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# UNIT 13 RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS :

## SHAMANS, PRIESTS AND

## PROPHETS

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## 13.0 OBJECTIVES

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The present unit deals with the nature of religious specialists, focussing attention on three particular types: the shaman, the priest and the prophet. We hope that once you have studied the unit, you will have gained some idea about the following

- the nature and functions of specialists
- how these developed over time and how their position today may not be as socially significant as it once was
- the role they play in mediating between the human and the divine world
- the changes that have taken place in the nature of these specialists.

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## 13.1 INTRODUCTION

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This Unit is concerned with the nature of religious specialists. It is important for us to briefly understand who they are. As such, they are persons who because of certain charismatic qualities they possess, are accorded the status of being intermediaries of mediators between the world of the human and that of the divine

or magical. This act of mediation may either be performed by a single individual or a group of individuals, where each performs a separate task. Such performances may occur on special ritual occasions, as a matter of daily routine, or during illness.

There are different kinds of specialists who derive their power from the functions they perform, the doctrine they adhere to and by the nature of their following. To name a few, we have priest found in temples, prophets such as Muhammad, cultic leaders such as Sathya Sai Baba, shamans such as those found in Nepal and Tibet, sectarian leaders like the late Swami Prabhupadji of the ISKCON, and so on.

The significance and role of these specialists varies from society to society, and it is related to an extent to the nature of the religious system in the particular society. The functions of the specialists are usually meant for achieving positive ends and benevolence, but often they may even be aimed at inflicting harm. We often find men seeking the services of the specialists even when they are not required. Even the assistance of the exorciser, medicine man and magician are sought as a normal routine. This unit will therefore deal with the development of three particular categories of specialists, the priest, the shaman and the prophet, and their functions and social significance. We will support our description wherever we can with examples.

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## 13.2 RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

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Before we proceed into a detailed discussion of the nature of the three specialists, it is imperative that as students of sociology, we look at what the sociology of Religion has to say about them. "A religious specialist is one who devotes himself to a ...religious system" (Turner in *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, p. 437). In societies where such power is considered as impersonal anthropologists have described it as magic and the specialist who manipulates the power as a magician; and where power is personalised, as deities, gods, spirits or demons and the life, anthropologists talk of religion. In reality, no clear demarcation can be drawn between religion and magic. Religious systems contain both religious beliefs, practices and magical elements. The role of religious beliefs, practices and magical elements, the role of religious specialists, is thus overlapping.

Early anthropologists such as Frazer, Durkheim, Malinowski did not specifically identify religious specialist as a distinct phenomenon for theoretical discussion. They considered the specialist a part of the religious system which according to them is a distinct 'social' phenomenon.

Max Weber provided the necessary breakthrough. His comparative study of world religions, which focused on theory of religious ideas, brought focus directly on religious specialist as agent of social transformation or as conservation of tradition. Weber wrote extensively on religions, its social consequences and the nature of religious functionaries. Before we go on to detailed discussion on what Weber has to say, we will have a look at how anthropologists have distinguished different religious specialists.

Max Weber, though aware of the numerous instances of overlap distinguishes between a priest and a prophet. A priest, he writes is always associated with the functioning of regularly organised and permanent enterprise concerned with influencing the gods. In Weber's view the prophet is distinguished from the priest by personal call. The authority of the prophet is founded on revelation and personal charisma.

### Box 1

Anthropologists, who, unlike Weber, are less concerned with the genesis of religion as a force of social change or reinforcement have looked at shamans

as part of the working of religious systems in simpler societies. The editors A. Lessa and E.Z. Hogt devote a whole section to this aspect in their *Reader in Comparative Religion* (1958). They find that shamans tend to predominate in food-gathering societies. Where the shaman offers personalised service to one or two individuals or a group whereas the priest, according to them, is characteristic of more structurally elaborate food-producing, or agricultural societies, where there are common ceremonials or rites for the benefit of the whole community.

Raymond Firth regards the shaman as a specialist who exercises developed techniques of control over spirits. The emphasis, here, is on control exercised over spirits. Thus he "serves as a means of communication between other human beings and the spirit world" (Firth, 1964: p. 689).

Although, we sometimes find the functions of these specialists overlapping, the priests, prophets and shamans clearly constitute a subtype of a single type of religious functionary. Let us briefly consider what Weber had to say about religion, before we proceed to consider in general the role of religious specialists in everyday life.

