UNIT 12 RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS : SECTS, CULTS AND DENOMINATIONS

Structure

12.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you should be able to

- familiarise yourself with various religious organisations both in the Indian context and the western context

- understand the origins of the religious organsations, their development and their social functions

- compare the religious organisations in India with that of the Western religious organisations

- analyse whether the typologies offered by western sociologists are adequate to understand the Indian religious organisations.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will discuss religious organisations as an important element of religion. The religious organisations discussed in this unit are the ecclesia, the sect, denomination and the cult along with the three Indian groups, viz., the Sangh, the Mat and the Panth. This we hope will enable you to evolve a comparative perspective. This unit also seeks to explain the genesis of religious formations, their development, functions and the dynamics. We hope this discussion will help you understand the dynamic-interactia between ideal and real.

12.2 UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Religion is not only a body of belief but it is practised. Almost all major religions

of the world are found in organised forms.

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

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

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

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

Without emphasizing too much on the uniqueness of India, we have to keep in mind the distinction between two traditions of religious experience—the Semitic, out of which grew Christianity and Islam and the tradition of **netiwad-anekantwad** (the tradition of religious pluralism) out of which grew religious groups in India. Let us elaborate them a little more. As you can already discern the cross over of religious concepts from the Christian tradition as discussed above, are really distinct from each other so far as organisations are concerned.

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

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

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

i) Group Membership: Compulsory or voluntary

ii) If voluntary: exclusive or relatively open to new members

iii) Group's attitude towards other religious groups

iv) Whether the group proselytises or not

v) Internal Organisation: autocratic or democratic

vi) Clergy: Whether clergy regarded as necessary for the salvation of lay members

vii) Attitude of the group towards the secular affairs of the society as a whole. Such
criteria can be used for comparative study of religious groups.

12.3 THE GENESIS OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS

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

12.3.1 Social Factors

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

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

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

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

Since the founder of Islam did not have a successor, **Khilafat** had came to occupy
a cardinal place in the organisation of Islam. Christ, too, did not have a successor,
nor did he name one but Christianity grew into an ecclesiastical-apostolic order.
Buddha decreed that the Sangh which he founded, would be guided by Dhamma
(Dharma) and Vinaya after he was no more. It is said that the oligarchic-democratic
tradition of the Sangh grew out of the republican traditions of the Sangh grew out
of the republican traditions of the tribes among which Buddha was popular.

12.3.2 Development Process

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

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

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

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

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

12.3.3 Universal Features

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

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

Activity 1

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

12.4 THE CHURCH-SECT TYPOLOGY

When a religious grouping establishes its beliefs, norms and practices into an organised form it takes an established religious organisational form. In a very loose sense a

Church can be described as this. At the same time an organised religion has multiple strands because of internal differentiation. In this section we will try and understand the dynamics of church, sect and cult.

12.4.1 Ecclesia (The Church)

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

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

The Christian religion has a vast number of Church based rites which cover the entire life-span of its members.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

12.4.2 Sect

As a religious group, the Sect stands for those who dissent from the interpretation of the doctrine from an established church and (the united works) as a communion of religious brotherhood with a well-defined creed. Its ideal type is a contrast to that of the Church though it may share some traits with the latter. Unlike the Church,

the membership of the sect is not compulsory. It is voluntary, relatively exclusive and often qualified ritually. The fact is that the sect arises from people's dissent with the Church over many differences of dogma and perception of the social situation. These make the sect have a clear dogma and values of it's own.

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

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

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

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

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

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

12.4.3 Denomination

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

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

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

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

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

12.4.4 Cult

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

Box 1

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

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 1

i) Write a note on Ecclesia. Use about five lines for your answer.

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

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iii) Give two reasons for the rise of sectarian tradition in Christianity. Use about five lines for your answer.

