briefly examine the role of the Parsi Panchayat in India.

From the time Parsis landed in India, there were some members among them who negotiated with the rulers and traders on behalf of their community. Gradually the Parsi Panchayat or Council of Elders came into being. This was

established in Surat and Navsari around the middle of the seventeenth century. It consisted of both priests and laypersons. In this context, it is important to talk of the divisions, which have existed, in Parsi society in India.

In India, the Parsis are divided into two sections: namely the *Mobeds* (or priests) and Behdin (or laity). Priests for a long time were exclusive and intermarriage was seldom permitted. Only the son of a priest could become a priest. In terms of the Parsi Panchayat, in the seventeenth century though priests were members of the Panchayat, the laity members played a greater role in the economic role of the Parsis in India. Towards the last quarter of the seventeenth century the British started developing Bombay into their main trading centre. The Parsi community began to make full use of this trading venture in Bombay. The Parsi Panchayat played an active role in promoting the economic interests of the community. It also provided some inner stability and order to the Parsi community (Kulke 1978: 62).

The Bombay Panchayat was formally recognised to punish members of the community who went against the traditionally accepted Parsi norms (religious and social). Punishable acts included committing bigamy or insulting members of the priestly class. A person requiring divorce and permission to marry a second wife had to represent his case in writing to the Panchayat. When the bad conduct of a wife was established the Panchayat used to punish the guilty woman by taking her securities (her jewels, maintenance charge, funeral expenses on her death) before granting the husband permission to remarry. Those who were given permission to marry a second time had to get their marriage ceremony performed only by the priest named by the Panchayat. This would vary depending on whether the applicant belonged to the *Shehenshah* sect or the *Kadmi* sect.

Here we need to mention another social division. The Parsis are divided into two sections on the question of pronunciation of the *Avestan* prayers and the intercalation (this word means, to insert as a day on the calendar) in the Iranian-Zoroastrian calendar. In ancient Iran the length of the year was known to be 365 days and 6 hours. This difference of 6 hours was made up once in 120 years by adding one month known as *Kabisa*. Those who followed this method called themselves *Kadmis* or *Kadims*, meaning the ancient. While the Parsis who did not follow this calendar came to be known as *Shehenshahis*. Fire temples are open to both these sections. Intermarriage among these sects is quite common. For the *Shehenshahi* Parsis the New Year falls at the end of August, while for the *Kadmis* it falls a month ahead at the beginning of August. The Parsi Panchayat kept these divisions in mind when it tried to arrive at any decision.

Those who violated the rules were to be turned out of the community and punished, as the Panchayat thought proper. Besides obtaining permission from the Panchayat to marry a second time (when the first wife is alive) a man had to very often pay the Panchayat some amount of money as charity (Bulsara 1968: 28).

Among the punishments which could be imposed by the Panchayat were forbidding: (i) priests to enter the house of the person punished; (ii) the person to visit the Parsi temple; and (iii) the person to go to the Tower of Silence. Other punishments included beating the offender with a shoe, shaving a

woman's head, and excommunicating the deviants from the community and so on. The Panchayat continued to wield a strong influence over the religious-social life of the community till 1830. After this the sons of the old members took over and began considering their positions in the Panchayat as personal possessions. They behaved high handedly and in a biased manner. Henceforth, the Panchayat became an institution of class discrimination. Thus serious breaches like bigamy were now glossed over by the Panchayat, so far as the richer members of the community were concerned. This made some of the 'elderly' members resign their positions on the Panchayat. It had virtually become a powerless institution. The British Government also withdrew its recognition from the Panchayat.

In 1865, a Parsi Law Reform Association and later in 1961 a Government Commission worked on drafting a bill which gave the Parsi community, a written law of their own. It was entitled the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act of 1865 and Parsi Succession Act of 1865. These Acts have been amended in subsequent years to liberalise and facilitate legal proceedings relating to marriage and succession.

19.4.5 Festivals

So far we have discussed the emergence of Parsi community in India, their basic tenets, some of the important rites and customs of the Parsis and the role of the Parsi Panchayat. There is another area of Zoroastrian social organisation that reflects the collective entity of the Parsis. The area which rejuvenates the Zoroastrian way of life are the Parsi Festivals.