### 13.2.1 Weber on Religion

Weber believes that the behaviour of individuals in a society is motivated by religious and magical factors. He discusses in his work the plurality of gods and their potential. He also traces out the development of monotheistic religions such as Islam and Judaism, and, polytheistic religions such as Hinduism. In an attempt to classify religious experiences and specialists, he points out how men relate to supernatural forces through prayer, sacrifice and worship. They are helped along here by mediators such as priests. Often charms and spells are used when prayer does not work. In such cases they turn to the magician. One can say that religious specialists relate to the divine through rituals and religious activity while they relate to the evil or malevolent, through magical activity. There are some societies where both functions are performed by the same religious specialist, for example the Leopard Skin chief among the Nuer tribe of Sudan, Africa.

Other than the above mentioned functionaries, Weber also recognises the presence in society of the religious leader or the prophet. The prophet could be the founder of a world religion such as Islam or a cultic figure such as Sathya Sai Baba in India. Let us now examine each specialist independently.

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## 13.3 THE PRIEST

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We have here first a description of the priest as Weber understood the category and then undertake a general explanation.

### 13.3.1 Weber's Understanding of the Priest

According to Weber, the priest is a functionary who performs regular, permanent and organised functions that are related to the divine. He does this usually through the act of worship either on behalf of an individual or for society as a whole.

The priest belongs to a social organisation and occupies a hereditary office. He is expected to have some specialised knowledge of texts and doctrines. According to Weber, the priest would have attained significant social and religious status through both rigorous training and by virtue of being born into a particular social group.

The priesthood is based on a code of behaviour and ethics. They dedicate their life

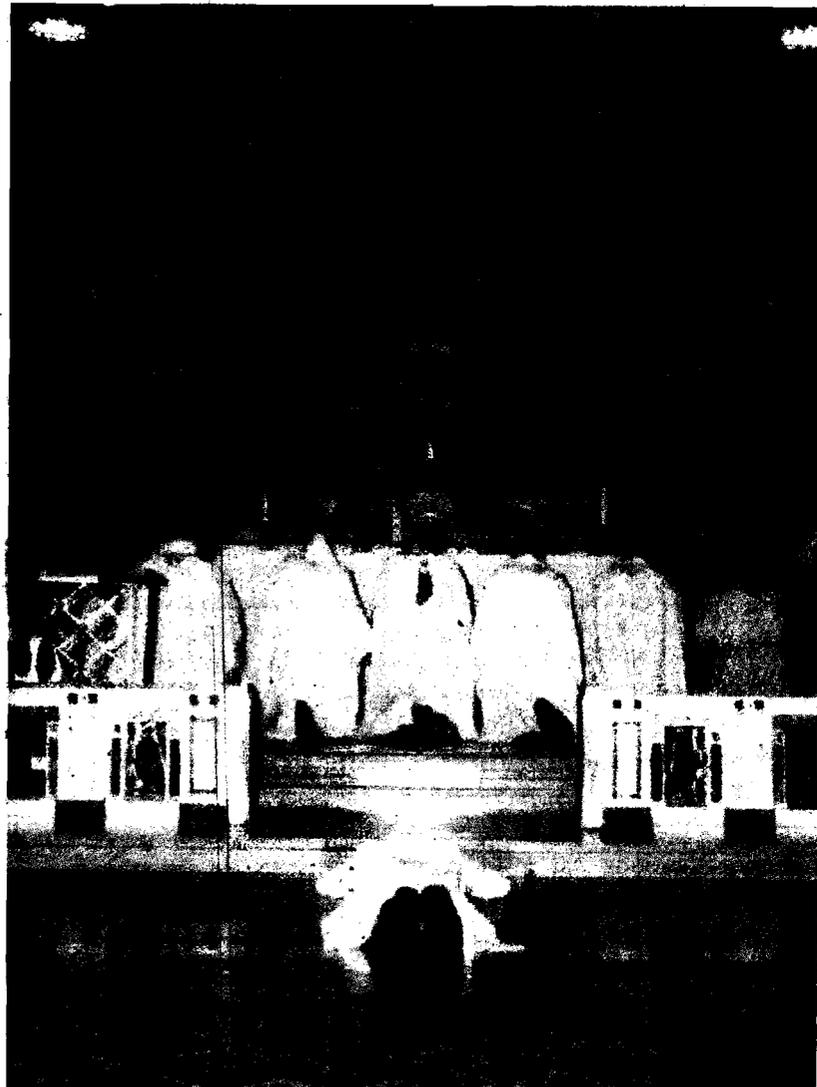
to the task of communicating with the gods and are associated with either a place of worship, a social group of a following of disciples. The development of a 'doctrine' which involves the rise of a rational system of religious concepts and ethics is also associated with them.