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12.5   THE RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN INDIA

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

- The Math, Marg and Sampradaya

- Sangh

- Mat

- Panth

12.5.1   Math, Marg and Sampradaya

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

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

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

12.5.2   Sangh

Founded by the Buddha the Sangh has grown to be international with significant national variations. It has assimilated from local traditions and also from the Ecclesia. However, it is not an ecclesia. The term Sangh means 'any close contact or any number of people living together for a certain purpose'. It also means 'society and association'. As a religious organisation it has two well-defined objectives : (1) To provide best possible conditions for individual development: (2) To teach **dhamma** (dharma in Sanskrit) to mankind. (Humphreys, Christian: 1951).

Members of the Sangh do not own property individually but the Sangh does own

property as a corporate body. It has a sect of hierarchy of appointive and elective offices. It is secular, empirical and rational. It can easily be compared to an association.

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

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

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

Buddhist monks at prayer. Note that the monks have a shaven head.

The Bhikkhu is also expected to practice a simple, austere and inquisitive living, taking only as much he needs. His belongings consist of three robes, a waist-cloth, begging bowl, a razor, a water-container and a needle. He may also add to this an umbrella, a pair of sandals and a few books.
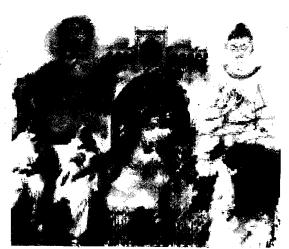
A Bhikkhu, particularly the Novice (The Samnera) is obliged to go out for begging in the morning and return by noon to take food. He spends the rest of the day in study, meditation and teaching. Excepting the rainy season, the Bhikkhu is expected to travel and teach all the year around. In rainy seasons, he returns to communal life to study and revise the rules of Dhamma. To carry the gift of Dhamma to the people is Bhikkhyu's main duty. To progress on the path of Dhamma is the individual's business and not of his. He is not a priest/missionary in the Christian sense of the term. He does not belong to an 'apostolic order'. He is just a preacher of Dhamma (Humphreys: ibid: p.138).

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

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

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

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

Each religion has a vast set of icons and symbols which communicate religions insights to the believers.

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

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

12.5.3 Mats

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

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

The Mat is said to have its ancestry in the Sangh. Organisationally, it shares much **with the Sangh though, doctrinally, it differs. The Sangh is atheistic. Rooted in Vedanta, the Mat is theistic. The Mat and adwaita** and their organisational inter-relatedness grew out of protest against Buddhism and the **Mimansaka**. Shankara established four Maths at the four corners of India (Badrinath, Puri, Dwarka and Sringeri) to "emphasise the growing consciousness about the geographical unity of India" (Nehru, J.L. : 1960: 182). The Mat is also viewed as a product of Hindu reformation in the eighth century (Pannikkar, K.M. 99-101).

The Mat was founded to organise and train selfless spiritual preachers to preach **adwaita mat** oneness of belief.

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

The Mat is rather like a pendulum, moving between exclusiveness and inclusiveness. Its theistic doctrine, its ritual structure, its clergy and laity and their social background tend to give it the aura of exclusiveness though, theoretically, it welcomes all. As

is clear the **Mat** is an organisation of members who may themselves differ on crucial issues, often leading to one or more schisms over time. This is the usual path taken by a **Mat** when differences of opinion or dogma-interpretation is done with mutually differing stands on almost every issue. This leads to schisms in **mat** over time.

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

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

Box 2

The Organisational Structure of Chaitanya Mat

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

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

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

The saffron-robed functionaries of the Mat are Prabhus/Maharajas. They are knitted into a hierarchy which is based on seniority, recognition of one's spiritual attainment, learning in the religious lore of the math and meritorious services rendered towards the cause of the Mission. The title of Vishupad is indicative of the highest position and that of Prabhupad of the next

position in the hierarchy. One devoted to the service of the mission by body (kaya), mind (mana) and speech (vak) is Tridandi Swami. The Acharya has the right to initiate one into the order of the Mat, particularly into that of the Sanyasins. This power can be delegated.