Feasting is a necessary component of Parsi worship. In other words it is not just a 'desirable' or an expected mode of behaviour but one that is religiously enjoined upon Parsis. It follows directly from their fountainhead, Zoroaster, who enjoins every Parsi to lead a happy and joyous life. The principal festivals in the Parsi year are the six seasonal festivals, *Gahnbars* and the days in the memory of the dead at the Parsi year's end. Also, each day of the month and each of the twelve months of the year is dedicated to the deity. The day named after that month is when the great feast day of that particular deity is held. The new year festival, Noruz or Navroz is the most joyous and beautiful of Zoroastrian feasts. It is a spring festival in the honour or *Rapithwin,* who is the personification (i.e. considered as person) of noonday and summer. The festival to *Mithra or Mehragan* (noble spirits) was traditionally an autumn festival. This festival was as honoured as the spring feast of *Norus*.

As you have observed in this unit, the Parsis provide an interesting variation from other communities. Though numerically small and localised in a few regions in the world, they are significant in terms of their economic and social strength in India.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Fill in the blanks in the statements given below.

   a) The initiation site, which marks the admission of a Parsi boy or a girl into the Zoroastrian faith, is called ……………………………… .

   b) The place where the dead body of a Parsi is disposed is called ……………….. .

c)   The new year festival of the Parsis is called …………………… .

ii) State whether the following statements are true or false.

a)   Zorastrianism prescribes strict monogamy.

b)   Low age at marriage is prevalent among the Parsis today.

c)   A daughter and a son acquire an equal share of the father's property when the father dies intestate.

d)   The Parsis Panchayat consists of both the priest and laymen.

19.5   LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you were introduced to the social organisation of the Zoroastrian community in India. Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism (deriving its name from its supreme God, *Ahura Mazda*) was introduced in India around the 8th century A.D. We described how this community came to be localised in and around Gujarat and we mentioned their population strength at around 76,382 in India 1991. We pointed out that the Parsis (as they are referred to in India) have made a significant contribution to the economic, political, educational and social development of India. In order to have an understanding of their social organisation we looked at their basic tenets or belief systems. We noted that fire is worshipped as a symbol of their supreme God *Ahura Mazda*. We pointed out that Zoroastrians believe that a person has to make a choice between leading a good life or leading an evil life. We then moved on to describe their rites of initiation and death, their customs relating to marriage, family, and laws of inheritance and succession. We observed that in the Parsi society both men and women enjoy rights of succession and inheritance. We also described the Parsi Panchayat and the festivals of the Parsis. We have thus given an adequate overview of Parsi social organisation.

19.6   KEYWORDS

Ahura Mazda	Name given to the supreme God of the Zoroastrians, which means, "Wise lord"
Avesta	A collection of texts gathered in writing roughly between 4th and 6th century A.D. and attributed to Zoroaster or Zorathustra
Dakhma or Dokhma	Also known as 'Tower of Silence' where the Zoroastrians dispose the dead
Mazdaism	Another name for Zoroastrianism derived from the name *"Mazda"* meaning supreme Lord
Navjot	An initiation rite by which a boy or girl is admitted into the Zoroastrian faith

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19.8   SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i)   The founder of the Zoroastrianism is Zarathustra or Zoroaster.

ii)   The other name for Zoroastrianism is Mazdaism.

iii) Fire is worshipped as a symbol of the supreme God.

iv)   The Parsis are found mainly in Gujarat, Maharashtra especially in Bombay and Deccan.

v)   The two important sources of information about Zoroastrianism can be derived from its texts, the Avesta and the Gatha.

Check Your Progress 2

i)   a)   Navjot

      b)   Dakhma/dokma or Tower of Silence

      c)   Navroz/Noruz

ii)   a)   T

      b)   F

      c)   F

      d)   T

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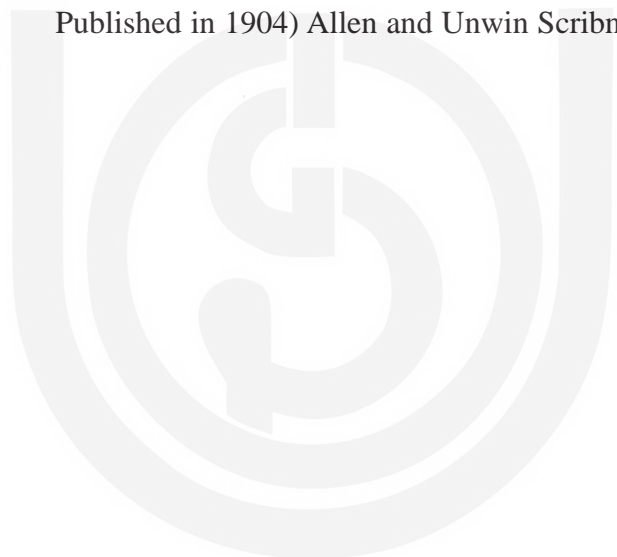
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