### **13.3.2 Priests and Priesthood : An Overview**

Priests and associated organisations are found in both simple and modern societies. The rise of priests is associated with the need felt by primitive man to come to terms with the supernatural world.

In simpler societies we find that not just priests but also magicians are associated with the ability to communicate with the divine world. It is believed as such that priesthood is as old as religion itself.

In both primitive and advanced societies priests and magicians are functionaries who through their specialised knowledge and powers, are associated with and overcome malevolent and benevolent forces. The need for such duality was considered necessary so that the unknown supernatural powers would not be harmful to the human; instead, they would bring prosperity and goodwill. These early religious and magical practitioners who offered guidance in such matters, have been regarded as the pioneers of an organised priesthood. We find that in the early periods of religious evolution there is no priesthood and men perform rituals or invoke the Gods themselves. There are some people such as tribals of Melanesia and Australia who



**Priests and related organizations (e.g. Church) are found in both simple and complex societies.**

even today do the religious and magical rites themselves without the help of any intermediaries or specialists.

Often in the early ages we find that in a collective group, one person would attain a certain significance in terms of his ability to deal with the supernatural or predict certain events or even acquire an expertise in performing certain ritual acts. Such a person would soon enough be regarded as an intermediary and gain priestly functions. As an example, we find that in certain Dravidian tribes, the head of the household would be the officiating priest at any type of family event. Before a regular priesthood arose, we thus find that men, other than priests, performed specialised functions. Into this category of specialists were also included those:

- i) who underwent ecstatic experiences by going into trances and then would make predictions such as a **darvesh**;
- ii) those who looked after places that have for some reason acquired a sacred significance and thus considered holy;
- iii) those persons or 'holy men' who exercise some kind of religious authority by performing miracles or curing illnesses.

Other than the above mentioned functionaries, magician too had a role to play in the lives of the people, for both their well-being and for inflicting harm. Those individuals who were able to exercise greater authority were the ones who over time gained significant status and were able to gain respect. They gradually came to form a category of specialists who officiated for individuals and groups and were both respected and feared.

### 13.3.3 Priests and Royalty

We find that in most societies an interesting relationship also arose between priestly authority and the royalty. There are many examples in history of kings who were priests also, such as, among the tribes of Polynesia and Melanesia or even in India where ancestor worship made it necessary for the king or family head to perform priestly functions. We also have examples of kings who were raised to the status of divinity and were believed to imbibe in their beings, the essence or life of the tribe or nation. Thus if a king weakened or became ill, it signified misfortune for the whole social group. Thus we find in many societies, the leader would be put to death prematurely and a successor chosen immediately to prevent society from breaking up.

We also find examples in history of a close relationship between priesthood and kingship such that each was dependent on the other. We refer here to the sacerdotal role of the priest, found in many societies, of bestowing upon the king his rights as a ruler. This could be seen in the coronation of the king as found in Europe, where the Church played an important role, or in the form of the **raja abhisheka** of the Indian kings that was performed by the Brahman priest. Further it was the duty of the king in the former case to protect the religion of the State and in India, the priests were protected by the king.

### 13.3.4 Priestly Qualifications

Certain qualifications are laid down as being basic to priesthood. We mention here some of them without going into details.

- i) The priest's primary task is to mediate between the human and divine.
- ii) Priesthood is usually a hereditary institution.

- iii) The priests communicate with the divine through prayer, worship, rituals and so on.
- iv) Priests have to undergo initiation into the profession. A certain self training is considered necessary.
- v) The priests are expected to uphold their status through knowledge of natural phenomena and the elements and may have an eccentric appearance. They are also expected to be able to perform miracles.
- vi) A certain aura of mystery surrounds them.
- vii) They are expected to maintain certain restrictions in their personal life particularly in relation to the sexual realm, food and language.

It may finally be noted that both religious and magical practitioners are included into the category of priests. While the magician uses magic spells and tries to coerce the known world of the supernatural, the religious functionary or priest brings about the desired results by propitiating the unknown through religious rituals and observances.

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### 13.4 THE HINDU PRIESTHOOD : AN EXAMPLE

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We now consider an example to support our description of priesthood. We take up here the Hindu case by examining what the various scriptures have to say about priests, down the ages. The priest in traditional India may assist in the performance of a ritual, at home, or in a temple. In Hinduism, he is born into a priestly caste, by virtue of which he gains these functions. We trace here his development as laid down in the texts.