12.5.4 Panth

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

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

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

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

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

Activity 2

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

Because of the importance of the Guru, in the panthic organisation, **gurudwara** attains a significant social-communal importance. With **gurudwara,** the **jhanda** (flag) cult occupies a crucial place in the total cultic structure of the panth. However,

Gurudwara is the place of daily, occasional and festive congregations. It strengthens brotherhood. It is a medium of religious-social communication. Panths such as those who have allegiance to a saint or master also experience Schisms when the preceptor dies and different groups emerge in the Panth.

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

Having its distinct initiation ceremony, the Panth is an exclusive-sectarian brotherhood. To be initiated into the Panth means owing allegiance to the Guru or to his ordained successor. In a Panth the Guru and the Mahant may be combined while in another they may be different. Mahant, in fact, is not a **guru**; he is head of a Math or of a group of saints. A highly exclusive **panth** may have secret rituals and a code language. Till recently, the Shivanarainis did not admit the uninitiated into their **gurudwara** and they have a code language which is now dying out. They also did not allow women to enter the **gurudwara**. A Shivanaraini is expected to carry with him his identity card (the parwana) issued by the presiding Mahant of the **gurudwara** he belongs to.

Box 3

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

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

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

A Sikh ceremony in progress.

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

Check Your Progress 2

i)   Write how the Sangh is different from the Ecclesia. Use about seven lines for your answer.

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ii)   Who is the founder of Advaita Philosophy?

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iii)   Name the four Mats established by Adi Shankaracharya.

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

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12.6   LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed and observed the following.

Complex religious organisations grow essentially out of and after the religious experience of a charismatic personality (e.g. : Christ, Mohammad). It then develops into a pattern of ideas and practices or rituals (see Unit 20 of Block 6 of ESO-1— The Study of Society for a discussion on complex form of religion).

The Semitic religions like Christianity and Islam are monotheistic which enables them to organise on a more systematic way. The Church or the Ecclesia is thus

far more organised than its equivalents that we may find in India. This raises the question whether we can use the Church-Sect typology, offered by Western sociologists to understand the Indian religious organisation. Though we find no exact equivalents to the Church-sect typology, it enables us to have a comparative perspective.

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

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

12.7 KEY WORDS

Ecclesia : The organisation of Church.

Dogma : Belief or system of beliefs, put forward by some authority

Laity : All those persons who are not clergy.

Literati : The learned, who have studied the Scriptures.

Transcendental : Going beyond human knowledge, that which cannot be discovered or understood by practical experience.

Creed : System of beliefs or opinions especially on religious doctrine. Also, the summary of Christian doctrine.

Atheist : A person who does not believe in the existence of God.

Renunciation : Denial, giving up the wordly possessions, desires and attachments.

12.8 FURTHER READINGS

O'Dea, Thomas F. 1969. *The Sociology of Religion*, Prentice-Hall, New Delhi : (Chapter III).

Johnson, Harry M. 1968. *A Systematic Introduction*, Routledge and Kegan Paul : London (Chapter 16).

12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

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

The Ecclesia or the church functions like a bureaucracy with hierarchy of offices. The member of the church-clergy derives his/her religious status qualities from

the office he holds the virtue of appointment and ordination. Its head the Pope is elected by a small group of officials. The rest of the hierarchy of officials is appointed.

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 2

i) The Sangh was founded by Buddha which essentially meant as an organisation or association coming together of people for certain purposes. The Sangh is different from Ecclesia by the fact that it is secular, empirical, rational. The Dhamma that it teaches is not, religion in the usual sense of the term but a set of empirically rationally derived rules of conduct, a duty which guides the individual in his life. The Dhamma that is preached is not a revelation of God and thus is not infallible.

ii) Adi Shankaracharya or Shankara as he is popularly known is the founder of adwaita philosophy.

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

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

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

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