#### 13.4.1 Vedas

In the Vedas we find it mentioned that the social group of **brahmana** was the priestly class. We find described in the Rig Veda the priestly activities of some of the families of the Vedic tribes. In the **Samhita**, the title of **brahmana** is given to that priestly class who worked for kings and wealthy nobles. These priests strictly adhered to their occupation and were also believed to have a knowledge of medicine. The Rig Veda also mentions subdivisions within the priestly class, on the basis of functions and rituals performed, such as the **soma** sacrifice. Two important priests found mentioned are :

- a) the **hotr** or one who recites hymns to celebrate the Gods and make offerings to them;
- b) the **prashastr** or one who makes the **hotr** recite his hymns.

The Rig Veda also mentions a third office, that of the **purohita**, who was the domestic priest of either the king or a noble. He often assisted the king in other activities as well. For example from Indian mythology we know of how both Vishwamitra and Vashishta served their kings during the war.

#### 13.4.2 Brahmanas

In the Brahmana literature which includes the period up to 6th century B.C., the priests are seen as a separate and hereditary class that was expected to maintain its distance and purity from others. Here also we find the priests performing sacrifices and there arise subdivisions here within the priestly class on the basis of functions performed. This period shows the functions of the **purohita** having increased in significance.

It is however the **brahmin** who is given more importance here and the best offerings of a sacrifice would go to him, rather than the king and he had greater jurisdiction than the king.

### **13.4.3 Upanishads**

By the time of the Upanishads, priestly functions had become more differentiated. The priest now other than performing sacrificial functions was expected to engage in philosophical studies and to take on disciples and pupils. The Upanishads also specify the four stages of life or the **ashramas** that a Hindu had to follow. We refer here to **brahmacharya**, **grihastha**, **vanaprastha** and **sanyasa** as the four phases in a man's life.



The priest in traditional India may assist in the performance of a ritual at home or in temple.

**Activity 1**

What do you think are the priest's activities? Outline some of these activities from your observation of a priest in your daily life.

The above mentioned teacher-pupil relationships in this period of history is seen to have given rise to two important religious movements as alternatives to Hinduism.

These were Buddhism and Jainism. In these two religions also the role of the priesthood and the order of monks was considered important.

**13.4.4 Early Hinduism**

In early Hinduism the priests are seen to have full control over the divine and the power of the king. In fact there have been many priests in history who have gained knowledge of not only rituals and worship but also of administration. A well known example was that of Chanakya. But in this period the priest was seen to have become learned in astrology, divination and magic as well. Stories about the process of such priests can be found in the **Jataka Katha**.

**13.4.5 Medieval and Modern Hinduism**

According to the Puranic texts, this period represents much the same features. We do however see a division of the priestly class into tightly knit endogamous and hereditary subunits. As these subunits grew, an occupational diversification was also seen to occur. The **purohita**s along with his priestly functions also came to perform astrological horoscope preparations, fortune telling and the performance of magic.

The temple priest became significant and came to look after the village temple deity. There also arose a group of priests who concerned themselves primarily with the imparting of knowledge and learning and came to be recognised as the **guru**.

Often the functions of the temple priest and the **guru** were combined along with the ability to perform magic and miracles as among the left handed **tantrics**. These individuals were both greatly feared and respected. Similar to the tantrics were the ascetics who undertook penance and sought to achieve ecstatic states and salvation.

In the more recent context we find that the sacrifices of the Vedic period have lost their significance and have been replaced by temple rituals and popular festivals such as Holi, Deewali, Makarsankranti and so on. This period is also characterized by the rise of religious movements such as the **bhakti** tradition where the priest corresponds to the wandering poet, musician and teacher who challenges Hindu orthodoxy. The **brahman**'s as a priestly class came under criticism here.

From the 19th century onward, further change towards a unification of priestly methods as well as religious teachings has occurred. We do continue to find temple priests and family priests in most parts of India where the latter are usually present on most life cycle events such as birth, marriage and death, to signify the well-being of the family.

We must keep in mind that here we are referring to 'priest' as a blanket term. In fact there are different levels of competence and authority vested in different practising priests.

**13.4.6 Tribal Context**

When examining the nature of priesthood in the Indian context we cannot ignore

the role of the priest in the tribal context. Here he is seen as a medicine man, a healer and a person who not only has divine powers but also powers of magic and sorcery. We have examples of temples being built by tribals, served the non-brahman priests such as among the Tiyans of Malabar. Because of their association with magic and healing, they are considered more as magicians than priests and are called shamans. We consider them in detail in the next section.

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Briefly discuss who religious specialists are.
- 2) State in a few words what Weber's understanding of the priest is?
- 3) Match the following :
 

i) One who has ecstatic experience	a) prashastr
ii) Reciter of hymns	b) purohita
iii) One who makes happen this recitation	c) brahmin
iv) The domestic priest	d) darvesh
v) The priestly class	e) guru
vi) Priests who impart knowledge	f) hotr

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## 13.5 THE SHAMAN

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Having examined in detail the nature and role of priests and priesthood, let us now proceed to look at the shaman as a specialist. In the previous sections we have been constantly referring to the need very often felt by a society to turn towards magical aid when religious rituals fail. We have also discussed how often the same individual would combine both priestly and magical functions.

As far as the shaman as a specialist is concerned (section 13.4.6), we have narrowed down his role to the tribal context as that is where he is largely seen to operate. In this section we will try and describe the shaman and his social role.

### 13.5.1 Weber on the Magician

If we examine Weber's work on religious specialists we do not find any mention of the shaman. He does however talk about the magician. We briefly examine what he has to say about the magician as, it is in magical acts that the shaman has his antecedents.

Weber believes that the relationship between the human and the supernatural could be expressed not just through religious worship assisted by a priest, but also through magical chants or sorcery. Weber also points out that, it is in magic that prayer and sacrifice have their origin. Sacrifice is seen as a major method of coercing the gods into submission to a supplicant's needs. It was also seen as a method of directing the anger of the gods towards another object. It is believed that the sacrificial rituals of the Brahmins were magical in their intent and implication. However not all sacrifices have magic or sorcery. The magician is understood by Weber as dealing with evil spirits on an individual level. His efforts may have both positive and negative consequences. The magician is usually self-employed though he may be the member of a hereditary caste or an organised guild. Rather than using a specialised doctrine of knowledge, the magician may derive his influence by virtue of personal gifts and knowledge of the supernatural world. The magician can have

considerable power among his community and may be respected more out of fear than faith. He does not necessarily have a following as the priests do.

### Activity 2

Locate a travelling magician and enquire from him what he feels about his work. Note down the important points of the conversation and share this information with other students in your Study Centre.

## 13.5.2 The Shaman : A General Overview

Earlier we have outlined some of the broader features of the magician as a specialist. As far as the shaman is concerned, he represents all of the above features and more. He is found to use his magical abilities for purposes of well-being as well as for harming, usually in the context of pre-literate society. (They or their counterparts may even be found in modern societies). For instance a shaman may engage in an act of magic or sorcery to cure an illness, exorcise a possession, inflict injury or illness on someone or influence the forces of nature to bring rains. In other words his is a multifunctional role which gives him his status and respect. The shaman is found to occupy an important position in most tribal societies. In fact shamanism is a native and tribal religion.

Once greatly feared and misunderstood, today we find him using his abilities in social and political spheres in simple societies. For long time in early anthropological literature, he had a negative image of being a deviant. In later years however his significance as playing a psychological role, was recognised. In fact it has been pointed out by the French structuralist, Claude Levi-Strauss, that the shaman provides for the sick, a language that helps them to express their condition which they normally would not be able to do.

## 13.5.3 The Functions and Role of a Shaman

As mentioned above, shamanism is a native religion. The word shaman is of North-East Asian origin and comes from the Tungusic word **saman** which means one who is "excited, moved or raised". We find that the shaman is usually seen as a medicine-man who employs exorcism and sorcery as his tools. He derives his powers from association with the supernatural and it is believed that he is assisted by a medium or a spirit to attain his ends. Very often, the shaman's ability to achieve results demands that his state of mind is altered and he either enters into a trance or an uncontrolled condition of excitement following which he communicates with the supernatural.

Shamans belonging to different tribes would use different means to achieve their ends. Certain factors are however found in common. They are as follows:

- a) either the office is hereditary or one's personality allows one to be chosen to the office;
- b) the shaman may have a peculiar mental state or even a physical shortcoming so that he may be considered neurotic or epileptic;
- c) the above abnormal qualities are central to his role;
- d) he may undergo training and austerities under the tutorship of an older shaman and may develop a peculiar disposition; the shaman may go into a trance or enter into an excited condition to make his predictions, or to cure the illness or get rid of a spirit.

## Box 2

Among the Public initiation ceremonies of Siberian Shaman, those of Buriats are among the most interesting. The principal rite includes a climb over the birch tree. A strong birch tree is set up in the Shaman's tent, its roots in the heaven and its crown coming out of the smoke hole. The birch tree is called **Udesi burkhan** — the guardian of the door, for it opens the door to Heaven to the shaman. The birch tree always remains in his tent — serving as a distinguishing mark of shaman's residence. On the day of this sacred ceremony, the candidates climb to the top of the birch, carrying a sword in one hand. Emerging through the smoke hole he shouts for the aid of the god. After this the master shaman, the apprentice and the entire audience go in a procession which halts by a particular path, a goat is sacrificed, and the candidate stripped to the waist, has his head, eyes and ears anointed with blood, while the other shamans play their drums. The candidate then climbs it, followed by other Shamans. As they climb they all fall — or pretend to fall in ecstasy.

There, the birch or pole is compared to the tree or pillar that stands at the centre of the world and that connects the three cosmic zones — Earth, Heaven and Hell.

As far as the functions performed by a shaman are concerned, it is believed that he combines the functions of priest, prophet and magician, all in one. He is known to perform priestly functions and uses sacrifice as a central act in the process of healing and divination. He also performs rituals of sacrifice and appeasement to the gods or spirits once they have been forced to submit to the shaman's needs.

Finally, because of fear of the shaman and his powers, he acquires a charismatic personality and qualities of leadership similar to a prophet. He may wear unusual jewellery and clothing, wear his hair long and matted, paint his body with colour or ash and carry either musical instruments or bones. His eccentric appearance and qualities have often earned him the name of a neurotic and a trickster.

### 13.5.4 Organisation

As far as the hierarchic organisation of the shamans is concerned it is not as clearly identified as that of the priests. Within the community however, on the basis of the power and control a shaman has over spirits, he has a particular ranks. They are also classified in terms of whether they perform positive magic (or white magic) in the well-being of a person or negative magic or black magic to make someone ill. Accordingly, they are either revered or feared and have higher or lower status. A shaman does not undergo indoctrination in an institution as a priest does not have to master tests except those that are special to his functions.

Unlike priesthood, we do find women included among the shamanistic category. Female shamans are usually associated with witchcraft and with sorcery. They are called shamanin.

The shaman is regarded important enough to be buried in a special way. Often where a shaman is buried a sacred site is created, entry into which is restricted. A dead shaman's body may even become the object of a cult. The shaman is found to play a significant role amongst the people of Tibet, Nepal, the Red Indians in America and in some south Asia communities. In the Indian context we find they are found to play an important role in some tribal communities. In our next section we take an example to illustrate this point.

### 13.5.5 An Example : The Oraon Shaman

As we have already mentioned, the shaman is closely associated with tribal life and medicine. We take here the example of a tribe among whom the shaman has great significance. We refer here to the Dravidian tribe of Oraons found in east India in the Chota Nagpur plateau. The shamans here and the tribe in general, were first studied by the Indian social anthropologist S.C. Roy, in the 1929s. The Oraons live in a hilly and forested region. They practise agriculture and both men and women share in farming. Their life is coloured by festivals and they have sacred groves for their village deity. Important in the life of the Oraon is the **bagat** or the shaman. His residence is identifiable by coloured flags on bamboo poles that stand outside it. These flags represent the gods and goddesses, that are worshipped by the **bhagat**. It also includes the flag of the special deity that enters the **bhagat** during his trances, and helps him to heal and cure. The position of the **bhagat** is hereditary and usually only one son or daughter is handed down the knowledge in a family. An Oraon can become a shaman, only if he has special qualities that are recognised by the person to whom he is apprenticed. The life of the **bhagat** is simple and strict in matters of food and drink and is governed by the prescribed conduct and rules of shamanic training.

The Oraon **bhagat** need not become a shaman by inheritance only. He may be chosen by divine interventions, through a dream or a possession by a god who informs the chosen person of how to go about learning the knowledge to be a shaman.

The **bhagat** usually deals with illnesses that come from demonic possession; or illness or madness that comes from psychological stress. The treatment can be in the form of a healing ritual or an exorcism, better known as **jhar phook**. These rituals are of various kinds and extent, depending on the depth of a person's illness. Thus the **bhagat** is seen to perform both rituals associated with good spirits and the bad. They are seen not only to perform both rituals associated with good spirits and the bad. They are seen not only to cure and provide remedies for illness but much of their success comes from faith healing and divination. The **bhagat** is also known to go into trances and an ecstatic condition to reach the root of his patient's malady. It may be pointed out here that the range of a shaman and his personal power vary greatly from one societal context to another.

If we look at the above example, even though discussed here briefly, we find that the **bhagat** or shaman among the Oraon is very similar in his personality and life to the shaman described in general. Having considered the nature of the shaman and his role in social life specific to simpler societies, let us now proceed to examine the nature of the prophet and prophecy as the final form of religious specialisation.

#### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Briefly discuss what Weber's understanding of the magician is. Use about three lines for your answer.

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- 2) Who is a shaman? Use about four lines for your answer.

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3) Briefly describe the shaman of Oraon. Use about four lines for your answer.

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## 13.6 THE PROPHET

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Having discussed the nature of the priest and shaman as religious specialists who have different and significant functions to perform particularly in relationship to the world of the supernatural, let us now turn to the prophet. The prophet is also a religious specialist but not of the kind that the priest and magician (shaman) are. He is more recognizable as a leader of a religious movement rather than as a functionary fulfilling a role within a movement. Prophets have also been the source of new world religions such as Islam or Zoroastrianism, or **leaders of sectarian religions**. Let us first consider what Weber had to say about the prophet.

### 13.6.1 Weber on the Prophet

In his book on religion, Weber has devoted a whole chapter to the understanding of what a prophet is. He defines the prophet as an individual who is capable of proclaiming a religious doctrine or a divine commandment because of his charismatic qualities. The major difference between the priest and prophet is that the prophet regards his mission as a "personal call" and derives his authority from personal revelation and charisma or an exceptional quality. The core of the prophet's mission is to carry forward the commandment or doctrine he has received as revelation. Often the prophet may use magic to establish his authority. The prophet is usually successful and respected till his ability to convince and prove his uniqueness of purpose is intact.

Prophets also engage in healing and counselling. Weber points out that the prophet usually does not belong to an organisation and neither does he receive economic rewards for his ideas. He is not a professional and has a following of disciples or a **laity** because they believe in his or have faith in him. The prophet makes prophecies which become often the guiding principles of a religious sect or cult or even an entire religious movement. The prophet besides making prophecies, is a teacher of religious and philosophical wisdom.

To put it simply, the prophet may be seen as an individual who is an instrument for carrying forward the will of god and he is obeyed because of the ethical nature of his mission. He may also be a person who individually sets an example of attaining salvation as did Buddha. This latter form of exemplary prophetism has been found particularly in India.

### 13.6.2 The Prophet : An Overview

The prophet has been found to rise in the context of almost all world religions in some form or the other. In this section we briefly consider some features of a prophet and an example as we have already outlined in general with the help of Weber's work. We have already noted that the prophet does not belong to an

institution as such and may be on a purely personal mission; we therefore do not examine the nature of organisation here. As such prophets have varied in nature from religion to religion and society to society, depending upon the nature of their mission. This has also determined the nature of the prophecies they have made. It may be noted however that the category of the prophet is absent in India's indigenous religious traditions. We mean by this that the idea of the prophet such as Moses, Jesus or Muhammad, who bring to mankind a message or a commandment from God, are absent in India. In fact we do not even find them in the Indian tribal context as we find the shaman.

We do however have another category of prophet in India who by virtue of his ability to foresee, to predict and to use clairvoyance, transcends time and space and makes prophecies about the future. He often is seen to use magic or miracle-making to convince the followers about the truthfulness of his prophecy. We consider here the example of such a prophet to illustrate the above.

### 13.6.3 Sathya Sai Baba : An Example

Sathya Sai Baba is regarded as modern India's most famous miracle maker and deity saint. He is easily recognisable by his appearance and clothes. The major part of his devotees come from the high caste middle and upper-middle classes in India. He can be regarded as a deity as he receives the homage of his devotees he returns these with blessings and grants boons. But above all he is known for his ability to make miracles and predictions come true. It is believed that only the real followers and believers of Sathya Sai Baba are really able to recognise him. His devotees have been seen to regard him as an **avatar** or manifestation of God on earth.

Sai Baba receives this special status not because of any mission that he heads of religion that he leads but as a consequence of the fact of his unusual capabilities and charismatic personality. His birth in 1926 in a village in Andhra Pradesh is seen as divine because of the mysterious occurrences that took place then, such as a cobra suddenly appearing under his bed. At the age of thirteen he is believed to have suffered a seizure and then began performing miracles and later claimed to be 'Sai Baba', the saviour of his people, and a reincarnation of the earlier saint, Sai Baba of Shirdi.

In 1940 he broke away from his family and set out on a career as a holyman and accepted devotees. He by now had begun performing the act of producing ash or **vibhuti** and other items. Although he became famous for his miracles, he also came to be known for his ability to cure and heal. In 1950, an **ashram** was constructed in the village of his birth and he had come to be recognised all over India as a god man, with a large following.

The important thing to note here is that his followers were there not because of what he professed but because of their faith in him as a divine person. He is known to go into trances and seizures to cure the illness of a devotee, by taking the illness upon himself.

He has predicted that there will be one more incarnation of Sai Baba, after him, and also tells of the place he will be born in Karnataka next. He claims himself to be an incarnation of Shiva and Shakti and much of the cult symbolism revolves around Shiva, though the cult and its membership themselves are very ambiguous. He remains the central charismatic authority of this cult and a modern day prophet and **guru** who does not preach a doctrine. Those who believe in him, are his devotees, and those who do not are not his devotees.

**Check Your Progress 3**

1) Who is a prophet? Explain in five lines.

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2) Differentiate between a priest and a prophet in five lines.

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**13.7 LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit you have studied three different types of religious specialists. We have begun by examining who a religious specialist is and what kinds of functions he performs for a society.

We have then proceeded to examine the major contribution made by Max Weber to the sociology of religion as well as his specific ideas on the priest, magician and prophet.

This unit has also tried to deal with each specialist: priest shaman and prophet, separately, outlining the features and functions of each. We have tried to show how each of the specialists has significance within a given context and how each associates with the layman differently. The purpose of examining these three different kinds of roles is to show how mankind relates to the world of the divine and supernatural, differently. Finally, wherever we have been able to, we have tried to support our presentation with examples from the Indian context. Our presentation has however been limited because the field is too diverse to be incorporated into a few pages.

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**13.8 KEY WORDS**

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**Brahmacharya** : the first phase in a pious Hindu's life where is a bachelor engaged in learning.

**Charisma** : certain supernatural or divinely gifted talents or something received from divine grace.

**Clairvoyance** : the ability to see mentally into the future.

**Cult** : a system of religious worship.

**Doctrine** : a reference to religious belief or teaching.

**Ethics** : reference to the science of morals

**Exorcism** : to get rid of evil spirits or expel spirits from someone's body through invocation and rituals.

**Grihastha** : the second phase of life as a householder.

**Monotheistic** : a doctrine that believes in only one God.

**Polytheism** : a doctrine that believes in the existence of many Gods.

**Sacerdotal** : related to the sacred or consecrated sphere.

**Sanyasa** : the final stage of life when one renounces the material world.

**Sorcery** : the use of magical arts to achieve something.

**Vanaprastha** : the third phase of life when one, having completed, one's duties, proceeds to the forest to meditate.

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### 13.9 FURTHER READINGS

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Babb, Lawrence A. 1986, *Redemptive Encounters : Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition*, Oxford University Press : Delhi.

Elwin, Verrier, 1955. *The Religion of an Indian Tribe*, Oxford University Press : Delhi.

Fuller, Christopher J. 1990. *Servants of the Goddess : The Priests of a South Indian Temple*, Oxford University Press : Delhi.

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

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### 13.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- 1) Religious specialists are people who because of certain special qualities they possess are able to mediate between the human world and the supernatural world. The priest, the magician, the shaman are all examples of religious specialists.
- 2) According to Weber the priest is one who performs mediatory functions directed towards the world of the supernatural and divine. The priest belongs to an organisation or is related to an institution. He may even be attached to a family. He undergoes indoctrination and organisational learning. He has to abide by certain defined codes of behaviour. He is also expected to perform periodic rituals and sacrifice for the propitiation of the divine or the Gods and Goddesses.
- 3) i) (d)  
ii) (f)  
iii) (a)  
iv) (b)  
v) (c)  
vi) (e)

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Weber understands the magician as a specialist who uses his knowledge of the supernatural, sorcery, miracle making and exorcism to carry out rituals and acts that are both beneficial and harmful. He deals with evil spirits and tries to overcome illness through his magical powers.
- 2) The shaman is a tribal magician and leader. He is known for his powers of sorcery and exorcism and similar to those of the magician he performs both positive rituals of well-being, and negative rituals of ill-being.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) The prophet is a person who by virtue of his charismatic personality and qualities is capable of being a leader and gaining a following. The prophet leads a mission not for economic reasons but as he sees it as his personal calling or as a divine mission. The prophet may either lead a mission or he may be the founder of a world religion. To put it simply, the prophet is seen as a messenger or instrument of God's will.
- 2) The difference between the priest and prophet is that while the priest is a religious specialist who is attached to an organisation and performs rituals on behalf of others, the prophet is an independent person. He performs no rituals on behalf of people as such and is not a member of an organisation where there are others like him although, he may lead one. Secondly while the priest inherits his authority by birth in a family or through indoctrination and specialised knowledge, the prophet's authority comes from his personal charisma.